



Abby Green

AWAKENED

by the Scarred

ITALIAN

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ABBY GREEN

Awakened By The Scarred Italian

Аннотация

The brooding Italian has returned... To finally make her his! Two years after their last heartbreaking meeting *Ciro Sant'Angelo* bursts back into *Lara Templeton's* life with a demand. His former fiancée will fulfil her promise and become his wife! *Ciro* is not the man *Lara* remembers—a devastating experience has left him scarred and completely ruthless. Yet their intense fire has never died, and his caress awakens innocent *Lara* to unimaginable pleasures. Could their convenient marriage be their redemption...?

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To finally make her his!

Two years after their last heartbreaking meeting, *Ciro Sant'Angelo* bursts back into *Lara Templeton's* life with a demand. His former fiancée *will* fulfill her promise and become his wife! *Ciro* is not the man *Lara* remembers—a devastating experience has left him scarred and completely ruthless. Yet their intense fire has never died, and his caress awakens innocent *Lara* to unimaginable pleasures. Could their convenient marriage be their redemption?

Discover this intense tale of romance and redemption

Irish author **ABBY GREEN** ended a very glamorous career in film and TV—which really consisted of a lot of standing in the rain outside actors' trailers—to pursue her love of romance. After she'd bombarded *Mills & Boon* with manuscripts they kindly accepted one, and an author was born. She lives in Dublin, Ireland, and loves any excuse for distraction. Visit abby-green.com or email abbygreenauthor@gmail.com.

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AWAKENED BY THE SCARRED ITALIAN

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This is for Sharon Kendrick, whose advice
I should have taken about two months before I did.
I got there in the end!
Thanks, Sharon!

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CHAPTER ONE

LARA TEMPLETON WAS glad of the delicate black lace obscuring her vision and hiding her dry eyes from the sly looks of the crowd around the open grave. They might well suspect that she wasn't grieving the death of her husband, the not so Honourable Henry Winterborne, but she didn't want to give them the satisfaction of confirming it for themselves. So she kept herself hidden. Dressed in sober black from head to toe, as befitting a widow.

A grieving widow who had been left nothing by her husband. Who had, in fact, been little more than an indentured slave for the last three months. A detail this crowd of jackals would no doubt crow over if it ever became public knowledge.

Her husband had had good reason to leave her with nothing. She wouldn't have wanted his money anyway. It wasn't why she'd married him, no matter what people believed. And he hadn't left her anything because she hadn't given him what he wanted. *Herself*. It was her fault he'd ended up injured and in a wheelchair for the duration of their marriage.

No, it wasn't your fault. If he hadn't tried to—

Lara's churning thoughts skittered to a halt when she realised that people were looking at her expectantly. The back of her neck prickled.

The priest gave a discreet cough and said, *sotto voce*, 'If you'd

like to throw some soil on the coffin now, Mrs Winterborne...’

Lara flinched inwardly at the reference to her married name. The marriage had been a farce, and she’d only agreed to it because she’d been blackmailed into it by her uncle. She saw a trowel on the ground near the edge of the grave and, even though it was the last thing she wanted to do, because she felt like a hypocrite, she bent down and scooped up some earth before letting it fall onto the coffin. It made a hollow-sounding *thunk*.

For a moment she had the nonsensical notion that her husband might reach out from the grave and pull her in with him, and she almost stumbled forward into the empty space.

There was a gasp from the crowd and the priest caught her arm to steady her.

Unbelievable, thought the man standing nonchalantly against a tree nearby with his arms crossed over a broad chest. He fixed his gaze on the widow, but she didn’t look his way once. She was too busy acting the part—practically throwing herself into the grave.

His mouth firmed, its sensual lines drawing into one hard flat one. He had to hand it to her. She played the part well, dressed in a black form-fitting dress that clung to her willowy graceful frame. Her distinctive blonde hair was tied back in a low bun and a small circular hat sat on her head with a gauzy veil obscuring her face. Oh, he had no doubt she was genuinely grieving...but not for her husband. For the fortune she hadn’t been left.

The man’s mouth curved up into a cruel smile. That was the least Lara Winterborne, née Templeton, deserved.

The back of Lara's neck prickled again. But this time it prickled with heat. Awareness. Something she hadn't felt in a long time. She looked up, shaking off the strange sensation, relieved to see that people were moving away from the grave, talking in low tones. It was over.

A movement in the distance caught her eye and she saw the tall figure of a man, broad and powerful, walking away towards the cars. He wore a cap and what looked like a uniform. Just one of the drivers.

But something about his height and those broad shoulders snagged her attention...the way he walked with loose-limbed athleticism. More than her attention. For a fleeting moment she felt dizzy because he reminded her of... *No*. She shut down the thought immediately. It couldn't be him.

Snippets of nearby whispered conversation distracted Lara from the stranger, and as much as she tried to tune it out some words couldn't be unheard.

'Is it really true? She gets nothing?'

'Never should have married her...'

'She was only trying to save her reputation after almost marrying one of the world's most notorious playboys...'

That last comment cut far too close to her painful memories, but Lara had become adept at disregarding snide comments over the past two years. Contrary to what these people believed, she couldn't be more relieved that she'd been left with not a cent of Winterborne's fortune.

She would never have married him in a million years if she hadn't been faced with an impossible situation. A heinous betrayal by her uncle. Nevertheless, she wasn't such a monster that she couldn't feel some emotion for Winterborne's death. But mostly she felt empty. Weary. Tainted by association.

The grief she *did* feel was for something else entirely. Something that had been snatched away from her before it had ever had a chance to live and breathe. *Someone*. Someone she'd loved more than she'd ever thought it possible to love another human being. He'd been hurt and tortured because of her. He'd almost died. She'd had no choice but to do what she had to save him further pain and possibly worse.

Swallowing back the constriction in her throat, Lara finally turned away from the grave and started to walk towards where just a couple of cars remained. She wasn't paying for any of this. She couldn't afford it. As soon as she returned to the exclusive apartment she'd shared with her husband there would be staff waiting with her bags to escort her off the premises. Her husband had wanted to maintain the façade as far as the graveside. But now all bets were off. She was on her own.

She clamped down on the churning panic in her gut. She would deal with what to do and where to go when she had to.

That's in approximately half an hour, Lara!

She ignored the inner voice.

One of the funeral directors was standing by the back door of her car, holding it open. She saw the shadowy figure of the driver

in the front seat. Once again she felt that prickle of recognition but she told herself she was being silly, superstitious. She was only thinking of *him* now because she was finally free of the burden that had been thrust upon her. But she couldn't allow her thoughts to go there.

She murmured her thanks as she sat into the back of the luxurious car. It was the last bit of decadence she'd experience for some time. Not that she cared. A long time ago, when she'd lost her parents and her older brother in a tragic accident, she'd learnt the hard way that nothing external mattered once you'd lost the people you loved most.

But clearly it hadn't been enough of a lesson to protect her from falling in love with—

The car started moving and Lara welcomed the distraction.

Not thinking of him now.

No matter how much a random stranger had reminded her of him.

Unable to stop her curiosity, though, she looked at the only part of the driver's face she could see in the rear-view mirror. It was half hidden by aviator-style sunglasses, but she could see a strong aquiline nose and firm top lip. A hard, defined jaw.

Her heart started to beat faster, even though rationally she knew it couldn't possibly be—

At that moment he seemed to sense her regard from the back and she saw his arm move before the privacy window slid up. Cutting her off.

For some reason Lara felt as if he'd put the window up as a rebuke. *Ridiculous*. He was just a driver! He'd probably assumed she wanted some privacy...

Still, the disquieting niggles wouldn't go away.

It got worse when she realised that while they were headed in the right direction, back to the Kensington apartment she'd shared with her husband, they weren't getting closer. They were veering off the main high street onto another street nearby, populated by tall, exclusive townhouses.

Lara had walked down this street nearly every day for two years, and had relished every second she wasn't in the oppressively claustrophobic apartment with her husband. But it wasn't her street. The driver must be mistaken.

As the car drew to a stop outside one of the houses Lara leant forward and tapped the window. For a moment nothing happened. She tapped again, and suddenly it slid down with a mechanical buzz.

The driver was still facing forward, his left hand on the wheel. For some reason Lara felt nervous. Yet she was on a familiar street with people passing by the car.

'Excuse me, we're not in the right place. I'm just around the corner, on Marley Street.'

Lara saw the man's jaw clench, and then he said, 'On the contrary, *cara*. We're in exactly the right place.'

That voice. *His voice*.

Lara's breath stopped in her throat and in the same moment

the man took off the cap and removed his sunglasses and turned around to face her.

She wasn't sure how long she sat there, stupefied. In shock. Time ceased to exist as a linear thing.

His words from two years ago were still etched into her mind. *'You will regret this for the rest of your life, Lara. You belong to me.'*

And here he was to crow over her humiliation.

Ciro Sant'Angelo.

The fact that she'd said to him that day, *'I will regret nothing,'* was not a memory she relished. She'd regretted it every second since that day. But she'd been desperate, and she'd had no choice. He'd been brutalised and almost killed. And all because she'd had the temerity to meet him and fall in love, going against the very exacting plans her uncle had orchestrated on her behalf, unbeknownst to her.

If she was honest with herself, she'd dreamed of this moment. That Ciro would come for her. But the reality was almost too much to take in. She wasn't prepared. She would never be prepared for a man like Ciro Sant'Angelo. She hadn't been two years ago and she wasn't now.

Panic surged. She blindly reached for the door handle but it wouldn't open. She tried the other one. *Locked.* Breathless, she looked back at him and said, 'Open the doors, Ciro, this is crazy.'

But nothing happened. He responded with a sardonic twist of his mouth. 'Should I be flattered that you remember me, Lara?'

She might have laughed at that moment if she hadn't been so stunned. Ciro Sant'Angelo was not a man easily forgotten by anyone. Tall, broad and leanly muscular, he oozed charisma and authority. Add to that the stunning symmetry of a face dominated by deep-set dark eyes and a mouth sculpted for sin. A hard jaw and slightly hawkish profile cancelled out any prettiness.

He would have been perfection personified if it wasn't for the jagged white ridge of skin that ran from under his right eye to his jaw. She could only look at it now with sick horror as the knowledge sank into her gut: she was responsible for that brutal scar.

He angled the right side of his face towards her, a hard light in his eyes. 'Does it disgust you?'

She shook her head slowly. It didn't detract from his beauty, it added a savage element. Dangerous.

'Ciro...' Lara said faintly now, as the truth finally sank in, deep in her gut. This wasn't a dream or a mirage...or a nightmare. She shook her head. 'What are you doing here? What do you want?'

I want what's mine.

The words beat through Ciro Sant'Angelo's body like a Klaxon. His blood was up, boiling over.

Lara Templeton—*Winterborne*—was here. Within touching distance. After two long years. Years in which he'd tried and failed to excise her treacherous, beautiful face from his mind.

A face he needed to see now more than he needed to acknowledge her question. 'Take your hat off.'

Her bright blue eyes flashed behind the veil. He could see the slope of her cheek down to that delicate jaw and the mouth that had made him want to sin as soon as he'd laid eyes on it. Full and ripe. A sensual reminder that beneath her elegant and coolly blonde exterior she was all fire.

Her lips compressed for a second and then she lifted a trembling hand—*another nice dramatic touch*—and pulled off the hat and veil.

And even though Ciro had steeled himself to face her once again she took his breath away. She hadn't changed in two years. She was still a classic beauty. Finely etched eyebrows framing huge blue eyes ringed with long dark lashes... High cheekbones and a straight nose... And that mouth... Like a crushed rosebud. Promising decadence even as her eyes sent a message of innocence and naivety.

He'd fallen for it. Badly. Almost fatally.

'Not here,' he said curtly, angry with himself for letting Lara get to him on a level that he'd hoped to have under control. 'We'll talk inside.'

Inside where? Lara was about to ask, but Ciro was already out of the car and striding towards an intimidating townhouse. Her door was opened by a uniformed man—presumably the real driver?—and Lara didn't have much choice but to step out of the back of the car.

As she did, she noticed two or three intimidating-looking men in suits with earpieces. *Security*. Of course. Ciro had always been

cavalier about his safety before, but she could imagine that after the kidnapping he'd changed.

The kidnapping.

A cold shiver went down her spine. Ciro Sant'Angelo had been kidnapped and brutally assaulted two years ago. Lara had been kidnapped with him, but she'd been released within hours. Dumped at the side of a road outside Florence. It had been the singularly most terrifying thing they'd ever experienced and *she'd* been the reason it had happened.

For a moment Lara hesitated at the bottom of the steps leading up to a porch and an open front door. She could see black and white tiles in the circular hallway. A grand-looking interior.

'Mr Sant'Angelo is waiting.'

One of the suited men was extending his arm towards the house. He looked civil enough, but she imagined it was a very superficial civility.

She went up the steps and through the door. A sleek-looking middle-aged woman approached her with a polite smile. 'Miss Templeton, welcome. Please let me take your things. Mr Sant'Angelo is waiting for you in the lounge.'

Numbly, Lara handed over her hat and bag, barely even noticing the use of her maiden name. She wore a light cape-style coat over her shift dress and she left it on, even though it was warm. She followed the woman, not liking the sensation that she was walking into the lion's den.

The sensation was only heightened when she saw the tall figure

of Ciro, his back to her as he helped himself to a drink from a tray on the far side of the room.

‘Would you like tea or coffee, Miss Templeton?’

Lara shook her head at the question from the woman and murmured, ‘No, thanks.’ The housekeeper left the room.

The muted sounds of London traffic could be heard through the huge windows. It was a palatial lounge, beautifully decorated in classic colours with massive paintings hanging on the walls. The paintings were abstract, and a vivid memory exploded into Lara’s head of when Ciro had taken her to an art gallery in Florence, after hours.

They’d only just met a few days previously, and she’d been surprised enough at his choice of gallery to make him say with a mocking smile, ‘You expected a rough Sicilian to have no taste?’

She’d blushed, because he’d exposed her for assuming that a very alpha Italian man would veer towards something more...classical, conservative.

She’d turned to him, still shy around him, wondering what on earth he was doing with her, a pale English arts student. ‘You’re not rough...not at all.’

He’d been like a sleek panther, oozing a very lethal sense of coiled sensual energy.

The gallery had been hushed and reverential. She could still remember the delicious knot of tension deep in her abdomen, and how she’d thought to herself, *How can I not fall in love with this man who opens art galleries especially for me and makes me*

feel more alive than I've ever felt?

They hadn't even kissed at that stage...

Ciro's voice broke through her reverie. 'Would you like something stronger, Lara? Perhaps some brandy for the overwhelming grief you must be feeling?'

Lara's nerves were jangling. He'd turned to face her now, and she noticed that he'd taken off the jacket and wore dark trousers and a white shirt open at the throat. Her mouth went dry. She knew how he tasted there. She could still remember how she'd explored that hollow with her tongue—

Stop.

She ignored his question. 'How long have you lived here?' Had he been here all this time? Just seconds away from where she'd been existing so miserably?

Lara thought she saw Ciro's hand tighten on his glass, but put it down to her overwrought imagination. He said, 'I bought it months ago but the renovations have only just been completed.'

So he hadn't been living here. Somehow that thought comforted Lara. She didn't know if she could have borne being married to Winterborne while knowing Ciro was so close. Even the thought of seeing him with another woman coming out of this house made her insides clench. *Crazy*. She had no jurisdiction over this man. She never had. She'd been dreaming. Delusional.

She lifted her chin. 'I don't have time for this, Ciro...whatever it is that you want. I have to be somewhere.'

Evicted. She ignored the fresh spiking of panic.

Ciro lifted his tumbler of golden liquid and downed the lot in one go. For a second Lara wished she'd asked for a drink.

Then he said slowly, 'But that's just it, Lara. You don't have anywhere to go, do you?'

She actually felt the blood drain from her face. How could he possibly...?

'How can I know?'

He read her mind. Speared her with that dark gaze. Maybe she'd spoken out loud. She felt as if she were slipping under water, losing all sense of control.

He lifted a brow. 'The guests at the funeral were a hotbed of gossip, but I also have my contacts, who've informed me that Winterborne left everything to a distant relative and that as soon as you collect your things from the apartment, you're out on the streets. As for your trust fund—apparently you've blown through that too. Poor penniless Lara. You should have stayed with me. I'm worth three times as much as your dead husband and you wouldn't have had to put up with an old man in your bed for the past two years.'

Lara's head hurt to think of how he'd obtained all that information about her trust fund, and her insides churned at the mention of *old man*.

Any money left to her by her parents had been long gone before she'd ever had a chance to lay her hands on it. 'It was never about the money.'

Ciro's mouth tightened. 'No. It was about class.'

No, Lara thought, *it was about blackmail and coercion.*

But, yes, it had been about class too. Albeit not for her; she couldn't have cared less about class. She never had. Not that *Ciro* would ever believe her. Not after the way she'd convinced him otherwise.

She clamped her lips together, resisting the urge to defend herself when she knew it would be futile. She hardly knew this person in front of her, even though at one time she'd felt as if she'd known every atom of his being. He'd disabused her of that romantic notion two years ago. Yet, she couldn't deny the rapid and persistent spike in her pulse-rate ever since *Ciro* had revealed himself. Her body *knew* him.

Something caught her eye then, and she gasped. His right hand...the one holding the glass...was missing a little finger.

He saw where her gaze had gone. 'Not very pretty, eh?'

Lara felt sick. She remembered *Ciro* lying in that hospital bed, his head and half his face covered in bandages...his arms... She'd been too distraught to notice much else.

'They did that to you? The kidnappers?' Her voice was a thread.

He nodded. 'It amused them. They got bored, waiting for their orders.'

Lara realised that he was different. Harder. More intimidating. 'Why am I here, *Ciro*?'

'Because you betrayed me.' He carefully put down the glass on the silver tray. And then he looked at her. 'And I'm here to

collect my due.'

My due. The words revolved sickeningly in Lara's head.

'I don't owe you anything.' The words felt cumbersome in her mouth.

Liar, whispered a voice.

'Yes, Lara you do. You walked out on me when I needed you most, leaving me at the mercy of the press, who had a field day reviving all the old stories about my family's links to the Mafia. Not only that, you left me without a bride.'

A spark of anger mixed with her guilt as she recalled the lurid headlines in the aftermath of the kidnapping and her subsequent engagement to Henry Winterborne. She focused on the anger.

'You only wanted to marry me to take advantage of my connections to a society that had refused you access.'

Ciro hadn't loved her. He'd wanted her because at first she'd intrigued him, with her naivety and innocence, and then because of her connections and her name.

Over the last two years, with the benefit of distance and hindsight, Lara had come to acknowledge how refreshing someone like her must have been for someone as jaded as him. She'd been so trusting. *Loving*.

If they had married it never would have lasted. Not beyond the point where her allure would have worn off and he would have become disenchanted with her innocence. Not beyond the point at which her name and connections would have served their purpose for his ambitions. Of that she had no doubt.

Of course he wasn't going to forgive her for taking all that away from him. He was out for revenge.

For a heady moment Lara imagined telling him exactly what had happened. How events had conspired to drive them apart. How her uncle had so cruelly manipulated her. She even opened her mouth—but then she remembered *Ciro's* caustic words. They resounded in her head as if he'd said them only moments ago.

'Don't delude yourself that I felt anything more for you than you felt for me, Lara. I wanted you, yes, but that was purely physical. More than all of that I wanted you because marrying you would have given me a stamp of respectability that money can't buy.'

Ciro's voice broke through the toxic memory as he said coolly, 'I prefer to think of it as a kind of debt repayment. You said you'd marry me and I'm holding you to that original commitment. I need a wife, and I've no intention of getting into messy emotional entanglements when you're so convenient.'

Lara's blood drained south. 'That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.'

'Is it? Really? People have married for a lot less, Lara.'

She looked at him helplessly, torn between hating him for appearing like a magician to turn her world upside down and desperately wanting to defend herself. But she'd lost that chance when she'd informed him coldly that she'd never had any intention of going through with their marriage because she was already promised to someone else—someone eminently more

suitable.

She'd told him that it had amused her to go along with his whirlwind proposal, just to see him make a fool of himself over a woman he could never hope to marry. She'd told him all her breathy words of love had been mere platitudes.

She'd never forget the look of pure loathing that had come over his face after she'd spoken those bilious words. That had been the moment when she'd realised how deluded she'd been. And on some level she'd been glad she was playing a role, that at least she knew how he'd really felt.

He was almost killed because of you.

Lara felt sick again. He hadn't deserved that just for not loving her. And he hadn't deserved her lies. He'd saved her from the kidnappers. He'd offered up his life for hers. And then she'd learned she'd never really been in danger. He didn't know that, though. And right now the thought of him ever finding that out made her break out in a cold sweat. However much he hated her already, he would despise her even more.

Suddenly a ball of emotion swelled inside her chest. Lara couldn't bear it that *Ciro* thought so badly of her, even if it *was* her fault that she'd convinced him so well. Seeing him again was ripping open a raw wound inside her, and before she knew what she was doing she took a step forward, words tumbling out of her mouth.

'Ciro, I *did* want to marry you—more than anything. But my uncle...he was crazy...he'd lost everything. He didn't want me to

marry you—he saw you as unworthy of a Templeton. He forced me to say those awful things... They were all lies.’

Lara stopped abruptly and her words hung in the air. The atmosphere was thick with tension. Taut like a wire. Ciro was expressionless. She could remember a time when he’d used to look at her with such warmth and indulgence. And *love*, or so she’d thought. But it hadn’t been love. It had been desire. Physical desire and the desire for success.

He lifted his hands and did a slow and deliberate hand-clap, the sound loud in the room. Lara flinched.

He shook his head. ‘You really are something, Lara, you know that? But the victim act doesn’t suit you and it’s wasted on me. You really expect me to believe you were *coerced* into marrying a man old enough to be your father and rich enough to pay off the national debt of a small country? You forget I’ve seen your extensive repertoire of guises, and this innocent, earnest one is overdone and totally unnecessary.’

Her belly sank. She’d known it was futile to try. How could she explain how her uncle had manipulated and exploited her for his own gain since the moment he’d taken over her guardianship after her parents had died? The extent of his ruthlessness still shocked her, even now.

And she should recognise ruthlessness by now. She should have known Ciro hadn’t been making idle threats two years ago. After all, he was Sicilian through every fibre of his being. He came from a long and bloody tradition of men who meted out

revenge and punishment as a way of life, even if they had tried to distance themselves from all that in recent generations.

Ciro had told her once that his ancestors had been Moorish pirates and she could well believe it. She could see that he'd been wounded beyond redemption—not in his heart, because that had never been available to wound, but in his fierce Sicilian pride. Wounded when she'd walked away, and by the ruthless kidnappers when they'd physically altered him for ever and demonstrated that even he wasn't invincible.

She did owe him a debt. But it was a debt she couldn't afford to pay emotionally.

Lara's sense of self-preservation kicked in and she cursed herself for even trying to defend herself. She couldn't bear for him to find out just how vulnerable she really was—how nothing had really moved on for her since she'd known him. How the last two years of her life had been a kind of lonely torture.

She ruthlessly pushed aside all those memories and shrugged one shoulder minutely, affecting an air of boredom. She'd played this part once before—she could do it again.

'Well, it's been interesting to see you again, *Ciro*. But quite frankly you're even more pathetic now than you were two years ago, if this is how little you've moved on. What would you have done if Henry hadn't died? Kidnapped me? Seduced me away and then meted out your punishment?'

Lara's words fell like stinging barbs onto *Ciro's* skin. They cut far too close to the bone. He had been keeping tabs on her.

Getting reports on her whereabouts and her activities—which, as far as he could see, had consisted of not much at all. Not even socialising. Her husband had monopolised her attention, kept her all to himself.

Ciro hadn't articulated to himself exactly what he was going to do where Lara was concerned, but he'd known he had reached some kind of nadir when he'd bought this house, sight unseen, because it was around the corner from where she lived. He'd known that he was reaching a place where he simply could not go on without exacting retribution.

Without seeing her again.

He crushed that rogue thought.

In the past few months, as a restless tension had increased inside him, he'd found himself contemplating seducing Lara Winterborne. He'd told himself it would be to prove just how duplicitous she was. But he knew that his motivations were murkier than that. Embedded in a place he'd locked them away two years ago, when she'd morphed into a stranger in front of his very eyes.

When she'd shown him up as a fool who had cast aside his well-worn cynical shell in a fit of blind lust and something even more disturbing. *Emotion*. A yearning for a life he'd never known. For a woman who was pure and who would be faithful. Loving. Loyal. A good mother. Fantasies he'd never indulged in before he'd met Lara and she'd exposed a seam of vulnerability he'd never acknowledged before.

The fact that he'd even considered seducing her away from her husband was galling for a man who had always vowed to conduct his life with more integrity than his mother—never to stoop to her level of betrayal. And yet he'd had to face the unwelcome realisation that his desires were no less base than his weak and adulterous mother's.

Lara watched a series of expressions flicker across Ciro's face. They gradually got darker and darker, until he was glaring at her as if she was the sum of all evil. He started moving towards her then, all coiled lethal masculinity, and Lara took an involuntary step back.

She wasn't scared of his physicality—not even with this tension in the air. She was scared of something far more ambiguous and personal deep inside where she knew he had the ability to destroy her. Where he'd already destroyed her.

He stood in front of her, his scent winding around her like invisible captive threads. He asked with lethal softness, 'Are you suggesting my life has been on hold?'

Before she could respond, a sound halfway between a sneer and a laugh came out of Ciro's mouth.

'Oh, *cara*, my life hasn't been on hold for one second since you decided to take that old man into your bed.'

Lara winced inwardly. She already knew that Ciro's life hadn't been on hold. Far from it. As much as she'd tried to block him out of her consciousness, it had been next to impossible. Since his kidnapping he'd become even more infamous and sought-

after. He'd tripled his fortune, extending the wildly successful Sant'Angelo Holdings, which had been mainly focused on real estate, to encompass logistics and shipping worldwide.

And he hadn't been seen with the same woman twice—which was some feat, considering the frequency with which he'd been photographed at every ubiquitous glamorous event on the European and the worldwide circuit.

The gossip about his hectic love-life had quickly eclipsed any rumours about why his wedding to Lara hadn't taken place. Most people had assumed exactly what her uncle had wanted them to assume—that the kidnapping and fresh stories of his links to the Mafia had scared off Lara Templeton, one of Britain's most eligible society heiresses.

If anything the tone of the gossip about her had been as sneering as about Ciro—especially when she'd got married so quickly after the event, to a man more than twice her age. It was as if she'd merely proved her own snobbishness. As if she hadn't been woman enough to handle Ciro Sant'Angelo.

Certainly all the women he had been photographed with since then had run to a type that was a million miles from Lara's cool blonde, blue-eyed looks. Women with flashing dark eyes and glossy hair. With unashamedly sexy and curvaceous bodies and an effortless sensuality that Lara could never hope to embody. She was too self-conscious. Too...inexperienced.

Ciro was shaking his head now, a look of disgust twisting his features and making his scar stand out even more. 'Did you keep

up the virginal act with your husband? Or did you fake it right up until—?’

‘Stop it!’ The sharp cry of Lara’s voice surprised even herself. She felt shaky. ‘That wasn’t an act.’

Ciro made a rude sound, dismissing her words. More proof that she’d been utterly naive to try and defend herself. All she could hope for was that *Ciro* would get bored and ask her to leave.

‘Look, what do you want, *Ciro*?’ Lara’s voice had a distinctly desperate tone that she didn’t even try to disguise now.

‘It’s very simple. I want *you*, *Lara*.’ He folded his arms across his formidable chest. ‘It’s time to pay your debt.’

CHAPTER TWO

LARA'S SENSE OF panic and desperation increased. 'I told—you I don't owe you anything.'

Ciro responded, 'We've been through this and, yes, you do. You owe me a wedding.'

Lara fought to stay calm. To appear unmoved. 'Don't be ridiculous. I'm not going to marry you.'

He shook his head. 'Not ridiculous at all. Very practical, actually. Like I said, I'm in need of a wife, and as you deprived me of one so memorably two years ago, you can step up now and honour the commitment you made when you agreed to marry me in the first place.'

Vainly scrabbling around for something—anything to make sense of Ciro's crazy suggestion, Lara asked, 'Why do you need a wife so badly?'

'The circles I'm moving in... Let's just say things would be better for me if I had an appearance of stability. Settling down. Conforming to societal norms of what people expect of a man my age.'

'An appearance... So this would just be a sham...a fake marriage?'

'Call it a marriage of convenience.'

'But it'll mean nothing.'

Ciro's lip curled. 'As if *that* was a concern in your first

marriage... As if you *cared* about Winterborne.'

Lara had to hide her flinch at that.

Ciro continued, 'It'll be a lesson in learning that your actions have consequences.'

She took a step backwards, surprised that her legs were still working. 'This is beyond crazy. If marriage is so important to your image then I'm sure there are many more suitable women who would be happy to become your wife.'

Like any of the hundreds of women she'd seen on his arm over the past twenty-four months, for a start.

'I don't want any of them. I want *you*.'

Ciro was finding it hard to maintain his composure. Lara was right—there were plenty of women he knew who would jump at the opportunity to become his wife. He'd found himself seeking out women who were the antithesis of this woman's cool blonde looks, but none of them had made his blood run hot as she could, just by standing in front of him.

For two years his bed had been lonely and he had been frustrated. Not that the world would believe it. But he hadn't wanted any of them. He wanted Lara. And now, after two years of a kind of purgatory, hating her and wanting her, she was finally within reach again.

He would be the first to admit that his pride had suffered a huge blow when she'd walked away from him and from their marriage commitment. He was, after all, descended from a long line of proud Sicilians.

She'd accused him of only wanting to marry her to further his ambitions for social acceptance and he hadn't been able to deny it. But it hadn't been as much to the forefront of his desire to marry her as he'd let her believe. However, he had to admit that it had always been in the back of his mind...her strategic connections.

But, more than that, he hadn't been done with her. When she'd told him she was a virgin—most likely a lie—Ciro had been stunned. To think that she was untouched...a rare novelty in his jaded world, had been, surprisingly, and seriously, erotic. The prospect that he would be her first lover had tipped Giro over the edge of his restraint where Lara was concerned.

He'd always been traditional and Sicilian enough to envisage taking an innocent wife some day, but also cynical and experienced enough to know that it was next to impossible in this modern world. And yet there had been Lara, with her huge innocent blue eyes that had looked at him sometimes as if he was a hungry wolf, and her body with its slender lines and lush curves, telling him that she was this rare thing. An innocent in a world of cynics.

She'd led him a merry dance. Convincing him that she had something he'd never seen before in his life: an intoxicating naivety. But it had all been an act. For her own amusement. Because she'd been bored. Or as jaded as him.

Lara stood in front of him now, tall in her heels, but she'd still only reach his shoulder. For a second something inside him

faltered.

Had her eyes always been so blue and so huge? She was pale now, her cheeks and lips almost bloodless. Because she was disgusted by his proposal? Good.

Ciro had to forcibly curb the urge to clamp his hands around her face, angle it up towards him and plunder that mouth until she was flushed and her mouth was throbbing with blood.

No other woman had ever had the same effect on him. Instantaneous. Elemental. He vowed right then that she would never see how easily she pushed him to the edge of his control.

He took a step back. Lara had denied him before but she wouldn't deny him now. She owed him. Owed him her body and the connections a marriage to her would bring him.

'Well, Lara?'

'This is the day of my husband's funeral...have you no sense of decency?'

Ciro could have laughed at her dogged refusal to stop acting. 'Are you telling me you really *cared* about the old man?'

The thought that she might actually be grieving for her husband slid into his mind for a second before he brutally quashed it. *Impossible*.

She flushed. With guilt. *Ciro* didn't like the rush of relief he felt. 'Save your energy, *cara*. Your acting skills are wasted on me.'

'Stop calling me that. I'm not your *cara*.'

Her hands were balled into fists by her sides and her eyes were bright blue.

Ciro uncrossed his arms. 'You never minded it before... If I remember correctly you used to love it.' He mimicked her breathless voice, "*Ciro, what does it mean...? Am I really your cara?*"

'That was before.' Lara's cheeks had lost their colour again.

'Yes,' *Ciro* said harshly, angry that he noticed so much about this woman. Every little tic. 'That was when you were only too happy to court infamy by becoming engaged to me to alleviate your boredom. What I can't quite understand, though, is the virginal act? That was a touch of authenticity that deprived us both of mutual pleasure.'

It was excruciating to Lara that *Ciro* remembered how ardently she'd loved him. How much she'd wanted him.

Without thinking about it, just needing to wound him as he was wounding her, she let words tumble out of her mouth. 'I never wanted you.'

As soon as she'd said the words she realised her mistake. Colour scored *Ciro's* cheekbones, making the scar stand out even more lividly. His eyes burned a dark brown, almost black. She was mesmerised by the fierce pride she could see in his expression. He was every inch the bristling Sicilian male now.

'Little liar,' he breathed. 'You wanted me as much as I wanted you. *More.*'

He came towards her, closing the gap. Lara's feet were frozen to the floor. He reached for her, hands wrapping around her waist, pulling her towards him, until she could feel the taut and

unforgiving musculature of his body. But not even that could break her out of this dangerous stasis. She was filled with a kind of excitement she'd only ever felt with this man.

She'd thought she'd never feel it again, and something exultant was moving through her, washing aside all her reservations and the sane voices screaming at her to wake up. Pull back.

Ciro's hands tightened on her waist and his head came down, blocking out the room, blocking out everything but *him*. Lara's breath was caught in her throat, nerves tingling as she waited for that firm mouth to touch hers. It was so torturous she made a small sound of pleading...

Ciro heard the tiny sound come from Lara's mouth. He knew this was the moment when he should pull back. He'd already proved his point. She was practically begging him to kiss her... But his body wouldn't follow the dictates of his mind. She was like a quivering flame under his hands. So achingly familiar and yet utterly new.

He could feel the press of her high firm breasts, the flare of her hips, the cradle of her pelvis. He burned for her. He'd been such a fool to believe in her innocence. He'd held back from indulging in her treacherous body. But no longer.

Ciro gave in to the wild pulsing beat of desire in his body and claimed Lara's mouth with his. For a second he couldn't move—the physical sensation of his mouth on hers was too mind-blowing. And then hunger took over. He could feel her breath, sharp and choppy, and he deepened the kiss, taking it from chaste

to sexual in seconds.

Lara was wrapped in Ciro's arms, and for a moment she happily gave up any attempt to bring back reality. His touch and his kiss, that masterful way he had of touching her and bringing her alive—she'd dreamed of this so often.

His taste was heady and all-consuming. She barely noticed his hands moving up her body, cupping her face so he could angle it better and take the kiss deeper, make it even more explicit. She craved him. Pressed herself even tighter against him.

The knot at the back of her head loosened and the sensation of her hair falling around her shoulders finally broke through enough for her to falter for a moment. And a moment was all she needed to allow enough air back into her oxygen-starved brain to recall what Ciro had called her. *Little liar*. And she'd just proved him right.

She stiffened and pushed against Ciro. He let her go and stood back, but it was no comfort. Lara already ached for him. The glitter of triumph in his eyes only added salt to the wound she'd opened.

She felt totally dishevelled and unsteady on her feet. Her cheeks were hot and her mouth felt swollen. She'd just humiliated herself spectacularly.

She lifted a shaking hand to her mouth. 'You had no right to—'
'To what?' he said silkily. 'To demonstrate that our chemistry is still very much mutual and alive?'

It wasn't much of a consolation that Ciro didn't look overly

thrilled about that fact.

He shook his head, his dark hair gleaming. 'In this at least you can't hide your true nature.'

He started to walk around her and Lara's skin prickled. Her pulse was still pounding. She felt raw.

'How could you do it?' he asked from close behind her. 'How could you take that man into your bed every night and let him—?'

Lara whirled around, bile rising. 'Stop it! I won't discuss my dead husband. Not on the day of his funeral. It's...immoral.'

Ciro emitted a harsh bark of laughter. '*Immoral*, is it? More immoral than promising yourself to a man only to leave him by the wayside as soon as you realise how close you've come to sully the perfect Templeton family line with a brood of half-Sicilians?'

Lara's heart squeezed painfully. At one time she had fantasised about the children she would have with Ciro, wondering if they'd inherit their father's dark good looks and vital charisma. The fantasy mocked her now. She'd been so deluded.

Her voice trembling slightly, she said, 'You accuse me of being immoral, but you admitted that your motive for marriage was nothing but a cold calculation to improve your social standing.'

Ciro stood back and his dark gaze narrowed on her. She immediately felt exposed.

'There was nothing immoral about seeking out a union that would benefit us both. You really didn't have to go so far as to feign feelings for me, *cara*. It was entertaining, but unnecessary.'

Lara smarted as she recalled yet again how naive she'd been. Because it wasn't as if he'd led her on—he hadn't professed any feelings for *her*. Instead she'd pathetically read too much into every tiny gesture and word, building up a very flimsy belief that he was falling for her too.

Ciro continued. 'Why didn't you try to secure your future by giving Winterborne an heir? Is that why he left you with nothing? Because you didn't fulfil your wifely duty?'

Lara shook her head to negate what he'd said. She couldn't seem to formulate words. Memories were rushing at her in a jangled kaleidoscope of images—Ciro proposing, down on one knee in the middle of a *piazza* in Florence, with everyone looking on and clapping, the pure joy she'd felt in that moment.

And then another memory—the awful dark, dank smell of fear as she'd been jostled in the back of that van with a hood over her head. *Ciro's* arms had been around her and she'd clung to him with a death grip...

'I don't... I never wanted to marry—'

'Me,' *Ciro* interjected. 'Yes, I know.'

Lara swallowed. He'd misunderstood her. She'd wanted to marry *Ciro* so desperately that she was afraid if she opened her mouth now it might all spill out and then he would tear her to shreds.

She couldn't imagine—didn't want to—what he would do if he ever found out that her uncle had been behind the kidnapping in an elaborate bid to show *Lara* the lengths to which he would

go to ensure she married someone ‘suitable’.

She had to regain control of this situation and of her fraying emotions. She injected all the *froideur* she could muster into her voice. ‘You’ve proved your point, Ciro. You haven’t forgiven me for leaving you. But if it’s a wife you need I suggest you look elsewhere. I’m not available.’

She turned away to leave, but before she could take a step her arm was taken by a firm hand. She stopped, every part of her body tense against the inevitable effect Ciro had on her.

He drew her back around to face him. ‘Please do tell me what it is you’re so busy with now that you’re a free woman again?’

He dropped her arm, but the imprint of his fingers lingered. She rubbed it distractedly. She looked at him, but the truth was that she was busy with nothing, because she literally *had* nothing—as he well knew.

She had just enough money in her account to see her through a week, maybe, in an inexpensive hostel. And that was it. She had nowhere to go. No one to go to.

The stark reality of just how isolated she was hit her like a body-blow.

‘The fact is you’re not busy— isn’t that the truth, Lara?’

It was as if Ciro was delving casually into her mind and pulling out her innermost humiliation for inspection.

She tipped up her chin. ‘I’ll keep myself busy finding a job, somewhere to live.’

Ciro snorted. ‘A *job*? You wouldn’t know a job if it jumped up

and bit you. I doubt an art history degree gets you very far these days. You were bred to fulfil a role in society, Lara. Anything else is beneath you.'

Hurt hit Lara squarely in the chest. She'd once confided in Ciro about wanting to do more than what was expected of her. No doubt he thought she'd been lying.

She lashed out. 'You mean like marrying you? We went through this once before—do you *really* want to be humiliated again, Ciro?'

This was the Lara that Ciro remembered. Showing her true haughty colours. He could recall only too easily how two years ago she'd morphed in front of his eyes into someone distant and calculating. Utterly without remorse.

It had shocked him. And yet it shouldn't have. Because it wasn't as if he hadn't already learnt how beautiful women operated at the hands of his brittle, self-absorbed mother. She'd made a fool of his father over and over again in her bid for desperate validation that she was desired.

His father had put up with it because he'd loved her, and Ciro had believed from an early age that if that was what love meant, he wanted none of its ritual humiliation.

And yet Lara had sneaked under his defences before he'd known what was happening.

His first image of her was still etched into his memory, no matter how much he'd tried to excise it. She'd been standing just a few steps from Ciro on a busy street in Florence, a hand up

to her face, shading her eyes, seemingly entranced by an ornate building. She'd been like a vision of a Valkyrie princess against the ancient Florentine backdrop. Long bright blonde hair falling to the middle of her back... Acres of pale skin...

She'd been oblivious to the attention she was drawing. *Or so* *Ciro had believed.* But now he knew she must have been aware of exactly what she was doing, with that face of an angel and the body of a siren.

Suddenly someone had jostled her from the pavement and she'd stumbled into the busy road. She would have been hit by a car if not for *Ciro* grabbing her and pulling her to safety. She'd landed against him, all soft lithe curves. Silky hair under his hands. And her scent...lemon and roses. Huge shocked blue eyes had stared up into his and he'd fallen into instant lust, for the first and only time in his life. Captivated.

But memories were for fools and he would never be such a fool again. He knew who—*what*—Lara was now. He would make use of her and then discard her, exactly as she had done with him when he'd literally been at his lowest point.

'You're really not in a position to bargain, Lara. You have nowhere to go and no one to turn to. You wouldn't survive half an hour outside that door.'

Lara clenched her hands into fists. The only thing stopping her making a vociferous defence was the fact that *Ciro* was speaking her fears out loud. What skills did she have? What meaningful education? Where would an interesting but useless degree get

her in this new digital age? Some menial job in an art gallery if she was lucky? She could probably plan and host a diplomatic function for fifty people, but in reality domestic cleaners were more highly qualified than she was.

Taking advantage of her silence, Ciro said, 'This is what I'm proposing. We will get married in Rome, exactly as we planned two years ago. I think a year of marriage should suffice, but we can review it after six months. During our marriage you will perform social duties as my faithful and loyal wife. You will open doors for me that have remained resolutely shut. And once we agree to a divorce settlement I will make you a very rich woman.'

Lara was incredulous. 'You're serious.'

'Deadly.'

He looked at his watch then, as nonchalantly as if he hadn't just made such a preposterous suggestion. 'My driver will take you back to your apartment, where you will pack up your things, and then you will return here to me. We leave for Rome this evening.'

Lara's head was spinning. Too much had happened in such a short space of time. Her husband dying. Ciro reappearing in her life. His crazy proposal, which made a mockery of his first proposal. The prospect of having to learn how to survive on her own. And now the opportunity for something else entirely.

Something ridiculous. Gargantuan. *Impossible*.

And yet all she could think of to say was, 'Why did you pretend to be a driver?'

Ciro's jaw clenched. 'Because it amused me to see you in action among your peers. Behaving true to your nature. The nature you hid from me when we first met.'

Her chest ached. The woman she'd been when she'd met Ciro—that *had* been her. Infinitely naive and innocent. But she'd learnt many harsh lessons since then, and she had to protect herself around this man or he would annihilate her.

She said, with as much coolness as she could muster, 'This conversation is over, Ciro. You've played your little stunt but I'm not interested.'

He merely lifted a brow. 'We'll see.' He extended his hand towards the door. 'My driver is ready to take you to the apartment, where he will wait for you outside.'

Without a word Lara turned and walked out. The woman who had shown her into the room was waiting with her things. Lara murmured a distracted thank you and went to the front door, where Ciro's car and driver were indeed waiting. Along with the security men.

Another shiver went down her spine as she recalled that awful moment when Ciro had gathered her in his arms to kiss her on that quiet Florentine side street and all hell had broken loose as they'd been ripped apart and then bundled into the back of a van...

She was tempted to ignore the car and walk around the corner to her apartment, but the driver was waiting with the door open and Lara's innate sense of politeness and a wish to not

cause conflict made her get into the back of the vehicle. Also, although she was probably being paranoid, she could imagine Ciro standing at a window, silently commanding her to do as he'd bade.

The journey was short and she got out again only a couple of minutes later. She noticed that Ciro's security detail hadn't followed her to her apartment. *And why would they?* she scolded herself. She was nothing to Ciro except someone he wanted to toy with for his own amusement.

And revenge, whispered a voice.

She hurried inside, needing the time alone. To her relief the apartment was empty of staff. Her few meagre belongings were packed into two suitcases, which were standing neatly in the entrance hall. A reminder to leave as quickly and quietly as possible. But Lara needed time to process everything that had just happened.

She wandered around the apartment that had been like a prison to her in the past two years. She still couldn't quite believe the sequence of events that had led her to this place: marriage to an odious man old enough to be her father.

Of course she hadn't wanted to marry him. When her uncle had suggested it she'd laughed. But then he'd revealed to her that he'd been behind the kidnapping and that he would do worse to Ciro unless she married Henry Winterborne.

Lara sat down blindly on the end of the bed for a moment, overcome with the weight of the past.

Her uncle had been in debt to the tune of millions. His entire fortune gambled away. When she'd told him defiantly she didn't need him, that she had her trust fund, which was due to come to her on her twenty-fifth birthday, he'd told her that that was gone too. He'd had access to it, in order to manage it on her behalf, and he'd gambled it away.

Even then—after his threats and after he'd revealed how far he was willing to go to stop her from marrying *Ciro*—Lara had still hoped that perhaps if she told *Ciro* he would be able to protect them. So she'd gone to the hospital where he'd been recuperating and she'd asked him if he loved her—because she'd known that if he loved her then she was willing to do anything to defy her uncle. She'd believed that once *Ciro* knew about the threat surely he'd be powerful enough to protect himself—and her?

But *Ciro* had looked at her for a long moment and hesitated. And in that moment she'd known she'd been ridiculously naive.

He must have seen her expression, because he'd said quickly, 'Love? *Cara*, I never promised you love. But I am prepared to commit to you for ever, and I respect you... Isn't that enough? It's a realistic foundation for a life together.'

He hadn't loved her. And so she'd followed the dictates of her uncle in order to protect a man she loved who didn't love her.

Lara had come back to London where she'd been introduced to Henry Winterborne and the marriage had been arranged. Her uncle had made a deal. Henry would bail him out of his debts, restore his reputation, in return for marriage to Lara. A medieval

and Machiavellian arrangement.

Lara had been in a fog for days. Lost. Alone. And all the time she was being reminded by her uncle that if she didn't comply he would hurt Ciro.

It had been on their wedding night that Lara had returned to this apartment with her new and very drunk husband and reality had finally broken through the numbing shell in which she'd encased herself.

To this day she had no real memory of the wedding, or saying her vows. It was all a blur. But on that night she'd heard her husband thrashing about the apartment, shouting at the staff to get him drinks. She'd hidden in the bedroom, telling herself that she would leave, escape...send a warning to Ciro somehow... Anything had to be better than this.

And then Henry had come into her room. Crashed through the door.

Lara had tried to get away, but he'd caught her and tried to rip her nightdress. He'd shoved her down on the bed and instinctively Lara had lifted her legs to kick him off. His bulk and his inebriated state had made him fall backwards, and he'd hit his head on the side of a dresser.

The fall and his general bad health had resulted in him being put into a wheelchair. The shock of the accident, and Lara's uncle's persistent reminders of his threats, had stopped her initial thoughts of trying to escape.

That was when she'd started to see pictures of Ciro, out and

about, getting on with his life. The beautiful women on his arm didn't seem to be put off by the livid scar. It only enhanced his charismatic appeal. And seeing Ciro like that... It had broken something inside Lara. Broken any will to try and escape her situation. Any sense of optimism that perhaps she'd been wrong about him not loving her dissipated.

All hope had gone.

With the threat of physical violence from her husband negated, Lara had sunk into a routine of sorts. Days had passed into weeks, and then months, and before she'd known it a year had gone by. Henry Winterborne had got rid of his staff by then, had begun using Lara as an unpaid housekeeper and carer.

When her uncle had died, three months ago, Lara's will to leave her husband had been revived. The threat hanging over Ciro was finally gone. But without any funds of her own she'd been in no position to take legal action.

Before she'd had a chance to assess her options Henry Winterborne had had a stroke, and he'd spent the last two months of his life in hospital. For the first time in two years Lara had had a sense of autonomy again. Albeit within her gilded prison.

She caught sight of her reflection in a mirror on the wall opposite her. She took in her pale and wan features. Why on earth would a man as vital as Ciro Sant'Angelo still be remotely interested in marrying her?

An inner voice answered her: *For revenge.*

And because he had her right where he wanted her. Vulnerable

and desperate. Or so he thought.

Lara might have qualms about navigating the world on her own after a lifetime of not being prepared for it, but she'd do it. She'd longed for months just to walk out of this apartment and not look back. To take her chances. But the blackmail her uncle had subjected her to and the guilt of Henry Winterborne's accident had kept her a prisoner.

And there was still guilt. Because the threat to *Ciro* might be gone, but it had been *her* involvement with him that had led to his kidnap in the first place. If she hadn't ever met *Ciro* he would never have come to her uncle's attention and would never have been put in danger.

She'd *known* that her uncle had plans for her to marry someone 'suitable'. He'd spoken of little else since she'd left school and gone to university—which he hadn't approved of at all. But Lara had never taken him seriously. It had sounded so medieval in this day and age, and at one time she'd told him so.

He'd reminded her of how much she owed him. Asked her where she would have ended up if he hadn't been there to take her in after his dear brother's tragic death. He'd reminded her of how he'd put his life on hold to make sure she was educated and looked after. He'd reminded her that his brother's death had been a devastating shock for him too, and yet he'd had no time to grieve—he'd been too busy making sure Lara was all right.

Little had she realised how deadly serious he was about marrying her off, and by the time she'd met *Ciro*, Thomas

Templeton had been in dire straits—which had turned Lara into an invaluable commodity. And even though *Ciro* was a wealthy man, it hadn't been enough for Lara's uncle. He'd needed her to marry a man of *his* choosing, from the *right* side of society.

Lara willed down the nausea that threatened to rise. She needed to focus on the present. Not on the painful past.

She stood up from the bed, immediately agitated. *Ciro*. Back and looking for revenge. And could she even blame him? No. She couldn't. She'd single-handedly brought terror into his life. Forced him to live under the shadow of personal protection. Because he'd been shown to be vulnerable. Something she knew he must *hate*.

She also owed him for the resurgence in the rumours about his family's links to the Mafia, who people believed had been responsible for his kidnapping. Not to mention the humiliation of walking out on him days before they were due to be married under the spotlight of the world's media.

One of the many headlines had read *Sicilian Millionaire to Wed English Society Fiancée!* The article underneath had been less flattering, snidely suggesting that *Ciro* had been trying to marry far above his station.

The fact that *Ciro* had managed to ride out the storm of headlines and speculation to thrive and survive only demonstrated the scale of his ambition. But clearly that wasn't enough for him.

Her guts twisted. She'd loved him so desperately once. She

would have done anything for him. And she had. Could she sacrifice herself again just to allow him to feel some measure of closure? To allow him the access he craved to a level of society that would bring him even more success and acceptance?

'A year of marriage...review it in six months.'

Ciro's cold proposal was daunting. Could she possibly even contemplate such a thing? Subject herself to Ciro's bid for revenge?

Lara stopped pacing and caught her reflection in the mirror again. Her cheeks were flushed now. Eyes over-bright.

Would it really be a sacrifice when he still stirs up so many powerful emotions and desires? questioned a snide inner voice.

She saw the buildings and the skyline of London behind her, reflected in the mirror through the window. There was a back way out of the apartment. She knew she could leave if she wanted to. Slip away into the millions of anonymous people thronging London's streets. Get on with her life. Try to put all this behind her.

But Ciro would come after her. Just as he'd pursued her once before. Relentlessly. Seductively.

She'd kept refusing his advances at first, intimidated by his charismatic masculinity and his playboy reputation. But in the end he'd won her over, when he'd taken her to that gallery after hours.

She shook her head to dislodge the disturbing memory. All it had been was an elaborate seduction ruse. She'd been different

from his other women. Naive, wide-eyed. Except now he thought it had all been an act.

Lara had already been through worse than a marriage of convenience to one of the world's most notorious playboys. Far worse. She'd lost her entire beloved family overnight. She'd been heinously betrayed and exploited by her uncle, her last remaining family member. She'd been belittled and bullied by her husband. And she'd had her heart broken already by *Ciro Sant'Angelo*, so she had no heart left to break.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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