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BOTH HEART AND SOUL

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MARIANNE EVANS

With This
Kiss

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Marianne Evans

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With this Kiss

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Dedication

To my grandma, Rachel Alfano DeSantis. 82 Mozart Street and your deli live forever in my memory...and my heart.

This book belongs to you, Nooch, with all my love.

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

Ecclesiastes 3:11

1

The Mercury Club
East Rutherford, New Jersey
December 21st—Ten Years Ago

Voices filled the banquet hall. Music and laughter resonated off the walls like the bell chimes of the season.

Scoping the room, Jonathan Santini accepted and dismissed people at a glance. He didn't intend to stay long; he simply wanted to pay his respects to Rachel Alfano—affectionately referred to by those who knew and loved her as Grandma Rache. He'd spend some time with Grandma Rache and then call it a night. Social glitz had never been at the top of his favorites list, and he wasn't really into mingling with the horde of family who had gathered for Grandma Rache's eightieth Christmas.

Jonathan's visual wandering took in the long head table festooned with balloons and streamers of green and gold, red and white. His attention zeroed in on a

spot to the far side of the room.

Exquisite.

The solitary word rode a tempting circuit through Jonathan's mind. A solitary sensation filled his body. *Lightning-sizzle.*

She looked a bit younger than the type to usually hold his interest, but she took his breath away. Olive-hued skin suggested an Italian heritage. He focused on her bare, creamy arms and his fingertips twitched.

His gaze traveled the length of a thick column of dark brown hair that fell neatly to her waist and shimmered beneath the overhead lights. A few errant curls tumbled free from a pair of tiny, sparkling barrettes. The image prompted an ache to know more about her.

In manner and appearance, she struck him as a young woman of breeding and class, while he felt out of place in this sea of tuxedos, fancy clothes, and sparkly baubles. In fact, the longer he surveyed the scene, the more oppressive became the neatly knotted tie he wore. But he resisted the instinct to run a finger beneath his shirt collar. Instead, he straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin.

Settings like this left him edgy and tense. Frankly, he'd rather be in his commissioned post behind the counter of Rachel Alfano's simple neighborhood grocery store. After all, he thoroughly enjoyed chatting up the slew of customers who relied on Rachel's Deli for sundry items, fresh sandwiches, and all the latest neighborhood gossip.

He loved the store and Rachel Alfano, because Rachel returned that love ten-fold and unconditionally. That was her way. Would the rest of the Alfano family react in similar fashion? Blue collar versus white

collar—with complex layers between the two? The answer to that remained to be seen.

He moved forward, captured by the pull of the mysterious woman's large brown eyes. Wide and full, her mouth often fell into smiles as she chatted with a group who stood nearby. By way of contagious reaction, Jonathan smiled as well.

He watched her glide from her position at a built-in buffet table to stand close to Rachel's side. She settled a hand lightly on the older woman's shoulder—evidently his mystery lady knew Rachel quite well. Tenderness accentuated the gesture; loving emotion telegraphed from her eyes straight through to her mannerisms. That fact intrigued him even more than her beauty.

Eager to meet her, Jonathan moved to join their group.

When he stepped up, he bent to greet Grandma Rache with a tender kiss on the cheek. Petite and pleasingly rounded, she wore a simple, red, wool dress with pearls at her throat and ears. She looked far younger than her years would tell.

"Jonathan!" Her eyes sparkled. "You made it! It's about time too. I've been waiting."

He smiled. "How could you miss me in this sea of people? Grandma Rache, you look gorgeous. Merry Christmas, *mia bella*."

When he straightened, he looked right into the eyes of his mystery woman. No longer diluted by distance, her presence hit him swift and hard. The bodice of her dress featured black velvet. Involuntarily his fingertips twitched again, reacting to an inner call to reach out, to touch the soft fabric.

She sipped water from a goblet and then set it

aside, all smooth grace and supple form. When she moistened her lips, he all but tasted their dewy, sweet flavor.

Rachel arched a brow. Not much got by Grandma Rache. "Jonathan Santini, I'd like you to meet my granddaughter, Isabella Julianna Alfano."

Jonathan took Isabella's extended hand and kissed the back, admiring her and unapologetic for it.

She looked away, blushing.

"Isabella Julianna Alfano," Jonathan repeated in a murmur. "That's not a name, that's poetry. I'm delighted to meet you."

The comment snared her wide-eyed attention. Her blush deepened. "Thank you. It's a pleasure. And, unfortunately, Grandma never fails to use the unabridged version of my name. I'm usually called Bella."

Translation: Beauty.

Jonathan grinned. "Indeed."

Grandma Rache chuckled low.

Bella averted her gaze, but rebounded quickly. When she looked back up at him there were questions in her eyes. Questions and...intrigue. "Aunt Bella!"

Bella's attention slid to Jonathan's left. He turned, following the direction of her gaze.

"Hey, Nick!" Isabella called, her voice a perfect blend of smoke and satin. "Come here and give me a hug. I haven't had a chance to see you yet. Did you get a look at all the gifts under the tree?"

The youngster, maybe six or seven, all but rocketed into her open arms. A look of love bloomed from Bella's smiling lips to the depths of her eyes.

Fleetingly Jonathan envied the boy for being on the receiving end of her tenderness and enthusiasm.

Bella crouched and flipped her hair to the side so she could give the kid a peck on the cheek.

The back of her gown scooped discreetly just as the front, and once more the sight of her exposed skin turned into a siren call, prompting his fingers to twitch. Resolutely, he quelled the impulse.

Nick pulled on Bella's hand, yanking her free of their group. "C'mon, Aunt Bella! You've gotta come to the window and look outside. It's snowing like crazy!"

She looked back at Jonathan, apology in her eyes. He smiled and nodded in understanding.

When Bella drifted from the table, a middle-aged woman took her spot. Fingering a goblet of red wine, she regarded Jonathan with unhidden speculation and more than a touch of hauteur. "You are?"

"Jonathan Santini."

In an instant, her attitude morphed from superior to ice-cold. The transformation left him confused; he'd never met her before.

"Santini. Would Carlos Santini be your father?"

Oh yes, he thought. *Here we go*. This woman knew his dad, the scrappy, opinionated, tough-minded businessman and former union boss.

Life experience had taught Jonathan to remain smooth and calm in the face of hostility. Further, he refused to hurt or offend Grandma Rache—*ever*—so he regarded the woman politely. "That's right, yes. You would be?"

"Isabella's mother," she answered with succinct cool. "My name is Emily Alfano."

Rachel gave Emily a quelling look. "Em, did you know that my Jonathan here is a freshman at Columbia Law School? In his spare time, he's been helping me at the store. I wouldn't make it without him. He's a

godsend.”

Jonathan took Rachel’s soft, gnarled hand in his and held it firm. “Labor of love, Grandma Rache.”

Emily remained stoic and unswayed from a suspicious demeanor. “Interesting style of help you’ve recruited for the deli, Mom. I hope you keep as close an eye on him as he does on you.”

Rachel’s mouth went taut, her lips pressed tight as she glared at Emily. Jonathan addressed his next comment solely to Rachel. “I’ll be back for a visit shortly.” But before he walked away, he couldn’t resist looking once more at Isabella’s mother. “Mrs. Alfano, I’m glad to have met you. Enjoy the evening.”

Jonathan’s struggle to remain proper evaporated once he left. He clenched his jaw and strode toward the bar. Right about now something cold and bracing was definitely in order.

~*~

Bella watched Jonathan from a distance while her niece, eleven-year-old Christina, kept her company.

He stood at the bar, nursing a beverage of some sort. His leather jacket was off now. It probably hung on the coatrack in the entry hall.

She turned her attention to her evening bag and searched for lipstick and hand lotion. She and Christina stood beneath an evergreen wreath adorned by a large red bow and glittering, white, twinkle lights that sprayed festive, sparkly beams across her niece’s face.

“You always smell so good.” Christy swayed in time to the music that played and pointed at the bottle Bella held out. “Is that what you use?” she asked as she

reached towards the bottle.

Bella nodded. *Trésor*. The scent was her favorite. Christina's hero worship prompted Bella's smile. She remembered coveting such vanities when she was her niece's age. Their almost seven year age gap felt like a few decades of maturity.

"It sure is. Here." Bella squeezed a dollop onto Christy's palm. "Rub it in."

Christy smiled, her delight as bright as a sunbeam. On a dais near the back of the hall, a DJ continued to play pre-dinner music selections. Guests spun on the dance floor. Jonathan looked her way once or twice; Bella ducked her head in diversion.

Christina sniffed experimentally at the back of her hand and then sighed with undiluted female pleasure. "Awesome."

Drawn back to the moment, Bella laughed and happily surrendered the tube of lotion to her niece. "Go ahead and keep it, sweetie. Enjoy."

"Wha... Really? Thanks, Bella! I love it!" Christy clung to it like a treasure then hugged her tight. "You're so cool!"

Bella tucked back a strand of Christy's soft, blonde hair. "Promise you won't overdo it, OK? If you do, I'll get in big-time trouble."

"OK."

Bella felt a fingertip slide, slow and firm, against the length of her arm. She jumped, knowing who it was without turning around, even before the familiar voice sounded.

"She's right, you know. You do smell great."

Christy giggled. Her attention ping-ponged between Bella and Jonathan. "She's pretty too, isn't she?"

Jonathan gave Christy a playful wink. “*Pretty* doesn’t even scratch the surface.” The playfulness disappeared as he looked at Isabella. “Will you dance with me?”

Heat and desire slid neatly into place. Her pulse scampered. “I’d love to.”

Jonathan escorted her to the dance floor, but he turned back to Christy. “Stand by. You’re next.”

The lighting toward the back of the banquet facility was dim. Thousands of tiny white lights wound through thick swags of evergreen on the walls. A brightly illuminated tree stood guard in the corner, beneath it a veritable flood of presents. Strobes from a suspended sparkle ball picked up the light and flashed all around Jonathan. As though compelled to focus attention only on him, Isabella noticed each tantalizing play of light and dark.

He tucked her expertly into his arms. She looked into his eyes and promptly realized she was out of her league with this mystery man.

As though in answer, Jonathan touched a fingertip to the underside of her jaw, tilting her chin upward. “This dance will be better if you move in a little closer, Isabella.” A brief, unsteady silence followed as a ballad began to play. “I promise I don’t bite.”

She lost herself in eyes black as coal. Straight, jet black hair fell in neat layers to the collar of his shirt. Bella imagined the satiny texture of it and felt sure that reality would surpass the fantasy.

She allowed him to pull her closer, but skirted eye contact by watching him twine his fingers with hers. His skin, olive-hued like hers, was rougher, arousing.

“You really know your way around kids,” he said. “That little girl sure does love you.”

“And I love her back. Someday I’d love to have lots of kids who are just like Christy and Nick.”

“It’d certainly be *my* pleasure,” he murmured, almost too low to hear. But Bella caught the words, and heat climbed through her body, instant and bone-melting. Seeming to realize he was busted, Jonathan’s lips curved upward.

Though startled by his forward manner, Isabella didn’t back down. Instead, she decided to challenge him. “That it would.”

But the effort left her dizzy. He possessed an aura of confidence she envied. In fact, it pulled her to him at the same time it left her unnerved. Always carefully refined and proper, she absorbed the vibration of his inner strength, wishing she possessed a larger portion of that attribute.

He settled their joined hands against his chest and they swayed together in time to the music. They remained part of a crowd, yet at the same time, the moment they shared built into privacy.

“I just met your mom,” he said.

“And?” She braced herself for what her mom might have said, or how she might’ve reacted to a person who exhibited his degree of intensity and edginess.

He slowly drew her hands to rest on his shoulders. “And I think she wants me to disappear into the night. She must have seen us talking with your grandma, because she bee-lined over from the bar as soon as you left with Nick.”

“Yet here you are.”

Large shoulders, tightly muscled, lifted and fell against her splayed hands as he shrugged.

“Here I am.”

Isabella trailed her fingertips against a curl of his hair. The heat of his neck, and the understated, appealing aroma of wood-spiced cologne, slipped against her senses. "I'm sorry if she was mean to you."

His teeth shone in a smile best described as wolfish. "She wasn't mean, Bella. She didn't need to be."

"Tell me about it," she muttered, which only increased his smile.

"It's OK," he assured her with unexpected gentleness. "I can tell you this, though. She's no fan of mine or my family."

Why on Earth would that be? She pondered the point, but didn't want this moment tainted by negativity. Instead, she tucked her head against his chest. Jonathan's breath was warm and soft against her cheek.

She drifted into quietude, enjoying the way it felt to be in his arms, to move with him in time to the music. He rested his cheek against her hair, and she wanted to sigh with pleasure.

"Tell me about your branch of the Alfano family tree."

"Well, my father was Grandma's youngest son. Tony. He died a few years ago of lung cancer."

"I'm sorry."

She nodded. "Thanks. As you've already seen, my Mom's overly protective as a result. I don't blame her really. I'm the youngest and the only girl." She looked at him, a bit surprised by the narrowed eyes and speculative expression she discovered.

"Your dad...he was in construction, wasn't he?"

"Mm-hm. We live in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. My two older brothers are getting ready to take over the

operation of his company. My uncle's been doing it up until now. Why do you ask?"

"I think I remember my dad speaking of a Tony Alfano—long time ago, though."

Speculation eased, but she wondered about his comment. Was there a history, perhaps?

She railed against asking questions, not wanting to dissuade him. Being in his arms thrilled her.

Jonathan peered at her, visibly curious. "How old are you, Bella?"

"I'll be eighteen in two months."

Releasing her hand, he tucked his own snug against her waist. As they concluded their dance, her pounding heart left her breathless, her body warm.

In the end, they separated slowly. Isabella prayed a red flush hadn't covered her skin. Jonathan kept a light hold on her until the last note faded. Lights flicked on and off a few times and the assemblage responded, gathering for dinner.

His gaze traveled the length of her body in a slow, attentive survey, which she felt clear through to her singing veins.

"Thank you for the dance," he murmured.

Swept away by his appreciative gaze and the disproportionate unemotional tone of his words, Bella simply nodded.

Jonathan acted as escort, leading her to the head table. In gentlemanly fashion, he seated her. To Isabella's delight, he had been assigned the spot next to her.

Following a meal-opening prayer provided by Grandma's long-time Pastor, Father O'Hara, plates overflowing with chilled antipasto were presented and beverage orders taken. Wait staff stepped forward

carrying bottles of burgundy and Chianti wine to accompany the meal.

Trays of lasagna were prepped along with baskets of fresh Italian bread that would cap the meal to perfection.

As usual, Grandma had outdone herself. Nobody, but nobody, was going home hungry.

Bella gnawed on the inside of her cheek, pining for a goblet of wine...her first official adult drink. Surely her mother would understand.

The waiter neared. Isabella leaned toward her mom and whispered, "Can I please order a glass of Chianti? Just one? For Christmas?"

Her mother sighed. "Isabella, I don't appreciate being manipulated."

A silent face-off ensued. Isabella wouldn't embarrass herself by arguing, but she also refused to buckle. At last her mother backed down, but not before saying, "You're not going to like it."

Isabella rewarded her mother with what she hoped was a radiant smile then reached beneath the table to give her hand a squeeze. "Thank you!"

Apparently not quite appeased, her mother arched a brow. "Just one glass."

"Understood."

Once Bella's crystal goblet shimmered with ruby-red Chianti, she noticed the amused expression on Jonathan's face. Her focus stayed on his eyes when she lifted her glass. A pungent, almost woody aroma filled her nostrils just seconds before the full, rich flavor of the wine slid against her taste buds.

Jonathan lifted his own glass in salute and tipped back a sip before releasing her gaze and delving into his antipasto salad.

“So, Jonathan,” her mother said, “when we introduced ourselves, you mentioned you attend Columbia Law School. That’s very impressive. I wonder if the idea of his son studying law, of all things, is disconcerting to your father.”

With those few taut words, tension brewed. Isabella looked at her mother aghast. At least Jonathan didn’t seem put-off by her condescension. Not yet, anyway.

“Emily, Jonathan is someone I count on without a second thought,” said Grandma Rache. “He’s earned my complete trust—and friendship.” Grandma Rache’s kind glance toward Jonathan added emphasis to her reproach of Mom’s indiscretion. “The Santinis have been friends to me for a lot of years.”

Mom shrugged. “I apologize if the comment seems rude, I’m simply curious.”

Grandma Rache prepared to answer that, but Jonathan beat her to the punch. “My father’s proud of what I’ve done so far. And I’m equally proud of *his* accomplishments.”

Grandma Rache nodded, twirling pasta around her fork. “Carlos is a working man who has spent his life looking out for the working man.”

“You mean a notoriously-connected working man who thinks nothing of ruining anyone who gets in his way.” The muttered words were so quiet that Grandma Rache and those around them couldn’t hear. Isabella did, however. Judging by his stiff posture and the firm set of his mouth, so did Jonathan.

Bella absorbed it all, her attention moving in an avid triangle between the three participants. In the end, her gaze landed on Jonathan, who fidgeted with the stem of his wine goblet then his cutlery. Despite the

subtle display of disquiet, his demeanor remained resolute.

Bella marveled once more at his well-harnessed control. But then he looked her way, and Isabella noticed a lightning-strike intensity sparked in his eyes just beneath that mask of restraint.

Conversation shifted as dinner progressed, but a tide of longing coursed through her body. A breath-soft tingle awakened her senses.

So the danger she'd sensed in him wasn't just her imagination.

When dinner concluded, he dismissed himself quickly, kissing Grandma Rache's cheek and securing the promise of wine and conversation later in the evening.

But as he walked away, his gaze never strayed from Isabella's. Gooseflesh rose on her skin. Without a word being spoken, he beckoned.

Transfixed, she waited impatiently for a suitable length of time to pass; then she stood to leave as well.

"Isabella," her mother said, "if you're mingling, you should really put on the jacket to that dress. It's such an attractive complement."

Yes, attractive, and oh-so-discreet.

The black bolero jacket would hide the sensuality of the dress, the very thing Isabella loved most about it. In secret, of course. For a lifetime Bella had existed on a steady diet of conservative attire—standard-issue sweaters, jeans, and modestly stylish dresses. While she had no problem with that, tonight felt magical—like a winter snowfall and Christmas itself had come alive and breathed into the moment. Her ensemble was an adventure in haute couture. Petal-soft velvet, bare arms, and unbound hair fostered within her the heady,

foreign sensation of being an adult.

"I'll get the jacket later, Mom." Consumed by the image of Jonathan, she ignored all else and lifted her half-finished glass of wine to carry with her. A need to break free took over. She had always lived within the shell of a delicate cocoon. While she appreciated its gossamer protection, an awakening spurred her forward.

This was the season of magic. And a mysterious man openly found her attractive. Isabella decided then and there to catch a small piece of that mystery and claim it as her own.

Outside the main doors of the Mercury Club, stillness wrapped around her like the mantle of snow that covered the ground as perfectly as a gentle hush. It was late, with almost no traffic, and no sound but silence.

She lifted her face to the fat, slow-spinning flakes, savoring the feel of the crystals melting on her skin. Everything glowed. Towering evergreens were painted a shimmering white. Christmas lights outlined trees, fences, and homes nearby. The rainbow of colors against the stark white cover of snow turned brilliant.

Snow drifted into her wine goblet, dissolving into the vivid red liquid. She sipped as she strolled down the sidewalk, and then she stopped near a window. The blind was pulled, but inside she heard music playing, voices raised in conversation and laughter, the melodic chime of dinnerware.

Then, just a few feet away, she saw Jonathan.

Her throat went dry, the wine she held forgotten. She licked her parched lips. Her heart thudded fast as she faced the moment of truth. Leave or stay.

Nerves almost won. When he saw her and started