The Italian Count's Defiant Bride

Catherine George

INTERNATIONAL BILLIONAIRES

MILLS & BOON

MODERN™

CATHERINE GEORGE
The Italian Count's Defiant Bride

Аннотация

Step into a world of sophistication and glamour, where sinfully seductive heroes await you in luxurious international locations.Wedded and bedded by the Italian Count Count Francesco da Luca isn’t used to being made a fool of. When his wilful bride fled the marriage bed, he vowed she’d pay the debt owing him – a wedding night! But Alicia Cross is no longer the trembling, naïve innocent he married – and she won’t be pushed around by the masterful Count.His runaway bride is proving to be more of a challenge than Francesco anticipated – until he discovers she’s still a virgin. The wedding night he wanted is his for the taking!

Содержание

THE ITALIAN COUNT’S DEFIANT BRIDE 7
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 62

INTERNATIONAL BILLIONAIRES

Life is a game of power and pleasure. And these men play to win!

Let Modern™ Romance take you on a jet-set journey
to meet eight male wonders of the world.
From rich tycoons to royal playboys—
they're red-hot and ruthless!
International Billionaires coming in 2009

The Prince's Waitress Wife by Sarah Morgan, February.

At the Argentinean Billionaire's Bidding by India Grey, March.

The French Tycoon's Pregnant Mistress by Abby Green, April.

The Ruthless Billionaire's Virgin by Susan Stephens, May.

The Italian Count's Defiant Bride by Catherine George, June.

The Sheikh's Love-Child by Kate Hewitt, July.

Blackmailed into the Greek Tycoon's Bed by Carol Marinelli, August.

The Virgin Secretary's Impossible Boss by Carol Mortimer, September.

8 volumes in all to collect!

Catherine George was born in Wales, and early on developed a passion for reading which eventually fuelled her compulsion to write. Marriage to an engineer led to nine years in Brazil, but on his later travels the education of her son and daughter kept her in the UK. And, instead of constant reading to pass her lonely evenings, she began to write the first of her romantic novels. When not writing and reading she loves to cook, listen to opera

and browse in antiques shops.

Recent titles by this author:

***CHRISTMAS REUNION THE MILLIONAIRE'S REBELLIOUS MISTRESS THE MILLIONAIRE'S CONVENIENT BRIDE THE RICH MAN'S BRIDE**

*In the anthology *Married by Christmas*

Dear Reader

Welcome to my contribution to *International Billionaires*! Since I come from Wales, where Rugby is not just a game but almost a religion, I was only too delighted to write one of the stories.

Over the years my father, husband and son all played Rugby in the first fifteen at their various schools, and my brother captained his university team, which meant the game was in my blood from early childhood. It was soon the same for my son (who played at fly half), also for my daughter, who is as hotly enthusiastic a fan as her brother. They watch Six Nations matches together, kitted out in the red shirts of Wales and yelling their heads off for the home team. (I do my share of shouting, too.)

As a background to a romantic novel, the game of rugby football provides great heroes: big, muscular men, doing battle like gladiators in a packed arena, with fans cheering them on. So with them in mind the rest soon fell into place.

I hope you enjoy my Rugby story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Happy reading!
Love
Catherine

THE ITALIAN COUNT'S DEFIANT BRIDE

BY
CATHERINE GEORGE

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To rugby players of all nationalities,
with a special dedication to the men
who wear the red shirts of Wales.

CHAPTER ONE

THE atmosphere in the city was electric. Alicia Cross felt it tingle in her veins as she joined the Welsh rugby fans streaming into Cardiff's Millennium Stadium. As always they had arrived in their thousands to support their heroes, with the added excitement that today a victory against Italy would mean a step forward towards the holy grail of the Six Nations contest, the grand slam; victory over all five of the other teams. Wales were now level with England on wins.

After weeks of travel and hard work to organise parties and press events, Alicia had begged a couple of hours off duty

this afternoon to watch the match with friends. Earlier she had checked the arrangements for the sponsor's lunch at the stadium, then hurried back to Cardiff Bay to ensure that all was ready in the hotel chosen for the party later that night. But now at last, instead of joining the sponsors in their hospitality box, she was on her way to her seat in the stands, and she was cutting it a bit fine. In her rush she almost bumped into the man who stepped in front of her, barring her way. She opened her mouth to apologise then snapped it shut, the colour draining from her face. In a knee-jerk reaction she flung away, but he was too quick for her and seized her hand. Conscious of curious glances beamed in their direction, she forced herself to stand still, her heart thudding against her ribs as she looked up into the handsome, unforgettable face of the man who had once changed her girlhood dreams into nightmares.

'Alicia,' he said in the voice that had not, to her intense disgust, lost the power to send shivers down her spine. Eyes locked with hers, he held her hand captive.

She returned the intent, heavy-lidded gaze for the space of several, deliberate heartbeats, then wrenched her hand away and turned on her heel.

But Francesco da Luca caught her by the elbow. 'Alicia, wait. I must speak with you.'

She stared at him in silent disdain, refusal blazing in her eyes as a crowd of late arrivals surged through the turnstiles to jostle them, and with a smothered curse he let her go.

'Do not think you can escape me again so easily, Alicia!'

The hint of menace in the deep, husky voice sent her racing up after the other fans as though the devil were after her. She shot into the cauldron of noise and music in the famous arena, and dived down the steep steps at such breakneck speed that Gareth Davies leapt up from the end of a row to seize her by the arm.

'Steady on, you'll break your neck.'

'Where have you *been*?' demanded Meg indignantly, as her brother thrust Alicia into the seat between them. 'The teams are just about to come on— Hey, what's up?'

'Big rush.' Alicia leaned across to smile at Meg's husband. 'Hi, Rhys.'

'Are you all right, love?' he said, reaching to pat her hand.

'Fine.' Or she would be in a minute.

'You don't look it,' Gareth told her.

Alicia's reply was drowned by the roar from the Italian supporters as their team ran onto the pitch. Then the entire arena erupted as Billy Wales, the famous ram mascot of the Welsh Guards, was led out from the players' tunnel. The big Welsh captain came next, holding a tiny red-shirted boy by the hand as he led his team to line up for the royal presentation.

The smiling prince went along the line, shaking the hands of players on both teams, saying a word here and there. Once he was escorted back to his seat the band of the Welsh Guards struck up the first bars of the Italian national anthem, and the Italian fans in the arena roared out the words to encourage their team. There were cheers as it ended, but a hush fell as the band played the

first chords of the Welsh national anthem and every Welsh man, woman and child in the stadium—including those in the home team line-up not too choked with emotion—sang in one voice. Hairs rose on every patriotic neck present as the sound filled the stadium.

The band marched off to cheers, the referee blew the whistle, and from the moment the first ball was lofted to start the match excitement wound the crowd to fever pitch. Alicia cheered and gasped with the others as the tide of play went first one way, then the other. Like everyone else she screamed encouragement when a long pass from the Welsh scrum-half began a running movement which brought the crowd to its feet as Welsh backs surged towards the line, dodging the tackles of their Italian opponents as they passed the ball from hand to hand. The noise from the crowd mounted to a frenzied crescendo when the quicksilver Welsh wing caught the final pass from the full back, danced his way through the chasing Italian defenders and dived over the line to score. Alicia applauded wildly, then after a moment's hush joined in the cheers as the outside half sent the ball sailing over the bar, plum between the posts, to convert the try.

But through it all, even as she hugged Meg in triumph, one part of Alicia's brain was still numb with shock from the confrontation with Francesco da Luca. She had known only too well that he might come here to support his country in such an important match. But in the throes of the Six Nations season

there was no way she could have taken time off from her job today purely on the off-chance that he might turn up, even less explain why. None of her colleagues knew about her connection to Francesco.

When the final whistle blew at last to confirm Welsh victory, the crowd went wild. Not a soul in the stadium moved to leave, and the crowd cheered and yelled as the euphoric Welsh squad saluted their supporters.

'How absolutely wonderful! But duty calls. I've got to go now, folks,' said Alicia, getting up. 'You stay here and enjoy the celebration.'

'Are you sure?' said Gareth, torn between seeing her out safely and wallowing in national euphoria.

'Of course. I'll see you at lunch tomorrow.' As Alicia leaned down to kiss Meg, her friend gave her an anxious look.

'I hope you're not too late to bed tonight, Lally. You look tired.'

'I'm fine, Mother Hen. Cheers, boys.'

Alicia made her way up the tiers of wildly cheering fans, returning the jubilant smiles on all sides as she went. But her smile vanished when she spotted the elegant, raincoated figure waiting just outside the exit. For a split second she considered racing back down to the others. Instead she stiffened her spine and mounted the remaining steps, head high. She ignored the hand Francesco held out, but in silent, icy acquiescence accompanied him down to ground level and outside to the

entrance of the stadium. As silent as Alicia, he put up a large black umbrella and put an arm round her rigid waist to draw her under its shelter as the first of the exultant Welsh crowd began streaming past them on their way to begin celebrating their team's magnificent victory.

'I must talk with you,' said Francesco at last, dropping his arm as he leaned close to speak in her ear.

'No,' she said flatly.

'I understand your hostility—'

'No one better!'

His eyes blazed. 'You know very well how many, many times I have tried to contact you, Alicia, but you do not return my calls; my letters come back to me unopened. And appeals to your mother have been useless. She would tell me nothing.'

'Of course not. She was acting on my instructions.' Her chin lifted. 'And you can't have appealed to her lately. She moved from Blake Street ages ago.'

He drew her aside to avoid being buffeted by the crowds. '*Dio*, this is impossible. Come with me to my hotel.'

She gave him a look like a thrown dagger. 'After what happened last time we were in a hotel room? In your dreams, Francesco!' She tried to thrust his arm away, but he held her fast.

'Dreams of you are all I have!' His eyes locked with hers. 'I felt hope when I finally received a letter from you, but it was merely your—your *condoglianze* for the death of my mother.'

'And you only had that because *my* mother insisted I write it

after your letter was forwarded to her.'

His eyes darkened. 'Do you hate me so much then, Alicia?'

She gave him a pitying smile. 'Good heavens, no. I feel nothing at all for you any more, Francesco. This urgent talk you want,' she added briskly, 'I assume it's a divorce you're after? If so you don't need me to agree to it after all this time, unless the law's different in your part of the world. And to set your mind at rest, Signor Conte, I don't want a single thing from you, legally or any other way. So go ahead, get on with it. I'll sign whatever papers you want. As far as I'm concerned you're a free man.'

He shook his head slowly, a look in his eyes she didn't care for at all. 'You and I were married by a priest in the sight of God, Alicia. You are still my wife. And I,' he added, in a tone she cared even less for, 'am still your husband.'

'Only on paper! As a bride I fell disastrously short of your requirements. Something you made cruelly plain to me.' She raised an eyebrow. 'Surely you can just get the marriage annulled?'

'And make public what is personal between us?' He shook his head, and bent nearer under cover of the umbrella. 'After all this time I doubt that you are still a virgin. And if you are not—' he shrugged in the way she remembered only too well '—there is no proof that our marriage was not consummated.'

Alicia's eyes glittered with icy distaste. 'Your problem, not mine, Francesco. I have no plans to marry again. These days I enjoy less binding relationships.' She looked at her watch, then

gave him a bored little smile. 'Fascinating though this is, I have to go.'

Francesco released her so abruptly she almost staggered. '*Va bene*. Do what you do so well—run away again, Alicia.'

She tried to think of some crushing response, but in the end just turned on her heel and left him, forcing herself to walk rather than take to her heels as she longed to. She glanced back through the throng to see if Francesco was watching her, but the tall figure in the long black raincoat had vanished. And with it all her pleasure in the day.

Alicia tried hard to blank the encounter from her mind as she got ready for the party that evening. In a routine she'd long since got down to a fine art, she tamed her newly washed hair with a miracle preparation that transformed rebellious curls into glossy obedience, then sleeked them up into a sophisticated knot and went to work on her face. But she functioned like an automaton, her eyes absent, and her disobedient mind full of memories the encounter with Francesco had brought flooding back. Not that they'd ever gone away.

On her eighteenth birthday, blissfully unaware that her life was about to change forever, Alicia had set out to explore Florence alone on the first day of the holiday. With a city map for a guide, she'd threaded her way through ancient streets with fascinating names, and felt very pleased with herself when she eventually reached the Piazza della Signoria. Eyes blazing with excitement behind her dark glasses, she edged her way through the crowds

and clustering pigeons to marvel at sights familiar from art books and television, but most of all from a favourite film: *A Room With a View*. Making a mental note of every detail to report back later, she headed at last for the famous Caffe Rivoire. But as she dodged like a rugby fly-half to avoid a pair of kissing lovers, she dropped her bag and lunged after it in such panic only the lightning reflexes of the man she collided with saved her from falling flat on her face as she snatched it up.

'*Mi dispiace!*' said a voice as hard, safe hands held her steady.

Flushed with embarrassment, Alicia looked up into a striking, honey-skinned face crowned by black curling hair, a face so familiar that every Italian phrase she'd tried to learn vanished from her brain as she stared, dazed, at her rescuer.

'I'm so sorry, it was my fault,' she managed, when she could trust her voice.

Her rescuer smiled. 'Ah! You are English. And you are trembling, *piccola*. Are you hurt?'

'No.' Just knocked sideways by meeting the man whose photograph lived on her bedroom wall.

'But you had the shock, no? Come. You need a cold drink,' he said firmly. 'Allow me to introduce myself. I am Francesco da Luca.'

Was this was really *happening*? She took in a deep breath to steady herself. 'How do you do? My name's Alicia Cross.'

In the shade of an awning at one of Rivoire's outdoor tables, she took off her huge sunglasses and brand-new white cricket

hat and smiled shyly as she asked for hot chocolate instead of something cold. 'I was told it's a speciality here. I was on my way to treat myself when I ran into you…' She trailed into silence as she met the arrested look in Francesco da Luca's eyes.

He blinked, murmured an apology, gave the order to a waiter, then leaned back in his chair. 'So. You are in Firenze on holiday, Miss Alicia Cross?'

'Yes.'

He arched a dark eyebrow. 'Alone so young?'

'No.' Just how young did he think she was? 'I'm here with my best friend. Megan was airsick on the flight this morning, so she's sleeping it off at our hotel. But she insisted I come out to explore on my own.' Alicia smiled. 'And gave me a long list of instructions before I left.'

'I can guess one of these.' His answering smile set her pulse racing. 'You must not talk to strangers.'

Twin dimples flickered at the corners of her mouth. 'Top of the list.' Her smile faded as his eyes lit with the unsettling look again. 'Sorry. I didn't mean to offend you.'

'I am not offended—I am charmed by the *fossetti*,' he said softly.

The word hadn't come up in Alicia's phrase book, but she was pretty sure he meant her freckles. 'I hate them,' she said passionately, then smiled as the waiter set her chocolate in front of her and thanked him with the one word of Italian she could remember.

Francesco leaned nearer. 'You should not hate them,' he informed her. 'They are enchanting.'

Alicia sipped some of her chocolate. 'Not to me,' she said, resigned. 'I've tried all sorts of things to get rid of them, but nothing works.'

He frowned. 'I think we have a language problem. Smile again for me, *per favore*.'

Alicia obeyed, her smile widening as she realised he meant her dimples. Not that she was hugely keen on those, either. She brushed a finger over her cheekbones. 'I thought you meant the freckles.'

'They also are charming,' he informed her gravely.

Not sure how to answer that, Alicia took refuge in her chocolate, which went down like liquid gold as she marvelled at her wonderful luck. She was here at last in Florence, with all the world going by in the afternoon sun in this famous *piazza* full of statues and wonderful architecture. And to top that she was actually, unbelievably, doing all this in the company of Francesco da Luca.

'What are you thinking?' he asked at last.

'That you speak very good English, Signor da Luca.' With a slight accent that sent shivers down her spine.

'*Grazie*, but I am Francesco, please. And I speak English,' he added, 'because it is a great advantage in my business.'

His sporting career had been so brief Alicia had never discovered anything about his private life. 'What do you do?' She

flushed. 'I'm sorry. You don't have to answer that.'

Francesco shook his head, amused. 'What man does not like to talk about himself?'

Alicia beamed. As far as she was concerned he could talk about himself as long as he liked.

Francesco sat back in his seat, apparently happy to oblige her. 'I studied law, but although the knowledge I gained is useful to me I do not practise it.' He shrugged his broad shoulders. 'For me life is wine, olives and marble. And responsibilities.' He shot her a searching look. 'And you, Miss Alicia; you are still in school?'

'No. Though I was until last week,' she added honestly. 'I've just finished my exams. If my grades are good enough, I go on to university in October.'

'Then you are not as young as I thought,' he said, surprised, and leaned forward again. 'So. How old are you, Alicia?'

'Eighteen.' She hesitated, then smiled, for once deliberately bringing her dimples into full play. 'Today, in fact.'

His heavy-lidded eyes opened wide and her heart skipped a beat as she saw they were a translucent shade somewhere between green and blue; improbable and unexpected in such a masculine face.

'It is your birthday!' Francesco exclaimed. '*Buon compleanno!*'

'Thank you.'

'But instead of chocolate to celebrate you should have champagne, or a glass of our own prosecco. Now you are a grown-up lady this is allowed, no?'

She smiled. 'Will you laugh if I say I'm not very keen on champagne?'

'No,' he said very softly. 'I will not laugh.'

Silence fell between them as the spectacular eyes held hers. Alicia gazed at him, mesmerised, then blinked at last and braced herself to confess 'Actually, I know who you are.'

He nodded, smiling. 'Because I told you my name.'

'No. I mean that I once saw you play rugby.'

'*Davverro?*' he exclaimed, astonished.

She nodded and named the tournament in which she'd seen him play.

'Few people remember that! I was injured soon afterwards and never played at that level again.' Francesco shook his head in wonder. 'You were just a child—also a girl. I am amazed.'

'That I remember you, or that I'm a girl who likes rugby?'

'Both of these. Your father played?'

'I don't know. I've never met him,' she said, and could have bitten her tongue the moment the words were out.

Francesco winced. '*Mi dispiace!*'

She tried to make her shrug nonchalant. 'I follow the game because my best friend's father is a rugby fanatic, her brother too. I used to watch Gareth's school matches with Meg, then his club matches later on. Once he even got us tickets for an international at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff.'

'An impressive arena,' he agreed. 'I have been there to watch Italy play against Wales.'

‘Do you miss playing rugby?’

‘Yes.’ He shrugged impressive shoulders. ‘But I have no time for sport in my life now, except to watch on television. Will such an ardent rugby-fan look at me in disgust if I confess I also follow Fiorentino, the local soccer-team here?’

Alicia shook her head, smiling. Then she glanced at her watch and saw that they’d been sitting there far longer than she’d thought. With a sigh she replaced her dark glasses and pulled her hat down low over them. ‘It’s time I got back to my friend. Thank you for the chocolate—and for being so kind.’

Francesco rose quickly. ‘Where are you staying?’

She gave him the name of a small hotel in a quiet residential area well away from the town centre. ‘It was recommended by one of my mother’s friends.’

‘*Bene*. I shall escort you back.’ He bent his head to smile under the green-lined brim of her hat as they left the table. ‘I must make sure you return to your friend safely on your special day, Miss Alicia Cross.’

On her own earlier the route to the Piazza della Signoria had seemed quite long while she was finding her way, but the walk back with Francesco was far too short for Alicia, as she talked about her plans for the holiday as though she’d known him for years. Which in one way she had. When they arrived at the hotel she held out her hand.

‘Thank you again. It was an amazing coincidence to meet you.’ She smiled shyly. ‘And such a pleasure.’

To her delight Francesco kissed her hand. 'It was a great pleasure for me also, Miss Alicia Cross. I hope you find your friend recovered. *Arrivederci*.'

Alicia went up in the lift in a daze, gazing at the back of her hand as though Francesco's kiss was engraved on it. She came back to earth as the doors opened and hurried to knock on the door of their room, calling softly, 'Sorry to get you out of bed. It's me.'

Megan Davies blinked owlishly when she finally opened the door. 'You're back soon. I thought you'd be ages yet.'

'I was worried about you.' Alicia eyed her critically. 'How do you feel?'

'Feeble, but not throwing up any more. I'll be fine tomorrow.' Meg sighed despondently. 'Which isn't much use. Your birthday's today.'

'We'll celebrate it tomorrow. In the meantime, lie down again; you still look peaky.' Alicia plumped her friend's pillows up invitingly.

'So come on then, Lally,' demanded Meg as she subsided against them. 'Tell me what you've seen!'

'I found the Piazza della Signoria quite easily. It's not far, and just as amazing as expected, like a great outdoor sculpture-gallery. I had a look at the Palazzo Vecchio, though I didn't go inside, then I went past the crowds round the Neptune fountain to look at the replica of David and the statues in the Loggia dei Lanzi. The Rape of the Sabines is pretty realistic,' added Alicia

with relish. ‘But my favourite is Perseus holding the severed head of Medusa.’

‘Can’t wait! Did you splurge on a birthday hot chocolate at Rivoire afterwards?’

‘Sort of, yes.’

‘What do you mean, “sort of”?’

Alicia took in a deep breath, her eyes blazing with excitement. ‘You’ll never guess who I ran into.’

Megan’s eyes widened. ‘The minute you’re let loose in Florence? Who?’

With drama, Alicia described the incident with her bag and the man who came to her rescue.

Meg snorted. ‘You mean that after all my dire warnings you let someone pick you up?’

‘Yes, Mother Hen! Literally. Otherwise I would have fallen on my nose.’

‘This rescuer—was he Italian?’

‘What did you expect, someone from Cardiff?’ Alicia’s dimples flashed wickedly. ‘Are you sitting comfortably, Megan dear? Because here’s the bit you won’t believe. It was Francesco da Luca.’

Meg stared at her, open-mouthed. ‘The Italian winger from your rugby gallery?’

‘The man himself.’ Alicia laid a hand on her heart. ‘The object of my girlish adoration.’

‘Did you tell him that?’

‘Of *course* not. But I did say I was a rugby fan.’

‘So what happened then?’

‘He insisted on buying me a cold drink to get over my little shock—only I asked for chocolate—and we sat at one of the outside Rivoire tables. We talked for ages, then he walked back here with me.’ Alicia smiled rapturously. ‘It must have been fate that sent me tumbling in front of him.’

‘And kindly made me sick so you were on your own,’ said Meg darkly, then grinned. ‘But I’m glad you had some excitement on your birthday, love.’

‘My mother will never believe me!’

‘Nor mine!’ Meg yawned widely. ‘Look, I’m not up to eating yet, but you must be hungry.’

‘Not really, after the hot chocolate. And you still look tired, so get your head down again. I’ll read for a while outside on the terrace.’ Alicia waved a paperback with anticipation. ‘What a treat! Fiction to wallow in instead of endless text-books. Try to sleep. I’ll see you later.’

But when she finally settled under an umbrella Alicia was too wired to concentrate on her novel. Instead she leaned back, eyes closed, reliving every moment of the meeting with Francesco. Eventually she gave up even pretending to read and went inside to see if Meg felt like eating something.

‘Great—I was just about to text you! Those just arrived.’ Meg yanked Alicia into the room to show her the flowers on the dressing table. ‘The receptionist brought them up. The posy of

carnations is for me, because the card wishes me a swift recovery, but the roses are for Miss Alicia Cross.'

Alicia gazed in delight at the creamy, half-open blooms. The message on the card wished her a happy birthday, and asked Miss Alicia Cross and her friend to give Francesco da Luca the pleasure of dining with him that evening. He would call for them at eight to see if this was agreeable.

'Agreeable? It's fantastic! Sorry I was nosy, but I just had to see what he said.' Meg's eyes glittered in her pallid face. 'So get your party dress on, girl. This is your night!'

'It most certainly is not! I'm not leaving you on your own again, Megan,' said Alicia indignantly. 'When Francesco comes I'll tell him you're not well enough, and thank him nicely and say maybe some other time.'

'Are you *nuts*? There won't be another time.' Meg pulled Alicia down on the edge of the bed beside her. 'Look, this is a one-off, Lally. Go for it. If you're in doubt ring your mother again first and see what she says.'

Alicia grinned ruefully. 'If I do that, Bron will say no.'

'And you really want to go out with your Francesco?'

'Of course I do. But I wish you were well enough to go too.'

'So do I, but as I look totally gruesome and can't face the thought of food it's just not on. Give Francesco my regrets.' Meg patted Alicia's hand. 'Ring down for some tea for me, then hit the shower, deck yourself in some of your birthday gear, and get ready to party!'

There was soon a lot more argument while Alicia hassled the invalid into eating some of the toast ordered with the tea. But in the end she gave in to Meg's urging and began to get ready.

'Bron insisted I pack the dress she bought as part of my present, so do you think I'd better wear it tonight?' Alicia asked, holding it against her.

'Of course! That coffee-cream shade looks good on you. Subtle but pretty.'

'I wanted black and strapless, not pretty,' sighed Alicia. 'But Bron vetoed that.' She shivered suddenly and hung the dress back in the wardrobe. 'Look, I'm not sure this evening's a good idea —I'll stay here with you.'

'Rubbish. If you don't keep your date with Signor Dreamboat, you'll never stop kicking yourself afterwards. Now, move. Get into the underwear I gave you, and I'll lend a hand with your hair after you do your face.'

All her life Alicia had longed for straight, dark hair like Meg's. To tame her curly, coppery mane she usually wove it into a thick braid, but because this was a one-off special occasion Meg insisted on wielding the hair dryer and created looser waves that she ordered Alicia to leave down for once.

'Looks great like that. Now, put your frock on and I'll fall in a heap while you add the finishing touches.' She crawled back into bed with a sigh of relief.

'Oh Meg!' said Alicia in remorse. 'Now look at you.'

'I'm fine. Hurry up. Put the new heels on and give me a twirl.'

Alicia pulled a face as she obeyed. 'I hope I don't have to walk far in these.' She transferred a few belongings to a small clutch-bag and fastened on the gold chain-bracelet Meg's parents had given her. 'Are you sure you'll be all right? I've got my posh new phone if you need me.'

'I won't need you. I'll read or watch telly.' Meg smiled encouragingly. 'For heaven's sake go, girl. Enjoy your birthday!'

But Alicia suffered a bad attack of cold feet as she went down in the lift. Francesco might get entirely the wrong idea when she turned up alone. He knew nothing about her or her background. He might think she did this kind of thing all the time, whereas Meg's brother Gareth and his friends were the only boys she knew. And to them she was just a freckle-faced kid.

When she reached the foyer Alicia's heart leapt as Francesco walked through the door. Elegant in a superb linen suit, he was so much her every dream come true she pinched herself surreptitiously to make sure this was really happening.

'*Buona sera*,' he said, taking her hand. 'You look delightful, Miss Alicia Cross.'

'Thank you.' She smiled shyly. 'Meg and I both thank you very much for the flowers, too, but I'm afraid there's a problem—'

'You cannot dine with me?' he said quickly, his smile fading.

'Meg's not well enough to come.' Alicia eyed him uncertainly. 'Is it all right if I come with you on my own?'

Francesco's eyes lit with a look which set her pulse racing. 'It is perfect. I am most honoured to help you celebrate your birthday.'

He took a phone from his pocket. 'I will ring the restaurant.' After a short, rapid-fire conversation he led Alicia outside into the balmy, starlit night. 'We are dining in Santa Croce. Can you walk that far in those shoes?'

She nodded fervently. Even if she had blisters tomorrow.

Florence after dark was so vibrant with noise and life, and the constant background noise of traffic and inevitable motor scooters. Alicia took in a deep, relishing breath, drinking it in like nectar as Francesco led her through the still-crowded Piazza della Signoria where at outside tables couples were drinking cocktails and people-watching in the balmy evening. Neptune loomed in his fountain, sleek and silvery-pale in the floodlights with his attendant water-nymphs, but Alicia's eyes went straight to the Loggia dei Lanzi where Perseus held his gruesome trophy aloft.

'You like that statue?' asked Francesco, watching, and she nodded happily.

'But I love everything here. I've looked forward to the holiday for so long, I was afraid I might be disappointed.' She smiled up at him. 'But your city is even more wonderful than I'd imagined.'

'It is beautiful,' he agreed as they left the *piazza* behind to make for Santa Croce. 'But it is not *my* city. I am here for a few days on business. I do not live here. My home is in Montedaluca.'

As they passed the floodlit façade of the great Santa Croce church, it suddenly struck Alicia that in the town that had his name in it he might well have a wife and family. Something she should have checked on long before now.

Francesco came to a halt soon afterwards outside the ancient *palazzo* which housed the restaurant. 'Something worries you,' he said in the slow, careful English which had surprised her from the first. She would have expected an Italian to talk quickly, with a lot of hand waving. But there was an inner stillness to Francesco da Luca she found deeply fascinating. 'What troubles you, Alicia?'

She braced herself. 'Are you married?'

'Ah, I see! What would you do if I say yes?' he asked, amused, sending her heart plummeting down to the new shoes.

'Go straight back to the hotel,' she said promptly. And cry into her pillow.

'Without your birthday dinner?' He smiled. 'Then it is a good thing, *cara*, that I am not married.' He threw out a hand. 'No wife, no *fidanzata*.'

'What's that?'

'A fiancée, MissAlicia.' He looked suddenly stern. 'If I had possessed either I would not have requested your company tonight.'

Her chin lifted defiantly. 'I had to ask.'

'*Naturalmente*.' He smiled and took her hand. 'Now, let us eat.'

An elegant woman at the reception desk led them through the crowded restaurant to a small group of tables for two on a raised dais at the back of the room. Alicia gazed at her surroundings in delight as Francesco held her chair for her. Faded haughty faces of mediaeval knights looked down on them from frescoed walls, their rearing horses and lean hunting-dogs given the illusion of

movement by the flickering candles on the tables. Alicia was suddenly grateful for her mother's faultless taste. Her simple little sheath-dress, for all its simplicity—or because of it—felt exactly right here. As Francesco held her chair for her Alicia's eyes widened. On her plate lay a single, creamy rose. She gazed up at him in delight as she thanked him, thinking how aristocratic he looked, so very obviously at home in surroundings like this.

'I chose it with care,' he informed her, his eyes gleaming in the candlelight. 'See? The petals are the colour and velvet texture of your skin.'

Thankful that due to this same texture her skin rarely showed blushes, she smiled at him luminously. 'Thank you for making my birthday so special for me.'

'It is my great pleasure,' Francesco assured her as a waiter filled their glasses. '*Allora*, even if you do not care for it you must have one sip of champagne to celebrate this special day. Happy birthday, Alicia.'

She smiled as he raised his glass in a toast and touched it with her own, and to please him drank a little. And found that this champagne was pure nectar. 'It's delicious,' she told him, surprised.

He smiled indulgently. 'I am glad it pleases you. Now, tell me what you like to eat.'

Alicia took one look at the daunting menu and appealed to Francesco. 'Will you help me choose?'

His eyes gleamed bright in the candlelight as they smiled into

hers. 'I will do anything you wish, *cara*.'

Afterwards Alicia had very little recollection of the delicious *antipasti* she was served, or the meltingly tender lamb with artichokes that followed. She was so enchanted with Francesco and Florence that the food was of secondary importance as they talked together in a little candlelit oasis of privacy on their dais above the other diners in the crowded restaurant.

'So where did you go to school, Alicia?' he asked.

'In a convent,' she admitted reluctantly. 'When the nuns heard we were coming to Florence, they told us we must visit Santa Croce—but they meant the church, not a restaurant like this.'

'You are a Catholic?'

'Yes. Are you?'

He nodded. 'But not as devout as my mother would wish.'

'I'm not as devout as Bron, either.'

'Bron?'

'My mother, Bronwen Cross. As I mentioned before, I've never met my biological father,' she said matter-of-factly. 'Is your father still alive?'

His eyes shadowed. 'No. My parents married late. He died when I was young.'

'I'm so sorry.' She touched his hand in sympathy. 'Brothers, sisters?'

'None.'

'So your mother just has you.'

'*Davvero*,' he said heavily, then smiled and changed the

subject. 'I would offer you more champagne, but perhaps it is better you keep to one glass.'

'Much better,' she agreed, and with a sigh glanced at her watch. 'The entire evening has been so lovely, Francesco, but now I must get back to Meg.'

As they left the restaurant Alicia stumbled a little in her new heels, and Francesco took her hand to steady her, then kept it in his to walk back to the hotel. For Alicia the warm, hard clasp of Francesco's hand in hers was the crowning touch of the entire evening. As they neared the hotel he drew her to a halt in the shadows in the quiet street.

'Tomorrow I have business matters to attend to during the day, but in the evening will you dine with me again, Alicia? Your friend also, if she is well enough.' He smiled into her startled eyes. 'Say yes.'

'I need to ask Meg first,' she hedged, secretly ecstatic.

'Do you have a *telefonino*—a mobile phone?'

She nodded. 'Megan's brother gave me a new one for my birthday.'

'Give it to me, then. I will enter my number into it, and yours into mine. *Allora*,' Francesco said with satisfaction when he'd finished, 'we can communicate.' He paused and moved closer. 'Though there are other ways to communicate, Alicia—the most delightful way is a kiss to wish you happy birthday.' He drew her very gently into his arms in the shadows. 'Passers by will not think it remarkable to see people kissing.'

Alicia stood very still in his embrace, her heart hammering. She had been hoping, longing, for Francesco da Luca to kiss her. She had dreamed about it often enough in the past when his photograph was the last thing she saw before going to sleep every night.

Francesco bent his head, his lips gentle at first. But at the first touch of them against hers she responded so helplessly she felt his athlete's body tense against her. His arms tightened as her lips parted, his tongue found hers in a caress that took her breath away, and the kiss quickly grew so urgent Alicia's head reeled when his arms finally fell away.

He stood back, breathing hard as he stared down at her blankly. '*Mi dispiace*,' he said hoarsely. 'I did not expect…'

'Neither did I,' she said with feeling, and took in a deep breath. 'I've never been kissed like that before.'

He smiled in open male triumph and kissed her again. 'You enchant me, Alicia Cross. I will call for you tomorrow evening.'

'I haven't agreed to that,' she protested.

'Then agree now, *tesoro*.' His eyes locked with hers. 'Say "yes, Francesco, I will be very pleased to dine again with you".'

Instead of saying yes to dinner—and to anything else he wanted—Alicia hung on to every scrap of willpower she possessed. 'Ring me tomorrow and I'll let you know if Meg agrees.'

Francesco tucked an errant curl behind her ear. '*Va bene*, Miss Alicia Cross.' He took her hand and escorted her into the lobby

of the hotel. '*A domani*,' he said formally, and waited until the lift doors closed behind her.

CHAPTER TWO

FRANCESCO rang early next morning, before Alicia even had time to worry whether he would or not.

'Whatever he suggests tell him yes!' Meg ordered, as she devoured her breakfast.

'*Buon giorno*, Alicia,' said Francesco. 'How are you today?'

'Good morning. I'm just fine. How are you?'

'Waiting in great suspense,' he said, with a caressing note in his voice. 'Is your friend better?'

'Fighting fit now,' said Alicia, grinning as she pushed the last roll towards Meg.

'*Eccelente*. Please give her my good wishes. So—you will both dine with me this evening?'

'Thank you, we'd love to,' said Alicia, rolling her eyes as Meg punched the air in triumph.

'*Bene*. What will you do today?'

'The usual tourist things.'

'Do not tire yourself with too many such things, *cara*. I shall call for you at eight. *Ciao*.'

'*Ciao*,' she echoed and switched off the phone. 'There, Megan Davies. We've got a date. Satisfied?'

'You could have asked him to bring a friend.'

'You don't want much, do you? Hard luck; you'll just have to share Francesco with me.'

‘Playing gooseberry’s not my thing, you know,’ said Meg ruefully.

‘It’s not applicable,’ said Alicia, blocking out last night’s kiss. ‘Francesco is just a very kind man taking pity on a couple of convent schoolgirls let loose in Florence for the first time.’

‘You *told* him about the convent?’ said Meg in disgust, then grinned wickedly. ‘I hope you said we just went to school there! Nuns we are not.’

‘I might as well be,’ said Alicia gloomily. ‘I’ve never had a boyfriend.’

‘Only because you’re picky—and Rhys Evans was already taken.’

‘Bowled over by you the first time Gareth brought him home to supper!’ Alicia laughed and hugged her friend. ‘Thank goodness you’re feeling better. Come on, we’re wasting time.’

‘Put loads of sunscreen on first—and don’t forget your hat and glasses.’

‘Yes, Mummy!’

For the rest of the holiday the girls packed in as many sights as possible during the day. In deference to the nuns, they inspected the tombs of Michelangelo and Galileo in the great church of Santa Croce, visited the vast Duomo to marvel at Brunelleschi’s dome, then after waiting in line marvelled even more at Michelangelo’s mighty David in the Accademia. They queued for hours longer to look at the paintings in the Uffizi, and after wriggling their way to the front of the crowd to look at

it close up decided they liked Botticelli's Primavera best. They bought paninis stuffed with ham before visiting the Pitti Palace to look at more paintings, then picnicked afterwards in the Boboli Gardens.

In the narrow streets of Oltrarno—literally the 'other side' of the River Arno—they peered into little workshops where craftsmen carved wood for mirrors and picture frames, or created elegant handbags and gloves from softest leather. They gazed in the jewellers' shops on the Ponte Vecchio, and at designer clothes in the Via Tuornabuoni, fantasising over what they would buy if they had the money. But eventually it was agreed that their favourite place of all was the Bargello, once a prison, now a sculpture museum where Meg fell madly in love with Donatello's nude bronze of David.

'He looks so cute in just his jaunty hat and boots!'

'Only you could call a fabulous work of art *cute*,' said Alicia, laughing.

Each evening Francesco called for them to take them out to dinner and listen to their report on their day, and from the moment Meg first met him she had no more qualms about playing gooseberry. As she told Alicia later, he was as good looking and charming as she'd expected, but his manners were so perfect he made her feel like an asset to the evening instead of an unwanted third.

Both girls had made it plain to Francesco, the moment he arrived the first evening to take them both out, that they must

be allowed to pay for their share of the meal. And to Alicia's relief he'd taken them to a lively, packed *trattoria*, very different from the restaurant of the night before, and a great deal less expensive. Meg had loved everything about it, and tucked into her prawn-stuffed ravioli with unashamed gusto after her fast of the previous day. The only flaw in the evening came later when Francesco had insisted on paying the bill after all. But Meg had calculated the cost of their meals to the last euro, and the moment the three of them left the trattoria she presented Francesco with two thirds of the bill in notes.

'Our share,' said Meg firmly, and in the end, under protest, he had to accept.

'But this once only,' he said at last when they refused to budge. '*Allora*, tell me what you have planned for tomorrow.'

When they'd got back to the hotel Meg announced that it was time for her nightly phone call to her boyfriend, and after thanks to Francesco for a fabulous evening she hurried inside and left them together.

'Your friend is not only charming, but tactful,' he said, looking down at Alicia. 'This boyfriend is waiting for her at home?'

'Yes.' She smiled affectionately. 'Rhys thinks Meg hung the moon.'

'He is a man of perception. She is very attractive—not just her looks, but her personality.' Francesco's hand caught hers. 'Do you have a boyfriend waiting for you, Alicia?'

Wishing she could say there were several all counting the

minutes until she got back, she shook her head. 'No, I don't.'

'*Ottimo!*' He kissed her hand, then drew her into his arms and kissed her willing mouth. 'I will call for you both at eight tomorrow. And this time I will pay, so no more *argomento*!'

The dream holiday went by so fast the last day arrived all too soon. During a final shopping trip for gifts to take home, Alicia found it hard to be cheerful as they searched for bargains in San Lorenzo, because later that night she would have to say goodbye to Francesco. Once Megan left them outside the hotel after dinner, their few moments alone together would be the last time she would ever see him. And she couldn't bear the thought of it.

Meg eyed her downcast face as they carried their modest haul up to their hotel room, then told her to ring Francesco. 'Ask him if we can eat earlier tonight.'

Alicia eyed her suspiciously as she unlocked their door. 'Why?'

'When Francesco walks us back after dinner, I'll plead packing and phone calls to my mother and Rhys and you two can enjoy an hour alone together. Don't argue. Do it.'

Alicia looked at her friend's vivid face in silence for a moment, then threw her arms round her and hugged her. 'Thank you.'

Meg hugged her back. 'You've done it for me and Rhys often enough, now it's my turn.'

'It's hardly the same thing!'

'It's exactly the same thing. Go on. Ring him.'

When the unmistakeable voice said '*Pronto*,' Alicia took in a deep breath.

'It's me. Alicia.'

'*Que cosa?* Is something wrong?' Francesco demanded sharply.

'No. Nothing. It's just that Meg—I mean we—well, we wondered if we could have dinner earlier tonight? Because we've got packing and so on.'

'But of course,' he said, with such audible relief Alicia smiled radiantly at Meg. 'I will come for you at seven.'

'*Grazie*, Francesco. *Ciao*.'

Meg grinned like a Cheshire cat as Alicia switched off her phone. 'Quite the little linguist these days! So, early is good?' Her eyes sparkled. 'Better than Francesco knows. He's such a star, never giving the slightest sign that I'm in the way, but he's obviously desperate to spend time alone with you.'

'No more desperate than I am,' said Alicia, with heat that brought a startled look from Meg. 'Well, it's true. For years I was in love with a photograph, but Francesco in the flesh is a dream come true.'

'Emotive word, "flesh",' said Meg uneasily. 'Until now you've never shown the slightest interest in any man—unless he was covered in mud on a rugby pitch.'

'So isn't it about time I did?' Alicia sucked in a deep breath. 'Oh Meg—I'm so in love with Francesco.'

'I know you are! It's frightening.'

‘You feel the same about Rhys!’

‘That’s different.’

‘Why?’

‘You’ve only just met Francesco.’

‘I feel as if I’ve known him forever. Maybe I knew him in another life.’

‘You’re beginning to worry me, Lally.’

Alicia’s wistful smile brought a lump to her friend’s throat. ‘No need. We’ve had a wonderful holiday in Florence, and Francesco was part of it; an experience I can look back on and dream about.’ Her mouth drooped. ‘But it’s going to be so hard to say goodbye tonight.’

‘I know. That’s why I’m giving you time to yourselves.’ Meg wagged a stern finger. ‘Just make sure you’re in by midnight, Cinders.’

When the three of them walked back to the hotel after their early dinner that evening, Megan gave Francesco a beaming smile. ‘As a small return for the meals you’ve paid for, and the restaurants we’d never have discovered on our own, I’m giving you a goodbye present.’

He eyed her in surprise. ‘But I need no present, *cara*. I have enjoyed your company very much.’

‘I know that. Otherwise I wouldn’t have enjoyed myself so much. But now I’m going up to our room on my own to pack and make my phone calls, so you can have Alicia to yourself for an hour or so as a parting gift.’

Francesco leaned down and kissed her on both cheeks. 'You are a very kind lady. This is also your wish?' he demanded, turning to Alicia, and gave her a smile that turned her heart over when she nodded in eager consent. 'Then it is a present I accept with gratitude, Miss Megan Davies. *Mille grazie*.'

When they'd seen Megan inside the hotel Francesco took Alicia's hand to walk back to the Piazza della Signoria. 'I am going to make a request,' he said, oddly sombre. 'You must say no if you do not wish to grant it, *tesoro*.'

By this time finding it hard to imagine saying no to Francesco, no matter what he wanted, Alicia looked up at him expectantly. 'You'll have to tell me what the request is first.'

'You have not asked where I am staying.'

'I took it for granted you were at one of the grander hotels.'

He shook his head. 'I keep an apartment here in Firenze.'

'For your business trips?'

Francesco's quiet laugh was mirthless. 'Officially, yes. But it is also my *rifugio*, my sanctuary, where I can relax alone occasionally away from the demands of my life in Montedaluca. My intention was to spend only two days here this time. But then, Miss Alicia Cross, I met you. And could not leave until you do.'

A statement which sent Alicia's pulse into overdrive. She gazed up at him, starry-eyed. 'This request, Francesco—are you asking me to have coffee in your apartment?'

His smile was answer enough. 'Yes, *carina*. Will you?'

'Of course I will,' she said impatiently. 'Do we have to walk

far?'

'No.' To Alicia's surprise he led her to a building in the *piazza* itself, and took her up to the top floor in a lift. '*Allora*,' he said as he unlocked a door. 'Welcome to my *rifugio*.'

The apartment was impressive, with a high, raftered ceiling. But instead of the antiques Alicia had expected the comfortable furniture was contemporary, and the colourful paintings on the walls were abstracts.

'This is so lovely, Francesco,' she said, impressed. 'You could make a fortune letting it out to visitors.'

'There are other apartments in the building for that,' he informed her. 'This one I keep only for myself.'

Alicia's eyes rounded. 'You own the building?'

'It was part of my mother's dowry when she married my father. But she uses it only when she comes to Florence to buy clothes. The responsibility for running it as a commercial enterprise is mine.' He shrugged. 'But I do this willingly, because it gives me an excuse to escape here sometimes to my—what do you say in English?—bolt hole?'

She smiled crookedly. 'A very smart bolt-hole.'

'But I have not shown you the best part,' he said, and put his arm round her.

Sure he meant to rush her off to a bedroom, Alicia wasn't sure whether she was relieved or disappointed when he led her to a window and threw back the shutters. Then she gave such a raucous, boyish whistle he hugged her close, laughing.

She beamed at him in rapture. 'A room with a view, Francesco! And what a view.'

They were opposite the Palazzo Vecchio, with a perfect view of the Loggia dei Lanzi and most of the Piazza della Signoria.

'You may gaze on Perseus from here as much as you like,' he said softly, and cleared his throat. 'I shall make coffee.'

She shook her head. 'In the time we've got left, can't we just sit and talk?'

He took off his jacket and led her to one of the sofas. '*D'accordo*. Some talk is necessary.' He hesitated for a moment, then put his arm round her, and she leaned against him, so pliant and trusting he gave a husky little laugh. 'So innocent, so sweet.'

She turned her head up to give him a wry look. 'I may have gone to school in a convent, Francesco, but I didn't take vows!'

'For which I am passionately grateful,' he said, and kissed her.

And this time, knowing she'd never see him again, Alicia responded with fire fuelled by despair. With a groan Francesco drew her onto his lap, and she caught her breath, thrilled to feel his heart hammering against her. Elated by the effect she was having on him, she returned his kisses with mounting fervour as she breathed in the heady scent of aroused male mingled with something she identified as Aqua di Parma cologne.

At last Francesco tore his mouth away and turned her face into his shoulder, his hand unsteady as he held her head hard against him. '*Tesoro*, forgive me.'

'For what?' she whispered, and pulled away to look up into the

tense, handsome face. 'I wanted you to kiss me.'

'I know.'

'How could you tell?' she said, frowning.

He smiled ruefully. 'You made it very plain, *carina*. But,' he added, sobering, 'if you kiss a man like that it is dangerous; he will want more.'

Alicia eyed him with interest. 'Do you?'

'Yes,' he said starkly. 'But I will not take it.'

'Why not?'

He smoothed an unsteady hand over her hair. 'For many reasons. You are young, and in a country foreign to you—and you are a virgin, no?'

She rolled her eyes. 'I'm a virgin, yes.'

'You are making fun of me!'

'No, I'm not.' As she wriggled closer he caught his breath, and she felt his erection harden against her thighs through the thin fabric of her dress. Now what? she thought in panic. Should she stay where she was and pretend to ignore it, or should she slide tactfully from his lap and say it was time to go? But it wasn't time yet, and she didn't want to go. She quite desperately wanted him to make love to her, for him to be her first lover, even if this was the last time she'd ever see him. 'Francesco,' she whispered, and looked up into eyes which blazed as they met the invitation in hers.

To her dismay he jumped up and set her on her feet. '*Carissima*, you must not look at me like that.' He gestured

towards the window. 'I am not marble, like the statues out there. I am flesh and blood, and you know well that I desire you.' He gave a wry laugh and held her close. 'When Megan gave us this last time together, I told myself I would be content just to talk to you for a while. But I am human, and a man—'

'And I'm a woman, Francesco,' whispered Alicia against his chest. 'Make love to me. *Please!*'

'*Dio!*' he exclaimed in anguish. 'You must not say this.'

'Why not?'

'You know well why not,' he said fiercely, his accent more pronounced as he spoke rapidly into her hair. 'I want you. You know this because a man cannot hide his desire. But I have wanted you from that first moment out there below, at the Rivoire. When you took off your hat and sunglasses I looked into those great, dark eyes and felt such an urge to kiss you I was—how do you say?—spellbound.'

Alicia moved away slightly to look up at him, her eyes alight with pure joy at his confession. 'I thought you were put off by my freckles.'

Francesco's eyes softened as he stroked a finger across her cheekbones. 'I adore your freckles. I adore *you*, Alicia, so much that although I desire it desperately I will not take this precious gift you offer me. At least,' he said, in a tone which made her tremble, 'not tonight.'

'But I'm going home tomorrow,' she said forlornly.

He led her to the sofa again. 'So let us sit down and enjoy this

last time for a while together.'

'For a while?'

Francesco took her hand. 'I must go home to Montedaluca first, but very soon I will fly to visit you in your home.'

Alicia's eyes widened to dark saucers as she stared at him. 'Are you serious?'

'You do not wish me to come?' he demanded.

'You know I do!' She swallowed hard. 'I just never imagined in my wildest dreams that I'd see you again once I left.'

'Ah, *carina*,' he said caressingly, and kissed her fingers one by one. 'I told you I wanted you from that first moment. Did you feel the same for me?'

'Oh yes.' She dimpled at him so mischievously he caught his breath, so obviously wanting to kiss her that she touched a hand to his cheek. 'So I think it's time I told you a little story, Francesco da Luca.'

He kissed her nose and sat back, holding her hand. 'Talk then, *diletta mia*.'

'Once upon a time a girl found a picture in a rugby magazine, with a feature and a shot of a Treviso winger scoring a spectacular try. The girl was so impressed she cut the picture out and added it to the gallery of Welsh rugby stars on her bedroom wall.'

Francesco looked down at her in astonishment. 'This is true?'

'We convent-educated girls don't tell lies,' she said sternly, and smiled up at him. 'Every night since then your face has been the last thing I see before going to sleep. I couldn't believe my eyes

when I bumped into you out there in the *piazza*.'

'*Un miraculo!*' He kissed her swiftly. 'I was too restless to concentrate on paperwork that afternoon, and suddenly felt a great need to be part of life out there. Fate sent me to catch you when you fell.' Francesco put a finger under her chin. 'And I will never let you go. *Ti amo*, Alicia Cross. Must I translate?'

She shook her head, smiling radiantly. 'I love you too, Francesco da Luca.'

His answering smile took her breath away. 'Do you love me enough to live with me in Montedaluca one day as my wife?'

'Yes,' she said without hesitation.

This time his kiss was not gentle, and she responded to it with joy, then trembled as his hands caressed her through the thin fabric of her dress.

He buried his face in her hair. 'I want you so much.'

She pulled his mouth down to hers. 'Make love to me, Francesco. *Now*. But you'll have to teach me what to do.'

He gave a stifled groan and crushed her to him. 'I will take much, much pleasure in teaching you the art of love, *tesoro*, but not until our wedding night.'

'Why not now?'

'Because I want our first time together to be perfect, with all the time in the world to love each other.' He smoothed the tumbled curls back from her forehead. 'I shall come next week to ask your mother for her daughter's hand. Will she be willing to give you to me?'

Alicia bit her lip. 'She probably won't be, Francesco. She expects me to go to college.'

'For the love of God, do not ask me to wait that long for you, Alicia.' He kissed her with mounting urgency. 'Life is short, *carissima*,' he said against her lips. 'Let us not waste any of it apart. Fate meant us to be together. Do you not believe this?'

Alicia did believe it, utterly. But trying to make her mother believe it would be another matter. 'Bron will take some persuading,' she warned.

'You call her by her name?' he said, diverted.

'Yes.' Alicia hesitated. 'You'll probably be surprised when you meet her. She looks too young to be my mother.' She took in a deep breath. 'Francesco, if we really are going to be married—'

'You doubt this?' he demanded, and kissed her hard. 'Believe it, *amore*. You will be my wife as soon as it can be arranged.'

'You'd better learn a bit more about me first.'

'Nothing you could tell me would change my mind,' he assured her.

CHAPTER THREE

TO HIS credit it had not, Alicia conceded now as she reached the hotel chosen as the venue for the party. She handed her raincoat in, then hurried off to the flower-banked function room overlooking Cardiff Bay. She checked with the catering manager, to be told the waitresses were ready to serve the canapés, and the waiters were lined up at the bar, champagne bottles at the ready. At her signal the pianist began to play, and

she returned to the entrance to smile in welcome as the first batch of guests arrived.

'Looking good, Alicia,' said the managing director jovially. 'Excellent job.'

'Thank you.' She smiled, pleased.

For the next hour Alicia's entire attention was focussed on making sure that everything ran to plan, and that the press had access not only to the sponsor's management but to all the celebrities, rugby and otherwise, who were present. Satisfied that drinks were circulating fast enough, she checked that dinner would be served on time—welcome news, since her only meal that day had been a sketchy breakfast. As she rejoined the party the marketing director, who had once played at centre for Cardiff, caught her by the arm.

'Come with me, my fair Alicia,' said David Rees-Jones. 'A guy's just arrived who says he knows you. I played against him once in a game against Italy.'

She stiffened, alarm bells ringing as David relentlessly towed her through the crowd to join the man at one of the great windows looking down on the water. 'You remember Francesco da Luca? How come you two know each other?'

Alicia's eyes narrowed in fierce warning at Francesco.

'We met years ago in Florence,' he said smoothly, and took her hand to kiss it. '*Com'esta*, Alicia? You look very beautiful tonight.'

'She looks beautiful every night, friend,' said David cheerfully,

and with a wink atAlicia excused himself to greet some late arrivals.

'What are you doing here?' she hissed, pinning on a bright, social smile.

Francesco's triumphant answering smile set her teeth on edge. 'I was invited.'

'By David?'

'No.' He manoeuvred her nearer the window, neatly isolating her from the rest of the room. 'Last night I dined with some old rugby friends who introduced me to John Griffiths. He was most kind to invite me here tonight.'

Alicia stared, seething, through the window. If his invitation had come from the managing director, she had to grin and bear it. Even if it choked her. 'Are you here long?' she asked politely, as though they were strangers.

'For as long as necessary,' said Francesco with emphasis, and moved closer. 'I insist that we talk tonight, Alicia.'

She turned narrowed, hostile eyes on him. 'Insist?'

He laid a hand on his heart. '*Mi dispiace. Request* is better?'

'No. As far as I'm concerned, we have nothing to talk about.'

'But we do, Alicia.' He took her hand. 'I will take you home when the party is over.'

She shook her head. 'The party was over for us a long time ago, Francesco.'

His grasp tightened. 'Ah no, *contessa*, you are mistaken.'

'Neither mistaken nor interested, Francesco. And don't call

me that! Now, let me go, please. Dinner is about to be served.' Not that she felt hungry any more.

'Wait,' he commanded. 'Why did your mother move from Blake Street?'

Conscious of curious eyes turned in their direction, Alicia kept her smile pinned in place as though they were just indulging in party chat. 'She got married.'

His eyes softened as he released her. 'And do you like her husband?'

'Yes, very much. Now, I've got to go—'

'Not until you tell me where you live.'

Oh well. He had to know sometime. 'I rent a flat right here in the Bay.'

'You live alone there?'

She nodded curtly, and hurried off through the crowd.

It seemed like hours before the meal and the speeches were finally over. At last Alicia collected her raincoat and went down to the foyer, where most of the management and their wives and partners were waiting for taxis. And, with them, Francesco da Luca.

'Well done, Alicia. A triumph for Wales and for the party tonight,' said John Griffiths with satisfaction. 'Can we drop you on our way?'

'I have a taxi waiting,' said Francesco swiftly.

'Ah. We leave her in good hands, then.'

Goodnights were exchanged, and before Alicia could argue

that she lived near enough to walk home she was giving a taxi driver her address, which Francesco noted down in something he took from his wallet. He needed the information anyway, thought Alicia, resigned. Ever since Bron's surprise marriage and her move to her husband's home in Cowbridge, there had been no way for Francesco to demand news of his missing bride. And presumably he wanted to marry again and provide an heir for Montedaluca. In which case he could just send her the necessary papers to sign and that would be that. Mission accomplished.

The ridiculously short journey was accomplished in fraught silence, which lasted after Francesco paid the driver and continued as he followed Alicia into the lift in the foyer of her waterside building. By the time the doors opened at her floor, every nerve in her body was tied in knots.

When she ushered him into her sitting room, Francesco made straight for the glass doors which opened onto a minuscule balcony overlooking the Bay. He turned to her with a smile. 'You also have a room with a view, Alicia.'

'It's why I couldn't resist the flat,' she admitted, ignoring the memory his words brought to life. 'Though the basement swimming-pool and parking facilities make it worth the steep rent.' She gave him a bright smile. 'Would you like some coffee, or a drink? I can give you some passable wine.'

'*Grazie*, nothing.' He looked round the room, at the small sofa and the one chair that could be remotely described as comfortable. 'Let us sit down.'

Alicia took off her raincoat, and conscious, now that she was alone with Francesco, that her caramel silk shift stopped short of her knees and left one shoulder bare, excused herself to put her raincoat away. Feeling defenceless without it, she snatched up an elderly black cardigan and wrapped herself in it to rejoin her uninvited guest.

She took the chair and waved him to the sofa. 'All right, Francesco. But I warn you, I'm tired. So I hope this won't take long.'

He sat down, eyeing the cardigan in amusement. 'If that garment is meant to hide you from me, Alicia, it does not succeed.' His eyes moved over her in slow, nerve-jangling scrutiny. 'You have changed much from the shy young girl I first met.'

He had changed too. His face was harder, older, but no less striking than the first time she'd seen it, caught on camera in grinning triumph. 'I grew up, Francesco. It took me longer than most girls, but the treatment you and the *contessa* dished out fast-forwarded me into adulthood pretty rapidly in the end.'

Francesco's jaw clenched. 'My mother is dead,' he reminded her.

'And, as I said in my letter, I'm truly sorry for your loss.'

'Are you?'

'Of course. She was the most important person in your life. You must miss her very much.'

'I do. But I do not pretend that, now she is dead, she was a

saint.' He sighed heavily. 'I regret that she did not welcome you to our home with warmth.'

That was an understatement for the permafrost which had chilled Alicia to the bone. She shrugged. 'But she was right when she told me I was an unsuitable bride for her son.'

His eyebrows shot up. 'Mamma said this to you?'

'I'm sure she said it to you, too.'

'*Davverro*, but I made it plain to her that you were the only bride *I* wanted.'

She raised a sceptical eyebrow. 'A pity you didn't make it plainer to me. Once I arrived in Montedaluca, I began to doubt it more with every passing day. Most people in the *castello* took their cue from the *contessa* and made me feel like an outsider. Which I was, of course. Apart from your great-aunt Luisa, and the lady you hired to teach me Italian, hardly anyone spoke to me for the six weeks I lived there—including you. You were so busy during the run-up to the wedding you had no time for me. You turned into a stranger.' Alicia smiled coldly. 'Which you were, of course. Until then, I didn't even know you had a title.'

He shrugged dismissively. 'Such things mean little now.'

'It meant a great deal to your mother. The only time she deigned to spend with me was filled with instructions on how a future Contessa da Luca must behave.' Alicia smiled sardonically. 'She must have been utterly delighted when I bolted.'

He shook his head. 'You are wrong. She was ravaged with

worry.'

'You surprise me. I thought she would have been over the moon because you were free again.'

'But I am not free.' His mouth twisted. 'Having married you in the *cattedrale* in Montedaluca, I am bound to you for life.'

Alicia's eyes flashed. 'Cut the drama, Francesco. You can get a divorce easily enough. Or easier still you could just get the marriage annulled after what happened—or didn't happen—between us.'

'No one knows this,' he said, his tone so harsh it startled her. 'Unless you told your mother, or Megan?'

Alicia shivered and drew the cardigan closer. 'How could I bear to talk about—about *that* to anyone?'

'So what reason did you give your mother for leaving me?'

'I said I'd made a huge mistake; that it was better to make a clean break right away.' She smiled. 'Bron, not surprisingly, wished I'd decided before the ceremony rather than after, but she sympathised totally with my refusal to return to Montedaluca. The *contessa* was no warmer to her than she was to me, even though Bron did her the courtesy of agreeing to hold the wedding in Montedaluca instead of Cardiff.'

'But Signora Cross soon had her revenge,' he said grimly.

Alicia frowned. 'How, exactly?'

'When my mother accompanied me to Cardiff to see her—'

'She did *what*?'

Francesco's eyes narrowed. 'You did not know this?'

‘I most certainly did not!’

‘It was very soon after you left me, Alicia.’

She stared at him in blank astonishment.

‘You do not believe me?’ He shrugged. ‘It is the truth. Your mother swore to me that you had gone away.’

Alicia regrouped hurriedly. ‘I had. When I got back from Paris I was so—so miserable I was sent off with Megan to stay with her grandmother in Hay-on-Wye for a while to recover. Or try to.’

Francesco’s jaw tightened. ‘I was told nothing of this during the visit. Megan’s parents were there to support your mother. Also the large brother.’ He smiled grimly. ‘They were unmoved by my anguish. Your mother insisted that you never wanted to see me again.’

Alicia stared at him, shaken, feeling the warmth drain from her face.

‘You are very pale. Do you have brandy, Alicia?’ asked Francesco gently. He got up to take her by the hand and led her to the sofa.

‘No.’ She tried to smile, but her lips were stiff. ‘I’ll make some tea in a minute.’

‘Tell me what to do and I will make it,’ he commanded.

‘No. First I just need to sit and get my head round this.’

Francesco sat beside her, keeping tight hold of her hand. ‘I swear it is the truth, Alicia.’

‘I’m sure it is. It would be easy enough to disprove. But it’s a shock, just the same,’ she said huskily, her throat thickening. ‘I

just wish I'd known.'

'*Piangi!*' he ordered, and held her close.

Alicia obeyed, but not for long. She blew her nose in the handkerchief Francesco produced, but when she tried to move away he held her tightly, one hand sliding under the ancient cardigan to smooth over the silk covering her shoulders.

'No, *piccola*. Stay. It is easier to talk like this, no?'

Oh, yes. Half seduced by his touch, the mixed pain and pleasure of his endearment made it all too dangerously easy. *But*, a voice in her brain quickly reminded her, although his mother had been partly to blame for her headlong escape from matrimony it had been Francesco's words that had actually sent his bride on the run. Words that had remained, engraved in her mind, ever since. Alicia pushed at his restraining arms until he released her, then went back to the chair. Sniffing inelegantly, she mopped away the last of her tears and smiled at him in bleak apology as she drew the cardigan closer.

'I'm afraid I've ruined your handkerchief.'

'*Gran Dio*, what does that matter?' His eyes glittered like blue flames. 'When you ran from me you ruined my life!'

Alicia met the look head on. 'I thought I was giving it back to you, *Signor Conte*. I was sure you'd go back to your mamma and Montedaluca, glad to be free of your unsatisfactory bride. I'm sure the *contessa* was thrilled.'

'As I have told you,' he said harshly, 'she was not.'

'I find that hard to believe.'

‘Nevertheless, it is the truth. When she saw my despair, my mother confessed to much regret that she had not behaved well towards you.’

‘To a “freckled schoolgirl with red hair and a figure like a boy”,’ quoted Alicia with deadly accuracy.

Faint colour rose along Francesco’s patrician cheekbones. ‘You overheard?’

‘Except for the Italian for freckles, which I already knew, your mother took good care to speak English.’

‘So that the servants would not understand,’ he said stiffly.

‘But that *I* would.’ Alicia shrugged. ‘Not that it matters any more, Francesco. That schoolgirl grew up fast.’

‘And no longer has a figure like a boy.’

‘Nor was my hair ever red!’ That was something which had annoyed her almost as much as the rest of the *contessa’s* comments had hurt.

His eyes moved over her with a look as tactile as a caress. ‘You have matured into an alluring woman, and I was not the only man who thought so tonight.’

‘I see a lot of men in my work,’ she said indifferently.

The eyes slitted. ‘Is there one you see more than others?’

‘Several I look on as friends to share a meal with.’

‘And a bed?’ he demanded.

‘You have no right to ask me that!’

‘I have every right,’ he said through his teeth. ‘I am your husband.’

‘You gave up any right to call yourself that on our wedding night,’ she shot back.

He took in a deep, unsteady breath. ‘Alicia, in my frustration and *disilluzione*, I uttered words I have regretted bitterly through all the years since. If you could have witnessed my anguish when I found you gone, you would have had your revenge.’

She shrugged impatiently. ‘I wanted escape, not revenge.’

‘And threw your rings on the floor!’

‘Better than having theft added to my sins,’ she retorted. ‘I scrubbed myself, pulled on my old clothes and ran off via the service lift with my back pack, desperate to get away before you came back.’

‘You had no thought that I would be demented, thinking of you alone in Paris?’ Francesco’s jaw tightened. ‘I was such an ogre, Alicia?’

She shrugged. ‘If not an ogre, you were nothing like the man I fell in love with. Though the change had started long before then. When I arrived to stay in Montedaluca before the wedding, you were different, so preoccupied with your business affairs, that you had very little time for me. Almost from the start I began to wonder if I was making a big mistake. But I just didn’t have the courage to put a stop to all the preparations your mother had made. Afterwards I wished to God I had. You said such terrible things; I was heartbroken. But not for long,’ she added quickly. ‘My heart soon healed once I cut you out of it.’

They stared at each other in tense silence.

‘So. Tell me what happened next,’ said Francesco at last.

‘Not much. I spent a long time with Meg, pulling myself together, then I had another holiday alone with Bron in Cornwall. And then I went to college. Only not here in Cardiff, as originally planned.’

‘Because you thought I might trace you there?’

She gave a flippant little laugh. ‘Heavens no, that never occurred to me. I knew you’d rung Bron a few times to ask about me, but because you never came after me—or so I thought—I assumed you were glad to get shot of me. I transferred to the university where Megan was reading law, and I changed to economics because by then an art-history degree with a year’s study in Florence was the last thing I wanted.’ She smiled at him sardonically. ‘You wouldn’t have recognised the convent schoolgirl, Francesco. I was the archetypal student—with body piercing, bare midriff even in the dead of winter, and skirts so short they terrified my mother. I dyed multi-coloured streaks in my hair, drank beer in the union with the rugby team, and partied like mad.’

He sat very still, his eyes locked with hers. ‘You held me responsible for this?’

Alicia nodded vehemently. ‘Of course I did. But after a while Bron read the riot act, and told me I was worrying Megan so much her work was suffering, which meant her parents were worried too. So I put you out of my mind, cut the partying and got down to work myself.’

‘And in time my pride would no longer allow me to continue pleading with Signora Cross for news of you,’ Francesco said bitterly. ‘She is a very strong lady.’

‘Life has shaped her that way.’

‘She has never told you more about your father?’

‘No.’ Suddenly Alicia could take no more. ‘Enough of this, Francesco. Would you please go now?’

He got up at once. ‘*Va bene*. But I will take you to lunch tomorrow.’

She shook her head. ‘Sorry. I’m having lunch with Megan.’

‘Then I shall come here in the evening.’ His eyes locked on hers. ‘Make very sure you are here, Alicia. I will not return to Montedaluca until the problem is resolved.’

‘Oh, very well,’ she said wearily. ‘But come after dinner, please.’ No way was she going to prepare a meal for him. ‘Do you want to ring for a taxi?’

‘No.’ His jaw tightened. ‘I will relieve you of my unwanted company immediately. *A domani*.’

‘Goodnight.’ Well aware that she’d offended him, Alicia saw him to the door. She locked up and turned out the lights, and with a grateful sigh made for her bedroom, suddenly so tired it was a struggle to go through her usual routine before she crawled into bed.

An hour later she gave up all idea of sleeping and got up again, cursing Francesco for spoiling what should have been a wonderful day. Wales had beaten Italy—which for her was a

particularly personal triumph—and the party she'd organised had been a success, except for the presence of Francesco da Luca. She should have been on cloud nine. Alicia sighed irritably, made some tea, propped up the pillows on her bed and sat upright against them, unable to get the da Lucas' visit to her mother out of her mind. In the morning she would ring Bron to get her side of the story before Francesco returned tomorrow night. Bronwen Cross had obviously not wanted her daughter to go back to her bridegroom.

But Alicia felt no animosity towards her mother, who early on in life had learned to make her own way. Bronwen Cross's father had died when she was twelve, and her mother a relatively short time later during Bron's first year at Cardiff University. At the time the newly-orphaned Bronwen was lodging in the home of Huw and Eira Davies in a room in the attic flat they let out to students to help pay the mortgage on their Victorian town house.

Huw Davies was a solicitor, and in spite of the long hours he worked in his aim to achieve partnership in his firm he was a godsend to his grieving young lodger in sorting out the legalities after the death of her mother. In exchange Bron looked after his young son, Gareth, during Eira's trips to the ante-natal clinic at nearby Glossop Terrace, the hospital where the second Davies baby would soon be born.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.