

A man and a woman in formal attire are shown in a close embrace. The man, on the left, is wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a patterned tie. The woman, on the right, is wearing a black sleeveless dress and has her hair pulled back. They are both looking down and smiling. The background is a warm, golden-brown color.

# Maid in the U.S.A.

THE BAD BOY BILLIONAIRES SERIES VOLUME 2

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY  
BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

JUDY  
ANGELO

# **MAID IN THE USA**

**JUDY ANGELO**

The BAD BOY BILLIONAIRES Series  
Volume 2

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## **MAID IN THE USA**

**WHO EVER SAID BILLIONAIRE BACHELORS AND MODEST MAIDS DON'T MIX?**

Celine Santini couldn't have been more shocked when billionaire bachelor Pierce D'Amato offers her a job as nanny to his four-year-old charge. After all, he hardly even knows her. But after finding herself thrown into an unexpectedly intimate encounter with him, are they really strangers? Celine is captivated by the green-eyed heartthrob who takes her heart ransom but how can she give in to her feelings when they're from two totally different worlds?

From the first day he lays eyes on the dark-eyed beauty, Pierce D'Amato knows he is lost. He immediately devises a plan to get her under his roof...and it works. But the more he gets to know the sweetly seductive Celine Santini the more he realizes there's a lot more to this woman than he could ever have imagined. Her intriguing combination of sophistication and innocence keeps him forever off-balance and, before he knows it, his bachelor heart turns traitor. The heart knows what the heart wants and it wants Celine Santini...whatever the cost.

A thrilling romance with twists and turns that will keep you turning the pages...

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## CHAPTER ONE

Celine hummed a love song as she pushed the housekeeping trolley down the carpeted hallway. Today was going to be a great day she'd told herself, no matter that she was stuck in Cambridge for yet another summer when she'd much rather be back home in France with her mother and two rowdy little brothers.

She smiled as she thought about Marc and Sylvan. The ten and twelve year olds were probably driving her *maman* crazy at this very moment with their constant pranks and rough play. If only she could be home with them. She was the only one who could keep those two in check.

She stopped at the door to suite 1206. No time to dwell on that now. She had twelve suites to clean in the next few hours and she wanted to make a good impression. For the last two summers she'd worked at small hotels where the pay was minimal and the hours long. This summer she'd been lucky to land a job at one of the largest hotels on Main Street. She'd be earning almost fifty percent more than she'd made at her previous job. It was still a far cry from adequate but if she kept to a tight budget she might just be able to save enough to go home for Christmas.

Celine knocked on the door. No answer. She knocked again just to be sure then stuck her keycard in the slot and pushed it open. Gathering up a handful of towels and tiny bottles of toiletries she tucked them in the crook of her arm, grabbed the handle of the vacuum cleaner then backed into the room.

The presidential suite was magnificent with a spacious living room filled with antique furniture and ornate carpeting. A sparkling crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. Celine paused to admire the elegant room. Oh, to be able to live like this.

She chuckled to herself. It would probably take a month's salary for her to pay for one night in this suite.

Now where to start? She had an armful of towels so the bathroom it was. Still humming she pushed the door and walked into the bedroom.

At that moment she heard a click and the bathroom door opened. She gasped and the towels fell from her hands. Standing in front of her, his face hidden by a thick towel, was a tall, muscular and very naked man.

Celine screamed.

"What the..." The man dropped the towel and stared back at her in obvious shock. "Where did you come from?"

"I...I'm sorry," Celine said as she backed away. "I thought the suite was empty. I'm so sorry."

The man was staring at her with eyes that were shockingly green. "I was in the shower," he said, raking his fingers through his dark brown hair, "so if you knocked I wouldn't have heard a thing."

*Mon Dieu.* He was standing there, tall and lean and every inch a man, and he was making no move to cover himself. Celine dropped her eyes, her face hot with embarrassment. She turned to flee.

"Wait. I want to talk to you."

Was he serious? She would not turn back to talk to a naked man no matter how handsome. She was back in the living room and had already grabbed hold of her vacuum cleaner when his voice stopped her.

"Don't leave," he said, his voice imperious and bold. He sounded like the kind of man who expected to be obeyed. He was standing in the bedroom doorway



and this time, thankfully, he had the towel wrapped around his waist. “Wait for me in the living room. I’ll get dressed.”

Without bothering to wait for a reply he turned and went back into the bedroom, leaving Celine staring at the empty doorway. Who did this man think he was, to be ordering her around like that? She frowned as her thoughts raced wildly. Come to think of it, that was a good question. Who was he, really? He had to be a very important person or else a very rich one to be staying in the presidential suite of one of the most expensive hotels in town. Her heart pounded as a new thought crowded her mind. Was he going to come back and reprimand her for violating his privacy? Was he going to report her, or worse, get her fired? Her palms grew damp and she slid them down the sides of her uniform. She couldn’t afford to lose this job, she just couldn’t. When he came she would have to plead her case.

In less than a minute the man was walking out of the bedroom in dark slacks and a white shirt which he buttoned casually as he approached. His long, lean feet were bare.

“Have a seat,” he said and beckoned to the couch by the window.

“Excuse me?” Celine stood stock-still, her hand on the vacuum cleaner, her eyes wide as she stared back at him. Why was he offering her a seat? If he was going to reprimand her why not do it quickly and let her go? He must really plan to lecture her. She decided to speak up, maybe appease him before he got the chance to blast her.

“I’m very sorry for barging in on you like this,” she said, her voice earnest. “It won’t ever happen again. I’ll be back later to clean your room.” With that she started toward the door, pushing the vacuum cleaner before her. Maybe if she made a quick exit nothing more would come of this. At least, that was what she hoped.

She was halfway to the door when he laughed, a deep husky laugh that sent a little shiver up her back. It stopped her in her tracks. She turned to stare at him.

“No need to fly so fast,” he said, tucking the ends of his shirt into his trousers. “I’m not going to bite. I just want to talk to you about something.”

He wanted to talk to her? About what? Her curiosity got the better of her and when he waved her over to the couch again she released her hold on the vacuum cleaner and went to sit demurely on the edge of the chair.

“My name is Pierce D’Amato,” he said and plucked a business card from the desk. He reached over and handed it to her. “And you are?”

“Celine Santini.”

“Pleased to meet you, Ms. Santini,” he said with a smile then cocked an eyebrow. “You’re Italian? Your accent sounds French.”

She nodded and smiled. “Good guess. I’m from France but my dad was an Italian American serviceman. I speak all three languages.”

He gave her quick bow of the head and looked impressed. “Now that we know each other we can talk.” He leaned against the desk and folded his arms across his chest. His face grew serious. “I’m in a dilemma, Ms. Santini, and I wonder if you can help me?”

Celine frowned. What in the world could she do to help a man like him? He was obviously a powerful, wealthy man and she was nothing but a PhD student moonlighting as a hotel maid.

“I’m a busy man,” he said, deftly buttoning his cuffs as he spoke, never once taking his eyes off her, “but I suddenly find myself in a difficult situation. I’ve got my business to run and now I’ve got a four year old. I need the services of a nanny.”

Celine could only stare at Pierce D'Amato, convinced that the man had gone mad. He didn't know a thing about her. What was he thinking?

"I know this sounds crazy," he said, giving her a smile that told her he'd seen the confusion on her face, "but I was just appointed guardian for my cousin's little girl and...I'm a bit lost, to say the least." He shrugged. "What do I know about children?"

"So you're looking for someone to take care of her."

"Yes, a nanny, companion, helper. Whatever you call it. I already have a housekeeper but she's got her hands full and I don't think she's up to the challenge of a four year old. Mrs. Simpson is almost sixty."

"But what about the agencies? They can help you find lots of people who would be happy to take care of a child."

"I went that route already. Hated it." He grunted as if in disgust. "They sent me young, old, fat, thin. Kylie hated all of them. She's really picky, that little one."

"And you think...she'd like me?"

He chuckled. "I'm sure of it. From the second I laid eyes on you I knew you were the girl for Kylie."

The second he laid eyes on her? How could he form an opinion that fast? And then she remembered she'd formed an opinion of him in that split second, too. And as she remembered their encounter her face grew warm. Celine shook her head. "I don't understand."

He laughed then stood up and walked over to the window. He looked down at the street below then turned to look at her. "As funny as it sounds when my eyes met yours something clicked. You have a freshness about you that I think will appeal to Kylie. And you look like a girl who isn't afraid to have fun."

Now what did he mean by that? Celine frowned and rose to her feet. "I'm sorry, Mr. D'Amato. I don't think that would be a good idea. I've got a good job here and-"

He laughed. "Working at what? Minimum wage? I could give you many times that without blinking."

Celine sucked in her breath. The nerve of him. "Money isn't everything. I don't know you. How can I leave my job to go to a man I don't know?"

"Is that all?" He waved his hand dismissively. "I've got great references, starting with the man who owns this hotel. He's one of my clients."

"Mr. Pierrefond?" she asked, her voice a reverent whisper. "You know him?" Every one of the hotel employees knew and respected John Pierrefond. He was one of the few billionaire businessmen in the area who took a personal interest in his employees. He was in his seventies but he remained as involved in the operations of his businesses as when he'd started out. The veteran employees never stopped talking about him.

Pierce shrugged. "We've been doing business for years. Ask him." Then he gave her a grin that revealed a charming dimple in his right cheek. "He'll stand by my character. I don't go around ravishing innocent maidens, if that's what you're worried about."

The smile disappeared as quickly as it had come. He glanced at the heavy gold watch on his wrist then back at her. "Listen, I have to go. Keep the card and call me. You have until tomorrow. I'm heading back to Springfield and I need an answer before I go."

Celine nodded and slid the card into her pocket. "Of course," she said, hurrying to retrieve the vacuum cleaner. "I'll think about it and let you know."

“Good.” He nodded and before she was even out the door he was heading back to the bedroom.

Celine closed the door behind her, leaned her back against it and closed her eyes. Talk about an interesting start to the day. She’d just met the most seductively handsome man and her heart still raced at the memory of Pierce D’Amato with his broad shoulders, narrow waist and the silky strands of black hair that nestled around his...

*Mon Dieu.* She had to get a hold of herself. But the image of Pierce was burned into her mind and she knew that, like it or not, it would haunt her for a very long time.

She pushed her trolley on to the next suite. She had no intention of still being in sight when Pierce exited his room. The next time she saw him, if there ever was a next time, it would be on very different terms.

## CHAPTER TWO

Heart thumping, Celine drove up the long and winding driveway that led to Pierce D'Amato's house. Actually, house was an understatement. What she was looking at was a mansion. The place looked big enough to house five families and still have room to spare. She pulled her Toyota Corolla into the space between a sleek black Jaguar and a candy-red Porsche. She couldn't help but grimace. Beside the other vehicles her ten-year old car looked so out of place. Oh, well. The other cars would just have to get used to working-class company.

She slid her damp palms down the sides of her jeans, shaking her head in annoyance. She hated how they perspired when she was nervous. There was no need to be, she knew, but her body was saying otherwise.

After almost an entire day of vacillation Celine had decided to call Pierce D'Amato. After all, how could she throw away the chance to possibly double her salary? With such an increase in fortune she would be able to afford two, maybe even three trips back to Europe each year to visit her family. Her eyes grew misty at the thought of Christmas at home in France.

She'd confided in Bridgette, a friend she'd made on her first day of work, and received a glowing report from the older woman. Bridgette had met Pierce many times and she described him as a true gentleman known for giving generous tips to hotel staff who served him. Still, there was a sparkle in the woman's eyes that told Celine she was smitten by him. And who wouldn't be? With his sleek, dark looks and intense green eyes, Pierce D'Amato looked like he had the power to charm any woman he desired.

That evening Celine called Pierce and he invited her to meet with him in his home office so she could be introduced to his little charge. They'd talk further, he'd said, and then she could make her final decision.

And so it was that she found herself walking toward the magnificent steps of Pierce D'Amato's residence. She clutched the strap of her bag tighter, gave her palms one last swipe on the seat of her jeans and climbed the steps to the expansive marble-tiled entrance.

She rang the bell then stood there plucking at the buckle on her bag, trying to steel her nerves for her next meeting with Pierce. Try as she might she could not wipe from her mind the memory of his strong toned body and she wondered how she'd react when he opened the door. She took a deep breath, trying to slow her racing heart. It would not do to let this man see her sweat.

The door opened and a plump gray haired woman smiled up at her. "Miss Santini. Welcome. I was expecting you. I am Elizabeth Simpson. Come in."

Celine released her breath, thankful that it was the housekeeper who opened the door. That would buy her some time to get her wits together. She gave the woman a smile and a whispered "thank you" then entered the house.

Celine was in awe. The foyer was huge with a high cathedral ceiling graced with a sparkling chandelier that looked like a host of tiny stars floating in mid-air. The white columns reached gracefully up to the ceiling and multicolored tiles of marble glistened beneath her feet. She was almost afraid to step on them. This wasn't the entrance to a private home. It was more like the lobby to a grand hotel.

"I'll take you to the office and let Mr. D'Amato know you've arrived," Mrs. Simpson said as she led the way down a hallway that seemed to run along the length

of the house. “You’re a bit early so he’s not quite ready but he won’t keep you waiting.”

“Thank you,” Celine said again but she was hardly listening to the woman. She was too distracted by the splendid paintings that lined the walls. She loved art and paintings in particular. She could live for days in a museum and not miss life in the outside world. Pierce’s collection fascinated her. She caught her breath at the sixth one. Was that a Picasso? No, it couldn’t be. She stared at it, almost bumping into Mrs. Simpson as she walked. She would have to come back and check that out later.

They were walking past wide French doors now, and through them Celine saw a huge swimming pool, its water glistening brilliant blue in the bright sunshine. And there in the pool, his back to her, was the man who had occupied her thoughts since the day they met. Pierce was standing in the shallow end of the pool, the skin of his shoulders and back deeply tanned by the rays of the hot sun. His hair, wet and slicked back, gleamed in the sunlight.

Celine almost stopped walking. Her eyes fixed on the broad shoulders she remembered, the narrow waist, and those lean hips now encased in black hip-hugging swim trunks. She could see the outline of firm cheeks through the wet material that clung to his body. For the second time in two days she was seeing this man without his clothes on.

Celine bit her lip to keep from smiling. If she were totally honest she would admit that neither experience had been painful.

She caught a glimpse of a little blonde head just by Pierce’s hand and realized that he was in the water with the little girl she’d heard about. He was probably giving her a swimming lesson. For a man who made it clear how busy he was it came as a



surprise to Celine that he was spending a weekday afternoon entertaining a child. She admired that. She smiled and kept on walking.

Mrs. Simpson was right. Pierce did not take long to appear at the office door. She'd been sitting there less than five minutes, just enough time for Mrs. Simpson to bring her a cup of herbal tea, when Pierce arrived fully dressed in white button down shirt and navy trousers.

"You're early," he said as he walked over and gave her a nod of greeting. "I didn't expect you for another half hour."

"I'm sorry," Celine said. "I wasn't sure what the traffic would be like so I decided to give myself ample time." She laid the cup and saucer on the table beside her. Pierce sounded quite formal. This was a job interview, of course, and she would be as professional as he was.

He turned those intense green eyes on her. "Thank you," he said with a smile. "I appreciate punctuality. Now let's bring you up to speed on what this job requires." Pierce gave Celine the details on Kylie's situation and the kind of help he was looking for. Kylie's mother, a cousin of his and a widow, had been in a serious motor vehicle accident and had sustained severe head injuries. Now she lay in a coma with only a fifty percent chance of recovery. The little girl had been at the daycare center when it happened. Not having any close relatives, Kylie's mother had listed Pierce's name as the emergency contact person. And so it was that he became an overnight surrogate parent.

"What about Kylie's father?" Celine asked, her heart going out to the little girl who was now without her mother. "Why doesn't he help?"

Pierce shook his head, his face solemn. “Sadly, he died when Kylie was only two. He had congenital heart disease. Had a heart attack and died when he was only twenty-seven.”

“Oh, no,” Celine whispered. What a tragedy for a child to experience. First, the loss of her father and now a mother who was barely clinging to life. What must the little one be going through?

At that moment Mrs. Simpson came in holding the hand of the little girl who’d been the subject of their conversation. She was dressed in a white puff sleeve summer dress with a yellow bow. She looked like a delicate little daisy.

“Here she is, Mr. D’Amato. Kylie is ready to meet your guest.” Mrs. Simpson smiled at Kylie and gave her a little push toward Pierce. The child walked slowly up to him and with a serious little face she rested her tiny hand in his outstretched one.

Pierce gave her a gentle smile then said softly, “There’s someone I’d like you to meet, Kylie. This is Celine who came all the way from Cambridge to meet you.” He turned the child to face Celine. “Why don’t you go over and say hello?”

Kylie hesitated and turned wide blue eyes up to Pierce as if seeking reassurance. Then, at his smile and nod, she looked at Celine for the first time. She took a quick breath then walked over.

Celine felt her heart melt instantly. There was a world of sadness in Kylie’s eyes but she did not flinch and she did not cry. She went to Celine and took her hand and did not utter a word of protest. What a brave little soldier she was. Celine felt like pulling her into her arms and hugging her till she felt only love and peace. It was so heartbreaking to see grief in the eyes of one so young.

Celine slid off her chair and kneeled in front of the child so their eyes were level. "I'd like to be your friend, Kylie," she said, making her voice as soft and comforting as she could. "May I?"

The girl remained silent, staring back at Celine with eyes filled with uncertainty. Then slowly she nodded her curly blonde head and lifted her thumb to her mouth.

"May I have a hug?" Celine tilted her head and smiled.

Kylie didn't wait for Celine to open her arms. She simply popped the thumb out of her mouth, took the two steps she needed to get to Celine, and wrapped her arms tight around her neck. No words were spoken but Kylie buried her face in Celine's neck and began to cry softly.

"It's okay, *ma cherie*, it's okay," Celine soothed as she rubbed the child's back and held her close. "I'm here for you."

For almost a minute Kylie clung to her until finally she quieted and lifted her face. "I'm glad you're my friend," she said in a tiny whisper then rested against Celine with a sigh.

Celine lifted her head, her eyes pricking with tears of sympathy, and when she looked at Mrs. Simpson the woman was dabbing at her face with a dainty handkerchief. When her eyes wandered over to where Pierce stood, his hands shoved deep into his pockets, his face was somber and dark with emotion. They'd all been affected by Kylie's innocent plea for comfort.

When Mrs. Simpson left the room taking Kylie with her Celine looked directly at Pierce. After meeting the child there was no way she would say no to this job. How could she deny her the attention, sympathy and love that she so desperately craved?

“I want this job,” she said and her voice cracked on the last word. She cleared her throat, trying hopelessly to hide the depth of her emotions. “I want to be here for Kylie. When can I start?”

Pierce nodded and although he did not smile his eyes told her he was pleased with her decision. Still, he asked, “Are you sure?”

“I want to help Kylie,” she said, her voice earnest. “I can’t explain it but I feel a connection between us.”

Pierce nodded again and this time the smile reached his lips. “I could tell. Don’t ask me how, but the moment my eyes landed on you I knew you were the one. I knew you’d be perfect for Kylie.”

Celine sat back in her chair, surprised at the strength of his confidence in her. How could he have known that? He hadn’t even known a thing about her before that day. And even though she’d emailed him her resume and references after they spoke on the phone he still didn’t know that much about her.

And what about him? Was she perfect for him, too?

Celine’s breath caught in her throat and she stole a guilty glance at Pierce. Where had that thought come from? Why in the world had she even gone there? She meant nothing to this man, absolutely nothing except someone who’d make a great nanny for his charge. If she was going to survive at this job she’d better reign in her unruly emotions.

If it was one thing she knew it was that she and Pierce D’Amato were in two totally different classes and unless she suddenly won a few hundred million dollars in the Super Lotto never would their two worlds meet.

## CHAPTER THREE

Pierce watched as Celine climbed into her car and drove away. He thanked the stars he'd found her when he did. Kylie needed someone like Celine in her life. And then there was him. What was it about the girl that drew him to her, made him determined to get her under his roof? It had been weird. That first day they met he'd heard the scream, dropped the towel and found himself staring into the liquid brown eyes of a startled and stunningly beautiful woman. No matter that she was in a maid's uniform and had her sleek black hair pulled into an old fashioned bun. He'd felt a jolt of electricity run through him, a shock that made him freeze. What the hell, he'd thought. He'd never reacted to a woman like that before.

And she'd appeared just when he was praying for a miracle, just when he'd almost given up hope of finding the perfect nanny for Kylie.

He remembered seeing her fright and saying something or other to reassure her but he'd been so startled that seconds passed before he remembered that he was still standing stark naked in front of her. By that time she was already turning to flee. Good thing he'd stopped her from leaving the suite altogether. Now because of his quick action she would be working for him under this very roof. He couldn't help but smile at the turn of events. He was looking forward to getting to know Miss Celine Santini.

When Celine's tail lights disappeared Pierce went inside in search of Kylie. He found her watching cartoons.

"Uncle, can I have ice cream?"

Pierce went over and tousled her hair. "Of course, Kylie. And it's 'may I have ice cream', okay?"

"Okay," she said as she stuck her thumb in her mouth and looked up at him with big blue eyes, her little face as solemn as a priest. Pierce knew what that meant and his chest tightened in sympathy. The thumb in the mouth meant that Kylie was really missing her mother right then. Her thumb was her source of comfort in a world that had turned upside down.

"Come on, sweetie," he said and lifted her up in his arms. "Let's both go get some ice cream."

\*\*\*

A week had passed since Celine arrived at Pierce's house with her suitcases and few possessions piled into her car. Thankfully, she would be able to spend the next five months or so focusing on Kylie and her needs since she didn't need to check in at the university until October. Since her arrival Kylie had spent every waking moment with her and slowly, tentatively, the little girl began to open up like a tender flower in the morning dew.

The first three nights were difficult. Kylie had cried herself to sleep each night, refusing Celine's attempts to comfort her. On the fourth night, instead of trying to read a bedtime story, Celine pulled toys from the box and acted out the story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs right there on top of the little girl's blanket. Kylie laughed so hard she had to wipe happy tears away with the back of her hand.

After that she insisted that Celine pile the toys onto the bed each night so they could act out Cinderella, the Bremen Traveling Musicians and all her other favorite

bedtime tales. Celine was happy to oblige and when Kylie asked her to climb into the bed with her she pulled the child close and they cuddled until the little head dipped onto her shoulder and Kylie slipped softly into sleep.

Next day Celine woke to the sound of birds whistling outside her window. It was going to be a great day, she knew, because it was sunny and bright, it was Saturday, and Pierce would return home.

She knew it was stupid of her to feel the way she did but she couldn't help it. She was actually looking forward to seeing Pierce D'Amato again. She was sure that a man like him would have women flitting around like moths to a flame. He probably had myriads of female admirers in every city he visited. He certainly wouldn't notice her, a simple nanny working to make a living.

Even though she knew there was no way she could compete for his attention Celine could not stop herself from feeling a jolt of excitement at the thought of seeing him again. With a smile on her face she hopped out of bed and padded across the hallway to Kylie's room. She tapped on the door and went in then leaned over to tickle the little girl's cheeks.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," she said with a laugh as Kylie stretched and opened her tiny mouth in a yawn that could swallow an elephant. "Time to get ready for a fun day."

Half an hour later Celine and Kylie were in the kitchen having a breakfast of pancakes, eggs, strawberries and yogurt. They were racing to see who would finish first. They had a full day scheduled. First, Celine would review letters and numbers with Kylie then they would take a dip in the pool then do lunch and then gardening.

Celine knew that working in the garden, planting seeds and nurturing the flowers were all excellent therapy for her little charge. She was in her second year of

the PhD program in Psychology and much of her research involved child development, motivation and counseling. There was something about working with your hands that calmed the nerves, and working outdoors in the fresh air surrounded by the beauty of nature were like magic to soothe the spirit and comfort the soul. This was what Kylie needed in her life right now - structure, physical activity and a feeling of accomplishment.

After lunch Celine plopped a wide-brimmed straw hat onto Kylie's head and they went out to the garden that circled the back patio. The little girl was armed with a miniature garden fork and shovel while Celine followed with a watering can.

"Race you," Kylie yelled and took off across the grass, laughing as she ran.

Celine ran after her, laughing too, happy to see that she was in a cheerful mood.

When they got to the far end of the garden Celine flopped down onto the grass, panting and laughing, then she slid a finger across her brow, pretending to wipe sweat away. "Wow, you're a really fast runner," she said, opening her eyes wide as if in amazement. "I couldn't catch you in a million years."

"Really?" Kylie asked, eyes wide with wonder. "Did I run that fast?"

"Yes, you did," Celine said and reached over to tickle her. "You're my Olympic champion."

After that they settled down to some serious gardening, with Celine digging the holes and Kylie dropping the seeds in and covering them with earth. Then it was Kylie's job to water the seeds while Celine weeded out that section of the garden to make sure they didn't choke the seedlings when they popped out of ground.

They were so absorbed in their task, working together in comfortable companionship, that they both jumped at the snap of a twig behind them. They



whirled around to see a tall, blonde and exquisitely beautiful woman in a cloud-white summer dress staring down at them. Celine put up a hand to shade her eyes from the sun and that was when she saw the woman's face, perfectly made-up with crimson lips that curled in what looked like disdain.

Celine, taken aback by the sudden appearance of the stranger, took off her garden gloves and rose to her feet. She was at least a couple of inches taller than the unexpected visitor but somehow she felt almost intimidated in her presence. The woman was looking at them with such an unfriendly expression that it was as if they were the intruders and not her.

"Hello," Celine said, still feeling a little off balance. "May I help you?" She felt Kylie move closer to her and she put a reassuring hand on the child's shoulder.

"So you're the new maid," the woman said, her eyes flashing with something akin to dislike. "I heard about you but nobody told me you were beautiful."

"Excuse me?" Celine said, unnerved by her statement.

"Pierce told me he got a nanny for his new...responsibility." She turned her eyes on Kylie and from her look Celine could tell that, for some reason, the child was a source of annoyance to her. Then she trained her flashing blue eyes on Celine again. "But I thought it would be somebody like Mrs. Simpson. He never told me you were young." Her brows settled into a frown that made it obvious that this was a major problem.

Celine raised her eyebrows, unable to hide her surprise. "And you are?"

The woman's eyes widened as if shocked that she would ask. Or maybe she was shocked that she didn't already know of her. Celine didn't know which.

"I am Sophia Redgrave and I own the home next door. Pierce and I have been friends for several years." The woman said the words with a haughty sniff.

Celine did not miss her deliberate emphasis on the word ‘friends’. Sophia Redgrave was obviously sending her a message. Her relationship with Pierce was a whole lot more than just friendship.

Celine didn’t know what deflated her more, the thought that Pierce was involved with the woman or the thought that there was any possibility of Sophia Redgrave getting involved in Kylie’s life. The woman obviously had a problem with the child’s presence at the house. Heavens, what if Kylie became Pierce’s charge permanently? And what if Sophia became his wife? What would happen to poor little Kylie? She shook her head, trying to dispel the horrible thought. She gave the woman a cold stare, as chilly as the one that had been directed at them. “Is there anything I can help you with, Ms. Redgrave?”

“No, there’s nothing you can do for me,” she said and raised a delicate hand to brush away the wisps of hair that the soft breeze had blown into her eyes. “But I’ll speak to Pierce about the activities of this child. Why do you have her out here digging in the dirt? Shouldn’t she be in school?”

“There’s no school on Saturdays. Besides, she’s only four. Whatever she needs to learn I teach her at home.”

Sophia frowned. “You? Teach her? What would a maid know about what’s best for a child? She needs structure in her life. The best thing that Pierce could do for her is to get her into a good boarding school.”

Celine gasped. “Boarding school? Are you mad?” The words were out before she could stop herself. She could not believe the woman would suggest such a thing.

Sophia's lips tightened and she glared at Celine. "I would ask you to remember your position." Then with a look full of scorn she said, "I went to boarding school in Europe all of my young life and it did me a world of good."

Celine could just imagine the good it had done her. That was probably what had turned her into the world-class bitch she was now. The nerve of her to even think of putting dear little Kylie into boarding school.

"Celine, am I going away?"

She looked down to see Kylie gazing up at her with huge, scared eyes, the hint of tears already appearing in the corners.

Celine felt like someone was squeezing her heart. How could she have been so thoughtless? She'd been discussing Kylie's future with this woman right in front of the child as if she weren't there.

She dropped to her knees in the dirt and pulled Kylie into her arms. "No, *cherie*, you're not going anywhere. Your home is right here with Uncle Pierce."

"And you?" Kylie asked, searching Celine's eyes as if for even more reassurance.

But how could she promise Kylie that, too? She was only an employee, after all. Pierce could terminate her employment at any time. And if this meddler Sophia Redgrave had any say in it that day could come sooner rather than later. Still, she had to say something to appease the child. She'd already experienced enough confusion for one day.

"*Oui, cherie*, and me too."

Kylie smiled and Celine's heart sang. The little girl was going to be all right. Pulling her close, she gave her a quick kiss on the forehead.

"Oh, so you're a foreigner, are you?"

Sophia's words broke into their communion of friendship, making them turn their attention back to her again.

"You called her 'cherie'. Lots of foreigners come to this country and then decide they're never going home. Are you an illegal immigrant or something?"

Of all the backwards things she could have said, for Celine this was one of the worst. As wealthy and sophisticated as she might be Sophia Redgrave was obviously living in a world of stereotypical perceptions. She was a bigot who needed a curt response.

But then she remembered. Not in front of Kylie. As much as she itched to put Sophia Redgrave in her place she would not do it at the expense of Kylie's happiness.

Taking a deep breath, she counted to ten in her mind then slowly expelled the air. In a calm voice she said, "If you'll excuse me I have to take Kylie inside now." Then she quickly gathered up the tools, took Kylie's hand and walked away leaving the grand Ms. Sophia Redgrave staring after them.

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Pierce groaned and shook his head. Yet another delay and two more hours this time. He looked across at his pilot and the man gave him a shrug and an apologetic grin. There was nothing he could do. If air traffic controllers said they had to sit out the windstorm then that was what they would do.

Pierce checked his watch. After eight o'clock. Mrs. Simpson would be gone by now and Kylie would already be in bed. He'd spoken to her earlier that day and promised he'd be home to read her a story. He grimaced. He'd broken a promise to a

child who was very sensitive right now and needed stability and reassurance.

Breaking a promise was definitely not the way to give her that.

Then his mind went to the woman who had crowded his thoughts for the whole week he'd been away. He shifted in his seat as his loins tightened at the very thought of her. What was it about Celine Santini that turned him on every time? He couldn't think about her without imagining kissing her till she was breathless, his hands sliding down to cradle her soft, full breasts.

He shook his head and stood up then he went over to the plate glass windows of the lounge and began to pace. He had to rein in his thoughts. Celine was an employee and he'd better remember that. But, damn, why did she have to be so sexy?

And there was more. There was something about her that drew him like a magnet. It wasn't just her physical beauty. Maybe it was her infectious smile or her obvious love for children. There was something good and calm and nurturing about her that made him trust her completely. He'd trusted her with Kylie and even though he'd done his duty and checked all her references he'd known from the first time they met - brief as it had been - that she was genuine.

He smiled to himself as he thought about getting back home and seeing her again. Of course he wouldn't see her tonight. It would be too late for that. But he'd be home all day Sunday in the company of his two 'girls'. He chuckled at that thought. He, the dedicated bachelor, had become a family man in the space of just a couple of weeks. The thought of the responsibility of a family had scared him for years but now he was looking forward to seeing his pretend one. He must be getting old.

Pierce did not get home till almost two o'clock in the morning. Tired and grimy from his travels he dumped his suitcase in the hallway and climbed the stairs to

the master bedroom where he stripped and went straight into the shower. It was only when he was clean and refreshed that he felt the weight of weariness lift from his shoulders. God, it felt good to be clean.

He pulled on his boxers then grabbed his robe from the hook and shrugged it on and secured it with the sash. Then, barefoot, he headed over to the wing that Celine and Kylie occupied. He wanted to check on them quickly before retiring for the night.

First, he peeped in on Kylie. In the room was a dim light cast by the softly glowing nightlight by Kylie's bed. Quietly he padded over to look down at the sleeping child. She was resting peacefully as she clutched her teddy bear, her blonde hair curling softly around her face which was slightly pink from sleep.

He left the room and returned to the hallway then glanced at the door to Celine's room. He thought of checking in on her too but quickly dashed the idea. What was he, a Peeping Tom? He couldn't invade her privacy like that. No, he'd have to be patient and wait till morning to see her again.

He was just about to turn away when he noticed that the door was ajar. Had she done that deliberately, probably so she could hear if Kylie cried out in the night? Or was she still up? He could see a dim light through the thin slice between the door and the jamb. She might be up reading.

For a moment he paused then his curiosity got the better of him and he approached the door. He gave a soft tap. Hearing no response he slowly pushed the door just wide enough for his head to go around.

The bedside lamp was on but Celine's bed was empty. The covers were neatly spread and the bed looked like it hadn't been slept in.

Pierce frowned. Where in the blazes was she? His eyes swung over to the bathroom door but it stood open and the bathroom was in total darkness. Now he was really concerned. Celine wouldn't have left Kylie in the house all by herself, would she? No. He was certain she would never do such a thing.

He backed out of the room then took the few steps to the other door down the hallway. Before he even pushed it open he could tell this was where he'd find Celine. As he stood at the door the fragrance of her perfume wafted toward him. He followed the flowery scent, stepping into the sitting room Celine shared with Kylie, and walked over to the loveseat by the window.

And there she lay, curled up in the seat like a little cat, a book of fairy tales resting on her hip. She must have come into the sitting room after putting Kylie to bed and had fallen asleep with the book still in her lap.

Pierce contemplated getting a blanket and covering her where she lay. She was wearing a nightdress of white silk and the coolness of the night would certainly give her a chill. But then he realized that wouldn't be enough. The love seat hadn't been made to accommodate a sleeper and the steep arm had her neck positioned at what looked like an extremely uncomfortable angle. She'd be sure to have a strain by morning.

He had no choice but to wake her.

"Celine," Pierce whispered softly, not wanting to startle her out of sleep.

She didn't budge. Her breathing remained deep and peaceful.

"Celine," he said again and this time he touched her arm. It was smooth and cool to the touch. He frowned. The girl needed to be in her bed under a warm blanket. At Pierce's second try her eyes fluttered but she did not wake.

He sat on the loveseat, his hip touching the curve of her waist, and leaned over her. “Celine, wake up,” he whispered. “You need to go to bed.” He put his hand on her shoulder and gave her a slight shake.

Her eyelids fluttered again and this time they opened. She looked up at him sleepily. “Pierce,” she whispered, her brown eyes cloudy with confusion, “what is it?” Then her eyes widened and she struggled to sit up. “Kylie. Is something wrong with her?”

“Kylie’s fine,” he soothed, putting out an arm to steady her. “You need to get to bed.”

“Oh,” she sighed and relaxed against his arm. “You scared me. I thought something happened.”

“Nothing at all,” Pierce said but this time his voice was strained and he was finding it difficult to breathe. Celine had slumped against him and he could now feel the weight of one of her delicious breasts. He immediately hardened in response. Christ, what was this woman doing to him?

The soft silk of Celine’s nightgown slid over the hairs on his arm, sending shockwaves rocketing through his body. His mouth went dry with want. He wanted so badly to kiss her, to taste those lips, to consume her. He wanted to kiss the tops of those beautiful breasts. He gazed into her eyes then he dipped his head, the intensity of his desire making him groan, and pressed his lips to hers.

Celine gasped and then to his great relief she was responding, tentatively at first then with a passion which almost matched his own. Stirred by her ardor he teased and explored then he took possession of her mouth, kissing her till she was breathless in his arms.



“Celine, where are you? I’m thirsty.” The tiny voice cut through the sizzling tension.

Pierce froze. Then he jerked back and jumped up off the loveseat.

“Can I get some water?” The door creaked open and Kylie stood there sleepily rubbing her eyes. Then the little girl’s eyes widened as she stared up at Pierce. “Uncle Pierce, you’re home.” She ran into his arms and he picked her up in a huge bear hug.

“Yes, little one, I’m home. I got in late but I made it. Did you miss me?”

Kylie nodded, her eyes huge and earnest. “Uh huh. I wanted you to come home before my bedtime.”

“I’m sorry I got in late, sweetie,” he said softly, “but I’m here now. Do you forgive me for being late?”

She nodded again. “Uh huh.”

“Thank you.” Pierce smiled and gave her a soft kiss on the cheek. “Now let’s go get you some water.”

As Kylie rested her head on his shoulder Pierce turned around to glance back at Celine. She sat on the loveseat staring up at them, or more accurately up at him, as if in shock.

“Go to bed.” Pierce mouthed the words soundlessly then before Kylie could start asking questions he took her out of the room and down the hall.

After Pierce had settled Kylie back in her bed and returned to his room he lay back in the pillows for a long time reliving every second he’d spent with Celine. He ached, thinking of what could have been. He knew without a doubt that if Kylie hadn’t walked in when she did they’d have found ecstasy in each other’s arms. But it was not meant to be. Not this night, anyway.

He folded his arms behind his head as he stared up at the ceiling. His brain was telling him to stay away from her, that he'd acted out of line and should back off. She was his employee, after all.

But then there was another part of him that wanted to possess her, body and soul. He'd gotten just a taste of sweet Miss Celine Santini and he desperately wanted more...

## CHAPTER FOUR

Celine sat up in the bed and twisted the blankets in her hands. She stared at the curtains blowing softly by her window. After that episode last night how was she going to face Pierce?

She could hardly recall how it started. All she remembered was finding herself in Pierce's arms then he was kissing her and then she was lost. Pierce had expertly awakened her body to a sensual symphony played by his hands, his lips, his body, so powerful and vibrant to her touch. He'd kissed her lips till she melted in his embrace. Thank God Kylie walked in when she did. Somehow deep in her heart Celine knew that if the spell had not been broken she would have been powerless to resist him.

Taking a deep breath Celine summoned her courage and climbed out of bed. It was Sunday and there would be no Mrs. Simpson to fix breakfast for Kylie so she needed to be up and ready to face the day. Like it or not, she would have to face Pierce D'Amato.

When Celine went downstairs with Kylie the man who dominated her thoughts was already sitting at the table, cup in hand, reading what looked like the New York Times on his iPad. He turned around as they walked in.

"Hello, Miss Bright Eyes," he said with a smile then set the cup down and opened his arms to give Kylie a Good morning hug. He kissed the top of her head then still smiling, he raised his eyes to Celine who hung back, keeping a few feet of distance between them. His smile seemed innocent enough but in them was a look that made Celine squirm.

So he was remembering, too. That much was obvious from his look. But where she felt shame at her behavior, at how easily she'd fallen under the spell of his seductive caress, he seemed pleased. There was not a hint of regret in his eyes.

Celine didn't know whether to feel angry at his lack of shame or flattered. This was all so confusing. She dropped her eyes and walked over to the stove, anxious to find something to do, anything to keep her from having to meet his eyes again.

"Good morning, Celine."

With his greeting Pierce forced her to turn her attention back to him. She pasted a smile on her lips. "Good morning," she said and glanced at him then quickly turned back to her task, painfully aware of his eyes trained on her. Furtively she took a quick breath then exhaled slowly, trying to calm her jangling nerves. How was she going to survive a day in his company?

Celine breathed a sigh of relief when Pierce engaged Kylie in conversation. They began a serious discussion about the merits of each of her toys and which would make the best friend of all, Barbie or Elmo or The Little Mermaid. Celine fixed Kylie's oatmeal and within minutes she'd set her cereal, orange juice and banana on the table.

Only then did she turn her eyes to Pierce. "What would you like?" she asked, her voice a lot more controlled and calm than she felt.

Pierce stared back at her, his look enigmatic, but there was a curl to his lips that told her he was reading far more into her question than she'd meant.

She felt the heat rise to her face and she was turning away, trying to hide her distress, when he spoke.

“I’ll have whatever you’re having,” he said then gave a soft chuckle which was not lost on her.

Celine struggled through a breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast with Pierce. It was difficult sitting right across from him, trying all that time to avoid his eyes. Thank goodness Kylie was there to entertain them.

When she’d collected the dishes and she stacked them in the machine then sighed with relief. Breakfast was over. Now she could escape.

“So what would you like to do today, Princess?” Pierce’s words broke into her thoughts. “I’m all yours.”

“Swimming,” Kylie yelled and clapped her hands in delight. “I love swimming.”

Pierce chuckled. “I would never have guessed.” He looked over at Celine as she stood by the sink. “What say we meet at the pool in about forty-five minutes?”

Celine nodded. “I’ll have her ready. That would be more than enough time for her breakfast to settle.”

Pierce cocked an eyebrow. “What do you mean, you’ll have her ready? You mean you’ll both be ready.”

Celine stared at him. He wanted her in the pool with them, he in nothing but swim trunks and she in bathing suit exposed to his gaze? How would she keep her eyes off him? After last night, knowing what it felt like to have those broad shoulders beneath her palms, his warm skin pressed against hers, how would she stay calm so close to his near naked body?

No, not a good idea. “I...was thinking of catching up on some...reading.” She floundered for an excuse. Lying had never come easy to her. “Maybe you and Kylie could spend some quality time together?”

Pierce gave her a look that told her he knew she was doing her best to avoid him. Then he shrugged and looked down at Kylie. "Sorry, Princess, Celine doesn't want to go swimming today. I guess we'll just have to call it off."

"No," Kylie wailed. "I want to swim."

Pierce shook his head and on his face was an exaggerated look of regret. "No can do. Not unless Celine is going to be here to help me with you."

"Celine, you have to come," Kylie cried tugging at her hand. "Please?"

Celine patted her head and with the little girl distracted she got her chance to glare at Pierce. She grew even more peeved when she saw the wide grin on his face. The snake. He'd used Kylie to force her hand. He knew she'd never refuse the little girl. How could he be so low?

Apparently he could go that low and quite easily, too. Without any sign that he felt guilty he smiled and said, "Okay, ladies, meet you here in forty-five. Don't be late."

When Celine and Kylie arrived at the pool Pierce was already in the water. His body, sleek and strong, cut through the water as he did laps up and down the pool. When he looked up and saw them he rolled over onto his back and waved.

"Come on in," he called to them. "The water feels good." Kylie was the first to respond. Slipping her hand from Celine's grasp she ran to the edge of the pool and jumped, almost landing on top of Pierce's head. He laughed and caught her then waved to Celine. "Your turn."

She grimaced and shook her head. Did he really think she was going to jump into his arms? Not likely.

"Don't let me come get you," he said with a grin and hoisting Kylie onto his shoulders he began to swim toward the lip of the pool.

Celine knew not to play around then. Quickly she let the towel fall from where she'd wrapped it tightly under her armpits, exposing her bikini clad-body to his gaze. Pierce stopped paddling and his appreciative stare told Celine he liked what he saw. She could feel her body go pink all over. Wanting to hide herself as quickly as possible she hurried to sit on the edge of the pool then slid into the water, relieved when it flowed over her body. Of course the water hid nothing from his view but it gave her some small comfort knowing that something, though transparent, was covering her.

It took all of fifteen minutes before Celine began to relax. Maybe it was Kylie's shrieks of laughter when Pierce bobbed her up and down or maybe it was this other side of Pierce that she was seeing - so carefree, playful and even mischievous. He thought nothing of playing tricks on poor Kylie, sinking to the bottom of the pool, making her think he'd disappeared, or swimming up behind to tickle her ear. It was like Celine was seeing the little boy he used to be. She could just picture him - active and naughty and loads of fun. Soon Celine was caught up in the horseplay, too. When Pierce almost drowned her with a tidal wave of water she swung after him, trying to give him a taste of his own wicked medicine. But he was too strong and too fast. As hard as she swam she couldn't catch up to Pierce and finally she gave up and swam back to Kylie who was giggling uncontrollably as she watched from the shallow end of the pool.

Celine ducked down and whispered in her ear. "Just watch," she said. "I'll get him." Then she put up her right hand, Kylie did the same, and they did a high five.

Celine turned to check out Pierce's location. He was still on the far end of the pool but now he was lounging, doing the backstroke, leisurely floating back towards

them. Obviously, he felt there was no more threat. He'd probably thought she'd given up and gone back to sit with Kylie and lick her wounds. Well, he had grossly underestimated her and he was about to get the shock of his life.

With the slippery stealth of a snake Celine slid back into the water but this time she took a huge breath and went under, traveling swiftly along the bottom of the pool. As she moved she watched Pierce float toward her, totally oblivious to the danger lurking below. Then when he was right above she crouched and, using the bottom of the pool for leverage, she vaulted straight up and shot toward him.

Celine grabbed Pierce around the waist and dragged him under and as he kicked in surprise she shot away from his reach.

She was laughing as she got back to Kylie's side. Why had she done that? For the life of her she couldn't tell what made her as to dunk her own boss. Dear God, she must be losing her mind.

He'd been so close, he'd been so warm when she grabbed him around the waist, he'd been so firm to the touch. And she'd been so turned on. The horseplay was supposed to have been pure innocent fun but tell that to her body. Every time Pierce came near her nipples turned into hard pebbles she was sure he could see through the fabric of her bikini top. And every time she saw his lean muscled body cut through the water her breath caught in her throat. She was dying to slide her hands over his muscled chest and tight abs. She was craving to slide her lips down his back. She'd never had such bold thoughts in her life. What was this man doing to her?

By now Pierce had swum back to the surface and still sputtering, was staring at her through the water streaming down his face. The glitter in his eyes told her he wasn't about to take that without a response. He shook the strands of wet hair from



his face and fixing his dark eyes on Celine, ducked down into the water, his body, mouth and nose below the surface. Like a crocodile stalking its prey, with only his eyes and the top of his head above the surface, Pierce streaked toward her.

Although she knew it was in fun, and although she was fully aware that this was a man and not a beast, an unreasonable fright filled Celine and she shrieked. The game was becoming too real. She scooped Kylie up and swam quickly toward the steps, intent on getting out of the pool and escaping her stalker's clutches.

She was almost out when a woman's high-pitched voice cut through the air. "Well, what have we here?" As one, they spun in the direction of the voice. And there stood Sophia Redgrave looking cool and crisp in a pant suit of white linen. In her arms she gingerly held a tray on which lay a colorful cake cover.

She gave them a tight little smile. "I was ringing the doorbell but when there was no answer I decided to come around. Did I break up a party?"

Her eyes flashed with something akin to anger as they swept over Celine and Kylie. But then her face softened as she turned her attention to Pierce. "I brought you something special," she said, her face softening into a smile. "I'll take it to the kitchen. Come see."

Pierce raised his eyebrows then he smiled and swam to the side of the pool where she now stood looking down at him.

"What do you have there?" he asked, his voice full of amusement.

Sophia shook her head and gave him a teasing frown. "I'm not telling. Only if you're a good boy and follow me." Without waiting for a reply she minced her way up the path in her high heeled gold sandals, her bottom swaying seductively as she went.

Pierce watched her go then he turned to Celine and Kylie who had not moved from the edge of the pool where Sophia found them. He raised his eyebrows and grinned. “Who doesn’t like a surprise?” he said with a shrug. Then he put his hands on the side, hauled himself out of the water and loped up the cobbled path to the house.

With each step Pierce took up that path Celine’s heart slid lower and lower. When he finally disappeared into the house she felt like her heart was a rock that had rolled to the bottom of her belly.

How could she have been so stupid? How could she have forgotten about Sophia Redgrave?

She’d had her doubts when the woman implied that she and Pierce were more than just friends. She hadn’t heard Mrs. Simpson mention her so then she’d thought the woman was probably exaggerating. Maybe she just wanted Celine to think they had something going on.

But if she’d had any doubts about the veracity of the woman’s statement she didn’t have any such doubts now. The way Pierce’s face lit up, the way he’d run off after the woman told her all she needed to know. Pierce D’Amato was taken and if she knew what was good for her she’d stay as far away from him as possible.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Next day Pierce flew out to Texas and it was another four days before Celine saw him again. Not that she minded. She needed time without him near, time to build up her defenses and accept that Pierce was her employer and that was all.

Who was she kidding? The man was a billionaire. Why would he want her? Women like her were just playthings for men like him, toys to be used and discarded when you got bored. Sophia, on the other hand was in his class. She had lots of money, Celine was sure, and she certainly had the attitude.

She, on the other hand, had nothing. How could she compete?

That evening when Pierce got home Celine was prepared for him. Her heart was encased in a steel vault and nothing he said or did would have any impact on her. She would keep her face neutral and she would greet him with a professional smile. As hard as it was, for the sake of Kylie and for the sake of her own sanity she would divorce herself from her emotions. She would be as cool as you please and she would be the perfect employee. Nothing more, nothing less.

That was her plan.

But when Pierce walked in the door the look of dejection and sadness on his face dashed all her well-made plans.

Shocked, she rushed to his side. “Are you all right?” she asked, searching his face. What in the world could have happened for him to look so terrible?

“I need a minute,” he said and dropped his bags on the floor. His eyes swung past her to Kylie who seemed to have sensed that something was wrong. She hadn’t

come running to jump into her Uncle Pierce's arms. She just stood there, her fingers twisting the sash that hung from her dress, her blue eyes huge in her pixie face.

Pierce straightened and as he did so he took a deep breath and looked at Celine.

In that moment she knew. No words were exchanged between them but the anguish in his eyes, the extreme exhaustion on his face, were all she needed. The worst had happened. Sweet, gentle Kylie had lost her mother.

Celine's lips trembled and even though she'd never met the woman she felt like she would burst into tears. When she felt her face begin to crumble she bit down on her lip and inhaled slowly. No, she would not break down. This was not her moment. This was Pierce's loss and more than anyone, it was Kylie's.

"What do you want me to do?" Celine whispered as she looked up into Pierce's grief stricken face.

"Take her," he said. "I need a few minutes. Just take her to her room and I'll be up soon."

Celine nodded and went over to Kylie and took her hand. "Come, Sweetie," she said in a soft, soothing voice. "Uncle Pierce will come visit you in your room. Let's just give him some time to rest for a bit."

Kylie said nothing. For a moment she continued to stare up at Pierce then she nodded, her face now looking far older than her four years, and turned with Celine and walked away.

Kylie Nichols was the bravest little girl Celine knew. Like a miniature soldier she sat quietly, her hands in her lap as Pierce told her how he had gone away to visit her mother after receiving an urgent call from the hospital. Unfortunately, she'd

slipped away before he arrived. But the nurses told him she'd passed peacefully, just like falling asleep for a very long time.

"Is Mommy in heaven now?" Kylie asked in a barely audible whisper.

"Yes," Pierce said, his eyes shiny with emotion. "The angels are taking care of her now."

Only then did Kylie's tears begin to flow. As Pierce kneeled on the floor in front of her he opened his arms. She walked into the hug and laid her head on his shoulders. Then her tiny body shook with her sobs.

Pierce let her cry and as she did he rubbed her back soothingly and crooned soft words of comfort into her ear. It took several moments before the crying stilled and Kylie lifted her face to look into Pierce's eyes. "I wish Mommy could have stayed with me," she said with a sigh, "but I think Daddy needed her more. I know they're together now."

When Celine heard her utter those words she felt like pulling her into her arms and bawling. What a stoic little four year old. She was acting with a maturity far beyond her years, handling her tragedy with a courage that many adults would not have been able to muster.

That night Kylie slept in Celine's bed, in her arms. There was no way she would have let her sleep alone. As the child slept she stroked her hair until she, too, drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

Days later Pierce flew them out to New Haven in his private jet where Kylie said her final goodbye. For her sake it was kept a quiet affair with only close relatives and friends attending. She spent the entire ceremony sitting on Celine's lap, wrapped in her arms.

When they returned home they were especially nice to Kylie, never letting her spend much time alone but allowing her enough space to grieve. Even Sophia went out of her way to be nice, bringing her toys and a book about angels. Still, it took a few days before the first smile appeared on Kylie's face and even more days before they heard her laugh. It would take a long time for her to heal but Celine knew that her little soldier would pull through.

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"I want a change of environment for Kylie. Since the funeral she hasn't left the house. She needs to get out, to breathe again." Pierce folded his arms across his chest and leaned back against the marble top island in the middle of the kitchen.

He'd been thinking about it for some time now. He wanted to take her to a place where she could play and laugh again, somewhere that didn't remind her of her loss.

"Disney World?" Celine rested her chin in her palm as she stared up at him. Today she'd forgone the ponytail and let her dark hair fall gently onto her shoulder.

Pierce gave it some thought then shook his head. "No, a bit too much for her I think. Sort of from one extreme to the other, you know?"

"What about a Caribbean cruise? One of those that caters to children?" Celine asked with a slight tilt of her head. She looked so cute when she did that.

He wrinkled his forehead. "Hmm, no. That's just more of the same." He released his arms and stretched them wide to loosen the kinks in his back. "I want to take her somewhere different but I want it to be a more gentle change of environment. Not so fast paced."

Then a thought came to him. Celine had spoken with such animation each time she'd mentioned her kid brothers and her mother. Would a week or two in the company of a loving family be the change that Kylie needed?

"What about a trip to Europe?"

At his words Celine's brows lifted and she looked up at him with just a hint of excitement in her eyes. "Europe?" she asked. "So far away?"

Pierce chuckled. "A seven hour flight? That's not bad. Try fourteen or eighteen hours. I've done lots of those. Now that's far."

There was a faraway look in Celine's eyes. It was clear that she was thinking of home.

Pierce decided to press home his point, get her on board while she seemed to be in a nostalgic mood. "How would you like to go see your family?"

Celine turned wide expressive eyes to him. "Do you mean it?" Her voice was a breathless whisper, almost as if she were afraid to utter the words.

"Of course. You've talked so much about Marc and Sylvan that I feel I almost know them. I'd love to meet them." He was smiling as he walked over to the table and pulled out a chair. He sat down across from Celine. "More importantly, it would be great for Kylie. Being around other children is probably what she needs right now."

Celine began to worry her bottom lip with her teeth. "I don't know. I would absolutely love to go home for a visit but...the boys and Kylie? I'm not too sure. They can be a bit rough."

"Don't underestimate the depth of understanding that kids can show. And even though they're boys," he said with a chuckle, "they can be compassionate. Hey, boys aren't that bad. I know. I used to be one."

At that comment her face relaxed and her lips curved in a smile. Her liquid brown eyes sparkled as she looked back at him. “You’ve convinced me. I would love to take Kylie to meet my family.”

He put on a mock frown. “What about me?”

Celine burst out laughing. “And you, too, Pierce. I’m sure they’ll all love you.”

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“So this is Mr. Pierce D’Amato. *Bienvenue, Monsieur.*”

Claire Santini took his hands in hers then stood on tiptoe to kiss him on both cheeks. She was a diminutive woman with raven black hair caught up in a bun on the crown of her head. Her dark eyes shone in her rosy face and her lips told of much laughter and mirth. She reminded Pierce of a sprightly little sparrow, full a lively energy that could never be extinguished.

She was something of a contrast to her daughter. Where she was tiny and slightly plump with eyes as black as night, Celine was of slender build with deep brown eyes a man could lose himself in. Even though she was of medium height she was at least four or five inches taller than her mother.

When Claire released his hands Pierce looked over at Celine as she stood in the middle of the modest living room. “So where are the young men I’ve heard so much about?”

She rolled her eyes. “Hiding I’m sure, just waiting to play a prank on us.” But then she smiled broadly and her eyes flashed with eager anticipation. She put her fingers to her lips and tiptoed to the door that led into the kitchen. It was slightly ajar



and, without warning, she reached an arm around and came back with a boy, now howling with laughter.

“Marc, what do you have there?” She demanded as she pulled a huge water gun from his hands. “You were going to soak us, you naughty boy. *Tu es si mechant.*” She deposited the toy on the floor. “Come, you naughty boy. Give your sister a hug.” She wrapped her arms around him and kissed the top of his head.

“Ugh, kissing. Gross. *C’est pas bon.*” Marc struggled out of her arms but his flashing dark eyes showed that he was loving the attention.

“Marc, not like that, *mon petit*. Behave.” Claire shook her head and gave him a stern look. “Now go and get your brother. Tell him enough with this hiding.”

Sylvan had obviously been listening to everything because at his mother’s words he peeped round the door then stepped out into the living room. With his huge brown eyes and dark hair he was like a male version of Celine. More subdued than his brother, or maybe wishing to seem more mature, he approached his sister with a small smile which widened into a huge grin. Obviously he was unable to contain his joy at seeing his sister again.

“Sylvan,” Celine cried. “You’ve grown so tall.” She gave him the same treatment she’d given Marc, hugging him close, but he was almost as tall as she was so she ended up kissing him on the cheek. Unlike his brother, he showed no objections.

Then Celine went over to where Kylie stood hiding behind Pierce. “Come, *cherie*. Don’t be shy.” She took the little girl’s hand. Gently, she pulled her forward. “Guys, this is Kylie. Come on over and say hi.”

Kylie clung to Celine with one hand then stuck the thumb of her free hand in her mouth. She stared up at the boys with huge, tired eyes.

Marc grinned and gave her a quick wave. “Hi,” he said then shoved his hands into his pockets.

Sylvan, though, took a different approach. He must have seen Kylie’s uncertainty at being in a strange house with three strangers who talked funny. He crouched low and looked into her eyes. With a smile he extended his hand. “Pleased to meet you, Mademoiselle Kylie.”

For a moment she hesitated then, not letting go of Celine with her left hand, she popped her thumb out of her mouth and extended her right hand to Sylvan. He took it, wet thumb and all, and shook her hand. “I know we’ll be good friends,” he said.

Kylie said nothing but she nodded slowly and slipped the thumb back into her mouth.

Claire must have seen how exhausted the child was because she patted her hands together and proceeded to shoo the boys out of the room. “Time to rest now. The travelers are very tired.”

Her words triggered a feeling of weariness in Pierce and if he felt so tired he could imagine how the others felt, and especially Kylie who was not used to flights several hours long. Although she’d slept through most of the journey she would not have slept as soundly as when she was in her own bed.

What made it worse, where it would now be the middle of the night back in Massachusetts it was bright daylight in France. It would take at least twenty-four hours for their body clocks to adjust.

After a light meal Claire bundled them off to bed, Celine and Kylie sharing Celine’s bedroom and Pierce occupying Marc’s room.

Celine's home was a small, neat bungalow in the tiny village of Thomery-By just outside of Avon, the nearest town of any significant size. As for Paris, they'd traveled almost an hour from Charles De Gaulle Airport to get here. It had been a long journey but as far as Pierce was concerned it had been worth it.

Here in this village, far away from the bustle of the city, he knew Kylie would find healing. As he lay back in the bed listening to the birds whistling in the branches that hung by the window he could imagine her running across the grassy meadows with the boys or picking the flowers that lined the winding pathways they'd seen on the way here. Everywhere you looked there were flowers. Gardens bloomed in front of the little houses and Pierce could sense the pride of the inhabitants in their beautiful little town.

He smiled in contentment. He was looking forward to a relaxing, peaceful stay in this sleepy village.

Next afternoon when they had fully recovered from the plane ride Celine decided to introduce Pierce and Kylie to her hometown. They embarked on a walking tour of the village which took all of two hours. They stopped to meet the butcher who was hanging a string of sausages in the window then they moved on to the shop of a seamstress who sat by the window humming as she worked on what looked like a wedding gown. When she saw Celine she dropped the fabric, clapped her hands together then ran outdoors to greet her. Celine got the same response at the post office, the pharmacy and the tiny library she told him had been like her second home. It was obvious that she was known and loved in her community.

They continued on, enjoying the crisp air and bright sunlight, until they got to the local grocery store now operated by Celine's old piano teacher. Tall, thin and reedy, he looked like a bespectacled stick insect. He kissed both Celine and Kylie on

their cheeks. When he turned toward him Pierce took an involuntary step back but the man only extended his hand in greeting.

“*Bonjour*,” he said, eyeing Pierce suspiciously.

“*Bonjour*,” Pierce replied and but with cool reservation. Where did this guy come off looking at him like that?

The man turned back to Celine and began an animated conversation in French of which Pierce understood only two words, *fiancé* and *mariage*.

When the words left the man’s mouth a strange look passed over Celine’s face. She bit her lip and looked down at the ground. It was obvious that whatever he’d said had upset her. When she finally looked up her serene expression had fled and her brown eyes flashed with unmistakable anger.

She replied to the man’s comment, her tone curt. She nodded and said her goodbye then she pasted a smile on her face and turned to Kylie and Pierce.

“I guess you two must be hungry now. Why don’t we head home?”

They’d been walking in silence for a few minutes, Celine seeming lost in thought, when Pierce decided to question her change in demeanor. She’d gone from cheerful and bubbly to quiet and somber in the space of minutes, all because of a conversation she’d had with her old teacher. There was obviously something worrying her because she kept biting her lower lip and frowning. She probably didn’t even realize she was doing that.

“What’s up?” he asked. “That guy obviously pissed you off. Want to talk about it?” She looked up at him then, a startled expression on her face. His question must have jerked her out of her reverie. “I…” She shook her head and looked away and Pierce could swear he saw the glint of tears in her eyes.

What the hell had the man said to her to upset her so much? “Celine, tell me,” he urged. “Is there anything I can do?”

She took a deep breath and gave him a brave little smile. Then she shook her head. “Thanks for asking but no...there’s nothing you can do.”

Not wanting to push, he continued walking by her side. Then he felt a soft hand on his arm.

“Maybe...if I talk to someone about it, it might help.” Her voice was soft, hesitant, and there was a hint of pleading in her eyes. “Can we talk...later?”

“Of course,” he said, searching her eyes for a hint of what could have caused her such distress. Could it be something to do with her family? Was it something that money could fix? If so, he had lots of it. For some reason that he couldn’t quite explain he felt protective of her, almost as if she were...his.

Later that evening after a meal of salad, baked fish, bread and Camembert cheese, Pierce left Kylie with the boys and walked down to a nearby stream with Celine. They sat on the soft grass of the bank and Celine, her voice low and subdued, began to speak.

“It’s very difficult to speak about this and I’m sorry to burden you,” she said with a rueful smile, “but I think my behavior earlier requires some explanation.”

She looked down at her hands then back at him. “I was engaged once, to the son of the gentleman you just met. The grocer.”

Pierce felt his heart lurch in his chest. It was like she’d told him she was about to die, his reaction was that violent. Why had her words affected him like that? Hell, he’d known her less than two months. Still, her words had given him a real jolt.

“We’d gone to high school together and then when we ended up going to the same university in Paris. In senior year we got involved.” She seemed to be

deliberately avoiding his eyes, looking down at the ground where she pulled distractedly at the blades of grass. “We planned to get married right after graduation but then he said we should wait until after graduate school.”

She heaved a sigh then lifted her face, the strain showing in the tightness of her lips. She swallowed. “I waited. He wanted to get his MBA at INSEAD. He knew that a degree from the top business school in France would open doors for him. He didn’t want to start a family just then so I supported his decision.” She shrugged. “I wanted to do my Master’s too so I thought I’d do my graduate degree while he did his, and then we’d get married afterwards. Another year or so shouldn’t matter, right?”

Pierce said nothing, sensing that all she wanted to do just then was talk. She needed to get whatever was bothering her off her chest.

She gave a bitter laugh. “The problem was, he went back to Paris but I went to the United States. I wanted to be part of an excellent Psychology program so I applied to Harvard and was accepted. That was the beginning of the end.” She slid her legs up, wrapped her arms around them and rested her chin on her knees. “I came home at Christmas, still wearing my engagement ring,” she said her voice cracking, “to learn that he was going to be a father in two months.”

So that was it. The bastard had cheated on her. No wonder she didn’t want to talk about it. Then Pierce frowned. So why was his father talking to Celine in a tone that made it seem like she was the one at fault? Something was not adding up.

His confusion must have been obvious because Celine began to speak again and this time she was offering an explanation.

“*Monsieur* Girard, he knows that after my Master’s I went back to America to do my PhD because I didn’t want to be around Giles, the memories and the thought of

what could have been.” She began to worry her lip again. “He’s upset because...” she paused and drew in a long breath, “because Giles wants me back and I won’t say yes.”

What in the blazes?

“Hold up. You lost me.” Pierce held up his hand. “He wants you back?

What about the other woman? What about the child?”

Celine shook her head. “That’s the thing. He keeps saying it was an accident.” She gave a laugh full of disbelief. “Yet he married her and they settled down right here in Thomery.”

“And so you left.”

Celine nodded. “I had to.”

Pierce got up and brushed the grass from the seat of his trousers. This story was getting even more confusing. “I still don’t get it. You said he wanted you back.”

She laughed dryly. “Yes. Funny, isn’t it?” Then she shook her head. “He and his wife were divorced a year ago and he’s been hounding me ever since.”

Son-of-a-gun. “Now he wants you back?”

She nodded. “Now he wants me back.”

For a moment Pierce was silent. The nerve of the jerk. He felt like if he had the chance he’d punch this Giles guy in the gut. As much as it was none of his business he was pissed at the situation.

More than that, he realized with shock, he was alarmed. What if Celine still had feelings for the guy? What if he tried to weasel his way back in? Where the heck would that leave him?

He raked his fingers through his hair and stared out over the water. Things were getting really complicated. Here he’d thought he was making things better by

choosing Celine's hometown as their vacation spot but he'd dropped her right into a hornet's nest.

He turned to face her. "So what does this guy's father have to do with all this? Where does he come off tackling you about this?"

"Monsieur Girard always wanted us to get married. I was his favorite pupil. He still wants me to consider renewing my relationship with Giles." She shrugged. "He means well."

"Yeah, right." Pierce response was cold. "He needs to mind his own business and not pressure you into something you don't want to do." He looked at her as he said the words. Was it really something she didn't want to do? Or did she still have a soft spot for her ex?

As if sensing the direction of his thoughts Celine got up and threw her handful of ripped up grass blades into the bubbling water. "It's getting cool out here. I guess we'd better go back to the house."

Well, that was an effective end to the conversation. It seemed he'd touched a very sensitive nerve. Pierce looked at Celine, trying to gauge her feelings but she'd already turned, effectively shielding her face from his gaze. She was heading up the bank, leaving him to follow.

Celine's reaction was not a good sign and now he was worried. Very worried.



## CHAPTER SIX

Days passed and neither Pierce nor Celine brought up the subject of their conversation. Without words both of them seemed to have agreed to focus on Kylie and her amusement.

When Pierce saw the rosy cheeks of the child as she raced about outdoors with Sylvan, Marc and a little puppy they'd acquired he knew he'd made the right choice in taking her here. No trip to Disney World could have done for Kylie what her new friendships had done for her. Without pampering her the boys took full charge of her, taking her on long walks from which she returned exhausted but brimming with stories of the birds she'd seen in the woods, the flowers she'd picked and the bugs she'd caught.

"Bugs?" Celine wrinkled her nose when Kylie first told her about her new found interest. "Yucky."

Kylie only giggled and ran off to find the boys she now seemed to view as her big brothers. Obviously she wanted to be like them and if collecting bugs was what they loved to do then she'd do it, too.

A whole week passed and Pierce's life settled into a comfortable rhythm that had him wondering how he would adjust to the fast paced world of business when he got back to the United States.

He had competent managers at his software development firm so he was not worried. Still, he knew he couldn't stay away for too long. He'd get rusty and when it came to business and negotiations you didn't want to do that. Still, he was enjoying

the down time and he knew Mrs. Simpson was glad for the time off to visit her grandkids.

One evening after picking up a steak from the butcher shop Pierce returned to find that the magic bubble he'd been living in had suddenly burst.

As he rounded the corner and strolled toward the cul-de-sac where Celine's house was nestled he realized that she was standing at the bottom of the gravel driveway and she was not alone.

Standing mere inches away from her was a man, tall and blonde and what you'd call handsome in a 'Brad Pitt' sort of way. He was deep in conversation with Celine and as he spoke he moved his hands expressively as if trying to make a point. At one point he even reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. She seemed to flinch and he pulled it away.

Pierce slowed his pace as he approached, taking his time so that he could observe Celine's reaction to the man he assumed was her ex-fiancé. Her head was down and her shoulders drooped as if she carried the weight of a nation on them. When she lifted her face to respond to a comment Giles made her eyes flashed with anger. Or was that the gleam of unshed tears?

Pierce felt like a hand encircled his heart, squeezing hard, making him feel almost physical pain. Were they going to kiss and make up?

He was almost upon them now and as one they turned and looked at him. Now he could see it. Yes, those were tears in Celine's eyes. What the hell had the jerk said to make her cry? Pierce turned to him and he knew his face was set in a dark scowl but he didn't give a damn. If the man was harassing Celine he'd better be prepared for a fight.

He walked up to them and mere feet away. His eyes skimmed Celine's flushed face and came to rest on the long lean face of the man he now considered her tormentor. He glared at him.

The man took a quick step away from Celine. He frowned as he stared back at the newcomer. He looked back at Celine, his eyes uncertain.

Before Pierce had a chance to think what to do next he felt slender arms sliding round his waist and looked down to see Celine smiling up at him. In her eyes was a look of relief. "*Mon amour*, what took you so long? I've been waiting for you," she said, her voice sweet and low and seductive.

Pierce almost sucked in his breath but caught himself just in time. God, she sounded sexy when she talked like that. And the look she was giving him. This must be what they called 'bedroom eyes'. Whatever they called it, it was having a hell of an effect on him. He could feel himself harden in his trousers.

"I came back as soon as I could," he said and returned the smile. "You know I can't stay away from you for too long." Okay, so that was corny but she'd caught him off guard. No time to think of sophisticated lines. But no matter, their act was working. A pink flush began to creep up the neck of Gyles whatever-his-name-was and soon his face was totally red.

"*Ex...Excusez-moi*," he spluttered then backed away and as Pierce held Celine close with one arm and cradled his package of meat with the other the man turned and practically fled down the road back toward his father's house. As soon as he was out of hearing distance Celine released her breath in a whoosh and pulled her arms from around Pierce's waist, then she stepped back and out of his reach.

He felt the loss. He'd enjoyed having her warm body, her sensuous curves, pressed against his torso and he wanted more. But short of reaching for her and

hauling her back into his arms like he wanted, he had no choice but to abide by the distance that she'd created between them.

"Thank you so much," she said with a smile. "You came just in time."

"For what exactly?" he asked, searching her face. What was she feeling at this moment? And what had caused her to put on that act?

"I'm sure you know who that was."

"Yeah, I guessed," Pierce replied. "Your ex."

"Yes. He's been here for the past hour trying to get back on *Maman's* good side. He was so persistent that I could see he was getting on her nerves." She gave a little laugh. "I thought I'd make things better by suggesting I'd walk him out to the road. That's when he started bringing up old memories, all the good times, trying to convince me to take him back."

"Remembering... was that what made you cry?"

She chuckled softly. "How did you guess? I kept telling him not to bring them up but he kept going on and on. My tears were partly out of sadness at what we'd lost but also out of sheer frustration. I couldn't get him to shut up. I just wanted to smack him."

Pierce laughed at that. "You? Smack someone? I'd love to see that."

"Oh, I'm quite capable," she said with a laugh which told him her cheerful spirit was back. "Don't try and test me."

Pierce smiled but said nothing. Oh, he was tempted to test her. He wanted nothing more. He wanted to test those lips so soft and pink and pliable. He wanted to nibble his way down her neck then down lower to those delicious breasts-

"I'm glad I came on this trip."

Celine's words jerked Pierce out of his reverie.

“In spite of the stress?” he asked. Then he said, “Of course, seeing your family makes it worthwhile.”

“Yes, that goes without saying but that’s not I meant.” She gave him a smile, obviously amused when he frowned at her in confusion. “I’m glad I got to see Giles again.”

Pierce felt like she’d kicked him in the stomach. Now what the hell kind of game was she playing? Hadn’t she just said that she didn’t want to talk to him?

“I’m glad because all this time I’ve been blaming myself for our break up. I’ve been so wracked with guilt that half of the time I couldn’t stand myself.”

Pierce gave her a sharp look. What was she talking about now? She was like a pendulum that kept swinging from one confusing side to the other. “Okay, I can see this is going to take some explaining because right now you have me confused as hell. “What say we drop off this meat in the kitchen and head down to the stream?”

She seemed to like that idea. She was smiling as they walked up the pathway to the house and her step was light. It looked like she dropped a ton of troubles off her shoulders.

Pierce couldn’t wait to get down to the stream to hear what Celine had to say. She was the most baffling woman he’d ever met. As soon as he got there he flopped down in the grass. “Now put me out of my misery,” he said, looking up at her as she stood above him in her sexy pink halter top and even sexier skinny jeans. “Spill it.”

She dropped into the grass beside him and wrapped her arms around her legs then dropped her chin on her knees. It seemed to be a favorite position of hers.

“What I was saying was, I don’t feel guilty anymore. For the first time I feel as if I’ve been set free.”

“And what, pray tell, were you feeling guilty about?” Pierce pulled up a blade of grass and used it to tickle her shoulder.

She laughed and shrugged it off. Then her laughter died away and a more serious look settled on her face. “I’ve never shared this with anyone but somehow I feel as if I can trust you.” She turned her face away and looked out at the water.

That statement got his attention. He wiped the grin off his face and sat up, the better to give her one hundred percent of his attention.

“Giles and I were in a relationship for all of senior year in college and throughout a whole year of graduate school. During that time he’d asked me...many times if we could...make love. I told him no. I wanted to wait till marriage.”

Pierce frowned, almost not believing what he was hearing. Was she saying what he thought she was saying?

“When he got Amelie pregnant I was devastated. I was hurt and confused but I also felt it was all my fault. Maybe if I hadn’t denied him he would still be with me, maybe even be my husband right now.” She turned to Pierce, her eyes earnest. “But you know what? It wasn’t until this trip back home that I realize what a jerk he really is. I’m glad he didn’t wait for me.”

For a moment Pierce was silent, letting it all sink in. So what she was saying was, for the whole two years of her relationship with this man she’d remained a virgin? In the twenty-first century? Was that even possible?

He shook his head knowing that he was the one being the jerk right now. Good thing he wasn’t stupid enough to blurt his thoughts out loud.

“So what was it that made you realize he’s a jerk? You’ve known him for years.”

“Pierce, do you know what that man said to me? When I asked why he wanted me back, why he hadn’t stayed with his wife, he said he’d never wanted her in the first place. He’d only married her because he got her pregnant.”

Pierce nodded. That was a stupid and insensitive thing to say. Still, he wouldn’t be the first man who said something like that. Lots of men got women pregnant and married them just to save face. There had to be something more to make Celine so incensed.

“And when I asked him about his son, the poor little one caught in the middle of this, he said he can always get other children. He wants to have children with me.” Eyes flashing with outrage she released her legs and stood up, apparently too agitated to stay still. “I couldn’t believe he would say something like that. If he can talk like that about his own flesh and blood can you imagine what he’d do with me when he got tired of having me around? The pig.” She spat the words out, not hiding her disgust.

Pierce nodded. Now that was low. For a man to deny his child he’d have to be lower than a snake crawling on its belly.

“Anyway,” Celine said with a sigh, “I finally realized how lucky I was for not having slime like that in my life. I wouldn’t want him to rub off on me.” She shuddered as if the thought repulsed her. “And when you saw me with those tears in my eyes they weren’t for me they were for that child who has such a heartless bastard for a father.”

Pierce got up then. He could see the emotions as they played across her face. Yes, she was angry but she was also in pain. She might not know it but he was reading every emotion that flashed across her face.

Before he realized what he was doing he reached for her and wrapped her in his arms and this time she did not step back or pull out of his embrace. Instead, she rested her cheek on his chest, right against his beating heart, and she cried.

She cried, he knew, for many things. She didn't have to tell him. She'd bottled up her emotions for so many years and now it was time to let them flow free. She cried for what could have been, for what never was, for the guilt she'd borne and now for the relief of knowing she'd made the right decision. She cried because now she was free.

Pierce let her cry and when, after long moments her hiccups softened into sighs, he put his finger beneath her chin and tilted her face up to his. She was vulnerable but he wanted to kiss her so bad he stifled his better self, lowered his head and pressed his lips to her soft, willing mouth. She responded to him eagerly, almost desperately, and when her arms slipped round his waist he felt a thrill run through him. He pressed her closer and his kiss grew urgent, the hunger he'd felt for her intensifying with the taste of her lips. God, how he wanted this woman.

Too soon he had to release her lips. He heard Kylie in the distance and knew that in minutes they'd be set upon by a yelling four-year-old girl, two gangly boys and a barking dog.

For a long while he looked deep into those liquid brown eyes, trying to read their depths. This woman, so seductive and sultry yet so vulnerable and innocent, what was she thinking right now? Was she wanting him as much as he wanted her?

He didn't have the chance to find out. As the shouts of the children came closer and closer he slid his hands down her arms to her hand then slowly let go and stepped back.

Celine stared, wide eyed, back at him.



He could see that he'd shocked her with that kiss but that was the least of his problems. They were heading back to the United States in a few days and when she was again his roof he'd have a hell of a time keeping his hands off her. God help him.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Celine arrived in the United States feeling like a new woman. The unexpected all expense paid trip to see her family had been like a miracle, and having both Pierce and Kylie with her made the visit even more special. And to top it off she'd found resolution to that part of her life that had haunted her for so long. Giles St. Juste was not and had never been the man for her. Now she had closure.

She soon settled into her old routine with Kylie, reviewing letters and numbers and reading stories in the morning then spending the afternoons at play on the lawn, swimming in the pool or working in the garden. She'd been nanny to the little one two months now and she almost saw her as her own daughter. At times her mind would fast forward to the day when she would have to go, return to her life as a student, leaving behind a child who had become so special to her. And Pierce. To think that there would come a day when she would never see him again. It did not bear thinking about.

She still remembered his kiss that day by the stream in Thomery-By. She'd relived it so many times in her mind. She hadn't wanted that moment to end.

But it did. And it was a good thing, too, because she was losing her heart and soul to Pierce D'Amato.

What was she going to do? She'd just overcome one hurdle by expunging Giles from her heart and now she'd gone and created another problem? The man was her employer which was bad enough but on top of that he was involved.

Or was he? Sophia had been over several times since their return but most times it was when Pierce wasn't around. Each time she'd come she'd made it clear

that she was dying for both her and Kylie to disappear. She continued to hint at a long-standing relationship with Pierce but then Celine hardly saw them together. Was their relationship a secret? Was Pierce engaging in love trysts at her house rather than his, seeing that she and Kylie were there? It made her heart ache just thinking about it.

There was something Celine had to do, something that was against her nature but totally necessary under the circumstances. She was going to have to meddle in somebody else's business.

That night after she'd put Kylie to bed she went downstairs to find Pierce. He was lounging in the comfy couch in that room he called his 'man cave'. Fitted out with a huge television that covered half of one wall it had surround sound that made the room sound like a movie theatre when the TV was on.

Tonight he didn't have it on. Instead he lay in the semi-dark room, seeming to be lost in thought.

"Pierce," she said as she stood in the doorway, "can we talk?"

He jumped, clearly startled at the sound of her voice. Then he propped himself on one elbow and looked over at her. "Sure, come on in," he said.

She stepped into the room but she didn't go near the couch where he lay. It would not do to get so close to a man who looked so sexy in an A-shirt and faded jeans that hung low on his hips.

She went to perch on the edge of an easy chair and folded her hands in her lap. She was deliberately trying to look subdued. What she was about to say was something that might rile Pierce up so she didn't want to come across as aggressive in any way.

"I want to talk to you about Kylie," she said quietly.

Pierce frowned and sat up. He planted his bare feet on the floor and rested his elbows on his knees. He trained his green-eyed gaze on her. “What is it?”

Celine took a breath. How to begin? She decided to plunge right in. “I’m concerned about Kylie. What’s going to happen to her when I leave in the fall?”

Pierce expelled his breath and a look of relief passed over his face. “I thought you were going to tell me something was wrong with her.”

“No, not at all,” she replied quickly. “I’m sorry I scared you and I really don’t mean to pry but...I just need to know what plans you have for Kylie after I’m gone.”

His eyebrows lifted. He seemed taken aback by her question and for a moment there was silence.

Had she upset him with her question? She held her breath. She knew she’d taken a risk in digging into his personal business but she had a very good reason for asking.

“I’ve been giving it some thought,” he said finally then he shook his head, “but to tell the truth, I haven’t made a final decision.”

“Do you have any ideas, any plans?” Her voice came out breathless with relief. He was actually having a conversation with her about the matter. Thank goodness he hadn’t slammed her for being nosy.

“I’ve had a few suggestions thrown my way,” he said with a thoughtful look. “A distant relative to come in, a matronly lady who can be like a mother to her, boarding school-.”

“What did you say?” Celine’s words shot out in a vehement whisper. “How could you even consider it?”

“What? The caretaker or the-”

“The boarding school.” She cut him off before he could even finish the sentence. “Pierce, you are not sending that little girl to a boarding school.”

“I never said-”

Celine hopped to her feet, unable to sit still a moment longer. “Yes, you did. You said you were considering it.”

“Will you calm down?” Pierce straightened his back and glared up at her. “Sit down so we can have a sensible discussion.”

Celine sucked in her breath. Was he ordering her around?

“Please,” he said, his tone softer, almost apologetic. But not quite. “Have a seat so we can talk.”

She sat back down on the chair and waited for him to speak. She’d better get control of her emotions or else she’d be out of Kylie’s life even earlier than scheduled. She couldn’t afford for that to happen. She would cling to her little charge as long as she could.

“Now,” Pierce began, his tone firm, “I said I got suggestions but that doesn’t mean I was planning to implement any of them. I need to evaluate all the options and then I’ll decide what’s best for Kylie.”

“And when are you going to decide?” Celine shot back.

“Soon,” he said, frowning again.

Celine didn’t know if it was out of annoyance at her questions or simply because he was thinking. She decided to assume he was thinking. Now would be the best time to air her major concern. “I know who made those suggestions. It was Sophia, wasn’t it?”

He nodded.

“And did you ever stop to think that she might have an ulterior motive?”

Pierce cocked an eyebrow and stared back at her. He said nothing. He was obviously waiting on her to explain herself.

“Sophia has made it very clear that she doesn’t want Kylie...or me...around.” She shook her head as the anger rose in her. “I don’t care what she thinks about me but how could she dislike Kylie?”

Pierce frowned. “What makes you think that?”

Men were so dense. How could he not know what the woman was really like? “Pierce, haven’t you noticed how cool her interaction is with Kylie? It was only after the death of Kylie’s mother that she acted with any kind of warmth... if you can call giving a few stuffed toys being warm.”

Celine got up, unable to stay seated any longer. She needed to express herself and she needed her hands, her whole body in order to do that. She was wound too tight sit still. And she had to make him understand.

She wrung her hands together then she blurted it out, that thing that had been worrying her all this time. “What’s going to happen to Kylie when you and Sophia get married? How is she going to live with a woman like that?”

“What?” Pierce looked at her as if she’d gone mad. “What are you talking about?”

“You and Sophia,” Celine said exasperated. Why was he pretending? “She said you’ve been seeing each other for years and that it was only because of your business and frequent travels that you decided to delay marriage.” When Pierce still looked dumbstruck she waved her hand in an expression of frustration. “Think about it. Now that there’s a child in your home there’s no reason to delay the marriage. In fact, it’s a very good reason to settle down. But then who’s going to protect Kylie from...her?”

Her voice cracked and she felt the sting of a tear in the corner of her eye. She turned away. The last thing she wanted was for him to see how this was affecting her. Let him think this was only about Kylie because Kylie was, in truth, her greatest concern. But deep down inside she had to admit it was about her, too. How could she bear the pain of knowing that she didn't have a chance in this world of being with the man who had stolen her heart?

Pierce burst out laughing.

Celine whirled round to face him. What in the world did he find so funny? Before she could move he was on his feet and walking toward her. Then he was close enough that she breathed in the fragrance of what must have been the bath gel he showered with. It was a fresh, masculine scent that had her reeling.

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Rest assured, Sophia and I are not getting married."

She looked up into his eyes, her heart pounding loudly in her ears. "You're not?"

"No," he said, "we're not." He let his hand slid from her shoulder but he did not step away. Instead, he took her hands in his. "I've known Sophia for many years. I met her through her husband." When Celine frowned he smiled. "They're divorced. She got the house." Then he shook his head. "Trust me, whatever Sophia led you to believe, there is nothing going on between us. We're just friends."

"Then why would she..." Celine's voice trailed away.

"Who knows? Maybe she just enjoyed leading you astray." Pierce shrugged. "Maybe she thinks you're a threat to our friendship."

Now Celine was really confused. "Me? How? I'm just the nanny."

"Oh, but a very beautiful, extremely seductive nanny."

Celine's heart lurched at his words. She looked up quickly, her eyes searching his. Was he toying with her? But no, his green eyes had clouded over with a passion that could not be mistaken.

"Let me kiss you, Celine," he whispered, his voice hoarse with emotion. "I've been dying to taste your lips again and it's driving me crazy."

Celine looked deep into his eyes. She should resist him. Dear God, she knew she should. But how could she when her body was reacting so strongly to his? Her breath caught in her throat as her nipples pebbled in response to his closeness and, oh Lord, she was growing moist. Down there. She ducked her head as a wave of embarrassment washed over her.

But, just as he'd done by the stream, Pierce took control. He would not let her flee. With a gentle hand under her chin he tilted her head up. Then he dipped his head and covered her mouth with his.

The kiss by the stream had been gentle and sweet. This kiss was nothing of the sort. Pierce kissed her with a fervor that spoke of pent-up passion and desire and this time it seemed he was holding nothing back.

His tongue slipped past her lips to plunder her mouth till she was gasping. Her hands slid up to his shoulders, so solid and strong, and there she clung. Her legs, like jelly, could no longer support her. She'd turned to chocolate and had melted in his heated hands.

Pierce released her lips just long enough to bend and lift her off her feet and into his arms.

"Pierce," she gasped. "What are you doing?"



“Just making you more comfortable.” He grinned wickedly, his green eyes glinting in the light cast by the lamp in the corner of the room. “Just relax,” he whispered. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

He took her over to the long black couch and laid her gently in the cushions then he was leaning over her, blocking out the light and all she could see was his handsome face - his strong forehead, firm lips and his rugged jaw with the captivating cleft in his chin.

Celine shivered, suddenly feeling out of her depth. *Reste tranquile, Celine. Calm down. He’s only a man after all.* But that was the problem. Pierce D’Amato was all man and he wanted her. She could see it in the flash of his eyes. She could hear it in the rasping of his breath as he dipped his head to kiss her neck. She could feel it in the pounding of his heart as she pressed her hand against his chest. And even worse, she could feel the intensity of his passion in the hardness that now pressed against her leg.

If Celine had any fear it fled when Pierce began to nibble on her ear lobe. She sighed and arched her back in response. He must have seen her reaction as a signal to go farther because his lips shifted from her neck and slid down to the shadow between her breasts. His hands came up to cup them and then his thumbs were circling her nipples through the fabric of her blouse, making them pucker into deliciously painful pebbles, sending jolts of lightning coursing through her body.

“So beautiful,” he whispered then with a groan he pushed away the blouse and the top of her bra and took the distended rosebud into his mouth.

She gasped and writhed under the expert teasing of his lips. Oh God, he was driving her crazy with want. He released the nub then moved his lips to its twin,

administering the same sweet torture till she cried out and arched her back, forcing the nipple deeper into his mouth.

It was when his hands slid lower to caress her belly that she froze. Her eyes opened wide as she realized what was happening. Pierce had bewitched her with his caresses and now he was moving in for the kill. How could she have been so easily seduced? How could she have been so stupid?

Pierce was a man of the world and he must have been with many women. He knew exactly how to turn a woman on. He was certainly doing a good job on her. But was he using his seductive charms to get her into his bed? And to what end? So he could give her the last paycheck and send her packing at the end of the summer?

The thought was like a bucketful of ice-cold water in her face.

She wanted Pierce, there was no doubt in her mind about that. But not like this. She would gladly give him her all if only he had half the love for her that she felt for him. But why would he? He could have any woman in the world. Why in heaven's name would he settle for her?

"No," she said, her voice coming out in a moan. "Please. Stop."

Pierce went completely still. Even his chest froze, as if he'd stopped breathing. Slowly he lifted his head and in the hazy green of his eyes was a mix of desire and confusion.

He pulled back from her then and raised himself up to sit on the seat beside her. He looked down at her, his eyes boring into her with an intensity that made her look away. "What's wrong?" he asked, his voice quiet and low.

She refused to look at him, could not meet his eyes. What was she going to say? That she didn't want to go farther because he hadn't told her that he loved her?

He would laugh in her face if she said something as stupid as that. Instead, she just shook her head. "I...can't," she said, her voice a broken whisper.

Pierce sucked in his breath. Then he reached out and took her chin in his hand and turned her face toward him.

She kept her eyes lowered, not wanting him to read the expression there.

"Celine," he said softly, "don't tell me you're...still a virgin?"

She bit her lip, not trusting herself to speak. Instead, she simply nodded.

She knew she was misleading him, making him think that was why she had stopped him. But that hadn't been the main reason. She'd stopped him because she was afraid. She didn't want to be used, to give up her body to a man after waiting so long, and then to be discarded like a dirty old rag.

Her mother had taught her well. Not until marriage, she'd told her, or else as soon as they get what they want they move on to someone prettier or better. Don't let them use you for practice. She'd never forgotten those words and she'd held fast to that principle in her one and only relationship with Giles.

But now with Pierce it was different. What she felt for Pierce went far beyond what she'd ever felt for Giles. With Pierce she would have thrown her mother's advice out the window without another thought...if only he could love her.

Pierce stared at her in silence and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Celine. I didn't mean to come on so strong but I had no idea..." His voice trailed away and he seemed to be searching for words. "I know you told me about waiting for marriage but I thought...since you and Giles broke up and you came to America, I just assumed you had a relationship here."

She looked at him askance.

“I’m sorry, that’s not quite what I meant,” he said back-pedaling. “I’m making a mess of this, aren’t I?” He broke off and stood up then raked his hand through his hair in an obvious sign of frustration. “Listen, forget what I said. I’m just ...sorry.”

*Oh, Pierce, you just don’t get it. I love you but how can I make you love me too?* She thought it but she didn’t dare say the words out loud.

Instead, she simply straightened her blouse and in a voice that was surprisingly calm she said, “That’s okay, no apology necessary.” She lowered her legs to the floor. “I think I’d better go now.” She got up and took the few steps toward the door then she stopped. She turned back to look at Pierce. “Please think about what will make Kylie happy.” Then she turned and walked out the door.

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Pierce stared at Celine’s retreating back then with a soft curse under his breath he walked over to the couch. Instead of sitting in it he leaned against the back of the big chair and crossed his arms. He was pissed but it was at himself that he directed his anger. After Celine had confided in him, told him about her decision regarding her sexuality, he’d still gone ahead and made the wrong assumption.

Now she probably thought he was a jerk and with good reason. He couldn’t blame her if she decided to stay a million miles away from his reach. But he wished she wouldn’t. He wanted this woman in his life. He’d be the first to admit that sex had something to do with it. There was no denying his attraction to her. But it was more than that. There was some sort of spiritual connection he could not explain. With each passing day she seemed to be growing on him and in him, becoming part of

his soul. It was almost as if he couldn't imagine waking up and not seeing her in their home. His and Celine's and Kylie's. This was how he'd begun to think of home.

And then there was her connection with Kylie. From day one he'd observed her interaction with the little girl, how she'd pulled her out of her shell to bloom like a tiny little flower in the sun. How could he separate Kylie from that?

He shook his head. He didn't know what he'd do in the fall when it was time for Celine to return to the university. Kylie would be devastated. And he? He didn't even want to go there.

Celine had asked about his options and pleaded with him to do what was best for Kylie. There was one option he'd not mentioned, one that would be ideal, at least for him and for Kylie. But for Celine? He didn't know.

There were so many things he didn't know. Like Celine... she was such an enigma. Did she have feelings for him? Did she crave him as much as he craved her?

He knew he wanted Celine to a degree he'd never felt for any woman. She was different from anyone he'd ever known. But he, confirmed bachelor, was he ready to give up his fast paced life to become a father and husband in one jump? More importantly, if he asked her to marry him, would she say yes?

His lips tightened and he stared with blind eyes at the space in front of him. Somehow, after the way he had behaved tonight, he doubted it.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

That weekend Pierce took Kylie and Celine to the zoo where, for the first time, the little girl saw real live elephants, lions, tigers and zebras. As the adults expected, her favorites were the monkeys who entertained them with their antics. One of them punched his brother then took off, running smack into the patriarch of the clan who gave him a whack for his troubles. They all laughed out loud at that.

Next they went to the small amusement park where they went on all the rides - the merry-go-round, the haunted train, the bumper cars and the kiddies' roller coaster.

Last and scariest of all was the Ferris wheel. All three of them sat in the chair and when they went up, up into the air, so high they could see the tops of trees and buildings, Celine was the only one who screamed to get down. Even after they got home Kylie would not let her forget it. Both she and Pierce teased her relentlessly that night until she feigned a pout and marched off to bed.

Next day, Sunday, was another day of wonderful weather. And again, Celine decided that she and Kylie would spend most of the afternoon outdoors. To Celine's shock and near horror Pierce had decided to try his hand in the kitchen. She decided she'd made the right decision in taking Kylie outside just in case he blew up the house experimenting with the stove.

They had been playing tag on the lawn for a while when Celine put a hand on Kylie's shoulder and stopped her. She'd heard a sound coming from the copse of trees that lined the garden path. She stood still listening. There it was again, the soft cry of what sounded like a cat.

"Kylie, wait over by that rock," she said. "I just want to check on something."

Walking stealthily across the grass she ducked under a branch then pushed through some bushes until she entered the cool shadows of the alcove created by the trees.

“Celine, where’re you going?” Kylie’s call was plaintive.

Celine realized that she’d probably become scared when she disappeared but, not wanting to scare the animal, she remained silent. She had a soft spot for cats. They were her favorite animals and she’d had several as pets when she was growing up.

The tiny cry came again then Celine saw it, a black and white kitten curled up in the root of a tree. “Hi, baby,” she crooned, “What are you doing here? Are you all alone?” She looked around but the kitty’s mommy was nowhere in sight.

She went closer, slowly, fearing that the little cat would flee in fright. To Celine’s surprise it did the exact opposite. When its big green eyes came to rest on her it got up from its cradle at the foot of the tree and walked over to her. The cat looked like it was about three or four months old, still quite young but old enough to survive and thrive without its mother. Not shy at all, it yawned and stretched its neck up as if to invite Celine to scratch its head.

“Aw, you’re so cute.” She took the invitation and tickled the little head. Then she straightened. So. What was she going to do now? She couldn’t leave the cat in the woods to starve. On the other hand, this was not her home. If she’d been in France the cat would be installed at her house, no question about it. But here? She didn’t have that right. The only option, it seemed, was to take the cat and ask Pierce to take it to the shelter.

She stretched out her hand and the cat immediately came to her. It must have strayed from someone's house, it was so tame. Then, cradling it to her chest, she headed back to the lawn.

"Celine," Kylie cried her voice full of relief. "Where were you? Why did you go into the woods?"

"Look what I found," Celine said with a laugh. She shifted her little bundle so that Kylie could see.

"A kitty," she exclaimed in wonder. "You found a kitty."

"Yes, and I'm going to give her some milk and find a nice box to make a bed for her."

"And then we get to keep her?" The child's eyes were wide and full of hope.

"I don't know, *cherie*," Celine shook her head. "That all depends on what Pierce says. I was thinking of taking her to the shelter."

"The shelter? Oh, no. I want to keep her. I want her for my friend." Kylie almost looked like she was going to cry.

Celine's heart went out to her. A pet was just what she needed, something to hug, to love, to call her friend. She could suggest it to Pierce. They could take the cat to the vet, have her checked and vaccinated, and then Kylie could have a pet of her own. At the end of the day, though, it would be Pierce's decision.

"Can I touch her?" Kylie stretched out a hand but Celine turned, keeping the cat out of reach.

"No, not yet. I have to make sure she's safe before I let you play with her." She saw Kylie's face fall. "There's something you can do to help me, though. Why don't you help me make a carrier box for her so we can take her safely to the vet? You can help me make air holes in the box."



That seemed to cheer her up. Her face brightened and she skipped ahead of Celine up the path toward the house.

“Uncle Pierce, guess what? We have a surprise,” she yelled as they entered the kitchen.

He turned toward them, a head of lettuce in his hand. “What kind of surprise?” He said with a smile that matched hers. “Is it something delicious?”

“No, you can’t eat it,” she said with a laugh. “You can hug it and kiss it.”

Pierce frowned as if in deep concentration. “Is it a baby? Maybe a dolly baby?”

“No,” Kylie crowed and shook her head.

Celine laughed and still cradling the very comfortable cat, she turned to Pierce so that he could see.

He looked at the bundle in her arms and blinked. Then his face turned ashen.

Pierce let the lettuce fall to the ground and began to back away, his eyes trained on the cat in Celine’s arms. Then to her horror he began to sweat and shake then he was hyperventilating. He backed away into a corner of the room and slid his back down the wall to crouch on the floor. Wrapping his hands around his knees, he began shaking uncontrollably.

What in the world...it had something to do with the cat. Pierce had taken one look and had simply fallen apart.

Celine rushed back outside and deposited the cat on the grass. Then she dashed back inside where Kylie stood staring at Pierce, her eyes wide with distress. He still crouched on the floor, his body shaking.

Celine ran over to kneel beside him. “Pierce,” she cried out, touching his back. “What’s wrong?”

He didn't respond and curled even tighter as if to get away from her hands.

Celine hopped up and reached for the phone. She needed help. She began to dial 911.

It didn't take much for Celine to realize that Pierce had a severe phobia to cats. With the help of a paramedic on the phone she was able to calm him so the violent shudders ceased and his gasping breath grew deep and steady again. She'd grabbed the kitchen towel and with it she dabbed at the perspiration that had settled on his brow then she wrapped her arm around his shoulder.

It was only when Pierce was back to normal that Celine removed her arm. He lifted his head and looked at her with a mixture of gratitude and embarrassment. Then he asked for Kylie but Celine had whisked her away to the den and switched on the Disney channel, effectively removing her from the scene of Pierce's distress.

"Thanks," he said, his voice hoarse and strained.

Celine shook her head, still reeling from what had just happened. "No, Pierce. Don't thank me. I almost killed you by bringing that cat into the house." She felt so full of guilt her heart hurt.

He shook his head and gave her a reassuring smile. "No, you didn't. And anyway, how could you have known?"

They were silent for a while. Then she asked the question uppermost in her mind. "Why are you so afraid of cats?"

"I think it had to do with an incident when I was an infant. My mother told me she had a pet cat before I was born and when she gave birth and took me home the cat seemed to go crazy." He chuckled. "It must have pissed her off that she wasn't the center of attention any more. Mom said she used to hiss at me all the time as I lay in my crib and once she even took a swipe at me. Scratched me on the arm."

“What?” Celine said, indignant. “Didn’t your parents get rid of her?”

“Eventually they did but not before she did lasting damage. Since then I haven’t been able to look a cat in the eye without seizing up.”

“Oh, Pierce. I can’t imagine what that must be like.”

“Hey, it’s not that bad,” he said with a shrug. “I just stay away from them and all is well with the world.”

“Until today,” she said.

“Until today.” But he was smiling at her now, back to his old self, the confident green-eyed Pierce that she loved.

And after what had happened today she felt she loved him even more. She’d always seen him as so bold, powerful and invincible - the billionaire businessman, always in control. Now she’d seen another side to him, a side that was vulnerable, a side that needed her. She’d been able to take him in her arms and comfort him and her strength had been his. For once she’d felt that she’d been the one giving, not receiving.

A half hour later the three of them sat down to Pierce’s meal of macaroni and cheese from the box, fried chicken made by his own hands and a salad. He couldn’t take credit for the salad since Celine had been the one to rescue the lettuce, wash it and prepare it. After his ordeal Pierce had not been up to any more challenges in the kitchen.

After a surprisingly delicious meal considering that it had been made by a near novice, Celine found the kitten and boxed her up while still outdoors then she drove to the shelter where she handed her over to the care of the staff there.

That night after putting Kylie to bed Celine went back downstairs to check on Pierce. She was being something of a mother hen but she couldn't help it. Today the protective instinct in her had been triggered and now it was working overtime.

She found him in his usual place of refuge, the den. "All is well?" she asked peeping in.

He was leaning back in the sofa, feet up on the ottoman and when he saw her he smiled. "All is well. Well in my world, at least." When she hesitated in the doorway he waved her over. "Come. Sit."

Celine smiled to herself. Giving orders, as usual.

Last time she'd been in this room alone with Pierce she'd sat on the seat farthest away from him. Tonight she went and sat on the sofa. He raised his eyebrows but said nothing. He simply scooted over to give her more room.

She relaxed in the couch and looked at him. He was dressed casually in gray sweatpants and a light cotton shirt. When decked out in his suits Pierce was immaculate but at home he was totally relaxed and casual. She liked that.

"Pierce, do you mind if I ask you something?" she asked.

"Sure. Go ahead."

"Earlier today you mentioned your mother. Why doesn't she come over to visit?"

"I wish she could," Pierce said. "My parents decided to retire in Hawaii. I talk to them every few days but as you can imagine visits take some advance planning, particularly with my busy schedule."

"And your brothers and sisters. What about them?"

“No brothers, one sister. Happily married, living in San Diego with her husband and two kids.” He gave her a smile of amusement. “Anything else you want to know?”

She groaned inwardly. She’d been Miss Nosy Parker again.

“Don’t worry, I’m not offended. Flattered, actually. What makes you want to know about my family?”

She glanced at him then looked away again, a sudden shyness seizing her. “I just want to know more about you.”

He seemed pleased at that and her heart soared. She really did want to get to know Pierce and she had so little time. The end of the summer was fast approaching. When she left his home she wanted to take all these memories of him with her. “What were you like as a boy?”

He chuckled. “Very much a geek. I was the kid with the glasses who was always hanging around the computer lab begging to be allowed to create new programs.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet,” she said, laughing.

“No, it wasn’t.” He shook his head. “I can laugh about it now and I can be grateful for all those hours in the lab. I started my software company back in high school.”

“You did?” Celine could have guessed he was the genius type but he’d far exceeded her expectations.

“Your parents must have been so proud.”

“They were, but at the time I almost wished I could have been a normal kid. It wasn’t easy being the school geek.” He shrugged but there was a pain in his eyes that he could not hide.

“You were bullied?”

“Yeah,” he said casually. “Like most nerdy kids I was the brunt of jokes. Got beat up a fair number of times.”

“Oh, no,” she whispered. Her heart went out to the kid he’d been. He must have suffered so much.

“But, hey,” he continued, “it all worked out great. It was all those hours spent hiding in the computer lab that made me the man I am today.”

And what a man that was. He was as far from geek as could be. He had a sophistication about him, an aura of self-assurance that made him compelling. And it didn’t hurt that he was extraordinarily handsome. No wonder she found him irresistible.

As if thinking similar thoughts Celine and Pierce turned to each other at the same time. When their eyes met she knew he was thinking exactly what she was thinking. She wanted him so much her mouth went dry.

There was nothing she wanted more right now than to have his arms around her, his lips on hers. But as she gazed back at him she knew he would not make that move.

So she did.

With newfound boldness Celine slid across the sofa, closing the few inches that separated their bodies. Then before she could change her mind she reached her hand up to touch his cheek.

He stared down at her, his green eyes sparkling with emotion, but still he made no move. He was waiting for her to take the lead.

Sliding her hand to the back of his head she tilted it down until his lips touched hers. She moaned as her body tingled in anticipation.

Only then did he move. Sliding his arms around her he leaned into the kiss, taking full control as she knew he would. She gasped as his tongue slid past her lips to taste her, tease her then plunder her till she felt like her very bones had turned to liquid.

As they kissed, Celine slid her hands inside the neck of his T-shirt to caress his shoulders and then as the passion of his kiss intensified she clung to him as if for dear life.

The moment he lifted his mouth from hers she dipped her head and caught his ear lobe between her teeth. She felt a thrill of satisfaction when she heard him groan. She pressed her advantage, sliding her lips down his neck. Then she was lifting his T-shirt to feather soft kisses across the broad muscles of his chest now bare to her gaze.

She did not meet his eyes. She refused to look at him, knowing there'd be questions there. This time she wanted nothing to get in the way. Just as he'd done to her she moved her lips lower, lower until she'd caught a taut flat nipple between her teeth. When he moaned she smiled and she did not stop. She covered that sensitive part of him with her lips and sucked and nibbled until his chest heaved and his heart pounded in his ears.

Next, she slid her hands down his taut, muscled belly and stopped just shy of the top of his sweatpants. Dared she go farther?

Yes, she dared. She loved this man. She knew that without a doubt. And now, whatever the consequences, she was ready.

She was sliding her hands under the waistband of his sweatpants when she felt firm hands on hers.

"Celine, stop now or else I won't be responsible for my actions." His voice was hoarse, his breathing labored. She knew he was trying hard to resist her.

But she wouldn't let him get away. Not this time.

"You won't be responsible," she whispered. "I will."

With a groan he reached for her and hauled her up so he could capture her mouth. He gave her a searing kiss that told of pent-up passion and want.

And then, ever so gently, he pushed her away, sat up and shoved his T-shirt back down.

Celine stared at him in shocked silence. It took several seconds before she could speak. "What are you doing?" she asked, totally bewildered. "Why did you stop me?"

Tucking the T-shirt into his sweatpants, almost as if to shield himself from her, he looked at her with an expression she could not figure out. "I had to stop you. I didn't want you doing something you would regret."

"But I wanted it," she said. "I'm ready, Pierce. I really want this."

He stared back at her, his face a reflection of the battle raging inside him. But then he shook his head. "No. You don't. Not yet." He got up and when he looked back at her his face was serious and his lips tight. "I'm going to turn in now. I suggest you go to bed."

Then he turned and walked to the door and just like that he was gone.

Celine sat on the couch, unable to move. Tonight had turned out to be one of the worst nights of her life. She'd come to Pierce ready to give him everything, and he refused the one thing she had to give. What else could she give a man that had it all? What else but herself?

But he'd rejected her most precious gift and now she knew it was no use trying. She'd never be good enough for Pierce D'Amato.



## CHAPTER NINE

The days that followed were difficult for Celine. It was hard having to put on a cheerful face, laughing and playing with Kylie, when inside she was dying. Each time she was in the same room with Pierce she felt the heat of embarrassment rise in her face as the memory of his rejection came rushing back. Each time he spoke to her she avoided his eyes, not wanting to see amusement or scorn reflected there. She would not be able to live with that. When she left she wanted to remember the good times she'd had in this house. She did not want to spoil those memories any more than they'd already been blemished by that night.

By the following week, though, things began to improve. She'd finally accepted the fact that outside of their working relationship there would never be anything between her and Pierce. Of course, she'd known that from the beginning. Still, she'd been stupid enough to let herself fall under the spell of their situation living under his roof, spending so much time together. She'd forgotten her role. Now, though, things were back in perspective. She knew where she stood and she would never let herself forget it.

After that talk with herself things got a whole lot better. She began to laugh again and Kylie, who'd had to put up with her distraction, looked relieved that her old Celine was back. As for her interactions with Pierce, she kept them light and amicable. She did not seek out his company but she no longer avoided being in the same room with him as long as Kylie was there, too.

Being alone with him was another matter altogether. Her body seemed intent on betraying her, her breath growing shallow and her nipples puckering anytime he

came near. But she did her best to hide her response to him. She only hoped he could not sense the depth of her inner turmoil.

Then one morning something happened that made Celine realize that she wasn't the only one who was suffering. She woke up to the sound of soft sobbing and sat up to find Kylie curled up in the bed beside her.

"What's wrong, *cherie*?" Celine's heart lurched. Had Kylie been hurt? She threw back the covers so she could see the child's body. No, she looked fine. She pulled away the hands that covered the little face. "Are you hurt?"

Kylie shook her head and began to sob louder.

Celine gathered her in her arms and hugged her close. The child's tears soaked through the top of her nightgown. "Hush, hush," she soothed as she rocked her in her arms.

"I miss my mommy," Kylie wailed then began to cry anew, the force of her sobs making her whole body shake.

Celine felt like a knife pierced her heart. Poor Kylie. She'd been so absorbed in her own problems that she hadn't been there for the child as she should have, keeping her so busy she would have less time to dwell on her loss. She cursed herself for being so thoughtless. "Oh, Kylie, I know you do," she said softly, tears filling her eyes. "Just cry, *cherie*, let it out. I'll take it all. Just cry."

It was like Celine's words burst a dam of sorrow inside the little girl in her arms. She clung to Celine and bawled. For several minutes they stayed like that, woman and child, hugging each other like they'd never let go.

When Kylie's shaking finally stilled and her sobs died away Celine gently stroked her hair and hummed a lullaby, one she'd loved as a child. She hoped the soft sounds would provide some soothing comfort.

It took a long time for them to get out of bed that morning. For a while they lay there, quiet and thoughtful, not needing any words at that moment, just resting after an emotional cleansing.

The release of that flood was an obvious source of relief for Kylie. Celine could see it in the way she relaxed against her and began playing with her fingers.

For Celine, though, it had the opposite effect. It reminded her how much Kylie would still need a shoulder to cry on. There would be more emotional outbursts and who would she turn to? She wanted to be there to comfort her but how could she?

Celine's heart lay in a painful place right then. She'd resolved to live the rest of her life without Pierce but how could she stifle her love for Kylie?

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Pierce watched from his bedroom window as Celine and Kylie sat on the bench in the shade of the old oak tree in the backyard. Both heads were bent, one sleek and raven black, the other curly and golden. They were busy with Kylie's morning lesson, going through the story of the day. Celine had told him they'd be reviewing simple two and three letter words. Now Kylie was deep in concentration as Celine guided her through her word list for the day.

Every time he saw them together he thanked his lucky stars for the day she walked into his hotel room. While he'd been in the hotel shower that day Kylie had been on his mind and he'd been up to his ears in frustration, tired of the long list of candidates the agency had sent him, none of whom could connect with Kylie. He'd

walked out of that bathroom praying for a miracle. The thought hadn't even had time to lodge in his mind when there she stood in front of him, an angel in maid's uniform.

He chuckled as he thought back to that day. His first memory of Celine was of her screaming and backing away from him, her eyes wide with fright. And yet he'd known the moment his eyes landed on her that she was the answer to his prayers. Strange as it now seemed, at the moment he'd had absolutely no doubt in his mind. And that was why he'd made sure she didn't escape before he made her an offer she would find hard to refuse.

Now as he watched his 'girls' together he had absolutely no regret at his spur-of-the-moment decision. Celine had been a Godsend in more ways than one.

And that was why he'd decided to take it slow with her. She'd told him she didn't take sex lightly so when she'd come to him he knew it had been in a moment of weakness. He wouldn't be able to live with himself if he'd taken advantage of that moment. Even though it had taken a hell of a lot of willpower he'd saved her from herself that night and he did not regret it. She probably hated him for it but it was the right thing to do.

And although she was annoyed with him right now he would make it all worth the wait. He smiled as he thought about it. That day would be soon.

Next day Pierce left for the office early as usual to avoid peak hour traffic. He had a full day ahead of him as he was expecting a cadre of programmers from Japan who would be consulting with him on a special project. It was a big deal for his firm, one that could lead to an explosion of growth in the international marketplace.

He was in the middle of his meeting when his administrative assistant knocked on the door of the conference room. He frowned. Lynette had been with him for years and she knew better than to interrupt such an important session.

She hurried over and leaned down to whisper in his ear. At her words his blood ran cold. Kylie. Pool. Hospital. Ambulance.

At that instant all thought fled his mind except for one. Kylie. He had to get to Kylie.

He shoved the chair back and with the briefest of apologies he was up and out the door. Lynette would have to do the explanation. He had no time to spare.

He jumped into his car and tore out of the parking lot, tires screeching as he went. Within fifteen minutes he was pulling up in front of St. Mary's Hospital. He'd parked the car in the tow zone but he didn't give a damn. They could have it. All he wanted was to see his little girl.

He dashed up to the reception desk and almost reached out and throttled the nurse when she calmly told him to take a number and sit down. When he growled at her and demanded to see Kylie immediately she jumped and looked like she was about to call security but she must have seen the desperation in his eyes because she called for an orderly who escorted him to the intensive care ward.

There Pierce saw Celine. She was sitting all alone on a long bench and she was twisting her hands in her lap, tears streaming down her face.

He dashed over to her. "Celine. What happened? Where is she? Is she..." He could not say the word.

Celine hopped up and turned red, puffy eyes toward him. "Pierce. *Mon Dieu*, Pierce. I'm so sorry. So sorry."

That stopped him in his tracks. It was a stake hammered right into his heart. The words were a confirmation of his worst fear. Kylie was gone.

The words sucked his strength, the very life out of him. He collapsed onto the bench and stared at Celine in shock. His Kylie, his sweet little Kylie, was dead.

He'd meant to make life so good for her, give her a family, and now it was too late. Too late, too late. The words rang in his head. Oh God, he was too late.

He dropped his face in his hands and the tears seeped through his fingers.

Celine came to him then. He felt when she sat on the bench beside him and then her arms were around him, hugging, comforting him like she'd done once before.

"We have to pray," she whispered. "Pray for Kylie, Pierce. Just pray."

Pray? What was the use of praying? Praying wouldn't bring her back so he could hold her in his arms again, so he could feel that bundle of energy, his little girl, so full of life. Celine could pray all she wanted but he just wanted Kylie.

"We have to be strong for her, Pierce. Help her pull through."

It took a moment for the words to sink in. What was she saying? Kylie was...alive?

He lifted his head and stared into Celine's eyes, willing her to say the words. "Kylie?" he said.

"They're working on her right now," she said.

Pierce's shoulders sagged with relief. Thank God.

The gigantic rock that had landed squarely in the middle of his chest began to crumble, leaving pebbles of fear behind.

"What did they say? Will she be all right?"

Celine shook her head and her eyes were full of sadness. "I don't know."

Pierce looked at her and then away. Had he been given hope just to have it dashed? No, God would not be so cruel. He clung to that thought, that hope, and only then was he able to breathe freely.

Pierce took Celine's hand in his. Her palm was damp. He could only imagine what she must have gone through, dealing with all of this without him. He stroked

the back of her hand, trying to give her some small comfort. They sat like that in silence.

Finally he asked, “Celine, what happened?” He knew it would be traumatic for her to relive the experience but he had to know.

Celine’s hands gripped his tightly and then she pulled it away. She drew in a trembling breath.

“Kylie and I...we did some gardening this morning and we got all muddy so...I took her upstairs and gave her a bath.” She drew a deep breath then let it out in a heavy sigh. “There was still mud splattered on my leg so I fixed a quick snack for Kylie and set her at the kitchen table to eat. I told her I’d be down in five minutes. I just wanted to take a quick shower.”

“Why didn’t you leave her with Mrs. Simpson?”

“She called a little after you left this morning. Her grandson was sick and her daughter called on her suddenly to babysit while she went to work.” Celine bit her lip. “I was alone with Kylie.”

She was silent then and Pierce could imagine she must be blaming herself for that one slot of time when she’d let Kylie out of her sight. He spoke then. “But how did Kylie get over the fence around the pool?” He’d had that fence installed the same week Kylie moved into the house.

Celine sucked in her breath. “That’s what I don’t understand. I know I locked the gate last night and we didn’t go anywhere near it all morning. I know Kylie’s way too short to get anywhere near that latch so the gate must have been left open.” She shook her head, her eyes distressed, her face dark with confusion. “I know I locked that gate. I’m sure of it. I did, Pierce, I did.” She covered her face with her hands and began to cry.

“Hush,” he said and put his arm around her shoulder. “I know.”

It took several minutes for Celine to calm down and then they sat together in silence, the moments ticking by. Each time the door leading to the operating room opened both turned as one but each time it was a nurse or an orderly going about their various duties.

Finally, after an exhausting two hours a doctor dressed in green scrubs stepped through the door. “Miss Santini,” he said as he approached, “and Mr...”

“D’Amato. Pierce D’Amato,” Pierce said, rising to his feet.

The doctor nodded. “You’re Kylie’s guardian, correct?”

“Yes,” he said quickly, wishing the doctor would just come out with the words. The suspense was torture.

“As you know, we’ve been working on Kylie for some time. She ingested quite a bit of water but the good thing is,” he turned to Celine, “you got her out quickly and started CPR right away. If it hadn’t been for that we wouldn’t have been able to save her. The paramedics would have come too late. Your quick action saved her life.”

“So she’s going to be all right?”

The doctor smiled. “Your little girl is a real fighter. We’ll have to keep her for at least a week for observation but it looks like she’s out of the woods.”

Pierce could have kissed him, his relief was so great. Kylie was going to be all right.

He turned and grabbed Celine and hugged her tight, expressing all his relief and gladness in that embrace.

Then he released her and stretched out his hand. “Thank you, Doctor,” he said and shook the hand of the man who had saved his daughter’s life.



There, he'd said it. His daughter. And that was what Kylie had come to be for him - a member of his family, his child. He'd been thinking about her like that for some time now and he knew that whatever the future held for him, Kylie would always be a part of it. He would make it official. She would be his daughter.

"Can we see her?" he asked.

"Yes, but one at a time." He nodded to Pierce. "You go first, Mr. D'Amato."

Pierce looked at Celine and she nodded, her face flushed with relief. "Go to her."

When Pierce disappeared through the swinging doors Celine sat back down and stared at the floor. Thank God Kylie was going to be all right. She didn't know what she would do if she hadn't pulled through. She was dying to run to her and hug her close but she would have to wait her turn.

Then she thought of the role she'd played in Kylie's near tragedy. Why had she left her alone? She'd moved quickly in the bathroom and had returned downstairs to find the kitchen empty and Kylie gone. She'd gone into the garden, thinking she'd wandered out there but there was no Kylie. Then she ran back to the pool and that was when she saw the open gate. She dashed through and there was Kylie floating face down the water.

She screamed then dove into the water and dragged her out. She immediately started with the life-saving techniques she'd learned as a teenage babysitter. She only stopped long enough to call the ambulance and then she kept working on her until the paramedics took over.

All that had taken mere minutes but to Celine it seemed like a lifetime.

She got up, too agitated to sit still any longer, and began to pace the floor.

Then she came to a standstill and leaned her forehead on the cold concrete wall. Her

shoulders shook but there were no tears. She was crying again because she knew what she had to do. For the sake of Kylie's safety it would be best for her to go.

## CHAPTER TEN

Kylie came home six days later. Pierce installed her in her bedroom with lots of picture books, toys and games. He spent almost the entire day with her, playing with the dolls on her bed and acting out plays with sock puppets he'd made himself. Celine could see that he was trying to make it up to Kylie for the trauma of the past week, even to the point of overdoing it. It was only when her eyelids drooped that he decided to leave her alone.

Now that Kylie was home Celine decided it was time to broach the subject of her departure. She asked Pierce to meet with her in the kitchen and then she sat down and laid out her plan. She would stay another week so he could find a replacement but then she would be leaving.

Pierce was none too pleased with her announcement. "You're leaving in a week? That's a whole five weeks earlier than planned."

"I know, and that's why I'll stay the week to give you time to find my replacement. You and I know it's for the best."

"Best for you? It's certainly not best for Kylie."

"Especially for Kylie," she cried. "Look what happened to her in my care? I'd never be able to forgive myself if things had been...worse."

"Celine," he said, his face a study in exasperation, "it wasn't your fault. It could have happened under anybody's watch."

“But it happened under mine. Don’t you understand what that means for me? I almost got Kylie killed.” The guilt swept through her and she felt like her heart would crack right open.

“Celine, will you stop it?” Pierce’s voice was harsh. “What happened was an accident. It could have happened to any one of us, to forget to lock the gate. I know it wasn’t deliberate.”

Celine sucked in her breath, her eyes wide with shock. “You don’t believe me. You do think it was my fault.”

“I’m not saying that.” Pierce was glaring back at her now. “Any one of us - you, me, Mrs. Simpson - could have left the gate open. I’m not trying to cast blame. I’m just saying even if it had been you I would not condemn you for what happened.”

Now he was changing his story. In Celine’s mind Pierce did blame her. This discussion was only confirming that she’d made the right decision. She needed to go as soon as possible.

“Pierce,” she said quietly, “I’ve made up my mind. I know you don’t trust me with Kylie anymore so it’s best for all of us if I leave. Please start looking for my replacement.”

Pierce was scowling at her now. “Is that your final word on this?”

“It’s my final word,” she said, keeping her face blank even though she felt hollow inside.

If only she didn’t have to go. She would miss Kylie so much. And Pierce. And even though he’d said she didn’t have to go, even though he said he still trusted her, it was the big question that made her want to flee. How did she know she could trust herself?

She'd left the gate open, it seemed, even though she could distinctly remember locking it. Pierce seemed to think so although he wouldn't admit it. She'd been so sure and look what happened. How could she be sure it wouldn't happen again?

No, for the sake of Kylie's safety it was best if she stayed far away...no matter that her heart was breaking at the thought.

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Sixteen days. It was sixteen days since Celine had last seen Kylie and Pierce. She'd thought things would get better with time, that the pain would eventually go away, but it had gotten worse. She was far away from Kylie and it was like being separated from her own daughter.

This summer she'd had a family, a family very different from the one in France, but a family just the same. And she missed them as she would her own flesh and blood.

She'd tried hard not to intrude in their lives but she hadn't been able to resist calling Kylie and had done so almost every day since leaving. But calling was not the same as seeing her, holding her, smelling the cherry blossom fragrance of her hair.

Celine had made sure to call the house during the daytime when she knew Pierce would not be around. She didn't know if her heart could take the deep timbre of his voice without breaking down in tears. She missed him too much for words. She'd been afraid that if she ever saw him she would break down and blurt out how she truly felt about him. And what would that achieve? He'd probably be speechless with embarrassment or bolt for the nearest exit.

Today, though, she didn't care. She had to see Kylie again. She picked up the phone and dialed Pierce's cell phone number. At the sound of his voice a tremor ran through her.

"Pierce, it's Celine," she said softly. "Do you have a minute?" She would hate to know that she'd disturbed a meeting.

"Yes, go ahead." Pierce sounded formal, clipped.

"I was wondering if you'd let me visit Kylie. I'd love to go today if that's okay with you." She'd said it all in a rush, wanting to get the words out before she lost the courage.

Silence. That was the response on the other end of the line. Total silence.

"Hello?" Celine said into the phone. Had he hung up on her?

"Celine." Pierce was speaking again. Finally. "At what point did I tell you not to see Kylie?"

"Well...never," she said, feeling stupid.

"Exactly. So why do you think you need my permission? You spoke as if you expected me to say no." Pierce's voice was cool. It seemed that she had offended him.

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to impose-."

"What time would you like to visit Celine?" He cut her off mid-sentence.

"I was thinking two o'clock in the afternoon." She'd specifically chosen that time because she knew he would not be home.

"Fine. I'll let them know to expect you." And then he hung up.

He hadn't given her a chance to say goodbye. Well, so much for him wanting to see her again. He hadn't even asked how she was doing. It was obvious that any

feelings between them were all on her end. Feeling deflated, she gently laid the receiver back in the cradle and got up to dress for her trip.

Almost two hours later Celine was pulling into the long circular driveway of the house that had been like her home for most of that summer. Her heart quickened in anticipation. She hopped out of the car, opened the back door and grabbed the huge gift bag with the Molly Dolly Set with its twenty-five fashion outfits. She knew Kylie would love dressing her up.

She bounded up the stairs and rang the doorbell, a bright smile on her face. She was looking forward to seeing Mrs. Simpson, too. She'd always found her to be pleasant company.

The door opened and Celine found herself staring into the thin, well made-up face of Sophia Redgrave.

Celine's smile fled. What was Sophia doing there? Had she used her departure as an opportunity to worm her way into Pierce's life?

"Good afternoon, Sophia," she said when her wits returned. "I'm here to see Kylie."

Sophia nodded but as usual there was no smile of greeting. "We were expecting you."

She opened the door wider so Celine could enter then led the way across the foyer and down the hallway. "Kylie," she called. "Celine is here."

Out of nowhere a bundle of pink and yellow came flying toward her and Celine had just enough time to drop the gift bag and catch Kylie as she leaped into her arms.

"Celine, I missed you so much," she cried and wrapped her arms around Celine's neck.

“I missed you, too, *cherie*. So much.” Celine closed her eyes and reveled in the feel of the little body in her arms. She smelled of strawberries and peaches.

They were still hugging when they heard the roar of an engine out front.

“Daddy,” Kylie yelled and wriggled so much Celine had to set her down on the floor.

Daddy? It had to be Pierce Kylie was calling Daddy but when had she started doing that?

Then at the thought of Pierce her heart began to accelerate. Despite her efforts, today she would see Pierce again. Thank you, God.

Slowly, trying to seem casual, she followed Kylie back out to the front porch. Her heart did a somersault when she saw him.

Pierce was climbing out of a jet black Porsche, sunshades still on his face. The sun glinted on his dark chocolate hair. He looked super-sexy in his black business suit and red power tie.

Kylie was running to him now. He scooped her up and gave her a big fat kiss on the cheek.

How Celine wished that could be her.

Then he looked up and ever so slowly he removed the sunglasses from his eyes. And there they were, those beautiful green eyes that looked like they could see into her soul. He was looking at her and on his lips was the hint of a smile.

Still holding Kylie with one arm Pierce walked up the driveway and up the steps until he was standing in front of her.

“Hello, Celine,” he said, looking down at her as she stood staring up at him.

“Hello, Pierce.” She cleared her throat. “I thought you’d be at work today.”

“I was,” he said. “I decided to come home early.”



“Because of me?” *Dieu*, had she said it out loud?

“Because of you,” he said and there was such feeling in his voice that Celine blinked.

“Daddy, Celine’s come home to stay,” Kylie chirped up. “I am sooo happy.”

Eyes wide, Celine stared at Kylie. Now where did the child get that from? She didn’t want to mislead her. “No, *cherie*, I’m only here for a visit.”

“No, you’re not. You came back to be with me,” the child insisted. She began to wriggle in Pierce’s arms. “I want to go to Mommy.” And she reached out both arms towards Celine.

Celine gasped and quick tears stung her eyes. Then her face crumpled and the tears spilled onto her cheeks. “Kylie, dear sweet Kylie,” was all she could manage, her throat constricted with emotions. She reached out and took her from Pierce and buried her face in the child’s neck.

“I still love my old mommy,” Kylie whispered, “but I want you as my new mommy now.”

“I...” How could she tell her that she’d love that more than anything in the world but that it couldn’t happen? “I...” She tried again but could go no further.

Pierce came to her then. As she held Kylie in her arms he stood looking down into her eyes. “Celine, as you can see Kylie... and I...are having a hard time living without you. When you left you took a part of us with you. We need you.”

Celine looked up at him, not believing what she was hearing. “Kylie needs me,” she whispered, “but do you?”

He gave her a smile that told her all she needed to know. “I can’t live without you, Celine. Won’t you come back home, but this time as my wife?”

Celine had been waiting with bated breath for that question, all her life she'd been waiting and now the man of her dreams was waiting for her answer. Was this all a dream?

"Are you sure?" Celine whispered. "You're not still angry with me?"

"I was never angry with you. I love you. You've been my miracle angel since the day we met."

"Yaay," Kylie chortled. "Mommy and Daddy are getting married."

"Hold on, Kylie," Pierce said, laughing. "Celine still hasn't said yes."

"Yes, yes, yes," Celine said through her tears and walked into the arms Pierce held open wide.

And so they hugged - Pierce, Celine and Kylie, all three - happy in knowing they were now a family.

## EPILOGUE

Kylie was the prettiest flower girl in the world. Slowly and carefully, her face beaming with pride, she left the church vestibule and walked up the aisle with her basket of red rose petals, sprinkling the flowers along the path ahead of her.

She followed a very nervous ring bearer, a little friend she'd made on her first day in junior kindergarten. In his black suit the little gentleman walked ahead of Kylie, stopping every few minutes to check that she was still there.

The church was full of friends and family including Claire, Sylvan and Marc. Pierce's family was there, too - Elizabeth and Carlos from Hawaii and Sharon, her husband and two children from San Diego.

Mrs. Simpson beamed as she looked toward the back of the church and saw Celine standing there, waiting on the organist to start the bridal march.

Sophia was in the congregation, too, looking more stylish and elegant than anyone in the church. She'd been Celine's greatest surprise. At the news that Pierce had proposed to her the woman seemed to have changed her whole demeanor as if she accepted that it no longer made sense to pretend. She did not become warm and inviting but she became a great source of advice to Celine as she prepared for her big day.

To Celine's even greater surprise and relief she solved the mystery of the pool gate. It was Sophia who had left the gate open and not Celine. She'd come by early that morning to borrow the long net to give to her pool cleaner. It had been too early in the morning to wake anyone. It was only when she heard Mrs. Simpson speaking about the mystery of the gate that she realized her role in Kylie's near death

experience. She apologized in tears and since then had become Kylie's greatest ally, even at times when she deserved to go to the naughty corner.

Now it was time for Celine to walk up the aisle. As the bridal march began she lifted her head. Her heart soared as she smiled at the man who waited for her at the other end. Tall, dark and deliciously handsome in his suit and bowtie, Pierce was smiling at her and in his eyes was a light that told her never to doubt his love again.

And so, as the strains of the march filled the church she stepped forward proudly, ready to start her new life as mommy to an angel and wife to her beloved, Pierce D'Amato.

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VOLUME 15 - BILLIONAIRE'S BLACKMAIL BRIDE

As a research scientist it is **Lani Donatelli's** dream to make a difference in the lives of people suffering from neurodegenerative diseases. There's only one problem, and it's a huge one - she's lost her funding from the big pharmaceutical companies and her research lab is in danger of closing down. Without funding her experiments are at a standstill. On top of that, she has one month to come up with the money to clear months of arrears with the leasing company before she and her team are evicted. In desperation, she turns to the one man she knows can save her skin. But is she willing to pay the price he demands?

As co-member of a Houston school board, **Ridge Kent** has admired Lani Donatelli for months. She, however, can't stand him. According to her, he's nothing but a joker and an annoying one at that. Their disagreements at board meetings don't help since the constant conflict builds a brick wall between them. He wants to get to know her better but how can he, when all their interactions have been the polar opposite of positive? And then, like a heaven-sent miracle, lovely little Lani falls right into his hands. She has nowhere to turn but to him. He is willing to help, on one condition - Lani Donatelli must become his wife.

Bride by blackmail - a recipe for disaster or an unexpected chance for love?

## BAD BOY BILLIONAIRES

Judy Angelo

- Volume 1 – Tamed by the Billionaire
- Volume 2 – Maid in the USA
- Volume 3 - Billionaire's Island Bride
- Volume 4 - Dangerous Deception
- Volume 5 - To Tame a Tycoon
- Volume 6 - Sweet Seduction
- Volume 7 - Daddy by December
- Volume 8 - To Catch a Man (in 30 Days or Less)
- Volume 9 – Bedding Her Billionaire Boss
- Volume 10 - Her Indecent Proposal
- Volume 11 - So Much Trouble When She Walked In
- Volume 12 – Married by Midnight
- Volume 13 - The Billionaire Next Door
- Volume 14 - Babies for the Billionaire
- Volume 15 - Billionaire's Blackmail Bride
- BAD BOY BILLIONAIRES, Coll. I - Vols. 1 - 4
- BAD BOY BILLIONAIRES, Coll. II - Vols. 5 - 8
- BAD BOY BILLIONAIRES, Coll. III - Vols. 9 - 12
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## HOLIDAY EDITIONS

- Rome for the Holidays - Novella
- Rome for Always - Full-length Novel

## The NAUGHTY AND NICE Series

- Volume 1 - Naughty by Nature

## COMING SOON

- Volume 16 - Bossing the Billionaire

MEET THE BAD BOY BILLIONAIRES  
FROM COLLECTION I  
VOLUMES 1 - 4

TAMED BY THE BILLIONAIRE - Vol. 1

Roman Steele - The business tycoon who has the daunting task of taming the spoiled princess.

MAID IN THE U.S.A. -Vol. 2

Pierce D'Amato - The software billionaire who thinks he's in control but instead finds himself at the mercy of an angelic four year old and a dark-eyed French beauty who steals his heart.

BILLIONAIRE'S ISLAND BRIDE - Vol. 3

Dare DeSouza - The owner of a line of Caribbean resorts who tries to teach our beloved heroine a lesson she'll never forget...but then ends up learning the greatest lesson of his life.

DANGEROUS DECEPTION - Vol. 4

Storm Hunter - He loves motorcycles, fast cars and now he's got to add one more item to his list of loves: Danielle Swift. Dani has a charm he tries to resist but this committed bachelor is no match for this bold and independent woman who's like none he's met before.

Alpha males at their best - which one will you fall in love with?



MEET THE BAD BOY BILLIONAIRES  
FROM COLLECTION II  
VOLUMES 5 - 8

TO TAME A TYCOON - Vol. 5

Enrico Megalos - A shipping tycoon with a big problem but one which 'lion tamer', Asia Miller, is determined to fix.

SWEET SEDUCTION - Vol. 6

Jake McKoy - Billionaire author, philanthropist and recluse - a man with a past that is tearing him apart. Will Samantha Fox be the woman to pull him out of his shell?

DADDY BY DECEMBER - Vol. 7

Drake Duncan - Billionaire investor and a man determined to win the love of his life: a woman who is just as determined...to stay the heck out of his way.

TO CATCH A MAN (IN 30 DAYS OR LESS) - Vol. 8

Stone Hudson - Owner of Hudson Broadcasting Corporation, Stone is thrown for a loop when he meets a woman gutsy enough to laugh at him. And then she turns into a temptress. How can he resist?

MEET THE BAD BOY BILLIONAIRES  
FROM COLLECTION III  
VOLUMES 9 - 12

BEDDING HER BILLIONAIRE BOSS - Vol. 9

Rockford St. Stephens - The owner of a newly acquired luxury vacation business who finds himself boss to an executive assistant who can't stand him...but who he finds impossible to resist.

HER INDECENT PROPOSAL - Vol. 10

Sloane Quest - The media mogul who's rocked back on his heels when his top competitor, the lovely Melanie Parker, makes him an offer he can't refuse.

SO MUCH TROUBLE WHEN SHE WALKED IN - Vol. 11

Maximillian Davidoff - The cosmetics giant turned NASCAR entrepreneur who's bowled over by the most ornery woman he's ever met.

MARRIED BY MIDNIGHT – Vol. 12

Reed Davidoff – The fashion mogul who gets caught up in a fairy tale romance that makes him wish he could reverse his past. After the mistakes he's made, can he win the hand of the princess?

## VOLUME 14 - BABIES FOR THE BILLIONAIRE

**Anya Petersen** has always been described as gentle, understanding and quiet. The last thing she'd be called is a bully. But when a certain handsome stranger walks into her life her defense instincts go into overdrive and she does whatever it takes to protect her heart - by keeping him far away from her. Then he turns up in the last place she would expect - and that's when she knows, where the battle for her heart is concerned, she's already lost the fight.

**Rafe Kent** is so entranced by the German beauty he meets while touring Europe that he will do anything it takes to be with her, even if it means moving halfway across the world. But there's no way he could have known that getting close to the woman who's stolen his heart would mean he'd need a crash course in handling tiny tots...and fast!

## NOVELLA - ROME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Talk about sexy as sin...

**Arie Angelis** is floored when she lays eyes on the handsome hunk seated at the head table at the holiday event she's catering. She literally can't take her eyes off him. She's always prided herself on being the consummate professional, but not this time. But, attracted or not, when she finds out who he is she realizes he's way out of her reach. But you can't stop a girl from dreaming...

**Rome Milano** is used to getting what he wants but when he meets the hot and heavenly Arie Angelis he learns that he can't always have his way. He's used to calling the shots but, if the lady has her way, not this time...

(This story has a sequel - Volume 14 - Rome for Always. Read on to learn more)

ROME FOR ALWAYS  
(sequel to 'Rome for the Holidays')

SHE HAD ROME FOR THE HOLIDAYS, BUT WOULD SHE HAVE HIM FOR ALWAYS?

**Arie Angelis** is on top of the world. She's engaged to the man of her dreams, the super-handsome and successful CEO of Belitalia, Rome Milano. She could not believe it when he proposed on Christmas Day. Of course, she said yes! But then, only a month into their engagement there's a turn of events that threatens to steal her newfound happiness. In the past she'd made a life-altering choice. Now it's time to stand by that decision. The only question is, will Rome stand with her or will it send him running?

**Rome Milano** knows a good thing when he sees it and when he meets Arie he has no doubt that she's the one for him. He falls so swiftly in love with her that within weeks of meeting her he's proposing. He can't be any happier when she accepts. But there's just one problem - how to convince the important people in his life that this is for real. Now that he's found happiness will he be forced to choose between love and loyalty?

It's decision time on both sides. Through it all, will love prevail?

## VOLUME 13 - THE BILLIONAIRE NEXT DOOR

### NEVER PIT AN ALPHA MAN AGAINST A FEISTY FEMALE

**Soledad Felix** doesn't take guff from anyone, not even if that someone is the tall, dark and gorgeous hunk who moves in next door. Since the day he moves in he's a royal pain in the rear, going out of his way to make himself a nuisance. But then, as fate would have it, her big, bad and bossy neighbor falls right into her hands. And with him at her mercy, it's time to make him pay...

**Ransom Kent** likes to mind his own business and lead a quiet life but tell that to his crazy neighbor next door. From the first day they meet it's like she's got this thing against him, a crazy vendetta of her own making. And it doesn't help that she's both beautiful and bewitching, with a whole lot of hot sauce on top. It's an alluring combination that he just can't resist. But when he gives in to the temptation and hands her his heart on a platter, that's when he realizes she's nothing like the woman he thought she was.

The epic battle of fire and ice, and only one can be the victor...

## VOLUME 12 - MARRIED BY MIDNIGHT

### A modern-day Cinderella Story

#### A PRINCE TO THE RESCUE?

Golden Browne is the victim of a fate that, while not worse than death, is almost more than a girl can bear. Having no way out, she resigns herself to her sad fate. And then she meets a man who is like a prince from a fairy tale, her knight in shining armor who will rescue her from the wicked wizard, A.K.A. Dunstan Manchester, the stepfather she just can't stand. But just when Golden thinks her story will have a happy ending, fate takes a nasty turn and she finds out that the man she'd hoped would be her savior is not the man she thought he was.

Reed Davidoff is entranced when a girl with hair like sunset runs out of his fashion show leaving behind a golden slipper, his only clue to who she is. He is determined to find this enchanting creature but when he does he realizes he has bitten off more than he can chew. Because, after all, how can he give Golden what she wants when he's in a prison of his own?

Will this fairy tale have a happy ending?

VOLUME 11  
*So Much* TROUBLE WHEN SHE WALKED IN

TROUBLE TO THE 'NTH DEGREE.

When Maximillian Davidoff meets Silken McCullen little does he know how much trouble will follow in her wake. The woman practically gets him thrown out of an establishment he could have purchased without a thought. And then, as if that weren't bad enough, she bulldozes her way into his life and proceeds to act like she's in charge. He soon finds out that there's a whole lot of woman packed into that petite bundle.

Silken McCullen has always had a feisty streak but no matter how she tries to curb her fiery nature it's forever getting her in trouble. When she first meets Maximillian Davidoff it is under less than ideal circumstances...particularly because her temper clouds her judgment and she ends up cursing him out. It is only after she has given him a good piece of her mind that she finds out that he is innocent of her charges. Now it falls on her to track him down and apologize. But apologies come hard for Silken and, before you know it, she's in a new kind of trouble with Max...but this time it's oh, so sweet.

With Silken McCullen, trouble is always just around the corner.



## VOLUME 10 - HER INDECENT PROPOSAL

### GIVE ME A BABY...NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Melanie Parker is at the top of her game. Thirty-three years old, owner and CEO of Parker Broadcasting Corporation, with assets totaling over a billion dollars. There are many who would die to be in her shoes. But there's one thing Melanie feels is missing from her life. A child. She's always dreamed of one day being a mother but just never found the time to fall in love. And now time is running out. So she seeks out the one man who she knows can give her what she wants and will demand nothing in return, a man who's a billionaire himself.

Sloane Quest can't believe it when the owner of Parker Broadcasting Corporation – his biggest competitor in the media business – makes him the craziest of all proposals. The decision he makes is quick, and it probably defies all reason, but he has an ulterior motive which will not be denied.

Complications, intrigue and a baby bargain in the middle. Can love conquer all?

## VOLUME 9 - BEDDING HER BILLIONAIRE BOSS

### SLEEPING WITH YOUR BOSS – CAN ANY GOOD EVER COME OF THAT?

Dana Daniels considers herself to be the consummate professional and she would never, under any circumstances, mix work with pleasure. She's got the reputation of being the 'office bulldog' and has killed the hopes of many an interested male co-worker. But when her kindly boss is replaced by a rigid block of stone, that's when she knows that she's in trouble. Because the man who now runs the show, a man she would love to hate, is the only one who has ever made her want to forget the rules and partake of forbidden fruit. But how can she give in to her desires? The man is her boss, after all.

From the first day he lays eyes on her, Rockford St. Stephens is blown away by his executive assistant. Much good that will do him, though. The woman hates him from day one...and she says so. But although he knows how she feels, he can't resist the pull of attraction. Boss or not, he wants Dana Daniels. And if ever there were a situation that could lead to trouble, this is it. Can he afford to go down that road?

Conflict meets passion – a heady combination...

## VOLUME 8 - TO CATCH A MAN (IN 30 DAYS OR LESS)

### HOW DO YOU CATCH A MAN...IN 30 DAYS?

Indiana Lane is in a pickle. She must find a man, fall in love and get married...all within the space of thirty days. How in the world can she pull this off? And then she runs into Stone Hudson - or, more accurately, he runs into her - and that's when the adventure begins.

Stone Hudson has met his match. He is used to women fawning over him and then he meets Indie, a woman who tells it like it is. And worse, she dares to tease him wherever and whenever she desires. Stone is intrigued, to say the least, but then his heart is snagged on a wire from which there is no escape.

Will the wedding bells ring for Indie, and will they ring in time? Thirty days is not a lot of time...

## VOLUME 7 - DADDY BY DECEMBER

### A DADDY IN THE MAKING...

A little girl, a wish, and a woman determined to stay out of his reach. How to reconcile the three?

Billionaire investor, Drake Duncan, is at the top of his game. He decides to hire a ghostwriter to work on his memoir. Little does he know that the writer who will answer the call is truly a ghost - from his past.

Meg Gracey is the proverbial 'starving artist', a writer down on her luck. When she is offered a contract as ghostwriter she jumps at the chance, only to later realize that the job will throw her directly in the path of the man she vowed never to 'touch with a long stick'. Caught between starvation and emotional torture she is forced to choose.

Does she follow reason or give in to the desires of her heart?

## VOLUME 6 - SWEET SEDUCTION

### SEDUCTION SO SWEET...

Jake McKoy moves to a tiny town in upstate New York to escape a painful past. He has no idea that it is here that he will find healing and strength and a new start in life. And that healing comes in the form of a fresh-faced woman who steals his heart.

Samantha Fox was only a month away from her wedding day when her fiancé broke the engagement. He'd found a more 'suitable' bride. Haunted by the constant fear that she's not 'good enough', Sam finds it hard to give her heart to another man. And when that man happens to be a billionaire who can't let go of his past, things become complicated indeed.

*Can Jake and Samantha overcome their difficult pasts to forge a bright future together?*

## VOLUME 5 - TO TAME A TYCOON

### HOW DO YOU TAME A TYCOON?

Enrico Megalos is bold, brash and a big problem...at least for his staff in the Miami office of Megalos Shipping. And that's where the lion tamer comes in.

Asia Miller, personality coach, is hired to tame the big boss. She takes on the challenge, not realizing until it is too late that while taming him she is also losing her heart...to the one man it doesn't pay to love.

Sun, sea and a steamy affair - a thrilling ride on the sensual side.

## VOLUME 4 - DANGEROUS DECEPTION

### TO CATCH A COMMITTED BACHELOR...

When Dani Swift put on her chauffeur's uniform, with her hair tucked under her hat and her face make-up free, she looks like a clean-shaven young man. It's while wearing her little disguise that she meets the man of her dreams, billionaire businessman Storm Hunter. But how can she compete in his world of wealth and women who will do anything to snag this eligible bachelor?

Storm Hunter loves motorcycles and fast cars. And then he meets Dani Swift. Bold and independent, she's like no woman he's ever met. And when their little game of deception leads to him losing his heart that's when he knows that, in her, he's found his greatest love.

### VOLUME 3 - BILLIONAIRE'S ISLAND BRIDE

#### **BAD BOY BILLIONAIRE VERSUS REBEL ISLAND BRIDE - AND THE WINNER IS...**

Normally shy and reserved, college student Erin Samuels goes to the island of Santa Marta where she breaks out of her shell and does things that shock even her. And, as if that weren't bad enough, she ends up trapped in a marriage by blackmail!

Dare DeSouza is used to women throwing themselves at him and he lumps Erin Samuels in the same category. Gold-diggers, that's what they all are, but this time he has a plan. He sets out to teach Erin a lesson she'll never forget...and ends up learning the greatest lesson of his life.

An island romance that will keep readers guessing every step of the way...



## VOLUME 2 - MAID IN THE USA

WHO EVER SAID BILLIONAIRE BACHELORS AND MODEST MAIDS DON'T MIX?

Celine Santini couldn't have been more shocked when billionaire bachelor Pierce D'Amato offers her a job as nanny to his four-year-old charge. After all, he hardly even knows her. But after finding herself thrown into an unexpectedly intimate encounter with him, are they really strangers? Celine is captivated by the green-eyed heartthrob who takes her heart ransom but how can she give in to her feelings when they're from two totally different worlds?

From the first day he lays eyes on the dark-eyed beauty, Pierce D'Amato knows he is lost. He immediately devises a plan to get her under his roof...and it works. But the more he gets to know the sweetly seductive Celine Santini the more he realizes there's a lot more to this woman than he could ever have imagined. Her intriguing combination of sophistication and innocence keeps him forever off-balance and, before he knows it, his bachelor heart turns traitor. The heart knows what the heart wants and it wants Celine Santini...whatever the cost.

A thrilling romance with twists and turns that will keep you turning the pages...

## VOLUME 1 - TAMED BY THE BILLIONAIRE

### THE TAMING OF A PRINCESS...

Serena Van Buren, the privileged daughter of a wealthy businessman, can't wait to begin her three-month tour of Europe with her college mates. Little does she know that fate has other plans in store!

Instead of dancing with handsome Italians and dining with charming Frenchmen Serena finds herself trapped in a six-month internship with overbearing business tycoon, Roman Steele - an arrangement orchestrated by her own father.

Serena is determined to show Roman that she won't yield to the demands of any man, boss or no boss. She's a Van Buren, after all, known to wither a man with one look. But Roman Steele is like no man she's ever met before. Suave, sexy and stunningly handsome, there's something about him that she can't resist. It looks like Serena Van Buren has finally met her match.

A sweet and saucy romance that will have you smiling...

The NAUGHTY AND NICE Series

VOLUME 1 – NAUGHTY BY NATURE

THE NAUGHTIER THE BETTER...

Tessa Tyndale is known for her naughty nature. Although she's a high school teacher she's no angel. She's been guilty of a prank or two. And then she meets Wolf Spencer, gloomy and serious, the very opposite of Tessa's idea of the ideal mate. But, strangely enough, this is the man who makes her heart race. Now if only she can change him from grumpy to fun-loving...it's a challenge that she's willing to take on. With Tessa, anything is possible.

Wolf Spencer is intrigued by the petite blonde pixie he meets at his friend's wedding. But when he tries to make friends he's surprised to find that she's not at all interested in him. And then he realizes that she's nothing like what he'd thought. Far from being demure, this woman is daring and bold and not at all afraid of playing tricks on him.

Wolf soon finds out that around Tessa nobody is safe, especially not him...

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