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Desire

THE BILLIONAIRE'S
BEDSIDE MANNER

Robyn Grady

HER INNOCENCE,
HIS CONQUEST

Jules Bennett

Robyn Grady

**The Billionaire's Bedside Manner /
Her Innocence, His Conquest: The
Billionaire's Bedside Manner /
Her Innocence, His Conquest**

«HarperCollins»

Grady R.

The Billionaire's Bedside Manner / Her Innocence, His Conquest:
The Billionaire's Bedside Manner / Her Innocence, His Conquest /
R. Grady — «HarperCollins»,

The Billionaire's Bedside Manner Billionaire Mateo Celeca had an unexpected beautiful and mysterious visitor on his holiday. Bailey Ross claimed his grandmother had sent her, so he took her with him...to Paris. Being with Mateo soon made Bailey forget all the reasons she'd vowed to avoid romantic entanglements. But falling into bed with him could lead her dangerously close to revealing all her secrets...and falling in love. Her Innocence, His Conquest Architecture kingpin and expert playboy Zach Marcum gets what he wants – both on the job and in the bedroom. Until sexy, independent and impossible-to-ignore Ana Clark charges into his life. Discovering she's a virgin makes the seduction stakes even greater, as Zach crosses the line from business to pleasure...

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“I didn’t ask you to stay here for this.”

Looming above her, everything seemed to still as he searched her eyes in a world of midnight shadows. His deep, low voice seemed to fill the room.

She drew an aimless pattern through the hair at the base of his throat.

“I know.”

“Although I’m not sorry you agreed.”

She matched his grin. “I’m not sorry you asked.”

He dropped a tender kiss at the side of her mouth, a barely there touch that shot a fountain of sparks through her every fiber.

“Come with me to France,” he murmured against her lips.

She groaned. The temptation was huge. She’d said no and had meant it. She was starting a job Monday. She didn’t want to take more charity. But those considerations didn’t seem quite so solid since he’d carried her to his bed.

Dear Reader,

I’m a firm believer in the adage, *Every cloud has a silver lining*. Some horrible event reduces you to tears. You’re wondering how the heck you’ll ever pick yourself up and get rid of the sick, nasty feeling crouched in the pit of your gut. Then, as a direct consequence of that knock, something wonderful occurs. Something you might never have otherwise been brave enough to try or accept. Pain is transformed into hope. Into success.

When *The Billionaire’s Bedside Manner* opens, the heroine, Bailey Ross, is in a bad place, emotionally and financially. She’s arrived back in Australia from an overseas sabbatical that she’d hoped would be both enlightening and memorable. Instead, she’d escaped a dangerous situation in Italy by the skin of her teeth. Now she only wants to regroup ... get back on her feet and repay Mama Celeca, the lady who helped her when no one else could.

Mama C’s grandson, obstetrician Mateo Celeca, doesn’t swallow Bailey’s hard-luck story. In fact, Mateo could be convinced that Ms. Ross is an opportunist—a con, to be less polite. She’s such a master that even *he* is not immune to her manipulations. That he should invite Bailey to accompany him on his annual jaunt to France is a surprise to them both. But what they discover there changes their lives—and ideas about each other and love—forever.

I hope you enjoy reading Bailey and Mateo’s silver-lining story!

Best wishes,

Robyn

About the Author

ROBYN GRADY was first published with Harlequin in 2007. Her books have since featured regularly on bestseller lists and at award ceremonies, including The National Readers' Choice Award, The Booksellers' Best Award, Cataromance Reviewers' Choice Award and Australia's prestigious Romantic Book of the Year Award.

Robyn lives on Queensland's beautiful Sunshine Coast with her real-life hero husband and three daughters. When she can be dragged away from tapping out her next story, Robyn visits the theater, the beach and the mall (a lot!). To keep fit she jogs (and shops) and dances with her youngest to Hannah Montana.

Robyn believes writing romance is the best job on the planet and she loves to hear from her readers. So drop by www.robyngrady.com and pass on your thoughts!

For the gorgeous Jade Pocklington for her input on all things French!

With thanks to my editor, Shana Smith, for her unfailing support and advice and belief in my stories.

One

“Just shout if it’s a bad time to drop in.”

The instant the words left her mouth, Bailey Ross watched the man she had addressed—the man she knew must be Doctor Mateo Celeca—brace his wide shoulders and spin around on his Italian, leather-clad feet. Brow furrowed, he cocked his head and studied her eyes so intently the awareness made Bailey’s cheeks warm and knees go a little weak. Mama Celeca had said her obstetrician grandson was handsome, but from memory the expression “super stud” was never discussed.

When Bailey had arrived at this exclusive Sydney address moments ago, she’d hitched her battered knapsack higher as she’d studied first the luggage, set neatly by that door, then the broad back of a masculine frame standing alongside. Busy checking his high-tech security system, Mateo Celeca had no idea he’d had company. Bailey wasn’t normally one to show up unannounced, but today was an exception.

Remembering manners, Mateo’s bemused expression eased into a smile ... genial but also guarded.

“Forgive me,” he said in a deep voice that hinted at his Mediterranean ancestry. “Do we know each other?”

“Not really, no. But your grandmother should have rung. I’m Bailey Ross.” She drove down a breath and thrust out her hand. But when Dr. Celeca only narrowed his gaze, as if suspecting her of some offense, Bailey’s smile dropped. “Mama Celeca did phone ... didn’t she?”

“I received no phone call.” Sterner this time, that frown returned and his informal stance squared. “Is Mama all right?”

“She’s great.”

“As thin as ever?”

“I wouldn’t say thin. After enjoying so much of her Pandoro, I’m not so thin anymore, either.”

At her grin, Mateo’s cagey expression lightened. A stranger lands on your elite North Shore doorstep with a half-baked story, looking a mess after fifteen hours in the air, who wouldn’t dig a little deeper? But anyone who knew Mama Celeca knew her delicious creamy layer-cake.

Looking like a sentinel guarding his palace, Mateo patiently folded his arms over the white button-down shirt shielding his impressive chest. Bailey cleared her throat and explained.

“This past year I’ve backpacked around Europe. I spent the last months in Italy in Mama Celeca’s town. We became close.”

“She’s a wonderful woman.”

“She’s very generous,” Bailey murmured, remembering Mama’s final charitable act. She’d as good as saved Bailey’s life. Bailey would never be able to repay her, although she was determined to try.

When a shadow dimmed the light in the doctor’s intelligent dark eyes, fearing she’d said too much, Bailey hurried on.

“She made me promise that when I arrived back in Australia, first thing, I’d drop by and say hello.” She stole another glance at his luggage. “Like I said ... not a good time.”

No use delaying her own day, either. Now that she was home, she needed to decide what her next step in life would be. An hour ago she’d suffered a setback. Vicky Jackson, the friend she’d hoped to stay with for a couple of days, was out of town. Now she couldn’t go forward without first finding a place to sleep—and finding a way to pay for it.

Mateo Celeca was still studying her. A pulse in his strong jaw began to beat before his focus lowered to his luggage.

Bailey straightened. *Time to go.*

Before she could take her leave, however, the doctor interjected. “I’m going overseas myself.”

“To Italy?”

“Among other places.”

Bailey frowned. “Mama didn’t mention it.”

“This time it’ll be a surprise.”

When he absently rotated the platinum band of his wristwatch, Bailey took her cue and slid one foot back.

“Well, give her my love,” she said. “Hope you have a great trip.”

But, turning to leave, a hand on her arm pulled her up, and in more ways than one. His grip wasn’t overly firm, but it was certainly hot and naturally strong. The skin on skin contact was so intense, it didn’t tingle so much as shoot a bright blue flame through her blood. The sensation left her fizzing and curiously warm all over. How potent might Mateo Celeca’s touch be if they kissed?

“I’ve been rude,” he said as his hand dropped away. “Please. Come in. I don’t expect my cab for a few minutes yet.”

“I really shouldn’t—”

“Of course you should.”

Stepping aside, he nodded at the twelve-foot-high door at the same time she caught the scent of his aftershave ... subtle, woodsy. Wonderfully male. Every one of her pheromones sat up and took note. But that was only one more reason to decline his invitation. After all she’d been through—given how narrowly she’d escaped—she’d vowed to stay clear of persuasive, good-looking men.

She shook her head. “I really can’t.”

“Mama would have my head if she knew I turned a friend away.” He pretended to frown. “You wouldn’t want her to be upset with me, would you?”

Pressing her lips together, she shifted her feet and, thinking of Mama, reluctantly surrendered. “I guess not.”

“Then it’s settled.”

But then, suddenly doubtful again, he glanced around.

“You just flew in?” He asked and she nodded. He eyed her knapsack. “And this is all your luggage?”

Giving a lame smile, she eased past. “I travel light.”

His questioning look said, *very*.

Mateo watched his unexpected guest enter his spacious foyer. *Sweet*, he noted, his gaze sweeping over her long untreated fair hair. Modestly spoken. Even more modestly dressed.

Arching a brow, Mateo closed the door.

He wasn’t convinced.

The seemingly unrehearsed sway of hips in low-waisted jeans, no makeup, few possessions ... Bailey Ross had described his grandmother as “very generous,” and it was true. In her later years Mama had become an easy touch. He didn’t doubt she might have fallen for this woman’s lost-kitten look and his gut—as well as past experience—said Miss Ross had taken full advantage of that.

But Mama was also huge on matchmaking. Perhaps Bailey Ross was here simply because his grandmother had thought she and her grandson might hit it off. Given how she tried to set him up with a “nice Italian girl” whenever he visited, it was more than possible.

His first instinct had been to send this woman on her way ... but he was curious, and had some time to spare. His cab wasn’t due for ten minutes.

Taking in her surroundings, his visitor was turning a slow three-sixty beneath the authentic French chandelier that hung from the ornately molded second-story ceiling. The crystal beads cast moving prisms of light over her face as she admired the antiques and custom-made furnishings.

“Dr. Celeca, your home is amazing.” She indicated the staircase. “I can imagine Cinderella in her big gown and glass slippers floating down those stairs.”

Built in multicolored marble, the extravagant flight split midway into separate channels, which led to opposite wings of the house. The design mimicked the Paris Opera House, and while the French might lay claim to the Cinderella fable, he smiled and pointed out, “No glass-slippered maidens hiding upstairs, I’m afraid.”

She didn’t seem surprised. “Mama mentioned you were single.”

“Mentioned or repeated often?” He said with a crooked, leading grin.

“Guess it’s no secret she’s proud of you,” Bailey admitted. “And that she’d like a great-grandchild or two.”

Be that as it may, he wouldn’t be tying any matrimonial knots in the foreseeable future. He’d brought enough children into the world. His profession—and France—were enough for him.

She moved to join him. Her smile sunny enough to melt an iceberg, her eyes incredibly blue, Bailey and Mateo descended a half dozen marble steps and entered the main reception room. Standing among the French chateau classic decor, pausing before the twenty-foot-high Jacobean fireplace, his guest looked sorely out of place. But, he had to admit, not in a bad way. She radiated *fresh*—even as she suppressed a traveler’s weary yawn.

Was there reason to doubt her character? Had she fleeced his grandmother or was he being overly suspicious? Mama could be “very generous” in other ways, after all.

“So, what’s first on the itinerary?” She asked, lowering into a settee.

“West coast of Canada.” Mateo took the single saloon seat. “A group of friends who’ve been skiing at the same resort for years put on an annual reunion.” The numbers had slowly dwindled, however. Most of the guys were married now. Some divorced. The gathering didn’t have the same feel as the old days, sadly. This year he wasn’t looking forward to it. “Then on to New York to catch up with some professional acquaintances,” he went on. “Next it’s France.”

“You have friends in Paris? My parents honeymooned there. It’s supposed to be a gorgeous city.”

“I sponsor a charitable institution in the north.”

Her eyebrows lifted as she sat back. “What kind of charity?”

“Children without homes. Without parents.” To lead into what he really wanted to know—to see if she’d rise to any bait—he added, “I like to give where I can.” When she bowed her head to hide a smile, a ball of unease coiled low in his stomach. With some difficulty, he kept his manner merely interested. “Have I said something funny?”

“Just that Mama always said you were a good man.” Those glittering blue eyes lifted and met his again. “Not that I doubted her.”

Mateo’s chest tightened and he fought the urge to tug an ear or clear his throat. This woman was either a master of flattery or as nice as Mama obviously believed her to be. So which was it? Cute or on the take?

“Mama is my biggest fan as I am hers,” he said easily. “Seems she’s always doing someone a good turn. Helping out where she can.”

“She also plays a mean game of Briscola.”

He blinked. *Cards?* “Did you play for money?” He manufactured a chuckle. “She probably let you win.”

A line pinched between Bailey Ross’s brows. “We played because she enjoyed it.”

She’d threaded her fingers around the worn denim knees of her jeans. Her bracelet was expensive, however—yellow-gold and heavy with charms. Had Mama’s money helped purchase that piece duty free? If he asked Bailey straight out, what reply would she give?

As if she’d read his mind and wasn’t comfortable, his guest eased to her feet. “I’ve held you up long enough. You don’t want to miss your flight.”

He stood too. She was right. She wasn’t going to admit to anything and his cab would be here any minute. Seemed his curiosity with regard to Miss Ross’s true nature would go unsatisfied.

"Do you have family in Sydney?" He asked as they crossed the parquet floor together and she covered another yawn.

"I was raised here."

"You'll be catching up with your parents then."

"My mother died a few years back."

"My condolences." He'd never known his mother but the man he'd come to know as Father had passed away recently. "I'm sure your father's missed you."

But she only looked away.

Walking alongside, Mateo rolled back his shoulders. No mother. Estranged from her father. Few possessions. Hell, now *he* wanted to write her a check.

He changed the subject. "So, what are your broader plans, Miss Ross? Do you have a job here in town to return to?"

"I don't have any real concrete plans just yet."

"Perhaps more travel then?"

"There's more I'd like to see, but for now, I'm hanging around."

They stopped at the entrance. He fanned open the door, searched her flawless face and smiled. "Well, good luck."

"Same to you. Say hello to Paris for me."

As she turned to walk away, hitching that ratty knapsack higher on one slim shoulder, something thrust beneath Mateo's ribs and he took a halting step toward her. Of course, he should let it alone—should let her be on her way—but a stubborn niggling kept at him and he simply had to ask.

"Miss Ross," he called out. Looking surprised, she rotated back. He cut the distance separating them and, having danced around the question long enough, asked outright. "Did my grandmother give you money?"

Her slim nostrils flared and her eyebrows drew in. "She didn't give me money."

Relief fell through him in a warm welcomed rush. As she'd grown older, Mama had admitted many times that she wasn't overly wealthy by design; she had little use for money and therefore liked to help others where she could. There was nothing he could do to stop Mama's generosity—or gullibility as the case more often than not proved to be. But at least he could leave for his vacation knowing this particular young woman hadn't left his grandmother's house stuffing bills in her pocket.

But Bailey wasn't finished.

"Mama *loaned* me money."

As the stone swelled in his chest, Mateo could only stare. He'd been right about her from the start? She'd taken advantage of Mama like those before her. He took in her innocent looks and cringed. He wished he'd never asked.

"A ... loan," he said, unconcerned that his tone was graveled. Mocking.

Her cheeks pinked up. "Don't say it like that."

"You say it's a loan," he shrugged, "it's a loan."

"I intend to pay back every cent."

"Really?" Intrigued, he crossed his arms. "And how do you intend to do that with no job, no plans?" From her reaction to his question about her father, there wouldn't be help coming from that source, either.

Her eyes hardened. "We can't all have charmed lives, Doctor."

"Don't presume to know anything about me," he said, his voice deep.

"I only know that I had no choice."

"*We all have choices. At least when we're adults.*"

Her cheeks flushed more. "Then I chose escape."

He coughed out a laugh. This got better and better. "Now my grandmother was keeping you *prisoner*?"

“Not your grandmother.”

His arms unraveled. Her voice held the slightest quiver. Her pupils had dilated until the blue was all but consumed by black. But she'd told him what he'd stupidly wanted to know. She'd accepted Mama's money. He didn't need or want excuses.

“Goodbye, Miss Ross.” He headed inside.

“And thank you, Doctor,” she called after him. “You've killed whatever faith I had left in the male species.” A pulse thudding at his temple, he angled back. Her expression was dry. Sad. *Infuriating*. “I honestly thought you were a gentleman,” she finished.

“Only when in the presence of a lady.”

Self-disgust hit his gut with a jolt.

“I apologize,” he murmured. “That wasn't called for.”

“Do you even want to know what I needed to escape?” She ground out. “Why I needed that money?”

He exhaled heavily. Fine. After that insult, he owed her one. “Why did you need the money?”

“Because of a man who wouldn't listen,” she said pointedly, her gaze hot and moist. “He said we were getting married and, given the situation I was in, I *didn't* have a choice.”

Two

"You're engaged?" Mateo shook himself.

"No." In a tight voice, she added, "Not really."

"Call me old-fashioned, but I thought being betrothed was like being pregnant. You either are or you aren't."

"I ... was engaged."

Slanting his head, he took another look. Her nose was more a button with a sprinkling of freckles but her unusual crystalline eyes were large and, as she stood her ground, her pupils dilated more, making her gaze appear even more pronounced. Or was that scared?

I didn't have a choice.

An image of the degrees decorating his office walls swam up in Mateo's mind. Time to take a more educated guess as to why Mama might have sent this woman. He set his voice at a different tone, the one he used for patients feeling uncertain.

"Bailey, are you having a baby?"

Her eyes flared, bright with indignation. "*No.*"

"Are you sure? We can do tests—"

"Of *course* I'm sure."

Backing off, he held up his hands. "Okay. Fine. Given your circumstances, it seemed like a possibility."

"It really wasn't." Her voice dropped. "We didn't sleep together. Not even once."

She spun to leave, but, hurrying down the steps, she tripped on the toe of her sandal. The next second she was stumbling, keeling forward. Leaping, Mateo caught her before she went down all the way. Gripping her upper arms, he felt her shaking—from shock at almost breaking her neck? Or pique at him? Or was the trembling due to dredging up memories of this engagement business in Italy?

She was so taken aback, she didn't object when he helped her sit on a step. Lifting her chin, he set out to check that the dilation in her eyes was even, but with his palm cradling her cheek and his face so close to hers, the pad of his thumb instinctively moved to trace the sweep of her lower lip. Heat, dangerous and swift, flared low in his belly and his head angled a whisper closer.

But then she blinked. So did he. Spell broken, he cleared his throat and got to his feet while she caught her breath and gathered herself.

He might be uncertain about some things regarding Bailey Ross, but of one he was sure. The constant yawning, tripping over herself.

"You need sleep," he told her.

"I'll survive."

"No doubt you will."

But, dammit, he was having a hard time thinking of her walking off alone down that drive and Mama phoning to ask if he'd looked after her little friend who'd apparently had such a hard time in Casa Buona. Given her stumble, her jet lag, Mama would expect him to at least give Bailey time to recuperate before he truly sent her on her way. And that was the only reason he persisted. Why he asked now.

"So ... who's this fiancé?"

Closing her eyes, she exhaled as if she was too tired to be defensive anymore.

"I was backpacking around Europe," she began. "By the time I got to Casa Buona, I'd run out of money. That's where I met Emilio. I picked up work at the taverna his parents own."

Mateo's muscles locked. "Emilio Conti is your fiancé?"

"Was." She quizzed his eyes. "Do you know him?"

"Casa Buona's a small town." Emilio's kind only made it feel smaller. Mateo nodded. "Go on."

Elbows finding her knees, she cupped her cheeks. “Over the weeks, Emilio and I became close. We spent a lot of time with his family. Time by ourselves. When he said he loved me, I was taken off guard. I didn’t know about loving Emilio, but I’d certainly fallen in love with his parents. His sisters. They made me feel like one of the family.” Her hands lowered and she brought up her legs to hug her knees. “One Saturday, in front of everyone, he proposed at the taverna. Seemed like the whole town was there, all smiling, holding their breath, waiting for my answer. I was stunned. Any words stuck like bricks in my throat. When I bowed my head, trying to figure out something tactful to do or say, someone cried out that I’d accepted. A huge cheer went up. Before I knew what had happened, Emilio slid a ring on my finger and ... well ... that was that.”

Bailey ended by failing to smother a yawn at the same time the sound of an engine drew their attention. His ride—a yellow cab—was cruising up the drive.

“Wait here,” he said, and when she opened her mouth to argue, he interrupted firmly. “One minute. Please.” He crossed to the forecourt and spoke to the driver, who kept his motor idling while Mateo walked back and took a seat on the step alongside of her.

“Where do you plan to go now? Do you have anywhere to stay?”

“I’d hoped to stay with a friend for a few days but her neighbor said she’s out of town. I’ll get a room.”

“Do you really want to waste Mama’s money on a motel?”

“It’s only temporary.”

He studied the cab, thought of the dwindling group of guys doing their annual bachelor bash in Canada and, as Bailey pushed to her feet, made a decision.

“Come back inside.”

Her look said, *you’re crazy*. “You’re ready to leave. The meter’s running.”

He eyed the driver. Best fix that.

He strode to the vehicle, left the cabbie smiling at the notes he passed over and heard the engine rev off behind him as he joined Bailey again.

Her jaw was hanging. “What did you do?”

“I’d thought about cancelling the first leg of my trip anyway. Now, inside.” He tilted his head toward his still open front door.

“Flattering invitation.” Her smile was thin. “But I don’t do *fetch* or *roll over*, either.”

Mateo’s chin tucked in. She thought he was being bossy? Perhaps he was. He was used to people listening and accepting his advice. And there was a method to his madness. “You say the money Mama gave you is a loan. But you admit you have no income. No place to stay.”

“I’ll find something. I’m not afraid of work.”

Another yawn gripped her, so consuming, she shuddered and her eyes watered.

“First you need a good rest,” he told her. “I’ll show you to a guest room.”

Another *you’re crazy* look. “I’m not staying.”

“I’m not suggesting a lease, Bailey. Merely that you recharge here before you tackle a plan for tomorrow.”

“No.” But this time she sounded less certain.

“Mama would want you to.” When she hesitated, he persisted. “A few hours rest. I won’t pound on the door and get on your case.”

She glared at him. “Promise?”

“On my life.”

All the energy seemed to fall from her shoulders. He thought she might disarm him with a hint of that ice-melting smile, but she only nodded and grudgingly allowed him to escort her back inside.

After ascending that storybook staircase, Mateo Celeca showed her down the length of a wide paneled hallway to the entrance of a lavish room.

“The suite has an attached bath,” he said as she edged in and looked around. “Make yourself at home. I’ll be downstairs if you need anything.”

Bailey watched the broad ledge of his shoulders roll away down the hall before she closed the heavy door and, feeling more displaced than she had in her life, gravitated toward the center of the vast room. Her own background was well to do. With a tennis court and five bedrooms, her lawyer father’s house in Newport was considered grand to most. Her parents had driven fashionable cars. They’d gone on noteworthy vacations each year.

But, glancing around this lake of snowy carpet with so many matching white and gold draperies, Bailey could admit she’d never known *this* kind of opulence. Then again, who on earth needed this much? She wasn’t one to covet riches. Surely it was more important to know a sense of belonging ... of truly being where and with whom you needed to be. Despite Emilio, irrespective of her father, one day she hoped to know and keep that feeling.

After a long warm shower, she lay down and sleep descended in a swift black cloud.

When she woke some hours later in the dark, her heart was pounding with an impending sense of doom. In her dream, she’d been back in Casa Buona, draped in a modest wedding gown with Emilio beckoning her to join him at the end of a long dark corridor. She shot a glance around the shadowy unfamiliar surrounds and eased out a relieved breath. She was in Sydney. Broke, starting over. In an obstinate near-stranger’s house.

She clapped a palm over her brow and groaned.

Mateo Celeca.

With refined movie-star looks and dark hypnotic eyes, he did all kinds of unnerving things to her equilibrium. One minute she was believing Mama, thinking her grandson was some kind of prince. The next he was being a jerk, accusing her of theft. Then, to really send her reeling, he’d offered her a bed to shake off some of the jet lag. If she’d had anywhere else to go—if she hadn’t felt so suddenly drained—she would never have stayed. She wasn’t about to forgive or forget his comment about her not being a lady.

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed at the same time her stomach growled. She cast her thoughts away from the judgmental doctor to a new priority. Food.

After slipping on her jeans, she tiptoed down that stunning staircase and set off to find a kitchen. Inching through someone else’s broad shadow-filled halls in the middle of the night hardly felt right but the alternative was finding a takeout close by or dialing in. Mateo had said to make herself at home. Surely that offer extended to a sandwich.

Soon she’d tracked down a massive room, gleaming with stainless steel and dark granite surfaces. Opening the fridge she found the interior near empty; that made sense given Mateo was meant to be on vacation. But there was a leftover roast, perhaps from his dinner earlier. A slab went between two slices of bread and, after enjoying her first mouthful, Bailey turned and discovered a series of floor-to-ceiling glass panes lining the eastern side of the attached room.

Outside, ghostly garden lights illuminated a divine courtyard where geometrically manicured hedges sectioned off individual classical statues. Beyond those panes, a scene from two thousand years ago beckoned ... a passionate time when Rome dominated and emperors ruled half the world. Chewing, she hooked a glance around. No one about. Nothing to stop her. A little fresh air would be nice.

She eased back a door and moved out into the cool night, the soles of her bare feet padding over smooth sandstone paths as she wandered between hedges and those exquisite stone figures that seemed so lifelike. She was on her third bite of sandwich when a sound came from behind—a muted click that vibrated through the night and made the fine hairs on her nape stand up and quiver. Heart lodged in her throat, she angled carefully around. One of those figures was gliding toward her. Masculine. Tall. Naked from the waist up.

From behind a cloud, the full moon edged out and the definition of that outline sharpened ... the captivating width of his chest, the subtle ruts of toned abs. Bailey's gaze inched higher and connected with inquiring onyx eyes as a low familiar voice rumbled out.

"You're up."

Bailey let out the breath she'd been holding.

Not a statue come to life, but Mateo Celeca standing before her, wearing nothing but a pair of long white drawstring pants. She'd been so absorbed she'd forgotten where she was, as well as the events that had brought her here. Now, in a hot rush, it all came back. Particularly how annoyingly attractive her host was, tonight, with the moonbeams playing over that hard human physique, dramatically so.

When a kernel of warmth ignited in the lowest point of her belly, Bailey swallowed and clasped her sandwich at her chest.

Mateo Celeca might be beyond hot, but, at this point in her life, she didn't care to even *think* about the opposite sex, particularly a critical one. Her only concern lay in getting back on her feet and repaying Mama as soon as possible, whether the doctor believed that or not.

"I didn't mean to wake you," she said in a surprisingly even voice that belied how churned up she felt.

"You tripped a silent alarm when you opened that door. The security company called to make sure there'd been no breach. I thought it'd be you, but I came down to check, just in case."

Bailey kicked herself. She'd seen him fiddling with a security pad when she'd arrived. Heaven knew what this place and its contents were insured for. Of course he'd have a state-of-the-art system switched on and jump when an alert went off.

"I was hungry," she explained then held up dinner. "I made a sandwich."

She wasn't sure, but in the shadows she thought he might have grinned—which was way better than a scowl. If he started on her again now, in the middle of the night, she'd simply grab her bag and find the door. But he seemed far more relaxed than this morning when he'd overreacted about the money Mama had loaned her.

"You usually enjoy a starry stroll with your midnight snack?" He asked as he sauntered nearer.

"It looked so nice out."

"It is pleasant."

He studied the topiaries and pristine hedges, and this time she was certain of the smile curving one corner of his mouth as he stretched his arms, one higher than the other, over his head. She wanted to fan herself. And she'd thought the *statues* were works of art.

"Are you a gardener?" She asked, telling herself to look away but not managing it. Bronzed muscles rippled in the moonlight whenever he moved.

"Not at all. But I appreciate the effort others put in."

"This kind of effort must be twenty-four seven."

"What about you?" He asked, meandering toward a trickling water feature displaying a god-like figure ready to sling a lightning bolt.

"No green thumbs here." Moving to join him, she tipped her head at the fountain. "Is that Zeus?" She remembered a recent movie about the Titans. "The god of war, right?"

"Zeus is the god of justice. The supreme protector. Perhaps because he could have lost his life at the very moment he entered the world."

"Really? How?" Moving to sit on the cool fountain ledge, she took another bite. She loved to hear about ancient legends.

"His father, Cronus, believed in a prophecy. He would be overthrown by his son as he had once overthrown his own father. To save her newborn, Rhea, Zeus's mother, gave him up at birth then tricked her husband into thinking a rock wrapped in swaddling clothes was the child, which Cronus

promptly disposed of. He didn't know that his son, Zeus, was being reared by a nymph in Crete. When he was grown, Zeus joined forces with his other siblings to defeat the Titans, including his father."

She couldn't help but be drawn by Mateo's story, as well as the emotion simmering beneath his words. Had she imagined the shadow that had crossed his gaze when he spoke of that mother needing to give up her child?

"What happened to Zeus after the clash?" She asked.

"He ruled over Olympus as well as the mortals, and fathered many children."

"Sounds noble."

"The great majority of his offspring were conceived through adulterous affairs, I'm afraid."

Oh. "Not so good for the demigod kids."

"Not so good for any child."

Bailey studied his classic profile as he peered off into the night ... the high forehead and proud, hawkish nose. She wanted to ask more. Not only about this adulterous yet protective Roman god but also about the narrator of his tale. Not that Mateo's life was any of her business. Although ...

For the moment he seemed to have put aside his more paranoid feelings toward her, and this was an informal chat. In the morning she'd be well rested and on her way, so where was the harm in asking more?

Making a pretense of examining the gardens, she crossed her ankles and swung her feet out and back.

"Mama mentioned that you left Casa Buona when you were twelve."

His hesitation—a single beat—was barely enough to notice.

"My father was moving to Australia. He explained about the opportunities here. Ernesto was an accountant and wanted to look after my higher education."

"Have you lived in Sydney since?"

He nodded. "But I travel when I can."

"You must have built a lot of memories here after so long."

Who were his friends? All professionals like him? Did he have any other family Down Under?

But Mateo didn't respond. He merely looked over the gardens with those dark thoughtful eyes. From the firm set of his jaw, her host had divulged all he would tonight. Understandable. They were little more than strangers. And, despite this intimate atmosphere, they were destined to remain that way.

A statue caught Bailey's eye. After slipping off her perch, she crossed over and ran a hand across the cool stone.

"I like this one."

It was a mother, her head bowed over the baby she held. The tone conjured up memories of Bailey's own mother ... how loving and devoted she'd been. Like Rhea. Both mothers had needed to leave their child, though neither woman had wanted to. If she lived to one hundred, Bailey would miss her till the day she died.

"Is this supposed to be Zeus as an infant?" She asked, her gaze on the baby now.

Mateo's deep voice came from behind. "No. More a signature to my profession, I suppose."

His profession. An obstetrician. One of the best in Australia, Mama had said, and more than once.

"How many babies have you brought into the world?" She asked, studying the soft loving smile adorning the statue's face.

When he didn't reply, she edged around and almost lost her breath. Mateo was standing close ... close enough for her to inhale that undeniable masculine scent. Near enough to be drawn by its natural heady lure. As his intense gaze glittered down and searched hers, a lock of dark hair dropped over his brow and jumped in the breeze.

"... to count."

Coming to, Bailey gathered herself. He'd been speaking, but she'd only caught his last words.

"I'm sorry," she said. "To count what?"

His brows swooped together. "How many babies I've delivered. Too many to count."

Bailey withered as her cheeks heated up. How had she lost track of their conversation so completely?

But she knew how. Whether he was being polite or fiery and passionate, Mateo exuded an energy that drew her in.

Indisputable.

Unwelcome.

Heartbeat throbbing in her throat, she lowered her gaze and turned a little away. "Guess they all blur after a time."

"Not at all. Each safe delivery is an accomplishment I never take for granted."

The obvious remained unsaid. Even in this day and age, some deliveries wouldn't go as planned. No matter how skilled, every doctor suffered defeats. Just like criminal lawyers.

She remembered her parents speaking about one client her father had failed to see acquitted. The man's family had lost nearly all their possessions in a fire, and her father donated a sizable amount to get them sturdily on their feet again. She'd felt so very proud of him. But he seemed to lose those deeper feelings for compassion after her mother passed away.

As Mateo's gaze ran over the mother and child, Bailey wondered again about *his* direct family. He'd lived with his grandmother in Italy. Had come to Australia with his father. Where was his mother?

"I'm turning in," he said, rolling back one big bare shoulder. "There's a television and small library in your room if you can't get back to sleep." That dark gaze skimmed her face a final time and tingling warmth filtered over her before he rotated away. "*Sogni d'oro*, Bailey."

"*Sogni d'oro*," she replied and then smiled.

Sweet dreams.

Mateo sauntered back inside, his gait relaxed yet purposeful.

He was a difficult one to work out. So professional and together most of the time, but there was a volatile side too, one she wondered if many people saw. More was going on beneath the sophisticated exterior ... deep and private things Mateo Celeca wouldn't want to divulge. And certainly not divulge to a troublesome passerby like herself. Even if they had the time to get acquainted, he'd been clear. She wasn't the kind of woman the doctor wanted to get too close to.

Bailey thought of those shoulders—those eyes—and, holding the flutter in her tummy, concurred.

She didn't need to get that close either.

Three

Early the next morning, Mateo strode out his back door and threw an annoyed glance around the hedges and their statues. Not a sign of her anywhere. Seemed Bailey Ross had flown the coop.

After knocking on her bedroom door—politely at first—thinking she must be hungry and might join him for breakfast, he'd found the room empty. The shabby knapsack vanished. No matter her consequences, she shouldn't have taken money from an elderly, obviously soft-hearted woman. Equally, she ought to have had the decency to at least stay long enough to say "thanks for the bed," and "so long."

He'd practically laughed in her face when she'd vowed to pay that "loan" back. After this disappearing act, he'd bet all he owned neither he nor Mama would hear from Miss Ross again. She was a woman without scruples. And yet, he couldn't deny it—he was attracted to her.

After her stumble yesterday, when he'd cupped, then searched, her face, the urge to lean closer and slant his mouth over hers had been overwhelming. Last night while they'd spoken among the shadows of these gardens, he'd fought to keep a lid on that same impulse. Something deep and strong reacted whenever she was near. Something primordial and potentially dangerous.

He'd felt this kind of intense chemistry once before, Mateo recalled, looking over the statue of mother and child Bailey had found so interesting last night. Unfortunately, at twenty-three he'd been too wet behind the ears to see that particular woman for what she was: a beautiful, seductive leech. He'd fallen hard and had given Linda Webb everything she'd wanted. Or, rather, he'd *tried*. Expensive perfume, jewelry, even a car. She was an unquenchable well. Took twelve months and a ransacked savings account before he'd faced facts—unemployed Linda hadn't wanted a fiancé as much as a financier.

Unlike Mama, he had no problem with being wealthy. He'd worked hard to achieve this level of security and he wouldn't apologize for doing well. He also liked to be generous—but only where and when his gifts were put to good use and appreciated. That cancelled out the likes of Linda Webb and Bailey Ross.

Giving up the search, Mateo rotated away from a view of bordering pines at the same time he saw her.

Beyond the glass-paneled pool fence, a lithe figure lay on a sun lounge, floppy straw hat covering the back of her head and the teeniest of micro bikinis covering not much of the rest. An invisible band around Mateo's chest tightened while his clamoring heartbeat ratcheted up another notch. Last night in the moonlight she'd looked beyond tempting, but in an almost innocent way. There was nothing innocent about the way Miss Ross looked this morning.

Those bikini bottoms weren't technically a thong, but far more was revealed by that sliver of bright pink fabric than was covered. Minus the jeans, her legs appeared even longer, naturally tanned. Smooth. His fingertips, and other extremities, tingled and grew warm. He couldn't deny that every male cell in his body wanted to reach out and touch her.

One of Bailey's tanned arms braced as she shifted on the lounge. The disturbed floppy hat fell to the ground. When she blindly felt around but couldn't find it, she shifted again, pushing up on both palms. A frown pinched her brow and, as if she'd sensed him standing nearby, her gaze tipped higher then wandered across the lawn.

When their eyes connected, hers popped and she sprang up to a sit while Mateo fought every impulse known to man to check out the twin pink triangles almost covering her perfect breasts. With difficulty, he forced his face into an unaffected mask.

Get a grip. You're a medical doctor. An obstetrician who has tended hundreds of clients.

But there was a distinction between "work" and this vastly different environment. Irrespective of profession, he was still a man, complete with a man's urges and desires. Under normal circumstances,

being physically attracted to a member of the opposite sex was nothing immoral. Trouble was ... he didn't *want* to be attracted to Bailey Ross. Whether she was a victim or a schemer, she was a drifter who seemed to court trouble.

As Bailey swiped her T-shirt off the back of the lounge, Mateo set his hands in his trouser pockets and cast an aimless glance around. When he was certain her top half was covered, he crossed over.

"I took an early morning dip," she said as he entered the pool area.

"When I couldn't find you inside, I thought you'd run off."

She frowned. "I wouldn't leave without saying goodbye."

"Unless I was your fiancé?"

"I'm grateful for the bed," she said, standing, "but not appreciative enough to listen to any more of your put-downs."

He moved to the rock waterfall, wedged his hands in his pockets again and, after debating with himself several moments, said calmly, "So tell me more about your situation."

"So you can scoff?"

"So I can understand."

Dammit, one minute he was wanting to help, offering her a bed, the next he was lumping her in the same class as Linda. Was Bailey genuine about paying that money back, or were her dealings with Mama merely a side issue for him? Was his interest more about that long fair hair, those blazing blue eyes?

That, after his last comment, seemed to have lost a little of their fire.

Folding back down again, she set that straw hat on her lap and explained.

"After that night ... the night Emilio proposed," she said, "his sisters jumped into organizing the wedding. Emilio set the date two months from the day he shoved that ring on my finger. He wouldn't listen when I told him it was a mistake. He only smiled and tried to hug me when I said this had all happened too fast. Everyone kept saying what a great catch he was."

"Not in your opinion."

"Sure, we had fun," she admitted. "Up to that point. But after that night, whenever I got vocal and tried to return his ring, Emilio got upset. His face would turn red and beads of sweat would break on his brow. He'd proposed, he'd say, and I'd accepted. I'd taken his family's charity by working at the taverna and sleeping under their roof. We were getting married and he knew once I got over my nerves I'd be happy. I didn't have nearly enough money for a ticket home. I was trapped." Looking at her feet, she exhaled. "One day at Mama's place, I broke down. We were alone and when she asked what was wrong I told her I couldn't go through with the wedding. Everyone else might have been in love with Emilio but I wasn't."

"Why not call your father?"

Regardless of disagreements, family was family. His own father had been there through thick and thin. Or rather the man he knew as a father was.

"If I introduced you to Dad," she plopped her hat back on her head, "you'd understand why. I went overseas against his advice. The last thing he said to me was that if I was old enough not to listen, I was old enough to figure out my own problems." Her voice dropped. "Believe me, he wouldn't want to know."

"You've made a few mistakes in the past?" An insensitive question, perhaps, but he was determined to get to the bottom of this maze.

"Nothing monumental."

"Until this."

Screwing her eyes shut, she groaned. "I knew I could've said no to Emilio on the day of the wedding, but I couldn't bear to think of everyone's meltdown, particularly his. Or I could simply have packed up and stolen off in the middle of the night and moved on to the next town. But Emilio proved

to me he wasn't the kind to let go what he believed was his. He'd come after me and do all he could to bring me back."

From what Mateo remembered of Emilio, he had to agree. Beneath the superficial charm lived a Neanderthal.

Moving to a garden crowded with spiky Pandanus palms, Mateo swept his foot to move stray white pebbles back into their proper bed.

"What makes you so sure he won't come here?"

"I'm *not* sure. I mailed him a package from the airport. The letter explained how I wished he'd listened and I wasn't coming back. I put his ring in, as well. Hopefully that will be enough."

Mateo grunted. "He's thick but not entirely stupid." When she glanced over, curious, he explained. "The summer before I left Italy, a twelve-year-old Emilio tried to call me out. Can't recall the reason now but certainly nothing to warrant a fistfight. When Emilio and a couple of friends cut me off in an alley, I defended myself. Emilio didn't bother me after that."

Surrounded by memories, Mateo absently brushed more pebbles into the garden bed. How different his life would have been if he'd stayed in Casa Buona. What if no one had come for him all those years ago in France? What would have become of him then? If Mama hadn't offered her help to this woman—if what she said was true—what would have happened to Bailey?

"I'm going to pay her back," Bailey insisted. "If it takes five years—"

"Mama may not *have* five years."

Her head went back as if she hadn't considered Mama's advanced age. But then one slender shoulder hitched up and she amended. "I'll get a loan."

A loan to pay a loan. "With no job?"

Sitting straighter, she crossed those long tanned legs. "I'm fixing that."

"Looks like it," he muttered, eyeing the pool sparkling with golden east coast sunshine. Linda was always on the verge of getting a job too.

Bailey's jaw tightened. "Accepting Mama's money wasn't any moral highlight—"

"And yet you did accept."

The frustration in her eyes hardened before the irritation evaporated into resignation. She slowly shook her head. "Someone like you ... you could never understand what it's like to feel powerless."

Oh, but he *did* know. And he'd spent his entire adult life making certain he never felt powerless again. He'd done it through hard work, not lying around a pool. Although part of her plan had merit.

"Getting a loan is a good idea," he said, "but not from an institution. There's interest. If you get behind, there are fees."

"Maybe I should throw some cash at a roulette wheel," she groaned.

"I have a better idea. I'll pay Mama the money you owe—"

"*What?*" She shook her head. "Absolutely not!"

"—and you can pay me back."

"I don't want to owe *you* anything."

"So you're not serious about paying her back as soon as possible?"

She eyed him as Little Red Riding Hood might eye the big bad wolf.

"What are the terms?" She finally asked.

"A signed agreement. Regular repayments."

"Why would you do that for me?"

"Not for you. For my grandmother." The amount Bailey owed wouldn't make a dent in any of his accounts but he liked to think that, for once, Mama wouldn't be left out of pocket by virtue of her soft heart.

Bailey pushed to her feet, paced around the back of the sun lounge, studied him and then, defiant, crossed her arms. A few more seconds wound out before she announced, "Well, then, I'd better get cracking."

That floppy hat stuck on her head, she fished her jeans out of her knapsack and drove her legs through the denim pipes. When he realized he'd been staring while she wiggled and scooped her bottom into the seat of her jeans, he jerked his gaze away and heard her zip up. He'd already faced the fact Miss Ross wasn't the kind of woman with whom he wished to become more involved than he already was.

In time, he looked back to see her heading for the pool gate, that knapsack swinging over a shoulder. "Where are you going?"

"To get a job. I'll be back by five to sign that contract. And about those repayments ..." She stopped at the gate and her glittering blue eyes meshed with his. "I want them as steep as possible."

His eyebrows jumped. "To get the debt paid off in record time?"

"To get you out of my life ASAP."

As she strode away, Mateo gave himself permission to drink in the sway of those slim hips and long hair. High on each thigh, his muscles hardened as his thoughts gave over to how those curves and silk might feel beneath his fingers, his lips....

Regardless of whether she took Mama's money or not, she was attractive and fiery and ... something more. Something he would dearly love to sample.

Whether it was good for him or not.

Four

Bailey visited every employment agency she could find, unfortunately with little success. Although initially there seemed to be some prospects, they turned out to be either charity work or commission-based jobs, like knocking on doors.

Time and again she'd been asked about qualifications. No high school diploma. One year of an apprenticeship at a hair salon. She'd been a school crossing guard, helping kids cross streets for a while. Mainly she'd performed waitress work.

She'd been directed to a hospitality recruitment agency. Placements were available at exclusive establishments but she didn't have the experience necessary to be put forward as a candidate. Many courses to enhance her skills, however, were available. But they cost money and Bailey didn't have the time to spare. She needed to start earning. Needed to start paying back and showing Mateo Celeca she wasn't a con artist but merely someone who'd needed a hand up.

As weary as she felt after a full day trekking around the city, she tried to keep her spirits high. Her mother had always said there was good in every situation. Bailey didn't quite believe that; what was so good about having a stroke take a parent out at age thirty-five? But Bailey did believe in never giving up. Her mother would have wanted her to stay strong and believe in herself, even now when she'd never felt more alone.

In the busy city center, with traffic and pedestrians grinding by, she'd pulled out her bus timetable and had found a suitable link when a familiar voice drew her ear. Masculine. Tense. The tone sent simultaneous chills and familiar warmth racing over her skin. She hadn't heard that voice in over a year. Back then it had told her not to come home begging.

Her heart beating high in her throat, Bailey looked carefully over her shoulder. Her father stood on the curb, phone pressed to his ear, announcing his displeasure over a jury verdict gone wrong.

In an instant, Bailey couldn't draw enough breath. She had the bizarre urge to run—both toward her father and away from him. Never would she have simply waltzed up to his door and thrown out her arms, and yet now—with him available such a short distance away—she couldn't help but relive those much earlier days ... times when her dad had taken her horseback riding, or suffered answering inane questions from an eight-year-old while he worked on depositions. When she'd come down with tonsillitis he'd rushed her to the doctor. He'd even taken time off to nurse her back, complete with spoon-fed antibiotics.

And that was a full year after her mother had died.

Bailey's throat convulsed at the same time her eyes misted over.

He was right there.

A now-or-never feeling fell through her middle as she moved one foot forward, and another. Maybe he hadn't meant to sound so harsh. So final. Maybe he *wouldn't* turn her away. She was his only child, after all. Perhaps he'd cry out in surprise and wrap his arms around her. Tell her that he'd missed her and ask that she come home with him now. Straight away.

An uncertain smile quivering on her lips, she'd cut the distance separating them by half when a cab swung into the curb. Before Bailey could think to call out, Damon Ross had flung open the door and, phone still at his ear, slid into the backseat. Her hand was in the air, a single word on her tongue, when the cab cut into a break in traffic and shot away.

Her hand lowered and stomach dropped. Blinking furiously, she fought back the bite of rising tears and disappointment. But, no matter how much it hurt, that bad timing was probably best. The cab swerving in at that exact moment had saved her from herself. Her father had said she'd regret dropping out of school and while that was one thing he'd been right about, there was a whole lot more that had never needed to be said. But it was too late for those kind of regrets. Nothing could be done about the past.

Determined, Bailey walked a straight line to the bus stop.

Now the future was all that mattered.

She'd told him five, but Bailey didn't get back to Mateo's mansion until six. Answering the bell, he threw open the door, took in her appearance and frowned. Bailey drew herself up, entered the foyer and fought the impulse to ease the sandals off her feet, grimy with city dirt. God, she must look like an urchin in need of a warm meal and a bath.

He closed the door. "No luck on the job front?"

"There are a few possibilities." She firmed the line of her mouth and almost succeeded in squaring her shoulders. "I'll be out again tomorrow. I just wanted to let you know I haven't skipped town. I have every intention of going through with my end of the deal." Taking up his offer of a loan and signing a contract that would legally commit her to paying every penny back, the sooner the better. She wanted this episode of her life over as much as Mateo must, too.

But then she stopped to take in his attire—custom-made trousers and a black jersey knit shirt that covered his shoulders and chest like a dream. His scent was hot and mouth-wateringly fresh. His shoes were mirror polished.

"Are you on your way out?"

Seemed she was destined to show up on his doorstep whenever he was about to head off.

"I spoke with a friend today," he said. "We went to university together. I delivered his baby boy."

"Having an obstetrician friend must come in handy."

He conceded a smile. "Alex's wife worked in real estate," he went on in that rich deep voice that resonated like symphony base chords through the foyer. "Rental properties. Natalie still works a couple of days a week to keep her hand in."

"Smart lady."

And you're telling me all this ... why?

As if reading her thoughts, he explained. "Since my trip's been delayed, I suggested we catch up for dinner. Alex thought you might like to come."

At the same time a muscle in his jaw flexed, a wave of anticipation, and apprehension, rippled between them and Bailey fought the urge to clear her ears.

"Your friend doesn't know me. You barely know me and, call me paranoid, but I have the impression you don't like me much."

His closest shoulder hitched and dropped. "We have to eat." She narrowed her eyes at him. Since when had "he" and "she" become "we" "Unless you have other plans," he finished.

Her only other plans entailed checking into an affordable hotel. The more interesting question was, "How did you explain me to your friend?"

"I told him the truth."

"That I took money from your grandmother and you don't mean to let me out of your sight until I've paid back every cent?"

"I said you were a friend of Mama's returned to Australia."

Bailey held that breath. His expression was open. Given she'd kept her word and come back today, were his suspicions about her character being unfavorable starting to wane? Not that his opinion of her should matter ... only, if she were completely honest, for some reason they did.

He thrust his hands in his trouser pockets. "Of course, if you're not hungry—"

"No. I mean, I am." In fact, now that food had been mentioned, her empty stomach was reminding her she hadn't eaten since a muffin several hours earlier. But ... wincing, she looked down and felt the day's dust on her skin. "I'll need a shower."

"Table's not booked till seven-thirty."

Bailey nibbled her lower lip. There was something else. Something any female would be reluctant to admit. "I, um, don't have another dress." From the look of Mateo's crisp attire, jeans and a T-shirt wouldn't cut it.

When his gaze skimmed her frame, her eyes widened. She'd felt that visual stroke like a warm slow touch.

He gave a sexy slanted grin. "What you're wearing," he said, "will be fine."

Twenty minutes later, showered and somewhat refreshed, Bailey followed Mateo to the garage. She was determined not to drink in the way the impression of his shoulder blades rolled beneath that black shirt or recall how delectable that back had looked so bronzed and bare in the moonlight last night.

As much as she'd like to, she couldn't deny she was physically attracted to the man. That didn't mean she should dwell on bone-melting images of him as she had done while standing beneath the showerhead mere moments ago. She hadn't been able to pry her thoughts from memories of Mateo strolling among those lifelike statues. Worse, she couldn't help but speculate on how those strong toned arms might feel surrounding and gathering her in, or how the bow of his full lower lip might taste grazing languidly back and forth over hers....

Now another image faded up in her mind—Mateo Celeca, gloriously naked and poised above her in that beautiful big upstairs bed. Her throat immediately thickened and beneath her bodice, nipples peaked and hardened. Slowing her step, Bailey pushed out a breath. She might have been engaged to Emilio but he'd never affected her this way. No man had. Why should that be so when, not only had she and Mateo locked horns, they'd only known each other a day?

In the garage, he showed her to the passenger side door of an expensive low-slung vehicle. A Maserati, if she wasn't mistaken. Odd there wasn't at least one or two other sports cars housed in the overly spacious garage. Or, perhaps, something classier to more aptly suit his station, like a Bentley or Rolls.

The garage door whirled up and soon they were cruising down the tree-lined drive and out on to a quiet street bordered by wide immaculate sidewalks where women in designer tracksuits walked poodles showing off diamanté collars. These people couldn't have the foggiest idea how the other half lived.

"I phoned someone else today," Mateo said, changing gears.

"Mama?" She guessed, and he nodded. "I wanted to be half settled before I called or wrote her."

"She figured that."

"Did you tell her that you invited me to stay last night?" She asked, feeling a little awkward over it. Not that Mama would mind in the least.

"I told her you rested at my house overnight and you were out looking for a job." Large sure hands on the steering wheel navigated a corner. "She said you should stay until you were earning and set up some place."

Closing her eyes, Bailey groaned as her cheeks grew hot. Mama was a lovely lady. She was only showing that she cared. But, "I'm sure you told her I'd be fine."

"I said I'd offer."

"You *what*?"

"I said you could stay for a couple of days until things were sorted out."

Bailey thought that statement through. "You mean things like our loan agreement?"

He gave an affirmative grunt. "And it's not as if the house isn't big enough to accommodate one more." He skated over a defining look. "For a few days."

Before she could argue, he turned the conversation toward the couple they'd be dining with that night—Natalie and Alex Ramirez. But Bailey's thoughts were stuck on Mateo's offer to stay in his home. She didn't want to sponge. But a few days grace to set herself up would be heaven-sent. She was willing to work at anything to get her life back on track, and quickly. Surely a job would turn up in the next day or two.

When they pulled up at a well-to-do address, Bailey's stomach flipped. She shouldn't be surprised that the Ramirez abode almost rivaled Mateo's in size and grandeur. Of course his friends

would be wealthy. But beyond that, despite her nerves, she was curious to meet people the doctor liked to spend time with and perhaps learn a little more about the enigma that was Mateo Celeca. She only wished she was dressed more appropriately, and that she had a better pair of shoes to wear out. Dinner with this type meant more than pulling up a chair in a pizza joint.

Mateo slid out of the car. When he opened her door, she accepted his hand and a flurry of sparks shot like a line of lit gunpowder up her arm. Easing out into the forecourt, although her heart was thumping, Bailey managed to keep her expression unaffected. She'd felt this buzz before, when he'd caught her yesterday and, holding her chin, had looked into her eyes. Tonight the effect was even more pronounced. If an everyday act like hands touching caused this kind of physical reaction, she couldn't fathom how something of consequence might affect her ... like a no-holds-barred penetrating kiss.

Did Mateo feel it too?

A stunning brunette holding a young child dressed in a blue jumpsuit, and a tall, dark-haired man answered the door. At the same time the man—Alex Ramirez—stepped aside to show his guests through, his wife put out her free hand. Her nails were French tipped. The princess-cut diamond solitaire was enormous. “You must be Bailey. I'm Natalie and this little fellow is Reece.” She bounced the baby and he smiled and squealed again. “Come in, and bring that handsome devil with you.”

Mateo leaned in to brush a light kiss on Natalie's cheek before shaking his friend's hand heartily then returning close to her side again, as if he could sense her anxiety. As if they might be a genuine couple.

As they all moved into a sumptuous living room, furnished with contemporary leathers and teak, Bailey took in Natalie's exquisite dress. Cut just below the knee, the lilac fabric shimmered beneath strategically placed downlights. The effect was dazzling, bringing out her complexion and intensity of her long dark hair. Her shoes matched the dress, lilac, delicate heels. Her toenails were painted red. Had she enjoyed a professional pedicure earlier that day?

Glancing down, Bailey cringed.

Her own toes hadn't seen a lick of polish in too long to remember.

Everything in Casa Buona had been so relaxed. She hadn't needed much, although, in order to travel light—to leave quickly when she had—she'd left a number of pretty skirts and tops behind, casual bright wear that suited work at the taverna. Despite the way it had all ended, she'd enjoyed being part of the staff there, serving tables, joining in on the songs and chatter afterward when the kitchen had closed for the night.

How would *this* evening end? With brandy and cigars in the study for the men, most likely. Perhaps flutes filled with Cristal offered to the ladies. And when Mateo drove her home ...

Standing beside the liquor cabinet, Alex rubbed his hands together. “What can I offer you to drink?”

“I'm fine,” Bailey replied, “thank you.” Given her inquisitive thoughts regarding Mateo, better she stayed well clear of beverages that would only weaken inhibitions.

“Ice water for me, Alex,” Mateo said, moving to stand alongside her, close enough to soak in the natural heat emanating from his body. “You and Natalie can indulge a little tonight.”

“It's true.” Natalie rubbed her nose with her baby's. “It isn't often we get a night off.”

The little boy giggled and held his mother's cheeks. When his fingers caught in her perfectly coiffed hair, Natalie only laughed, but then worried over a strand wrapped around one tiny finger. Alex walked over, unwound the hair from around his boy's finger then kissed the baby's palm with a loud raspberry that sent the child into peals of laughter.

Bailey's chest squeezed. This trio was the picture of the perfect family. The happiness they so obviously shared lit all their faces. What they had couldn't be bought.

That's what *she* wanted one day. The kind of marriage that took a person's breath away. The kind of love her parents had once shared. They'd been so happy. When she was young, she'd never stopped to think it might not last.

When she refocused, a feathery feeling brushed over her. She looked across. Mateo was looking at her, a curious light shining in those dark eyes, a sexy grin curving one side of his mouth. A pulse in Bailey's throat began to beat fast. She blinked then, uncertain of where to look, concentrated on Alex who sent her an ambiguous smile before returning to the bar to see to the drinks.

Natalie spoke to her husband as he poured a water then what looked like scotch for himself.

"Honey, I might change his diaper for Tammy before we go." Natalie explained to Bailey, "Tammy's the wonderful lady who looks after Reece when I go into the office a couple of times a week. She's catching up on her knitting in the family room until we leave."

"Mateo mentioned that you work outside of the home."

"It's a great balance. Only four hours each day—" Natalie rubbed noses with her baby again "—and then I'm dying to get back to him." She met Bailey's gaze. "Want to help me change him?"

Bailey's knees locked. She'd done some babysitting but never one so young. "I'm not sure I'd be any help."

Natalie only smiled. "You look like a quick study."

They left the men, who were busy discussing football, and moved into a nearby room—a downstairs nursery. Bouncing the baby, Natalie crossed to a white lacquered changing table where she gently lay her bundle down then set about unbuttoning his suit.

"Mateo mentioned you know Mama Celeca?"

"I lived in her town for a few months."

"I've heard so much about her. Alex says she's the biggest darling ever. He went with Mateo to Italy one summer a long time ago. Apparently Mama tried her best to get both of them married off."

She seemed so genuine, Bailey couldn't help but like her. Couldn't help but feel relaxed and at home, even in a dress that looked more like a rag next to Natalie's exquisite creation.

Bailey brushed a palm over the baby's soft crown and carried on the thread of their conversation.

"Lucky for you Mama's matchmaking didn't succeed."

"Lucky isn't the word." Natalie peeled back the diaper and let out a pleased sigh. "I love when there's no messy surprises. Could you hand me a fresh diaper, please?" Natalie cast a glance to her right. "They're in that lower drawer."

Bailey dug one out while Natalie cleaned up, shook on powder then slid the fresh diaper under the baby's bottom.

"Mateo mentioned that you're in between jobs," Natalie said, pressing down the diaper tabs.

"I was out looking today." *All day.*

"Find anything?"

"Not yet."

Natalie took both the baby's feet and clapped the soles together, but the baby's smile was a little slow to bloom this time. Must be past his bedtime, Bailey thought.

"What are you interested in?" Natalie asked, scooping her baby up. "Do you have office skills?"

"Afraid not. I've been waitressing, serving and general cleanup."

"In Italy?" Bailey nodded and Natalie beamed. "What an adventure."

Bailey arched a brow. "It certainly was that."

"I don't know of any waitressing positions, but we're always after good cleaners for rentals at the agency."

Bailey's heart leapt. "Really?"

With the baby's head resting against her shoulder, Natalie headed for the door. "You're probably not interested—"

"No," Bailey jumped in. "I mean, *yes*. I *am* interested. When do you think I could start?"

"I'm going in Monday. I'll give you the address."

"I'd appreciate that." *A lot.* "Thank you."

Natalie's pace had slowed. The baby's eyelids were drooping now. He was about to drift off. "Would you like a cuddle before we leave?"

Bailey gave a nervous laugh. She would. He was so adorable and full of smiles. But what if she took him and he cried? She'd feel terrible. But, as if to reassure her, little Reece stretched his arms out to her and found a drowsy smile.

"Seems at least one of you wants a cuddle," Natalie joked. But then she saw Bailey's hesitation. "He's a darling, honest. The worst he'll do is pull your nose."

Bailey blew out a shaky breath. "Well, I've never had my nose pulled before." She put out her arms.

The baby weighed more than she thought. Close up, his heavy-lidded eyes looked even bluer. And he smelled divine—all fresh and new. No wonder Natalie and Alex were so happy. They had it all.

"He likes your bracelet." Natalie touched the dangling charms that Reece was fingering too. "So do I. Did you get it overseas?"

"It was a gift." And then Bailey admitted what she hadn't in a very long while. "A gift from my mother."

"Then it's doubly precious. Do your parents live in Sydney?"

"My father does. My mother passed away."

Natalie's beautiful face fell. "Oh ... I'm so sorry, Bailey."

"It was a long time ago."

The sudden lump in Bailey's throat made speaking a little difficult. Over a decade had passed since her mother's death. Not everyone would understand why her grief hadn't faded. But something about Natalie made Bailey feel as if she would. As if the two of them could be more than acquaintances. That, maybe, they could be friends.

Still, she didn't want to mire down the conversation, not when Reece was mumbling adorable things she couldn't quite understand and hiccuping in such a cute way.

But Natalie's expression had grown alarmed. Slanting her head, she held out her arms.

"I think you'd better give him back."

Bailey's heart sank. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no. It's just I think he's about to—"

Natalie didn't move quickly enough. Reece gave another hiccup. Heaved a little. Then a lot. Next his dinner came up.

All over the front of Bailey's dress.

Five

When Natalie barged into the room, Mateo and Alex had been discussing the state's current public hospital concerns. Mateo immediately dropped the conversation and peered past Natalie's shoulder. Bailey wasn't in tow and Natalie's hands were clasped tight before her. Seemed unlikely—Natalie was one of the sweetest people he knew. But Bailey was a relatively unknown quantity. Had the women had a disagreement?

Natalie pulled up in front of her husband. "Can you ring and let the restaurant know we'll be late?"

Standing, Alex caught her arm. "Is the baby all right?" "Too much milk after dinner, I'm afraid." Alex lowered his hand. "Another accident?" "All over poor Bailey."

Mateo was no stranger to babies' assortment of surprises. He not only cared for pregnant women before and during delivery, he looked after their concerns postpartum. Many days, his practice was filled with the sights, sounds and smells of children of all ages. He'd been chuckled up on more often than some people brushed their teeth. Part of the job. He wasn't sure Bailey would be quite so cool with it, particularly given the trying day she'd had.

Setting down his glass, Mateo rose too. "I'll take her home."

"No need. Bailey's fine," Natalie said. "Other than needing a quick shower and a fresh change of clothes, and I have a stack of outfits in my pre-baby wardrobe she can wear." She ran her hand down her husband's sleeve. "Tammy's settling the baby now. I'll go see how Bailey's doing."

As she sailed away, Alex fell back into his chair. The grin on his face said it all. "She's an amazing woman, isn't she?"

"You're a lucky man."

Alex leaned closer and lowered his voice. "So, now we know they'll be occupied for a while yet, tell me about it."

"Tell you what?"

"About your date."

"She's not a *date*."

"She's an attractive female accompanying you to dinner. If she's not a date, what is she?"

"Difficult to work out," Mateo admitted. "Like I said on the phone, she appeared on my doorstep yesterday morning." He went into more about the engagement and her dramatic flight from Italy, the loan and Bailey's search for a job to pay it back. "When I phoned Mama today, she confirmed that she'd told Bailey to drop in." Mateo dropped his gaze to the glass he rotated between his fingers. "Mama also asked me to watch out for her until she can make amends with her father."

"Trouble there too?"

"I'm sure whatever's gone on before could be sorted out with one or two calm conversations."

"Family rifts aren't usually that easy to solve." Alex took a long sip of scotch.

"Either way, it's none of my business."

"So where's Bailey staying?"

"I said she could stay with me—just for a few days." Alex coughed as if his drink had gone down the wrong way. Mateo frowned. "What?"

Alex tried to contain his amused look. "Nothing. I mean, Bailey seems very nice."

"But?"

"But nothing, Mateo. I'm only surprised that you've opened your home to her. You haven't done that in a while."

"You mean since Linda." Mateo slid his glass onto the side table. "This isn't the same."

Alex studied his friend's face and, inhaling, nodded and changed the subject.

"What's happening with the vacation?"

"I haven't made any firm decisions yet."

"But you're still going to France, right?"

It was more a statement than a question. His annual pilgrimage to Ville Laube was a duty he never shirked. But, of course, it was more than simply an obligation. He enjoyed catching up with the people who ran the orphanage. Although seeing the children conjured up as many haunted feelings as good. Each year he saw so many new faces as well as those who had lived there for years.

One little boy was a favorite. Remy had turned five last visit. Dark hair and eyes, solemn until you pitched him a ball—any kind. Then his face would light up. He reminded Mateo of himself at that age. Leaving Remy last year had been difficult.

When he returned this year, Mateo hoped that little boy was gone. He hoped he'd found a good family who would love and support him. He wondered what kind of man Remy would grow into. If he would learn from the right influences. Whether he'd always have plenty to eat.

Mateo confirmed, "I'll go to France."

"Maybe Bailey would like to go too."

Mateo all but lost his breath. Then he swore. "You're not trying to step into Mama Celeca's matchmaking shoes, I hope."

"Just an idea. You seem ... interested."

"You saw us together for less than a minute."

"It was all the time I needed to see that you think she's different."

"Hold on." Mateo got to his feet. "Just because you've found the one, doesn't mean I need to be pushed down any aisle."

"Maybe it'd make a difference if you didn't fight it quite so hard?"

"Fight what?"

Both men's attention flew in the direction of that third voice. Natalie stood in the living room doorway. While Mateo withered—*was Bailey a step behind, within earshot?*—Alex pushed to his feet and crossed to his wife.

"Nothing, honey," he said, stealing a quick kiss. "Is the baby okay? How's Bailey?"

"Judge for yourselves."

When a stylish woman, wearing an exquisite pink cocktail number and glittering diamond drop earrings, slid into the room, Mateo did a double take then all but fell back into his seat.

Bailey?

While the bikini-girl turned glamour-queen crossed the room, looking as if she'd worn Chanel all her life, Natalie clasped her hands under her chin and exclaimed, "Isn't she gorgeous?"

Mateo knew he was smiling. He wanted to agree. Unfortunately he was too stunned—too delighted—to find his voice.

"The first time Mateo and I came to this place, we were twenty-two," Alex explained as a uniformed Maxim's waiter showed the foursome to a table next to the dance floor.

"Twenty-three," Mateo amended, his hand a touch away from Bailey's elbow as they navigated tables of patrons enjoying their meals and tasteful atmosphere, including tinkling background music. "You'd just had a cast off your arm after a spill on your skateboard."

"You rode a skateboard at twenty-three?" Natalie laughed as she lowered into a chair the waiter had pulled out for her.

Alex ran a finger and thumb down his tie. "And very well, might I add."

While the waiter draped linen napkins over laps, Bailey tried to contain the nerves jitterbugging in her belly. She'd dined at similar establishments, although not since her mother had died. In the old days her family had enjoyed dinner out at least once a week, but never to this particular restaurant. Wearing this glamorous dress and these dazzling earrings, not to mention the fabulous silver heels, she felt as if a magic wand had been waved and she'd emerged from her baby throw-up moment as

a returned modern-day princess. For a day that had started out horrendously, she was feeling pretty fine now. Not even tired. Although catch-up jet lag would probably hit when she least expected it.

Until then she'd lap up what promised to be a wonderful night.

Some people you couldn't help but like. Natalie and Alex were that kind of folk. And Mateo ... she'd wondered what he'd be like in friends' company. His smile was broader. His laugh, deeper. And when his gaze caught hers, the interested approval in his heavy-lidded eyes left her feeling surreal and believing that tonight they might have met for the first time.

"I must confess," Natalie said, casting an eye over the menu. "I love not having to think about the dishes."

"I help with that," Alex pointed out, teasing.

"And I love you for it." Natalie snatched a kiss from her husband's cheek then found Bailey's gaze. "Do you like to cook?"

"I'm no expert. But I would like to learn how to prepare meals the way they do in Italy." The dishes she'd enjoyed there had been so incredibly tasty and wholesome.

Natalie tipped her head toward Mateo. "You know your date's a bit of a chef?"

Her date?

Hoping no one noticed her blush, Bailey merely replied, "Really?"

"We go over for dinner at least every month," Natalie added.

Mateo qualified, "Nothing fancy. Just a way of remembering home."

"His crepes are mouth-watering," Natalie confided.

Bailey thought for a moment. "Aren't crepes French?"

"Mateo spent his first years there." As soon as the words were out, Natalie's expression dropped. "That probably wasn't my place to say."

While Mateo waved it off, Bailey puzzled over what the drama with France could be. He must have seen her curiosity.

"I lived in an orphanage the first six years of my life."

All the air left Bailey's lungs as images of dank, dark corridors and rickety cots with children who lacked love's warm touch swam up in her mind. She couldn't imagine it, particularly not for Mateo Celeca. Her lips moved a few times before she got out a single, "Oh."

"It wasn't so bad," Mateo said, obviously reading her expression. "The people who ran it were kind. We had what we needed."

"Mateo sponsors the orphanage now," Alex chipped in as, wine menu in hand, he beckoned a waiter.

Bailey sat back. Of course. Yesterday Mateo had mentioned he was a benefactor. She hadn't thought beyond the notion that any donations would be the act of someone who had the means to make a difference to others' lives. She hadn't stopped to think his work in France might be more personal. That he was paying homage to a darker past and wanted to help those who were in the same underprivileged position he'd once been.

"It's difficult for them to find funds," Mateo was saying, pouring more water. "A small bit goes a long way."

"You're too modest," Alex said.

Natalie added, "Wouldn't surprise me if one day you come back with someone who needs a good home."

"I'm hardly in a position."

Mateo's reply sounded unaffected. But Bailey detected a certain faraway gleam in his eye. Would Mateo consider adopting if he *were* in the position? If he were married?

She tried to focus on Natalie's words ... something about looking forward to dessert. But, as much as she tried, Bailey couldn't shake the vision of Mateo playing with a child of his own with a faceless Mrs. Celeca smiling and gazing on. Not her, of course. She wasn't after a husband—or

certainly not this soon after her recent hairy experience. One day she wanted to be part of a loving couple—like Natalie and Alex—but right now she was more than happy to be free.

Did Mateo feel the same way? Natalie wondered, stealing a glance at the doctor from beneath her lashes. Or could Mama's perennial bachelor be on the lookout for a suitable wife slash mother for an adopted child?

Finishing dessert, a moist, scrumptious red velvet cake, Bailey gave a soft cry when some chocolate sauce slipped from her spoon and caught the bodice of her dress. She slid a fingertip over the spot to scoop up the drop, which only smeared the sauce. Bailey didn't wear these kinds of labels, but she knew something about the price tags. Often they cost more than her airfare home.

With dread filling her stomach, Bailey turned to Natalie. "I'll pay to have it dry-cleaned."

But Natalie wasn't troubled.

"Keep the dress, if you want. It's too snug on me after the baby anyway. In fact, there's a heap of things you could take off my hands, if you'd like."

Eyes down, Bailey dabbed the spot with her napkin. She was grateful for the offer but also embarrassed. Over dinner, they'd discussed her travels and lightly touched on the Emilio affair. Mention had been made of Mateo's suggestion she stay a couple of days as well as Natalie's proposal of work. Now the offer of a designer wardrobe.

She was beginning to feel as if she constantly had her hand out.

Bailey set aside the napkin. "That's very kind, Natalie. But you don't need to do that."

"Chances are I won't wear them again. Some mothers are eager to get back their pre-baby bodies but I quite like the fuller me."

"Hear, hear," her husband cooed close to her ear. "Now if you've finished dessert, what say we dance? Just you and me."

Natalie laughed. "Oh, you love when the three of us dance together in the living room."

"Of course." Alex kissed her hand and found his feet. "But this moment I'm happy to have only you in my arms."

As they headed for the dance floor, Bailey sighed.

"You're right. They're a magic couple. Have they been together long? The way they look at each other, anyone would guess they'd fallen in love yesterday."

"They've been together a couple of years."

"I thought they might have been school sweethearts," she said, watching them slow dance to the soft strains of a love song drifting through the room while misty beams played over their heads.

"Natalie grew up in far different circumstances than she enjoys now. Very humble beginnings."

Bailey was taken aback. "She looks as if she might've been born into royalty."

"Tonight, so do you."

Bailey's breath caught high in her chest. Was he merely being polite or was the compliment meant to have the reaction it did? Suddenly she didn't know where to look. What to say. But her mother had said to always take a compliment graciously. So, gathering herself, she lifted her eyes to his and smiled. "Thank you."

Her heart was thumping too loudly to maintain that eye contact, however, so she found Alex and Natalie on the dance floor. Natalie was laughing at something her husband had said while Alex gazed down at his wife adoringly. They radiated wedded bliss.

"It was a good day," Mateo said.

"Which day?"

"The day I helped bring their son into the world."

Elbow on the table, Bailey rested her chin in the cup of her hand. "I bet you had everything prepared and everyone on their toes."

“Quite the opposite. When she went into labor, we were at Alex’s beachside holiday house. It happened quickly.” He peered over toward the couple. Natalie’s cheek was resting on Alex’s shoulder now. “She’d miscarried years before. Alex was concerned for mother and child both.”

“But nothing went wrong?”

Mateo smiled across. “You saw Reece tonight.”

Bailey relaxed. “Perfect.”

“Alex had always longed for a son.”

“I suppose most men do,” she said, wondering if she’d get a reaction.

“Most men ... yes.” Then, as if to put an end to that conversation, he stood and held out his hand. “Would you care to dance?”

Bailey’s throat closed. Perhaps she should have seen that coming but she was at a loss for words. Mateo looked so tall and heart-stoppingly handsome, gazing down at her with those dark, penetrating eyes. Eyes that constantly intrigued her. She wanted to accept his offer. Wanted the opportunity to know the answer to her earlier question—how it would feel to have his arms surround her. Here, in this largely neutral, populated setting, she could find out.

She placed her hand in his. That telling warmth rose again, tingling over her flesh, heating her cheeks and her neck. His eyes seemed to smile into hers as she found her feet and together they moved to the dance floor, occupied by other couples, some absorbed more in the song than their partner, others locked in each other’s arms and ardent gazes.

Bailey couldn’t stop her heart from hammering as Mateo turned and rested a hot palm low on her back while bringing their still-clasped hands to his lapel. Concentrating to level her breathing, she slid and rested her left hand over the broad slope of his shoulder at the same time the tune segued into an even slower, more romantic song and the lights dimmed a fraction more.

They began to move and instantly Bailey was gripped by the heat radiating from his body, burrowing into and warming hers. Her senses seemed heightened. She was infinitely aware of his thumb circling over the dip in her back. Her lungs celebrated being filled with his mesmerizing scent. Strangely, all the happenings around them faded into a suddenly bland background. When a corner of his mouth slanted—the corner with that small scar—her pulse rate spiked and her blood began to sizzle. She’d wanted to know. Now she did. Having Mateo’s arms around her—soothing and at the same time exciting her—was like being held by some kind of god.

“So you’ll be working for Natalie’s agency?”

“While I was dressing—make that redressing—Natalie explained they’d lost three cleaners in the past couple of weeks.”

“You don’t mind the work?”

“I’m grateful for it. And it won’t be forever.”

He grinned. “Sounds as if you’re making plans.”

Seeing her father today cemented what she’d already come to realize. Education was the key to independence. “I’m going to apply to college.”

“Do you know what you’ll study? Teaching? Nursing?”

“Maybe I should become a doctor,” she joked. “Dr. Bailey Ross. Neurosurgeon.” She laughed and so did he, but not in a condescending way. “I want to do something that makes people happy,” she went on. “That makes them feel good about themselves.”

“Whatever you choose I’m sure you’ll do well.”

“Because you know I’m an A student, right?”

“Because I think you have guts. Persistence will get you most places in life.”

Unless you were talking about her father. The more she’d tried, the more he’d turned his back. Cut her off. There came a time when a person needed to accept they should look forward rather than back.

But then she retraced her thoughts back to Mateo's words—*I think you have guts*. She gave him a dubious look. "Was that another compliment?"

A line cut between his brows. "Tell you what. We'll make a deal. I promise not to mention the money you owe Mama in a derogatory way if you promise something in return. It has to do with my vacation."

She couldn't think what. Except maybe, "You want me to house sit?"

"I want you to come with me to France."

Bailey's legs buckled. When she fell against him, bands of steel stopped her from slipping farther. But the way her front grazed against his, his help only made her sudden case of weakness worse.

Siphoning down a breath, she scooped back some hair fallen over her face. "Sorry. Did you just say you want me to go to France with you?"

"I got the impression you hadn't seen Paris."

"I was saving it for last. I never got there."

His smile flashed white beneath the purple lights. "Now's your chance."

She took a step back but more deep breaths didn't help. She cupped her forehead.

"Mateo, I'm confused."

He brought her near again and flicked a glance over his shoulder at the couple dancing nearby. "Blame Alex. He suggested it."

She tried to ignore the delicious press of his body, the masculine scent of his skin, the way his hard thigh nudged between hers as he rotated them around in a tight circle. "You know I don't have money for a ticket to Europe." Her jaw hardened. "And I won't take any more charity."

"Even if you'd be doing me a favor, keeping me company?" His dark gaze, so close, roamed her face. "One good turn deserves another."

"That's not fair."

His mouth turned into a solemn line. "There wouldn't be any conditions."

Bailey blinked. Maybe because he was Mama's grandson, she hadn't considered he might be trying to buy more than her company.

With the lights slowly spinning and couples floating by, oxygen burned in her lungs while she tried to come up with an appropriate reply to a question that had knocked her for a loop. After an agonizingly long moment, she felt the groan rumble in his chest and his grip on her hand loosen.

"You're right," he said. "Crazy idea."

"It's not that I wouldn't *like* to go." She'd always wanted to see Paris. It was her biggest disappointment that she'd planned to save France for last rather than enjoying that country first. "But I've just got back," she explained. "I'm starting that job Monday." She finished with the obvious excuse. "We don't know each other."

He dismissed it with a self-deprecating smile. "Like I said. Forget I spoke."

But as his palm skimmed up her back and he tucked her crown under his chin while they continued to dance, although she knew she really should, Bailey couldn't forget.

At the end of the evening, she and Mateo dropped Natalie and Alex off then drove back to his place in a loaded silence.

Her breathing was heavier than it ought to be. Was his heartbeat hammering as fast as hers, or was she the only one who couldn't get that enthralling dance and tempting offer out of her mind? Mateo had asked her to jet away to France with him. What had he been thinking? What was she thinking still considering it after having already told him no?

Bailey pressed on her stomach as her insides looped.

Admittedly, she was uniquely attracted to Mateo Celeca; he had a presence, a confidence that was difficult to ignore. But how did she feel about him beyond the physical? Yesterday, after he'd

tried to degrade her over the money she'd loaned, she'd thought him little more than a self-serving snob. And yet, tonight, when she'd met his friends ... had been his *date* ...

Her stomach looped again.

After that episode with Emilio, the last thing she wanted was to get caught up in a man. Any man. Even when he gave generously to the orphanage where he'd spent his earliest years. Even when she felt as if she'd found a slice of heaven in his arms.

Since that dance, the air between them had crackled with a double dose of anticipation and electricity. If, when they got home, they started talking, got to touching, she didn't know if she'd want to stop.

After they pulled into the garage, Mateo opened her door and helped her out. Their hands lingered, the contact simmered, before his fingers slipped from hers and he moved to unlock the internal door and flick on the lights. Gathering herself—straightening her dress and patting down her burning cheeks—Bailey followed into the kitchen.

"Care for a nightcap?" he asked, poised near the fridge.

Bailey clasped the pocketbook Natalie had loaned her under her chin and, resolute, made a believable excuse.

"I'm beat. Practically dead on my feet. Think I'll go straight up and turn in."

As she headed out, Bailey laughed at herself. He might not even *want* to kiss her. She could be blowing this awareness factor all out of proportion. But prevention was always better than cure. She'd accepted his invitation to stay a couple more nights. She didn't want to do something they both might regret in the morning. And if they got involved that way, there *would* be regrets. Neither was looking for a relationship. She certainly didn't want to get caught up in a man who, only yesterday, had as good as called her thief. A man who might set her pulse racing but who could never get serious about a woman in her situation.

And yet, he had asked her to France...

When Mateo reached the foot of the staircase, he stopped and turned to face her. Standing there, simply gazing at one another in the semi-darkness, she had this silly urge to play down the scene, stick out a hand and offer to shake. But, given past experience, probably best they didn't touch.

"Thank you for the lovely evening," she said.

"You're welcome."

Still, he didn't move.

"Well ..." Clutching her pocketbook tighter, she set a foot onto the lowest stair. "Good night."

"Good night, Bailey."

When she began to climb, he started up too. They ascended together until they hit a point where the stairs divided into separate branches. A fork in the road.

Her stomach twisting with nerves, she chanced a look across. He was looking at her too, a masculine silhouette a mere arm's length away.

Swirling desire pooled low in her belly and she frowned. "You're not moving."

"Neither are you."

Rolling back her shoulders, she issued a firm and final, "Good night."

She hiked the rest of the stairs, right to the top. But before she could head off down to her suite, curiosity won out again. She edged a gaze over her right shoulder, to where she'd left Mateo standing seconds ago. What she saw sent her heart dropping in her chest.

He was gone. And wasn't that what she'd wanted? What she knew was best for both their sakes?

Still, she stared at that vacant spot a moment more, feeling strangely empty and no longer so pretty in her pink designer dress. Shifting her weight, she finally rotated back ... and ran right into Mateo's solid chest.

Her heels balanced on the edge of the stairs, Bailey toppled back. But before she could fall, his arm hooked around her waist, pulling her effortlessly against him. *Déjà vu*. With the bodice of

her dress pinned to his chest—with every one of her reflexes in a tailspin—she worked to catch her breath before croaking out, “I thought you were tired.”

“*You* said you were tired.” His dark eyes gleamed. “I’m wide awake.”

When she felt his hardness pressed against her belly, she gulped down another breath only to feel him grow harder still. Any doubts she may have had were blown away. The way her own blood was throbbing, taking this steadily growing attraction further seemed frighteningly inevitable.

“Maybe ...” She wet her suddenly dry lips. “Maybe we should have that nightcap after all.”

His gaze dropped to her lips. “What kind of nightcap?”

“What would you like?”

His mouth came to within a whisper of hers.

“I’d like you.”

Six

He didn't waste time waiting for her reply. Bailey supposed he saw all he needed to know in her eyes. He angled and, before she could think beyond *I need you to kiss me*, she was in his arms and he was moving down the hall, away from her suite, headed for his.

The tall double doors of his suite were open. He didn't bother to kick them shut after he'd carried her through. Nor did he switch on any lamps. What she could make out in the shadows was courtesy of the light filtering in from the hall as well as the moonbeams slanting through a bank of soaring arched windows that looked out over that garden and its statues below.

He stopped at the foot of his bed and his voice dropped to a low rasp.

"This is what you want?"

Instinctively, her palm wove around the sandpaper of his jaw. She filled her lungs with his scent then skimmed the pad of her thumb over the dent in his chin.

"Yes," she murmured.

His chest expanded, his grip tightened then he lifted her higher in his arms as his head came purposefully down. When his mouth claimed hers, Bailey couldn't contain the moan of deepest desire the sensation dragged from her throat. She didn't want to contain *anything*. And as his mouth worked magic against hers and his stubble grazed and teased her skin, she pressed herself up and in, needing to feel even closer. Needing him as close as it got.

Her fingers wound through his hair while his throat rumbled with satisfaction and the kiss deepened. Even as her mind and body raged with desire, she was lucid enough to recognize the simple truth. Whatever it was that had sparked when they'd met, it had grown to a point where now they were downright hungry for each other. *Starving* for each other's touch in a primal nothing-held-back, nothing-taboo, kind of way. She could never get enough of this burn ... of the flames that already leapt and blazed nearly out of control.

When his lips gradually left hers, she felt dizzy. Her eyes remained closed but she heard and felt his breathing. At the edges of her mind, she wondered ... why was this coming together so intense? So combustible?

He dipped to sit her on the edge of the mattress. With moonlight spilling in, she dragged the dress up over her head then, in her lingerie, watched as he wound the shirt off his shoulders, the sleeves from his arms. When he was naked, he bent near, slid an arm around her waist and drew her up to stand again. Holding her chin, he ran the wet tip of his tongue along the open seam of her mouth while, at her back, he unsnapped the strapless bra with one deft flick. His palm pressed down the dent of her spine and slipped into the back of her panties. She whimpered as her womb contracted and quivered ... a tantalizing prelude to the climax she couldn't wait to enjoy.

His fingertips pressed and seared into her flesh while his mouth covered hers completely again, and all the time her insides clenched and pulsed while her limbs and mind went to mush. She wanted this heaven to go on forever. But even more, she wanted him bearing down on top of her. Inside of her. Filling and fulfilling her *now*.

Her hands ironed down his sides. When she reached his lean hips, she urged him forward, toward her and the bed. With their mouths still joined, she felt his smile before he broke the kiss long enough to wrench back the sheets. With a determined gleam in his eyes, he crowded until the back of her legs met the cool edge of the mattress. His big hands ringed her waist and her feet left the ground long enough for him to lay her gently down. He followed a heartbeat behind.

Looming above her, everything seemed to still as he searched her eyes in a world of midnight shadows. His deep low voice seemed to fill the room.

"I didn't ask you to stay here for this."

She drew an aimless pattern through the hair at the base of his throat.

“I know.”

“Although I’m not sorry you agreed.”

She matched his grin. “I’m not sorry you asked.”

He dropped a tender kiss at the side of her mouth, a barely there touch that shot a fountain of star-tipped sparks through her every fiber.

“Come with me to France,” he murmured against her lips.

She groaned. The temptation was huge. She’d said no and had meant it. She was starting a job Monday. She didn’t want to take more charity. But those considerations didn’t seem quite so solid since he’d carried her to his bed.

Closing her eyes, she sighed. He was kissing the sensitive spot beneath her left lobe.

“What if I say please?”

She bit her lip. He was *killing* her.

“I’ll tell you what.” She filed her fingers up over his burning ears, through his hair. “I promise not to say no again if you promise not to ask.”

He moved lower to nuzzle the arc of her neck. “I don’t like when you say no.”

“To everything but that, Mateo ...” She hooked her leg around his hip and drew him close. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Mateo couldn’t stop to think about how his unexpected encounter with Bailey Ross had come to this. How they’d gone from strangers to opponents to lovers in less than two days. As he tasted a leisurely line along the perfumed sweep of her shoulder, he only knew these sensations were too intense to analyze. More intense—more vital—than he’d ever had before.

When her heel dug into the back of his thigh, letting him know again she was on the same page, he ground up against her but then grit his teeth and blocked that insistent heady push. Tonight would be sweet torture. He’d need every ounce of willpower to keep this encounter—his pleasure—from peaking too soon.

Working to steady his breathing, his pace, he sculpted a palm over the outside of one full breast as he shifted lower. His mouth covered that nipple before his teeth grazed up all the way, tugging the tip of the bead. Her hands had been winding through his hair but now she dug in and held on as she shuddered and moaned beneath him. He heard her desperate swallow and listened, pleased that her breathing sounded more labored than his own. Savoring the way her breasts rose and fell on each lungful of air, he twirled his tongue around that tip and tried to ignore the fact his every inch was ready to explode.

With her leg twined over the back of his, her pelvis began to move in time with the adoring sweep of his tongue. She murmured something he didn’t catch. But he wouldn’t ask and stop the bone-melting rhythm their bodies had fallen into. He didn’t want to interrupt for a moment the feel of her body stirring beneath his. He could lie here all night, doing precisely this.

If only his erection wasn’t begging for more.

He repositioned again, higher to savor the honey of her lips at the same time his touch wove down: over her ribs, the curve of her waist, the subtle flare of a hip, then up over the same terrain. He was performing a repeat descent, stroking and playing—anticipating the added treasures he’d discover this time around—when she grunted, shifted and pushed against his chest.

He froze. Then, eyes snapping open, he rolled away. What was wrong? Had he hurt her?

When she slid over too—on *top* of him—he held his brow and almost laughed with relief.

“What are you doing?”

Crouched on his lap, she slid her hips one way and the other then tossed back the hair fallen over her face. “What do you think?”

She slid *up* a little this time then down over his throbbing shaft. That sent him reeling way too close to the edge. He was thrilled she was so completely in the zone that she wanted to take the reins, but any more of that kind of maneuvering and he’d reach the finish line way too soon.

He flipped her over so she lay on her back again, him firmly on top. While she peered up at him, a saucy glint in her eyes, his hand burrowed between them, down the front of her panties, and his erection grew heavier still. She was warm and moist. When his touch curled up between her folds and pressed against a woman's most sensitive spot, she let out a time honored sound that told him she was ready.

Leaning over, he opened his bedside drawer, found the pack then tore a single foiled wrap with his teeth. As he rolled on protection, her fingers sluiced up and down his sides. Oh, he wanted to take this slower. Make it last. But this time, with this lady, that wasn't going to happen.

Sheathed, he positioned himself, took a long slow kiss from her welcoming mouth then eased inside. Her walls clamped around him at the same time her hips lifted and she opened her mouth wider, inviting him deeper.

With one arm curled around her head, he drove in and clenched every muscle as a mind-tingling burn hardened him more. He felt as if he was drowning in a lake of fire. All exposed nerve endings and profound sizzling need.

Bailey trailed her fingers down his neck, felt the cords bulging and pulsing, and melted more. The way he moved with her left her breathless while his mouth on hers raised her up. She wanted this moment to go on forever. Never wanted the steep waves of pleasure to wane or fade. And yet they both needed to go that bit further. Needed to be thrown up to the stars and explode on their way back down.

He was snatching slow kisses from her brow, from her cheek, holding her hip securely as his strokes grew ever stronger and longer. The friction was scolding, the pleasure beyond what she could take.

And then his kisses stopped and his body grew still and hard. She sensed his every tendon stretched trip wire tight, could feel his heart thumping and pounding in his ears. The mind-altering fire at her core intensified, somehow changing in dimension and in shape. Then, in one finite moment, in less time than it took to suck down a breath, all the universe contracted into a single high-voltage speck. Beyond that nothing existed. Nothing but black.

When he thrust again—when he hit that secret wanting spot—she threw back her head, spread her wings and flew.

Seven

“Tell me more about France.”

At the sound of Bailey's voice filtering through the predawn mist, Mateo lifted his head off the pillow and dropped a kiss on her silky crown.

They'd made love well into the night. The first time had been incredible. Incomparable. But over far too quickly. The second time they'd slowed down enough to thoroughly explore each other's bodies and share their most intimate needs. The third time they'd come apart in each other's arms might have been the best ... the time when he'd truly begun to see that this joining meant more than simply great sex. The connection they shared, the amazing way they fit, was special.

That didn't mean he'd changed his mind about getting serious. About settling down. Invariably marriage meant children. Children of his own. But his practice was his life. He'd put all he had into doing his best and building a home that was his. He had everything he needed. Everything and more. He felt secure, and that was life's most valuable gift.

If he were to become a husband ... a father ... well, he couldn't think of a more vulnerable place to be. There were concerns over the complications in the womb, worry about childhood disease, not to mention the fact that in this world he had no living family now, other than Mama. If fate stepped in and left his child without parents ...

Mateo swallowed against the pit formed in his throat.

This is why he never let himself analyze relationships too deeply, particularly following the “after all she could get” Linda incident. He was a man of influence and means who could choose what course his life should take. Tonight he'd chosen to act on the undeniable chemistry he shared with Bailey. Given she'd asked about France a moment ago, he hoped they could continue to enjoy the attraction a while longer. For however long it might last.

Nestled in the crook of his arm, she twined to rest her chin on her thatched hands, which lay on one side of his chest.

“What's it like?” She asked, looking beautifully ruffled and sleep deprived but content. “Everyone seems to love Paris. Did you ever get into the city when you were young?”

“As a child?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I didn't know Paris existed.”

She sat up a little, bracing her weight on an elbow as she searched his eyes in the misty light. Outside, the morning sun peeked over the distant rise, painting a translucent halo around her head.

Her voice softened when she asked, “Were you very lonely there? At the orphanage, I mean.”

Mateo's jaw tensed. His first instinct was to push her question aside. If anyone, including Alex or Natalie, brought up his childhood, he rarely gave away too much. The past was past ... even if it was never forgotten.

But lying here with Bailey after the extraordinary night they'd shared, he felt closer to her this minute than anyone he'd known. That shouldn't be. He'd loved and respected Ernesto. He adored Mama. He had friends he would do anything for and, he was certain, vice versa.

And yet, he couldn't deny it. Whatever drew him to Bailey Ross was a force unto itself. He wanted to share more than his bed with her tonight. He wanted to open up ... at least this once.

“I wasn't lonely,” he began. “I had many friends and adults I knew that cared for us all.” He thought more deeply and frowned. “I did feel *alone*, which is different, but I was too young to understand why. I never knew my parents. No one explained about the ‘who’ or the ‘when.’ I didn't realize a life outside the orphanage existed until my fifth birthday.”

Sitting up, she wrapped the sheet around her breasts, under her arms. “What happened on your birthday? I don't suppose you had a party.”

“From what I can recall, the day was pleasant enough. Everyone sang to me after lunch. I got a special dessert along with two friends I picked out.” He searched his memory and blinked then smiled. “I received a gift. People from town donated them. I tore open the paper and found a wooden train. Green chimney,” he recalled. “Red wheels. I thought I was made.” But his smile slipped. “Then my best friend said he was going away. That a mother and father were taking him home.”

Bailey tucked her knees up and hugged her sheet-clad legs. “It mustn’t have made sense.”

He flinched at a familiar pang in his chest and for a moment he wanted to end that conversation and talk about the France people found in travel books. The “gay Paree” with which Bailey would identify. But she wasn’t listening to this story to snatch some voyeuristic thrill. He saw from her unguarded expression that she wanted to learn more about the man she’d made love with tonight. He wanted to learn more about her too. So, to be fair, he took a breath and went on.

“I knew some children were there with us, then, suddenly, they weren’t. No one spoke about it, or if they did, I didn’t have the maturity to latch on and work the steps out. But this time, with Henri, I began to see.”

“You realized something was missing.”

He nodded.

Yes, missing. Exactly.

“From a second-story window,” he said, “where the boys slept, I watched Henri slide into a shiny white car and drive away with two people, a man and woman. I shouted out and waved, but he didn’t look up. Not until the last minute. Then he saw me. I think he called out my name, too.”

With her blue eyes glittering in the early dawn light, she tipped nearer and held his arm.

“Oh, Mateo ... that must have been awful.”

Not *awful*. “Eye-opening. Unsettling. From then on I was more aware of others leaving. More aware that I was left behind. I tried to find him a few years back. It would be great to see him again. Hear if his memories match mine.”

Henri had been his first friend.

Mateo touched the scar on his upper lip—the one he’d received when Henri had thrown a ball too hard and he’d missed catching it—then, dismissing the pang in his chest, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and reached for the water decanter. After pouring two glasses, he offered her one.

She drank, watching him over the rim of her glass.

“How did Mama Celeca find you?” she asked, handing the empty glass back.

“Not Mama. Ernesto.” He took another mouthful and set both glasses down. “Years before, he’d been in love with a woman who’d carried his child. A friend, returning from France, let Ernesto know he’d heard that Antoinette had given birth in a town called Ville Laube and had offered her baby boy up for adoption there. Ernesto flew straight over. He found the orphanage his friend had described but not his boy.”

Clutching the sheet under her chin, Bailey sagged.

“I thought you’d say that *you* were Ernesto’s child.”

“Not through blood. But apparently my parents were Italian, too. I was left there when I was three, but I don’t remember any life before the orphanage.”

She shifted and he waited until she’d settled alongside of him.

“One day after Henri had gone,” he went on, “I saw this sad looking man sitting alone in the courtyard under a huge oak. His hands were clasped between his thighs. His eyes were downcast. When I edged closer, I saw they were bloodshot. He’d been crying. I knew because some times in the mornings I had bloodshot eyes too.”

His throat closed as the memory grew stronger and flooded his mind with a mix of emotions, sounds and smells from the past. The scent of lavender. The noise of children playing. The deepest feeling that, if only he knew this sad man, he would like him.

But, “I didn’t know why the man was unhappy. I had no idea what to say. I only knew I felt for him. So I sat down and put my hand over his.”

Mateo looked across. In the growing light, he thought he saw a single tear speed down Bailey’s cheek. Ironic, because after that day he couldn’t remember ever crying again.

“And he took you home,” she said.

“Home to Italy, yes. And later here to Australia.”

“So Mama Celeca isn’t your real grandmother?”

“She’s always treated me as though she is. She accepted me from the moment Ernesto brought me back to Casa Buona. I helped Ernesto in his office during the day and hung out with Mama in the kitchen in the evenings.”

“Where she taught you to cook.”

Remembering the aromas and Mama’s careful instructions, he smiled and nodded. “The old-fashioned way.”

“The *best* way.” She turned more toward him. “Did Ernesto find his boy?”

“No.” And that was the tragedy. “Although he never gave up hope.”

“Did he ever marry?”

“Never. He died two years ago.”

“I remember. Mama told me.”

“He wanted to be buried back home. Mama was heartbroken at her son’s death, but that, at least, gave her a measure of comfort.” He voiced the words that were never far from his heart. “He was a good son. A good father. Last year I had a call from a woman, Ernesto’s biological son’s widow. After he’d been killed in a hit-and-run, she’d found papers from the orphanage that helped her track Ernesto down. She’d wanted him to know.”

She lowered her head and murmured, so softly, he barely heard. “Is all this why Natalie thinks you might bring home a child from France one day?”

“Adoption rules were more flexible in the country back then.”

“You’d have no trouble proving you could care for a child. I haven’t known you long but I know you’d make a good father ... like Ernesto.”

A knot twisted in his chest. Sharp. Uncomfortable. He’d already explained.

“I’m too busy for a child.” He looked inside and, flinching, admitted, “Too selfish.”

When his temple throbbed, he turned to plump up his pillow. They ought to get some sleep, Bailey especially.

They lay down again, front to front, curled up tight. Mateo was drifting when she murmured against his chest.

“When are you expected in France?”

“Next week.”

“I told Natalie I’d start work for her in two days’ time.” She lifted her head to glance out the window at the ever-rising sun. “Make that tomorrow.”

Mateo was suddenly wide awake. If Bailey was thinking about changing her mind and coming with him.

“Natalie won’t hold anything against you for taking a week off.”

In fact, he was sure she’d be happy at the news. Natalie made no secret of the fact that she would love to see her husband’s best friend settled with someone nice. Not that that was in the cards.

She snuggled into him more. “I’d feel as if I were copping out.”

“Visiting the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, perhaps. But the orphanage?” He skimmed a hand down her smooth warm arm. “It’s not a cop-out.”

After several minutes, her breathing grew deeper and he thought she was finally asleep. He was letting oblivion overtake him too when she spoke again.

“Mama’s right.”

He forced his heavy lids open. “About what?”

She rubbed her cheek against his chest and murmured in a groggy voice, “You are a good man.”

Eight

As Mateo predicted, Natalie wasn't the least bit upset when the following day, Bailey rang to explain.

"I know I'm only starting," she began, sitting behind Mateo's desk in his home office. "I'm so grateful for the chance, but I was wondering if I could possibly ask for the week after next off?"

"Are you all right?"

"I feel great." In fact, better than great. "Mateo asked whether I might like to fly with him to France."

Bailey jerked the receiver from her ear as Natalie squealed down the line.

"Sorry," Natalie said. "I'm just excited for you. For you both. And I'll need to go through my wardrobe with a fine-tooth comb. In late October, you're going to need some warm clothes over there."

The following day Bailey dived into the first of her cleaning jobs. The work was constant and anything but glamorous, but she rolled up her sleeves and took pride in making sure the floors were spotless and that the kitchens and bathrooms sparkled. She was being constructive, pushing forward, earning her way and feeling rewarded because of it.

When Friday came, Bailey was exhausted by the time she got to Mateo's place. But she was also elated. When he opened the door for her, she threw out her hand.

Mateo took the slip of paper she held. "What's this?"

"A printout of the receipt from my transfer."

Mateo had set up an account solely for the purpose of her loan repayments.

When he smiled, he truly looked pleased.

"We should celebrate."

"What do you suggest?"

"Dinner at this little Italian taverna five minutes from here. Unless you're too tired ..."

"No." Suddenly she was feeling pepped up. She *should* celebrate. This was a noteworthy step toward reaching her goals. "But on one condition. I pay my way."

One brow hiked up. "You're supposed to be saving, not spending."

"We go dutch or we don't go."

They went and enjoyed a carafe of Chianti, twirled and slurped spaghetti, paid half each and, when they arrived home, made love as they'd done every night since their first.

Afterward, as they lay tangled in each other's arms and Mateo stroked her hair, Bailey thought back on the week, feeling happier than she had in a long while. She'd had fun backpacking around Europe and she'd enjoyed herself in Italy—before Emilio had cornered her the way he had. But now, here with Mateo, she'd stepped up to a different level of understanding.

Funnily enough, she felt settled. Living in this grand palace with a strong-minded millionaire doctor ... unbelievable, but she felt as if she belonged.

But this hyper exhilaration was only temporary. It wasn't real. Wouldn't last. Staying in this extraordinary house with this extraordinary man was a fairy tale she happened to fall into. Clearly, Mateo had been with other women but he'd never committed, as Mama had told her more than once. There was no reason to believe that what they'd shared this week would last either.

She was a big girl. She was fine with that.

Smoothing a palm over his chest, she smiled softly. This time with Mateo might be temporary, but she planned to enjoy each minute and, when it was over, cherish every memory. It was a temporary happy ending to an unpleasant episode in her life. And Paris was yet to come!

Two days later they flew halfway around the world on the sumptuous private jet Mateo hired. Nibbling on mouth-watering cheese and fruit platters, feeling as if she were lounging at a luxury retreat rather than an aircraft, Bailey was certain she would never view air travel the same again.

It was early evening when they landed at Charles de Gaulle. The weather was cool in the City of Light, but the darkening sky held no threat of rain or sleet. Bailey tugged Natalie's silk-lined designer jacket higher around her ears and, loving the chilly nip on her nose—so different from the warm weather in Australia this time of year—slid into the back of the chauffeur driven limousine, with Mateo entering behind her. She guessed her mother would have felt just as excited when she'd arrived in this famous city years before.

As the driver performed a pared down city tour, she lapped up the scenery while Mateo pointed out noteworthy spots. The iconic spire of the Eiffel Tower, the history effused Arc de Triomphe. Then they passed the Louvre and the Pyramid.

Bailey sighed. "I wonder if there's a person in the world who doesn't want to see the *Mona Lisa*." His hand found hers and squeezed. "We'll spend an entire day there."

"Before or after we've spent a morning strolling along the Seine? And I want to sip coffee at a gorgeous sidewalk café and gaze up at the obelisk at the Place de la Concorde."

Mateo nuzzled her hair. "We'll do it all. I promise."

They checked into one of the best hotels in the city, only steps from the Champs-Elysees. Bailey held her pounding heart as she took in magnificent glittering chandeliers, mirror polished floors, classic marble statuettes and fountains of fresh scented flowers. She wasn't interested in being wealthy. Money did *not* buy happiness—ask her father. But this kind of experience was different. It was about appreciating another culture. About absorbing history. Enriching one's life by seeing how others communicated and lived. This hotel was a prime example of crème de la crème. Tomorrow they would move among the less fortunate ... children without family or homes of their own. Children who lived as Mateo had once done.

As Mateo checked in at the reception desk, Bailey absorbed his effortless sophisticated air. Calling into that orphanage each year must be a bittersweet experience. Were his memories of that place still sharp or were those long ago days more like a dream ... as these days would no doubt be to her in a few years' time?

When they reached their suite, Bailey drifted toward a twinkling view, visible past a soaring window, while Mateo wasted no time coming up behind and enfolding her in his arms.

"It's said that Paris in daytime is only resting," he murmured against her hair. "That the city only comes to life at night. So," his breath felt warm on the sweep of her neck, "are you ready to take on the town?"

"I'd love to say yes, but I need sleep." And she didn't want to be dead on her feet tomorrow when they reached their first and most important destination—the orphanage.

"Hungry then?" He twined her arms around his and pressed her extra close. "Or perhaps we ought to check out that fine piece of furniture."

Eyes drifting closed, she hummed out a grin. He meant that canopied bed.

Turning her back on the view—on the glittering spectacle of Paris at night—she rotated until they were facing one another then gifted his stubbly jaw with a lingering kiss.

"I like that idea," she murmured. "Let's freshen up first."

"Only if we do it together."

He led her through to a marble finished room, featuring a classic clawfoot tub, big enough for two. After kissing her thoroughly, a toe-curling taste of what was to come, he left to order up refreshments.

Floating, Bailey ran the gold gooseneck faucet, added salts and bubble liquid into the rising water then, humming, twirled her hair up and set it with a single pin. After stripping off her shoes

and Natalie-sponsored clothes, she threaded her arms through an oversized courtesy robe but stopped when she caught her reflection in the window.

Holding her fluttering stomach, she wanted to imprint this precise moment ... this dreamlike feeling ... into her memory forever. Beyond that pane, Paris was buzzing with music and laughter and life. Even more amazing, beyond that door, Mateo Celeca was looking forward to sharing this bath with her.

Tying the robe's sash, she lowered onto the edge of the bath's porcelain rim and took stock.

Two weeks ago she'd been near desperate to get home, for the chance to start again. Two weeks ago she'd thought constantly about her father ... reliving those earlier happier years ... regretting that their relationship had come unstuck. When she'd seen Damon Ross in the city during that exhausting second day back in Australia, her heart had screamed out for her to walk over. To give them another chance. The cab's timely arrival had put a stop to that idea, thank heaven, because there was nothing she could say that she hadn't said before. Nothing she could do that would mend those flattened fences. She'd tried in the past, over and again. The more she'd persisted, the more her father had only wanted to push her away.

One day, perhaps, they'd talk again, Bailey decided, swirling a hand through the deepening warm bubble-filled pool. But that couldn't happen until she'd proven herself to herself. She was young. With the right attitude she could accomplish anything. Go anywhere.

Right now, however, she wanted to help Mateo accomplish his goals here in France. Of course, she also wanted to enjoy this time they had here as lovers. Still, she was mindful of keeping this whirlwind romance in perspective. It would be ridiculously easy to fall in love with an amazing man like Mateo Celeca only to be left behind.

After this time together, that he was so successful and she was so definitely not didn't worry her so much. His state of mind, as far as commitment was concerned, did. She'd briefly wondered whether he might want to find a wife and adopt that little boy he'd spoken about. But Mateo was married to his career and wanted to keep it that way. He'd confessed he was too busy for a family of his own. Too selfish.

Despite his mansion back home and all his lavish possessions, she couldn't believe he was self-centered. Although Mateo kept him well hidden, the orphaned boy he'd once been was still there deep inside. The boy who'd had no one and nothing. She felt the bracelet heavy on her wrist and smiled softly. People had different ways of dealing with the past.

The adjoining door fanned open and Bailey, brought back, pushed herself to her feet. Mateo entered the room carrying a silver service tray holding two champagne flutes and a dish of sliced pear. At the sight of him, the tips of her breasts tingled and her blood instantly heated. But for the white serving cloth draped over his forearm, he was naked.

Her gaze drank him in ... tall, toned and completely comfortable in his own gorgeous bronzed skin.

"I hope you didn't answer the door to room service dressed like that," she said, holding off tightening her robe's sash.

"I doubt they'd bat an eye."

With his gaze lidded and hot, he sauntered closer. After placing the tray on a ledge next to the bath, he poured the champagne then handed over a flute. The glasses pinged as they touched.

"To Paris," he said.

"To Paris," she agreed and sipped.

As the bubbles fizzed on her tongue then slid down her throat, Mateo selected the largest piece of pear, bit in and watched juice sluice down his thumb.

"Delicious," he said and licked his lips.

He offered her a taste. But when she moved to take a bite, he lowered the fruit and touched the piece to the hollow of her throat, drawing a calculated circle before sliding the pear farther down.

Pulse rate climbing, Bailey closed her eyes and waited for the cool to glide between the dip of her cleavage, under the folds of her robe. Instead Mateo lowered his head and sucked at the juice slipping a single line down her throat.

Soaking up each and every thrilling sensation, Bailey sighed and let her neck rock back.

As his mouth slid lower, the sash at her waist was released. A moment later, cool air feathered over her exposed breasts, her thighs, at the same time a big palm trailed the plane of her quivering belly then higher, over her ribs and tender swell of each breast.

He nipped her lower lip and spoke of the near overflowing tub. “That bath needs attention.”

Winding her arms around his neck, she whispered in his ear, “Me first.”

Nine

Although the morning was far too fresh to leave the top down, Mateo arranged a late model French convertible for the road trip.

From Bailey's wide-eyed expression as they cruised beyond the city limits, she was in thrall of the unfolding country scenes ... roads lined with trees whose leaves had been kissed with the russets and reds of autumn and far-reaching vineyards busy with the business of harvest. She marveled at the *colombage* houses with their geometric half-timber patterns. Mateo had obliged when she'd begged to stop at a rustic farmhouse with a leaded-glass feature that highlighted a coat-of-arms on the lintel above.

And there was so much more ahead of them.

He didn't dwell on the niggling doubts that had surfaced since she'd accepted his invitation to join him on this trip, although at times he had found himself wondering if he'd acted too quickly—whether he was a fool believing Bailey was cut from a different cloth than Linda. But they were here now, and he intended for them both to make the most of it.

"After we visit the children," Mateo said, stepping on the gas, "we'll go back to Paris and spend a couple of days. Longer if you want."

"Two days will be wonderful," Bailey said, focused on a tractor trundling over a patchwork of fields. "I told Natalie I'd be back on deck by next Monday."

"She won't mind—"

"I know she wouldn't," Bailey said, looking over at him, "but I've taken up enough slack. Natalie was good enough to offer me a job. I need to step up to the plate."

Changing down gears to take a bend, Mateo was deep in thought. That Natalie had offered Bailey a job didn't bother him in the least. What did rankle was the fact that she scrubbed floors to pay back money he would never miss. After the time they'd spent together, the intimate moments they'd shared, if he didn't know that she'd argue, he'd tell her to forget the debt. He'd much rather set her up in an apartment and, if she followed through with the idea, finance her way through university, like Ernesto had done for him.

Of course he'd be clear that any arrangement would not include a marriage proposal. From what she'd told him of her experience with Emilio Conti, she'd be glad of the clarification. She'd had one close call. She wouldn't be looking forward to the sound of wedding bells.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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