

He shifted his chair and leaned forward. Up close, I studied the angled curve of his jaw, the hint of stubble hugging his chin. “Are things getting better with Allegra?” he asked. “You seemed more relaxed tonight.”

“I backed off of work. It’s not fair to my mom or my daughter to be only partially present.” I sighed, tapping my finger against my glass. “I don’t know when I realized work was getting the lion’s share of my attention. I can’t go back, but we have two weeks left together. I need to prove to my family they’re more important than anything else.” I paused, lifting my gaze to meet his. “You helped me see that.”

“No, you did that on your own. I just listened. How are the panic attacks?”

“None since that morning.”

“Good. I did some research after my sister struggled. I can send you some really good articles.”

“Thank you, I’d like that.” We fell silent and the connection between us tugged and hummed, pushing me to be a bit reckless. “You mentioned your home was close to the villa we’re renting. I was thinking maybe you could give me some tips about the local area. Things to do. Places to go.”

“Of course.” His hand stretched casually across the table surface. “I could even take a day to drive out there and show you around personally. If you’re interested.”

My breath caught and I knew there was an undercurrent of meaning in his offer. He was giving me the power right here and now to safely back out and keep him at a distance.

Or not.

“That would be very kind of you,” I said.



He stared at me. His jaw clenched, like he was struggling with something. “I’m not doing it to be kind, Francesca. But if I say it aloud, I can’t take it back.”

I reached out my own hand until our fingers touched. The slight contact made my skin burn. “Maybe I don’t want you to take it back. Maybe I need to know if I’m being silly or I’m alone in this.”

It was the most I could give him. Vulnerability cut through me. I’d never been the beautiful, most popular woman in the room, and I’d accepted my fate with grace. I was smart and capable and sometimes funny. My partners had been picked by my head rather than my heart, until I was driven to have Allegra on my own and stop looking for a magical romance that didn’t exist. At least, not for me.

Yet, tonight, with my pinky brushing his, I experienced more electricity than I ever had. I wanted more of him. His words, his gaze, his touch. I wasn’t comfortable with this version of myself, but if I didn’t try, I’d never know what I was missing.

His voice rumbled deep and rough like sandpaper. “Then I’ll tell you. It’s against the rules to get involved with the tourists. I could lose my job for pursuing anything with you. I’ve been hit on numerous times before and not once did I have to battle even a passing temptation. Until you.”

I trembled but didn’t back off. “I tempt you?”

He shuddered. “Yes, Francesca, can’t you see it? I’m always trying to get close to you, or find excuses to talk, but I keep my distance because I’m afraid it’ll be obvious to the group. I don’t want to put anyone in a bad position, especially you or your family.” A touch of frustration surged, but then his fingers slipped through mine and he was holding my hand, and my



entire soul sighed with pleasure. “That morning in Capri, I was crazed to kiss you. I barely managed to hold back in time.”

“I wanted you to kiss me,” I said simply, past flirting or trying to play games.

A groan escaped him. “I wasn’t sure. This is new territory for me. I don’t want to disrespect you or the rules of my job. Do you understand?”

“I do. And I don’t want to put you in that position either. But—”

“But?”

His eyes practically pleaded for me to finish. “But I can’t stop thinking about you either,” I whispered. “And I want more, even if it’s messy or wrong or crazy.”

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