

K I M A N I TM R O M A N C E

Seduced BY THE TYCOON AT CHRISTMAS

The Morretti Millionaires

Pamela Yaye



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Seduced By The Tycoon At Christmas

Аннотация

Love at first kiss? As one of Italy's most powerful businessmen, Romeo Morretti spends his days brokering multimillion-dollar deals, and his nights romancing Europe's most beautiful women. But a chance encounter at a busy intersection sends the international playboy's life hurling in a new direction. The desire that ignites between Romeo and lush Caribbean beauty Zoe Smith is impossible to resist. Their intimate display becomes public under Milan's bright Christmas lights when a blog leaks their secret affair and they're touted as the city's newest celebrity couple. Between glittering A-list events and candlelit dinners at Romeo's villa, Zoe is living a life of glamour and endless pleasure alongside the dangerously handsome tycoon. Their high-profile holiday romance could even save her PR job at prestigious fashion house Casa Di Moda. Until secrets and lies threaten their passionate bond. Amid doubt and distrust, Romeo is accused of a crime that endangers his financial empire. He will have to fight to clear his name before they can share a future under the mistletoe...

Love at first kiss?

As one of Italy's most powerful businessmen, Romeo Morretti spends his days brokering multimillion-dollar deals and his nights romancing Europe's most beautiful women. But a chance encounter at a busy intersection sends the international playboy's life hurling in a new direction. The desire that ignites between Romeo and lush Caribbean beauty Zoe Smith is impossible to resist. Their intimate display becomes public under Milan's bright Christmas lights when a blog leaks their secret affair and they're touted as the city's newest celebrity couple.

Between glittering A-list events and candlelit dinners at Romeo's villa, Zoe is living a life of glamour and endless pleasure alongside the dangerously handsome tycoon. Their high-profile holiday romance could even save her PR job at prestigious fashion house Casa Di Moda. Until secrets and lies threaten their passionate bond. Amid doubt and distrust, Romeo is accused of a crime that endangers his financial empire. He will have to fight to clear his name before they can share a future under the mistletoe...

For some strange reason, Romeo made her heart race and her temperature soar. Zoe wanted him gone, far away from her, before she embarrassed herself.

"Come on, Zoe, don't leave me in suspense. I need the 411 on you."

"If you must know, I'm the PR director at Casa Di Moda."

Nodding, he snapped his fingers. "I should have known you

worked in the fashion industry,” he said, his gaze sliding down her physique. “You’re stunning and you have a great sense of style, not to mention a unique, eye-catching look.”

Zoe didn’t respond, searched the streets once again for a taxicab. Romeo was buttering her up, trying to sweet-talk her because he felt guilty about the accident, but it wasn’t going to work. Immune to his charms, she wanted nothing to do with him, and gave him her back.

Undeterred, Romeo stepped forward, moved in so close Zoe could smell his minty-fresh breath. Her mind went blank, and her head spun.

[Dear Reader,](#)

One summer evening, while bike riding with my children, a distracted driver struck my five-year-old son with her car. Within minutes, the police and paramedics arrived on the scene and quickly assessed my son. Thankfully, he had no injuries, and the driver apologized profusely for the accident. I used this real-life experience as the opening scene for *Seduced by the Tycoon* at Christmas. From the moment Romeo Morretti and Zoe Smith meet, sparks ignite.

Consumed with guilt, Romeo will do anything to prove to Zoe he’s a stand-up guy who made a mistake, but the headstrong PR director won’t give him the time of day. To win her over, he pursues her relentlessly. Of course he does. He’s a Morretti millionaire; charming is his middle name!

I hope you enjoyed reading the eighth book in The Morretti

Millionaires series as much as I enjoyed writing it. Thank you for your support and encouragement over the past ten years. I am deeply grateful.

All the best in life and love,

Pamela Yaye

Seduced by the Tycoon at Christmas

Pamela Yaye



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PAMELA YAYE has a bachelor's degree in Christian education. Her love for African American fiction prompted her to pursue a career in writing romance. When she's not working on her latest novel, this busy wife, mother and teacher is watching basketball, cooking or planning her next vacation. Pamela lives in Alberta, Canada, with her gorgeous husband and adorable, but mischievous, son and daughter.

"We don't meet people by accident. They are meant to cross our path for a reason."

—Rubyanne from Read, Love and Learn

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[Chapter 1](#)

“Forget it. No way,” Romeo Morretti snapped, struggling to control his temper. Scowling though his publicist couldn’t see him through the phone, he turned off the stereo system inside his yellow Lamborghini Veneno and took a deep breath. Every morning as he drove to work, Giuseppe Del Piero called to discuss social events in and around Milan. But for the first time in eight years Romeo wished he’d let the call go to voice mail. “I’d sooner run through the city center naked singing ‘Ave Maria’ than appear on that pathetic gossip show.”

“But you love the spotlight,” Giuseppe argued. “Always have, always will.”

“In light of everything that’s happened in recent weeks I think it’s best I lie low,” he said, rubbing his tired eyes. Working fourteen-hour days, seven days a week, was starting to take its toll on him. Romeo loved his company, Morretti Finance and Investments, and wanted it to achieve even greater success. Hence, he was working around the clock. “I need to focus on my clients, instead of wasting my time doing magazine interviews and TV shows.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. The press love you, and they’re obsessed

with your fabulous, jet-setting lifestyle. You're the Italian version of James Bond minus the Secret Service thing. If you shy away from the public now it could hurt your bottom line."

"Life is about more than just money."

Giuseppe scoffed, as if he'd never heard anything more outrageous in his life. "Tell that to my three teenage daughters. The more moolah I give them, the more they want."

Romeo stopped at the intersection and stared out the window. His gaze landed on the corner newsstand, zeroing in on the headline splashed across the front of Celebrity Patella. He gripped the steering wheel so hard his veins throbbed.

Scanning the glossy magazine cover, he read the large, bold title—The Morretti Family, Sex, Lies and Secrets Exposed!—and gritted his teeth. For the umpteenth time, he wondered where he'd gone wrong, and cursed the day he'd met Lizabeth Larsen. He'd become acquainted with the lingerie model at a beach in Portugal and it had been lust at first sight.

How could Lizabeth do this to me? Doesn't she have a heart? Romeo couldn't wrap his head around what she'd done. They'd been broken up for over a year, and he hadn't seen or heard from her in months, so why now? Why was she trying to ruin him? She'd given a tell-all interview to the trashy gossip magazine, and now the entire city was buzzing about the salacious story. Lizabeth had shared intimate details about their sex life and had also bad-mouthed his family. Thankfully, his brothers and cousins lived in the States and would probably never see the

issue. Romeo, on the other hand, couldn't go anywhere in Milan without people staring at him.

He swallowed hard, but the lump in his throat grew. The negative things Lizabeth had said about his family played in his mind. To his shock, she'd discussed his nephew's fatal pool accident at his brother Emilio's estate, the embezzlement accusations against his cousin Nicco, and his cousin Rafael's baby-mama drama in Washington years earlier. But what hurt Romeo more than anything were the lies she'd told about his deceased mother. He only hoped his grandparents, who lived in a small coastal fishing town, didn't hear about Lizabeth's interview.

"You have to do the show," Giuseppe insisted, raising his voice.

His enthusiasm was palpable, but Romeo didn't share in his publicist's excitement. "I don't have to do shit. It's my decision, not yours, so tell your producer friend at the TV station that I'm not interested in doing a sit-down interview tomorrow. Or any day for that matter."

"Lizabeth made explosive claims about you, and I hear she's planning to publish a tell-all book about your on-again, off-again relationship later as well."

Reeling from the news, Romeo spoke through clenched teeth. "Good for her."

"Want some advice?"

No, he thought, raking a hand through his thick brown hair.

I want you to quit badgering me, and cancel all of my public appearances for the rest of the week. I need a break. I'm feeling run down, and I don't want to end up in the hospital again. Romeo shuddered to think what would have happened if Giuseppe hadn't found him in his home office that fateful day in August, and pressed his eyes shut to clear his mind. His hospital stay last year had been a huge wake-up call, and Romeo wasn't going to let anyone or anything stand in the way of his health or his happiness. If that meant keeping a low profile, so be it.

"Go on Lifestyle TV, tell your side of the story, then give Elizabeth a million-dollar cash settlement to make her disappear once and for all..."

His eyes wide, he started down at his cell phone, unable to believe what he was hearing. Romeo didn't need this shit. Not today. Every day brought new headaches and problems, and yesterday was no exception. As he was leaving his office for the day, he'd received a phone call from his executive team, and their conversation had left a bitter taste in his mouth. One of his favorite clients, Julio Mario Domínguez, had publicly humiliated Romeo's staff at a business conference in Venice, and his repeated attempts to contact the billionaire businessman had been unsuccessful. The Colombian native was one of his wealthiest and most influential clients, and even though Romeo wanted to keep the entrepreneur happy, he had to stick up for his staff.

"Trust me. I know what I'm doing. It's the only answer. If

you don't give her a cash settlement, she'll crucify you and your family in the media."

"A cash settlement? For what? Being mean and vindictive? No way. It's not going to happen." It was only seven o'clock in the morning, but his day was going from bad to worse. Talking to Giuseppe, a jovial character with a boisterous laugh, usually put Romeo in a good mood. Not today. His publicist wanted him to go on TV and dish the dirt about his family, and if that wasn't bad enough, he wanted him to pay Lizabeth off. Hell. To. The. No.

The light turned green, and Romeo stepped on the gas pedal, speeding down the street as if he were on a racetrack. He couldn't believe this was happening—again. Not after everything he'd done for Lizabeth over the years. During their tumultuous, drama-filled relationship, he'd showered her with designer clothes, Cartier jewelry, luxury cars and world-class trips, and how did she repay him? By dragging his name through the mud. Through friends, he'd learned of her bitter quest for revenge, and if Romeo didn't respect her ailing father he'd sue her. "I've given Lizabeth enough money to last a lifetime. I'm not giving her another dime."

An awkward silence infected the phone line. Romeo knew Giuseppe was upset, but he had to do what was right for him, not his publicist. A clean, refreshing scent wafted through the open window, and Romeo took a deep breath. The sun was shining, and the sky was a radiant shade of blue, but the balmy November temperature wasn't enough to brighten his mood. He was so

angry about Elizabeth's interview his entire body was tense, and he decided a midday workout was in order. At lunch, instead of going to his favorite restaurant with his executive team, he'd use the speed bag in the office gym. Then he'd have a Cuban cigar. He hadn't smoked since he was discharged from the hospital last year, but he was having the day from hell, and a stogie was the perfect antidote for his stress.

"You're the boss," Giuseppe said. "Like you always say, there's no such thing as bad press. We'll find a way to spin the story to your advantage, and you'll come out on top."

I was wrong. There is such a thing as bad press, Romeo thought with a heavy heart. This was a nightmare. He'd never been more humiliated in his life, and he hated the cruel, spiteful things his ex-fiancée had said about the people he loved most. Thinking about the lies Elizabeth had told the magazine about him, Romeo decided to call Markos later for legal advice.

A smile curled the corners of his lips. Two weeks ago, he'd traveled to Los Angeles to be the best man at his brother's wedding. It still blew his mind that Markos had tied the knot. Years ago, Markos was a workaholic, determined to be the most successful attorney in the state of California, but program director for a non-profit organization, Tatiyana Washington had captured his heart, and now they were husband and wife.

Giuseppe yapped on and on about creative and innovative ways to increase Romeo's online presence, but Romeo's mind wandered. A year ago, the buzz about his company had reached

an all-time high. Thanks to his team, his carefully cultivated image had not only added to his insane popularity in Italy, it attracted women like a sale sign in a boutique window. In the hopes of meeting him, socialites and heiresses had flocked to his office in droves, and once there, he had convinced them to invest with his company. A favorite of gossip bloggers, there was a time when Romeo enjoyed the spotlight. The more brazen he was, the more the public seemed to love him, especially the opposite sex.

Slowing down to allow a jaywalker to cross the street, he reflected on the highs and lows of his life in Milan. He'd done it all—partied too hard, drunk too much and spent money recklessly—but after his hospital stay he'd turned over a new leaf. Quit drinking, smoking cigars and eating like a college frat boy. At thirty-two, hooking up with a different woman every night of the week had lost its appeal, and although he had a life most men would kill for, Romeo felt empty inside, lonely now that his closest friends had wives and children. One by one, his brothers and cousins had found love, and they were all ridiculously happy. Romeo wondered if he was missing out on something. Everyone around him was moving forward, and he was stuck in neutral. For months, he'd been playing it safe, doing everything right and following his doctor's orders, but Christmas was right around the corner and he wanted to enjoy the holidays without stressing out about his health. Or his bitter ex-fiancée.

“Handle it, Giuseppe. I don't want this story hanging over my head during the holidays. Make it go away, now.”

“Nessun problema. Leave everything to me. I know just what to do.”

“You better,” he said in a stern voice. “Or you’re fired.”

Giuseppe chuckled. “You wouldn’t survive a day without me, and you know it.”

A grin overwhelmed his mouth. It was true. Giuseppe wasn’t just his publicist, he was also a confidante and a trusted friend. If not for Giuseppe, Romeo wouldn’t be alive. “Are you on your way to the office or are you having breakfast with Bellisa again?”

“Bellisa is my breakfast,” he said with a throaty laugh. “I’ll give you a ring in the afternoon, but promise me you’ll give some thought to what I said about Lizabeth.”

“There’s nothing to think about.” Switching lanes, Romeo punched the gas. “I’m not giving her a damn thing.”

“A million euros is chump change to you.”

“Dammit, Giuseppe, it’s not about the money.”

Making a right turn, Romeo heard something hit the passenger-side door and slammed on the brakes. Frowning, he peered in the rearview mirror. His heart stopped. His cell phone fell from his hands and dropped to his feet. Fearing the worst, Romeo took off his seat belt, threw open his car door and ran around the trunk.

Romeo surveyed the scene. A purple mountain bike lay in a tangled heap on the road along with the contents of a handbag. A woman of Caribbean descent with caramel-brown skin, delicate facial features and waist-length black braids sat on the sidewalk,

shaking uncontrollably. Filled with concern, he moved toward her, speaking in a quiet tone of voice.

“Miss, are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Romeo tried to help her to her feet, but she pushed his hands away. Standing, she straightened her short sleeveless dress and brushed the dirt off the hem. Watching her every move, he admired everything about her—her almond-shaped eyes, the beauty mark above her lips, the diamond hoop earrings that grazed her shoulders and her womanly physique. He guessed she was in her early twenties, around the same age as his kid sister, Francesca, and suspected she was an exchange student.

Glaring at him, it was obvious she was pissed, and Romeo didn’t blame her. He should have been paying attention to the road instead of arguing with Giuseppe about his ex. He’d messed up, and now because of his mistake the cyclist was staring at him with tears in her eyes.

Romeo swallowed hard. Feeling like a specimen under a microspore, his throat dried, and sweat drenched his suit jacket. If looks could kill, he’d be dead, and the coroner would be notifying his next of kin. For the first time in Romeo’s life he was tongue-tied, in such a state of shock he couldn’t speak. And not just because he’d accidentally struck a cyclist with his car; he was transfixed by the woman’s natural beauty. There weren’t a lot of people of color in Milan, and she was such a knockout that Romeo couldn’t stop staring at her. Her full, sensuous lips and her Lord-have-mercy curves were captivating, instantly seizing

his attention.

Romeo was intrigued by her, wanted to know her story. Where was she from? And most importantly, was she single? The woman was off-the-charts hot, and if they'd met under different circumstances he definitely would have asked her out. But since Romeo didn't want her to think he was an insensitive jerk, he quit lusting and wore an apologetic smile. "Miss, I feel horrible about what happened."

Drawn to her, he stepped forward, eager to make amends for what he'd done. Romeo felt like an ass. Guilt-ridden, he opened his mouth to apologize again, but her strident voice filled the air.

"Are you blind?" she shouted. "You could have killed me with your stupid sports car!"

A crowd of curious onlookers had gathered around them, and Romeo wished everyone—except the dark-skinned beauty with the American accent—would disappear. Well-traveled, with vacation homes and real estate properties all across the United States, he guessed she was visiting from New York and wondered how long she'd be in Milan.

The woman gestured to the road, an incredulous expression on her flawless oval face. "I had the right of way, but you turned right into me. What's wrong with you? You couldn't wait ten seconds for me to cross the street?"

"Miss, I'm sorry. I didn't see you—"

"Of course you didn't see me," she shot back. "You were too busy on your cell phone."

“You’re right,” Romeo conceded. “I should have been paying more attention to the road.”

“Jerk,” she mumbled, shaking her head in disgust. “You should lose your license.”

Gasps and whispers ripped through the well-dressed Milanese crowd. A camera flashed in Romeo’s face, then another one, and he knew it was just a matter of time before everyone in the city knew about his morning traffic accident. Great, he thought, shoving his hands into the pockets of his black, suit pants. That’s all I need. More bad press.

Horns blared, and pedestrians complained as they maneuvered their way around the accident scene. An irate driver in a gleaming white Porsche stuck his head out the window and yelled in Italian about the traffic jam. Romeo’s car was blocking the intersection, but the street was so narrow that there was nowhere for him to move it. “The accident was my fault, and I take full responsibility for it,” he said, hoping to defuse the situation. “I’ll pay to replace your bike, your dress and all of the contents in your purse as well—”

“How benevolent of you, Mr. Morretti, but I don’t want anything from you.”

His mouth fell open, and seconds passed before he spoke. “You know who I am?”

“Of course I know who you are. I haven’t been living under a rock the last two years.”

“You live here? In Milan?” Romeo asked. “Where?”

A bearded man holding a leather satchel made his way through the crowd. “My name is Lucan Bianchi and I’m an emergency room doctor at Milan General Hospital,” he explained, addressing the cyclist. “Is it okay if I check you out while we wait for the paramedics to arrive?”

Nodding, the woman allowed the doctor to lead her over to a wooden bench under a cluster of lush green trees, and she took seat. To Romeo’s relief, most of the spectators put their cell phones away and moved on. He heard sirens in the distance, knew the police were on their way to the scene and considered calling Giuseppe back. This was bad. Worse than the stories about him in the tabloids. He’d screwed up and needed his public relations director to work his magic again.

Romeo shook his head. No. He’d handle it. He’d take responsibility for his actions and would deal with the consequences, whatever they may be. But a chilling thought came to mind, and a shudder ripped through his body. What if there was footage of his accident? If the police brought charges against him, would his reputation suffer? Would his billionaire clients take their investments elsewhere? His pulse drummed in his ears, deafening him. Romeo could see the headlines now: Woman Struck by Morretti Millionaire! Wealthy Businessman Charged with Careless Driving! Jail Time for Bad-Boy Tycoon!

“Zoe, where are you visiting from?”

The sound of the doctor’s voice interrupted Romeo’s thoughts. Eager to learn more about the cyclist, he listened closely to

the conversation she was having with the physician. It was a challenge, but Romeo blocked out all the noises on the busy street and committed everything about her to memory. Her name was Zoe Smith; she'd lived in Milan for two years and was the PR director for the fashion house Casa Di Moda. He'd never heard of the company before, but made a mental note to Google it when he returned to his car.

Trying to appear casual, he moved closer to the bench and listened in. Romeo was used to meeting beautiful females and had no shortage of admirers, but this was the first—and only—time in his life a woman had left him flustered, desperate to be in her presence. He couldn't take his eyes off of her and wished he could trade places with the doctor. The physician had the pleasure of touching her, and as Romeo stared at the dark-skinned beauty, all he could think about was kissing her. Undressing her. Making love to her at his villa. And he would. But first, Romeo had to save his neck.

Chapter 2

Zoe Smith stood on the corner of the traffic-congested road, watching the female paramedics fawn all over Romeo Morretti, and rolled her eyes. They were flirting with him, acting as if they were socializing at a cocktail party rather than at the scene of a traffic accident. Their behavior was annoying her. They were flipping their hair, batting their eyelashes, laughing outrageously every five seconds. Why were they showering him with attention? Why weren't they assessing her—the victim? Wasn't that their

job? To help her?

Romeo caught her staring at him, and her heart stopped. Zoe wanted to look away, but his gaze held her in its seductive grip. Even though she was a mature, thirty-two-year-old woman, she couldn't muster the strength to break free. The media—and every female in the city—loved the brazen playboy, and although she'd seen numerous pictures of him in the tabloids, Zoe still gave him the once-over. Dressed in a tailored suit, it was easy for her to see why socialites, actresses and pop stars threw themselves at him on a daily basis. He was eye candy. The kind of man women fantasized about, men idolized and children adored. Romeo was twenty feet away from her, but he still made her breathless. Light-headed. It was more than just his ridiculous sex appeal and his dark, soulful features; his calm, cool demeanor drew her in. He was trouble though, no doubt about it. Thoughts she had no business having about Romeo filled her mind, and she couldn't escape them.

Giving her head a shake, Zoe tore her gaze away from his handsome face. She hadn't traveled all the way to Milan to get played by a cocky bachelor with a reputation with the ladies. She'd read the stories in the tabloids, and now that she'd met Romeo Morretti for herself, Zoe knew the gossip was true. According to published reports, he was used to getting his way in the boardroom and the bedroom, but she wasn't going to give him the time of day. She was actively searching for Mr. Right, not a bad-boy businessman who reeked of arrogance.

Zoe glanced at her wristwatch, saw that it was eight thirty and felt a rush of panic. The staff meeting started in thirty minutes, and since she didn't want to miss Aurora's announcement, she had to hurry. Her office was only ten minutes away, and once the police finished their investigation, she'd be on her way. Her colleagues at Casa Di Moda were convinced they were receiving Christmas bonuses today, and the news was music to her ears.

For the first time that morning, Zoe smiled. Drowning in debt, she planned to use the money to pay off her bills and buy a plane ticket to New York so she could spend the holidays with her family. Milan was expensive, and it was impossible for her to save money when she had to network every night of the week. Not that Zoe was complaining. She attended red-carpet events, charity galas and award shows, and mingled with the most important people in the fashion industry. In two short years, she'd developed strong relationships with magazine editors, beauty bloggers and supermodels, and her boss was thrilled with the progress she'd made. Best of all, she loved the energy and environment at Casa Di Moda, and hoped to work at the up-and-coming fashion house for many years to come.

"Ms. Smith, would you like to add anything else to your statement?"

Surfacing from her thoughts, Zoe shook her head and faced the police officer with the heavy accent and wiry black hair. "What happens now?" she asked. "Are you going to charge Mr. Morretti with distracted driving?"

The officer closed his notebook and tucked it into his front pocket. “No.”

“Why not? He was yapping on his cell phone and driving recklessly when the accident occurred. If that isn’t the definition of distracted driving, I don’t know what is.”

“Witnesses said Mr. Morretti had the right of way when you slammed into his car.”

“Yeah, right. And I was an astronaut in a past life,” she quipped.

The officer frowned. “Why would the witnesses lie? Furthermore, I interviewed everyone in the café across the street and the staff said the same thing. You crossed illegally.”

Stumped, Zoe closed her mouth. Am I at fault? Did I cause the accident? She tried to remember what happened, to visualize the scene in her mind’s eye, but her brain was foggy. Last night, she’d stayed up late working on the December events calendar, and Zoe was so tired, she’d dozed off at the kitchen table while reading the morning newspaper.

Her gaze landed on her mountain bike, lying in pieces on the cobblestoned road, and her shoulders sagged. Milan was flat, with no hills or valleys, and biking around the city was not only fun and economical, it was a great way for her to learn her way around. It had been a gift from her colleague, Giovanni Costa, and Zoe had fond memories of them cycling through the countryside, talking, laughing and cracking jokes. The associate designer was the brother she’d never had, and if not for his friendship she never

would've survived her first month in Milan.

"Am I free to go?" Zoe asked, addressing the police officers.

"You should go to the hospital to get checked out," the emergency room doctor advised, pushing his rimless eyeglasses up the bridge of his nose. "I think it's for the best."

The police officer with the crooked teeth nodded his head. "I agree."

Zoe was annoyed, but she didn't argue with the three men crowded around her on the wooden bench. It wasn't their fault Romeo Morretti had ruined her morning commute, and although she was tired of the doctor pressuring her to go to the hospital, she hid her frustration. "Thanks, but no thanks," Zoe said, rising to her feet. Pain coursed through her right ankle, but she ignored the discomfort. "I'm good."

Worry lines wrinkled the doctor's forehead. "But you're favoring your right side."

He was right; she was. Dodging his gaze, Zoe stared down at her wedge sandals. Her shin was sore and her legs ached, but since it was nothing a warm bath and a glass of Chianti couldn't cure, Zoe dismissed his concerns with a wave of her hand. "I'm fine. I don't need to go the hospital. I need to go to work, and if I don't leave now, I'll be late."

The men shared a worried look, and Zoe wondered if the police had the authority to take her to the hospital against her will. Anxious to get to the office, she crouched down on the road, grabbed her broken handbag and stuffed her personal items back

inside. Her cell phone and her tablet were both cracked, and her makeup case was caked in mud. Pausing to look at the family pictures that had fallen out of her journal, her vision blurred. As she'd collided with Romeo Morretti's car, images of her parents and her younger sister had flashed before her eyes. If her cell phone weren't broken, she'd call them right now just to hear their voices. It was hard being away from her close-knit Trinidadian family, but Zoe loved living and working in Milan and wanted to help make Casa Di Moda a household name.

Standing, Zoe glanced around for a taxi stand. Spotting one across the street in front of a bakery, she swung her purse over her shoulder and gingerly approached the intersection. If she hurried, she could make it to the staff meeting on time, and her boss would never know she'd been an hour late for work. Zoe still couldn't wrap her mind around what had happened. Her bike was destroyed, but she was alive and well, and that was all that mattered.

"Hey! Wait! Where are you going?" the police officer said, raising his voice. "You can't leave your bike on the road all day. Someone could get hurt."

Zoe frowned. What did he expect her to do? Carry it on her back to work? His tone was sharp, implying that his patience was limited. To smooth things over, she apologized for the inconvenience and thanked the officers in Italian for their help.

Everyone on the sidewalk—including Romeo Morretti—gawked at her. No doubt, they were shocked she spoke Italian.

Everyone was. Two years ago, while traveling through Europe, she'd fallen in love with Milan, and after a chance meeting with up-and-coming fashion designer Aurora Bordellio at a networking event, she'd landed the public relations director position at Casa Di Moda. Thrilled to be living and working in her favorite city in the world, she'd devoted herself to learning the language, culture and history. Taking night classes at the local university and attending community events were the wisest things she'd ever done. When locals heard her speaking Italian, they instantly warmed up to her and went out of their way to help her.

The light changed, and pedestrians flooded the street. Taking her time, despite all of the people rushing past her, Zoe slowly crossed the intersection. High-rise buildings crowded the skyline, but she could still make out the top of the golden-painted statue on the Duomo and admired its beauty. Described by locals as the Italian Manhattan, Milan was a fast-paced city packed with entrepreneurs, university students, attractive women in the latest designer fashions, and wide-eyed tourists toting cameras and backpacks.

Zoe was tired and her ankle ached, but the sounds and aromas around her were invigorating. Milan had it all—historical buildings and monuments, breathtaking architecture, outstanding restaurants, and a vibrant nightlife—and every day, Zoe found something new to love about the city. Her work visa expired in the new year, and although she missed her friends and family back home, she teared up at the thought of leaving Milan.

“Where are you going?”

Zoe glanced over her shoulder and saw Romeo Morretti standing directly behind her, and gulped. What does he want? Her eyes zeroed in on him, taking in every aspect of his six-foot-three frame. He had a full head of curly brown hair and skin that looked smooth to the touch, and his lips were so thick and juicy, thoughts of kissing him overwhelmed her mind. He smelled of shampoo and aftershave; the strong, masculine scent tickled her nose. His piercing gaze and his boyish smile were a lethal combination. Zoe feared if she didn't move, her knees would buckle, and she'd fall headfirst into his arms. Desperate to put some distance between them, she increased her pace, speed walking toward the taxi stand even though her ankle was killing her.

“Zoe, please, wait. Don't run off. I can drive you wherever you need to go.”

Her feet slowed. Not because of his generous, unexpected offer, but because of the way he said her name. With tenderness and warmth, as if they were lovers and he was pleading for forgiveness. Deleting the thought from her mind, Zoe knew it was important to keep her guard up and wisely took cover behind the green taxi stand. Her mouth was dry, and her stomach was twisted in knots, but she managed to sound calm. “No, thank you.”

“Why not?”

“I've seen you drive, and I don't want to end up in the

emergency ward.”

The light in his eyes dimmed, and Zoe felt guilty for insulting him. She remembered what the police officers had told her about the accident. According to witnesses, she was to blame, so she had no right to insult Romeo Morretti. Still, he made her nervous, uncomfortable. She wished he'd return to his fancy sports car and leave her alone.

“Where are you going?”

“Work,” she said, trying to conceal her frustration. Hot and thirsty, all Zoe could think about was drinking a tall, cold glass of ice water, and hoped Giovanni had remembered to bring snacks to the staff meeting. “I’m late, and if I don’t hustle, my boss will kill me.”

“Work? In your condition?” His eyebrows slanted in a frown. “You should go home and rest. I’m sure your boss will understand.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a pest?”

Romeo gave a hearty chuckle. “No, never.”

Damn, even his laugh is sexy, Zoe thought as she wiped her damp palms along the sides of her dress. It wasn’t every day she met a man of Romeo Morretti’s calibre—someone suave, charming and dapper—and being in his presence had an odd effect on her. Every time their eyes met she felt short of breath, as if she were going to have an asthma attack—but she didn’t have asthma. Licking her lips, she searched the street for a cab.

“Zoe, what’s the number for Casa Di Moda? I’ll call on your

behalf.”

A shiver tickled her spine. Hearing her name come out of his broad, sensuous mouth warmed her all over. Seconds passed before she could speak, and when Zoe finally reunited with her voice, it sounded foreign to her ears. What’s the matter with me? Why am I acting skittish? For some strange reason, Romeo made her heart race. Zoe wanted him gone, far away from her, before she embarrassed herself.

“No thanks, I’m good. Don’t bother.”

“I should have known you worked in the fashion industry,” he said, his gaze sliding down her physique. “You’re stunning, and you have a great sense of style, not to mention a unique, eye-catching look.”

Zoe didn’t respond, searched the streets once again for a taxicab. Romeo was buttering her up, trying to sweet-talk her because he felt guilty about the accident, but it wasn’t going to work. Immune to his charms, she gave him her back.

Undeterred, Romeo stepped forward, moved in so close, Zoe could smell his minty-fresh breath. Her mind went blank and her senses spun. They were standing side by side now, shoulder to shoulder, and for the second time in minutes, Zoe inhaled sharply.

“You speak Italian very well,” Romeo said, his tone filled with awe. “How did you learn the language?”

Doesn’t he have somewhere to be? His office? A meeting? On his private jet with a bevy of supermodels? Zoe told herself

to be nice and forced a smile on her lips. “I took Italian in high school and throughout university, so I had a good handle on the language before I moved to Milan.”

Annoyed that her favorite pair of sunglasses had been destroyed in the accident, she shielded her eyes from the sun with her hands. The sky was a brilliant shade of blue, the breeze was warm, and a delicious scent wafted out of the bakery, eliciting groans from her stomach. Zoe thought of going inside the shop to grab a bite to eat, but decided against it. She was pressed for time, and she feared Romeo Morretti would follow her inside if she did. The last thing she wanted was to be alone with him in a cozy, intimate setting. He made her jittery, and there was no telling what would happen if he touched her again.

“I feel horrible about the accident, and I want to make it up to you.”

Zoe didn’t answer, hoping that if she stayed quiet, he’d take the hint and go away.

“I’d like to take you out for dinner tonight at Dolce Vita Milan,” he said.

His broad smile revealed straight, blinding white teeth and dimples in each cheek. He was a pretty boy who was used to getting his way, and although he wasn’t her type, Zoe had to admit that Romeo was one fine-looking man. A handful, too, according to her favorite blog. Every week, there was a story about him hooking up with an Italian actress or model. Zoe didn’t doubt it. He had a devilish expression on his face, as if he was

cooking up mischief, and Zoe suspected this was his MO—flash a wink and a smile, then pour on the charm. She made up her mind not to be his next victim. Dubbed Diavolo Sexy by the local press, which meant sexy devil in Italian, Romeo could have any woman he wanted, and Zoe didn't doubt that he had.

“Put your number in my phone,” he instructed, taking his cell out of his back pocket and offering it to her. “I’ll call you this afternoon so we can hook up.”

Zoe narrowed her eyes. Hook up? After five minutes of conversation? Boy, bye!

Disgust must have shown on her face, because Romeo wore an apologetic smile and brushed his fingertips against her forearm.

“What is it, bellissima? You look upset. Did I say something wrong?”

Beautiful? Overcome by his close proximity, Zoe dodged his sexy, steely stare. Romeo thinks I’m beautiful? Goose bumps flooded her skin. Feeling out of sorts, as if a shy, flustered teenager had suddenly inhabited her body, her mouth dried and her heart beat in triple time. “You don’t have to buy me dinner. It was an accident, and since the police said I’m to blame, you don’t owe me anything.”

“I’d still like to take you out tonight. I love being in the presence of smart, accomplished women. I think we’ll have a great time together at Dolce Vita Milan.”

Swallowing hard, Zoe fingered the gold pendant at her neck. “Thanks, but no thanks,” she said, still convinced he was up to

something. “We’re strangers, and—”

“That’s why I want us to have dinner. We’ll have a nice meal, a bottle of your favorite wine, and get to know each other better. Doesn’t that sound like fun, Zoe?”

Romeo licked his lips with such finesse her skin tingled. It was a struggle, but Zoe maintained her composure, didn’t wither under the intensity of his dark, smoldering gaze.

“I can’t. I have a work function to attend.”

“I understand. No problem. We can have dinner tomorrow night. Same time and place.”

Zoe shook her head. “I have plans with friends.”

“Cancel them.” Glancing around, he lowered his face to hers and spoke in a quiet voice. “We need to get our stories straight about the accident. I don’t want any surprises.”

His words didn’t register. “I don’t understand.”

“I think you do, but we can discuss the details tomorrow night at dinner.”

A taxicab stopped at the curb, and Zoe sighed in relief. “I have to go.”

“Not so fast.” Romeo put his hand on the passenger side door, thwarting her escape. “You still haven’t given me your cell number. How am I supposed to finalize our plans if I don’t know how to reach you?”

Zoe couldn’t believe his nerve. Who does he think he is? My man? The time for being nice was over. It was time to make herself crystal clear. “We’re not having dinner tomorrow night or

any other night. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go."

He looked shell-shocked, like a survivor stumbling off a shipwrecked boat. Zoe suspected a woman had never told him no before. Proud of herself for not falling victim to his charms, she gestured to the door and smiled her thanks when he reluctantly opened it.

"Zoe, please, reconsider meeting with me. I know we can work something out."

"There's nothing to reconsider."

To her surprise, Romeo reached into his pocket, took out his wallet and handed the driver several dollar bills. Lowering his head through the open window, his cologne engulfing the compact car, he spoke to the driver in Italian.

His words made her heart smile. Take this beautiful woman anywhere she wants to go. Zoe couldn't deny it, the man had a way with words. Romeo straightened to his full height, and watching him made her pulse race. He waved at her, but Zoe dropped her gaze to her lap. Since Zoe didn't want to encourage Romeo's advances, she told the taxi driver to step on it.

Chapter 3

On the outside, Casa Di Moda headquarters in the Milan city center was nothing special, but Zoe called the two-story property her second home. Housed in a brown brick building, with the name of the fashion house written on the windows in fine script, the decor was clean and simple.

Breezing through the front door, Zoe smiled and waved

at her colleagues. The interior had bright colors, scrumptious chairs and couches, and vintage mirrors throughout the main floor. Oversize photographs of ad campaigns and fashion shows beautified the walls, and as Zoe entered the reception area, the tranquil atmosphere calmed her nerves. Despite the pain in her ankle, she moved with confidence.

The December program she'd created for Casa Di Moda was packed with creative holiday events, and Zoe was confident her boss would love it, especially the Men of Milan calendar. The idea had come to her days earlier after a loud, spirited conversation with her girlfriends on FaceChat, and Zoe couldn't wait to pitch it at the morning staff meeting.

Reaching the conference room door, she smoothed her hands over her braids and the front of her dress. It had been one hell of a morning, but her day was about to get better. Excitement coursed through her veins. Cha-ching! Zoe had big plans for her bonus. After she paid her bills and bought her plane ticket to New York, she'd donate the rest of the money to her favorite charity. Last year, she'd organized a Christmas toy drive at the office, and it had been a success. This year, Zoe planned to do more.

For some strange reason, an image of Romeo Morretti popped into her mind, derailing her thoughts. She'd done nothing wrong, so why did she feel guilty about turning down his dinner invitation? Zoe had a bad feeling about him, just knew that he was as cocky as the tabloids said he was, so why did she regret not giving him her cell phone number? Had she made a mistake?

During the taxicab ride, she'd read several articles about him on her tablet, and each story was more shocking than the one before. Born into one of the richest families in the country, Romeo had been educated in the finest schools and lived a life most people could only dream of. He owned real estate properties, premier restaurants, spas and fitness centers. Eight years after opening his company, Morretti Finance and Investments, his personal net worth had tripled. Not that Zoe was impressed by his staggering wealth. The most interesting thing she'd read about the brilliant businessman had nothing to do with his flamboyant lifestyle and celebrity friends. Every year, he donated millions of dollars to charity and even fed the homeless. Maybe he's more than just a bad-boy bachelor, she'd thought, staring at the images taken of him at local hospitals and orphanages. Maybe he has a heart.

Zoe shook her head to clear her mind. It didn't matter what she thought. She didn't have time to daydream about a man she'd never see again. She was late, and since every second counted, she gripped the door handle, turned it and peeked inside the conference room.

The blinds were drawn, allowing sunlight to fill the room, and decorative vases overflowing with peach and orange roses sweetened the air. Decorated in white with floor-to-ceiling windows, leather armchairs and contemporary art, the conference room was spacious and attractive. Fruit and pastry trays were on the table, and Zoe's mouth watered in anticipation.

Sighing in relief, Zoe eased open the door. Thankfully, Aurora

had her back to the door and was furiously writing notes on the Smart Board. Her husband, Davide, was staring down at his iPad. With his clean-cut looks and salt-and-pepper hair, the executive vice president often joked about feeling old. But he had a youthful air, and everyone on staff loved him.

“Come here,” Giovanni mouthed. “I saved you a seat. Hurry up.”

Hoping to go unnoticed, Zoe tiptoed across the room. The moment she sat down in the empty chair beside Giovanni, Aurora called her name.

“Zoe, how nice of you to join us,” she said, glancing over shoulder. “I hope my weekly staff meeting isn’t interrupting your very busy schedule.”

Her cheeks warmed and her stomach churned. Embarrassed that her boss was taking her to task in front of her colleagues, Zoe wore an apologetic smile. “Sorry I’m late Aurora, but I was in a—”

The designer spun around, startling her, and Zoe broke off speaking.

“Save it for someone who cares. We have work to do, and lots of it.”

Feeling her mouth drop open, she stared at her boss with wide eyes. Aurora never raised her voice, let alone yelled at her, so Zoe was shocked by her tone. The designer wasn’t just her boss, she was also a good friend, and her stinging retort hurt her feelings.

Aurora fussed with her multicolored scarf. Petite, with a

brown pixie cut, olive skin and a slender frame, she had perfect posture and impeccable manners. “Zoe, I’m sorry I yelled at you.” Sniffing, she dabbed her eyes with the back of her hand. “The last few weeks have been a nightmare...”

Her voice faltered, and she couldn’t finish her thought.

Zoe straightened in her chair, tried to make sense of what was going on with her boss. Was Aurora having a mental breakdown? she wondered, scrutinizing the designer’s appearance. Dark lines rimmed her eyes, but her black A-line dress complemented her shape, and the leopard-print heels she wore elongated her legs. Were the late nights, and early mornings, finally getting to her? Was she so overwhelmed with stress and fatigue she couldn’t function?

Rising from his leather chair at the head of the table, Davide stood behind his wife and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Casa Di Moda is in trouble, and we need your help.”

“What are you saying?” a graphic designer asked. “Is the company broke?”

Davide spoke in a solemn tone of voice. “No, but if we don’t turn things around in the next three months, we’ll have no choice but to file for bankruptcy.”

The room was so quiet, Zoe could hear her heart beating inside her chest. Was this a joke? A trick? She wondered if the powerhouse couple were pulling her leg, and studied their faces for clues. They looked serious, sounded serious, too, but Casa Di Moda couldn’t be in financial trouble. The line was popular;

celebrities wore their designs to award shows, movie premieres and industry events. They'd recently landed a multiyear contract with an international film company to design costumes.

"That's impossible," Giovanni argued, his short black curls flopping around his face. "We signed several deals this year, and high-end boutiques in Montreal, Dubai and Paris are chomping at the bit to carry our gowns as well."

Giovanni had a fun-loving personality, an outrageous sense of humor and an infectious laugh. He loved fine wine, Italian rap music, and had a different woman on his arm every week. He liked to joke about marrying her one day, but he was the big brother Zoe never had, and she'd never ruin their friendship by getting involved romantically with him.

"The film company backed out of the deal weeks ago, but we didn't know how to tell you." Davide wore a sad smile. "You worked hard on the presentation, and we didn't want to disappoint you, especially after everything you've done over the years to help the line succeed."

"How could this happen? We've given our blood, sweat and tears to this company for years, and now we have nothing to show for it," grumbled the creative director.

"Casa Di Moda isn't the only company feeling the pinch," Aurora said. "People aren't splurging on designer labels like they used to, and according to official figures, clothing, shoes and jewelry fell another eighteen percent over the last nine months."

"Households are under increasing pressure as they wrestle

with rising living costs,” Davide added. “There’s a lot of fear and uncertainty in the world right now. Consumers are being very conservative with their money, even the rich and famous.”

Staff members grumbled and complained, bombarding Aurora and Davide with questions and concerns. Zoe couldn’t speak. This couldn’t be happening. Not to Aurora and Davide. They had big hearts, and she admired their tireless work ethic. Married for over a decade, the couple had no children, but referred to Casa Di Moda as their baby and treated everyone at the company like family. It was hard to listen to her colleagues bash them, but every time Zoe tried to come to the couple’s defense, someone interrupted her.

“Everyone, please settle down. I’m still the boss, and I won’t tolerate this kind of behavior at my company. If you can’t be respectful, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

Silence fell across the room as Aurora spoke, but tension and anger polluted the air.

“It will be business as usual around here during the holidays, but Davide and I will be away from the office a fair bit, so we’ll need all of you to hold the fort while we’re aggressively seeking new investors who’ll help us take Casa Di Moda to the next level.”

An associate designer raised her hand. “Are you planning to file for bankruptcy in the new year? Should we be looking for other jobs?”

Aurora stared down at the beige carpet, as if the answer to the question were written there. “I don’t know,” she said in a quiet

tone of voice.

“Let’s not dwell on the negative.” Davide wore a broad smile. “Tonight’s the premiere of Amore in Tuscany, and we expect to see all of you at Anteo spazioCinema. You can’t get in the theater without your VIP pass, so guard it with your life.”

For weeks, Zoe had been looking forward to the movie premiere, but Aurora and Davide’s announcement had soured her mood. Casa Di Moda collaborated with several European directors to design movie sets and costumes, and the success of the film could mean more business for the company. Since Zoe wanted to see the fashion house succeed, she’d post about the event again on her social media pages once she got to her office.

“One last thing,” Aurora said, raising an index finger in the air. “If you have any ideas on how to help us turn things around and increase sales, please don’t hesitate to share them with us. Speak up. We want to hear from you.”

“I know a surefire way to boost sales and increase our popularity as well.”

Everyone in the room cranked their heads in Zoe’s direction but she wasn’t at all intimidated. She had this. Knew what she was talking about. Had the numbers to support her argument. And she was excited to share her knowledge with her colleagues.

“You do?” Interest sparked in Davide’s eyes.

“Well, don’t keep us in the dark.” Aurora spoke in a loud, animated voice. “What is it? What’s your brilliant idea for saving Casa Di Moda?”

“Create a plus-size line for curvy women.”

A scowl darkened Davide’s face, and the smile slid off Aurora’s thin pink lips.

“I don’t design clothes for big girls,” she spat. “And I never will.”

“Why not?” Zoe pressed, curious why her boss had shot down her idea. “According to published reports, the average woman in the United Kingdom is a size fourteen, and I think it’s high time we tap into that underserved and unappreciated market.”

“We will not. I style women from size zero to size eight, and that’s it.”

“But women don’t stop at size eight,” Zoe argued. “We come in all shapes and sizes. As a woman with curves, I know firsthand how stressful it is to find attractive designer clothes in Milan. And from what I hear on social media, it’s an issue all across Europe.”

Aurora inspected her French manicure. “That’s not my problem.”

Zoe took a moment to collect her thoughts. Having had this conversation with Jiovanni numerous times before, she stared at her best friend for help, but he dodged her gaze. Undeterred, Zoe returned her attention to her boss, forgetting about everyone else in the room and speaking from the heart. “Aurora, you make the most beautiful clothes, and I’d kill to wear your designs but I can’t because you don’t make them in my size. Why not create clothes for everyone? Why not share your talent with the world?”

“Because if I do I’ll never be taken seriously again as a

designer. I'll be shunned by the entire fashion community. At this stage in my career that's a risk I can't afford to take."

"You're a designer, and no one can ever take that away from you."

"We could call the line, Chic and Curvy," proposed an intern with colored braces.

"I love it!" Zoe said, unable to hide her excitement. The expression on Aurora's face said back off, but she had to speak her mind. Wouldn't be able to live with herself if she kept her feelings bottled up inside. Buying clothes had been an issue ever since she'd moved to Milan. If not for Jiovanni making dresses for her to wear to industry events, she'd be stuck ordering clothes online from the States.

"You have a God-given talent," Zoe continued. "And it's time you share your gift with the world, namely curvy beauties like me. Hey, voluptuous women love fashion, too!"

Her joke fell flat, and for the second time in minutes, an awkward silence filled the air. Needing help, Zoe stared around the table at her colleagues, but everyone avoided her gaze. Undeterred, she flipped open her journal and reviewed her notes.

"I think the Men of Milan calendar promotion would tie in well with the launch of a plus-size line," she explained, continuing her pitch.

Aurora perked up. "A Men of Milan calendar? Sounds dreamy! Tell me more."

"Everyone who buys a Casa Di Moda gown during the

Christmas holidays will receive a free calendar. People love getting free things, and I think this holiday promotion will be a hit.”

“I love it,” Aurora praised. “I think we should go all out. Let’s hire male models to serve champagne and pose for pictures with customers as well.”

Zoe tapped her pen on her notebook. “Christmas is several weeks away, but I’m going to get started on the Men of Milan today. We need to create buzz about our fabulous new holiday collection, and I think this is the best way to do it.”

“Who do you have in mind for the calendar?” Davide asked, cocking an eyebrow. “Money is tight right now, so you’ll have a very small budget for this project.”

“No problem. Women love to see men in uniform, right, ladies?”

For the first time since the meeting started, her colleagues smiled and nodded.

“I’m going to hire some local models and dress them up as firefighters, paramedics, police officers and doctors. I’m still working on the logistics, but I should have everything finished early next week.”

“I want the proposal tomorrow,” Aurora said.

Zoe gulped and her pen fell from her hands. Twenty-four hours? Is Aurora out of her mind? That’s not enough time to pull everything together!

A cell phone rang, filling the air with a popular Italian pop

song.

Smiling sheepishly, Davide took his cell out of his pocket, switched it off and put it on the table. "Great work, Zoe. I can tell everyone in here is really excited about this holiday promotion, and I'm pumped about it, too. Well done."

Thrilled that she had her bosses' support, Zoe jotted down ideas as they came to her. "How long will it take for the plus-size line to be ready?" she asked. "I think it would be cool if we had some women posing in Casa Di Moda gowns draped all over the models, don't you?"

Anger flashed in Aurora's eyes, and she spoke through clenched teeth. "We're not doing the plus-size line. Just the calendar. Got it?"

Worried she'd lose her temper if Aurora yelled at her again, Zoe picked up her glass and sipped her water. The self-made woman struck the fear of God in people, but Zoe wasn't going to let anyone disrespect her. "I'm disappointed that you won't consider my suggestion, but you're the boss, and I respect your decision," she said with a shrug. "If you don't want to expand the line and increase sales, there's nothing I can do."

Aurora seemed to shrink right before Zoe's eyes. With her head down and her shoulders hunched, she looked fragile and scared. Turning her face toward the windows, she gazed at the sky and fiddled with her wedding ring. For all her wealth and success, she was stubborn and insecure, and Zoe had never pitied anyone more.

“As you all know, the Christmas Wonderland Ball will be held on December 20, and I don’t have to tell you how important this event is for Casa Di Moda. Everyone who’s anyone will be there, and it’s a great networking opportunity for us all.”

“How many tables will we have this year?” asked the human resources director, straightening in her chair. “Is everyone on staff invited?”

Aurora and Davide shared a troubled look, and Zoe knew the couple was about to share more bad news with the staff. Every year, famous names from fashion, film, politics, business and the world of sports attended the black-tie event, which raised millions of dollars for the local children’s hospital in Milan. It had the most expensive and coveted tickets of the year, and Zoe was looking forward to attending her first Christmas Wonderland Ball.

“I wish everyone could go, but the cost of the ball has dramatically increased this year to 100,000 euros a table. Only the executive team can go,” Aurora explained.

“That’s all for today, everyone.” Davide opened the door. “Back to work.”

Staff members filed out of the room wearing long faces, and Zoe couldn’t recall ever feeling so low. She wanted to stay behind to speak to Aurora privately, but decided against it. Now wasn’t the right time. Filled with sympathy, Zoe watched the couple embrace. It was bad enough Casa Di Moda was struggling financially, and since she didn’t want to make things worse for

Aurora and Davide by arguing with them about expanding the line, Zoe grabbed her things and hurried through the open door.

Needing a moment to catch her breath, Zoe ducked inside the ladies' room and locked herself in a stall. If I'm a valuable member of the team why won't Aurora and Davide take my ideas seriously? And why did Aurora roll her eyes when I pressed her for details about the plus-size line? Does she want to save Casa Di Moda from bankruptcy or not?

Zoe used the bathroom, then washed her hands. Deep down, she feared things were going to get worse at Casa Di Moda in the coming weeks, and wondered what that would mean for her future. Will I have a job after the holidays? Will I be forced to leave Milan for good?

As Zoe studied her reflection in the mirror, her mind flashed back to her conversation with Romeo Morretti that morning. A thought came to mind. He was a businessman with deep pockets who owned an investment company. Someone with billionaire friends and clients. Maybe if she reached out to him he could help Casa Di Moda—Zoe shook her head, told herself it was a bad idea. No good could come out of calling Romeo Morretti. From what she'd read about him, he was an opportunist who preyed on vulnerable people. Since Zoe didn't like playing with fire, she pushed the thought from her mind. Yanking open the door, she marched down the hallway toward her office, determined to finish her paperwork before the six o'clock movie premiere.

Chapter 4

"I come bearing gifts," Jiovanni announced, poking his head inside the door of Zoe's office on Thursday afternoon. Wearing a broad grin, his eyes alight with mischief, he strolled inside the room clutching a wine bottle in one hand and a garment bag in the other. "After that staff meeting from hell this morning, I figured you could use a pick-me-up, so I brought you a snack."

Hard at work at her desk, Zoe glanced up from the field sales report she was reading and put down her yellow highlighter. "When did Chianti become an afternoon snack?"

"When Aurora announced that Casa Di Moda was floundering and had the nerve to ask us to save it." His smile disappeared, and a frown crimped his lips. "I almost fell off my chair when she said profits were down eighteen percent from last year. Of course they're down! What does she expect? She's controlling as hell and stifling everyone's creativity."

All afternoon, Zoe had been holed up in her office, blogging, tweeting and posting about the premiere of Amore in Tuscany at Anteo spazioCinema. The response to her online messages on the Casa Di Moda social media pages was so overwhelming, Zoe knew the event was going to be a success. Celebrities would be in attendance, on hand to mingle with fans and pose for pictures. Zoe was pleased her hard work was paying off. She'd been promoting the event for weeks, and was confident her industry friends would come through for her in a big way at the premiere. In a good mood, she didn't want to rehash what had happened at the staff meeting, but it was obvious Jiovanni needed to vent. She

set aside her report and gave him her full attention, even though she had a million things to do before calling it quits for the day.

“I’m so angry, I could punch something.” Jiovanni put the wine bottle on the mahogany end table and chucked the garment bag on one of the velvet chairs. “My opinions and ideas aren’t valued here, and it’s frustrating.”

Zoe wore a sympathetic smile. “I hear you, J, and I know how you feel.”

“This goes down on record as being one of the worst days of my life,” Jiovanni confessed, plopping down on the edge of the desk, his shoulders hunched in defeat. “And it’s Aurora and Davide’s fault. If they respected their staff, instead of treating us like a bunch of dumb schmucks fresh out of fashion school, Casa Di Moda wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Don’t hold back,” she joked, hoping to make her best friend laugh. “Tell me how you really feel.”

Hanging his head, he rubbed at his eyes. “For the last nine years, I’ve given everything to Casa Di Moda, and now I have nothing to show for it.”

Filled with compassion, Zoe rose to her feet and came around her desk. “Don’t say things like that.” To comfort him, she rubbed his back. “All isn’t lost. We’ll help Aurora turn things around, and this time next year, Casa Di Moda will be more popular than ever.”

“How? How can we make a difference when Aurora is stubborn, and closed-minded?” His voice was resigned, and his

expression was grim. "I want answers, Zoe. Tell me how we fix things. How do we save this company and our careers?"

Stumped, Zoe didn't know what to say in response. Seconds passed, but nothing came to mind. Her thoughts returned to the staff meeting, and Zoe mentally reviewed everything that was said and done inside the conference room.

"I thought so. You don't know what to do, either."

"You're right, I don't, but I'm not giving up. I'm committed to Casa Di Moda, and I want to see it succeed."

Jiovanni spoke through clenched teeth. "And I don't?"

Silence descended on the room.

"What happened this morning?" Zoe asked, still bothered by his lack of support at the staff meeting. Educated and well-read, Jiovanni had an opinion about everything, so his silence during the discussion had bothered her. "Why did you leave me hanging? Why didn't you say anything when I lobbied for a plus-size line to be added to the holiday collection?"

"Because I knew Aurora would never go for it. You don't think I've tried to talk to her about expanding the woman's line a million times before? Well, I have, and the last time I submitted a detailed proposal, she tossed it in the trash." Jiovanni dusted his hands, as if they were covered in sand, and fervently shook his head. "Zoe, I don't know about you or anyone else on this sinking ship, but I'm done."

Zoe raised an eyebrow. "What are you saying?"

"That it's time I branched out and did my own thing in the

fashion world.”

“But you don’t have enough money saved up yet to rent a space,” she reminded him, recalling the conversation they had weeks earlier about his long-term goals.

“I know, but I’m sick of twiddling my thumbs. I’m just as talented as Aurora, and if I work my ass off, Designs by Jiovanni will be a household name in no time.”

“I believe in you, J. You can do anything you put your mind to.”

Seizing Zoe’s hand, Jiovanni pulled her into his arms and held her close to his chest. He danced around the room, expertly dodging the furniture, then lifted her up in the air. “Jiovanni, stop!” she yelled, scared he’d lose his footing and drop her on the carpet. She’d taken two Asprin at lunch, and her ankle wasn’t hurting her anymore, but she didn’t want to do anything to aggravate it. “What are you doing? This isn’t Milan Dance Championship and you’re not a professional dancer, so put me down right now.”

“What do you mean, what am I doing?” he repeated, flashing a toothy smile. “I’m dancing with the most beautiful woman in Milan, and it’s the best feeling in the world.”

Zoe sighed in relief when her feet touched the ground. She swatted his shoulder. “Don’t do that again. I almost had a heart attack when you picked me up, and I’m only thirty-two!”

“Quit playing. You know you loved it.” Lowering his face to hers, he kissed her forehead. “I love holding you in my arms,

Zoe. You know that.”

His fingers grazed her forearm. He was too close for comfort, moving nearer to her, and Zoe feared he was going to do something crazy like kiss her. That would ruin everything. They were friends and nothing more. She didn’t want a romantic relationship with Jiovanni. Not today, not ever. Feeling trapped, she ducked under his arms and slid behind one of the chairs.

Her computer pinged, informing her that she had a new email message, and Zoe returned to her desk. These days Jiovanni was more flirtatious than ever, and she wondered if it had anything to do with his longtime girlfriend dumping him weeks earlier. To cheer him up she’d brought him home-cooked meals, wine and an armload of action movies.

“You and I make a great couple.”

His gaze bore down on her, and a lascivious grin spread across his mouth.

“Everyone thinks so, even my nonna, and she’s never liked any of my girlfriends.”

To lighten the mood, Zoe cracked a joke.

“I’d never dream of arguing with your dear, sweet nonna,” she said, making her eyes wide. “But the next time you want to re-create something you saw on your favorite dance show, find another partner, because I prefer having my feet on the ground, not suspended in midair.”

Jiovanni stuck out his tongue and Zoe laughed. She could never stay mad at him; he made life fun, and she enjoyed his

company so much they spent most of their free time together, much to his nonna's delight.

"You know what they say about male fashion designers, don't you?"

Zoe wore a blank expression on her face. "No. What?"

"They're the world's best lovers."

"According to who? You and the womanizers in your bad-boy posse?"

"My posse? Can't say I've ever heard that expression before," he said with a hearty laugh. "You kill me, you know that? I just love your sass and wit."

"Good, so you won't mind when I ask you to leave."

"So, that's how it is? I bring you wine, and you show your appreciation by kicking me out. That's cold. What's up with that? I thought you were my girl?"

"I am, but you have to go. You're distracting me, and I have tons of work to do." Zoe accessed her email account from her computer and read her newest message. "I have to finish planning the Men of Milan calendar, but we'll meet up later at the premiere. I'll save you a seat."

"No, don't. I have plans tonight, and they don't involve Casa Di Moda."

"You're not going to the movie? Why not? Aurora's expecting everyone to be there."

"She doesn't run my life, and there's no way in hell I'm canceling my date."

“But the after-party’s at Milano Cocktail Bar, your favorite spot in the city.”

“Like I said, I have other plans.” Jiovanni took his cell phone out of his pocket and swiped his finger across the screen. “I met a woman last night at the Blue Note jazz bar, and I’m taking her to the new French restaurant in the Bicocca.”

As Zoe listened to Jiovanni boast about his flavor of the week, her gaze fell across the web page on her computer, and she clicked it. An image of Romeo Morretti filled her screen. At lunch, as she’d sat at her desk eating the steak panini she’d ordered from a nearby deli, she’d read several articles about him, and even watched a documentary about his family. The Morretti family was an accomplished, successful bunch who donated their time, money and resources to worthy causes. But it seemed the more money Romeo made, the more ostentatious he was. Sure, he gave generously to charity organizations, but former employees painted him in a bad light.

And they weren’t the only ones.

The interview his ex-fiancée had given to the tabloids was so outrageous, Zoe had abandoned her lunch and soaked up every juicy word. There were thousands of pictures of him online with his billionaire clients, supermodel dates and equally attractive family members. To her surprise, Romeo traveled more than a flight attendant. He was in Spain when his brother Emilio won his fifth Formula One championship, on hand when his cousin Demetri smashed another baseball record in the Windy City, at

the opening of Dolce Vita Dubai to support his cousin Nicco, and the dutiful best man at his brother Markos's glamorous, over-the-top wedding in LA.

Zoe wet her lips with her tongue. Staring at the images of Romeo, she decided the photographs didn't do him justice. They failed to capture his energy, his zest for life. Truth be told, she was intrigued by him. He was such a force, so charismatic, she couldn't get him out of her mind. No surprise. Like every other woman in the city, she was attracted to his dashing good looks. Not that it mattered. Nothing would come of it. They didn't travel in the same social circles, and Zoe had a better chance of winning Milan Idol than making a love connection with one of the richest men in the country.

"Before I go, I want you to check out these outfits I designed specifically for you." Jiovanni grabbed the garment bag off the chair, unzipped it and marched around the desk. His confidence was evident in his broad I'm-the-man grin. "Mi amore, prepare to be blown away..."

Finding clothes that fit her hourglass figure in local stores was impossible, but Zoe could always count on Jiovanni to hook her up. Raised by a single mother and three older sisters, he understood women and appreciated the female body. From the moment Aurora had introduced them they'd clicked, and when his mother died unexpectedly last summer they'd grown even closer. He'd said she was his rock, the only person he trusted explicitly. His words had touched her heart. They'd never be

lovers, but they'd be friends for life.

“What do you think? Did I hit it out of the park, or completely miss the mark?”

Zoe admired the outfits. Each one was impressive, and she couldn't decide which one she liked best—the beaded dress with the plunging neckline; the one-shoulder gown with the frilly red bow, or the navy pantsuit with the floral-print design along the waist. Overcome with emotion, Zoe gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks, Giovanni. I love all of them, and I'm honored to wear your amazing designs.”

Dropping into a chair, he clasped his hands behind his head and crossed his legs at the ankles. “Prove it. Try them on, *mi amore*. Go ahead. Give me a show.”

“With pleasure.” Zoe grabbed the garment bag, draped it over her forearm and entered the bathroom. Much to Giovanni's delight, she modeled each outfit, but when she sashayed out of the bathroom in the navy pantsuit, he cheered.

“That's it,” he said, jumping to his feet. “That's what you should wear tonight.”

“Are you sure it's not too sexy?” Zoe adjusted her cleavage.

“You have a great body and beautiful *décolletage*, so flaunt it.” Giovanni wore a proud smile. “I love to see you in my clothes. You make them come alive.”

To complete her look, Zoe opened the closet and searched through her wooden jewelry box for the right accessories. Zoe often went straight from work to industry functions, and had

everything she needed at her disposal. Taking Giovanni's advice, she selected teardrop earrings and a rhinestone necklace and bracelet. As she did her hair and makeup, he snapped pictures of her with his cell phone. With billions of people on social media every day, Zoe knew how important it was to give fans an intimate, behind-the-scenes look at Casa Di Moda and encouraged him to upload the images immediately.

"You look incredible," Giovanni praised. "All eyes will be on you at the premiere."

Putting on her stilettos, Zoe admired her appearance in the full-length mirror beside the bookshelf. She felt sophisticated in her chic ensemble, and Zoe was so anxious to hit the red carpet at Anteo spazioCinema, she decided to call it a day. The premiere didn't start for another three hours, but she wanted to get there early to live-stream interviews with the cast. As publicity director it was her job to promote Casa Di Moda, and she couldn't pass up the opportunity to rub shoulders with A-list celebrities, entertainment reporters and TV personalities.

Her desk phone buzzed, and the receptionist's voice filled the office.

"Hi, Zoe, sorry to bother you, but I need you at reception. You have a visitor."

Giovanni rose to his feet. "Duty calls, huh?"

"Hopefully it's the blogger I spoke to yesterday," Zoe said, logging off her computer. "I want her to do a piece on Casa Di Moda and invited her to come by today for a tour."

Zoe grabbed her purse, turned off the lights and waved goodbye to Jiovanni. Hustling toward the reception area, she mentally rehearsed what she was going to say to the popular fashion blogger. Zoe hoped the online article would help boost sales, because just the thought of losing the best job she'd ever had made sadness fill her heart.

Chapter 5

The Casa Di Moda reception area was noisier than a train station, and the scent of coffee and expensive perfume wafted through the air. Telephones buzzed and staff members chatted in the hallway. Deliverymen shuffled in and out, carrying oversize boxes and packages.

As Zoe reached the entrance, she noticed a gift bag, a flower bouquet on top of the U-shaped desk and a mountain bike with a gigantic red bow propped against the far wall.

“Great, you’re here,” the receptionist said brightly, gesturing to the items with a nod of her head. “These things are for you. Do you want me to help you carry them to your office?”

“They are? But I didn’t order anything online. Where did they come from?”

A slim man with a thick mustache appeared at Zoe’s side and bowed in greeting. “Ms. Smith, these gifts are from Mr. Romeo Morretti. His sincere hope is that everything is to your liking.”

Stunned, all Zoe could do was nod in response. Peeking inside the bag, she pushed aside the tissue paper. Her eyes wide with disbelief, she admired each item—the crocodile leather, Chanel

handbag with the shiny diamond clasp, the floral-print dress almost identical to the one she was wearing that morning, and a Samsung cell phone and tablet. Why would Romeo do this? I caused the accident, not him, so why did he buy me thousands of dollars' worth of gifts? Her head was spinning as she struggled to understand what the gentleman was saying.

"Mr. Morretti wishes to extend his deepest apologies for the incident that happened this morning, and hopes that you will accept these presents as a sign of his deep remorse."

"What incident?"

Aurora appeared at the reception desk with Davide at her side. The couple wore designer outfits and sidled up beside her, asking a million questions.

"What's this about?" Aurora asked, flinging her cashmere shawl over her slender shoulders. "What happened between you and Romeo Morretti this morning?"

Zoe hadn't planned to tell anyone about her ill-fated run-in with the business tycoon, not even her family. Images of her parents, Reuben and Collette Smith, and younger sister, Shelby, popped into her mind. Her mom and dad were happily retired from their jobs, and her twenty-six-year-old sister was a graduate student. During the staff meeting, Aurora had made it clear there wasn't enough money for a Christmas bonus. Without it, Zoe wouldn't be able to go home for the holidays and didn't know how she was going to break the news to her family.

As Aurora questioned her about Romeo Morretti, Zoe's

thoughts wandered. In September, she'd returned home to celebrate her parents' thirty-fifth wedding anniversary, but three days after arriving in Long Island she'd wanted to cut her one-month vacation short. Had actually considered returning to Milan to attend Fashion Week instead. Zoe couldn't go anywhere without her ex-boyfriend, Khalil Tisdale, nipping at her heels. Worse still, her mother adored him and his parents, and invited them over for dinner every evening. It didn't matter how many times she told Khalil that they were over, he wouldn't let her be. He was a successful orthodontist with a thriving medical practice. But he called her several times a day, showed up at her parents' house unannounced and wrote her love letters. They were over, and nothing he said or did would ever change that; still he pursued her relentlessly.

Fond memories filled her heart when she thought about her first love. Zoe was proud of Khalil and everything he'd accomplished, but she had no desire to rekindle their romance. All her life, she'd longed to travel abroad and experience different cultures and she'd refused to let anyone—not even her college sweetheart—stand in the way of her dreams.

“Earth to Zoe.” Aurora waved her bejeweled hands in the air. “Tell us what’s going on. We’re dying to know about your run-in with Romeo Morretti.”

Feeling trapped, she reluctantly told the couple about the accident, but left out the part about Romeo's dinner invitation. The less they knew about her interaction with the financier, the

better. Aurora was obsessed with the rich and famous, and Zoe didn't want her boss to get the wrong idea about her and Romeo. "Thankfully, I wasn't hurt," she said with a sad smile. "My bike was totaled, but that was the worst of it."

Aurora gasped. "Good God, Zoe, how terrible! Why didn't you say anything?"

"It sounds worse than it was. I'm fine."

"Grazie a Dio!" she exclaimed. "I can't believe you were in a car accident this morning, but still came to work. You should have gone to the hospital to get checked out."

Zoe shook her head. "No way. I'm a New Yorker. I'm strong and resilient."

"Thank God you're okay. I don't know what we'd do if anything ever happened to you," Davide said in a solemn tone of voice. "You're an important part of the Casa Di Moda family. We don't want to lose you."

"I second that." Nodding, Aurora gave Zoe a one-arm hug. "You're the hardest-working employee we have, you've established a strong online presence for the company, and you've made the brand cool among millennials. We're fortunate to have you on board, Zoe."

Zoe was embarrassed by the couple's effusive praise and wished they'd stop showering her with compliments. The receptionist was listening in, and she was afraid the loquacious single mom would gossip to the rest of the staff about what Aurora and Davide had said. That would be a disaster. Giovanni

and the other associate designers were already upset, and Zoe didn't want them to feel worse.

"Now, back to you and Romeo Morretti." Aurora linked arms with Zoe and dropped her voice to a whisper. "What's he like? Does he smell good? What was he wearing this morning? Armani or Kenneth Cole?"

"I-I-I don't know," she stammered. "We only talked for a few minutes."

"Ms. Smith, Mr. Morretti wanted you to have this."

The gentleman reached into his jacket pocket, took out an envelope and offered it to Zoe, but Aurora plucked it out of her hand.

"I'll read it to you. You've had a stressful day, and I don't want anything to upset you."

Before Zoe could protest, Aurora ripped the envelope, took out the card and shrieked in a high-pitched voice in Italian about Zoe being rich.

I'm rich? What is she talking about? Zoe thought, bewildered by her boss's odd behavior.

Aurora was gesturing wildly with her hands, speaking so fast in Italian Zoe didn't understand a word she was saying. "What is it? Why are you screaming? What does the card say?"

Everyone in the reception area was watching them, and the gentleman's face was red.

"You struck pay dirt! Literally. Romeo Morretti just financed your future!"

What? Perplexed, she shook her head. Prying the envelope out of her boss's hands, Zoe realized the piece of paper she'd been waving around was a bank draft, and stared at the check. Zoe choked on her tongue. Rubbing her eyes, she counted the number of zeroes—twice—to make sure she hadn't made a mistake. A hundred thousand euros? What for?

"I have to return this. I can't keep it." Zoe glanced around, searching the reception area for Romeo Morretti's employee, but he was gone. Unsure of where Morretti Investments was, Zoe asked the receptionist to find the address online and waited patiently for her to locate it.

Drumming her fingernails on the desk, Zoe imagined what would happen when she saw Romeo again. Would she be calm and composed this time, or a tongue-tied fool? It was hard not to get flustered when he stared at her. His gaze was unnerving and intense, and his boyish smile could melt the ice around any woman's heart.

"Keep the gifts and the check. You earned it."

Earned it? It was an accident, not a setup! Again, Zoe was bewildered by Aurora's words. Surely she didn't mean it. Furthermore, what kind of person would Zoe be if she took the money? She wouldn't be able to live with herself if she did; guilt would eat her alive.

"Romeo Morretti struck you with his car, and you deserve to be adequately compensated," Aurora continued in a haughty tone of voice. "To be honest, a hundred thousand euros isn't enough

money for your terrible pain and suffering.”

Zoe frowned. What pain and suffering? I’m fine!

“I second that,” Davide agreed. “Call Romeo Morretti and demand ten million euros.”

“No way! That’s crazy. I could never do that.”

“If he refuses to pay, take him to court.” Dollar signs flashed in Aurora’s hazel eyes, and a smirk curled her lips. “You’ll definitely win, and when you do, you can use your settlement money to invest in Casa Di Moda. It’s a win-win for everyone!”

In businessman mode, Davide confided in Zoe about his meeting with bank officials yesterday, and the stress he was under to find new investors. Listening to him, Zoe was convinced that Aurora was making a mistake about the plus-size line. If they launched the line, and it did well, investors would come running. It wasn’t the time or the place to broach the subject, but she decided to speak to her boss again tomorrow in private.

“Rosannah, can you do me a favor and put these things in my office before you leave?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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