



Ruthlessly Bedded by the Italian Billionaire

By Emma Darcy

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And then there's the private arrangement Dante is ruthlessly demanding....

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Editorial Review

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Sydney, Australia

'Miss Rossini...'

Another voice calling to her, using Bella's name.

Jenny struggled to understand. Her mind felt weirdly disconnected, taking in only snatches of what was said. She couldn't make sense of what she heard. It was as if she was locked inside a fog that almost cleared sometimes but then swallowed her up into a blank nothingness. Was this a nightmare that kept coming and receding? She needed to wake up, get a grip on what was real, but her eyelids were so heavy.

'Miss Rossini...'

There it was again. Where was Bella? Why did the voices use her friend's name as though it belonged to her? It was wrong. Her head ached with trying to figure it out. The fog swirled. So much easier to slide back into oblivion where there was no painful confusion. Yet she wanted answers, wanted the torment of this nightmare to end. Which meant focusing all the energy she could summon on opening her eyes.

'Oh, dear God! She woke up! She's awake!'

The screech hurt her ears. The sudden glare of light made her want to close her eyes, but she fought the impulse, frightened of losing the strength to open them again. Her blurred vision picked up a flurry of movement.

'I'll get the doctor!'

Doctor... white bed... white screens... tubes stuck in her arm. This had to be a hospital. Some kind of sling was on her other arm. She couldn't see her legs. The blanket on the bed was covering them. She tried to move them but couldn't manage it. Dead weight. Her mind filled with a galloping fear. Was she paralysed?

A nurse appeared at the foot of her bed, a pretty blond woman with anxious blue eyes. 'Hi! My name is Alison. I've paged Dr Farrell. He'll be here in a minute, Miss Rossini.'

Jenny tried to say that wasn't her name but her mouth wouldn't co-operate. Her lips, her throat were so dry they felt cracked.

'I'll get you a cup of ice,' Alison said, darting away.

When she returned she was accompanied by a man who introduced himself as Dr Farrell. Alison fed her a piece of ice which she rolled around her tongue, working moisture from it, grateful for the lubrication trickling down her throat.

'Glad to have you with us at last, Miss Rossini,' the doctor was saying, looking cheerful about it. He was a short stocky man, probably mid-thirties, dark hair given a buzz cut that seemed to defy the receding hairline, certainly no vanity about hiding it. His bright brown eyes twinkled approval of her wakeful state. 'You've been in a coma for the past two weeks.'

Why? What's wrong with me? Panic churned through her as she tried to telegraph the questions with her eyes.

'You were in a car accident,' he said, understanding her need to know. 'For some reason you were not wearing a seat belt and you were thrown clear of the wreck. However, you suffered a severe concussion, and the bruising of the brain undoubtedly contributed to the coma. You also had three broken ribs, a broken arm, deep lacerations on one leg and you have a cast on the other, fixing up a broken ankle. However, you are mending nicely and it's only a matter of time before you'll be on your feet again.'

Relief whooshed through her. She wasn't paralysed. However, her bruised brain wasn't working so well. It couldn't recollect any memory of a car accident. Besides, it didn't make sense that she hadn't been wearing a seat belt. She always did. It was an automatic action whenever she got into a car.

'I see you frowning, Miss Rossini. Are you up to speaking yet?' the doctor asked kindly.

I'm not Bella. Why didn't they know that?

She licked her lips and managed to croak, 'My name...'

'Good! You know your name.'

No!

She tried again. 'My friend...'

The doctor sighed, grimaced. His eyes softened with sympathy. 'I'm sorry to tell you that your friend passed away in the accident. Nothing could be done for her. The car burst into flames before help arrived. If you had not been thrown clear...'

Bella... dead? Burnt? The horror of it brought a gush of tears. The doctor took her hand and patted it, mouthing words of comfort, but Jenny didn't really hear anything but the tone. All she could think of was that being burned was a terrible way to die and Bella had been so kind to her, taking her in, giving her a place to live, even letting her borrow her name so she could work at the Venetian Forum since everyone employed there had to be Italian. Or of Italian heritage.

Was that how their identities had got mixed up?

The tears kept coming. The doctor left, appointing the nurse to sit at her bedside and talk to her. Jenny couldn't speak. She was too overwhelmed by the shock of her situation and the dreadful loss of her friend. Her only friend. And Bella had had no one, either. No family. Both of them orphans—a bond that had given them immediate empathy with each other.

Who would bury her? What would happen to her apartment and all her things...the home she'd made, waiting for her to come back... except she never would return to it.

Eventually the exhaustion of grief drew her into sleep.

Another nurse had replaced Alison when she woke up.

'Hello. My name is Jill,' she said encouragingly. 'Can I get you anything, Miss Rossini?'

Not Rossini. Kent. Jenny Kent. But there was no one to care about who or what she was now that Bella was

gone.

Fear speared through the dark turmoil in her mind.

Where would she go when they finally released her from this hospital? Social Services would probably find some place for her, as they had throughout her childhood and early teenage years—places she'd hated—and if she was forced back into the welfare system because of her injuries, that sleazy abusive creep might hear of it.

Revulsion cramped her stomach. The officials hadn't believed her when she had reported their highly experienced social worker for *helping* down-and-out girls in return for sexual favours. He was too entrenched in the system not to be trusted, and the other girls had been too frightened of his vengeful power to back up her report. She'd been painted as a vindictive liar for not getting what she wanted from him, and no doubt he would revel in victimising her again if he became aware of her present circumstances.

Yet what other choice was viable? Simply to survive she would have to be dependent on welfare until she could stand on her own two feet again and make her way, selling her sketches on the street as she had before meeting Bella. Impossible to stay on at the Venetian Forum without the Rossini name.

The wild thought flashed into her mind—did she have to give it up?

Everyone thought Jenny Kent was dead.

There was no one to care if she was, no one to come forward to claim her. If officialdom believed she was Isabella Rossini... if she found out why they did... would it be too terrible of her to take over her friend's identity for a while... stay in the apartment... go on working at the Venetian Forum... build up some savings... give herself time to think, to plan out what to do when she felt up to coping on her own?

Wouldn't her friend have wanted that for her instead of all of it just... *ending*?

Rome, Italy

Six Months Later

Dante Rossini unwound himself from Anya's voluptuous charms and reached for his cell-phone.

'Don't!' she snapped. 'You can pick up the message later.'

'It's my grandfather,' he said, ignoring the protest.

'Oh, fine! He calls and you jump!'

Her burst of petulance annoyed him. He sliced her a quelling look as he flipped open the cell-phone, knowing it could only be his grandfather because no one else had been given this private number—an immediate link between them. He'd bought the phone for this specific use when Nonno had been diagnosed with inoperable cancer, and yes, he was ready to jump whenever it rang. Three months at most, the doctors had forecast, and already a month had gone by. Time was running out for Marco Rossini.

'Dante here,' he said quickly, aware of a tight knot of urgency in his chest. 'What can I do for you, Nonno?'

Frustrated that her jeering words had had no effect on him, Anya flounced off the bed and strutted angrily towards the bathroom. Time was running out on Anya Michaelson, too, he decided. She always expected to

be indulged, which he hadn't minded in the past, given her fantastic body and her talent for erotic games, but her self-centred core was beginning to irritate him.

He heard his grandfather wheezing, gathering breath enough to speak. 'It's a family matter, Dante.'

Family? Usually it was a business issue he wanted resolved. 'What's the problem?' he asked.

'I'll explain when you get here.'

'You want me to come now?'

'Yes. No time to waste.'

'I'll be there before lunch,' he promised.

'Good boy!'

Boy... Dante smiled ironically as he flicked the cellphone shut. He was thirty years old, already designated to take over the management of a global business, having met every challenge his grandfather had set for him from his teenage years onward. Only Marco Rossini had the balls to still call him a boy, and Dante excused it as a term of familial affection. He'd just turned six years old when his parents were killed in a speed-boat accident and he'd been his grandfather's *boy* ever since.

'What about me?' Anya demanded as he rose from the bed.

She'd propped herself provocatively against the bathroom doorjamb, every lush naked curve jutting out at him, her long blond hair arranged in tousled disarray over her shoulders, her full-lipped mouth pouting. The desire she'd stirred earlier was gone. The only feeling she raised now was impatience.

'I'm sorry. I have to leave.'

'You promised to take me shopping today.'

'Shopping is unimportant.'

She was blocking the way into the bathroom. He took hold of her waist to move her aside. She flung her arms around his neck, pressing herself against him, her green eyes sparkling anger. 'It is not unimportant to me, Dante. You promised...!'

'Another time, Anya. I'm needed on Capri. Now, let go.'

His voice was cold. His eyes were cold. She let go, infuriated by his command but ...

Users Review

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