



THE SICILIAN'S SURPRISE
Wife

MODERN™
& 

TARA PAMMI

Tara Pammi

The Sicilian's Surprise Wife

Аннотация

The Suave Sicilian: Married for RevengeStefan Bianco is a man with one thing on his mind. Revenge. And the last person he expects to see hanging on the arm of his nemesis? The stunning Clio Norwood; the only woman to ever resist his near-lethal brand of seduction.Clio's life has become a mere shadow of what it once was. But Stefan's searing gaze returns her to the fiery, passionate woman he once knew. Clio has the key to his revenge, and Stefan has the key to her freedom...but only if he agrees to her shocking proposal!

Society WeddingsThe world's sexiest billionaires finally say 'I do'!

Society Weddings: The world's sexiest billionaires finally say "I do"!

Dedicated bachelors and firm friends Rocco Mondelli, Christian Markos, Stefan Bianco and Zayed Al Afzal have made their marks on the worlds of business and pleasure. Marriage was never something they were ever after...but things change and now they'll have to do whatever it takes to get themselves to the church on time!Yet nothing is as easy as it seems...and the women these four have set their sights on have plans of their own!You are cordially invited to:The marriage of Rocco Mondelli & Olivia Fitzgerald in The Italian's Deal for I DoThe marriage of Christian Markos & Alessandra Mondelli in The Greek's Pregnant BrideThe marriage of Stefan Bianco & Clio Redgrave in The Sicilian's Surprise WifeThe marriage of Sheikh Zayed Al

Afzal & Princess Nadia Amani in The Sheikh's Wedding Contract So RSVP and get ready to enjoy the pinnacle of luxury and opulence as the world's sexiest billionaires finally say 'I do'... Praise for Tara Pammi The Man to be Reckoned With 4.5* RT Book Review Pammi's romance is a bittersweet tale, set on a grand English manor. Her enigmatic, loner hero bent on revenge and innocent, intelligent heroine wanting forgiveness play their roles perfectly. But it's the intensely heart-wrenching conclusion that's the perfect icing on this drama cake. The True King of Dahaar 4.5* RT Book Review Exotic locales and ostentatious riches enhance this disturbing, poignant second-chance desert romance. The willful, broken Arabian prince and offbeat Middle-Eastern heroine doctor both harbor destructive secrets and thwarted passion in this painfully sincere twist-of-fate tale. A Deal with Demakis 4.5* RT Book Review Pammi's romance is a losing (but entertaining!) battle of wills, set on a jewel in the Greek Isles. It stars a know-it-all, emotionally damaged Greek tycoon and a down-but-not-out heroine, whose interludes are meteoric.



Together with their families

Clio Norwood

and

Stefan Bianco

Invite you to join them as they become

Mr & Mrs

June 2015

The Chatsfield

New York, New York

Reception to follow

... but only if Stefan can claim his unexpected bride!



Dedicated bachelors Rocco Mondelli, Christian Markos, Stefan Bianco and Zayed Al Afzal met and bonded at university, wreaking havoc amongst the female population. In the decade

since graduating they've made their mark on the worlds of business and pleasure, becoming wealthy and powerful.

Marriage has never been something Rocco, Christian, Stefan or Zayed were ever after ... But things change, and now they'll have to do whatever it takes to get themselves to the church on time!

Yet nothing is as easy as it seems ... and the women these four have set their sights on have plans of their own!

Your embossed invitation is in the mail and you are cordially invited to:

The marriage of

Rocco Mondelli and Olivia Fitzgerald April 2015

The marriage of

Christian Markos and Alessandra Mondelli May 2015

The marriage of

Stefan Bianco and Clio Norwood June 2015

The marriage of

Sheikh Zayed Al Afzal and Princess Nadia Amani July 2015

So RSVP and get ready to enjoy the pinnacle of luxury and opulence as the world's sexiest billionaires finally say 'I do'...

The Sicilian's Surprise Wife

Tara Pammi



www.millsandboon.co.uk

TARA PAMMI can't remember a moment when she wasn't lost in a book—especially a romance, which was much more exciting than a mathematics textbook. Years later, Tara's wild imagination and love for the written word revealed what she really wanted to do. Now she pairs Alpha males who think they know everything with strong women who knock that theory *and* them off their feet!

For the three wonderful ladies who made working on this book such a treat—Andie, Jen and Michelle.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

SHE FELT LIKE GLASS, *stretched so tightly that a gentle tap could shatter her forever.*

Clutching her wrap tight in her fingers, Clio Norwood looked around for her fiancé, Jackson.

Ashley, his secretary, who had arrived unannounced and interrupted their meeting with a client Jackson was determined to add to his cap, was nowhere to be seen either. Something distasteful hovered in the back of Clio's mind, as if waiting to strike.

With the small get-together of the ultrarich in full swing atop

the Empire State Building, Manhattan glittered around them.

Usually, the vibrant, unrelenting pulse of the city that had become home to Clio over the past decade filled her with unending spirit for life. It had kept her going even when she had been struggling after graduation from Columbia University. And had helped her swallow her failures and her naive, broken expectations of making it by herself in the city that never slept.

But tonight, even New York couldn't puncture the bubble of dread that had begun to pervade her of late.

Jackson had returned last night after three weeks from an overseas trip and had been in *a stinker of a mood* as he liked to call it, because he had missed out on some real estate deal.

They had barely exchanged a word all day today as she had been at work. When she had returned to the posh flat they had been living in for the past year, he had commanded her to get ready for this party tonight.

Commanded and not asked, much less requested. A pattern that was becoming more and more obvious to Clio. Still, she knew the stress of his business, understood the driving need to make one's mark in the world, so she had given in.

Even if she was still bone tired from the out-of-season flu she had had a week ago.

Tonight, Jackson needed her help to convince Mrs. Alcott, an old friend of her parents', to hire him as her personal investment banker. With her estates in Britain and substantial family business, Jane Alcott would be a coup for Jackson's

already flourishing career.

But they hadn't even greeted Jane properly before Ashley had approached Jackson with a desperate glint in her eye.

Loath to create a scene, Clio had clenched her teeth and smiled serenely even as she saw the curious looks and stifled whispers among Jackson's clients' wives and girlfriends. Even the utter kindness of Jane's question if everything was all right between Jackson and her had been unbearable.

What was going on with him? What was going on between them?

Because Clio knew with a nauseating clarity that Ashley was just the tip of the iceberg for what was going on between her and Jackson.

Suddenly, it felt blatantly scandalous of Ashley to drag him away with a barely disguised proprietary claim on him.

Squaring her shoulders, Clio let her long stride eat up the space. She hated creating a scene, hated the pitying and speculative glances that had been coming her way far too frequently the past few months, but she had endured it all silently.

Tonight, she had had enough. She stilled as a tall, commanding figure came into her focus.

Clio blinked, the impact of those jade green eyes and generous but scornful mouth instantaneous.

Stefan Bianco.

Her first instinct was to head for the elevator before he could see her, leave the party. Even her parents, with their

disapprovingly stifling silence, would have been welcome. She didn't want the man she had known a long time ago, one of her oldest friends, to see her tonight.

Stefan, Christian, Rocco and Zayed made up the Columbia Four—the four young men she had known when they had all been at university together, who had turned into supersuccessful, ultrawealthy, sought-after bachelors for whom the world was a playground and its most beautiful women were playthings.

But before they had all become successful in their own right, she had known them, had seen them every day for four years, and had shared her deepest fears and hopes with them.

And the fact that she wanted to run away from one of the few people who had genuinely known her, had understood her, left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Was she that much of a failure, then? Was she running away from Stefan or was she running away from what she had become?

* * *

Stefan Bianco looked around at the glittering cityscape of Manhattan and gritted his jaw tight.

The vibrant pulse of it, the memories from almost a decade ago everywhere he looked, his own sheer naïveté when he had studied at Columbia with his other three friends—the memories rose up around him like a specter that wouldn't let him breathe easy even for a few minutes.

And yet, as the head of a multimillion luxury real estate company, New York was unavoidable even though he tried to

reduce the number of times he came here.

But this time, he had a reason for being at this exact party, on top of the Empire State Building.

It was high time he found a way to stop Jackson Smith.

The memory of his executive assistant Marco's whitened face as he lay against the hospital bed after his suicide attempt, Marco's five-year-old daughter's chubby face wreathed in confusion as she asked Stefan about what had happened to her papa...

The powerlessness he had felt was like acid in his stomach.

Jackson had swindled Marco out of his savings, pushed him to bankruptcy, until his assistant had lost everything, had seen no way out...

The eviscerating self-doubt, the sense of being an utter failure, of letting down everyone that had counted on him—looking into Marco's eyes had been like looking at his own reflection of a few years ago.

Guilt corroded his insides. If only he had found a way to stop Jackson years ago when he had swindled Stefan himself...

It had been the worst time of his life—Serena's betrayal, his guilt driving him to not return to his parents in Sicily and the around-the-clock hours he had worked to secure a deal...

He had lost the little he had made because of Jackson's treachery. He would have been in Marco's place if it hadn't been for his friends Rocco, Christian and Zayed anchoring him, if he hadn't already been woken up to the reality of life by Serena, the

woman who had professed to love him.

This time Jackson needed to be stopped, whatever it took.

As though Stefan thinking Jackson's name invoked the very devil himself, the American laughed in a group not two feet from where Stefan stood.

A short blonde, dressed in jeans and a tight T-shirt, dragged Jackson away, interrupting the conversation. His craggy face tight with tension, Jackson leaned toward another woman in the group, a tall redhead, and whispered something.

An apology, Stefan assumed. That didn't quite work, given the way the woman flinched and turned her head away. More curious than ever, Stefan looked on as the woman's bare shoulders stiffened, bones jutting out of her shoulders.

Everything about her posture screamed tension and something more. Jackson let himself be dragged away even as the tall woman stood ramrod straight, her head held high and so perfectly still that Stefan wondered if she would break if someone blew a wisp of breath her way.

Her face wreathed in shadows, there was a quiet dignity to her. And then he noticed her hair. Even tucked away from that angular face and scrunched tight into an elaborate knot, that red hair was as unmistakable as the narrow, upturned nose and stubborn tilt of the chin.

That face would be perfectly oval and her eyes green, like glittering emeralds. When she smiled, one corner of her mouth turned upward in a crooked slant.

Clio Norwood, the one woman he had never tamed.

Every cell inside him went on high alert, as if he had been infused with a charge of live current. What the hell was Clio doing with Jackson Smith?

There had been intimacy in the way Jackson had bent closer to her and whispered something, in the way his open palm had caressed her bare arm.

Yet Stefan could feel the tension in her as the silence of the group reverberated against her. Saw the speculative and intrusively hungry glances cast her way. Noted the way she retreated into herself as an older woman inquired something.

And knowing Jackson and his perfidious ways, a thousand kinds of thoughts swarmed in on Stefan.

Anything even remotely connected to Jackson, Stefan didn't touch with a pole. Yet, he found himself moving toward her, his gaze savoring the sight of her. Inch by glorious inch, light bathed that long neck and her face.

He stilled, supremely aware of the insistent beat of his own pulse, of the heightened charge of his own breath.

Clio was just as utterly gorgeous as she had always been, if a little too thin.

His mind cast back to over a decade ago, to his university days with Rocco, Christian and Zayed—who'd become more brothers than friends—to the unparalleled enthusiasm of learning the world and knowing that it could be at their feet, to the glory of discovering women and the pull they held for them, and to Clio

Norwood—the woman who had known the Columbia Four as well as they had known each other.

Every inch an aristocrat she no longer wanted to be and used to privileged playboys just like them, she had often laughed at their exploits, seeing their escapades with other women with a decidedly amused resignation and distance. She'd rejected his come-ons that first year, as easily as she had shrugged away the elaborate wealth and standing she had been born into.

Of all the men on the planet, the last man he would have envisioned Clio to be with was Jackson Smith.

In no mood to get into a sparring match with Jackson again, especially when his patience was already dangerously low, Stefan waited. Minutes piled on top of each other. With a graceful tilt of her head, Clio excused herself from the group.

Ignoring the uncharacteristically frantic thrumming of his heart, Stefan cornered her in the next moment. "*Ciao*, Clio."

He wrapped his fingers over her arm to turn her and felt the shiver that went through her. Saw the bracing breath she took before she turned around. A flash of fear, feral and bright, danced in her green eyes.

Until she blinked, those long lashes hiding her expression.

When she looked up again, a flicker of warmth dawned in those green depths. "Stefan...what a surprise...I had no idea you were in New York."

That accent of hers—it had always done strange things to his insides, swept over him with a mix of warmth and heated

awareness. But her tone was reserved and artificial; it rattled him.

Granted, they hadn't seen each other in a while, but for four years, Clio had been a part of his life—an integral one and one he remembered without bitterness.

Placing his arm around her toward the railing, he trapped her, shielding her from the rest of the crowd.

“You would have known if you'd kept in touch, wouldn't you, *bella?*”

Tension thrummed in the tight set of her shoulders. “You barely ever set foot in New York whereas this is my home.”

“True. But you didn't think it important to even attend Rocco's wedding. Does your new...*life* not allow room for old friends, Clio?”

She didn't flinch as she had done with Jackson, but there was an infinitesimal withdrawal. That shadow of fear again.

Dio, what was her association with Jackson?

“I've always been here, Stefan.” A remnant of the old Clio—full of adventure and plans for a new kind of life—flashed in her gaze. “I'm not the one determined to wipe anything related to our life in New York from memory.”

“Maybe I realized there wasn't anything of value left for me here in New York. It's not like Rocco, Christian or Zayed live here.”

She didn't strike him down with words as she used to, only stared at him with those wide eyes and her mouth pinched. Why didn't she just put him in his place with a cutting remark as she

had always done?

Where was this need to land a shot at her coming from? And why? Just because she had some kind of association with Jackson Smith while she had rejected his cocky advances a lifetime ago?

He didn't need his male ego to be validated by her interest in him.

Women flocked to him with one interested glance from him and he took advantage of it. He liked sex, had a healthy libido and when he was done, he walked away from the woman whether she liked it or not.

He had no place or use for a woman in his life, except in his bed.

Yet he had barely spent two minutes with Clio and suddenly, he was more interested in her thoughts and her actions.

Her chest rose and fell with the calming breath she took, coating his skin with warmth. He saw the mask that fell into place covering up her obvious distress, saw years of breeding and good manners slide into place.

The very thing she had been determined to overcome about herself...

"It was good to see you, Stefan," she said evenly, with a perfectly bland smile. "But you'll have to excuse me. I have things to do."

He clasped her arm. "You didn't answer my question. Why didn't you come to Rocco's wedding?"

Distress marred her gaze, before she composed herself

enough to hide it. Her green eyes were huge in her oval face, the pallor of her skin parchment white. "I've been busy with work. Not all of us have turned our dreams into such an amazing reality as you have done with your global real estate company."

"I started with nothing more than you did, Clio. I never took a penny from my parents after they disowned me."

"Christian told me. After Serena, you—" She must have caught the blaze of anger in his gaze because she grimaced and continued, "After everything that happened in the last semester, you never looked back once."

"So stop blaming me alone for a friendship that didn't last. In the first couple of years, Christian kept me abreast of what was happening with you guys. After that, it was hard to miss your success with all four of you hitting young millionaires' lists left and right. But I'm not bitter enough to bemoan your success, Stefan."

"I'm asking now, *bella*. What happened to your dreams, Clio?"

"Reality happened, okay? I discovered how hard it is to actually make it in this world. So kudos to you for doing it." She took another calming breath. "Tell me about Rocco's wedding." It was obvious that she wanted to turn the conversation away from her life, but still, warmth spilled into her green eyes as she said Rocco's name. "It would have been something to see Rocco dance to the tunes of the woman he fell so hard for. Olivia Fitzgerald must be really special."

The wistfulness in her gaze before she looked around herself

and covered it up tugged at his curiosity. “Olivia is definitely something, and Rocco is well and truly caught.”

He noted the way her gaze kept going to the entrance to the terrace, the same revolving door that Jackson and the blonde had walked through. “It was only a plane ride away, Clio. If it’s money for the plane ticket, you could have just asked one of us.”

“I’m not destitute, Stefan,” she said tiredly, as if she would do anything if he just left her alone. “After Christian paid my rent for a few months that one time, I managed fine.”

Shock reverberated through Stefan.

Christian had helped Clio once with the rent? Had it been that bad for her?

But he had no doubt as to why Christian wouldn’t have breathed a word. His friend had grown up in poverty on the streets of Athens, was the one who really understood what it meant to make ends meet when you started with nothing.

He understood why it would have been Christian that Clio had gone to. But still, he didn’t like that things had been so bad for her and he hadn’t even had an inkling of it.

He stared at her anew.

There was no emotion, not even bitterness, in her tone. Only an underlying urgency and fear prompted by what, he had no idea.

It had to be something related to Jackson.

A renewed purpose filled him. He had to help her get out of whatever it was.

"If you ever needed something, you only had to ask."

"I don't want charity. Yours or anyone else's. I paid Christian back when I was able to. I'm fine now."

"Then why did you not come to the wedding? Why did you blanch when you saw me?"

"I told you. I've had too many things going on and—"

"Is it that or is the fact that your new associations and your new way of life don't let you see your old friends anymore?"

She paled. "Whatever it is that you're implying, say it straight to my face, Stefan. It's not like you to worry about someone else's feelings, is it?"

"Jackson Smith."

A stillness came over her and Stefan knew. Whatever it was that robbed all color from her skin, that made a shadow of Clio, it was Jackson. "What...what do you mean?" He saw her throat swallow forcibly.

"Are you not well, *bella*?"

She jerked away from him, her breath coming in sharp bursts. "What. About. Jackson, Stefan?"

"Jackson is a crook. A polished, smooth-talking, self-centered crook. The best thing I can say about him is that he doesn't lack for female company wherever he goes."

Her brittle laughter interrupted him. "I could say the same or even less about you. A Slavic model and the ripples that she created just a couple of months ago come to mind." A feverish gleam entered her eyes. "What was it? 'Bianco's last name should

really be Bastard,” she finished with a mutinous gleam. “You have been dubbed the One-Date Wonder because you won’t even see the same woman twice.”

Her defense of that crook infuriated Stefan. “You have no idea what Jackson could be up to. His business practices are extremely murky. I have been looking for proof for a long time to pin him for it. He’s a greedy bastard, a leech who will use anyone to climb the ladder a little more, will use any means, even illegal ones to get what he wants. In straight words, he’s scum through and through. Whatever connection you have with him, cut it and walk away, before he brings you down with him.”

Every ounce of color fled from her face, leaving a pale, tight mask behind. “I don’t believe you. I know that Jackson can be brash and even uncouth sometimes, but he...”

“Then you’ve also become a fool and are not worth my time or advice.”

Fury that she would put him on the same level as Jackson left a bad taste in his mouth. This was not the woman he had known and admired once.

“Or maybe this is the life you lead now, Clio. Maybe walking away from wealth and the status you were born to didn’t work out quite like you thought it would. Maybe the facade of status and wealth that Jackson provides you makes being part of his crooked schemes worth it.”

Something flittered in her gaze, and against every instinct that warned him to walk away, Stefan stayed. Instead of the anger

he expected, hurt wreathed her features. And again, this pale imitation of the old Clio he had known once twisted a knot in his gut.

“You don’t think that really.”

“A decade is a long time. You might be just as power hungry and itching to be kept like most women I know.”

“And you must have really become a cold bastard to be able to say that to me.”

Her words fell away like water on rocks. Had he become sentimental about her because he had known her a decade ago?

Clio was no different.

Women with self-respect, women who weren’t out for everything they could get could be counted on one hand. Like Rocco’s Olivia.

“Touché, *bella*. Maybe we are strangers to each other.”

“With nothing more to say to each other.”

She looked as if she was caught in a trap with no way out. It would haunt him if he walked away now.

“*Dio*, Clio...are you in some kind of trouble? Just tell me how you know him.”

Her chin lifted. As if she was bracing herself for attack.

“I work for him, have done for five years now. He gave me a job when no one would hire me, Stefan, showed me a way to make it in New York when I would have returned home to England with shame on my face. I have to believe that you’re mistaken. I have to believe for my own sake that everything

you're saying..." As erect and stiff as her shoulders were, she trembled. "Jackson's my fiancé."

"You are..." Gritting his jaw, Stefan curtailed the stinging response that rose to his lips, waited for the shock that was reverberating inside him to abate.

The fact that she had mentioned her engagement to Jackson as a second thought, that she had almost swayed while saying it—nothing could dilute the acidic taste that filled him.

How could Clio, of all the women in the world, be engaged to marry Jackson Smith? Had she changed that much?

Was it all shine and no substance to Clio either?

A memory from a long time ago of a laughing Clio, her lustrous red hair flying behind her, cycling across the campus from one class to the next, challenging him to a race, slammed into him.

Against the backdrop of a lot of ugly memories of New York that persisted in his mind, he could do nothing but let himself be washed in the wake of this one.

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference," he said, quoting her favorite line by Frost.

A gasp fell from her mouth, the sheen of tears turning her eyes into glittering emeralds. "I used to think of you as a firestorm, Clio. Vibrant, fierce and so unafraid." His pulse quickened as the scent of her skin teased him. "I used to think you were the strongest woman I had ever met.

“Don’t tell me everything is okay in your life, *bella*. Because I can see it’s not.” He placed his hand on one bony shoulder and squeezed. Felt the tremble that racked her.

She looked up at him, shock and disbelief written all over her face.

“I’ll be at the Chatsfield for a couple of days. If you need something, *anything*, come see me.

“We can have a drink and I’ll tell you about this girl I met on the first day of university, looking for art class. Her hair the color of molten fire, her smile as big as the ocean...the very joy in every step she took that she was finally free...

“She was a sight to behold.

“Two years later, she bet the champion rowing team of four —” he was smiling now, thinking of himself, Zayed, Rocco and Christian brimming with cocky confidence, amazed at the redhead who dared challenge them while every other woman worshipped the ground they walked on “—that she would walk naked across the university lawn rather than cheer them in the final tournament. Told them their arrogant heads were already full of themselves.

“And the night they did win that match, she ran through the lawn, fully dressed and completely sloshed, like a streak of lightning. Because she thought they would demand that she pay.

“I don’t think I remember ever laughing so much as I did that night.”

With a hand that was not quite steady, he wiped the one tear

that rolled down her cheek. Whispered the motto by which he and the rest of the Columbia Four lived by. Words that had served Rocco, Christian, Zayed and him well, more than once.

"Memento vivere, bella."

CHAPTER TWO

REMEMBER TO LIVE...

Clio leaned against the balcony, her legs trembling beneath her, her heart thumping wildly against her rib cage.

A motto that Rocco, Christian, Zayed and Stefan lived by... She had always laughed at the way they quoted it, at how they used it to conquer the world that had been their playground...

Laughed it away so easily because, of course, she had been a shining example of it...

Had she been that girl once?

Stefan's words swept through her with the force of a tsunami, holding up a picture of the woman she had been so long ago that it was almost like a figment of her imagination.

That Clio had been full of fire and dreams for the future, determined to take on life on her terms.

And yet, here she was today, waiting for the man who had professed to love her. Letting him rule her choice of clothing, her time and even what she did with her life. Waiting for him to look at her again as he had done three years ago. Wishing desperately that he still loved her.

Letting her life pass by with a sigh, her opinions and her words swallowed and locked in her throat.

How had she become this person? Where the hell was Jackson?

Sick of waiting another moment longer, she made her way into the corridor. The empty space sent her heart thudding in her chest as she took the staircase to the lower floor.

And stilled as a smoky, drawling laugh and the accompanying husky female whisper reached her.

A dreadful suspicion gathered momentum and rushed toward her like a freight train. Every step felt like one toward her own doom. Her skin crawled as a sensual gasp filled the air, and the whispers of clothes and limbs punctured the silence.

“Jackson...oh, baby...I can’t do this anymore, Jackson. I love you and I... Tell her it’s over, Jackson.”

Tears filled Clio’s eyes as she stood there, her breath suspended in her throat, her world falling apart around her. Her hands turned into fists by her side, and she shoved one in her mouth to stop the shocked gasp from making itself heard.

She heard more grunts and a soft curse fall from Jackson and instantly, her mind supplied the image required. “Just a few more months, baby. You know how much we need her connections.

“Clio is blue-blooded aristocracy, the likes of whom I won’t meet again. Did you see the sheer size and scope of Jane Alcott’s estates? A few more clients like that, and we will be set.”

“But, Jackson...” Clio could just imagine the pout of Ashley’s voluptuous mouth, “I’ll be showing by then. Is this how you want our new life to begin? Me hiding in case Ms. Stiff and Proper

sees me while you pretend to be her loving fiancé? The thought of you touching her makes me so...”

Ashley is pregnant... It seemed there was no end to the knocks coming her way...

Jackson spoke amidst rattling breaths. “I have no desire to touch her. And you very well know that I have no strength left after one of our afternoon appointments to do so even if I were inclined.”

Clio slapped her hands over her ears as she heard Ashley’s satisfied laugh.

“Just give me a couple more months.” Saccharine warmth dripped from Jackson’s voice. “She’s still very useful to us. Once I have used up all the connections Clio can provide for us, I’ll get rid of her. Until then, appearances are crucial.”

“If she backs out before then?”

“Backs out of what? For all her claims of walking away from her family and the man they wanted her to marry, Clio’s desperate to be loved, desperate to feel that she’s succeeded at something even if it’s just scoring a man.” There was no hesitation in Jackson’s voice. Only the absolute truth as he believed it to be. “The woman she is now, there’s no other man who would touch Clio Norwood with a pole, much less want her.”

Bile crawled up Clio’s throat and she turned away from the door. Pushing the heavy door to the staircase, she only got up one group of stairs before her legs gave out and she collapsed onto the grimy floor.

Desperate to be loved, desperate to feel that she's succeeded at something...

Beating back her head against the wall, Clio closed her eyes, shutting off the tears that threatened to deluge her. Still, a few drops leaked through her tightly shut lids.

How could she have misjudged Jackson so badly? How could she have not seen this coming? How many times did she need to learn this lesson? She had never been valued for anything more than her father's name, had never been valued for herself.

However far she ran, her name and everything it entailed caught up with her. Fury and self-disgust unlike she had ever known slammed into her gut.

For months, she had let Jackson walk over her, she had let Ashley make a mockery of her in front of friends.

There had been too many business dinners to attend, too many charity galas they needed to be seen at—dressed in designer clothes and sipping champagne, instead of where she preferred to be—behind the scenes getting her hands dirty.

There had been too much of displaying themselves rather than doing anything of substance. Too much of putting herself on parade on Jackson's arm, too much of talking about her parents and her family's aristocratic background and connections.

Too much of being stifled by rules, weighed down by expectations. Too much of being a Norwood, daughter of one of the most powerful aristocratic families in Britain, too much of being the Manhattan elite, power-hungry financier Jackson

Smith's fiancée.

Too little of being herself, of just being Clio.

All her life, she had craved her father's approval, even when she hadn't fit right with her family's aristocratic connections. She'd stupidly hoped he would be proud of her if she did as he asked of her.

Had tried to make herself the perfect daughter. Until she found out he had arranged her marriage and choked at the very ropes she had bound around herself.

And she had fallen into the same trap with Jackson.

All the signs had been there and she had been too blind to see them, too desperate to need something in her life to be a success.

She had led herself to the very same place she had left in her home country over a decade ago, into the same life where she couldn't breathe.

Every uncomfortable feeling she had repressed, every doubt she had swallowed so that she didn't mess up another one of his meetings and parties, suddenly balled up in her throat, choking her breath.

Her identity had somehow fractured and attached itself in pieces to Jackson's.

And all for what?

So that he could cheat on her, so that he could impregnate his assistant.

Her love, her fears, hadn't mattered to Jackson at all. And not seeing that truth had all been her fault.

CHAPTER THREE

"I'M SORRY, MA'AM. I can't allow you to go up to Mr. Bianco's suite."

Clio heard the receptionist behind the huge swathe of pristine black marble and looked around herself in confusion. Had she inquired about Stefan? Where had she walked to?

Turning around, she swept her gaze over the quiet and ultraluxurious lounge at the Chatsfield New York. A bank of glass-walled elevators stood to the side.

Utter silence reigned over the marble-floored lounge, the humdrum of quiet efficiency amidst the flowing humanity of Manhattan outside creating a sharp contrast.

The lavish interior of the famous hotel filtered in through her slowly.

"Do you want me to let him know of your arrival, Ms....?"

Blinking, Clio pulled her attention back to the young man. "Clio. Just Clio," she said, working her mouth to make the sound. Just the thought of saying Norwood sent a chill through her. Her entire body felt as if it was operating on some kind of auto mechanism she hadn't known she possessed.

Why else would she come to a man whose power and ambition were ten times those of Jackson? A man who had looked at her as if she had somehow tainted herself just by her association with Jackson?

"Wait, Miss...Ms....Clio, hold on."

Coloring at the curious perusal of the receptionist, Clio

wrapped her arms around herself. "I'm sorry for troubling you. I have to leave."

She hadn't even realized how or when she had decided to walk to the Chatsfield, to see Stefan. The enigmatic green gaze and scornful mouth rose in front of her and she shook herself. No, she had no strength to expose herself to his brand of truth and evaluation, didn't have the strength to fare against the memory of a woman she didn't even remember being once.

His disappointment earlier still stung like a slap.

If she went to him the way she was feeling right now, he would lacerate her with his ruthless words, would peel away any remnants of self-respect she still had left.

The thought of telling him what she had heard, the thought of his reaction got her to move as nothing else could.

She took a few steps toward the revolving glass doors when she heard her name called again.

"Ms. Clio, Mr. Bianco authorized a permanent key card for you with us. At all our international branches. He left very specific instructions that we were to provide anything you asked for, anything you needed, should you come."

The receptionist placed the key card on the gleaming counter and pulled his hand back.

As if he knew how close to breaking point she was. As if she were a wild animal he needed to treat with the utmost care. Something in his kind gaze, something in the cajoling tone of his voice shook Clio out of the fog she was functioning in.

Was this what she had become? A woman so lost in life that she had reduced a perfect stranger to pitying her?

She didn't know what she wanted to do, she didn't know how to take the next step in her life. She felt utterly lost, alone.

The fact that all she wanted to do was crawl into the nearest hole and never emerge scraped her raw. And yet, something in her, some small part of her that refused to whimper like a victim, had brought her here.

Her career, her life, her self-respect and her heart—everything lay in ragged tatters around her feet.

She knew that she needed help. To figure out how to do the one thing that burned inside her while everything else lay in ashes.

She grabbed the key card and palmed the smooth surface. Forced herself to put one foot in front of the other, to take a deep, purging breath. The quiet swish of the lift as it bore her to the fifty-second floor pinged against her tautly stretched nerves.

When the doors finally opened, she stepped out onto an enormous foyer boasting four balconies with glass railings that provided breathtaking views of the one of the world's finest cities.

It was like a castle built amidst the clouds.

Walking past a gold-embossed statue in the middle of the foyer, she reached the lounge. A champagne-and-brown color scheme reigned, with glittering burnished-gold and deep red accessories here and there that matched the white-hot

temperament of the man she had once known.

Although the Stefan she had met this evening had been coldly ruthless.

What the hell was she even doing here?

Just as she turned in the direction of the elevator, his silky smooth question rang out.

“You’re leaving already?”

Clutching her eyes closed, Clio willed herself to calm down. In a helpless way that made her totally nauseous, she was glad that he had spotted her before she had made a hasty exit.

Because now, she knew Stefan wouldn’t let her leave. Now, if she could just find the strength to say what she had come to say without betraying herself...

Every doubt she was harboring ground to a halt as he moved into the lounge with a lithe grace that she followed as if she was mesmerized.

A plush white towel wrapped around his narrow hips contrasted sharply against a tanned chest. Droplets of water clung to chest hair that covered ropes of well-defined muscles. His freshly shaved jawline glinted with that trademark arrogance of his while his olive green gaze pinned her to the spot.

Awareness sliced through Clio like a physical shove to her senses and she swayed where she stood. It was like a deluge of flood over drought-ridden land.

“Clio, is everything all right?” he said, tossing a white towel over his nape that fell onto his chest.

Clio came back to the earth with a thump. Suddenly, asking Stefan for help felt like the most absurd idea she had ever thought of.

Before she could blink, he covered the distance between them. The scent of him, raw and masculine, was like a whiplash that slammed her breath in her throat.

Shaking her head, she pushed her hair back. "I'm fine. Can I have something to drink?"

For a few seconds, he stood there staring at her.

Tall, impossibly wide, six feet three inches of prime Sicilian male, and all his focus was on her. His eyes perused her with a leisurely intensity that made her feel exposed, raw.

Not that she trusted her body's response.

Finally, he moved to the glittering bar that covered one side of the lounge. "What would you like to drink?"

"Just some water, please." There was a false comfort in talking about something so mundane. Maybe because it reminded her that the world did not fall away even through the earthquake in her life. "Alcohol gives me—"

"A migraine, I know. Are they still as bad as they used to be?"

He had remembered. Clio squashed the spurt of warmth that bloomed in her chest with ruthless will. So one of the youngest millionaires in the world had a good memory. Not a big surprise. "I never found anything to help me. So I don't touch it," she said, shrugging.

The sound of the refrigerator opening, the soft clink of the ice

cubes against the glass punctured the silence that swathed them with awkwardness.

She hadn't even told him why she was here. And he hadn't asked.

Yet, it felt as if there was something in the air, an imbalance of power, a swirl of currents eddying around them, caging them together in the cavernous lounge. And she recoiled at adding to it by telling him what had happened tonight.

Would he laugh at her stupidity that she hadn't even seen through Jackson's facade for so long?

She grabbed the glass from him, and took a greedy gulp. All the while, he stood there like a dark specter, watching her, assessing her. And somehow she had a feeling, he found her wanting.

She had fallen in her own eyes. *Did it matter if she did in his?* a rebellious part of her mocked.

The answer had to be no because she didn't have a single feeling to spare for him. There was nothing but cold will to keep her going.

"I'm sorry about intruding on you unannounced," she said, once the cold water brought feeling back into her throat. "I didn't even realize I had started walking toward..."

Catching the gleam of mockery in his green gaze, she faltered. He took the glass from her shaking fingers. "Clio Norwood—epitome of good manners and decorum, even as she's falling apart."

“I’m not falling apart.”

His blunt-tipped fingers landed on her jaw and tilted her face up.

Panic chasing her stringent awareness of him, she caught his wrist to push it away. The pressure of his fingers increased.

“Then why are you so jumpy?”

There was no sympathy in his voice and for that she was a thousand times grateful. One kind word from him would break the small thread that was holding her together.

Falling apart, in front of him, was not a choice.

“I’m not. I just...” A ball of tears tightened her throat.

“Tell me what’s going on, Clio.”

The inherent command in his tone somehow grounded her.

Instead of jerking away from his touch, she slowly pushed it back. But the rasp of his hair-roughened wrist, the strong tendons of it, was too much sensation. She dropped his hand, her pulse thudding too loud.

“Have you eaten dinner?”

“No.”

“How did you get here?”

She raised her gaze. “What?”

“To the Chatsfield?”

“I walked.”

“From where?”

“From the dinner party.”

“At the Empire State Building?”

“Yes.”

He cursed so vehemently that Clio hugged herself instinctively. “That’s almost fifteen blocks from here and it’s nine-thirty at night. What the hell is wrong with you that you would walk at night in New York of all places?”

She remained mute, no response rising in the face of his valid point.

He sighed. “Finish that water and then order something from room service. I’ll get dressed and be back. And then you can tell me why you look like you—”

Anxiety hit her in waves. If he disappeared, she knew she would lose whatever it was that had brought her this far.

Saving face in front of him would become more important than moving on in her life.

“No, wait. Don’t leave. I...”

“Then get rid of that look in your eyes, *bella*,” he said. “I can’t stand it.” A hint of emotion colored that bland statement.

“What look?”

Pushing his tensile body into her space, he folded his hands. The muscles in his biceps curled enticingly and Clio choked back hysteria. Her life was falling apart, and yet it seemed the sight of Stefan half-naked could distract her as nothing else could.

“Like you’re terrified of me,” he said through gritted teeth. “We might have become strangers to each other but I would never hurt you, *bella*. Whatever Jackson did, you need to shake yourself out of it.” His voice fell as if she were a wounded animal he was

persuading into his care.

“I’m not a danger to you, Clio.”

Oh, but he was, Clio admitted, her pulse skyrocketing.

If Jackson had reduced her to a shadow of herself over the years, Stefan could destroy the small part of her that was still intact. That he knew what she had been once and what she was now, it was a weapon he could wield with ease and without emotion, if he didn’t like what she was about to say.

The young man she had known at Columbia had not only been idealistic but also kind, with a rosy view of the world.

This man he was now, he rattled Clio on so many levels.

But she had no intention of ever letting a man define her sense of self. Ever again.

The thought gave her the courage to say what she wanted to. “I decided to take you up on your offer. I need your...I need help, Stefan.”

Something infinitesimal flashed in his brooding gaze, gone before she could read it. His defined jaw hardened. He moved to a small side table with delicately carved legs, and pulled out a checkbook.

He flipped it open with a pen poised in his left hand. That familiar sight of him balancing the book on his right forearm brought forth such a strong memory that she almost didn’t hear him when he said, “How much do you need?”

Her jaw falling open, Clio stared at him. Acid crawled up her throat and she forced herself to hold his gaze, realizing what his

look had meant.

He thought she had come to him for money.

Even as he had reminded her of what she had been, it was clear that Stefan had already written her off as a lost cause.

It rankled just as much as Jackson's treacherous perfidy did, it tore her in half that she had brought this on herself. But it was high time she started fighting for herself, too. High time she started growing a backbone.

"How much, Clio?"

"Will you give me as much as I want, Stefan? How about a million dollars?" Something in her challenged him, pushed to see how far he would go.

He didn't even blink. "A million it will be, *bella*. I will tell my finance guy that this year our charity contribution is going to the Clio Norwood Foundation."

I don't want your charity.

Swallowing back the bile his offhand comment provoked, she reminded herself to not flinch, to not betray the hurt that lanced through her.

She had no idea why she was inflicting this on herself, but she couldn't stop.

"And if I come back for more?"

"I'll give you more." He threw the checkbook on the coffee table between them, the gesture so full of powerful arrogance and a masculine elegance that Clio forgot what had prompted it. Even half-naked as he was, power and ruthlessness emanated

from every cell in him.

“You can have as much as you want, Clio. All you would have to do is walk away from that crook. No matter how deep you are in, you can walk away.”

“Why? Why would you help me?”

“Once, you were my friend. Once, I used to think the world of you. Seeing you like this...”

Some unnamed emotion flickered in his eyes and Clio stared anew. His face transformed so much when a hint of emotion touched it that it was like seeing a shadow of the old Stefan.

“If I can help you get away from—” he scowled as if he hated even saying Jackson’s name again “—I’ll save you, even if it has to be from yourself. It’s like taking a friend or a family member to a rehabilitation clinic for treatment for addiction.”

“Even though you think I’m not worth the ground I’m standing on?”

His dark smile didn’t falter for a second. “Your words, *bella*, not mine.” A blast of cold solidified in her core and Clio shivered.

It was one thing to think that of herself, another to hear someone confirm it. But with Stefan, there was nothing but honesty. Cutting, lacerating honesty, but honesty all the same.

His gaze swept over her, lingering and intense. “But, yes, even then. I would do the same for Rocco, Christian and Zayed, too.”

The Columbia Four’s friendship, the inviolate bond they had forged with each other, she had always been envious of it. To be included now as something he had to salvage from the wreck

she'd made of herself... "Wow, at least in one regard, I'm in illustrious company, aren't I?"

He moved around the coffee table, and it was like watching a wild animal move. With grace and purpose.

The moment he was within touching distance, everything within Clio retreated inward into a tight ball. But still, the heat of his body incited a trembling in her very bones.

The breadth of his frame swathed her as he bent down. "Do not ask a question of me if you don't have the constitution for truth, Clio."

Her brain taken over with issuing flight responses, Clio nodded dumbly.

Stefan Bianco was a Sicilian alpha male in his prime.

Physically magnificent, powerful beyond her wildest imagination, ruthlessly rich. A potent combination of masculinity and heat that could probably compel a stone to react if he so intended.

A woman like her, with her very sense of self battered and beaten down, was nothing. She wrapped her hands around herself, as if it could corral his presence and her reaction.

If she wasn't careful, he would overpower her so much that she would get swept away in unraveling that enigmatic disinterest he projected so easily. As so many women did—deluding themselves that they could melt the icy heart beneath the fiery exterior of his Sicilian temperament.

Stefan had buried his heart so deep and so long ago that he

didn't even have one anymore, she sensed. Stepping away from him, she shook herself free of his magnetic pull. Met his gaze head-on. "I never want to hear anything but the truth from you, Stefan."

"Deal," he said with an indulgent smile that was more like a threat than a reassuring promise. "Now it's time to put your cards on the table, *bella*. Without fear."

She knew exactly where she stood with him; she would always know.

His brand of friendship—eviscerating and without an ounce of pretension—was what she needed to remake herself, to redefine herself. Stefan was the perfect path for her to walk on toward becoming her own woman again.

"As gratifying as it is to learn I could have millions if I just made myself your charity case, I didn't come here for money. I want nothing from you for free."

"What do you want, then?"

Her chest felt so tight that she had to break his gaze. Had to force herself to speak past the sound of Jackson's and Ashley's combined laughter resonating through her.

Jackson's cheating on her, using her for her connections, reducing her entire identity to the value she provided him in his blasted business, scraped her raw. But that he could be so casually cruel about her feelings, that he would betray every aspect of their lives together, that he would laugh at her fears and insecurities behind her back...it festered inside her like a

putrefied wound.

It tainted every aspect of her so much that she was beginning to despise herself.

And she wouldn't be able to move forward, wouldn't be able to look herself in the eye unless she showed him that he couldn't do this to her without realizing the consequences. Unless she proved to him and herself that she was more than what he had called her.

"I want to teach Jackson a lesson he will never forget."

Cold—blanching and eviscerating—dawned in Stefan's gaze and he stepped away as if she was the very plague. His jaw clenched so tight that it was a wonder he spoke through it. "I will not play petty games so that you can make him jealous and win him back. If that's why you came, get out. *Now*. Before I physically restrain you from going back to that leech."

"I don't want to make him jealous. I want to remove Jackson from every part of my life. I don't want even his shadow to touch me anymore."

"That is as simple as walking away, Clio."

"Not without making him realize what he's done to me."

Disbelief shone in his eyes. "Earlier, you wouldn't believe a word I said. How do I know you won't go running back to him the minute he starts whispering words of love again?"

"Earlier, I was a fool who'd have done anything for the man I loved. Now...I feel nothing but disgust and pity for that woman. My skin crawls when I think that I stayed all these years... Does that satisfy you? Or do you want me to prostrate myself before

you're ready to believe me?"

His gaze encompassed her from top to toe as though he was enjoying the idea of her prostrating herself. By sheer will, she stood still under that assessing gaze.

"You're angry and emotional right now. Tomorrow, you'll forgive him and crawl back to him—"

"Listen to my proposal first. Then make your decision."

She was so tired of men playing their games with her, controlling her, defining her, owning her joys and her sorrows.

First her father and then Jackson...

So tired of losing herself, again and again. The irony of appealing to another man for help, of letting him see her darkest fears, a man who was a hundred times more powerful and ruthless than Jackson or her father, wasn't lost on her.

But Jackson had been wrong. She still had one avenue left and she was going to throw herself into it.

"Do you want to expose Jackson's reality to the world?"

Something shifted in his expression, a watchful uncoiling of his rigid stance. He was hooked. For the first time in months, Clio felt a surge of positivity fill her.

"Throwing a million dollars at you is easy. What you're suggesting is far more elaborate and requires a great deal of my actual involvement."

"But you'll do it," she said, forcing confidence into her tone.

Heat flared in his gaze at the vehemence of her statement. She braced herself, expecting him to cut her down.

“Why?”

“Because I saw it in your face tonight just as you saw whatever you did in mine.

“When I said he was my fiancé, there was such anger, such distaste in your gaze. I don’t know how or what he did to you, but I know that you won’t forgive and forget.”

His gaze swept over her face with a thoroughly cold appraisal. “I see that there’s still a bit of the old Clio in you, *bella*.”

“You have found the weak link in Jackson’s life. It’s me.” Her voice wobbled on the last bit, the very venom that Jackson’s words caused in her coating her throat.

“I will bring that man down if we start on this path. There will be no half measures, no backing out. No going back to him. Ever.”

“I’m not weak, Stefan, not in this. I swallowed the disgust that was roiling through me today, and came to you without his knowledge.”

“Tell me what happened.”

For a second, Clio could only stare at the authority with which he demanded an answer.

“Does it matter what happened? If I have to face myself in the mirror, if I have to...I’ll bring you anything you need about Jackson’s business and his hedge fund company. But only if you agree to my proposal.”

“What is your proposal, Clio?”

Clio stared at Stefan and willed the words to come, willed

herself to put the last part of her plan into words. It had been gathering in the back of her mind like a tsunami, shaking everything in its path, laughing at her weak will, her fears.

She couldn't back out now, as scary as it was to tie her fate to this man even temporarily.

Stefan Bianco, once a cherished friend and now a ruthless stranger, would be the fire through which she would have to walk. And once she emerged from that fire, no man would ever have the power to hurt her again.

No man would even come close.

"I want you to profess undying love to me. In a gesture that captures media attention. I want you to get engaged to me, turn all that brooding arrogance into possessive, fiery love for me. I want you to lend me the might of your status as the ruthless playboy who wouldn't look twice at the same woman much less have a relationship with her.

"And I want all this done in a way that Jackson can't turn his head, can't even blink without our engagement splashed in his face.

"Then, I'll bring you everything you need to expose him."

CHAPTER FOUR

"NO."

The word fell from his mouth and boomeranged in the cavernous lounge even before Stefan processed Clio's outrageous proposition. The very thought of tying himself to a woman, any woman, filled his veins with ice.

And to someone like Clio, whom he had liked once...it was unbearable even in thought.

Rubbing his hand over his jaw, he looked up at her.

Desperation and something else danced beneath the steady look she cast him. Her fingers as she settled them over her forearms left pink marks revealing how tightly she was holding on.

Her hair was beginning to fall away from the tight knot at the back of her head. Still dressed in the black sleeveless dress that somehow leached all the color from her face, he knew she had come to him directly from the party.

Had somehow found the strength to come to him.

He shoved away the protectiveness that rose like a storm within him, to be discerned later.

It had been a while since a woman had surprised him with her words or actions.

The fact that it was Clio, a woman he had written off as a lost cause, intensified the surprise.

“As tempting as your proposal is, I have no intention of associating myself with a woman romantically, *bella*. Even for a pretense. Even for a few months. Even for saving a friend. I will never be good to the woman who occupies that role in my life, Clio.”

Her chin tilted down, but there was determination in her gaze. “It’s just a pretense, Stefan. I won’t ask anything of you.”

“No.”

“Then you get nothing from me about Jackson.” Her gaze flashed with determination. “And just so you know what you’re saying no to, I’m a board member on his company.

“Of course, I have been nothing but a figurehead all these years but at least it’s unrestricted access. To his company’s finances, his bank accounts, even his offshore investments.”

“Anything shady ever caught your interest?”

She shook her head. “I’ve never had reason to doubt him.”

“The minute the media links my name with you even in a whisper, Jackson will shut you out. You’ll be of no use to me. Our antipathy is mutual.”

Exhaling slowly, she loosened her fingers, her relief palpable in the way her features relaxed. “Obviously, it’s my first time plotting something vicious like this, so you’ll have to excuse me if I don’t go all *Kill Bill* on you right now, Stefan. I’m thinking on my feet here.”

He laughed, glad to see a spot of color in her cheeks again. “Then let’s put shopping for a yellow suit and a samurai sword on the agenda, sì? First stop will be Japan.”

An almost smile glimmered around her pink mouth and Stefan had the oddest urge to tease it out completely. The way flashes of the old Clio peeked through the desperation and defeat in her eyes stirred him.

A challenge—that’s what she could become to him, if he let her. Because, even a decade ago, he had wanted her, had pursued her doggedly that first year.

But once they had become true friends, he had backed off, cherishing that friendship more; then he had met and fallen in love with Serena.

His mind was more than eager to wander on the paths they had never gone on, that they could take now.

But there were plenty of uncomplicated, desirable women in the world for his taste. Ones who didn't look as if they were barely holding on.

Clio, for him, clearly needed to be in the Do Not Touch camp.

He couldn't help teasing her, though. "As far as I can see, you're in good shape, so that's good."

Utter silence stretched between them, the moment building and building.

"Since we're counting if I'll be useful to you or not, are you considering my proposal?"

There was a self-deprecation in her tone that masked something beneath. The way she held herself so stiff, the way her fingers clutched her opposite hands—Stefan knew it was fear.

Realizing how close she was to falling apart only made him wonder at the strength of her. But whatever Jackson had done, she was still riding that wave of adrenaline.

Which meant she would crash soon.

And he had no doubt that she would back away, even recoil at the very idea of them joining forces to bring down Jackson.

The young woman he had known at Columbia had possessed the biggest heart he had ever seen, had possessed amazing

capacity for love and forgiveness.

That she had come to him like this, that Clio was considering this path, spoke of the damage Jackson must have done to her.

Fury filled Stefan that Jackson's ambition had led to this. If he didn't take care of her, she could end up like Marco. Or worse.

And the thought of anything happening to her at the hands of Jackson drove him wild with panic.

With a control that had taken him years to hone, he forced himself to sound casual. "Your proposal is beneficial to me. So yes, I'm considering it."

"What do I have to do to convince you completely?" she retorted instantly and he found relief in her mutinous gaze.

What he needed now was time with Clio.

Time in which Clio didn't see Jackson and revert back to that pale shadow she had been earlier tonight. Time in which she would crash from whatever was driving her right this minute and consider going back to him again.

Time in which he could keep her close. And even if things didn't work out as per the plan between them, he had no intention of letting her go back to that man.

Even as he had struggled with getting a handle on his intense reaction to seeing her again, he had come to terms with some of it.

He felt responsible for Clio. It didn't matter where it grew from, only that he did.

"I will accept your deal based on one condition."

* * *

Clio forced herself to shrug, to affect a casualness that she was far from feeling. She had known the man he was today wouldn't just follow along with her plans.

That he would demand something from her struck fear in her, though. "I have nothing else to give you. My career, my life, even my savings account is tied to Jackson and his company. As of this moment, I don't even have a place to go back to."

"That works out perfectly for what I have in mind, then."

"Was that my miserable life that you were referring to just now?"

A dark smile turned the corners of his serious mouth upward. "If you want to be publicly engaged to me, if you want me to act the part of besotted fiancé, first you have to prove it to me that you have enough guts to see through this whole thing. I won't let you go back on it when it's time for your part."

"I already told you that this is..."

He shook his head. "My way or no way, Clio."

She blew out a long breath, her aristocratic nose flaring with her struggle for control. "Fine. What do I have to do to prove that I'll see this through, that you won't have a hysterical female who's dying to go back to Jackson?"

"You have to come with me to Christian and Alessandra's wedding," he said.

It was the last thing she expected him to say. The last thing she wanted to do in the world.

Coming to see Stefan tonight, she was still amazed at her own strength in managing it. But seeing Rocco, Christian and Zayed, seeing the disbelief and pity that would fill their faces when they saw her, she didn't have the heart for it.

"There's nothing you will gain by dragging me to Christian's wedding."

"That's for me to decide," he said, arrogant implacability in his tone.

"Stefan, listen to me. I'll go back to Jackson tonight and pretend like nothing happened. Even as nauseous as it makes me to do it. For the next week, I'll continue to keep my mouth shut like I did over the last few years and let him think I'm still the same, spineless Clio." Just thinking of it made her skin crawl. "I'll wait until you return from Christian's wedding. That's innumerable chances for me to back out of this thing, by your logic. But I'll be here, waiting. Then you'll know that I'm serious."

"No."

"Why the hell do you care if I go to Christian's wedding or not?"

"If you want to start a new life, *bella*, why not start it with coming back to your old friends?"

"I can't, Stefan. I don't have the..."

"What?"

He reached out to her and pulled her hand into his. Immediately, her fingers stiffened in his but he didn't let go. "Neither of us is going to benefit by lying to each other or by

treading carefully, Clio. If this pretense has any chance to work, it has to be anything but between us. *Capisce, bella?*”

“Yes, but I don’t see the point in carrying the pretense forward to our friends, too. Will you lie to Rocco, Christian and Zayed, Stefan? Will you be able to?”

“If we want the world to buy into our shock engagement, yes. Leave them to me. You...you will not breathe a word to another soul what’s happening between us.

“With Rocco already married and Christian doing the same, the whole world’s eyes are already on the Columbia Four. Won’t be difficult to get them to buy that I’m following in my friends’ footsteps and looking forward to a happily-ever-after with the woman I adore.”

“I won’t be able to pull it off. Deception and lying have never come easy to me.”

“Don’t worry, Clio. You’ll be just as good or even better at pulling this off as any other woman I’ve ever known.”

“Stop insulting me, Stefan. I’m not one of your—”

“The jury’s still out on that one,” he cut her off without blinking an eye, without an ounce of emotion. “Think of it this way, *bella*. For us to begin a pretend engagement that the media and the whole world will eat up, we need to lay the groundwork.

“And what better way to start a lifelong love affair that will be the talk of the world than going to an old, mutual friend’s wedding? Every way I look at it, this is what we need to start our fairy-tale romance.”

A fairy-tale romance with one of the most gorgeous, arrogant, hard-hearted men she had ever met...it was a fate that would have sent Clio running a decade ago.

It had been the fate she had walked away from.

But joining forces with Stefan in this was her choice, she reminded herself.

Meeting his gaze, she nodded. "Fine. Let's go to Christian's wedding. But I have to see Jackson tomorrow."

"No."

"If I have to look through his finances, I can't walk away from him yet."

"Then I will come with you."

"No. I won't fall apart, Stefan. Not tomorrow, not in the coming days."

* * *

"Where the hell have you been, Clio? You don't answer your cell, you're not at work..."

Her breath balling in her throat, Clio stilled as she walked into the lounge of the flat she had lived in for more than four years. Jackson swept his gaze over her. Shock pervaded it and something else.

Pushing his laptop onto the sofa, he shot up and walked toward her. And Clio automatically stepped back.

Do not betray yourself, bella.

With Stefan's warning ringing in her ears, she forced herself to not flinch as Jackson neared her. Her gut twisted and she

wondered if Stefan had been right. That she was not up to even facing Jackson again.

“Clio?”

At five-nine, she topped him a good couple of inches. His gaze on level with hers, he cupped her cheek. There was no way to curb the shiver that spewed within.

“Is everything all right?”

The false sweetness in his greeting sent nausea rising through her. “Actually, I’m not okay.”

There was no need to pretend about her mood. She had not an ounce of belief that she could carry it off even if she tried.

Stepping away from him, she walked to the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of water.

His gaze was still on her but she let hers drift over the sitting area and the dining room.

Desperate to be loved, desperate to feel she’s succeeded at something...

Her chest was so tight that it felt like a miracle that she was breathing. Because everywhere she looked, there was no trace of her in the space she had lived in for four years. It was all either an extension of Jackson’s loud personality or the abode of a New York financier. Nothing about the flat reflected her.

How had she not seen this until now? Her fingers shaking on the plastic bottle, she took a sip of the water and forced the knot in her throat down.

“Clio, you left the party yesterday without informing me, you

didn't return last night except for that text. Where the hell were you?"

"With an old friend," she replied, finally setting her gaze on him.

Not one strand of his expertly cut blond hair was out of place. He was dressed to impress in a charcoal-gray suit—his ice-blue shirt chosen explicitly to bring out the blue of his eyes by none other than Ashley and picked up at the dry cleaner every week by Clio.

He had screwed his assistant barely half a mile away from her and had the temerity to demand explanation of her. Felt not an ounce of shame or guilt. Not even a shadow of hesitation.

Had she made it that easy for him? Had it been so easy to mock her, to use her?

"Clio... Open that mouth and say something or—"

"Or what, Jackson?" the question burst out of her on a wave of anger. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and counted to ten.

The minute Stefan had shown her into the extra bedroom, she had collapsed onto the bed. Yet, sleep had evaded her, the awareness she had tried so hard to shove away descending on her. She pressed her fingers against her temple. "I don't feel good."

Instantly, Jackson's expression fell, like a little boy who was on the verge of a tantrum. "Don't tell me you have another headache coming on. Really, Clio, you would think you would have enough sense to know what triggers one of your episodes..."

It's damned inconvenient of you to be getting one every time we have something important going on."

Perversely, Jackson's sheer lack of concern filled Clio's throat with tears more than his cheating. "I do not plan them, Jackson."

"Is that why you walked away last night while Jane and I waited? You knew how important that meeting was to me."

"I was ill for two weeks, Jackson. A concept you don't seem to understand because you dragged me there even after I told you so. While you were gallivanting around the world, I was here alone, sick with flu. I had barely recovered when you stormed in here and asked me to get ready for that dinner."

A curse flew from his mouth and he almost shoved the cordless phone in her face. "Fine. Pop some pills. Call Jane Alcott, in the next few minutes. Make another appointment. And then call the Savoy and book a table for tomorrow's lunch, I want this deal with Jane done. Like yesterday. And make sure you sound cheery.

"The old biddy asked me a hundred questions after you left last night. Looked at me as though I was responsible for your headaches. And half the time I can't even understand what the bloody hell she's saying."

"God, show her some respect, Jackson."

He glanced at her with such obvious disbelief that Clio cringed inwardly. Was he so shocked at even the smallest sign of an angry response from her?

"What is wrong with you? You have this crazed look in your

eyes. God, you're not pregnant, are you, Clio?"

"How could I be when you haven't touched me in four months?"

The minute she said it, Clio blinked.

Was it any wonder he had walked all over her? The very way she had framed her question meant she had given all her power to him. Every aspect of their relationship had been his to rule.

Something close to shame crossed his face. Would he apologize? Would he make an excuse? Her heart rising to her throat, Clio waited with bated breath. And hated herself a little more for the fact that she did.

"That's not my fault, is it?" he said, his gaze shying away from hers. And something monumental crumbled inside Clio. If there could be a sound for despondence, it would be the sound that she caught in her throat.

"Half the time, you're unhappy with yourself, half the time, you are unhappy with me. And you have a hundred hang-ups about sex. For Christ's sake, Clio, sex is not always about cuddling, and sharing dreams and words of love. Sex should sometimes be just bloody sex. Nothing wrong with letting go in bed. But you can never do that, can you?"

"Do you not care at all about how I feel, Jackson?" The pitiful question left her mouth before Clio knew she was asking it. The desperation in her tone tied with the almost hopeful note made bile rise in her throat.

It was like watching an alternate version of herself talking

to Jackson, hoping he would give an answer that would fix everything she had heard last night, as if it could magically erase the ugliness of their relationship.

That infinitesimal sliver of hope was the most pathetic thing she had ever seen in her life.

I don't trust you to not crawl back to him while I'm gone.

Stefan's word pricked her and she turned away from Jackson.

Everything inside her shook, everything inside her wanted to fall apart and give in to the maelstrom of grief swirling within. But she couldn't. Not yet.

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