



A Deal
FOR THE DI SIONE
RING

MODERN™



JENNIFER HAYWARD

Jennifer Hayward

A Deal For The Di Sione Ring

Аннотация

‘Marry me, sell me the ring and I will fly you out of here tonight.’ Hotel magnate Nate Brunswick’s faith in marriage was destroyed by his father. But in searching for the ring that his beloved grandfather has asked him to retrieve, the illegitimate Di Sione who hates weddings finds himself inconveniently engaged! The alluring owner of the ring, Mina Mastraintino, can only pass it on once she’s married. Quick vows and an even quicker annulment should be easy... but the exquisite, impromptu wedding night gives them both far more than they planned! Book 7 of The Billionaire’s Legacy

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Book Seven of The Billionaire’s Legacy

“You are vulnerable, Mina. You are looking at me like I’m some knight who’s come to your rescue, when I am anything but. You have no idea what you are throwing out there right now.”

She swallowed hard. “I am vulnerable right now but I want to feel vulnerable. I want to want what I want. I want to figure out who I am. And I am under no illusions as to what this would be between us. I’ve just said I’m not looking for a commitment. Not now. Not for a long while.”

Nate was silent. so heard-stoppingly silent she could hear her heart pounding in her ears.

“Just to be clear,” he rasped finally, “you’re telling me you want us to go to bed together and to hell with the consequences?”

She bit the inside of her mouth. Hard.

“You keep baiting me, Nate. You won’t leave it alone, either. What do you want?”

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A Deal for the Di Sione Ring

Jennifer Hayward



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JENNIFER HAYWARD has been a fan of romance since filching her sister's novels to escape her teenage angst. Her career in journalism and PR, including years of working alongside powerful, charismatic CEOs and traveling the world, has provided perfect fodder for the fast-paced, sexy stories she likes to write, always with a touch of humor. A native of Canada's East Coast, Jennifer lives in Toronto with her Viking husband and young Viking-in-training.

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For Melody, who took me into the world of ultra-luxury hotels and taught me what a six-star property is, what a butler does, and why some day I must stay in one! You are one of the special people.

And for my sister, Susan, a brilliant psychologist, who helps me dig deep into the heads of my characters.

Thank you! Xx

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

THE WEALTH AND OPULENCE of Long Island's legendary Gold Coast was like a trip back in time to the old money, scandalous, glamorous tales immortalized in American fiction. High-society dynasties born of the Industrial Revolution had built these lavish mansions and castles one after another along this sweep of the ruggedly beautiful northern coast, with gardens rivaling European grandeur.

They had sought to outdo one another, these American scions, to glitter as the Gold Coast's preeminent jewel. But as with so many other symbols of that lavish time, little of the grandeur of those magnificent estates survived today, with only a few of the massive, character-filled mansions still left standing. Even legendary shipping magnate Giovanni Di Sione's sprawling villa, built in the late eighteen hundreds as a rambling summerhouse to entertain the scion's clients and financiers, had been extensively

renovated to stand as a shining symbol of modern architecture.

The ostentatious display of wealth, the almost tangible scent of old money in the air, brought with it familiar irony for Nate Brunswick as he turned his Jaguar down the rolling, winding stretch of road toward the Di Sione estate. He could buy the Gold Coast several times over with the wealth he'd amassed and add it to the vast global property empire he controlled and still never feel like he belonged.

It was a lesson he'd learned the hard way. That all the money in the world couldn't heal old wounds. That new money would always be just that in New York—the spoils of an interloper who didn't really belong. New blood might mix with blue blood, but it would never have the same status in the collective psyche of the elite.

It was a truth he would put right up there with the Ten Commandments: Thou shalt not aspire to join our realm. It has never been, nor will it ever be, yours.

He brought the Jag to a halt in front of his grandfather's villa with a defiant squeal of its wheels. The villa's imposing facade gleamed in the late-afternoon sun, the light setting off its graceful arches and multileveled roofline.

He sat for a moment, a heavy weight pressing down on his chest. Always this place inspired a wealth of emotion, all of it complex and decades in the making. But today he felt as if whatever higher power was up there in the sky orchestrating this chess game that was life had reached inside him and yanked out

his heart.

His grandfather was dying of leukemia. Nate had been traveling so much of late, overseeing his sprawling, global property empire, he had had little time for his mentor, who had been the only father figure he'd ever known. He'd stood there, shell-shocked, as his half sister Natalia had told him at her art exhibition that his grandfather's leukemia was back, and this time, a bone marrow transplant from Nate would not save him.

Apparently not even the all-powerful Giovanni could cheat death twice.

The swell of emotion he'd been fighting during the drive from Manhattan swept over him, threatened to wipe away the composure he had cultivated as a second skin. He blinked and pushed it away. He would not allow that expression of weakness. Not now and definitely not here.

He swung his long legs out of the car, wincing as his muscles protested the long drive in the low-slung machine. He had barely put his foot on the top step of the sweeping column of stairs that led to the villa's elegant entrance when Alma, the Di Sione family's longtime housekeeper, opened the door.

"Master Nate," Alma greeted him, ushering him in. "Signor Giovanni is enjoying the last rays of the sun on the back veranda. He's been anxiously awaiting your arrival."

A twinge of guilt stirred low in his gut. He should have made more time for his grandfather, but he had fallen into the trap of thinking Giovanni was invincible like everyone else.

A few pleasantries exchanged with Alma, he set off toward the back of the villa, his footsteps echoing on the gleaming marble floors. He'd first visited this house at eighteen, hunted down by his half brother Alex as the only genetic match for a bone marrow transplant that would save his grandfather's life—a man Nate had never met.

A vision of his six half siblings perched on the handmade wrought-iron and stone staircase filled his head. They had sat there, lined up like birds on a telephone wire, big eyes inquisitive as Alex had led Nate past them into the salon to meet an ailing Giovanni for the first time.

Orphaned, they had been taken in by his grandfather after Nate's father, Benito, and his wife, Anna, had been killed in an alcohol-and drug-fueled car crash. A tragedy to be sure but all Nate could remember was the isolation and bitterness his hardened, eighteen-year-old self had felt at the charmed life his half siblings had led while he and his mother had fought to survive.

The family he'd never been privy to as Benito Di Sione's illegitimate child.

Which was ancient history, Nate told himself as he stepped out onto the veranda with its incomparable views of the sparkling gray-blue sweep of Long Island Sound. He had obliterated that iteration of himself and replaced it with a success story that no one could ignore—not even the aristocrats who loved to snub him.

His grandfather sat in a wooden, high-backed chair, bathed in the dying light of the sun. He turned with that sixth sense of his as Nate approached, a slow smile spreading across his olive-skinned face.

“Nathaniel. I was beginning to think Manhattan had eaten you up whole.”

Nate walked around the chair and stood in front of the man who had come to mean so much to him. A lump formed in his throat at how small, how fragile, his once vital grandfather looked, even more wasted away than their last meeting. And now he knew why.

Giovanni stood and drew him into an embrace. The cancer, his treatments, had robbed his olive skin of its robust glow, turning it a sallow hue. His shoulders felt like skin and bone as Nate closed his fingers around them, his throat thickening with emotion. Despite the very mixed, complex feelings he held toward the Di Sione family, Giovanni had been the self-made, ultrasuccessful, honorable man Nate had modeled himself after in the wake of his father's failings. In those formative years, when his life could have gone either way with the anger consuming him, his grandfather had been the difference. Had shown him the man he could be.

He drew back, his gaze moving over his grandfather's ravaged face. “Is there nothing that can be done? Are the doctors sure another transplant won't help?”

Giovanni nodded and squeezed his shoulder. “They only did

the transplant the first time because of my name and health, you know that. It's my time, Nathaniel. I've had more of a life than many could ever dream of having. I'm at peace with it."

His grandfather sat down and waved him into a chair. Nate took the one opposite him, declining the offer of refreshments from a maid who appeared in the doorway. "I have plans to review when I get back to Manhattan."

Giovanni told the maid to bring Nate a beer. "You work too much," he admonished. "Life is for the living, Nathaniel. Who is going to keep you company the day you have made so many billions you can't hope to spend it all?"

He had already reached that point. For him work, success, was biological, elemental, spurred by a survival instinct that would never rest as long as there was a deal to be made, another building block to be put into place.

"You know I'm not the type to settle down."

"I wasn't talking about the lack of a permanent woman in your life," his grandfather came back wryly, "although that, too, could use some work. I'm talking about you being a workaholic. About you never getting off that jet of yours long enough to breathe fresh air, to register what season it is. You're so caught up in making money you're missing the true meaning of life."

Nate lifted a brow. "Which is?"

"Family. Roots." His grandfather frowned. "Your nomadic ways, your inability to put a stake in the ground, it won't fulfill you in the long run. I hope you will realize that before it's too

late.”

“I’m only thirty-five,” Nate pointed out. “And you are as much of a workaholic, Giovanni. It’s our dominant trait. We don’t choose it. It chooses us.”

“I seem to be gaining some perspective given my current situation.” His grandfather’s eyes darkened. “That discipline becomes our vice, Nathaniel, when taken to extreme. I failed your father and, by virtue of that, you, by spending every waking moment building Di Sione Shipping.”

Nate scowled. “He failed himself. He needed to own his vices but he never could.”

“There is truth in that.” Giovanni pinned his gaze on him. “I know you have your demons. I have them, too. Ones that have haunted me every day of my life. But for you, it’s not too late. You have your whole life ahead of you. You have brothers and sisters who care about you, who want to be closer to you, yet you push them away. You want nothing to do with them.”

His jaw hardened. “I flew in for Natalia’s art exhibition.”

“Because you have a soft spot for her.” His grandfather shook his head. “Family should be the rock in your life. What sustains you when the storms of life take over.”

The suspicious glitter in his grandfather’s eyes, the bittersweet note in his voice, made Nate wonder, not for the first time, about the secrets Giovanni had kept from his grandchildren. Why he had left Italy and come to America with only the clothes on his back, never to have contact with his family again.

“We’ve had this discussion,” he told his grandfather, his response coming out rougher than he’d intended. “I have made my peace with my siblings. That has to be enough.”

Giovanni lifted a brow. “Is it?”

Nate expelled a breath. Sank into a silence that said this particular conversation was over.

Giovanni sat back in his chair and rested his gaze on the sun, burning its way into the horizon. “I need you to do me a favor. There is a ring that means a great deal to me I would like you to track down. I sold it to a collector years ago when I first came to America. I have no idea where it is or who possesses it. I only have a description I can give you.”

Nate was not surprised by the request. Natalia had mentioned at the gallery all of the Di Sione grandchildren except Alex had been sent on quests around the world to find similar treasures for Giovanni. The trinkets that his grandfather called his Lost Mistresses in the childhood tales he had told his grandchildren were, in fact, real entities his siblings had begun to recover: various pieces of precious jewelry, a Fabergé box and the book of poetry Natalia had found for him in Greece along with a husband in Angelos. What the grandchildren couldn’t figure out was the significance of the pieces to their grandfather.

Nate nodded. “Consider it done. What do these pieces mean to you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

His grandfather’s gaze turned wistful. “I hope someday to be able to tell you that. But first, I need to see them again. The ring

is very special to me. I must have it back.”

“And you will send Alex on the last task,” Nate speculated.

“Yes.”

His relationship, or the lack of one, he had with his oldest half brother who ran Di Sione Shipping was volatile and complex. Giovanni had made Alex work his way up the ranks to CEO, starting out at the very bottom loading goods at the shipyards, while in contrast, he had appointed Nate to a desk job straight out of the university education he had provided his grandson—compensation, Nate figured, for his having had so little growing up.

But what ran far deeper than this preferential treatment of Nate at Di Sione Shipping, Nate suspected, was that Alex blamed him for his parents’ death. The night Nate’s mother, his father’s mistress, had shown up on Benito Di Sione’s doorstep, ten-year-old Nate in tow, begging for financial support, had been the night his father had wrapped his car around a tree and killed himself and his wife. There had been a violent argument between the adults prior to the crash, perhaps the precursor to his father’s reckless performance behind the wheel.

“Nathaniel?”

Nate shook his head to clear it of things that could never and would never change. “I’ll begin the search right away. Is there anything else I can do?”

“Know your brothers and sisters,” his grandfather said. “Then I will die a happy man.”

An image of Alex's young face in the window that night Nate and his mother had stood on his father's porch begging for assistance filled his head. The confusion written across his brother's face...

Only Alex had known of Nate's existence in the years that had followed, yet he had never once revealed his secret—not until Giovanni had fallen ill. If Nate wondered why, when surely the revelation would have changed his own life irrevocably, when sometimes the question burned a hole right through the center of him, the two brothers had never discussed it.

And really, he thought, shaking his head and bringing himself back to the present, what was the point? Nothing could ever alter the circumstances of that night. What fate had thrown at all of them... Some things were just better off left alone.

* * *

Nate put finding Giovanni's ring at the top of his priority list. He gave the description to the private investigator he used to research the mega-million-dollar deals he made on a daily basis and received a response back within forty-eight hours. The ring had been purchased at auction by a Sicilian family decades ago and was, apparently, not for sale.

A patently incorrect term in Nate's book. Everything and everyone on the planet were for sale if the price tag was high enough. He simply had to come up with a number at which the family would find his offer too sweet to resist.

Concluding his business in New York, he had dinner with

his mother, who complained per usual that he was never home, neglected to mention he was doing an errand for Giovanni because the Di Siones were always a sore spot for her, then flew to Palermo on Wednesday. Not known for wasting an opportunity, he checked into the six-star Hotel Giarruso he had been eyeing for acquisition and scheduled a meeting with the consortium who owned it for later that day.

His first order of business after he'd been welcomed into the luxury two-level suite with a personal check-in was to make himself human again. He stepped under a bruisingly hot shower in the palatial marble bathroom on the upper level and closed his eyes, letting the punishing spray beat down on him. No matter how luxurious the jet, how smooth the ride, he never slept on planes. His PA, Josephine, liked to call it the control freak in him, but the truth was he always slept with one eye open, a habit he'd developed while living in a series of sketchy Bronx apartments he and his mother had rented where bad things could and did happen on a regular basis.

Installing his mother in a luxury apartment with 24/7 security and ensuring she never had to work again should have provided him with some level of peace. Instead, his wary nature persisted. When you'd run errands for a neighborhood enforcer for a couple of years in your misguided youth before your mother straightened you out, you knew danger lurked everywhere, particularly for someone with his money and reputation. A smart man kept his eyes open.

His humanity suitably revived, he stepped out of the shower, sluiced the water from his face and grabbed a towel to dry off. Intent on answering a few urgent emails before a catnap and his meeting, he headed down to the lounge. His brain busy running the numbers the lawyers had given him for the hotel's value, he didn't notice the chambermaid bent over the cherrywood bar until he'd taken a couple of steps into the room.

His first impression was that she had the sweetest behind he'd ever seen. Round, firm, shapely buttocks stretched the material of her pewter-colored uniform tight across her hips. Spectacular legs completed the picture. His imagination effortlessly supplemented the rest of the tempting scenario: her face and remaining assets would be equally as luscious.

But what the hell was she doing in his suite?

"Would you mind," he requested deliberately, taking the final two steps into the lounge, "telling me what you are doing here when I left explicit instructions with the butler not to be disturbed?"

She straightened and turned, all in one wary slow-motion move. His gaze slid over her. Her waist in the dress, which was stylish for a chambermaid, was tiny, cinched in just above those delectable hips. Her ample cleavage strained the buttons of the modest, short-sleeved style, as if she was too abundant to be contained in it. Her glossy dark brown hair was caught up in a tight ponytail, her cheekbones high and defined under the most stunning pair of espresso-brown eyes he'd ever seen.

He'd been wrong in his estimation. She wasn't just temptingly attractive—she was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever laid eyes on. Exotic in that olive-skinned, perfectly curved Sicilian sense of the word.

His body tightened as biology demanded in the face of such perfection. He imagined one sultry look from those eyes and most men would be on their knees.

Except right now, he noted, those eyes were aimed at him in a wary perusal, tracing their way down to where the towel was slung around his hips. They widened, darkened into giant espresso orbs. His towel had worked its way lower during his trip down the stairs, sitting now on his hip bones. He was giving her an eyeful. A gentleman would remedy that. But he had never been, nor would he ever be, a gentleman.

This was a six-star hotel he was considering purchasing. He had told his private butler he was not to be disturbed. He wasn't letting it go.

He lifted an eyebrow. "So?"

* * *

Dio mio, but he was beautiful. Mina dragged her gaze up to the American's face, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip. He was all defined, perfectly symmetrical muscle, as ideally proportioned as the models in the pictures their teachers had shown them in the anatomy lessons they'd given them in finishing school to prepare the girls to interact, as they'd called it, with the opposite sex. As if her classmates hadn't known what the internet was. As if some

of them hadn't had their own personal anatomy lesson already...

His dark, brooding gaze slid over her, sending a pulse up her spine. If she had looked up the meaning of *intenso* in the dictionary, his picture would have been right there beside it. Although the glare he wore suggested he had limited patience to go with the definition.

"The butler informed me you were at a meeting." She lifted her chin, pasting a composed look on her face while she searched desperately for the confidence she'd been taught to effortlessly exude. "I knocked before I came in, Signor Brunswick."

"My meeting is this afternoon." His gaze sharpened as it pinned her to the spot. "Isn't that the point of a six-star hotel? To be six steps ahead of my schedule, anticipating my every wish?"

Mina's brain went straight to the bedroom on the second level and what this arrogant man would demand of a woman in bed. Her nonexistent experience deferred to her imagination to fill in the blanks. She bet it would be worth every second of her enforced capitulation.

Heat flooded her cheeks. Her fingers tightened around the bar of chocolate she held. His gaze flickered, narrowed, as if he'd read her thoughts down to her final, helpless surrender.

She shifted her weight to both feet, her stomach tying itself in knots. What was she thinking? She was engaged. And furthermore, she didn't have naughty thoughts like this.

She cleared her throat and held up the chocolate bar. "It is my job to anticipate your every need. I was stocking the bar with our

fine Sicilian hazelnut chocolate.”

The beautiful American strode toward her and took the chocolate out of her hand. A whiff of citrus mixed with spice filled her head. She breathed in deeply as she drank him in. He was even more devastating close up, his thick dark hair spiky and wet from the shower, designer stubble covering the square set of his jaw.

“We make it our policy to know everything about our guests based on past visits,” she sputtered nervously. “I brought hazelnut and brazil nut.”

He crossed his corded, very fine arms. “Mistake number one...Lina,” he said, peering at her name tag, which did not use her real name but the name she’d given her manager when she’d taken the job. “I prefer milk chocolate.”

“Oh.” That threw her for a loop. They were never wrong here at Hotel Giarruso. Ever. “Well...” she stumbled. “Sì. We must have made a mistake. It happens very rarely. I’ll fix it.”

“What else?” he asked.

“Scusi?”

“What else do you know about me, then?”

Other than the fact that he was known to fraternize with tall, beautiful blondes and that she was not to bat an eye if she came across one in his room who was not registered here, despite their strict security policy?

The heat in her cheeks deepened. His gaze narrowed. She desperately filed through the intelligence she’d been given. “We

know that you tend to forget to pack the charger for your laptop. I have brought you a universal one.”

He walked over to the coffee table. The towel slipped further, giving her an eyeful of chiseled hip bone. Maledizione. She needed to get out of here.

He picked up a cord, a charging pack attached. “Not so much of a perk for me this visit.”

Her nails dug into her palms as her even-keeled disposition started to slip. He was something else. She nodded toward the bar. “We have stocked your favorite single-malt Scotch.”

“Predictable.”

Her blood started to boil. Being inquisitioned by an arrogant male in a towel that might fall off at any moment was above and beyond the call of duty. Way above her pay grade.

She squared her shoulders. “I understand all of this might not be revolutionary, Signor Brunswick, but it’s what is expected of us. To surround you with the comforts of home. Although I do agree, we could do better.”

Curiosity flashed in those beautiful dark eyes. “Such as?” he purred. “I am all ears.”

She took a step back. An amused glitter filled his eyes as he tracked the movement. “I would go beyond cataloging a guest’s preferences and start anticipating them. For instance, you are known to be a morning runner. If it were me arranging things, I would have had a list of suitable routes through some of Palermo’s most beautiful neighborhoods sitting on your coffee

table for you to follow. Another route to spend much of your run in our most beautiful park. Perhaps one to visit our many famous monuments.”

The cynical twist to his mouth smoothed out. “What else?”

“You are a fan of a particular Pinot Noir from the Mount Etna region. I would stock that in your room as we have done so, but I would also include another lesser-known wine from what we Sicilians think is the best vineyard in that region—a wine you cannot purchase in the US.”

A gleam of approval fired his eyes. “One more.”

She chewed on her lip, her confidence returning. “You are known to appreciate the opera if you are accompanied on a trip with a...compagno. I would anticipate an outing for you. Secure tickets at the opera and a gown for the lady, colors suitable for a blonde, of course, as that seems to be your preference.”

A smile tugged at his mouth, the dimple that cleaved his cheek transforming him from arrogant to utterly breathtaking. “And you were on such a roll there with your intriguing ideas, Lina. Until you got to the preference for blondes...”

His gaze blazed a deliberate trail over her high ponytail, down over her face to the slightly strained buttons of her dress she’d been cursing since day one of this job. The pure male appreciation in his eyes made her pulse pound.

“It just so happens my last few compagnos have been blonde, but in actual fact, I prefer exotic-looking brunettes.”

She forgot to breathe, her head spinning from a lack of

oxygen. His stark appraisal was most certainly improper. Most definitely had a message attached to it. She knew she should look away, but the heat coursing through her was like nothing she'd ever felt before. It was like her skin was on fire, like he knew exactly what was under her dress and he wanted his hands all over it.

She took a step back and yanked in a deep breath. Regained her senses. "Perhaps," she suggested, lifting her gaze to his, "I can have a bottle of the Pinot Noir delivered to your room?"

His long, dark lashes swept down in a heavy-lidded look. "Will you deliver it personally?"

She gasped. Took another step back. "I'm afraid that won't be possible. I'm off duty in an hour. I have a date tonight."

He raised an eyebrow. "Undoubtedly."

The towel slipped another inch. She made a garbled sound at the back of her throat, shoved the other two bars of chocolate in her apron on the table and fled, her muttered, "Buonanotte..." followed by his low laughter.

"Enjoy your date, Lina. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

She thought that since this was Signor Brunswick and his improper towel they were talking about, that might give her a great deal of latitude.

* * *

Nate watched the chambermaid go, amusement coursing through him. He didn't remember the last time he'd enjoyed himself so much. Yes, it had been a bit cruel to put the delectable

Lina through that, but he was meeting with the owners of this hotel in a few hours and a hotel was only as good as its service. He'd wanted to know what kind of people the Giarruso employed, and Lina had potential.

She clearly had brains to go with her beauty. And not just brains, but a keen understanding of the clientele she served and what could enhance their experience. Which had, in the end, made up for the breach in his privacy and his personal butler's mistake.

His chambermaid's ideas had given him food for thought. Certainly society was moving toward personalization in every industry and the products that were being developed reflected that. To offer his clients things they hadn't even asked for but might appreciate complemented some of the ideas he was already working on. It wouldn't work for every client—some would find it an intrusion. But for others it could prove to be that particular experience, that unique value add that developed in them an affinity for the brand.

He had loved Lina's examples. They were doable, creative ideas that would certainly impress.

His butler appeared with a bottle of Marc de Grazia's Guardiola Mount Etna red just before his meeting. Grown at the highest elevation of any red grape varietal in all of Europe, it looked intriguing.

He slid the bottle into the fridge, a smile on his lips. He'd be lying if he said he didn't wish his delectable chambermaid

were here to share it with him. That he would have enjoyed sampling it on her fantastic body. He knew the instant attraction he'd experienced toward her had been reciprocated by the flare of awareness he'd seen in her dark eyes. But she was taken, unfortunately, at least for tonight.

And perhaps that was for the best. He was here to retrieve Giovanni's ring. To fulfill his obligation to his grandfather as quickly as possible so that Giovanni could enjoy the sentimental memories associated with the bauble as long as his life allowed. Perhaps pick up a Palermo-based luxury hotel while he was at it.

Seducing an innocent-looking brunette wasn't in the plans, as much as his macho core wouldn't mind demonstrating to Lina how utterly lacking her date would ultimately prove compared to a night with him.

A pity, really.

CHAPTER TWO

"WHAT'S THE MATTER, bella mia?"

Silvio Marchetti, Mina's fiancé, arched a thick, dark brow at her. "You've been distracted ever since we sat down, and since I know it cannot be my scintillating company that is lacking, you must be worrying about something."

Mina, also known as Lina when she was entertaining improper men in towels in luxurious hotel suites, blinked. She'd thought she'd done a good job hiding her distraction from her fiancé, but apparently her expressive face, which had been her downfall in the etiquette classes designed to attract a man just like Silvio,

continued to plague her.

“Mi dispiace.” She waved a hand in the air. “I’ve had a busy day.”

Silvio’s thin lips twisted. “Exhausted ordering your team of wedding planners around? It’s a good thing I have a big staff, cara. You will have many responsibilities as my wife at Villa Marchetti. You must learn how to multitask.”

She was quite adept at multitasking! She’d cleaned a whole floor of hotel suites today in addition to surviving Signor Brunswick’s improper inquisition. The latter of which was half of the problem with her distraction tonight. She couldn’t get the sizzling connection between her and the beautiful American out of her head.

But Silvio didn’t know about any of her extracurricular activities. Her job moonlighting as a chambermaid at the Giarruso to pay off the debt her mother had incurred since her father’s death was a secret to everyone but her. It wouldn’t do for anyone to know Simona Mastrantino’s daughter, engaged to one of Italy’s wealthiest men, was cleaning toilets by the hour.

She pinned a smile on her face, the fact that her mother would have a coronary if she knew what her daughter was doing to keep things afloat of secondary importance to her bigger problem—her impending marriage to Silvio, which she could not possibly go through with.

“Maybe I’m having prewedding jitters,” she murmured. “It’s a big production this wedding. So many people will be there.”

Silvio reached for her hand and curled his fingers around it. “All you have to do is look beautiful. The rest will be taken care of.”

And then they would consummate their relationship. Her stomach dipped at the terrifying thought. She’d never slept with a man. Hadn’t had the opportunity with her mother dragging her from one social event to another husband hunting, advertising her innocence like a detail on a high-end real-estate listing. Look but don’t touch, her mother’s vibe had said. And since Mina had never agreed on any of her mother’s choices for a rich husband, her mother had chosen for her.

She studied her fiancé as he poured her more of the terrifically expensive Chianti he’d ordered for them, undoubtedly trying to loosen her up. He was classically, undeniably handsome with his chiseled features and straight Roman nose, but his eyes, which Mina did think were the windows to the soul, were hard and unyielding, dominated by thick dark brows that always seemed to frown. She had never once experienced any chemistry whatsoever when he had touched her, kissed her, which was as far as he’d managed with her mother on guard.

And yet this afternoon, she acknowledged with a shiver, all it had taken was one look from the American to send electricity coursing through her from her head to her feet. For her to wonder what it would be like to be taken to bed by him. To know it would be as good, as improper, as everything else about him.

“Mina?”

“Hmm?”

Silvio narrowed his gaze on her. “I was asking if you would like dessert or some Frangelico and coffee... Keep this up, cara, and I will start thinking it’s my company you are finding tiresome.”

The desperation that had been coursing through her veins all day with their wedding looming in just forty-eight hours picked up her pulse, sent her heart hammering in her chest.

“What’s bothering me,” she blurted out, “is that we hardly know each other, Silvio. Maybe this has all been a bit fast.”

That hard edge in his eyes deepened. “Now I am thinking you have cold feet, Mina. What more is there to know? I will provide a luxurious life for you to match the one you’re accustomed to. You will entertain me in bed and be a good mother to my children. It’s very simple.”

She pressed a palm to her flushed cheek. She had let the cat out of the bag; she might as well follow through with it.

“When is my birthday?” she asked quietly.

His mouth flattened, a scary, lethal line. “I will, of course, know that when we’re married.”

“Am I a morning person or a night owl? Can I swim or would I drown if you tossed me over the side of your yacht?”

“I’m considering it,” he growled. “Enough, Mina.”

She sunk her teeth into her bottom lip. “You asked what was wrong. I’m telling you.”

Well, not all of it. If she told him the entire truth—that

her mother was marrying her off so she inherited the family heirloom, a precious ring her father had bequeathed to her upon her marriage—he might not be so impressed. Of course, she conceded miserably, it changed nothing, really. She was being sold as a possession to bear Silvio Marchetti's bambinos, when all she had ever wanted was to go to business school and follow in her father's footsteps.

Silvio threw his napkin on the table. "I think we should get out of here."

Mina's heart collided with the wall of her chest as her fiancé lifted his hand and signaled the waiter. "Perhaps we should have a liqueur," she suggested. To give this conversation a chance to cool down before they left supervised company.

He ignored her. Bill secured and paid, he placed a hand at her elbow, brought her to her feet and walked her out of the restaurant with such haste Mina's head swam. She had consumed more than her usual share of wine with dinner with the nerves plaguing her and now it seemed like a particularly bad idea, given she'd gone and voiced thoughts she never should have.

Her mother was going to kill her. Silvio looked like he wanted to kill her.

She was going to face the consequences.

She sat as far away from Silvio as she could in the car that took them home, his usual driver at the helm. Her fiancé sat stone-faced beside her, not uttering a word as they drove through the streets of Palermo to the posh, aristocratic neighborhood

of Montepellegrino where she and her mother lived. If it was possible for a man to be utterly furious without showing any outward sign of it, her fiancé had mastered it. His anger emanated from him like a red cloud.

When the car pulled up in front of her mother's house, she breathed a sigh of relief. Silvio got out of the car, came around and opened her door. She took his hand, swung her legs out of the car and straightened. "Silvio—"

"Wait here," her fiancé told his driver in a low tone.

"That isn't necessary," she murmured, panicked because her mother was out at the opera. "I think I'm just tired. I'm sure if I—"

Silvio clamped his fingers hard around hers and propelled her toward the villa. She fumbled in her purse for her keys and found them with shaking fingers. Silvio frowned as she pushed the key into the lock. "Where is the staff?"

"It's Manuel's night off." He had been off for over a year, as in permanently off, but she wasn't about to tell Silvio they had no staff because they were penniless.

Silvio loosened his tie as he walked past her into the salon. "Pour me a drink."

She wanted to refuse, wanted desperately for him to leave, because she didn't like the vibe coming off him, but to reject his suggestion would only add fuel to the fire.

Crossing to the bar, she took a glass from the cabinet and poured him a Cognac, her hands trembling as she put the bottle

down. Silvio watched her with a hooded gaze as she turned and carried the glass over to him.

She handed him the tumbler, flinching as his fingers brushed hers. His dark gaze turned incendiary. "We are marrying in front of hundreds of people in two days, Mina. What is behind this sudden display of nerves?"

She didn't love him. She didn't even like him. If the truth be known, she was afraid of him.

Dannazione! If only she could sell the ring her father had left her without marrying him. But the condition in her father's will had been unbreakable. She had to be married to get her hands on the ring.

"It's like I said." She lifted her gaze to her fiancé's. "It seems very fast and I—I wish I knew you better. I would feel more comfortable."

He took a sip of the Cognac. "You did not go on and on about knowing me when your mother sold you off to the highest bidder. You were happy to snare Palermo's most eligible bachelor. So don't cry foul now, Mina. We will come to know each other."

She lowered her gaze. He was right. It had been as much a business deal as if her mother had forked over an old-fashioned dowry for her except she had nothing and she was being traded for her looks and childbearing ability. Which, she thought hysterically, she didn't even know if she had.

The thud of her fiancé's glass hitting the coffee table brought her head up. "Perhaps you are nervous about us," he suggested.

“You’ve been playing the ice queen so long we haven’t had a chance to get properly acquainted.” His eyes glittered as he wrapped his fingers around her wrist and drew her to him. “Since we are very nearly married, I suggest we take some time to do that now.”

Her heart thumped in her chest. “My mother—”
“—is at the opera.” He brought his mouth down on hers. “You mentioned that earlier.”

He kissed her then, a hard, demanding press of his mouth that was about punishment, not pleasure. Her heart galloped faster at the secure hold he had on her wrist. He was tall and big and she could never get away unless he chose to let her.

He didn’t. His mouth continued to punish her, the hand he had on her waist moving down to cup her buttocks through the thin silk of her dress. He pulled her against him in an intimate hold she had never experienced before, his aroused body pressing against hers. It set off alarm bells in her head. “Silvio,” she gasped, twisting away from his mouth. “Not like this...”

His face contorted with rage. “It will be exactly as I want it, cara. Any way I want it.”

“Silvio—”

He brought the flat of his hand across her cheek so hard her head snapped to the side. Her ears rang with the force of it, her head spinning as a white-hot throb spread across her cheek.

“Refuse me again,” he bit out, “and you will discover the depths my anger can sink to. I will not hear one more word of

your silly jitters, Mina. Nor will I tolerate you repeating any of them to anyone. You are going to be my wife in two days. Our union is the talk of this city. Get yourself together.”

The sound of keys in the door brought her head around. Her mother walked in, her gaze flicking from Mina to Silvio, then back again, eyes widening at the mark on Mina’s face. “I thought that was your car, Silvio.”

Silvio released her and stepped back. Sparing her mother a brief nod, he stalked past her to the door. “My driver will pick you up for the rehearsal dinner at six thirty tomorrow.”

The door slammed. Mina’s mother unwound her scarf from around her neck and walked slowly toward her, her gaze wary. “What was that?”

The moment she’d found out her fiancé was a violent man. Mina sank down on the sofa and buried her face in her hands.

“I can’t marry him.”

Her mother sat down beside her. “Let me see your face.”

She lifted her head, utterly sure when her mother saw the welt she would agree she couldn’t marry Silvio. Her mother sighed, went to the bar for ice, wrapped some in a towel and came back to sit down beside her, pressing it to her cheek. “What Sicilian man doesn’t have a temper?”

Mina froze, disbelief plummeting through her, followed by a deep rage that sent blood pumping to every inch of her skin. “Did Father ever hit you?”

Her mother’s lips pursed. “Your father was a different kind

of man.”

Yes, he had been. Honorable and loving. He would no more have lifted a hand to his wife or daughter than he would have kicked a dog on a street corner, which, she was sure, Silvio Marchetti would do. She was also sure from what had just happened, her fiancé’s behavior would escalate when she was under his roof as his wife.

“I won’t do it. We can find someone else.”

Her mother shook her head, a resigned look on her face. “You have rejected every choice I’ve made for over a year now, Mina. You are marrying in front of half of Palermo in two days. Life is not all sunshine and rainbows. Sacrifices must be made and we need your sacrifice now. You know that.”

Her mother was okay with sacrificing her to a ruthless, violent man?

Dio mio. She’d always known she was heartless, but this... What kind of a monster was she?

Her mother’s gaze softened. “I suggest you find some peace with this. Men are men. You happen to be marrying a filthy rich one. Let that be your comfort.”

CHAPTER THREE

MINA’S WEDDING DAY dawned sunny and crisp, ushering in the first day of fall in true, glorious Palermo fashion.

Bright rays of sunshine stole through the curtains that swayed in her open bedroom windows, a light breeze kissing her shoulders with a jasmine-scented caress. Temperatures were

supposed to skyrocket to an unseasonable warmth as the afternoon went on, making it the perfect day for the lavish outdoor reception she and Silvio would host at Villa Marchetti.

Soon it would be time to slip on the stunning dress hanging in her wardrobe and make her way by horse and carriage to the elegant Palermo cathedral to wed her wealthy, influential groom.

A fairy-tale day it should have been. But inside, Mina was filled with dread. She couldn't seem to function, her every muscle and limb numb as the minutes passed, her stomach barely holding down the light breakfast she'd managed to consume. Today she would marry Silvio, a man she didn't love, who had turned out to be a hot-tempered, violent man. Everything she'd suspected he could be and more. And nothing she had said or done to convince her mother she couldn't do it had worked.

She stared in the mirror as her mother layered thick concealer over the bruise Silvio had left on her cheek, not a hint of emotion on Simona Mastrantino's face to indicate she felt any degree of empathy for her daughter.

"Makeup is a woman's magic." Her mother swept another layer of the thick concealer over her cheek. "No one will see the bruise. But you must remember to tuck this in your purse for touch-ups later with the photographs."

Mina absorbed this latest piece of advice from her mother dazedly, wondering if she could truly be this heartless. There was no question their relationship had always been strained, distant. Simona Mastrantino had made it clear from the very beginning

she had no interest in being a mother—she had done it only to keep her husband happy. Off to the nannies Mina had gone while her mother lived a socialite's glamorous life as the wife of the CEO of one of Italy's most successful companies.

Mina had accepted this state of affairs with the innocent obliviousness of a child who knew no different. That Camilla, her nanny, and her beloved papà were her source of love and affection, her mother a beautiful, foreign creature who was to be awed from afar, like one of her beautiful dolls, had been her reality.

Her chest throbbed at the memory of her papà. He had always come to her first when he'd gotten home, swung her up in his arms and called her his piccolo tesoro, his little treasure, as he'd carried her off to bed to read. The bond between father and daughter had been inviolate, her papà lavishing upon her the attention her mother had not.

Until the day she'd come home from school to find her nonna, Consolata, at the house, and her father dead of a massive heart attack. Mina had clung to her nonna, her eight-year-old face a river of tears as she'd begged her to take her to see her father, perhaps instinctively knowing her last grounding force had been taken away. But her nonna had refused all of Mina's hysterical demands, telling her a hospital was no place for a child.

The dust had barely settled on her father's grave when her mother had sold the family business and packed a grieving Mina off to boarding then finishing school. Ripped away from

everything she knew, without the unconditional love of her father or Camilla, Mina had floundered, filled with confusion and guilt. What was it about her that caused her mother to reject her so completely? It had been her good schoolfriend Celia and her mother, Juliana, who had become a surrogate mother to Mina, who had saved her from the shadows of those miserable years.

Her mother had only recognized Mina's importance when she'd come of age, an attractive bauble to dangle before Palermo's most eligible bachelors to solve their financial problems. Then it had been a relentless pursuit to find her a rich husband to marry, not the bonding Mina had craved.

A lump formed in her throat. "Please don't ask me to do this," she begged her mother through frozen lips, repeating the appeal she'd already made twice today. "We can find someone else, Mamma."

Her mother's gaze hardened with impatience. "We've been through this, Mina. You had your chance to pick someone else. You chose no one. I chose Silvio. Stop being so childish and selfish. You are doing your duty to this family. Marry Silvio, sell the ring and all our problems will be solved."

All her mother's problems would be solved. Hers would just be beginning. She closed her eyes. This was not how it was supposed to go. Today was supposed to be sunshine and rainbows. Her father was supposed to be walking her down that aisle toward a man as besotted with her as her father had been with her mother.

After she'd made a life for herself. After she'd followed in her father's brilliant business footsteps. She may not have Felicia Chocolate left—the family chocolatier her mother had sold—but her time spent in France studying and attaining top grades, learning of the vast and varied world out there, had taught her she could never limit herself to the traditional role of a woman in Sicily. She wanted more, so much more, for herself.

But all of that would be for naught if she married Silvio today. Her fingers curled around the arms of the chair, her knuckles gleaming white. She would spend her days pregnant with his bambinos, relegated to an artifact in his beautiful, cold, austere home.

The wedding planner's assistant swept back into the room, Mina's dress draped over her arm, having given mother and daughter a discreet few minutes to cover Silvio's damage. "Are we ready for the dress?"

Her mother straightened and nodded. The wedding planner gave Mina a once-over. "Excellent. You look beautiful."

Mina stood as the wedding planner moved to her side to help her on with the fairy-tale dress, one worthy of Silvio Marchetti's wife. She lifted her arms as the assistant dropped the dress over her head and settled it down around her hips in a whisper of silk and lace. She obediently pulled in a breath as the dress was done up, hugging every curve of her body with its slim, tulip shape. Except she didn't need to expend the effort as the dress did up easily. Too easily. She'd lost weight the last few weeks of fretting.

The wedding planner tutted about this latest wrinkle, producing pins to close the gap below the low, dipping back of the dress. Mina surveyed herself in the mirror, a tumult of emotion swirling through her. She looked impeccable. The dress was perfect, her hair an elegant chignon with tiny, white flowers woven through it, her face a subtle, painted masterpiece.

And it was all wrong. She could not do this. She could not.

Silver stilettos and the diamond choker and drop earrings Silvio had given her as a wedding gift completed her irreproachable appearance. And then it was time to go. She descended the wide circular staircase to the main level of the villa, the wedding planner managing her modest train behind her.

She had not even a bridesmaid to commiserate with. Celia was managing a big product launch in Paris and hadn't been able to make it, which meant the bridesmaids were all Silvio's—strangers to her.

She waited in the salon for the horse and carriage that would transport her to the church. Her mother and the planner would ride on ahead in the limousine Silvio had sent for them to ensure everything was ready for her arrival.

A cloud of perfume preceding her, her mother brushed a kiss against her cheek. "Brighten up, Mina. You will have everything after this."

Except what she really wanted. Her freedom. A man who actually loved her.

The door closed behind her mother in a waft of jasmine and

she was alone. Alone in the beautiful dress that flowed around her, the diamond choker growing tighter around her throat with every second that passed.

Her breathing grew shallow, her palms sweaty. She was out of time. Out of options.

* * *

The elegant old Mastrantino villa was located in the aristocratic neighborhood of Montepellegrino, with its sweeping views of Palermo, the surrounding mountains and the Tyrrhenian Sea.

As much as Nate appreciated the spectacular view, he was more interested in speaking with the Mastrantinos, acquiring Giovanni's ring and wrapping up his business in Sicily so he could complete stops in Capri, Hong Kong and the Maldives before heading home to hand the ring over to his grandfather.

He had elected not to pursue the Giarruso at this point in time, as it wasn't quite the unique opportunity he'd been searching for to enhance his portfolio—delectable smart chambermaids aside.

The handsome, elegantly stuccoed Mastrantino villa looked as quiet as it had the night before when he'd come seeking the ring only to find no one home. Hoping his luck was better today, Nate asked his driver to wait at the front entrance, strode up the wide set of steps to the front entrance and rang the bell.

When no one answered, he rang again, impatience thrumming through his veins. Why were there no staff members answering the door? Were the Mastrantinos out of town? He scowled. That

would put a major kink in his plans.

He was about to ring a third time when the door opened and he was faced with a vision in white. A dark-haired vision in white. A wedding dress to be exact, floating around the woman's incredible figure. He lifted his gaze to her beautiful face and shock flooded through him. Lina. Here?

"I thought you were my horse and carriage," she breathed, hiking up the train of her dress.

He looked down at her silver, high heel-clad dainty feet, then back at the luxury sedan his driver had parked at the curb, wondering dazedly if he'd been transported into some bizarre real-life Cinderella reenactment. "No," he replied slowly, looking back at Lina, "I most definitely came on four wheels."

She blinked. "Signor Brunswick. What are you doing here?"

He noticed then the tears that streaked her perfect makeup, the vulnerable tilt to her chin, the quiver to her mouth, and damn if it didn't tear him up inside.

He dragged his gaze back up to hers. "I am looking for the Mastrantinos. Do you live here?"

Her beautiful mouth quivered some more. He ran a hand through his hair. Cursed. Comforting emotional women was not his forte.

She pressed her lips together. "Now is not a very good time."

No kidding. She was apparently getting married today. Not just taken, but marrying someone.

Why was she crying on her wedding day? He was no expert

but he had been led to believe it was every woman's dream.

He swallowed. "I am looking for Simona or Mina Mastrantino. They own a ring I would like to purchase. But since this is clearly not a good time, as you say, I can come ba—"

"What ring?" Her dark gaze fixed on his.

"The Fountain Ring with the sapphire in it."

Her eyes widened. "How do you know about that ring?"

"My private investigator tracked it down for me. I want to purchase it."

"Why?"

"It has...sentimental value for someone close to me."

A woman walking down the avenue gave them a curious look. Lina stepped back and motioned for him to come in. He stepped in and she shut the door behind him.

"I am...Mina Mastrantino," she said haltingly, digging her teeth into her bottom lip in that trademark nervous tic of hers. "I—I don't use my real name when I work. But you can't—I mean—please keep that between us."

Who was he going to tell? And—what? Lina was Mina? Why in God's name was she working as a chambermaid?

Lina, or rather Mina, gestured to a room to the left. "Please come in. Sit down."

He walked past her into the richly appointed, slightly outdated salon which had clearly once been the showpiece of the villa with its hand-carved fireplaces, crystal chandeliers and elegant arches. Mina followed and indicated a chair for Nate while she perched

on a sofa. He sat down, his gaze moving over the distraught bride's face.

Her eyes were full of turmoil as she lifted them to his. "I would love to sell you the ring, Signor Brunswick, but unfortunately, I cannot."

"Nate," he corrected. She had seen him in a towel, after all. "And why not?"

"It's a family heirloom. My father bequeathed it to me upon my marriage."

He looked pointedly at her expensive wedding dress. "Which is happening today..."

"Yes." Her lips started to quiver again, a tear escaping those dark-as-night eyes.

His blood pressure shot through the roof. Dear Lord, he didn't need this right now. He really didn't.

"Mina." He moved across the room to sit beside her on the sofa, likely not the smartest move given the chemistry between them, but he couldn't help himself as he lifted a hand to her delicate jaw to turn her face to him. Her dark lashes were soaked with tears that ran down her cheek like sparkling crystals. Her sultry mouth was vulnerable and bare of color. Undeniably enticing. But it was the dark shadow on her cheek the sunlight pouring in through the windows revealed that caught his attention. Turned his blood to ice.

He knew it was none of his business, knew he should walk out the door right now and come back tomorrow, but he couldn't

seem to move. He was a smart man. He could put two and two together and he did not like what he saw.

“Your fiancé,” he said quietly, dangerously, “gave you that bruise on your cheek?”

Her fingers flew up to cover it. “Oh, no, I—”

“Mina...”

She stared at him, dropped her head into her hands and sobbed.

Dammit all. Nate wrapped his arm around her and pulled her onto his lap, cradling her against his chest. She stiffened against him as if ready to bolt, then another sob racked her petite body and she melted into him, her tears soaking his shirt. Shredding his self-possession.

He held her as she cried, ruthlessly commanding his all too aware body that the soft curves that fit so perfectly against him were utterly off-limits. His hand stroked her silky hair, nudging some curly tendrils free from the perfect knot as her sobs dissolved into sniffles, but he didn't care. She was trembling like a leaf.

“Tell me,” he ordered, “what is going on here.”

She shook her head. “Silvio—my fiancé—he's a very powerful man. He would kill me if I said anything.”

He lifted her chin with his fingers. “Funny thing about that, Mina, but I'm a powerful man, too, and I don't hit my women. Silvio who?”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “Silvio Marchetti. He owns half

of Sicily. You really don't want to get mixed up with him."

He would like to get very mixed up with Silvio Marchetti right now. Violently, aggressively mixed up with Silvio Marchetti. Unfortunately, he wasn't here for him to inflict the desired punishment.

"Why are you marrying a monster?"

Her dark eyes shone like polished ebony. "He is my mother's choice. It's been...arranged."

He gave her an incredulous look. "That still happens?"

"Here it does."

"Does your mother know he hits you?"

Her chin wobbled.

Hell. "Tell her you won't."

"I have. I—we need this match."

"Why?" She could hardly need it.

Mina shook her head. "It doesn't matter. Everyone is at the church already. I am marrying Silvio in front of half of Palermo in—" she looked at her watch "—less than an hour."

"Call it off," he grated. "You can't possibly marry him, Mina. Look at you."

She pushed a hand against his chest to get up. He held her firm. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because we need the money," she bit out. "I need to marry to get the ring so I can sell it and pay off our debts. My mother and I are bankrupt. That's why I was working at the hotel."

So she was going to marry a violent man to make that happen?

He let her go. Watched as she stood and paced the room, the train of her dress following behind her. “Why not marry someone of your own choosing, then?”

“I told you already.” She stopped and jammed her hands on her hips. “My mother arranged the match. Silvio was the last of a dozen candidates she put forward. I am out of choices.”

“Why did you reject the others?”

“Because I didn’t love them.”

Oh, boy. She was one of those. He hated to burst Ms. Mastrantino’s bubble at this particular dire moment in time but... “Love is a myth, Mina.” He gave her a hard look. “Find a man you’re comfortable with, who treats you right, and marry him.”

“It’s too late for that.” Her gaze swung to the window, a frantic, trapped look in her eyes. “The carriage will be here any minute.”

He studied the tension in every muscle of her slim body. The panicked aura that wove itself around her. She was truly terrified. And why not? She was about to marry an abusive man in minutes.

In that moment, he realized he could not leave Mina here to suffer that fate. It was insane, ludicrous. He had certainly never pegged himself as anyone’s Prince Charming, but he was not walking away and abandoning this vulnerable woman to a violent man. It went against every code of honor his mother had drilled into him.

He stood up and joined her at the window. She turned to look at him, a glazed, resigned expression on her face. “What would you do if you had a choice?” he asked. “If you could marry

someone other than Silvio and sell the ring?"

"I would pay off our debts," she said quietly, "walk away and start a new life for myself."

"Silvio will be furious," he said. "To have his bride jilt him at the altar in front of the whole city. You would have to leave town. And quickly."

She stared at him, wide-eyed. "I was merely speaking in 'what ifs.' Of course I would never do it. It's far too late now."

He held her gaze. "Someone I care about very deeply wants that ring back. It was once his—years ago he had to sell it to survive. You need to get out of this situation. There is no way you can marry Silvio. So I'm proposing a business solution. Marry me, sell me the ring and I will fly you out of here tonight on my jet. We'll get the marriage annulled immediately after the deal is done. We both get what we need."

She gaped at him. "That is...crazy. I—I don't even know you. Silvio will—" she waved a hand at him, the multicarat ring she had not been wearing while cleaning blinding in the light "—lose his mind."

"You had me vetted at the Giarruso," he reminded her. "They do full security checks. And you know this isn't going to get any better. If he's hit you once, he'll hit you again. And again. Until you'll think it's normal to greet the day with bruises. If he doesn't send you to the hospital with broken bones."

She stared at him mutely.

"My jet is waiting on standby." He kept his gaze on hers,

steady and sure. "I'm offering you a way out of this. The decision is yours. If you choose to marry Silvio, I can come back at a mutually agreed upon time and make you an offer for the ring."

Her cheeks drained of color. She pressed her hands to them and shook her head. "I don't know what to do."

"Make a decision,' he advised, casting a deliberate look toward the window. "And fast. When that carriage arrives, you are out of options."

She paced the length of the room. Back and forth. Finally, she stopped in front of him, her small palms curled into fists by her sides. "You are really willing to do this? What about whatever woman is in your life? How is she going to feel about it?"

His mouth lifted. "There is no current woman, and even if there was, she'd know marriage is never in the cards for me. I'm fine with this, Mina. The question is are you?"

Her chin moved up and down.

"Is that a yes?"

"Sì."

"You're sure?" He held her gaze with his. "You have to be sure. There's no turning back."

"I'm sure." Fear filled her eyes. "What if Silvio comes after us?"

"I will deal with him," he said roughly. God help the man if he got his hands on him.

He swung into execution mode. "Get your purse and passport. Everything else can wait."

She turned on her heel and walked out of the room, elaborate dress trailing behind her. Nate raked his hair out of his face. This might be the most unique business deal he'd ever made, but it certainly wasn't the most complex. This one was simple. Marry the girl, get the ring and have their union annulled. As far as marriages went, it was the kind he could wrap his head around.

* * *

Mina was in shock. She must be, she decided as she sat in the backseat of the luxury car alongside Nate and attempted to contemplate the enormity of what she was doing. At this very minute, she was standing up Silvio Marchetti, one of Sicily's most powerful figureheads, at the altar where her mother and her family and everyone they had known for generations were waiting for her to appear.

An image of her fiancé's hard, unyielding face with its cruel edge flickered through her head. The incredulity of her failure to show up spreading across it until that white-hot rage of his set in. He would lose his mind. He would take it out on those around him. Her hands, laced together in her lap upon the fine silk of her dress, went ice-cold.

Would he take it out on her mother as the next best thing to her? Would her mother ever forgive her?

Simona Mastrantino might be an unfeeling, ambitious, repressed aristocrat willing to trade on her daughter's fate, but she was all the family Mina had.

Would Silvio send his henchmen after her when he discovered

what had happened? Did he have henchmen?

Her stomach heaved, a determined swallow all that was keeping her breakfast in her stomach. She was giving up everything she knew, agreeing to marry a man she hardly knew, to start a life far away from her home. Where would she go? To Paris where Celia was? Where she could use her French? Or was that too close to danger?

Nate continued to make phone call after phone call on his mobile, barking out orders in that deep authoritative tone of his. Phrases and words flew by in rapid succession. Civil ceremony, marriage license, documentation, prenu.

Nate flicked her a glance. "Can you have your solicitor give us the ring today? It would be better for us to leave tonight rather than wait around until the open of business tomorrow morning."

Which might give Silvio a chance to track her down in a murderous rage. She shivered. "I will call him and find out."

A quick conversation with Pasquale Tomei determined they were in luck. He had the ring in his home for safekeeping and could see them late afternoon. Which gave them time to marry first.

They pulled up at the Giarruso minutes later. She kept her head down as Nate put a hand to her back and guided her past curious onlookers through the front doors of the hotel and into the elevators to the penthouse suites. She breathed a sigh of relief as they rode skyward having avoided anyone she knew.

Everything happened in a blur after that. The arrival of the

Giarruso butler with the prenuptial agreement Nate's lawyer had sent along with a bouquet of beautiful white flowers for Mina and two simple, elegant gold bands. She kept her back turned as her colleague offered his congratulations to Nate, then left.

The civil registrar who had miraculously been produced to marry them arrived next. It was a testament to the authority of the stranger who was about to become her husband as every detail fell into rapid-fire place, nothing beyond his control.

Then she was standing by Nate's side, her groom-to-be now dressed in a dark, expensive-looking suit rather than the jeans and shirt he'd had on when he'd arrived at her home. Insanely handsome.

The registrar began the short, textbook ceremony. Mina recited the words in Italian, Nate in English, words that should have been a sacred affirmation of a love that would last forever conducted in a church with a priest as with the traditions of her own faith.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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