



Angela Bissell

*The*

**SICILIAN'S  
SECRET SON**

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Angela Bissell

**The Sicilian's Secret Son**

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His heir revealed... And he'll protect what's his – with a ring! Luca Cavallari is a man who always gets what he wants. So when he uncovers the existence of his hidden son, he's determined to whisk his new family away to his sprawling Sicilian estate. Convincing gentle Annah Sinclair won't be easy... but denying their still fierce attraction is even harder! And Luca knows there's only one way to truly claim Annah and his son... marriage!

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His heir revealed...

**And he'll protect what's his—with a ring!**

Luca Cavallari is a man who always gets what he wants. So when he uncovers the existence of his hidden son, he's determined to whisk his new family away to his sprawling Sicilian estate. Convincing gentle Annah Sinclair won't be easy...but denying their still-fierce attraction is even harder! And Luca knows there's only one way to truly claim Annah and his son—marriage!

*Escape to Italy with this secret baby story*

**ANGELA BISSELL** lives with her husband and one crazy Ragdoll cat in the vibrant harbourside city of Wellington, New Zealand. In her twenties, with a wad of savings and a few meagre possessions, she took off for Europe, backpacking through Egypt, Israel, Turkey and the Greek Islands before finding her way to London, where she settled and worked in a glamorous hotel for several years. Clearly the perfect grounding for her love of Mills & Boon Modern! Visit her at [angelabissell.com](http://angelabissell.com).

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The Sicilian's Secret Son

Angela Bissell

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## CHAPTER ONE

DINO ROSSINI SAT FORWARD, an ugly sneer on his face. 'You're making a mistake, Cavallari. You think this is what your father wanted?'

Seated behind the desk in his late father's study, Luca Cavallari met Rossini's angry stare with a steady one of his own. Glancing away—even blinking—would show weakness, and this man, like all bullies, preyed on those he considered weaker than himself.

It was why Luca had just fired him.

'What my father wanted ceased to matter the day he died,' he said. 'We do things my way now.'

Rossini's expression darkened. 'The old ways—'

'Will not be tolerated. I made that clear two months ago.' A warning his father's security chief had blatantly ignored. Disgust turned Luca's voice rough. 'What you did yesterday was indefensible.'

'He stole from you,' Rossini said, as if that justified his brutality.

'You should have called the police.'

Rossini laughed, the sound harsh. Mean. 'This isn't New York. You think a fancy suit and haircut gets you respect?' He shook his head. 'America made you soft, Cavallari. Here, when someone steals from you, disrespects you, you don't call the police. You teach him a lesson.'

Anger sent Luca surging to his feet. He leant forward, planting his fisted hands on the desk. 'A lesson?' His voice boomed inside the high-ceilinged room. 'You set your men—your thugs—onto a sixteen-year-old boy! He has a fractured leg, broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder and a serious concussion.' Bile burned the back of Luca's throat. Controlling his temper, he sat back down and said coldly, 'Get out.'

'What about my men?'

'They're fired, too.'

Rossini stood, another sneer distorting his face. 'It won't be easy replacing us.'

'I already have.' Luca punctuated the fact with a hard, satisfied smile. 'There are two men outside the door waiting to escort you off the estate.'

Rossini's cheeks turned a deeper shade of mottled red. He strode to the door, shot Luca one last belligerent look, and stalked out.

Luca stood and moved to the window behind the desk. Outside, in the bright glare of the Sicilian sun, two large, muscular men accompanied Rossini to where his black sedan was parked. He got in, gunned the engine and sped off, the car's tyres spitting gravel and kicking up a cloud of pale dust. Luca watched the vehicle vanish from sight.

Good riddance.

He should have fired Rossini two months ago, his twenty years of service to the family be damned. Perhaps the man was right to some extent, although it galled Luca to admit it. He wasn't 'soft'—far from it—but years of self-imposed exile in America had left him ill prepared for the mammoth job ahead.

'Signor Cavallari?'

He turned away from the window to find Victor, the family's long-serving butler and head of the domestic staff, standing in the room.

Luca returned to the chair behind the expansive hand-carved desk—the place from where Franco Cavallari had ruled both his empire and his family with an iron fist—and sat. 'What is it, Victor?' he said, casting his gaze over the endless piles of paperwork demanding his attention.

'I need to show you something.'

The urgency in Victor's voice brought Luca's head up. He studied the man. Not a hair out of place as usual, and his standard pinstriped suit looked as if it had come straight off the housekeeper's

steam press. But his brow glistened with beads of sweat and the knuckles on his left hand, which clutched an oversized envelope against his chest, shone white.

Luca leaned back in his chair. Well, well. Something had got the unflappable Victor in a flap. 'For God's sake, man,' he said. 'Sit down before you fall down.'

Victor dropped into the chair Rossini had vacated. 'Thank you, *signor*.' He plucked a pristine white handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed his brow.

Growing impatient, Luca held out his hand.

Victor hesitated, opened his mouth and closed it again, then relinquished the envelope.

Expecting documents of some kind, Luca removed the contents and instead found himself holding a bunch of eight-by-ten colour photographs. He examined the top one. A young woman stood on the grass in what looked like a public park. Other people milled about, but the photographer had clearly focused on her. The weather was sunny and presumably warm since she wore shorts, a sleeveless T-shirt, and a straw sunhat that cast her face in shadow.

'Stunning,' he murmured, trailing an appreciative eye over shapely curves and long, slender legs.

Victor clicked his tongue. 'The other photos,' he urged, pointing at the pile. 'Look at them...the child...'

Luca put the picture down and picked up the next, this one of a young boy playing outdoors. No older than three or four, the child had tousled dark hair, brown eyes fringed with thick lashes, and olive skin flushed with exertion.

The hairs on Luca's forearms lifted.

It was a photo of him as a boy. Except it wasn't, because the date stamp was only ten months old.

*What the hell?*

He glanced at Victor, who mopped his brow with renewed vigour. 'Where did these come from?'

'Your father's apartment in Rome. I had his things packed and sent here, as Signora Cavallari requested. She asked me to sort through the boxes—'

'She has seen these?'

'Of course not.' Victor's voice held a note of affront. 'I brought them straight to you.'

Good. He wasn't close to his mother, but he had no wish to see her humiliated. It was possible, even likely, that Eva Cavallari knew her husband had kept a mistress—but an illegitimate child? A half-sibling to Luca and his brother Enzo?

He ground his teeth together. Another goddamned mess to clean up, but this went beyond the realm of money laundering and illegal business activities.

This involved a child. A child who could one day stake a legitimate claim for a share of the Cavallari wealth.

Luca flicked through the rest of the photos, found one of the woman without her sunhat, and held it up for a better look.

Blonde and beautiful. Of course. If nothing else, Franco Cavallari had had good taste in women. And she really was exquisite. Startling blue eyes, amazing bone structure, flawless skin...

Luca frowned.

A voice whispered in his head. *You know her.*

No. He shoved the notion away. It was crazy. Fanciful. The world was full of blue-eyed, flax-haired beauties. Why would his mind even go there after all these years?

And yet...

He drew the photo closer, trailing his gaze over an elegant cheekbone and down to her pretty mouth.

The camera had caught her at a circumspect moment, and, as such, no smile adorned her face. But Luca realised with sudden, heart-stopping certainty that he already knew this woman's smile. Knew the exact angle at which her lips would tilt, how perfect her teeth would look, and how

prominently those incredible cheekbones would stand out. Her blue eyes would sparkle like sunlight on water and when she laughed...

Luca swallowed, his throat gone dry.

When she laughed, it'd be the sweetest, most alluring sound he'd ever heard.

He closed his eyes, his mind catapulting him back to a frigid February night in London. He'd been walking the streets, headed back to his hotel, lost in a dark mire of thought until he'd collided with something soft that bounced off his hard body, reeled backwards, and landed in a clump of dirty snow with a small *oomph*.

Not something but *someone*, he'd realised, staring down at the young woman he'd accidentally bowled off her feet.

She should have yelled at him. Told him to look where he was going. Instead she pushed off her hood, revealing a head of golden hair and a pair of striking blue eyes, and grinned up at him.

Luca had stood dumbstruck for long seconds before he'd finally roused himself, helped her up and found his voice to apologise. And then he'd whisked her into the hotel's swanky lounge bar and ordered her an enormous hot chocolate.

Which was where their random encounter should have ended.

But her natural beauty, her easy smile, her infectious laughter...everything about her captivated him, and the temptation to touch, to hold her close and lose himself in her sweetness—to pretend for one night his world was not tainted with ugliness—was too strong to resist.

Breathing hard, Luca riffled through the photos, searching for something more, some clue, *anything* to help him understand how the woman he'd spent one unforgettable night with five years ago had become not only his father's mistress but the mother of Franco's illegitimate child.

Hatred flared. How typical of his father to corrupt the one pure thing Luca had ever had.

He upended the envelope and a piece of paper, folded in half, fell out. He flipped it open. It was a photocopy of a birth certificate for an Ethan Sinclair, the boy in the photos presumably.

He skipped down to the mother's name.

Annah Sinclair.

And just like that, the memory of her sweet, melodic voice filled his head.

'Annah with an "h",' she'd said, smiling at him over the frothy rim of her hot chocolate.

He'd misunderstood. 'Hannah?'

She'd laughed, shaking her head, then spelt it for him.

Luca thrust aside the memory and focused on the certificate. The father was listed as unknown. The kid's birth date was October the thirty-first in the year—

He froze.

'Signor Cavallari?'

He looked at Victor but didn't see him. In his head, he swiftly calculated the number of months and weeks between February the seventeenth and October the thirty-first.

Victor spoke again, but the sudden rush of blood in Luca's ears and the loud rasp of his breathing drowned out the older man's words.

Wrong.

He had it all wrong.

The boy wasn't Luca's half-brother; he was his *son*.

\* \* \*

'Oh, don't you dare,' Annah muttered, throwing down her shears and lunging for the spool of silver ribbon rolling across her worktop.

She was fast, but the renegade ribbon was faster. Before her outstretched fingers could reach it, the reel had gathered momentum and shot off the counter.

Annah groaned, listened to the clatter of the cylinder hitting the floor, and imagined the hideously expensive organza ribbon unravelling beneath her workbench.

*Excellent.*

She pulled a face at the bunch of purple tulips in her hand. 'Sorry, you lot. I'm afraid you'll have to hang tight.' She set the flowers on the bench and crouched down to search the floor.

No trail of ribbon.

No reel in sight, either.

Puffing a strand of hair out of her face, she got to her hands and knees and crawled beneath her work space.

*Please don't let a customer walk in right now.*

She loved customers. Who didn't when you ran your own business? But with Chloe—her friend and co-owner of their floral studio—in London visiting a sick friend, Annah was operating alone and stretched to capacity.

She stuck her hand in a gap between some boxes of coloured binding wires stacked against the wall. 'There you are,' she said, closing her fingers around the spool—just as the vintage shopkeeper's bell over the front door of the studio jangled.

*Blast.*

Hoping to see the scrawny bare legs of her delivery man, she peeped under the front of the counter.

Nope. Not Brian's legs. He didn't wear dark tailored trousers and expensive-looking leather shoes. Handmade shoes, by the look of them.

Her walk-in wasn't a local, then. The men who lived in and around the small rural village of Hollyfield in South Devon typically wore wellies or work boots, not the kind of shoes that wouldn't survive a muddy field or a half-decent snowfall.

'I'll be right with you,' she called, backing out of the crawl space.

'Please, do not rush on my account,' replied a deep masculine voice.

An accented voice.

Annah stiffened for a second and then, in her haste to stand, misjudged her clearance of the bench. With a loud crack, the top of her skull connected with solid wood. Pain knifed across her scalp. Clutching her head, she dropped back to her knees. 'Ow!'

The man walked around the counter. 'Are you all right?'

His deep voice floated somewhere above her in the flower-scented air.

'Yes,' she lied, not moving, her heart racing in her chest. 'I'm fine.'

*You're not fine. You're about to have one of those silly paranoia attacks. After all these years!*

Lowering her hands to the floor, she took a deep breath and steadied herself. She mustn't overreact. A man had walked into her shop. He had a sexy Italian accent. Those facts could mean nothing.

Or they could mean—

*No.*

She shut down the thought and clenched her teeth against the swell of panic. She would not become that woman again. The one who looked over her shoulder and flinched at shadows, seeing threats where none existed. It wasn't fair to Ethan. Her son was an intuitive little boy who deserved better than a nervous wreck for a mother.

'Are you sure?' the man said.

She pushed to her feet. She would look at him and prove she was being ridiculous. With any luck he'd be short and rotund, nothing at all like the tall, dark-haired devil who'd seduced her with hot chocolate and a hint of torment in his deep brown eyes on a cold night in London five years before.

More importantly, he'd be nothing like Ethan's paternal grandfather—a man she hoped never to have the misfortune of meeting again.

‘Yes, thank you,’ she said, placing the reel of ribbon on the counter. The top of her head throbbed, but she turned towards the man with a professional smile. He was probably passing through and had stopped to buy flowers for his girlfriend or wife. ‘How can I help?’

The lapels of a sleek, single-breasted camel coat worn over a black polo-neck jumper confronted her at eye level, along with a set of extremely broad shoulders. Although Annah couldn’t see the body beneath the coat, her immediate impression was of solidity and power.

Her smile faltered, and, in the same way people peek through their fingers at a scary movie, afraid to look yet helplessly compelled to do so, she lifted her gaze.

A pair of dark brown eyes, deep-set in a brutally handsome face, connected with hers.

‘Hello, Annah.’

She gasped, her heart lunging into her throat, and stumbled backwards, colliding with the workbench.

Luca Cavallari moved towards her. ‘Careful—’

‘Don’t touch me,’ she blurted, and grabbed the first object to hand—her florist shears—and stuck them out in front of her.

He looked down at the small pair of secateurs and then back at her, his expression more quizzical than alarmed. He spoke softly. ‘You would stab me, Annah?’

‘Maybe.’ She firmed her grip on the shears. Of course she wouldn’t stab him, but he didn’t know that. He didn’t know *her*. They were strangers, regardless of the fact that they’d created an amazing little person together.

Anyway, people were capable of all sorts of things when something dear to them was threatened. Annah would do anything to protect her son, especially from the people who’d wanted him gone long before he’d drawn his first breath.

The bell over the door tinkled and Annah glanced towards the entrance. *Mistake*, she realised as Luca Cavallari seized her wrist and deftly disarmed her, tossing the shears down the far end of the bench beyond her reach. ‘No!’ she cried, tugging her wrist, but his one-handed grip was too strong.

Annah cast a panicky look at the newcomer—a thick-necked behemoth dressed in black—and her stomach plummeted. She glared at Luca with false bravado. ‘Really? You brought reinforcements?’

He frowned as if her hostility perplexed him, and that incensed her. What had he expected? Not a warm reception, surely. If only she’d had the presence of mind to act as if she didn’t recognise him. She’d spent one night with him five years ago; it was entirely plausible that his face had faded from her memory.

Except the truth was it hadn’t.

How could she forget the man she’d recklessly given her virginity to—the only man she’d ever slept with—when every day she looked at a tiny, living replica of him?

Thoughts of Ethan spiked her anxiety. Her one chance to play it cool was gone. She’d overreacted. Tipped her hand by revealing her fear. If he hadn’t already known she had something to hide, he knew now.

She looked at the man in black, her heart beating so hard her chest hurt, then back to Luca, whose eyes narrowed as he scrutinised her face.

His frown deepened. He switched his gaze to the other man and said something in Italian. Immediately, the man exited the studio and crossed the street to a big black SUV parked up by the village shop, two wheels perched on the footpath so it didn’t block the narrow road.

The shop owner was nowhere in sight, and Annah felt a glimmer of relief. She liked Dorothy Green. The fifty-something widow was kind and well meaning, but she was also incurably nosy. Little happened in Hollyfield without Dot knowing, and new faces always garnered special attention.

‘You have nothing to fear,’ Luca said in that crushed-velvet voice she knew better than to trust. ‘I simply wish to talk.’

And yet he still held her wrist as if he didn't trust her not to reach for a sharp object again. Annah put her shoulders back, pretending her skin wasn't tingling where he touched her and her hormones weren't leaping with awareness of those chiselled good looks and thick-lashed, espresso-coloured eyes.

Setting her jaw, she made herself recall his father's callous treatment of her. His cold dismissal of the child who at the time had been little more than a lentil-sized embryo in her womb, but his grandchild nevertheless!

Where had Luca been then, when *she* wanted to talk? Conveniently absent. In the arms of another woman for all Annah knew, his memory of her already gathering dust while she came to terms with a far more permanent reminder of their night together. Of the one time in her life she'd chosen desire and spontaneity over the inclination to be sensible.

'Talk about what?' she said, clinging to the possibility, remote as it was, that his walking into her floral studio in the middle of the Devon countryside was just a crazy coincidence and he knew nothing of Ethan's existence.

A flimsy hope at best, and Luca crushed it with two words.

'Our son.'

His gaze challenged her to look him in the eye and deny it.

'My son,' she said, more ferociously than she'd intended. But he didn't get to show up on her doorstep after four years and pretend he was interested in the son he hadn't wanted. She tugged her wrist again. 'Let me go.'

He released her, and she clasped her arms around her middle, a thousand questions hammering her brain. How and when had he found out she'd gone through with the pregnancy? Why show up now? More specifically, what did he want?

*Not Ethan. Please, not Ethan.*

She didn't want her little boy anywhere near his paternal family!

By all accounts, Ethan's grandfather was little better than a modern-day gangster. Admittedly, those accounts were based on rumour and originated from an Italian chef with a flair for dramatics whom Chloe had briefly dated in London. But Annah hadn't needed much convincing. She'd met Franco Cavallari, and he'd terrified the living daylight out of her. She'd never met anyone more formidable or intimidating—or so devoid of compassion.

'Annah—'

She held up a hand, closing her eyes, light-headed all of a sudden. 'I... I just need a moment,' she said, because the conversation they were about to have was one she'd believed would never happen. Which meant that she, the woman Chloe had dubbed the Queen of Preparedness, was woefully *ill* prepared.

She opened her eyes and mentally braced for the visual impact of him. Predictably, her pulse spiked at the sight of all that dark, chiselled masculinity. But at least he wasn't touching her now, inflaming the nerves in her wrist and making her body tingle in very inappropriate places.

She did *not* want to feel sexually attracted to this man.

'Are you all right?' he said suddenly. 'Your head. Perhaps it should be checked?'

He shifted towards her, lifting his hands, and she instinctively shrank back. Having Luca Cavallari run his fingers over her scalp would undo her completely.

'My head's fine,' she said hurriedly. 'I'm just a little...overwhelmed. I never imagined having this conversation, to be honest.'

His eyes narrowed. 'You never imagined I would one day wish to know my son?'

Annah didn't like how that question made her insides twist, as if *she* had some reason to feel guilty. It made her want to push back. 'You haven't met my son. What makes you so certain he's yours?'

'I've seen his birth certificate. And photos.'

Annah blinked. Photos of Ethan? How? She was always so careful. She only used social media for business and she never posted photos of her or Ethan online.

Luca slid his hands into the pockets of his expensive-looking coat. With his dark looks, his lean, broad-shouldered physique and his stylish attire, he wouldn't have looked out of place on a catwalk in Paris or Milan. In Hollyfield, he looked about as alien as Annah had felt the first time she and Chloe had driven into the quaint country village.

'Your son was born at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital exactly thirty-six weeks and five days after you and I spent a night together in London,' he said. 'I'm no expert on pregnancy, but I can do the math. Unless you slept with another man around the same time who looks remarkably like me, or you were already pregnant by immaculate conception when we met...' he paused just long enough for Annah's face to flame at his reference to how innocent she'd been '...I am reasonably confident without the aid of a DNA test—which I'm not ruling out, by the way—that Ethan Sinclair is not only your son but *my* son, as well.'

She glared at him, hating that she had no comeback to any of that. 'What photos?' she said instead.

He hesitated for a beat. 'Surveillance photos.'

Annah sucked in a breath. 'You've been having us watched?' Her voice rose in horror. Did he have photos of her, too? The sense of violation made her stomach roil.

'Not me.'

'Then who?' she demanded.

His jaw hardened. 'My father.'

A chill ran up her spine. 'Why?'

'I don't know,' he said tightly.

She shook her head, confused. 'Haven't you asked him?'

'No,' he said.

'Why not?'

'Because he's dead.'

## CHAPTER TWO

LUCA WONDERED WHAT, if anything, it said about him that he could announce his father was dead and feel nothing but loathing for the man.

Annah's blue eyes widened, but she didn't offer any trite words of condolence, and her silence strengthened Luca's suspicions that his father had done a damn sight more than place her and their son under surveillance.

At some point she and his father had met. Luca didn't know when or why, but Franco had clearly put the fear of God in her. Why else had her reaction to seeing Luca been to draw a weapon? That the sight of him could provoke fear and panic in anyone, let alone in this woman—the mother of his child—made him feel physically ill.

It'd taken his investigator three days to locate her, during which time he'd gradually come to terms with the knowledge—or the ninety-nine percent certainty at least—that he'd fathered a son.

Travelling by private jet from Palermo to Exeter, and then by road to this deathly quiet English backwater, had given him time to mentally prepare as much as he could for something so far outside his realm of experience.

It was a luxury he had denied Annah by turning up here unannounced, so he'd expected shock and even defensiveness and guilt, given she'd raised his son without his knowledge for the last four years.

But abject fear?

Even his touch, meant only to calm and gently restrain after disarming her, had induced a wild, trapped look in her eyes. And at the first mention of their son she had turned fierce and possessive, like a tigress protecting her cub. Protecting *his* cub.

For some reason he'd found that inordinately sexy.

The bell over the door jingled and, just like when he'd arrived and again when his man had come and gone, the sound evoked memories of the old-fashioned ice-cream parlour he and his brother had frequented in a small fishing village near their childhood home.

As did anything relating to his brother, the memories stirred a sense of disquietude, and he cast them aside and looked towards the entrance, hoping his bodyguard had not returned. Mario's muscle-bound physique intimidated most people, men included, and Luca had noted how Annah's fear had escalated in response to the big man. Luca had told him to go back to the vehicle and stay there. Mario's job was to put himself between Luca and danger, but Annah was no more a physical threat to Luca than he was to her.

However, it wasn't Mario but a wiry, bald-headed man who entered the shop and crossed to the counter.

Annah turned to him, subtly putting distance between her and Luca. 'Hi, Brian. I'm so sorry but I'm running behind. If you can wait I'll have it ready in a couple of minutes.'

'No problem, see to your customer first,' he said, acknowledging Luca with a courteous nod.

Annah shook her head. 'I'll do Caroline's now. She wants the bouquet for a client meeting at three.' She sent Luca a stiff smile. 'I'm sorry. Perhaps you could come back in ten minutes?'

Luca gave her a look. She would not get rid of him that easily. 'I can wait.'

'Great,' said Brian. 'I'll just pop over to Dot's. Back in a tick.'

The solid workbench behind Annah stretched along the wall at a right angle to the counter. Luca chose a spot at the end, leaned his hips back against the wooden edge, and crossed his arms over his chest.

Annah jammed her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes at him.

He stared back. 'You and I *are* going to have a conversation.'

‘Fine,’ she said in a tone that told him it wasn’t. She pointed to a spot behind him. ‘I need my shears.’

Luca glanced over his shoulder at the ‘weapon’ he’d wrested from her earlier. He picked up the shears and held them out, one eyebrow raised. ‘Can I trust you with these?’

She gave him a withering look and snatched them out of his hand, then set to work, her nimble fingers moving quickly as she snipped and pruned.

He looked around. The shop wasn’t large but the space was well utilised, the décor stylish and contemporary. An elegant logo stencilled on the large front window read ‘Scent Floral Boutique’. His investigator’s report had revealed that Annah co-owned this business. Luca recalled her talking that night in London about her ambition to open a floral studio with her friend.

‘Congratulations on the business,’ he said.

She paused her work and stared at him.

He added, ‘It was your goal, was it not?’

After a moment’s hesitation, she said, ‘Yes. It was.’

‘You should be proud.’ As soon as he said it he realised the words sounded patronising. It wasn’t how he’d meant them. He knew well the challenge of building a business from the ground up. He’d built a successful private equity firm in New York. It had taken five years of relentless work, but he didn’t regret a single minute. There was something deeply satisfying about earning a legitimate living—a concept his father had never embraced despite Luca’s attempts to steer him down a respectable path.

A village floristry shop and a billion-dollar investment firm were light years apart on the business spectrum, but the over-arching principles for success were the same.

And Annah wasn’t only running a business, she was raising a child.

His child.

A responsibility she shouldn’t have to shoulder alone—and wouldn’t have to from now on.

She resumed her work. Luca pulled out his phone. If he didn’t occupy himself he would stand there watching her and his mind would end up going where it shouldn’t. As it was he had noticed too much. Her exquisite bone structure; her flawless complexion; her slim yet curvaceous figure. Her eyes were still that startling shade of blue, her long hair still golden and glossy.

Five years ago, he wouldn’t have believed Annah Sinclair could grow more beautiful. But she had.

Frowning, Luca stared at his phone and concentrated on his email until Brian returned. Annah handed him the large bouquet she’d skilfully fashioned out of the flowers and greenery on her workbench and, after Brian had left, locked the door and flipped an open/closed sign on the glass to ‘Closed’. She strode to the rear of the shop, untying and removing her red apron as she went, leaving a plain outfit of slim-fitting black trousers and a long-sleeved white top.

She hung the apron on a hook. ‘I can give you half an hour, but then I need to pick up my son.’

He put his phone in his pocket. ‘From where?’

‘Nursery.’ She turned. ‘We can talk up here,’ she said over her shoulder, and started up a flight of stairs.

Luca followed. The stairwell was narrow and the steep stairs creaked under his weight. He concentrated on where he put his feet rather than looking at Annah’s backside swaying above him. At the top she paused on a small landing, opened a door, and led him into a large room.

A rush of warmth and sunlight greeted him. He looked around. The long open-plan space incorporated lounge and dining areas and a small kitchen with a breakfast bar.

The investigator’s report had listed the same physical address for Annah’s home and business, and suddenly Luca realised he was standing in his son’s home, on a rug that Ethan had probably walked and crawled across a thousand times.

A strange sensation tugged at Luca's gut. He surveyed the room again, this time noticing a box filled with toys next to the sofa, a blue and white plastic truck under the coffee table, and a cat—a real cat with ginger fur—curled up on an armchair. A large framed photo of Annah and Ethan hung on the wall. Mother and child both grinned into the camera lens. It was a beautiful photo.

Luca dragged his gaze from it. 'How long have you lived here?'

'Since before Ethan was born.'

He glanced back towards the stairs and tried to imagine tackling them with an armful of shopping bags, or a stroller and a baby or toddler in tow.

Annah closed the door. 'I'll put the kettle on and make some tea.'

Ah, yes. The quintessentially English answer to every problem. A cup of tea. Luca would have welcomed an espresso or even a shot of whiskey, but if the ritual of making tea settled Annah's nerves and eased the way for a difficult conversation, he'd happily drink a gallon of the stuff.

Annah went to the kitchen, and Luca crossed to a window overlooking the back of the property. Outside the kitchen was a roof terrace with a small wrought-iron table, two chairs, and a bunch of potted plants. The terrace was accessible from both the kitchen and a set of external steps leading down to a courtyard, where a dark blue hatchback was parked. A narrow driveway snaked around the side of the building and a brick wall separated the rear of the property from dense woodland.

From a safety perspective, Luca was glad the upstairs flat had another route of access. But he couldn't help surveying the concrete courtyard and the tiny terrace and comparing them to the outdoor space he and Enzo had enjoyed growing up, including landscaped gardens, citrus and olive groves, and even a vineyard.

A fierce desire rose in him for his son to experience that, too. To have the freedom to run and play and explore the land that would one day be his. Land that Luca had thought was lost to him, along with everything else associated with the Cavallari legacy, until recently. Now he had the opportunity to shape that legacy in the way *he* saw fit. To take what Franco Cavallari had sullied and turn it into something good. Something worth passing on to the next generation.

Hearing the electric kettle turn off, he glanced towards the kitchen. Annah stood on the other side of the breakfast bar, her back to him. He wandered over. A teapot sat on the bench, lid off, waiting to be filled.

She stood motionless.

'Annah?'

She swung around and looked at him. 'You could leave.'

He frowned. 'Excuse me?'

'You could just go,' she said, stepping closer, eyes wide as she looked up at him, 'and we could both pretend you were never here. You'll never hear from us—I promise. I'll never contact you. Never ask for money. Never ask you for anything *ever*.'

Anger flickered. She thought he was the kind of man who could walk away and pretend his son—his own flesh and blood—didn't exist?

He clenched his jaw. 'Make the tea, Annah.'

'Luca...' She spoke his name like a husky entreaty, and it reached inside him, evoking a memory as scorchingly vivid as if she'd lain beneath him only yesterday, driving him to the brink with her soft, seductive pleas.

*Don't stop, Luca. Please...don't stop.*

He nearly had. When her body's tight resistance and her stifled cry of pain had given rise to a shocking realisation, Luca had frozen mid-thrust, then almost reflexively withdrawn. But it was too late by then. He couldn't *unbreach* her innocence. He was deep inside her and she was clinging like a limpet, stubbornly—and sexily—refusing to let him go.

Thrusting the memory aside, Luca unbuttoned his coat, took it off, and draped it over the back of a dining chair. 'Black,' he said, sliding his hands into his trouser pockets. 'No sugar. And I'll have it strong, thanks.'

Annah blinked, and the pleading look vanished from her eyes. She finished making the tea in silence. Only once they were seated at the small dining table, steaming mugs in front of them, did she speak again. 'When did your father die?' she asked quietly.

'Two months ago.'

She nodded slowly. Her hands were wrapped around her mug, and she stared into her tea for so long his patience began to unravel.

'Are you going to tell me what happened, Annah, or will I have to drag it out of you?'

Her gaze snapped up. 'It's obvious what happened, isn't it? I didn't do what you wanted.'

He frowned. 'I don't know what that means.'

'Oh, come on, Luca.' The way she said his name this time wasn't husky; it was hard and bitter, saturated with scepticism. 'You might not have had the nerve to try paying me off in person, but your father made it clear he was representing your interests.'

Dread knotted Luca's stomach. He needed the truth, but at the same time he wanted to close his ears, sensing that whatever was coming would destroy any lingering shred of the love he'd once felt for his father.

'When?' he said.

Annah's eyebrows knitted. 'I'm sorry?'

'When did you speak to my father?'

'Why are you asking—?'

'Please, Annah,' he cut in. 'Just tell me.'

She pulled her hands away from her mug, sat back and clasped her arms around her middle. 'Late March. In London. At the Cavallari offices.'

Luca's lungs locked as if someone had sucker-punched him in the chest.

Annah frowned. 'What?'

He took a moment to collect his thoughts, get the air moving in his lungs again. 'Do you remember what I told you that night in London? About leaving for the States the next day?'

'Yes. You'd left your job. You were moving to New York the next day.'

As much as he had wanted her that night, his conscience had forbidden him to seduce her with false promises. His flight to New York had already been booked. There had been nothing left for him in Europe. In Sicily. His father had declared him an outcast, made it brutally clear that Luca would never be welcomed back. He'd been upfront with Annah about his impending departure. One night of pleasure was all he offered. Nothing more.

He pushed his tea aside and sat forward. 'Three days before you and I met, my father and I had a falling-out. The job I'd left was my position in the London office of Cavallari Enterprises.' He'd vacated both his office and the company apartment on the same day, checking into a hotel and taking only his personal effects with him. He hadn't wanted anything that was paid for with Franco Cavallari's ill-gotten gains. 'After I left, I had no contact whatsoever with anyone in the company, my father included.'

Annah stared at him. 'What are you saying?'

'My father and I never spoke again. The next time I saw him, he was lying in a casket.' Luca paused, giving her a minute to process his words. 'What did you mean about a pay-off? A pay-off for what?'

Annah hesitated, her eyes wide. 'An abortion,' she whispered.

\* \* \*

Annah and Luca stared at each other across the table.

'Tell me everything,' he said, his expression grim.

She sucked in her breath, her mind grappling with the implications of what he'd told her. If it was true, everything she'd believed about him in the last five years was wrong.

'Start at the beginning,' he said, his tone gentling as if he realised just how deeply he'd shocked her. 'When did you discover you were pregnant?'

'Four weeks later.' Her voice was not as steady as she hoped. 'It didn't occur to me before then that I might be pregnant. I mean...we used protection.'

Her face heated and she glanced away. She didn't want to think about sex with Luca. Not while he was sitting at her dining table looking so handsome and compelling.

Bringing him up here had been a calculated risk. They could have gone to the cosy café at the Wilkinsons' farm shop half a mile down the road, or even sat on a bench in the local park to talk. But they wouldn't have had complete privacy like they had here.

And she wasn't concerned for her safety. Despite her knee-jerk reaction downstairs, her gut told her Luca wasn't a physical threat to her or Ethan.

'But you weren't on the Pill?'

'No,' Annah confirmed.

'And condoms aren't foolproof,' he added, voicing all the same thoughts that'd run through Annah's head in the beginning, when she'd struggled to accept she was pregnant.

'Apparently not.' She took another deep breath. 'You were entitled to know and I wanted to tell you—but I had no idea how to contact you.' That last sentence sounded faintly accusatory, and she cringed inwardly. She didn't want to sound petulant because he hadn't given her his number. He'd told her he was leaving the country. Annah had understood what he was offering: one night, no strings attached.

Luca brushed a hand over his face, dragging his thumb and fingers down the sides of his jaw. He was clean-shaven, but his five o'clock shadow was already growing in. Annah could hear the scrape of fine stubble under his hand. 'I hadn't thought about the need for contact in case there were...consequences,' he said, his expression pained.

They were both silent.

After a moment, he said, 'Tell me how—and why—you ended up meeting with my father.'

Annah picked up her mug and swallowed a mouthful of tea, then kept the mug in her lap, hands wrapped around it, trying to absorb the lukewarm heat from the china. 'Does it matter now?' she said, her chest tightening at the prospect of reliving the encounter. 'What's done is done. The last five years can't be reversed.'

'It matters,' said Luca, the sudden obdurate angle of his jaw not unlike Ethan's whenever he dug his little heels in about something.

Annah sighed. 'I tried to find you on social media,' she said, omitting to mention she'd actually searched the more popular sites *before* discovering she was pregnant. After their night together, forgetting about him had been difficult. Eventually, curiosity had won out, although it didn't get her far. She knew his name but not much else, and she quickly discovered dozens of online profiles for men named Luca Cavallari. Not one of them was the dark, sexy stranger she'd spent a night with in a plush hotel room in London.

'I'm not on social media.'

'So I discovered.' She put her half-drunk tea on the table. 'I searched the Internet using your name combined with New York and then Rome, since that's where you said you were originally from.' But that had been a lie; Luca was Sicilian. 'It took ages, but eventually I came across a photo of you at a gala fundraiser in Rome.'

Annah's heart had leapt at the two-dimensional image of him, gorgeous and suave in a tuxedo, then plunged when she'd seen the glamorous woman on his arm. The photo had been two years old at the time, but her stomach had still twisted with silly jealousy. 'The caption mentioned your family's

company. I discovered there was an office in London and called to see if someone could give me a phone number or email address for you.

'I got the runaround, though. The receptionist said you'd left and they didn't have forwarding details. I couldn't believe that no one in your own family's company was able to contact you. I kept calling back, but I just got transferred to a different person with the same story.'

It had been so frustrating—and humiliating. 'In the end I lost my cool and did something stupid,' she confessed. 'I blurted out that I was pregnant with your child and suggested somebody might like to pass on the information.' She huffed out a humourless laugh. 'It got a reaction at least. A woman called me within an hour and invited me to go in for a meeting two days later.'

Annah looked down at her hands. 'Until I got there, I'd thought maybe I was going to meet you,' she said, stopping short of confessing that a part of her had fizzed with anticipation at the prospect despite the awkward circumstances. 'But it was your father.'

She glanced at Luca. A deep groove had settled between his eyebrows, and a muscle flickered in his jaw.

'He wasn't very kind,' she said, vastly understating Franco Cavallari's demeanour. 'He treated me like a gold digger. Wrote a cheque for ten thousand pounds and told me to go have an abortion.' Her voice wobbled at the memory. 'I tried to leave without taking it, but he pushed it into my bag and then had me escorted out of the building. I ripped the cheque up as soon as I got home,' she added.

'What else did he say?'

'Not much.'

'Annah.'

She sighed again. 'He said you would have handled it yourself if you were still in the country. Then he said you wished me well and hoped this would put an end to the matter.'

Those words had cut deeper than any others. After a burly man had shown her the door, she'd hurried away on shaky legs, found a toilet in a shopping mall and promptly thrown up.

'Did he threaten you?'

'Not exactly—not in words. But he was...intimidating.' And convincing. Annah had gone home believing the worst—that Luca had spurned her and his unborn child and not had the courage or decency to do it in person.

Emotion clogged her throat, and she rose suddenly and rushed to the back door. With trembling hands she tried to open it, but the deadbolt jammed and she cursed under her breath—why hadn't the landlord replaced it like he'd promised?—and then her fingers blurred alarmingly before her eyes.

She blinked furiously. She was not going to cry. She just needed some air.

*If only this blasted lock—*

It gave way and she yanked the door open, stumbled out to the terrace, and gulped in a breath of the crisp March air. Seconds later the back of her neck tingled, alerting her to Luca's presence before his deep voice rumbled behind her.

'I didn't know you were pregnant, Annah. If I had, all this would have turned out very differently. It's important you understand that as we move forward.'

*Move forward?*

Annah wasn't sure she wanted to know what that entailed.

Curling her hands over the railing, she looked out at the treetops and the hilly fields and farmland beyond. It was quiet in Hollyfield—too quiet sometimes—but the countryside was pretty, the area safe, the villagers friendly and kind.

She and Ethan were settled here. Content. She didn't want his life disrupted like hers had been too often as a child.

But Luca was here and he wasn't going away. Annah had to deal with this. Deal with him. Straightening her back, she turned and faced him. 'What now?'

'Take me to my son,' he said.

## CHAPTER THREE

LUCA RETURNED TO the SUV, got in the back, and instructed Mario to follow Annah's hatchback. Apparently, his son's daycare facility was in a neighbouring village, about a fifteen-minute drive away, according to Annah.

She hadn't looked thrilled about taking him to meet his son, but her grudging acquiescence was a win nonetheless. Still, Luca didn't count on plain sailing ahead. Annah Sinclair was no pushover; she was a tougher version of the woman he'd met five years ago, and a damn sight less trusting.

He fisted his hand on his thigh. If his father wasn't already dead he'd wring the bastard's neck.

Listening to Annah's account of what had happened, Luca had felt winded and then furious at what Franco had done.

Had his father hated him that much?

Bile burned the back of Luca's throat. The answers to so many questions had gone with Franco Cavallari to his grave—including why he'd had photos of Annah and Ethan in his possession, and, more disturbingly, what he'd planned to do with them.

For the next ten minutes Mario sat on the tail of the hatchback. Annah drove at a fair clip, obviously familiar with the winding back roads and country lanes. When they reached the village she parked on a side road and Mario pulled up behind her.

She got out, crossed the road, and disappeared through a gate in a high wooden fence.

A full minute passed with no sign of her, then another. Luca tapped his fingers against his thigh.

How long did it take to collect a child?

He watched other vehicles come and go. Other parents disappear through the gate, all of whom emerged soon after with one or more children in tow.

He got out of the SUV and paced the footpath, stopping every few seconds to glare across the road. From behind the wheel, Mario sent him a look that was vaguely amused, and Luca gave him a dark scowl.

He looked across the road again. Perhaps he should go in?

No sooner had the thought formed than the gate swung open, and Annah came out holding the hand of a dark-haired boy.

Luca froze. Suddenly, his heartbeat sped up and his hands went clammy.

He was about to meet his child. An event for which he had no point of reference. No previous experience to help him navigate this unfamiliar territory.

He stared at Ethan, so like himself as a boy, and a memory surfaced. A vignette of the Cavallari family in happier times, years before ugly revelations had torn them apart and planted them on opposite sides of an unbridgeable divide.

The day was hot and they were picnicking on the family estate. Luca was young, no older than Ethan, and he was riding high on his *papà's* shoulders, giggling and shrieking as Franco put his arms out like an airplane and raced across the lawn. His mother wore a pretty sundress and sat under a big oak, baby Enzo cradled in her arms. Luca could hear the sweet tinkle of her laughter, unaware that in years to come he would rarely hear his mother laugh.

Luca had loved his father. It pained him to admit it, but he had. He'd idolised him. Wanted to be him. In the eyes of his young son, Franco Cavallari had been an important man. Wealthy and successful. Handsome and charismatic. Other men treated him with deference—and respect.

Luca had been a teenager when he'd finally understood it wasn't respect his father engendered in other men, but fear.

On the night Franco initiated his eldest son into manhood, Luca's love for him had turned into something confusing and complex. A gut-churning mix of revulsion and love and hatred he struggled for years to understand.

His first big mistake was believing he could change his father. His second was not destroying Franco when he had the chance. Emotion had made him weak. Incapable of doing what had to be done.

If he had been stronger, if he'd taken Franco down, he could have saved his brother.

He took a deep breath and calmed his heart rate. He wouldn't fail Ethan like he had failed Enzo. He could do this. He was a better man than Franco; he could be a better father. All he had to do was stay focused and control his emotions.

\* \* \*

'Is that him, Mummy?'

Ethan tugged on Annah's hand. Standing with her feet glued to the pavement, she swallowed down a bubble of nervous laughter. 'Yes, sweetheart,' she said, staring across the road. 'That's him.'

'Holy Moly,' breathed a woman's voice.

Annah glanced to her left. Harriet, a frazzled but good-humoured mother of five, stood with her youngest—a little girl with ginger ringlets—balanced on her hip.

Harriet, like Ethan, stared across the road. So did several other mothers as they trotted along the street and bundled their kids into cars. Annah couldn't blame them. Luca Cavallari was a knee-weakening mix of smouldering sex appeal and unadulterated machismo.

'Who is *that*?' said Harriet.

Ethan leaned around Annah's legs. 'That's my daddy,' he said proudly.

*Oh, God.* The footpath swayed beneath Annah's feet. She closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, Harriet was looking at her, bug-eyed.

'Wow,' said Harriet. 'That's...unexpected?'

This time she couldn't stop the nervous laughter escaping. 'You could say that.'

Harriet put a hand on Annah's arm and squeezed gently. 'Let me know if you need anything, hon.'

Annah managed a smile. 'Thanks.'

Harriet headed off to her car, and Annah looked across the road again. Luca wasn't even looking at her. His gaze was fixated on Ethan.

'Mummy?'

'Yes?'

'You're holding on too tight.'

'Oh!' Annah loosened her grip on Ethan's hand and looked into his upturned face. 'Sorry, sweetheart.' She smiled, hoping it looked less strained than it felt, and he beamed back.

'Are we crossing now?'

His little voice rang with eagerness, and Annah's heart clenched. Ethan was excited to meet his father, but she was still grappling with shock and anxiety. She would have appreciated a few days' grace—time to get her emotions under control before introducing Ethan to his father—but Luca had different ideas.

Annah had tried to put herself in his shoes. He had missed out on the first four years of his son's life. Wanting to meet his child without further delay perhaps wasn't unreasonable.

Reminding Ethan to look both ways for traffic, she crossed the road with him. Luca waited on the other side. He wasn't wearing his coat, and his all-black attire combined with his sheer size and the intense expression he wore made him look rather intimidating. But as they drew close he squatted down, bringing his face level with Ethan's, a smile curving his lips that not only softened his hard features but caused Annah's pulse to hitch.

'Hello, Ethan,' he said. 'My name is Luca.'

Ethan blinked and then looked to Annah, shyness overtaking him now that he was face to face with the commanding figure of his father.

Annah smiled reassuringly. 'It's okay, sweetheart. Say hello.'

He turned back to Luca. 'Hello.' His hand reached out and touched Luca's bent knee, as though to make sure he was real. He pulled his hand back, broke into a grin, and boldly announced, 'You're my daddy.'

Luca shot Annah a surprised look.

She lifted one shoulder. 'I thought honesty was best.' She could have made something up. Introduced Luca as her 'friend'. But then what? Ethan would learn the truth eventually, and then he'd know she'd lied to him.

Their eyes held for a moment.

'Thank you,' he said quietly.

Annah gave a single small nod, his gratitude sparking a warm glow she hadn't expected—and wasn't sure she should welcome. Not when she and Luca could be headed for opposite sides of a custody battle.

His attention returned to Ethan. 'I am,' he said. 'Although where I come from we say *papà*.'

'Where are you from?' Ethan asked, and Annah suddenly realised she had no idea how far Luca had travelled to get here or where he lived these days. New York? London? Sicily? Rome?

Her stomach tightened. How would a shared custody arrangement work if she and Luca lived in different countries?

'A long way away,' Luca said.

'Is that why you haven't come to see me before?'

Annah winced inwardly. Seeing the discomfort on Luca's face, she stepped in to rescue him. 'Come on, sweetheart. The ducks will be wondering where we are.'

Ethan turned back to his father. 'Are you coming to feed the ducks?'

Annah held her breath. In his handmade Italian shoes and tailored trousers, Luca wasn't exactly dressed for a walk in the reserve, but she'd thrown the invitation out there anyway. This was part of her and Ethan's weekly routine; Luca could fit in or not.

'Yes.' He straightened up. 'Your mother invited me. Is that all right with you?'

Ethan clapped his hands. 'Yes!'

Annah forced herself to smile. It was stupid, but Ethan's enthusiasm towards his father felt like a kick in her ribs. 'Come on, then,' she said, imbuing her voice with a cheerfulness she didn't feel. 'Let's go before it gets too cold.'

\* \* \*

Half an hour later, Annah sat on a bench seat carved out of an old gnarled tree trunk and hunched her shoulders inside her jacket.

It wasn't all that cold. This part of the nature reserve was sheltered from the cool breeze, and the early spring sunshine lent a modicum of warmth to the afternoon.

The chill was inside her. A cold knot of anxiety that wasn't going to shift any time soon, at least not until she knew what Luca's long-term intentions were.

She watched him and Ethan at the water's edge, scooping handfuls of oats, seeds and food pellets out of a paper bag and tossing them into the midst of a noisy gathering of ducks. Farther out, a pair of white swans glided across the calm surface of the landscaped lake.

It was a pretty spot and one of her and Ethan's favourite haunts. Throughout the reserve, wild daffodils already bloomed in bright patches of cheerful yellow. In another few weeks, spring would start throwing its confetti of colour across the countryside in earnest. The wedding season would gear up, and work would get busy. Annah and Chloe had made a name for themselves specialising in wedding flowers and event styling. Last year they'd even won an award for South West Wedding Florist of the Year.

She wished Chloe were here now. She wasn't only Annah's business partner, she was her best friend. Her only close friend really. Annah knew plenty of people, was friendly with most, but she

struggled to make that leap from acquaintance to friend. Learning to rely on herself as a child had made her fiercely independent, inclined to put walls up when she didn't necessarily mean to.

But walls could be good. Especially if you didn't know who to trust.

Could she trust Luca?

According to Chloe's ex, Franco Cavallari had been a corrupt and powerful businessman with ties to organised crime. Just because Luca had fallen out with his father, it didn't mean he wasn't a bad guy, too.

And bad guys didn't mind doing bad things, did they? Things like...kidnap their own children?

*Oh, Lord.*

Annah jammed the brakes on her imagination. Luca's behaviour so far had been perfectly civilised, she reminded herself. He'd sat down and had a cup of tea with her, for goodness' sake!

And now he stood on a muddy lakeside feeding a bunch of ducks with Ethan. It almost made her smile. She'd bet his fancy leather shoes were toast.

'All gone, Mummy,' Ethan called to her, tipping the paper bag upside down to show it was empty. 'Can we go see Sandy now?'

'Yes.' Annah stood and pushed a smile onto her face as Ethan and Luca came towards her. Seeing them together like this, side by side, made her jumbled emotions even more difficult to untangle. The physical similarities—dark hair, brown eyes, olive skin—brought a lump to her throat.

Shoving the empty paper bag at Annah, Ethan said to his father, 'Sandy's got eight babies!'

Luca returned a suitable look of surprise. 'Eight?' he said, raising a quizzical eyebrow at Annah.

'Puppies,' she clarified. 'Sandy's a golden retriever. She belongs to the family who runs the café and lives in the house up by the entrance.'

'They were too small to hold last time but they might be big enough now,' Ethan chipped in, then chattered excitedly all the way to the café, something like awe lighting up his face every time he tipped his head back to gaze up at his father.

As they stepped into the warmth of the café, Annah wrestled down a pang of jealousy. She didn't need to compete for Ethan's affections. He loved her. She was his mummy. Luca's sudden arrival didn't change that.

Going straight to the window table where she and Ethan usually sat, she unzipped her puffer jacket and then hung it on the back of a chair. Not until she glanced up did she notice Luca's burly associate sitting at a table in a back corner.

He got to his feet, and Annah's pulse did a nervous skitter. While he wasn't the same man who had wrapped a bruising hand around her arm five years ago and 'escorted' her from the Cavallari Enterprises offices after Luca's father had carelessly dismissed her, the likeness was enough to make the hairs on the back of her neck lift.

Instinctively, without taking her eyes off the man, she reached for Ethan and dragged him close.

\* \* \*

Luca narrowed his gaze on Annah's face and watched her complexion go from peaches and cream to chalky white. Her hands clutched Ethan's shoulders and she stared at Mario as if expecting him to try to snatch up her child and steal him away.

Gripped by an urge to reassure, Luca set his hand against the small of her back and felt her flinch. She darted him a look that made his stomach harden. There was no weapon in her hand now, but the wariness and distrust in her eyes told him she was still afraid.

How many times in the months since he'd returned to Sicily had he seen that same expression of trepidation and fear?

*Too many.*

His father's legacy had tainted the Cavallari name, and many people assumed Luca was cut from the same cloth. Changing that perception and rebuilding trust was proving a slow process.

Luca motioned Mario over. 'Annah, this is Mario Russo, my driver,' he said. 'Mario, this is Annah Sinclair. And this...' he placed his hand on Ethan's head '...is our son.' Saying the words aloud for the first time sent a quiver of something like pride through Luca's chest.

A smile wreathed Mario's face, transforming him from grizzly bear to teddy bear. 'Nice to meet you, Miss Sinclair,' he said, extending a beefy hand.

Annah hesitated, then put her hand out for a shake. Mario's enormous paw engulfed her slender hand entirely. 'And you,' she said.

Mario looked towards Ethan, who blinked, round-eyed. 'Hello, Ethan.'

Luca said, 'Mario has a daughter about your age, Ethan.'

Ethan's gaze shifted back and forth between the two men. 'What's her name?'

'Liliana,' said Mario.

'That's a pretty name,' Annah remarked, her features relaxing into a smile.

Mario beamed and then, with a nod to Luca, politely took his leave, returning to the SUV.

Annah's eyes met Luca's and her mouth opened, but whatever she intended to say was halted by the approach of a smiling, curly-haired brunette from behind the café's counter. Luca stifled a flare of frustration.

'Hi, Annah,' said the brunette. She sent Luca a polite smile laced with a hint of curiosity. When Annah didn't offer an introduction, the woman ruffled Ethan's hair. 'Hey, young man. Want to see the puppies?'

Ethan grinned. 'Yes!'

'Yes, what?' Annah said gently.

'Yes, please!'

The woman smiled. 'Come out the back, then. Laura's just home from school and having a play now.' She looked at Annah and Luca. 'What can I bring you? Coffee? Something to eat?'

Luca ordered a coffee, and Annah a pot of Earl Grey tea.

Once they were seated and Ethan had disappeared with the woman, Luca said quietly, 'You need to trust me, Annah.'

Her gaze dropped to the blue-and-white-checked tablecloth. 'I'm trying,' she said after a moment. 'It's just...'

'Just what?' he prompted when she didn't finish.

Her eyes came back to his. 'I don't know you, Luca.'

'Then give me the benefit of the doubt,' he said, fighting to keep frustration out of his voice, 'and believe me when I tell you that neither myself nor anyone in my employ will ever harm you or Ethan.'

Her teeth trapped her bottom lip for a moment, drawing his gaze to a mouth he'd tried to forget over the years but hadn't succeeded in banishing from his fantasies.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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