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"What are you doing?"
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"Nothing very interesting. Why?"

The man on screen was now lifting the woman up and positioning her over his huge, erect cock. For a moment he held her there and Dani stopped breathing, wondering at the exact length of his cock as she watched the purple tip brush against the opening of the woman's vagina. Then, as the man sheathed himself with the woman, Dani's breath escaped her body in a rush. She felt as if the man had entered her instead of his partner on screen. She closed her eyes, trying to imagine how it would feel with Roberto moving slowly in and out of her like that. He'd be so big and so hard, and she'd be so wet, he'd have her right on the edge in no time flat. Any second now, and he'd have her—

"Dani?"

Roberto!

The sudden remembrance Roberto was still on the phone and might even, horror of horrors, have guessed what she was watching, brought Dani back to earth with a bang...

<sup>&</sup>quot;Doing?" Dani said. "I'm er...I umm..."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Are you okay? You sound funny. Out of breath."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I'm fine. I—I'm just watching TV."

<sup>&</sup>quot;What are you watching?"

#### ALSO BY CHRISTIANE FRANCE

The Butterfly Girl

# BY

CHRISTIANE FRANCE

### AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

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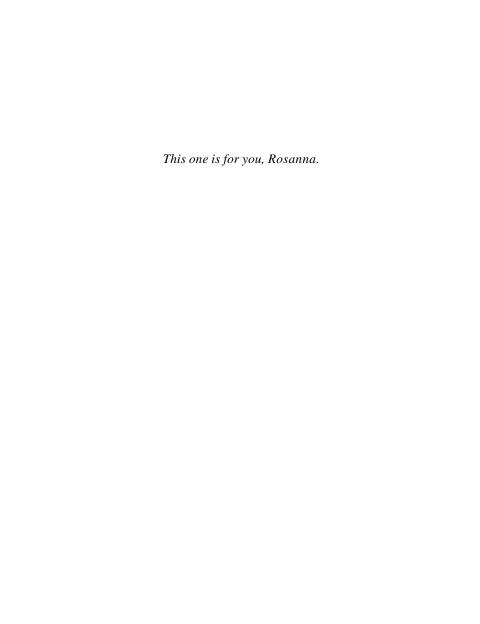
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"You don't remember me. Do you, bella?"

The softly spoken words, flavored with the barest trace of a foreign accent, caught Danielle Stevens totally off guard. Her eyes flicked open, and she glared at the speaker.

Tall, tanned, and devastatingly handsome. So he was gorgeous, but so what? She didn't like people creeping up on her. And who did he think he was, calling her bella? She had a real problem with anyone she didn't know calling her darling, or sweetheart, or any other meaningless endearment.

"No." She kept the glare firmly in place. With a little luck, the man would get the hint she wasn't interested and take off without her having to spell it out.

"No?"

"Sorry!" They'd never actually met, but Dani knew who the man was. His face was plastered all over Vegas like a heat rash.

But she had to admit pictures were a poor substitute for the real thing. The man was incredibly attractive, with a sexy body that made her mouth water, and a personal magnetism she found difficult to resist—the kind of man who had no trouble capturing a woman's complete attention with a single look. But whatever he was selling, Dani wasn't buying. She'd met men like Roberto Ventura before. Men who only had to snap their fingers to get what they wanted. As the current star attraction at one of Las Vegas' biggest casinos, Roberto probably figured his celebrity status entitled him to view unattached women as a twenty-four-seven smorgasbord, where he could indulge himself whenever the mood struck. In her case though, the jerk had just struck out.

"I think you've mistaken me for somebody else."

Roberto's brow creased in confusion. "But you must remember. We both swore we'd never forget one another. I realize it was a long time ago, but even so..."

Between the petulant frown, the disappointed look in his dark, chocolate brown eyes, and the dejected droop of his mouth, Roberto Ventura appeared completely crushed. A clever pick-up trick most women would find impossible to resist. As far as Dani was concerned, he was behaving the same way her neighbor's two-year-old behaved when the kid was denied a treat.

Although tempted to hoot with laughter and suggest he grow up, she managed to restrain herself and give him a sugary-sweet smile instead. "I'm sorry! I don't know you. We've never met before. But if you're trying to pick me up, I suggest you try your luck elsewhere. 'Bye."

"Pick you up?" Roberto said, standing his ground. His frown had grown deeper and his accent even more pronounced. "I don't need to pick women up."

To Dani's complete astonishment, he then moved in even closer.

Sitting down on the edge of her lounger, he brushed his fingers over the jagged, zee-shaped scar on her left forearm. "I can't believe you've forgotten the idiot who did this to you."

He held her gaze and smiled, his strong teeth a brilliant white against his handsome, tanned face. "Of course, I was only a boy at the time. A thoughtless, ill-mannered boy, who should have known better than to play such rough games with a little girl. I believe I was about fourteen at the time, and you were a year or so younger."

He removed his hand from Dani's arm and gave her another dazzling smile. "I was standing near you at the hotel desk this morning and I noticed the scar on your arm. It's an unusual scar, and I knew I'd seen it somewhere before, so I asked the clerk who you were. When she said Dani Stevens, well, I knew right away that I'd found you again."

Found her again?

Dani searched her memory. There was something a little familiar about Roberto Ventura... his dark eyes... the slight twist to his lips when he smiled... "Why didn't you say something to me then?"

"I intended to. But that's when you finished your business and moved away. I tried to follow, but you disappeared before I could catch up."

"I see..." Dani rubbed the tip of one of her fingers over the scar on her arm. The scar wasn't that big and it wasn't what anyone would call ugly or disfiguring. She'd been a clumsy kid, always falling over, or injuring herself in some way. Her childhood had been a never-ending mixture of hospital emergency rooms, clinics, bandages, and plaster casts, and the scar on her arm was merely one among many. She had scars on her knees, her elbows, and a tiny white line at the base of her left thumb—the result of playing with a sharp knife she'd been told time after time not to touch. Scars she knew were there, but no longer thought about.

She searched her memory again. If what Roberto said was true and

they had met before, then the scar on her arm was the result of something that had happened about twenty years ago...

Twenty years ago, Dani had been a frightened, traumatized tenyear-old, who'd stood in the middle of a New York street and watched while her mother was crushed to death by a runaway truck. With no siblings and no other relatives to turn to, from that day on she'd lived in a constant state of panic, convinced she'd lose her father as well if she didn't watch out for him. As a result, she'd clung onto her father like a limpet and screamed like a banshee whenever he was out of her sight for more than a minute or two.

At the time of her mom's accident, her father had been involved in an important business deal in Europe. And, since he could neither delay the business nor leave his hysterical child alone in New York with only a housekeeper for company, he'd rented a villa in Italy, where they'd ending up staying the whole summer.

The people in the neighboring villas were all adults—either retired people, boring, world-weary executives taking a few weeks to kick back, or self-absorbed celebrities resting before their next engagement. The only person her own age in that whole entire complex had been the gardener's son...a boy with dark hair and eyes like melted chocolate.

"You do remember me, yes?"

"I'm not sure."

"But you remember spending a summer in Italy?"

"Sure, I remember that."

"You don't remember a young boy who followed you around all the time?"

"Vaguely." Dani had no trouble recalling the villas with their terra cotta roofs and pale gold plaster walls, the hot Italian sun, the sandy beach, and the incredible blue of the Mediterranean...and she'd never quite forgotten a local boy called Berto. Berto the errand boy. Berto will do it for you. Berto will get you that. Just call Berto and ask him.

A smart-mouthed, skinny Italian kid with a big smile and huge, dark eyes, who never stopped yammering away in broken English, and who'd followed her around like a lost puppy almost every minute of every day.

When she asked Berto how come he spoke such good English, he'd said he learned it from the tourists. He'd also said that, like Dani, it was just him and his father. He didn't have any brothers or sisters and his mom had died in an automobile accident. The shared confidences had changed the boy's status in Dani's mind from errand boy to friend. After that, between their common bonds of loss and loneliness, and Berto's non-stop chatter, Dani had been able to get through her grief and put her mother's untimely death into perspective.

She hadn't thought about Berto in years, but now she put her mind to it, Dani realized she remembered him very well. By the end of the summer she'd developed a king-sized crush on Berto that had taken her months to get over. She could see him now, the day she'd left Italy to return to the States. She knew he'd been as heartbroken about her leaving as she was herself, but he'd tried so hard not show it. His beautiful, dark eyes bright with anger and unshed tears, he'd backed away down the steps leading to the beach, singing, "Ciao, ciao, bambina," at the top of his voice.

...one more kiss and then we must part forever.

Ciao, ciao, bambina...

However, she was having trouble in reconciling that boy from so long ago—a boy whose only clothing had seemed to consist of a single pair of dirty, ragged jeans, the same boy she now recalled chasing her down those very same steps, causing her to trip and cut her arm on a broken bottle—with the delicious and sophisticated-looking hunk in designer gear sitting less than a foot away.

"Well?"

She relaxed and smiled. "I guess I do remember you vaguely."

"That's all?"

"It was a very long time ago. You've changed."

"True. You've changed, too. If it wasn't for that scar..." He touched her arm again and shrugged. "I sent you a Christmas card one year, but it came back to me marked 'moved,' or something like that."

Dani closed the magazine she'd been reading and put it in her bag "Yeah, well...we moved around a bit after we came back to the States. My dad was suffering with some serious respiratory problems, so his doctors suggested Arizona. We lived in Phoenix for a couple of years, then he had more business in Europe, so we went back there for a while. First England, then France."

"Your father has recovered from his illness?"

"He's fine. He just needed to slow down, change his lifestyle, and quit smoking." She stopped speaking and pushed a strand of hair back from her face. "You appear to have done very well for yourself. Congratulations."

"You know what I do now?"

Roberto's handsome face and engaging smile both fascinated and attracted Dani. She'd planned to catch his show while she was here in Vegas. In fact, she'd asked about tickets before coming to the pool. But she was out of luck this time around. The show was dark tonight, and then sold out for the rest of the engagement.

"I'd have to be blind not to know. Every billboard in Vegas has your face on it."

"I've been very lucky."

Dani had met lots of good-looking, sexy men since she'd been working for her father, but there was something different about Roberto, something she'd noticed when they were kids...something that had captivated her girlish imagination and made her his willing slave. Twenty years ago, she'd been too young to understand that "special something" was good, old-fashioned sexual attraction, but she

certainly understood it now.

She wondered what it would be like to have Roberto touch her—to feel his long-fingered hands stroking her skin and exploring her most intimate places. He moved back a little, revealing an intriguing bump in his swim trunks, and she dampened her dry lips with the tip of her tongue.

"I thought it took talent to make it as a headliner in Vegas."

"I guess, but talent by itself is not enough. Without the luck..." He shrugged. "Have you seen my show?"

"Not yet."

"There's no show tonight. But if you're still here tomorrow, I could leave a couple of tickets for you at the front desk."

"That's very nice of you, but—"

"But nothing. My pleasure." He glanced at the expensive-looking gold watch on his left wrist and frowned. "I'm sorry, I have to go. I have business to attend to, and a couple of errands to run." He hesitated. "Perhaps we can get together later for a drink or something. Catch up on old times, yes? Of course, that's if you would like to, and you have no other plans."

"I'd like that very much."

Dani gave Roberto her room number, then wished she hadn't sounded so eager. She was behaving like one of his adoring fans, desperate for a moment of his time. Her gaze took in his perfectly sculpted body and tight butt as he made his way through the other sunbathers and disappeared through the glass exit door. She should have refused the invitation. Told him she was here in Vegas with someone, or made up some excuse about being busy or whatever. Men like Roberto Ventura were always knee-deep in willing women, and she had no intention of joining the lineup and competing for his attention.

She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. She wasn't being

fair. The fact some male celebrities behaved like idiots didn't mean Roberto was like that. Maybe he did want to see her again for old times' sake. And if so, there was no telling what might happen when they got around to swapping memories and reliving old times.

She took another deep breath and tried to relax. She was tired and stressed out, and Roberto had stirred up feelings that would take a couple of hours of hot, inventive sex to deal with and get her back on track. But she was here in Vegas on business. She had an appointment to meet with the owner of a hotel property her father and a group of his investor friends were interested in acquiring, and she needed to keep her mind focused on that.

She really should have told Roberto no. She didn't have time to get side-tracked by a sexy Italian singer who just happened to be someone she had a little history with. Especially when she could almost guarantee Roberto would be able to turn her on her with a single look and make her want to rip her clothes off.

Working for her dad kept Dani busy and always on the run from one project to another, and right now busy suited her just fine. She wasn't ready to settle down, and she didn't want a steady stream of men screwing up her life the way she'd seen happen with some of her friends. The odd time Dani did go out on a date, it was always at her instigation and for therapeutic or business reasons only. Better a little casual sex than an ulcer, or a bunch of hang-ups that required keeping a shrink on retainer.

At least that's what her doctor had advised when she told him she wasn't sleeping too well. According to the doc, sex was normal and healthy. Pills and therapists were to be avoided at all costs. She liked kids and hoped to get married some day, but even though she was over thirty, that was still way off in the future. First, she needed to meet the right man—a man whose goals and aspirations meshed with her own.

"Would you care for something to drink?"

Dani opened one eye and looked up at the poolside waiter—another tasty-looking hunk with roving blue eyes and an intriguing bump in his well-fitting swim trunks. She wondered if he kept his spare socks in his trunks, then stifled a giggle at the possibility she could be right. If she didn't have that meeting to go to, it might be fun to find out. She gave the man a regretful smile. "No, thanks. I have somewhere I need to be."

Although the time set for the meeting was another two hours away, Dani collected her things and headed for her room. She needed to forget about sex and sexy men and prepare for what promised to be a round of very tricky negotiations. To succeed where her dad had failed and get the property he wanted, she would have to keep her mind on the job at hand.

First, a quick shower to rid herself of sun block, then a few minutes to go over her notes and make certain she had all her ducks in a row. The deal was important, so she might even give her dad a call and see if he had any last minute instructions.

As it turned out, a brief look at her notes was all Dani needed. With her arguments lined up and her opening words clear in her mind, she was confident she could manage fine by herself. Instead of calling her father, she wrapped herself in one of the fluffy, white bath towels, picked up the remote control and turned on the TV. As she surfed through the various in-house channels, she found an ad for Roberto's show. He was singing a current pop song, something about lost love and a broken heart, surrounded by a crowd of adoring fans.

No doubt about it, Roberto Ventura was one sexy dude. She tried to imagine what it would be like to have him here with her now, lying beside her on the bed. To feel those long fingers caressing her body, while his mouth worked magic from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. She wondered if Roberto was a good kisser. Back in high school she'd known one boy who'd been a fabulous kisser. By the time that guy was through with her, even the soles of her feet had been on

fire.

The ad finished and Dani stretched out on the bed with a sigh and clicked to the next channel. If she had a regular boyfriend with whom she could indulge her fantasies on a regular basis, maybe this sudden preoccupation she had with sex would go away. But she didn't have a regular man in her life, and the chances of her finding one any time soon were somewhere between slim and zero. For one thing, she'd never met a man who was more interested in her than he was in her father's money. And for another, working as project manager and troubleshooter for her father's company made it difficult for her to predict where she'd be on any given day. Her business in Vegas might take a couple of days. She might also be able to clear it up this afternoon. Whatever happened, once it was wrapped up, instead of rushing on to the next job, she intended to take a little time for herself.

The Vegas hotel her father and the other investors who made up The Trenton Corporation were after had been closed for a year and neglected for even longer, and would need a ton of time and money to bring it in line with other similar properties. The widow of the late owner had refused their first offer by saying she didn't want to sell, that she wanted to keep the hotel in the family.

But when Dani checked and found out there were no children and the widow was sole beneficiary of her late husband's estate, her father figured the refusal meant the woman thought she had a goldmine on her hands and was holding out for more than the place was worth. Now it was up to Dani to convince the widow to sell.

Her father's actual words had been, "Figure out what you consider to be a fair price and offer her that. If she tries to up it, then leave. But don't forget about it. Back off for a while and see what happens. I guarantee she won't get a better offer, and once she realizes that, she'll contact us. You just wait and see."

Dani had researched the asking prices for similar properties,

realized their first offer was on the low side and decided she could come up with something a little better. If the figure she had in mind proved successful, The Trenton Corporation would not get the bargain they'd hoped for, but the widow wouldn't have anything to complain about either.

She glanced at the bedside clock. She still had lots of time before she needed to get ready for her appointment, so she continued to surf through the various programs on TV. Nothing on the regular channels caught her attention, so she began checking out the movies. First a western, followed by a not so scary horror film she'd already seen, an action thriller she had no interest in at all, then a warning that the movie about to be shown was adult entertainment not to be viewed by anyone under the age of eighteen.

Dani had seen a few of the so-called adult movies on late night TV where two or more consenting adults engaged in a series of sexual acrobatics that followed the same boring formula. The movies had neither plot nor story line and were, as far as she was concerned, about as arousing as watching paint dry. But as the warning was replaced with a bedroom scene, she decided to amuse herself by watching for a few minutes on the off chance Vegas TV had better quality sexy movies than L.A. or New York.

She'd spent the past week traveling back and forth between L.A. and New York, clearing up the debris from a couple of hostile corporate takeovers and listening to the complaints of disgruntled former employees. She needed to take time out and relax before her meeting with the widow, and in the absence of anything else interesting, even the worst adult movies could be counted on to provide a chuckle or two.

The camera panned from gauzy white drapery fluttering in the breeze at the open bedroom window to a panoramic view of a sandy beach and azure blue ocean beyond. Then the camera retreated to track

slowly around the room before zooming in on the bed, where a man and woman lay on their backs and looked to be fast asleep. The first indication Dani received this might not be the usual "in your face" type adult fare was the fact that, with the exception of footwear, both actors were dressed. The man had on loose, khaki cotton pants and a black tee, while the woman was wearing a long, flowered skirt and a sleeveless white top.

As Dani continued to watch, the man showed signs of waking up. First, he opened his eyes, rubbed them with his fingers, then he raised himself on an elbow and half-turned so he could smile down at the woman.

With his free hand, the man stroked the woman's face and arms. Then, after wetting his forefinger in his mouth, he slid the finger back and forth along her lips as he whispered sexy suggestions of what he wanted to do. The woman uttered a soft moan. Then her lips parted and her tongue emerged. Wrapping her tongue around the man's finger, she drew it into her mouth.

When the finger went a little further into the woman's mouth, Dani experienced a slight cramp in the pit of her stomach, along with a rush of warmth at the juncture of her thighs. The man's coloring reminded her of Roberto. Same dark hair and deep tan, and the same broad shoulders. The man's finger had now completely disappeared inside the woman's mouth, and, as the woman began to suck on it, the man closed his eyes, his smile replaced with a look of pure ecstasy.

The camera moved in close as the man slowly withdrew his finger, then the pair opened their eyes and gazed lovingly at one another. They continued to whisper sweet nothings and talk dirty while they stroked and petted each other's most sensitive parts, their actions so explicit and erotic the cramping in Dani's stomach was beginning to build to the point of actual physical pain.

Taking her time, the woman undid the button at the waistband of

the man's pants and lowered the zipper. As her fingers dipped inside his pants, the man's hand disappeared under her skirt, and Dani closed her eyes. She didn't need to see what they were doing. She could imagine every last little detail only too well. And imagination was working a thousand times better than seeing it up close and personal.

She threw off the bath towel. She felt so hot and so horny she was ready to explode.

The couple had now begun to remove each other's clothing. An excruciating slow-motion process that sent Dani's need up a few more notches. When the last item of clothing had been removed, the erotic kissing and caressing began anew. Dani's nerves were stretched to breaking point, nevertheless she continued to watch the man paint wet circles around the woman's nipples with his tongue, while the woman groaned in ecstasy and played with his balls.

She took a couple of quick breaths and tried to get herself under control. She couldn't believe anyone could find the patience to take lovemaking in slow-motion. But then she realized the tension between the pair was now starting to build. The touching and kissing became more explicit, and more urgent. As the man sucked greedily at the woman's breasts and the woman began rubbing his penis with both hands, Dani had the insane desire to rush out, grab the first man she found, haul him back to her room and fuck him senseless.

She stifled a giggle. With her luck, any man she found would be either too old, too young, or plain not interested. Or he'd be a cop, and she'd find herself under arrest for lewd behavior.

The man sat back on his haunches, and as far as Dani was concerned, his likeness to Roberto had grown even stronger. That same hot, narrow-eyed look, the same sexy mouth was driving her insane. The woman gave the man an inviting smile, then she lay down on her back, raised her knees and parted her thighs. The camera moved in close, and the action paused for a tension-filled moment. The woman

ran her tongue over and around her lips in a seductive parody of what she wanted the man to do. Then, holding his gaze, she reached down and opened her labia for his attention.

Dani swallowed hard and held her breath as the man moved forward and bent his head, then let it out with a rush when the camera moved in even closer. The tip of the man's tongue flicked out, barely touching the woman's clit yet making the woman clench her muscles in response, then he began to caress the sensitive bud with his tongue, until she was squirming and writhing around the bed, begging for him to stop.

Instead of stopping, the man stepped up the titillation by inserting two of his fingers in the woman's vagina, making the woman scream with pleasure and, at the same time, driving Dani nuts. She was hot, desperate to cool the fire raging in her own pussy. She needed to find release. With her gaze glued to the screen, her fingers got busy with her own clit. Mimicking the man's actions and trying to imagine it was Roberto's hand rather than her own, she began to rub back and forth over the sensitive spot, until she exploded with an orgasm unlike anything she'd ever known before.

Caught up in a heady mixture of excitement that she could succeed getting herself off in such spectacular fashion, and embarrassment at having to resort to such tactics, she continued to watch as the woman's turn came, and she stroked and sucked her partner's penis into a magnificent erection that jutted out from his groin. Once again, the woman's movements had started off without any hurry, then increased in intensity, and Dani felt a fleeting stab of envy as the woman guided her lover's huge, hot and throbbing penis into her own equally hot and welcoming vagina.

Lord! Some women had all the luck.

She wondered if Roberto had a wonderful cock like that. If the bulge in his swimsuit was anything to go by, it was reasonable for her

to assume he did, but how could she find out for sure?

The woman locked her legs around the man's waist, drawing him inside, and holding him prisoner. When the man began to ride her, Dani tried to imagine it was Roberto riding her, and her fingers moved up and down inside her own heat, matching the couple on screen stroke for stroke. As the tension inside her began to build again, she strained for the gold ring wavering in the distance, just beyond her grasp. She teetered on the very edge, the sensations growing stronger and stronger the more she thought about Roberto. She worked harder, keeping Roberto's face at the forefront of her mind. Then, the couple came on screen, and she came right behind them in a mind-shattering, earthmoving orgasm that pushed the breath from her body in a long, heartfelt sigh of satisfaction.

The couple left the bed and moved into the bathroom to engage in further sexual antics Dani could only guess at. She glanced at the digital clock on the bedside table, then grabbed the remote and turned off the TV. If she didn't get a move on, she would be late for her appointment.

She felt drained and light-headed, yet strangely relaxed. She also felt a mixture of guilt and embarrassment, and although she was tempted to watch more, she couldn't. Whether she liked it or not, business came first. Anyway, that was enough for one day because she had a sneaky feeling self-inflicted thrills like that could soon become addictive.

She had another quick shower to cool herself down and was about to get dressed, when the phone rang.

"Ms. Stevens?"

"Speaking."

"This is Mrs. DiMarco's secretary. Mrs. DiMarco has asked me to convey her apologies, but she has a small emergency in her home. Something to do with the plumbing, I understand. I'm afraid this means

we have to cancel the meeting she had scheduled with you for this afternoon."

A real emergency, or a ploy to try and justify an even higher price? Dani suspected the latter, but whatever the reason, there wasn't anything she could do about it.. "I see. In that case, please give Mrs. DiMarco my sympathies. Plumbing problems are definitely no fun." She hesitated. "Did she say if she's interested in rescheduling?"

"She said her answer is still the same, but if you don't mind wasting your time, she'll be available at either ten tomorrow morning, or two tomorrow afternoon. If neither of those times work, let me know when you'll be free, and I'll talk to Mrs. DiMarco and get back to you."

After meeting with DiMarco, Dani intended to report the outcome to her father by phone, then spend a few days in Vegas, shopping, taking in some of the shows, and relaxing by the hotel pool. However, if she shared her plans with DiMarco's secretary, she could find herself dangling at the end of a hook for days. "Ten tomorrow will be fine."

"See you then, Ms. Stevens."

Dani knew her father had his mind set on acquiring The Neapolitan. Otherwise, she'd have left a polite message telling DiMarco to stuff it, and then spent the time looking around Vegas for what might prove to be other interesting properties. But doing her best to get her father what he wanted was what a good daughter did. At least that's what he was always telling her.

Returning her chic, black business suit to the closet, Dani grabbed the remote control and turned on the TV again. After a moment's hesitation, feeling guilty and just a little wicked, she clicked her way past the hotel ads and information menus that always came on first, until she found the movie she'd been watching earlier. The couple were still in the bathroom, but they were only now turning on the shower, leaving Dani to make a couple of educated guesses about their activities in the interim. She licked her lips and held her breath, waiting to see

what they would do next, but as she sat down on the edge of the bed to watch, the phone rang again.

"Dani? It's Roberto."

The sound of Roberto's voice sent Dani's temperature soaring and her feelings of guilt into overdrive. She tried to get a grip on her composure. So what if she was watching a dirty movie? She wasn't hurting anyone, and she wasn't doing anything wrong. And Roberto couldn't possibly know what she'd been doing. He couldn't see her red face, or the rumpled bed, or what the couple were doing on TV, even so... She ran a shaky hand over her hair and twisted a dark, silky strand around her forefinger. "Hi. This is a surprise," she said in a weak voice she barely recognized as her own.

Leaning back against the pillows, she pressed the mute button on the remote. The couple were in the shower now, and the man was down on his knees, kissing the woman's pussy and urging her to open up to him—

"What are you doing?"

The man succeeded in parting the woman's legs, and Dani felt herself getting wet again. "Doing? Me? Nothing. Why?" As the man began to tease the woman with his tongue, Dani's fingers started to creep under the edge of her panties. Before she could reach her goal, she pulled them out and used them to smooth the rumpled sheet instead.

"I was supposed to go over some new material today, but a couple of the people who were supposed to be there can't make it, meaning the rehearsal's been cancelled. So, I was wondering..."

The man's tongue was delving deeper now, and the woman's hands were locked in his hair. Dani's fingers forgot about smoothing the sheet and took off down her belly with another project in mind. But before her hand could get them both into trouble, she snatched it back and scrutinized her nails. "Wondering what?"

"I was wondering if you'd like to have lunch with me?"

The woman opened her legs wider and the camera moved in closer to track the man's searching tongue and hands. Unable to drag her gaze away from the action on screen, Dani crossed her own legs, held her breath and tried to ignore the sensations rippling through her body in waves, pleading for her attention. If Roberto were here with her right now...if she could just open her legs and feel his warmth breath moving up her thighs, his tongue caressing her—

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"Are you still there. Dani?"
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The man on screen was now lifting the woman up and positioning her over his huge, erect cock. For a moment he held her there and Dani stopped breathing, wondering at the exact length of his cock as she watched the purple tip brush against the opening of the woman's vagina. Then, as the man sheathed himself with the woman, Dani's breath escaped her body in a rush. She felt as if the man had entered her instead of his partner on screen. She closed her eyes, trying to imagine how it would feel with Roberto moving slowly in and out of her like that. He'd be so big and so hard, and she'd be so wet, he'd have her right on the edge in no time flat. Any second now, and he'd have her—

"Dani?"

Roberto!

The sudden remembrance Roberto was still on the phone and might even, horror of horrors, have guessed what she was watching, brought Dani back to earth with a bang. She tried to cover up with a fit of

<sup>&</sup>quot;I'm here."

<sup>&</sup>quot;What are you doing?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Doing? I'm er...I umm..."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Are you okay? You sound funny. Out of breath."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I'm fine. I—I'm just watching TV."

<sup>&</sup>quot;What are you watching?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Nothing very interesting. Why?"

forced coughing that made her perspire and start to gag, then she began coughing for real. Grabbing the glass of water she'd left on the bedside table, she swallowed half the contents, almost threw the water back up, then held her breath for a couple of seconds, willing it to stay put.

"Dani? Talk to me. What's going on down there? Are you sick?"

She grabbed a tissue from the box on the bedside table and wiped the perspiration from her face. "No. Just something caught in my throat, I guess. The air here in Vegas is so dry." She faked another cough, used a fresh tissue on her hot, clammy face, and tried to regulate her breathing. "I'm okay now, though."

"You sure?"

"Positive." She sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed.

"You don't need a doctor or anything?"

"No! I'm fine." What she needed was a good, hard f— Correction. What she needed was ten minutes in an ice-cold shower. "Like I said, just a simple coughing fit. Nothing to worry about."

"So, what about lunch?"

"You want to meet at one of the restaurants here in the hotel?"

"Would you mind having it with me here in my suite?" He gave a soft, sexy-sounding chuckle. "I know I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for the fans. But I'm afraid fans can sometimes make eating in a public place a little difficult."

Dani had seen the way fans crowded celebrities brave enough to show their faces in restaurants, both in L.A. and in New York, so she understood where Roberto was coming from. Which made the invitation to eat in his suite sound sensible rather than sleazy. It wasn't like he was luring her there with the intention of seducing her. They were childhood friends, who hadn't seen one another in a zillion years, and lunch was the perfect way to catch up.

"So, what do you say?"

"Sure. What's your room number?"

"I'm in a suite on the top floor, and the only way up is by private elevator. I'll have to find someone to come down and get you. Say twenty minutes from now?"

"Twenty minutes is good."

Since their history was comprised of a brief childhood friendship, and she didn't want to give Roberto any wrong ideas, Dani decided to dress down rather than up. For all she knew, he was married with a bunch of *bambinos* by now. And if not married, at least either engaged or committed to one of the gorgeous beauties the entertainment industry could always be counted on to provide.

Selecting a pair of well worn jeans, she put them on, added an old t-shirt that sported a rapidly fading picture of a favorite rock star, and thrust her bare feet into a pair of tennis shoes. Foregoing anything complicated in the way of a hairdo or makeup, she simply tied her dark hair back with a scarf, touched her eyelids with a smear of green shadow, and put a light coral gloss on her lips to emphasize her tan. No mascara, no blush, no perfume. Nothing heavy, nothing heady. Nothing to make Roberto think she'd read more into his invitation than a friendly lunch.

She checked herself in the mirror.

For all she knew, Roberto was gay!

She recalled the beautiful young men she'd seen at a party in Rome a few years ago. Gorgeous, young, Latin men, with even tans on their perfect bodies, lots of gold jewelry and expensive designer clothes. Men with the same sexy, dark good looks as Roberto. She also remembered how foolish she'd felt when a friend told her most of those gorgeous young men at that party were gay. Gay men with rich patrons willing and able to turn their protégés' slightest wish into reality.

Like wanting to become a singing sensation, but lacking the money and connections to make it a reality?

Dani had just finished getting ready when she heard a knock on the

door. She checked the peephole and saw one of the hotel security guards standing in the corridor.

Knowing never to take anything for granted, even in the best hotels, she opened the door to the extent of the security bar only. "Yes?"

"I'm here to take you up to Mr. Ventura's suite, Ms. Stevens."

"Be right with you." After slipping her room key into her purse, Dani followed the guard, first into the regular elevator, then into another, smaller elevator located behind a locked door on a lower floor. The second elevator was key operated and whisked them to the top of the building in a matter of seconds.

"First door to your right," the guard instructed as the elevator door slid silently open and Dani stepped out. "All you gotta do is knock and Mr. Ventura will let you in."

Actually the door was standing partway open. Dani knocked, then pushed it wider and called out, "Anyone home?"

"Come on in."

Dressed in the same casual manner as Dani, in worn blue jeans and a black polo, Roberto was standing by the floor-to-ceiling window, with a can of soda in his hand.

Dani closed the door and joined him at the window.

Roberto indicated his beverage. "Want one of these, or do you prefer something stronger?"

"Soda's good."

Roberto opened another can of soda, poured it into a tall glass, and handed it to her. He gestured toward the low table in front of an equally low sofa. "Lunch is here. Chicken salad. Hope that's okay with you."

"Perfect."

He waited until Dani took a couple of sips of her soda, then he said, "Are you here in Vegas on business or vacation?"

"A little of both actually."

"And are you here alone?"

Dani took another sip of her drink. "All alone. And I'm not married or otherwise involved, if that's what you're asking."

Roberto laughed. "Me, either. My career doesn't leave me much time for sleep, let alone a social life."

"Same here." She leaned back against the soft cushions and stifled a yawn, then made a silent promise to herself to catch up on her own sleep.

He frowned. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"I'm not sure." He shrugged. "You look flushed, and your eyes seem a little over-bright."

Aware the way she looked had to be the result of getting herself sexually aroused watching dirty movies, she smiled and said, "I'm a bit tired is all. My job keeps me very busy, and I've had a hectic few days traveling back and forth between L.A. and New York."

He slipped a finger beneath her chin and lifted her face toward his own. She held her breath, convinced he was about to kiss her. One kiss could lead to another, and then...

But all he did was brush his lips against her forehead, then frown and let her go. "Sure that's all it is? Feels to me like you have a temperature. Maybe you're coming down with something."

"I don't feel sick." Dani always felt hot when she was horny, but she couldn't tell Roberto that. Instead, she sat down on the sofa, picked up a fork and speared a succulent morsel of chicken. "This salad looks very good."

Determined to steer the subject away from herself, she asked, "When did you come to live in the States?"

"About fifteen years ago. Most of my relatives were already living here by then, so my father asked one of his brothers to sponsor us."

"And your father's here with you in Vegas?"

"No." Roberto shook his head. "Dad remarried a couple of years

ago, and now he and my stepmother live in San Francisco."

"What made you become a singer?"

"Long story short...I've always loved to sing, and I was fortunate enough to win a few singing competitions. One of my uncles has a friend in the music business who found me some gigs on the basis of the wins, and one thing just lead to another."

Dani gave him a look of disbelief as she put down her fork and reached for her drink. "Right. One day you were an unknown, the next, the new singing sensation of the western world. Sorry! I don't believe it was really that easy."

Roberto smiled and squeezed her hand. "It wasn't. That's where the luck came in. I was doing a lounge act here at this hotel, when the star attraction in the main showroom came down with laryngitis. We were both singing pretty much the same kind of thing—romantic ballads and pop songs—all the stuff the women love, so I was asked if I'd like to take over for a few days."

"And then what happened?"

"The laryngitis turned out to be something a great deal more serious, so I finished the rest of the engagement. The customers liked me and I picked up a couple of favorable reviews from the critics, so the hotel invited me back."

"And the rest, as they say, is history?"

He laughed. "Not quite. I'm not a household name yet, but I'm working on it."

"Good for you."

They continued to chat about a number of subjects while they finished their salads, including a complete rehash of that long ago summer in Italy. Then Roberto said, "You mentioned something earlier about working for your father. What is it that you do?"

"My father's company acquires failing businesses and brings them back to life before reselling them. It's my job to iron out all the

glitches."

"Such as?"

"Everything from pacifying employees who find themselves out of a job, to figuring out what went wrong, finding new people capable of turning the investment into a winner and all the little details in between."

"Sounds interesting."

"It is. But I'm afraid the job involves an awful lot of traveling, which I could really do without."

"Would you like some coffee? Tea?"

Dani shook her head. "No. Soda's fine."

Roberto leaned forward and touched the zee-shaped scar on her arm, making her shiver.

"You find it cold in here?"

"No." The air-conditioning was going full blast, but Dani still felt hot. Fever hot.

His fingers slid down her arm, and as he captured her hand, he also captured her gaze. "I never forgot you, Dani. After you left Italy, I couldn't stop thinking about you, and I dreamed about you every night for months." His soft chuckle sent a dozen more tiny shivers skipping down her spine. "When we came to the States, I told everyone I was coming here to find my woman."

Dani's temperature moved up a notch. "You did? That's so cute."

"I thought finding you would be a simple matter of checking phone books. But this country is so big, and so full of people with the last name of Stevens."

Dani snuggled a little closer. "So you gave up?"

"Yes and no. You were always there at the back of my mind. I knew if we were meant to meet again, we would."

"And now we have," she murmured, wondering what, if anything, he intended to do about it.

"Tell me the truth. Had you forgotten about me until today?"

"I admit I hadn't thought about you in a long while, and I didn't recognize you when you spoke to me by the pool. But no, I hadn't forgotten about you." She hesitated, feeling a sudden rush of embarrassment. "I remember I couldn't stop crying that day we left Italy. The more Dad tried to comfort me, the more I howled. And I remember I moped around for weeks after that. I had such a huge crush on you, I was convinced life as I knew it would be over if I couldn't see you again."

"Really?"

Dani laughed and squeezed his hand. "Really. If Dad hadn't been so sick at the time, I think I would've tried to talk him into staying longer."

After that long ago summer with Berto, as she'd known him, bringing her small gifts, like a flower or a shell from the beach, and serenading her with Italian pop songs, Dani had learned to appreciate the finer points of European men. Not only were they experts in making a woman feel like a woman, they had a polish and sophistication she'd never found in their American counterparts.

He released her hand and touched the pad of this thumb to her lips. "And now?"

Her temperature moved up another couple of notches. "As you can see, I've survived. It's difficult to maintain a crush for twenty years."

"But true love never dies. And first love is very special. There's always one little corner of our heart that remembers. Yes?"

"I guess." Giving in to temptation and the mood of the moment, she touched his thumb with the tip of her tongue, then nipped it with her teeth when he shuddered and slipped his free arm around her waist.

"I want to make love to you, bella."

"I know." Dani held her breath as he moved closer, his full lips a scant inch or two from her own. She wanted that, too. More than

anything, she wanted to feel the touch of Roberto's hands against her bare breasts, her belly...touching, discovering... She just didn't know if making love with him would bring closure to a teenage crush, or if it would start a whole new chapter in her life. And there was only one sure way of finding out.

She closed the gap until their lips were almost touching. She could feel his heat, and beneath the light, woodsy fragrance of what she recognized as an exclusive men's cologne, she was aware of the warm, earthy scent of his masculinity. She closed her eyes and inhaled the exotic fragrance.

"Mm...you smell wonderful." Pressing her lips against his, Dani slipped her hands beneath his shirt and stroked his back, while she waited for him to make the next move.

"So do you, *bella*. Good enough to eat." He nudged her lips apart and his tongue slid into her mouth, grazing against her teeth and heightening the desire flooding her body as he explored every fold, every crevice.

He pulled back a bit to look at her, his emotions evident from the tension she could feel in his body and the way his hand shook as he stroked her face. His eyes had changed color from warm chocolate to something hot and dark, and as his fingers trailed down her neck and rested against her breast, she felt the familiar urgent pulsing sensation between her legs.

"Tell me you want this, too, *bella*," he murmured, his warm breath touching her skin like a caress as he pressed her hand against his erection. "Tell me you want me as much as I want you."

Dani's mouth felt dry. She hadn't got over the shock of meeting Roberto again after all these years, and now everything was speeding out of control. Common sense told her to slow things down. Not to rush into anything she might later regret. Get to know him again. But the way he was making her feel didn't allow for common sense or caution.

She wanted him to take her, and take her now, not talk about it.

"Tell me, bella. I want to know."

"You need to ask?" She smiled, holding his gaze as she pushed him back against the cushions and stroked the bulge in his jeans. She could feel the heat and the hardness of him through the worn fabric, and she was on fire to feel him moving inside her. But first...

She unbuttoned his pants, then, taking the hem of his shirt, she pulled the garment up and over his head. "That's better." She ran her fingers through the light sprinkling of dark hair that covered his chest. After laving his nipples with her tongue, she noticed a thin line of dark hair continued down below his waist. She followed the line with her fingers, watching his facial muscles tighten as she undid the zipper on his jeans and began to stroke his cock.

He wasn't wearing underwear and his jeans weren't tight enough to cause a problem, so she tugged them down over his hips to give herself better access. The moment his engorged cock sprang free of the restraining fabric, she took him into her mouth, thrilled to feel the shudder that ran through his body. She began to suck him, gently at first, then a little harder. He groaned and his fingers were in her hair, holding her in place. Encouraged by his reaction, she increased her efforts.

But then he was pushing her off and flipping her over. Her clothes disappeared like magic, and his mouth and hands were everywhere—suckling her breasts, stroking her thighs, and urging her legs apart. She took a deep breath and opened her legs wider as his tongue found her clit, then she pressed herself against his fingers as they teased and explored, before sliding up into her heat.

His fingers moved faster. She was close. Right on the edge. But as she was about to go over, he stopped. She wanted to scream at him to continue, but then his mouth was on hers and she felt his cock rubbing against her slit. Taking the stiff shaft in both hands, she rubbed the head

against her clit, then guided him to the entrance of her vagina, loving the sensational feelings that engulfed her mind and body as he pushed inside. He paused a moment, then pulled out and pushed back in again.

"Feels good, taking it slow like this. Yes?"

"It feels fantastic." She sighed and wrapped her legs around his waist, restricting his movements. Slow was okay, but she was on fire, her pussy screaming for release, and she needed him to move a whole lot faster.

She found his balls and squeezed, urging him to push deeper, harder, faster. But all he did was laugh and tell her to be patient.

"It's better like this, *bella*," he whispered. "Better to take our time and make it good."

They'd done it without hurry like this in that adult movie she'd watched, and she wondered if the actors were Italian. Maybe all Italians liked to take their time. "But—"

"No buts." Without interrupting his rhythm, he rubbed her clit hard with his thumb, and she felt the start of an orgasm. He waited a moment, then did it again. But before the orgasm could take hold, he stopped. "That feel a little better?"

"Anyone ever tell you you're a sadist?"

"No." As he picked up the pace, he touched her clit again, pushing her even closer to the satisfaction she craved.

Then, without warning, it happened, a series of small orgasms that built in intensity and size until she exploded like a firecracker. And the way Roberto lost his steam and held her like he planned to never let her go, she knew it had happened for him, too.

As her breathing settled back to normal, he kissed her on the lips and stroked her hair. "You okay?"

"Yes." She gave a delighted chuckle in response to the diffident expression she saw on Roberto's face. "To use a cliché, was it as good for me as it was for you? Well..." She smiled and ran a finger down the

center of his broad chest. "To be honest, it was both wonderful and fantastic."

"Fantastic? I think you may be exaggerating just a little."

"I never exaggerate."

His expression brightened. "Maybe we should try again after dinner."

"Dinner? We've just had lunch."

"That was hours ago." He twisted his wrist so she could see the time by his watch.

"Six o'clock! What happened to the afternoon?"

He shrugged. "Seems like we lost track of it. Do you like Mexican?"

"I love it."

"Good. There's a small Mexican place not far from this hotel. Dark as a rabbit hole, but with lots of atmosphere and candles instead of regular lighting."

By the time they'd showered and put their clothes back on, it was starting to get dark, so Roberto took Dani out of the hotel by a back entrance where a couple of taxis were waiting at the curb.

The restaurant turned out to be just as Roberto had described—small, intimate, dark, and decorated with brightly colored Mexican pottery and crafts. The air was filled with the tantalizing smells of Mexican food, and *mariachi* music played in the background, while waiters dressed in gaucho outfits moved from one tiny candlelit table to the next.

"What do you think?" Roberto asked after the waiter settled them at a table and brought them Mexican beer.

"It's nice." The moment they arrived, Dani had realized why Roberto liked it so much. It was very dark in here, so the chance of him being recognized was less than nil. Heck, her father could be sitting at the next table and she wouldn't even know.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur of good food and conversation. Roberto didn't want to let her go, and Dani didn't want to leave him. But reality returned like a dash of iced water just after eight the following morning, when Roberto awakened her with a kiss, asked her what her plans were, and she remembered she had an important business meeting in less than two hours.

Promising Roberto she'd have supper with him after that night's show, Dani returned to her room to get ready for the meeting with Mrs. DiMarco. She'd make her pitch, and with a little luck it would be successful. If the widow wanted to play games, she'd follow her father's advice and leave the woman to play games on her own.

She arrived at The Neapolitan a few minutes before ten. A uniformed security guard was waiting to let her in, and he guided her through the darkened, silent casino and up the steps to Mrs. DiMarco's office on the mezzanine floor. Ignoring the shabbiness, the dust and the years of obvious neglect, Dani concentrated on the faint sounds generated by her own imagination—the tinkle of coins in the slot machines, the excited screams of the winners, and the groans of the losers. With her training and experience, and Trenton's team of experts, she could turn The Neapolitan into the number one hotspot on the Strip. All she needed was permission to go ahead.

The beautifully dressed and coiffed blond sitting behind the desk was older than Dani had expected. She looked sixty, which meant she had to be at least five or ten years older, making Dani wonder why the woman didn't just grab the money and enjoy it while she still had the chance.

After introducing herself and refusing Mrs. DiMarco's offer of coffee, Dani got down to business. She said her company realized their first offer had been on the low side, but now they were prepared to do something better. She opened her briefcase, extracted the new offer from a file and pushed it across the highly polished, but rather dusty

desk. "If you'd care take to a look, I think you'll be pleased with these new figures."

Mrs. DiMarco moved the offer to one side without bothering to read it, then she smiled and shook her head. "It's like I told your father, Ms. Stevens. I don't want to sell. I want to keep The Neapolitan in my family."

According to Dani's research the DiMarcos were childless. But research wasn't an exact science and vital records could sometimes be missing or out of place. "I see. You have children who are willing to take it over?"

"No. I have no children of my own, but there's my sister's nephew. He—"

Mrs. DiMarco stopped speaking as the door burst opened, and to Dani's surprise, Roberto stormed into the room. "Please, Aunt Silvia, I just don't have the time for this," he said in a loud voice, ignoring Dani and making her wonder if he was aware of her presence. He hadn't as much as glanced in her direction, so maybe not.

Mrs. DiMarco was Roberto's aunt?

Dani decided she must be dreaming. The dusty office, the widow, and Roberto's sudden intrusion were all a crazy dream.

But then Roberto continued speaking. "I know you mean well. But as I've told a hundred times before, me taking over this hotel is out of the question. When you get the new offer from Trenton, I want you to do us both a favor and take it. Please."

Mrs. DiMarco leaned back in her chair and waved a hand in Dani's general direction. "If you'd behaved like a gentleman, Roberto, and knocked instead of bursting in here like a madman, you'd see the Trenton representative has already arrived. Ms. Stevens, this is my sister's son, Roberto Ventura."

"Ms. Who?" Roberto turned around fast, then stared at Dani in shock. "What are you doing here?"

"Making a new offer for The Neapolitan."

He dropped into an adjacent chair. "I don't understand. You said you worked for your father."

"I do. My father is president of The Trenton Corporation."

"I don't believe this. I can't—" He shook his head.

Silvia DiMarco frowned. "Do I take it that you two know each other?"

"We met years ago in Italy when we were children," Dani admitted. "We lost touch, but yesterday Roberto saw me at the hotel and realized who I was. Of course, he had a little help." She pushed up the sleeve of her jacket and showed Mrs. DiMarco the zee-shaped scar. "He recognized this first."

Mrs. DiMarco peered at Dani's arm. "My God! You're the girl Roberto was so determined to find when he and his father first came to live here. This is incredible." She smiled at Roberto, then shook her head. "I remember how disappointed he was when the letter he wrote you was returned. He just hung around the house, singing the same silly, sad love song over and over. I don't remember now what it was called, just that it was very sad and I had to plead with him to stop."

"Has Dani given you the new offer?" Roberto asked, forcing an abrupt change of subject.

"Yes. But I haven't looked at it, nor do I intend to," his aunt replied. "Your Uncle Frank told you that once you made a name for yourself, you'd be The Neapolitan's resident main act—like Siegfried and Roy were at The Mirage, or like Celine Dion is over at Caesars. You said you wanted that, too. Or have you forgotten?"

"No, I haven't forgotten." Roberto sighed. "But that was before Uncle Frank died. The hotel has been closed for almost a year, the renovations Uncle Frank had in mind never happened because he was too sick to deal with them, and all the people who worked here are long gone."

"I know all that. But we can still reopen if we put our minds to it. Hiring new staff won't be difficult. I'm quite sure some of our former employees will want to come back. If they don't, there are always people out there looking for work. And the money Frank put aside for the renovations is still in the bank earning interest. What more do we need?"

"The expertise to bring an out-dated, rundown hotel and casino into the twenty-first century. Uncle Frank could've done it, and he would have done it if he hadn't got sick. But I don't have a clue how to go about it, and neither do you," Roberto said with a sigh. "Sorry. But it's time you faced facts."

"I do," Dani said, feeling a quick rush of excitement.

"You do what?" Silvia asked, frowning.

"I know how to put The Neapolitan back on the map. That's what The Trenton Corporation does. It buys a failing or rundown business like The Neapolitan, brings it back into line, then sells it to the highest bidder."

"But I want to reopen The Neapolitan, not sell it," Silvia said, a note of exasperation in her voice. She hesitated for a moment, looking first at Roberto, then shooting Dani a somewhat sly glance. "Money's the last of our problems. But my nephew's right when he says we wouldn't know where to start. My late husband was the brains behind The Neapolitan." She shrugged. "I imagine updating a hotel is a whole lot more complicated than finding an interior decorator to make over my living room."

"For a project this size, you would need someone who knows what he or she is doing," Dani said.

"Anyone you'd care to recommend?" Silvia asked.

"Not really. With Trenton, it's a group project. We sit down, figure out what's needed, organize financing, then go to work. But you already have the money, so you all you need to do is find someone to

take on the job. Vegas hotels are always undergoing renovation, so it shouldn't be difficult. Ask around. Check the Yellow Pages."

"You say Trenton buys the property, renovates, then sells," Roberto said, frowning. "Think there's a chance they would forget steps A and C, and just concentrate on B?"

"Sorry. That's not the way we work. Trenton invests in property for resale. The refit is just part of the process."

Roberto scooted his chair a little closer and took both Dani's hands in his. "Do you think maybe you could you speak with your father and ask if he would make an exception in our case?"

Dani loved the idea of restoring The Neapolitan to its former glory. Not only could she pull it off, she would make it even better. "You mean remind him of when we were kids, and ask if he'll do you a favor?"

"Whatever it takes."

Dani knew Roberto's smile was aimed at melting both her heart and any objections she might have to asking her father for a favor. "If he agrees, I'll have to do it on my own. That means taking a leave of absence from my regular job and hiring the necessary talent to help me pull it off. Renovating this place could take months."

His smile broadened and his hold on her hands tightened. "Would you mind?"

She tugged her hands free and rummaged in her briefcase for her cell phone. "Is there somewhere I can have a little privacy to call my father?"

Roberto stood up. "Come. I'll show you."

A few minutes later, Dani was back. "Dad's disappointed Mrs. DiMarco won't sell, but he's willing to settle for Trenton doing the makeover. He says he and my mom spent their honeymoon here at The Neapolitan, and that's why he doesn't want to see it disappear."

\* \* \*

Later that same evening, Dani went with Silvia DiMarco to see Roberto's show. There were the usual scantily dressed showgirls and dancers, and an opening comedy act that had everyone in stitches. After that, the showroom went dark for a few minutes, then the lights came back on and Roberto appeared to thunderous applause.

The moment she saw him, Dani's heart skipped a beat. He looked magnificent. Dressed in a white suit with an open-necked black shirt, and his dark hair groomed to perfection, he looked the very epitome of the Latin lover. The majority of the audience was female and many of them were waiting at the edge of the stage to give him flowers. Dani felt a rush of jealousy when she realized most of the floral offerings were single red roses. But then she relaxed, remembering where she'd spent the previous night. Where she would spend tonight as well.

Roberto's songs were all romantic ballads—some new, some old, some familiar, some not so familiar, but the audience loved every single one, and when the show ended and Roberto left the stage, everyone clapped and stamped their feet and screamed for more.

When Roberto came back for the encore, the jacket was gone, and he held a single red rose in his right hand. He moved to center stage, where someone had placed a tall stool and sat down, one foot on the floor, the other resting on one of the rungs.

"When I was a boy growing up in Italy," he said, "I fell in love with an American girl. We were much too young to do anything about the way we felt, and when her father took her back to America, my heart broke into a million tiny pieces. Our wonderful summer together was over, and I knew in my heart the chance of us ever meeting again was too small to consider. I remember I felt so miserable all I wanted to do was die." He paused, looking toward the spot where Dani was sitting. "This is the song I sang to that girl the day she left me...

"Ciao, ciao, bambina..."

As the familiar melody and Roberto's wonderful, rich baritone

filled the room, Dani's emotions got the better of her. Tears covered her face, while her mind flipped back to the steps leading down to that Italian beach and the heartbroken boy in ragged jeans, pouring out his heart in song to the girl he loved and was about to lose.

The final "Ciaaao, bambinaaa," faded away into the far corners of the room, but before the applause could start, Roberto held up his hand for silence.

"A few years later, when I came to America, I looked for that girl everywhere. Needless to say, I couldn't find her," he said in a voice husky with emotion. "But yesterday, I was in the lobby of this hotel and a miracle happened..."

The houselights dimmed and a spotlight tracked Roberto as he came down the runway toward Dani's table. At the same time, another spotlight singled Dani out. When Roberto reached her and presented her with the rose, the two lights merged into one, and the audience went wild.

Taking Dani in his arms, he whispered, "Ti amo. Molto. Forever, and for all time."

Dani's heart was full to bursting. What Roberto had just done was romantic and embarrassing, and hokey and schmaltzy, and she couldn't blame the audience if they thought it was a put up job. But none of that mattered. She knew it was real, and she'd loved every last second of it.

"I love you, too. Molto, molto."

#### CHRISTIANE FRANCE

Christiane truly believes that love makes the world go round, so she likes stories with both happy and bittersweet endings. Christiane has been writing romance for the past twenty years and lives near Niagara Falls with her husband and The Boys—two black and white Persian cats.

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