



The
Seduction
of Hayden
Indulgence

Stephanie Morris

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Romance

Indulgence 2

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Amalía Carabelli has always been certain of one thing since she was a little girl. She wants to get married and she wants to have children. The problem is she can never seem to find Mr. Right. She especially doesn't expect Mr. Right to come along and rescue her from the grips of a guy who is definitely Mr. Wrong. Amalía sets out to find a way to seduce this Mr. Right. Little does she know that in a few weeks' time, he'll be her brother-in-law...

Hayden Davis is only in Rome, Italy, for his sister's wedding. He has no idea that he will end up coming to the rescue of a woman that may be in more danger with him. But Amalía Carabelli appeals to him in a way that a woman hasn't in a long time--in a way he definitely looks forward to exploring.

Genre: Contemporary, Interracial

Length: 55,276 words

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A SIREN-BOOKSTRAND TITLE

IMPRINT: Romance

THE SEDUCTION OF HAYDEN

Copyright © 2010 by Stephanie Morris

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-075-2

First E-book Publication: December 2010

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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PUBLISHER

www.BookStrand.com

DEDICATION

This book is for my mom, who makes me laugh when she tries to keep up with the titles and characters in my stories. Thank you for encouraging my creativity and letting me go in a completely opposite direction, even when you thought I should go in another. I love you.

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STEPHANIE MORRIS

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Chapter One

What the hell am I doing?

Amalía Carabelli scolded herself for getting into this predicament. She had made a vow to stay out of troublesome situations like this. Nevertheless, here she was running her hands over the muscled chest of her latest conquest. She had been insane enough to bring him out to the pool area where any of her family members or employees could catch them. Maybe this had been a subconscious decision. The likelihood of getting caught out here was very likely.

Why am I doing this?

When his warm lips found her neck, she remembered why and couldn't help but moan, but the pleasure was short lived. She stiffened when she heard a sound not too far from them. Someone was out by the pool. It could be one of her brothers, and if that was the case it could become a dangerous situation.

"Píero—"

His mouth covered hers, muting the rest of her statement, but her passion was waning. She had no desire to get caught making out like this by the pool area. Her brothers would have a fit to say the least.

I can't do this!

She pulled away from him. "Píero, we have to stop."

Amalía knew he wasn't listening to a word she said. She should have known better than to bring Píero here. It was difficult to recall the last time she'd been with a decent man, but there was no way she should stoop to this level of desperation. It had been a while since she had gone slumming, and it had taken her two years to recover from it. Now here she was setting herself up for failure again.

He moved closer to her, and his lips found her neck again, making her body betray her once more.

"Píero, we have to stop. Someone else is out here."

He gave her a sultry look. "For some strange reason, I don't believe they are concerned with what we are doing."

"Well, if it is one of my brothers you will be," she whispered.

Píero shrugged. "You are a big girl, besides you are the one who brought me out here."

His devil may care attitude was a major turn off. His response was just the thing she needed to hear to kill any remaining desire.

"Yeah, and I'm starting to realize it was a mistake." It was a very stupid mistake. One she shouldn't have made.

"Yes, well if you ask me, I think you wanted to get caught, which is why you brought me out here. It is apparent that there isn't any privacy out here. You have a very naughty side to you, and I am more than happy to explore it with you."

Píero moved closer to her, but she squirmed away. "So if you like for people to watch, I say whoever is coming this way deserves a show and we should give it to them."

When Píero made the statement aloud, she was repulsed by the idea, but before she could say so his mouth covered hers again. Actually it was more like crushed. She pulled away from him again and tried to put space between them.

"Stop, Píero. I mean it. *Stop! No!*"

When he didn't obey her command she got his attention by kneeing him in the groin. He howled in a way that would make the hairs on an animal stand up. A moment later a pair of hands reached out and jerked Píero up.

"I believe the woman said no."

Píero moaned in pain.

"Ma'am, are you okay?"

In shock, Amalía glanced up at her hero and nodded. "I'm fine. *Grazie.*"

He glanced at the man he held onto with disgust before looking back at her.

"What do you want me to do with him?"

His question spurred her into action. "Just hang onto him for a second."

* * * *

The last thing Hayden had expected to hear when he stepped out into the pool area where the sounds of a woman's protest. At first he couldn't tell where the voice had come from but after scanning the area closely, he'd spotted the couple. It would have been clear to anyone that the woman attempted to fight off his advances, and the man she was with seemed not to notice her resistance. He immediately knew he had to get involved. His mother would eat him alive if he hadn't.

Hayden continued to hold on to the man still bent over in pain, but he had recovered enough to start swearing in a combination of English and Italian. He understood enough to know what the man was saying wasn't complimentary. He jerked the man up by the collar.

"Shut your mouth before I shut it for you."

Evidently, he was convincing enough because the man shut up. He watched as the woman he'd just rescued used a phone by the pool. Several heartbeats later two large men appeared and took the man

Hayden held out of his grip. They escorted him out so quietly Hayden almost wondered if the scene playing out before him was real. The woman who still stood by the phone was visibly shaken, which told him he definitely hadn't imagined it. Stifling a sigh, he made his way toward the woman.

"Are you okay?"

She looked up at him in surprise as if she'd forgotten he was there.

"Yes, I am. Thank you for your assistance."

He nodded. "You're welcome."

"Are you staying at the hotel?"

He gave her look. Maybe she was more shaken up than he thought. She noticed his gaze and questioned it.

"What?"

The corners of his mouth curved upward. "The security here is very tight. If I weren't staying here I couldn't get in."

She smiled, and for the first time he realized how beautiful she was. He was taken aback for a moment. "You could be the guest of someone."

He gave her a blank stare before recalling the subject of their conversation. "In a way, yes, but no, I am staying at the hotel."

She tilted her head to the side. "Tell me your room number. I will have complimentary gift certificates sent up so you can enjoy room service or a meal in the restaurant, your choice."

"That isn't necessary. I have reassurance in the fact that my mother will let me live to see another day."

She smiled, and he felt like he had been punched in the stomach. She was too beautiful to be lurking in the dark with creeps by the poolside.

"So chivalry isn't dead?"

"It isn't here."

"Well, will you at least allow me to buy you a drink?"

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "Do you offer to buy strange men drinks often?"

“Only the ones who rescue me from jerks.”

“And what makes you think I’m not a jerk?”

“You wouldn’t have stopped to help me if you were.”

He stared at her for another moment before shaking his head. As much as he would like to take her up on the offer, he was only here for his sister. Not to mention his strong attraction to this woman was a little unsettling.

“Thank you, but no thank you. Your appreciation and your safety are all the reward I need. You have a good night, and try not to pick up anymore jerks.”

He turned to head back into the hotel before she could say anything else.

* * * *

Amalía stared at the man walking away from her in shock. For the first time in her life a man had turned her down. She didn’t know whether to laugh or get mad. She pulled out her mobile phone and made a few calls. A few moments later she was heading for home. She realized her actions tonight had been a stupid mistake. How was she to know it would get out of hand? Still, she was a Carabelli, and she had a reputation to uphold. Talía would kill her if she had to do any clean up PR work. Most people didn’t have to worry about things like that, but as the co-owner and manager of a five star deluxe hotel, she did. Then there was the fact she had five hot-blooded Italian brothers.

It could be a dangerous situation and a huge reason as to why she kept her romantic life as secret as possible. This stunt was definitely going to cause fall out of some sort and the last thing she wanted was a long discussion about her horrible taste in men. Her brother’s were definitely good for doing that not to mention her mother. It was no wonder she was going insane. With five Italian brothers she was walking on edge all of the time. Even though four of her brother’s were younger than she was they were still overbearing and

overprotective. They were also taller and like to throw their weight around but she knew how to bring them to their knees if needed just like she brought Píero to his.

Pulling into her driveway, she smiled. Everyone was already there waiting on her. As she stepped out of her car, she greeted her three best friends before leading them into the family room. Daníella, Sophia and Talía took their normal seats on her couch and sofa.

“Is Tierra coming?” Sophia asked.

Amalía shook her head as she took a seat. “I couldn’t invite her without having Antonio be nosey, and there is already going to be hell to pay for this as it is.”

Daníella sighed heavily, clearly tired and irritated. “This had better be important for you to drag me out at this time of night.”

Amalía frowned. It was barely eleven at night and they had stayed up way later than this on several occasions.

“Oh-oh,” Talía sang in a dramatic fashion. “Daníella is grumpy. Ignacio must have done something stupid.”

“When doesn’t he do anything stupid?” Sophia questioned.

Daníella gave all of them an evil look before grumbling something under her breath. Amalía laughed. “Do any of you want something to drink before I get into the reason why you’re here?”

When they declined, she took a deep breath. “Well, I called you over here tonight to let you know how disastrous my date with Píero was as well as to tell you about the sexy man who rescued me from him.”

Three pairs of wide eyes turned to her and Amalía smiled before relaying the awful events that occurred early this evening, stopping after she told them how her rescuer had turned down her offer for a complimentary meal or room service.

Talia’s eyebrows rose. “Well, I definitely appreciate the advance warning. I will go home and get started on a press release tonight.”

Sophia snickered at the displeasure in Talia's tone. "It might be a good idea, but I am more interested in finding out why the guy who rescued you turned you down."

Amalía smiled at Sophia's intuitive question. "Which is exactly what I am wondering, and I think I have figured it out."

Sophia sat up straight before leaning closer. "Why do you think it happened?"

Amalía stared at the family picture hanging over the mantle before looking back at her friends. "I think he isn't the casual type."

"Or he could not like women. Or maybe he isn't interested in hitting on a woman he just rescued from another man's unwanted advances." Daníella replied with heavy sarcasm.

Amalía couldn't take Daníella's attitude any longer. Her friend didn't have one often, but when she did it could be nasty, like it was right now. For that to happen something had to be wrong. She had to find out what it was before she could figure out her own problem. She turned and looked at her friend with concern. "Okay Daníella. What is wrong with you?"

"What makes you think something is wrong with me?"

Now it was Amalía's turn to be sarcastic. "Oh I don't know, maybe it is the fact you have been irritable and rude since you have stepped through the front door."

Daníella crossed her arms over her chest and huffed indignantly. "Things are not going too well between Ignacio and me."

Sophia rolled her eyes dramatically. "There's a news flash."

Talía elbowed Sophia before placing a comforting arm around Daníella. "What happened?"

Tears began to form in Daníella's eyes. "He forgot our one year anniversary."

"Has it been that long?" Amalía asked with surprise before she could catch herself.

The statement seemed to make Daníella cry, and Amalía felt terrible. "I'm sorry, Dani. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"It isn't your fault. You are telling the truth." Daníella mumbled.

Amalía looked at Sophia and Talía for advice on something to say that would make the situation better. Their expressions told her anything good said about the situation would be a lie..

"Did he tell you why he forgot?"

"No, he didn't, but even if he had it wouldn't matter. There is no excuse to forget the anniversary of the relationship you share with a person you say you care for."

Amalía looked Daníella directly in the eyes. "You are right. So you know what this means, right?"

Daníella sniffed. "What?"

"He isn't worth shedding another tear over."

Daníella smiled. "Would you believe me if I said I'm not crying over Ignacio but rather the fact I have been so stupid?"

Amalía corrected her quickly. "You are not stupid for wanting a man who cares about you. We all want it." Amalía responded.

Sophia and Talía murmured their agreement. Daníella sat up straighter. "Maybe I need to go on a relationship sabbatical."

The statement earned her three amused stares, but Daníella forged ahead.

"How long do those normally last?"

"Longer than you would," Talía stated without hesitation. A moment of silence passed between them before they fell over each other in laughter. When they were finally able to breathe again without bursting into another fit of laughter, Daníella gave Amalía's hand a tight squeeze.

"Thank you, Amalía. I needed that. I really did. Now back to you. What are you going to do about this guy you seemed to be so attracted to?"

"There isn't any doubt here. I am attracted to him and I plan to make sure that he feels the same even if it takes a little seduction."

The pool area had been dark, but she'd been able to make out enough to know the man was a gorgeous specimen. The interesting

thing was she didn't even know his name, but she planned on finding out.

"What does he look like?"

She smiled at Sophia and began describing him.

"He was at least six foot three. He has mahogany brown skin with a nice build, but not the type who seems to be a workout fanatic. Nice arms, chest and butt. He seemed to be American from his accent."

"So he was cute," Daniella teased

"No, he was handsome. Extremely handsome."

Sophia gave her a puzzled look. "How do you plan on finding this guy if you don't know his name?"

Amalía's excitement dimmed a little. Everything about the man that rescued her tonight made her want to get to know him better. He appealed to her on a level she hadn't experienced—not only physically, either. She didn't know exactly how she would find him, but she knew where to start, and she would do just that.

Chapter Two

Hayden sat up abruptly, his eyes barely open. He hated the nightmares he still had about his deceased wife. Sitting up, he swung his feet over the edge of the bed then headed for the bathroom. He went straight into the shower and turned on the water, letting it beat down on the anger and the tiredness he felt. When he was able to think clearer, he began to bathe.

A short time later, he stepped out of the shower and glanced at the clock. It was only a few minutes until he'd set the alarm to go off. He was supposed to meet his parents and sister downstairs so they could have breakfast together. His parents had already been in Rome for two weeks helping Tierra with the finalization of her wedding. Maybe his sister did have good taste after all. So far everything the Carabelli's offered was first class. He was still anxious to meet this Antonio guy. His sister meant a lot to him, and the guy she married had to know he didn't mind drawing a little blood if it was necessary when it came to her. He dressed quickly before leaving the room to head downstairs early.

Why?

He didn't know. Actually he did he was just lying to himself. He wanted to see if he could catch a glimpse of the mysterious woman who'd been on his mind before he'd gone to sleep. It was only when his head hit the pillow last night that he realized he didn't know her name. Then he'd been plagued by the thought of why he wanted to know her name. The answer had been immediate...because he was a man and from what he'd been able to see, she was a beautiful woman. What intrigued him about the entire situation was he didn't feel guilty

about the attraction. Why should he? He was not looking for a woman to replace Christy, but maybe his family was right. Maybe it was time for him to get out and socialize again. What better place to do it in than Rome with a woman he would never have to see again after his week here was over? He knew he should feel bad for thinking like this, but if he found the woman, he would let her know exactly what his plans were before anything happened.

The last thing he wanted to do was hurt someone. He'd experienced enough hurt of his own in his lifetime to know it was an awful thing to go through. Also seeing the pain and embarrassment etched in his sister's face on her wedding day had almost done him in. Hayden was happy his sister had recovered so quickly. Antonio seemed to have a lot to do with it.

Stepping off the elevator, he headed for the bar area to wait for his parents. It was closed, but it was a place he could sit and relax without being bothered too much. He took a seat and began to watch people pass by. Hotel Carabelli seemed to be exclusive yet busy. He could never recall staying at a hotel that had a doorman and security. He didn't mind. From what he understood about the clientele that frequented the hotel, it was necessary.

He still couldn't believe he was in Rome.

If he didn't know any better he would say his family members suffered from delusions. They had to, and he was just as delusional if not more. When he found out his sister was getting ready to walk down the aisle for the second time in four months to a different man, he wondered if Tierra had been more affected by being left at the altar than he originally thought.

He was concerned about his little sister. Nevertheless, instead of trying to talk her out of getting married, he made the trip to Rome, Italy to support her. Not that he really had a choice. He'd only been in Rome for a few hours, but that was enough time for him to see how beautiful the country was and he could certainly understand how his sister could fall in love with it.

Still, for her to fall in love and marry a man from the country? It seemed to be a little too extreme for him. He knew he shouldn't have let his sister come over to the county by herself. She'd been in too much of an emotional state. The only reason he'd finally given in was because he thought it would be better for her to be as far away from the man who had jilted her on her wedding day. Even worse was that Tierra had been dumped by her ex-fiancé, for her best friend Shannon—or he should say his sister's former best friend. Evidently, during the trip that was supposed to be her honeymoon, she had met one of the owner's of the hotel and fallen in love. As they said, the rest was history, and now he stood in the same exact hotel. He thought it was ludicrous but stranger things had happened. The last thing he wanted was for his sister to be unhappy, but he was truly worried about this whole setup.

Maybe it was due to the fact he hadn't had the chance to meet this guy face to face yet. Antonio had followed his sister back to the States to propose, and two weeks later Antonio swept Tierra away to Italy again. They immediately began planning the wedding scheduled to occur at the end of the week. The one thing comforting him was the fact his parents loved this Antonio Carabelli character. If their father liked the guy, it meant a lot. Yet, he was worried about his sister. His sister would not survive another heartbreak. She'd barely survived the first, and he knew all about trying to survive heartbreak. He was still struggling with his own and barely surviving.

Several minutes passed by before he spotted his parents. He stood up and called out to them. The expressions on their faces somewhat shocked him. They seemed relaxed and happy...truly. It had been a while since he had seen them look so content. They embraced him tightly, and he hugged them back just as hard.

His father placed a hand on his shoulder. "How was your flight?"

He gave them an amused glance but smiled as he led them to the bar area to have a seat. "Long, but it was okay."

His mother inclined her head in his direction. “Have you seen your sister yet?”

“No not yet.”

They sat there in silence for a moment before he made another attempt at conversation. “Have the two of you been enjoying yourself?”

His parents shared a glance more intimate than he wanted to witness before turning to focus back on him. He didn’t want to know what the look was about.

His father responded. “Yes, we have. The Carabellis are very gracious and generous hosts.”

His mother agreed. “And it doesn’t hurt that Rome is such a beautiful place. Hopefully you will get a chance to see some of it. Tierra has a nice acquaintance who gives tours.”

His gaze narrowed. “Male or female?”

His mother’s eyes narrowed until her expression matched his. “Female, and before you go there, no it is not a set up. She had a boyfriend. Besides I don’t think she would want to get involved with a man whose heart is in the grave with his deceased wife.”

Hayden’s mouth dropped open in shock, and his father coughed. His mother had never spoken to him like this before. It angered him to the point that his teeth clenched.

“Mother, I would really appreciate it if you showed my deceased wife some respect.”

His mother leaned forward, and he was careful to keep an eye on her hands knowing how quick they could be. “It isn’t Christy I’m losing respect for.”

His jaw went slack, and he couldn’t think of anything to say for a moment. He knew losing Christy had been hard on his parents. It had been hard on everyone, and it was selfish to think it hadn’t been.

He studied his parents for a moment, and they watched him expectantly. When had things become so tense between him and his

parents? Why hadn't he noticed before now? A second later his mother's expression softened.

"Hayden, your father and I love you, but you are too young to be this miserable and so jaded. Frankly you're worrying us to the point of insanity." Tears came to his mother's eyes. "I know you loved Christy. We all did but if you don't return to the land of the living soon you are going to be a lot lonelier."

"What are you trying to say, Mom?"

His mother leaned forward. "What I am *telling* you, Hayden, is that your father, sister and I are going to distance ourselves from you if don't make a few changes. Actually if he you don't make a lot of changes. If you took a step back and see what you have become you wouldn't blame us. We are tired of fighting with you, Hayden If you want to be left alone we will." His mother paused. "Do you have any idea what this is doing to your sister? Your relationship with Tierra is so strained it might as well be non-existent."

"I know that, Mom," he interrupted, "and I hate it, too. I have always been close with Tierra—with all of you. Growing up life was good for us. You and Dad have always been completely devoted to each other as well as to Tierra and me." He paused when his voice cracked. "That's what made the loss of Christy hurt so much. I could have had the same thing that you and dad had with her. We did have it, only it wasn't long enough."

His father reached out to him. "Son, I can't even begin to say that I know what you are going through. I don't. But Christy is gone. As much as I would like to bring her back, I can't. What I do know is that right now you have two choices. You can continue living the way that you are and lose even more than already have, or you can try to pick up and move on the best way you can with those of us here who love you unconditionally."

Hayden remained silent for several minutes, processing everything that both of his parents said. So many emotions swamped him that in a way he felt like he was drowning. Yet, he knew what he

had to do. He couldn't go on this way. Barely participating in life was no longer an option. It would be difficult, but he had to do it.

He looked at his mother and the corner of his mouth tilted up in the resemblance of a smile. It had been so long since he had done it his muscles struggled with the action.

"You are right, Mom. I am sorry for all of the strain I have caused the two of you."

"Don't forget your sister," his father interjected.

"You have no idea of all the good things going on in your sister's life. She has been afraid to share them with you because you have been in such a foul state of mind."

Hayden frowned at the thought. Had he really made his sister so uncomfortable? He knew the answer to the question before he finished asking it, and he planned to fix it.

"I will apologize to her as well." He spotted his sister walking off the elevator into the lobby of the hotel. The first thing that struck him was how happy she looked. It was the first time he had seen her look that way in a long time. Or was it the first time he'd noticed because he had been caught up in his own world? He recalled Tierra calling and inviting him to dinner once with her and Antonio while they'd been in Boulder City. Now he knew it had been disappointment he heard in her voice when he declined the invite.

He vowed to make it up to his sister. She'd always been there for him when he needed her. The least he could do was return the favor. As she neared he called out to her.

"Well, if it isn't the princess." He'd always referred to her as the princess as a play on her name when they were younger, and she'd always laughed. It was one of the many things they shared between the two of them. Her reaction was different this time, and he knew why. He hadn't called her by that name since before Christy's death. He watched a complete transformation of his sister before his eyes. Her spine stiffened before she turned in the direction of his voice. The bright smile and happiness on her face was replaced with an

expression he could only be described as guarded. To see his sister change so suddenly before his eyes made him realize just how bad it had been, and he felt guilty.

Pushing his shame aside, he smiled at his sister, and the action came a little easier this time. “What, don’t you have a hug for your big brother?”

He stood up, took a step toward her and she met him halfway. He swept her up in his arms, embracing her tightly.

“I have missed you, Sis.”

Tierra’s arms tightened around his neck, and she returned his embrace. He realized just how long it had been since they’d last hugged.

“I have missed you too, Hayden,” she whispered brokenly.

They embraced for a long time, neither of them saying anything. When he finally released his hold on her, letting her stand back on her own feet, he saw the tears in her eyes. They were tears of happiness, and he brushed one away as it slid down her cheek. Somewhere along the way she’d bloomed, and he’d missed it.

“You look beautiful, Tierra.”

She brushed the remainder of tears from her eyes. “Thank you. Did you have a good trip?”

“Yes I did. Thank you for the first class upgrade.”

“No. You should thank Antonio. It was his idea.”

At the mention of his future brother-in-law he looked over her shoulder but didn’t see anyone. He turned his gaze back to her.

“Speaking of which, where is Antonio?”

Her expression became wary. “I wasn’t sure...”

Her voice trailed off, and he knew he was the reason behind Antonio’s absence. He had a lot of apologizing to do.

“I’m sorry, Tierra.”

“Don’t worry about it. Antonio is having breakfast with his family and if you want to meet him, we are supposed to have dinner at his parents’ house this evening.”

“I will be there.”

Tierra smiled and her parents finally cleared their throats. Their father spoke first.

“Now that our happy reunion is over, can your parents have a hug and kiss from their favorite daughter?”

Hayden laughed as she embraced their father, and Tierra joined him as she pulled back.

“That line would work, Daddy, except I’m your only daughter.”

He father laughed. “Either way, it is still true.”

“I would hope so.” Tierra stepped away to hug her mom.

“Are you guy’s hungry? If so we can have breakfast in the hotel’s restaurant, or we can go to this café around the corner.”

They chose to go to the restaurant inside the hotel. They were seated immediately, and Hayden sat back to watch as the wait staff greeted his sister. Even to him it was obvious they genuinely cared about Tierra. His eyebrows rose as he sister spoke in a litany of clear Italian like it was the language she'd learned how to speak instead of English.

His parents had been right. While he had been off in his own world he'd missed out on a lot. His sister looked over at him.

“Order anything you want.”

He kept his order simple. The only thing he wanted was bacon, eggs and toast. His sister made sure he received plenty of it. He could barely move after he finished eating. The food had been excellent. Tierra must have read his mind.

“How was everything?”

He chuckled. “It all tasted good...too good.”

“Buon.” *Good.*

Her attention went to their parents, and Hayden realized she wasn’t even aware she spoke to him in Italian.

“What time does your tour leave?”

Their mother looked down at her watch and grimaced. “Daníella is probably waiting on us right now.”

Hayden said goodbye to his parents and watched them move with liveliness he hadn't seen them exhibit in a long time. When they were gone he returned his attention to Tierra.

"Are those our parents?"

Tierra grinned. "Yes they are."

"I can't recall seeing them this happy since we were kids."

Tierra's expression grew somber. "I can."

He stared at his sister for a moment. "Have I been that bad?"

His sister stared at him just as long before responding. "Hayden, there have been times when I have been so scared for you. Times when I jumped at the sound of the phone ringing because I knew it was going to be about you." She shrugged. "After a while I tried to stop worrying. I figured I'd done everything I could, and if it wasn't good enough then I would have to live with it."

He reached across the table and took her hand in his. "I don't know if it means anything to you, but I am sorry and I'm going to make this up to you."

Tierra squeezed his hand in return. "Hayden, as strange as it may sound, I think you need to make it up to yourself more than any of us."

He shrugged, knowing his sister's reasoning was probably right but still not completely believing he could atone for what he had done. But he could try his best to make it up to them. Tierra was right. In order for this to work, he had to forgive himself and start to live again. He knew exactly where to start. That meant he had to find the woman he'd encountered last night.

* * * *

Amalía had to fight back a yawn. They'd overdone it last night. Daníella, Sophia, Talía and herself had stayed entirely too late talking about their ideal man. All of them had slept at her place. The end result had been Daníella, Sophia and Talía having to get up and rush

to get back to their respective homes this morning. Amalía had spent the time rushing around getting ready and preparing herself for the showdown with her family. As much as she hadn't wanted to get up this morning, she had to show her face at breakfast. Her mother made breakfast every morning, and the only way a person couldn't be there was if they had a good excuse. For some reason she didn't think telling her mother she was up half the night discussing Mr. Right would be good enough of an excuse. The only thing it would accomplish was more meddling and painstaking matchmaking.

So she would sit and suffer happily through breakfast with her family if it kept her away from the alternative. She took a sip of her coffee and had to fight a shudder. If it was one thing she didn't like it was coffee. Unfortunately, right now she needed it or she was going to fall asleep in her eggs. This time when she yawned, she couldn't hide it.

"Long night, Amalía?"

She gave Leonardo a dirty look. If she'd been closer to him she would have kicked him. Instead she gave him a sarcastic smile.

"As usual," she replied.

Carlo's eyebrows rose in surprise, and suddenly she felt worse than she had a few minutes ago—if that were possible.

"Really? Well, that is strange because I could have sworn I received a call from one of our security guards saying they had to throw a guy out for mauling you by the pool."

Amalía closed her eyes, wanting to die of embarrassment as rapid Italian began to fly around the table. To make things even worse, she tried to remain calm and carry on with her breakfast. The noise volume rose, and she saw resolving to remain calm wasn't going to get her anywhere. She set down her fork before letting out an ear-piercing scream. Her family looked at her as if she'd gone insane, and for a moment she feared her mother was going to come around the table and cuff her ears. Truth was she had lost her mind, screaming at

her mother's table, but she had been pushed to this point. When she cut the off the sound her mother was the first to speak.

"*Amalía Maria Carabelli*, have you lost your mind?"

"Yes mother, as a matter of fact I have lost my mind. You all are driving me crazy."

She clasped her hands into fists to keep from slamming them on the table. She might get away with screaming but not banging on the table. Her mother loved this table. Taking a deep breath, she tried to speak calmly. "I don't understand what gives all of you the right to intrude in my life. I don't meddle in any of your lives."

All of her brothers made unintelligible sounds, but Carlo was the only one brave enough to speak up.

"Actually, you meddle in mine and quite often I might add."

"It was to keep you from killing yourself, you idiot," she almost yelled.

Her family began to laugh at her, and she pushed away from the table only to have Antonio reach out and stop her. She gave him an irritated glare.

"Where is Tierra when I need her to keep you in line?"

Antonio grinned, which infuriated her even more. "What has you so heated, Amalía?"

"You and your idiotic brothers," she growled.

She sat back down in her chair, realizing she wasn't going to be going anywhere anytime soon. For the last few months her brothers had been torturing her relentlessly. What flabbergasted her was the fact her mother stood by and allowed it to happen.

"Are you all trying to drive me insane?"

"Yes," Antonio replied.

Her head snapped up, and she saw that her older brother was serious. "Excuse me?"

Antonio shrugged as if he hadn't said anything out of the ordinary. "Frankly little sister, you have become a little boring since your break up with Stefano. Almost predictable as Macéo."

“Hey,” Macéo interrupted in protest, and Amalía shuddered at the thought. Then it dawned on her what Antonio had just said.

“You mean to tell me for the last few months you all have intentionally been annoying me?”

“Try the last year,” Giovanni added drolly.

Her mouth dropped open in shock. “You are kidding me.”

A quick glance around the table told her they weren’t. What got her was even her parents seemed to be in on the plan.

“I can’t believe this.”

She looked at her family, stunned at what they’d just revealed. She wanted to know why but wasn’t sure if she was calm enough to hear the answer.

Macéo decided to be brave enough to try to explain to her why they’d done it. “Well, big sister, to be honest, we don’t like your choice in men lately, including Stefano. You have been choosing the wrong type of guy and for the wrong reason. You have nothing to prove to anyone. And as much as I might regret saying this, we want the outspoken, confident and competitive sister we’ve always known back.”

She sat there in shock, not sure what to think. Her family members were truly insane. She looked at her mother.

“I thought you wanted me to get married and have children.”

“I do, and you will but not with any of the men you are choosing.” Her mother responded.

“Well, being outspoken, confident and competitive is not going to help the cause.” Amalía mumbled.

Leonardo scowled. “Stefano was as dumb as an animal’s butt who shouldn’t be allowed to go outside unescorted.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. She had to agree with her brother. Stefano was intelligent, but lacked common sense. He’d always wanted a trophy wife. She’d tried to mold herself to be one and had failed miserably according to Stefano.

It had been devastating when he had called off their relationship, stating he had found a more suitable candidate for a wife and she was no longer needed. To add insult to injury he'd proposed marriage to her replacement less than a month after breaking up with her. It only became worse when six months later they walked down the aisle. The last she heard Stefano and his wife were expecting their first child. It had been everything she should have and everything she wanted. She had done everything she could to make Stefano happy, even neglected her own personal happiness on more than one occasion. Still it hadn't been enough.

"Amalía," Antonio called out softly.

She looked over at her older brother, knowing what was coming and she deserved it.

"What you did last night was irresponsible and could have caused a lot of problems."

She couldn't help but to give a small smile even though she felt contrite. She had made a mistake, and it could have been costly. The Carabelli's prided themselves on running an exclusive establishment. They worked hard to build it, and she'd lost sight of that for a moment. She couldn't consider herself to be any better than Stefano if she became selfish enough to do that. It was something she would never do again because she loved the hotel and what it stood for too much to do so. She released a pent up breath as she looked at Antonio.

"I know, but luckily there was a gentleman in the pool area who helped me before security arrived."

All of her brothers looked at her in surprise, including Carlo, and she mocked him. "Oh, so your security team didn't tell you the whole story, huh? Imagine them leaving out the part about not being the ones to come to the rescue."

Carlo muttered something she couldn't understand. Smiling at his response, she relayed the story of what had really occurred. When she finished Antonio frowned.

“Do you know this man’s name?”

“No. I tried to get his room number so I could give him a complimentary meal at the restaurant or room service, but he wouldn’t accept it.”

All of her brothers’ eyebrows rose in surprise. But Macéo was the only one to speak. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Did he know you were a Carabelli?”

She frowned at Giovanni’s question. Yes, it was true some people tried to use them when they found out who they were, and for that reason it made it really hard to trust people. It was one of the reasons she valued the friends she’d known most of her life. Giovanni cleared his throat, interrupting her thoughts, and she realized he was still expecting an answer.

“No, Giovanni, he didn’t know, but trust me, it wouldn’t have mattered if he did.”

Macéo gave her a questioning look. “Why is that?”

One corner of Amalía’s mouth curled upward. “Because anyone who knows the Carabelli’s recognizes us. When he looked at me, it was obvious he didn’t recognize me.”

Leo chuckled. “I bet that threw you for one.”

She flashed the characteristic Carabelli smile. “No, it didn’t because it is clear that he isn’t from Italy, and that’s a very good thing. It means I might have found the one man who sees me as a woman instead of a Carabelli.”

Chapter Three

Amalía walked into the hotel refreshed. She was a few hours late, but she felt rejuvenated. After her tortuous breakfast, her brothers had made her go back home with the demand she not show up to work looking like the living dead. She had taken their advice and had gone home and went straight upstairs to her bed. Two hours later her alarm had gone off dutifully, and she slid out of bed and into the shower. By the time she'd dressed and headed for the hotel she felt like a new person. She greeted the staff as she headed for her office. Leonardo was the first sibling she passed. He whistled his approval. She just shook her head as she continued into her office. Giovanni stuck his head in a moment later, and he was all smiles.

“Leonardo said you arrived.” He glanced down at his watch. “And several hours earlier than I expected.”

She frowned at his sarcasm. “Whatever, you idiot. You are lucky I was able to get some extra sleep and that I have work to do.”

He left her office, laughing as he went. She put her full attention into the reports she needed to complete. This was the part of the day she disliked the most, so she tried to get it out of the way. She was definitely more of a people person, liked to get out and mingle with the guests and staff. It was important to her for everyone to be happy. In turn, it rubbed off on her. She knew firsthand what it was like to be unhappy. So if she could avoid it, she did at all cost. Sighing softly, she turned her attention back the report in front of her. She didn't have time to waste, considering she'd come in late. She couldn't stay late at work tonight because they were having dinner with Tierra's family, and she was looking forward to it.

She worked on the report in front of her, and it didn't take her long to finish. She signed a few invoices with a flourish before putting all the paperwork into her outbox. It was time for her to make her rounds. She stuck her head into Antonio's office to find him hunched over paperwork of his own.

"I am going to go check on the staff and customer's," she informed him. He gave a slight nod without looking up. She left the office headed toward the front desk where Sophia stood looking surprisingly refreshed considering the lack of sleep she'd received last night.

"Good morning, Sophia."

Sophia looked up from the paperwork she was shuffling through, and the corners of her mouth curving upward.

"Good morning, Amalía. Did we keep you up too late?"

"No, my family woke me up too early, then decided to take mercy on me by letting me get a few extra hours of sleep. Have you seen Talía or Daníella?"

Sophia laughed. "Talía went to speak with Leo. Daníella left with Tierra's parents to take them on their tour."

Amalía frowned. "Did Tierra's brother Hayden ever make it?"

"Yes, I believe he made it in yesterday evening."

"Good. I look forward to meeting him at dinner tonight."

Sophia looked at her with longing. "What is Mona cooking?"

"I have no idea what my mom is cooking, but it will be good I'm sure."

Sophia moaned as if she could taste the food already. Amalía decided to tease her.

"You could come to dinner if you like. I am sure Giovanni would love to have the company."

Sophia began to blush at the mention of Gio's name. It was well known that Sophia liked Giovanni. She had since she'd laid eyes on him for the first time. It was a shame her lug-headed brother didn't take Sophia seriously. Sophia was a good woman. They would be

good together. There were times when Amalía was tempted to hit her brother in the back of the head to get him to see what was in front of him, but she didn't want to embarrass her friend in such a way. Judging by the impatient look Sophia gave her, it was too late.

"You know Giovanni isn't the reason I want to come over for her dinner."

Amalía laughed knowing Sophia liked to come over to have dinner because the food was good. If it was one thing her mother could do, it was cook.

People were known to drop by just to have a meal and for the company since there never seemed to be a dull moment in the Carabelli household. She glanced at Sophia.

"If you really want to come over, I'll call mom so she can set an extra place."

Sophia nodded. "I will be there."

"Okay. I'll call mom and let her know."

Sophia didn't respond as she turned her attention to a person who'd just walked up.

"Excuse me ladies. Could you tell me where I can find a good tour that comes along with a tour guide?"

Amalía froze at the sound of the familiar voice. She would recognize it anywhere. When she turned around and looked up she nearly swallowed her tongue. Standing in front of her was one of the sexiest men she'd ever seen. In good lighting he was devastatingly handsome. His outfit consisted of a simple knit shirt tucked into jeans that rested on a narrow waist leading down to powerful, muscular thighs.

He was a very attractive African American male. Hazel eyes watched her intensely, and the smile on his face spoke of pure wickedness. She stared back at him, struggling to find her voice. When she did, she said the first thing that came to mind.

"Well, if it isn't my knight in shining armor."

"And if it isn't my damsel in distress."

Sophia looked at the two of them for a moment silently before excusing herself. Amalía fought her amusement as she reached for the brochures Daníella had left behind.

“Do you have any locations in mind you would like to visit?”

“No, I can’t say I do. I was hoping you could help me with that decision.”

She slid a few of the brochures in front of him.

“These are a few of the popular tours. My advice is to look at three things, the time the tour takes, the physical exertion required and the cost.

He cocked his head to the side. “If I want to sign up for one of these, where do I go?”

The corners of her mouth curved upward. “You can come back here and sign up.”

He leaned in a little closer, and his strong masculine scent enveloped her. “And what if I want you to be my tour guide?”

Her breath caught in her throat at his blatant come on, but she decided to play along with him. “Then I would still advise you to pay attention to my original advice.”

“What are your work hours?”

“I have the ability to make my own hours.”

His eyebrows rose in shock. “Well, it is nice of your manager to allow that sort of luxury.”

“I *am* the manager.”

The surprise on his face only grew as she held out her hand to him in greeting. “Amalía Carabelli, and you are?”

She could hardly hold back her amusement at the expressions currently playing out over his face. Only it was her turn to be shocked when he encircled her hand politely but firmly in his own.

“Hayden Davis, and it is a pleasure to meet you as well.”

Her eyes closed in mortification. It would be her luck. She was coming on to her future brother-in-law. No wonder something about him looked so familiar. Hayden and Tierra definitely shared familial

traits. At that thought, her eyes popped back open. This was definitely not the man Tierra had described to her. She had been told to look out for his moodiness and not to expect too much of a response from him. Tierra's description of Hayden always made Amalía compare him to her own brother, Carlo.

However, this was *definitely* not the man Tierra had described. Instead she stood here staring at the exact opposite.

"You did say your name was Hayden Davis, right? As in Tierra Davis's brother?"

"I guess my reputation has preceded me?"

She nodded. "Although I am tempted to say your sister was off base, but she usually isn't."

Amalía removed her hand from his. Her palm still tingled, but excitement began to wane.

"So, is this some sort of game you are playing?"

His gaze darkened, giving her a glimpse of the Hayden he could be. The interesting thing was, it did put her in the mind frame of Carlo.

"Lady, I don't play games unless I am asked to."

She gasped at the undertone in his voice and the type of games it hinted at. She was tempted to learn more of these games he referred to. Shaking her head to clear it, she tried to remember where she was.

"That's good to know. I will keep it in mind for later in case the opportunity ever arises."

To her surprise Hayden began to laugh. He leaned closer to her as if they weren't already close enough.

"Amalía Carabelli, is it?"

"It is."

He chuckled. "I like you."

She was tempted to tell him what she liked about him, but Tierra and Antonio arrived then.

"Buongiorno, Tierra, Antonio."

They greeted her in return, and Tierra's expression became a little worried. "You have met my brother, I see."

Amalía found herself nodding as her gaze returned to Hayden. "Not the one I was expecting to meet, but yes, I have met Hayden."

Tierra smiled, and Amalía turned her gaze to Antonio. "As a matter of fact this is our second meeting, since Hayden is the man who rescued me from my mauling last night."

Both Tierra and Antonio looked at her in shock. A moment later, Antonio recovered.

"Well, I would say a small celebration is in order."

They all watched as Hayden as he extended his hand to Antonio. "It isn't necessary. I was only doing what my mother raised me to do. Besides you have already repaid me by making my baby sister happy."

"Well, Mother would be glad to hear that, and thank you," Tierra stated.

The corners of Antonio's mouth tilted upward as he pulled Tierra closer to him. "It is easy to do when you are in love with the most beautiful woman in the world. It is also nice to finally meet her older brother."

Hayden chuckled, his expression slightly embarrassed. "It is a pleasure to meet you. My only regret is it has taken so long."

Antonio gave him an understanding look. "Sometimes patience is a good thing."

Amalía knew there was a hidden meaning behind those words, but she didn't have time to decipher it because Tierra was reaching for Hayden.

"However, would you excuse Hayden and me for a moment?"

She and Antonio and excused the two of them. Amalía watched Hayden and Tierra walk away before looking up at Antonio.

"Do you know what you are doing?"

She laughed. "Of course not."

Antonio chuckled as he shook his head, but Amalía was being completely honest.

“Would you listen to me if I told you this isn’t a good idea?”

“Probably not, but I could pretend like I am.”

He gave his sister a glare reserved only for her. It served to be more humorous than threatening, but Amalía sighed.

“Why am I attracted to him, Antonio?”

He shrugged. “Because you are a woman and he is a man.”

“It is more than that.”

The corners of Antonio’s mouth curved upward, and Amalía knew if anyone would understand it would be him. He had fallen in love with Tierra as soon as he laid eyes on her. Her brother had set out to make Tierra fall in love with him in the two weeks she’d been in Rome. As one could see, her brother had been successful. In her own case, she wasn’t in love with Hayden, but she was interested in getting to know him better. For some reason she was drawn to him. It was if they had something in common.

She knew from the information Tierra provided that Hayden suffered from the heart-wrenching loss of his wife. “If he breaks your heart, you know your other brothers and I will have to go after him.”

Amalía assessed Antonio with a cool stare. “You and my other brothers will do no such thing. I am a grown woman and I am walking into this situation with my eyes open. Besides, this will be Hayden’s and my time to have a little innocent fun. He will only be here for a week. Both of us will walk into this situation knowing what we are getting into.” She paused. “If *we* decide to.”

Antonio reached out and embraced her warmly. “Just know I’m here if you need me.”

She gave a brief nod and turned her attention to Tierra. Judging by her animated gestures, she was very interested in what was being said. It was cute to see Tierra come to her defense. She looked forward to having her as a sister-in-law.

* * * *

Hayden chuckled as his sister pulled him across the lobby of the hotel, her distress very noticeable. When they were in a spot where no one could really hear what was going on, Tierra turned to stare at him. It was clear she was worried. He struggled to hide his amusement.

“Hayden, this isn’t a good idea,” she whispered.

He feigned innocence. “What isn’t?”

Tierra made an exasperated sound. “I see the way you are eyeing at Amalía. It is the same way Antonio looks at me, minus the love.”

He struggled to contain his amusement. “Isn’t that the way most relationships start out?”

“Yes. The only problem is, both you and I know you aren’t looking for a relationship. At least not a serious one,” she said with a grimace.

Hayden let his attention drift to Amalía who watched him as she talked to Antonio. He imagined she was receiving the same line of questioning. Turning his attention back to his own sister, he smiled.

“For some reason, I don’t think Amalía minds.”

Tierra folded her arms over her chest. “Trust me, Hayden, you are judging a book by its cover. Amalía is looking for a forever type of relationship. She wants a husband and babies.”

Tierra paused to let the information sink in. When Hayden didn’t respond to the information she continued. “She wants them in that order Hayden.”

He processed the warning his sister was trying to give him, but he knew Amalía was an adult as he was. To be honest, it was a miracle he hadn’t taken Amalía into his arms and kissed her senseless, but that wasn’t an option right now. One thing he knew for sure was Amalía Carabelli was lethal, and he was ready for his dose. “Yes, but something tells me she doesn’t mind having a little fun until she finds a husband to have those babies with.”

Tierra closed her eyes and shook her head. When they opened again, the worry there had intensified. "I'm sure there isn't anything I can say to make you change your mind, but just know I warned you." Tierra started to turn and walk away but paused. "And just know when you break Amalía's heart you will have five Italian males will come looking for you, not to mention your own sister."

He glanced at his sister, then her fiancé and lastly, the woman he was contemplating living dangerously for. Would Amalía be worth it? He studied her for a moment, taking in everything about her. The suit she wore looked custom made for her body. The outfit revealed just how well proportioned, her curves being exactly where they needed to be. He would be willing to bet she did have a tailor. Her silky black hair was pulled back into a ponytail that did it a complete injustice. His hands itched to remove the band holding it back so he could run his fingers through it. She looked young, but her brown eyes spoke of experience and wisdom that came from surviving a hardship. Her expression gave him pause. The reason he recognized it was because it was familiar to the one he had seen himself when he looked into the mirror over the last year. Maybe Tierra was right. It probably wasn't a good idea to get involved with her. Yet there was something about her that was so tempting for him.

Smiling to himself, he made the decision he wanted to get to know Amalía better. It was well worth the risk in his opinion.

"I will be careful and I promise I won't do anything Amalía isn't comfortable with."

Tierra's expression told him his statement did not comfort her any. Her words confirmed it.

"That's what worries me."

He chuckled as she led the way back over to where Amalía and Antonio stood waiting for them. Tierra stepped closer to Amalía, giving her a measured look. "I have warned my brother of his fate if he hurts you."

Hayden watched the corners of Amalía's mouth curved upward as she stared at Tierra and then back at Antonio. She seemed to be as amused about the entire situation as Hayden was.

"Antonio had been kind enough to make me aware of it as well."

Smoothing her hands over her suit to remove any wrinkles there, she turned her attention to Hayden. "But please keep in mind Hayden can't hurt me unless I allow him to, and I have no intention of doing that. Now if the two of you will excuse me, I am going to offer Hayden a tour of our hotel."

* * * *

Antonio and Tierra watched Amalía walk away before turning their attention to each other. "Do you think we should have tried harder to discourage them?"

Antonio looked down at his fiancé, his love for her obvious in his expression. She could barely contain her happiness.

"No I don't. As insane as it may sound I think our siblings may actually be good for each other."

Tierra laughed. "Then I *would* say you are insane."

Antonio placed a brief kiss on her lips. "You think so, huh?"

She moved further into his embrace. How she had been lucky enough to find Antonio she didn't know, but she was grateful for it. Deep down she hoped her brother could find this kind of happiness regardless of whom it was with. She just hoped neither Hayden nor Amalía got hurt in the process.

* * * *

Amalía took a calming breath, trying not to show her nervousness to Hayden as she led him away. His gaze remained on her, clear humor in his expression.

"Did you enjoy your scolding?"

She tilted her head to the side to study him. "I didn't receive one. Mine was more of a warning mixed with concern."

Hayden smiled. "Well, I can definitely say mine was more of a threat mixed with a warning."

Amalía couldn't hide her surprise. "Tierra threatened you on my behalf?"

"Yes."

"That's what I like about Tierra. There is more to her than what can be seen by the eye."

"That is interesting since I was just told the same thing is true about you."

Amalía glanced back at her future sister-in-law, who was currently caught up in Antonio's passionate embrace. She wondered just how much had been revealed, but common sense told her it wasn't anything bad otherwise Hayden wouldn't be standing in front of her. Trying to seem nonchalant, she shrugged. "You know I think that can be said about everyone."

He studied her closely for a moment making her even more nervous than she already was. Finally he nodded. "I guess it may be true, in a way."

"I'm glad you agree. It means we can get back to the matter at hand."

Confusion marred his face. "And that would be?"

"Your tour of course," she replied, humored that he'd forgotten why they'd walked away together."

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "I haven't made a decision yet."

She stepped closer to him. "I believe I can help you out with that, and you'll be happy to know this tour is free of charge."

"What tour would it be?"

She lowered her voice to a suggestive tone. "A tour of our hotel facilities and its amenities of course."

Chapter Four

Amalía looked in the mirror and wanted to scream at her reflection. Of all the nights for her hair to be unruly she should have known this would be it. It was days like this that her naturally wavy, semi curly hair was a thorn in her side. Giving it one last stroke with the brush, she sat the hairbrush down in frustration. There was no use. She refused to wear her hair in a ponytail. Hayden had already seen her with one. Besides a ponytail wouldn't be the right hairstyle for this outfit. The forest green halter-top revealed the right amount of perfectly tanned skin. She also wasn't afraid to admit she'd had to lay on the bed to button up her khaki capris. She just took it as a sign she needed to swim a few more laps in the pool, possibly do a few more sit-ups, too. Although the looks Hayden had given her all day told her he didn't mind.

His gaze left her with a totally different feeling than Stefano's had. She had almost starved herself at times to keep the idea of a beauty he'd determined for her a reality. It was something she would never do again. The main reason being she liked her mother's cooking, and she was no longer afraid to admit it. Still it was obvious she did need to cut back on how many times a day she ate at her mother's.

Knowing her hair was as good as it was going to get, she put on her earrings before sliding a few of her bangle bracelets on her wrist then headed back into the bedroom. After she slipped her feet into her flat sandals, she was ready to go. Thankfully it didn't take her long to make it to her mother's home. She and her brothers all lived relatively close to their parents' home.

She smiled as she pulled up beside Sophia's moped only to see her friend taking off her helmet. She groaned in frustration when she saw how perfect Sophia's hair was in spite of wearing a helmet. Sliding out of her car, she went around to greet her friend.

Sophia looked at her and smiled. "Perfect timing."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I was sitting here dreading having to go inside without you."

"I don't know why. It isn't like my family would attack you or something."

"Of course not. Your family is good to me. They always have been. It is me making a fool of myself in front of Giovanni I'm worried about."

Amalía laughed. "Oh please. I don't think you could make a fool of yourself if you tried."

"Thank you for your vote of confidence."

"Come on, Sophia, we need to get inside. It looks like we are the last to arrive."

Sophia groaned. "This is just great."

Amalía shook her head as they walked up to the front door of her parents' home. When she stepped inside she realized she was correct, she and Sophia were the last to arrive. Her family began to greet them, and Amalía doubted Sophia even noticed her earlier statement was true. Amalía laughed as Leonardo swept her up in a bear hug.

"You look very pretty tonight, big sister."

She gave him a teasing pout. "What, have I not been before now?"

Her younger brother chuckled as he released her to stand back on her feet. "You are always pretty, but tonight you look very pretty."

"Well, thank you, little brother. I am starting to see why the women find you so hard to resist." Leo winked and laughed as he walked away.

"Well, I happen to think you look beautiful."

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth at the sound of Hayden's voice. She turned to face him, and the first thing she noticed was how good he looked.

"Thank you. You look very handsome yourself."

"Thank you. I—"

"Okay everyone, it is time to eat."

Amalía groaned at her mother's timing but followed everyone into the dining room. The wonderful smell of food assailed her, and her stomach grumbled. It was going to be a lot harder than she thought to break away from her mother's cooking. She held back her excitement as Hayden sat down on one side of her, leaving Sophia to take the other. It amused her even more to watch Sophia become flustered when Giovanni sat down next to her.

She was quickly distracted when a large bowl of fresh salad greens was passed around. When the caprese salad came out, she knew she was in trouble. She had a major weakness for mozzarella cheese, especially buffalo mozzarella. Yet she was able to control herself because she was well aware of the fact she didn't have a lot of room to spare in her pants. Her mother helped her by serving lamb as the main course. It was one of the meats in the world she wasn't fond of at all. Something about it didn't sit well with her. So she helped herself to a few extra pieces of buffalo mozzarella and added a tomato to balance it out. Hayden looked at her, his expression full of puzzlement.

"Do you not like lamb?"

"No. I never have."

"I have tried it several times several different ways but I think it is the meat itself. I enjoy seafood a lot more."

Hayden took another hearty bite of his lamb and savored it before responding. "Well, this is my first time having lamb, but I like it. Your mother is a good cook."

She groaned playfully. "I'm well aware that."

He gave her a questioning look. "What do you mean?"

“If I indulge in too many more of my mother’s meals I will need two chairs to sit in instead of one.”

Hayden shot her a look of disbelief. “I know you aren’t saying you are overweight are you?”

Amalía found herself shaking her head. Yes she was curvaceous but overweight no. “No, but I have put on a few extra pounds in the past several months, and it just so happens to be in noticeable places.”

She watched his gaze travel over her body slowly before lifting to hers again. The heat there was scorching. It was clear he liked what he saw.

“Trust me, you look perfect the way you are. Anyone who tells you otherwise is lying or jealous if not a combination of both.”

The statement made her smile because she knew he meant it by his tone. “Thank you.”

He gave her a curt nod. No other words needed. It also made it a lot easier for her to consume a nice portion of the dessert her mother served.

Amalía’s thought drifted to everything that they had to do in order to make sure the wedding went off as smoothly as they all wanted it to. Her thoughts were interrupted as her cell phone rang simultaneously with all of her brothers. This could only mean one thing. There was a problem at the hotel. Antonio was able to reach his cell phone first to get the call. The information was relayed to him and had him swearing in Italian before he disconnected the call. He apologized to their mother before she could scold him. He turned his attention to her and their brothers.

“It seems the electricity is malfunctioning again. The restaurant, lobby and bar are without power.”

She moved into action as quickly as her brothers. Hayden rose as well, and she looked at him with surprise.

“I may be able to help if I can look at your blue prints and electrical wiring.”

Sophia stood as well. “And being the head of hospitality I should probably come as well.”

“Good idea,” Giovanni agreed before looking at Sophia. “You can ride with me since I’m sure you are on that moped of yours.”

He took her arm, telling everyone he would see them at the hotel and practically dragging Sophia out of the room before she could get a word out. Gio didn’t seem to realize how many eyebrows he raised with his gesture. Amalía suspected even if her brother did know, he didn’t care. He lived to raise eyebrows with his actions.

Earl and Jean Davis followed Tierra and Antonio to their car, and Amalía turned to look at Hayden. “You can ride with me if you like.”

He nodded, and she kissed her parents, thanking them for the meal before leading Hayden to her car. Carlo, Leo and Macéo were on their heels. When they arrived at the hotel, Sophia was already calming the guests, although she looked a little frayed herself. Giovanni appeared with the blue prints and quickly led Hayden to where the fuses and cables were. Carlo followed them.

Amalía made a quick call to Talía to inform her of the situation, telling her it wasn’t necessary she get out of bed and come in. But if the situation called for it, Amalía would definitely let her know. There would be plenty of work for Talía to do in the morning. After disconnecting the call, Amalía moved to help Sophia at the hospitality desk. Leonardo appeared by her side a moment later, helping to calm even more guests with his charming smile. Macéo, Tierra and Antonio moved around making sure candles and flashlights lit up any areas of darkness.

Amalía smiled when Earl and Jean pitched in to help as well. In the short time she’d known Mr. and Mrs. Davis it was easy to tell they had passed on a lot of good traits to their children. It wasn’t hard for one to see why Tierra and Hayden were such good people. Half an hour later the hotel’s bar, lobby and restaurant had electricity. Hayden appeared a short while later, looking tired followed by Giovanni and Carlo.

Once all of the guests had been calmed and offered complimentary services, Giovanni suggested they have a quick meeting. When they were all seated in a conference room, she braced herself, fully expecting bad news.

“Go ahead and fill everyone in on what you discovered, Hayden.”

Hayden looked at them with a bleak expression. “To be completely honest with you, the wiring of the hotel is abysmal. I’m surprised you haven’t had any electrical problems before now.”

Amalía clenched her jaw, trying to contain her anger. “Actually, we have quite a few over the last six months. We have called in several repairs.”

Hayden rubbed his hand across the back of his neck. “That explains the quick fixes I saw. This problem is going to get a lot worse. Even what I did was a temporary fix, but you need a serious electrical wiring overhaul. Something that is more up to date.”

“Otherwise?” Antonio asked.

“Hotel Carabelli will be completely without power. Trust me, it is only a matter of time before the wiring goes completely out.”

This time it was she who cursed very efficiently in Italian and English. Hayden chuckled, and she blushed. She had definitely been in her brothers’ presence for too long. If her mother heard the words coming out of her mouth she would probably keel over. Still Amalía was only doing what Talía would have if she’d heard this news. This was going to be a potential PR nightmare. Amalía looked over at her brothers.

“This isn’t good at all. We need to get this fixed and quickly. No matter what the cost.”

Her brothers nodded. It was obvious this was an urgent issue and needed to be taken care of quickly. Having the hotel in complete darkness was not an option. Antonio looked over at Hayden.

“Is there anything else you can do right now?”

Hayden yawned.. “I have done all I can for now. I have talked to Carlo and Giovanni about taking a look at the wiring again in the morning. If anything else can be done, I will do it.”

“Let us know if you need anything.” Antonio replied.

Hayden rubbed a hand over his face. He appeared to be exhausted. He had worked hard to get the power back on, and he’d done a good job of it.

“I will. Right now I suggest we all get as much sleep as possible. If there are any other shortages, just come to my room and wake me.”

Antonio held out his hand gratefully. “Thank you. Again if there is anything else we can do for you, let us know.”

Hayden returned the handshake smiling. “You are welcome, and you have done enough for me. Just continue to make my sister happy, and we will call it even.”

Antonio smiled himself. “That, I can do.”

When Antonio stepped back Tierra stepped forward to embrace her brother. “Thank you for helping, Hayden. You really didn’t have to.”

“Yes I did, but you go home and get some rest. I will see you tomorrow.”

Tierra gave him a kiss on the cheek before leaving with Antonio. Leonardo stood up and yawned.

“I think I’m going to spend the night here just in case.”

Macéo and Carlo stood as well.

“I would stay but tomorrow is my day off, and I have plans.” Carlo murmured.

“Same here,” Macéo replied.

Amalía stood and fought a yawn of her own. There was no way she was leaving tonight. She was too exhausted.

“Well, I am going to stay the night here as well. If anything else happens, I can be here to help Leo.”

No one protested the idea, and Carlo and Macéo wished them a good night. She turned and spoke with Giovanni for a few moments before he stood up.

“It is getting late, and I need to get Sophia home.”

Sophia sat up straight at the mentioning of her name. “That’s okay, Giovanni. I can stay the night here.”

Gio was oblivious to Sophia’s uneasiness.

“Nonsense. There is no need for you to stay here. Besides you have tomorrow off as well. If you are too tired to drive your moped home I can drop you off at home then swing back by tomorrow to take you to get it.”

Amalía found herself amused at Sophia’s discomfort. “It sounds like a good idea, Giovanni.”

The look Sophia gave her was murderous, but she was neatly trapped and couldn’t get out of the situation without making a scene. Amalía knew Sophia wasn’t the type to make a huge fuss, and there wasn’t a good reason for her to give about not accepting the ride unless she wanted to admit the truth. Instead Amalía allowed Sophia to glare at her without comment as she stood. Amalía shot Sophia a look of mock innocence. “I will give you a call tomorrow.”

“Make sure you do,” Sophia half growled and half whispered to her.

Finally she and Hayden were alone. When she turned back to look at him, there was an amused expression on his face.

“I would ask what that was about, but I am too tired to follow along right now.”

She laughed. “Trust me. It is a long story. Plus Sophia would kill me if I told you.”

“Well, I am beat. I guess I will see you in the morning.”

She stood. “Yes, I will, Hayden. Have a good night.”

“Goodnight.”

He stepped aside to let her exit the conference room first before following. She closed her brother’s office and locked it. He made his

way toward the hotel lobby while she went to her office. Luckily she kept a few changes of clothes hanging in the closet in her office. There had been a few times when she'd been so tired after working a night shift that she just decided to stay in one of the empty rooms. She picked out a few choices. When she had everything she needed, she made her way to the front desk and checked herself into the other empty family suite, seeing Leo had already taken the other. She hadn't realized how tired she'd been from the events of this evening. Actually it was probably a combination of her lack of sleep last night plus the fact she put in a full day of work. Not to mention that she'd run at full operating speed for the last hour.

She reached her room and slid the access key in with relief. The first thing she did was take a shower. A short time later she slipped into one of her favorite pairs of cotton short pajamas. In an attempt to avoid the bad hair day she'd experienced tonight, she made the wise decision to pull her hair back into a ponytail and plait it. Otherwise when she woke in the morning, hair duty would take two hours instead of the normal one. Okay maybe she was exaggerating a bit, but it felt like an hour.

Finally ready for bed, she crawled in between the sheets, grateful to be in a reclined position. She instantly had the image of Hayden in bed with her holding her and exhaled softly. She should be so lucky. The most interesting thing to her was that she hadn't really found a way to have him to herself yet. As large and demanding as her family was, it would probably be impossible. She wasn't really certain she wanted to have alone time with him but if she did she'd better move quickly. Hayden was only going to be in Rome six more days and counting. It didn't give her long to act. She had to come up with a plan and soon. Hopefully her subconscious mind was ready to concoct one because she was too tired to stay awake and think of one. She set her alarm clock for a time later than she would normal get up considering she was already at the hotel. She even had a good reason as to why she was going to miss breakfast with her family. More

importantly, she had a perfect excuse to sleep in and she was going to use it

* * * *

Hayden sighed as he stepped underneath the warm spray of the shower and let the water rinse off the dirt he'd acquired during the day. He didn't think coming to Rome for his sister's wedding was going to be so interesting. So fun. The Carabelli's were an exciting group and the most down to earth, wealthy people he'd ever met. Tonight Giovanni had offered him a shirt of his own so Hayden wouldn't get his own dirty while trying to fix the electrical wiring tonight. It wasn't literally the shirt off his back, but it was close enough. If he hadn't realized it before, now he knew for sure the Carabelli's were good people. He bathed quickly before stepping out of the shower. Drying off briskly, he dropped the towel on the floor before pulling on a pair of boxer briefs.

He lay down on top of the covers, certain he would be under them before the night was over. He was very warm-natured and always had been. As soon as he had stepped off the plane yesterday he had been struck by the humidity in the Mediterranean air. Even with the air on in the room, he was still a little warm. Yet, the reason he'd started out on top of the covers before he went to bed had become a recent development.

After Christy's death, it had become difficult to slip underneath the covers without his wife. He couldn't really explain it, but he knew it was just one more thing he had to let go of eventually. It was another way he still carried his deceased wife with him daily, and he recently he realized how unhealthy it was. Not only for himself, but for the rest of his family as well. He could see firsthand just how unhealthy a lot of things currently were for him, and he was working on it. He needed to have a healthy relationship with women again.

Did he ever see himself getting married again? His thoughts automatically went to Amalía and it was a little disconcerting, but not as much as it should be. Amalía was an interesting woman. There was a lot more to her than what met the eye as Tierra had indicated. It was refreshing. She made him laugh. Made him think about things he hadn't contemplated in a long time. He closed his eyes then took a deep breath. It was obvious he was tired and trying to think at the same time, a dangerous combination. The best thing he could do was close his eyes and get some rest. He needed to be prepared for the hard work he planned to do tomorrow.

Several moments later his body followed his advice, and he fell asleep, but it was a restless sleep. So much so he was up before the sun, something that had become a normal ritual for him. It had been a long time since he'd gotten a full night sleep—a year to be exact. He was always plagued with nightmares Christy and the baby.

Swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, he tried to relax. Maybe he could fall back asleep and get a few more hours of rest. When he realized that wasn't going to happen, he got up and dressed quickly. A short time later he took the elevator down to the lobby. He walked past the hospitality desk toward the offices and was allowed to pass through by security. Leo's office was the second one he came to and the only door open.

Leo looked up as he approached. "Buongiorno, Hayden."

Hayden raised a brow. "I assume that means good morning in Italian?"

Leonardo smiled. "Yes. I apologize. I have gotten so used to speaking with Tierra. I just make the assumption all of the Davises speak Italian."

Hayden laughed. "Well, I assure you we don't. My sister is the only smart one in that sense."

Leonardo motioned for him to have a seat. "Please join me."

Hayden continued into the office and took a seat, the aroma of coffee hit him. His system went into overdrive.

“Is there more coffee around?”

Leonardo nodded. “How do you take it?”

“Black.”

Leonardo picked up the phone on his desk. He listened as Leo made a request in his native language, and a few moments later Hayden had a cup of hot coffee sitting in front of him. Hayden took the first sip gratefully. He didn’t really need caffeine, but if it was around and it smelled good, he enjoyed a cup or two. The first jolt hit his system in the way he needed it to this morning. Still, he was certain he would pay for his lack of sleep later.

“Thank you for the coffee.”

“It isn’t a problem. Let me know if you need another.”

“I probably won’t finish this one. I like to work with steady hands.”

Leo chuckled. “It is probably a good rule to have when working around electricity. Let me know when you are ready.”

Hayden nodded. After a few more sips of coffee he’d be ready. That would also give Leo time to finish working on the information in front of him. Several moments later Leo put the paperwork aside, and Hayden realized he had finished the entire cup. Leo inclined his head toward the empty cup as Hayden put the cup down.

“Are you ready?”

He nodded and stood up. The sooner he started the minor repairs the quicker he would finish and be able to find Amalía. He was very interested in spending time with her today. He had a feeling that he was getting in over his head, but he didn’t care. He wanted her, and he planned to have her.

Chapter Five

Amalía growled with frustration. *Serious* annoyance rose at whomever it was pounding on her hotel door at this awful hour in the morning. Groaning in aggravation, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and half walked, half stumbled to the door. She didn't bother with the peephole because her eyes were so bleary she wouldn't be able to see out of it anyway. Opening the door a crack she saw a cheerful Hayden standing on the other side.

"Buongiorno, Amalía."

Her eyes widened at his first attempt at Italian.. Profanity poured from her mouth, but Hayden only smiled.

"I assume that wasn't hello or good morning in return was it?"

She scowled at his cheerful disposition.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" she asked crossly.

"It is a few minutes before seven."

Hearing the time aloud made her feel even worse. She was up two hours before she had to be, *two whole hours*. Closing her eyes, she spoke to Hayden as calmly as she could. "Is the electricity out again?"

"No."

She paused. "Is the hotel on fire?"

He chuckled. "No."

She sighed. "Flooded?"

"No."

Amalía felt her teeth clench as her eyes reopened. "Then why the hell are you standing here at my room so early?"

Hayden smiled at her. "Because I want to have breakfast with you, and Leo told me you needed at least an hour to get ready."

Her eyes closed again and counted to ten before she said something else inhospitable.

“Did my brother also happen to tell you I’m not a morning person?”

“Yes, he did, but he didn’t say you were this bad.”

Her eyes flew open in outrage. “*This bad!*”

The only thing keeping her from saying more was the fact he stood there looking at her with open curiosity, making her wonder how bad she was. His expression also told her he wasn’t going anywhere. Sighing heavily, she opened the door to let him in.

“Come on in.”

She turned and walked back into her room, not waiting to see if he followed her or not. A whimper fought its way up from her throat, but she held it back as she walked past the bed. It was calling her name. It took everything she had not to crawl back into it. Instead she went over to a chair and collapsed into it, closing her eyes. After a long moment of silence she reopened them to find Hayden nearing her. The expression on his face was indescribable. She could only imagine why he was staring at her the way he way.

“What is it?”

He remained silent for another moment before speaking. “Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?”

She rolled her eyes. “Trust me, I have seen what I look like in the morning when I first wake up. You don’t have to sweet talk me.”

He reached out and touched a loose tendril of her hair. “If it is one thing I don’t do it is lie. You are beautiful, whether you see it or not. You don’t need any make-up and fancy stuff to impress me.”

She gave him an exasperated look. “Who says I’m trying to impress you?”

His self-assured expression reminded her so much of Leonardo’s she shook her head.

“Your body does. Your eyes do.”

Denial lay upon her lips, but it would be a lie and both of them knew it. He reached out and pulled her upward until she was standing. She knew he had to be delusional. If he'd been Stefano, she wouldn't have allowed him into the hotel room until she was presentable. That would include make-up and fancy stuff as Hayden put it. It was somewhat of an unspoken rule that she always looked her best around Stefano. If she didn't, Stefano hadn't hesitated to tell her so.

There had been so many times when she'd taken extra care with her appearance only for him to wrinkle up his nose in disapproval. Stefano was a self-centered bastard. How she'd managed to stay with him as long as she had was beyond her. Had she truly been so desperate? Evidently, she had or she wouldn't have nursed a broken heart for two years. Hayden touched the side of her face, bringing her out of her thoughts.

"Amalía?"

She shivered at the way he enunciated her name. He said it like no one else ever had, like no one else ever could.

"Yes?" she whispered.

"I want to know if you taste as sweet as you look," he stated softly. "Can I kiss you, Amalía," he asked as he drew her nearer.

She knew she should say no. Instead she found herself stretching up to meet him halfway. The first touch of their lips was feathery, but it was enough. In the next instant his mouth covered hers, hot and demanding. His kiss commanded everything of her, forcing aside the docile and compliant Amalía that Stefano would have expected. The thought spurred her on, and she pressed her body closer to his, wanting the contact, craving it. Hayden feasted on her lips as if he needed nourishment. She was more than happy to provide it. She needed to feel more of his touch. Feel her skin against his.

As if he heard her request, he slid his hand under her cotton pajama top, encountering smooth skin. She moaned, pushing her body closer to his, needing the contact. His hand slid higher until it found

one of her breasts. She knew she wasn't a large woman, but she fit into the cup of his palm perfectly.

It only made her want him more, just as badly as he seemed to want her, yet, she found the strength to pull away from his hand and mouth simultaneously. He groaned at the loss, reaching for her again but she evaded his hands.

"No, Hayden. We have to stop. My family is expecting us at breakfast. Thanks to you, no less."

He exhaled heavily. She studied him, taking all of him in, knowing she probably appeared just as sexually frustrated as he did. She could feel her nipples straining against her night top in arousal. Not to mention she stood there breathing just as hard as he did from his kiss.

"We could call and say we changed our minds."

"Only if you want your limbs separated from your body. Trust me, it wouldn't take long for them to figure out what we are doing, then they would show up to dismember you."

He smiled at the imagery she used, but she knew she was right. Hayden had never seen her brothers in action when they were angry, but she had. "So I need to get ready."

She made a wide, sweeping gesture. "Feel free to make yourself comfortable while I do so."

He did as she told him to, putting himself in the perfect place to observe her freely, and she could see him just as well. He watched her open a garment bag and mull over the contents before sighing.

"What is it?"

She looked up at him. "Trying to figure out what I should wear. I had my outfit picked out last night before I went to bed, but I'd planned on sleeping in and missing breakfast."

"I say put your work clothes out so you can change into them once you get back from breakfast. If it isn't too much trouble to change that is."

She smiled at the reasonable suggestion. Normally she wore her casual clothes to breakfast so she could be comfortable while she ate. Then she would change into her work clothes at her parents' home. "That sounds like a good idea but I don't have much of a choice unfortunately."

She set out her clothes, choosing a sand-colored pantsuit, matching it with a pink print top finished with lace around the straps and the hem of the shirt. She laughed to herself as she heard him groan in disappointment when she went into the bathroom. Had he really expected her to change in front of him? A resounding *yes* sounded in her head, otherwise he wouldn't have reacted the way she had when she walked into the bathroom and closed the door. As bold as she could be on occasion, stripping in front of Hayden didn't seem like a wise thing to do. She really didn't feel like being caught in another compromising position. Her episode the other night was enough.

She laughed, shaking her head as she changed into her clothes before returning to the room. Maybe Hayden was the exact distraction she needed.

"Amalía?"

She looked up at him as he called her name, putting her pajamas away as she did so. "Yes?"

"I know this may sound like a strange question, but are your suits tailored?"

She gave him look of surprise at the random question. "Some of them are. Why do you ask?"

His eyes trailed over her body in a way that should have been illegal. "Because the suit looks so good on you. Both of the ones I have seen you in so far do. They fit you as though they were made specifically for you."

She laughed. "And you should have slept in because you are obviously delusional from your lack of sleep."

“No, you just underestimate the power of your body in one of those suits.”

Placing a hand on a curvaceous hip, she turned to look at him amused by his statement. “Tell me, Hayden. Which would you prefer to strip me out of, this suit or a lacy lingerie set?”

She looked at him in shock when he actually contemplated the question.

“You really are delusional aren’t you?”

He shook his head, a small smile on his face. “As I have already stated you just underestimate the suit you are wearing and the body underneath it.”

She mumbled under her breath as she walked back into the bathroom. The man actually had to think about whether he would prefer to strip her out of a suit or lingerie. To be honest she didn’t have any lingerie. She had disposed of it when her relationship with Stefano ended, mainly because he had been the one to buy it for her and she hadn’t wanted to keep anything that reminded her of him. Secondly, she preferred her comfortable cotton pajamas, but she did splurge on a sexy panty and bra set every once in a while.

A quick look in the mirror confirmed what she already knew. Her hair was a mess. She would have to settle for putting it in a ponytail again today. Sometime during the night, the effort she made to control her hair had come down. Reaching for her hairbrush, she began to busy herself with the task until she had her thick and unruly hair pulled back into a decent ponytail. She applied her make-up lightly, trying to cover the horrendous black circles under her eyes. If Hayden thought she looked sexy in her current state, he would swallow his tongue if he saw her dressed to go out. When she walked out of the bathroom, Hayden was still sitting there waiting for her. In some ways she figured she was dreaming and would wake up soon. He watched her every move intensely.

“What is it?”

He laughed. “Is hasn’t even taken you thirty minutes to get ready.”

“Let’s just say you have motivated me to get dressed a little quicker today.”

She reached for her purse and car keys before turning back to look at him. “Come on. Let’s go so you won’t have to work on the electrical wiring all day.”

He stood, a huge grin appearing on his face. “I have completed it already.”

She paused, finding it hard to hide her horror at his statement. . “What time did you get up this morning?”

He told her only to laugh when she responded in rapid Italian. She would never repeat what she said in English, but his expression told her he grasped the gist of what she was saying and it wasn’t nice.

“Well, if that is true, you definitely need to get some nourishment into your system,” she finally murmured in English as she walked toward the door.

He followed her to the door and held it open so she could pass through. As she walked by him, he inhaled deeply before complimenting her on her perfume. It was her favorite fragrance, a light and flowery scent. Not overpowering like some of the other fragrances other people wore. They made their way to her car, and he opened her door for her, making sure she was in before closing the door. When he slid into the passenger seat she grinned as he buckled his seatbelt.

“What is it?”

“Are you always such a gentleman?”

He gave her an intense look and his eyes darkened. When he spoke, his voice was husky. “Why don’t you ask me not to be and you will find out.”

At the promise she heard in his tone she started the engine and shifted the car into drive. “I would, but I am driving.”

His laughter filled the car. “Then this would be the perfect opportunity for me to show you something a gentleman wouldn’t do.”

She shot him a wry glance out of the corner of her eyes. “No, thank you. I don’t want to have to explain to my family why we crashed on the side of the road.”

“For some reason, I don’t think you would have to explain it.”

“Then you obviously don’t know my family.”

He smiled. “No, I don’t, but I am a man and a brother, so I can imagine.”

“Yeah, well don’t forget to multiply it by five.”

* * * *

Hayden shook his head at the image Amalía’s words put into his head. Although he had to admit if she were his sister he would probably be just as protective. Thankfully she wasn’t, or the thoughts he was having about her would be seriously wrong. He sat back, enjoying the rest of the ride to Bruce and Mona’s home. Truthfully, he was hungry. He’d already been up for three hours and he’d worked hard. He finished the work early, which made him feel better, but the hotel was in need of some serious electrical overhaul. Several moments later they pulled up in front of the house. He went around to open Amalía’s door before the engine had completely shut off. She smiled as he extended his hand to her to assist her out. He was going to have to thank Leo for suggesting he bring Amalía to breakfast even if Leo hadn’t done it for true altruistic reasons.

It seemed like a little bit of a setup, but he didn’t mind having an excuse to be in Amalía’s presence. She was a dynamic woman. Amalía led the way into the house, and the noise volume that greeted them was deafening. He gave her an amused look.

“Are you guys always this loud this early in the morning?”

“No. Normally we are louder.”

He laughed, and they continued toward the dining room. The room became quiet, and all eyes fell on them. Tierra was the first to get up and greet them.

“Buongiorno, Amalia, Hayden.”

“Buongiorno,” Amalia replied. *Good morning.*

Hayden found himself saying good morning in Italian as well. He smiled as his sister’s eyes widened.

He chuckled. “Don’t worry, it is the only word I know right now.”

Tierra laughed in response. He couldn’t help but be a little surprised. Today was turning out to be a good day so far, especially considering the way he’d woken up. He hated the nightmares because his day just didn’t seem to go right afterward. Fortunately his interaction with Amalía had been enough to jolt him out of any bad mood he’d been in. He greeted the rest of the Carabelli’s, watching as Amalía headed for Leo. Leo looked down at his watch with a smile.

“I must say, Amalía. This must be a new record of sorts.”

Amalía hit Leo in the arm, and Hayden couldn’t hide his smile as Leonardo winced. Hayden made a mental note to himself to avoid Amalía’s right hand if balled into a fist.

“That’s right little brother, but the next time you send someone to wake me before I’m ready, you will be the one setting a new record.”

Leonardo squeezed her in a hug. “Your threat has been received, big sister.”

One corner of her mouth curled upward as she looked at Leo. “I hope so.”

Hayden greeted his parents before turning to hold out the chair for Amalía. She sat down, and he took the remaining seat next to her. The conversation resumed in Italian and enough English so Hayden could follow along.

Giovanni cleared his throat. “Thank you again for helping fix the electrical wiring.”

Leonardo nodded. "He even took the time to provide me with a breakdown of what the cost of fixing a problem like this in the states might cost."

Hayden nodded. "Even so there might be some significant price differentials between supplies and labor cost here in Rome than the States."

Antonio smiled. "Still it gives us an idea of what we are looking at."

"Anything I can do to help." Hayden replied.

Hayden fixed his plate before commencing to eat the wonderful food Mona had prepared. He glanced at the small plate Amalía made. Whoever the jerk was who'd given her a complex about her body ought to be taken out and shot. There was only one word for Amalía's body. Lush. She was right on the cusp of being full-figured. She had a nice, toned upper body that led to a neat waist, but her hips left little to the imagination. They were what he referred to as baby-making hips. She was built differently than Christy, who'd been slender in every way, but it didn't matter to him at all. He liked women of all shapes, colors and sizes, and right now he really liked Amalía. Now he just had to get Amalía to see how beautiful she was, how beautiful her body was. Tierra spoke, interrupting his musing.

"Did you get a chance to sign up for a tour yet?"

He grimaced. "I was so worried about the electrical wiring, I completely forgot. I will sign up for one when we get back to the hotel."

"Nonsense," Mona stated. "Why don't you give him a tour, Amalía?"

"Mama." Amalía's voice held a warning.

Hayden chuckled. Even he could see the clear attempt at matchmaking. His sister seemed to be on board as well.

"Actually it may be a good idea, Amalía. You know Rome just as well as Daníella does, and she is probably already booked for the day."

Amalía did a mock sniff of the air. “Do I smell matchmaking?”

He laughed, and Tierra waved her hand dismissively. “Oh please. There is no need to do that. You and Hayden are already attracted to each other. I just don’t see any harm in you giving Hayden a tour.”

Amalía looked over at him for his assistance, but he wasn’t inclined to help at all. This was his chance to get her alone. He wasn’t going to turn it down. He nodded in agreement with his sister.

“Tierra has a point.”

A blush began to make its way up Amalía’s neck to her face. He felt her leg shift and quickly moved his leg as she tried to kick him. He chuckled when she glared at him for anticipating the move.

“You aren’t helping the situation.”

He shrugged in response, watching as Amalía turned to look at her family.

“Why is it I’m always being set up by you all?”

When no one responded, Hayden leaned over and whispered in her ear. “Think about the endless possibilities if we get uninterrupted time together.”

* * * *

Amalía tried to keep a straight face as Hayden’s words sunk in. The tone of his voice made her thighs clench and her nipples harden. A deeper blush made its way to her face. She looked at Hayden before whispering back.

“You are going to get more than a tour if you don’t watch what you are saying.”

As soon as the words left her mouth she knew they were the wrong words to say. His expression became so heated she was certain she would combust.

“That’s what I am hoping for.”

She stared at him for a long moment, trying to figure out what she had gotten herself into. It was clear she was going to find out soon enough. She finally turned her attention back to her family.

“Well, I am sure you are all happy to hear I will be giving Hayden a tour today, but in the mist of all this planning did you all decide who is going to take over my shift today?”

She had the brief pleasure of seeing her brothers wince. Her gaze shifted expectantly to Macéo and Carlo. They only two Carabelli's that had the day off today. They were also the two who were the most reluctant to give up a day off without getting it back, and there was no way she was switching. She had too many things to do on the days she did have off.

“I'll work for you.”

Her mouth almost hit the table when Carlo volunteered. She had to be dreaming, but the choking sound were coming from Leo told her she wasn't. It also made her wonder what had gotten into Carlo. She had noticed a change in him lately. It seemed Tierra had a lot to do with it. Now she wasn't so certain she liked this change. As a matter of fact Tierra looked pretty smug.

“Well, it seems like everything had been worked out so you have no excuse, Amalía.”

Amalía rolled her eyes in disgust at how this plan had been set up and worked out. “It looks like it would have been whether Hayden and I wanted it to or not.”

Hayden smartly remained silent, but he gave her a look told her this was what he wanted. She just shook her head, giving in to defeat. There was no way she was going to go up against everyone by herself. Nor would she try to. Especially since deep down she did want alone time with Hayden.

“So where would you like to go today, Hayden?”

Hayden pushed his plate away, finally finished eating what seemed like an insane amount of food to her. She was certain he had

wolfed down two full plates of food. Where he'd room to put it she had no idea.

"I was thinking the Coliseum."

The response brought laughter from Tierra. "How long did it take you to think of that one?"

Amalía watched as Hayden and Tierra shared a look. "Very funny, little sister."

Everyone at the table seemed to be interested in what the banter was about, including Amalía. Tierra was happy to continue her teasing.

"Why don't you tell them what your favorite movie is, Hayden?"

"I have told you several times *Gladiator* is not my favorite movie. I just like it more than most of the others. It doesn't hurt that it has a lot of blood and fight scenes in it."

"Well, regardless if it is your favorite movie or not, I happen to like touring the Coliseum myself, so you are in luck." Amalía responded.

"Good. I'm interested in seeing it. I want to see the results of the restoration."

Antonio's ears perked up. "Are you into restoration?"

"Only if it is a car," Tierra scoffed. "He and dad used to spend so much time on this hunk of junk they call a truck. Fortunately, to this day it still isn't running."

Ripples of laughter sounded out from around the table. Hayden issued a mock frown.

"I will be sure to tell Dad what you think about his years of hard work."

Tierra pushed her plate away. "Go ahead. I'm sure it won't be anything he hasn't heard from mom already."

Hayden's reply was cut short as Giovanni stood up abruptly.

"Well, as much as I would love to stay and continue this family banter, it's getting late and some of us need to get to work, considering the time."

The comment urged everyone into action because breakfast had lasted a little longer than it normally did. Unfortunately she had to go home or back to the hotel to change into something more casual. The hotel was closer and would be a safer location to change at. She stood a better chance of getting Hayden to the Coliseum for a tour if they went there for her to change. It was a good thing she kept extra clothes at the hotel or she might be in trouble. More trouble than she already was.

Chapter Six

“Man, this place is majestic.”

Amalía smiled at Hayden’s comment. He truly was amazed at the sight before him.

“It is very beautiful.”

He turned to look at her, one corner of his mouth tilting upward. “No, it is more than beautiful it is surreal.”

She studied him as he turned slowly in another circle. “Do you know any of its history?”

“Yes. The Coliseum is almost two thousand years old. It covers about six acres. I believe at its full glory it seated around forty-five to fifty thousand people.” She paused briefly. “As you know from the movie you watched, gladiator matches were held here. There were also hunts held here amongst other things.”

Hayden sat down next to her. “I wonder what it was like to be a gladiator.”

She frowned. “I can’t say I do. It is somewhat disputed, but you do realize the movie *Gladiator* was more accurate than most believe or want to admit.”

He gave her a puzzled look. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t remember the name of the emperor they were portraying in the movie, but the guy was pretty bad from what historical accounts say. Some says most gladiators were men fighting for their freedom. However, this was also the grounds where executions were held.”

He frowned. “Are you serious?”

“The sad thing is, the lions were not always into the executions, so the people being executed were smeared with fresh blood to jump start the lions' hunger.”

A truly appalled look appeared on his face as he understood the implication of her words. She couldn't blame him. Who wouldn't be appalled?

“Where there women and children subjected to this?”

“Yes, there were.” His complete expression changed to one of distaste. “And just so you know, you might have been a victim yourself because of your reaction.”

His horrified expression turned to one of surprise. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, this same beloved emperor was known to pull spectators from the crowd and throw them into the Coliseum arena if they didn't show enough enthusiasm over the events happening”

Hayden shot her another look of displeasure. “You're right, it does change your feelings slightly, but not about the fact that this place is majestic, just that stories like that give the place a different feel knowing there are tortured souls here.”

“You're right, and don't forget some people dispute gladiator history.”

“They do?”

“There are some who now say gladiators weren't enslaved people because to be a gladiator seemed to be a glamorous position at the time. Being a gladiator seemed to come with a lot of perks. So some find it hard to believe gladiators were enslaved fighters of the opposition's army or people being punished for so-called wrong doings.” She smiled. “But I agree with you. Having that knowledge doesn't take away from its beauty. It does cause you to look at the Coliseum a little differently. Makes you realize there is more to the place than its beauty.”

She tried not to squirm as he stared at her for a long, silent moment before commenting. “We are not only talking about the Coliseum are we?”

She hesitated for a moment before sighing. “No we aren’t. I know it may only seem like I’m carefree and fun, but there is more to me.”

Hayden smiled and reached out for her hand. “I know. I think I figured that out the second time I met you.”

She found herself laughing at the statement, but Hayden squeezed her hands. “I know the signs of a person who has been hurt. Maybe it is because I have been hurt myself. It could be the reason why I gravitated toward you. Who knows?”

“So what are you hoping to get out of this?”

“To be completely honest, I hope to have a great time with a beautiful woman.”

Amalía held back her immediate response, looking off into the distance. A moment later she returned her gaze to his. “Are you looking to have it with me?”

“I would like to, but only if you understand that more than likely nothing else will come of this. The last thing I want to do is hurt you. You need to know I’m not in a position to give you *all* of me. But I would like to give you what I can.”

Her breath caught in her throat at the sincerity in his voice. She knew she was probably setting herself up for the biggest heartache, but another glance at Hayden told her he was worth it.

“I would like that as well.”

Hayden stared at her for several heartbeats before leaning toward her. His lips brushed hers briefly.

“I’m glad.”

“So am I.”

They sat there quietly for a few more minutes before she spoke. “Would you like to see anything else today?”

“No. This is all I wanted to see today. Besides it is getting late. Almost dinner time, if my stomach is correct. But I would like to spend some time with you this evening.”

“Just the two of us?”

“As much as I like having meals with your family, I would prefer to have you to myself this evening.”

“Now you realize what my family will assume if we don’t show up for dinner tonight?”

“Let them assume. To be honest I would be surprised if they weren’t expecting it.”

She nodded slowly. “I suppose you are right. So I guess the question should be, are we going to give them what they expect?”

The corners of his mouth titled upward into a sexy smile. “Why don’t we just enjoy our evening together and see where it leads?”

She liked his reasoning. Finding that he seemed to have all of the right answers, yet knowing he meant what he said.

“It sounds like a good plan to me. I also know the perfect place for us to have dinner.”

Hayden stood and held out his hand to her. “I’m ready when you are.”

She took his hand, and they left the Coliseum heading for her parked car. A short time later they were heading for Ferroni’s. It was one of her favorite places to eat because they served good Italian food at a reasonable price, not to mention the restaurant was cozy.

They walked in and were seated quickly. It wasn’t until they arrived that she realized how hungry she was. Still she waited patiently as Hayden took in the restaurant, showing his approval as he did so.

“I like this place.”

She grinned. “So do I. This is sort of my hiding place.”

“Hideout from what, or should I say who?”

“My hideaway from anything I need to get away from. However, it’s not a true hiding place since my friends and your sister know I

love this place, so they can find me if they need to. Consider it more of my place of comfort. If something is bothering me, I can come here to think it out.”

Hayden smiled at her. “Well, I am glad you decided to share it with me.”

The corners of her mouth curved upward. “I am glad I did as well. I think you will really enjoy the food. Now, you should be able to understand the menu but if you don’t let me know.”

Amalía started them with one of her favorite items on the menu, parmesan and sage focaccia along with herb-flavored oil. She caught him watching how she tore the bread apart and swirled it in the oil before biting into it. Amalía held back her laughter when he followed her lead. She chuckled at the expression that appeared on his face.

“Wow.”

“You like it?”

The waiter appeared before Hayden could respond. Amalía helped him pick his meal from the menu. When the food arrived, he eyed it appreciatively. He dug into the food after a tentative first bite. She began to eat her own before offering him a bite. He thanked her generously but declined.

A second later he took her up on the offer, causing her to laugh. She fed him a nice size bite, mainly sticking to the fettuccine noodles, black olives, mushrooms and tomatoes. She knew how particular her taste in food was and figured those were items he’d had before. She studied him as he chewed slowly, savoring the bite.

“I like it as well but it needs meat in it.”

She laughed. “Such a masculine response.”

He pointed his fork at her food. “And that is feminine pasta.”

She chuckled. “Italian men eat this pasta all the time.”

He gave her a look. “They probably sneak bites of meat in between when no one is looking.”

She chortled until she had a stitch in her side from it and gasped in pain. He looked at her with concern, but she shook off his worry.

“I haven’t laughed like this in a while is all.”

She realized how true the statement was and how good it felt to do so again. It only made her want him more. She wanted him period. That scared her because she knew she couldn’t have him, or at least not the part of him she could grow to want if she let herself. It was clear his deceased wife still had his heart, which was very understandable. But Amalía knew Hayden still had enough love there to give to someone else, he just didn’t realize it. Fortunately Hayden’s voice pulled her from her dangerous thoughts as he began amusing her with the stories of some of the idiotic and death defying things he and Tierra had done growing up together. She particularly found it humorous when he told her of their cooking escapades. For some unknown reason Hayden and Tierra had always tried to come up with the strange food concoctions. The contest was to see who could eat it and hold it down the longest.

She laughed as she studied him. “Who would win?”

He smiled at her. “I would of course. Tierra used to tell me I had an iron stomach all the time.”

“Well, lucky for me I never had to deal with anything like that from my brothers.”

Hayden leaned closer to her. “What did you have to deal with?”

She observed him for a moment not really surprised by the genuine curiosity there, yet it was strange. No man had really ever asked her about her relationship with her brothers. The fact he asked and he truly wanted to know, meant a lot to her. She smiled as she prepared herself to relay her interesting past with her brothers.

“Well, you have already met them so you have a good idea of what I have to go through. Antonio is the oldest, and probably the most protective, especially since my break up with Stefano. Carlo is probably the most difficult to deal with. The car accident he involved in four years ago had changed him, and not for the better.” She frowned. “Then there is Giovanni, who can definitely be classified as the bad boy and has been from birth. Giovanni doesn’t like authority

and is probably the hardest of my brother's to work with because of it. Leonardo is the charmer and sometimes it sickens me at how women fall for some of his lines."

She reached for her drink and took a quick sip before continuing. "Last but not least there is Macéo. He is the baby of the family and can be very absent minded unless it is related to numbers. Yet, he is sincere and genuine in a way that he can be forgiven for his absent mindedness when it occurred. So in other words, I just your generic form of brotherly torture times five. Sometimes it was simultaneous group torture, other times it was individual torture." She shuddered at some of her memories before a smile reappeared on her face. "It seems the torture has changed into a different form now that I'm older and pack a mean punch."

"I noticed it earlier. Where did you learn it from?"

The corners of her mouth curved upward into a secretive smile. "I will tell you, but only if you promise not to tell anyone else."

He didn't hesitate. "You have my word."

She paused for a moment before revealing the secret. "My dad taught me." She laughed at the look of surprise that appeared on his face.

"Your dad taught you how to fight?"

"Dad was tired of the boys picking on me. He figured if I could best them they would leave me alone."

Hayden chuckled. "Did it work?"

She laughed as she recalled the first time she'd used it. "Yes, Giovanni was my first victim. The look on his face when I punched him was priceless. Gio fell over like a ton of bricks. As you can tell, my brothers tower over me, they always have, but they will also probably admit to you I have brought all of them to their knees at least once if not twice."

Hayden winced. At the look of discomfort on his face she knew what he thought and shook her head. "Not like that. The knee move is reserved for jerks."

Palpable relief appeared on his face. She chuckled. “No I just used a nice swift punch to the stomach or chest area. Just enough force to knock the wind out of them.”

Hayden chuckled. “I can only imagine what your brothers thought.”

“Well, let’s just say it made them smart enough to realize not to mess with me anymore—well most of the time.”

“I’m sure they quickly became wise to the consequences of torturing you.”

“Yeah, well now that they have gotten older they tend to forget on occasion. I promptly have to remind them.”

* * * *

Hayden chuckled then continued to eat his food. Amalía was lively. There was no denying it. He liked that about her. Liked it a lot, actually. Spending the day with her had been so much fun he’d seriously forgotten about the time. It seemed to be going by quickly, judging by the fading sunset.

“Will you share a dessert with me?”

He nodded even though he knew he would probably only have a few bites of whatever she ordered. Fortunately he didn’t have much of a sweet tooth. He never had, but if it would make her feel less guilty about eating dessert he would humor her. In the short time he had known her he had witnessed a few glimpses of self-doubt under the confident exterior.

What he wanted to know was who’d given her the complex about her self-image. “Who told you weren’t perfect the way you are?”

He knew he struck a nerve when she stiffened. A second later she sat down her fork and pushed her plate of food away. She pasted what she probably thought was a smile on her face, but he saw it more as a grimace. He was able to tell right away because the smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“I’ve changed my mind about dessert. I’ll get our server’s attention and get our check.”

He sat his own fork down then reached for her hands. “No, you haven’t. You just don’t want to talk to me about this.”

She gave him a slightly irritated look. “Yes, but I’m sure you are going to insist we do so anyway.”

“You are correct.”

He studied her as she went silent for several minutes, then she smiled. He found he didn’t like the smile too much. It normally meant she was brainstorming a dangerous idea. Her next words confirmed his fear.

“Okay. We can talk about my past, but only if we talk about yours as well.”

He flinched, but he should have known this was coming. Still, the request caught him somewhat off guard. It was only fair, so he agreed. Her mouth dropped open in shock when he did, and he chuckled.

“Did you not think I would agree?”

“To be honest, no I didn’t.”

He gave a slight shrug. “What are going to do now that I did?”

“Throw myself on the floor and have a temper tantrum.”

He laughed before he could stop himself, and a few heads in the restaurant turned in their direction. “That is one of the many things I like about you. You have a great sense of humor.”

She shot him an agitated look. “I’m glad you think so, although it does seem to come in handy on occasions.”

He watched several emotions play out over her face as she prepared herself to tell him about the person who had hurt her so badly. When she finally spoke, it was softly.

“His name is Stefano. We met several years ago, but about three years ago his interest in me turned romantic.” She shrugged, seemingly more to herself than to him. “Under the surface, I’d always been attracted to him. So I decided to give a relationship with him a try.”

Leaning back in the booth, she sighed heavily. “The first six months things were good, then Stefano made it clear that there were certain things about me that needed to change. At first it was small things like my hair style, my clothes, but they quickly escalated to larger things, mainly my personality and my weight. After a little over a year into the relationship he’d become a different person, and so had I.”

“I’m still appalled at myself and how much I let him change me and for the worse.”

He studied her silently before speaking. “What made you do it?”

Her laugh was void of humor. “I was in love. Unfortunately he wasn’t in love with me. He was in love with the idea of having the perfect woman.”

Hayden sat back in his seat. This loser sounded as bad as Quincy, Tierra’s ex-fiancé, had been. “Ah, so in other words he was looking for someone to control and mold to make up for his own inadequacies.”

“I guess so.”

Hayden leaned toward her again. “I know so because there is nothing wrong with you. We all have our quirks. It’s what makes us unique.”

She gave him a small smile. “Well, I have to give you credit. You know exactly what to say to a woman to make her feel better.”

“That isn’t a line.”

“Yeah, well it still hurts. I gave the man two years of my life, and he threw me away like trash without a second thought.” She exhaled heavily. “Then, to make it worse, in less than a year he meets another woman and gives her everything I wanted.”

He stared at her, seeing the fresh hurt in her expression. “What was it you wanted?”

She answered him without hesitation. “Love. Marriage. Babies.”

He closed his eyes briefly, because not too long ago he’d had it all and it had been ripped from him. It was a pain he wondered if he

would ever recover from. Trying to pull himself away from the dangerous thoughts, he opened his eyes his focused them on the woman sitting across from him. He knew the question he was going to ask could be a disastrous one, but he had to know.

“Do you want that now?”

“I guess it depends on what day you ask me.”

“How about today?”

“No,” she replied without indecision, and he believed her. “After my break up with Stefano two years ago, I swore off men. For the most part I have. I have gone out on a date or two and always had plenty of suitors calling but nothing serious. My mistake the night we met was bringing Píero back to the hotel. He is nice guy but he doesn’t have the brains to go with his looks. Even as I sit here now, I don’t know why I did it. Píero implied that I did it because I wanted to get caught. Maybe he was right, or it could just be another one of my imperfections.

“Trust me, Amalía, you are perfect the way you are. Anyone is worth having you won't question it.”

“I am starting to realize that.”

She gave him a genuine smile, and his heart skipped a beat. How could anyone think she was less than beautiful? Less than perfect? He was glad things hadn’t worked out with Stefano. The loser had definitely missed out on a good thing.

“So are you ready for dessert?”

She nodded and caught the attention of the waitress. She placed the order for a cream brulee. When it arrived she dug into the first bite with relish before turning her attention to him.

“Now it is your turn.”

He took a deep breath. “What would you like to know?”

“Tell me about your wife.”

The corners of his mouth tilted upward. “Her name is Christy and she was a beautiful person. It was more than physical beauty. Christy was so sweet, so caring. The best wife I could have ever asked for.”

He closed his eyes briefly, pushing back his anguish. "I hate that she was taken away from me so soon. I loathe the fact that I didn't get to see her grow round with our child. The only reassurance I have is that the drunk driver that took both my wife and unborn child away from me was in prison, and it will be a long time before he is released. Still it doesn't take away the hurt." He paused when his voice cracked. "The pain that comes along with knowing I will never hold my wife again. Never having the chance to hold the child she and I created." He sighed. "Christy completed me."

He took the bite of cream brulee she offered before continuing. "I loved her with everything I had. In some ways I still do."

She gave him another bite, and he had to admit the dessert was good.

"Our marriage was good. We had more ups than downs, but we could work our way through anything." His tone became somber. "Everything was going good, and we talked about having children. It was all going well until the day they called me on my cell phone and told me I needed to come to the hospital."

When he laughed it was without humor. "The sad thing is I automatically assumed it was something going on with one of my parents. Imagine my shock to arrive and find out it was my wife instead. I was almost beside myself with panic."

He sighed heavily. "I held myself together long enough to contact everyone to inform them of what happened. What I didn't know was Christy and the baby were already gone."

He closed his eyes, trying to keep the memories at bay. They always seemed to eat him up on the inside. His eyes opened when Amalía's hand touched his. The look on her face made him smile. She understood his pain and it was obvious. He had to be completely honest with Amalía.

"I haven't looked at a woman since I became a widower a little over a year ago. The loss of Christy so unexpected devastated me to the point that some days it was amazing I can still function. I have my

parents to thank as well as my sister for my remaining slight grip on sanity. My family has pulled me through a very hard time. As I sit here now I'm grateful they didn't let me crawl into the grave with my wife and unborn child. I would be lying if I said I haven't been tempted to."

"I'm sorry you've had to suffer so much." Amalía responded, giving his hand a slight squeeze.

"So am I. I just wonder if there will ever be a day I am not reminded of everything I have lost. If a time will come when I can actually sleep through the night without having a nightmare."

She gave him a gentle smile. "I have no idea if it will or not but we can always hope."

He stared at her for a moment then leaned over to place a brief kiss on her lips. "Thank you for listening."

"Thank you for listening to me as well. Thank you for sharing because you didn't have to."

"You're right, but I believe one should never ask someone to do something they aren't willing to do as well."

He inclined his head toward the remaining cream brulee. "Are you finished with dessert?"

He saw her glance down and knew she had forgotten about it as well.

"Yes I am, but you are more than welcome to finish it if you like."

"No. There is no way I can finish this. I'll take one more bite than we can leave."

He watched as she picked up the spoon and waited for her to hand it to him. Instead she spooned off some of the dessert then offered it to him. He took it and she sat the spoon down before signaling for their check. A moment later it arrived and the battle began. She placed her hand on top of his before he could pull money out of wallet.

"Let me. I still owe you from rescuing me."

"I owe you for taking me on today's tour."

She gave him a measured look. "Well, I owed you first."

He laughed before conceding. "I tell you what. I will let you pay this time only if you promise to let me pay the next time."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Next time?"

"Of course. I would like to come back here at least one more time before I go back home."

"I think we can arrange that request."

"Good."

He stood before helping her to her feet. They made their way to her car.

"Where are we headed now?" he asked as he climbed in on the passenger side.

"Back to the hotel, unless there is somewhere else you want to go."

He looked down at the clock and shook his head. "No, I don't. Besides it is getting late, and I'm sure you have plans tomorrow."

"We're having Tierra's bridal shower, but not until evening."

"Is there anything else you'd like to do?"

She gave him a sensual smile. "I was thinking we go back to the hotel and see what happens from there."

Her tone of voice suggested what she had in mind, and he wasn't going to protest. Instead the corners of his mouth curved upward.

"Sounds like a good idea."

Chapter Seven

They reached the hotel room she was occupying and as soon as they did she was upon him. He stiffened, and for a minute she thought she had read him wrong. She couldn't face another round of rejection...of humiliation, at least not from him. Her face burned as she pulled away from him.

"I'm sorry. I thought—"

His finger came up and covered her lips. He gave her a gentle look as he lowered his hand. "We are, but not like this. There is no need for us to rush. Let's take our time and enjoy this."

Unable to hide her embarrassment, she looked away from him. "I'm sorry. I just—"

His finger came up again. "No more apologizing."

She sighed in relief a moment before his lips touched hers. Her eyes drifted closed as her body moved toward his. The contact made her want him even more. He deepened the kiss, devastating her beyond all belief. Desire rushed through her veins, yet she felt sluggish. As if the only thing she could do was stand there and take his sensual assault. Her nipples hardened instantly. She began to rub back and forth against him, trying to soothe the ache. He growled before pulling her closer to him, angling her body more firmly against his. His mouth fed off hers as if he were thirsty and she were the water. She couldn't remember when she'd been more turned on by a kiss. Her brain had stopped working several minutes ago. Her body had taken over leaving her with more hunger.

His hands began to roam over her body, grasping her bottom, pulling her up into his erection. She gasped at the feel of it. There was

enough there to make her second guess this idea. Still her thigh muscles tightened in anticipation. He broke off the kiss, nuzzled her throat, causing a tingle to make its way down her spine. One thing she noticed was his hands never stopped moving. The sensation of his touch distracted her from being able to focus on anything but him. When her knees began to weaken, he pulled her closer to him before lifting her up into his arms. He carried her to the bed then sat down, positioning her so she straddled him. The move brought her sex directly into contact with his, making her gasp. When he moved his hips against her, she whimpered at the intense need he created. She had never needed an orgasm so badly, and she told him so. He stilled against her before chuckling.

“As you wish.”

She didn’t have the chance to amend her statement. He stood her up and began undressing her. When he had her down to her bra and panties, he stared at her for a moment. Her skin flushed at his scrutiny. Just as her self-consciousness started to kick in, he smiled.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered.

She had no problem believing the conviction in his voice. The way his eyes roamed over her body left her with no choice. Not wanting him to be the only one in a state of semi-nakedness, she reached for him.

He came to her, not stopping until he stood directly in front of her. She reached for his shirt and pulled it out of his pants, tugging it over his head. For a long moment the sight of his gorgeous chest distracted her. She couldn’t resist touching him. His breath caught in his throat, encouraging her to continue. Her hands slid lower until they reached his belt buckle. With his assistance, she shed his pants. Her eyes didn’t leave his but from the slight brush of her hand she was able to tell his erection was as impressive as she first thought.

“You do realize there is such a thing as payback, right?”

Before she could ask what he meant, he swept her into his arms again, placing her on the bed as his lips latched onto one of her

breasts. The sensation of his mouth on her through the lace of the bra was almost more than she could take. Her hands came up to grip his shoulders to keep from floating away. She realized she'd been wrong when he began removing the straps of her bra with his teeth. His mouth found her breast again, and she cried out.

"Più."

He lifted his head, disrupting the sensation. She moaned in protest.

"What does that mean?"

"More," she mumbled brokenly.

He nodded before lowering his head again. She felt as though she was going to explode at any moment. When his hand began to trail down her stomach to her panties, she whimpered in anticipation. She wanted to growl with frustration as he continued to tease her by removing them without touching her where she needed his caress the most.

"Per favore," she whispered brokenly.

When he lifted his head and his hands stilled, she almost screamed in agony, but she knew it was her fault.

"What does that mean?"

"Please," she growled in frustration, and he smiled.

"It isn't my fault you are speaking a language I don't fully comprehend."

She closed her eyes, annoyed at his teasing. "I'll remember that. Now please continue before I finished this myself."

His expression became feral turned on. She knew he was picturing that image. His words confirmed it

"I'll have to take you up on the offer sometime."

Before she could complain again, his hand slipped between her damp curls. She cried out, arching into his touch, craving more of it, needing more of it. He stroked her until she began to lose all coherent train of thought. When his mouth joined the assault, it only took her a second to fly over the edge head first into an orgasm. She moaned his

name as her body bowed off the bed. The waves of pleasure washed over her, rendering her senseless. When the intense pleasure finally subsided Hayden was lying next to her, smiling.

“Was it enough for you?”

She looked at him through eyes that were still not fully focused. Still she was able to move up and over him before he could blink.

“Why don’t you tell me,” she murmured before she took his erection in her mouth through the opening of his boxers. His moan of pleasure was music to her ears. It had been a while since she’d pleased a man this way, but the sounds he was making told her he enjoyed what she was doing.

* * * *

Hayden closed his eyes at the wonderful sensations Amalía’s mouth was creating. She hadn’t pleased him for long, and he was already in danger of putting an end to it all. *Had it been that long?* He knew the answer to the question before he asked it. Since Christy had passed he hadn’t looked at another woman. He hadn’t thought about doing so either, until he’d met Amalía, and so far he hadn’t regretted the decision. He was glad he’d chosen her. She was definitely making it worth the wait, but he realized he couldn’t take too much more of her oral pleasure. Regrettably had to put an end to it. Reaching down, he pulled her upward, and she released him with clear reluctance. Before she could voice her protest aloud, he her on top of him before rolling over.

“I need to be inside you,” he whispered huskily.

She nodded and gave him a shy smile. He placed what he meant to be a brief kiss on her lips, but couldn’t force himself to pull back. When he did they were both breathless, her lips swollen from his passionate kisses.

“I think I need that as well,” she replied.

He moved away to find his jeans. She watched as he made quick work of protecting them. An expression of uncertainty flickered across her face. When he came back to her, it swiftly disappeared. He came over her and she opened for him. She gasped as he began to fill her, telling him he loved the sensations he created. It had been so long since she'd enjoyed this sort of intimacy. The underlying twinge of discomfort she felt was worth it. A moment later he stopped and looked down at her.

"Am I hurting you?"

She nodded and he went to pull away, but she held onto him. "Please don't stop, Hayden. It's just been a while. A long while. I'll be okay."

He looked down at her his expression full indecisiveness. The concern she saw there touched her deeply. She did her best to reassure him again, not wanting to give up this wondrous moment.

"Please don't stop, Hayden. I'm okay. I promise."

She was certain about this and there would never be any regrets. Yes, she'd been celibate for a while, even before her relationship with Stefano ended. Stefano's rejection of her imperfect body had hurt, but Hayden rejected her it would cut even deeper. .

"Please Hayden. I trust you. I want it to be you."

* * * *

Hayden stared at Amalía for another moment, seeing what he needed to in her eyes but he still had to ask. "Are you certain?"

She nodded. "Yes, I am. I want you."

He moved closer to her his indecisiveness gone. If she wanted him he wouldn't take this lightly.

"I don't want to cause you too much discomfort. Let me know if I need to stop."

He heard Amalía's sigh of relief. She nodded and loosened her grip but he shook his head.

“Hold on to me.”

She did as he asked, and he began to move within her. He hoped he wouldn't hurt her. They both exhaled softly when he was seated firmly inside her. Nothing had prepared him for this. It felt so good to be inside of her. Slowly, her body began to relax, and sensations he couldn't describe began to take over him. Everything felt so right. Nothing at this moment could be any more perfect.

He was wrong. It only became better as he began to move against her. He felt her body take over, instinctively remembering what to do. She rocked her hips against him causing him to groan. He began to move faster against her, sliding deeper with each thrust. The sensation changed for him, growing as their bodies moved together in perfect rhythm. Her body pulled at him greedily, telling him it was only a matter of time before she reached the pinnacle again. She didn't disappoint him, as her head began to thrash against the pillow, her breath came in gasps. She held on to him tightly as he continued to move and rewarded him with her cry of pleasure as her entire body convulsed around him. The feel of her body tightening around his was enough to push him over the edge with her.

She held him as his body shuddered violently against her, and he reached a pinnacle so glorious his vision blurred. His grip tightened on her reflexively. He released a shuddering breath, more affected by what he'd just experienced than he should have been...than he wanted to be. His arms became shaky at the thought, and he lowered himself to her. She made a small sound of pleasure so he knew he wasn't crushing her, but it still couldn't be comfortable for her. Taking a much needed breath, he summoned enough energy to move to the side. When he looked at her face he saw she was smiling, but her eyes were closed.

“Are you okay?”

She opened her eyes and nodded. There was nothing but satisfaction in her eyes “I'm wonderful. Thank you.”

He gathered her close to him. “Why didn’t you tell me it has been so long for you?”

She gave a slight shake of her head. “Because I thought you might change your mind about making love to me.”

He gave her a pointed look. “I almost did.”

She gave him a satisfied smile, and he chuckled in response. “I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Are you sure about that?”

She rolled over slowly, not breaking eye contact as she spoke. “Even if we never see each other again after this week is over I will always have this memory of you.”

He stared at her for a long moment before lowering his head to kiss her. “I am glad I was able to give you such a good memory. I also have one of my own.”

He pulled her into his arms, allowing her to rest her head on his chest. He marveled at how natural it felt to have her in his arms like this.

“I didn’t hurt you too much, did I?”

“No you didn’t. It was more discomfort than anything else, and it was gone before it really had the chance to register.” She sighed softly. “It was wonderful, Hayden. You were perfect.”

He smiled at the emotion in her voice. It was similar to what he felt. He was just glad he’d made the experience pleasurable. But urgent issues needed to be taken care of. He gave her another kiss before moving away.

“I’ll be right back.”

She nodded, sinking back into the pillows before he headed toward the bathroom. He smiled to himself because he felt so alive again for the first time in a long time. He had been serious when he told her this was something he would remember forever as well. He quickly rid himself of the used protection then cleaned up before picking up another washcloth. He headed back into the

bedroom. Amalía lay there waiting for him. He cleaned her gently with the washcloth before tossing it aside and rejoining her in the bed.

“Are you going to stay the night?”

He smiled before placing a kiss against her temple. “Of course I am.”

They lay there in silence for a few moments before he spoke again. “Why has it been so long for you?”

“Being with Stefano wasn’t always pleasurable. He had peculiar taste. Not to mention there were times when he was rough and insensitive. If I didn’t have an orgasm when he wanted me to, he would give up then want me to turn all my attention to pleasuring him.”

He gave her an incredulous look. “And you were in love with this guy?”

“What can I say? My judgment was really off.”

“And is it off now?”

She looked up at him from beneath half-masked eyelids. “Actually, I have never been more certain of my judgment than I am now.”

It was his turn to smile. “Well, thank you for choosing me. I will never take that lightly.” His gaze darkened. “But you might want to rest up, because while I will be gentle next time, I plan to ride you until you scream my name.”

She looked at him in surprise and he felt a shudder go through her body at the promise he issued.

“Oh my,” she whispered. Her response told him she grasped the meaning behind his statement. He also felt her body soften against his, telling him she wanted him as much as he wanted her. He had to admit her response scared him because it only fueled his own.

There was so much she had to offer him. He knew he couldn’t offer her the same in return. Christy still had his heart. A heart Amalía would want and deserve from any man she became involved with. He felt Amalía’s body began to relax even more against his. When he

looked down, he saw her eyes had begun to close. He could understand the fact she was tired. It'd been a busy day. His body was telling him he needed rest as well and with Amalía in his arms, he was more than willing to give into his body's request.

* * * *

Hayden came awake slowly with a smile on his face. Two significant things had happened. He hadn't had any nightmares and he'd slept through the entire night. He glanced at the clock and saw it was three hours later than he normally awoke. He looked down at the woman he still held in his arms, knowing she was the reason behind it. As if feeling his gaze on her, she stirred slowly before her eyes opened. He knew in a moment he could wake up to her every morning if the possibility ever presented itself. Before he could process that thought, she spoke.

"Buongiorno," she whispered, her voice still husky with sleep.

He smiled. "Buongiorno."

"What time is it?"

He gave her a slight shrug. "A little after seven o'clock."

It was her turn to smile. "Wow, I'm surprised I'm up this early."

He looked down at her. "Well, since you are, how about we get dressed and go have breakfast?"

She laughed at him in response. "You'd better watch out. My mother's food will put weight on you."

"I see no problem with it as long as I look as good as you do."

She stretched upward and gave him a brief kiss on the lips. "Once again you know the right thing to say."

He chuckled. "It's the truth, Amalía."

She snuggled further into his embrace. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

They lay there for a few more moments in silence until the inevitable could no longer be put off. If they wanted to make it to

breakfast they had to get out of bed. As if she were reading his mind, she slipped out of his embrace. He watched as she swung her feet over the edge of the bed with surprise at her level of comfort with her nudity. Maybe she was finally starting to believe his statements about her gorgeous body. Either that or she was still half-asleep. He bit back a chuckle. It didn't matter as long as he had the chance to continue enjoying the sight before him.

He watched her until the door closed. A few moments later he heard the toilet flush and the water to the shower start. Figuring he could help cut down on the amount of time it would take for them to get ready if he joined her, he slid out of bed himself.

As he stepped into the shower, she'd just begun to wet her hair to wash it. The sight of her body had him instantly hard. She looked at him with astonishment as she tried to keep water from running in her eyes.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

"Not at all."

The shower was more than large enough to hold both of them. At first he was content with watching her wash her hair. She seemed to struggle for the mass of wavy curly hair seemed to become curlier the wetter it got. She was so beautiful he couldn't resist touching her. He felt her jump in surprise when he touched her back.

He smiled. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just figured since you are busy washing your hair. I could help you out by washing the rest of you."

She laughed, sputtering when water entered her mouth. "You are trying to be helpful, huh?"

He nodded, struggling to keep his expression innocent. "Yes, I am."

He watched her as she closed one eye as to not to get soap into it. "That's fine. Just make sure you wash everything thoroughly."

As soon as the words were out of her they both knew how dangerous they were, and her expression told him she had no

intention of taking them back. He pulled her into his embrace, loving the way her body felt against his, caressing her curvy figure under the pretense of washing her. He knew they were going to be late, but what did a few minutes matter? Several moments later he groaned as she squeezed herself out of his embrace and rinsed the shampoo out of her hair and the soap off her body then stepped out of the shower.

“Where are you going?”

“Somewhere that is out of your reach before we end up not making it to breakfast at all,” she responded with a wry expression.

He chuckled to himself as he watched her wrap a towel around her body and another around her head before turning to look at him.

“What?”

He reached out and tugged at her towel. “You don’t realize how long my reach is, do you?”

The comment had her tightening her hold on the towel and rushing toward the bedroom. He chuckled as he reached for the soap. He could definitely get used to mornings like this.

* * * *

Thirty minutes later they were headed for her parent’s home. She was only working half the day because she had a few things to finalize for Tierra’s bridal shower. It was being held at Amalía’s home, and she wanted everything to be perfect. When she pulled up in front of her parent’s home she stifled a sigh. As usual everyone was there for breakfast. It was definitely going to be an interesting day. Hayden came around and opened her door then escorted her inside. It was as if her family had been waiting on them to arrive. Not wanting to give them the satisfaction of flustering her, she greeted them before walking over to the table. Hayden pulled her chair out for her. She murmured her thanks as she sat. Unfortunately Giovanni was the first brave Carabelli to speak up.

“Did you sleep well, Amalía?”

She gave her brother a sugary sweet smile in response to the underlying crassness in his tone. “As well as you did, I’m sure.”

She had the satisfaction of watching his smug expression slip a little.

“Well, actually, I didn’t sleep if you want to be technical about it.”

“*Giovanni Carabelli*,” their mother scolded. “We will not talk like that around this table.”

Amalía couldn’t help but smile. “Yes, Giovanni, you don’t have to remind us you got through women like air. We already know.”

A dull flush actually began to make its way up Giovanni’s neck, and she found herself preparing for a confrontation. It was Hayden who grabbed her around the waist to stop her from making her way over to Giovanni.

She rolled her eyes in exasperation as Antonio thanked him. Instead she had to level Giovanni with one of her most intimidating stares.

“Stay out of my business, little brother, and I will stay out of yours.”

Giovanni smartly remained silent, but she was certain it was for their guest’s sake. She and her brother would have it out later. She was certain of it. Hayden let her go when she gave him the indication she was going to retake her seat.

Mona tried to clear out the tension a little. “How was your tour of the Coliseum yesterday, Hayden?”

She looked over at Hayden, and he chuckled. “It was great! Amalía told me a lot of information about the Coliseum I wasn’t aware of.”

“Did she tell you about her crush on Spartacus?”

She almost spit the juice she had just taken a sip of across the table. She looked over at Leonardo in shock. “I can’t believe you said that.”

Hayden looked over at her with apparent amusement. “Is it true?”

“You have to learn you can’t believe everything my brothers say.”

Reaching for the nearest bowl of food, she served him then herself without really noticing what she was doing. “Leonardo has been teasing me over a report I wrote when I was younger.

“It wasn’t a report. It was a love letter.” Leonardo replied.

Amalía burst out laughing. “Stop it, Leonardo, before Hayden actually believes you.”

“I already do,” Hayden replied.

She looked at him with surprise, and he winked at her in return. She took another sip of her juice. “You all are delusional, but thanks for trying to defuse the situation. It almost worked.” She looked at Giovanni over her cup.

Leonardo sighed. “So this means I need to come play referee for you later?”

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I definitely won’t need one.”

Leo turned his pointed gaze toward Giovanni. “Oh, it isn’t you I’m worried about.”

Chapter Eight

When they arrived at the hotel, Hayden figured out very quickly just what Leonardo would be refereeing. Giovanni and Amalía were in the middle of a heated battle, none of which he couldn't understand. Thanks to Leonardo and himself, Giovanni and Amelia were a safe distance apart.

He had never seen a woman look more beautiful than she did right now. Her eyes sparkled with fire, and it was easy for him to see why she could command the respect of Giovanni. Yet, every time she drew near Hayden would grab her around the waist and pull her back. He knew she had a mean right hand and he would hate to see Giovanni on the receiving end of it. She would give him an evil look, and he would smile. Her attention would go back to Giovanni, and all would be well until the next time she neared him.

What felt like an eternity later the argument seemed to be over. So this time when Amalía made her way toward Giovanni, he let her go. Hayden watched the two of them embrace, and all seemed to be well at least for now.

It made him wonder if the Carabelli's were the typical Italian family. Something told him they weren't. One thing he knew for sure was at this exact moment Amalía had turned him on, very much so. Watching her storm around Giovanni's office the last several minutes in a suit only added to the power radiating off of her. Hayden stood up and followed her to her own office, hoping his growing erection wasn't obvious. They entered her office, closed the door and locked it for good measure. Amalía looked at him in surprise as he pulled her into his embrace.

“What are you—”

She suddenly stopped speaking when he pressed his erection against her. A smile appeared on her face. “Are you turned on?”

“As awful as it sounds, yes.”

“Well, we don’t have time to go back to the room.”

He looked at her with every ounce of passion he felt. “Who said anything about going to the room?”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “You want to do it here?”

He eyed her desk. “This looks pretty sturdy.”

Before she could say anything, he backed her toward the desk. “The suit comes off because I don’t want you to get wrinkled.”

She laughed. “Thank you for your thoughtfulness. I would hate to have to explain why my suit is so untidy so early in the morning.”

He chuckled at the humor in her voice as he undressed her quickly. When he was finished, she stood there in her shoes, panties and camisole. He was still completely dressed, but she seemed ready to rectify that as she reached for him.

He distracted her by bringing his lips down on hers. His kiss started out gentle and soft until her tongue entered his mouth, touching his tentatively. The kiss turned dangerous. He leaned her back on the desk, lifting her camisole as he did. She held onto him while he undid the front clasp of her bra. He filled his mouth with her breasts, one first, then the other, until her moans became loud enough to leave the office. It made him pull back because the last thing he wanted was for them to be overheard or interrupted. He covered her mouth with his again before pulling off her underwear. Her aroused scent found its way to his nose, and he moaned.

“Amalía, I don’t think I’m going to be able to go slow this time.”

Her heated look almost pushed him over the edge. Lord she was hot. He wanted her badly.

“I don’t want you to,” she whispered.

The statement tested his control sorely, but he managed to hold himself in check. No matter how eager she was, she was new to this

again. He reached between her thighs to gently touch the damp curls. She moaned in response and parted her thighs even more.

“Now, Hayden,” she demanded.

He just smiled at her. “I like it when you are bossy.”

She gave him a pointed look. “And I would like it if you were inside of me.” She reached downward and cupped his erection. “All of you.”

His control shattered. He almost put an extra hole in his belt and ripped the snap off his jeans in the process of trying to get them off.

He reached for his wallet and pulled out the condom he had enough sense to replace this morning when they had stopped by his room for him to change. Her eyes never left him as he protected them. When he entered her, they shared a simultaneous groan of pleasure. There was no discomfort for her. The feel of her body surrounding his was almost more than he could take, yet he wanted to savor it, so he set an unhurried pace. She moaned in agony.

“I thought this was supposed to be quick.”

He looked down at her. “It is, but I want to pleasure you as well.”

She gave him a frustrated look. “Then try moving a little faster and deeper.”

Her brazenness shook him a little, but he smiled. “Maybe I should let you take over?”

Her confident expression slipped a little. “What do you mean?”

“Hang on to me, and you will find out.”

He waited until she wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. Once he had her secured, he moved toward the chair and sat down, letting her straddle him. Her loud gasp filled the office as he slid deep inside of her.

“Is this deep enough for you?”

She nodded and held onto his shoulder as she tried to find her balance. He helped her by holding onto her waist.

“You are in control now,” he whispered.

She wiggled slightly, causing him to moan as he tried to get used to the sensations the position created. A quick glance at her face told him she was doing the same thing. The first move of her hips was electrifying.

With his help, she was able to set a pace which had them clinging to each other. It took only a few thrusts to have them erupting in simultaneous orgasms. He fused his mouth to hers, muting her cries of gratification as she writhed against him in pleasure. He held her tightly until he felt her last tremor. When she opened her eyes, he smiled at her sated look.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, I am.”

They stayed like that for a few moments before he moved. “As much as I would love to carry you to my room right now, I know you have to get to work.”

She groaned. “It isn’t nice of you to remind me.”

He chuckled as he helped her to stand. Several minutes later they were both presentable again.

He pulled her into his arms and placed a brief kiss on her lips. “Please tell me I can see you tonight.”

“I don’t know. Your sister’s surprise bridal shower is this evening. The shower starts at six. I’m not sure how long we will be, but I will try to get by and see you tonight.”

“Get a key to my room. Wake me if I am sleep.”

“I will.”

With one last kiss he released her. “Have a good day.”

“Oh, I’m sure I will. What are you going to do today?”

“I’m supposed to be spending the day with my parents.”

She smiled. “It sounds like fun.”

“I’m sure it will be.”

It had been a long time since he’d done so. He was looking forward to it. He had a few things to do himself to pass the time.

“Now you go and have fun. I’ll see you later.”

It was difficult to walk away from Amalía, but he did and headed for the hotel lobby with a genuine smile on his face. He was still thinking of his erotic experience with Amalía. Never would he have imagined anything like this would happen, but it had and he was enjoying himself. After freshening up in his room, he made his way back to the lobby. He spotted his parents and headed toward them. According to Tierra, their parents had chosen to sleep in this morning, not going to breakfast with everyone else.

“Mom. Dad.”

His parents embraced him, and he hugged them back just as tightly. “Good morning, son. It’s good to see you.”

“Yes. We were starting to wonder if you were still in Rome.”

He gave his mother an amused look. “It had barely been over twenty-four hours since you last saw me, which is hardly enough time for me to pack my bags and leave the country.”

His father smiled. “And from what your sister tells us, you have no inclination to.”

“Yes, it’s true, and I’m sure we shall discuss it over lunch.”

His parents nodded as they made their way into the hotel’s restaurant. They were seated quickly. Once everyone ordered their food, his parents turned their gazes to him expectantly.

“So how did your tour go with Amalía?” his mother asked.

He leaned back in his chair. “It went very well. I found out a lot of interesting information about the Coliseum. I also found out I’m not as immune to pursuing another woman as well.”

His parents looked at him in surprise, then his mother’s expression turned to worry. “Don’t hurt this woman, Hayden. She is a good person and it would really upset your sister.”

He gave his mom a gentle smile. “I know, Mom, that’s why Amalía and I have discussed it already. Trust me, we are both two consenting adults.” His grin widened. “After we went to the Coliseum she took me to this restaurant she likes where we had dinner. Come to think of it, we were pretty much on a date.”

Their food arrived, and he stopped talking long enough for them to be served. When the waiter walked away, Hayden returned his gaze to his parents.

“The most interesting thing was we talked about the recent heartbreaks we have both experienced.”

His mother’s jaw dropped when she realized what he was saying. “You talked to her about Christy?”

“Yes I did. Believe it or not it, was easier to do than I thought it would be.”

His parents shared a look between them before returning their gazes to him. His father smiled at him.

“Just be careful, son. Your mother and I are truly happy for you, but just be careful.”

He contemplated his parents comment. They weren't telling him anything he didn't already know. He had no intention of hurting Amalía. She was a good woman, and she had been nothing but kind to him. His parent’s began to eat, and he looked down at the cup of coffee in front of him. He wasn't hungry due to the wonderful breakfast prepared by Mona, but he had to admit the food in the restaurant was good as well. He was falling in love with the food of the region.

The rest of breakfast was spent talking about the tours his parents had been on as well as the upcoming wedding. He was excited to see his sister walk down the aisle with a man who obviously loved her. The corners of his mouth curved upward. Quincy’s loss was Antonio’s gain, and Antonio was definitely the better man for his sister.

A short while later, breakfast with his parents was over and he left the restaurant with a treat in his hand for Amalía. He found her at the front desk checking in a couple, so he got in line. She smiled when she saw him, and he felt like he had been punched. The woman had a very beautiful smile, one he could stop and look at all day. A moment later she was handing the customers the key to their room, giving

them general directions to it while she did so. He stepped up in front of the desk and held out a container bearing the hotel restaurant's logo.

"I brought you something."

She looked at him in surprise. "What is it?"

He smiled at her. "Open it and see."

He waited as she opened the box. Suddenly, the corners of her mouth curved upward. "Fruit biscotti. How did you know?"

He gave a slight shrug. "I asked our waiter."

Amalía's grin was so bright it made his heart swell. He watched as she turned and looked at one of the employees standing behind her the counter.

"Marie, can you handle the desk?"

Marie nodded, and Amalía stepped away, motioning for him to follow her. When he was within arm's reach, she pulled him toward her and placed a kiss of gratitude on him that made his body harden.

"Thank you," she whispered when she finally pulled back.

He chuckled. "If that's the kind of thanks I will get, I'll bring you fruit biscotti every day."

She gave him a wicked look. "You don't have to bring me biscotti to get that kind of thank you."

His gaze became heated instantly. "I think you'd better get back behind the safety of the desk before we end up in your office again."

He actually felt her shiver at the reminder and smiled at the fact he was able to do it to her. They shared another kiss, and he let her go. She opened the container again and took out a piece of biscotti before turning to walk away. He watched the seductive sway of her hips as she moved away from him. He seriously hoped she would wake him when she came to his room tonight, although he didn't think he would need a wakeup call from her. His body would let him know when she was in the room. Finally finding the strength to turn away, he headed for his hotel room. He was going to have to find something to do until the time came.

* * * *

Amalía walked back behind the desk with a huge smile on her face. Hayden was leaving his mark all over the hotel. After this morning, she would never be able to walk into her office again without thinking about what she and Hayden had done. Now she would never be able to stand at the check-in desk without thinking about the small thoughtful gift he'd brought her. A surge of satisfaction travelled through her. Giving herself a mental shake, she tried to focus her mind back on work. She would only be here a few more hours. She needed to get as much as she could done—starting with the reports in her office that beckoned. She managed to complete them a lot quicker than she thought she would, considering she kept picturing herself on her desk with Hayden.

Several minutes later she headed for the lobby again. It was going to be a good day.

“Just the person I have been looking for.”

She winced at the sound of Sophia's voice. It didn't sound like she was too happy and Amalía could only imagine why. Taking a deep breath, she turned to face her friend.

Oh well. If it wasn't going to be a good day, it was going to be an interesting one. As she suspected, Gio had been the one to ruffle Sophia's feathers. Amalía tried to smooth the situation over as best she could. She didn't have time to dally because her brother was still in a foul mood from this morning.

When Sophia seemed to be calm again, Amalía raced around completing the rest of her work before rushing from the hotel. A few hours later she smiled to herself as she put the finishing touches on the decorations for the bridal shower. Tierra was going to be so surprised when she saw everything. To be honest it had been one of the hardest things to keep from her future sister-in-law, but it was worth it.

Now her part was over, and she was waiting for the guest to arrive. Daníella and Sophia had gone to pick up Jean and Mona. Talía was keeping Tierra distracted. If any of them could dodge Tierra's line of questioning effectively, it was Talía. Her experience in public relations really came in handy, and Amalía was grateful for it. She looked up as her front door opened. Daníella and Sophia entered followed by Mona and Jean. The two older women had their heads together and no doubt were talking about last minute details for the wedding.

"I am glad you guys are here. Talía just called. She and Tierra will be here in about ten minutes."

"How long ago was that?"

She checked her watch. "About five minutes ago."

"Then we arrived just in time." Daníella responded.

Jean came forward and kissed her on the cheek. "The decorations are beautiful. Tierra is going to love this."

"You picked out all of the right things." Sophia replied.

Amalía exhaled in relief. Now she hoped that Tierra liked all of it as well. "Thank you all. Now we don't have long. Everyone find a good hiding spot so we can surprise Tierra when she comes in."

It didn't take long for everyone to find a spot. A few moments later they heard the closing of the car doors. Amalía could hardly contain her laughter. Tierra was going to be so shocked. A second later the door swung open, and a unanimous "surprise" rang out. The expression on Tierra's face was priceless.

Amalía walked forward to hug her future sister-in-law. "Are you surprised?"

Tierra looked at her in shock and nodded. Amalía knew she had made the right choice. She had been appalled when Jean had informed her Tierra hadn't had a bridal shower the last time she was supposed to get married. Amalía was well aware that it was custom for the Maid of Honor to host the bridal shower in the States. Considering the fact that Tierra's Maid of Honor the first time around had been

cheating with the husband-to-be, it might not have been high on the list of priorities. She was brought out of her thoughts as Tierra hugged her back.

“Thank you for this, Amalía. I don’t know what to say.”

Pulling back she gave Tierra a kiss on both cheeks. “Thank you is enough.”

Amalía stepped back so everyone else could greet Tierra while she headed for Talía. She gave her friend a grateful look.

“Thank you for keeping her distracted.”

Talía laughed. “Trust me when I say I had the easy assignment. Tierra is so nervous about the wedding I didn’t really have to distract her at all.”

Amalía struggled to contain amusement. “Well, thank you anyway.”

Several minutes later, food, conversation, and games were free flowing. They all were having a good time. For the first time, Amalía watched some of the nervousness and worry disappear from Tierra. It had been one of her main goals. The closer the wedding date the more nervous Tierra became. Amalía couldn’t blame Tierra, considering her history. Yet everyone knew there wouldn’t be a repeat because Antonio loved Tierra entirely too much.

A few hours later their mother’s were starting to wind down from all of the excitement. Daniella volunteered to take the two women home so they could get some rest. As soon as they were gone, three pairs of expectant eyes turned to her. Amalía narrowed her eyes.

“Why are you all looking at me like that?”

Talía shrugged. “I’m certain we are all sitting here wondering what it will take to make you spill about the interesting developments between Hayden and yourself.”

Before she could reply, her cell phone rang. Seeing it was Daniella she answered on speakerphone.

“Hello, Daniella. Did someone forget something?”

“No. I just called to you all of you no talking about anything interesting until I get back.”

Amalía studied the three women sitting before her.

“Oh, somehow I think I will manage to, but the three across from me might have serious objections.”

“There isn’t any *might* to it,” Talía grumbled.

Daníella only laughed. “I will be back in about fifteen minutes. I am certain all of you can find something else to do doesn’t involve talking about juicy details until I get back.”

“Don’t forget, there are no men here,” Tierra interjected.

Amalía couldn’t hold back her sharp crack of laughter. Daníella joined in with her, and even Talía had to smile. Sophia blushed furiously, but there was a hint of a smile on her face. Tierra just shook her head.

“You have my word, Daníella, no talking until you get back.”

What she didn’t say was she didn’t plan to talk about it at all. She didn’t feel like sharing what was going on between her and Hayden. The nature of their involvement was between the two of them. Besides if she talked about it, she would have to put a label on their connection and that wasn’t something she was ready to do right now.

To be honest, she didn’t know how to describe it. Exhaling heavily, she stood up and began to clean up a little. She would go crazy if she just sat there, trying to avoid the nosey stares of her friends. Several minutes later she had everything put away. Her gaze fell on the cabinet where she kept a secret cookie jar hidden. It now held the biscotti Hayden had gotten for her earlier. She snuck one, smiling to herself as she bit into it. The biscotti had been such a nice gesture. It was the first time someone she was involved with had done something unselfish for her without cause. The one time she’d questioned Stefano about the flowers, he’d stated it didn’t matter where he bought them from. She should just know he bought them for her because it was expected of him, and to enjoy them because he wasn’t going to waste his time getting her anything else. When she

looked back at everything, the clues that she shouldn't have been with him were clear. She finished the biscotti as her front door swung open. Groaning inwardly, she chewed as slowly as she could, trying to think of a way to stall.

"Come on, Amalía. We know you are in the kitchen hiding. Don't make us come in after you."

She had to smile at the singsong tone to Talia's voice.

"I'm not hiding," she responded. "I'm cleaning."

"From the sounds of it, you are eating," Sophia retorted.

Rolling her eyes in aggravation, she pushed the door open and marched out into the living room. Her friends were waiting for her expectantly.

"I'm not going to sit and gossip with you."

Daníella raised an eyebrow. "Well, since you are actually present and talking about something that involves you, I don't think it can be called gossip."

Amalía gave Daníella a look. "Don't you start with the technicality stuff." She sat down in her chair. "Now, I will repeat myself for those of you who are hard of hearing. I'm not going to talk about Hayden and myself because there is nothing to talk about."

"Not from what I saw."

Amalía groaned as all eyes went to Sophia.

"What did you see, Sophia?"

Amalía closed her eyes as she sat back. After what she'd done to Sophia the other night, there was no way she would be able to talk Sophia into keeping her mouth closed.

"I saw Hayden and Amalía share a very heated kiss after he gave her a gift."

"He gave you a gift?"

Amalía opened one eye and looked at Tierra. "Yes, he did."

"What was it?"

She took a deep breath, knowing she wasn't going to be able to get around this. Might as well face them head on. Opening both eyes, she sat up straight.

"Fruit biscotti."

Daníella's eyes widened. "He brought you your favorite cookie?"

She nodded slowly, and sighed when Tierra became misty eyed. "Oh, that is so sweet."

Amalía gave her a look. "Don't you start, Tierra, you are supposed to be saving those for your wedding day."

Talía leaned closer to Amalía. "Just admit it, Amalía. You and Hayden are hot together."

She looked at her friend, wanting to admit it, but she couldn't. To do so, would make her long for something she couldn't have right now—his heart.

Chapter Nine

Hayden came awake slowly as the door opened. He smelled Amalía's sweet and spicy scent as soon as she entered the room. The next sound he heard was the rustle of her clothes as she undressed. When she slipped into the bed beside him, she was naked.

"Hayden, are you awake?"

He reached for her. "I am now."

She rolled over to look at him. "I didn't mean to wake you."

He pulled her close to him. "It isn't your fault. I'm a light sleeper."

"Well then, I don't feel so bad."

"How was the bridal shower?"

She smiled. "It was great although the interrogation that followed was awful."

"What were you interrogated about?" Even as he asked the question he already knew the answer.

"About us and fruit biscotti."

He laughed in response. "Well, it sounds like you still managed to have a good time."

"I did. How was the rest of your day?"

He hid a yawn as he rolled over. "It was actually good, but it is better since you are here."

Before she could ask why, he drew her beneath him before bringing his mouth down on hers. Her mutual need for him radiated off of her. When his hands began to roam over her body she moaned out loud in response. He lifted his head and smiled.

"You feel so good."

“So do you,” she whispered as she brought her own hands up to do some exploring of her own. He allowed her to explore as much as she wanted, her hands stopping when she found a spot on his body that she really wanted to lavish attention upon. He forced his body to relax as she trailed her hands over his chest, down his abs before stopping at the aching length of him. She looked up at him with a slight smile as she cupped him in her hands.

“Do you always sleep naked?”

He moaned in pleasure while she caressed him. Her touch felt good.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me?” he asked her in a voice heavy with arousal.

He groaned again as her hand encountered the moisture from the tip of his hard shaft before she used it to create a smooth friction.

“I have an idea,” she whispered.

He chuckled. “Yes, well you seem to be enjoying yourself a little too much. I think it’s time I turned the tables.”

He lowered his head to one of her breasts and drew her nipple deep into his mouth. She whimpered and let his erection slip from her hands. She reached upward to grip the back of his head. His mouth switched to the other nipple, and his hand trailed lower, making its way toward the juncture of her thighs. He loved how sensitive her nipples were.

She gasped as he dipped his hand between her thighs. Her body clenched around his hand, and he felt her convulse, followed by a small shiver. Even in the darkness, he saw the need shining from her eyes.

“I need you inside of me,” she whispered.

He started to deny her the pleasure she sought, to tease her, but it would disallow him his own as well. Instead he reached for a condom and protected them before coming back to her. Her thighs automatically parted to make room for him, but he shook his head.

“I want to try something different.”

She nodded, amazing him with the complete trust she put in him and what he wanted to try without knowing. He wouldn't do anything she was uncomfortable with, and if she asked him to stop he would. Still her trust was touching.

He lifted her up in his arms then turned her face down on the mattress. When he slipped a pillow under her hips, he could tell by her movements she had an idea of what he wanted. Still neither of them were prepared for the actual sensation, as he slid between her thighs then pushed deep inside of her. She gasped, her back automatically arching. He began to move, building up to a rhythm that was bound to take both of them over the edge. He listened to the cries of pleasure forced from deep within her throat with each thrust he offered her. Yet, it wasn't enough for him. He loved giving her the ultimate pleasure, enjoyed sharing with her.

He slid his hand down to where they were joined and began to tease and caress her. A tight smile appeared on his face as her orgasm overtook her, making her cry out his name. He continued to thrust, pushing her higher. When she peaked again, he growled, moving before she even caught her breath.

"Come on baby. I think I like it better when you are on top."

He switched positions rolling them until she sat astride him. He was still hard with desire, and he knew the moment she realized it. Her eyes met his. He lifted her slightly before sliding into her. She lay there stretched out on his chest, seeming as though she would be content just to lie as they were. But that wouldn't suffice for him. He needed more.

"Move when you're ready," he whispered into her ear as he caressed her back, experiencing the last tremors of her pleasure with her. What seemed like an eternity later, she finally sat up. He helped her set a pace she could keep and soon realized his mistake. There was no way he was going to last long enough to give her pleasure again. As soon as the thought entered his mind, her breath hitched in her throat, and he knew he might have been wrong.

Her head fell back as her hips continued to move. He took in the beautiful sight of her. A few heartbeats later, his orgasm slammed into him, taking him by surprise, while her body stiffened above his. She moaned his name as she began to shudder. He held onto her tightly, a growl of pleasure forcing its way from his throat as he erupted. She collapsed against his chest again, and it was a long time before either of them could move. He held her against him, smiling as she relaxed.

A short time later he realized she had actually fallen asleep. He chuckled. She must have been tired from all of today's events. From what Leo had told him earlier, Amalía had put a lot into throwing the bridal shower for Tierra. Once she'd found out Tierra's last Maid of Honor hadn't thrown one, Amalía had begun planning one immediately. He liked that about Amalía. She was so giving and always wanted to make others happy.

He wondered what would happen if she put herself first sometimes, the same thing he was trying to do for himself. Slowly, he rolled to the side, trying not to disturb her state of sleep. He knew she needed as much of it as she could get because the following days promised to be even busier. When she didn't stir, he slipped from the bed and cleaned himself up. He returned to the bed to find her in the same spot he had left her. She looked absolutely breathtaking. He wouldn't mind coming home to hold her like this every day. His step faltered, and he almost tripped and fell. *What was he thinking?* There could be nothing permanent between Amalía and himself. Could there?

They were from two different parts of the world. Sure his sister and Antonio were doing it, but even they didn't have everything planned out. It had been a major step for his sister to uproot her life to move to Rome.

He was nowhere near ready to make as big of a leap. His life was in Boulder City, Nevada. It was the only life he'd ever known. The only life he wanted to know. It was dangerous for him to consider anything else because innocent people could wind up getting hurt—

mainly Amalía. It was evident she'd experienced enough hurt to last her for the rest of her life.

He rejoined her in bed, allowing her to drift toward him, even in her sleep. She felt good against him in more ways than he cared to admit. He looked down at her, knowing he had to be careful. She was the kind of woman he could lose himself in if he didn't tread carefully. Right now it was something he couldn't risk doing. It wouldn't be fair to her because she wouldn't be first in his life. She deserved more than anything regardless of who she became involved with. He yawned tiredly as the sleep he'd been awakened from beckoned him. Right now he was content. Things were okay, so he was going to leave things as they were. With that thought on his mind, he fell into a peaceful sleep.

* * * *

Amalía took in the sights and sounds surrounding them. Hayden had signed up for the Ancient Ostia tour with his parents yesterday. Since it was her day off, he'd invited her to come along. The tour had been nice. In four hours time they had visited Necropolis, Baths of Neptune, Diana's House, Piazzale della Vittoria and the synagogue.

Hayden reached out and took Amalía's hand in his. She smiled as she looked down at his hand, appreciating how strong it was, how it engulfed her dainty hand. "This has been fun."

She nodded, and he leaned closer to her. "Yes it has, but now I am ready to get back to the hotel so we can get a little R and R."

She laughed when he waggled his eyebrows at her. "You know, for some reason I don't think it is rest or relaxation you have in mind."

"You're right. It's what comes afterward that will be."

She laughed again, and it earned her a curious look from his parents and Daníella. One thing she'd noticed during the tour was Earl and Jean's eyes had never left her and Hayden. She understood their

fear. Deep down she felt the same way. It was the worry that one of them was going to get hurt. She tried to reassure them with a constant smile and pleasant conversation. Now his parents sat quietly, sharing amused looks between each other. She wasn't certain as to which one made her more nervous. Turning her attention back to Hayden, she flashed him another bright smile.

"How about we go and sit out by the pool once we get back to the hotel?"

"Sounds like a good idea. I haven't been swimming in a long time."

She was glad she'd taken the initiative to bring a swimsuit with her. It had been a long time since she'd actually been in the pool. Honestly, she was worried if her swimsuit was going to fit. She had gained at least eight, maybe even ten pounds since she'd last worn it. When she slipped into it over half an hour later the heated look Hayden sent her way told her there was nothing wrong with the way the swimsuit fit, even if it was like second skin. The two-piece had definitely gotten a little snug, but it wasn't uncomfortable. Amazingly she didn't even have to suck her stomach in. She found her cover up and slipped into it before leading the way to the pool. They found a good set of chairs on which to put their things. She let him slather a little more sunscreen on her while she braided her hair back.

She had barely secured the braid before Hayden leaned forward to give her a kiss. The feel of his lips against hers was always nice.

He eyed the pool. "I think I am going to go for a little swim."

"Have fun. Maybe I will join you in a little while and we will see who can get to the other side of the pool the quickest."

"My money is on you."

Amalía looked up as Sophia appeared by her side. "Is it?"

Sophia nodded quietly. "It is."

Amalía smiled before turning her eyes back to Hayden who was now moving gracefully, yet, powerfully through the water.

"So, are you still mad at me?"

“No, but it’s because I got my revenge on you already.”

Amalía smiled. “Glad I can make you feels better.”

“So am I.”

Amalía sat up, looking at her friend with concern when she heard the wistfulness in her voice. “What’s wrong, Sophie?”

The nickname was reserved only for deep conversations, but Sophia still cringed slightly.

“Nothing really. I just think I need to do something different. Something exciting.”

Amalía tried to keep her eyebrows from rising. Different and exciting weren’t words in Sophia’s vocabulary. Of the four of them, Sophia was the most predictable and non-exciting. Nevertheless, she could see her friend was serious .

“What brought this on?”

“Seeing you with Hayden.” She looked around before continuing in a lowered voice. “And not wanting to be like Daniella.”

Amalía fought a smile. “Meaning?”

“I don’t want to spend my life pining away over a man wouldn’t notice me even if I ran completely naked through the room.”

Amalía laughed. “Sophie, everyone would notice you if you ran naked through the room. You have a gorgeous body. Unfortunately you hide it.”

To emphasize the point, Amalía tugged Sophia’s baggy swimsuit which effectively hid the sexy body beneath it. Her casual clothes were even worse. They hung off of her in ways would make anyone think she was confused about what size she actually wore.

Amalía leaned in closed to Sophia. “Is this about Giovanni?”

Sophia’s spine stiffened, a physical reaction that gave Amalía the answer she needed.

“In a way it is, but in a way it isn’t. Giovanni had his turn to notice me, but he hasn’t.”

Amalía held her tongue as she thought carefully over her next words. Finally she realized he just had to be truthful. “How could he,

Sophie? You barely say one word when he is around. None if you don't have to."

Sophia gave her an irritated look. "But I'm a woman. You mean to tell me he happens to notice every single woman in Rome with the exception of me?"

"If it makes you feel any better, I doubt he has noticed Daniella or Talía either."

Sophia's eyes flashed with anger, surprising Amalía somewhat. "No, I can't say it does because we both know they would stand more of a chance than I do." Sophia gave Amalía a small smile as she straightened her suit. "So, that is why I have decided I need to indulge a little."

"Well, Sophie, don't be like me in that sense."

Sophia frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Don't change yourself for a man. Trust me, you will only end up regretting the transformation."

Sophia's expression softened a little. "This change would be for me. I need it. As insane as it may sound, I really want a change—for me and me only."

Amalía reached out and squeezed Sophia's hand. "If you feel this is the decision you need to make, I will support you. I'm also here if you need any advice."

Sophia leaned over to give her a hug. "I will keep that in mind. Now you go and join that sexy man of yours in the pool."

Amalía eyebrows arched upward. "If I didn't know you, I would be worried about that comment. Besides Hayden isn't my man."

Sophia looked at her in surprise. "He isn't? Then what is he?"

"I don't know. I guess I need to figure that out huh?"

Sophia just gave her a knowing look before leaning down to hug her. "Well, I'm sure you will figure it out. Just have fun while you are doing it."

Amalía stared at Sophia in astonishment as she walked away. Maybe Sophia had drunk too much punch at Tierra's bridal shower.

When she thought about it, she'd started seeing subtle changes in Sophia over the last few months. The problem was Sophia wanted to do this because of Giovanni, whether she would admit to it or not. Amelia knew rejection and hurt first hand, but she was going to keep Sophia from turning her life upside down for a man—even if he was her brother. She began to tingle with anticipation as she began to formulate a plan. What she could do was help Sophia make a few changes to see if Giovanni noticed. If he didn't, she would help Sophia move on and find a man who would...a man like Hayden.

She turned to look at him, only for her mouth to go complete dry as he rose up out of the water. How could a man be so sexy? He smiled as he neared her like he knew what she was thinking.

“Are you ready for our race yet?”

She had to keep her mouth from dropping open. The last thing she'd been thinking about was racing him from one end of the pool to the other, but he'd given her a good idea. She needed a cool down, and the water just might serve that purpose. She stood up and let her cover fall, making sure Hayden had an eyeful of her rear end, using it as the distraction she needed. While Hayden stood there drooling over her, she headed for the pool and plunged in, taking advantage of the head start. The swim had been just what she needed she decided as she heard him hit the water. She picked up her strokes, staying relaxed but rotating her arms with well placed power.

Still she was smart enough to realize he was gaining on her. She shivered and almost drowned as he passed by her, brushing his hand up her leg as he did. It was enough to totally make her forget about swimming. She came up above the water, spitting out the excess that had found its way into her mouth before looking for Hayden. He had touched the end of the pool and now was coming back toward her. She remained there, waiting for him to pass her by. Once he did, she treated him to the same caress, laughing with pleasure as his stride broke. A second later he appeared above the surface, and she smiled sweetly.

“Fascinating race, huh?”

“Very,” he nearly growled as he pulled her into his arms. She relaxed in his embrace as his lips came down on hers. When he lifted his head she was panting.

“I guess I win.”

“No, you lose, which means you get to be on top...the next time.”

She shivered at the statement, looking forward to the promise. It didn't bother her to be on top. As a matter of fact, she liked it as much as he seemed to. She was in control of her own pleasure, although Hayden also seemed to be very capable of assisting her with that as well. He leaned down to kiss her one more time before pulling away.

“I think we'd better get out of the water and head back to the room while I physically am able to. Otherwise we might end up in this pool a lot longer than either of us wants to be.”

She turned to head toward the ladder. She had the pleasure of hearing Hayden groan when she stepped from the pool. He had the view she wanted him to have, and she used it to her advantage.

She made her way toward the pool chair and bent over to retrieve her stuff. He inhaled sharply..

“Honey, I swear the next time you bend over in front of me like that, you will be screaming my name as you climax.”

Amalía straightened immediately desire slammed into her at the thought. Turning slowly, she looked at him with every ounce of desire she felt.

“I think we need to go back to your room now,” she whispered. Nothing else needed to be said. He helped her gather up everything then took her hand and rushed her up to his room. Foreplay began in the shower and ended in the bed.

They ended up being half an hour late to dinner. Amalía's face was still flushed, but neither of them cared. What they shared was between them and that was all that mattered to her. She was having the best time of her life. She knew her family understood, which was why she took her family's comments for what they were. Amusement.

Even Hayden was humored. As she ate her food, she knew she could get used to this. The thought gave her pause. She realized she was getting in a lot deeper than she should with Hayden. He had never said he wanted a relationship. He also hadn't said he would be opposed to one. Either way, she knew she was in serious trouble because she was starting to fall for him, and that wasn't part of the deal.

Chapter Ten

“Hayden, have you ever thought about getting married again?”

The hand drawing lazy circles on her back stilled. He inhaled deeply. They lay in bed, trying to wind down after another interesting dinner at her parents’ home. She lay in what had become her favorite spot with her head on his chest.

“To be honest, Amalía, no I haven’t. I’m not completely over Christy’s death.” He paused. “Even if I were, I’m not sure I could give my heart away again.” His breath came out on a sigh. “If I were to love someone again, only to lose them like I lost Christy, it would destroy me completely.” His laugh was void of humor. “I’m barely hanging on as it is right now.”

She went up on one elbow and stared down at him. “So you wouldn’t consider it, even once your heart healed enough to where you could?”

He paused again, and she watched him contemplate the answer to the question. It was obvious he hadn’t given the possibility of getting involved in a relationship any thought before now. Not that she could blame him. After her break up with Stefano, it had been at least several months before she thought about looking at another man. Even then, she’d still been wary of being hurt again.

It had been another three months after that point before she had considered going out with another man, and it proved to be one disaster after another. She’d even considered sleeping with one of the guys she’d dated for a short while. That had been a disaster as well. The poor guy had been so excited about the possibility of having sex with her, he literally came inside his pants.

In spite of it all, no man had ever affected her the way Hayden did. No other man would.

“To be honest I haven’t really thought about it.” She watched him close his eyes briefly before opening them again. “In a way I guess I would, but in another I wouldn’t.”

Hayden opened his eyes to look at Amalía, and she returned his stare. She remained silent.

“I don’t want to hurt you Amalía, but I have to be honest. I loved Christy with everything I had and I’m not sure I can ever love that way again.” He resumed his soft caress of the skin on her back. “It wouldn’t be fair to you because you deserved the best of everything. Growing up, Tierra and I joked on occasion about how sappy our parents’ relationship was.” He chuckled. “It had been embarrassing on occasion. As an adult I realized how lucky we’d been to grow up with the parents we had. My father showed me what it took to be a good husband and a good father. My father spoils my mother on a daily basis. He is strong, charismatic and a great provider, everything I tried to be for Christy.”

He paused, as if lost in thought and she touched the side of his face. “What is it?”

“Sorry. I just remembered how I used to wait for my dad to come home from work. As soon as he walked through the door it became family time. Everyone would gather around the table until homework was complete and dinner had been eaten. We would relax a little afterward then prepare for bed.” He brought his hand up and gently caressed her cheek. “It wasn’t until I married Christy that I finally understood why my parents had pressed so hard for the family values they instilled in me and Tierra. Knowing and understanding the reasons behind it, inspired me to be the person my parents raised me to be. I needed to know how to be strong enough to keep my family together throughout the good times as well as the bad ones.” His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat before continuing. “I was well on my way there with Christy until she was taken away from him

tragically. To have my beautiful wife taken away from me by a drunk driver almost killed me.” He drew in a shuddering breath. “She had been on her way home to tell me the wonderful news about the baby. I can remember when Christy and I decided we were ready to start a family. When I think about what I have been robbed of it makes me angry. My life has changed dramatically because of it. I nearly gave up on going on without Christy on more than one occasion. Every time I was tempted to, my mother stood right there willing me not to give into the despair.”

She could see the grief in his eyes. If she had been in his shoes she wasn’t sure how she would have dealt with it.

“I lost weight that even to this day I haven’t gained back. I didn’t have much reprieve during the leave of absence I took from work. To be honest, the accident took away the person I used to be. I’m not as happy and carefree as I used to be. I now have a preference for solitude that drives my family insane. I’m doing my best to change that. Seeing my sister’s reaction to me when I first arrived almost broke my heart. At a time like this I want nothing more than for my sister to be happy, especially after having the strength to walk away from a loser like Quincy. Tierra deserves more.” He placed a kiss on her forehead. “You deserve more.”

* * * *

“What in the hell am I doing?”

Amalía stared across the table, talking to the one person she knew would give it to her straight.

“You are having a good time with one of the sexiest men alive.” Talía responded.

Amalía closed her eyes and groaned. Maybe she had chosen the wrong person to talk to. “But am I being stupid in the process? Am I setting myself up for failure?”

Talía stared at Amalía for a moment before continuing. “Hayden is not Stefano and never will be even on a bad day. Hayden has too much class and even more manners. However, you can’t forget he told you what he wanted up front. If you can’t handle it, you need to break it off with him right now.”

Amalía sat back in her chair. Today was her day off. She sat across from Talía, because she felt it was less dangerous than sitting across from Hayden. She could feel herself getting too attached to him. Something she wanted to avoid at all cost. It could only lead to another heartbreak. One from which she probably wouldn’t recover from. She saw the disappointment on Hayden’s face when she told him what her plans were for the day, but it didn’t stop her from sending him off to tour the Trevi Fountain and Michelangelo’s Moses. There had still been a moment of weakness when she told him she would join him for dinner at her parents’. He was only going to be in Rome four more days including this one. She could survive it. She had to.

“I can handle it, Talía, but I can’t turn off my feelings. It is impossible for me to do so.”

“I know.” Her expression became serious again, which worried Amalía. “But you still have a serious decision to make.”

“Talk about stating the obvious.”

Honestly, she had already made it. She couldn’t call it off with Hayden because she was having way too much fun. They both were. Looking over at Talía, she hesitated before she spoke. “Just promise me you will be there to pick me up if I need you to.”

Talía reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “You know I will.”

“Thanks. Now let’s move on to a more upbeat subject.”

Talia’s eyebrows rose. “Such as?”

“Your love life. How is it?”

Talía laughed in response. “Non-existent, but there are prospects on the horizon.” Suddenly, Talía grimaced. “Just don’t tell Leonardo. He has a bad habit of chasing them off.”

Amalía frowned with confusion at the comment. It was something she hadn’t noticed. Yes, Leonardo was protective of Talía. Maybe he was starting to get a little too protective.

“Do you want me to talk to him?”

Talía smiled. “I can handle him. But if I need your help you will be the first to know.”

Amalía picked up her menu. “Good now let’s get on to the most important subject of the day.”

“And what would that be?”

Amalía stared at her friend straight-faced. “Deciding what we are going to eat, of course.”

Talía groaned as she picked up her own menu. “Nothing too heavy I hope, because personally I’m saving room for your mother’s good cooking.”

Amalía choked back a laugh. Everyone loved her mother’s cooking. She couldn’t blame them. Besides the way she figured it, the more people there were around the table the less attention would be paid to what was going on between her and Hayden.

“Well, Mother is excited that you’re coming to dinner.”

It was Talía’s time to sigh. “I just wish Daníella would come sometime. I really miss having all of us at dinner.”

“Yeah, I miss that as well, but would only hurt her. Regardless of what she says, she still loves Carlo, and it is obvious.”

“I don’t see what the difference is. Ignacio is hurting her as well. Personally I think she stands a better chance with Carlo.” Talía grumbled.

“You have noticed the change as well, huh?”

“Who couldn’t? Sometimes I can’t help but to wonder what Tierra and Carlo are whispering about, but she seems to be helping him, and for that I am glad.”

Amalía laughed. “You should have seen his face when I told him he is starting to look handsome again.”

Talía chuckled. “I swear I almost had a heart attack a week ago when I heard him laugh at something Macéo said.”

“Tierra is responsible for that trend as well.”

“I really like her. I am glad Antonio found someone like her. They deserve each other.”

Amalía wrinkled her nose playfully. “I know. It is disgusting isn’t it?”

“I know. It makes you want to be just like them.”

Amalía laughed at Talía’s sarcasm, but she found today she did want to be like them.

* * * *

Amalía raised her hand to knock on Hayden’s door and paused. She could just walk in, but it might seem a little presumptuous. Raising her hand again, she knocked. She had gone back to her place after lunch with Talía and cleaned up before gorging on fruit biscotti. There had only been three cookies left, and she ate all of them without any guilt. During each bite she’d thought about Hayden. Once she finished the biscotti, she began a countdown of time until dinner. Now she was standing outside his hotel door, the countdown over. A second later Hayden swung the door open. He stood there smiling and shirtless. Her mouth dried out completely.

“Did you forget your key?”

She shook her head as she stepped into the room. A heartbeat later, she pushed him up against the wall and assaulted his mouth with hers. When she finally pulled back, they were both breathing heavily and he was grinning.

“Have you been eating biscotti again?”

“Yes, I have but it isn’t the reason I kissed you.”

He laughed. “Then what was the reason?”

“Because I missed you. Seeing you when you opened the door reminded me of just how much I did.”

His smile widened. “That’s interesting, because I missed you as well.”

She stepped back, missing his touch as soon as she did. “Did you have fun today?”

“Yes, I did. Although I have come to realize Daniella is not as good of a tour guide as you are.”

“Don’t tell her that,” she murmured as she walked over to the bed and sat down. To be honest it probably wasn’t the smartest place to have a seat, but it was the closest to Hayden. Not to mention she had a nice view. It was soon obstructed when Hayden pulled his shirt over his head. The man was too sexy to be covered up, yet it would be a sin to let him walk around half undressed, let alone completely nude. He was also sure to cause a riot or two.

“You look beautiful this evening,” he.

“Thank you.”

Her outfit was simple. She had chosen to wear a plum-colored short-sleeved oxford shirt and khaki shorts. Strappy sandal covered her feet.

“As usual you look sexy yourself.”

He chuckled as he tucked his shirt into his pants. “I try my best.”

“And you are so vain.”

He turned and looked at her, his expression full of amusement. “No, I’m just confident. If you hadn’t dated such a jerk you might be as well.”

“I have confidence, just not as much as you. Are you ready to go?”

“I am if you are.”

She stood up and followed him out of the room. He placed his hand above the curve of her bottom, at the base of her spine, an intimate touch that she liked. It spoke of possession. She should have

minded, but she didn't. She liked his touch. He had nice hands, very nice hands, and he knew just what to do with them.

A short while later she pulled up into her parents' driveway. Thankfully, they were not the last to arrive. Once everyone arrived, her mother led them all to the table. Surprisingly dinner was rather mild affair compared to what it typically was.

Amália stifled a groan when her mother brought out dessert. It was Zuccotto. She loved the rich cake dessert, especially since their mother only made it a few time a year at the most. The one time she helped her mother make it she'd learned why. It was a very time consuming dessert to put together. She looked up when Hayden moaned. It was a sound she'd heard several times, but this time her hands weren't on his body. She smiled at his blissful expression.

"Do you like it?"

"You would have to be missing your tongue not to enjoy this."

She laughed at his extreme statement. "I wouldn't go that far, but it definitely is a good dessert."

"Good doesn't begin to describe this. Let me think about it."

She smiled, and a look of concentration appeared on his face as he tried to think of a word that would describe the dessert. She tried to think of a few that could help.

"Exquisite?"

"No that would be you."

Her smile widened at his smooth words. "Perfect?"

"No again it would be you."

She laughed. "How about delicious?"

His gaze darkened, and she shivered at the desire that appeared within it. "Once again that would be describing you."

A blush began to creep its way up her neck. She cleared her throat before speaking. "I think we should just agree to leave the dessert at being good before we get into trouble."

He leaned close to her. "I don't know. I am having fun coming up with all of these adjectives trying to describe the dessert. Besides I think getting in trouble with you could be fun."

She gave him a knowing glance and he smiled. "I'm sure you do."

He winked. "I do."

He placed a kiss on her cheek that affected her the same as it would if he'd placed one on her lips. His mouth had that effect on her, and frankly she would be glad when dinner was over. She wanted him.

The fact she had been away from him all day was really starting to affect her thought process...along with the verbal foreplay he had just bestowed upon her. He had a way of making her feel special, beautiful, like she was the only woman in the world. Without a doubt Christy had been a very lucky woman to capture a man like Hayden.

* * * *

When they entered his room a few hours later, Hayden began to show Amalía just how fortunate she was as well. She wrapped her arms around his neck, going up on tiptoe to kiss him. He seemed happy to oblige her, drawing a sound of pleasure from deep within her throat. Somehow their clothes disappeared, and he pulled her down to the mattress with him. Her nipples hardened beneath his light touch. He lowered his head to lick them.

She cried out, arching into his mouth, tightening her hold on him. When he lifted his head, she groaned in protest. He swallowed up the sound as his lips captured hers again, rendering a tender assault until she pulled away, breathing heavily.

"I need you now," she whispered brokenly.

He stared at her with eyes full of heat and passion. "Are you sure?"

He rocked his hips into hers, and she moaned in response.

"Yes, *please*."

“Not yet. We have to make sure you are ready.”

She wanted to tell him she *was* ready, but she couldn't find the words as his hand slid past her navel to her slick feminine folds.

There was no need to confirm anything now. His fingers would be able to determine how ready she was for him. He continued to stroke her until she quivered against him. His touch was devastating, and she couldn't breathe without gasping. She reached for him, holding onto him as he pushed her closer and closer to the edge of a powerful orgasm. She cried out in shock as he pulled away, leaving her clutching for pleasure.

“Hang on a sec, baby. I want to be inside of you when you come.”

She could hardly grasp the meaning of his words through the confused haze of her pleasure. The only sound that registered was the one signaling that he was opening a condom to protect them.

He came back over her, and she reached for him, desperate to have his touch again, needing it badly. Still he hesitated, and she had to fight from crying out with frustration.

“Are you ready for me baby?”

She nodded frantically, almost desperate for the pleasure he was keeping from her. Before she could take her next breath, he thrust deeply into her. She came immediately, shouting his name as she shattered. He kept moving, pushing her higher until she fell head first into another onslaught of pleasure and dragged him along with her. When she became aware of her surroundings Hayden was holding her gently.

“You okay?”

She nodded and closed her eyes briefly. Hayden seemed to know exactly what to do when it came to pleasuring her. It was a little overwhelming, and made her care for him even more. The more time she spent with him, the more she realized she was in danger of falling for him. Deep down she realized it was too late.

Chapter Eleven

Amalía yawned again as Hayden sat the breakfast tray on the bed. For once they'd awakened too late to attend breakfast with the family. She hadn't been too upset when he suggested they order room service instead. He liked how much she seemed to enjoy spending time with him, and the feeling was definitely mutual.

"Everything looks good," she murmured.

"I know. It really does."

He joined her on the bed, and they fed each other until the food disappeared.

She looked over at him. "So what do you have planned today?"

"Tierra and I are going to spend some time alone together since we really haven't had a chance to do that yet."

She smiled at him. "I'm sure it will be fun."

He watched as she dressed in a gray business suit. It looked to be another custom made suit, one he wouldn't mind taking her out of later on this evening. Seeing that he was getting into dangerous territory, he moved away from Amalía and focused on getting dressed without incident. He didn't know what was wrong with him. It was as if he was reverting back to his early years of marriage with Christy when the two of them could barely keep their hands off of each other.

"What are you thinking about?"

"What did you say?"

"I asked you what you were thinking about. It must be something good."

"Why do you say that?"

“Because you were standing there with this strange look on your face and your hand in your pants.”

A quick glance downward told him she was accurate, and he was embarrassed that he had been so lost in thought. He removed his hand from his pants, shaking his head.

“You and those suits have a way of distracting me.”

She buttoned her jacket, chuckling. “I still say you need to have your brain checked for your delusion.”

“And I say you truly don’t realize how beautiful you are.”

She paused giving him a small smile. “Actually I’m starting to believe you. You show me just how much you believe when you look at me. When you kiss me. When you touch me.”

* * * *

What she didn’t say was she believed it to be the reason she was falling in love with him. She had awakened in the middle of the night when the thought popped up into her head. It was nice to finally have a label to put on what she felt for Hayden—even if it did scare the hell out of her. As much as she tried to avoid doing so, it was inevitable. Somewhere along the way she had fallen in love with him. There was nothing wrong with loving Hayden because he was a good man. The problem was whether or not he would return the feelings. She knew he wasn’t in a place where he felt he could right now. After going through what she had with Stefano, she could definitely understand.

When they walked out of his room a few moments later, she stifled a sigh at the impossible situation. He escorted her to her office, leaving her only after they shared a brief kiss. She watched him walk away before turning to enter her office. A gasp of surprise escaped her when she saw Daniella sitting there.

“Goodness, you startled me.”

Daniella stood. “Hmm, I wonder if Hayden is the reason why you were so distracted.”

She smiled as she walked over to her desk. “Yes he is. Why do you ask?”

“No reason, just wondering if you could give me some advice on how to get Ignacio to do half the stuff for me that Hayden does for you.” Daniella responded.

She gave her friend a puzzled look. “What are you talking about?”

Daniella’s mysterious smile only made Amalía more curious. “Yesterday when I took Hayden on his tour, you were all he wanted to talk about...know about.”

She groaned. “Please don’t tell me you told him anything embarrassing.”

“Only one or two things.”

Amalía growled. She was going to get Daniella. There was no limit to the insanity Daniella stirred up.

“I will keep that in mind when you actually start dating someone worth your time.”

Daniella rolled her eyes at the statement, but there was a small grin on her face. “As crazy as it is, I’m almost starting to agree with you.”

Amalía gave her a droll look. “Almost is not good enough. Daniella, does the man even know when your birthday is?”

Daniella shrugged. “As sad as it is to say, who knows?”

Amalía reached for the report on her desk. “I’m sitting here trying to figure out what I can say to make you leave the loser, but I guess you will have to find out for yourself like I did.”

“Oh, come on now. Ignacio isn’t as bad as Stefano was,” Daniella scoffed.

Amalía’s eyes widened in shock. “I think you might be right because the man is worse. At least Stefano noticed me.” Amalía took a quick look at her reports and grimaced. “If I was in this much denial when I was with Stefano it’s a wonder none of you went insane.”

Daniella laughed. “What do you mean we didn’t? We did go insane.”

“Maybe that’s what wrong with you. The insanity never wore off.”

Daníella laughed. “You might be right.”

Amalía began working on the report. “So, really, why did you come to see me this morning?”

“I wasn’t kidding about getting your advice.”

“Do you really think I would give you advice on how to keep a loser?”

At Daníella’s slight nod, Amalía put her pen down and folded her arms over her chest. “First, that’s insulting. Secondly, you didn’t have to waste your time coming down here for my advice. Trust me you are doing a great job by yourself.”

“Like I said, where I need your advice is to tell me what I can do to make Ignacio fall in love with me like you have managed to get Hayden to fall in love with you.”

Amalía’s mouth drop open in shock. “*What?*”

“Oh, come on. It is obvious that he is in love with you, just as much as you are in love with him.”

“Who says I am love with him? Better yet, who says he is in love with me?”

Amalía was surprised she could ask the questions with a straight face, but she did.

“The Trevi Fountain.”

Amalía threw up her hands and stood up. “Dani, have you been drinking?”

“Not this early in the day. Besides you know I never get drunk.”

“Are you doing drugs?”

“Ha-ha Amalía. Very funny.”

Amalía retook her seat. “Then can you kindly tell me what, or rather how, you came to the conclusion Hayden is in love with me from a trip to the Trevi Fountain?”

Daníella gave her a mysterious smile. “You know what they say about the fountain.”

Amalía found herself nodding. She was very aware of the lore surrounding the Trevi Fountain. It was said if a person wanted to return to Rome they had to visit the fountain and toss a coin in. The only catch was it had to be tossed over the person's shoulder and their back had to be to the fountain.

"Yes, I do. So, now you can tell me what it has to do with you coming to the conclusion Hayden is in love with me?"

Daníella's smile widened. "It is simple. When I told Hayden about the lore surrounding the fountain, this strange look came over his face, then he reached into his pocket." Daníella paused with a chuckle. "I swear to you he threw at least ten coins into the fountain and every single one of them made it."

Amalía tried not to get her hopes up. "Don't forget he has a sister who will be living here now."

"Trust me. This had nothing to do with Tierra. I may be irrational for trying to give Ignacio a chance, but I know what I saw yesterday. Hayden is in love with you, but I can see right now both of you are going to fight it."

Amalía smiled at her friend. "There is nothing to fight. Hayden and I are friends, and that's where it ends."

"You guys are way more than friends."

Amalía stood up again and began to pace. Daníella wasn't helping her erratic thoughts in any way. "Let me rephrase that. The way things are right now, the only thing Hayden and I can be is friends."

"We all have a past, Amalía, and if anyone can help Hayden, it would be you. I also think Hayden is good for you as well."

Amalía sighed wistfully. "Yeah, well it isn't going to happen, so I'm not going to get my hopes up."

Daníella stood up. "And you say, I'm insane. I think I will talk to Tierra. She might have better advice."

Amalía rolled her eyes. "If she says anything opposite of what I told you, it will be surprising."

“I know, but I figure I will keep asking around until I get the answer I am looking for.”

Amalía laughed. If she hadn’t heard the sarcasm in her friend’s voice, she probably would have been concerned. She was certain Daníella was well on her way to breaking up with Ignacio. As much as she hated to say it, she hoped the nudge came quickly. Her friend was suffering unnecessarily, and Amalía didn’t like standing by idly and watching it. If this was how worried her friends had been about her concerning her relationship with Stefano, she vowed not to put them through it again...at least not intentionally.

* * * *

“Hey, princess.”

Tierra turned to look at Hayden. The smile on her face lit up the room.

“Hi, Hayden.”

He embraced his sister tightly before pulling back. “You look pretty today.”

“Thank you. You look handsome yourself.”

He locked arms with her. “What are our plans for today?”

“I figured we could go for a walk, just hang out, maybe even stop and tour if we feel like it.” She grinned at him. “I just thought it would be nice to spend some time together since we haven’t done it for a while.”

He nodded, knowing it might be a while before they would have the chance to do it again. After she and Antonio were married, Antonio was going to whisk her off to Paris for a two-week honeymoon. He was happy for his sister. Happy that a man like Antonio had chosen a wonderful woman like his sister. They were both deserving of each other.

“It sounds like a good idea to me. You lead the way. I will follow.”

Tierra clasped his bicep as they headed toward the exit of the hotel. She led him toward what was going to be their first stop, the Spanish Steps. They took a seat near the steps on an empty bench.

“Are you hungry?”

“Amalía and I had breakfast at the hotel this morning.”

“Yes. I notice the two of you have become nearly inseparable.”

“What can I say? Amalía is a great woman.”

Tierra sighed softly before responding. “I have to admit I really was worried about the two of you getting involved, but I have watched the two of you together, and see how good you are for each other.”

Hayden sighed himself before he could help himself. “But I’m still worried about hurting her.”

Tierra gave him a puzzled look. “Why?”

“Because as much as I like her, I don’t think I can be the man she needs.”

“Why do you think that?”

He looked over at his sister. “Because she needs a man who will love her and treat her so lovingly, so she will never doubt how special she really is again.”

“Well, from what I know of you, I think you could be that guy.”

“I’m not ready to be. Not sure I can be.”

She gave him a puzzled look. “Why, Hayden?”

He sighed in response. “Because I still love Christy. I still think about her on a daily basis.”

Tierra laughed. “Of course you do, Hayden. Christy was your wife. You guys were great together, had a wonderful life together.” Tierra leaned closer to him. “You didn’t think you could stop loving Christy, or that you could erase her from your thoughts before you moved on, did you?”

He couldn’t hide his guilt and Tierra gave him a reassuring squeeze. “No wonder you have been in the dark for so long.”

“I just don’t understand how it would be fair to Amalía. How can I ask her to compete with Christy?”

His sister stared at him with mixture of horror and disbelief. “You don’t, and you would have to be an idiot to do so. I also know Amalía would be smart enough not to do it.”

He couldn’t hide his confusion, really finding it hard to understand how this was supposed to work. What he was supposed to do to make this work. Yet he knew if anyone could help him figure it out it was Tierra.

“I don’t understand what I’m supposed to do.”

“Well, big brother, I can’t tell you how to work this out because this is something you have to do on your own, but I suggest you figure out a way and soon. I know that you have the capability to do so.” She stood up and offered him her arm. “Now let’s take a little tour while you ponder your plan. I will even be nice enough to allow you to run some of your ideas by me. As a woman I will tell you how rational they sound.”

“You could help me come up with some ideas, you know.”

She smiled at him as she stretched upward and place a kiss on his cheek. “I already have. More than you know from what it seems.”

He locked arms with her. “I guess that is the case. Lead the way, princess.”

He allowed his sister to lead him on a tour of the Spanish Steps, stopping along the way to tell him about the Barcaccia. He marveled at the beauty of the Immaculate Conception column. It only seemed to get better from there. They stopped at the Trinita dei Monti Church at the top of the stairs. He paid close attention to the way his sister lit up as she led him on. In a way, he felt slightly jealous. When they were finally heading back down the steps, he smiled.

“If I didn’t know any better, little sister, I would say you have lived in Rome all of your life.”

She laughed. “In some ways I feel I have, but then again I’ve had a wonderful tour guide.”

His expression turned somber as he studied his sister. “Do you think you will miss it?”

She gave him a puzzled look. “Do I think I will miss what?”

He chuckled. “Boulder City, of course.”

“If anything, I will miss Mom, Dad and you. That is the only thing that makes this hard for me.”

He could understand his sister's fear. Moving around the world to a different country had to be difficult even for his sister who seemed to be able to handle anything.

“Antonio realizes that and promises me we can come to visit as often as I want to, but it won't be the same.” He gave her a reassuring squeeze when she gave him a wistful look. “For the past several days I have been contemplating asking Mom and Dad to move here to Rome.”

She gave a slight shrug as he contemplated her words. “I know it may seem like it would be for selfish reasons, but I have never seen mom and dad look so healthy so relaxed. Even when we were kids, you know?”

“Rome has been good to Mom and Dad.”

Tierra stopped walking and looked at him with an intensity he'd never seen before.

“Rome has also been good to you Hayden.”

The statement caused him to pause, especially when he realized how true it was. He hadn't smiled and laughed this much since Christy had been alive. If he were honest with himself, he would admit Amalía was the reason behind it.

“I'm not sure if I'm ready to take that step.”

“It took me a little while as well to realize I was ready. But the fact Antonio flew halfway around the world to come convince me didn't hurt either.”

He gave Tierra's hand a slight squeeze, knowing what it meant to his sister to have a man come find her to prove his love to her.

She gave him a grateful smile. “He has also shown me it is okay to have fear in this entire situation, but he also has me looking at real estate in Boulder City. After we come back from our honeymoon he wants to go house shopping for a home in the States.”

He gave her a teasing grin. “You know Quincy’s house is on the market.”

He laughed as his sister shuddered in response. “Yes, Mama told me, but I don’t want it. I never liked the house, and to move my new husband into it would be tacky.”

Hayden nodded reluctantly in agreement. “I guess you’re right. It would just be nice to see you stick it to Quincy one more time.”

Tierra smiled at him. “I am. In three days I will marry a man who loves me just as much as I love him.”

Hayden had to laugh at his sister’s sound reasoning. “Antonio is lucky to have you.”

Her expression changed to one that was hard for him to describe. “As lucky as you are to have Amalía.”

His heart jolted at the thought. “Do I have her?”

“More than you know.” She reached up and touched the side of his face. “Amalía cares about you so much, but you will have to be the first one to make a move.” His sister sighed. “If there is anyone who can even grasp the pain you are going through, it’s Amalía. If there is anyone can help you through all of this it is her.”

In a way, his sister understood him so well was irritating, but in others it was helpful. He was confused about which direction he should turn in right now. Still, he couldn’t demand anything from Amalía with the state of mind he was in right now. Tierra read his expression well, her own full of sadness.

“In spite of it, Amalía will let you walk away if you choose to. The only difference being she won’t come after you once you are gone.”

Hayden looked into his sister’s eyes and saw nothing but the truth there. He knew what his sister was trying to do, but he wasn’t ready

yet. As they made their way back to the hotel, he wasn't sure he ever would be.

Chapter Twelve

“What’s wrong?”

Amalía glanced up at Hayden with confusion. “Hmm?”

He gave her a slight smile. “I asked you what’s wrong.”

She gave him a smile that wasn’t as bright as hers usually was.

“Nothing really. I just don’t feel well.”

Hayden frowned, placing a hand to her forehead. “You feel warm, but not in the way a person with a fever would.”

When he removed his hand, she smiled at his thoughtfulness. “No, it’s a headache, but Mama has already given me something for it.”

The part she left out was the headache had been with her off and on throughout the day and he was the reason behind it. Ever since Daníella felt the need to enlighten her, she’d been thinking about Hayden nonstop. His look of concern didn’t fade, but he relaxed a little. She pushed her food around on her plate before taking a bite. It was a struggle to swallow. Having a headache tended to affect her level of hunger. She forced herself to take a few more bites then pushed the plate away. When she skipped dessert altogether, she earned a few looks of concern from her parents and brothers. Instead she leaned on the person next to her. The person who’s touch she craved the most. She scooted her chair closer to Hayden, who promptly wrapped his free arm around her.

She sighed when he placed a soothing kiss on her forehead as she rested her head on his shoulder. The comfort he radiated, lulled her into drowsiness. Several minutes later he woke her.

“Honey, it’s time to go.”

She roused slowly, finding her headache gone. His expression was still full of concern.

“Are you okay to drive?”

She looked into Hayden’s handsome face and smiled. “Yes, I am.”

When she straightened up, she realized her entire family was still there and empty dessert plates were still on the table. It felt like she had been asleep a lot longer.

“How is your headache?”

Amalía smiled at her mother. “It’s gone Mama. Thank you for the medicine.”

Her mother gave her a gentle smile. “Buon. I gave Hayden some more for you in case you need it later.”

She nodded, allowing Hayden to help her to her feet as everyone began to prepare to leave. She embraced Tierra, glad she would officially have a sister-in-law in two more days. For as long as she could remember, she had always wanted a sister. She loved her brother’s dearly, but it would have been wonderful to have a sister growing up. Amalía knew Tierra felt the same way. It had been her goal to make Tierra feel like she was a part of the family—including bringing her into her circle of friends.

Luckily they all got along as though Tierra had been a part of the group from day one. The interesting thing was Tierra rounded out the group. She pulled back and smiled.

“Only two more days until the big event.”

Tierra laughed, her entire face lighting up. “I know, and I am so ready to become Mrs. Tierra Carabelli.”

Antonio appeared behind Tierra, placing a kiss on the top of her head. “I’m ready for that as well, cara.”

Tierra smiled before turning her attention back to Amalía. “We are meeting at your place tomorrow after breakfast right?”

Amalía shook her head. “No. I think it would be better if we all meet up at the banquet room in the hotel. That way we can start out

by making sure everything is okay for the rehearsal dinner. Then we can swing by the church for the wedding rehearsal.”

Tierra laughed before hugging her again. “Good idea. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Go insane,” she teased.

“Too late,” Hayden interjected, hugging his sister tightly.

Antonio laughed. “Hayden, my brothers and I would like to invite you to hang out with us tomorrow, especially since all of the ladies will be together.”

“It sounds like a good time to be had.” Hayden replied.

She was glad her brothers were extending an invitation to Hayden to join them. Maybe he could help Antonio keep the other ones out of trouble. She looked over at Antonio as he extended his hand to Hayden.

“Good. I plan on stopping by the hotel to do a little work, but either Leonardo or I will swing by to pick you up.”

Amalía gave her brother a teasing look. “You planning on get in an hour or two of work, Antonio?”

“Yes, I am. This way I can be reassured the hotel won’t fall apart while my wife and I are on our honeymoon.”

Joy surged through her when her brother referred to Tierra as his wife. It made her wonder if that day would ever come for her. She looked forward to the day she was able to plan her own wedding. Yes, she was helping Tierra with all aspects of her and Antonio’s wedding, but she’d made sure it was everything they wanted. She already had several things in mind she wanted for her own wedding. It was probably going to be the one thing she went all out on. She only planned to get married once, and she hoped her marriage lasted as long as her parents’ had.

Her parents had a great marriage. In her opinion they had the best kind of relationship. Both of her parents had an equal say in the relationship. Sexism wasn’t allowed in the house. She had been responsible for taking out the trash just as much as her brothers had

been responsible for learning how to cook and wash dishes. It was for that reason she really was surprised she had managed to stay with Stefano as long as she had. He had been looking for a trophy wife, something she wasn't. It was something she never would be. In some ways it seemed as if she'd been desperate. There were other ways where it was obvious as well. She made a promise to herself she would never be so desperate again. There was no need for her to be. She was a good woman and a good catch. No vanity intended.

"Well, you guys have a good night, and we will see you tomorrow."

She blinked as the sound of Tierra's voice brought her out of her thoughts. Daydreaming was becoming a bad habit of hers.

"You too," Amalía murmured as Hayden placed his hand at the base of her spine. He led her to her car, and held her door open for her as she slid into the driver's seat. They headed to the hotel, with him staring at her the entire way.

"How was your day today?"

"It was busy. How was yours?"

"A lot of fun. Tierra took me on a tour of the Spanish Steps."

Amalía smiled, knowing how much Tierra loved the plaza. It had a lot of significant meaning to Tierra because of the memories she shared with Antonio there.

"Did you enjoy yourself?"

"How could I not when I was with my sister?"

"I'm glad."

The rest of their ride was in silence. He led the way in the hotel, with her stopping to check with the employees as she always did. She always wanted to make sure they were all okay before she turned in for the night.

They were on their way up to the room when her stomach growled. He laughed at the sound.

"I guess the lack of dinner is catching up with you."

“I will order room service when we get to the room. Unfortunately, I was not to eating earlier.”

He opened the door to the room, and she walked in. She slipped her sandals off of her feet and put them out of the way. She looked at him as she made her way to the phone.

“Do you want anything?”

“I’m still full, but thank you anyway.”

She picked up the phone and quickly spoke in Italian before hanging up. “Do you want to eat at the table?” He asked.

“I think I would rather eat on the balcony.”

He nodded and made his way to the door which led to the balcony. He stepped out on the balcony to enjoy the night air, and she joined him. Several minutes later there was a knock on the door. When she went to reenter the room, he stopped her.

“No, you have a seat. I will get it.”

She sat as he answered the door and took the tray from the room service attendant.

“Thank you,” he replied before letting the door close.

He carried the tray out to the balcony. When he took the lid off of the plate, she inhaled deeply.

“It smells good. What is it?”

“Farfalle with arugula pesto sauce.”

He leaned a little closer to look at the food. “Does it have any meat in it?”

She laughed, loving his sense of humor. “Of course not, but it’s good and light, which is what I am going for.”

He sat down next to her, opening her bottle of water for her. “Why?”

“Because I will be going to bed shortly. If I eat too heavy I will have nightmares about all of the weight I could potentially gain from such a bad habit.”

He chuckled. “Finish your dinner, and I will be sure to do something to ensure you don’t have any nightmares.”

* * * *

Hayden sat there and watched Amalía eat, enjoying the nighttime sounds of Rome. One thing he couldn't deny was the city was beautiful...almost as beautiful as the woman sitting across from him. When he saw she was almost finished, he stood up. She looked up at him in surprise.

"Where are you going?"

He smiled at her. "Don't worry. I'll be right back."

He made his way toward the bathroom. He ran very warm water into the tub, squirting some of the hotel's bubble bath into the water. When the water was to the right level, he shut it off before heading back out on the balcony to join Amalía. She had finished her food and the water.

"Are you full now?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good. I will sit the tray outside of the door then meet you in the bathroom."

She gave him a puzzled look, and he smiled in response. "I have a surprise for you."

She stared at him for another moment before standing up. He picked up the tray and headed into the room. She followed behind him, stopping to draw the curtains when he told her they wouldn't be going back on the balcony tonight. He was only a step behind her as she made her way to the bathroom.

A gasp escaped her at the sight before her, causing him to smile. He had drawn a bath for her in the vintage marble tub, one of the amenities he knew she loved about the hotel. It was also one he wanted to share with her. Hayden stopped behind her and she tilted her head back to look at him.

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Yes, I am, but it isn't what you think."

Before she could say anything else he began undressing her. “I thought the two of us could enjoy a nice warm bubble bath before we retire to the bed.”

“Well, I must say I really like the way you think.”

Her shirt and bra fell to the floor in unison. His hands went to the button on her shorts before they even settled. “I thought you would.”

He had her completely undressed in what seemed like seconds. A few minutes later he stood as naked as she. He stepped into the tub carefully before extending a hand to her. She took it before joining him in the tub.

“*Oh*, the water feels nice.”

He waited for her to lower herself into the water before situating himself behind her. She laid her head against his chest, watching as he reached for the neatly folded washcloth on the edge of the tub. He worked up a good lather before running the towel across her chest. She bit back a moan at the sensation. He requested for her to lift her arm so he could wash it. When he dragged the towel back across her chest so he could get to the other arm, he brushed her nipples again. They hardened, begging for more of his attention. He ignored them, bathing her arms as if they had layers of dirt on them. He loved the way she responded to his teasing.

“I think it’s clean,” she murmured.

“Is it?” he questioned, trying to keep the smile out of his voice.

“Yes, it is,” she replied huskily. “But I have other body parts need cleaning.”

His body reached an even high level of arousal at the thought. Amalía was an extraordinary woman whom he wanted in every way possible. He planned to have her.

“Are there? Like what?” he asked as he dropped the towel into the water then reached for the soap. He took the soap, working up a good lather by rubbing his hands together. When his hands replaced the washcloth, she gasped and sank further back into his chest. He took the sound as confirmation that he’d guess correctly on the other body

parts she been referring to. When his hands slid lower, she helped him by raising and parting her knees. He teased her with his touch, avoiding the spots where she indicated she needed him the most, lavishing attention on the spots she didn't. When he finally touched her feminine folds beneath the water, he found her slick and hot, and it wasn't from the water.

She gasped again, her hips arching upward to meet his touch. He smiled, keeping the caress light, knowing he had her right where he wanted her.

"Is there anything else that needs to be cleaned?" he whispered in her ear. She gave a frantic shake of her head. He kept touching her with a light caress. Her hips began to move in rhythm with his hand. The undulations of body sending the water in the tub closer and closer to the edge, but he didn't care. He was pleasuring her, and it was all that mattered. When he lightened his touch even more, her hips arched even higher, seeking his fingers.

"Please don't stop, Hayden," she whimpered.

He had no intentions of stopping. Shifting his hand slightly, he touched her directly. A few heartbeats later, she cried out as she climaxed. Her hips continued to move as she rode the waves of pleasure he'd produced within her. He looked down and saw her eyes were closed tightly, pleasure etched into her expression as the release exploded within her.

He held her until her breathing returned to normal. He smiled tightly as he kept a rein on his desire.

"Are you clean now?"

She nodded slowly while he gathered her closer to his chest. She was boneless against him, her thighs quivering from the pleasure he had given her. The last thing he wanted was for her to drown in the tub. He watched her hand come up to cover her mouth, covering a yawn. Lowering his head, he brushed a kiss against her temple.

"Are you tired?"

She shifted against him slightly. "I would seem I am now."

He wrapped his arms around her. “Yeah, I guess it was quite a workout you received from bathing.”

She tried to respond but was interrupted by another yawn. The words she did manage to murmur were not understandable. He chuckled low in his throat as she tried to speak again, but gave up the battle as her eyelids began to droop.

“It’s okay, Amalía. It won’t hurt if you close your eyes for a little while.”

He tightened his arms around her as he watched her drift off to sleep. Holding her against his chest, he sighed wistfully. Having her in his arms like this only added to the moment they’d just shared. He continued to hold her for a few more minutes. He understood how she could be so exhausted.

Daníella had pointed out to him everything Amalía was doing to make sure Tierra had a perfect wedding, making sure everything his sister wanted she had. It only made him think even more highly of Amalía. Realizing her skin was starting to prune, he lifted his legs slowly and pushed the lever to the drain up so the water could drain from the tub. When it was to a level he could stand up in without endangering them, he did so. He chuckled at his blatant and eager erection, telling it there would be no action tonight. He glanced down at Amalía. She appeared angelic lying in the tub asleep. Reaching for two towels, he wrapped one around his waist, then maneuvered her into his arms, wrapping her in the towel before carrying her to the bed. He toweled her off gently, trying not to disturb her. The towel accidentally brushed her nipple, and she moaned, arching into the touch. Her nipples hardened, and he had to smile. Even in her sleep she responded to him.

His chest was not the only thing that swelled at the thought. He pulled the blanket up over her before toweling himself off. When he joined Amalía in the bed, she gravitated toward his warmth, sandwiching her body next to his. He realized he didn’t want this trip to come to an end, but it was...and soon. There were too many things

in Boulder City that would keep him from being the man that he needed to be for her. He had a lot to figure out before he could even think about having a real relationship with another woman. He just hated knowing he would hurt Amalía in the process.

Chapter Thirteen

“You know we need to get up and get dress right?”

Amalía smiled at Hayden. “Yes I do, but I don’t want to.”

She went willingly as Hayden pulled her close and nuzzled her neck. “Yes, you do. You love having breakfast with your family, whether you want to admit it or not.”

She started to tell him that she loved having breakfast with her family even more now because he was there. Instead she smiled and moved more into his touch.

“That’s true, but I enjoy lying here talking to you as well.”

He drew back to look at her. “If you don’t want to go to breakfast we don’t have to. We can stay here and enjoy a quiet breakfast together and talk.”

She stared at him, grateful for his agreeableness with the suggestion, but she knew of all mornings this wasn’t one they couldn’t show up for breakfast, especially since they wouldn’t have a family breakfast tomorrow. One of the American traditions Tierra had wanted to keep was not seeing the groom on the day of their wedding, not until she was coming down the aisle to get married to him. The Carabelli’s were more than happy to let Tierra have her wish since she agreed to several of the traditional Italian wedding ideas. It was something Amalía had been more than willing to assist Tierra with. It was also the reason they had to be at breakfast. It was the last one they would all have together for a while. She stretched upward and placed another kiss on his lips.

“It is sweet of you to offer, but we have to be there today. We can have a private breakfast tomorrow.”

He rolled out of bed. She watched him stroll across the room in his naked glory. He deserved the right to do so, for the man was sexy as sin. She forced herself from the bed before her thoughts got her into trouble. What was she going to do with herself when Hayden was gone? As much as she hated to admit it, she'd gotten used to having him around...wanting him around. He fit into her life so perfectly. The problem was where did she fit into his? Unfortunately that was her biggest uncertainty about the entire situation. It was a major doubt for her. She had already made the mistake of making a fool of herself over one man who hadn't wanted her. It wasn't a mistake she was going to make again. She made her way over to her suitcase. It wasn't an error she could afford to make again. She wouldn't be able to survive another heartache. Opening her bag, she pulled out the teal-colored scoop neck t-shirt and paired it with her denim capri pants.

She managed to get dressed before Hayden exited the bathroom. It was probably a good thing since his front looked even better than the back. She blushed when she realized she'd licked her lips, as if he was a piece of meat she was getting ready to devour. Truth was, if she'd had time she probably would. Instead she shook herself out of her stupor and made her way to the bathroom. A glance in the mirror had her grimacing. Why could she never wake up and look like she had just completed a photo shoot for a glamour magazine? Preferably one not associated with the paparazzi. Right now she looked like a prime candidate. Giving her reflection another once over in front of the mirror, she groaned. Right now her hair was doing its own thing, and she didn't have long to tame it.

When she reentered the room Hayden was tucking his shirt into his pants. He looked up at her and smiled.

"Beautiful as usual."

She walked over to the foot of the bed to put on her shoes. "As usual you know what to say to make the day start off in a perfect fashion."

"Yes, but I only speak the truth."

She sat down on the edge of the bed, waiting for him to finish getting ready. There was so much that needed to be done today. She hoped there was enough time to get all of it done.

“Are you ready?”

She looked up at him. “Yes, I am. I can’t believe how hungry I am, especially since I ate so late last night.”

He gave her a wicked smile. “Don’t forget you worked most of off before you went to bed.”

She stood up. When she had awakened this morning, her thought had automatically gone back to last night’s events. The last thing she remembered was experiencing spellbinding pleasure. She’d almost been embarrassed by the fact she fallen asleep on Hayden, not returning the pleasure he had given her. When she mentioned it, he told her his pleasure came from giving her satisfaction. It reassured her slightly, but she still planned to make it up to him. It also pointed out another way he was different from Stefano.

If she had fallen asleep on Stefano, he would have been rude enough to wake her and insist that she pleasure him. She was positive of this because he’d awakened her from a dead sleep demanding for her to do so one time. It had been the one and only time she’d used profane language with him, but she got her message across to him. A few months later Stefano left her for another woman. Either way, she couldn’t figure out why she had been so into Stefano. Tierra had told her an American saying several times, hindsight was twenty/twenty. Amalía understood exactly what it meant, but it didn’t make her feel any better about the situation at all. She jumped as Hayden touched her arm.

“Stop thinking about whatever you are thinking about.”

She laughed at his expression, and he returned the smile before handing her the two remaining pills for her headaches her mother had given to him.

“Take these with you, in case there is an emergency.”

She took them and put them into her purse. “Thank you for remembering you had them. I may need them later since my tension headaches sometimes come back to back.”

He offered her his hand. “Let’s get going so we can eat.”

She took his hand, and they left the room and made their way toward her car. When they arrived at her parents’ home, Antonio and Tierra were getting out of the car. She frowned when she didn’t see Jean or Earl.

“Where are your parents?”

Tierra expression was full of guilt. “Antonio and I overslept, so we had Macéo stop by and pick them up.”

Amalía chuckled. “Well, the way Macéo drives you might want to check to see if the two of them arrived in one piece.”

Amalía looked over at Hayden to find him frowning, worry etched into his expression. She knew he didn’t get the joke. Tierra and Antonio headed toward the house while Amalía touched Hayden’s arm gently.

“It’s a joke. Macéo drives so slow I could pass him on Sophia’s moped.”

She could see he still wasn’t reassured and led him toward the house to show him. When he saw his parents were indeed safe, a look of relief appeared on his face.

It was then she realized just how much he was still affected by the car wreck. Hayden definitely had a long way to go to get to the point where he wasn’t as affected by an innocent statement. She was more than willing to help him, if he would allow her to do so.

They greeted everyone as they entered her parent’s home. She loved the way Hayden and Tierra’s parents hugged her as tightly as her own would. Mr. and Mrs. Davis were wonderful people. They had done a wonderful job raising two children.

By the time they sat down at the table everyone was brimming with excitement at how close the wedding was. Amalía was excited for so many reasons. Antonio and Tierra deserved the happiness

they'd found together. Secondly, she was the only one to see Tierra's wedding dress because she had helped pick it out. Still, she was at the same disadvantage as everyone else, because she hadn't seen Tierra in it. The one thing she knew for certain was Tierra was going to look beautiful in it. She was almost rubbing her hands together in anticipation. Hayden looked over at her and smiled.

"You are very excited about the wedding aren't you?"

"Very. I'm so excited for Antonio and Tierra that I'm almost beside myself with anticipation."

He gave her an amused look. "Try eating some breakfast. I don't want you passing out from starvation later."

She nodded as she picked up her fork. He was definitely right. She could get so caught up into today's events she might forget to eat later if she didn't do so now. That wouldn't be a good thing so she ate, joining in the conversation centering on today's events when she could. It definitely seemed like the women had a busier day planned than the men. Their parents were going to spend the day sightseeing together, under the claim they wanted to stay out of the way of the young people.

Amalía saw right through it. The truth was her parents had built a good friendship in the two weeks they'd been in each other's presence, and they just wanted to spend the day together away from the wild circus of the wedding events. That was fine by her, especially since her parents had not gotten along with Stefano's, making shared social gatherings tense. It was even worse because her brothers hadn't liked them either. The fact that the Davises were able to sit around the table with them and join in the playful banter said a lot. She was more than willing to make them feel like family. After Tierra and Antonio married, they official would be.

Looking over at Hayden, she smiled. "Now you realize after tomorrow this arrangement we have will have to end right?"

"Why?"

Hope flared up in her, but she had to force it back down, knowing his question was rhetorical.

“Because we will officially be brother and sister-in-law.”

She watched as a look of pure amusement appeared on his face. “I’m not going to touch that statement because none of the responses I have would sound right on any level.”

A shiver made its way down her spine. His tone said it all, yet, she couldn’t help but to focus on the truth of her prior statement. After tomorrow their relationship would change permanently. She just wished she had some say in the matter. *What the hell was she saying?* She did have more say in the matter, she just didn’t want to exercise it. Besides, in her opinion there was no need to state the obvious.

“You’re thinking again.”

She looked over at him with a guilty expression. “Sorry, but I can’t help it.” She remained silent for a moment. “How do you know when I’m over thinking something?”

“Because this expression comes over your face that’s a mixture between deep concentration and a frown.”

She tried to figure out how he could notice something so small, something she didn’t even notice herself. The only answer she could come up with was just because it was something Hayden would be thoughtful enough to pay attention to.

By the time breakfast was over, she was excited about getting started with the rest of the day. Sophia, Daníella and Talía were going to meet her and Tierra at the hotel. They had to ensure the banquet hall was going to be ready for the wedding reception tomorrow and the restaurant would be ready for dinner after the rehearsal at the church. They also had to stop by the church to make sure it was ready for the rehearsal—not to mention the wedding. Then a quick rehearsal would occur before everyone headed back to the hotel for the after rehearsal dinner. They were going to be extremely busy, but it was going to be fun.

“Are you ready to go?”

She looked over at Hayden and nodded. Her mind hadn't been on eating breakfast, but looking down at her plate, she noticed she had managed to eat everything.

"Amalía, Antonio and I were just talking, and we thought it might make more sense if I go ahead and ride back to the hotel with you. Hayden can go with the guys."

She looked at Hayden who shrugged with indifference. "Whatever works best."

Tierra smiled brightly. "Good."

Amalía looked at Hayden as he stood up, holding his hand out to her. She let him assist her to her feet. Before she could blink, he pulled her into his arms, kissing her until she was dizzy. When Earl cleared his throat, Hayden pulled back.

"I guess that will be enough to get me through the day."

Amalía felt herself blush at the statement. Antonio only made the situation worse by pulling Tierra close.

"I know the feeling," Antonio murmured before lowering his head to kiss Tierra in an exaggerated fashion. He didn't let Tierra come up from air until Earl cleared his throat again.

"Save some for the honeymoon," Leo whispered loudly. Laughter sounded out from around the room.

"Come on everyone, we need to get moving or we aren't going to get everything accomplished."

Amalía thanked Macéo for his rational input that spurred everyone into action, and they began heading for their cars. Tierra walked to the car with Amalía. She looked over at Tierra with a smile.

"Are you ready for the big day tomorrow?"

Tierra nodded. "I have been since he proposed."

Amalía stifled a sigh. She wondered what it was like to be proposed to. The only ones she'd witnessed before were the exaggerated ones shown in the movies. The way Tierra told the story about the way Antonio proposed didn't seem cheesy at all, but if she were ever proposed to, she wondered how it would happen. Would he

propose to her in private like Antonio and Carlo had both done, or would he propose to her in front of a crowd? Her nose wrinkled up at the thought. Was a proposal something she wanted to share with a crowd?

Before she could dwell on it too much, she pulled into the parking garage of the hotel. She and Tierra made their way toward the lobby. Daníella, Talía and Sophia were already at the hotel waiting on them. Amalía couldn't help but smile.

"You all are a little anxious, aren't you?"

"I'm excited about the big event." Talía responded.

Tierra walked over to embrace Talía. "So am I."

Sophia stepped forward next. "I'm excited about seeing the decorations."

Even Daníella had to trudge forward with a smile. "I'm excited about everything, mainly that two people are marrying the person of their dreams tomorrow."

Well then, let's go to the banquet hall and have a look, then we can go to the restaurant." Amalía suggested.

Everyone nodded as they headed for the banquet hall. "Oh, my, it's *beautiful*." Sophia whispered.

Even Amalía's mouth dropped open at the sight that lay before them. The room had been decorated beautifully. Green and silver adorned the room in a way that could only be described as stunning. If she ever got married she knew which decorator she would hire. They all entered the room slowly, taking in as much as they could, trying not to miss anything. Everything was perfect from the centerpieces to the dish setup. Tierra turned to hug Amalía tightly.

"Thank you for everything."

Tierra's eyes were shiny with tears, and Amalía frowned playfully. "Now don't get started with the water works. We don't want Antonio thinking we tortured you."

Tierra laughed as she embraced Amalía again before turning to face Daníella, Sophia and Talía.

“Thank you guys as well for helping out. I couldn’t have done this without any of you.”

They all knew Tierra could have, but none of them bothered to correct her. Tierra was happy and content, and so were they. They continued into the banquet hall, walking around slowly, touching the decorations gently. She turned and gave Amalía a sheepish look.

“I just wanted to make sure it wasn’t a figment of my imagination.”

Tierra turned back to the decorations, touching another as she went. Amalía was happy to watch. Tierra deserved the wedding of her dreams.

“Everything is so perfect,” Tierra whispered.

“As it should be,” Daníella murmured.

An hour later they left the banquet hall and made their way to the restaurant. They were set up in a private room at the back of the restaurant so they could have as much fun as they wanted during the after rehearsal dinner without disturbing the other patrons. The private room was decorated in similar fashion to the banquet hall, but it was more intimate, just as Tierra said she wanted it to be. They left the restaurant smiling.

“Is it lunchtime yet?”

Amalía spun around to look at Sophia. In some ways it seemed all the woman thought about was food. What made it even worse was the fact Sophia could consume the food without consequences. Sophia had always joked that when she turned thirty, gravity was bound to catch up with her.

“It will be by the time we arrive at Ferroni’s.”

With it being the consensus of the group, they made their way to her car. Her appetite was coming back as well considering she hadn’t really eaten a lot at breakfast. Daníella sighed wistfully from the back seat.

“I can’t wait to see you in your dress, Tierra.”

Amalía smiled. “I haven’t seen Tierra in it, but as beautiful as it looks on the hanger, it can only look better on Tierra.”

As many times as Amalía looked at Tierra’s dress hanging in her closet at her home, she knew there was no way Tierra wouldn’t look like every bride should on her wedding day. It was hanging in her closet because Tierra had been afraid Antonio would get nosy and find it. Amalía had been more than happy to help Tierra with the task. The dress hung in the guest room closet and Amalía tried not to look at it too many times. She didn’t want to be reminded of what she didn’t have every day. It was bad enough she thought about it.

She found the closest parking spot she could to Ferroni’s before they all piled out of her car.

Tierra leaned over and whispered to her. “You realize we just finished breakfast a little under three hours ago right?”

Amalía nodded. “Yes, but I figured we would humor Sophia, especially since we have time to waste.”

Tierra nodded seeing the wisdom in the choice. “You’re right. Maybe we can split a lunch plate or something.”

“Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of dessert.” Amalía replied.

Tierra laughed. “I think the sweet tooth may be a genetic thing for the Carabelli’s.”

“You could be right, or it could be that we are spoiled from growing up. Mama always made dessert with dinner. Even if it was just biscotti.” Amalía said.

“Well, dessert sounds great to me.”

They made their way into Ferroni’s with the rest of the lunch crowd. It was a good thing because it would help them use up more time. Lunch wasn’t a rushed affair around Ferroni’s. The more people who were there, the longer it took the food to arrive. Between focaccia and conversation, though, no one really paid attention to the wait.

“So, what else do we have planned for today?”

Amalía smiled at Daníella. “Not a lot actually. By the time we leave here we will have just enough time to go to the church and make sure everything looks good before the rehearsal starts.”

When then finally arrived at the church, they only had a few minutes to spare to view the church and the decorations before the wedding rehearsal started. Seeing Antonio and Tierra face each other before the priest tugged at her heartstrings. Amalía tried to focus on the decorations to keep from becoming teary-eyed. The plan worked. Once again the interior decorator had done a stellar job on the decorations. When the rehearsal was over, the women gathered together.

“Is it possible for everything to be this perfect? Something has to go wrong.”

Amalía looked up in shock at Tierra’s statement, but Sophia scolded Tierra before anyone else could.

“Don’t talk like that. Everything is perfect as it should be. You and Antonio deserve nothing but the best.”

The statement gave Amalía pause. What was it that she deserved? Because as of right now, she didn’t think she’d come close to reaching perfection. The closest she had come was meeting Hayden, and he was getting ready to leave after tomorrow. So it would leave her where she normally was—alone and seeking the perfection that had managed to elude her so far.

Chapter Fourteen

“Come on, Hayden. It’s time to get up. Otherwise we are going to be late.”

She smiled when Hayden growled before burying his face deeper into the pillow. It was amusing that they had switched roles this morning. Unfortunately it was probably due to the fact that he and the rest of the men had consumed an entire bottle of Stock 84. The brandy was good, but it packed a punch. It was a little deceiving with its smooth and mellow taste. In spite of that, after a few sips most would definitely know it was brandy, unless they had a low tolerance for liquor, by then it would be too late. She nudged Hayden again until he lifted his head and gave her a blurry-eyed stare.

“What is it?” he grumbled.

She looked at him with amusement. “In case you have forgotten, my brother and your sister are getting married today.”

He blinked several times before rolling over to his back and staring at the ceiling. “Please tell me there is some coffee somewhere around here.”

“Since you were sleeping so soundly, I ordered breakfast, as well as coffee—a whole pot to be exact.”

“Good,” he murmured as he sat up. “Because I’m going to need it.”

She laughed as he climbed out of bed slowly, his boxers hanging off of him haphazardly. He’d been pretty intoxicated by the time the men dropped him off at the room. She’d barely been able to get his clothes off of him before he’d fallen face down on the bed into a dead sleep. She’d been tempted to smack her brothers for delivering him in

such a state, but when she remembered how bad it had been when Daniella and Carlo had married she could deal with this a lot better.

Turning around, she followed him out onto the balcony, making sure he didn't miss a step. She poured him a cup of coffee that he had to his mouth before she sat the coffee pot back down. The first sip seemed to give him a good jolt. He gave her another blurry-eyed stare.

"What was it that I drank again?"

"Stock 84. Why?"

He shuddered. "So if I ever see it again I know not to drink it."

She laughed as she uncovered his plate. It only had toast and scrambled eggs on it. She had a feeling any food containing grease would be a bad idea. The last thing she needed was a sick man on her hands. He already looked bad enough. After he stomachached as much food as he could stand, she pushed him under the spray of warm water.

By the time he emerged from the bathroom, he looked a lot better. She took her turn in shower. By the time she returned to the room, Hayden had his clothes on. The expression on his face told her he probably regretted agreeing to arrive to the church early with her. The few extra hours of sleep he could have gotten probably would have come in handy. Thirty minutes later they walked out of the hotel and headed for her car. They would have to stop by her home so she could pick up Tierra's dress as well as her bridesmaid dress. When Amalía pulled into her driveway, he eyed her home appreciatively.

"Is this where you live?"

"Yes, it is. You are more than welcome to come in and have a look around. We have a little time."

He exited the car and followed her to the front door. As soon as they stepped inside, he smiled.

"I like your place."

She turned and gave him an amused look. "How is that? You have only seen the foyer and maybe a glimpse of the living room?"

He gave her a look. "It's enough for me to tell that your home is nice."

She led him further into her home. "Feel free to continue to look around while I run upstairs."

He nodded and she made her way upstairs to the guest room. She pulled Tierra's wedding dress out of the closet, making sure the dark garment bag was zipped all the way up. She left the room, nearly running into Hayden. "Are you finished looking around downstairs?"

"Yes, and I will restate what I said earlier. You have a very nice home."

She smiled before stretching upward to give him a kiss on the lips. "Thank you. Feel free to look at the bedrooms."

He gave her a mock lecherous look. "Only if you will be my tour guide through each one."

She gave him a saucy look. "Maybe later if you're good."

He chuckled, and she continued on toward her bedroom. She reached for the garment bag containing her bridesmaid dress and carefully arranged it over her arm then bent to reach for the bag that had all of the accessories they would need to prepare for the wedding.

Hayden appeared by her side and took the bag from her without question. "Do you need me to carry anything else?"

"You did me a huge favor by taking the bag. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She watched him take in her room, his eyes falling on her bed last. His eyebrows rose as he did. When he turned to look at her, she just shrugged. She really had gone all out on it, and she loved her king size four-poster bed. The only downside was that it sat so high off the ground that she needed a set of steps to get into it. It was also adorned with an assortment of pillows that normally took her ten minutes to gather up and arrange on the bed each morning. The black cherry color of her bed set fit in perfectly with the room.

"You sleep in that bed by yourself?"

She met his gaze directly. "Maybe it is why I am so lonely."

He stared at her, and for a moment she thought he would respond. Instead he held his hand out to her.

“We better get going or we’re not going to be on time.”

“Yes, we should. I’m positive that Tierra and Sophia have arrived at the church already.”

After carefully arranging the dresses in the car, they made their way to the church. She smiled when she saw Leonardo and Giovanni getting out of their cars.

“Good morning, Leo, Gio.”

They both greeted her warmly before shaking Hayden’s hand. Their expressions clearly spoke of surprise.

“Good to see you standing this morning,” Leo commented.

Hayden chuckled. “Barely.”

Amalía was surprised at her brother’s gall. “Don’t let these two fool you. The first time they gorged on Stock 84 they were sick for days.”

“Hey,” Giovanni claimed in a wounded tone. “Don’t insult our manhood.”

She smiled at her brothers. “There’s no need to. The both of you do that for me.”

Before either of them could come back with a response, she leaned back inside her car and reached for the garment bags. Hayden pulled out her bag as well as his own.

“Is Antonio here?”

“No. He is in the care of Carlo and Macéo, who are trying to calm him down.” Leonardo responded.

She stared at her brothers in puzzlement, wondering why Antonio would need calming. He was normally the most rational of everyone.

“For what reason?”

Giovanni gave her a look of disgust. “Antonio is so excited that he is actually bouncing around.”

Leonardo tilted his head to the side, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Actually I think it was more of a skip.”

Giovanni glared at Leonardo. "I might point out that a man shouldn't do either."

She turned to Hayden, shot him a sympathetic look. "I hate to leave you in the presence of these two, but it will only be for a few hours. I promise."

"I think I'll be okay, but I will need a kiss or two to get me by until then."

She laughed as he pulled her close before assaulting her mouth with his. When he lifted his head they were both breathless, and her mind was somewhere it shouldn't be with her standing outside of a church. The thought made her look around quickly. She had completely forgotten they were out in plain view of everyone including the paparazzi, and that could be a disastrous thing. The last thing she needed was to be plastered on the front of the magazine. A quick glance around told her there probably wasn't any danger of that but she would be more careful the rest of the day. When she turned her attention back to Hayden he was still smiling.

"I think that will hold me over for now."

She gave the trio a look of warning as she took her bags from Hayden. "The three of you try to behave yourselves."

She didn't stay to see what their response was. Instead she headed inside the church toward the bridal room that was theirs for the wedding. She opened the door and walked into the room. Her eyes automatically went to a worried looking Sophia.

"What's wrong?"

"Tierra is nervous. She has locked herself in the room and won't come out."

Amalía groaned. She had wondered when the fallout was going to occur. She walked over to the door and knocked as she announced herself.

"Tierra, open the door. It's me."

After a long moment the door opened. A frazzled Tierra stood on the other side of it. "I'm so glad you're here."

Amalía smiled as she stepped into the room. She held up their dresses then went over and hung them up. “Where else would I be? Did you forget we are having a wedding today?”

Amalía needed today to go smoothly. So did her brother and Tierra. She was going to do everything to make it possible.

“At least I hope so.”

She turned to look at Tierra unable to hide her surprise. “Why would you say that?”

Tierra made her way over to the vanity mirror and sat down. “You forget I have been here once before and both of us know how it ended.”

She gave Tierra a gentle look. “Yes, and we both know Quincy was a jerk who wasn’t worthy of even asking you to marry him in the first place.”

Tierra exhaled softly. “That may be, but I still can’t help but to think this is all a dream and I will wake up soon with the joke being on me.”

Hoping that she could find the right words to solve this situation, Amalía began to unzip the garment bags so the dresses hung freely.

“So I take it you are a little nervous?”

“No. I’m flat out worried.” Tierra responded.

“Well, you shouldn’t be. My brother loves you. You know he does. He has shown you from day one.” She stated facts Tierra couldn’t argue with. “So, I suggest you take a few deep breaths and relax. You need to try to eat a little food so you have something in your stomach. We don’t want you to faint from hunger.”

Tierra laughed before standing up to embrace Amalía. “Thank you for everything you have done. This means a lot to me.”

Amalía returned Tierra’s embrace just as tightly. “It has been my pleasure.”

“Hey. Where is everyone? I thought we were here for a wedding.”

Amalía grimaced at the sound of Talía's voice ringing out loudly through the room. She pulled away from Tierra and stuck her head out into the main room.

"We are and don't forget we are in a church."

Talía gave Amalía an exasperated look. "That's why I plan on getting married outside on a beach if I ever become irrational and agree to marry someone."

Daníella rolled her eyes. "Not if your mother has anything to say about it."

Talía stuck her tongue out. "If I elope, my mother won't have a say."

Sophia smiled. "Yes, but she will when she plans your funeral because of it."

Laughter sounded around the room even from Talía herself. Everyone piled into the main room and soon a buffet of fruit, cheese and bread was being passed around along with peach Bellini's.

"Now, Tierra, your limit is one. We don't want you stumbling down the aisle."

"I know I'm not much of a drinker, but I can handle more than one Bellini."

The statement went uncontested but when it actually came down to it Tierra had two peach Bellini's. She was barely finished with the second when Sophia announced it was time to start getting ready. Amalía grabbed Tierra's hand and stood.

"Okay guys I'm going to help Tierra get dressed. Remember no peeking."

Talía shook her head. "I make no promises."

"You never do," Daníella muttered.

Amalía dragged Tierra into the private dressing room before they were pulled into the conversation. She sat Tierra down in front of the vanity mirror.

"We are going to do your hair then we are going to give you a little make-up."

Tierra nodded, and Amalía began to remove her arsenal of hair products and make-up from the bag. Several minutes later she was sweeping Tierra's hair to the top of her head in preparation for an elegant bun.

"I feel like I'm playing dress up."

Amalía smiled at Tierra in the mirror. "In all reality you are."

Tierra handed her another hairpin. "I used to imagine having a sister so we could do this growing up."

Amalía squeezed Tierra's shoulder. "Now you don't have to imagine any longer."

Tierra smiled and handed Amalía the last hairpin that was needed to hold her hair in place.

"Now it is time for your make-up."

It didn't take long since Amalía only applied a light touch of blush, liner and eye shadow. She finished Tierra's make-up with a touch of gloss.

"Perfect. Now it is time to get you in your dress."

"Actually I want to put my jewelry on first."

Amalía nodded, and Tierra reached for the jewelry set Antonio had bought for Tierra. She helped Tierra put on the necklace while Tierra put on the earrings. They stared at her reflection in the mirror.

"And to think you were worried. My brother would have to be a complete idiot not to be head-over-heels in love with you."

* * * *

Hayden turned to watch Amalía walk down the aisle, his breath catching at how beautiful she was. The silver Empress style dress fit her perfectly. He couldn't recall a time when she appeared more beautiful, more regal. She had every detail of the royal look Tierra had been hoping for when she chose the princess style wedding. His gaze met hers, and she gave him a smile that was reserved only for him. When she reached the altar, the wedding march began. He stood

along with everyone else. He couldn't help but notice how beautiful his sister looked. How happy she looked, even under her veil. His father and sister made a slow progression down the aisle, where he noticed Antonio had eyes for no one but his sister.

The love in his expression quieted all doubts Hayden had. Antonio and Tierra would make it work because it was meant to be. He watched his father hand his sister off with a brief word to Antonio before coming to join them on the front pew. The ceremony was beautiful. He listened to his sister and Antonio recite their vows to each other. Hayden couldn't take his eyes off of Amalía. Something had changed when he saw Amalía coming down the aisle, but he couldn't figure out what it was. He still hadn't figured out what it was as Tierra and Antonio made their way down the aisle as husband and wife. It was something he was still trying to figure out when Amalía came up to him doing the reception. Hayden pulled her into his arms and placed a kiss on her forehead.

"You look beautiful."

She smiled. "Grazie. You look very handsome yourself."

She took his hand and led him over to one of the receiving lines everyone seemed to be filing into. Macéo placed a glass of liquor strongly resembling Stock 84 into his hands. Seconds later Tierra and Antonio appeared at the entrance, and he watched Amalía raised her glass in salute.

"Per cent anni," she called out as they passed.

He looked down at her as others started repeating the phrase. "What does that mean?"

She smiled. "The literal meaning is for a hundred years."

Hayden nodded before wishing Tierra and Antonio the kind of happiness would last a hundred years. Once Tierra and Antonio were seated, Amalía led him to where they would sit.

As soon as they were seated someone clinked a fork against a glass. Several other wedding guests joined in. Hayden was puzzled until Antonio pulled Tierra close and kissed her, obliging the crowd

requests. The time seemed to fly by once the food started being served. His eyes bulged when he learned Antonio and Tierra planned to serve sixteen courses of food. The most he had ever heard of was seven. What also surprised him was the amount of free flowing alcohol. After his experience with Stock 84 last night he drank the one snifter he'd been given during the toast before sticking to water. After the fourth course, Antonio stood and pulled Tierra into his arms. The band began to play a slow tune. It had a touching romantic melody to it. It wasn't anything he was familiar with, but it seemed to mean a lot to Antonio and Tierra from the looks of it. Hayden looked over at Amalía, and she must have read the question in his expression.

"This is the first song Antonio and Tierra ever danced to."

Hayden nodded. His sister looked so beautiful and so happy. It was also more obvious the love they had for each other was strong. No one else in the room seemed to matter. It was like Antonio and Tierra were the only two people in the room, reminding Hayden of how he'd felt with Christy and how he was starting to feel with Amalía. The song ended and flowed into another. He looked up as his parents and Mona and Bruno made their way to the dance floor. His gaze fell upon Amalía who watched the dance floor intently. Hayden stood and held his hand out to her.

"Would you honor me with this dance?"

Amalía nodded before taking his hand, allowing him to lead her to the dance floor. Everything instantly felt right as he pulled her into his arms and began to dance with her. He stared down into her face. The emotions he'd experienced when he watched Amalía come down the aisle came back. His heart jumped when he realized what the feeling was. He was falling in love with her.

Chapter Fifteen

Amalía closed her eyes and held in a groan of displeasure. What the heck was she supposed to say? Was she supposed to say anything at all? These questions were a dilemma for Amalía because she stood next to Tierra, waiting for her and Antonio's flight for Paris to be called for boarding. After the reception last night Antonio and Tierra had stayed at the hotel in the original room Tierra had stayed in during her first trip to Rome. She smiled. Her brother was such a hopeless romantic just like Hayden was. That was where her dilemma started.

As soon as Antonio and Tierra boarded their plane, everyone else was going to walk to the other side of the airport where Hayden, Jean and Earl would board theirs and head back to the States, taking Hayden from her for who knew how long. It was tough to deal with because after Hayden made love to her last night, she knew she was in love with him, and could no longer deny or fight the emotion.

She jumped as the agent came over the loud speaker and announced Antonio and Tierra's flight was beginning to board. Tierra turned to hug her tightly.

"Once again, thank you for everything."

Amalía hugged Tierra just as tightly before pulling back. "It was my pleasure, but remember that you may have to return the favor some day."

Tierra smiled. "I look forward to it."

She watched as Tierra began embracing everyone else, intentionally leaving Hayden for last. Amalía struggled to keep her eyes from tearing up as she overheard what Tierra said to him. It

made the moment seem all the more real to her. Antonio appeared in front of her with a smile on his face.

“Thank you for everything you have done for my wife.”

Amalía smiled as she embraced her brother. “I only did what you would have done for me. Now the two of you enjoy your honeymoon and try not to worry about anything until you get back.”

Antonio embraced her before nodding. When he stepped back he took Tierra’s hand and led her to the gate. They all stood there until Antonio and Tierra could no longer be seen before heading toward the gate the Davises would leave from. Amalía’s heart grew heavy at the thought, and she had no idea what to do. Was this how Antonio had felt when Tierra had left and gone back to the States? How had her brother remained so calm, so sane? She smiled as she remembered how the calmness and saneness had worn off very quickly until Antonio had finally broken down and flown to the States to get Tierra. She wasn’t going to do that. Her days of chasing men were over.

They reached the gate, and she exhaled heavily. She looked up in surprise as Carlo gave her a tight squeeze. There was understanding in his eyes, and she smiled, squeezing him back. She wasn’t sure what had come over Carlo lately, but he was almost back to being the person he’d been before his car wreck. He was still a little rough around the edges, his laugh was a little rusty, but other than that there had been great improvement.

It seemed like it was only minutes before the agent came over the loud speaker announcing the boarding for the Davis’s flight. Her heart leaped into her throat and she tried to keep her nerves from getting out of hand. She embraced Earl and Jean first, telling them how much she enjoyed their company and looked forward to seeing them again.

They repeated the sentiment before moving on to say the rest of their goodbyes. When Hayden appeared in front of her he smiled.

“Is this as hard for you as it is for me?”

She nodded, her throat constricting, keeping her from being able to say anything else. He brushed his hand across her cheek.

“When I get home I have a lot to think about. I know I don’t have the right to ask this, but will you allow me to keep in contact with you?”

She gave him a look, telling him she was surprised he would even have to ask the question.

“Of course you can. I would be insulted if you didn’t.”

“Thank you.”

When he lowered his head to kiss her, it was one so tender that tears welled up in her eyes. She held them at bay, even as he walked away from her, even when he stopped at the entrance and stared at her so intently one last time, she was certain he was going to change his mind and stay. It wasn’t until they disappeared that she realized Giovanni stood next to her holding a hotel container out to her.

“Hayden wanted me to give you this after he boarded the plane.”

She took the container and laughed when she opened it. Fruit biscotti and a folded piece of paper stared back at her. She picked up the note and Giovanni held the container while she read it.

Just wanted to leave you a little something for you to remember me by.

Love, Hayden

The simple note made all the tears she held back start flowing. Giovanni pulled her into his embrace.

“Ah, come on, Amalía. You know I hate to see you cry.”

“Unless you are the one who made me cry,” she managed to choke out in reply.

The statement made both of them laugh, and she pulled back from Giovanni, wiping her eyes.

“Besides, these are tears of happiness.”

She saved her tears of unhappiness for when she walked back into her empty home and crawled into her empty bed. The next two days

were spent in bed alone with her living off of fruit biscotti. If her family was worried about her not showing up for breakfast, dinner, or work they seemed to understand and let her have her space. Day three, she forced herself out of bed. Hayden had called her twice, and even though she enjoyed the sound of his voice, it wasn't the same. Regardless, she had to be back to the normal life she lived. She'd promised herself she wouldn't let another man turn her life upside down, and she meant to keep the promise. Even if she had to shut herself down emotionally to do so. As she made the statement, she knew she was lying to herself. Hayden had her heart, and there was no getting it back.

* * * *

Hayden sighed heavily as he shut off the engine. He had only been home for a week, yet things were already different. Since he had been home, his every waking thought had been of Amalía, and he felt guilty about it. Christy had only crossed his mind once today, and it was because his plans today involved her. They had since he buried her over a year ago. His ritual had become going to church with his parents, then he would go visit Christy's grave before going to spend time with her parents. Today he was doing things in different order. He hadn't gone to church or stopped by Christy's gravesite, but he was stopping by to visit with Paulette and Stan. He'd still been recovering from jet lag last Sunday and had missed their usual meeting time. Finally gathering up the courage he needed to get out of the car, he made his way up the Jones's walkway. He didn't know why he felt like he was stepping before the firing squad, but he did.

Taking a deep breath, he rang the doorbell before putting his hands into his pocket. It was a sure sign he was nervous. Yet, when Paulette opened the door the genuine smile she always wore was in its place.

"Hello, Hayden. How are you?"

He embraced his Christy's mother, placing a kiss on her cheek.

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"Good. Come on in. Stan is out back."

Hayden stepped over the threshold. "I know I'm a little early, but I thought I would come by here first, before going to visit Christy's grave."

Paulette nodded. "We've been expecting you."

"You have?"

"Yes, we have. Now go on out back and join Stan. I will bring out some lemonade in a minute."

Hayden made his way through the Jones's home. Stan was sitting out on the patio as Paulette said he would be.

"I was told you were out here being lazy."

Stan looked at him with a smile before standing to greet him. "I don't know who is spreading such untruth, but I plan to have a little talk with them once I find out."

Hayden laughed as Stan embraced him. "You be sure to do that."

"I will," Stan replied as he sat back down. "We missed you last weekend, but Earl called and told us you were feeling a little under the weather."

"I think it might have been jet lag."

"You sure about that?" Stan asked.

The statement confused Hayden. Before he could ask what Stan meant by the comment, Paulette appeared on the patio with tray weighed down with a pitcher of lemonade and glasses filled with ice. Stan took the tray out of Paulette's hands and sat it on the patio table. She made sure everyone had a glass before sitting down.

"So how was the trip to Rome?"

"It was fun. Tierra's wedding was beautiful. I wish you could have been there."

Paulette smiled. "You will have to make sure you bring the pictures by once they have been developed."

"I will."

There was a moment of silence before Stan spoke. “So, tell me about the lovely woman you met.”

Hayden’s excitement evaporated and guilt hit him like a brick to the stomach. He couldn’t find the words to speak. Closing his eyes, he leaned forward and rested his head in his hands. How was he supposed to respond to the question? He was going to have a serious conversation with his parents when he recovered from the shock and embarrassment racing through him. *What should he do now?* He couldn’t lie to the Stan and Paulette. This had been the main reason he had come over. His plan had been to tell them about Amalía and his feelings for her to see how they responded. The plan was no longer relevant. He felt so guilty now. The Jones’s had mourned the loss of Christy, and they knew the guilt and anger he felt over it. The most comforting thing was they didn’t blame him for not protecting her better than he had. He’d taken on that responsibility himself.

When a hand clasped his shoulder, he hesitated to look up. He wouldn’t be able to stand the expressions of hurt and disappointment on Stan and Paulette’s faces.

“Hayden, look at us.”

Hayden finally gathered up enough courage to lift his head. He was surprised to see concern on their faces.

“We didn’t mean to upset you, son. Paulette and I just assumed this was the reason you were coming by to see us.”

Hayden nodded slowly, still in shock over their response. It was a lot calmer than he had expected.

“It is, but this wasn’t how I planned for this all to come out.

“Unfortunately, Hayden, things don’t always turn out the way we want them to.” Paulette replied.

It was the one thing they all knew firsthand. His life hadn’t turned out the way he imagined it would. He wasn’t sure it ever would at this point.

“Now why don’t you tell us about this young lady?”

Hayden nodded and a small nervous smile appeared on his face. "To begin with, her name is Amalía. She is the sister of Antonio, Tierra's husband."

He paused, not really certain of how much he should tell Paulette and Stan. His gut told him to tell them everything. The Joneses had been supportive of him this last year while they all grieved together. Yet he wondered if they could take his dismissal of their daughter. Taking a deep breath, he forged ahead, telling Paulette and Stan everything. When he finished, they were both smiling.

"Do you like her?"

Hayden hesitated slightly before telling them the truth. He had always been honest with the Paulette and Stan.

"I'm in love with her."

It was shocking how good it felt to admit the statement aloud. What was more astonishing was Paulette and Stan's reaction. Stan began to laugh while Paulette reached over to hug him.

"That is wonderful, Hayden. Do you plan on seeing her again?"

His mouth dropped open, and there was nothing he could do to get it to close. "I'm not sure. It isn't so easy."

Paulette and Stan stared at him for a long time, until he finally became uncomfortable. "Are you hesitant because of Christy?"

His expression must have said it all, but he couldn't help it. He was hesitant because of Christy. Why shouldn't he be?

"Son, we don't expect you to stay faithful to Christy forever. She is gone now. You were faithful to her as long as you were supposed to be." Stan stated.

Paulette sighed sadly. "As much as it hurts that Christy is no longer with us, it doesn't mean we expect you not to go on and live your life."

Stan reached out and clasped his shoulder. "If you have found half the happiness you had with Christy, with Amalía, Paulette and I think you would be a fool to pass it up."

Hayden's mouth dropped open in shock at their understanding, but he didn't know why. If it was one thing Paulette and Stan had always been, it was accepting.

"Plus Stan and I want grandbabies before we get too much older."

Hayden wasn't the type of man to cry. He could actually count on one hand—without using all of his fingers—how many times he had since he had reach puberty. Yet, there was no fighting the tears that sprang into his eyes and began to fall. He felt Paulette lean over to hug him, and he stood, and pulled her into his embrace. His tears of relief and happiness continued to flow as Stan joined in on the hug. It took Hayden a few moments to compose himself, but when he did he couldn't help but to smile back into the faces grinning back at him.

"Thank you for everything. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

Stan pulled back to look at him. "You already have son. You loved our daughter unconditionally. It was all we could ever ask for."

* * * *

Hayden stepped off of the plane, now knowing he was just as certifiable as the rest of his family. He had made several life altering changes in the last three months. The first had been putting in a two-week notice at his job. After all of the years he had put in with the company the job no longer appealed to him. Secondly, he had put the house he'd shared with Christy on the market. As much as he loved the home, he knew he would never move on as long as he stayed in it. Lastly, he decided to take an impromptu return trip to Rome. He missed Amalía, and he wanted to see her again. The good thing was she had no idea, so it should be a pleasant surprise. He neared the baggage claim where a gentleman stood holding a sign with his name on it. He walked over to the driver and relinquished his hold on his bags before following the driver to the car. Leo had come through for him in a major way. He was definitely going to have to repay him. He

smiled at the driver as he slid into the back seat. He couldn't wait to see Amalía. To see what her reaction would be when she saw him. He just hoped she was looking forward to seeing him as much as he was looking forward to seeing her.

* * * *

Amalía groaned at the sight of the paperwork on her desk. This was the last time she volunteered to help her brothers. Her desk was littered with reports that she didn't have long to complete because Antonio had been called away by Tierra. So she volunteered to meet the new electrician her brothers had hired. Antonio had been in such a rush to get away—for what Amalía suspected was an afternoon of honeymooning—that he hadn't bothered to leave her any pertinent information, such as the name of the person she was supposed to be meeting. The only thing she knew was the applicant had been handpicked by Hayden. Just thinking of him made her heart ache. She missed him more than she thought she would, but she couldn't think about that right now. She had a candidate to interview, a nameless candidate at that. She'd called her other brothers to see if any of them could tell her the electrician's name, and either they were away from their phones, or they were ignoring her.

It was probably the latter, for which they would pay. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before throwing her concentration into the last three reports she had to review. It didn't take her as long as she had thought it was going to. A short time later she put the last report in her outbox just as someone knocked on her door.

"Come in."

The door swung open, and her breath caught in her throat. She blinked slowly to make sure she wasn't seeing a mirage. When she was certain the man standing before her was Hayden, she stood up and was in his arms in an instant. His mouth came down on hers as he

walked her backward, closing the office door behind them. He kissed her until she was breathless.

“I missed you,” he whispered as he lifted his head.

“I missed you, too,” she replied.

She sandwiched his face between her hands, wondering if she was dreaming. Never would she have imagined he would be here.

“Why didn’t you call me and tell me you were coming?”

He smiled at her, a smile she had missed a lot. “Because I wanted it to be a surprise.”

She groaned. “Well, unfortunately we are going to have to get together later. I have a meeting in a few minutes. How long are you going to be here?”

“That depends on how our meeting goes.”

Amalía stiffened as if cold water had been doused over her as she comprehended his words. She removed herself from Hayden’s embrace, puzzled by his statement.

“What do you mean?”

He spread his arms out, and she finally saw how he was dressed...for a business meeting. Embarrassment began to flow through her. Here she had been thinking he’d come back for her, but had he come back for her, or was it the job appealed to him? How could her brother’s have done this to her? She tried to compose herself, to push back the hurt that was threatening to spill over.

“Well then, we’d better get started.”

She watched a look of confusion spread over his face at her change in attitude and it served him right. If he thought she was going to take him on her desk like she had before after what he just revealed, he had another thing coming. He would be lucky if he got the chance to touch her ever again.

He reached out to her, and she dodged his touch. It was hard to do, but she knew she had to. She’d been here once before and this wasn’t a time for her to be weak.

“Amalía, what’s wrong?”

She gave him a cool look she'd practiced for years. "Nothing. You're here for a *business meeting*, remember?" Turning she made her way behind her desk leaving him more puzzled, as she'd hope to do. "If you have a seat, Mr. Davis, we can get started."

When she addressed him by his last name his eyebrows rose impressively high. "What's wrong, Amalía?"

It was her turn for her eyebrows to rise. Her Italian temper flared as she stood up. "You ask me what's wrong?"

She stood up and walked over to him. He had the good sense to grab both of her hands when she was in swinging distance. She was sorely tempted to hit him, but she didn't. His touch affected her all the way to her toes, but she couldn't let her resolve weaken.

"You make a fool of me by letting me throw myself at you when you are only here for a business meeting, and you feel the need to ask me what's wrong?"

An infuriating smile appeared on his face as his hands tightened. It still didn't stop her from making an attempt to jerk her hands free.

"The business meeting is only a part of it."

The statement made her stiffen again. A small amount of hope flared up in her, but she kept control over it.

"What is the other part?"

He bravely let her hands go. "You."

She stared at him for a moment, trying to grasp what he was saying. It seemed to be the word she wanted to hear, but she wasn't sure.

"What do you mean?"

He smiled before stepping closer to her. "A few months ago I started to fall in love with a woman who seduced me the first moment I saw her. Now I'm back to see if she loves me, or if it was all a part of seducing me."

Tears formed in her eyes as she threw herself at Hayden again without any hesitation. How could he not know how she felt about him? *Because she never told him.* She needed to fix it immediately.

“Of course I love you. I fell in love with you when you gave me the biscotti.”

He pulled back and looked at her, his expression full of humor. “The first time, or the last?”

“The first,” she whispered, sliding her hands up to the back of his head to bring his lips to hers for a kiss. She planned to share many more with him before their meeting was over. Now that she had her man back, she had no plans to let him go, ever again.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Morris resides in Fort Worth, Texas. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, traveling, cooking, and spending time with her friends and family. In Stephanie's opinion, there is nothing like curling up with a good book that you can't put down, and she is addicted to writing them.

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