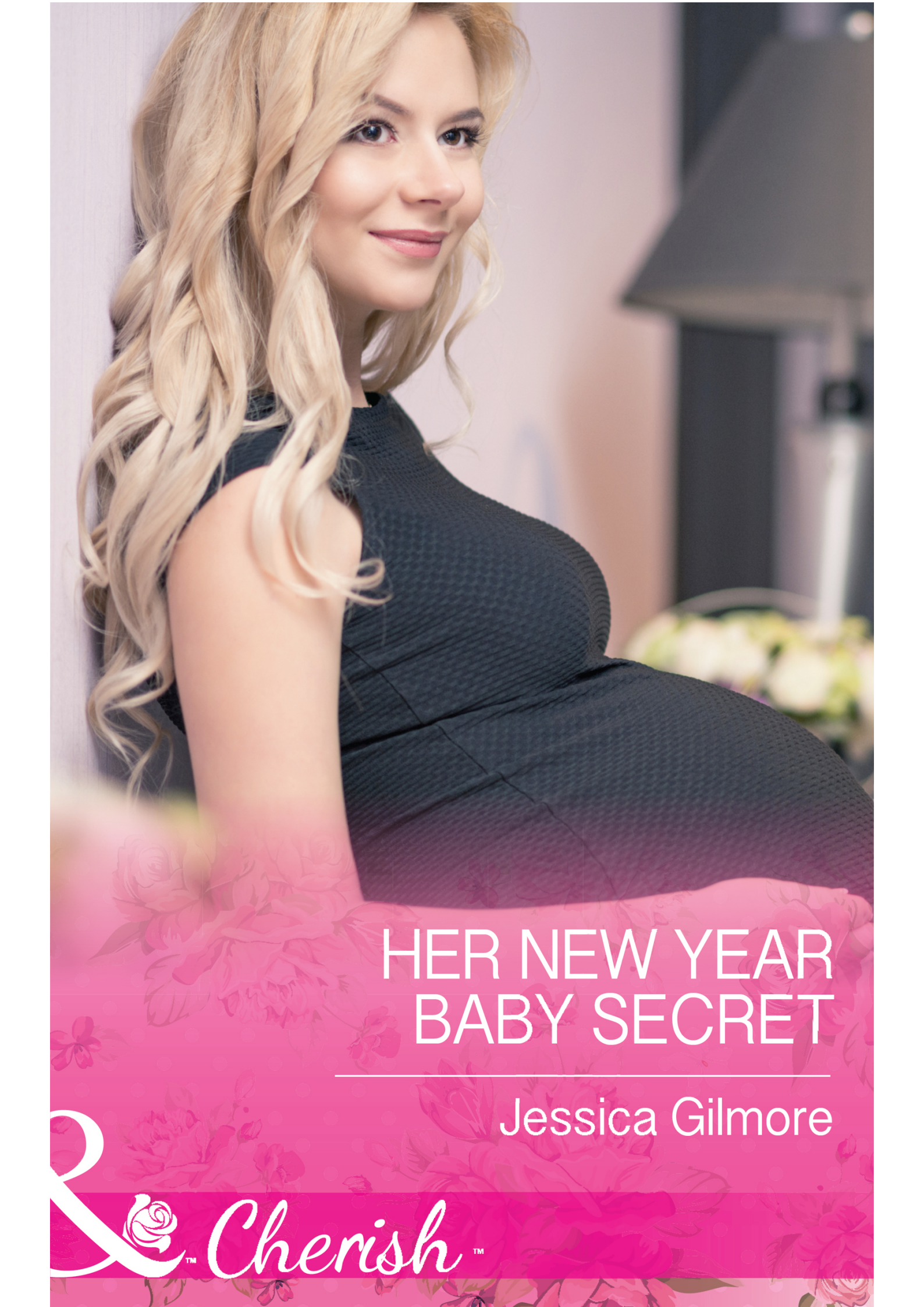




HER NEW YEAR BABY SECRET

Jessica Gilmore

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Her New Year Baby Secret

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The Italian millionaire's secret heir! Waitress Sophie Bradshaw is used to being ignored at glamorous parties and, bruised by a disastrous relationship, that's fine by her. Until Marco Santoro offers her his jacket in the snow, leading to a magical Christmas evening together... Exasperated by his family's matchmaking, millionaire Marco never gets close to anyone. But one heart-stopping night with Sophie isn't enough, and he invites her to his Venetian palazzo. Little does Marco know, though, that Sophie is bringing one tiny, life-changing surprise with her! Maids Under the Mistletoe Promoted: from maids to Christmas brides!

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A former au pair, bookseller, marketing manager and seafront trader, JESSICA GILMORE now works for an environmental charity in York, England. Married with one daughter, one fluffy dog and two dog-loathing cats, she spends her time avoiding housework and can usually be found with her nose in a book. Jessica writes emotional romance with a hint of humor, a splash of sunshine and a great deal of delicious food—and equally delicious heroes!

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past and present.

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so generous with your time, experience and wisdom,
and thank you for writing such amazing books.
It's an honor to work with you all. x

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CHAPTER ONE

Early December, Chelsea, London

‘WAIT! STOP! OH, NO...’ Sophie Bradshaw skidded to a halt and watched the bus sail past her, the driver utterly oblivious to her outstretched hand. ‘Just great,’ she muttered, pulling her cardigan more closely around her and turning, careful not to slip on the icy pavement, to scan the arrivals board in the bus stop, hoping against hope the next bus wasn’t too far behind.

She huffed out a sigh of disappointment. Tonight London buses were definitely not running in pairs—she would have to wait twenty minutes until the next one. And, to add insult to injury, the light snowflakes that had been falling in a picturesque fashion over Chelsea’s well-heeled streets all evening had decided to pick up both speed and strength and were now dancing dizzily through the air, blown here and there by some decidedly icy gusts of wind. Sophie eyed a taxi longingly. Would it hurt? Just this once? Only, last time she’d checked, she had only forty pounds left in her bank account, there was still a week to go until payday and, crucially, she still hadn’t bought any Christmas presents.

She’d just have to wait and hope her best friend, and fellow waitress, Ashleigh, joined her soon so that she could forget her freezing hands and sore feet in a good gossip about the evening’s event. Sophie hadn’t received one thank you in the three hours she had toted a laden tray around the expensively dressed party-goers, but she had experienced several jostlings, three toe-tramplings and one pat on her bottom. It was a good thing her hands had been occupied in balancing the tray or the bottom patter might have found himself wearing the stuffed prawns, which would have been momentarily satisfying but probably not the best career move.

Sophie shivered as another icy gust blew through the bus shelter and straight through her inadequate if seasonally appropriate sparkly cardigan. Why hadn’t she brought a coat, a proper grown-up coat with a hood and a warm lining and a waterproof outer layer? ‘Vanity, thy name is Sophie,’ she muttered. Well, she was getting her just reward now; nothing shrieked high-end fashion like the ‘frozen drowned rat’ look.

Huddling down into the cardigan, she turned, hoping once more to see her friend, but there was still no sign of Ashleigh and Sophie’s phone was out of battery—again. The snow-covered street was eerily deserted, as if she were alone in the world. She blinked, hot unwanted tears filling her eyes. It wasn’t just that she was cold, or that she was tired. It was that feeling of being invisible, no more human or worthy of attention than the platters she held, less interesting than the cocktails she had been handing out.

She swallowed, resolutely blinking back the tears. Don’t be a baby, she scolded herself. So her job was hard work? At least she had a job and she was lucky enough to work with some lovely people. So her flat was so small she couldn’t offer Ashleigh even a temporary home? At least she had a flat—and, even better, an almost affordable flat right here in Chelsea. Well, ‘right here’ being a twenty-minute bus ride away to the unfashionable edges of Chelsea, but it was all hers.

So she was a little lonely? Far, far better to be lonely alone than lonely with someone else. She knew that all too well.

She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin as if she could physically banish her dark thoughts, but her chest still ached with a yearning for something more than the narrow existence she had lived since moving to London just over a year and a half ago. The narrow existence she’d trapped herself in long before that. What must it be like to be a guest at one of the many glittering parties and events she worked at? To wear colour and shine, not stay demure and unnoticed in black and white?

With a sigh she looked around once more, hoping that the bright smile and can-do attitude of her old friend might help her shake this sudden and unwanted melancholy, but although the snow fell thicker and faster than ever there was still no sign of Ashleigh. Nor was there any sign of the bus. The board in the shelter was resolutely sticking to an arrival in twenty minutes’ time, even though at least five long minutes had already passed...

Sophie blew on her hands and thought of the warm, inviting glow of the hotel lobby just a few metres behind her. She was staff—and temporary staff at that—but surely, after a night run off her feet catering to some of the most arrogant ignoramuses she had ever had the misfortune to waitress for, they wouldn't mind her sheltering inside for just a few minutes? Besides, a snowstorm changed the rules, everyone knew that. Even a posh hotel turned into Scrooge after the three ghosts had visited, welcoming to one and all. And it would be easier to keep a lookout for Ashleigh if she wasn't constantly blinking snow out of her eyes...

Mind made up, Sophie stepped cautiously away from the limited shelter of the bus stop and onto the increasingly snowy pavement, her feet sinking with a definite crunch in the snow as she began to walk back towards the lobby. She kept her head down against the chill, picking up speed as she neared the door, and warmth was in sight when she collided with a tall figure, her heel slipping as she did so. With a surprised yelp Sophie teetered, arms windmilling as she fought to remain upright, refusing to surrender to the inevitable crash but knowing that any millisecond now she would fall...

Just as she started to lose the battle a strong hand grasped her elbow and pulled her upright. Sophie looked up, startled, and found herself staring into a pair of the darkest brown eyes she had ever seen, framed with long thick lashes. 'Careful! It's snowing. You could hurt someone—or yourself if you don't look where you're going.'

Italian, she thought dreamily. She had been saved by an Italian man with beautiful eyes. Then his sharp tone permeated the fog in her brain and she stepped back, sharply moving away from his steady grasp.

'Snowing? So that's what this white cold stuff is. Thank you for clearing that up.' She stopped, the anger disappearing as quickly as it came as shock flared up on his face—followed by the ghost of a smile. It was a very attractive ghost; he was probably rather gorgeous when he relaxed. Not relevant, Sophie. More to the point, she had bumped into him. 'I'm sorry, you're right, I wasn't looking where I was going. I just wanted to get inside before I turned into the little match girl. I've had to admit defeat on finding transport. It's looking like I'm going to have to walk home...' She looked ruefully down at her black heels. They were surprisingly comfortable—comfortable enough for her to wear them to work—but patent court shoes probably weren't high on most Arctic explorers' kit lists.

'Typical London, just a few flakes of snow and the taxis disappear.'

Sophie didn't want to contradict him and point out that there was a little more than a drop of snow—several inches more in fact—or that she wasn't actually looking for a taxi but for a far more prosaic bus. 'It's always the same when it snows,' she said airily, as if she were a real Londoner, blasé about everything, even the fairy-tale scene unfolding before her, but instantly ruined the effect by shivering.

'And you've come out inappropriately dressed.' The disapproval was back in his voice, but before Sophie could react, he shrugged off his expensive-looking coat and wrapped it around her. 'You'll catch pneumonia if you're not careful.'

Pride warred with her frozen limbs and lost. 'I... Thank you... Although,' she couldn't help adding, 'it wasn't actually snowing when I left home.' She snuggled into the coat. The lining felt like silk and there was a distinct scent on the collar, a fresh citrus scent, sharp and very male, rather like the smartly tailored man standing in front of her. She held out her hand, just the tips of her fingers visible, peeking out of the long coat sleeves. 'Sophie Bradshaw.'

'Marco Santoro.' He took her outstretched hand and, at his touch, a fizz of attraction shivered up Sophie's spine.

She swallowed, shocked by the sudden sensation. It had been far too long since she'd had that kind of reaction and it unnerved her.

Unnerved her—but she couldn't deny a certain thrill of exhilaration too, and almost without meaning to she smiled up at him, holding his gaze boldly even as his eyes darkened with interest.

'I must be holding you up,' she said, searching for something interesting to say but settling on the banal, unsettled by the speculative look in his eyes. 'I should give you your coat back, thank you for coming to my rescue and let you get on your way.' But she couldn't quite bring herself to return the coat, not when she was so blissfully warm. Not when she was so very aware of every shifting expression on his rather-nice-to-look-at face with cheekbones cut like glaciers, the dark stubble a little too neat to be five o'clock shadow. She also rather approved of the suit, which enhanced, rather than hung off or strained over, his tall lean body. She did like a man who knew how to dress...

* * *

She'd given him the perfect getaway clause. One moment of chivalry could have marooned him here with this sharp-tongued girl for the rest of the evening. All he had to do was say thank you, retrieve his coat and be on his way. The words hovered on his tongue, but Marco paused. There was something he rather liked about her defiantly pointed, uptilted chin, the combative spark in her blue eyes. It was a nice contrast to the tedium that had made up his evening so far.

'Take your time and warm up. I'm in no hurry. The fresh air is just what I needed after being in there.' He gestured behind him to The Chelsea Grand. 'I was at the most overcrowded, overheated party imaginable.'

'Me too! Wasn't it awful?'

'Unbearable. What a shame I didn't see you in there. It would have brightened up a dull evening. No one ever enjoys these Export Alliance affairs, but it's necessary to show willing, don't you think?'

Her eyes flickered. 'Oh, yes, I hope the evening wasn't too much of a bore.'

Marco deliberately didn't answer straight away, running his gaze over Sophie assessingly. She was a little under average height, with silky blonde hair caught up in a neat twist. Her eyes were a clear blue, her mouth full. She wasn't as poised as his usual type, but then again he was bored of his usual type, hence the last six months' dating detox. And fate did seem to have brought them together; who was he to argue with fate? He smiled straight into her eyes. 'For a while there I thought it was. But now, maybe, it has...possibilities.'

With interest he watched her absorb his words, his meaning, colour flushing high and quick on her pale cheeks. She stepped back. 'Well, it was lovely meeting you, Mr Santoro, but I really should try to get back before I need a team of huskies to whisk me home. Thank you so much for lending me your coat. I think I'm warm enough to risk another five minutes looking for transport.'

'Or,' he suggested, 'we could wait out the storm in the comfort of a bar.' There, the gauntlet was thrown; it was up to her to take it or not.

He rather hoped she would.

Sophie opened her mouth, then closed it again. Marco could practically see the arguments running through her mind. She didn't know him. It was snowing and impossible to get home. What harm could one drink do? Was she acknowledging the sizzle of chemistry in the air? That indefinable quality that stopped him from taking his coat and walking away, that stopped her from saying a flat no. He could almost smell it, rich and ripe.

Sophie sighed, a tiny sound, a sound of capitulation. 'Thank you, a drink would be lovely.'

'Bene, do you know somewhere you would like to go? No? Then if I may make a suggestion, I know just the place.' He took her arm and she allowed him, as if the process of saying yes had freed her from making any more decisions. She was light under his hand, fragile as he steered her away from the hotel and down to the lights and bustle of the King's Road. Neither of them spoke, words suddenly superfluous in this winter wonderland of shadow and snow.

The bar he'd selected was just a short walk away, newly refurbished in a dazzling display of copper and light woods with long sleek tables for larger groups and hidden nooks with smaller, more intimate tables for couples. Marco steered Sophie towards the most hidden of these small areas, gesturing to the barman to bring them a bottle of Prosecco as he did so. Her eyes flickered towards

his and then across their small hideaway with its low table for two, its intimate two-seater sofa, the almost hidden entrance.

‘Excuse me for just a minute, I’m going to freshen up.’

‘Of course, take your time.’ He sat down and picked up his glass and smiled. The dull evening was suddenly alive with possibilities. Just the way he liked it.

* * *

What am I doing? What am I doing?

Sophie didn’t need to look at a price list to know the bar was way out of her league—each light fitting probably cost more than every piece of furniture she owned. And she didn’t need to be a mind reader to know why Marco Santoro had selected such a small, hidden table. The whole scenario had seduction written all over it.

She’d never been the kind of girl handsome men in tailored suits wanted to seduce before. What would it be like to try that girl on for size? Just for once?

The loos were as bright and trendy as the bar, with huge mirrors running all along one wall and a counter at waist height. Sophie dumped her bag onto the counter, shrugged off the coat, hanging it onto the hat stand with care, and quickly tallied up her outfit. One dress, black. One pair of tights, nude. One pair of shoes, black. One silver shrug, wet. Hair up. Make-up minimal. She could do this.

It didn’t take long; it never did. Hair taken down, shaken and brushed. That was one thing about her fine, straight blonde hair: it might be boring, but it fell into place without too much effort. A colour stick added a rich berry glow to her lips and colour to her cheeks and a sweep of mascara gave her eyes some much-needed definition. A quick sweep of powder to her nose, an unflattering scarlet after ten minutes in the snow, finished her face.

She looked at herself critically. Her face was fine, her hair would do, but even though she’d added a few stitches to the Maids in Chelsea standard black dress to improve the fit, her dress was still more suitable for church than an exclusive bar. She rummaged in her bag and pulled out a white ribbon. Two seconds later she had tied it around her waist, finishing it with a chic bow. She added oversize silver hooped earrings, looped a long, twisted silver chain around her neck and held the shrug under the dryer for a minute until it was just faintly damp. Not bad. Not bad at all. She closed her bag, slung the coat nonchalantly around her shoulders and took a deep breath. It was a drink. That was all. An hour, maybe two, with someone who looked at her with interest. Someone who didn’t know her, didn’t feel sorry for her.

An hour, maybe two, of being someone different. A Chelsea girl, the kind of girl who went to glamorous parties and flirted with handsome men, not the kind of girl who stood on the sidelines with a tray of drinks.

Sophie wasn’t remotely ashamed of what she did for a living. She worked hard and paid her own way—which was a lot more than many of the society women she cleaned for and waited on could say—and Clio, the owner of Maids in Chelsea, the agency Sophie worked for, had built up her successful business from scratch. Maids in Chelsea was known for supplying the best help in west London and Sophie and her colleagues were proud of their reputation. But it wasn’t glamorous. And right now, she wanted just a few moments of glamour. To belong in the world she served and cleaned up after until the clock struck twelve and she turned back into a pumpkin.

Didn’t she deserve this? It was nearly Christmas after all...

CHAPTER TWO

New Year’s Eve

‘THAT’S FANTASTIC, GRACE. No, of course I’m not mad, I’m really happy for you. So when do I get to meet him? Tonight? He’s taking you to the Snowflake Ball. That’s...that’s really, really great. I can’t wait. I’ll see you there. Okay. Bye. Love you.’

Sophie put her phone down and stared across the room. If there had been room on the floor, she would have slumped in a dramatic fashion, but as every inch of the tiny sitting room/dining room/

kitchenette was covered in bolts and scraps of fabric, she could only lean against the wall and swallow hard.

Did Cinderella feel resentment when she was left alone and everyone else went to the ball? No, she was quite happy to sit by the fire with the mice and Buttons and weave straw into gold before letting down her hair and eating an apple.

Okay. Maybe Sophie was muddling up her fairy tales a little.

But, crucially, Cinderella was excluded from the ball completely. How would she have felt if she had been made to attend the ball as a waitress and had to watch her stepsisters waltzing by in the arms of their handsome tycoons and earls? There would have been less singing, more teeth-gnashing then.

Not that Sophie had any inclination to gnash her teeth. She was happy for her friends, of course she was. It was amazing that they had all found such wonderful men and goodness knew they deserved their happiness—but did they all have to find true love at the same time? And did they have to find it just before the Snowflake Ball?

She sighed. Last year had been such fun, waitressing at the prestigious event with Emma and Grace, and she'd been looking forward to introducing Ashleigh to the glitter and sparkle that were the hallmarks of the charity gala. The ballroom always looked amazing, the organisers ensured there were plenty of breaks, tips were generous and there was a short staff event afterwards with champagne and a delicious buffet. In fact last year had been the best New Year's Eve Sophie could remember. But this year everything was different. First Emma had bumped into her estranged—and secret—husband, Jack Westwood, aka the Earl of Redminster, and after a few difficult weeks the pair had blissfully reconciled. Then Ashleigh had fallen for gorgeous Greek tycoon Lukas while house-sitting for him. Sophie had been over the moon when her old friend had phoned her on Christmas Eve to announce her whirlwind engagement—she'd never heard Ashleigh sound so happy.

But she had to admit that she had been a little relieved that Grace, like Sophie, was still single, still employed at Maids in Chelsea and would still be waitressing at the ball. There was only so much loved-upness a girl could take.

Only while Sophie had endured overcrowded trains back to Manchester on Christmas Eve to spend an uncomfortable two days back tiptoeing around her family's habitual disapproval and enduring the same old lectures on how she had messed up her life, Grace had spent her Christmas being swept off her feet by hotelier Finlay Armstrong. Swept off her feet and out of her waitress clothes and into a ballgown. She would be at the Snowflake Ball tonight, but, like Emma and Ashleigh, she'd be there as a guest, not hired help.

'You are officially a horrible person, Sophie Bradshaw,' Sophie said aloud. 'Grace of all people deserves all the happiness in the world.' She'd been alone in the world, even more alone than Sophie, so alone she'd chosen to work over Christmas rather than spend the holidays on her own. The rift in Sophie's family might seem irreparable, but at least she had them. Yes, Grace deserved every bit of luck and happiness the last week had brought her.

But didn't Sophie deserve some too?

She pushed herself off the wall and picked her way over to the sofa, resolving once again to do something about the material strewn all over every surface as well as the floor. She did deserve happiness; she knew that even if she didn't always feel it. Her ex, Harry, had done far too good a job of eroding every last bit of confidence from her for that. But happiness for her didn't lie in the arms of a man, no matter how titled or rich or handsome he was. It lay in her dreams. In her designs. In her... And if waitressing at this ball would help her achieve those dreams, then waitress she would—and she would smile and be happy for her friends even if they were divided from her by an invisible baize door.

Only...was Harry right? Was something wrong with her? Because she had had her own little romantic adventure this Christmas, but, unlike her friends, hers had ended when the clocks struck—well, not twelve but five a.m. It had been her choice to creep out of the hotel room without leaving as much as a note, let alone a glass slipper, but she couldn't imagine Jack or Lukas or Finlay leaving

a stone unturned if their women simply disappeared without a trace. But although her heart gave the odd unwanted leap whenever she saw dark hair above an expensive suit—which in Chelsea was about thirty times a day on average—the last she had seen of Marco Santoro had been his naked, slumbering torso, dimly lit by the light of the bathroom as she had gathered her belongings together.

And okay, she hadn't looked for him either, not even when she'd confessed her one-night stand to her friends just a few days ago. Not only was Marco Santoro out of her league in every way, but Sophie had allowed infatuation to cloud her judgement before. She wasn't foolish enough to mistake lust for anything deeper, not again.

Although it had been an incredible night...

The sound of the buzzer interrupted her slide into reminiscences just as she was picturing the curve of Marco's mouth. Sophie shivered as she pushed the all too real picture away and picked up the answerphone. 'Yes?'

'Sophie, it's me, Ashleigh.' Her old friend's unmistakably Australian tones sang out of the intercom and Sophie's spirits immediately lifted. So all her friends would be married to insanely wealthy, influential and hot men? It wouldn't really make a difference, not where it counted most.

'Come on up.' She pressed the buzzer and looked around wildly. Was it possible to clear a space in just twenty seconds? There was a knock on the door before she had managed to do more than pick up several scraps of material and, with them still clasped in her hand, Sophie opened the door to discover not just Ashleigh but Grace and Emma as well, brandishing champagne and a thick white envelope.

'Surprise!' they sang out in chorus, surging into the room in a wave of perfume, silk and teetering heels. The dress code for the Snowflake Ball was white or silver, but blonde, tall Emma had added red shoes and accessories to her long white silk shift, Grace, glowing with happiness, was sultry in silver lace and Ashleigh had opted for a backless ivory dress, which set off the copper in her hair and the green in her eyes. They all looked gorgeous. Sophie tried not to look over at her black waitress's dress, ironed and hung on the back of the door.

'How lovely to see you all.' She narrowed her eyes at Grace. 'You must have called me from just around the corner.'

'From the taxi,' Grace confirmed, her eyes laughing.

'Congratulations again. Finlay's a lucky man and I'll tell him so when I finally meet him. I'd hug you, but I don't want to crease your dress.'

'Where are the glasses?' Emma, of course, was already at the counter optimistically known as a kitchenette looking in one of the three narrow cupboards allotted for crockery and food. 'Aha!' She brandished them triumphantly, setting them down before twisting the foil off the bottle. It was real champagne, Sophie noted, a brand well out of her price bracket. Funny to think just a few weeks ago they would have happily been drinking cheap cava from the off-licence at the end of her street. So the divide between her lifestyle and her friends' had begun. Just as it had ten years ago when she had opted for paid work and domesticity while her few friends went to university.

She pushed the thought away as the champagne cork was expertly popped. 'Not for me, Em. I can't. You know what Clio says about drinking on the job and I need to be at the hotel for staff briefing in an hour.'

'Now, that,' Ashleigh said triumphantly, 'is where you are wrong. We've asked Keisha to cover your shift and you, Miss Sophie Bradshaw, will be going to the ball! Here you are, a formal invitation.' She thrust the envelope towards Sophie, who took it mechanically.

'I've always wanted to be a fairy godmother,' Grace said, holding out her hand to accept one of the full glasses Emma was handing out.

Sophie stared at the three beaming faces, completely flabbergasted as she took in their words, the envelope still clutched unopened in her hand. 'I'm what?'

'Going to the Snowflake Ball!'

‘We’re taking you as our guest!’

‘You didn’t think we’d leave you out, did you?’ Ashleigh finished, taking a glass from Emma and pressing it into Sophie’s unresisting hand. ‘Cheers!’

‘But...but...my hair. And what will I wear?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Emma said. ‘If only one of us was an aspiring fashion designer with a wardrobe crammed full of original designs. Hang on a minute...’ She strode into the minuscule bedroom—so tiny Sophie could only fit in a single cabin bed—and pulled back the curtain that divided the crammed clothes rails from the rest of the room. ‘Ta-dah!’

‘I couldn’t wear one of my designs to an event like this! Everyone else will be in dresses like, well, like yours. Expensive, designer...’

‘And you will outshine us all in an original Sophie Bradshaw.’ Grace beamed at her. ‘Oh, Sophie, it’s going to be a magical night. I am so very happy you are coming with is. Let’s get you ready...’

* * *

Why on earth did I agree to attend this ball?

More to the point, why did he agree to attend the Snowflake Ball every New Year’s Eve? It was always the same, filled with the same people, the same talk, the same tedium. Marco cast a scowling look at the crowded ballroom. Oh, it was tastefully done out with abstract snowflakes suspended from the ceiling and the glitter kept to a minimum, but it was still not a patch on Venice on New Year’s Eve. His was a city that knew how to celebrate and New Year was a night when the stately old city came alive.

He hadn’t spent a New Year in Venice for over a decade, although there were times when the pull of the city of his birth ran through his veins like the water in the canals and he missed the alleyways and bridges, the grand old palazzos and the markets with an almost physical ache that no amount of excellent champagne and food could make up for. His hands folded into fists. Tomorrow he would return home, not just for a fleeting visit, some business and a duty dinner with his mother and sister. Tomorrow he would return for a fortnight, to host the Santoros’ annual Epiphany Ball and then stay to walk his sister down the aisle.

Tomorrow he would step into his father’s shoes, no matter that he wasn’t ready. No matter that he didn’t deserve to.

Marco took a deep sip of wine, barely tasting the richness. He wouldn’t think about it tonight, his last night of freedom. He needed a distraction.

His eyes skimmed the room, widening with appreciation as four women stopped at a table opposite. They were talking over each other, faces lit with enthusiasm as they took their seats. His gaze lingered on a laughing blonde. Her silver minidress was an interesting choice in what was a mainly conservatively dressed ballroom, but Marco wasn’t complaining, not when the wearer possessed such excellent legs. Excellent legs, a really nice, lithe figure and, as she turned to face him as if she were aware of his scrutiny, a pair of familiar blue eyes. Eyes staring straight back at him with such undisguised horror Marco almost turned and checked, just to make sure there wasn’t an axe murderer creeping up behind him.

The girl from the snow. The one who had disappeared...

Marco muttered a curse, unsure whether to coolly acknowledge her or ignore her presence; it had been a novel experience to wake up and find himself alone without as much as a note. Novel and not exactly pleasant; in Marco’s experience women clung on long after the relationship was over, they didn’t disappear before it had even begun.

And they certainly didn’t run away before dawn.

His eyes narrowed. She owed him an explanation at the least, apology at best. There were rules for these kinds of encounters and Sophie Bradshaw had broken every one. Besides, he was damned if he was going to spend the evening marked as the big bad wolf with Little Silver Dress going all

wide-eyed at the very sight of him. He had a fortnight of difficult encounters ahead of him; tonight was supposed to be about having fun.

Mind made up, Marco took a step in Sophie's direction, but she was already on her feet and shouldering her way through the ballroom. Away from him. So she liked to play, did she? He set off at an unhurried pace, following the silver dress as it darted across the crowded room and through a discreet door set in the wooden panelling. The door began to close behind her, but his long stride shortened the distance enough for him to catch it before it could close fully and he slipped inside...

To find himself inside a closet. A large closet, but a closet nonetheless, one filled with towering stacks of spare chairs, folded tables and several cleaning trolleys. Sophie was pressed against one of the tables, her hands gripping the sides, her heart-shaped face pale.

He allowed the door to close behind him, leaning against it, his arms folded, staring her down. 'Buongiorno, Sophie.'

'Marco? Wh-what are you doing here?'

'Catching up with old friends. That's what I like about these occasions, you never know who you might bump into. Nice corner you've found here. A little crowded, lacking in decoration, but I like it.'

'I...' Her eyes were wide. Scared.

Incredulity thundered through him. He'd assumed she had hidden because she was embarrassed to see him, that maybe she hadn't told her friends—or boyfriend—about him. Or because she was playing some game and trying to lure him in. It hadn't occurred to him that she would be actually terrified at the very thought of seeing him.

Although she had fled from his bed, run away from her friends the moment she had recognised him. How many clues did he need? His mouth compressed into a thin line. 'Apologies, Sophie,' he said stiffly. 'I didn't mean to scare you. Please rest assured that I will leave you alone for the rest of the evening.' He bowed formally and turned, hand on the door handle, only to be arrested by the sound of her low voice.

'No, Marco. I should apologise. I didn't expect to see you here, I didn't expect to see you ever again actually and I overreacted. I'm not...I don't really do... You know. What we did. I have no idea how these things work.'

What we did. Marco had spent the last three weeks trying to put what they'd done out of his mind. Tried not to dwell on the satin of her skin, the taste of her, the way she laughed. The way she moaned.

Ironically he usually did know how these things worked. Temporary and discreet were the hallmarks of the perfect relationship as far as Marco was concerned. Not falling into bed with strangers he'd met on street corners. He was far too cautious. He needed to be certain that any and every prospective partner knew the rules: mutually satisfying and absolutely no strings.

But somehow that evening all his self-imposed rules had gone flying out of the window. It had been like stepping into another world; the snow deep outside, the city oddly muted, the world contracting until it was only the two of them. It seemed as if there had been no other route open to him, booking the hotel room an unsaid inevitability as they'd moved on to their second drink, walking hand in hand through the falling snow but not really touching, not yet, waiting until the room door had swung closed behind them.

And then...

Marco inhaled, the heat of that night burning through his body. He didn't know what he'd have done if she'd been there when he woke up, pulled her to him or distanced himself in the cold light of day. But he hadn't had to make that decision; like the melted snow outside, she was gone. He'd told himself it was for the best. But now that she was here, it was hard to remember why.

He turned. Sophie was still staring at him, her blue eyes huge in her pale face. 'How these things work?' he repeated, unable to stop the smile curving his mouth. 'Does there have to be a set path?'

Colour flared high on her cheekbones. 'No, I'm not looking for Mr Right, but neither am I the kind of girl who spends the night with a stranger. Usually. So I don't know what the etiquette is here.'

'Nor do I, but I'm pretty sure it doesn't require us to spend half the evening in a cleaning closet.'

'No,' she said doubtfully as if the cleaning closet were actually the perfect place to spend New Year's Eve. 'But what happens when we get out there? Do we acknowledge that we know each other or pretend that none of it ever happened?'

The latter was certainly the most sensible idea—but hadn't he decided he needed a distraction? Sophie Bradshaw in a silver minidress was the epitome of distraction. Marco stepped away from the door, leaving it a little ajar, and smiled as ruefully as he could. 'Are those my choices? They seem a little limited. How about I throw a third option in there—I ask you to dance?'

'Ask me to dance?' Her eyes were even wider than before if that was possible and she pressed even further into the table. 'But I walked out on you. Without a note! And I ran away as soon as I saw you.'

'Si, both of these things are true, but if you dance with me, then I am willing to overlook both transgressions.'

'I did mention that I don't want a relationship, didn't I?'

'You did. Sophie, I am also not looking for anything serious and, like you, I'm not in the habit of picking up strangers in the snow. So if neither of us is interested in a relationship and neither of us indulges in one-night stands, then why not get to know each other better? Retrospectively. Unless you're here with someone else?' His hands curled into loose fists at the thought, the thrill of possession taking him by surprise. It was only because they had barely scratched the surface of their attraction, he reminded himself. Only because spending the evening with Sophie would be safe and yet satisfying. No expectations beyond fun and flirtation, although if the evening did end the same way as their past encounter, he wouldn't complain. His gaze travelled down the sixties-inspired minidress to the acres of shapely leg, lingering on the slight swell of her hips. No, he wouldn't be complaining at all.

'No. I'm here with my friends and their husbands and fiancés. They are all lovely and doing their best to include me, but they're all so madly, sickeningly in love that I can't help feeling like a spare part.'

She was wavering. Time to press his advantage. 'Then this is fate,' he said promptly. 'Every time you feel like a spare part, dance with me. We can have a code.'

Her eyebrows raised. 'A code?'

'Si, you rub your nose or tug your ear and I will know you need rescuing from the tedium of romance.'

'They don't mean to be tedious.' But the wariness had disappeared from her face and she was smiling. 'What if you're not watching, when I signal?'

'Oh, I'll be watching,' he assured her. 'But just in case you forget to signal, let's make an appointment now to see the new year in together. I'll meet you...' He paused, trying to think of a landmark in the ballroom.

'Outside this closet?'

'Perfect. Yes, I'll meet you outside here at eleven.'

'But that's a whole hour before midnight.'

'You owe me half an hour of dancing for running out on me and half an hour for escaping into a closet. I'm Italian, the hurt to my machismo could have been catastrophic.'

A dimple flashed in her cheek. 'Okay, eleven it is. Unless I need rescuing, in which case I'll...I'll twizzle my hair. Deal?'

'Deal.' Marco opened the door and held it, standing to one side while Sophie passed through it, brushing past him as she did so, his body exploding into awareness at each point she touched. He took her hand as he stepped out of the small room and raised it to his lips. 'Until eleven, signorina. I look forward to further making your acquaintance.'

Marco leaned against the door as he watched Sophie disappear back into the ballroom. Yes, she would do very nicely as a distraction, very nicely indeed. Suddenly he was looking forward to the rest of the Snowflake Ball after all.

CHAPTER THREE

‘WHO IS THAT HOTTIE? What?’ Emma looked round at her friends, indignation flashing in her eyes at their splutters. ‘I’m married, blissfully and happily married, but I still have eyes—and, Sophie...that man is sizzling. Tell us all.’

Sophie slid into her seat uncomfortably aware that her cheeks were probably bright red under her friends’ scrutiny. ‘There’s nothing to tell,’ she said, picking up her white linen napkin, dislodging a drift of small glittery paper snowflakes as she did so. ‘I didn’t miss the starter, did I? I’m starving.’

‘Tell me my eyes are deceiving me and I didn’t just see you emerge from a closet with him.’ Ashleigh leaned in to stare intently at her and Sophie’s cheeks got even hotter if that was possible—she was almost combusting as it was. ‘Ha! You did. Nice work, Soph. Quick work though. We’ve only been here for twenty minutes.’

‘I didn’t go into the closet with him.’ Sophie reached for her glass of champagne and took a much-needed sip, wincing at the unexpectedly dry taste. She pushed it aside and grabbed some water instead. ‘He followed me in there.’

‘He did what? I take it back. He’s not hot. He’s creepy. Well, kind of both. Do you want me to set Jack on him?’

‘I’m sure Lukas would be only too glad to have a word,’ Ashleigh chimed in with a dark look over at the corner Marco had disappeared into.

‘Finlay can be very intimidating,’ Grace said, smiling dreamily at her very new and very large pink diamond ring on the third finger of her left hand.

‘No, thanks for the offer, but I don’t need defending.’ Sophie lowered her voice. ‘I know him. He’s the guy...’

Three faces stared at her blankly.

She sighed. It wasn’t as if there had been many—or indeed any—guys since she’d moved to London. ‘The guy. From a few weeks ago. The export party guy. You know, in the snow... Italian, we went to a bar...’

‘Oh, the one-night-stand guy?’ Ashleigh exclaimed.

‘Just a little louder, Ash, I don’t think he heard you over on the other side of the room, but just one more decibel should do it.’

‘What’s he doing here? It must be fate.’

‘No, Grace, it’s not fate. It’s embarrassing, that’s what it is. I didn’t expect to see him again, that’s the whole point of a one-night stand.’

‘Ah, but the real question is are you going to see him again? Now that he’s the one-night stand and the quickie-in-the-closet guy?’ Emma’s eyes were twinkling.

‘We did not have a quickie in the closet. Your mind! Call yourself a Countess?’

‘It’s My Lady to you.’ But Emma’s smile was rueful. Her friends hadn’t got tired of teasing her about her newly acquired title. Sophie wasn’t sure they ever would.

‘You didn’t answer the question, Sophie. Are you going to see him again?’

‘Look, just because the three of you are all besotted doesn’t mean that I’m looking to settle down. I’ve been there and done that and it very much didn’t agree with me. I have agreed to dance with him later. But that’s all I want. Honestly.’

But the scepticism on all three faces showed that none of them believed her. And she didn’t blame them because she wasn’t entirely sure she believed herself. Oh, she didn’t want or need what her friends had, she wasn’t hankering after a diamond ring the size of Ashleigh’s or Emma’s, nor, beautiful as it was, did she want to wear Grace’s huge pink diamond. She was quite happy with a ring-free third finger, thank you very much. In fact Sophie’s ambitions were as far from domestic

bliss as it was possible to get. She wanted to make something of herself. Prove to her family—prove to herself—that she hadn't thrown her life, her chances away when she'd moved in with Harry. She didn't have the time or the inclination for romance.

But shocking as it had been to see Marco, it hadn't been unpleasant. After all, Emma was right: he was smoking hot. Smoking hot and charming. Smoking hot, charming and very, very good in bed. Not that she was planning to sleep with him again. Once was an excusable lapse, twice would be something far too much like a relationship.

But a dance wouldn't hurt—would it?

* * *

Sophie had had no intention of using any of the secret signs Marco had suggested. She kept her hands firmly on her lap, on her knife and fork, or wrapped around her water glass to ensure that she didn't inadvertently summon him over. But, as the night wore on, her resolve wavered. It wasn't that her friends and their partners intentionally excluded her, but they just couldn't help themselves. They kept separating off into cosy little pairs to sway intimately on the dance floor, no matter what the music, or to indulge in some very public displays of affection over the smoked salmon starter. In some ways it was worse when they emerged from their love-struck idyll and remembered Sophie's presence, tumbling over themselves to apologise and making Sophie feel even more like a third—or seventh—wheel than ever.

Then when the men sauntered off to the bar between courses, leaving the four friends alone, the conversation turned, inevitably Sophie supposed, to Grace's and Ashleigh's forthcoming weddings.

'Definitely a church wedding,' Grace said. 'Probably in Scotland, although it would be a shame not to hold the reception at The Armstrong. After all, that's where we met. The only thing is a church can be a little limiting. Do you think it would be okay for the bridesmaids to wear short dresses in a church?'

'The bridesmaids were in minidresses at the last church wedding I attended. They were certainly effective.' So effective that Harry, Sophie's ex, hadn't been able to take his eyes off the head bridesmaid as she had paraded down the aisle all tumbled hair and bronzed, lithe legs. Nor, it had transpired just a few hours later, had he been able to keep his hands off her either. Sophie swallowed, reaching for her water blindly to try to mask the metallic taste she always noticed when she thought about that night. The taste of humiliation. Not just because Harry had treated her like that; if she was honest with herself, he'd behaved like that for far too many years. Nor was it because he had chosen to do so in front of all of their friends; after all, Sophie had spent many occasions making excuses for him or turning a well-practised blind eye. No, the scalding shame she still experienced every day was because it had taken such a blatant humiliation to force her to act, to realise that this bad boy couldn't be redeemed and he wasn't worth one more of her tears.

How had it taken seven years? Her parents had known it almost instantly, as had her few friends. And yet she'd chosen Harry over every single one of them, sure that she saw something special in him nobody else could see. Maybe if she'd been more confident, maybe if she hadn't felt so alone when she met him...

No, there were no maybes. She had only herself to blame. What a fool, young and blinded by lust and romance. Never again.

She looked over at her friends, forcing a smile. 'I have a request, no, a demand. You must promise to seat me at a table full of fabulous, fun single ladies. No set-ups with your cousin's best friend's brother's boss just because he visited Manchester once and so we'll have lots in common and no nudging me towards the best man because that's what happens at weddings. I want a party table.'

'It's a promise,' Ashleigh agreed, turning to greet Lukas with a brilliant smile as he put another champagne-filled ice bucket down on the table along with another bottle of mineral water. Maybe she was too used to cheap cava, but Sophie just couldn't drink the champagne; every sip tasted sour. Not only was she a third wheel, but she was a sober third wheel...

What was wrong with her? She should be having a good time; she looked okay, her dress had got several appreciative comments, which was always warming to a designer's ears, the food was really tasty, the band talented and the ballroom looked like a very tasteful winter wonderland. It was New Year's Eve and she was out with her best friends being wine and dine. Sophie straightened. She was being selfish. She shouldn't need anything more.

Except...

Sophie's gaze slid, not for the first time, over to the large round table at the other side of the room. Marco was leaning back in his chair, a glass clasped elegantly in his fingertips, apparently deeply involved in a conversation with the couple sat next to him. Only a slight inclination of the head and a tilt of the glass towards her in a light toast betrayed his awareness of her scrutiny. But he knew, she had no doubt. He'd known every time.

It was only nine o'clock. Two hours until their promised dance.

The third of the six courses had been cleared away and Emma and Jack had taken advantage of the hiatus in the meal to dance—if you called moving very slowly staring intensely at each other dancing. Grace and Finlay were sitting opposite Sophie, but there was no point trying to chat to either of them; they were looking into each other's eyes, emitting so much heat Sophie had moved the water jug closer in case they suddenly combusted. As for Ashleigh, Sophie hadn't seen her friend for several minutes, but at last sight she had been towing Lukas determinedly towards the closet Sophie had discovered earlier.

She had a choice. She could spend the next two hours sitting here feeling sorry for herself or she could allow herself some real fun. The kind of fun she'd been too busy accommodating Harry to enjoy before. The kind of fun she hadn't allowed herself since the breakup. Just looking at Marco made her stomach fall away and her breath hitch, but she was no longer a naïve teenager who couldn't tell the difference between lust and love. And that was what this was: pure and simple delicious lust. If she knew that, remembered that, then what harm could a few more hours in Marco's company do?

And as the thought crossed her mind her hand rose, almost by its own volition, and, with her eyes fixed on Marco, Sophie slowly and deliberately wound a lock of hair around her finger and smiled.

* * *

He'd been aware of her every second of the evening, from the moment she'd walked away from him to rejoin her friends. The swish of her hair, the sway of her hips, the curve of her mouth. It was as if an invisible thread stretched across the vast room connecting them; every time she moved he felt it, a deep visceral pull.

It was unlike any reaction he'd ever had towards a woman and it wasn't hard to work out why; he didn't need a degree in psychology to realise that she was probably the first woman to walk away from him and he was completely unaccustomed to not calling the shots in all his relationships, personal and professional. No wonder his interest was piqued.

Not that he wanted her to know it. Knowledge was power in every relationship, no matter how temporary.

But Marco knew every time Sophie slid a look in his direction, he felt the tension in her as if it were his, he knew she would cave in eventually and so, with a surge of triumph, he watched her as she reached up and wound a lock of silky blonde hair around her finger, a provocative smile on her full mouth—and a challenge in her eyes.

Marco's expectations of the evening had risen the second he'd caught sight of the elusive Signorina Bradshaw; at that look in her eyes they took flight. 'Excuse me,' he said, pushing his chair back and languidly getting to his feet. No need to rush. She wasn't going anywhere. 'I have some personal business to attend to.'

He held Sophie's gaze as he moved with predatory grace across the dance floor, his steps slow and easy until he came to a halt in front of her. Sophie sat alone on one side of the table, the only

other occupants breaking off from an intense conversation to watch, open-mouthed, as he extended a hand. ‘Signorina?’

Sophie arched an elegant bow. ‘Sir?’

He smiled at that, slow and purposeful. ‘Would you do me the honour?’

‘How very unexpected.’ Her eyes laughed up at him. ‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘I believe the words you are looking for are “Thank you. I would love to.”’

‘Are they? In that case thank you, I would love to.’ And she slipped her hand into his and allowed him to lead her from her chair and onto the dance floor.

She slipped into his arms as if she had never left, every curve fitting perfectly against him, her arms resting naturally around his waist. ‘Are you having a nice evening?’ It was a strangely formal question considering the way her body was pressed to his.

‘I am now,’ Marco answered gravely and, with some satisfaction, watched the colour rise in her cheeks. ‘Have you attended this ball before?’

‘I was here last year.’

‘No, I was here also. How on earth did I miss you? Impossible.’

She smiled, a dimple peeping out. He remembered that dimple; it had enchanted him the first time she had smiled, snowflakes tangled in her hair, slipping on the snowy ground. ‘Maybe you weren’t looking hard enough. So this is a regular event for you?’

He shrugged. ‘Usually. One of my clients always has a table and so here I am.’

‘How very convenient. Don’t you want to...’ But she trailed off, shaking her head. ‘Never mind.’

‘Don’t I want to what?’

‘I’m just being nosy. It’s just, isn’t spending New Year with clients a little, well, impersonal? What about your friends and family?’

His stomach clenched. Tomorrow would be all about family—with one glaring omission. ‘My clients are my friends as well, of course. Most of the people I know in the UK I met through work. What about you? Who are the people you are here with?’

The dimple peeked out again. ‘Work friends,’ she admitted. ‘London can be a lonely place when you first move here.’

‘You’re not from London?’

‘Manchester, and no, I’m not spending New Year with my family either. I did Christmas and that was more than enough.’ A shadow crossed her face so fleetingly he wondered if he’d imagined it. ‘How about you? Whereabouts in Italy are you from?’

‘Venice.’

Her eyes lit up. ‘Oh, how utterly gorgeous. What an amazing place to live.’

Amazing, thrilling, beautiful, hidebound, full of rules and expectations no man could be expected to keep. ‘You’ve been?’

‘Well, no. But I’ve read about it, watched films, seen pictures. It’s at the top of my bucket list—lying back in a gondola and watching the canals go by. Masked balls, palazzos, bridges...’ She laughed. ‘Listen to me, I sound like such a tourist.’

‘No, no. It is a beautiful city. You should go.’

‘One day.’ She sounded wistful. ‘How can you bear to live here when you could live there? London is cool and all, but Venice? There’s a story, a view around every corner.’

‘And a member of my family, or an old family friend, or their relative. Sì...’ as her eyes widened in understanding ‘...Venice is beautiful, captivating, unique, all these things and I miss it every day, but it is also an island. A very small island.’

‘Gets a little claustrophobic?’

‘A little. But London? Here a man can be who he wants to be, see who he wants to see, do the work he feels fitting. Be his own man.’

‘London’s not that big,’ she pointed out. ‘After all, I’ve bumped into you twice—literally the first time!’

‘Ah, but, signorina...’ he leaned forward so his breath touched her ear and felt her shiver at the slight contact ‘...that was fate and we don’t question the workings of fate.’

They were so close he could feel her heart racing against him before she pulled back. ‘Still, small or not, it must be a wonderful place to live. Are your parents still there?’

‘My mother,’ he corrected her. ‘My father died ten months ago.’ He steeled himself for the usual hit of guilt, regret and anger. Guilt his father’s heart had been weakened in the first place, regret they had never patched up their relationship—and anger his father would never now admit that Marco had a right to a life of his own.

‘Ten months ago? That’s so recent, I’m sorry.’

‘Thank you.’

‘She must miss you, your mother.’

He allowed a smile but knew it was wintry at best. ‘Miss me? I’m not sure. Miss telling me how to live my life? Every day.’

‘I know a little about that. What does your mother want that’s so terrible?’

Marco shrugged. ‘What every Italian mother wants for her children, especially her only son. A place in the family business under her eyes, a wife, children, the usual.’

‘And you aren’t hankering for bambinos clustered around your knee?’ She didn’t sound disappointed or disapproving, which made a refreshing change. So many women seemed to see Marco’s lack of interest in a family as a personal affront—or, worse, a challenge. ‘Sunday morning football, wet wipes in every pocket? I have two brothers and they both have kids. I know the drill.’

‘I like my life the way it is. Why complicate it?’

‘And I take it no interest in a wife either.’ She smiled, a small dimple charming him as she did so. ‘Your poor mother.’

‘She only has herself to blame,’ he said lightly. ‘My marriage is an obsession with her. I remember going to my mother’s friend’s house and while the mothers talked I played with the daughter. She was a nice girl, sporty. We got on really well. When we left my mamma asked me if I liked her and when I said I did she said bene she would make a good wife for me. I was five!’

‘All mothers do that. My mother was convinced I’d marry Tom next door. He played the violin and sang in the church choir, always said hello and helped shovel snow or rake leaves. Perfect husband material.’

‘And yet he isn’t here with you tonight?’

‘Well, it turns out that Tom prefers boys to girls, so even if I had been tempted, it was never going to happen.’

‘Lucky for me.’ He pulled Sophie in close and swung her around. ‘Tell me, signorina, why are we here in this beautiful room dancing to this beautiful music and discussing my mother? I can think of many more interesting topics.’

Her eyes laughed up at him. ‘Such as?’

‘Such as how very sexy you look in that dress. Such as how very well you dance. Such as what shall we do with all this time until midnight?’

Sophie swallowed, her eyes luminous in the bright, pulsing disco lights. His eyes were drawn to the graceful column of her neck, the lines of her throat, and he ran his thumb down her skin, feeling her pulse speed up. ‘Do?’ she echoed a little hoarsely. ‘Why, signor, you asked me to dance and so far we’ve just swayed to the music. Less talk, more dancing. It’s New Year’s Eve after all.’

There was no conversation after that, just dancing, movement, an intimacy that could only be conjured by two bodies caught up in the same beat. Sophie could move, hair flying, eyes shining and silver minidress glittering in the disco lights as she swayed and turned. ‘A childhood full of dance

lessons,' she told him during a breathless break. 'I did it all, ballet, jazz, tap. I have medals and everything.'

But as the night neared midnight the music slowed and she was back in his arms. The ballroom was filled with anticipation as the seconds began to tick away, people gathering in groups ready to welcome in the new year. Marco steered Sophie to a secluded corner of the dance floor, not wanting the shared jollity, the drunken group embraces that so often marked the new year's first seconds. 'Felice anno nuovo.'

'Happy New Year, Marco.' Her eyes were half shuttered, her lips full and inviting. He knew the taste of them, the sweet plumpness of her bottom lip, knew the way her hands wound into his hair as a kiss deepened, how her skin slid like silk under his fingertips. Just a dance, he'd said. Surely they'd both known that after the night they had shared they couldn't possibly stop at dancing. Besides, it was New Year's Eve; it was customary to kiss.

And how he hated to be rude. Just one kiss, to round off the evening, to round off their brief but, oh, so pleasing acquaintanceship.

Sophie purred her approval as he lowered his mouth to hers, her hands tightening on his shoulders, her body swaying closer until he felt every curve pressed tight against him. Marco was dimly aware that the room was erupting with cheers as the new year dawned, could hear bangs and pops as the balloons and streamers were released and the first chords of 'Auld Lang Syne' began to echo around the room, but it was as if he and Sophie were separated from the cheerful celebration, hidden in some alternate dimension where all he knew was her mouth under his, her body quivering under his caress, her touch on his neck, light enough to drive a man mad.

And then it was over as she stepped back, trembling and wide-eyed. 'Thank you for a lovely night. I don't think...I mean, my friends will be looking for me.'

It took a few moments for her words to penetrate his fogged-up brain. All he wanted was to pull her back in, take her mouth again, hold her still. Marco inhaled, long and deep, pushing the dangerous desire deep down where it belonged.

'It was my pleasure. I am glad I got to meet you again, signorina.' He took her hand, bowing formally over it, then stepped back, a final farewell. She hesitated for the briefest of seconds and then, with a quick smile, turned away.

A pleasant interlude and now it was over as all these interludes eventually were. Unless...

Tomorrow he returned home. Returned to a wedding, to play a part, to the weight of parental expectations, no less heavy with the loss of his father. Returned to guilt.

He could do with a distraction.

Sophie obviously wasn't looking for any kind of relationship; in fact this was the third time she'd walked away from him without a backwards glance. A wry smile curved his mouth; thank goodness her response to his kiss had been so all encompassing or he'd be wondering if the attraction was one-sided. And she had never seen Venice...

She would make the perfect distraction, for himself and for his family.

Marco didn't want to take any more time to think his idea through, not when Sophie was disappearing into the revelling crowd. 'Sophie?' She stopped and turned, a confused expression on her face.

He crossed the distance between them with a few long strides. 'My mother will be holding her annual party on the sixth of January, for Epiphany. I have to be there, to co-host, in place of my father. Would you like to be my guest?'

The confusion deepened. 'Me? Come to Venice? But...'

'You said yourself how much you want to go.'

'Yes.' She looked tempted for a moment, then frowned again. 'But, Marco, I hardly know you. You don't know me and I'm not really looking for anything, for anyone. I like you, I like spending time with you...'

‘And I like spending time with you and I really would like to get to know you better. And that’s all this is, Sophie. A couple of days in Venice, a party and then we go our separate ways. What do you say?’

* * *

‘Of course you should say yes.’ The ball might officially be over for another year, but the evening was far from finished yet—after all, as Emma pointed out, they hadn’t properly celebrated Grace’s engagement yet—and so they had all piled into taxis and gone back to The Armstrong, the hotel Finlay owned and where the newly engaged couple had met, to finish welcoming the new year in in style. It was a novel experience for Sophie to be escorted up to the exclusive suite as a guest, not a maid, and to sink onto one of the comfortable sofas, the room-service menu at her disposal and the promise of a car to take her home.

A novel experience for Sophie, but all her friends seemed to take this level of luxury almost for granted; even Grace stepped into the private lift as if it were an everyday occurrence for her. And now it was. Grace, just like Ashleigh and Emma, was marrying into some serious wealth.

This evening, lovely as it was, was exposing the very clear differences in Sophie’s future and the paths her friends were headed down—and made her even more determined to shape hers the way she had always intended it to be. This year she’d put some serious effort into the website she’d recently set up and start trying to sell her designs. She clenched her hands at the familiar twist of excitement and fear. What if Harry was right? What if she was wasting her time?

Grace plumped down onto the sofa opposite, heaving her bare feet onto the glass coffee table with a sigh of relief. ‘I agree. Go, have fun. It’s always quiet at work at this time of year—and we’ve been run off our feet for months. Take some time off. You deserve it.’

‘I’ll lend you the fare if you need it. Consider it an early birthday present.’ Ashleigh seated herself next to Sophie and nudged her. ‘Venice, Soph. You’ve always wanted to go.’

‘Marco offered to pay for my ticket. No, don’t look so excited. He has loads of air miles from his work. It’s not a big deal.’ Actually it was. Sophie didn’t want to admit how much his casual ‘I’ll cover all expenses, it’s the least I can do, you’ll be far more of a help than you realise’ had touched her. Harry had not only always expected Sophie to pay her way but frequently his as well. He was a musician after all, above mundane worldly tasks like making a living. ‘It’s just, I hardly know him.’

Grace raised her eyebrows knowingly. ‘Didn’t look that way from where I was sitting tonight. The chemistry between you two...oof!’ She fanned herself dramatically, ducking with a squeal as Sophie threw a cushion at her.

‘What do you need to know?’ Ashleigh asked, squeezing Sophie’s hand. ‘What would make you feel better about going?’

Sophie shrugged, unable to articulate the prickle of unease that ran over her when she thought about accepting Marco’s casual invitation—or, more worryingly, the ripple of excitement overshadowing the unease. ‘I don’t know where he lives. I don’t exactly know what he does for a living. I don’t know if he likes music or books or walks in the country.’

‘What do you know?’ Emma curled up next to Grace. ‘Tell us about him.’

‘He’s Italian, does something to do with art and antiques. Erm...he’s lived in London for ages but really loves Venice, you can hear it in his voice. He has a gorgeous accent, dresses really well, his suits look handmade to me, beautifully designed, great fabric.’

‘Focus, Sophie. We want to know about the man, not his clothes. How does he make you feel?’

How did he make her what? When Sophie had packed her bags, the shattered remaining pieces of her pride and her bruised heart and moved over a hundred miles away to start again, the one thing she had guarded herself against was feeling too much. It was thanks to her emotions she had fallen into such a sorry state in the first place. She picked up a cushion and cradled it close, as if it were a shield between her and the rest of the world while she thought. ‘He makes me feel sexy. Wanted. Powerful.’ Where had those words come from? But even as she spoke them Sophie knew that they were the

truth—and that not once, in seven years, had Harry made her feel any of those things. Desperate, insecure, weak, needy, pathetic? All the above. Never powerful. Never wanted.

She straightened, turning to stare at Ashleigh half excited, half terrified. ‘I should go, shouldn’t I?’

‘You should totally go. Who cares about his address and what exactly something in art and antiques means? As long as he isn’t a drug smuggler and doesn’t live with his wife and six kids, it’s irrelevant. Sexy and powerful? Now, they’re relevant.’

‘Who knows where it might lead? Look at me. I went to Scotland for a bit of adventure and came back head over heels. Go for it!’ Grace practically clapped in excitement, but Sophie shook her head emphatically.

‘I am so happy for you, Grace, for all of you. But believe me, I’m not going to come back engaged. Marco made it very clear he’s not interested in anything long-term and that suits me perfectly. There’s a lot I want to achieve, that I need to achieve, and wedded bliss is very far down that list. But this will be good for me. I’ve been so scared of being sucked back into a relationship I’ve gone too far the other way. This is a big city. I should date and see people occasionally, live a little.’

‘Live a lot,’ Emma corrected her. ‘You should, Sophie, you deserve to. And we’ll be cheering you on every step of the way.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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