



The Sparkling One (The Marcelli Sisters of Pleasure Road, Book 1)

By Susan Mallery

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Editorial Review

Review

"Smart, sexy entertainment." -- Christina Dodd

About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Susan Mallery has entertained millions of readers with her witty and emotional stories about women. Publishers Weekly calls Susan's prose "luscious and provocative," and Booklist says "Novels don't get much better than Mallery's expert blend of emotional nuance, humor and superb storytelling." Susan lives in Seattle with her husband and her tiny but intrepid toy poodle. Visit her at www.SusanMallery.com.

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Chapter One

Katie Marcelli knew that with the right staff, she could organize the world. But as good help was hard to find, she contented herself with smaller projects, such as organizing closets, parties, and seminars. She owned her own business, made a decent living, and had a five-year business plan that would make a Fortune 500 CEO weep with envy. She was tough, confident, in charge.

On the outside.

On the inside her nerves were currently playing baseball in her stomach, and someone had just hit a foul ball down the third base line. She pressed a hand to her midsection and knew that fourth cup of coffee she'd gulped in her car was about to turn to acid. She was tense, wired, and pacing in high heels that might make her ankles look as slender as a gazelle's but also threatened her future ability to walk without a limp.

Oh, please, oh, please let me say just the right thing, she thought as she paused in front of a large window overlooking Century City and Beverly Hills. Opportunities like this didn't come along every day. She'd wanted to take her company to the next level, and this job was going to make it happen. All she had to do was be...sparkling.

The word made her smile. Ah, yes. She was "the Sparkling One." Bright, bubbly, like fine champagne that had --

"Ms. Marcelli? Mr. Stryker will see you now."

Katie turned toward a well-dressed fifty-something woman who held open a thick door and motioned for her to enter.

Katie stepped from the nicely carpeted hallway into sink-to-your-ankles plushness in an office the size of Rhode Island. A *corner* office, with floor-to-ceiling windows, sleek yet traditional furniture, a massive pair of leather sofas on the walls opposite the windows, and an elegantly dressed man good-looking enough to grace one of the billboards that lined Sunset Boulevard.

Zach Stryker, one of only three senior partners in the largest family law firm in the Los Angeles metropolitan

area, and the youngest partner. He had a reputation for being tough, unflinching, and a hell of a negotiator. Oh, and he wasn't just a winner in the courtroom. Rumor had it he broke at least two female hearts a week.

The nerves in her stomach instantly abandoned their baseball game and began flying in a "man-alert" formation which warned her that caffeine overload was not all that far away. Perfect, she thought, because staying calm in a meeting was so overrated.

"Ms. Marcelli?" the man said, his voice low and sultry enough to make him a fortune in radio. "I'm Zach Stryker."

"Mr. Stryker. A pleasure."

She managed to cross the carpet without twisting her ankle. As he came around his pool-size desk, she transferred her briefcase from her right hand to her left, then shook with him.

Oh, great, sparks, she thought as sexual heat arced from her fingers to her chest and beyond. Wildly attractive, tall, dark, and blue-eyed. How L.A. How her luck. Wasn't she only supposed to care about the job?

A good question, she thought as she took the seat he offered in front of his desk.

Instead of circling back to his "I'm the man" leather chair, he settled next to her, then angled toward her and gave her the kind of engaging smile that could send an angry, gray-haired nun into cardiac arrest. Katie told herself she was made of sterner stuff.

"I guess we're going to throw a party together," he said.

Right. A party. The reason she was here. "Absolutely."

She opened her briefcase and pulled out a light blue folder. "Your assistant filled me in on the basics. Your law firm hosts an annual fund-raiser, with the proceeds going to several local family charities."

"Right. The event is generally coordinated by one of the partner's wives. John's wife volunteered, but then she discovered she was pregnant with twins. Her doctor didn't want her stressing herself with all the planning, so I stepped in and said I'd take care of things." He rested one ankle on his opposite knee. "Not having a wife, I needed to call in a professional. That's where you come in."

"I see." Which she did. Sort of. Yes, she'd planned parties before, but never one of this magnitude. It was black-tie, A-list, and exclusive. She would never personally have been invited, although she'd read about the fun and good times in *In Style* magazine.

No doubt he couldn't ask one of his women to do it. That would require him keeping her around for more than fifteen minutes. A circumstance that would no doubt cramp his style.

He pushed a stack of folders toward her. "Everything you need to know about the previous two parties, including the guest list. John's wife got as far as picking the hotel, so you're going to be starting from there."

Which meant practically starting from scratch. Easy enough. If she had six months and hired three or four more staff members, she could --

"The party's in May."

"Not a problem," she said, holding in a shriek. May? As in less than four months from now? As in ohmygod, now what?

He gave her the exact date, and she wrote it down on her pad.

"I know it's a lot to ask," he said.

"As you said, Mr. Stryker, I'm a professional. This is what I do."

"I'm sure you do it very well."

The intensity of his gaze unnerved her. Or maybe it was the heat he generated. She felt as if she were sitting too close to a furnace. Or maybe it was the drop in his voice, as if they were having an *intimate* conversation.

She glanced around at the impressive office, then studied his tailor-made suit, expensive shoes, and casually elegant good looks. Uh-huh. She knew the type. Zach Stryker was the kind of man used to getting what he wanted in business, and in life. Women lined up by the dozens just to throw themselves at his feet.

She might be experiencing a little attraction, but there was no way she would become one of a crowd. So she would keep her thoughts and her reactions to herself. Besides, this was business.

"If you're the kind of woman who enjoys a challenge, this is going to be exactly what you were looking for," he said.

"I do like a challenge," she admitted. "I'm not afraid to take risks or work hard. That's why I'm successful."

"I'm sure it is." He shrugged, and gave her another dazzling smile. "I'm a typical guy about party planning, so I'm not sure I'm going to be much help to you. Still, I'll do what I can." He shifted so that both feet were flat on the floor, then leaned toward her. "We'll have to work closely together."

She had the feeling they were talking about more than the party, but she wasn't going to let on.

"I appreciate your willingness to cooperate, but the bottom line is, Mr. Stryker, you're hiring me to make the party happen with a minimum of disruption to your already busy schedule."

"Call me Zach."

Call me anytime.

Fortunately she only thought the words, rather than saying them aloud. When she got home she was going to give her hormones a stern talking to. Over the years they'd quivered over any number of inappropriate men, but never one this far out of her league. Men like Zach chewed up and spit out women like her with their morning coffee.

She mentally winced at the awkward metaphor, then turned her attention back to business.

"I'll look over the plans from the previous fund-raisers," she said as she gathered the files. "I'll review the

location and come up with three or four possible themes. I should be back in touch with you by the middle of next week."

"That sounds good. I've notified my assistant to get you in to see me as quickly as possible."

Talk about an invitation. "Great."

Katie snapped her briefcase closed and they both rose. Which meant they were standing close together. Too close.

Despite her potentially crippling high heels, she found herself several inches shorter than Zach. He smelled good -- clean, sexy, powerful. His cobalt blue eyes crinkled slightly at the corners. She couldn't decide if they were his best feature or if she liked his mouth better.

The job, she reminded herself. His ability to pay her was by far his most appealing characteristic.

"This event is very important to my law firm, Katie," he told her. "I'm looking for a win."

Hardly a news flash. He wasn't the kind of man who looked for anything else. Still, she could reassure him.

"I don't believe in second place, either. You'll have your win."

He smiled. She felt her insides shift slightly. The sensation was nearly as disconcerting as the heat washing over her. If the man ever got tired of the law, he could make a fortune simply smiling at women.

She doubted any of his attentions were even personally directed at her. No doubt he knew he was God's gift to women and couldn't help sharing the bounty. She was smart enough not to take any of it personally.

"Thank you for your time," he said as he led the way to the door.

Katie followed, then paused when he opened it.

"I haven't done any work for your firm before," she said, because in addition to being efficient, she was wildly curious. The combination occasionally got her in trouble. "How did you find my company?"

"A recommendation." He held up his hand before she could speak. "I don't remember from whom. I have it somewhere. I'll get back to you."

"I'd appreciate that. Most of my business comes through referrals. I'd like to pass on a thank-you."

"Sure." He took a step back, then paused. "Make sure Dora has your number."

"Of course. Good-bye."

She nodded once and headed down the long corridor toward the bank of elevators by the reception desk. Dora must be his assistant. As she'd already given the woman her card, she knew Zach had her number. If he needed it. Not that he would. There was nothing more to say until she'd gotten up to speed on the fund-raiser.

Unless he wanted to call for some other reason. Seduction? The thought made her chuckle. Right. So likely

to happen.

As the elevator doors opened, she stepped inside and pressed the button for the parking garage.

What very few people knew and what she took great pains to disguise was that under her expensive business suit beat the heart of a romantic. Men like Zach Stryker would never appreciate that. They wanted the new, the trendy, the easy. She had been told more than once she was anything *but* easy.

If he wanted a conquest, she wasn't his woman. She wanted hearts, flowers, and happily ever after. He wanted a cheap, sexual encounter.

As she walked out of the elevator, her hormones took great pains to remind her that it had been some time since the last emotionally significant relationship in her life and that a cheap, sexual encounter would go a long way toward smoothing some of her frazzled edges.

"Not my style," Katie said aloud and unlocked her car door.

Oh, but if it were, Zach Stryker would certainly be her man.

• • •

Katie drove out of the underground parking lot and headed west. While mid-February could be cool and rainy in Los Angeles, the past week had been perfect. California blue skies, balmy temperatures -- no smog, no haze, and not an earthquake in sight. It was the kind of weather that drew tourists like flies to a pest strip, especially those suffering with snow and blizzards in their regular lives.

After crossing under the 405 freeway, Katie turned left, toward Santa Monica and her dollhouse-size bungalow. Traffic was lighter than it would be in an hour or so, as lawyers, accountants and financial types packed it in for the weekend.

Okay, yes, it was only two in the afternoon, and she really should still be working. But hey. She'd just landed a huge contract, been smiled at by one of the best-looking men in LaLa Land, and somewhere north of the city there was a cannoli with her name on it.

Inspired by the thought of dinner, she threaded her way through the growing congestion and made it home in about twenty minutes. After changing from her suit and high heels into a sleeveless dress and sandals, she grabbed a cardigan, the already-packed overnight bag, and headed for the bathroom. There she plucked pins from her hair until the shoulder-blade-length reddish-brown waves tumbled free. A scrunchy secured them at the nape of her neck. She paused long enough to slather sunscreen on every exposed inch. She might be half Italian, but she'd inherited her mother's Irish skin. Just thinking about the sun was enough to start her burning.

On her way to the front door Katie glanced at her answering machine. No flashing light announced the delight of a waiting message. Obviously Zach Stryker had manfully resisted the nearly overwhelming urge to call her and beg her to return to his office where they would make love on his designer leather sofa.

Once in the driveway she stowed her luggage in the trunk, then slipped into her Sebring. The convertible top opened, then folded neatly behind the backseat. An adjustment of her radio from NPR to a rock station completed her travel ritual. It was time to go home.

By three o'clock she'd crested the hill that marked the line between L.A. and the valley. The exit to the 101 freeway was on her right. Katie slipped into that lane, all the while singing along with a song about broken hearts and holding on.

Her car phone rang.

Katie hit a button on the console, muting her radio and activating her hands-free microphone.

"Hi," she said, speaking loudly to be heard over the wind and the sound of the other cars.

"Oh, good. You're in your car," her youngest sister, Mia, said, sounding delighted. "I was calling to make sure you're still coming home this weekend."

"I'm already on my way. How's school?"

"Good. I'm settling into my classes and getting ready for midterms."

Katie frowned as she followed the curving interchange. "Didn't you just start the quarter?"

Mia sighed dramatically. "Tell me about it. I love UCLA, but the quarter system is so tough. I barely figure out what the class is about and suddenly it's time for midterms."

"And despite the pressure, you dazzle us all with your straight A's."

"I try." Mia giggled. "Guess what? There's gonna be an announcement at dinner."

"Announcement?" Katie eased into the fast lane and concentrated on the minivan in front of her. "Good or bad?"

The Marcelli family had a tradition of announcing news at large family gatherings. Once everyone was seated and the meal had been served, the pronouncements began. Confirmations of births, blights, and illness were made, along with surprises, some welcome, some not.

Katie quickly considered the possibility of damage to the vines, but it was only February. Everything was dormant.

"Good," Mia said with another giggle. "Very good."

"Want to give me a hint?"

"Not really. So how was your Valentine's Day?"

Katie remembered the quiet evening she'd spent in front of her tiny fireplace. She'd celebrated one of her favorite days with a bottle of champagne, Godiva chocolates, and a romance novel.

"It was perfect," she said honestly.

"Was there a man involved?"

"Nope. I'm currently blissfully single."

Mia sighed. "Katie, you know that means trouble. If you're not seeing anyone, the entire family is going to jump all over you this weekend."

"I know."

The Marcelli family might be incredibly close and loving, but they were also rabid about marriage and kids. At twenty-eight and still single, Katie wasn't just considered an old maid, she was thought to be unnatural and in need of serious therapy.

Which she didn't want to think about. "So how was your Valentine's Day?"

"Fabulous."

Katie pictured her sister's petite yet curvy figure, her streaked blond hair and doe eyes. She grinned. "Let me guess. Forty-seven guys wrestled for the honor of buying you dinner."

"No. I just saw David."

"You've been seeing him for a while now, haven't you?" She vaguely recalled a good-looking kid breezing through at Christmas.

"Uh-huh. Since September. He's really special, Katie. We're in love."

"I'm happy for you," Katie said, speaking the truth. She was two parts thrilled and one part envious. When was the last time she'd been in love? Not her previous boyfriend, or the one before that. They'd been great guys, but not *the one*.

"I should let you concentrate on driving," Mia said. "See you in a couple of hours."

"I'll be there. Give my love to everyone."

"I will. Bye."

The connection clicked off. Katie pushed the button to restore her radio, but instead of joining in with the song, she shook her head. Mia in love? Was her baby sister really old enough to fall for a guy?

She laughed. Mia was eighteen. In the Marcelli family that was the perfect age for a short engagement, followed by a long marriage. Katie's other sisters, Francesca and Brenna, had both married at eighteen, although Francesca was now a young, beautiful widow. Katie herself had been engaged at eighteen, although the marriage had never taken place.

Whispers of the past threatened, but she wasn't interested in spoiling her drive, so she ignored them. Instead she cranked up the volume on the radio and fantasized about a certain lawyer she'd recently met. He might be fifteen kinds of bad for her, but he sure knew how to make her body burst into flames.

A wrought-iron arch announced the entrance to the Marcelli Winery. Hundreds of acres of vineyard stretched out on both sides of the two-lane drive amusingly named Pleasure Road. Come summer, the plants would be

thick with leaves and budding fruit. In September, right before harvest, they would hang low with heavy, ripe grapes, but now, in February, they were simply gray and bare.

As Katie drove under the arch, she noticed that the winter pansies flourished. The dozen or so flower-filled half barrels surrounding the base of the arch were filled with colorful blossoms waving in the soft breeze. She could inhale the scent of flowers and earth, and the ocean in the distance.

The road to the main hacienda was nearly three quarters of a mile. Up ahead the three-story, pale yellow hacienda stood at the end of a long driveway. Wrought-iron balconies decorated the front of the structure. Katie didn't have all that much interest in growing grapes or making wine, but she considered herself a real fan of the Marcelli family home. So many happy memories lingered in the corners and crevices of the old place. So much history filled each of the rooms. Coming back always made her feel good.

She pulled up next to the large house, parking her car next to Mia's five-year-old Accord. A beat-up pickup sat on the other side, which meant Francesca had also come home for the weekend. Brenna would be arriving later. Katie smiled in anticipation. The four sisters hadn't been under the same roof since Christmas, nearly two months before.

She'd barely popped the trunk when a side door opened and Francesca strolled out.

"I figured you'd be the next to arrive," she said with a wave. "Brenna won't be here for a while. She had to take Jeff to the airport."

"He's not coming for the weekend?" Katie asked, more than a little disappointed. She, along with her sisters, adored Brenna's husband. He was funny, affectionate, the brother they'd never had.

"Nope. He had to go to some doctor convention."

"I can't believe he'd rather go there than hang out with us."

"I agree. I mean, we're charming *and* we have unlimited access to pasta. What's not to like?"

The two women laughed, then embraced. Katie hugged her sister hard, holding her close for a second. When they released each other, she tried not to notice how great Francesca looked in her white cropped T-shirt and pale blue skirt.

Francesca had always been the pretty sister...pretty and nearly physically perfect. She was perfectly tall (5 feet 9), perfectly slender, with that annoying combination of large breasts and nonexistent hips. Her perfect features -- wide hazel eyes, a full mouth, and cheekbones that defied gravity -- combined to create a face that could not only launch a thousand ships, it could heal several debilitating personality flaws. Long, thick brown hair tumbled down her back, while perfect, olive-colored skin seemed to radiate light.

All of this and a brain, too, Katie thought with a combination of love and pride, flavored with a touch of sibling rivalry. Katie had always been the smart sister, but Francesca's success in her Ph.D. program demonstrated there were fairly efficient brain cells firing behind those big eyes.

Katie grabbed her suitcase. "Poor Dad and Grandpa Lorenzo. They always look forward to Jeff's visits. He keeps them from feeling outnumbered by the women."

"They'll survive, but I'm not sure we will," Francesca said as they walked to the back door and stepped into the utility room. "You need to brace yourself. There's an estrogen fest going on in the kitchen. The Grands are on a roll and Mom is only making it worse. If you don't keep your distance, your ovaries may mutate."

Katie smiled as she dropped her suitcase and purse. She stepped into the kitchen and took a deep breath.

"Hi!"

Three women stood around the central island of the massive kitchen decorated with hand-painted tiles. Dozens of bowls, casseroles, and pots filled every inch of counter space that wasn't already holding fresh produce and homemade pasta.

Three heads turned, three pairs of eyes widened in delight, six arms reached for her. Katie found herself being engulfed in a hugging competition designed to snap at least two ribs, while making her feel she was the most important person on the planet.

"Katie, at last! We were so worried. The long drive. A young woman alone. Who knows what could happen?"

Her paternal grandmother pinched her cheek hard enough to leave a mark. Katie smiled, even as her eyes watered from the pain. "Grandma Tessa," she said warmly. "If you stopped worrying, what would the saints do with their time?"

Grandma Tessa, born and bred in Italy, dismissed the blasphemy. She was used to it from all her girls.

Katie's mother, petite and stylish in a designer suit, sans shoes, cupped her face. "You look thin. Katie, you're a beautiful young woman. You don't need to starve yourself. Are you dieting again?"

Katie kissed her soft, pale cheek. "I swear, I'm not dieting. In fact, I weigh exactly the same as I did the last time you saw me, and the time before that."

Colleen O'Shea Marcelli harrumphed, obviously unconvinced. "I think we should talk later. When your father and I were in San Francisco, we met the nicest young man. He's a sous chef in a restaurant up there."

Francesca stole a slice of cheese. "I thought all chefs were gay."

Grandma Tessa brought the cross on the rosary around her neck to her lips. "Francesca, God did not make you so lovely on the outside so that you could have such a dark heart. Katie needs a man. For that matter, you need a man."

Francesca looked at Katie. They both rolled their eyes.

Finally Katie turned to the tiny woman still holding her arm. "Grammy M," Katie said, her voice warm with affection. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm grand. The sun feels good on these old bones. I've no complaints a'tall."

"You're not so old," Katie reminded her. "Besides, I'm counting on you living forever."

Mary-Margaret O'Shea had been born in Ireland and married at seventeen to a young man she'd only met twice. Less than two weeks after the wedding he'd taken her away from home and family, bringing her across the ocean to a great new land. They'd eventually settled in California.

Grammy M squeezed her hand. "I'm plannin' on it, darlin'."

"So," Katie's mother said, expectantly. "If you're not interested in the sous chef, does that mean you have someone special in your life?"

Katie looked at Francesca, who stuck her finger down her throat and silently gagged.

Katie knew she had two choices. She could tell the truth -- that she wasn't seeing anyone and that she was perfectly okay with that. Only no one would believe her. Instead her grandmothers and mother would fuss and chide and torture her for the entire weekend. They would bring up names of men who had never married (and once they reached forty without tying the knot, how *couldn't* there be something wrong with them?), men who were recently divorced, even men who were thinking about divorce. They would talk about her growing old alone, about the odds of finding a man after she turned thirty. They would try to love her into submitting to the family credo of "marry young and have many babies."

Or she could lie.

While she generally tried to tell the truth, desperate times and all that.

"I recently met the most amazing guy," she said.

The Grands did a second swooping thing, while her mother beamed.

"Tell us everything," she insisted. "What's he like?"

"His name is Zach Stryker and he's a very successful lawyer."

"Ooh, a man with a profession," her mother said happily. "So he has money."

Katie didn't have a clue, but unless Zach spent every weekend redecorating his house at the Neiman Marcus home store, he should have gobs. "Sure. He's gorgeous and charming and I think he's really special."

Francesca nearly choked on her cheese. Katie tucked her hand behind her back and crossed her fingers. "He hired me to handle a big fund-raiser for his firm. It's a huge job and it's going to put my company onto the 'A' list, but that's not nearly as exciting as meeting the right guy, you know?"

Francesca still stood behind the Grands. Now she chewed the last bit of cheese and wrapped her hands around her throat, as if strangling herself. Katie knew she was laying it on a bit thick, but she was on a roll.

She sighed heavily. "The man is a hunk."

Just then footsteps clattered on the dining room hardwood floor. Katie was almost disappointed by the interruption. She could have done another five minutes on the unlikely virtues of Zach.

Everyone turned toward the sound as Mia burst into the kitchen.

As usual, she was dressed in jeans and a cropped shirt. Her highlighted hair looked more blond than brown, although the roots were showing, the way Mia liked it. Heavy makeup emphasized her brown eyes. She looked like a makeover gone bad, and yet so lovely and full of life that Katie couldn't help smiling.

"You've got to start blending," Katie said, crossing to her youngest sister and hugging her. "That's why God invented Q-tips."

Mia puffed out her glossy lips, then gave an exaggerated sigh. "I'm still experimenting to find my style. We can't all be perfect like Francesca or together like you." Mia fingered Katie's cardigan. "I mean, you match, for God's sake."

Grandma Tessa fingered her rosary. "Mia Theresa Marcelli, your mouth shames the entire family."

Mia dropped her head in mock surrender. "Sorry, Grandma. I didn't mean to take the Lord's name in vain."

Never one to stay contrite for long, she quickly straightened. "Is Brenna here? I really, really want to tell everyone my news. Where are Dad and Grandpa Lorenzo?"

"They'll be back for dinner," Grandma Tessa said. "You'll have to wait."

Katie grinned. Telling Mia to wait when she wanted something was about as productive as attempting to change the Earth's axis. No matter the effort, not one thing shifted.

"Oh, sh -- " Mia glanced at her paternal grandmother and quickly modified her word choice. "Oh, shimmy! I'll just tell you, and then we can tell everyone else when they get here." She frowned.

"Have you been working on your plan to rule the world?" Katie asked her youngest sister. "Remember, I'm only going to organize it. You're in charge of world domination."

"Not today." Mia drew in a deep breath, then spun around once. She clapped her hands together and grinned. "I've got the best news. I'm getting married!"

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