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# BELLA FRANCES

The Consequence She Cannot Deny



**Bella Frances**

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## **Аннотация**

Bedded, banished, pregnant! Talented photographer Coral Dahl can't afford any distractions on her first major photoshoot. But the beauty of her location—the private Greek island of Hydros—is nothing compared to the lethal charisma of its owner, tycoon Raffaele Rossini! A charisma that wary, innocent Coral is powerless to resist... Coral is astonished to discover her family is scandalously entwined with Rafa's, and that she has a claim on his inheritance. Branded a gold-digger, she's dismissed from his bed and his life. But the biggest surprise of all is that their one night of rapture has had unexpected permanent consequences!

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Coral is astonished to discover her family is scandalously entwined with Rafa's, and she has a claim on his inheritance. Branded a gold digger, she's dismissed from his bed, and his life. Yet the biggest surprise of all? Their one night of rapture had unexpected, permanent consequences!

Rafa still held her fingers in his hand. Coral knew she should pull them free but she didn't want to.

"Why do I feel that this is dangerous...?"

"I've got nothing to gain by kissing you other than pleasure. That should tell you all you need to know."

She felt almost woozy now, with the lovely sensation as he continued to stroke his fingers round her wrist.

"Pleasure?" she repeated stupidly.

"That's right. I just want to give you pleasure. Nothing else."

He closed his hand around her fingers and gently tugged her towards him.

"Why deny yourself what you know you want?"

"I don't even know what I want any more."

"I know you want me to kiss you...don't you?"

He moved a fraction closer. She could see the eyelashes that framed each eye, the fine line of his eyelid, the proud jut of his nose. She could scent him. No matter what her brain was saying, her body was reacting to this man on a level she'd never experienced before. She was almost completely lost.

Unable to sit still without reading, BELLA FRANCES first found romantic fiction at the age of twelve, in between deadly dull knitting patterns and recipes in the pages of her grandmother's magazines. An obsession was born! But it wasn't until one long, hot summer, after completing her first degree in English Literature, that she fell upon the legends that are Mills & Boon books. She has occasionally lifted her head out of them since to do a range of jobs, including barmaid, financial adviser and teacher, as well as to practise (but never perfect) the art of motherhood on two (almost grown-up) cherubs.

Bella lives a very energetic life in the UK, but tries desperately to travel for pleasure at least once a month—strictly in the interests of research!

Books by Bella Frances

Mills & Boon Modern Romance

The Playboy of Argentina

Claimed by a Billionaire

The Argentinian's Virgin Conquest

The Italian's Vengeful Seduction

Mills & Boon Modern Tempted

The Scandal Behind the Wedding

Dressed to Thrill

Visit the Author Profile page at [millsandboon.co.uk](http://millsandboon.co.uk) for more titles.

The Consequence She Cannot Deny

Bella Frances



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

For Dad

Whose moral compass is always due north

Thank you for always being there

At my back but pointing forwards

Helping me on my way

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

Heavenly things are about to happen!

SO DECLARED THE press pack for Heavenly magazine, in an elegant cursive font across its front cover.

I'm absolutely sure they are, thought Coral Dahl as she sat back on the cream leather of Romano Publishing's executive jet and started flicking through the folder. Fingers crossed they'll happen to me...

Heavenly's tagline summed up how she was feeling about this trip, but for the posse of fashion, art and creative directors, stylists, hair and make-up assistants and editorial staff it was just another day at the office. Celebrity fashion editorials were no big deal to them, but for Coral, as a rookie photographer, it was the

biggest career step of her life.

In less than an hour they would be landing on Hydros, the infamous private island belonging to the infamously private Di Visconti family. They'd spend the next two days photographing the heir apparent, Salvatore, and his fiancée before their ultra-hush-hush, ultra-exclusive wedding. All after signing confidentiality agreements. In triplicate.

'OK, people, listen up.' Mariella, the senior editor, walked through the cabin, looking more than a little flustered. 'Word is that Salvatore's brother Raffaele, our very own commander-in-chief, is going to be there, overseeing things. Yes, I hear you gasp, but I don't want anyone in a panic or fluttering too many eyelashes—I'll handle everything. We're professionals, and we all know what we're doing. Well, nearly all of us,' she added, looking at Coral. 'So there shouldn't be any problems. Just let me reassure him. We go way back, and whatever it is that's got him ruffled I'll sort it out.'

Coral looked around. Everyone seemed to be grabbing their bags and reapplying their make-up.

'What's going on?' she asked the girl next to her.

'Raffaele Rossini—CEO of Romano. Signor Smokin' Hot!' She laughed, slicking her lips with gloss. 'None of us stands a chance, but it doesn't stop us from trying.'

Coral raised her eyebrows. She wouldn't be trying anything with anyone. This trip was strictly business. She'd only vaguely heard of the Di Visconti family before she'd been handed her

brief, two hours earlier, but now she knew plenty about the late Giancarlo, founder of the billion-dollar Argento Cruise Line, and his son Salvatore. And, of course, the more mysterious Raffaele Rossini, head of the entire Romano Publishing empire, which just happened to publish Heavenly—the magazine for which she'd won this commission.

'Nobody gets close to Raffaele. He's like a god, up in the clouds, so it's really amazing that we're going to meet him.'

Coral flicked back through the pages of the press pack, past images from the nineteen-fifties of the first cruise liner in the Argento fleet right up to recent shots of their twelve amazing vessels. It was the most exclusive cruise line in the world. She scanned them for information about Raffaele, but all she could see was that he had an architect-designed cliffside house along the coast from the family's ancient villa, and that he had launched a bunch of magazines over the years. Oh, and his net worth was billions.

'It hardly says anything in the press pack about Raffaele,' she said, frowning.

'Yes, that's how he likes it,' said Mariella, bustling up. 'Trust me—the fact that he's getting personally involved is not something that happens every day. So, top of your game everyone. Coral, are you well prepared? It's a tiny little shoot with Kyla this afternoon. We'll do it outside—on the loggia. Yes? Happy with that? No need for any fancy ideas, OK, sweetie? Try not to panic. Speak only if spoken to. Leave it to the pros.'



Coral's heart sank. Outdoors? The loggia? So her creative input was going to be limited as to where to position the reflective umbrella. After all the effort she had put in to winning this commission.

Her portfolio had been super-sharp, super-artistic. She could just imagine her mother gasping when she heard about this. Lynda Dahl would be horrified to hear that the pinnacle of her talented daughter's art school career was a point-and-click camera shoot with some billionaire's babe.

Oh, well. It was a start. The start she and her mother had dreamed of for years. And it was on Hydros. And she'd be published in Heavenly. All things considered, that was pretty good going for her first month as a professional photographer.

Despite the air-conditioned chill, Coral warmed at the thought of her mother. After everything she had been through, the pride on her mum's face when she'd watched Coral graduate had been the best feeling ever. Even though this job wasn't high art, Coral knew that it was going to mean the world to Lynda.

Inside, the team were getting more and more hyper, but outside the Adriatic Sea was calm and jewel-blue. The jet's wing sparkled in the sunshine. The whole day twinkled like a golden blessing. This was going to be the start of an amazing chapter in her life. She could feel it. Things were finally turning around...

The plane landed smoothly, the wait to disembark was mere moments, and then they stepped out into the spectacular sunshine of the Adriatic springtime.

She walked away from the magazine staff and tried to call Lynda. The confidentiality clause was real, but her mother was a worrier. And when she worried she got anxious, and when she got anxious...

That was something to be avoided at all costs.

There was no answer. Out of the corner of her eye Coral saw them all skipping off towards some cars.

She sent a text.

Touched down on a secret island in Greece! On my way to meet the client! Wish I could tell you more but I'm sworn to secrecy! Hugs xx

That should do it, she thought, tucking the phone back into her bag and running to catch up to where the others were all standing like a chorus line, bubbling with excitement. She came up right up behind them—and then saw what had their attention.

There, in between shoulders, she glimpsed a fleet of cars. They were parked one behind the other. The drivers' doors were open and standing at each one was a man in black trousers and shirt. Everyone seemed to be staring, waiting.

And then, from one of the cars, a man emerged.

'Oh, my God,' she heard being whispered along the row. 'Everybody take cover. Here comes the walking sex bomb.'

Coral strained to see clearly. Was Raffaele Rossini really such a big deal? With her photographer's eye she scanned and judged.

Tall and toned—just like they all were. Proportions? Perfect. Head to shoulder, chest, waist, hips, legs. Handsome? Yes. Off

the charts. Brown hair as opposed to black. Shorter than execs normally wore it. And a close-cropped beard that sculpted his cheeks, lips and jaw. Stubble wasn't her thing. Normally.

He moved around the cars and then she felt it. Wow. There was no way to deny that this man was utterly magnetic.

But he was going to be her boss. Off-limits was the only rule that applied.

He moved forward slowly. There was nothing to see under the mirrored shades of his Aviators. The slant of his mouth was neutral. But the slow nod of his head as he checked them all out was like a caress. His voice, when he spoke, an embrace. They sighed as they budged a little closer.

'Welcome to the Island of Hydros. I hope you had a good flight. My men will escort you to your villas and make sure you're comfortable.'

Mariella breathed her appreciation as everyone else fluttered thank you with their eyelashes.

'You have all signed non-disclosure agreements, so you're fully aware that there will be no unauthorised photography, recording or social media.'

The gang gushed an obedient yes. He turned to Mariella.

'And your protégée, Mariella—where is she?'

As if she was infected with some plague, everyone shuffled away from Coral. The dust from the ground swirled and the wind blew her hair. Coral lifted her hand to sweep it from her face as his gaze zoomed to her.

‘This is Coral Dahl, Raffa. She’s the one I told you about.’

Coral smiled and waited for him to speak, but he didn’t. His eyes flashed over her quickly, and then he seemed to nod slightly.

‘You won the commission to photograph Kyla.’

It didn’t sound like a question, but she found herself nodding.

‘Yes, that’s right. I’m really thrilled to meet you and get a chance to work on the magazine.’

He stared.

Silence settled over the whole group as he began to walk towards her.

‘Let’s talk about that as we drive. Pass me your bag.’

She looked down stupidly to the huge leather tote that doubled as handbag, briefcase and holdall.

‘No, no. It’s fine. I’ll manage,’ she said cheerfully.

He waited, as if she hadn’t understood him, and then she got it. Obviously whatever Raffaele said, happened. No questions, no rebuttals, no argument. She handed it to him. Fine.

‘There.’ He indicated the second car in the line—low and sleek, compared to the four-wheel drives. He opened the passenger door and she slid inside.

She scented leather and musk, and then the man who got in beside her. The brilliant day was left behind as he closed the door and sealed them in.

She didn’t so much as glance to the side as they passed the others but she could sense them all staring. Raffaele turned off down a narrow road and immediately put his foot down. She

lurched back, grabbed at the seatbelt.

‘So, Coral, tell me a little bit about yourself.’

‘Well, I’m twenty-four. I live in London, in a little flat in Islington. I work in a café round the corner. But all my life I’ve wanted to be a fashion photographer. So that’s why this commission is my dream come true.’

‘I see. And you studied art?’

She braced herself as he took the corners on the road which twisted like a corkscrew along the cliff.

‘Yes, I started out doing Fine Art. My mother is an artist and I practically lived in art galleries growing up. She took me all over the country when she could. When she wasn’t...’

‘Wasn’t?’

‘What I mean is, I chose photography for my Master’s because my mother had struggled so hard to make ends meet. I want to have a creative career but with an income, and—’

‘It’s a crowded market. What makes you think you will succeed?’

‘Because I’m good,’ she said. She didn’t mean it as a boast. She knew she was good.

She waited to see what he was going to say, but he drove on in silence. From the corner of her eye she could see the length of his thigh and the hard muscle that flexed as he pressed on the pedals. There was no doubt about his physical perfection, but it was almost impossible to read what he was thinking.

‘You took a Master’s in photography. And my senior creative

director thought your work was outstanding.’

‘Thanks,’ she said, suddenly brightening. Finally a compliment.

‘But, for me, this is too important a project to take risks with a novice.’

So that was what the problem was. Oh, dear. It wasn’t all going to land in her lap after all.

‘Let’s start with the creative angle. What have you got in mind? A story? A concept?’

So much for outdoors on the loggia. She wasn’t going to be the one to tell him that Mariella had it all decided. Her heart raced. Her mind ran. She looked at the vista, the distant scattering of volcanic islands wrapped in ribbons of blue sun and sea.

‘Of course! I—I’ve been thinking since we took off—knowing that the light would be so good and the colours so strong—that I’d like to take a fresh look at the Greek goddess trope.’

Words poured from her mouth before she even knew what they were, but it was obvious that she had to sell him something pretty amazing or she was going to be sent home.

‘When I think of Athena and all those mythical goddesses I’m seeing seventies women—liberated, but still incredibly feminine. I want to use the clarity of the landscape and the light and juxtapose it with soft silhouettes.’

‘I see.’ He frowned as he turned down a road.

A modern building came into view, its huge windows curving off to the right as it hugged the cliff.

He parked and got out beside a wide stone entrance where two huge black dogs lay sleeping in the sun. She glanced up at him as she got out of the car. His eyes were still hidden behind sunglasses, his mouth impassive. But at least he wasn't telling her to go home.

‘Avanti,’ he said.

He touched her arm lightly, swung her bag over his shoulder and guided her to the wide steps. The dogs watched carefully as she passed, but didn't make a move.

Inside, light beamed down—radiant and golden. Every single surface reflected understated wealth, from the crystal glints of an elegant chandelier to the aquamarine depths of a sunken rock pool that stopped her dead in her tracks.

‘Wow!’ she said, unable to hide her awe.

‘Aphrodite's Pool,’ he said. ‘It is said that she bathed the baby Adonis in it.’

Coral wandered closer. The water babbled like giggling children. But beneath the surface rocks gave way to slippery darkness. She stepped back as if she might fall.

‘Aphrodite was so completely spellbound by Adonis's beauty that she couldn't bear to be parted from him. She had to share him with Persephone, the goddess of death, for six months each year.’

‘Children aren't parcels to be passed around,’ said Coral indignantly.

‘Indeed,’ he said, his voice low and calm. ‘But no one argued

with Zeus.'

'I'd give it a try!' she smiled.

'Yes. I imagine you would,' he said quietly.

He'd removed his sunglasses and was standing close by, watching her. She smiled into the heavy silence and then found herself staring, mesmerised by the navy rings around ice-blue irises and the high cheekbones that seemed slightly flushed underneath the honey skin. The close-cropped beard that framed his mouth...

That mouth. She so badly wanted to photograph the absolute perfection of it—wanted to touch and mould it with her fingers.

Wow. He was the real deal and no mistake.

'You were saying something about being inspired by Greek mythology?'

She snapped out of her reverie. He was beginning to sound impatient, but before she could answer she heard music. The silly ringtone she'd set for her mother's calls. The only ones she answered, regardless of where she was or who she was with.

'Excuse me,' she said, reaching for her bag. 'My phone's ringing.'

'You can call them back. This won't take long.'

Her fingers closed around her phone. Maybe now wasn't the best time to argue. Surely her mum would know she was busy and would call back...

'Sure,' she said.

She smiled sweetly and turned to see him pointing at a perfect



lounge with an ornate love seat. Her shoes squeaked on the marble floor as she walked and she was intensely aware of how casual she looked in her favourite fifties sundress. She'd hoped vintage would cut it among the fashionistas, but around all this money she simply felt shabby.

Not everyone is born with a silver spoon in their mouth, she thought defensively.

Gathering her skirt, she sat, intensely aware of him watching. His eyes flicked over her, but still his face remained impassive.

'I'll be honest. Your concept does not sound innovative or new.'

Oh, great...

He pinned her with his intense blue gaze. She forced herself to look right at him.

'The Greek goddess thing has been done to death. Kyla is an Australian marrying into Italian nobility. I thought with your youth you might bring a fresh approach.'

'I'm sure I can do fresh. I've got loads more ideas—'

'Your portfolio contained high fashion—art. Very beautiful. Intelligent. But this feature needs to be something much more glamorous. Heavenly readers deserve a twenty-first-century fairytale.'

'Absolutely. A prince marrying his Cinderella.'

He sighed impatiently.

She swallowed. Come on, Coral! This was going badly wrong. She'd put in so much work. There was no way she was going to

let it fall apart now. She had to pull it back.

‘If you could tell me more about what you have in mind I’m sure I can deliver.’

Her phone started to ring again. She glanced at her bag. Her mother would be getting in a panic. They hadn’t seen or spoken to each other for two days now. And she was hundreds of miles away on an island, on the cusp of what might be the most important move in her career.

Or the worst.

‘Sorry, I thought I’d put it on silent. Would you mind if I took the call?’

‘Don’t you think you’re a little busy right now?’

She squirmed on the seat and tried to put it out of her mind.

‘Signor Rossini, I will deliver exactly what you want. When I set my mind to something I don’t give up until I succeed—’

He cut her off. ‘The photographers I work with are legendary.’

He wasn’t even giving her a chance. It was as if he had made his mind up already—and that was just plain unfair.

‘Everyone’s got to start somewhere! I only found out what the commission was two hours ago, if you’ll recall?’

‘Maybe so, but I would have thought that on the flight over you would have worked up your ideas.’

‘This is not how I would expect to carry out a commission. There should be consultation and discussion, and various themes explored with the client. Not two hours’ notice and then an interview that feels more like an interrogation.’

‘This feels like an interrogation?’

She swallowed, regretting her brave words. But she couldn’t take them back.

‘If you feel that this is an interrogation, you’d better get a new career. This is business—and it’s personal. As owner of Heavenly, I am simply making sure that a complete novice gives me the quality of work and the discretion I require. I have never met you. I have no guarantees about you. No recommendations other than Mariella’s and the words that come out of your mouth. So far they’re not up to my standards. You understand my concern?’

His tone was so quiet, so controlled.

The phone. Again.

‘If you’d rather chat on the phone, be my guest.’

He was mocking her now. She dipped her hand into her bag, faced him grimly and grabbed her phone.

‘I’m taking this,’ she said, then turned her head slightly. ‘Mum, I’m fine. Yes, everything is fine. I can’t talk now because I’m being interviewed. Hydros—the island is Hydros. There’s no need to panic. You’ll only get yourself upset. I’ll call you right back. I won’t be long. I promise.’

He watched, one eyebrow raised, as she switched the phone off and then put it back in her bag. Her face was flushed, but the burn she felt on her cheeks was nothing to what she felt in her chest.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘but it’s my mother. I had to tell her where

I was. She gets worried about me and she can be quite ill with nerves. I know this was all supposed to be kept hush-hush, with your non-disclosure forms, but I've never gone to the end of the road without letting her know before. Maybe that's not how your "legends" would behave, but that's how we are.'

He looked utterly impassive and she felt the tension inside her bubble higher.

'You know, you're not the only one who cares about their family,' she said, filling the hideously blooming silence as he continued to watch her. 'My family is every bit as important to me as yours is to you. So my clothes are from a charity shop and not couture? So what? That woman on the phone is my mother. And, since this interview doesn't seem to be going anywhere, I'll head back to England to see her right now.'

She stood up.

'Sit down,' he said.

Despite the glare she fixed him with her legs buckled and she sank back down, bracing herself for his verdict. Her eyes flicked away, over his shoulder, to the other end of the cove, where the majestic old Villa Di Visconti sat against a hillside of olive groves.

The team would be getting it ready for the shoot. She desperately wanted to stay with them and complete her first big job, but she wouldn't be bullied into ignoring her mother when she needed her. Not by anyone.

'First of all, I make the decisions about who comes and goes

from this island. The only way on and off is by my boat or my plane. So forget any plans you have for dramatic exits. Unless you'd like to take your chances swimming to the mainland?"

Coral's mouth tightened. No way was he going to threaten her.

"Secondly, respect is non-negotiable if we are to have any kind of relationship. You will never speak to me like that again."

"Relationship?" she spluttered.

"Relationship," he repeated, his tone now rich and velvety. "As in client and creative."

"I don't get it..."

He sighed, almost imperceptibly, and sat down opposite her.

"Let's just say you've passed the first test."

"I have?" Coral's bag slid from her lap and her shoulders slumped. She felt her mouth hang open. "How come? What did I say? The seventies thing?"

Suddenly his face relaxed, and for a second a tiny smile curved the corner of his mouth.

"Definitely not the seventies thing. No. Your loyalty. Family values. Very strong. And for me that is a pretty good indication of a person. I know you can take pictures, so we can work with the rest." He waved his hand dismissively.

"I don't understand," she whispered, staring. "You're hiring me but you don't like my ideas?"

"Let's just say that I'm confident you won't let me down. What you feel for your mother mirrors what I feel for la famiglia Di Visconti. As long as you are sensitive to that, I think we will be

able to work together.’

‘I don’t know what to say. This is all very—’

‘Say nothing. Just convince me now that you can work the magic you say you’re capable of.’

‘OK,’ she said, sinking back into the seat a little. ‘It shouldn’t be difficult. All the ingredients are there already. They’re a lovely couple.’

He regarded her silently. ‘There are some quite important differences. The Di Viscontis do not court the media. But Kyla is...shrewd. She wants to create an empire—for the world to witness every moment of her life. It is my job to control what the world sees.’

He sat forward, leaned his elbows on his hands and stared with such intensity that she had to fight the urge to slide back in the seat.

‘Giancarlo spent the last twenty years of his life making sure that his family were undisturbed by the world. He adopted me when I was eight, so I think I’m in a good place to judge. There’s no way I’m going to let the family’s privacy unravel because of someone’s vanity.’

Coral sat up and blinked. His emotion was completely under control, but she could feel the passion and the warning in the words that he spoke.

She nodded. ‘I didn’t realise. I thought you were his son...’ Her voice trailed off. ‘Not that it’s any of my business.’

‘Correct. It’s not your business, but it is public knowledge. I

was at school with Salvatore, in Switzerland. We were waiting for our parents to collect us for the Christmas vacation but mine never came. I was eight. They were late because my mother had to fulfil other commitments—an interview. She was an actress and had a new film to promote. And then bad weather came down. She and my father were killed in an avalanche on the way.’

‘Oh, my God, I’m so sorry. Really.’

‘Don’t apologise. I was scooped up by Giancarlo the day it happened and he looked after me ever since. I’ve been blessed beyond words to be part of this family, so you understand now why I don’t want the Di Visconti name to be tainted by this—

‘Fairytale?’

‘Charade,’ he said, watching her closely. ‘I want it stage-managed down to the last dusting of powder on Kyla’s cheeks.’

‘So you’re not really bothered about the art? This is all about making sure no one will kiss and tell or show your family in a bad light.’

‘I know that no one will kiss and tell because I would slap an injunction on them and on any publication stupid enough to print it. Have no doubt about that, signorina.’

‘I hope you’re not implying that I would do something like that? I’m here because I want a proper career as a photographer. I’m not in it for the fame.’

He stared at her, and for the first time some emotion flickered in his eyes. It was so intense she couldn’t hold his gaze. She looked down at her lap, at her crushed and crumpled dress, the

scuffed peep-toe sandals, her shabby bag.

‘I’m only saying that I’ve got my principles too,’ she said quietly.

After a long moment he stood up, his hands on his hips.

He watched her, then nodded. ‘I think we understand each other. I suggest we get some lunch and then I’ll show you around. You can tell me a bit more about yourself and your ideas about fairytales. Let’s call it part two of the “interrogation”.’

She let out the long, slow breath she’d been holding in. Maybe things would turn out heavenly for her after all.

‘Sounds good,’ she said, swallowing the smile that was spreading from her chest. ‘Though maybe we could leave out the interrogation part? I respond better to the carrot than the stick.’

‘We’ll see,’ he said, and it was as if some kind of mask had suddenly slipped from his face.

He walked to the doors that opened onto the terrace and turned, fixing her with the most devastating smile.

‘If that’s what gets results, why not?’

She beamed back at him—a completely involuntary reaction, but the only one imaginable in the full glow of that smile.

He was so handsome it almost hurt to look at him. She could totally see why the team were falling over themselves to impress him. A date with ‘Raffa’ would be like dining on ambrosia. Everything else would taste like dust afterwards. Thank goodness theirs was definitely going to be a strictly professional relationship.



They walked across the terrace and took a short flight of steps side by side down to a beautiful dining area. Under an arbour planted with climbers, popping with bursts of pink and white, stood a long table draped in white linen, heaving under the weight of baskets and bowls of the most delicious-looking food.

‘This is amazing. What an incredible view.’

‘You know you’re not totally in the clear yet? I’m still waiting to hear something better than your seventies goddess idea.’

He pulled out a chair for her, waiting as she walked over.

‘The Greek Charlie’s Angels trope isn’t working for you?’

She glanced up at him as she sat down. His eyes crinkled as he smiled at her little joke and it quickened her heart.

‘You don’t really want me to get the thumbscrews out, do you?’

‘I don’t think I’d suit them, thanks all the same,’ she said, shifting slightly in her seat before she dared look up at him. ‘I can think of many more attractive accessories.’

‘Are you flirting with me, Miss Dahl?’

He was sitting down now, utterly relaxed, one arm on the back of his chair, head cocked, watching her. His eyes drew her gaze like twin blue magnets. His mouth was ever so slightly curved in a smile.

‘What?’ she said, flushing. ‘I’m sorry if I came across like that. I can assure you that I don’t even know how to flirt.’

She reached for her glass, which had just been filled by a server. Her fingers closed around the crystal, damp with condensation, and she stared at the pale golden liquid that

sloshed inside, glad to have something to focus on other than the impenetrable, delectable Raffaele.

‘I find that hard to believe.’

She flicked her eyes to his in a determined stare and breathed deeply. ‘You can believe what you like. It’s not my way, and I wouldn’t have thought you’d be open to such an obvious approach.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought so either,’ he said, lifting his glass and toasting her. ‘But today seems to be full of surprises. I didn’t intend that you would make it off the Tarmac, and here we are having lunch.’

‘May I ask what changed your mind?’

He placed his glass down and looked at her. A long, slow stare that reached deeper than his eyes.

‘Let’s just say I liked what I saw.’

Coral swallowed. ‘You felt I had potential?’

‘I did. Do you?’

‘Have potential? I’m biased but, yes. I think I can deliver whatever you have in mind.’

He flashed her another amazing smile. But just as quickly his face became impassive once more.

‘Let’s get back on track. We’ll finish lunch, then go and find Kyla. She has her own ideas. I’ll sanction the ones that are appropriate and you can take it from there.’

She dipped some bread in oil. ‘Do you sanction everything around here?’ she asked, as nonchalantly as she could under the

circumstances.

‘You really have to ask?’

She let the oil-drenched bread slide down her tongue and swallowed as calmly as her beating heart would allow. She knew he was watching her very carefully. There was more than the midday sunshine warming the atmosphere.

‘Are you flirting with me, Signor Rossini?’

He put his head back and laughed.

‘If it’s that obvious I must be losing my touch.’

In all her experience with men she had never felt anything that came close to that moment. She’d known him less than two hours, but she knew she’d hit pay-dirt when she made Raffaele Rossini laugh unguardedly.

‘Let’s just say I’m no push-over. It’ll take more than a free lunch in paradise and a commission from one of the world’s bestselling glossies to make me fall at anyone’s feet.’

Raffaele’s look across the table was straight and true. ‘If I didn’t know better, I’d say that sounds like a challenge.’

‘Not at all,’ she said, leaning forward on the table. ‘I’m here to follow my dream. And I won’t let anything get in the way. You can count on that.’

His thousand-watt gaze still beamed down on her and she was beginning to wilt under it. But she wasn’t going to show weakness. She brushed her fingertips together to get rid of some imaginary crumbs, smoothed her dress and sat back in her chair.

Then she slanted him a look that said—Is that all you’ve got?

He raised an eyebrow, put down his glass and stood. She raised her arm to shield her eyes.

‘It sounds like we’re on the same page,’ he said, nodding. ‘As long as you’re every bit as good as you say you are.’

‘Only one way to find out,’ she said, rising. She nodded at the old villa. ‘Shall we?’

## CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS JUST POSSIBLE—just possible—that this ridiculous situation might not end in total disaster after all. He’d thought seriously about demoting Mariella after her catastrophic error of judgement. It was only because of what they’d achieved together over the years that he’d relented.

He knew the magazine’s editor was still in love with him, and he’d been fond of her once, but linking this feature with their graduate competition proved she just didn’t get it. It was not a ‘cute idea’ when it involved Kyla and her out-of-control ego. Not now that she was almost family. And not when family was the only thing that really mattered.

If only Salvatore hadn’t gone into such a tailspin after Giancarlo’s death. He hadn’t coped well when his father was alive and he’d been in even worse shape these last few months. Now he was right in the middle of this new drama and it had to be managed.

Where Salvatore was concerned, damage limitation was a full-time occupation, but at least Giancarlo wasn’t around to see it. He was barely cold in his grave, and he would not have approved

of this fast-track wedding at all.

Kyla wasn't right for the family. She stood for everything Giancarlo hated—with her second-by-second social media presence, telling the whole world what she'd had for breakfast, turning pouting and preening into a full-blown career.

It was a useful lesson, though, and it had made him even more determined to keep his own women at a distance. Life was messy enough without consciously opting for an emotional double suicide. Especially with someone who was so clearly digging for gold.

Anyhow, he had Romano Publishing to take care of. And the Di Visconti empire to babysit until Salvatore learned which way was up. So what time did he have for women, gold-diggers or not?

'Oh, this is too lovely! Would you mind?'

He turned to see the young woman who had charmed him into this volte-face. He rarely went back on a decision, but there was no time to get anyone else. Plus, she was principled. And smart. He had a good feeling about her. In more ways than one...

It could all work out, he mused. He'd had no intention of having any downtime this weekend, but he'd just hit a home run of increased turnover in the digital wing of Romano, and—even better—started some pretty interesting talks with MacIver Press. If he added them to his portfolio he would be one happy CEO.

'I can't let it pass—I have to...'

She had stopped suddenly on the narrow path that linked the

old villa with his house. Her eyes, dark as charcoal, widened with joy as she grabbed her bag and started rummaging for her camera.

‘Honestly, if I lived here I’d get nothing done. It’s amazing!’

She stood back, checked what she’d photographed, then put the camera back to her eye and took another shot.

‘I suppose you must take it for granted, but...’

She was totally in the zone, oblivious to the world. It was always interesting to watch creatives at work, but she was so refreshingly, achingly lovely that he found himself slipping back into the trance she had begun to work him into over lunch. A trance that had him imagining kissing that wide, sensual mouth and unbuttoning the little pearl buttons that held her full, high breasts snug in that dress. Undressing her and holding her in his arms and—

She turned suddenly, beaming. ‘Isn’t it absolutely lovely?’

He smiled back. ‘Absolutely.’

She turned around, giving him another perfect view. In that sundress she was so evocative of someone. A young Sophia Loren? Maybe... Feline, but incredibly fresh.

‘You must thank God every day that you live here.’

‘All day long,’ he said.

‘Mmm, yes. How amazing to call this home.’

‘Third home,’ he corrected. ‘I live in London and Rome. But this is my favourite family retreat.’

‘Of course,’ she said, continuing to snap pictures with her

camera. She turned to take one of him. 'It's like being on holiday in heaven.'

'Avanti,' he said. 'There will be plenty time to take pictures of heaven later.'

'Hang on. Is that Salvatore?' She had stopped again and was pointing out to the bay.

Their yacht, Silver Spirit, was berthed some way off, tagged by the trail of a speedboat. Salvatore's speedboat. He had stopped and was waving up at him.

'Si. The man himself. He'll be heading over to meet the team. Let's go, Coral.'

She had her hand to her eyes and with the other began to wave back at Salvatore.

'Coral,' he said again, more sharply.

'Sorry!' She laughed.

As he started down the path, he struggled again to place just who it was she reminded him of. She had such an Italian look—wide-eyed, wide-mouthed, with auburn hair and creamy skin. An exotic, sensual cocktail. He couldn't think of any famous starlet that she resembled, now or in the past, but there was something, someone that jarred in his mind.

'Just getting some background,' she said suddenly, jolting him out of his reverie. 'It's not every day you get to wander along the cliffs of Hydros.' She grabbed up her bag and ran to catch up. 'Does Salvatore have a third home here too?'

'Salvatore would count here as his fifth home, I think. At a

push. Kyla has plans for it. I don't think they will be here much, though. They prefer Sydney, where she is from.'

'You don't like her, do you? This Kyla? I can tell. I'm getting a definite vibe that she's not your cup of tea.'

They'd reached the paved area that marked the boundary of the old villa. He stopped, and she almost ran into the back of him.

'Oh—sorry!'

She stumbled into his chest. He scooped his arm around her and held her against his side until she'd regained her balance. She tucked neatly under his arm, soft and warm and...

Not yet, Raffaele. Take it easy.

He let her go.

'OK. Before we take another step—the ground rules.'

'Right,' she said, smoothing the wide skirt of her dress and looking up at him, those big dark eyes so earnest, so honest. Unflinching. He was used to people looking away from him, nervously avoiding eye contact. So many men were intimidated and so many women coquettish. She was unashamedly neither.

'Professional questions only from now on. And keep your personal opinions to yourself.'

'You don't, do you?'

What was it with this girl? Why did she speak to him like this?

'Coral, what I think about Kyla or anyone else is not your business and should not even enter your head. You're here to do a job. Capisce?'

She nodded. 'Si—capisco.'



‘Parli italiano?’

‘No, not really. I’ve picked up a few words from films.’

He looked at her again and frowned.

‘We will meet Salvatore and Kyla. You will propose your ideas, chat them through with the team, and I will give you the final decision.’

‘You do know that Mariella has already decided that the shoot with Kyla will be done on the loggia? That does limit our options.’

‘She has? We’ve spent over an hour discussing this and you didn’t think to say?’

‘You were a little busy biting off my head,’ she said, smiling.

This woman was beyond infuriating. No one ever spoke back to him and here she was, staring him down and firing back with the most exhilarating confidence. She was easily the most attractive woman he’d met in a very long time.

‘Are you normally this difficult?’ he asked, turning back to the path.

‘I’m normally honest, if that’s what you mean. It wasn’t my idea to play it safe.’

They emerged from the cliff path onto the driveway. Before them stood the old villa in all its majesty, its secrets about to be shared with the public for the first time ever. A Di Visconti home for centuries, but now just the backdrop for Kyla’s vanity.

He led on across the terrace, helping Coral to step carefully on the worn marble. He knew too well the feeling of the hard slap of bone on stone, the trickle of blood from split knees, the

sound of Salvatore's voice, laughing. He knew the feeling of the housekeeper's arms around his young shoulders and the ache of wanting to be comforted. Wanting but never having. Because his own mother hadn't been able to.

Sometimes he felt as if his heart was as cold and hard as that marble.

He pushed the heavy door open, feeling the calming press of the brass handle on his palm. The relief of air-conditioning washed over his skin, cool and fresh. A buzz of voices caught his ear and he frowned, turning to catch the source.

Behind him the squeak of Coral's sandals told him she was right at his back.

'Sounds like it's all kicked off without us.'

He led on through the lounge areas that led from the pool into the main part of the villa.

Kyla had changed too much already. The oil paintings and eighteenth-century Italian furniture—heirlooms that as an eight-year-old boy he'd been taught to treat with respect—had all been replaced with squat sofas in white leather and black and white portraits of supermodels in various poses.

On through the house, he heard the buzz and thump growing louder as they passed stucco-panelled walls, repainted cream over the elegant duck-egg-blue that he and Salvatore had been warned never to touch with muddy fingers.

Salvatore.

Since Giancarlo's death their relationship had been more and

more strained, and disputes about the will were adding to that. It had been such a blow for Salvatore to learn that Giancarlo had left Raffaele in charge of the cruise line. It had been the last thing he'd wanted too, and as the empire's main trustee he would do his best to pass it on to Salvatore when the time was right.

'Darlings! She's here! We have our photographer!'

They stepped out on to the loggia and there was the team, flanked by muslin-draped walls and a haze of chatter and noise. On one side rails of clothes and racks of shoes waited to be rifled through. On the other side lights, screens and men on ladders attaching flowers to the loggia's ancient columns.

And, in the middle of it all, Kyla.

'Raffa! You've kept this angel all to yourself!'

Raffaele felt his jaw clench as Kyla walked towards him, fluttering her fake lashes and pouting. She was hot for him and made no attempt to conceal it—even in front of her fiancé.

And he, Raffaele, was going to be part of this charade.

He should be at work, focussing on Argento instead of slumming it with the B-list. Raffaele felt his patience snap. He wanted the whole thing to end. Now.

'Keeping to what we agreed, Kyla. I see you've made some interior design choices already. I assume they're temporary?'

She looked hurt, but that was an irrelevance. She was wearing a four-carat diamond and in less than a week would be joint owner of this ancient home. That would salve any wound.

He felt the light touch of a hand on his arm and a whisper in

his ear.

‘I’d be happy to get involved from here. It’s all looking good so far, and I guarantee that everyone will be happy with the results.’

He looked down at Coral’s face, the un-made-up, unflinching eyes gazing up at him. Again he felt the tug of something he knew, something he trusted. He thought of her confidence during their little interview, her direct, no-nonsense attitude. He thought of the stills that had excited Mariella so much that she’d dreamed up this commission as a prize. She’d rarely seen talent like it—sympathy with the subject, intelligence with the design. Exactly what Kyla needed to bring her back down to earth.

Giancarlo would be turning in his grave.

‘You’re in charge. You have the veto—whatever you say goes.’

‘You’re clear that this must—?’

‘Reflect well on the Di Visconti name? Absolutely. There is nothing I understand more than that. The lineage, the heritage, the legacy—I’m all over it.’

“All over it” is not what I want to hear. That sounds messy.’

She swallowed and closed her eyes as if—damn her—she were dealing with a recalcitrant toddler.

‘I know what you want to hear. I’ve figured it out. Your family brand is “class”.’ She walked around him where he stood in the centre of the melee, lowering her voice. ‘Kyla’s is “trash” and you want me to change that. You want the bored housewives and the media snoopers to open up their copies of *Heavenly* and see nothing but a perfect airbrushed and back-lit image of the ancient

famiglia Di Visconti. An illusion.'

'La famiglia Di Visconti is not an illusion. It is solid and serious.'

'It's classy. I will deliver classy. That's what the readers want, too. They want a glimpse into this fairytale world. They want to see beauty and elegance and style. They want to feel as if you've welcomed them into that world for the five minutes it takes them to read the feature.'

She was electrifying in her pitch. As he watched her he knew that he could stand her in front of any board of directors and they would hang on her every word. Whatever happened with these photographs, this young woman had a fire in her that would light up more than just this photo shoot. She had a fabulous career ahead of her. He recognised the signs.

'And I will deliver that. I will.'

He folded his arms over his chest, looked down at her upturned, earnest face. 'Yes, you will,' he said.

'Si, signor!'

And, dammit all, he found himself smiling. Just for a second. Caught up in her infectious words.

Then he watched as she headed straight for Kyla, greeting her like some long-lost sister. Beaming round at Mariella. Quirky. Confident.

That hair... Those curves...

Yes, maybe this would all turn out OK.

All around about him people got busier and busier. Raffaele

wandered outside to take some calls and keep an eye on Salvatore. Every five minutes or so he'd glance over his shoulder to see what was happening inside.

He shouldn't have to do this. He should be able to let Salvatore run his own life. They were the same age, had more or less had the same upbringing, but they were miles apart in terms of values. In terms of direction.

If he could walk away from all this right now he would. But he'd made a promise. He didn't need a penny from Argento. He had more than enough from Romano. But Giancarlo hadn't been stupid. He'd known exactly how quickly it would all unravel as soon as Salvatore was let loose with all those millions. Tying him in through the will had been a cast-iron guarantee of keeping Argento afloat.

But how much more of this could he stomach? He couldn't watch over every move Kyla made. He'd have to let them sink or swim some time. Legally, he was tied to Giancarlo for three more years. But morally he had him for life.

He glanced back inside the loggia. It seemed that order was descending.

The adorable Coral was looking through the clothes rails with Kyla and Mariella. Then she was organising assistants to move screens and lights. Laughing with the hair guy, consulting with the fashion editor as clothes were ruthlessly discarded. She was 'all over it' and no mistake.

'Is everything all right?'

He was still standing at the side, checking his emails, when she walked towards him, a glass of water in her hand.

‘Only you look at little preoccupied.’

‘Just waiting to hear good news, Coral.’

‘OK. I think I’ve got it down. It’s not going to be a pastiche or a pantomime. It’s a simple studio shoot—nothing too exciting. I’m afraid you were right about the princess trope. That’s what Kyla wants to be. But I’ve talked her into nineties glamour rather than eighties pop. Those prints we passed in the hallway—the Testinos—gave me an idea. I said I’d do an homage to the supermodel. She loved it.’

She was chatting to him as if he was an old friend. The glints in her hair were warm and rich and he itched to feel the heavy tresses in his hand.

‘The team are amazing. I can’t believe how fluidly they work together. I’m learning so much. I can’t tell you how grateful I am for this.’

She dipped her head and looked at him with those bewitching eyes. Those bewilderingly familiar, bewitching eyes.

‘OK, so I’d better get back to work. Phew. It’s hot.’

She reached her arms up and twisted her hair into a knot. Her breasts thrust forward and his groin was shot with pleasure at the sight.

‘Come here,’ he said, putting his hand around her arm and drawing her towards him.

He took her jaw in his hand, gently moving her face this way

and that.

‘What is it about you? I can’t take my eyes off you. There’s something so familiar... Have we met before?’

It was possible. Shorter hair? Different clothes? He looked at her again. There was something so engaging and compelling about her—and, still at the back of his mind, something so familiar.

She stepped back out of his reach and he dropped his hand.

‘Sorry, but I don’t think so.’

He had to laugh at that. ‘You don’t think you’d remember?’

‘Maybe. Maybe not. I’m not sure.’

Her eyes dipped, and for the first time he thought he saw the coquette. She was either the most naturally sensual woman he’d ever met or she was playing little games. Either way, he was beginning to get more and more turned on by her.

‘Look at me.’

She lifted her eyes slowly, flicked him a quick glance and then dropped her gaze to the side.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I’m sorry, but would you mind if I got back to the shoot? I’ve only got one shot at this and I don’t want to blow it.’

He put his hand on her jaw again and her eyes widened.

‘You really are genuine, aren’t you? You’d rather hang out at the pantomime than flirt with me.’

‘Signor Rossini, my future is in photography—not in flirting.’

At that he laughed. A proper laugh. The sound of it startled



him.

‘I like you flirting. You have a very promising career in flirting.’

She smiled too. And it was beautiful. So beautiful that he couldn’t stop himself. He wanted this woman. Now.

‘Come here. I want to show you something.’

At the far end of the loggia a short flight of steps led down to a sunken courtyard garden—private and tucked away. It was the perfect place for what he had in mind.

He clasped his fingers round hers and escorted her through the glare of lights and pounding music, driven by an ache that had to be assuaged. He led her down the marble steps, walking briskly, barely aware of the sun splattering flower shadows on each side of the path, until finally spinning her round in the archway that looked out onto the jewel-bright sea. He could hold back no longer.

He clasped her face in his hands and stared down into those eyes. ‘You beautiful girl.’

But as he moved to kiss her she squealed and stepped out of his grasp.

‘I—I have to get back. They’ll be waiting for me.’

He smiled with casual confidence. ‘You can take ten minutes to check out the view.’

‘That’s kind, but it will set tongues wagging. They’ll all think I’m down here getting it on with you.’

‘That doesn’t sound like such a bad idea.’

But she stepped further away, looking horrified.

‘OK, Miss Dahl. If you insist.’

‘I’m sorry, but I really want to make a good impression on everyone. This is so important for me. I need to network with these people. Some of them could open doors for me. The last thing I want is anyone thinking I’ve been on some kind of casting couch.’

He looked at her. She was serious.

‘Nobody would dare to question you. You’ve been in discussion with me. And I answer to no one.’

She looked vexed.

‘You don’t understand. I want this more than I can tell you. I’ve never been rich or successful. My mum has had to beg and borrow and steal to put me through college and I can’t risk ruining this one chance.’

‘You’re not going to ruin anything. Mariella is one of the toughest in the business and you won her over because of your talent. You’ve won me over too. That’s a fact. And we have chemistry—really explosive chemistry. You can’t deny that. I’m not sure why you think it’s such a problem.’

‘I’m not denying that I’m flattered. Of course I am. But...’

‘But?’

She looked away, uncomfortable.

He’d had enough. He pulled out his phone.

‘Va bene. I’ve got work to do. Enjoy the rest of your day.’

He walked away, smiling. Casting couch! As if he would need

anything so obvious. A glance, a whisper, a word left unsaid—that was all it ever took.

But he had to admire her principles. How refreshing. And even more attractive. At least he could be sure she wasn't one of those who thought a kiss was a declaration of love or a proposal of marriage. Or a sign to go out and choose a wedding dress or wallpaper for the nursery.

Ha! He laughed at his own joke. Wallpaper for the nursery! Words he would never say. Not even with a gun to his head.

### CHAPTER THREE

'THE STILLS LOOK amazing. Kyla is really pleased. It was an absolute genius idea.' Mariella, who'd been a little bit glacial all afternoon, managed to squeeze out a compliment.

Coral closed her eyes in a silent prayer of thanks as they checked out the stream of images for Kyla's final outfit.

'The whole day has been a dream come true,' she said. 'Everyone's been lovelier than lovely. Just being here watching would have been amazing, but getting to work with the best in the business... I've learned loads already.'

'Yes, I bet you have. All we need now is Raffaele's final approval and then we can really relax.'

There was no mistaking the tone. Coral looked away. Glances had been exchanged all afternoon, but so far no one had mentioned the fact that she had been alone with Raffaele twice over the course of the day.

'So lucky that he gave you his approval.'

‘Yes, I couldn’t be happier.’

‘Amazing that you managed to change his mind so easily.’

Here it came.

‘Yes, it was. You’re absolutely right. He liked my idea and I’m so grateful to you for giving me this chance.’

‘You know we had a thing once, Raffa and I?’

‘Oh. No. I didn’t realise.’

Could this get any more awkward?

Mariella’s wily, exquisitely arched brows rose. ‘Angel, no one who dresses in Sophia Loren’s hand-me-downs is fooling anyone. You think you can get your claws into Raffaele? Let me give you some free advice. You’re just some light relief between emails. Don’t think that your fumble on the terrace is going to get you on some fast track to fame. There’s a whole stable of little fillies like you, waiting for him to click his fingers. So take it from me—success is about what you put in, not about how well you put out.’

‘I don’t know what you think you know, Mariella, but I can promise you this: I am here for one reason and one reason only. I want to make a name for myself.’

‘You already have, angel. You already have.’

Mariella winked at her, then shook her head as she breezed past, leaving Coral adrift in the swarm of people packing things away.

But she was right. She was absolutely right. This was her career, not a fantasy island adventure. Raffaele Rossini was not going to chase after her when she was back in London. She’d

been a distraction this afternoon and that was it. He was off the charts and off the agenda in every single way. Every. Single. Way.

Thank goodness she'd had the strength of will to resist him earlier. It had taken every ounce of her resolve not to kiss him back. When he'd touched her she'd wanted to melt into him. When he'd held her face she'd wanted to close her eyes and slide into heaven...

But that wasn't why she was here. She was shoving open the door of her career. And it would slam in her face if she messed up.

'Miss Dahl?'

She looked up from the images on the laptop into the face of a very attractive young man.

'Signor Rossini wishes you to attend a meeting at his villa.'

'Oh! I haven't quite finished, and my things—'

'The meeting is due to start now.'

Coral looked around. Mariella and the fashion staff had disappeared and the clothes were being packed away. Only a few junior staff still wandered about, tidying up the loggia.

'Is it really important?'

He gave her an Are you serious? look and shook his head.

'Follow me, please.'

It would be fine. It was probably a meeting to look through the images she'd shot and select the best, decide what needed to be filtered or airbrushed. Mariella would be there. And the other senior staff. Maybe they would be planning the next shoot. There

was talk that Kyla was going to ask Salvatore to do a couple shoot.

She picked up her precious camera and tucked it in her bag. Then she followed the brisk pace set by the man back through the house and out to the front entrance, into a black buggy and along the short paved road to Raffaele's villa.

Her stomach fluttered and she felt the dirt and dust of the day on her as she tried to wipe her damp hands on her dress.

'Do you think I could clean up before I meet Signor Rossini?' she asked the young man, but he merely opened the door and closed it behind her as she once more stepped inside the spectacular house.

'You may bathe in Aphrodite's Pool, if you like.'

\* \* \*

'Raffaele?'

She looked around for signs of the others, but the eerie green glow from the sunken pool and the shimmer of light from the chandelier landed on a room that was quite deserted.

'Indeed. Thank you for joining me,' he said, beckoning for her to follow as he led her through the lounge and out to the terrace.

It was already lit with candles and tiny lights, and there was a glimmering curtain between the wide, low walls and the high hedges beyond.

'I thought it was important to close our discussion more appropriately than the last time. Mariella has just left. She thought things went very well. You have potential.'

'Thank you,' said Coral, following behind him.

Her eyes shifted from the broad slope of his shoulders in a tight T-shirt to the tight fit of his trousers across his backside as he walked. He stopped and turned so suddenly that she realised she'd been caught staring.

She looked up at the unreadable, unbearably handsome face and blushed.

‘Yes, everyone seemed pleased,’ she babbled. ‘Especially Kyla. She channelled her inner supermodel and looked quite the goddess—but in a very tasteful way. I’m so glad you’re pleased.’

‘Yes, I am. Very pleased.’

He took the bag that hung limply from her hand and put it down. The butterflies in her stomach soared. To please Mariella was one thing, but to please the CEO of Romano with the list of conditions he had set was another thing entirely. She felt almost dizzy with pride.

‘I couldn’t be more pleased,’ he said.

And, although she knew he wasn’t just talking about her work, she was flattered.

‘That makes me feel very proud,’ she said.

‘So you should be.’

He stared into her eyes and she tried to look away, but the inky irises drew her in deeper and deeper. He smiled, ever so slightly, and her eyes fell to his mouth, to the perfect shapes and shadows.

Oh, my God! He’s going to kiss me!

Her treacherous body fluttered with longing. But he smiled gently and the moment passed as he turned back towards the

lights of the house.

Air flew from her lungs like a burst balloon. She felt light-headed. Undone. And nothing had even happened.

‘You can bask in your glory all evening at the party.’

‘What party?’ she said, swallowing.

‘It’s been a good day. Kyla’s lust for cheap glamour has been held in check. Mariella has pulled off a great feature. Of course there will be a party. They’re getting it ready now, at the old villa. Salvatore is coming here shortly—we have some things to discuss—and then we will come over to join you all.’

He was inside now, walking back to the lounge. The dogs pricked up their ears and tracked him with their eyes as he passed.

‘That’s amazing. I mean, I’m really, really pleased that you liked the work. Do you think...?’ She paused.

‘Do I think that there might be more commissions to follow?’ he said.

He unscrewed a bottle of water and poured it out slowly, rhythmically.

‘Perhaps... Kyla has some idea of a couple thing with Salvatore, so maybe they’ll want you to do that before the wedding. Mariella will talk that through with you tonight.’

‘That’s incredible. I can’t thank you enough.’

Her mind whirled. A party. The staff would all be there. Mariella and the others, drinking champagne and looking so well put together—the way they always looked. They worked in an



industry where everything was about looking perfect, and they had access to every product, every accessory under the sun. Her vintage thrift shop dress had been just about good enough for daytime, but she'd look ridiculous wearing it again tonight.

'I wish I'd known. I thought I'd be flying home tonight. I never imagined I'd be invited to a party. I've not brought anything to wear.'

'That's never a problem on a fashion shoot. Everyone will be helping themselves.'

'But I can't wear those clothes! I'm a totally different shape.'

'There'll be something to suit you. You're not such a different shape than Kyla.'

'I'm nothing like Kyla. She's tiny. I'm...'

Coral ran a mental check over the clothes that had been brought, trying to imagine herself squeezing into something that might pass scrutiny.

'You're...what?'

He sipped water and looked at her.

'I'm not easy to dress.'

'I'm not sure I follow.'

'I mean I have my own style.'

It was the best thing she could say in the circumstances. What was the alternative—pointing out her huge backside and overflowing boobs? No way!

'You will not be difficult to dress at all. Stand there.'

He tilted his head and scanned her body, his eyes trailing

slowly from her neck to her chest and down to her waist.

He walked around her. 'Of course what you are wearing could be covering up some grave imperfections. Or perfections.'

'I'm well aware of what suits me and what doesn't.'

She watched his inscrutable face. He could be looking at a lump of rock for all he was giving away, but she was feeling electrified as his eyes slowly scanned her body.

'The question is—what are you hiding under that dress? The perfect hourglass?'

He stepped closer and walked around her again. Coral felt her heart begin to thunder. She felt an unbearable desire for him to touch her with his hands.

'You know, my longest love affair was with women's fashion,' he said, lifting her left arm up by the fingertips and scanning her from wrist to shoulder. 'I remember going along to my mother's couture fittings. Even as a very young child I was fascinated by the process—the illusions that could be created or destroyed. That's one of the reasons I started Heavenly. It's all behind me now, but I spent my first two years after college working on American Vogue, copywriting. And dating models.'

'I'm no model, I can assure you,' said Coral, suddenly cringing at the thought of her generous proportions.

He had stopped behind her. She could feel the heat from his body, his broad shoulders and firm biceps framing her. She could feel the roar of desire rampaging through her veins.

'But you are incredibly beautiful. And you have a body that is

driving me almost mad with curiosity.’

His words landed close to her right ear and she shivered uncontrollably. He moved around her, now lifting her right fingertips and staring down the length of her arm.

‘As an artist, you will know that fashion is a creative process. But you should never ignore the fact that what is pleasing to the eye mirrors desire. For example, I’ve never been clear why it is that just this curve—may I?’

She looked down to where his bronzed hand moulded the space between her waist and her ribs. Her breathing stopped...her body seemed to wilt. She leaned back a tiny fraction and her bottom grazed his loins. She felt his chest against her shoulder blades. A wall of heat flamed between them.

‘Why do some designers ignore the lines and curves that you have to such perfection—that instantly fire a man’s desires? I cannot understand why they do not design clothes that flatter and complement nature’s basic lines. So many make awful clothes that suit...nobody.’

Briefly he lifted her skirt, looked at the fabric. ‘This is nice.’ He dropped it and stepped away. ‘Perplexing, isn’t it? I could dress you. Very easily. There are rooms full of vintage here—couture and off the peg.’

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