

## *Holiday in Bologna – excerpt*

He was standing right in front of her, so close that she could see the definition of his lean, muscular frame through his crisp cotton shirt. 'Yes, I can see that,' Heidi said, exasperated at herself. She would never agree to massage a fully naked man but she dealt with male clients in her aromatherapy practice, treated their hands and feet, their necks and shoulders. Why should she be so flustered by Stefano? 'How's your sprain?' she asked, seizing gratefully on the change of subject.

'Better for this gentle walk,' Stefano said, in a voice of amused indulgence. 'But if you are offering to treat my aching shoulder and back...'

His smile deepened as Heidi was silent, torn between her professional life and this strange new shyness she seemed to have acquired while dealing with him. Perhaps it was because he had opened up to her a little and now, standing by this fountain, he was as close as her own shadow. Closer, because he was lowering that bright blond head and his clever, sensitive hands were encircling her narrow waist.

He kissed her lightly on the mouth and brushed a bead of fountain spray from her cheek. 'I've wanted to do that for a long time,' he said, kissing her again. He smelled of fresh bread and sun and his hands on her back held her tenderly, as if she was made of spun sugar.

'Don't you know how very pretty you are?' he said softly, laughing as she stiffened at the compliment. 'You are, you know. Like the little bride doll on top of a wedding cake.'

Stefano blushed, clearly embarrassed at hearing himself say anything, so absurdly sentimental. 'Thank you for your help,' he said gruffly, taking a step back and releasing her.

It was only a thank you kiss, Heidi told herself. She'd known Stefano for only two weeks.

What does that matter? an inner voice whispered, but Heidi ignored the voice and tried to control her rapidly beating heart, taking several slow deep breaths. 'Shall we continue our walk?' she said, grateful that her question was not a squeak.

Stefano stood back and pointed down the gravelled path. 'There you go.'

Moving first, Heidi set off along the path, scarcely conscious of the wafting spray from the fountain or the opulent red peonies and roses lining the terrace walkway. Stefano had kissed her. She touched her lips with her hand, feeling truly sensual for the first time in her life, registering that she was wearing a blue cotton button-through sundress and sandals, items that had just become her favorite outfit.

'Hey, wait!' Stefano overtook her in a few strides. 'It's usually you trotting after me,' he teased.

'Pardon me, but I don't trot.' Feeling more composed, Heidi took Stefano's hand in hers.

'Got you!' she teased in return. 'Where to now?'

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