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IN ONE

Michelle Smart
BILLIONAIRE'S BRIDE *for*
REVENGE

Susan Stephens
The
SHEIKH'S SHOCK
Child

MILLS & BOON
MODERN

Susan Stephens

**Billionaireâ€™s Bride For Revenge:
Billionaireâ€™s Bride for Revenge**

«HarperCollins»

Stephens S.

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MICHELLE SMART's love affair with books started when she was a baby and she would cuddle them in her cot. A voracious reader of all genres, she found her love of romance established when she stumbled across her first Mills & Boon book at the age of twelve. She's been reading them—and writing them—ever since. Michelle lives in Northamptonshire, England, with her husband and two young Smarties.

SUSAN STEPHENS was a professional singer before meeting her husband on the Mediterranean island of Malta. In true Mills & Boon style, they met on Monday, became engaged on Friday and married three months later. Susan enjoys entertaining, travel and going to the theatre. To relax she reads, cooks and plays the piano, and when she's had enough of relaxing she throws herself off mountains on skis or gallops through the countryside singing loudly.

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MILLS & BOON

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[Billionaire's Bride for Revenge](#)

Michelle Smart

A billionaire seeking retribution...

A bride stolen for revenge!

Billionaire Benjamin has the ultimate plan for vengeance on those who betrayed him: steal his enemy's fiancée, Freya, and marry her himself. It's meant to be a convenient arrangement, yet the cool, collected prima ballerina ignites a passion in his blood! There's nothing remotely convenient about the red-hot pleasures of their wedding night—and Benjamin is tempted to make Freya his for more than revenge...

This is for Tilly & Eliza.

Follow your dreams. xxx

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

BENJAMIN GUILLEM CAST his eye over the heads of the people scattered around the landscaped garden of the Tuscan-style villa in the heart of Madrid, an easy feat considering he was a head taller than most. The only guest there without a plus-one, he was also the only guest in attendance with no intention of celebrating Javier Casillas's engagement.

He snatched a flute of champagne from a passing waitress and drank it in one swallow. The bubbles felt like jagged barbs down his throat, magnifying the hot, knotted feeling that twisted inside him.

Javier and Luis had betrayed him. The Casillas brothers had taken advantage of their lifelong friendship and ripped him off. All the documentary evidence pointed to that inescapable conclusion.

He hoped the evidence was wrong. He hoped his instincts were wrong. They had to be. The alternative was too sickening to contemplate.

He would not leave this party until he knew the truth.

Benjamin took another champagne and stepped over to the elaborate fountain for a better view. He spotted Luis at the far end of the garden surrounded by his usual entourage of sycophants. Javier, Luis's non-identical twin brother and host of the party, was proving far more elusive.

Javier would be hating every minute of this party. He was the most antisocial person Benjamin knew. He'd always been that way, even before their father killed their mother over two decades ago.

Thoughts of the Casillas brothers swiftly evaporated when a dark-haired woman walked out of the summer room, capturing his attention with one graceful step onto the flourishing green lawn. She raised her face to the sky and closed her eyes, holding the pose as if trying to catch the sun's

rays on her skin. There was an elegance about her, a poise, a way of holding herself that immediately made him think she was a dancer.

There were a lot of dancers there. Javier's new fiancée was the Principal Dancer at the ballet company the brothers had bought in their mother's memory. Benjamin wondered if the fiancée knew or cared that she was only a trophy to him.

Benjamin had never cared for the ballet or the people who inhabited its world. This dancer though...

The sun caught the red undertones of her hair, which hung in a thick, wavy mass over glimmering pale shoulders. Her features were interesting rather than classically pretty, a strong, determined jaw softened by a wide, generous mouth...

Her eyes suddenly found his, as if she sensed his gaze upon her, two black orbs ringing at him.

A slight frown appeared on her brow as she stared, an unanswerable question in it, a frown that then lessened as her generous mouth curved hesitantly.

His knotted stomach made a most peculiar twisting motion.

No, not classically pretty but striking. Mesmerising.

He couldn't look away.

And she couldn't seem to tear her gaze from him either, a moment in time existing only for them, two eye-locked strangers.

And then a shadow appeared behind her and she blinked, the sun-bound spell woven around them dissolving as quickly as it had formed.

The shadow was Javier emerging from the sunroom to join his own party.

He spotted Benjamin and nodded a greeting while his right hand settled proprietorially on the dancer's waist.

It came to him in an instant that this woman, the slowly forming smile on her face now frozen, was Javier's fiancée.

By the time Javier had steered the dancer to stand before him by the fountain, Benjamin had swallowed the bite of disappointment, shaken off the last of that strange spell and straightened his spine.

He wasn't here to party or for romance. He was here for business.

'Benjamin, it's good to see you,' Javier said. 'I don't think you've met my fiancée, Freya, have you?'

'No.' He looked straight at her. A hint of colour slashed her high cheekbones. 'A pleasure to meet you.'

Under different circumstances it *would* have been a pleasure but now the spell had broken all that remained was a faint distaste that she should have stared so beguilingly at him when engaged to another man.

But that was all the introduction Javier deemed necessary between his oldest friend and new fiancée, saying, 'Have you seen Luis yet?'

'Not yet but I am hoping to rectify that now.' Then, dismissing the striking vision from his consideration, Benjamin added evenly, 'We need to talk. You, me and Luis. In private.'

There was a momentary silence as Javier stared at him, eyes narrowing before he nodded slowly and caught the attention of a passing waiter. 'Find my brother and tell him to meet me and Senor Guillem in my study.' Dropping his hold on his fiancée's waist, he turned and strode back into the summer room without another word.

Two months later...

Smile, Freya, it's a party and all for a worthy cause.

Smile for the cameras. Smile for your fiancé, still not here but expecting you to turn on the charm even in his absence.

Smile for the gathered strangers, pretend you know them intimately, let them brush their cheek against yours as you greet each other with the fake air kisses that make your stomach curdle.

Smile, there's another camera. Smile as you nurse your glass of champagne.

Smile at the waiting staff circling the great ballroom with silver trays of delicious-smelling canapés but do not—not—be so gauche as to eat one.

Just. Smile.

And she did. Freya smiled so much her face ached, and then she smiled some more.

Being promoted to Principal Dancer at Compañía de Ballet de Casillas came with responsibilities that involved more than pure dance. Freya was now the official face of the ballet company and at this, its most exciting time. The new state-of-the-art theatre the Casillas brothers were building for the company opened in a couple of months and it was her face on all the billboards and advertisements for it. She was the lead in the opening production.

Her, Freya Clements, an East London girl from a family so poor that winters were often a choice between heating and food, a Principal Dancer. It was a dream. She was living her dream. Marriage to Javier Casillas, joint owner of the ballet company, would be the...she almost thought icing on the cake but realised it was the wrong metaphor. Or was it the wrong simile? She couldn't remember, had always struggled to differentiate between them. Either way, she couldn't think of an appropriate metaphor or simile to describe her feelings about marrying Javier.

Javier was rich. Very, very rich. No one knew how much he and his twin Luis were worth but it was rare for their names to be mentioned in the press without the prefix *billionaire*. He was also handsome. He had chosen her to be, as he had put it, his life partner. When she looked at him she imagined him as her Prince Charming but without the title. Or the charm.

It didn't matter that he was morose and generally unavailable. It was better that way. Marrying him gave her deteriorating mother a fighting chance.

In exactly one week he would be her husband.

The entire ballet company was, as of that day, on a two-week shutdown so the new state-of-the-art training facilities and ballet school that went hand in hand with the new theatre could be completed. Javier had decreed they would fit their nuptials in then so as not to disturb her training routine.

Where was he? He should have been here an hour ago. She'd snuck away to the Ladies to call him but found her phone not working. She couldn't think what was wrong with it but she had no signal and no Internet connection. She would try again as soon as she had a minute to herself.

The media were out in force tonight, ready for their first public glimpse of the couple, beside themselves that Javier, son of the ballet dancers Clara Casillas and Yuri Abramova, a union that had ended in tragedy and infamy, was to marry 'a ballerina with the potential for a career as stratospheric as his mother's had been'. That had been an actual quote in a highbrow Spanish magazine, translated by her best friend, fellow ballerina and flatmate, Sophie, who had mastered the Spanish language with an ease that made Freya ashamed of her own inadequacies. In the two years she had lived and worked in Madrid she had hardly picked up the basics of the language.

Many of the company's *corps de ballet* were in attendance that night, window dressing for the attending patrons of the arts whose money and patronage were wanted. Sophie had begged off with a migraine, something she'd been suffering with more frequently in recent weeks. Freya wished she were there. Just having Sophie in the same room soothed the nauseous panic nibbling in her stomach.

Just smile.

So she stretched her lips as wide and as high as she could and accepted yet another fake air kiss from another of Europe's richest women and tried not to choke on the cloud of perfume she inhaled with it.

A tall figure stepped into the ballroom of the hotel the fundraiser was being held in.

Her stomach swooped.

It was *him*. The man from her engagement party.

Benjamin Guillem.

The name floated in her head before she could stamp it out.

It was a name that she had thought of far too often since the party two months ago. His face had found itself floating into her daydreams too many times for comfort too. And in her night dreams...

Suddenly aware of the danger she was placing herself in, she shifted her stance so he was no longer in her eyeline and smiled at an approaching elderly man.

She must *not* stare at him again. If he came over to speak to her she would smile gracefully exactly as she had to the other guests and this time she would find her tongue to speak in the clear voice she had cultivated through the years; chiselling the East London accent out of herself so no one in this moneyed world ever doubted she belonged.

She'd never been so tongue-tied before as she had the first time she'd seen him. She had literally been unable to say a word, just stared at him like some kind of goofball.

Her senses were on red alert, though, and as hard as she tried to concentrate on what the elderly man was saying—something about his granddaughter being a keen dancer—her skin prickled with electricity.

And then he was there, a step behind the old man, waiting his turn to speak to her.

She didn't look directly at him as she laughed politely at a joke the old man said. She hoped it was a joke. She could barely hear her own words let alone his. Blood pounded hot and hard in her head, a burning where Benjamin's gaze rested on her.

He was well mannered enough to wait for a natural pause in the conversation before stepping forward. 'Mademoiselle Clements?'

To her horror she found her vocal cords frozen again and could only nod her acknowledgement at the simple question.

'We met at your engagement party. I am Benjamin Guillem, an old friend of your fiancé.'

He had the thickest, richest French accent she had ever heard. It felt like set honey to her senses.

Unlike the other guests she'd met that evening he made no effort to pull her into an embrace, just stared at her with the eyes she'd found so unnervingly beautiful at her engagement party. Olive skinned, he had messy thick black hair and thick black eyebrows, a rough scar above the top lip of his firm mouth and a sloping nose. He reminded her of a *film noir* star, his dark handsome features carrying a disturbingly dangerous air. Where the other guests wore traditional tuxedos, Benjamin wore a black suit and black shirt with a skinny silver tie. If he were to produce a black fedora it wouldn't look out of place.

The only spot of colour on him were his eyes. Those devastating eyes. A clear, vivid green, they pierced through the skin. They were eyes that didn't miss a thing.

'I remember,' she said in as light a tone as she could muster, fighting through the thumping beats of her heart. 'You stole him away from me.' She'd been thankful for it. Javier had put his hand to her waist. His touch, a touch any other woman would no doubt delight in, had left her cold.

She prayed fervently that by the time they exchanged their vows in exactly seven days her feelings for her fiancé would have thawed enough for her to be receptive to his touch. Javier had yet to make a physical move on her but she knew that would change soon.

They both knew what they were getting into, she reminded herself for the hundredth time. Theirs would be a loveless marriage, the only kind of marriage either of them could accept. She would continue to dance and enjoy her flourishing career for as long as she wanted and then, when *she* felt the time was right, give him babies.

She would be Javier's trophy, she accepted that too, but was hopeful that once they got to know each other properly, friendship would blossom.

And even if friendship didn't blossom, marriage to Javier would be worth it. Anything had to be better than the pain of watching helplessly while her mother withered away. Marrying Javier gave her the chance to extend her mother's life and ensure it was a life worth living.

Benjamin inclined his head, those eyes never losing their hold on hers. ‘Unfortunate but necessary. We had business that could not wait.’

‘Javier said the same.’ That was all he’d said when she had tentatively probed him on it when he’d returned to her an hour later. The tone in his voice had implicitly told her to ask no more.

Her fiancé was a book that wasn’t merely closed but thickly bound too, impossible to open never mind read.

His disappearance with his brother and friend had only piqued her interest because of the friend. This friend. Benjamin. She’d had to hold herself back from peppering Javier with questions about him, something she’d found disturbing in itself.

It occurred to her that she was lucky she felt nothing for Javier. If her heart beat as rapidly for him as it did for this Frenchman she would have thought twice about accepting his proposal. She knew Javier would have thought twice about proposing if she’d displayed any sort of feelings for him too.

The Frenchman showed no sign of filling her in on their meeting either, raising a shoulder in what she assumed to be an apology.

‘I’m sorry if you’re looking for Javier but I’m afraid he hasn’t arrived yet,’ she said when the silence that fell between them stretched like charged elastic. She had to remind herself that people were watching her. ‘I don’t think Luis is here yet either.’

Benjamin studied her closely, looking for signs that Freya knew about the enmity between him and the Casillas brothers but there were no vibes of suspicion. He hadn’t expected Javier to take her into his confidence. Javier did not do confidences.

But there *were* vibes emanating from her, as if her skin were alive with an electricity that sparked onto him, an intensity in her dark eyes he had to stop himself from being pulled into.

He had a job to do and could not afford the distraction of her striking sultriness to delay him at a moment when time was of the essence. He’d planned everything down to the minute.

Tonight, her dark hair had been pulled back into a tight bun circled with tiny round diamonds, her lithe figure draped in a sleeveless deep red crushed velvet dress that flared at the hip to fall mid-calf. Her pale bare shoulders glimmered under the ballroom lights just as they had done under the hot Madrid sun and there was an itch in the pads of his fingers to touch that silky looking skin.

He leaned in a little closer so only she could hear the words that would next spill from his tongue. The motion sent a little whirl of a sultry yet delicate fragrance darting into his senses. He resisted the urge to breathe it in greedily.

‘I already know Javier isn’t here. Forgive me, Mademoiselle Clements, but I have news that is only for your ears.’

A groove appeared in her forehead, the black eyes widening.

He turned his head pointedly to the huge swing doors that led out of the ballroom and held his elbow out. ‘May I?’

Her throat moved before she nodded, then slipped her hand through the crook of his arm.

Benjamin guided her through the guests socialising magnificently as they waited for their hosts, the Casillas brothers, to arrive and for the fundraising gala to begin in earnest. They would have a long wait. The wheels he’d set in motion should, if all went as planned, delay them both for another hour each. He felt numerous eyes fall upon them and bit back a smile.

When Javier did finally get there, he would learn his fiancée had disappeared with his newly sworn enemy.

He had never wanted it to come to this but Javier and Luis had forced his hand. He’d warned them. After their last acrimonious meeting, he had given them a deadline and warned them failure to pay what was owed would lead to consequences.

Freya was collateral damage in the ugly mess *they* had created, the deceitful, treacherous bastards.

When they were in the hotel's lobby, Benjamin stopped beside a marble pillar to say, 'I am sorry for the subterfuge but Javier has encountered a problem. He does not wish to alarm the other guests but has asked me to bring you to him.'

'Is he hurt?' She had a husky voice that perfectly matched the sultriness of her appearance.

'No, it is not that. He is well. I only know that he has asked me to take you to him.'

He saw the hesitation in her eyes but gave her no chance to act on it, taking the hand still held in the crook of his arm and lacing his fingers through hers.

'Come,' he said, then began moving again, this time towards the exit doors.

Her much shorter, graceful legs kept pace easily.

A sharp pang of guilt punched his gut at her misplaced trust, a pang he dismissed.

This was Javier's fiancée.

Benjamin's sister, Chloe, worked as a seamstress at the ballet company and knew Freya. She had described her as nice if a little aloof. Intelligent. Too intelligent not to know exactly the kind of man she had chosen to marry.

Money and power in the world you inhabited were mighty aphrodisiacs, he thought scathingly.

What he found harder to dismiss were the evocative tingles seeping into his bloodstream from the feel of her hand in his and the movement of her lithe body sweeping along beside him.

His driver was waiting for them as arranged at the front of the hotel.

Benjamin waited until she was sitting in the car before following her in, staring straight into the security camera above the hotel's door as he did so.

'Do you really not know what kind of trouble Javier is in?' she asked with steady composure as the driver pulled away from the hotel.

'Mademoiselle Clements, I am merely your courier for this trip. All will be revealed when we reach our destination.'

'Where is he?'

'In Florence.'

'Still?'

'I understand there was some delay.' An understanding brought about by his own sabotage. Benjamin had paid an aviation official to conduct a spot-check of Javier's private plane with the promise of an extra ten thousand euros if he could delay him by two hours. He'd also paid a contact who worked for a mobile phone network to jam Freya's phone.

As they drove into the remote airfield less than ten minutes later she suddenly straightened. 'I haven't got my passport on me.'

'You don't need it.'

Benjamin's own private plane was ready to board, his crew in place, all ready to get the craft into the air the moment he and Freya were strapped in.

He ignored another wave of guilt as she climbed the metal steps onto his jet, as trusting as a spring lamb.

Within half an hour of leaving the hotel they were airborne.

He inhaled properly for what felt the first time in half an hour.

His plan had worked effortlessly.

Sitting on the reclining leather seat facing her, Benjamin watched Freya. Her features were calm, the only indication anything was worrying her the slight tapping of her fingers on her lap. He would put her out of her misery soon enough.

'Drink?' he asked.

Her eyes found his and held them for the longest time before blinking. 'Do you have tea?'

'I think something stronger.'

'Do I *need* something stronger?'

Not yet she didn't.

‘No, but a drink will help you relax, *ma douce*.’

Her throat moved, the generous lips pulling together. Then she loosened her tight shoulders and nodded.

Benjamin summoned a member of his cabin crew. ‘Get Mademoiselle Clements a drink, whatever she wants. I will have a glass of port.’

Soon their drinks had been served and Freya sipped at her gin and tonic. Her forehead was pressed to the window, her gaze fixed on the dark night sky. She covered her mouth and stifled a yawn.

‘You are tired?’ he asked politely.

A quick, soft shake of her head that turned into a nod that morphed into another yawn. When she met his gaze there was sheepish amusement in her eyes. ‘Flying makes me sleepy. I’m the same in cars. Are you *sure* Javier is okay?’

‘Very sure. Your seat reclines into a bed. Sleep if you need to.’

‘I’ll be fine, thank you.’ Another yawn. Another sip of her drink.

He observed her fight to keep her eyes open, the lids becoming heavier followed by a round of rapid blinking, then heavying again.

A few minutes later her eyes stayed closed, her chest rising and falling in a gentle rhythm.

He leaned forward and carefully removed the glass from her slackening fingers.

Her eyes opened and stared straight into his.

A shot of something plunged into his heart and twisted.

Her lips curved in the tiniest of smiles before her eyes fluttered back shut.

Benjamin closed his eyes and took a long breath.

There was something about this woman he reacted to in a way he could not comprehend. It unnerved him.

Through all the legal battles he’d been going through these past two months and as the full extent of the Casillas brothers’ treachery had become sickeningly clearer, Freya’s face had kept hovering into his thoughts.

He stared at it now, watching her sleep through the dimmed cabin lights, absorbing the features that had played in his mind like a picture implanted into his brain.

It was fortuitous that she should sleep. It would make the difficult conversation they must have easier if they weren’t thirty-five thousand feet in the air.

Let her have a little longer of oblivion before she learned she had been effectively kidnapped.

CHAPTER TWO

A BUSTLE OF movement in the cabin woke Freya from her light slumber to find Benjamin’s gaze still on her.

A warm flush crept through her veins.

For the first time since infancy, full sleep hadn’t taken her into its clutches.

He gave a tight smile. ‘I was about to wake you. We will be landing shortly.’

‘Sorry.’ She smothered a yawn and stretched her legs, flexing her feet before noticing her shoes had slipped off. ‘Travel has always had a sedative effect on me.’

It had been the case since she’d been a baby and her parents had taken turns walking her in the pram to get her to sleep. Once she had outgrown the pram the walks had continued with Freya in a buggy, sleeping happily along the same daily walk, which had taken them past a local ballet school. She had always woken up then. Her first concrete memory was pointing at the little girls in their pink tutus and squealing, ‘Freya dance too!’

Those early walks had given birth to two things: her love of dance and her unfailing ability to fall asleep in any mode of transport.

Planes, trains, cars, prams, they were all the same; within ten minutes of being in one she would be asleep regardless of any excitement for the destination.

That she had managed almost half an hour before the first signs of sleep grabbed her on Benjamin's jet had more to do with him and the terrifying way her heart beat when she was in his presence than it had about any fears she might have for her fiancé.

She'd had to keep her gaze fixed out of the window to stop herself from staring at him as her eyes so longed to do. When her brain had started to shut down into sleep it was images of this man flickering behind her eyes that had stopped her brain switching off completely.

Her fingers still tingled from being held in his hand, her heart still to find a normal rhythm.

Rationally, she knew there couldn't be anything too seriously wrong with Javier. Benjamin had told her Javier was unhurt and that there was nothing for her to worry about...

But there was a tension in the Frenchman now that hadn't been there before.

A prickle of unease crawled up her spine and she looked back out of the window.

When she'd last looked out of the window they had been high above the clouds. Now the earth beckoned closer, dark shadows forming shapes that made her think of mountains and thick forests, beyond them twinkling lights, towns and cities bustling with late-evening life.

None of it looked familiar.

The unease deepened the closer to earth they flew and she kept her eyes peeled, searching for a familiar landmark, anything to counteract the tightening of her stomach and the coldness crawling over her skin.

She hardly noticed the smoothness of the landing, too busy straining through the darkness to find something familiar in the airfield they had landed in.

As she whispered words of thanks to the cabin crew and climbed down the metal stairs to the concrete ground, she inhaled deeply. Then she inhaled again.

She had been in Florence as part of her ballet company's European tour only the week before. Florence did not smell like this. Florence did not smell of lavender.

Benjamin had reached the ground before her and stood at a waiting sleek black car, the back passenger door open.

'Where are we?' she asked hesitantly, not at all liking the train of her thoughts.

'Provence.'

It took a beat for that to sink in. 'Provence as in France?'

'*Oui.*'

'Did I misunderstand something? I thought you said Javier was still in Florence.' Freya knew she hadn't misheard him but told herself her ears were unused to Benjamin's thick accent and therefore she must have misunderstood him.

Slowly, he shook his head. 'You heard correctly.'

Through the panicking spread of her blood she forced herself to think, to keep calm and breathe.

She had only met Benjamin once before but knew he was Javier and Luis's oldest friend. Their mothers had been best friends. They had grown up thinking themselves as family. She knew all this because of a costume fitting she'd had before *Compania de Ballet de Casillas* had gone on its most recent tour, the one that had taken her to the beautiful city of Florence. A new seamstress had been tasked with measuring Freya, a young, dazzlingly beautiful woman called Chloe Guillem. When Freya had casually asked if she were any relation to Benjamin, she'd learned Chloe was his sister. She should have been glad of the opportunity to speak to someone who knew Javier and taken the opportunity to learn more about her fiancé. It shamed her that she'd had to restrain herself from only asking about Chloe's brother.

'Where is he, then?'

Benjamin looked at his watch before meeting her eye again. The lights shining from his jet, which still had the engine running, made the green darker, made them flicker with a danger that clutched in her chest.

‘I think he must now be in Madrid. Very soon he is going to learn you have disappeared with me. He might have already.’

‘What are you talking about?’ she whispered.

‘I regret to tell you, *ma douce*, that I have brought you here under false pretences. Javier did not ask me to bring you to him.’

She laughed. It was a reflex sound brought about by the absurdity of what he’d just said. ‘Is this a joke the pair of you have dreamt up together?’

But Javier didn’t joke. She had seen no sign whatsoever that her fiancé possessed any kind of sense of humour.

Benjamin’s unsmiling features showed he wasn’t jesting either. The dark shadows being cast over those same features sent fresh chills racing up her spine.

The chills increased as, pulling her phone out of her bag, she saw it still wasn’t working.

There was the slightest flicker in his eyes that made her say, ‘Have you got something to do with my phone not working?’

‘It will be reconnected tomorrow,’ he said steadily. He took a step towards her. ‘Get in the car, *ma douce*. I will explain everything.’

Her heart pounding painfully, she took a step back, taking in the darkness surrounding them. High trees edged the perimeter of the huge field they had landed in, the only sound the jet’s engine. The vibrant civilisation she’d glimpsed from the window could be anywhere or nowhere.

To the left of the runway sat a small concrete building, its lights on.

When Freya had exited the plane she had seen a couple of figures in high-visibility jackets walking away from them. She had to assume they’d gone into that building. She thought it safe to assume that building contained, at the very least, a working telephone.

‘I’m not going anywhere else with you until you tell me what is going on,’ she said in the steadiest voice she could manage while sliding her hand back into her small shoulder bag. She put her non-functioning phone back into it and groped for the can of pepper spray.

He must have seen her fear for he raised his hands, palms facing her. ‘I am taking you to my home. You have my assurance that you will come to no harm.’

‘No. I want to know what’s going on *now*. Here. No more riddles.’

‘We have much to talk about. It is better we talk in privacy and comfort.’

‘And I prefer to discuss things now, before I get back on that plane and tell the pilot to take me back to Madrid.’ To get to the plane, though, meant getting past *him*. A lifetime of dance had given her an agility and strength most other women didn’t possess but she didn’t kid herself that she had the strength to match this man, who had to be a foot taller than her own five foot five and twice her breadth.

She caught a glimmer of pity in those dangerous green eyes that made her blood chill to the same temperature as her spine.

Her fingers found the pepper spray.

She might not have the strength to match him but she would bet her life she was quicker than him.

She pulled the weapon out and aimed it at him, simultaneously stepping out of the heels that would hinder any escape. ‘I *am* going back to Madrid and you can’t stop me.’

Then, not giving him a chance to respond in any shape or form, Freya took off, racing barefoot over the runway and then over the dry grass to the safety that was the concrete building with its welcoming lights. Not once did she look over her shoulder, her focus solely on the door that would open and lead her to...

A locked door.

She tugged at it, she pushed it, she pulled it. It didn’t budge.

‘This airfield belongs to me.’ Benjamin’s voice carried through the still night air that was broken only by the running engine of his jet. ‘No one here will help you.’

She turned her head to look back at him, surprised to find herself more angry than fearful.

Surely this was a situation where terror rather than fury should be the primary emotion?

He had lied to her and deliberately taken her to the wrong country.

No one did that unless they had bad intentions.

She should be terrified.

Benjamin hadn’t moved. He stood by the car watching her impassively. For the first time she realised the car had a driver in it.

And for the first time she realised his jet’s engines were still running for a reason. Not only that but it was moving...

Open-mouthed, fighting back despair, Freya watched it increase in speed down the runway.

A moment later it was in the air.

It soared into the night sky, the roar of its engines decreasing the further it flew until it was nothing but a fleeing star.

And then there was silence.

‘Come with me.’ This time there was no other sound but Benjamin’s voice. ‘You will not be touched or harmed in any way. I give you my word.’

‘Why should I believe you?’ she called back.

He gave what she could only describe as a Gallic shrug. ‘When you get to know me, you will learn I am a man of my word.’

She shivered at words that sounded more like a threat than a promise and looked around the airfield for a route that could be her pathway to freedom. As far as she could tell they were in the middle of nowhere.

She could run. She had a good chance of making it to the perimeter before his car could catch her and then she could disappear. But where would she disappear *to*? She had no idea how far she was from civilisation, no money, a phone that didn’t work...she didn’t even have her shoes on.

She either took her chances and ran off into the unknown or she went with Benjamin into another unknown.

The question was which unknown held the least danger.

Benjamin watched Freya rub her arms as she stared back at him, could see her weighing up her options.

Then her spine straightened and she stepped slowly towards him, holding the spray can outwards, aimed at him.

When she was two metres from him she stopped. ‘If you come within arm’s reach of me I will spray this in your face. If you make any sudden movements I will spray this in your face.’

He believed her. The fear he had glimpsed before she had run had gone. Now there was nothing on her face but cool, hard resolve.

If he’d believed she was a woman to fall into a crying heap at the first sign of trouble he would never have taken this path.

Everything he had learned about her backed his instinct that Freya had grit. Seeing it first-hand pleased him. It made what had to be done easier.

‘I have given you my word that you will come to no harm.’

‘You have already proven yourself a liar. Your word means nothing to me.’

He turned to the open car door. ‘Are you getting in or do I leave you here?’ He didn’t like that he’d had to lie and had swallowed back the bile his lies had produced. That bile was a mere fraction of the sourness that had churned in his guts since he’d accepted the extent of the Casillas brothers’ betrayal.

She glared at him and backed into the car.

By the time Benjamin had folded himself into the back next to her, she had twisted herself against the far door, still aiming the spray can at his face.

‘Don’t come any closer.’

‘If I wanted to hurt you I would have done so already.’

Her jaw clenched and her eyes narrowed in thought but she didn’t lower her arm or relax her hold on the can. He was quite certain that if she were to spray it at him it would temporarily blind him. It would probably be painful.

‘Do you always carry that thing with you?’ he asked after a few minutes of loaded silence had passed while his driver navigated the dark narrow roads that led to his chateau.

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

She smiled tightly. ‘In case some creep tries to abduct me.’

‘Have you ever used it?’

‘Not in anger but there’s a first time for everything.’

‘Then I shall do my best not to provoke you to use it on me.’

‘You can do that by telling your driver to take me to the nearest airport.’

‘And how will you leave France on a commercial flight without your passport?’

Her lips clamped together at this reminder, the loathing firing from her eyes hot enough to scorch.

The car slowed over a cattle grid, the rattling motion created in the car one Benjamin never grew tired of. It was the motion of being home.

After driving a mile through his thick forest, they went over another cattle grid then stopped for the electric gates to open.

For the first time since they’d got into the car, Freya took her eyes off his face, looking over his shoulder at the view from his window.

Her eyes widened before she blinked and looked back at him.

‘You can put the spray down,’ he informed her nonchalantly. ‘We have arrived.’

His elderly butler greeted them in the courtyard, opening Freya’s door and extending a hand to help her out.

Benjamin got out of his door in time to hear her politely say, ‘Please, can you help me? I’ve been kidnapped. Can you call the police?’

Pierre smiled regretfully. ‘*Je ne parle pas anglais, mademoiselle.*’

‘Kidnapped! Taken!’ She put her wrists together, clearly trying to convey handcuffs, then when Pierre looked blankly at her, she sighed and put a hand to her ear to mimic a telephone. ‘Telephone? Police? Help!’

While this delightful mime was going on, Benjamin’s driver slowly drove the car out of the courtyard.

‘Pierre doesn’t speak English, *ma douce*,’ Benjamin said. He’d inherited Pierre when he bought the chateau and hadn’t had the heart to pension him off just because he spoke no other language as all other butlers seemed to do in this day and age.

She glared at him with baleful eyes. ‘I’ll find someone who does.’

‘Good luck with that.’ Only one member of his household staff spoke more than passable English and Freya had just proven she couldn’t speak a word of his own language. ‘Come, let us go in and get settled before we talk. You must be hungry.’

‘I don’t want your food.’

Turning his back to her, he walked up the terracotta steps and into the main entrance of his chateau.

‘Christabel,’ he called, knowing his head housekeeper wouldn’t be far.

No sooner had he finished saying her name than she appeared.

‘Good evening, sir,’ she said in their native tongue with a smile. ‘Did you have a good trip?’

‘I did, thank you. Is everything well here?’

‘Everything is fine and we have prepared the quarters for your guest as instructed.’ Christabel’s eyes flickered over his shoulder as she said this, which he guessed meant Freya had followed him inside, her bare feet muffling the usual clacking sound that could be heard when people entered the great room.

He had a sudden vision of her black high heels discarded on the runway of his airfield, a sharp pang in his chest accompanying it, which he shrugged off.

He would replace them for her.

‘Thank you, Christabel. You can finish for the evening now.’ Turning to Pierre, who had also followed him in, he said, ‘We require a light supper, anything Chef chooses. Bring me a White Russian and Miss Clements a gin and Slimline tonic.’

When his two members of staff had bustled off, he finally looked at his new houseguest and switched back to English. ‘Do you want to talk now or would you like to freshen up first?’

She glared at him. ‘I don’t want to talk but, if you insist, let’s get it over with because I want to go home.’

He held the mutinous black orbs in his. ‘Is it not already obvious to you that you will not be going home tonight, *ma douce*?’

CHAPTER THREE

FREYA STARED INTO the green eyes that only a few hours before she had been afraid to stare too deeply at because of the strange heat gazing into them produced. Now, her only desire was to swing her small bag into his face. She’d put the pepper spray back into it and her fingers itched to take it back out and spray the entire contents at him.

‘When will I be going home?’ she demanded to know.

A single brow rose on his immobile face. ‘That will be determined shortly. Come with me.’

‘Come where?’

‘Somewhere we can talk in comfort.’

He walked off before she could argue. She scowled at his retreating figure but when he went through the huge double doors and disappeared, she quickly got her own legs moving. This chateau...

She had never seen the likes of it before other than on a television screen.

Walking past sculptures and exquisite paintings, she entered another room where the ceiling was at least three times the height of a normal room, with a frescoed ceiling and opulent furniture and more exquisite works of art. She caught sight of Benjamin going through a door to the left and hurried after him. It would be too easy to get lost in this chateau, a thought amplified when she followed him through a third enormous living area, catching sight of a library—a proper, humongous, filled with probably tens of thousands of books library—on the way.

Eventually she caught up with him in yet another living area. It was hard to determine if this living area was indoors or outdoors. What should have been an external wall was missing, the ceiling held up by ornate marble pillars, opening the space to the spectacular view outside.

Her throat caught as she looked out, half in delight at the beauty of it all and half in anguish.

The chateau was high in the hills, surrounded by forests and fields that swept down before them. Far in the distance were the twinkling lights she had seen on the plane. Civilisation. Miles and miles away.

‘Are you going to sit?’

She took a long breath before looking at Benjamin.

He’d sat himself on a huge L-shaped soft white sofa with a square glass coffee table in front of him.

Staring at her unsmilingly, he removed his silver tie then undid the top two buttons of his shirt.

The wrinkled old man who'd greeted them on arrival appeared as if from nowhere with two tall drinks. He placed them on the coffee table and indicated one of them to her. Then he left as unobtrusively as he had come.

Benjamin mussed his hair with a grimace then took his glass and had a long drink from it. 'What do you know about my history with the Casillas brothers?'

Surprised at his question, she eyed him warily before answering. 'I know you're old family friends.'

His jaw clenched as he nodded slowly. 'Our mothers were extremely close. They had us only three months apart. We were playmates from the cradle and it's a bond we have shared for thirty-five years. I was raised to think of Javier and Luis as cousins and I did. We have been there for each other our entire lives. You understand?'

'I guess.' She shrugged. 'Is there a point to this story?'

His eyes narrowed. 'The point to this story is the key to it.'

'You're talking in riddles again.'

'Not riddles if you would bother to listen to what I am saying to you.'

She caught the faint scent of juniper. Although only a moderate drinker—very moderate—Freya loved the refreshing coolness of a gin and tonic. Usually she limited herself to only the one. But usually she hadn't been practically abducted. And she'd fallen asleep before she could finish the one on his jet.

And she really needed something to calm the ripples crashing in her stomach.

Giving in, she picked it up then sat on the opposite side of the sofa to him, at the furthest point she could find, using all the training that had been drilled into her from the age of three to hold her core and enable herself to be still.

Never would she betray how greatly this man unnerved her but beneath her outward stillness her pulses soared, her heart completely unable to find its usual rhythm. She wished she could put it down to fear and it unnerved her more than anything to know the only fear she was currently experiencing was of her own terrifying erratic feelings for this man rather than the situation he'd thrown her into.

She took a small sip then forced herself to look at him. 'Okay, so you grew up like cousins.'

Before he could answer the butler reappeared with a tray of food.

The tray was placed on the table and she saw a wooden board with more varieties of cheese than she'd known existed, fresh baguettes, a bowl of fruit and a smaller bowl of nuts.

'*Merci, Pierre,*' Benjamin said with a quick smile.

Pierre nodded and, just as before, disappeared.

Benjamin held a plate out to her.

'No, thank you,' she said stiffly. She would choke if she had to eat her captor's food.

He shrugged and cut himself a wedge of camembert.

'It's not good to eat cheese so late,' she said caustically.

He raised a brow, took a liberal amount of butter and spread it on the opened baguette. 'You must be hungry. I took you from the gala before the food was served. You do not have to eat the cheeses.'

'I don't have to eat anything.' She truly didn't think she could swallow anything solid, doubted her stomach would unclench enough for food until she was far from this beautiful prison.

Staring back out over the thick trees and hills casting such ominous shadows around the chateau, she resigned herself to staying under his roof for the night. As soon as the sun rose she would find something to put on her feet and leave. Sooner or later she would find civilisation and help.

He took a large bite of his baguette and chewed slowly. His impenetrable green eyes didn't move from her face.

'If you will not eat then let us continue. I was telling you about my relationship with Javier and Luis.'

Freya pushed her fears and schemes aside and concentrated. Maybe Benjamin really had gone to all this trouble to bring her here only to talk. Maybe, come the morning, his driver would take her to the airport without any fuss.

And maybe pigs could fly.

If Benjamin wanted nothing more than to talk he would have conducted this chat in Madrid.

Either way, she needed to pay attention and listen hard.

‘Like cousins,’ she clarified. ‘A modern-day tale like *The Three Musketeers*, always there for each other.’

‘*Exactement*. Do you know the Tour Mont Blanc building in Paris?’ He took a bite of creamy cheese.

‘The skyscraper?’ she asked uncertainly. World news was not her forte. Actually, any form of news that wasn’t related to the arts passed her by. She had no interest in any of it. She only knew of Tour Mont Blanc because Sophie had been fascinated with it, saying more than once that she would love to live in one of its exclusive apartments and dine in one of its many restaurants run by Michelin-starred chefs and shop in the exclusive shopping arcade.

He swallowed as he nodded. ‘You know Javier and Luis built it?’

‘Yes, I knew it was theirs.’

‘Did you know I invested in it?’

‘No.’

‘They came to me seven years ago when they were buying the land. They had a cash-flow problem and asked me to go in with them on the project as a sleeping partner. I invested twenty per cent of the asking price. When I made that first investment I was told total profits would be around half a billion euros.’

She blinked. Half a *billion*?

‘It took four years for the building work to start—there was a lot of bureaucracy to get through—and a further three years to complete it. Have you been there?’

‘No.’

‘It is a magnificent building and a credit to the Casillas brothers’ vision. Eighty per cent of the apartments were sold off-plan and we had eleven multinational companies signed up to move into the business part before the roof had been put on.’

‘So it’s a moneymaking factory then,’ she said flatly. ‘I take it there’s a reason you’re boring me with all this?’

The piercing look he gave her sent fresh shivers racing up her spine.

‘We all knew the initial profit projections were conservative but none of us knew quite *how* conservative. Total profit so far is closer to one and a half billion euros.’

Freya didn’t even know how many zeros one and a half billion was. And that was their *profit*? Her bank account barely touched three figures.

‘Congratulations,’ she said in the same flat tone. It was a lot of money—more than she could ever comprehend—but it was nothing to do with her and she couldn’t see why he thought it relevant to discuss it with her. She assumed he was showing off and letting her know that his wealth rivalled Javier’s.

As if this chateau didn’t do a good enough job flaunting his wealth!

Did he think she would be impressed?

Money was nothing to brag about. Having an enormous bank account didn’t make you a better person than anyone else or mean you were granted automatic reverence by lesser mortals.

Freya had been raised by parents who were permanently on the breadline. They were the kindest, most loving parents a child could wish for and if she could live her childhood again she wouldn’t swap them for anyone. Money was no substitute for love.

It was only now, as that awful disease decimated her mother's body, that she wished they'd had the means to build a nest egg for themselves. She wouldn't have felt compelled to marry Javier if they had.

But they had never had the means. They had worked their fingers to the bone to allow their only child to follow her dreams.

'I invested twenty per cent of the land fee,' Benjamin continued, ignoring her sarcasm. 'I have since invested around twenty per cent of the building costs. How much profit would you think that entitles me to?'

'How would I know?' she said stiffly. 'I'm not an accountant.'

'Take a guess.'

'Twenty per cent?'

'*Oui*. Twenty per cent. Twenty per cent investment for a twenty per cent profit. Twenty per cent of one and a half billion equals three hundred million, do you agree?'

'I'm not an accountant,' she repeated, looking away from him, her lips tightening mutinously.

'You do not need to be an accountant to agree that three hundred million euros is a lot of money.'

Her slim shoulders rose but other than a flash of colour on her high cheekbones, the mutinous expression on her face didn't change.

'I have received all of my investment back but only seventy-five million euros of the profit. The equivalent of five per cent.'

Her eyes found his stare again. 'Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?'

'You are not expected to feel anything,' Benjamin stifled his growing anger at her cold indifference. He hadn't expected anything less from the woman engaged to the coldest man in Europe. 'I am laying out the facts of the situation. Javier and Luis have ripped me off. They owe me two hundred and twenty-five million euros.'

He had earmarked that money for a charity that helped traumatised children.

The irony of why he had chosen that charity would be funny if the situation were not so damn serious. The memories of Javier and Luis's traumatising at the death of their mother at the hands of their father had haunted him for years.

Benjamin had almost bankrupted himself investing in the Tour Mont Blanc project. He'd spent seven years clawing his way back, going higher than he had ever climbed before, investing and expanding his fine food business across the globe until he had reached the point where he didn't owe a cent to anyone. All his assets, his business and subsidiaries were his alone and could never be taken from him. Now he could do some good with the great wealth he had built for himself and Javier and Luis had stolen his first significant act from him, just as they had stolen his money, his trust and all the memories he'd held dear.

'Take it up with your lawyers.'

'I have.' Benjamin remembered the green colour Andre had turned when he'd had to tell his most lucrative client that the Casillas brothers were correct in their assertion that he was only owed five per cent of the profits.

It had been there in black and white on the contract he'd signed seven years ago, hidden in the small print. It could have been written in the largest font available and he doubted he would have noticed it back then. He had signed the contract without getting his lawyer to read it first. That was his own fault, he accepted that. It was the only contract he'd ever signed without poring over every word first. The brothers had been given until midnight to come up with the full asking price or the land would have been sold to another interested party and they would have lost the substantial deposit they'd already paid at that point.

They had come to him for help on the same day Benjamin's mother had been told there was nothing more the medical team could do to stave off the cancer ravaging her body. Although not a

shock—she had not responded well to any of the treatment she’d been given—it had been the single biggest blow in his life.

Benjamin had signed with only a cursory glance at the document and transferred the money there and then. If it had been anyone else he would have refused to even contemplate the investment but it had been Javier and Luis asking. Men he regarded as kin. Men his mother had regarded as kin. Men he’d trusted unconditionally. At the time he hadn’t cared that it would eat into his own cash-flow and that the chateau he’d intended to buy outright for his mother to pass the last of her days in would need him to take a hefty mortgage. It was that knock-on effect that had almost bankrupted him.

‘From a legal point of view there is nothing more I can do about it.’ The words felt like needles in his throat.

He’d refused to accept Andre’s judgement and had fast-tracked the matter to a courtroom. The judge had reluctantly agreed with Andre.

Benjamin’s rage at the situation had been enflamed when Javier and Luis successfully applied for an injunction on the reporting of the court case. They didn’t want the business world to know their word was worthless or the levels to which they would stoop in the name of profit.

‘Have you brought me here to tell me this thinking I will speak to Javier on your behalf?’ she asked, her disbelief obvious despite the composed way she held herself.

He laughed mirthlessly and took a paring knife off the tray. He doubted very much that Javier cared for Freya’s opinion. She was his beautiful prima ballerina trophy not his partner. Benjamin’s hope was that her value as a trophy was greater than two hundred and twenty-five million euros.

Cutting into the peel of a fat, ripe orange, he said, ‘I am afraid the situation has gone far past the point where it can be resolved by words alone.’

‘Then what do you want from me? Why am I here?’

‘Every action has a consequence. Javier and Luis have stolen from me and I am out of legal options.’ He cut the last of the peel off the orange and dropped it into a bowl. ‘In reality, the money is not important...’

She let out a delicate, disbelieving cough.

He cut into the flesh of his peeled orange. ‘I am a very wealthy man, *ma douce*...’

‘Well done.’

‘And if it was just the money I would write it off,’ he continued as if she hadn’t interrupted him, cutting the orange into segments. ‘But this is about much more than money, more than you could understand. I am not willing to let it go or let them get away with it. You are my last bargaining chip.’

‘Me?’ For the first time since she had entered his home, her composure made an almost imperceptible slip. ‘But I had nothing to do with it. I was still in ballet school when you signed that contract.’

‘*Oui*. You.’ He looked at his watch and smiled. ‘In three minutes it will be midnight. In three minutes Javier will receive a message giving him exactly twenty-four hours to pay the money owed.’

She swallowed. ‘Or...?’

‘If the Casillas brothers refuse to pay what they have taken from me then by the laws of natural justice I shall take from them, starting with you. If they do not pay then, *ma douce*, the message Javier will receive any moment tells him his engagement to you will be over and that you will marry me instead.’

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BURN THAT had enflamed Freya’s brain earlier returned with a vengeance. She gazed into the resolute green eyes that gave nothing away and felt her stomach clench into a pinpoint.

Freya had no illusions about her lack of intellect. Ballet had been her all-consuming passion since she could walk. She couldn’t remember a time in her life when she hadn’t breathed dance and her education had suffered for it. She had one traditional educational qualification and that was in art.

But this didn't mean she was stupid and she would have to be the dimmest person to walk the earth not to look into those green eyes and recognise that Benjamin was deadly serious.

This was revenge in its purest form and she was his weapon of choice to gain it.

She was his hostage.

Her kidnapper stared at her without an ounce of pity, waiting for her response to his bombshell.

She responded by using the only means she had at her disposal, *her* only weapon. Her body.

Jumping up from the sofa, she swept an arm over the coffee table, scattering the crockery and glasses on it, but didn't hang around to see the damage, already racing through the non-existent wall and out into the warm grounds. Benjamin's surprised curse echoed behind her.

Security lights came on, putting a spotlight on her but she didn't care. She would outrun them. She dived into the thick, high shrubbery that she hoped surrounded the perimeter of the chateau and hoped gave adequate camouflage until she found the driveway they had travelled to reach the chateau and which she would follow until she found the road.

She had run from Benjamin earlier. She had reluctantly gone back to him because she had thought he was the unknown that posed the least danger.

She had made the wrong choice. Her heated responses to his physicality, the strange chemical responses that set off inside her every time she looked into his green eyes had stopped her recognising the very real danger she was in.

How big was this chateau and its grounds? she wondered desperately as she cut her way through the trees and hedges, trusting her sense of direction that she was headed the right way.

It seemed to take for ever before she peered through the shrubbery to find the courtyard Benjamin's driver had dropped them off at. The night was dark but there were enough ground lights for her to see the electric gates they had driven through.

Quickly she looked around it and saw the gate, a high wrought-iron contraption with spikes at the top that linked the high stone wall she would have to scale if she were to get away.

Keeping to the shadows, Freya treaded her way to the wall, her heart sinking the closer she got.

It was at least twice her height.

She stepped cautiously from the high tree she'd hidden behind for a better look. The wall was old. It had plenty of grooves and nooks for her to use to lever herself up. If she kept to the shadows she'd be able to scale it away from the estate lights...but then she wouldn't be able to see what was on the other side if she were in the dark.

Determination filled her. If she didn't climb this wall she would never escape.

She took one deep inhalation for luck then darted forward.

The moment she stepped off the thick, springy ground of the woods and onto the gravelled concrete, it seemed as if a thousand lights suddenly shone on her.

Not prepared to waste a second, she raced to the wall, found her first finger holes and began to climb.

She'd made it only two feet off the ground when she heard shouts. Aware of heavy footsteps nearing her, she sped up. The top of the wall was almost within reach when she stretched to grip a slightly protruding stone and, too late, realised it was loose.

With a terrified scream, she lost her hold entirely and fell back, would have crashed to the ground and almost certainly landed flat on her back had a pair of strong arms not been there to catch her as assuredly as any of her dance partners would have done.

Instinct had her throw her arms around Benjamin's neck while he made one quick shift of position to hold her more securely.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried her hardest to open her airwaves.

She couldn't breathe. The shock of the fall and the unexpected landing had pushed all the air from her lungs. But her terrified heart was racing at triple time, tremors raging through her body.

How had he reached her so quickly? He must have run at superhuman speed.

‘Do you have a death wish?’

His angry words cut through the shock and she opened her eyes to find his face inches from her own, furious green eyes boring into hers.

He was holding her as securely as a groom about to cross the threshold with his new bride but staring at her with all the tenderness of a lion about to bite into the neck of its prey.

Then he muttered something unintelligible under his breath and set off back to the chateau.

‘You can put me down now,’ she said, then immediately wished she hadn’t spoken as now that she could breathe again she could smell again too. Her face was so close to Benjamin’s neck she could smell the muskiness of his skin under the spicy cologne.

He shook his head grimly.

She struggled against him. ‘I’m quite capable of walking.’

His hold tightened. ‘And have you run away and put yourself in danger again?’

‘I won’t—’

‘What were you thinking?’ he demanded. His footsteps crunched over the gravel. ‘If I hadn’t been there to catch you...’

‘What did you expect?’ Her words came in short, ragged gasps. The feel of his muscular body pressed so tightly against her own made her wish he were made of steel on the outside as well as the inside. Damn him. If he were a robot or machine she could ignore that he was human and that her body was behaving in the opposite manner that it should to be held in his arms like this.

Her lips should not tingle and try to crane closer to the strained tendons on his neck, not to bite but to kiss...

‘I expected you to listen, not run into the night. The forests around the chateau are miles deep. You can spend days—weeks—lost in them and not meet a soul.’

‘I don’t care. You can’t kidnap me and hold me to ransom and think I’m going to just accept it.’ She squeezed her eyes shut to block his neck from her sight.

If only she could block the rest of him out too.

God, she could hardly breathe for fear and fury and that awful, awful awareness of him.

Pierre had the door open for them. As Benjamin carried Freya over the threshold, the butler saw her feet and winced.

Benjamin sighed inwardly before depositing her onto the nearest armchair and instructing Pierre, who really should have long gone to bed, to bring him a bowl of warm water and a first-aid kit.

‘Telling him to bring handcuffs so you can chain me in your horrible house?’ his unwilling guest asked snidely.

‘That’s a tempting idea, but no.’ Tempting for a whole host of reasons he refused to allow himself to think of.

Holding Freya in his arms like that had felt too damn good. The awareness he’d felt for her from that first look had become like an infection inside him.

He must not forget who she was. Javier’s fiancée. His only possible means of getting his money back and giving Javier a taste of the betrayal he himself was feeling.

Kneeling before her, he took her left foot in his hand. She made to kick out but his hold was too firm. ‘I am not going to hurt you.’

‘You said that before,’ she snapped.

‘The harm you have caused to your feet is self-inflicted. Keep still. I want to look for damage.’

The full lips pulled in on themselves, her black eyes staring at him malefically before she turned her face to the wall. He took it as tacit agreement for him to examine her feet. The foot in his hands was filthy from walking bare through all the trees and shrubbery but there was no damage he could see. He placed it down more gently than she deserved and picked up her right foot. It hadn’t fared so well. Tiny droplets of blood oozed out where she’d trodden on something sharp.

Pierre came into the room with the equipment he’d requested, along with fresh towels.

‘Going to do a spot of waterboarding?’ she asked with a glare.

He returned it with a glare of his own. ‘Stop giving me ideas. I’m going to clean your feet...’

‘I can clean my own feet...’

‘And make sure you have no thorns or stones stuck in them.’

‘You’re a doctor?’

‘Only a man with a sister who could never remember to put shoes on when she was a child.’ And rarely as a teenager either. Chloe had moved out of the chateau a few years ago and he still missed her lively presence in his daily life.

His much younger sister was as furious with the Casillas brothers as he was and had insisted on helping that night. He’d given her the task of delaying Luis from the gala and she had risen to it with aplomb. Now she was safely tucked up in first class flying to the Caribbean to escape the fall-out.

‘I’m a dancer,’ Freya said obstinately. ‘My feet are tough.’

‘Tough enough to risk infection? Tough enough to risk your career?’

‘Being held hostage is a risk to my career.’

‘Stop being so melodramatic. You are not a hostage.’ He took a sterile cloth and dipped it in the water, squeezing it first before carefully rubbing it against the sole of her foot.

‘If I’m not allowed to leave that makes me a hostage. If I’m being held for ransom that makes me a hostage.’

‘Hardly. All I require is twenty-four hours of your time. One day.’ He rubbed an antiseptic wipe to the tiny wounds at the sole of her foot, then carefully placed it down on its heel.

‘And what happens then? What if Javier says no and refuses to pay?’

‘You have doubts?’ He lifted her other foot onto his lap. ‘Are you afraid his love for you is not worth such a large amount of money?’

She didn’t answer.

Raising his gaze from her feet to her face, he noted the strain of her clenched jaw.

‘You are the most exciting dancer to have emerged in Europe since his mother died. You have the potential to be *the* best and Javier is not a man who settles for second best in anything. You are not publicity hungry. You will give him beautiful babies. You tick every box he has made in his list of wants for a wife. Why would he let you go?’ As he spoke he cleaned her foot, taking great care in case there were any thorns hidden in the hard soles not visible to the naked eye.

Freya’s assessment of her feet being tough was correct, the soles hard and calloused, the big toe on her right foot blackened by bruising.

His heart made a strange tugging motion to imagine the agonies she must go through dancing night after night on toes that must be in perpetual pain. These were feet that had been abused by its owner in a never-ending quest for dance perfection. And what perfection it was...

Benjamin had been dragged across the world in his younger years by his mother, who had been Clara Casillas’s personal seamstress as well as her closest friend. His childhood home had been a virtual shrine to the ballet but he’d been oblivious to it all, his interest in ballet less than zero. He’d thought himself immune to any of the supposed beauty the dance had to offer. That had been until he’d watched a clip of Freya dancing as *Sleeping Beauty* on the Internet the other week.

There had been something in the way she moved when she danced that had made his throat tighten and the hairs on his arms lift. He’d watched only a minute of that clip before turning it off. He’d tried to rid his mind of the images that seemed to have etched themselves in his brain ever since.

Freya belonged to his enemy. He had no business imagining her.

And yet...

As hard as he had tried, he had been completely unable to stop his mind drifting to her or stop the poker-like stabs of jealousy to imagine her in Javier’s arms that had engulfed him since he’d first set eyes on her.

‘Javier knows I am a man of my word,’ he continued, looking beyond the battered soles of her feet to the smooth, almost delicate ankles and calves that were undeniably feminine. A strange itch started in his fingers to stroke the skin to feel if it was as smooth to his touch as to his eye. ‘He knows if I say I will marry you then I will marry you.’

‘You’ve rigged everything to fall your way but unless you have something even more nefarious up your sleeve you can’t marry me without my permission.’ Steel laced her calm voice. ‘Besides, you said I only have to stay with you for one day—you’ve given me your word too. You are lying to one of us. Which is it?’

‘I have not lied to either of you. Have you not wondered *why* I had your phone tampered with?’

Clarity rang from her eyes. ‘To stop me warning him. You don’t want me in a position to scupper your plans by telling him the truth.’

He smiled. She was an astute woman. ‘Javier will know by now that we left the gala together. I do not doubt he will hear we left hand in hand. He will know you left willingly with me and will be wondering how deep your involvement goes. If he trusts and loves you he will know you are my pawn and will pay me my money to get you back. If he doesn’t trust or love you enough he will refuse to pay and cut you adrift. If he cuts you adrift the ball rolls into your court, *ma douce*. The moment Javier reaches his decision, whatever that decision may be, you will be free to leave my chateau without hindrance. If you choose to leave I will fly you back to Madrid even if your choice is to plead your case with him and throw yourself at his mercy. If, however, you decide to stick with a certainty then you can marry me. I am willing to marry you on the same terms you were going to marry him—I assume there was a pre-nuptial agreement. I am prepared to honour it. Or you can decide to have nothing to do with either of us and get on with your life.’

Benjamin put the towel down by the now cold bowl of water and got to his feet. ‘Whatever happens, I cannot lose. Javier will pay for what he has done one way or another.’

While he’d been speaking, Freya’s silent fury had grown. He’d seen it vibrate through her clenched fists and shuddering chest, the colour slashing her cheeks deepening.

Finally she spoke, her words strangled. ‘How can you be so cruel?’

‘A man reaps what he sows.’

‘No, I meant how can you be so cruel to *me*? What have *I* done to merit this? You don’t even know me.’

‘You chose to betroth yourself to a man without a conscience. I notice you have accepted at face value that Javier and Luis stole from me. You know the kind of man he is yet still you chose to marry him. What kind of woman does that make you?’

The colour on her face turned an even deeper shade of red, her stare filled with such loathing it was as if she’d stored and condensed all the hatred in the world to fire at him through eyes that had become obsidian.

She rose from her seat with a grace that took his breath away. ‘You don’t know anything about me and you never will. You’re the most despicable excuse for a human being I have ever met. I hope Javier calls your bluff and calls the police. I hope he gets a SWAT team sent in to rescue me.’

He reached out to brush a thumb against her cheekbone. It was the lightest of touches but enough for a thrill to race through him at the silky fineness of her skin.

He sensed the same thrill race through her too, the tiniest of jolts before the eyes that had been firing at him widened and her frame became so still she could be carved from marble.

‘If he were to involve the police the news would leak out and his deception would become public knowledge,’ he murmured, fighting the impulse to run his hand over her hair and pull the tight bun out, imagining the effect of that glorious hair spilling over her shoulders like a waterfall. ‘But the police would not do anything even if he did go to them because I have not broken any law, just as Javier has not technically broken any law.’

‘You kidnapped me.’

‘How? You got into my jet and my car of your own free will.’

‘Only because you lied to me.’

‘That was regrettable but necessary. If lying is a crime then the onus would be on you to prove it.’

‘You paid someone to disconnect my phone.’

‘Again, the onus would be on you to prove it.’

Her throat moved before her voice dropped so low he had to strain to hear. ‘How do you sleep at night?’

‘Very well, thank you, because my conscience is clear.’ Finally he moved his hand away and took a step back from her lest the urge to taste those tempting lips overcame him. ‘I will get a member of staff to show you to your quarters. Sleep well, *ma douce*. I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be a long day for both of us.’

Then he half bowed and walked away.

CHAPTER FIVE

FREYA PACED HER bedroom feeling much like a caged tiger prowling for escape. The only difference between her and the tiger was she hadn’t been locked in. She could walk out right now and never look back. Except it was now the early hours of the morning and her feet would rightly kill her if she tried to escape again. Third time lucky, perhaps? A third attempt to escape into the black canopy of Benjamin’s thick forest? She might even emerge on the other side alive.

She slumped onto the bed with a loud sigh and propped her chin on her hands. Her feet stung, the corset of her dress dug into her ribs and she was suddenly weary from her lack of food. The pretty pyjamas on her pillow looked increasingly tempting.

A young maid had shown her to her quarters. She hadn’t spoken any English but had been perfectly able to convey that the pyjamas were for Freya and that the clothes hanging in the adjoining dressing room were for her too. There were even three pairs of shoes to choose from, all of them worse than ballet slippers for an escape in the forest.

All the clothes were Freya’s exact size, right down to the underwear. She guessed Benjamin’s sister had passed on her measurements.

The planning he must have undertaken to get her there made her shiver.

He was remorseless. Relentless. He left nothing to chance, going as far as installing a camera outside her bedroom door. She’d seen the flashing red light and known exactly what it was there for. A warning that should she attempt to leave her quarters she would be seen in an instant. If she found a landline phone she would never get the chance to use it.

Without laying a finger on her he’d penned her in his home more effectively than a collie rounding up sheep.

But he *had* touched her.

The shivers turned into tingles that spread up her spine and low in her abdomen as she remembered how it had felt to have his large, warm hands holding her feet so securely, different tingles flushing over her cheek where he had brushed his thumb against it.

She had never met a more unrepentantly cruel person in her life and being part of the ballet world that was saying something.

But he had cleaned and tended to her feet with a gentleness that had taken her breath away. She had expected him to recoil at them—anyone who wasn’t a dancer would—but instead she’d detected a glimmer of sympathy. Bruised, aching feet were a fact of her life. Smile through the pain, use it to drive you on to perfection.

She had to give him his due—in that one respect Benjamin had been the perfect gentleman. If she’d allowed any of her straight male colleagues to clean her feet she could only imagine the bawdiness of their comments. The opportunity for a quick grope would have been almost impossible for them to resist. The ballet world was a passionate hotbed, the intimacy of dancing so closely together setting off hormones that most didn’t want to deny let alone bother to fight. Freya wasn’t

immune to it. The passion lived in her blood as it did in everyone else's; the difference was when the music stopped the passion within her stopped too. She had never danced with a man and wanted the romance to continue when the orchestra finished playing. She had never felt a man's touch and experienced a yearning within her for him to touch her some more.

Benjamin had held and touched her feet and she had had to root her bottom to the chair so as not to betray her own body's betrayal of wanting those long fingers to stop tending and start caressing. She had had to fight her own senses to block out the thickening of her blood at his touch, had fought to keep the detachment she had spent a lifetime developing.

She squeezed her eyes shut, her brain-burn deepening at how she reacted so physically to the man who threatened to ruin *everything*.

She was caught in a feud between two men—three if she counted Luis—but it wasn't Freya who had the potential for the greatest suffering as a consequence of it, it was her mother. Her mother was the only reason she had agreed to Javier's emotionless proposal.

You know the kind of man he is yet still you chose to marry him. What kind of woman does that make you...?

It made her a desperate one.

Dance was all she knew, all she was, her life, her soul, her comfort. She had achieved so much from her humble beginnings but there was still so much to strive for, both for herself and for her parents who had made so many sacrifices to get her where she was today. Imagining the pride on their faces if she were to get top billing at the Royal Opera House or the Bolshoi or the Metropolitan gave her all the boost she needed on the days when her feet and calves seared with such pain that she forgot why she loved what she did so much.

Javier's proposal had given her hope. He would give her all the space she needed to be the very best. Marriage to him meant that if she did make it as far as she dreamed in her career then she would have the means to fly her parents all over the world to watch her perform. Much more importantly, her mother would have the means to be alive and well enough to watch her perform, not be crippled in pain with the morphine barely making a dent in the agony her body was putting her through.

But she *did* know the kind of man Javier was and that was why she had no faith he would pay Benjamin the money he owed. She didn't doubt he and Luis owed Benjamin money, although how they could have got one over the French billionaire she could not begin to guess, and right then she didn't have the strength to care.

Her forthcoming marriage was nothing more than a marriage of convenience. Javier's feelings for her ran no deeper than hers did for him.

If he didn't pay Benjamin then it meant their marriage was off. It meant no more money to pay for her mother's miracle drugs.

If he didn't pay it meant she would have to trust the word of the man who'd stolen her and hope he'd been telling the truth that he would marry her on the same terms.

Because if Javier didn't pay she would have to marry Benjamin. If she didn't her mother would be dead by Christmas.

* * *

Benjamin was on his second cup of coffee when a shadow filled the doorway of the breakfast room. He'd drained the cup before Freya finally stepped inside, back straight, chin jugged outwards, dressed in three-quarter-length white jeans and a dusky pink shirt, her glorious hair scraped back in another tight bun.

The simplicity of her clothing, all selected by his sister, did not detract in the least from her graceful bearing, and Benjamin found himself straightening and his heart accelerating as she glided towards him.

She allowed Christabel, who had followed her in, to usher her into the seat opposite his own and made the simple act of sitting down look like an art form.

‘Coffee?’ his housekeeper asked as she fussed over her.

‘Just orange juice, thank you,’ she answered quietly.

Only when they were alone did Freya look at him.

He’d thought he’d become accustomed to the dense blackness of her eyes but right then the weight of her stare seemed to pierce through him. He shifted in his seat, unsettled but momentarily trapped in a gaze that seemed to have the ability to reach inside him and touch his soul...

He blinked the unexpected and wholly ridiculous thought away and flashed his teeth at her.

‘Did you get any sleep?’

She smiled tightly but made no verbal response.

‘You look tired.’

She shrugged and reached for her juice.

‘Have some coffee. It will help you wake up.’

‘I rarely drink caffeine.’

‘More for me then.’ He poured himself another cup as the maid brought Freya’s breakfast tray in and placed it in front of her.

His houseguest gazed at the bowls before her in surprise then smiled at the maid. It was a smile that made her eyes shine and for a moment Benjamin wished he were the one on the receiving end of it.

‘Please thank the chef for me,’ she said. ‘This is perfect. She must have gone to a great deal of trouble.’

As the maid didn’t speak English, Benjamin translated.

The moment they were alone again, Freya said, ‘Has Javier been in touch?’

‘Not yet.’ He’d turned his phone’s settings so only Javier, Luis and Chloe could reach him. He didn’t want any other distractions.

She closed her eyes and took a long breath. He could see her centring herself in that incredible way he had never seen anyone else do, as if she were swallowing all her emotions down and locking them away. If he hadn’t seen those bursts of anger-fuelled adrenaline when she had run away at his airfield and then when she had sent his supper flying before fleeing into the night, he could believe this woman never lost her composure.

And yet for all her stillness there was something about her that made her more vivid than any other woman he had ever met, a glow that drew the eye like a breathing, walking, talking sculpture.

What kind of a lover she would be? Did she burn under the sheets or keep that cloak of composure?

Had her exotic, intoxicating presence turned his old friend’s heart as well as his loins? Had he lost himself in her...?

Benjamin shoved the thought away and swallowed back the rancid taste forming in his mouth.

He should be hoping Javier *had* lost himself in her arms as that would make it more likely for him to pay to get her back. He should not feel nauseous at the thought of them together.

That sick feeling only became more violent to think of Freya losing herself in Javier’s arms.

How deeply did her feelings for Javier run?

If they had any depth then why did her eyes pulse whenever she looked at *him*?

He inhaled deeply, trying to clear his mind. He needed to concentrate on the forthcoming hours until Javier made his move. Only then could he decide what his own move would be.

In that spirit, he looked pointedly at the varying bowls of food his chef had prepared for her. He’d sent Christabel to check on his unwilling houseguest earlier and see what, if anything, she required for breakfast. He did not deny his relief to learn she’d abandoned her short hunger strike.

‘What are you having?’ he asked. ‘It looks like animal feed.’

‘Granola. Your chef has kindly made it fresh for me.’

‘Granola?’

‘Rolled oats.’

‘Animal feed.’

She pulled a face at him and placed a heaped spoonful of berries on her animal feed, following them with a spoonful of almonds. Then she spooned some natural yogurt onto it and stirred it all together. As she raised the spoon to her mouth she paused. ‘Do you have to watch?’

The colour staining her cheeks intrigued him. ‘It bothers you?’

‘You staring at me? Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Because...’ Freya put the spoon back in the bowl. She could hardly believe how self-conscious she felt sitting before him like this. She spent hours every day with her every move scrutinised by choreographers, fellow dancers, audiences and had long ago learned to tune out the weight of their stares.

Yet sitting here with Benjamin’s swirling green eyes fixed upon her she was aware of her body in ways she had never been before, could feel the blood pumping through her, heating with each cycle.

It wasn’t merely herself and the components of her own body that she was freshly aware of, it was Benjamin too, this Lucifer in disguise. The vibrating hairs on her nape and arms strained towards him as if seeking his scent and the heat of his skin, her senses more alert than they had ever been before.

‘It just does,’ she said tightly. ‘Why don’t you get yourself something to eat and leave me in peace?’

‘I rarely eat in the morning,’ he informed her.

‘Cheese late at night then no breakfast...all the ingredients for health problems when you reach middle age.’

A glimmer came into his eyes. ‘I can assure you I am in peak physical health.’

She could see that for herself though she would never admit it to him and felt a pang of envy at a life where you could eat any morsel you liked without scrutiny and without having to weigh up its nutritional value or energy-boosting properties.

Oh, to have the freedom to eat whatever you liked—or not—whenever you liked...

Benjamin’s phone suddenly buzzed loudly.

She met his narrowed green eyes the moment before he reached for it.

‘It’s an email from Javier,’ he said matter-of-factly.

Her stomach dropped. ‘Already?’

He nodded. ‘He has sent a copy to your email too.’

‘What does it say?’

He studied it for a long time before sliding the phone to her.

The email contained no text. Javier had sent an attachment of two adjoining photos.

She blinked a number of times before the pictures she was staring at came into focus and their significance made itself clear.

They had been taken by one of the photographers at the gala who had spotted something intriguing about them leaving together and decided to capture it. The first shot caught the moment when they had paused in the hotel lobby for Benjamin to briefly explain the situation, the other had them walking out of the hotel hand in hand.

It was the first picture she found herself unable to look away from and, she knew in the pit of her stomach, it was the reason Javier had sent the pictures to her too.

Benjamin’s face had been mostly obscured but her own features were there for all to see, and all could see her black eyes staring intently into his and her body tilting towards him. They looked like a pair of lovers caught in the midst of a most intimate conversation.

The blood whooshed up and into her brain.

That look in her eyes as she’d stared at him...

Had she really looked at Benjamin like that?

She covered her mouth, horrified.

She couldn't even bring herself to say anything when Benjamin's large hand stretched across the table to take his phone back from her.

Freya was so shamed and mortified at the expression captured on her face she feared her vocal cords had been stunned into silence for ever.

Nothing was said between them until another loud buzzing cut through the silence, a continuous buzz signalling a phone call.

Benjamin put it on speakerphone.

His eyes rested on Freya as the gravelly Spanish tones of Javier Casillas filled the room.

'You will not receive a cent from me, you son-of-a-bitch. Keep her. She's all yours.'

Then the line went dead.

This time the silence between them was loud enough for Freya to hear the beats of her thundering heart.

The room began to spin around her, the high ceiling lowering, the wide walls narrowing.

She was going to be sick.

She might very well have *been* sick had the most outrageous sound she'd ever heard not brought her sharply back to herself and the room back into focus.

Benjamin, his eyes not once dropping their hold on hers, was laughing.

'How can you think this is funny?' she asked with a croak, dredging the words from the back of her throat. 'You've lost.'

And she had lost too. Javier had emailed the pictures to her too as a message. Their engagement was over.

'Lost?' Benjamin's face creased with mirth. He threw his head back, his laughter coming in great booms that echoed around her ears. 'No, *ma douce*, I have not lost. I told you last night, I cannot lose.'

It was a struggle to breathe. 'He's not going to pay the money.'

'There was only an even chance that he would. There were only two end scenarios: Javier would pay or he would not. This result is not my preferred one but I can take satisfaction that he will be burning with humiliation at the photographs of us so it is not a loss by any means.'

'Not a loss for you, maybe, but what about me? He's never going to take me back. You know that, right? These pictures make it look like I was encouraging you...that I was a part of it.'

Oh, God, that look in her eyes as she'd stared into his...

There was not an ounce of penitence to be found in his glittering eyes. 'You don't have to lose anything, *ma douce*. Your career is safe. You are one of the most exciting dancers in the world. If Javier is foolish enough to sack you then I guarantee another company will snatch you up.'

'You think I care only about my career?' she demanded.

His laugh was merciless. 'My sister says you are the most driven dancer she has ever met, but if it is the loss of your fiancé that grieves you then I suggest you have a rethink. If he had feelings for you he would have fought for you. If he'd believed in your love he would have fought for you. You should be thanking me. I am saving you from a lifetime of misery.'

'I can assure you, you are not. I told you last night that you don't know anything about me.'

'If he means that much to you, now is your chance to go to him and plead your case,' he said sardonically. 'He has made his choice, which means you are now free to make yours. Say the word and I will arrange transportation to take you back to Madrid. You can be back there by lunch.'

Rising from her chair, Freya leaned forward to eyeball him. She had never known she could feel such hate for someone. Her heart was beating so frantically against her ribcage she had to fight to get the words out. 'Believe me, my preferred outcome would be to leave this awful excuse for a home and never have to see your hateful face again. Quite frankly, if I were stuck on a desert island with the choice between you and a rat for company, the rodent would win every time.'

Something flickered on his darkly handsome face, the smug satisfaction vanishing.

A charge passed between them, so tangible she felt it pierce into her chest and thump into her erratic heart.

He gazed at her with eyes that swirled and pulsed before his lips curved into a knowing smile and he too leaned forward. 'The way you were looking at me in that photograph proves the lie in that.'

CHAPTER SIX

'I DON'T KNOW what you're talking about.' Freya hated that her burning cheeks contradicted her.

Benjamin rose slowly from his seat and walked around the table to her, that feline grace she had seen before taking a dangerous hue, the panther stalking towards its prey.

She twisted around so her thighs pressed into the hard wood, her usually nimble feet becoming like sludge.

And then he was standing in front of her, that strong neck her lips kept longing to press into right there in her eye line, standing close enough for his fresh spicy scent to seep into her senses.

'I think you know exactly what I'm talking about, *ma douce*.' He placed a hand on the arch of her neck and dropped his voice to a murmur. The feel of his fingers on her skin burned through her, the heat from his breath catching the loose strands of her hair and carrying through it to her scalp and down into her bloodstream. 'The camera never lies. Javier saw the desire you feel for me. I have seen it too and I have *felt* it, when I carried you back into my home and the moonlight shone on us both. You say you hate me but still you long for my kiss.'

Freya found herself too scared to move. Too scared to breathe. Terrified to make the slightest twist in her body lest her lips inch themselves forward to brush against the warm neck so close to her mouth and the rest of her body, aching at the remembrance of being held so securely in his arms, press itself wantonly against him.

Focus, Freya. The next few minutes will determine you and your mother's whole futures.

He moved a little closer so his breath danced over the top of her ear, electrifying parts inside her she hadn't known were there. 'There is an attraction between us that has been there since we first saw each other in Javier's garden.'

She gave a tiny shake of her head to deny his words but he dragged his hand from her neck and placed a finger on her lips, standing back a little so he could stare straight into her eyes.

'Now you no longer belong to him, we are free to act on it.' Benjamin brushed the finger from her lips to rest lightly on her cheek. She truly had the softest skin he had ever touched, more velvet than flesh.

He'd always known it would be fifty-fifty whether Javier would pay up, which was why he had gone to the lengths he had to make sure that whatever the outcome, he would still win.

He hadn't expected the destruction of Javier and Freya's relationship to feel like a victory that would taste as sweet as if Javier had paid in full.

Never again would he be haunted by thoughts of Freya enjoying herself in his enemy's bed because she had been correct that Javier would never take her back. She could plead with him but Benjamin knew Javier too well. His Spanish foe's reputation and pride were the fuel he needed to get through the day. In one stroke Benjamin had battered them both and soon he would set his sights on Luis too.

Benjamin was well aware the actions he'd taken made him as bad as the men he sought to destroy but he didn't care. Why should he? Who had ever cared for him?

His mother had loved him but when he had discovered the Casillas brothers' treachery the past had come back into sharp focus and he'd been forced to accept that her love for him had always been tied with her love for them. Louise Guillem had loved Javier and Luis as if they were children of her blood because, for his mother, Clara Casillas had been the love of her life. A platonic love, it was true, but with the emotional intensity of the most heightened love affair. Benjamin had been a by-

product of that love, a child to raise alongside Clara's, not wanted as a child should be for himself but more as a pet, an accessory.

His father had long gone, leaving the marital home when Louise had fallen pregnant by accident a decade after Benjamin had been born. Already fed up playing second fiddle to the World's Greatest Dancer, his father had refused to hang around and raise a second accessory. Benjamin had never missed him—you had to know someone to miss them and he had never properly known his father—but, again, with the past being brought back into focus, he had realised for the first time that his father hadn't just left his mother but his only son too. He hadn't cared enough to keep their tentative relationship going.

Then there was Javier and Luis. Their betrayal had been the most wrenching of all because it had made him look at the past with new, different eyes and reassess all the relationships he had taken for granted and unbury his head from the truth.

The only relationship he had left was with his sister but she was a free spirit with wounds of her own, a beautiful violin with broken strings.

Every other person he'd trusted and cared for had used or betrayed him.

He was damned if he would trust or care again.

This beautiful woman with eyes a man could fall into was no innocent. He regretted that he'd had to use her but it had been a necessary evil. He would not regret destroying her relationship with Javier. If she had cared an ounce for his foe she would not be staring at him as if she wanted him to devour her.

Dieu, a man really could fall into those eyes and never resurface...

But there was something else breaking free in the heady depths of those eyes, a fire, a determination that made him drop his hand from her cheek and step back so he could study her carefully without her sultry scent playing under his nose and filtering through into his bloodstream...

The moment he stepped away she folded her arms across her chest and seemed to grow before his eyes.

'The only thing we're going to act on is your word.' Freya's husky voice had the same fiery determination as resonated in her eyes.

'You are ready to be taken back to Madrid?'

This time she was the one to laugh, a short, bitter sound. 'Yes. But not yet. Not until you have married me.'

For a moment it felt as if he had stepped onto quicksand.

He shook his head. 'You want to marry me?'

'No. I would rather marry the rodent on the desert island but you told me I would have three choices once Javier had made his. He won't take me back, not even if I get down on my knees and beg. I need the money set out in our pre-nuptial agreement so going back to Madrid and resuming my single life is not an option either, which leaves just one remaining choice—marrying you. You need to honour the contract Javier and I signed on our engagement as you said you would.'

He stared into her unsmiling face, an unexpected frisson racing up his spine.

Marriage to Freya...?

He had made his threat to Javier with the full intention of acting on it if it came to it but never had he believed she would go along with it, let alone demand it of him.

He tried to envisage Javier's reaction when he heard the news but all he could imagine was Freya naked in his bed, the fantasies he'd been suppressing for two months suddenly springing to life in a riot of erotic colour.

Marriage had never been on his agenda before. He'd spent the past seven years so busy clawing his business back to health and then into the business stratosphere that any thoughts of wedlock had been put on the back burner, something to be considered when his business no longer consumed his every waking thought.

Now the thought of marriage curdled his stomach. Marriage involved love and trust, two things he was no longer capable of and no longer believed in.

‘Were you lying to me when you gave me your word?’ she challenged into the silence.

‘I save the lies for your ex-fiancé. He’s the expert at them. And I am thinking you must be good at them too seeing as you fooled him into believing you had feelings for him.’

‘I didn’t fool or lie to anyone. Javier and I both knew exactly what we were signing up for.’

‘You admit you were marrying him for his money?’

‘Yes. I need that money.’

‘And what did Javier get out of marrying you other than a prima ballerina on his arm?’

Fresh colour stained her cheeks but her gaze didn’t flicker. ‘The contract we signed spells it out. If you’re the man of your word you say you are, you will duplicate it and honour it.’

‘You are serious about this?’

‘Deadly serious. The ballet company is on a two-week shutdown. I was supposed to marry Javier next Saturday. I presume with all the strings you’re able to pull you can arrange for us to marry then instead. Either that or you can pay me now all the money I would have received from Javier, say, for the first ten years of our marriage.’ Her eyes brightened, this idea clearly only just occurring to her. ‘That can be my compensation for being the unwitting victim in your vindictive game. It comes to...’ her brow furrowed as she mentally calculated the sum ‘...around twenty million. I’ll be happy to accept half that. Call it ten million and I go back to my life and we never have to see each other again.’

‘You want me to pay you off?’ he asked, part in astonishment and part in admiration.

‘That would be the best outcome for both of us, don’t you think?’

He shook his head slowly, intrigued and not a little aroused at the spirit and fight she was showing. No wonder Javier had chosen her for his wife. She was magnificent. ‘*Non, ma douce*, the choice was marriage or nothing. If I pay you off, I get nothing from it.’

‘Your conscience will thank you.’

‘I told you before, my conscience allows me to sleep well. With you in my bed every night I will be able to sleep even more sweetly.’ His arousal deepened to imagine that wonderful hair fanned over his pillow, the obsidian eyes currently firing fury at him firing only desire...

‘Maybe you should read the contract before assuming I will be in your bed every night. You might find you prefer to pay me off.’

‘Unlikely but, even if that is the case, the knowledge Javier will spend the rest of his life knowing it is my ring you wear on your finger and not his will soften the blow.’

‘You really are a vindictive monster, aren’t you?’

‘You insult me and speak of my conscience when you are a self-confessed gold-digger.’ He smiled and closed the gap that had formed between them and placed a hand on her slender hip. There was no danger of trusting or caring for this woman, even if he was capable of it and even if she did have eyes he could sink into. ‘We don’t have to like each other to be good together...and I think we could be *very* good together. Marry me and you have everything you would have had if you had married Javier.’

‘And you get continued revenge,’ she finished for him, her tone contemptuous.

‘*Exactement*. We *both* get what we want.’

Freya could smell the warmth of his skin beneath the freshness of his cologne...

Benjamin was *not* what she wanted. He provoked her in ways Javier never had. Javier was scary but Benjamin terrified her for all the wrong reasons.

She wouldn’t be swapping one rich man for another, she would be swapping ice for fire, safety for danger, all the things she had never wanted, all the things she had shied away from since she had learned sex was the only control she had over her body.

There was not a part of her external body that hadn’t been touched or manhandled; a grab of her arm to raise it an inch higher, rough hands on her hips to twist her into the desired shape,

a chuck under the chin to lift it, partners holding her intimately in dance... Her external body was not hers; it belonged to dance. Her body was public property but her emotions and everything inside her belonged to herself.

That the control she'd worked so hard for was in danger of slipping for this man, this vindictive, abhorrent...

She clamped her lips together to contain a gasp.

Benjamin had taken another step closer. Their bodies were almost flush.

For the first time in her life someone had hold of her hip and she could *feel* it, inside and out, her blood heating and thickening to treacle.

She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, trying to block her dancing senses and contain what was happening within her frame.

'You know what this means?' he murmured.

She swallowed and managed a shake of her head.

'It means you and I are now betrothed. Which means we need to seal the deal.'

Before she could guess what he meant, he'd hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her tight against him. Before she could protest or make any protective move of her own, he'd covered her mouth with his.

Having no preparation or warning, Freya found herself flailing against him, her hands grabbing his arms as her already overloaded senses careered into terrifying yet exciting new directions. She struggled helplessly to keep possession of herself while his lips moved against hers in what she instinctively knew was the final marker in the game he'd been playing, Benjamin claiming her as his in an expert and ruthless manner that...

His tongue swept into her mouth and suddenly she didn't care that it was all a game to him. Her body took possession of her brain for the very first time and she was kissing him back, taking the dark heat of his kisses and revelling in the sensation they were evoking in her. Such glorious, heady sensations, burning her skin beneath her clothes, sensitising flesh that had only come alive before for dance. She loosened her hands to wind them around his neck and press herself closer still while he swept his hands over her back, holding her tightly, possessively, devouring her mouth as if she were the food he needed to sustain himself. When his hand moved down to clasp her bottom and grind their groins together, it was *her* moan that echoed between them.

Her breasts were crushed against his chest, alive and sensitised for the first time in her life, making her want to weep that she had chosen to wear a bra when she so rarely bothered, and as these thoughts flickered in her hazy mind reality crashed back down.

All the clothes she wore, her underwear, her shoes, every item designated as hers under this roof had been bought without her knowledge.

She was a pawn in Benjamin's game of vengeance and she *hated* him.

She would not accept his kisses with anything but contempt.

When Freya suddenly pulled out of his arms and jumped back, seeming to leap backwards through the air yet still making the perfect dancer's landing, Benjamin had to blink rapidly to regain his focus and sense of place.

What the hell had just happened?

Breathing heavily, he stared at her, stunned that one simple kiss could explode like that. He'd known the attraction between them was strong but that...that had blown his mind.

He hadn't experienced such heady, evocative feelings from a kiss since...since ever, not even those illicit teenage kisses when he'd first discovered that the opposite sex was good for something more than merciless teasing.

She stared back, eyes wide and wary, her own breaths coming in shallow gulps, her cheeks flushed. Her hair was still pulled back in that tight bun but there was something dishevelled about her now that made the heavy weight in his loins deepen.

He put a hand on the table, partly to steady himself and partly to stop himself crossing the room to haul her back into his arms. His loins felt as if they had been set on fire, the burn spread throughout him but concentrated there, an ache such as he had never experienced before that threatened to engulf his mind along with the rest of him.

Had she reacted to Javier's kisses with that same intensity...?

The thought deflated the lust riding through him as effectively as a pin in a balloon.

He needed air.

'Your pre-nuptial agreement. Where is it?' he asked roughly.

A flash of confusion flittered over her features before she blinked sharply. 'In Javier's safe but I have a copy of it on an email attachment.'

'*Bien*. I will get your phone unlocked. When it is working again, forward it to me. I will get it redrafted with both our names on it. It will be ready to sign by the end of the day.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

BENJAMIN RAPPED LOUDLY on the door to Freya's quarters, his heart making as much noise in his chest as his knuckles made on the door.

It was incredible to think these would be her permanent quarters.

When he had bought the chateau seven years ago there had been a vague image of a future Madame Guillem to share the vast home and land with but it had been a secondary image. He'd bought it for his mother and, at the time, nursing her through her final months had been his only concern. Not long after her funeral, he'd found himself unable to repay the mortgage and forced to face the reality of his financial situation. Nursing his mother had taken him away from his business. The bills had mounted. Suppliers had threatened court action. He'd been days away from losing everything.

All thoughts of a future Madame Guillem had been buried. He'd dated. He'd had fun. But nothing permanent and definitely nothing serious. He'd had neither the physical time nor the mental space to make a relationship work.

It was only when he'd reached a position in his life where he could take his foot off the accelerator and slow things down enough for a real life of his own that he'd reached the inescapable conclusion that he would never trust anyone enough to pledge his life to them. As much as he'd regretted it would likely mean he would never have children, another of those vague in-the-future notions, he would not put himself through it. If he couldn't trust the people he'd loved all his life how could he trust a stranger?

He didn't have that worry with Freya. Knowing there was no trust to fake made taking this step more palatable.

Reading through the contract she and Javier had signed had made it even more so.

He had read it, shaking his head with incredulity at what it contained.

He could easily see his old friend signing this cold, emotionless contract but for the hot-blooded woman whose kisses had turned him to fire to sign such a thing stretched the realms of credulity.

But then, she was already proving to be far more fiery a woman than he'd thought Javier would commit himself to.

He hadn't seen her since their explosive kiss that morning. He'd been busy in his office organising things. She'd kept herself busy doing her own thing, his staff keeping discreet tabs on her.

He knocked again. After waiting another thirty seconds, he pushed the door open and let himself in.

Her quarters were large and comfortable, a small reception area leading to a bedroom, bathroom and dressing room to the left, and a spacious living area to the right, where the faint trace of music played out through the closed door. He opened it and paused before stepping over the threshold.

All the furniture had been pushed against the far wall to create a large empty space. The music came from her freshly working phone.

Freya had contorted herself into the strangest shape he'd ever seen the human body take right in the centre of the room. Her calves and knees were on the carpet as if she'd knelt to pray but instead of clasping her hands before her and leaning forward, she'd gone backwards into a bridge, her flat stomach arched in the air, her elbows on the floor where her toes rested, her face in the soles of her bare feet with her hands clasping both her heels and her temples.

It looked the most uncomfortable pose a person could manipulate themselves into but she didn't appear to be in any discomfort. If anything, she seemed at peace, her chest expanding and her stomach softening in long, steady breaths.

He found his own breath stuck in his lungs. He didn't dare make a sound, afraid that to disturb her would cause her to injure herself.

After what felt like hours but in reality was probably less than a minute she uncoiled herself, walking her hands away from her feet then using them to push herself upright.

Kneeling, she finally looked at him. She showed no concern or surprise at his appearance in her quarters.

He'd been so entranced with what he'd seen that it was only when her eyes met his that he noticed all she had on were a black vest and a pair of black knickers.

If she was perturbed that he had walked into her quarters while she had hardly any clothes on she didn't show it.

But then, recalling all the years spent touring with Clara Casillas, he had never met a body-shy ballerina before. He'd seen more naked women in the first ten years of his life than if he'd been raised in a brothel. It was a fact of their life. Freya was a woman who spent her life with her body under a microscope, different hands touching it for different reasons, whether to lift, to shape or to dress.

Desire coiled through his loins to imagine what it would feel like to lift this woman into his arms as a lover...

He would bet she had poise and grace even when she slept and felt a thickening in his loins to know it wouldn't be long before he discovered that for himself.

And, as his imagination suddenly went rampant with heady thoughts of this beautiful, supple woman in his bed, those long, lithe legs wrapped around him, those black eyes currently staring at him without any expression coming alive with desire, the strangest thing of all occurred. Freya blushed.

She must have felt the heat crawling over her face for her features tightened before she jumped gracefully to her feet, going from kneeling to standing in the time it took a mortal to blink.

'If you'll excuse me, I'll put some clothes on,' she said stiffly.

The lump in his throat prevented him from doing more than stepping aside to let her pass through the door to her bedroom.

Breathing deeply, he took a seat on the armchair while he waited for her to return, keeping his thoughts and imagination far away from sex, trying to quell the ache burning in his loins.

They had business to take care of.

Feeling more together in himself when she came back into the living room, he said, 'What were you doing?'

She'd put her three-quarter-length white jeans back on and covered her chest with an off-the-shoulder navy top. Her battered feet were bare. She sat on the leather sofa nestled next to his and twisted her body round to face him. 'Yoga. That pose was the Kapotasana.'

'It sounds as painful as it looks.'

The glimmer of a smile twitched on her lips. 'It's invigorating and, under the circumstances, necessary.'

'Why?'

'I need to keep fit. I'm used to dancing and working out for a minimum of seven hours a day. I need to keep my fitness levels maintained, I need to stretch and practise regularly or it will be extra

hard when I return to the studio. This is all I have available to me...unless you have a secret dance studio tucked away somewhere with a barre?

'I am afraid not but you are welcome to use my gym and swimming pools and sauna. There's tennis courts too.'

She pulled her lips in together. 'I have to be careful using a gym and swimming. It's what they do to my muscles—they bulk them in all the wrong places. I've never played tennis before and wouldn't want to risk taking it up without advice.'

He looked around again at the space she had created for herself in this room and knew without having to ask that this was not suitable for her to practise dancing in.

'Still, I'm sure you're not here to discuss my fitness regime,' she said, changing the subject and straightening her back before nodding at the file in his hand. 'Is that the contract?'

He'd almost forgotten what he had come here for.

Pulling his mind back to attention, he took the sheets of paper out of the folder. 'I've booked our wedding for Thursday.'

She was silent for beat. 'Thursday?'

'Oui.'

'I was supposed to marry Javier on Saturday.'

'At this short notice there are no slots available for Saturday.'

'Couldn't you have bribed or blackmailed someone?'

'I pulled enough strings to bypass the notice period. If it's a Saturday wedding you long for we can always wait a few weeks.' He stared hard at her as he said this. Having now read the terms of the contract he understood why she was keen to marry on the same day she would have married Javier. On the day of their wedding he would transfer two hundred thousand euros into her account, the first recurring monthly payment of that sum. According to the contract, Javier had already paid her two lump sums of one hundred thousand euros.

'No,' she declined so hurriedly he could see the euro signs ringing in her eyes. 'Thursday is fine.'

He gave a tight smile. 'I thought so. I will take you to the town hall tomorrow to meet the mayor and fill out some forms but the arrangements are all in hand. Is your passport in your apartment?'

She nodded. 'I've spoken to my flatmate. She's got it safe.'

'I will send a courier to collect it.'

'I'll go and get it. I need to collect the rest of my stuff.'

'Your possessions can be couriered over with the passport.'

'I want to get them myself.'

The thought of her being in the same city as Javier set his teeth on edge. '*Impossible*. There is too much to arrange here.'

'I need my clothes.'

'I have appointments in Paris after our meeting with the mayor tomorrow. You can fly there with me and buy whatever you need.'

'With what? Fresh air? I can't buy an entire new wardrobe with one hundred and fifty euros, which is all I have in my account.'

His lips curved in distaste. 'You have spent all the money Javier has already given to you?'

'Yes. I had...'

'I have no cares for what you spend your money on. I will give you a credit card. Buy whatever you need with it. Consider it an early wedding present. While you are there you can buy a wedding dress.'

'Something black to match your heart?' she suggested with a touch of bitterness.

'You are hardly in a position to talk of my heart when you were party to a contract like this one.'

There was the slightest flinch. 'Javier and I drew up a marriage agreement that suited us both.'

'It does not suit me.'

‘You said you would honour it.’

‘And I will. I have only changed one item.’

‘I’m not signing unless it’s the original with only Javier’s name substituted for yours.’

‘You will if you still want the fortune and all the assets that come with it.’

‘What have you changed?’

‘Look for yourself.’ He handed the file to her. ‘The change is highlighted in red.’

She took it from him with a scowl.

‘May I remind you,’ he said as she flicked through the papers, ‘that it is your choice to marry me. I am not forcing your hand.’

She didn’t look up from the papers. ‘There was no other choice for me.’

‘The lure of all that money too strong to give up?’ he mocked.

But she didn’t answer, suddenly looking up at him with wide eyes, colour blasting over her cheeks. ‘Of all the things you could have changed, you changed *that*?’

‘I am not signing away a chunk of my fortune and my freedom to spend only one night a week in a bed with my wife.’ He’d read that part of the long, detailed pre-nuptial agreement with his mouth open, shaking his head with disbelief as he’d wondered what kind of a woman would sign such a document.

Scheduled, mandated sex?

And then he had read the next section and his incredulity had grown.

How could the woman who kissed as if she were made of lava agree to such a marriage?

He stared at Freya now and wondered what was going on in that complex brain. She was impossible to fathom, a living contradiction. Scalding hot on the outside but seemingly cold on the inside. Which was the real Freya: the hot or the cold one?

‘I will comply in full with the rest of the contract but when we are under the same roof we sleep in the same bed. If it is not something you can live with I suggest you tell me now so I can make the necessary arrangements for your departure from my home.’

Freya stared into eyes as uncompromising as his words and dug her bruised toes into the carpet. Her skin itched with the need for movement, the hour of yoga she had done before he had walked into her quarters nowhere near enough to quell the fears and emotions pummelling her.

Their kiss...

It had frazzled all her nerve endings.

How could she have reacted to his kiss like that? To *him*?

It had been her first proper kiss and it had been everything a first kiss should be and, terrifyingly, so much more.

She had spent the day searching for a way to purge her heightened emotions but her usual method of dancing her fears away was not available to her. She’d taken a long walk through his grounds and explored the vast chateau praying that somewhere within the huge rooms would be one she could use to dance in. It had been like Goldilocks searching for the perfect porridge and bed but without the outcome; not one of the rooms had been right. The majority could work with their proportions but the flooring was all wrong, either too slippery or covered in carpet, neither of which were suitable and could be dangerous.

Meditation and yoga were her fail-safe fall-backs, clearing her mind and keeping her body limber, but they weren’t enough, not for here and now when she was as frightened for her future and as terrified of what was happening inside her as she had ever been.

Her brain burned to imagine Benjamin’s private reaction when he had read the section that covered intimacy in her pre-nup. Javier had insisted it be put in, just as he had insisted on the majority of all the other clauses, including the one stating they would only have a child at a time of Freya’s choosing. He hadn’t wanted them to ever get to a point in the future where either could accuse the other of going back on what had been agreed. That agreement would always be there, a guide for

them to enter matrimony and ensure a long, harmonious union without any unpleasant arguments or misunderstandings.

The whole document read as cold and passionless, entirely appropriate for a marriage that had nothing to do with love but business and safety.

Javier had been cold but he *had* been safe. There had never been any emotional danger in marrying him.

She had never had to dig her toes into the ground when she was with him. There had been no physical effect whatsoever.

The brain burn deepened as she read the contents again, the only change being Benjamin's name listed as Party One. And the new clause stating they would share a bed when under the same roof.

Her heart thumped wildly, panic rabid and hot inside her.

When she had envisaged making love to Javier it had been with an analytical head, a box to tick in a marriage that would keep her mother alive and ease her suffering for months, hopefully years, to come.

There was nothing analytical about her imaginings of Benjamin. She had felt something move inside her in that first look they had shared, a flare of heat that had warmed her in ways she didn't understand and could never have explained.

Their kiss had done more than warm her. She could still feel the scorch of his lips on hers and his taste on her tongue. Meditation and yoga had done nothing to rid it but it had helped to a small extent, allowing her to control her raging heart and breathing when he had unexpectedly entered her quarters.

And then he had stared at her with the look that suggested he wanted to strip the last of her clothing off.

She had never been shy skimpily dressed in front of anyone before but in that moment and under the weight of that look she had felt naked for the first time in her life.

And she was expected to share his bed and give herself to this man who frightened her far more than her ice-cold fiancé ever had?

He, Benjamin, was her fiancé now...

She could do this, she assured herself, breathing deeply. She had faced far scarier prospects, like when she'd been eleven and had left the safety and comfort of her parents' home to become a boarder at ballet school. That had been truly terrifying even though it had also been everything she'd wanted.

Joining the school and discovering just how different she'd been to all the other girls had almost had her begging to go home. Having been accepted on a full scholarship that included boarding fees, she'd been the only girl there from a poor background. In comparison, all the others had been born with silver spoons in their mouths. They'd spoken beautifully, worn clothes that hadn't come from second-hand stores and had had holiday homes. Freya's parents hadn't even owned the flat they'd lived in.

Somehow she had got through the chronic homesickness and the merciless taunts that nowadays would be considered bullying by burying herself in ballet. She had learned to hide her emotions and express it all through dance, fuelling the talent and love for ballet she had been lucky enough to be born with.

If she could get through that then she was equal to this, equal to Benjamin and the heady, powerful emotions he evoked in her. She could keep them contained. She must.

She could not predict what her future held but she knew what the consequences would be if she allowed this one clause to scupper their marriage plans: a slow, crippling painful death for her mother. She would do anything to ease her mother's suffering. Anything. The first message that had popped into her phone when it had come back to life earlier was her father's daily update. Her mother had had 'a relatively comfortable night'. Translated, that meant the pain had only woken her a couple of times.

‘If you’re allowed to make a change in the contract then I must be allowed to make one too,’ she told him, jutting her chin out and refusing to wilt under the swirling green eyes boring into her. She would not let him browbeat her before they had even signed the contract.

‘Which is?’

‘I was supposed to be moving in with Javier. My flatmate’s already found a new tenant to take my room so I’m not going to have anywhere to live when I’m at work. I want you to buy me an apartment to live in in Madrid. We’re on a two-week shutdown so that’s plenty of time for a man of your talents to buy one for me.’

She saw the faintest clenching of his jaw before his eyes narrowed.

‘I will not have my wife working for my rival.’

‘The contract states in black and white that I continue my career for as long as I like and I do what is best for me and my career. You have no say and no influence in it.’

‘I can change the terms to include that.’

‘You said one change. Or have you forgotten you’re a man of your word?’

No, he had not forgotten, Benjamin thought grimly. It had simply not occurred to him that, having agreed to marry him, Freya would want to return to Madrid. She could work anywhere. It didn’t have to be there.

‘He will make your life a misery,’ he warned.

‘Javier has nothing to do with the day-to-day running of the company. He’s rarely there.’

But Madrid was his home. The thought of Freya living in the same city as *him* set his teeth further on edge.

‘There are many fine ballet companies in France who would love to employ you. I will never interfere with your career but in this instance I am going to have to insist.’

‘Insist that I quit Compania de Ballet de Casillas?’

‘*Oui.*’

The black eyes shot fire-dipped arrows at him. ‘So you want to punish me and an entire ballet company for the sins of its owners, is that what you’re saying?’

‘*Non.* I am saying I do not wish for my wife to work for her ex-lover. It is not an unreasonable request.’

Something shone in her eyes that he didn’t recognise, a shimmer in the midst of her loathing that disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. ‘It’s a request now? That’s funny because the word *insist* made it sound remarkably like a demand.’

‘This will be my only interference.’

Her foot tapped on the carpet but her tone remained calm. ‘So I can get a job working in Japan and you won’t complain?’

‘You can work wherever you like.’ As long as it was far from the Spaniard who had captured her long before he’d set eyes on her...

‘Just not for Javier.’

‘Just not for Javier.’

She sucked in a long draw of breath before inclining her head. ‘I will hand my notice in but I will work my notice period. You can add that to the contract and reiterate you are never to interfere with my career.’

‘How long is your notice period?’

‘Two months. That will allow me to do the opening night of the new theatre. I’m on all the advertising literature for it. I can’t pull out. It’s the biggest show of my life. I’ve worked too hard to throw it away.’

‘*D’accord.*’ He took in his own breath. Two months was nothing. He could handle her working for Javier for that period.

He reminded himself that until that morning he had expected her to insist on returning to Madrid.

‘You share my bed when we are under the same roof and hand your notice in to Compania de Ballet de Casillas. I buy you a property to live in while you work your notice and guarantee never to interfere with your career again. I believe that is everything unless there was something else you wished to discuss.’

Colour rose up her cheeks, her lips tightening before she gave a sharp nod. ‘Just one thing I think it is best to make clear. I may be agreeing to share a bed with you but that does not mean you take ownership of my body. It belongs to me.’

‘I think the kiss we shared earlier proves the lie in that, *ma douce*,’ he said silkily.

The chemistry between them was real, in the air they both inhaled, a living thing swirling like a cloud, shrouding them.

‘Think what you like.’ She dropped her gaze. ‘I will not be your possession.’

‘I am not Javier. I do not expect you to be. But I do expect a wedding night. After that, you can turn your back to me as often as you wish. I do not forget the clause in the contract allowing Javier to take a mistress without question or explanation and, seeing as you have not requested that clause to be removed, it stands for me too. And as you know, I am a man who likes to have all options on the table.’

Her nostrils flared as she juttred her chin back out again, a sign he was starting to recognise meant she was straining to keep her composure.

Let her try and keep it. Come their wedding night he would shatter that composure and discover for himself if her veins ran hot or cold.

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘YOU BOUGHT EVERYTHING you need?’ Benjamin asked as his helicopter lifted into the air to fly them back to Provence after what had proven to be an extremely long day. ‘It doesn’t look like much.’

They had sorted out the paperwork for their wedding first thing then flown to Paris. Having work to do, he’d arranged for his PA’s assistant who spoke English to take Freya shopping.

He had been so consumed in recent months with his feud with the Casillas brothers that he’d neglected his business. He’d hardly stepped through the headquarters of Guillem Foods in weeks and knew from bitter experience how dangerous it could be to take his eye off the ball. Now that the first part of his revenge had been extracted he needed to concentrate on his business for a while before making his next move. Luis would have to wait.

Yet even though he’d needed his brain to engage with Guillem Foods, he’d had to fight to keep his attention on the job because his mind kept wandering back to the woman who would be his wife in three days’ time.

What was it about Freya that consumed his thoughts so much? She’d lodged herself in his mind from that first look, a fascination that had refused to shift that, now she was under his roof, was turning into an obsession.

Things would be better once he’d bedded her. The thrill of the chase and the unknown would be over and she would become mere flesh and bone.

He stared at her now, convinced she was the perfect wife for him. When the desire currently consuming him withered to nothing she would not care. Her own desire for him, unwanted as it was to her, wouldn’t last either. Her heart was too cold for lust to turn into anything more. The marriage agreement she had willingly signed giving herself to two separate men proved that.

Freya was a gold-digger in its purest form. A gold-digger who at some point in the future would give him a child...

A sudden picture came into his head of Freya dancing, a miniature Freya at her feet copying her moves; the child they would have together, the child that would make the chateau he had bought for his mother to end her days in a home.

It was a picture he had never imagined with anyone in all his thirty-five years and the strength of it set blood pumping into his head and perspiration breaking out over his skin.

So powerful was his reaction to the image that it took a few moments to realise she was answering his question.

‘Sophie’s packing my stuff up for me. I’ve arranged for the courier to collect it later when he gets my passport.

‘Will you not need it for your new apartment in Madrid?’ How he hated to think of her returning there but a deal was a deal. The contract had been signed over breakfast.

He’d already instructed an employee to hunt for a suitable home in Madrid for her. The main stipulation was that it be located as far from the district Javier called home as possible.

‘I’ll decide what to take with me when I go back,’ she said. ‘It’ll be mostly my training stuff I take.’

‘Would it not be easier to have separate wardrobes for each home?’ He spent the majority of the year in his chateau but had apartments in Paris and London and houses in Australia, Argentina and Chile. Each had its own complete wardrobe, allowing him to travel lightly and spontaneously when the need or mood arose.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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