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SANDRA MARTON

Nicolo: The Powerful Sicilian



Sandra Marton

Nicolo: The Powerful Sicilian

«HarperCollins»

Marton S.

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Powerful in the boardroom... Nicolo Orsini has better things to do than visit some ancient Tuscan vineyard! Yet when family and business mix he has little choice. Then he meets Alessia Antoninni – a spoilt little princess with a smart mouth and a pert figure – and the trip instantly becomes more interesting! Passionate in the bedroom! Alessia's been told that the Orsini name spells danger. But she wasn't expecting Nick's potent masculinity. With her heart and her business at risk, soon she is giving in to all his demands...The Orsini Brothers Darkly handsome - proud and arrogant The perfect Sicilian husbands!

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“I’m the potential investor,” he said softly, “not my father.”

“That is not what I was told!”

A muscle knotted in Nick’s jaw. She was staring at him through eyes so deep a blue they were almost violet. He’d stunned her, he could see that. Hell, he’d stunned himself.

“Trust me, princess,” he said in a voice as rough as sandpaper. “The only Orsini you’re going to deal with is me.”

Alessia Antoninni, the Princess Antoninni, shook her head. “No,” she said, and he silenced her the only way a man could silence a woman like this.

He thrust his hands into her hair, lifted her face to his, and kissed her.

Nicolo: The Powerful Sicilian

By

Sandra Marton



www.millsandboon.co.uk

About the Author

SANDRA MARTON wrote her first novel while she was still in primary school. Her doting parents told her she'd be a writer some day, and Sandra believed them. In secondary school and college she wrote dark poetry nobody but her boyfriend understood—though, looking back, she suspects he was just being kind. As a wife and mother she wrote murky short stories in what little spare time she could manage, but not even her boyfriend-turned-husband could pretend to understand those. Sandra tried her hand at other things, among them teaching and serving on the Board of Education in her home town, but the dream of becoming a writer was always in her heart.

At last Sandra realised she wanted to write books about what all women hope to find: love with that one special man, love that's rich with fire and passion, love that lasts for ever. She wrote a novel, her very first, and sold it to Mills & Boon® Modern™ Romance. Since then she's written more than sixty books, all of them featuring sexy, gorgeous, larger-than-life heroes. A four-time RITA® Award finalist, she's also received five *RT Book Reviews* awards, and has been honoured with *RT Book Reviews*' Career Achievement Award for Series Romance. Sandra lives with her very own sexy, gorgeous, larger-than-life hero in a sun-filled house on a quiet country lane in the north-eastern United States.

The patriarch of the powerful Sicilian dynasty,
Cesare Orsini, has fallen ill,
and he wants atonement before he dies.
One by one he sends for his sons—he has a mission
for each to help him clear his conscience.
His sons are proud and determined,
but they will do their duty—the tasks they undertake
will change their lives for ever! They are...

THE ORSINI BROTHERS

Darkly handsome—proud and arrogant The perfect Sicilian husbands!

by

Sandra Marton

RAFFAELE: TAMING HIS TEMPESTUOUS VIRGIN

October 2009

DANTE: CLAIMING HIS SECRET LOVE-CHILD

December 2009

FALCO: THE DARK GUARDIAN

August 2010

NICOLO: THE POWERFUL SICILIAN

December 2010

Chapter One

THE wedding at the little church in lower Manhattan and then the reception at the Orsini mansion had made for a long day, and Nicolo Orsini was more than ready to leave.

A naked woman was waiting in his bed.

She'd been there when he left his Central Park West triplex at ten that morning.

"Must you go, Nicky?" she'd said, with a pout almost as sexy as the lush body barely covered by the down duvet.

Nick had checked his tie in the mirror, checked the whole bit—the custom-tailored tux, the white silk shirt, even his wing tips, spit-polished the way he'd learned to do it in the corps. Then he'd walked back to the bed, dropped a light kiss on her hair and said yeah, he did.

It wasn't every day a man's brother got married.

He hadn't told her that, of course, he'd simply said he had to go to a wedding. Even that had been enough to put a spark of interest in her baby blues, but if he'd said it was one of his brothers doing the deed...

Talk about the Orsini brothers and weddings was not a thought he cared to leave bouncing around in any woman's head.

"I'll phone you," he'd said, and she'd pouted again—how come that pout was becoming less of a turn-on and more of an irritation?—and said maybe she'd just wait right where she was until he returned.

Nick lifted his champagne flute to his lips as he thought back to the morning.

Damn, he hoped not.

He had nothing against finding beautiful women in his bed, but his interest in this one was definitely waning and the female histrionics that sometimes accompanied the end of an affair were the last thing he wanted to deal with after a day like this. Much as he loved his brothers, his sisters, his mother, his sisters-in-law and his little nephew, there was such a thing as too much togetherness.

Or maybe it was just him. Either way, it was time to get moving.

He looked out the glass-walled conservatory at the garden behind the Orsini mansion. The flowering shrubs his sister Isabella had planted a couple of years ago were still green despite the onset of autumn. Beyond the shrubs, stone walls rose high enough to block out the streets of his childhood, streets that were changing so fast he hardly recognized them anymore. The Little Italy that had been home to generations of immigrants was rapidly giving way to Greenwich Village.

Trendy shops, upscale restaurants, art galleries. Progress, Nick thought grimly and drank some more of the champagne. He hated to see it happen. He'd grown up on these streets. Not that his memories were all warm and fuzzy. When your old man was the don of a powerful crime family, you learned early that your life was different. By the time he was nine or ten, he'd known what Cesare Orsini was and hated him for it.

But the bond with his mother and sisters had always been strong. As for the bond with his brothers...

Nick's lips curved in a smile.

That bond went beyond blood.

All day, his thoughts had dipped back to their shared childhoods. They'd fought like wolf cubs, teased each other unmercifully, stood together against kids who thought it might be fun to give the sons of a *famiglia* don a hard time. Barely out of their teens, they'd gone their separate ways only to come together again, their bond stronger than ever, to found the investment firm that had made them as wealthy and powerful as their father but without any of the ugliness of Cesare's life.

They were part of each other, Raffaele, Dante, Falco and him. Close in age, close in looks, in temperament, in everything that mattered.

Was that going to change? It had to. How could things remain the same when one after another, the Orsini brothers had taken wives?

Nick tossed back the rest of his champagne and headed for the bar that had been set up at one end of the conservatory. The bartender saw him coming, smiled politely as he popped the cork on another bottle of vintage Dom Pérignon and poured the pale gold liquid into a Baccarat flute.

"Thanks," Nick said.

Unbelievable, he thought as he watched Rafe dancing with his wife, Chiara. His brothers, married. He still couldn't get his head around it. First Rafe, then Dante and now even Falco. I-Am-An-Island-Unto-Myself Falco...

Absolutely unbelievable.

His brothers had fallen in love.

"So will you, someday," Rafe had said last night, as the four of them had toasted Falco's coming nuptials in The Bar, the Soho place they owned.

"Not me," he'd said, and they'd all laughed.

"Yeah, my man," Dante had said, "you, too."

"Trust me," Falco had said. "When you least expect it, you'll meet the right woman and next thing you know, she'll have your poor, pathetic heart right in the palm of her hand."

They'd all laughed, and Nick had let it go at that.

Why tell them that he'd already been there, done that—and no way in hell was he going to do it again.

Sure, it was possible his brothers would end up on the positive side of the grim statistics that said one in four marriages wouldn't last. Their wives seemed sweet and loving, but that was the thing about women, wasn't it?

They played games.

To put it bluntly, they lied like salesmen trying to sell ice to Eskimos.

Nick scowled, went back to the bar and put his untouched flute of champagne on its marble surface.

"Scotch," he said. "A double."

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't have Scotch."

"Bourbon, then."

"No bourbon, either."

Nick narrowed his dark eyes. "You're joking."

"No, Mr. Orsini." The bartender—a kid, maybe twenty-one, twenty-two—swallowed hard. "I'm really sorry, sir."

"Saying you're sorry isn't—"

A muscle ticked in Nick's jaw. Why give the kid a hard time? It wasn't his fault that the only liquid flowing today was stuff that cost two hundred, three hundred bucks a bottle. Cesare's idea, no doubt. His father's half-assed belief that serving a classy wine would erase the stink that clung to his name.

Forget that. Falco would have paid for the wedding himself, same as Dante and Rafe had done. That was the deal, the only way any of them had agreed to hold the receptions in what their mother insisted would always be their home. Isabella had done the flowers, Anna had made the catering and bar arrangements. If he wanted to bite somebody's head off, it would be hers.

That did it. The thought of taking on his fiery kid sister—either one of them, actually—made him laugh.

"Sorry," he told the kid. "I guess I only thought I was all champagned out."

The kid grinned as he filled a flute. "No problem, Mr. Orsini. Me, I'm all wedded out. Did one yesterday afternoon, another last night and here I am again. Comes my turn, my lady and I are definitely gonna pass on this kind of stuff."

Nick raised his glass in a mock salute. It was the appropriate reaction but what he really wanted was to say was, *Hell, man, why get married at all?*

Still, he knew the answer.

A man made his mark in the world, he wanted to make it last. He wanted children to carry on his name.

So, yeah, he'd marry some day.

But he wouldn't pick a wife by fooling himself into thinking it was love.

Outside, visible through the walls of glass, the sky was graying. Rain, the weatherman had said, and it looked as if he'd got it right for a change.

Nick opened the door and stepped onto the patio.

When he was ready to choose a wife, he would do it logically, select a woman who'd fit seamlessly into his life, who would make no demands beyond the basic ones: that he support her comfortably and treat her with respect. Respect was all he would ask from her in return.

Logic was everything, in making business decisions, in planning a marriage. He would never make an emotional decision when selecting a bank to take over, or a stock to ride out. Why would he do it in selecting a wife?

Relying on emotion was a mistake.

Once, only once and never again, he had come dangerously close to making that error.

At least he hadn't been fool enough to tell anybody. Not even his brothers. He hadn't planned it that way; he'd just kept what was happening to himself, probably because it had all seemed so special. As a result, there hadn't been any "Oh, man, we're so sorry this happened to you" bull. Not that his brothers wouldn't have meant it, but there were some things a man was better off keeping to himself.

Things like learning you'd been used.

It had happened four years ago. He'd met a woman on a business trip to Seattle. She was smart, she was funny, she was beautiful. She came from a family that was as close to royalty as you could get in America but she'd made it in business on her own as the CFO of the small private bank he'd gone to the Northwest to buy.

To consider buying.

And that had turned out to be the key to everything.

She'd been in his bed by the end of the first day. And he'd wanted to keep her there. Before he knew it, they'd set a pattern. He flew to Seattle one weekend, she flew to New York the next. She said she missed him terribly when they weren't together; he admitted he felt the same way.

He had been falling in love, and he knew it.

A month into their affair, he decided he had to tell her about his father. He'd never done that before. A woman either knew his old man was a crook or she didn't. Who gave a damn? But this was different. This was—he'd avoided even thinking the word in the past—a relationship.

So, one night, lying in her bed, he told her.

"My father is Cesare Orsini." When she didn't react, he told her the rest. That Cesare was the head of a notorious *famiglia*. That he was a gangster.

"Oh," she purred, "I already knew that, Nicky." A sexy smile. "Actually, it's a turn-on."

A muscle knotted in his jaw.

The revelation should have set off warning bells. But the part of his anatomy with which he'd been thinking didn't have the luxury of possessing bells, warning or otherwise.

A long holiday weekend was coming. He'd asked her to spend it with him. She said she couldn't. Her grandmother, who lived in Oregon, was ill. She'd always been Grandma's favorite; Saturday morning, she'd fly out to spend the weekend with her, just the two of them, alone. She smiled. And she'd tell Grandma about the wonderful man she'd met.

Nick said he understood. It was a sweet thing to do.

And then, Friday night, he thought, what if he went with her? He could meet Grandma. Tell her how important her granddaughter had become to him.

He decided to make it a surprise.

He took the Orsini jet to Seattle, rented a car, drove to his lady's town house, took the key she'd given him and slipped quietly inside.

What came next had been like a punch in the gut.

His lady was in bed with her boss, the bank's CEO, laughing as she assured him that Nicolo Orsini was absolutely, positively going to make an offer for the bank that far exceeded its worth.

"An Orsini and you, babe," the man had said. "It's a classic. The princess and the stable boy..."

The delicate champagne flute shattered in Nick's hand.

"Merda!"

Champagne spilled on the jacket of his tux; a tiny drop of crimson oozed from a small cut on his hand. Nick yanked a pristine white handkerchief from his pocket, dabbed at his tux, at his finger...

"Hey, man," an amused male voice said, "the champagne's not that bad."

It was Rafe, coming toward him with a bottle of Heineken in each hand. Nick groaned with pleasure and reached for one.

"You're a miracle worker," he said. "Where'd this come from?"

"Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies." Rafe frowned, jerked his head at Nick's hand. "You okay?"

"Fine. See? The bleeding's stopped already."

"What happened?"

Nick shrugged. "I didn't know my own strength," he said with a lazy smile. "No problem. I'll get something and sweep it up."

"Trust me, Nick. One of the catering staff is bound to come out of the woodwork before you can—" A woman appeared, broom and dustpan in hand. "See? What did I tell you?"

Nick nodded his thanks, waited until the woman was gone, then touched his bottle to his brother's.

"To small miracles," he said, "like brothers with bottles of beer at just the right moment."

"I figured it would do away with that long face you were wearing."

"Me? A long face? I guess I was—ah, I was thinking about that Swiss deal."

"Forget business," Dante said, as he joined them. He, too, had a bottle of beer in his hand. "It's a party, remember?" He grinned as he leaned closer. "Gaby says that little caterer's assistant has been eyeing you all afternoon."

"Well, of course she has," Nick said, because he knew it was expected.

His brothers laughed. They talked for a few minutes and then it was time to say goodbye to the bride and groom.

Finally, he could get out of here.

He went through the whole routine—kisses, hugs, promises to his mother that he'd come to dinner as soon as he could. His father wasn't around. Perfect, he thought as he made his way down the long hall to the front door. He never had anything to say to Cesare beyond a perfunctory "hello" or "goodbye," and if the old man got hold of him today, it might take more than that because—

"Nicolo."

Hell. Think of the devil and he was sure to turn up.

"Leaving so soon, *mio figlio*?" Cesare, dressed not in Brioni today but in an Armani tux, flashed a smile.

"Yes," Nick said coldly.

Cesare chuckled. "So direct. A man after my own heart."

"You don't have a heart, Father."

"And you are quick. I like that, too."

“I’m sure I should be flattered but you’ll forgive me if I’m not. Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“Have you forgotten you were to meet with me the day of Dante’s wedding?”

Forgotten? Hardly. Cesare had cornered Falco and him; Nick had cooled his heels while Falco and the old man were closeted in his study and after a few minutes Nick had thought, *What am I doing, waiting here like an obedient servant?*

Besides, he’d known what his father wanted to tell him. Safe combinations. Vault locations. The names of lawyers, of accountants, everything the don felt his sons had to know in case of his death, when truth was none of them would ever touch the spoils of what the media called the Orsini *famiglia*.

“Five minutes,” Nick said brusquely. “Just so long as you know in advance, Father, that whatever speech you’ve prepared, I’m not interested.”

Freddo, Cesare’s capo, stepped out of the shadows as father and son approached the don’s study. Cesare waved the coldeyed hoodlum aside, followed Nick into the room and shut the door.

“Perhaps, Nicolo, I will be able to change your mind.”

Ten minutes later, Nick stared at his father.

“Let me be sure I get this. You want to invest in a winery.”

Cesare, seated behind his oversized mahogany desk, hands folded on its polished surface, nodded. “Yes.”

“The Antoninni winery in Florence, Italy.”

“In Tuscany, Nicolo. Tuscany is a province. *Firenze* is a city within it.”

“Spare me the geography lesson, okay? You’re investing in a vineyard.”

“I have not made that commitment yet but yes, I hope to invest in the prince’s winery.”

“The prince.” Nick laughed, but the sound was not pleasant. “Sounds like a bad movie. *The Prince and the Don*, a farce in two acts.”

“I am pleased you are amused,” Cesare said coolly.

“What’d you do? Make him an offer he couldn’t refuse?”

The don’s expression hardened. “Watch how you speak to me.”

“Or what?” Nick leaned over the desk and slapped his hands flat on the surface. “I’m not afraid of you, old man. I haven’t been afraid of you since I figured out what you were two decades ago.”

“Nor have you shown me the respect a son owes a father.”

“I owe you nothing. And if respect’s what you want from me—”

“We are wasting time. What I want from you is your professional expertise.”

Nick stood straight, arms folded. “Meaning what?”

“Meaning, I need to know the true value of the vineyard before I make a final offer. A financial evaluation, you might call it.”

“And?”

“And, I am asking you to make the evaluation for me.”

Nick shook his head. “I evaluate banks, Father. Not grapes.”

“You evaluate assets. It is your particular skill at the company you and your brothers own, is it not?”

“How nice.” Nick’s lips drew back from his teeth in a lupine smile. “That you noticed your sons own a business so different from yours, I mean.”

“I am a businessman, Nicolo.” Nick snorted; Cesare’s eyes narrowed. “I am a businessman,” he repeated. “And you are an expert on financial acquisitions. The prince offers me a ten percent interest for five million euros. Is that reasonable? Should my money buy me more, or will I lose it all if the company is in trouble?” The don picked up a manila envelope and rattled it. “He gave me facts and figures, but how do I know what they mean? I want your opinion, your conclusions.”

“Send an accountant,” Nick said with a tight smile. “One of the *paesano* who cooks your books.”

“The real question,” his father said, ignoring the jibe, “is why he wants my money. For expansion, he says, but is that true? The vineyard has been in his family for five hundred years. Now,

suddenly, he requires outside investors. I need answers, Nicolo, and who better to get them for me than my own flesh and blood?”

“Nice try,” Nick said coldly, “but it’s a little late for the ‘do it for Dad’ routine.”

“It is not for me.” Cesare rose to his feet. “It is for your mother.”

Nick burst out laughing. “That’s good. That’s great! ‘Do it for your mother.’ Right. As if Mama wants to invest in an Italian vineyard.” Nick’s laughter stopped abruptly. “But it’s not going to work, so if you’re done—”

“There are things you do not know about your mother and me, Nicolo.”

“Damned right, I don’t. For starters, what in hell possessed her to marry you?”

“She married me for the same reason I married her.” Cesare’s gruff voice softened. “For love.”

“Oh, sure,” Nick said sarcastically. “You and she—”

“We eloped. Did you know that? She was betrothed to the wealthiest man in our village.”

Nick couldn’t keep his surprise from showing. Cesare saw it and nodded with satisfaction.

“That man is the father of Rafe’s wife, Chiara.”

“Chiara’s father? My mother was engaged to...?”

“Your brother knows. He kept the information to himself, as is proper. *Sì*, Sofia and I eloped.”

Cesare’s expression softened. “We fled to Tuscany.”

Nick was still working on the fact that his mother had run away with his father, but he managed to ask the obvious question.

“Why? If you were both Sicilian...”

“Tuscany is beautiful, not harsh like Sicily but soft and golden. There are those in Italy who think Tuscany is the heart of our people’s culture while Sicily and Sicilians...” The don shrugged. “What matters is that it was your mother’s dream.”

Nick felt the story drawing him in.

“Then, why did you emigrate to America?”

A small tic danced under Cesare’s left eye.

“I had no skills other than those I acquired as a boy,” he said in a low voice, “skills that had a use in Sicily. And here, in this country, as well. I knew this, you see, just as I knew that if I wanted to give your mother more than a life of poverty—”

Nick leaned over the desk and slammed his hands on either arm of his father’s chair. “How dare you use my mother as an excuse for the things you’ve done!”

“I have done what I have done,” Cesare said flatly. “The decisions were mine and I offer no apologies or excuses.” His tone softened. “But if I could give Sofia this—this bit of Tuscan soil, this only thing she ever asked of me—”

“It’s a hell of a story,” Nick said coldly, “I’ll grant you that.”

But was it true? The only way to know was to ask his mother, and there wasn’t a way in hell he was about to do that.

What it came down to was simple. Cesare might be using him...but so what? A couple of days out of his life was all it would take.

“Okay,” Nick snapped. “I’ll give you two days. That’s it. Two days in Tuscany. Then I head home.”

Cesare held out the manila envelope. “Everything you need is here, Nicolo. *Mille grazie*.”

“Don’t thank me. Thank your wife for having eloped with a man unworthy of her forty years ago.”

Nick took the envelope, turned on his heel and walked out.

“Two days, Alessia,” Prince Vittorio Antoninni said. “That is all I ask.”

Alessia Antoninni kept her gaze on the moonlit grape vines that stretched toward the softly rolling Tuscan hills. It was fall and the vines, long since stripped of their fruit, seemed lifeless.

“I told you, Papa, I have work waiting for me in Rome.”

“Work,” the prince scoffed. “Is that what you call running around with celebrities?”

Alessia looked at her father. They stood on the verandah that spilled from the rear of the centuries-old villa that was her ancestral home.

“I work for a public relations firm,” she said evenly. “I do not ‘run around,’ I deal with clients.”

“Which means that handling public relations for your very own father should take you no effort at all.”

“It is not a matter of effort. It is a matter of time. I don’t have any.”

“Perhaps what you do not have is the wish to be a dutiful daughter.”

There were endless answers to that but the hour was late. Alessia decided to let the gauntlet lie where her father had thrown it.

“You should not have agreed to a visit from this American if you knew you would not be available for it.”

“How many times must I explain? Something’s come up. I cannot be here for *Signore Orsini*’s visit and it would be impolite to cancel it.”

“You mean, it would be dangerous to disappoint a gangster.”

“Cesare Orsini is a businessman. Why believe the lies of the tabloid press?”

“Your staff can handle things. Your accountants, your secretary—”

“And what of the dinner party I arranged?” The prince raised an eyebrow. “Would you have my housekeeper assume the role of hostess?”

“I have not been your hostess for years. Let your mistress play the part. She’s done it before.”

“*Signore Orsini* was born in this country.”

“He was born in Sicily,” Alessia said, with all the disdain of a Tuscan aristocrat.

“And Sicilians often cling to the old ways. Being entertained by my mistress might offend him.” The prince’s eyes turned cool. “Did you expect me to deny that I have a mistress? You know of your mother’s condition.”

Alessia looked at him in disbelief. “My mother is in a *sanatorio*!”

“Indeed.” The prince paused. “A very expensive *sanatorio*.”

Something in her father’s tone sent a chill down Alessia’s spine. “What are you saying?”

The prince sighed. “Without an infusion of capital, I am afraid I will have to make some difficult choices. About your mother and the *sanatorio*.”

“There are no choices.” Alessia could feel her heart pounding. “There is the *sanatorio*, or there is the public hospital.”

“As you say, my dear. There is the one—or there is the other.”

Alessia shuddered. She knew he meant it. Her father was a man with no heart.

“I see the condemnation in your eyes, daughter, but I will not lose what has been in our family for five centuries.”

“You should have thought of that before you brought the vineyard to the edge of bankruptcy.”

The prince made an impatient gesture. “Will you do as I ask or not?”

Was there a choice? Alessia thought bitterly.

“Two days,” she said. “That is all I can give you.”

“*Grazie, bella mia.*”

“A blackmailer does not thank the person he blackmails, Papa.”

It wasn’t much of a rejoinder, she thought as she went into the villa, to the room that had once been hers, but it would have to do.

Chapter Two

THERE was no woman waiting in Nick's bed, but she'd left a note.

Call me.

Nick sighed and tossed the note aside. He'd call, but not until he'd returned from this pointless trip. Call, send flowers and say goodbye. It was definitely time to end things.

He stripped off the tux, showered, put on a set of well-worn Marine Corps sweats and went into the kitchen. It was a decorator's dream but he pretty much used it only for making a sandwich or a pot of coffee, as he was now, spooning the stuff into a French press, putting the kettle on to boil, then settling in to wait.

The more he thought about it, the more certain he was that he'd been suckered into going to Italy. That story about his mother... Even if it were true, and that was a stretch, why would his father have waited forty years to give her, as he'd put it, a little bit of Tuscany?

Not that it mattered.

He'd said he would do this thing. A man was nothing if he broke his word.

The kettle whistled. Nick made the coffee, gave it a few minutes, then poured some into an oversized mug. Too much champagne or maybe too much Cesare. Either way, a couple of sips and he felt the caffeine kicking in as he emptied the contents of the envelope his father had given him onto the polished stone counter.

He picked up a document, read a couple of paragraphs, then shook his head in dry amusement. He was due to meet with Prince Vittorio Antoninni the next day.

"Would have been nice if you'd consulted me first, Father," he muttered, but a quick meeting would serve his purpose. The sooner this was behind him, the better.

He drank a little more coffee, then reached for the phone. The Orsini jet was taking Falco and his bride on their honeymoon. No problem. The company used a travel agent; Nick had the guy's home phone number. It was one of the perks of doing seven figures worth of business with him every year.

To his surprise, there were no nonstop flights from Kennedy Airport to Florence. He would have to change planes in Rome. That meant the travel time would be longer than he liked, but still, two days for this would be enough. He arranged for a first-class ticket that would get him into the city by 2:00 p.m., arranged for a suite at the Grand Hotel and a rental car he'd pick up at the airport.

Okay.

Nick punched a speed-dial number, ordered *pad thai* from a little place a few blocks away. While he waited for it to arrive, he went through the rest of the Antoninni Vineyard papers, but he learned little more than he already knew. The Antoninni family had owned the land and the winery for five centuries. Prince Vittorio had taken over from his father; his daughter would eventually take over from him, though she seemed disinterested in anything to do with business.

Alessia Antoninni was a party girl. She called herself a publicist but she spent her time in Rome, running with a fast crowd of people too rich for their own good. He knew what she was like without half-trying. Self-centered. Self-indulgent. And bored out of her empty mind. New York was filled with young women like her.

Not that it mattered to him.

His business was with her father. Without question, the sooner it was over with, the better.

There was a note in the envelope, on heavy vellum adorned with a royal crest. *Signore* Orsini was to telephone the prince's secretary when he knew the exact time of arrival. The prince would not simply send a car, he would, himself, be at the airport to greet *Signore* Orsini. And, of course, *Signore* Orsini would be his guest at the Antoninni villa in the hills outside *Firenze*.

Nick made the call. It was the middle of the night in Italy by then so he ended up leaving a voice mail message in what he suspected was terrible Italian because he'd never picked up more than

the basics, confirming he'd be arriving the next day, as planned, but omitting the time and flight information, and politely refusing the offer that he stay at the villa.

He preferred being on his own when he was checking out possible investment properties.

The bell rang. It was the doorman with the *pad thai*. Nick settled down with his dinner and his laptop and went through the Antoninni Vineyards paperwork again.

By midnight, he had lots of questions and not many answers. He could only hope the prince could provide them.

The prince, Nick thought, and laughed. This entire thing was like a bad joke.

Alessia paced the waiting area in the Peretola Airport, the last of her patience rapidly fleeing.

This was like a bad joke, she thought grimly. If only she could see enough humor in it to laugh.

The Orsini gangster had left a voice-mail message in the middle of the night. Did he not realize there was a time difference between America and Europe?

Probably not.

He was a hoodlum. He would have the IQ of a snail. The message was delivered in incredibly bad Italian. Delivered? Barked, was more like it, in Sicilian-Italian. Such a lower-class patois...but what else would such a man speak?

He had an interesting voice, she had to give him that. Low-pitched. Slightly husky. A young voice for an old man.

What counted was that the message was pointless. He would arrive today. Alessia bit back a snort of derision. Of course he would! That was the arrangement he had made with her father. Then there'd been something about hotel arrangements when he surely knew he would stay at the villa. As for his arrival time, the airline he was flying...

Nothing.

She'd had to waste time scanning for all the incoming flights that he could take from London or Paris or who knew where. She'd ended with a list of arrivals that ranged from early morning to this last one due in now, from Rome.

She had been pacing these grimy floors for hours. An entire day, wasted.

An unladylike word slipped from her lips. A nun, hurrying by, gave her a shocked look.

"You try putting yourself in my place," Alessia said to the nun's retreating back, and then she thought, *I am losing my mind!*

A message blinked on the arrivals board. *Grazie a Dio!* The plane from Rome had landed. Orsini had to be on it. Five minutes for the passengers to disembark. Ten for them to collect their luggage. Another ten to clear passport control...

Her feet were killing her.

She had worn Dior heels. Heels? They were more like stilts. Foolish to have done so but they went well with her ivory Armani suit. She had dressed with care, not to impress this Cesare Orsini but to remind him of who she was and who *he* was and if that seemed wrong, so be it. Heaven only knew what her father had led the man to think about this unholy deal, but since going to work in Rome, she had seen enough deals go sour to know that it was important to establish one's position as soon as possible.

This gangster wanted to buy into the Antoninni Vineyards? She would set the rules. That was her right, now that her father had dumped the situation in her lap. And the first rule was that if it had been left to her, the American thug would never have thought to set foot on Tuscan soil.

Ah. Finally. The passengers from Rome were starting to trickle into the hall. A trio of priests. A middle-aged woman, wheeling a suitcase. Two teenaged boys with backpacks. A harassed-looking mother clutching a wailing child. An elderly man, leaning on a cane. A young couple, hands tightly clasped.

And a man.

Tall, dark-haired, impeccably dressed in what was surely a custom-made suit, his stride long and fluid, the look on his face one of such controlled anger that Alessia took an unthinking step to her left.

A mistake, because he took one to his right.

They collided.

No. Too strong a word. His body simply brushed hers....

An electric shock seemed to jolt through her.

He looked at her. He must have felt the same thing, judging by the sudden narrowing of his eyes. Such dark eyes, the color of the strongest, richest espresso. The rest of his features were strong, too, she thought on a little inrush of breath. The narrow nose, with just the slightest dent near the bridge. The square jaw. The firm mouth.

It was a hard, masculine face. A beautiful face...

"Excuse me."

Alessia blinked. The man's voice was as cold and hard as his expression. And the words were a lie. "Excuse me," he'd said, but what he meant was, "Why don't you get out of my way?"

Her eyes narrowed, the same as his.

She took a step to the side. "You are excused," she said, her tone as frigid as his.

His dark eyebrows rose. "Charming," he muttered, and strode past her.

Charming, indeed. The rudeness of him! He had spoken in English; without thinking, she had answered in the same tongue. He was, without question, an American, and everyone knew how *they* were...

Wait.

Had there been something familiar in his voice? Deep. Husky. Silken, despite its sharpness...

A bustle of noise and motion jerked her back to the present. More passengers had just appeared. It was an interesting parade of humanity but when it ended, it had not included Cesare Orsini. There was no short, rotund figure wrapped in a dark overcoat, an old-fashioned fedora pulled low over his eyes.

To hell with this.

Alessia turned on her heel, marched through the terminal and out the exit doors. Her black Mercedes had acquired two more parking tickets. She yanked them from under the wiper blades, opened the car and tossed them inside.

Her father could deal with this nonsense.

She had had enough.

She got behind the wheel. Turned the key. Opened the windows. Started the engine. The Mercedes gave a polite but throaty roar. It had no effect on the pedestrians swarming past the hood. Crossing without acknowledging traffic was a game in Italy. Pedestrian or driver, you could not play if you showed fear.

Slowly, she inched the Mercedes forward. The crowd showed reluctance but, gradually, a narrow tunnel opened. Alessia pressed down harder and harder on the gas....

And struck something.

She heard the tinkle of glass. Saw the crowd part.

Saw the broken taillight of the Ferrari ahead of her.

Dio, what now? she thought as the driver's door flew open. A man stepped out, strode to the rear of the Ferrari—dammit, of all cars to hit, a Ferrari—looked at the shattered glass, then at her...

Cavolo!

It was him. The tall, dark-haired American. He didn't just look angry, he looked furious. Alessia almost shrank back in her seat as he marched toward her. Instead, she took a long, deliberate breath and stepped from her car, her professional easing-the-tension smile on her face.

"Sorry," she said briskly. "I didn't see you."

“You didn’t see me? Am I driving a slot car?”

She almost asked him what a slot car was and caught herself just in time. All she wanted was to get home—to the villa, which was not really home but would have to do—and kick off her agonizingly painful shoes, peel off her wrinkled suit, pour herself a glass of wine...or maybe two glasses—

“Well? Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

His tone was obnoxious, as if this were her fault. It wasn’t. He’d been parked in a no-parking zone. Yes, so had she, but what had that to do with anything?

“First you try to walk through me. Now you try to *drive* through me!” His mouth thinned. “Did you ever hear of paying attention to what you’re doing?”

So much for easing the tension. Alessia drew herself up. “I don’t like your attitude.”

“*You* don’t like *my* attitude?”

He laughed. The laugh was ugly. Insulting. Alessia narrowed her eyes.

“There is no point to this conversation,” she said coldly. “I suggest we exchange insurance information. There has been no injury to either of us and only the slightest one to your vulgar automobile. I will, therefore, forgive your insulting attitude.”

“My car is vulgar? My attitude is insulting, but you will forgive it?” The man glared at her. “What the hell is with this country, anyway? No direct flights from New York. A layover in Rome that’s supposed to take forty minutes and ends up taking three hours, three endless hours because some idiot mechanic dropped a screwdriver, and when I made a perfectly reasonable attempt to charter a private plane instead of standing around, killing time...”

He was still talking but she couldn’t hear him. Her thoughts were spinning. He had come from New York? A layover in Rome? A longer layover than planned?

“Do you speak Italian?” she blurted.

Stopped in midsentence, he glared at her as if she were crazy. “What?”

“I said, do you—”

“No. I do not. A few words, that’s all, and what are you, an adjunct to passport control?”

“Say something. In Italian.”

He shot her another look. Then he shrugged as if to say, *Hey, why not accommodate the inmate?* And said something in Italian.

Alessia gasped.

Not at what he’d said—it was impolite and it had to do with her mental state but who cared about that? She gasped because what he’d spoken was not really Italian, it was Sicilian. Sicilian, spoken in a deep, husky voice...

“Your name,” she whispered.

“Excuse me?”

“Your name! What is it?”

Nick slapped his hands on his hips. Okay. Maybe he’d stepped into an alternate universe.

Or maybe this was the old-country version of Marco Polo. Kids played it back home, a dumb game where they bobbed around in a swimming pool, one yelling “Marco,” another answering “Polo.” It made about as much sense as this, an aggressive, mean-tempered babe—if you could call her a babe and, really, you couldn’t—who had first tried to walk through him, then tried to run him down....

“Answer the question! Who are you? Are you Cesare Orsini?”

“No,” Nick said truthfully.

“Are you sure?”

He laughed. That made her face turn pink.

“I think you are he. And if I am right, you’ve cost me an entire day.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, I have been here for hours and hours, waiting for your arrival.”

Nick’s smile faded. “If you tell me you’re Vittorio Antoninni, I won’t believe you.”

"I am his daughter. Alessia Antoninni." Her chin jutted forward. "And, obviously, you are who you say you are not!"

"You asked if I was Cesare Orsini. I'm not. I'm Nicolo Orsini. Cesare is my father."

"Your father? Impossible! I know nothing of a change in plans."

"In that case," Nick said coldly, "we're even, because I sure as hell don't know about a change in plans, either. Your father was supposed to meet me. If I'd let him meet me, that is, which I had no intention of doing."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"That makes things even. I don't understand anything you're babbling about, lady, and—"

"Where have you been all these hours?"

"Excuse me?"

"It is a simple question, *signore*. Where were you while I paced the floor here?"

"Where was I?" Nick's jaw shot forward. "In the first-class Alitalia lounge in Rome," he said sharply. "And trust me, princess, it loses its charm after a while."

"The title is no longer accurate."

Nick looked Alessia Antoninni over, from her falling-apart chignon to her wrinkled Armani suit to the shoes she seemed to be trying to ease off her feet.

"Yes," he said, "I can see that."

She flushed. "I was expecting—"

"My father. Yeah. I get that part. What I don't get is what you're doing here. Where are your old man and his driver?"

"So. You admit you knew that someone would be waiting for you. And yet, you left no word of your arrival time, of the airline you would be flying. You did not spend so much as a second looking for my father or his chauffeur inside the terminal, and you did not trouble yourself to telephone the villa when you did not see them. If you had, someone would have called me."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry this didn't go according to royal protocol, princess, but life doesn't always do what you want."

"I repeat, I am not a princess. And this has nothing to do with protocol. If you had left your arrival information as part of that useless voice-mail message—"

"If I had, your father would have met me. Or, as it turns out, you'd have met me. And I'm not interested in being taken by the hand and shuttled to your villa while somebody tells me how lucky I am to be given the chance to invest in what's probably a disaster of a vineyard."

"I thought it was your gangster father who would be investing. And to so much as suggest the vineyard is a disaster—"

Alessia caught her breath as Nicolo Orsini stepped closer. With him this near, she had to tilt her head back to see his face. Even in these shoes of medieval torture, he towered over her.

"I'm here as my father's emissary," he said in a cold, dangerous voice. "And I'd advise you to watch what you say, princess. Insult one Orsini, you insult us all."

Nick frowned even as he said it. Where had that come from? Insult his brothers or, even worse, his mother or his sisters, and, of course, you insulted them all. But the old man? The don, who was part of something ancient and ugly and immoral? Was an insult to him an offense to all the Orsinis?

"Your father is what he is," Alessia Antoninni said with dogged determination. "If you expect me to pretend otherwise, you are wrong."

He looked down into her face. Her hair was an unruly mass of streaked gold, long tendrils dangling free of what had once been some kind of ladylike knot. Her eyes flashed defiance. There was a streak of soot on a cheekbone high enough to entice a man to trace his finger across its angled length.

The rest of her was a mess.

Still, she was stunning. He could see that now. Stunning. And arrogant. And she was looking at him as if he were beneath contempt.

His jaw tightened.

She had pegged him for the same kind of man as his father. He wasn't—but something in him rebelled at denying it. She was an aristocrat; his father was a peasant. Nick had once delved into the origins of *la famiglia*, enough to know that though some scholars traced the organization solely to banditry, others traced it to the rebellion of those trapped in poverty by rich, cruel landowners.

It didn't matter. Whatever the origins of his father's way of life, Nick despised it.

Still, there was a subtle difference between viewing that way of life from the comfort of America and viewing it here, on such ancient soil. It brought out a feeling new to him.

"Your father is also what he is," he said, his voice rough. "Or do you choose to forget that your vineyard was created by the sweat of others?"

"I do not need a lesson in socioeconomics! Besides, times have changed."

"They have, indeed." Nick smiled coldly. "You and your father must now come to me, an Orsini, to beg for money."

Alessia stiffened. "The House of Antoninni does not beg! And you forget, we come to Cesare Orsini, not to you."

She was right, of course. His only function was to report back to his father....

"Why, *signore*," she all but purred, "I see I have silenced you at last."

She smiled. It made his belly knot. There were hundreds of years of arrogance in that smile; it spoke of the differences between commoners and kings, and in that instant, Nick knew the game had changed.

He smiled, too, but something in it made her expression lose a little of its upper-class defiance. She began to step back but Nick caught her by the wrist and tugged her toward him.

"There's been a change in plans, princess."

"Let go of me!"

He did, but only to slip his hand around the nape of her neck. Tendrils of the softest gold tumbled over his fingers.

"I'm the potential investor," he said softly, "not my old man."

"That is not what my father told me!"

A muscle knotted in Nick's jaw. She was staring at him through eyes so deep a blue they were almost violet. He'd stunned her, he could see that. Hell, he'd stunned himself.

He might be a peasant, but he was also a man. And she was a woman. A woman who needed to learn that this was the twenty-first century, not the sixteenth.

Nick's gaze dropped to her lips, then rose so his eyes met hers.

"Trust me, princess," he said in a voice as rough as sandpaper. "The only Orsini you're going to deal with is me."

Alessia Antoninni, the Princess Antoninni, shook her head. "No," she said, and he silenced her the only way a man could silence a woman like this.

He thrust his hands into her hair, lifted her face to his and kissed her.

Chapter Three

TIME seemed to stop.

Alessia was too stunned to react.

A stranger's powerful arms around her. His mouth on hers. The heat of his body, the leanly muscled male strength of it...

Then she gasped. Fury and indignation transformed her into a virago. She twisted her head, slammed her hands against his chest, knotted those hands into fists when he failed to let her go.

A mistake, all of it.

His hand slid up into her hair so that there was no way to turn away from his kiss. One big palm slid down her spine, stopped at its base and brought her tight against him.

Was he insane?

He was kissing her as if he had the right to do it. To take whatever he wanted because of who and what he was, and to hell with propriety or their surroundings or the fact that they'd met only minutes ago and already despised each other.

Her hands flattened against his chest again. She pushed at that wall of hard muscle and when that had no effect, she tried to squirm free.

Another mistake, worse than the first one.

Instantly, she felt the thrust of his aroused flesh against her belly.

Her heart thudded.

She began to tremble, and his lips moved on hers, the angle of the kiss changing so that she had to tilt her head back. Was that why she suddenly felt dizzy and the ground took a delicate tilt beneath her feet?

She heard a sound. Was it she who'd made it, an almost imperceptible whimper overlaid by Nicolo Orsini's raw, ragged groan?

Her hands moved. Slid to his shoulders. Into his hair. Her lips began to part...

And then it was over.

He clasped her arms with such force that her eyes flew open, and as they did, he set her away from him.

She stared at him. His face was all harsh planes and angles; his eyes were slits of obsidian beneath thick, black lashes. Faint stripes of color ran beneath his high cheekbones as a muscle ticked in his jaw.

Alessia wanted to slap his face. More than that, she wanted to run.

But she wouldn't. She knew better than to show fear to a predatory animal. It was a lesson she'd learned when she was twelve, hiking the golden Tuscan hills alone late one afternoon and suddenly coming face-to-face with an enormous wild boar. Its long, razor-sharp tusks could easily have torn her open.

Despite her terror, she'd stood her ground. After what had seemed an eternity, the creature had snorted, stepped back and faded into the brush.

Now, as then, she forced herself to stand still. Not only wild animals but men, too, measured power in the fear they could engender.

That was why Nicolo Orsini had kissed her, and why she would not run from him. Instead, she drew a steadying breath and then slowly, deliberately, wiped the back of her hand across her mouth.

"If that was meant to impress me," she said in a steady voice, "it failed in its purpose."

The slightest smile curved his mouth.

"Did it," he said.

His tone made it clear the words were not a question. Alessia decided to ignore the implications.

"And I warn you, *signore*, if you do anything like that again—"

“Spare me the threats. You’re in no position to make any.”

Dio, the man was hateful! Alessia’s chin lifted. “*Sei un barbaro!*”

“I’m a barbarian, huh?” He grinned. “Come on, sugar. Don’t hold back. Say what you’re thinking.” His phony smile vanished. “What I am is the man who holds the purse strings. Remember that and we’ll get along just fine.”

Alessia stared at the hateful American and the last of her composure slipped away.

“We will not get along at all, *signore*. There has been a change in plans. The Antoninni Vineyard is not available for investment. You have made a long trip for nothing.”

Nick narrowed his eyes. The *principessa* stood tall, shoulders back, head lifted in an attitude of defiance. She despised him, which was fine. He didn’t think any better of her. All that was clear and up-front. The only question was, why had he kissed her?

To put her in her place?

A lie.

He didn’t deal with women that way. He had faults, sure, but using sex as a weapon wasn’t one of them. And he was not a man who’d ever take anything a woman wasn’t eager to give.

Aside from all that, if putting her in her place had been what he’d intended, it had backfired. She wasn’t shaken by what had happened; she was as cold and disapproving as ever. He must have imagined that something had changed in the last seconds of that kiss. That her mouth had softened. That her body had yielded to his. That she had parted her lips for him, that she had moaned...

Or had the moan been his?

“Do you understand me, *Signore* Orsini? Go home. Go back to your people. You have no further business here.”

Nick looked at her. The message was clear. He was not only a barbarian, but he was also a Sicilian thug. An Orsini. And that was more than sufficient for a woman like her.

“We shall, of course, reimburse you for any expenses you’ve incurred.”

The imperial *we*. The princess, addressing one of her subjects. Nick smiled, folded his arms and leaned back against the side of the Ferrari. It was a smile that those who’d faced him in boardroom battles or desert combat would have known enough to fear.

Hell, he thought coldly, *why not live down to her expectations?*

“Such a generous offer,” he said softly.

“Yes. It is.” She shot a look at the Ferrari’s bumper. “I see some simple damage. Send us the bill.”

“Shall I send it at the same time I send you a list of...how did you put it? The expenses I’ve incurred?”

“As you prefer. And now, *signore*...”

“And now, you assume, *arrivederci*.”

“Assume?” she said, her tone one of elegant disdain.

But she didn’t look elegant. Nick’s gaze made a slow circuit again, from the shoes that seemed to make her wobble to the wrinkled silk suit to the drawn-back hair. Wispy strands the color of winter sunlight fell around her oval face.

There was a bedraggled look about her.

And maybe *bedraggled* was the right word.

She looked as if she’d just tumbled out of a man’s bed. His bed, he thought, and felt the immediate response of his body to the image of what it would be like to strip the arrogant princess of her clothes and do whatever it took to turn all that frosty hauteur to hot passion.

He did a mental double take. Why would he even think of something like that? Alessia Antoninni was beautiful in the way statues were beautiful. There was nothing soft or warm or welcoming about her. She wasn’t a challenge, she was a turnoff. That he’d even imagined bedding her—hell, that he’d actually kissed her—made him furious.

Dammit, he thought, and he took his anger and put it where it rightly belonged.

"You were right," he said brusquely, "my trip was lengthy. Eight hours flying to Rome from New York, then a three-hour delay at the airport added up to lots of time to kill."

"And you expect compensation for that time immediately."

She said it as if it were a given. Nick watched as she opened her purse, rummaged through it and finally extracted a checkbook. "If you can provide me with a figure—"

She gasped as his hand closed around her wrist. His fingers were biting into her flesh. He was probably going to mark that tender, upper-class skin. Not only didn't he give a damn, but he was also grimly pleased to do it.

"Are you always so sure of yourself, princess? Or is it only with me?"

Her eyes flashed.

"Let go of me, Mr. Orsini."

Nick smiled tightly. "What happened to *signore*? Don't I even rate that much now that I'm about to call your bluff?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. And if you don't unhand me—"

"Another threat, *principessa*?" His smile twisted. "Maybe you need to listen before you make threats."

"Listen to what?" She looked as if she wanted to kill him. Fine, he thought grimly. The more certain she was of herself, the more he'd enjoy the sight of her taking a metaphoric tumble right on her icy ass. His grasp on her tightened until they were a breath apart. "I repeat, I had lots of time on my hands. I spent it going through the material your father sent about your precious vineyard. It was detailed. Very detailed...but there was lots missing."

"I have no knowledge of what material you saw and it is of no interest to me. You are—"

"Dismissed? A while ago, I was excused. Now I'm dismissed." Nick's smile was as frigid as his tone. "Antoninni Vineyards is on the verge of ruin."

"That is not your concern."

"Four years of bad weather damaged the grapes. Your old man chose new plantings that turned out to be a mistake. He made lousy marketing decisions. I don't know a damned thing about viniculture—"

"How nice to hear you admit it."

"But I do know about investments. I added up some figures, added them up again and figured out, real fast, that what your father neglected to list in that report is at least as meaningful as what he did."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, but Nick could hear the lie in the words.

"I think you do. Papa Prince took more cash out of those vineyards than he put in. Where did it go, sugar? The horses? The casinos? Women?"

Alessia yanked furiously on her imprisoned hand. "This conversation is over!"

"Without money—and we both know it's going to require more than the five million euros Daddy requested—without it, your family's business will be a thing of the past."

"You are a fine one to talk about family businesses," she said, her face filling with color.

It was a nicely placed jibe. Dead wrong, but she had no way of knowing that and Nick had no interest in pointing it out. She thought he was a *famiglia* heavy? Let her think it. Hell, he wanted her to think it. There was a sweet pleasure in a woman like this believing she was on the receiving end of help from the man she believed him to be.

"The bottom line," he said, "is that you need my money. I'd bet my last dollar your father will be more than happy to remind you of that."

"I need nothing from a man such as you!"

"Five hundred years of royal living, gone in the blink of an eye?"

"Do you think that matters to me?"

“I think it matters enough so that you were willing to show up today to greet a commoner.”

“You’re wrong, Mr. Orsini. I only, as you put it, showed up today because—because—”

She blinked. Nick could almost see her processing what was happening. She’d been sent to greet him. She was the prince’s reception committee. She was an Antoninni, unaccustomed to dealing with the peasants, but she didn’t have the power to get rid of him.

No wonder she was staring at him as if she’d just remembered something she’d all but forgotten.

He was sure he knew what that “something” was.

The princess had been flexing muscle she didn’t have. She had no power. To all intents, she might as well have been a chauffeur, sent to meet the plane of the visiting banker.

“What’s the problem?” Nick smiled thinly. “Thinking twice about telling me to leave?” When she didn’t answer, he took his cell phone from his pocket and offered it to her. “Here. Call Daddy. See what he says about sending me home.”

Alessia looked at the sleek bit of plastic as if it might bite her. Then she looked at the man holding it toward her.

Bastardo insolente!

He knew damned well she wasn’t about to make that call. He just didn’t know why.

Mama, she thought, Mama, how could I have forgotten you?

For a few moments, anger at this horrible man had blinded her to reality. Now, it was back. She’d made a bargain with the devil. If she wanted her mother to remain in the *sanatorio*, she could not get rid of Nicolo Orsini. She had to deal with him, no matter what.

He was vile.

His macho arrogance. His brutal occupation, if you could call being a hoodlum an occupation. And that kiss, the assumption that he was irresistible, that the male domination of his world extended to hers...

Vile was not a strong enough word.

It didn’t matter.

She was stuck with him. He was her problem, and she knew how to handle that. Problems were her specialty. Let her father think that the public relations business was nothing but an excuse for protecting people with too much money and ego. Perhaps that was a reflection of what he knew of Rome and Romans.

That was not her world.

Alessia had put endless days, weeks and months into learning how to deal with the people her firm represented.

Having a royal title helped, though she loathed the idea that titles should exist at all in today’s complex world. The rest? Damned hard work.

Preventing clients from making asses of themselves was part of what she did. Cleaning up after they’d done so anyway was another part, as was making sure they did what they were supposed to do without veering from an accepted plan.

Some clients were pleasant, talented people. Some were not. And still some, admittedly a small percentage, thought that money and power and, often, good looks made them gods.

There was no question as to which category Nicolo Orsini belonged, nor was there any question that she could handle him. The truth was, given the circumstances, she had no choice.

“A problem, princess? Have you forgotten Daddy’s phone number?”

She blinked, looked up at him. Barbarian though he was, gangster that he was, Nicolo Orsini was also—there was no other word for it—magnificent. The epitome of masculinity. Alessia met a lot of very good-looking men in her work. Actors, industrialists, men whose money bought them the clothes, the cars that could turn a nice-looking man into a good-looking one.

The American's clothes were obviously expensive, his haircut as well. But he was also—could you call a man *gorgeous*? Because that was what he was. Gorgeous, and it was not what he wore or how he was groomed.

It was him.

The thick, espresso-brown hair. The eyes the color of night, the strong, straight nose set above a firm mouth and chiseled jaw. Even that little depression between nose and mouth, what was it called? A philtrum. That was it. How could something with such a foolish name be sexy?

The truth was, all of him was sexy. The long, leanly muscled body. The hard face. The sculpted lips. Perfect in design, in texture. She knew that. Knew the warmth of that mouth, the feel of it against hers. If she'd parted her own lips a little when he'd kissed her, she'd even know his taste...

"Take a good look, princess. Let me know if you like what you see."

Alessia's gaze flew to his. His tone was as insulting as the heat in his eyes.

She felt her face redden.

That she could find him physically attractive was shocking. She didn't understand it. A man's looks meant nothing; she had never been taken in by such superficial things. No matter. Living with her father, dealing with his careless verbal and emotional cruelty, had taught her the benefits of a quick recovery.

"I was thinking," she said coolly, "that you do not look like a savage, *Signore* Orsini, but that only proves that looks can be deceiving."

He hesitated. Then, he shrugged.

"Your father is what he is, as is mine, *principessa*. As for me—I am precisely what you see."

Alessia's eyebrows rose. It was, at first, a disconcerting answer. Then she realized he was simply saying that she was right. He was the son of a don, a man from his father's world, venerated in some dark corners of old Sicily but despised by decent Italians everywhere.

And yes, she would have to deal with him.

So. A tour of the vineyard tomorrow. The formal dinner tomorrow night. He'd be gone the following day, out of her life, forever.

She could manage that.

As for what her father had intended, that she act as Orsini's driver, that he stay at the villa... Out of the question. He'd made it easy. He'd already told her he preferred to be on his own. The Ferrari, which would be a rental, was proof of it. Good. Excellent. As for his being a guest at the villa—she would suggest a hotel, if he hadn't already arranged for one, and pick him up there in the morning.

Easier and easier, she thought, but before she could say anything, Orsini punched a button on his cell phone and began speaking in English. There was no mistaking the conversation. He was talking with the agency from which he'd rented the Ferrari, telling a clerk in brisk tones of command that they could pick up the car here, at the curb. There was some minor damage; they could contact his insurance company. No, the car was fine except for that. It was simply that he would not need a car, after all.

"But of course you'll need it," Alessia blurted. "To drive to your hotel. You did make hotel reservations, didn't you?"

He smiled tightly. Eyes still locked to hers, he hit another button on his phone. She listened as he canceled a reservation at the Grand. Then he flipped the phone closed.

"Your father intended that I stay at your villa and that you be my tour guide. Isn't that right, princess?"

"Don't call me that!"

"It's what you are, isn't it? The princess who commands the peasants?"

Alessia thought of responding, then thought better of it. Instead, she jerked her head toward her Mercedes, still just behind the Ferrari.

“Get in,” she said brusquely.

“Such a warm and hospitable invitation.”

She strode around the car, got behind the wheel, sat stiffly as he folded his long legs under the dashboard. Then she slammed the car into gear, backed up just enough to avoid hitting the Ferrari again and pulled into traffic.

“Two days,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Sorry?”

Dio, she hated him! The pleasant tone, the polite manner that was about as real as...as fairies at the bottom of the garden. Ahead, a green light turned red. She slowed the Mercedes, pulled to the light and stopped.

“I said, I can give you two days. That’s more than enough time for you to tour the vineyard, see the wine-making operation and meet with my father’s managerial staff.”

Nick found the control next to his seat, pushed it and eased the seat farther back. Two days had been exactly the amount of time he’d intended to be in Tuscany...but things had changed.

“Really,” he drawled. “Two days, hmm?”

“Two days,” Alessia repeated briskly. “As I said, that’s more than sufficient time to—”

“Two weeks,” he said. “I’ll need that much time to make a decision. And, of course, I’ll expect you to be available to me 24/7.”

She looked at him. The look of disbelief on her face made him want to laugh, especially considering that he’d just changed all the plans he’d so carefully made but, dammit, the woman needed to be taught a lesson in humility.

“Are you *pazzo*? There is no way in hell I am going to endure two weeks of—”

Nick leaned over. Put his mouth on hers. Kissed her, and when she tried to jerk away, he curved his hand around her jaw and went on kissing her until she made a little sound and when she did, he parted her lips with his, bit lightly into the exquisite softness of her bottom lip...

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