



MODERN™



# MELANIE MILBURNE

Scandal: Unclaimed Love-Child



**Melanie Milburne**  
**Scandal: Unclaimed Love-Child**  
Серия «Mills & Boon Modern»

**Аннотация**

He'll claim his baby...by whatever means! Billionaire Luca Sabbatini may have ruthlessly cast Bronte from his life...but he'd be lying if he said he'd forgotten this sweet ballerina. That's why he's back, and ready to reawaken their lost passion. Only this time he finds Bronte isn't quite so biddable! Her better judgement is urging her to walk away.Bronte has been lured into Luca's lair before... This time, however, the secret she's hiding will have its repercussions!**THE SABBATINI BROTHERS** Three powerful playboys from the richest dynasty in Europe! Ruthless, irresistible...impossible to tame?

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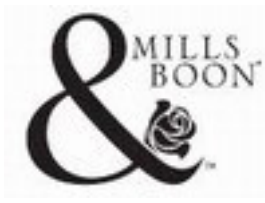
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# **Scandal: Unclaimed Love-Child**

by

# Melanie Milburne



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**MELANIE MILBURNE** says: 'I am married to a surgeon, Steve, and have two gorgeous sons, Paul and Phil. I live in Hobart, Tasmania, where I enjoy an active life as a long-distance runner and a nationally ranked top ten Master's swimmer. I also have a Master's Degree in Education, but my children totally turned me off the idea of teaching! When not running or swimming I write, and when I'm not doing all of the above I'm reading. And if someone could invent a way for me to read during a four-kilometre swim I'd be even happier!'

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# THE SABBATINI BROTHERS

*Three powerful playboys from the richest dynasty in Europe!  
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Luca, Giorgio and Nicoló have Italian fire and passion coursing through their blood. And now they are looking for the one thing that money can't buy...the love of a good woman!

**This month meet Luca as he makes a scandalous discovery!**

*Luca took a breath, but it felt as if he was breathing through barbed wire. His throat felt raw and his chest so tight it ached unbearably. He scored his hair with his fingers, not surprised to see how unsteady his hand was. He could feel the tremors of rage rolling through him. Rage and remorse—a juxtaposition of emotions that made it hard for him to think clearly.*

*He had a child.*

**Look out for gorgeous Giorgio and notorious Nicoló Sabbatini, coming soon in Modern™ Romance**

*To Carey and Laura Denholm, such wonderful friends and fabulous company. Thanks for being there for us when we needed it most and thanks too for all the side-splitting jokes! XX*

# Chapter One

BRONTE was doing a hamstring stretch at the barre when she heard the studio door open. She looked in the wall-to-ceiling mirror, her heart screeching to a halt when she saw a tall dark figure come in behind her. Her eyes flared in shock, her hands instantly dampening where they clung to the barre. Her heart started up again, but this time with a staccato beat which seemed to mimic the frantic jumble of her thoughts.

It couldn't be.

She must be imagining it.

Of course she was imagining it!

It couldn't be Luca.

Her mind was playing tricks. It always did when she was tired or stressed. And she was both.

She curled her fingers around the barre, opening and closing her eyes to clear her head. She opened them again and her heart gave another almighty stumble.

It just couldn't possibly be Luca Sabbatini. There were hundreds, no, possibly thousands of stunningly handsome dark-haired men who might just by chance wander into her studio and

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'Hello, Bronte.'

*Oh, dear God, it was him.*

Bronte took a slow deep breath and straightened her shoulders

as she turned and faced him. ‘Luca,’ she said with cool politeness. ‘I hope you’re not thinking of booking in for the first class of the afternoon. It’s full.’

His dark eyes roamed over her close-fitting dance wear-clad body slowly, lingering for a heart-stopping moment on her mouth, before meshing his gaze with hers. ‘You look as beautiful and as graceful as ever,’ he said as if she hadn’t spoken.

Bronte felt a frisson of emotion rush through her at the sound of his voice: rich and dark and deep and smoky with its unmistakable and beautifully cultured Italian accent. He looked the same as the last time she had seen him, although perhaps a little leaner if anything. Well over six feet tall, with glossy black hair that was neither short nor long, neither straight nor curly, and with the darkest brown eyes she had ever seen, he towered over her five feet seven, making her feel as dainty and tiny as a ballerina on a child’s music box.

‘You’ve got rather a cheek to come here,’ she said with a flash of her gaze. ‘I thought you said all that needed to be said two years ago in London.’

Behind his eyes it looked as if a small light had gone on and off like a pen-sized flashlight. It was a tiny movement and she would not have seen it at all if she hadn’t been glaring at him so heatedly. ‘I am here on business,’ he said, his voice sounding a little rusty. ‘I thought it might be a good chance to meet up again.’

‘Meet up and do what exactly?’ she asked with a lift of her chin. ‘Talk about old times? Forget about it, Luca. Time and

distance has done the trick. I am finally over you.'

She turned and walked back to the barre. 'I have a class starting in five minutes,' she addressed him in the mirror. 'Unless you want to be surrounded by twenty little girls in tights and leotards, I suggest you leave.'

'Why are you teaching instead of dancing?' he asked as his gaze held hers steady in the mirror.

Bronte rolled her eyes impatiently and turned back to face him. She placed one hand on her hip, her top lip going up in a what-would-you-care curl. 'I was unable to make the audition at the last minute, that's why.'

A small frown pulled at his brow. 'Were you injured?'

Bronte suppressed an embittered smile. Heartbroken and pregnant sort of qualified for injury, didn't it? 'You could say that,' she said, sending him a cutting look. 'Teaching was the next best option. Back home in Melbourne seemed the best place to set up to do it.'

His dark gaze swept over the old warehouse Bronte and her business partner Rachel Brougham had fashioned into a dance studio. 'How much rent do you pay on this place?' he asked.

A feather of suspicion started to dust its way up Bronte's spine. 'Why do you ask?'

One of his broad shoulders rose and fell in a noncommittal shrug. 'It's a sound investment opportunity,' he said. 'I'm always in the market for good commercial property.'

She frowned as she studied his inscrutable expression. 'I

thought you worked in hotel management for your family?’

Luca smiled a ghost of a smile. ‘I’ve diversified quite a bit since I saw you last. I have several other interests now. Commercial property is a sure bet; it often gives much better returns than the domestic property market.’

Bronte pressed her lips together as she worked on controlling her emotions. Seeing him like this, unannounced and unexpected, had thrown her completely. It was so hard to maintain a cool unaffected pose when inside she felt as if she had been scraped raw. ‘I am sure if you contact the landlords they will tell you the place is not for sale,’ she said after a short pause.

‘I have contacted them.’

She felt her spine slowly turn to ice as her eyes climbed all the way back up to his. ‘A...and?’

His half-smile gave him a rakish look. It was one of the things that had jump-started her heart the first time she had met him in a bookshop in London. Her heart was doing a similar thing now, for all her brave talk of having got over him.

‘I have made them an offer,’ he said. ‘That’s one of the reasons I am here in Australia. The Sabbatini Hotel Corporation is expanding more and more globally. We have plans to build a luxury hotel in Melbourne and Sydney and another on the Gold Coast of Queensland. Perhaps you have heard about it in the newspapers.’

Bronte wondered how she could have missed it. In spite of her animosity towards him, from time to time she couldn’t stop

herself trawling the papers and gossip magazines for a mention of him or his family. Only a few months ago she had heard of the separation of his older brother Giorgio and his wife Maya. She had also heard something about his younger brother Nicol  winning an obscene amount of money playing poker in a Las Vegas casino. But she had heard nothing of Luca. It was as if for the last two years he had completely disappeared off the news media radar.

‘No, but then again I have better things to do with my time,’ she said with a disparaging look.

His dark eyes continued to hold hers in a stare-down Bronte was determined to win. She tried to keep her expression masked but even so his presence was having an intense effect on her. She could feel her skin tightening all over, her heart was racing again and her stomach was fluttering with a frenzied flock of razor-sharp wings. Seeing him again was something she had never allowed herself to think about. On a cold, miserable, grey day in November almost two years ago he had brought their six-month affair to an abrupt and bitter end. Her love for him had over time cooled down until it was now like a chunk of sharp-edged ice stuck right in the middle of her chest. What sort of na ve fool had she been to have loved such a heartless man? He had not once returned any of her calls or emails. In fact she suspected he had switched addresses and numbers in order to get her out of his life.

And now he was back as if nothing had happened.

‘Why are you here?’ she asked with a pointed glare. ‘Why are

you *really* here?’

He continued to look down at her from his towering height, but something about his expression had softened slightly. His dark eyes reminded her of melted chocolate, his mouth a temptation equally irresistible. She could almost feel those sculptured lips pressing down on hers. Her lips tingled with the memory and, as she thought of how he had made her feel in his arms, her chest felt as if someone was slowly pulling scratchy pieces of string from all four chambers of her heart.

Bronte felt her guard lowering and hastily pulled up the drawbridge on her emotions, standing stiffly before him, her arms folded across her middle, her mouth tight with renewed resolve.

‘I wanted to see you again, Bronte,’ he said. ‘I wanted to make sure you are all right.’

She blew out a breath of disgust. ‘All right? Why wouldn’t I be all right?’ she asked. ‘Your ego must be far bigger than I realised if you think I would be still pining over you after all this time. It’s been nearly two years, Luca. Twenty-two months and fourteen days, to be exact. I’ve well and truly moved on with my life.’

‘Are you seeing anyone?’ he asked, still watching her in that rock-steady hawk-like way of his.

Bronte pushed up her chin. ‘Yes, as a matter of fact I am.’

He gave no outward sign of the news affecting him but she sensed an inner tension in him that hadn’t been there before. ‘Would your current partner mind if I stole you for dinner this

evening?’ he asked.

‘I am not going out with you, Luca,’ she said with deliberate firmness. ‘Not tonight, not tomorrow night, not ever.’

He moved a step closer, his hand coming down on one of her arms to stop her from moving away from him. Bronte looked down at his long, dark, tanned fingers on her creamy bare skin within touching distance of her breasts, and felt her body shiver all over. It felt as if her blood was being heated to boiling point from that simple touch. She felt the drum roll of her heart and the deep quiver of her belly as his fingers subtly tightened. ‘Is one night so very much to ask?’ he said.

She pushed at his hand but he brought his other one over the top and held her firm. He was too close. She could feel his warm minty breath on her face. She could smell his lemon-based aftershave. She could feel her body responding as if on autopilot. ‘Don’t do this, Luca,’ she said in a cracked whisper.

‘Don’t do what?’ he asked, holding her gaze steady with his as his thumb slowly, mesmerisingly stroked along the back of her hand.

She swallowed a lump of anguish. ‘I think you know,’ she said. ‘This is a game to you. You’re here in Australia and you want a playmate. And who better than someone you already know who is going to go away when it’s over without too much fuss.’

A corner of his mouth lifted in a rueful smile. ‘Your opinion of me is a lot worse than I expected. Didn’t I give you enough compensation for bringing an end to our affair?’

*More than you know*, Bronte thought. 'I sent the opal pendant back,' she said with a defiant glare. 'They're supposed to be bad luck. I kind of figured I had already had my fair share in meeting you.'

A tight spot appeared beside his mouth, like a pulse of restrained anger beating beneath his skin. 'It was very mean-spirited of you to return it in that state,' he said. 'It was an expensive piece. How did you smash it? Did you back over it with an earth mover or something?'

She pushed her chin a little higher. 'I used a hammer. It was immensely satisfying.'

'It was an appalling waste of a rare black opal,' he said. 'If I had known you were going to be so petulant about it I would have given you diamonds instead. They, at least, are unbreakable.'

'I am sure I would have found a way,' she said tightly.

He smiled then, a rare show of perfect white teeth, the movement of his lips triggering the creasing of the fine lines about his eyes. 'Yes, I am sure you would have, *cara*.'

Bronte felt that quivery feeling again and tried desperately to suppress it. What was it about this man that made her so weak and needy? His mere presence made her remember every moment they had spent together. Her body seemed to wake up from a long sleep and leap to fervent life. All her senses were switched to hyper vigilant mode, each and every one of her nerves twitching beneath her skin to be subjected again to the exquisite mastery of his touch.

He had been the most amazing lover. Her *only* lover. She had been romantically and perhaps somewhat foolishly saving herself for the right man. She hadn't wanted to repeat the mistakes her mother had made in falling for a wastrel and then being left holding the baby. Bronte had instead fallen for a billionaire and the baby she had been left holding he still knew nothing about.

And, given how appallingly he had treated her, she planned to keep it that way.

'I have to ask you to leave, Luca,' she said. 'I have a class in a few minutes and I—'

'I want to see you tonight, Bronte,' he stated implacably. 'No is not a word I will tolerate as an answer.'

She pulled out of his hold with a surge of strength that was fuelled by anger. 'You can't force me to do anything, Luca Sabbatini,' she said. 'I am not under any obligation to see you, have dinner with you or even look at you. Now, if you don't leave immediately, I will call the police.'

His dark eyes hardened to black ice. 'How much rent did you say you were paying on this place?' he asked.

Bronte felt a lead-booted foot of apprehension press down on her chest until she could barely breathe. 'I didn't say and I am not going to.'

His smile had a hint of cruelty about it. He reached into the inside breast pocket of his suit jacket and handed her a silver embossed vellum business card. 'My contact details,' he said. 'I will expect you at eight this evening at my hotel. I have written

the name and address on the back. I am staying in the penthouse suite.'

'I won't be there,' she warned him as he turned to leave.

He stopped at the door of the studio and turned to look at her. 'Perhaps you had better speak to your previous landlords before you make your final decision,' he said.

'Previous?' Bronte's eyes flared as the realisation dawned. 'You mean you bought the building?' Her heart gave a stutter like an old lawnmower refusing to start. 'Y...you're my new landlord?'

He gave her a self-satisfied smile. 'Dinner at eight, Bronte, otherwise you might find the sudden rise in rent too much to handle.'

Bronte felt anger rise up like lava inside an ancient volcano. Her whole body was shaking with it. Her hands were so tightly fisted her fingers ached, and her blood was pounding so hard in her veins she could hear a roaring in her ears. 'You're *blackmailing* me?' she choked.

He met her excoriating look with equanimity. 'I am asking you on a date, *tesore mio*,' he said. 'You know you want to say yes. The only reason you are making all this fuss is because you are still angry with me.'

'You're damn right I'm still angry with you,' she spat.

'I thought you said you were over me,' he returned with an indolent smile.

Bronte wanted to slap that smile right off his face and only

a smidgen of self-discipline and common sense stopped her. 'There is a part of me that will always hate you, Luca,' she said. 'You played with me and then tossed me aside like a toy that no longer interested you. You didn't even have the decency to meet with me face to face to discuss what had gone wrong.'

The hot spot of tension was beating beside his mouth again but Bronte continued regardless. 'What sort of man are you to send one of your lackeys to do your dirty work for you?'

His eyes darkened as he held her burning gaze. 'I thought it would be less complicated that way,' he said. 'I don't like deliberately upsetting people. Believe me, Bronte, meeting you in person would have been much harder on both of us.'

Bronte rolled her eyes again. 'That is *such* an arrogant thing to say. As if for a moment you had any feelings. You're a heartless, cruel bastard, Luca Sabbatini, and I wish I had never met you.'

The studio door opened again. 'Sorry I'm late. You would not believe the traff—Oh, oops...sorry,' Rachel Brougham said. 'I didn't realise you had company.'

Bronte walked stiffly to the reception desk, using it as a barricade. 'Mr Sabbatini is just leaving,' she said with a pointed glare at Luca.

Rachel's gaze went back and forth like someone at a Wimbledon final. 'You're not one of the parents, are you?' she asked Luca.

'No,' he said with a crooked smile. 'I have not had the pleasure as yet of becoming a father.'

Bronte couldn't look at him. Her face felt like a furnace as she silently prayed Rachel wouldn't mention Ella.

'So...' Rachel smiled widely, her grey eyes twinkling with interest. 'You know Bronte, huh?'

'Yes,' he said. 'We met a couple of years ago in London. My name is Luca Sabbatini.' He held out his hand to Rachel.

*Please, God, please don't let her join the dots,* Bronte begged silently.

'Rachel Brougham,' Rachel said, taking his hand and shaking it enthusiastically. 'Hey, I think I read something about you in the paper a couple of weeks ago. You're in hotels, right?'

'That's right,' Luca said. 'I have some business here and thought it would be a good opportunity to catch up again with Bronte. We're planning to have dinner tonight.'

'Actually, I have something on to—' Bronte began.

'She'd love to come,' Rachel said quickly, giving Bronte an are-you-nuts-to-turn-him-down look. 'She hardly ever goes out. I was only telling her the other day how she needs to get a life.'

Bronte sent her friend a look that would have stopped a charging bull in its tracks. Rachel just smiled benignly and turned back to look at Luca. 'So how long are you in Melbourne?' she asked, leaning her elbows on the reception counter as if she was settling in for a good old natter, her expression rapt with interest.

'A month to start with,' he said. 'I will use Melbourne as a base as I have some distant relatives here. I will also be spending a bit of time in Sydney and the Gold Coast.'

Bronte hadn't realised Luca had family here. Although, now that she thought about it, Melbourne had a huge Italian community so it was not all that unlikely he would have cousins or second cousins, even perhaps uncles and aunts. They hadn't really talked too much about their backgrounds when they were involved. Bronte had always found his reticence about his family one of the most intriguing things about him. It was as if he wanted to forget he was from wealth and privilege. He rarely mentioned his work and, although they had dated for six months, he had never flashed his money around as some rich men would have done. They had eaten in nice restaurants, certainly, and, apart from that hideously expensive parting gift delivered by one of his minions, she had never received anything off him other than the occasional bunch of flowers. But then hadn't he unknowingly given her the most priceless gift of all?

'Well, I am sure you'll have a fabulous time while you're in Australia,' Rachel went on, just shy of gushing. 'You speak fabulous English. Have you been here before?'

'Thank you,' Luca said. 'I was educated in England during my teens and have spent the last few years travelling between my homes in Milan and London. I haven't so far had the chance to travel to Australia but both of my brothers have. My older brother's wife is Australian, although they met abroad.'

The first of the afternoon class began to arrive. Bronte watched as Luca turned to look at the group of small children who filed in with their mothers or, in a couple of cases, with their

nannies. He smiled softly at them and several mothers did double takes; even the girls beamed up at him as if he was some sort of god or well known celebrity.

‘If you’ll excuse me,’ Bronte said to him stiffly as she moved from behind the reception desk, ‘I have a class to conduct.’

‘I will see you this evening,’ he said, locking gazes with her. ‘I have a hire car so I can pick you up if you give me your address.’

Bronte thought of the modest little granny flat she and Ella lived in at the back of her mother’s house. She thought too of all the baby paraphernalia that would require an explanation if he was to insist on coming inside. She was not ready to explain anything to him after what he had done. He’d had his chance to find out about his baby and he’d callously thrown it away. ‘No, thank you,’ she said. ‘I can make it on my own.’

He gave her a gleaming smile. ‘So you’ve made up your mind to come after all?’

She gave him a beady look in return. ‘It’s not as if I have much choice in the matter. You’re hanging the threat of charging me an exorbitant rent if I don’t comply with your wishes.’

He reached out and trailed the point of his finger down the curve of her cheek, the action setting off a riot of sensation beneath her skin. ‘You have no idea what my wishes are, *cara*,’ he said softly and, before she could say a word in return, he had turned and left.

## Chapter Two

‘OF COURSE I’ll mind Ella for you,’ Tina Bennett said to Bronte later that evening. ‘She’ll be tucked up in bed in any case by then. Are you going out with Rachel’s brother David again? I know he’s not exactly your type but he seems a rather sincere sort of chap.’

Bronte cuddled her fourteen-month-old daughter on her lap, breathing in her freshly bathed smell. ‘No,’ she said, meeting her mother’s gaze. ‘It’s someone I met while I was in London. He’s in Melbourne for a few weeks and decided to look me up.’

Tina’s slim eyebrows moved together in a worried frown. ‘Bronte, darling, is it him? Is it Ella’s father?’

Bronte nodded grimly. ‘I stupidly thought this day would never come. When he broke off our relationship the message I got was he never wanted to see me again. “A clean break,” he said. Now he’s suddenly changed the rules.’

‘You don’t have to see him if you don’t want to, darling,’ Tina said. ‘It’s not as if he knows about Ella. Anyway, after the way he treated you, I don’t think you are under any obligation to tell him.’

Bronte’s long heavy sigh stirred the soft feathery dark brown hair on the top of her baby daughter’s head. ‘Mum, I’ve always worried about the timing of it all. He broke things off before I knew I was pregnant. If I had found out just a week earlier it might have changed everything. Perhaps if he had known he

might not have been so...so adamant about never seeing me again.'

'Darling, what was a week either side going to do?' her mother asked. 'He had clearly already made up his mind. He wouldn't even agree to talk to you on the phone let alone see you face to face. What were you supposed to do? Tell him via a third party?'

Bronte bit her lip as she looked at her mother. 'Maybe that's what I should have done,' she said. 'Perhaps then he would have agreed to see me again. We could have at least discussed options.'

Tina Bennett gave her daughter a streetwise look. 'And what options might those have been? It's my guess he would have marched you straight off for a termination. A man with that sort of lifestyle would not want a love-child to support. It wouldn't suit his lifestyle.'

'I would never have agreed to that,' Bronte said, holding Ella even closer to her body. 'I would never have allowed anyone to talk me into getting rid of my baby.'

'Darling, you were young and madly in love,' Tina said. 'I know plenty of young women who have done things they later regretted just because the man they loved insisted on it.'

Bronte looked down at her little daughter, who was now snuggling against her chest, her dark blue eyes struggling to stay open as she fought against sleep. It worried Bronte that there might be some truth in what her mother had said. She *had* been young and madly in love. She would have done almost anything to keep Luca by her side. As it was, she had made a

pathetic fool of herself chasing after him like a lovesick teenager, leaving countless ‘call me’ messages and texts on his phone, not to mention pleading emails that made her cringe to think about now.

‘You’re not going to tell him about Ella, are you, love?’ her mother asked.

Bronte gently brushed the soft hair off her sleeping baby’s face. ‘When he came into the studio unannounced like that today, all I could think was how much I hated him.’ She looked up at her mother. ‘But one day Ella is going to be old enough to realise she doesn’t have a father. She’s going to want to know who he is and why he isn’t a part of her life. What am I supposed to say? How will I explain it to her?’

‘You’ll explain it the way I did to you,’ her mother said. ‘That the man you thought would stay by you deserted you. Remember, Bronte: a father is as a father does. As far as I see it, Luca Sabbatini was nothing more than a sperm donor. One day you’ll meet some nice man who will love you and Ella. He will be a far better father to her than a man who cut you from his life without a backward glance. What’s to say he does it again if not sooner rather than later? He won’t be just hurting you this time, but Ella too.’

‘I guess you’re right,’ Bronte said on a sigh as she rose to her feet, carefully cradling Ella in her arms. ‘But there’s a part of me that thinks he has a right to know he fathered a child.’

‘Men like him don’t even like children,’ Tina said matter-of-

factly. ‘They see them as too much responsibility. Believe me, I know the type.’

A small frown tugged at Bronte’s brow. ‘When my junior class arrived at the studio this afternoon he looked at them...I don’t know...almost wistfully, as if he was imagining being a parent one day.’

‘Bronte—’ her mother’s voice sounded stern ‘—think carefully about this before you do something you might regret. He’s a very rich man. A very rich and powerful man. He might take it upon himself to pay you back for not telling him about his child. He could take you to court. You’d have no hope of fighting him and, even if you did, you’d have the burden of paying for the legal work. And, don’t forget, given his pedigree background, he would have the best of lawyers at his disposal. The family court is much more accommodating when it comes to fathers these days, especially well-to-do ones. Even if he got partial custody, it would mean Ella would have to fly back and forth to Italy or wherever he currently lives. You might not see her for months on end, and then one day when she’s older she might decide not to come back to you at all.’

Bronte felt her heart contract in fear at such an outcome. Luca came from such a powerful dynasty. The Sabbatini clan would be the very worst sort of enemy to take on. Their power and influence reached all over the world. She hadn’t a hope in taking Luca on in a custody battle, let alone his family.

The bitter irony was she had never intended to keep Ella’s

existence a secret. In spite of Luca's insistence that he never wanted to see her again, as soon as Bronte had found out she was pregnant she had tried to contact him. After a couple of fruitless weeks of not getting through to him, she had eventually flown to his villa in Milan but the household staff had refused her entry. The housekeeper had told her rather bluntly that Luca was in America with a new lover.

The news had hit Bronte like a fist in the face. It had devastated her that he had moved on so quickly. She even wondered if he had had his American mistress the whole time he had been seeing her in London. After all, he had never once stayed the full night with her at her flat and he had never allowed her to spend the night with him at his luxurious London home. He had never taken her away for a weekend; she had never even stayed in a hotel with him. He had always insisted on driving her home, his excuse being he was an extremely early riser and didn't want to disturb her. In hindsight, she realised she had been so naïve in accepting his explanation. How gullible of her to have never questioned why he would not spend a single night with her after making love. What sort of lovers didn't spend the night entwined in each other's arms? Street workers and the men who paid them, that was who, Bronte thought bitterly. Luca had treated her like a whore and she had been too blind to see it. But this time she would not be making the same mistake. She would meet him and that would be that. It would be a form of closure for her, something she had longed for when their affair

had ended so abruptly. Saying goodbye and meaning it would be very satisfying. She would be finally free of the man who had caused her so much heartache and bitterness, and then and only then would she be able to move on with her life.

Bronte caught a cab to the city rather than worry about parking. She wanted to be able to make a quick escape if things got tricky. She reasoned that an anonymous cab was a much safer exit plan than her battered car with its baby seat full of crumbs and juice stains in the back.

She had dressed for the occasion with deliberate care. Although not exactly destitute, she didn't have the sort of money to throw around that allowed her to fill her wardrobe with designer clothes. But she had a few select items she had bought on sale that made her feel feminine and elegant without being overdressed or too showy.

The hotel was one of the premier ones in the Southbank Complex along the Yarra River. The luxurious marble foyer with a sweeping two-sided staircase with a fountain as its centrepiece gave the hotel more than a touch of Hollywood glamour. Bronte felt like a movie star arriving for a glamorous event as one of the uniformed doormen opened the doors for her with a flourish.

The staircase led to a classy bar area with deep leather sofas placed in intimate formations to give privacy to guests as they socialised over a drink. Bronte saw Luca rise the moment she stepped into the bar. She felt a flutter in her chest as he came towards her and she noted that practically every female head

turned to look at him as he moved across the carpeted floor.

He was dressed in a charcoal-grey suit, teamed with a snow-white business shirt and wearing a tie that was red with stripes of silver. He seemed even taller than he had in the studio earlier that day, even though Bronte was now wearing heels.

She felt his gaze move over her, taking in her little black dress, cinched in at the waist with a black patent leather belt which matched her four-inch heels and clutch purse. She was glad she had taken some extra time with her make-up. She had dusted her skin with mineral powder and blush and had made her eyes smoky with eye-shadow and kohl pencil, and her lips ripe and full with a glossy pink lipstick. Her dark brown hair she had smoothed back into a chignon that gave her an added air of sophistication. *Let him look and regret what he threw away*, she thought with a gleam of satisfaction as his pupils flared with male appraisal.

‘You are looking quite stunning, *cara*,’ he said as he came to stand in front of her, his eyes running over her assessingly.

She gave him a tight formal smile. ‘Let’s get this over with, shall we?’

He drew in a breath that pulled at the edges of his mouth. ‘Bronte, there is no need to be so prickly,’ he said. ‘We are just two old friends catching up, *si*?’

Bronte’s fingers dug into her clutch purse. ‘You are no friend of mine, Luca,’ she said. ‘I think of you as a stupid mistake I made. Something I would like to forget about. I don’t like

reminding myself of failure.’

His forehead furrowed as he looked down at her. ‘It was not you that failed, Bronte. It was my problem. My issues. It was never about you.’

Bronte blinked up at him in surprise. Was that some sort of apology? Or was it part of the softening up process? She was well aware of the Sabbatini charm. It was a lethal potion that could bewitch any unsuspecting woman. And she had not just been unsuspecting but naïve and innocent with it. She had fallen for him so easily. It embarrassed her now to think of how easily. One look, one smile and that bottomless dark chocolate gaze locking on hers had done it. ‘So you are prepared to admit you handled things rather callously, are you?’ she asked in a wary tone.

He gave her a rueful movement of his lips that fell just short of a smile. ‘I have regrets over a lot of things, Bronte. But the past is not something any of us can change. However, I would like to compensate for the hurt I caused you in ending our affair so abruptly and without proper explanation.’

She gave him an embittered look. ‘How are you going to compensate me? By blackmailing me into seeing you? It’s not working, Luca. You can blackmail me all you like but it won’t make me fall in love with you again.’

His dark eyes flickered for a pico-second, a fleeting shadow of something she couldn’t identify or understand. ‘I realise that is rather a lot to ask after all this time,’ he said. ‘I would be happy to take it one day at a time, for now.’

Bronte set her mouth. ‘You have one evening, Luca, and this is it. I am not doing this again. Say what you have to say and let’s leave it at that.’

An arm in arm couple moved past them, the female half turning back to look at Luca. She whispered something to her partner and then he too stopped and stared.

Luca smiled politely but stiffly at the couple and then took Bronte’s elbow in the cup of his palm, saying in an undertone, ‘Let’s get away from the eyes of the public. Before we know it, the press will be tipped off.’

Bronte couldn’t bear the thought of being alone with him in his hotel room, but neither could she bear the thought of having her image splashed with his over tomorrow’s papers. She could almost imagine the headlines: *Italian hotel tycoon dates ballet teacher single mother*. She would never hear the end of it from the parents of her students, let alone Rachel and her mother.

She followed him to the bank of lifts and silently stepped in beside him as one opened. The doors whooshed closed and she felt as if the air had been cut off along with the background noise of the hotel. It was like being in a capsule with him. The lift was large but it felt like a matchbox with him standing within touching distance. Her stomach gave a nervous quiver. She hadn’t been alone with a man since...well, since him. Her one recent date with Rachel’s newly divorced older brother had been in a crowded public restaurant. David Brougham hadn’t even touched her the whole time they’d worked their way through an eight

course degustation menu. *Note to self*, she thought. Never go to a fine dining restaurant with a morose, newly divorced man. Bronte had listened patiently as he had relayed his angst about his marriage breakup and the custodial arrangements for his children, and silently prayed for the evening to be over.

As the lift soared to the penthouse floor Bronte looked at Luca from beneath her lowered lashes. He had a frown of concentration on his forehead and there were twin lines of tension running either side of his mouth. His arms were hanging by his sides, but she saw him clench and unclench his hands as if he was mentally preparing himself for something.

‘I thought you would be used to the intrusion of the media by now,’ she said into the humming silence.

He turned his head to look at her. ‘Believe me, Bronte, you never get used to it. Do you know what it’s like having every moment of your life documented? The lack of privacy is unbelievable. There are times when I cannot even have a cup of coffee without someone wanting to take a picture. It drives me completely crazy.’

‘I guess it’s the price of success,’ she said. ‘You were born into an extremely wealthy family. The public are fascinated by how the other half lives.’

He gave her a quirky smile as the lift stopped at his floor. ‘Are *you* fascinated, *cara*?’

She pursed her lips and stepped past him, holding her head at a proud angle. ‘You and your family hold no fascination for me

whatsoever. I have too much to do in my own life to be keeping track of someone else's.'

As they came to the correct number he inserted his key card into the penthouse suite door and held it open for her to precede him. 'So you haven't kept yourself up to date on all my affairs over the last two years?' he asked.

Bronte spoke without thinking. 'There's been hardly anything about you in the papers and magazines. It always seems to be about your brothers. It's as if you disappeared off the face of the earth the first year after we broke up.'

He gave her a long thoughtful look as he closed the door behind him. 'For a time that's exactly what I wanted to do,' he said, leading the way through to the large lounge. 'What would you like to drink?' he asked over his shoulder.

Bronte was still thinking about why he'd wanted to disappear without trace. There had been something in his tone that seemed tinged with regret and a part of her wondered if it had something to do with her.

*Of course not!* she chided herself crossly. He was a playboy who had had numerous affairs before she had come along. The only thing that might have set her apart was her innocence and naivety. He had obviously found that a novelty and was hoping for a rerun. She could see it in the dark depths of his eyes every time they meshed with hers. She felt the rush of her blood too, which reminded her rather timely that she was not quite as immune to him as she would have liked.

‘Bronte?’ he prompted, holding up a bottle of champagne.

‘Oh...yes, thanks,’ she said, feeling gauche and awkward.

After a moment he handed her a fizzing glass of French champagne, the price of which, Bronte noted, would have paid her last electricity bill, not just for her granny flat but most probably the studio as well.

‘To us,’ he said, touching his glass against hers.

Bronte hesitated before she took a sip. Luca watched her quizzically, one brow slightly elevated. ‘Not to your taste, Bronte?’ he asked.

‘The champagne, I am sure, is lovely,’ she said. ‘It’s what we’re toasting to that is not palatable.’

He held her flinty look with consummate ease. ‘You choose, then,’ he suggested, holding his glass just in reach of hers. ‘What shall we drink to?’

Bronte raised her glass and clinked it against his. ‘To moving on.’

His brow went up a little higher this time. ‘Interesting,’ he said musingly. ‘Does this mean the man you are seeing is a permanent fixture in your life?’

Bronte wished she could say yes. And if it was anyone but David Brougham she might well have done so. She felt she needed an excuse, a good excuse, not to see Luca again. It was just too dangerous; not because of Ella, but because of how he made Bronte feel. She could feel emotions bubbling under the surface even now. Dangerous emotions: needs that ached to be

fulfilled, longings that wouldn't be suppressed, no matter how hard she tried.

She was supposed to hate him.

She *did* hate him.

He had abandoned her, leaving her when she was so vulnerable and alone. And yet one meeting with him and her mind was filling with images of them together: him kissing her, his lips sealing hers with such passion, his arms around her body, holding her against the surging heat and potency of his. How could she forget how he made her feel? Would there ever be a time when she would not feel her heart twist and ache when she heard his name mentioned or saw it in print? Would she ever be able to forgive him for not loving her, for not even respecting her enough to say goodbye face to face?

'You seem to be taking rather a long time to answer my question,' Luca observed. 'Which can only mean one thing: you are not seriously involved with him. If you were madly in love with someone, surely you would have no hesitation in telling me.'

Bronte drank some of her champagne, stalling for time, for courage, for anything. 'It seems to me it wouldn't matter to you how I answered. You have your own agenda. That's what this little tête à tête is all about, isn't it?'

He wandered over to one of the massive leather sofas and indicated for her to sit down. He waited until she was perched on the edge of one of the cushions before he spoke. 'I want to see you, Bronte. Not just tonight. Not even just now and again.' He

waited a beat, his eyes intense and unwavering on hers. 'I want to see you as much as possible while I am here. I want you back.'

Bronte's hand trembled as she held the champagne glass. She tried to hold it steady by cradling it with both of her hands, her heart beating like an out of time pendulum. 'I...you...I...I'm afraid that's not possible...' she faltered.

He came to sit beside her, his hand removing the glass from her shaking ones. 'I mean it, *cara*,' he said and took both of her hands in his warm, dry ones. 'I have never forgotten you.'

Bronte felt anger come to her rescue. She wrenched out of his hold and jumped to her feet. 'I am not some stupid plaything you can pick up and put down when you feel like it,' she said. 'You were the one to end things. You wanted a clean break and you got one. Coming back after all this time and telling me you've changed your mind is not just arrogant, it's downright insulting.'

Luca rose to his feet and pushed a hand through his hair. 'Bronte, I wasn't ready for a relationship two years ago. You came along at the wrong time. God, how I wish I could have met you just a year later. Even six months later. Everything would have been so different then.'

She glowered at him and he felt a spike go through his chest. He had not expected her to hate him quite so much. This was going to be a little harder than he'd expected but he was prepared to work hard for what he wanted. If there were obstacles in the way he would remove them. If there was a way of winning her back to him he would do it, even if he had to resort to ruthless

means. He had hoped he would not have to apply any sort of pressure. The rent thing was an insurance scheme on his part to get this far. First base was to see her again in private. He hadn't even thought as far as second and third. He had just so desperately wanted to see her again.

Bronte was still sending him looks with daggers and spears attached. 'So what brought about this sudden change, Luca?' she asked.

*Should he tell her?* Luca wondered. He had told no one; not even his mother or brothers or elderly grandfather had known the truth about his trip to America until the deed was over and he was safely on the other side. He hadn't wanted his family to go through the agonising heartache of knowing they could lose him or, even worse, have him come back to them damaged beyond recognition. He had seen his father propped up in a semi-conscious state in the last weeks before he'd finally died from the injuries he had sustained in a head-on collision. That had decided it for him. He had wanted to spare his mother and brothers from witnessing anything as gut-wrenching as that.

Luca hated talking about that time, now that it was over. He liked to push it to the back of his mind, inside a locked compartment inside his brain. In the weeks and months afterwards he would creak it open almost daily, marvelling that he was still here, functioning and breathing and talking. Now he just wanted to forget it had ever happened. The shame of his body letting him down so cruelly was something he no longer

wanted to mull over. Telling Bronte about it would only make it come back to haunt him. It was too personal and too private and there was no way he could risk anything being leaked to the press if she wanted to try her hand at a payback. It was better she didn't know. He just wanted his life to begin again from now. He was ready to move on and he wanted to do so with a clean slate.

'I am at a time of life when I am looking for more stability,' he said. 'What we had was good, Bronte. Some of the happiest times of my life were those I spent with you.'

Her slate-blue eyes were dark with suspicion. 'Were those good times just with me, Luca? Or are you getting me mixed up with someone else?'

'I never betrayed you, *cara*,' he said. 'There was only you during that time. No one else.'

Her eyes rolled upwards as she swung away from him, her arms doing that barricade thing across her slim body, warning him off, shutting him out. 'You betrayed me by ending our relationship without a single explanation as to why,' she said in an embittered tone.

Luca took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds before he slowly released it. 'I never intended to hurt you the way I did, Bronte. I accept full responsibility for it. I know it's hard for you to understand, but I had no choice. It was not the time for us. We met too soon.'

She turned back to look at him, her expression so scathing it actually hurt him to maintain eye contact. 'So, now you've sown

all your wild oats, you want what, exactly?’ she asked. ‘You’re not proposing marriage, are you?’

Luca was not going to offer something that would be thrown back in his face, or at least not yet. There were other ways to bring about what he wanted. More subtle ways. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I am not proposing anything long-term at this stage. I am here in your country and I would like to see if what we had before can be resurrected.’

Her lips pressed so tightly together they went white. After a tense moment she expelled her held breath on a whoosh. ‘You are unbelievable,’ she said. ‘You think you can just pick up where you left off, all things forgiven? What planet did you just drop down from? As if I would agree to being involved with you again. *As if!*’

It was the tone of her ‘As if’ that did it. Luca felt his temper snap to attention like an elastic band stretched to the limit. ‘You might not have any choice in the matter,’ he said.

Her eyes flared as his words hit home. ‘You wouldn’t dare...’ She almost breathed rather than said the words.

He pushed his jaw forward, his eyes locked on hers. ‘I want you back in my bed, Bronte. If you don’t agree then there is nothing more to be said between us. You will have one week to vacate the premises of your studio. If you don’t vacate in one week the rent will increase substantially.’

Her soft mouth fell open, her eyes still as wide as saucers. ‘You can’t mean that...’ she swallowed and then swallowed again, her

voice coming out even scratchier ‘...y...you can’t possibly mean that...’

Luca came over to her and stood just within touching distance, his eyes pinning hers. ‘The decision is yours, Bronte,’ he said, running a hand down her upper arm from shoulder to elbow, each and every pore of her flesh rising in shivery goosebumps under his touch. ‘Which is it to be?’

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