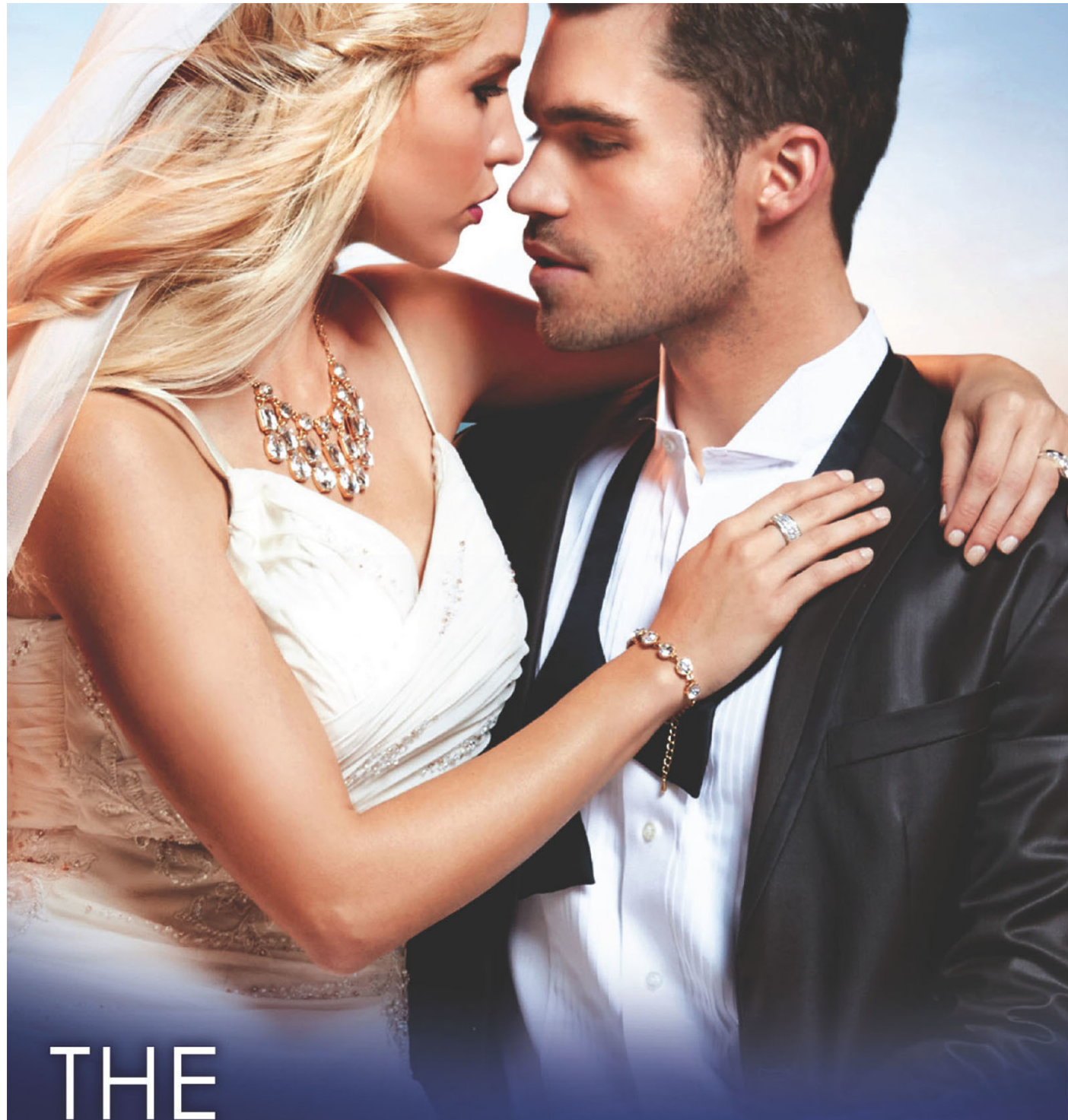




THE
Italian's
DEAL FOR I DO

MODERN™



JENNIFER HAYWARD

Jennifer Hayward

The Italian's Deal for I Do

«HarperCollins»

Hayward J.

The Italian's Deal for I Do / J. Hayward — «HarperCollins»,

The Irresistible Italian: Married for Business He's conquered global markets and immeasurable hearts, but to regain control of the fashion empire that's rightfully his, Rocco Mondelli must prove his playboy days are over. His secret weapon? Supermodel-in-hiding Olivia Fitzgerald...and the power to ruin her if she refuses to play his loving fiancée! But returning to the world stage revives Olivia's old demons and instead of walking down the aisle towards her gorgeous groom – she flees! The world holds its breath: can the indomitable Rocco get his wayward bride to the altar on time? Society Weddings: The world's sexiest billionaires finally say "I do"! Dedicated bachelors and firm friends Rocco Mondelli, Christian Markos, Stefan Bianco and Zayed Al Afzal have made their marks on the worlds of business and pleasure. Marriage was never something they were ever after... but things change and now they'll have to do whatever it takes to get themselves to the church on time! Yet nothing is as easy as it seems...and the women these four have set their sights on have plans of their own! You are cordially invited to: The marriage of Rocco Mondelli & Olivia Fitzgerald in *The Italian's Deal for I Do* The marriage of Christian Markos & Alessandra Mondelli in *The Greek's Pregnant Bride* The marriage of Stefan Bianco & Clio Redgrave in *The Sicilian's Surprise Wife* The marriage of Sheikh Zayed Al Afzal & Princess Nadia Amani in *The Sheikh's Wedding Contract* So RSVP and get ready to enjoy the pinnacle of luxury and opulence as the world's sexiest billionaires finally say 'I do'... Praise For Jennifer Hayward *The Magnate's Manifesto* 4.5* RT Book Review TOP PICK GOLD Hayward's must-read romance is a heart- stopping page-turner with an intriguing, jaw-dropping twist. The glitzy locales are over-the-top perfect and intensely explosive intimacies are mind blowing. *Changing Constantinou's Game* 4* RT Book Review Hayward's expressive narrative expertly tells this drama-rich romance. The mistakes and redemptions in the relationship are genuine, and the love scenes are a sensual feast. *The Truth About De Campo* 4.5* RT Book Review TOP PICK Hayward's explosive romance features over-the-top opulence and stars the youngest De Campo, Matteo, who's tortured by his past and a not-so-icy,

shrewd businesswoman. The romance rocks with breath-stealing sexual tension between the pair, whose lovemaking is wickedly sensual. Brava!

© Hayward J.
© HarperCollins



Rocco Mondelli and Olivia Fitzgerald

invite you to celebrate their union as they become husband and wife.

7 o'clock in the evening

April 2015

The Mondelli Estate, Lake Como

dinner & dancing to follow

... but only if Rocco can win back his runaway bride!



Dedicated bachelors Rocco Mondelli, Christian Markos, Stefan Bianco and Zayed Al Afzal met and bonded at university, wreaking havoc amongst the female population. In the decade since graduating they've made their mark on the worlds of business and pleasure, becoming wealthy and powerful.

Marriage has never been something Rocco, Christian, Stefan or Zayed were ever after... But things change, and now they'll have to do whatever it takes to get themselves to the church on time!

Yet nothing is as easy as it seems... and the women these four have set their sights on have plans of their own!

Your embossed invitation is in the mail and you are cordially invited to:

The marriage of

Rocco Mondelli and Olivia Fitzgerald

April 2015

The marriage of

Christian Markos and Alessandra Mondelli

May 2015

The marriage of

Stefan Bianco and Clio Norwood

June 2015

The marriage of

Sheikh Zayed Al Afzal and Princess Nadia Amani

July 2015

So RSVP and get ready to enjoy the pinnacle of luxury and opulence as the world's sexiest billionaires finally say 'I do'...

The Italian's Deal for I Do

Jennifer Hayward



www.millsandboon.co.uk

JENNIFER HAYWARD has been a fan of romance since filching her sister's novels to escape her teenage angst. Her career in journalism and PR, including years of working alongside powerful, charismatic CEOs and travelling the world, has provided perfect fodder for the fast-paced, sexy stories she likes to write—always with a touch of humour. A native of Canada's East Coast, Jennifer lives in Toronto with her Viking husband and young Viking-in-training.

To my editor Laura McCallen and fellow authors Michelle Smart, Andie Brock and Tara Pammi, who made the Columbia Four such a joy to write! *Memento vivere!*

And for Valentina and your invaluable help with the beautiful Italian language! *Grazie!*

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Invitation](#)

Society Weddings

[Title Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

New York Fashion Confidential

Society Weddings Exclusive

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

“HE WILL NOT make it through the night.”

The grizzled old priest had served almost a century of Mondellis in the lakeside village of Varenna. He rested his gnarled, weathered hand on the ornately carved knob of the inches-thick, dark-stained door of Giovanni Mondelli's bedroom and nodded toward the patriarch's two grandchildren. “You must say your goodbyes. Leave nothing unsaid.”

His gravelly tone was somber, weighted with the grief of an entire village. It cut through Rocco Mondelli like a knife, severing a lifeline, rendering him incapable of speech. Italian fashion icon Giovanni Mondelli, son of the Italian people, had been the father he'd never had. He'd been Rocco's guiding influence when he'd taken his grandfather's place as CEO of House of Mondelli and brought it kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century. Transformed it into a revered global couture powerhouse.

He could not be losing him.

Rocco's heart sputtered to a stop, then came back to life in a brutal staccato that pounded against the walls of his chest. Giovanni was everything to him. Father, mentor, friend... He wasn't ready to let him go. Not yet.

His sister, Alessandra, grasped his arm, her knuckles white against the dark material of his suit. "I—I don't think I can do this," she stumbled huskily, her glossy brown hair tangled around her face, eyes wide. "It's too sudden. I have too much to say."

Rocco ignored the desire to throw himself on the floor and cry out that it wasn't fair, like he had at age seven when he'd stood on the deck of a boat outside this window on Lake Como in a miniature-size suit, his big, brown eyes trained on his *papa* as he tossed his mother's ashes into the brilliant blue water. Life wasn't fair. It had nothing to do with fair. It had given him Alessandra, but it had taken away his beloved mother. Never could that be considered a fair compromise.

He turned and gripped his sister by the shoulders, breathing through the searing pain that gripped his chest. "We can and we will, because we have to, *sorella*."

Tears streamed down Alessandra's face, negotiating the crevices of her stubborn mouth. "I can't, Rocco. I won't."

"You *will*." He pulled her into his arms and rested his chin on her head. "Gather your thoughts. Think of what you need to say. There isn't much time."

Alessandra soaked his shirt with silent tears. It had always been Rocco's job as much as it had been Giovanni's to hold this family together following the death of his mother and his father's subsequent descent into gambling and drink. But he did not feel up to it now. He felt as though one of the breezes wafting in from the lake might fell him with a single, innocent, misplaced nudge. But giving in to weakness, into emotion, had never been an option for him.

He set Alessandra away from him and slid an arm around her shoulders to support her slight weight. His gaze went to the short, balding doctor standing behind the priest. "Is he awake?"

The doctor nodded. "Go now."

His strong, sometimes misguided, but always confident sister trembled underneath his fingers as he led her into Giovanni's bedroom. If the saying was true you could smell death in the air, it was not the case here. He could *feel* the warmth, the vital energy Giovanni Mondelli had worn like a second skin. That he had infused into every single one of his designs. He could *hear* the caustic bite of his grandfather's laughter before it turned rich and chiding and full of wisdom. *Smell* the spicy, sophisticated scent that clung to every piece of clothing he wore.

It was Rocco's eyes, however, that stripped him of any shred of hope. The sight of his all-powerful grandfather lost in a sea of white sheets, his vibrant olive skin devoid of color, snared his breath in his chest. This was not Giovanni.

He swallowed past the fist in his throat. "Go," he urged Alessandra, pushing her forward.

Alessandra climbed onto the massive bed and wrapped her slim arms around her grandfather. The sight of Giovanni's eyes watering was too much for Rocco to bear. He turned away, walked to the window and stared out at the lake.

He and Alessandra had flown the fifty kilometers from the House of Mondelli headquarters in Milan via helicopter as soon as they had heard the news. But his stubborn grandfather had been ignoring pains in his chest all day, and by the time they'd got here, there was little the doctors could do.

His mouth twisted. If he knew his grandfather, he'd probably decided this was the cleanest way to go. Giovanni Mondelli was not beyond manipulating the world to his advantage. What better way to go out then in a blaze of glory on the eve of Mondelli's greatest fall line ever?

But then again, Rocco conceded, Giovanni had been ready to join his beloved wife, Rosa, in the sweet afterlife, as he called it, for almost twenty years. He had lived life to the fullest, refused to fade after her passing, but there had been a part of him that yearned for her with every waking breath.

He would have her back, he'd promised.

Alessandra let out a sob and rushed from the room. Rocco strode to the bed, his gaze settling on his grandfather's pale face. "You've broken her heart."

"Sandro did that a long time ago," his grandfather said wearily, referring to Rocco's father, who Alessandra had been named for. His eyes fluttered as he patted the bed beside him. "Sit."

Rocco sat, swallowed hard. "Nonno, I need to tell you..."

His grandfather laid his wrinkled, elegant, long-fingered hand over his. "I know. *Ti amo, mio figlio*. You have become a great man. Everything I knew you could be."

The lump in Rocco's throat grew too large for him to forge past.

His grandfather fixed his dark eyes on him, staring hard in an act of will to keep them open. "Trust yourself, Rocco. Trust the man you've become. Understand why I've done the things I've done."

His eyes fluttered closed. Rocco's heart slammed against his chest. "Giovanni, it is not your time."

His grandfather's eyes slitted open. "Promise me you will take care of Olivia."

"Olivia?" Rocco frowned in confusion.

His grandfather's eyes fluttered closed. Stayed closed this time. A fist reached inside Rocco's chest and clamped down hard on his heart. He took his grandfather's shoulders in his hands and shook them hard. *Come back. Do not leave me*. But Giovanni's eyes remained shut.

The spirit of the House of Mondelli, the flame that had burned passion into brilliant, groundbreaking collections for fifty years, into his own heart, was extinguished.

Rocco let out a primal roar and rested his forehead against his grandfather's lined brow.

"No," he whispered over and over again. It was too soon.

* * *

The emotion he had exhibited upon the death of his grandfather was nowhere to be seen in the week following as Rocco negotiated the mind-numbing details of organizing Giovanni's funeral, now reaching state-like proportions, and the settlement of his estate. The Mondelli holdings were vast, with properties and business interests spanning the globe. Even with his own intimate knowledge of the company and its entities, it would take time.

Alessandra helped him plan the funeral. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to come—public and government figures, heads of state and celebrities Giovanni had dressed over his forty-five years in the business. Weeding them out was their challenge.

And, of course, the remainder of the Columbia Four were coming: the three men Rocco had met and bonded with during their first week at Columbia University. Not a mean feat given the intense, grueling schedules of Christian Markos, Stefan Bianco and Zayed Al Afzal. Athens-born Christian was a financial whiz kid and deal maker who divided his time between Greece and Hong Kong. The inscrutable Sicilian, Stefan Bianco, preferred to make his millions masterminding the world's biggest real-estate deals on his private jet rather than in his hometown of Manhattan, but then again everyone knew Stefan had commitment issues. The final member of the group, Sheikh Zayed Al Afzal, would have the longest to travel from his home in the heart of the Arabian desert—a tiny country named Gazbiyaa.

It comforted him as he sat down with the Mondelli family's longtime lawyer, Adamo Donati, to review Giovanni's will, to know the men he considered more brothers than friends would be by his side. The bond he shared with those men was inviolate. Impenetrable. Built from years of knowing

one another's inner thoughts. And although his life was not the only one that was tumultuous at the moment, his friends would not miss such an important event, including Zayed, whose country was embroiled in rising tensions with a neighboring kingdom and teetering on the verge of war.

Memento vivere was the Columbia Four's code. Remember to live. Which meant living big, risking big and always having one another's back.

"Shall we begin?"

Adamo, Giovanni's sage sixty-five-year-old longtime friend, who was not only a brilliant lawyer but a formidable business brain, tilted his chin at him in an expectant look. Rocco nodded and focused his attention on the lawyer. "Go ahead."

Adamo glanced down at the papers in front of him. "In terms of the properties, Giovanni has split them between you and Alessandra. I'm sure this is no surprise, as you've talked to him about it. Alessandra will receive the house in St. Barts and the apartment in Paris, while you will take ownership of Villa Mondelli and the house in New York."

Rocco inclined his head. Alessandra, a world-class photographer who traveled the world doing shoots, had always joked Villa Mondelli was too big for her, that she'd rattle around its sprawling acres by herself, while it was the only place on earth Rocco felt he could truly breathe.

He cocked a brow at the lawyer. "My father?"

"The current arrangement will continue. Giovanni left a sum of money in Sandro's name for you to administer."

Like a child unable to manage his own pocket money, Rocco had long given up on the idea that his father could manage anything, but he wondered if somewhere inside him he was waiting for the day Sandro would apologize for gambling away their family home. For handing them over to Giovanni when he could no longer cope. That someday he might step forward and shock them all. Until then, his father had been provided with an apartment in the city, a weekly shipment of groceries and a limited amount of spending money that inevitably went to gambling rather than to his own personal grooming.

When that ran out, he would slink back asking for more, and when he was told no, he did things like showing up drunk and disheveled at Alessandra's twenty-fifth birthday party, embarrassing them all.

Mouth set, he gestured for Adamo to continue.

The lawyer looked down at the papers. "There is another apartment in Milan. Giovanni purchased it a year ago. It is not accounted for in the will."

"Another apartment?" Rocco frowned. His grandfather had never liked to stay in the city. He preferred to drive to the villa each day or take the company helicopter.

The lawyer's olive skin took on a ruddy hue, his gaze glancing off Rocco as he looked up. "It's in Giovanni's name, but a woman has been living there. I had someone look into it. Her name is Olivia Fitzgerald."

Rocco sucked in a breath. "Olivia Fitzgerald, the model?"

"We think so. It took some digging. She's not using her real name."

He stared at Adamo as if he'd just told him the Pope was turning Protestant. Olivia Fitzgerald, one of the world's top supermodels, signed to a competitor five years ago and unattainable to the House of Mondelli, had dropped off the face of the earth a year ago. Hadn't worked a day since, reneging on a three-million-dollar contract with a French cosmetics company. And Giovanni had been keeping her in an apartment in this city? While the tabloids scoured the earth for her...

His gaze met the lawyer's as he came to the inevitable conclusion.

"He was involved with her."

Adamo's cheeks flushed even darker. "In some way, yes. The neighbors say he spent time with her in the apartment. They were seen arm in arm, going for dinner."

Rocco pressed his hands to his temples. Giovanni, his seventy-year-old grandfather, had taken a twenty-something-year-old mistress? One of the world's great supermodels... A party girl extraordinaire who'd apparently frittered her way out of her million-dollar bank balances as fast as she'd filled them. It seemed preposterous. Was he even living on the same planet he had been a week ago?

Promise me you will take care of Olivia.

Cristo. It was true. Blood rushed through his head, pulsing at his temples. As if he would continue to allow his grandfather's former lover to live on Mondelli property now that Giovanni was gone. A woman who had taken up with him in a transparent attempt to avail herself of his fortune.

He leveled a look at the lawyer. "Give me what you have on her. I'll deal with Olivia Fitzgerald."

Adamo nodded. Ran a hand over his balding head and gave him another of those hesitant looks, so uncharacteristic of him.

Rocco arched a brow. "*Per favore*, tell me there are no more mistresses."

A faint smile crossed Adamo's lips. "Not that I know of."

"Then, what? Spit it out, Adamo."

The lawyer's smile faded. "Giovanni has left you a fifty percent stake of House of Mondelli, Rocco. The remaining ten percent controlling stake has been allocated to Renzo Rialto to manage until he sees fit to turn it over."

Rocco blinked. Attempted to digest. Giovanni hadn't left him a controlling stake in Mondelli? Prior to his grandfather's death, the Mondelli family had held a 60 percent share in the company, with outside shareholders holding the remaining 40 percent, leaving the family firmly in control of the legendary fashion retailer. Giving him the power he had needed as CEO to guide Mondelli forward. Why would Giovanni have taken that power out of his hands and given it to Renzo Rialto, the chairman of the board, who had always been Rocco's nemesis?

Adamo read his dismay. "He didn't want you to feel overwhelmed without him. He wants you to be able to lean on the board for support. Find your feet. When the board feels you're ready, they'll hand over the remaining shares."

"*Find my feet?*" White-hot rage sliced through him, rage that had been building since his grandfather's death. Steel edged, it straightened every limb, singed every nerve ending, until it escaped out his fingertips as he slapped his palms down on the desk and brought himself eye to eye with the lawyer. "I have built this company into something *Giovanni* could never have envisioned. Taken it from prosperous to *wildly successful*. I don't need to find my feet, Adamo. I need what's rightfully mine—control of this company."

Adamo lifted a hand in a placating gesture. "You have to consider your personal history, Rocco. You have been a renegade. You have not listened to the advice the board has tried to give you."

"Because it was *wrong*. They wanted to keep Mondelli languishing in its past glory when it was clear it needed to move with the times."

"I agree." Adamo shrugged. "But not everyone felt that way. There is a great deal of conservatism within the board, a nostalgic desire not to strip away what made the company great. You're going to need to use more finesse to work your way through this one."

The blood in his head tattooed a rhythm against his skull. *Finesse*? The only thing that worked with the board was to whack them over the head with a big stick before they all retired in a wave of self-important glory.

Adamo eyed him. "There is also your personal life. You are not what the board considers a stable, secure guiding figure for Mondelli."

Rocco reared his head back. "Do not go there, Adamo."

"It was a...delicate situation."

"The one where the board castrated me for an affair I didn't even know I was having?"

"She was a judge's wife. There was a child."

“*Not mine.*” He practically yelled the words at Adamo. “The DNA is in.”

“Not before the entire affair caused Mondelli some considerable political difficulties.” Adamo pinned him with a stern look of his own. “You weren’t careful enough about which playgrounds you chose to dip into, Rocco. You play too fast and easy sometimes, and the board doesn’t like it. They particularly worry now that Giovanni isn’t here to guide you.”

So his grandfather had thought it a good idea to handcuff him to the chairman of the board? To assign him a *babysitter*? He eyed the lawyer, his temper dangerously close to exploding. “I am CEO of the House of Mondelli. I do not need guiding. I need for a woman to *tell me* when she’s still married. And if you think I’m going to sit around while the board rubber stamps my every decision, you and they are out of your minds.”

Adamo gave a fatalistic lift of his shoulder. “The will is airtight. You have a fifty-percent share. The only person who can give you control is Renzo Rialto.”

Renzo Rialto. A difficult, self-important boar of a man who had been a lifelong friend of Giovanni’s, but never a huge fan of him personally, even though he couldn’t fault what he’d done with the bottom line.

He would relish pushing Rocco’s buttons.

He scraped his chair back, stood and paced to the window. Burying his hands in his pockets, he looked down at Via della Spiga, the most famous street in Milan where the House of Mondelli couture collection flew out the door of the Mondelli boutique at five hundred euros apiece. *This* was the epicenter of power. The playground he had commanded so magnificently since his father had defected from life and his path had been chosen.

He would not be denied his destiny.

And yet, he thought, staring sightlessly down at the stream of chicly dressed shoppers with colorful bags in their hands, his grandfather was making him pay for the aggressive business manner that had made Mondelli a household name. For an error in judgment, a carelessness with women that had never *once* interfered with his ability to do his job.

Understand why I’ve done the things I’ve done... Giovanni’s dying words echoed into his head. Was this what he’d been talking about? And how did it fit with everything else he’d said? *You have become a great man... Trust the man you’ve become.*

It made no sense.

Anger mingled with grief so heavy, so all encompassing, he leaned forward and rested his palms on the sill. Did this have to do with his father’s legacy? Had Sandro made his grandfather gun-shy of handing over full responsibility of the company he’d built despite Rocco’s track record? Did he imagine he, as Sandro’s flesh and blood, was capable of the same self-combustion?

He turned and looked at the lawyer. “I am *not* my father.”

“No, you aren’t,” Adamo agreed calmly. “But you do like to enjoy yourself with that pack of yours.”

Rocco scowled. “The reports of our partying are highly overblown.”

“The women part is not. You forget I’ve known you since you were in *pannolino*, Rocco.”

He crooked a brow at him. “What would you have me do? Marry one of them?”

Adamo held his gaze. “It would be the smartest thing you could do. Show you have changed. Show you are serious about putting Mondelli first. Marry one of those connected Italian woman you love to date and become a stable family man. You might even find you like it.”

Rocco stared at him. He was serious. *Dio.* Not *ever* happening. He’d seen what losing his mother had done to his father, what losing Rosa had done to Giovanni. He didn’t need that kind of grief in his life. He had enough responsibility keeping this company, this family, afloat.

“I would not hold my breath waiting for the silk-covered invitation,” he advised drily. “Do you have any more bombshells for me, or can I pay Renzo Rialto a visit?”

“A few more items of note.”

They went through the immediate to-dos. Rocco picked up his messages after that, went to his car and headed to Rialto's offices. The retired former CEO of a legendary Italian brand was a thorn in his side, but manage him he would.

He swung the yellow limited edition Aventador, his favorite material possession, onto a main artery, attempting to corral his black temper along the way. He would deal with Rialto, then he would take care of the other complication in his life. Olivia Fitzgerald was about to find her very fine rear end out on the streets of Milan. Just as soon as he found out what kind of game she was playing.

CHAPTER TWO

ROCCO HAD EXPECTED Olivia Fitzgerald to be beautiful. She had, after all, a face that had launched a dozen brands to stardom. A toned, curvaceous body that regularly graced the cover of America's most popular annual swimsuit magazine. Not to mention a tumbling swath of silky golden hair that was reputed to be insured for millions.

But what threw him, as he sat watching her share drinks with her girlfriends at a trattoria in Navigli in the southwest of Milan as dusk closed in over the city, was *his* reaction to *her*.

He was seated at a tiny round table close enough that he could hear the husky rasp of her voice as she ordered a glass of Chianti, the textured nuance of it sliding across his skin like a particularly potent aphrodisiac. Close enough that he could see her catlike, truly amazing eyes were of the deepest blue—the color of the glacially sculpted lakes of the Italian Alps that met his eyes when he opened his curtains in the morning.

Close enough to observe the self-conscious look she threw back at his stare.

And wasn't that amazing? Surely a woman of such world-renowned beauty knew the reaction she elicited in men? Surely she'd been well aware of it when she'd ensnared Giovanni and had him purchase a three-million-euro luxury apartment for her in the hopes of continuing within the style to which she'd become accustomed?

Surely she knew the combined effect of it all was somewhat like a sucker punch to the solar plexus of just about every man on this planet, which he, to his chagrin, was also not immune to.

His mouth twisted into that familiar scowl of late. Olivia Fitzgerald—the Helen of Troy of her time.

Her girlfriends, two beautiful dark-haired Italian girls, giggled and glanced his way. He pulled his gaze back to the menu, sighed and ordered a glass of wine from the *cameriera*. The private investigator who'd helped Adamo uncover who was living in the apartment in Corso Venezia had been a gold mine of information on Olivia Campbell, as she'd been calling herself. She didn't socialize much, spent most of her days holed up in her luxury abode, but she did have a faithful yoga date with her girlfriends on Thursday nights, followed by drinks at this popular spot on the canals in Navigli.

It had been a stroke of luck that the café that sat on the water of the picturesque canals was owned by an old family friend of the Mondellis... No problem obtaining a prime location to study the flaxen-haired sycophant.

He had thought of waiting until she was at the apartment to confront her, but in his current black mood, he wanted the woman who'd taken his grandfather for a ride out on the street. *Yesterday*.

He sat back and crossed one long leg over the other. Watched as the three women engaged in animated conversation. She hadn't, he observed grimly, been struck down with grief at the loss of her lover. Was she even now out hunting her next conquest before her life of luxury was unceremoniously cut off? Was that what the self-conscious looks were about?

A wave of hostility spread through him, firing his blood. He forced out a smile as the *cameriera* set his drink down in front of him, wrapped his fingers around the glass and took a long swallow. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea, hunting Olivia Fitzgerald down when his emotions were so high. His meeting with Renzo Rialto had not gone well. The arrogant bastard was convinced Rocco was a loose cannon without a guiding force now that Giovanni was gone, and had suggested exactly

what Adamo had anticipated. "Settle down, Rocco," he'd encouraged. "Show me you are ready to take on the full responsibility of Mondelli and I will give it to you."

He growled and slapped the glass back down on the table. It was going to take more than an overblown bag of wind to make him say, "I do." Hadn't the Columbia Four vowed "single forever?" Weren't women the source of every great man's downfall? Wasn't it far more rewarding to have your fill of a female when you craved it, then leave her behind when you were done?

He thought so.

In a salute to the missing three, he lifted his glass and downed a healthy gulp of the dark, plum-infused wine. His gaze moved over Olivia Fitzgerald, registering the rosy glow of attraction in her perfect, lightly tanned skin as she stole another look at him.

A plan started to form in his head. He liked it. He liked it a lot. It was perfect for his reckless, messy mood.

* * *

He was watching her. Flirting with her.

Olivia tried to smother the butterflies negotiating wide, swooping paths through her stomach, but it was impossible to remain unaffected by the Italian's stare. It was like being singed by a human torch. Hot. Focused. *On her*. And why? He was undoubtedly the most attractive man she'd ever seen in her life, and given she'd traveled the world working with beautiful men of all backgrounds, that was saying something. *She*, on the other hand, was dressed in jeans, a scrappy T-shirt with a zip-up sweatshirt over it, had no makeup on and had thrown her sweat-dampened hair into a ponytail after her yoga class—virtually unrecognizable as the top model she'd once been.

She averted her gaze from his rather petulant pout, sure women threw themselves at his feet at the slightest hint of it. For the whole package, really. But the impression he made lingered. He seemed familiar, somehow, the broad sweep of his high cheekbones framing lush, beautifully shaped lips, a square jaw and an intense dark gaze.

She frowned. Was he a model she'd worked with? Had he recognized her? But even as she thought it, she knew she would have remembered him. How would you ever forget *that* specimen of manliness? *Impossible*. His utter virility and overt confidence were of the jaw-dropping variety.

Violetta yawned, threw her hair over her shoulder and drained her wineglass. "I need to go home and study. And since *he*," she lamented, giving the gorgeous stranger a long look, "is eating *you* up, I might as well go home and pout."

"That's because Olivia is stunning," Sophia sighed. "She is blonde and exotic."

"I wish I had *your* olive skin," Olivia pointed out.

"We trade," Sophia said teasingly, reaching for her bags. "I bet the minute we leave, he's over here, Liv. And about time, too. You haven't even looked at a man since we met."

Because she'd been treasuring her stress-free escape from reality... Because she was only just now feeling like herself again...forging a new identity. Because getting close to a man had meant he might recognize her, and she didn't want to be Olivia Fitzgerald right now.

Also, because none of them had made her pulse flutter like it was at this moment.

Violetta got to her feet and threw some euros on the table. Sophia followed suit.

"You can't leave me here," Olivia protested.

"We live on the opposite side of town," Violetta countered cheerfully. "And honestly, Liv, if we don't go soon, he's going to glare the table down."

"He could be a criminal," Olivia muttered. "I'll only leave."

"A criminal who wears a twenty-five-thousand-euro Rolex," Violetta whispered in her ear. "I don't think so. Enjoy yourself, Liv. Call with the juicy details."

Olivia had no intention of offering up any details, because she wasn't staying. The only reason she was out tonight was to take her mind off Giovanni and how much she missed him. She felt completely adrift without the one person who had been her anchor in this new life, where she was

truly alone. Without the mentor who had spent the past year working on her fashion line with her, teaching her. And now that the girls had lifted her spirits a bit, it was time to go.

Violetta and Sophia ambled off in the direction of the metro. Olivia fumbled in her bag for money, the meager amount in there reminding her how desperate her situation was. Her job at the café paid for her spending money, but it would never be enough to afford her own place, let alone the stunning apartment Giovanni had lent her.

Biting her lip, she dug around her change purse for coins. She would figure it out. She always did.

A shadow fell over the table. She registered the rich gleam of the handsome stranger's impeccably shone shoes on the pavement before she lifted her head to take him in.

"Ciao."

He was even better looking up close, his deep brown eyes laced with a rich amber the candlelight picked up and caressed. Big. Six foot two or three, she'd venture with her model's eye. Well built—with more hard-packed muscle than the average Italian she'd seen on the streets. *Heavenly*.

"May I sit down?" he asked in perfectly accented English, taking advantage of her apparent inability to speak.

"Actually," she muttered, "I was just on my way home."

"Surely you can stay for one more drink?" He flashed a bright, perfectly white smile that drew her attention back to his amazing lips. "I stopped to enjoy the lights and a drink and found myself staring at you instead. A far worthier pursuit, I would say."

Her chest heated, the flush that started there traveling slowly up to her cheeks. It was a line, to be sure, but the best she'd ever been handed. And somehow in her vulnerable state, because he was just *that* attractive, it was difficult to say the words she knew she should.

She forced herself. "I really should go... It's getting late."

"You really should stay," he murmured, his sultry brown eyes holding hers. "Nine o'clock is early in Italy. One drink, that's all."

Perhaps it was the way he stayed on his feet and gave her the space to say no. Or maybe it was the fact she just so very much wanted to say yes, but she found herself nodding slowly and gesturing toward the seat across from her.

"Please."

He sat, lowering his tall frame into the rather frail-looking chair. The waitress fluttered to his side the minute he crooked a finger, as if sent from above. He ordered two glasses of Chianti for them in rapid-fire Italian accompanied by one of those wide smiles, and the waitress almost fell over herself in her haste to do his bidding.

"Are you a regular here?" Olivia asked, amused, his behavior oddly relaxing, as if that type of confidence simply had to be obeyed and she might as well go with it.

"The café belongs to an old family friend of mine." The words rolled off his tongue, smooth as silk as he leaned forward and held out his hand. "Tony."

"Liv." She allowed her fingers to curl around his. The fact that he had not recognized her sent a warm current of relief through her. Or perhaps that was more a by-product of the heated, somewhat electric energy he imparted through his strong grip.

"Liv." He repeated the word as if trying it on for size and sat back, crossing his arms over his chest. "Your friends left rather suddenly. I hope I didn't chase them away."

A smile curved her lips. "You *meant* to chase them away."

He spread his hand wide. "Caught in the act. I so appreciate that about you Americans. So direct. It's refreshing."

"The New York accent is that obvious?"

"Unmistakable. I lived there for four years doing my business degree at Columbia."

The reason his English was so perfect... She gave him a long look. "If we're being direct, I'd ask you what you're doing here alone without a beautiful woman on your arm. Asking a complete stranger to have a drink with you."

His gaze darkened with a hint of something she couldn't read. He flicked a wrist toward the lights glimmering on the water. "I was looking for a little peace. Some answers to a question I had."

That intrigued her. "Did you find them?"

His mouth quirked. "Maybe."

She felt the inquisitive probe of his gaze right down to the lower layers of her dermis, the indolent way he looked at her suggesting he had all the time in the world to know her. "So what do you do, then, beautiful Liv, when you aren't sitting here?"

She couldn't help but feel like she was being led somewhere he wanted her to go, but the casually issued compliment had a much more potent effect than it should have.

"I'm a designer." She called herself that for the first time since she'd come to Milan a year ago to pursue her dream, somehow tonight needing to assert it as fact in the wake of her mentor's demise. "I'm working on my debut line."

Which hopefully would still see the light of day with Giovanni gone.

He lifted a brow. "You will partner with one of the design houses here?"

"That is the plan, yes."

"Did you study fashion in school?"

"Yes, at Pratt in New York."

His gaze turned inquisitive. "Why not stay there and start your career where you have roots?"

Because she was running from a life she never intended to return to.

"I needed a change...a fresh start."

"Milan is certainly the place to do that if you are a designer." He smiled at the waitress as she arrived with their drinks, then waited until she'd left before raising his glass. "To new...*friendships*."

Her pulse skittered across her skin like hot oil in a pan. She lifted her glass and pointed it at him. "And to you finding answers."

A slow, easy smile twisted his lips. "I think maybe meeting you was exactly what I needed."

That turned her insides completely upside down. She took a sip of her Chianti, discovered it was a significantly nicer vintage than the one she'd ordered and took some extra fortifying sips.

He crossed muscular arms over each other and sat back in the chair. "Have you had success with any of the design houses here?"

"I had made some inroads, yes, until something beyond my control happened. Now I'm not so sure it's going to work out."

"Why is that?"

She lifted her chin, fought the burn of emotion at the back of her eyes. "Life."

He was silent for a moment, then dipped his head. "I am sure you will find alternate avenues."

She nodded determinedly. "I intend to. You do what it takes, right? To make your dreams come true?"

His mouth twisted, a strange light filling his dark eyes. "You do indeed."

It was like a coldness had enveloped the warm Navigli night, the way the warmth drained from his expression. Olivia shifted in her seat, wondering when the breeze had kicked up. Wondering what she'd said or done to bring the mood change about—because everyone had dreams, didn't they? They were good things, not bad.

She took another sip of her wine. "So," she murmured in an attempt to lighten the mood, "you know what I do. Your turn to spill."

He arched a brow at her. "Spill?"

"Confess. Tell me your secrets... At least, what you do for a living."

“Aah.” His mouth tilted. “I push money around. Make things profitable. Ensure the *creatives* don’t bring the ship down.”

She gave him a look of mock offense. “Where would the civilized world be without us?”

“True.” His half smile sent a frisson of awareness through her. Made her hot all over again. She had a feeling he did that easily. Ran hot and cold. Turned it on and off like a switch.

His gaze probed hers. “What?”

“You do that easily.”

“Do what easily?”

“Run hot and cold.”

An amused, slightly dangerous glint filled his eyes. He set his wineglass down with a deliberate movement, his gaze on hers. “Possibly very true. Out of curiosity, Liv, which would you like me to be?”

Her heart skipped a beat. “I think I’ll abstain from answering that.”

“Forever or just for now?” he jibed.

“For now,” she said firmly. She focused on the inch of ruby-red liquid left in her glass. She hadn’t flirted with a man since the beginning of her unspectacular, long-term relationship with Guillermo Villanueva, a photographer she’d met on a job and eventually lived with. They had been finished for over a year now, and she was sorely out of practice when it came to flirting.

“Have you eaten?” He lifted an inquiring brow as she glanced up at him.

“I was going to eat when I got home.”

He picked up the menu and scanned it. Ordered a selection of appetizers without consulting her. Surprisingly, for a woman who valued her independence above all else, she found it a huge turn-on. Found everything about him a huge turn-on. And it only seemed to get worse as they chatted about everything from French and American politics to books and music. He was clearly way above average intelligence, sophisticated and seemed to have vast amounts of knowledge housed under that compelling facade.

“Why Columbia?” she asked as she snared the last piece of bruschetta. “Did you have family in America?”

He shook his head. “I wanted a change of pace like you did. To spread my wings. New York as the epicenter of it all made sense.”

“So are you a financial genius, then? Million-dollar deals and all that?”

A glitter entered his eyes. “The genius part is debatable, but yes, sometimes there are big deals.”

She found herself staring at his mouth again. It really was lush. Spectacular. What would it be like to kiss him? What would it be like for him to kiss *her*? Oh, God. She pushed her empty wineglass away with an abrupt movement. Enough of that.

He inclined his head toward the glass. “Another?”

She shook her head. “I should get home. I have a lot I want to accomplish tomorrow.”

“I’ll drive you, then.” He lifted his hand to signal the waitress.

She wanted to say yes. Wanted him to drive her home so he could kiss her good-night. But that was utter madness. She *didn’t* know him. He *could* be a criminal. A high-end one with a Rolex and great shoes.

He looked up at their server as she took his credit card and ran it through the machine. “I would like to drive this young woman home, Cecilia. Can you offer me a reference?”

The brunette let out a husky chuckle, her gaze moving to Olivia. “He is perfectly respectable. If uncatchable.”

Olivia had no doubts about that. She got to her feet, gathered her gym bag and purse and allowed Tony to guide her through the crowded little trattoria, his hand on the small of her back electrifying. They walked a short distance down a side street to where his insanely expensive-looking yellow monster of a car was parked at the curb.

He tucked her inside with a sure hand. She felt her heart rev to life as the engine rumbled beneath them, snarling like the beast it was. Pressing a palm to her throat, she gave him the directions to her apartment and tried to remember the last time she'd felt this alive. Like herself... The past year had been about finding herself again, stopping the nightmares, ending the pain.

Who was she now? She didn't even know.

Tony was quiet in the car, his elegant, eminently capable hands guiding the powerful vehicle through the streets to the aristocratic neighborhood that bounded Corso Venezia and Via Palestro, her home for the past year. Her chest pulsed with a funny ache as they passed the stunning examples of baroque and neoclassical architecture that lined the streets, the elegant exclusive avenues of Milan's fashion district. The beautiful palazzo that lay only a stone's throw from her window. Every day she sat there drinking coffee, dreaming up designs and feeding the voraciously hungry birds that knew her now. It was *hers*, this neighborhood. She'd finally found a sense of belonging and she didn't want to give it up.

Tony turned into the driveway of her modern building located in one of the neighborhoods tucked in behind Corso Venezia. When Giovanni had shown it to her, she'd instantly fallen in love with its wrought iron balconies and wall-size liberty windows. With its feeling of lightness after the prison New York had become...

Tony brought the car to a halt in the rounded driveway. "Do you have a parking spot? I'll see you to your door."

Her already agitated heartbeat sped up. She knew exactly where this was leading if he accompanied her up to her apartment, and for a woman who had never done this, never invited a man back to her apartment on a first date, it was like someone had dropped her onto one of those death-defying loop-the-loop roller coasters that promised equal amounts of terror and exhilaration.

She shook her head, dry mouthed, realizing he was waiting for a response. "It's underground," she told him huskily, pointing to the entrance at the end of the driveway.

He guided the car into the garage, parked in her spot and followed her to the elevators. They rode the glass-enclosed lift up to her tenth-floor apartment.

"An awfully exclusive apartment for a struggling artist," Tony commented, leaning back against the wall.

Olivia pressed damp palms against her thighs as the cityscape came into view. "A friend was helping me out."

His brow rose. "*A friend?*"

"A *nonromantic* friend," she underscored, absorbing the aggressive, predatory male in him. It wasn't helping the state of her insides.

His raised brows arched into a slashing V. "Men just don't *lend* multimillion-euro apartments to a female unless they have other intentions, Liv."

The insinuation in his words brought her chin up. "This one did," she rasped. The elevator doors swung open. She stalked out of the car and headed down the hallway to her apartment, her head a muddled, attracted mess.

Tony caught up with her at her door. She turned to face him, confused, her stomach a slow burn. "I think you don't know me at all."

"My mistake," he came back laconically, tall and daunting. "It's a natural question for a man to ask."

Was it? They'd only had a drink. She was so confused about the whole evening, about what was happening with this beautiful stranger, her head spun. She stood there, heart hammering in her chest. Tony put a hand to the wall beside her, keeping a good six or seven inches between them, his gaze pinned on her face. Her stomach dropped as if she was headed toward the steepest plunge on that scary roller coaster, the part where one had big, huge second thoughts.

Something glimmered in his gaze. "Aren't you going to invite me in for an espresso to cap the evening off?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly, knees weak.

"Oh, come on, Liv," he chided, that glimmer darkening into a challenge. "Men are territorial. Would you expect a man like me not to be?"

No. Yes. Her head swam.

He closed the gap between them until he was mere inches from her. His palm came up to cup her jaw, his gaze dropping to her lips. Her own clung shamelessly to that lush pout she'd been staring at all night, had been wanting to kiss all night. And he knew it.

He lowered his head and rocked his mouth over hers. Smooth, questing, he exerted just the right amount of pressure not to frighten her away, and that mouth, *that mouth*, was sensational. She anchored her palms against the solid planes of his chest, her bones sinking into the hard line of the wall as he explored the curves of her mouth. He kissed her so expertly she never had a chance. All she could do was helplessly follow his lead. When he delved deeper, demanded entrance to the heat of her mouth, she opened for him.

Their tongues slid along each other's in an erotic duel that rendered her knees useless. She dug her fingertips harder into his chest, breathing him in, registering how delicious he smelled. He was a potent combination of heady male and tangy lime, and she was completely and irrevocably lost.

He pulled back, his gaze scouring her face. "Your key," he prompted harshly.

Her brain struggled to process the command. Blood pumping, head full, she rummaged through her purse, found her keys and handed them to him.

* * *

The sane part of Rocco told him he didn't need to carry the charade any further. It was obvious Olivia Fitzgerald was not above falling into the arms of a man with a beautiful watch and a nice car if it meant rescuing her from her precarious position. Whether she displayed an irresistible vulnerability along with it was inconsequential. It was likely a well-rehearsed act.

The less-than-rational part of his brain wanted to see how far she'd let him take it. How desperate she was.

He tossed her keys on the entryway table. Watched her sink her small white teeth into her perfectly shaped bottom lip.

"I'm not so interested in coffee," he admitted harshly, watching her pupils dilate. "Do you mind if we skip it?"

She shook her head, eyes wide. Worried her lip with those perfect teeth. He closed the distance between them, the heat they created together rising up to tighten his chest. He swallowed hard at the swift kick of lust that rocketed through him as he brought his palms to rest on either side of her where she stood, back against the door. It was inconceivable to him that he could feel such desire for her given who she was, what she had been to his grandfather, even if this was a deliberate experiment to extract the truth. But she was undeniably exquisite.

Her cheeks, tanned to a light golden brown from the hot Milanese summer sun, were flushed with desire. Her chest under the worn purple T-shirt was rising and falling fast, her nipples erect against the soft fabric. Her hands lay limp at her sides, as if she had no idea what to do with them.

He did. He wanted them on him, sliding over every inch of his hot skin until he rolled her under him and made her his. *Dio*. This was insanity.

He dipped his hands under the frayed edge of her T-shirt and sought out the silky-soft bare skin beneath. She was enough to tempt a levelheaded man to mad acts, even his rigidly correct grandfather who had never looked at another woman after his Rosa had died. Her swift intake of breath echoed in the silent apartment as he trailed his fingers over the bare skin of her flat stomach, her midriff, the muscles of her abdomen tensing beneath his touch. Her head dropped back against the door, eyes almost purple as she waited for his kiss.

"You could bring the strongest man to his knees," he muttered roughly, almost angrily, as he brought his mouth down to hers. "But then you know that, don't you, Liv?"

Her brows came together in a frown, her lips parting to answer him. He didn't let her get that far, his mouth taking hers in an insistent kiss that allowed no hesitation. She was rigid under his hands for a moment, as if teetering in indecision. He took her tongue inside his mouth, drawing her back into the heat. She was soft and perfect and he could not resist the lure of her flesh, bare beneath the T-shirt.

He pushed her jacket off her shoulders, letting it drop to the floor. "Lift your arms."

She did, her gaze on his as he pulled the threadbare T-shirt over her head, tossed it to the floor and drank her in. She was slim, perfect, with high, firm breasts and rose-colored nipples that were tautly aroused.

It was like being in the Garden of Eden and told not to touch. He just couldn't do it.

Bending his head, he palmed her breast, taking the rosy tip into his mouth. Her swift intake of breath made his blood heat. He sucked on her, laved her, until she was moaning, moving restlessly against him, then he transferred his attention to the other rounded peak. The feel, the taste of her underneath his mouth, was like forbidden fruit. *Irresistible*. The sound of their connection filled the hot Milanese night, breathy, seeking. He slid his thigh between hers and filled his hands with the rounded, toned curves of her bottom, seeking relief for his aching flesh.

Her gasp filled his ear. "*Tony*."

One word, one softly uttered admission of surrender, was all it took to bring him crashing back to earth. To know he had proved what he had come here to do.

He lifted his head, sank his hands into her waist and pushed her away.

"The name is Rocco."

Her eyes widened, darkened. A frown furrowed her brow as her hands came up to cover herself. "Rocco? Why did you tell me your..." Her voice trailed off as the color drained from her face.

"That's right, Liv," he said harshly, taking great pleasure in her look of horror. "Antonio is my middle name. How does it feel to sink your hooks into two generations of Mondellis?"

Her look of complete confusion was award worthy. She shook her head, gaze fixed on his. "What are you talking about? Giovanni and I were not like that."

"What were you, then?" His tone was savage. "You expect me to believe a man buys you a three-million-euro luxury apartment out of the goodness of his heart? Because you're *friends*? My grandfather has not talked about you *once*, has never even mentioned you in passing conversation. And yet you were *together*?"

"Because I didn't want anyone to know I was here." She snatched her T-shirt up from the floor and pulled it over her head. "Giovanni was protecting my privacy. He was my mentor. My *friend*. He was not my lover. How could you even think that? It's preposterous."

Fury lanced through him. He stepped forward until they were nose to nose. "No more than a seventy-year-old man thinking *you* could be interested in him." He waved a hand at her. "You must be good, I'll hand you that. What man could resist you servicing him? Moaning his name as if you can't wait to get into bed?"

She was in front of him so fast, her palm arcing through the air, she almost got it to his face before he snatched it away and yanked it down to her side.

"You bastard," she snarled at him, her catlike eyes spitting fire as he held her hand captive. "How *dare* you make accusations about something you know nothing about?"

"Because I *know* him," he raged. "Giovanni was hopelessly, irrevocably in love with my grandmother. There is no way he would take a twentysomething lover unless he was completely *taken in*. *Brainwashed with lust*."

She glared at him. "He didn't. I keep trying to tell you that."

He kept his fingers manacled around her wrist as she tried to tug her hand free. “Why are you hiding out from the world here? Why not use your name to build your line, if that was the truth—if that is your dream?”

“It *was* the truth.” She wrenched her arm free, her show of strength taking him off guard. “Everything I said tonight was the truth. I needed to get away from modeling, from *everything*, so I came here.”

“To escape your creditors?”

“To escape *my life*.” She pointed to the door. “Get the hell out of my apartment. *Now*.”

“My apartment, you mean.” He gave her a searching look. “Why Giovanni, Olivia? Why choose a seventy-year-old man as your lover when you could have anyone? Any rich man on this planet would welcome you into his bed. Pleasure you with the youth of a much younger man. All you would have to do is snap your fingers.”

Her hands curled into fists by her sides. “You are so unbelievably wrong.”

“Then why the checks? Why was Giovanni doling out cash to you on a regular basis? Was that also *friendship*?”

Her mouth flattened into a defiant line. She closed her eyes, a long silence stretching between them. When she opened them, her eyes glimmered with a wealth of emotion he couldn’t read.

“We were building a line together. The money was for fabrics. For suppliers.”

He gave her an incredulous look. “I am the CEO of House of Mondelli, Olivia. I know every project Giovanni was working on because he was a creative and he tended to go off half-cocked with new ideas without exploring their viability. There was no line.”

She stalked around him and headed down the hallway. He followed her into the bright, large room at the back of the apartment. Dozens of designs hung from a rack along the back wall. A sewing machine sat on a table. Stacks of illustrations lay scattered across a table.

He walked over and fingered some of the designs. They were beautiful, ethereal creations that even the noncreative in him could see were sensational, different, stamped with a unique sense of freedom of fabric and color that was distinct from anything he’d seen before. But they also featured a Giovanni-like sense of symmetry.

An odd emotion stirred to life inside of him. Riled him. “This doesn’t prove anything. All it proves is that you were using my grandfather to further your ambition. What did you say in the café? You do what it takes to make your dreams come true?”

Some of her newly found color drained from her face. “You’re taking that way out of context.”

“I think I’ve got it just right. You have a drink with a complete stranger, a man with an expensive watch who clearly does well, you see your opportunity for another rich benefactor and you make your move.” He tossed his head in disgust. “I could have had you against that door. You were ready to replace Giovanni *seven days after his death*.”

Her pallor took on a grayish tinge. “You set that all up tonight to see if I was a gold digger?”

“And wasn’t it telling?” He gave her a mirthless, half smile. “The idea actually didn’t come into my head until I sat there watching you and your *fidanzate* laughing and giggling as if your lover hadn’t just passed away. I wanted to see what kind of a woman you were before I tossed your beautiful little behind out on the street and now I know.”

Her head reared back. “I was out tonight to try to take my mind off Giovanni. I can’t expect to understand how much you must be grieving him. I know you were close. But *I* am grieving him, too. I cared for him. And I will not permit you to sully what we had with your wild accusations.”

“It’s the truth,” he gritted.

“It’s far from it.”

“Then spit it out. I am craving a little honesty here.”

She took a deep breath. Pushed stray strands of hair that had escaped her ponytail out of her face. “Your grandfather was in love with two women. Madly, fully in love with two people. One of those women was my mother, Tatum.”

He stared at her. “What the hell are you talking about?”

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth. “When my mother modeled for Mondelli in the eighties, she had an affair with Giovanni. Giovanni was torn between her and Rosa, agonized over the decision, he said. In the end, he chose Rosa and severed all ties with my mother. Rosa knew about the affair, but neither she nor Giovanni spoke of it afterward.”

He gave her a look of disbelief. Giovanni in love with Tatum Fitzgerald? While he’d been married to his grandmother? He may not have much of a belief in the concept of true love, but the one person he’d seen have it was his grandfather with Rosa. They’d conceived Sandro when his grandmother was just eighteen, had been each other’s first loves and had remained deeply enamored until Rosa had passed away.

An affair? It was inconceivable.

He leveled a gaze at her. “How do you know all this?”

A nerve pulsed in her cheek. “I was going through a rough time in my modeling career. Giovanni approached me at an industry function in New York. I think he felt guilty about what happened to my mother’s career after he ended things. She fell apart after he left her. She went on to marry my father, but she never got over Giovanni and they divorced. Giovanni told me the whole story that night.”

He attempted to absorb the far-fetched tale. “So he decided to *befriend* you? Put you up in a luxury apartment in Milan and mentor you because he felt guilty over a relationship that ended *decades* ago?”

She lifted her chin. “He knew I needed a friend. Someone I could count on. He was there for me.”

“What about your own family and friends?”

“They aren’t something I can turn to.” Her gaze dropped away from his. “I left my whole life behind when I came to Milan.”

Because she’d known she had a free ride. He smothered a frustrated growl and paced to the window. “So Giovanni is just your friend, you were out tonight missing him, and that thing with me just now was what? The way you treat all men who chat you up in a café?”

“You *deliberately* tried to seduce me.”

He swung around. “And *how* seducible you were, *bella*. You made it easy.”

Her expression hardened. “If you choose not to believe a word I say, you can leave. I’ll be out within the week.”

“Tell me the truth about you and Giovanni and I’ll give you a month. I’m not an unreasonable man.”

Her eyes flashed. “Get out.”

He thought that might be a good idea before he lost what was left of his head. Putting his hands on Olivia Fitzgerald, *coming here*, had been a mistake driven by his grief and his desire to know what had been in Giovanni’s head these past months. And now it was time to rectify it by getting the hell out.

He swept his gaze over the racks of clothes. She was going to have an issue finding a place she could afford that could accommodate all of *this* without Giovanni bankrolling it. And even he wasn’t without a heart.

“I’ll give you a month. Then I expect the keys delivered to me.”

She followed him to the door, looking every bit the angelic blonde damsel in distress that she was not. He walked through the door and didn’t look back.

Giovanni had always been a bit of a romantic. Good thing Rocco was nothing like him.

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

ROCCO STOOD ON the tarmac of Milan's Linate Airport, Christian Markos at his side. The last of the Columbia Four to depart following Giovanni's funeral, Christian was headed to Hong Kong and a deal that couldn't wait. As always, when Rocco parted from his closest friends, there was an empty feeling in his heart. They had become so tight during those four years at Columbia. Watched one another grow into manhood and cemented their friendships as they took on the world.

Together they were an impenetrable force, greater than the sum of their parts. It was always difficult to return to their respective corners of the world, but they did so with the knowledge they would see one another soon—their four-times-a-year meet-ups a ritual none of them missed.

Christian wrapped an arm around him. "I may have a weekend off midmonth. Why don't we take your boat out? Catch up properly?"

Rocco smiled. "I'll believe it when we're drinking Peroni on the deck, *fratello*. Some big deal will come up and you'll be gone again."

Christian gave him an indignant look. "That last one was a megamerger. Out of my hands."

"And the brunette that came along with it?"

"Opposing pain in my behind," Christian grumbled. "Who was the blonde today by the way? Looked like a heated conversation."

It had been. Olivia Fitzgerald showing up at his grandfather's funeral had been an event he hadn't anticipated. Despite his objections, she'd insisted on staying. Not something he'd been willing to risk a scene over, particularly when his father had just made his own notable appearance, reeking of alcohol.

He looked at Christian. "Olivia Fitzgerald. She was not invited. I had an issue with it."

His friend lifted a brow. "Olivia Fitzgerald the model? I thought she was in hiding."

"She is, here in Milan. She knew Giovanni and wanted to pay her respects."

Christian looked curious. "What is your issue with her?"

"It's complicated."

"Everything is complicated with you." His friend shrugged. "You should sign her. The board would be kissing your feet."

"She doesn't want to be in the limelight." Why, he still didn't know.

An amused smile twisted the Greek's lips. "One of my senior deal makers had that photo of her nude on the beach in his office. I had to make him take it down. It's a little distracting when you're trying to crunch numbers."

"No doubt." Rocco knew exactly the shot his friend was talking about. The beach scene of Olivia kneeling in the surf, hands strategically covering herself, had graced the cover of an annual swimsuit magazine, then made the rounds as a wildly popular screensaver.

The engines of Christian's jet started to whirl. "I'm so sorry about Giovanni," he said to Rocco. "I know how much he meant to you. And I'm sorry you had to deal with your father today. That can't have been easy."

"It was inevitable." The fact that Christian and Zayed had had to remove his father from the proceedings—not so much.

He frowned. "I'm sorry you had to bear witness to that."

"It's not your cross to bear," his friend said quietly. "You take the weight of the world on your shoulders sometimes, Rocco. There's only so much of a burden a man can carry."

Rocco nodded. Except he'd been carrying the burden of his family for so long he didn't know how it could be any different.

"Go," he told Christian, clapping him on the back. "My boat and a case of Peroni are waiting when you come back."

His friend nodded and strode toward the plane. Rocco watched while he boarded the jet, the crew closed up the doors and the pilot taxied off to join the lineup of planes waiting to take off.

Even with everything he had on his plate, he couldn't get that night with Olivia out of his head. What she'd told him about Giovanni. Whether there was the slightest bit of truth in any of it. It sat in his brain and festered. Added to his confusion over his grandfather's decisions, the changes he'd seen in Giovanni of late. Had he been capable of cheating on his beloved Rosa? Sure, Giovanni had admired women for the pure aesthetic of them. He was a designer. But *unfaithful*?

He'd thought it had just been age softening his grandfather lately, the mellowing of his acerbic, grandiose personality. Had it instead been the influence of a woman? Olivia Fitzgerald?

Had he been in love with her? Did Olivia possess many of the same attributes as her mother, thus replacing the one woman he'd never been able to have? His stomach rearranged itself with a strange emotion he didn't want to identify. After witnessing the genius Giovanni and Olivia had created together in those designs, it was clear they had a connection.

And why did he care? What was it to him if his grandfather had fallen for a woman a third of his age? If he'd allowed himself to be made a fool of? *He* had done his job ensuring Olivia Fitzgerald would no longer take advantage of his family.

Because you almost lost your head. Over a beautiful blonde who'd had more of a master plan in *her* head than he'd ever had.

An image of Olivia's face when she'd walked into the church today flicked through his head. Fear she would be discovered even though she'd had a scarf over her head. Fear of *him* as she'd seen him. Stubborn defiance blazing in those amazing blue eyes as she'd stood her ground.

She'd also, he conceded, looked heartsick. Sad. And in his gut, he knew it was true emotion. He hadn't had the heart to toss her out. She had left as quickly as she'd appeared, not staying for the reception. He knew she was still in the apartment; he'd had the building supervisor keep him advised of her presence. He suspected she was having difficulty finding another place, but it wasn't his problem she'd lost her paycheck in Giovanni.

Christian's jet disappeared into the clouds. Rocco turned and headed toward the terminal, but his friend's words followed him. *You should sign her. The board would be kissing your feet...*

They *would* kiss his feet if he signed Olivia Fitzgerald. The worldwide press had been in a furor ever since her disappearance from modeling. She'd left on top, one of the most highly paid faces in the world. Everyone wanted her. Her disappearance had only added to the mystique.

He pushed his way through the terminal doors, strode through the tiny building and exited into the car park. There was only one problem with Christian's rather brilliant plan. Olivia didn't want to be found. Had wanted to escape her former life. And if it wasn't because she'd been bankrupt, as he'd suggested, then why? Why abandon a three-million-dollar contract when she could have just worked her way out of it, then gone into the career she'd desired?

She'd looked so miserable, so dejected, as she'd left the church today. She had no hope of launching that line without Giovanni. Her dream was done. Unless she found herself another benefactor.

He paused, his hand on the handle of the Aventador's door. Suddenly the path forward became clear. He had what Olivia needed as head of one of the most powerful design houses in the world. Olivia had what he needed if he could persuade her to come back to modeling for a year as the exclusive face of Mondelli. Her star power would turn Mondelli into a superstar brand, the couture house of the moment, the board would fall to its knees at such an acquisition and he would have control of his company again.

Adrenaline fueled his movements as he stepped into his car and brought it purring to life. Making Olivia an offer she couldn't refuse was an undeniably alluring play. But there was something else his mind was manufacturing that would be the icing on the cake. The *pièce de résistance*. Olivia Fitzgerald as the face of Mondelli and the brand-new fiancée of the CEO of House of Mondelli. A perfect union from all angles. And the perfect way to convince the board he had House of Mondelli as his top priority.

All his problems solved in one tidy little package.

A smile curved his mouth. Renzo Rialto would wet himself. How much more could he want? Now all he had to do was persuade Olivia Fitzgerald his plan was in both their interests.

* * *

Olivia was packing a box of design materials when the knocking sounded hard and insistent on her front door. Thinking it might be Violetta coming to help, and frowning at her exuberance, she got to her feet, dusted off her hands and went to answer it. Any distraction to take her mind off her rather desperate situation was welcome at this point.

When she saw who was standing in the hallway, she amended that thought. Any distraction *other* than a fully resplendent Rocco Mondelli clad in the dark suit he'd worn to the funeral that morning. Despite her vow to hate him, her heart pitter-pattered in her chest as she took him in leaning against the doorjamb, impatience written across his olive-skinned face.

"You said I had a month."

"You do." He walked past her into the apartment. "You'll find I'm a man of my word, Olivia. Have you had any luck yet finding another apartment?"

A man of his word? He'd deliberately seduced and misled her in this very apartment. She gave him a cool look and shut the door. "As a matter of fact, no, but I thought I'd better start getting packed up before you send in the goons."

"I won't have to." He waved a hand toward the kitchen. "This time I would like an espresso."

She stared at him in amazement. "You were ready to toss me out of that funeral this morning and now I'm supposed to make you coffee?"

He returned her stare, nonplussed. "I have an offer I think you'd like to hear."

Not in this decade.

His mouth curved. "Get me that coffee, Olivia."

Deciding she wasn't really in a position to argue because he *could* toss her out on her butt at this very moment, she walked past him to the kitchen, emptied the grinds from the espresso machine and did his bidding. He stood there, hands in his pockets, watching her.

"You were genuinely sad this morning."

She pressed the start button, turned and leaned back against the counter. "I loved Giovanni. Of course I was."

"So now it's love," he jibed. "Giovanni was madly in love with a woman and I hadn't a clue. How remarkable."

"You can walk right back out that door if this is the way this is going to go."

"*Nessuno*, Liv, it isn't." He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the countertop. "I'm going to make you an offer that makes a whole lot of sense, you're going to take it and we're going to make the most of this difficult situation."

"There's nothing you could say that would convince me to have anything to do with you after what you did to me."

"I think you're wrong." He waved his hand toward the living room and the packed boxes littering every open space. "You are never going to be able to afford an apartment in Milan that will allow you to do your design work on a barista's salary. You've made it clear returning to your former life is not an option and you cannot rely on family and friends for help. So all you have left," he concluded, touching his chest, "is *me*."

"I don't want anything from you," she said pointedly, shoulders rising to her ears. "I will figure out a way."

His gaze darkened to a forbidding ebony. "What if I said I would honor the commitment Giovanni made to you? But I would take it even further. I would move the development of your line in-house at Mondelli, offer you all the design and marketing support we have and bring it to market for the fall of next year."

Her mouth dropped open. He would take the development of her line *in-house*? *Why*, when he clearly thought so little of her?

“Because you have something I want, Olivia.” He answered her unspoken question with a twist of his lips. “I need a face to carry the House of Mondelli through the next year. Bridget Thomas’s contract is up and I don’t care to renew it. I would offer you a five-million-dollar contract for the year. You coming back to modeling would generate a great deal of excitement for the brand, make people stand up and pay attention again.”

Her heart dropped. “I’m not modeling anymore. That part of my life is over.”

He nodded. “I understand you want to design, that that’s where your heart is. But surely one year, *twelve months of your life*, to secure your dream isn’t such a hardship.”

“No.” The word flew out of her mouth, harsh, vehement. “I will never model again.”

He pinned his gaze on her. “Why? What happened to make you give it all up?”

Her last appearance on a runway. Her best friend overdosing after walking that same runway months before... The memory of it slammed through her head, dark and terrifying. She reached back and gripped the counter, her fingertips pressing into the cold granite. She had completely lost it that night, her pressure-packed life finally eating her alive. And she was never going back.

She lifted her gaze to his. “It doesn’t matter why. I left and I’m not going back.”

“When the alternative is letting your dream die?” He stared at her, an incredulous look on his face. “If you debut a line with House of Mondelli you will *instantly* become a star of the design world. You won’t have to build a reputation, you will have one immediately. And from there, all you need to do is choose your path. You would never have to set foot on a runway again after the twelve months.”

She sank her palms into her temples and turned away. It was tempting, so tempting, to say yes. What he was saying was true. She’d thanked her lucky stars when Giovanni had taken her under his wing, because with his help she could succeed in a cutthroat industry that was almost impossible to break into. She could change her life and finally be happy. But return to modeling to make it happen? Acid inched its way up her throat. Not doable.

It would be the end of her this time.

She turned back to him, her features schooled into an expressionless mask. “I’m sorry. It’s just not possible.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.