THE ITALIAN'S RUTHLESS Seduction

MODERN™

MIRANDA LEE

Miranda Lee

The Italian's Ruthless Seduction

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The Italian's Ruthless Seduction / M. Lee — «HarperCollins»,

What his billions can’t buy…If Sergio Morelli wants something, he has only to click his fingers to get it. Except for Bella Cameron. No matter how much his stunning stepsister once drove him wild with lust he never allowed himself to have her, believing she was a gold-digger like her mother.Now, when Bella calls unexpectedly, seeking refuge at their secluded family home by Lake Como, their unfulfilled desire resurfaces. No longer able to resist, Sergio ruthlessly decides it’s finally time to quench the fire.But their one night together only inflames their passion – and now he wants more!

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The trouble hadn't started till her birthday party, when Bella had emerged like a butterfly from a cocoon, blowing him away with her grace, her grown-up beauty and her devastating sex appeal.

Sergio hadn't been back to Sydney for several months. University life—and the sophistication of Rome—had had more appeal than staying in a house run by a woman he disliked intensely.

He had been startled when Bella had come up to him and demanded a birthday kiss.

'You'll have to do, Sergio,' she'd said, without a hint of flirtation. 'A girl has to be kissed on her birthday and you're the only male here other than Papa. And he doesn't count.'

Sergio hadn't been ready for the effect on him when she'd gone up on tiptoe and pressed her mouth to his. For a split second he'd been tempted to yank her hard against him, to part her innocent lips and plunge his tongue inside. But he'd resisted the devil's urging just in time, keeping the kiss to a platonic peck—which had obviously disappointed Bella, if her pout had been anything to go by.

Well, she's not an innocent now, Sergio, he reminded himself. *Time you stopped having cold showers and started having what you've always wanted.*

Which was Bella herself—in his bed and at his mercy.

Rich, Ruthless and Renowned

Billionaires secure their brides!

International tycoons Sergio, Alex and Jeremy were best friends at college. Bonded by their shared passion for business—and bedding beautiful women!—they formed The Bachelors' Club, which had only two goals:

1. Live life to the full.
2. Become billionaires in their own right!

But now, with the dotted line signed for the sale of their multibillion-dollar wine empire, there's one final thing left for each of the bachelors to accomplish: securing a bride!

The trilogy begins with Sergio's story in

The Italian's Ruthless Seduction

Look out for Alex and Jeremy's stories, coming soon!

The Italian's

Ruthless

Seduction

Miranda Lee

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Born and raised in the Australian bush, **MIRANDA LEE** was boarding-school-educated, and briefly pursued a career in classical music before moving to Sydney and embracing the world of computers. Happily married, with three daughters, she began writing when family commitments kept her at home. She likes to create stories that are believable, modern, fast-paced and sexy. Her interests include meaty sagas, doing word puzzles, gambling and going to the movies.

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CHAPTER ONE

I SHOULD BE HAPPIER, Sergio thought as he snapped off the shower, stepped out onto the luxuriously soft bath mat and reached for an even more luxurious bath sheet. Today I became a billionaire. Today, my two best friends became billionaires as well. If that doesn't make me happy, then what will?

Sergio frowned as he dried himself vigorously. Why wasn't he happier? Why wasn't he thrilled to pieces with the four-point-six billion they'd been paid for the Wild Over Wine franchise? Why did signing that contract today leave him feeling just a little...empty?

Wise people did say it was the journey that gave the most satisfaction, not the destination, he conceded with a resigned shrug of his broad shoulders. The irrefutable fact was that the three members of the Bachelors' Club had now reached their destination. Well...almost. None of them had turned thirty-five yet, though they would soon. His own thirty-fifth birthday was just over a fortnight away.

Sergio smiled a wry smile as he recalled the night they'd formed the Bachelors' Club. How young they were at the time. Not that any of them had realised it back then. They'd felt incredibly mature, older at twenty-three than a lot of the other students at Oxford in their year. More confident than most as well, each of them having been blessed with good looks as well as above-average intelligence. They'd also been very ambitious.

At least, he and Alex had been ambitious. Jeremy—who'd already had a private income—had just gone along for the ride.

It had been a Friday night, several months after they'd first met. They'd been in Jeremy's room, of course. His room had been so much bigger and better than the one Sergio and Alex had shared. They had all been more than a little intoxicated when Sergio—who had a tendency to become philosophical when he drank—had asked the others what their goals were in life.

'Definitely not marriage,' had been Jeremy's rather scathing remark.

Jeremy Barker-Whittle, youngest son of a British banking empire that went back generations. Perhaps because of their excessive wealth, his family was littered with divorce. It had not escaped his two friends that Jeremy was somewhat cynical when it came to the institution of marriage.

'I'm not interested in marriage either,' Alex Katona, a Rhodes Scholar from Sydney with a working-class background and a near-genius IQ had agreed. 'I'll be too busy working to get married. I aim to be a billionaire by the time I'm thirty-five.'

'Me too,' Sergio had concurred. Although Sergio was the only son and heir to the Morelli Manufacturing Company, based in Milan, he was well aware that the family firm was not doing as well as it once had. By the time Sergio inherited the business, he suspected it might not be worth

inheriting. If he wanted to be a success in life, he had to make it on his own. Which meant no marriage as well. Not for ages, anyway.

And so the Bachelors' Club had been born, their rules and goals laid out that night with great enthusiasm.

Rule One had been somewhat sentimental—and optimistic—for three young men in their early twenties.

To remain friends for ever.

Of course they had been very drunk at the time, having consumed quite a few bottles of Jeremy's seemingly limitless supply of fabulous French wine.

But, rather amazingly, they were still the best of friends over a decade later, despite going into business together, which would usually spell the kiss of death where friendships were concerned. Sergio didn't question why their friendship worked, but he was grateful for it. He couldn't imagine anything ever happening to spoil the bond between them.

Sergio had to laugh over Rule Two, however, which was To live life to the full.

Translate that to mean they were to sleep with every attractive girl who looked sideways at them. Which the three of them had managed very well during their years at Oxford. Since their graduation to real life, however, they'd become a little more discerning. At least, Sergio had, preferring the company of women who had more to offer than just their willing bodies. Women with careers and class and conversation. Often older women, unlike Alex, whose girlfriends seemed to get younger as he got older.

'Younger women don't cling or criticise or complain as much as females of my own age,' he told Sergio one day. 'Neither do they always want me to marry them.'

Alex was still anti-marriage. Not in principle. Just for himself. Unlike Jeremy, he wasn't cynical about the institution, Alex's parents and siblings having enjoyed happy marriages. As for Jeremy...he'd become a playboy of the first order, his girlfriends coming and going with alarming speed. No one could get bored with a girlfriend quicker than Jeremy. But there was always another one eager to take the previous one's place, Jeremy's wealth, good looks and charm had women falling at his feet wherever he went. Naturally, they all fell in love with him as well, a sentiment that was never returned. Jeremy wasn't into love, leaving a trail of broken hearts all over Britain, and half of Europe as well. Sergio didn't approve—and said so—but Jeremy just shrugged and said it wasn't his fault that he was fickle. It was a genetic flaw. His father was on his third marriage and his mother her fourth. Or was it her fifth?

So of course neither Alex nor Jeremy had trouble with rule number three.

Members of the Bachelors' Club must not marry till at least thirty-five.

Which had seemed an eternity away at the time.

Still, Sergio had always known, despite a huge dose of bitterness over his father's second marriage and subsequent divorce, that one day he would marry. He was Italian, after all. Family was important to him. But he'd put the idea on hold whilst he'd worked obsessively towards the Bachelors' Club's main goal.

To become billionaires by the age of thirty-five.

Which they'd finally managed. Today.

Another wave of melancholy washed through Sergio as he accepted that today also marked the virtual end of their club. Yes, the three of them would still remain friends for ever—that was a given—but only at a distance. He himself was returning to Milan shortly to take control of the family business which had gone into serious decline since his father's death last year. Alex was off back to Australia tomorrow to expand his already successful property development company whilst Jeremy would stay in London where he planned to buy himself a business. Possibly advertising. Anything but banking, apparently.

Sergio knew that once he told Jeremy and Alex tonight about his intention to marry, they would also see that the Bachelors' Club's days were seriously numbered. Still, that was life, wasn't it? Nothing stayed the same. Change was inevitable.

I will think of marriage as a new goal, Sergio decided with determined positivity as he strode from the bathroom. A new challenge. A new journey.

So what kind of wife do you want, Sergio? he asked himself as he made his way into his huge dressing room, which housed a wardrobe that even Jeremy envied. Sergio bypassed the rack of superb Italian business suits he owned—tonight was for celebrating, not business— selecting a casually tailored pair of black trousers, drawing them on and zipping them up in a rather reckless fashion for a man of his impressive dimensions.

She would have to be reasonably young, he supposed, since he wanted to have more than one child. Certainly no older than mid twenties. She would also have to be physically attractive, he decided pragmatically, taking a white silk shirt off its hanger and putting it on. Sergio couldn't see himself marrying a plain Jane. Not stunning looking, though. Stunningly beautifully women caused a man trouble.

Sergio was buttoning up his shirt when his personal cell phone rang. He frowned as he strode back into the bedroom and over to where he'd left the phone by the bed. Only a small number of people had that particular number. Alex and Jeremy, of course. And Cynthia. He changed the number every year, liking the privacy this afforded him. No doubt it was either Alex or Jeremy, telling him they were running late. As usual. It wouldn't be Cynthia. He'd broken up with her over a month ago, and she'd long given up on a reconciliation.

Sergio's eyebrows lifted when he swept up the phone and saw that the caller ID was blocked, his lips pursing angrily at the very real possibility that some scam artist had hacked into his private number. It had happened once or twice before.

'Who is this?' he snapped down the line.

There was a short silence at the other end before a woman's voice hesitantly said, 'It...it's Bella...'

Shock slammed into Sergio with all the force of a physical blow, taking his breath away, not to mention his voice.

'Sergio?' she went on after a few seconds of strained silence. 'That is you, isn't it?'

'Yes, Bella, it's me,' he managed to say at last, marvelling at how normal he sounded. Because there was nothing even remotely normal going on inside him. His heart was pounding behind his ribs and his head...his head had ceased to process logical thoughts. For this was Bella calling him. The stunningly beautiful Bella...his one-time stepsister and long-time tormentor.

'You said...that if I ever needed your help...that I could call you. You...you gave me your number. At your father's funeral...don't you remember?' she finished on a somewhat breathless note.

'Yes, I remember,' he admitted once his addled brain plugged into his memory bank.

'I'm going to have to ring you back,' she suddenly blurted out, then hung up.

Sergio swore, then stared down at the dead phone, gripping it tightly as he struggled to resist the urge to throw the damned thing at the wall.

For a full five minutes he paced the room, willing her to call him back, wondering and worrying about what kind of trouble she was in. Not that he should care. She obviously hadn't given him a second thought since their parents' divorce. And that had been eleven years ago! Her showing up at his father's funeral last year had been all about his father, not him personally. It infuriated Sergio that he was wasting time waiting for her to call him back when he should be getting himself down to the restaurant for dinner. His booking was for eight and it was close to that now.

If he had any sense he would stop thinking about Bella and do just that.

He laughed at himself as he collected his shoes and socks and started putting them on. For when had he ever been able to stop thinking of Bella once she'd entered his head?

Maybe, if she'd remained a nobody, living a quiet life back in Australia, Sergio might have been able to forget her. But no. Fate hadn't been that kind. After winning a high-profile talent quest on Australian television shortly before Dolores asked his father for a divorce, Bella had gone on to become a famous leading lady in musical theatre, starring in shows all over the world, most on Broadway, but some of them in London. Her exquisitely beautiful face had been everywhere at one time. On television. The sides of buses. On billboards. Sergio had resisted going to see her on stage, knowing that watching her perform in person would only fuel the overwhelming desire that she'd once inspired in him, the memory of which he still struggled with.

But once again, fate hadn't been kind, Jeremy dragging him along one night about three years ago to a Royal Variety Performance where Bella—unbeknownst to Sergio—had been one of the guest performers. What agony it had been, sitting there watching her sing and dance.

But even worse had been to come that night, with Jeremy informing him after the curtain had finally gone down that he'd received an invite to the after-concert party at the Soho Hotel. Sergio could have refused to accompany him, but a perverse curiosity had overridden his first instinct, which was to go home to his new Canary Wharf apartment and get blind drunk. Instead, he'd gone to the party where Bella had waltzed in on the arm of her latest lover, a handsome French actor of dubious talent with a reputation as a womaniser. What a brilliant-looking couple they'd made, her exquisite blonde beauty the perfect foil for the Frenchman's dark good looks, Bella dressed in an ethereal white evening gown whilst he was all in black; a devil to her angel. Sergio had watched her for ages from a distance, watched her and wanted her, his jealousy fierce whenever the Frenchman had touched her. Which had been often.

Sergio no longer had a clear memory of what he'd said to her when she'd finally spotted him across the room, leaving the leech for a moment to come over and speak privately to him. He would not have been rude. That was not his way, his father having instilled politeness and manners into him from a young age. No doubt he'd said something complimentary about her performance. What he could recall, however, was the wicked cruelty of his erection as he'd watched her mouth move to say he knew not what. Never before or since had he felt anything like it, her physical closeness causing his unrequited desire for her to flare to a point almost impossible to control.

But control it, he had, conversing with her for a short while till her obsequiously possessive lover had come over and drawn her away. It was only after Sergio had arrived home and was safely alone in his bedroom that he'd given vent to his explosive emotions, smashing his fist through the bathroom door, breaking two fingers in the process, after which he'd plunged himself into a cold shower and wept like a baby.

It had taken several weeks for his hand to heal, and for him to find some perspective about his self-destructive feelings for Bella. Talking to Alex and Jeremy had helped, though their advice had been typical.

'What you need, mate,' Alex had said, 'is to get laid more often.'

'She's probably not that great in bed, anyway,' Jeremy had added. 'Alex is right. There's plenty more fish in the sea. Throw the net out a bit more, bro.'

Which he had, for a while, having sex with more women in the next month than he had for years. All of them had been one-night stands. All of them blondes with blue eyes, pretty faces and very nice figures.

In the end, however, such a lifestyle had not sat well with Sergio. So he'd found himself Cynthia, an attractive divorcee who had been very good in bed and hadn't minded that he didn't love her. Gradually, Bella had slipped to the back of his mind, where she stayed. Most of the time.

Still, when he'd heard via Alex that Bella had broken up with the French actor, Sergio hadn't been able to deny feeling some satisfaction. He hadn't felt quite so happy when he'd found out she'd taken up with a Russian oligarch who'd made billions out of oil and natural gas, investing his fortune in a string of luxury hotels. The Russian had, again according to Alex, a reputation as a notorious

ladies' man with a penchant for celebrity blondes, usually supermodels or actresses. Sergio had shaken his head in dismay over this. Because it wasn't the first time Bella had taken up with a man of dubious reputation. Aside from the French actor, her list of previous lovers included a rock star with a drug problem and an Argentinian polo player who changed girlfriends as often as his horses. None of these relationships had lasted. But the gossip rags had had a field day during every one of these affairs, and afterwards.

When would Bella ever find true love? they'd speculated ad nauseam.

Sergio stared down at the still-silent phone, hating himself for worrying about her, despising himself for just wanting to hear the sound of her voice again. But why hadn't she rung back? She'd actually sounded nervous. And why had she hung up so abruptly? Had her latest lover come into the room and found her on the phone to another man? Was she in an abusive relationship perhaps? Despite being successful in her career, Bella was a very bad picker of men.

Which was nobody's fault but her own!

Still...he did not like to think of her being treated badly.

Sergio swore at his tortured train of thoughts. Damn it all, she wasn't his responsibility any more. Hadn't been since the divorce. He shouldn't care about her at all! But somehow, for some perverse reason, he did care. Which was perhaps why, when she'd shown up out of the blue at his father's funeral last year, looking tired and strained, he'd given her his private phone number and told her that if she ever needed him for anything, then he would be there for her.

Perversely, he hadn't recognised her at first. She'd been wearing a large black hat, a black wig and dark glasses. Even when she'd revealed her identity to him, he hadn't reacted the way he would have expected, with a mad rush of rampant desire. When she'd expressed her condolences, then added a sincere apology for the way her mother had treated her father, his only emotion had been sadness. Looking back, Sergio could only imagine that grief over his father's death had dampened his hormones to a point where not even being in Bella's provocative presence could rouse him. He recalled actually wanting to talk to her more. But when someone else had come up to speak to him —he couldn't remember who—she'd said a hurried goodbye and disappeared.

He'd never told Jeremy or Alex that the mysterious brunette was Bella. He hadn't been into chatting, or confiding, at that particular time, depression taking hold of him for several weeks after the funeral. When he'd finally dragged himself out of the black pit, Sergio had regretted giving Bella his phone number. Not because he'd thought she would ever contact him but because his foolish gesture had brought her back into the forefront of his mind. It had taken a supreme effort of will to push her back to a place where she was no more than a frustrating memory, but every now and then—like tonight—she would break out of the mental dungeon into which he'd locked her and give him hell.

It was pathetic, really. Exasperated with himself, he slipped his phone in his trouser pocket and headed for the door, determined not to waste another moment of headspace on that infernal woman. But within seconds of locking the door another thought crossed his mind.

Maybe she was pregnant!

This time, Sergio's laugh was both rueful and self-mocking. In the old days a single woman falling pregnant would have been a disaster. But this wasn't the old days. If Bella had happened to accidentally fall pregnant—a highly unlikely idea, he now appreciated—she wouldn't need his help. She had enough money to hire nannies and any other help she needed. She certainly wouldn't ask any man—especially himself—to make an honest woman out of her. That was total fantasy. As much as Sergio had had many fantasies about Bella over the years, none of them had included marriage.

Women like Bella were not made for marriage. They were made to be admired and desired. Made to be bedded, not wedded. As for children...clearly Bella had never felt the urge to reproduce. Yet she could have, if she'd wanted to. A lot of celebrity women had babies outside marriage. No, clearly Bella wasn't interested in that kind of commitment. Sergio wasn't surprised, given she'd been raised by a woman whose ambition for her daughter to become rich and famous had been nothing

short of obsessive. Sergio believed Dolores had only married his father so that he could pay for her daughter's tuition in singing and dancing. She'd seduced the Italian widower when he had been lonely and vulnerable, then trapped him into marriage with a supposed pregnancy that had miraculously disappeared as soon as the ring had been on her finger. Sergio could not prove that she'd never been pregnant at all, but he'd always suspected. When she'd asked for a divorce as soon as Bella's career had taken off, his suspicions had been confirmed. Not that he'd said as much to his father. The poor man had been shattered, having truly loved Dolores. And Bella as well.

Sergio didn't blame Bella entirely for what she'd become. Stage mothers were notorious for producing damaged children. And Bella was definitely damaged. Why else would she become involved with a succession of men whose reputations preceded them and who would never make her happy? It galled Sergio that Bella lived her life like one long reality show, played out in front of the media, allowing herself to be paraded in front of the paparazzi by men who were more interested in her as a trophy than a person.

And who are you to judge, Sergio? his conscience reminded him quite savagely. She's no longer a person to you either. She hasn't been, not since the night of her sixteenth birthday party. That was the night she became your object of desire, a desire so strong that nothing, not time or distance, or having another woman in your bed, can totally obliterate it. You think you care about her? That's a laugh.

His phone ringing at that precise moment sent his heart leaping into his mouth. Snatching it out of his pocket, Sergio didn't even bother to look at the caller ID.

'Yes?' he said somewhat brusquely.

'Alex here, mate. Sorry, but we're stuck in traffic. Going to be a bit late.'

'Damn it all, Alex,' Sergio snapped, frustrated that it wasn't Bella calling him back. 'The reason I bought a place at Canary Wharf was because it was supposedly close to everything.' And also because the tower that housed his luxury apartment had a heated pool, a fantastic gym and a top-class restaurant.

'Yeah, well, Thursday night, you know. And Jeremy was pathetically slow getting dressed. Look, we shouldn't be more than fifteen minutes. Go sit at the table and have a drink till we get there. You sound like you need one.'

Sergio sighed. 'You could be right.'

'Anything wrong?'

'Not really. Just a bit tired.' He might have told them about Bella's call if he'd known what it was about. But he didn't, damn it all. Maybe he'd never know. Maybe she'd never ring back. Hell, he wasn't sure if he could stand that.

'Well, it's been a big day,' Alex said. 'But a great one. You are one incredible negotiator, buddy. Now go relax with a whisky, and we'll be there soon.'

CHAPTER TWO

BELLA DIDN'T STOP shaking for a good five minutes after she'd hung up. Even then her heart was still racing, her mouth dry, her head whirling. Never in her life had she ever had a full-blown panic attack. But she knew all about them, a colleague of hers suffering from severe panic attacks before opening nights. Bella knew all the symptoms. She'd just never experienced them personally.

Admittedly, she'd been a bit nervous before ringing Sergio, but that was only natural. She still felt guilty over the way her mother had treated his father. If she was strictly honest with herself, she didn't feel she had the right to ask Sergio for help. Not after what her mother had done. If anyone was to blame for that panic attack, it was her mother!

Bella hadn't found out till the middle of last year just how badly her mother had treated Sergio's father, Dolores admitting one night whilst supposedly giving her daughter advice about men and marriage that she herself had used a pretend pregnancy to trap her Italian boss into marrying her; that she'd never really loved the man; that she'd been willing to do anything to secure the financial

support she'd needed to make her daughter into a star. Her earlier claim that she'd asked for a divorce because her husband no longer loved her had been a lie.

Bella had been so appalled by her mother's cold-blooded confessions that she'd felt compelled to seek out the man whom she'd once affectionately called Papa and apologise. Tracking him down had proved difficult—there was no mention of him on the internet—but she'd finally managed with the help of a private investigator, only to discover Alberto was close to death in a Milan hospital. Guilt had seen her dropping everything and flying over to Milan, determined to tell him in person that she always remembered him with great fondness and that she really appreciated all he'd done for her.

By the time she'd arrived at the hospital, however, he'd already died. So she'd gone to his funeral instead. In disguise, of course. She hadn't wanted to cause the family—especially Sergio—any embarrassment, knowing that if the paparazzi recognised her, then the service could turn into a three-ring circus.

It had been one of the most difficult days of her life, sitting all by herself in that huge cold cathedral, silently witnessing Sergio's palpable grief and wondering if her mother was indirectly guilty of his father's death. It was often said that stress could cause cancer. And clearly, Dolores had given Alberto Morelli loads of stress and unhappiness during the eight years their marriage had lasted.

Yet he'd never shown that unhappiness around her. He'd been very good to her, sweet and kind, as had Sergio, who'd been a wonderful big brother, always willing to listen to her sing, or watch her dance. Looking back, she realised he'd been amazingly patient with her, not a virtue one often associated with teenage boys. Sergio had only been fifteen when her mother had married his father, she a rather silly and very precocious ten-year-old. He'd been a quiet boy, rather reserved in personality but awfully clever. And surprisingly good at sport. They'd often played basketball together in the backyard when he'd wanted a break from his studies.

She'd missed him terribly when he'd been sent away to a university in Rome, his father not wanting him to forget his Italian roots. She'd been thirteen at the time, a very skinny thirteen, the only girl in her class not to have hit puberty. She'd only seen Sergio three times a year after that, at Easter and Christmas when he'd flown back to Sydney for a few days, then for the two weeks during July when the family had holidayed at the family villa on Lake Como.

Oh, how she'd loved those holidays! What fun the two of them had had together, swimming and boating and just generally larking around.

Not the last time, though, she recalled, Sergio spending most of his time in his room, studying for his final exams. By the following year, their parents had already separated, Sergio had gone to Oxford for further studies and she'd been on her way to Broadway, and stardom. Their relationship—which she'd imagined had been close—had suddenly no longer existed. She'd missed her big brother at first but soon she'd been consumed by her career and the attention that went with it. Out of sight had eventually been out of mind.

They'd crossed paths only once in the years since, at an after-concert party in London. She hadn't recognised him at first, he'd been so handsome and impressive looking, having finally filled out his tall, lanky frame. But his eyes had been the same. Hard to forget eyes like that. So dark and so beautiful, and she'd felt unsettled by the hardness in his gaze. It hadn't taken her long to realise he'd still been angry with her mother—and with her too, she'd supposed—his politeness having a chilly edge to it.

There'd been no chilliness in his eyes at his father's funeral, however, only sadness and a gentleness, which by then she hadn't felt she deserved. Thank God she'd been wearing dark glasses, because behind them she'd been weeping silent tears of wretchedness and remorse. She knew that she should have contacted both him and his father after the divorce. Should have shown some regret and gratitude. Some decency! But she'd been too caught up at the time with the sudden burst of fame, with finally being on the verge of fulfilling her mother's rabid ambition, and yes, Bella, admit

it...fulfilling your own. She could excuse herself by saying she'd only been eighteen, but that was no excuse. No excuse at all!

Bella had been quite overcome when Sergio had written down his private number on a business card and told her to ring him if she ever needed anything, anything at all. His compassionate and unexpectedly generous gesture had threatened the last of her emotional control, so when a very attractive redhead had come up to them and linked arms with him, she'd stuffed the card into her handbag, said a hurried goodbye and fled before she'd burst into noisy tears in front of everyone.

Tears threatened again now. Tears of frustration and misery. She hadn't slept well last night. She hadn't slept well in ages. Truly, she could not go on like this. She had to get away. Away from everyone who she knew down deep didn't have her best interests at heart. They only wanted what they could get out of her, which was why they kept pressuring her to take on more and more work. Bella had acquired a long list of hangers-on over the last few years. At present she had a manager, a Hollywood agent, a PA, a publicist, plus her own personal stylist. Then, of course, hovering in the background, was her mother.

They all wanted their cut. All wanted their piece of her.

She had no time to herself. No time for a personal life. No time for anything but work.

Lately, she'd begun to feel as if she were on a roller-coaster ride that never stopped. She never stopped. Well it had to stop. She had to stop. And she had to stop right now!

'So stop being such a lily-livered coward and ring Sergio back,' she ordered herself.

Stiffening her spine, Bella ignored her suddenly pounding heart, grabbed her phone and hit redial.

CHAPTER THREE

SERGIO WAS SITTING at the table with the best view of the river, sipping a glass of Scotch on the rocks and doing his best to relax, when his phone rang.

His heart jumped, his gut twisting into knots as he glanced at the caller ID, a wave of relief hitting him with the force of a tsunami. Because it wasn't Alex, ringing again to say they would be even later. The caller ID was blocked. Which meant it was Bella, calling him back. Thank God. Sergio suspected he would not have been able to sleep tonight if she hadn't. He would have had to do something really ridiculous, like hire a private investigator to find out her number, or her address. Or some way of contacting her.

How pathetic was that?

Truly, Sergio, get a grip!

But it was futile advice, his fingers tightening around the phone as he lifted it to his ear. But his voice—when he spoke—sounded wonderfully calm and seemingly relaxed. 'Hello, Bella.'

'Heavens! How did you know it was me?'

'You blocked your ID,' he explained. 'No one else who uses my private number does that.'

'Oh, I see...'

'So what happened earlier? Why did you hang up?'

'Sorry about that. But Mum suddenly came to my door and I didn't want her to know I was ringing you.'

Sergio was truly taken aback. 'Your mother lives with you?'

'Lord, no. I live by myself in New York. But I came back to Sydney a few days ago for a holiday. More fool me,' she added drily. 'Look, have I called you at a bad time? Are you too busy to talk? Where are you? I can hear quite a bit of noise in the background.'

A loud group of men had just passed by Sergio's table.

'I'm in a restaurant, waiting for some friends of mine to arrive. But they're running late. London traffic is not conducive to punctuality.'

'New York's just as bad. So you're still living in London?'

‘I bought an apartment here,’ he told her, wondering what she was getting at. He was also beginning to see that his earlier concern for her welfare had been ridiculous. But that was typical of his reactions where Bella was concerned. They were always over the top and dangerously lacking in logic.

‘So how can I help you, Bella?’ he asked, knowing full well that her problem would be nothing like he’d been imagining.

‘I was wondering...do you still have that villa on Lake Como? You didn’t sell it after your father passed away, did you?’

‘No. I would never sell the villa. It’s been in the Morelli family for generations. Why?’

‘I...I need to get away, Sergio. Somewhere private and peaceful. I was hoping to rent it from you for two or three weeks. Maybe even a month.’

‘I see,’ he said, suppressing his annoyance with difficulty. If she wanted to rent a damned villa on Lake Como there were plenty on the market. Why ask for his? One part of him wanted to tell her to go to hell. But that other part—the one that still wanted her, despite everything—could not resist the opportunity to see her again. In the flesh. Her absolutely gorgeous exquisite flesh.

‘So when would you be wanting to stay there?’ he asked, casually.

‘Straight away,’ she said. ‘Or at least as soon as I can get there. Like I said, I’m in Sydney at the moment.’

At her mother’s house, he thought bitterly, the one his father had generously given to that gold-digger as part of their divorce settlement.

‘I gather that Dolores won’t be coming with you to the villa, then?’

‘Good God, no. I want to come alone.’

That shook him, since he had presumed that she would be coming with her latest lover. Suddenly, Sergio could not contain a rush of dark excitement. He’d never pursued Bella over the years, despite his obsessive desire for her. And he could have, once he was older, especially after their wine bars had been such a great success and the money had started rolling in. After all, she was no longer his stepsister, no longer forbidden fruit. So why hadn’t he?

For lots of reasons, he accepted. Pride mostly. He was Italian, after all. He would not have reacted well to rejection. Running after a woman—any woman—was not his style. Running after the daughter of the gold-digger who’d broken his father’s heart would have felt like the ultimate betrayal, plus the height of stupidity. After all, the apple never fell far from the tree, did it? If Bella had responded to his advances, he would never have been sure if her feelings were real, or faked, especially after he’d become seriously rich.

But this was different. Her placing herself in his debt made it different.

‘I’m sorry, Bella,’ he said, relishing his moment of power over her, ‘but I can’t let you rent the villa any time soon. I’m going to be staying there myself all during July.’

‘Oh,’ she said, conveying a wealth of disappointment and dismay in that one word.

‘But you can stay there with me free of charge,’ he offered. ‘If you don’t mind having a bit of company.’

‘Just you?’ she said, sounding slightly hesitant. ‘I mean...you won’t have anyone else there with you?’

‘No. Just me. And Maria, during the daytime.’

‘The same Maria who used to do the cooking and cleaning back in the old days?’

‘The one and the same. But she doesn’t live in now. She’s married and lives in a nearby village with her husband, Carlo. He does the garden, when it needs to be done, and the pool, during the summer. Maria comes in regularly when someone is staying there. Which isn’t all that often since my father passed away.’

Her sigh sounded sad. ‘I still feel terrible about your father.’

Sergio gritted his teeth. He didn’t want her apologising again.

The sight of Alex and Jeremy entering the foyer brought Sergio to a quick decision. 'I'm sorry to cut you off, Bella, but my friends have just arrived. If you could give me your phone number, I promise I'll ring you back later this evening and we'll make concrete plans.' A quick mental calculation reassured him that it would still be morning in Australia, even at midnight in London. 'Meanwhile, book a flight to Milan and get yourself packed. And for pity's sake, don't tell your mother where you're going. In fact, don't tell anyone where you're going. I don't want the paparazzi hovering over the villa in a helicopter trying to get a shot of the infamous Bella and her latest lover, okay?'

'What? Oh, yes, yes, I see what you mean. They do like to jump to conclusions, don't they? Especially about me. I promise I won't tell a single soul. Gosh, you've no idea how much I appreciate this, Sergio. I always—'

'Have to go now, Bella,' he interrupted brusquely. 'Your number, please?'

She gave him her number and he hung up just as Alex and Jeremy reached the table, Sergio turning his phone right off before slipping it back in his pocket.

The face he lifted to greet his friends would have looked calm enough. Sergio was not in the habit of showing his emotions, which was just as well, given the thoughts that were going on in his head. He could still hardly believe it. Bella! In his home and in his debt!

Sergio had never believed himself a ruthless man. Or a vengeful one. It seemed he was even more Italian than he'd thought.

'Sorry we're late,' Alex said as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

Alex, Sergio finally noted, had dressed casually in dark blue jeans and a pale blue shirt, whilst Jeremy was still wearing a suit. Not the navy pinstripe he'd worn earlier today but a superb grey three-piece with a purple shirt and a lilac tie.

'Setting up a date for tomorrow night?' Jeremy asked as he too sat down.

'Sergio doesn't go on dates,' Alex said drily. 'He has sleepovers.'

'Cheapskate,' Jeremy said, though affectionately. 'The least you can do is pay for a girl's dinner before you take her to bed. So who are you sleeping with these days?'

'That's none of your business,' Sergio returned coolly, deciding right then and there not to tell either of them about Bella's call. He didn't want either of his friends swaying him from the course of action he'd decided to take. 'Come on, let's hurry up and order. I'm starving.'

That was another thing about this restaurant that Sergio liked. The speed with which drinks and meals were delivered. In no time a bottle of champagne was opened and poured, two plates of herb bread arriving at the same time to soak up some of the alcohol.

It would have been a highly enjoyable evening if his mind hadn't been on other things. Namely how he was going to seduce Bella, which of course was what he had every intention of doing. In all honesty he hadn't had much practice at actual seduction. Tall, dark and handsome men—especially well-heeled ones—rarely had to resort to outright seduction. But just tall, dark and handsome might not cut it with Bella. He supposed he could tell her he was now a billionaire—women like Bella could never have enough money—but that wouldn't be nearly as satisfying as having her come to his bed willingly, not because she was attracted to his money, but because she was attracted to him.

Sergio mulled over what approach would appeal to Bella all through his entrée. He came to the conclusion during his main course that her relationship history suggested she was attracted to bad boys, something Sergio was not. At least...not till now.

I can do bad boy, he decided over dessert. Because of course, now that he had the opportunity, he would do anything—anything at all—to have Bella in his bed, at least once. No, not just once. Once would not be nearly enough to obliterate the heat that was already gathering in his tortured loins. He would need a whole month of sex before he'd grow tired of her. And not just straightforward sex either. He wanted to have her every which way there was, wanted to experience all the wildly wanton things that those other boyfriends of hers would have insisted upon.

And when the month was over, after he'd had his fill, he would send her on her merry masochistic way, after which he would set about finding himself a nice girl to marry.

Good plan, that, he decided as he devoured his last mouthful of crème caramel. Though maybe good was not the right word.

'You're in a strange mood tonight, Sergio,' Jeremy remarked over coffee. 'I know Alex and I are the major talkers in our trio but you usually contribute a little more to the conversation. So what gives? You having woman trouble?'

Sergio smothered a laugh. Woman trouble didn't even begin to describe the effect Bella's call had had on him. But he did feel somewhat calmer now that he had a definite plan in mind to deal with his ongoing and obsessive desire for her. All that remained was to execute that plan successfully and she would cease to be a problem.

Meanwhile, he decided to broach the subject he'd been going to bring up before Bella had rung. After all, the three of them might not get together again in person for ages and, as they were fellow members of the Bachelors' Club, he believed they had a right to know what his future intentions were.

'In a way,' he replied enigmatically. 'The opposite sex certainly does figure in what I am about to say.'

'That sounds ominous,' Alex said.

'Not ominous. But serious. Yes. I've decided that I'm going to get married.'

Alex sucked in sharply whereas Jeremy just smiled.

'That doesn't surprise me,' he said wryly.

'Well, it surprises me!' Alex said, scowling at Sergio. 'I thought after your father's divorce you swore off marriage for ever.'

Sergio shrugged. 'That's ancient history. Now that my father's passed away and we've sold the franchise, I feel the urge for a more settled life.' Or he would, after he'd fixed up his other, more immediate urges. 'I want a family, Alex.'

Alex sighed, then nodded. 'Fair enough.'

'So who's the lucky lady?' Jeremy asked.

'Yes, who the hell is she?' Alex joined in.

'I have no idea,' Sergio told them. 'I haven't met her yet. I was thinking of an Italian girl. Someone whose family lives in or near Milan, since that's where I'll be working from now on.'

Alex just shook his head whilst Jeremy nodded, as though in agreement. 'Good thinking, Sergio. Italian girls are passionate creatures and excellent breeders, which I presume is your main reason for getting married. To have children.'

'Yes,' he admitted. 'And I want more than one child. Which means my wife will have to be young. And pretty, of course. And preferably from a wealthy family. I'll ask the Countess to throw a few parties at her villa. She knows everyone in the district who is anyone.' The Countess was his closest neighbour at Lake Como, a wealthy widow in her fifties who'd been a good friend to his father, and him. Though naturally, he wouldn't have her arrange anything till Bella had left.

'But what about love?' Alex interjected, sounding unexpectedly horrified. 'You can't marry someone you're not madly in love with.'

'For pity's sake, Alex,' Jeremy snapped. 'Being madly in love is the worst reason to get married. Trust me. I know. My father, mother and brothers are always falling madly in love and it never lasts. Sergio's got the right idea. Marry some sweet little thing who adores you and wants nothing more than to be a wife and mother and you'll be happy as a pig in mud.' He smiled suddenly. 'You know, I always suspected you were a husband in waiting.'

'Why do you say that?'

Jeremy chuckled. 'All that righteous disapproval you exhibited when I was playing the field.'

Alex snorted. 'You're still playing the field.'

‘True. It’s hard to give up a game that’s so much fun and which, at the risk of sounding arrogant, I have a singular talent for. Both of you have been critical at times of my callously breaking hearts but I can honestly say that not one of my ex-girlfriends think badly of me. When I break up with them I always let them down gently, and with great empathy for their feelings.’

‘Oh, truly,’ Alex exclaimed, but laughingly. ‘What shall we do with this cockcrowing devil, Sergio? Give him a gold medal for lover of the year?’

‘Possibly. His record suggests he does have great skill in that area.’ A sudden thought came to Sergio. ‘So how do you do it, Jeremy? I mean, say there’s a girl you meet whom you fancy like mad but who doesn’t fancy you back. How do you go about getting her into bed? What’s your first and best seductive move? This is a hypothetical case, of course,’ he quickly added. ‘Maybe that’s never happened to you.’

‘Can’t recall that it has.’

‘But if it did, what would you do?’ Sergio persisted.

Jeremy sipped his coffee as he gave the matter some thought.

‘After today,’ Alex said drily, ‘he’d just have to show the girl the size of his bank balance. She’d start fancying him straight away.’

Jeremy rolled his eyes at Alex as he put down his coffee cup. ‘Such cynicism. I have never had to resort to mercenary measures to get any girl I wanted.’

‘Spoken by a man born with a silver spoon in his mouth,’ Alex muttered under his breath.

‘Boys, boys,’ Sergio reprimanded. ‘Behave yourselves! I am trying to do some serious research here. I want to know what tactics Jeremy would use to get such a girl interested. You too, Alex,’ he suggested. ‘Surely you must have come across some desirable young thing who didn’t just fall into your lap. Come on, both of you. I want to know what you’d do under those circumstances.’

‘Well, I suppose I would try laying on the charm first,’ Jeremy said. ‘Tell her how great I thought she was. Not beautiful. Beautiful women are cynical about being complimented on their beauty. Better to concentrate on their other qualities. Then if that didn’t work, I would place myself in her company as much as possible but ignore her completely. Use the old reverse psychology tactic. You know the adage... Treat ’em mean, keep ’em keen.’

‘Can’t say I agree with either of those tactics,’ Alex said.

‘So what would you do, lover boy?’ Jeremy asked.

‘First, I would find out everything I could about her. Her background. Her friends. What she liked to do. What she liked. Then I would ask her out somewhere that she’d love to go, somewhere seriously special, somewhere which cost a bomb. Best seats at a concert, for instance. Or the red carpet premiere of a movie which starred an actor she liked. Then, if that didn’t work, I’d say how much I admired and desired her and that if she didn’t go out with me then I would have to go to Thailand and become a monk.’

Sergio could not help it. He laughed. Jeremy just looked incredulous.

‘And has that ever worked?’ Jeremy asked. ‘The monk business?’

‘Don’t know. Never tried it. Never needed to go that far. Sorry, Sergio, but girls do seem to fall into my lap without much effort on my part.’

Sergio didn’t doubt it. Though all three of them had been blessed in the looks department, Alex was exceptionally good-looking. Very tall and very handsome, with blond hair, blue eyes and a body that he’d honed to perfection in the gym.

‘You won’t have any trouble getting any girl you want,’ Alex directed at Sergio. ‘But don’t go rushing into marriage, mate. You’ve waited this long. Give true love a chance.’

‘I never realised you were such a romantic,’ Sergio said, suddenly anxious to get this dinner over and ring Bella back.

‘Me either,’ Jeremy intoned drily. ‘I can see that our bachelors’ club might be losing two of its members soon, not just one.’

Alex just smiled. ‘Not me. I don’t have any plans to settle down any time soon. If ever. I’m much too busy. I have a golf resort to finish for starters. You know the one.’

‘Not sure that I do,’ Sergio said.

‘The one you bought after the owner went bankrupt?’ Jeremy asked.

‘Yep. Got a bargain, I did. But it’s a massive project, one which needs me to be hands-on a good deal of the time. I’ve already worn out one set of tyres driving to and fro up there. At the same time, I’ve got a few blocks of units going up in Western Sydney. With interest rates so low, the real-estate market there is booming. Truth is if I hadn’t found the most perfect little PA last year who does everything for me bar tie my shoelaces, I wouldn’t even have time to have sex.’

‘Hmm.’ Jeremy’s glance was speculative. ‘Is she attractive, this perfect little PA of yours?’

‘Actually yes, she’s very attractive. I like being around attractive people. But I’m not an idiot, dear friend. Harry’s very much engaged and very much in love. I never mix business with pleasure.’

‘A sensible rule,’ Sergio said. ‘I suppose her real name’s Harriet,’ he added, knowing Alex’s penchant for nicknames. He’d actually tried to call Jeremy Jerry when they’d first met, till Jeremy had put his foot down.

‘And what about you, Jeremy?’ Sergio asked. ‘Anyone special in your life at the moment?’

‘Can’t say that there is. I do date, of course. But no one special. Trust me when I say I will be a member of the Bachelors’ Club till the day I die. Possibly the only member, by the sounds of things.’

‘You don’t have to marry, you know,’ Alex said. ‘You could always live with someone. Have a baby, even.’

‘I don’t like babies,’ Jeremy said offhandedly. ‘I also don’t want to live with anyone. I like living by myself. I like being selfish.’

Alex frowned. ‘You’re not selfish. You’re a very warm, generous man and a terrific friend.’

Jeremy came as close to blushing as Sergio had ever seen.

‘And you, my friend,’ Jeremy shot back whilst trying not to look too pleased, ‘are the biggest bull-dust artist in the world. You could sell ice to Eskimos. You’re going to make another billion before you’re finished.’

‘I sincerely hope so,’ Alex concurred. ‘I have a lot of poor people to house and their kids to educate.’

‘You and your charities,’ Jeremy said. ‘I suppose you’ll be hitting me for more donations after today.’

‘Absolutely. And you too, Sergio. I’ll email you both with the details and amounts. Now I don’t know about you two, but I’m bushed. It’s been a long day. On top of that, I have a twenty-three-hour flight back to Sydney tomorrow. So let’s get the bill. Sergio, you can pay since you got the lion’s share today.’

‘My pleasure,’ he said, and reached for his wallet.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘I DON’T UNDERSTAND why you can’t tell me where you’re going,’ Dolores complained. ‘In fact I don’t understand why you have to go anywhere at all! I thought you’d come home to have a holiday.’

Bella glanced up from her packing to give her mother a droll look. ‘It’s hardly a holiday when you keep hammering away at me to do that movie Charlie wants me to do. If I’ve told you once, Mum, I’ve told you a thousand times, I do not want to do movies.’

‘Then why did you get yourself a Hollywood agent?’

‘I didn’t. Josh did. I only agreed because at the time some famous producer in Hollywood was thinking of making a movie version of An Angel in New York. I would have done that. After that project fell through I kept Charlie on because I thought maybe some other party might pick up the option. But that hasn’t happened yet. Meanwhile, I do not intend to do some second-rate musical which just wants to use my name to get distribution.’

'How do you know it's second rate?'

'I've read the script. And the songs are rubbish.'

'Scripts can be changed. And songs can be rewritten. Charlie says they've hired a top director.'

Bella sighed. 'See what I mean? You just won't stop. That's why I'm going away. And why I'm not going to tell you where I'm going. It's not as though you can't still contact me on my mobile,' she added, immediately making a mental note to turn the infernal thing off the moment she hit Lake Como. 'Now would you please leave me alone? I have to finish packing and I need to leave for the airport soon.'

That was a lie. Bella hadn't even booked a taxi yet. She had, however, secured a flight to Milan, leaving Mascot later today. Not a direct flight, of course. They didn't seem to exist from Sydney. She would have to endure a couple of stops. One in Singapore and then again in Rome. It was going to take her eons to get there but, hopefully, she might get some much-needed sleep on the way. Also hopefully, Sergio wouldn't let her down when he finally rang back. If he changed his mind about her staying at his villa, then she'd go anyway and check into a hotel on Lake Como. Lots of the large old villas had been made into boutique hotels.

Bella had every confidence, however, that Sergio would not let her down, not after telling her to book a flight. Sergio had obviously matured into a decent man, like his father. Nothing like the kind of man she kept getting mixed up with and who always let her down in the end.

'It must be somewhere warm, by the look of the clothes you're taking,' her mother said, having not moved an inch from where she was standing at the foot of the bed, her arms crossed, her expression as stubborn as usual.

Bella didn't comment, just kept on packing.

'Dare I hope you've come to your senses and are going to meet up with Andrei in Europe somewhere? It is summer over there, isn't it? If truth be told, I still can't fathom why you left him in the first place.'

Exasperation finally had Bella's head lifting, her glare more than a little angry. 'I didn't actually leave Andrei, Mum. We never lived together. I broke up with him because he was sleeping with other women at the same time as he was sleeping with me.'

'So you said. But truly, Bella, all seriously wealthy men have wandering eyes. And Andrei isn't just wealthy. He's a billionaire many times over. I read on the internet that he's just opened the most luxurious hotel in the world in Istanbul. Just think what kind of life you could have as his wife. He doesn't care about those other girls. It's you he pursued and wanted. You he would have proposed to, in the end.'

'No, he wouldn't have, Mum. Andrei's not the marrying kind.'

'Which is why I advised you to get pregnant. He would have married you then. A proud man like that would not have wanted to have an illegitimate child.'

Bella shook her head, thinking ruefully she should have told her mother the truth about Andrei. Yes, he was proud but was also totally selfish with absolutely no conscience. He'd fallen in lust with her when he'd seen her on stage one night in New York, pursuing her quite ruthlessly—and romantically—till she'd given in and gone to bed with him. At the time, she'd actually thought he loved her, and vice versa.

Unfortunately, their sex life was not a great success. Her fault, of course. It was always her fault; all of her lovers over the years—and there'd been a lot less than the tabloids suggested—having grown bored with her after a relatively short while. None of them could believe that she was actually quite shy in the bedroom. That was why she'd been a virgin till she was twenty-one, and why it always took a very determined admirer to seduce her.

When Bella had confronted Andrei with his unfaithfulness last year—his cavorting on the deck of his yacht with some female had been all over the gossip rags—he'd claimed that her lack of passion was why he had to have other women. He'd said he'd grown tired of her refusing to do all the erotic

and exotic things he craved. But he would put up with her being somewhat boring in bed, he'd added, because he loved having a woman of her exquisite beauty on his arm in public. He'd even offered to buy her an apartment in Paris, if she would overlook his other mistresses and continue to go out with him. He'd actually been shocked when she'd told him their relationship—such as it was—was over. Andrei was not used to rejection from the opposite sex.

Of course, if Bella had told her mother all that, she would have said that she'd been a fool not to at least accept the apartment in Paris.

She was indomitable, her mother. Indomitable and dominating and downright infuriating, with a moral compass that was as suspect as Andrei's. Bella had grown up thinking Dolores was wonderful: a single mother who'd become estranged from her own family when she'd fallen pregnant during a working holiday overseas; supposedly seduced by a married Swedish chap she'd met on the snowfields of Switzerland. She'd refused to tell her disgusted parents the father's name, refused to have an abortion, then refused to live under their roof by their rules. Bella had admired that. If it were true, that was. She'd come to believe in recent times that maybe a lot of what Dolores had told her over the years might not have been strictly true. Still, it was true that Dolores had worked hard to give her daughter everything she'd needed. She'd even managed to budget her meagre wage as a receptionist to pay for dance and singing lessons. Though not with the kind of teacher she'd wanted for her talented Isabel.

So when a new boss had arrived on the scene, an Italian widower who'd been sent out to Sydney by his father to head the Australian branch of the family's import business, Dolores had seen the answer to all her problems. From photographs Bella had seen, Dolores had been a very attractive woman back then. Poor Alberto hadn't stood a chance, and soon Dolores had acquired a husband able to provide everything for his new stepdaughter that Dolores had wanted. Not only the best private tuition money could buy but also enrolment at a top school that specialised in the performing arts.

And the rest, as they said, was history.

Bella looked at her mother and wished she didn't still love the woman. Impossible not to, she supposed. She was her mother. On top of that, she knew Dolores did love Bella back, even if she was a pain in the neck.

'Mum,' she said firmly. 'I am not going to Europe to meet up with Andrei. Neither am I going to tell you where I'm going, except to say that I am going alone. Now I want you to leave this room ASAP. If you don't, I will pick you up bodily and carry you out.' Which she could. All those years of dancing had made Bella very strong. She was also a good eight inches taller than her mother, who barely topped five feet. Bella had obviously inherited her height and fair colouring from her Swedish father.

'Well, really!' Dolores exclaimed with a huff and a puff. 'There's no need to get nasty. I don't need telling twice when I'm not wanted. Just don't come crawling back to me the next time you need a place to run to.' And she stormed off.

Just in time too, Bella's phone ringing less than ten seconds after Dolores had slammed the bedroom door.

Relief flooded Bella when she saw it was Sergio calling. Relief and excitement. Already she was looking forward to seeing him again; to being in the company of someone she could relax with.

'Sergio,' she answered with pleasure in her voice. 'I've been waiting for you to call. As luck would have it, I've been able to get a flight which leaves Mascot late this afternoon.'

'That was quick,' he said.

'Yes, well, flying first class does have its advantages. But there's still two stopovers. One in Singapore and one in Rome. I won't arrive in Milan for simply ages.'

His silence on the other end of the line worried her for a moment. 'You still want me to come, don't you?'

'Oh, definitely,' he said. 'I'm very much looking forward to it.'

Bella smiled. It was good that he actually wanted her to come. She didn't like to think he'd said yes out of pity for her.

'It will be good to catch up,' she said. 'I'll want to hear about everything you've been up to over the past decade or so. I know we ran into each other a few years back but we didn't actually talk much. I presume you've been successful at whatever you've been doing. You looked very impressive that night. But then you always were frightfully clever.'

'I've done all right for myself over the years,' he said with a modesty she wasn't used to in men. Usually they couldn't wait to brag. 'As have you, Bella. Impossible not to know about your successes when your life is lived in the spotlight. But let's not waste time exchanging personal details over the phone. I'd much rather do that when I see you in the flesh. Now I suggest you text me the time of your arrival when you get closer to Milan airport—at your last stopover, perhaps—and I will arrange for a car to pick you up. What name will you be travelling under? Not Bella, I hope.'

'Good God, no. I booked the seat under the name of Isabel Cameron. I wasn't always known as just Bella, you know.'

'Yes, I know. You were just Isabel when we first met.'

'So I was. But you used to call me Izzie. Till Mum told you not to. She said it was an awful nickname. She even complained about it to your father, do you remember?'

'I remember. Papa agreed with her and told me that if I had to shorten your name, I should call you Bella.'

Bella smiled at the memory. 'Which is hardly much shorter. But I did like it, especially after your father said it meant beautiful in Italian.'

'And wars.'

'What?'

'Bella is also the plural of bellum, meaning war in Latin.'

'Oh. I didn't know that. Anyway, Sergio, if you're worried about people recognising me, then don't. Once I put on a wig and glasses, no one ever recognises me. Tell the driver to hold up a sign with Dolores Cameron on it.'

'Fine,' he said crisply.

'You are sure about this, Sergio?' she asked, suddenly worried that she was imposing. 'I mean I could stay at one of the local hotels instead.'

'Don't be silly,' he said. 'I always did like your company.'

'Did you really? I always thought I drove you mad, dragging you away from your studies to watch me perform all the time.'

'You were an incorrigible little attention seeker, I have to admit,' he said, a smile in his voice. 'But you were also very talented. Watching you sing and dance was no hardship. Playing you at basketball, however, was a bit of a trial, especially after you cried when you didn't win.'

'I did not cry!' she protested.

'Yes, you did. The first time we played. After that, I let you win occasionally.'

She laughed. 'And I always thought I'd won fair and square.'

'Nothing in life is fair and square, Bella,' he said on a suddenly serious note.

'True,' she agreed, thinking of all the skulduggery that went on in the entertainment industry. 'I'd better go, Sergio,' she added with some reluctance. She'd really enjoyed talking to him and reminiscing about old times. Happier times. Once again, Bella regretted not having kept in contact with Sergio after the divorce. Still, no use crying over spilt milk. They were in contact now and she aimed not to let him get away again. She could use a big brother in her life, someone who would always give her good advice, someone who didn't have a secret agenda of his own. 'I'll text you when I get to Rome.'

'Excellent. Oh, and, Bella...'

'What?'

‘Don’t forget. Don’t tell anyone where you’re going, or who you’re staying with.’

‘Don’t worry, I won’t. Ciao,’ she finished up on an excited note, then hung up.

CHAPTER FIVE

SERGIO PLACED HIS phone on the bedside table, letting out a long sigh as he lay back against the pillows, his conscience urging him to change his mind about the course he’d set in motion tonight. But it was too late, of course. Way too late. He’d passed the point of no return the moment Bella had asked him to let her rent the villa.

He had to see this through, even if it was a disaster waiting to happen. For already Sergio suspected that seducing Bella might have consequences that would be not so easily dismissed.

Not a pregnancy. He wasn’t stupid enough to let that happen. He was thinking of emotional consequences. The last thing he wanted to do was fall in love with her. Falling in lust with Bella was bad enough. But he could survive that. Hell, he had survived it. Just. Falling in love with her, however, was another ball game.

And it could happen, especially if he was going to spend so much time with her.

Then don’t spend too much time with her, Sergio, came the brutally logical advice. Once you get her into your bed, go to Milan to work during the day and only come home to the villa at night.

Good thinking, Sergio.

Which only leaves the problem of getting her into your bed in the first place.

Easier said than done.

Clearly, she still thinks of you as her big brother; that rather quiet, introverted boy she first met. First impressions did tend to stick. He would have to make sure that, this time, she saw nothing of that boy. This time, Bella had to see someone very different. Not a totally bad boy. Sergio suspected he would not be able to bring off such a radical change in character with conviction. But there was room for a little wickedness and a lot of boldness.

He took some confidence from Bella’s comment that she’d found him impressive when she’d seen him at that party a few years back. Though of course he’d been wearing a tux that night. Women often found a man impressive looking in a tux. Sergio needed Bella to be impressed by him out of his tux. He had a good body. Well shaped and well toned, with olive skin and surprisingly little body hair for an Italian. He also had an impressive package, a genetic blessing that women seemed to like. A lot. They might say size didn’t matter but he’d found that, on the whole, the opposite was true.

Sergio sucked in sharply as he envisaged how it would feel, having sex with Bella. His body started envisaging it too. Damn. Now he would have trouble sleeping. Yet he had an early start tomorrow, even earlier than his original plans for this Friday. He’d been going to spend the whole day in the franchise’s head office, thanking the staff for all their hard work as well as preparing them for the handover to their new bosses next Monday. Impossible now. All he could afford was a few hours in the morning. Unfortunate, but he would soften his abrupt departure by giving them the rest of the day off and paying in advance for them to have a handover party at a local pub.

Sergio hated cutting and running, but he had no option. He needed to get to Lake Como, pronto, the villa having been unoccupied for some time, Sergio not having darkened its doorstep since Easter. He knew Maria would have kept the place clean, but it might need an extra spruce up. She also needed to be told that a guest was coming to stay. He would not tell her his guest’s identity in advance, however. Just that it was a female friend. He didn’t want her inadvertently leaking the information that Bella was coming to stay. And she might. Maria was a big fan of Bella’s, a factor that had irked Sergio over the years. Maria had loved Dolores’s beautiful daughter. Doted on her. Spoiled her, even. She had never forgotten her and had obviously found pleasure in Bella’s success.

Maria was going to be very excited when he finally revealed who the mystery guest was, Sergio realised with some frustration, this troubling thought swiftly followed by another. How on earth was he going to seduce Bella right under Maria’s nose without her finding out?

Impossible. Hell on earth! He'd backed himself into a corner here. Hardly an unusual situation where Bella was concerned. That creature had been nothing but trouble since the first day he'd clapped eyes on her.

No, no, Sergio, be honest here. The trouble didn't start till her sixteenth-birthday party when she'd emerged like a butterfly from a cocoon, blowing him away with her grace, her grown-up beauty and her devastating sex appeal. He hadn't been back to Sydney for several months; university life —and the sophistication of Rome—having more appeal than staying in a house run by a woman he disliked intensely. But Bella's birthday had coincided with his mid-year break in June, and his father had insisted he come home for the celebration, after which they would all fly to Lake Como for their annual holiday. The last time he'd seen Bella on the previous Christmas, she'd been a skinny schoolgirl in a ponytail and braces.

She hadn't been skinny that night. And her braces had been long gone. Instead, she'd worn make-up and the most exquisite party dress. White, of course. Dolores had known to dress her daughter in white, the colour making her look like an exquisite angel. Unfortunately, a sexy angel as well. Yet Sergio had felt sure she was still a virgin. Dolores would have seen to that.

So Sergio had been startled when Bella had come up to him and demanded a birthday kiss.

'You'll have to do, Sergio,' she'd said without a hint of flirtation. 'A girl has to be kissed on her sixteenth birthday and you're the only male here, other than Papa. And he doesn't count.'

Sergio hadn't been ready for the effect on him when she'd gone up on tiptoe and pressed her mouth to his. For a split second, he'd been tempted to yank her hard against him, to part her innocent lips and plunge his tongue inside. He certainly hadn't been an innocent at twenty-one, not after two and a half years at university. But he'd resisted the devil's urging just in time, keeping the kiss to a platonic peck, which had obviously disappointed Bella, if her pout had been anything to go by.

Well, she's not an innocent now, he reminded himself as he rose and headed for the bathroom. Time you stopped having cold showers and started having what you've always wanted.

Which was Bella herself, in his bed and at his mercy.

CHAPTER SIX

EXCITEMENT AND ANTICIPATION built in Bella the closer she got to the villa. Not long now, she thought eagerly, catching glimpses of the lake through the tall trees.

Suddenly, she no longer felt tired, a burst of adrenalin firing her blood, forcing it to run less sluggishly through her veins. When she'd first exited the plane in Milan, she'd been absolutely wrecked, having managed only the briefest of dozes between stopovers. Unbelievably, she'd forgotten to bring her sleeping tablets with her, which meant she was in for a few sleepless nights at best.

Insomnia was the very devil. Bella hated tossing and turning in bed all night. Hated the negative thoughts that besieged her at such times. Hated the feeling of loneliness, which had been getting worse lately. Still, with a bit of luck the fresh air and change of scene would do what no sleeping tablet could achieve. Make her relax. Make her unwind. Make her work out what she really wanted in life. Because, quite frankly, she wasn't so sure any more.

There'd been a time when she'd thought she could have it all. An exciting and challenging career on the stage, with a devoted and supportive husband waiting in the wings to take her home afterwards to their lovely home and two happy children. A boy and girl, of course. Nothing but perfection in Bella's dream world.

It had come as a shock to her as she'd turned thirty last week that she wasn't even close to living that dream existence, with no hopes of achieving it any time in the near future. Okay, so she still had an exciting and challenging career. On paper. But it didn't feel as exciting and challenging any more. It just felt like hard work.

As for the idea of a devoted and supportive husband waiting in the wings... That was a pipe dream! Such a man simply did not exist. Men weren't devoted or supportive. At least, the ones she was attracted to weren't. They'd all been selfish, arrogant and only wanted her as a notch on their

belt, or a status symbol, never as a wife. As for children... Bella knew she could have a baby if she wanted. You didn't need a husband for that these days. Just a sperm donor. She'd actually considered it—for about thirty seconds, the thought of being a single mother having no appeal whatsoever. She wanted her child—or children—to have a father as well as a mother, a man who actually loved and supported her, and who was hands-on with parenting.

'Almost there, Signorina Cameron,' the driver said, startling her out of her introspection.

The driver hadn't been a talker, thank heavens. But he spoke perfect English, with not too heavy an Italian accent. His name was Luigi and he was about fifty.

'Yes, I'm beginning to recognise things. I've been here before. Though not for several years.'

'It has not changed. Lake Como. Italy...it does not change much.'

'No,' she agreed warmly. 'That is part of its charm.'

The car pulled into a familiar gravel driveway, coming to a halt in front of tall wooden gates connected to a high stone wall. The gates looked new. The stone wall was not.

'Signor Morelli died last year,' Luigi told her in sombre tones as he pointed a remote controller at the gate.

'Yes, I know. I went to his funeral.'

Luigi frowned at her in the rear-vision mirror. 'You are not a relative.'

'No. Just a friend.'

'Ah.' He nodded sadly. 'I miss him. I was his driver for the last year of his life. He was a good man.'

'Yes,' Bella choked out. 'He was.'

'His son is a good man too.'

'He certainly is,' Bella agreed, glad to get off the subject of Alberto's death.

She was almost relieved when the gates were finally open and Luigi's attention was occupied with negotiating the Mercedes slowly round the crunchy gravel driveway that encircled a huge stone-edged fountain. As a child Bella had been shocked by the flagrant nudity of the three statues at the centre of the fountain. She still found the male statue slightly confronting. His sexual equipment was decidedly larger than normal, which possibly explained the looks of awe on his two female companions. Sergio's grandfather—who'd been alive and well when Bella had first holidayed at the villa—had claimed that the model for the male statue was a distant ancestor of his who'd built the villa in the sixteenth century. A myth, Sergio had told her later that same day, explaining that the villa had been a monastery back then, the Morelli family not buying it till late in the nineteenth century. The fountain—despite looking centuries old—was a later addition, built just after the First World War.

'You will learn, dear Izzie,' Sergio had confessed quietly with a rueful smile, 'that Italian men are given to boasting and bragging.'

Bella smiled at the memory. Not that she agreed with Sergio entirely. Yes, some Italian men liked to boast and brag. Sergio's grandfather had been of that ilk and his father to a lesser degree. Alberto had certainly liked showing off his attractive new wife and his pretty little stepdaughter. Sergio, however, didn't seem to have the need to impress others. Some people would have shouted to the rooftops that they were having the darling of Broadway as a guest in their home. But not Sergio. He'd insisted she tell no one where she was going, not even her mother.

Which suited Bella admirably, peace and privacy her priorities at the moment. She did wonder, however, if he'd told Maria that she was coming to stay.

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