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CHRISTINA HOLLIS

The Italian's Blushing Gardener



Mills & Boon Modern

Christina Hollis

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Blossoming under his expert touch...Kira Banks far prefers plants to people. After a heartbreaking affair, she lives alone in the beautiful Bella Terra Valley. But when restless billionaire Stefano Albani helicopters into the estate, Kira's peaceful existence is shattered for ever... Notoriously charming but guarded, Stefano is fascinated by cautious, hidden Kira: this seduction will be unforgettable! But his polished routine goes awry – could it be that the tycoon who can have anything he wants might need someone for the very first time...?

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‘To our new partnership,’ he said, his voice a sensual growl of anticipation which immediately created answering ripples in the pit of her stomach.

Determined to quell them, she snapped, ‘Are you always so openly provocative?’

He broke the tension with a sudden laugh. ‘I’ve never met another woman quite so woundingly honest! I can’t help it, I’m afraid. Some men are born to it, while others need to be coaxed out of their shell by a loving, sensitive hand.’

Kira felt colour riot in her cheeks. Before she could explode, Stefano turned his statement into a warning.

‘I am most definitely *not* one of those men.’

The Italian's Blushing Gardener

By

Christina Hollis



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About the Author

CHRISTINA HOLLIS was born in Somerset, and now lives in the idyllic Wye valley. She was born reading, and her childhood dream was to become a writer. This was realised when she became a successful journalist and lecturer in organic horticulture. Then she gave it all up to become a full-time mother of two and run half an acre of productive country garden.

Writing Mills & Boon[®] romances is another ambition realised. It fills most of her time, in between complicated rural school runs. The rest of her life is divided among garden and kitchen, either growing fruit and vegetables or cooking with them. Her daughter's cat always closely supervises everything she does around the home, from typing to picking strawberries!

You can learn more about Christina and her writing at www.christinahollis.com

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Chapter One

SHADOWS rippled over Kira's slight form. She stood on the lookout of ancient pine trees guarding the Bella Terra estate, all her attention focused on the other side of the valley. Far away across the rolling grassland a white streak scarred the distant hillside. It was a road, and Kira was waiting. She was watching for the telltale cloud of white Tuscan dust that meant the end of her solitude.

Her little patch of paradise was about to be changed for ever. The land surrounding her house was up for sale. And according to Bella Terra's estate agent, the most fantastic man in the world was interested in buying it.

Kira could not have cared less. She had moved to Italy to get away from all that. Everything she had heard so far about Signor Stefano Albani hadn't done anything to improve her general opinion of men. He had been due to view the Bella Terra villa and estate earlier that afternoon, but he hadn't shown up. The female estate agent had called in at Kira's cottage, looking for him. She had been breathless with excitement and full of this charming billionaire's flirty telephone manner, but Kira wasn't impressed. She guessed this rogue Albani was probably more interested in women than he was in buying a big country estate.

As time went on and he still never showed up, the estate agent's interest dwindled. She began to worry about missing her next appointment. Eventually, feeling sorry for her, Kira offered to take care of the villa's keys and details. Dealing with strangers tied her in knots, but it didn't look as though Signor Albani was coming, and her offer was only a ploy anyway. All she really wanted to do was get rid of the estate agent.

It worked. Her unwelcome visitor dashed off, leaving Kira alone once more.

That was exactly how she liked it.

And there were much worse ways of spending an afternoon than enjoying this view of the Bella Terra estate.

The scorching sun eventually slid behind a bank of clouds, heading for the wooded ridge on the western side of the valley. Kira began to relax. She felt more and more confident that Stefano the Seducer wouldn't come. That was a relief to her, in more ways than one. The fewer people who viewed the estate, the longer it would take to sell. Kira didn't care if the rambling old place stayed empty forever. Her small home was nicely isolated from the villa, although each building could see the other in the distance.

Bella Terra's last owner, Sir Ivan, had been as reserved as Kira. They had waved to each other across the valley every day, and she had looked after the estate gardens, but that was pretty much the extent of their friendship. It had suited them both, but now Sir Ivan was dead. It was odd: in the two years since she had bought La Ritirata Kira had rarely spoken to the man except on business, yet she missed him. And now she was faced with the unknown. Whoever bought La Bella Terra was unlikely to be as peaceful and unobtrusive as the old man. She hated that thought.

She wondered if the future would seem quite so threatening if she had someone to talk to. A letter had arrived from England the previous day. Kira knew she should have sent a curt reply by return, but couldn't bear to do it. The envelope lay where she had dropped it, unopened, on the kitchen table. She would have to release its tentacles of emotional blackmail sooner or later, but not just now.

With an effort, she tried to concentrate on the beautiful scene in front of her. The valley was a patchwork of flowery grassland and ancient woods. She strolled as far as the cool green shadows of the sweet chestnut wood. Thunderheads were forming over the hills. There would be a storm soon. That would cool everything down. She smiled. Rain would transform the single-track road leading to the Bella Terra villa into a quagmire. If Signor Albani was still on his way, that was almost guaranteed

to put him off. The prospect of fighting a prestige sports car upstream like a salmon was sure to turn him back. Her little retreat would be safe for a while longer.

As Kira counted her blessings, she became aware of a subtle change in the air. All the birds fell silent. She looked around. The landscape was poised, waiting for something to happen. Then she felt a vibration. Faint at first, it rose from the ground beneath her feet like an earthquake. She started forward as a roe deer bounced through the trees behind her. With one bound it crossed the track and was gone. Still the shuddering increased, rising up through Kira's ribcage until she looked around for somewhere to run. Instinctively, she headed out into the summer-rich pasture. The trees surrounding it had been still in the oppressive heat. Now they swayed and bucked like a wild green sea. It wasn't an earthquake, but something even more alarming. A helicopter was sweeping in from above, and tearing Kira's peaceful valley apart.

'I'm going off-message for a couple of hours,' Stefano Albani announced into his hands-free phone. 'I've got the Milan project back on track, and if Murray's people ring, tell them the publishing tie-in is off, unless they come up with something that can really appeal to me.'

Closing the call, he sat back in his seat. There was no question of relaxing; his spine remained rigid. Flying a helicopter took a lot of concentration. He never inspected any property from ground level without making a lowlevel pass over it first. The Bella Terra estate looked perfect, and its aspect was a dream. Cool, shady woodlands offered sanctuary from the roasting heat of summer, while beautifully planned terraces around the house offered plenty of space for entertaining in the golden sunshine. Talking of which...

A movement at the edge of the trees caught his eye. It was a girl. She was flinging her arms about, and waving papers at him. Stefano's sensuous mouth lifted in a half-smile. He had only spoken to the estate agent by phone so far, but from where he was sitting she looked as good as she sounded.

His dark features eased as he thought back to that long, teasing telephone conversation with her. Taking up where they had left off would be a good way to wind down after a high-pressure day.

He gazed down on the pretty little ragazza, and gave her a wave. As he did so, a corresponding ripple of relief passed up his arm and across his shoulders. His muscles were tense from working for far too long without a break. What he needed was distraction. A few hours in a place like this would take his mind off all those boardroom battles and investment decisions. The company of a pretty girl was a bonus he had half forgotten in all the chaos.

Stefano smiled as he set his helicopter down on the far side of the house. His few precious hours of freedom were off to a great start.

Kira was in no mood for games. Bella Terra was supposed to be a private valley, and the helicopter's racket was shockingly intrusive among all that usually undisturbed beauty. Worst of all, it felt like an omen of things to come.

'I've seen pheasants fly higher than that!' she shouted after the helicopter as it swept overhead. Her voice was totally swamped by the thundering rumble of its rotors, but it hardly mattered. Simply putting her anger into words made Kira feel better.

As she watched, hands on hips, the machine swung its nose around and dropped down behind the beautiful old villa. If the pilot's antics hadn't made her so annoyed, she might have been nervous. Instead, she saw it as a chance to catch up with him. She sprinted along the track, heading for an overgrown entrance to the Bella Terra gardens. Squeezing in through a gap in its rusty ironwork, she marched up the path.

She found the helicopter parked as neatly as a saloon car, very close to the main house. It was deserted, and silent apart from the click of cooling metalwork. There was absolutely no sign of the pilot. Confused, she circled the villa buildings in the sultry heat. From every side, ornamental broom and gorse set off their exploding pods like gunfire. Anyone with any sense would have headed straight for shade. She made for the yew walk. Reaching the north end, she glimpsed a tall, masculine figure disappearing through a gap in the hedge that led into the fountain garden. She was about to call out

to him, but something about the decided, athletic grace of his movements made her pause, and when she came out into the sunlit square of the fountain garden, it was empty.

Turning her head, she strained to hear any signs of life. Only the quiet rustle of air through pine trees and the constant sniper fire of genista seeds disturbed the peace. Then, as she listened, she heard something that might have been footsteps. It was only one tiny sound, and all the interconnecting yew hedges made it difficult to decide from which direction it came. She looked around, but there was no one.

Then two strong hands slipped around her waist, and in one smooth movement she was drawn into an inescapable embrace.

‘We meet at last, Miss Barrett!’ a deep, delicious Italian voice purred in perfect English. ‘I have been searching for you. I felt sure you would be waiting for me at Bella Terra’s front door!’

His teasing words reverberated into the curve of Kira’s neck. She froze, shrinking from the whisper of warm breath against her skin. The movement only drew her closer to his hard, masculine body. He was holding her so perfectly, she could barely breathe.

‘When we spoke on the phone you said you were looking forward to meeting me. Remind me—exactly where did you want to have dinner tonight?’ There was a soft, low chuckle in his voice as he murmured, pulling her around to ravish her with a kiss.

Before he could make contact, Kira burst from his grasp with reflexes that astonished them both.

‘I’m not Amanda Barrett, and I’m not very happy!’ she confronted him, breathing fast. ‘Please keep your hands to yourself!’

The visitor recoiled instantly, but he was far too professional to give his horror free rein. Instead, his features became a mask. With a slow, careful dip of his head, he addressed her gravely. ‘Scusi, signora.’

Glaring, Kira took two steps backwards. His assault had been so swift and sure she hardly expected him to stop so suddenly. She had no idea what to do next. If this was Signor Stefano Albani, billionaire, then he was nothing like any of the rich men she had worked with in the past. They were predictable, humourless and would never have dreamed of such a stunt. In contrast, Stefano Albani looked ready for anything. He was fit and he was handsome in a tense, distracted way. Standing straight and tall before her, he seemed quite unfazed by her rebuff. He brushed his shirtsleeves down over his bare brown arms and fastened his unbuttoned cuffs.

‘I mistook you for someone else, I’m sorry. It was arranged that I should meet the property agent here. Do you know where I can find her?’ he asked in his softly accented English.

‘She’s probably at home by now, having dealt with at least two more clients in the time it took you to get here,’ Kira snapped, still unsettled by the unexpected embrace. Stefano’s face remained expressionless, but his eyes glittered, and suddenly Kira regretted her rudeness to this rather formidable man. Then his mouth curled with sudden humour.

‘Dio—it’s been a long time since anyone spoke to me like that!’

In that puzzled instant, years fell away from his face and he looked much younger. Kira was momentarily thrown off balance. His beautiful eyes and quizzical expression were almost too much to bear. She had to swallow hard before she spoke again, but she’d be damned if she’d let him walk all over her just because she couldn’t stop staring at his mouth.

‘I’m sorry, *signore*, but you have turned up over three hours late—without any apology—and flown ridiculously low over this valley, terrifying the wildlife and ruining a beautiful evening,’ she said firmly, quailing slightly inside as his expression turned stormy. Someone like this didn’t hear enough straight talking in his working life. He had just said as much himself.

‘If I have caused offence, I apologise,’ he said, slightly stiffly. ‘Not having the neighbours flying in overhead all the time is a big selling point as far as I am concerned.’ Then his features softened. ‘I am Stefano Albani, by the way. I’m interested in buying the Bella Terra estate. That’s why I assumed

you were Miss Barrett, the agent. I thought you were welcoming me with cries of delight!’ he joked, searching her expression as he spoke, his mocking eyes somehow piercing her outraged manner and making it irritatingly difficult to stay angry.

‘Well, I wasn’t,’ Kira said, biting back everything else she felt like telling him. She had to tread carefully. Stefano Albani might have arrived late and lascivious, but there was, unfortunately, a chance he would become her new neighbour and there was no point in making it more difficult than it had to be.

Stefano compressed his lips at the note of accusation in her voice.

He has a really beautiful mouth, Kira caught herself thinking, before his frown dragged her attention back to the Mediterranean depths of his eyes.

‘A delay put me behind schedule, and I wanted to get here as fast as I could. That meant flying. Besides, the disturbance was over in a few seconds. I’m sure the valley has recovered from much worse over the years. People always try to imprint themselves on the countryside. The land shakes them all off, sooner or later.’

Kira’s alarm must have shown in her face. He quickly softened his tone and added, ‘You have my promise that it won’t happen again. There will be no low flying in this valley after I move in.’

His words were quite definite, but the essence of a smile still hovered around his lips. When he looked like that, it was impossible for Kira to look away. There was plenty to see. With the air cleared between them, his eyes were now the untroubled blue of a perfect Italian sky. His dark hair was a riot of soft curls, short enough to be neat but long enough to move slightly in the warm air rising from the parched earth at their feet. He was undoubtedly powerful, but it was the strength of steel hawsers rather than unsophisticated animal bulk. Unlike the millionaires Kira had worked for in the past, this man looked as though he used his body as hard as his brain. She could never imagine him parked behind a computer console. She wished she had paid more attention when Amanda Barrett had been rabbiting on about the wonderful Signor Albani. At the time, Kira had shut her ears. Thank goodness the estate agent wasn’t here now. She would have fallen for this man like a lead weight.

It’s all too easy to see how women must do that, Kira thought darkly. With bewildered fascination, she wondered why they didn’t see him for what he must really be—a rich pleasure seeker with no thought for anyone but himself. She could tell exactly the sort of man he was, simply by the way he brimmed with self-assurance. Kira watched him looking up at the grand old building as though he already owned it. She tried to ignore a shiver of apprehension, and told herself looks meant nothing. He hadn’t stepped over the villa’s threshold yet. How could he be so sure this was the place for him?

‘We’ll see—if you move in,’ she replied grimly, wondering if she held any influence over his purchase. Maybe it’s time to forget what I think about Stefano Albani, and start wondering what he might be thinking about me, Kira told herself. Stefano seemed like the kind of man who might actually thrive on opposition rather than avoid it. She decided to try and muffle her objections, for as long as it took this man to make up his mind about the villa and estate. She told herself sharply that this had nothing to do with not wanting to appear like an angry shrew in front of such a gorgeous man.

‘The fact is, *signore*, I was only waiting here with the estate details and keys, because I was confident you would never turn up,’ she told him. ‘I had my whole evening planned until you dropped out of the sky—’

‘And wrecked all your plans?’

Kira’s scowl returned. ‘I was going to say you gave me the fright of my life and apologise for the way I reacted,’ she replied frostily.

Stefano said nothing. Instead, he reached out his hand. Kira stared woodenly at his smooth, pale palm until she realised what he was after. She pushed the property details at him. They had been turned around in her nervous hands for too long, and he had to smooth out some creases before he could begin to read.

‘What did I stop you doing this evening?’ he asked after a few moments’ study. His eyes never left the printed page, so the question caught Kira off guard.

‘Nothing, as usual,’ she replied instantly, before remembering what she had said to him in the heat of her anger.

He looked up from the brochure with a smile that glittered like pearl against his golden skin.

‘In that case, why don’t you show me around this old place?’

The offer was so unexpected, Kira replied without thinking. ‘Oh, I’d love to!’

She regretted the words in an instant. This wasn’t her job. She had no business here. She had simply offered to hand over the details and keys, before disappearing. That was the deal—nothing more. She tried to backtrack. ‘Yes, I’d love to, Signor Albani, although I’m only a neighbour.’ She looked up at the lovely old house and heaved a long, heartfelt sigh. ‘I don’t really know anything about the place. I’ve only seen inside one or two rooms before—’

“It has been owned by an Englishman for many years,” Stefano read aloud from the notes. ‘Do you know him?’

‘Sir Ivan was my client. I was his landscape consultant. That’s all,’ she added hurriedly.

‘I suppose you two English people both “kept yourselves to yourselves,” in that well-worn phrase?’ Stefano’s wry smile made Kira feel defensive. However right he may be, she didn’t like that he assumed so much about her. Piqued, she ignored her impulse to refuse him.

‘I’ll gladly show you around outside, *signore*. There’s no one who knows more than I do about the estate and the gardens here, but you’ll be better off with the brochure when it comes to viewing the house.’

‘You’re a landscape consultant, you say?’ His smile dimmed as he looked her over with a different intensity. Kira reddened as he studied her working clothes of dusty jeans and simple white shirt. Seeing her reaction, his generous mouth lifted in a grin.

‘But why are we wasting time out here talking, when we could be looking around this beautiful house? If I know English women—which I do,’ he said in a way that needed absolutely no explanation, ‘I’m sure you are as keen as I am to get inside the villa and have a good look around. So come with me now. What do you say?’

There was nothing Kira could say. He was talking about a tour of the house she had spent two years dreaming and wondering about. She had been trying to pluck up the nerve to have a peek inside before he arrived, but couldn’t bring herself to do it. Now he was inviting her in...

Without waiting for her answer, he started forward. Holding the Bella Terra brochure in one hand, he touched her waist lightly with the other. Kira found herself drawn gently towards the big old building. His pat of encouragement was enjoyable in a way she did not want it to be. Putting on a little more speed, she moved fractionally ahead of his hand. She reached the steps of the house just in front of him. Then there was a pause as Stefano used the great iron key to unlock the door. Standing aside, he let Kira enter first. Still she hesitated. She was desperate to poke around the villa, but on her own. Quite apart from him possibly becoming the villa’s next owner, exploring such a beautiful place with Stefano Albani felt somehow much too intimate.

Stefano had none of her misgivings. His hand connected with her waist again, gently urging her to enter. A little sigh left Kira’s lips. It felt dangerously like the sound of her scorn softening around the edges. He stayed where he was, but inclined his head politely. ‘After you. I need to see everything, so I’m afraid this may take some time.’

He spoke softly, but with absolute authority. He was acting as though the house already belonged to him. Kira coloured guiltily. She had enjoyed the run of this valley for so long she considered it to be her own private haven. Now she finally had a chance to look around the villa at its heart, but the company of such a man added an extra frisson of excitement. If she was honest, it was the surprising intensity of this feeling which was making her hesitate.

What if she couldn't think of enough to say? She had got out of the habit of small talk. Flustered, she looked around wildly for help. Why, she had no idea. There was no one for miles. She had never felt so alone. This man scrambled her brains. He had totally blown away all her common sense. She looked into his eyes and saw things she recognised from the reflection in her bathroom mirror each morning. His blue eyes spoke words that never reached his lips, and she knew that look. Aside from his dangerously smooth assurance, there might be a deeper, darker reason to beware. He might have secrets like hers hiding beneath that sophisticated surface. Unaccountably, she felt the need to peel away his seductive veneer and find out the truth beneath the image.

The weight of Stefano's hand began to rest against her a little more noticeably. At first it had been the merest brush of his fingertips. Now his palm settled gently in the hollow of her back, like falling snow.

With terrifying clarity, Kira imagined it sliding around to encircle her waist again. It felt so good, it had to be wrong. Swallowing hard, she suppressed every wild, unfamiliar instinct and announced quietly, 'Please don't touch me, Signor Albani.'

His hand fell away. He stepped back, surprised.

'Are you sure?'

'I'm positive.'

He stared at her, trying to puzzle out her expression. Kira willed herself to return his look blandly.

'That's interesting,' he murmured at length.

After studying her face, he let his gaze drift at leisure over her body.

'First you answer me back, but now you're as nervous as a kitten,' he mused, his eyes hooded with thought. 'I came to look at property. It seems that's not the only thing around here that might be worth investigating.'

Chapter Two

'DON'T flatter me, or yourself,' Kira muttered, beginning to fuss with the belt of her jeans. It felt wrong to be exploring such a place in her dusty work clothes; somehow she felt that the villa demanded a sense of occasion. He was standing so close to her that the temptation to study him was next to irresistible. Instead, she concentrated on brushing herself down, removing any stray grass seeds before she crossed the threshold of the grand house.

'Don't worry. It's a villa, not the Vatican!' He chuckled, again exhibiting a disquieting ability to read her thoughts. 'You look fine. You're one of those women who look good in anything.'

Kira glanced up sharply at his unexpected compliment. He laughed as their gazes connected. She couldn't stop staring at him, and when he caught her eye it sent a confusion of signals through her body.

'You're right. I'm only looking around a house, that's all. It's nothing more than that,' Kira murmured, trying to stake her claim to innocence. This Stefano Albani was strangely magnetic. Leaving him to investigate on his own might mean she never saw him again. If she followed him, she would delay the moment of parting and get to view the property of her dreams, too.

'So if you are ready, *signore*, shall we make a start?' she added with a bit more confidence.

He laughed again. 'Suddenly so businesslike! I'm making the effort to leave the world behind for a while. Why don't you do the same? I suspect it would do us both good to live a little, for once.' His gaze was uncomfortably direct and Kira shifted under it. 'In fact, it occurs to me that I don't even know your name. So, as we begin, why don't we start with some simple introductions? You know who I am, but who are you?'

Kira had often wondered that herself. 'That isn't important, Signor Albani.' She shook her shoulders irritably.

'Of course it is!'

'No, really. I'm nobody.'

'Don't be ridiculous.' His smile showed signs of fading. 'Everybody is somebody. Your name is your own. You can give it to me.'

Kira stopped. Ignoring this danger sign, Stefano didn't.

'Go on. You know you want to, and it won't hurt!' he teased her gently.

His question revived all Kira's pain. The isolation of Bella Terra meant she didn't have to introduce herself more than once or twice a year. That suited her. Every time she spoke her name, it reminded her of the shame she had left behind in England.

'It's Kira Banks,' she muttered. Head down, she tried to cross the threshold but Stefano blocked her retreat.

'You don't sound very happy about it.' His air was light, but she saw interrogation in his relentless blue gaze.

Blast him, what was wrong with the man? Kira was used to people backing off, becoming bored when met with her reluctance to talk about herself. In her experience most people preferred to be talking about themselves in any case. It appeared Signor Albani was used to having his questions answered.

'Why is that?' Stefano persisted quietly in the face of her continued silence.

Kira wanted to stare him out but her features lost the struggle. They were moving of their own accord. Her lids would not obey. She lowered her lashes, unable to struggle against the depth of his gaze. Making up some excuse for any other person would have been easy enough, but Stefano Albani was looking down at her with a fiction-piercing stare that demanded nothing less than the truth.

She gritted her teeth and muttered, 'I came here to escape. I wanted to live in a place where no one knows my name.'

He drew back from her a little.

‘Okay, I’ll let it go at that...’ he relented, although his face told a different story. ‘For now...’ he added with a smile.

Kira mastered her features and managed a bland smile.

‘Don’t say I have stumbled on a master criminal, living in her bolthole in Italy?’

He was teasing her again. She managed to lift her eyes to challenge him, but knew she couldn’t afford to rise to his bait. Her pain hovered too close to the surface. She didn’t need him to aggravate her injuries. There were other people only too willing to do that.

‘Why I’m here is nobody’s business but my own.’ She tried not to snap, but it was difficult. Only his steady gaze softened her reaction. ‘In any case, the reasons would take far too long to explain, Signor Albani. Some things are best kept private. Why don’t we stop wasting time, and start looking around this lovely house?’

Purposely keeping her voice casual, she jerked herself out of his grasp. She could not escape his expression so easily. It was like a caress. It took all her determination to break eye contact with him. She managed it by concentrating on the breathtaking photograph on the cover of the property brochure in his hand. It was the only sure way she could distract herself from the delicious dangers of this man. Stefano gestured for her to walk across the entrance hall first. It was large, cool, and it echoed with his slow footsteps as he followed her across the cracked marble tiles.

Kira took a good look around. She had only ever entered the villa by one of the back doors. This was her first time in the grand public areas, and she didn’t want to miss a thing. While she was daydreaming, Stefano strolled past her. Pulling a pearl-handled penknife from his pocket, he pushed the blade against the woodwork of the nearest door. Kira gazed in wonder at the ornate plasterwork, and the beautifully worked banisters on the great double staircase, but he was busy with more practical things. He worked his way methodically around the entrance hall, testing, checking and inspecting.

‘This is the most beautiful house I have ever seen,’ she said wistfully. Stefano was not so easily impressed.

‘My town house in Florence is more practical, and in better condition,’ he observed, before flashing another brilliant smile at her. ‘But you’re right. The setting and space here can’t be beaten.’

Kira nodded. ‘It’s a lovely house. Oh, yes, there are bound to be things about it that must be altered, updated or replaced. It’s old. But I’d like nothing better than the chance to give it some homely touches. Couldn’t you just imagine the scene in December, with a fifteen-foot Christmas tree standing in that bay between the staircases?’

Stefano looked over to where she pointed. He studied the space, tipping his head first one way, and then the other.

‘Yes, the proportions would be exactly right. That’s important with these old houses. Everything must be in scale,’ he said firmly.

Kira’s heart gave a strange flutter. She had been half joking, hardly expecting the big-shot billionaire to consider Christmas trees with such seriousness. That might be a glimmer of hope. Even if he might fill the place with rowdy celebrity friends, he clearly had an eye for the important things in life.

‘A tree like that in a place like this will need to hit exactly the right note. When I host my first Christmas party I want everyone to be speechless with delight—because I’m all for a quiet life.’ He smiled, and gave her a look of undisguised interest. ‘So that’s the festive season sorted out. What do you suggest for my housewarming extravaganza?’

It was a totally unexpected question. Kira looked to see if he was trying to wind her up. He gazed back innocently. Smiling in spite of herself, she decided to answer in the same spirit.

‘Actually, I’m the last person you should ask about entertaining. I’m a garden designer. I prefer to work with plants rather than people.’

‘What is a Christmas tree, if it isn’t a plant?’ He shrugged. ‘And I shall need all sorts of those. When we become neighbours I shall want your advice, sooner or later.’

Kira shot him a look of pure disbelief. ‘You can have exactly what you like, *signore*. You don’t need anyone to advise you, let alone me!’

‘There are times when everyone can do with a little help,’ he slung straight back at her. ‘By employing skilled people, I can spend my time and effort on all the things I really want to do. In this instance, it gives me plenty of time to plan for Christmas.’ He stopped inspecting the paintwork and turned an acute gaze on her. ‘I know—you must have a good eye for colour. How would you like the task of co-ordinating all the decorations?’

Kira nearly laughed out loud. It felt truly bizarre to be standing in a vast Tuscan villa in the heat of summer, talking about something that was months away.

‘Why on earth would you want someone else to decorate your Christmas tree? It’s something I’ve looked forward to every year for as long as I can remember! It’s the chance to be a child again, I suppose, without all the pressure.’

It was Stefano’s turn to look askance. ‘I know all about pressure.’ His voice darkened with meaning.

Kira groaned under the weight of memory. ‘That’s why it’s so good to get away from it all, to a place like this. I can enjoy Christmas my way. No rehearsing recitals in Gloucester cathedral, dashing between carol services and amateur dramatics, torturing tons of holly, ivy and mistletoe into wreaths and swags. When I was a child, it was never ending.’

He pursed his lips, and then said drily, ‘It’s a wonder you had any time to yourself.’

‘I didn’t. That’s the penalty you pay for being a trophy child, isn’t it?’

‘I wouldn’t know. I missed out on all that. I skipped it, and went straight from sleeping in a box under the table, to earning a living.’

‘Gosh, you must have had a deprived childhood!’ she joked.

He stared at her, unimpressed. His eyes were suddenly chill with all the hidden feelings she recognised from her own reflection. She stopped laughing.

‘Yes. Yes, I did.’ He grazed his lower lip with his teeth for a moment, and then added, ‘But that’s behind me now. The future is all that matters.’

There was iron-hard determination in his voice. His eyes were everywhere. She wondered what havoc he would wreak on this beautiful old house when he took possession of it. The thought worried her. A few moments ago, she had been annoyed by the way he talked as though the villa was already his. Now she was thinking about it in the same way. He was checking every inch of the building like the rightful owner. If ever a man was made to lord it over the Bella Terra valley, it’s Stefano Albani, she thought, with a shiver of apprehension.

‘You’re cold. Why don’t you step outside into the evening sun and warm up?’ he murmured.

His words surprised her. She thought all his attention was riveted on the villa’s sales brochure, and hadn’t expected him to notice.

‘No, I’m fine,’ she said quickly, unwilling to miss this chance to look over the grand villa she gazed at every day from her favourite viewpoint on the other side of the valley.

His eyes glittered with sudden fire. ‘As long as you’re sure.’

Kira began to feel uneasy. Every time he looked at her, he smiled as he spoke. It was an unusual expression, caressing the most secret parts of her. As she tried not to shrink beneath his gaze, she felt the peaks of her nipples push against the smooth profile of her thin shirt. They stiffened still more to know he was looking at her. It was no longer the chill of the cool marble hall affecting her body. He must have realised it, too, but looked away sharply as obvious appreciation flared for a moment in his eyes.

Kira didn’t know what to do. Putting her head down, she scuttled off towards the nearest door.

‘Let’s see what’s through here, shall we?’ she said, bursting into the first room beyond the entrance hall. Within half a step she stopped. It was the reception room that time forgot. Sunlight streamed through tall, graceful windows but its beams danced with dust motes. The design of the room was in a typically grand Italian style, although its furnishings wouldn’t have been out of place in an English country house.

‘Oh, my goodness!’ Kira exclaimed. ‘A little bit of England overseas!’

Following close behind her, Stefano clicked his tongue when he saw her shudder.

‘My stepparents have spent a lifetime collecting stuff like this. Cane-back chairs, chintz upholstery and Goss china. Sir Ivan must have shipped everything over here from England. Why on earth would you move to Italy, then recreate England in your new home?’

‘I don’t know.’ Stefano was equally put out at the sight. His mouth was a stern line of disapproval. ‘Some foreigners buy up these properties claiming to love Italy. In reality, Toscana is nothing more to them than England with better weather. They are more interested in worshipping their own land from a safe distance.’

‘I’m not. I love it here,’ Kira told him. ‘I couldn’t wait to leave England behind, decorations and all...’ She paused, wondering whether to push her luck, and decided she had nothing to lose.

‘If we’re going to be neighbours, I’d feel happier if I knew you were going to treat this old place well,’ she went on. ‘It would be such a shame to see it spoiled.’

‘It won’t matter to you for a few weeks a year, surely?’ He shrugged.

Kira was puzzled. ‘So you’re going to be away a lot?’

‘No, but you’ll be leaving with the summer, won’t you?’

Kira coloured up angrily. ‘Why should I?’

‘So you won’t be flitting between here and your home in England?’ He looked surprised.

She shook her head defiantly. ‘No! I thought I’d made it clear—I don’t have a home in England any more. In any case, I couldn’t bear to leave at the end of summer, as the holiday-home owners do. How could I abandon my home here? The Bella Terra valley is everything I want—peace and beauty.’

Stefano’s dark brows lightened a little. ‘I assume that means you could find no peace in England, so you brought your beauty here?’

His voice was low and melodious but his eyes shone with mischief. Drawn to look straight at him again, Kira could not help lifting her lips in the ghost of a smile, but she said nothing.

‘I don’t know of many people who would willingly hide away in such an isolated spot,’ he murmured. ‘You’re not afraid to stand up for yourself, you work for your living and you love this place as much as I intend to. How could anything make such a forthright, independent woman leave England under a cloud?’

Kira lifted one hand and began to fiddle with a skein of her dark auburn hair.

‘It was a combination of things,’ she said, hoping to stop him asking any more awkward questions.

He lifted his brows still higher, encouraging her to unburden herself. She shifted from foot to foot. Her fingers moved from her hair to toy with the thin gold chain around her neck. Stefano watched her. He seemed genuinely interested, and ready to listen. Suddenly she was tired of bottling everything up, and keeping herself to herself. She wanted to talk. She needed someone who might sympathise, or at least answer back. It hardly mattered about the words. She had never seen Stefano Albani before today, and might never see him again. He had already proved himself to be sympathetic. If she explained the whole miserable business to him, as an impartial third party, it might make her feel better.

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him the whole sorry story. She pushed the guilty words against her teeth, trying to force them out. It was no good. She had kept silent for so long, she didn’t know where to begin. Finally, she shook her head.

‘It’s nothing.’

He considered her gravely. 'I think it is. Something is obviously weighing heavily on your mind.'

He took a step towards her. Kira knew he moved almost silently, but the brush of his leather-soled shoes sounded loud in the peace of the reception room. She stared at the floor. She winced when his feet appeared in her field of view, but it was still a shock to feel the gentle touch of his hand on her shoulder.

'There's no need to jump. I'm only offering a little support,' he said.

'I don't need it,' she said staunchly, but he took no notice and never moved. His touch was warm, reassuring...seductive. In spite of herself, Kira relished the feeling. Then he spoiled the effect. His touch vibrated slightly. She looked up, and saw laughter in his eyes.

'One day, I would really enjoy the chance to discuss sins with you, Miss Kira Banks. Whatever you may have done, I'm sure I can top it!'

With a sharp twist of her head, Kira looked away. She could not bear to let him see her misery. Squeezing her lids tightly closed, she battled to stop the tears falling. She was so lost in her own despair she was completely unprepared for what happened next. Stefano closed the gap between them. His arms glided around her. She was drawn into his body again, and it felt so natural she let it happen without a word. For a few heart-stopping seconds she leaned against him. The sensation of his shirt pressed against her cheek and the enveloping male fragrance of him closed her eyes.

'Is there anything I can do?' His voice echoed around the unloved caverns of the villa.

Kira shook her head. 'I'd be grateful if you could just drop the subject,' she managed, with a trace of steel showing through her muttered words.

'Okay.'

He took his time in releasing her. Kira normally disliked physical contact, but this was different. Stefano seemed to specialise in the sort of touch she might like to experience again.

He obviously wasn't going to give up on her. Kira sensed he couldn't resist a challenge any more than she could. However, she also knew her fragile self-esteem couldn't stand too many questions. Her reaction to unwarranted attention was usually to snap first, and apologise later. It appeared that this hadn't dissuaded Stefano in the slightest. The most disconcerting thing about that was how ready she'd been to indulge in the comfort he offered. *Pull yourself together!* she ordered herself silently. This man was clearly used to getting his own way and she was embarrassed how easily she had mistaken his charm for anything more permanent.

A hint of her old defiance returned. It allowed her to face him calmly, but it didn't stop her cheeks flaming red at how much she had nearly revealed. 'I'm sorry, *signore*. That was a momentary lapse, but now you'll see that I really don't want to talk about it. So I'd be grateful if we could leave it at that. Okay?' she finished crisply.

Stefano's gaze ebbed away from her as she spoke. He said nothing. Instead, he tightened his lips, and bobbed his head once in silent agreement. In the pause that followed, he glanced around. His eyes, like his body, were restless.

'Everyone has parts of their lives they're not proud of,' he conceded. 'I can relate to that. So if we agree on a truce, can we continue with the tour?'

He had been almost teasing as he tried to extract her secret, but now he had retreated again behind that impenetrable mask. Kira felt a strange pang of loss. She wondered if he ever experienced the sort of social unease that tortured her. It seemed unlikely. What could ever make such a man feel inadequate?

She nodded and gave him a fleeting smile. 'Of course.'

What would it feel like to unburden herself to him? She was certain he would listen. Really listen, and not simply humour her because he wanted something. Life would take on a different dimension. It was something she had never bothered about before, but a few seconds in Stefano's arms had opened up a whole new world of possibilities for her. It almost tempted her out of her shell, but not quite. If he couldn't be on time for a business appointment, he was hardly likely to treat a

casual acquaintance any better. She gave up on the idea. At least when she was on the defensive, she couldn't be hurt.

'If you are really interested in buying the Bella Terra estate, Signor Albani, you should be making the most of your visit. You mustn't stand around here with me.'

Without waiting for his reply, she turned her back on him and walked out of the sunlit room. The vast, gloomy hall beyond was supposed to cool her feelings.

'There's no need to run away from me, Kira.'

She stopped.

'You might be surprised,' she said finally.

Her darkening attitude didn't bother Stefano at all. He stuck one hand casually in his pocket, and grinned at her.

'So what are you waiting for, then? Surprise me.'

His words made her uncertain. Until a short time ago, endless surprises—none of them good—had been the story of her life. Then she had escaped, and moved to Italy. For a couple of years she had experienced wonderful freedom. And now, with the loss of Sir Ivan, her foremost client, she was faced with the threat that happiness might soon be snatched away from her again. Unconsciously, her shoulders began to sag. Then she sensed his gaze was still on her. She looked up. He was still quizzing her with his eyes.

She shrugged. 'I'm afraid there's nothing more to me than you see here, *signore*.'

His face was totally impassive but he went on watching her as he said quietly, 'Then it's a good job I came here to see the Bella Terra estate, rather than anything else. My journey won't have been entirely wasted,' he announced before setting off across the hall again. 'Now, down to business. I want to look around this house. Would you like to come with me?'

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