

THE VALTIERI MARRIAGE DEAL

Caroline Anderson



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Caroline Anderson

The Valtieri Marriage Deal

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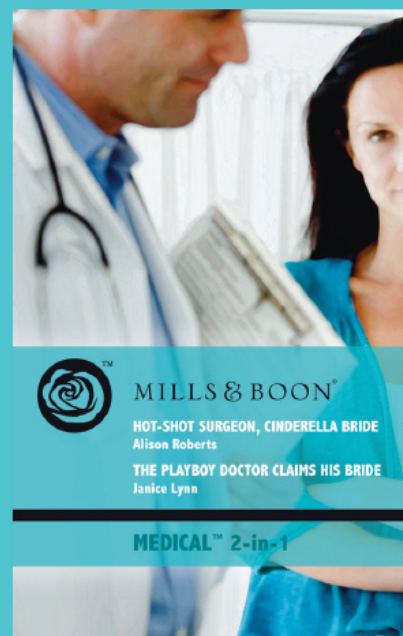


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He saw her through the glass. He didn't know her—he'd never seen her before in his life—but as their eyes connected, Luca's heart began to pound.

She was beautiful. Utterly gorgeous. Her wide lavender eyes had caught his attention first, and below them a generous mouth, slightly parted, was just begging to be kissed. Her sweater clung lovingly to soft, rounded breasts with just a hint of cleavage to taunt him, but it was something else, something he couldn't define, something fierce and elemental and soul-deep that drew him to her, and he wanted her so much he could taste it.

If he had any sense, he'd keep on walking. He liked control—and there was something very uncontrolled about his reaction to her.

But he was in desperate need of a shot of caffeine, this was the best caffè in the area and the only free seat was at her table. So he went in and walked over to her. He'd just get a coffee and go. How hard could it be?

'Signorina?'

She looked up, and her breath jammed in her lungs. It was the man, standing beside her, a crooked smile on those sexy, unbelievable lips, the dark, intense eyes that had locked with hers through the window glittering with something that if she'd had a shred of sense left would have sent her running, but she couldn't move. Even her lungs had stopped working.

'Are you expecting anyone to join you, or may I take this seat?' His voice was soft, gravelly, warmed by a rich Italian accent, and it trailed over her like the hand of a lover, bringing everything screaming back to life.

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THE VALTIERI MARRIAGE DEAL
BY
CAROLINE ANDERSON



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and maker of the best chocolate cake in times of need, and for
Alastair, Rhea and Eleanor who introduced us to Italy. Grazie!

THE VALTIERI MARRIAGE DEAL

CHAPTER ONE

HE SAW HER through the glass.

He didn't know her—he'd never seen her before in his life—but as their eyes connected, Luca's heart began to pound.

She was beautiful. Utterly gorgeous. Her wide lavender eyes had caught his attention first, and below them a generous mouth, slightly parted, was just begging to be kissed. Her sweater clung lovingly to soft, rounded breasts with just a hint of cleavage to taunt him, but it was something else, something he couldn't define, something fierce and elemental and soul-deep that drew him to her, and he wanted her so much he could taste it.

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'Are you expecting anyone to join you, or may I take this seat?' His voice was soft, gravelly, warmed by a rich Italian accent, and it trailed over her like the hand of a lover, bringing everything screaming back to life.

She sucked in a breath. 'No—no, I—Please, do.'

She gathered up the books she'd scattered all over the table—a guide to Florence, a phrase book that didn't seem to have any of the questions that she wanted to ask, a couple of tourist information leaflets she'd picked up—and made room for him, and as he sat down, his knee brushed against hers and a hint of spicy citrus cologne drifted over her and made her shiver.

He moved his knee, shocked by the bolt of lightning that had shot through him at the fleeting contact. Hell, this was going to be harder than he'd imagined. He dredged about for something sane and innocuous to say, then his eyes lit on the books. 'Sightseeing?' he asked, disgusted at his corny line, and she gave a little chuckle, but an endearing sweep of colour touched her cheeks.

'Wow. Sherlock Holmes,' she said drily, but there was a teasing little smile playing at the edges of her mouth and he wanted to taste it.

He dragged his gaze back to her eyes. Although her voice was cool and controlled, something in those gorgeous lavender depths told him that the accidental brush of his leg against hers had affected her as much as him, and he felt a kick of something raw and elemental in his gut. His eyes returned to her mouth, and he felt his mouth curve in response to her smile.

'Well, the English-Italian dictionary and the guide book were a bit of a giveaway,' he said, and decided it was time to introduce himself. He extended his hand. 'I'm Luca, by the way.'

'I'm Isabelle.' After a second's pause, she took his hand—only fleetingly, but it was enough. Their gazes locked, heat flared in her eyes and she sucked in a breath and pulled back her hand, to his regret.

Isabella, he thought, saying it in his head in Italian, tasting the word, feeling it surge straight to his groin.

'Ignore?' the waitress said. 'What can I get you?'

A room...

He hauled himself back in line. 'Isabelle? May I buy you another coffee?'

‘Oh—well, I wasn’t—but actually, that would be lovely, thank you. Could I have a latte?’

‘Sure.’ He added a double espresso and a selection of pastries to the order, and turned back to her. ‘So—what brings you to Florence, Isabelle? It’s not the best time of year for sightseeing, in January.’

She gave a little shrug. ‘I just wanted a break. It’s so dreary in London in the winter, and I worked all over Christmas and New Year, so I thought I deserved a treat.’

‘I should think so. Weren’t you with your family?’

‘No—my mother lives in Canada with her husband.’

‘And your father? Brothers? Sisters?’

She looked slightly uncomfortable. ‘I’m an only child, and I don’t have a father.’

He frowned. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Why should you be?’

Luca shrugged. ‘Because my father is a very important person in my life, as are my mother and my brothers and sisters, and I can’t imagine Christmas without them. So—why Firenze?’

It was her turn to shrug. ‘I’ve always wanted to come here, so I thought, Why not? A couple of days—just time to take in a bit of culture, a bit of shopping, some lovely food...’ She shrugged again and smiled. ‘So here I am.’

‘Alone?’

Was it so obvious? ‘My friends wouldn’t come,’ she told him ruefully. ‘They didn’t mind the shopping, but they weren’t interested in traipsing round in the cold looking at mouldy old paintings and statues covered in pigeon poo!’

Luca chuckled, sending shivers down her spine. ‘And have you seen much yet?’

She shook her head, trying to drag her eyes off his mouth long enough to concentrate on what he was saying. He really had the most gorgeous mouth.

‘Not enough. I only got here early yesterday, and I’ve done the Ponte Vecchio and the Pitti Palace and a couple of markets, but there’s so much more to do today I don’t know where to start.’ And she was sick of sightseeing alone.

‘Would you like a guide?’

She frowned, and for a moment he thought he’d pushed it too far, but then she smiled. ‘Why would you want to do that?’

Because I want to spend time with you and I don’t care if I have to trudge round every last damned artefact to do it?

He shrugged. ‘I know the city inside out, and I can tell you what to see and what not to bother with. And my interview finished early, so I’m free for the rest of the day,’ he added.

‘Oh—didn’t it go well?’ she asked, thinking that it explained the rather beautiful suit and wondering what the interview had been for.

‘No, it went very well—they offered me the job.’

‘But not as a tour guide, I take it?’ she suggested, fishing for more information about him, and he gave a deep, sexy chuckle.

‘Me? No,’ he said with a grin. ‘I’m a doctor.’

‘Oh!’ she said, oddly relieved because doctors she understood. ‘So—are you working in the hospital already?’

‘No. I had the first interview there yesterday, and I had to go back today for another look round.’

‘Interesting job?’

He shrugged. ‘I suppose so. Wherever women are having babies the job’s essentially the same, though, and I’ve worked there before, so it’s perhaps a bit familiar—not enough of a challenge.’

She tipped her head on one side, fascinated by the coincidence. ‘So—you’re an obstetrician?’

‘Yes—why? Don’t tell me—you’re pregnant.’

She chuckled. ‘No, no chance of that, but I’m a midwife.’

‘Really? Hospital or community?’

‘Hospital—in the consultant unit, by choice, so I can make things better for women with high-risk pregnancies and try and give them a decent birth experience.’

A brow rose slightly. ‘Are you saying that doctors don’t?’

She smiled wryly. ‘No—but their focus is on something different, and it’s easy to get terrified by all the technology. My job’s to take away some of the fear and uncertainty and give my mums the labour they want, and it’s really rewarding—but that’s probably all about to change, because the unit’s being refurbished and I’m going to be sent off to some other hospital for months, so who knows what I’ll be doing? Anyway, about you—is this a step up? Will you take it?’

‘Maybe. But it’s not just a career move, it’s also a social move.’

‘Back to the city of your misspent youth?’ she asked teasingly, and he chuckled.

‘Perhaps. Actually, since you obviously have an interest, there’s something I’d love to show you that I wouldn’t show just anybody. It’s a bit gruesome but it’s interesting. We’ll start there, and we can do the mouldy paintings and the pigeon poo afterwards,’ he said. ‘That is, if you want to?’

She hesitated a second, then gave in. ‘Well—since you’re offering,’ she said, wondering why a man so gorgeous would have nothing better to do all day but spend it with her.

But Luca didn’t seem to have any trouble with that idea. He leant back so the waitress could set the tray down and smiled. ‘Good. That’s sorted. We’ll have our coffee, and I’ll show you the edited highlights of my city.’

So after they’d finished their coffee and demolished the pastries, he took her to the Museo di Storia della Scienza—the Science Museum—next to the Uffizi, and showed her a room where the walls were lined with fascinating but gruesome old wax models of obstetric complications.

‘Oh, horrors!’ she said, the professional side of her glad to be working in a modern, well-equipped hospital and her other side, the part that was a woman, just a little bit afraid.

‘Now you see why the Italians invented the Caesarean section,’ he said with a dry smile, and took her back out into the glorious but chilly winter sunshine. ‘Right, the pretty stuff,’ he said, heading for the Piazza della Signori by the Uffizi entrance.

Isabelle was awestruck by it all. The city was scattered with amazing and jaw-dropping sculptures in every piazza and public area, so that everywhere she turned she all but fell over another one, and they were all famous. ‘It’s like a Renaissance theme-park,’ she said, making him laugh. ‘It’s incredible.’

‘They’re not all originals,’ he pointed out. ‘You need to see the original David—it’s in the Galleria dell’ Accademia.’

‘Will we have time? We can’t possibly see everything!’

‘Of course not. I’m cherry-picking—showing you the best bits. Otherwise you’ll just get overwhelmed.’

How true, she thought, but it wasn’t only the art that was overwhelming, it was Luca, warm and funny and tactile, casually looping his arm around her shoulders to steer her in a different direction, resting his hand on her waist to usher her through doorways, his boyish grin at odds with those very grown-up eyes that were sending an altogether different message.

‘Right. The Duomo,’ he said after a lightning tour of the Uffizi, and led her through the narrow mediaeval streets to the magnificent cathedral with Brunelleschi’s huge terracotta dome that dominated the skyline, then up all four hundred and sixty-three steps between the outer and inner skin of the dome and out onto a little walkway at the very top.

It took her breath away—especially when she glanced down over the curving dome towards the ground so far below.

‘Don’t look down, look out,’ he said quickly, and moved closer to her—so close she could smell the spicy citrus of his aftershave and something else freed by the warmth of his body that made her ache to bury her face in his throat and breathe him in—and turning her with the pressure of his

body, his other hand light on her arm, he pointed out the landmarks amongst the higgledy-piggledy terracotta roofs of all the buildings laid out below them.

A waste of time, because all she could feel and smell was him, all she could see was his hand, strong and steady, the long, square-tipped fingers and the light scatter of hair on the olive skin of his wrist tantalising her. What would it feel like to be touched by that hand, to feel it on her skin?

Stifling a whimper, she swayed, and his other arm circled her instantly and hooked her up tighter against him. ‘Steady,’ he murmured, but her heart just beat faster, because his body was rock-solid and very male, and she just wanted to turn in his arms and kiss him.

‘OK?’ he asked, and released her carefully, as if he wasn’t sure if she’d fall over.

‘I’m fine—it’s just the height,’ she lied, shocked at her reaction, and he slid his fingers through hers and held her hand firmly until they were back inside.

‘Have we got time to see the real David?’ she asked once they were safely back down, trying to concentrate and not squander the whole day like a lovestruck teenager, and he grinned.

‘Feet not tired yet?’

She laughed. ‘Don’t be silly—I’m a midwife. I put a pedometer on one day and did over nineteen thousand steps. I can walk forever. How about you?’

‘Ditto. I’m fine, let’s do it,’ he said. ‘I’d love to show you and we’ve probably got time. You’ll be blown away.’

She was. ‘The anatomical detail’s amazing,’ she said, staring in awe at the statue—the real one, the one Michelangelo’s hands had carved lovingly and incredibly skilfully five hundred years ago. ‘It’s so accurate!’

‘Did you know he used to buy corpses and dissect them so he could learn what happened under the skin? That’s why his work is so lifelike—because it’s based on real anatomical knowledge. Except the genitalia, of course,’ he added softly in her ear, his grin mischievous. ‘Pre-pubescent, so as not to shock the matrons and terrify the virgins.’

She suppressed a laugh, and they moved on, but the gallery was closing and they were turned out into the cold and dark of the January evening—and her wonderful day with him was over. She turned to him, hugely reluctant to let it end, needing to show her gratitude somehow.

‘Luca, I’ve had the best day and I’ve taken so much of your time—would you let me buy you dinner?’ she said softly. ‘Just as a thank you?’

His mouth twitched. ‘You’re welcome to my time, cara—but I’ll buy the dinner. I was going to suggest it anyway. Do you want to go back to your hotel and change?’

He’d agreed? Her heart soared and she beamed at him. ‘Actually, I’m starving, so if I’m OK as I am...?’

He laughed softly, sending a delicious shiver down her spine. ‘No, you’re fine. Better than fine. Most of the women in my life would need at least two hours to get ready, and they’d never confess to hunger.’

‘You obviously mix with the wrong sort of women,’ she teased, and was surprised by the thoughtful look on his face.

‘Maybe I do,’ he murmured, and offered her his arm. ‘Shall we go?’

She tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and they turned into the wind, but the cold air struck her face and slid down her neck and she shivered and huddled down into her coat. ‘Oh, that’s icy. I didn’t realise it would be so cold. I should have brought a scarf.’

‘Here—have mine,’ he said, and draped it round her neck.

‘Oh—you’ll get cold now!’ she said, and then caught the scent of his body on the fine, soft wool and nearly moaned out loud.

‘I’m sure I’ll survive. It’s not far to the place I want to take you, just round the corner.’ And it was worth giving up his scarf just to watch her snuggle down inside it with that sensual sigh. ‘Here, this is it.’

He opened the door and ushered her in, and the tempting aromas made her mouth water. They'd paused for a light lunch, but it and their coffee this morning were just a distant memory now, and she was more than ready, but it was heaving.

'It's too busy,' she said, disappointed, but Luca just shook his head and looked up, catching the eye of a man with a white apron wrapped around his ample middle, and he beamed and came over to them, arms extended.

'Luca! Buona sera!'

'Buona sera, Alfredo. Come sta?'

Isabelle listened to the warmly affectionate exchange but only caught the odd recognisable word, such as bambini, and then Luca switched to English. 'Alfredo, do you have a table?'

'Si, si! Of course, for you, my friend. Always.'

And with a bit of shuffling and rearranging, he fitted them in, dragging a table out of the corner and finding another chair.

They sat down, but because they were squeezed in, her leg was jammed against Luca's hard, muscular thigh. 'I'm sorry, I can't move out of your way,' she said, but he just smiled.

'Don't apologise!' he said softly, and she felt heat flood through her. Good grief, what on earth was happening to her? It was only a leg, and yet since the first touch of his knee against hers in the café this morning, every fleeting contact had been enough to send her heart into hyperdrive.

All day she'd been trying to forget it, but he'd made it impossible, constantly brushing into her, touching her—nothing in the least bit questionable, but it had kept her senses simmering all day, and then he'd offered her his arm and wrapped his scarf around her neck, still warm and heavy with the very male scent of his body, enclosing her in his essence, and the small amount of common sense she'd talked into herself had been wiped out in an instant. And now the heat of that solid, well-muscled leg against hers was setting it on fire and burning away the last fragments of reason.

'Relax, bella,' he murmured, his teasing eyes dancing. 'I won't eat you.'

Shame, she thought, and shut her eyes briefly at the images that leapt into her mind. Good heavens, this wasn't like her! She'd never felt like this, never reacted so violently, so completely to a man's touch.

But it wasn't just his touch, it was his presence, too. She'd felt him at the café before she'd seen him, felt his eyes through the window stroking over her like little fingers of fire. And now, every time he looked at her, there was something there, something hot and dangerous and unbelievably tempting. And she was totally out of her depth. It had been so long since she'd dated anyone she'd forgotten how to do it, and a bit of her wanted to stop the clock and breathe for a few minutes, just to settle everything down again and remind herself why she didn't do this.

But the clock didn't stop, and Alfredo was coming back, weaving between the tables, a bottle of Prosecco in one hand, two menus in the other, and he filled their glasses with a flourish. Luca lifted his and smiled at her. 'Welcome to Firenze, Isabelle.'

'Thank you.' She clinked her glass against his and sipped, the bubbles tickling the back of her throat as she met those hot, dark eyes. 'And thank you for bringing it to life for me. It was fabulous. Much more fun than trailing round alone.'

'My pleasure,' he murmured, his eyes locked on hers.

Oh, help. 'So—what should we eat?' she asked lightly, trying to break the tension, but it lingered for another second.

'The special's always good,' he said after a slight pause, and she dragged her mind back into order.

'Let's go for that, then,' she agreed, and tried to concentrate on the food, but she could hardly taste it. She was too conscious of the pressure of his leg against hers, the warmth in his eyes, the soft sound of his laughter wrapping round her and making her ache because it was so nearly over.

And then at last it came to an end; they'd finished their food, dragged their coffee out indefinitely, and their conversation had finally run dry. The day was officially done.

He set his napkin on the table and smiled wryly. 'Shall we make a move?' he suggested, and she felt a surge of regret.

He held out his hand to her, and after the tiniest hesitation, Isabelle put hers in it and stood up, desperately trying to ignore the sensation that raced up her arm. Her leg was still burning from the heat of his body, and when he'd stood up and moved away, she'd felt the loss of his warmth like an arctic blast. Crazy. He was just a man, just an ordinary man.

No. That was a lie, and she'd never been dishonest with herself. He was gorgeous—witty, intelligent, disarmingly frank, and his body, tall and powerfully built, with those midnight-dark eyes, made her go weak at the knees. His hair was slightly rumpled from the wind; she wanted to touch it, to thread her fingers through it and test the texture, and then draw her hand slowly over his jaw, letting the rasp of stubble graze her palm.

His lips, so firm, so full, made her ache to feel them. On her lips, but also on her cheeks, her eyelids, her throat, her breasts. Everywhere.

Relax, bella. I won't eat you.

Oh, lord! She looked away, dragging her eyes off him and bending to pick up her bag from the floor while she gathered her composure.

'I need the Ladies', she said.

'Good idea, I'll meet you back here,' he said, and she made her way into the sanctuary of the quiet room with relief.

What was happening to her? She never reacted like this to men! Never in a million years. Or twenty-eight, more to the point. Over a quarter of a century, and no man had ever made her heart beat fast or her skin heat or her body ache with a longing so intense it almost frightened her.

But Luca did. Luca made her body sing with joy at the slightest touch, and when she rejoined him and he rested his hand lightly against her spine to usher her out into the street, she could have been naked the effect on her was so powerful. It was as if he'd touched her intimately, found her secret places and stroked them with the slow, sure hand of a lover.

And now she was being ridiculous! He was just killing time after his interview, indulging in a little mild flirtation, and she'd do well to remember it. It was nothing personal, he was just exercising his natural charm, and there was certainly nothing intimate, for heaven's sake! And even if there was, nothing was going to come of it. She was only here for one more night, flying out in less than eight hours! She'd never had a one-night stand in her life, and she wasn't starting now. But she wished there was more time...

'Where's your hotel?' he asked, and she told him.

'That's good, it's just near here.'

He tucked her hand into his arm again, his smile gleaming white against his olive skin in the darkness, and she caught the faint tang of his aftershave and that warm, male scent that was becoming so familiar—the scent that was also drifting up to her from the scarf, snuggled so softly and intimately against her skin, almost as if he was holding her.

She shivered, and he shot her a quick glance. 'OK?'

'I'm fine,' she lied, but she wasn't, because it was the end of their time together and she wasn't sure she'd survive if he simply took her back to her hotel and dropped her off, whatever her scruples, because for some reason this night—no, this man—was different, and if he asked her...

Luca paused outside the entrance, staring down thoughtfully into her eyes, and she reached up and kissed his cheek, her warm breath whispering over his skin and setting it alight. 'Thank you for the most lovely day. You've been so kind, Luca.'

He didn't feel kind. He felt on fire, more alive than he had in years, and extraordinary reluctant to let her go, but there was no way...

‘What time’s your flight tomorrow morning?’

‘I have to be at the airport at five.’

He hesitated, not sure what was happening to him, just knowing he couldn’t walk away. Not from this, because this—this was different, and he’d deal with the consequences later.

‘It doesn’t have to end here,’ he said softly, and waited, his breath lodged in his throat, for her reply.

Isabelle’s heart was pounding now, because this was something she didn’t do. Never. She felt she was on the brink of a precipice—or at the gateway to a whole new era.

‘I don’t do this,’ she said in a whisper, but he heard and he laughed under his breath.

‘Nor do I.’

‘I—I can’t get involved.’

‘That’s OK.’

‘So—just tonight?’

He nodded slowly. ‘Sì. Just tonight, cara. If that’s what you want.’

Why not? she thought. It had been years now. She was too fussy to sleep with anyone just for the sake of it, not desperate enough to settle for mediocrity, and she was alone by choice.

But Luca—Luca did something to her that no man had ever done. He made her heart race, her blood heat, her body throb with need. There was absolutely nothing mediocre about him.

If she walked away from him now, she’d never know what it would have been like to make love with the most interesting and attractive man she’d ever met in her life. A man she could so easily, under other circumstances, have come to love.

And maybe it was time to let herself live again—if only for one night. Taking her courage in both hands, she met his eyes. ‘Your place or mine?’ she asked.

He let out his breath in a rough, choppy sigh, then his lips twisted into a wry little smile. ‘Yours is closer.’

Her heart nearly stopped, then started again with a vengeance as he took her hand and led her into the hotel. She picked up her key at the desk, her heart pounding, and they went up to her room in a taut, breathless silence, their fingers tightly meshed.

They’d hardly made it through the door before he reached for her, his mouth finding hers in a kiss she felt she’d been waiting for all her life. She dropped her bag on the floor, and somehow he peeled away her coat and his scarf that she was still wearing, and then his hands slid up and cradled her breasts and he gave a deep, guttural groan that turned her legs to jelly.

She whimpered, and as if it was what he’d been waiting for, he stripped the sweater off over her head, muttering incoherently as he pressed her back against the wall, his mouth on hers, his hands moulding her breasts again. His chest was heaving as she grabbed the front of his shirt and dragged it open, pinging buttons off in all directions and whimpering in frustration because she couldn’t get it down over his shoulders with his arms bent and his hands doing such incredible things to her nipples.

She gave up with the shirt, her hands moving to his waistband, and then he dragged his mouth away and dropped his forehead against hers, his hands catching hers and stopping their frenzied fumbling. ‘Wait,’ he growled, his breath sawing in and out of his lungs. ‘This is crazy. It’s too fast.’

Crazy? Too fast? Maybe, but when he stepped away and released her, she felt a huge sense of loss. She didn’t want to be away from him, not for a moment—but apparently that wasn’t what he had in mind.

He stared at her, his eyes on fire, and shook his head slowly, his hand coming up to cradle her cheek with incredible tenderness, and she could feel that it was shaking. ‘If we go on like this, it’ll all be over in seconds,’ he murmured roughly, ‘and I don’t want seconds, Isabella. I want hours. I want to take my time—savour every moment of this night. Touch you all over. Taste you.’

Her knees nearly buckled. Relax, bella. I won’t eat you.

‘Oh, Luca, please,’ she whimpered, and he closed his eyes and muttered something that sounded halfway between an oath and a prayer.

‘I need a shower first—come,’ he said, pushing open the bathroom door and leading her in before turning on the water, then he held out his hands out to her and drew her closer.

Gentle now, and garment by garment, he slowly stripped away the rest of her clothes, his knuckles grazing softly over her skin. She closed her eyes, suddenly shy, but he touched her cheek, tipping her face up to his so she could see the heat in his eyes, so close to hers.

‘You’re beautiful, cara,’ he said gruffly, his thumb dragging slowly over her lips. ‘Don’t be shy with me.’

She swallowed and flicked her tongue out to moisten her lips, and the tip caught his thumb. He paused, and she grew bolder, stroking it back and forth across the pad, then sucking it gently, nipping it between her teeth—just lightly, but it was enough to make him groan.

‘You’re going to drive me crazy,’ he whispered unsteadily, and stepping back a fraction, he shed his clothes in record time then stepped into the shower, holding out his hand for her.

Her heart hammered against her ribs, and she let her eyes absorb him—the sheer potent masculine beauty of his body, so beautifully sculpted, so taut, so exquisite that he could have been one of Michelangelo’s models—except this man would surely have shocked the matrons and terrified the virgins, she thought, stifling a bubble of slightly hysterical laughter, but the only thing that shocked and terrified her was her own reaction.

She wanted him—wanted to touch him—no, needed to touch him, to feel him, test the texture of that hot, wet skin beneath her palms, and so she took his hand and followed him into the shower, under the streaming water that pounded over them like a tropical storm, and let her roaming fingers explore him, investigating the stark contrast between the rough texture of his body hair and the wet silk of his skin, following the streaming water from his shoulders, over his deep, solid chest to the arrow of hair that her downwards.

She moved lower, her fingers trailing over the taut muscles of his abdomen, and his teeth clenched and he sucked in his breath with a hiss.

‘Cara, slowly,’ he groaned, and, easing away from her, he squirted shower gel onto his hands and started to wash her, his hands firm and almost impersonal as they touched her everywhere. If it hadn’t been for the blazing heat in his eyes she might have thought he was washing a child, but there was nothing of the nurturer in this man now, and when she filled her palms with shower gel and smoothed her hands over his body he gave a shuddering sigh, his breath hot against her face as he cupped her bottom and eased her against him. She felt the urgent pressure of his knee between her thighs and opened for him as his hand slid round and cradled the terrible, yearning ache that was building in her body.

‘Luca?’ she whispered, and as the water streamed over them his mouth found hers in a kiss so searing she thought she’d go up in flames. She felt the hot, sensual slide of his tongue, its probing so erotic, so explicit that she could scarcely breathe. And it wasn’t just his mouth. His hand was moving against her, freeing a wanton woman she hadn’t even known existed until this moment.

A woman who wanted him, this man she’d never met before tonight but would have trusted with her soul, because already, in some obscure way, it belonged to him.

She felt fevered. She thought she’d die if she didn’t have him, and then he hit the shower control, grabbed a towel and rubbed her roughly dry, then hauled it over his skin and threw it aside as he led her back into the bedroom.

His mouth found hers again, and then his thigh was between hers and he pressed her backwards until her legs hit the bed and he toppled her over, falling with her in a tangle of limbs into the centre of the mattress.

‘Isabella,’ he groaned, lifting his head to stare down at her, his hands shaking as they touched her. She was gorgeous. So beautiful. So perfect. So much woman. He wanted to go slowly but he couldn’t. He needed her, and his control was in tatters.

Slowly, he told himself. Slowly. Make it last. He lifted a damp strand of hair from her face and pressed a tender, lingering kiss to her lips, then turned his attention to those soft, generous breasts, first one, then the other, kneading them gently and rolling her tightly budded nipples between his fingers until she whimpered and arched up to him, and then using his knee to ease her thighs apart, he turned his head and stared down at where the soft nest of curls hid her from his sight.

Dio, he wanted her. Wanted to taste her, to touch her, to bury himself inside her...

His mouth closed over one nipple as his hand sought her again, found the hot, sleek moisture of her delicate folds, felt the tremble in her body as his thumb found the swollen bud and stroked it gently, probing her warmth, testing her.

‘Luca!’ she sobbed, bucking under him, and he hushed her softly and moved on, his tongue taking over where his thumb had left off, and she cried out and trembled, her shaking fingers knotting in his hair. ‘Oh, God, Luca, now, please!’

He couldn’t wait any longer. He felt as if he’d been waiting for her all his life, and he couldn’t wait any more. She was begging him, her voice cracking, and he moved over her, settling against her, feeling her body yield to him as he entered her with a long, slow thrust that nearly pushed him over the edge.

She gasped his name again, and he kissed her softly, trying to take it slowly, trying to give her time to adjust to him as he withdrew and thrust into her again, deeper this time, harder, bringing a tiny scream to her lips. He felt her hands clawing at him, her nails digging into his shoulders as she urged him on breathlessly, her body striving beneath him.

He needed no urging. He was on the brink, hanging on for her with the last shreds of his control, and then he couldn’t wait any more.

‘Now, cara, please, now,’ he grated, his body shaking with desperate restraint, and then he felt the first contraction, the convulsions deep within her body closing around him and drawing him ever deeper, and locking his mouth to hers in a desperate kiss, he drove into her again and again, until the waves came up and claimed him and he followed her into the boiling maelstrom of their release.

She couldn’t move.

He was sprawled across her, his head against her shoulder, his chest heaving, and she could feel the wild pounding of his heart gradually slowing until finally he lifted his head and stared down into her eyes.

‘Oh, Isabella,’ he whispered, and, wrapping her tenderly against his chest, he rolled onto his back, taking her with him so she lay draped across his body, her legs tangled with his, his hard, muscled thigh pressed against her tender flesh, still pulsing with the aftermath of the most incredible experience of her life.

She felt tears sting her eyes and blinked them away, but they still fell, and there was a stupid sob rising in her throat. She bit it down, but it escaped, and he tightened his arms and rocked her.

‘Hush, tesoro. It’s all right. I’ve got you.’

It was as if he knew how she felt, as if he felt it too, the amazing, incredible, tumultuous emotions that were cascading through her, and his hand stroked gently over her hair and soothed her, and gradually her limbs relaxed and she sank slowly into sleep.

Luca didn’t sleep. The street light filtered through the shutters and brought with it disturbing and intrusive thoughts—thoughts that he dismissed for now. He’d deal with the consequences later. For now—for now he had Isabella, and nothing else mattered.

He turned his head and gazed wonderingly at the sleeping woman by his side. He’d never known it was possible to feel such a powerful storm of emotions. It was as if he’d come out of a coma. Everything felt—hell, it just felt, and so much more than it ever had.

He reached out a hand, then stopped before he touched her, because although he wanted her again, he also wanted to watch her, to lie there beside her and absorb her while she slept so peacefully at his side. And if he touched her, the fire would start again. He'd never known a fire like it, he thought, and he wondered how he could have felt so much for a woman he didn't know. Because he didn't know her. He knew hardly anything about her. She might be a real fruitcake, a neurotic, clinging vine—or, worse, a money-grubbing little witch out for all she could get. He'd had it with that sort, big time.

But she wasn't any of those things. She was a good, decent woman who didn't do this. He knew that, from the straightforward honesty of her response to him. He was just trying to talk himself out of something that scared the living daylight out of him, because if this was what it felt like, his life would never be the same again.

'Luca?'

He realised she was looking at him, and he put away his dark thoughts and dredged up a smile. 'Hi,' he murmured, and, leaning over, he brushed her lips with his. 'Did you sleep well?'

'Mmm. Fabulous. What about you? Are you OK?'

'Great. Fantastic,' he told her, realising that it was true. He felt better than he had for months—years—and it was all down to her. He kissed her again, then dropped his head against hers and sighed softly. She'd been so responsive, so passionate and tender and honest, and it had blown him away.

Made him forget all sorts of things he had no business forgetting—including one rather vital and critical thing that he just couldn't believe he'd overlooked.

He lifted his head and met her soft, sleep-hazed eyes. 'Mind if I ask you a personal question?'

'No,' she said slowly, as if she wasn't too sure.

'Are you, by a miracle, on the Pill?'

Isabelle's eyes widened, and she stared at him in consternation. She was—only to regulate her cycle, but it worked just the same. Which was as well, since she'd forgotten about contraception completely. Forgotten everything, even how to breathe at some points. And the Pill would only protect her from pregnancy. Oh, what an idiot.

'Yes, I am,' she said, and his eyes drifted shut, his relief obvious. He muttered something in Italian, then opened them again and grinned a little wryly, making her heart flutter.

'Sorry. I just—forgot about things like that, last night, which is crazy, because I never forget, but—it was amazing.' His voice softened and he reached out for her with his hand. 'You were amazing. Incredible.'

'So were you,' she said, feeling colour mount her cheeks and the now-familiar heat invade her body, but she ignored it, her brain, brought to its senses now, suddenly remembering all the other things she'd forgotten in addition to the pill she really must remember to take later on. 'Um—I don't really know how to say this, but—well, you don't need to worry about getting anything from me.'

'Oh, Isabella.' His fingers touched her cheek gently. 'Don't worry, you're safe, cara. I wouldn't do that to you.'

She felt a wave of relief, then common sense dawned again. 'Luca, what's the time?'

'Nearly four.'

No! She swallowed hard. 'I have to go soon.'

'I know. My car's not far away. I'll get it while you pack.'

He gave her a tender, lingering kiss, and then got out of bed. She watched as he pulled on his clothes—the shirt with no buttons, the crumpled suit, damp from the bathroom floor, and she wanted to cry. 'I'll see you outside in fifteen minutes,' he said, kissing her again, and closed the door softly.

He drove her to Pisa airport, and as they turned in he said, 'I'll park and come in with you—get a coffee or something.'

‘No. I couldn’t bear to say goodbye in public,’ she said, wondering how she’d even do it in private, and so he pulled into the drop-off zone, cut the engine and turned to her, his eyes shadowed by the streetlights.

‘Hey, don’t look like that,’ he murmured.

‘I can’t help it. I don’t want it to end,’ she said, unable to lie to him. ‘It’s been so special, Luca. Thank you.’

‘Don’t thank me—and it doesn’t have to end,’ he said softly, as if he’d read her mind, and she shrugged.

‘Of course it does—and, anyway, we said just one night.’

‘Can’t I change your mind?’

She shook her head. ‘It’s silly getting involved. Long-distance relationships never work.’ Relationships, full stop. And it might be better to let it go than to ruin the memories with reality. At least this way she could treasure them unsullied.

‘There are ways,’ he said, oddly reluctant to let her go without some means of contacting her. ‘Tell me your number, cara. I’ll call you when I’m next in London.’

She shook her head. ‘No, Luca. That wasn’t the deal—and I need to go now, or I’ll miss my check-in.’

Oh, lord. She didn’t want to go, whatever she’d said about long-distance relationships. She didn’t want to leave him—couldn’t bear to—and, crazily, she thought she was going to cry. She tried to smile, but her mouth wouldn’t cooperate and she felt her eyes welling. ‘Look—I have to go.’

‘I know.’

He took her case from the boot and stood staring down at her, his eyes brooding and unreadable, and she flung her arms round him and hugged him, the tears welling once more. ‘Thank you, again, Luca. Thank you for everything,’ she said, and he shook his head.

‘Hush, cara,’ he murmured, and, lifting his hands, he cupped her cheek and brushed the tears from her face, then leaned in and touched his lips to hers.

It was a gentle kiss, tender and comforting, but then something shifted, and he threaded his fingers through her hair and anchored her head and kissed her with all the passion, all the incredible sensuality that he’d shown her last night.

Then finally he lifted his head, his breathing harsh, his face taut, but his fingers on her cheek were gentle. ‘Give me your number—your address. I’ll come and see you.’

‘No—it’s silly, Luca. We live too far apart—you’re going to be working in Florence.’

‘Maybe not. Isabelle—take my card. Call me, even if it’s just to tell me you’re home safe. Please. And if you change your mind...’

She hesitated, then took it and stuffed it into her pocket. ‘Oh—your scarf!’ she said, reaching for it, but he stilled her hands.

‘Keep it. You’ll be cold on the plane.’

She nodded, her eyes filling. ‘Thank you.’ She blinked away the tears. ‘I have to go,’ she said, choked. ‘Goodbye, Luca.’

‘Goodbye, Isabella,’ he said softly, and his hand fell to his side, leaving her desolate. Grabbing her case, she ran into the airport without a backward glance before she made a fool of herself and started to cry again.

Luca watched her go, shocked at the emotion that ripped through him. He had to hold himself back, force himself not to follow her into the terminal and make her stay. He didn’t know what had happened to him, but for some reason, everything felt different. Real. And he couldn’t bear to let her go.

He waited until she was out of sight. Gave her time to come back, to call him.

Then he got back into his car and drove slowly out of the airport, his mind still full of the woman who’d blown his world apart...

CHAPTER TWO

HER JOURNEY WAS awful.

The flight was delayed, then they hit turbulence over the Alps and just about everyone was ill—including her—and by the time she got home she felt wrung out. She groped for her house keys, and found his card in her pocket where he'd tucked it as she was leaving him.

Luca Valtieri, she read, and a mobile number. She hadn't known his surname. It hadn't really mattered, not then. Not now, really. She wasn't going to see him again.

But she missed him.

Ridiculously so, with an ache that was almost physical.

Just a quick call, she promised herself—just long enough to hear his voice and tell him she was safe. And she could withhold her number so he wouldn't be able to call her back. That way she'd have control of the relationship—

No! It wasn't a relationship. She wouldn't let it be! But she was desperate to hear his voice, to have some kind of contact with the man who'd stolen her heart so suddenly.

So she rang him, and after a few moments she got his voicemail. She rang it again, just to hear his message, to hear the low rumble of his voice, the crisp message at odds with the man she'd spent last night with, and finally she spoke.

'Hi, Luca, it's Isabelle, I'm sorry I've missed you. I'm back. And thank you—for everything.'

Then she hung up, resisting the urge to give him her number. She could always call him again. Next week, perhaps. Or tomorrow.

No! Not tomorrow. Not next week, either. She was being ridiculous. She didn't want a relationship. Last time was enough for a lifetime.

She swallowed hard and then on impulse she turned on her computer and typed 'Luca Valtieri' into a search engine, expecting nothing, really, maybe a paper or two, some medical reference—and got a whole bunch of stuff.

Extracts from articles in medical journals, research material, awards—but nothing personal, nothing to tell her more about the man himself except the fact that he was clearly very active and involved with his field of medicine, and he'd worked with a lot of English consultants whose names she recognised.

Silly her. She'd fallen—and how!—for a truly gorgeous man with a devastating smile and a kiss that had wiped out all the common sense she'd been born with, and not only that, he was funny and intelligent and dedicated. Thank God she'd refused to see him again. He was much too dangerous to her peace of mind but, oh, she missed him.

Oh, well. She'd get over it. She had before. It wasn't the first time her heart had been broken, although that time, of course, she'd been betrayed. Idly she wondered how she would have felt about Luca if she'd been able to trust him with her heart, but she couldn't turn the clock back and she had no idea how it would feel to have that much faith in a man.

Impossible. And if she'd allowed herself to fall for Luca, how much more would it have hurt when it all went wrong?

She swallowed hard. At least she'd had the sense to withhold her number, so he wouldn't be able to contact her.

And, besides, there wasn't time in her life to mope. Until her hospital's maternity unit refurb was completed she was working in another unit not nearly so easy to get to, so it was just as well Luca was out of her life because, frankly, with the extra travelling, she wouldn't have time for a relationship at the moment.

And if she told herself that often enough, maybe she'd believe it...

He'd missed her call.

He swore softly and dropped into a chair, resting his head in his hands. Damn. Of all the stupid, stupid things, to forget to put his phone on charge when he'd got back to the flat. But maybe...

He scrolled through to his incoming calls, and the hope died. 'Withheld. Damn.'

'Maybe she'll ring again,' his brother suggested.

He shook his head and swallowed hard. 'No—no, she won't. It doesn't matter. She didn't want to see me again anyway. I just wanted to—'

'Talk to her?' Gio finished softly for him when he broke off, and he nodded, his throat curiously tight. 'So are you going to go and find her?'

He shook his head. 'No. We agreed it was only for one night. I'll just have to live with it.' But hell, he didn't want to. He hadn't realised how much he was looking forward to speaking to her again—maybe talking her into letting him see her when he was back in London.

'So—what next?'

He let the air out of his lungs on a long, slow breath and met his brother's eyes. 'I don't know. Maybe I'll go back to London and finish off my research.'

'You could look her up—it's time you had a bit of fun. Where does she live?'

'Herne Hill, but I have no idea where or I'd go and try to talk her into seeing me again.'

'You must be slipping. It's not like you to have to chase after a woman. Did you disappoint her last night?'

He met his brother's mocking eyes with disgust. 'No, I did not—not that it's your damn business.'

Gio shrugged. 'So—what about the job? Mama will be disappointed if you go back to London. She was looking forward to having you closer to home.'

'She'd cope.'

'Of course—and who knows? You may even bring home a bride. Now, that would make her happy.'

He grunted and stifled the little leap in his chest that felt remarkably like hope. 'Unlikely. I have to convince her first—and, anyway, aren't you jumping the gun a bit? It was only one night.'

'Of course it was,' Gio said soothingly, and smiled. 'Just promise me one thing—let me draw up the pre-nup. And don't even contemplate getting hitched without one.'

He laughed. 'Relax, Gio. I'm not going to marry her. It's not on my agenda.'

'We'll see. Coffee?'

Luca gave his phone one last regretful look and slid it into his pocket. 'Why not?'

'What's going on?'

The group of women around the central nursing station didn't take their eyes off the office door.

'Richard Crossland's got someone with him. And he's a hunk,' her friend Sarah said in a stage whisper. 'He's been in there ages—they must be about to come out. I swear he's the most beautiful man I've ever seen.'

'Really.'

'Really. Really really really. Even you'd think so, Little Miss Fussy-Pants.'

Not fussy enough, apparently, or she wouldn't be moping about now with a broken heart six weeks down the line, Isabelle thought, and walked away towards the staff room to dump her bag. The Tube had been delayed and she didn't even have time for a cup of tea now. She certainly didn't have time to stand and ogle some stud who the girls thought was so damn marvelous.

There was a little commotion behind her, a sudden burst of activity that could only mean the office door had opened and they'd been caught staring. Well, serve them right, she thought, and glanced over her shoulder.

And stopped dead in her tracks.

'Luca?'

The word was soundless, hardly even a breath, but he turned his head and met her eyes, and the bottom dropped out of her world.

‘Isabella.’

He crossed the ward in two strides, his warm hands cupping her shoulders, sending a shock wave through her body. She eased herself away from his grasp, horribly conscious of their rapt audience, her heart drumming against her ribs like a wild thing.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asked, choked by a flood of emotion that was threatening to unravel her.

‘I could ask you the same thing. Your hospital’s miles away.’

‘Not nearly as far as Florence. Anyway, the unit’s—’

‘Shut for a refurb. I know that, you told me. They wouldn’t tell me where you’d been relocated to, though. They were—well, let’s say they were profoundly unhelpful. It didn’t make it any easier to find you. So—how are you?’

She ignored that, her heart pounding as she took in his words. ‘You were looking for me?’

‘Si—for the last six weeks. I’d given up.’

Six weeks? Ever since...

‘We weren’t going to see each other again,’ she pointed out, trying to sound composed while her heart was busy breaking all over again just at the sight of him.

‘No. You didn’t want me.’ His mouth twisted into a wry smile, and her heart flip-flopped again and then contracted. Want him? She’d never stopped wanting him, not for a moment.

Whatever, it didn’t alter the facts.

‘It doesn’t matter anyway, does it?’ she said quietly, conscious of the stares of the other midwives still clustered round the nursing station with their mouths hanging open. ‘What I want. I mean, you’re here anyway, regardless of my feelings.’

‘What?’ He gave a startled cough of laughter and shook his head. ‘Of course it matters. I’m not here to see you—I didn’t know you worked here.’

‘So why are you here?’

‘I’m an old friend of Richard’s. He heard I was back in London and asked me if I could help out. I owed him a favour—so I’m here. I swear, I had no idea you’d be here or I would have spoken to you first. Is it going to be a problem?’

She shook her head, feeling incredibly foolish and naïve. ‘No. Of course not. Sorry, I misunderstood.’ Of course he wasn’t here for her. She was being ridiculous. Neurotic.

‘So—why are you in London anyway?’

He smiled wryly. ‘Finishing off some research—and I wanted to see you again if I could find you.’

No. She felt a flicker of panic. She didn’t want this—didn’t want to see him again. It was too much.

Her body was calling her a liar, and her heart was racing, but her mind was in panic mode and she shook her head and backed away.

‘Luca, I can’t talk about this here. I have to work.’

‘So do I, now. But later—’

‘No, Luca,’ she said firmly, shaking her head and hanging on to the last shreds of her dignity. ‘I told you I didn’t want to see you again, and I meant it. I’m sorry, I don’t want to talk to you, either now or later. Please—just leave me alone.’

‘Isabelle, please, give me a few minutes—’

‘No. Go away, Luca. Please.’

Turning on her heel, she ignored his protest, walked into the staff room, closed the door behind her and burst into tears.

‘Izzie?’

‘Go away, Sarah,’ she mumbled, her hands pressed hard over her mouth to keep in the sobs that were tearing her apart.

‘No. Oh, sweetheart, what’s happened? Who is he? What did he say to you?’

She dragged herself together, sniffing hard and lifting her chin firmly. ‘Nothing. Really—please—I’ll be fine. I have to go to handover. I—I can’t—’

‘Rubbish. Here, you need a tissue and a cup of tea.’

‘No. Well, yes, the tissue,’ she said with a fractured laugh, ‘but I haven’t got time for tea. I’ve just got to get on.’

‘So who is he?’

‘Luca? He’s a guy I met in Florence.’

Sarah’s eyes widened. ‘Really? Oh, my God—why ever did you come back?’

She laughed a little crazily. ‘Because it was just one day? Because I have a life here, and he lives in Italy?’

‘Well, it doesn’t look like it. He’s Richard’s new locum, covering the maternity leave post.’

‘What?’ Shock nearly took the legs out from under her, and Sarah hugged her hard and steered her to a chair. ‘Sarah, you’re joking. He said he was doing Richard a favour, helping him out. I assumed he meant some research or something.’

Sarah shook her head. ‘Sorry, Izzie, he’s here, and he’s working in the unit, and you’re going to have to see him every day.’

‘Every...’ She dragged in a lungful of air. ‘Oh, God, no! I’m going on holiday. How long’s he here for?’

‘I don’t know. Weeks, I suppose. Months, maybe.’

Months?

‘Will you be OK with that? Can you do it? Because I don’t think you’ve got that much holiday,’ Sarah said with a vain attempt at a smile.

Probably not, but—work with him? For months? Oh, lord. Maybe she could get a transfer? Or maybe she should just get a grip.

‘Of course I can,’ she lied, straightening her spine and blowing her nose hard. ‘I’ll have to. Just keep him away from me, and I’ll be fine.’

And without giving Luca another thought—well, that was a lie, but she had to pretend—she threw herself into her work. Which would have been fine, of course, if it hadn’t been for the first labouring woman she checked.

Superficially, there was nothing wrong, but it was her third baby and third babies could often be a bit different. The notes contained no special warnings, the last ultrasound scan had been fine and there was technically nothing to worry about. Certainly nothing had been mentioned at handover, but the moment she went into the woman’s room, she just felt a little tingle of suspicion.

‘Hi, Julie, I’m Isabelle, I’m going to be looking after you now during your labour,’ she said with a smile as she ran her eyes over her patient and skimmed the notes. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Oh, I love the epidural,’ she said with a heartfelt chuckle. ‘It’s marvellous. Just like going to the dentist, only I’m going to have a baby, not a filling!’

Isabelle smiled and checked her over, listening to the baby’s heart with the foetal stethoscope. Was that a little hitch?

‘Can I just turn you on your side, Julie? I can’t quite hear.’ She helped the woman adjust her position, checked again, then shook her head. ‘I still can’t hear enough. I’d like to put the monitor on you to get a better feel for what’s going on.’

‘Sure. It does seem awfully slow, this labour.’

‘Well, that can be the epidural. Because you’re lying down, you aren’t getting any help from gravity, but I think it’s just as well to check, don’t you?’

She was setting up the machine as she worked, explaining to Julie how the cardiotocograph would give her the baby's heart rate and the pressure of the uterus, and also, most importantly, the correlation of the heart rate to the contractions.

And, sure enough, every time Julie had a contraction, the baby's heart rate dipped.

'So is there a problem?' she asked, looking more worried now.

'I'm not sure. Probably not, but it is dragging on a bit and I don't think your baby's very happy at the moment, so I'll get a doctor to take a look at you to be on the safe side,' she said with a reassuring smile. 'We might need to hurry things along a little.'

She stuck her head out of the door and looked around, just as Sarah came out of the sluice. 'You couldn't page the on-call register for me, could you? I've got a query with Mrs Marchant.'

'Sure—oh, there he is. Luca, Izzie wants you.'

Oh, perfect. Luca—of course, looking more gorgeous than a man had any right to look in shapeless scrubs. And Sarah's phrasing left a lot to be desired, as well! Oh, hell.

She straightened her shoulders and tried to find a professional face. She could do this. She could...

Luca walked towards her, wishing he hadn't taken this locum job to help his old friend out, wishing he'd just found Isabelle and spoken to her, but when he'd walked out of Richard's office this morning and seen her again, it had seemed like the answer to his prayers.

Now he wasn't at all sure. Ever since he'd set eyes on her again he'd been hoping that being forced to work together might give them a chance to get to know each other, find out if they had anything worth pursuing, but her face was closed, her lips pressed tightly together, and he realised that working with her could be a nightmare. She'd got issues of some sort. God knows what, but, given time, he was sure he'd be able to break through them. He had before—and how. He only hoped that he'd be able to remain professional until then, because all he wanted to do right now was wrap his arms around her and tell her it was all right—and if he tried it, she'd probably kill him. Thank God there was a patient in the way!

'Problems?' he mouthed as he reached her, and she nodded.

'Maybe,' she murmured quietly, and he realised with relief that she was going to behave as if nothing had happened—for now, at least. 'Julie Marchant, third pregnancy, straightforward previous history, admitted late last night in early labour. She had an epidural at five a.m.—so that's three hours ago, she's had two top-ups, but progress has slowed right down even though she's virtually fully dilated, and there's a dipping foetal heart rate—nothing much, but I'm just...'

She ground to a halt with a little shrug and bit her lip, and he dragged his eyes off it and made himself concentrate.

'Is the head high?' he asked.

'A little. It's probably nothing, just the mother's position...'

But she looked troubled, and he knew better than to ignore a troubled midwife. He gave a terse nod. 'Give me ten seconds, I have to make a note of something and I'll be with you.'

Isabelle went back to her patient, and moments later he joined her, squirting gel onto his hands and rubbing it in as he smiled at their patient and tried to focus on her.

'Hi, Mrs Marchant, I'm Luca. May I call you Julie? Tell me, how are you feeling?' he asked, but as she talked and he probed gently with his questions, he was checking the CTG, watching their patient carefully, his eyes flicking to Isabelle's from time to time for confirmation of Julie's words.

And then, as much to hear her voice as for the information she'd give him, he said, 'Isabelle, could you run over the notes with me?'

Isabelle, she thought with a stupid tinge of regret, not Isabella, with that wonderful, slow roll of her name over his tongue, tasting every syllable. Damn. And she needed to concentrate.

So she filled him in again, showed him the charts and pointed out her concerns without alarming the patient, although there was nothing much to alarm her, anyway—nothing very untoward,

nothing drastic, really, at all, and as she was telling him about it she thought, Oh, lord, he thinks I'm overreacting, because the baby's heart rate was only dropping a tiny bit—but...

'She's contracting,' she said, forgetting the charts for a moment, and he looked back at their patient with a smile that should have melted her bones, murmured, 'May I?' and laid his hands over her abdomen, the fingers of one splayed over the baby's head to feel for its descent, watching the monitor as the contraction progressed. This time, she was both pleased and concerned to see that the dip in heart rate was more noticeable. So she hadn't imagined it—and it was a worry.

He made a small, thoughtful sound and his eyes flicked to Isabelle's. 'She's fully dilated?'

'Yes, except for an anterior lip,' she told him, hoping that he was going to believe her and not give Julie an unnecessary internal examination, 'and she's been in established labour for four hours.' So the head should be lower, and coming down with every contraction, not staying stubbornly high as if something—the cord?—was preventing its descent.

'Hmm,' he said again, then looked back at Julie. 'I think your baby might be a bit of an acrobat,' he said with another of those smiles. 'The cord could be a bit tangled, and if that's the case, we need to untangle it for him. Unfortunately this means a C-section, but it's nothing to worry about and you have an epidural already, so you're all set. We'll take you up now, there's a theatre free. Is there anyone here with you?'

'No, my husband's taking the children to school and getting some food in. I was taking so long—oh, damn! Can we wait for him?'

He shook his head, busily disconnecting her from the machines and kicking the brakes off the bed. 'No, your baby's not comfy so I'm not happy to wait, but we'll look after you, you don't need to be afraid. Isabelle will stay with you. I'll get someone to contact your husband—do we have a mobile number for him?'

'Um—I think so.'

'OK. Don't worry, we'll deal with it. Isabelle, could you come to Theatre with Mrs Marchant?'

'Sure. I'll just hand over my other patients to Sarah—'

'She'll understand. Come on, let's go—we can't miss the theatre slot!' he said with a grin at their patient, but Isabelle picked up the hidden meaning and pulled the bed out from the wall, relieved not only for Julie but for herself that he'd taken her concern so seriously.

Sarah must have seen them go, because they were ready and waiting in Theatre, and Julie was on the table and draped in moments.

'OK, time to meet your baby,' he said the second he was scrubbed, and Isabelle ran in after him, her gown still trailing, and watched him do the fastest section she'd ever seen.

'Good call,' he murmured to Isabelle, clamping and cutting the cord which was wrapped several times round the baby's neck, and with a smile for the mother, he eased the tiny girl out and handed her instantly to the waiting neonatal team while Isabelle wondered what it was about him that his praise could mean quite so much to her. But then she stopped thinking about that, because the baby was silent, and in the normally noisy theatre they could have heard a pin drop.

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