

2 *in* 1
GREAT
VALUE

STAR-CROSSED
SWEETHEARTS

JACKIE BRAUN

SECRET PRINCE,
INSTANT DADDY!

RAYE MORGAN

Cherish

Mills & Boon Cherish

Jackie Braun

**Star-Crossed Sweethearts /
Secret Prince, Instant Daddy!**

«HarperCollins»

Braun J.

Star-Crossed Sweethearts / Secret Prince, Instant Daddy! / J. Braun —
«HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon Cherish)

STAR-CROSSED SWEETHEARTS It's a media circus when baseball superstar Angelo Casali returns home to Italy with stunning – and scandalous – starlet Atlanta Jackson. Is this notorious playboy ready to settle down? SECRET PRINCE, INSTANT DADDY! David Dykstra's journey to claiming his rightful place as prince of fallen Ambria becomes complicated when he discovers he's a father – to beautiful Ayme Sommers's niece!

Содержание

Star-Crossed Sweethearts	6
Jackie Braun	7
Raye Morgan	8
MILLS & BOON	9
Star-Crossed Sweethearts	10
Prologue	11
Chapter One	14
Chapter Two	20
Chapter Three	26
Chapter Four	32
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	40

Star-Crossed Sweethearts

By

Jackie Braun
Secret Prince, Instant Daddy!

By

Raye Morgan



www.millsandboon.co.uk

MILLS & BOON

Before you start reading, why not sign up?

Thank you for downloading this Mills & Boon book. If you want to hear about exclusive discounts, special offers and competitions, sign up to our email newsletter today!

[SIGN ME UP!](#)

Or simply visit

signup.millsandboon.co.uk

Mills & Boon emails are completely free to receive and you can unsubscribe at any time via the link in any email we send you.

Star-Crossed Sweethearts

By

Jackie Braun

JACKIE BRAUN is a three-time RITA® Award finalist, a four-time National Readers' Choice Award finalist and a past winner of the Rising Star Award. She worked for nearly two decades as an award-winning journalist before leaving her full-time job to write fiction. She lives in mid-Michigan with her husband and their two sons. She loves to hear from readers and can be reached through her website at www.jackiebraun.com

For Brady Williamson and his new sister, Alexandria.

Dear Reader,

It's been years since I visited Italy, but three things have stayed with me despite the passage of time: the friendliness of the people, the beauty of the Italian countryside, and the food.

Oh, the food. I've often said if I were only allowed to eat one kind of cuisine for the rest of my life I would choose Italian.

So, when I was asked to be part of *The Brides of Bella Rosa* continuity, I was excited that it not only explored the themes of forgiveness and family, but that it did it so against the backdrop of Rosa and Sorella, the fictional restaurants owned by Luca Casali and his sister Lisa Firenzi.

I invite you to pour yourself a glass of wine and join Atlanta and Angelo as they travel to Italy and towards love.

Happy reading!

Jackie Braun

Prologue

ANGELO CASALI stood at the home plate with his feet planted shoulder's width apart in the dust. The bat hovered in the air just beyond his right ear. It was the bottom of the ninth inning with two outs, and the Rogues were trailing by two. Anxious runners filled the bases waiting for New York's Angel to work a miracle. They and the fans knew the team's pennant hopes rested squarely on his shoulders.

The opposing team's pitcher glared at Angelo from beneath the bill of his cap. Kyle Morris had one of the best arms in the league. Only a handful of batters could touch his fastball. Angelo was one of them, which was why Morris had yet to bring the heat against him this game. In fact, the pitcher had walked Angelo his last two times at bat. Morris couldn't afford to do that now, and they both knew it.

The pitcher hiked up his leg and levered back his arm before bringing it around. The ball blasted free of his hand like a bullet clearing the barrel of a gun. Even so, Angelo was ready, his eyes tracking its trajectory. He timed his swing perfectly and put everything he had into it, shifting his weight to his right leg as he brought the bat around.

Crack!

The sound of red-stitched white leather meeting wood rent the air like gunfire. It was followed by a sickening *pop!* that only Angelo heard...and felt. Pain, wicked and white-hot, exploded from his shoulder. The crowd's deafening roar drowned out his cry.

It's worth it, he told himself. It's worth it.

Even as he dropped the bat and started toward first base, he knew there was no need to hurry. The ball was riding high in the clouds and showed no signs of dropping.

"And it's out of here!" the announcer shouted.

The fans were on their feet, clapping and high-fiving.

"Angel! Angel! Angel!"

Their jubilant chanting buoyed him. Along with the adrenaline streaking through his system, it allowed him to ignore the worst of the pain. He rounded the bases at a leisurely trot with his good arm raised in triumph. By the time he arrived at home plate, his teammates were out of the dugout, standing there en masse to greet him with whoops and careless back slaps that nearly sent Angelo to his knees. He kept his grin in place, enjoying the moment. How could he not? The Rogues had just sealed a berth in the playoffs. He was the city's hero.

Barely twenty-four hours, Angelo adjusted the ice pack on his shoulder and drank a beer in the solitude of his Upper East Side apartment. If he closed his eyes, he could still hear the crowd chanting his name as the video replayed on the big screen over the scoreboard. He'd watched it from the bench in the dugout, a spot he'd most likely keep warm for what little remained of the season. Most disturbing of all, though, was the thought that this time he might have to hang up his cleats for good.

He sipped the pricey imported brew he'd acquired a taste for his first year in the majors. What would he do then? The question nagged at him more than the pain from his shoulder.

His cell phone trilled as he debated having another drink in lieu of the medication the team doctor had prescribed. It was probably another journalist. Reporters were eager for an interview or even just a quote from the Angel. He snatched it off the coffee table, intending to turn it off. A glance at the readout stopped him. It was his brother, Alessandro.

He grinned as he flipped it open. "Alex. Hey."

"How are you?"

"Never better," Angelo lied.

"Except for your shoulder, you mean."

"Yeah." He shrugged the body part in question and immediately winced. "Except for that. What are you up to?"

“Drinking a beer. Been a long day.”

“I’m doing the same. I know what you mean.”

Angelo tossed the ice pack aside and started for the kitchen to retrieve another bottle. He wished his twin were there to share a cold one with him in person. It still amazed Angelo that Alex owned a ranch in San Antonio, Texas, and was as at home roping steer as Angelo was snapping up grounders in a major league ballpark. God knew their chaotic childhood hadn’t lent itself to either profession. For that matter, it was amazing either of them had amounted to much of anything.

“So, is your shoulder as bad as the sportscasters are saying?” Alex wanted to know.

Angelo made a dismissive sound. “You know how those vultures are. They’re milking the story to boost their sagging ratings.”

His brother wasn’t fooled. “You won’t be back in uniform this season.”

“No.”

“And next year?”

“Sure. After surgery and some rehab I’ll be as good as new.” Angelo’s shoulder throbbed, seemingly in contradiction. He silenced it with a gulp of beer and settled back into the leather recliner. “I’m too damned young to retire.”

It was a lie and they both knew it. Thirty-eight wasn’t old by most standards, but in baseball it was damned near ancient. Before the injury, Angelo had remained a powerhouse, but his legs weren’t what they used to be. Things like that didn’t escape the notice of the guys in the dugout, much less the guys in management. This injury didn’t help. It was his second serious one in three years, and pulled tendons had taken him out for several games in June. No ball club wanted to pay top dollar for a player who’d ride the pine. Even his agent was getting antsy that when Angelo’s multimillion-dollar contract expired in a couple months the team would cut him loose.

“Well, it sounds like you’ll have some time on your hands.”

“Yeah.” He studied the label on his beer and scraped at the edge with his thumbnail. “Maybe I’ll mosey on down to Texas and pay you a visit. I could get better acquainted with your bride-to-be and her little girl.”

It still came as a surprise that the pretty single mom had knocked his brooding brother off his feet when she’d shown up at the ranch with her disabled daughter a few months earlier. Alex wasn’t the sort to fall fast or hard. Yet he’d done both.

“I’d like that.” Alex paused then. “But what I’d like even more is for you to use the time to go to Italy.”

Angelo closed his eyes. “Not this again,” he muttered after an oath.

For weeks his twin had been urging on him to reconnect with their estranged father and meet the rest of the Casali clan in Monta Correnti, the place of their birth.

“Go and make your peace. You won’t regret it,” Alex said.

“I have no peace to make. I’m fine with things just the way they are.”

“Fine? You’re ticked off, Angelo.”

“That too,” he agreed after a long pull on his beer. “Where were they when we were stealing to eat or getting dumped into yet another foster home? Where was Luca?” he demanded, referring to their father. “No one was inviting us to Italy to visit then.”

The way he saw it, the old man had washed his hands of his sons when he had sent them to Boston to live with their American mother, who was more suited to partying than parenting. They’d been three years old then. By the time the twins were fourteen, Cindy had drunk herself to death and the boys had been made wards of the state. Not long after, they’d made their way to New York. His skin still crawled when he thought about how close they’d come to winding up statistics.

“They didn’t know, Angelo. None of them, including Luca, knew that Mom was gone or that we were in and out of the foster system.”

“They didn’t know because they didn’t care enough to find out,” he shot back.

In Angelo's mind, it was all very cut and dried. In the past, when it could have made a real difference, his family had wanted nothing to do with him. Well, he wanted nothing to do with them now, regardless of how many olive branches they extended.

He'd already ignored the surprise e-mail from his half-sister, Isabella, which had kicked off this whole reunion quest. Talk about a curveball. He certainly hadn't expected to learn via the Internet that he had additional siblings in Monta Correnti, three of them born to Luca's second wife after Angelo and Alex's exile. He'd also passed on a wedding invitation from a cousin who'd grown up in Australia.

Family had been falling out of the rafters for the past several months, but it was all too little and coming far too late.

"Don't think Luca doesn't regret his choices," Alex said quietly. "He does. But he can't go back and change the past. He can only try to change the future. Go to Italy, Angelo. Spend a week in Monta Correnti. In fact, spend two. You could use a vacation. I've already booked you a flight and found you a place to stay. I'll e-mail you the information. You can pay me back later."

"I'll drop a check in the mail first thing in the morning, bro. But I'm not going."

Alex was quiet a moment before he pulled out his ace. "If you won't do it for yourself, then do it for me. I'm asking you to go."

"That's low." And it was. His level-headed and older-by-mere-minutes brother knew he was the only person who could get Angelo to do something he didn't want to do.

Far from sounding insulted, Alex's voice held a smile when he replied, "Sure it's low, but it's also effective. You'll thank me later."

"Thank you? Right. Don't hold your breath," Angelo snapped before hanging up.

Chapter One

ATLANTA JACKSON expelled a gusty sigh as she studied herself in the hotel suite's full-length mirror. Was the pale, hollowed-eyed woman staring back really her?

The hair was right, a long cascade of nearly white-blond curls. But her skin was pasty and her body a tad too angular to carry off the bombshell label that was routinely applied to it. She was a good half-dozen pounds thinner than she'd been just a month earlier, and ten pounds thinner than she'd been the month before that. Forget the low-carb fad that was all the rage among Hollywood A-listers. She'd gone on the high-stress diet, guaranteed to melt off the pounds quicker than butter on Louisiana asphalt in August.

At least her dress, a simple navy sheath made of cotton, hid some of her new angles.

A smile bowed her lips. Zeke would hate this dress, which was precisely why she'd purchased it the day before at a pricy Fifth Avenue boutique, outside of which she had been mobbed by paparazzi and actually booed by a couple of passersby. Buying it and now wearing it out in public were acts of defiance.

Zeke Compton—her manager, mentor and, according to him, her messiah—hadn't allowed her to wear navy. It was too close to black, he claimed. Black being another forbidden color since it reminded him of mourning.

"What does America's favorite actress have to be sad about?" he'd asked the one time Atlanta's stylist had suggested a vintage Oscar de la Renta gown the color of onyx for a red-carpet event.

Wouldn't the public like to know? she'd thought at the time. Now she knew better. The public didn't want the truth, unvarnished or otherwise. They wanted romantic, rags-to-riches fairy tales and titillating scandals. They wouldn't accept that she was tired of being manipulated, tired of being dictated to and sick to death of living a lie.

Atlanta slipped on a pair of rounded-toe flats. Despite the fashionable little bow on them, the shoes were another no-no in Zeke's book.

"You're too short to wear anything less than a three-inch heel, love," he'd decreed one year into their professional relationship. By then, things between them also had turned personal, and she'd moved from her West Hollywood studio apartment into his Bellaire home, playing the dutiful Eliza Doolittle to his domineering Henry Higgins.

Atlanta was five-seven, hardly what one would consider petite, but she'd listened to him about clothing and shoes and pretty much everything else. She'd always listened to the men in her life, a habit that dated to her childhood.

Bad things happen to little girls who don't do what they're told.

The words echoed from her distant past. As she had done a million times before, Atlanta forced them and the black memories that accompanied them back. Then she glanced at her watch. It was time to go. Thank God, she thought, as she made her way out the suite's door. She was as eager to leave New York as she'd been to leave Los Angeles. Neither place was welcoming now that Zeke had poisoned the well of public opinion against her and made her a pariah among her peers.

In the elevator, she checked her purse one more time, making sure she had her itinerary, tickets and passport. Her luggage was waiting downstairs. The limousine she'd called for would be at the curb, only a gauntlet of paparazzi to run before she could relax in the relative privacy that its tinted windows would afford.

In a dozen hours she would be in Monta Correnti, Italy. Her stylist, one of the few people from her old life still willing to speak to her, assured Atlanta that the remote hillside village situated between Naples and Rome was the ideal place to drop off the radar, relax and rejuvenate.

God, she hoped Karen Somerville was right. Atlanta was wound so tightly these days she felt ready to explode. But first things first. Sucking in a deep breath, she donned a pair of dark designer sunglasses as the elevator's doors slid open.

"Show time," she murmured.

Eyes shaded with his trademark Oakleys, Angelo sauntered into the VIP lounge at JFK International as if he hadn't a care in the world. Image was everything, especially given all of the speculation swirling around his career.

The official line from the team was that Angelo was suffering pulled ligaments and severe tendonitis in his right shoulder, but that after rest and physical therapy he would return to the regular lineup in the spring. The truth wasn't quite as rosy as that. In addition to the start of osteoarthritis, he had a torn rotator cuff. Cortisone shots had kept the worst of the arthritis pain at bay in the past, but no shot would take care of the torn cuff.

As the team's physician bluntly put it, "You need surgery. An injury like this won't heal on its own. And, given your age, it might never heal well enough to take the abuse heaped on it by a major league ballplayer."

It all boiled down to a truth he wasn't ready to accept. Instead of scheduling surgery, he had embraced his brother's high-handed scheme for a family reunion. He was going to Italy, where he would spend the next couple of weeks. He had no intention of reconnecting with his father, but the gesture would appease Alex. As an added bonus, that little speck on the map was a good place to duck the press and figure out his future.

The bar area of the VIP lounge held only a smattering of patrons. None of them looked up when he entered. They were all important people in their own right—movers, shakers, captains of industry. They didn't get awestruck or if they did, they hid it well behind blasé attitudes. His ego certainly hoped that was the case with the gorgeous blonde sitting in front of the floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the tarmac.

Despite the oversized sunglasses perched on her small nose, Atlanta Jackson was easy to recognize. The actress had starred in a dozen bona fide blockbusters. He took in the naturally pouty lips and the trademark blonde hair that tumbled just past her shoulders. Interest stirred. Again. He'd met her at a New York nightclub a few years earlier. They'd talked briefly. He'd flirted shamelessly, but to no avail. She'd turned him down flat when he'd asked her to dance. A couple of Angelo's teammates still liked to razz him about the fact that he, Angelo Casali, had struck out.

She shifted in her seat to cross her legs. The demure hemline of her simple navy dress pulled partway up her thighs. Interest turned to outright lust. Not many women were built as she was: long-limbed and slender, yet curvy in all of the places a man liked to rest his hands. A little less curvy than he recalled. He could guess why. Her image was taking a beating in the tabloids ever since she'd walked out on her much older manager slash boyfriend.

According to one story Angelo had read, the guy claimed Atlanta had betrayed him with a slew of lovers over the years, most recently bedding his twenty-year-old son.

Had she?

Maybe it was Angelo's ego talking, but the woman who'd turned him down flat in a nightclub a few years earlier hadn't seemed the sort to stray. With that in mind, he crossed to her table and waited until she looked up to speak.

"I'd offer to buy you a drink, but you'd probably turn me down. So, how about some meaningful conversation until one of our flights boards?"

He couldn't see her eyes behind the glasses, but her full lips twitched with amusement. "As lines go, that's very original, Mr. Casali."

"Thanks." He didn't wait to be offered a seat. He pulled out one of the chairs and straddled it backward. "So, you do remember me. I wasn't sure you would. It's been a few years."

His ego took another little hit when she replied, "Well, you've been in the news a lot these days."

“I could say the same about you.”

Her mouth tightened fractionally. “Yes, I have.”

“Is that why you’re wearing sunglasses inside?”

“Maybe.” She motioned to his Oakleys. “And you?”

“Definitely. This way no one can be sure I’m making eye contact with them. I find it discourages conversation.”

A pair of finely arched brows rose over the top rim of her dark lenses.

“You find that ironic,” he guessed.

“A little.” She shrugged delicately.

“Here’s the thing. Since you and I are the only two people in the lounge wearing shades I figure we probably should stick together. You know, play for the same team.”

“Given all that is being said about me right now, are you sure you want me on your team, Mr. Casali?”

“The name is Angelo.” He cocked his head to one side. “We’ll consider this a tryout.”

Atlanta laughed if for no other reason than the man’s sheer nerve. A tryout? She hadn’t had to read for a part in quite a while. The starring roles in her last three movies, each of which had grossed well over a hundred million dollars in the American market alone, had been written specifically with her in mind. Everyone in Hollywood knew that no one played the vulnerable vixen better than Atlanta Jackson. It was her niche. Her character type. She sobered at that.

“What if I don’t want to be on your team?” she asked.

“You do.”

She wanted to be turned off by his unflagging confidence or at the very least irritated by it. She found herself intrigued instead and maybe even a little envious. While she could portray confidence in front of the camera, she seldom felt it in real life. It was just one of the many things she was working to rectify.

“How can you be so sure?” she wanted to know.

“Everyone wants to be on the winning team.”

“And that would be yours?”

“Of course. I’ve got the golden touch. The Rogues are in the playoffs because of me. We’re heading to the World Series.”

“That’s only an assumption at this point.”

“No. It’s a fact, sweetheart. We’ll be there.”

Normally, she didn’t care for empty endearments, but his casual use of sweetheart complemented his bravado so perfectly, she let it pass. Instead, she honed in on another matter.

“We? Are the news reports wrong, then?” Her gaze strayed to his shoulder. It didn’t look injured. Indeed, nothing about the man’s rock-hard physique appeared compromised...or compromising, for that matter.

“You know the media.” He shrugged.

Atlanta might have believed that news of Angelo’s professional demise was vastly overblown if he hadn’t grimaced after making the casual movement.

“They’re ruthless when they scent blood,” he was saying.

Thinking of Zeke, she replied, “They’re even more ruthless when they’ve got sources happy to help draw it.”

Her image was being put through the shredder, and, while she wasn’t all that sad to see some of the false layers she’d once agreed to peel away, she certainly didn’t want them replaced with more lies and half-truths. Unfortunately, that was exactly what Zeke was feeding the hungry hordes these days, and they were eating it up, ravenous for more.

I made you. I’ll ruin you.

Zeke's parting words. Foolishly, she hadn't believed he'd do it. She knew better now. He was doing a bang-up job of making good on his promise.

Angelo was apparently far less naïve than she. "The world is full of people eager to sell you out. You have to be careful who you trust."

"At this point, I trust no one." Surprised to have told him that, she asked, "Who do you trust?"

"My twin," he replied without hesitation. "Alex has always had my back."

"You have a twin?" Good heavens, there were two men on the planet as good-looking as this one? She'd worked with A-list actors, bona fide heartthrobs, who couldn't match Angelo's rugged male perfection. "Are you identical?"

"Not quite. I'm better looking."

"No doubt you're more modest, too," she replied dryly.

"Sure." Angelo wasn't put off. In fact, he pulled the sunglasses down the bridge of his nose and winked as he boasted, "I'm also better with women."

God help her. The man was every bit as sexy as she recalled from their brief meeting in a nightclub a few years back. He also was every bit as cocksure. She was used to being around oversized egos, her own included. Angelo, at least, tempered his with humor. He was harmless, she decided, especially here in a public place.

Which was what gave her the nerve to lean closer and say, "So, Don Juan, if I'm going to be on your team, perhaps you should explain the game we're playing."

"Distraction."

"Is that the name or the object?"

"Both."

"I'm intrigued. Tell me more."

He glanced at the chunky Rolex strapped to his wrist. "Here's the thing—I have an hour and forty minutes to kill before my flight departs. I could get my own table, order a drink and sip it alone while I wait. Or I could stay here with you and enjoy what is bound to be some fascinating conversation."

A lifetime ago, Atlanta had thought herself interesting, but it had been a very long time since a man had said so. "What makes you so sure the conversation would be fascinating?"

"You're a fascinating woman. What else would it be?"

Come-on or not, his reply caused her breath to catch. Clearly, being a pariah among the people she'd considered her friends had taken its toll on her self-esteem.

"I like your answer," she told him.

"Enough to let me buy you a drink?"

"Enough that the drink's on me."

Angelo waved over a server and they ordered their beverages—an imported beer for him and a glass of unsweetened iced tea for her. As the waitress left he was frowning.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Not wrong. I guess I thought you'd order something...else."

"Such as champagne perhaps? And not just any champagne but Piper-Heidsieck by the magnum?"

"Or Dom. I read once that you bathed in it."

"I read that, too."

"It's not true?"

She shook her head. "Afraid not."

"I'm disappointed. I was going to ask you what it felt like having all of those bubbles bursting against your bare skin."

His smile, set as it was on a mouth that would have been at home on Michelangelo's David, dazzled. Atlanta camouflaged her involuntary shiver by shifting in her seat. There was no camouflaging the gooseflesh that pricked her arms. She hoped he wouldn't notice it.

"My publicist made that one up. It enjoyed a lot of buzz for a while, and I even picked up an endorsement deal for another brand of champagne. The truth is, I prefer showers to baths of any sort and I don't drink."

"At all?" he asked.

"Rarely these days." She preferred to keep a clear head.

"Neither do I."

"You just ordered a beer," she reminded him.

The corners of Angelo's mouth turned down as if in consideration and he gazed out the window where a jumbo jet was lumbering toward a runway. "Special circumstances."

"You don't like flying," she guessed. It was a phobia Atlanta understood perfectly. She still experienced a burst of anxiety each time a plane she was on prepared for takeoff.

But Angelo was shaking his head. "Nah. Flying doesn't bother me. I do it all the time. But talking to a gorgeous woman? It leaves me tongue-tied." Again, the dazzling smile made an appearance.

"I don't know. You've managed fine so far without any fortification," she pointed out, well aware that she could do with a little of the false courage found in a cocktail right about now herself.

Apropos of nothing, he asked, "When's your flight?"

"Two forty-something."

"Around the same time as mine, which means I've still got an hour and a half left with the potential to humiliate myself. I don't want to take any chances."

"I'm sure if we keep the conversation light and neutral, you'll be just fine."

And she would be just fine, too. So, that was precisely what they did.

It was with regret that Angelo glanced at his watch a little over an hour later. He would have to leave soon. It wasn't only the thought of what lay ahead in Italy that disturbed him. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had an actual conversation with a woman that didn't include foreplay of some sort or other. Both he and Atlanta still had their clothes on, a good thing given their surroundings. But they had ditched their sunglasses.

"If you didn't have a plane to catch, too, I'd hop on a later flight just so I could spend more time with you," he told her.

"Sure you would." She humored him with a smile, apparently deciding she'd just been fed another line.

"I mean it." He reached across the table and caught her left hand in his. Her fingers were delicate and bare of any adornment. "To be honest, I didn't expect to enjoy myself as much as I have."

Her brows pulled together at the same time she pulled her hand free. "Gee, thanks."

"Sorry." He grimaced. "That was a pathetically backhanded compliment. I told you I get tongue-tied around beautiful women."

The truth was the only beautiful woman around whom he'd ever found himself at a loss for words with was Atlanta.

Chuckling, she shook her head. "You're forgiven. I think I know what you mean. I enjoyed being distracted."

That was all he'd had in mind when he'd sat down earlier, someone to take his mind off the problems at hand. Now...?

"Maybe when we both get back to the States we could get together. If you're going to be in New York, there's a new exhibit coming to the Met in October."

"The Met?" Her eyelids flickered. No doubt she'd figured he was going to suggest a sporting event of some sort.

"I'm a patron."

“Oh.”

“I’m not exactly the quote unquote dumb jock whose only interests are those that happen on the diamond.”

“I didn’t think you were. Honestly, I don’t know you well enough to draw that conclusion.”

“That doesn’t stop most people.”

She sighed. “Look, Angelo, I really appreciate the offer, but I’ve got a lot on my plate right now. Dating isn’t going to be a priority for a while.”

He nodded slowly, bemused and a little disappointed. “You know, that makes twice now that you’ve thrown me out before I got on base. Forgive me for saying so, Atlanta, but you’re hell on a man’s ego.”

“I think you’ll survive.” She smiled. It wasn’t the high-wattage sort the cameras captured. This one was the genuine article.

“Glad I could make your day,” he grumbled.

“You did, Angelo, but not in the way you mean.”

Atlanta rarely did anything spontaneous. Spontaneity was too costly. She’d found that out as a child. Under Zeke’s care and later his control, she’d learned to deftly plan out her every move. She didn’t plan to kiss Angelo Casali. She just leaned across the table and did it, resting her lips against his for a brief, sweet moment during which neither of them closed their eyes.

Innocent. That was what the gesture was. It had been a long time since she’d felt that way around a man, which was what caused her to draw away.

She gathered up her handbag and reached for her small carryon as she stood. Even though her legs felt ridiculously shaky, her voice came out steady. “From one wounded ego to another, thank you.”

Atlanta stopped in the restroom after saying goodbye to Angelo. Taking several slow, measured breaths, she regained the last of her composure. Then, with her makeup freshened and her emotions firmly in check, she dropped the dark glasses back onto the bridge of her nose and hustled to the gate. She arrived just in time for the final boarding call for Flight 174 to Rome’s Leonardo da Vinci International Airport. A flight attendant helped stow her carryon in one of the overhead compartments. Atlanta let out a sigh and turned to find her seat.

“Cutting it a little close, aren’t you, sweetheart?” a masculine voice drawled.

Her neck snapped around and her gaze locked with Angelo’s. He was two rows behind her on the opposite side of the aisle. So much for restoring her composure.

“Wh-what are you doing here?” she asked inanely.

He tugged at the strap of his seat belt. “Preparing for takeoff.”

“Are...are you following me?”

She immediately felt like an idiot for making the assumption and that was before Angelo replied, “And you claim to have a wounded ego. Seems perfectly healthy to me.”

Her gaze darted around. Thankfully none of the other passengers in first class seemed to be paying much attention.

“So, you’re going to Italy,” she managed on a weak smile.

“Yeah. Is that seat next to you open?”

Angelo didn’t wait for her to reply. He unbuckled and rose, grinning as he plopped down beside her. One thought came through loud and clear: The flight to Italy was going to be interesting indeed.

Chapter Two

“SO, WHAT takes you to Italy?” Angelo asked once their flight was airborne. “A movie role?”

“A vacation, actually. I want some time alone without the media following my every move.”

“So you picked a small town like Rome for that,” he replied deadpan.

“Rome isn’t my final destination.” She lowered her voice. “I’m heading a little farther south to an isolated little village that I’d never heard of before. It’s tucked up on a hillside, very remote and the people are very discreet when it comes to celebrities, or so I’ve been told.”

No way, Angelo thought. What would be the odds? He had to know. “You’re not talking about Monta Correnti, by any chance?”

“You know it?” Then her face paled. “You’re...you’re not going...”

“Yep.” Angelo’s laughter rang out loud enough to draw the attention of the passengers around them.

Distraction. In the airport’s VIP lounge he’d told Atlanta it was the name of their game as well as its object. Apparently they were going into extra innings.

A couple hours into their flight, Angelo could no longer ignore the angry throbbing of his shoulder. Atlanta was reading a magazine, or more likely pretending to since she hadn’t turned the page in twenty minutes. He was no speed-reader, but even he could have finished the article on eyeliner dos and don’ts in that amount of time.

He twisted the cap off the mineral water he’d ordered when the flight attendant last came around, and as discreetly as possible popped a couple of the potent painkillers the team doctor had prescribed, washing them down with a gulp of the beverage.

“That bad, huh?” She closed the magazine and laid it on her lap.

“Just stiff,” he lied. “I’ll be all right.” He had to be.

After the pills kicked in, he didn’t wake until shortly before the aircraft was making its final descent into the larger of Rome’s two airports. He was hungry, having slept through the dinner that was served during the flight, the medicine was wearing off and his overall mood wasn’t much improved.

Through the thick glass of the plane’s window, Angelo caught his first glimpse of Italy in thirty-five years. Even with the floral scent of Atlanta’s perfume teasing his senses, he could no longer ignore his real reason for coming.

“Sleep well?” she asked.

“Like a baby.”

“You moaned a few times. I thought maybe you were in pain.”

“Erotic dreams,” he corrected on a wink.

“My mistake.” But she rolled her eyes.

“Sir, your seat needs to be in the upright position,” a flight attendant stopped by to remind him. He shifted and a moan escaped before he could muffle it.

“Apparently you have those dreams even when you’re awake,” Atlanta said dryly.

“Want me to share the particulars with you?”

“That’s all right.”

“Sure? I wouldn’t mind.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t, but I’ll pass.”

“How long are you going to be staying in Monta—?”

“Shh!” she admonished and glanced around as if she expected to find the other first-class passengers shamelessly eavesdropping. That was a virtual impossibility over the loud hum of the jet engines. Still, he obliged her by lowering his voice.

“So, how long?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Just curious how much time I’ll have to wear you down. Eventually, even though you claim not to drink, I predict you and I will share a bottle of wine and some more fascinating conversation.”

She chuckled. “What do you call this?”

“You’re avoiding answering my question.”

“Fine. I’ll be there for three glorious weeks with an option to stay four.” She sighed, as eager to arrive as he was to have the trip behind him.

“I’ll be there two weeks tops. Might as well be a life sentence,” he mumbled.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing. You never said what made you decide to make Monta—” he caught himself before he finished the village’s name “—MC your final destination. It’s a speck on the map, you know.”

If she heard the derision in his tone, she didn’t comment on it. “That’s why it’s ideal.”

“Ah, that’s right. Hiding out.”

A line formed between her brows. “That makes me sound like a coward.”

“Sorry. I didn’t—”

“No.” She waved off the rest of his apology. “I guess I am hiding out. I just needed a place to go to recharge my batteries.” Her expression turned rueful. “Someplace where I wouldn’t have to deal with booing fans or the paparazzi at every turn. My stylist suggested the village. She visited it a few years ago. She was seeing a rather famous actor at the time and according to her they could go anywhere in town without worrying about drawing a crowd, much less paparazzi.”

Frowning, Angelo said, “It’s nothing like LA or New York, that’s for sure.”

“So, this isn’t your first visit?”

He shook his head.

“What’s it like?”

“It’s been a while, years in fact.”

Vague images of quaint, red-tile-roofed houses tucked into the side of a hill rose from his memory, accompanied by the scents of fresh basil, roasted red peppers and plum tomatoes. Angelo couldn’t be sure if they were real or the result of wishful thinking. As it was, nothing of his childhood in Boston evoked anything worth recalling.

“I looked it up on Google,” Atlanta was saying. “There’s not a lot of information, but I did find some photographs. It’s very picturesque and old-fashioned, like a snapshot out of the past.”

His past.

Her gaze shifted to his shoulder. Her expression held understanding. “Are you interested in dropping out of sight for a while, too?”

“Not exactly.” He took a deep breath before admitting, “My father lives there.”

Atlanta blinked, not quite able to hide her surprise.

“Yes, I have one of those,” he replied dryly.

“From the scowl on your face I gather the two of you aren’t close.”

“I haven’t seen him in thirty-five years.” And Angelo had no desire to see Luca now.

“Ouch. Sorry.”

He laughed outright as a cover for the pain he couldn’t admit to feeling. “It’s no big deal. I didn’t need him and I haven’t missed him. Hell, I barely remember him.”

“So, why are you going? If you don’t mind me asking,” she added.

He shrugged. The pain the gesture caused made him wince. “My brother booked my flight and my accommodations. Alex thinks that making peace with our father is important.”

“But you don’t share his opinion,” she guessed.

Angelo caught himself before he could shrug again. “It’s ancient history. What’s to be gained?”

“I’m the wrong person to ask,” Atlanta admitted. “I haven’t seen my mother in years. My choice.”

“You’re smart. The only reason my brother is all for a reunion now is that he’s met a woman and they’re getting married. He’s *in love*.”

“From your tone I’d take it you’re not a big fan of the emotion.”

“I’ve got nothing against love. I’m happy for my brother.”

How could Angelo not be? Allie, the woman Alex was marrying, was pretty, kind and intelligent. She had a daughter whom his brother obviously adored. Together they were a ready-made family. If that thought made him feel unbearably alone at times, it was his own problem. He’d get over it.

“Have you ever been in love yourself?” Atlanta asked.

“You’re a regular Oprah. So many questions,” he teased, stretching out his stiff legs. He hoped whatever accommodations Alex had arranged came with a jetted tub. He could do with a nice long soak.

“Sorry.” She ruined the apology by adding, “Well?”

“No. I like women in general too much to commit to any one in particular.” He sent Atlanta a wolfish smile that caused her to roll her sky-blue eyes.

“Gee, that’s romantic,” she said dryly.

“No, that’s realistic. I could say something cliché like I haven’t met the right woman, but I don’t think the right woman exists.”

“Your brother apparently disagrees.”

Angelo held up a finger. “Let me clarify. I don’t believe the right woman exists *for me*.” It was a long-held belief, one that predated puberty. Commitment? His parents had gone that route and look how it had turned out. They hadn’t been able to keep the promises they made to one another, let alone to the children they’d brought into the world. He grinned wickedly to banish the old bitterness, hiding behind the cockiness that was as much his trademark as Atlanta’s bombshell looks were hers. “But if she did exist, she’d be blonde, about your height and have ridiculously long legs.”

Atlanta crossed her arms and sent him a pointed look. “Do lines like that actually work for you?”

“Apparently not,” he replied with feigned disappointment.

She shook her head. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I know. A judge told me that very thing before sending me off to juvie when I was a kid.” He said it lightly, though nothing about the incident could be considered fun or funny. Before she could comment he said, “I won’t bother to ask if you’ve ever been in love. You lived with that Zeke guy for—what?—a decade?”

“Something like that,” she murmured. Her gaze strayed to the window.

“But no ring?” he prodded.

“Not the kind you’re talking about.”

Curious, he asked, “What other kind is there?”

It sounded as if she said, “Through the nose,” but he couldn’t be sure.

“I find it hard to believe he didn’t propose. If I were the sort of guy interested in lifelong commitments, I’d have been on bended knee after our first date.”

Atlanta made a tsking noise. “Obviously you’re not up on your tabloid reports. Zeke proposed dozens of times during the course of our relationship. Actually, begged is how I believe he put it. He wanted to marry me. He wanted to have a family with me. Heartless witch that I am, I repeatedly turned him down. I didn’t want a husband and I didn’t want babies. My figure is my fortune, you know. I’m nothing without a twenty-four-inch waist and flawless abs.”

He’d seen pictures of the abs in question. Still, he said, “You sell yourself short.”

She glanced over sharply, studied him for a moment. It might have been a trick of the light, but her eyes looked bright. “It doesn’t really matter now.”

The captain came on the public address system announcing the local time and temperature and the usual end-of-the-flight banter. Afterward, Angelo asked, “Should I apologize for prying?”

A ghost of a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. Even without her usual crimson gloss, her lips were full and inviting. “Are you sorry?”

Since she was striving to remain upbeat, he decided to oblige her. “No. I’m too curious to be sorry. You’re quite an enigma.”

“Me?” She laughed. “Everybody knows everything there is to know about me.”

Did they? People thought they knew him, too. Since his injury, Angelo had begun to wonder if he knew himself.

Alex had assured Angelo that a driver would be waiting to take him to Monta Correnti. A rental car would be at his disposal in the village, but his brother figured Angelo would appreciate having someone else navigate the roads after a long flight. Alex had thought of everything, perhaps so that Angelo wouldn’t have any excuses for backing out.

Atlanta had someone meeting her as well. Even so, they stayed together after deplaning.

“Want me to help you with your bags?” she asked.

“That’s supposed to be my line.”

She tilted her head to one side. “I’m not the one with a bum shoulder.”

“It’s fine,” he protested through gritted teeth.

Her brows rose but she said nothing else as they waited to spot their bags on the conveyor belt. One by one, Atlanta’s four pieces of matching designer luggage came around before Angelo’s large suitcase. She snatched them off before he could offer.

“I thought you said you were going to be in Italy for less than a month?” he drawled as a bushy-haired porter hurried over with a cart. “From the amount of luggage, it looks like you’re planning to move here.”

“I like clothes and shoes.”

“That’s obvious. You could outfit the population of a small country.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Sorry. I’m incredibly selfish when it comes to my shoes. I don’t share.”

“How many pairs did you bring?”

“Twelve, not counting the ones I’m wearing.” She looked inordinately pleased when she announced, “Almost all of them have heels less than one inch.”

“No stilettos?”

“Not a one.”

“Damn.” He spied his bag and moved closer to the conveyor to snatch it. She was at his side in an instant, helping him heft the bulky suitcase off.

“I’ve got it,” he grumbled.

“Of course you do, big he-man that you are. You don’t need anybody.”

Angelo laughed, even if in truth he didn’t want to need anybody. He’d learned a long time ago to rely on himself. The only people he trusted to help him out when needed were his twin and, of course, his teammates.

Assuming they were together, the bushy-haired porter added Angelo’s bag to the cart stacked with Atlanta’s.

“We’re going to owe him a really big tip when it’s all said and done,” Angelo muttered as the man started off toward Customs.

“It’s not like we can’t afford it.”

No indeed. She was one of the few women he’d ever met who actually made as much money as he did, perhaps more, since he didn’t know what her cut had been on her past few movies.

Still, he had enough pride that he said, “I’ll get this one since you picked up the tab in the lounge.”

“*Grazie mille*,” she said, batting her lashes at him for effect.

After they cleared Customs, she dropped the sunglasses back onto the bridge of her nose. Before landing, she’d pulled her hair back into a simple ponytail. Along with the navy dress and flat-

heeled shoes, she hardly screamed high-maintenance Hollywood. But such raw beauty rarely went unnoticed. As low-key as she was trying to be, as soon as they passed into the main terminal she attracted a lot of attention and some of it was exactly the kind she wanted to avoid.

A couple of photographers began shouting her name. Even prefaced with the courtesy title of *Signorina* the intrusion was rude, especially since it was followed by a succession of near-blinding flashes. Atlanta held up her handbag as a shield. Just that quickly, the witty and surprisingly candid woman with whom he'd spent the past several hours was swallowed up by a monster of her own making.

Fame. Sometimes it grew fangs and bit you.

Angelo waited for the photographers to holler out his name, too. It was their lucky day. The parasites had a pair of American celebrities in their viewfinders. He patted his pockets in search of his Oakleys. He was as used to dealing with them as Atlanta was. On any given day, half a dozen of their ilk stood guard outside his Manhattan apartment building, their digital cameras trained on the exits in the hope of snapping a money shot or two for the tabloids.

"I'm going to duck into the ladies' room for a minute," Atlanta whispered. "You go on ahead to your car. Tell the porter to wait there with my bags."

"Divide and conquer?" he asked.

"Maybe we'll get lucky."

"See you in MC."

She didn't answer. They'd reached the ladies' room and she hustled inside.

Angelo turned. He'd found his sunglasses but needn't have bothered. With Atlanta gone, the paparazzi lowered their cameras. It came as a huge blow to realize that he hadn't been recognized. Baseball was a largely American game, he reminded himself. Neither it nor its players resonated much outside the United States, and apparently that was true in Italy.

He should have been relieved. It was a pain to be hounded by the paparazzi. Even so, he felt sucker-punched. Was this what his life would be like post-career? Would no one recognize him? Would no one care that for four consecutive seasons he'd led the league in runs batted in or that he was half a dozen homers from passing the current record? Would he return to the obscurity from which he'd come, a mere postscript in write-ups about the game that had literally saved his life?

The porter nudged him and said something in Italian. It was Angelo's native tongue, but he remembered none of it even if he found the accent and cadence oddly comforting.

"Sorry. I only speak English," he replied.

"Taxi?" the man said helpfully and pointed to an overhead sign designating the way to ground transportation.

"Ah, no. Someone is meeting me."

Several of those waiting to welcome passengers were holding signs with names written on them. One was printed with Angelo's. "My driver."

"*Signorina*?" The porter glanced back to the rest-room door.

She had her own transportation. She'd told Angelo to go. Yet Angelo told the porter, "We'll wait for her here."

He knew the moment she was out in the open. The paparazzi descended on her like a pack of wolves on prey. Long legs and irritation made her pace fast, but eventually, she had nowhere left to run.

"I told you to leave," she snapped, turning this way and that in an effort to avoid the cameras. Angelo stood perfectly still. "I'm bad at following directions. It's a guy thing."

"This will make a fine headline."

"They don't know who I am."

"They will back home. You'll be labeled as my latest conquest."

"Yeah?"

“Don’t look so smug,” she cried. “That’s not a good thing.”

“From your point of view,” he replied, hoping to see her smile.

Her expression remained grim.

“You need to get out of here,” he told her.

“I would, but apparently my driver is late.” Her laughter verged on hysteria.

“It’s Italy,” Angelo said. “I’ve been told they run on their own time here.”

More camera flashes popped. Atlanta backed up, trying to put as much distance between herself and Angelo in the photographers’ frames as possible.

“Come with me. We’re heading to the same place.”

He extended a hand. She declined both it and his offer with a shake of her head. “No, no. That’s kind, but I have my own transportation. Or I will. Soon.”

The photographers snapped off a couple more shots. In addition to paparazzi they were drawing a crowd of onlookers, some of whom had pulled out their camera phones. Within a matter of hours this was going to be all over the Internet.

“Do you really want to wait around?” he asked.

“I..” She issued a heartfelt sigh. “God, no.”

Along with the porter and driver, they made a mad dash for the exit. At the curb, Angelo peeled off some bills, trying to remember the exchange rate of dollars to euros. At the porter’s broad grin, he figured the tip was as generous as intended.

He grinned, too, but for an entirely different reason.

Chapter Three

ATLANTA assumed that the closer they drew to Monta Correnti and the villa she'd rented, the more relaxed she would feel. But just the opposite was occurring, probably because the small, isolated village was Angelo's final destination, too.

While it was entirely likely they would bump into each other a time or two during the next couple weeks, she didn't want it to become a habit. She was enjoying his company...a little too much. She found him funny and surprisingly interesting. He was far more than the inflated ego and one-dimensional jock she'd first assumed. She also found him intensely attractive. Their kiss kept coming to mind. It had her yearning for something she'd lost long ago. Something she could never get back.

It was just as well this wasn't a true vacation for either of them. He was in Italy to meet with his estranged father. She had come to escape the media's prying eyes. She had a career to save, a reputation to salvage. A life to start over without the guiding influence of a man. Any man. By the time the driver pulled the Mercedes sedan to a stop outside a sun-bleached two-story villa, she had rehearsed the lines in her head for her farewell speech.

"Great view," Angelo remarked before she could get the first words out.

The pre-World-War-II residence was bounded on one side by a cobblestone courtyard, part of which was shaded by a grapevine-draped pergola. Beyond it, the land sloped gently down before falling away completely to reveal a valley dotted with houses, farms and olive groves.

"Stunning," she agreed. "Well, thank you again. I hope you enjoy your stay here."

She reached for the door handle, intent on making her exit. Angelo ruined it by following her out.

"From what Alex has told me about the place I'm staying, it has an equally gorgeous view. It's farther up the hillside. If you want to stop by tomorrow evening, we can compare panoramas before going to dinner."

The invitation was delivered so smoothly that she nearly agreed. "I appreciate the offer, but I think I'll be eating in for most of my stay."

The driver had retrieved her bags from the trunk. Despite her objections, Angelo insisted on carrying one of them to the door. After the man returned to the car to wait, Angelo said, "I thought one of the reasons in coming to Monta Correnti was the discretion of the locals. Does that scene at the airport have you worried about being ambushed by paparazzi?"

"No. I just need time alone...to reflect and make plans. You understand, right?"

Angelo whistled through his teeth. "I can't believe I just struck out for the third time with you. You'd think I'd learn." The accompanying smile took the sting out of his words. Even so, Atlanta felt bad.

"I'm sorry. It's not you personally. In fact, I was just thinking about how much I've enjoyed your company on the trip here. It's bad timing."

"For dinner?"

"You know what I mean."

"No." He set his hands on his hips. "Not really. I'm talking about a meal."

She changed tactics. "You're talking about avoidance, as in avoiding the real reason you came here. Your father."

"My choice. My business." His expression lost some of its easy charm, telling her she'd struck a nerve. So much for his earlier claim not to care about the estrangement. But the affable smile was back when he said, "What's the harm, Atlanta? We've already established that I'm not interested in a long-term relationship and you're not ready for one. What's wrong with a little...friendship?"

He stepped closer and ran his knuckles lightly down her cheek, making it clear he had more than friendship in mind. God help her, the simple touch stoked her pulse to life. Her feelings scared

her almost as much as what he was suggesting. “We’re two Americans in a foreign country. What happens here stays here.”

He wound up his tempting offer with, “No one needs to ever find out.”

Don’t tell your mother. It’s our little secret.

Bile rose in her throat, along with anger and a baffling amount of disappointment. But she kept her tone even when she said, “Let me put this another way: I’m not interested in continuing as your distraction, Angelo.”

Indeed. She’d spent too many years being just that: A sick father figure’s plaything. A powerful man’s puppet.

Angelo frowned. “You just said you’re not looking for strings.”

“I’m not, but while I didn’t mind being a distraction during the trip over, that scenario has played out.” She took a step back. “To use your vernacular, the game is over.”

He sucked in a breath and stepped back with his palms up in defeat. “Got it, sweetheart. Enjoy your stay.”

She watched the Mercedes drive away. Should she have been so blunt? Could she have handled things differently, more diplomatically, perhaps? Though she was beset with doubts and some regret, one thing came through clearly. As angry and irritated as Angelo had been, he’d respected her decision.

As she stood on the steps replaying the encounter, the door behind her opened. A young woman stood just inside the entry. She wore a plain cotton dress and her dark hair was parted in the middle and pulled back.

“Miss Jackson, welcome,” she said in heavily accented English. “I am Franca Bruno.”

The name registered as Atlanta stepped inside. This was the owner of the house. “Thank you. I was just admiring the view. My travel agent said it was lovely and he wasn’t mistaken.”

The woman glanced at the bags before poking her head out the door. “Is my husband with you? He was supposed to pick you up from the airport.”

“No. I caught another ride.”

Franca’s dark eyes narrowed and she rattled off something in Italian that didn’t sound particularly nice. “He was late, wasn’t he?”

“Maybe just a little,” Atlanta hedged, not wanting to get in the middle of a domestic dispute. “Unfortunately, circumstances came up that forced me to leave in a rush. I was lucky to run into a friend who also was coming to Monta Correnti.”

That snagged Franca’s attention. “Another American?”

“Yes. Angelo Casali.”

Franca nodded. “Luca’s other son. I had heard that he might come. I am pleased for his father’s sake that it is so. Signor Casali is a kind man...and far more reliable than my husband.”

Franca helped Atlanta pull her bags inside. “Come, let me show you around.”

In addition to the stunning view, the villa boasted three large bedrooms, three bathrooms, formal sitting and dining rooms, and what appeared to be a study. The furnishings were an eclectic mix of charming old-world pieces and modern conveniences such as the flat-screen television that hung over the fireplace in the study and the microwave oven that sat on the counter opposite a brick pizza oven.

Atlanta had everything she needed. Franca had stocked the refrigerator with food and had even gone to the trouble of preparing an antipasto salad in case Atlanta was too jet-lagged to go out later that evening.

“You will find bottled water and local vintage red wine in the pantry. I am happy to prepare any meals you request.”

“Thank you. The antipasto will hold me over for tonight.”

Together they walked back to the door and Atlanta followed the other woman outside.

“I hope you will enjoy your stay.”

“I’ll be hard-pressed not to.” She spread out her hands to encompass the scenery. “It’s truly lovely here.”

“It is a special place,” Franca agreed. “It belonged to my grandparents. My husband and I live just down the hill. I will be by each morning to freshen up the linens and take care of anything else you need.”

After Franca was gone, Atlanta headed upstairs. The only thing she needed right now was a hot shower and a few hours of uninterrupted sleep. Unlike Angelo, she’d spent the entire flight wide awake and way too aware of not only the sexy man slumbering next to her, but her physical response to him.

The game is over.

Angelo mulled Atlanta’s parting words on the way to his villa. He wanted to be able to shrug them off...shrug her off. There were plenty of other fish in the sea. He knew that firsthand. So, why did he feel so damned disappointed? Maybe because at times while they’d talked, it hadn’t felt like a game.

It was the painkillers, he decided as the driver turned off the main road and passed through a gated drive. They made his brain fuzzy.

A turn-of-the-last-century villa came into sight. Its view of the surrounding countryside was worth every penny of the rent. His courtyard sported more than the cobblestones and grapevines that graced Atlanta’s. His had a built-in pool and spa.

While the driver took his bags inside, Angelo walked over to inspect the amenities. The pool wasn’t Olympic size, but he wasn’t in any condition to swim laps anyway. The hot tub was more his speed, he thought on a grin. He could picture himself in it, the pulsating jets working the tension out of his muscles as he enjoyed a glass of red wine and watched the sun set. If he had to stay in Monta Correnti, at least he would be comfortable. From what he’d seen so far, his brother had done well in choosing accommodations. He headed back to the house.

Alex hadn’t said anything about meals being included, but when Angelo stepped inside he was greeted by the mouth-watering aroma of garlic, onions and assorted herbs. He inhaled deeply, letting the scents linger in his nose. Snippets of memories came to him before he could stop them, popping like corn kernels held over a flame. He recalled following his father to a nearby riverbed to pick the special basil that Luca said gave his tomato sauce its distinctive flavor. Alex was with them. Angelo swallowed now, remembering how happy the boys had been and how he’d basked in their father’s attention. It was not long after that that Luca sent his sons away.

“No wonder I’ve never been a fan of spaghetti,” he muttered with a shake of his head.

“Actually, I am making ravioli stuffed with porta-bella mushrooms and roasted garlic.” A young woman stood on the opposite side of the room. Given her apron and her words, he assumed the door from which she’d entered must be the kitchen. She was dark-haired and lovely with surprisingly blue eyes. Eyes that were the exact shade of his, a trait he had inherited from his father.

“Isabella,” he guessed, feeling mule-kicked.

So this was the sister he’d never met and had only learned about recently. Yet another reason to resent Luca. But it wasn’t only resentment he felt. Emotions Angelo couldn’t label, much less process, raced through his head. For so long he’d just had Alex. Now he was meeting a sister, and Luca had two other sons who shared the Casali name, as well.

Clearly, Isabella had more practice in handling the surreal. While he stood gaping, she smiled warmly at the mention of her name.

“And you are Angelo.” She crossed to him and rose up on tiptoe to kiss both of his cheeks. It was a standard Italian greeting, he reminded himself when a lump rose in his throat. “Welcome home.”

“This...this is Luca’s home?” He glanced around. Other than the aroma wafting from the kitchen, nothing about the place was remotely familiar.

“No. I meant welcome to Monta Correnti,” Isabella clarified. “An American businessman owns this particular villa. He leases it out when he is not here, which is most of the time. Alessandro said he thought it would suit your needs.”

Angelo nodded. Unsure what else to say, he told her, “Your English is very good.”

“Better than your Italian?” Isabella’s smile told him she already knew the answer to her question.

“It could use some work.”

“So could your brother’s when I met him. But he learned a lot during the time he was here.” Her satisfied expression made Angelo think she was referring to more than the language. “Alessandro is a good man. I was grateful that he came, and I am even more grateful that he was able to convince you to come as well.”

Angelo needed to set the record straight. “I’m not sure the outcome of my visit will be what you’re hoping for, Isabella. Alex and I may look a lot alike, but that doesn’t mean we think the same.”

She took a moment to weigh his words before nodding. “You are here. That is enough for now. We will see about the rest later.” She wiped her hands on her apron, a gesture that spoke of nerves more than necessity. “Come. You must be tired after your long journey. I can show you around.”

“Actually, I’m not all that tired. I slept most of the way.” He hated that he still felt a little groggy from the medication. Despite the returning pain, he was determined to forgo another dose. He had too much to process to be lost in the fog.

“Are you hungry, then?” Isabella asked.

He hadn’t been since leaving the plane. Between the visit to come and Atlanta’s intoxicating company, he’d been way too keyed up to think about food. Now, his empty stomach made its presence known with a loud growl, which she heard.

“I guess I am,” he said sheepishly.

Isabella smiled, clearly pleased. “I was hoping that would be the case. I will set the table while you freshen up. You will find a bathroom down there.” She pointed to a hallway that led from the room. “It’s the first door on the right. You will find a larger one upstairs. Your rooms are on the second floor to the left of the landing.”

Angelo opted for the former. A few minutes later, after splashing a little water on his face and adjusting his wrinkled clothes, he joined Isabella in the kitchen. Even though the villa had a formal dining room appointed with intricately carved mahogany furnishings, she’d set the wooden-plank table in what was a surprisingly plain kitchen. Plain and downright rustic, he thought, glancing around.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she said. “The other room is fancier, but so big and formal. We are family.”

The word was as foreign to him as her accent. “I take it the American businessman who owns this place isn’t much of a chef.”

“No. On the rare occasions when he is here, he takes all of his meals in the village. But you are not to worry,” she said, as if reading Angelo’s mind. “You will find the master suite very comfortable. He has done what you would call extensive updating elsewhere in the house.”

“And outside as well. It was kind of hard to miss the in-ground pool and hot tub.”

“They look very inviting,” Isabella agreed.

“So does this meal.”

She motioned with her arms. “Then sit and enjoy.”

While he lowered himself into one of the chairs, she filled his glass with red wine. He tried not to stare, but he couldn’t help it. When she glanced up and caught him, they both flushed.

“I’m sorry. It’s just...disturbing, you know?” When her brows pulled together in puzzlement, he added, “Seeing a resemblance in a stranger’s face.”

“The eyes.”

“Yes, and our chins.” At her startled expression, he laughed. “Don’t worry. Yours is much smaller and far more refined.”

“And this resemblance disturbs you?”

He decided to be frank. “For most of my life, it’s been just Alex and me.”

“But your mother—”

“Even then,” he interrupted. Given Cindy’s fair looks and her absorption with partying, it had been easy to discount her role in their lives. As for Luca, whenever Angelo had thought of their father, he hadn’t considered the possibility of half-siblings. Or maybe he simply had been unable to process the idea that Luca could send away his twins and then someday have children he would keep. Confused and a great deal more curious than he wanted to be, he said, “You know, I’m a big eater, but there’s enough here to feed a small army.”

“I cook when I’m nervous,” she admitted on a laugh.

“Why don’t you join me and enjoy some of the fruits of your labor?”

A smile lit her face. “I would like that.” As she took the seat opposite his it was obvious she knew the real reason he’d issued the invitation. “It will give us a chance to get better acquainted with one another.”

He wasn’t exaggerating about the amount of food. In addition to the pasta dish, which she’d served with the savory tomato sauce that had assaulted his senses upon arrival, the table included a loaf of thick-crust bread, steamed green beans and a side of some sort of sausage that she told him was produced locally.

“This is excellent,” he declared after his first bite of ravioli. It was no empty compliment. The flavors sang in his mouth. “You’re an excellent cook.”

“I cannot take all of the credit. The sauce is the real star.”

“It’s very good.” In fact, he’d never tasted its equal, which made his aversion to bottled pasta sauce all the more understandable.

“It’s very popular with our patrons.”

“At Rosa.” Despite his best effort, the name was hissed between clenched teeth. From Alex, Angelo had heard a lot about the quaint and rustic eatery their father owned and had named for their late grandmother. Far from taking pride in it, he saw the place as competition. After all, it was what Luca had squandered his time, love and attention on after shipping his sons off to America.

“I used to spend more time there than I did away,” Isabella mused. Shook her head and laughed. “Scarlett, our cousin from Australia, manages it now. Her husband to be, Lorenzo, is the chef. But I am still there a lot.”

“Why do you bother? Why do any of you bother to slave away for him?”

She sobered. “I have a full life, Angelo. As does Scarlett. I am married to a wonderful man and very happy. I work for our father because I enjoy what I do.”

Angelo snorted. “You must to put up with him.”

“That’s unfair,” Isabella objected. “You know nothing of Luca.”

“Only because that’s the way he wanted it,” he shot back. “From what Alex has told me, the restaurant isn’t doing as well as it could be these days. Money is tight.”

Her face had paled. “That is true. He insists on using local produce and labor, and sometimes that has cost him more than if he’d outsourced.”

The anger that had been simmering for the better part of three decades rolled to a boil. “So, call in the millionaire stepbrother to help save the day.”

Isabella’s cheeks flamed red now and she shot to her feet. She shouted something in Italian before she collected herself and, in a more moderated tone, replied in English, “I will apologize if that is the way it seems, but what you are saying is not true. Money is not why I sought out either you or Alex and asked you to come to Monta Correnti.”

He wanted to believe her. Even so, he challenged, “Then why? Why now?”

“I only recently learned of your existence, Angelo.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “That makes two of us. Again, Luca’s choice. Or, should I say, his fault?”

He had her there and she knew it. But Isabella raised that small chin that was so similar to his.

“My motives for asking you to come here are very simple. I have two older brothers whom I wished to meet and a rift in our family that I wish to see mended. These are the reasons I sought Luca’s permission to contact you and Alex in America.” She unknotted her fingers from the cloth napkin she held and set it on the table. “If all I needed was money to save Rosa, Angelo, my husband would be happy to provide it. It is not beyond his means, and he has generously offered to do so on more than one occasion.”

“But you’ve turned him down.”

“Yes. *Family* is more important than the restaurant, but *family* is what it will take to save it.”

She needn’t have stressed the word. It would have struck him like a prizefighter’s blow anyway. He’d never viewed family as the sort of savior she was implying it could be. Before he could respond, she was going on.

“We have a plan in mind. Our cousins and I. We want to combine our families’ restaurants. They are joined by a courtyard. It is time they were joined in other ways.”

“How does Luca feel about that?”

“He knows nothing of the plan. We want to surprise him. We want everyone who is descended from our grandmother, Rosa Firenzi, to come together. As I said, it will take all of us to make it happen.”

He didn’t question whether she was referring to funding now. He knew better.

Isabella rose to her feet. “I will leave you now to finish your meal and to settle in. I have things I must see to.”

“At the restaurant?” It was a low blow and he knew it. Shame stirred, making him wish it were possible to snatch back the words and start over.

Instead of answering his question, Isabella said, “If you want for anything, I wrote my number next to the telephone in the front parlor.”

With that, his sister disappeared out the door. Angelo stood so abruptly that his chair tipped backward, clattering noisily on the tiled floor. He wanted to call her back so he could apologize. He felt horrible, putting her on the defensive, especially when she’d gone to such trouble to make his first day in Monta Correnti pleasant.

Besides, this wasn’t her fault. None of it was. Luca was the one responsible for the rift in their family. Their father was the one who had screwed up all of their lives with his selfishness and single-minded pursuits.

Oh, Alex had tried to palm off some of the blame on Lisa Firenzi, Luca’s older sister and the owner of the restaurant with which Isabella wanted to join Rosa. According to Angelo, if only their aunt had given Luca the loan he’d sought when the boys were toddlers, they could have remained in Italy rather than being sent to live with Cindy. Angelo wasn’t buying it. Ultimately, the choice had been Luca’s.

Angelo didn’t go after his sister. Instead, he uncorked the bottle of wine and filled his glass to the rim. Then, without bothering to change into the swim trunks that were packed in the luggage the driver had toted upstairs, he went outside and lowered himself fully clothed into the hot tub.

It would be several hours yet before the sun set, but, lost as he was in bitter memories of his fractured childhood, he really didn’t give a damn about either his pricey clothes or the million-dollar view.

Chapter Four

ANGELO woke early the next morning with a pounding headache that was the result of jet lag, regrets and too much wine. He'd finished off the bottle the evening before. In fact, he'd sat in the hot tub drinking it. Now, not quite dawn, he was in his bed. His head was throbbing more than his shoulder, but not quite as much as his conscience.

He owed Isabella an apology.

Women. This made two who'd gotten under his skin in short order in ways that he hadn't thought possible.

Last night, after a second glass of wine and half an hour of bubbling hot water had mellowed his mood, he'd considered going to see Atlanta. He'd poured himself more *vino* and brooded instead. He'd never pursued a woman in the past. He'd never needed to. Yet he found himself practically chasing Atlanta and eager to see her even though she'd made it clear she wanted solitude. And that she didn't want him. He didn't care for the fact he was acting like some lovesick teen.

As for Isabella, his sister had welcomed him to Monta Correnti with a feast suitable for a returning prodigal son, which in a way he guessed he was. They were strangers, yet they also were siblings. Half, whole or otherwise, she hadn't felt the need to sever their kinship. She'd made it clear all she wanted was a chance to get to know her long-lost brother. A chance to right a wrong and mend a rift. In return, all she asked of Angelo was for him to keep an open mind when it came to their father and the rest of the family.

He'd blown that deal before they'd finished eating the pasta she'd no doubt spent hours preparing. God, he was a heel. He had to make amends. He waited until it was a reasonable hour and called the number she'd left, only to find out she wasn't home.

The man who answered the phone told Angelo in heavily accented English that she was in the village running errands and he didn't expect her back for a couple hours.

"This is Angelo, no?" the man asked gruffly.

Guilty as charged, he thought. "Yes."

"I am Max, Isabella's husband."

Not sure what else to say, Angelo replied, "It's nice to meet you."

Max didn't bother with inane pleasantries. "Isabella was upset when she returned to our home last night."

"That would be my fault."

"Si She told me as much. You made her very angry." Max's voice softened when he added, "My Isabella is especially pretty when her temper flares."

Angelo had heard that tone before. His brother used it whenever the subject of his intended came up.

Max was saying, "As much as it was my pleasure to take her mind off family matters, it is my duty to look out for her well-being. I do not wish to see her distraught again."

Under other circumstances, the man's subtle threat might have irritated Angelo. In this case, he figured he deserved it. Besides, he'd already managed to get off on a bad foot with relatives. No sense making matters worse by getting into a verbal boxing match with Max.

So, he said, "Neither do I. In fact, that's why I'm calling. I'd hoped to apologize to her. I knew even before she left that I was way out of line."

"Good." Max sounded pleased. "If you happen to be in the village this afternoon, you can find her at Rosa."

And chance running into Luca? No, thanks, Angelo thought.

Max seemed to read his mind. “Your father will not be at the restaurant today. In fact, he is away from Monta Correnti on a buying trip to the coast for fresh seafood. He prefers to take care of important business in person.”

Max’s message was clear. Angelo should offer his apology to Isabella in person as well.

He was right, too, Angelo thought after ending the call. Hadn’t Big Mike, the only foster father he’d ever considered worthy of the title, taught Angelo that very lesson right along with tips for how to steal a base when the pitcher wasn’t looking?

Dressed and ready to eat whatever amount of crow was necessary, he started off for the village a little later. He figured he could poke around a bit before going to see Isabella.

In New York or while on the road with his team, Angelo left the driving to others. Here, he had a car at his disposal, a sporty little five-speed that his brother had thoughtfully rented on his behalf. He was itching to get behind the wheel, but he decided to walk. He could use the fresh air and exercise. Besides, he was too off-kilter to remember which side of the road he was supposed to be on.

The temperature was cool when he started out, the air still moist from dew. After a while, the sun poked through the filmy layer of clouds. Between its warmth and Angelo’s physical exertion, by the time he reached the village he was regretting the jacket he’d pulled over his button-down shirt. He shrugged it off and slung it over his good shoulder as he made his way down cobbled streets that looked like something straight out of Brigadoon.

He navigated his way around what he figured was the main business district. With each turn, he discovered quaint shops and encountered the homey smells of fresh-baked bread and drying herbs. Based on his reaction the previous day to scent, he waited for some blast of recognition or sense of déjà vu to slow his steps. But while he definitely found Monta Correnti inviting and the smells mouthwatering, none of it was familiar.

Angelo told himself he was relieved. The last thing he wanted at the moment was to take a trip down memory lane. So what if the place of his birth didn’t ring any mental bells? Why would it? He’d barely spent three years here. He and Alex had spent more than a decade with their apathetic mother in a Boston apartment building, and those memories were good and buried. That was how he preferred it. As far as he was concerned, his life had begun the day a scout from a small private college in upstate New York had come knocking at his foster family’s door. It hadn’t been the big leagues, but it had helped pave the way to them.

Lost in good memories, he took a moment to recognize the woman who emerged from the pastry shop at the corner. It was Atlanta.

She was wearing jeans, the faded boot-cut variety, and a ridiculously prim apple-green sweater set that did nothing to diminish her sex appeal. She might as well have been outfitted in skin-tight leather pants and a low-cut leopard-print blouse given the way his body reacted.

She’s not interested, he reminded himself. She’d made that abundantly clear. He was just starting to turn in the opposite direction when she spied him and offered a tentative wave. He waved back and though he intended that to be the end of the encounter, his feet had other ideas. They started off in her direction.

“Good morning,” he said when he reached her.

“*Buongiorno.*”

“Show off. You listened to Berlitz tapes before you came,” he accused, finding it easier to distance himself from real emotions by hiding behind teasing humor.

For her part, Atlanta looked almost relieved.

“Actually, I had to learn a little Italian for a movie I did a few years back. I liked the language, so I brushed up on it before traveling.” As she spoke, she tucked the little white pastry bag behind her back.

“What have you got in there?” he asked, craning to one side.

“N-nothing.” She looked and sounded nervous. Not nervous, he amended. Guilty. But he’d be damned if he could figure out why.

“Did you knock over the pastry shop or something?”

Her mouth fell open and she sputtered a moment before finally managing a full sentence. “Why on earth would you say that?”

“Because you’re acting suspicious.” He retrieved the bag from her hands. “It’s like you’ve got the Hope diamond stuffed in there or something.”

She snatched it away before he could open it. “It’s just a cannolo.”

“A cannolo?” All that subterfuge for a damned pastry? He said as much.

She sighed. “Okay, two. I couldn’t resist. They were fresh-made this morning.”

“Mmm. Nothing like a freshly made cannolo.” Angelo’s mouth watered a little, but it wasn’t the pastry alone that had whetted his appetite. “Were you planning to share with someone?”

“No. I bought them for me.” She laughed and some of her nervousness leaked away. “I guess that’s why I seemed so guilty. I can’t believe I bought one cannolo, much less two and just for myself.”

“What’s so wrong with that?”

“I planned to eat them both. In one sitting.” The last part was confessed in a near whisper with her gaze glued to the tips of her shoes.

“Is that a crime?”

“Yes.” She shook her head then and her gaze reconnected with his. “No. Of course not. Unless you’re Darnell.”

“Darnell?”

“My sadistic personal trainer. Since I’ve been away from Los Angeles he’s text-messed me nearly every day to ask if I’ve been working out and sticking to my diet.”

Though he knew he’d regret it, Angelo allowed his gaze to slip south. The woman had a killer body. It was perfectly proportioned, even if parts of it were a little less full these days. “I don’t think you need to worry about a diet right now.”

“I’ve lost a little weight,” she admitted. “I call it the stress diet.” She touched a finger to her chin, the pose intentionally thoughtful. “You know, maybe I should patent it and start hawking it to young starlets as a backup plan in case my career never recovers.”

“That would be a waste of your talent. Besides, I like women with some curves.”

“Some curves.” She nodded. “But there’s a fine line, which is why Zeke wouldn’t let me...”

She flushed and didn’t finish, but Angelo figured he could fill in the blanks easily enough. It sounded as if the guy had done a real number on her. Let it go, he told himself. Leave it alone. He had enough problems of his own to concentrate on without taking on Atlanta’s, especially since she’d made it abundantly plain she was not interested in sharing a cannolo or anything else with him.

He hitched one thumb over his shoulder and took a step backward. “I should be going.”

“Yes. I should, too.”

“You wouldn’t want those cannoli to get stale.” He motioned toward the bag as he backed up another step.

“No.” She forced out a laugh. “It was nice seeing you, Angelo.”

He stopped. “Was it?”

His point-blank question caused her to blink. “I...I feel bad about yesterday. About...about how things ended between us.”

“Well, as you said, it was time for them to end. The game was over and all,” he drawled.

Atlanta winced. “That came out...”

“Wrong?” He shook his head. “I don’t think so. Actually, I appreciate your honesty.”

She blinked again, this time looking more piqued than perplexed. “I doubt that. You were clearly mad.” Royally ticked was more like it. But he smiled now. “Whatever. Water under the bridge.”

“Then why bring it up?”

“I didn’t.”

“You did.”

Damn. She had him there. He glanced past her up the block. A coffee shop caught his attention. He told himself it was only the promise of his first cup of java that caused him to say, “I want a cannolo.”

“What?”

“A cannolo. I’ll buy the espresso if you’ll share your cannoli. It doesn’t even have to be a whole one. I’ll settle for a bite or two.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You want a cannolo?”

“That’s what I said.” He held his breath, half expecting her to state the obvious and tell him to go buy his own.

Instead, to his surprise, she said slowly, “I guess that’s a reasonable trade.”

The coffee shop was small with limited seating inside and only half a dozen wrought-iron tables and chairs on its speck of a cobblestone patio. Most of the tables indoors were unoccupied, but it was too nice a day to sit inside. Outdoors, only two were empty. They took a seat at one of them and waited for the server to come for their order. Angelo went with espresso, the stronger the better in his opinion, especially given the rough start to his day. Atlanta opted for a cappuccino.

“In for a penny, in for a pound,” she announced when their beverages arrived.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked.

She pointed to the rich froth that topped her cup. “This is steamed whole milk and the espresso isn’t decaffeinated. Do you have any idea how long it’s been since I allowed myself to have either?” She didn’t wait for Angelo to answer. “And a cannolo!” She pulled one of the pastries in question from the paper bag. “I would be eating two if you hadn’t talked me into being nice and sharing.”

She tried to hand him one of the tempting pastries, but he refused to take it. “I’ve changed my mind. I want you to eat them both. And I want to watch.”

“God, no! Please, Angelo. Save me from myself.” Though the drama of her words was definitely for effect, he sensed a nugget of truth—and perhaps of fear—in them.

He leaned back in his chair. “What’s to save, sweetheart? Everyone’s entitled to a little indulgence from time to time.”

Still eyeing the cannolo, she nodded. “I know.”

“Do you?”

“Some habits are hard to break,” she said softly.

“Zeke?”

She set the cannolo on a napkin and glanced away. “You think it’s stupid that I let a man run my life to such a degree for so long.”

“Is that what I think? Or is that what you think?” he asked, reneging on his earlier promise to himself to stay out of her business. He’d also vowed to steer clear of her. As the woman said, in for a penny, in for a pound.

“It’s what I think.”

“So, how’d it happen?”

Her brow furrowed. “It wasn’t all at once. I thought I was free...”

“Free?”

She cleared her throat. “You know. Footloose and fancy free. God knows, I was all attitude when I first arrived in Hollywood. I didn’t look in the rearview mirror when I left rural Louisiana. I was happy to kiss my hick roots and...and everything else goodbye.”

The way she hesitated made him think there was more to it than that, but he commented on the obvious. “I thought you were born in Georgia?”

One side of her mouth rose. “That’s what you’re supposed to think. It was Zeke’s idea after he came up with my name. Atlanta is one of his favorite cities, very cosmopolitan but with a bit of edge. He said it suited me.”

“What is your given name?”

“Jane. Jane Marie Lutz.”

It was a nice enough name, but it didn’t fit her, Angelo decided as he took in the tumble of nearly white hair and the blue eyes that, even without the benefit of much makeup, were her face’s star feature.

“Forgive me for saying so, but you don’t look like a Jane.”

Her laughter held little humor. “Zeke’s words exactly. He wanted something exotic, something people would remember. A name that could be used all by itself and people would know who you meant.”

“Like Cher or Madonna.”

She nodded. “You got it. The idea of being that famous caught my attention, even if at first I wasn’t too excited about being called Atlanta. Still, I was willing to do whatever Zeke suggested. He was a Hollywood big shot who had managed the careers of some of the hottest names in the business, and I was a nobody who wanted to be a star. I was grateful to him, pathetically so, for believing that I could be.”

“I don’t think he had to overtax his imagination. He must have seen a spark of something that he knew would have broad appeal.”

“He saw my body,” she said dryly. “I was nineteen, wearing a G-string and pasties and performing onstage at a gentleman’s club. Not my finest hour and definitely not the career I envisioned when I traded in my Podunk Ville address for a cockroach-invested walkup in Tinsel Town.”

A G-string and pasties.

Angelo had too much testosterone not to hone in on those words and be turned on by the erotic image they evoked. Somehow, however, he managed to say in a remarkably normal tone, “It takes more than a hot body and pretty face to become a mainstay in Hollywood. Lots of actresses with only that to recommend them have come and gone, while you’ve remained a box-office draw. You’re selling yourself short again.”

He expected her to argue, but she didn’t. Neither did she agree. Instead, she tore open a white packet of sugar and added it to her beverage. Another act of defiance, he was sure.

“So what does all of this have to do with a couple of cannoli and caffeine laced with whole milk and now some sugar?” he asked.

“Zeke was strict about what I could eat.” She exhaled and shook her head. “And about what I could drink, wear...you name it.”

“Controlling?”

“He claimed that he was only looking out for my best interests.”

Of course he did.

“Controlling,” Angelo said again, this time not as a question but as a statement.

“He was right about a lot of things, though. He got me my first big break. I didn’t want the part of Daisy Maddox.” It was the role that had made her a bona fide star. “He insisted I take it and it wound up being my best-grossing movie.”

“Are you defending him?” Angelo asked.

“No.” She looked insulted. “I’m merely pointing out the hand he had in making my career.”

“So, you’re defending him.”

“No!”

“He could have had the same impact on your career without treating you like a lump of clay to be molded to his exact specifications.”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand.”

“Do you?”

“He managed what has been a very successful career for me.”

“So, that meant he got to manage your life, too?”

“Of course not.”

“As for your career, is it all you envisioned for yourself?”

He wasn’t sure what made him ask the question, but he was glad he had when he saw her mouth drop open. “I...I have other ideas, other avenues I’d like to explore.”

“Let me guess. He didn’t want you to explore them.”

Her gaze slid away. “Let’s drop it.”

“Sure.”

Atlanta grew quiet. He considered apologizing, but he wasn’t really sorry. She’d been under the guy’s thumb for way too long. Angelo didn’t want to see her slip beneath it again, even for a moment. No one deserved that kind of treatment.

She dipped the tip of her index finger into the custard that oozed from the end of the cannolo and licked it off. All thoughts of Zeke vanished. In fact, thoughts of every variety except the lustful kind vanished. It was all he could do not to groan.

“That’s a good start. But you can do better.”

When she looked at him in question, he nodded to the cannolo.

She dipped her finger in a second time for another nibble. He snagged her wrist before she could and brought it to his mouth instead, taking his time licking off the last of the rich filling. The quick intake of her breath was all of the encouragement he needed.

“I know all about indulgence, Atlanta. You might say I’m an expert.”

She pulled her fingers free and reached for her cappuccino. The hands holding the cup weren’t completely steady. He knew the feeling.

“*Seduced in Italy.*”

“Excuse me?” She gaped at him and his ego needed to believe she looked every bit as guilty as she had over the cannoli.

“The name of the movie you learned Italian for.”

“Oh. Right.” She smiled. “That was the one. It was shot on location in Venice. I loved it there.”

“Was Zeke with you?”

“Only for the first couple days, then he had to fly back to LA for business.”

“Perhaps that’s why you enjoyed Venice so much. It’s a city known for indulgence.”

She shrugged, non-committal, and took another sip of her cappuccino. “I’m guessing you were on a date when you saw the movie.”

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s a chick flick. I can’t see you going with a couple of guys from the team.”

“You’re right.” His expression was unrepentant when he said, “I don’t remember the woman I was with, but I remember the scene where you danced in the fountain in that really sheer top.”

“What a surprise,” Atlanta replied dryly.

Angelo was flirting with her again, although at times it seemed as if he was testing himself as much as her. Either way, flirting was harmless, she decided. Come to that, even though she’d had precious little practice at it away from the big screen, it was all but required when two healthy and unattached adults got together in an idyllic setting. In Angelo’s case, it was second nature and indicative of nothing more than his interest in a romp in the sack. The man had a one-track mind.

He needn’t bother. She was the polar opposite of her celluloid twin, the recent stirrings of her libido notwithstanding. With a crew looking on and a camera recording her every move and emotion, she’d enticed and seduced her leading man or fallen victim to his charms. In real life, however, she’d always been careful not to send out signals or offer come-hither glances and coy smiles. She considered that to be too close to her mother’s method of operation when it came to men. Too close to what

her stepfather had accused Atlanta of doing to assuage his conscience for the petting and pawing that had begun even before she'd hit puberty.

Even with Zeke, Atlanta had felt awkward and had approached sex with a straightforwardness that had siphoned off every last ounce of romance from the act. He hadn't seemed to mind, which she realized now was because for him romance had never entered into it.

"Is something wrong with your dessert?" Angelo's question roused her from her thoughts.

"No. It's fine. Delicious, in fact." She reached for her napkin and blotted the corners of her mouth.

"Then why are you frowning?"

"I wasn't aware that I was."

"You are."

"If I am, it's not the company." She said it automatically. She'd had a lot of practice placating men.

"Sure it is." Angelo's eyes narrowed. "I make you nervous."

"Please." She waved a hand. "What do I have to be nervous about?"

"You're attracted to me."

She huffed out an impatient breath to camouflage the truth. "Right. And that would make me nervous?"

"Yeah," he said slowly. "You're not as confident in real life as you are in your movies."

So, he'd figured that out, had he? Well, points to him.

"That's because I'm a person, not a character for whom every action and reaction has been scripted." She crossed her arms. "You, on the other hand, come across as grossly overconfident."

"It's not overconfidence if you can back it up with actions."

"I'm talking off the ball diamond."

"So am I."

"Is that so, *sweetheart!*" she drawled. "I hate to tell you this, but, all of your bravado aside, you're no more certain of yourself than I am. It's easy to flirt and throw out pickup lines, but you've admitted that you aren't capable of cultivating a real relationship."

"I didn't say I was incapable." The calf that had been rubbing against hers under the table stilled. "I said it's not what I want."

"Uh-huh. The right woman doesn't exist for you. I remember the conversation. Have you ever *had* a relationship? And I'm talking about something that involves more than the exchange of apartment keys and regular sex."

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "As I said, that's not what I want."

"Why?" It was her turn to play therapist, and if it kept her out of the hot seat, all the better. "Is your life so perfect flying solo all the time?"

"That's right."

"No. That's what you want everybody to think. Most people buy it. I don't. What insecurities are you trying to mask? Hmm? What are your secrets?"

He shifted back in his chair, his gaze turning guarded. She'd struck a nerve.

"You know, I almost turned around and walked the other way when I saw you today," he admitted.

"Regretting that you didn't?"

He didn't answer.

"You don't like it when the shoe is on the other foot," she said.

"It's damned uncomfortable," he surprised her by admitting.

"Then maybe you'll resist the next time you're tempted to analyze me."

"Maybe. I probably should." He shrugged. "For that matter, I should probably leave you alone entirely. You've asked me to. I don't usually pursue a woman who tells me not to bother."

“Then why are you?”

She expected him to mention attraction again. What he said was, “I can’t quite figure you out, Atlanta.”

Her laughter was bitter. “No one else seems to have a problem.”

“Yeah, I thought I had, too. But you’re a bundle of contradictions. Strong one moment, vulnerable the next.”

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “Maybe I’m both. Maybe I’m neither. I am an actress.”

“Uh-uh. My turn to tell you I’m not buying it. This is you. Not an act. Contradictions,” he said again. “Like the way you keep telling me no but—”

That was as far as he got. She shot to her feet, rapping her hip against the edge of the table and spilling both of their beverages.

“When I say no, I mean no.”

“Atlanta.”

“No means no!”

He reached out a hand in entreaty, but she shook her head, turned and fled.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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

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