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MELANIE MILBURNE

Uncovering the Silveri Secret



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Melanie Milburne

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Caught between fury... Heiress Bella Haverton is furious that her late father left everything to Edoardo Silveri – her family house, her financial guardianship and, most grating of all, the right to decide who and when she marries! Bella is determined to shake off these intolerable shackles... And passion! Her plan to confront Edoardo spins wildly out of control when she learns that the troubled boy her father adopted is now a commanding, enigmatic man – with lethal sex appeal! Her head is warring with her traitorous body, and it's time for Bella to uncover the secrets behind the man who controls her destiny... 'I always love Melanie's books; you never want to put them down!' – Michelle, Carer, Hull

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‘I’ve known you since I was a child, but I hardly know you at all,’ Bella said in a husky tone.

Edoardo wanted her so badly it was like a drug his system craved. The trouble was he knew one taste would never be enough. He wasn’t sure how long with her would be enough. He saw it: the need, the lust and the longing. It pulsed in the air in a hot, swirling current that was almost palpable.

Her eyes flickered to his mouth and back again to his eyes. ‘I want to know who you are,’ she said. ‘Who you *really* are.’

‘This is who I really am,’ he said.

‘I want to know why you’re so closed-off emotionally,’ she said. ‘You push everyone away. Why do you do that?’

Edoardo gripped her shoulders a little tighter. ‘I’m not pushing you away right now, am I? In fact I’m about to bring you a whole lot closer.’

About the Author

From as soon as **MELANIE MILBURNE** could pick up a pen she knew she wanted to write. It was when she picked up her first Mills and Boon® at seventeen that she realised she wanted to write romance. After being distracted for a few years by meeting and marrying her own handsome hero, surgeon husband Steve, and having two boys, plus completing a Masters of Education and becoming a nationally ranked athlete (masters swimming), she decided to write. Five submissions later she sold her first book and is now a multi-published, bestselling and award-winning *USA TODAY* author. In 2008 she won the Australian Readers' Association most popular category/series romance, and in 2011 she won the prestigious Romance Writers of Australia R*BY award.

Melanie loves to hear from her readers via her website:

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To my niece Bethany Luke—an absolute sweetheart who cares about everybody. XOX

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS the first time Bella had been home since the funeral. Haverton Manor in February was like a winter wonderland, with a recent fall of snow clinging to the limbs of the ancient beech and elm trees that fringed the long driveway leading to the Georgian mansion. The rolling fields and woods beyond were shrouded in a thin blanket of white, and the lake shone like a sheet of glass in the distance as she brought her sports car to a stop in front of the formal knot garden. Fergus, her late father's Irish wolfhound, gingerly rose from his resting place in the sun and came over to greet her with a slow wag of his tail.

'Hiya, Fergs,' Bella said and gave his ears a gentle scratch. 'What are you doing out here all by yourself? Where's Edoardo?'

'I'm here.'

Bella swung round at the sound of that deep, rich, velvet-smooth voice, her heart giving a funny little jump in her chest as her eyes took in Edoardo Silveri's tall figure standing there. She hadn't seen him face-to-face for a couple of years, but he was just as arresting as ever. Not handsome in a classical sense; he had too many irregular features for that. His nose was slightly crooked from a fist fight, and one of his dark eyebrows had a scar through it, like a jagged pathway cut through a hedge, both hoofmarks of his troubled adolescence.

He was wearing sturdy work-boots, faded blue denim jeans and a thick black sweater that was pushed up to his elbows, showcasing his strong, muscular arms. His wavy, soot-black hair was brushed off his face, and dark stubble peppered his lean jaw, giving him an intensely masculine look that for some reason always made the back of her knees tingle. She took in a little jerky breath and met his startling blue-green eyes, almost putting her neck out to do it. 'Hard at work?' she said, adopting the aristocrat-to-servant tone she customarily used with him.

'Always.'

Bella couldn't quite stop her gaze drifting to his mouth. It was hard and tightly set, the deep grooves either side of it indicating it was more used to containing emotion than showing it. She had once come too close to those sensually sculptured lips. Only the once, but it was a memory she had desperately tried to erase ever since. But even now she could still recall the head-spinning taste of him: salt, mint and hot-blooded male. She had been kissed lots of times, too many times to recall each one, but she could recall Edoardo's in intimate, spine-tingling detail.

Was he remembering it too, how their mouths had slammed together in a scorching kiss that had left both of them breathless? How their tongues had snaked around each other and duelled and danced with earthy, brazen intent?

Bella tore her eyes away and glanced at the damp dirt on his hands from where he had been pulling at some weeds in one of the garden beds. 'What happened to the gardener?' she asked.

'He broke his arm a couple of weeks ago,' he said. 'I told you about it when I emailed you the share-update information.'

She frowned. 'Did you? I didn't see it. Are you sure you sent it to me?'

The right side of his top lip came up in a mocking tilt, the closest he ever got to a smile. 'Yes, Bella, I'm sure,' he said. 'Perhaps you missed it in amongst all the messages from your latest lover. Who is it this week? The guy with the failing restaurant, or is it still the banker's son?'

'It's neither,' she said with a lift of her chin. 'His name is Julian Bellamy and he's studying to be a minister.'

'Of politics?'

She gave him an imperious look. 'Of religion.'

He threw back his head and laughed. It wasn't quite the reaction Bella had been expecting. It annoyed her that he found her news so amusing. She wasn't used to him showing any emotion, much

less amusement. He rarely smiled, apart from those mocking tilts of his mouth, and she couldn't remember the last time she had heard him laugh out loud. She found his reaction over the top and completely unnecessary. How dared he mock the man she had decided she was going to marry? Julian was everything Edoardo was not. He was sophisticated and cultured; he was polite and considerate; he saw the good in people, not the bad.

And he loved her, rather than hating her, as Edoardo did.

'What's so funny?' she asked with an irritated frown.

He swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, still chuckling. 'I can't quite see it somehow,' he said.

She sent him a narrowed glare. 'See what?'

'You hanging around tea and scones at Bible study,' he said. 'You don't fit the mould of a preacher's wife.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' she asked.

His eyes ran over her long black boots and designer skirt and jacket, before taking a leisurely tour of the upthrusts of her breasts, finally meeting her gaze with an insolent glint in his. 'Your skirts are too high and your morals too low.'

Bella wanted to thump him. She clenched her hands into fists to stop herself from actually doing it. She wasn't going to touch him if she could help it. Her body had a habit of doing things it shouldn't do when it came too close to his. Her nails bit into her palms as she tried to rein in her temper. 'You're a fine one to talk about morals,' she threw back. 'At least I don't have a criminal record.'

Something hardened in his gaze as it pinned hers: diamond-hard. Anger-hard. Hatred-hard. 'You want to play dirty with me, princess?' he asked.

This time Bella felt that tingling sensation at the base of her spine. She knew it had been a low blow to refer to his delinquent past, but Edoardo always triggered something dark, primal and uncontrollable in her. She didn't know what was it about him that got her back up so quickly, but he needed her like no other person.

He had *always* done it.

He seemed to take particular delight in getting a rise out of her. It didn't matter how much she promised herself she would keep a lid on her temper. It didn't matter how cool and sophisticated she planned to be. He *always* got under her skin.

Ever since that night when she was sixteen, she had done her best to avoid her father's bad-boy protégé. For months, if not years, at a time she would keep her distance, barely even acknowledging him when she came home for a brief visit to her father. Edoardo brought out something in her that was deeply unsettling. In his company she didn't feel poised and in control.

She felt edgy and restless.

She thought things she should not be thinking. Like how sensual the curve of his mouth was, the way the lower lip was fuller than the top one; how his lean jaw always seemed to need a shave. How his hair looked like it had just been combed with his fingers. How he would look naked, all tanned, whipcord-lean and fit.

Like how he always looked at her with that hooded, inscrutable gaze as if he was seeing through the layers of her designer clothes to her tingling body beneath ...

'Why are you here?' he asked.

Bella gave him a defiant look. 'Are you going to march me off the premises for trespassing?'

A glint of something menacing lurked in his gaze. 'This is no longer your home.'

Her look hardened to a cutting glare. 'Yes, well, you certainly made sure of that, didn't you?'

'I had nothing to do with your father's decision to bequeath me Haverton Manor,' he said. 'I can only presume he thought you were never very interested in the place. You hardly ever visited him, especially towards the end.'

Bella's resentment boiled inside her—resentment and guilt. She hated him for reminding her of how she had stayed away when her father had needed her the most. The permanency of death had made her run for cover. The thought of being left all alone in the world had been terrifying. The desertion of her mother just before her sixth birthday had made her deeply insecure; people she loved *always* left her. She had buried her head in the social scene of London rather than face reality. She had made the excuse of studying for her final exams, but the truth was she had never really known how to reach out to her father.

Godfrey had come to fatherhood late in life, and after her mother had left, he had not coped well with the role of being a single parent. Consequently their relationship had never been close, which had made her insanely jealous of the way in which her father had fostered his relationship with Edoardo. She suspected Godfrey saw Edoardo as a surrogate son—the son he had secretly longed for. It made her feel inadequate, a feeling that was only reinforced a hundredfold when she found out the way her father had left his estate. 'I'm sure you worked my absence to your advantage,' she said, shooting him another embittered glare. 'I bet you sucked up to him every chance you could, all the while painting me as a silly little socialite with no sense of responsibility.'

'Your father didn't need me to point out how irresponsible you are,' he said with that annoying, trademark lip-curl. 'You do a fine job of that all by yourself. Your peccadilloes are splashed across the newspapers just about every week.'

Bella simmered with fury even though there was some truth in what he said. The press always targeted her, making her out to be a wild child with more money than sense. She only had to be in the wrong place at the wrong time for some ridiculous story to come out about her.

But things would be different soon.

Once she was married to Julian, the press would hopefully leave her alone. Her reputation would be spotless. 'I'd like to stay for a few days,' she said. 'I hope that won't inconvenience you?'

Those intriguing eyes glinted dangerously again. 'Are you asking me or telling me?'

Bella put on a beseeching expression, her hatred of him tightening her spine until she could feel every knob of her vertebrae. It was positively galling to have to ask for permission to stay at her childhood home. That was one of the reasons she had turned up unannounced. She'd figured he might not be able to turn her away with the household staff looking on. 'Please, Edoardo, may I stay for a few days?' she asked. 'I won't get in your way. I promise.'

'Do the press know where you are?' he asked.

'No one knows where I am,' she said. 'I don't want anyone to find me. That's why I came here. No one would ever dream of finding me here with you.'

His chiselled jaw was locked like a vice, a muscle on the left side moving in and out like a tiny heart beating under the skin. 'I've a good mind to send you on your way.'

Bella pushed her bottom lip out. 'It's about to snow again,' she said. 'What if I run off the road or something? My death would be on your hands.'

'You can't just turn up here and expect the red carpet to be rolled out for you,' he said with a look of stern disapproval. 'You could at least have called and asked if it was all right to stay. Why didn't you?'

'Because you would have said no,' Bella said. 'What's the problem with me staying a few days? I won't get in your way.'

The muscle tapped a little harder in his jaw. 'I don't want a bunch of voyeurs lurking about the place,' he said. 'As soon as the paparazzi turn up, you can pack your bags and leave. Got it?'

'Got it,' Bella said, inwardly seething at his overbearing manner. What did he think she was going to do—call a press conference? She wanted to escape all that and lie low until Julian came back. She didn't want any more scandals in her life.

'And nor will I tolerate you bringing friends here to party all hours of the day and night,' he said, drilling her with his diamond-hard gaze. 'Understood?'

Bella gave him her best ‘I’ll be good’ face. ‘No parties.’

‘I mean it, Bella,’ he said. ‘I’m working on a big project just now. I don’t want to be distracted.’

‘All right, already. I get it,’ she said, flashing an irritated gaze. ‘So what’s the big important project? Is she female? Is she currently sleeping over? I wouldn’t want to cramp your style or anything.’

‘I’m not going to discuss my private life with you,’ he said. ‘Before I know it, you’d be spilling all to the press.’

Bella wondered who his latest lover was, but there was no way she was going to ask. Asking would imply she was interested. She didn’t want him thinking she spent any time at all musing over what he was doing and whom he was doing it with. He mostly kept his private life exactly that—private. His enigmatic, unknowable nature made him a target for the paparazzi but somehow he managed to keep his head below the parapet. Whereas Bella couldn’t seem to step outside her house in Chelsea without attracting a camera flash from the lurking paparazzi, who always painted her as a professional party girl with nothing better to do than get a spray tan.

Her engagement to Julian Bellamy would hopefully put all that to rest. She wanted a clean slate, and once she was married, she would have it. Julian was the nicest man she had ever met. He was nothing like the men she had dated in the past. He didn’t attract scandal or intrigue. He didn’t party or drink. He didn’t have a worldly bone in his body. He wasn’t interested in wealth and status, only helping others.

‘Would you bring in my bags for me?’ she asked Edoardo with mock sweetness. ‘They’re in the boot.’

Edoardo leaned against the front fender of her car, one ankle crossed over the other, his arms folded against the broad expanse of his chest. ‘When do I get to meet your new lover?’ he asked.

Bella pushed her chin a little higher. ‘He’s technically not my lover,’ she said. ‘We’re waiting until we get married.’

He laughed again. ‘Holy mother of Jesus.’

She threw him a look. ‘Do you mind not blaspheming?’

He pushed himself away from her car and came to stand close enough for her to smell the heat of his arrantly male flesh: sweat and hard work with a grace note of citrus that swirled around her nostrils, making them involuntarily flare. She took a prickly little breath and stepped backwards but one of her heels snagged on the crushed limestone and she would have fallen but for one of his hands snaking out and capturing her by the wrist.

Her breath completely halted as his long, tanned fingers gripped her like a steel manacle. An electric charge surged through her skin as soon as those calloused fingers made contact with her skin. She felt it sizzling all the way to the bones of her wrist; they felt like they were going to disintegrate to fine powder. She swept her tongue out over her lips as she tried to muster as much icy hauteur as she could, but even so her heart fluttered like a hummingbird behind the scaffold of her ribs as his eyes meshed with hers. ‘What in God’s name do you think you’re doing?’ she asked.

One corner of his mouth came up in a sardonic smile. ‘Now look who’s blaspheming.’

Bella’s stomach dropped like an out-of-control elevator when his thumb pressed against her leaping pulse on the underside of her wrist. She hadn’t been so close to him in years. Not since *that* kiss. Ever since that night, she had assiduously avoided any physical contact with him. But now her skin on her wrist felt like it was being scorched. It felt hot and tingly, as if electrodes had zapped the nerves. ‘Get your filthy hands off me,’ she said but her voice came out raspy and uneven.

His fingers tightened for an infinitesimal moment, his unusual blue-green eyes holding hers, sending a riot of sensations tumbling down the length of her spine. She could sense *him* so close to her pelvis, that essential part of him that defined him as a virile and potent male. Her body felt its primal magnetic pull just as it had all those years ago. What would it feel like to press against him now that she was no longer that gauche, inexperienced, slightly inebriated teenager?

‘Say please,’ he said.

She gritted her teeth. *Please.*'

He released her and she rubbed at her wrist, shooting him a livid glare. 'You've made me all dirty, you bastard,' she said.

'It's good clean dirt,' he said. 'The kind that washes off.'

Bella looked at the cuff of her shirt below the sleeve of her jacket that now had a full set of his dusty fingerprints on it. She could still feel the pressure of his fingers as if he had indelibly branded her flesh. 'This shirt cost me five-hundred pounds,' she said. 'And now you've completely ruined it.'

'You're a fool, paying that for a shirt,' he said. 'The colour doesn't even suit you.'

She stiffened her shoulders in outrage. 'Since when did you become a personal stylist?' she jeered. 'You don't know the first thing about fashion.'

'I know what suits a woman and what doesn't.'

She scoffed. 'I bet you do,' she said. 'The less clothes the better, right?'

His eyes glinted as they did a lazy sweep of her form. 'I couldn't have put it better myself.'

Bella felt her skin tingle all over as if he had physically removed her clothes, button by button, zip by zip, piece by piece. She couldn't stop herself from imagining how his work-roughened hands would feel on the softer smooth skin of her body. Would they catch and snare like a thorn on silk? Would they scratch or would they caress? Would they ...?

She pulled back from her wayward thoughts with a hard mental slap. 'I'm going inside to say hello to Mrs Baker,' she said and swished past him to go to the front door.

'Mrs Baker is away on leave.'

Bella stopped as if she had suddenly come up against an invisible wall. She turned around to look at him with a quizzical frown. 'So who's doing the cooking and cleaning?' she asked.

'I'm taking care of it.'

Her frown deepened. 'You?'

'You have a problem with that?' he asked.

Bella blew out a little breath. She had a very *big* problem with it. Without Mrs Baker bustling about the place, she would be alone in the house with Edoardo. She hadn't planned on being alone with him. It was a very big house, but still ...

In the past he had lived in the gamekeeper's cottage. But, since her father had left him Haverton Manor, he had the perfect right to live inside the house. He managed her father's investments and operated his own property-development business out of the study next to the library. Apart from the occasional business trip abroad, he lived and worked here.

He slept here.

In *her* house.

'I hope you don't expect me to take over the kitchen,' Bella said, shooting him another glare. 'I came to have a break.'

'Your whole life is one long holiday,' he said with a sneer that boiled her blood. 'You wouldn't know how to do a decent day's work if you tried.'

Bella gave her head a little toss. She wasn't going to tell him about her plans to help Julian fund his mission work with a good chunk of her inheritance. Edoardo could jolly well go on thinking she was a flaky airhead just like everybody else. 'Why would I need to work?' she asked. 'I have millions of pounds waiting for me to collect when I'm twenty-five.'

The muscle near his tightly set mouth started hammering again and his eyes turned to blue-green granite. 'Do you ever spare a thought for how hard your father had to work to make his money?' he asked. 'Or do you just spend it as fast as it's dropped in your account?'

Bella gave him another defiant look. 'It's my money to spend how I damn well like,' she said. 'You're just jealous because you came from nothing. You got lucky with my father. If it hadn't been for him, you'd be pacing a prison cell somewhere, not playing lord of the manor.'

His eyes glittered with sparks of acrimony. ‘You’re just like your gold-digging bitch of a mother,’ he said. ‘I suppose you know she was here a couple of days ago?’

Bella tried to disguise her surprise. *And hurt.* She hadn’t seen or heard from her mother in months. The last time she had heard from Claudia was when she’d called to say she was moving to Spain with a new husband—her second since her divorce from Bella’s father. Claudia had needed money for the honeymoon. But then, Claudia always needed money, and Bella always felt pressured into giving it. ‘What did she want?’ she asked.

‘What do you think she wanted?’ he asked, that hard gaze glittering with cynicism.

Bella gave him an arch look. ‘Maybe she wanted to check you were still managing my assets properly.’

A frown suddenly pulled at his brow. ‘If you want a blow-by-blow inspection of the books, then all you have to do is ask,’ he said. ‘I’ve offered to meet with you more regularly but you’ve always refused. The last three meetings, you didn’t even have the decency to show up in person.’

Bella felt a little ashamed of herself. She had no question over his management of her father’s estate. The profits had steadily grown from the moment he had taken over the share portfolio in the months before her father had died from cancer. His street-smart intelligence and clever intuition had saved her assets where other investors’ had been lost during the economic turmoil of the past few years.

A couple of times a year he would insist they meet so he could go through the estate books with her. At first she had suffered those meetings, all the while sitting silently seething at how he was in control of her life. But even in that large, swanky London office he had seemed a little too close to her. The last meeting she had attended in person, her mind had wandered off into dangerous territory as she sat staring at the dark pepper of stubble around his mouth as he patiently explained the stocks and shares. She had tried to focus but within seconds she had started gazing at his hands as he had turned the pages of the meticulous report he had prepared. He had looked up at one point and locked gazes with her. She still remembered the throb of that silence. She had felt it deep inside her body.

She could still feel it.

‘That won’t be necessary,’ Bella said. ‘I’m sure you’re doing all you can to keep things in order.’

There was a tight little silence.

‘Are you expecting your boyfriend to join you?’ he asked.

Bella tucked a strand of hair back behind her ear that the chilly breeze had worked loose. ‘He’s away on a mission in Bangladesh,’ she said. ‘I thought I’d come here until he gets back.’

‘London nightlife losing its appeal?’ he asked.

She gave him a brittle glare. ‘I haven’t been to a nightclub in ages. It’s not my scene any more.’

‘Prayer meetings more your thing?’

Oh, how she hated him for his mockery. ‘I bet you’ve never got down on your knees in your life,’ she tossed back.

His eyes slid to her pelvis and back with deliberate slowness. They seemed to burn with a secret erotic message as they met hers. ‘Say the word, princess, and I’ll be on my knees before you can say “heavens above.”’

Bella’s insides coiled and flexed with hot, traitorous desire. It simmered between her thighs. A flickering pulse that made her aware of every muscle and nerve and cell at the feminine heart of her.

He was the bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks. She was the rich heiress with a pedigree that went back centuries.

She was about to become engaged.

It was forbidden.

He was forbidden.

Bella gave him a frosty look. ‘I don’t think there’s a prayer on this earth that could save your soul,’ she said.

‘Why not try some laying on of hands instead?’ he said with a bitter smile.

She felt that disturbing little flicker again. It made her hate him all the more. She hated that he could have this effect on her, even now. How could he make her body act so shamelessly wanton just by being near him? It annoyed her that he had so much sensual power over her. It shocked her that she couldn’t control her reaction to him. It was even more shocking to know he was well aware of his impact on her. She could see it in those darkly brooding, indolent looks he gave her. The slow burn of his gaze made her skin feel like it was going to melt off her bones. ‘Go to hell,’ she bit out through tightly clenched teeth.

‘You think I haven’t already been there?’ he asked.

Bella couldn’t hold his gaze. It seemed to burn through her like a laser beam, touching her, stroking her, making her feel sensations she should not be feeling.

She turned on her heels and marched inside, closing the door with a satisfying clunk of metal and wood.

Edoardo let out a long hiss from between his teeth once she had gone inside the manor. He clenched and unclenched his fist a couple of times but he could still feel the tingling of where his hand had touched her wrist.

He should have frogmarched her back to her car and sent her packing. She was nothing but trouble.

And temptation.

He blew out another harsh breath. Yes, well, Bella Haverton was nothing if not tempting. She was a pint-sized little she-devil with an uppity attitude that stuck in his craw like a twig. He wanted her as much as he hated her. For years he had burned with lust for her. She was the temptation he had taught himself to resist, all except for that one night when she had pushed and pushed until he had snapped. He had kissed her roughly, angrily. The searing heat of that kiss had been building up for months and months. All those ‘come and get me’ looks she had been casting him, all those flirty little accidental touches as she had moved past him in the doorway had slowly but surely corroded his iron self-control. It had been like a massive explosion once their mouths met.

He still didn’t know quite how he’d had the strength of will to pull back from her, but somehow he had. She had been only sixteen, young, passionate and way out of her depth. He was nine years older than her, but he was centuries older in terms of experience. He hadn’t wanted to betray the trust Godfrey Haverton had placed in him. It had never been spoken in so many words, but he had always sensed Godfrey trusted him not to do the wrong thing by his young daughter.

It was different now she was older. There was no reason why he couldn’t indulge in a hot little affair with her. She might fancy herself in love with some other man, but she couldn’t hide the fact she still wanted him. He saw it in her eyes: the hunger, the wildfire passion she tried so desperately to hide from him.

He could *still* taste her.

All those years had passed, but he could still remember her hot, wet sweetness, the way her mouth had felt, the way it had moved against his. His body jammed with lust at the mere thought of driving into her, feeling her softness against his hardness, her arms tightly around him, her mouth on his, her tongue tangling with his in a sensual duel.

He had not touched her again until today. It had been like touching a live wire. His fingers still fizzed with the sensation. The ache to touch her again was like a pulse in his blood. It roared and screamed through his veins.

He *wanted* her.

He *lusted* after her.

There was a part of him that didn’t *want* to want her. She was the one person who could make him lose control, and control was everything to him. He was not proud of the way he had grabbed her that night all those years ago. He had acted on impulse, not reason. She had that power over him.

She *still* had that power over him.

Bella always liked to play the haughty aristocrat with him. She looked down her nose at him as if he had just crawled out from a primeval swamp with his knuckles dragging along the ground. He could think of nothing better than taking her down a peg or two.

And she had played right into his hands by turning up unannounced.

He gave an inward smile. She might think she could flounce in and take charge, issuing orders as if he was nothing but a lowly servant paid to wait on her hand and foot. Had she forgotten how her father's will was written?

He was in charge now.

And he was not going to let her forget it.

CHAPTER TWO

AS SOON as Bella stepped inside the foyer, she felt a pang of emptiness that was like a hollow ache inside her chest. There was no hint of pipe tobacco. No sound of a walking stick tapping against the floorboards. No sound of classical music playing softly in the background.

There wasn't even the sound of Mrs Baker singing tonelessly in the kitchen. No homely sounds of pots and pans clattering. No delicious smells of home baking, just the sharp tang of fresh paint lingering in the air and a silence that was measured by the methodical ticking of the grandfather clock: Tick, tock. Tick, tock.

She wandered through the lower floor of the manor, noting the newly painted kitchen and conservatory. The formal sitting room, overlooking the garden, the lake and the rolling fields beyond, had also had a bit of a makeover. Edoardo had spent much of the past five years restoring the manor to its former glory. He did most of the work himself. It wasn't that he was short of money; he could easily have afforded to outsource to contractors but he seemed to enjoy doing hands-on work.

Bella had only been seven years old when he had come to live at Haverton Manor. It had been the year after her mother had left. Her father had taken Edoardo on as a project, presumably to distract himself from his own misery at being deserted by his young wife and left to care for a small child on his own.

Edoardo had been kicked out of every foster home in the county. At sixteen he had clocked up enough minor offences to put him in juvenile detention until he turned eighteen. Bella remembered a surly adolescent with a bad attitude. He had seemed to wear a perpetual scowl. He solved conflicts with his fists. He swore like a trooper. He didn't have manners. He didn't have friends, only enemies.

But somehow her father had seen behind the bad-boy façade to the young man with the potential to go places and achieve great things. And under Godfrey Haverton's steady and patient tutelage, Edoardo had managed to finish school and earn a place at university, where he studied commerce and business.

Edoardo had used the leg-up to good purpose. Godfrey had given him a small loan, and from that he had purchased his first property and subdivided it. He reinvested the profits in more property, which he subsequently restored and resold. His business had grown from those humble beginnings to what was now a highly successful property-investment portfolio that was constantly expanding. He also managed her father's estate, which was held in trust for Bella until she reached the age of twenty-five. With just one year to go until she could access her substantial inheritance, Edoardo was a thorn in her side she tried to avoid as much as possible.

Each month he dutifully transferred her allowance into her bank account. She had mostly kept within her budget, but now and again an extra expense would come in and she would have to suffer the indignity of contacting him to ask him to provide her with more funds. It infuriated her that her father had set things up in such a way, that he had chosen Edoardo as her trustee rather than appoint someone else—someone more impartial. Her father had trusted Edoardo more than he trusted her, and that hurt. It made the ill feelings she had always harboured against Edoardo all the more intense. To add insult to injury, her father had given him *her* ancestral home. She loved Haverton Manor. It was where she had spent the happiest days of her life before her mother had left. Now it was Edoardo's and there was not a thing she could do about it.

Bella hated him with a passion that seemed to become more and more fervent as each year passed. It simmered and boiled inside her. She could not imagine it ever abating.

He was her enemy and she couldn't wait until he was no longer in control of her life.

Bella moved through the upper floors, taking in the view from each window, reacquainting herself with the memories of the grand old house where she had spent her early childhood before she'd gone away to boarding school. Her nursery was on the top floor, along with a nanny's flat and

a toy room that was as big as some children's bedrooms. The nursery hadn't been renovated as yet. She was surprised to find some of her childhood things were still there. She hadn't been back to pack them up since her father's funeral. She wondered why Edoardo hadn't packed them up and posted them off to her.

Going into that room was like stepping back in time to a period when her life had been a lot less complicated. She picked up her old teddy bear with his faded blue waistcoat. She held him to her face and breathed in the smell of childhood innocence. She had been so happy before her mother had left. Her life had seemed so perfect. But then, she had been very young and not tuned in to the undercurrents of her parents' marriage.

Looking back with the wisdom of hindsight, Bella could see her mother was a flighty and moody woman who was soon bored by country life. Claudia craved attention and excitement. Marrying a very rich man who was twenty-five years older than her had probably been enormously exciting at first, but in time she'd come to resent how her social-butterfly wings had been clipped.

And yet, while Bella could understand the frustration and loneliness her mother had felt in her sterile marriage, she still could not understand why Claudia had left *her* behind. Hadn't she loved her at all? Had her new boyfriend been more important than the child she had given birth to?

The hurt Bella felt still niggled at her. She had papered it over with various coping mechanisms but now and again it would resurface. She could still remember the devastation she had felt when her mother had driven away with her new lover. She had stood there on the front steps, not sure what was happening. Why was Mummy leaving without saying goodbye? Where was she going? When would she be back? Would she *ever* be back?

Bella sighed and looked out of the window. Her eye caught a movement in the garden below, and she put the teddy bear back on the shelf and moved across to the window.

Edoardo was walking down to the lake; Fergus was following faithfully a few paces behind. Every now and again he would stop and wait for the elderly dog to catch up. He would stoop down and give Fergus's ears or frail shoulders a little rub before moving forward again.

His care and concern for the dog didn't fit with Bella's impression of him as an aloof lone-agent who shied away from attachment. He had never shown any affection for anyone or anything before. He hadn't appeared to grieve the loss of her father, but then, she hadn't been around to notice all that much. He had been marble-faced at the funeral. He had barely uttered a word to her, or to anyone. At the reading of the will he had seemed unsurprised by the way her father had left things, which seemed to suggest he had a part in their planning.

She had flayed him with her sharp tongue that day. The air had rung with her vitriol. She had ranted and fumed and screamed at him. She had even come close to slapping him. But he had not moved a muscle on his face. He had looked down at her with that slightly condescending look of his and listened to her blistering tirade as if she'd been a spoilt, wilful child having a tantrum.

Bella moved away from the window with a frustrated sigh. She didn't know how to handle Edoardo. She had *never* known. In the past she had tried to dismiss him as one of the servants, someone she had to tolerate but not like, or even interact with unless absolutely necessary. But she had always found his presence disturbing. He did things to her just by looking at her. He made her feel things she had no right to feel. Was he doing it deliberately? Was he winding her up just to show he had the upper hand until she turned twenty-five?

He had always viewed her as the spoilt princess, the shallow socialite who spent money like it was going out of fashion. When she was younger she had tried her best to understand him. She had sensed the world he had come from was wildly different from hers from the occasional snippet of gossip from the locals, but when she had asked him about his childhood, he would cut her off with a curt command to mind her own business. What annoyed her more was that he must have spoken to her father about her probing him, as Godfrey had expressly forbidden her ever to speak to Edoardo about his childhood. He'd insisted that Edoardo deserved a chance to put his delinquent

past behind him. It had driven another wedge between Bella and her father, making her feel more and more isolated and shut out.

Over the years her empathy towards Edoardo had turned to dislike and then to hatred. During her adolescence she had brazenly taunted him with saucy come-hither looks in an effort to get some sort of rise out of him. His aloofness had made her angry. She'd been used to boys noticing her, dancing around her, telling her how beautiful she was.

He had done none of that.

It was as if he didn't see her as anything but an annoying child. But then, that night in the library when she'd been sixteen, she had overstepped the mark. With a bit of Dutch courage on board—compliments of some cherry brandy she had found—she had been determined to get him to notice her. She had perched on his desk with her skirt ruched up and with the first four buttons of her top undone, showing more than a glimpse of the cleavage that had begun to blossom a couple of summers before.

He had come in and stopped short when he'd seen her draped like a burlesque dancer on his desk. He had barked at her in his usual growly way to get out of his hair. But, instead of scampering off like a dismissed child, she had slithered off the desk, come over to him and tiptoed her fingertips over his chest. Even then he had resisted her. He had stood as still as stone, but she had felt empowered by the way his eyes had darkened and the way he had drawn in a sharp breath as her loose hair brushed against his arm. She'd pressed closer, breathing in the scent of him, allowing him to breathe in hers.

She could still remember the exact moment he'd snapped. He'd seemed to teeter on the edge of control for long, pulsing seconds. But then he had finally grabbed her roughly—she had thought in order to push her away—and slammed his mouth down on hers. It was a kiss of hunger and frustration, of anger and lust, of forbidden longings. It had shaken her to the very core of her being. And, when he'd finally wrenched his mouth off hers and thrust her from him, she could tell it had done exactly the same to him ...

Bella pushed back from her thoughts of the past. It was her future she had to think about now. *A future that could not happen without Edoardo's co-operation.*

Edoardo was in the kitchen a few hours later preparing a meal. He knew the exact moment Bella entered the room even though his back was turned away from the door. It wasn't the sound of her footfall or even the fact that Fergus opened one eye and lifted one faded steel-grey ear. It was the way the back of his neck tingled, as if she had trailed her slim, elegant white fingers through his hair. His body had always felt her presence like a sophisticated radar tracking a target. He had spent years of his life suppressing his reaction to her. He had hardly even noticed her until she had reached adolescence. But then, as if a switch had been turned on in his body, he had noticed everything: her long, glossy brown hair and those big, Bambi toffee-brown eyes with their dark fringe of impossibly long lashes.

He had noticed the graceful way she moved, like a ballerina across a dance floor or a swan gliding across the surface of a lake. He had noticed her porcelain skin, the way it was milky-white compared to his deep olive-brown. He had noticed her smell, that gorgeous mix of honeysuckle and orange blossom with a hint of vanilla. At just five-foot-five she was petite up against his six-foot-three frame. He towered over her. One of his hands could swallow both of hers whole. His body would crush hers if he took possession of her.

He *ached* to take possession of her. His body had been humming with it ever since he had grabbed her wrist outside. His fingers could still feel where they had come in contact with her skin. Her skin had felt like satin. He wondered if the rest of her body would be as silky-smooth.

How long before he caved in to the temptation? He had always been wary around her, distant to the point of rude. It wasn't just because of his sense of obligation to her father: he had a feeling she would do more than move him physically. He didn't want her to use him like she used the other men in

her life. The men she dated were just playthings she picked up and put down again when her interest waned. He would allow no one—not even Bella Haverton—to use him for sport or entertainment.

‘Dinner will be ready in half an hour,’ he said.

‘Would you like some help?’ she asked.

Edoardo flicked the tea towel over his shoulder as he turned to face her. She looked young, fresh and innocent, yet worldly and defiant at the same time. It was a potent mix she had always played to her advantage. She was like a chameleon: a woman-child, a sexy siren and a doe-eyed innocent all wrapped in a knockout package.

Her clothes draped her model-slim figure like an evening glove on a slender arm. She could make a bin liner look like a million-dollar designer outfit. Her make-up was subtle and yet brought out the toffee-brown of her eyes and the lush thickness of her lashes. The lip-gloss she was wearing made her bee-stung lips all the more tempting and alluring.

She was playing her ice-maiden game now but Edoardo could see straight through it. She couldn’t hide the way her body reacted to him. She was aware of him in the same way he was aware of her. There was a sexual energy in the air between them—a current, a force, that crackled every time their eyes met.

‘You can pour a glass of wine for us both,’ he said. ‘There’s a red open over there, or there’s white, if you prefer, in the fridge.’

She poured a glass of red for them both and handed him one. He felt the zap of her fingers as they briefly met his around the stem of the glass. He saw the flare of reaction in her brown eyes. ‘*Salut*,’ he said, holding her gaze as the blood thundered in his loins.

She gave her glossy lips a quick darting sweep with the tip of her tongue. ‘*Salut*,’ she said and lifted the glass to her mouth. It always amazed him how sensual she was, seemingly without even trying. How could taking a sip of wine suddenly be so sexy? He couldn’t stop staring at her mouth, how it glistened from the wine. How her lips were so plump and full, just ripe for kissing.

‘So how did you meet this boyfriend of yours?’ Edoardo asked as he dragged his gaze away from her mouth.

‘He was serving meals to the homeless when I walked past from the tube station,’ she said. ‘I thought it was amazing that he was standing out there in the cold and wet, handing out food parcels and blankets. We got talking and then we exchanged numbers. The rest, as they say, is history.’

‘How serious are you about him?’

‘I’m very serious,’ she said, setting her chin at a defiant height. ‘I want to get married in June.’

He took a measured sip of his wine and then placed the glass back down on the counter. Bella married? *Not on his watch*. ‘You realise you can’t marry anyone without my permission?’ he said.

She blinked. ‘What?’

‘It’s clearly stated in your father’s will,’ he said. ‘I have to approve your choice of husband if you choose to marry before the age of twenty-five.’

Her eyes widened and then narrowed. ‘You’re lying,’ she said. ‘It does *not* say that. You’re in control of my money, not my love life.’

‘Go check it out with the lawyer,’ he said, turning back to his chicken dish on the stove.

Edoardo could feel her anger building in the silence. It made the air heavy, loaded with anticipation, like that tense period after lightning flashed, just before the thunder bellowed.

‘You put my father up to this, didn’t you?’ she said. ‘You cooked up this little scheme to get absolute and total control of me.’

Edoardo put the wooden spoon down on the spoon holder and turned back round, folding his arms across his chest and crossing one ankle over the other. ‘So why do you want to marry this Julian guy?’ he asked.

She put up her chin. ‘I’m in love with him.’

He laughed and unfolded his arms. ‘Now, that’s funny.’

She sent him a gimlet glare. 'I suppose it is to someone who doesn't have an emotional bone in his body,' she said. 'You wouldn't recognise love if it came up and bit you on the face.'

Edoardo looked at her mouth again, at those lips he had fantasised about for years, remembering how soft and yielding they had been beneath the pressure of his. He had fantasised about them moving over his body, kissing and sucking on him until he exploded. A red-hot dart of lust shot him in the loins. He could just imagine her taking him to heaven with that sexy little mouth of hers. It would certainly make a change from her spitting at him like an angry little cat. 'Ah, yes, but I recognise lust when I see it,' he said. 'And you are positively simmering with it.'

She hissed in a little breath, her eyes flashing in fury. 'How dare you?'

'Oh, I dare,' he said, trailing a light fingertip down the length of her arm.

She pulled back from him as if he had scorched her. 'Don't touch me.'

'I like touching you,' he said in a low, growly tone. 'It does things to me. Wicked things. *Sinful* things.'

Her slim throat moved up and down agitatedly. 'Stop this,' she said. 'Stop this right now.'

'Stop what?' he asked. 'Stop looking at you? Stop imagining how it would feel to thrust inside you right to the hilt? To have you bucking and screaming underneath my—'

She raised her hand so quickly he almost didn't block it in time. He captured it within a hair's breadth of his cheek, his fingers clamping around her wrist with bruising force. 'I can do rough if you want, princess,' he said. 'I can do it any way you want it.'

'I do not want you,' she said, spitting the words out like bullets.

He felt her thighs bump against his. He felt the softness of her breasts where they brushed against his chest. He felt the drum beat of her pulse against his fingers. He felt his need race through his blood with an almighty primal roar.

It would be so easy to slam his mouth down on hers like he had done before. To taste her, to tempt her with the pleasure he could feel building like a dam inside him. She would go off like a firecracker. He knew they would be dynamite together. She needed someone strong enough to control her wild impulses and reckless behaviour. The men she dated danced around her like moths around a bright light.

He would have her. He knew it in his bones. He would have his fill of her, purging her from his system once and for all.

And she would enjoy every pulse-racing second of it.

Edoardo slowly released her wrist. 'Got that nasty little temper of yours under control?' he asked.

She gave him a fulminating look as she rubbed at her wrist. 'I pity the women you take to bed,' she said. 'They probably leave it bruised from head to foot.'

'They leave it panting for more,' he said with a smouldering smile.

She made a scornful sound. 'Why? Because you don't know how to properly satisfy a woman?'

His eyes mated with hers. 'Why don't you try me and see?'

She gave him a withering look. 'I'm about to become engaged, remember?'

'So you say,' he said. 'Has he asked you, or are you just clearing it with me in case he does?'

She gave him a reaction that reminded him of a bantam hen ruffling its feathers. 'The man doesn't always have to do the proposing,' she said. 'What's wrong with a woman asking a man?'

'That could work every four years, but this year isn't a leap year, so you've either got to buck the trend or wait.' Edoardo picked up her left hand. 'So where's the ring?'

She snatched her hand away. 'I'm having one designed specially.'

'Who's paying for it?'

She frowned at him. 'What sort of question is that?'

'So *you're* paying,' he said with a mocking look.

'I don't have to discuss this with you,' she said. 'It's none of your damn business.'

‘Yeah, well, that’s where you’re wrong, Bella,’ he said. ‘It *is* my business to see that you don’t get ripped off by some gold-digging sleazebag. That’s why your father appointed me as your financial guardian. He didn’t want you to be taken advantage of until you were old enough to understand how the world works.’

‘I’m twenty-four years old!’ she said. ‘Of course I know how the world works. My father was old-fashioned. He was two generations older than my friends’ fathers. You had no right to agree to this stupid scheme. You should’ve talked him out of it. I should’ve been given control when I turned twenty-one.’

‘You were too young at twenty-one,’ he said. ‘I think you’re still too young even now. You don’t know what you want.’

Her hands were in tight little fists by her sides. ‘I know I don’t want you messing up my life,’ she said. ‘I love Julian. I want to be his wife. I want a family with him. You can’t stop me marrying him. I’ll fight you every step of the way.’

‘Fight me,’ he said. ‘I’ll look forward to it. But you won’t win this, Bella. I will not allow your father’s life’s work to be frittered away by your impulsive choice of a partner. I’ll put a hold on your allowance. I’ll freeze your assets. You won’t have a penny to buy a cup of coffee, much less pay for a wedding.’

‘You can’t do this!’

‘How long have you known this man?’

Her cheeks blushed like a rose. ‘Long enough to know he’s my soulmate.’

He nailed her with his gaze. ‘How long?’

‘Three months,’ she mumbled.

‘What the—?’

‘Don’t say it.’ She cut him off before he could let out his forceful expletive. ‘It was love at first sight.’

‘That’s a load of crap,’ he said. ‘You haven’t even slept with this guy. How do you know if you’re compatible?’

‘I don’t expect you to understand,’ she said. ‘You don’t even have a soul.’

Edoardo was inclined to agree with her. His childhood had bludgeoned his heart until he had hidden it away for ever. He had taught himself not to feel anything but the most basic of feelings. He hadn’t loved anyone since he was five years old. He wasn’t sure he *could* love any more. It was a language he had forgotten, along with most of his native tongue. He had taught himself not to need people. Needing people left you vulnerable, and the one thing he would never allow himself to be again was vulnerable.

‘Let’s leave me out of this,’ he said. ‘What I’m concerned about is you. You’re doing exactly what your father was afraid you would do—you’re letting your heart rule your head. It should be the other way around.’

‘You can’t choose who you fall in love with,’ she said. ‘It just ... happens.’

‘You’re not in love with him,’ he said. ‘You’re in love with the idea of marriage and family, of security and respectability.’

She flounced to the other side of the kitchen, taking her wine with her. ‘I’m not going to talk about this any more,’ she said. ‘I’m marrying Julian, and you can’t stop me.’

‘Will he wait a whole year for you?’ Edoardo asked.

She lowered her glass and sent him a furious scowl. ‘You heartless, controlling bastard.’

‘Sticks and stones,’ he said, picking up his own wine and raising it in a toast.

She slammed her glass down so hard the stem broke and wine swirled in a red arc like a splash of blood. She yelped and jumped backwards, clutching her right hand.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked, stepping towards her.

‘I’m fine.’ She bit down on her lip.

He took her hand and unpeeled her fingers to find a little gash in the pad of her thumb. ‘You silly little fool,’ he said. ‘You could’ve severed a tendon.’

‘It’s nothing.’ She tried to pull her hand away but he didn’t let go. She glared up at him. ‘Do you mind?’

‘You need a plaster on that,’ he said. ‘There’s a first-aid kit in the downstairs bathroom. Come with me.’

She looked as if she was going to defy him but then she gave a frustrated sigh and allowed him to lead her to the bathroom next to the conservatory. ‘I can sort it out myself,’ she grumbled. ‘I’m not a little child.’

‘So stop acting like one.’

She flashed him a furious scowl. ‘Why don’t you stop acting like an overbearing ogre?’

‘Sit on the bath stool,’ Edoardo instructed as he pulled out the drawer where the first-aid kit was stored.

She sat and held out her hand with a recalcitrant look on her face. ‘It’s just a scratch.’

‘It’s just shy of needing a stitch,’ he said as he checked the wound for traces of glass.

‘Ouch!’

‘Sorry,’ he said.

She glowered at him. ‘I bet you’re not.’

‘You know me so well.’

She gave him a lengthy look. ‘Does anyone know you, Edoardo?’ she asked.

He shifted his gaze to her thumb as he carefully placed a plaster over the wound. She had switched from spitting cat to gentle dove within a heartbeat. He had seen her work her lethal charm on others. He had seen grown men fall over like ninepins when she gave them that misty, doe-eyed look. She knew the feminine power she had and exploited it whenever she could.

But he was *not* going to let her manipulate him.

‘What makes you ask that?’ he asked casually.

‘You don’t seem to have a lot of friends,’ she said.

‘You don’t seem to need people like other people do.’

‘I have what I need in terms of companionship,’ he said.

‘Who is your best friend?’

He released her hand and moved to the basin to wash his hands. ‘You should take care of that thumb,’ he said. ‘You don’t want to get it infected.’

‘Edoardo?’

He dried his hands on the nearest towel and then shoved it back on the rail. ‘I’d better go clean up that glass before Fergus steps on it,’ he said.

She bit her lip again. ‘I’m sorry ...’

He gave her a brief glance before he shouldered open the door. ‘We all have our limits, Bella.’

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