



## Alessandro's Prize

By Helen Bianchin

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A vacation in Milan sounds ideal to Lily Parisi. Her world was rocked to its core when she found her fiance cheating on her, but now she is determined to get on with her life—on her own! But not for long... She bumps into someone she knows—Alessandro del Marc—and her plans come a little undone...

Darkly, smolderingly enigmatic, Alessandro has long wanted Lily but never pursued her. He's always kept his cool. However, now that Lily—the prize he's always wanted—is in his reach, he's finding it impossible to keep control... The time has come to stake his claim—especially since the passionate chemistry appears to be mutual!

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Helen Bianchin was encouraged by a friend to write her own romance novel and she hasn't stopped writing since! Helen's interests include a love of reading, going to the movies, and watching selected television programs. She also enjoys catching up with friends, usually over a long lunch! A lover of animals, especially cats, she owns two beautiful Birmans. Helen lives in Australia with her husband. Their three children and four grandchildren live close by.

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Alessandro del Marco eased the sleek black sports car to a halt in the parking bay reserved for guests adjacent to the magnificent villa built at the edge of Lake Como.

Owned by the late Giuseppe dalla Silvestri, the villa was now occupied by his widow, the elegant Sophia, whose efforts in the aid of children's charities was legend.

It had been Giuseppe, Alessandro reflected, who had taken Alessandro in as a wild young teenager abandoned to the streets of Milan by unfit parents. A boy who, by a combination of street smarts and cunning had managed to evade the government system, and who had quickly learnt to fend for himself among others of his kind.

Giuseppe had earned the teenager's reluctant trust, fashioned his edgy talent with electronics from illegal to legal dealings, ensured completion of his education, and then employed him and taught and honed his business skills. Then, when he had been ready, he had backed him financially into his own electronics firm.

A consortium now known as Del Marco Industries. A successful empire, which afforded Alessandro a luxurious villa in the hills overlooking Lake Como, an apartment in Milan, real estate in several major capitals around the world, a private jet, and a small fleet of expensive cars.

Then there were the women... *plural*. Beautiful, captivating women who sought his company, his bed.in return for the social status associated with the man he had become.

None of whom succeeded in extending anything other than a temporary relationship lasting mere weeks, a few months at most, despite their various ploys to hold his attention.

Had he become jaded? Perhaps. Never bored, but a little tired of the feminine gender who tried so hard to please, acting out a part they imagined he sought. Beautiful, engaging arm candy, socially acceptable, intelligent, visually perfect...and merely players on the stage of life.

His youth had hardened him, created a wariness in order to deal with the ugliness of surviving on the streets. To be constantly on watch for an ill-intentioned demand and recognize if the hand in a pocket held a knife, a knuckle-duster about to maim, or merely coins.

To fight, and win by any means.

It had been Giuseppe who had patiently gifted his business acumen and time, but Sophia who had taught Alessandro social skills, guided and chided him with genuine affection.

During the initial few years, when in his late teens, any lingering doubts regarding his worthiness in an elevated society were very thoroughly dispensed with by the two people who had chosen to take him beneath their wing.

*You are a young man among men, equal in every aspect that matters,* Giuseppe had counselled. *Never forget where you came from...then measure the success you have achieved by your efforts.*

He owed them, despite their denial. Giuseppe had become the father he never knew. And Sophia—well, for her he would do anything she asked of him.

Such as this evening's dinner invitation to join a few guests to welcome Sophia's niece and god-daughter, Lily Parisi, from Sydney, Australia. A young woman he'd met many years ago as a teenager when she'd visited Sophia and Giuseppe with her parents.

A solemn girl with beautiful dark chocolate brown eyes and dark hair confined in a single plait. Who even at such a young age appeared delightfully unaware of the captivating quality of her smile or her zest for life.

She had changed, of course. He'd seen photographic evidence of those changes, had the essence of some of her correspondence relayed to him over the ensuing years. He had learnt of her parents' accidental death, Lily's success in taking over the Parisi family restaurant, her engagement, only to be privy to Sophia's distress when she received news that the impending marriage had been abandoned mere weeks before the wedding was due to take place.

Sophia, empathetic and sympathetic, had extended an invitation to Lily to visit indefinitely...an offer that had been graciously accepted.

*Family* held priority in life, Sophia insisted, perhaps understandably more so, given Sophia and Giuseppe had been unable to have children of their own.

Alessandro slid out from behind the wheel, engaged the locking mechanism, then took a moment to breathe in the crisp late February evening air. A time of year that held the unpredictability of a lingering winter and the soft elusive hint of spring.

The dark night sky was heavy with the threat of rain, and he turned up the collar of his coat as he crossed towards the impressive well-lit front entrance with its double ornately carved wooden doors.

Doors that swung open within seconds of ringing the bell to reveal Carlo, Sophia's factotum, whose features held genuine pleasure.

'Alessandro. It is good to see you.' *'Grazie, Carlo.'*

Both tall men in their late thirties, they went back a long way—years in fact—and shared a common history, to a degree. Sufficient enough to warrant a brief, but genuine male hand-clasp.

'Sophia?'

'Happy to have her god-daughter here.'

Words that conveyed much. For both men shared a silent bond to protect the one woman who had stood up to the plate for each of them. In their book, nothing, no one, could harm so much as a hair on her head without consequence.

Giuseppe had been a very successful businessman, whose villa bore discreet witness of his wealth. Beautifully patterned marble floors hosted an expansive foyer with exquisite furniture, a crystal chandelier whose prisms of sparkling light provided a spectacular setting for the double staircase curving to the upper floor.

A place Alessandro had been privileged to call *home* for the few years it had taken to conclude his schooling and later, during his university breaks. The sanctuary that, thanks to Giuseppe and Sophia, had offered him the opportunity to make something of his life.

'Alessandro.'

He turned at the sound of Sophia's voice, and he moved to greet her, settling his hands on her shoulders as he brushed his lips lightly to first one cheek, then the other before releasing her.

'You are well?' he queried gently, and received her smile in response.

'Of course, *caro*. It is good of you to join us.'

He lifted an eyebrow in musing query. 'You imagine I would refuse?'

Her answering smile brought one of his own. 'No.'

She tucked an arm through his own. 'Come and meet the guests.'

Familiar faces of a select few, six in all, Alessandro perceived, as he acknowledged each and every one as Sophia drew him toward a slender petite young woman with sable hair styled in a classic knot, deep brown eyes and honey-gold skin.

Attractive, rather than classically beautiful, and possessed of a quality that set her apart. For there was a quiet strength apparent, a sense of self-preservation he recognized and admired.

'Lily.' Alessandro regarded her thoughtfully for a few seconds as he took her hand in his, glimpsed the unbidden flair of awareness evident as he leant forward to brush his lips to one cheek, then the other, and he caught the momentary tension before she swiftly recovered.

'Alessandro.' Her acknowledgment was accompanied by a polite smile as he released her hand.

In control, he perceived...and wondered idly what it would take to break it. Only to immediately dismiss the thought. Lily was Sophia's niece, god-daughter, and *family*.

Yet something about her resonated with him, and he was inclined to discover why. The stirring of sensual chemistry together with the temptation to taste her generous mouth intrigued him.

'You are enjoying your stay with Sophia?' More than polite conversation, he mused, surprised to discover he was genuinely interested in her response.

A subtle perfume teased his senses...light, with a faint hint of warmth, woodsy, slightly floral with a tinge of musk, and something else he failed to define. Different from the more exotic fragrances favoured by many of his feminine companions. He wondered if she was aware it invited a closer examination, followed by the unbidden inclination to discover if the perfume was merely spritzed to various pulse-points, or applied as a lotion smoothed over her body. 'My aunt is very kind.'

'Sophia's generosity is well known.' Hence the instinctive protectiveness of those who had Sophia's interests at heart. 'Your visit will give her much pleasure.'

Her mouth curved into a faint smile, and he found himself being fascinated by the slight dimple at the edge of her cheek.

'Please don't feel obligated to engage me in polite conversation,' she offered quietly.

His eyes sharpened a little. 'Is that what you think I'm doing?'

Her chin lifted fractionally. 'Isn't it?'

'No.'

'I wonder why I find it difficult to believe you.' One eyebrow slanted as he regarded her thoughtfully. 'A lack of confidence in your personal charm?'

*Oh, yes, that would do it.* Except Lily refused to allow herself the indulgence.

Three days ago she'd arrived in Milan. A city where her late parents had been raised, educated, and had married before emigrating to Australia with their six-month-old daughter, Liliana—or Lily, as she was affectionately known—to begin a new life in Sydney.

An idyllic childhood, a good education—Lily had excelled in every area of her life, qualifying as a chef and becoming a partner in her parents' restaurant. But then her parents' death three years ago in a car accident had left her suddenly in charge of the restaurant, an enviable inheritance, and one she had lived up to with the support of a few long-term friends.

A year ago she'd fallen in love, accepted James's ring, and had begun planning the big day. Only to return home early two weeks before their wedding to discover James in bed with a blonde, with whom, when pressed, he admitted he'd been conducting an affair for some months.

Lily had immediately thrown him out, despatched his clothes after him, returned his ring by courier, and promptly telephoned Sophia, her late mother's sister, to relay the wedding was cancelled. An invitation to visit had followed, and it had taken Lily only a few weeks to appoint a valued staff memb...

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