



Scorching sex: definitely on the menu. Hold the love, please...

Workaholic Carly Mason is caught between a rock and a hard place. The rock: an invitation for four days of sun and sand with her friends and their men. The hard place: “Mr. Invisible”, who lusts after her with delicious abandon, doesn’t exist—Carly invented him to keep her friends off her back about her lack of a love life.

Then she encounters a motorbike-riding Adonis whose image taunts her during the wee small hours. When fate drops him in her sights the next day, she grabs the opportunity to offer him a job. Pretend to be her Romeo, just for the duration of her getaway.

Exhausted from months negotiating his multi-million-dollar company’s expansion, Marco Valente is more than tempted by Carly’s outrageous proposal. If nothing else, it’ll give him a temporary escape from his high-profile life—and his mother’s serial-bride attitude.

Once on the island, Carly realizes her well-meaning friends have tricked her into a “relaxing” vacation. For the next four days and nights, it’s just her and her hired Romeo. And a growing connection that definitely wasn’t part of the contract...

This book has been previously published.

Warning: Contains two unbelievably stubborn people undergoing serious cell phone withdrawal, and seriously scorching sex on the beach. Not responsible for reader’s failure to apply sunblock before reading.

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Romeo for Hire

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Romeo for Hire

Jane Beckenham

Dedication

To authors Yvonne Walus and Melody Knight for being such great inspiration, and mates.

Chapter One

She had no one.

She was alone.

And she had lied.

What started as a joke had become Carly Mason's living nightmare.

The words "*Don't forget!*" were ingrained in gold on the glossy invitation, visible from wherever she stood in her office. It was as if they were chasing her, following her every move.

Don't forget? "Fat chance."

And now, as the day of departure for rest and relaxation in paradise grew nearer, the joke was on her.

Trying to bluff her way out of going had proved impossible. Her friends wouldn't let her off the hook.

"Come on, Carly, four days on an exotic island, just us and our men."

"Can't wait to meet your man."

"You mean the invisible man."

Carly cringed, remembering their reference to the boyfriend she bragged about but never produced. Right now she wished the ground would open up and swallow her whole.

She picked up the invitation, fingers trailing over the embossed outline of a palm tree beside a blue lagoon. "I'll be a laughingstock," she moaned and tossed it toward the bin. She turned back to her desk, though the sight of piles of fabric, wallpaper samples and the unopened mail littering her desk didn't improve her mood.

Barely visible beneath a stack of multi-colored chintz was a gilded frame holding a picture of her and her girlfriends—and their men.

Tania and Martin.

Maxine and Frederico.

She caressed the ornate frame, staring at the photo. Though surrounded by friends, she'd never felt so lonely. She may have been smiling in that photo, but deep down she knew the truth she'd carefully hidden, and now, every time she looked at the group, a sharp pain of something she couldn't quite understand tugged at her heart.

Dropping the photo frame onto the overflowing desk, she returned her gaze to the mounting piles of work. She had no time for men. Besides, history told her they weren't reliable.

"D-Day" however, was drawing near, and she still hadn't produced the invisible man, described, unfortunately, in superlative detail after several glasses of Cabernet. Tall and devilishly good-looking, who of course worshiped the ground she walked on. Where on earth was she going to find such a specimen in less than seventy-two hours?

"Couldn't make him a nerd, or a plain Harry, could you?" Carly eyed the invitation as if it was a summons from hell.

Her cheeks stung as she remembered the graphic details she'd spouted, and a wave of rampant desperation shook her normally serene composure. How could she have been so stupid? Perhaps she could sleep through it, say she'd caught some grisly plague and couldn't go.

Own up.

Carly chose to ignore that piece of internal advice. There had to be a way out. She picked up the folder containing the job specifications for the hotel chain, but her mind wasn't on the job. She couldn't concentrate. Her mystery man got in the way—again.

Perhaps Adonis could get chicken pox, be deranged and in jail for murder. "Hell and..." She needed to work. Not think about men.

Perhaps then the problem will go away!

If only.

The day never seemed to end. Too many tasks to complete, with not enough hours to do it, which resulted in Carly leaving the office late into the evening. As the road ahead appeared to blur with the murky night, Carly battled to concentrate. She gritted her teeth, and her hands tensed on the steering wheel. She should have left work earlier, but instead pushed herself to finish the last drawing for Auckland's newest boutique hotel complex.

Get a life.

She did—have a life that is. One she enjoyed immensely. Her business was her life.

As she glanced into the car's mirror, she caught the reflection of a flickering single golden beam. It loomed out of the darkness, alone, closing in on her and filling the car with an eerie glow. Automatically, she stiffened and a ripple of fear trickled down her spine. She tested the car door to make sure it was locked, chastising herself for taking the back road where the dense hedgerows clung to either side of the narrow winding road. The route was meant to be a shortcut,

but now, in the depth of the night, it seemed to meander forever. She pressed on the accelerator and the car instantly sped up, but the beam of light continued to trail mile after long mile behind her.

Practicing deep breathing, Carly managed to rein in her fanciful thoughts when a fractured boom pierced the night. The car jerked sideways, the steering wheel whipping from her grip as the right front wheel began to thump with a bone-jarring jolt.

She yanked the wheel back, righting the car, swerving to miss a culvert.

Her foot pumped the brake.

Nothing. No pressure, no resistance.

Staring down at her foot as if it would explain why the brake wasn't reacting, she tried it again and pushed harder.

Still nothing.

Dear God. Carly's stomach lurched. She was going to crash. There was no way out. No brakes and only three tires. The grating scrape of metal against metal rent the air—then nothing—no movement or sound, except for the hum of a single engine echoing in the silence.

Carly's heart thudded so hard she thought it would explode. Her breathing came in harsh, short gurgles and her eyes fluttered shut for a second. She counted slowly to ten, trying to collect her scattered wits.

"Need some help?"

Her head shot up and she choked back a fearful sob as she looked up into the eyes of a stranger at the driver's door. Instinctively, she pulled away from the daunting outline of a lone man silhouetted by the flare of a motorcycle headlight.

There was no one here to protect her.

So what's new?

Carly gave a tiny internal shrug.

With stubborn pride, she bit back her uncertainty, struggling to stamp down the flock of butterflies doing an upbeat tango in her stomach.

"I...uh, yes." Remembering common sense to meet your foe at eye level, she opened the car door. She clutched her car keys in the ball of one fist, letting the pointed edge of the key poke between thumb and finger, and stood. She was battle-ready if need be.

Grateful for the lighting of the moon that haloed them as if they were in their own illuminated cocoon, she pulled herself to her full height. He was powerfully built, with the broad stance of an athlete and the aura of being in charge—totally. It unnerved her, and she stepped back a fraction.

“The tire is flat,” she muttered apologetically, feeling foolish at stating the obvious. On autopilot, she operated on sensory rather than brain cell. “And the brakes wouldn’t work.”

“Sounds bad.”

It was. Very bad. And his nearness set Carly on edge and drowned out any sensible thoughts. Her nostrils flared as she inhaled the spicy scent of his cologne, recognizing the tang of citrus and cinnamon. The exotic perfume wrapped around her, conjuring up visions of the desert, of men riding bareback. Very sexy. Very tempting. And definitely all male.

Beneath her silk blouse her nipples grazed against her lacy bra and she felt a scalding heat stain her cheeks, liquid desire spreading through her body. It pooled where it had no right to make her feel. Not here. Not now. Not in the middle of the night, on a lonely back road with a total stranger.

Whoa! Back up. What was she thinking?

Never mind thinking, what was her body doing? Her wayward reaction set her off balance, as if she were two people, her body and her brain.

That reaction alone ignited an uncomfortable emotion in Carly she hadn’t dealt with for a long time. Things like this didn’t happen to her. She had no time for men. She wasn’t interested.

Perhaps if she said it enough, she would finally believe it. Carly frowned and ignored her own reasoning.

If the stranger noticed her scramble for sanity, he said nothing. He crouched down, and Carly heard the clanging sound of metal wrenched from metal. A frown creased his brows, and her gut churned. The nightmare wasn’t easing.

He straightened and dusted his hands down leather trousers that molded his muscled thighs like a second skin, the moon in a cloudless sky striking a play of light against the shiny fabric. It hid absolutely nothing.

No. Don’t do that, she pleaded silently. But her gaze remained riveted to his hands as they grazed his thighs. She choked back a cough, and her brain switched into overdrive. In her overheated imagination it wasn’t *his* legs his hand caressed, but hers.

“I can change the tire, but I don’t think it’ll do much good if the brakes are acting up.”

Carly’s eyes closed. She bit back the urge to cry. “My foot went straight to the floor. There was no pressure at all.”

“Be dangerous to drive then. You’d better ride with me.”

Carly’s eyes shot open. “Dangerous?” she repeated. “With you?”

“Yeah. I can promise you a smooth ride.”

She bet he could. His voice had a faint accent, making it smoky and sinful. Just the sound of it sent a shiver racing down her spine.

She shook her head. This shouldn’t be happening. What was wrong with her? She was...on fire.

So where is Ms. Boring now? Ms. Everything-is-about-business.

Who the heck knew?

From the scuff of his ebony boots with all those shiny silver buckles to the tip of his rakish jet-black hair, this man fit the description of *her* Mr. Invisible perfectly.

Whoa. Forget it. Bad, bad idea.

What was she thinking? She tried to find her voice, but came up blank.

“If you lock up your car, you can call the auto service when you get home.”

“Ride with you?” Oh, Lordy. Carly eyed the bike. A silver-chromed monster, seething with power and...sex. Just like him.

“Unless you want to walk ten miles in those sex-kitten heels you’re wearing?”

“Sex-kitten? They’re expensive...”

“Most likely, since they’re Manolo’s,” he interrupted, surprising Carly that he knew about shoes. “But with that peep toe you’ve got going on and heels that are no fatter than a noodle, they’re definitely in the sex-kitten category.”

Carly stared down at her feet. The beam from his motorcycle highlighted her shoes. “What the heck do you know about shoes?”

“Not shoes exactly, but I’ve seen plenty of legs in killer heels in my time.” He gave her a wink.

How did she reply to that? Carly snapped her mouth closed. Heaven help her.

“Ready?”

Was she? Suddenly, she felt as if she’d swallowed the Sahara desert and licked her lips. But the

moment she lifted her gaze and saw Mr. Blue Eyes staring straight at her mouth, she slammed her lips firmly closed.

“Have you ridden on top before?”

Oh, good God. Help! Someone! Why was everything he said, plus everything she thought, sounding like sex? Totally and utterly carnal. “I...I’ve never ridden a bike, unless you count a push bike and my sister’s tricycle.”

“Really?” One dark brow arched, and his smile broadened. “Then it will be my pleasure to teach you.”

Oh, boy.

The way he said pleasure—lilting, charming, and very sexy—set her body firing.

He held his hand out to her and for a fleeting second Carly thought to turn tail and run. But where to? Her car was knackered, in a ditch with a dud tire and brakes that wouldn’t get her home in one piece. She had no choice. No car repair service would come out at this time of night.

“You prefer to walk?” he asked.

Her head shot up and she caught his amused expression.

“Don’t panic. I can’t read minds.”

Thank God for that, she reasoned. Her shoulders sagged as she realized there was no way on earth she wanted him to read her wayward thoughts.

“But your face tells the story, *cara mia*. ”

“ *Cara*...?”

“ *Cara mia* is Italian and means my heart.”

“I know what it means, but...”

“You wonder why I speak such intimate words?”

“To a stranger, yes.”

“A beautiful stranger, nonetheless.”

Carly stiffened, but he smiled again, tilting her off her axis of sanity.

Huh!

That had long gone, and unless she stayed on this darkened road for the rest of the night, she knew she had no other option. Her cell phone battery had died, and besides, she was probably beyond coverage.

“I’m Marco,” he said as she took his hand. His fingers wrapped around hers in an almost tender caress. She couldn’t help wondering how they would feel against her bare skin.

Oh, dear Lord. What was she thinking—again? Stop, stop, stop!

“So now we’re not strangers,” he said. Then he smiled—slow and teasing. If it was meant to set her at ease, it completely failed.

She stepped closer to the bike and eyed the monster.

“It’s like a woman,” he said. “Very smooth. Treat it right and you get a good ride.”

Carly choked back a shocked gasp. Did he really say that?

With her hand still clasped in his, an action she told herself was so that she kept her balance—which she didn’t believe one iota unless it was for her mental balance—she lifted her right leg over the seat. Her skirt hoisted up her thighs. Catching Marco’s blatant appraisal, she shifted awkwardly, trying to yank down the fabric.

“Skirts and bikes don’t really mix,” he advised her with barely controlled humor.

“Don’t I know it.”

Then he joined her on the bike.

He was close. So close she could lean forward—if she wanted to—and rest her cheek against his leather-clad back.

“Hold on,” he laughed.

Hold him? Or the bike?

The bike roared to life and Carly grabbed Marco.

Hard muscles slid beneath her fingers. She held on tight.

“Ready to roll?”

His lop-sided grin sent her heart and stomach into tandem flip flops again.

“Just remind me to follow my own rules next time.”

“What are they?”

“Rule number one, never travel this road again at night, and rule number two, learn how to fix tires.”

“And deny me your company? Not fair.”

Carly never had the chance to answer him as the engine roared and he eased the bike back onto the road. With a death grip, she clutched him while trying not to lean into his back and her thighs vibrated with the roar of the engine between her legs.

Oh, heavens. How sexy could it be? A throbbing, vibration between her legs.

She shuddered and her eyes closed.

“Lean closer. You won’t ache so much.”

Wanna bet? Nothing would take that particular ache away. Except...well, there was one thing.

Carly leaned forward, her cheek touching his back, ebony hair poking out from beneath his helmet tickling her nose. But it was his smell that teased her most. She licked her dry lips. Temptation all wrapped up in leather.

Stop it. Right now.

She shook her head. She was way out of her depth. And she knew it.

Chapter Two

It was a sin that a man could look that good, Carly reflected the next day. But sexy men, or one in particular, weren’t the reason for her joy. Nope. That was down to her hard work paying off. If she played her cards right, she would formalize the deal of a lifetime. CV Hotels was expanding its international base, and she intended to land the contract for the interior design. It would be the culmination of everything she’d worked so hard for.

Buoyed by her good humor, she strode downtown as her phoned buzzed. Still in full stride, she flicked on her mobile, but didn’t get the chance to speak.

“Carly, you have to come.”

Her shoulders sagged and, for a moment, she held the phone away from her ear and gathered the strength to cope with the caller.

“Mum, slow down. What is it now?” As much as she loved her mother and sisters, they were trying at the best of times, relying on her for every petty factor of their chaotic lives. She was

their rescuer, mothering her siblings while their mother wallowed in self-pity.

“Martha’s pregnant.”

Carly should have been surprised, but wasn’t. All her sisters had children, either in or out of wedlock. All depended on her when times were tough and things went haywire, which was often.

“What do you want me to do about it?”

For the next ten minutes, her mother told her exactly what she wanted, pleading for her help. Carly wanted to tell her mother it was Martha’s problem, but remained mute. Finally she flipped her phone off and decided a break from familial duty wouldn’t go amiss and headed to her favorite coffee shop.

As she sipped coffee, her gaze wandered down the cobbled lane. A mecca for designer stores and, with the lunch trade out, it was booming.

Then Carly saw him. His coal-dark head towered above other pedestrians, his long, muscular stride shortening the distance between them with every step. Her breath caught in her throat.

She didn’t know whether to stop him or ignore him.

As he neared, every woman ogled the imposing male. No longer in his intimidating leathers, but casually dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt, the sleeves rolled up to display biceps most men would give their eye-teeth for and women would drool over, he headed her way. Before she had time to back out, she waved, feeling like an idiotic school kid. “Hello, Marco.”

He came to a sudden stop and turned, blue eyes focusing on her. Heat flooded her cheeks, and her mouth opened and closed several times. Oh, my God, he didn’t remember her. How embarrassing was that?

“Hello.” Then there it was, the flicker of recognition in his eyes and husky voice. It sent a shiver down her spine.

Just like last night.

Aware of her awakening body, Carly clamored for words—any would do. “Thanks again, for last night, I mean.” Oh, hell, that sounded even worse—like she was saying thanks for the time in bed. The heat in her cheeks upped several notches, and she fiddled with her empty coffee cup, trying to hide her embarrassment.

“Let me buy you a coffee, for payment,” she said, fumbling for her purse.

Why not just shout, “For services rendered”?

“There’s no need.”

“Please.”

His lips curved into a lopsided grin that made Carly’s toes curl. Suddenly it seemed really important she do this. He shrugged and pulled the spare chair out from the table and sat, stretching out his long legs. Carly gulped and looked away then walked to the counter to order his coffee. As she shoved her purse back in her handbag, a slip of paper caught her attention. The invitation. Why on earth had she retrieved the blasted thing from the rubbish bin?

Shoving it out of sight, she took the coffee to the table. She eyed him. He was a perfect fit. A perfect “ten”. Exactly as she had described. Tall, dark and supremely handsome. Her mind whirled with possibilities, the same ones she’d tried to squash last night. Didn’t they make movies about this sort of thing? Why couldn’t it work?

You don’t have a million dollars.

Sitting opposite him, Carly coughed. His gaze lifted from his coffee and across the cup toward her. For a second there was the unmistakable flicker of danger and an indefinable strength in his eyes, a warning, but just as quickly it dissolved, shadowed by the thick veil of his ebony eyelashes. Carly shrugged. Her brain was acting way off kilter as a result of too little sleep and far too many fanciful musings. But when he took another sip of his cappuccino and a thin layer of milky white froth lined his top lip, instinctively the tip of her tongue wiped across her own, igniting a wave of heat that had been a gentle swell and whipping it into tidal wave proportions.

Carly shook her head. She didn’t want to go there.

“You’re watching me,” she said.

“A crime?” He smiled again.

Blast the man. He was smooth. Too smooth. She tilted her head up a fraction. “It makes me nervous.”

“You’re a beautiful woman. But then,” he said as the blue of his eyes darkened to the deepest of sapphires, “you know that.”

She held out her hand. “I don’t think I’ve introduced myself properly. Carly Mason.”

“Marco Valente.” Just like the night before, his big hand encircled hers. Big and beautiful. And it felt just as wonderful as it had last night.

Wrong. It felt twice as good.

“You’re Italian?”

“*Si.*”

Steeling herself, she pasted on the brightest smile she could. "I have a proposition for you."

"Is it legal?"

Carly spluttered at his comeback and set down her cup. Her hands shook, but she took her time to wipe her lips with a napkin, aware Marco Valente followed her every move.

"Of course it is. The fact is, Mr. Valente, I need a man."

"Really? Why would a woman as beautiful as you need a man?"

"I need someone to accompany me to an island. Four days. That's all. I'll pay you, of course. You don't have to do anything, just be there."

"You want a gigolo?"

Heat stole across her cheeks. "I do not."

"Then what for, may I ask?"

"You have a right to know," she admitted, knowing how embarrassing the whole scenario sounded.

"I do."

Disquiet interrupted her confidence. Maybe this was a mistake. "My friends are expecting me."

"On this island?"

Inwardly, she groaned. "Yes."

He nodded. "Go on."

But Carly didn't want to go on; she wanted to disappear, to run away and forget the whole, completely absurd idea. Talk about wishful thinking. Suddenly the idea was just too way out there to be good.

"My friends and I were to take a holiday with our boyfriends, but ah...um." She halted and her gaze lowered.

"You don't have one," he filled in for her.

Carly swallowed her pride. "No. I don't. It started out as a joke," she said, trying to lighten her voice. "My friends have partners. I don't, but I sort of made one up."

“Sort of? What kind?” he asked.

She gave him a fleeting grimace. “The usual kind. Tall, dark and handsome. Unfortunately, it got out of hand. Now they’re expecting me to present my mystery man. We’re to spend four days on a private island. There are cabins. Everything is provided. You won’t need a thing. I’d pay you, of course.” Carly snapped her mouth closed. Darn it. She was babbling.

“Clothes are required, I presume.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You said I wouldn’t need a thing. I presume this isn’t a nudist colony and I’ll need clothes.”

“You’re teasing me, right?”

“Of course,” he assented, allowing her to see that way too sexy grin once more. “That way I get to see the pretty pink blush on your cheeks.”

“Oh...” Carly’s jaw dropped. “You’re toying with me.”

“*Si*.” He shrugged. “And it’s working.”

Her lips pursed. Damn it. She was falling for his smooth lines. She wasn’t experienced with men—except in business. Business she could handle, but this...? Smooth and sexy, and with eyes that made her want to shout *yes* and jump onto his lap. That was way off the scale as far as she was concerned.

“You want me to be your paramour for four days, be attentive?” he asked.

Even to her ears the idea sounded perverse. She wished for the umpteenth time she hadn’t let it get so out of hand. She nodded.

“Not a problem.”

“It’s not?”

“*Si*. It’s perfect. What would be more so? Days spent isolated with a sexy woman.”

Oh, heavens. With the velvety rich resonance of his accent sending goose bumps down her spine, he made it sound so decadent. She struggled to restrain her wanton thoughts and keep her tone businesslike. It was the hardest thing she’d ever done. She had to get away from him, from temptation, get back to reality and control. Quickly she told him the details, offered him a set sum that he agreed to, and they arranged to meet at the heliport on Thursday, ten a.m. sharp.

“I have an appointment. I must go. See you Thursday.” Flustered, knowing his narrowed gaze rested on her, Carly hurriedly stood, but just as she was about to leave a worrying thought caught

her off-guard, and she stalled. “This island, there are cabins, but to put your mind at ease, there are two bedrooms in each. You’ll have your own room.”

“ *Grazie*. I am relieved. Two bedrooms. What else could a man want?” The corner of his very kissable mouth flickered, and once again Carly’s control slipped more than a few notches.

She snatched up her bag, desperate to douse her raging nerves and ignore her niggling conscience. She’d never done something so off track, so spontaneous. Spontaneity wasn’t on her to do list. Her world was order, systems and goals. Finally, she found her voice. “Right. I’ll see you.”

“Thirty-six hours and counting, *cara mia* .”

Marco leveled his gaze on Carly Mason’s long legs as she strode over the cobbled street, racing as if the devil was after her. He grinned. He may not be the devil, but he was after her—in a sense.

She was some woman. All woman, and unknowingly, the woman who had kept him awake all night, something that had never happened to him before. Marco smiled. Their chance meeting was a blessing from on high. After ordering another coffee, he eased his large frame back into the chair and let out a heavy sigh, frowning as he spied a wedding magazine in the free-to-read pile in the cafe. He dragged a hand through his tousled hair. Sleep deprivation was not good for his mood, and meeting Carly had turned his emotions upside down. Hell, her proposal was incredible, but that he’d accepted without a second thought socked him a punch he found inexplicable.

She had taken him by surprise, but one look at her long legs, spiky high heels and a dress which clung to every delicious curve set his blood pumping and his groin reacting as if he was a schoolboy experiencing his first crush. He found himself imagining what lay beneath that dress. Visions of frothy bits of lace and silk teased his mind, and despite the midday activity in the café, his eyes closed for a moment as his imagination ran wild.

It didn’t last. A sharp cackle of laughter nearby dragged him back to reality. His eyes snapped open. What the hell was he doing, mentally undressing a woman he barely knew? But, he smiled, nevertheless. Four days on an island, albeit surrounded by her friends, would give him ample opportunity to get to know Carly Mason.

It was a good opportunity, and Marco always took opportunities. Opportunities had taken him to the top. But then, there was no need to tell Carly exactly who he was.

Nope, for now, he’d enjoy the freedom. That his public profile wasn’t so widespread was more due to his diligence rather than the ineptitude of the paparazzi.

However, that sadly was about to change along with the status of his business with its global

expansion. CV Hotels had taken up his every waking hour for months and as the project heated up, the noose tightened, choking him, dragging him through a mire of minutiae that needed sorting. This was his dream. Something he'd worked long and hard to achieve. Even so, he needed time out, and four days with a long-legged woman with hair the color of autumn would be a plus.

Besides, he had another reason. Four days escape would provide respite from his mother's constant marriage prattle which had increased ten-fold in recent months. As much as he loved his mother, he was beginning to believe she was a serial bride, constantly on the lookout for a husband. Such escapades while he was growing up had absolutely put Marco off marriage forever.

Nope. Playing lover, not husband, was the order of the day, and if Carly Mason wanted a gigolo to play Romeo to her Juliet, then she would get one, as long as he didn't have to die like the bard's hero.

Chapter Three

"Where the heck is he?" Carly paced the heliport's forecourt and for the umpteenth time glanced at her watch.

He was late.

Okay, so it was only two minutes, but late was late. She scanned the distance. There was no motorbike in sight. Her lips pressed into a thin, disapproving line. If there was one thing she hated most in the world, it was tardiness. She liked order, control and certainly for people to be on time.

"You waiting for me?"

Marco's thickly sensual drawl stung like a bee. She whipped around. "You're late," she accused.

His dark brows arched. "Sorry, Miss. Did you think I wouldn't come?"

"Of course not."

"Liar."

Carly reddened. Okay, so she had, but only a fleeting, teensy bit.

Marco folded strong arms across his chest, and she couldn't help but admire his rippling muscles. The pulse in her throat throbbed, and suddenly there didn't seem to be enough oxygen. She struggled to find her voice, not something she normally had problems with.

"The pilot's ready to take off. Let's go."

“Yes, ma’am.” He saluted.

Carly halted. She took a deep, steadying breath. Several actually. One just wouldn’t cut it. Not with Mr. Adonis’ teasing remarks. With slow deliberation she faced him, holding herself rigid. She looked him eye to eye.

They were great eyes.

“Shi—”

“Pardon?”

She exhaled in a whoosh, and her shoulders sagged. “This is a fiasco.”

“Are you afraid of me?”

Her lips twisted into a grimace. This man was very perspicacious. “Sort of. You’ve got to admit this is a weird situation.”

“You asked me. Do you want to back out?”

“Too late,” she admitted ruefully. “They know we’re coming.” Yeah, another dumb move. “I phoned my friends and told them.” And she had enthused about him. Talk about a web of deceit. Now she’d have to play schoolmarm, ensuring he would remember everything she’d made up about him.

For the next few minutes, she proceeded to tell him just who exactly her Mr. Perfect was, every last gory detail.

“Do you think you can remember all that?”

“Not a problem. It is a fantasy, correct? Then we will fantasize.” Marco closed the space between them. “There’s no need to be afraid of me.”

Carly’s foolish musings disintegrated on the spot. Only inches away from her, he caressed her cheek. She swallowed. His almost sensual touch lit a fire in her belly, a desire, a...

Oh, heaven help me. Give me sanity. Where’s my computer?

“I’m not a villain, Carly Mason. I may not have a magic carpet, but since you’ve hired me for a few days, I can be your genie from the lamp.”

“And I’m Aladdin?”

“Si. Your wish is my command. I will be the attentive boyfriend. Your friends will accept our love is true and passionate.”

“They will?” she croaked.

“Sure. You and I will fool the world. Four days of sun, sand and—”

“Then it’s back to work,” she interrupted.

“Work? Is it so important?”

“It is to me,” she asserted. Leading the way, she strode toward the waiting helicopter pilot and passed him her bag. Sidestepping Marco, she entered and seated herself.

One thing troubled her, though.

If Marco was the genie and she was Aladdin, she sure as heck wasn’t about to ask which part she was to rub.

Within seconds the helicopter roared into life.

“Hold on, we’re about to take off,” her partner in deceit said.

How could he look so calm? Wasn’t he the least bit worried? She was terrified. What on earth had she done? He was a stranger. He was...oh, hell.

Carly knew her reaction to Marco teetered way off beam. She was out of her depth.

She had to remember the job was temporary.

The helicopter lifted off, darting away from the mainland and over the frothing green waters of Auckland’s Hauraki Gulf. The city was noted for its many volcanoes, most of which, thankfully, were extinct, but then that was New Zealand. Volcanoes, mountains and rivers. A clean, green playground.

They were traveling at over one hundred and twenty kilometers an hour, though the perception seemed quite different—slower, as if gliding over the blue green waters below.

With Marco sitting beside her, Carly dissected her fanciful scheme. That he had agreed to it had taken her by surprise. But then, the last few days had been utter chaos, and no one in their right mind would believe she would hire a gigolo. She cast a quick glance in his direction.

Marco Valente was far too good-looking and devilishly sexy.

She smiled. He was exactly right for the job.

He wore a black T-shirt that stretched across his broad chest blatantly delineating a muscular torso and biceps, while his long jean-clad legs struggled to be contained in the small seating area.

His slightly longer than fashionable hair with its smattering of gray tingeing his temples gave him a distinguished aura—though the unruly curl that constantly fell forward made Carly want to reach up and flick it—and of course let her fingers run through his hair at the same time.

Hold that thought.

And she did, and held his hand—as if her life depended on it. Well, it did—sort of. At least it did if she wasn't to look a fool in front of her friends. She'd already resigned herself to going through with the charade. She would grit her teeth and smile sweetly if it meant once and for all she would get them off her back.

There was one unfortunate snag. Trying to ignore the tingle ricocheting up her arm every time he touched her was quite a different thing.

Carly shifted uncomfortably in her seat and managed to pull her hand from his and wrap her arms in a protective huddle across her chest. Battling down her nerves, she chewed on her bottom lip and twisted away from Marco so she faced the small window. She stared blankly out.

One minute she was like a scared rabbit, the next she wanted to link her fingers around his neck and...oh, heavens, this was way off the sensible scale.

“Am I doing my job right?” he whispered in her ear.

Carly bolted upright. She tried to smile—and failed. Beads of sweat dotted her forehead and the silk blouse she'd donned this morning stuck to her sweat-dampened skin like glue. “Yes, perfect, everything is fine,” she lied and looked down at the broad hand that spanned hers again.

As the helicopter passed over the gulf, Carly drew in deep, slow breaths to fortify her disquiet. She could cope with temporary. Besides, it was too late now.

“Okay people, we're about to land,” the pilot's voice interrupted.

Their four days in paradise was about to begin.

Fifty yards ahead lay the island. Carly leaned forward and rested her forehead on the chilly glass panel, taking in the exotic landscape below. Luxurious verdant palms littered the foreshore and through the shift of swaying fronds she could see the outline of the four cabins.

“This is your paradise?” Marco asked as he leaned close and stared down at the dot in the ocean.

Carly held her breath then let it go in one long whoosh. She nervously licked her lips then managed to find her voice. “The island is remote, accessible only by boat or helicopter. A generator will provide power and, thankfully, there's running water,” she said, feeling a tad more in control.

“You are a mine of information, *cara mia* .”

She pulled back a bit, pushing herself into her seat to give herself some space from him. “You don’t have to do the *cara mia* stuff, yet.”

Marco shrugged. “Perhaps not, but it is the language of love.”

“Love?”

“*Si*. We should practice.”

Oh, no. No. No. “Over my dead body.”

“That’s no fun at all.”

“This isn’t about fun, Mr. Valente,” she countered.

“It’s not?” He gave her a teasing frown. “And here I thought I would have four days of fun, sand, and...”

“You’re playing a part, Marco. Remember that. Acting. It’s not real.”

“Then, let us see how well we can act, hmm?”

Carly spun away, riveting her gaze back to the golden sands glittering under the full heat of a cloudless early February sky. Oh, Lordy. This was going to be harder than she expected.

She had to remember it was a game, play the part and keep her heart closed. She had no time for foolish love games. Love got you nowhere. Her family was a prime example of love’s undoing.

Within minutes they had landed, exited, and the whirring beast turned to fly back to Auckland. Unsure what to do next, Carly hesitated.

“You are expecting your friends, *si* ?”

“Of course. They’re meant to be here already.” She looked toward the first cabin tucked behind a group of palms and frowned.

“Where’s the reception committee? There doesn’t appear to be anyone.” Marco’s cool voice stated the obvious, making Carly grit her teeth.

“I can see that. Come on.” She walked ahead. “They must be up at the cabins.”

But they weren’t. The first cabin was empty. And the next one, and the next. They were all empty. With Marco watching her, assessing her reaction, a prickle of tension fluttered down her spine. “Do you think they perhaps joke?”

“Don’t be silly, of course they’re here. Well, I mean, they will be.”

“You sound so sure.”

“I am.” Though in truth, she had begun to harbor a nagging doubt. She cringed at the thought and childishly checked under the beds as if expecting them to jump out and shout “surprise”.

A few minutes later Marco walked toward her with long strides. “I think you may need to read this.”

He held out a piece of paper. She took it, mindful not to let her fingers touch his. Been there, done that and she didn’t want to do it again, though the flicker of amusement that crossed his tanned face told her he could read her mind, knew exactly what she tried to avoid. She opened the note.

“Carly, sorry, can’t make it. Time for you to have fun for once with the sexy hunk you’ve been telling us about.” Her friends had signed it.

“How could they?” She re-read it just in case. Nope. Every single word was the same. “Blast.” She screwed up the paper into a tight ball and let it drop to the floor. “This is a nightmare. They can’t do this.”

“Your friends aren’t coming.”

“What do you think? Do you have to sound so happy about it?”

Marco’s brows rose a fraction, and he held up his hands in surrender.

“Sorry, it’s not your fault.”

“I presume I’m meant to be the sexy hunk.”

“Sex doesn’t come into it. We’ve discussed that. This was a temporary assignment, so to speak.”

“And I’m the eye candy.”

Carly lowered her head, hoping to hide the heat of embarrassment threading its way up her neck and face. She wished the ground would open and swallow her.

“This is too much. This is way beyond the Richter scale of embarrassment.” She stomped across the sand, uncaring that her expensive shoes were filling with sand. “I’m thirty years of age and I had to hire a man as a companion. I’ve lied through my teeth, lied about having the most fabulous man on earth at my beck and call, a man who loved me to distraction. What a fool.”

“Not a fool. Misguided, perhaps.”

“Misguided nothing,” she said, spinning around to face him. “Work is my life. I’ve no time for frivolity, and see, the moment I let my guard down, think maybe, just maybe I can join in with the gang, it turns into a disaster.” Carly turned sharply and gazed into the horizon, a hand guarding her eyes against the brilliant sunlight. “We’ll have to call the helicopter back. Where’s your phone?” She began to pace back and forth along the sand, muttering under her breath, annoyed she’d been stupid enough to leave hers behind. “This is ridiculous. I can’t stay here. So much for enjoying the delights of a tropical island.” Right now, she wanted to be off this beach as fast as possible.

“Why not stay?”

Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. “You want to?”

He shrugged. “This island is paradise. Nobody around. Total silence. You look like you could do with a break.” His voice lowered and eyes narrowed so that she could no longer see their clear blue depths, had no chance of reading his mind. He looked her over, head to foot, in one long and very slow drift.

“But we’d be alone.”

“It’s a problem?”

Carly swallowed. She knew her protests sounded like those of a school kid scared of her reflection and struggled to pull herself together. “I take it you haven’t got a mobile?”

He shook his head. “Think of it as an adventure.”

“Adventure I can do without.”

“Suit yourself.” He turned to walk away.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting comfortable. We’re here for four days. Might as well make ourselves at home.” He turned his back on her and walked into the closest cabin, carrying their bags, stopping at the doorway. “I’m accepting fate.”

“Fate. You say it like it’s a challenge.”

“Life’s a series of challenges and obstacles. Do you run from challenges?”

Panic welled in her gut. “But four days.”

“Four days, alone,” Marco corrected with a throaty chuckle.

Carly choked. Okay, so it was always going to be four days, but four days alone with a stranger.

“I can’t do this.”

“You organized it.” Marco dismissed her argument.

“That’s it.” Carly stormed into the cabin, hands on her hips. “You’re getting on my nerves. You seem to have an answer for everything. Four days may be all right for you, a free holiday and getting paid for it, but that was when I thought there would be others around.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not an axe murderer.”

“I sure hope not,” she shot back, turning away from his intense scrutiny. Damn the man. He made her more nervous by the minute. Heck, this whole situation was making her very aware of him, when she really didn’t want to be.

Not for the first time, she wondered what on earth she’d gotten herself into. Four days, alone, with a man who was as sexy as sin, and sinning, according to the deal she’d struck, wasn’t on the agenda.

Was it fate?

Chapter Four

Unpacking her few belongings took only minutes, but Carly delayed it as long as she could, hoping vainly something, or someone, would turn up, wave a magic wand and she’d be back at work and all would be right with the world. “Where is a fairy godmother when you need one?” she moaned.

The heat finally drew her back outside. Grateful for the soft wash of the onshore breeze, Carly tried to focus on how she was going to get through this catastrophe.

For the first time in many years, she felt out of her depth. She had no control of the situation and she didn’t like it. Work was what she knew. Work she could control and, thankfully, she’d brought her laptop at the last minute.

“Work.” That was the answer. She’d bury herself in work and ignore him, then hey presto, she’d be back to reality and could tell her friends she and the mystery man broke up. She had no idea where Marco was and told herself she didn’t care.

She came to a rocky outcrop, plopped down and dangled her feet in the crystal-clear water, refreshing in the summer heat. It was a shame about the holiday. This was the perfect place for lovers.

“Huh!” Carly snorted. Lovers, maybe, but not her. She didn’t have time for love. Her ego had gotten her into this pickle. Next time...

Carly brought herself up sharply. What was she thinking? There wouldn’t be a next time.

Not wanting to interrupt her, Marco stood back as he watched the play of dejection on Carly's face. She looked so alone, and it made him wonder why a woman as articulate, entertaining and successful as Carly Mason needed to go to such lengths for a companion. And, did he mention, stunningly beautiful. It made no sense, but he couldn't deny it—she intrigued him. Just then, she turned to him and shot him a tentative smile, barely holding back tears, showing a vulnerability he'd not seen before. It cut deeply into him, urging him to take her in his arms, to protect and soothe. But something held him back. If he touched her, she'd probably jump up and try and swim back to the mainland right now.

"You don't seem happy," he said as he sat beside her.

"Would you be? It seems my friends have played a joke on me."

"Leaving you here with your mystery man."

Carly choked back a laugh and a single tear trailed down her cheek, forcing Marco to suppress the compulsion to hold her, to wipe away her tears. "They didn't know you invented a boyfriend. From what that note says, they thought you needed to ease off work and beef up the play time."

"What do they know?"

"They know you."

"Yeah, I suppose so," Carly grudgingly admitted. "I work long hours. I wasn't born with a silver spoon, and besides, I have a family to support. Sisters who would rather phone me for a loan than go out and get a job."

"So you work your butt off for everyone else?"

"That's about it."

"And in the meantime, you get no time to play?"

Good grief, what was she doing, spilling her life story to a stranger? Carly looked at the man at her side, but saw no humor or accusing glint in his eyes. Instead, there was sympathy. She gritted her teeth. "Don't you dare offer me sympathy, Marco. I don't need anybody, or owe anyone anything."

"Okay, okay. I get the picture."

She turned to the ocean, watching the sway of the water lapping at the shore. Then she spoke

quietly, more to herself than Marco. "See the tide. Coming in. Going out. It's consistent. That's how I like my life. Constant and regular. No upsets."

"And you have such control?"

Carly nodded.

"Since you're here, why don't you enjoy yourself?" he suggested.

"Enjoy?"

Marco laughed. "You make it sound like it's inconceivable."

"You could say that. I haven't had much time to play. Besides, most men tend to want me to be the play thing," she admitted ruefully, unable to stem the heat flooding her cheeks.

"You're a beautiful woman."

"Thank you."

"You don't believe me?"

She shook her head.

Marco groaned. "*Cara mia*, you are a temptation I'm unable to resist. Nor do I want to." He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her to him.

Carly smiled. Marco wasn't as cool, calm, or collected as he appeared and it was rather satisfying to know it. He didn't demand anything else of her, and she found herself relaxing into his embrace, resting her head on his chest.

"You smell of lavender," he said. He brushed her hair back as his mouth grazed the sensitive skin behind her ear. Carly's heart skipped a beat.

"Intoxicating, just like the scent of the Tuscan hills. Fragrant and enticing and very desirable."

He let out a deep groan and pulled her onto his lap, his aroused state obvious through his jeans.

Marco Valente was definitely not calm, but then Carly couldn't admit to any vestige of calm, either.

"Believe me, Carly. You are woman enough for any man."

Carly wanted to believe him. "Most men want model types."

"You mean stick insects with no curves and nothing to hold onto. No, *cara*, a man wants to

hold his woman, to touch her, feel her.”

Oh, heaven. Why did he say those things? Her insides were melting.

“And when he makes love to her, he wishes to imprint his claim on her. You have the curves of the goddess Aphrodite.”

Carly chuckled at the comparison. “Aphrodite. I’m not sure that’s a compliment.”

“Why not?”

“Aphrodite may have been the goddess of love, but it’s said her meddling caused misery among the armies during the Trojan War. She was meant to be all sweetness and love, but her adventures triggered bloodshed. I’d hate to cause such havoc.”

“Women always cause havoc, *cara* . They are temptation incarnate.”

Carly’s breath hung in her throat. She knew she played with fire, but couldn’t resist. “Is that how you see me?” she challenged.

Although she knew it was true, Carly still felt helpless to resist. She couldn’t pull away and instead watched the play of expressions on Marco’s face. He was a fusion of mystery and sensuality. One minute somber and serious, the next he laughed and teased, causing her body to heat. When he spoke, his voice was a soft whisper.

Blast it. She should have left well enough alone.

“I see a woman whose friends thought she needed time out. Time to unwind and play. Friends who loved her enough to trick her.”

“Yeah, the joke was on me.” Carly grimaced.

“No, not a joke.” Marco’s fingers twined through her hair and the soft pad of his thumb grazed over the skin behind her ear. The hairs on her nape rose and her senses skittered into high alert.

“Your friends care. Isn’t this all we ask in life? That we have people around us who care?”

Marco’s gentle words of wisdom set Carly off and she could no longer stem the tide of tears. He eased her back and looked into her tear-laden eyes, a frown etched across his brow and his gaze narrowed as he wiped them away.

“You cry because...?”

“Because someone cared,” she whispered. And it was wonderful. But that small truth she kept to herself.

Suddenly, Marco stood, pulling her up with him. She stood so close. Thigh touching thigh, hip to hip, his solid chest grazing against her sensitive nipples, making the tender buds ache for more. She placed her hand in his and a tingling heat scorched her fingertips. Carly gasped. This was liquid sex at a single touch—while fully clothed. She couldn't move. Didn't want to, and when Marco's intense gaze traveled from her face, lingering on the gentle rise and fall of her breasts, she swayed toward him, back arching. She blushed.

"That pink tinge again," he teased.

She tried to smile, but failed. Pink? It felt like a raging inferno. Heaven, she sighed.

"What say we use these four days for you to play hooky?"

"Play hooky?"

"Yeah, you know, like sneaking out of school. Your friends want you to have a break."

"But they're not here."

"I am."

Carly's breath froze. He sure as heck was. The hardness of him against her left her in no doubt. She should have hesitated, even a smidgen, but didn't.

"Okay." Her voice came out as a hoarse croak. She tried to breathe, but nothing seemed to be working. All she could focus on was the touch of his skin against hers and the alluring scent of his cologne. Then his breath fanned the sensitive carnal zone of her neck, and a thread of shivery need nearly sent her over the edge.

She tried hard to keep calm. "What do you suggest?"

"How about you relax."

"And you?"

"I'll play genie from the bottle. Your every wish will be my command."

Carly gulped, frightened to think what her wishes might be. "Every wish?"

"Every single one. Starting with this." He leaned forward, brushing his lips against hers. Just one touch and her brain turned to mush, leaving her with only feelings...and a desperate need that he kiss her forever.

He didn't disappoint.

"Is this one of your wishes?" he whispered as he trailed butterfly-soft kisses across her eyes.

“Mm.” Oh, yeah. It really was. Her brain may have stalled, but her senses were very much alive. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her close, seeking her lips once more. Carly knew she had lost. She wanted *and* needed his touch.

Silently, she urged him for more as her hands splayed across the broad expanse of his back. Beneath the thin fabric of his T-shirt she felt his corded muscles ripple, reveling in the moment as she slid one hand through his hair.

He needed no other invitation. His lips trailed a path across her jaw and down her throat to rest between her breasts. He inhaled deeply, murmuring in Italian. Carly had no idea what he said, but it sounded exciting and sinful, and her body automatically arched into the curve of his.

“You are woman enough for any man. For me.”

Carly stilled. What was she doing? “This is madness. Crazy.”

“*Si*, you are driving me crazy with desire.”

She jerked back and shoved against his chest. Her hands were shaking, her body weak with need. She had to escape him before her traitorous body gave in.

“I must be out of my mind.”

“With desire.”

Carly chose to ignore that statement. She had to, for her sanity’s sake. “Wishes, you said—my every wish.”

Marco’s eyes narrowed and the once dark sapphire lightened to a chilling and suspicious ice blue. It sent a shiver shimmying down her spine. She took another step back and crossed her arms over her chest as if barring access to her body and soul. Lifting her chin, she looked at him with as much poise she could marshal, which, heaven help her, was practically nil. “I *wish* you’d stop.”

Marco laughed. Then he smiled, a broad white grin which reminded Carly of a lion on the prowl and set her already razor-edged nerves on high alert.

It was nearly her undoing. She wanted to give in, to take what he offered, but forced herself to hold back. She wasn’t going to repeat family history. Her sisters had jumped in the deep end—and look where it had led them. No, she wouldn’t do it. She steeled herself and waited.

“Your wish is my command,” he finally drawled before bowing low, though his mocking gaze never once left her face. “Your body was on fire for me, Carly. Remember that.”

Remember? How could she forget? His touch, his heat and the feel of his rock-hard body had

been seared into every single inch of her consciousness.

Carly let out a wavering groan. She had to get away. Fast. Spinning on her heels and kicking sand up in her wake, she did the only thing a gal who was in way over her head could do—she fled.

But where do you flee to on a deserted island? How could she hide from the sexiest man on earth and, more to the point, how was she going to hide from her desires?

Carly took respite in solitude for the next few hours, grateful for silence as she struggled to get her thoughts under control.

“Don’t you ever learn?”

The moment Marco’s sharp accusation tore into her fluttering concentration, the pile of papers she’d been working on scattered to the sand along with her dismal struggle to forget he existed.

She turned around, and the laptop wobbled. She made a grab for it, but not before Marco reacted and their fingers linked, resting on the computer screen. Carly’s eyes locked with his, drugging her into immobility.

“You said you’d relax,” he chastised, taking the computer from her and placing it with care on the wooden table.

“I’m doing some work, but I am relaxing. See, I’m sitting.” She tried to defend herself.

He gave her a withering gaze. “Since when did working, even with a laptop at the beach, become relaxing?”

“You don’t understand. I’ve so much to do. There’s a contract I’ve a chance at. It would mean...”

“Yes, it would mean what? That you make more money, that you are a success?”

Carly prickled with annoyance. “What’s so wrong with that?”

“Money is not the road to happiness.”

“How the heck would you know? Unless you were born with a rich daddy.”

Marco said nothing, and Carly gave a satisfied snort. “Don’t you tell me what is or isn’t important. You weren’t the one who had to miss most of school to look after a mother who couldn’t cope.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Work is for me. It’s mine alone. I’ve done the babysitting, caring for my siblings, working two jobs so we had food in the house when my mother couldn’t manage. What’s the saying?” she snapped, “been there, done that. Yep, that’s me. Done it all. But now, work *and* my success, which, let me tell you, I’ve worked damned hard for, is mine and mine alone. No one else is responsible for it.”

“Bravo, bravo.” Marco began clapping, which surprised Carly into silence. Her mouth opened and closed several times before she managed to speak.

“I beg your pardon.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t beg anything off anyone. I can see that.”

Carly searched his face for ridicule or insincerity, but found nothing. He was serious and his gaze steadfast.

“Apart from our little deal here, you do what you want and the heck with anyone else.”

True, but hearing it from his lips didn’t make it sound very nice.

“Come on, it’s exercise time. Your genie is determined to give you your every wish.”

Linking his fingers with hers, he pulled her toward the beach. She didn’t resist. Couldn’t even if she wanted to, which she didn’t because the instant his fingers locked with hers, all thoughts of work evaporated.

Subdued, Carly walked beside him along the sloping sand where the fine grains shifted through her toes, its warmth permeating her heart.

As they reached a headland, she began to search the rock pools, but when she realized Marco hadn’t followed, she halted. “You’re not going to tell me you didn’t search for crabs and barnacles when you were a kid.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“My childhood was...difficult,” he said, walking ahead of her.

“Goodness, this is something I’ve got to remedy. Come on.” She crossed the space between them, grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the outgoing tide.

“What is so special about rock pools?”

“It’s another world. A watery world, where everything horrid is washed away with the tide, only to be renewed and refreshed again a few hours later.”

“How life should be?”

She smiled up at him. “So you do understand.”

Marco said nothing, and she carried on searching, picking up shells and washing off the sand, inspecting their shapes and sizes before replacing them.

“Is this how you wanted your life to be?” he asked quietly.

Carly’s hand stilled mid-air. “It may have been how I wanted life to be.”

“But it wasn’t?”

“No.” Memories of how life had been laid open anxiety Carly thought long forgotten and conquered. It knotted in her gut, building until she could almost taste it, depressing and desperate in its totality. “Life, unfortunately, isn’t washable. My life was full of dirt and grime and disappointment.” Until she’d made a stand for herself.

Digging up her past, dealing with feelings she’d submerged for years was too much to cope with at once. She’d wanted the perfect family, the perfect life.

Instead, she got her life.

She glanced toward Marco, witnessed a depth of understanding in his dark eyes.

Why not enjoy her time in paradise? Enjoy his company, being cared for. It was only four days, after all. She deserved four days of perfection, didn’t she?

Marco faced the outgoing tide. He was disconcerted and he hated it. Carly was an intricate mix of woman and child. One minute her sensuality intoxicated him, the next he was confused by her youthful angst. He’d seen frustration and sadness etched on her face, felt her fear and, yes, he avowed, her shame. Even though she didn’t admit it, she was ashamed of her past. Heavens knew why. His past wasn’t perfect by far. But his past and his present he would keep private.

Then there was work. Carly was addicted to it as much as he was, and she was as independent. Yet he had the temerity to chastise her for it. Shouldn’t he listen to his own advice?

In a state of constant arousal, aching more so every time he looked in her direction, he was held captive. He would make love to her in an instant and envisioned her luscious curves and long legs wrapped tightly around him, holding him to her. Such desire nearly broke the covenant he’d made with himself.

Denial was one thing. Denying, when his body told him it couldn't continue one iota longer, was completely another.

"Look!" Carly's excited voice rang across the cove, interrupting Marco's self-absorbed musings.

"Dolphins. They're playing." She raced to the water's edge and he followed. Ignoring the chill as it lapped the frayed edges of his jeans, he waded in behind her.

A group of six or seven dolphins surfed for a few meters on the incoming waves before they turned and headed out to sea, only to repeat the process over and over again. Clearly, they were having fun.

Marco grinned. So did Carly. Her laughter echoed across the empty bay, while he, unfortunately, was in serious sexual agony.

One by one, the dolphins frolicked then finally disappeared. A laughing Carly turned to him.

"Your eyes are bright with life."

Her smile beamed wider and lit up her face with a joyful intensity he'd not seen before as her laughter rippled between them. She tipped her head back, exposing the long, creamy curve of her neck and the swell of her breasts. His throat closed. He didn't have a clue if he was breathing. Didn't care. "*Cara mia*, you are alive."

Carly stilled and her head fell sideways, the lush veil of her hair draped across her shoulders. "Weren't they wonderful? So beautiful."

"It is you who are beautiful. Your joy is infectious."

For a fraction of a second she stiffened and the light in her eyes dulled.

"Come on, let's see what else the island has to offer," he suggested. Tucking her hand in his he pulled her gently with him and, without faltering, she fell into step as they headed back toward the shimmering sand.

"This is like being Robinson Crusoe," Carly explained as she stepped over the last of the rock pools. "You could be Friday, and we're off to explore the island."

Marco chuckled. "You are a fusion, Carly. Do you know that?"

Her smile disappeared and, for the second time in as few minutes, he cursed with exasperation. He was handling this all wrong.

"Don't fret. You are you." And he pulled her with gentleness into the crook of his arm as he directed them inland toward adventure.

Chapter Five

Energy flagging, Carly forced herself to concentrate and put one foot in front of the other. Pearls of sweat dripped down the sides of her face and into her eyes, making them sting. The hike over the precipitously rocky foreshore and up to the headland under the blistering heat had taken its toll. She swatted away a fly.

A frond slapped her across the face. “Oof.”

Marco halted, and she slammed into his back. “You okay?”

“If you mean am I okay about having damn palms slap me in the face for the umpteenth time, then no, I’m not.”

“We’re nearly there.”

“Good.”

“Do you want to rest?”

Carly eyed Marco. He looked cool and totally unfazed, whereas she felt a wreck. The thought of taking a break was tempting, but one look at that upward quirk in his jet-black brows and the haughty measure of his gaze changed her mind.

“Just so you know, genie, I’m not happy. This isn’t a wish of mine.”

“It’s not?” His eyes crinkled. Carly could see he was holding back a laugh at her expense and fumed.

“I’m aching, tired, hot, dirty and sweaty,” she railed, gathering in a jagged breath, “and did I mention aching? Playing ducks and drakes with palm fronds isn’t my idea of fun.”

But they had to keep going. Dragging up determination she didn’t realize she had, Carly started walking, simply concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. She ached in places she’d forgotten could ache and, although grateful Marco had the forethought to insist she wore her sneakers, they’d long ago filled with gritty sand and dirt.

However, despite it all, she was surprisingly happy, though she wasn’t going to admit that to Mr. Genie who hadn’t oozed even an ounce of sweat.

“See, you can enjoy yourself,” Marco commented as they headed back a short while later.

Carly swatted a palm out of her way. “I never said I couldn’t.”

“Really? Could have fooled me.”

She came to an abrupt halt, spinning around on her soaked and mud-caked sneakers to face Marco. She wagged a finger at him. “What is this, Marco? Are you trying to psychoanalyze me?”

He chuckled, and that same old twinkle in his eye she’d come to recognize as dead-set dangerous, sparkled. Her lips pursed and her body stiffened as if trying to brace herself against his chemistry.

“As if I would.” His smile broadened, and she balled her fists at her side.

Stand firm, Mason.

“Life is for living, Carly. Balance. That’s what you need. Work—and play.”

As the sun lowered in the western horizon, Carly hummed a very out of tune melody as she moved about the small connecting bathroom. Surrounded by a haze of mist from the hot water pulsating from the shower, she caught her reflection in the mirror. Grime streaked her face and her hair hung in sweaty clumps. She grimaced. Yep, a total wreck and yes, okay, she was tone deaf and sang off tune. She couldn’t be good at everything.

She was good at work. Her design business had flourished. What else could she want?

Work and play, Marco had said.

She loved her work, and yes, she would admit, she’d enjoyed their hike inland. She had enjoyed playing—with Marco.

Her genie had done well.

Above the sound of the water, she heard him call from the kitchen and quickly finished her shower, toweling dry with one of the big, luxuriously fluffy bath sheets.

But despite her happiness, a disconcerting niggles tugged at her heart and her normally very vocal conscience remained mute, questions unasked.

Noise from the small kitchen echoed through to the bathroom and brought a smile to her lips. A domesticated man. Her father liked cooking... Carly caught herself before she went down that all too familiar track. That, however, was another story, one she’d tried to forget.

Marco had offered to fix dinner, and she’d graciously accepted, once again thinking how delightful it was to be cared for, a luxury she rarely, if ever, experienced.

She donned a fresh tank top with spaghetti straps and a pair of cut-off jeans and gave her hair a

quick brush. Under the luminescence of the single bulb, the silken strands glistened a deep, rich auburn, grazing her shoulders in soft waves. She curled the ends of a strand of hair around her fingers.

Like burnished copper or autumn leaves. The memory of her father's muffled voice sent a shiver of disquiet racing through her, and her smile faded. What on earth made her think of him again? Vincent Mason was long gone from her life. "Out of sight out of mind," she muttered at her reflection, roughly tugging the brush through a knot.

Huh! That was another falsehood. Her father may not be in her life, but he was in her mind, albeit occasionally, and it hurt as much now as it did all those years ago.

"Dinner's up," Marco called from the kitchen. The sound of rushing water stopped and he heard Carly's footfall as she left the shower cubicle. Thoughts of a naked Carly in the shower played havoc with his concentration.

Dinner *had* been ready.

Marco glanced at the burnt offering in the sink and grimaced, nostrils flaring as he sniffed the lingering acrid smoke. The blackened meat had shriveled beyond recognition.

Damn it. He was Italian and prided himself on his finesse in the kitchen. Wasting two bits of prime beef was anathema to his skill. Nevertheless, he threw another couple of steaks onto the smoldering grill. This time he'd better concentrate or they'd starve.

Carly had upset his equilibrium. Hell, it was more than upsetting, he acknowledged ruefully. The woman was under his skin and it hadn't even been twenty-four hours. Where was the successful businessman who loved them and left them? CV Hotels was his life—not love or commitment.

"Smells good."

Carly's whispery voice thwarted Marco's concentration, and the steak knife clattered from his grip. He sucked in a lung-full of air..

His eyes widened and the pulse in the base of his throat throbbed, blood rushing to his groin. He smothered a swallow and tried to pull his warring, urging body into line. It was a struggle. He was a Valente. Struggle went arm in arm with the name.

"Sit down." Marco directed her to the small pine dining table in the corner. "I'll bring it over."

"You're spoiling me."

"As I said, your wish is my command."

“I’ll have to think up something difficult then.”

“Such as?”

“Some weird and wonderful commands for the genie,” she said, suddenly lowering her gaze, dark, sooty lashes shadowing her expression so he couldn’t see her eyes. He wanted to—very much. He wanted to see what was going on behind those long lashes, to look into her soul.

He snatched up his wine glass, downed its contents in one gulp and refilled it immediately. Finally, he managed to speak. “Wonderful, huh? What sort of wonderful?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Oh, yeah. He sure did. “A challenge?”

“You sound worried, Marco. Do you think I’ll ask you to do something uncomfortable?” she asked, emphasizing the last word.

Marco choked on his wine, suddenly beset by an intense disquiet as he fought to corral his very scattered common sense. Images of him serving a naked Carly whirled through his brain, torturing him. Hell. This woman could bring him to the brink of no return.

“You are a minx,” he chastised.

“Absolutely.” She chuckled lightly, the soft corners of her mouth tilting upwards, a shining brightness in her eyes once more.

“So, what are these ideas?”

Marco waited impatiently while she pretended to consider it carefully.

“How about making you wear a loin cloth?”

He gulped. What the hell had he got himself into? He should have kept his mouth shut. But, oh, no, he’d gone and asked.

“Genies always wear a loin cloth when they’re serving their masters. Well in this case, mistress,” she corrected.

“Mistress?” Marco kept his voice smooth as silk. “You want to be my mistress?”

He heard her sharp gasp, embarrassment registering on her face, and felt a moment of triumph.

“That’s not what I meant at all.”

“No? You disappoint me .” Yeah. Shame. “Is it that a mistress is not the same in Italian as in English?”

Carly’s face flushed with color and her lips parted. She wiped the tip of her tongue over them, and his body tightened.

“You’re having me on.”

Marco heard a shaking resonance in her voice. He wanted to smile at her courage under fire, but restrained himself. She was a good sparring partner, and he always liked a challenge. “As if I would.”

“Yeah.” She smiled. “You would. You know perfectly well I wasn’t inferring I’d be your mistress.”

He grinned then took another sip of his wine, savoring the fruity taste as it slid over his tongue. He rested his gaze on her lips. Lush and ripe. Ready to be kissed.

“This is a game,” he admitted, smiling. “Like cat and mouse.” Yet he had still to decide who was who.

Dinner over, night loomed, and with no city lights, the glow of the lighthouse to the north was the only evidence of man. On the table, the naked flame of candlelight flickered.

“Fancy a coffee?” Marco asked and passed her a cup. Carly took it, giving a brief nod, and headed out to the patio. He followed like the proverbial bee to honey, he thought with a wry sense of self-mockery.

Outside, the night air was warm, a testament to the gulf winds. Cicadas chirped, and a faint breeze wafted up from the ocean, stirring the tips of the palms and banana trees. The fragrance from the wild frangipani and the gardenia growing nearby were a heady mix to his already over-indulged senses.

Carly sat on the step and rested against the railing. He followed.

She burst into laughter as they both spoke at once.

“You first,” he acquiesced.

“Okay, I was...um,” she prevaricated. “I was teasing, before. Joking, you understand.”

“About being my mistress?”

“Mm.” Embarrassed, she looked away.

“How do you know I wasn’t?”

Her head whipped up and she stared at him wide-eyed, lips parted. It set his body into overload once more.

“Your lips are for kissing and your body made for loving.”

“You know the deal, Mr. Valente,” she said, her tone thick with a concoction of fear and formality. “I’m not sleeping with you. There are separate rooms. I expect you to be honorable.”

“Deals can be broken,” he suggested.

“You are joking—aren’t you?”

He wished he were, but realized as soon as he’d said the words, he meant them. Totally. His body told him. Heat coursed through his veins as the thought of sleeping with Carly lit his brain like fireworks on bonfire night.

“For forty-eight hours I’ve wondered what it would be like to make love with you. Feel your body under mine, touching, tasting. Filling you...”

“Enough.” Carly jumped up. Her cup toppled to the sand, and the wail of an owl fluttering overhead brought Marco crashing to his senses. He shouldn’t tease her. He wasn’t some uncouth youth unable to control himself. He stamped back an oath and sucked in a steady breath.

“Carly?”

But it was too late. He’d scared her off. She’d scuttled to her own cabin, leaving him alone and his body on fire for what he couldn’t have.

So much for bedtime. Sleep eluded Marco as it had the previous night, and the reason was exactly the same.

Carly.

Carly with eyes so somber and sad at times he wanted to hold her and tell her everything would be all right. His reaction was an anomaly he couldn’t understand. He wasn’t acting like the Marco Valente he knew himself to be. That Marco was business first and pleasure second, with no room for relationships.

The fact that she lay on the other side of his bedroom wall was in no way soothing. He was wired, and every sound reverberated in his ears tenfold. Playing Romeo was a lot harder than he’d expected. Groaning, he turned onto his side and tossed aside the coverlet. His skin prickled

from the soft ocean breeze wafting through the window.

Good.

Perhaps a little chill would tame his libido. But as the crescendo of the crashing waves with their age-old rhythm drifted from the foreshore, he cursed, mouthing the worst Italian he could think of. He rolled onto his stomach, shoved the pillow over his head and tried to drown out all sound.

Minutes ticked past and he rolled over again. It wasn't working. Besides, who was he trying to kid? It had nothing to do with the beach, the waves or even the constant chorus of cicadas. It was Carly. Carly with the lustrous hair that tantalized him so relentlessly. He wanted to wind his fingers through it and let it drape across his bare skin. Carly with the long, sleek legs that were every man's fantasy—especially his.

“Shit.” It was no good. Sleep was impossible. Giving up, he hauled himself out of bed. Perhaps a swim would knock some sense into him.

Some hope. But he'd try anything to expunge the vision of auburn tresses and legs from heaven from his brain.

He hadn't gone more than a few yards when he heard a whispered breath.

“Who's there?”

Marco stepped closer and froze. Carly wore the skimpiest of nightdresses. A baby-doll number that was enticing yet innocent all at once.

He gulped. Under the shards of the silvery night sky, her attire was as sexy as hell and outlined every curve, every nuance, molding to the crest of her breasts. Who needed lace and silk when white cotton and Carly were combined? The vision was as alluring as anything he'd ever seen.

A shy smile lit her face. “I couldn't sleep.”

“Must be the sea air. Too much of a good thing.”

“Mm.” Her gaze returned to the ocean, while his was held captive by the siren in front of him.

Moonbeams swept across the sky and over the peak of the waves, making them glitter, while the stars appeared like icy diamonds in the inky blackness. Every few minutes, the beacon from the lighthouse scanned the horizon then disappeared. As it vanished from view, Carly shivered.

“Here, let me.” Marco pulled her to him, exhaling as she leaned into his chest. He wrapped her in the circle of his arms and held her close. His body tightened as the tangle of her glorious auburn locks brushed across his bare chest. “That better?” he finally managed to ask.

She nodded.

He was thankful she wasn't in one of her bantering moods because he didn't think he could string more than two syllables together, let alone a sentence.

He trailed a kiss across her hair, inhaling the heady scent he had come to recognize as hers. Lavender and roses, a combination as old-fashioned as it was intoxicating.

Time stood still. Lost in his own world, he could only feel. And it felt damn good. The rise and fall of her breasts swelling against the cotton drugged him, catching him in a web of need. His body was on fire, hungry for hers.

"I should get some sleep." Carly's soft voice interrupted Marco's wild dreams and thrust him back to reality. He dropped his hands, and she stepped from him. The emptiness swallowed him whole.

"Sleep would be good," he agreed. It was an outright lie. Sleep was impossible. What he really wanted was to keep her here at his side. To touch her, taste, feel. Blood surged in his veins. His body was awake with an urgent, burning and absolute desire he'd never felt before.

But without a backward glance Carly walked away and he could only stand and watch, mesmerized by the sensual sway of her buttocks beneath the filmy nightdress. His groin swelled in protest, and he bit back a groan. Right now any sort of oblivion would be better than the war his body waged.

Marco desperately wanted to follow her.

He didn't.

Instead, he turned and stared numbly out across the ocean with his brain cells in a go-slow mood. It suited him just fine. That way he didn't have to feel or think.

Huh! Who was he kidding? Carly was very much under his skin—and it itched like hell.

She'd survived day one.

Carly snuggled beneath the bed covers as daylight filtered through the lace panel undulating in the breeze at the open window. She wondered what day two would bring. And day three and four?

More of the same?

She hoped—for what?

Hoped not?

A light tap at her door interrupted her musings, and when Marco entered, her heartbeat upped a notch and her senses came suddenly alive.

“Breakfast, madam.” He held a tray. A bud of hibiscus lay to one side beside a cup of steaming hot coffee and a plate of toast and jam. The rich and intoxicating fertile aroma of the toasted coffee beans yanked Carly instantly awake, the pungency making her nostrils flare. She sat up, aware at the same time of where she was, and hauled the bed cover up under her chin.

“You didn’t have to do this,” she said, annoyed her cheeks heated automatically.

Marco acknowledged her blush with a slight upward flick at the corner of his mouth, an action that sent the blood surging through her veins and made her bones melt. Her own lips were as parched as the desert, and it wasn’t because she was thirsty—well, at least not for water.

“Perhaps not, but as your genie, it is my honor to serve you.”

“Honor, now that’s a word you don’t hear too often these days.”

“Honor is a lost commodity.”

“Is honor important to you?” she asked.

“Honor in life, in business. Family. These are important things.”

“You’ve never mentioned your family,” she said, hoping he might hint at his past. So far, she knew absolutely zilch.

“My family is a confused affair,” he said, not offering anything more. “Eat your breakfast, we have a busy day.”

“Sounds promising.”

Framed by the door, he turned to her. “Was yesterday so terrible? Do you need to bury yourself in the sand with your laptop?”

“No... I,” she stuttered. “Once I’d gotten over the shock of being alone with a virtual stranger—correction, complete stranger,” she said, giving him a tentative smile only to have her pulse lurch when his brows rose in tandem and he winked at her. She coughed and cleared her throat. “Actually, it turned out to be a rather nice day.”

“Nice?”

“Yes, nice. Is there something wrong with nice?”

Marco laughed and gave her a teasing smile. “We fly on my magic carpet to an island paradise, I

indulge your fantasies, and you call it *nice* .”

Fantasy—if only he knew.

“Once I decided to give in rather than fight it, I did begin to enjoy myself.”

“That’s a relief. To think it was only nice would destroy the genie myth,” he said and placed a hand across his heart in mock horror.

“Well, we can’t have that.” Carly tossed the bed covers back, forgetting her barely there nightdress until it was too late, but when she caught the flicker of bold assessing in his gaze before he looked away, she faltered then decided to brazen it out. “So, what have you planned?”

“Eat, put some clothes on,” he instructed. “Then see what the day holds.”

“Great.” She shot him a smile. “Now get out of here. Can’t have a genie in the boudoir too long. I need to dress.”

Placing her palms firmly on his shoulders, she turned him around and gave him a playful pat on the *derrière*.

He left pronto, and her gaze followed him out of her bedroom, focusing on that way too cute butt of his.

Oh, boy, big mistake.

Heat scalded every inch of Carly’s body, and when she glanced down to her open hand, she was surprised there wasn’t a burn mark on it where her fingers had touched his taut jean-clad *derrière*.

“Don’t touch what you can’t afford.”

This was bad. Very bad.

She slammed the bedroom door shut and retreated to dress. She had better get her head round this before day two began.

“Pure bliss,” Carly drooled as she took the last step onto the patio.

“You deserved a good day.”

And it had been. Her genie had seen to that. Relaxing by the shore, swimming. Marco peeling the exotic fruit, feeding her. All the things a genie should do. The weather had been perfect, the day perfect. Which surprised her. Carly hadn’t expected to enjoy her time here. She was focused.

Centered. But somehow, Marco had wiped the slate clean, and she hadn't thought about work all day.

She turned to face her genie. "It has been a lovely day. Thank you."

Marco bowed low. "My pleasure."

Pleasure. Pure pleasure. Suddenly, her tongue thickened and she struggled to speak. "You're good company," she finally managed to say.

He leaned against the railing, eyes narrowed, shading them from the glaring late afternoon sun. "You sound as if you're surprised."

"No. It's just..." Carly exhaled a loud sigh. "Let's face it, we didn't exactly know each other before this, um..."

"Experiment," he suggested.

Embarrassed, she looked away.

"The trouble is, no one is going to know about it, and more importantly, your friends won't even know the mystery man turned up."

"No. I was thinking about that. I thought maybe I could say Mr. Invisible and I had a row."

"A row?"

"We'll have a blazing argument and I'll tell my friends Mr. Invisible was really a big jerk and I tossed him."

"A jerk? You're going to dump me?" Marco's voice held a hint of astonishment.

Surprised at his reaction, Carly took a sideways glance at his inscrutable face and her heart did a gigantic flip. She wished she knew what he was thinking, but one look at the ever-changing color of Marco's eyes only served to augment her mounting urge to bolt. With every passing hour she was increasingly out of her depth.

But something, whatever it was, held her back. Besides, swimming to the mainland wasn't an option in paradise.

"Not you, exactly," she corrected, "but my so-called mystery man."

"That *is* me. A man has his pride. You're going to dump me."

"Well, not really you. I mean, you came, but it could have been a thousand other men."

“A thousand. That is impressive. I didn’t know you’d interviewed a thousand.”

“I didn’t.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear it.”

“You are?”

“Competition is good, but a thousand other men. Even I know the odds,” he chuckled.

Wordless, Carly stared at her hired Romeo. Even if there were a hundred thousand other men, she reasoned, Marco would have won hands down. That particular thought shocked Carly and she began to tremble, overtaken by lightheadedness.

“You all right?” Marco reached for her hand, holding it in his. Touch to touch, skin on skin, his thumb stroking a path across her palm. He laced his fingers through hers and gently massaged her hand.

Once again words hung in her throat as she stared down at her own pale hand dotted with the sun’s kisses, resting in the broad expanse of his. His touch was surprisingly soft, a caress, slow and languorous, a hypnotizing motion that teased and soundlessly promised more.

Carly blinked several times and pulled herself out of Marco’s grasp. That was enough of those wayward thoughts. This was getting ridiculous.

Vainly, she tried to steady her shaking hands and shoved them behind her back as if it would hide the heat Marco’s touch ignited. “I’m fine,” she lied, keeping her face averted. Marco had a way of seeing into her thoughts, her soul, and she wasn’t going to fall into that trap. “I need some time alone, that’s all.”

“You want to run away again, *cara mia* .”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Am I? Think about it. You relax, you begin to enjoy yourself and then you want to hide away, to not think, to not feel. You are scared of feeling.”

“Am not,” she denied hotly, realizing at the same time she sounded like a petulant child.

But Marco merely smiled, the soft lines at the corners of his eyes crinkling, sending blood rushing to her temples. Beneath her shirt, her breasts thrust against the constraints of her lacy bra. This was pure, unadulterated heat—and lust.

He stood close by. Too close for comfort.

And, yes, she wanted to run—sort of.

“Last night you didn’t run from my touch. You welcomed my arms around you.”

“I was cold.”

Marco chuckled, his tone richly bold and inviting. “Hmm, but you warmed under my touch.”

“I’m not my sisters, Marco. Nor my mother. Don’t even think I’ll have a fling with you. I’ve worked hard and hauled myself out from the cyclic environment of my family. I’ve succeeded beyond my dreams.” Carly broke her monologue and gasped for air. Marco’s gaze bored down on her, and she folded her arms across her chest, lifting her chin with defiance.

“But what about your wildest dreams, *cara* ? What about those?”

“I don’t have any.”

“Liar,” he whispered. His intense gaze speared right through her, and she tried to look away, but his fingers gripped her chin, holding it fast.

“Everyone has dreams, Carly. Even you. Dreams. Fantasies. What about them?”

Her lips pursed into a thin, disapproving line.

“Don’t deny it, *cara* . Dig a little deeper, search for them.”

And she did. Her mind whirled with images, provocative and exciting, igniting flights of fancy she thought buried long ago. The very thought of them flung her into a forgotten world, tingling with an intensity that brought her to life. Seconds ticked by. She thought she couldn’t stand another moment, that her overwhelming need to touch and feel, to taste Marco’s lips on hers, would send her over the edge.

But what on earth was she thinking?

An affair with a stranger? That wasn’t her.

Wake up. This is paradise, fake reality.

“I need to think, Marco.”

“Go think about your dreams and fantasies, *cara* .”

Carly retreated to her room, sank onto a cane chair and dropped her head into her hands. Heaven help her, she was just like her mother and sisters.

For a long, silent while, she shut herself in her room, sitting beside the window overlooking the golden sand. She hugged a cushion to her chest and stared numbly out at the view. A seagull,

perched atop a craggy rock pool uncovered by low tide, cawed several times before flapping its wings and taking to the clear skies. Such a peaceful existence. No worries, no cares.

No dreams.

Carly sprang up. She didn't want to think about dreams, wild or otherwise. She had goals—clear, determined, get-out-of-my-way-I'm-coming sort of goals. Goals that didn't include a fantasy four-day fling, or any other sort of fling for that matter, and definitely not with a stranger.

With shoulders squared and a determined set to her jaw once more, she eyed her reflection in the mirror. Wild hair haloed her elfin face, and she screwed her nose up in distaste as she spied the light spattering of sun kisses.

Eyes the color of deepest indigo and flecked with shards of gold stared back. They were alive with excitement.

Outside, she heard Marco moving about and, for a moment, she stared at the closed bedroom door. She couldn't stay locked away. She had to go out and face her demons.

And right now, Marco Valente was her demon.

A tentative smile tilted the soft curve of her mouth. She slid the pad of her thumb over her lips and for a fraction of a second her eyes shuttered as she remembered his touch, the feel of his body pressed against hers. His lips on hers, pliant and inviting and definitely delicious. Oh, yes, he was a demon to be handled with kid gloves. He needed a sign tattooed on his forehead—handle with care. She hadn't been prepared for Marco.

"Feeding time at the zoo," she announced as she opened the door with a flourish.

"I thought you had gone into hibernation."

"Just a minor setback."

"Setback?" His eyes darkened. "I hope nothing serious."

"Nope. Everything is fine, absolutely dandy, and back on track."

"Back on track?"

Carly laughed. "Do you always repeat what people say?"

But he didn't smile. His expression was deadly serious. "Only when I'm completely lost as to the change in a person." He turned away abruptly.

"Where are you going?"

“Out,” he shot back over his shoulder. “This genie is taking a break.”

“Trust a man,” Carly muttered. “Can’t stand the heat in the kitchen, they take off.”

Damn it. Where had she heard that before? Heard it and lived it.

“You don’t know the meaning of heat,” Marco snarled. “Perhaps I should show you.” In two long strides he closed the gap between them and pulled her to him, crushing her in the circle of his arms. “Heat, *cara*, is this.” Swiftly, his lips sought hers. Hard and demanding, sending a shiver up and down her spine as his tongue flicked over her bottom lip.

Full-blown pleasure radiated through Carly. She laced her arms around his neck and slid her fingers through his silky hair. It was so soft. She let out a mewling gasp of delight.

It was all the invitation Marco needed. His tongue teased a sensuous dance with hers, hands caressing her back, cupping the curve of her buttocks, pressing her into his hardness.

Carly felt it all, and it thrilled her. Her heart raced and her pulses sang with a passion and seductive sensuality she’d never felt before. Liquid heat beat a path to her loins, moistening her center, melting in its intensity.

Outside, the sounds of crashing waves reached up the beach, sharply breaking the barrier of her wanton need for more. A jolt of ice laced around her heart and she stilled.

“*Cara?*”

“No,” she pleaded, refusing to even look at him. She wrapped her arms around her as a protective coat of armor. “Don’t say anything.”

Marco’s fingers caressed her shoulder, but Carly yanked herself out of his reach. “Please, Marco. Just leave me.”

“You tease, *cara* .”

“Tease?” Carly accused. “You started this, Marco. It was you who kissed me.”

“You can’t deny you liked my touch.”

Tears streamed down her face. “I do deny it. Don’t touch me. Ever.”

“So you run away again, Carly. Run from life, from living, from your fantasies.”

“You’re not my fantasy.”

“Am I not?”

Carly heard the challenge in his voice and shivered. She was no match for him. “You’re my paid employee, remember?” she shot back.

“Your gigolo?”

“The hired help. Paid to be attentive. But remember, I call the shots.”

“Really? We’ll see about that.”

“Heat,” Marco spat as he stormed up the beach. “She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” He’d done everything he could to make her days a pleasure and then she went and froze him out. The moment he thought he’d broken through her self-imposed shell, the reserve she hid behind, she iced up and retreated.

Heat. Hell, his body was on fire like Mount Vesuvius and ready to explode. He bit back his hunger and passion. Held it in check. He was a man. He had to have control. Marco let out an agonized groan and ran a hand through his hair, wrestling with desire as never before.

Why on earth had he come here? He didn’t need this. Playing Romeo for some uptight woman who preferred a laptop on the beach to having a life, so much so, she had to hire a man to pose as her boyfriend.

Yet this oddball chance had proved to be a fortuitous bonus. Well, it would have been if he weren’t so frustrated that he wanted to behave like Tarzan and carry Jane off to the treetops and make wild, passionate love to her.

Rounding the corner of the cove, Marco headed for one of the sand dunes and sat. He yanked his mobile out of his pocket and a wave of guilt flashed over him. He’d told Carly he didn’t have one. The opportunity to stay alone with her had been fervently overwhelming, so he had lied. Only a small lie, he rationalized, though somehow it didn’t make him feel a whole lot better, simply worse.

Flicking on the phone, he called his office, ensuring everything with the hotel plans were on course. Chad Burns reassured him, but as he hit the off button, a niggling worry twisted his gut.

It’d be okay. Only two more days. Then back to business. Back to what he knew and what he felt comfortable with.

Chapter Six

“I thought I’d managed to rid you of that accessory.”

Carly threw a guilty look over her shoulder and struggled to douse the flutter in her stomach elicited the second she heard the heart-stopping timbre of Marco’s voice. “You sneaking up on

me again?”

Marco strode toward her, and her tummy performed another series of flip-flops, the ever-present butterflies dancing an unbridled tango without so much as a whiff of concern for her sanity. It seemed every time he came within an inch of her, those same butterflies erupted into wild abandon whether she liked it or not.

As he came alongside, he offered her a luminous smile, a flick of his dark hair falling across his forehead. Her fingers itched to touch it, brush it back, to...

Stop it!

She clenched her jaw, gnawing at her bottom lip, and her hands balled to fists at her sides. Her nerves were shot.

“How much longer are you going to stay attached to that toy? You’re wasting a lovely day,” Marco advised as his gaze scanned the sun now high in the sky.

“Not long.” Sighing, Carly turned back to her laptop, saved the document and sat back. “All finished. Satisfied?” She gave him an impish grin.

“Woman, don’t you know about relaxing?”

“Sure I do. We did that yesterday. Besides, I slept like a log, so I must have been relaxed. You, on the other hand, Mr. Genie, paced up and down for hours.” Carly refused to listen to the silent nagging of her conscience. Truthfully, she hadn’t slept a wink either. And it wasn’t because of the heat. No, siree. Marco sure had a lot to answer for.

But this morning, as she stared up at him and a smile twisted the corners of his full mouth, she decided it best to ignore their heated “discussion” from last night. Best to ignore the fire that raced through her every time he came within ten feet.

Carly laughed at his sheepish grin. “At least you have the decency to look guilty. How’s a girl to get her beauty sleep with a genie waltzing around all hours of the night?”

For a moment, Marco didn’t speak, but when he did, his voice was tinged with a velvety sexual undertone.

“*Cara mia*, you don’t need beauty sleep. You *are* beautiful.”

Sudden tears welled in her eyes. “Oh, Marco. No one has ever said that to me before you.”

“Never? What about boyfriends?”

“Boyfriend, singular. I don’t have time to date.” Embarrassed and suddenly feeling defensive, she looked away, but Marco leaned forward, and when his fingers grazed her cheek, his middle

finger tipping her chin up so that her gaze was caught in the rich cerulean intensity of his, she didn't flinch.

"Look at me, Carly." His authoritative tone was one she couldn't ignore, and as a physical heat passed from the tips of his fingers to her own sensitive skin, she obeyed. It was as if he pierced her soul and could see right through the layers, the facade and her defenses.

"You are a successful business woman, *si*?"

She nodded.

"One boyfriend, a hundred. *Dio mio*, it does not matter. What matters is you have pride. Pride in yourself. You have that, do you not, Carly?"

Choking on thick emotion, she simply nodded.

"Good. That is all that is required," he said matter-of-factly. But the phrase "pride goeth before a fall" came unbidden to Carly's mind. Did she have too much pride?

"Let's go." Marco stood with the ease of a finely tuned animal, unfurling long legs, tall, proud and powerful. He held a bronzed hand out to her. "Time to have some fun."

For a second Carly stared at him and hesitated.

Only two days left. What are you going to do? Then she smiled at him, and the world that hung on her shoulders vanished. "The genie has spoken."

With Marco at her heels, she spent the morning in glorious abandon, trekking over the golden sands circling the island, delighting in the myriad of small fish seen from the rocky peninsular.

By midday they decided to settle at the water's edge.

Walking around the island had been easy. Laughing and chatting with him, almost easy. But as she sat alongside Marco now, a sense of excitement tangled with nerves and heat and...lust, all rolled into one enormous ball in the pit of her stomach. It threatened to overwhelm her, and that was something she hadn't counted on. Keeping her gaze lowered, she made a great fuss of laying her towel down on the golden sand, flicking any minute speck of sand from its edges.

"Your perfectionism is showing," Marco drawled, snagging Carly from her lust-crazed thoughts. Her head snapped up.

Oh, dear Lord. Her jaw dropped, blood pounding through her veins at breakneck speed as her gaze leveled on Marco.

He was bare.

Well, okay, not quite naked—but bare-chested, from his muscled torso to that little dip below his belly button where a smattering of dark, wiry hair peeked above.

Oh, save me. Don't look.

Carly slammed her mouth closed, aware as her cheeks, hell, every single part of her overheated.

In fact he wore a pair of swim shorts—and damn it, they fit perfectly.

The guy was tanned—seemingly all over, because there was no white skin whatsoever showing above his waistline.

Nada. Not one little itty bit.

Carly swallowed hard.

Mr. Genie needed to be renamed, and Mr. Adonis seemed rather apt right now.

Carly dropped the edge of her towel she'd forgotten she was holding.

"How about I rub sun block on your back, hmm?" Marco offered. He held up the bottle of sun block, and her blank gaze traveled from it and up to stare at his quizzical grin.

Rub her back? Oh, Lordy.

"I can't do it if you're clothed. You'll need to strip down to your swimsuit."

"Strip?" she croaked.

Marco's brows wiggled, and his grin widened.

With shaking fingers, Carly lifted her T-shirt over her head, tossing it to the sand, uncaring that the very sand she'd picked with utmost diligence off her towel now littered her shirt. Too bad. She didn't care. Right now, the only thing she was aware of was Marco's hot gaze on her. Hot and bold.

Stripped down to her bikini, Carly chastised herself for bringing such a skimpy thing. Damn it. It barely covered what it needed to. But the thing that irked her most was that as Marco took great care in ensuring she wouldn't burn under the tropical sun, he, blast it, seemed totally unaffected by their closeness. He was playful and attentive, never threatening...and it bugged the hell out of her. She wanted...what? To touch him, to feel.

It only took a second for her to realize Marco's fingers had ceased their caress. Carly groaned and turned over on the warm sand. Frustration singed her emotions. She desperately needed to

cool her overheated body. Throwing her towel aside, she raced for the water, ignoring Marco's call. She dove into the incoming tide and swam a few easy strokes, arms slicing through the clear blue ocean. She tried not to think, to simply concentrate on her strokes, but visions of Marco kept interrupting any sane thought and she gave up. Flipping onto her back, she brushed her tangled hair away from her face.

"Trying to swim to the mainland, *cara*?"

Marco had waded out to her. He held a peeled mango. Without saying another word he tore off a piece and popped it into his mouth, sucking his fingers one at a time, licking them free of juice. Not once, though, did his heated gaze leave her face.

Carly's heart thudded an erratic beat and she hardly noticed her feet sink to the ocean floor. His actions were mesmerizing, and when a trail of juice dribbled down his chin and he licked at it with the tip of his tongue, she thought she'd melt with the blatant heat this one simple action induced.

Oh, hell.

She couldn't take her eyes off his lips, his tongue, thinking what he—they—could do to her. What she wanted them to do to her.

Double hell.

Marco stepped closer and tore off another piece of the mango, running the cool flesh against her lips. They parted, and he fed her, slowly, bit by bit, until it was all gone and the sweet droplets of tangerine-colored nectar dripped down her chin. He had her spellbound, and when he brushed the juice with the pad of his finger then traced the outline of her lips, she swore the world had stopped spinning.

She was losing it.

Carly gasped as Marco's thumb pressed against the pad of her bottom lip. Automatically, the tip of her tongue laved his finger. It tasted sweet, salty and absolutely delicious.

"The fruit of passion," Marco said and licked his lips with a deliberate slowness.

Carly followed his every movement.

Definitely time to change the subject.

"Race you to the reef," she challenged and dove into the water. Escape was the best answer. Escape her feelings and escape impulses she wasn't sure she could deny. Because sure as the sun was yellow, she was having impulses and control was not a word in her vocabulary right now.

“That’s the best imitation of Tarzan I’ve ever seen.” Carly chuckled a few hours later as Marco climbed down from a palm, carrying more of the deliciously sweet finger-sized bananas.

Relaxed as she had ever been, she lay on the sand and stared out across the ocean. The sun had passed its highest point and had begun to descend to the west.

“Fancy seeing the fish up close?” Marco delved into a small bag he’d brought with them and produced flippers, snorkels and masks.

Carly donned the flippers and tried on her mask, but it flopped down her face.

“Here.” Marco stood behind her. The tincture of his musk and the pure maleness of him mingled with the hint of the ocean spray assailed her senses, making her tense. She held her breath as his hands adjusted the strap on her mask. She wished he would hurry. He was too close. She couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe.

“Follow me,” he finally instructed.

She did as she was told, knowing she couldn’t ignore him. Not in a million years.

Within minutes she was up to her waist in the tepid, swirling waters. The tide was on the way in and, as the frothing waves crashed against her, tipping her off balance, Marco snaked out a hand, gripping her elbow to steady her. She froze at his touch.

Yep, way too close.

She tried to ease herself from his grasp. Then, just as suddenly, his hand dropped away and he dived beneath the watery surface. Carly followed.

Surrounded by exotic fish swimming in convoy, she and Marco wound their way into deep crevices. Carly was in awe of the sight before them and every few minutes she surfaced to drag in another lung-full of air before descending again. Rocks, which above looked brown and dull, came to life, and the swaying fronds of seaweed and plant life were lush and alive. As a small school of fish swam by, their tails all seeming to flick in unison, Carly had to stifle the urge to laugh. She gave Marco the thumbs up and smiled before shooting to the surface and crashing through the turgid waves to tread water. She yanked her mask up and wiped her eyes. Her breathing was short and sharp. “That was fabulous. It’s a different world.”

“*Cara*, don’t you realize this yet? This whole island is another world. This paradise is your grotto.”

“That sounds rather magical,” she sighed. Moving toward the shoreline, she stepped onto the sand and bent over to wring out the excess water from her hair. But when she stood, it was to face Marco whose blatant arousal burned in his darkly powerful eyes. She quickly looked away.

“You’re getting burnt.”

“Am I?” Her voice was a soft whisper.

“*Si*. You need to put on more sun block.” Marco walked a few steps away, reached for his bag and pulled out a white tube. “See, I’m a regular boy scout.”

“My hero. Are you prepared for *everything* ?” But the moment she uttered the words, Carly realized how searching they were and blushed to the roots of her hair. She tried to subdue the racing imagery that whirled like a recurring video in her mind, and failed.

“Did you join the Boy Scouts in Italy?” she finally managed to ask, hoping the change of topic would douse the fire igniting in her belly.

“What makes you think I live in Italy?” Marco’s tone was sharply reproofing.

“Well, don’t you? I mean you are Italian, right?”

“*Si*.” But he didn’t expand and, as his fingers slathered the thick cream across her shoulders and down her back to just above the line of her bikini bottom, all air evaporated from her lungs. Her body reacted with a tantalizingly aching awareness to the slick graze of his caress, while her brain struggled with a silent plea. *No. Stop. Don’t tempt me.*

“Italy was the land of my birth, but my mother is English.”

“Oh.” Carly wished she could think of something more intelligent to say, but every word dried up on the tip of her tongue as he continued to massage the cream into her overheated skin. It was like an elixir, setting her on fire with desire. One she really should douse, but didn’t. She played for time, anything to dissipate the want. “When did you come to New Zealand?”

“Ten years ago. I’ve lived in New Zealand and Italy.”

“And your mother?”

Marco faltered. He was clearly uncomfortable, and Carly heard his barely audible sigh. She snatched a look at him over her shoulder, shocked as she saw a deep and abiding sadness etched in the suddenly somber lines of his face.

“My mother lives here now.”

“Is she married?” He hadn’t said mother and father, so Carly presumed Papa Valente wasn’t in the picture. Funny, Papa Valente sounded just like Papa Mason.

“Married. Oh, *si*, Mama marries. Well not at the moment, but...” His voice trailed off and he dropped his hand from her shoulder. “Enough about the real world. This island is not reality. Let’s enjoy it.”

Carly wondered at his sudden change, but chose to say nothing. “Isn’t that the truth. This island definitely isn’t reality. Mind you, the whole scenario is something from cloud cuckoo land,” she said. And who would have believed she would be ensconced with her own version of Romeo.

“Right, like good Boy and Girl Scouts,” Marco instructed, his mood lightening in the flicker of an eye, “we will explore the island.”

He held his hand out to her and smiled. It was as infectious as it was dazzling, and also very sexy, sending Carly’s stomach into a tailspin. Damn it, those butterflies were at it again, kicking up their heels at her expense.

An hour later however, they’d tramped inland after having run out of beach, finding the craggy crevices too steep and sharp to traverse.

The vegetation was quite dense inland, and as Carly edged her way through an archway of palms, she recognized the tinkling sound of water coming from behind a small copse. Veering toward the sound, she brushed aside a heavy frond and came to an abrupt halt. There, on the other side of the clearing, was a sparkling clear waterfall. Like a jewel in a crown of green emeralds, it cascaded over a wall of rock and into a crescent-shaped pool. Carly thought she had died and gone to heaven. The sound was an elixir to her hot and sticky body and beckoned instantly.

“It’s glorious,” she called out as she trailed a hand in the crystal-clear pool.

Marco followed suit, dipped his fingers and grimaced.

“Okay, so it’s chilly,” she admitted.

“Try freezing.”

“Where’s your Boy Scout spirit gone to now? I thought Italian men prided themselves on *machismo* .”

A burst of deep male laughter ricocheted around their hidden oasis. “You calling me a chicken? I am not some Italian youth who sandpapers the front of his jeans to look manly.”

Carly did a double take. “You’re not serious, are you?”

“It has been known.”

“Oh, my.” She blushed to her roots.

“Don’t worry, it is not something I’ve ever resorted to.”

She gulped, working double hard to stifle the urge to glance down his length. “Glad to hear it. I

mean, not that I'm *glad* ...oh, you know what I mean." Well, what else could she say? Sandpaper. Yikes. Talk about desperate. She stole a glance at Marco. There was nothing desperate about this man. He oozed sex without even trying. He was macho, manly, whatever you wanted to call it. He wore it like a second skin, a part of him that was so integral that it was one and the same. Yet, she acknowledged, she barely knew anything about him. There was no way, however, she would call Marco "Mr. Invisible". He couldn't help but stand out.

Carly fanned her face with her hand. She was hot. Way too hot, and it wasn't anything to do with the sun or the temperature. Still clad in her bikini, she slipped and stood under the waterfall, letting it spill around her, sending watery ripples across the pool.

"Why don't you join me, or is it too cold?" she teased.

Marco's eyes narrowed, shadowed by the heavy fall of his coal-black lashes. She couldn't even begin to imagine what he was thinking.

"Is that a challenge?"

Oh, boy. Her tongue licked over her suddenly parched lips. "You could look at it that way, I suppose," she teased.

"I never run from a challenge, *cara mia* ."

His answer hung between them, though it was what he hadn't said that worried her. "I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not." But before she had time to refute the challenge, Marco stripped off the still-damp jeans he'd donned after their swim and joined her.

Naked! He was naked. Completely naked. Oh, my God. She choked back a gasp as he circled her like a lion on the prowl. Her head began to spin and her breasts peaked, aroused to fever pitch, the buds swollen and achingly sensitive.

"You should never challenge a man. It is like that English saying, a red rag to a bull."

There was a roaring in Carly's head and the only thing she could focus on was a bare-chested Marco, the taut muscles of his shoulders and washboard abdomen tapering down...

Her gaze lowered to where the water lapped his torso, and she blinked furiously. Nope, she wouldn't, couldn't and definitely shouldn't think about it, but when Marco bent his head to hers, Carly knew she was lost.

Again.

"I want to meet your challenge."

"How do you know what my challenge is?" she parried, surprised any words could actually pass her lips.

Heaven help her. Carly groaned inwardly at the audacity of her teasing remark. Marco was so close she could feel the heat radiating from his body. So close that when his breath fanned her inordinately sensitive skin, her eyes shuttered momentarily and she gloried in every wave after shockingly wanton wave of sensations.

He laughed then, a deep, barrel-chested sound. “*You are* the challenge. You challenge me with every movement.”

Oh, Lordy! “You’re being fanciful.” But there was a knot of tense emotion blasting her body that Carly knew she had no chance of controlling.

“Fanciful. *Si*. Very much so. I fancy you very much.”

“You do?” Her voice came out as a squeak. Why was it that around Marco she couldn’t think or speak or anything?

“You seem surprised.”

Her eyes widened even further, but she had no time to answer. No time to think. Besides, she wasn’t sure she wanted to think. Marco lowered his head to hers, blocking out the sun, shadowing her as he pulled her against the hardness of his body. Strong arms held her tight. Her body melted into his as his heat threaded a path through her. But when his lips sought hers in an oh-so-very-tantalizing kiss, all air was sucked from her lungs, casting her senses into a world she had never known until now...but wanted to, very much.

She clung to him for dear life, not trusting her limbs to support her if she let go. She wanted his kisses to go on and on. Forever, she prayed as his lips slanted over hers. He slipped a hand beneath her bikini top and began to pay undivided attention to her breasts. Carly reveled in the feeling of pure pleasure his touch elicited. If she had thought she had died and gone to heaven, then surely this was paradise.

Over and over his fingers brushed across one hardened peak till she wanted to scream, his touch sending sparks of liquid fire racing through her, drugging her brain. She could only feel, thought totally impossible. She swayed toward him, aching for more, and when his arousal pulsed and pressed against her stomach, she let out a deep, satisfied sigh.

Marco stilled and pulled back a fraction, his dark, shrouded eyes gazing down at her nakedness, firing a sudden shyness in her. Nervously, she bit at her lower lip. She could still taste him.

“Beautiful,” he whispered. A look of adoration glittered in his blue eyes. Carly stepped out of his arms, surprised at the intense need seemingly taking over her every action and reaction. She’d let her guard down, the sentry to her heart not challenging everything that was Marco. She shook her head at the irony. How she had fought this—her need for Marco’s touch.

Not now, though. Now she wanted it.

She smiled a sweet, tentative sort of smile. Never before had she felt so beautiful to a man. Never had she been so reassured, so wanted.

Be careful, Cupid may pierce your heart.

But Carly refused to listen to the inner warnings.

Just then a flock of birds flew overhead, their cawing startling her, and she slipped, tumbling off balance, her feet sliding out from beneath her. Marco made a grab for her, but she slipped beneath the surface, swallowing a mouthful as she went, her head and arms scraping painfully across the rocky bottom.

In one swift movement, he pulled her choking and spluttering to the surface. Mud and silt rained down her face, stinging her eyes. As she brushed her hair aside, something warm oozed across her hand and trickled between her fingers.

“*Dio mio.*” Marco scooped her up without another word and carried her to the side of the rock pool. Gently, he set her on the edge. He held her arm out to inspect it. “Hold still,” he instructed, as he examined the damage through the rivulets of blood trailing down her arm.

“Don’t fuss, Marco, it’s just a scratch.”

“Hardly. There’s a jagged cut.”

She stared down at her arm. A long, purplish graze littered with shards of ground rock mixed with blood covered the entire length of her arm. A surge of shock and delayed pain ripped through her. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block it out.

“It hurts?”

“Of course it damn well hurts,” she snapped and blinked back unshed tears.

Marco’s lips pursed with concern. “This needs attention.”

“Don’t fuss. Just get me back to the cabin, it’ll be all right.”

“It needs cleaning.”

“Yes, yes. Marco, take me back to the cabin. Please.” Carly wasn’t sure she could keep her emotions buckled much longer. Her arm hurt—a lot. Actually, more than a lot. For a second, she concentrated on her breathing—slow and deep, garnering the strength to subdue the still-threatening tears. Marco swept her back into his arms.

“What the heck are you doing?”

“Taking you home.”

“I can walk,” she protested.

“Not if I can carry you.”

“But...”

Marco interrupted. “Woman, are you going to argue till you bleed to death?”

“It’s not that bad,” she whimpered, knowing her protests were feeble. But goodness, how could she cope with this? The man was naked as the day he was born.

“It’s not good, either,” he advised. “You have a large graze and you’re bleeding.”

“At least it’s red and not blue blood like royals,” she tried to joke.

Marco didn’t laugh.

“You have to do something first, Mr. Genie,” Carly whispered. As another bout of pain ripped through her, she squeezed her eyes closed.

“Your wish is my command.”

Her eyes opened and she battled to douse the flush of heat that stained her cheeks. Okay, she could do this. “Well, do you think you could actually put some clothes on?”

“Oh...is that all?”

That all? Wasn’t it enough he stood there buck naked, holding her?

But without saying a word, Marco propped her against a rocky outcrop. Her eyes fluttered open, but she refused to let her gaze drop. Oh, no, siree. She wouldn’t look.

Much as she’d like to.

She squeezed them shut again.

They say hearing is the last thing to go, and boy, oh, boy, she could hear. She heard Marco slide on his jeans, heard his grunt as he pulled the taut fabric over obviously still-damp skin and heard the zip slide up.

Then he was at her side again, lifting her into his arms. “Now do me a favor. Be quiet, lie still. We’ll be home in no time.”

Suitably chastised, Carly did as she was told and lay still in his arms, her head resting against his

shoulder. She said nothing, but neither did Marco, though nothing could drown out the roar of his heart as it beat in rapid unison with hers.

Never had she been so glad to be back at their cabin. It had taken a lot longer than she'd expected, but Marco never complained and carried her the entire way.

"Stay there," he instructed, depositing her on her bed and retreating to the bathroom. She heard him opening the cupboards and a few minutes later he returned carrying antiseptic cream, a bandage and a bowl of warm water.

"What are you going to do?"

"Play doctor."

Carly's eyes widened. "Now wait a minute, what do you know about first aid?"

"Enough. You want your arm to get infected?"

"Of course not, but..." Carly's words trailed off as she looked down at the vicious laceration. It wasn't that she didn't want him treating her, but even now uncertainty ran deep. Only a short time ago she had been in his arms, kissing him, drugged by his touch.

She should have known better, should have resisted temptation. Never before had she thought being wounded would be her savior.

"It's stopped bleeding, but it won't take much to set it off. It looks like something out of a horror movie."

Carly grimaced. "Thanks a bunch. So what am I, Lily Munster?"

"I don't think it's very deep. Lots of bleeding, like a head wound."

As a grim-faced Marco cleaned away the embedded blood and grime, she bit down on her tongue, holding back tears as waves of pain washed over her.

But, like a knight in shining armor, he treated her like his queen, bandaging her wound then carrying her to the bathroom so she could clean herself up.

Marco took over. Dealt with her injury, cooked dinner. Now, as he put away the last of the evening meal, Carly watched him work in silence.

"You're some guy, Marco," she admitted.

He cocked an eyebrow, smiling slightly, but said nothing and continued cleaning the kitchen.

“Cook, nursemaid, doctor, Tarzan. Although your tree-climbing skills need a bit of a shake up,” she teased.

“Thanks very much. Next time we need a bunch of bananas from the tallest tree this side of the island, I’ll let you climb.”

“Not a problem. I was a regular tomboy as a child. The first to climb to the top of the jungle gym.”

“I’ll bet.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Oh, *si*, I believe you to be the best of all challengers.”

Challenge.

Carly’s mind filled with memories of his kisses, his touch, and her throat dried up. Deciding it best to divert her attention, and hopefully Marco’s, she gazed out the french doors. Night had arrived. Day two was almost over. Suddenly, Carly was hit by an overwhelming wave of tiredness. It inched through her, limb by limb, encasing her in a desperate need to sleep. Her eyes fluttered closed and her head lolled to one side and within minutes, her breathing was regular.

Glued to the chair, Marco was unable to drag his gaze away from a sleeping Carly. Guilt, oppressive and weighty, coiled in impenetrable knots in his gut. He’d made another quick call to the office. All was well, but it hadn’t lightened his mood, which was deathly black.

Okay, so things were going smoothly on the mainland. He should be ecstatic. The deal was sealed and going ahead as scheduled. In several months CV Hotels would be starting the next phase of their expansion to include the boutique hotel market. Why the hell then did he not feel content?

A whispered snuffle escaped Carly’s lips, and she stirred, drawing Marco out of his self-censure. She turned onto her side, and the quilt he’d draped over her fell to the ground.

Pushing himself out of his chair, he stooped and picked it up. About to put it back over her, he hesitated and brought it to his face. He inhaled. He could smell her fragrance, heady and teasing.

Lavender.

The perfume tangled with memories of his childhood, of Italy, of his mother, his stepfathers...

His eyes shuttered, and an overwhelming sense of loss ripped through him, a pain so physical,

yet it was merely his mind reeling with past hurts. He dropped back into the chair, and his shoulders sagged. He cradled his head in his hands and took a deep, steadying breath.

He used to hate the smell of lavender.

Used to.

But now... His gaze dropped to the woman in front of him, at peace in her sleepy world. Now, the scent meant only one thing.

Carly.

He watched her, ensconced in her tranquil sleep-filled oblivion. He had promised her four days. He would keep his promise.

Outside, in the distance, the clash of a summer storm rumbled ever closer. Lightning streaked across the horizon and lit the sky, quickly followed by several boisterous claps of thunder.

Carly bolted upright. "What?"

Stark terror spread across her face, and her fear-filled gaze darted around the dimly lit room.

Marco was at her side instantly and crouched beside the sofa. "It's a storm over the ocean. Not too close."

But her face paled as a second and then a third jagged bolt of lightning cracked overhead. Rolls of thunder reverberated around them with an increasing viciousness and made their small cabin shake with each fresh burst.

"Not close?" Carly whimpered. "Could have fooled me. It's loud enough."

"*Si*." But it wasn't as loud as his heartbeat. To his ears, that thundered a thousand times louder. Marco swallowed hard as her now-familiar fragrance mingled with the tangled web of his thoughts. "You are afraid?"

"Don't laugh."

"You see me laughing?" he replied somberly. "It's time for bed." Bracing himself against the sofa, he bent and picked her up.

"What are you doing?"

"Carrying you to bed."

"Bed." It was a croak, and her eyes widened.

“Perhaps you would prefer to sleep on the sofa?”

He held her tightly. So tight he could feel the erratic throb of her heartbeat against his. Her fear of storms was obvious with each burst of thunder, but it was the subtle looks that passed from her to him, the way her heated gaze focused on him, his throat, rising to rest on his mouth, that told Marco Carly was as excited and aroused as he was.

“I hate storms.” Her gaze swiveled toward the window.

“Nature’s revenge on us mere mortals,” he agreed.

“It’s as if the whole world is angry.”

“Only fleeting, though. The sun will shine another day. I think you need to get some rest. It’s been an eventful day.”

He carried her over the threshold to her room and laid her gently on the bed at the precise moment lightning flashed, haloing the room in an eerie electric blue glow.

Carly squeezed her eyes shut again, counting aloud. “It’s a game, you see,” she said. “You count from the lightning to the thunder, then you’re meant to know how far away it is. Or close.”

“A children’s game?”

Carly simply nodded, because right at that moment nature didn’t disappoint, as one thunderous roll after another clapped overhead until the cabin seemingly would rock off its foundations.

Marco watched her with increasing concern. “You’ll be okay?” he asked.

She squeezed her eyes tighter, nodding, her lips moving as she silently continued to count.

“Good night, sweet dreams.”

Her eyes burst open. “You’re going?”

“I must go, *cara* . Otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?”

“Otherwise I might want to stay.”

“You don’t want to?”

“No, *cara* , I want to, and that is the problem.”

“Please stay, Marco. Just for a while.”

A while? A smile tugged the corners of his mouth, and he sat beside her.

Fear-filled eyes looked up at him. “Thank you. I know it’s irrational, but I hate to be alone in a storm.”

“I will stay.” With that, Marco stretched out beside her, his length shadowing hers. He pulled her to him, cradling her from her fears, and felt her exhale, long and slow. Her heartbeat that had moments ago echoed the deafening heavens when he’d carried her in his arms slowed, too.

“When I was a child, there was a storm,” she began.

“A bad one?”

“Yes. They said it was the storm of the decade. Mum had gone out, leaving me to babysit the younger ones.”

“You were alone?”

“Yes.”

“And that happened often?”

“More than it should. But it was my life. I didn’t know any different.”

“And you were alone in the storm?”

Carly turned away from the thrashing storm outside. “Windows broke, the rain lashed the house, inside and out. I didn’t know what to do. Then the power went out. I went outside to try and board up the windows, but I was only ten, Marco. Ten years old and trying to be an adult.” Tears gathered in her eyes.

“Too hard for a child,” he acknowledged. He held her hand, fingers lacing with hers, wishing he could have protected her then and wanting to protect her now, to ease her pain. “Shush, don’t cry.”

Turning her to him, he brushed his fingers down her cheek, wiping away her tears. Her breath stilled as his thumb caressed the outline of her mouth and his eyes held hers. Soulful and full of promise.

“Please don’t leave me tonight, Marco. I don’t want to be alone.”

“Are you sure?”

“*Si*,” she teased, her accent exaggerated.

“I can see I have to give you a few Italian lessons.”

“There’s a lot I’d like to learn.”

“*Amore mio*, I would teach you everything.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

Marco’s touch set Carly on fire. It was sublime, everything she thought it would be, and more.

As she lay on the bed, she watched him strip, clothes falling where he dropped them. He was a magnificent man and she couldn’t take her eyes off him. Broad shoulders tapered to slim hips, the smattering of jet-black chest hair beckoning her fingers. Carly lowered her gaze, suddenly filled with a raging, hungering need to explore his glorious body and any residual calm she thought she possessed shattered as he eased his long, taut body next to hers.

He reached for her, and her body grazed his, chest to chest, hip to hip, the hard sensual thrust of his arousal a potent reminder that Marco was all male. Slowly his eyes darkened to a blue-black, holding hers in a powerful force. His lips sought her mouth, arousing her with a whisper-soft touch. Carly groaned and her body yielded, arching against his. Marco’s breathing came in short, sharp intakes and the pulse in the base of his throat throbbed. She ran a finger over it, felt it skip an erratic dance. She couldn’t help but smile, enjoying his reaction to her.

“Lesson one,” he whispered in her ear.

Carly braced herself, waiting with excited expectation, her eyes closing the moment before he dropped soft, shivery kisses on her eyelids then her earlobes and continuing down to her throat.

Her skin burned with desire, her body consumed by a basic need. She wound her arms around his neck, holding on, praying it wasn’t a dream and, like a genie, he would vanish. With the tips of her fingers sliding through his silky hair, the texture a sensual play against her own soft skin, she tilted his head down to her breast.

“You taste delicious,” he groaned as he suckled on one pebble-hard nub.

Hearing his whispered ecstasy, she smiled, satisfied. Nothing else mattered. “I’m learning,” she managed to say between the teasing kisses he dotted across her lips, her eyes, her face.

“You’re a good student,” he agreed and sought solace from her other breast. “Your body is so responsive, *cara mia* .”

Carly couldn’t think clearly, her mind fragmented. She could only feel, touch and taste. All thought beyond the now was gone.

Reacting with a compulsion and desire so strong, she lifted her hips to his. His erection pulsed against her stomach and he began to explore her intimately, teasing her to even greater heights than she thought possible. Emboldened, she slipped her hand between them and clasped him, smiling as Marco exhaled a harsh, ragged gasp.

“Lesson number two.”

She smiled. “I try to please.”

“You do. Very much.”

Lost in a sensory world, Carly’s mind went blank. Only Marco touching her, urging her with his fingers as they flickered over her slickness, was important. She gloried in the sensations whirling through her veins, the rhythm of his heightened touch. Finally, as she reached for some intangible goal, allowing her body to surrender completely, her cry of pleasure pierced the night as Marco brought her to heart-wrenching, joyous fulfillment.

Nothing had prepared Carly for this. Nothing. She lay dazed in utter contentment, savoring the spine-tingling moment, too happy to breathe, too fulfilled to think.

Finally, as every wonderful sensation washed over her in a gentle ebbing caress, she let out a shuddering sigh of total release and contentment. “That was beautiful.”

“Beauty for the beautiful, *amore* .” Marco grinned and trailed a finger down the side of her cheek. “Lesson number three, *cara* . A man makes sure his woman is pleased,” he whispered into the fall of her hair and again began dotting butterfly-soft kisses down the curve of her throat. It sent goose bumps shimmying up and down her spine, an instant heat pulsing between her thighs.

“You have pleased me. I’ve never...” Her voice trailed off, and an embarrassed heat rushed to her cheeks.

But Marco pulled back and the tip of his finger lifted her chin. Her gaze met his.

“Pleasure, Marco. That was the pinnacle of pleasure. I feel complete.” And she was. It echoed through her body in a continuous salve of pure joy and made her heart sing. “You’ve made me come alive. I don’t want to even breathe in case it disappears.” She ran her hands across his skin, reveling in the feel of it beneath her fingertips. “I never want to lose this feeling. To lose...”

“Shush. That is impossible. We have all night.” Dark, teasing glints flickered in Marco’s passion-filled eyes.

“All night. Sounds perfect.” Reaching up, Carly trailed a path over the rough sandpaper stubble of his chin. “Everything I touch is so heightened, so erotic and arousing,” she whispered. “Are our lessons finished?”

One dark eyebrow arched humorously. “Life is one long lesson.”

Carly curved a hand around his blatantly aroused penis, stroking the thick shaft. She arched back, her legs parting. "Then hadn't we better get on with the lesson?" she asked with a wicked smile.

"The final lesson is about to begin. Kiss me. Now," Marco instructed and with a gentleness that surprised and warmed her, he edged himself to her moist center, tentative and teasing as he nudged at her slick folds.

"Now, Marco. Please?"

He smiled down at her. "Patience, *cara* . A man needs to know his journey before he starts."

Inch by delicious inch, Marco entered her. Carly reveled in the feel of him, wanting him to fill her. Faster. Harder.

"At last," Marco sighed and captured her lips. "I've waited a long time for this."

Lilting laughter slid from Carly. "A few days."

"It seems a lifetime."

Carly silently agreed. It did. For some unknown reason, she felt as if the past had dissolved. Only now mattered. Only being with him, holding him to her. She felt cherished... Even thinking the word took her by surprise. It was not something she'd felt before. Ever.

Marco was holding back, when what she wanted was for him to bury himself in her, deeply, over and over, but at the same time, take it slow so she could savor every single glorious second.

"You are Aphrodite, the temptress," he said. "And I am definitely tempted. Your skin is silk and satin." His voice was hoarse with need, with unmasked desire etched across his face. His hands caressed her in ever-increasing circles, from her breasts, down the flat plane of her stomach, lower and lower till he came to the junction of her thighs. He laved a path from one aroused nipple to the other with the tip of his tongue. "You taste of the ocean and of passion, Carly. I cannot wait. For two days your lushness has lured me. Now, we finish what we have started."

Speech died in Carly's throat as he took hungry possession of her mouth. She clasped his shoulders and pulled him to her.

More. She wanted more.

Her body yearned for him, craved his touch, the taste of him. He was her drug. His lips plundered hers, devouring, taking everything she had, everything she willingly offered with an equal need, until she rocked in unison with him and the flames of desire overtook her. Finally, he cried out her name, and together they soared to a deep and total fruition.

“*Cara.*” Marco’s strident voice interrupted her slumber. She rolled over. This wasn’t how it was meant to be—afterwards. She didn’t want to wake up. She wanted to dream, to remember, to...

“Wake up.”

Carly bolted upright, blinked several times and groaned as the morning light seared her barely awake brain. “What’s the matter?”

“We have a problem.” Marco spoke so matter-of-factly goose bumps slithered up and down her arms, a prickling fear welling in the pit of her stomach.

Was this how morning afters started? What was he going to say? *Sorry, it was a mistake, can you please go to your own room.* Carly looked about. She was in her own room. She didn’t want to hear this and shimmied down the bed, yanking the cover up over her. “Not now, Marco. I’m tired.”

Marco’s warm breath brushed across the curve of her neck. “I’m sorry, but we have to discuss this.”

She pushed the corner of the sheet away from her face and looked up into his very somber expression. It didn’t bode well. “What’s got you so serious this early in the morning? Don’t tell me you’re not a morning person,” she teased. She knew she was babbling. Anything to stay the execution.

“*Cara.*” Hearing the gentle but insistent tone in his voice, she sat up, careful to wrap the sheet about her. If it was over already, no need to let him get an eyeful, she thought sourly.

“Protection.”

She looked blank. “Protect...oh, my God.”

“Even He can’t help us. Are you?”

“Me?” she squeaked.

“Yes.” Gone were the passion-filled eyes, the twinkling glint of mischief.

She blustered. “Yes, of course.” She waved a dismissive hand at him. “Don’t worry about it.” What were the chances? A one-off. Surely not?

Marco visibly relaxed, and Carly tried to follow his lead. “It’s my fault,” he said. “I could not hold back. I am a man. I should have had more sense. Next time...”

“Next time?”

“*Si*, like now, my sweet.” Marco grinned and glanced down at his erection. Her gaze followed. “Even now my body yearns for you, sweet Carly.”

“It does?” Oh, yeah, it sure did.

“But this time,” he said, turning to the side table beside the bed and reaching for the foil packet. “This time we are prepared, together.”

“Whoa hold on.” Carly eyed the condom packet. “They were there all along?”

“It seems your friends wanted to make sure you were prepared. Just as well.” He gave her a wink.

Carly had no time to reply, no time to think. Again, she could only feel as he circled her in his arms and led her on a journey of slow, body-tingling, mind-blowing lovemaking. A journey she never wanted to end, one she thought could never be repeated.

But it was. Over and over again.

Chapter Seven

The end had arrived.

Marco lay beside her, asleep, his breathing regular and one arm slung possessively across her waist.

Four days had come and gone. Funny how a few days ago she’d wanted it to be over as quickly as possible. Now, she wasn’t so sure.

As Marco turned toward her, his long, lean frame rubbed against her bare skin and the tangled sheets fell away, leaving him naked. Her eyes shuttered, blotting him out of view. She had to be strong. Get back to business.

But, just as it had the last few days, his touch sent an unwavering heat threading through her veins, lighting a deep and intense need to be with him, to feel him inside her. Shutting her eyes couldn’t drown out those feelings. They intensified every minute. It was as if his body was a current and sent a shaft of longing straight through her like an electric bolt.

Carly let out a heavy sigh, smothering the sound with her hand as a single tear trailed down her cheek. She swiped at it and rolled away from the tempting heat of the man beside her. She didn’t want their time in paradise to end. She wanted it to go on—forever.

But forever didn’t happen. Forever wasn’t reality. It was impossible. She had a life. Marco had a life, though she still didn’t know much about it.

Okay, so he had an old bike. He was Italian and his mother was English. That summed up her entire knowledge of Marco Valente.

Just as she'd kept her life a secret.

These four days had been an emotional foreplay, a temptation of what life...

No.

Carly gritted her teeth. She wouldn't go down that track. She had to remember her goals, her motivation.

Their time in paradise wasn't infinite and, despite the lovingly sensual reality that had catapulted her into another world, making her lie awake for hours while he slept like a babe beside her, it had ended.

And that was that.

Easing from the bed, she snatched up her toweling robe and put it on, yanking the belt tight around her. Perhaps if she felt something other than Marco, it would jolt her back to undeniable reality. She needed time alone. Time when Marco's body didn't tempt her every second. She was addicted to this man. He was her drug.

On silent feet, she padded outside. The morning had barely woken, the sky a rainbow of colors as the sun tipped over the thick green crest of the island and the tuis and fantails began their morning chorus. Leaning against the porch railing, Carly pulled the collar of her robe up around her neck. It might be the heart of summer, but she was frozen to the bone. And confused.

Mindlessly, she stared out to the horizon.

Seagulls dipped and dived in a circle off shore. They'd obviously found their breakfast. The tide was on the wane, and a strip of dark, wet sand lay exposed—just like her heart, Carly admitted wryly. Tears welled in her eyes, but she refused to cry. Refused to give in.

Oh, God. What was she to do?

Marco Valente was one sexy man. He was also the man she had, in four short days, come to love—totally and utterly, with a pure intent that shocked her to the core. This wasn't part of her life plan, part of *her* reality, but had snuck up on her, taking her unaware.

“Carly?”

She didn't move, but her body registered Marco's presence as a heat pervaded her heart and she relived in a fraction of a second every moment of their four days.

“What are you doing outside? Come back to bed.” His hands, warm and reassuring, reached out

to her shoulders and pulled her back gently so she leaned against his hard frame. He was aroused. Again. She couldn't help but smile. This man was so very blatant.

"We have time." His breath fanned her cheek, and she let her head drop back, wallowing in the scent of him. His tongue caressed her exposed neck, eliciting a shiver from her. Her nipples were hard and sensitive, wanting and needing him. She turned and his arms enveloped her, crushing her to his body. Cradling her to his chest, Marco carried her back to bed.

Carly didn't utter a sound. She wanted this—with a vengeance. Her time may be almost up, but she determined she would enjoy it to the absolute last second. She would ignore the warring words in her brain and the increasing fear rising in a wave of panic in her gut. A fear that reminded her of her past, one she never, ever wanted to recreate.

Why?

Because reality would catch up. Eventually.

Carly lifted her gaze skyward, the whirring sound in the distance catching her attention and forcing her to face up to the present. She so desperately wanted to ignore the sound, believe it wasn't happening, but it was. It had to—in the end. The sound became louder until she had to admit the helicopter was about to arrive.

Paradise was dissolving.

"*Cara.*" Marco cradled her to him.

She would never tire of his touch. Struggling to contain her grief, Carly mustered every last crumb of strength and turned to him, pasting a smile on her face. "The helicopter is here." Her voice was but a whisper as she stated the obvious. She filled her lungs with a deep, steadying breath. "It's time."

It was over. The words twisted and churned with tumultuous viciousness in her heart, and her hands shook and her knees began to buckle beneath her. Marco reached out to support her, but she flinched and jerked away from him. She couldn't bear for him to touch her. Not now that it was over.

His hands fell away. She wanted to cry, *no please, hold me, don't leave me*. But she couldn't, wouldn't. Her mouth opened and closed several times before she could utter a sound.

"So, this is it then?" she whispered, struggling to sound cheery while inside she cried silent tears, her words awkward and trite.

"It's been a pleasure."

"Pleasure," she repeated parrot fashion. Her moist eyes caught his, drinking in as much as she could in the few minutes they had left. They were the bluest eyes she'd ever seen and lightened

and darkened with his mood. The hard planes of his bronzed cheeks and his killer smile sent a heady anticipation spiraling down her spine and made her hunger for his touch. The touch she had to deny.

She dragged her gaze away, suddenly taking intense interest in the sand-splattered patio. “Yes, it was. Thank you.” She turned from him then, retreating inside and quietly dressing, tossing her clothes into her case. The end of paradise.

She tried to tell herself that everything had to end. But it didn’t make it any better. She still ached inside. Desperately.

Thank you!

All she had said was *thank you*. Marco forced himself to retain an air of detachment. Without speaking, he escorted her to the waiting helicopter.

It was the same pilot who’d ferried them four days earlier. “Good holiday, was it?”

Carly nodded, but Marco couldn’t trust himself to speak so remained mute. The pilot eyed them both and shrugged. Holding herself stiffly, arms hugging her waist, she ignored him then seated herself and buckled in. The pilot went through procedures and within minutes they were off, leaving paradise behind.

For twelve long, drawn-out minutes, she refused to acknowledge he was even at her side and, for the first time in his life, he found himself stymied. Damn it. He had his pride. He wouldn’t beg.

Where was his control, his renowned ability to tackle the most difficult business acquisitions?

She wasn’t an acquisition.

No-, but he wanted her. A lot.

“Would you care to have dinner with me tonight?” he asked.

“Dinner?”

“Yes, the meal in the evening,” he teased.

For a moment, Marco thought she would say yes. Wanted her to very much, which surprised him. He hadn’t realized how four days could change a man’s thinking. But it had. He’d entered this deal with Carly for fun, a chance respite from his own hectic world of responsibilities and his mother’s constant marriage prattle.

And now? Now...well, it was just dinner. That was all. Wasn't it?

"I don't think so," she finally replied.

"No?"

"No," she repeated, her refusal curt.

Marco wasn't used to begging, but as the helicopter began to land, he was filled with a sense of urgency, of unrequited need. "Another time then?"

"No. I can't." Carly scrambled from her seat, but he grabbed her wrist just as she made for the exit.

"Can't or won't?"

"Take your pick. But the answer is still the same."

"Yet you shared many hours in my arms."

"That was then, Mr. Valente," she said with a stiffness in her voice he hadn't heard for four days. "And this is now. Now we go back to our lives. I go to work and you go...wherever you want to."

As she shook him off, Marco realized with a jolt that even now, after days and nights together, neither of them really knew anything about the other or had even offered that information.

Paradise Island truly had been a fantasy.

She grabbed her bag and delved into its depths. She turned to him and held out an envelope to him.

"What's that?"

"Payment."

"*Porca miseria*," Marco swore. He closed the space between them. He easily towered over her. She tilted her head back, squinting as the sun shone in her eyes, and raised a hand to shade her face, but he grabbed her wrist and she gasped. Did she feel the heat between them as he did?

"You think I want your money?"

"That's not what you said before we went. You agreed."

"Ah, but all that changed didn't it, *cara* ? Your friends didn't come. We had time for ourselves, and...sex. You hired me to play your gigolo, and now you toss me aside."

“But, the job...the terms.”

“Damn the job and its terms. This is about us.”

“There *is* no us, Mr. Valente. It’s over. Get it? You were merely an employee.”

Anger boiled inside Marco. Not at Carly, for she obviously knew what she wanted and had gotten it. He was angry with himself. His gut churned, and he fisted his hands at his side. He’d been a fool even to agree in the first place. Had thought that perhaps, maybe...

Fool!

“We were meant to be on the island with my friends, and since neither of us had come with a phone, we had to stay. Simple as that. Nothing more,” she said, taking several steps back. “The contract ended the moment the helicopter flew off and my friends didn’t turn up.”

“Yet you were happy to *play*, sweetheart,” he drawled.

Carly’s face bleached.

Just then he felt the buzz of his mobile hidden in his jacket pocket. A slow smile spread across his face.

Revenge is often sweet, so they say. Pulling it from his pocket, he flicked it open.

“I’m here,” he said.

Carly stared at him. Her mouth moved, but no sound came out. He searched her face, waiting, keeping his stance rigid, knowing she would go on the attack.

She didn’t disappoint him. “You had a phone all along,” she accused, jabbing an index finger at his chest. “I asked you the day we arrived if you had one. You said no.”

Marco looked away, aware of a definite stain of heat beneath his skin. He disconnected his call and pocketed his mobile.

“At least you have the decency to look guilty,” she chastised.

He snorted, uncomfortable with her accurate barb. “Do you think a phone would have improved the situation?”

“Of course.”

“How? We would have gotten off the island and you could have worked your butt off, instead of enjoying four days. I made a decision. You said you wanted to escape to paradise with your

friends.”

“My friends weren’t there, remember?”

“Was it so bad? Didn’t you enjoy yourself?”

Carly’s lips pursed into a thin, disapproving line.

“Okay.” He shrugged, refusing to acknowledge his guilt. “So I lied. I’m not sorry.”

He was. Why else would he feel so damned guilty?

“Tell me one thing, Marco, since I didn’t hear it ring while we were on the island, I presume you deliberately kept it on silent. Did you?” she challenged.

Marco nodded, and Carly’s breath escaped in one long hiss. “If there is one thing I hate, it’s a liar and a cheat.”

“What are you complaining about, *cara* ?”

“Don’t you *cara* me, buster.”

“You got what you wanted. Don’t complain.”

Carly shivered. “Wanted? How the heck do you know what I wanted?”

A slow smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. “Oh, *cara mia* , I know. Your body told me.”

“Trust you to bring it down to sex.”

“It wasn’t just sex. It was desire. Blatant, scorching and flagrantly hot sex,” he said, watching with triumph as a blush traveled the curve of her delicious neck. “It was more than good, you can’t deny it.”

Carly’s eyes widened.

“See, you can’t, can you?” He sure couldn’t. It had been pure heat. Sizzling, mind-numbing and unforgettable. But, despite the ring of truth, Marco felt a sadness and disappointment that everything had come down to this.

A play of emotions crossed Carly’s sweet face, and she let out a world-weary sigh. “You lied to me.”

“No, *cara* . You do that by handing me money.”

“I always keep my promises.”

“All very admirable, but I don’t need your money. I have my own, plenty of it.”

Just then a limousine rounded the corner and pulled up beside them. A black-suited driver with a crisp white shirt and dark tie exited and held open one of the rear doors. He nodded toward Marco. Now the truth would be out.

For the second time in as few minutes, Carly’s mouth gaped in astonishment. “What does that man want?”

“He wants me,” Marco stated tonelessly.

“You?” Carly looked from the driver and back to Marco, an unspoken question in her eyes.

“*Si*, he is my driver.”

“But you ride a bike. That rattle trap Moto Guzzi or whatever it’s called.”

“I do. For a hobby, to relax and unwind.”

“What are you talking about? This doesn’t make any sense. You wear black leather.”

Marco couldn’t hold back a smile. “You judge a book by its cover, isn’t that what they say in English? I ride a bike. I wear leathers.” He shrugged. “The car is also mine.”

“It is?”

Marco watched Carly with the intensity of a hawk.

“Don’t,” she demanded.

“Don’t what?”

“Look at me like that. You make me feel as if you’re dissecting me.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s very difficult not to admire a beautiful woman.”

“Enough, Marco. Forget it.”

“As you wish, *cara*, but the truth is, I’m a wealthy man.” Then, without another word, he spun on his heels and headed for the limousine.

Panic hit. He was leaving. Out of her life.

“Where are you going?”

Half in the car, he halted and faced her. Once again the mask was back in place. Carly’s fingers itched to slap it right off.

“I have a meeting. You have your car?”

She nodded. “So, um, this is it then?”

Marco shrugged. “We’ve had our fun.”

His gaze traveled in a slow and deliberate fashion, raking her from head to foot, stripping her naked in broad daylight. “You got what you wanted. You didn’t want me when you thought me penniless. Are you having second thoughts, *cara* ?” His mouth twisted in a derisive curl. “Forget it. I’m not for sale.”

“And I’m not buying.” Prickles of sweat beaded between her breasts. She stared at him. She wouldn’t look away, wouldn’t kowtow to this man. “I didn’t ask for a liar or a cheat, Marco. My father was one of those. I don’t need another in my life.”

Marco’s mouth turned downwards, lips in a thin sneer. “So, our deal is done. You got your four days of play.”

For a moment, silence hung between them, and Carly struggled and failed to douse the longing she felt for him or find a suitable response. “I thought...maybe,” she said, fighting one part of her that said, okay, this is the end, the other that desperately wanted to hang onto what they’d had these last four days, “that perhaps we could have dinner.”

That she had already declined his invitation for the same didn’t escape her.

“Dinner?” Then he took her by complete surprise and burst into a deep-throated laugh. “I see.”

“What’s so funny?”

“Now you see I am not just a poor motorcyclist, you want marriage perhaps? You think to tempt me. The temptation is strong, *cara* ,” he said, letting his gaze linger on her, “but not for marriage.”

Carly’s jaw dropped. “Marriage to you? You must be joking.” How wrong could he be? Money wasn’t her elixir, though lust was. Marco Valente was.

“*Si*. It’s a joke,” he agreed, interrupting her silent internal argument. “Marriage is definitely not an offer.”

Thank God she’d said nothing. Hadn’t pleaded. Carly crossed her arms across her chest as tangled fingers of humiliation clawed at her heart and soul. She lifted her chin and gave Marco

what she hoped was a chilling stare. “Good, because I’m not interested. Marriage is not on my To Do list.” She turned to walk away, then halted mid-step and shot him a glare over her shoulder. “Oh, and by the way, the offer of dinner is definitely off.”

How Carly arrived home was quite beyond her, the journey a blur. The moment she opened the door to her apartment, she dropped her bag where she stood.

Working on automatic pilot, she filled the kettle with water and plugged it in. Coffee, strong, hot and black, was in order.

Just like Marco’s.

Cruel. She shouldn’t think about him.

But as stinging tears began, unhinging her for a second time, there was no way on earth she could stop them. She sniffed, walked to the bathroom for a box of tissues and blew her nose loudly. What she wanted was comfort food. Chocolate—and lots of it.

Carly fell to the sofa and huddled under the aubergine velvet throw. It may have been eighty-five degrees outside, but she was frozen to the core, dead cold and miserable as hell. The whistle on the kettle blew and thankfully switched itself off. She couldn’t be bothered, didn’t care and couldn’t move. She didn’t want to do anything.

But wallow in self-pity.

So? Wasn’t a girl allowed to wallow if she wanted?

And she certainly wanted to.

What a fool she’d been. She snatched a fifth tissue and wiped away the ceaseless tears just as the phone rang.

Damn.

She wanted to ignore it. She tried, but her conscience got the better of her. Maybe it was Marco. Maybe he was going to apologize.

Don’t be stupid. He doesn’t even have your phone number. Or you, his.

Carly grabbed the phone. “Hello.”

“Carly, is that you? You sound sick.”

“Hi, Maxine. I’m not, just, um, a bit tired, that’s all.”

“Tired?” Maxine giggled. “Sounds like our plan worked.”

Confused, Carly could barely answer. She just wanted to go away and hide, not talk to dear, faithful Maxine.

“Did Mr. Invisible give you a good time then? Your hunk had the rest of us jealous.”

“He did?”

“Sure. Who wouldn’t be? Dark, sexy as can be and devoted to you.”

“Yeah, devoted,” Carly parroted.

“You don’t seem so sure, honey. What’s wrong?”

Carly bit her lip. “Oh, Maxine,” she wailed, unable to halt the torrent of tears once more.

“What’s up? Didn’t he come? You weren’t alone for all the four days, were you?” Maxine gasped. “Oh, God, Carly, I’m sorry. The thought horrifies me.”

“I wish.”

“Why? Surely it can’t have been that bad.”

Carly hesitated. What was she going to say? The man was invisible because he didn’t exist. That he was a heavenly hunk, but a liar, and oh, so sexy and loving and passionate and stirred her senses until they were so hot they ignited? That she loved him, but was scared. Confused.

“Come on, Carly, you can tell Auntie Maxie. What’s up?”

“It’s over.”

“Over? As in *finito* , kaput, over and out?”

Carly nodded then whispered. “Yes.”

Her friend was clearly speechless, and she decided now was as good a time as any to end this call. “Maxine, I’m not up to long explanations right now.”

“Perhaps later?” Maxine offered.

Carly grimaced. Maxine was like a dog with a bone. She wouldn’t give up on a good bit of gossip. She’d want the ins and outs and all the gory details.

“Maybe,” she agreed, but knew there was no way on earth she would recite the whole messy

saga to anyone. Never. Ever. She said her goodbyes and hung up.

“What a fool. Really dumb.” Carly groaned out loud. Why had she allowed herself to become so entangled in make-believe? She’d been sucked into four days with her mysterious Mr. Romeo and had stupidly fallen totally and irretrievably in love with him.

Romeo had conquered Juliet.

“Not fair!” Carly wailed and erupted in another torrent of tears. It wasn’t meant to happen. She didn’t want it to. She’d never planned on romance.

It obviously hadn’t been part of Marco’s plan, either.

Carly grimaced. Not only had she made a fool of herself, Marco had thought she wanted the romance, even suggesting she angled for marriage. The man had laughed his head off at her.

Her mouth trembled, and she gnawed at her swollen bottom lip. She felt so confused. One part of her wanted to admit her love to the heavens, while her normal, self-controlled, goal-setting self denied it.

But she loved the heavenly hunk.

Okay, so she’d known him only four days and really knew nothing about him, but what the heck, her body and heart told her differently. Who was she to disobey their commands?

She’d been there, done that with kids, albeit playing mummy to her siblings and mothering her mother when she’d staggered through her own brand of ineptitude. They were years Carly tried to forget and had put her off marriage and babies and unreliable husbands for life.

Carly sniffed and pulled the last tissue from the box, eyeing the overflowing rubbish bin.

Nope. She was better without a man. She would get on with life without any interruptions from heavenly hunks of any kind, especially not from one willing to play Romeo on a whim.

As her eyelids fluttered and her breathing steadied, she reminded herself of her newest rule in her life. “If there is one thing I’ll never, ever do again,” she whispered as her voice slurred with sleep, “I’ll never invent a mystery man. No more hunks for this gal.”

Chapter Eight

Three Months Later

A choking bile rose in Carly’s throat, making her gag. She shot out of bed, ignoring the chill of the early morn, and raced for the bathroom. A fleeting glance at her reflection in the mirror shocked her, but she didn’t wait. She couldn’t. Rocked with nausea, she bent over the toilet bowl and vomited for the second time in as many days, surrendering to each new wave without any

option.

Finally, as the nauseous surge waned, she stood, brushing aside the tangled mass of her hair. Her pallor was as bleak as a piece of paper. She ran the cold water, splashed her face and cleaned her teeth to get rid of the acidic taste in her mouth. Her hand fell to her stomach.

Could she be...pregnant?

The thought cut across the nausea.

Her hand rubbed her stomach in small circles, an oddly comforting gesture as she stared down.

She couldn't be. She'd had her period. Light, yes, but still...

Carly shook her head. No. She didn't want to think about it. Not now. She had too much at stake to even consider a baby.

Marco's baby.

Back in her bedroom, she glanced at the clock. Seven a.m. Time to get to the office. She had to arrange the final plan for the big presentation. A thrust of determination shot through her. She wanted the contract with a vengeance. It would put her business on the road map once and for all.

After a quick shower, she dressed in a navy suit with a coral polo underneath. It gave the suit a slight edge, something that said a bit more than "office". With matching shoes and her trademark gold bracelets and hoop earrings in place, she eyed herself in the mirror.

The summer sun's highlights in her hair were almost gone, as was summer. Autumn had arrived on the doorstep.

"Summer." The word rolled off the tip of Carly's tongue. Summer meant sand and surf. Summer was Marco. Summer would always be tinged with memories of Marco and their time in paradise.

But summer was over. So was her fling with Marco. Over before it began. Suddenly, an ice-cold fear sprinted through Carly's veins and her hand stilled mid-air, her hairbrush clattering to her floor.

"Forget it. Forget him," she said. But she couldn't. Sinking onto her bed, she wrapped her arms tightly around her chest. She was trying to forget him, but it was always the same. Every time she saw her reflection in the mirror, she would remember the words of love Marco had whispered as he caressed her.

Get over it.

Snapping out of her daze, Carly picked up the hairbrush. She needed to go to work. Work solved

everything.

“Tansy, have you got those samples of brocade and velvet we ordered?” Carly called the moment she entered the office.

Tansy Butler was a sweet, willing-to-do-anything-and-everything assistant without whom Carly couldn’t manage.

Dropping the folder onto her desk, she turned to Tansy who raced in with the samples. Taking them, her fingers grazed over the textured brocade and the silky smooth pile of the opulent velvets. She smiled. “These are perfect.”

The young woman nodded. “They’re the best quality. Exactly what the hotel chain wants. Drop-dead luxurious.”

Carly laughed, patting the fabrics. “If this doesn’t send them our way, nothing will.”

“Your designs are top notch. They won’t want anyone else.”

Carly wanted to agree, but forced herself to stem her excitement. “Let’s just wait.”

“Carly, you are far too reserved.”

“No, not reserved, Tansy. Designers can’t afford to be reserved. Call me cautious. You know the saying about eggs and baskets. Well, I’m just not counting those eggs quite yet.”

“Wait until tomorrow when they sign on the dotted line then you can shout from the rooftops.”

“Perhaps not the rooftops,” Carly chuckled, “but it will be nice to celebrate.”

Just then another bout of nausea washed over her, and her vision went suddenly murky. She felt raging hot, but the next second was icy cold. A damp beading of sweat broke out on her forehead, and her mouth went dry. The samples slid from her hands and fell to the floor.

“Are you okay?”

Carly sank into her chair. “I’m not sure. I…”

“Here.” Tansy quickly poured her a glass of water from the jug on her desk and handed it to her. Her pulse raced and everything went topsy-turvy. She closed her eyes and sucked in a steady gulp of air, aware of a concerned Tansy hovering nearby.

“I think you should go to the doctor.”

“No! There’s too much to do. Not enough time.” Carly struggled to sit up, but Tansy’s hand remained firmly on her shoulder and kept her sitting.

“Listen, Carly. You’ve done too much, for too long. Time to back up a bit. These past three months, you’ve worked like a demon. You need a life.”

“I can’t. The presentation is tomorrow.”

“Except for the samples to be posted to the color boards, the presentation is complete.”

Carly concentrated on breathing, wishing the roaring in her ears would stop. The phone rang, but Tansy beat her to it, answering it quickly and decisively. In the background, Carly could hear the muted conversation, but it was all too much for her and she closed her eyes again and tried to block out her ongoing queasiness.

“Right, that’s all settled.”

Carly’s eyes flickered open. Tansy stood in front of her, a satisfied grin on the young woman’s face.

“What have you done, Tansy? I’m not sure I like that look.” She tried to smile, but it was too hard and took too much energy.

“A doctor’s appointment. I’ve ordered a taxi. It’ll be here in a couple of minutes.”

“Taxi? Doctor? I don’t need either. I can drive.”

“Sure you can, then you sick up just as you turn a corner. Not a good idea. It’s all taken care of.”

Grateful someone else was taking charge, Carly sank back into her seat. “I’m not going to drop dead, you know.”

“Time you looked after yourself.”

“You say it as if it’s a big problem.”

Tansy merely gave her a knowing smile which caused Carly to wonder if the young woman knew something she didn’t know. But then again, it was all too much, and she closed her eyes while she waited for the taxi.

Dr. Maria Purvis indicated the cubicle. “You can get dressed again.”

Carly took a quick glance at her doctor. What was wrong? Measles? Mumps? Chickenpox? She mentally ticked them off as she dressed and re-entered the surgery.

“Sit down, please.”

Rigid with nerves, Carly clutched her purse to her chest. Fear prickled down her spine, anxiety gnawing low in her belly.

“Congratulations, Ms. Mason, you’re pregnant.”

Carly’s jaw dropped, but no sound came out. The seconds ticked by and still nothing.

“I’d say about three months, to be exact,” the doctor informed her.

“I can’t be,” Carly exploded in a whoosh of air, and the roar in her ears started up again. Thunderous this time, but it couldn’t blank out one word.

Pregnant.

The doctor’s brow rose, and her lips twitched with mirth.

Carly snapped her mouth closed.

“Not quite impossible, I’d say. The tests,” she said, referring to the paperwork on her desk, “are conclusive.”

“Absolute, you mean?”

“Yes.”

Dazed, Carly slumped back in the chair.

Pregnant. She was pregnant.

“Due late October. We’ll need some other tests.”

“October,” Carly repeated, dazed.

Marco.

A baby.

Marco’s baby.

Their baby.

Her gaze lowered to her still flat abdomen, and she rested a hand protectively against the soft rise and fall of her stomach. She was carrying a child. A boy or girl? A burst of laughter rippled

from her lips and a broad smile lit her face. She looked back up at the doctor.

“You’re pleased?”

“It’s a bit of a shock, but I think so.”

“And the father?”

“The father...” What about the father? What about Marco? Would he want to know? She didn’t even know where he was, so how could she tell him? Her head shook with all the questions that whirled in her brain. “There is no father.” Carly reddened. “Well, not around, if you know what I mean.”

“Don’t worry, it’ll work out. The receptionist will book your scan and checkups.”

Overwhelmed with information, Carly nodded and left, but didn’t make the appointments.

Later.

She’d sort it out later.

It would be all right, the doctor said.

Would it? She had to believe that.

Where work had been her salvation in the past, now she couldn’t concentrate one iota as the afternoon ticked by in a blur.

Pregnant.

Even mouthing the word nearly choked her. It wasn’t that she didn’t like babies. She loved them. Other people’s, that was. She just hadn’t envisioned babies for herself. Taking charge of her sisters and their subsequent broods had been enough babies for a lifetime. She wanted more out of life and had set her heart on building her business.

Now this.

A baby.

What about the presentation?

Chuckling up midway through was not an option, and she couldn’t let Tansy do it. CV Hotels was expecting Mason Designs, and specifically its owner.

“They want me, they’ll get me, morning sickness or not. So come on, baby.” Carly patted her stomach. “Do this for your mama and hold back that sick stuff, eh? Let me get this done tomorrow, then you can make me chuck as much as you like.”

“Baby? Did I hear the word baby?”

Carly sagged. Big mouth. She gave her assistant a faint, fluttering smile and shrugged sheepishly.

Tansy rushed forward. “That’s great! I thought it might be that. Wowee!” She gave her a hug and then just as suddenly stepped back. “You are all right, aren’t you?”

Unable to remain unaffected by Tansy’s infectious spirit, Carly grinned. “Yes, I’m fine. The baby’s fine, too. In fact, as long as I can keep the nausea at bay, we’ll be dandy.”

“You don’t sound too sure.”

“Let’s put it this way. The baby thing was a big shock, but I guess it’ll grow on me.”

“Course it will. Babies are great fun.”

“Fun,” Carly repeated. She wasn’t so sure of that. Fun wasn’t the word she would have used for that time of her life.

For the remainder of the day, Carly worked at half speed. Anything more and a rising tide of panic threatened to overwhelm her and she had to sit. She only hoped the baby would heed her plea and back off the sick bag routine tomorrow.

Finally, with everything complete, she escaped home, grateful to ease her tired legs onto the sofa. Her apartment was her sanctuary, her hideaway from the world. The one place she felt at peace.

Too tired and shocked to contemplate fixing herself a meal, she reheated yesterday’s risotto and numbly ate, staring out to the street below. The neighbors’ children played in their front yard tossing a brightly colored ball back and forth, their uncomplicated, childish laughter echoing up the street. Carly edged forward and lifted her hand to the window. The glass was cold to the touch. Exactly how she felt inside.

She trailed her fingers over the pane as seven-year-old Jimmy raced to retrieve the ball. He stopped and looked up. Bright, lively eyes caught hers for a moment before a shout went up behind him and he glanced quickly over his shoulder. He gave her a cheery smile and wave before spinning in his battered sneakers to return to his mates.

They all looked happy.

Carly tried to remember a similar time in her own childhood, but came up blank. Surely she

must have played.

Overwhelmed by a deep, heart-wrenching sadness, she dragged herself away from the window. She couldn't remember playing—ever. In her experience, childhood and freedom didn't go hand in hand. Having to play mother to her siblings had meant that her childhood had been almost non-existent.

Tossing out her half-eaten meal, she decided to shower, but as she toweled herself dry she caught sight of herself in the bathroom mirror. She didn't look any different. Her stomach was still flat, though her breasts felt swollen.

Carly smiled at her reflection, wondering about all the changes that would happen over the next few months. In part, she was afraid, yet another part of her welcomed the excitement. Wrapped in her warmest nightdress, a neck to toe job that held not the remotest hint of sexiness, Carly crawled into bed, pulled the covers right up to her ears and snuggled down. She let out a deep sigh, wishing her body would relax. She wanted oblivion. Today's news was a shock of the deepest kind.

A baby.

Her baby.

Marco's baby.

Her eyes fluttered shut and she sighed. A baby was good. It would be okay.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come? Moral support and all that?" Tansy argued.

"No. It's fine. Stay and look after the shop."

"While you go and knock their socks off."

"Let's hope so." Carly automatically crossed her fingers. "So far, so good." She hadn't been sick this morning. She patted her stomach.

Face tense with concern, Tansy asked, "You okay?"

Carly smiled and looked down at her hand, surprised at her own action. "Sure. Baby is behaving this morning and giving me a break from racing to the bathroom."

"Good. Keep telling that little blimp and it'll understand how important this is."

"You think so?"

“Sure. They play music to babies before they’re born, don’t they?”

Carly shook her head. The idea sounded both weird and wonderful at the same time. “Guess I’ll have to get some how-to baby and mother books.”

But Tansy was busy sorting through the incoming mail and didn’t hear her. Carly took several deep breaths and seated herself at her desk. She wanted to go over everything one more time, make sure she had all the plans and design layouts for her presentation.

Focusing on what she wanted to achieve, she whispered a silent prayer all would go her way. She’d worked long and hard on this.

It had been one way to forget him.

Carly blinked. Not now. She wasn’t about to sabotage her composure by dragging up memories of Marco. But who was she kidding? Since when had she stopped thinking of him?

“Take a seat, Ms. Mason.” The receptionist motioned Carly toward the plush waiting area. Battling to extinguish the butterfly dance going on in her insides, she concentrated on the clip-clop of the shoes of the woman in front.

Remember—breathe—in and out, slowly does it. But damn it, why wouldn’t her lungs work?

Carly took a moment to glance around. Understated and elegant, she mused as her eye for design kicked in. No money had been spared here. Her feet slid over the thick, velvety pile of the dark blue carpet and she wondered what it would be like lying on it, in front of a fireplace.

With the man you love.

Stop it! She groaned, and the receptionist darted a look in her direction.

“Ms. Mason?” a smooth voice intoned. “Chad Burns.”

Carly rose, sucked in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. This was her show now. She held out a hand. “How do you do?” She shook his hand, but when Chad Burns held her hand longer than necessary, she realized he was a smooth operator.

He motioned for her to follow him. “The boss will be here in a few minutes.”

“I thought my meeting was with you.”

“It is, but the boss wants to oversee everything on this project. It’s his baby, so to speak.”

Mention of the word baby made Carly falter, but she quickly gathered her wits and followed

Chad into the boardroom, her attention drawn immediately to the floor-to-ceiling windows.

“Spectacular view isn’t it?”

She nodded, but when he stepped up behind her, the hairs on her neck prickled with a chilling slash of tension. She swallowed hard. She wasn’t sure she liked this man. But then she wasn’t here to like him. She was here to make a deal. “My compliments to the designer,” she said, swiveling around to face the executive.

“That was the boss.”

“He designed it?”

Burns nodded.

Carly couldn’t help but be surprised. “Then why hire a designer for the hotels? Surely he’d oversee this, too?”

“Because he’s too busy,” came the sharp retort from behind her.

Carly froze. That voice. She knew it. Oh, God, how she knew it—every nuance, the delicious timbre of it.

Fear raced up and down her spine and, as if in slow motion, she turned.

Marco. Here. Her mind wouldn’t work. Damn brain cells—activate. Her gaze swallowed him whole. He looked the same—but different. Tired. The small creases at the corners of his eyes more pronounced, his pallor gray.

“Marco?”

“So it would seem.” Ice tinged his voice, mirroring the emotion in his eyes. He stepped into the room. “What are you doing here?”

“I...” Carly stuttered and her cheeks burned.

Chad Burns butted in. “Mr. Valente, this is Carly Mason of Mason Designs.”

“Designs?” Marco’s brows rose a fraction while Carly struggled to pull herself together.

She placed her design folder on the table. “CV Hotels requested my presentation.”

“My company.”

“CV Hotels is yours?” So that’s where his wealth had come from.

“ *Si*. Named after my father.”

Oh, no, don't say that. Don't speak Italian, she pleaded silently. Just the sound of his voice sent shivers down her spine, doing wholly wanton things to her body. Not a good look when she was trying to be professional and get that darn contract.

“Shall we begin?”

“Begin?” Carly parroted, annoyed she was behaving like an idiot. But then, Marco Valente did that to her.

“It’s what you’re here for, I presume. Nothing else?”

Carly shot a look at the other man, but he didn’t seem to understand or have heard. She, however, knew exactly what Marco hinted at.

The tips of her fingers brushed the side of her portfolio containing all her hard work, her hopes and dreams. She looked directly at Marco, meeting his cold, hard glare and pushed her shoulders back. She wouldn’t collapse in the heat of fire, and definitely not in front of the man who’d broken her heart without knowing it. “Right. If you would please be seated, gentlemen.”

Carly waited for the men to sit while Marco, in true dictatorial style, sat at the head of the board table, hands resting in front of him. His long, tapered fingers caught her attention. She remembered their touch, the tantalizing and tortuous passion they roused in her.

Choking for air, she drew on every ounce of professionalism she could muster. Crisply, without seeming to be in hurry although she wanted out as fast as her Chanel-shod feet would carry her, she laid out her presentation.

Marco, much to her chagrin, said nothing, his expression immobile.

Finally, she finished. She left the plans on the desk and folded her own shaking hands in front of her.

Dour-faced, Marco turned to Chad. “Leave us.” It wasn’t a request, but an order.

Burns looked to her and back to Marco. Clearly, he could see something else simmered in this room. Carly gave him a slight smile and nodded encouragingly as he left.

“What’s going on between you two?” Marco demanded the minute the door shut. His chair scraped back and he stood, towering over her. Carly reeled backward. She’d forgotten how tall he was.

No, she hadn’t. She hadn’t forgotten one single thing.

“What on earth are you getting at, Marco?”

“Smiling sweetly at Burns. The man’s a sucker for long legs and a skirt.”

“Don’t be so disgusting.” She snatched up her bag and turned to go.

“This interview isn’t over.”

Carly halted, her fingers digging into her bag, jaw clenched so tightly she thought her teeth would break. She battled for a semblance of calm, aware her breathing staggered in her chest. She lifted her gaze to Marco. God, how could she have gotten it so wrong? “The hell it isn’t. Look, Marco, the fact that you are you and I’m here is merely a coincidence.”

“Really?”

“I had no idea you were the owner of CV Hotels.”

But she should have. She should have checked out who headed the company, but she’d been so wound up in the details of the design, she’d let that tiny detail slip. Bad move. Damn it. Double damn!

“I’ve worked long and hard on this project. You could at least give my work the time of day.”

“I thought I had.”

Carly sniffed. “You must be joking. All you did was stare at me.” She wasn’t about to add that it made her decidedly uncomfortable.

“You’re a pretty sight.”

“Oh, shut up. Just shut up.” She had to escape, but a sudden swell of queasiness forced her to halt in her tracks, and she doubled up, gagging.

“Carly?” Concern tinged Marco’s voice, and he closed the gap between them. But his overwhelming masculinity and the familiar scent of him was more than Carly could handle. When his hand touched hers, it was as if her heart turned to stone.

“Don’t touch me.” Oh, dear God, she wanted to be sick. She slammed her lips closed, fighting the pressing urge that threatened to overtake her any second.

“Carly?” Marco wasn’t giving up. His soft and caring voice caressed her taut senses. It was the nail in the coffin. She could cope with harsh, cold, even indifferent, but not a caring Marco. Spinning on her heels, mindless that she’d left everything behind, she raced out of the boardroom. In the hallway, she came to an abrupt halt and looked left and right. She spied a sign for the ladies’ room. Carly shoved the door open and raced for the closest cubicle, dismayed when she heard Marco enter behind her.

“Go away.” She tried to shut the door, but his towering frame stood in the doorway. “Leave me alone.”

“You’re sick?”

“What does it look like?”

A flicker of emotion crossed his face before the mask slid back. Carly sighed. He had a right to know, but not now, not in a toilet while she vomited her heart out.

Later.

Maybe.

She heard the tap running, and Marco passed her a damp towel, catching her wrist at the same time. Gently, he pulled her out of the cubicle and backed her into the chair in the corner. She tried to smile, but couldn’t. “Even in the ladies’ bathroom, there’s luxury.”

“CV Hotels is renowned for its excellence and quality.”

“That’s why my designs suit your hotels.”

Marco laughed. “Even while you’re sick, you’re working,” he countered. “Why does this remind me of somewhere else?”

“Don’t.”

“*Cara...*” he began, but she couldn’t and wouldn’t listen. She flung the hand towel away.

“Don’t you dare start that *cara mia* stuff on me. Once was enough, Marco. I’m not going down that track again.”

“But...”

“No buts,” she snapped. “President of CV Hotels. That’s some step up from the drifter you led me to believe you were.”

“I never said what I did.”

“No, you didn’t, and even when you had the chance, when we arrived back at the mainland, you kept the lie alive. As I said then and I’ll say now, you deceived me. I don’t like liars.” She wrenched the door open, raced back to the boardroom and grabbed her portfolio, ready to leave.

“I’ve left copies of the design on the table. I’ll wait to hear from your company,” she said. She couldn’t say “hear from you”. That would be too much.

Marco's blue eyes darkened to deepest sapphire as he watched her. But he didn't try to stop her.

The lift doors closed with a soft hiss, shutting Marco from sight and, as it lowered to the ground floor, Carly shoved a clenched fist in her mouth to stifle the harsh wracking noises that choked her.

"Oh, baby, what are we going to do?"

Finally outside and free of the constraints of the building, she looked back up.

Carry on. Keep going. No looking back, the soft voice in her head instructed.

Chapter Nine

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Chad Burns railed at him as he marched into his office. He didn't bother to close the door.

Marco let out a heavy sigh and dropped the papers he'd been trying to read—without much success. He looked up at his off-sider. Chad Burns was good. They'd worked side by side for years, but that was as far as it went. Marco wasn't about to parade his private life for anyone.

"Let's just say Ms. Mason and I are acquainted."

"Acquainted, hell. You just about ate the woman alive in there."

Marco snorted. "You exaggerate."

Chad was probably right. Unfortunately. From the moment he'd walked in the room, he hadn't been able to keep his eyes off Carly. How the hell had he stopped from pulling her into his arms and kissing her till she melted, which, if recollection served him, would be no more than a second? Oh, yeah, he remembered every single moment of it.

"So I take it she's why you've been like the proverbial bear with a sore tooth these last few months?"

Marco refused to answer.

"No. Don't bother. I can read you a mile away, mate. You've got it bad."

"Don't be melodramatic. You make it sound like I have a disease."

"It is. Remember Gloria, my ex-wife, and Lara, my other ex-wife? Drain you dry, Marco. Take my advice and keep well away. Besides, I thought you learned your lessons with Rosaria."

"Never fear, I'll be a good boy and do as I'm told," Marco said with good humor. All the while his insides ground as if under attack from a bulldozer. He was distinctly aware of tightness in his

groin. It hadn't stopped throbbing from the moment he'd seen Carly. But the mention of Rosaria only added to his woes. The woman was one she-devil he had no intention of reuniting with ever again. He was over Rosaria's teasing, enticing, lying ways.

"Right, I'm off for the weekend. Mary is taking me home to meet her parents."

Despite himself, Marco chuckled. "And you think I don't learn. Have you looked at yourself lately?"

"So I made a mistake." Chad shrugged sheepishly.

"Twice."

"Test runs before the real thing. See ya." As the door slammed shut, Marco was left alone with the haunting memory of auburn hair and teasing green eyes.

"Sh..."

Three months, he cursed silently. Three months of hell, loneliness—and remorse.

He swiveled in his chair and looked down at the world. It was home time, everyone rushing for Friday night and freedom. But he felt trapped. Ten floors up in his office, Marco felt as if he were confined to a gilded cage, strangled by emotions he didn't know how to deal with or sure he wanted to.

What was he going to do about it?

He eyed the clock on the central shelf of his mahogany bookcase.

Time was passing.

Snatching up the phone, he punched in some numbers. The phone rang, and his breathing halted as he waited with anticipation.

It kept ringing, and his gut churned.

Marco realized he was very, very nervous. A new experience.

Suddenly, an answer phone clicked in. It was Carly at her crispest and most professional. The office was shut. He tried her mobile and got another answer phone, the same voice, the same tone. It was driving him nuts. He didn't want to speak to a machine; he wanted the real, live thing. He wanted Carly in person.

There was only one other avenue. Marco dialed the phone service operator and quickly related his problem. The operator asked him to wait. He did. But it bugged the hell out of him. His fingers drummed on the desk and he fidgeted with the plans Carly had left behind. They were by

far the best.

“Sorry, sir, that number is confidential.”

“What do you mean?” He had to have it. He couldn’t wait.

“Sorry, sir,” the operator replied, obviously trained to be patient. Patience was something Marco was quickly running short of. “We can’t give the number out.”

“Can’t or won’t?” he accused.

“Can’t, sir, and won’t,” she reiterated, but there was a firm tone to her voice and Marco ungraciously realized she had him beat. The woman wasn’t about to budge one iota. Frustrated to hell, he slammed down the phone. Damn it. There had to be some way he could contact her.

Family?

Would they give out her number? Besides, he reasoned with renewed hope—how many Masons could there be in the phone book?

He found out.

One hundred and twenty-eight, to be exact.

One after another after another.

Bleary eyed, Marco dialed number seventy-four. He wanted to be positive, but was fast losing any hope after the last guy accused him of having an affair with his wife. He’d begun to wonder if phoning all the Masons in the phone directory in the hope of hitting pay dirt and finding someone, anyone, who knew Carly, was worth it.

Unbidden, an image of her on the beach came to mind. Her aquamarine-colored bikini, the firm swell of her breasts, the feel of her skin under his fingers as he’d covered her with sun cream.

He swallowed hard. Yes, she was worth it.

“You’ve got to come, Carly, little Damian is so looking forward to it,” her sister Margaret whined down the phone line.

“Okay,” she reluctantly agreed. Little Damian, she knew, wouldn’t care less whether she was there or not. He was only one year old. Whereas little Damian’s mother would, and it wasn’t particularly pleasing to realize her sister wanted her mainly for the present she would give Damian.

Carly sighed. Three sisters whose husbands or boyfriends came and went with regularity and an assortment of nieces and nephews who kept her poor, but then she supposed she had more than they did.

But she worked harder .

Carly shrugged. It was true. Though now, with her own baby on the way, she wasn't quite sure what to expect. One thing was certain however: she wasn't prepared to let her business go. Somehow she would cope.

"Carly. Please come."

Carly really wanted to say no and to go home and sleep. The thought of having to cope with her boisterous family felt daunting, especially after the upsetting day she'd had.

But as always, family came first.

At least the presentation was behind her. For what that was worth, she thought with increasing despondency. She'd set her heart on the contract, but finding Marco at the helm had seriously undermined her confidence that the contract would be hers.

She couldn't disappoint Damian, however. The small boy held a special place in her heart. His father was as scarce as hers had been.

Instead of going back to the office, Carly spent the remainder of Friday afternoon toy shopping at a major children's store. What normally would be a chore, she suddenly found riveting beyond all reason. She fingered the tiny, lemon-colored booties, so small they'd fit only two fingers at most. Would her baby be so small? Just thinking about it caused a warm flush to invade her body.

Her baby. It sounded pretty darn good.

"You came," Margaret called as she stepped off the front porch, little Damian slung on one hip, his bib still grubby with the last meal.

Carly grimaced and stifled the urge to tell her sister to clean up her act. "I said I would."

Margaret snatched at the large gift. "What did you get him?"

"Some welcome," Carly muttered as her sister left her standing alone.

Inside was bedlam. When the Mason clan gathered, it usually meant chaos in the extreme, and today was no different. Carly gave her mother a kiss, but was barely acknowledged as the older woman succumbed to the throng of grandchildren at her feet.

“Look after yourself, Carly, I can’t get up,” she prompted.

“What’s new?” It was the story of her life. Everyone expected her to look after herself—and them. But for some reason, she kept coming back. Family was family, she supposed. Carly rested a hand on her stomach. Soon, she’d have her own family.

“You lookin’ a bit peaky, Carly,” Laura yelled from across the room.

Carly’s hand dropped from her stomach. “I’m fine,” she lied. “Just working too hard, that’s all.”

“Hey, Auntie Carly, you wanna sausage roll?” Bryce shoved a loaded plate under her nose.

Carly balked at the greasy offerings, averted her face and slapped a hand over her mouth. She wanted to be sick, her stomach roiling at the merest whiff of the pastry and fatty sausage concoction.

Her sister’s eyes narrowed, a telltale hint of recognition fluttering across her face. “You never were a good liar, Carly. What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re pregnant.”

The room went quiet. “Don’t be silly,” she denied hotly. She should never have come. Should have known she couldn’t hide anything from her family.

“Silly, my foot. Come on, you can tell us. Heck, we’ve all been there, done that.”

Carly’s gaze traveled around the room. Laura’s boyfriend now resided in prison, and Margaret’s husband wasn’t much better. He came and went, each time leaving Margaret pregnant. Her sisters stared back, interest blatantly piqued.

“You’re just like the rest of us single mothers.” Laura chuckled, slapping her fat thigh. “Hey, Mum, Carly’s pregnant.”

“Is she now? Well, who would have guessed.”

Under this scrutiny, there was no way out. Her family would hound her until they unearthed the facts. “I’ve only just found out,” she finally admitted.

“Hey, get a look at that car,” one of her nephews called out. He yanked down the slats of the venetian blinds and pressed his face to the window. “Cool. Bet it’s fast.”

Carly didn’t really care what they were talking about and turned away as the boys raced outside. All she wanted to do was to control the urge to scream while her sisters interrogated her.

With everyone gone from the office, Marco had spent hours phoning virtually every Mason in the book. He didn't succumb to defeat easily and now, as he parked his car, his heart raced with expectation. This was it. He'd spoken briefly to someone and they'd confirmed that Carly was a family member and expected later that evening.

From the safety of his car, he stared at the house in the gloom of the evening. It didn't look much; in fact, it was pretty dilapidated. He checked the number on the piece of paper lying on the car seat beside him against the letterbox. They were one and the same. Just then, two scruffy boys raced out the front door. Marco sat up. One boy's hair was an exact replica of Carly's burnished copper. Hope soared in his chest. Perhaps he *had* found her.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed the car door open and exited the Jaguar, automatically locking it. This wasn't a neighborhood to leave anything unattended or unlocked for too long. He glanced up and down the dimly lit street. It was a sad place. Upright rubbish bins, houses needing a coat of paint and dilapidated cars lining both sides of the street. Although most houses had small front lawns, there were no gardens to speak of.

"Hey, mister, this your car?"

Marco stared down at the boy. The child had the same intense forest green eyes as Carly.

He smiled. "Sure is. Maybe one day I'll give you a ride."

"Really?" The boy's eyes widened in disbelief.

"Sure thing." Marco sidestepped and pushed the gate open, grimacing as it lurched back on one hinge and threatened to fall off any second. He strode to the door, knocked once, aware the little boys were right behind him.

"Who you want to see, mister?"

"Well, that depends. I'm hoping I've got the right place." Hoping like hell.

The door was opened by a large woman, a child resting on her hip. Her coloring was so very much like Carly's. One of the little boys pushed past him. "Ma, he said he'd take me for a ride."

"Hush, Bryce. Go inside right now. Tell Auntie Carly to cut you some cake."

Carly? Marco's smile broadened.

Bingo!

"Is Carly here?"

“Who wants to know?” The woman’s assessment was blatant, but he refused to acknowledge it and kept his expression carefully masked.

“A friend,” he offered as a reply.

“Really?” Interest washed across the woman’s eyes. She turned and yelled into the house. “Carly. Someone to see ya. A friend.”

In the background, the raucous cackle of children shouting and arguing increased by the second. It made Marco smile. How different from his childhood.

“He’s gorgeous, definitely hunk material. Sounds foreign,” he heard Carly’s sister inform the others. But he wasn’t interested in her thoughts, only Carly’s.

Carly stepped up to the door. “Marco!” Her shock was obvious as she offered him an angry and unwelcoming glare. “What are you doing here?”

Marco’s practiced speech suddenly disappeared.

“How did you find me?”

“I phoned your office, you were gone and your mobile was switched off,” he responded flatly. “Carly...” But one look at her cold expression and he froze.

“Go away, Marco.”

“I can’t. This isn’t how I wanted it to be.”

“So what did you expect? That I’d jump into your arms?”

He offered a sheepish grin. “That would be nice.”

But Carly gave him a withering scowl, which he chose to ignore, and continued. “Why did you leave?”

“I wasn’t feeling well.”

“That much I know.”

Her lips pursed into a reproving line. “How did you find me? Why, Marco?”

“I was concerned.” He saw her tense again at his endearment and cursed himself. He needed to go slower. He needed control.

“There’s no need to be. I’m fine.”

“Really? You look pale. Perhaps you need a holiday.”

Carly’s head shot up. “I’m fine,” she reiterated. “No holiday is required. I’ve had enough holidays to last a lifetime.”

An older woman’s head popped around the corner. “Carly, don’t be rude, invite your man in.”

“He’s not my man.” She shuffled on the balls of her feet, folding her arms across her chest.

Marco took his opportunity. “Hello, I’m Marco Valente.” He held out his hand.

The older woman was clearly impressed, which was just the way he wanted it. He wanted to get Carly’s family on his side. She took his hand as if she was inspecting it for dirt and grime.

“I’m Carly’s mother, but you can call me Mabel. So, you’re the one,” she accused.

“I beg your pardon.”

“So you should, young man.”

Carly’s horrified gaze swiveled from her mother to him and back to her mother. “Mum, don’t,” she pleaded. She had gone deathly white and leaned against the doorway.

“Don’t what?” Marco interjected. His gaze flicked from Mabel to Carly, and back again.

“You mean you haven’t told him yet?”

“Haven’t told me what?”

“Baby. That’s what. You got my daughter pregnant.”

Marco gasped.

A baby. His.

He was going to be a daddy.

Carly directed her gaze anywhere but at him.

“Is this true? Are you pregnant with our child?” he demanded.

“My child. I’m pregnant.”

“Yes, but it is mine?”

“You think so little of me, Marco, that I sleep around?”

“*Dio.*” Marco slapped his forehead with the flat of his palm as an icy cold chill took hold of him. “I apologize. I...we may know very little about each other, but I do know you would not act this way. When were you going to inform me?”

“I’ve only just found out.”

“But you knew when you were at the office?”

Carly nodded again.

Marco felt himself pale. He looked directly at Carly’s mother. The woman would have once been gorgeous, he acknowledged, but now her gray hair hung in scraggy, uncut tendrils around her lined face; a face that had seen too many late nights, too many bars and, more than likely, he reasoned, too many men. Then there was the acrid stench that clung to only those who were heavy smokers and the red-rimmed eyes, dulled from years of sitting amidst the pall of cigarette smoke.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Mason, but your daughter and I need to talk.”

“Go right ahead,” she answered, but remained where she was.

“Alone.” Wrapping his fingers firmly around Carly’s arm, he pulled her away from the door.

“Stop, you can’t do this. Where are you taking me?” Carly struggled against him, but Marco’s determination was stronger.

“The car,” he said curtly. “We’re going to talk in the car, Carly.”

Marco unlocked his car. He opened the passenger door, and she got in without further protest. That surprised him. He’d expected a fight.

Never before had a car space seemed so claustrophobic. Carly hugged her body to the door, wishing she could put more space between her and Marco. Preferably a hundred kilometers.

She stole a glance at him. His expression was grim and determined which only exacerbated her defensiveness. Then she began to shake and clasped her hands across her chest. She needed to stand up to Marco, yet with him so close, her body remembered too much. The aroma of his aftershave filled every nook, setting her on a precipice. Valiantly, she battled the urge to bolt, swallowing back a sob as she roughly brushed at the single tear that trailed down her cheek. She knew she had to face him, but couldn’t bear to look him in the eye.

“When exactly were you going to tell me?”

“I don’t know. Sometime, I suppose.”

“You suppose?” Marco shouted.

Carly flinched and edged closer to the door as if the metallic hardness offered reassurance. “You’re being unreasonable. I had no idea where you lived or how to find you prior to this morning. And besides, what did you expect me to do, slip it in during the middle of the presentation with Mr. Burns sitting there? Or tell you afterward when you were so angry, so hostile to me? Or maybe between throwing up and trying not to...” She inhaled deeply. “No, I couldn’t tell you in the office, it wasn’t the right time, or place. *And* it would have been completely unprofessional.”

“Unprofessional?” Marco’s fist hit the steering wheel. “This is my baby we’re talking about.”

“So?”

“So!” He muttered a few oaths in Italian, words she was quite certain his mother wouldn’t want to hear.

“Look, Marco, we met, we had sex and we parted.”

“Sex. Is that it?”

“Yes,” she lied and looked away for a moment. “It was a shock. I hadn’t gotten as far as figuring out how to try to find you. I was still trying to get used to the idea, trying to figure out what to do...”

“I see,” Marco agreed quietly. “So what now?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know how I’m going to care for a baby and run my business...”

“You’re not getting rid of my child, Carly.”

“No, I’m...”

“I’m telling you here and now. No way. Never. That’s my child you’re carrying.” His lips twisted with vehemence, an expression of desperation and fierce anger reflecting in the depths of his darkened eyes. Suddenly, he started the engine, and a stark, unbridled fear sprinted down Carly’s spine.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Home.”

“Home? You don’t know where I live.”

“Not your home. Mine. Ours. We’re having this baby...and we’re getting married.”

“Married?” Carly’s heart raced, and the roar in her ears escalated to supersonic proportions, drowning out every other sound around them. “Married? We’re not getting married. No way. Absolutely not.”

But Marco wasn’t listening and, with a squeal of tires, he steered the car away at breakneck speed, forcing Carly to clutch the armrest, nails digging into the luxuriously soft leather.

She tried again. “I won’t marry you, Marco Valente. This is a joke isn’t it?”

But Marco’s dour expression remained unchanged as he drove them toward his home, wherever that was. Which precisely reiterated the fact that she knew very little about him whatsoever—still.

“This baby is mine. It needs a father.”

“You can be its father. But marriage? Forget it. I’m not the marrying kind. Neither are you, if I remember correctly.”

“I remember what I said. I remember everything,” Marco responded when they stopped at a traffic light. He turned to her, and his lingering gaze slid over her face, down her breasts, and came to rest on her stomach. The look of heated desire reflected in his eyes told her he remembered just as much as she did.

“A baby changes everything. Irretrievably,” he said, lowering his tone.

“It doesn’t have to.”

“You telling me you’re one of these modern women who goes around having baby after baby, not caring whether the father is around or not?”

Carly blanched. “You make me sound cheap.” Though what he had done was make her sound exactly like her sisters. She loved her family, but it didn’t mean she had to like their way of life. Wasn’t that why she’d chosen a different life? Chosen work over babies. Work over love.

“Not cheap, *cara*.” Marco’s voice softened. “Perhaps misguided.”

“Misguided, hell. I *choose* my life. Not you, not my family. You can’t make me marry you.”

“Perhaps not. But think of our child. Isn’t it better to have two parents than one?”

He may not have realized it, but those words were a cruel blow. Carly sank back on the seat. She felt as if she’d been hit square on the jaw, his comment forcing her to think of her own childhood and draining her of any energy to fight.

With those few words, he'd hit her right where it hurt.

Round one to Marco.

Her mind replayed their holiday. Four days of bliss, of love, and the lying that destroyed her.

And now she was having Marco's baby—and he *wanted* her.

Don't fool yourself.

Carly closed her eyes. What she wanted was to forget it all, forget it happened. Her hand found her stomach, and she let it rest there and wondered if the baby could hear its parents fighting, hear the anger and hurt, just as she had all those years ago.

But marriage? Carly's eyes flashed open.

A few minutes later, the car edged down a narrow driveway into an underground car park. Carly sat up a bit straighter. "I don't want to go to your apartment, Marco."

"I know." Dark, unreadable eyes stared down at her, searching her face.

Her breath caught. "So why are you making me?"

"We need to talk."

Carly stiffened at his continued use of the endearment and blinked back the sudden threat of tears. He maneuvered the car into a parking space, switched off the ignition and came around to open her door. Her fingers balled into fists at her side, digging viciously into her palms. She gritted her teeth and willed herself to remain calm as she breathed deeply and got out of the car.

She took a glance up at the powerful man at her side. Almost regal in his bearing, his strong Mediterranean features exuded an omnipotent aura that commanded attention.

But what did she know about this man?

Very little.

Fear should have been warring in her gut, yet it wasn't. Not really. Somewhere deep down inside, hidden beneath the pain and hurt and bitterness, was one thing she had to cling onto. And that was hope.

"You're having my baby, Carly. We need to at least discuss this." With that, as if she was breakable glass, Marco took her hand and placed it on his arm and guided her toward the lifts that would, she reasoned with silent acceptance, lead her life in a very different direction.

As the elevator whisked them to his penthouse apartment, she pushed her shoulders back, ready for battle. But with each passing moment, a complete and debilitating numbness seeped through her body, limb by limb, until it reached her heart with a chilling thoroughness.

And still her mind played games. She kept telling herself she didn't want this.

She did.

She didn't.

The scenario was something akin to the children's game where they picked petals off a flower, reciting "he loves me, he loves me not".

Which petal would she pick?

Marco stabbed at the panel of buttons, and the lift jolted to a halt.

"What are you doing?"

"Giving you some time."

"I don't need any time. The answer is still the same. No. Got it?"

"Oh, I get it. But perhaps you'd like to consider something. This morning you pitched the best designs I've seen for our hotel expansion. The contract is yours."

"Really?" Excitement, despite everything else, bubbled in Carly's stomach. Yes! She'd done it. She'd reached out and grabbed exactly what she wanted. Hard work had paid off.

"Excited?" Marco asked.

"Of course. It's..."

"Yours—on one condition."

With those few words, Marco ripped the rug right out from under her feet, and a chilling dread snaked through her, insidious in its totality.

She lifted her chin, determined he wouldn't see her crumble. "And that is?"

"Marriage. You want the contract. I want to be my child's father."

"You can do that without marriage."

"Not this father. Have we got a deal?"

“You want a deal based on needs versus wants?”

“I want to be in *my* child’s life,” he said.

So where did that leave her?

Such a hollow victory. Marco would give her the contract only as a tool to get what he wanted, not because she’d earned it, because her design was the best for his complex, though he’d already admitted as much.

Caustic fury burned deep in Carly’s belly. “I’ve worked damned hard on your designs, Marco. I know they’re good. Excellent, in fact.”

“Absolutely,” he agreed.

“Yet you blackmail me to assuage your desire. How dare you.”

“Oh, I dare. You see, desire is such an easy word to flaunt around.”

Carly bit her tongue, stifling the urge to retaliate. Besides, it would do no good. She’d already made up her mind.

Then why did she feel like she was selling her soul?

“Damn you, Marco.”

But he said nothing, simply stared at her, one brow slightly cocked, his surety in himself so evident, so blasted real, that Carly felt her own self-confidence melt with every passing silent second.

Seconds escalated into minutes. Still he said nothing. She fumed inwardly. Finally he reactivated the lift and the conveyance slid soundlessly to the penthouse apartment. Marco opened the door and stood back to let her walk in.

Three steps inside and she halted.

Wall-to-wall glass offered a view over the city, across the harbor and the gulf islands and the harbor bridge that spanned the city’s two shores. In every direction, colorful lights like something from a fairy grotto blinked a million times a minute.

“Impressive,” she muttered, surprised she could even function.

“Once a designer, always a designer, I suppose.”

Carly shrugged, refusing to rise to the bait, but the moment Marco stepped up behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders, she stiffened.

“Please don’t.” If she was going to go through with this, his touch was the one thing she couldn’t handle. Instead, she stepped away and removed her coat, dropping it on the side of a brown leather sofa. Slowly, she gazed around the room. A rich cream on cream had been painted on three walls, and on the fourth a dark burgundy suede paint effect had been used on either side of the brick fireplace. Leather, suede and stone. This was a man’s home. Strong and defined with a myriad of textures for the senses.

“You like?”

Carly nodded. “It suits you. Very manly.”

“Do you want a drink?” Marco headed to a side cabinet and extracted a couple of goblets before she had time to react.

She patted her stomach. “The baby. No alcohol or caffeine. Herbal tea if you’ve got it.”

Marco’s dark eyes narrowed and he stared at her for a long, drawn-out minute.

Nothing had changed. She felt as if he could see right through her, read her mind and perhaps even her heart. She wanted to wither on the spot, but held her ground.

Spinning on his expensively shod heels, he strode to the open kitchen. He flicked the switch on the kettle. When he finally spoke, he seemed to soften. “How could I forget?” He rifled through the cupboards, a frown creasing his brows. “I’m sure my housekeeper has some stored somewhere.”

Seeing the domestic side of Marco again, Carly couldn’t help but smile. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you this afternoon. My assistant made a doctor’s appointment for me yesterday—I thought I had the flu or something—and you have to agree it was hardly the time or place.”

“You’re telling me.”

“The whole thing is such a shock,” she said, knowing she was repeating everything she’d already told him.

“Hell, yeah.” Marco moved about the kitchen. There was a firm set to his jaw and his expression was hooded. The kettle whistled and automatically switched off. He placed two cups on a tray then poured the boiling water and carried the tray to where she sat.

She tried again. “It takes two, Marco. We both forgot the condom.”

“You said you were protected,” he countered.

“When we both remembered...um, afterward, it was too late.”

“Too lost in the moment.”

“Something like that,” she agreed. “I wouldn’t have allowed us to, um, you know, be together again without protection.”

“Lucky we had condoms then, wasn’t it?”

Carly’s embarrassment increased. “I hoped it wouldn’t happen. What were the chances of getting pregnant the first time we...”

“Had sex,” he finished for her. “But we did.”

“I didn’t want you to worry. What good would it have done to tell you that I wasn’t protected?”

“Too late for that, isn’t it? But you should have told me.”

She nodded.

“And the doctor says the baby is healthy?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Growing well.”

Marco gave a curt nod. “Tell me something. If we hadn’t met by chance again today, would you have taken the time to try to find me? To let me know I was going to be a father?”

“I...I...don’t know. I’m sorry, but I don’t. In my experience, most men aren’t too thrilled to have a pregnant woman from their past show up in their lives again, making demands. And believe me, I wasn’t interested in trying to use the baby to get a husband or, for that matter, a contract.”

“I have a right to be angry, don’t you think?”

“Why? Angry about what exactly? What I might have done if we hadn’t met again? Tell the truth, don’t you mean angry with yourself for letting this happen to *you* ? For getting carried away and fathering a child with a woman you hardly know?”

“And don’t you mean, we both got carried away, *cara*. ”

“I didn’t know how to contact you, Marco. I had no idea who you really were. Being angry with me makes no sense.”

Wordlessly, Marco passed her a cup of tea, and she sat. He didn’t follow, but remained standing and started to pace the room, seemingly absorbed in his own thoughts. Watching him going back and forth made her dizzy.

“If you don’t stop that, you’ll wear a track in your Aubusson,” she said, trying to lighten the

cheerless pall that hung between them. He halted in front of her, and her heart skipped a beat. “Sit down. You’ll give me a crick in the neck. Besides, if you’re trying to scare me into marrying you, you’re failing.”

He remained standing.

Who was the liar now? The idea of marriage scared her witless, but in her heart she’d already made up her mind.

Marco hadn’t spoken for a long time, making her edgy. She shoved her hands beneath her to stop them from shaking and drew in a deep, steady breath. Letting him see her nerves wouldn’t help her cause.

“You asked me to marry you,” she said, pushing herself out of the chair. Facing your opponent was better than having him tower over you, she reasoned. But the moment she was eye to eye with him, Carly realized she was in trouble.

If anything, Marco was better in the flesh than in her memory, and, nervously, her tongue licked over her lips as her mind whirled with erotic memories of the two of them making love, laughing, kissing until breathless.

Yep, in the flesh was infinitely better.

“Our baby needs stability, not a parent who comes and goes at a whim,” Marco admonished.

Carly gasped. “You think I would do that?” A caustic anger stirred in the pit of her stomach that he thought so little of her. “That kind of life belongs to my sisters, not me.”

“I wasn’t talking about you, Carly.”

“What do you mean then?”

“I mean, you’re not the only one who had a...shall we say, a disrupted childhood. I’m not prepared to be a deadbeat father who pops in at birthdays and the odd Christmas.”

“You don’t have to marry me to see our child or be a part of its life.”

“I don’t want to ‘see’ my child. I want to live with my child every day. And I assume you do, too?”

For several extended minutes, Carly simply looked at Marco. This was another man, a man who seemed both hunted and haunted. She remembered the man who lovingly cared for her, caressed her. She remembered the way he made her feel—deep down.

She shook her head. The man before her was cold, hard, calculating and manipulative; so very different, yet still hauntingly similar.

Finally, she spoke. “Okay. We’ll marry.”

Dear God, had she really said that?

But as soon as the words slid from her lips, the few inches between them disappeared as Marco pulled her to him. Heat radiating from his body scorched every nerve cell in hers. She had to force herself to keep her hands at her sides, when what she wanted to do was to wrap them around his neck, pull him to her and kiss him senseless. Battling a sensory instinct that warred between her brain and her body, she dredged up every ounce of control she possessed and stepped back.

Surprise showed on Marco’s face. “Just like that?”

Carly hesitated a fraction, but long enough to clarify in her own mind what she had to do. She would marry Marco—on her terms.

History told her men weren’t reliable. Eventually, they walked. Just like her father. She wouldn’t—no couldn’t—trust *that* much.

Their baby would have a father, but she would keep her distance, keep her emotions tightly reined in. “Yes, just like that. However, I have some stipulations if I’m going to agree to this marriage.”

“Rules?”

She nodded and dragged her gaze away from his and retreated across the room. Space and distance from this man was imperative right now. “If we are to marry, then it’s in name only. Nothing else.”

A muscle in Marco’s cheek jerked, indicating his obvious surprise. Carly couldn’t help but feel a tad sorry for him. Marco would never have expected this kind of rule.

“By else, I’m presuming you mean the marital bed?”

“You want this baby in your life. You’ve got it. But it doesn’t mean I come with it. I’ll live here, we will be a family for all to see, but what goes on behind closed doors at night is no one else’s business.”

“If I remember, nighttime wasn’t the only time you came to me.”

A flush of heat scorched Carly from head to foot.

Toughen up, Carly.

“Memories play funny tricks sometimes,” she countered.

“Not mine—or yours.” His voice was whisper-soft and teasing, like sensuous silk gliding over her body, arousing her senses to fever pitch.

Could words do that?

Oh, yes, his could.

Carly stifled a gasp at the direction of her wayward thoughts. “Don’t be crass. Nighttime, daytime, whatever.” She snapped her fingers. “There will be *no* marital bed. There *will* be separate bedrooms.”

Marco seethed, obviously offended. “All right.”

“You agree?”

“You seem surprised. Did you think I would do a Tarzan act and sweep you off your feet, declaring everlasting love?”

Carly froze. Okay, so she had hoped, a little. “I...”

“Never. I said once before I’m not the marrying kind.”

“So why marry me when you don’t have to?”

He laughed, a brittle sort of laugh that cut her heart in two. “I’m marrying you for our baby’s sake. This is purely a business deal. No more, no less. You, Carly Mason, know all about business deals. Remember?” With that, he spun around and exited the room, leaving her alone and in no doubt as to where her prospective husband’s affiliations lay.

Tears pricked at her eyes, but she refused to give in to them. Yet.

She may have just agreed to marrying Marco Valente, the man she loved, the one she’d dreamed of nightly for the last three months, but she realized she’d never, ever, felt so alone.

“Damn it.” Marco’s curse sliced the air around him as he bolted like a drowning rat into his study.

How appropriate. He’d never felt so desperate in his entire life, desperate for Carly’s agreement and for his child. Desperate from the moment he saw her again in his office, for what he couldn’t say, was scared to say or even acknowledge.

That he’d acted so badly, so high-handedly, frog-marching her to his apartment, hadn’t just taken Carly unawares, but himself.

He didn't know what to think about anything—except that he couldn't stand there and do nothing but watch her walk out of his life again.

Desperate times required desperate measures.

Chapter Ten

Sleep came surprisingly easy for Carly, though every time she woke, she was intensely aware that Marco was only a few feet away in the next room.

What was different? He'd been right beside her on the island.

Huddled beneath the cozy feather duvet, she squeezed her eyes closed. Marco hauling her to his apartment hadn't prepared her for anything. But then how do you prepare for being offered a marriage of convenience?

She'd made her presence felt when she demanded a rule of her own, one on which she wasn't prepared to stand down.

Carly chuckled. It had been good to see Marco at a loss for words. Something she hadn't expected, but rather liked and wouldn't mind seeing again.

And again.

That tiny feeling of success had boosted her confidence, something she needed plenty of at this moment.

She slid her legs off the side of the bed, scouted around the bedroom and found a toweling robe hanging on the back of the ensuite door. Suitably covered, though wishing she had her own nightwear, she decided to enter the lion's den.

The smell of coffee hit her the moment she stepped through the door. She gagged and slammed a hand over her mouth, battling to hold onto whatever was in her stomach.

"You okay?" Marco's concerned tone reached through the miasma of what was left of her brain as she concentrated on overcoming the nausea.

She nodded, breathing slowly—slowly—until she was able to remove her hand. "Can you get rid of the coffee?" she asked, spying the mug Marco held.

Another wave hit her. "Please," she added.

Seeing her distress, Marco retreated to the kitchen and poured the coffee down the sink.

He turned to her. "Better?"

Was she? She gave him a tight nod.

“Did you sleep well?”

“What? You mean you actually care?”

“Of course I care.”

“For the baby,” Carly accused waspishly.

Marco’s lips thinned and the muscle in his cheek throbbed visibly. Carly knew she was being bitchy, but hell, he was the one who forced her here.

And she had agreed.

A flush of contrition washed over her. “I’m sorry, I...it’s just strange, that’s all.”

No, that wasn’t all. That was a lie. It was everything. Marco. The baby. Fear of the unknown.

Battling the increasing swell of panic in her belly, Carly walked to the large window and stared into the distance. Another day. Another life. Her life. So many changes in only a short time. It was hard, scary, and damn it, she felt cornered and she didn’t like it one little bit. She was used to being the designer of her life. If this was going to work, she needed to salvage a sense of control, somehow.

She turned to face Marco. “If you want me to stay here,” she began, “I want a few concessions.”

“Such as?”

“My own things around me. You have an exquisite home, but it’s yours,” she said, glancing around the room, though really not seeing any of it. “This will now be my home, and I don’t intend to simply be the little wife on your arm.”

“You’re the mother of my child.”

“Yes, I am, but I’m also Carly Mason. Myself. So...” she said, finding her confidence once more. “This is what I want.” Without any further preamble, she, soon to be wife and mother, but still herself, began to tell her fiancé exactly what she wanted. She had managed only a few sentences when there was a sharp knock on the door then it opened. Her hand stilled, cup of tea halfway to her mouth.

A diminutive powerhouse charged through the entrance. “Oh, I do so love a wedding.”

Marco’s eyes rolled skyward as the woman walked past and completely ignored him. “Mother, how nice to see you.”

“Mother?” Carly mouthed.

He nodded.

“Yes, dear, I’m sure it is, but you could have at least warned me.”

“It’s rather sudden.” Marco closed the door and followed his mother.

“I’m Daphne, dear. Lovely to meet you. Where has Marco been hiding you?” She turned to her son and wagged a finger at him. “Naughty boy. Mind you, I’m absolutely delighted. As I said, I so love a wedding.”

Carly smiled shyly. In the silver-haired woman, she recognized Marco’s blue eyes and forceful personality.

“We have so much to do.”

“Mother,” Marco warned for a second time.

“Now don’t *Mother* me. I’m an expert in this field.”

“Huh! I should know,” he muttered, and Carly noted the downturn in his mouth, clear evidence he wasn’t particularly pleased with his mother’s interference.

“Nice to see someone can get the better of you, Marco. I rather like it.”

He gave her a withering look.

“A lot,” she added, chuckling.

“With three husbands, one does gain a certain experience in these things,” Daphne declared.

“Three,” Carly exclaimed.

Marco’s gaze hit the sky again, making Carly smile. This really was rather enjoyable.

“Yes, three. Though you never know, Ted is looking rather besotted these days.”

Marco let out a groan, but it had no effect on his mother. Daphne grabbed her son’s arm. “Off you go. Carly and I have some planning to do.”

“Mother, this is a small wedding. No one is invited.”

“They aren’t?”

“What Marco means is we haven’t even discussed it.”

In truth, Carly wasn’t really interested. Their marriage wasn’t real, anyway.

“Ridiculous. It’s a wedding. It needs to be celebrated. Go!” Daphne may have been pint-sized, but within minutes she had Marco directed toward the door, opened it and gave him a slight shove which sent Carly into fits of giggles as she saw his astonished expression. Daphne closed the door in his face.

“Poor, helpless boy.” Carly chuckled.

“Pah. The boy doesn’t know what’s good for him.”

Carly choked back another fit of giggles. No one could win against Daphne. She was a formidable force all on her own.

The older woman led Carly toward the sofa, patting the seat. “Now, you and I need to get to know each other,” she said. “I rather think this is going to be fun.”

Fun?

A wedding she didn’t want. It sounded more like a living nightmare. But what Carly found interesting was the definite undercurrent between mother and son. Marco may not like the fact that his mother seemed intent on giving Liz Taylor a run for her money in the husband stakes, but his love for her shone in his eyes.

It was this simple thought, that Marco could love, that cheered Carly on as she sat and listened in awe of Mrs. Valente-Miller-Chambers and maybe soon, Taylor.

Carly guessed her to be in her early sixties and, despite the fact that she’d found herself a batch of husbands, Marco was her only child.

“Trust me, my dear. I’m an expert.”

“I’m sure.”

Still, she didn’t want a fancy wedding. Why bother? It wasn’t a celebration. It wasn’t as if he loved her.

Sudden tears stung her eyes. Stupid. Stupid. Why think such a thing? So what if he didn’t love her. They would be a family.

Yeah, but she loved him. And they were marrying in two days’ time.

The thought scared her to death. But for her baby’s sake, she would do it.

In a whirlwind, Daphne organized everything, leaving Carly to simply traipse after her. Fittings, flowers, hair, jewelry. Nothing was too much of an undertaking for her future mother-in-law.

But what Carly really wanted was to go to work. However, with Daphne in charge, she had to temper her urge to phone Tansy constantly.

“You don’t have to check on me every hour,” Tansy advised when she phoned her assistant for the sixth time that day. “It’s all going fine. You rest. You’ve a wedding tomorrow.”

Tomorrow sounded so far away, yet would come all too soon. Her gut churned continuously, though, thankfully, she hadn’t seen Marco since yesterday. After being hounded out the door by his mother, he’d come home late and gone early this morning. Everything, according to Daphne, who had retreated a short while ago, giving Carly some blessed respite, was on schedule.

Just then, the doorbell rang. Carly frowned. She wasn’t expecting anyone. She punched the security speaker.

“Who is it?”

“Rosaria Santos. I have a wedding gift.”

Presents?

It was real. A wedding. Marriage to Marco.

Carly buzzed the door release and waited.

A knock sounded on the apartment’s front door a few minutes later, and she opened it. A statuesque woman with lustrously dark hair hanging down her back stood on the doorstep. She didn’t wait to be invited in, but strode past Carly and into the apartment.

The woman’s audacity caught Carly unawares for a few seconds, till she recovered her composure. “Marco’s not here at the moment,” she informed the visitor.

“Never mind. It wasn’t him I wanted to see,” she almost purred, her scarlet nails trailing a path along the back of the leather sofa.

“It wasn’t?”

“No, dearie.”

“Dearie?” Who was she calling dearie? Carly bristled. She eyed the woman. Long, leather-clad legs, her slim hips wrapped in a beaten silver and aqua belt, breasts pouting over the top of a laced, peasant-style blouse.

And shoes.

Carly's gaze dropped to the woman's shoes. The heels seemed so thin, they'd split in two any minute. She prayed God would listen and heed her prayer. Not nice, she knew, but who cared. This woman had barged in and wasn't about to win any personality contests as, with barely concealed disdain, her gaze traveled up and down Carly.

Rosaria circled her like a lioness on the hunt, ready to pounce, and a prickle of fear shot down Carly's spine. Had she let a mad woman into the apartment?

"You'll do."

"Do?" Carly frowned. She rested her hands on her hips. "Look, I think it best you go."

"In my own time, *dearie*. I have a wedding gift." Rosaria smiled and let out a deep, throaty chuckle. It was the sound of molten sex. Damn it. The woman was a vixen in heat and made Carly more than nervous. She was afraid.

Rosaria picked up a bag at her feet and passed an elaborately wrapped parcel.

Carly took it, unsure what to say.

"Aren't you going to open it?"

"I'll wait for Marco."

"Oh, no, don't do that. I'd love to see you open it."

Putting the parcel on the coffee table, Carly sat on the sofa and fiddled with the abundance of frothy ribbons. She turned the gift over and slipped a finger under the tape and unwrapped it. It was a picture frame.

Rosaria hovered, reminding Carly of a vulture swooping down. She turned the frame over, and her jaw dropped. It was elaborate gold filigree and very expensive. But it wasn't the expense that shocked her, but the large portrait photo it enclosed. The frame slithered from her fingers and clattered onto the coffee table. Carly didn't care if it smashed into a thousand pieces.

"Don't you like it?"

"Get out." Carly scrambled from her seat and pointed to the door. "I think you'd better go. Thanks for the frame."

"Oh, dear, I seem to have upset you." Rosaria smiled and sashayed toward the door. Carly gritted her teeth. Why did the woman have to be as sexy as hell?

“What did you expect, Ms. Santos? Did you think I’d enjoy seeing a picture of you, naked? I presume you’re an ex-girlfriend of my fiancé?”

“Tut, tut.” Rosaria laughed again, showing off her brilliant white smile, while her eyes remained cold and lifeless. “You may not like it, but I’m sure Marco will. Marco always said I had a good body. He loves it.” She slid a well-manicured hand across her flat abdomen and over the curve of her hip.

Carly choked back the bile. She had to get this woman out of here. “Thanks for your visit. Time to go.” Her tone was hard as stone, but her heart was fragile, breaking. *This is the body Marco loves*. Present tense. The woman had said loves, not loved, as in the past. Was Marco still seeing her? The thought filled Carly with a bitter dread.

“I’m going, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Warn me?”

“*Si*.”

Carly gasped. “You’re Italian?”

“Of course.” Her smile widened. “Marco and I go a long way back. Family friends. We understand each other. I *know* him.” She gave Carly another withering look. “You may think you have him, but don’t get too attached. Marco is mine. Once he gets over the baby idea, he’ll come running back. He always does. Babies are such a bore. Marco doesn’t want my body to get so ugly.” She preened, letting a hand drape once more over her pancake-flat stomach.

Numbed by the woman’s vicious verbal attack, Carly couldn’t speak.

It didn’t get any better. “Just wait till you’re big and fat. Marco will not want you. And when that brat screeches the night away, he’ll be back in my bed.” Rosaria Santos tossed her silken tresses over her shoulder with the flick of one scarlet finger and walked to the lift, hips swinging with a sexual invitation Carly knew would turn heads wherever she went.

She couldn’t look a moment longer and slammed the door, sinking to the floor only to catch sight of the picture frame. Naked as the day she was born, but definitely more voluptuous, Rosaria was draped with a barely-there bit of fluff. Carly wanted to smash it to pieces, tear the picture out and rip it up. But most of all, she wanted to strangle the dratted woman with the oh-so-artfully draped feather boa.

“Who the hell brought this?” Marco asked sharply as soon as he arrived home and spied the gift lying where she’d dropped it.

Carly looked up from her book. She hadn’t been reading, merely staring at the same page for the

last quarter of an hour feigning interest. “Your girlfriend, I believe.”

Marco eyed the picture. “She was here?”

“Yes, and I can’t say it was a delight to meet her. If you intend to continue your liaisons with Ms. Santos, make sure it’s not here.”

“Liaisons?” Marco exhaled, but Carly refused to jump, refused to acknowledge the power he had over her, despite the warring in her stomach. Her nerves were shot, and her stomach heaved. Quite frankly, she far preferred staring at the toilet bowl than the icy blue accusing eyes of her soon-to-be husband. “Rosaria is history.”

“Whatever you say,” she said, flicking a hand in dismissal. “Just keep her away from me.”

Marco frowned, but Carly wasn’t interested in letting him draw out this conversation.

“I can’t be bothered arguing.” She turned a page. “I realize my hold on you is tenuous, to say the least, that the draw card in our marriage is the baby, but back off and keep that woman away.” With as much dignity as she could muster, Carly stood and looked down at the frame lying neglected on the sofa. “Nice frame, shame about the photo,” she said. She turned on her heels and walked to her room, closing the door behind her, the click of the lock resounding tenfold, though it couldn’t drown out the pain in her heart.

Crawling onto her bed, Carly pulled the luxurious cotton coverlet up and huddled underneath. She hurt—a lot—and within minutes the floodgate opened and tears fell. She didn’t try to stop them, hoping to purge her heart. Having Rosaria Santos around hurt like hell and aborted any minuscule thread of hope she held.

A brittle laugh escaped her lips.

A tenuous hold, she’d said.

What a joke. It wasn’t a hold. It was their baby that bound them, nothing more.

But there was one thing Carly couldn’t forget. She loved Marco. But what use was love?

Swearing under his breath, Marco paced the floor. He dropped his gaze and caught sight of the Aubusson underfoot, lips twisting in a slight smile as he remembered Carly’s words about wearing a path in the rug. He halted, placed his tumbler of brandy on the side table, and flopped down on the sofa, dropping his head in his hands. What an ass he’d been. Guilt washed over him, and he felt an intense discomfort. Not for the first time either, he remembered. Where Carly was concerned, he seemed to be making a shambles of everything.

Marriage!

The very idea scared the living daylights out of him, which wasn't surprising, considering his mother's track record. Okay, so he was an adult and should conduct his life accordingly, but when it came to the "M" word, he was back at boarding school, listening to his mother's explanations about why he had to stay there or else be shipped off to obscure Italian relatives. Father number two didn't like children. Marco shook his head and tried to block out the memories. Memories he wished he didn't have, but had to deal with nevertheless.

Children needed fathers. He knew that and he wasn't about to forsake *his* child. Never. His child would have him around and not be bundled off to boarding school or distant family. Never in a million years would Marco repeat his life experiences with his own child.

But marriage?

Carly hated his guts for forcing her hand.

Too bad. His child needed him.

He drained his glass and headed to his bedroom. Hopefully he'd get some sleep. Three months dreaming of a certain auburn-haired goddess hadn't done his sleep patterns any good, and he needed as much coma-like sleep as he could get.

Tomorrow was his wedding day.

The sun streamed through the bedroom window, waking Carly with a start. For a moment, she was confused by her surroundings until the mush that constituted her collective brain cells began to function, albeit one at a time.

Today was her wedding day. She was marrying Marco.

She should have been radiantly happy. Should have been ecstatic. Brides were, weren't they?

But inside, her nerves did a war dance. She was ready to bolt, but knew deep down she wouldn't.

Couldn't. She tossed aside the covers and swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stared out at the day. The leaves were changing color. From the darkest reds to oranges, they lay scattered across the street below like a lush carpet. How different life in New Zealand must be for Marco from his native Tuscany where everything was old, with walled towns and castles, the medieval heart of Italy. Down under, New Zealand's seasons were the opposite, and the lifestyle not so frantic. It was, however, where he had etched an incredibly successful business for himself. Her soon-to-be husband was determined and loyal—at least where his baby was concerned. But it wasn't enough. Would never be enough.

Snatching the phone up before her courage crumbled, she punched in the numbers for Marco's mobile.

He answered on the first ring.

"Carly?"

Her eyes shuttered. He knew it was her. For a moment her voice faltered.

"Carly, what's wrong?"

Everything!

"I can't...we can't..."

"Can't what? You're not making sense."

"I can't marry you."

"Like hell." The phone went dead.

For two heart beats she stared at the phone still in her hand, heard the disconnected call tone. The phone dropped from her fingers, falling to the bed.

Five minutes. Ten tops. That's all she had, then she knew Marco would be here, charging in, taking control. She had to go. She'd write him a note.

He made it in four.

"What the hell do you mean, you can't?" he stormed, the door to her bedroom slamming back on its hinges as he charged in.

Carly backed up. "Marry you."

"Bit late for that," he said, glancing at his watch. "The wedding is in three hours."

"Call it off."

"Neither of us wants this marriage, but *we* will marry."

Carly wrapped her arms across her middle, hypnotized by the single water droplet on a strand of his hair that fell across his forehead. It dropped to his cheek, sliding to the corner of his mouth.

His tongue slipped across his lips, teasing the droplet. He licked it away, and Carly's blood heated to inferno proportions.

She shook her head. This wasn't helping. He wasn't helping. "And if I refuse?"

"Ah, but, you haven't."

"I just did."

"We both want the best for our child, and that's two parents. The contract with CV Hotels will secure your company's place in the design world, countrywide, *si*?"

Carly nodded.

"Your company has put everything into this project. Perhaps if the contract went to someone else, you might not be able to support yourself and our child."

Carly's world toppled. "You bastard."

"Definitely. But you see, Carly, I already love the child you carry. My child. I will do whatever I must to keep my child in my life."

He made it perfectly clear. If she didn't marry him, he would destroy her world. The world she'd worked so hard to build. Then where would she be? Pregnant and with no means to support herself and the baby.

No marriage.

No contract.

A potent threat.

Marco didn't love her, but she loved him and that was that. Unrequited love would have to be enough for their marriage.

With a heavy heart, she acceded. "Love our child, Marco, but keep the hell away from me."

A knock at the door silenced her argument. Marco opened the door. A maid entered, carrying a breakfast tray.

Neither said a word as the woman deposited the tray then left. As the door closed, Marco turned to face Carly. "Breakfast, madam." He offered her a strained half smile.

"You don't have to wait on me." Just then Carly realized Marco was staring at her, his gaze heated as it traveled down her length. Her partially clad length.

Carly pulled the edges on her dressing gown closer.

He offered a slight grin and winked. "Nothing I haven't already seen."

Beneath her silk robe, her body hitched into overdrive.

Damn it. It shouldn't be happening. She was meant to be leaving. Calling off the wedding. "Well, don't get any ideas," she fumed. "We've a deal. Mummy, Daddy and baby make three. That's it."

It was as if her comments had splashed him with ice water, and his mask fell back in place, good humor replaced by the darkly daunting man of recent days. "I can see being married to you is going to be a joy."

"Don't bet on it. I didn't ask for this marriage."

"You agreed, nevertheless."

"Does the word blackmail mean anything to you, Marco?"

Marco's jaw tightened at her waspish comment. "I thought you might like to know that the blood tests have returned. Also, our lawyers have sealed the pre-nuptial agreement," he said as if brushing her aside physically.

Sadness snaked through Carly's veins and around her heart until she could barely breathe. Suddenly the tray of food on her lap, the toast with the sliver of butter, the small pot of raspberry conserve and the frosted glass of orange juice, became so intensely interesting that she couldn't look anywhere else.

Bad move. Her stomach heaved, and bile rose in her throat, scorching an acidic path. She wanted to be sick.

"Excuse me." Scrambling as if lightning had struck, Carly shoved the tray aside and raced for the bathroom, clutching her belly as she went. Unceremoniously, she huddled over the porcelain.

What was she doing? Why was she marrying him?

Stupid questions. Easy answers.

She knew the truth, but nothing right now would force her to tell him. That would only lead to more hurt, and she'd had enough rejection to last a lifetime.

Church bells pealed in unison and rippled through the cathedral with vocal grandeur, but it could have been rap music for all Marco cared. He wasn't in a good mood and wanted to get the whole fiasco over with. How his mother had organized a cathedral in such a short space of time was beyond him.

Marco lifted his head and stared up at the church tower. At least they were real bells, even if his marriage wouldn't be real.

That bugged him, though he wasn't sure why. He didn't want the fleeting kind of love a man finds with a woman, didn't want marriage and certainly didn't want commitment. But it was the fact that Carly called the shots and made the rules that was giving him a headache.

You're losing control.

Too true, he admitted grimly. And he didn't like feeling powerless. But time to ponder the present evaporated as his hurriedly appointed best man rushed alongside. "Time to roll, mate. Carly's car is coming."

Rooted to the spot, Marco felt his gut churn.

Chad gave him a wry look. "You nervous? Don't be. I can see you love her."

"Love, huh." He did not love her, or any woman, ever. Love was for fools.

Minutes ticked by. "If she's not here in ten seconds, I'll damn well go and get her."

Marco groaned. What was the matter with him? Suddenly, it was imperative she turn up.

Chad slapped him playfully on the back. "Don't stress, mate. She's here. Probably fluffing her dress. You know how women are."

Marco cocked an eyebrow at his best friend. "Do I?" He wasn't so sure. Right now, all he could do was try to keep the rising tide of anxiety at bay. "I don't have a clue."

The organ struck a chord, and the whispering voices in the ancient cathedral hushed. As if in slow motion, Marco felt his gaze pulled to the rear where, outlined from behind by the golden rays of sun streaming through the wide-open cathedral doors, stood Carly.

"Gorgeous" came to mind, but seemed a totally inadequate description.

Carly's soft pink satin dress hugged her curves in all the right places. Atop her head she wore a spray of rosebuds entwined with pink ribbons. She looked ethereal.

But Carly was real. Very real.

And so was the baby.

Accompanied by the fluttering chords of the organ, she began a slow walk up the aisle toward him, each step measured and stiff. Even from this distance, he could see a burning fear reflected in her expression, and his gut lurched. Had he put that there?

She was alone. Where was her father?

But Marco had no time to ponder his future father-in-law's absence. When Carly took the last steps toward him and looked at him fleetingly, he felt he could drown in her eyes.

As she came to a halt in a shimmer of satin at his side, he bent and whispered in her ear, "I thought brides wore white."

"It's oyster pink," she responded, her voice breathless. "Besides, I can hardly wear white being three months pregnant."

Marco went to answer that surely propriety didn't matter these days, but his attention was tugged back by the priest who began to speak in a singular drone that echoed across the vast abyss of the vaulted cathedral.

It was time to get married.

"You are now man and wife."

It was over. Marco exhaled, and his body jerked alive. It was as if he'd slept throughout the entire service.

"Kiss the bride," came a childish call from behind. The small gathering laughed.

There was no turning back. Marco looked down at Carly, whose unsmiling eyes gazed nervously up at him.

"Go on, mate," came a verbal nudge from one of the wedding guests.

A hint of a smile tilted the corners of his mouth. "Better do as we're told," he said and lowered his head.

"No..." Carly began, but he covered her mouth with his, flaring an instant ardor in his loins. He meant the kiss to be brief, simply to satisfy their audience, but realized he needed to satisfy himself and couldn't pull away even if he'd wanted to.

And he certainly didn't want to.

Wrapping his arms around her, he tilted her head up to his. His lips seared a path over hers, seeking, teasing them apart and, as the tip of his tongue brushed against her sweet, moist mouth, a ripple of heat ricocheted through his body, making him shudder. He pulled back a fraction and murmured against her hair. "You taste of heaven."

Her touch. Her perfume. The taste of her. Everything was a potent aphrodisiac and sent his body

on a tidal wave of discovery. Again, his lips sought hers.

“Aw, heck, how long does he have to kiss her for?” Carly’s nephew Bryce’s childish voice interrupted.

Titters of laughter echoed around the cathedral and, with more reluctance than Marco wanted to admit, he pulled away. The simple fact that Carly’s breathing was as labored as his own gave him a small measure of satisfaction.

“Ready?” he asked, trying to steady the adrenaline pumping in his veins, wondering briefly if he was fighting a lost cause.

Flush-faced, his wife nodded mutely, but she kept her eyes downcast. Gently, Marco folded her arm into the crook of his and guided her down the marbled aisle and outside as family and friends crowded around.

There was a tug at his jacket, and he glanced down to see Carly’s nephew. “That kissing stuff. Looked like you enjoyed it.”

Aware Carly had stilled at his side and watched his every move, he crouched down to the young lad. “Well, son, it’s like this. Kissing can be fun. However, it’s something that requires a lot of practice.”

“Do you?” the boy asked.

“Do I what?”

“Practice. Don’t look too much fun to me, all that slobbering. Yuck.”

Marco chuckled and stood, his hand resting on the tangled mop of Bryce’s curls. “Well, look at it this way. You don’t have to start for a long time, so keep to playing with snails and puppy dogs’ tails for a while longer.” He gave Bryce a knowledgeable wink.

Seemingly satisfied, Bryce gave Marco the thumbs up in return and tottered off towards his cousins.

“Good answer. You have a knack with children,” Carly congratulated him.

“Do I?”

“Bryce seems satisfied.”

“At least someone is satisfied with me.”

The throb in Carly's head increased with every passing minute. She wanted to escape, to be anywhere but at her wedding reception. She didn't feel remotely like celebrating. Besides, who celebrated a marriage of convenience? Instead, she stood in the corner watching the merriment of others. It left her cold. Her sisters ignored their rambunctious children and left them to their own games while her mother latched onto Chad Burns, filling him in on every explicit and sordid detail of her life story.

In the past Carly would have cringed with embarrassment, but now she didn't care. She'd had too many years fostering her family's every whim, propping up her mother and caring for her siblings on her small and inexperienced shoulders, until one day she'd had enough and rebelled. She'd gotten out of the trap. Strength and determination saved her sanity and from a life of being at everyone's call.

She was successful. Life was good.

Okay, so she was married to someone who didn't love her. She could handle that. Unrequited love would be enough, she hoped. Besides, watching Marco interact with her nephew had eased her mind considerably. He would make a good father. Forget the good husband. That wasn't important.

But Carly ignored her inner voice and, as the car drew up, Chad ushered her and Marco to the waiting limousine. Everyone crowded 'round, their voices loud and grating on her already overstretched nerves.

She got in and moved swiftly to the far side, followed by Marco. He said nothing, merely gave her one of his imperious glares he was so good at.

"Not the happy couple scene I thought you'd want to impart on the family, Mrs. Valente."

Carly looked the other way and stared out the window. Bryce stood watching. He gave her the thumbs up, and she replied with a fleeting smile. But the moment the car drove away, the heavy layer of sadness she'd fought all day broke the flood banks and enveloped her in its gloom.

Second by second, as the car eased into the city traffic, Carly's sense of desperation escalated. Cocooned by the exotic aroma of leather seats, mingling with the heady spice of Marco's cologne teasing her senses, she couldn't fight the way her body reacted to Marco.

She had to get away. Leaning forward, she tapped the window between the driver and herself. "Drop me off at High Street."

Marco jerked around to face her, his expression narrowed and hooded. "Where the hell are you going?"

"I want to go to the office." Carly was ready to go back to work. She needed to.

"I should have known." He sneered. "A woman who works on a beach with a laptop would

certainly want to work on her wedding day. I presume that's the reason you changed into a suit. Off with the wedding dress and back to reality." He gave her a withering, glacial look. "Far be it from me to suggest we spend some time together." He gave the driver a nod, and the car turned at the next intersection.

Satisfied they were heading in the right direction, Carly relaxed and, once curbside, the driver opened the door for her. But she didn't move. She wanted Marco to say, "Stop, don't go," pull her into his arms and declare his undying love. She twisted on the seat and looked into his face. It was hard as granite, his gaze so bleak it sent a shiver down her spine.

"Your office awaits, Mrs. Valente." Marco's scathing retort killed her hopes.

Fairy tales don't exist. Haven't you learned that yet?

Disappointment and defeat cut through Carly's heart. She battled to contain it. Head held high, she blinked back the threat of tears and bit her bottom lip to stop herself from trembling. With as much dignity as she could muster, she exited the car, but before she had time to straighten her skirt, Marco yanked the door closed behind her, and the car sped off, leaving her alone.

Alone on her wedding day.

Well, wasn't that she wanted?

Of course it was. She wanted the safety of her office, her work and the things she knew and understood, not the feelings and emotions playing havoc with her senses.

Didn't she?

Stoically, Carly walked into her office. It was empty.

She was married and she was alone. Somehow, she'd made the two things that weren't meant to go together synonymous.

Slumped in a chair, she dropped her head into her arms and finally gave in to the tears she'd forcibly held back all day. One by one they trailed down her cheeks. Soulful tears, heart-wrenching sobs full of pain and hurt and every emotion she'd ever felt, ever owned and denied. They rose to the surface, brutal and unrelenting. Yet there was no one to hear it, no one to comfort her.

Just like her whole life.

"It's okay, baby," she whispered. "I love you." Carly caressed her stomach. "Your daddy will love you. He just doesn't love me, that's all."

Chapter Eleven

Carly took the lift to the penthouse. The butterflies in her stomach were definitely not rioting because she hadn't eaten all day. Her nerves were as taut as a high wire. Any slack and she'd probably crumple to the floor.

The lift came to a halt with a soft hiss.

"Here we go. Shoulders back," she muttered as she stepped into the lobby. Swiping her key tag in the locking system, she opened the door.

He's a man, that's all. Just a man.

He's my husband.

Marco's sharp, deriding tone attacked her as soon as she entered. "So, you decided to come home. Work all done, is it?"

"There's always work to be done."

"*Si*." Marco shrugged and gulped the last of his brandy. "Work is *so* important."

Carly tried to brush past him, but his hand snaked around her wrist. He held her fast, and she bit back a cry as a wave of heat radiated from his firm grasp and thundered through her veins. "Work is my life," she confirmed.

"And our baby is not?"

"Of course it's important."

"But not the marriage."

"Marriage? This isn't a marriage, Marco. Your threat determined that. This is a deal to make a family for our child. You do your thing, and I'll do mine."

"Which is?"

"My business. I've not worked for years to let it slide away. I intend to keep working. I won't let you take from me all I've worked for."

"And you intend to tag the baby along with you?"

Her shoulders sagged, and she fought off a rush of exhaustion. "I'm tired. I want to go to bed."

His hold on her dropped away. "Alone, I take it."

"We had a deal."

“We did. A marriage with two bedrooms.”

“I didn’t force this situation.”

“So you keep reminding me. But you came nevertheless.”

“I came because you blackmailed me.” Carly clamped her lips firmly closed. She wasn’t about to tell him her other reasons. Why put herself through that much hurt?

Marco stepped away and picked up a magnificent bouquet of roses from a side table. Dozens of them in every color and shade imaginable. “These are for you.”

Tentatively, Carly took them from him, mindful her fingers didn’t touch his. At all costs, she had to keep away from him—touching him had always been her downfall. She bent and inhaled their heady fragrance. “They’re divine.”

“*Si*.” His voice was thick and full of velvety promise and stirred an instant nervousness, amplified as her gaze locked with his.

“Thank you.”

“Wait, there’s more.” He handed her a gold-wrapped box.

“You sound like the man from television, hawking his wares.”

“That’s good.”

“What is?”

“You’re smiling. A wedding day, no matter what the circumstances, should at least see a smile on the bride’s face, hmm?”

Carly’s fingers trembled as she undid the silk ribbon and lifted the lid. “Chocolates.” Her stomach rumbled at the sight of food, reminding her she hadn’t eaten for hours.

No good for a baby.

Awash with guilt, she tucked the box under one arm and carried the flowers in the other. “Thanks, Marco. It’s a nice gesture.”

“Nice. I seem to have heard that word from you before.”

The corners of her lips twitched. “I presume the champagne is for you,” she said, pointing to the large bottle of bubbly still on the table.

Marco glanced at the bottle and back at her. “*Si*. No alcohol for you or baby,” he said sternly.

She laughed. “You’ve been reading up on daddy stuff.”

Color suffused his cheeks, and she realized she’d hit the jackpot. It took her by surprise.

But Marco hovered, his closeness disconcerting. His eyes darkened, face etched with the lines of a man with something on his mind. A hitch of uncertainty captured Carly.

Finally, he spoke. “I have something I wish to ask you.”

Carly feigned exhaustion, though it wasn’t far from the truth. But she didn’t want any more confrontation. Not now. “Can’t it wait, Marco? I’m beat.”

“No, it can’t. I want a...”

Her heartbeat stopped. “A divorce?”

All color drained from his face. “Never. I will not have my child tossed from parent to parent. No, Carly, not divorce, but we cannot live as two people who pass in the night, with never a civil word.”

Carly watched the play of emotions flicker across her husband’s face. Suspicion was powerful, and she steadied herself for the onslaught of disaster. Marriage to a man who didn’t love her, a man she ached to touch and couldn’t allow herself to, was more than she could bear. And the future, knowing he would find release with other women, even if discreetly, was too overwhelming to consider.

“What do you have in mind?” she asked, although she really wasn’t courageous enough to want to know the answer.

“I want a truce.”

Was that all? Carly’s relief was absolute, and she sagged against the door. “All right,” she agreed and turned to escape to her room, to shut out the pure physical attraction Marco’s presence caused—lest she cave in.

“Before you go,” he cautioned, and she halted. Her eyes shuttered for a moment. “This is for you.” Marco held out a large white envelope. She looked questioningly at it then at him, but his eyes were hooded, veiling any expression.

She took it.

“Open it.”

Her heart thudded and her throat tightened as she tore it open. She pulled out a cream and gold folder.

“A contract for the interior design of all the new CV Hotels,” he informed her.

Carly’s legs buckled beneath her. “Do you think I married you to get the contract?”

“Didn’t you?” he asked, his tone hard-edged.

Hadn’t she?

No! No! No!

She held the contract to her chest. “Why, Marco?”

“You’re the best designer around. I want the best. I wanted you.”

She nodded. He thought her the best. Her spirits soared.

For a few drawn-out minutes, his words hung thickly between them, the air crackling with tension.

“The best,” she whispered.

“*Si.*”

But it was the words he left unsaid which disturbed her, ingratiating themselves into her conscious. Wanted. He said *wanted* —past tense. Tears pricked her eyes and she felt a thick cord choking her, cutting off all air. Perhaps Marco *had* wanted her once, but now his words intimated that was in the past.

He’d screwed up—again. Big time. Marco’s muttered curses rent the air as he paced his home office.

It had been her tears that got to him. Soft, silent tears that slid down her face.

Carly had thought she’d hidden them from him. But no—he’d seen them, and it tore at his gut—and his heart. Yes, he would admit it. She’d gotten to him, and in more ways than one.

That she obviously thought him an ogre, forcing her into marriage, was of little consequence.

He could handle being hated.

But being loved would be infinitely better. Marco had tried to tell himself it was for the baby’s sake, but even if he was only slightly honest with himself, that wasn’t the whole truth. Not by a long shot.

But the truth scared the hell out of him, made him react. And reaction made Carly cry.

Damn it.

He wasn't an ogre, wasn't some mean-spirited bastard bludgeoning others to do his bidding.

Was he?

Marco tempered that question and refused to answer it, though he acknowledged his actions were a prime rendition of caveman tactics.

He knew Carly must be going through hell with all the emotional and hormonal changes, realizing she was pregnant, wondering about her future.

Wasn't that where he came in?

The fact was, somewhere deep down inside him, a primal instinct to protect had reared itself, taking him totally and utterly by surprise. It shocked him. It terrified him.

Marco eyed the papers that littered his desk. Unable to concentrate because of the visions replaying in his brain, work was anathema to him.

Carly in paradise.

Carly in his arms.

Carly kissing him as his wife.

She had taken his breath away as she walked up the aisle, but it hadn't been until that moment, as he released a breath all pent up and expectant, that he'd realized his fear. Would she turn up?

But she had, and now they were married. For better or worse.

Chapter Twelve

"Tell me I don't look like a beached whale," Carly wailed as she tried on a maternity dress two months later.

"Don't be ridiculous. You're blooming," Daphne chirped.

"Fat, frumpy, and..."

"No. Never say that. Enjoy your baby, even before it comes. Some people never get the chance at all."

Carly's lips pursed. "True. I shouldn't be so careless with my words. I'm lucky," she admitted. And she was. She felt so very lucky. "I admit it was a shock at first, but after reality set in, I really am loving every moment."

Liar.

"Is Marco taking care of you?"

Carly's gaze lowered. She didn't want to tell the truth. "Oh, he's fine." Well, as far as she knew he was.

"You don't sound so sure." Daphne looked directly at her, and Carly felt the older woman's intuitive gaze. Her heart plummeted. So far they'd managed to fool everyone. Their marriage had been hailed the wedding of the year. What a joke.

"Having a baby is new for both of us. It takes time to get used to, I suppose..." Carly's excuse trailed off.

She spied the small pile of color samples in the bag next to her handbag and brightened. "The plans are almost ready for the hotel at the Viaduct," she said, changing the subject.

Daphne's brows rose. "You are a wonderful woman, Carly Valente, and clever to boot. Marco did right choosing you."

"Well, my designs seem to fit the style the hotel wishes to project."

A spirited chuckle burst from Daphne. "Oh, no, dear, I don't mean the design work, although it's true, you are a master, or should that be mistress, in that field. No, what I meant was Marco did right to fall in love with you. How could he not?"

Okay, so they'd called a truce, which she supposed was going well. Marco spent very little time in her presence, and when he did, it was usually to do with work. Night after night she cried herself to sleep, the old sense of aloneness all enveloping, crushing her spirit.

She should be happy.

Nothing had changed.

Later that day, shopping bags from some of the best stores in town littered her bed. Carly eyed them with contempt. Okay, so they were expensive, but money and fancy clothes weren't making her happy.

Needing some decadence time, she retreated to the bathroom and began to run the bath. She reached for a bottle of pearly rose bath oil and poured a generous amount into the bath and

ensured the water was lukewarm. It may have been an old wives' tale about bath water being too hot for a pregnant woman, but Carly wasn't about to take any chances.

With the fragrant aroma wafting up from the water, soothing her frazzled nerves, she eased into the bath and let out a heavy sigh as its warmth succored her tired and aching body. Her hand trailed over her stomach. It was a very definite bump now and her breasts were fuller. Eyelids drifting closed, she began to relax and tried to forget everything, mindless to every sound around her. Time, for now at least, meant nothing.

"What?" Her eyes shot open, and her hand dropped to her belly. There it was again. A dig in her stomach, soft and fluttery, just like a tickle. She stared down in awe at her little bulge. Again, harder. "Oh, my!" she all but shouted. Her baby had moved. She smiled, and a joyous tingle of tears cascaded down her cheeks. Her baby.

"What's going on? Are you okay?" Marco burst into the bathroom, giving Carly such a fright she slipped and slithered beneath the bubbles. A firm hand grasped her under the arms and yanked her upward. She came up spluttering, spitting out soapy water.

"What did you do that for?" she accused.

"You were drowning. Why the hell didn't you wait until I got home if you wanted to have a bath?"

"Why should I?"

"Because... Damn it, Carly, what are you trying to do, drown the baby and yourself?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You're overreacting. The baby kicked. That's all."

"Kicked?"

"Yes. It's what babies do. You barging in here frightened the life out of me and I slipped under the water. If you want to get rid of me that much, drowning would..." Carly stopped mid-sentence. Her eyes widened and focused on one spot. She couldn't drag her gaze away as a practically bare-chested Marco knelt beside the bath, the broad, muscled chest revealed by the gap in his partially unbuttoned shirt now covered in tiny, glistening bubbles. Carly slapped a soapy hand over her mouth, trying to stifle a fit of giggles. "Oh, Marco. You look so pretty. Bubbles suit you. They soften the fierce exterior."

"I'll give you bubbles," he threatened with mock severity, but his eyes crinkled at the corners, mouth twitching with humor.

Carly licked her lips, suddenly aware of the heat burning between them. "Dare you."

"Oh, I dare." He reached for the sponge and soap and began a slow and rhythmic circle across her slick and very sensitive skin. It was erotic in the extreme, and her nipples peaked under the

surface of the still steamy water.

“Lean forward a little,” he instructed. She did as she was told. “Very nice. A wife who is obedient.”

She bit back a retort, not wanting to destroy the moment. Instead, she concentrated on his touch, closing her eyes as he trailed the sponge down her back. But when the tips of his fingers teased with delicious delight over her sensitive skin, she felt as if she was burning alive, her body strumming with intensity. Every nerve cell tingled as she succumbed to his ministrations.

Then he kissed her, a slow, thoughtful kiss, tentative and teasing, sending shivers of desire racing down her spine.

Carly thought she’d died and gone to heaven and let out a joyous sigh. Her lips parted a fraction. It was the invitation Marco needed, and his tongue began to trace the soft edges of her mouth, dancing with hers, hungrily seeking her response.

Time stood still, had no meaning. But when she shivered as the bathwater cooled, Marco gently lifted her out, water streaming in a cascade around them, puddling on the floor. She ignored it all. She had eyes only for her husband. For Marco.

Marco snatched at one of the huge, fluffy bath sheets from the heated towel rail and wrapped her in it. His fingers trailed across her full breasts. Nothing had prepared her for their erotic sensitivity, and she gazed down in wonder. Her nipples were tinged a delicate shade of pink, hard and aching with need. He bent his lips to her breasts, suckling one pebble-hard tip, a caress, velvet on silk, intoxicating as it sliced through her last vestige of calm.

Marco’s arousal pressed fully against the length of her, taut beneath the constrictions of the trousers he wore. Carly shivered.

She felt fully alive, her body on fire, pulsating and vibrant beneath his touch. She wanted him.

“*Cara mia*, you’ll get cold.”

Carly heard the passion in his voice and smiled. It matched her own. “Cold? I’m on fire.”

With her cradled in his arms, he sought her lips once more. It was a demanding kiss, firing her yearning with a mastery she’d thought she would never feel again. Holding her close, he carried her to her bed and laid her gently before him.

Suddenly, Carly felt vulnerable and unsure. Exposing her heart, her love for her husband, brought such pain she wasn’t sure if she could cope with the heartache of loving him. She started to cover herself with the large towel.

“No.” Marco’s fingers halted her hand, resting against her breast. “Don’t cover yourself. Don’t hide from me.”

Her lips quivered. She wanted Marco desperately. She wanted to love him one more time.

“Is it safe for the baby?” he asked.

She nodded. She couldn’t wait.

Marco began to undress—slowly—sending Carly’s temperature skyrocketing, her senses in a whirl of delicious torment.

First, his shirt, the flick of the buttons as he undid them a thunderous applause in the potent silence surrounding them.

Next, the buckle of his trousers.

Carly’s throat thickened, her lips suddenly parched. She looked away, unsure of the heat that flooded through every part of her.

“No, look at me. I need to see your eyes on me.”

She turned to face him. His eyes glittered with the golden glints she remembered so well, and it thrilled her to see such desire mirrored in those eyes.

Naked, he was a superb male, his blatant need for her leaving her in no doubt whatsoever. He eased his long frame beside her onto the bed and pulled her to him, cradling her in his embrace.

Carly let out a fulfilled sigh.

“It’s good?” he asked.

She simply nodded. She couldn’t speak. Only feel. And it felt wonderful, glorious. Wrapping her arms around him, she pulled his head down to her. “Don’t talk. Love me, Marco. Love me now.”

“I’m a very obedient husband,” he whispered.

“Good.”

He dragged her onto him, and she felt the entire length of his body hard against hers, making her tingle with anticipation. Levering herself so she sat astride him, she trailed her fingers over the wiry hair of his chest, tugging ever so gently at the fine, ebony curls. His eyes closed, and a burst of laughter bubbled up from deep within. “Nice?” she asked.

“Nice doesn’t seem adequate.”

Carly’s eyebrows rose at his admission. “That’s good. Very good.”

His large, bronzed hands cupped her breasts, the broad, flat pads of his thumbs rubbing repeatedly over her swollen nipples. A shudder shot through her. She was ready to explode.

It had been too long since she'd been in his arms. Far too long.

She remembered his touch, every nuance of his body, the undulating curve of his ribs, the texture of his delicious skin and the feel of him inside her. Carly's eyes fluttered closed. She wanted it all.

But when Marco chuckled, a deep throaty laugh, her eyes flicked open. "You shall have all you desire."

With a hand on either side of her hips, he lifted her a fraction before letting her slide down his swollen length. He let out a deep, appreciative sigh. "*Cara*, you have returned home. Where you should be, in my arms, my bed."

One part of Carly wanted this, yet her brain warned her. She chose to ignore it, her aching need for him too intense.

"Home feels good." Her body purred, and she began to rock in rhythm with him, the soft peaks smoldering, intensifying until they melded together as one. She clung to Marco, his mouth seeking hers in a fierce, possessive kiss, his tongue imitating their joining. Together they rode the wave of passion and reached the crest, Marco exploding into her in one long, shuddering wave while her orgasm splintered into a thousand sensations beyond thought. Only feelings.

This, Carly believed without a doubt, was where she belonged—in Marco's arms.

Chapter Thirteen

Weeks flew by. She was ecstatic. With an attentive and oh-so-very loving Marco taking her in his arms, holding her until they fell asleep, life was good.

Carly eyed the world outside her office. The color schemes for the hotels were all in place, and everything was set for the first hotel.

She let out a contented sigh and patted her stomach. "Everything's going to be okay, bubs."

Marco had come with her to the scan, but both had decided not to ask the baby's sex. To those around them, the Valente marriage was the epitome of success. Only one thing was missing.

Love.

She had long ago forgiven him for his intimidation, realizing she would have married him regardless. She loved him. It was as simple, and as complicated, as that.

He made love to her with an intensity that belied all reasoning, but not once had he uttered a single word about loving her. But, like a beggar who craved food, she would take whatever was offered while vowing not to open her heart. She kept her own counsel—for self-preservation.

She prayed it was enough.

Her phone rang, and she swiftly picked it up. “Hello.”

“Meet me downstairs.”

“Marco?”

“You were expecting another lover?”

Carly swallowed and bit her tongue, lest she give away her heart. There would never, ever be another lover. Only him.

“I’m downstairs waiting.” The phone line went dead.

She stared at the receiver for a fraction of a second before reacting and dropping the phone on her desk. She called to Tansy. “I’m going out,” she almost shouted.

Tansy winked at her enthusiastically. “A midday assignation with that hunk of yours?”

Carly felt a telltale heat color her cheeks. She offered a smile, but said nothing.

She grabbed a bag and raced for the door as quickly as her growing size allowed. Marco wanted her at his side. She wasn’t going to waste a minute of this special time—in case it ended.

She saw him the moment she stepped outside. He leaned against one of the large, blue glazed pots that housed an assortment of geraniums and trailing ivy. Marco Valente was a man everyone noticed. He drew people to him like a magnet. More than once she’d witnessed women fawning over him, despite the fact she stood at his side.

For weeks now, though, she’d been receiving odd phone calls. They were incessant. She was certain it was Rosaria, but had decided to say nothing to Marco about his ex-girlfriend and her attachment to the phone.

Marco hugged her to him. “I thought a little retail therapy appropriate.”

“I don’t need anything.”

One darkly angled brow rose as he looked at her with amusement glittering in his eyes. “Did I mention you? I think our baby could do with a few items, hmm?”

“But...”

“Humor me?” he teased.

“Never let it be said I turned down an opportunity to shop.”

Marco joined in her laughter. “Typical woman. Especially when it’s someone else’s money.”

It was as if he’d doused her in ice, freezing her blood and heart. Marco seemed to sense the change and stopped walking. He held up his hands in surrender. “Joke!”

“Oh. Ha, ha.” She tried to find the humor, but failed. “I’m not a gold digger, Marco. I earn my own money and have never had to rely on any man. I rely on myself.”

Not daring to look at him in case she lost her temper further, Carly walked ahead. Right now she didn’t care whether he followed or not.

Who was she trying to kid?

Several hours later, laden with shopping bags, she turned to Marco. “Talk about shop till you drop. I’m ready to do just that.” She gave him a rueful smile.

Concern etched his face. “I’m a fool. I forget the most important thing. Our baby needs its rest.”

The most important thing?

Not her.

Sadness swaddled Carly’s heart and she struggled to keep her gaze steady. Inwardly, she tried to rationalize his statement. She was being pedantic, childish, hormonal. Of course the baby was the most important thing. That Marco had bought every single title in the shop hadn’t failed to impress her. This baby was important to him. But just for once, she wished she could be the most important thing in his life because trying to ignore the hurtful emotions such an admission dug up was proving harder every day.

As she set the table for dinner later that evening, Carly tried to extinguish the heavy sense of foreboding that had been with her since they’d returned from the shopping expedition.

She flicked a quick gaze toward the room designated as the nursery. The painters had finished the artwork, and it was full to the brim with every conceivable baby gadget.

Marco stood at the stove and lifted the lid from cast iron casserole. “Smells good.”

“Just like a kid, can’t wait,” she admonished.

“Baby, I can never wait.”

Carly didn’t ask what for because, as usual, there seemed to be too much left unsaid and she was too scared to ask.

During dinner, Marco regaled her with humorous tales. Not once did he mention his childhood, however. She couldn’t understand it. Daphne was such a lovely woman. She knew Marco’s father had died young, when Marco was barely a toddler. That was certainly where their lives were in tandem.

When Marco offered to tidy up the kitchen, Carly went and put her feet up on the sofa. She gazed out into the dark night and across the inky sway of the harbor.

“I bet you never realized how domesticated I could be,” he called from the kitchen.

“Actually, if I remember right, you did pretty well on the island. Keep it up, a girl could get used to it.” Just then, her dear, nearly-to-be-born child gave her a kick. “Ouch.”

Marco was at her side in the flicker of an eye. “What’s the matter?”

She gave him a beaming smile. “The baby is playing baseball tonight.”

Marco wiped his damp hands on a cloth and dropped to his knees. Gently, almost timidly as if he was scared, he rested a hand on her stomach. The baby kicked repeatedly, and he burst into a broad smile, his laughter infectious as she joined in. “Perhaps he tries for the soccer World Cup.”

“He could be a she.”

“*Si*, a beauty like her mother,” he said, trailing a finger down her cheek. It was a purely magical moment, and Carly dipped her head sideways as Marco cupped her head, fingers smoothing the toss of her wayward curls.

“You say the nicest things.”

“I’m a *nice* guy.”

Carly stared up at her husband. Nice guy. Oh, he sure was. But exactly how nice, she wasn’t going to say. Not yet. Maybe one day. Sometime. First, she needed to trust his heart—and hers.

The shrill peal of the phone echoed in the silence. Carly wished it would go away, but its persistence forced her awake. Groggily, she struggled upright and snatched up the phone. “Hello.”

“Get Marco.”

“Marco?”

“Are you dumb as well as pregnant?”

“Rosaria?”

“Who else. Get him on the phone now!”

Carly froze. Was her intuition correct, had Rosaria been her phantom caller? “Before I do as you ask, answer me one thing. Have you been phoning me, saying nothing?”

There was a moment of hesitation at the other end. Carly knew the answer without hearing it.

At her side, Marco stirred. “Who is it?”

“Your ex-girlfriend. She needs you.” Carly tossed the phone at him and, as he switched from English to Italian, a wave of panic swelled in the pit of her stomach. She couldn’t be certain what was said, but one thing *was* certain: the sultry Italian was upset *and* demanding.

Marco’s expression dulled, and he turned away from her. Carly wanted to screech, “No, don’t.” Her hands covered her stomach as if to prevent her baby from seeing its father turning to another woman.

Minutes seemed to last forever until finally, Marco switched off the phone and climbed out of bed. He disappeared into the bathroom, taking the phone with him and closing the door. She heard the beep of Marco punching numbers into the phone and his muffled voice through the door.

In that single moment, Carly’s heart tore apart, her dreams and hopes dying.

Seconds later, a grim-faced Marco reappeared. “Rosaria needs me. I have to go.”

“Needs you? Doesn’t she have other friends?”

“She’s an old friend.”

“Friend being the operative word here. Try lover.”

But Marco ignored her taunt. “Old friends help each other.”

“So you go running to your lover, leaving your very pregnant wife to cope alone.”

“You’re very capable, *cara mia* .”

Hearing the endearment on his lips nearly undid Carly, but when he returned to their room fully

dressed, her resolve was fueled. “And she’s not?”

“Rosaria is distraught, her...” Marco’s voice trailed off and he ran a hand through his disheveled hair.

“Call her back. Tell her you can’t come, find someone else.”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

“Am I? You come and go as you please. Never mind your wife, she’s tough. I mean, look at the rabble-rouser family she comes from. You’re right. I don’t need you. Go to your lover.” Carly knew she sounded like a fishwife, but...damn it, she cared. She wished she didn’t.

They had only half a marriage. Marco didn’t love her. But he shared her bed. Surely that gave her the right to be upset? The woman gave a nude picture of herself for a wedding gift, had been harassing her with phone calls and now called in the middle of the night and rudely demanded to talk to Marco. Her husband. Who apparently was going out to meet her.

Marco shook his head. “Carly?”

“Don’t,” she shrieked. “I’ve had it. You do as you like, but if you go to her now, don’t expect me to be around when you come back.”

If he came back.

Marco stood silent for several heartbeats, silent and angry. Then, without offering her another word, he spun away from her and strode through the door.

Carly closed her eyes, squeezed them tight and waited. Waited for the door to slam. To hear Marco leave, as she knew he would.

The door slammed.

How long she sat on her bed, she didn’t know, but every emotion charged through her brain, cauterizing her heart, killing off hope. He’d gone. Her hand dropped to her stomach, the swell a comfort amidst the charge of unending pain.

Then he was back. Beside her. The same. But different. Carly lifted her head, held captive by stormy dark eyes.

Marco stepped toward her, but she held up a hand to halt him. “Don’t come near me. I don’t want you anywhere near my baby.”

“It’s my baby, too.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. “I can’t take any more. Wondering whether our marriage will last or not. It’s better this way.” What she didn’t say was that she couldn’t stand the wait. Waiting for him to leave, as he would, as her father had. The inevitable outcome of marriage. History repeating itself. It was better she guard her heart now, before it was too late and it broke.

Carly choked back a sob as the chill of reality froze her to immobility. It was already too late.

“What do you intend doing about it?” Marco’s tone was frigid, and she had to force herself to stand her ground. She tilted her chin upward and met him eye-to-eye.

“If you want to have input into our child’s life—fine.”

“Input,” he parroted.

“That’s what I said. But it won’t be as husband and wife. Go to your Italian floozy. Just leave me alone.”

“Floozy? Rosaria? You must be joking.”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

For one long, lonely minute he stared at her. Then he spoke. “What about our marriage?”

That one question nearly destroyed Carly, and her breath caught in her throat, a scalding tremor threading through her veins.

“Marriage? Our marriage is sex. Pure and simple. Good old sex.” To Carly, her voice sounded like someone else’s, someone in control of things, when the truth was completely the opposite. Inside, she felt numb.

Without a word she dressed quickly and grabbed her handbag, aware the whole time Marco stood watching. She turned to him and squared her shoulders, sucking in a steady breath for good measure. “Goodbye, Marco. Have a happy life. I’ll let my solicitor sort out visitation.”

“Visitation?” he snarled. “You bitch. You think you can take my son away from me?”

“Son, daughter, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that this is the last time they’ll hear us argue. I refuse to be part of a marriage of hate. I want a divorce.”

There! She’d said it.

For a moment, the word hung between them, the atmosphere tense and unbending. Then she turned and walked out of the bedroom, out of the apartment and out of the life of the only man she’d ever loved.

Chapter Fourteen

“Are you always this rude and grumpy, or is it that you’re sleeping alone and don’t like your own company?” Daphne asked as she barged into Marco’s office.

Marco eyed his mother and uttered a silent prayer. He didn’t know why he hoped for heavenly intervention. It had never helped him. “You on the warpath again, Mother?”

Daphne ignored his caustic remark and sat opposite him, her ruby red lips set into a very determined, thin line.

“Judging by your rather intent stare aimed my way, I guess the warpath is going to be clearly directed at me.”

“Don’t you try that ‘oh, Mother’ look on me, my boy.”

Marco struggled to control a grin. “You make me sound as if I’m some school boy still in short pants.”

“Wish you were,” she shot back. “Be easier to handle.”

“I’m a grown man. I don’t need *handling* .”

“You do if you’re going to get your wife back.”

Marco stilled and his expression soured. “My marriage is none of your business.”

“My daughter-in-law’s happiness is, and so is my future grandchild.”

“Let’s just put it down to a marriage that isn’t going to work,” Marco snapped, wishing his mother would disappear. “As much as I love you, and despite your uniqueness in the marriage department, *my* marriage is absolutely none of your business. Do you understand me?”

“Don’t be so negative, Marco. You give up too easily. Love has its ups and downs.”

“You can talk,” he said, rather more scathingly than he intended. “You’ve been there, done that so many times, I’ve lost count.”

Daphne’s lips twisted downward, and Marco guiltily saw a dullness creep into his mother’s blue eyes.

“Nastiness doesn’t become you, Marco.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You may be, but I guess you’d rather wallow in self-pity. I know exactly what you think of me,

but you're wrong. I've loved every man I've ever married...and a few others," she teased.

Marco's brows rose sharply. "Others?"

Daphne laughed, a pure peal of bubbling laughter. "Oh, if you could see your face. Yes, your mother still has it in her. Some people are born to love many. Others, like you, only once."

"And your reasoning is?"

"Don't sound so surprised. I'm your mother. I know my son." Daphne leaned forward in her chair and patted his hand. "Sometimes a mother does know best. Your father and I were like you and Carly. We argued, we loved, we argued. But we loved the most." Her eyes sparkled, jewel-like with unshed tears.

Marco tensed. "You don't have to go over this, Mother." He didn't want his past raked up, especially not by his mother. His hurt was his own and not to be shared.

But if he thought his mother would give up, he was sorely mistaken. "When your father died, I thought I would never recover. In time however, I discovered I could love again. However, the love I felt for your father was the strongest and most soul-fulfilling love I've ever had, even though I remarried again."

"And again." Marco couldn't resist teasing.

His mother smiled. "Yes, and again. I have loved my husbands, but your father was my first love, my soul mate. That love was so deep and empowering."

"Empowering?" Marco asked, uncomfortable with his mother's confession.

"Indeed." She nodded. "Loving your father, I felt I could do anything, be anything, solve anything. When he died, that feeling evaporated. I think this is why I married so many times. I needed a crutch. I was searching for that same empowerment. With your father gone, I searched for it in others."

"She doesn't need me," Marco bit out. The words left a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Have you asked her?"

"She won't speak to me. She won't see me except through a solicitor."

His mother gave him an encouraging smile. "Then find a way to get to her. Get in through the back door, so to speak. What is it that is most dear to her heart?"

Success. Business. Freedom.

The envelope slipped from her fingers and fluttered to the sand. Carly followed it a second later. Above, gulls circled and cawed as they came back to land, and the helicopter that had delivered food and mail and had disturbed the birds' deliberations retreated into the distance.

Silently, she reread the letter.

Due to the departure of the sole contractor, the contract between CV Hotels and Mason Designs is deemed null and void.

Carly's hand shook and she stared blankly at the letter, a numbness overtaking her second by second as she tried to reason the cruel joke.

It wasn't a joke, though—but Marco's ultimate revenge. He wanted her back. Crawling.

Carly choked back a sob. He didn't want her back for herself. Oh, no. It wasn't her. It was their baby. No baby, no contract was the concealed threat she read between the lines. Again.

"Damn him." Carly began to pace, racking her brain for a way out. By exacting revenge, Marco's intention was to humble her to her knees. He knew that if she had no business, she couldn't support her baby. And he knew she'd rather die than swallow her pride and accept money from him, despite the fact the law would demand he pay support, the courts ensuring the amount would be more than ample.

Pride goeth before a fall.

Carly refused to listen to her inner voice.

He knew she prided herself on her independence. Now, in one swift, incisive swing of the axe, knowing she'd declined other contracts because of the intensity of the CV Hotels job, Marco had killed her hopes for her future.

Damn him.

The golden rays from the midday sun did its best to warm the dead chill running through her veins.

It failed.

Carly stared out at the swirling ocean. The irony that she'd sought solitude on the island where she'd found love didn't escape her.

Did she suspend all pride and go back, crawling?

What was the most important thing to her?

The answer was twofold. Her baby and Marco. They were entwined, and the truth hit with blinding reality. Her eyes closed as an unbidden image of Marco filled her mind, his fragrance, his touch, the taste of him. It assaulted her senses as if he was at her side. She couldn't escape him, no matter how hard she tried. She couldn't escape her love for him, ever.

She loved her husband passionately, despite the fact he was an overbearing, uncaring ogre who wanted to cripple her business—and that made her mad as hell.

Carly didn't know if she could trust Marco. Trust was important. The presence of Rosaria Santos had unnerved her, and his actions that night were unforgivable.

He loves my baby.

But was that enough? She prayed it would be. She loved him, loved their baby, and if Marco loved only the baby in return, then so be it.

It sounded simple.

But what was simple? She'd thought that before and look where she had ended. Pregnant and married to a man who didn't love her.

Carly caught herself up short. Her hands began to shake and, when she felt her knees buckling beneath her, she took grateful refuge in the chair beside her.

"I should be locked up and certified," she whispered, thinking perhaps if she voiced the words she'd believe them.

Nothing had changed. Nothing seemed logical, yet it all made sense—to her, at least.

She was going home.

She was going back to be Mrs. Valente, but, she determined as she took one last look at the island as the helicopter lifted off and swung toward the mainland, she wouldn't let him know her heart. That was hers alone. Not to be broken again. Perhaps, in time, she would trust herself enough.

Once back in Auckland, Carly headed straight for Marco's office.

"You bastard." Carly snapped the door handle down on Marco's office and strode in, uncaring as all eyes in the office and reception area pivoted to focus on her. "You couldn't stand to lose, could you? You had to have me come crawling back."

Marco shrugged as if uninterested. "It seems you wanted the contract badly enough."

Carly watched her husband. His eyes were dead, and she had to force herself to stand rigid and not quiver under his unrelenting and unemotional gaze.

“The baby?” he asked.

“The baby is fine. Thank you for asking.”

“Our baby is important to me.”

“Important enough to blackmail its mother—twice.”

“The contract will be reinstated.”

Carly couldn’t speak. He, of course, thought she came back for money. Wasn’t that what she wanted him to think? Pain tore at her heart. But this way was better. She’d protect herself and her heart.

Weeks passed, and Carly’s pregnancy progressed. Marco was the image of the concerned father. Nothing was too much for his future child, while inside Carly felt dead. He hadn’t touched her since she returned, just as she’d demanded that first day. And, though he did as she had asked, her nerves were shot, and she flinched at the slightest sound.

As the lift rose swiftly to the penthouse, an exhausted sigh escaped her lips. She sank against the mahogany-lined walls. Everything was set. The plans, colors, furniture all ordered for the hotel complex. All she had to do was wait till the building was advanced enough so she could begin.

The lift doors eased open with a breathless sigh and Carly pushed off the wall and toward the apartment. Her legs ached, her head ached, her body ached. “Baby, you sure know how to put your mother through a tough day.” She smiled, rubbing her burgeoning belly.

“Carly.” Marco’s harsh voice interrupted her mind-numbing tiredness as she entered the apartment. “What is it?”

A soft gasp escaped her lips. “You’re concerned?”

His brows knitted and his shoulders slumped as he dropped his hands into his trouser pockets. He shook his head. “Of course. The baby?”

“Ah, yes. The baby. It’s always the baby.”

“Are you not concerned for your child?” Marco asked.

Anger burned in the pit of her stomach, and she glared at her husband. “What sort of stupid question is that? Of course I am.”

“Yet you work all hours of the day, not resting.”

A guilty heat suffused her cheeks. “Of course I rest. Tansy is always telling me.”

“You don’t tell yourself.”

“Look, Marco. I am tired, all right? Can’t we leave this? Do we have to argue again?”

“Argue? I thought I was showing concern.”

“By bullying me the moment I walk in the door?”

The already reddish tinge to Marco’s features flushed deeper and frustration etched his eyes. She felt the same.

Marco dragged a hand through his tousled, dark locks. “*Cara*.”

“Don’t call me that.”

His lips curved into a grim downward curve, and his gaze narrowed. “If that is what you wish.”

“Wish,” Carly parroted with soul-destroying exhaustion. She closed her eyes for a moment. She wished this were over. She wasn’t sure she would survive an uncaring Marco. It was far harder than she’d ever expected.

The instant his fingers touched hers, flames of desire ignited in her veins, and her eyes flew open, caught in the haunting gaze of her husband’s sapphire blue stare. His fingers curled around hers, his warmth permeating her body, firing her chilled senses. Gently, he tugged her forward.

On autopilot, Carly followed him as he led her toward the lounge and nudged her down onto the sofa.

“Stay still and silent,” he instructed. “If you can.”

“What’s this all about?”

“*You* and our baby.”

Confused and so tired she could barely function, let alone think, she wordlessly watched Marco move around the room as he brought a large towel and a bottle of lilac colored oil. Without speaking, he knelt in front of her and lifted her feet, placing them on the towel. He took off her shoes, tossing them aside, and lifted one foot and let it rest gently on his bunched thighs. Carly’s breath caught as she watched his movements, felt his touch and the strength and tautness of his hard, muscular thighs beneath her feet.

“Lavender,” he said, holding the bottle. “They say it helps you to sleep.” He poured the rich aromatic oil onto the palm of his hand and Carly’s nostrils flared as the sweet elixir stirred her

senses.

Cradling her foot in one hand, he deftly massaged the oil into her foot and, within seconds, as his intimately erotic touch intensified, a groan of pure indulgent pleasure escaped her lips and she began to relax.

Through lowered lashes, Marco looked up at her, and Carly witnessed a heady desire reflected in their darkened depths. "It's good you relax," he said.

Finished with one foot, he began the same process on the other. Carly writhed on sofa, biting back an urge so intense her fingers ached to hold onto him. She licked her lips, desperately aware of the need to taste his mouth on hers. Then her toes curled.

A burst of throaty laughter erupted from Marco, making her jump, and her eyes shot open. She looked down at her husband, her left foot still cradled in his oil-soaked palms.

"Your toes curled."

Carly said nothing, but a scorching heat flushed her face.

"They say curling toes are an indication of sexual excitement."

"Oh." She tried to sound vague and barely interested. But who was she trying to kid? "Glad you're amused." She tried to straighten them, but they curled right up again and she groaned inwardly.

Straighten, damn you, she cursed her toes. They remained curled.

"Am I driving you wild, *cara*?"

Carly could barely look at him, embarrassed he could read her so easily.

"I have never seen someone as sexy as you, *cara*."

"But I'm so...pregnant," she returned.

"*Si*, but I still desire you."

He desired her. He didn't say he loved her.

Carly ignored her conscience and let her body dictate her needs. She desired Marco. She loved him. It was enough, she told herself, and finally she gave herself permission to let go.

"It's too early," Carly gasped later that night as a tearing pain ripped through her and she

struggled to find her breath.

Marco shot bolt upright, knocking the bedside phone to the floor as he lurched to find the light switch in the darkness. “*Cara?*”

“The baby. It’s too early,” Carly cried. The pain subsided and she relaxed fractionally until a few minutes later when her eyes blurred from another surging spasm, and she automatically stiffened, stifling a scream.

Within seconds Marco had flung some clothes on and raced around to her side of the bed. He crouched low, his face ashen. “Are you sure?”

“No. I have no idea. I’ve never had a baby before. Have you?”

Concern darkened his eyes, and his lips thinned. “But you are only thirty-six weeks. Maybe it’s indigestion.”

“If this is indigestion,” Carly bit back, “I must have eaten an elephant. I think it’s time to phone the hospital.”

While Marco did as she asked, she eased herself off the bed. Pains came every few minutes. Wasn’t that a bit fast? She wished it was indigestion, but somehow knew it wasn’t. This baby was about to arrive whether she was ready or not.

Despite her protests, she was taken to the hospital by ambulance. At the hospital the white lights and voices passed in a blur as she concentrated on her baby. Marco never left her side.

“I’m right here.”

She nodded. “Perhaps you could do this next time,” she whispered, teeth clenched as another contraction subsided and they wheeled her into a side room. Carly looked back. Marco’s face was gray, his eyes somber.

“Don’t worry,” she said, trying to smile, “the baby will be fine.”

“It’s not the…” But his words were broken off as they wheeled her through the swinging doors which closed behind her and cut him off from view.

“Where is my wife?” Marco demanded.

“Mr. Valente, if you will lower your voice a moment.”

“No,” Marco stormed. “My wife is about to have my baby. I want to be with her.”

“Yes, yes. The nurse gave the other staff a rolling glance. “Another first timer,” she muttered under her breath. The other nurses merely smiled.

“Your wife is delivering rather fast, Mr. Valente, she’s losing a bit of blood.”

Marco shuddered, and the nurse gave him a concerned look.

“You’re not going to faint on me, are you?”

He brushed aside her concern. “No. My wife…”

“Come with me.”

He followed right on her heels, not giving the woman a moment to change her mind.

“Your wife is fine,” she said. “A bit tired, that’s all. We’ve already put her on a drip and she’s getting a bit of plasma. We don’t want her to become anemic.”

Marco said nothing and his thoughts raced with what-ifs as the nurse held the door open and he walked in. He took two steps to Carly’s side and reached for her hand, holding it in both of his. “*Cara?*”

Carly’s eyes fluttered open. “The baby—”

“Is fine,” the nurse interrupted. “Baby wants a quick entry.”

“Push,” the doctor instructed.

Marco’s head jerked sideways. At the end of the bed stood the doctor. He gave Marco a cursory nod and looked back at the action. “She’s nearly there.”

Marco stared down at his wife. Her eyes were squeezed shut and her jaw clamped as she concentrated. Beads of sweat dotted her brow. Holding her hand, he reached for a nearby cloth and brushed aside the straggling, damp strands of her hair. “I’m so proud of you,” he said. What he didn’t add was that he’d never been so scared.

White-faced and already bracing for the next wave of contractions, Carly still managed to giggle. “I’ve never seen you so circumspect.”

But before he had time to reply, she let out a wail, and her nails dug hard into his palm. His gut churned. He wanted this over. He didn’t want to see her in pain.

“Here it comes,” the doctor announced.

Marco didn’t know what to do. He felt more than useless, but as Carly exhaled, a last, harsh whoosh rushing from her lungs, he felt her relax. A hive of activity erupted around him. A nurse

took the baby, and then suddenly the sound of their baby's cries echoed around the room.

"Congratulations, you have a daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Valente," the doctor exclaimed. The nurse passed the baby to Carly and then retreated to finish with the delivery.

A daughter.

He was a father.

A swell of exultant pride rippled through Marco as he stared in wonderment at the baby now snuggling against Carly. His child. "She looks like a cherubic angel," he whispered, smiling. "Just like you." He bent to kiss the top of his daughter's head.

Just then the head nurse walked in. "Right, you two, no more canoodling. That's what got you here in the first place, Mr. Valente."

Marco chuckled. Nothing could drown his buoyant mood.

"Now, I need to take the baby for a few minutes to weigh her."

"Is there something wrong?"

"No, sir, you've got a fine and healthy baby. It's simply procedure. Won't be long." With that, the nurse gathered the baby in her arms, whispering cooing noises as if the wee babe was her own, and retreated to an auxiliary room off to one side.

"Marco," Carly began, but he placed a finger on her mouth and felt the light rush of her breath against his skin.

"Shush. The baby is fine. It's you I..."

"Don't worry about me."

"I do, *cara*," he said, dropping a kiss to her tousled hair.

But as Carly let out a heavy sigh and a tear trailed down her cheek, pain ripped at his heart. The most joyous day of his life and he watched his wife cry. He lifted a finger and wiped away the tear, brushing the corner of her mouth. Her lips trembled and she looked up at him with tear-filled eyes.

"I didn't try to trap you. I want our baby and would never have gotten rid of it. If you want to carry on with Rosaria, it's okay. Just don't forget our baby, that's all."

"Carry on with...? You think that I've been...that I'm interested in her?"

"What else would I think? She called you her lover."

“Oh, *cara*, it’s true, Rosaria and I go a long way back. But that was before you came into my life. How could I abandon our child or her mother? You are unforgettable, Carly. Your auburn curls and luscious body.” Marco searched for the right words then he smiled, remembering. “You empower me.”

“Empower? That sounds mighty challenging.”

“*Si*. Like Mama said, two hearts, one soul, equals empowering love.”

“One soul...love?” Carly’s brow creased, eyes darkening with confusion, a wariness washing across her face.

“Mama is a wise woman when it comes to these things.”

“I want to believe you, Marco, but I...” She stalled over her words.

No. He had to make her believe in his love for her. He gripped her hands in his, pleading silently with his touch, his heart.

“Oh, Marco, it’s just the emotional high of becoming a father.” Her voice was but a whisper, and he had the distinct and fearful sense he was losing her. “There’s been so much anger between us, so much distrust, for too long.”

“But if those hearts change,” he said, hope coloring his every word. “It’s not just the baby, *cara*. It’s you. From the very start, it was you who stole my sanity, kept me up at night, made me want things I never thought I’d want from a woman.”

For a moment, there was silence, and he watched his wife, seeking assurance. He brushed his lips across hers and felt her tremble again. He pulled away.

“Don’t go.” Her voice was a plea and stirred his dreams and hopes.

He clasped her hand firmly, his fingers stroking in circles on her palm. “Never,” he replied.

It brought a tentative smile to her lips. Seeing it swelled his heart, and he realized with distinct clarity he had to take a chance. He glanced over his shoulder toward the other room where the nurse was busy settling their daughter then back to his wife. Dragging in a breath, he prayed as he’d never done before. He was about to gamble his life, everything he’d known or thought he’d wanted, on the most precious thing in his life: the love he felt for his wife. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t,” Carly confirmed.

“I need to explain.”

Carly shook her head, but he silenced her with a soft kiss on her warm lips. “I must. When you told me you were pregnant, it was as if it was happening all over again,” Marco bit out.

“Again?”

“Some time ago, before we met,” he admitted, “Rosaria Santos led me to believe she was pregnant with my child. She got rid of it.”

“Oh, God, no.” Carly’s nails dug into his forearms, but he ignored the pain. It was no more than what he’d felt hearing Rosaria’s cruel words.

“However, she wasn’t pregnant—at least not by me. The night she phoned, she admitted she’d made those calls to you. She also told me she’d taken an overdose.”

“That other phone call, in the bathroom?”

“I phoned emergency services, said I would meet them at the hospital. I wanted to tell you, but she pleaded with me not to.”

“Loyal till the end,” Carly said dully. “It should hurt. It does, but I do understand why you did it. Your loyalty to a friend is admirable.”

“I’m truly sorry. It was foolish and cruel, something I will regret for all my days. Rosaria and I were once friends, good friends, but I have never, ever felt for her what I feel for you *cara mia*, believe me.”

Marco waited, his heart hammering, hoping and praying his gamble on life would pay off. It had to.

“I want to,” Carly said, lifting tear-filled eyes up to him. “But you hurt me. I married you understanding you didn’t love me, and it wasn’t a real marriage...”

A vicious pain tore into Marco’s heart. What had he done? “What I feel for you *is* real.”

“Until she turns up again. Or you get tired of playing daddy.”

“No. That’s *not* going to happen. Do you hear me? I need you in my life, Carly. Need our daughter. But, mostly, I need and want you at my side. Please understand.”

For a long moment, Marco didn’t dare breathe, but clutched his wife’s hands in his. He searched her face. “You are everything to me, and I’ve been foolish, scared to believe in love, scared to even try, until I nearly lost it all. Help me believe. Stand at my side.”

A flurry of emotions crossed her face. He desperately wanted her to understand and to forgive him. “I need to tell you about Rosaria.”

“You don’t have to.”

Marco’s chest heaved with a raw and caustic sigh. Oh, yes, he did. “If I am to expunge her from our marriage, *cara*, I do.” For a few moments, he offered a silent prayer to the heavens. Then he began. “Rosaria got caught up with some casino high flyer. Trouble was she fell in love, hard and fast.” He shrugged ruefully. “But her gambler was gambling not just with money, but with her heart, *and* she became pregnant by him.”

Carly’s eyes widened.

“Yes, I know. A bit like calling wolf. However, the father didn’t want to know.” Marco bent closer to Carly and stroked her cheek with the side of his hand. “But believe me, I have been with no other woman since our time in paradise.”

A slow, lingering smile lit Carly’s face. “That long, huh?”

“ *Si*. How could I?”

“Thank you. To know that means everything to me and, despite my disapproval of the sex-pot, I do feel sorry for her. To love and not be loved in return is a cruel fate.”

“ *Si*. Rosaria thought to end her life, or at least that trying would bring him back.”

“And has it?”

“No,” he admitted with sadness. “She has gone back to Italy to heal her wounds. She won’t bother us again.”

“Good.”

“My love, you are the one for me. You are my heart, my life. I fought hard to resist. I struggled to understand love. I didn’t want to believe it, tried to ignore my heart. I couldn’t. It wouldn’t let me.”

“So you forced me back.”

Guilt washed over Marco, but he knew the accusation was deserved. “I was determined to use anything to get you back. I know it was harsh, but I was a desperate man.”

“And desperate people use desperate measures,” Carly added.

“It was the L word.”

“Love?”

“It was foreign to me, an emotion I’d dodged with ruthless determination for years. But once

you came into my life, lighting up my heart and soul, love grabbed me when I wasn't expecting it. The way I feel for you threw me. It was a new experience, something I wasn't sure how to handle. I was scared. Can you forgive me? I never meant to hurt you. I only want to love you."

Marco waited. How he loved this woman. He prayed to the gods for forgiveness, that she could love him enough.

"You want my forgiveness?"

He nodded. "Desperately."

"Well." She hesitated then her eyes lit up with a twinkle. "I love you, too, Marco, though I fought hard against it. My father disappeared when I was a child and I grew up with a string of 'uncles', while my sisters' constant stream of men didn't impress me much, either. It warned me off men. I thought they were unreliable and I determined I would go it alone and be independent."

"And my trying to blackmail you didn't improve the image, I bet."

Carly gave him a sheepish grin. "But how can a woman resist a knight in shining armor?"

"Always at your service, my love."

"Mm. The fates were with me the night my car decided to die. Oh, Marco, I love you. I always have and will. I want you to be in our baby's life."

Tears glistened in Carly's eyes, and his heart broke in two. "Shush, don't cry," he pleaded, brushing away the sprinkle of teardrops. "To think I have done this to you."

"No, it's not you. Giving birth, seeing your joy at becoming a father is wonderful, but tinged with sadness, too. I may not have liked my father's desertion, but it hasn't stopped me loving him. Not really, not deep down. He left me with the belief that when a woman loves a man, that man eventually breaks her heart and leaves her."

Carly had to believe him.

"You are my life. I want you in it forever. I was a fool. My mother has a penchant for husbands, giving me too many fathers that weren't particularly fond of having someone else's offspring hampering their lives." Marco grimaced as he finally doused the mental pictures of his tormented childhood once and for all. Carly squeezed his hand slightly, encouraging him, giving him the confidence to carry on.

"Mother loved all her husbands. However, sending me off to distant relations in Italy wasn't conducive to giving me a good idea of family life or a good impression of fathers. I vowed never to marry, never to have a child and risk putting an innocent life through that much heartbreak."

Carly's face froze. "Never marry?"

"Until I met someone who needed a gigolo."

She laughed. "I never asked for a gigolo."

"Well, this woman needed a mystery man to play Romeo and I decided I wanted a change of job for a while."

"Only for a while?"

Marco's expression softened. "Do not be afraid, *cara* ."

"I'm not."

"I see the hint of fear pass across your eyes. But my new job has rather good conditions with it. Ones I cannot resist. Believe me, my heart and my soul are with you and our daughter."

"Sounds perfect."

"Doesn't it?" he said, smiling. "You love me?"

Carly looked up at him from beneath her lashes.

"Absolutely."

Marco's overriding fear vanished into thin air, and his heart swelled with pride and love. "*Cara*, my heart, I thought you hated me for forcing you into a marriage you didn't want. I'm so sorry. I had no idea you were protecting your heart, thinking I didn't care for you."

"Just as you were."

"Hmm," he agreed. "Though I didn't know it. My brain refused to listen to my heart for far too long."

"And now?"

"Now, dear wife..." He took her hands in his once more and idly rubbed his finger over her wedding band. It thrilled him to realize she was still wearing it. "This employer holds a power over me which is unbreakable. She holds me in her loving heart, forever. Carly, I love my job as your husband, father to our daughter. I'd like to keep the job for the rest of my days, if you'll have me."

She didn't reply straight away, and a sudden panic gripped his heart. *Please say yes. Please.* As the silence lingered, Marco realized he'd never prayed so hard in his life, but then he'd never wanted someone so much or loved so deeply as he loved his wife.

“When we parted at the heliport, I never thought I’d ever see you again. Then you turn up demanding marriage because of the baby. Marriage wouldn’t have happened if I’d not been pregnant,” she challenged.

“No.” Marco dragged a hand through his hair. He had to make her believe. “All those months after our time on the island, I was a wreck. I couldn’t stop thinking about you, couldn’t sleep because you filled my dreams, taunted me with your delicious body. I wanted you.”

“For sex,” Carly countered.

“No. Well,” and he grinned, “not *only* sex, although your body constantly delights me. But it was more than that, though I tried to avoid admitting to myself exactly what I felt. I had no idea how to find you, and when you turned up in my office, I decided not to let you get away, though I fought an internal battle. Remember, I went through all the Masons in the phone book to find you, and that was prior to knowing about our child. And although I was scared of marriage, I want us bound to each other eternally. Our daughter has made it extra precious to me. Something I would not change for anything.”

He held his breath. It seemed as if the world had stopped. Everything hinged on Carly, on her accepting him, loving him.

“Do you mean it? Really mean it?”

He heard her hesitation, her fear. And it was all his fault. He needed to put it right—for both of them.

“You’ve taken a huge step in letting me into your life,” he said.

But his desperation was insidious, gnawing at his gut and at his heart. Words were easy, slipping off the tip of his tongue. He needed to show his wife how much he loved her.

Raising her hands in his, he kissed them then knelt on one knee.

A traditional proposal for a man who had discovered joy and trust and hope—but above all, true love. Marco smiled at the irony of it all, aware of an overwhelming tide of emotion. He rested his gaze on his wife. “Yes, I mean it, *cara mia*. With all my heart. Please, be my wife.”

Suddenly, all words died in his throat. He had tried. Now he prayed—for forgiveness or acceptance, for her love.

Slowly, as if wiped away by his words and deeds, all the tension in her eyes and the tinge of icy reserve that she had clung to in her uncertainty vanished, replaced by a trace of a smile.

Finally, he could breathe.

All was well.

“Let’s see,” she said. As her smile increased, all Marco’s worries evaporated. “You get to sleep with the boss and make babies with the boss. Pretty good job.”

“It is,” he agreed.

“Then, as long as you can keep up those foot massages, you’ll make the best husband in the world, Marco. Now is definitely the perfect time for love.”

Epilogue

Carly stared down in wonderment at the tiny morsel of human life cradled in her arms. Only a few hours old, her daughter Ruby Angelina Valente gurgled joyfully, a halo of dark auburn wispy hair surrounding her heart-shaped face. Carly touched her small cheek, and Ruby’s eyes shot open. Deepest sapphire blue stared back at her.

“She’s adorable.”

“*Si*,” Marco whispered, so close his warm breath fanned her cheek. Carly felt the familiar heat fire in her veins, and a soft burst of laughter escaped her lips.

“Your eyes and my hair.”

“A formidable concoction,” he agreed.

“Where is she?” Daphne burst into the room, a five-foot-two dynamic whirlwind that nothing could stall.

Marco’s grin spread even further.

“Mother,” he warned gently.

Daphne gave him a knowing look, and when Carly looked at her husband, he merely shrugged, although she saw the flicker of crimson stain beneath his tan.

“I believe I have you to thank for such sage advice to your son,” Carly said, saving her husband further grief.

“Of course. Isn’t that what mothers-in-law are for? Love comes in many forms, and sometimes it takes a while to recognize it,” she said, giving Carly’s hand a squeeze. “Now I must see my granddaughter.” Daphne leaned over Ruby. “May I?” She held out her arms, eagerly waiting to hold her first grandchild.

Carly handed over Ruby, feeling a wave of loss as she placed her daughter in her grandmother’s arms.

“Now, darling,” Daphne cooed. “You’ve got so much to look forward to. First, there’s Grandfather Carlo. I can tell you so much about him, so many stories. Then there’s Grandfather Fred, but I think Maurie wants to be called Poppa, so at least that won’t lead to confusion.”

Marco rolled his eyes, and Carly struggled to hide her laughter.

There was a soft knock at the door just then and Marco went to open it. He turned back to Carly for a moment, his look searching, before whispering to whoever was outside. He shut the door and came back over to her.

“I have a surprise for you.”

“Really? A baby and a surprise in one day.” She laughed. “I’m not sure I can handle all this fun.”

Marco turned and re-opened the door to her room, and an elderly man walked in.

“Hello, Copper Top.” Smiling sheepishly, her father stepped toward her. “I hear you made me a grandfather today.”

“Daddy!” Tears sprang instantly, and Carly wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. Her mouth trembled, and the hurt of days long gone revisited in one painful rush.

Marco wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Your father and I have talked. We have an understanding,” he said seriously. “He knows he cannot come in and out of your life at will. I will not let him do that to you again or to our child.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I never meant to hurt you.”

“I know. Oh, Daddy.”

“I’d like to stay. Get to know you again. If you’ll let me.”

Carly looked up at her father. His face was aged with the lines of a hard life. The gentle eyes she remembered filled with joy were duller now.

Carly turned to her husband, who gave her a reassuring nod. “We’d like you to stay.”

Daphne batted her lashes toward her father. “Oooh, I do so love all that Irish red hair.”

“Mother, not again,” Marco warned.

Agog, Carly giggled. “Your mother looks like she’s reassessing her options.”

Marco rolled his eyes and shrugged.

“You organized this?” Carly asked of her husband.

“ Si. You don’t mind? I started to look for him the day we were married, after seeing you walk down the aisle alone. I only hope I’ve done the right thing. Today, of all days, a daughter must have her father at her side. I have my daughter. I prayed your father wanted to be reunited with his.”

“Oh, Marco.” Carly wept with joy. “Now was just the right time. A new life, time to heal wounds, a time for love,” she said, wrapping her arms around her husband’s neck and pulling him to her. Hungrily, she sought his lips, tasting and savoring his kisses as if she never wanted it to end.

And she didn’t.

About the Author

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Look for these titles by Jane Beckenham

Coming Soon:

He’s the One

Can anything change in 24 hours? Can everything ?

One Night in Napa

© 2009 Allie Boniface

Journalist Grant Walker has one chance to salvage his job and his relationship with his domineering father. When terrorists kidnap a fading film star’s son, he’s there to get the first interview with a grieving mother. Even better, her illegitimate granddaughter arrives on the scene—a granddaughter who hasn’t been heard from in seven long years. It’s the story of a lifetime, and all Grant has to do is deliver.

Kira March left her childhood home seven years earlier, vowing never to return after discovering a terrible secret about her birth. But when her father is taken hostage and her

adoptive grandmother cracks under media pressure, it's up to Kira to find and destroy all evidence of that secret. Trouble is, a reporter has weaseled his way into the house looking for answers—and he isn't leaving until he gets them.

As the hours pass, Kira finds herself falling for the very man who can destroy her. And when Grant comforts her in the wake of a midnight tragedy, he discovers that reporting a story gets a lot more complicated when you have feelings for your interview subject. As dawn nears, both Kira and Grant are forced to examine the ways in which their fathers have shaped them—and the lengths they'll go to protect and uphold the family name.

Warning: This title contains a hunky hero who thinks he knows it all, an unconventional heroine who's out to prove him wrong, a ticking clock, family secrets, and enough sexual tension to heat every corner of an enormous mansion...especially when the power goes out

Enjoy the following excerpt for One Night in Napa:

Kira's eyes filled. After a long minute, she switched on her Internet connection. She wanted to know. She didn't want to know. She couldn't bear to look. Her knees popped as she stood and stretched. *Come on*. Her thumbs pattered against the keyboard, impatient. The screen took forever to load, and when it did, the picture looked faded and filmy. "Damn battery." She held it up to the light.

"Everything okay?"

She jumped at Grant's voice, just over her shoulder. "God. Don't sneak up on me."

He brushed dark curls out of his tired eyes. "Sorry." He leaned closer, and his breath raised the hairs on the back of her bare neck.

"Could you possibly not crowd me?"

He cleared his throat and stepped back again. She shivered at his nearness and wondered if he guessed that the real reason she wanted him away was because she no longer trusted herself not to fall into the comfort he was trying to provide.

Kira leaned against the counter and squinted at the screen. After a minute, a news report scrolled along the bottom: *Morelli Kidnappers Continue With Demands*. She shook her head and found another site with an AP bulletin, time-stamped 10:56 p.m.

"The administration is refusing to give in to the terrorists' demands to release twelve prisoners from the Guantanamo Bay complex," she read aloud. "At this time there has been no further discussion by either party. Ambassadors in the countries of..."

A cold stone lodged inside her stomach, and Kira stopped reading. She blinked to keep her tears

at bay. “Refusing?” She looked at Grant and then flung the phone across the room. “How can they re-refuse?” She wrapped her arms around her waist and began to hiccup. “It’s my father—it’s a person’s *life* they’re talk-talking about. It’s—”

She couldn’t get any more words out. She wasn’t even sure what she meant to say. War images flashed through her mind: bloody bodies, overturned jeeps, a somber president who praised fallen troops, and mothers who wailed over their sons’ coffins. *Hundreds of people die every year, in one war or another. One person means nothing in the big picture. Not even a person the world adores .*

She sank to the floor, legs rubbery. For the first time, the possibility that her father might really die clutched in the back of her throat. Shaking, she leaned over and buried her forehead against her fists on the cold tile.

“Hey.” She felt a touch on her back. “Hey, hang on there.”

But Kira had nothing to hang on to. No hope, no good memory. She opened her eyes and stared at the pattern of dark green and gray tile beneath her. It spun, grew lighter and darker by turns, until she thought she’d go mad. Tears dripped. Her head pounded.

“Kira?” Grant’s hand moved from the small of her back to her shoulder.

She stiffened, but only for a moment. Then she acquiesced because the pressure at her temples and the tightness in her chest softened as he moved his fingers along her spine. She didn’t speak. She barely moved. She remained prone, because she didn’t have the energy to sit up. Fatigue washed over her in waves.

Still he sat there with her, silent. His fingers moved in the fringe of hair along her neck. His palm flattened in the space between her shoulder blades, and the heat from his touch seeped into her in slow degrees. Finally she pushed herself to a seated position, in slow jerking movements, until she sagged against the refrigerator with her arms crossed.

One breath, she told herself. *In and out. Just keep breathing .* It amazed her how difficult that one act could become, when it seemed as though the entire world crushed her with desperation.

Just breathe.

After what seemed like a long time, she opened her eyes. Grant was crouching beside her, a few inches away, and saying nothing. His hands rested on his knees. The breaths came more easily, one after another, and she rubbed a hand over her face. Outside, the rain increased, spitting against the windows.

“A little better?” His breath feathered her ear, and she shivered at the chill that crept along her skin.

She nodded. “A little.” She closed her eyes as his fingers brushed her neck, and then her jaw.

“That tickles.”

He didn’t say anything. But he didn’t move away either.

Kira kept her eyes closed. For a moment, she let herself imagine she was sitting somewhere else. She imagined she was some *one* else, the someone else she’d tried to become after leaving home. *It would be so easy, if I was just a girl and he was just a guy*. She wouldn’t be sitting here trying to rationalize every thought and resist every touch. She could flirt. She could turn and wrap her arms around his neck. She could just...be.

Grant’s arm slipped around her waist, and he leaned closer, pressing his cheek to her temple. Affectionate. Comforting. Kira let the sensation move down her, warming her until her toes burned against the tile underneath them.

“Can I do anything?”

For a moment, Kira’s thoughts turned decidedly twisted, and the fine line between the agony of missing her father and the ecstasy of blending into a man blurred. She almost told Grant he could do whatever he wanted, right then and there, wide windows or cold tile or granite countertop be damned. Then she reined in the heat that slipped through her veins.

“Like what?” Kira looked at him and lifted her chin. But facing him turned out to be a bigger mistake than she’d guessed. Want colored his eyes a deeper shade of blue, and his smile lit something inside her. She swallowed. She knew she only had to reach up with one hand, draw in his mouth with hers, and Grant Walker would wrap those arms around her and lift her, breathless, off her feet.

So she did.

Grant hadn’t expected this. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected at all, when he approached Kira and dared to touch her. He’d thought maybe he could ease her anxiety. Maybe even convince her to talk to him some more.

But every rational thought left his mind when Kira pressed her fragile frame against his and opened his lips with her tongue. His hands slid to her waist and he pulled her to a stand, breathing in a fragrance that reminded him of springtime.

She murmured something against his mouth that turned him heady. Grant shifted and took a step back, fighting for composure. She reached for him, her eyes so wide that he thought he might slip inside them and not come up for air. His groin ached, and something in the back of his mind thought he should probably stop this before it went somewhere it shouldn’t. But this was Isabella Morelli he had his arms wrapped around. And she—was that a tongue stud exploring his mouth? Cold metal touched his bottom lip, and stars exploded behind his eyes.

She laced her hands behind his neck and stood on her tiptoes. Her mouth moved to his cheek, his neck, his collarbone.

“Hey.” With great effort, he pulled away from her.

She continued to look at him with those dark brown, heavy-lidded eyes.

“This—I really shouldn’t.” He could barely choke out the sentence.

The tiniest frown knit her brows together, and she caught her bottom lip between her teeth. She locked her gaze with his, and Grant could almost feel her peeling away his shirt and khakis. Jesus, what a look. No wonder the camera loved her.

“I—” It took near-inhuman strength to loosen his hold on her waist. “I don’t want...”

“Me?”

He almost laughed. “Christ, no. You—” *You drive me crazy in ways you can’t even imagine* . But a bizarre sense of duty, even this close to midnight, knocked against his brain. He didn’t want to fulfill the prophecy he knew waited for him at the Chronicle’s office. He didn’t want to play the predictable role of cavalier Grant Walker, playboy extraordinaire, and think with the wrong brain. Not when he was this close to getting the story of a lifetime.

He ran a finger along her chin. Yet somehow the story of Isabella Morelli was far less fascinating right now than the curve of her mouth. Or the length of her fingers, especially when they were buried in his hair.

“I’m a reporter,” he began.

“So you said.”

“I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Who says you’re taking advantage?”

Lies and secrets have a way of returning to bite a girl in the butt...

Tea for Two

© 2008 Shelley Munro

Hayley Williams thought she was past the screwing-up stage of her life. These days, she wears

her good girl persona well—except when she moonlights as a gypsy tea leaf reader in order to earn money to buy her own home. There’s something about Sam Norville, though, that prods her inner imp back to life. A chance meeting, a margarita...okay, two...a stolen kiss, and suddenly she’s back in hot water.

Sam, a successful businessman, doesn’t believe in love at first sight. Not anymore. For him, involvement with any woman means risking a run-in with the tabloid press. But his mysterious gypsy lover keeps him coming back, keeps him prodding her for more...like the truth. Of course it’s not love. No, sir. Sam only does lust.

Hayley knows she shouldn’t want Sam, especially since she lied to him. The right thing to do? Shove that naughty imp off her shoulder and come clean. But at pesky imp just won’t budge...

Warning: There be lies and secrets ahead, wrapped in pretty bows with margaritas, a one-night stand, fortune telling and a gypsy. Oh, and tea. Lots and lots of pots of tea.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Tea for Two:

Hayley couldn’t believe Sam Norville sat beside her, holding her hand. His spicy citrus scent and the stroke of his fingers were playing havoc with her senses. Her stomach fluttered despite her steady smile. The man looked better in person, way better than in the photos plastering the magazines and society pages of the newspapers.

Sam’s dark hair gleamed, even in the dim lighting. Slightly long, it looked in need of a cut, but the shagginess didn’t detract from his good looks. His strong features were sensual and the corners of his golden eyes bore fans of wrinkles, displayed whenever he grinned his very sexy and probably well-practiced crooked smile. A definite bad-boy smile if ever she saw one. Jeans, a white T-shirt and black leather jacket added to her initial bad-boy impression.

Happy birthday to me.

“I haven’t seen you around here before,” he said, leaning forward so they could speak over the noise.

“I came with a friend.” Hayley couldn’t suppress a shiver of awareness when his warm breath wafted across the whorl of her ear. His palm bore several calluses and, curse her vivid imagination, she could envision them stroking across her naked breasts without any difficulty at all. Oh, dear. Big trouble—margarita-induced trouble. Maybe she should have stopped at number three, but she’d badly needed a drink to steady her nerves after their dance.

“Are you going home with your friend?”

“No. She’s spending the night with her boyfriend.” She’d seen Suzie briefly when she first arrived but not since. Hopefully with this crowd Suzie wouldn’t see her again and notice her

infatuation. Suzie knew her well enough to see straight through her pretence.

“Good news for me.” His thumb strummed across her palm in a hypnotic manner. Back and forth.

Hayley shivered. If she concentrated on the dancers, maybe she’d manage not to make a fool of herself. She picked up her drink with her free hand and drank a good half. The faint tremor of her hand was barely noticeable, but she knew. Hayley set her drink down, determined not to drink another drop.

“Dance with me again,” he said, tugging her to her feet effortlessly.

Hayley acquiesced without protest. If they were dancing, she didn’t have to think quite as hard. She could just feel.

On the dance floor, he swept her into his arms, their lower limbs brushing with exquisite slowness. Hayley swallowed, trying to control her excitement. She’d made her decision when she’d given him a false name. A one-night stand. Dare she? With a determined playboy? At least that’s what the papers reported. Sam Norville was a dedicated playboy.

And she was considering...oh, dear. *She was bad*. Even thinking about a one-night stand. Hayley pressed her cheek against his leather jacket and smiled dreamily. Could a secretary be a bad girl during her off-duty hours? Maybe, maybe not. Well, she’d see how the night progressed. She ignored her conscience screaming about impulsiveness and consequences. The memories of her parents’ lectures... Couldn’t a girl have a little fun on her birthday? Maybe he didn’t feel the same sexual currents she did. Perhaps she was making a huge fool of herself, providing a little entertainment for the playboy.

Their bodies swayed. Barely moving, their limbs brushed and bumped together when they collided with other laughing dancers. His nearness, his intoxicating citrus scent overwhelmed her, kept adding to the daring thoughts already dancing through her head. She tingled all over, the heat from his touch pulling her nipples to tight beads beneath the cups of her silky bra.

They continued to dance, holding each other close, hands wandering and lazily exploring. She felt the hard ridge of his erection brushing against her stomach. Gradually she let herself believe that this attraction, this thing between them went both ways.

“What would you do if I danced you into a dark corner and kissed you?” he asked during a break in the music.

“I’m not sure.” *Liar*, her subconscious taunted. Her body warmed and her limbs became heavy, her pulse skittering alarmingly out of control. She glanced up at him and winked. “Why don’t you try it and find out?” He could do just about anything to her, if he kept talking in that low, husky voice.

He stared at her for a long second, and she swallowed, her nerves doing a real number on her

knees. His sudden smile sent her pulse lurching madly and her stomach fluttering. Those margaritas were tricky little suckers, sneaking up on a girl without warning.

“Come on,” he whispered. “I want to see if my imagination is good.”



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