Her Ruthless Italian Boss

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Her Ruthless Italian Boss / C. Hollis — «HarperCollins»,

Step into a world of sophistication and glamour, where sinfully seductive heroes await you in luxurious international locations.Expecting the boss's baby… Beth Woodbury thinks she's put the past behind her. Until she discovers her new boss is ruthless Italian Luca Francesco! Beth has to beg his forgiveness for the past. She needs this job! Luca lets her stay on one condition: she'll assist him in the day – and warm his bed at night! And this time there'll be no talk of marriage…or babies… But soon Beth is pregnant – with her formidable boss's heir!

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‘Beth?’

As Luca spoke her name she trembled. She knew his touch came at a price, but she no longer cared. The same wisdom that made her desperate for him also warned she would be nothing more than his next conquest. Still she could not resist.

When his fingers traced their way around the heart-shaped outline of her face, she looked up. Tears were threatening to fill her eyes, but before she could apologise for it, he kissed her.

In an instant, all her fear and pain slipped away. Desire filled the void he had left in her body. The warmth of longing infused her. It was such a long time since he had held her with genuine passion like this. She relaxed, savouring every second of the experience.

She was in Luca’s arms.

Christina Hollis was born in Somerset, and now lives in the idyllic Wye Valley. She was born reading, and her childhood dream was to become a writer. This was realised when she became a successful journalist and lecturer in organic horticulture. Then she gave it all up to become a full-time mother of two, and to run half an acre of productive country garden. Writing Mills & Boon® romances is another ambition realised. It fills most of her time, between complicated rural school runs. The rest of her life is divided between garden and kitchen, either growing fruit and vegetables or cooking with them. Her daughter’s cat always closely supervises everything she does around the home, from typing to picking strawberries!

Recent titles by the same author:

ONE NIGHT IN HIS BED

COUNT GIOVANNI’S VIRGIN

THE ITALIAN BILLIONAIRE’S VIRGIN

Dear Reader

1908 was a wonderful year for lovers of romantic fiction. Mills and Boon was born, and over the years their books have helped millions of readers escape to a world filled with excitement, love and passion. I started reading them as a teenager, sharing the rollercoaster ride of couples overcoming all sorts of obstacles in the search for their happy-ever-after. My favourites were the stories where an independent, unconventionally attractive girl broke through the defences of her unattainable hero. They gave such hope to the stroppy, lumpen fourth-former I was in those days!

Writing for Mills and Boon was a distant dream for me then. When my first book was accepted, I could hardly believe my luck. HER RUTHLESS ITALIAN BOSS is my fourth Modern™ Romance for Harlequin Mills and Boon, and I’m still high on the excitement of it all. I hope you love the hero, Luca, as much as I do. Strong, self-reliant men have always fascinated me. As an ex-soldier, Luca is all that and more. If only he could forgive Beth for the way she treated him in the past, he would be the perfect man. But as far as Beth is concerned he’s always been her ideal. If she can’t have him, then she doesn’t want anyone else.

I’ve really enjoyed making Luca into a hero to continue the Mills and Boon tradition. It’s a real privilege to be writing at the beginning of the company’s second century. With you, I look forward to enjoying hours of reading pleasure in the future.

With my warmest wishes

Christina

HER RUTHLESS ITALIAN BOSS

BY
CHRISTINA HOLLIS

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To Kate Walker, for all her good advice.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM the first moment she saw Venice from a waterbus, Beth was entranced. *La Serenissima* rose from the lagoon like crystals growing up through mist. If a city could be described as being like a woman, then this one was straight out of a nineteenth-century novel. Everywhere murmured with the sound of water whispering against wood and stonework. Beth could identify with all this gentle melancholy. She was miles from home, and feeling sick with fear at the prospect of arriving at the headquarters of Francesco Fine Arts for the first time. I'll love this new job once I get there, she thought, desperately trying to convince herself. She was tired, alone and scared. There had been too many challenges over the past few years. The immortal serenity of Venice was in stark contrast to the confusion of consultants and hospitals she had needed to arrange for her father. His eventual death had been so hard to bear, and the after effects had cast her adrift from all the security she knew and loved.

A wave of excitement suddenly engulfed the other passengers in her boat. Half a dozen Venetian matrons erupted with coos of admiration, and then everyone started pointing through the fine drizzle. They were all talking at once, and it didn't take long for Beth to see why. A spectacular craft was approaching. The thoroughbred's streamlined beauty swept past them with an assurance that made it seem a whole lot faster than the speed limit. The pilot drew as many admiring looks as his boat did. He was tall, lean and concentrating like a perfectionist. The fingers of one hand splayed casually against the boat's paintwork, while the other dealt with the controls. His attitude was totally out of place in that soft-focus, watercolour landscape. And yet it was strangely familiar… Beth's heart stopped dead, and amazement pitched her to her feet.

'Good grief! What's he doing here?' She gasped, before coming to her senses. People were looking at her, and grinning. Sinking back into her seat with an embarrassed grin, Beth muttered some apologies. I must be going mad with the stress of it all, she thought. Hallucinating about Luca should have stopped years ago. He was a career soldier on frontline duty, and the very *last* person who would be found piloting a luxury speedboat around Venice. As for dressing in Milan tailoring and wraparound shades—it was laughable, but that didn't dull her pain. Silenced by heartache, she watched her vision disappear into the distance, sweeping off to his own private kingdom like the royalty he obviously was.

Whoever he is, he probably didn't even see me, Beth thought.

She was right. Self-made billionaires didn't need to notice ordinary mortals. Luca Francesco was no exception. He had checked his e-mails three times already that morning, and his mind was full of schedules and appointments. Thank God Ben Simpson's pet PA was finally arriving from England today, he mused—the woman must be a saint to put up with him.

Reaching the headquarters of Francesco Fine Arts, Luca left his docking attendant to moor the craft, and strode into the building. Nodding in the direction of the reception staff, he stabbed the button of his private lift. He was still irritated by the reality of Ben Simpson. The man might be a genius in his field, but he had no common sense at all, and no social skills. Luca had merely waved through the request from FFA's Human Resources department to include Ben's girl Friday as part of

his employment package. At the time, it had seemed like a harmless perk of the job. Everyone had discovered since then she must be a vital part of Ben Simpson's life-support system.

The elevator arrived. Luca stepped in, wincing as the mirrored doors clicked shut. That final glass of vin santo last night had been a mistake. He had flown to Florence, to taste Count Guido's latest vintage. As he always did, Luca had agreed with his host that the wine was even better than Guido's previous releases. He had been saying that for five years. Luca had no enthusiasm for socialising any more, but his manners were faultless—right down to accepting that last shot of alcohol. Thinking about it now made him flinch. Luckily, one of his chauffeurs had been acting as co-pilot, and had flown him back to Venice a few hours ago. There had been no time for sleep, and he had accepted Count Guido's offer of a guest wing for the night it would have pushed Luca several conversations too far. He was a man with a thousand invitations, who had lost all desire for friendship.

And now he had to force himself to face office life—again.

Luca had been sharing his own PA, Andria, while they all waited for Ben Simpson's girl to sort out her 'personal problems' back in England. He was thinking of giving this shadowy wonder-woman an immediate pay rise, sight unseen. Feeling the way he did this morning, the next problem Luca met with Ben was liable to end with blood being spilled all over the executive carpet…

By the time she reached her new workplace, Beth's heart was hammering so fast, she thought it might burst. Ben had arranged to meet her in the vestibule and escort her up to their office suite. He led her through a busy honeycomb of activity. Although it was set within a rambling old building, full of cubby-holes and squeaking floorboards, everything at FFA ran with the high-tech efficiency of an international multibillion-dollar business. While firewalls and virus checkers protected investments, the building's real walls were draped with tapestries. As she was shown around Beth wondered if the drapes hid any secret passages. The people who lived here in the Renaissance had been high on security—in those days, lives as well as fortunes were at stake. Ben guided her through a warren of passages, stopping every so often to ask directions back to his office. Beth didn't mind. It gave her a chance to admire her surroundings. Beautiful antique side tables and grand carved chairs were placed at regular intervals along each corridor. Her father would have loved it. He had adored treasures, and this place was stuffed with them. Each time he had gone out to buy stock, Gerald Woodbury had brought home at least one more exquisite piece he could not bear to put up for sale. Unfortunately, his bank account had emptied at much the same speed with which his beloved Rose Cottage had filled up with beautiful things.

As soon as they reached their office Beth plunged straight into her job of making Ben's life run as smoothly as possible. Their suite had been formed out of the building's old ballroom, and it did not take her long to convince him that his desk should be repositioned, right at the far end. He was too easily distracted to have his seat any closer to the door. Her workstation would stand guard there, fending off unwanted visitors.

Disaster struck only a short time after they had settled down to work. A frantic call drifted over to where Beth was setting up some computer records.

'Beth—Beth—I've just sat on my glasses!'

'The spare pair is in the top right-hand drawer of your desk, as always.'

'This *is* the spare pair! I lost a lens from the other ones just after I got here…'

Beth picked up the telephone on her desk and made a quick call. Then she walked over and handed Ben a note.

'Don't panic. Here are the details of your new English-speaking optician. They're expecting you.'

Ben beamed, stood up and pulled on his jacket. 'If ever Signor Francesco wants to know why I need you here, I'll tell him about little things like this!'

Seconds after Ben left, Beth came to his rescue again when the telephone on his desk rang.

‘Oh—hi, you must be Beth!’ a friendly voice said. ‘I’m Andria, Signor Francesco’s assistant. Could you send Ben up to the executive lounge, please? Signor Francesco wants to see the notes for his address to the ceramics convention next month. I thought the two of them could cosy up over a latte.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, Andria, Ben’s had to dash out for a while—’

Beth heard a sharp intake of breath from her opposite number. That was a clear danger signal, and nothing could be allowed to blot Ben’s reputation. Beth sprang into action.

‘But I can deliver the notes myself. I’ve got them right here, and they’re all ready.’

‘Brilliant.’ Andria’s relief was audible. ‘Signor Francesco is a good boss, but he’s totally single-minded when it comes to work. If he thought I’d sent him on a coffee break without the chance of fitting in a bit of paperwork, I’d never hear the end of it!’

Beth laughed, printed out the document and slipped it into a cover. It sounded as though she would have her work cut out keeping Ben on the right side of his boss. No wonder he had wanted her help and support in this new job. Ben was as disorganised as he was accident-prone. She had better get out of her silly habit of wincing each time she heard the surname of their new employer.

When Ben had announced the people at Francesco Fine Arts had approached him, Beth’s stomach had gone into a spin. The simple mention of a name shared by millions of people around the globe had thrown her into turmoil. Then reality had supplied a parachute, and told her not to be so stupid. Luca had been a soldier, and the original bull in a china shop. What connection could he possibly have with international fine art? The only interest he ever showed in glass was how much liquid it could hold. All the same, Beth was still not comfortable hearing the name ‘Francesco’. It would be a relief to meet their new managing director at last. When his real-life image replaced the tall, dark fury that still haunted her, life would become easier.

Negotiating the maze of corridors, Beth was scared in case her rusty holiday Italian let her down, but everyone she met in the building was really friendly. She soon found the executive lounge, and walked in with a broad smile.

It evaporated the instant she saw the man who was silhouetted at the window. The impressive figure had his back to her, but she still recognised him. He was the same man who had been piloting that speedboat, and the realisation hit her heart a hammer blow. Now there could be no mistake. His sable-dark hair had not been given its regulation trim in a while and now curled almost to his collar, but it didn’t matter. Beth was convinced that when the managing director of Francesco Fine Arts turned around, every word, English or Italian, would desert her. She already knew this billionaire workaholic would turn out to be the man she desired most in the world.

And the only one she would ever love.

Beth had been quiet and discreet, but Luca still heard her enter the room. He glanced over his shoulder with a smile—and then stopped. In one second his open expression turned from pleasure to deep, dark distrust. Beth went cold with dread. Although he was not handsome in the way of soap stars or male models, Luca was devastating to look at. Those dark, wide-set eyes might have lashes to die for, but the effect was compelling, not sentimental. His masculinity was carved, not manufactured. It had been honed on the assault course, giving him a form every woman wanted to touch. Beth was no exception. Despite his ten-kilowatt glare, the first thing she noticed was how pale and tired he looked.

And then his quiet words tore the years away.

‘*Mio Dio*…I must have died and gone to hell…’

Beth was shattered. His eyes were like chips of black diamond. The man who meant everything to her was now trying to intimidate her, not melt her. He succeeded in no time at all, because Beth’s soul still bore the indelible brand of his hard, dark anger. It had been seared into her on that last burning night in Balacha. Five years later, it still hurt.

She began inching pinches along the edge of the file she carried, measuring her embarrassment and shame.

‘Luca…I had no idea…I would never have come here if I’d known—’

He silenced her with a single, sharp gesture of his hand. Their time apart had increased his natural authority a hundredfold. His appearance had always been unconventional. Now he looked dangerous. Instead of tanned and open, his face was drawn and watchful. Those beautiful eyes with their sweeping lashes now had dark hollows beneath them. Beth was horrified, but all the old attraction was still there. She could sense it, but she could also feel waves of resentment flowing from him.

Shock and shame forced her words out in a torrent of apology. 'Look, I can hardly blame you for being angry with me, Luca. I picked up a pen a thousand times to try and write to you but—'

'Don't give me any more lies, Elizabeth. Or Beth, or whatever your name is these days. I don't need your excuses.' His tone was like silk drawn over sandpaper. 'I suppose you must be this indispensable PA Ben Simpson needs to keep him in check?' He moved forward. Beth stepped back. Seeing her flinch, he exhaled angrily. 'There's no point in pretending to be afraid of me. We both know that's never been the case. Besides, what's done is done. As far as I am concerned you are part of my past, and a part that I have no wish to remember. My interest is in the here and now.'

He paused, and raised his right hand to the side of his head. Beth watched him dig his fingers into his temple before continuing. 'I won't go back on the agreement to employ you. Ben is fast becoming a world expert in ceramics. I want him on my team and, for that privilege, I am willing to endure anything. Even your presence,' he finished meaningfully.

Somehow, Beth pulled herself together. Over the past couple of years she had survived a lot, but much of it had not been of her own making. Luca's cold fury was a different thing altogether. This was entirely down to her, so she would just have to put a brave face on it.

'Don't worry—now I can see how things are, I won't be staying here for more than six months. That's the length of my initial contract with FFA, and I won't be asking you to renew it. I wouldn't dream of putting you to any trouble, Signor Francesco.' She managed to keep her voice calm, but her mind was in chaos. All she knew was that she had to escape from his presence, to get away…

'But while you are here, you will give every assistance to Ben in his job as my new Head of Glassware and Ceramics.'

It was a command, not a question.

'Of course. That's why you are employing me, Signor Francesco,' Beth replied crisply. 'But I shall make arrangements to train a replacement, so I can leave the moment my contract comes up for renewal.'

'As long as we both know where we stand,' Luca said grimly. He paused as if he wanted to say more, but then turned away from her. 'Let me call for some refreshments.'

One end of the executive lounge had been fitted out as a kitchen, making everything from antipasti to zabaglione. Beth tucked the file of paperwork under her arm and set off to fetch him something. Any good PA would have done the same, but she intended this as a statement as well. She wanted to show Luca she knew her place as a loyal employee.

'I'll fetch you a latte and—'

'Elizabeth, you don't have to wait on me. Please find yourself a seat.'

Beth had never thought of Luca's Italian accent as dynamite before. Now it was enough to send her hurtling towards one of the softly upholstered settees scattered around the room. She sat down, her eyes fixed on the edge of the table in front of her. It was piled with magazines, but she was not in the mood to look at them. After summoning a waitress and giving his instructions, Luca rejoined her. He did not sit on the settee. Instead he picked up a hard, angular chair and dropped it opposite where she was retreating into the shelter of comfortable cushions. Although he tried to hide it, Beth saw him wince. She wondered if he was in pain but thought better than to ask. The waitress, in a smart lavender apron, brought a tray to their table. The girl set down two cups of coffee and two pastries, laying a monogrammed napkin and fork beside each place.

When he saw she had brought nothing else, Luca clicked his tongue and began to lever himself up from his chair.

‘I’ll fetch you a spoon, Elizabeth,’ he murmured.

‘No! No, I can manage with just a fork,’ she said frantically, looking from Luca to the waitress and back again.

‘Nonsense.’ Luca switched on his old, devastating smile as he turned to the girl who had brought their order. ‘Miss Woodbury always eats with a spoon as well as a fork, Bella. It is her good English breeding.’

Beth burned with shame. She could not remember the last time she had been able to afford to eat pudding, let alone worry about how to do it.

‘Times change, Luca,’ she muttered when he returned from a trip to the counter for more cutlery.

‘I know. That is why you went off with the man who called himself my friend.’

‘It was a big mistake.’

‘As I told you at the time.’

Beth paused as she went to pick up her spoon and said softly, ‘I would never have thought you were mean-minded enough to say “I told you so”, Luca.’

Pained, she turned her head away. She could not afford to let him see how much he still affected her.

He paused, grazing his lower lip with his teeth. ‘You’re right, of course. I should not have gone so far. But you must admit, it was not without provocation, Elizabeth.’

‘Please call me Beth. I prefer it nowadays,’ she said faintly. ‘I’ve given up on formality.’

‘I find that hard to believe.’

Luca picked up his pastry fork and cut through the mouth-watering dessert, but Beth noticed something.

‘Wait, Luca, they’ve only given you a small portion. Here—take mine—it’s much bigger.’

‘This is the way I like it.’ He spoke without looking at her. ‘I don’t eat so much these days.’

I can see that, Beth thought, eyeing him with concern. His suit was expensively tailored, but this new-style Luca was built like a greyhound rather than the mastiff she had known back in Balacha.

‘There isn’t much call for route marches and midnight manoeuvres in Venice,’ he added by way of explanation.

‘I’ll bet your girlfriend is pleased.’

He shrugged. ‘They don’t complain.’

His casual reply gave Beth almost as much of a shock as the way he looked at her before speaking again.

‘You used to do a lot of that, didn’t you, Elizabeth? Complaining, I mean.’

‘Can you blame me?’ she countered before looking pointedly at the fine lines of his linen jacket. ‘And you don’t want to lose too much more weight, Luca.’

Without breaking eye contact, he put one hand over Beth’s, and removed her plate. A wave of excitement broke over her as she felt the rough, parched touch of his fingertips, once so familiar but now moving with clinical precision.

‘It doesn’t take much to convince me.’ He nodded, replacing her portion with his own, smaller one.

‘Then it’s a good job I’m not hungry.’

He sat back and laughed. ‘Oh! That was almost a retort. And I thought something must have extinguished your spark, Beth. Perhaps I was wrong, for once.’

‘No.’ Beth scowled, remembering just how infuriating one of his greatest talents had always been. ‘You were right, as always. It’s just that life has doused me pretty well over the past few years.’

Beth could hardly hold Luca’s piercing gaze as he answered, ‘Then welcome to the club.’ He sat back, his legs stretched out in front of him. ‘When the army let me go, I had no alternative other

than to come here to Venice. This was my great-uncle's firm. He died a couple of years ago, and left everything to me. His home—and his business, which I have developed into the success you see now.'

Beth gaped, still trying to catch up.

'Luca—you *left* the army?'

'I didn't say that.'

She stared at him. All sorts of images tumbled through her head. They must have thrown him out for some reason. She knew he had a short fuse. But he had always managed to control his temper, when they were together.

When they were together…

What on earth had she started, the night she had abandoned him in Balacha?

'But…the army was your family.'

'They had to let me go.' His features were unreadable as he took a small container from the breast pocket of his jacket and shook out a couple of small white tablets.

'Oh, Luca…'

He took no notice, but concentrated on taking the painkillers. Beth moved forward, but he stopped her by stabbing a finger on the table between them. It was a noisy gesture of ownership.

'Don't worry about me. I have all this now.'

His hand had landed on the cover of the latest *Time* magazine, and she wondered if he was grinding in a further insult. A haunting photograph of Luca's face gazed up at her, above the headline EUROPE'S RICHEST MAN. Now he had money, and she had none. There's irony for you, Beth thought bitterly.

'I can only hope you have better luck than I've had, Luca.'

'Luck has nothing to do with it.' His eyes burned into her like glowing coals. 'Nobody has ever been lower than I was when they brought me back here, five years ago. From a position of authority, travelling the world, and fending for myself, I was reduced to nothing more than a poor relation. Worse than that, I was trapped indoors for twenty-four hours a day.' Despite his story, there was no self-pity in him. His low laugh was a dry, humourless sound. 'That didn't last long, believe me. I whipped myself, and Francesco Fine Arts, into shape at the same time. Nothing stops me, Elizabeth. Not even life. And certainly not you,' he finished meaningfully.

She looked away from him and the intensity of his words, focusing instead on the delicate pastry in front of her. Principles were slippery things when it came to luxury, and she had not tasted cake like this for a very long time. At last she came to the crumbs, then put down her spoon and fork. There was nothing for it now but to try and make a dignified exit from Luca's watchful presence.

'Well, delightful though this has been, Signor Francesco, I've delivered Ben's notes so I really must be getting back to my work,' she said in a cool, detached voice. 'Is there anything else you would like to discuss with me?'

'No.'

'I mean with regard to Ben's conference notes.'

'So do I.' He checked his Rolex. It was identical in design to the one she had presented to him, all those years ago.

Given the look in his eyes, it was probably not *exactly* the same watch.

His glance flicked across the table. He was clearly waiting for her to add something. But Beth's heart was hammering so hard in her chest that speech was impossible. For an instant she wondered if he could hear it, too. As she looked into those deep, dark, irresistible eyes it brought back the delicious thrill of his hand moving over hers a few moments before. All of a sudden, nothing mattered to her any more except winning his forgiveness, so she could have that sensation again. Then reality hit home. Luca was the boss in more ways than one now. She was nothing more than the hired hand. She would have to stifle her own feelings—all of them.

'I'd better get back to work, Signor Francesco. I always match my hours to Ben.' She met his stare calmly. 'He won't take a midday break today because he's had to go out for an optician's appointment, so I won't, either.'

Luca did not look impressed. 'You must eat, Beth. I shall tell the staff to expect you here at one o'clock. That is the time you eat at Rose Cottage, yes?'

His expression was severe, but then she remembered how she had always managed to get around him in the past. And his mention of Rose Cottage seemed like a reminder of their time together. As she handed him the copy of Ben's notes she risked everything.

'That almost sounded like an invitation to lunch, Luca.'

'No.' He shook his head and turned away from her. 'Not today, Beth. Perhaps some other time, eh? *Ciao, bella!*'

Hope flickered again, until Beth realised his last remark was not directed at her. He was raising a hand in salute to the waitress who had served them. Beth watched him go, but he didn't once look back at her. Luca was abandoning her in the same brisk way he left the room. He could not wait to get back to a world in which she had no place at all. It was the ultimate dismissal.

CHAPTER TWO

BETH continued to stare after Luca until the door of the executive lounge eased itself closed. That broke her trance, but she gave him a few minutes to get back to his eyrie before leaving the room herself. To meet him a second time so soon after that brush-off would be awful. She needed time to steady her nerves before she saw him again. Burying herself in the reassurance of work would help. As she walked back to her desk she wondered how long it would be before she could face Luca with courage. A long time, a small, sad voice replied.

From that moment on, Beth could not concentrate properly. She had always wondered if Luca still hated her. Now she knew. He had made it clear exactly how deep his feelings ran. He had every right to feel that way. Painful though it was, she would have to isolate herself from him as much as possible. She did not want to increase his bitterness. The only way to cope was to forget they had ever meant anything to each other. She would have to stifle all her emotions, and treat him with nothing but cold formality.

But something was busily working away at the back of her mind. It would not leave her alone, and fizzled through her body like a slow charge. The sensation grew as the day wore on until her limbs were as heavy as her head. An uncomfortable truth was beginning to seep along her veins. It mingled with the hot, urgent feeling that had leapt into life the moment she recognised him. The combination was sensual, yet terrifying. She had never stopped loving Luca, so it was no wonder her body melted now at the thought of him. What shocked Beth to the core of her being was the discovery that, no matter how much he hated her, no matter how much his attitude towards her had altered, or the weight of her own guilt—nothing changed the way she reacted to him. She still wanted him as much as ever.

Instead of going up to the executive lounge at lunchtime, Beth slipped out of the building. The thought of bumping into Luca and being trapped by his turbulent gaze again made her feel sick. It was partly embarrassment, but mostly shame. She was angry her body was not strong enough to resist him. Five years ago he had refused to make any commitment to her. Now he was blaming *her*, because she had stood up for her principles, and given him an ultimatum. And the worst part of it was, Beth knew those principles would crumble into dust now, the instant he laid another finger on her…

In the end she had to give herself a mental pep talk. I'm worth more than this, she thought, grinding her teeth so hard her head began to throb. Mooning after a man who hates me is a fast track to heartache.

She threw all her energy into her work, but it was no use. No matter how many jobs she found to do around the office that afternoon, the memory of Luca haunted her for the rest of the day. Each time there was a knock at the door her head jerked up in alarm. Every ringing telephone set her

nerves jangling. She was so glad to see Ben pull his jacket off the back of his chair and try out his '*Ciao!*' at the end of the day she almost pushed him out of the door.

Beth had been so desperate to plunge into the ordeal of her first day at work she had travelled straight from the airport to the office. There had been no time to find her new home. Once she had cleared her desk and pulled the cover over her computer monitor, it was time for her second shift to begin. This time, Beth's job title was 'Apartment Hunter'.

Trying to track down the flat Ben had rented for her was a nightmare. By the time she had puzzled out his hopeless directions, it was raining and she was soaked. The 'apartment' turned out to be little more than twenty square metres of furnished hell, on the sad side of town. The agency employed by Ben had thrown Beth's few pieces of luggage into the middle of the dirty carpet. The whole room had a dank, unfriendly feel, and smelled of mushrooms. It looked as cheerful as Beth felt.

At least I won't have time to feel sorry for myself, she thought, dropping her handbag and going over to the single small window. It was sticky with disuse and she had to force it open. No refreshing breeze burst in from outside: only the relentless rattle of raindrops on rusting ironwork. She gazed down onto a cobbled courtyard, wondering how long it would be before all the puddles joined up to make a lake. A single pigeon hunched on next-door's window ledge, fluffed up against the deluge. It looked sick. Desperate for company, Beth wondered if she ought to try and coax it closer. Before she could try, a knock at her door sent the bird rocketing off into the rain.

The thought of having a conversation with a real person made Beth throw common sense after the bird. Crossing her room in a couple of strides, she opened the door and instantly the smile froze on her face.

It was Luca.

The impulse to throw her arms around his neck and beg to be rescued died as she saw the look in his eyes. It nailed her to the spot. He looked as though he would respond only too quickly, but not in the way she needed. Beth wanted to keep him there, not send him away. She stared at him for what felt like hours. He had changed out of his business suit, but Luca in casual clothes looked equally stunning. Dressed in beautifully cut jeans and a blue open necked shirt, he was glittering with raindrops. They sparkled in his jet-black hair and darkened his trousers to navy, but could not dilute his disapproval. There was a bottle of Bardolino in his left hand and a pizza box in his right, but he lowered them as Beth's hand went to her hair. Subconsciously, her fingers searched for the honey-blonde strands she always twiddled when she was nervous.

'H-how in the world did you know where to find me?' She gasped.

'Employee records.' Concern creased his brow. 'Don't you know how dangerous it is to open your door without finding out who is calling first, Beth? I might have been anybody.'

For a second Beth allowed herself to think that his concern might mean he still cared, but quickly realised that he was just protecting his investment—doing his job.

'I heard you skipped lunch. It's a bad habit, Beth. Accept this as a peace-offering. We shouldn't have parted on such bad terms this morning, after so long apart.' His words were meant kindly enough, but his expression didn't soften.

Beth nodded, and backed into her room. This was the ultimate reversal of fortune, and it hurt.

'I—I'm sorry about the state of this place, Luca…'

'Don't be. I've seen worse.'

Both of them silently added the words 'in Balacha', but that was not something to be spoken out loud.

'Ben insisted on booking my accommodation himself, and the agency made some sort of mix-up. Apparently,' she said, staring at her sandals.

'They found him a cosy canal-side hotel room, I notice.'

Beth made a nervous, fluttering gesture with her hands. 'It doesn't matter. Sit down, Luca.'

The choice was between her apartment's squashy old armchair, and the edge of her bed. Beth pointed to the chair. Luca remained standing.

'Your reactions puzzle me, Beth.' He hesitated over her name, still finding it unusual. 'It's almost as though you really have changed since we were together.'

'I told you so.'

He raised a dark brow. 'So you are throwing my own taunt back at me, eh?'

She took the pizza from him and set it down on the apartment's single table. Opening the cutlery drawer, she tried to take out a knife, but recoiled in horror. Without comment, Luca moved in to do it for her. A previous tenant had left everything in the drawer horribly sticky. Luca went over to the small, scratched sink but could find no washing-up liquid. Cleaning the knife as best he could, he rinsed it well under a noisy, intermittent stream of tepid water. Returning it to Beth, he watched her divide up the pizza with the care she always used when she knew he was watching.

He accepted a single slice and as he watched her nibble nervously on her piece commented, 'Perhaps I shouldn't have bothered bringing a full-sized one. Knowing you, Beth, you'll throw the rest away as soon as I've disappeared.'

'I would never do a thing like that now.' She blushed, remembering all the times she had been flippant about money, dining out and always after something new.

'Really?' He raised his eyebrows in a knowing gesture.

'Really,' she repeated with feeling.

'I hope this "new" Beth is still as keen on parties as she always used to be,' he said. 'I've decided to throw one to introduce Ben to all the people who matter. As his assistant, you're invited as well, of course. It will be a chance for you to do some socialising, fine dining, and dancing— all the things that mean so much to you.'

So that's the only reason he's come to see me, Beth thought, absolutely deflated. When she had first opened the door to find Luca standing there, it had taken all her strength not to weep with relief. Thank goodness she hadn't. She made the necessary effort and forced herself to smile.

'So…when is it, exactly?'

'I haven't decided yet. I came to consult you first. How much notice does it take to get Ben to the right place at the right time?'

She looked at him scornfully, but he was quick to cut short any smart remark she might have made.

'It had better be on Friday night, or Saturday. That's for the benefit of the guests coming from abroad.'

'How much notice will they need?'

He gazed at her, quizzically. 'What do you mean?'

'People will need to check their diaries, and make arrangements.'

He raised his eyebrows, shaking his head in mystification. 'It's never bothered them before. Andria rings around. If they're free, they come. If they're not, they don't. Though I can't remember ever having a refusal.'

No, thought Beth. I'm sure you can't.

'As you obviously don't have any strong objections, I'll go ahead. This weekend is good for me. I'll ring Andria now, and she'll get things going.'

'You're off duty, but your assistant is still at work?' Beth gasped.

Luca was offended. 'Of course not—what do you think I am?'

I know exactly what you are—whatever you're doing, you're bound to be a workaholic, Beth thought. She watched him extract a phone from the pocket of his jeans. They were cut to perfection. Memories of his beautiful body had been haunting her since their first meeting in the executive lounge. Now they struck her low down, with a vengeance. Her temperature began to rise as she saw

the fabric stretched tight around the tempting curve of his flank. Luckily, Luca was too busy with his call to notice the effect it was having on her.

He looked over in Beth's direction and smiled, but she had more sense than to think it was directed at her. It must have been the stream of words chattering from his handset that sparked his amusement. Beth could imagine what poor Andria felt like, being telephoned at home on office business.

She turned away to make sure their call was private but, in a room as small as hers, it was impossible.

'Ah, yes, you know me too well,' she heard Luca say. 'That's why you're my assistant, Andria.' As he spoke he cast his eyes around Beth's new flat. 'Andria, I don't see any signs that the firm has sent Beth a welcome basket—you know the sort of thing—flowers, a few basics like coffee and washing-up liquid, fruit, a guide to local attractions…'

Luca finished his call. Beth turned to watch him put his phone back into his pocket again, although she was careful to keep her expression bland.

'Andria is the best assistant I have ever had. That girl is a mind-reader.' His satisfaction was obvious.

'That isn't quite as tricky as you might think, Luca. All it would take is for her to sacrifice everything for the sake of your career.'

His smile evaporated. 'Ah, so you still think you made the right decision in leaving me? Then you haven't seen everything my hard work has brought me. Come on—I'll show you now.' Dragging out his phone again, he called up his pilot and arranged to be picked up. 'He'll be docking my launch in ten minutes,' he informed Beth. 'If you want to grab that bottle and the pizza, we can eat later.'

Beth had to hurry to keep up with Luca as they left her apartment. His long strides led her beneath festoons of washing threaded over the back lanes. It had all been abandoned to the rain. That had stopped, but the laundry still dripped reminders of the deluge onto their heads. These alleys were hidden away, where the tourists did not visit. It was the dim, claustrophobic Venice only local people saw. Beth was glad when they reached the canal. She was even happier to recognise the smart new craft Luca had been driving earlier that day. He helped her in, his grasp firm and warm as his hand closed over hers. Beth tensed at his touch, but he let her go the moment she was safely on board. As their pilot steered them away from the mooring an argument broke out between a tenant of one of the waterside apartments and a boatman below. It resulted in a bucket of water being thrown out of an upstairs window, complete with vegetable peelings.

Beth was not impressed, and wrinkled her nose. 'I thought Venice was supposed to be more sophisticated than this.'

'Winter is coming. Tempers get shorter as the nights get longer. But it is not always like this. You will soon grow to love the place, all year round.'

'My contract with Francesco Fine Arts comes up for renewal in six months' time.'

He made no further comment and, hurt, Beth stayed silent until their launch swung around a gentle bend. Then she gasped, and Luca's smile showed his satisfaction.

'So you like my new house?'

'That's *yours?*' Beth could hardly speak. Ahead of them, a beautiful creamy-pink palace rose out of the water. Despite the cloudy sky, its four storeys were still a shimmering reflection of grace and ageless beauty.

'Oh, Luca…it's wonderful…' she breathed.

His smile had an ironic twist. 'She's falling to bits. And sinking. It would be cheaper to have the whole place transported over to the mainland, stone by stone. There, we could at least use modern luxuries like solid foundations.' He clicked his tongue. 'I don't know. This place eats money. I have to spend my working days stuck inside an office—the things I do to keep my family name alive.'

Beth thought back to the one and only time Luca had taken her backpacking. He was born to be wild. It took imagination to see him enjoying life in a perfectly proportioned, stone and shuttered place like this, lovely though it was.

'You kept very quiet about this grand family of yours when I knew you first, Luca.'

'My background wasn't important to me then. At that point there was no more than this old wreck to inherit. Besides, you were quite happy playing the part of a grand lady consorting with her "bit of rough", back then.'

The pilot tied up their launch. As Luca stepped off the boat he extended his hand to help Beth ashore. She hesitated, nervous of the effect of his touch, but she had no choice. As she suspected, when her fingers met his her body betrayed her and wanted more of what she couldn't have.

When they were both safely on the broad paved way in front of the palazzo, Luca dismissed his pilot with a smile. Now they were alone together. Beth could not stand the silence.

'I really am sorry for what happened between us in Balacha, Luca,' she said quietly.

'I don't doubt it.'

He was studying the façade of his house in minute detail.

'Can't you look at me, Luca?'

Dropping his gaze to her face, he looked at her with all the emotion of a professional poker player. 'How's that?'

'I did a stupid thing back then. It was in the heat of the moment, because I was angry. Tristram was always there. You weren't. Then one day it all got too much for me.'

Eyes burning, she looked to him for sympathy, or at least understanding. She saw neither. Luca was listening to her, but his expression showed he simply no longer cared. My God, she thought, his hidden, gentle heart has turned to stone. I might as well be explaining the running order at an English gymkhana.

'So…the way I treated you hasn't affected you at all, Luca?'

'It was a long time ago, Beth. I am over it now.'

'Is that all you can say?'

He heaved an exasperated sigh. 'Opposites attract, Beth. You moved on when you discovered we did not differ quite as much as you thought. We both like to get our own way. It's called inflexibility, and that is not a good ingredient in relationships. Or so I am told.'

'And you honestly believe that?'

'Yes,' he said slowly, 'I believe that.'

She stared at him, staggered by his uncaring attitude. She did what she always did, and fell back on good manners.

'I think—I think that as you have been kind enough to bring me here, Luca, I would like to see inside your home.'

CHAPTER THREE

LUCA led her towards his house without a word. This was another change in him. In the past, he used to laugh at her interest in bricks and mortar. Beth expected him to make some remark about her obsession with places and things, but he said nothing. As he wasn't in the army any more, she supposed he could not argue about settling in one place. But this giant step into prestige property ownership must have stretched even Luca's powers. Beth marvelled to see the great doors of the palazzo sweep apart before them, as though he had said 'open sesame'. Efficient staff met them on the threshold. Two of them took charge of the pizza and wine Beth and Luca had brought back, while another whisked Beth's jacket away. The palazzo was far too grand to have anything as simple as a coat-stand. Instead, her jacket was slipped onto a padded hanger and placed carefully inside an enormous mahogany closet.

Whatever Beth felt about Luca's silence faded the moment she stepped inside his house. Her first sight of his home knocked all the breath from her body. It really was a palace. Large winged

lions topped each lintel, looking down on everyone with aristocratic scorn. Any surface that was not polished to a glass-like finish glittered with gold leaf. The entrance hall was high and wide, but Beth could hardly take it all in. She was too busy admiring the floor. It was a cold sea of marble, which gave the whole space an echoing, church-like feel. The grey-veined ground was inlaid with coloured geometric shapes of sienna and cypress, all worked into a beautiful repeating design.

'The stone was brought here from many different quarries,' Luca said, noticing her interest as he guided her past statues of his ancestors. 'When I was at school in England, the boys would bring back souvenirs from their exotic foreign vacations. I was not lucky enough to have that sort of family. My guardians arranged for me to stay in the boarding house, even during holidays. To go anywhere more romantic than Windsor was unthinkable for me then. But now…'

Hesitation was not usually part of his nature. Beth glanced at him. She had never seen wonder in his face before, but his expression came close to it now as he looked around his great vaulted hall, lavish with the art of Renaissance masters. Then he realised she was looking at him. In a flash he was back to his normal, decisive self.

'This must be the ancient version of holiday keepsakes. A reminder of all the trading missions my ancestors made to far-flung places like Asia, Egypt and Greece. I am lucky to have the job of protecting it all for future generations.'

'It sounds as though you really love this palazzo.' Beth smiled at the pride in his voice. Luca shrugged his shoulders, but the action seemed more like someone who was adjusting to a heavy burden.

'I am growing to like it. This building and all the people who have lived here in the past must not be forgotten. Tradition is important. To me it is vital, as I grew up without any sense of close family. This place is a treasure, so, even if I would rather spend my time out in the fresh air, I owe it to my ancestors to put the needs of their palazzo first.'

'And the generations that will follow you?' Beth suggested, but he did not seem to hear. Instead he sauntered on, through to an inner courtyard. Here, herringbone brickwork and cool colonnades surrounded a high stone font, richly carved with shields and heraldic lions. Everywhere showed the chips and scratches of centuries, giving it the beauty of experience.

'When this house was built, the architects thought of everything. I even have my own well.' Luca indicated the central stone structure.

Beth stepped up onto its plinth and planted her hands on the gritty surface of the well's wide stone lip. Leaning forward, she looked over the edge.

'I can't see the bottom. How deep is it?'

Luca shrugged. 'It was intended as a private water supply in times of siege, so it has to be deep enough to make it secure.'

Inspired, Beth glanced at him again. This time she risked a smile.

'Does it grant wishes?'

Luca narrowed his eyes and gave her a look that was enough to melt any woman, and Beth was lost. Her heart hesitated, and then almost stopped as he raised one dark eyebrow.

'Try it, and see,' he murmured.

She didn't need to be told twice. Rapidly churning through the contents of her bag, she managed to find a single Euro and tossed it into the blackness. Luca watched with amusement as she craned over the edge, listening, and then smiled at her childlike excitement at the resulting 'plop'.

She caught him watching her, and sparkled.

'I really hope it works, Luca.'

A warm glow began to stroke over her body. It shimmered with tension, and she blushed. If he can read my mind I'm in trouble now, she thought breathlessly. Although not the sort of trouble I would want to avoid…

‘Oh, it does, Beth. In fact, that well works a lot harder than many people I know,’ he said, already starting off up a narrow stone stairway leading to the next floor. ‘No visitor can resist testing its powers by throwing in money, so we dredge it regularly. The coins we pull out help to pay the bills.’

‘Luca!’ Beth laughed, running to catch him up. ‘And you used to be so romantic!’

His laughter echoed off the ancient walls. ‘Experience has taken its toll on me, *cara*.’

Beth’s heart bounced again at the casual endearment. Then she caught sight of his expression. It was full of pride in ownership, nothing more. She should have known better. Luca never put his real feelings into words until it was far, far too late. Of all people, *I* should know that, she thought. Lost in memories, she hardly took in anything as Luca escorted her around a series of ever more stately apartments. She was so distracted when he merely waved a hand in the direction of his own rooms, she did not ask to see them. It was only when they reached a separate wing of the building she managed to rouse herself.

‘This is where the official tour ends,’ he said with some relief. ‘These final rooms have always been called Tiepolo’s bridal suite, as he is supposed to have been the last decorator.’

Beth guessed Luca was trying to make a point by running down the work of such a grand artist, so she said nothing. Stepping past him, she went straight into the suite. It was dark in the reception area. The still air was heavy with the fragrance of lavender. She stopped, afraid of blundering into anything in the gloom. Luca strode straight past her and, one by one, opened all the pairs of tall shutters at the far side of the room. Watery evening sunshine streamed in and, despite all the other wonders she had seen, Beth gasped. She was stunned.

For a few seconds, all she could do was walk around in a small circle, gazing at the high, graceful beauty of the apartment.

‘I thought the rest of your home was lovely, but this place is truly magical,’ she breathed, lost in wonder. The entire ceiling was decorated with exquisitely painted gods and goddesses billowing across pink and silver clouds. Every surface was transformed into heaven. Wandering on into the suite, Beth was glad the click of her stilettos was silenced here. It would have been an intrusion. Thick antique rugs softened the cold acreage of marble, and muffled the echoes that made the rest of the palazzo feel so formal and unwelcoming. All the carpeting here was in shades of rose and old gold. The softly upholstered chairs picked up these colours and everything was reflected in the highly polished sheen of ancient oak furniture.

Beth walked from the reception area into the private apartments in a daze. At the heart of the suite stood an enormous bridal bed, canopied with gauze and lace hangings. These fell in sumptuous folds from somewhere near the ceiling, and she looked up to see how it was done. Then she began to have second thoughts about her dream apartment.

‘It’s awfully dark up there. Are you sure there aren’t any bats?’

‘Anyone would think you were afraid, Beth.’

‘No,’ she retorted nervously. ‘It’s just that…’

He laughed. ‘Let me put your mind at rest. Though…I think electric light is too harsh for such a setting, don’t you?’

Beth heard a rasping sound and light flared in the dusky gloom. It danced over a golden crown, suspended high among the ancient, smoke-blackened beams of the ceiling. She turned to see what Luca was doing. He had lit a candle. Setting it into a sconce on the wall, he took several more candles from a drawer and touched their wicks alight from the first flame. Shadows leapt up all around, moving softly through the evening light.

‘Your apartments are on the other side of the building where it’s so formal and cold, Luca. Why don’t you use these rooms instead? They feel much more friendly and welcoming,’ she asked as he went around the room fixing lights into more of the specially designed holders on the walls.

‘I don’t need places to be “friendly”. And, besides, why would I need a bridal suite?’ He paused and turned to look at her. ‘I am not cut out for marriage.’

She had used that jibe on him in their distant past. Now her own words were being bounced back at her. Tears stung her eyes as she looked around the room. She soon spotted another good reason why Luca wouldn't sleep here. It was decorated with dozens of cupids.

'It was a silly question, I suppose. You aren't one for all these baby dimples, that's for sure.'

'These are merely an artistic ideal, not a literal representation of what this room was expected to produce.'

Beth swung around and gaped at him. That remark and its language were totally at odds with the Luca she had always known. What she saw now was equally amazing. He was looking over the wall paintings with the air of a true connoisseur, pointing out the quality to her with one expressive hand.

Once she had got over the shock, Beth could not resist a sly dig at him.

'Careful, Luca—you're beginning to sound like my father!'

He dropped his arm, and hooked a thumb into one of the belt loops of his jeans. Her sarcasm did not bother him at all. He put his head on one side, and looked at her with an expression close to pity.

'I always take my responsibilities seriously, Beth. When I arrived here, my great-uncle's art business was failing. I was not about to sit back and watch it die. Neither was I going to let my disappointment at having to leave the army blight the rest of my life. With plenty of spare time on my hands, I began to read. You saw the library here earlier.'

Beth nodded. The palazzo's reading rooms held more books than she had ever seen in one place at any one time.

'With my great-uncle always on hand, I untangled the mysteries of art appreciation for myself. That meant I could combine new knowledge with my organisational skills, and propel Francesco Fine Arts into the twenty-first century. From there it was an easy move into international markets. I never waste my time, Beth. If I see something I want, I go for it. In this case, the project was to make a success of my family's business.'

'And there's no doubt at all you've succeeded.'

Beth thought back to the efficiency of his head office, the copy of *Time* magazine, and the priceless luxury in which he lived. She wandered over to a small side table, made of glistening yew wood. A pretty little porcelain dish sat on it. She picked it up, turning over the delicate, shell-like piece in her hands. Its base was marked with cobalt-blue crossed swords.

'You put Meissen on display in a room you never use?'

'I may not use it, but I have plenty of guests.'

Luca gave a wolfish smile. Beth guessed he meant most of them were women.

'That makes it worse,' she muttered. Bewitched by the room's beauty, she had hardly taken in the fine details at first. Now she began to look at its contents more closely. Some of her father's enthusiasm for his work had rubbed off on her, and Beth could recognise the styles of Chippendale and Wedgwood. There were many other exquisite pieces of furniture, glassware and porcelain that she could not identify, but they all murmured of quality and taste. She had no doubt every item was as genuine as Luca. The things in this bedroom alone must be worth hundreds of thousands. She gave a silent whistle of amazement.

'But you're such a perfectionist, Luca. Aren't you afraid your lovely things will get broken or stolen?'

'What sort of a host would I be, if I worried about little things like that?' he said airily, strolling over to the window.

Beth watched him walk away from her. In the past, she had done it dozens of times, but always when feeling the normal fear of any soldier's partner—that he might not return to her arms. Back then, the pain had been all in her mind. Now, Luca's new coldness had stamped it all over her heart as well. She gazed at his broad back and wide shoulders. The fine designer cut of his blue silk shirt could not disguise the power of his body. Gradually, her pangs dissolved into need. This time, she was feeling the agony of a separation from him that could never be repaired.

Her anguish was so real it trembled through her body, willing her to rush up and throw herself on his mercy all over again. As she watched he put up a hand to push aside the gauzy curtains with his slender bronze fingers. She saw the contrast of his olive skin against the white net. She remembered his touch so vividly that it hurt. Thoughts of what they had shared tugged at her like stitches in a wound that would not heal. Unable to fight her desire any more, Beth felt herself drawn across the few metres separating them. Although the thick Amritsar rug muffled all sound, Luca still sensed her movements. Turning his head, he looked at her with limpid dark eyes. They told her nothing. She was so close now she could breathe in the warm, familiar fragrance of his cologne, although the faint shadow along his jaw line showed it was hours since he had last shaved. Her whole body ached with the desperate urge to reach out and touch him—to feel his raw masculinity.

All he did was look at her, silently and steadily. It was a tigerish expression, daring her to get within his danger zone. There would be no open invitation any more. Beth had to risk making contact on instinct alone. Nervously, she raised her hand until her fingertips could no longer resist the magnetic attraction of his proud, carved cheekbones. His skin felt exactly as she remembered. As her index finger traced the slope of his jaw she felt where the smooth, flawless surface of his cheek became roughened at his beard line.

As inflexible as Sansovino's statue of Mars, Luca allowed her caress to move slowly to his hair. Hardly daring to breathe, she continued to stroke him. Her touch drifted down around his neck to the front of the plain white fabric of his shirt. All the time his unblinking stare challenged her to continue, to tempt him beyond endurance. But there was not any direct response. Finally, Beth closed her eyes. She could not carry on laying her emotions bare like this without any encouragement. Her hand faltered and fell away. She was unable to go any further, in case he rejected her.

Then she sensed a sudden darkening of the world outside. Opening her eyes again, she saw Luca had moved his hand and let the curtain fall. Now they were both completely surrounded by shadows. He stood before her in his magnificence, a coiled spring perfectly contained by his tall, lean body. The challenge of his eyes was replaced by the defiance of his stance.

'How does it feel to be denied the one thing you desire, *tesoro?*' His native language whispered into the growing darkness but the endearment could not help her. His tone had been too painful.

'Oh, Luca…it's unbearable, especially when you speak to me like that.'

Her voice was hardly strong enough to tremble the nearest candle flame, but there was no doubt Luca heard it. In response, he moved towards her until barely a dream could slip between them. Beth dropped her head, unable to stand the pain of feeling him so close, and yet so far away. And it was then that he placed a finger under her chin and lifted her head so her gaze connected with his.

He met no resistance as he took possession of her as easily as he had always done. Beth should have known what was coming next, but she was still surprised when his mouth closed over hers. His tongue penetrated her with all the fierce passion she craved. For a few moments it was as though they had never been apart. Beth could fool herself she had never said goodbye to him, on that last terrible night in Balacha.

Luca's thrusting urgency fired Beth's desperate need for him. She clung to him with urgent hands. For five years she had quashed every emotion he inspired in her. Now her feelings rushed out in a torrent of release. She fretted over his body with her lips and tongue and fingers, but as quickly as he had embraced her he stood back.

He was breathing fast; his expression was masked. Beth felt herself crumble—Luca hadn't changed at all! Despite everything, he was still, and always would be, in control. He might allow her to touch his body, but she would never reach his heart and soul. This was no bitter-sweet reconciliation between friends. All her fierce desire and need were useless in the face of his iron will. He was rejecting her as easily as he had snatched her up.

'Don't you want me after all?' she asked, wide-eyed with realisation.

His eyes narrowed. '*Want*, certainly. But you answer your own question with those two little words "after all", Beth. After all that has happened over the past few years I don't *need* you,' he said, his voice dangerous and dark.

Beth felt his scorn like a blow. She tried to take a deep, steadying breath. Seconds before, the perfume of lavender and candles had seemed so romantic. Now it seared her lungs like acid.

Luca smiled, but while his mouth might have softened, his eyes did not. He was watching her like a cat watching a mouse.

'What is the saying— "Once bitten, twice shy?" I'm surprised a clever girl like you didn't remember that, *tesoro*.'

Her hands reached out to him, but dropped to her sides before they made contact. Passion was still burning within her, but he had discarded her.

'Luca…you were enjoying yourself… The feeling wasn't only on my side, was it?'

He gave an eloquent shrug. For a few glorious seconds, they had been pressed together so tightly, the smallest movement of his body had rubbed against hers with wicked intent.

Beth lost every shred of self-respect. She had come so far she could not give up on him now.

'Luca…look at me, please! Then tell me you didn't enjoy what we were doing just then.'

Candlelight flickered in the black pools of his eyes. It was a long time before he spoke.

'I enjoyed it very much.'

He could hardly deny it. Beth had felt the unmistakable, insistent pressure of him crushing against her. But now the look on his face mocked the flames of light dancing around the room.

'If I wanted to, I could take you right here and now, Beth. But as it would mean nothing to either of us, there would be no point.'

'You don't know that.' She looked up at him with the hopeful ghost of a smile.

'I know enough. Self-knowledge is a wonderful thing, Beth. I could have you any time I wanted, but it won't be today.'

She took a step back and stared at him, confused.

'What?'

He checked the Rolex on his wrist. 'It is getting late, Beth. My pilot will take you home, before your new neighbourhood comes alive—if you know what I mean.'

Beth groaned. The fear of what might be waiting for her back at that horrible apartment squashed all her deepest physical needs in an instant.

'Don't worry. I shall tell my pilot to see you right to your door,' Luca added quickly. 'He will have instructions not to leave until you are safely inside. And remember—don't open that door to anyone overnight. Not even me.'

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