

Chapter One

Melissa Thomas ran a fine sable brush along the palette sitting next to her on the scaffolding and put the final touches of white paint on the mural. Just the right amount would highlight the women's umbrellas and bring out the rain's translucence.

"Any news from that fancy school in Italy?" Jose Hernandez' voice pulled her from her reverie.

"Not yet." Her stomach flip-flopped at the mere mention of Santa Reparata's International School of Art in Florence. She glanced from her rendition of Renoir's Umbrellas to her swarthy colleague down in the mezzanine. The carpenter always put the finishing touches on the houses she decorated. Today, they consisted of laying mahogany moldings, an oval shaped crown and garland trim. The Villa Collection accents would lend the room an air of 18th century French pleasure retreat.

"Smile." He held up the small digital camera he always kept in his work belt.

Melissa pushed her dark stringy hair out of her eyes with the back of her hand. "Jose, put that thing away. I'm covered in paint and I – "

The flash went off, catching her in mid-sentence. "Send them a picture of you with this mural and you're a shoo in."

"They want real artists, Jose. Not a girl who paints murals in rich people's homes."

Something resembling exasperation creased Jose's weathered face. "You're good, pecoso. Way better than this Renoir guy."

She grinned at the term of endearment and ludicrous compliment. Her old friend had been calling her pecoso, or 'freckle face', since the first time they'd met. No one else could get away with calling her that, but from Jose, the nickname felt right. "You're just saying that 'cause you like me."

"Who said I like you? You make me crazy and you're dripping white paint all over the floor."

She grabbed a paint-splotched rag and threw it in his direction. It hit his arm, and dropped to the ground, adding another stain on the rich auburn colored hardwood. "Aye, aye, aye. What am I going to do with you?"

She climbed down the ladder, and snatched a lukewarm beer from his cooler. "When I get into Santa Reparata you'll be rid of me for good." She'd been working with Jose for almost two years. It was the longest she'd ever stayed in a place and she was beginning to feel antsy. She popped the brew's cap off against the side of one of the rungs and took a swig. Jose lunged and grabbed one of her ankles in an attempt to snag the beverage while she was off guard. Melissa nearly fell over but recovered, spilling cerveza all over his t-shirt.

"Madre de dio." The rest of his words were lost in an inaudible grumble, "Maria is going to think I spent my day drinking at the Cantina."

Melissa giggled and took another large sip. Jose's wife would take her side even if she were dead wrong, just to give Jose a hard time.

After stealing one more sip, she relinquished the drink and grabbed a damp cloth.

"Drinking on the job, Jose?" Brianna Moore's shrill voice came from the open sliding doors.

The thirty-something carpenter glared at Melissa and whispered, "I owe you one."

Melissa bit her lip to stifle a giggle and turned an innocent face at Brianna.

She and Jose had a love-hate relationship with the designer, but they knew better than to antagonize her. She was the most sought after decorator in Southern California and there was never any shortage of work.

Jose put the beer down on his workbench. "We were just taking a little break, Miss Moore." He only called her 'Miss' when he was in trouble.

Brianna walked the perimeter of the room, examining their artistry, a pleased smirk floating on her lips. Jose followed her, imitating her gait and doing a poor job of it. Melissa looked away in an effort to ignore Jose's shenanigans. One laugh and Brie would get upset.

Business for Décor Delights had been good of late and Brianna always booked her to do their decorative painting. And although the style maven could stop a conversation with an icy stare, Melissa didn't want to upset her. A couple more jobs like this one and she'd have enough money to spend the coming year in Italy.

She studied Brie's impeccable look. Her classic blonde bob and impossibly long legs were accented by a salmon Capri and blouse combo, big bold Mardi Gras type earrings and delicate sandals. Melissa turned her gaze to her own paint-stained t-shirt, ripped cargos and ugly work boots. At first glance no one ever believed she and Brie worked together and they had an even harder time buying their friendship. And yet, if she hadn't met the decorator, she'd probably still be working as a scenic painter. Brie was the one who'd convinced her she had the talent to do more.

Crouching by the scaffolding, she put her paints and brushes away in the artist box she'd made in Theatre Arts a few years back. Jars on the bottom, tubes on top, fine sable brushes on the left, larger ones on the right. She reached behind her for the bottle of paint thinner and found it resting next to a pair of feet. Men's feet enclosed in a pair of expensive deck shoes. Melissa's glance traveled up a pair of beige linen pants to the open collar of an off-white shirt, then from a square stubbly jaw into the deepest, bluest eyes she'd ever seen. She stared, mesmerized.

'Blue Eyes' looked down at her and smiled. "You must be Melissa."

She stood up and all five feet three inches of her stared at the stranger's luscious full lips. Were it not for the sharp angles of his face, they might have looked a little too pretty. With his sun-streaked bangs and deep tan, he looked like one of those preppy yacht club guys – hardly the kind of man who would choose an umbrella scene. She realized she was gawking and an uncomfortable heat rose to her cheeks. Could she be acting any weirder? She held her hand out, then, remembering it was sticky with paint, pulled it away and wiped it on her pants.

Good-natured laughter escaped the man's mouth. His warm voice caressed the top of her head. He sounded like an angel.

"I'm sorry. I'm being rude, Mr.?" She tentatively held her hand out again.

The man took it, seemingly unaffected by the paint or her discomfort. "I'm Alden. Alden Desoto." He turned to her colleague and shook his hand. "You must be Jose. Brianna speaks very highly of you both."

The handyman shot Melissa a look of disbelief, then smiled at the newcomer. "It's all lies. She's the brains of the operation, and the beauty, of course," he added smiling at their boss who was walking toward them.

"Jose. You flatter me," Brianna purred.

Melissa smiled and gave Jose a look that said, 'Smooth move, dude.' At the sound of his voice, she snapped her attention back to Alden.

"Brie thinks my home needs a makeover. She had a hard time convincing me and invited me to come see a few of her works-in-progress. If this is any indication of what you're capable of, I'm in."

So, the ostentatious Venice Canal villa wasn't his. Melissa stared at him, at a complete loss for words. Luckily, Jose seemed unaffected by Alden's charm and welcomed him on behalf of both of them. "Mr. Desoto, you're in good hands. Miss Moore is the best in the business."

"Call me Alden. She says the same thing of you."

Alden and Jose chatted briefly while Melissa slinked away to wash her hands. When she came back, Brianna was leading Alden outside to the villa's terrace. The sweet scent of wisteria drifted in from the front yard. Melissa watched the couple through the French doors as they chatted.

Brie had a penchant for rich men and she'd dated many of her clients. Melissa couldn't blame her. Especially where Alden was concerned. He looked like he'd jumped out of a Ralph Lauren campaign.

The sound of Brie's clear, polished laughter resonated. She was pulling out all the stops. Melissa watched, a pang of jealousy tugging at the pit of her stomach. Brie would suggest they meet for dinner, no doubt. She'd disguise the meeting as a necessary step to discuss the terms of their business arrangement and would come back with a new client and potential new boyfriend.

Through the window pane, she watched as the blonde punctuated her conversation with subtle but very clear touching. "Look at her. She's so – "

"Easy?"

"Knock it off. You heard the man. She said nice things about you." For a moment, Alden looked in her direction, as though he could see her. Melissa's heart jumped in her throat. He couldn't. The windows were tinted so curious passers-by couldn't see in from the Canal Walk. "She's so cool and elegant and yet, there's no doubting what she's after. I wish I were more like that."

"You want to be an aging beauty queen with an agenda?"

"No. Educated, elegant, classy." Her community college night classes in Theatre Arts hardly counted as a Fine Arts Education. She sighed and in a moment of candor, added, "I don't know if they're going to let me into that school. I might end up painting faux finishes and cheesy murals for the rest of my life." At least she'd do it in Italy.

"You can do anything you want to do. But, if you really want to be like Brianna, skip art school and start learning how to be more manipulative, power hungry and self-absorbed."

Melissa ruffled Jose's hair and leaned her head on his shoulder for a moment. "You're sweet. She's not that bad."

"You're right. Somebody should give her an award for being such a warm and giving humanitarian."

"She hired you, didn't she?"

"That's it, no more beer for you. You're getting just a little too mouthy."

She watched Alden's casual confident stride as he walked away. "I sure as hell couldn't say anything cute when I had a chance."

Brianna breezed in from the terrace. "So, it's settled. We start work on the Desoto home, next Monday."

"By 'we' I'm assuming you mean 'me'?" Melissa asked. "I've got a guy coming in to fix my inboard motor on Monday. Can we push it to Tuesday?"

"Are you still living in that sieve?"

Melissa rolled her eyes. "I like living in the Marina and when I've had enough, I'll untie my boat and sail away."

"Brianna is right. I worry about you alone at night over there."

"Guys, I appreciate your concern. But, I am not alone. A lot of my neighbors are live-aboards and –"

Noticing Brie's raised right eyebrow and the deep furrow between Jose's eyes, she sighed. "Never mind. We're getting off topic. Santa Barbara is two hours away. I can't drive back and forth every –"

"You'll be staying in the Desoto guesthouse for the duration of the contract."

Sleeping in a real bed on solid ground for a few weeks might be kind of nice. Melissa frowned. As long as she didn't have to put up with the guy's trophy wife all day. "How does Mrs. Desoto feel about that?"

Brianna's mouth curled into a slow enigmatic smile. "There is no Mrs. Desoto."

So 'Blue Eyes' was single. The gig was sounding better and better by the minute. "Have you discussed the extent of the work he wants to have done?"

"We're meeting tonight to go over the details of our deal."

Bingo. Melissa gave Jose a knowing look, then turned to Brie and grinned.

Her boss didn't share their amusement. "What's so funny?"

At Brie's petulant pout, Melissa turned her grin into what she hoped was an earnest smile. Now was not the time to get on her bad side. "As soon as I saw him, I sensed Mr. Desoto had discerning taste." Brianna's mouth softened a little but she wasn't buying it.

"Look, I didn't mean any disrespect. Jose and I were just talking about what a great business woman you are and I bet him you'd not only land the deal, but that you'd be dining with the guy tonight."

An expression of satisfaction showed in Brianna's eyes.

Melissa pressed on, eager to appease her supervisor. Brie might be hard as nails on the outside, but somewhere under the expensive clothes and Botox injections there was a sensitive soul. "I wish I had half your charm."

"Enough. I forgive you. I've got to go. I want to check on the Malibu job and change before Alden and I meet for dinner. Oh, and honey – " She wiggled her index toward Melissa's left cheek. "You've got a big splotch of white stuff right there."

Melissa put her hand to her face. Great. No wonder Alden had grinned at her that way.

Brie applied a coat of peach colored lipstick while admiring her reflection in the inside mirror of her designer handbag. "All right, my dears. I'm off!"

"But, what about Monday, the mechanic – "

"I've got to go now if I want to get across town and back in time for dinner. Call me tomorrow." Brie took off, leaving behind a cloud of her fresh lemony scent.

Jose followed her out the back door. "I'm taking some of this stuff out to the truck."

"Okay." Melissa sighed and returned to her half-packed kit and soaking paint brushes. She'd have to cancel the appointment with her marine mechanic – again. Once Brie decided when a job would start, there was no changing her mind.

Melissa rooted through the box for the small bottle of theatre make-up remover she always kept on hand. That stuff was better than paint thinner – well, on her face anyway. She pulled it out and dabbed a little on the bottom of her t-shirt as she crossed the room to the closest mirror. It was going in the wash anyway. Looking at her reflection in the glass above the fireplace, she pulled the baby tee up above her stomach to her face to wipe the paint. And there, looking back at her in the 19th century mirror, was Alden, a sweet smile dancing on his lips.