



A MARRIAGE
MADE IN ITALY

REBECCA
WINTERS

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Mills & Boon Cherish

Rebecca Winters

A Marriage Made in Italy

«HarperCollins»

Winters R.

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Single dad Leon Malatesta is determined to keep his baby daughter out of the headlines. So when a mysterious beauty starts asking questions, the brooding Italian's protective instinct goes into overdrive. But when this stunning stranger turns out to be an innocent, Leon knows Belle brings with her the possibility of a new future... if he can convince her he wants to marry her for love!

Содержание

Leon wanted her to be his baby's mother.	6
MILLS & BOON	7
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

A brooding Italian...

With a dark family history, single dad Leon Malatesta is determined to keep his baby daughter out of the headlines. And so, when a striking woman starts asking questions around the sun-kissed town of Rimini, Leon's protective instinct goes into overdrive.

...and a mysterious beauty!

Only, Belle Peterson turns out to be the long-lost daughter of his stepmother! Her innocence touches Leon's locked-away heart in a way he never believed possible after losing his wife. Now Belle brings the possibility of a new future for them all...if only he can convince her he wants to marry her for love, not just to give them all the family they want so much....

Leon *wanted* her to be his baby's mother.

That had to mean something, didn't it?

He was the most marvelous man. To think he trusted her with his prized possession!

Even if she was a virgin who'd had no experience with men she could do the mothering part right. Maybe their marriage would help heal the wound between Leon and his family.

Marriage to Leon would ensure a close relationship with Belle's mother for the rest of their lives.

But what if Leon met another woman and fell in love?

She knew the answer to that. It would kill her. But would their marriage be so different from the many marriages where one of the partners strayed? It was a fact of life that millions of married men and women had affairs. There were no guarantees.

By the time morning came she'd gone back and forth so many times she was physically and emotionally exhausted. But one thing stood out above all else. The thought of going back to her life in New York sounded like living death...

Dear Reader,

About a year ago I was watching a documentary about adoption. It followed the lives of two different women who'd been adopted and wanted to meet their birth mother. In both cases the reunions brought joy to begin with. The birth mothers now knew what had happened to the baby they'd had to give up. The birth children now had answers about their origins and the family they came from. This documentary picked up on their lives five years later. In the first case, both parties had kept up a relationship. In the second case, neither party continued to stay in contact. The documentary discussed the reasons why and why not.

I found it so fascinating that the idea for a story began to grow in my mind and became *A Marriage Made in Italy*. In this love story I have incorporated some of the things I learned in the documentary about the expectations of the adopted child in relation to the adoptive parent, as well as to the birth parent, with all their attendant intricacies.

Enjoy!

Rebecca Winters

A Marriage Made in Italy

Rebecca Winters



www.millsandboon.co.uk

REBECCA WINTERS, whose family of four children has now swelled to include five beautiful grandchildren, lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, in the land of the Rocky Mountains. With canyons and high alpine meadows full of wildflowers, she never runs out of places to explore. They, plus her favourite vacation spots in Europe, often end up as backgrounds for her romance novels, because writing is her passion, along with her family and church.

Rebecca loves to hear from readers. If you wish to e-mail her, please visit her website: www.cleanromances.com.

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Contents

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[EXCERPT](#)

CHAPTER ONE

BELLE PETERSON LEFT the cell phone store she managed, and took a bus to the law office of Mr. Earl Harmon in downtown Newburgh, New York. The secretary showed her into the conference room. She discovered her thirty-year-old, divorced sibling, Cliff, had already arrived and was sitting at the oval table with a mulish look on his face, daring her to speak to him. She hadn't seen him since their parents' funeral six months ago.

On the outside he was blond and quite good-looking, but his facade hid a troubled soul. He'd been angry enough after his wife had left him, but the deaths of their parents in a fatal car crash meant he was now on his own. Today Belle felt Cliff's antipathy more strongly than usual and chose a seat around the other side of the table without saying a word.

Now twenty-four and single, she had been adopted fourteen years ago. The children at the Newburgh Church Orphanage had liked her, as had the sisters. But out in the real world, Belle felt she was unlovable, and worked hard at her job to gain the respect of her peers. Her greatest pain was never to know the mother who'd given birth to her. To have no identity was an agony she'd had to live with every day of her life.

The sisters who ran the orphanage had told Belle that Mrs. Peterson had been able to have only one child. She'd finally prevailed on her husband to adopt the brunette girl, Belle, who had no last name. This was Belle's chance to have a mother, but no bonding ever took place. From the day she'd been taken home, Cliff had been cruel to her, making her life close to unbearable at times.

"Good morning."

Belle was so deep in thought over the past, she didn't realize Mr. Harmon had come into the room. She shook his hand.

"I'm glad you two could arrange to meet here at the same time. I have some bad news and some good. Let's start with the bad first."

The familiar scowl on Cliff's face spoke volumes.

“As you know, there was no insurance, therefore the home you grew up in was sold to pay off the multitude of debts. The good news is you’ve each been given fifteen hundred dollars from the auction of the furnishings. I have checks for you.” He passed them out.

Cliff shot to his feet. “That’s it?” Belle heard panic beneath his anger. She knew he’d been waiting to come into some money, if only to make up delinquent alimony payments. She hadn’t expected anything herself and rejoiced to receive this check, which she clutched in her hand before putting it in her purse.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Peterson, but everything went to pay off your father’s debts and cover the burial costs. Please accept my sincere sympathy at the passing of your parents. I wish both of you the very best.”

“Thank you, Mr. Harmon,” Belle said, when Cliff continued to remain silent.

“If you ever need my help, feel free to call.” The attorney smiled at her and left the room. The second he was gone, an explosion of venom escaped Cliff’s lips. He shot her a furious glance.

“It’s all your fault. If Mom hadn’t nagged Dad for a daughter, there would have been more money and we wouldn’t be in this mess. Why don’t you go back to Italy where you belong?”

Her heart suddenly pounded with dizzying intensity. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. Dad never wanted you.”

“You think I didn’t know that?” She moved closer to her brother, holding her breath. “Are you saying I came from Italian parents?” All along she’d thought the sisters at the orphanage might have named her for the fairy-tale character, or else she came from French roots.

Her whole life she’d been praying to find out her true lineage, and she’d gone to the orphanage many times seeking information. But every time she did, she’d been told they couldn’t help her. Nadine, her adoptive mother, had never revealed the truth to her, but Belle had heard Cliff’s slip and refused to let it go.

He averted his eyes and wheeled around to leave, but she raced ahead of him and blocked the door. At twenty-four, Belle was no longer frightened of him. Before they left this office and parted ways forever, she had to ask the question that had been inscribed on her mind and heart from the time she knew she was an orphan. “What else do you know about my background?”

Cliff flashed her a mocking smile. “Now that Dad’s no longer alive, how much money are you willing to pay me for the information?”

She could hardly swallow before she opened her purse and pulled out the check. In a trembling voice she said, “I’d give you this to learn anything that could help me know my roots.” While he watched, she drew out a pen and endorsed it over to him.

For the first time since she’d known him, his eyes held a puzzled look rather than an angry one. “You’d give up that much money just to know about someone who didn’t even want you?”

“Yes,” she whispered, fighting tears. “It’s not important if they didn’t want me. I just need to know who I am and where I came from. If you know anything, I beg you to tell me.” Taking a leap of faith, she handed him the check.

He took it from her and studied it for a moment. “You always were pathetic,” he muttered.

“So you don’t know anything and were just teasing me with your cruelty? That doesn’t really surprise me. Go on. Keep it. I never thought we’d get that much money from the auction, anyway. You’re one of the lucky people who grew up knowing your parents. Too bad they’re gone and you’re all alone now. Knowing how it feels, I wouldn’t wish that on anyone, not even you.”

Belle opened the door, and had started to leave when she heard him say, “The old man said your last name was the same as the redheaded smart-mouth he hated in high school.”

Her heart thundered. She spun around. “Who was that?”

“Frankie Donatello.”

“Donatello?”

“Yeah. One day I heard Mom and Dad arguing about you. That’s when it came out. He said he wished they’d never adopted that Italian girl’s brat. After he left for work, I told Mom she ought to send you back to where you came from, because you weren’t wanted. She said that would be impossible because it was someplace in Italy.”

What? “Where in Italy?” Belle demanded.

“I don’t know. It sounded something like Remenee.”

“How did he find out? The sisters told me it was a closed adoption.”

“How the hell do I know?”

It didn’t matter, because joy lit up Belle’s insides. Her leap of faith had paid off! Without conscious thought she reached out and hugged him so hard she almost knocked him over. “Thank you! I know you hate me, but I love you for this and forgive every mean thing you ever said or did to me. Goodbye, Cliff.”

She rushed out of the law office to the bus stop and rode back to work. After nodding to the sales reps, she disappeared into the back room and looked for a map of Italy on the computer. She was trembling so violently she could hardly work the keyboard.

As she scrolled down the list of cities and towns that popped up, the name Rimini appeared, most closely matching “Remenee.” The blood pounded in her ears when she looked it up and discovered it was a town of a hundred forty thousand along the Adriatic. It was in the province of Rimini.

Quickly, she scanned the month’s schedule of vacations for the employees. They all had one week off in summer and one in winter. Belle was on summer break from college, where she went to night school. Her vacation would be coming up the third week of June, ten days away.

Without hesitation she booked a flight from New York City to Rimini, Italy, and made arrangements for a rental car. She chose the cheapest flight, with two stopovers, and made a reservation at a pension that charged only twenty-eight dollars a day. No phone, no TV. The coed bathroom was down the hall. Sounded like the orphanage. That was fine with her. A bed was all she needed.

Since she’d been saving her money, and roomed with two other girls, she’d managed to put away a modest nest egg. All these years she’d been guarding it for something important, never dreaming the money would ever help her to find her mother.

“Belle?”

She lifted her head and smiled politely at her colleague. “Yes, Mac?”

“How about going for pizza after we lock up tonight?”

“I’m sorry, but I have other plans.”

“You always say that. How can someone so gorgeous turn me down? Come on. How about it?”

Her new assistant manager, transferred in from another store, was good-looking and a real barracuda in sales, but he irritated her by continually trying to get her to go out with him.

“Mac? I’ve told you already that I’m not interested.”

“Some of the guys call you the Ice Queen.” He never gave up.

“Really. Anything else you want to say to me before you finish the inventory?”

She heard a smothered imprecation before the door closed. Good. Maybe she was an ice queen. Fine! So far she hadn’t seen examples of love in her personal life and didn’t expect to.

Her birth parents had given her away. Her adoptive parents had suffered through an unhappy marriage. Her adoptive brother was already divorced, and angry. He’d used her pretty mercilessly as an emotional punching bag. Belle always felt she was on the outside looking in, but never being part of a whole.

She thought about the single girls at the store, who all struggled to find good dates and were usually miserable with the ones they landed. Two of the four guys were married. One of them was

having an affair. The other was considering divorce. The other two were players. Both spent their money on clothes and cars.

Her own roommates were still single and terrified they would end up alone. It was all they talked about when the three of them went running in the mornings.

Belle didn't worry about being alone. That had been her state from the moment she was born. The few dates she'd accepted here and there outside the workplace had fizzled. It was probably her fault, because she didn't feel very lovable and wasn't as confident as she needed to be. Marriage wasn't an option for her.

She didn't trust any relationship to last, and cut it off early. Belle hadn't met a man she'd cared enough about to imagine going to bed with. No doubt her mother had experimented, and gotten caught with no resources but the church orphanage to help her. Belle refused to get into that circumstance.

What she could depend on was her career, which gave her the stability she craved after being dependent on the orphanage and her adoptive parents. She was a free agent now. Her store had been number one in the region for two years. Soon she hoped to be promoted to upper-level management in the company.

But first she would take her precious vacation time to try to find her mother. If Cliff had gotten it wrong or misunderstood, then maybe the trip would be for nothing, but Belle had to think positive thoughts. Romantic Italy, the world of Michelangelo, gondolas and the famous tenor Pavarotti, had always sounded as delightful and as faraway as the moon. Incredible to believe she'd actually be flying there in ten days.

Tomorrow she'd see about equipping herself with a company GSM phone and SIM card, the kind with a quad-band. Once in Rimini, she'd find a local library and work from the latest city phone directory to do her research.

She was in the midst of making a mental list of things she'd need when Rod, one of the reps, suddenly burst in on her. "Hey, boss? Can you come out in front? An angry client just threw his cell phone at Sheila and is demanding satisfaction. He said it broke after he bought it."

She smiled. "If it wasn't broken, it is now. No problem." No problem at all on the first red-letter day of her life. "I'll be right there."

* * *

It was seven in the morning when thirty-three-year-old Leonardo Rovere di Malatesta, the elder son of Count Sullisto Malatesta of Rimini, finally got his little six-month-old Concetta to sleep. The doctor said she'd caught a bug, and he'd prescribed medicine to bring down her temperature. It was now two degrees lower than it had been at midnight, and she hadn't thrown up again, grazie a Dio!

After he'd walked the floor with her all night in an attempt to comfort her, he was exhausted. The dog ought to be exhausted, too. Rufo was a brown roan Spinone, a wedding gift from his wife's father.

Rufo had been devoted to Benedetta and had transferred his allegiance to Concetta when Leon had returned from the hospital without his wife. Since that moment, their dog had never let the baby out of his sight. Leon was deeply moved by such a show of love, and patted the animal's head.

There was no way he'd be going in to the bank today. Talia and Rufo would watch over his daughter while he slept. The forty-year-old nanny had been with him since Benedetta had died in childbirth, and was devoted to his precious child. If the baby's fever spiked again, he could count on her to waken him immediately.

He kissed Concetta's head with its fine, dark blond hair, and laid her in the crib on her back, out of habit. She never stayed in that position for long. Her lids hid brown eyes dark as poppy throats. She had Benedetta's coloring and facial features. Leon loved this child in a way he hadn't thought possible. Her presence and demanding needs filled the aching loneliness in his heart for the wife he'd lost.

After tiptoeing out of the nursery, he told Talia he was going to bed, then went to find his housekeeper, who'd always worked for his mother's family. She and Talia were cousins, and he trusted them implicitly.

"Simona? I've turned off my cell phone. If someone needs me, knock on my door."

The older woman nodded before Leon headed for his bedroom. He was so exhausted he didn't remember his head touching the pillow. The relief of knowing the baby's fever had broken helped him to fall into a deep sleep.

When he heard a tap on his door later, he checked his watch. He'd slept seven hours and couldn't believe it was already midafternoon! He came awake immediately, fearing something was wrong.

"Simona? Is Concetta worse?" he called out.

"No, no. She has recovered. Talia is feeding her." Relief swamped him a second time. "Your assistant at the bank asked if you would phone him at your convenience."

"Grazie." Leon levered himself off the bed and headed for the shower, surprised that Berto would call the villa. Normally he would leave a message on Leon's cell. Maybe he had.

After he'd shaved and dressed, Leon reached for his phone. There was a message from his father asking him to join the family for dinner.

Not tonight.

Another message came from his friend Vito, in Rome. Leon would phone him before he went to bed.

Nothing from Berto.

Leon walked into the kitchen, where he found Talia feeding plums from a jar to his daughter, who was propped in her high chair. Rufo sat on the floor with his tail moving back and forth, watching with those humanlike eyes.

Concetta's sweet little face broke into a smile the second she saw her father, and she waved her hands. Whenever she did that, it made him thankful he was alive. He felt her forehead, pleased to note her fever was gone.

"I do believe you're much better, il mio tesoro. As soon as I make a few phone calls, you and I are going to go out on the patio and play." It overlooked his private stretch of beach with its fine golden sand. Concetta was strong and loved to stand in it in her bare feet if he braced her.

Yesterday he'd bought a new set of stacking buckets for her, but she hadn't felt well enough to be interested. Now that her health was improved, he couldn't wait to see what she'd do with them. First, however, he phoned his father to explain that the baby had been sick and needed to be put down early.

When Leon heard the disappointment in his voice, he made arrangements for dinner the following evening if she was all better. With that accomplished he called his secretary at the bank.

"Berto? I sent you a text message telling you my daughter was ill. Is there a problem that can't wait until tomorrow?"

"No, no. I'll talk to you in the morning, provided the bambina is better."

Leon rubbed the pad of his thumb along his lower lip. "You wouldn't have phoned if you didn't think it was important."

"At first I thought it was."

"But now you've changed your mind?" Berto was being uncharacteristically cryptic.

"Sì. It can wait until tomorrow. Ciao, Leon."

His assistant actually hung up on him! Leon clicked off and eyed the baby, who'd eaten all her plums and seemed perfectly content playing with her fingers.

"Talia, something has come up at the bank. I'll run into town and be back within the hour. Tell Simona to phone me if there's the slightest problem."

"The little one will be fine."

He kissed his daughter's cheek. "I'll see you soon."

After changing into a suit, Leon alerted his bodyguard before leaving the villa. He drove his black sports car into the most celebrated seaside resort city in Europe, curious to understand what was going on with Berto.

After pulling around to the back of the ornate, two-story Renaissance building, partially bombed during World War II and later reconstructed, he let himself in the private entrance reserved for him and his family. He took the marble staircase two steps at a time to his office on the next floor, where he served as assets manager for Malatesta Banking, one of the two top banking institutions in Italy.

Under his father's brilliant handling as wealth manager, they'd grown to twenty-five thousand employees. With his brother, Dante, overseeing the broker-dealer department, business was going well despite Italy's economic downturn. If the call from Berto meant any kind of trouble, Leon intended to get to the bottom of it pronto.

His redheaded assistant was on a call when Leon walked into his private suite of rooms. Judging from his expression, Berto was surprised to see him. He rang off quickly and got to his feet. "I didn't know you were coming."

Leon's hands went to his hips. "I didn't expect you to hang up so quickly from our earlier conversation. I want to know what's wrong. Don't tell me again it's nothing. Which of the accounts is in trouble?"

Berto looked flustered. "It has nothing to do with the accounts. A woman came to the bank earlier today after being sent from Donatello Diamonds on the Corso D'Augusto."

"And?" Leon demanded, sensing his assistant's hesitation.

"Marcello in Security called up here, asking for you to handle the inquiry, since your father wasn't available. The manager at Donatello's told her she would have to speak to someone at the bank. That's when I called you.

"But after I heard it was some American wanting information about the Donatello family, I figured it was a foreign reporter snooping around. At that point I decided not to bother you any more about it."

Leon frowned in puzzlement. Someone wanting to do legitimate business would have made an appointment with him or his father and left their full name.

Was it one of the paparazzi posing as an American tourist in order to dig up news about the family? Leon's relatives had to be on constant alert against the media wanting to rake up old scandal to sell papers.

Leon had seen it all and viewed life with a cynical eye. It was what came from being a Malatesta, hated in earlier centuries and still often an object of envy.

"When I couldn't get you or your father, I tried your brother, but he's out of town. I told Marcello this person would have to leave a name and phone number. With your daughter sick, I didn't consider this an emergency, but I still wanted you to be informed."

"I appreciate that. You handled it perfectly. Do you have the information she left?"

Berto handed the notepaper to him. "That's the phone number and address of the Pensione Rosa off the Via Vincenza Monti. The woman's name is Belle. Marcello said she's in her early twenties, and with her long dark hair and blue eyes, more than lives up to her name. When she approached him, he thought she was a film star."

Naturally. Didn't the devil usually appear in the guise of a beautiful woman? Of course she didn't leave a last name....

"Good work, Berto. Tell no one else about this. See you tomorrow."

More curious than ever, Leon left the bank. A few minutes later he discovered the small lodging down an alley, half hidden by the other buildings. He parked and entered. No one was around, so he pressed the buzzer at the front desk. In a moment a woman older than Simona came out of an alcove.

"I'm Rosa. If you need a room, we're full, signore."

Leon handed her the paper. “You have a woman named Belle registered here?”

“Sì.” With that staccato answer he realized he wouldn’t be learning her guest’s last name the easy way.

“Could you ring her room, per favore?”

“No phone in the rooms.”

He might have known, considering the low price for accommodations listed on the back wall.

“Do you know if she’s in?”

“She went out several hours ago and hasn’t returned.”

He spied a chair against the wall, next to an end table with a lamp on it. “I’ll wait.”

The woman scrutinized him. “Leave me your name and number and she can call you from the desk here after she returns.”

“I’ll take my chances and see if she comes in.”

With a shrug of her ample shoulders, the woman disappeared through the alcove.

Rather than sit here for what might be hours, he phoned one of his security people to do surveillance. When Ruggio arrived, Leon gave him the American woman’s description and said he wanted to be notified as soon as she showed up.

With that taken care of, he walked out to the alley and got in his car. He was halfway to the villa when his cell phone rang. It was Ruggio. Leon clicked on. “What’s happening?”

“The woman fitting the description you gave me just entered. She’s driving a rental car from the airport.”

“Which agency?”

When Ruggio gave him the particulars, Leon told him to stay put until he got there. On the way back to the pension, he called the rental agency and asked to speak to the manager on a matter of vital importance. Once the man heard it was Signor di Malatesta investigating a possible police matter to do with the bank, he told him her last name was Peterson, and that she was from Newburgh, New York. Leon didn’t often use his name to apply pressure, but this case was an exception.

He learned she’d made the reservation nearly two weeks ago and had rented the car for seven days. It seemed she’d already been in Rimini three days.

Leon thanked the manager for his cooperation. Pleased to be armed with this much information before confronting her, he made a search on his phone. Newburgh was a town sixty miles north of New York City. What it all meant he didn’t know yet, but he was about to find out.

He saw the rental car when he drove down the alley and parked. Ruggio met him at the front desk of the pension, where Rosa was helping a scruffy-looking male wearing a backpack and short shorts.

“She’s been in her room since she came in. She’s *molta molta bellissima*,” Ruggio whispered. “I think I’ve seen her on television.”

Marcello had said the same thing. “Grazie. I’ll take it from here,” Leon told him. If she was working alone or with another reporter, he planned to find out.

Once Ruggio left, he sat down. By now it was quarter after six. Without a TV, she’d probably leave again, if only to get a meal. If he had to wait too long, he’d insist Rosa go knock on Signorina Peterson’s door. To pass the time, Leon phoned Simona, and was relieved to hear his little girl seemed to be over the worst of her bug.

As he was telling his housekeeper he wasn’t sure what time he’d get home, a woman emerged from the alcove. Without warning, his adrenaline kicked in. Not just because she was beautiful—in fact, incredibly so. It was because there was something about her that reminded him of someone else.

She swept past him, so fast she was out the door before he was galvanized into action. After telling Simona he’d get back to her, he sprang from the chair and followed the shapely woman in the two-piece linen suit and leather sandals down the alley to her car.

He estimated she had to be five feet six. Even the way she carried herself, with a kind of unconscious grace, was appealing. Physically, Leon could find nothing wrong with her, and that bothered him, since he hadn't been able to look at another woman since Benedetta.

"Belle Peterson?"

She wheeled around, causing her gleaming hair, the color of dark mink, to swish about her shoulders. Cobalt-blue eyes fringed with black lashes flew to Leon in surprise. If she already knew who he was, she was putting on a good act of pretending otherwise.

She possessed light olive skin that needed no makeup. Her wide mouth, with its soft pink lipstick, had a voluptuous flare. He found her the embodiment of feminine pulchritude, but to his surprise she stared at him without a hint of recognition or flirtatiousness. "How do you know my name? We've never met."

With that accent, she was American through and through. He found her directness as intriguing as her no-nonsense demeanor. Some men might find it intimidating. Leon's gaze dropped to her left hand, curled over her shoulder bag and resting against the lush curve of her hip. Her nails were well manicured with a neutral coating. She wore no rings.

If in disguise for a part she was playing—perhaps in the hope of infiltrating their family business in some way to unlock secrets—he would say she looked...perfect.

He pulled the note Berto had given him out of his suit jacket pocket and handed it to her.

She glanced at it before eyeing him again. "Evidently you're from the bank. How did you get my last name?"

"A simple matter of checking with the car rental agency."

Her blue eyes turned frosty. "I don't know about your country, but in mine that information can only be obtained by a judge's warrant during the investigation of a crime."

"My country has similar laws."

"Was it a crime to ask questions?"

"Of course not. But I'm afraid our doors are closed to all so-called journalists. I decided to investigate."

"I'm not a journalist or anything close," she stated promptly. Reaching in her shoulder bag, she pulled a business card out of her wallet.

He took it from her fingers and glanced at it. Belle Peterson, Manager, Trans Continental Cell Phones Incorporated, Newburgh, New York...

He lifted his head. "Why didn't you leave this card at the bank with the security man you talked to?"

Without hesitation, she said, "Because a call to my work verifying my employment would let everyone know where I am. Since my whereabouts are no one's business, I wish it to remain that way. The fact is, I'm on vacation and it's almost over."

He slipped the card into his pocket. "You'll be returning to Newburgh?"

"Yes. I've talked to as many people with the last name Donatello as I've been able to locate in Rimini. So far I haven't found the information I've been seeking."

"Or a missing person, maybe?" he prodded. "A man, perhaps?" The question slipped out, once again surprising him. As if he cared who she was looking for...

Her gaze never wavered. "I suppose that's a natural assumption a man might make, but the answer is no. Not every woman is looking for a man, whether it be for pleasure or for marriage...an institution that in my opinion is overvalued."

She sounded like Leon, only in reverse, increasing his interest.

"To be specific, the manager at Donatello Diamonds directed me to the Malatesta Bank, but it seems I've come to a dead end there, too. Since you prefer not to tell me your name, at least let me thank you for the courtesy of coming to the pension to let me know you can't help me. I can cross Donatello Diamonds off my list of possibilities."

Like a man concluding a business meeting, she put out her hand for Leon to shake. His closed around hers. Unexpected warmth shot up his arm, catching him off guard before he released her. “What will you do now?”

“I’ll continue to search until my time runs out in three days. Goodbye.” She turned and got in her rental car without asking him for the card back. He watched until she drove to the end of the alley and turned onto the street.

Her card burned a hole in his pocket. He pulled it out. If he phoned the number on the back of it, he’d find out if she’d been telling the truth about her job. But since he was a person who always jealously guarded his own privacy, he could relate to her desire to keep her private life to herself.

No matter what, this woman meant nothing to him. If she’d come on a fishing expedition, he hadn’t given her any information she could use to cause trouble.

By the time he’d driven back to the villa, his thoughts were on his daughter. It wasn’t until later, after he’d kissed her good-night and was doing laps in the pool, that images of the American woman kept surfacing. There was something familiar about her that wouldn’t leave him alone.

A nagging voice urged him to phone the head office of TCCPI, wherever it was located, to find out if she’d fabricated an elaborate lie including a business card. Leon could do that before he went to bed. If he didn’t make the call, he’d never get to sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY WEDNESDAY MORNING, Belle came awake after a restless night. The tall nameless man in the light blue silk suit who’d tracked her down in the alley last evening was without question the most dangerously striking male she’d ever met in her life.

With those aquiline features, he embodied much more than the conventional traits one normally attributed to a gorgeous man, such as handsome, dashing or exciting. She couldn’t believe it, but she’d been attracted to him. Strongly attracted. It had never happened to her before.

Once he’d called out to her, she’d felt his powerful presence before she’d even turned to study his rock-hard physique. His black hair and olive skin provided the perfect foil for startling gray eyes.

For him to come from the bank armed with information no one could have known meant he was someone of importance. The fact that her inquiry had brought him to the pension convinced her she’d unwittingly trespassed on ground whose secrets were so dark, they had to be well guarded.

Who better than the man who’d suddenly appeared like some mysterious prince from this Renaissance city? Just remembering their encounter sent a shiver down the length of her body.

She was being fanciful, but couldn’t help it. His deep voice with barely a trace of accent in English had agitated her nervous system. Even after twelve hours she could still feel it resonating. Though she’d never forget him, she needed to push thoughts of him to the back of her mind. Her flight home Sunday would be here before she knew it, which meant she needed to intensify her search.

Once she’d showered down the hall, and had slipped on a short-sleeved, belted white cotton dress, she left the pension armed with her detailed street map and notebook. She’d kept a log of every Donatello name so far. Her destination for the last Donatello she could find in the city of Rimini was Donatello’s Garage.

After following the directions she’d been given on the phone yesterday, she talked to the manager, who spoke passable English. He told her a man by another name now owned the shop. The original owner, Mr. Donatello, and his wife had both died of old age. They’d had no children who could inherit the garage.

This was the way it had been going since last Sunday, when she’d started working through the list of Donatellos in the Rimini phone directory. In most cases the people she’d talked to were willing to help her, even going to the trouble of finding someone to help them understand her English.

They were proud of their genealogy. Many of them told her she could come by their house. The others told her their information over the phone, but so far there were no leads on a woman with the

middle or last name Donatello, in her late thirties or early forties, who'd been to New York twenty-six years ago. It was like looking for a needle in the proverbial haystack.

Resolving not to be dispirited, Belle thanked him and headed for the library near her pension, to do more research on the other nineteen cities and towns within Rimini Province. They were ten to twelve miles apart and had much smaller populations, so there wouldn't be as many Donatellos to look up. That could be bad, if nothing was discovered about her birth mother.

En route to the library, Belle stopped at a trattoria for breakfast and filled up so she wouldn't have to eat until dinnertime. She would be doing a lot more driving over the next few days. Before she left Rimini, she approached the woman in the research department, who spoke excellent English and knew she was looking for Donatello names.

"I have one more question, if you don't mind. Could you tell me anything about the Malatesta Bank?" The striking Italian who'd shown up at the pension had refused to leave her mind.

"How much time do you have?"

That's what Belle had thought. "Yesterday the manager of Donatello Diamonds directed me to the bank to get information, but I learned nothing. Why would he do that? I don't understand the connection."

"The House of Malatesta was an Italian family that ruled over Rimini from 1300 to 1500. There's too much history since then to tell you in five minutes. But today a member of that old ruling family, Count Sullisto Malatesta, runs the Malatesta Bank, one of the two largest banks in Italy. They own many other businesses as well.

"Another, lesser ruling family of the past, the House of Donatello, made their fortune in diamonds, but over years of poor management it started to dwindle. Some say it would have eventually failed if Count Malatesta, then a widower, hadn't merged with the House of Donatello.

"He saved it from ruin by marrying Princess Luciana Donatello, the heiress, whose father was purported to have died of natural causes." The woman lowered her voice. "I say purported because some people insisted both he and his wife had been murdered, either by another faction of the Donatello family, or by the Malatesta family. Soon thereafter, the count made his power grab by marrying her, but nothing definite came of the investigation to prove or disprove the theories."

Belle shuddered. The dark stranger from the bank had looked that dangerous to her.

"The Donatello deaths left a question mark and turned everything into a scandal that rocked the region and made the wedding into a nationwide event."

"You're a fount of knowledge, and I'm indebted to you," Belle told her. "Now I'm off to the other towns in Rimini Province to look up more Donatellos. Thank you so much for your time."

The woman smiled. "Good luck to you."

Belle was glad to be leaving the city, to be leaving him. Before she left, she would pay her bill at the pension and turn in her rental car. In case the man from the bank made more inquiries about her, he'd be thrown off the scent. Leaving no trail, she'd take a taxi to another rental agency and procure a car for the rest of the week.

She left the library and walked out to the parking lot to get in her car. As she opened the door, she heard a deep familiar voice say, "Signorina Peterson?" Her heart jumped.

It was déjà vu as she looked around and discovered the man who'd been responsible for her restless night. This time he was dressed in a blue sport shirt that made him even more breathtaking, if that was possible. His eyes played over her with a thoroughness that was disarming.

"Why are you following me, signore?"

"Because I overheard your conversation with the librarian and am in a position to help you in your search if you'd allow me."

"Why would you do that, when you won't even tell me your name?"

“Because you’re a foreigner who has suffered two frights. The first from me, because I put you through an inquisition yesterday. The second from the librarian, who increased your nervousness just now when she answered your question.”

He’d been listening the whole time? That meant he’d followed her from the pension. Belle held on to the door handle for support. “What makes you think I’m nervous?”

“The pulse in your throat is throbbing unnaturally fast.”

Those silvery eyes didn’t miss a detail. “I imagine it always does that when I’m being stalked.”

“With your kind of beauty, I would imagine it’s an occupational hazard, especially at your workplace.” While she tried to catch her breath, he said, “I had you investigated.”

“I knew it,” she muttered.

He cocked his dark head. “Not in a way that anyone from your store could ever find out. I called headquarters in New York and explained our bank was doing the groundwork to sponsor an American cell phone company in Rimini, to see how it would play out.”

“That was a lie!”

“Not necessarily. American cell phone companies are one asset we’ve had an idea to acquire for some time. When I asked which store manager might be equal to the task, you were mentioned among the top five managers for your company on the East Coast.”

“What did you do? Talk to the CEO himself?” she demanded.

“Actually, I did.”

Good heavens. He was handsome as the devil and just as cunning.

“I find it even more compelling that you started with that company at age eighteen and six years later are still with them. That kind of loyalty is rare. I was told you’re going to be promoted to a regional manager in the next few months. Perhaps it might land you in Rimini.”

What?

“My congratulations.”

Who was this man with such powerful connections? Belle needed to keep her wits. “Just so you know, I have no interest in moving overseas. So now that you’ve learned I’m not one of the paparazzi, I’d like your word that you’ll leave me alone, whoever you are.”

“I’m Leonardo di Malatesta, the elder son of Count Sullisto Malatesta.”

Her heart thudded too fast. It all fit with her first impression of a dark prince, and explained the signet ring with a knight’s head on his right hand. There was a wedding ring on his left. “I understand that name connotes someone sinister.”

His smile had a dangerous curl. “If it would make you feel more comfortable, call me Leon.”

“The lion. If that’s supposed to make me feel any better...”

A velvety sound close to a chuckle escaped his lips. “I want to apologize for my unorthodox method of getting to know you, and frightening you. Considering the fact that you plan to return to the States on Sunday, perhaps if you told me exactly what you’re hoping to find, I could help speed up the process. I really would like to assist you.”

“I doubt your wife would approve.”

Those gray eyes darkened with some unnamed emotion. “I’m a widower.”

“Yet you still wear your wedding ring. You must have loved her a great deal. Forgive me if I’m being suspicious. The truth is, I wouldn’t dream of bothering a busy man like you, one with so many banking responsibilities. The only thing I was hoping to get from the manager at Donatello Diamonds was a little information about the female members of the Donatello family. It would take just a few minutes.”

“So you’re looking for a woman...”

“That’s very astute of you.”

A gleam entered his eyes. “Considering the very attractive female I’m talking to, surely I can be forgiven for my earlier assessment of the situation.”

Don't let that fatal charm of his get to you, Belle, even if he is still in mourning.

"That depends on what you can tell me," she retorted with a wry smile back at him.

After a pause, he said, "Obviously you haven't found her yet. Why is she so important to you that you would come thousands of miles?"

The small moment of levity fled. "Because the answer to my whole existence is tied up with her. My greatest fear is that she's no longer alive, or that I'll never find her." Sorrow weighed Belle down at the thought.

He studied her with relentless scrutiny. "Is she a relative?"

This was where things got too sensitive. "Maybe."

"How old would she be?"

"Probably in her forties." Again, maybe. According to Cliff, her adoptive father had called her mother "that Italian girl." Belle took it to mean she was young. "I learned she was from Rimini, Italy, but that could mean the city or the province."

His black eyebrows furrowed. "My stepmother, Luciana, was an only child, born to Valeria and Massimo Donatello here in Rimini. Valeria died in a hunting accident on their estate when Luciana was only eleven. As the librarian told you, some people still believe it wasn't an accident."

"What she told me sounded positively Machiavellian."

"You're right. It was only a few months ago that the police finally solved the case. The shooting was ruled as accidental."

"I see. It's still tragic when any child loses its mother."

"I couldn't agree more," he said in an almost haunted voice. Their eyes held for a moment. "My father was fifteen years older than Luciana, and he married her against my brother's and my wishes. She was only twenty at the time and could never have replaced our mother."

Four years younger than Belle's age now. "Of course not." She could only imagine this man's pain. Suddenly he'd become more human to her. He'd lost his own mother and his wife.

"She's forty-two now," Leon added. "There must be quite a few Donatello women between those ages you've met while you've been here in Rimini."

"Yes, but so far I've had no luck, because none of them ever traveled to New York in their late teens or twenties."

* * *

Leon's heart gave a thunderclap. "New York is the connecting point?" he rasped.

Belle nodded.

What had she said in answer to his earlier question about why this was important to her? Because the answer to my whole existence is tied up with her. My greatest fear is that she's no longer alive, or that I'll never find her.

As Leon stared at Belle, pure revelation flowed through him. He knew why she looked familiar to him. Had Marcello picked up on the resemblance? Or the manager at Donatello Diamonds? Probably not, or they would have said something, but he couldn't be sure. Ruggio thought he'd seen her on television.

Madonna mia!

"I told you I'd like to help you, and I will, but we can't talk here. Leave your car in the library parking lot and come with me. It will be safe."

"I don't need your help. Thanks all the same."

She opened her shoulder bag to get her keys, but he put a hand on her arm. "If you want to meet your mother, I'm the person who can make it happen. But you're going to have to trust me."

Her gasp told him everything he wanted to know. Those fabulous blue eyes were blurry with tears as they lifted to his. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Her voice shook.

"Let's find out. Is there anything in your car you need?"

"No."

“Then we’ll drive to my villa, where we can talk in private. I have some pictures to show you.”

She moved like a person in a daze as he escorted her to his car and helped her inside. At a time like this, the shape of her long, elegant legs shouldn’t have drawn his attention, but they did. Her flowery fragrance proved another assault on his senses.

“Do I look like her?”

“When I saw you come out of the alcove at the pension yesterday, you reminded me of someone, but I couldn’t place you. It’s bothered me ever since. Not until a few minutes ago, when you mentioned New York, did everything click into place.” He started the engine. “You’ll need to buckle up.”

Leon wove through the streets to the villa, not really seeing anything while his mind played back through the years to the time he’d first met Luciana. He remembered his father telling him and Dante that she’d lived in New York for a year and could help them improve their English. How much had his parent known about the sober young princess he’d brought home to the palazzo, besides the fact that she had money and was beautiful?

Yet even if she’d told him nothing about having a baby, his father would have guessed, if she’d had a C-section or stretch marks. If not, he might still be in the dark. Her terrible secret might explain why she’d always seemed so remote and elusive to Leon.

Before they reached the house he phoned Simona. After learning Concetta was back to normal and playing with her new buckets in the kitchen, he told his housekeeper to prepare lunch for him and a guest. They’d be arriving shortly and could eat out on the patio.

Engrossed in her own thoughts, the woman seated next to him hadn’t said a word during the drive. Once upon a time she’d been a baby, separated at birth from her mother by an ocean. When Leon thought about his little daughter and how precious she was to him, he couldn’t fathom Belle’s or Luciana’s history. Leon had so many questions he didn’t know which one to ask first.

When the white, two-story villa built along neoclassic lines came into view, he pressed the remote to open the gates and drove around to the back. When she saw the flower garden there, Belle gave a gasp of admiration.

Leon helped her from the car and led her up the steps into the rear foyer that opened into the dayroom. “At the end of the hallway is a guest bedroom with bath, where you can freshen up. When you’re ready, come and find me in here, and we’ll eat lunch on the patio, where we won’t be disturbed.”

“Thank you.”

The second she disappeared, he hurried through the main floor to the kitchen, where he found Concetta in her playpen with some toys. She made delighted sounds when she saw him, and lifted her arms. He gathered her up and kissed her half a dozen times against her neck, causing her to laugh. Again he was reminded that his lunch guest had never known her mother’s kiss. Obviously not her father’s, either.

Talia smiled. “She’s had her lunch and is ready for her nap.”

“I brought company, so I can’t give her all my attention, but I will when she wakes up.” He kissed her once more and handed her back to Talia. His daughter didn’t like being separated from him, and shed a few tears going down the hall to the staircase.

Much as he wanted to put her to bed himself, he was aware someone else was waiting for him, someone who’d been waiting years for any word about her parentage.

Simona looked over her shoulder. “Do you want lunch served now?”

“Please.”

He retraced his steps to the dayroom and found Belle holding a five-by-seven framed photo she’d picked up from a grouping on one of the credenzas. Her back was turned to him, but even from this distance, he could see her shoulders shaking.

“I won’t pretend to say I understand what you’re feeling. I can only imagine what it must be like to see yourself in Luciana’s image. Though you’re not identical, anyone who knows you well would notice certain similarities.”

Belle put the picture back and whirled around, her lovely face dripping with tears. She used both hands to wipe them off her chin. “My mother is a princess? Your stepmother? I—I can’t take it in,” she stammered. “In the orphanage I used to dream about what she would be like. I had to believe she gave me up because of a life-and-death reason. But my dreams never reached heights like that.”

Leon put his hands on his hips. “I’m still in shock from the knowledge that she had a baby, yet there’s never been a whisper of you.”

He heard his guest groan. “When Cliff told me my mother was from Italy, I wanted it to be the truth. But I never thought I’d really find her. Why did you bother to come to the pension?” The throb in her voice hung in the air.

It was the question Leon had been asking himself over and over. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I can’t honestly tell you the reason. It was a feeling that nagged at me to the point I had to investigate.”

She clasped her hands together. “If you hadn’t come, I would know nothing, and I would be flying back to New York without ever getting an answer. Thank heaven for you!” she cried. “I’ll never be able to repay you.”

A strange shiver chased through his body at the realization he might not have heeded the prompting. He’d tried to ignore it, until he’d been swimming in the pool. Then it wouldn’t leave him alone.

Belle’s gorgeous eyes searched his. “But now that I see her picture, I think I’m frightened. It’s like that old expression about being careful what you wish for, because you might get it.”

She wasn’t the only one alarmed. Already she was important to him in ways he couldn’t begin to explain.

“Is it because you’ve discovered you’re the stepsister through marriage of the infamous Malatesta family?”

He’d thrown the question at her in a silky voice to combat her pull on him. His attraction to her was sucking him in deeper and deeper. He didn’t want this kind of complication in his life, not after having lost Benedetta. Too many losses convinced him it was better not to get involved. Leon had his daughter. She was all he needed.

His guest stared at him through haunted eyes. “What are you talking about? When the couple who adopted me brought me to their house, they broke their birth son’s heart. He hated me from the first day. If anything, I’m afraid of being the orphaned offspring of the woman your father brought into your home, thereby breaking your heart.”

Her words touched on Leon’s deep-seated guilt, and confounded him. She really was frightened. He could feel it. “You’re pale and need to eat. Come out to the patio with me.”

Leon showed her though the tall French doors on the far side of the dayroom. Simona had set the round, wrought-iron table with a cloth and fresh flowers from the garden. She’d prepared bruschetta and her bocconcini salad of mozzarella balls and cubetti di pancetta ham he particularly enjoyed.

He helped Belle to a seat where she could look out at the Adriatic. With the hot, fair weather, he spotted half a dozen sailboats and a few yachts out on the water. It was a sight he never tired of, especially now with the view of her alluring profile filling his vision.

Once he’d poured her some iced tea he said, “If you’d prefer coffee or juice, I’ll ask Simona to bring it.”

But Belle had already taken a long swallow. “This tastes delicious and is exactly what I needed. Thank you.”

After drinking half a glass himself, he picked up his fork and they started to eat. “I’m assuming Cliff is the son you referred to.”

She nodded. “The Petersons adopted me when I was ten. Mr. Peterson never wanted me, but Nadine had always hoped for a daughter and finally prevailed on him to adopt me. They already

had a sixteen-year-old son, who had no desire for a girl from an orphanage to move in on what he considered his territory.”

Leon’s stomach muscles clenched in reaction. He could relate to Cliff’s hatred at that age. Leon had been eleven when his father had installed the twenty-year-old Luciana in the palazzo, a world that had belonged to him and his brother, Dante. No one else.

Now that the years had passed, and Leon had his own home and was a father, he understood better his parent’s need for companionship. At eleven he’d been too selfish to see anything beyond his own wants.

From the beginning he’d rebuffed any overtures from Luciana, but he had to admit she’d never been unkind to him or Dante. Anything but. As the years went by, he’d learned to be more civil to her. Maturity helped him to see that her cool aloofness at times masked some kind of strange sadness, no doubt because she’d lost both her parents under tragic circumstances.

To think she’d had a baby she’d been forced to give up! The knowledge tore him apart inside. He could never give up Concetta for any reason.

“How did it happen that Cliff told you about your mother?”

After putting her fork down, Belle told him what had transpired at the attorney’s office. Leon was astounded by what he heard. For her adoptive brother to take the money before telling her what she’d been desperate to know all her life sickened Leon. What made Cliff more despicable to him was to learn he hadn’t let her keep the money that was legally hers.

“Tell me about your life with the Petersons. I’d like to hear.”

She looked at him for a minute as if testing his sincerity. Then she began in a halting voice. “The day I was taken to their house, Cliff followed me into the small room that would be my bedroom. He grabbed me by the shoulders and told me his dad hadn’t wanted a screaming baby around the house. That’s why they’d picked me. But I’d better be good and stay out of his dad’s way or I’d be sorry, Cliff said. And in fact his father was so intimidating, I tried hard to be obedient and not cause trouble.”

Leon grimaced. “They should never have been allowed to adopt you.”

“Laws weren’t so strict then. The orphanage was overcrowded. You know how it is.”

As far as Leon was concerned, it was criminal.

“Ben was a car salesman who loved old cars and had restored several, but it took all their money. He lost his job several times because of layoffs, and had to find employment at other car dealerships. The money he poured into his hobby ate up any extra funds they had. He was an angry man who never had a kind word. The more I tried to gain his favor, the more he dismissed me.”

And destroyed her confidence, Leon bet.

“Nadine held a job at a dry cleaners and was a hard worker who tried to make a good home for us. She took me to church. It was one of the few places where I found comfort. But she was a quiet woman unable to show affection. It was clear she was afraid of her own son and stayed out of her husband’s way as much as possible. I never bonded with any of them.”

“How could you have under those circumstances?” Leon was troubled by her story.

“One good thing happened to me. As soon as I was old enough, I did babysitting for people in the neighborhood to earn money. I’d helped out with the younger children in the orphanage and knew how to play with them and care for babies. I love them.” Her voice trembled.

There was a sweetness in Belle that got under his skin.

“To tell you the truth, I liked going to other people’s houses to get away from Cliff and his father, who were so mean-spirited. He constantly asked me for money, telling me he’d pay me back, but he never did. I didn’t tell on him for fear Ben would take out his anger on me.”

With each revelation Leon’s hands curled into tighter fists.

“Finally Cliff got a job in a garage after school, and in time bought himself a motorcycle. That kept him away from me, but from then on it seemed he was always in trouble with traffic tickets and accidents.

“He was often at odds with both his parents because of the hours he kept with girls they didn’t know. Sometimes he barged into my room, to take out his frustration on me by bullying me. He never lost an opportunity to let me know I’d ruined his life,” she whispered.

“I can’t begin to imagine how you made it through those hellish years, Belle.”

“When I look back on it neither can I. The day I turned eighteen, I got a job in a cell phone store and moved in with three other girls, sharing an apartment. It saved my life to get away from my nightmarish situation.”

“Did Cliff follow you?”

“No. I left while he was gone. He had no idea where I went, and could no longer come after me for money and badger me. The few times I went to see Nadine, I went by her work at the dry cleaners so Cliff never saw me. She knew things were out of control with him and never pushed for me to come home again, because I was over the legal age.”

Certain things Belle had just said brought home to Leon how mean-spirited he’d been to Luciana when she’d first come to live at the palazzo. He’d been an adolescent and had ignored any overtures on her part. Dante had done the same thing to her, following in his big brother’s footsteps.

“I only ever saw him at the church funeral and the attorney’s office after that,” Belle explained. “When he told me my last name, I didn’t know if it was the truth. But I wanted it to be true, so badly that I flew to Rimini on a prayer, knowing I’d seen the last of him, and was thankful.”

Shaken by her revelations, Leon wiped the corner of his mouth with a napkin. “You didn’t learn anything about your birth father through Cliff?”

She drank the last of her tea. “No. I decided he must have disappeared before my mother took me to the orphanage. What other explanation could there be...unless something horrendous had happened and she’d been raped? I shudder to think that might have been the case, and would rather not talk about it.”

“Then we won’t.” If Luciana had been raped, and Leon’s father knew about it, how would he feel about Belle, the innocent second victim? The more Leon thought about it, the more it was like a bomb exploding, the resulting shock waves wreaking devastation. “What’s the name of the orphanage?”

“The Newburgh Church Orphanage. Why do you ask?”

He put down his fork. “Despite the public’s opinion of the Malatesta family, we give to a number of charities. Your story has decided me to send an anonymous donation to the orphanage where you were raised. That’s something I intend to take care of right away.”

A gift no matter how large wouldn’t take away his guilt over his treatment of Luciana, but he realized the only reason Belle was still alive was due to the generosity of others who gave to charity.

“If you did that, the sisters would consider it heaven sent, but you don’t need to do it.”

“I want to. They gave you a spiritual and physical start in life. No payment would be enough.”

“You’re right,” she said in a quiet voice. “One of the sisters in charge reminded us that we were lucky to be there where we could get the help we needed, so we shouldn’t complain. The priest at the church where Nadine took me told me I was blessed to have a birth mother who loved me enough to put me in God’s keeping.”

Hard words for a child to accept, but Leon could only agree. Whatever Luciana’s circumstances at the time, she’d at least had the courage to make certain her baby would be looked after. His admiration for her choice when she could have done something else changed his perception of her. But why had she given up her baby?

Had Luciana loved that baby with all her heart, the way he’d loved Concetta from the moment he’d learned they were expecting? He knew enough about Luciana’s strict upbringing to realize she would have been afraid of letting anyone find out about her baby, causing a scandal that would tarnish the Donatello family name.

Unbelievable that her offspring had grown up into a beautiful, intelligent woman eating lunch with him, no less! You’re enjoying it far too much, Malatesta.

Luciana had lived through a nightmare, and had gone on to make a home for his father and the boys despite Leon's antipathy. An unfamiliar sense of shame for his behavior over those early years crept into his psyche. He was now paying the price.

"Their goodness to you needs to be rewarded," he murmured, still trying to digest everything.

"Sometimes I felt guilty for wanting to know about my parents when the sisters tried so hard to keep our spirits up. When Cliff asked me why I wanted to find someone who didn't want me, I told him it wasn't important if they didn't want me. I just needed to know who I am and where I came from. But I'm not your responsibility, and I've taken up too much of your time as it is."

She pushed herself away from the table and stood up. "Now that I have answers to those questions, I can go back to New York. Needless to say, I'll be indebted to you for the rest of my life. Thank you for bringing me to your villa, and please thank the cook for the wonderful food. If you'll drive me back to the library, I'd be very grateful."

Leon got to his feet. "We haven't even scratched the surface yet."

"Yes, we have. You and I both know there are reasons why she gave me up. I would never want to cause her pain by showing up uninvited and unwanted."

"You could never be unwanted!" he declared. He refused to believe it, but that was the father in him speaking, the father who idolized his little girl. Ever since Belle was born, she'd never known the love of her own parents. He couldn't fathom it.

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