

The Italian's Rags-to-Riches Wife

*Julia
James*

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Julia James

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Allesandro di Vincenzo is a perfect male specimen. There's no woman he can't have—until Laura Stowe crosses his path. Laura is plain, poor and hides behind her homely appearance to avoid getting close to people. But Allesandro needs her family connections to open the door to ultimate corporate power. So he must woo the ugly duckling into his bed—where she will learn what it is to be a beautiful, desired swan.

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Julia James
THE ITALIAN'S RAGS-TO-RICHES WIFE

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All about the author...

Julia James

JULIA JAMES lives in England with her family. Harlequin® novels were the first “grown-up” books she read as a teenager, alongside Georgette Heyer and Daphne du Maurier, and she’s been reading them ever since. Julia adores the British countryside—in all its seasons—and is fascinated by all things historical, from castles to cottages. She also has a special love for the Mediterranean—“the most perfect landscape after England!” She considers both ideal settings for romance stories. Since becoming a romance writer, she has, she says, had the great good fortune to start discovering the Caribbean, as well, and is happy to report that those magical, beautiful islands are also ideal settings for romance stories. “One of the best things about writing romance is that it gives you a great excuse to take holidays in fabulous places,” says Julia, “all in the name of research, of course!”

Her first stab at novel writing was Regency romances. “But, alas, no one wanted to publish them,” she says. She put her writing aside until her family commitments were clear, and then renewed her love affair with contemporary romances. “My writing partner and I made a pact not to give up until we were published—and we both succeeded! Natasha Oakley writes for Harlequin Romance®, and we faithfully read each other’s works in progress and give each other a lot of free advice and encouragement.”

In between writing Julia enjoys walking, gardening, needlework, baking “extremely gooey chocolate cakes” and trying to stay fit!

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PROLOGUE

‘WHAT do you mean, you’re retaining the chairmanship?’

The voice that had spoken was harsh, and clearly angry. But out of respect for the man he had addressed, a man more than twice his age, Allesandro di Vincenzo kept the anger under control.

‘The situation has changed,’ the other man replied sombrely. He was sitting in his leather chair, in the library of his eighteenth-century villa in the depths of the Roman countryside.

Allesandro drew in his breath sharply. His lithe body was clad in a handmade suit from one of Italy’s most stylish and fashionable designers, and his sable feathered hair was superbly cut, setting off a face whose features could have graced an Italian movie star, let alone the chief executive of a major Italian company. He had dark, long-lashed eyes, high cheekbones, a finely cut nose, planed jaw and a sculpted, mobile mouth which, at the moment, was drawn in a taut, forbidding line.

‘But it’s been understood you would step down in my favour—’

‘Only by you, Allesandro,’ the older man retorted. ‘I never gave any legally binding undertaking. You simply assumed that when Stefano died—’ His voice broke off a moment, then he recovered, and continued. ‘And, as I have said, the situation has changed. Changed in a way I could never have envisaged.’

For a moment the sombre look left him, and he shook his head, looking suddenly every one of his seventy years.

‘I could have had no idea—none at all...’ His voice trailed off.

Allesandro’s brows drew together impatiently. His long-fingered hands pushed back his jacket, indenting around his lean hips.

‘What is this, Tomaso? No idea about what?’

The old man looked at him again. He paused a moment before speaking, his voice heavy.

‘Stefano hid it from me completely. I discovered it now, only when I was able to face going through his personal effects. What I found shocked me to the core.’ He paused again, as if collecting himself, then continued, still in the same heavy voice.

‘The letters are over twenty-five years old—why he kept them I do not know. It cannot have been sentimental attachment, for the last of them says that it will be the final letter—that the writer accepts, finally, that Stefano will not reply. But for whatever reason they survived. And the fact that they did—’ his gaze rested unreadably on the younger man again ‘—changes everything.’

Allesandro’s expression was closed.

‘How so?’ he prompted. There was wariness in his voice, and suspicion. The old man was being evasive, and Allesandro was running out of patience. Ever since Tomaso’s forty-five-year-old son, Stefano, doggedly bachelor, had smashed himself up in his power-boat ten months ago, Allesandro had been earmarked to move up from being the energetic and highly successful chief executive of the company founded by his late father and Tomaso Viale to being chairman of Viale-Vincenzo—with full control. He had given Tomaso time to mourn—even though his relations with his son had never been good—and had even accepted Tomaso taking on the temporary role of caretaker chairman after the initial shock of Stefano’s death.

But enough was enough. Tomaso had given Allesandro every reason to expect that he would retire before the end of the financial year and hand full control of the company over to him. Frustration bit at Allesandro. He had places to be, things to do, plans to execute—and having to make the journey here had not been on his agenda. Dio, he could think of a dozen places he’d rather be right now. Starting with the Rome apartment of Delia Dellatore, whose voluptuous charms were currently exclusively reserved solely for his enjoyment.

He threw a covertly assessing look at Tomaso and saw that he had aged since Stefano's death. Stefano might not have been a satisfactory son—his flamboyant playboy lifestyle had been wild and self-indulgent—but his death had been a devastating shock.

And now it seemed Tomaso had suffered yet another shock—sufficient enough to distract him from the business of the chairmanship of Viale-Vincenzo.

'How so, Tomaso?' Allesandro prompted again. Whatever it was that was keeping the chairmanship out of his reach, he wanted it sorted.

Tomaso's eyes had a strange expression as he looked at Allesandro before speaking.

'As you know, Stefano refused to marry, preferring his wild lifestyle.' There was a familiar disapproval in Tomaso's voice. 'So I had little hope of the continuation of my line. But those letters I found were from a woman. A young Englishwoman imploring Stefano to come to her, to at least acknowledge her letters. And her reason for writing them...'

He paused again, and Allesandro saw emotion in the lined face.

'She bore Stefano a child. A daughter. My granddaughter.' His hands tightened over the cusp of the arms of the leather chair. He looked straight at the younger man.

'I want you to find her and bring her here to me, Allesandro.'

CHAPTER ONE

LAURA braced her shoulders and lifted the handles of the overladen wheelbarrow. The tower of damp kindling she had gathered wobbled a moment, but did not fall. Blinking the rain from her eyelashes, she set off over the bumpy ground of the orchard towards the gate that led into the back yard. Her rubber boots swished through the long, wet grass, and her worn corduroy trousers were damp, as was her baggy jacket and hood, but it didn't bother her. She was used to the rain. It rained a lot in the West Country. Gaining the Tarmacked surface of the back yard made her progress easier, and she headed for the woodshed. Firewood was valuable, and helped cut down on expensive oil and electricity bills.

She needed to save every penny she could.

Not just for the essential repairs to the house which, even when her grandparents had been alive, had become increasingly neglected due to shortage of cash, but also, now that she had inherited Wharton, to pay off the death duties that the taxman had imposed on her.

Anxiety bit at her. Even as her head told her that selling Wharton was the most sensible course of action, her heart rebelled vehemently. She couldn't just sell it like a pair of old shoes!

It was the only home she could remember—her haven from the world. She had been brought up in its sheltering protection by her grandparents after the sorry and shameful tragedy that had befallen their only daughter. A daughter who had died, unmarried, and left behind an illegitimate baby...with a father who had refused to acknowledge her.

But there was no income to go with Wharton. Laura's only hope of keeping it was to convert it to an upmarket holiday let—but that required a new kitchen, en suite bathrooms, extensive repairs and redecorating. All far too expensive.

Worse, the first tranche of tax was due imminently, and her only means of paying it was by selling the last few paintings and antiques she had in the house. Laura hated the idea of selling them, but was faced with no other option.

Anxiety pressed her again, a constant companion.

As she emptied her barrowload of kindling into the woodshed to dry off, and set off back towards the orchard to gather yet more, she halted suddenly. A car was approaching down the long drive from the road.

Few people ever called. Her grandparents had kept themselves very much to themselves, and Laura did likewise. As she listened, she heard the car take the fork to the seldom-used front drive. Abandoning the wheelbarrow, she set off around the side of the house.

A gleaming silver saloon car was pulled up outside the front door, its sides flecked with mud but still looking as sleek and expensive and as out of place as if it had been a spaceship.

And looking even more out of place was the man who was getting out of it.

Laura's mouth fell open, and she stared gormlessly, blinking in the rain.

Allesandro stepped out of the car, his expression taut, barely suppressing his black mood. Even with SatNav the narrow, winding lanes had been almost impossible to navigate. And now that he was finally here the place seemed deserted. The stone surface of the old house was as damp and sodden as the landscape that surrounded him. Broken, dirty shutters blanked out the downstairs windows and the drive was green with weeds. The flowerbeds looked windswept and unkempt, and the ancient rhododendrons crowded the sides of the overgrown lawn. There was a piece of guttering hanging loose and spilling rainwater onto the porch, which was crumbling.

Ducking through the rain, he gained the relative cover of the entrance. It had been raining solidly ever since his landing at Exeter, and showed no signs of stopping. Allesandro's dark eyes

flashed disparagingly as he took in the dilapidated state of the house. Was it really as deserted as it looked?

The crunch of trodden gravel made him swivel his head.

No, not deserted.

Some kind of outdoor hand, he assumed, was approaching him, clumping in heavy boots, the bulky figure enveloped in a worn waxed coat and concealing hood.

‘Is Miss Stowe in?’ he demanded, raising his voice through the rain.

Laura Stowe. That was the name of Stefano’s daughter. Her mother, so Allesandro’s investigations had uncovered, had been Susan Stowe, and Stefano had met her while she had been an art student visiting Italy. Apparently Susan had been pretty, and naïve, and the results had been predictable. Allesandro had also discovered that Susan Stowe had died when her daughter was three, and the child had been raised by her maternal grandparents, here in this house.

At least, Allesandro thought grimly, the girl would be overjoyed to discover she had a rich grandfather wanting to take her in. This place was a derelict dump.

His mood was bad. He didn’t want to be here, practically as Tomaso’s gofer, but Tomaso had indicated that once he had met his granddaughter, he would want to retire, to have more time with her. That suited Allesandro perfectly.

What did not suit him was being kept out in the cold and the wet.

‘Miss Stowe?’ he repeated impatiently. ‘Is she in?’

The bulky figure spoke suddenly.

‘I’m Laura Stowe. What was it you wanted?’

Allesandro stared disbelievingly. ‘You are Laura Stowe?’ he said.

The expression on the visitor’s face might have made her laugh, but Laura was too taken aback by his presence to find it humorous. What on earth was someone like this doing here—and of all things looking for her? Someone who was not just utterly out of place here, but—she swallowed silently—who was just jaw-droppingly good-looking. Night-dark hair, night-dark eyes, and a face cut with the same chisel Michelangelo must have used. His skin had a natural tan to it, she registered, and as for his clothes...

They went with the swish car; that was obvious. They screamed designer—from the superb fit across his shoulders to the pristine whiteness of his shirt, the crisp elegance of his tie and the lean length of his trousered legs and the polish on his leather shoes. These clothes had not been made in England—not even by a top Savile Row tailor.

They were as foreign as he was.

The final element clicked into place. It was his voice, she realised. It was accented. Perfect, but accented. Italian, she thought, her brain still reeling. That was what he looked like. And even as the word gelled in her head, another emotion went through her.

Instantly she suppressed it. No, it was just a coincidence, that was all.

It had to be.

For a moment longer she just went on staring at him, as he stared back at her, that look of appalled disbelief still in his face. Something about it finally got to her, penetrating her own complete shock at what on earth a man so bizarrely inappropriate for the rain-swept West Country was doing in front of her house.

She felt her expression stiffen.

‘Yes,’ she said brusquely. ‘I am Laura Stowe. And you are—?’

She waited pointedly, but the man simply went on gazing at her, not bothering to veil the expression in his eyes. It was more than just surprise.

It was a look she had long been familiar with. She'd been getting it from men all her life. The look that told her, as if it had been written in letters six feet high, that so far as they were concerned she simply didn't count as a woman.

She never had.

Her grandparents, she knew, had been relieved. What they had feared most was a repeat of the fate that had overcome their beloved daughter, born so late in their lives, cherished so closely.

Until her one rash venture abroad had ruined her life.

Her grandparents had never overcome the shame of their daughter being an unmarried mother, nor the stigma of their granddaughter's illegitimacy. Despite their love for her—the more so after her mother had died—Laura knew her grandparents had never come to terms with it. It had never been mentioned, but it had been there all the time, like a stain on her skin. An embarrassment to be coped with, endured—and hidden.

Wharton was a good place to hide from the world. Remote, secluded, hard to find. But now she felt unease snake through her. Someone had found it. Someone whose apparent nationality was the most unwelcome she could think of.

But surely, surely that was just a coincidence?

Laura stood, staring at the man who was a million miles out of place here. The familiar look she was so used to seemed more pronounced in his dark eyes—but why wouldn't it be? she thought. A man that ludicrously handsome would never surround himself with any females who weren't his absolute equal in looks.

The beautiful people.

The old phrase formed in her mind, suiting itself totally to the man standing on her porch. The beautiful people—glamorous, rich, moving in rich, glamorous circles, in a glittering, fashionable world. A world as far away from hers as Mars.

But this wasn't Mars, this was Wharton, and it was her home, and Laura was determined to find out what this man was doing here.

She stepped forward under the porch, pushing her hood back.

'Perhaps you didn't hear me. I'm Laura Stowe. What was it you wanted?' she repeated. Her voice was clipped.

The eyes flicked over her again. The same reaction in them, but now with something more—something that didn't have to do with her appearance. Unease tensed her spine again. What was going on? Who was this man and why was he here?

Tension made her speak again. More brusquely than was polite, but that was the way it came out.

'If you can't state your business, I must ask you to leave.'

She saw the dark eyes flash—he didn't care for being spoken to in that way. Well, it was too bad. He'd turned up here out of the blue, asking for her, and now, when she'd answered him, he wasn't saying anything.

The sculpted lips tightened.

'I have a matter of significance to impart to you,' he said shortly. 'Perhaps you would do me the courtesy of opening the door so that I may talk to you indoors?'

Her hesitation was visible. A sardonic look showed in his dark eyes.

'You will be quite safe, signorina,' he said.

Dull colour mounted in Laura's cheeks at his words. She didn't need smart jibes to tell her she was safe from any untoward advances by men.

'This door is locked,' she told him. 'Wait here.'

Allesandro watched her turn and stomp off along the weed-strewn drive, towards the corner of the house, before disappearing out of sight. For a moment he just stared after where she had gone.

Dio, the girl was a fright! How the hell had Stefano produced offspring so dire? He'd been a good-looking man himself, and he'd hardly have bothered to seduce this girl's mother if she hadn't

been pretty—so where had all that genetic legacy disappeared to? As for her personality, it matched her appearance. Ungracious and unmannerly.

He turned back to stare at the still obdurately closed and locked front door. A flurry of raindrops blew in on him, and another heavy drop landed on his shoulder from one of the several leaks in the roof. He felt his mood worsen even more.

After what seemed an interminable amount of time the door finally creaked open, and Allesandro stepped inside.

Immediately, the smell of damp assailed him. For a moment he could see nothing, then he made out a dim hallway, with a dark, cold flagstone floor, and an old chest set against the wall and a grandfather clock. The door closed behind him, cutting out some of the damp and cold, but not a great deal.

‘This way,’ said the female he had come a thousand miles to find.

She was still wearing those unspeakable corduroy trousers, and the absence of the hooded jacket had not improved her appearance, as her top now consisted of a baggy hand knitted jumper with a hole in one elbow and overlong sleeves. Her hair, he noted without surprise, was atrocious: a lank mop that was roughly tied back with a piece of elastic.

She took him through a baize door and into an old-fashioned kitchen, warmed, he noted thankfully, by an ancient range.

‘So, who are you, and what is it that you want to tell me?’ demanded the girl.

Allesandro did not answer immediately. Instead he sat himself down in the chair she had pulled out and surveyed her.

‘You are Laura Stowe, you say?’ he began.

The hostile look came his way again.

‘As I have previously said, yes, I am Laura Stowe. And you are—?’ she said pointedly.

Allesandro let his eyes rest on her a moment, taking in the full extent of her unprepossessingness. The girl wasn’t just plain—she was ugly. Unkind it might be, but there was no other word for her appearance. She had a square face, eyes that were marred by unsightly thick brows, and a sour expression. Stefano’s genes had definitely passed her by.

‘I am Allesandro di Vincenzo,’ he informed her, his Italian accent becoming pronounced as he said his own name. ‘And I am here on behalf of Signor Viale.’

The announcement of his own name had done nothing to her blank expression, but when he said the name of her grandfather something happened to it. If he had thought she’d looked hostile before, it was as nothing to the grim, hard look that seized her expression now.

‘You know of him?’ Allesandro’s eyebrows rose inquisitorially.

‘I know the name Viale all right,’ came the terse reply. ‘Why are you here?’ she again demanded.

Allesandro had no idea how much the girl knew about her background, so he continued. ‘Signor Viale has only just learnt of your existence,’ he informed her reprovingly.

For a moment emotion worked in the girl’s face. Then she gave vent to it.

‘That’s a lie!’ she said venomously. ‘My father’s always known about me!’

Allesandro’s brows drew together forbiddingly. ‘I am not referring to your father. I am speaking of your grandfather. Your existence has only just come to light to him.’

There was no change in her expression.

‘Well, bully for him! And if that’s all you’ve come to tell me, then you can be on your way!’

Allesandro felt his features stiffen.

‘On the contrary. I am here to inform you that your grandfather, Tomaso Viale, wishes you to come to Italy.’

Now her expression changed.

‘Wishes me to come to Italy?’ she echoed. ‘Is he mad?’

Allesandro’s mouth thinned and he tamped down his rising temper at the girl’s attitude.

‘Miss Stowe, your grandfather is an old, frail man. The death of his son has hit him hard, and he—’

There was a rough gasp from the girl.

‘My father is dead?’ Her voice was blank with shock. For a moment Allesandro felt he had been too blunt, but the girl was so aggressive he didn’t care. ‘Stefano was killed in a power-boat crash last summer,’ he said matter-of-factly.

‘Last summer...’ The echo of his words trailed from her. ‘He’s been dead all that time...’

Something seemed to shift in her eyes. Then, abruptly, the same resentful expression resumed.

‘You’ve had a wasted journey, Signor di Vincenzo. So you might as well leave now.’

‘That is not possible.’ Allesandro had not raised his voice in any way, but there was an implacable note in it. ‘Your grandfather wishes me to escort you to Italy.’

‘I’m not going.’ The flash came again in the unlovely eyes. ‘My father treated my mother unforgivably. I want nothing to do with his family!’

She had spoken with a low, grim vehemence that was at one with her unappealing appearance. It irritated Allesandro. He had no wish to be here, none whatsoever, and now, for his pains, this fright of a girl was trying to send him off with a flea in his ear.

He sat back in the chair. It was time to cut to the chase.

‘Perhaps you do not realise,’ he said, and his dark eyes rested unreadably on his target, ‘that your grandfather is a very wealthy man. One of the richest in Italy. It would be, Miss Stowe, to your clear material advantage to accede to his wishes.’

For answer she leant forward slightly, her hands touching the top of the table across from him.

‘I hope he chokes on his wealth!’ she bit out. ‘Just go! Right now! Tell him, since you’re his messenger boy, that so far as I’m concerned I have no grandfather! Just like his son had no daughter!’

Anger seared in Allesandro’s face.

‘Tomaso was not responsible for your father’s refusal to acknowledge you!’

‘Well, he clearly did a lousy job of bringing up his son! That was something he did have responsibility for, and he failed miserably! His son was despicable—so why should I have the slightest time for a man who brought up his son to be like that?’

Allesandro got to his feet. The sudden movement made the chair legs scrape on the flagstoned floor.

‘Basta!’ More Italian broke from him, sounding vehement. Then he cut back to English. ‘It is as well that you are refusing to visit your grandfather. You would be a great disappointment to him. As it is,’ he said cuttingly, ‘I am now facing the task of telling an old, sick man, mourning the tragic death of his only son, that his last remaining relative on earth is an ill-mannered, inconsiderate, self-righteous female prepared to condemn him sight unseen. I’ll take my leave of you.’

Without another word he strode out of the room, back down the corridor to the front door. She heard the front door thump shut, and then the sound of an engine starting, of a car moving off, soon dying away.

She was, she realised, shaking very slightly.

Aftershock, she thought. Out of nowhere, for the first time in her life, contact had been made by her father’s family in Italy. All her life his name had been excoriated, all mention of him—and they had been few and far between—prefixed by condemnation and unforgiving hostility. She had grown up from infancy with her mother dead, and her grandparents making it extremely plain to her just how despicable her father had been.

But now he’s dead...

A stab of pain went through her again. She had never expected—let alone wanted—to see him, or meet him, or know anything more about him. Yet to have been told so bluntly that he was dead had still been a shock. For a second so brief it was extinguished almost as soon as it occurred, a sense of grief went through her.

My father is dead. I never knew him, and now I never will...

Then she rallied. She knew enough about him to know that he would not have been worth knowing.

He rejected you. Rejected you so entirely that he completely and absolutely ignored your existence. He didn't give a damn about you...

He was nothing but a spoilt, self-indulgent playboy, who used women like playthings. Getting away with it because he was rich and handsome.

Like the man who was sent here.

Unwillingly, her eyes flicked to where he had been sitting, and her expression soured even more. Then she straightened her shoulders. There was work to be done, and she had better get on with it. Grim-faced, she plodded back out into the yard, and set off to gather another load of kindling in the rain.

Allesandro sank into the soft chintz-covered armchair with a sense of relief and looked around the warm, elegant drawing room of the Lidford House Hotel, which his PA had booked for an overnight stay before flying back to Rome. Now this was the way a country house in England should be—not like Laura Stowe's decaying ruin.

He took a sip of martini, savouring its dry tang as if it were washing a bad taste out of his mouth. Dio, but the girl was a termagant! Without a redeeming feature—in appearance or personality—to her name. Though he had resented Tomaso's manipulation of him, now he could only pity the man for his granddaughter. He wouldn't wish her on anyone! Allesandro's face shadowed momentarily. Tomaso's disappointment would be acute. It did not take much to realise that what he had been hoping for was not just comfort in his bereavement but also, eventually, a hope of his own progeny.

Well, he could whistle for a husband for the girl—that much was plain. As plain as she herself was.

He took another sip of his martini, enjoying the warmth from the roaring fire in front of him.

In other circumstances he would have pitied the girl for her complete lack of looks. But her manners and personality had been so abrasive, so unpleasant, that they put her beyond pity.

Impatiently he reached for the leatherbound menu to decide what to have for dinner. Tomaso's unlovely granddaughter was no longer his concern. He had done what Tomaso had asked, and if she were refusing to come to Italy, so be it.

It was not his problem.

Except when Allesandro returned to Italy, he discovered that Tomaso did not see it that way.

'He's done what?' Two days later, Allesandro's voice was rigid with disbelief.

But the question was rhetorical. The answer to it was in front of his eyes, in the tersely worded memo that his PA had silently handed him. Signed by the chairman of Viale-Vincenzo, informing him that his services as chief executive would no longer be required.

A rage such as he had never known permeated through Allesandro. He might still be a major shareholder in Viale-Vincenzo, but now he would no longer even have day-to-day control of the company, let alone the long-term control that the chairmanship would have given him. He knew exactly what was behind this. Tomaso had not accepted Laura Stowe's refusal to visit him. Allesandro had balked at spelling out just how hostile the girl had been to him. Now he wished he'd been less sensitive of Tomaso's feelings.

'Get me Tomaso on the phone,' he ordered savagely. 'Now!'

CHAPTER TWO

LAURA picked up the post that had fallen through the letterbox, her expression bleak. Yesterday's post had brought grim news. A final reminder from the taxman warned her that late payment would incur interest charges, and a letter from the auction house had valued the remaining antiques at considerably less than the sum the taxman required.

Despair and fear were gnawing at her. Day by day she was edging closer to the bleak prospect of having to sell Wharton. Her heart clawed at the thought.

I can't sell! I just can't! There has to be something—something I can do to keep it going!

If she could just pay the taxman, she would have a chance. She could raise a mortgage on the property and then use the money to convert the house into a holiday let, as planned. The lettings would then pay the mortgage and maintenance costs. But if she couldn't pay the tax...

Desperation knifed through her again.

As she continued to consider her bleak future, her hands stilled suddenly on one of the letters. It was a thick white envelope, and the stamp was Italian. Grimly she ripped it open. Inside were three things: a letter, an airline ticket...

And a cheque.

A cheque drawn on Viale-Vincenzo. In a sum that brought a rasp to her throat.

Slowly she looked at the letter, written on company paper. It was not informative, merely drew her attention to the enclosed cheque and ticket. As she flicked open the ticket she saw it was from Heathrow to Rome, and was dated for a week's time. It was also executive class. Attached to the back of the letter was a second page of closely printed Italian that she could not understand. Obviously this document must explain that the cheque was a gift in return for her visiting her grandfather in Italy.

Carefully, Laura replaced everything inside the envelope, and went to sit down at the kitchen table. She stared at the envelope in front of her, so different from yesterday's communication from the Inland Revenue and the auctioneer.

Suddenly temptation, like an overpowering wave, swept through her.

I'll pay the cheque back—every last penny, with interest!—once I've got the mortgage through. But the taxman won't wait—I've got to settle that first, in any way I can!

But not this way, she riposted mentally. She couldn't touch a penny of Viale money! Her grandfather would turn in his grave if she did—especially after the way Stefano Viale had treated his daughter..

But surely the Viale family owed him, too?

They owe you—and your mother, and your grandparents—for all the years of struggle, because of what your father did. They owe you...

Not a penny in child maintenance had her mother received. It had been Laura's grandparents who had kept her and her mother, who had brought her up, paid for her education and keep, shod and housed her. Stefano Viale—whose father, according to the handsome lordly gofer who had told her, was one of the richest men in Italy—had not parted with a penny of his money.

The cheque's just back-payment. That's all!

But if she did take the cheque, she would have to do what it was bribing her to do. Her stomach hollowed. She would have to go to Italy and face her father's family.

Her face hardened. She had to save Wharton. It was her home, her haven! She had always lived here, helping to take the burden of its upkeep off her increasingly frail grandparents. She couldn't lose it now! She just couldn't! She stared blankly at the cheque in her hand, stomach churning.

I'm going to have to do it. I'm going to have to go to Italy. I don't want to—I don't want to so badly that it hurts. But if I want that money—money I need to help save Wharton—then I'm going to have to do it.

Laura stared out of the porthole over the fleecy white clouds, her expression tight. With every atom of her body she wished to heaven she was not here. But it was too late now. She was on her way, and there was nothing she could do about it.

‘Champagne?’ The flight attendant, a tray of foaming glasses in her hand, was smiling down at her, as if she didn’t look totally out of place in an executive class seat.

‘Thank you,’ said Laura awkwardly, taking a glass. Well, why not? she thought defiantly. After all, she had something to drink to.

She lifted her glass a fraction.

‘To Wharton,’ she whispered. ‘To my home. And damn my father’s family!’

A man was holding up a sign with her name on it as she walked out into the arrivals section at Fiumicino airport. Landing in Rome had been strange. She had seldom been abroad. There had been a school trip to Brussels, and her grandparents had once taken her to the Netherlands. But Italy, of course, had been out for obvious reasons.

And she didn’t want to be here now. Resentment, resistance, and a horrible churning emotion she could not name sat heavily on her as she clumped after the man holding the sign, who was now carrying her single piece of luggage. Outdoors, the difference in temperature from still-wintery Devon struck her. It was not warm, but it was definitely mild. Thin sunshine brightened the air, but it could not brighten her mood. The ordeal ahead of her suddenly seemed very real. She clenched her jaw and climbed into the back of the smart black saloon that had been sent for her.

It was only as she sank into the deep, soft leather of her seat that she realised she was not alone in the car.

Allesandro di Vincenzo sat beside her. His dark eyes surveyed her critically.

‘So,’ he said, ‘you finally came. I thought the fat cheque I paid you might change your mind.’

His voice was caustic, as was the look he gave her.

The intervening time since his rain-sodden descent on Laura Stowe had not improved her looks, observed Allesandro critically. She looked every bit as much of a fright now as she had then. Oh, she’d clearly made some degree of effort to look less bedraggled than before, but to hopeless effect. Although she was no longer wearing those unspeakable corduroy trousers and that thick unravelled jumper, her skirt was ill-fitting, clearly cheap, and her blouse bagged around her bust and waist. She wore thick stockings and heavy-soled flat shoes. Her hair was unkempt, completely unstyled, and still tied back with an elasticated band in a clump at the back of her neck. Her eyebrows still beetled across her brow, and she wore no make-up whatsoever. As his gaze narrowed, he knew why. Because it wouldn’t do anything for her.

Nothing could—that much was obvious.

His mouth tightened. Tomaso was welcome to her. After this second round of even more base manipulation, Allesandro’s sympathy for Tomaso was at rock-bottom—even allowing for the old man’s emotional state. He would deliver the girl and get back to his life—running Viale-Vincenzo, at least as CEO again, even though Tomaso was still holding out on the chairmanship. If the old man reneged on that again, now that he’d actually delivered the damn girl to him...He snapped his mind away and opened his laptop, immediately burying himself in work and ignoring the other passenger in the car.

Laura spent the journey staring out of the window. They seemed to be heading deep into the Italian countryside, rather than heading into Rome. But wherever her grandfather was, she didn’t want to meet him.

She also didn’t want to be in a car with Allesandro di Vincenzo. It had been an unpleasant surprise to see him again. A discomforting one. She’d always done her best in life to avoid the company of men, removing herself before they did. A man who was as ridiculously good-looking as Allesandro di Vincenzo, with all his expensive glamour and effortless sex appeal, simply made her

even more acutely uncomfortable. Even without all the business about her father and his family, it was totally obvious that a man like that would endure her company only under duress.

A shuttered look showed in her face. She'd read somewhere that beautiful women and handsome men tended to be nicer than those not so beautiful or handsome. The reason, the article had explained, was that the beautiful people had always been feted and welcomed and admired, and so naturally they found the world a good place to live in. Plain people, like herself, were far less sure of a welcome by others. It made them awkward and self-conscious, uncertain.

Well, that was true of her, she thought, staring up through the windscreen. She'd felt an outsider all her life, thanks mainly to the circumstances of her birth. But then adolescence had arrived, bringing home to her the tough truth about her appearance, and that sense of being an outsider—shut out from the normal activities of her age group—had been exacerbated a thousand times.

Laura had finally realised that she had two choices in life. Either to be bitter about being so unattractive, or to get over it and move on. There were other things in life that were worthwhile, and if she just totally ignored her own appearance then she wouldn't be bothered by it.

And now she refused to be troubled by it. She wore clothes she could afford, which were serviceable and comfortable. She didn't bother about her hair—never spending money getting it cut, just tying it back out of the way. And as for make-up, she'd save her money for something more useful. Like groceries and bills.

And what did she care about a man like Allesandro di Vincenzo, as alien to her as if he'd come from another planet, looking at her with disdain? It was a lot easier when he was doing what he was doing now—completely ignoring her. Immersed in his laptop, he tapped away at the keyboard.

He must, she realised, be a key part of Viale-Vincenzo. He was clearly rich, and there was an aura of command about him even though he must only be in his early thirties, she surmised.

She gave a private sour smile as she gazed out of the window, then deliberately forced her mind away from the man in the car. Instead, she looked at the passing countryside as the car sped smoothly along the autostrada.

This was Italy—the cypresses, the olive groves, the fields and the hills, the vineyards and the red-tiled houses. All bathed in sunlight.

This is my country, as much as England is.

Something stirred inside her, but she crushed it down. She might be half-Italian, but it was by accident only, not intent. Her upbringing was English—all English. This was an alien place. She did not belong here. It meant nothing to her. Nothing at all.

Deliberately, she started to run through all the repairs that needed doing at Wharton. That was the only place that meant anything to her.

Not anything here.

Laura got out of the car and looked around her. Involuntarily, her eyes widened. The house in front of her was huge. A grand, aristocratic villa, no less, made of cream-coloured stone. Sash windows marched along the frontage, winking in the sunlight and on the other side of the gravelled drive on which the car had drawn up formal gardens stretched away down a gentle slope. Even at this time of year she could see the grounds were perfectly manicured.

Tension knotted inside her like a ball of steel wool.

She was here, in Italy. Inside this vast house was her only living relative. The father of the man who had fathered her. Father of the man who had destroyed her mother with his callousness and cruelty, and who had refused to acknowledge his own daughter's existence.

She wanted to run. Bolt. Get away as fast and as far as she could. She wanted to go home, be home—the only home she had ever known, the only home she wanted. She wanted nothing, nothing of what was here.

She stared about her. That strange pang came again, very deep within. If the man who had fathered her hadn't been the complete bastard that he had, she might have known this place. Might have been brought here for holidays. Might have run laughing through the gardens as a child. Her mother might have been here too—alive and happy with the man she loved...

But Stefano Viale had not been interested in love, or marriage, or his own daughter. He had made that very, very plain.

Inside her head, she heard again her grandmother's stricken voice.

'He never wrote, not once. Never answered any of your mother's letters. She was heartbroken—just heartbroken. Not a single letter, not a single kind word to her. He'd taken her innocence, used her and thrown her away!'

Laura's expression hardened. That had been the reality she had grown up with.

Father? She didn't have one. She never had.

And she didn't have a grandfather either. Whatever the man waiting for her inside wanted to call himself.

'This way.'

The terse, impersonal tones of Allesandro di Vincenzo interrupted her baleful thoughts. She was being directed indoors, and with an increasing sense of oppression she walked inside into a vast marble-floored entrance hall.

Allesandro strode past her, towards a pair of double doors beyond. He threw them open and walked in. Tomaso was there, at his desk by the window. He looked up immediately. There was a taut expression on his face. Tense. Expectant.

Suddenly, for all that the old man had manipulated him shamelessly, Allesandro felt he could not do this to him. He should go in first, warn the old man what he was about to get by way of a granddaughter. Then he crushed his compunction. Tomaso was playing hardball—deliberately using Allesandro's desire for control of Viale-Vincenzo in order to make him do what he wanted. And if what he wanted was his deeply unpleasant granddaughter, he could have her.

Behind him Allesandro could hear the heavy plod of unfeminine feet shod in flat clumpy shoes that no Italian woman this side of a lunatic asylum would even have possessed, let alone worn.

The old man was getting to his feet.

'Tomaso—your granddaughter,' announced Allesandro, his voice studiously expressionless. 'Laura Stowe.'

But Tomaso was not looking at him. He was staring past the younger man to the female figure that had walked in behind him. Allesandro watched his face as the old man's expression changed.

It became bland, unreadable.

'Laura—' said Tomaso, and held his hand towards her.

The girl was standing there, ignoring the hand that stretched out to her. Her face was shuttered, the way it had been the entire journey. The lack of expression made the girl look like a pudding—one of those stodgy English ones, with suet in them.

'I am your grandfather,' said Tomaso. The face might be bland, Allesandro thought, eyes narrowing minutely, but the voice was not. It was audibly suppressing emotion.

Something flickered angrily in the girl's face.

'My grandfather is dead. You are merely the father of the man who ruined my mother's life.'

The aggression in her tone was unequivocal. For a moment Allesandro saw new emotion in Tomaso's face. Shock. Naked and raw.

The girl held her pitiless gaze.

'The only reason I'm here,' she told him, 'is because that man—' she nodded curtly in Allesandro's direction, and he felt a spurt of vicious anger both at her manner, and at what he knew was coming next '—bribed me to come.'

'He bribed you?' The old man's voice was a disbelieving echo.

'Yes.' Allesandro watched, aghast, as the girl spoke bluntly. 'I don't want anything to do with you, or anyone connected with the man who treated my mother so unforgivably! I can't imagine why you thought I would have the slightest desire or interest in meeting you—any more than the man who fathered me had the slightest desire or interest in my existence, or in what he'd done to my mother!' A sharp, tight breath made her pause, and then she went on. 'I'm sorry your son is dead—but it's nothing to do with me. Nothing. Because your son wasn't anything to do with me. He made that totally clear even before I was born!'

Shock edged Tomaso's face. 'This is not how I—This is not—' He faltered. He looked across at the girl, half turned away. 'I thought—I thought you would be glad—glad that I had sought you out...'

His face greyed, and then suddenly his hand was clutching at his heart. Allesandro started forward, catching him as he fell.

The next hour was endless. Allesandro had immediately summoned an ambulance, and Tomaso had been rushed to hospital. To Allesandro's relief he was soon pronounced out of danger, even though he was being kept in overnight for monitoring.

Whatever kind of seizure Tomaso had had, Allesandro knew only one thing. That harpy, with her venomous tirade, had been responsible. His eyes darkened now, as he glared at the girl sitting stony-faced in the car taking them back to Tomaso's villa. Her hands were clenched in her lap. She'd sat just like that in the hospital lobby while Allesandro had accompanied Tomaso into the ward.

'Is he going to be all right?' she asked suddenly.

'You care?' Allesandro derided.

'I told you—I'm sorry his son is dead, and I'm sorry he collapsed. I wouldn't want him to die. I wouldn't want anyone to die.' Her voice was terse and jerky.

'Big of you,' he replied. 'But if you really want to be big, you'd better do what he wants and stay at the villa until he's well enough to see you. God knows why he should want to, but he said he did before I left him.'

He got no answer from her, only a shoulder turning away from him, maximising the distance between them. The movement irritated him. If there was a female in the world less likely to engage his interest, she was beyond imagining.

CHAPTER THREE

LAURA sat on the bed in the bedroom she'd been shown to by one of the household staff, and stared out of the window. The view was beautiful. Formal Italianate gardens, just like in a guidebook, and then a vista of olive groves, narrow dark cypresses and rolling hills.

She turned away. She didn't want to see it. Didn't want to be here. Didn't want to be in Italy, in her grandfather's villa—

He's not your grandfather—don't think of him that way!

Genes didn't make you family. She had half her father's genes, but that didn't make her his daughter. It certainly hadn't in his eyes, anyway.

She lay back on the bed. She was tired. She'd had to catch an early bus to Exeter, then the coach to Heathrow, then the flight here. Her eyelids grew heavy...

She must have nodded off, because the next thing she knew there was a maid in the room, informing her that dinner was served. Reluctantly Laura went downstairs, prudently taking a book with her. She'd have rather eaten in her room, but didn't want to be a nuisance.

A manservant waiting at the foot of the sweeping stairs conducted her to a room opening off the hall. She walked in, and stopped dead.

Allesandro di Vincenzo was there, already seated at the table. As she clomped in he got to his feet. There was a sheaf of papers beside his place, and he'd obviously been reading them.

'I thought you'd gone,' she blurted, before she could stop herself.

'Alas, no,' came his reply. It was smooth, but terse. And very unfriendly. 'Much though I would have preferred to return to Rome, I would not dream of abandoning a hospitalised Tomaso to nothing more than your loving presence.'

Laura felt colour mottle her cheeks.

'How is he?' she asked, as she went and took the only other place laid at the vast table—directly opposite Allesandro. It made him seem closer than she wanted him to be. But then she didn't want him anywhere near her at all anyway.

The feeling was doubtless mutual, she realised, intercepting a black look from him as she pulled in her chair.

'His condition is stable,' he said. 'As if you care.'

Her colour mounted. 'I don't want him to die—I told you that.'

'And as I told you—that's big of you,' Allesandro returned. He frowned. 'Do you have nothing better to wear for dinner?' he demanded, his eyes flicking dismissively over her clothes.

'No,' said Laura. If she'd known he was going to be here she'd have insisted on a meal in her room. He was the last person she wanted to spend time with. She opened her book and started to read. To her relief, her unwelcome dining partner returned his attention to his papers.

The meal that followed was ludicrously formal, to Laura's mind. There were too many courses, and it went on for ages. The only compensation—for the company was even worse than the formality and the length of the meal—was the food, which was incredibly delicious. As she scraped up the last of the delicious sauce accompanying the beautifully cooked lamb, Laura realised she was under surveillance.

'Do you always eat so much?'

Laura stared blankly. She liked food. She always had. Comfort eating, the magazine articles called it, but she didn't care. Her lifestyle was not sedentary, and with all the sheer physical slog of looking after Wharton, plus the long, solitary walks she loved to take through the countryside, she had a good appetite. 'Sturdy' her grandmother had always called her. Probably she would run to fat when she was middle aged—as her grandmother had.

Now, she swallowed the last mouthful, put her cutlery back on the plate, and said baldly, 'Yes.'

Then she went on reading.

Allesandro glowered from his seat across the table. None of the women he knew could put food away like that. Even though it was impossible to see her figure in those shapeless clothes, if she were eating like that she could hardly be anything but overweight. He went back to his report on market conditions in South America. Laura Stowe could be the size of an elephant for all he cared.

The following day the hospital phoned to say that Tomaso was up to receiving visitors. Relieved, Allesandro marshalled Laura into the waiting car. As she sat, her hands twisting uneasily in her lap, he suddenly asked, 'What is wrong with your hands?'

She glanced down. 'Nothing. Why?'

He hadn't noticed them before. But then, it was hard to when there was the rest of her unappealing appearance to attempt to ignore.

'They are covered in scratches,' he said.

She shrugged. 'They're healing. I was clearing some brambles in the garden the day before I came out here.' She turned her hands over. The palms were just as scratched, plus rough and callused.

'What do you do to yourself?' he demanded.

She looked at him expressionlessly. 'I work. Wharton doesn't look after itself.'

His face tightened. 'You have staff, surely?'

She rolled her eyes. 'Oh, yes—four housemaids and just as many gardeners!'

He took a breath. 'Well, perhaps now, with the money I paid you, you can afford to hire some help.'

'I doubt the Inland Revenue will see it that way,' she said dryly.

'Como?' Allesandro's eyebrows drew together.

'Your cheque paid off the first tranche of death duties I owe. That's why I accepted it. I'd have torn it to shreds otherwise. But...' she shrugged, looking at him defiantly '...I'm going to fight tooth and nail to keep Wharton. And you'll get your money back, Signor di Vincenzo. I assure you. When I'm finally earning money from holiday lets at Wharton—'

'You think someone will pay to stay there?' Allesandro interjected incredulously. 'It's a rain-sodden, decaying wreck!'

Her chin lifted. 'I'll renovate it,' she said. 'I won't sell up unless I'm absolutely forced to!'

Allesandro was looking at her strangely.

'You are attached to the place?' He made it sound as though she enjoyed eating rotten meat.

'It's my home,' she said tightly.

He gestured with his hand around him. 'But you have a new home here, for the asking,' he said.

Her expression tightened even more.

'And also,' he went on, with the same strange look in his face, 'you now need have no more money worries. Your grandfather will lavish on you whatever you want.'

A hard light entered her eyes. 'What a pity the man he fathered didn't think to lavish the one thing on his daughter that she actually would have valued—his acknowledgement of her existence!'

Allesandro's expression changed. 'Stefano was a—a law unto himself. He did what he wanted. He was—'

'A bastard,' said Laura. 'Like me.'

Her jaw was set. She looked belligerent.

Cussed. Sullen. Ill-tempered.

The familiar adjectives scrolled in Allesandro's mind. Then another one entered. Where it had come from, he had no idea. But suddenly it was there all the same.

Bleak, with an empty look in her eyes.

He thrust it aside. Laura Stowe wasn't someone he wanted to feel sorry for.

At the hospital his instructions were terse.

‘Say anything to upset Tomaso and you will be sorry, I promise you.’

Laura only looked away. The last time she’d been in a hospital ward it had been to see her grandfather, the day he had finally died of heart failure, mere months after her grandmother’s death. As she followed Allesandro into the intensive care room, and saw the solitary figure surrounded by instruments and electronics, his body wired up to them and a drip in his arm, she swallowed hard.

The figure in the bed was so frail. As frail as her grandfather had been.

But this is my grandfather. The thought pierced her suddenly.

She shook her head. No—no, it wasn’t! She wouldn’t let him be. She wouldn’t let anything of this touch her. She would block it out of her mind, her life, her existence.

This is nothing to do with me! Nothing!

But as she walked in, the head lying on the white pillow turned towards her.

‘Laura—’

The voice was thin, but it had lifted on her name.

Silently, with clear effort, a frail hand was held out to her.

‘You came,’ he said. Dark eyes rested on her. In them Laura thought she saw something she had not expected to see.

Gratitude.

She walked forward. She didn’t take the hand, and Tomaso let it fall back on the bed. A little of the light went out of his eyes. It made Laura feel bad, but she did not want to touch him.

‘How—how are you?’ she said, her voice stiff and awkward.

There was a flicker in the dark eyes. ‘Better for seeing you. Thank you—thank you for staying. For allowing me—’

He took a breath. It sounded difficult and rasping.

‘Please, won’t you sit down?’

Heavily, she sank down into the chair by the bed. Tomaso’s gaze went past her to the figure standing in the doorway.

‘I’m staying,’ said Allesandro in Italian. ‘I don’t want her upsetting you.’

Tomaso’s expression changed. ‘I think I will be safe enough. Thank you for bringing her to me, Allesandro, but now—’

Reluctantly, Allesandro left. The heart monitor would give the alarm if the crash team were to be needed precipitately. Moodily, he went on pacing up and down the corridor.

Inside the intensive care room, Tomaso’s gaze returned to Laura. She bit her lip. Tension wracked her body. Her throat was as tight as a drum.

‘Laura—my child. I have something I must say to you. I ask you, most humbly, to allow me to say it.’ The rasp in his voice came again. ‘Then, if you still wish, leave and return to England. With my blessing. Should you want it,’ he added, and there was a wry ruefulness in his voice.

He paused a moment, as if he were gathering strength. From the corner of her eye Laura could see the oscilloscope pulse to the beating of his heart. Her own heart seemed to be thudding heavily inside her.

She wanted to go. Wanted to bolt, run, get out of here. March away on heavy, hard feet. March all the way back to England. To Wharton. Shut herself in the house and never come out. Never. But she couldn’t. She couldn’t bring herself to do it. Something kept her glued to the chair. It was probably tension. Nerves. What else could it be?

She felt Tomaso’s gaze on her—as if, she realised, he was steeling himself to say something more. As if he was wary of her reaction. Anxious, even. Then, with that weak rasp still in his voice, he spoke. His eyes rested on her, and his head turned towards her.

'Lying here has given me time to think. To remember. And I have thought much and remembered much. I have remembered Stefano. Not as I last saw him—not as he was in those last years of his life—but long ago. When he was your age. Younger. Even younger.'

He took a breath, then went on. 'But I don't have very many memories of him. Nor as a boy. You see...' his eyes wavered a moment '...I did not spend a great deal of time with him. I was busy making money. Stefano I left to his mother. She doted on him.' His gaze wavered again. 'I was too busy to spend much time with her, either. So she lavished on him all the devotion and attention that I was too busy to accept from her. Stefano was always wild, obsessed with his power boats.'

He was silent a moment, whether to gather his strength or to dwell on his dead son Laura didn't know. She only knew that she was stretched tight, like a pulled wire. She wanted Tomaso not to have spoken. Not to have drawn an image of a boy, a young man, half-neglected, half-spoilt, taking what he wanted and ignoring the consequences.

And that included my mother! He took her and dumped her! And be damned to the consequences—including getting her pregnant!

Anger, familiar like an old hair shirt, rubbed against her.

Tomaso was speaking again. His voice had changed now.

'A man wishes to be proud of his son. But how can I be proud that my son seduced and abandoned the mother of his child? Ignored her existence—and yours.' The eyes rested on her, and she could see pain in them. And remorse.

'It was crass of me. Stupid, insensitive—and selfish—of me to think you could have any wish to know your father's family,' he said heavily. 'All your life you have lived knowing what my son did to your mother, and to you. And for me to think that in an instant everything could be forgiven and forgotten was stupid of me in the extreme. There is anger in you—a lifetime of anger—and I cannot ignore that. I must not.'

He took another breath. His eyes hung on hers.

'Go home, if you wish. I have no right to you at all. None. I have been foolish and greedy. I wanted to do well by you, but I cannot wash away the past. I cannot undo what Stefano did to you, to your mother, and to her parents. I have not been a good father, Laura. I wished to make up for that by being a good grandfather to you, but...'

His voice trailed off.

Laura went on sitting there. She could hear small sounds—the click of an electrical unit, the sound of a bird, a car, some muffled voices in the corridor outside.

It was very quiet.

Then, suddenly, it burst from her.

'How could he do it? How? How could he just ignore her like that? It wasn't as if he even wrote back to say he didn't believe the baby was his! He just totally ignored her! She wrote and wrote, and he never, ever got back in touch. She was just a nuisance! That's all she was to him! And so was I. He didn't even want to know.'

There was a horrible cracking noise in her throat.

'He didn't want me,' she said.

Two spots of colour were burning in her cheeks. They did not flatter her. She got to her feet. It was an abrupt, jerky movement. She turned away, towards the door, taking a sharp, agonising breath. She took a step forward, not looking at the man who stood in the doorway. Not looking at anyone or anything.

'But I want you, Laura.'

Her head whipped round.

Tomaso had reached out his hand again.

'I want you,' he said again. There was an impulse in his voice, an urgency. 'It is too late for Stefano, but I ask—I ask if it will not be too late for me. You are my only kin. All I have. Give me

a little, just a little of your time. I shall not ask for much. Only the chance, poor as it is, to pass a little time with you.'

His eyes were holding hers, as if they were cast upon a lifeline. Slowly, very slowly, not sure what she was doing, let alone why, or whether she should turn, and walk on heavy, rapid feet, as far away as possible, Laura reached out and touched the tips of his fingers held out towards her. Then she dropped her arm to her side.

'Thank you,' said Tomaso quietly.

Laura was silent on the way back to the villa, staring out of the car window. Allesandro let his gaze rest on her from time to time. She'd closed herself up, like a clam. But there was something different about her. Something...softer.

He frowned. Could that really be true? Surely not. It was an absurd word to use about Laura Stowe. She was as hard and as unyielding as granite, her manner as abrasive. Harsh and unlovely.

His eyes studied her as she stared out of the window, locked in on herself. Yes, it was there still, that change in her expression. Almost imperceptible, but there all the same.

And there was something else about her, he realised frowningly, trying to put his finger on what else had changed about her.

Then it came to him.

Somehow—he didn't know how—with that slightly, oh, so slightly softer expression—she didn't look quite so awful.

He shook the thought aside. It was nothing to do with him what she looked like—only whether she was going to make good on what she had said to Tomaso or not. He needed to know. If she were staying, then at last the way would be clear for Tomaso to make good on his promise to him and hand over the chairmanship.

'So,' he heard himself ask abruptly, 'what are you going to do now? Bolt back to England? Or give your grandfather some of your precious time?'

His voice sounded brusque in the confines of the car. Brusquer than he'd meant. Laura turned her head.

'I'll...' She swallowed. 'I'll stay for a bit. Till he's better. I suppose I don't have to go home right away.'

Any time would be too soon to go back to that rain-sodden dump, thought Allesandro, thinking unpleasurably about the wreck she lived in. What on earth did she want to keep it for? Anyway, if she made her peace with Tomaso, as she might just have done now, she wouldn't need it any more.

Just as Tomaso would not need the chairmanship of Viale-Vincenzo any more.

A spurt of impatience went through Allesandro. He wanted to be off, back to Rome. Away from all this. Preparing to take full control of the company.

Enjoying Delia Dellatore.

Deliberately, he let his thoughts conjure her image in his mind. Chic, fashionable, sensual.

His eyes flickered sideways one last time.

The contrast between the woman in his mind and the female sitting there like a sack of potatoes couldn't have been more different.

He looked away. She was nothing to do with him. And now he was done with her. The moment they were back at the villa he'd return to Rome. He slid out his mobile, phoning his PA to let her know his plans. Relief washed through him. He was getting out of here, prontissimo.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALLESANDRO must have left the villa at some point that afternoon, but Laura did not pay his departure any attention. Her mind was too full of other things.

What had she done? Emotion twisted inside her. She had dropped her guard against a man she had been determined to stonewall, to deny any place in her life. Her hands knotted against each other, fingers crushing.

What have I done? she thought again, agitated and unhappy, heart stormy.

But she knew. She knew in her heart of hearts what she had done. She had acknowledged Tomaso Viale as her grandfather.

And she would stay with him—just for a while. Until he was better. It wouldn't kill her to do that, would it?

When he was brought home the following day, carried in on a stretcher, she hurried out of the music room, where she had incarcerated herself, and felt again that strange pang go through her at the sight of his frail figure. As his eyes went to her, they lit at the sight of her.

'You didn't leave,' he said.

She shook her head. There was a thickness in her throat.

'No,' she managed to say. Then, 'How...how are you feeling?'

He gave a wry smile. 'The better for seeing you, my child.'

She gave an uncertain smile, and watched as he was borne aloft up the wide marble stairs.

He asked for her, later on in the day, and she went. He'd been installed in what seemed to her a palatial room, with a vast tester bed and ornate antique furniture. She personally found it very overdone, but it was obviously what he liked. She felt a strange sense of indulgence tug at her. Tomaso saw her smile to herself as she glanced around the room.

'You think it a little too much, no?' he said.

'It's the opposite of my grandfather—my...' She paused awkwardly. 'My other grandfather. He was Spartan in his tastes. He thought only foreigners went in for fancy décor.'

Tomaso looked ruefully humorous. 'Well, I am foreign, so that must account for it.' He patted the side of the huge bed he was propped up in, and without thinking Laura found herself crossing to sit on it. 'When I was a boy we were very poor. We lived in a bleak, post-war concrete apartment block in a grim suburb of Torino, with cheap utility furniture. I always promised myself the good things in life.'

He glanced around, and Laura could see the satisfaction in his face at all he had. And the pride, too.

'Did you really start from nothing?' she asked.

'Nothing but my nerve and my confidence,' he replied promptly.

He was looking better, Laura thought, his colour stronger, and he was no longer wired up, although a mobile heart monitor station stood beside the bed.

'I was determined to make money—a lot of money!—and I did!' he went on.

'My grandfather—my other one—' it was easier to say this time, she found '—never talked about money. It was one of those things that was never mentioned.'

'Ah,' said Tomaso shrewdly. 'That is always the way of those who were born to it. Never the way of those who have to make it themselves. Allesandro's father was the same—he thought profit a dirty word.' His voice edged slightly. 'But he enjoyed the money we made, all the same.'

'Why did he go into trade?' Laura asked, unconsciously curious to discover more about Allesandro's family background.

'He was broke. That was why,' Tomaso said bluntly. 'So he graciously consented to be my partner when I approached him to join forces. For me, he was very useful—he could open doors that

were closed to me with all his high-society friends, especially those in banking and finance. But he was never interested in business the way I was. Now, young Allesandro...' Tomaso's voice changed suddenly. 'He is very different.'

'He seems to work all the time,' Laura said. 'His nose is always buried in his laptop or in papers.'

'He wants my job. And the company to go with it.' Tomaso's voice was even blunter now. 'He is completely different from his father. He could see how his father had little real power in the company—did not want it, did not seek it!—but Allesandro always resented that. He felt it as a slight to his father. But he also acknowledged that his father was uninterested in running the company anyway. As was Stefano.'

There was a shadow suddenly in Tomaso's eyes, and Laura felt a stab of discomfort, of raw emotion, at the mention of the man who had fathered her.

Tomaso lifted a hand, as if to dispel the shadow. 'Had Stefano lived, Allesandro would have manoeuvred to do a deal with him—take over the company in exchange for buying him out. Let him go to all his beloved lethal powerboats. Stefano would have agreed. I have no illusions about that—as I told you, he was only interested in spending money, not increasing it. But whether I would have agreed...?' He shook his head. 'Perhaps I would. For what else was to happen to the company after my death? Of course, had Stefano married—'

His voice broke off. Laura felt emotion sting inside her again. Tomaso's eyes were focussed on her. Suddenly he looked neither frail, nor ill, nor even old.

'Make no mistake, my child. Had I the slightest knowledge of what had happened so many years ago, him leaving your mother pregnant with you, he would have married her the next day. I would have seen to it.'

Laura bit her lip. She swallowed.

'Probably that's why he made sure you never found out,' she said in a low, strained voice. 'He obviously wasn't the marrying kind—not if he never married at all.'

Tomaso's voice edged again. 'No, he was a philanderer—nothing more. A playboy. He lived a wild, self-indulgent bachelor life. Many times I made it clear I expected him to marry and produce an heir for me—but he never did. Not even his mother could persuade him—not that she ever thought any woman good enough for him!'

He fell silent, his eyes shifting away from Laura.

They weren't happy, she found herself thinking. For all their money, they weren't happy. None of them.

His eyes came back to Laura. He looked suddenly tired, weary and old.

She stood up. 'I've tired you,' she said awkwardly. 'Your nurse said five minutes and no more.'

An imperious hand gestured away such diktat.

'She fusses because she is paid to fuss,' he said. Abruptly, he shot at her, 'How much money did Allesandro give you to come here?' Dark, penetrating eyes bored into hers.

The question had come out of nowhere, and Laura felt her face mottle. Defensively, she said, 'Enough to persuade me, evidently!'

Sharp humour glinted in Tomaso's eyes.

'Quite right—reveal nothing that you need not,' he said. There was approval in his voice. 'However much it was, Allesandro will have considered it cheap. Too much is at stake for him. His back is against the wall, and he knows it.'

Laura frowned. Allesandro di Vincenzo did not seem like a man with his back against the wall. Not unless he lounged against it with an elegance that would make females swoon by the dozen!

Tomaso enlightened her. 'I told you—he wants my job. I am chairman of Viale-Vincenzo, and it galls him. Even as chief executive he can do nothing without my consent, which frustrates him. He wants to be in sole control, and he assumes that now Stefano is dead I am the only impediment

to his ambition. I set him a task, like a king in a knightly tale—his quest was to bring you to me. Now he is waiting for his reward.'

He was looking at her with a speculative expression, as if considering something. 'Tell me, Laura, do you play chess?'

'A little,' she answered.

'Good,' he said. 'We'll play after dinner.'

It was the strangest time for Laura. She felt unreal, as if the universe she had lived in for the past twenty-four years had shifted dimension. Or opened to another one.

The world of her father's family. Alien, strange. But now—day by day, little by little—increasingly less so.

It was a slow journey, and she took it slowly. Warily. Uncertainly. Awkwardly. But step by step it was a journey she made. With each passing day life in the villa, with Tomaso steadily gaining strength, was becoming steadily more familiar to her—was less traumatic.

At some point, she knew, she would need to go back to Wharton—but not quite yet. Tomaso was stronger, but he was still confined to his bed, still visibly weak—and still so grateful that she was there. His eyes would light every time she came to see him, and he would hold his hand out to her.

He asked her about Wharton, but she spoke only in general terms, not about the expenses she faced. She didn't want him offering to bankroll her. Sneering thoughts about back-payment for child maintenance were gone now—and anyway, she knew her maternal grandfather would never have accepted money from the Viales.

Her days passed lazily. There was an indoor swimming pool at the villa, and the extensive grounds were beautiful to walk around in, yet as the time passed, leisured and unhurried, eventually she grew more anxious to return to Wharton. The mortgage needed to be finalised and repairs scheduled, and Laura was eager to get stuck into all the work waiting for her.

She tackled her grandfather about the subject one afternoon, as they played chess in the library.

'I really do need to go home soon,' she said.

His eyes flickered. 'I had hoped you would come to see your place here with me as home, child,' he answered.

Dismay filled her. How could she say no—and yet how could she possibly say yes?

Tomaso saw her reaction and pressed on. 'Wait at least until Allesandro returns—he will be here for the weekend. He will have business to discuss with me of a nature very important to him.'

There was nothing she could say to that, either. She had no wish to see Allesandro di Vincenzo again, or to hear about his ambitions to run the company himself, but it seemed rude to say so to her grandfather.

'All right,' she conceded. 'But then I really must go.'

'Good, good,' said Tomaso. He reached for the chess set. 'Now, I will tell you what mistakes you made so that you can learn for the next game. You should never lose any game you play, Laura. Always play to win! I have done that all my life—and I have never lost. Not once! Whatever game I've played. And the reason is—in life as in chess—I plan ahead. Always I plan ahead—make the moves I need to make—and then I win!'

He smiled, and it seemed to Laura that it was a particularly satisfied smile. She found herself wondering why it should be—then her attention was recalled to her shortcomings at chess, and the thought slipped away from her.

Moodily, Allesandro helped himself to a flute of champagne from the tray of a circulating waiter and let his thoughts darken. His mind was not on the lunch party he was attending. It was on the fact he still was not chairman of Viale-Vincenzo. Tomaso still had not resigned. Resentment and anger burned in him. Tomaso was taking him for a ride—and it was one he did not appreciate.

Allesandro had thought his mood would improve when he returned to Rome. Not only would he be well out of range of both Tomaso and his repellent and graceless granddaughter, but he had also been looking forward to enjoying Delia's company again. However, when he had arrived at her apartment she had casually informed him that she was moving on.

'I'm off to the Grenadines,' she had cooed. 'Guido Salvatore's invited me to his yacht party there. I'm flying out tonight.'

Allesandro glowered into his glass as he took a large slug of the vintage champagne, hoping it would give him the buzz he needed to lighten his mood. On top of all the silence he was getting from Tomaso, he was also resenting another night of celibacy.

'Sandro, ciao—'

His thoughts interrupted, Allesandro acknowledged the greeting—but without pleasure. Luc Dinardi had wanted Delia Dellatore for himself, and would not miss the opportunity to offer false sympathy for her defection. He braced himself for the jibe.

But when it came, it was not about Delia's desertion.

Luc's eyes glinted with friendly malice. 'So tell me, Sandro—do I offer commiserations or congratulations? The press seem to think the latter, but then they're always hopelessly sentimental. The reality's usually different.'

Allesandro stared, frowning. What the hell was Luc talking about? The other man took a mouthful of his own champagne, his expression taunting.

'Perhaps it's a case of congratulations and commiserations. Congratulations on finally getting what you're after. Commiserations—' his tone changed to a humorous one '—on the way you've had to get it.' He clapped a hand on Allesandro's shoulder. 'So, when do we get to meet her?'

Allesandro's voice was blank, 'Meet who?'

Luc grinned. 'Oh, come on, Sandro—don't play coy. Your fiancée—Tomaso Viale's long-lost granddaughter.'

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