Sicilian Millionaire, Bought Bride

Catherine Spencer

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"You're doing all the giving," she whispered. "I want to give a little, too."

"How? Like this?" He dipped his head and once again touched his mouth to hers. "Or had you something more intimate in mind…like this?" He slid his finger in a straight, sure line past the pearls at her throat and, cupping a brazen palm over her breast, teased her nipple with his thumb.

A sharp, sweet arrow of sensation speared the length of her and found its target between her legs, leaving her embarrassingly damp. Aghast, she stammered, "Only if it's what you want."

He put her from him as if he suddenly found her repugnant. "Sorry, Corinne, that's not a good enough reason. The day—or night—has yet to come that I take a woman to my bed because she feels she owes me her body."

Catherine Spencer, once an English teacher, fell into writing through eavesdropping on a conversation about romances. Within two months she'd changed careers, and sold her first book to Mills & Boon in 1984. She moved to Canada from England thirty years ago, and lives in Vancouver. She is married to a Canadian and has four grown children—two daughters and two sons (and now eight grandchildren)—plus three dogs. In her spare time she plays the piano, collects antiques, and grows tropical shrubs.

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SICILIAN MILLIONAIRE, BOUGHT BRIDE

BY
CATHERINE SPENCER

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SICILIAN MILLIONAIRE, BOUGHT BRIDE

CHAPTER ONE

TERSE AND ENIGMATIC, the letter sat on Corinne Mallory's dressing table, held in place by a can of hair spray. Hardly a fitting resting place, she supposed, for correspondence written on vellum embossed with an ornate gold family crest. On the other hand, considering her initial response had been to decline its autocratic summons, it was a miracle that she hadn't tossed the whole works in the garbage.

But the name at the end of the typed missive, signed in bold, impatient script, had given her pause. Raffaello Orsini had been married to her dearest friend, and Lindsay had been crazy about

him, right up to the day she died. That alone had made Corinne swallow her pride and accede to his wishes. Whatever the reason for his sudden visit to Canada, loyalty to Lindsay's memory demanded Corinne not refuse him.

Now that she was just two short hours away from meeting the man face-to-face for the first time, however, she wasn't so sure she'd made the right decision. What did one wear to an invitation that smacked more of a command performance than a request?

Eyeing the limited contents of her closet, she decided basic black was probably the most appropriate choice. With pearls. Dinner at the Pan Pacific, Vancouver's most prestigious hotel, called for a touch of elegance, even if the pearls in question weren't the real thing, and the black dress made of faux silk.

At least her black pumps came with a designer emblem on the instep, a reminder of the time when she'd been able to afford a few luxuries.

A reminder, too, of Lindsay, a tiny woman full of big dreams, who hadn't believed in the word "can't."

We'll buy some run-down, flea-bitten old place in the right part of town, and turn it into a boutique hotel, Corinne. I'll take care of housekeeping and decor, and you'll be in charge of the kitchen.

We'll need a fairy godmother to accomplish that.

Not us! We can do anything we set our minds to. Nothing's going to derail us.

What if we fall in love and get married?

It'll have to be to men who share our vision. She'd flashed her

dimpled smile. *And it'd help if they were also very, very rich!*

And if they're not?

It won't matter, because we'll make our own luck. We can do this, Corinne. I know we can. We'll call it The Bowman-Raines Hotel, and have a great big old BR emblazoned over the front entrance. By the time we're thirty, we'll be famous for our hospitality and our dining room. People will kill to stay with us….

But all that was before Lindsay went to Sicily on holiday, and fell in love with Raffaello Orsini who was indeed very, very rich, but who had no interest whatsoever in sharing her dreams. Instead he'd converted her to his. Forgetting all about creating the most acclaimed hotel in the Pacific northwest, she'd moved halfway around the world to be his wife and start a family.

And the luck she'd believed in so fiercely? It had turned on her, striking her down at twenty-four with leukemia, and leaving her three-year-old daughter motherless.

Swamped in memories, Corinne blinked back the incipient tears, leaned closer to the mirror to sweep a mascara wand over her lashes and tried to remember the last time she'd worn eye makeup. Far too long ago, judging by the finished effect, but it would have to do, and really, what did it matter? Whatever the reason for his sudden visit, Raffaello Orsini certainly hadn't been inspired by a burning desire to evaluate her artistry with cosmetics.

Downstairs, she heard Mrs. Lehman, her next-door neighbor and baby-sitter, rattling dishes as she served Matthew his supper.

Matthew hadn't been happy that his mother was going out. "I hate it when you go to work," he'd announced, his lower lip trembling ominously.

With good reason, Corinne had to admit. She frequently missed tucking her son into bed, because her work too often involved late nights and time during his school holidays. It was the nature of the beast and much though she'd have preferred it otherwise, there wasn't much she could do about it, not if she wanted to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table.

"I won't be late, and I'll make blueberry pancakes for breakfast," she promised. "Be a good boy for Mrs. Lehman, and don't give her a hard time about going to bed, okay?"

"I might," he warned balefully. Although only four, he'd recently developed an alarming talent for blackmail. He was becoming, in fact, quite a handful. But Corinne hoped tonight wouldn't be one of those nights when she arrived home to find Mrs. Lehman exhausted from fighting to get him to bed, and Matthew still racing up and down the stairs every fifteen minutes and generally raising mayhem.

I should be staying home, Corinne thought, the familiar guilt sweeping over her as smoothly as the black dress slid past her hips. But the letter pulled at her, and even though she could have recited it word for word from memory, she picked it up and scoured it yet again, as if the writer's reason for sending it might be hidden between the lines.

Villa di Cascata

Sicily

January 6, 2008

Signora Mallory:

I shall be in Vancouver later this month on a matter of some urgency recently brought to my attention and which I wish to discuss with you in confidence.

I have reservations at the Pan Pacific Hotel and would appreciate your joining me there for dinner on Friday, January 28, a date I trust you find convenient. Unless I hear otherwise, I shall send a car for you at seven-thirty.

Kindest regards,

Raffaello Orsini

But just as with the first reading, there was nothing. No hint of what she might expect. And if the racket taking place in the kitchen was anything to go by, Matthew was gearing up to give poor Mrs. Lehman another night of grief.

"This had better be good, Mr. Orsini," Corinne muttered, tossing the letter aside, and taking a last glance in the mirror before going downstairs to appease a little boy who had no memory of his father, and whose mother seemed to be making a lousy job of doing double duty as a parent.

The view, Raffaello decided, was impressive. To the north, snowcapped mountains glimmered in carved splendor against the clear night sky. The lights of a bridge spanning the entrance to the harbor looped like so many diamonds above the Narrows. And closer at hand, almost directly below his suite, a yacht some

twenty-five meters long or more rocked gently at its moorage.

Not Sicily, by any stretch of the imagination, but arresting nonetheless, as much because it had been Lindsay's home, a setting both wild and sophisticated, beautiful and intriguing, just like her.

Two years ago, one year even, and he could not have come here. The pain had been too raw, his grief too filled with anger. But time had a way of healing even the most savage wounds; of gilding the memories that were his wife's legacy, and turning them into a source of comfort. "I do this for you, *amore mio,*" he murmured, raising his eyes to the heavens.

Somewhere in the city below, a church bell rang out, eight solemn chimes. The woman, Corinne Mallory, was late. Impatient to get down to the business of the evening and be done with it, he paced to the telephone and buzzed the front desk to remind whoever was in charge that she should be directed to his suite when—*if*—she showed up. What he had to propose was not something to be aired in public.

Another ten minutes dragged past before she arrived, her knock so sudden and peremptory that his hackles rose. Curbing his irritation, he shot his cuffs and tugged his lapels into place.

Remember she was Lindsay's best friend. That does not mean she has to be yours, but it will be better for everyone if you can at least establish a sympathetic cordiality, he cautioned himself, striding to the door.

He had seen photographs, of course, and thought he knew

what to expect of the woman waiting on the other side. But she was more delicate than he'd anticipated. Like fine lace that had been handled too carelessly, so that her skin was almost transparent and stretched too tightly over her fine bones, leaving her face much too small for her very blue eyes.

Standing back, he waved her across the threshold. "Signora Mallory, thank you for agreeing to see me. Please come in."

She hesitated a moment before complying. "I'm not aware you gave me much choice, Mr. Orsini," she said, her accent so vivid a reminder of Lindsay's that he was momentarily disconcerted. "Nor did I expect our meeting would take place in your room, and I can't say I'm particularly comfortable with that."

What did she think? That he'd traveled halfway around the world to seduce her? "My intentions are entirely honorable," he replied, tempted to tell her that if a romp in bed was all he wanted, he could have found it much closer to home.

She let him take her coat and shrugged, an elegantly dismissive little gesture that made the pearls nested at her throat slither gently against her skin. "They'd better be," she said.

Suppressing a smile, he motioned to the array of bottles set out on the bar. "Will you join me in a drink before dinner?"

Again, she paused before inclining her head in assent. "A very weak wine spritzer, please."

"So," he said, adding a generous dollop of San Pellegrino to an inch of Pinot Grigio, and pouring a shot of whiskey for himself, "tell me about yourself, *signora*. I know only that you and my

late wife were great friends, and that you are widowed, with a young son."

"Which is rather more than I know about you, Mr. Orsini," she replied, with a candor he found rather disarming. "And since I have absolutely no idea what this meeting is all about, I'd just as soon get down to business as waste time regaling you with a life history I'm sure you have no real interest in hearing about."

Joining her on the other side of the room, he handed her the spritzer and raised his own glass in a wordless toast. "That's where you're mistaken. Please understand that I have a most compelling and, indeed, legitimate reason for wanting to learn more about you."

"Fine. Then until you share that reason with me, please understand that I am not about to gratify your curiosity. I don't pretend to know how things are done in Sicily, but in this country, no woman with a grain of sense agrees to meet a strange man alone in his hotel room. Had I known that was your plan, I would most definitely not have come." She set her drink down on the coffee table and glanced very pointedly at her silver wristwatch. "You have exactly five minutes to explain yourself, Mr. Orsini, and then I'm out of here."

He took a sip of his whiskey and eyed her appraisingly. "I can see why you and my wife were such close friends. She, too, drove straight to the heart of a matter. It was one of the many qualities I admired in her."

"Four and a half minutes, Mr. Orsini, and I'm fast losing my

patience."

"Very well." He picked up the leather folder he'd left on the coffee table and withdrew the letter. "This is for you. I think you'll find its contents self-explanatory."

She glanced briefly at the handwriting and paled. "It's from Lindsay."

"*Si*."

"How do you know what it's about?"

"I read it."

A flush chased away her pallor. "Who gave you the right?"

"I did."

"Remind me never to leave private correspondence lying about when you're around," she said, her blue eyes flaring with indignation.

"Read your letter, *signora*, and then I will let you read mine. Perhaps when you've done that, you'll regard me with less hostility, and have a better understanding of why I came all this way to meet you."

She flung him one last doubtful glance, then bent her attention to the contents of the letter. At first, her hand was steady, but as she continued to read, the paper fluttered as if caught in the faintest of breezes, and by the time she reached the end, she was visibly shaking.

"Well, *signora?*"

She raised shocked eyes to his. "This is…ridiculous. She can't have been in her right mind."

“My wife was lucid to the last. Disease might have ravaged her body, but not her mind.” He pushed his own letter across the table. “Here is what she asked of me. You’ll notice both letters were written on the same day. Mine is a copy of the original. If you wish, you may keep it, to read again at your leisure.”

Reluctantly Corinne Mallory took the second letter, scanned it quickly, then handed it back to him and shook her head in further disbelief. “I’m having a hard time accepting that Lindsay knew what she was asking.”

“Yet viewed dispassionately, it makes a certain sense.”

“Not to me it doesn’t,” she retorted flatly. “And I can’t believe it does to you, either, or you’d have brought it to my attention sooner. These letters were written over three years ago. Why did you wait until now to tell me about them?”

“I accidentally discovered them myself only a few weeks ago. Lindsay had tucked them inside a photograph album, and I admit, on first reading, my reaction was much the same as yours.”

“I hope you’re not implying you’re now in agreement with her wishes?”

“At the very least, they merit serious consideration.”

Corinne Mallory rolled her big blue eyes and reached for her wineglass. “I might need something a bit stronger than this, after all.”

“I understand the idea takes some getting used to, Signora Mallory, but I hope you won’t dismiss it out of hand. From a purely practical standpoint, such an arrangement has much to

recommend it."

"I've no wish to offend you, Mr. Orsini, but if you seriously believe that, I can't help thinking you must be a few bricks short of a full load."

"An interesting turn of phrase," he remarked, unable to suppress a smile, "but far from accurate, and I hope to persuade you of that over dinner."

"After reading these letters, I'm no longer sure dinner's such a good idea."

"Why not? Are you afraid I might sway you into changing your mind?"

"No," she said, with utter conviction.

"Then where's the harm in our discussing the matter over a good meal? If, at the end of it all, you're still of a mind to walk away, I certainly won't try to stop you. After all, the doubts cut two ways. At this point, I'm no more persuaded of the viability of my wife's request, than are you. But in honor of her memory, the very least I can do is put it to the test. She would expect no less of me—nor, I venture to point out, of you."

Corinne Mallory wrestled with herself for a moment or two, then heaved a sigh. "All right, I'll stay—for Lindsay's sake, because this meant so much to her. But please don't harbor any hope that I'll go along with her wishes."

He raised his glass again. "For Lindsay's sake," he agreed then, as a knock came at the door, gestured to the dining area situated in the corner. "That'll be our dinner. I ordered it served up here.

Now that you realize the delicate nature of our business, I'm sure you agree it's not something to be conducted where others might overhear."

"I suppose not." Her reply signified agreement, but the hunted glance she cast around the suite suggested she was more interested in making a fast escape. "Is there someplace I can freshen up before we sit down?"

"Of course." He indicated the guest powder room at the end of the short hall leading past the kitchen and bedroom. "Take your time, *signora*. I expect the chef and his staff will need a few minutes to set everything up."

She'd need a lot more than a few minutes to pull herself together! Locking the powder room door, Corinne stared in the mirror over the long vanity unit, not surprised to find her cheeks flushed and her eyes feverishly bright. Emotionally she was under siege on all fronts, and had been from the second she'd arrived at Raffaello Orsini's door and come face-to-face with the most beautiful man she'd ever seen.

At the time of her wedding, Lindsay had sent photos, but that was years ago, and even if it had taken place just yesterday, no camera could capture his raw sexual magnetism. A person had to view him in the flesh to appreciate that. For Corinne, the experience had almost put her in a trance.

He did not look the part in which she'd cast him. Yes, he had the smooth olive skin and gleaming black hair typical of someone Mediterranean born and bred, but as she understood it, Sicilian

men did not, as a rule, stand over six feet tall, or sport a pair of shoulders that would do a football running back proud.

As for his face, she'd hardly been able to bring herself to look at it, afraid that if she did, she'd focus too intently on his sensuous mouth, rather than the words issuing from it, or lose herself in eyes the color of woodsmoke.

He'd rendered her tongue-tied, and for the first time, she'd gained a glimmer of understanding for why Lindsay had so readily given up everything to be with him. That chiseled jaw, those exquisitely arrogant cheekbones and mesmerizing voice would have been hard to resist.

His hotel accommodation on the twenty-third floor was equally mind-boggling. A luxury suite, it was larger than most apartments, with a baby grand piano installed in the huge sitting room, seating for six at the round table in the dining alcove, and fabulous artwork on the walls. Not that she could imagine anyone paying much attention to the latter, at least not during the day, with stunning views of Stanley Park, Lions Gate Bridge, Coal Harbour and the North Shore mountains commanding attention beyond the windows.

Finally, and by far the most discombobulating, was the reason he'd asked her to meet him. If she hadn't recognized Lindsay's handwriting, she'd never have believed the letters were authentic. Even accepting that they were, she couldn't wrap her mind around their contents, which was why she'd tucked hers into her purse and brought it with her into the powder room.

Spreading it out on the vanity now, she prepared to read it again, this time without Raffaello Orsini's disturbing gaze tracking her every reaction.

June 12, 2005

Dear Corinne,

I hoped I'd see you one more time, and that we could talk, the way we've always been able to, without holding anything back. I hoped, too, that I'd be around to help Elisabetta celebrate her third birthday. I know now that I'm not going to be here to do either of those things, and that I have very little time left to put my affairs in order. And so I'm forced to turn to writing, something which was never my strong suit.

Corinne, you've been widowed now for nearly a year, and I know better than anyone how hard it's been for you. I'm learning first-hand how painful grief can be, but to have money troubles on top of sorrow, as you continue to have, is more than anyone should have to put up with. At least I'm spared having to worry about that. But money can't buy health, nor can it compensate a child for losing a parent, something both your son and my daughter have to face. And that brings me to the point of this letter.

All children deserve two parents, Corinne. A mother to kiss away the little hurts, and to teach a daughter how to be a woman, and a son how to be tender. They also deserve a father to stand between them and a world which doesn't seem to differentiate between those able to cope with its senseless cruelties, and those

too young to understand why it should be so.

I've known much happiness with Raffaello. He's a wonderful man, a wonderful role model for a young boy growing up without a father. He would be so good for your Matthew. And if I can't be there for my Elisabetta, I can think of no one I'd rather see taking my place than you, Corinne.

I've loved you practically from the day we met in second grade. You are my soul sister. So I'm asking you, please, to bring an open mind to my last wish, which is to see you and Raffaello join forces—and yes, I mean through marriage—and together fill the empty spaces in our children's lives.

You each have so much to bring to the arrangement, and so much to gain. But there's another reason that's not quite so unselfish. Elisabetta's too young to hold on to her memories of me, and I hate that. Raffaello will do his best to keep me alive in her heart, but no one knows me as well as you do. Only you can tell her what I was like as a child and a teenager. About my first big crush, my first heartbreak, my first kiss, my favorite book and movie and song, and so much more that I don't have time to list here.

It's enough to say that you and I share such a long and close history, and have never kept secrets from each other. Having you to turn to would give her the next best thing to me.

I'd trust you with my life, Corinne, but it's not worth anything now, so I'm trusting you with my daughter's instead. I want so badly to live, and I'm so afraid of dying, but I think I could face

it more easily if I knew you and Raffaello…

The letter ended there, the handwriting not as sure, as if Lindsay had run out of the strength required to continue. Or perhaps she'd been too blinded by the tears, which had blurred the last few lines and left watery stains on the paper—stains made even larger by Corinne's own tears now.

Desperate to keep her grief private, she flushed the toilet, hoping the sound would disguise the sobs tearing at her, then mopped at her face with a handful of tissues. She didn't need to look in the mirror to know her makeup was ruined. The mascara stung her eyes, adding insult to injury.

"Oh, Lindsay," she mourned softly, "you know I'd do anything for you…anything at all. Except this."

CHAPTER TWO

SHE RETURNED to the main room to find the moon casting an icy swath across the ink-black waters of the harbor. Within the suite, a floor lamp poured a pool of warm yellow light over the love seat next to the window, but at the linen-draped dining table, candles now shimmered over the crystal and silverware, and lent a more subtle blush to a centerpiece of cream roses. She was glad of that. Candlelight was much kinder, its subdued glow helping to disguise her reddened eyes, bereft now of any trace of mascara.

Raffaello Orsini held out her chair before taking a seat opposite, and nodding permission for the hovering waiter to pour the wine, a very fine sparkling white burgundy. Still shaken

from rereading Lindsay's letter, Corinne could barely manage a taste, and was sure she'd never be able to swallow a bite of food. She deeply regretted having accepted her host's imperious invitation. Quite apart from the fact that her composure lay in shreds, she knew she looked a mess, and what woman was ever at her sharpest under those circumstances?

At least he had the good grace not to comment on her appearance, or her initial lack of response to his conversation. Instead, as braised endive salad followed a first course of crab and avocado pâté served on toast points, with foie gras-stuffed quail bathed in a sherry vinaigrette as the entrée, he regaled her with an amusing account of his tourist experiences earlier in the day. And almost without her realizing, she was coaxed into doing at least some justice to a meal he'd clearly taken great pains to make as appealing as possible.

By the time dessert arrived, a wonderful silky chocolate mousse she couldn't resist, a good deal of her tension had melted away. The man oozed confidence, and reeked not so much of wealth, although he clearly had money to burn, but of the power that went with it. A heady combination, she had to admit. Watching him, enjoying his dry wit and keen observations, and more than a little dazzled by the smile he allowed so sparingly, she was almost able to push aside the real reason for their meeting and pretend, just for a little while, that they were merely a man and woman enjoying an evening together.

Lulled into a comfortable haze induced by candlelight, and

a voice whose exotic cadence suggested an intimacy worth discovering, if only she dared, she almost relaxed. He was a complex man; an intriguing contradiction in terms. His wafer-thin Patek Philippe watch, handmade shoes and flawlessly tailored suit belonged to a CEO, a chairman of the board, a tycoon at his best wheeling and dealing megamillions in the arena of international business. Yet the contained strength of his body suggested he could sling a goat over one shoulder and scale a Sicilian mountainside without breaking a sweat. Despite that, though, there was absolutely nothing of the rustic in him. He was sophistication personified, and much too charming and handsome for his own good.

Or hers. Because, like a hawk luring a mouse into the open, he suddenly struck, diving in for the kill before she realized she'd left herself vulnerable to him. "So far, I've done all the talking, *signora*. Now it's your turn. So tell me, please, what is there about you that I might find noteworthy?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," she said, disconcerted by the question, but not yet suspecting where it would lead. "I'm a single, working parent, with very little time to do anything noteworthy."

"Too occupied with making ends meet, you mean?"

"That about covers it, yes."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm a professional chef."

"Ah, yes. I remember now that my wife once mentioned that. You were snapped up by a five-star restaurant in the city, as I

recall."

"Before my marriage, yes. After that, I was a stay-athome wife and mother. When my husband died, I…needed extra income, so I opened a small catering company."

"You're now self-employed, then?"

"Yes."

"You hire others to help you?"

"Not always. At first, I could handle the entire workload alone. Now that my clientele has increased, I do bring in extra help on occasion, but still do most of the food preparation myself."

"And offer a very exclusive service to your patrons, I'm sure."

"Yes. They expect me to oversee special events in person."

"A demanding business, being one's own boss, don't you find? What prompted you to tackle such an undertaking?"

"It allowed me to be at home with my son when he was a baby."

"Resourceful and enterprising. I admire that in a woman." He steepled his fingers and regarded her sympathetically. "How do you find it, now that your son's older?"

"It's not so easy," she admitted. "He's long past the age where he's content to play quietly in a corner while I create a wedding buffet for sixty people."

He allowed himself a small, sympathetic smile. "I don't doubt it. So who looks after him when you're away taking care of the social needs of strangers?"

"My next-door neighbor," she replied, wincing inwardly at his

too-accurate assessment of her clientele. “She’s an older woman, a widow and a grandmother, and very reliable.”

“But not quite as devoted to him as you are, I’m sure.”

“Is anyone ever able to take a mother’s place, Mr. Orsini?”

“No, as I have learned to my very great cost.” Then switching subjects suddenly, he said, “What sort of place do you live in?”

Bristling, she snapped, “Not a hovel, if that’s what you’re implying,” and wondered how much Lindsay had told him about her straitened circumstances.

“I didn’t suggest that it was,” he returned mildly. “I’m merely trying to learn more about you. Paint the appropriate background to a very attractive portrait, if you like.”

Mollified enough to reply less defensively, she said, “I rent a two-bedroom town house in a gated community several miles south of the city.”

“In other words, a safe place where your son can play in the garden without fear that he might wander away.”

She thought of the narrow patio outside her kitchen, the strip of lawn not much bigger than a bath towel that lay beyond it and her neighbors on the other side, the Shaws—a crusty old couple in their eighties, who complained constantly that Matthew made too much noise. “Not exactly. I have no garden as such. I take him to play at a nearby park instead, and if I’m not available, my sitter takes him for me.”

“But there are other children he can visit in this gated community, boys his own age, with similar interests?”

“Unfortunately not. Most residents are older—many, like my baby-sitter, retired.”

“Does he at least have a dog or cat to keep him company?”

“We aren’t allowed to own pets.”

He raised his elegant black brows. “*Dio*, he might as well be in prison, for all the freedom he enjoys.”

In truth, she couldn’t refute an opinion which all too closely coincided with her own, but she wasn’t about to tell him so. “Nothing’s ever perfect, Mr. Orsini. If it were, our children wouldn’t be growing up with one parent standing in for two.”

“But they are,” he replied. “Which brings me to my next question. Now that you’ve had time to recover from the initial shock, what is your opinion on the content of the letters?”

“What?” She raised startled eyes to his and found herself impaled in a gaze at once penetrating and inscrutable.

“Your opinion,” he repeated, a sudden hint of steel threading his words. “Surely, Signora Mallory, you haven’t forgotten the real reason you’re here?”

“Hardly. I just haven’t given the matter…much thought.”

“Then I suggest you do so. Enough time has passed since my wife wrote of her last wishes. I do not propose to delay honoring them any longer than I have to.”

“Well, I do not propose to be bullied, Mr. Orsini, not by you or anyone else. Since you’re so anxious for an answer, though, let me be blunt. I can’t see myself ever agreeing to Lindsay’s request.”

“Her friendship meant so little to you, then?”

“Save the emotional blackmail for someone else,” she shot back. “It’s not going to work with me.”

His smoky-gray eyes darkened. With suppressed anger? Sorrow? Frustration? She couldn’t tell. His expression gave away nothing. “Emotion does not play a role in this situation. It is a business proposition, pure and simple, devised solely for the benefit of your child and mine. The most convenient way to implement it is for you and me to join forces in marriage.”

“Something I find totally unacceptable. In case you’re not aware, marriages of convenience went out of fashion in this country a long time ago. Should I ever decide to marry again, which is doubtful, it will be to someone of my own choosing.”

“It seems to me, Signora Mallory, that you’re in no position to be so particular. By your own admission, you do not own your own home, which leaves you at the mercy of a landlord, you’re overworked and your son spends a great deal of time being cared for by someone other than yourself.”

“At least I have my independence.”

“For which both you and your boy pay a very high price.” He regarded her silently a moment, then in a seductively cajoling tone, went on, “I admire your spirit, *cara mia*, but why are you so set on continuing with your present lifestyle, when I can offer you so much more?”

“For a start, because I don’t like having charity forced down my throat.” *And calling me* cara mia *isn’t going to change that.*

“Is that how you see this? Do you not understand that, in our

situation, the favors work both ways—that my daughter stands to gain as much from the arrangement as your son?"

Absently Corinne touched a fingertip to the velvet-soft petals of the nearest rose. They reminded her of Matthew's skin when he was a baby. Before he'd turned into a tyrant.

…Raffaello will do his best to keep me alive in her heart, but having you to turn to would be the next best thing to having me, Lindsay had written, or words to that effect. *I'm entrusting you with my daughter's life, Corinne….*

Seeming to think she was actually considering his proposal, Raffaello Orsini asked, "Are you afraid I'm going to demand my husbandly rights in the bedroom?"

"I don't know. Are you?" Corinne blurted out rashly, too irked by the faint hint of derision in his question to consider how he might interpret her reply.

"Would you like me to?"

She opened her mouth to issue a flat denial, then snapped it closed as an image swam unbidden into her mind, shockingly detailed, shockingly erotic, of how Raffaello Orsini's naked body might look. Her inner response—the jolt of awareness that rocked her body, the sudden flush of heat streaming through her blood—appalled her.

She'd moved through the preceding four years like an automaton, directing all her energies to providing a safe, stable and loving home for her son. As breadwinner, the one responsible for everything from rent to medical insurance to paying off debts

incurred by her late husband, she'd had no choice but to put her own needs aside. To be assaulted now by this sudden aberration—for how else could she describe it?—was ridiculous, but also an untimely reminder that she was still a woman whose sexuality might have been relegated to the back burner, but whose flame, it seemed, had not been entirely extinguished.

"Don't feel you have to make up your mind on that point at this very moment," Orsini suggested smoothly. "The welfare of two children is the main issue here, not sexual intercourse between you and me. I shall not press you to consummate the marriage against your will, but you're an attractive woman and as a hot-blooded Sicilian, I would not spurn your overtures, should you feel inclined to make any."

Hot-blooded Sicilian, maybe, she thought, staggered by his arrogance, but it'll be a cold day in hell before I come begging for sexual favors from you. "There's not the slightest chance of that ever happening, for the simple reason that I have no intention at all of agreeing to your proposition. It's a lousy idea."

"Why? What's wrong with two adults uniting to create a semblance of normal family life for their children? Don't you think they deserve it?"

"They deserve the best that we can give them—and that is *not* by having their respective parents marry for all the wrong reasons."

"That would be true only if we were deluding ourselves into believing our hearts are engaged, *signora*, which they most

certainly are not. Rather, we're approaching this from a cerebral angle. And that, in my opinion, vastly increases our chances of making the union work."

"*Cerebral?*" She almost choked on her after-dinner coffee. "Is that how you'd define it?"

"How else? After all, it's not as if either of us is looking for love in a second marriage, both of us having lost our true soul mates, the first time around. We harbor no romantic illusions. We're simply entering into a binding contract to improve our children's lives."

Unnerved as much by his logic as his unremitting gaze, she left the table and went to stand at the window. "You omit to mention the extent to which I would benefit financially from such an arrangement."

"I hardly consider it important enough to merit attention."

"It is to me."

"Why? Because you feel you're being bought?"

"Among other things, yes."

"That's ridiculous."

She shrugged. "Finally we agree on something. In fact, the whole idea's preposterous. People don't get married for such reasons."

"Why do they get married?"

Beleaguered by his relentless inquisition, she floundered for a reply and came up with exactly the wrong one. "Well, as you already made clear. For love."

Yet in the end, at least for her, life had rubbed off all the magic, and what she'd believed was love had turned out to be lust. Infatuation. Make-believe. An illusion. The only good thing to come out of her marriage had been Matthew, and if Joe had lived, she knew with certainty that they'd have ended up in divorce court.

From across the room, Raffaello Orsini's hypnotic voice drifted into the silence, weaving irresistible word pictures. "You would be marrying for love this time, too. For love of your son. Think about him, *cara mia*. Hear his laughter as he runs and plays with a companion, in acres of gardens. Imagine him building sand castles on a safe, secluded beach, or learning to swim in warm, crystal clear waters. See yourself living in a spacious villa, with no monetary cares and all the time in the world to devote to your child. Then tell me, if you dare, that our joining forces is such a bad idea."

He was offering Matthew more than she could ever hope to provide, and although pride urged her not to be swayed by what was, in effect, a blatant bribe, as a mother she had to ask herself if she had the right to deprive her son of a better life. Yet to sell herself to the highest bidder… what kind of woman did that make her?

Torn, confused, she considered her options.

Money could buy just about anything, and it was all very fine for high-minded people to scorn it as the root of all evil, but until they found themselves having to scrape and save every last

cent in order to make ends meet, they were in no position to cast judgment on those who faced just such a situation every day.

On the other hand, it was claimed by those who ought to know that there were never any free lunches, and if something seemed too good to be true, it probably was. The kind of lopsided bargain Raffaello Orsini was proposing might well end up costing more than it was worth. Would she really be doing Matthew any favors if she ended up losing her self-respect?

Marshaling her thoughts, she said, "You've gone to great pains to explain how the arrangement might benefit me, Mr. Orsini, but exactly what's in it for you?"

From the corner of her eye, she saw him go to the bar and pour cognac into two brandy snifters. "When Lindsay died," he replied, joining her at the window and passing one glass to her, "my mother and aunt moved into my house, to take care of Elisabetta and, if I'm to speak with truth, to take care of me, too. It's as well that they did. At the time, I was too angry, too wrapped up in my own grief, to be the kind of father my daughter deserved. These two good women put their own lives on hold and devoted themselves to ours."

"You were very lucky that they were there when you needed them."

He swirled his brandy and warmed the bowl of the glass between his hands. "Very lucky, yes, and very grateful, too."

She heard the reservation in his tone and glanced at him sharply. "But?"

“But they have indulged Elisabetta to the point that she is becoming unmanageable, and I am at a loss to know how to put a stop to that without hurting their feelings. She needs a consistently firm hand, Corinne, and I am not doing such a good job of providing one, in part because the demands of my work take me away from home at times, but also because…” He shrugged ruefully. “I am a man.”

His use of her first name left Corinne giddy with such insane pleasure that she lost all control over her tongue. “So I’ve noticed.” Then appalled at how he might interpret her answer, she rushed to explain, “What I mean is, that like most of your breed, you seem to think because you decree something, it shall be done.”

He actually laughed at that, the sound as rich and dark as buckwheat honey, then just as suddenly sobered. “You’ve read Lindsay’s letters. You know what she wanted. What you can do for me, Corinne, is carry out her dying wishes. Take her place in Elisabetta’s life. Shape my daughter into the kind of woman that would make her mother proud.

“It will be no easy task, I assure you, so if, as I suspect, you think I’m the one doing all the giving, please think again. What I offer to you can, for the most part, be measured in euros. It is impossible to put a price on what you have to offer to me.”

“You’re very persuasive, Mr. Orsini, but the fact remains, logistics alone make the idea impractical on any number of fronts.”

"Name one."

"I signed a three-year lease on my town house."

"I will break it for you."

"I have obligations…debts."

"I will discharge them."

"I don't want your money."

"You need my money."

He had an answer for everything. At her wit's end, she took a different tack. "What if you don't like my son?"

"Are you likely to dislike my daughter?"

"Of course not. She's just a child. An innocent little girl."

His raised hand, palm facing up, spoke more eloquently than words. "Exactly. Our children are the innocents, and we their appointed guardians."

"You'd expect me to disrupt my son's life and move to Sicily."

"What is there to keep you here? Your parents?"

Hardly. Their disenchantment with her had begun when she was still in her teens.

A chef? they'd sneered, when Corinne had shared her ambitions with them. *Is slaving over a hot stove all day the best you can aspire to after the kind of education we've given you? What will people think?*

But that was nothing compared to their reaction when Joe entered the picture. *Marry that fly-boy Joe Mallory, young lady, and you're on your own*, her father had threatened.

Determined to have the last word as usual, her mother had

added, *Your father's right. But then, you never did use the brains God gave you, otherwise you'd have chosen that nice accountant you were dating last year, before he got tired of being strung along and ended up marrying someone else.*

That they'd ultimately been proved right about Joe did nothing to lessen Corinne's sense of abandonment. She couldn't imagine ever turning her back on Matthew. Parents just didn't do that to their children. But hers had, and shown not a speck of remorse about it.

"No," she told Raffaello Orsini. "They retired to Arizona and we seldom visit."

"You are estranged?"

"More or less," she admitted, but didn't elaborate.

He closed the small distance between them and with a touch to her shoulder swung her round to face him. "Then all the more reason for you to marry me. I come with instant family."

"I don't speak Italian."

"You will learn, and so will your boy."

"Your mother and aunt might resent a stranger coming into the household and taking over."

"My mother and aunt will accede to my wishes."

Once again, he had an answer for everything. "Stop badgering me!" she cried, desperation lending an edge of hysteria to her voice. No matter how real the obstacles she flung in his path, he steamrolled over it and confronted her with an even better reason why she, too, should *accede to his wishes*. And if she didn't put a

stop to him now, she'd end up surrendering to his demands from sheer battle fatigue.

"*Ti prego, pardonami*—forgive me. You're in shock, as was I when I first read my wife's letters, and for me to expect you to reach a decision at once is both unreasonable and inexcusable."

His response, uttered with heartfelt regret, so far undermined her battered defenses that, to her horror, she heard herself say. "Exactly. I need some time to assimilate the benefits and the drawbacks, and I can't do it with you breathing down my neck."

"I absolutely understand." He strode to the desk, returned with an envelope containing several photographs, which he spilled onto the coffee table. "Perhaps these will help clarify matters for you. Would you like me to leave you alone for a few minutes so that you may examine them?"

"No," she said firmly. "I would like to go home and take my time reaching a decision, without the pressure of knowing you're hovering in the background."

"How much time? I must return to Sicily as soon as possible."

"I'll have an answer for you tomorrow." In all truth, she had an answer for him now, but it wasn't the one he wanted to hear, so she might as well keep it to herself and make her escape while she could. The sooner she put distance between him and her, the less likely she was to find herself agreeing to something she knew was out of the question.

"Fair enough." He slid the photographs back into their envelope, tucked it in the inside pocket of his jacket, then

retrieved her coat and, after draping it around her shoulders, picked up the phone. “Give me a moment to alert the driver that we’re ready for him.”

“You don’t need to come down with me,” she said, after he’d made the call. “I can find my own way.”

“I’m sure you can, Corinne,” he replied. “You strike me as a woman who can do just about anything she puts her mind to. But I will accompany you nevertheless.”

All the way back to her town house? She sincerely hoped not. Bad enough that his effect on her was such that she hadn’t been able to issue an outright refusal to his ludicrous proposition. The enforced intimacy of a forty-minute drive with him in the back of a dark limousine, and there was no telling what she might end up saying.

As it turned out, he had no such intention. He walked her through the lobby and out to where the limousine waited, handed her into the backseat then, at the last minute, withdrew the envelope from his pocket and dropped it in her lap. “*Buena notte*, Corinne,” he murmured, pinning her in his mesmerizing gaze. “I look forward to hearing from you tomorrow.”

CHAPTER THREE

SHE FLUNG HIM a baleful look and tried to return the envelope to him, but the wretched thing fell open and released its contents, which slithered in disarray over the leather upholstery. By the time she’d scooped them up, the door had clicked shut and the car was moving smoothly into the downtown traffic.

Wearily—she seemed to have been fighting one thing or another ever since the evening began, starting with Matthew's tantrum at once again being left in Mrs. Lehman's care—Corinne stuffed the photographs into her purse. Just because Raffaello Orsini had decreed that she should accept them didn't mean she had to look at them, did it? She'd send them back to him by courier tomorrow, along with her rejection of his proposal.

When the limousine driver at last dropped her off at the entrance to the town house complex, she knew a sense of relief. It might not be much by most people's standards, especially not the obscenely rich Mr. Orsini's, but it was home, and all that mattered most in the world to her lay under its roof. Hugging her coat collar close against the freezing night air, she hurried to her front door, her heels ringing like iron on the concrete driveway she shared with her neighbors.

Once inside the house, she realized at once that it was too quiet. As a rule, Mrs. Lehman watched television in the family room adjoining the kitchen, and being a little hard of hearing, turned up the volume. But tonight, she met Corinne in the tiny entrance hall, her own front door key in her hand, as if she couldn't wait to vacate the premises. In itself, this was unusual enough, but what really dismayed Corinne was the dried blood and ugly bruise already discoloring the baby-sitter's cheekbone, just below her left eye.

Dropping her purse on the floor, Corinne rushed forward for a closer look. "Good heavens, Mrs. Lehman, what happened? And

where are your glasses? Did you fall?"

"No, dear." Normally the most forthright of women, she refused to meet Corinne's gaze. "My glasses got broken."

"How? Oh…!" Sudden awful premonition sent Corinne's stomach plummeting. "Oh, please tell me Matthew isn't responsible!"

"Well, yes, I'm afraid he is. We had a bit of a run-in about his bedtime, you see, and…he threw one of his toy trucks at me. It was after ten before he finally settled down."

Corinne felt physically ill. She'd spent the evening being wined and dined with the very best, by a man she'd never met before, and for what? A proposition so absurd it didn't merit a second thought. And meanwhile, her son was abusing the kindness of the one woman she most relied on to help her out when she needed it.

"I hardly know what to say, Mrs. Lehman. An apology just doesn't cut it." Then, biting her lip at her poor choice of words, she examined the cut more closely. It had stopped bleeding and didn't appear to be deep, but it must be sore. "Is there anything I can get for you? Some ice, perhaps?"

"No, dear, thank you. I'd just like to get to my own bed, if you don't mind."

"Come on, then. I'll walk you home." Taking her arm, Corinne steered her gently to the door.

"Don't trouble yourself, Corinne. It's only a few yards. I can manage by myself."

But Corinne waved aside her objections. Frost sparkled on the

path, and she wasn't taking a chance on the poor woman slipping and breaking a hip. Enough damage had been done for one night. "I insist. And tomorrow, Matthew and I will be over to see you —after I've dealt with him, that is."

She barely slept that night for worrying. What if Mrs. Lehman's injury was worse than it looked, and she suffered a concussion? Lapsed into a coma? What if her sight had been damaged? She'd claimed not to have a headache, had seemed steady enough on her feet during the short walk to her front door and had no trouble inserting the key in the lock, but she was well into her seventies and at that age…

Aware she was letting her imagination run riot, Corinne focused on the underlying cause of so much angst. What was happening to her son, that he would behave so badly? A "run-in," Mrs. Lehman had called it, but in Corinne's estimation, broken glasses and a black eye amounted to a lot more than that.

Yet if she was brutally honest with herself, she shouldn't be altogether surprised. Lately she'd come close to a few such "run-ins" herself. How did she put a stop to them before they escalated beyond all control and something *really* serious happened?

Finally, around four in the morning, she fell into an uneasy sleep riddled with dreams in which all the town houses in the complex fell down. Mrs. Lehman rode away in a big black limousine with every stick of her furniture piled next to her on the backseat. Corinne fought her way out of the rubble that she'd once called home, to look for Matthew who was lost, and came

face-to-face with Raffaello Orsini shuffling a deck of playing cards. “This is all your house was made of, *signora*,” he said, fanning them out for her to see. “You have nothing.”

She awoke just after eight, her pulse racing, to find that some time while she slept, Matthew had left his own bed and now lay curled up beside her, safe and sound, and such a picture of innocence that her heart contracted in her breast.

She loved him more than life; too much, she sometimes thought, to be a really effective disciplinarian. When things went horribly wrong, as they had last night, the full brunt of being the only parent weighed heavily on her conscience. Yet she knew that, had he lived, Joe would have sloughed off his share of that responsibility, just as he had every other. He’d been no more cut out for fatherhood than he had for marriage.

Dreading the morning ahead, she inched out of bed, showered and dressed in comfortable fleece sweatpants and top, and went down to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Should she make her son pancakes, as she’d promised, she wondered, or would that be condoning his bad behavior? Did his transgression justify her breaking her word? Did two wrongs ever make a right?

She was still debating the matter when Matthew came downstairs, trailing his blanket behind him, and climbed up on the stool at the breakfast bar. He looked such a waif, with his hair sticking out every which way, and one side of his face imprinted with the creases in his bedding, that her heart melted.

Okay, pancakes but no blueberries, she decided, pouring him

a glass of juice. And for her, coffee, very strong. She needed a jolt of caffeine to drive the gritty residue of too little sleep from her eyes and give her the boost she needed to face what lay ahead.

Overnight, the sky had turned leaden. A persistent drizzle shrouded the trees in mist and reached its damp aura past the ill-fitting window over the sink to infiltrate the house. Next door, Mrs. Shaw screeched for Mr. Shaw to come and get his oatmeal before it grew cold. In Corinne's own kitchen, Matthew, also out of sorts from too little sleep, stabbed his fork into his pancakes and spattered himself with syrup.

Steeling herself to patience, she waited until he'd finished his meal before tackling him about the previous night. As she expected, the conversation did not go well.

"I don't have to," he said, when she scolded him for not obeying Mrs. Lehman. "She's not my mommy. She's silly." Then, sliding down from the stool, he announced, "I'm going to play with my trains and horses now."

Swiftly Corinne corralled him and hauled him back to his seat. "You most certainly are not, young man. You're going to listen to me, then after you're dressed, we're going next door and you're going to tell Mrs. Lehman you're sorry you hurt her."

"No," he said, aiming a kick at her shin. "You're silly, as well."

Barely nine o'clock, and already time-out time, she thought wearily. But when she went to take him back to his room, he turned limp as a piece of spaghetti, slumped on the floor and burst into tears. He was still screaming when the doorbell rang.

Leaving him to it, Corinne trudged to answer.

Mrs. Lehman stood outside, her eye almost lost in the swelling around it, her bruise a magnificent shade of purple. “No, dear, I won’t come in, thank you,” she said in response to Corinne’s invitation. “I’m going to stay with my married daughter, to give her a hand with the new baby, and she’ll be here any minute to pick me up.”

“That’s nice,” Corinne said, hardly able to look at the poor woman, her face was such a mess. “But you should just have phoned, Mrs. Lehman, instead of coming out in this weather. And if you’re worried about looking after Matthew, please don’t be. Business is always slow in January, and I’m sure I can—”

“Yes, well, about that. I’m afraid I won’t be looking after him anymore, dear, because I’m not going to be living next door much longer. My daughter and her husband have been after me for months to move in with them, and I’ve decided to take them up on it. That’s why I came over. You’ve always been very kind to me, and I wanted to tell you to your face. And give you back your key.”

“I see.” And Corinne did, all too clearly. The episode last night had been the last straw. “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Lehman,” she said miserably. “I feel as if we’re driving you out of your home.”

“Oh, rubbish! The plain fact is, there’s nothing to keep me here since I lost my husband, and I’ve been ready for a move for some time now. And truth to tell, even if I wasn’t, I couldn’t have continued baby-sitting your boy much longer. He’s got more

energy than he knows what to do with, and I'm past the age where I can keep up with him." A wry smile crossed her face as Matthew's wails echoed through the house. "Anyway, I'd better let you get back to him. From the sound of it, you've got your hands full this morning."

Just then, a car drew up outside her door. "There's my daughter now, and I've still to pack a few things to see me through the next day or two," she said, and thrust a slip of paper in Corinne's hand. "Here's what you owe me. Just drop a check in my mailbox, and I'll collect it when I come to get the rest of my stuff." She bathed Corinne in a fond, sad smile. "Goodbye, dear, and all the best."

Corinne watched as the daughter climbed out of her car. Heard the younger woman's shocked exclamation at the sight of her mother. Saw the outraged glare she directed at Corinne. Never more ashamed or embarrassed than she was at that moment, Corinne slunk back inside the house, shut her own front door and retraced her steps to the kitchen.

She found Matthew quite recovered from his tantrum and happily playing with his trains and horses. She wished she could leave it at that, let last night's incident go and just move on. But young though he might be, he had to be held accountable for his actions. And if she didn't teach him that, who would?

Sighing, she waded in to what she knew would be a battle royal. Tried reason in the face of defiance; calm in the midst of storm. Nothing worked. He resisted her at every turn, flinging

himself on the floor, giving vent to his frustration at the top of his lungs.

He broke her heart with his tears and anger. What had happened to her sunny-tempered little boy, that he was now in his room for a "time-out," when he should have been enjoying himself?

She knew what. He needed a full-time mother, and she couldn't give him one. And the fact that she was doing the best she could under trying circumstances did nothing to ease her conscience. Something had to change, and fast, but what—and how?

Pouring a fresh cup of coffee, she paced the confines of her kitchen and considered her options. She could hire extra staff for her business and spend more time at home with her son. But not only was good help hard to find, it didn't come cheap, and money was a perennial problem. Had been ever since Joe died and her credit rating had hit the skids because of the debts he'd run up on their jointly held accounts.

Shortly after his death, the bank had foreclosed on their mortgage and she'd lost the house. She'd been forced to leave the upscale suburban neighborhood with its acred lots and treed avenues, where Matthew had been born and just about everyone else on the street had young families. Had had to trade in her safe, reliable car for a twelve-year-old van, large enough to hold her catering supplies, certainly, but with such a history of abuse that she never knew when it might let her down. In a bid to

avoid bankruptcy, she'd cut all her expenses to the bone, yet had to splurge on supplies to give her fledgling catering company a fighting chance of success.

But although she might be the one caught in a vicious financial bind, in the end, Matthew was the one paying the real price, and how high that price might go didn't bear thinking about.

We don't have fun together anymore, she thought sorrowfully. *I used to play with him. Sing to him. Make him laugh. Now I make him cry, and I can't remember the last time I really laughed until my stomach ached.*

She used to do other things, too, like look forward to tomorrow, and wring every drop of enjoyment out of life. Now she woke up and wondered how she'd get through the day. She was afraid all the time, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

What sort of message did that send to Matthew?

Our children are the innocents, Raffaello Orsini had said last night.

Raffaello Orsini… Even the silent mention of his name was enough for him to fill the house with his invisible presence; his implacable logic.

Think about your boy….

What's wrong with a binding contract to improve our children's lives…don't they deserve it?

Involuntarily her glance swung to the table in the dining nook where she'd tossed the envelope he'd given her. Exercising a mind of their own, her feet followed suit. She sat down. Picked up the

envelope. Dared to examine its contents.

She discovered pictures of a villa, its rooms cooled by whirring fans and dressed in soothing shades of oyster-white and dove-gray and soft blue. Original oil paintings hung on its walls, antique rugs covered its pale marble floors, elaborate wrought-iron grilles accented its elegant curved windows, and frescoes its high domed ceilings.

Lindsay's kind of house: spacious, airy and charming. And outside its ancient stone walls, palm trees and flower beds filled with vivid color, and emerald-green lawns as smooth as velvet, and a distant view of turquoise seas.

Slowly Corinne lifted her gaze and looked at her present surroundings, at the place Matthew called home. The town house was too old to be sought after, and not nearly old enough to be chic. The rooms were poky and, on days like today, dark; the walls so paper thin that, at night, she could hear Mr. Shaw snoring in bed, next door.

She thought of Matthew being confined to a square of patio barely large enough to hold a sandbox, and much too small for him to ride his trike. She remembered last summer when Mrs. Shaw had vehemently accused him of kicking his soccer ball and breaking the plastic planter holding her geraniums. "Keep that brat on his own side of the property," she'd snapped.

Corinne thought of his never having play dates because no other children lived close by. Of his constantly being told not to make noise because he might disturb the neighbors. Little boys

were supposed to make noise. They were supposed to run and play themselves into happy exhaustion. But his life was bound by other people's rules and expectations to the point that he was like a tender young plant, so deprived of light and water that it couldn't thrive.

Viewed from that perspective, Lindsay's request no longer seemed quite as far-fetched as it had upon first reading. "A business proposition, pure and simple, devised solely for the benefit of your child and mine," Raffaello Orsini had called it.

If, as he'd maintained, emotion wasn't allowed to enter the picture, could they make it work? And if so, what would it be like to look forward to tomorrow, instead of dreading what it might bring? For that matter, when was the last time she'd looked forward to anything except getting through each day the best way she knew how?

The question brought her up short. With an attitude like hers, was it any wonder Matthew misbehaved? Her own disenchantment had spilled over onto him. But now, suddenly, the power to change all that lay within her grasp.

Horrified, she realized her resolve to turn down Raffaello Orsini's proposal was weakening, and as if to drive the final nail in the coffin of her resistance, one last photograph fell out of the envelope and held her transfixed. Unlike the others, it had nothing to do with luxury or locale. This time, the camera had recorded the face of a little girl.

Although the date in the corner showed the picture had been

taken within the last six months, the face was Lindsay's all over again. The vivacious smile, the eyes, and the dimples were hers. Only the hair was different; darker, thicker, springier.

I'm trusting you with my daughter's life, Corinne… having you to turn to would give her the next best thing to me….

Corinne traced a fingertip over the delicate features of the girl in the photograph. "Elisabetta," she breathed, on a soft sigh of defeat.

Patience was not his strong suit, at least not when it came to matters of business. And the proposal he'd put before Corinne Mallory last night was entirely concerned with business. Surely a woman of reason could quickly ascertain that the pros vastly outweighed the cons? Yet here it was, almost four o'clock, and still no response from her.

Deciding he'd waited long enough, he picked up the phone. Then, about to punch in her number, he abruptly changed his mind, called the hotel's front desk instead and ordered a car and driver. Slightly more than an hour later, with daylight fading fast, he was at her town house.

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