

A close-up portrait of a man with dark hair and a light beard, wearing a dark suit jacket, white shirt, and dark tie. He is looking off to the side with a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

SURRENDERING  
TO THE VENGEFUL

Italian

MODERN™



ANGELA BISSELL

**Angela Bissell**  
**Surrendering To**  
**The Vengeful Italian**  
Серия «Mills & Boon Modern»  
Серия «Irresistible  
Mediterranean Tycoons», книга 1

**Аннотация**

One step from surrenderFor seven years formidable Leonardo Vincenti has planned his vengeance on Douglas Shaw—and nothing will stop him. Not even Shaw’s stunning but treacherous daughter Helena, who—right now—is pleading for leniency.Grim satisfaction spreads through Leo, because he knows she would willingly never take up his challenge to return to his side. But he has greatly underestimated Helena. Secrets drive her as if the very devil were on her heels. And suddenly the passion that left them undone years before is forcing them both to the brink of surrender...Don’t miss Angela Bissell’s dramatic debut for Mills & Boon Modern Romance!

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## One step from surrender

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But he has greatly underestimated Helena. Secrets drive her as if the very devil were on her heels. And suddenly the passion that left them undone years before is forcing them both to the brink of surrender...

'What if we don't convince them?'

'That we are lovers?'

'Yes.' The word came out slightly strangled.

Leo straightened from the table. 'You assured me you could handle it. Are you getting cold feet already, Helena?'

She almost laughed at his choice of expression. Cold? Oh, no. No part of her felt cold right now. Not even close. Not when the prospect of playing lovers with Leo for an entire week had her blood racing so hot and crazy she feared her veins might explode.

He stepped towards her. 'There is one way to ensure we're convincing.'

'Oh?' She tamped down the urge to scurry to the other side of the room. 'How?'

'Drop the pretence.'

Her brain took several seconds to register his meaning. She

blinked, a bubble of incredulous laughter climbing her throat. ‘You’re kidding, right?’

‘You find the prospect of sex with me abhorrent?’

The question—so explicit, yet so casually delivered—triggered a fresh wave of heat that burned all the way from her hairline down to the valley between her breasts. Abhorrent? No. Dangerous? Yes. Terrifying? Utterly. Though not for any reason she was fool enough to admit.

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Surrendering to the Vengeful Italian

Angela Bissell



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

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For Tony. Because you never stopped believing. And you never let me quit. Love you to infinity, Mr B.

And for Mum. The memories have left you but our love never will. You are, and always will be, our real-life heroine.

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*CHAPTER ONE*

HELENA SHAW HAD been sitting in the elegant marble foyer for the best part of two hours when the man she had trekked halfway across London to see finally strode into the exclusive Mayfair hotel.

She had almost given up. After all the effort she had devoted to tracking him down, she had almost lost her nerve. Had almost let cowardice—and the voice in her head crying insanity—drive her out of the plush upholstered chair and back into the blessed obscurity of the crowded rush-hour streets.

But she had not fled. She had sat and waited—and waited some more.

And now he was here.

Her stomach dropped, weightless for a moment as though she had stepped from a great height into nothingness, and then the fluttering started—a violent sensation that made her belly feel like a cage full of canaries into which a half-starved tomcat had been loosed.

Breathe, she instructed herself, and watched him stride across the foyer, tall and dark and striking in a charcoal-grey two-piece that screamed power suit even without the requisite tie around his bronzed throat.

Women stared.

Men stepped out of his way.

And he ignored them all, his big body moving with an air of intent until, for one heart-stopping moment, his footsteps slowed on the polished marble and he half turned in her direction, eyes narrowed under a sharp frown as he surveyed the hotel's expansive interior.

Helena froze. Shrouded in shadows cast by soft lighting and half hidden behind a giant spray of exotic honey-scented blooms, she was certain he couldn't see her, yet for one crazy moment she had the unnerving impression he could somehow sense her scrutiny. Her very presence. As if, after all these years, they were still tethered by an invisible thread of awareness.

A crack of thunder, courtesy of the storm the weathermen had been promising Londoners since yesterday, made Helena jump. She blinked, pulled in a sharp breath and let the air out with a derisive hiss. She had no connection with this man. Whatever

bond had existed between them was long gone, destroyed by her father and buried for ever in the ashes of bitterness and hurt.

A hurt Leonardo Vincenti would soon revisit on her family if she failed to stop him seizing her father's company.

She grabbed her handbag and stood, her pulse picking up speed as she wondered if he would see her. But he had already resumed his long strides towards the bank of elevators. She hurried after him, craning her neck to keep his dark head and broad shoulders in her line of sight. Not that she'd easily lose him in a crowd. He stood out from the pack—that much hadn't changed—though he seemed even taller than she remembered, darker somehow, the aura he projected now one of command and power.

Her stomach muscles wound a little tighter.

Europe's business commentators had dubbed him the success of the decade: an entrepreneurial genius who'd turned a software start-up into a multi-million-dollar enterprise in less than ten years and earned a coveted spot on the rich list. The more reputable media sources called him single-minded and driven. Others dished up less flattering labels like hard-nosed and cut-throat.

Words that reminded Helena too much of her father. Yet even hard-nosed and cut-throat seemed too mild, too charitable, for a man like Douglas Shaw.

She shouldered her bag, clutched the strap over her chest.

Her father was a formidable man, but if the word regret

existed in his vocabulary he must surely rue the day he'd aimed his crosshairs at Leonardo Vincenti. Now the young Italian he'd once decreed unsuitable for his daughter was back, seven years older, considerably wealthier and, by all accounts, still mad as hell at the man who'd run him out of town.

He stopped, pushed the button for an elevator and shoved his hands in his trouser pockets. Behind him, Helena hovered so close she could see the fine weave in the fabric of his jacket, the individual strands of black hair curling above his collar.

She sucked in a deep breath. 'Leo.'

He turned, his dark brows rising into an arch of enquiry that froze along with the rest of his face the instant their gazes collided. His hands jerked out of his pockets. His brows plunged back down.

'What the hell...?'

Those three words, issued in a low, guttural growl, raised the tiny hairs on her forearms and across her nape.

He'd recognised her, then.

She tilted her head back. In her modest two-inch heels she stood almost five foot ten, but still she had to hike her chin to lock her gaze with his.

And oh, sweet mercy, what a gaze it was.

Dark. Hard. Glittering. Like polished obsidian and just as impenetrable. How had she forgotten the mind-numbing effect those midnight eyes could have on her?

Concentrate.

‘I’d like to talk,’ she said.

A muscle moved in his jaw, flexing twice before he spoke. ‘You do not own a phone?’

‘Would you have taken my call?’

He met her challenge with a smile—if the tight, humourless twist of his lips could be called a smile. ‘Probably not. But then you and I have nothing to discuss. On the phone or in person.’

An elevator pinged and opened behind him. He inclined his head in a gesture she might have construed as polite if not for the arctic chill in his eyes.

‘I am sorry you have wasted your time.’ And with that he swung away and stepped into the elevator.

Helena hesitated, then quickly rallied and dashed in after him. ‘You’ve turned up after seven years of silence and come after my father’s company. I hardly think that qualifies as nothing.’

‘Get out of the elevator, Helena.’

The soft warning made the skin across her scalp prickle. Or maybe it was hearing her name spoken in that deep, accented baritone that drove a wave of discomfiting heat through her?

The elevator doors whispered closed, cocooning them in a space that felt too small and intimate despite the effect of mirrors on three walls.

She planted her feet. ‘No.’

Colour slashed his cheekbones and his dark eyes locked with hers in a staring match that quickly tested the limits of her bravado. Just as she feared that lethal gaze would reduce her to

a pile of cinders, he reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out an access card.

‘As you wish,’ he said, his tone mild—too mild, a voice warned. He flashed the card across a sensor and jabbed the button labelled ‘Penthouse Suite’. With a soft whir, the elevator began its stomach-dropping ascent.

Helena groped for the steel handrail behind her, the rapid rising motion—or maybe the butterflies in her belly she couldn’t quell—making her head swim.

It seemed her ex-lover could not only afford the finest digs in London...he could afford to stay in the hotel’s most exclusive suite.

The knowledge made her heart beat faster.

The Leo she’d known had been a man of understated tastes, stylish in that effortless way of most Italian men but never flashy or overt. She’d liked that about him. Liked his grit and drive and passion. Liked that he was different from the lazy, spoilt rich set her parents wanted her to run with.

And now...?

Her hand tightened on the railing. Now it didn’t matter what she felt about him. All that mattered was the havoc he’d soon unleash on her family. If he and her father went head to head in a corporate war and Douglas Shaw lost control of his precious empire the fallout for his wife and son would be dire. Her father didn’t take kindly to losing; when he did, those closest to him suffered.

‘Has your father sent you?’ The way he ground out the word father conveyed a wealth of hatred—a sentiment Helena, too, wrestled with when it came to Daddy Dearest.

She studied Leo’s face, leaner now, his features sharper, more angular than she remembered, but still incredibly handsome. Her fingers twitched with the memory of tracing those features while he slept, of familiarising herself with that long, proud nose and strong jaw, those sculpted male lips. Lips that once could have stopped her heart with a simple smile—or a kiss.

Emotion rose and swirled, unexpected, a poignant mix of regret and longing that made her chest ache and her breath hitch.

Did Leo smile much these days? Or did those lines either side of his mouth stem from harsher emotions like anger and hatred?

Instinctively Helena’s hand went to her stomach. The void inside where life had once flourished was a stark reminder that she, too, had suffered. Leo, at least, had been spared that pain, and no good would come now of sharing hers.

Some burdens, she had decided, were better borne alone. She let her hand fall back to her side.

‘I’m not my father’s puppet, Leo. Whatever your misguided opinion of me.’

A harsh sound shot from his throat. ‘The only one misguided is you, Helena. What part of “I never wish to see you again” did you not understand?’

She smothered the flash of hurt his words evoked. ‘That was a long time ago. And I only want an opportunity to talk. Is that

asking too much?’

A soft ping signalled the elevator’s arrival. Before he could answer with a resounding yes, she stepped through the parting doors into a spacious vestibule. She stopped, the sensible heels of her court shoes sinking into thick carpet the colour of rich chocolate. Before her loomed an enormous set of double doors. It was private up here, she realised. Secluded. Isolated.

Her mouth went dry. ‘Perhaps we should talk in the bar downstairs?’

He brushed past her and pushed open the heavy doors, his lips twisting into a tight smile that only made her heart pound harder.

‘Afraid to be alone with me?’

Helena paused on the threshold. Should she be afraid of him? In spite of her jitters she balked at the idea. Leonardo Vincenti wasn’t thrilled to see her—that was painfully clear—but she knew this man. Had spent time with him. Been intimate with him in ways that marked her soul like no other man ever had.

Yes, she could sense the anger vibrating beneath his cloak of civility, but he would never lose control and lash out at her. He would never hurt her the way her father hurt her mother.

She smoothed her palm down the leg of her black trouser suit and assumed a lofty air. ‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ she said, and strode into the room.

\* \* \*

Leo closed the penthouse doors, strode to the wet bar and splashed a large measure of whisky into a crystal tumbler. He

knocked back the potent liquid, snapped the empty glass onto the bar and looked at the woman whose presence was like a blowtorch to his veneer of calm.

‘Drink?’

‘No.’ She reinforced her refusal with a shake of her head that made her auburn curls bounce and sway. ‘But...thank you.’

Shorter, he noted. Her hair was shorter, the dark silky ribbons that had once tumbled to her waist now cropped into a sophisticated cut above her shoulders. Her face, too, had changed—thinner like her body and more striking somehow, her cheekbones strong and elegant, her jaw line firm. Bluish crescents underscored her eyes, but the rest of her skin was toned and smooth and free of imperfections. It was a face no man, unless blind, would pass by without stopping for a second appreciative look.

Helena Shaw, he reluctantly acknowledged, was no longer a pretty girl. Helena Shaw was a stunningly attractive woman.

Scowling, he reminded himself he had no interest in this woman’s attributes, physical or otherwise. He’d been blindsided by her beauty and guise of innocence once before—a grave error that had cost him infinitely more than his injured pride—and he’d vowed his mistake would not be repeated.

Not with any woman.

And especially not this one.

‘So, you want to talk.’ The last thing he wanted to do with this woman. Dio. He should have bodily removed her from the

elevator downstairs and to hell with causing a scene. He banked the flare of anger in his gut and gestured towards a duo of deep leather sofas. ‘Sit,’ he instructed, then glanced at his watch. ‘You have ten minutes.’

She frowned—a delicate pinch of that smooth brow—then put her bag on the glass coffee table and perched on the edge of a sofa. She drew an audible breath.

‘The papers say you’ve launched a hostile takeover bid for my father’s company.’

He dropped onto the opposite sofa. ‘An accurate summary.’ He paused. ‘And...?’

She puffed out a sigh. ‘You’re not going to make this easy for me, are you?’

Easy? That simple four-letter word made him grind his molars. This girl’s entire life had been easy. Her family’s excessive wealth, her father’s connections, had ensured she wanted for nothing. Unlike Leo and his sister who, after their mother’s death, had survived childhood in a murky world of poverty and neglect. For them, nothing came easy.

‘You want me to make this easy for you?’

Like hell he would.

She shook her head. ‘I want to understand why you’re doing this.’

So she could talk him out of it? Not a chance. He’d waited too many years to settle this score with her father. He returned her gaze for an extended beat. ‘It’s business.’

She laughed then: a short brittle sound, not the soft, sexy laughter that resided in his memory. ‘Please—this isn’t business. It’s...payback.’

Her voice conveniently wobbled on that last word, but her ploy for sympathy, if that was her angle, failed to move him.

‘And if I said this is payback, what would you say?’

‘I’d say two wrongs don’t make a right.’

He barked out a laugh. ‘A quaint sentiment. Personally, I think “an eye for an eye” has a more appealing ring.’

She dropped her gaze to where her fingers fidgeted in her lap. Her voice was husky when she spoke again. ‘People aren’t perfect, Leo. Sometimes they make mistakes.’

His gut twisted. Was she talking about her father? Or herself? ‘So you’re here to apologise for your mistakes?’

She glanced up. ‘I tried that once. You didn’t want to listen. Would it make any difference now?’

‘No.’

‘I was trying to protect you.’

He bit back another laugh. By driving a blade through his heart? Leaving him no choice but to watch her walk away? A bitter lump rose in his throat and he swallowed back the acrid taste.

Seven years ago he’d come to London to collaborate with a young software whiz on a project that, if successful, would have guaranteed his business unprecedented success.

As always, he was focused, dedicated, disciplined.

And then he met a girl.

A girl so beautiful, so captivating, she might have been one of the sculptures on display at the art gallery opening they were both attending in the West End.

He tried to resist, of course. She was too young for him, too inexperienced. Too distracting when he should be focused on work.

But he was weak and temptation won out. And he fell—faster than he'd ever thought possible—for a girl who, five weeks later, tossed him aside as if he were a tiresome toy she no longer wanted or needed.

He curled his lip. 'Remind me not to come looking for you if I ever need protection.'

She had the good grace to squirm. 'I had no choice. You don't understand—'

'Then explain it to me.' Anger snapped in his gut, making him fight to stay calm. 'Explain why you walked away from our relationship instead of telling me the truth. Explain why you never bothered to mention that your father disapproved of us. Explain why, if ditching me was your idea of protection, I spent the next forty-eight hours watching every investor I'd painstakingly courted pull their backing from my project.'

He curled his fingers into his palms, tension arcing through his muscles. Douglas Shaw had dealt Leo's business a significant blow, yet his own losses had barely registered in comparison to the impact on his younger sister. Marietta's life, his hopes and

dreams for her future, had suffered a setback the likes of which Helena could never appreciate.

Sorry didn't cut it.

'Perhaps you wanted an easy out all along—'

'No.'

'And Daddy simply gave you the perfect excuse.'

'No!'

There was more vehemence behind that second denial than he'd expected. She threw him a wounded look and he shifted slightly, an unexpected stab of remorse lancing through him. Hell. This was precisely why he'd had no desire to see her. Business demanded a cool head, a razor-sharp mind at all times. Distractions like the beautiful long-legged one sitting opposite him he could do without.

A lightning flash snapped his gaze towards the private terrace overlooking Hyde Park and the exclusive properties of Knightsbridge beyond. His right leg twitched with an urge to rise and test the French doors, check they were secure. He didn't fear nature's storms—on occasion could appreciate their power—but he didn't like them either.

Didn't like the ghosts they stirred from his childhood.

A burst of heavy rain lashed the glass, drowning out the city sounds far below. Distorting his view of the night. He waited for the rumble of thunder to pass, then turned his attention from the storm. 'How much has your father told you about the takeover?'

'Nothing. I only know what I've read in the papers.'

Another lie, probably. He let it slide. ‘Then you are missing one important detail.’

Her fidgeting stilled. ‘Which is...?’

‘The word “successful”. In fact...’ He hooked back his shirt-cuff and consulted his watch. ‘As of two hours and forty-five minutes ago my company is the official registered owner of seventy-five percent of ShawCorp.’ He offered her a bland smile. ‘Which means I am now the controlling shareholder of your father’s company.’

He watched dispassionately as the colour receded from her cheeks, leaving her flawless skin as white as the thick-pile rug at her feet. She pressed her palm to her forehead, her upper body swaying slightly, and closed her eyes.

A little theatrical, he thought, the muscles around his mouth twitching. He shifted forward, planted his elbows on his knees. ‘You look a touch pale, Helena. Would you like that drink now? A glass of water, perhaps. Some aspirin?’

Her lids snapped up and a spark of something—anger?—leapt in her eyes, causing them to shimmer at him like a pair of brilliant sapphires.

Leo sucked in his breath. The years might have wrought subtle differences in her face and figure, but those eyes...those eyes had not changed. They were still beautiful. Still captivating.

Still dangerous.

Eyes, he reminded himself, that could strip a man of his senses.

They glittered at him as she raised her chin.

‘Water, please.’ She gave him a tight smile. ‘You can hold the aspirin.’

\* \* \*

Helena reached for the glass Leo had placed on the table in front of her and sipped, focusing on the cold tickle of the carbonated water on her tongue and throat and nothing else. She would not faint. Not in front of this man. Shock on top of an empty stomach had left her woozy, that was all. She simply needed a moment to compose herself.

After a third careful sip she put the glass down and folded her hands in her lap. She mustn’t reveal her turmoil. Mustn’t show any hint of anxiety as her mind darted from one nauseating scenario to the next. Had her father hit the bottle in the wake of this news? Was her mother playing the devoted wife, trying to console him? And how long before the lethal combination of rage and drink turned him from man to monster? To a vile bully who could lavish his wife with expensive trinkets and luxuries one minute and victimise her the next?

Helena’s insides trembled, but it wasn’t only worry for her mother making her belly quiver. Making her pulse-rate kick up a notch. It was an acute awareness of the man sitting opposite. An unsettling realisation that, no matter how many days, weeks or years came between them, she would never be immune to this tall, breathtaking Italian. She would never look at him and not feel her blood surge. Her lungs seize. Her belly tighten.

No. Time had not rendered her immune to his particular potent brand of masculinity. But she would not let her body betray her awareness of him. If her father's endless criticisms and lack of compassion had taught her anything as a child it was never to appear weak.

She laced her fingers to keep them from fidgeting. 'What are your plans for my father's company?'

A muscle in his jaw bunched and released. Bunched again. He lounged back, stretched out his long legs, draped one arm across the top of the sofa. 'I haven't yet decided.'

She fought the urge to scowl. 'But you must have some idea.'  
'Of course. Many, in fact. All of which I'll discuss with your father, once he overcomes his aversion to meeting with me.'  
He paused. 'Perhaps he's hoping his daughter will offer his new shareholder some...incentive to play nice?'

Heat rushed her cheeks, much to her annoyance. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Oh, come now. There's no need to play the innocent for me.'  
Leo's hand moved absently over the back of the sofa, his fingers stroking the soft black leather in slow, rhythmic patterns. Helena stared, transfixed, then hastily averted her eyes. Those long, tanned fingers had once stroked her flesh in a strikingly similar fashion, unleashing in her a passion no man had unleashed before or since.

She pulled in a breath, tried to focus on his voice.  
'You needn't look so worried, Helena. You won't have to dirty

your hands with the likes of me again.’ His fingers stilled. ‘I have no interest in anything you could offer.’

As though emphasising his point, his gaze travelled her length, from the summit of her blushing hairline to the tips of her inexpensive shoes. ‘As for the company,’ he went on, before she could muster an indignant response, ‘if your father continues to decline my invitations to meet, my board will vote to sell off the company’s subsidiaries and amalgamate the core business with my own. A merger will mean layoffs, of course, but your father’s people will find I’m not an unreasonable man. Those without jobs can expect a fair severance settlement.’

Her jaw slackened. ‘Dismantle the company?’ The one thing guaranteed to bring her father to his knees. ‘You would tear down everything my father has worked his entire life to build?’

He shrugged. ‘As a minority shareholder he’ll benefit financially from any asset sales. He’ll lose his position at the head of the company, of course, but then your father’s no longer a man in his prime. Perhaps he’ll welcome the opportunity to retire?’

She shook her head. For Douglas Shaw it wasn’t about the money. Or retirement. It was about pride and respect and status. About winning. Control.

‘You don’t understand.’ Her voice trembled. ‘This won’t hurt only my father. It will hurt others, too—my family. Is that what you want, Leo? To see innocent people suffer?’

His eyes narrowed, his gaze hardening under his dark slanted brows. ‘Do not talk to me about suffering. You and your family

don't know the first meaning of the word.'

Not true! she wanted to shout, but she held her tongue. Another habit deeply ingrained from childhood, when she'd been taught to avoid such indiscretions—to lie, if necessary, about her less than perfect home life.

She stifled a frustrated sigh.

Why did people think growing up with money meant a life filled with sunshine and roses? That might have been the case for some of her friends, but for Helena it had been nothing more than a grand, sugar-coated illusion. An illusion her mother, the ever-dutiful society wife, still chose to hide behind.

Leo lunged his powerful shoulders forward, planted both feet firmly on the floor. 'This is business. Your father knows that. Better than most.'

He rose to his full impressive height: six feet four inches of lean, muscled Italian.

'I could have made things much worse for him. You might remind him of that fact.'

For a moment Helena considered telling him the truth—that she'd not seen or spoken with her father in years. That she worked as a secretary and lived in a rundown flat in North London and visited her family only when her father was absent on business. That Douglas Shaw was a domineering bully and she didn't care a jot for the man, but she did care for those who would suffer most from his downfall. That she held no sway with her father and could offer Leo nothing in return for leniency except her

eternal gratitude.

But caution stopped her. The man who stood before her now was not the Leo she'd once known. He was a tough, shrewd businessman, bent on revenge, and he would use every weapon in his arsenal to achieve it. Knowledge was power, and he had plenty of that without her gifting him extra ammunition.

Besides, he'd already accused her of lying—why should he believe the truth?

She unlaced her hands and stood.

'There must be other options,' she blurted. 'Other possibilities that would satisfy your board and keep the company intact?'

'My board will make their decisions based on the best interests of my business. Not your father's interests and not his family's.' He looked at his watch. 'Now, if you have nothing else to discuss, there are more important matters requiring my attention.'

She stared at him.

More important matters?

A bitter laugh rose and died in her throat.

Really, what had she expected? Understanding? Forgiveness? A friendly chat over a cup of tea?

Humiliation raged through her. She was a fool, wasting her time on a fool's errand. She snatched up her handbag. 'Next time you look in the mirror, Leo, remind yourself why you despise my father so much.' She returned his stony stare. 'Then take a hard look at your reflection. Because you might just find you have more in common with him than you think.'

His head snapped back, an indication that she'd hit her mark, but the knowledge did nothing to ease the pain knifing through her chest. Head high, she strode to the door.

The handle was only inches from her grasp when a large hand closed on her upper arm, swinging her around. She let out a yelp of surprise.

'I am nothing like your father,' he said, his jaw thrusting belligerently.

'Then prove it,' she fired back, conscious all at once of his vice-like grip, the arrows of heat penetrating her thin jacket-sleeve, the faint, woodsy tang of an expensive cologne that made her nostrils flare involuntarily. 'Give my father time to come to the table. Before your board makes any decisions.'

Leo released her, stepped back, and the tiny spark of hope in her chest fizzed like a dampened wick. God. She needed to get out. Now. Before she did something pathetic and weak—like cry. She pivoted and seized the door handle. At the same instant his palm landed on the door above her head, barring her escape.

'On one condition.'

His voice at her back was low, laced with something she couldn't decipher. She turned, pressed her back to the door and looked up. 'Yes?'

'Have dinner with me.'

She blinked, twice. Three times.

'Dinner?' she echoed stupidly.

'Si.' His hand dropped from the door. 'Tomorrow night.'

Her stomach did a funny little somersault. Was he fooling with her now? She narrowed her eyes at him. ‘Is that an invitation or a demand?’

The shrug he gave was at once casual and arrogant. ‘Call it what you like. That is my condition.’

‘Tomorrow’s Friday,’ she said, as if that fact bore some vital significance. In truth, it was all she could think to say while her brain grappled with his proposition.

His nostrils flared. ‘You have other plans?’

‘Uh...no.’ Brilliant. Now he’d think she had no social life. She levelled her shoulders. ‘A minute ago you couldn’t wait to get rid of me. Now you want us to have dinner?’

His lips pressed into a thin line. Impatience? Or, like most men, did he simply dislike having his motives questioned?

He jammed his hands in his trouser pockets. ‘You wanted an opportunity to talk, Helena. Take it or leave it. It is my final offer. I return to Rome on Saturday.’

Helena hesitated, her mind spinning. This could be her one and only chance for a calm, rational conversation with him. An opportunity to appeal to his sense of reason and compassion—if either still existed. The takeover was beyond her control and, if he spoke the truth, a fait accompli, but if she had even a slim chance of dissuading him from stripping the company’s assets, convincing him to settle on a strategy more palatable to her father, she had to take it. Had to try, no matter how daunting the prospect.

She nodded. ‘All right. Dinner. Tomorrow night. Where shall I meet you?’

‘I will send a car.’

Her stomach nose-dived. The thought of Leo or anyone in his employ seeing where she lived mortified her. Her neighbourhood was the best she could afford right now, but the area was far from salubrious.

She fished in her handbag for pen and paper, jotted down her work address and her mobile number. ‘You can pick me up from here.’ She handed him the slip of paper. ‘And my number’s there if you need to contact me.’

‘Very well.’ With scarcely a glance at it, he slipped the note into his trouser pocket and pulled open the door. ‘Be ready for six-thirty.’

With a nod, she stepped into the vestibule and pressed the elevator call button, having briefly considered then dismissed the stairs.

She would not bolt like an intimidated child.

The man who’d stolen her heart and left behind a precious gift she’d treasured and lost might be gone, the stranger in his place more formidable than she’d imagined, but she would not be cowed.

Ignoring the compulsion to glance over her shoulder, she willed the elevator to hurry up and arrive. When it did, her knees almost buckled with relief. She started forward.

‘Helena.’

Leo's voice snapped her to an involuntary halt. Without turning, she braced her arm against the elevator's door jamb and tilted her head fractionally. 'Yes?'

Silence yawned behind her, turning the air so thick it felt like treacle in her lungs.

'Wear something dressy,' he said at last.

And then he shut the door.

## CHAPTER TWO

LEO PICKED UP the half-empty water glass and studied the smudge of pink on its rim. Had Douglas Shaw sent his daughter as a honey trap? The idea was abhorrent, yet he wouldn't put it past the man. What Shaw lacked in scruples he more than made up for with sheer, bloody-minded gall.

He crossed to the bar, tossed out the water and shoved the glass out of sight along with the whisky bottle. Then he smashed his palms down on the counter and let out a curse.

He should have let her go. Should have let her walk out of here and slammed the door—physically and figuratively—on their brief, discomfiting reunion.

But standing there watching her strut away, after she'd stared him down with those cool sapphire eyes and likened him to her father; seeing the haughty defiance in every provocative line of her body...

Something inside him had snapped and he was twenty-five again, standing in a different room in a different hotel. Watching the girl who'd carved out a piece of his heart turn her back and

walk out of his life.

Bitterness coated his mouth. He opened the bar fridge, reached past a black-labelled bottle of Dom Perignon and a selection of fine wines and beers and grabbed a can of soda.

At twenty-five he'd considered himself a good judge of character—a skill honed during his teens, when looking out for his sister, taking on the role of parent during their father's drink-fuelled absences, meant learning who he could trust and who he couldn't. Over the years he developed strong instincts, avoided his father's mistakes and weaknesses, but Helena remained his one glaring failure. For the first and last time in his life he'd let his feelings for a woman cloud his judgement.

He would not make the same mistake twice.

Just as he would not be swayed from his purpose.

Douglas Shaw was a bully who thought nothing of destroying people's lives and he deserved a lesson in humility. Leo didn't trust the man and he didn't trust his daughter.

He drained the soda and crumpled the can in his fist.

Shaw wanted to play games? Leo was ready. He'd been ready for seven years. And if the man chose to use his daughter as a pawn, so be it. Two could play at that game.

He threw the can in the wastebin, a slow smile curving his lips. Si. This might be fun.

\* \* \*

'Go home, Helena.'

Helena looked up from the papers on her desk. Her boss stood

holding his briefcase, his suit jacket folded over one arm, a look of mock severity on his face. It was after six on Friday and their floor of the corporate bank was largely deserted.

‘I’m leaving soon,’ she assured him. ‘I’m meeting someone at six-thirty.’

David gave an approving nod. ‘Good. Enjoy your weekend.’

He started off, but paused after a step and turned back. ‘Have you thought any more about taking some leave?’ he said. ‘HR is on the use-it-or-lose-it warpath again. And if you don’t mind me saying...’ he paused, his grey eyes intent ‘...you look like you could do with a break.’

She smiled, deflecting his concern. David might be one of the bank’s longest-serving executives and knocking sixty, but the man rarely missed a beat. He was sharp, observant, and he cared about his staff.

She made a mental note to apply more concealer beneath her eyes. ‘I’m fine. It’s been a long week. And the rain kept me awake last night.’

Partly true.

‘Well, think about it. See you Monday.’

‘Goodnight, David.’

She watched him go, then glanced at her watch.

She had to move.

The car Leo was sending was due in less than twenty minutes, and earning a black mark for running late was not the way she wanted to start the evening.

Shutting herself in David's office, she whipped off her trouser suit and slipped on the little black dress she'd pulled from the bowels of her wardrobe that morning, then turned to the full-length mirror on the back of the door and scanned her appearance.

She frowned at her cleavage.

Good grief.

Had the dress always been so revealing?

She couldn't remember—but then neither could she recall the last time she'd worn it. She seldom dressed up these days, even on the rare occasions she dated. She tugged the bodice up, yanked the sides of the V-neck together and grimaced at the marginal improvement.

It would have to do.

There was no time for a wardrobe-change—and besides, this was the dressiest thing she owned. She'd sold the last of her designer gowns years ago, when she'd had to stump up a deposit and a month's advance rent on her flat. Keeping the black dress had been a practical decision, though she could count on one hand the number of times it had ventured from her wardrobe.

She turned side-on to the mirror.

The dress hugged her from shoulder to mid-thigh, accentuating every dip and curve—including the gentle swell of her tummy. Holding her breath, she pulled in her stomach and smoothed her hand over the bump that no number of sit-ups and crunches could flatten.

Not that she resented the changes pregnancy had wrought on her body. They were a bittersweet reminder of joy and loss. Of lessons learnt and mistakes she would never make again.

She snatched her hand down and released her breath. Tonight she needed to focus on the present, not the past, and for that she would need every ounce of wit she could muster.

Outside the bank a sleek silver Mercedes waited in a 'No Parking' zone, its uniformed driver standing on the pavement. 'Ms Shaw?' he enquired, then opened a rear door so she could climb in.

Minutes later the car was slicing through London's chaotic evening traffic, the endless layers of city noise muted by tinted windows that transformed the plush, leather-lined interior into a private mini-oasis. Like the luxury suite at the hotel, the car's sumptuous interior epitomised the kind of lifestyle Helena had grown unused to in recent years—unlike her mother, who still enjoyed the baubles of wealth and couldn't understand her daughter's wish to live a modest life, independent of her family's money and influence.

She dropped her head back against the soft leather.

She loved her mother. Miriam Shaw was a classic blonde beauty who had moulded herself into the perfect society wife, but she was neither stupid nor selfish. She loved her children. Had raised them with all the luxuries her own upbringing in an overcrowded foster home had denied her. And when they'd been packed off to boarding school, at her husband's insistence, she'd

filled her days by giving time and support to a long list of charities and fundraisers.

Yet where her husband was concerned Miriam was inexplicably weak. Too quick to forgive and too ready to offer excuses.

Like today, when she'd called to cancel their prearranged lunch date. A migraine, she'd claimed, but Helena knew better. Knew her mother's excuse was nothing more than a flimsy veil for the truth, as ineffectual and see-through as the make-up she would use to try to hide the bruises.

Denial.

Her mother's greatest skill. Her greatest weakness. The impregnable wall Helena slammed into any time she dared to suggest that Miriam consider leaving her husband.

A burning sensation crawled from Helena's stomach into her throat—the same anger and despair she always felt when confronted by the grim reality of her parents' marriage.

She massaged the bridge of her nose. Over the years she'd read everything she could on domestic abuse, trying to understand why her mother stayed. Why she put up with the drinking, the vitriol, the occasional black eye. Invariably, when the latter occurred, a peace offering would ensue—usually some priceless piece of jewellery—and then Miriam would pretend everything was fine.

Until the next time.

Helena had seen it more times than she cared to count, but now

the stakes were higher. Now her father stood to lose everything he held dear: his company, his reputation, his pride.

If Leo got his way the ShawCorp empire would be carved up like twigs beneath a chainsaw, and Helena had no doubt that if—when—her father went down, he would take her mother with him.

‘Miss Shaw?’

She jolted out of her thoughts. The car had stopped in front of Leo’s hotel and a young man in a porter’s uniform had opened her door. Lanky and fresh-faced, he reminded Helena of her brother, prompting a silent prayer of gratitude that James was in boarding school, well away from all this ugly drama.

She slid out and the porter escorted her through the hotel to a grand reception room with a high vaulted ceiling and decorative walls. The room was crowded, filled with tray-laden waiters and dozens of patrons in tailored tuxedos and long, elegant evening gowns.

‘Have a good evening, miss.’

The young man turned to leave.

‘Wait!’ She clasped his arm, confusion descending. ‘I think there’s been some mistake.’

He shook his head, his smile polite. ‘No mistake, miss. Mr Vincenti asked that you be brought here.’

\* \* \*

Leo stood at the edge of the milling crowd, his gaze bouncing off one brunette after another until he spied the one he wanted,

standing next to a wide marble pillar just inside the entrance. Weaving waiters, clusters of glittering guests and some twenty feet of floor space separated them, but still he saw the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. The twin furrows of consternation marring her brow.

Satisfaction stirred. Last night the element of surprise had been hers. How would the minx cope when the tables were turned?

He lifted two champagne flutes from a passing silver tray and carved a path to her side.

‘Buona sera, Helena.’

She spun, her startled gaze landing on the flutes in his hands, then the bow tie at his throat, before narrowed eyes snapped to his.

‘This is dinner?’

Score.

He smiled. ‘You look very...elegant.’

The look she gave him might have sliced a lesser man in half. ‘I look underdressed.’

She smoothed an invisible wrinkle from the front of her short and exquisitely low-cut black dress.

‘The other women are wearing ball gowns.’

‘Your dress is fine,’ he said—an understatement if ever he’d uttered one. The dress wasn’t fine. It was stunning. No eye-catching bling or fancy designer frills, but its simple lines showcased her lithe curves and long, toned legs better than any

overblown creation could.

She stole his breath. As easily as she'd stolen his breath the first night he'd laid eyes on her. Her dress that night, however, aside from being a daring purple instead of black, had been less revealing, more...demure. By comparison, tonight's figure-hugging sheath was sultry, seductive, the tantalising flash of ivory breasts inside that V of black fabric enough to tempt any man into secret, lustful imaginings.

'It's a plain cocktail dress,' she said, fretting over her appearance as only a woman could. 'Not a gown for an event like this.' She pressed a hand to the neat chignon at her nape. 'And you're sidestepping the question.'

He extended a champagne flute, which she ignored. 'This—' he gestured with the glass at their lavish surroundings '—is not to your liking?'

'A charity dinner with five hundred other guests? No.'

He feigned surprise. 'You don't like charity?'

She glanced at a wall banner promoting the largest spinal injury association in Europe and its twentieth annual fundraiser. 'Of course I do.' Her eyebrows knitted. 'But I thought we'd be dining in a restaurant. Or at least somewhere... I don't know...a little more...'

'Intimate?'

Her eyes flashed. 'Private.'

'There's a difference?'

She glared at the flute in his hand, then took it from him. 'Do

you make a habit of attending charity dinners at the hotels where you stay?’

‘Si. When I’m invited to support a worthy cause.’ He watched her eyebrows arch. ‘There are better ways to spend an evening, admittedly, but this event has been a long-standing commitment in my diary. And it coincides with my need to do business in London.’

‘Ah, well...’ She paused and sipped her champagne. ‘That’s convenient for you. You get to mark off your social calendar and wreak revenge on my family—all in a week’s work.’ Her mouth curled into a little smile. ‘There’s nothing more satisfying than killing two birds with one stone. How eminently sensible for a busy man such as yourself.’

Leo tasted his bubbles, took his time considering his next words. Exert enough pressure, he mused, and a person’s true colours would eventually surface. ‘Revenge is a very strong word,’ he said mildly.

Her eyes widened. ‘Oh, I’m sorry. Do you have a different name for what you’re doing?’ She raised her palm. ‘No, wait. I remember—“an eye for an eye”, wasn’t it?’

He studied the churlish set of her mouth, the dainty jut of her chin. ‘I had not remembered your tongue being so sharp, Helena.’

Twin spots of colour bloomed on her cheekbones, but the glint of battle stayed in her eyes. ‘This is retaliation for last night, isn’t it? I turned up unannounced at the hotel and you didn’t like it. Now you get to spring the surprise.’ She raised her glass in a

mock toast. ‘Well-played, Leo. So...what now? You parade me on your arm at some high-profile fundraiser and hope it gets back to my father?’

He smiled—which only irritated her further if the flattening of her mouth was any indication. Her gaze darted towards the exit and the idea that she might bolt swiftly curbed his amusement.

Helena would not run from him.

Not this time.

Not until he was good and ready to let her go.

‘Thinking of renegeing on our deal?’

Her gaze narrowed. ‘How do I know you’ll keep your side of the bargain?’

‘I’ve already spoken with your father’s solicitor.’

‘And?’

‘He has until Tuesday to get your father to the table.’

Her mouth fell open. ‘My God...that’s four days from now. Can you not give him longer?’

‘Time is a commodity in business, not a luxury.’ He didn’t add that the solicitor’s chance of success was slim, no matter the time allowed. Both men knew the invitation would be rejected. A great pity, in Leo’s mind. He’d hoped to see for himself the look on Douglas Shaw’s face when the man learnt the fate of his company. But Shaw’s repeated refusals to turn up had denied Leo the final spoils of victory.

‘He won’t show.’

Her voice was so small he wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly.

‘Scusi?’

‘My father. He won’t show. He won’t meet with you, will he?’

He schooled his expression. Had she divined his thoughts? Absurd. He shook off the notion. ‘You tell me. He’s your father.’

‘Leo, I haven’t—’

‘Leonardo!’

Leo heard his name boomed at the same time as Helena stopped talking and darted a startled look over his shoulder. He turned and saw a lanky, sandy-haired man striding forward with a petite blonde by his side.

Leo grinned. ‘Hans.’ He gripped the man’s outstretched hand. ‘I didn’t know you’d be here. How are you? And Sabine.’ He raised the woman’s slender hand, planted a kiss on her knuckles. ‘Beautiful, as always.’

She issued a throaty laugh. ‘And you, my dear, are still the charmer.’ Rising on tiptoes, she kissed him on both cheeks, then turned her sparkling eyes on Helena. ‘Please, introduce us to your lovely companion.’

Leo shifted his weight, fielded a sidelong glance from Helena and sliced her a warning look. Do not embarrass me.

‘Helena, this is Dr Hans Hetterich and his wife, Sabine. Hans, when he is not winning golf tournaments or sailing a yacht on the high seas, is one of the most prominent spinal surgeons in the world.’

‘Nice to meet you, Helena.’ Hans took her hand. ‘And please pay my friend no attention. I am not nearly as impressive as he

makes me sound.’

An unladylike snort came from beside him. ‘I think my husband is not himself tonight.’ Sabine commandeered Helena’s hand. ‘Normally he is not so modest.’

Hans guffawed and clutched his chest, earning him an eye-roll and a poke in the ribs from his wife. He winked at her, then turned a more sober face to Leo. ‘Our new research unit in Berlin is exceptional, thanks to your support. Our stem cell procedures are attracting interest from some of the best surgeons in the world. You must come soon and see for yourself. And you are most welcome too, Helena. Have you visited Germany?’

Her hesitation was fleeting. ‘Once, a long time ago. On a school trip.’

‘Perhaps in a few months,’ Leo intervened. ‘When I get a break in my schedule.’

‘How is Marietta?’ Sabine said. ‘We haven’t seen her since her last surgery.’

His fingers tightened on his glass. ‘She’s fine,’ he said, keeping his answer intentionally brief. He had no wish to discuss his sister in front of Helena. Proffering a smile, he gestured at the dwindling number of people around them. ‘It appears the waiting staff would like us to be seated. Shall we...?’

With a promise to catch them later in the evening, Hans and Sabine joined the trail of diners drifting through to the ballroom. Leo turned to follow, but Helena hung back.

He stopped, raised an eyebrow. ‘Are you coming?’

After a pause, she jammed her evening purse beneath her arm and shot him a baleful look. ‘Do I have a choice?’

He gave her a silky smile—one designed to leave her in no doubt as to his answer. But just to ensure she couldn’t mistake his meaning he leaned in and said softly, ‘You don’t.’

\* \* \*

Gorgeous. Devastating. Lethal.

Those were three of a dozen words Helena could think of to describe Leonardo Vincenti in a tuxedo. And, judging by the lascivious looks he was pulling from every corner of the ballroom, she wasn’t the only female whose hormones had clocked into overdrive at the mere sight of all that dark, brooding masculinity.

He spoke from beside her. ‘The fish is not to your taste?’

She cast him a look from under her lashes. ‘It’s fine. I’m not very hungry.’

The treacle-cured smoked salmon served as a starter was, in fact, superb, but the knots twisting her stomach made the food impossible to enjoy. Which really was a shame, some part of her brain registered, because she rarely had the opportunity these days to sample such exquisite cuisine.

She laid her fork alongside her abandoned knife and leaned back in her chair. So much for a quiet dinner à deux and the chance for a serious talk. She almost rubbed her forehead to see if the word gullible was carved there.

Surreptitiously she watched Leo speak with an older woman

seated on his left. His tux jacket, removed prior to appetisers being served, hung from his chair, leaving his wide shoulders and lean torso sheathed in a white wing tip shirt that contrasted with his olive skin and black hair. He bowed his head, murmuring something that elicited a bright tinkle of laughter from the woman, and the sound scraped across Helena's nerves.

Age, evidently, was no barrier to his charms.

She averted her gaze, smothered the impulse to get up and flee. Like it or not, she'd agreed to be here and she would not scarp like a coward. If she was smart, bided her time, she might still persuade Leo to hold his plans for her father's company. A few weeks...that was all she needed. Time to make her mother see sense before—

'Bored?'

Leo's deep voice sliced across her thoughts.

She drummed up a smile. 'Of course not.'

'Good.' His long fingers toyed with the stem of his wineglass. 'I would hate to bore you for a second time in your life.'

Helena's smile faltered. His casually delivered words carried a meaning she couldn't fail to comprehend. Not when her own words—words she'd bet every hard-earned penny in her bank account had hurt her more than they'd hurt him—were embedded like thorns in her memory. I'm bored, Leo. Really. This relationship just isn't working for me.

She shifted in her seat, her face heating. 'That's unfair.' She glanced around the table, pitching her voice for his ears alone. 'I

tried once to explain why I said those things.’

After he’d left that awful message on her phone—telling her what her father had done, accusing her of betrayal and complicity—she’d gone to his hotel room and banged on his door until her hand throbbed and a man from a neighbouring room stepped out and shot her a filthy look.

‘You didn’t want to listen.’

He shrugged. ‘I was angry,’ he stated, as if he need offer no further excuse.

‘You still are.’

‘Perhaps. But now I’m listening.’

‘I doubt that.’

‘Try me.’

She arched an eyebrow. He wanted to do this now? Here? She cast another furtive glance around the table. Fine.

‘I needed you to let me go without a fight,’ she said, her voice a decibel above a whisper. ‘And we both know you wouldn’t have. Not without questions. Not unless I—’ She stopped, a hot lump of regret lodging in her throat.

‘Stamped on my pride?’ he finished for her.

Her face flamed hotter. Must he make her sound so cruel? So heartless? She’d been nineteen, for pity’s sake, staring down the barrel of her father’s ultimatum. Get rid of the damned foreigner, girl—or I will. Naive. That was what she’d been. And unforgivably stupid, thinking she could live beyond the reach of her father’s iron control.

She smoothed her napkin over her knees. ‘I did what I thought was best at the time.’

‘For you or for me?’

‘For us both.’

‘Ah. So you were being...how do you English like to say it...cruel to be kind?’

His eyes drilled into hers, but she refused to flinch from his cutting glare. She didn’t need his bitter accusations. She, too, had paid a price, and however much she longed to turn back the clock, undo the damage, she could not relieve the pain of her past. Not when she’d worked so hard, sacrificed so much, to leave it behind.

She mustered another smile, this one urbane and slightly aloof—the kind her mother often wore in public. ‘Hans and Sabine seem like a nice couple. Have you known them long?’

The change of subject earned her a piercing stare. She held her breath. Would he roll with it?

Then, ‘Nine years.’

He spoke curtly, but still she breathed again, relaxed a little. Perhaps a normal conversation wasn’t impossible? ‘You never talked much about your sister,’ she ventured. ‘Sabine mentioned surgery. Is Marietta unwell?’

Long, silent seconds passed and Helena’s stomach plunged as the dots she should have connected earlier—Leo’s choice of fundraiser, Hans’s reputation as a leading spinal surgeon, talk of the Berlin research unit followed by the mention of Marietta

and surgery—belatedly joined in her head to create a complete picture.

A muscle jumped in Leo's cheek. 'My sister is a paraplegic.'

The blood that had heated Helena's cheeks minutes earlier rapidly fled. 'Oh, Leo. I'm... I'm so sorry.' She reached out—an impulsive gesture of comfort—but he shifted his arm before her hand could make contact. She withdrew, pretending his rebuff hadn't stung. 'I had no idea. How...how long?'

'Eleven years.'

Her throat constricted with sympathy and, though she knew it was silly, a tiny stab of hurt. Seven years ago they'd spent five intense, heady weeks together, and though he'd mentioned a sister, talked briefly about their difficult childhood, he'd omitted that significant piece of information.

Still, was that cause to feel miffed? She, too, had been selective in what she'd shared about her family.

'Did she have an...an accident?'

'Yes.' His tone was clipped.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't mean to pry. I can see you don't want to talk about this.'

She lifted a pitcher of iced water in an effort to do something—anything—to dispel the growing tension. She'd half filled her glass when he spoke again.

'It was a car accident.'

Startled, she put the pitcher down and looked at him, but his head was angled down, his gaze fastened on the wineglass in his

hand.

‘She was seventeen and angry because we’d argued about her going to a party.’ His black brows tugged into a deep frown. ‘I didn’t like the neighbourhood or the crowd, but she was stubborn. Headstrong. So she went anyway. Later, instead of calling me for a ride home, she climbed into a car with a drunk driver.’ He drained his wine, dropped the glass on the table. ‘The doctors said she was lucky to survive—if you can call a broken back “lucky”. The driver and two other passengers weren’t so fortunate.’

Helena tried to imagine the horror. Teenagers made bad decisions all the time, but few suffered such devastating, life-altering consequences. Few paid such an unimaginable price.

She struggled to keep her expression neutral, devoid of the wrenching pity it was impossible not to feel. ‘Sabine mentioned surgery. Is there a chance...?’

Leo’s gaze connected with hers, something harsh, almost hostile, flashing at the centre of those near-black irises. ‘Let’s drop it.’

Slightly taken aback, Helena opened her mouth to point out she had tried to drop the subject, but his dark expression killed that pert response. ‘Fine,’ she said, and for the next hour ignored him—which wasn’t difficult because over the rest of their dinner another guest drew him into a lengthy debate on European politics, while the American couple to Helena’s right quizzed her about the best places to visit during their six-month sabbatical in England.

When desserts began to arrive at the tables the compère tapped his microphone, waited for eyes to focus and chatter to cease, then invited one of the organisation's patrons, Leonardo Vincenti, to present the grand auction prize. After a brief hesitation Helena joined in the applause. In light of his sister's condition Leo's patronage came as no real surprise.

His mouth brushed her ear as he rose. 'Don't run away.'

And then he was striding to the podium, a tall, compelling figure that drew the attention of every person—male and female—in the room. On stage, he delivered a short but pertinent speech before presenting a gold envelope to the evening's highest bidder. People clapped again, finished their desserts, then got up to mingle while coffee was served.

Twenty minutes later Helena still sat alone.

Irritation sent a wave of prickly heat down her spine.

Don't run away.

Ha! The man had a nerve.

She dumped sugar into her tea. Gave it a vigorous stir. Was he playing some kind of cat-and-mouse game? Or had he cut his losses and gone in search of a more agreeable companion for the evening?

Another ten minutes and finally he deigned to show. He dropped into his chair but she refused to look at him, concentrating instead on topping up her tea.

'You have no boyfriend to spend your Friday nights with, Helena?'

Her pulse skipped a beat. No apology, then. No excuse for his absence. Had his desertion been some kind of test? An experiment to see if she'd slink away the minute his back was turned? The idea did nothing to lessen her pique.

She piled more sugar in her tea. 'He's busy tonight.'

'Really?' His tone said he knew damn well she was lying. He lifted his hand and trailed a fingertip over the exposed curve of her shoulder. 'If you were mine I would not let you spend an evening with another man.' He paused a beat. 'Especially not in that dress.'

Carefully, she stirred her tea and laid the spoon in the saucer. He was trying to unsettle her, nothing more. She steeled herself not to flinch from his touch or, worse, tremble beneath it.

His hand dropped and she forced herself to meet his eye. 'You said my dress was fine.'

His gaze raked her. 'Oh, it's fine. Very fine, indeed. And I am sure not a man here tonight would disagree.'

Did she detect a note of censure in his voice? She stopped herself glancing down. She'd been conscious of her plunging neckline all evening, but there were dozens of cleavages here more exposed than her own. And, though the dress was more suited to a cocktail party or a private dinner than a glittering gala affair—cause at first for discomfort—there was nothing cheap or trashy about it.

She crossed her legs, allowing her hem to ride up, until another inch of pale thigh defiantly showed. 'And you?' She watched his

gaze flicker down. ‘I wouldn’t have thought a man like you would need a last-minute dinner date. Where’s your regular plus-one tonight?’

His lips, far too sensual for a man’s, twitched into a smile. ‘A man like me?’

‘Successful,’ she said, inwardly cursing her choice of words. ‘Money attracts, does it not? The world is full of women who find wealth and status powerful aphrodisiacs.’

One eyebrow quirked. ‘When did you become a cynic?’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ She pursed her lips. ‘Maybe around the time you were getting rich.’

He lounged back in his chair, the glint in his eye unmissable. ‘In answer to your question, I’m between mistresses.’

‘Oh...’ She fiddled with the handle on her teacup.

Not girlfriends or partners. Mistresses. Why did that word make her heart shrink? So he enjoyed casual relationships. So what? His sex life was no business of hers.

She sat back, forced herself to focus. She couldn’t afford to waste time. The evening was slipping away. If she didn’t speak soon her chance would be lost. ‘Leo, my father and I are estranged.’

In a flash, the teasing light was gone from his eyes. Her stomach pitched. Should she have blurted the words so abruptly? Too bad. They were out there now.

A vein pulsed in his right temple. ‘Define “estranged”.’

She hitched a shoulder, let it drop. ‘We don’t talk. We don’t

see each other. We're estranged in every sense of the word, if that's what you're asking.'

'Why?'

She hesitated. How much to tell? The bitter memory of that final violent confrontation with her father was too disturbing to recount even now.

'We fell out,' she said, her tongue dry despite the gallon of tea she'd consumed. 'Over you and what he did after we—after I broke things off. I walked out seven years ago and we haven't spoken since.' She paused and glanced down. Her hands were shaking. She lifted her gaze back to his. 'I dropped out of university and went to live in a rented flat. Father cut off my allowance, froze my trust, so I work at a full-time job. As a...a secretary. In a bank.'

Leo stared at her, his face so blank she wondered if he'd heard a single word she said. Her insides churned as if the tea had suddenly curdled in her belly. She wished she could read him better. Wished she could interpret the emotion in those dark, fathomless eyes.

And still the silence stretched.

God, why didn't he say something?

'You gave up your design studies?'

She blinked. That was his first question? 'Yes,' she said, frowning. 'I couldn't study full-time and support myself. The materials I needed were too expensive.'

Other students on her textile design course had juggled part-

time jobs along with their studies, but they'd had only themselves to think about. They hadn't been facing the same dilemmas, the same fears. They hadn't been in Helena's position. Alone and pregnant.

Careful.

She shrugged. 'I might go back one day. But that's not important. Leo, what I'm trying to tell you is that I'm not here for my father.'

'Then why are you here?'

She leaned forward. 'Because what you're doing will hurt the people I do love. And before you remind me that my father—and thus his family—stands to gain financially from having his company torn apart, it's not about the money.'

Helena hesitated. She had to choose her words with care. Miriam Shaw might be too proud to admit to herself, let alone the world, that she was a victim, but she was none the less entitled to her privacy. Her dignity. She wouldn't want the painful truth about her marriage shared with a stranger. Who knew what Leo might do with such sensitive information?

'My father can be...difficult to live with,' she said. 'At the best of times.'

Leo sat so still he barely blinked. Seemed barely to breathe. 'So what exactly do you want?'

'I want you to reconsider your plans for ShawCorp.' The words tumbled out so fast her tongue almost tripped on them. 'At the very least give my father more time to come to the table. Offer

him a chance to have a say in the company's future. Maybe keep his position on the board.'

He gave her a long, hard look. 'That's a lot of want, Helena. You do realise my company is overseen by a board of directors? I am not the sole decision-maker.'

'But you have influence, surely?'

'Of course. But I need good reason. Your concern for your family is admirable, but this is business. I cannot let a little family dysfunction dictate corporate strategy.'

'Can't you at least delay Tuesday's deadline by a few weeks?'

His eyebrows slammed down and he muttered something under his breath. Something not especially nice.

He rose. 'We will finish this talk later.'

Warmth leached from her face. Her hands. Had she pushed too hard? Said too much? 'Why can't we finish it now?'

He moved behind her chair, lowered his head to hers. The subtle scent of spice twined around her senses. 'Because we're about to have company.' His hot breath fanned her cheek. 'Important company. And if you want me to consider your request you will be very, very well behaved.'

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