

The Moretti Heir  
*Katherine Garbera*  
Billionaire Extraordinaire  
*Leanne Banks*



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**Katherine Garbera**  
**Leanne Banks**  
**The Moretti Heir / Billionaire**  
**Extraordinaire: The Moretti**  
**Heir / Billionaire Extraordinaire**

**Аннотация**

The Moretti Heir Katherine Garbera His competitor's daughter had come to him with the ultimate request: impregnate her to free their families of the curse that plagued them. The chemistry between Marco and Virginia was electric. Yet in begetting the Moretti heir they were falling in love with the opposition! Billionaire Extraordinaire Leanne Banks The key to achieving all Damien desired lay in the hands of sweet new secretary, Emma Weatherfield. She could reveal the privileged information he so desperately wanted. But in order to gain Emma's trust, he had to win her love and do it without entrapping himself... Irresistible Strong, rich, sexy men – almost too hot to handle!

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**The Moretti Heir**  
**by Katherine Garbera**  
**“Why do you want my baby,**  
**Virginia?” he asked.**

She twisted a long strand of hair around her finger and walked a bit closer to him. Clad only in her negligee, she appeared so small and vulnerable, yet every inch a sexy woman. He knew she'd seduced him for a reason, but right now with only the faint lights from the bedroom and balcony illuminating the room, she seemed ethereal.

But he didn't want to trust the vulnerability he saw in her. She'd lied to him.

“It's all tied to the curse. Your family and mine are connected.”

“Interesting. Do you honestly think having my child will break the curse?”

“Yes. But I don't think we can fall in love.”

“That's not going to be an issue,” Marco replied. “I'm not going to fall in love with you.”

# **Billionaire Extraordinaire**

## **by Leanne Banks**

**Damien took a seat at the bar,  
ordered a scotch and watched Emma.**

She glided with confidence through the ballroom, setting guest lists on tables. She smiled at the wait staff in a friendlier, more open way than she did him. That fact stuck in his craw. He wondered what it would be like if she were that open with him. He felt an odd wrench in his gut and watched her through eyes lowered to half-mast. Why should it bother him?

He would have her. In every way a man could have a woman, he was determined to have her, and he would.

Damien took another swallow of whisky and felt the burn all the way down. Not only would she give him herself, she would give him all the information he wanted to make Max De Luca pay.

# **The Moretti Heir**

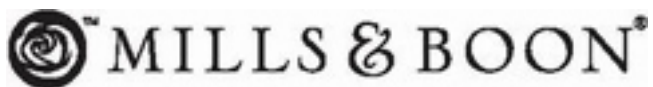
By

# **Katherine Garbera**

## **Billionaire Extraordinaire**

By

**Leanne Banks**



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# **The Moretti Heir**

By

**Katherine Garbera**

Dear Reader,

The MORETTI'S LEGACY trilogy idea came to me out of my fascination with my Italian grandmother's superstitious nature. She was a devout Catholic, but also believed you could curse someone or put the "evil eye" on them. That blend always intrigued me and a few years ago I found a book called *Italian Witchcraft* that talked about the old ways...and when I say old, I mean from times of Roman rule.

My idea was simply a cursed family. The curse was simple: the Moretti men would either be lucky in love or in business but never in both.

Cassia Festa put the curse on Lorenzo Moretti. He broke her heart when he chose car racing over her and she wanted to make very sure that he never found love in another's arms. To be fair, Lorenzo probably would not have ever fallen in love because he was too enamoured of racing and his dreams of building a car empire.

This story takes place around the globe in the glamorous world of Formula One racing. I love to travel and the idea of having

a job that takes you to every continent in the world (as Grand Prix drivers do) is one that makes me envious. This story blends together a lot of things that are important to me: family, tradition and the idea of taking the seeds of the past and sowing them into a brighter future.

I hope you will enjoy this journey into *The Moretti Heir*, the first story in the MORETTI'S LEGACY mini-series.

Take care,

*Katherine Garbera*

**Katherine Garbera** is a strong believer in happily-ever-after. She's written more than thirty-five books and has been nominated for *Romantic Times BOOKreviews* Career Achievement Award in Series Fantasy and Series Adventure. Her books have appeared on several bestseller lists. Visit Katherine on the web at [www.katherinegarbera.com](http://www.katherinegarbera.com).

This book is dedicated to my son...beautiful face.

Who could not love a boy who is so full of fun  
and laughter, quick wit and intelligence?

Thanks for all the silly conversations,  
tickling matches and just spending time with me.

Acknowledgement:

Thanks as always to my wonderful editor  
Natashya Wilson.

# One

Marco Moretti, by anyone's standards, was a man who had it all. His win today was part of his plan to become the most decorated Moretti driver of all time. His grandfather Lorenzo had won three back-to-back Grand Prix championships—something that Marco had done, as well, but this year he intended to surpass that record.

Both Moretti drivers were tied with three other drivers for the most Grand Prix championship wins, but this year Marco would win a fourth, something he had craved from the time he was a rookie driver.

He had no doubt that he would do it. He'd never failed at anything he put his mind to, and this would be no different. Why, then, did he feel bored and restless?

His teammate, Keke Heckler, was sitting at the banquette next to him, drinking and talking to Elena Hamilton, a *Sports Illustrated* cover model. Keke looked as if he had the world in his hands. All Marco could think was that there should be more to life than racing, winning and partying.

Oh, hell, maybe he was getting sick, coming down with a cold or something.

Or perhaps it was the family curse. Supposedly no Moretti male could succeed in both business and love.

“Marco?” Keke asked in his heavy German accent.

“Yes?”

“Elena asked if Allie was meeting you here later,” Keke said.

“No. We’re not together anymore.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Elena said.

A few minutes later, Keke and Elena left the table to go dance and Marco sat back against the leather seat and watched the crowd. This party was as much for him as it was for the jet set that followed the Formula One races. He saw other drivers mixed in with the sea of beautiful women, but he made no move to join anyone.

Allie and he had drifted apart during the off-season. It was as if she wanted him only when he was in the spotlight. A part of him craved the quiet life. He couldn’t give up the glamour that came with racing, but sometimes when he was alone he wanted someone with whom he could share the quiet times of his life. A companion at the villa in Naples where he retreated to be an average man.

He glanced around the room. None of the gorgeous women stood out—they all were too beautiful for words, but he’d never find a woman here who wanted that type of lifestyle.

What was wrong with him?

He was poised to usher in a new era for Moretti Motors. He and his brothers had grown up in an odd world of wealth and privilege, all the while knowing that they had no riches of their own. Something that he, Dominic and Antonio had changed as soon as they were old enough.

The three of them were now men who commanded respect in the cutthroat business world of automotive design. Under their guidance, Moretti Motors had returned as the leader of the pack for exotic cars. The power of the Moretti engine and the state-of-the-art body design combined to make their cars the fastest in the world, something that Marco was aware of each time he got behind the wheel of his Formula One race car. What more could he want?

His breath caught as he noticed a woman across the room. She was tall—probably almost five-nine, and had hair the color of ebony. Her skin was pale, like moonlight on the Mediterranean. Her eyes...well, it was too far for him to be certain, but they seemed deep and limitless as he gazed at her across the room.

She wore a subtly sexy dress, in the same sky-blue color as his racing uniform. Her hair was caught up and a few curls hung down, framing her face.

Marco slid around the booth to stand up. He was used to letting women come to him, but he needed to meet this woman. Had to find out who she was and claim her as his own.

As he stood up and took two steps toward her, she turned away, disappearing into the crowd. His heart raced as he started after her. But a hand on his arm stopped him.

He turned to see his older brother, Dominic. They were of a height, and both had the same classic Roman features—at least, according to *Capital*, an Italian business magazine. Something that Antonio, their middle brother, liked to tease them about.

“Not now,” Marco said, intent on finding the mystery woman.

“Yes, now. It’s urgent. Antonio has just arrived and we have to talk.” Dominic was very much the leader of their fraternity. Not just because he was the head of the company, but also because he was the engineer of this new wave of prosperity for Moretti Motors.

“Can’t it wait? I just won the first race of the season, Dom. I think I’m entitled to one night’s celebration.”

“You can celebrate later. This won’t take long.”

Marco glanced back to where the woman had been, but there was no trace of her. She was gone. Maybe he’d imagined her.

“What’s up, and where is Antonio?”

“On his way. Let’s go to the VIP section to talk. I don’t trust this crowd.”

Marco wasn’t surprised. Dom took no chances when it came to Moretti Motors. He’d been the one to realize that the curse put on their grandfather, Lorenzo, when he was a young man was responsible for their parents losing their wealth. Marco didn’t put much stock in curses made by old Italian witches, but his father believed the curse was responsible for their family’s change in fortune.

When they were teenagers, he and his brothers had taken a blood oath never to fall in love. They vowed to restore the glory and power of the Moretti name.

Marco and Dom made their way through the crowd to the velvet-rope section of the room. Marco was stopped many times

by well-wishers congratulating him on his victory, but he kept looking for that dark-haired woman. He didn't find her. They reached the VIP section and found a quiet area toward the back of the room. It was walled in on three sides and had a curtain for privacy.

Antonio was waiting there for them. "Took you long enough."

"Marco is the champion. Everyone wants a piece of him tonight," Dom said.

"What is the problem?" Marco asked, not interested in having one of their brotherly discussions that led nowhere.

"The problem is the Vallerio family is adamant that we can't use their name on the new production car."

The Vallerio was Moretti Motors' signature car and had been out of production since the sixties. Bringing the model back was Dominic's plan to firmly reestablish their dominance in the marketplace.

"How can I help?" Marco asked. "Keke or I can take the stock car to Le Mans and win the Twenty-Four Hours with it."

"Impossible. Their lawyer sent a cease and desist letter to us."

"We need to get to the Vallerio family and convince them to let us use the name," Dominic said.

"What do we know about them?" Marco asked, his interest in the dark-haired woman momentarily abated. He knew how important it was that Moretti Motors go ahead with their plans.

"That Pierre Henri Vallerio hated Nonno and is probably jumping for joy in the afterworld at the thought that his

descendants have something we need,” Antonio said.

“So a family feud...”

“Of a sort. I think they’d say no just to prove they can,” Dom said.

“Well, then, I will have to offer them something they can’t refuse,” Antonio said.

“Like what?” Marco asked. His middle brother was used to winning. Hell, they all were.

“I’ll figure it out,” Antonio said. “Leave this one to me.”

“We can’t let this derail us,” Dom said.

“We won’t,” Antonio said.

And Marco knew it wouldn’t be a problem for long. The Vallerio’s lawyer would be surprised when he had to deal with Antonio.

Virginia Festa had had a moment’s panic when Marco left his seat and started walking toward her. She knew enough about him to realize that he liked his women interested, but not obvious. So she turned away hoping...oh, hell, she had turned away due to panic.

Melbourne, Australia, was steamy in March—something that she had anticipated before she’d left her home on Long Island. In fact, she’d planned every detail of this trip with excruciating precision, knowing that timing was everything. But she hadn’t anticipated the human element. A mistake she was sure her grandmother had made, as well, when she’d placed the curse on the Moretti men.

She suspected that her grandmother—who had only a rudimentary knowledge of the ancient *strega* witchcraft—hadn't realized that when she'd cursed her lover, Lorenzo Moretti, and his family she was also cursing the Festa women. Virginia had spent a lifetime studying the curse her grandmother had used, trying to unravel the words so she could break it. There was no way to just take the curse back, since her grandmother had been the one who'd spoken the words and she was now deceased.

It totally ticked her off that she had panicked after coming this far. She was putting into action the plan she'd been thinking about since she was sixteen, since the moment she'd discovered the curse her grandmother had placed on the Moretti men and, by accident, the Festa women.

She wiped her damp hands on her classic Chanel gown. She was going to have to try to find Marco again—find him and charm him without giving away her plan. The key was to be vague. She had spent hours studying books on the *strega* spell her grandmother had used to curse the Morettis and looking for a way to break it. She'd determined through her research that to put the plan in action, she had to be anonymous.

She had only her grandmother's memory of the words she'd spoken—words that Cassia had written in her journal and that Virginia had studied. Her grandmother had demanded retribution for her own broken heart, and in doing so, she'd doomed the Festa women to always have broken hearts.

There could be no joining of Festa and Moretti hearts. They

had to stay forever apart. But their blood...As she'd studied curses, Virginia found a loophole. Separately, both families were doomed forever. But a child of Festa and Moretti blood could break the curse. A child given to her freely from a Moretti would repay the broken heart her grandmother had received from Lorenzo Moretti two generations ago and lift the curse on the Morettis and the Festas.

Now that the moment was here, she was really nervous. It was one thing to sit in her condo and make plans to seduce a man. It was something else entirely to actually fly around the world and put the plan into action.

She stepped out of the crowded room and onto the terrace that overlooked downtown Melbourne. Until now, the places she'd seen had been only the small town in Italy where her grandmother had grown up and her own home on Long Island.

Tonight, standing on this terrace looking out at the black sky dotted with stars, she felt like she was on the edge of starting something new. All the *strega* magic that her mother and grandmother had taught her had its basis in being outside. She looked up at the moon shining brightly down on her and took strength from it.

"It is a beautiful night, is it not?"

The deep, masculine voice sent a tingle down her spine and she wasn't surprised when she turned around and saw Marco Moretti standing there.

The panic she'd felt inside the party didn't return. Instead, as

she looked over her shoulder at him, she felt a sense of power come over her.

“Yes it is,” she said.

“May I join you?”

She nodded.

“I’m Marco Moretti.”

“I know,” she said. “Congratulations on winning today.”

“That’s what I do, *mi’ angela*,” he said, grinning at her.

“I’m not your angel,” she said, though she loved the sound of him speaking in his native language.

“Tell me your name and I shall call you by it.”

“Virginia,” she said, very aware that her last name would give her away. So she kept it to herself.

“Virginia...very pretty. What are you doing here in Melbourne?”

“Watching you win,” she said.

He laughed out loud, the sound washing over her senses like the warm breeze that stirred around them.

“Will you join me for a drink?”

“Only if we can stay out here,” she said. She didn’t want to go back into the craziness of the party. Out here, she felt in control and better able to concentrate. Plus, she needed all the *strega* magic she could summon. The night sky filled with stars and the bright moon would help her.

“Certainly,” he said. He signaled one of the uniformed waiters and they placed their drink orders.

Once their drinks came, Marco took her elbow and led her farther away from the people lingering on the terrace. The terrace spanned the entire side of the building, and as they walked along, she became very aware of his hand on her arm, of the subtle brush of his fingers over her flesh.

When they reached a quiet area with no one around, he stopped walking and dropped her arm. Leaning back against the railing, he looked at her, his dark brown eyes intense. She wondered what he saw, she hoped she seemed mysterious, sexy, sultry. She was afraid she was going to give up the game she was playing by betraying her nervousness.

“Tell me about yourself, *mi’ angela bella*,” he said.

She hadn’t counted on her senses being engaged by Marco. She’d figured she’d come here, flash some leg and a hint of cleavage, and that he’d be turned on and take her to bed and she’d leave in the morning.

Instead she found that she liked listening to his voice. She loved his accent and the rhythm of his words as he spoke. Liked also the scent of his cologne, and the way that he made her feel like she was the only woman in the world. And of course, that fit what she’d learned about him—that his relationships, while short-lived, were very intense.

“What do you want to know, *mi diavolo bello?*”

He laughed again and she understood why he was considered so charming. Charm imbued every part of him. “So you think I am handsome?”

"I think you're a devil," she said.

"I love the sound of my native tongue on your lips," he said.

"Tell me about yourself in Italian."

"I only know a few phrases," she said, "What is it you want to know about me?"

"Everything," he said.

She shook her head. "That would be a very boring tale. Nothing like the famed story of the Marco Moretti."

"I bet that's not true. What do you do?" he asked.

"Right now I'm on sabbatical," she said, which was the truth. She had taken six months off from her teaching job at a small liberal arts college to follow the Formula One racing season and meet Marco.

"Why?"

"I'm going to be thirty next year and I decided it was time to see the world. I've always wanted to travel but never had the time."

"So it's just a happy coincidence that we are both in Melbourne?"

"Yes," she said. A very happy coincidence, put in play by her own actions.

"Melbourne's only the first stop. This is one of my favorite cities."

"What do you like about it?" she asked. She knew little about the man beyond what she'd read on the Internet and in magazines.

"Tonight, I like that you and I are both here."

She shook her head. "That's a corny line."

"It's not a line, but the truth," he said. "Come and dance with me."

She took a sip of her Bellini. She'd caught his attention, diverted the conversation away from herself, and now... "Okay."

"Did you really have to think it over?" he asked, taking her hand in his and drawing her near to him.

"Not really. I just wasn't expecting this."

"Expecting what?"

"To find you so attractive."

He laughed. "Good. I wasn't expecting you, either, Virginia."

"What were you expecting?" she asked.

"Another victory party where everyone pretends that they are happy for me, but no one really cares."

"Is that usually a problem for you?"

"Not really. That's just the way this crowd is. Everyone is here to see and be seen."

His words revealed more than she was sure he intended them to. But before she could ask any more questions, he leaned in, cupped her face and brought his mouth down to hers.

The scent of his Scotch was sweet as he parted her lips with his own. She felt the warmth of his breath and then the gentle brush of his tongue against her mouth.

And in that moment she knew—*strega* magic or not—this was a dangerous mission she'd set for herself. Because not falling for the charming Marco Moretti was going to be harder than she'd

ever imagined it would be.

## Two

Virginia's plan was working...a little too well. Marco was smooth and charming. She'd expected that. But he was also very funny and a bit self-deprecating.

Everyone wanted a piece of him tonight. A moment to bask in his glory. He had the aura of someone who was going to break that record on wins in the Formula One circuit, and everyone wanted to be close to him.

Since they'd come in from the terrace, she tried to leave a few times, not being comfortable in the spotlight. But he kept her by his side, his fingers linked loosely with hers as they moved through the crowd.

She didn't have to try to be mysterious here. No one knew her, and to be honest, she didn't think anyone wanted to know her tonight. She was simply a pretty woman hanging on Marco's arm.

The feminist in her was a bit outraged to be delegated to nothing more than arm candy.

"I am sorry, *mi' angela*, but winning always means that my time is not my own."

"It's okay," she said. She was learning a lot about Marco from watching him. She wondered if her grandmother had realized what the Formula One lifestyle was like. Was this why Lorenzo Moretti hadn't wanted to settle down with her grandmother? Maybe having experienced the high life, he hadn't been ready to

give it up for home and family.

“What are you thinking, *cara mia*?”

“I’m thinking that you can’t remember my name so you keep calling me by endearments.”

“Virginia, you wound me.”

“Doubtful.”

He smiled. “I do want to know what you are thinking. You look too serious for a woman at a party.”

She didn’t know how to respond to that. She wanted—no, *needed*—to be mysterious. She couldn’t allow herself to forget for one moment that she wasn’t here to fall in love with Marco Moretti. She was here to break a curse.

But when he pulled her into his arms on the dance floor, she forgot about plans and curses. She forgot about everything except the way his arms felt wrapped around her. The way his shoulder was the perfect place to rest her head, which she did for only one second, because the sexy scent of his aftershave was too potent that close.

“I was thinking that at this party, everyone wants something from you.”

“Including you?”

Yes, she thought, but didn’t say it out loud.

“It’s okay, I know you do. Everyone wants something, I want something from you.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Another kiss.”

Of course he did, and that made her agenda so much easier because she wanted him to want her. But at the same time...

"You're doing it again," he whispered into her ear. "I'm going to think that you aren't happy to be with me."

Shivers ran down the length of her body from her neck to her toes. Her breasts felt heavier all of a sudden, and her nipples perked up, as if they wanted the warmth of his breath against them.

"Of course I'm happy to be with you, Marco. You are the man every woman wants...all you have to do is beckon and any woman here would come to you."

"I don't want any other woman tonight, Virginia, only you."

"Why?" she asked.

"I could say that it is the hint of mystery in those deep, chocolate-brown eyes of yours. Or the smoothness of your skin against my hand."

"But that's not it?"

"No, *cara mia*, it's not. The reason I want only you is much more base and too demanding to be tamed by words."

"Lust."

"You say it with disdain, but there is a power to lust and to attraction at first sight. From the moment I caught sight of you, I have been unable to think of anyone else."

She smiled up at him and let go of those silly girlish dreams she'd secretly harbored about love. Lust was exactly what she wanted from Marco, and she should be very happy that he felt it.

“It’s the same for me.”

“Is it?” he asked, drawing his hand down her back. Her skin was exposed by the plunging V at the back of her dress and his fingers felt big and warm against her skin.

He pulled her closer to his body as he spun them around the dance floor. His mouth touched the exposed skin at the nape of her neck. His lips felt warm and moist against her skin as he said something she couldn’t understand. All she understood at this moment was that she wanted Marco Moretti.

Her flesh was sensitized to him. She felt alive in this man’s arms. Perhaps it was the magic of the night, or maybe it was the peach Bellinis she’d drank going to her head. But deep inside her, where she kept the superstitious part of her soul, she knew it was the curse coming out. She knew this attraction went beyond her and Marco.

It was something cosmic and wonderful, she knew. Especially when he lowered his head to hers. She didn’t wait for him to kiss her, but instead rose on her tiptoes and met his mouth with her own.

He brushed his lips over hers before opening them the slightest bit. She felt first the barest rush of his breath over her sensitive lips and then the smooth taste of his tongue.

He kissed her with the kind of passion she’d only read about in books and seen on movie screens. She clung to his shoulders as everything feminine inside of her responded to everything masculine in him.

Kissing Virginia was addictive. Like the rush he got from going over two hundred miles per hour on the track. There was that feeling of being in charge of something he knew he couldn't really control.

Her mouth was sweet and she clung to him like she couldn't get enough of him, either. He maneuvered her off the dance floor, keeping one arm around her waist and tucking her close to his side.

"Where are we going?" she asked. Her voice was breathless and her lips, swollen. There was something almost ethereal about her. He would never have admitted that fact out loud, but having grown up under a very suspicious Italian mother, he believed strongly in things that couldn't be explained.

"To a place where we can be alone. Is that okay with you?" he asked her. Expectation sizzled in the air between them. He felt almost as if they'd met before. With her, he didn't feel the distance that he felt with most women, as if they had an expectation of something that he couldn't deliver on.

She nodded and smiled. Her mouth was wide and so damned sensuous. He'd never get enough of kissing her. And for tonight, he didn't have to. He ran his hand down the center of her bare back, enjoying the feel of her soft flesh under his fingers.

"I'd like that," she said. There was a hint of shyness in her voice, a timidity at odds with the brazen and mysterious woman he'd known her to be so far.

"Virginia?"

“Yes?”

“Are you sure?”

He saw hesitation in her eyes, but then she nodded her head, curls dancing around her face as she stepped forward. She rose on tiptoes and drew his head toward hers and brushed her lips over his. She kissed him deeply and passionately, arousing him with just that one aggressive move.

“I’m very sure,” she said.

“Good,” he said, his own voice sounding husky.

He led the way out of the party toward the elevator and almost groaned when he saw Dominic coming. He didn’t want to talk to his brother now.

*“Merda,”* he muttered under his breath.

“Excuse me?” Virginia said pulling away from him. “Is everything okay?”

“Pardon me. My brother is heading this way, and with him there is always a discussion about business.”

He fought the urge to hit the call button for the elevator again. That would make it look as if he were afraid of Dominic, and that wasn’t the case. He just wanted to get Virginia out of the party to be alone with her.

That made him feel a bit odd. He’d never been one of those men who needed to keep a woman all to himself. With Virginia, he realized he wanted just that.

“I didn’t realize that a driver would be involved in the running of a company,” she said.

“At Moretti Motors we have decided to keep things all in the family. So that means that we all take an active role in running it.”

“Doesn’t that interfere with your driving?” she asked.

Marco liked being involved in running the company. Dominic, Antonio and he had decided the reason their father had lost his controlling share of the company was that he had not been involved in the day-to-day details. And that was one thing he and his brothers were determined not to let happen.

“Not most of the time...but it can put a crimp in my love life.”

She rolled her eyes at that. “Saying things like *that* might be more of a problem for you.”

Marco shook his head and gave her a charming smile. The same smile she’d seen when he’d graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated* last year. “Most women don’t mind.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” she said.

“I make up for my...how do you say...ill manners in other ways that women appreciate.”

“What ways?”

“I’ll show you as soon as we get out of here.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” she said. “Should I leave you alone with your brother?”

“No,” he said, not wanting her to disappear again. “Dom won’t be long.”

“Marco, do you have a minute?” Dominic said as he reached them.

Marco tucked Virginia’s hand in the crook of his arm, keeping

her close to his side.

“Not really. I promised to show Virginia one of my favorite places in Melbourne. I can meet with you tomorrow to discuss the matter,” Marco said.

Dominic didn't look pleased, but then his brother rarely did. “That will be fine. But I'm flying back to Italy tomorrow, so my schedule is tight.”

“I understand,” Marco said. As much as he resented the delay in leaving with Virginia, Moretti Motors was as important to him as it was to Dom.

“Virginia, let me introduce you to my oldest brother, Dominic. Dom, this is Virginia...” He didn't know her last name, he realized. This wouldn't be the first time that he had a one-night stand with a woman whose last name was a mystery to him. So why did it bother him?

“*Affascinato*,” Dominic said.

“The pleasure is mine,” she said.

“Did you enjoy the race today?” he asked.

“I missed it,” she said, blushing.

Marco found that odd. Most of the women who followed the circuit never missed a race. He looked down at her. “You did?”

“My flight was late. I was upset, but I had this party to look forward to.”

“Where are you from?” Dominic asked.

“The United States,” she said.

“Most Americans prefer NASCAR racing. Do you follow that

sport, as well?” Marco asked, realizing that with his brother here he was learning more about her than he had all evening, talking to her.

“No. I’ve always been in love with the glamour of Formula One.”

He raised one eyebrow at her. “What do you think is glamorous about it?”

“This party, for one,” she said. “Oh, look, the elevator is here.”

The doors opened and Marco wondered at her vague answers. Was she hiding something? She wrapped an arm around his waist and squeezed him closer to her. “You did promise to show me your favorite sight in Melbourne.”

“Indeed I did. *Ciao, Dom.*”

“*Arrivederci, Marco.*”

Virginia didn’t say much as they got in Marco’s sports coupe convertible. She recognized it as a Moretti model. The car was pure luxury on the inside and all speed under the hood. She’d never feel confident enough to drive a car like this, but Marco handled it like the professional driver he was.

As they left the hotel behind he glanced over at her. “So you’re from the States?”

She’d known he was going to ask questions. She’d done a good job of keeping her past vague and the spotlight on him, but the conversation with Dominic had probably made him realize how little he knew about her.

“Yes. Long Island. Where did you grow up? I know Moretti

Motors is based in Milan, but do you live there?"

"I have a villa in Milan, and my family has an estate outside of the city."

"Do you like living in Milan? I've never visited there," she said. She was very aware of the Moretti family estate in San Giuliano Milanese. Her grandmother had gone there to curse Lorenzo, and there was a faded picture of the Moretti estate hanging on her wall back home. Her grandmother had bequeathed it to her along with her journal.

"It's a fashionable city and there is always something to do there." He shrugged as he glanced over at her. "It's home."

She envied him the feeling of belonging in Milan. It was there in his voice and his words. Unlike she, who'd never fit in anywhere, he had a place that he called home. And that was a big part of why she was determined to break the curse her grandmother had placed on them by accident. She wanted—no, *craved* a home and a family. She was tired of always being alone. Her mother and grandmother were both deceased, and no matter how hard she tried, the bonds of family seemed to always be just out of her reach.

Having his child would give her a chance at happiness. A chance at that elusive dream she'd longed for. Once she broke the curse, she would marry and give her child a father and siblings.

"We're here." Marco's words startled her from her thought.

She glanced out the window as a uniformed valet came to open her door. The high-rise building was a monument to modern

architecture, its lines distinctive and clean.

“Good evening, Mr. Moretti.”

“Good evening, Mitchell.”

Marco led the way into the foyer and to a bank of elevators.

“I thought you were taking me to see your favorite spot in Melbourne.”

“I am. My penthouse has a spectacular view of the city. It’s amazing,” he said, glancing down at his titanium watch. “In about two hours, the sun will come up and you will be amazed at how beautiful the sunrise is here.”

“Will I?”

“Yes, I think you will,” he said. “Unless you’d rather I take you back to your hotel.”

She shook her head.

The elevator arrived and they entered. They were alone in the marble-floored car, and as soon as the door closed Marco entered a code on the keypad and the elevator started to move. He drew her into his arms and lowered his head, kissing her.

She felt the return of the passion he’d evoked in her on the dance floor. Her body longed for his. She’d missed his touch during the twenty-minute drive, and she wondered how much of this feeling was due to the magic spell she’d cast earlier to help her break the curse. She wasn’t a practicing witch, but she figured she’d better enlist as much help as she could before she came to Melbourne. How much of it was due to the fact that she needed him to be obsessed with her?

And how much, if any of it, was real?

When the doors opened, he broke the kiss and ran his hand down her bare arm, linking their fingers together. She squeezed her hand against his and followed him eagerly into the foyer of his home.

"I have this entire floor. Would you like a drink?"

"That would be nice," she said.

He led the way into the living room. There were floor-to-ceiling windows that lined the wall and a sliding door that opened onto a huge balcony. Marco kept one hand on the small of her back as they walked across the room.

She felt a slight bit of panic as she realized this was it. She was going to sleep with this man, whom she'd known for less than five hours, and then she was going to walk away. It was what she'd planned for more months than she could count, but now that the moment was here...

She stopped in the middle of his living room as a surreal feeling swamped her. She was aroused, every inch of her skin sensitized from his kisses and touch. As she glanced at the Monet painting hanging on one wall and felt the thick Arabian carpet under her feet, she knew she was really here, that this wasn't something she was imagining. Yet, at the same time...

"Would you like to step outside? We can sit in the hot tub and have that drink."

She glanced at Marco, with his strong Roman features, and saw in him the glimpse of her future. She wasn't going to let panic

or doubt swamp her, and give up everything she'd ever wanted.

She needed Marco Moretti, and it seemed that he wanted her tonight. And that was all she needed. She repeated that in her head as she stepped out onto the balcony and let the warm air wrap around her.

# Three

Marco poured a glass of champagne for each of them. He wasn't inept when it came to taking care of the women in his life, despite the fact that Allie had often complained he paid no attention to her. The fact was, he was careful to pay only a certain amount of attention.

He was careful not to let his emotions get involved, always leery of falling for a woman and thereby ruining his life.

His mobile rang and he cursed out loud as he saw from the caller ID that it was Dominic.

"What do you need now?" he asked in Italian.

"Just wanted to remind you to be careful with Virginia. We can't risk anyone falling in love, especially now."

*"Mordalo,"* he said to his brother.

"I'm not jerking your chain, Marco. You know that falling for a girl isn't something we can do."

He glanced across his penthouse apartment to the balcony where he could see Virginia leaning against the railing. She didn't *look* dangerous. He saw nothing in the woman to indicate she could bring about the downfall of Moretti Motors.

"She's just a woman, Dom," he said, even as, deep inside, a part of him protested. But the truth was, his priorities were simple—racing and winning. Moretti Motors and then enjoying life. And Virginia was a woman who would make his life very

enjoyable tonight.

“Make sure you remember that.”

“I always do. I think you’re afraid that Antonio and I are too much like you.”

There was silence from his usually loquacious brother. Dom had fallen in love in college, and that one, brief lapse in his vigilance served as a constant reminder to Dom that all women had the potential to tempt any of the Moretti men.

“I don’t know what I fear. Just be careful, Marco. This is the year that everything will change. We have worked hard to get to this point. We are launching the revamped Vallerio model. You will surpass the Gran Prix record for most wins...”

“I am aware of that. *Buona notte*, Dom.”

“*Buona notte*, Marco.”

He hung up the phone, thinking of his oldest brother. Antonio often complained that Dominic needed to get laid so that the old boy would relax. But Marco suspected that Dominic’s heart was the most vulnerable of all of the Moretti men.

“Marco?”

“Coming, *mi’ angela*.”

A warm, gentle breeze stirred the air around the balcony as he approached Virginia. Her hair lifted in the wind and for a minute it seemed as if she were part of the night. As if this was the only place she could exist. Almost as if she were a fantasy. But she was a flesh-and-blood woman, as he’d ascertained by kissing her and holding her in his arms.

"I thought you'd changed your mind," she said.

"Not at all. I just wanted to make sure I had everything perfect," he said, handing her the glass of chilled champagne.

"Is this part of the charm you promised to show me earlier?"

"Do you think it is?"

She laughed, and the sound was like music on the wind. He closed his eyes and let the worries that his brother always reminded him of disappear. For tonight he was nothing more than a winning driver with a beautiful woman.

"I'm not so sure."

He arched one eyebrow at her. "What will it take to convince you?"

"I'm reserving judgment until morning."

He handed her the champagne flute, which she took.

"To your victory on the track today," she said.

He tapped the lip of his glass against hers. "*Grazie.*"

He kept eye contact with her as he took a sip of the sparkling wine.

"To mysteriously beautiful women," he said, lifting his glass toward her.

"*Grazie,*" she said with a shy smile. "But I'm not beautiful."

"Let me look again," he said.

She stood still, a hesitant, almost fragile smile on her face as he stared at her features. Her wide brown eyes seemed luminous and filled with secrets. The thick eyelashes that surrounded them and the light dash of makeup on her lids made them look exotic.

Her high cheekbones and creamy skin were next. He lifted his free hand and traced the line of her brow and then down the side of her face. Her nose was thin and long, marking the elegance of her face, but it was her mouth that entranced him.

Her upper lip was a bit fuller than the bottom one, and both were rosy red and so soft to his touch. He ran his thumb over her mouth, tracing the bow at the top and then stroking her bottom lip.

"I see nothing to change my opinion," he said.

"Maybe in your eyes I'm beautiful, but I promise you other men don't see me that way," she said.

"The eyes of other men don't matter, *mio dolce*."

"No, they don't...I just...I've never done this before," she said suddenly, her words coming out in a rush.

"Come back to a man's apartment?" he asked, unable to help feeling a bit honored and possessive of the fact that he was the first man she'd felt this strongly attracted to.

And he couldn't deny the attraction between them. He hoped she'd never know how much he wanted her and how much power that gave her over him. He needed her in ways he was only beginning to realize.

"Yes...I'm a bit nervous."

"It's not too late to leave. We can finish our drinks and I can take you back to your hotel."

Virginia realized that Marco was making very sure she couldn't say he coerced her into anything. Or perhaps he was

just being a gentleman. What did it say about her that her first thought was that he was protecting himself?

But there was little he could do to protect himself against her. She wanted nothing more than this night in his arms—and his sperm.

She felt cold and calculating, thinking the words. She knew that every night millions of people had one-night stands and it meant nothing.

But she didn't. She had been pretty sheltered all of her life. After being told early on that love and romance were not in the cards for her, she'd become determined to find a way to make her romantic dreams come true.

She knew that her motivation for being here was breaking the Moretti curse. But when he'd described her just a moment ago, talked about a beauty she just couldn't see when she looked in a mirror, she felt as if this encounter meant more than she knew.

She felt as if Marco wasn't just the means to an end. That he wasn't just another victim of a long ago, bitter love feud between their families...felt as if he could be the man who would make her fall in love with him.

And love for Festa women wasn't a good thing.

"Virginia?"

She shook her head to clear it. Glanced up at the moon and gathered the strength she needed to forget about consequences and right and wrong. For this one night, she wanted to just enjoy the moment with this man.

"I'm not leaving," she said.

He smiled at her, and she realized just what true male beauty was. It was his smile when he looked at her.

"Are we going to just stand here and wait for sunrise?" she asked.

"Not at all. I thought we could sit in the hot tub and relax. Enjoy the champagne and the rest of the evening."

The warmth of his hand on the center of her back and the low thrum of the hot tub located on the end of the balcony settled her nerves. She let go of all the planning and concentrated on the fact that she was here with a charming and sexy man.

"I'd like that," she said.

"There's a changing room over there stocked with robes," Marco said, his voice deep and dark in the moonlit night. He gestured to the small building next to the tub.

Having spent most of her adult life waiting for this exact moment, she knew it was time for her to act. But action was the one thing that had always scared her. Her grandmother had loved Lorenzo Moretti and that single act had completely ruined Cassia's life.

Perhaps sensing her unease, Marco said, "Do you know about the stars?"

"What?"

"The stories of the different stars and why the constellations fill the sky," he said. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he led her to a double lounge chair and gestured for her to sit down.

She did, and Marco sat down next to her. He put his arm around her shoulder and shifted until she was lying next to him with her head on his shoulder.

She looked at him and knew without a doubt that he had sensed her keyed-up nerves. And she wondered if this was a sign from the universe that she should give up on her plan. Was there a side effect she'd missed when she'd determined the way to break the curse on their families was by getting pregnant with Marco's child?

"The sky is different here," Marco said. "In the Northern Hemisphere, where we both live, you can never see the Southern Cross."

She stopped worrying about seduction and relaxed against him. "I had heard that. Where is the Southern Cross?"

He pointed at the sky. "Right there...do you see it?"

Her gaze followed the line of his arm, and she saw four stars in a diamond shape in the sky. The Southern Cross. "Does it have a legend with it, like Orion or Sirius?"

"Not really. Because it is visible only from the Southern Hemisphere, we have no Greek or Roman legends associated with it."

"What is that constellation?" she asked pointing to another one.

"That is Leo. Egyptian priests used to be able to predict when the Nile would flood based on its position in the sky."

He talked about other constellations and she began to see

beyond the international celebrity race car driver to the man beneath. He was used to moving in a world of privilege and wealth, yet tonight he was just a man.

“How did you become interested in stars?”

“My father. He isn’t into racing or cars...not the way a Moretti should be.” He turned on the lounge chair so that he was leaning over her. “But he loves legends and the past...he has spent a lot of his life reading about stories of old.”

“Where are your parents now?”

“In San Giuliano Milanese. It’s where our family home is.”

“Are you close to your parents?” she asked.

“In some ways. I’ve always shared a love of the night sky with my father. When I was younger, most of my time alone with him was spent outside at night, looking through the lens of his telescope.”

Being an only child, she’d had too much time alone with her mother, who had been very sad most of the time.

“Why didn’t your father like cars?” she asked. She knew that Giovanni Moretti was rumored to have been too easygoing to run the big automotive company. That he wasn’t interested in business...only in making love to his wife.

“He liked them, he just loved my mother more. So business didn’t hold his interest.”

“Yet, it does hold yours,” she said.

“Tonight I can see why my father was distracted,” Marco said. She thought she saw surprise in his eyes as he revealed that,

but he recovered quickly, leaning in close to kiss her. His kiss was soft and slow, one of seduction rather than full-out passion.

He swept his hand down the side of her body, unerringly finding the zipper in the side of her dress. Instead of unfastening it, he simply traced his finger over the seam.

His mouth moved along her jawline with small, nibbling kisses, then dipped lower to caress the length of her neck. She shifted in his arms, trying to bring her body into full contact with his as he continued to tease her.

Her breasts felt sensitive and the skin of her arm beaded with goose bumps as he continued to move his hand over her body. She wanted more.

Marco had always had an innate gift for seducing women. Dom had suggested it was because he was Italian and wooing women had been bred into him, but Marco thought it was more than that. He'd never been callous in his seductions and he'd walked away from women who he knew would regret having made love to him when they woke in the morning.

But he couldn't walk away from Virginia. He surprised himself with the depth of the need he had for her. Still, if he made this about the physical, then his emotions would recede and she would be nothing more than a passionate memory for him to look back on, years from now.

The rich darkness of her hair contrasted with the creamy whiteness of her skin. He drew down the zipper at the side of her body and watched as the sky-blue material gaped open. He

slipped his hand under the fabric and touched her skin.

Her breath caught and she shifted in his arms, turning on her side so they were now facing each other. He reached between them and drew her hands up to the first button on his shirt.

Staring into her wide, chocolate-colored eyes, he saw the shyness that was so much a part of her melt away as her fingers brushed against his chest.

Blood rushed through his veins, pooling in his groin and hardening him as she started unbuttoning his shirt. Her fingers were cool against his skin as she worked her way down his body. When she finished unbuttoning the shirt she pushed it open and he shrugged out of it.

He growled when she leaned forward to brush kisses against his chest. Her lips were soft and not shy as she explored his torso, and he felt the edge of her teeth graze his pecs.

He watched her, his eyes narrowing and his pants feeling damned uncomfortable. Her tongue darted out and brushed his nipple. He canted his hips forward and put his hand on the back of her head, urging her to stay where she was.

“Where did you get this?” she asked, one finger tracing over the scar under his left nipple.

“Tony pushed me out of the fig tree in the backyard when I was eight and I landed on a hoe that the gardener had left lying on the ground.”

“Did it hurt?” she asked. She braced one hand on his chest as she leaned over him.

He shifted under her and lifted her in his arms so that she straddled him. He leaned up and kissed her lips. "At the time it hurt very much."

"I'm sorry," she said, leaning down to lave the spot with her tongue. "I have a scar, too."

"Where?" he asked.

She blushed and then shrugged her shoulders, pulling her right arm out of the dress. The bodice loosened and the other sleeve slid down her left arm until the dress pooled at her waist. She wore those strapless bra cups that were clear in color. He could see all of her breasts and yet as he reached up to touch them, he felt only fabric and not the sweetness of her flesh.

"The scar isn't on my boobs," she said, with a little laugh.

"No?"

"No," she said. "It's here."

She pointed to her right side an inch below her breasts. It was long, almost two inches, and had faded with time.

"How did you get this?" he asked, stroking a finger down the length of it. She shivered in his arms and rocked against him. His erection twitched against her core.

"Trying to climb into the window of our house. My mom locked the keys inside."

"I'm sorry," he said. He lifted his hips to tip her body toward him. He found the scar with his lips and rubbed his hands over her naked back, enjoying the feel of this warm woman in his arms.

She put her hands on his shoulders and eased her way down his chest. She traced the muscles of his abdomen and then slowly made her way lower. He could feel his heartbeat in his erection and he knew he was going to lose control if he didn't slow things down.

But another part of him wanted to just sit back and let her have her way with him. When she reached the edge of his pants, she stopped and glanced up his body to his face.

Her hand brushed over his straining length. He removed the bra she still wore and then lifted her up so that her nipples brushed his chest.

"Hmm...that feels so good," she said.

"Does it?"

"Yes."

Blood roared in his ears. He was so hard, so full right now that he needed to be inside of her body. But he had to take care of details first.

"*Cara mia*, I hate to ask this, but are you on the pill?"

She pulled back for a second. "I'm...yes."

"You are taking the pill?" he asked.

She nodded. "And I don't have anything else you need to worry about. What about you?"

"I'm clean."

"Good," she said.

He pulled her closer and kissed her until she relaxed. Then, impatient with the fabric of her dress, he shoved it up to her waist.

He caressed her creamy thighs. God, she was soft. She moaned as he neared her center and then sighed when he brushed his fingertips across the crotch of her panties.

The lace was warm and wet. He slipped one finger under the material and hesitated for a second, looking up into her eyes.

They were heavy-lidded. She bit down on her lower lip and he felt the minute movements of her hips as she tried to move his touch where she needed it.

He pushed the fabric of her panties aside and lightly traced the opening of her body. She was so ready for him. It was only the fact that he wanted to bring her to climax at least once before he entered her body that enabled him to keep his own needs in check.

She shifted against him and he entered her body with just the tip of one finger. He teased them both with a few short thrusts.

“Marco...” she said, her voice breathless and airy.

“Yes, *mi’ angela?*”

“I need more.”

“Is this better?” he asked, pushing his finger deep inside of her.

“Yes,” she said. Her hips rocked against his finger for a few strokes before she once again needed more.

“Marco, please.”

He pulled his finger from her body and traced it around her pulsing center of her need. Her eyes widened and she moved frantically against him. She leaned forward, her breasts brushing

against his cheek as she braced her hands on the back of the lounge chair.

He turned his head and drew one beaded nipple into his mouth, suckling her deeply as he plunged two fingers into her body. He kept his thumb on her center and worked his fingers until she threw her head back and called his name.

He felt her tighten around his fingers. She kept rocking against him for a few more seconds and then collapsed.

He tipped her head toward his so he could taste her mouth. He told himself to take it slowly, that Virginia wasn't used to him. But one taste of her lips and he was out of control.

He kissed her and held her at his mercy, caressing her back and spine, scraping his nails down the line of her back down the indentation above her buttocks.

She closed her eyes and held her breath as he returned his fingers to one nipple. It was velvety compared to the satin smoothness of her breast. He brushed his finger back and forth until she bit her lower lip and shifted on his lap.

She moaned, a sweet sound that nearly did him in. He reached between them and unzipped his pants, freeing his erection. She cried out softly as he brushed the tip against her humid center.

She reached between them and touched him, her small hand engulfing the length as she shifted to put the tip inside her body.

He held her still with a hand on the small of her back. He had a lap full of woman, and he wanted Virginia more than he'd wanted any woman in a long time. Maintaining control was harder than it

had ever been. Dangerous. He knew better than to let this mean anything more than a passionate encounter.

This was about the physical. One night together.

She rocked her hips, trying to take him deeper, and he knew the time for teasing was at an end.

“Marco?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you going to take me?” she asked.

“Do you want more?” he asked.

She leaned down and sucked his lower lip into her mouth, biting gently. “You know I do.”

“Beg me to take you, *mi’ angela bella*.”

“Take me, Marco. Make me yours.”

He did want to make her his, in this moment with the night sky around them, the Southern Cross shining in the sky, he was away from Italy and the curse that had dogged the Moretti men for too long.

He was going to claim Virginia as his...even if only for this one night.

He gave her another inch, thrusting his hips up into her sweet, tight body. Her eyes were closed, her hips moving subtly against him, and when he blew on her nipples he saw gooseflesh spread down her body.

He loved the way she reacted to his mouth on her. He sucked on the skin at the base of her neck as he thrust all the way home, sheathing his entire length in her body. He knew he was leaving

a mark with his mouth and that pleased him. He wanted her to remember this moment and what they had done when she was alone later.

He kept kissing and rubbing, pinching her nipples until her hands clenched in his hair and she rocked her hips harder against him. He lifted his hips, thrusting up against her.

“Come with me,” he whispered to her in Italian.

She nodded and he realized she understood his native tongue. Her eyes widened with each inch he gave her. She clutched at his hips, holding him to her, eyes half-closed and her head tipped back.

He caught one of her nipples in his teeth, scraping very gently. She started to tighten around him. Her hips moving faster, demanding more, but he kept the pace slow, steady, building the pleasure between them.

He varied his thrusts, finding a rhythm that would draw out the tension at the base of his spine. Something that would make his time in her body, wrapped in her silky limbs, seem to last forever.

“Hold on to me tightly.”

She did as he asked and he rolled them over so that she was beneath him. He pushed her legs up against her body so that he could thrust deeper, so that she was open and vulnerable to him.

“Now, Virginia,” he said.

She nodded and he felt her body tighten. Then she scraped her nails down his back, clutching his buttocks and drawing him in.

Blood roared in his ears as he felt everything in his world center on this one woman.

He called her name as he came. He saw her eyes widen and felt the minute contractions of her body around his as she was consumed by her orgasm.

He rotated his hips against her until she stopped rocking against him. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed the underside of his chin.

“Oh, Marco,” she said. “Thank you for making love to me.”

“You’re very welcome, Virginia.”

She wrapped her arms around him and held him close. “I never thought it would be like this.”

“Like what?”

“So incredible. Being with you is just...well, I had no idea it would be so raw and intense.”

He laughed. “That’s because you hadn’t made love with me before.”

She tipped her head back and in her eyes he saw a vulnerability that he didn’t understand.

“I think you are right.”

Marco stretched and rolled over as the morning sunlight spread across the floor of his bedroom. The pillow next to his was rumpled and the sheets still smelled faintly of sex and Virginia’s perfume.

“*Cara mia?*”

There was no answer as he stood up and stretched. There was

a glass of juice on his nightstand. He smiled as he reached for it. Maybe Virginia was making breakfast for them.

He walked slowly through his penthouse. All of Melbourne was spread out before him, and he thought for a moment about his life and the fact that he seemed to have it all. He wondered about the curse of Nonno's that had doomed their family. He'd never put too much stock in it, preferring to believe that he had control over his own destiny, but Dom had loved and lost badly, so perhaps there *was* something to the Moretti curse.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. Why was he thinking about that damned curse this morning?

He didn't want to admit it was because he liked Virginia. He was tempted to postpone his travel plans today. Stay in Melbourne with her as long as he could before commitments would demand he leave.

And that was the true measure of why she really did need to leave. He'd find her, eat whatever it was she'd fixed for him and then send her on her way.

"Virginia?"

Still no answer. The kitchen was empty. Maybe she was on the balcony. He remembered that last night she'd really enjoyed being outside. He stopped in his office, noticing that the papers on his desk were askew, as if someone had riffled through them. Knowing how important it was to keep the Moretti Motors secrets, Marco started to grow concerned. Had Virginia been in his penthouse just to find out what Moretti Motors was doing?

Hell, now he was getting paranoid like Dom. She hadn't asked a single question about the company and hadn't really seemed interested in it.

He finally got to the balcony and it was empty, as well. He realized she was gone. He knew it wasn't hard to leave. The keypad at the elevator only prevented people from entering.

Marco clenched his fists, angry that Virginia had left before he'd had a chance to...hell, he wasn't ready for her to leave yet. He'd thought about changing his entire day for her, and she was gone.

## Four

The race in Barcelona, Spain, wasn't any different from the two previous races for Marco. He did press conferences, attended Moretti Motors functions and as far as his brothers and his teammate Keke were concerned, he was the same ambitious winning driver he'd always been.

But inside Marco seethed. At first, when he'd discovered he was alone in Melbourne, he'd been concerned about Virginia, worried that their night of passion had overwhelmed her. But as time had gone on he'd realized that she'd been after just that one night with him.

He also realized that she didn't want to be found. And that shouldn't have been a big deal. He was aware that if she'd stayed, he would have hustled her out of the penthouse and then gone on with his life. He wasn't looking to settle down. He had made a promise to his brothers that he wouldn't break, and he had no time in his life for romantic complications.

So why, then, was he still so angry when he thought about the way she'd left him?

"Marco?"

"Si?"

"We have to meet with the officials in a few minutes...are you okay?" Keke asked.

"Fine. Just going through the race in my head."

“Are you free for dinner tonight? Elena’s family is in town and we’re going out with them.”

Keke and Elena were getting more serious with each month that passed, and he appreciated his friend always including him, but Marco was starting to feel like a third wheel with them.

“My parents are coming to the race, so I’m going to spend the evening with them.”

“You can invite them, as well.”

“What’s up? Don’t you want to be alone with Elena’s parents?”

Keke flushed. “It’s not that. I’m going to ask her to marry me and I would like to have you there. I don’t have any real family, you know?”

Marco understood. “I’d be honored to join you. In fact, Dom has reserved a restaurant for our evening so that we would have privacy...would you like to use that location?”

“I made reservations at Stella Luna,” Keke said.

“Then we will join you there. What time?”

“Nine.”

Marco looked at the German, wondering what this would mean for their friendship. He knew no matter how much a man wanted his relationships to remain intact, once a man got married, his life changed. “Congratulations, *amico mio*.”

“Thanks. I...if she says yes, will you be my best man?”

“She will say yes, and I will be your best man.”

Keke left a few minutes later and Marco called his parents and brothers to invite them to join Keke’s dinner celebration.

Marco had a moment's pause, as he always did when he thought of marriage. The plan that he and Dom and Tony had concocted when they were young boys meant that they'd probably never marry for love. And he envied his friend that relationship.

He left the garage and found a group of fans waiting for autographs. He stopped, smiled for photos and signed hats and shirts, all the while scanning the crowd for Virginia's face. He was a sap and an idiot to keep looking for her. She was gone. And he needed to move past that one night in Melbourne.

But he couldn't. She was the one who left. A part of him acknowledged that it was wounded pride that made him want to see her again. Another part, the baser part, wanted to see her again for purely sexual reasons. He wanted to take her and enslave her with the passion that ran between them. Bind her to him and then when she was well and truly his...leave her so that she could experience what he'd been going through.

He was lucky his racing hadn't suffered, but at this point in his career he knew how to shut out everything except the race when he got behind the wheel.

"Marco, wait up," Dom called as he walked across the field toward him.

"What is it?"

"I got your message about tonight and I'll try to be there. But I may not be available."

"Is something going on?"

"I think we have a spy in our company. I might have to return

to Milan to take care of the matter.”

Marco’s eyes narrowed. *The ruffled papers on my desk...* “Why do you think that?”

“I ran into Dirk Buchard today in the owner’s lounge, and he mentioned rumors of a new car design from ESP,” Dom said.

ESP Motors had been formed by Nonno’s archrival on the Grand Prix track. Moretti Motors had outshone ESP at the time. One thing that had been in Lorenzo’s favor was the fact that he had the Midas touch when it came to business. “What about the design?”

“I might be paranoid—”

Marco snorted. His brother wrote the book on paranoid when it came to guarding business secrets. *“Might be?”*

“Whatever. But he mentioned something that is on the new Vallerio model. And no one outside of you, me, Antonio and our R & D team has seen that.”

“You don’t have to stay for the race if you want to go back to Milan and do some more research,” Marco said.

“I want to. I think you race better when Tony and I are here.”

“I agree. I like to remind you both that I’m faster than either of you can ever hope to be.”

Dom punched him in the arm. “Speed isn’t the only thing that matters.”

“In our world it is.”

“True enough. Speaking of speed, did you get the e-mail I sent about the new marketing campaign?”

“Yes. I like it. I think it’ll be just what we need to launch the new Vallerio.”

“I agree.”

Marco thought for a moment. “Is it possible that someone could have figured out what we were doing by studying the cars? I’m using similar technology in my race car this season.”

“I’ll know more after I go back to the Milan office.”

Marco looked at his brother and thought of how hard they’d all worked to distance themselves from the fiasco that had been Moretti Motors under his father’s management. At times like this, Marco felt like no matter what they did, they were always going to be struggling.

The only times he didn’t feel that way were when he was on the track...and when he’d slept with Virginia. That night, he’d realized he could find peace in a woman’s arms.

Virginia landed in Barcelona on Saturday morning. Last week, when her period had started, she’d had a genuine excuse to return to Marco. Clearly their one night of passion hadn’t born fruit. She had been happy, because she’d missed Marco. And she knew that was a problem. What if her actions just perpetuated the curse on both families?

The truth was, she didn’t care. Every night she’d been away from Marco, she’d dreamed of him, rich and vivid images of the two of them together.

And not just making love.

She’d had strong visions of her and Marco with children

dancing around them.

She collected her luggage and found the car she'd hired to take her to the hotel. She wished her grandmother was still alive so she could ask her about the curse she'd put on Lorenzo.

But she had no one. There had been a bit of sadness laced in the knowledge that she wasn't pregnant. For the first time, she understood why her mother had been so happy to have her. A child meant the end to the loneliness that seemed to haunt each generation of Festa women.

She meant to end that loneliness.

"Welcome to Barcelona," the liveried doorman at the Duquesa de Cardona Hotel said.

She'd chosen a luxury boutique hotel in the heart of Barcelona's Gothic district. She smiled at the doorman as she exited the cab and walked into the hotel. It was odd to be traveling so much, yet at the same time, she felt like she was finally alive.

All those solitary years of staying at home on Long Island, going to school as a child and young woman and then teaching—it had been a life of nothing but routines; and now she had a mission. Something to fill her days. She felt alive for the very first time.

She had no idea how to contact Marco and knew she'd have to spend the day by herself until the race tomorrow. She wasn't even sure if she'd be able to get close enough to see him and had no idea what she'd say to him when she did get there.

She checked into her room and changed her clothes. She

thought about hanging out in her room, but she didn't like the thought of waiting around for Sunday.

She knew that changing her life this year was about more than breaking the curse. She needed to find a way to be the woman she'd always dreamed of being. If she was going to be a mother, she didn't want to be like her own mother had been, that solitary figure who rarely smiled and never left their small house. She needed to get out and experience life.

She went to the F1 track and watched the practice session, making sure to stay out of Marco's sight, but getting as close as she could to him.

He looked thinner than he had been in Melbourne, but he smiled for his fans and signed autographs. She started to approach, but there was no way to get through the throng of people. And then Marco waved to the crowd and turned away.

She watched him until he disappeared into the garage area, and then she left the track. In her year of figuring out how to get close to Marco, she'd gone online to the F1 message boards and made friends with a lot of people. Using those contacts, she'd been able to get into the exclusive parties after the racing events. Even the VIP areas.

She took a cab to the Picasso Museum, because the thought of going back to her hotel room was unbearable. She strolled through the museum and lingered in front of a Picasso painting titled *The Embrace*, which the artist had completed in 1900. It struck Virginia how little couples had changed over time.

Nothing was more soothing than standing together wrapped in each other's arms.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

She glanced at the woman who'd spoken. She was tall and slender and very beautiful.

"Very."

"I love Picasso's work, before he started doing the abstract stuff."

"Me, too. He reminds me a little of Pissaro in some of his early work."

"I'm not that familiar with Pissaro. Just Picasso. Are you in town for the race?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I saw you at the party in Melbourne. My boyfriend is Keke Heckler."

"He's on the same team as Marco Moretti." Virginia didn't know if Marco had mentioned her after their night together. She realized that she hoped he hadn't. She didn't really want anyone to know about what had happened between them, especially since she had no idea how he'd felt the next morning.

She'd left while he was sleeping, afraid that if she stayed there in his arms, she'd forget her plans and resolve and just stay with Marco until he tired of her. Leaving like that was something that she suspected her own mother had done with Virginia's father.

"Yes, he is. We didn't meet at the party, but I saw you dancing with Marco. I'm Elena Hamilton."

"I'm Virginia," she said.

"I have a confession," Elena said. "I followed you here because I was curious about you."

Virginia tensed. "Why?"

"Because Marco has been asking about you. Questioning everyone, to see if they know your last name or where you went. Keke said he's never seen Marco so angry when he thinks no one is looking."

"I don't know what to say."

"Marco's like a brother to Keke. And I've come to know Marco, as well. He means a lot to me, and I don't want to see him being used."

Virginia was glad to hear that. Glad that Marco had good friends who looked out for him. "I'm not using him."

Elena glared at her. "I don't believe you. Just know that I'm watching you."

Virginia nodded as the other woman walked away. It might be harder than she'd thought to have a second night with Marco.

Marco finished the Catalonia Grand Prix in second place, but he didn't mind not winning this week. Keke had been unstoppable on the track. His friend and teammate had a string of good luck going that stemmed in part from his recent engagement to Elena.

Marco smiled along with everyone else. Dominic was happy, because a win for the Moretti team kept them ahead of Ferrari and Audi, which was really all Dom cared about.

Marco rubbed the back of his neck, realizing he wasn't as joy-filled as he should be. He needed to get away from Keke and the rest of the crowd.

He started to leave when he saw the familiar brown hair that he'd been searching for at each race since Melbourne. *Virginia.*

She was here. And he was going to get some damned answers about where she'd been and who she really was.

Fans swarmed around him as he made his way over to her. He didn't have time for smiles or photos, but he made himself take the time. His popularity was one of the things that was important to the success of Moretti Motors. He signaled Carlos, his security guard.

"Keep that woman here," he said, pointing to Virginia.

"Yes, sir," Carlos said, and went to Virginia's side. She arched one eyebrow at him and he guessed that she didn't like that he was keeping her from leaving. Too bad.

He took his time flirting with the women fans who were always waiting for him. They liked to pose with him and have their pictures taken. Today while Virginia was waiting, he said no to no one.

Why was she back? he wondered as the last of the fans moved away. He signaled to Carlos to bring Virginia to him. She didn't look pleased, but he didn't care. He wasn't going to give her any further ground. He was in charge, and it was about time she figured that out.

She slowly walked toward him, hips swaying with each step,

drawing his eyes to her body. He was intimately familiar with her curves and longed to touch her again. When she was within arm's reach, he took her wrist in his hand and pulled her to him.

She gasped as her body came into contact with his. He was hot and sweaty from the race and he was pumped with adrenaline and something else. Something he didn't want to define.

"Hello, Marco."

"*Bongiorno*, Virginia."

"You raced well today," she said.

She was nervous. And that pleased him. She *should* be leery of him. He'd never hurt her physically, but he was angry with her and he wanted her to know it.

He cupped her jaw gently and tilted her head back. "I want answers."

"I'll give them to you," she said. Her eyes were wet as he lowered his head, taking her mouth with his.

This was no gentle seduction. He meant to be masterful, to remind her that he wasn't a man to be toyed with. That his passion—and hers—belonged to him.

He forced her lips wide and thrust his tongue deep into her mouth. She clung to his shoulders, her fingers gripping him tightly.

He heard a small sigh escape her and he softened his embrace—wrapped one arm around her and hugged her to him. God, he wouldn't have thought it possible, but he'd missed her.

"Come with me," he said. The track wasn't the place for this

kind of reunion. She nodded, speechless, and he led her to the motor home he used as a dressing room and place to relax at the races.

He had a million questions to ask, but touching and caressing her made him want to take her. He needed to establish his dominance over her. She'd left him, and while it was true that one-night stands weren't out of the ordinary for him, he'd always been the one to leave.

"Why did you leave the way you did?"

She folded her arms. Her short, emerald-green designer dress brought out the creaminess of her skin. He tried not to notice.

"I...I didn't want to wait around for you to tell me to leave."

"Why do you believe I would have done that?"

"Marco, I know the type of man you are."

"What kind of man am I?" he asked, curious to know what she thought she knew about him.

"You have a reputation of living fast and large on the track and off. And I knew, just as I know now, that a simple girl from Long Island has little chance of slowing you down for long."

There was a certain amount of truth to that. But he suspected that wasn't the only reason she'd left. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that there was more to Virginia than met the eye.

"I have never hurried a woman out of my bed."

"It wasn't you."

She lowered her gaze to the side and walked around the living-

room area of the luxury motor home. She paused to look at the picture of his family on the wall. From over her shoulder, he saw his family all posed in front of the main Moretti Motors plant in Milan.

“Then what made you leave?”

“It was me,” she said, turning to face him. “I wasn’t sure I’d be able to leave gracefully if you were awake and I had to walk away from you. So I skulked out while you were sleeping.”

“Why are you back?”

She took a deep breath and walked over to him. She brushed her fingers over her bottom lip, which was swollen from his earlier kiss.

“I’m back because I missed you, Marco. And I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

He didn’t admit that he’d missed her, as well. “Good.”

“Good?”

“Yes. I have to shower and change, then we will go for an early dinner.”

He walked away from her before she could answer. She was here, and he was suddenly determined that she would never leave him again.

## Five

Marco's attitude made it difficult for Virginia to do anything but follow him. He'd showered and changed in the motor home and then come out smelling wonderfully masculine, and she felt very much like a school girl enamored with a boy. Though there was nothing boyish about Marco. He was all man.

A man who was determined to set the rules of their... "relationship" didn't seem the right word to describe what was between them. But he was definitely letting her know that he was in charge.

Whereas in Melbourne he'd wooed her, this time he simply took charge. And as they drove through Barcelona, she admitted to herself that she secretly liked the forcefulness of Marco.

To lessen some of his impact on her, she gazed out the window. Barcelona was a beautiful city. Very Mediterranean in feel. Whenever she traveled outside of the United States...as if she was a world traveler, she thought. But both times, she had left her home country, she noticed how different the world was. She loved the architecture of the old buildings. She loved the streets lined with people walking from place to place. And she loved the way that Marco fit into this world. This was his place, and she felt very much the intruder tonight.

But then she'd always felt like an intruder, and being in beautiful Barcelona wasn't helping.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

She didn’t want to tell him what she was really thinking. She cast around her mind for something to say and remembered that Picasso painting in the museum where Elena had cornered her.

“About a painting I saw earlier at the Picasso museum.”

“Which one?”

“*The Embrace*. Are you familiar with it?”

“I am. My mother is an art history teacher.”

“Really? Did you grow up surrounded by art?”

He shrugged. “Not really. She tried to expose us, but we were more interested in cars and engines.”

“All of your brothers?”

“Yes. And my father.”

“How did your parents meet?” she asked. She’d heard via the grapevine that Giovanni and Philomena had a love match. That their love had meant the destruction of Moretti Motors.

“My mom was hired to buy art for the lobby of our building. My father took one look at her and forgot all about cars and racing.”

“Was he a driver like you?”

“No. He did one twenty-four-hour race with his cousins when he was in his twenties, but didn’t care for it.”

“What’s a twenty-four-hour race?”

“An endurance race that involves a team of at least three drivers.”

“And you drive for twenty-four hours?”

“In shifts...usually each guy drives for three hours.”

She couldn't imagine what would make someone want to do that. But then again, she was a little unsure of why Marco raced. Wanting to go fast, she understood. She even got that he wanted to beat other people on the track—but racing as a calling she didn't really get.

“Is it fun?”

He laughed a little. “No. It's more. It's exhilarating and a bit of a headache. There's nothing else like it.”

“Do you drive through towns or around tracks?”

“Tracks, usually,” he said. He drove through the streets of Barcelona with skill and competency, which really didn't surprise her.

“Have you done one?”

“Every year my brothers and I participate in at least one.”

This was his world, she realized. She wondered if the child they had would be like Marco. Would he have the need for speed? And what would being raised so far away from the racing world do to the child?

For the first time, she realized that, while her plan was to fix this generation, she had no way of knowing what the fallout of her solution was going to be.

“I like the track at Le Mans. We've done charity events, too, where we compete against other car companies.”

“How is that different from what you do each week? Is it friendlier?”

“Not really. But we do raise money for charity. One charity rule requires you to have a woman driver for one leg.”

“Who do you guys use?”

“No one. We haven’t participated in that one...my family is cursed.”

“Cursed?” She wondered how much he’d tell her about the curse and whether she should pretend that she didn’t know what he was talking about.

“It’s an Italian thing,” he said. “Our curse involves women.”

“Being around women?” she asked, wondering how much he knew of the actual curse.

“No. But being involved with a woman. Okay, here’s the truth, Dom has always been afraid that either Tony or I will weaken and fall in love with a woman, and then our family curse will kick in. So that’s why we’ve never participated in that particular race. I think he fears that if I met a woman who loved racing as much as I do, I’d fall for her.”

Virginia didn’t like the sound of that. That Marco wasn’t going to fall in love. But that shouldn’t matter to her, she wasn’t after his heart, only his child. “You seem very successful, to be cursed.”

He turned into a parking lot and pulled into a space, but made no move to turn off the car or get out. “It’s not a curse like that.”

“What kind is it?”

“As I said, it’s one that involves women.”

“From where I’m sitting, you seem to do okay with women.”

“I do. But I never *fall* for a woman.”

“So, do you want to fall in love?” she asked. She wondered if he was lonely like she was at times. It didn’t matter how full his life was. Because of her grandmother, he could only be lucky in business or in love. Never both. And since he’d chosen business, that meant a lonely life.

“No,” he said with a smile. “I’m still young and have my life ahead of me.”

“Indeed. What about racing? Are you going to retire?”

“Not for another few years,” he said, turning off the ignition and looking at her.

The smell of his aftershave and the leather of the seats overwhelmed her, and she was very aware of the fact that she’d made small talk to cover her nervousness about being alone with Marco again.

This was something she hadn’t planned for. Being with Marco again wasn’t going to be easy, because each time she was with him she didn’t want to leave. But more than that, she realized that he wanted answers from her, and she was going to have to keep on her toes to stay one step ahead of him.

Marco led the way upstairs to his apartment. He hated staying in hotels, and since Moretti Motors always had a driver in F1, over the years the company had bought residences in all of the major cities where the races were held.

He was trying to be genial and laid-back, though he really wanted answers. But after that one passionate outburst he’d had back at the track, he knew he needed to rein himself in.

He didn't want Virginia to realize how much she'd gotten to him. And she had. Until he'd seen her again, he hadn't realized that he'd been searching for her in every crowd—that he'd been waiting for her at each race. And that each win and each loss was marked by the fact that she wasn't there.

He'd never let anyone have that kind of power over him. He didn't think he'd "let" Virginia. For some reason, she was the one woman who could make him react this way. Only finding out every detail of who she was would give him the peace he needed.

Dinner had yielded few answers. She was very clever at keeping the conversation off herself and on him. But he was determined to learn more about Virginia, and he wanted to do it without asking her flat out for the answers. She'd set the rules of their game by disappearing and by the very mystery of who she was.

"You're staring at me," she said.

"You're a beautiful woman. Surely I'm not the first man to stare at you."

She shook her head. "I'm not really beautiful."

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and I find you captivating."

"Marco."

"Yes?"

"Please don't say things like that."

"Why not?"

"Because I'll be tempted to believe you, and you just said that

you weren't interested in any woman for the long term."

"I did say that, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"But you're not really interested in the long term, either, are you, Virginia?"

"I don't know," she said.

He had no idea what she meant by that comment. Maybe she was just as confused about what was happening between them as he was. But she'd left after one night. Most women didn't do that.

He wasn't being a chauvinist or anything like that. His experience had shown him that women stuck around for a while. That only when they were convinced a man wasn't going to be the right one for them to spend their lives with did they move on.

"A woman who leaves while a man is sleeping surely isn't looking for 'happily ever after'...though I thought most American women were."

"Why would you ever think such a thing? American women are independent."

"My mother watches *Desperate Housewives*." To be honest, he wasn't too sure about that show as a standard for American women. But Elena was American, and she wanted to be married.

"That's a TV show."

"Television shows are made popular by the way they exaggerate real life."

"Marco, that makes no sense."

"You are simply saying that because you don't agree with my

theory.”

“Okay, if you’re right about TV echoing life, how do you feel about movies?”

“I think that, to a certain extent they reflect the view of what they are representing. You know, I’m not saying that movies and television programs are real life, simply that they mirror an attitude of the culture that produced them.”

She was so bubbly with her passion for discussing this. He liked it because he could tell that she wasn’t planning what she would say to him. She wasn’t keeping this conversation all about him, the way she had during dinner. This was something real. An indication of the woman who was Virginia.

He still didn’t know her last name, but he would before morning. He hoped to spend this night uncovering *all* of her secrets.

He would know everything about her body, of course—he was already intimately acquainted with the sounds she made when her body was suffused with pleasure. Now he wanted to know what made her mad. What made Virginia cry? What made her laugh and smile? He needed that knowledge and he would be ruthless about getting it.

“Did you see the movie *Talladega Nights*?” she asked him.

“Yes. It was quite funny, with that Will Ferrell.”

“Um...by rights I should assume you are like the French driver in the movie.”

It took him a moment to figure out that she was trying to say

he might be gay. He saw the sparkle in her eyes. She was teasing him. He knew he shouldn't feel good about that fact, but he did.

He closed the distance between them, tired of not holding her in his arms. The last month had been too long. He'd focused on racing and on the promo events that went with the Formula One season, but every night he'd had passion-filled dreams of Virginia and he wanted to make them a reality.

"I think I've proven that I'm more interested in women than men," he said, drawing her into his arms. "But perhaps you need another demonstration?"

She put her hands on his face and rose up to kiss him with the gentle passion he associated only with Virginia.

"I have no doubts that you are interested in women. I was trying to make a point," she said.

"Instead, you proved that Americans think Frenchmen are gay. It matters not to me. I'm Italian, and interested in only one woman tonight."

"Me?"

"You," he said, sweeping her up in his arms and carrying her down the hallway and into the bedroom.

He put her on her feet next to the bed. As he stroked one finger down the side of her neck and traced the soft fabric neckline of her dress, shivers spread down her body. His fingers were warm against her skin and she wasn't really listening to what he was saying.

She simply watched his lips to see if he was going to kiss her.

That was what she really wanted and needed. She had missed him. And though she'd had other relationships before Marco that one night in his arms had far exceeded what she'd expected. He'd marked her indelibly and she'd been unable to forget his touch.

"I'm almost afraid to believe that you are really here."

"I am here," she said. Truly, she was afraid to believe that he'd taken her back into his arms so easily.

He leaned down, his lips brushing over hers. They were so soft, yet so commanding. And as he sucked her lower lip into his mouth and laved it with his tongue, she stopped thinking and just gave herself over to the feelings that were swamping her.

When she was standing naked in front of him, he traced the scar under her breast. "Do you realize that this is one of the only things I know about your past?"

She felt a frisson of fear at his words. He could never know about her past. His family and hers were enemies. Real life Capulet and Montague stuff.

"My past isn't important, Marco. Only what we have when we are together. Make love to me."

"Why?"

She felt more vulnerable now than she had just a second before. "I want to know that I'm really here in your arms."

He bent down to trace the scar with his tongue. His hands cupping the weight of both her breasts, one long forefinger stroking up and over her nipples. She shivered in his embrace, needing more of him. He made her react so quickly...he was like

a flame she couldn't stay away from.

She tunneled her fingers through his thick black hair and held his head to her body. He murmured something in Italian against her skin. Then she felt his lips against her breast. His mouth moved over the skin, tongue licking and teeth lightly scraping until she was desperate for more of him. She needed more than just his mouth lightly touching her.

His hand on her other breast just kept stroking lightly, until she couldn't stand it a second longer. She pulled his head up to hers and kissed him deeply, sucking his lower lip into her mouth and biting him. She shifted in his arms until her breasts were pressed to his chest.

The cool fabric of his shirt shocked her naked skin. She hadn't realized he was still fully dressed and she was wearing nothing but her silky thong. The thought of being naked in his arms was very arousing.

He stood back up and lifted her onto the bed. Pulling his mouth from hers, he bent down to capture the tip of her breast. His hand still played at her other breast, arousing her, making her arch against him in need.

She reached between them and stroked his erection through the fabric of his pants, spreading her legs wider so that she was totally open to him. "I need you now."

He lifted his head. The tips of her breasts were damp from his mouth and very tight. He pressed his chest against them.

She reached up to unbutton his shirt. "Leave it. I need to be

inside you now.”

She nodded, and instead fumbled with his belt, finally getting it unfastened. Then she couldn't get the button at his waistband open. “Damn it.”

He laughed softly and brushed her hands aside so that he could unfasten his own pants. She heard the swish of fabric and then felt the warmth of his erection against the center of her body. He rocked his hips against hers, rubbing the length of his arousal against her feminine core.

She needed him inside her. She reached between them and took him in her hand, positioning him for easy entry. But she could get no more than the tip inside her body.

He held his hips still, and no matter how she squirmed or moved, he wouldn't budge. Finally she looked up at him. “What are you waiting for?”

“I'm waiting for you to really want me.”

“I do. I want you inside of me right now. I feel like it's been a lifetime since we were together, and I've missed you so much.” The words wouldn't stop coming, and she knew she'd revealed too much, but she couldn't help herself. “Please, Marco,” she said again. She ran her hands down his back, cupping his buttocks and trying to draw him closer to her.

He gave her barely an inch. “That's all you get.”

His words were breathed right into her ear and almost made her climax. She shifted in his embrace, trying to take him deeper.

“Marco, please, I need more.”

“No. You were a bad girl.”

“When I left?”

“Yes,” he said, pulling his hips back and thrusting into her again, still just an inch.

She wanted him madly. She needed to feel him deeper inside of her body instead of just at the threshold.

“Marco.”

“Yes, Virginia?”

“I’m sorry I left.”

“That’s good, *cara mia*,” he said, giving her another inch.

She shivered around him and felt the first fingers of an orgasm dancing up her spine. She clutched at his buttocks and tried to draw him deeper.

“Marco...”

“I want your promise that you won’t leave me again.”

“I promise.”

“You said that too quickly, Virginia. Do you mean it?”

“Yes, I mean it.”

“If I give you all of me, then I’m going to expect you to stay in my bed until I ask you to leave.”

She looked up into those obsidian eyes of his and knew he was serious. This was more to him than just a teasing game that lovers play. And she couldn’t help but want to give him that promise. It might be hard to keep, but she’d try. “I will stay until you ask me to leave.”

He stared into her eyes for a long moment before he thrust all

the way into her body. She felt marked by his possession, that he'd changed her and she'd never be the same again.

She slid her hands down his back as he thrust deeper into her. Their eyes met. Staring deep into his eyes made her feel like their souls were meeting. She felt her body start to tighten around him, catching her by surprise. She climaxed before him. He gripped her hips, holding her down and thrusting before he came with a cry of her name.

She slid her hands up his back and kissed him deeply. "You are so much better than I dreamed you were."

His deep laughter washed over her and she felt like she'd found her place here. And that was very dangerous thinking, because if she belonged with Marco, then what was she going to do when she had to leave him again?

# Six

Marco woke in the middle of the night and sat bolt upright in his bed. The voice of his grandfather echoed in his mind, saying something about being too late.

Marco scrubbed a hand over his face and reached for the light on the nightstand, flicking it on before he remembered he wasn't alone. *Virginia.*

She was really here. After they'd made love she'd fallen asleep in his arms. And he hadn't minded. Because the last thing he'd wanted to do was question her when he felt so vulnerable. Damned if this woman didn't make him feel...weak.

Well, out of control. Like he had the very first time he'd gotten behind the wheel of a Moretti F1 racing machine. Virginia lay curled on her side facing him, one of her hands reaching toward him, the other curled under her chin.

Asleep, he could study her without having to admit to anyone that he was obsessed with her. He knew that Dominic had been particularly glad when they'd met that morning in Melbourne and Virginia hadn't been with him.

Had his brother seen something in Virginia that had made him wary of the attraction she had for Marco? Or was it simply Dom's normal fear that a woman would distract him from the quest to take Moretti Motors to the top?

It wasn't like Marco was ever really alone. There were always

beautiful women who were more than willing to hang on his arm and go back to his place for a night. What had been different with Virginia? Or had it been *his* reaction that had made Dom more watchful?

Marco didn't know if he and his brothers had made a wise decision when they'd vowed to avoid women who could make them feel. Marco couldn't speak for his brothers, but he was tired of the emotional wasteland that was his past relationships.

He let no one close to him. And at the end of the day, he was alone. Of course he had his brothers, and together the Morettis were strong—but there were times when he longed for the happiness his father had found with his mother.

The kind of happiness that stemmed from love. He shook his head to clear it. He wasn't the kind of man who needed love. He needed a powerful engine under his control. He needed the thrill of pitting himself against the other top race car drivers in the world. But *love*? He didn't need that.

He pushed himself out of the bed and flicked off the light so he wouldn't disturb Virginia.

Why did she make him feel? He was thirty-six years old and he had a good life. Why was he suddenly asking questions and looking harder at the choices and decisions he'd made?

He walked to the wet bar and poured himself a Di Saronno. He tossed the drink back and walked around the darkened living room. The lights of Barcelona competed with the stars in the sky. He'd like to blame his restlessness on Virginia and the questions

he still hadn't asked her, but he knew it was more than that.

He leaned against the French doors, staring out at the night sky over Barcelona. It was quiet now, and he had the feeling that he was alone in the world. His thoughts swirled and he realized that winning the Grand Prix World Championship this year wasn't going to be enough for him. Because once he had another championship under his belt, there would be nothing left for him in the world of Formula One racing.

He felt sometimes as if he didn't know who he was if he wasn't behind the wheel of a race car. Being the face of Moretti Motors was fine, but that wasn't much of a career. And to be honest with himself, he'd known he'd always been a little bit embarrassed by the way women flocked to him and photographers sought him out.

He walked back to the bar and refilled his glass again.

"Marco?"

He turned to see Virginia standing in the shadows of the hallway.

"Si?"

"What are you doing?"

"I could not sleep. Did I disturb you?"

She walked toward him and he saw that she wore his shirt. He liked the way she looked in his clothes. When she was close enough, he reached out and pulled her closer, tucking her head under his chin and simply holding her.

"What are you thinking about? The race earlier?"

He was tempted to say yes. It would be easy to say that he was rerunning the race and trying to figure out when he'd lost, but his mind wasn't on Formula One or even Moretti Motors. It was on this woman.

"No. I'm not dwelling on the race."

"What then?" she asked, pulling back to look up at him.

"I was thinking that I don't know your last name or what you do for a living. Yet, you know what my mother's career is and a million other details of my life."

She flushed. "Is that important to you?"

"Yes," he said. "It is."

She hesitated. Then, "I'm Virginia Festa. I was born in Italy, but moved to America when I was a year old. My mother, Carmen Festa, was a schoolteacher."

"What about your father?"

"I never knew him. He died before I was born."

The name Festa sounded familiar to him. "Where in Italy were you born?"

"In Chivasso."

He stiffened. That was where Cassia had been from. The woman who'd cursed his grandfather and by default all of the Moretti men. He had no idea what the old witch's surname was, because his grandfather always just referred to her as that witch. But there was something about hearing the tale of Virginia's life that put him in mind of his own family's curse. He hadn't believed in the curse until Dom's doomed love affair. That had been the

incident that had made both him and Antonio consider what their  
*nonno*

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