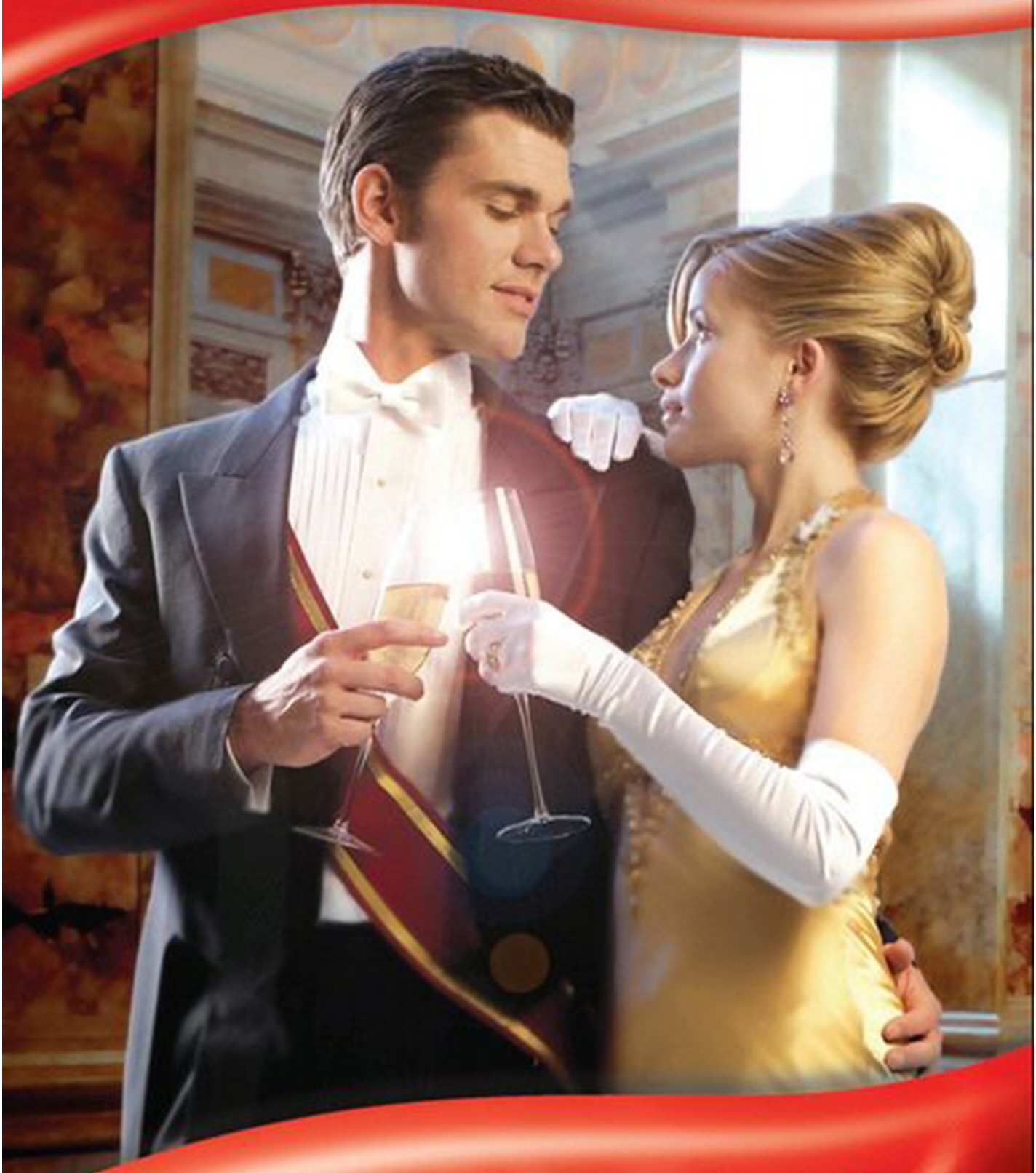
The Duke's New Year's Resolution

Merline Lovelace

Quade's Babies

Brenda Jackson



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The Duke’s New Year’s Resolution Merline Lovelace The setting was picture-postcard perfect; the hero, bona fide royalty. Duke Marco Calvetti had almost run Sabrina off the road. Now Sabrina was playing houseguest in his Amalfi-coast villa and the duke promised her a New Year’s she would never forget…Quade’s Babies Brenda Jackson Almost a year later, sexy operative Quade Westmoreland had finally tracked his unnamed one-night lover down – and discovered three little babies bearing his features. Learning he was a father made Quade even more determined: he would claim Cheyenne Steele!

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The Duke's New Year's Resolution by Merline Lovelace

"Do you remember asking me if Italians make New Year's resolutions?"

His face cast in shadows, Marco reached up to tuck a wayward strand behind Sabrina's ear.

"I do. And as I recall, you said that was an all-American tradition."

"I've decided to make one tonight."

She had to smile at his solemn expression. "Want to tell me what it is?"

"It's you, Sabrina *mia*."

As if consumed by the need to touch her, Marco drew his fingertips across her cheek, brushed her lips, cupped her chin. "I know we agreed to move one step at a time. I know I'm pushing when I should be patient. But I've resolved to do whatever I can, whatever I must, to keep you in Italy. And in my heart."

Sheer surprise took her breath away.

Quade's Babies by Brenda Jackson

"I have no intention of marrying you."

"You might want to think this through carefully," Quade cautioned.

"There is nothing to think about. I have no plans to get married, especially to you. I don't even know you."

"Then I suggest you get to know me. Like it or not, I don't intend for you or our children not to carry my name."

"My babies and I have a name. Steele. Thank you very much for your offer, but we don't need another one. I happen to like the one we have."

"And I happen to like the name Westmoreland for you and our babies better."

"Too bad," she snapped.

"No, too good," he replied.

And too late, Cheyenne thought, when she noticed his gaze had zeroed in on her mouth.

The Duke’s New Year’s Resolution

by

Merline Lovelace
Quade’s Babies

by

Brenda Jackson



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The Duke's New Year's Resolution

by

Merline Lovelace

A retired Air Force officer, **Merline Lovelace** served at bases all over the world, including tours in Taiwan, Vietnam and at the Pentagon. When she hung up her uniform for the last time, she decided to combine her love of adventure with her flair for storytelling, basing many of her tales on her experiences in the service.

Since then, she's produced more than seventy-five action-packed novels, many of which have made the bestseller lists. Over nine million copies of her works are in print in thirty-one countries. Named Oklahoma's Writer of the Year and the Oklahoma Female Veteran of the Year, Merline is also a recipient of Romance Writers of America's prestigious RITA® Award.

When she's not glued to her keyboard, she and her husband enjoy travelling and chasing little white balls around the fairways of Oklahoma. Check her website at www.merlinelovelace.com for news, contests and information about upcoming releases.

Be sure to watch for *The Executive's Valentine Seduction*, coming next month from Mills & Boon® Desire™.

Dear Reader,

Did you ever stumble on a place that just took your breath away? My husband and I did when we drove down from Rome and meandered along Italy's Amalfi Coast with two of our best friends. I'll never forget my first view of Positano, with its colourful villas stair-stepping down a steep hillside to the achingly blue Mediterranean Sea. Like the heroine of this book, I was completely blown away.

I knew I had to write a story set in that fascinating locale someday, and when I started plotting this series, the Amalfi Coast leapt instantly to mind. So sit back, sip a glass of limoncello if you can find it, and celebrate the New Year with a hunky duke in one of the most glorious spots on earth.

All my best,

Merline Lovelace

To our travelling buds, Sue & Pat,
who shared the glories of the Amalfi Coast with us
despite the knuckle-biting roads and one sprained
ankle. Next stop—the Pyramids! And very special
thanks to Elizabeth Jennings, doyen of Italy's fabulous
Women's Fiction Festival and the kind, patient fellow
author who straightened out my mangled Italian.

Chapter One

Sabrina Russo got only a few seconds' warning before disaster struck.

The powerful roar of a vehicle rounding the hairpin curve behind her carried clearly on the late December air. Cursing, she kicked herself for parking her rental car in a turnout a good ten yards back. The roads on this portion of Italy's Amalfi coast were narrow and treacherous at best. Walls of sheer rock hedged the pavement on one side, thousand-foot drops on the other. But, like the worst kind of numbnuts tourist, she'd *had* to leave the protection of the turnout and inch along this narrow, pebble-strewn verge to snap a picture of the colorful village spilling down the steep mountainside to the blue-green Mediterranean below.

The slick leather soles of her boots provided only marginal traction as she scrambled back toward the turnout. She was still trying to reach its protective guardrail when a flame-red Ferrari convertible swept around the curve.

Sabrina caught a glimpse of the driver—just a glimpse. Her frantic mind registered dark hair, wide shoulders encased in a buckskin-tan-colored jacket, and a startled expression on a face so strong and chiseled it might have been sculpted by Michelangelo. Then the Ferrari was aiming right for her.

"Hey!"

Yelping, she leaped back. She knew she was in trouble when her left boot heel came down on empty air. Faced with the choice of throwing herself forward, under the Ferrari's tires, or toppling down the steep precipice behind her, she opted for the tumble.

She didn't fall far, but she hit hard. The cell phone she'd been using to shoot the photos flew out of her hands. A rocky outcropping slammed into her hip. Her gray wool slacks and matching, hip-length jacket protected her from the stony, serrated edges. The wool provided little buffer, however, when she crashed into a stunted, wind-tortured tree that clung to the cliffside with stubborn tenacity.

Pain shot from her ankle to her hip in white-hot waves. The achingly blue Mediterranean sky blurred around the edges.

"Signorina! Signorina! Mi sente?"

A deep, compelling voice pierced the gray haze. Sabrina fought the agony shooting through her and turned her head.

"Ecco, brava. Apra gli' occhi."

Slowly, so slowly, a face swam into view.

"Wh—what happened?"

"*Siete*…" He gave a quick shake of his head and shifted to flawless English. "You fell from the road above. Luckily, this cypress broke your descent."

Sabrina blinked, and a twisted tree trunk came into focus. Its thin branches and silvery-green leaves formed a backdrop for the face hovering over her. Even dazed and confused, she felt its sensual impact.

The man was certifiably gorgeous! Whiskers darkened his cheeks and strong, square chin. His mouth could tempt a saint to sin, and Sabrina was certainly no candidate for canonization. His short, black hair had just a hint of curl, and his skin was tanned to warm oak.

But it was his eyes that mesmerized her. Dark and compelling, they stared into hers. For an absurd moment, she had the ridiculous notion he was looking into her soul.

Then more of her haze cleared and she recognized the driver of the Ferrari. Anger spiked through her, overriding the pain.

"You almost hit me!"

She planted a hand against the tree trunk and tried to sit up. The attempt produced two immediate reactions. The first was a searing jolt that lanced from her ankle to her hip. The second was a big hand splayed against her shoulder, accompanied by a sharp order.

"Be still! You're not bleeding from any external wounds, but you may have sustained a concussion or internal injuries. Tell me, do you hurt when you breathe?"

She drew in a cautious breath. "No."

"Can you move your head?"

She tried a tentative tilt. "Yes."

"Lie still while I check for broken bones."

"Hey! Watch where you put those hands, pal!"

Impatience stamped across his classic features. "I am a doctor."

Good excuse to cop a feel, Sabrina thought, too pissed to appreciate his gentle touch.

"You have no business taking these hairpin turns so fast," she informed him. "Especially when there's no guardrail. I had nowhere to go but down. If I hadn't hit this tree I could have…Ow!"

She clenched her teeth against the agony when he ran his hands down her calf to her ankle.

Frowning, the doc sat back on his heels. "With your boot on, I can't tell if the ankle is broken or merely sprained. We must get you to the hospital for X-rays."

He glanced from her to the road above and back again.

"My cell phone is in the car. I can call an ambulance. Unfortunately, the closest will have to come from the town of Amalfi, thirty kilometers from here."

Terrific! Thirty kilometers of narrow, winding roads with blind curves and snaking switchbacks. She'd be down here all day, clinging to this friggin' tree.

"It's better if we get you to the car and I drive you to the hospital myself."

Sabrina eyed the slope doubtfully. "I don't think I'm up for a climb."

"I'll carry you."

He said it with such self-assurance that she almost believed he could. He had the shoulders for it. They looked wide and solid under his suede bomber jacket.

Sabrina was no lightweight, however. She kept in shape with daily workouts, but her five-eight height and lush curves added up to more pounds than she cared to admit in polite company.

"Thanks, anyway, but I'll wait for the ambulance."

"You could black out again or go into shock." Pushing to his feet, he braced himself at an angle on the slope and issued a brusque order. "Take my hand."

The imperious command rubbed her exactly the wrong way. She'd spent a turbulent childhood and her even more tempestuous college years rebelling against her cold, autocratic father. She'd paid the price for her revolt many times over, but she still didn't take orders well.

"Anyone ever tell you that you need to work on your bedside manner, Doc? It pretty well sucks."

His dark brows snapped together in a way that clearly said he wasn't used to being taken to task by his patients. She answered with a bland smile. After a short staring contest, his scowl relaxed into a reluctant grin.

"I believe that has been mentioned to me before."

The air left Sabrina's lungs a second time. The man was seriously hot without that crooked grin. With it, he made breathing a lost cause.

"Shall we start again?" he suggested in a less impatient tone. "I am Marco Calvetti. And you are?"

"Sabrina Russo."

"Allow me to help you up to the car." He reached down a hand. "If you please, Signorina Russo."

It was either wait for the ambulance or take him up on his offer. No choice, really. Sabrina needed to get her ankle looked at and be on her way. She had business to take care of. Important business that could put the fledgling company she'd started with her two best friends into the black for the first time since they'd launched it.

She laid her hand in his, her nerves jumping when his fingers folded around hers. Loose stones rattled and skittered down the slope as she levered up and onto her uninjured leg. Once vertical, she got a good look at the sheer precipice only a few yards beyond her tree.

"Oh, God!"

"Don't look down. Put your arm around my neck."

When she complied, he lifted her and hooked an elbow under her knees. She could feel the muscles go taut under the buttery suede as he made his careful way up the slope. Determined not to look down, she kept her gaze locked on his profile.

The dark bristles sprouting on his cheeks and chin only accentuated his rugged good looks. He had a Roman nose, she decided, straight and strong and proud. His eyes were a clear, liquid brown. And was that a sprinkling of silver at his temple?

Interesting man. When he wasn't trying to run people down, that is. The black skid marks leading to the convertible nosed onto the narrow verge made Sabrina bristle again.

"You came around that corner way too fast. If I hadn't jumped backward, you would have hit me."

"You should not have left the safety of the turnout," he countered. "Why did you do something so foolish?"

She hated to admit she'd been mesmerized by the incredible view and was snapping pictures like an awestruck tourist, but she had no other excuse short of an outright lie. Sabrina had committed more than her share of sins in her colorful past. Lying wasn't one of them.

"I was taking pictures. For my business," she added, as if that would lessen the idiocy.

He didn't roll his eyes but he came damned close. "What business is that?"

"My company provides travel, translation and executive support services for Americans doing business in Europe. I'm here to scout locations for a high-level conference for one of our clients."

He nodded, but made no comment as they approached the red convertible. Raising a knee, he balanced her on a hard, muscled thigh and reached down to open the passenger door. Despite her efforts to protect her ankle, Sabrina was gritting her teeth by the time he'd jockeyed her into the seat.

"My purse," she ground out. "It's in the rental car."

He did the almost-eye-roll thing again.

Okay, so leaving her purse unattended in Italy—or anywhere else!—wasn't the smartest thing to do. She certainly wouldn't have done so under normal circumstances. But this was such an isolated stretch of road and she'd kept her rental car in view the whole time. Except when she'd nose-dived over the side of the cliff, of course.

Good thing she *didn't* have her purse with her then. If she had, it might have gone the way of her cell phone. God knew where that was right now. One thing's for sure, she wasn't crawling back down the slope to look for it.

"I locked your car," the doc informed her when he returned with her purse and the keys. "I'll send someone back for it while you're being attended to."

He folded his muscular frame behind the wheel with practiced ease and keyed the Ferrari's ignition. It came to life with a well-mannered growl.

"I'll take you to the clinic in Positano. It's small but well equipped."

"How far is that?"

"Just there." He indicated the cluster of colorful buildings clinging to the side of the cliff. "The place you were photographing," he added on a dry note.

Sabrina was too preoccupied at the moment to respond. Navigating these narrow, twisting roads in the driver's seat was nerve-racking enough. Sitting in the passenger seat, with a perpendicular drop-off mere inches away, it was a life-altering experience.

Stiff-armed, she braced her palms against the edge of her seat. Her uninjured leg instinctively thumped the floorboards, searching for the nonexistent brake on every turn. She sucked air whenever

the Ferrari took a curve but gradually, grudgingly, had to admit the doc handled his powerful machine with unerring skill. Which didn't explain why he'd seemed to aim right for her a while ago.

She must have startled him as much as he had her. Obviously, he hadn't expected to encounter a pedestrian on that narrow curve. He wouldn't encounter this one again, Sabrina vowed as the convertible hugged the asphalt on another switchback turn. She'd learned her lesson. No more excursions beyond the protection of the guardrails.

Dragging her attention from the sheer precipices, she pinned it on the driver. "Your name and accent are Italian, but your English has a touch of New York City in it."

"You have a good ear. I did a three-year neurosurgical residency at Mount Sinai. I still consult there and fly over two or three times a year." He sent a swift glance in her direction. "Are you a New Yorker?"

"I was once," she got out, her uninjured foot stomping the floorboard again. "How about you keep your eyes on the road, Doc?"

She didn't draw a full breath until the road cut away from the cliffs and buildings began to spring up on her side of the car.

Positano turned out to be a small town but one that obviously catered to the tourist trade during the regular season. This late in the year, many of the shops and restaurants were shuttered. Those still open displayed windows filled with glazed pottery and bottles of the region's famous limoncello liqueur.

The town's main street led straight down to a round-domed church and a piazza overlooking the sea, then straight up again. Since it was only two days past Christmas, the piazza was still decorated with festive garlands. A life-size nativity scene held the place of honor outside the church. Sabrina caught a glimpse of colorful fishing boats pulled up on a slice of rocky beach just before the doc made a sharp left and pulled into a small courtyard.

Killing the engine, he came around to the passenger side of the Ferrari. Once again she looped her arm around his neck. Her cheek brushed his when he lifted her. The bristles set the nerves just under her skin to dancing as he carried her toward a set of double glass doors.

The doors swished open at their approach. The nurse at the counter glanced up, her eyes widening in surprise.

"Sua Eccellenza!"

Sabrina's German and French were much better than her Italian, but she was fairly certain nurses didn't routinely accord physicians the title of Your Excellency. The rest of their conversation was so machine-gun fast, however, she didn't have time to figure that one out before the nurse rushed forward with a wheelchair.

"Rafaela will take you to X-ray," the doc said as he lowered her into the chair. "I'll speak with you after I review the films."

She must look like she'd just fallen off a cliff, Sabrina thought ruefully. The nurse gave her a fisheyed stare until a sharp order from the doc put her in motion. With a squeak of the chair's rubber wheels, she propelled Sabrina through another set of double doors.

Marco remained in the reception area for a long time after the doors swished shut. He couldn't blame Rafaela for gaping at this woman, this Sabrina Russo. The resemblance was incredible.

So incredible, he'd almost lost control of his car when he'd spotted her back there on that narrow road. Thank the Lord instinct had taken over from his shocked brain! Without thinking, he'd cut back into the proper lane and jammed on the brakes.

Then his only concern was getting to her, making sure she'd survived the fall. But now…

Now there was nothing to keep him reliving those terrifying seconds just before she fell. One thought and one thought only hammered into his skull.

He might have killed her. Again.

His jaw clenched so tight his back teeth ground together. Unseeing, Marco stared at the double doors. A phone buzzed somewhere in the distance. Outside, a horn honked with typical Italian impatience.

He heard nothing, saw nothing but the image of the woman who'd disappeared behind the doors. Her face, her features remained vivid in his mind as he reached into the inside pocket of his jacket.

The picture he drew out of his wallet was old and dog-eared. It was the only snapshot he hadn't been able to bring himself to pack away. His throat tight, he stared down at the laughing couple.

He'd been in his early twenties, a premed student at the University of Milan. Gianetta was three years younger. She looked so vibrant, so alive in this faded picture that a fist seemed to reach into Marco's chest and rip out his beating, bleeding heart.

How young they'd been then. How blinded by lust. So sure their passion would stand the test of time. So heedless of the words of caution both his family and hers felt compelled to voice.

He should have listened, Marco thought savagely. He'd been premed, for God's sake! He should have recognized the signs. The soaring highs. The sudden lows. The wild exuberance he'd ascribed to the mindless energy of youth. The seeds had been there, though. He could see them now in the laughing face turned up to the camera.

A face that was almost the mirror image of Sabrina Russo's.

She could be Gianetta's sister. Her twin. They had the same sun-streaked blond hair. The same slanting brown eyes. The same stubborn chin.

Or…

His stomach knotting, Marco echoed the irrational, improbable thought that had leaped into his mind when he'd glimpsed the woman in the road.

She could be his wife.

Gianetta, who had insisted on launching the sailboat despite the weather warnings.

Gianetta, whose frantic radio call for help still haunted his dreams.

Gianetta, whose body had never been recovered from the sea.

With a muttered oath, Marco shook his head. He'd been working too hard. Performing too many difficult surgeries. The long hours and unrelenting pace had gotten to him. How absurd to fantasize for so much as a single second that this American, this Sabrina Russo, could be his dead wife!

He was glad now his surgical team had pleaded with him to take a long-overdue break between Christmas and New Year's. Obviously, he needed it.

With another impatient shake of his head, he pushed through the double doors and strode down the hall toward X-ray.

Chapter Two

Wincing, Sabina swung her legs off the X-ray table and sat up on the edge. The remains of the boot they'd had to cut off lay discarded beside the table.

"Allow me to assist you, Ms. Russo."

Rafaela nudged the wheelchair closer. After a somewhat graceless transfer, the nurse got Sabrina settled into the chair.

"I shall take you to an exam room, yes? Dr. Calvetti will review the X-rays and consult with you there."

"You called him something else when we first came in," Sabrina commented as she was wheeled into the corridor. "*Eccellenza*, wasn't it?"

"*Si*."

"What's with that?"

"He prefers to use his medical title here at the clinic, but I forget myself sometimes. My mother cooks and cleans for him when he's in residence at his villa, you see."

"Not really. Who is he?"

"His Excellency Don Marco Antonio Sonestra di Calvetti, twelfth Duke of San Giovanti, fourteenth Marquis of Caprielle, ninth Marquis d'Almalfi, Count Palatine, sixteenth Baron of Ravenna…" She paused. "Or is it the seventeenth Baron Ravenna?"

"You got me."

"There are more titles. Many more." Smiling, Rafaela steered her patient into an exam room and set the brake. "Mama can recite the entire list without taking a breath. She has worked for the Calvetti family since she was a young girl."

Okay, Sabrina was impressed. So the doc was also a duke. Not to mention a world-class hunk. The combination was almost enough to make her forget how close His Excellency had come to flattening her into roadkill.

But not quite enough to keep her from scowling when he delivered the good news/bad news.

"The X-rays show no sign of concussion or fractured bones in your ankle. However, you may have damaged or torn a ligament. We won't know for sure until we perform a stress test."

"Where and when do we do that?"

"It's a simple test. A manipulation of the foot and ankle. I'll do it now if you can stand the pain."

Uh-oh! That didn't sound good.

"Once we are done, I will prescribe painkillers. But you must be alert for the manipulation, so you can tell me when I hurt you."

When, not if. That sounded even worse.

"Okay, Doc, let's get this over with. Or should I say duke?"

"Either will suffice." Those dark eyes held hers. "Given the circumstances, perhaps we should dispense with titles altogether."

She wasn't sure exactly what circumstances he referred to but had no problem with a more egalitarian approach. "That's fine with me."

"Good. You must call me Marco. And may I call you Sabrina?"

She granted the polite request with a regal nod. "You may."

"Very well, Sabrina. Rafaela and I will help you onto the exam table."

She managed it with their assistance and a couple of hops. Once they had her in place, Rafaela rolled up the hem of the wool slacks. The bruised, inflated sausage she revealed made Sabrina grimace.

"Lovely," she muttered.

"It will get worse before it gets better," the doc—duke—Marco warned.

He washed his hands at the sink in the exam room. The scent of antibacterial soap came with him as he rolled a stool close to the table, seated himself and cupped her heel. His touch was gentle, lulling Sabrina into a false sense of security. That lasted only until he flattened his other hand against her shin and applied pressure. The pain almost brought her off the table.

"Okay, okay," she gasped. "You found the not-so-sweet spot."

He relieved the frontal pressure and applied it sideways. More prepared this time, Sabrina merely gritted her teeth.

"It is not as bad as I feared," he said when he'd completed the test.

"Easy for you to say!"

"I don't believe you've torn the ligaments, merely strained them. We will wrap the ankle in a compression bandage. Then you must stay off your feet, apply ice and take the painkillers I will prescribe."

"Stay off my feet for how long?"

"As a minimum, until the swelling goes down and the pain lessens. After that, you may require crutches for a few days to a week."

"A week!"

Sabrina swallowed a groan. Her tight schedule was disintegrating before her eyes. She'd already rearranged it once to spend Christmas Day in Austria with her two best friends and business partners.

Sabrina, Devon McShay and Caroline Walters had met years ago while spending their junior year studying at the University of Salzburg. Filled with the dreams and enthusiasm of youth, the three coeds had formed a fast friendship. They'd maintained that friendship long distance in the years that followed. Until last May, when they'd met for a minireunion.

After acknowledging that their lives hadn't lived up to their dreams, they'd decided to pool resources. Two months later, they'd quit their respective jobs and launched European Business Services, Incorporated. EBS for short. Specializing in arranging transportation, hotels, conference facilities, translation and other support services for busy executives.

Now Devon McShay, the former history professor, Caroline Walters, the quiet, introverted librarian, and Sabrina the one-time rebel and good-time girl were hard-nosed businesswomen. They had an office and a small staff in a Washington, D.C., suburb and had spent megabucks on advertising. They'd landed a few jobs, but nothing big until aerospace mogul Cal Logan hired EBS to work his short-notice trip to Germany.

Sabrina had done most of the frantic prep work for Logan's five-day, three-city blitz, but came down with the flu the day before she was supposed to fly to Germany. Devon took the trip instead, with some interesting results. Sexy Cal Logan had made it plain he wanted to merge more than business interests with Devon.

Dev was now scrambling to put together a conference for high-level Logan Aerospace executives while Caroline and Sabrina divided forces to scout locations for the lucrative new contract they'd just landed with Global Security International.

Their client wanted to hold the conference the second week in February in either Italy or Spain. Caro and Sabrina had jumped on the computer to find locations with sufficient available rooms and conference facilities on such short notice.

Their choices narrowed to a handful of potential sites, Caro flew into Barcelona to physically inspect those along Spain's Costa Bravo. Sabrina was supposed to check the possibilities here, on Italy's Amalfi Coast. They had less than two weeks to put together an acceptable proposal, and Sabrina wasn't about to let a little thing like a sprained ankle deter her.

There was another side to her determination. One that went deeper and struck at what she was. Or what she used to be. She'd struggled too long to get out of her father's shadow…and taken too much crap from him and his lawyers when she'd resigned from the board of the Russo Foundation

to go into business with her two friends. Sabrina fully intended to make it on her own *and* make a success of EBS, which meant hopping off this exam table and getting her butt in gear.

She aimed her best smile at the doc/duke. "Bring on the ace bandage and painkillers, and I'll be on my way."

"Your way to where?"

"I'm booked in a hotel in Ravello tonight. I'm scouting it as a possible conference site."

According to Sabrina's research, the picturesque mountaintop resort was only a short distance from Positano as the crow flew. Too bad she couldn't sprout wings. The trip would take forever on these tortuous roads.

"You cannot drive to Ravello if you take prescription narcotics," the doc countered firmly. "Or anywhere else, for that matter. Under Italian law you cannot drive at all."

"Great!" She blew out a frustrated breath. "Okay, forget the drugs. Just bandage me up, throw in a set of crutches and I'll gimp on down the coast."

Marco hesitated. He was tempted to comply with her request—extremely tempted. The woman's resemblance to Gianetta had shaken him more than he cared to admit. He would like nothing more than to send Sabrina Russo on her way and slam the door on the memories she'd stirred.

Unfortunately, his personal preferences conflicted with the oath he'd taken as a physician and the knowledge that he was at least partially responsibility for this woman's injury.

"I'm afraid you don't appreciate the seriousness of your sprain," he told his reluctant patient. "It will heal itself in time if you're careful. If you bring the wrong pressure to bear on your ankle, however, you could cause more serious damage that might require surgery to repair. Or leave you with a permanent limp."

She paled a little at that. Satisfied that he had her attention, Marco pressed on.

"I should like you to remain in Positano tonight. I'll tend to your ankle and, if your condition allows, you may continue your journey tomorrow."

She gave in grudgingly. "I guess I have no choice."

"Very well. Rafaela, a pressure bandage, please."

The nurse had anticipated the request and had a rolled bandage in hand. She was every bit as efficient as her mama, Marco thought, pleased all over again that he'd paid her tuition to nursing school.

When he moved his stool closer and propped Sabrina's foot on his knee, her breath hissed in. Marco used his gentlest touch to wrap the ankle. The skin around the injured joint was distended, the bruising already vicious.

The calf above, however, was long and smooth and shapely. As he cupped the firm flesh, a jolt went through him. This time the shock had nothing to do with seeing what appeared to be the ghost of his dead wife. This time it was lust, hard and fast and hot.

Gesù! What possessed him today? Disgusted with himself, he caught only the tail end of his patient's question to Rafaela.

"…recommend a good hotel?"

"The tourist season is over, Signorina Russo. We have only one hotel still open. The five-star Le Sireneuse. It's quite elegant and very popular with film stars and visiting dignitaries. Their rooms are usually booked a year or more in advance, but I'll call and see if they have anything available, yes?"

"Thanks."

Rafaela slid out the cell phone clipped to her waist and made the quick call.

"It's as I feared, Signorina. The hotel is fully booked. I'll try The Neptune. It's just outside town and may still be open."

Marco brought the bandage under a delicate arch and waged a fierce internal debate. His gut told him to say nothing, to let this woman find her own accommodations. She disturbed him in too many ways. Yet the sense of responsibility bred into him with his name and title would not allow

him to ignore the fact he had contributed to her present predicament. Then there was that haunting resemblance to Gianetta…

"There's no need to call another hotel. You must stay at my villa tonight."

"Thanks, but I wouldn't want to impose."

"It is no imposition, I assure you. The villa is small, merely a vacation home, but has several guest suites. I should prefer to keep a watch on you to make sure you don't suffer any residual effects from the accident. And," he added with a smile for the nurse, "Rafaela's mama will cook for us. Rafaela will tell you her mama serves the best grilled swordfish on the Amalfi coast."

"It's true, Signorina. Mama's *pesce spada* will make you weep with joy." The young nurse kissed her fingertips in tribute to her mother's skills. "You will taste nothing like it."

"Well…"

"Good," Marco said. "It is settled. How does the bandage feel? Not too tight?"

His patient tried a tentative wiggle. "It's fine."

After securing the bandage with a Velcro strap, he carefully lowered her foot and rose. "Before I give you something for the pain, please tell me if you have ever experienced an adverse reaction to drugs or have a medical condition I should be aware of."

"No to both."

Marco considered the range of drugs available at the small clinic and wrote an order for an opiate that would provide swift relief with the fewest side effects. While he waited for Rafaela to return with the medication, he flipped up his cell phone and arranged to have Sabrina's rental car delivered to his villa.

"We will leave the keys here at the clinic. Ah, here are your pills. They are very strong," he warned.

After she downed the correct dosage, Marco helped her into the wheelchair again. They made a stop at the woman's washroom, where Sabrina hopped in with Rafaela's assistance and out again a few moments later.

When he wheeled her out of the clinic and scooped her into his arms for the transfer to the Ferrari, he could tell she was already starting to feel the effects of the fast-acting medication. Her body was pliant in his arms, her breasts soft against his ribs. While he held her, she turned her face up to his.

"Thanks for taping me up, Doc. Duke. Marco."

Her smile was wide and natural. Nothing like Gianetta's teasing pout. He hadn't noticed the dimples before, perhaps because Sabrina Russo hadn't relaxed and smiled at him until this point. And her eyes were a warmer, richer brown than he'd first thought.

Holding her this close, her mouth just a whisper from his, Marco noted other differences, as well. Her breasts were fuller, her hips rounder and she had the long, sleek legs of a thoroughbred. She was much a woman, this American. Very much a woman.

Marco was more prepared this time when his groin went tight. Nevertheless, the punch hit hard and forced a reminder that this woman was his patient and would be a guest in his home. Willing his rebellious body to behave, he lowered her into the passenger seat and reached across her for the shoulder harness.

He smells like antiseptic soap, Sabrina thought, feeling more than a little woozy. Soap and suede and some subtle, tangy aftershave she'd only now noticed. She'd been too shaken—or too pissed—to sniff his neck before.

"How far is it to your villa?" she asked when he'd backed the convertible out of the clinic's courtyard.

"Not far. About five kilometers."

"Oh, boy! On these roads, that means we'll get there when? Midnight?"

"I promise, you'll arrive in plenty of time for a nap before dinner."

"I may zonk out before then," she warned as her head lolled against the seat back.

"I hope so." One corner of his mouth tipped up. "That will save much wear and tear on the floorboards!"

Despite the lethargy creeping through her, Sabrina registered the impact of that crooked grin. Holy crap! The man should come with a warning label. When he dropped his brusque me Doctor/ you Jane attitude and let himself be human, His Excellency was downright dangerous.

"I'll try to restrain myself," she replied.

And not just her thumping foot, she admonished herself sternly. She couldn't let herself be distracted by sexy Italians right now. Caroline was depending on her for input into the megaproposal they had to submit by the end of next week. Sprain or nor sprain, crutches or no crutches, Sabrina intended to provide the required info.

For now, though, she'd just rest her head against the back of the seat and let the cool December air play with her hair. The loose tendrils fluttered around her face as the Ferrari maneuvered through the narrow streets of Positano.

The village was practically vertical. Pastelpainted shops and homes stair-stepped down the mountainside seemingly right on top of each other. At the bottom of the incline, dominating the piazza, was the cathedral. Beyond the church was the pebbly shore lined with colorful fishing boats.

As Sabrina had noted on the way into town, many of the small hotels and restaurants were shuttered. Umbrellas were folded and chairs neatly stacked on the terraces of open-air restaurants. Yet a few hardy tourists huffed up the steep, cobbled street, guidebooks in hand.

A momentary worry threaded through her as she wondered how the heck she'd handle streets like this on crutches, but she pushed the thought aside with a drug-induced optimism. She'd manage. Somehow.

When they left the town, the road once again became a narrow slice of pavement cut out of sheer rock. Rather than look down, Sabrina slumped in her seat and closed her eyes.

The next thing she heard was Marco's deep voice murmuring in her ear. "We're here. Don't stir. I'll carry you to your room."

She felt his arm slide under her knees. His other went around her waist. As if it was the most natural thing in the world, she wrapped an arm around his neck.

He lifted her easily. She could get used to this mode of transportation, she thought as she snuggled against his chest and buried her nose in the warm skin of his jaw.

"You need a shave," she complained sleepily.

"So I do. My apologies, Signorina. I'm on vacation, you see, and had not thought I would get this close to such a beautiful woman."

She nuzzled closer. "'S okay. You look good with bristles. You look good, period."

"*Grazie*."

She formed a hazy impression of a vine-covered arch, whitewashed walls, the sound of the sea slapping against rocks. Then a door opened and a gray-haired woman bustled out. Rafaela's mom, Sabrina thought as the woman greeted Marco in a torrent of Italian.

She heard him respond with her name, say something about ice. Mere moments later he lowered her onto sheets that smelled of sunshine and starch. His hands were gentle as he removed her one remaining boot. She was asleep almost before he propped a cushion under her injured ankle to elevate it.

Chapter Three

Food. She needed food.

The thought dragged Sabrina from a deep sleep. Or maybe it was the scents teasing her nostrils. Eyes closed, mind still only half engaged, she sniffed the air. The tantalizing aromas of garlic and onions sizzling in olive oil competed with something sweet and yeasty and fresh baked.

A loud rumble emanated from the vicinity of her stomach, reminding Sabrina she hadn't eaten since the roll and a cup of coffee she grabbed at the airport before claiming her rental car and driving south toward the Amalfi coast. She'd planned to stop at a restaurant along the way and lunch on the region's incredible seafood.

Instead, she remembered with a sudden jolt, she'd almost become food for the fishes!

The memory of how close she'd come to tumbling off a cliff and plunging into the sea brought her lids up. She blinked, confused for a moment by the unfamiliar surroundings, then the haze cleared.

She was in a bedroom. In Marco Calvetti's villa. Stretched out on a king-size bed. With her left leg stuck up at a thirty-degree angle and pillows propped under her knee and ankle. A cold compress was draped over the swollen joint.

She wiggled a bit to get comfortable and surveyed the room with more interest. It was a perfect blend of Mediterranean and modern, with Moorish arches and stucco walls painted a warm terra-cotta. An exquisitely carved antique chest stood against one wall. A flat-screen plasma TV hung on another.

But it was the view through the arches that held Sabrina spellbound. It gave onto a long, narrow terrace. Potted geraniums, hibiscus and trailing vines added splashes of color to an otherwise unbroken vista of sea and sky.

"Holy cow!"

Was that faint blur in the distance Capri? Sicily? Sabrina wasn't sure what part of the coast she was on or which direction the windows faced. She itched to get out onto the terrace for a better look and was gingerly lowering her foot when a soft knock sounded on the door behind her.

"Si," she called. *"Entri."*

"Good," Marco said when he opened the door. "You are awake."

"Barely."

She struggled to sit up as he came into the room. The first thing she noticed was that he was carrying a set of aluminum crutches. The second, that his sexy whiskers were gone.

Clean-shaven, his hair damp and slicked back, his broad shoulders molded by a cream-colored, V-neck sweater, he still looked good enough to eat.

Which reminded her…

"Please tell me that's Rafaela's mama's cooking I smell."

"It is indeed. I came to ask if you would like a tray here. Or are you feeling up to dinner on the main terrace? It is heated, so we'd be quite comfortable."

"You have another terrace with a view like this?"

"Several, actually. The villa is like the others along this stretch of coast. More vertical than horizontal, I'm afraid. But you don't need to worry about navigating stairs," he assured her. "I had an elevator installed when the place was built. The lift is very useful for Signora Bertaldi—Rafaela's mama. And for my own when she comes over from Naples for a visit."

"Then dinner on the terrace it is."

Now that she'd recovered from the shock of the accident and wooziness caused by the pills, Sabrina found herself intensely curious about the sexy doc.

"Does your mother visit often?" she asked as she pushed off the bed and onto her one good foot.

"Not often." He kept a firm grip on her arm while she experimented with the lightweight crutches. "Nor do I, for that matter. This is only my second time this year."

That surprised her. This bedroom didn't have an unused feel to it. The oversize marble tiles showed not a single dust bunny and light flooded through sparkling windowpanes. Rafaela's mama must have a squad of maids at her disposal to keep everything so fresh smelling and spotless.

"So where do you spend the rest of the year?"

"In Rome. That's where I have my practice."

Interesting. She knew now he had a mother in Naples and a practice in Rome. There were still some significant gaps in her database, however. Like whether there was a Mrs. Doc/Duke somewhere in the picture. Never shy, Sabrina figured there was only one way to find out.

"What about your wife? She must love coming down to this beautiful villa."

"My wife died three years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"So am I. Come, let's test your skill with these crutches."

His tone didn't invite further questions or expressions of sympathy. Sabrina swallowed her curiosity and clumped a few tentative steps.

"Be careful not to put too much pressure on your armpits. You don't want to compress the nerves there. Use the foam handgrips to support yourself as much as possible."

He stayed close by her side her while she made a circuit of the spacious suite.

"Your rental car has been delivered," he said when he was satisfied she could maneuver. "Your cases are just outside, in the hall. Would you like me to bring them in so you can freshen up before we eat?"

"Yes, please."

She felt like she'd rolled in dirt, then gone to sleep in her clothes. Oh, wait! That's exactly what she had done.

"Can you manage alone, or shall I have Signora Bernaldi come help you?"

"I can manage."

"Very well."

He set her roller bag and briefcase on an upholstered bench at the foot of the bed and carried her smaller tote into the adjoining bathroom.

"There's a phone on the vanity and one by the toilet. Press one-six if you require assistance."

"One-six. Got it."

"I'll wait for you in the hall."

Sabrina fished in her suitcase for a black, anklelength crinkle skirt and a velvet jacket trimmed with lace, then hobbled into the bath. The oval whirlpool tub drew a look of intense longing but she suspected she couldn't climb in without having to call for help climbing out.

Not that she'd mind getting naked with the doc. Especially now that she knew he was single.

Not single, she amended. *A widower.*

The thought of what he must have suffered sobered her.

She'd never lost a spouse, but had come close to losing her father when he was diagnosed with cancer several years ago. Foolishly, Sabrina had thought his illness might finally breach the walls between them. Instead it had left Dominic Russo more determined than ever to mold his only child into the woman he thought she should be.

She'd resisted his determined efforts for most of her life. With her mother watching helplessly from the sidelines, she and her father had engaged in a running battle of wills. Sabrina's warfare had taken the form of outrageous pranks and, later, wild parties.

His illness had sobered her, though. Shaken by his near brush with death, Sabrina had abandoned her own career as a top buyer for Saks Fifth Avenue and agreed to serve as the executive director of the Russo Foundation.

Big mistake. Huge. Her father couldn't give up an ounce of control. He'd questioned her decisions, countered her orders and generally made her life a living hell. She'd stuck it out, trying to make it work, until she finally admitted she could never fit the mold he'd designed for her.

Shaking her head at the memory of their titanic clashes, she thumped over to the vanity and sank down on a tufted stool. After stripping off her slacks and sweater, she went to work with a washcloth and lemon-scented soap before dragging a brush through her hair and reapplying her makeup.

The black crinkle skirt went over her head easily and dropped down to hide most of her bandaged ankle. The velvet jacket buttoned up the front, with a froth of ivory-colored lace swirling around the scooped neckline.

Feeling like a new woman, Sabrina dug in her suitcase for a pair of black, beaded ballet flats. She could only get one on, but its nonslip rubber sole provided an extra measure of security on the tiles as she crutched her way to the door.

Marco was waiting in the hall, as promised. Like the guest suite, the long, sunlit corridor sported graceful Moorish arches and a spectacular view of the sea. A magnificent Ming vase with a spray of fresh gladioli added to the fragrance of furniture polish and sunshine.

"The elevator's just here," he said, gesturing to a small alcove. "It will take us up to the dining room."

Up being the operative word, Sabrina saw when the door swished shut. The control panel indicated the villa was built on four levels. According to the neatly labeled buttons, the garage and main salon occupied the top floor. Below that were the library, the dining room and kitchen. Then came the bedroom level and, finally, the spa and stairs to what she presumed was a private beach.

"You weren't kidding about vertical," she commented as the elevator glided upward with silent efficiency.

"It is the price one pays for building where the mountains drop straight into the sea. Ah, here we are."

The elevator opened onto the library. It was a dream of a room, one Sabrina could happily have spent days or weeks in. Shelves filled with books and art objects lined three walls. The fourth wall was solid glass and gave onto another terrace with dizzying views of the ocean. Her crutches sank into a Turkish carpet at least an inch thick as she maneuvered around a leather sofa with a matching, man-size armchair and ottoman. What caught her attention, though, was the sleek laptop sitting atop a trestle table that looked like it might have once graced a medieval palace.

"Do you have wireless here?" she asked hopefully.

"I do."

"Mind if I use my laptop to log on?"

"Not at all. Here, I'll write the password for you."

He stopped at the table and jotted down a sequence of numbers and letters. Sabrina tucked the folded paper into the pocket of her jacket.

"Thanks. I think I mentioned I'm in Italy on business. I have several appointments I need to confirm. I also need to contact my partners. We're working a project with a very tight deadline."

"I understand. But first we eat, yes?"

"Yes!"

The mouthwatering scent of garlic and onions grew more pronounced as they entered the dining room. Like the library, this room, too, looked out on the sea. The table was a beautiful burnished oak and long enough to seat twelve comfortably. A smaller table had been set with china and crystal out on the terrace. It was tucked in a corner that protected it from the sea breezes and warmed by a tall, umbrella-like patio heater.

Lemon trees in ceramic pots provided splashes of color. Despite the lateness of the season, flowering bougainvillea climbed the walls. Enchanted, Sabrina passed the crutches to Marcos and eased into the chair he pulled out for her.

"I'll tell Signora Bertaldi we're ready," he said. "I would offer you an aperitif, but you should not combine alcohol with the drug I prescribed for you."

"No problem. The view alone is enough to get me high."

While Marco went inside, she breathed in a lungful of salty air and leaned forward to peer over the terrace wall.

Yikes! Good thing she wasn't acrophobic. She was sitting suspended in seemingly thin air, with only the wave-splashed rocks a hundred or so feet below.

Her host returned a few moments later with Rafaela's mama. "This is Signora Bertaldi. She runs this house—and me—with a most skilled hand."

The older woman blushed at the compliment. "His Excellency, he exaggerates."

Her eyes were dark and keen and set in a web of fine wrinkles. They stayed locked with disconcerting intensity on Sabrina's face.

"Please to excuse my English, Signorina Russo. It is not so good."

"It's better than my Italian. I met your daughter this afternoon, by the way. She says your *pesce spada* will make me weep with joy."

The strange intensity gave way to a wide smile. "Then it is good I cook the fish for you tonight, *si?*"

"Si."

"Please to sit, Excellency. I will bring the olives and antipasto."

Marco complied and stretched his long legs out. "So, Sabrina. Tell me more about this business that brings you to Italy."

She couldn't have scripted a more perfect finish to a day that had edged so close to disaster.

The sunset was glorious. The grilled swordfish was everything Rafaela had promised. The cappuccino came topped with sweet, creamy foam. The company…

Okay, she could admit it. She was seriously in lust with His Excellency, Don Marco Antonio d'Whatever. She'd always been a sucker for a man with smooth, polished manners and linebacker's shoulders. Not to mention tastes that ranged from opera to water polo to the succulent jerk-chicken skewers cooked up by New York City sidewalk vendors. And let's not forget eyes that crinkled at the corners when he smiled.

Still, she didn't deliberately plan her grimace as she got to her feet after their leisurely meal. Or her clumsy stumble when she tried to get the crutches under her. But she certainly didn't object when Marco muttered an oath and swept her into his arms.

"You're in pain, aren't you?"

"A little."

"I shouldn't have kept you up so long. You need to rest and elevate your ankle."

To hell with her ankle. A far more urgent need gripped Sabrina. With his mouth only inches from hers, she ached to brush her lips over his. She could almost taste their silky heat.

She didn't realize how transparent her thoughts were until they were in the elevator and he bent to press the button to take them to the lower level. When he straightened, he wore his doctor's face. Cool, assessing, concerned…until his gaze snagged hers.

Gesù!

Marco smothered the oath, but he couldn't hold back the hunger that punched through him, hot and swift and fierce. He wanted this woman. Wanted to taste her, touch her, hear her moan with pleasure as his mouth and hands roamed her lush, seductive curves.

The hours they'd spent together since their near calamitous meeting had erased his initial, absurd notion she might be Gianetta's twin. Or even, God help him, her ghost.

Sabrina Russo was nothing like his temperamental, tempestuous wife. Her laugh was spontaneous and natural, without a hint of frenzy lurking just under the surface. Her lively mind challenged his. And her mouth…Sweet Jesus, her mouth!

The elevator glided to a stop and the door slid open, but Marco made no move to exit. He knew he shouldn't yield to the urge to kiss this woman. She was his patient, a guest in his home. An American entrepreneur, impatient to be on her way and complete the tasks that had brought her to Italy. They were casual acquaintances at best. Strangers who would say goodbye in the morning.

The stern lecture proved completely ineffectual against the heat that raced through his veins. Only by an exercise of iron will could he hold off until he was sure she understood his intent. He saw it in the quick flare of her eyes. Heard it in the sudden rasp of her breath. With a low growl, Marco bent his head and took her mouth with his.

She tasted of dark coffee and sweet, rich cream. He angled his mouth, wanting more of her. Her arms locked around his neck. Her head tipped. She opened her lips, welcoming him, answering hunger with hunger.

He shifted her in his arms, his blood firing when her full breasts flattened against his chest. His body was so taut and straining with need he almost missed it when she gave a small jerk. He whipped up his head and caught her trying to cover a wince.

"Christ! I hurt you."

"No!" Her cheeks were flushed, her breathing ragged. "I banged my foot. The elevator…it's so small."

Shame and disgust hammered at him with vicious blows. Calling himself all kinds of a pig, Marco angled her injured foot away from the elevator wall.

"To kiss you like that was inexcusable of me," he ground out as he carried her into the corridor. His footsteps echoing on the tiles, he strode toward the guest suite. "I'm sorry, Sabrina."

The flush faded as her mouth tipped into a smile. "I'm not."

Still thoroughly disgusted with his lack of control, Marco shook his head. "I don't usually assault injured women."

"You don't, huh?" Amusement danced in her eyes. "How about those who aren't injured?"

"You tease, but that was no way for me—for anyone!—to treat a guest."

"Hey, you can't take all the credit, Doc. I was giving as good as I got back there in the elevator." She cocked a brow. "Or was I?"

He couldn't help but grin. "You were, Ms. Russo. You most definitely were."

That was still no excuse for his behavior. It took a fierce effort of will, but Marco managed to block the all-too-vivid feel of her mouth hot and eager under his and shouldered open the door to the guest suite. Signora Bertaldi had come down to straighten the room while he and Sabrina lingered over cappuccino. The bed was turned back, the sheets smoothed, the pillows plumped and ready.

Firmly suppressing the erotic and highly inappropriate thoughts that jumped into his head, Marco tugged down the top sheet and lowered his burden.

"We left the crutches upstairs. I'll ask Signora Bertaldi to bring them to you. She waited to help you prepare for bed before she left for the evening."

"Sure you don't want to tuck me in yourself?"

Laughter lurked behind her all-too-innocent expression. She was teasing him again. He knew it, but the knowledge didn't keep the gates from springing open and the mental images he'd just suppressed from pouring through. He could see her stretched out on those smooth sheets, one arm curled above her head, her lips parted in invitation…

Dammit!

"No," he admitted with brutal honesty. "I am not at all sure. But I'll send Rafaela's mama to you."

Marco was sweating when he left the guest suite. Shunning the elevator, he took the stairs to the upper floor. What the devil was wrong with him? Why did this woman stir such intense, erotic fantasies?

He hadn’t remained completely celibate after his wife’s death. He was a man. He had normal appetites, the usual physical needs. There were women in Rome, sophisticated women who played the game of flirtation and seduction with practiced charm. Yet none of them had roused him like this long-limbed American beauty.

Now he had to decide what the devil he would do about it.

Chapter Four

"Oh, yuck! Your ankle looks like an overcooked bratwurst."

Grinning at her friend's apt description, Sabrina swung the laptop propped on her stomach around. Its built-in camera made a dizzying sweep of the guest bedroom before her face was once again displayed on the screen alongside those of her two partners. How the heck had the world survived before videoconferencing?

"It is pretty gross," she agreed with a glance at her garish, yellow-and-purple lower limb. She'd unbandaged the ankle to let it breathe for a while. Before wrapping it up again and crawling under the covers for the night, she'd decided to try and contact her partners.

She'd caught Devon in Germany, where she was working frantically to set up the premerger meeting of executives from Logan Aerospace and Hauptmann Metal Works. Caroline, like Sabrina, was scouting sites for the job that had unexpectedly dropped into their laps last week.

"You need to stay off that ankle," Caro insisted, her heart-shaped face showing genuine concern. "Hole up at your hotel for the next few days and do not, I repeat, *DO NOT* even think about checking out those conference sites. I'll finish here and zip over to Italy. I can be there Thursday. Friday at the latest."

Devon countered with an alternate plan. "Don't cut your schedule short, Caro. I'll put things on hold here and fly down tomorrow. I can play nurse to 'Rina and scope out sites at the same time."

"Guys. Really. No need for either of you to charge to the rescue. I'll manage just fine."

"Sure you will," Devon scoffed. Her warm brown eyes held a combination of affection and concern. "I've been to the Amalfi coast. I know it's straight up and down. I also remember you mentioning that the hotel in Ravello had a lot of stairs and terraces."

"Actually, I'm not staying at the hotel. The doc who almost hit me offered to put me up at his villa tonight. He wants to check my ankle tomorrow to make sure I'm good to go before I take to the road again."

"That's the least the jerk can do," Dev huffed.

"Hey, did I mention that the jerk is a duke as well as a doc?"

Judging by their expressions, her partners weren't impressed.

"He's also seriously hot," Sabrina added nonchalantly.

The too-casual comment didn't fool either of her friends. They'd known her too long. They knew, as well, the good-time-girl reputation she'd worked so hard to maintain during her rebellious teen and college years.

Sabrina still enjoyed a good time. She wasn't particularly vain, but she recognized that her long legs and seductive curves attracted as many men as her family name and her father's wealth once had. As a consequence, she maintained a wide circle of male friends. Several had pushed to become more than friends. After so many years of resisting her father's attempts to dominate her, though, Sabrina was in no hurry to give up the freedom she'd struggled so hard to achieve.

That didn't mean she couldn't appreciate a real hottie when one almost ran her over. Especially one who could kiss like Marco Calvetti. She could still feel the delicious aftershocks of their session in the elevator.

"Uh-oh." Devon squinted into the camera at her end of the connection. "You've got that look on your face."

"What look?"

"The one that says your doc is fair game."

"Well, he is. His wife died a few years ago. I may be reading between the lines, but I think he's buried himself in his work since then. You wouldn't believe how gorgeous his villa is, yet this is only the second time this year he's driven down from Rome."

She chewed on her lower lip for a moment, mulling over her impressions of her host.

"He's really charming, guys, but also rather intense. It wouldn't hurt him to loosen up a little."

Devon and Caroline exchanged knowing, computer-generated glances.

"If anyone can loosen the man up," Dev drawled, "you can. Just remember you're now one of the walking wounded. Go easy on that ankle."

"And don't worry about scouting conference sites," Caro added. "Worst-case scenario, we can give Global Security fewer options."

"Absolutely not." Her professional pride stung; Sabrina was adamant. "This contract is too important. We're not scaling back our proposal. I'll be good to go tomorrow," she said firmly.

Which wouldn't give her time to loosen up the doc, she thought with real regret. Too bad. She could think of any number of inventive ways to follow up on that kiss.

Desire rippled through her as she said goodnight to her friends, shut down her laptop, and rewrapped her ankle. The damned thing still throbbed, but the ache was bearable so she decided against the pills sitting on the bedside table. Instead, she let the restless murmur of the sea surging against the rocks lull her to sleep.

She was up and dressed by eight the next morning. The faint scent of yeasty, fresh-baked rolls told her Signora Bertaldi was already at work in the kitchen.

Thankfully, Sabrina had stuffed a pair of merino wool palazzo pants in her suitcase at the last minute. The wide legs made getting them on over her still-swollen ankle a breeze. She teamed the oyster-colored slacks with a lightweight red sweater and a Versace scarf in a riot of colors. The rubber-soled beaded ballet slippers provided nonskid traction as she made her way along the tiled hall to the elevator.

She fully intended to hold the doc to his promise to check the sprain before she left. First, though, she intended to hold Signora Bertaldi to *her* promise of a goat cheese frittata for breakfast. If the frittata came anywhere close to the woman's grilled swordfish, heaven awaited on the floor above.

So did Marco, she discovered when she thumped into the library. He put aside the newspaper he'd been reading and sprang to his feet.

"You should have rung for help."

"I didn't need it," she replied when she recovered from the sight of the doc in well-washed jeans that hugged his muscular thighs and a silky black pullover that showed off some *very* impressive pecs.

Raising a crutch, she waved the tip in an airy circle. "I'm getting the hang of these things. What I *do* need, though, is coffee. Hot. Thick. Sweet."

"Of course." His assessing glance dropped to her foot. "But first, how is your ankle this morning?"

"Still fat and ugly, but it doesn't ache as much."

"Good. I'll look at it after we eat. Shall we have breakfast here in the library or on the terrace?"

"The terrace, please. I want to soak in every last ounce of your incredible view before I hit the road."

"I've been thinking about that." He matched his step to hers as they crossed through the dining room and went out on the spacious terrace. "I have a proposal for you to consider. Before I put it to you, let me fetch your coffee and tell Signora Bertaldi you are up and about."

Amused, Sabrina sank into the chair he held out for her and turned her face to the sun. She could get used to being waited on by a duke. Not that Marco fit her notions of royalty as shaped by her previous contacts.

She'd dated the playboy son of a Saudi sheik once. Just once. It was an eye-opening and not particularly pleasant experience. She'd also attended a couple of parties in London where Prince Harry popped in. He was great fun but way too young for her. Marco, on the other hand, was just the right age, height, size and shape.

Regret flickered through her. Too bad she was working against such a tight deadline. She wouldn't have minded a few more days with the sexy doc. Maybe she could extend her stay in Italy after she finished checking out conference sites. Or arrange a return visit once they had the Global Security contract firmed up.

She was considering the possibilities when Marco returned with two cups of espresso topped with frothy cream. As he passed her one of the cups, he sprang the proposal he'd mentioned earlier.

"I think you should stay here for the rest of your time on the Amalfi coast. Use this villa as a home base and make day trips to the locations you want to check out."

The suggestion dovetailed so closely with Sabrina's thoughts she almost choked on her first sip of the thick, sweetened coffee. Her startled glance met Marco's calm gaze. If there was more than mere courtesy behind the invitation, he hid it well.

Her first instinct was to jump on the offer. Excitement pulsed through her at the thought of another session or two of close body contact with this intriguing man. Unfortunately, the road map she hastily conjured up in her mind quashed that quiver of excitement. The distances involved weren't all that great but she'd have to navigate them on tortuous roads, then gimp around on crutches.

"Thanks for the offer," she said with genuine regret. "It's very tempting, but I don't think I'm up to driving out and back each day on these roads."

"You don't need to drive them. I'll be your chauffeur."

"You?"

"Si." A smile crept into his dark eyes. "Or don't you trust my driving? I would remind you that your foot did not thump the floorboards once during the drive from the clinic to the villa. Then again, you were out cold for most of that trip."

"You must have better things to do than transport me up and down the coast."

"Actually, I don't. I'm on vacation until January fifth. My surgical team has threatened to resign en masse if I return before that date. I have nothing on my schedule until then except a mandatory appearance at the ball my mother gives each year to celebrate La Fiesta di San Silvestro."

"That's on New Year's Eve, isn't it?"

"It is. So I'm at loose ends, you see. You would save me from utter boredom."

She didn't believe that for a minute. Someone with Marco's varied interests could easily fill up every minute of his vacation. His library alone could surely keep him occupied for weeks.

Sabrina hesitated, torn between the urge to spend more time with this man and the uncertainty of where it might lead. She didn't have time for personal entanglements right now. Caro and Dev were depending on her to provide the necessary input for the new contract proposal.

Which would be a lot easier to accomplish with someone who knew the area at the wheel, her traitorous mind pointed out.

That was a rationalization. She knew it. But what the heck. If the man wanted to spend his precious vacation time helping her nail down prospective conference sites, who was she to argue?

"If you're sure you have nothing more pressing to do," she said slowly, giving him a last out.

"I'm sure. And if you remain over until New Year's Eve," he added, "you must accompany me to the ball. It's really rather spectacular."

Okay, now she was hooked. What woman in her right mind would pass up the chance to attend a fancy-dress ball with someone like Marco Calvetti? The thought flashed into her mind that it was strange he didn't already have a date. The man was rich, cultured and a widower. But why look a gift hunk in the mouth?

"I'd planned to wrap up my business and fly home on the thirtieth," she told Marco. "I'll have to check on whether I can change my tickets. And get in some serious shopping. And…"

Signora Bertaldi's arrival with a loaded tray interrupted Sabrina's hasty revisions to her schedule. Tantalized by the mingled scents of broiled tomatoes, basil and melted goat cheese, she returned the older woman's greeting.

"Signorina Russo will be staying with us for a while longer," Marco informed her, speaking in English for the benefit of his guest. "You have additional help coming in from the village this morning, *si?*"

"Si, Excellenza." Signora Bertaldi placed the tray on the table. "The two who always assist me when you are in residence."

"Bring in more if you need them."

"I will," she promised as she positioned a heaping platter before Sabrina.

Marco himself poured fresh-squeezed orange juice from a carafe on the tray. The offerings also included a basket of fresh-baked rolls, a ramekin of creamy butter and an assortment of jams. Wishing them *buon appetito,* Signora Bertaldi left them to the dazzling sunshine and the sumptuous breakfast.

After breakfast Marco examined Sabrina's ankle. He had her sink into the soft leather of the sofa in the library and carefully unwrapped the Ace bandage. The swelling had gone down considerably but the skin was mottled with ugly purple-yellow bruises.

He rotated her foot gently, frowning when she fought to hide a grimace. "You really should stay off this today. It requires more ice and elevation."

"No can do. I need to get to work. How about I stretch out on the backseat of your Ferrari with an ice pack draped over my ankle?"

The prospect of driving around the Amalfi coast with a bandaged foot sticking out the rear window of his lean, mean machine didn't seem to particularly faze him, but he came up with an alternate suggestion.

"I have a better idea. My mother keeps a small fleet of vehicles at her home in Naples. I'll call and ask to borrow a sedan. It will give you more room and comfort."

"You're brave enough to tackle these hairpin turns in a big, honkin' sedan?"

"I've done it many times, I assure you."

"It will take you forever to get to Naples and back," Sabrina protested, remembering her own meandering journey after she left the interstate just south of the city.

"I'll have the car delivered. It will take an hour, two at most. During that time you will rest here on the sofa, with your foot up."

The command sounded so much like the ones her father used to issue that Sabrina bristled instinctively. Common sense kicked in a second or two later.

"Deal."

He rewrapped her ankle and helped her stretch out on the soft leather. Propping a pillow under her foot, he straightened and gestured toward the speakers attached to a high-tech iPod dock.

"Would you like to listen to some music while I fetch ice and make my calls?"

"What have you got on there?"

"Everything from Andrew Lloyd Weber to Zucchero."

Sabrina opted for show tunes over Italian pop rock. While Sarah Brightman and Steve Barton blended their voices in the haunting love duet from *The Phantom,* she let her gaze roam the library. Until now she'd caught only brief glimpses of the room as she and Marco passed through it.

She took her time now, seeking clues to the personality of the man who fascinated her more by the moment. She couldn't make out the titles of the books in the shelves lining three walls and itched for a closer look. She settled for studying the treasures interspersed among the volumes.

That bust of a Roman matron looked as though it might have been carved while Pompeii was still a thriving metropolis. And that small oil painting on an ornate stand was either a Caravaggio or a damned good copy. A caduceus carved from translucent alabaster occupied place of honor amid a collection of objects that looked more like medieval torture implements than medical instruments. On the shelf next to the caduceus was a chess set with tall, elaborately decorated pieces in ivory and red.

Not until her gaze had made a complete circuit of the library did something begin to nag her. She couldn't put a finger on it right away. Frowning, Sabrina made another sweep of the bookcases before glancing at the long table that served as Marco's desk.

A maroon leather paper tray and blotter sat squarely in the center of the slab of polished oak. A gold Mont Blanc pen jutted from its holder beside the blotter. Next to it was his sleek laptop and a cordless phone propped up in its charger.

What was missing, Sabrina realized after another puzzled moment, were photographs. Most desks contained at least one, framed and positioned for optimal viewing. Usually of the owner's spouse or family.

Intensely curious now, she glanced around again. Nope. No snapshots. No formal portraits. Not even one of those cartoonlike caricatures sketched by the street artists who plied every piazza in Rome.

Apparently Marco didn't choose to surround himself with visible reminders of the wife he'd lost three years ago. Was her death still so painful?

Although intensely curious, Sabrina wouldn't poke her nose into his past. God knew enough people had poked into hers over the years.

Maybe he'd open up a little when they knew each other better. The prospect of spending the next few days getting to know the handsome doc had Sabrina humming along with Sarah Brightman.

Chapter Five

"You invited one of your patients to recuperate in your villa? An American?"

Marco smiled at the sniff that came through the phone. A Neapolitan born and bred, his mother had a native's disdain of foreigners. That included Sicilians, Sardinians and Corsicans as well as everyone west of the Apennines and north of the Abruzzi.

"Who is this woman?"

"Her name is Sabrina Russo. She's in Italy on business. Since I was partially responsible for her injury, I felt I should offer the hospitality of my home."

That touched on another sore spot. His mother understood why Marco preferred to stay at his own villa during his infrequent trips down from Rome instead of the palazzo in Naples his family had called home for generations. He still had apartments there, an entire floor. He and Gianetta had occupied the apartment most of their marriage, until Marco had accepted his current position as chief of neurosurgery at Rome's prestigious *Bambino Gesù* Children's Hospital.

Palazzo d'Calvetti was still his home, but these days he preferred the simple solitude of this villa he'd had constructed after Gianetta's death. His mother understood, but she didn't like it.

Marco dined with her regularly, which mollified her somewhat. And dutiful son that he was, he made the requisite appearances at her numerous charity and social events, including the big New Year's Eve gala. That reminded him…

"If Ms. Russo is still in Italy on the Feast of St. Silvestro, I'd like to bring her to your ball."

The request produced a startled silence. Marco understood his mother's surprise. He hadn't escorted any woman to the ball since Gianetta. With good reason.

The media had gone into a feeding frenzy after Gianetta's death. Even now the paparazzi hounded him mercilessly, and one disgusting rag insisted on trumpeting him as Italy's most eligible bachelor. He preferred to keep his private life private and was careful to avoid the appearance of anything more than casual friendship with the women he dated. Until now, that had meant *not* escorting any of them to the ball so steeped in his family's history and tradition.

Marco could rationalize the break with his longstanding policy without much difficulty. Sabrina would be in Italy for a short time. Her life and her business interests were on the other side of the Atlantic. At best, the attraction sizzling between them could spark only a brief affair.

But spark it would.

He'd already decided that.

He'd gone to bed last night hungry for this long-limbed American with the sun-kissed blonde hair and laughing eyes. The hunger hadn't abated after a restless night's sleep. Just the sight of her limping into the library this morning had given him an unexpected jolt.

She wanted him, as well. He'd seen it in her flushed cheeks and heard it in the flutter of her breath after their kiss in the elevator last night.

The memory of that urgent fumbling made him shake his head. He would handle her with more finesse next time, with more care for her injured ankle. He was plotting his moves when his mother recovered from her surprise.

"Yes, of course you may bring her. I'll have my secretary add her to the guest list. What is her name again?"

"Russo. Sabrina Russo."

"Russo." His mother sniffed again. "Her ancestors must have come from northern Italy. In the south, she would be Rossi."

"I don't know where her ancestors came from."

In fact, Marco realized, he knew very little about her other than she was in business with her two friends and in Italy to scout locations for a conference.

"Bring her to dinner," the duchess ordered. "Tomorrow. I want to meet her."

He returned a noncommittal reply. "I'll see if she's available and get back to you. *Ciao,* Mama."

"Tomorrow," his loving mama repeated sternly before hanging up.

He had to smile at the autocratic command. Maria di Chivari had married into her title more than forty years ago. Since then it had become as much a part of her nature as her generous heart and fierce loyalty to those she loved.

He reentered the library some moments later with a cold compress. Sabrina was lying on the sofa as ordered, her foot elevated, humming offkey to the mournful solo coming from the iPod. Mr. Mistoffelees, Marco identified absently, from the hit show *Cats.*

"The car is on the way," he said as he draped the compress over her ankle, "but I'm afraid I may have opened a Pandora's box. My mother wants to me to bring you to dinner tomorrow night."

"Is that bad?"

He answered with a rueful smile. "Only if you object to someone probing for every detail of your life, past and present. She has an insatiable curiosity about people."

"People in general? Or the women you invite to stay at your villa?"

Marco hesitated a few seconds before replying. "Other than a professional colleague or two, you're the first woman I've invited to stay."

He could see that surprised her. Shrugging, he offered an explanation.

"This place is my escape. My refuge. I had it constructed after my wife died. Unfortunately, I don't get down here often, and then only for short stays."

Her expression altered, and Marco kicked himself for mentioning Gianetta.

His guest didn't use the reference as a springboard to probe, but the question was there, in her eyes. He could hardly refuse to answer it, given the heat that had flared between him and this woman last night. He moved a little away from the sofa and shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

"Before we moved to Rome, Gianetta and I lived in Naples. We kept a boat at the marina there. A twenty-four-foot sloop. She took it out one afternoon and a storm blew up."

His gaze went to the library's tall windows. The bright sky and sparkling sunshine outside seemed to mock his dark memories.

"Searchers found pieces of the wreckage, but her body was never recovered."

"Oh, no!"

The soft exclamation eased some of tension holding Marco in its iron grip. He'd heard so many platitudes, so many heartfelt expressions of sympathy, that they'd lost their meaning. Sabrina's soft cry was all the more genuine for being so restrained.

Inexplicably, he felt himself responding to it. With the haunting strains of Mr. Mistoffelees's lament in the background, he forced the memories.

"Gianetta loved to sail. Her family had made their living from the sea for generations. I used to joke she had more salt than water in her blood. She was—she was almost insatiable in her need to feel the wind on her face and hear the sails snap above her."

She had craved other thrills, as well. Downhill skiing on some of the Alps's most treacherous slopes. Fast cars. The drugs she'd flatly denied taking even after Marco discovered her stash.

At his insistence she'd gone through rehab. Twice. She swore she was clean, swore she'd kicked her habit. Yet he knew in his heart she'd driven down from Rome that last, fatal weekend to escape his vigilance. To escape him.

"I had a difficult surgery scheduled that week. A two-year-old child with a brain tumor several other neurosurgeons had deemed inoperable."

He'd been exhausted after the long surgery, mentally and physically, and wanted only to fall into bed. Gianetta flatly refused to cancel her planned trip to the coast. She'd been cooped up in the city too long. She needed the wind, the sea, the salt spray.

"I stayed in Rome until the boy was out of danger and in recovery, then drove down to join my wife for the weekend."

To this day Marco blamed himself for what followed. If he'd postponed the surgery…If he'd paid as much attention to his wife as he had his patients…

"I could see the storm clouds piling up when I hit the coast. I called Gianetta on my cell phone and begged her not to take the boat out."

Begged, cajoled, ordered, pleaded…and sweated blood when he arrived to find she'd disregarded his pleas and launched the sloop.

"As soon as I reached the marina, I contacted her by radio. By then she was battling twenty-four-foot swells and the boat was taking on water."

He could still hear her shrill panic, still remember the utter desperation and helplessness that had ripped through him. He could save the life of a two-year-old, but he couldn't save his wife.

"The last time I heard her voice was when she sent out an urgent S.O.S. The radio went dead in midbroadcast."

"How sad," Sabrina whispered. "You never got to say goodbye."

He flashed her a quick look, startled by her insight. For all their ups and downs, all the arguments and hot, angry exchanges, he'd never stopped loving his passionate, temperamental Gianetta. He'd sell his soul to be able to tell her so.

"You remind me of her," he said after a long moment. "You have the same color hair, the same eyes. Yesterday morning, on the road…For a second or two I thought perhaps I was seeing a ghost."

"So that's why you almost ran me over!"

Sabrina struggled upright on the sofa. She wasn't sure she liked being mistaken for a poltergeist, even briefly. And now that she thought about it, she realized Marco wasn't the only one who'd made that mistake.

"Now I know why Rafaela gaped at me at the clinic. Why her mama stared at me when I first arrived. Do I look that much like your Gianetta?"

His gaze roamed her face. "The resemblance is startling at first glance, but I assure you it's merely superficial. As I've discovered in the course of our brief acquaintance, Ms. Russo, you are very much your own woman."

"You got that right."

His slow smile banished the ghosts. "And very, very desirable."

Well! That was better. Mollified, Sabrina sank back against the cushions. She would have liked to draw Marco out a little more about his wife but she sensed his need for a shift in both subject and mood.

A quick glance at her watch indicated they still had some time to kill before the car arrived. She *should* get on her laptop. She needed to reconfirm her appointments for the next few days and update Devon and Caroline on the latest developments in her changing-by-the-minute schedule.

With Marco standing so close, though, Sabrina couldn't force her mind into work mode. Instead she nodded to the small, square table in the corner.

"I see you have a chessboard set up. We still have some time before the car arrives. Do you want to take me on?"

"You play?"

"Occasionally. When I do," she warned, "I usually draw blood."

"Ha!" He crossed to the table, lifting it with ease, and moved it into position beside the sofa. "We shall see."

Seen up close, the pieces drew a gasp of delight from Sabrina. They were medieval warriors from the time of the Crusades, with armor and weaponry depicted in exquisite detail. The Christian bishops carried the shields of fierce Knights Templar. The Muslim king was mounted on an Arabian steed. Even the queens wore armored breastplates below their circlets and veils.

"White or red?" Marco asked.

She chose white and saw that that the box containing the pieces also included a timer.

"The game will go faster if we play speed chess. How about two minutes max per move?"

When Marco nodded, she hit the timer to start the clock and moved a pawn in the slightly unconventional Bird's Opening, named for the nineteenth-century English master, Henry Bird.

Marco glanced up, his eyes narrowed, and countered with From's Gambit. Four moves later, Sabrina put him in check and had to bite her lip to keep from laughing at his stunned expression.

"You weren't joking about drawing blood. Who taught you to play like this?"

"My father. Chess is about the only thing we share a common interest in."

He lifted his gaze from the board. Sabrina deflected the curiosity she saw in his eyes by tapping the button on the timer.

"The clock's ticking. Your move, fella."

Frowning, he moved his rook to protect his king. She smothered a grin and countered with her knight.

"Checkmate."

Marco's brows snapped together. He scowled at the board, searching for another move, but she had him boxed in.

"I demand a rematch."

Sabrina took him three games to two and was about to put him in check again when the notes of a door chime cascaded through the intercom.

"That must be my mother's chauffeur. We'll finish this game when we return."

"Some folks are just gluttons for punishment."

While he went to trade car keys with the driver, Sabrina descended to the guest suite to slip on her jacket and grab her briefcase. The briefcase thumped awkwardly against her crutch as she hit the elevator again.

Marco was waiting when she emerged on the top floor. He'd pulled on his buttery suede bomber jacket and hooked a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses in the neck of his black sweater.

Oh, man! Oh, man, oh, man, oh, man!

Suddenly, avidly eager to complete her business and get back to the villa, Sabrina let him take the briefcase and went through the door he held open for her.

She stopped just over the threshold. Her eyes widened when she took in the gleaming Rolls parked under the portico. "This is your mother's sedan?"

"One of them," Marco answered calmly as he opened the passenger door of the chrome-plated behemoth. "She likes to travel in comfort."

Sabrina was no stranger to limos or Rolls Royces. Her father never drove anywhere when he could be driven. This baby, however, was a classic. With its massive grill, elongated body and top folded down into an oversize trunk, it had been crafted before the automobile industry cared about such minutia as weight and fuel efficiency.

The prospect of taking the narrow, hairpin turns in this monster made Sabrina gulp. Resolutely, she quashed her nervousness and handed Marco the crutches.

"Do you have enough room?" he asked when she sank into cloud-soft leather.

"More than enough." She waved an imperious hand. "Drive on, McDuff."

Tourists of all nationalities had made the arduous ascent to the mountaintop town of Ravello for centuries. First by donkey cart, then by motorized vehicles, they climbed roads so steep and narrow that traffic had to back up in both directions to let a tour bus pass.

The views alone were worth the nerve-bending trip and the reason Ravello had drawn so many artists over the years. Their ranks had included D. H. Lawrence, who wrote *Lady Chatterley's Lover* while ensconced in a villa overlooking the sea, and composer Richard Wagner. Wagner's works

had become the centerpiece of the town's annual music festival. The festival now drew thousands, according to the research Sabrina had done on the site.

Throughout the climb she caught awe-inspiring glimpses of sky and sea and rugged, rocky coast. The higher they went, the more stunning the vistas. Finally, Marco nosed the Rolls around the last steep curve and she caught her first view of the town itself. The twin towers of its cathedral dominated the jumble of whitewashed buildings perched high atop the cliff. Red-tile roofs and a profusion of flowering vines and trees added bright spots of color.

A sign indicated the town was closed to all vehicles except those belonging to residents and hotel guests. Another sign directed visitors to a parking lot at the base of the town walls. Marco bypassed the visitor lot and made for the main square. The Rolls bumped across the cobbled plaza crowded with tiny cafés, gelato stands and shops displaying beautifully crafted pottery.

The hotel Sabrina wanted to visit sat smack in the historic center of the town, almost in the shadow of the cathedral. When Marco pulled up at a facade adorned with weathered arches and belfry towers roofed in red tiles, a valet rushed forward to open Sabrina's door.

"Good morning. Are you checking in?"

"No, we're not staying," she replied in her shaky Italian. "I'm Sabrina Russo. I have an appointment with your hotel manager."

The well-trained valet switched to English as she swung out of the car. "Ah, yes. Mr. Donati, he says to expect you."

He supported her while she balanced on one foot, waiting for Marco to retrieve her briefcase and the crutches from the backseat.

"Do you wish a wheelchair, madam? I have one, just here."

"Thank you, but these are fine."

When she had the crutches under her arms, he tugged open the hotel's ornately carved door. "Please to go in and be comfortable. I'll call Mr. Donati to tell him you have arrived."

With Marco carrying her briefcase, Sabrina entered a lobby filled with light and terrazzo tiles and arches that opened on three sides to a courtyard with a magnificent view of the sea. In the center of the yard was a splashing fountain surrounded by lush greenery and tall palms nourished by the warm Mediterranean breezes.

They'd crossed only half of the lobby when a thin individual in a business suit and red-silk tie hurried out to greet her. He stopped short when he saw the man at Sabrina's side.

"Your Excellency! I didn't know…I wasn't aware…"

Flustered, he smoothed a hand down his tie and bowed at the waist.

"Please allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Roberto Donati, manager of this hotel. We met several years ago, when you and your most gracious mother opened Ravello's summer music festival."

"So we did. And this is Ms. Russo. She's come to survey your excellent establishment."

Donati took the hand Sabrina extended, obviously wondering how an American businesswoman had hooked up with the local gentry.

"Would you care for an espresso or cappuccino before we begin?"

"Perhaps later," she replied. "May I leave my coat and briefcase in your office while we tour the conference facilities?"

"But of course. Allow me to take them for you. And yours, Your Excellency."

Before handing over the briefcase, Sabrina extracted a pen and notepad. She skimmed her notes on Global Security's conference requirements and was ready when Donati returned with a folder.

"This contains our catering menus and the floor plans of our guest rooms and meeting facilities."

Marco took the folder. "You have your hands full, Sabrina. I'll carry this for you."

"Thanks."

With the men adjusting their pace to hers, she let Donati escort them across the open courtyard.

"Luckily, February is our off-season," the manager commented. "I indicated in my initial e-mail that we have fifty-three rooms available the week you specified. We've had several cancellations, so the number is now fifty-six. I have assurances from the hotel across the square that they can accommodate the remainder of your conference attendees."

"I'll want to see those rooms, too, before I leave."

"Of course. Once we finalize the meal plans, I'll provide a revised estimate incorporating those room rates."

"Hold on, I need to make a note of the numbers."

When she fumbled with the pen and pad, Marco stepped forward. "Let me do that for you."

She had to grin. "Doc, duke, chauffeur and secretary. You're a man of many talents."

His dark eyes smiled into hers. "Ah, but wait until I present my bill."

Damn! The man could melt her into a puddle of want without half trying.

Heat spreading through her veins, Sabrina handed him the pad and glanced up to catch the manager watching them. His goggle-eyed stare gave way to a combination of speculation and calculation.

Uh-oh! Maybe arriving at the hotel in a vintage Rolls with His Excellency in tow wasn't such a smart move. Good thing she had Donati's original estimate in writing. He'd better not try to pad the final figure. Sabrina would hold his feet to the fire.

She and Marco departed the hotel after lunch on a gorgeously landscaped terrace overlooking the sea. During the drive back down to the coast, she mulled over the revised estimate Donati had provided.

"How does it look?" Marco asked.

"The numbers seem high at first glance. I'll have to compare them to the final estimates from the other hotels."

"I'll call Donati and see if he can do better."

"No!"

Her sharp negative drew a surprised glance.

"Thanks," Sabrina said, tempering her tone, "but I prefer to handle these negotiations myself."

"My apologies. I merely wished to help."

She winced at the ice-coated reply. When he wanted to, the doc could wield one hell of a scalpel.

"Now it's my turn to apologize. It's just…"

She paused, chewing on her lower lip. The stubborn need to assert her independence had driven her for so long. She couldn't shake it, even now.

"My father doesn't believe I can make it on my own," she said finally. "I'm determined to prove him wrong."

"I see." Marco thought about that for a moment. "This is the father who taught you to play chess?"

"One and the same."

"He underestimates your killer instinct. I have your measure now, however. You won't win this evening as easily as you did this morning."

She couldn't resist the challenge. "Maybe we should up the stakes."

"Maybe we should. What do you suggest?"

Laughing, she waggled her brows. "Ever play strip chess?"

She was kidding. Mostly. And completely unprepared when Marco dug into his jacket pocket.

One handed, he flipped up his cell phone and punched a speed-dial button. His conversation was in Italian, but Sabrina caught enough to experience a sudden shortness of breath.

"The meeting took longer than anticipated," he informed his housekeeper. "There's no need for you to wait for our return."

He listened a moment and nodded.

"That will be fine. Thank you. I'll see you tomorrow. *Ciao*."

The phone went back into his jacket pocket. The slow, predatory smile he gave Sabrina told her the night ahead could prove extremely interesting!

Chapter Six

Marco lost one of his loafers in the first game. He forfeited its mate in the second.

"I've never seen such unorthodox moves," he protested. "You sacrificed a queen *and* a knight to gain a pawn."

"Thus opening the back door for my bishop. Stop whining and pay up."

He gave a huff of laughter and kicked off the loafer. As they reset the chess pieces for the next game, Sabrina calculated how many additional wins she'd have to score before she had him naked.

Socks, two.

Jeans, one pair.

One each belt, silky black pullover and, presumably, briefs.

Good thing they'd cut the two-minutes-per-move time limit down to one. Anticipation was putting her into a fast burn.

Anticipation, and the fact that they were alone in the villa. Stretched out on the plush Turkish rug in the library. With one of Vivaldi's violin concerti coming through the speakers and glasses of wine within easy reach. Since she hadn't had to resort to the painkillers after that first, powerful dose yesterday afternoon, she was enjoying the full-bodied red made from grapes grown in the Irpinia hills outside Naples.

They'd dispensed with the table and placed the chessboard on the carpet. Sabrina sat with her back against the sofa and her foot propped on a folded cushion. Marco sat cross-legged opposite her. He'd raked his fingers through his hair after one of her more outrageous moves. No longer neat and combed straight back, it showed more curl in the dark, disordered waves.

She itched to reach across the board and comb her hand through those waves. Or feather a finger along the dark sweep of his eyebrow. Or…

"Your move."

With a start, she saw he'd opened with queen's knight to a6. She advanced her king's pawn and the hunt was on.

She lost that game and paid with one of her beaded ballet slippers. They played to a draw on the next. Then Marco claimed her other shoe and she retaliated in the next game by crushing him with five moves.

"Ha! Take that!"

She expected him to peel off a sock or yield his belt. Instead, he dragged his black pullover over his head.

Sabrina's throat went bone dry. She'd snuggled against that broad chest each time Marco had carried her. Snuggling was good. She'd enjoyed snuggling. Seeing his upper half naked and in the flesh was better.

Her heart hammering, she let her gaze roam over the wide shoulders, the muscled pecs, the scattering of dark hair that swirled around his nipples and arrowed down toward his flat belly.

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