



HOLIDAY WITH THE
MYSTERY ITALIAN

Ellie Darkins

 Cherish™

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Holiday With The Mystery Italian

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Winning the ultimate prize... Since the accident that paralyzed him, Italian tycoon Mauro Evans vowed to embrace life. So when he stars in a dating show for charity, picking prickly journalist Amber Harris as the winner to take on holiday is a challenge he can't resist! In Amber's experience, relationships equal pain, so she's determined to ignore her attraction to charismatic Mauro. But his bravery and strength threaten to tear down her defences, giving her a new Christmas dream – ringing in the New Year with wedding bells!

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“Why are you angry that I paid you a compliment?”

Amber sighed, shaking her head. “I'm not angry that you complimented me, Mauro. I'm angry that you lied to me.”

“When?” Taken aback, she stopped for a moment. “When did I lie?” he asked again.

“You called me beautiful. And I know that that's not me. So don't do it. Please.”

“I'm sorry,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders as he leaned back against the side of the pool. “I didn't mean anything by it.”

“And that's the point, isn't it? It could have been anyone. I bet you've used that line a dozen times before, haven't you?”

“Amber, I think you're being—”

“I'm sorry, Mauro, I need to get showered.” She boosted out of the pool and walked away.

By the time Mauro came into the house from the pool, she was showered, caffeinated and had regained some of her composure.

“I'm sorry,” she said as he wheeled into the living space where she was sitting with an espresso and the English papers.

He shrugged. “No need to apologize. But, you know, I've given it some thought,” he said. “And I honestly think you're a very beautiful woman.”

“Well, okay,” Amber said with a small smile. “As long as you've thought about it.”

Dear Reader,

When my husband whisked me away to Sicily on our honeymoon, I knew that it would be the perfect place to set a story. The beaches are beautiful, the mountains dramatic and the local cuisine mouthwatering. It was a real treat to revisit my photos and memories to bring Mauro and Amber's story to life.

Special thanks go to my sister Rosie, not only for recommending the honeymoon destination in the first place, but for answering endless questions and providing Italian translations ever since—grazie mille!

I hope you enjoy visiting Sicily with Mauro and Amber as much as I did! If you're interested in seeing more of photos and inspiration, you can check out my Pinterest board at [Pinterest.com/elliedarkins](https://www.pinterest.com/elliedarkins/).

Lots of love,
Ellie Darkins
Holiday with the Mystery Italian
Ellie Darkins



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ELLIE DARKINS spent her formative years devouring romance novels, and after completing her English degree, she decided to make a living from her love of books. As a writer and editor, her work now entails dreaming up romantic proposals, hot dates with alpha males and trips to the

past with dashing heroes. When she's not working, she can usually be found running around after her toddler, volunteering at her local library or escaping all the above with a good book and a vanilla latte.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

'LAST BUT NOT LEAST, contestant number three, here's your question: As a gold-medal-winning ParaGames swimmer...' he paused for whoops from the enthusiastic audience '...I obviously spend a lot of time in the water. If you were a sea creature, what would you be and why?'

Amber suppressed an eye-roll. Seriously, this show couldn't be any cheesier if it tried. She had thought when she'd arrived that the flashing lights and tinsel-bedecked set were tacky enough, but this guy's titillating questions were taking the cringe factor to a new level. She just had to play along, she reminded herself, and get this over with. A charity gig was a charity gig, and when you worked in the media, even as a lowly newspaper columnist, you sometimes found yourself doing something completely embarrassing in aid of a kids' charity. Like appearing on a celebrity version of the country's best-loved dating show.

Luckily, with the answers she'd prepared, there was no way that this 'eligible bachelor' was going to pick her, even if the whole thing hadn't been scripted by the producers, so it was just a case of answering this last question, posing for a quick photo, and getting back to her laptop and her deadline. She still hadn't finished her latest column. Well, she hadn't actually started it yet—she had a mailbox full of 'Dear Amber' letters, and still had to choose the most interesting to feature on the magazine's website.

She took a deep breath and tried to remember the answer to the bachelor's final question that she'd written and memorised when she'd been emailed in advance.

'A killer whale,' she said, sotto voce. No doubt the man on the other side of the screen, not to mention the producers, had been hoping for something a little sexier. Something about mermaids and their shells and their penchant for handsome princes, or firefly jellyfishes lighting up the ocean. She'd considered several contenders for her answer, each designed to ensure that she would be the last contestant that this eligible bachelor would be interested in. ParaGames swimmer. That definitely

rang a bell—Mauro someone. Welsh surname. She spent an hour every morning in her local pool, and had watched hours of footage of the international sports and para championships held in London a few summers ago. He'd won a clutch of medals, featured in a fly-on-the-wall documentary about his training regime and then been the face of various food and sportswear brands in the years since.

The voice too—she definitely remembered that: an unusual combination of Welsh and Italian accents that was unmistakable. Her brain flashed a pair of built arms, wide shoulders with droplets of water catching the light from a hundred flashbulbs.

She realised that the studio had fallen into silence around them, waiting for her explanation for her decidedly unromantic response. 'A killer whale,' she repeated, 'because they're intelligent, the women stick together and they can be ruthless predators when it's called for.'

For half a moment the silence in the studio stuck, but readers of her column knew what to expect from her. She called the shots as she saw them, and more often than not she saw the whole 'romance' scene as one big game that was rigged against fifty per cent of the players.

A deep, rich laugh from the other side of the screen stopped her train of thought, and she practically felt the noise flow through her, smooth and dark as the chocolate she kept permanently stocked in her kitchen. And in her desk. And in her bedside drawer just in case. Another flash of something from her memory. Hair slicked back and wet, a charming smile turned on a flustered television presenter. A shiver ran through her spine as she remembered the charm and the charisma that had exuded from this man, even down the camera from an echoing swimming venue. Good job she had sabotaged herself in this game. She had more than a sneaking suspicion that this man was going to be trouble for whichever unfortunate contestant got picked. She was best off out of it.

She sat cooking under the heat of the studio lights and looked longingly at the heaps of snow dotted around the studio. Sweat threatened to prickle at her brow and break through the industrial strength anti-shine powder she'd been caked with. Not that the polystyrene decorations would have helped much—but then there wasn't a lot of genuine snow around in September.

Due to 'scheduling reasons', they were filming this Christmas special in the autumn, and she had to admit that the fake festivities were messing with her mind. Christmas carol fatigue was an annual complaint, but she'd never suffered from it this early before.

Whichever contestant was 'picked' to go on this date would be summoned back in December for the live programme, when the footage they were shooting now, and the highlights of the date, would be shown.

As she waited for Julia to announce which 'lucky lady' had been chosen, she tried to think of the advice she'd given the woman in her last Dear Amber article, but the crash of the audience breaking into applause intruded into her thoughts.

The presenter announced, with a shake to her voice, 'And so it seems that our lucky contestant is Amber, a journalist from London!'

Amber wobbled on her stool as her jaw fell open. Oh, please, no. How could he have picked her? She'd said 'ruthless predator'! She'd not made a single sexual innuendo, no matter how leading his questions, not even the one about which swimming stroke was her favourite—it had taken her an age to think of a response that didn't conjure images of breasts, butterfly kisses or caresses of a strong, muscled back. She knew for a fact that the producers had told him to choose one of the other women. Had he never seen this show before? He should be picking the person with the biggest hair—the one that the producers had pushed towards the most suggestive answers. She'd batted away their attempts to give her a makeover. She knew what she was working with, and a fake tan and big hair weren't going to change it. She glanced towards Ayisha, the show's producer, and from the look on her face it seemed that she was as shocked as Amber. It seemed that Mauro had just gone off-script.

She watched the two other women walk past the screen, and the groans of regret as Mauro met the women that he could be taking with him for their week in Sicily. Oh, God, a whole week with him. It had never even crossed her mind that he could pick her, and now she was signed up

for a week-long holiday with a man that her brain had—goodness knew why—been stashing mental images of in a state of undress.

And then the music was rising to a crescendo and Ayisha was energetically motioning for her to get up. She took to her feet and straightened her spine, desperately trying to remember what they'd been told to do if they were picked. It had hardly seemed worth listening when she'd known that her prickly answers would keep Mauro well away. Keeping men at arm's distance was more than a habit these days: it was a reflex, as easy to her as breathing. Normally one flash of her 'don't even think about it' look was enough to have them backing away and leaving her alone, just as she liked it.

Perhaps that was the problem, she thought. He couldn't see her face, couldn't see just how desperate she was not to meet any sort of bachelor, eligible or otherwise. She stood on the spot where Ayisha had been gesturing and waited for the big reveal, her inner monologue not giving her a minute's rest in its utter contempt for putting herself in this situation.

The screen rolled back, with a wobble and a creak, and then she saw him, and realised she had been right. It was him, the athlete her brain had clocked and ogled, and then apparently saved half-naked images of in some deviant part of her mind, just in case it came in useful one day. His dark hair, not slicked back this time, but rebelling from a side parting, showed a hint of red—a dash of chilli hidden in the chocolate—and the shoulders dominated the rest of his body, making his waist look narrow, although she remembered abs that would make a lesser woman dribble. His wheelchair was small and space-age-looking, and the least interesting thing about this mountain of a man. An open shirt collar showed a triangle of tanned skin below his neck—and for just a moment Amber remembered that bronzed torso, thrust out of the pool by powerful forearms.

She shook her head. This should not be happening. He should not have picked the woman who had chosen her brain, when asked what her favourite part of her own body was. But the presenter of the show had grabbed her hand and was dragging her across to meet Mauro.

'Mauro, meet your date—Amber Harris. Amber, how do you feel to have been chosen?'

As if this was all a big joke, and she was the punchline. If he'd been able to see all three women she knew for a fact that he would have chosen one of the others.

'Erm...surprised,' she choked out, and didn't know whether to be pleased or not at the look on Mauro's face, the one that suggested that he liked catching her off guard, that maybe he'd done it on purpose.

'Well, Amber, just you wait until you see what we've got in store for you. You'll be jetting off on a romantic week-long break to sunny Sicily. Mauro has generously allowed us to use his luxury villa, complete with swimming pool, private beach and no fewer than seven beautiful bedrooms to choose from. Over the course of your week you'll be wined and dined by the owners of the Castello Vigneto, and tour the grounds of their beautiful vineyard before feasting on local foods and wines. You'll take jet-skiing lessons from Mauro himself, and can choose from any of the other water sports equipment available at his private pontoon. There will be a hike up the Mongibello, otherwise known as the live volcano Mount Etna, and to top it off we'll be flying you, by helicopter, to view the volcanic eruptions of the island of Stromboli! Amber, what do you say?'

* * *

Mauro watched Amber's shell-shocked expression as the presenter outlined the romantic week in Sicily that had been planned for his date. Well, he'd planned a large part of it himself, actually. When the charity had approached him about appearing on the show, he'd gone one better and offered the use of his home—it seemed to defeat the object of money-raising if they were to shell out on accommodation. And it was entirely unnecessary when he had his very own villa sitting empty most of the time. Anyway, as the patron of a charity that helped disadvantaged children through sport, he wanted to do more than just sign big cheques.

His villa in Sicily, the country of his mother's birth, was one of his favourite places on earth, so it was hardly a chore to spend a week there, especially a week in the company of a beautiful woman.

Her blonde hair fell just to her collarbones in waves that seemed deliberately messy, and her eyes had grabbed his attention as he tried to work out whether they were more green or brown. But none of that was the reason that he'd decided to ignore the script the presenters had briefed him on, of course. Celebrity edition or not, he hadn't known who she was. The reason he'd picked her was simple: he'd been intrigued by her and wanted to know more. She was funny, for a start: he'd smiled at her answer to his first question, chuckled at her second and full-out belly laughed at her third.

And then there had been that attitude. The one that had said that she didn't for a second buy into the show's attempt at stirring up romance. The producers had told him that everyone involved knew that they were all just doing this as a money-raiser, that none of the women were actually interested in starting a relationship. But there had been one way to be sure that he wasn't getting involved with someone who had different expectations of this show from him—pick the woman that had *Keep Out* prickling her voice and written in neon letters so big he could see them above the screen that was keeping them apart.

She'd seen straight through his questions, straight through every pep talk and manipulation of the producers and refused to deliver the smut that *Holi-Date* had been leading her towards. She would have been a killer whale—who wouldn't have picked her after that?

She leaned in to kiss him on the cheek. Not exactly by choice—he was sure that he wasn't the only one who had instructions from the production team on what they were to do after the big reveal. What surprised him was that she was going along with it. The peck on the cheek was brief, gone almost before it started, but the scent of her shampoo, something earthy and familiar—rosemary, perhaps—lingered a second longer, teasing his senses. Two beautiful women had just sashayed past him—a singer from a girl band and a regular from one of the soap operas, apparently. But Amber...she marched. And though her expression wasn't quite a scowl, it wasn't the TV smile that everyone else in the studio was wearing either. No, she was definitely different. Good. Different was what he had wanted. Dating show or not, he wasn't in the market for a girlfriend, and no one had shown that they weren't interested in a relationship as eloquently as Amber had.

'And, Mauro, what do you think about your gorgeous date?' Julia, the presenter, asked him.

He took a moment to think about it. She was hot—there was no doubt about that. Slim legs were encased in dark jeans, and a hint of silk was revealed beneath her black blazer. The look was almost academic, it was so serious. And yet...something about it drew him in. Perhaps it was the thought of that silk, imagining the smooth warmth of it beneath his fingers if he managed to peel off that blazer, peel back the layers of protection that she had so clearly shown already that evening.

She hadn't given his chair more than a cursory glance—always a good start. Now she took a couple of steps back, guided by the presenter's hand on her waist, but her eyes hadn't left him yet. They'd dropped to his chest, he noticed, but they were making their way back up now, and...there. He had her again, her gaze locked into his. He wasn't going to let her go easily. He wanted to play with this—it wasn't as if he had to worry that she might want him to get involved.

'Oh, Julia, I'm very much looking forward to getting to know her better.'

Julia turned to the autocue and began to wrap up the show, but already he'd lost interest, could see only Amber as the audience were directed to clap and cheer. Then he realised he'd missed his cue. The two women were turning towards him and he realised they were meant to be making their way backstage. At this rate it'd look as if he was chasing Amber out of the studio—not the best of starts. He spun on the spot and caught up with her quickly then stopped at the mark they'd been given to turn and wave at the audience. He let out a breath of relief, and surprise. It took a lot to surprise him these days. He liked to think he'd seen it all—he'd spent the last ten years of his life trying to see it all in the wake of his accident. But somehow, after just half an hour in her company—and a large part of that without even being able to see each other—Amber had him chasing after her without his even realising how she'd done it.

He rarely had to chase. Normally, with women, he put in a little groundwork, a little charm; laid the bait and then waited for a bite. It never took long. Whether he was throwing a party, hanging out in a nightclub—hell, he'd picked women up in the supermarket—he always had this under control. He took advantage of every opportunity to experience something new, but always on the strict understanding that there was nothing more than a casual fling on offer. He didn't do commitment. Well, not to romance, at least. He was committed to his sport, his business, his charity work, and for ten years it had been clear to everyone involved that that didn't leave room for commitment to anything else.

As they headed back to the green room Amber kept her eyes dead ahead, and her shoulders seemed to stiffen and rise with every step that she took. Mauro hung back, nothing at all to do with wanting to keep an eye on that peachy culo, revealed with every swing of her jacket. But something about being close to Amber had made him concerned for her. That neon sign that had shown over the wobbly dividing screen looked different up close. There was hurt behind it, and a vulnerability that was making him wonder whether he had made a mistake in picking her. He had thought that it had been the straightforward, risk-free option, but now he wasn't so sure. He would give her space, he told himself. Space that she so desperately seemed to want.

She dropped onto the sofa in the green room and rested her head in her hands. Mauro moved in front of her and couldn't help but reach for one of her hands and brush it with his fingertips, before he remembered what he had told himself about giving her space. 'Hey, it's not that bad, is it?' he asked with a forced smile. It wasn't exactly flattering, that she seemed so traumatised at the thought of a date with him, but he knew from her answers on the show that this wasn't personal. She had had no intention of being the one to go on this date. He had thwarted whatever plan it was she had going on, and she was annoyed about it.

'I've made you angry?'

She looked him right in the eye.

'Maybe. Or maybe I'm angry at myself. I... It doesn't matter, anyway. Look—' she started gathering up her things, throwing her phone and bits of make-up into her handbag '—this has been...fun, and really nice to meet you and everything. But I've got to get back.'

'You're not staying for the party?' There were drinks planned—everyone on the show at a hotel in the city, where those from out of town were being put up. He wasn't staying at the hotel—he kept a penthouse suite in Mayfair for when he was in London—but it should be a fun couple of hours. From the looks he was getting from contestants numbers one and two he guessed that they would be at the party when he showed up. But for once the promise of a pretty face waiting for him in a bar didn't have its usual effect.

There was something about Amber that intrigued him.

Some of the things he'd worked hardest for in life had been the sweetest: his first gold medal the sweetest of them all. But with women...what could he say? He'd never had to work that hard. Women fell for him easily, and before things got too complicated, he got out. His life was too full, too packed with ambition and drive to fit in a relationship as well, but the board of the sports charity had assured him that just turning up for this date, making nice for a week for the show, would help their fundraising efforts no end. It didn't mean that he was here looking for a relationship.

He was so distracted by trying to work out what was really going on with Amber that he missed her moving towards him, until she was so close that he could smell that shampoo again. Her lips brushed against his cheek, soft and plump, and he wondered what she would have done if he'd turned his head slightly, so that they touched against his own. So that he would have the taste of her on his mouth.

'I have to go. It was nice to meet you, Mauro.'

Something about the way she said it raised his hackles. Nice to meet him, but she wasn't planning on seeing him again, he thought. She was going to try and back out of their date. Well, he'd see about that.

CHAPTER TWO

AMBER TURNED UP to the airport with a fake smile plastered onto her face, her ears ringing with the warning her boss had just given her: go on this date or lose your job. OK, so it had been more nuanced than that, but that was what it came down to.

Recently, the feedback on her articles had been taking something of a dive. The comments on her online column had started off unpleasant and steadily descended into venomous. She'd stopped reading them, chalking them up to bullies with nothing better to do. But her boss had told her in no uncertain terms that the powers that be at the paper were paying attention.

And maybe they were right; Ever since her heart had been broken, she'd lost her home, and realised that the best advice she could dish out to anyone looking for romance tips was to get out, get your life together on your own, and make yourself happy. The words that had been bandied around in that meeting—cynical, bitter—when had she become that?

But how was she meant to undo the hurt and the anger that had been simmering under her skin? The pain that had become such a part of her that she wasn't sure if, never mind how, she was meant to shake it off.

This wasn't just about her feelings. If Maddie was right and her job was at stake...well, there was nothing that she wouldn't do to save her job. It was all she had. She'd literally lost the roof over her head when her relationship had broken down. Now her rent ate up most of her salary, and her travel card to get in from Zone Three took the rest. Even a month without work would be a disaster. She could not lose this job.

She'd thought she'd be able to beat the check-in queues by doing it online last night, only to be told at bag-drop that she had to go to the desk after all. It was taking an age—an immaculately manicured woman in an airline colours scarf was tapping at a computer and frowning at her passport.

'I'm sorry for the delay, madam.' She looked up and Amber forced her mouth back into a smile. There was nowhere she could escape the judgemental gaze of her readers. 'Some of the information from your passport was missing from the upgrade request, but it's all sorted now. Here's your boarding pass, and the executive lounge is just over there. Mr Evans asked me to let you know that he has already checked in.'

Executive lounge? With budget cuts at work, and the unmitigated disaster that was her personal finances, she'd got so used to travelling economy that she'd forgotten that there was any other way.

She determinedly ignored the flutter in the base of her stomach as she walked towards the lounge. There was no way she was going to allow Mauro Evans to have that effect on her. No way she'd be pulled into those sparkling green eyes and be tempted to flirt. The man was incorrigible—a playboy who was with a different woman on the front page of each week's trashy magazines, and remembering that was her best defence. She was sure that she was going to need one. She'd felt a pull of attraction from the second that she had realised who she was speaking to. A relationship, a fling, a flirtation was the last thing that she wanted, or needed. Especially with someone that the sidebars of shame told her regularly saw, conquered and came all in the space of a weekend. Every weekend.

Ugh, she didn't even know why she was worrying about this. It wasn't as if he was going to be interested in her. He had picked her for some perverse reason of his own. He must have wanted to annoy the producers of the show for some reason. Anyway, she had more important things to concentrate on.

She needed an image update. She needed her readers to see something different in her. Something that they could identify with. So far she'd been honest in her columns, brutally honest. But that wasn't what the readers wanted. She wasn't what the readers wanted. So while the cameras were rolling, she was going to have to be someone else.

Perhaps Mauro could help her out. No doubt he'd just gone into this whole thing looking for the image boost that came with charity work. She needed to show a softer side. Maybe there was a way they could both get what they wanted.

She didn't have to do anything. She didn't even have to promise anything. All she had to do was let the light of Mauro's brightly shining libido reflect on her for a while. All she had to do was be friendly.

When had that started to be something she needed to work at? Since when had friendly seemed like such an effort?

Her boss was right. Something had to change, and a luxury holiday to a sunny destination—all on someone else's budget—seemed like as good a place as any to start a little soul-searching.

'Amber, you found us!'

Mauro greeted her as she stepped through the door to the lounge. He was already sipping from a glass of champagne, with the camera and a microphone pointed at him. The two members of the TV crew swung round at his words, and a camera was thrust in her face. She moulded her features once again into the smile that she'd practised in the mirror, and hoped that it looked more convincing than it felt.

'Mauro! This was a surprise. An upgrade?'

'The best way to travel,' he said with a smile, and the smallest salute from his champagne flute. 'Don't worry,' he added, and Amber guessed that some uncertainty had shown on her face. She'd thought that she'd kept her smile pinned in place, but he had seen through it. 'I matched the cost of the upgrade with a donation to the charity, if that's what you're worried about.'

Maybe she should have been worried about it. This was a PR exercise after all. But that hadn't been what she was thinking. What she'd been thinking was that his white shirt highlighted the hint of red in his hair and the golden warmth of his skin. That his hair looked as if it had been carefully undone, perhaps by some other woman's hands as he left her bed that morning. That the smile on his face was warm and open, as genuine as hers was strained.

'A great surprise, I should have said.' She forced the words out. 'Here's to the start of a great week.' Ayisha, the TV producer, had passed her a glass and she matched Mauro's toast with one of her own.

'To us,' Mauro said, with a searching look.

'To us,' Amber agreed, fixing her smile in place again, trying to hide the effect that Mauro was having on her.

God, he was attractive. Far too attractive for his own good, or for hers. He had been sent to test her. That was the only way she could think of it. One week, trying to show a softer side. Showing that she wasn't the bitter old hack that the Internet had labelled her. But did the dating gods really have to send this guy to help? Someone who it seemed she was physically programmed to react to. Someone whose eyes seemed to twinkle into the depths of her own, who seemed to sense her discomfort, however hard she tried to hide it.

She sat beside him, and he reached for her hand, pulling her towards him for a friendly kiss on the cheek. A day's worth of stubble scratched her cheek—he'd lain in bed too long that morning perhaps. Had something more tempting than a close shave kept him there?

Good for him if it had.

Just because she was sworn off romance and men, and sex by default, that didn't mean everyone had to live her celibate life. If he was getting some, she was pleased for him, really. And not in any way the teeniest, tiniest bit jealous. She settled into her seat and glanced at the screen showing flight details. Another hour until they had to be at the gate. Were they meant to make small talk until then? With the camera rolling?

'I think I might just have a look round the shops until they call our flight.'

She needed something to read, something to bury her nose in during the flight, to keep her eyes from wandering over to Mauro.

‘Great idea,’ Mauro said, draining his glass. ‘Lead the way.’

‘I meant—’

‘You were trying to get away from me?’

He said it with a laugh, but the question in his eyes was serious enough.

‘Of course not. I’m just surprised that you’re so keen on shopping.’

‘Casual sexism? I’m shocked at you, Miss Harris.’

She smiled, not quite sure whether he’d shamed her or charmed her into it. ‘Well, shopping it is, then. We’ll meet you back here before we go to the gate,’ she told Ayisha, pre-empting any thoughts of them following. She was going to have to get used to a camera watching her every move, of making sure that every word and action was projecting the image that she needed it to, but she couldn’t just turn it on from nowhere. She needed to practise without the cameras on her. One misstep and she was sure that they would be all over her.

‘So, then, what’s it going to be?’ Mauro asked. ‘Handbags? Clothes? Are you going to disappear into the make-up for an hour?’

‘Who’s sexist now?’ she asked. ‘None of the above.’ Her interest in make-up hadn’t survived her relationship with Ian. She’d never seemed to get it right, however hard she’d tried—too slutty, too shabby, too colourful, too drab. In the end, she’d stopped trying.

She strode purposefully across the concourse towards the bookshop, dodging tourists dragging cases behind them with no sense of spacial awareness.

‘What? My witty repartee isn’t going to be entertaining enough for you?’ Mauro asked as he zipped into a space in front of her, using his chair to clear a path through the throngs of holidaymakers. ‘I’m clearly not making a great impression.’

‘What can I say?’ Amber replied with a shrug of her shoulders. ‘I’m a writer. Which by default makes me a reader. We get a free pass to have our nose in a book whenever we want.’

‘Even when there’s something better to do.’

She laughed.

‘Wow. I’m surprised you got that ego of yours in the terminal. And, for the record, I have absolutely no intention of doing you.’ There, if she was going to try and flirt for the cameras then that needed to be said. She could pretend to be attracted to him now with a clear conscience. There was no leading him on if she’d already told him it wasn’t happening. He’d understand friendly banter. No doubt flirting came to him as easily as breathing.

He raised an eyebrow. ‘We’ll see about that.’

‘I want to be honest with you, Mauro. I’m here for the charity, because my work insisted on it, and for a week in the sun. I’ll smile for the cameras and if you want to get to know each other while they’re rolling then fine. But that’s all. No funny business.’

He held her gaze for a second longer than was comfortable. What was he seeing? What was making him search her features like that, as if he was trying to get inside her head?

* * *

Managgia, she was driving him crazy already. He’d fixed her with his most challenging look. The one that had got impossible contracts signed, and unattainable goals achieved. And she still hadn’t shown him who she was. She was carrying this front of hers like some sort of armour, and all he wanted was a glimpse at what was behind.

He’d heard the real her on the show, he was sure. The take-no-prisoners, ‘I’d be a killer whale’ Amber. The one whose caustic humour had hit him so hard he’d had to go off script, just to see what happened if he called her bluff.

So where was she now? Because she damn sure wasn’t in this airport with him. Instead, in her place, was a woman trying to appear...ordinary.

Was she soft underneath? he found himself wondering. Like the silk shirt she'd worn beneath that blazer the first time he'd met her. The one that had gaped slightly between the buttons, that had skimmed gently over her generous breasts, hinting at the shape below just enough to keep him awake last night, concealing him enough to drive him crazy.

What had happened to make her so...closed? So controlled? Where had these defensive walls around her appeared from?

At least she had made it clear that she hadn't expected anything from him this week. It was why he had gone off-script and chosen her, of course. When he had been swimming competitively it had been his time in the pool that had controlled his schedule, his time, his life. Now it was time in the boardroom, trying to steer his sports marketing company from one market-leading success to another. There was no room in that life for a relationship. It simply didn't fit. If he was going to achieve everything that he wanted in this life—everything that he needed to—then he had to be focussed.

Since his university friend had driven the car they were travelling in into a tree, leaving him with a spinal injury and a brush with death that had been closer than was comfortable, he'd been determined to do more. To see more. To be more.

Before the accident, he'd been a naturally talented but under-committed athlete. The thought of leaving this world with just a mediocre list of achievements to his name: a bronze medal in the university swimming championship. Scraping a two-two in his Sports Marketing degree. A girlfriend he had liked a lot, but not loved. Not enough, anyway.

After the accident? It had all changed. It had to. He wanted to leave a mark on the world. So he'd watched the ParaGames from his hospital bed with an interest that had bordered on obsession. Four years to get himself fit, to be the best in the world. And he'd done it. Six gold medals over two games. And then after a day in the pool or the gym it was packing as many more achievements and successes as was humanly possible: flying lessons, professional development courses, a one-night stand with a beautiful woman. Anything new, anything remarkable, anything to make his life meaningful. To drive him further and further from the mediocrity that had almost been his epitaph.

And after he retired from swimming, he'd attacked the business world with zeal. The seeds he'd planted when he was competing started to grow, and somehow, ten years later, he had money rolling in from sponsorship deals, which he'd used to set up his own sports marketing business, his half-dozen medals hanging in his Sicilian home, and a passport that had seen almost as much action as his super-king-sized bed.

This front of Amber's was meant to keep people at a distance, he guessed. To keep herself apart, private. She must not realise how much he could see. How her hurt radiated from her like an inflamed wound; how her strength and her vulnerabilities were so tangled together he couldn't seem to see one without seeing the other.

He had thought that he was picking the least complicated option, when he had chosen Amber. That she was someone who couldn't be less interested in a relationship with him. And yet now, with this strangely fragile front she was presenting to the world, she suddenly seemed more complicated. More dangerous.

And now she was off again, without a backward glance at him, elbowing her way through the crowded shop to the till. He followed in her wake, through the path that her elbows had created between the tourists, and caught up with her.

He gripped his wheels tightly with his fingers. Because despite every well-reasoned argument he made about why he absolutely, definitely could not get involved with her, it was taking all the self-control he possessed to stop himself reaching out and brushing his fingertips over her skin. Pulling her down to sit on his lap so that he could explore today's silk blouse, tug at the ends of that prissy pussycat bow and satisfy his need to know what it hid beneath. Whether she was peaches and cream or strawberries; firm and toned or soft and yielding.

Because it didn't matter how much he wanted to know, the fact remained that trying to find out would be a very bad idea indeed. She was the walking embodiment of complicated, and he didn't need that in his life.

He pushed through the crowds after her, wondering how he had found himself chasing again. It wasn't a situation he found himself in often. He'd got used to a slightly embarrassed deference when he was with other people—he'd heard, 'Oh, no, after you...' so many times that it made him wince. He was so different from the youth he had once been in so many ways—the money, the medals, the chair—that he wasn't sure which of the three it was that had that effect on people. All he knew was that whichever it was it didn't have an effect on Amber. It seemed there was actually a chance that he might have a normal conversation this week. One with someone who wasn't an employee, or a fan, or trying to get into his bed or his bank account. How refreshing. How utterly tempting.

He forced the thought away as they left the shop and the crowds thinned.

'Now we have something to keep us entertained on the flight, what next?' he asked. 'More shopping? More champagne?' Keeping themselves busy seemed like the best defence against his thoughts wandering in inappropriate directions, like sliding down the neckline of her silky blouse.

She glanced at the screen in the centre of the terminal. 'They've announced the gate number. We get priority boarding, right? Might as well head straight over.'

'Sure, if you want.' What he wanted was to take her shopping for one of the teeny tiny bikinis he could see in the window of the shop opposite. What, so that he could torture himself by looking at something that he couldn't have? He'd need his self-restraint locked down before they reached his pool later, with sunshine and Prosecco in abundance.

He just hoped that she was going to be taking care of her own sunscreen. The thought of smoothing his hands over her shoulder blades, lifting her blonde hair to one side and tracing the nape of her neck with his fingers, rubbing cold lotion into hot skin... He imagined her, muscles relaxing under his touch, leaning her weight back against him as his hands skirted her sides, dipped into the hollows of her waist, found twin indentations at the base of her back. Would she object if his hands drifted lower still, if they dipped into the waistband of that tiny bikini?

'Mother—' Amber stopped and grabbed her foot, pulling it up to nearly waist level and inspecting the grubby mark across her shoe, which looked suspiciously like a tyre mark. 'Watch your wheels, Mauro!'

Damn. He'd caught her toes like a complete novice and all because he'd let his thoughts get carried away, imagining something that he could never allow to happen. She was still standing on one leg, grimacing, and gripping her toes as if she were worried they might fall off.

'I'm sorry, Amber. Here, let me see.' Before she could protest he'd wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her down onto his lap. Caught off guard and off balance, she fell into him without protest, her bum landing on one thigh, her injured foot propped on the other.

'Mauro! What the hell; let me up.'

His arm was still wrapped tight around her waist—even as he was doing it he knew what a bad idea it was, but he'd just run her down, and it wasn't as if he were a waif. Between him and the chair they were well capable of doing some serious damage to a little toe.

'How about we wait until the smart wears off, cara? Don't tell me it doesn't hurt—I can see that it does.'

'It doesn't hurt so bad that I need to be in your lap.'

'It's nothing,' he said, wishing that he could believe what he was saying. 'It doesn't mean anything. Just think of me as a convenient seat. One of the underrated benefits of using a wheelchair, in my opinion. I'm very useful to have around when there's swooning going on.'

'Swooning? I didn't swoon, you tried to cripp—'

He saw the blood drain from her face as she realised what she had been about to say and stuttered to a halt.

‘I mean—I meant—I didn’t—’

Oh, he would enjoy this. Finally, a crack in this Ice Queen’s façade. This was the most out of her comfort zone he’d seen her since that screen had pulled back and she’d realised he hadn’t taken her ‘back off’ bait.

He raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to speak.

‘I wasn’t thinking.’ The words rushed out of her as she desperately tried to backtrack and swerve around the very politically incorrect word that had nearly escaped her mouth. ‘I would never use that word if I was talking about...’

Flames were devouring her face and there was an earnest, beseeching look in her eyes. OK, that was probably enough.

‘Relax—’ he nudged her shoulder with his own ‘—I know that you didn’t mean anything by it. It’ll take a lot more than accidentally dropping the C-word into conversation to offend me.’ He’d learnt pretty quickly after his accident that it was the intention behind a particular word that would offend him, rather than the word itself. In his opinion, that word used among friends was far less offensive than being labelled ‘brave’ by someone who knew nothing at all about him.

In her horror at what she had been about to say, the fight had left her body, and she now sat comfortably in his lap, leaning just ever so slightly into the arm around her waist. Maybe sitting a little too comfortably. He might have lost a lot of the sensation from his legs, but his spinal injury was incomplete—doctor-speak for the fact that his spinal cord hadn’t been completely severed—and those nerves that were still attached? Boy, were they doing an awesome job right now. And his eyes? There was nothing wrong with those. Nothing wrong with his nose, either, which was drinking in the rich scent of her hair by the lungful; or his hands, which were begging for permission to take hold of that stubborn chin, angle her luscious mouth down towards his own, and take the kiss that he’d been completely unable to stop imagining from the moment that he had first seen her, however much he had tried.

Or maybe he didn’t need to use his hands at all, because she was turning towards him all of her own accord. Those big hazel eyes were locked on his, until they dropped and he just knew that she was looking at his lips. He flicked a tongue out to moisten them, to tempt her into reacting to him. Her skin flushed again as she watched him, her eyes not leaving his mouth. He moved closer, a centimetre, and then another, waiting for the moment when she blinked, when she realised he was getting too close, and froze up on him. When there was nothing but a couple of millimetres between them he breathed in another lungful of that intoxicating scent and closed his eyes, desperate for the moist warmth of her lips on his.

And then the wind was knocked from his chest and they were wheeling across the floor. Someone must have barged his chair out of the way. His hands went to his wheels as her arms tightened around him.

Brakes, Mauro. He’d never been so relieved to have made such a schoolboy error. If he’d put on the brakes he wouldn’t have just been barged across the terminal building. She’d still be sitting in his lap, her lips on his, rather than scrambling herself upright. He was going to have to be more careful if he wanted to keep his life exactly as he liked it, with nothing getting in the way of his ambition and his achievements. The only relationships he had space for were simple, honest flings where both parties knew what they were getting and were happy with the bargain.

A relationship with Amber would be anything but simple. Something about the brittleness of the front she showed the world told him that she had been broken. It was as if the pieces of her didn’t fit together quite right, leaving chinks to the hurt and vulnerable woman underneath. ‘What the hell? Did someone just push you?’ She spun around, looking for a fight. Nice deflection, he thought, wondering why she was so angry at herself.

‘Leave it, Amber.’

There had been a time when he'd have chased anyone trying to push him around—literally or metaphorically—and shown him just how much damage a bloke with a spinal-cord injury was capable of inflicting with his fists. It just so happened that when you used a wheelchair you were at the perfect height for one or two particularly vulnerable targets. But he'd long accepted that some people would act like idiots around him. He could either let the anger consume him, as it had sometimes threatened, or he could learn to rise above it. To be the bigger man and show the world what he was capable of with his medals rather than with his fists and fury.

He glanced up at the flight information screen and realised that they had no time to pick a fight anyway. There wasn't even time to head back to the lounge and meet Ayisha and the cameraman—they'd have to hope that they would make their own way there without them.

'Come on,' he said to Amber, his resolve cracking for a second and brushing his hand against her hip. 'They're calling our flight.'

* * *

As the car swung into the driveway of the villa Amber caught her breath. The low-slung walls of the building were rendered in white, which in the late afternoon sun seemed to glow a warm orange. Three sides of the building wrapped around a central swimming pool, with expansive glazing, so every part of the house had a view of the water. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, Amber could see straight through the building, through more windows, to the clear blue-green of the Mediterranean. She stopped as she was climbing out of the car for a moment, stalled by the beauty of Mauro's home.

Somehow, even though Ayisha had told her to expect luxury, she'd been expecting the sort of villa she and her ex, Ian, had stayed in during happier times; the sort with slightly noisy plumbing and grass growing between uneven paving stones in the garden. This—this was something else.

Imagine being able to call this your own, she thought, her mind wandering back to her bedsit in a grimy part of London. She was grateful to have a roof over her head at all, but to think that this was real life for Mauro, not a week of playing house... Their lives couldn't be more materially different. It was bad enough that he was a millionaire, successful in every aspect of his life, whereas she was just holding onto her job by a thread. They had to rub it in her face with this beautiful house as well. Not that he was going to be interested in her, with her bargain basement clothes and her grubby flat. Not that she wanted him to be.

She turned to look at Mauro.

'This is beautiful.'

'Thanks,' he said with a nonchalant shrug. 'Come on, I'll show you around.'

She wasn't sure why, but somehow she found the idea that they were staying in his house more unsettling than if the production company had hired somewhere neutral. As if it handed him a massive advantage over her. And that wasn't the only thing unsettling her. There was the memory, too, of what had happened in the airport. The way that she had sat in his lap, hypnotised by his mouth. The slight smile tugging at the corner of his lips, the way his tongue had moistened them, readying them to meet her own.

If they'd not been interrupted...

But thank God they had, and she didn't have to think about how that sentence could end.

As Mauro gave her a guided tour of the property, she was blown away by the sheer luxury of the place. The gleaming chrome of the coffee machine, the soft, supple leather of the sofas, the expansive cotton and silks on the beds. Every now and then a detail caught her eye—a handrail, a switch to lower a kitchen counter, a tile underfoot that felt particularly grippy—that made her realise all the subtle adaptations that had been made to the villa in order for it to function perfectly as Mauro's home. A million miles away from the clunky white bars and red strings she'd seen in the disabled loos at work.

'And I thought you might like this room.'

He opened the door into one of the guest suites and Amber caught her breath at the view of the ocean from the wall of windows. The water stretched green-blue as far as she could see. The view

drew her in, closer to the windows until her fingertips were resting lightly on the glass. There was nothing between her and the horizon. No one but a handful of fishermen in their brightly coloured boats between her and the edge of the world. Mauro crossed the room and pressed a button on the side wall, upon which the glass doors concertinaed until the whole wall was gone and there was just a few hundred feet of terrace and sand between the bed and the ocean.

‘Mauro, it’s incredible.’ Amber’s voice caught in her throat, and she cursed herself. She didn’t even understand why she was feeling so emotional. Perhaps it was the fact that she’d lost her home, that she didn’t even have that West London shoebox to her name any more. Perhaps it was the knowledge that all of this had come from Mauro’s many successes, when she was barely keeping a job using the one talent that she had. Maybe it was the fact that she’d spent the last eight hours on edge, desperately trying to keep her hands to herself, her libido in check, and her thoughts from wandering to Mauro.

At least he seemed to be shying away from the issue as well. Since that moment in the airport they’d both been studiously well-behaved. It all added up to exhaustion, physical and emotional.

‘I was going to offer you dinner. My housekeeper will have left something in the fridge, or I can arrange something to be brought in.’ He took another look at her. ‘Or I can let you crash and see you at breakfast?’

She knew the relief on her face had shown when he gave her a concerned smile.

‘I’ll leave you to it.’ He showed her how the controls for the window wall worked and let her know that he’d be in the pool if she needed anything.

Once he was gone she sat heavily on the bed, still in awe of the understated splendour of Mauro’s home. If she had been unsure before about whether she wanted to succumb to Mauro’s advances, this had been the wake-up call she had needed. Their homes couldn’t be more different, their lives couldn’t be more different. She absolutely would not get involved with him.

CHAPTER THREE

MAURO WOKE TO the smell of rich Italian coffee percolating through the house—Amber was up already, then. He gave a half-smile. He hadn’t expected her to be awake first—had thought that she would be making the most of the holiday with a long, lazy lie-in. He had planned to be in the pool, fifty laps in, before she emerged and wanted to float on a lilo with a cocktail in hand. So she’d caught him out already. He didn’t like it, the way that she kept him guessing, kept proving his assumptions wrong.

It had made him wonder what else he’d been getting wrong lately.

His bedpost certainly wasn’t lacking in quantity of notches, but, now that he thought about it, there hadn’t been much variety, much challenge. He’d left hospital after his accident with the single goal of achieving and seeing as much as any person could in a lifetime, and now a whole aspect of it seemed...samey. Dull.

But those meaningless flings had been exactly what he had wanted. His ex-girlfriend had made it perfectly clear that his ambitions and commitment to his sport didn’t leave room for a partner or romance. He had failed at it once, and he had no interest in revisiting that disaster.

He pulled himself up in bed and transferred to his chair with a quick push of his arms. They still had a little time together before everyone else arrived. Once they’d had a quick breakfast and he’d done his laps for the day they were to meet Julia, Ayisha and the cameraman for that day’s filming. The usual stuff, he supposed—by the pool, on the beach, and a ‘romantic’ dinner for two. And in the meantime? He still couldn’t satisfy his curiosity, his need to understand more about her.

He wheeled through to the kitchen and found Amber sitting at the table, espresso cup in hand.

‘Morning,’ he called out to her as he came into the kitchen and headed for the coffee pot, still hot on the stove. There was something about being home in Sicily that brought his Italian blood out; if he were in England, he might start the day with a cup of tea and toast, but as soon as his feet were on Sicilian soil it was espresso or nothing.

He pulled up to the table with his coffee and reached for one of the pastries she'd piled onto a plate in the middle of the table. He expected his fingertips to meet flaky, buttery pastry, but instead they landed on impossibly soft, slender fingers as Amber reached for the cornetto at the same moment. He pulled away at the same instant that he registered her flinch. He couldn't help the sting of rejection at that tiny movement; whether he wanted her to be interested in him or not, that small pull away from him hurt. It was just his pride, he thought as he met her eyes, daring her to acknowledge the contact, the electric flicker that he had felt when their skin had touched.

But she backed away from the challenge, lowering her eyes and snatching her hand back.

So she really wasn't out here to play that game. Good. He decided to get them back on more neutral ground. 'All ready for your day as a reality TV star?'

She groaned, and he laughed at the look of horror on her face.

'I'm not sure I'm ever going to be ready,' she admitted. Her face had relaxed, and he could tell that she was relieved he hadn't called her out on what had just happened between them. Well, she didn't have to worry on that front. Ego had made him hold her eye just then, but that didn't mean that he had any intention of actually exploring that spark further.

'So why sign up in the first place?' he asked. She looked as if she had been regretting her decision ever since, after all.

'Sign up? I'm not sure that's how I'd describe it. It was more like...railroaded, or threatened. Definitely something that doesn't count as volunteering. And it's for charity. How could I say no? It's not like I ever thought...never mind.'

Oh, he knew exactly what she'd never thought, whether she was going to finish that sentence or not. She'd never thought she'd be here, never thought that she would be the one chosen. Well, in fairness she hadn't been. The TV company had had it all worked out—of course he'd been meant to pick contestant number two—but then with the cameras rolling and a live audience—what could they do when he picked the wrong woman? His agent had given him an earful, of course, but it had been worth it.

And what were a few booked flights and cancelled reservations when you had earned a fortune and were willing to use it to get what you wanted?

'Sorry I spoilt your masterplan. What can I say? I like a challenge.'

He instantly regretted his words, because he absolutely didn't want her getting the wrong idea. It wasn't that he wouldn't seduce her in a heartbeat if he had thought that she might be up for a fling. But it couldn't be more clear that a simple dalliance wasn't on the cards with her. There was too much hurt behind those eyes, too many defences built around her. The ghost of romance past haunting her expression.

And as much as he wanted to back away slowly, keep his distance from the big scary emotions that were clearly behind that controlled front, there was something in there calling out to him. Some vulnerability that made him want to protect her. To find out if there was anything that he could do to help.

He didn't want to think too much about why.

Perhaps, if nothing else, he could give her an ego boost. She clearly needed one. He could see it in her dropped eyes, the way she pulled her shoulders in to protect herself. Someone had given this beautiful woman cause to doubt that she looked like an absolute goddess. And as he couldn't give the person who had done that to her the hiding he no doubt deserved, then maybe he could at least get her to see what he saw, without any danger of either of them wanting to be any more involved.

'So you're not dating anyone? There's not some boyfriend hiding away somewhere while you raise money for the kiddies?'

'No.'

That wasn't a 'not right now', or a 'nobody special'. That was 'never', 'definitely not' and 'not ever' all rolled into one. He had been right: there was a world of back story behind that one word.

His voice dropped to a gentle murmur. ‘Do you want to talk about it?’

What was he doing? Talking about a bad break-up ranked right up there with sticking needles in his eyes on his list of enjoyable activities. But there was something about this woman that he couldn’t ignore. He couldn’t brush her pain away and pretend that he hadn’t seen it. If spilling her heart over her breakfast was what she needed he had a horrible feeling that he was signing up for the whole messy performance.

She took a long gulp of her coffee, and painted on something approximating a smile. ‘There’s nothing to tell, really. I broke up with someone a year and a half ago and have no intention of repeating my mistakes. I think maybe I’m just one of those people who are happier alone. Independent.’

Perhaps. Or perhaps not. Because as she spoke he could see the lurking shadows of grief and disappointment in her expression. The memory of someone who had let her down. Had left her feeling...less than she was.

‘Or maybe you just need to—’

‘Get back on the horse? Because there are plenty more fish in the sea? And someone better is just around the corner? Sorry but I’ve heard the clichés all before. Perhaps some people are just better suited to not...riding. Sorry, I’m better at the metaphors when I’ve had more coffee.’

She laughed, but it sounded hollow, thin. He had been right when he’d assumed that a quick fling would never be on the cards.

‘I’m going to head out to the pool for a few laps before the cavalry turns up,’ he said, trying to get them onto safer ground. ‘Can I tempt you with a dip?’

For a second he thought she was going to say no, but then a smile appeared on her lips, a real one this time. ‘Actually, that sounds good. I’ll go get changed and meet you out there.’

The day was already warming up as he made his way out to the pool, unseasonably balmy for this time of year. He was going over his conversation with Amber again. He wanted to make her see how beautiful she was. After a decade of mutually satisfying but emotionless seductions and flings, this was new ground. He might have had a sensitive side once. It’d just been so long since he’d had any call to get in touch with it he wasn’t sure that it was even still there.

He lowered himself into the pool and lay back in the water, letting it take his weight as he soaked up the warmth of the early autumn sun. His eyes drifted closed as he enjoyed the freedom to power himself around the pool, moving effortlessly in the water in a way his body didn’t allow him on land. He heard her before he saw her, the flip-flop, flip-flop of her sandals on the tiles at the water’s edge, the soft rustle of cotton as her towel hit the sunbed. Looking up, he saw the fluffy dressing gown she was wearing, and realised that he had been hoping for something else, something revealing, maybe. A better look at that body that she normally kept so well hidden beneath skimming silk.

She dropped the robe only at the last minute, as she slipped into the water. He had the briefest glimpse of a utilitarian one-piece in black and white, with thick straps and a racer back. Most definitely built for speed rather than decoration. Disappointed as he was, he had to admit to feeling a little pleased at finding that they had something in common.

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