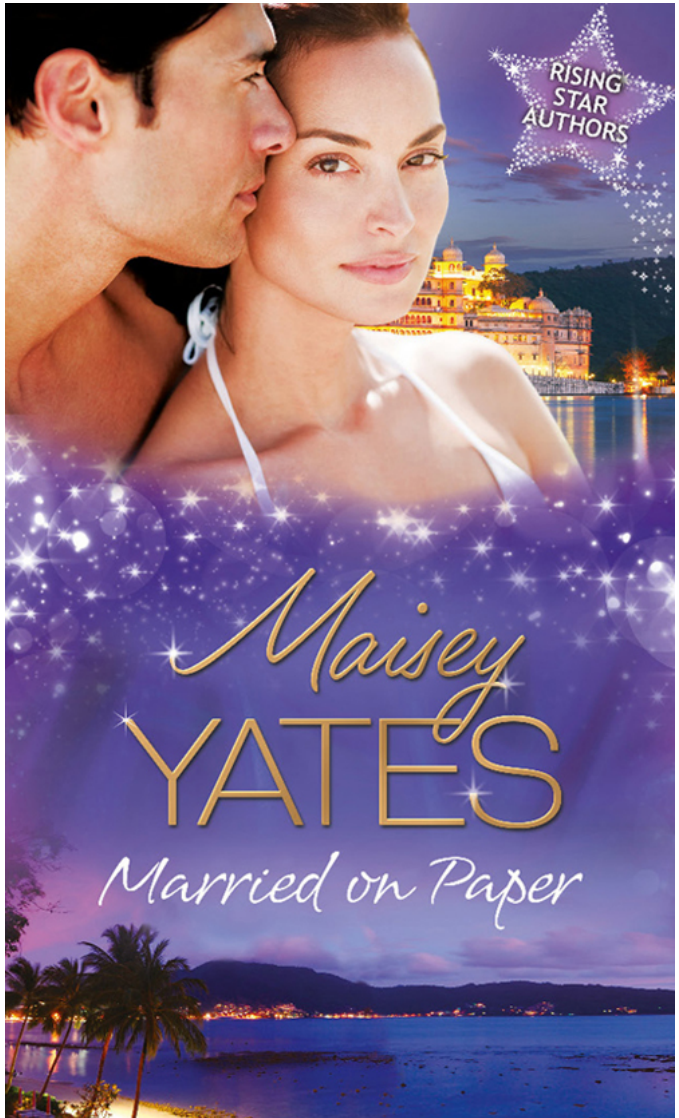
RISING STAR AUTHORS
Maisey
YATES
Married on Paper

Maisey Yates

Married on Paper: The Argentine's Price / The Inherited Bride / Marriage Made on Paper

Аннотация

The Argentine's PriceLazaro Marino, the housekeeper's son, has climbed his way out of poverty, but he's still denied entry into the highest echelons of society. And blue-blooded heiress Vanessa Pickett is the key to unlocking the door to all that he desires…But, for Vanessa, this deal with the devil comes with a startling price… The Inherited BridePrincess Isabella was certain of three things… She desperately didn't want to marry the Sheikh to whom she was betrothed… There was more to the darkly handsome, dark-hearted desert stranger escorting her back to the altar than met the eye… And, having kissed the stranger once, she was never going to be the same again…Marriage Made on PaperWhen ambitious public relations expert Lily Ford signs a contract with hot-shot property tycoon Gage Forrester, she inadvertently signs her life away! A tough taskmaster, he wants Lily at his beck and call 24/7. And when he needs to generate some positive PR – he proposes to Lily!

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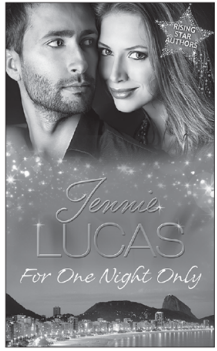

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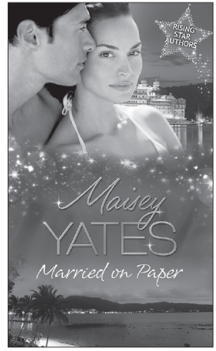

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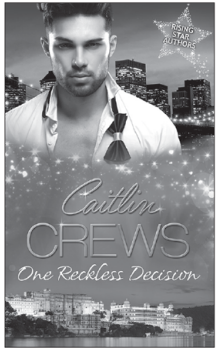

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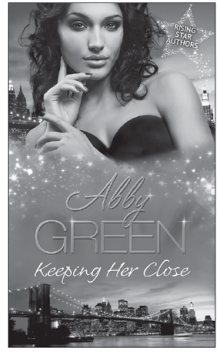

August 2014

Married on Paper
The Argentine's Price
The Inherited Bride
Marriage Made on Paper
Maisey Yates

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MAISEY YATES was an avid Mills & Boon® Modern™ romance reader before she began to write them. She still can't quite believe she's lucky enough to get to create her very own sexy alpha heroes and feisty heroines. Seeing her name on one of those lovely covers is a dream come true.

Maisey lives with her handsome, wonderful, nappy-changing husband and three small children across the street from her extremely supportive parents and the home she grew up in, in

the wilds of Southern Oregon, USA. She enjoys the contrast of living in a place where you might wake up to find a bear on your back porch and then heading into the home office to write stories that take place in exotic urban locales.

The Argentine's Price

CHAPTER ONE

"YOU'RE buying up my company's stock. Why?" Vanessa clutched her silver purse tightly in her hand and tried to ignore the heat and anger curling in her stomach as she addressed the tall man in black. Lazaro Marino. Her first love. Her first kiss. Her first heartbreak and, apparently, the man who was attempting a hostile takeover of her family's company.

Lazaro's dark eyes flicked over her and he handed his glass of champagne to the slender blonde standing on his left. It was clear from his dismissive manner that he saw the woman as little more than a cup-holder in a designer gown. Well, Vanessa imagined she was a little more than that to him, in his bed at least.

Her cheeks burned, the images in her head instant and graphic. How did he do that? Thirty seconds in his presence and he had her mind in the bedroom.

She stared just past Lazaro, at the painting on the wall behind him, in order to avoid those dark, all-too-knowing eyes of his. She could feel his gaze on her, warming her, turning her blood to fire in her veins. Instant. All-consuming. Still. After all this time. It threw her right back to the summer she was sixteen, when mornings had been all about the hope that he would be there, working on the grounds of the estate. So that she could sit and simply look at him, the boy she wasn't even permitted to talk to.

The boy who ultimately inspired her to break the rules, rules

that had been sacrosanct before that.

It was inconvenient that the boy had become a man who still had the power to make her pulse race. Even when he was only a picture in a magazine, looking at him was a full-on sensory experience. In person … in person he made her feel as if her skin was too tight for her body.

"Ms. Pickett." He inclined his head, a lock of obsidian hair falling forward with the motion. Not an accident, she was sure of that. He had that look about him. That sort of hot, can't-be-bothered-to-get-too-slick look. It gave the impression he'd gotten out of bed, combed his fingers through his thick black hair and thrown on a thousand-dollar suit.

And for some reason it was devilishly sexy. Probably because it was easy to imagine what he might have been doing in that bed, what activities might have prevented him from having adequate time to get ready …

She blinked furiously, redirecting her thoughts. She was not going down that rabbit trail again. She wasn't some naive sixteen-year-old anymore, imagining that the fluttering in her stomach was anything more than the first stirrings of lust, imagining that a kiss meant love. No, she wasn't that girl anymore, and Lazaro Marino didn't have any power over her.

She had power. And she would remind him of that.

"Please," she said, turning on her CEO voice. "Call me Vanessa. We are old friends after all."

"Old friends?" He chuckled, a dark, rich sound that made her

blood heat. “I had not thought of us as such. But if you insist, Vanessa it is then.” His accent had smoothed in the twelve years since she’d seen him, but he still said her name as he always had, his tongue caressing the syllables, drawing them out, making her own name sound impossibly sexy.

Age looked good on him. At thirty, he was even more attractive than he’d been at eighteen. His jaw a bit more square, his shoulders broader. His nose was different, slightly crooked, the imperfection adding to his mystique rather than detracting from his otherwise perfect face. She wondered if he’d broken it in a fight. It wasn’t impossible. The Lazaro she’d known had been hotheaded, passionate in every conceivable way. And there had been many times when she’d wondered what it might be like to have all that passion directed at her—and one wonderful occasion when it had been. When he’d made her feel that she was the only woman, the most important thing in his world. Lazaro could lie more effectively with a kiss than most men could with a thousand words.

Vanessa tightened her grip on her purse and took a step back, fighting the rising tide of heat and anger that burned in her stomach, trying to keep herself calm. Unaffected. At least in appearance. “Do you think we could talk?”

“Not here to socialize?” he asked, one black eyebrow quirked.

“I’m here to talk to you, and it’s not a social call.”

A small smile tipped up the corners of his mouth. “I’m certain you donated to the charity on your way in. Or was that not on

your list of priorities tonight?"

Vanessa bit the inside of her cheek, fighting to maintain composure. Taking the glass of champagne out of Lazaro's human cup-holder's hand and throwing the contents of it onto his very expensive suit might be satisfying, but it wasn't what she was here for.

Still, there was no way she was going to allow him to pretend that he was somehow a philanthropic marvel and she was a snobby rich bimbo who walked into a charity event for the company and the liquor and didn't bother to leave a dime.

"I wrote a check as I walked in. You can ask up front if you like."

"Generous of you."

"We need to talk. Without an audience." She flicked a glance at the group he was with. A lot of beautiful socialites, some of whom she recognized, not the sort of women she'd ever been permitted to associate with. Money did not mean class, as her father had always said, and that meant certain people had always been patently off limits to her.

Lazaro among them. Although, for one, heady week, she had defied that command.

"This way, *querida.*" He put his hand on her lower back and she cursed the low cut of the gown she was wearing as his palm made contact with her skin. His fingers were calloused, rough from labor still, even after years of white-collar work.

She remembered how those hands had caressed her face, her

body. They had been rough then, strong and hot. So very hot. She shivered slightly, thankful that her body chose the moment they stepped out into the chill, Boston air before the reaction hit. At least this way she could blame it on the weather.

The art museum's grand terrace was lit up by paper lanterns strung overhead. A few couples were secluded in dark corners, talking with their heads pressed together, or not talking, enjoying the feeling of seclusion.

Of course, there was no seclusion. There were reporters, there were other people. This was the sort of event her father wouldn't want her to come within a mile of. Discretion was the cornerstone of her father's value system. And of hers.

But she was here. She had to be. She had to talk to Lazaro. As far as Pickett Industries was concerned it was possibly a matter of life and death. She couldn't imagine he had any kind of altruistic motive for purchasing Pickett's shares. In fact, she was certain he didn't.

"You had a question for me?" he asked, leaning against the stone railing.

She turned to him, her face schooled into a neutral expression. "Why are you buying up all of my stocks?"

The corner of his mouth curved upward. "I'm surprised that you realized it so soon."

"Suddenly all of my shareholders are selling to three different corporations, all of whom have one name in common—Marino. I'm not stupid, Lazaro."

"Perhaps I underestimated you." He looked at her, as if waiting for her to be angry or indignant or something. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

She pushed down a surge of anger. "I don't care whether you underestimated me. I don't care what you think about me. I care about Pickett and it is in my best interest to try and understand why someone is trying to get to a point where they own equal shares with me and my family."

He paused for a moment, his smile widening, a cruel smile, void of humor, but just as devastating as it had always been. "Do you not appreciate the irony?"

"What irony is that?"

"That *I* can own my share of Pickett Industries. That a storied icon of a company can be passed into the hands of new money with such ease. The American dream, isn't it?"

She looked at his eyes, the glitter in them filled with emotion so dark and deep that she felt it reach into her and pull the air from her lungs. And that was when she realized that it was very likely she'd wandered into a trap. In that moment she wanted, more than anything, to turn and walk away. To leave Lazaro as nothing more than a vivid, unsatisfied memory.

But she couldn't. This was her responsibility. Her mess to clean up. There was no one else.

It's up to you now, Vanessa. Without you, everything crumbles.

Her father's words echoed in her head, filled her, pushed her forward.

"So … this is for your own amusement, then? Something to satisfy your twisted sense of irony?" she asked.

He chuckled, a dark sound laced with bitter undertones. "I don't have time to do things simply to amuse myself, Vanessa. I didn't get where I am by operating that way. My business was not handed to me on a silver platter."

And there was no doubt he found himself superior to her because of that. Fine, he could disdain her for having it easy if he wanted. Pickett wasn't really a silver platter to her. More like silver handcuffs with keys she couldn't access. But she'd willingly accepted the burden. Had done it for her family. For her father, and most of all for Thomas. Because her brother would have carried on Pickett's legacy gladly. He would have made it a success. He would have done it with dignity and kindness, as he had done everything else.

"Then why?" she asked.

"Pickett is dying, Vanessa, I know you know that. Your profits have dropped off in the past three years, so much so that you're now firmly in the red."

Her standard response, the one she'd been placating the shareholders with, rolled off her tongue with ease. "These things happen. It goes in cycles. Production has slowed with the economy as it is, and a lot of our clients are now getting their auto parts manufactured out of the country."

"The problem isn't simply the economy. You are stuck in the past. Times have changed and Pickett Industries has not."

"If Pickett really is dying some kind of slow, painful corporate death, why are you interested in investing your money in it?"

"The opportunity presented itself. I am a man who makes the most of all available opportunities."

Vanessa's stomach tightened as his eyes locked on hers, the meaning of his words seeming layered in the dim light, almost erotic.

She needed to get out more. She really did. As it was, the four walls of her office were so familiar, her situation was beginning to seem desperate. But that was how it was when one was at the helm of a dying corporation. Lucky, lucky her.

And Lazaro Marino saw it as an opportunity. Heaven help her.

"And what do you intend to do with this *opportunity*?"

"I could put pressure on the board to vote you out of your position."

Vanessa felt as though a bucket of icy water had been thrown in her face. Shock froze her in place, keeping her expression unaltered despite the rolling wave of fear that was surging through her. "Why would you do that?"

"Because you are in over your head, Vanessa. The company has been in decline ever since you were appointed. It is in the best interest of the shareholders to have someone in charge who knows what they're doing."

"I've been working on my game plan."

"For three years? I'm surprised your father hasn't stepped back in and taken control again."

She stiffened. “He can’t. When I was appointed CEO he signed an agreement, something the board wanted done to prevent … problems.” When her father was in a good mood, he was happy with what she was doing and when he wasn’t … well, she wouldn’t put it past him to try to oust her himself. No one on the board had wanted the employees, or the shareholders, living with that kind of instability.

Of course, if she didn’t turn things around soon that would be the least of anyone’s problems.

Vanessa had a degree in business, but a prodigy she was not. She knew it. But she stuck with Pickett out of duty, loyalty to her family, the driving need to make her father happy. How could she do anything else?

Thomas had lived and breathed Pickett, even in high school. Thomas, her handsome brother with the easy smile who had always had time for her, who had shown her warmth and affection, who had remembered her birthday. Who had been the only one able to make their father smile.

And with him gone, she was all her father had left to make sure the company, the family, continued. She couldn’t let Thomas’s dream die. She couldn’t force her father to lose the only thing in the world that truly mattered to him. She couldn’t stand to fail at the only thing that made her matter in his eyes.

She couldn’t be the one to see it all end, couldn’t be the cause of that. She’d let go of vague, half-imagined dreams in order to keep Pickett alive already. She couldn’t lose it now. She couldn’t

see someone else in the position her father had always wanted reserved for someone in their family.

Her great-grandfather had built the business up using family money, and it had been passed down to Vanessa's grandfather, and then to her father. It would have gone on to Thomas next.

The memory of that day was always there, sharp and vivid down to the way the rug in her father's office had made her bare feet itch, to the way her stomach had ached, so intensely she'd been convinced she would die too. Just like her brother.

It's up to you now, Vanessa. Without you, everything crumbles. Everything I've worked for, everything Thomas dreamed of.

She'd been thirteen. All of her brother's responsibilities had been passed on to her that night, the weight of her family's legacy. She'd be damned if she failed.

"It's difficult to compete now that the market has changed. So many things are being done overseas now because there's cheaper labor and lower taxes. It's a hard position for us to be in, but we're committed to keeping the factory here, to keeping the jobs here."

"Idealistic. Not necessarily practical."

He was right, and the worst thing was, she knew it. Had known it from the moment she'd taken her position in the big corporate office. She was fighting a losing battle, and she had been for three long years.

But she didn't want to move the factory, didn't want to eliminate all those jobs. Most of the employees had been with the company for more than twenty years and she couldn't fathom

taking that from them. They were her friends in some ways. Her responsibility.

Of course, if the company ceased to exist, the point was moot.

"Maybe not, but I don't have any better ideas right now." It galled to have to say that to him. To be put in the position of having to admit to deficiencies she was far too familiar with.

"As your principal shareholder, I'm not very pleased to hear that."

She narrowed her eyes. "What do you want from me, Lazaro?"

"From you? Nothing. But I very much enjoy the fact that the fate of Pickett is now resting with me."

"Maybe a better question for you is whether this is business or personal."

"It is business. But it is also an interesting quirk of fate, isn't it? Your father once held my future, my mother's future, in his hands. He paid her miserable wages to do work that was so beneath any of you. To keep house and be treated very much as the help. And now I could buy your father ten times over. I have bought the portions of the business that were available."

"So you just intend to lord over us with all that newfound power?"

"As your father has done to others?"

Vanessa bit the inside of her cheek. She knew her father, knew he was difficult at best. But he was all she had, her only family. The most important things to him were their family name, the tradition of the company and their standing in the community.

He needed to know that he would always have his place as a pillar of the city, his favorite chair and cigars in his country club.

She wouldn't be the one to lose that for him. Not now.

"I won't say he's been perfect, but he's an old man, he … Pickett means the world to him." And he—they—had lost too much already: Thomas, Vanessa's mother. They couldn't lose any more. It was up to her to make sure that they didn't.

Lazaro looked at Vanessa, her dark brown eyes cool and unreadable, her full lips settled into a slight frown, a berry gloss adding shine to her sexy mouth. She looked every bit what she was. Rich and upper-class, her silver gown hugging her curves without being over the top, the neckline high, the only skin on display the elegant line of her back. Restraint, dignity. That was how the Picketts were. In public at least.

He'd seen a different side to Vanessa Pickett twelve years ago. A side of her that was branded into him, under his skin.

He redirected his thoughts. "What's more important, Vanessa? The bottom line or tradition?"

To Michael Pickett, it was probably tradition. The blood in his veins was as blue as it came. He'd married old money and his daughter was the perfect aristocratic specimen, designed to keep the family name in a position of honor, to keep the family legacy going strong. Likely meant to marry a man of equal stock. That was what mattered to men like him. Not hard work, certainly not any sort of integrity. Just the preservation of an image and a way of life that was as outdated as his business practices.

When the opportunity to buy the shares had come up, Lazaro hadn't been able to turn it down. He hadn't been seeking any kind of poetic justice, but passing the chance up had been impossible when it had landed in his lap.

"I … Of course profit is the most important thing but we—my family—*is* Pickett Industries. We're the soul of the company, the reason it's lasted as long as it has. Without us, it wouldn't be the same."

"Of course it wouldn't be the same. It would be new, modern. Which your father is most definitely not. And you are running things based on systems put into place by him some thirty years ago. It's outdated in the extreme."

Her throat convulsed and a muscle ticked in her cheek. Her delicate hands clung tightly to her purse, the tendons standing out, the effort it took to maintain composure evident. "I don't know what else to do," she said, her voice flat.

He could see the admission cost her. He wasn't surprised by it, though. Vanessa had never seemed the CEO type. At sixteen she'd been sweet—at least he had seen her that way at first. She'd liked to swim in the pool in her family home's massive backyard. The image of her lying in a lounge chair in her electric-pink bikini was burned into his brain, a watermark that colored his view of things more often than he cared to admit.

She'd been intrigued by him from the start, the kid who mowed her daddy's lawn. He'd sensed her attraction right away, her hungry looks open, obvious. He imagined it had been some

form of rebellion for her. To be attracted to not just a poor boy, but an immigrant, one who was so far removed from the long, storied lineage of the Pickett family it was nearly laughable.

The fact that she'd managed to burrow beneath his skin, that the thought of her had made his heart race faster, that he'd looked forward to weeding the flower beds so that he could catch sight of the princess in her tower was even more laughable.

He'd been a fool. That air of sweetness and light had been the perfect way to capture his attention, the kindness she'd shown to him so rare he'd lapped it up like a man dying of thirst. But she'd only been toying with him. And she'd made that clear the evening she rejected him. Later that same night, as a bonus prize to go with the rejection, he'd woken up facedown in an alley, his nose broken along with any of his naive notions of a romance between him and Vanessa, as one of Pickett's hired henchmen warned him to keep away from the precious heiress.

It had been the beginning of rock bottom, both for him and his mother. He at least had crawled his way to the top. His mother had never had the chance. He curled his hands into fists, fought against the blinding rage that always came when he thought of his mother. Of how needlessly she'd suffered.

He chose instead to focus on how far he'd come, how much power he held. Of course, even now, with all of his billions in the bank, he wouldn't be considered good enough for the hallowed Vanessa Pickett. He could have any woman he desired, and had spent many years doing exactly that with women whose names

and faces he could no longer remember. But Vanessa was burned into his consciousness. A face he couldn't forget. Kisses he could still remember in explicit detail when far more recent, far more erotic events had faded from his memory.

All the events surrounding her were forever in his mind, etched so deeply, they would never fade. It had shown him that as long as he stayed where he was in life he could be made a victim —a victim of those with money and power, who could hire a group of men to beat up an eighteen-year-old boy, who could get a single mother evicted from her small apartment, get her thrown out onto the streets with no job and no hope of getting a job. He'd vowed never to be a victim again. Never allow anyone to have power over him.

The money he had earned—more than he had ever imagined when he'd started out. But the power, the absolute power that came with admittance into the highest echelons of society—that eluded him. He could not purchase it. It wasn't that simple.

To most on the outside, it would seem he had reached the top, but that was an illusion. What escaped him still was what Vanessa had, what her father had and what they would continue to have even if Pickett Industries went completely bankrupt. A blue bloodline. Family connections that could be traced back to America's first settlers. Not a lineage that began in a hovel in Argentina with an unwed mother and a father whose true identity was a mystery.

He clenched his teeth, fighting against the onslaught of

memories brought on by Vanessa's appearance. "Pickett is fixable. And I know exactly what to do to fix it."

Her brown eyes narrowed into slits. "You do?"

"Of course I do. I've made my fortune by turning dying corporations around, you know that, I'm sure."

"Given the constant profiles *Forbes* does on you I'd have to be blind to miss it."

"I can fix the mess," he said, a new idea turning over in his head now, one that made his adrenaline spike and his pulse race.

"By appointing someone new."

"Or not."

"Feeling charitable all of the sudden? I don't buy that, not when you were just dangling the mythical sword over my head."

His heart rate quickened. Right in front of him was the key, dressed in a deceptively sexy silver gown, her dark brown hair swept up into a respectable bun. She was the final step, the way for him to make his entrance into the last part of society that remained locked to him. The way for him to grasp the ultimate power that continued to elude him.

Money was power, but connections combined with money would make his status absolute. It ate at him that there was still a place in society he was barred from. That there were still things outside his control. This was his chance to rise above all that.

And as an added bonus, he would get to see the look on Michael Pickett's face when he took possession of everything the man had always tried so hard to keep in his control. Pickett

Industries *and* his only daughter. This was a way to exact revenge on the man who had made Lazaro and his mother unemployable within the circles they'd always worked, the man responsible for their nights on the street in the unforgiving Boston winter. The man responsible for his mother growing weaker and weaker until the strongest woman he had ever known had faded away.

He had watched his mother die in a homeless shelter, without possessions, without dignity.

He bit down hard, his teeth grinding together, the pressure satisfying, helping him keep control over the anger and adrenaline building inside him. He hadn't got where he was by letting opportunities pass him by. He took chances. He made snap decisions with a cool head. It was the secret to his success.

And Vanessa would be the key to his ultimate achievement.

A high-society bride would give him admittance into American aristocracy. He had considered it before, had already considered the advantage of marrying an old-money name to add weight to his own fortune, to improve his status. But every time he thought of marriage, every time he thought of finding a society princess, he couldn't stop himself from picturing Vanessa in her pink bikini. Couldn't erase the memory of stolen kisses in a guesthouse late at night.

Because of that, he'd never entertained the idea of marriage for very long at a time. But now … the idea of Vanessa as his high-society bride seemed too golden to let pass by. It was a chance to have all his needs fulfilled: his need to reach the top,

his need for her.

Vanessa, soft and bare beneath him, over him. Touching him, kissing him. Satisfying him.

Desire, hot and destructive, rushed through him at the thought of the chance to have her, to be able finally to satisfy the lust he'd carried with him through every affair, that had plagued him every sleepless night. In that instant, the flood of lust drove out every other thought. Everything was reduced to its most basic principle.

See. Want. Have.

He wanted Vanessa. He had spent the past twelve years with a gnawing sense of unfulfilled desire for justice and for the woman who haunted his dreams.

And he would have her now.

"I'll help you, Vanessa," he said, keeping his eyes locked on hers, "on one condition."

She tilted her chin up, revealing the long, elegant line of her neck. Tender skin he could easily imagine kissing, tasting. "Name your price."

He took a step toward her, cupped her chin between his thumb and forefinger and was shocked by the bolt of electricity that arced between them. She still had power over his body. But judging by the faint color in her cheeks, the tremble in her lips, he had power too.

"Marriage."

CHAPTER TWO

"ARE you insane?" she hissed, looking over her shoulder, checking to see if they were drawing stares. If her father ever heard about her meeting tonight with Lazaro Marino he would very likely explode, just before taking back control of the company, tearing the contract to shreds and dismissing her as a complete and utter failure, both as CEO and his daughter.

"Not in the least," Lazaro said.

Vanessa took a step away from him, her heart thundering in her ears. "I'm serious, Lazaro. Did you by any chance suffer a head injury in the past twelve years? Because while you were never the most sophisticated man I've ever met, you seemed lucid then, at least."

"I'm perfectly lucid," he said dryly. "Don't pretend that you're a stranger to the concept of a marriage of convenience."

Of course she wasn't. There was a reason that every boyfriend she'd ever had had been introduced to her by her father. That there was usually a folder with the man's name stamped on it somewhere in her father's office. The man she ended up with had to be from the right family, with the right reputation. The right credentials.

But she'd never wanted that. A part of her, a part that she kept guarded, locked away so that no one else would ever see, was still that romantic sixteen-year-old girl who believed in love. Who

wanted to be loved for who she was, not for her bank balance or for the shape of her body.

Of course, as far as her father was concerned, none of that mattered. Craig Freeman loomed in her future, the man her father had found worthy, the man with the right connections. That part of her life had been selected for her, as her job had been. As so many things in her life were.

Craig had been pinpointed as proper husband material before she'd been old enough to drive.

She'd managed to avoid marriage thanks to college and the demands of running Pickett. Before that, she had worked in most of the positions at Pickett so she could learn the ins and outs of everything, so she hadn't had time to get married. Or even to have a date.

Recently she hadn't had much time to do anything short of commuting to and from her office while taking antacids in hopes of easing the constant burn of stress in her chest.

"Of course I'm familiar with the concept, but that doesn't mean I have a desire to take part in one," she said crisply. That much was true. Marriage of any sort had never seemed like a real problem; it had always been safe in the gauzy future, not something she'd directly addressed. "And I really don't want to marry you." That part she added for good measure, and then wished she hadn't.

"Since when is any of this about want? Do you think I want to get married? To tie myself to one woman forever? Necessity. I've

known for a long time that I needed to make a good marriage in order to move freely in all social circles. I hadn't considered you before, but now I see that you'll be perfect. Consider yourself a walking, talking invitation into high society."

Vanessa bit her tongue. "You're sure you didn't sustain a head injury, Lazaro?"

"Quite."

"Because I don't remember you being this much of a bastard either."

"Time changes people, Vanessa. As I'm sure you know. You aren't who you used to be either, are you?"

"No," she said.

Except maybe she was. Being so near Lazaro now made her feel things she'd thought she'd left behind long ago, things she only let herself dwell on when she was alone, in the privacy of her room, in a painfully large and empty bed. Then she let herself dream—about a man who could share not just her bed, but her life. Her love.

But as soon as dawn broke through the curtains, reality returned, and it only hit harder the minute she walked into her office each morning to confront a failing company and her family's heritage slipping through her fingertips because she couldn't figure out how to fix the mess Pickett Industries was in.

And then there was the marriage her father already had planned for her. A marriage to a man she hardly knew, a man she hadn't bothered to get to know, because she'd never been able

to face the idea.

When she'd seen Lazaro for the first time, at sixteen, she'd discovered how badly she wanted love, and she'd let herself dream. A mistake. She'd fallen for him on sight, had thought he was special. Unique. But she knew the truth now. Lazaro wasn't unique. He wanted everything he could get. Money. Power. And if he had to use her to get it, he would.

His dark eyes were intent on hers, eyes that used to have a glimmer of humor in them. It was easy to imagine it there. Easy to imagine the boy he'd been. The inky black sky and the outline of the city faded and she was back there, in the summer, twelve years earlier.

"You aren't really supposed to talk to me." Vanessa looked over her shoulder to make sure her father wasn't watching. Just an instinctive check, because he was at the office, where he always was.

Lazaro smiled, teeth bright white against his bronze skin. Her heart started to beat faster. "Why is that?"

"Because I … Aren't you on the clock or something?"

He looked around the immaculate yard, then back at her, dark eyes locked on hers. It made her stomach tighten. Having him so close … she felt jittery, nervous. But she'd been watching him all summer, had been nurturing her crush on him until it had grown into something more. She lived for him to glance her way, for him to watch her while she lounged by the pool. She longed to see the interest in those beautiful eyes of his.

"I don't get paid hourly," he said, flashing her a grin that made her stomach do somersaults. "I'm done anyway."

"Oh …" she trailed off, all the words in her head jumbled.

"I'll stay until my mother's ready to leave for the day."

Vanessa suddenly felt too exposed in her bikini. She'd picked it partly to draw his attention, but now, with him standing so close, she felt acutely aware of how much skin was on display. She'd never really tried to draw attention to herself using her body, because she hadn't been ready for a man to take her up on the offer.

But Lazaro was different. He made her feel different.

They talked for the rest of the afternoon. About school, how different his inner-city public school was compared to her private all-girls school. But it turned out they liked the same foods, the same music, even though she had to hide hers from her father. She loved hearing how he talked about his mother, how proud he was of her. Vanessa told him how much she missed her mother.

They talked every day that week, sneaking around the property, evading watchful eyes, and by the end of it, Vanessa was certain she was in love. She also knew that if her father ever found out, Lazaro and his mother wouldn't have jobs anymore and she would be grounded for the rest of her life.

Because while most of the world had modernized, Michael Pickett had not. He very much believed in a class system and in socializing only with those who shared your designated position. She wasn't naive enough to think that her father's heart would

soften if she explained that she was really, truly in love with Lazaro.

She was already giving up so much in order to take on the responsibilities of Pickett Industries, already sacrificing so many dreams to major in business when she went to college and spend her life behind a desk, just as her father had done.

Surely that should count for something.

Yes, she and Lazaro had a gulf between them as far as money went. As far as prominence in society went, the gulf was even wider, impossible to bridge. But Vanessa didn't care. She couldn't care. When he looked at her, designer fashions, upscale parties and any feeling of being part of the elite faded completely. The world was reduced to her and Lazaro. There was nothing more.

And that was why risking serious consequences to see him was more than worth it.

It made her wonder what it would be like if it were only the two of them. If she had to leave it all behind for him … she would.

"Meet me tonight. Where no one can see," Lazaro said.

They were hidden in an alcove behind the guesthouse and it was doubtful that they could be seen, but there was always a risk. A bigger risk for him than for her, she knew.

"Okay." She didn't hesitate because she wanted more time with him, craved more time. She wanted to have him hold her hand. To kiss her. To tell her he loved her as she loved him. "Meet me here, at the guesthouse. I can get a key."

She spent the rest of the afternoon trying to decide what to wear, changing her clothes a hundred times. It felt like a first date. She was. Sort of. She'd never been on a date, had never kissed anyone. At her age, she felt like an oddity. Most of her friends at school had done a lot more than that.

But her father kept her on a tight leash, and boys were not something that was supposed to concern her at this stage of her life. Too bad for her father, since he couldn't control her thoughts, and boys had been among her biggest concerns for the past four years.

None of her crushes or interests mattered though, not really. There was a boy, a man really, six years her senior, that her father had his eye on for her—Craig Freeman. His family had all the right connections, the proper bloodline. And the thought of being married off to him someday made her feel like one of her father's broodmares.

She pushed the thought to one side. Craig was far in the future. He was on the West Coast building his name, and as far as she was concerned, having the entire expanse of the country between them was perfect.

And tonight, maybe she would just pretend he didn't exist. Maybe … maybe after tonight she would find the courage to tell her father that she didn't want Craig. At all. Ever.

She looked at the clock and then back at the full-length mirror. Her skirt was too short and her shirt was too tight. That's what her father would say. But she wasn't dressing for her father's

approval.

Tonight, only Lazaro's approval mattered.

She left her bedroom light on and closed the door. Her father was at his country club and the odds of him coming home before midnight were slim. Still, she wasn't taking chances.

She slipped quietly through the house and out the door, across the lawn.

When she got down to the guesthouse, Lazaro was there, waiting for her. Relief and happiness flooded through her. "You came."

He smiled that wonderful, knee-weakening smile. "Of course."

She unlocked the door and led him inside. "We can't turn on any lights," she whispered. "Someone might see."

"That's fine." Lazaro took her hand, the shock of his skin against hers making her body jolt. "We don't need lights."

He tugged her gently to him and wrapped his arm around her waist, placed his other hand on the back of her head and tangled his fingers in her hair. She was glad she'd left it down.

He leaned in, his lips feather-light on hers. Everything around her stopped for a moment, time, her heart, everything, as he increased the pressure of his mouth on hers. She closed her eyes, just standing there, letting the sensation of being kissed by Lazaro wash over her.

When the tip of his tongue slid over her lower lip, her mouth parted in shock and he took advantage, stroking his tongue over

hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck, boldness surging through her, a desire to make him feel the way she did, hold him captive to sensation, just as she was.

It was nothing like her friends had said. They said it was awkward. Bumping noses and teeth. She'd always heard that a lot of guys were sloppy kissers. But Lazaro was perfect. And there was nothing awkward about it.

And she was so glad she wasn't experiencing this moment with insipid, pale Craig Freeman. He looked as though he would probably be a sloppy kisser. She shoved the thought to one side, firmly planting her mind in the moment.

Lazaro took her hand in his, tugged it lightly as he took a step toward the hallway.

"What?" she asked, feeling dizzy, dazed, her body and soul focused on when he would kiss her again, caress her again.

"Looking for some place more comfortable."

She nodded and followed, her heart pounding in her throat; the only rooms back here were bedrooms, and she really didn't think she was ready for anything that might happen in a bedroom. But Lazaro was … He was different from anyone she'd ever known. She trusted him to go slow. To be what she needed.

He opened a door and looked inside, pushed it open and laced his fingers through hers again, drawing her in with him. She paused in the doorway, looking at the big bed. Her heart thundered hard—nerves, emotion, hormones threatening to wash her away in a powerful tide. He couldn't want to … they'd barely

kissed.

He pulled her to him, his hand caressing her cheek. “Just kiss me,” he whispered.

Yes. When she kissed him, everything else faded away. Just kissing.

He led her to the bed, his dark eyes serious on hers. She leaned in and kissed him again. He smelled clean. Not fussy and coated in cologne like the guys that went to the country club, but like soap and skin. Like Lazaro.

She’d never wanted anything, anyone, more in her life. She just wanted to stay with him forever, in the guesthouse, away from rules and propriety and all the things she was supposed to want. None of them mattered now. Only Lazaro mattered.

He sat on the bed and she sat with him, accepting a hungry kiss, his hands sliding over her back, down her waist, gripping her hips as he kissed her. Deeply. Passionately. Every thought fled her mind. Everything but how good it felt to have him touch her, kiss her, almost devour her as though she was the most decadent dessert he’d ever had.

She didn’t even realize she was falling until she felt the soft mattress beneath her back, and Lazaro’s hard frame over her. She tangled her fingers in his thick dark hair, her thighs parting slightly to make room for him.

Her heart felt as though it was overflowing with emotion, with love. She had to tell him. Had to tell him how much she loved him. How she wanted him forever. No matter what her father

thought, or what anyone said. The words hovered on her lips, but she couldn't find the courage to say them.

He knew though. He had to know. She wouldn't be here with him if she didn't love him.

He pushed her shirt up just enough to expose her stomach, the calloused skin of his fingertips pleasantly rough against her tender flesh. She arched into his touch and he took advantage, kissing her exposed neck.

The longing that overtook her was so big, beyond the physical, a deep emotional well that opened up inside her, desperate to be filled, so desperate for all of the attention that was being directed at her.

She was always lonely. Since Thomas had died the void in her life had been vast, her isolation in her own home devastating.

At least it had been until Lazaro. He brought the light back. He held the possibility of a future that wasn't filled with Pickett Industries.

When his hands moved higher, cupping her, she simply enjoyed his touch, tried to push all of the worries out of her mind and simply live in the moment.

He pulled away from her and stood. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Condom," he said, his chest rising and falling with hard, labored breaths as he reached into his pocket.

A wave of shock rolled over her, making her ears buzz, her throat tight. "I … No," she said, scrambling to sit up. She'd just

had her first kiss, anything more was impossible to fathom. "No."

She was torn then, torn because in so many ways she wanted him. Wanted to take advantage of being alone with him, of having all of his intensity focused on her. Part of her wanted to make love with him. To take every step possible to make him hers.

But she wasn't ready. She wanted love before there were condoms involved. She needed the words. She just did.

And if anyone found out she'd had her first kiss and her first time on the same night, in her father's guesthouse? She cringed at the thought.

"What would people think?" The words tumbled out before she had a chance to turn them over.

His eyes darkened, his mouth pressing into a tight line. A muscle jumped in his cheek. "I don't know, *querida*." The Spanish endearment sounded like a curse. "They might not think anything of it. I assumed you had arrangements with all of the gardeners."

His words were like gunfire, shocking and devastating. Harsh in the small, quiet space. "I …"

"You certainly aren't the only one of my clients' daughters I've gotten into bed."

Insults, angry words, curses she'd never spoken out loud before, all swirled in her head, but her throat was too tight for her to speak. And in his eyes, she could see her pain mirrored, raw and achingly sad.

He just looked at her for a moment, and she wished she had the courage to say something. But she just wanted to curl in on herself and hold the hurt to her heart.

"I think we're done here then." He turned and walked out, and she just sat and watched him go.

She wanted to go after him. To explain what she'd meant, because she was certain her words had hurt him in some way. To scream at him for making her hurt.

You'll see him again tomorrow. You can fix it then.

Except she'd been wrong about that. He'd walked out and he'd never come back. All he'd wanted from her was sex. That had been her introduction to relationships. Not exactly sterling. It was a memory, an experience she couldn't free herself from.

And more often than not her mind chose to focus not on the fight, but on the way his mouth had felt moving over hers. The slide of his tongue, his hands on her skin.

Worse than that were the times when she thought about what she'd been willing to do for him. She'd been ready to leave everything behind—her father, Pickett Industries—for him. That had been a moment in time when her future had seemed fluid rather than set in stone, and sometimes she dreamed of what it would be like to have options. To have the unknown stretching before her in a good way, and not in a failing-company, heartburn-causing kind of way.

Her mind was wicked. And treacherous.

Tonight was the first time she'd seen Lazaro in person since

he'd left her sitting on the bed in her father's guesthouse, although she'd revisited that night a thousand times every time she saw a picture of him, heard him discussed at cocktail parties. The bad boy made good. She'd never been able to truly escape him. Though she'd tried.

She'd only tracked him down now because the ghost of make-out sessions past was trying to stage a hostile takeover of her business—her life. Otherwise, she never would have sought him out again. Ever.

"The way I see it, Vanessa, you have very little choice in the matter if you want Pickett to survive."

"No," she said, "I don't see marriage as a formal business transaction."

"Now, I find that hard to believe."

"Really?"

He nodded. "Are you saying your father has nothing to do with the man you'll marry?" He watched as the light in her dark eyes dimmed. "Are you saying you get to choose?"

She shook her head. "Not … It's complicated."

"Not really."

"I can't," Vanessa said, keeping her voice hard, commanding. The voice she used during board meetings and to men who assumed she couldn't handle being in charge.

"You're already promised to someone, aren't you? Someone with the appropriate bloodlines?" His lip curled into a sneer. "Waiting for one of those golden boys to bail you out?"

"You know my father, he doesn't leave loose ends. Of course there's someone in his plans." The admittance was strange because no one, herself included, had ever voiced it. But no one had ever had to say anything. It was understood. It was as ingrained in her as which fork to use for the salad.

"Do you love him?"

"No." She didn't love Craig Freeman, or even know him, by her own design. She'd taken pains to avoid him, in fact. That hadn't been too hard since he'd been across the country for the majority of their tentative arrangement. He seemed about as interested in the whole thing as she was.

And that was another reason she'd never broached the subject with her father.

"Then why do you have an issue with a business-oriented marriage where I'm concerned?"

Because Craig Freeman could be put off. He was unchallenging. He was a nonentity. In some ways, it had been easier knowing that he was in the not-too-distant future. It took the pressure off her finding Mr. Right when she hardly had enough time to put on lipstick in the morning. Craig didn't make her heart race or her body burn. Lazaro Marino did. And *he* would not be put off by anyone.

Vanessa sucked in a sharp breath. "Before this goes any further, I need to know what this is about."

"Why is it that I can't get business deals with your father's cronies? Why is it that their businesses languish, and yet they sit

in their clubs sipping brandy and smoking cigars, ignoring the downfall, rather than pursuing help?"

"Because they're a bunch of stubborn old men who are set in their ways," she said. "Their business models are outdated, just as you've accused Pickett's of being."

"Perhaps. And also because I am not worthy in their eyes. They would rather watch their companies crumble than ask someone like me, with my dirty blood, for help."

"That's ridiculous," she said, even though she knew it was true. Those men would never stoop to taking a consultation from someone so far beneath them in station. That exclusivity was the source of their power, and they weren't about to let it go, no matter how modernized the rest of the world had become.

"It's not. We both know that."

"And you think marrying me will fix that for you?"

He chuckled. "I'm sure the son-in-law of Michael Pickett would be due some respect."

"If my father didn't disown me for marrying you instead of the golden boy he's selected for me," she said.

"Would he?"

She paused for a moment, honestly wondering if he would. She'd been ready to take the chance twelve years ago. More than ready to carve a new life for herself and Lazaro, to leave it all behind.

That dream had ended quickly. Maddeningly, it tantalized her sometimes when she was in bed, on the edge between sleep and

wakefulness. Stupid subconscious.

Finally, she shook her head. "No. He wouldn't. He has too much invested in me. And I own more stock than he does at this point. He can't vote me out of my position, which would mean that if he did disown me he would be separating himself from the company, and he won't do that."

"But if there is no company?" he asked.

If there was no company, her father would never speak to her again. Her life, everything she had worked for for so long, would be meaningless. She would have nothing but her big, empty town house—if she could even afford to keep it—with her big, empty bedroom and her big, empty bed. The thought made her sick, made her stomach physically cramp.

"It's not an option," she said. She refused to think about it. Refused to entertain the idea.

Her relationship with her father was complicated. It wasn't a happy, hugging sort of relationship, but he was all that she had, her only family. He was the one constant in her world. He had always cared for her, he had set her path in front of her and he had paid for her schooling to make sure his goals were met.

And she'd done all she could to earn his approval, done what she could to help fill the void Thomas had left behind. The Pickett heir—the real Pickett heir—hadn't lived to graduate from high school.

It was up to her now. It wasn't a responsibility she could simply shake off or ignore.

"And can you risk that, Vanessa?"

"No." She choked on the word.

"Then marry me."

"It's crazy, you know that, right?"

"More so than the arrangement you already have?"

"Yes," she fired back, brown eyes blazing. Lazaro's gut tightened. Of course she would feel that way. He was beneath her. He had been a toy to her twelve years ago. Good enough to flirt with, to tease, but nothing more.

What would people think? The look of horror on her face, the incredulity in her voice, was crystal clear in his mind, as though she had spoken it only a moment ago, instead of what amounted to a lifetime ago.

He was the housekeeper's son, and she was the princess of the castle. Years later, now that he had billions to his name and a reputation as one of the world's savviest business minds, she still believed herself above him.

Even as the anger coursed through him, he wanted her. Wanted her with the same burning desire he'd had for her when they were teenagers. Yes, he wanted the vital connections marrying her would provide. But at the moment, more than anything, he wanted her body. He wanted to finish what he had started twelve years ago. He wanted Vanessa, naked, willing, in his bed, crying out his name. His and no other man's. He wanted to brand her as she had done to him with those kisses years ago.

Vanessa's lips on his, her delicate hands skimming over his

skin—everything narrowed down to that. The broader goal was lost. There was nothing beyond lust. Simple, pure lust that had been with him since the first moment he'd seen her. A lust that had never released its hold on him. The need to satisfy it was suddenly driving, imperative.

He closed his hands into fists, took in a deep breath.

As much as he wanted that, he had to remember what his real goal was. There would be plenty of time to seduce Vanessa once they were married. It was about business now, and the rest would come later. Business, and dealing with Michael Pickett.

What sweet justice it would be, marrying Vanessa. Having her replace her hallowed last name with his.

How wonderful it would be to see Michael Pickett's face when he discovered his only daughter would be marrying the man he had had beaten in a back alley for daring to touch his beloved princess. For daring to sully her with his hands. A laborer's hands. An immigrant's hands.

Lazaro curled his fingers, forming fists.

The other man's fate—the fate of his much-loved business and that of his only child—was now Lazaro's to decide.

Just as his fate and his mother's fate, had once been Michael Pickett's to decide. And what a decision he'd made. He'd had them evicted. Had made sure they couldn't find work in Boston and that what little they'd had was lost to them.

Now the older man would know what it was like to feel desperate, to have to depend on the whims of someone else. What

it was like to have his power stripped from him.

Men like him didn't deserve such absolute power.

"I'm offering you a very simple solution, Vanessa."

"Oh, yes, simple. In what world is marriage the simple solution?"

"In *this* world. Alliances are made by advantageous marriages, it happens every single day. You admitted it is already in your future."

"Nothing was finalized. I believe marriage should be about love."

She looked so sincere when she said it, brown eyes liquid in the dim light. What would Vanessa Pickett know about love? No more than he did.

"Romanticizing an institution has always seemed pointless to me."

Vanessa swallowed hard, her heart thundering, the pulse in her neck fluttering. "You don't seem the type to romanticize anything."

She knew that about him. Had known it the moment kissing had turned into more and he'd produced a condom rather than words of love. Ironic that her very first marriage proposal was from him, twelve years after she'd been hoping to hear it. Of course, there was still no mention of love.

She'd been a romantic then, with all of her heart and not just a piece of it. And she'd learned, at Lazaro's hands, that blind naïveté didn't protect you from cold reality.

And what she had now was cold reality at its finest. A dying business, one that was under her control, the very real danger of losing that control. Worse, of losing the entire company to bankruptcy along with any respect she'd managed to gain from her father. She would be the one to destroy a family legacy that had stood for one hundred years. She was so close to losing absolutely everything, having nothing but a cold, arranged marriage waiting for her when the dust settled.

She also had an out in the form of Lazaro Marino. A deal with the devil, and it would only cost her soul. Well, maybe that was an exaggeration. But from where she was standing, it must look a lot that way. A dark, handsome devil, sure, but the devil nonetheless. And it was truly an exchange of one marriage of convenience for another.

Of course, for better or for worse, the arrangement with Lazaro would never be cold.

No. Impossible. She looked at him, broad shoulders, thickly muscled chest, trim waist and hips. He had a body most women would pay money to get their hands on, and the face of a fallen angel. Perfectly handsome, but with that hint of danger provided by his slightly bent nose and dark stubble. Stubble that would feel rough against her hands, her cheek …

"It isn't as though we would marry immediately," he said, his deep voice breaking through her fantasy.

"We wouldn't?" A stupid response, as though she'd agreed to something when she hadn't done any such thing.

"No. It takes time to plan a wedding. Especially of the calibre I have in mind."

"Oh, you've thought about this?" For some reason that made her stomach tighten.

"Not in a specific sense. But there are certain things expected from a society wedding." His lips curved up into a smile. A smile that lacked humor and warmth. It made her shiver.

She'd never wanted a huge wedding. She'd seen that circus one too many times. Had been a part of it for family friends. Those weddings were impersonal, affairs for the guests and not for the couple, and she'd always found them disingenuous. Although, she was certain, the choice would have been taken from her when the time came with Craig. A big, three ring circus of a wedding, befitting the alliance between the Picketts and the Freemans. The thought made her slightly dizzy. She hadn't given a lot of thought to that eventual union, but all this wedding talk was forcing it to the forefront, making her face something she'd been dutifully ignoring for years.

It had been a foolish thing, keeping that corner of her heart reserved for romantic fantasy. There had never been a hope for that in her future. Never. Lazaro's appearance didn't alter that, it just altered the groom. Craig, with his pale, angelic looks, was after her for the connections she would provide, and Lazaro, dark and dangerous, wanted the same. Neither man offered her love. Lazaro, at least, would help her hold on to Pickett Industries.

"And what do you intend to do with me until the wedding?"

He smiled again, and this time it touched his eyes, lighting a spark in their depths. Heat. She knew the look. She'd been on the receiving end of it before. And it was no less devastating to her at twenty-eight than it had been to her at sixteen.

He extended his hand, his open palm cupping her cheek, and heat spread through her, making her knees feel shaky, her breasts heavy. How long had it been since she'd been so close to a man? And how long had it been since one had made her feel like this? The very few times she'd come into contact with Craig she hadn't felt even the slightest twinge of electricity.

"I'll spend that time seducing my future wife," he said, his voice husky, the remnants of his accent clinging to the syllables, making each word sound like a sensual caress.

She swallowed, her throat suddenly tight and dry as though it had been lined with sandpaper. He was talking about seduction. Sex. It took her right back to that moment, the moment when he'd made it clear that sex was on his agenda for the night, his hand in his pocket, reaching for a condom. She'd been tempted then too, but … she'd loved him then. Or something. She'd been sixteen and sixteen-year-old girls were given to the dramatic when it came to matters of the heart.

That romantic part of herself had always hoped against hope that the man she gave her body to would be a man who loved her desperately, a man she felt the same way about.

It wasn't that that made her want to hold back from Lazaro though. It was the fact that he seemed to command some sort of

power over her body, that he could get her hot just by looking at her. He robbed her of all the steely control no other man had ever been able to crack.

That was scarier than anything. That was something she had to master because she was not allowing him to have that kind of hold over her. Not when he already had so much power.

"I'm not just going to jump into bed with you. I don't even know you."

"Sometimes that adds to the fun, Vanessa."

The way he said it, his rich, accented voice caressing the words, made her almost believe it. Made her wonder if love was overrated. "That's not how I see things, Lazaro," she said, her throat so constricted she could hardly force the words out.

"Relax. The courtship will be for the benefit of the media and my future clients. What better than a grand love story to keep everyone fascinated?"

"I don't know if any of my father's friends are old romantics."

"Perhaps not. But the more genuine it looks, the better. It's essential that it look real."

"I don't know …"

"What is it you don't know, Vanessa? Whether you want to embrace success or failure?"

"Why does it have to be marriage?" she asked. "Why can't …"

"Why can't I simply hand you the solution? Why can't I give you the knowledge and help that Pickett Industries cannot afford? Because that's what your father, your family would do

for others?"

"That isn't …"

"Nothing in life is free, Vanessa. Nothing."

"I know that," she said, her voice fading. She did know it. She knew the cost of duty over desire better than he realized. Pickett Industries wasn't her dream; Craig Freeman had never been her dream. But running the company, marrying Craig, were what she was supposed to do. This was her duty to her father, to Thomas's memory. And duty was something she'd embraced rather than turning away from. It had taken strength to do that, to deny whatever else she might want in order to preserve her father's respect for her. In order to preserve the Pickett family legacy.

"These are my terms, you can take them or leave them."

Vanessa felt as though the world had just rocked beneath her feet. But it hadn't; the paper lanterns above her head were still steady, the people around them were still talking, unaware that her life was crumbling around her, that everything she had always believed about herself lay in ashes before her.

She'd never thought she would stoop so low. Had never thought she would be the one willing to do whatever it took for the sake of money and power. And maybe if it were only money and power she wouldn't. Regardless of what Lazaro said, this did seem different from the friendly, family-made arrangement she had with Craig. This seemed mercenary. It seemed … It felt in some ways that she was selling herself. Her body.

But this was her reputation. It was all she had worked for. It was her relationship with the only family she had. If she didn't have that, she would have nothing. Breaking the unofficial engagement with Craig was one thing, losing Pickett, letting it fall into someone else's hands … that her father would never forgive her for. And she would never forgive herself.

She couldn't face that. And it was time to step up. To do what she'd been doing all her life—make the choice that would best benefit her family legacy and all of the employees who depended on her family for their paychecks.

"I'll take them." Her words sounded flat and harsh in the silent night air.

"A very wise choice, Vanessa." Lazaro's expression didn't change, his eyes remained flat and dark, latent heat smoldering there, his square jaw still set firmly. But she could feel a change in him, a subtle shift in the energy radiating from him. It resonated in her, caused a response she couldn't ignore or deny.

She looked at the cool, hard man standing in front of her. To him, this was business. Another way for him to climb to the top. She just had to see it the same way. She couldn't afford to involve her heart.

"I didn't have much of a choice, did I?" she asked.

"Not one that had a better outcome. And you're a smart woman. You know that the end result is all that matters."

She wanted to be that woman. She tried to be that woman. Because that was the woman who was going to pull Pickett out

of the red.

"Pickett Industries is all that matters," she said slowly, feeling the virtual shackles tightening on her wrists even as she spoke the words.

CHAPTER THREE

SURREAL didn't even begin to describe it. Waking up and realizing she had consented to marry Lazaro Marino the night before was surreal on an epic scale worthy of Salvador Dali. Given the state of things, she wouldn't have been shocked to see her clock melt off the wall.

But, as surreal as it was, it was her new reality. Nonetheless she couldn't make it feel real. She felt as if she was in a fog that not even driving to work through Boston's harrowing traffic could shake her out of. And when she sat down at her desk it didn't get any better.

It was early, the sun rising pink against the skyline of the city. Vanessa picked up her smartphone and snapped a picture. It was muted, nothing like it would have been if it had been done with an actual camera, something she'd never bothered to buy for herself. It wasn't that she couldn't afford one, but she didn't have time to indulge in any hobby that didn't directly benefit her company.

She would have even less time as CEO of Pickett Industries and fiancée to Lazaro Marino. She looked at her left hand. It was bare, no engagement ring. But there would be one, she had no doubt about that. Lazaro was a man of details and a detail like that wouldn't be overlooked.

She leaned forward and rested her forehead on the cool wood of her desk. How had she gotten so deep into a life that she didn't

want? She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath, trying to halt the tears that were starting to form.

She'd made her choice. Long before Lazaro had walked back into her life, she'd made her choice to do what she had to do to keep Pickett Industries in the family. She'd gone to college and majored in business so she could see that that happened, and that she did the best job she could. She'd chosen to put everything personal on hold in order to keep the business afloat.

It was just a part of her duty to Pickett. It felt like more though.

A strange bubble of exhilaration filled her chest because suddenly her future was different. The man standing at the altar in her mind was no longer Craig Freeman; it was the one man who had inspired a kind of reckless abandon in her. The one man who'd made her want to break the rules.

By marrying him, she was both toeing the line and rebelling against it.

That was liberating in some ways, terrifying in others. And what she really wanted to do—hide under her desk until the storm blew over—was impossible because she had to keep it together. She was the CEO of Pickett. She couldn't question her decisions, and she couldn't hide from the hard stuff.

The choice was made. There was no going back. She was committed.

"And possibly in need of being committed, since you're clearly certifiable," she mumbled into the emptiness of her office.

There was the small matter of telling her father that she would not be following his "advice" and pursuing a marriage with Craig. And that Lazaro was the one she was choosing instead. His wrath would be monumental. But she was between a serious rock and a hard place, and the broken marriage agreement, such as it was, would be much more forgivable than the loss of the family legacy.

A sharp knock on her office door had her lifting her head quickly, smoothing her hair. "Yes?"

The door swung open and her heart dropped into her stomach. Whether it had been twelve years or twelve hours, Lazaro still had all the power to make her body hot and achy, to make her lips tingle with the desire to feel his kiss.

"Good morning," he said, coming in without waiting for her permission. She doubted he ever waited for permission to do anything.

"Not especially. What brings you here?"

"I couldn't stay away from my beautiful fiancée," he said, his blinding smile making her stomach curl tightly.

Her stupid, traitorous heart leapt back into her chest and started thundering madly, despite the dry humor in his tone. She cleared her throat. "Right. Why are you here?"

"Because there are details we need to work out."

"Right. Details," she said, her voice hollow.

"There will be a prenup."

"I would hope so," she said, fighting to keep her tone neutral while nerves tightened her throat.

She didn't know if she could go through with it. Marry him. Live with him. Sleep with him. Let her whole life get tangled up in Lazaro.

Speak now, or forever hold your peace.

She looked at him, at the hardened line of his jaw, the glint of steel in his dark eyes. It was too late. If she went back now, he would take everything from her. Everything that made her Vanessa Pickett.

The words stuck in her tightened throat.

"I'm not counting on a lifetime of wedded bliss," he said, his voice dry.

"You aren't?"

"Hardly. But what I am expecting is that you will stand beside me with all the duty and conviction of a politician's wife."

"What exactly does that mean?" she asked, feeling dizzy all of a sudden, fighting to convey only cool composure.

"During a political scandal, no matter how vile, the politician's wife always stands beside her husband because it is about more than marriage. It is her job. This marriage will be your job."

"Planning on creating a vile scandal, are you?" She treated him to her deadliest glare. He seemed entirely unaffected.

"Not in the least. But my point is that no matter what, your commitment to our union must outweigh the circumstances. If at some point we are leading separate lives it is of no concern to me, so long as appearances show a united couple."

She'd been wrong about him being the friendlier option to

her arrangement with Craig. As little as marriage with Craig had been truly discussed, she'd assumed he would at least try to be a husband to her. Lazaro wasn't promising that. Not even close.

"Does that mean that even if you cheat on me I have to stay with you?"

"As I will stay with you," he said, his voice hard. "The union, the legal marriage, is what I need. I cannot project thirty years into the future, but I will ensure that you are still with me."

Vanessa was having a hard time breathing. It was as though he'd turned over her solid wood desk and placed it on her chest. Thirty years. This wasn't a temporary arrangement. He was talking about the rest of her life. Shackled to this man.

She tried to imagine turning away again. Imagined telling him the deal was off, and he could take his shares and the entirety of Pickett Industries to hell with him for all she cared.

But she couldn't. The words wouldn't come. They wouldn't even form in her brain in a cohesive manner. The idea of Lazaro losing his hold on her didn't open up a wide arena of possibilities for her life, rather, it showed just how narrow her scope of options truly was. Without Lazaro, the company crumbled. Without the company she had no job, no relationship with her father.

She'd promised her father, the week that Thomas died, that she wouldn't fail him, and she'd set out to make sure she didn't from that day on. She'd dropped out of the photography club she'd been in at school, started doing some basic business courses

instead. Done whatever she could to ensure she didn't let her father down.

In her mind, she was a Pickett. She was a loyal daughter. She was the CEO of Pickett Industries. Without that … she didn't know who she was beyond that. And without Lazaro's help, she wouldn't be any of those things. Of course, it was his interference that forced her to choose. But without him, there might not be any choice at all other than to watch Pickett slowly sink beneath the waves of debt, another casualty of a shifting business landscape.

And while this might not have been her first choice for how her life would end up, it was the right thing. At least this way, she would keep the business going. She would have children who would eventually take over.

Her stomach cramped at the thought. Yes, she'd planned on having children someday, but if she said yes they would be Lazaro's children. The room suddenly seemed much too small, Lazaro's presence in it far too big.

Another thought, small and insidious, reminded her of that moment of pure exhilaration when she'd realized that she had changed her future. That she had diverged from the path so carefully laid out for her.

If she said no now, it was back to that path. Everything would stay the same. The thought was suffocating.

She shook her head. "I don't want that."

"What is it you don't want?"

"You have to be faithful to me, Lazaro," she said, her throat tight. The entire conversation made her body feel hot, restless and edgy. She knew that she would be sleeping with Lazaro, and just the thought made her feel charged with adrenaline.

But the sex would be a purely physical act, with legal paperwork to make it all legitimate. There would be no feelings. No love. She didn't even have to ask him about that. The hardness in his dark eyes answered that question.

Fair enough, since she couldn't imagine falling in love with the cold man standing before her. It was shocking enough that her body seemed to respond to him. But she didn't want to share him either. There were a host of reasons why that thought didn't sit well with her, her health being foremost among them. Another being pure, possessive jealousy. But what woman would want to share her husband? None. Love or not.

"You have to give me that at least," she said. "If we have children … I assume you want children?"

"I need them."

He was talking in terms of producing heirs, and in that sense, she needed them too. It felt wrong to think of them that way, when it never had before. She'd always been confident that she would love her children, so it had never mattered if that was part of the incentive for marriage. But now, knowing Lazaro felt the same way made her see just how cold it was. Made her worry that he wouldn't ever see the children as anything more than vessels for his legacy.

Like your father?

She shook the thought off and continued, "If we have children, I think they need to know they can aspire for better than a marriage filled with lies and infidelity."

"I will honor the vows I speak," he said, clenching his jaw tightly.

"Good. Then I'll honor mine. And even if we're a miserable, distant, sexless couple, I will stay with you."

"Inspiring."

"Why should it be?" she asked. "This is a cold, mercenary agreement. I'm not pretending it's anything other than that. I don't want or expect you to fall in love with me, but respect would be nice. I consider knowing that the person you're sleeping with isn't out sleeping with other people to be a great sign of respect."

"Then you will be faithful to me," he said, his voice hard.

"I said I would be."

"And you will not deny me when I come to your bed."

Vanessa put her hand on her stomach, trying to calm the butterflies that were staging a riot inside of her. "After the wedding."

He nodded once, his eyes trained on her face. "After the wedding."

"My father isn't going to like this. I have to … Well, there's the arrangement I mentioned. And his family will be—"

"You are *engaged* to this other man?"

She held up her ringless left hand. "No. But there was an

understanding."

"Your father will be grateful to you if he finds out the circumstances surrounding the union."

"No."

"You don't want him to know?"

She shook her head. "No. I can't … I don't want him to know how far things have fallen … how … how bad things have gotten."

"He will have to know what I'm bringing into the union,"

Lazaro said, dark eyes glittering. "I want him to know that I intend to revamp Pickett. I want him to know that I am saving it. That I've done what he could not. If you want to take credit for meeting me while pursuing my help, it is of no concern to me. But I want him to know that I was the one to pull this dying, outdated company into a new life in the modern era." His voice was hard, uncompromising. He knew what it would do to her father to have to accept help, let alone to have to accept help from someone he believed to be beneath him, and Lazaro was relishing it.

Vanessa had never been able to believe what her father said about some people being better than others thanks to their bloodlines. She'd seen too many cruel, horrible people in her social class. People who wasted their money and used those around them with no thought to anyone but themselves. Believing that those people were somehow better than the rest of humanity was depressing.

And when she'd been sixteen, her emotions had been held

captive by a boy her father considered to be lower than them. A boy who had grown into the man standing before her.

Looking at him, she felt her chest get tight, pride swelling within her. It shocked her. But she was, she realized, proud of what Lazaro had become, professionally at least.

"Showing you have the real power?" she asked softly.

"Money *is* the real power, Vanessa. Money is how I got into this position, how I managed to purchase Pickett's shares."

"Then why do you care about the rest of it? Why do you need me at all?"

He raised a dark eyebrow. "Because I can have you."

Her stomach tightened. "The proof of how far you've come?" she asked, voice dry.

"Perhaps. But it has very little to do with anyone else's perception. I want every door open to me. I have earned it. Money, I have—I want the social power as well."

Lazaro's blood burned in his veins, adrenaline spiking through him. He wanted everything. To be at the top of absolutely everything. To sit as a social equal with the man who had had him beaten for daring to touch his precious daughter.

And to make Vanessa his. To finally to satisfy his desire for her.

"The old-money society, the American aristocracy, it's as outdated as your father's business model," he said.

"And you'll tear down centuries of it all by yourself, Lazaro?"

"I don't want to tear it down," he said, his voice rough, his

accent taking over his words. “I want in.”

She looked away, turning her focus out her office window and onto the Boston skyline. “And it frustrates you that you can’t do it without help.”

Lazaro bit down hard, a muscle in his jaw jumping. “None of this is done out of necessity, Vanessa. It is a bonus. You wouldn’t know about the necessities in life, not when your biggest concern is staying employed in a multi-million-dollar position you’re not qualified to do. You could walk away and there would be no great tragedy to either of us.”

She just sat, frozen behind her desk, dark eyes wide, her mouth pressed into a firm line. She wouldn’t walk away. She was too married to the tradition, to the lineage of her family, just as her father had been.

What will people think?

He wondered if she’d had a share in his broken nose if, after refusing him, she had told her father all about how the low-class housekeeper’s son had made an attempt to touch her with his filthy, laborer’s hands.

He wondered if Vanessa shared culpability for putting his mother and him out on the streets.

That had been the worst part about all of it. As he’d spat blood out onto the grimy pavement in the alley after being beaten by Michael Pickett’s men, after he’d been warned never to set foot on the Pickett estate again, been warned that if he so much as looked at Vanessa again, the consequences might be fatal,

the very worst part had been wondering if Vanessa had been complicit in it. If she might have wanted her father to make sure she was rid of him.

His mother had lost her job. He'd lost his job. They'd lost their home and his mother had paid the price with her health. Ultimately with her life.

But now he knew that whatever part Vanessa had played in what had happened, she had never intended it. She was thoughtless, but she wasn't evil.

That moment, when he'd been lying in the alley, had been the lowest of his life. But it had been then, jobless, broken and bleeding, that he had vowed to ensure no one else ever held power over him like that again. He would never allow anyone but himself to hold his fate in his hands.

That goal had consumed him, had propelled him from the gutter to the boardroom, had made him millions.

That Vanessa would be the key to unlock the final door, to allow him into the last segment of society where he was still unwelcome, was poetic justice.

He didn't hate her. He had no desire to hurt her or exact revenge on her. But he no longer cared for her. His body still ached for her, that was all.

Michael Pickett, on the other hand, deserved hell on earth and in the hereafter. Taking Vanessa, making her his own, wrenching her from her father's control … the satisfaction in that was endless. The man had been willing to commit murder

if necessary to keep Lazaro away from his daughter, and now there would be nothing he could do to prevent him from claiming Vanessa.

"You know I can't walk away. You might not see it as a necessity, Lazaro. But this is my whole life." She met his gaze, her dark eyes glittering. "And I don't think you'll walk away either. You need me, too."

"Do I?"

"Yes, you do."

His gut burned. "You or any other society princess."

"We both know this is about more than that."

Why bother to deny it? "True. It is rather satisfying, the idea of marrying into the family whose floors my mother wasn't good enough to clean."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, well-groomed eyebrows drawn together.

"I mean, your father fired my mother. We ended up on the streets. So yes, I suppose there is something especially satisfying about it being you."

There was no triumph in her eyes, only shock, sadness. For him? For his mother? It was far too late for that.

"I didn't know."

"Did you think we went on an extended holiday?"

"I didn't know," she repeated, her voice low.

He shrugged. "We'll start with dating, of course."

"What?"

"We need to be seen together, prior to the actual engagement."

Vanessa tried to ignore the knot in her stomach. She didn't know his mother had been fired. She wondered if that had been when he'd disappeared. If that was why he'd never come back after their disastrous almost night together.

She didn't want to ask. Didn't want to let him know she still thought about it. That it still mattered.

She cleared her throat. "And you want us to … date?"

"Of course. I intend to seduce my fiancée with all of the skill that I possess."

He took her hand in his and bent over it, pressing firm, hot lips to her skin. The gesture was light, gentlemanly even. Not even a little bit erotic. At least it shouldn't have been. But it was. It pushed all of her thoughts and concerns right out of her head and caused a riot of sensation through her system, made her entire body weak and energized at the same time. Made her breasts feel heavy as a pulse started to beat at the apex of her thighs.

She hadn't felt this way, not with this level of intensity, since the last time Lazaro had taken her in his arms when she'd been a completely inexperienced sixteen-year-old. And she hated that she still responded this way to him now. He was the man who was holding her future hostage and that she would melt under his touch with absolutely no resistance was appalling.

She pulled her hand back and pressed her palm to her chest, feeling her heart rage against her breastbone. "No seduction required," she said tightly. "You can seduce the media, I don't

really care, but not me. I'll do my 'wifely duty' once we're married, but until then, you can keep your lips to yourself."

He tightened his jaw, his eyes dark, glittering. Angry. "Don't worry, princess, I won't defile you in any way."

A stab of regret hit her. For a moment, she wondered if she'd hurt him. But the moment passed quickly. Lazaro Marino didn't do feelings. And the last time she'd turned down his advances he'd walked out of her life. All he saw her as was a body. Well, now he saw her as more than that. A body and a stepping stone on his way to the top.

It wouldn't hurt him to wait.

"One thing you need to know, Vanessa. With me, sex will never feel like duty. I guarantee it." His eyes were hot on her, making her body temperature rise along with her heart rate. His words were an invitation to sin a saint could hardly resist.

Sign me up for sainthood then, because I'm not going there.

She would do what she had to do. She would make this deal work for both of them, but she wasn't going to fall under his spell. She'd done it once, and she had no intention of ever succumbing to his wicked, deceptive charms again.

"Anything else?" she asked stiffly.

"You and I have a date tomorrow night."

CHAPTER FOUR

"OF course you picked Chev's," Vanessa murmured as Lazaro helped her from the limo.

She wasn't happy about it, that was clear. It was written all over that beautiful face of hers, her dark eyes glittering with barely suppressed anger.

"Of course," he said, drawing her to him, wrapping his arm around her slender waist.

It was a cool evening, the cobblestone sidewalk wet from rain that had fallen earlier. But Vanessa's arms were bare, her legs barely covered by the sheer veil of her nylons, killer black heels added to the look, making his mind spin with fantasies that couldn't possibly be legal at this sort of establishment.

Everything about her look was designed to entice. To torment. The formfitting, silken dress she was wearing acted as a flimsy barrier between his hands and her soft, smooth skin. He knew it was soft and smooth. He remembered, in explicit detail, how she had felt beneath his fingertips.

He slid his hand around to her lower back, the deep blue fabric catching on some of the rough patches on his hand, still calloused from so many years of labor. For a moment, his world reduced to Vanessa, to the tease she presented. It would be so easy to tear the gown from her body so that he could touch her, could see just what it would be like to feel her bare skin beneath the palm

of his hand.

"This is going to get back to my father in a couple of hours. If it even takes that long."

He felt her tense, the idea of her father seeing them together clearly not something she wanted to think about.

"He won't like to hear about it?"

She shot him a sideways glance. "What do you think?"

He could imagine what Vanessa's father would think. Vividly. Almost like a blow to his face. "He'll learn to deal with it."

"I doubt it."

"Easier to handle than having you deposed as head of Pickett. Or having to file for bankruptcy."

"Possibly," she said, teeth gritted.

Lazaro didn't wait for the host. He opened the door for Vanessa and ushered her into the small, intimate dining room.

"Your usual table, Mr. Marino?" The host approached them and gestured toward the back of the restaurant.

"We'll sit somewhere up front," Lazaro said.

The other man nodded. "Excellent, come with me."

Vanessa turned and gave Lazaro a look that could have frozen fire.

He leaned in, allowing a moment, just a moment, to enjoy her scent. Light. Feminine. The same as it had been twelve years ago. He moved his lips near her ear, brushing her thick, glossy hair back. "The better for us to be seen, my dear," he whispered.

He felt a shudder go through her body. Attraction. Need. The

kind that lived so strong in him. She wanted him. Good to know. He didn't want a martyr in his bed. He wanted her hot, begging for him.

"Great," she said, acid corroding the word.

She still didn't want to be seen with him. She was still worried about what people would think. Rage poured into the well of lust that had opened up in him, mixing, mingling, each making the other more potent.

He bypassed the host again and pulled the velvet chair out for Vanessa. She sat, her body held stiffly, her face stony.

Lazaro turned to the host. "Bring whatever you think is best."

"Of course, Mr. Marino."

Lazaro took his seat across from Vanessa. Her facial expression hadn't changed, her bright pink lips set into a firm line, her white-tipped fingernails drumming on the table. He put his hand over hers and halted the motion, curling his fingers around hers.

"You could at least try to look like you're enjoying yourself. Hell, you could actually enjoy yourself, I promise not to tell."

The corner of her mouth twitched. "Sorry if I'm not finding this whole sudden forced-marriage thing all that amusing."

"You use the word *force,* Vanessa, and yet I am not forcing you into anything. There is no way for me to do so. You made the choice, you agreed to it."

"Strong-arm tactics were involved," she said, raising a glass of red wine to her lips.

"Maybe. But you could walk away."

"I can't," she said, balling her hand into a fist beneath his before pulling it back and setting it in her lap.

"Status is so important to you?"

"What about you? That's why you're marrying me."

It was much harder to remember the logical reason behind the union when she was so close to him. Much easier to remember the visceral, base reasons for it. Revenge. Lust.

"Essentially," he said. "But I'm not acting like a victim. I need something, you can help me with it. It's the same for you. So we can use each other, go forward, obtain our goals.

If you want to drag yourself around like a martyr for a few months that's your prerogative."

"That's … I'm not doing that."

"You are. You made the choice."

"So own it?"

He shrugged. "Or make a new choice. Walk away now, Vanessa. I'm not going to force you to stay."

Vanessa met Lazaro's eyes, forced herself not to look away. He was right. It was so easy to blame him. To make all of this his fault somehow. And, well, him buying up all the stocks *was* his fault, but the position she was in wasn't. And agreeing to the marriage had been her choice.

She swallowed, uncomfortable with the revelation. It was more palatable to have it be Lazaro's fault and his alone. To feel as though she'd been forced into it all. It was harder to accept that

she'd agreed to it because she couldn't take the thought of failing.

She forced a smile. "You're right."

"It didn't even choke you to say it," he said, his voice laced with dark humor.

"I may not say it again," she said. "But in this instance, you are. I made the choice. I'm not walking away."

She'd chosen this path a long time ago, and while this thing with Lazaro was a diversion, the road would end in the same place. She wasn't turning back now just because things had gotten harder. Picketts didn't quit. She didn't quit. She would see it through.

A server came to the table and set a plate in front of each of them. A whitefish fillet and spring vegetables. Very elegant and perfectly cooked. Exactly what she needed to take her focus off Lazaro for a few moments. But not even a divine lemon sauce could keep her from being aware of him. He was just so very there. So present. Close. And he made her tremble inside. Made her remember what it was like to be kissed with the kind of passion normally reserved for books rather than real life.

She set her fork down and put her hands in her lap.

"Now what?" she asked, looking around the restaurant.

She saw Claire Morgan in the corner, eyeing them both with interest. Claire was a major gossip, had been in high school and still was. And Vanessa was willing to bet that she was holding her phone beneath the table frantically texting people to find out if they knew why Vanessa Pickett was at a restaurant with famed

billionaire Lazaro Marino.

"Now we wait for Claire to spread the word?" Vanessa asked, looking back at Lazaro.

Lazaro shrugged. "Her, or anyone else interested in why the two of us might be together. They'll wonder what we're saying." He leaned in slightly and Vanessa fought the urge to jump back, away from him, away from the danger he presented.

He was appealing. Much too appealing. He made her thoughts tangle, and she didn't want him to have that kind of power. If she was going to follow through and marry him, she was going to do it on her terms. That meant not allowing him to reduce her to a mass of quivering female longing just by looking at her.

"Your friend over there is watching us." He looked in Claire's direction. "And there's a table of women in the back corner that have been watching us since we came in."

Probably watching Lazaro, anyway. He was the kind of man that a woman really had to stop and admire. He was everything a man should be. Strong, exuding confidence and a kind of masculine grace. He was also drop-dead sexy, and that certainly didn't hurt his cause.

"They're probably creating our conversation for us," he continued, his voice husky, inviting. It made her want to lean in toward him. To draw closer. "Probably imagining me telling you how beautiful you look. That your lips look far more edible than any dessert they might have here. That your dress, as beautiful as it is, is a crime because it covers up all of your beautiful skin.

That I want to spend an hour removing it, teasing you, teasing myself."

Vanessa was held in thrall by his words, her heart pounding in her head. He reached across the table and brushed his hand over her cheek, his thumb skimming her bottom lip. Her lips suddenly felt dry and she slicked her tongue over them quickly. She could taste him. The slight, lingering flavor of him. Just a tease. Enough to make her wish it were more.

"They probably think I'm telling you that I want to take you to my bed and spend hours kissing and tasting every inch of your beautiful body." He leaned back again, a wicked smile spreading over his face. "They have vivid imaginations."

Vanessa blinked. "Oh." She cleared her throat. "They're thinking all of that, huh?" Her face was burning-hot, and she was sure her cheeks were bright pink, a perk of having pale skin.

My kingdom for a little sexual sophistication.

"Probably texting it too."

Vanessa grimaced and picked her fork up again. "I sort of thought as much."

"And by the end of the night it will be common knowledge that you and I are seeing each other."

"At least professionally," she said stiffly. Anything to try and bring back some of her sanity. Because Lazaro Marino had the maddening ability to melt her defenses and she really had to … unmelt them.

"I doubt anyone here thinks this is a professional meeting."

"Why is that?"

"Because you do not look at me the way a woman looks at an associate. At least I hope you don't look at your associates this way."

"What way?"

A small smile curved his lips. "Did you enjoy dinner?"

"The food, yes." She was almost grateful he didn't answer the question. Because in her head she was doing a really good job of disguising her recurring attraction for him. In reality, she probably wasn't.

She'd rather not have her bubble burst. Her pride had taken enough kicks in the shins in the past couple of days.

"Dessert?" he asked.

That word made a series of erotic images flash through her mind—images of him, his mouth, his hands on her body. Images of the kind of dessert she could only imagine. Heat flooded her face again, making her scalp prickle.

"No, thank you," she said, her throat tight.

The server stopped by the table again, dropping off the check. Lazaro handed the man cash, hardly blinking at the triple-digit cost of the meal. Vanessa normally wouldn't have given it a thought either, but being with Lazaro made her conscious of the cost. There was a time when he hadn't had anything. A time when the cost of this meal would have exceeded his weekly income.

Time certainly did change things.

Lazaro stood from the table, and she kept her focus on a spot

of sauce on her plate. Anything to keep from looking at him again. She wanted to, though. Another visual tour of Lazaro was very high on her body's to-do list. But sensible Vanessa wasn't going to indulge in that, because she really didn't want him to know that he held such strong appeal for her. It was a matter of pride if nothing else.

A flash of movement pulled her focus away from the plate just in time for her to see Lazaro's very nice-looking hands drop a very generous tip onto the table. She looked up then.

"That's a nice tip."

He shrugged and extended his hand to her. She looked at Claire, who was pretending to pay attention to her date, but who had one eye on them, then accepted his offered hand as she stood.

"Waiting tables is a thankless job," Lazaro said. "I like to add a thank-you."

"Oh." She dropped her hand to her side and flexed her fingers, trying to erase the impression of his touch.

Lazaro didn't really seem like a generous tipper. He didn't seem generous at all. He'd smashed his way back into her life with all the destructive power of a tornado, and that, combined with his callous treatment of her all those years ago, the insults he'd hurled at her, made it hard for her to attach humanity to him.

He leaned in, his dark eyes glittering. "I've been there, Vanessa. Name the grunt job and I've had it. I escaped it. A lot of people in this position never will. They'll work hard forever just to barely pay the bills. I haven't forgotten what that feels like."

"I … I hadn't thought of it like that." Vanessa had never known what it was like to worry about basic necessities. She'd never even had to worry about the frills in life. A new car at sixteen, vacations to exotic places, a luxury town house as a gift for her eighteenth birthday.

Even now, with Pickett Industries facing bankruptcy, her own position in life wasn't jeopardized in that way. She wouldn't have to worry about being homeless, keeping her car. She'd never had that worry.

Lazaro had.

"Of course you hadn't," he said, his tone dismissive.

She put her hand on his forearm and was shocked by the flash of heat that raced through her. She jerked her hand away. "What does that mean?"

"It means I wouldn't have expected you to have such a far-reaching thought."

"Are you calling me a snob?"

"Do you believe you aren't one, Vanessa?"

The chill in his tone shocked her. The condemnation and anger. "I'm not."

"Because you write checks to charities?"

"No, because … I'm not." She'd never bought into the idea that money or status added to someone's worth, but she did have to admit to herself that she didn't often think too far out of the scope of her own reality either.

She hadn't looked down on Lazaro for being poor. For doing

maintenance on the estate to earn money. But neither had she imagined him working toward other things, being unsatisfied, having financial needs that weren't really met by his position. It seemed silly now. Shortsighted.

Lazaro grasped her chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted her face up, forcing her to meet his gaze. "They're waiting for me to kiss you now," he said, his tone soft again.

"Who?" she asked, her heart dropping into her stomach.

"Our audience."

She licked her lips, the breath shuddering from her body. Her stomach tightened in anticipation.

She swallowed. "Are you going to?"

He dipped his head slightly and her heart felt as though it was going into free fall. "No."

He put his arm around her waist and drew her near to his body, his palm warm and enticing on her waist, his fingers stroking her gently.

"Why not?" she asked. "I mean … we're putting on a … show."

"I'm not going to kiss you, because this is more than just a date." He raised his hand and brushed her hair behind her ear, his eyes locked with hers.

She wanted to laugh, because really, it wasn't a date at all. Parts of her seemed to be forgetting that, her knees certainly had. They were weak now, trembling a little bit. But just because her body seemed to have forgotten didn't mean her mind had.

This wasn't a date. They barely knew each other. She had the sense that Lazaro didn't like her very much, and considering all he'd done to her in the past few weeks, she really shouldn't like him either.

"I'm not going to kiss you because you're my future wife. And I'm showing my respect for you. Discretion," he said softly.

Oh yes, discretion was law as far as her father was concerned. And anyone present who knew her would know that.

"G-good," she said, allowing him to lead her out of the restaurant and into the cool night air. His limousine was waiting for them, idling at the curb.

He opened the door for her and helped her inside, his manners those of a perfect gentleman, the earlier tension absent now.

Vanessa leaned her head back on the seat.

It wasn't a date. They didn't have a real relationship. But they were going to get married. And for one, crazy moment she'd really wished that he was going to kiss her.

Of course, the truth was that even though she'd only seen him in pictures, part of her had been longing to be kissed by Lazaro for twelve long years.

But he held so much power over her. Her professional life, the life of her family's legacy was in his hands. She wasn't going to give him power over her body too. When they were married, she would deal with it.

But for now she had to keep her control. She couldn't forget that this relationship was as mercenary as they came.

And when Lazaro touched her it was too easy to forget. She could never let herself forget.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I HOPE you aren't busy today."

Vanessa jumped and dropped the pen she was holding into the cup of tea on her desk. She looked up and saw Lazaro standing in the doorway of her office.

She looked down into her tea then back up at tall, dark and handsome intruder. "In some cultures it's considered rude to sneak up on people."

"I didn't sneak. You were deep in thought, or something like that." He walked in and put both of his hands on the back of the chair that was positioned in front of her desk. "I wanted to talk to you about your plans for Pickett. Being your principal shareholder, it's very much a vested interest of mine."

"I thought you were going to impart your wisdom to me. That is what you do, right?"

"Yes, that is what I do. Do you know why I'm so good at consulting, Vanessa? Why I make more than any of the CEOs I give consultations to?"

"Why?" she asked, her tone dry.

"Because I'm not stuck in the past. I have no loyalty to tradition or convention. I know how to increase profit, and I'm equipped to see new ways of doing things because the old style of business means nothing to me."

Vanessa gritted her teeth. "Well, tradition means a lot to me.

To my father."

"And that's probably the source of most of your problems."

"It's probably also why we've lasted as long as we have," she said stiffly.

"Until now. Now you need change. I'm bringing it. I've been over the expense reports from the past five years, and you might be interested in knowing that there was a sharp decline in sales and production the year before you took over. So it isn't all your fault."

Vanessa bit her lower lip, forcing herself to hold back a string of colorful and inventive expletives. "I know that. I told you changing markets have …"

"Made it difficult to compete. The fact is, Vanessa, if you want to keep the bulk of your production in the U.S. you won't be able to compete. But you can change what you're offering."

"Change what, exactly?"

"The future is in environmental sustainability. Responsible waste-disposal practices, using recycled materials. You might not be able to offer the cheapest product, but you can offer the safest, the most ethical."

"It would require some fairly aggressive campaigning." She started looking around the desk for a pen.

"In your teacup."

She felt the blush creep up her neck and over her cheeks. "I'll just get a new one." She opened her desk drawer and rummaged until she found a non-soggy pen.

"It would require some changes to the factory, to materials, to a lot of things actually. And it will cost."

"I'm not exactly swimming in resources."

"You could take a loan from your future husband."

Lazaro watched as Vanessa's cheeks flushed with angry color. "No."

"We have an agreement, Vanessa. I intend to honor it."

And he intended to let Michael Pickett know just how much control he was assuming of his assets. That he didn't have just his daughter, but that he'd played the part of savior for the venerable Pickett family business.

"I am not getting myself into that much debt. Not with you."

"Not a loan, an exchange. A fair one, I think."

"Hardly. I feel like you're … buying me." She spat out the last words as though they were distasteful.

"Do you want to back out?"

She snapped her mouth shut, tightened her jaw. "I don't …"

"Because if you do, make no mistake, I don't make idle threats. I will push the board to appoint a new CEO of Pickett, Vanessa."

She curled her fingers around the pen she was holding, angry color spreading from her cheeks down to her collarbone. "Are you always going to hold your power over my head? For the rest of our lives? Because that might be the one thing I just can't deal with."

A stab of regret hit him hard in the chest. Making threats

wasn't really his style. But something about the Pickett family, about the whole situation, brought things out in him that were normally dormant. Rage, a reminder of what it was to feel truly helpless, to feel as though his life wasn't really his own, but belonged to those with power over him.

"You don't have to worry about that, Vanessa, provided you don't back out of our agreement."

"I won't," she said tightly.

She looked at him, her dark eyes hard, her lush lips thinned into a tight line. He wanted to kiss her until her lips softened, until she was as desperate as he was. Until she begged.

Later. There would be time later. He wasn't about to let her manipulate him with his desire, even if she was doing it unknowingly. And he was certain she didn't know. She didn't give him any coy looks, no knowing smiles or flutters of her thick, dark lashes.

She blushed easily, her skin turning pink with nerves, embarrassment or anger. Her reactions seemed honest. He wasn't used to dealing with people who possessed Vanessa's straightforward manner. He was used to games, had gotten very good at playing them, at holding his cards close to his chest. Vanessa stripped that ability from him. She brought things to the surface, emotions, he wasn't used to dealing with. He wasn't about to allow her that sort of control. She'd turned him into a blind fool twelve years ago, a stupid boy who'd let the Pickett heiress walk all over him.

He was past that now. He would not be manipulated.

"You're right, *querida*, you won't. Because if you do, I will seize control of everything. I have that power."

"I believe it," she said, her words clipped. "But right now you're in my office. So I think the power might be in my favor."

Pride, unexpected and unwanted, made his chest expand. Pride and a strong measure of lust. He liked it better when she stood up to him. Liked it better when he saw a spark set fire to her dark brown eyes. It made his blood run faster, having her challenge him.

"Going to call security on me?" he asked.

"Do I have to?" She pursed her lips and cocked her hip to the side.

"Only if you can't handle me yourself."

"I'm more than capable. I'm not a little girl."

No, she wasn't. Not even close. His heart thundered heavily in his chest, the desire, the need to reach out and touch her almost overwhelming. But he couldn't afford to feel anything. Not now. Not when he was so close.

He forced his thoughts back on his goal, on his reason for being there. "Good. Busy tonight?"

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts. "I don't know. Am I? Do I have a choice?"

Annoyance surged through him. "Do you think I'm taking total control of your life?"

"I don't know what you expect from a little wife," her words

taunting, arousing, infuriating.

His heart thundered hard in his chest. She was making him out to be some kind of a tyrant. She was making him feel like one. He didn't like it, he didn't want her to see him that way, and he had no idea why he should care. When she hadn't seen him as the enemy, she'd seen him as beneath her.

He rounded the desk and she stood, hands on her round, shapely hips, a deadly glitter in her eyes.

"I expect you to attend events on my arm," he said. "I expect to use your connections to make advantageous business deals. And I expect this." He hooked his arm around her waist and drew her to him.

She was breathing hard, her breasts rising and falling against his chest. He realized he was breathing hard too. To hell with fighting it. She was his now, no longer off limits to him.

See. Want. Have.

He put his hand on her face, cupped her cheek, touched her soft lower lip with his thumb. "I want this," he said, his voice sounding rough, strained, even to his own ears.

He dipped his head and kissed her. Her lips parted beneath his. He wasn't certain whether it was in shock or supplication, but he wasn't going to stop and analyze it either.

She would be his now. Finally. His. All the longing, the lust that he'd carried around with him for so many years, aching and unsatisfied no matter how many women had warmed his bed since …

She tasted the same. Just as he remembered. So utterly unique, unforgettable. The only woman who had ever made him lose his head, the only woman who had ever rejected him. The only woman whose memory lingered after years of separation. Most women were a vague impression after a few days. Not Vanessa. She had stayed vivid and powerful in his mind.

And it had only been a shadow of the reality.

Actually kissing her, the velvety slide of her tongue against his, the soft sigh of satisfaction she made against his lips, her fingers curling around the fabric of his shirt as she held on to him, anchoring him to her, that was better than anything in his memory. It made his blood run like liquid fire through his veins, made his body pulse with need, made him hard and aching with the necessity of burying himself inside her.

She stole any semblance of control with the softness of her lips.

He slid his hand around the indent of her waist, the curve of her hip. She had changed physically. Her curves were softer, more womanly. More enticing. He'd been a boy twelve years ago, but he was a man now. And she was all woman.

Vanessa felt empowered by his passion, his anger. He was trying to show her that he had the power, but in one intense rush, she realized that she was the one who held it, because his hands, sifting through her hair, were unsteady, his body was hard with arousal. For her. Because of her.

He deepened the kiss and she took his bottom lip between her

teeth, nipping the tender skin, showing him that she wasn't going to be passive, in this or anything else, needing badly to stake a claim on him, as he was doing to her.

A growl rumbled in his chest and he took a step, backing her into her desk. She heard her pencil holder fall onto the floor, its contents scattering. She didn't care.

There was nothing. Nothing but this. This battle of wills and the all-consuming passion that was taking over her mind, her body.

His fingers crept beneath the edge of her top and she was arched into him, powerless to do anything else. And that sudden loss of control, that concession to his power, made a jolt of reality slap her in the face.

She'd promised herself she wasn't going to let him have this control. She shouldn't feel the way she did, as if she would die if she didn't have him. Inside of her. Now. On the floor, the desk, wherever.

She couldn't afford to give him this part of her, to let him have dominion over her body. He would never love her, and if she gave in to this … she would be vulnerable. She couldn't allow that.

Maybe you can't have love, but you can have this.

Amazing, all-consuming lust.

No. It would never just be that. Not for her. Lazaro was more to her than just a hard body. And she would never be anything more to him than a simple means of feeding his sex drive.

She let go of him and pulled away, her heart thundering in

her ears.

He flicked a dismissive glance in her direction, seemingly unaffected by what had just happened between them. Totally unfair, since her world had had another dramatic shift on its axis.

"I can see it won't be a problem," he said.

"What?" she asked, still feeling thick and muddled from the arousal that was crowding all the good, useful information out of her brain and leaving room only for the screaming want that was pounding through her.

"The attraction between us is very strong. That part of our marriage will not be a problem."

As far as physical attraction went, no, it wouldn't be. But it would be everything she'd never wanted and then some. A man using her because she was convenient. Because she had status. Because she had things he wanted, not because she was who he wanted.

That he was attracted to her didn't make her feel all that special. Yes, Lazaro was a sex god with looks that could not be denied, but men tended to like sex from whoever would give it to them. And after that display he was probably feeling pretty positive that getting it would be easy.

"I have work to do," she said, sinking back into her chair.

"I'll leave you to it then. Are we on for tonight?"

"What are we doing?" she asked, her eyes wandering to the pen still resting in her teacup.

"It's a surprise."

Vanessa watched him walk out of the room and her only thought was that she didn't think she could take another surprise from Lazaro.

Lazaro touched the velvet box in his coat pocket and cursed the flash of adrenaline that raced through him. It *was* adrenaline; it certainly wasn't nerves. He didn't do nerves. He did decisive action. He didn't question, he moved forward with confidence. Always.

That was how he'd worked his way up from the ground level of the massive corporation he'd eventually built up with his ideas on how to reinvent the place. It was how he'd built a career, a name for himself. How he'd netted billions in the bank.

He took advantage of every resource and did what had to be done. As he was doing now.

It was extremely fortuitous that one of the art museum's head curators happened to be on a par with Vanessa's father as far as social clout went. And even more fortuitous that she was a gossip.

It meant that she would tell anyone who was even half-interested that Lazaro Marino had paid to have the museum empty this evening so that he could ask the woman in his life a very important question.

In Vanessa's circle, media exposure was seen as vulgar, common. Anyone could earn that kind of notoriety. The First Families and those like them saw class as something you were born with, not something you could acquire. And anyone who wasn't born with it was somehow less.

The way to spread the word was through careless discretion, nothing half so common as an actual write-up in a newspaper.

He curled his fingers around the ring box and leaned against the terrace railing. Vanessa was due to arrive soon, another detail carefully coordinated with a trail that would be easy to follow.

He heard high heels on marble and looked up. Vanessa was walking toward him, the expression on her face mutinous. She had dressed for the occasion, though, as he'd requested. Red silk this time, hugging her curves. Her lips were painted to match her dress and her dark hair was pulled back into a neat bun. He wished she'd left it down. He enjoyed the feel of the silken strands sliding through his fingers.

He tightened his hold on the ring box. This was what it was about. The ring. Taking his place in the world. The truth was, he didn't give a damn about what anyone in high society thought of him. But he wouldn't be seen as beneath anyone, as some sort of trash from the *barrio* they could despise and lord their power over. He wouldn't be beneath anyone. And Vanessa was the key.

"What is this?" she asked, looking around the terrace. It was lit by a string of paper lanterns that hung low overhead, just as it had been the night they'd met at the charity event.

"You didn't guess?"

"I wouldn't dare try to guess at the inner workings of your mind," she said, walking to the railing and resting her forearms on the top of it, leaning over, keeping her eyes fixed on the garden.

He moved so that he was standing next to her and pulled the ring box out of his pocket and placed it on the top of the stone railing. "I thought this was an ideal place to make our arrangement official."

She turned her head sharply, her eyes wide. Then she looked down at the ring box.

"Are you going to look at it?" he asked.

"I … so this is your proposal?" Her eyebrows winged halfway up her forehead, her expression one of pure incredulity.

"I think I proposed already," he said stiffly.

"Well, but … no, because now there's a ring." She didn't touch the ring box, she just looked at it.

"And most women at this point would be looking at the ring."

"Why all this?" she asked, ignoring his statement. "The museum and the lights?"

"Because I had to speak to quite a few people to arrange this romantic gesture."

She nodded slowly. "And they'll tell other people."

"Yes. Your social class is just small enough that word travels to everyone in it very quickly."

She frowned. "Right."

"I'm sorry, did you want something more public?"

She shrugged. "No."

Anger surged in him, anger and something else that he couldn't quite identify. "You're disappointed?"

"I'm not disappointed. That implies I had an expectation about

this moment and, truly, for all I knew, you were going to courier me a ring at my office. But I did have expectations of this moment as far as my life goes."

"And this doesn't meet your standards?" he asked, his stomach tightening.

"Not really."

"You might want to look at the rock before you declare the effort subpar, *querida*," he said, conscious of the fact that his accent had thickened with his building anger.

He popped the top on the box and pushed it closer to her. She looked down and her eyes widened. Not a big surprise. Five carats would have that effect on someone like her.

"I hope that's fitting of a woman of your status."

Vanessa looked down at the ring, glittering beneath the lantern light. The large, square diamond set into a band of white gold with an intricate, antique-style weave was nestled in cream silk, looking as if it had been made just for her.

There was so much about the moment that seemed made just for her. An empty art museum, a gorgeous man and a marriage proposal. If it had been a real marriage proposal—real in the sense that there was love behind it and not just mercenary business dealings—he would have gotten down on one knee. They would have walked through the museum and talked about their future. They would have felt like the only two people in the world.

If they had never parted, if she had stopped him from leaving

that night, maybe it would be real.

Her heart squeezed in her chest and she squelched the thought. It didn't matter. This was reality. And in reality, he'd shoved the ring in her direction and barely looked at her. He hadn't even asked the question, and it all just hung between them, awkward and unspoken. Painful. Because this was like some nightmare version of a fantasy she might have created for herself.

"It's lovely." She reached out and touched it, hesitant to pick it up, to put it on, because the ring made it all seem real. And final.

And because part of her wanted so badly to wear Lazaro's ring, so very badly. And that was embarrassing, humiliating. She didn't really want the Lazaro that had come back into her life with all the finesse of a jackhammer. She wanted the man she used to imagine he was. The man he never had been.

"Don't you like it, *querida?*" he asked.

"I love it. It's beautiful. Perfect."

"You seem giddy," he said, his expression flat.

"I love it," she said, teeth gritted.

"Put it on."

Anger surged through her, pummeling her tender heart. "That's your job, isn't it?"

She held her hand out, determined not to be the one to fasten her own diamond handcuffs. He took her hand in his, the heat of his skin on hers sending prickles of electricity through her body, making it nearly impossible for her to cling to the anger that was anchoring her to the balcony, reminding her that this was nothing

more than a farce.

He took the ring out of the box and it caught the light. Such a beautiful sign of eternal bondage. She closed her eyes while he pushed it onto her fourth finger. It fit perfectly, and it was more disturbing than anything that it fit. That it somehow seemed right.

She pulled her hand back and brushed her palm down over her skirt, trying to ease the fiery, tingling sensation that was spreading from her fingertips to her wrist.

"How big is it?" Her own voice, the mercenary tone, cooled her off quickly. Reminded her that this was a transaction. Nothing more. Because she had to do something to stop her heart from pounding faster. To keep herself from thinking of all the what-ifs.

"Does it matter?" he asked, his voice as cold as the sick weight in her stomach.

"I've heard size matters."

A muscle in his jaw jumped. "Big enough to satisfy you."

She swallowed hard, the need to get the upper hand fueling her, choosing her words for her. "I'm not sure about that."

"The purebred could do better?"

She looked at the ring again. It was beautiful. Perfect. "Possibly." The lie stuck in her throat.

He jerked back, as though she'd struck him. He looked, just for a moment, like the boy he'd been the night she'd rejected him. Then any vulnerability was gone, replaced with an expression that was as hard as granite.

“I think,” he said, “it’s time we went and had a talk with your father.”

CHAPTER SIX

"I'VE already heard your news, Vanessa. I've been down at the club this morning."

Vanessa fought the urge to hang her head and stare at the toes of her ruby-red shoes. Something happened to her when her father used that tone, that flat, disappointed tone that let her know she'd somehow made a mess of things. She felt like a child again. Small and desperately inadequate, trying to live up to an ideal that had been placed just out of her reach, an ideal she was falling so short of it was nearly laughable.

Michael Pickett wasn't a large man; he wasn't young anymore. His voice was thin now, wispy. He couldn't yell. He didn't need to. What he could do with a small hint of disapproval in his voice couldn't be underestimated.

Vanessa swallowed. "Well, it was … unexpected." She looked down at the rug, a floral-print rug, the same one that had been in place in her father's office since she could remember. Everything was the same at the Pickett estate. Nothing ever changed. The house was like a relic, surrounded by the modern world but not really a part of it. Like the owner of the estate himself.

"And what of your obligations to Craig Freeman? Do they mean nothing?"

"I want to marry Lazaro," she said. "I don't want to marry Craig." That, in the very strictest sense, was the truth. In spite of

the fact that things had been stilted between the two of them since the previous night's engagement, he was still the better option.

"Since when is life about what you want?" he said, his voice soft, and deadlier for it.

"I …"

"Don't be stupid, Vanessa. This man is beneath you."

She could sense the moment Lazaro's control slipped its leash. The moment he was no longer playing his part.

"You had better damn well watch what you say to my fiancée," Lazaro said, his voice hard, dangerous, each word rougher, less civilized, as though a veneer was slowly being stripped away, revealing the true man. Dangerous. Feral. As far from the polished, old-money setting as it was possible to be.

Lazaro had been silent for most of the meeting, letting Vanessa do the talking. But the silence was broken now. "Vanessa was handed a crippled corporation, and with the remains that you gave to her she's fashioning something that can survive the new market, the modern sensibility, something no one else on your staff, including you, had the creativity to do."

She waited for him to say exactly why they were getting married. That he was the one saving the company from a slow corporate death. But he didn't.

Her father curled his hands into fists. "I'm not taking orders from a man whose mother used to scrub my floors."

She felt Lazaro stiffen next to her. "But maybe you will take orders from the man who is now the principal shareholder

of Pickett Industries. Interesting thing about going public, Mr. Pickett … the public can buy pieces of your company. And I've bought quite a few pieces for myself."

"Having money does not make you an equal with my family," her father said. "Money doesn't buy class."

"But money does buy stock."

"Vanessa." Her father leveled his cold gray eyes on her. "Did you know about this?"

"Yes." Vanessa cleared her throat and tilted her chin up, fighting the urge to look back down at the carpet. She wasn't going to look down anymore. "He's my fiancé. So it will still be all in the family, won't it?"

She felt a thrill of excitement race through her, a surge of adrenaline that chased away any intimidation or fear.

"You do not have my blessing on this." Michael Pickett stood from behind the desk, and suddenly Vanessa saw her father clearly for the first time. How he controlled her. How hard he tried to exert his will over her.

"I didn't come here to get your blessing." She bit out the words. "Just to tell you what was going to happen. What do you want?" she asked him. "Do you want the company to succeed? Because, trust me, right now we need Lazaro for that. Accept him, welcome him, and we stand a chance at some success."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No. I'm telling you how it is. This is reality." Her heart was pounding hard, blood roaring through her ears. She felt dizzy.

"We'll be in touch," Lazaro said, wrapping his arm around her waist and leading her from the room. He closed the heavy oak door behind them, the sound echoing in the expansive corridor of the old house.

"Thank you," Vanessa said quietly when they were back on the paved circular drive in front of her childhood home.

"For?"

"For saying that stuff. For making it sound like some of the good ideas were mine." She expelled the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. "I don't think any of them were."

Lazaro opened the passenger door of his dark blue sports car and she sank inside, letting the soft leather seats absorb some of her tension.

He rounded the car and slid into the driver's seat, putting the key into the ignition and turning the engine on.

When they were on the maple-lined highway, headed back into Boston, Lazaro flicked her a glance. "Why exactly do you work so hard to please him?"

"I …" She looked out the window and focused on the trees, watching them blur into a steady stream of color. "He's all I have. My mother died when I was four. And my brother died when I was thirteen. Thomas was going to take over the company. He was brilliant. He would have done an amazing job. But without him … there was only me." She turned to face him. "It's up to me, Lazaro. I can't be the one that fails."

"Do you love what you do?"

"Do you?"

He laughed. "I love the money that it brings in. And yes, I like solving problems. Fixing things. Making them run better."

"I don't love what I do. I have to take antacids when I get up in the morning," she said. She'd never said that out loud to anyone. She'd never even fully admitted to herself that she was unhappy, that she didn't like what she was doing. She was the CEO of a much-lauded company and saying she would rather do almost anything else seemed ridiculous. But it was true.

It was also too late. Her course had been set since she was thirteen. She knew there were plenty of people who would have walked away. People who would have pursued the life they wanted. But there was such a weight on her, a burden of responsibility. She couldn't turn her back on it.

If not for her father, then for Thomas's memory.

"And before you ask why I do it," she said, "I'll just tell you. Because how could I be the one to put an end to a legacy? How could I let it be my fault? Because Pickett Industries has to keep going, for my eventual children as much as for my father and for the memory of my brother. I do it because it's the right thing to do."

She took her phone out of her pocket and fiddled with the touch screen, moving icons around with her thumb. "My father will accept the marriage because he has no other choice. But the bluster was kind of a necessity for him. It's how he is."

"I know," Lazaro said, his voice hard, his grip tight on the

wheel.

Vanessa looked down at the ring on her finger and turned the phone camera on, snapping a picture of the diamond glittering in the late-afternoon sunlight.

"What would you do if you could do something else?" Lazaro asked.

She smiled. "I would take pictures."

"Of what?"

She leaned her head back against the seat and let the soft leather ease away some of her tension. "Everything."

"You might find the time to do that someday. Maybe not of everything, but … of some things."

She forced the corners of her mouth up into a smile. "Maybe. Maybe when all of this gets sorted out, and things settle down in the company I'll have time."

"You will."

"No one else knows that," she said, realizing it as she spoke the words.

"That can only be a good thing. Shouldn't a husband know things about his wife no one else knows?"

Heat made her skin prickle. "I suppose so." That made her think of sexy things. Erotic things. Things that made her lips tingle with the memory of his kiss. "But it isn't like we're going to have a real marriage."

"What will be unreal about it?" he asked.

Only the very core of the union. But of course, he didn't

seem overly concerned with that detail. “Well, we don’t love each other.”

“No.” Something about the way he said it, so matter of fact, so logical, made her chest ache. Maybe because there had been a time when she’d loved him, so much, with everything she had. It seemed like yesterday and another lifetime all at once.

She put her sunglasses on, all the better to avoid his eyes. “So that’s the part that makes it seem … not real.”

“You didn’t love that purebred you were supposed to marry.”

His choice of words made her snort. “No. I barely knew him. But I didn’t really … I tried not to think about it.”

“This is no different.”

It was different. It was different because, with Lazaro, she wanted things. Things no other man had ever made her want. At sixteen, loving him had made her feel that the whole world was open to her. As if she could do anything. Be anyone. Not just Vanessa Pickett of the Picketts of Boston.

He made her feel like that now. It was dangerous and stupid.

“I suppose it’s not.”

She looked at his profile. Strong. Masculine. Angry. She’d said something wrong again and she had no idea what.

“Is there any way you can take time away from the office?” he asked, effectively changing the subject.

“For how long?”

“A week. I’ve been doing some consulting work with a corporation in Argentina and I have to make a physical

appearance this week."

"And why do you want to take me?" she asked.

"What better way to celebrate our engagement?"

"I'm not just going to jump into bed with you. We already established that," she said, sounding prim even to herself.

"I remember. Vividly. Although you certainly do a good impression of a woman who wants to do some jumping when I kiss you."

"Kissing isn't sex," she said coldly. "You've always seemed to get the two confused."

"I assure you, Vanessa, I'm not confused about any part of sex. And a kiss is not sex, I'm well aware. Not even close."

"So don't equate one kiss with me being ready to sleep with you." He'd certainly made that assumption the first time she'd kissed him. "I'm not ready. I don't sleep with men I don't know. And if that's the point of the trip …"

"It will look nice if I take my fiancée on a celebratory vacation. If you're going to be a harpy you can stay here."

She thought of the two options for her week. Staring at the four walls of her office again, or escaping to Argentina for seven days. Even if it was with Lazaro, option two was the winner. She wanted to escape. Just go for a while. Leave reality behind.

"I'll go."

"*Bien.* You and I can … get to know each other."

Buenos Aires was electric. There was energy in everything, motion and lights and heat. Vanessa had never seen anything

like it. She'd traveled quite a bit before she'd graduated from high school, but they'd been trips with her father, trips that had begun at airports in air-conditioned limousines and ended up at cloistered resort properties.

She'd never truly gotten to enjoy the culture of the country she'd been visiting. And she'd never realized how sad that was until now. Had never realized what she'd been missing.

She wished she could capture it forever. The curves of the buildings, the brick on the street, the sun-washed blue sky.

"You grew up here?" She turned to Lazaro, who was sitting next to her in the back seat of the limo, engrossed in something on his smartphone.

"We left when I was thirteen," he said, not bothering to spare her a glance.

"It's beautiful."

"Sure. If you don't go down to where I used to live. But every city has its slums."

Vanessa's stomach tightened. "And that's where you're from?"

"Does that bother you, *princesa*?"

"No. Yes. Only in the sense that I don't like to think of you … of anyone, living like that."

"It's reality," he said, his voice rough.

"I know." She did. But it was sort of a hollow, half-realized knowledge.

"It's where I'm from. I hope it doesn't cause you too much despair to have a husband who comes from nothing. As your

father is so fond of saying, class can't be bought."

"I've never cared, Lazaro. Never."

"That isn't how I remember it."

"How do you remember it? Because I remember risking my father's wrath to speak to you whenever I got the chance, and I don't think I ever treated you like a second-class citizen. In fact, I pretty much remember my entire sixteen-year-old world revolving around you."

The limo pulled up the curb in front of a stretch of tall, white, connected buildings. "My penthouse is here," Lazaro said.

"Good."

"Good?"

"I like it," she said, opening her own door and getting out without waiting for Lazaro.

She liked it, and she was glad to be done with the conversation. She didn't want to talk about what an idiot she'd been for him back in her angsty teenage days. And she really didn't want him guessing just how close she was to being an idiot for him now.

Lazaro Marino was as hard as concrete and just as loving. The last thing she wanted was to cultivate feelings for him. She'd had her heart broken by him before. Granted, at sixteen, everything felt fatal, and she was sure that whatever it was she'd felt for him was more infatuation than anything else. But still, she had no desire to relive it.

This time, she did have Lazaro in her future. And a lifetime of living with him and loving him while he saw her as nothing

more than a possession would be worse than a relationship with no emotions at all.

So she was aiming for cool and distant. She could do that. She had plenty of practice being treated with cool distance; she ought to be able to dish a little bit out.

Lazaro got out of the limo and opened the trunk, retrieving their bags without waiting for the driver or for aid from one of the apartment building's employees.

She couldn't help but admire the grace in his movements, the easy strength. Even angry—and he was angry with her, that much was obvious—he was the single most gorgeous man she'd ever seen. Deep bronze skin, square jaw—which he was clenching tightly. He always did that when he was annoyed with her.

"You're going to get TMJ," she blurted, following him into the building.

"Que?"

"TMJ. You can get it from grinding your teeth. There was a girl at school who had to wear a mouth guard to stop her from doing it."

A smile curved his lips and a ridiculous, happy, fluttering sensation assaulted her. "Perhaps you should just endeavor to be less of a cause of stress."

She huffed out a laugh. "I stress *you* out, Lazaro? *Really?*"

He stopped walking and turned to face her, the look on his face intense. And for a second, she forgot that breathing was important. Because nothing seemed more important, more

compelling, than what was happening between herself and Lazaro.

"Maybe *stress* is the wrong word."

Vanessa leaned back slightly and her shoulders connected with the wall. "It is?"

"But I am having trouble sleeping."

"Why is that?"

"Because every night since you came to me at the museum I have stayed awake. Wanting you. In my arms. In my bed."

The need to kiss him again was unbearable. It was hard to remember why she was fighting her attraction for him, especially when sleeping with him was inevitable.

A thrill shot through her system when she realized that fully, for the first time. It was a matter of *when*, not *if*, and having it suddenly seem real made the distance between Lazaro and herself seem that much smaller.

He released his hold on one of the bags and let it drop to the carpeted floor of the lobby area. He brushed his thumb over her lower lip, an action that was becoming familiar to her. Maybe *familiar* was the wrong word, because each time he touched her like that it made her knees weaken.

She flicked the tip of her tongue to his finger, curiosity and desire mixing together to create a potent temptation she couldn't resist. His body shuddered, the movement running through every strong inch of him. She leaned her head back against the wall, pulling away from him. But he was still close. So close it wouldn't

take a very big action for him to close the distance between them and take her in his arms. To kiss her again as he'd done in her office. As he'd done in the guesthouse.

"Oh, yes, Vanessa, I very much look forward to getting to know you better this week." He picked up the suitcase again and turned away from her, the spell that had descended over her breaking.

He was playing with her. Teasing her. Proving that at any moment he could call up that desire in her that was so strong, so close to the surface.

If he kept behaving like that, it wouldn't be hard to keep her emotional distance from him. Not hard at all.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"WHAT'S this?"

Lazaro flicked her an uninterested look from his position at the sleek penthouse bar. "I had some things sent ahead for you."

A lot of things. Dresses, a swimsuit … the large armoire had been stocked with items, as had the freestanding vanity in the massive bathroom that was just off her expansive bedroom. But that wasn't what caught her eye. "This," she said again, picking up a black camera bag that was positioned in the middle of the sumptuous four-poster bed, almost afraid to open it.

She peered through the open door of her bedroom and out into the spacious living area.

Lazaro waved his hand in a dismissive manner. "You mentioned you liked taking pictures."

Her heart thundered hard in her head, and she felt dizzy. Overwhelmed. She ran her fingers along the edge of the bag. It was very high-quality heavy canvas sewn with thick nylon thread.

She grasped the zipper and pulled it open. Her hands shook as she pulled the camera out. It wasn't just a camera. It was lenses and filters and just about every other accessory she could think of. Much more than she would ever need to take pictures as a hobby.

She walked out of her room and into the living room, stepping up the marble steps into the bar area.

She felt short of breath as she turned the camera over in her hands, her fingers sliding over the slick black casing. Her body felt strange, hollow.

"Lazaro, why … why did you do this for me?"

He moved around to the other side of the bar, drink in hand. "Why not? You said you liked to take pictures. You were doing it with your phone and I thought you might want a real camera. Especially as I knew you would want pictures of Buenos Aires."

"I do … I was … I was so wishing I could capture it all forever while we were driving from the airport and … you knew."

He shrugged. "It isn't a big deal. Money is nothing to me."

"This is more than money."

"It's not," he said, his focus on the city skyline beyond the large window that extended the length of the living area.

"But I just don't understand why you went to the trouble to …"

"You're going to be my wife, Vanessa," he said, cutting her off. "I don't want you to be miserable. Do you think I mean to keep you as my captive and make you pay penance for the rest of your life? I have no interest in that."

"I hadn't really given it a lot of thought."

That he intended to make her happy was an entirely foreign concept. It wasn't that she'd imagined he wanted her to be miserable, it was just that she didn't think he'd cared one way or the other.

"Really?" he asked, his tone dry.

"I've just been trying to get through the day-to-day stuff. Not

only since you decided to play a little game of Russian roulette with my life, before that too. I've just been trying to get by."

"I have a lot of experience in just trying to get by," he said slowly.

"It's not fun."

"No, it's not." He looked at her, his dark eyes veiling his emotions, but she felt that his eyes were able to see into her, to read her thoughts. "It begs the question, why do you choose to do it?"

"I don't. Not really."

"You do."

"Fine, maybe. I choose to do it because as I said before, it isn't just me. It's my family. It's the inheritance for all my—our children."

"You could take an inactive role."

"It's not the same."

"No, it would save you all that money you spend on antacids," he said, his voice flat.

"It doesn't come naturally to me, I'll admit that. I took all the classes, I got really good grades, in fact, but a classroom isn't the real world. I don't have that extra thing that takes someone from good to great."

He took a long sip of his drink and walked back to the bar, putting both of his hands flat on the marble surface. "You might not have it for business, but that doesn't mean you don't have it."

That was a revelation—but one she couldn't accept. One she'd

been trained not to accept. “It doesn’t really matter if I can’t do the one thing that would matter.”

“Is it all that matters?”

“You can ask me that? Does your success matter, Lazaro? And is it enough? Or are you still after more?”

“I think you know the answer to that.”

“Exactly. You aren’t happy because there’s still that one thing. This is my thing, this is what I have to do. What I have to get right.”

He nodded once. “Good for you. I wouldn’t have thought you’d have this kind of determination.”

That stung a little bit. “Because you knew me for a few weeks when I was sixteen?”

“It made an impression,” he said dryly.

“Yay, me,” she said, turning the camera over in her hands, suddenly fighting back a hot flood of tears. She cleared her throat. “Thank you for this. Really.”

“You can bring it when we go out tonight.”

“We’re going out?”

“I thought you might want to see some of the city.”

She nodded. “I do. I very much do.”

“Great. I have to stop by Paolo Cruz’s office and give him a rundown of what we’re discussing at the board meeting tomorrow, but when I get back, we’ll go and have dinner.”

Dinner with Lazaro in Buenos Aires and a gift. A personal gift. Proof that he’d listened to her. That he wanted her to be

happy.

The emotion thing kept getting trickier. Lucky her.

Vanessa on a normal day was enough to light his blood on fire and make his libido kick into high gear. Vanessa dressed to kill in a tight black dress with a low V-neckline and a slit in the skirt that revealed one toned, gorgeous thigh when she walked was almost too much.

Already, the past few days in Buenos Aires had tested him, his body now so hot that an ice-cold shower at night did nothing to cool the fire that raged beneath his skin. A fire only Vanessa could dampen.

But he had not gone to her. He would not let her see that she had that power over him. It was a power she had always had. He'd been bewitched by her body, her spirit, from the moment he'd met her. It galled him that she still had him under her spell.

After three days, no, more like twelve years of resisting, right now he ached to pull her into his arms, the need so strong he thought he couldn't resist it without the pain becoming crippling. His body throbbed with the need to have her. To feel those slim, perfect legs wrapped around his waist as he drowned himself in the pleasure only she could offer.

Tonight, she'd left her hair down, rich brown waves cascading over her shoulders, partially concealing the round swell of her breasts that the daring neckline of her dress did not.

She brought something out in him, something he didn't recognize. A need, a desire, a totally primal lust that defied

anything he'd ever experienced before.

They'd shared a kiss. A simple kiss. Yet she'd burrowed her way inside him as no woman, not a long-term girlfriend or one-night lover, ever had. He wished this need was tied to vengeance. That he could explain. But it was separate from the issues with her father. Even if all of the events of the past sometimes tangled in his memory, the parts with Vanessa, the memories of her lips touching his, burned bright in his mind, washed everything else away. When he thought of her mouth, of her hands on his body, there was nothing else.

It was desire. That was all. Even if it was desire such as he'd never known. And he would have a lifetime to indulge that desire. To take the edge off it so that it no longer dominated his thoughts.

Her wicked red lips curved into a smile and all of his blood rushed south of his belt. "I didn't overdress, did I?"

She was absolutely overdressed. Anything covering those luscious curves was a crime as far as he was concerned. "Not at all," he said "Are you ready then?"

"Si." Images of them together, limbs entwined, moans of pleasure issuing from those plump red lips had him hard and shaking. He didn't want dinner. He wanted her, wanted her body pressed against his. He felt a smile curve his lips. "I think that, in honor of your dress, we need to go somewhere different than I originally had in mind."

Even at night the streets of Buenos Aires were alive. People were still walking around, laughing, talking, eating. Heat and

moisture clung to the air, to Vanessa's skin, as they walked down the crowded sidewalk.

Lazaro was completely at ease in his surroundings. Passersby stopped and looked at him, and Vanessa couldn't blame them. In his black suit and open-collared shirt, he was absolute masculine perfection. He demanded to be stared at.

He didn't seem to notice, or care, that he drew attention from every woman they passed. He didn't return any of the hungry, open stares. His eyes were on her. And it was making her blood feel hot.

"Where are we going?" she asked. It was a long shot, but talking might break up some of the tension that was building inside her.

"Right here." He took her hand in his, lacing their fingers together, and led her into a small, narrow doorway. The outside of the building had seemed the same as every building they'd passed—white brick with rounded edges showing its age. But the interior didn't match the old-world feel of the streets outside.

Inside was open and clean, with pared-down, square furniture and a large bar area surrounded by plush seating. Pendant lighting hung low at different lengths, made to look like floating candles suspended in space.

There was plenty of room to move, but everything was arranged so that it felt close, intimate. There was a band playing, and couples were on the dance floors, wrapped around each other, dancing in a rhythm so sensual that it made Vanessa feel

as though she was intruding on something by witnessing it.

"Would you like a drink?" Lazaro gestured to the bar.

"I … No." Her body already felt giddy, her thoughts light and fuzzy. She didn't want to add anything to her system that might encourage the feelings.

"Dance with me," he said, touching her hand, the sensation of his skin against hers lighting a fire that burned from her fingertips to her chest, settling around her heart. "And don't tell me you can't dance, because I'm sure a woman of your … status will have had dance lessons from the time she learned to walk."

"I don't dance like this," she said, flicking a glance back at the dance floor.

"This is how I dance," he said, taking her hand and drawing her to him. "And since I'm your future husband, you should learn to dance with me, don't you think?"

"We're going to tango at our wedding?" she asked, a short laugh escaping her lips as she imagined the seductive dance with the super-traditional Pickett estate serving as a backdrop.

"It would give people something to talk about."

"We already are something to talk about, Lazaro."

"I suppose we are," he said, dark eyes glittering in the dim light of the club. He looked different here. More dangerous. The polish of sophistication he'd cultivated seemed to have worn thin in the past few hours. This was the man she'd known twelve years ago.

Rough around the edges. Utterly deadly to her senses.

"Dance with me," he said again. Not a question, a demand. One she couldn't refuse.

She allowed him to lead her to the dance floor, her heart thundering so loudly she was certain people around her would be able to hear it, even over the steady beat of the music. But here, no one looked at them, not even at Lazaro. Every couple was totally enthralled with each other, with the movements of their partner.

Lazaro wrapped one arm around her waist and brought her up against his chest, his other hand clasping hers. "Follow my lead."

She knew she didn't look like the elegant women dancing around her, but with Lazaro leading, his movements strong and sure, she felt like one of them. She could feel his heart beating hard against her chest, strong and steady, and her steps began to match his, her body moving in rhythm with the beat of his heart.

The music closed in around them, making her feel as if they were alone, everyone else fading into murky, shadowy impressions. Nothing else mattered but Lazaro, the weight of his hand on her waist, the intensity in his eyes as he looked at her.

The strains of the violin wound through Vanessa's body, filled her, joined the arousal that had been building inside her since the moment she'd walked back into Lazaro's life, making her feel too full. But also more alive than she'd ever felt before.

Lazaro slid his hand down to the curve of her hip, down lower, edging beneath the daring split in the skirt of her dress. His hand connected with the very top of her stocking, the place where

nylon ended and bare flesh began. He curled his fingers in and lifted her leg, curving it around his. It was part of the dance, nothing more sensual than anyone else was doing. And yet it made her feel dizzy with desire, held captive to it, waiting to see what he would do next. Where he would touch her next.

He pulled her closer to him and the hard length of his erection pressed against her stomach. She dug her fingers into his shoulder, bit down on her lip, trying to keep back the sound of pleasure that was trying to escape.

This was real. Sexual. Raw. It stirred primal hunger in her, a sense of feminine power.

He moved his hand from her thigh, back to her hip, his grip tightening. He pulled into his body and she melted against him. It was all part of the dance.

And yet it wasn't.

He pressed his face against hers, the stubble that had grown in since that morning abrading her cheek, the slight prickle of pain combining with her mounting arousal, making her feel as if she was drowning in sensation.

"Come with me," he whispered, his voice rough.

He was leading. She was following. This felt like part of the dance too.

And yet it wasn't.

He brought her into a small alcove just off the dance floor, partly secluded with swaths of fabric that cascaded from the ceiling to the floor.

"Lazaro …" She couldn't think of anything else to say. Not when he was looking at her as though she was the only thing he could see.

He leaned in slightly and braced himself on the wall behind her, his hand resting by her head, his other arm wrapped around her waist. She was effectively trapped, and she didn't mind at all.

She tilted her head slightly, hoping that he would take the hint and kiss her. Logic and self-preservation had no place in what was happening between them now. This was about feeling, desire, the kind of passion she'd tasted once twelve years ago and had been starving for every night since then.

He kissed her and she forgot everything—everything but the graze of rough stubble on her cheeks, the velvet slide of his tongue, the firm warmth of his lips. There was nothing else.

She kissed him back with everything she had, all of the pent-up desire that had lain dormant in her for so long. Desire for him.

He cupped her cheek for a moment before sliding his hand through her hair, weaving his fingers into the thick curls. He held her like that, anchored to him, his kiss giving and demanding at the same time. Too much and not enough.

She arched against him, needing to be closer to him, as close to him as she could possibly get. She needed his touch. His hands. Needed him.

He tilted his head and kissed the tender skin beneath her jaw, the curve of her neck, her shoulder. She shivered and he continued down, his tongue tracing the line of her collarbone.

He lifted his hand and cupped her breast, teased her hardened nipple until she was panting, desperate, dying of the want that had taken over her body.

She gripped his shoulders, needing something to hold her to earth. He shifted his hand lower, palming her bottom, coupling it with a kiss to her collarbone. And then he was traveling down again, the tip of his tongue on the curve of her breast, exposed by the low neckline of her gown.

She opened her eyes for a moment and saw a flash of movement through the partly closed curtains. A reminder. Just enough to bring her back to reality.

"Lazaro, stop. We have to stop," she said, her tongue thick and clumsy, unable to form words effectively.

"No, *querida*," he whispered, kissing her throat. "Not yet."

"But … what … what will people think?"

Lazaro froze, all of the heat, the molten lust that had been roaring through his veins turning into ice.

What will people think?

He tightened his hold on her for a moment and then released her. "Don't worry, no one here will think anything, Vanessa. No one here knows that you are the Pickett heiress and I'm your housekeeper's bastard son." He spat the words from his mouth, vile words that reflected the clash of emotions raging inside him.

She shook her head and took a step toward him, her hand outstretched. "Lazaro …"

"How will you bear the humiliation of being married to a

man like me?" He stepped away from her, his stomach tight with disgust. "Although my money is good enough for you. My ring—" he reached out and took her hand, lifting it so that the diamond caught the light "—seems to be good enough for you."

"Don't say that. That's not fair. I …"

"Don't say what, Vanessa? Don't tell you the truth? I'm good enough to marry, as long as I'm bailing you out and giving you a ring that ought to come with its own security detail? Good enough to screw around with in your father's guesthouse as long as no one sees you slumming it with the boy who cuts the grass?"

"Lazaro …"

"You need me," he said, his voice sounding like a growl, shocking even him. "Admit it."

"I …"

Pain tore through him, made him want retribution. "Say it."

"Or what? You'll walk away? You'll forget that *you* need *me*?" She pulled away from him. "Because no matter how much you pretend to disdain me, my father, society, you want your place at the top. And you need me to get it."

Angry brown eyes clashed with his, a tear, not one of sadness but of pure rage, spilled down her cheek. "I want to go now," she said, her voice low.

He inclined his head. "Of course, *princesa*," he said, the term not meant as one of endearment.

She turned, walking ahead of him, pushing the door open.

It was warmer outside than it was in the club, the night air

heavy and clinging, weighing him down, along with what felt like a rock in his gut. She was acting as though she'd been deeply wronged—offended by his touch, most likely. Because he was so beneath her. At least in public.

He curled his hands into fists, holding them so tight the tendons in his wrists ached.

The penthouse was only a couple of blocks away and Vanessa maintained her stony silence the entire way there. Once they were inside the lobby she kept a few paces in front of him, clearly determined not to look at him or acknowledge his presence.

Anger roared to life in him, replacing the unsettling guilt that had momentarily crept in. She wouldn't have her way. Not now. He wasn't a boy anymore, at the mercy of her father's henchman. And she was no longer the princess in a tower, no longer so far above him she could dismiss him at will. She couldn't just walk away from him.

"You will have to get over your aversion to being seen with me in public, *mi amor*," he said.

She stopped mid-stride and turned to face him, her dark eyes shimmering with heat. "Do I also have to get over my aversion to being groped in public? Does it somehow offend you that I want to maintain some level of public decency?"

"You maintain a high level of private decency as well, since you do not allow me in your bed."

"You take it pretty personally when a woman says no to you. I remember that well."

"No, what I take personally is a woman thinking I'm good enough to tease, but not good enough to take to her bed."

She took a step toward him, her lips tightened into a line.

"Is that what you think that was? Me teasing you?" She shook her head. "I wasn't thinking. If I was thinking I would never have let you touch me."

"You think that's the basis for a happy marriage?"

"I think maybe the basis for a happy marriage is not pursuing the union for business purposes, but then, I'm not really an expert."

"That is a shame, as you have agreed to marry for the benefit of your company. And, as we've discussed, no one has forced you into this. And I will not be made a fool of. Not twice. Not by the same woman."

"You think I made a fool of you, Lazaro?" Her voice was barely raised above a whisper, the force of her emotions making her words tremble. "You weren't the one pressed up against the wall in a public place and … and you have the gall to be angry at me?"

He took a step toward her, softening his voice. "Is that what bothers you the most, Vanessa Pickett, that I make you lose all of that respectability that's so important to you and your family?"

"No, what bothers me is that you think nothing of … of … humiliating me like that in public. Treating me like a thing, your possession that you can put your hands on whenever you want to."

"Is that it? My touch humiliates you?"

Vanessa took a step toward him, her breasts rising and falling with each breath, her delicate hands curled into fists. Arousal and lust warred with anger for prime position inside him. His body still wanted her, was still craving her after that small taste he'd gotten back at the club.

It shamed him, how badly he wanted a woman who saw him as she did. And yet, he could not stop himself. He had been craving her for twelve years. There was nothing that could destroy the desire. Not years of separation, not other lovers, not even the anger that was rolling through him like a tidal wave.

He curved his arm around her waist and pulled her to him, his hand drifting down until it touched the rounded curve of her bottom. "I don't believe that. I think what you really hate, Vanessa, is that no matter what, no matter how much you wish you didn't, no matter how ashamed you are of it, you want me."

Her expression was tight, mutinous, her dark eyes blazing with heat and rage. She put her hands on his chest, curled her fingers around the fabric of his shirt and stretched up on her toes, her breasts brushing against him. She kissed him, her mouth hungry on his, the explosion between them making the kiss at the club seem tame, harmless.

Desire was a living entity between them, dark and dangerous, driving them, pushing them. It was like hurtling toward a cliff, knowing they would both go over the edge if they didn't stop. And yet, knowing that, neither of them stopped.

Lazaro doubted if he could.

She slipped her tongue between his lips, tasting him, teasing him, and a flood of pure lust spread through him, overtaking him. He slid his hand down and cupped her bottom, drew her hard up against his erection.

Vanessa's stomach contracted when she felt the evidence of his arousal. He still wanted her. And even though she was angry at him, she wanted him. Maybe even more because of that anger, all of her emotions mixing, the anger in her a lit match against flammable desire. She wanted him more than she wanted her next breath, and it didn't make any sense to her.

Sex, in her mind, had always been about love and roses and perfect moments. This was as far from a perfect moment as she'd ever imagined, and yet she wanted him. All of him. Every last muscular inch.

She slid her hand sideways and wedged her fingers into the gap of his buttoned-up shirt. He was all hot, hard flesh. She traced a line along his skin, the faint scrape of chest hair against her palm sending a shiver of excitement through her.

On the dance floor, she'd felt as if a part of herself had been unlocked, releasing a desire for more of life than she'd been living. It had been a taste of freedom, and now she was starving for it.

She always thought things through. She planned and rationalized and made sure she was making the right decisions for everyone involved, the right decision for her family name.

But now she wanted Lazaro. And it wasn't about the company, or the marriage or anything beyond the desire to find pleasure in the man who aroused her beyond words.

"Let's go upstairs," she said, her voice breathy and unfamiliar, her words echoing in the empty lobby.

He looked down at her, his jaw tight, a muscle ticking in his cheek. Every hard line of his body was locked and tense, and she could feel his heart raging beneath her palm. He wanted her every bit as much as she wanted him.

The knowledge sent a shot of pure giddiness through her, a kind of power she'd never fully understood before.

"I don't like to be teased," he said, his voice rough, his accent more pronounced.

"I'm not teasing." She held his gaze, tried to keep her hands, her legs, from trembling. Her voice at least was steady. She was deadly serious.

"Tell me what you want." He lowered his head, his lips hovering above hers.

"You," she whispered, the word torn from her.

"More," he ground out. "Tell me more."

Her heart thundered hard, her cheeks hot. "I want …" She swallowed. This wasn't the time to be timid. There was no room for lies, for self-protection. "I want you. Your hands, your mouth, your …" A shudder of desire racked her body. "I want to make love with you. Tonight."

CHAPTER EIGHT

FINALLY. Tonight she would be his. At last he would take the edge off of the burning desire that had plagued his sleep since the day he'd first seen Vanessa Pickett.

He growled low in his throat and pulled her to him, kissing her, tasting her, his body on fire with the need to push her up against the wall and take her then and there. It would be so easy to slide that dress up over her hips and have her that way, so easy and so tempting.

He pulled away from her and pushed the button on the wall to bring the elevator down. He wanted her, desperately. But he knew she didn't want a public display. And it mattered. Because when she'd spoken of humiliation, it had been genuine.

His stomach was a tight ball of pain. Her humiliation might simply be because it was him and not some purebred show boy her father had selected for her.

But then, Vanessa's relationships had never been news- or gossip-worthy, and he had a feeling she was simply private. The intense desire to protect that part of her, to protect *her*, shocked him.

Even if her humiliation was centered around being caught with him, he found he didn't want to make her feel that way.

The lift doors opened and he took her hand and led her inside, hitting the button immediately, unwilling to wait any longer than

absolutely necessary.

She looked at him, her cheeks flushed pink, her lips bright and swollen from kissing him. He cared about her not being humiliated because he wanted her filled with nothing but desire. He wanted her mind blank of everything but the need for him to be inside her, because when he was touching her, that was how he felt, and he wanted her to feel the same.

This moment wasn't about revenge. It was about satisfying a need that had gnawed at him for the past twelve years.

As soon as the elevator doors opened into the vast living area of the penthouse he took her in his arms again, and she came willingly, her soft, delicate hands sliding over his chest, his back. Her lips were hot and soft against his neck.

Vanessa didn't think. She just felt. Nothing else mattered. Nothing. She was determined not to let it matter.

She just wanted to feel. She wanted Lazaro. And she was going to have him. There were so many things in life she'd denied herself, so many things she'd wanted that she'd walked away from because of propriety. Lazaro was one of them.

Not now.

This was her moment. All hers. It was only about desire and want and satisfying the ache inside her, filling the cavernous void that had seemed to grow with each passing year.

She'd spent so long drifting. Walking down a path simply because she'd gone too far to turn back. But she didn't really feel alive. She felt heartburn and angst and stress. But there had to

be more than that.

This was more. This was different. And it was hers.

He was hers.

She slid her hands up his chest, his muscles tightening beneath her palms, his chest rising sharply with his quick intake of breath. He'd accused her of teasing him. Maybe she had teased him, but no more than she'd teased herself. She was haunted by her memories of him, of what might have been.

No more what-ifs. No more teasing.

The first step was always the hardest. Her fingers trembled as she slid the top button on his shirt through the buttonhole. The next one was easier, desire taking over and banishing nerves and doubts.

She flattened her hands on his bare chest, felt his heartbeat, strong and fast. She pushed his shirt from his shoulders and let it fall to the floor. He didn't move, he only stood in front of her, a bronzed god of masculine perfection, each muscle perfectly cut and defined. The way the light worked with his physique, adding even more extreme definition to his body, made her want to capture it on film. Forever. For her.

Her fingertips skimmed down his torso, over his washboard-flat stomach and down to his belt buckle. She sucked in a breath and worked the belt loose, letting it fall open. She felt driven now to uncover him, to see him, all of him. She had wondered, for so many years she had wondered, and now she didn't think she could wait another second to see the body her mind had woven

fantasies around since she was sixteen.

She pushed his pants and underwear down his hips in one jerky movement, and he kicked them to the side, his eyes never leaving hers. He made no move toward her, he simply stood, naked, completely aroused, in the middle of his living room.

His confidence boosted hers. He wanted this. He wanted her. For once, she wasn't going to worry about possible inadequacy.

She moved her hands down, not quite touching him intimately. He closed his eyes and put his hand over hers, guiding her toward his erection. Her stomach tightened, nerves making a guest appearance now.

She took a breath and placed her hand over his hard shaft. He was hot steel beneath her palm, the hard length of him speaking of his desire for her. She felt her internal muscles tighten as she explored him, nerves fleeing, unable to exist alongside the need that was filling her now.

She squeezed him gently, then again with more strength, increased boldness, when a raw sound of pleasure escaped his lips. His civility was all gone now. Lost in desire, his custom suit on the floor, he was just a man. And he called to everything feminine inside her, made her ache with the need to have him.

"You are overdressed now, I think, *querida*," he said, his voice raw.

She felt the slide of the zipper, a rush of cool air on her back, and then her dress was pooled at her feet. She was still wearing her high heels and a barely there bra and panty set. She should

have felt silly, or embarrassed or something. But she didn't.

Because she saw the hunger in his eyes. Saw the need that reflected her own.

And she felt powerful. Powerful and turned on.

"Kiss me," she said, reaching for him.

"Un momento." He unclasped her bra and discarded it. "Beautiful."

He cupped her breast, sliding his thumb over her nipple. She sucked in a breath and watched his dark hand cover her pale flesh. He leaned in and kissed her neck, then lower still, drawing one tightened bud into his mouth, teasing it with the tip of his tongue.

"Laz …" She gripped his head and held him to her, hoping that he would keep her from sliding to the floor.

He lowered himself to his knees, his lips skimming over her ribs, her stomach. He pushed her panties down her legs, baring her to him. She closed her eyes then and just felt. He kissed her thigh, his hands moving down her legs, unfastening the buckle on one of her shoes. He moved his thumb over her ankle as he removed her high heel, the contact on a totally unerotic point on her body sending sparks of sensation skittering through her.

He did the same with her other shoe, tossing it to the side along with the rest of her clothes.

"Sit down," he said, his voice rough but steady.

She looked behind her and saw the plush velvet couch. She'd forgotten where she was for a moment. Everything had gone

fuzzy around the edges, everything except for Lazaro.

She lowered herself to the couch, unsure why she was doing it, only knowing that, in this instance, obeying Lazaro was going to be the most rewarding course of action. She didn't know how she knew, only that she did.

"I have dreamed of this. Of you," he said, on his knees before her. "Of how you would look. Of how you would taste."

He pressed a kiss to her inner thigh, his hands moving to grip her hips and draw her to the edge of the couch.

Her entire body was trembling, inside and out, desire and curiosity defeating any of the embarrassment she should be feeling. Because this wasn't about propriety. This was about need. And she needed Lazaro.

She wove her fingers through his hair as he continued kissing her, higher, until he hit the spot that was aching for his touch. He slid his tongue over her, the friction sending heat and flame through her body.

She could feel something building in her, could feel the onset of her climax, so close. So close. He released his grip on her hips and pushed one finger inside her, the rhythm of his penetration working in time with the flick of his tongue over the bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs.

The tension that had been building, low and tight, released, pleasure rolling through her in pulsing waves.

When she came back to herself, Lazaro had joined her on the couch, his hands moving over her curves, caressing every inch of

her body. He leaned in and kissed her lips. “Good?” he asked.

She nodded, her voice lost to her.

He shifted positions so that he was over her, and she parted her thighs for him, making room. The head of his erection pressed against her and she held her breath for a moment, waiting, for pain or satisfaction or completion, whatever it would bring.

He cursed sharply and got up from the couch, crossing to his discarded pants.

“What?” she asked, feeling dizzy.

“Condom.” He fished a packet from his wallet and tore it open, making quick work of rolling it on.

They’d stopped at the condom point once before. But she had no intention of stopping him now. She couldn’t stop. She had to have him. All of him. For her. For him. Because they both needed it. She did.

She shook with her need to have him. Only him.

Her heart jolted when he moved to her, not from virginal nerves, but because she understood why there hadn’t been another man. It had been so easy to blame it on circumstances. To believe it was because of the specter of her almost-fiancé.

It was because of Lazaro. Because she wanted him. Because she’d been waiting for him. So stupid. So dangerously foolish. But she’d had a taste of true passion in his arms, and no one else had ever aroused anything remotely as intense.

Why take less?

And tonight, Lazaro wasn’t offering less than what she’d felt

before. It was more. So much more than she remembered.

"Thank you," she said, her teeth chattering slightly as a wave of emotion washed through her, making her shake inside.

"For?"

"For remembering. The condom. I think I would have forgotten."

She was glad he'd thought of it, because she hadn't. There was so much happening and she couldn't think straight. Marriage or not, she wasn't ready for a baby. Not when everything at Pickett was so unstable.

She pushed that thought to the side and focused on Lazaro. Nothing else mattered. Not now.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him as he moved back into the position he'd been in, poised to take possession of her body. She kissed him as he thrust into her, focusing only on the pleasure he was giving her with the erotic glide of his tongue, ignoring the vague, tearing pain.

It passed quickly at least, her body adjusting to him, welcoming him. He put his hand on her thigh and urged her to wrap her leg around his, as she'd done on the dance floor. The move opened her up to him, made each of his thrusts stimulate her inside and out.

Pleasure built inside her again, lower, deeper, more intense. He kissed her neck, her collarbone, lowering his head so that he could take one of her nipples into his mouth, his thumb gliding over the other one.

She arched against him, meeting his thrusts, letting his hands, his body, his touch, block out everything. Everything but the climax she was working toward, everything but the pleasure that was threatening to overtake her, body and soul.

His thrusts came faster, harder, his control slipping. He moved his hands to her hips, his fingers digging into her skin. She slid her tongue over the line of his jaw and she felt every muscle in his body shake, then seize as a harsh groan escaped his lips. His pleasure—seeing it, feeling him pulse inside her—pushed her over the edge and she was lost in her own sensation, in the ecstasy that drowned out everything else, every thought, every worry.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, holding on to him, holding him to her. For the moment, nothing else mattered. It was only Vanessa and Lazaro, and everything else was just peripheral. For now, this was the reality, and everything else was the fantasy. Distant and fuzzy. Unimportant.

Lazaro shifted and extricated himself from her arms, standing and walking into the bathroom. She watched him walk the whole way, dazed, sated and enjoying the view.

Her eyes started to flutter closed, a drugging sleepiness overtaking her, making her limbs feel heavy, pleasantly numb.

Lazaro walked back in, his expression blank. "Vanessa …"

"Don't," she mumbled, sleep slurring her words. "I promise, we can fight in the morning, but right now, can we just … sleep?"

He returned to the couch, settling beside her and drawing her

into his arms. She put her head on his chest, his heart thundering beneath her cheek. Tomorrow would be reality. For now, she was going to enjoy the fantasy.

Lazaro watched a shaft of pink sunlight catch one of the windows on a building outside, throwing its reflection into the living room of the penthouse, illuminating Vanessa's perfect body.

He had built fantasies around the idea of what her body might look like, of the way her face would look when he brought her to the peak of pleasure. Of what her silken flesh would feel like beneath his fingers.

He had convinced himself that there was no way she, any woman, could live up to what he had made Vanessa in his mind. A fantasy spun in the mind of an eighteen-year-old, left to grow, had to be beyond reality. Beyond what was possible.

But Vanessa had surpassed a mere fantasy last night. She had been perfection, a taste of heaven and light and a kind of soul-deep satiation he had never believed existed.

He could not have conjured up something more, something better.

She was complete female perfection. Every curve. Every dip and swell. Skin like cream; plump, pink-tipped breasts that made his stomach tighten with desire. Everything about her—touch, taste, sight and scent—satisfied him in a way that was utterly foreign.

But, incredibly, coupled with that bone-deep satisfaction was

a need for more that made him ache.

She stirred against him, her nipples brushing his chest, the contact lighting a fire in his blood. He moved his hand over the curve of her hip and she made a soft sound of pleasure and arched into him.

He dropped a kiss onto her bare shoulder and her eyes popped open. She rolled slightly and slid off the couch onto the floor, cursing before standing, her cheeks bright pink.

"Where are my clothes?" she asked, her voice rusty from disuse.

"Around," he said, pushing himself into a sitting position.

"Could you not look at me for a second please?"

"I've seen it, Vanessa. More than seen."

"Please," she said again.

He looked out the window, all his concentration taken by the effort it took to pull his focus away from her perfect body.

"You act as though you haven't had a morning after before," he said.

The telling silence made his stomach tighten, and he couldn't keep himself from looking back at her. She was standing there, clutching her dress to her chest, biting her lip.

"You haven't?" he asked.

She huffed out a breath, shifted her weight to one side, one bare hip looking more rounded, more prominent. "How many women have you slept with?"

"Excuse me?"

Her dark eyebrows shot upward. “Rude question, isn’t it?”

“Odd,” he said. “And pointless.”

“Then I don’t suppose I have to answer either.”

His heartbeat quickened. It really shouldn’t matter, and yet, he found it did. Because he wanted her to be his. His alone. The idea that no other man had ever been with her like that sent a rush of pure, unenlightened testosterone through him. His. In every way possible.

“I don’t know,” he said, disgust filling him as he spoke the words.

“You don’t know if I have to answer the question?”

“I don’t know how many women I’ve slept with,” he bit out.

She frowned. “Oh.”

He hadn’t anticipated this. That his vast experience could cause him shame. He didn’t brag about his luck with women, but inevitably, if there was an article about him written anywhere, his reputation with the opposite sex was mentioned. It had always earned him a certain measure of respect.

It wasn’t respect on Vanessa’s face. It was disappointment. It passed quickly, her expression neutral again, her eyes focused on a spot just past him.

Even though it was a fleeting impression of disappointment, it left a hollow feeling in his chest.

“I answered,” he said.

She met his eyes. “Then no, I haven’t had a morning after before.”

"How is that possible, Vanessa? I didn't pick you out as a virgin when you were sixteen."

"But I was. Well, obviously I was then, since last night I still was."

"Why?"

"Why don't you know how many women you've slept with?" she countered, clutching her clothes more tightly against her.

Because I was trying to forget you. He held back the stark, honest thought that filled his mind.

He shrugged and stood. "Because I'm a man, Vanessa. Once I made money, women were readily available and I took advantage."

She stood, her focus on an undefined spot on the carpet. He didn't like the look on her face. She sighed heavily and then lifted her face, meeting his eyes. "We're trading, are we?" He nodded in confirmation. "Because, in addition to the fact that my father is a professional at chasing men out of my life, I wanted … someone to want me. Not my father's money. Or my status. Or … I just hadn't found that." She averted her gaze.

"I didn't care about your money or your status."

"You just wanted sex?"

Her words bit into him. He shrugged. "I was eighteen. There isn't much more a horny teenage boy wants. Not only that, I was experienced, too much for my age. It's what we did. I think it was part of what made being so poor bearable. Taking advantage of those few moments of oblivion. It's how I related to women, so,

yes, it was what I wanted."

"But it's not all you want now. Now you want my connections too."

"Things have changed."

She nodded slightly. "Can you turn around again? I don't want to have to back out of the room."

"Why did you decide to sleep with me last night?"

Her lips flattened into a line. "When I figure that out I'll get back to you."

Lazaro turned his back and faced the view, letting her walk out without an audience. He tried to ignore the odd, crushing weight that was pressing down on his chest.

CHAPTER NINE

"WHERE have you been?"

Vanessa walked back into the penthouse after a day spent in careful avoidance of Lazaro, exhausted, feet aching.

Lazaro was standing at the bar, palms rested flat on the black marble surface, his dark eyes filled with intensity. She'd spent the afternoon taking photographs of Buenos Aires, deliberately not thinking about the night before and generally having a very relaxing day.

Well, the relaxation was clearly about to end.

"Out," she said.

"Out where?" he said, his voice low, deadly.

"It's not really your business is it?" She felt compelled to put distance between them, to exert some kind of control in a situation where she really didn't have any.

"It is my business," he said.

"No, Lazaro, it's my business." She started to walk toward her bedroom.

"You're mine, Vanessa, that means I have a right to know how you spend your time."

She turned sharply. "I do not belong to you. And I never will. A marriage license isn't a deed of ownership."

He slammed his palm on the top of the bar. "That is not what I meant."

Anger fired through her. “It is, though, isn’t it? You want me to be this sparkly possession that you can show off. The proof of how far you’ve come. A chance to give the world the finger. Well, great. But you had to make sure that I had no other options open to get me to agree to marry you. I had no other choice. Don’t forget that.”

She walked straight ahead to the balcony, tears, hot and angry, blurring the lights of the city. She slammed the sliding door behind her and leaned against the railing, pressing her palms hard against her eyes, trying to stop herself from dissolving, trying to keep from making a total idiot of herself.

She couldn’t let him affect her like this. Because he was dangerously close to being right in some ways. It wasn’t that she truly believed he had any ownership of her, but power … she was letting him have all kinds of power over her emotions. And as long as she did, he would always be the one in control, because she didn’t have a hold over him. He might like her body, but that was sex, and with nothing other than lust behind it, it would be temporary.

And what would happen then? She would be left behind, the faux-political wife committed to standing at her husband’s side no matter what he’d done. No matter how broken she was inside.

And if she let him, he could destroy her.

She gritted her teeth. She didn’t know why it was Lazaro. Why was he the only one who brought this out in her? She only knew that he was.

She closed her eyes and pictured a day twelve years earlier, the hot summer sun warming her skin, a boy with a smile that seemed to be meant only for her.

It hadn't been true then. Yet part of her still clung to the ridiculous fantasy. The part of her that had been waiting for him …

It was why she'd slept with him. She'd told him she didn't know why, and that had been a lie. He was the only man she'd ever really wanted.

And part of her … part of her believed he had to feel the same way. She housed some serious delusion inside herself.

"I didn't force you into bed last night. It had nothing to do with our agreement or blackmail or the future of Pickett."

She turned around and saw Lazaro striding toward her, his expression cold with black fury.

"I didn't get in your bed. That was your couch," she said tightly.

"I didn't force you to have sex with me." he said. "You wanted it."

She couldn't deny it. She wished she could. Wished she were capable of lying on that level, to his face, without remorse. But she couldn't. She'd told him last night that she wanted him. She had directed the evening activities once they'd left the club.

"You want *me*," he said, his eyes never leaving hers, coal-black and intense, glittering in the dim light. "Say it."

She swallowed hard and turned away from him, her eyes

focused on the skyline.

She felt him approach, her body responding to his, her breasts getting heavy, the pulse between her thighs pounding hard. The empty ache threatening to swallow her. She wanted him, again, during a fight. She didn't know herself. Didn't know what it was he did to her.

Only that he sparked a fire in her that no one else ever had. And it wasn't just about sex or lust or desire. It was so much more. He showed her how lacking her life was. Being with him, near him, seeing the steps he'd taken to change his life, made her so acutely aware of how little she'd done. Of how hollow all of her so-called achievements were. She'd had it all handed to her and she'd still messed up.

All her thoughts evaporated when Lazaro put his hand on the curve of her waist, swept her hair to one side, exposing her neck to the warm night breeze. "Tell me you want me," he said, a raw note in his voice now, showing a crack in his iron control.

And she realized that he needed to hear it. That her words hadn't glanced off his thick armor, but that they'd struck a blow. She'd imagined that he was invincible—a man with so much power, the freedom to do what he wanted. A man who lived without restriction.

But he wasn't. She flashed back to that moment in the club and saw his anger for what it was. She had hurt him. She had rejected him.

He slid his hand up, cupped her breast, the thin barrier of

her dress providing no protection from the sensual assault. He pinched her nipple lightly between his thumb and forefinger and tugged.

Her head fell back, and he took advantage, kissing her neck as he continued to tease her body.

"You want me, Vanessa," he said, not a question this time. "Me."

"Yes," she whispered.

"And it's not about money or what I can do for Pickett right now, is it?"

She shook her head, biting her lip to hold back the whimper of pleasure that was climbing her throat. She felt her dress give as he slid the zipper down, exposing her back. His hand drifted over the line of her spine, the light touch sending heavy waves of arousal through her.

She relaxed her shoulders and let her dress fall, the warm, heavy breeze kissing her bare skin, a completely foreign sensation. But no one would be able to see them. Even if someone might be able to, she wasn't certain she could bring herself to care.

Lazaro moved his hands over her stomach, his touch firm, warm, so sexy it made her knees weak.

"No, it's not about anything but …" She sucked in a sharp breath when he covered her breasts with one of his hands and pressed against her stomach with the other, drawing her more tightly against him, bringing his erection into firm contact with

her bottom. “But how much I want you,” she choked out.

He kissed her neck, her shoulder, and a tremor wracked her body, longing making her weak. But there was a fire smoldering in her stomach, a need for more. For more than simple lust. She’d confessed to wanting him, apart from their marriage arrangement and everything else.

She needed him to do the same.

She wiggled out of his grasp and turned to face him, her back against the balcony railing, her breasts pressed tightly against his chest. “Tell me you want me too.”

He rocked against her, the hard length of him pressing into her stomach. “Doesn’t it feel like I want you?”

“Tell me you want *me*, right now. Me. Not my status. Not my connections.” She slid her hand down his chest, past his belt, pressing her palm over his erection. “Tell me,” she said again.

His eyes were dark, nearly black with passion, his jaw locked tight, tension holding his body taut, every muscle rock-hard. “I want you.”

“My name,” she said, the words coming out broken. “I need you to say it.”

“I want you, Vanessa.”

She let out a gust of air. “Lazaro.”

He captured her lips with his, his kiss hungry, devouring, and she returned it, sliding her tongue over his, taking his bottom lip lightly between her teeth and tugging. He growled and scooped her up in his arms.

"We're making it to bed this time," he said, striding into the penthouse and heading into his room.

She'd avoided his room since they'd arrived in Argentina, and not by accident. Just seeing that big bed pushed her desire up to another level. Of course, now her fantasies were strengthened by the memory of what it was like to be with him, to have him inside her, his steady rhythm taking her to the heights of ecstasy.

He set her down in the center of the bed and she shivered.

"Cold?"

She shook her head.

"Nervous?" he asked.

"I am, a little bit." It didn't seem like the place for self-preservation. In this moment at least, honesty seemed imperative.

He made quick work of the buttons on his shirt, shrugging it off and casting it to the floor. Vanessa could only stare at all the sculpted, masculine perfection before her. She'd been with him once, but it didn't mean it wasn't intimidating. He was perfect, experienced and fantastic in bed. She wasn't sure she was offering him an even trade.

"I just …" She got up on her knees and inched to the edge of the bed, putting her hand flat against his stomach, his muscles shifting beneath her palm. "I don't know if I can compete with the memory of … more women than you can remember."

He encircled her wrist with his hand and pulled her gently to him, kissing her on the lips. "There's a reason I don't remember. They didn't matter. They aren't here in bed with us. When I look

at you, you're all I can see."

For now, she would accept his words. She wouldn't think too far into them. She refused to wonder if he'd felt the same about all of them at the time, only to have his desire for them fade as time went on, and to have memories of them fade completely later.

She pushed that thought aside because she didn't want to think of it now. Even if it was stupid and dangerous, she wanted to believe him.

He discarded the rest of his clothes and joined her on the bed, kissing her, putting his hand on the curve of her hip and dragging her panties down her legs. She kicked her shoes off and shoved them off the bed with her foot, anxious to have all of the barriers removed.

And when he took her in his arms, every inch of his body pressed against hers, she closed her eyes and inhaled his scent, tears forming in her eyes because he was everything she'd fantasized and more. He had been perfect the first night, but that had been frantic, and the main event had been so new it had been hard to focus on the finer points of what it meant to be intimate with a man. With Lazaro.

Her fingertips blazed a trail over his bicep, his skin smooth, hot, his muscles hard beneath. She skimmed her hands over his hair-roughened chest, flat abs, down to his hardened shaft. She kissed his mouth, catching the harsh sound of pleasure that rose in his throat as she explored his body.

He moved his hand down between her thighs and she stilled her movements then, luxuriating in the response he could call from her body. Orgasm built in her, quick and intense, ripples of sensation making her internal muscles tighten.

"I love watching your face when you come," he whispered.

She laughed, her throat tight with emotion. "I can't think of anything when you do that."

"Then I'm doing something right."

Yes, he was. It was something that reached down into her, something that surpassed her body and went straight for her soul.

He pulled away from her for a moment and opened the drawer to the bedside table, retrieving a condom.

And then he was in her, filling her, the friction so delicious it surpassed the climax she'd just experienced. She gave herself up to the sensation washing through her body, to the building pleasure that was blocking out everything else.

Her orgasm broke over her like a wave, spinning her in the tide, making her feel weightless. For a moment there was nothing more than her and Lazaro. Nothing more than what he was making her feel.

Dimly, she was aware of him coming with a harsh groan, his body braced hard against her as he kissed her fiercely.

Afterward, she lay with her hand on his chest, his fingers sifting through her hair, their legs tangled together.

Vanessa drew back and looked at him, running her fingers over his stubble-roughened jaw, tracing his brow, his high

cheekbones. “You look different,” she said, languor slurring her speech slightly. “But the same too.”

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