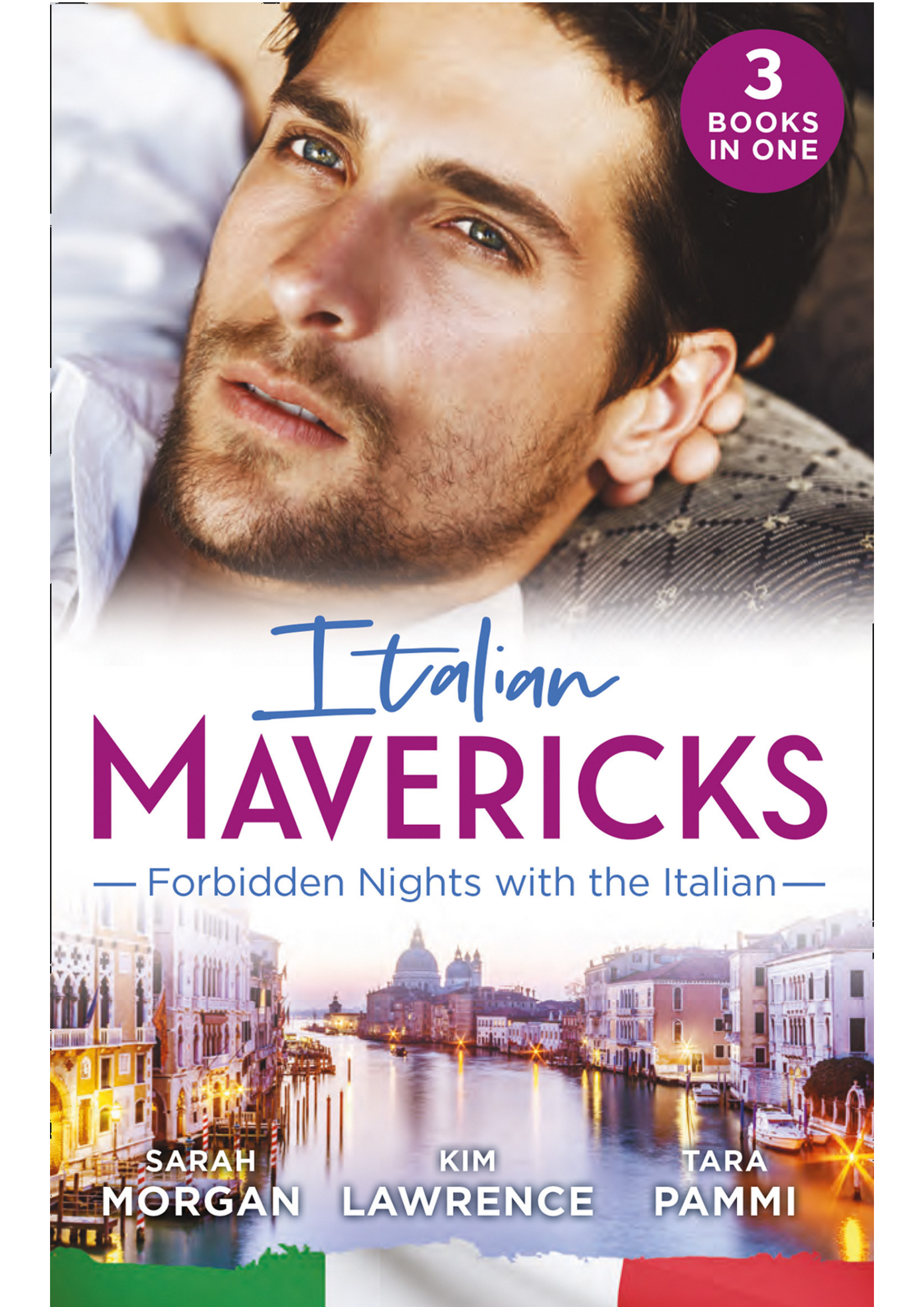




3
BOOKS
IN ONE

Italian
MAVERICKS

— Forbidden Nights with the Italian —



**SARAH
MORGAN**

**KIM
LAWRENCE**

**TARA
PAMMI**

Mills & Boon M&B

Sarah Morgan

**Italian Mavericks: Forbidden
Nights With The Italian**

«HarperCollins»

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The Italian Mavericks

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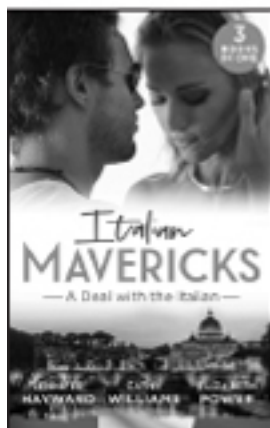
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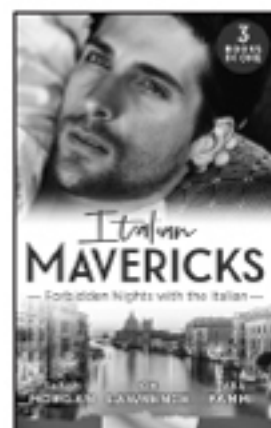
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About the Authors

USA Today bestselling author **SARAH MORGAN** writes hot, happy contemporary romance and her trademark humour and sensuality have gained her fans across the globe. She has been nominated four years in row for the prestigious RITA® Award from the Romance Writers of America and has won the award twice.

Sarah lives near London with her family. When she isn't writing she loves spending time outdoors. Visit her website at www.sarahmorgan.com.

KIM LAWRENCE lives on a farm in Anglesey with her university lecturer husband, assorted pets who arrived as strays and never left, and sometimes one or both of her boomerang sons. When

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TARA PAMMI can't remember a moment when she wasn't lost in a book—especially a romance, which was much more exciting than a mathematics textbook at school. Years later, Tara's wild imagination and love for the written word revealed what she really wanted to do. Now she pairs alpha males who think they know everything with strong women who knock that theory *and* them off their feet!

Italian Mavericks: Forbidden Nights with the Italian

The Forbidden Ferrara

Sarah Morgan

Surrendering to the Italian's Command

Kim Lawrence

The Unwanted Conti Bride

Tara Pammi

MILLS & BOON

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ITALIAN MAVERICKS: FORBIDDEN NIGHTS WITH THE ITALIAN

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Kim Lawrence *The Unwanted Conti Bride* © 2016 Tara Pammi

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Sarah Morgan

For my editor Lucy Gilmour who is wise, clever
and always wears great shoes. Thank you.

CHAPTER ONE

THERE was a shocked silence round the boardroom table.

Amused by the reaction, Santo Ferrara sat back in his chair. 'I'm sure you'll all agree it's an exciting project,' he drawled. 'Thank you for your attention.'

'You've lost your mind.' It was his older brother who finally broke the silence. Cristiano, who had recently relinquished some of his responsibility in the company to spend more time with his young family. 'It can't be done.'

'Because you didn't succeed? Don't beat yourself up. It's fairly common for a man to lose his edge when he's distracted by a wife and kids.' Santo loaded his tone with sympathy, enjoying the brief interlude in what had been a long, punishing few weeks. And if he felt a slight twinge of envy that his brother had gone on to be as successful in his personal life as he was in business then he told himself that it was just a matter of time before he found the same thing himself. 'It's like seeing a great warrior fallen. Don't blame yourself. Living with three women can soften a man.'

The rest of the Board exchanged nervous glances but wisely chose to remain silent.

Cristiano's gaze locked on his. 'I am still chairman of this company.'

'Precisely. You've taken a back seat while you change nappies. Now leave the good ideas to the rest of us.' He was being deliberately combative and Cristiano gave a reluctant laugh.

'I'm not denying that your proposal is exciting. I can see the business potential in adapting the hotel to accommodate a wider range of sports and appeal to a younger demographic. I even agree that expanding on the West coast of Sicily has potential for a certain type of discerning traveller—' he paused and when he looked at Santo his eyes were deadly serious '—but the success of the project rests on you gaining the extra land from the Baracchi family and old man Baracchi would shoot you through the head before he sold to you.'

Good-natured banter gave way to tension. Those around the table kept their eyes down, everyone well aware of the history between the two families. The whole of Sicily knew the history.

'That is my problem to deal with,' Santo said in a cool tone and Cristiano made an impatient sound as he pushed back his chair and paced over to the expanse of glass that overlooked the glittering Mediterranean sea.

'Since you took over day-to-day running of the company you have more than proved yourself. You have done things I hadn't even thought of doing.' He turned. 'But you will not be able to do *this*. You will simply inflame a situation that has been simmering for almost three generations. You should let it die.'

'I am going to turn the Ferrara Beach Club into our most successful hotel.'

'You will fail.'

Santo smiled. 'Shall we bet on that?'

For once his brother didn't return the smile or take up the challenge. 'This goes deeper than sibling rivalry. You *cannot* do this.'

'Enough time has passed for us to put grievances aside.'

'That,' Cristiano said slowly, 'depends on the grievance.'

Santo felt the anger start to heat inside him but alongside the anger were darker, murkier emotions that sprang to life whenever the Baracchi name was mentioned. It was a visceral reaction, a conditioned response reinforced by a lifetime of animosity between the families. 'I was not responsible for what happened to Baracchi's grandson. You know the truth.'

'This is not about truth or reason, but about passion and prejudice. Deep-rooted prejudice. I have already approached him. Made him several more than generous offers. Baracchi would see his family starve before he sells his land to a Ferrara. Negotiations are closed.'

Santo rose to his feet. 'Then it's time they were reopened.'

A man cleared his throat. 'As your lawyer it's my duty to warn against—'

'Don't give me negatives—' Santo lifted his hand to silence the man, his eyes still fixed on his brother. 'So your objection isn't the commercial development which you concede makes sound business sense, but the interaction with the Baracchi family. Do you think I'm a coward?'

'No, and that is what troubles me. You use reason and courage but Baracchi has neither. You are my brother.' Cristiano's voice thickened. 'Guiseppe Baracchi hates you. He's always been an irascible old man. What makes you think he will listen to you before he loses that infamous temper of his?'

'He may be an irascible old man but he's also a frightened old man in financial trouble.'

'I'm willing to bet he's not in so much trouble he'll take money from a Ferrara. And frightened old men can be dangerous. We've maintained the hotel there because it would hurt our mother to sell our father's first hotel, but I've been talking to her recently and—'

'We're not going to sell. I'm going to turn it around but to do that I need the land. *All* of the land. The whole bay.' Santo saw the lawyer's agitation but he ignored him. 'I don't just want the land for watersports, I want the Beach Shack. That restaurant pulls in more custom than all our restaurants in the hotel. This is not about fuelling a feud, it's about protecting our business. While guests walk away from us to eat at the Beach Shack and watch the sunset, we are losing revenue.'

'Which brings us to the second problem in this ambitious scheme of yours. That restaurant is run by his granddaughter—a woman who very possibly hates you even more than her grandfather.' Cristiano looked him straight in the eye. 'How do you think Fia will greet the news that you intend to make an offer for the land?'

He didn't have to think. He knew.

She would fight him with everything she had.

They would clash. Tempers would burn hot.

And woven through the tension of the present would be the past.

Not just the long-standing feud over land, but their own personal history. Because he hadn't been entirely honest with his brother, had he? In a family where no one had secrets, he had a secret. A secret he'd buried deep enough to ensure it would never see the light of day.

The sudden rush of black emotion took him by surprise. With an impatient frown he glanced out of the window to the beach beyond but he didn't see sand or sea. Instead he saw Fiammetta Baracchi with her long legs and temper hotter than a red chilli pepper.

Cristiano was still watching him. 'She hates you.'

Was it hate?

They hadn't discussed feelings, he thought. They hadn't discussed anything at all. Not even when they'd ripped each other's clothes off, when his body had screamed for hers and hers for his, not once in the whole wild, erotic, out of control experience had they exchanged a single word.

And instinct told him she'd buried her secret as deeply as he'd buried his.

As far as he was concerned, that was the way it was staying.

The past had no place in this negotiation.

'Under her management the Shack has gone from a few rickety tables on the beach to the most talked about eatery in Sicily. Rumour has it that she's a talented chef.'

Cristiano shook his head slowly. 'You're walking into an explosive situation, Santo. At best it's going to be messy.'

Carlo, their lawyer, put his head in his hands.

Santo ignored both of them just as he ignored the elemental rush of heat and the dark memories that, now woken, refused to return to sleep. 'This feud has lasted too long. It's time to move on.'

'Not possible.' Cristiano's voice was harsh. 'Guiseppe Baracchi's grandson, his only male heir, died when he wrapped a car around a tree. *Your* car, Santo. And you expect him to shake your hand and sell you his land?'

'Guiseppe Baracchi is a businessman and this deal makes perfect business sense.'

‘Are you going to tell him that before or after the old man shoots you?’

‘He won’t shoot me.’

‘He probably won’t need to.’ Cristiano gave a grim smile. ‘Knowing Fia, she’ll shoot you first.’

And that, Santo thought without emotion, *was entirely possible*.

‘This is the last snapper.’ Fia lifted the fish from the grill and plated it up. The heat from the fire warmed her cheeks. ‘Gina?’

‘Gina is outside checking out the driver of a Lamborghini that just pulled into our car park. You know she has a taste for men who can keep her in the style of her dreams. I’ll take those.’ Ben scooped up the plates and balanced them. ‘How is your grandfather tonight?’

‘Tired. He’s not himself. He doesn’t even have the energy to snap at people.’ Fia felt a ripple of worry and made a mental note to check on him next time she had a lull. ‘Are you coping out there? Tell Gina to leave the customers alone and work.’

‘You tell her. I’m too chicken.’ Ben skilfully dodged the waitress, who came sprinting into the kitchen. ‘Hey, be careful or we’ll be sending you out on the boat for more snapper.’

‘You’ll *never* guess who just turned up—’

Fia shot a glance at Ben as she started on the next order. ‘Serve the food or it will be cold and I don’t serve cold food.’ Aware that Gina was virtually trembling with excitement, Fia decided it would be quicker and more efficient just to let her gush. She added seasoning and olive oil to fresh scallops and dropped them onto the pan. They were so fresh they needed nothing but the best quality oil to bring out the flavour. ‘It must be someone exciting because I’ve never known you starstruck before and we’ve had plenty of celebrities in here.’ As far as she was concerned, a guest was a guest. They were here to eat and her job was to feed them. And she fed them well. Expertly she flipped the scallops and added fresh herbs and capers to the pan.

Gina sneaked a look over her shoulder to the restaurant. ‘It’s the first time I’ve seen him in person. He’s stunning.’

‘Whoever he is, I hope he booked because otherwise you’re going to have to send him away.’ Fia shook the pan constantly. ‘It’s a full house tonight.’

‘You won’t be sending him away.’ Gina sounded awestruck. ‘It’s Santo Ferrara. In the flesh. Only sadly not showing anywhere near as much flesh as I’d like in an ideal world.’

Fia stopped breathing.

Weakness spread through her body and then she started to shake, as if she’d suddenly been injected with something deadly. The pan slid from her hand and crashed onto the flame, the precious scallops forgotten.

‘He wouldn’t come here.’ *He wouldn’t dare*. She was talking to herself. Reassuring herself. But there was no reassurance to be had.

Since when did she know anything about what motivated Santo Ferrara?

‘Er—why wouldn’t he come?’ Gina looked intrigued. ‘Seems logical enough to me. His company owns the hotel next door and you serve great food.’

Gina wasn’t local, otherwise she would have known the history between the two families. Everyone knew. And Fia also knew that the Ferrara Beach Club, the hotel that shared her perfect curve of beach, was the smallest and least significant of the Ferrara hotel group. There was no earthly reason why Santo himself would choose to give it his personal attention.

Her concentration shot, Fia caught her elbow on the side of a hot pan. Pain seared through her and brought her back to the present. Furious with herself for forgetting the scallops, she plated them up with meticulous care and handed them to Gina, functioning on automatic. ‘This is for the couple on the waterfront,’ she croaked. ‘It’s their anniversary and they booked this six months ago so make sure you treat them with reverence. This is a big night for them. I don’t want them disappointed.’

Gina gaped at her. ‘Aren’t you going to—’

‘I’m fine! It’s just burned flesh—’ Fia spoke through her teeth ‘—I’ll put it under cold water in a minute.’

‘I wasn’t thinking about your elbow. I was thinking about the fact that Santo Ferrara is standing in your restaurant and you don’t seem to care,’ Gina said faintly. ‘You treat every customer like royalty and when someone genuinely important turns up you ignore him. You do know who he is? *The Ferrara*, yes? Ferrara Resorts. Five star all the way.’

‘I know exactly who he is.’

‘But Boss, if he’s come here to eat—’

‘He hasn’t come here to eat.’ A Ferrara would never sit down at a Baracchi table for fear of being poisoned. She had no idea why he was here and that lack of insight frustrated her because she couldn’t fight what she didn’t understand. And mingled in with the shock and anger was dread.

He’d walked boldly into her restaurant at peak time. Why?

Only something really, really important would make him do that.

Terror rippled through her. *No*, she thought wildly, *it couldn’t possibly be that*.

He didn’t know.

He *couldn’t* know.

With a final curious glance, Gina hurried out of the kitchen and Fia ran cold water over her burned elbow, trying to reassure herself that it was a routine visit. Another attempt by the Ferrara family to hold out an olive branch. There had been others, and her grandfather had taken each and every olive branch and snapped it in two. Since her brother’s death, there had been nothing. No overtures. No contact.

Until now ...

Functioning on automatic, she reached above her head for a fresh bulb of garlic. She grew it herself in her garden, along with vegetables and herbs and she enjoyed the growing almost as much as she enjoyed the cooking. It soothed her. Gave her a feeling of home and family she’d never derived from the people around her. Reaching for her favourite knife, she started chopping, trying to think how she would have reacted if the circumstances had been different. If the terror wasn’t involved. If the stakes weren’t so high—

She would have been cold. Businesslike.

‘*Buonasera*, Fia.’

A deep male voice came from the doorway and she turned, the knife turning from a kitchen implement to a weapon. The crazy thing was, she didn’t know his voice. But she knew his eyes and they were looking at her now—two dark pools of dangerous black. They gleamed bright with intelligence and hard with ruthless purpose. They were the eyes of a man who thrived in a cut-throat business environment. A man who knew what he wanted and wasn’t afraid to go after it. They were the same eyes that had glittered into hers in the darkness three years before as they’d ripped each other’s clothes and slaked a fierce hunger.

Those three years had added a couple of inches to his broad shoulders and more bulk to muscles she remembered all too well. Apart from that he was exactly the same. Still the same ‘born to rule’ Ferrara self-confidence; the same innate sophistication, polished until it shone bright as the paintwork of his Lamborghini. He was six foot three of hard, sensual masculinity but Fia felt nothing a woman was supposed to feel when she laid eyes on Santo Ferrara. A normal woman wouldn’t feel this searing anger, this almost uncontrollable urge to scratch his handsome face and thump that powerful chest. When she was near him, every feeling was exaggerated. She felt vulnerable and defenceless and those feelings brought out the worst in her. Usually she was warm and civil to everyone who stepped inside her kitchen. Reviews commended her hospitality and the intimate, friendly atmosphere of the restaurant. But she couldn’t even bring herself to wish this man a good evening. And that was because she didn’t want him to have a good evening.

She wanted him to go to hell and stay there.

He was her biggest mistake.

And judging from the cold, cynical glint in his eye, he considered her to be his.

‘Well, this is a surprise. The Ferrara brothers don’t usually step down from their ivory tower to mingle with us mortals. Checking out the competition?’ She adopted her most businesslike tone, while all the time her anxiety was rising and the questions were pounding through her head.

Did he know?

Had he found out?

A faint smile touched his mouth and the movement distracted her. There was an almost deadly beauty in the sensual curve of those lips. Everything about the man was dark and sexual, as if he’d been designed for the express purpose of drawing women to their doom. If rumour were correct, he did that with appalling frequency.

Fia wasn’t fooled by his apparently relaxed pose or his deceptively mild tone.

Santo Ferrara was the most dangerous man she’d ever met.

Without exchanging words, she’d fallen. Even now, years later, she didn’t understand what had happened that night. One moment she’d been alone with her misery. The next, his hand had been on her shoulder and everything that had happened after that was a blur. Had it been about human comfort? Possibly, except that comfort implied gentle emotions and those had been in short supply that night.

He watched her now, his face giving no hint as to his thoughts. ‘I’ve heard good things about your restaurant. I’ve come to find out if any of them are true.’

He didn’t know, she thought. If he knew, he wouldn’t be toying with her.

‘They’re all true, but I’m afraid I can’t satisfy your curiosity. We’re fully booked.’ Her lips formed the words while her mind raced over the possible reasons for his visit. Was that really all this was? An idle visit to check out the competition? No, surely not. Santo Ferrara would delegate that task to a minion. Her brain throbbed with the strain of trying to second-guess him.

‘We both know you can find me a table if you want to.’

‘But I don’t want to.’ Her fingers tightened on the knife. ‘Since when did a Ferrara dine at the same table as a Baracchi?’

His eyes locked on hers. Her heart beat just a little bit faster.

The searing look he sent her from under those dense, inky lashes reminded her that once they hadn’t just dined; they’d hungered and they’d feasted. They’d devoured each other and taken until there was nothing left to take. And she could still remember the taste of him; feel the rippling power of his body against hers as they’d indulged in dark, forbidden pleasure, the memory of which had never left her.

In a crowded room she wouldn’t have known his voice, but she knew how he’d feel and her palms grew hot and her knees weakened as her thoughts broke free of the restraints she’d imposed, liberating memories so vivid that for a moment she couldn’t breathe.

He smiled.

Not the smile of a friend, but the smile of a conqueror contemplating the imminent surrender of a captive. ‘Eat at my table, Fia.’

His casual use of her name suggested a familiarity that didn’t exist and it unbalanced her, as he’d no doubt intended. He was a man who always had to be in control. He’d been in control on that night and there had been something terrifying about the force of passion he’d unleashed.

She’d taken him because she’d been in desperate need of human comfort.

He’d taken her because he could.

‘This is *my* table we’re talking about,’ she said in a clear voice, ‘and you’re not invited.’ She had to get rid of him. The longer he stayed, the bigger the risk to her. ‘You have your own restaurant next door. If you’re hungry then I’m sure they’d accommodate you, although I admit that neither the food nor the view is as good as mine so I can understand why you find both lacking.’

There was a stillness about him that made her uneasy. A watchfulness that she didn't trust. 'I need to speak to your grandfather. Tell me where he is.'

So that was why he was here. Another round of fruitless negotiations that would lead the same way as the others. Thanks goodness he'd made this visit at night, she thought numbly. No matter what happened, she had to ensure he didn't return during the day. 'You must have a death wish. You know how he feels about you.'

Those eyes were hooded as he watched her. 'And does he know how *you* feel about me?'

His oblique reference to that night shocked her because it was something that had never been mentioned before.

Was he threatening her? Was he about to expose her?

Relief had been replaced by sick panic as various avenues of horror opened up before her. Was that why he'd done it? To have a hold over her in the future? 'My grandfather is old and unwell. If you have something to say you can say it to me. If you want to talk business, then you'll talk to me. I run the restaurant.'

'But the land is his.' His soft voice was a million times more disturbing than an explosion of temper and that control of his worried her because she felt none where he was concerned. She thought about what she'd read—about Santo Ferrara more than filling his brother's large shoes in his running of their global corporation. And suddenly she realised how foolish she'd been to think that the Beach Club was too insignificant to be of interest to the big boss. It was precisely *because* it was too insignificant that it had caught his attention. He wanted to expand the Beach Club, and to do that he needed—

'You want our land?'

'It was once *our* land,' he said with lethal emphasis, 'until one of your unscrupulous relatives, of which there have been all too many, chose to use blackmail to extract half the beach from my great-grandfather. Unlike him, I am willing to propose a fair deal and pay you a generous price to regain that which should never have left my family.'

And it was all about money, of course. The Ferraras thought everything could be bought.

Which was what frightened her.

The initial feeling of relief that had flooded her had been replaced by trepidation. If he were intent on developing the land then she'd never be safe.

'My grandfather will never, ever sell to you so if that is what this visit is about you're wasting your time. You might as well go back to New York or Rome or wherever it is you live these days. Pick another project.'

'I live here.' His lip curled. 'And I am giving this project my personal attention.'

It was the worst news she could have had. 'He hasn't been well. I won't let you upset him.'

'Your grandfather is tough as boots. I doubt he is in need of your protection.' A few layers of 'civilized' had melted away and the dangerous edge to his tone told her that he meant business. 'Does he know that you're deliberately attracting my customers away from the hotel to your restaurant?'

He was six foot three of prime masculinity, the force of his nature barely leashed beneath that outward appearance of sophistication. And Fia knew just how much heat bubbled under the cool surface. She'd been burned by that heat.

His passion has shocked her, but nowhere near as much as her own.

'If by "deliberately" you mean that I'm cooking them good food in great surroundings, then I'm guilty as charged.'

'Those "great surroundings" are exactly the reason I'm here.'

So that was what had brought him back. Not the night they'd shared. Not concern for her welfare or anything that was personal.

Just business.

If she weren't so relieved that there wasn't a deeper reason, she would have been appalled by his insensitivity. Whatever else had happened, a death lay between them. Blood had been shed.

But one inconvenient death wouldn't be enough to stand in the way of a Ferrara on the path to acquisition, she thought numbly. It was all about empire building. 'This conversation is over. I need to cook. I'm in the middle of service.' The truth was she'd all but finished, but she'd wanted him out of here.

But of course he didn't leave because a Ferrara only ever did what a Ferrara wanted to do.

Instead of walking away he lounged against the door frame, sleek and confident, those eyes fixed on her. 'You feel so threatened by me you have to have a knife in your hand while we talk?'

'I'm not threatened. I'm working.'

'I could disarm you in under five seconds.'

'I could cut you to the bone in less.' It was bravado, of course, because not for one moment did she underestimate his strength.

'If this is the welcome you give your customers I'm surprised you have anyone here at all. Not exactly warm, is it?' The fringe of thick lashes made his eyes seem darker. Or maybe the darkness was something they created together. She knew that the addition of just one ingredient could alter flavour. In this case it was the forbidden. They'd done the unforgivable. The unexplainable. The inexcusable.

'You're not a customer, Santo.'

'So feed me and then I will be. Cook me dinner.'

Cook me dinner. Just for a moment her hands shook.

He'd walked away without once glancing back. That, she could handle because, apart from one night of reckless sex, they'd shared nothing. The fact that he'd played a much bigger role in her dreams wasn't his fault. But for him to walk back in here and order her to cook him dinner, as if his return was something to celebrate ...

The audacity of it took her breath away. 'Sorry. Fatted calf isn't on the menu tonight. Now get the hell out of my kitchen, Santo. Gina manages the bookings and tonight we're full. And tomorrow night. And any other night you wish to eat in my restaurant.'

'Gina is the pretty blonde? I noticed her on the way in.'

Of course he would have noticed her. Santo Ferrara not noticing a blonde, curvy woman would be like a lion not noticing a cute impala. That didn't surprise her. What surprised her was the ache in her chest. She didn't want to care who this man took to his bed. She'd never wanted to care and the fact that she did terrified her more than anything. She'd grown up witnessing that caring meant pain.

Never love a Sicilian man had been the last words her mother had flung at her eight-year-old daughter before she'd walked out of the door for ever.

Afraid of her own feelings, Fia turned her back and finished chopping garlic, but they were the ragged, uneven cuts of an amateur, not a professional.

'It's dangerous to handle a knife when your hands are shaking.' Suddenly he was right behind her, too close for comfort, and she felt her pulse sprint because even though he wasn't touching her she could feel the warmth of him, the power of him and feel her answering response. It was immediate and visceral and she almost screamed with frustration because it made no sense. It was like salivating over a food that she knew would make her ill.

'I'm not shaking.'

'No?' A strong, bronzed hand covered hers and immediately she was back in the darkness of that night, his mouth burning against hers, his skilled fingers showing her no mercy as he drove her wild. 'Do you think about it?'

She didn't need to ask what he meant.

Did she think about it? Oh, God, he had no idea. She'd tried everything, *everything*, to wipe the memory of that night from her mind but it was always with her. A sensual scar that was never going to heal. 'Take your hand off mine right now.'

His hand tightened, the strength in those fingers holding hers still. 'You finish serving food at ten. We'll talk after that.'

It was a command not an invitation and the sure confidence with which he issued that command licked at the flames of her anger. 'My work doesn't finish when the restaurant closes. I have hours of work and when that is done I go to bed.'

'With that puppy-eyed boy who works for you? Playing it safe now, Fia?'

She was so shocked by the question that she turned her head to look at him and the movement brought her physically closer. The light brush of her skin against the hardness of his thigh triggered a frightening response. It was as if her body *knew*. 'Who I invite into my bed is none of your business.'

Their eyes met briefly as they acknowledged privately what they'd never acknowledged publicly. She watched, transfixed, as his gaze turned black.

A long dormant feeling slowly uncurled itself inside her, a response she didn't want to feel for this man.

What might have happened next she'd never know because Gina walked in and when Fia saw who she was carrying she wanted to shout out a warning. She wanted to tell the other girl to run and not look back. But it was too late. Her luck had run out. It was over. It was over because Santo was already turning to locate the source of the interruption, an irritated frown scoring the bronzed planes of his handsome face.

'He had a bad dream—' Gina cooed, stroking the sobbing toddler. 'I said I'd bring him to his mamma as you've finished cooking for the night.'

Fia stood, powerless to do anything except allow events to unfold.

Had circumstances been different she would have been pleased to see a Ferrara shocked out of his customary cool. As it was the stakes were so high she watched with the breath trapped in her lungs, reluctant witness to his rapidly changing emotions.

His initial irritation at the disturbance gave way to puzzlement as he looked at the miserable, hiccuping child now stretching out his little arms to Fia.

And she took him, of course, because his welfare mattered to her above all other things.

And two things happened.

Her son stared curiously at the tall, dark stranger in the kitchen and stopped crying instantly.

And the tall, dark stranger stared into black eyes almost identical to his own, and turned pale as death.

CHAPTER TWO

‘CRISTO—’ His voice hoarse, Santo took a step backwards and crashed into some pans that had been neatly stacked ready to be put away. Startled by the sudden noise, the child flinched and hid his face in his mother’s neck. Aware that he was the cause of that sudden display of anxiety, Santo struggled for control. Only by the most ruthless application of willpower did he succeed in hauling back the searing anger that threatened to erupt.

From the security of his mother’s arms, the child peeped at him in terror, instinctively hiding from danger and yet intrigued by it.

And she would have been hiding, too, Santo thought grimly, if she had anywhere to hide. But she was right out in the open, all her secrets exposed.

He didn’t even need to ask the obvious question.

Even without that instant moment of recognition he would have seen it in the way she held herself. That raw, undiluted anxiety was visible to the naked eye.

He’d come here to negotiate the purchase of the land. Not for one second had he anticipated *this*.

From the moment he’d walked into the kitchen she’d been in a hurry to get rid of him, and now he understood why. He’d assumed their past history was to blame for her response. And of course it was. But not in the way he’d thought.

There was a heaviness in his chest, as if his heart were being squeezed in a clenched fist.

Confronted by a situation he hadn’t anticipated, he struggled with emotions that were new to him. Not just anger but a deep, primitive desire to protect.

The weight in his chest bloomed and grew into something so huge and powerful he felt the force of it right through his body.

I’m a father.

But even as he thought it, he also thought, *this is not how it was supposed to be.*

He’d always assumed that he would eventually fall in love, marry and then have children. He was a traditional guy, wasn’t he? He’d seen his brother’s joy and his sister’s joy and he’d arrogantly assumed that the same experience awaited him.

He’d missed it all, he thought bitterly. The birth, first steps, first words—

Tormented by those thoughts, Santo gave a low growl.

The toddler’s eyes widened with alarm as he sensed the change in the atmosphere. Or perhaps it was just that he detected his mother’s panic. Either way, Santo knew enough about children to know that this one was about to dissolve into screams.

With another huge effort of will, he forced himself to suppress his feelings. It was the hardest thing he’d ever done. ‘It is late for someone so young to be up.’ He injected his voice with the right amount of gentleness, focusing on the child rather than the mother. Even looking at the boy sent a searing pain through his chest. It was a physical effort not to grab him, strap him into the seat of his Lamborghini and drive away with him. ‘You must be very tired, *chicco*. You should be in bed.’

Fia stiffened, clearly taking that as criticism. ‘He has bad dreams sometimes.’

The news that his son suffered from bad dreams did nothing to improve Santo’s black, dangerous mood. What, he wondered darkly, had caused those dreams? Reminded of just how dysfunctional this family was, anger turned to cold dread.

‘Gina—is it Gina?’ He glanced at the pretty waitress and somehow managed to deliver the smile that had never failed him yet and it didn’t fail him now as the girl beamed at him, visibly overwhelmed by his status.

‘Signor Ferrara—’

‘I really need to speak to Fia in private—’

‘No!’ Fia’s voice bordered on desperate. ‘Not now. Can’t you see that this is a really bad time?’

‘Oh, it’s fine,’ Gina gushed helpfully, blushing under Santo’s warm, approving gaze. ‘I can take him. I’m his nanny.’

‘Nanny?’ The word stuck in Santo’s throat. No one in his family had ever employed outside help to care for their children. ‘You look after him?’ He didn’t trust himself to use the words ‘my son’. Not yet.

‘It’s a team approach,’ Gina said cheerfully. ‘We’re like meerkats. We all look after the young. Only in this case there is only one young so he’s horribly spoiled. I look after him when Fia is working, but I knew she’d finished cooking tonight so I thought I’d bring him for a cuddle. Now he’s calmed down he’s going to be just fine. He’ll go straight off again the moment I put him in his bed. Come to Auntie Gina—’ Cooing at the sleepy child, she drew him out of Fia’s reluctant arms and snuggled him close.

‘We still have customers—’

‘They’re virtually all finished,’ Gina said helpfully. ‘Just waiting for table two to pay the bill. Ben has it all under control. You have your chat, Boss.’ Apparently oblivious to the tension crackling around them, Gina cast a final awestruck glance at Santo and melted from the room.

Silence reigned.

Fia stood, her cheeks pale against the fire of her hair, dark smudges under her eyes.

Words were some of the most deadly tools in his armoury. He used them to negotiate impossible deals, to smooth the most difficult of situations, to hire and fire, but suddenly, when he needed them more than ever before, they were absent. All he managed was a single word.

‘Well?’

Despite his heightened emotional state, or perhaps because of it, Santo spoke softly but she flinched as if he’d raised his voice.

‘Well, what?’

‘Don’t even think about giving me anything other than the truth. You’d be wasting your breath.’

‘In that case why ask?’

He didn’t know what to say to her. She didn’t know what to say to him.

Their situation was painfully difficult.

Before tonight they’d never actually spoken. Even during that one turbulent encounter, they hadn’t spoken. Not one word had been exchanged. Oh, there’d been sounds. The ripping of clothes, the slide of flesh against flesh, ragged breathing—but no words. Nothing coherent from either of them. He was a man confident in his sexuality, but he still didn’t really understand what had happened that night.

Had the whole forbidden nature of their encounter acted as some sort of powerful aphrodisiac? Had the fact that their two families had been enemies for almost three generations added to the emotion that had brought them together like animals in the darkness?

Possibly. Either way, their relationship had been like a blast from a rocket engine, the sudden heat tearing through both of them, burning up common sense and reason. He should have known there would be a price. And clearly he’d been paying that price for the last three years.

‘Why the hell didn’t you tell me?’ His tone was raw and ragged and he watched as her breathing grew shallow.

‘For a supposedly clever man you ask stupid questions.’

‘Nothing—*nothing*—that has happened between our two families should have prevented you from telling me *this*.’ With a slice of his hand he gestured towards the open door. ‘This’ had vanished into the night with the accommodating Gina and letting him out of his sight was one of the hardest things Santo had ever done. Soon, he vowed. Soon, the child would never be out of his sight again. It was the only sure thing in this storm of uncertainty. ‘You should have told me.’

‘For what purpose? To have my son exposed to the same bitter feud that has coloured our entire lives? To have him used as some pawn in your power games? I have protected him from all of that.’

‘Our son—’ Santo spoke in a thickened tone ‘—he is my son, too. The product of both of us.’
‘He is the product of one night when you and I were—’
‘—were what?’

Her gaze didn’t falter. ‘We were foolish. Out of control. We did something stupid. Something we *never* should have done. I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Well, tough, because you’re going to talk about it. You should have talked about it three years ago when you first realised you were pregnant.’

‘Oh, don’t be so naive!’ Her temper flared as hot as his. ‘This was not some cosy romance that had unexpected consequences. It was complicated.’

‘The decision whether or not to tell a man he’s the father of your child is not complicated. *Cristo*—’ Floored by the monumental issues facing them, he let out a long breath and dragged his hand over the back of his neck, seeking calm and not finding it anywhere within his grasp. ‘I cannot believe this. I need time to think.’ He knew that decisions made in the heat of anger were never good ones and he needed them to be good ones.

‘There is nothing to think about.’

Santo cast his mind back to that night, a night he never allowed himself to think about because the good was irrevocably entwined with the really, really bad and it was impossible to unravel the two. ‘How did it happen? I used—’

‘Apparently there are some things even a Ferrara can’t control,’ she said coolly, ‘and this was one of them.’

He looked at her blankly. The whole night had merged for him. Pulling out details was impossible. It had been crazy, wild and—she was right—ill-advised. But what they’d shared hadn’t been the product of rational decision-making. It had been sheer animal lust, the like of which he’d never experienced before or since.

She’d been upset.

He’d put his hand on her shoulder.

She’d turned to him.

And that had been it—

Such a small spark to light such a raging fire.

And then, even before the heat had cooled, she’d had the call telling her that her brother had been killed. That single tragic phone call that had sliced through their loving like the blade of a guillotine. And after, the fallout. The recriminations and the speculation.

The young waiter appeared in the doorway, his eyes on Fia. ‘Is everything OK? I saw Luca awake, which is always nice because I managed to snatch a lovely cuddle, but I heard raised voices.’ He shot Santo a suspicious look, which Santo returned tenfold. The news that everyone appeared to be cuddling his son except him simply fuelled his already fiercely burning temper. An unfamiliar emotion streaked through him—the primal response of a man guarding his territory.

So his child was called Luca.

The fact that he’d learned the name from this man drove him to the edge of control.

What exactly was his relationship with Fia?

‘This is a private conversation. Get out,’ he said thickly and he heard Fia’s soft intake of breath.

‘It’s OK, Ben. Just go.’

Apparently Ben didn’t know what was good for him because he stood stubbornly in the doorway. ‘I’m not leaving until I know you’re all right.’ It was like a spaniel challenging a Rottweiler. He glared at Santo, who would have given him points for courage had he not been way past admiring the qualities of another man. Especially a man who was making puppy eyes at the woman who, only moments earlier, had been clutching his child.

‘I am giving you one more opportunity to leave and then I will remove you myself.’

‘Go, Ben!’ She sounded exasperated. ‘You’re just giving him another reason to throw his weight around.’

Ben gave her one last doubtful look and melted away into the darkness of the night, leaving the two of them alone.

Tension throbbed like a living force. The air was heavy with it. He could taste it on his tongue and feel the weight of it pressing down on his shoulders. And he knew she could feel it too.

His head was a mass of questions.

How had no one guessed? Had no one questioned the identity of the child’s father? He didn’t understand how she could have hidden such a thing.

‘You knew you were pregnant and yet you cut me out of your life.’

‘You were never in my life, Santo. And I was never in yours.’

‘We made a child together.’ His low growl came from somewhere deep inside him and he saw her recoil as if the reminder came as a physical blow.

‘You need to calm down. In just ten minutes you’ve frightened my child, virtually seduced his nanny, bawled me out and been unforgivably rude to someone I care about.’

‘I did *not* frighten our child.’ That accusation angered him more than any of the others. ‘You did that by creating this situation.’ And he still didn’t understand how she had kept her secret. His usually sharp mind refused to work. ‘This is your grandfather’s idea of revenge? Punishing the Ferraras by hiding the child?’

‘No!’ Her chest rose and fell, her breathing shallow. ‘He adores Luca.’

Santo raised his eyebrows in disbelief. ‘He adores a child who is half Ferrara? You expect me to believe that age has finally gifted a Baracchi with tolerance?’ He broke off, alerted by something in her eyes, some instinct that went bone-deep. And suddenly it fell into place. Finally he understood the truth and the reality was another blow to his already aching gut. ‘*Cristo*, he doesn’t know, does he?’ It was the only possible explanation and one that was confirmed by the look in her eyes.

‘Santo—’

‘Answer me.’ His voice didn’t sound like his own and he saw her take a step backwards. ‘You *will* tell me the truth. He doesn’t know, does he? You haven’t told him.’

‘How could I tell him?’ Underneath the desperation was a profound weariness, as if this issue were a heavy weight she’d been carrying for too long. ‘He hates everything about your family, and he hates *you* more than any man on the planet. Not just because your surname is Ferrara, but because—’ She didn’t finish the sentence and he let it hang there because to get involved in a discussion about her brother’s death would mean being sidetracked, and he refused to be sidetracked.

They had a child.

A child that was half Ferrara, half Baracchi. An unimaginable bloodline.

A child born out of one night that had ended in tragedy.

And the old man didn’t know.

He wondered how her grandfather could not have seen what he himself had seen instantly.

White-faced, she stared at him. Santo was so shell-shocked by the enormity of the secret she’d been carrying, he was reeling from it. How had she done it? She must have lain there every morning wondering whether today would be the day she’d be found out. Whether today would be the day a Ferrara would come and claim their own.

‘*Madre de Dio*, I cannot believe this. When the child is old enough to ask about his father, what did you intend to tell him? On second thought, don’t answer that,’ he said thickly, ‘I am not ready to hear the answer.’ He knew as well as anyone that life was no fairy story, but belief in the sanctity of family ran strong in his veins. Family was the raft that kept you afloat in stormy seas, the anchor that stopped you from drifting, the wind in the sail that propelled you forward. He was the product of his parents’ happy marriage and both his brother and sister had found love and created their own families. He’d assumed that the same would happen to him. Not once had he considered that he would have

to fight for the right to be a father to his own child. Nor had he dreamt of his child being raised in a family like the Baracchis. He wouldn't have wished it on anyone. It was a nightmare almost too painful to contemplate.

Her breathing was shallow. 'Please, you have to promise me that you will let me deal with this. My grandfather is old. He isn't well.' Her voice shook but Santo felt no sympathy. He felt bitter and angry and *raw*.

'You have had three years to deal with it. Now it's my turn. Did you really think I'd allow my son to be raised in your family? And without a father in his life? The notion of family is alien to a Baracchi.' He jabbed his fingers into his hair, his stress levels turning supersonic. 'When I think what the child must have gone through—'

'Luca is happy and well cared for.'

'I saw your childhood.' Santo let his hand fall to his side. 'I saw how it was for you. You don't understand what a family should be.' And it broke his heart that his son had been raised in a family like that.

Her face was ghostly pale. 'Luca's childhood is nothing like mine. And if you know what mine was like then you should also know that I would never want that for my son. I don't blame you for your concern but you are wrong. I *do* understand what a family should be. I always have.'

'How? Where would you learn that? Certainly not in your own home.' Her home life had been fractured, messy and unbelievably insecure because the Baracchi family didn't just fight their neighbours, they fought amongst themselves. If family was a boat built to weather stormy seas, then hers was a shipwreck.

The first time they'd met properly she'd been eight years old and hiding on the far side of the beach. *His* side, where no Baracchi was supposed to tread. She'd taken refuge in the disused boathouse, amongst jagged planks of wood and the acrid smell of oil. He'd been fourteen years old and totally at a loss to know what to do with his wild-haired intruder. Was he supposed to hold her captive? Ask for a ransom? In the end he'd done neither. Nor had he blown her cover.

Instead, intrigued by her defiance, spurred on by the lure of the forbidden, he'd let her hide there until she'd chosen to return home.

Weeks later he'd found out that the day she'd kept her solitary vigil in his boathouse had been the day her mother had walked out, leaving Fia's violent Sicilian father to cope with two children he'd never wanted. He remembered being surprised that she hadn't cried. It was years before he realised that Fia never cried. She kept all her emotions hidden inside and never expected comfort. Which was probably because she'd learned there was none to be had in her family.

Santo's mouth tightened.

Maybe she did shut people out, but there was no way in hell he'd let her shut him out. Not now. Not this time. 'You made your decision, by yourself with no reference to anyone else. Now I will make mine.' He cut her no slack. Didn't allow the beseeching look in her eyes to alter him from what he knew to be the right course of action.

'What do you mean?'

'When I'm ready to talk, I'll contact you. And don't even *think* of running because if you do I will hunt you down. There is nowhere you can hide. Nowhere on this planet you can take my son that I can't find you.'

'He is my son, too.'

Santo gave a humourless smile. 'And that presents us with an interesting challenge, doesn't it? He is possibly the first thing our two families have had in common. When I've decided what I'm going to do about that, I'll let you know.'

As the furious growl of the Lamborghini disturbed the silence of the night, Fia just made it to the bathroom and was violently sick. It could have been panic, fear, or some noxious combination of the two, but whatever it was it left her shaking and she hated the weakness and the feeling of

vulnerability. Afterwards she sat on the floor with her eyes closed, trying to formulate a plan but there was no plan she could make that he couldn't sweep aside.

He would take control, the way the Ferraras always took control. His contempt for her family would drive his decision-making. And part of her didn't blame him for that. In his position she probably would have felt the same way because, now, she understood how it felt to want to protect a child.

Fia wrapped her arms around her knees and pulled them closer, tucking herself into as small a space as possible.

He hadn't listened when she'd tried to explain herself. He hadn't believed her when she'd told him that she'd made sure that Luca's childhood was nothing like her own.

His mission now was to rescue his son from the Baracchi family.

There would be no softness. No concessions. No compromise.

Instead of being raised in a calm, loving atmosphere, Luca would be subjected to the intolerable pressures of animosity and resentment. He'd be the rope in an emotional tug of war.

And that was precisely why she'd chosen this particular rocky, deadly path and she'd lived with the lies, the worry and the stress for three years in order to protect her son.

'Mamma sick.' Luca stood there, his favourite bear clutched in his arms, that dark hair rumpled. The harsh bathroom lights spotlighted every feature and for a moment she couldn't breathe because right there, in her son's face, she saw Santo. Their child had inherited those unforgettable eyes, that same glossy dark hair. Even the shape of his mouth reminded her of his father and she wasn't going to start thinking about his stubborn streak ...

Realistically, it had only been a matter of time before her secret was out.

'I love you.' Impulsively she dragged him into her arms and kissed his head, letting the warmth of him flow into her. 'I'm always going to be here for you. And Gina, and Ben. You have people who love you. You won't ever be alone.' She held him tightly, as she had never been held. She kissed him, as she had never been kissed. Perhaps it wasn't fair to blame Santo Ferrara for assuming that his child was being raised in a toxic atmosphere. He had no idea how hard she'd worked to ensure that Luca's childhood was nothing like her own.

And as he snuggled against her, happy and content, she felt her eyes fill.

What had she lacked, she wondered, that her own mother hadn't felt this same powerful bond? Nothing, *nothing*, would induce her to walk away from her child. There was no price, no power, no promise that could make her do such a thing.

And there was no way she was going to let Santo take her son.

Blissfully ignorant of the fact that their lives were teetering on the edge of a dangerous chasm, he wriggled out of her arms.

'Bed.'

'Good idea,' she croaked, scooping him up and carrying him back to his bed. Whatever happened, she was going to protect him from the fallout of this. She wasn't going to let him be hurt.

'Man come back?'

Her insides churned again. 'Yes, he'll come back.' She was in no doubt about that. And when he returned he'd bring serious legal muscle. She had no doubt about that, either. Events had been set in motion and there was no stopping them. No stopping a Ferrara from getting what he wanted.

And Santo Ferrara wanted his son.

She sat on the bed, watching her son fall asleep, her love for him so huge that it filled every part of her. The strength of that bond made it all too easy for her to imagine Santo's feelings. Deep inside her, the guilt that she worked so hard to suppress awoke.

She'd never been comfortable with her decision. It had haunted her in the dark hours of the night when there were no distractions to occupy her mind. It wasn't that she regretted the choice she'd made. She didn't. But she'd learned that the right decision could feel completely wrong. And

then there were the dreams. Dreams that distorted reality. Twisted the impossible into the possible. Dreams of a life that didn't exist.

Blocking out images of black, silky lashes and a hard, sensual mouth, Fia stayed until Luca was safely asleep and then returned to the kitchen to clear up. Because she'd sent the staff home she had to do it herself, but the mindless work helped calm the panicky knot in her stomach. She poured her anxiety into each swipe of her cloth until every surface in the kitchen shone, until sweat pricked her brow, until she was too bone-tired to feel anything except the physical ache of hard labour. And then she grabbed a cold beer from the fridge and took it to the small wooden jetty that butted out from the restaurant.

Fishing boats bobbed quietly in the darkness, waiting to be taken out onto the water.

Usually this was a time to be calm, but tonight her nightly ritual failed to produce the desired effect.

Fia kicked off her shoes and sat on the jetty, feet dangling in the cool water, her gaze sliding to the lights of the Ferrara Beach Club on the opposite side of the bay. Eighty per cent of her customers tonight had come from the hotel. She had reservations for plenty more, booked months ahead. Twisting off the cap, she lifted the bottle to her lips, realising that by being good at what she did, she'd inadvertently drawn the eye of the enemy.

Her success had brought her out from under the radar. Instead of being irrelevant to the all-powerful Ferraras, she'd made herself significant. This was all her fault, she thought miserably. In pursuing her goal of providing for her family, protecting her son, she'd inadvertently exposed him.

'Fiammetta!'

Her grandfather's bark made her jump and she sprang to her feet and walked back towards the stone house that had been in the family for six generations, a feeling of sick dread in her stomach. '*Come stai?*' She kept her voice light. 'You're up late, Nonno. How are you feeling?'

'I'm as well as a man can be when he sees his granddaughter working herself to the bone.' He scowled down at the bottle in her hand. 'A man doesn't like to see a woman drinking beer.'

'Then it's a good job I don't have a man I need to worry about.' She teased him lightly, relieved that he had the energy to spar with her. This was their relationship. This was Baracchi love. She told herself that just because he didn't express it didn't mean he didn't feel it. On some days she actually believed that. 'What are you doing up? You should be asleep in bed.'

'Luca was crying.'

'He had a dream. He just wanted a cuddle.'

'You should leave him to cry.' Her grandfather gave a grunt of disapproval. 'He'll never grow up to be a man the way you coddle him.'

'He's going to be a fine man. The best.'

'The boy is spoiled. Every time I see him, someone is hugging him or kissing him.'

'You can't give a child too much love.'

'Did I fuss over my son the way you fuss over yours?'

No, and look at how that turned out. 'I think you should go to bed, Nonno.'

'*Can I cook for a few people?* That's what you said to me—' he winced as he walked stiffly towards the waterfront '—and before I know it my home is full of strangers and you are serving good Sicilian food on fancy plates and lighting candles for people who wouldn't know the difference between fresh food and fast food.'

'People travel a long way to taste my cooking. I'm running a successful business.'

'You shouldn't be running a business.' Her grandfather settled himself in his favourite chair at the water's edge. The chair he'd sat on when she was a child.

'I'm building a life for myself and a future for my child.' A life that was now overturned. A future that was threatened. Suddenly she didn't trust herself not to betray what she was feeling. 'I'll fetch you a drink. *Grappa?*'

She had to tell her grandfather about Santo, but first she had to work out how. How did you tell someone that the father of his precious great-grandchild was a man he hated above all others?

Fia walked back to the kitchen and grabbed the bottle and a glass. It was a long time since he'd mentioned the Ferraras. And that was because of her, of course. Concerned for Luca, she'd insisted that if he couldn't speak the name positively then he wasn't to speak the name at all.

At first she was just grateful that he'd taken her threat seriously, but now she was wondering whether it meant he'd actually softened over time.

Please. Please let him have softened—

Fia put the glass on the table in front of her grandfather and poured. 'So what's wrong?'

'You mean apart from the fact that you are here every night slaving in that kitchen while someone else looks after your child?'

'It's good for Luca to be with other people. Gina loves him.' She didn't have the family she wanted for her son, so she'd created it. Her son was never going to be lonely in the way she'd been lonely. He had people he could turn to. *People who would hug him when life threw rocks.*

'Love.' Her grandfather grunted with contempt. 'You are turning him into a girl. That's what happens when there is no father to teach a boy to be a man.'

It was the perfect opening for her to tell him what she needed to tell him. But Fia couldn't push the words past her dry throat. She needed time. *Time to discover what Santo intended to do.* 'Luca has male influences in his life.'

'If you're talking about that boy you employ in the restaurant, there's more testosterone in my finger than he has in his whole body. Luca needs a real man around.'

'You and I have very different ideas about what makes a real man.'

His bony shoulders slumped and the lines on his forehead were deep. In the past month he appeared to have aged a decade. 'This isn't what I wanted for you.'

'Life doesn't always turn out the way we plan it, Nonno. When life gives you olives, you make olive oil.'

'But you don't make olive oil!' He waved a hand in frustration. 'You send our olives to our neighbours and *they* make our oil.'

'Which I use in my restaurant. The restaurant that everyone in Sicily is talking about. I was in the paper last week.' But somehow the buzz that she'd got from that fleeting moment of success had gone. Recent events had diminished it to nothing. 'The week before I was mentioned in an important travel blog. The article was called "Sicilian Secrets". I'm doing well. I'm good at my work.'

'Work is what a woman does before she finds a husband.'

Fia put the bottle down on the table. 'Don't say that. Soon, Luca will be old enough to understand you and I don't want him growing up with that opinion.'

'Men ask you out! But do you say yes? No, you don't. Dark, blond, tall, short—it's always "no". You shut everyone out and you have done since Luca's father.' He looked at her intently and Fia's fingers tightened on the bottle.

'When I meet a man I'm interested in, I'll say yes.' But she knew that wasn't going to happen. There had only ever been one man in her life and right now he despised her. And worse, he thought she was an unfit mother.

Barely able to think about that, she focused on her grandfather and felt a flicker of worry as she saw him absently rub his fingers across his chest. Impulsively, she reached across the table and touched his hand. When he immediately withdrew, she tried not to mind. Her grandfather wasn't tactile, was he? It was silly of her to even try. He didn't hug her and he didn't hug Luca. 'What's wrong? More pain?'

'Don't fuss.' There was a long silence while he glared at her and something in his gaze made her stomach clench.

Was it just her guilty conscience or did he—?

‘You weren’t going to tell me, were you?’ The harshness of his voice shocked her and she felt as if the earth had shaken beneath her feet.

‘Tell you what?’ Her heart was suddenly pounding like a drum in a rock band.

‘He was here tonight. Santo Ferrara.’ He said it as if the name tasted bad on his tongue and Fia put the bottle down before it slipped from her hand.

‘Nonno—’

‘I know you banned me from mentioning his name but when a Ferrara walks onto my property, that gives me the right to talk about him. You should have told me he was here.’

How much did he know? How much had he heard?

‘I didn’t tell you because I knew this would be your reaction.’

He thumped his fist on the table. ‘I warned that boy not to step onto my land again.’

Fia thought about the width and power of those shoulders. The haze of dark stubble accentuating that hard jaw. ‘He’s not a boy. He’s a man.’ A wealthy man who now ran a global corporation. A man with the power to shake up everything she loved about her life. A man who had gone off to talk to lawyers and think about the future of her son.

Their son.

Oh, God—

Her grandfather’s eyes glowed bright with rage. ‘That *man* walked into my home—*my home*—’ he stabbed the air with his finger ‘—with no respect for my feelings.’

‘Nonno—’

‘Did he have the courage to face me?’

‘*Calma!* Calm down.’ Fia was on her feet; the emotion was a burning ball at the base of her ribs. If her grandfather was this upset now, how much worse was it going to be when he found out the truth? It was starting again, only this time Luca would be in the middle of it. ‘I didn’t want him to see you and this is why! You’re getting upset.’

‘Of course I am upset. How could I not be upset after what he has done?’ His face was white in the flickering light from the candle and Fia was sure that hers was equally pale.

‘You *promised* me when Luca was born that you would let the past go.’

He gave her a long, long look. ‘Why are you defending him? Why is it that I’m not allowed to say a bad word about a Ferrara?’

Fia felt the heat pour into her cheeks. ‘Because I don’t want Luca growing up with that animosity. It’s horrible.’

‘I hate them.’

Fia breathed deeply. ‘I know.’ *Oh, yes, she knew.* And she’d thought about that every day since she’d felt the first fluttering low in her abdomen. She’d thought about it as she’d pushed her son from her body, when she’d first looked into his eyes and every time she kissed him goodnight. There were days when she felt as if she couldn’t carry the weight of it any more.

Her grandfather’s eyes were fierce. ‘Because of Ferrara, you will be alone in the world when I’m gone. Who will look after you?’

‘I will look after us.’ She knew he blamed Santo for her brother’s death. She also knew it was pointless to remind him that her brother had barely been able to look after himself, let alone another. It had been his own reckless irresponsibility that had killed him, not Santo Ferrara.

Her grandfather rose unsteadily to his feet. ‘If Ferrara dares to come back here again and I’m not around you can give him a message from me—’

‘Nonno—’

‘—you can tell him I’m still waiting for him to act like a man and take responsibility for his actions. And if he dares set foot on my property again I’ll make him pay.’

CHAPTER THREE

SANTO sat and waited in his office at the Ferrara Beach Club—an office hastily vacated in his honour by the manager of the hotel. If he needed an indication as to why this hotel was less successful than the others in the group it was right there on the desk. Lack of discipline and organisation was visible everywhere, from the scattered papers to the dying plant that drooped sadly in the corner of the office. Later, he'd deal with it. Right now he had other things on his mind. Mocking him from the wall was an enlarged photograph of the hotel manager, posing with his wife and two smiling children.

A typical Sicilian family.

Santo stared moodily at that picture. Right now he felt like tearing it down. He'd never considered himself idealistic, but was it idealistic to assume that one day his family would look much like the one in the picture?

Apparently it was.

He glanced at his watch.

Not for one moment did he doubt that she would come. Not because he had faith in her sense of justice but because she knew that if she didn't, he'd come and get her.

His face expressionless, he waited as darkness gave way to the first fingers of dawn; as the sun rose over the sea, showering light across the smooth glassy surface.

He'd sent the text in the early hours, at a time when most people would have been asleep. It hadn't occurred to him to try and sleep. There had been no rest for him and he knew there would have been none for her, either.

Exhaustion fogged his mind and yet his thoughts were clear. As far as he was concerned the decision was clear. If only the emotions were as simple to deal with.

He checked his phone again and found a message from his brother, another person who had been frequenting the early hours. Just four words—

What do you need?

Unconditional support. Unquestioning loyalty. All those things that a family should offer, and which his did. He'd been raised with that support, surrounded by love. Unlike his son, who had spent his early years in the equivalent of a pit of vipers.

Sweat beaded on his brow. He could barely allow himself to think about what his son's life must have been like. What was the long-term impact of being raised in an emotional desert? And what if the abuse hadn't just been emotional? Although he'd been young, he still remembered the mutterings and the rumours about the Baracchi family. Remembered seeing Fia sporting bruises almost all the time.

The knock on the door was the most reluctant sound he'd ever heard.

His eyes narrowed and he felt a rush of adrenaline, but it was only a young chef from the kitchen, bringing him more coffee.

'Grazie—'

The rattle of the cup on the saucer and her nervous glance told him that his black mood was visible on his face although they'd probably all misinterpreted the cause. Everyone in the hotel from the top down was jumpy about his visit. Normally they'd have reason. They had no way of knowing that his current mood was caused by something different. That a reorganization of the hotel was the last thing on his mind right now.

She melted away but moments later there was another tap on the door and he knew instantly that this time it was her.

The door opened and Fia stood there, those fierce green eyes glittering like jewels in a face as pale as morning mist. One look at her white face told him that she hadn't had any more rest than he had.

She looked washed out and stressed. *And ready for a fight.*

Across the room their eyes clashed.

They'd been lovers.

They'd shared the ultimate intimacy, but that wasn't going to help them navigate the treacherous waters they now found themselves in because they'd shared nothing else. They had no relationship. Essentially they were strangers. All they'd had were a few chance encounters and one stolen night, one delicious taste of the forbidden. None of that was going to help them through this desperate situation. And it *was* desperate; even he could see that.

'Where is my son?' He snapped out the words and she leaned her back against the door and looked at him.

'Asleep in his bed. In his home. And if he wakes, Gina is there, and my grandfather.'

The anger rushed at him like a ravenous beast ready to snap through the last threads of his fragile self-control. 'And that is supposed to provide me with comfort?'

'He loves Luca.'

'I think we have a very different idea of what that word means.'

'No.' Her eyes were fierce. 'No, we don't.'

Santo's mouth tightened. 'And will he still "love" him when he discovers the identity of his father? I think we both know the answer to that.' He rose from his chair and saw her hand shoot towards the door handle. His mouth tightened and his eyes narrowed in a warning. 'If you leave this room then we will be having this conversation in public. Is that what you want?'

'What I want is for you to calm down and be rational.'

'Oh, I'm rational, *tesoro*. I have been thinking clearly from the moment I saw my child.'

The atmosphere thickened. The air grew overly warm.

'What do you want me to say? That I'm sorry? That I did the wrong thing?' Her voice was smoky-soft and that voice drew his eyes to the smooth column of her throat and then to her mouth. It had been just one night but the memory of it had left deep scars in his senses. He knew how she'd taste because he remembered it vividly. He knew how she'd feel because he remembered that too. Not just the smooth texture of her skin, but the softness of her gorgeous hair. Now released from the clips that had restrained it during cooking, it fell down her back like a dark flame, reflecting the sunrise back at him. He remembered the day her father had cut it short in a blaze of Baracchi temper, hacking with kitchen scissors until she'd been left with a jagged crop. A horrified Santo had witnessed the incident and had tried to intervene but the sight of him had simply inflamed the situation.

She'd sat still, he remembered, saying nothing as hunks of long hair had landed in her lap. Afterwards she'd hidden in the boathouse, her fierce glare challenging him to say one word about it and of course he hadn't because their relationship didn't encompass verbal exchanges.

And it had been in the boathouse, on that one night that had ended so tragically, that their relationship had shifted from nothing to everything.

Santo hauled in a deep breath, resisting that savage, elemental instinct that had him wanting to flatten her to the wall and drag the answers from her. 'When did you find out you were pregnant?'

'Why does that matter?'

'I'm the one asking the questions and right now you'll answer any question I choose to ask you.'

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the door. 'Not for ages. Afterwards ... I can't really remember. It's all a blur. First there was the hospital. Then the funeral. And my grandfather ...' Her sudden silence said more than words. Her breathing was fractured. 'It was chaos. The last thing I was thinking about was me.'

Yes, it had been chaos. Pandemonium. A huge tangled mess of blame, guilt, regret and raw emotion. The frantic rush to save a life that was already lost. A moment of intimacy lost in a sea of negative publicity and cruel gossip. Remembering it sent the tension flowing through his muscles and he knew she was feeling the same. In fact he was fairly sure that the only thing holding her upright was willpower.

‘So when *did* you find out?’

‘I don’t know. I suppose it must have been a couple of months. Longer—’ she rubbed her fingers over her forehead ‘—it was a very difficult time. I probably should have realised sooner but at the time I just thought that everything I was feeling was part of the shock. I felt sick the whole time but I thought that was grief. And when I did finally work it out it seemed like—’

‘—one more problem?’ His hands were clenched by his sides but her eyes flew to his, appalled.

‘No!’ She shook her head violently. ‘I was going to say that it seemed like a miracle.’ Her words dropped to a whisper. ‘The best thing in my life came from the worst night of my life.’

It wasn’t the response he’d expected and for a moment it threw him. ‘When you realised, you should have contacted me.’

‘For what purpose?’ There was despair in her tone. ‘So that you and my grandfather could rip each other to pieces? Do you think I wanted Luca exposed to that? I made the decision that was best for my baby.’

‘*Our* baby,’ Santo corrected her with lethal emphasis. ‘And from now on we’ll be making those decisions together.’ He saw the panic flicker across her face and knew that anxiety was responsible for those dark shadows under her eyes.

‘Luca is happy. I can understand how you’re feeling, but—’

‘You do not understand how I’m feeling.’ His voice was raw. Savage. He didn’t know himself and he certainly didn’t trust himself. ‘This is my son we’re talking about. Did you honestly believe I would want him to grow up a Baracchi?’ He braced himself to ask the question that had robbed him of sleep. ‘Has he ever hit him?’

‘No!’ Her denial was immediate and sincere. ‘I would never, ever allow anyone to touch Luca.’

‘And how do you defend him? You never defended yourself.’ Perhaps it was low of him, but he told himself that his son’s welfare was more important than her feelings. ‘You just endured it.’

‘I was eight years old!’ Hurt and reproach flickered in her eyes and suddenly he felt like an animal for ripping into her. That was what people had done all their lives, wasn’t it?

‘I apologise for that remark,’ he breathed and she shook her head.

‘You don’t need to. I don’t blame you for being protective of your child.’ She spoke quietly, as if she had long since resigned herself to the fact that no one had any concern for her. ‘And yes, I was brought up in a violent family but that violence came from my father, not my grandfather. I assure you that Luca has never been at risk. He has had a warm, loving childhood.’

‘Without a father in his life.’

She flinched as if he’d slapped her. ‘Yes.’

‘Naturally I am relieved that he has been safe, but that doesn’t change the fundamental issue here. Family is the most important thing to me. I am a Ferrara and we look after our own. There are no circumstances—*none*—that would induce me to walk away from my own child.’ His words struck another blow because of course her mother had done exactly that. She’d walked away when Fia was only eight years old.

Her face lost the last hint of colour and he wondered briefly how it must feel to watch a parent walk away, leaving you to cope with danger alone.

He knew the story, as did everyone else. Her mother had been an English tourist who had fallen for the charms of the smooth, good-looking Pietro Baracchi, only to discover after the wedding that he was an incurable womanizer with a dangerous temper. After one beating too many, she’d turned her back on Sicily and her two children and soon after that Fia’s father had been killed in a drunken boating accident.

She watched him steadily. ‘You are very quick to judge me, but did you bother to come back and find out if there were consequences to our night together?’

Her unexpected attack shook him. ‘I used contraception.’

‘And that worked out well, didn’t it?’ She tilted her head. ‘Did you, at any point, wonder how I was doing after that night? How I was coping after the accident that killed my brother? Did you bother to come and find me?’

‘I did not wish to inflame the situation.’ But her words had kindled a nagging guilt. He should have contacted her. The thought was uncomfortable, like walking with a sharp stone in your shoe.

‘So you’re admitting your concern that having contact with me would escalate our problems.’ Her voice was remarkably calm. ‘How much more inflammatory would it have been if I’d told you there was a child?’

‘The child changes everything.’

‘It changes nothing. It just makes everything harder.’ She pushed her hands into the pockets of her jeans. With a face free of make-up and her hair loose, she looked impossibly young. More like a teenager than a successful businesswoman. ‘It’s a waste of time dwelling on what is already done so let’s talk about the future. Of course you want to see him. I understand that. We can arrange something.’

Distracted by the length of her legs in those jeans, Santo frowned. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘I’m saying that you can see Luca. We’ll work something out, providing you agree to certain rules.’

She was giving *him* rules? Stunned, he could barely respond. ‘What rules?’

‘I will not at any time tolerate you speaking ill of my grandfather in front of Luca. Nor will you denigrate anyone else in my family, and that includes me. No matter how angry you are with me, you will not show it in front of Luca. As far as he is concerned, we are united. We might not be together, but I want him to believe we are on friendly terms. Providing you agree to that then I’ll let you have full access.’

Genuinely shocked at the depth of her misunderstanding, Santo felt exasperation surge through him. ‘Access? You think I am talking about visiting rights? You think this is about making polite arrangements to take my child on the occasional outing?’

‘Don’t you want that?’

‘*Sì*, I want access. Full access.’ His tone was a perfect reflection of his mood. Grim. ‘The sort of access that comes from being a full-time father. Access to tuck him in at night and get him up in the morning. Access to spend all the time I want to spend with him. Access to teach him what family is *truly* about. And that is what is going to happen. I have had lawyers working through the night drawing up the necessary paperwork to acknowledge him as my son. *My* son.’

There was a hideous silence.

For a moment she said nothing and then she exploded across the room like a wild thing and pounded his chest with her fists.

‘You will *not* take him from me! I won’t let you.’ She was so furious and he was so shocked by the unexpected explosion of emotion it took him a few seconds to grasp those slender wrists, a few more seconds to free himself from a lock of that vivid hair that had wrapped itself around him.

‘And yet you took him from me—’ He enunciated every syllable, threw those words right into her shocked face and saw the exact moment reality sank home.

‘I’m his mother—’ her voice was hoarse ‘—I will not let you take him. I will find a way of stopping you. He needs me.’

Santo paused long enough to make her suffer a fraction of what he had suffered since he’d discovered the truth. Then he released her hands and stepped away from her. ‘If you’re trying to impress me with your maternal dedication then don’t waste your time. Even if everything else you say is true, the fact is that you have employed a nanny.’

She stepped back from him, confusion on her face. ‘What does Gina have to do with this?’

‘You don’t look after him yourself.’

‘I do look after him—’ her eyes were stricken ‘—and there are reasons I choose to have a nanny. I can—’

‘You don’t have to explain. Caring for a child full-time is a demanding experience. A young child is very restricting, as your mother discovered. She chose to walk away from it. I’m willing to give you the opportunity to do the same.’

Her eyes were huge. ‘I don’t understand what you’re saying.’

‘I’m saying that I will take full responsibility for him.’

‘You’re ... threatening to take my son from me?’

‘Offering,’ Santo interjected smoothly, watching her face closely. ‘Offering, not threatening. And if you want to see him then of course that can be arranged.’

Her breathing was shallow. ‘You think I want to give him away?’

‘You can have your life back. And given that I’m prepared to sweeten the deal with a significant financial incentive, it could be a very comfortable life. It’s a generous offer. Take it. You’d never have to work again.’

She lifted her hands to her cheeks and gave a choked laugh. ‘You really don’t know anything about me, do you? I love my son, and if you truly believe for a moment that I’d give him to you on any terms then you have no idea who you’re dealing with.’ Her hands dropped to her sides. Clenched into fists. ‘There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to protect my child.’

Unmoved by the anger in her eyes, Santo nodded. ‘Your mother would have taken the money and run. It’s to your credit that you didn’t do the same.’

‘So this was some sort of test?’ She gave a moan of disgust. ‘You’re sick, do you know that?’

‘Our child’s future is at stake. There is nothing I wouldn’t do to protect him. If protecting him means offending you, I’ll do that too.’ He threw her own words back at her and she wrapped her arms around herself.

‘I am not my mother. I will never leave Luca.’

‘In that case we will find another solution.’ And there was only one that he could see. He consoled himself with the fact that at least she was making an effort to fight for her child.

‘Do you think I haven’t searched for one?’ Her raw tone exposed layers of despair. ‘There *is* no solution. I don’t want him shuttled between us. I don’t want him absorbing all the bad feeling that runs between our families. He’s been brought up in an atmosphere of happiness and calm.’

‘Knowing your grandfather, I find that impossible to believe.’

‘My grandfather has stuck to my rules.’

Santo frowned. ‘More rules?’

‘Yes. From the moment Luca was born, I insisted that any mention of the name Ferrara in our house had to be positive. I didn’t want my son growing up in the same poisonous atmosphere I experienced.’

Genuinely surprised, Santo lifted his eyebrows. ‘And how did you achieve this miracle of good behaviour?’

‘I threatened to take his grandson away unless he agreed to my terms.’

If he’d been surprised before, he was shocked now. *So she was stronger than she looked, then.* ‘Ingenious.’

‘You will abide by the same rule. You will not speak badly about my family in front of Luca. If you can’t say anything nice, then you don’t mention us. When he spends time with you I want to be confident that you are not denigrating my family and I *will* know because right now Luca is like a recording device. He repeats everything he hears.’

Fascinated that so much passion could be trapped in such a small package and reluctantly impressed at her steadfast refusal to involve herself in the Baracchi/Ferrara hostilities, Santo took his time to respond.

‘Firstly,’ he said softly, ‘the bad feeling was all on your side. We made several overtures, all of which were rejected. Secondly, you will know what I am saying to Luca because you will be there to hear it in person. Thirdly, our families will be merged, so all this ceases to be relevant.’

‘Merged?’ Nervous, she pushed her hair back from her face. ‘You mean because Luca belongs to both of us?’

‘I mean because I intend to marry you.’

Silence spread across the room.

For a moment he wondered if she’d actually heard him.

Then she made a strange sound in her throat and took a step backwards.

‘Marry you?’ Her voice was barely audible. ‘You have to be joking.’

‘Relish the moment, *tesoro*. Up until now, women have waited in vain for a proposal of marriage from me.’

She looked as if she’d suffered a major shock. ‘You’re proposing.’

‘In a practical sense, yes. In a romantic sense, no,’ he drawled, ‘so if you’re expecting me to get down on one knee you can forget it.’

This, he thought, would be a real test of her devotion to their son.

She lifted her hand to her throat and looked at him as if he was mad. ‘Apart from the fact that we haven’t laid eyes on each other for three years and barely know each other, there is no way our families would accept this.’

‘I presume you are talking about your side of the family, because my side will support me in whatever decision I make. That’s what families do. The reaction of yours is of no interest to me.’ He gave an indifferent shrug. ‘And as for the fact that we barely know each other, that will be rectified quickly enough. You will get to know me fast enough because I don’t intend to let you out of my sight.’

She sleepwalked to the window. ‘I saw a picture of you just last week strolling along a red carpet with a woman on your arm—you have a million women chasing after you.’

‘Then it’s fortunate for you that I was waiting for that one special person and hadn’t yet made that commitment.’ His expectations mocked him. His brother and his sister both had strong, happy marriages. He’d had no reason to believe that his wouldn’t be the same. His hopes for the future were undergoing a transformation so rapid that it left him reeling.

‘I can’t accept your proposal.’ Her voice had lost some of its strength. ‘I don’t need to. I run a successful business and—’

‘This isn’t about you, it’s about Luca. Or does your streak of selflessness only emerge when it suits you? If you truly have Luca’s best interests at heart then you will do what is right for him.’ He came right back at her, offering no soft words of reassurance and she shook her head frantically.

‘It would be wrong for Luca, too.’

‘What’s “wrong” is my child growing up in a family that doesn’t know the meaning of the word,’ he said coldly. ‘He is a Ferrara and he is entitled to all the love and security that comes with being a Ferrara. And I am going to use every means at my disposal to make sure he is given that right.’

‘You’re doing this to punish me.’ Her eyes were horrified. She knew how much power he wielded. She knew exactly what he could achieve if he set his mind to it. He saw her mind going to all sorts of places and he let it happen because it suited his purpose to scare her.

‘Luca deserves to be raised in a strong, solid family, not that I expect you to understand that.’ Another low blow and to her credit she didn’t flinch from it.

‘I do understand that. I understand that an ideal family is a unit of people who love and support you unconditionally. I admit I didn’t have that, so I created it. I wanted Luca to be surrounded by people who would love him and support him and in reality I did need help because I wanted to be able to support us financially and not rely on my grandfather.’

‘That is the most convoluted justification for a nanny I’ve ever heard.’

‘You are very disparaging about nannies, but that is because you have aunts and cousins who all help each other with childcare. I don’t have that and so I found a warm, loving girl I trust. She’s been with us since Luca was born, and so has Ben because I wanted him to have a good male role model—’ She bit her lower lip. ‘I’m aware that my grandfather isn’t soft or tactile. He never hugs and I wanted Luca to be hugged. I wanted him surrounded by people who felt like I did. People who would give him affection. I didn’t have a family like yours, but I tried to create one for him.’

She’d *created* a family?

Santo thought about what he’d seen. About the amount of affection he’d witnessed in that short time with his son. ‘If that is true, then that is definitely a point in your favour, but it is no longer necessary. Luca doesn’t need a stand-in family. He can have the real thing.’

‘You’re not thinking straight.’ Her voice was remarkably strong. ‘My father married my mother because he made her pregnant. I was first-hand witness to the fact that approach doesn’t work. And now you are suggesting we do the same thing?’

‘*Not* the same thing.’ He heard the chill in his own voice. ‘Our marriage will be nothing like your parents’, I can assure you of that. They led separate lives and their children—*you*—were the casualties of their selfish, hubristic existence, not to mention the vicious Baracchi temper. Our marriage will not be like that.’

She rubbed her fingers over her brow and gave him a desperate look. ‘You are angry and I don’t blame you for that, but please, please think of Luca.’

‘I have thought of nothing but Luca since I walked into your kitchen last night.’

‘How can he possibly benefit from you and I being together? You are being hasty—’

‘Hasty?’ Just thinking about how much of his son’s life he’d missed made him want to punch his fist through something. ‘As far as I’m concerned we are long past “hasty”. Luca has an aunt and an uncle. Cousins to play with. He has a whole family he knows nothing about.’ Seeing the wistfulness in her eyes, he drove his point home. ‘As a Ferrara he will never feel lonely or unloved. He will never have to hide in an abandoned boathouse because his family is in crisis.’

‘You bastard—’ She whispered the words, her eyes two deep pools of pain, but Santo was impervious to any emotion but anger.

‘You hid my child from me. You robbed him of the right to a warm, loving family and you robbed me of something that can never be returned. Do I intend to dictate terms from now on? Yes, I do. And if that makes me a bastard I’ll happily live with that title. Think about it.’ He strode towards the door. ‘And while you’re thinking, I have work to do.’

‘You’re going to *work*?’

‘Of course. I have a company to run.’

She shook her head in disbelief. ‘I ... I need some time to decide what is best for Luca.’

Holding on to his temper, Santo yanked open the door. ‘Having a father and joining the Ferrara family is what is best for Luca and even twisted Baracchi thinking will struggle to distort that fact. You have until tonight to see sense. And I suggest you tell your grandfather the truth, or I’ll do it for you.’

CHAPTER FOUR

THERE was nothing quite so cruel as the distortion of a dream.

How many times had she stared across the bay and envied the family life of the close-knit Ferraras? How many times had she wished she were part of that? It was no coincidence that in times of trauma she'd chosen to hide in their boathouse, as if simply by being there she might soak up some residual warmth.

She'd crawled through the open window, grazing her leg on the rough wood of the window frame, covering herself in dust as she'd landed. Fia hadn't cared about any of that.

With the sea lapping at the door that conveniently faced away from the bay, she had no fear that someone would find her. Who would look for her here, in the enemy camp? So sure had she been of the seclusion of her hiding place that when she'd seen Santo standing on the rocks, watching her, she'd known a moment of pure terror. Too afraid even to breathe, she'd waited for him to blow her cover. Her family hated his. Even a mention of the Ferrara name was enough to sour the atmosphere in her house for days. The only thing the Baracchi family knew how to nurture was a grudge.

And so she'd waited for Santo Ferrara to blow her cover.

Not only had he not done that, but he'd left her alone, as if understanding her need for space.

To her eight-year-old eyes, he'd turned from a boy she'd envied into something close to a god. The boathouse became her regular hiding place and from there she could observe the Ferraras and see the differences between their family and her own. Suspicion turned to wistful envy. She'd envied the family picnics, their games on the beach. It was from them she'd learned that a quarrel could be affectionate, that a father could embrace a child, that a sister and brother could be close, *that a family could be a unit*.

Some of the girls at school had joked about discovering that they were secretly a princess. Fia's childhood dream was to wake up one day and discover that she was secretly a Ferrara; that there had been some mix-up at the hospital and somehow she'd ended up in the wrong family. That one day they'd claim her.

Be careful what you wish for.

Her head throbbing from lack of sleep, her stomach churning from an encounter she'd found hideously stressful, Fia dragged her mind back to the present and tried to work out what to do next. She had until tonight to find a way to tell her grandfather that the man he hated above all other was Luca's father.

Once she'd negotiated that hurdle she'd move on to the next one. How to respond to Santo's 'proposal' of marriage.

The suggestion was utterly ridiculous.

What sane woman would agree to marry a man who felt the way Santo felt about her?

On the other hand she could hardly criticise him for fighting for his child when her whole life had been spent wishing that her parents had done that for her. How could she argue with his claim that her son deserved to be a Ferrara when she'd modelled her little family on them?

If she agreed to his terms then Luca would grow up a Ferrara. He'd have the life she'd craved as a child. He would be cocooned in a warm and loving family, wrapped up in love.

And for that privilege she would have to pay a very high price.

She would have to join the family too, only unlike her son she would never truly be part of it. She would be tolerated, rather than welcomed. She'd be on the outside.

And she'd spend every day of her life with a man who didn't love her. Who was furious with the decision she'd made.

How was that good for Luca?

It wasn't.

Somehow she had to make Santo understand that no one would benefit from such an arrangement.

Mind made up, she arrived back at the Beach Shack to find the kitchen a hive of activity. Life was the only thing that could fall apart and yet still carry on, she thought numbly. She should have been relaxed, here in her tiny slice of paradise with the sparkling Mediterranean Sea lapping at the shore just steps away from her, but she'd never felt more stressed in her life.

'Hey, Boss, I wondered where you were. I met the boat this morning. Beat everyone to it. The *gamberi* look good—' Ben was hauling a box of supplies into the kitchen. 'I've put them on the menu. *Gamberi e limone con pasta?*' He caught her expression and frowned. 'But if you'd rather do something else then just tell me.'

'It's fine.' Functioning on automatic, she checked the quality of the fruit and vegetables that had been delivered by her local suppliers. It was as if nothing had changed, and yet everything had changed. 'Did the avocados arrive?'

'Yes. They look perfect. It was a good idea to switch.' He paused with a box clutched to his chest. 'So, are you OK?'

He wasn't really asking that, of course. He was asking what had happened with Santo and she wasn't ready to discuss that with anyone. 'Where is my grandfather?'

'Still in the house, I think. Oh, and Luca has a new word—' he was grinning at her '—*gamberi*. Gina and I took him down to the quay this morning while they were unloading the boat. He was fascinated by the octopus. Wanted to take it home. Which we did. But we didn't tell him we'd be cooking it and serving it with wine later.'

She managed a smile. Luca had grown up surrounded by these people. He was happy and confident. He'd witnessed none of the emotional fireworks that had scorched her childhood. Her heart ached to think that the simplicity of his life had gone for ever.

And just as she had that thought, Ben frowned over her shoulder.

'He's early for lunch, isn't he? And overdressed.'

Fia looked round and saw a bulky man in a suit hovering at the edge of her restaurant.

Her temper flared. Santo had promised her until tonight but already he was making his presence felt. 'Carry on, Ben,' she said quickly. 'I'll deal with this.' She had her phone in her hand and was dialling as she walked. 'Put me through to Ferrara—I don't care if he's in a meeting—tell him it's Fia Baracchi. Do it now ...' Adrenaline coursed around her veins and she was ready to stalk right over there and smash her way into his precious meeting if she had to but moments later she heard his smooth masculine voice on the phone.

'This had better be important.'

'I have a man who looks like something straight from some mob movie prowling around my restaurant.'

'Good. That means he is doing his job.'

'And what exactly is his job?'

'He's in charge of security for the Ferrara Group. He's conducting a risk assessment.'

'A risk assessment?'

'Use your brain, Fia.'

From his curt tone she assumed he had people in the office with him and had no wish to broadcast his personal business. Soon the whole world would know, she thought numbly. They'd all know that Santo Ferrara had a son. And when that happened—

She wondered how he could concentrate in a meeting. She was so distracted she could barely string a coherent sentence together.

'I want him out of here. He'll frighten my customers.'

'The welfare of your customers is not my concern.'

Fia eyed the physical bulk and intimidating presence of the man currently exploring the perimeter of the restaurant and played the one card that was likely to influence him. 'He is going to frighten Luca.'

'Luigi is a family man and brilliant with children. And he's part of our deal. Now go and fulfil your part. Tell your grandfather or I'll do it myself. And don't ring me again unless it's urgent.' He hung up and Fia stalked over to the man, temper boiling, feeling as helpless as a fish trapped in a net.

'In two hours my restaurant will be full of customers. I don't want them thinking there is a problem.'

'As long as I'm here, there won't be a problem.'

'I don't want you here. You stand out. My guests will worry that something is going on. Luca is—' The fight went out of her and she swallowed. 'He's led a very low-profile life. I don't want him frightened.' She'd expected him to argue with her, to show the same rigid inflexibility as his arrogant boss, but to her surprise his eyes were sympathetic.

'I'm only here for his protection. If we can find a way to keep that low-key, that's fine by me.'

He knew the history. She could see it in his eyes and she lifted her chin, prepared to fight the whole world if she had to.

'I can protect my own son.'

'I know you think you can.' His voice was gruff. 'But he isn't just *your* son.' The implication was that it was the other half of the gene pool that mattered. If Luca had truly just been her son, he wouldn't have needed protection. Unfortunately his father was one of the most powerful men in Sicily and that bloodline made him a potential target for all sorts of unscrupulous individuals. The thought made her want to be sick.

'Is there really a risk?'

'Not with the security that Santo Ferrara has in place. Give me a minute to think about this —' He looked around the restaurant. 'We can work something out that keeps everyone happy.' His response was so unexpected that Fia felt emotion well up inside her.

Horried, she gulped it down. 'I ... Why are you being kind?'

'You gave my niece a job last summer when she had some trouble at home.' His voice was neutral. 'She had no experience, but you took her on.'

'Sabina is your niece?'

'My sister's child.' He cleared his throat. 'Why don't you give me the chair at the corner of the restaurant? I'll move a table to a position that works for me and I'll linger over my meal. That way I can blend with your customers and everyone is happy.'

Fia stared at him. 'And if he finds out?' There was no need to spell out who 'he' was.

'The boss doesn't micromanage his staff. He employs people he trusts and then lets them do their job in the way that best suits them.' He gave a faint smile. 'I wouldn't work for him if he didn't.'

Right now she didn't need to hear admiration in anyone's voice when they talked about Santo. But at least Luigi appeared reasonable. More reasonable than his boss.

'You can take that table—' agreeing to the compromise, she gestured '—and it would be great if you could take off your jacket. We're pretty casual here, especially at lunchtime.'

'Mamma!' Luca came sprinting through the restaurant and she heard Luigi's sudden intake of breath as he had his first glimpse of the child he'd been assigned to protect.

'*Madre di Dio—*'

The likeness was that obvious? Fia scooped her son into her arms protectively but he gazed curiously at the big man in the suit. He hadn't learned fear, she thought numbly. He'd been brought up here, by the beach, surrounded by people who loved him and guests who thought he was a charming addition to this hidden Sicilian gem. But once people knew he was Santo Ferrara's son, there would always be a risk. Even she could see that.

‘This is Luigi,’ she said huskily, ‘and he is going to be eating in our restaurant today. Aren’t we lucky?’ She looked at the reassuring power house that was Santo’s head of security and gave a slight smile. ‘Thank you.’

‘*Figurati*. You’re welcome.’ He winked at the boy and went to rearrange tables while Fia returned to her job.

A busy lunchtime merged into a crazy evening where she hardly emerged from the kitchen. She had time to check on her grandfather briefly, but no time to embark on a difficult conversation. It hung over her as she tossed *gamberi* into fresh pasta, and served her speciality dessert, *Zuccotto al cioccolato*. And all the time she was aware that time was running out.

By the time Gina and Ben had left for the night and everywhere was quiet, she was a nervous wreck.

All day she’d been rehearsing the best way to tell her grandfather, trying to work out which combination of words would cause the least shock.

I need to talk to you about Luca.

You’ve often asked me about Luca’s father ...

Bracing herself for major conflict, she walked into the kitchen to finish her preparations for the next day and saw the frail figure of her grandfather crumpled on the floor.

‘Nonno! *Cristo*, please, no!’ She was across the floor and down on her knees in seconds, hands shaking as she gave his shoulder a gentle shake and then grabbed his thin wrist and tried to find a pulse. ‘Speak to me—Oh, God, don’t do this—’ She scrabbled in her pocket for her phone and then realised she’d left it in the house.

‘Is he breathing?’ Santo’s voice came from behind her, calm and strong as he strode across the room. His phone was already in his hand and he was talking into it, issuing a string of instructions in rapid Italian.

It was a measure of her stress that she was relieved to see him. She didn’t even question what he was doing here. ‘Did you call the emergency services? How long?’

‘They’re sending a helicopter.’ With no hesitation, he moved her grandfather and pressed his fingers to the old man’s neck. ‘No pulse.’

Why had she felt his wrist and not his neck? She *knew* she was supposed to feel his neck but all her basic first aid knowledge had apparently been driven from her brain by panic. Unable to think properly, Fia took her grandfather’s hand and rubbed it. ‘Nonno—’

‘He can’t hear you.’ Santo’s voice was firm and steady. ‘You need to move to one side so I can start CPR.’

‘I’m not going anywhere!’

She heard someone running and then Luigi appeared in the kitchen holding a small box. ‘Here, Boss—’ He handed it to Santo, who moved with swift purpose and lightning speed.

‘Undo his shirt, Fia.’

‘But—’

‘Just do it!’ He yanked open the box and hit a switch.

‘What are you doing?’ Her fingers fumbled on buttons that didn’t want to undo and she heard Santo mutter something in Italian and then strong hands were pushing hers aside and he tore the fabric and exposed her grandfather’s chest in a single movement.

‘Move away from him. Get back.’ He ripped off the protective backing from two sticky pads and pressed them onto her grandfather’s chest.

He just took control, she thought numbly, the way the Ferraras always took control. Not once did he hesitate or fumble.

‘Do you even know how to use that thing?’

‘It’s an AED. And yes, I know how to use it.’ He didn’t spare her a glance. All his attention was focused on her grandfather as a disembodied voice delivered instructions from the machine.

Anxiety flared. 'You're going to give him a shock? But what if that's not the right thing to do? You might kill him!' And for a moment her own heart almost stopped because she realised that her grandfather's life was in the hands of a man who had no love for him.

His exasperated glance told her that he'd read her mind. 'This device contains a sophisticated computer chip. As far as I know, they're not programmed to bear grudges. Now let go of his hand.'

Reluctantly she moved back.

The voice instructed them to stand clear of the patient and press the button and after that the emergency services arrived and everything blurred. There was a flurry of activity while they stabilised her grandfather and then they transferred him swiftly into the air ambulance. And through it all she was aware of Santo, cool and in control. Santo, calling a top cardiologist and ordering him to meet them at the hospital. Santo arranging to drive her there. And when she pointed out that she had to take Luca and his Lamborghini wouldn't accommodate a child's car seat, he helped himself to Luigi's sturdy four-by-four instead. And Luca didn't even stir as she transferred him from bed to car seat, completely oblivious to the drama being played out around him.

'Does he have a favourite toy or something?' Santo secured the belt. 'Something he can't be without?'

She looked at him blankly and he gave an impatient sigh. 'My niece can't sleep without her favourite blanket. Does he have something like that?'

She swallowed. 'He sleeps with a stuffed giraffe.'

'Fetch it. It will help when he wakes up in a strange place.'

Wondering why he had been the one to think of that and not her, she sprinted to fetch Luca's giraffe and quickly stuffed a change of clothes for him into a bag.

Santo drove her himself and for once she was grateful for the tendency of Sicilians to drive too fast. They made the journey in silence and when he pulled up outside the Emergency Department he sat for a moment, his hands gripping the wheel as he stared at the double doors that led inside.

Fia undid her seat belt.

'They won't let you near him at the moment so there's no point in rushing. You might as well sit here for a while.' Santo switched off the engine. His expression was grim and there were lines of fatigue around his eyes. 'The waiting is the worst part.'

She was about to ask how he knew that when she remembered that his father had died suddenly of a heart attack. Had he been brought to this hospital? Staring at Santo's white knuckles, she assumed the answer to that was positive.

'Are you all right?' Her voice faltered because even to her it sounded like a ridiculous question. Her grandfather was lying in the hospital and she was asking him if he was all right. And why would he even tell her? In all ways but one he was a stranger, except that no stranger ever made her feel the way that being close to him made her feel.

Even now, in these direst of circumstances, she felt that dangerous heat spread through her body. That awareness that made her skin prickle and her stomach flip.

He didn't speak and his silence unsettled her more than his anger had.

'I owe you thanks.' Embarrassment made her rigidly polite. 'For the lift and ... and for your first aid skills. I'm grateful you arrived when you did, although I've no idea what you were doing there —' And then suddenly she knew.

He'd arrived ready to carry out his threat to tell her grandfather.

The reminder that she still had to do that made her feel sick.

'I gather he didn't take the news well.' His tone was flat and it took her a moment to understand that he thought her grandfather's heart attack was somehow related to their situation.

'I hadn't told him. I was going to. I'd just walked in and he was lying there. I panicked—' And that made her angrier than anything. Angry with herself. 'I don't know how I could have been so useless. I've done a first aid course. I should have known what to do.'

‘It’s different when it’s someone you love.’

Were his words intended as comfort or statement of fact? Statement of fact, obviously. They didn’t have the sort of relationship that allowed comfort.

That didn’t stop her knowing what she owed him. ‘How come you had one of those machines?’

‘The AED? We have them in all our hotels. One at reception, one in the health and fitness clubs. Sometimes one on the golf course. Our staff are trained in CPR as part of their induction programme. You never know when they could save a life.’ There was something in his voice that made her look closely at him but his profile revealed no clues as to his thoughts.

‘Santo—’

‘On second thought, why don’t we go and see if there is someone who can give us an update.’ Cutting across her, he opened the car door and then frowned as he realised Luca was asleep. ‘There is no sense in disturbing him. Luigi can stay with him and let us know the moment he wakes.’ He strode over to the other car and, after a brief exchange, Luigi eased his muscular bulk into the seat beside Luca.

‘Don’t you worry. If the little one so much as moves a muscle, I’ll call you. You concentrate on your grandfather.’

Torn by her responsibilities, Fia allowed Santo to lead her into the Emergency Department.

As they walked through the glass doors she heard the breath hiss through his teeth. Even a brief glance was enough for her to see the tension in those wide shoulders. And this time she was sure that he was thinking about his father.

Of course she knew none of the details. Just that it had been sudden and that it had devastated the close-knit Ferrara family. Santo had still been at school, his older brother Cristiano away at university in the US. She’d seen pictures of the funeral in the paper, but she hadn’t attended. A Baracchi wouldn’t have been allowed within the charmed perimeter of the Ferrara circle but that didn’t mean she hadn’t felt his pain. It had seemed grossly unfair to her young mind that such a perfect family could suffer such a loss. Their father adored his three children. How was it right that he should die before his time?

And now Santo was back here, forced into it by grim circumstances.

The sight of a Ferrara in the hospital was enough to throw the staff into a frenzy. The top cardiologist had summoned his team and it was obvious from the flurry of activity that no expense or effort was being spared in the drive to save her grandfather.

Her brother had been jealous of that, she remembered bleakly. The ability of the rich, powerful Ferrara brothers to open doors with just one look. He’d wanted that for himself. What he hadn’t understood was that their wealth and status had been achieved by hard graft. They didn’t demand the respect of others, they earned it.

And in this instance she was grateful for their power and influence. It meant she had the best people taking care of her grandfather.

The exchange with the cardiologist was brief, but it was enough to confirm what she’d suspected—that her grandfather was alive because Santo had shocked his heart back into normal rhythm. That knowledge added to the confusion in her brain. She didn’t want to be in debt to him, but at the same time part of her was proud that her son’s daddy was a man who could save a life.

They were shown to a small room reserved for relatives and something about those impersonal, clinical surroundings increased her feeling of desolation. And perhaps he felt it too because he didn’t sit, but instead stood with his back to her, staring out of the window at the chaos of the city.

Fia waited for him to leave and when he didn’t her good opinion started to fade. Resentment grew with each passing moment. ‘You don’t have to stay. Even if he recovers, he won’t be in a position to listen to you for a while.’

He turned. ‘You think I’m staying so that I can tell him the news? You think I’m that inhumane?’ The ferocity in his voice shocked her.

‘I assumed ... Then why are you here?’

Incredulous dark eyes swept her face. ‘Do you have any other family to support you?’

He knew she didn’t. Her family wasn’t like his. Apart from her son, the sum total of her family was currently fighting for his life in the coronary care unit.

‘I don’t need support.’

‘The man you have lived with all your life is through those doors struggling to stay alive and you don’t need support? That is coping with hard times the Baracchi way. Or should I say the Fia way.’ He dragged his hand over the back of his neck and met her gaze. ‘Maybe that’s how you’ve dealt with them in the past but that isn’t how you’re going to deal with them in the future, be sure of that. I’m not leaving you here alone. From now on I’m by your side for all life’s major events—births, deaths, the graduation of our children. And for the minor events, too. That’s how we Ferraras conduct ourselves in a relationship. That’s how it’s going to be in *our* relationship, *tesoro*. Everything I said to you this morning still stands.’

The word ‘relationship’ reminded her that if her grandfather lived, she still had to break the news to him. And if he didn’t—

Her heart felt as if someone was twisting it.

‘You being here isn’t support, Santo. It’s adding to the stress because I know that you’re just waiting to pick your moment to tell him.’ Suddenly she needed to get away from him. From the width of those powerful shoulders and the sheer force of his presence. He’d made it his mission to eject her from the comfortable safe place she inhabited and she felt as vulnerable as a small animal chased from its burrow. ‘I need to check on Luca.’

‘He is still asleep. If he wasn’t, Luigi would have called me.’

‘He might not want to bother you.’

‘I would trust Luigi with my life.’

Fia thought about how kind his head of security had been earlier. He’d had a job to do and he’d done it, but he’d done it with a sensitivity that had surprised her. ‘It’s not about trust. It’s about the fact Luca doesn’t know him. I don’t want him to wake up, find himself in a strange place and be scared.’

Those eyes frowned into hers and he was about to answer when the door opened and the consultant walked in.

Panic gripped her. ‘My grandfather—?’ Now that the moment had come she was almost too afraid to ask the question that had to be asked. As if by postponing it for a few seconds she could change reality. ‘Is he—?’

‘He had an occluded coronary artery. Without rapid treatment he would not be here now. It is without doubt your use of the AED that saved him in those first precious minutes.’ The consultant carried on, talking about heart muscle, clots and drugs, angioplasty and future risk factors but all she heard was that her grandfather was still alive. The rest washed over her in a wave of jargon she didn’t understand and didn’t want to understand.

It was Santo who asked the relevant questions. Santo who discussed treatment options and truthfully she was grateful to him because once again her brain seemed to be working in slow motion.

Eventually all the questions were answered and the consultant nodded. ‘He wants to see you. Normally I would refuse at this point because he needs rest but it’s clear that something is causing him stress. He is very agitated and he needs to be reassured.’

‘Of course.’ Fia flew to the door but the consultant stopped her.

‘It was Santo he asked for. He was quite specific about that. Your grandfather asked for Santo Ferrara.’

Fia felt her knees shake and she glanced at Santo in horror. ‘No! Seeing you will upset him badly.’

‘He is already upset. Apparently there are things he needs to say,’ the consultant told them, ‘so I think it might be helpful for him. But keep it brief and keep any stress to a minimum.’

Santo would tell him that Luca was his child.

How was that keeping stress to a minimum?

Apparently suffering from none of her doubts, Santo strode through the door. 'Let's do this.'

She shot after him. 'Please don't.' She kept her voice low. 'Whatever you think of me, don't do this. Please don't tell him yet. Wait until he's stronger.' She almost stumbled as she tried to keep up with him, panicking madly, unable to see a single way that this encounter was going to have a happy ending. Why was her grandfather asking to see him? At this stage he couldn't even know that it was Santo who had saved his life.

Reluctantly, she walked into the room and caught her breath at the sight of the machines and wires that dominated her grandfather's frail form.

For a moment she couldn't move and then she felt a warm strong hand close over hers and the reassuring squeeze of male fingers.

Shocked, Fia stood for a moment, distracted by the novel experience of being comforted.

And then she heard a sound from the bed and saw her grandfather's eyes open. And she realised Santo's touch wasn't about comfort, but manipulation.

Instantly she snatched her hand away. 'Nonno—' She tried to catch his eyes and reassure him but her grandfather wasn't looking at her. He was looking at Santo.

And Santo, being who he was, didn't flinch or look remotely discomfited.

'You gave us all a shock,' he drawled, approaching the bed with a confidence that suggested he was a welcome visitor.

'Ferrara—' her grandfather's voice was weak and shaky '—I want to know your intentions.'

There was a long pulsing silence and Fia shot Santo a pleading glance, but he wasn't looking at her. He dominated the room, the power of his athletic physique a cruel contrast to the fragility of the man in the bed.

'I intend to be a father to my son.'

Time stood still.

She couldn't believe he'd actually said that. 'I don't—'

'About time!' Her grandfather's eyes burned fiercely in his pale face. 'For years I have been waiting for you to do the right thing—not even allowed to mention your name in case she walked out —' He glared at Fia and then coughed weakly. 'What sort of a man makes a woman pregnant and then leaves her to cope alone?'

'The sort of man who didn't know,' Santo replied in a cool tone, 'but now intends to rectify that mistake.'

Fia barely heard his response. She was staring at her grandfather.

'What?' He snapped the words. 'You thought I didn't know? Why do you think I was so angry with him?'

She sank into the nearest chair. 'Well, because—'

'You thought it was because of a stupid piece of land. And because of your brother.' Her grandfather closed his eyes, his face pale against the hospital sheets. 'I don't blame him for your brother. I was wrong about a lot of things. Wrong. There. I said it. Does that make you happy?'

Fia's heart clenched. A lump formed in her throat. 'You shouldn't be talking about this now. It isn't the time.'

'Always trying to smooth things over. Always wanting everyone to love each other and be friends. Keep an eye on her, Ferrara, or she'll turn your son into a wimp.' Her grandfather's frame was racked by a paroxysm of coughing and Fia fumbled for the buzzer. Within moments the room filled with staff but he waved them away impatiently, his eyes still on Santo. 'There's one thing I want to know before they pump me full of more drugs that are going to dull my mind—' his voice rasped '—I want to know what you're going to do now that you know.'

Santo didn't hesitate. 'I'm going to marry your granddaughter.'

CHAPTER FIVE

HE HATED hospitals.

Santo scrunched the flimsy plastic cup in his hand and dropped it into the bin.

The smell of antiseptic reminded him of the night his father had died and just for a moment he was tempted to turn on his heel and walk right out again.

And then he thought of Fia, keeping vigil over her grandfather, hour after hour. His anger was still running hot. He was furious with her. But he couldn't accuse her of not showing loyalty to her family. And he couldn't leave her alone in this place.

Cursing softly, Santo strode back towards the coronary care unit that brought back nothing but bad memories.

She was sitting by the bed, her hair a livid streak of fire against her ashen skin. Those green eyes were fixed on the old man as if by sheer willpower and focus she might somehow transmit some of her youth and energy to him.

He'd never seen a lonelier figure in his life.

Or perhaps he had, he thought grimly, remembering the first time he'd seen her in his boathouse. Some people automatically sought human company when they were upset. Fia had taught herself to survive alone.

He compared that to his own big, noisy family. He knew from experience that had it been a Ferrara lying in the hospital bed the room would have been bulging with concerned relatives, not just his brother and sister but numerous aunts, uncles and cousins all clucking and fussing.

'How's he doing?'

'They gave him a sedative and some other stuff. I don't know what. They say the first twenty-four hours are crucial.' Her slim fingers were curled around her grandfather's. 'If he wakes up now he'll be angry that I'm holding his hand. He's not great at the physical stuff. Never has been.'

Santo realised that this woman's whole life revolved around the man currently lying in the bed and the child fast asleep in his car.

'When did you last eat?' It was the automatic Ferrara response to all moments of crisis and he almost laughed at himself for being so predictable.

'I'm not hungry.' Her voice was husky and she didn't shift her gaze from her grandfather. 'In a minute I'll go and check on Luca.'

'I just checked him. He hasn't stirred. He and Luigi are both asleep.'

'I'll bring him in here and tuck him up on the chair. Then you can go home. Gina will come and I need to call Ben and ask him to cover tomorrow.'

Santo felt an irrational surge of anger. 'He doesn't need to. I've already sorted that out. My team will take over running the Beach Shack for the time being.'

Her spine tensed. 'You're taking advantage of this situation to take over my business?'

Santo held on to his own temper. 'You need to stop thinking like a Baracchi. This is not about revenge. I'm not taking over your business, just making sure you still have one to come home to. I assumed you didn't want to leave your grandfather's bedside to cook *calamari* for a bunch of strangers.'

Her cheeks were pale. 'I'm sorry.' Her gaze skated back to her grandfather. 'I *am* grateful to you. I just assumed—'

'Well, stop assuming.' Her fragility unsettled him. And it wasn't the only thing that unsettled him. The response of his body was equally disturbing. His feelings were entirely inappropriate for the surroundings. 'You can do no more here tonight. Your grandfather is going to sleep and it's not going to help anyone if you collapse. We're leaving now. I've told the staff to call me if there is any change.'

'I can't leave. It's too far to get back here again if something happens.'

‘My apartment is only ten minutes from here. If something happens, I’ll drive you. If we leave now you can still get some rest and my son can wake up in a proper bed.’ He’d been trying not to think about that side of things, putting his own emotions on hold in order to maintain the delicate balance of a situation that could only be described as difficult.

Perhaps it was the logic of his argument. Perhaps it was the words ‘my son’. Either way, she ceased arguing and allowed him to lead her away from the bedside to the car.

Ten minutes later Luca was tucked up in the centre of an enormous double bed in one of his spare bedrooms.

Santo watched as she spread pillows on the floor next to the bed. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Sometimes he rolls. I don’t want him to fall onto the tiled floor,’ she muttered. ‘Do you have a baby alarm?’

‘No. Leave the door open a crack. Then we’ll hear him if he wakes.’ Santo strode out of the room and she followed, her eyes tracing every detail of his apartment.

‘Do you live alone?’

‘You think I’m hiding women under the sofa?’

‘I just mean it’s very big for one person.’

‘I like the space and the views. The balconies face over the old part of the town, not that I think Luca will be that discerning. What can I get you to eat?’

‘Nothing, thank you.’ Restless and tense, she walked over to the doors that led to the balcony and opened them. ‘Don’t you keep these locked?’

‘You’re worrying about my security?’

‘I’m worrying about Luca’s security.’ Biting her lip, she stepped onto the small area and ran her finger along the iron railings. Then she gauged the height of the balcony. ‘This is a real hazard. Luca is two years old. His favourite pastime is climbing. He climbs anything and everything he can find. We’re going to have to lock the doors to the balconies and remove the keys.’ She was brisk and practical, but then she walked past him and he caught the scent of her hair. Flowers. She always smelt like flowers.

Irritated with himself for being so easily distracted, Santo followed her back into the apartment. This time her eyes were on the large sunken living room that formed the centrepiece of his luxurious apartment. ‘You’re worrying about the welfare of my white sofas? Don’t. My niece has already spilled something unmentionable on them. I don’t care. People are more important than things.’

‘I agree. And I’m not thinking about your sofas, I’m thinking of Luca. More particularly, I’m thinking about the step down to your living room.’

‘It’s an architectural feature.’

‘It’s a trap for a fearless toddler. He’s going to fall.’

Santo digested that. ‘He walks perfectly well. We will teach him to be careful.’

‘He gets enthusiastic and excited. If he sees something he wants, he runs. If he does that here, he’ll trip and smash his head on your priceless Italian tiles.’

Santo spread his hands in a gesture of surrender. ‘So this place is not exactly child-proofed; I accept that. I will deal with it.’

‘How? You can’t exactly remodel the apartment, can you?’

‘If necessary. And in the meantime I will teach him to watch the step.’ He tried to hide his exasperation. However angry he was, he was well aware that she’d been through the most stressful twenty-four hours of her life and yet, apart from her visible panic when she’d found her grandfather, she hadn’t shown any emotion. She was frighteningly calm. The little girl who had refused to shed a tear had grown into a woman with the same emotional restraint. The only sign that she was suffering was the rigid tension in her narrow shoulders. ‘Are you always like this? It’s a wonder Luca isn’t a bundle of nerves, living with you.’

‘One minute you accuse me of not taking good care of your son and then you accuse me of taking too much care. Make up your mind.’ She picked up a slender glass vase and transferred it to a high shelf.

‘I was not accusing you of anything. Just pointing out that you’re overreacting.’

‘You have no idea what it’s like, living with an active toddler.’

Her words snapped something inside him. ‘And whose fault is that?’ Bitterness welled up and threatened to spill over. Afraid he might say something he’d later regret, Santo strode towards the kitchen, struggling with the intensity of his own emotions.

‘I’m sorry.’ Her voice came from the doorway.

‘What for?’ He dragged open a cupboard. ‘Keeping my son from me or casting doubt on my abilities as a father?’

‘I wasn’t casting doubt. Just pointing out the hazards of having an active toddler in a bachelor pad.’ She looked impossibly fragile standing there with her hair pouring over her shoulders in soft waves of wicked temptation.

He didn’t want to feel anything but anger yet he was sufficiently self-aware to know that his feelings were much, much more complicated than that. Yes, the anger was there and the hurt, but mixed in with those emotions was a hefty dollop of something far less easy to define but equally powerful.

The same thing that had brought them together that night.

‘We’ll do what needs to be done, Fia.’ He left the statement purposefully ambiguous and pulled plates out of the cupboard. ‘We need to eat. What can I get you?’

‘Nothing, thank you. I think I’ll go to bed. I’ll sleep with Luca. That way, if he wakes up he won’t be frightened.’

Santo thumped a fresh loaf of bread in the centre of the table. ‘Who is frightened, *tesoro*? You or him?’ He sent her a black look. ‘You think if you don’t sleep in his bed you’ll be sleeping in mine?’

Wide green eyes fixed on his face. Those eyes that said everything her lips didn’t. The first time he’d caught her in the boathouse he’d seen misery and fear, but also defiance. Even though she hadn’t said a word, he’d had no trouble reading the message. *Go on and tell. See if I care.*

He hadn’t told.

And he knew she would have cared.

She showed nothing, and yet he knew she was a woman who felt everything deeply. He wouldn’t have been able to list her favourite colour or whether she liked to read, but he’d never doubted the intensity of her emotions. He’d always sensed the passion in her, simmering beneath the silent surface. And eventually, of course, he’d felt it. Touched it. Tasted it. *Taken it.* He could clearly remember the feel of her bare skin under his seeking fingers, the scent of her as he’d kissed his way down her body, the flavour of her under his tongue.

Sexual arousal was instant and brutal.

He dragged his gaze from the wicked curve of her hips back to her face.

Those green eyes had gone a shade darker and her cheeks were flushed.

Santo strode over to the fridge and yanked open the door. Maybe he should just thrust his whole body into it, he thought savagely. He had a feeling that was the only way of cooling himself down.

He was about to pull out a dish of *caponata* when another memory revealed itself. Frowning, he let go of the dish. It wasn’t true to say he knew nothing about her, was it? There *was* something he knew. His mouth tightening, he put the *caponata* back and removed *pecorino* and olives instead. Putting them on the table next to the bread, he gestured. ‘Eat.’

‘I’ve told you I’m not hungry.’

‘I make it a personal rule only to resuscitate one person a day so unless you want me to force-feed you, you’ll eat.’ He tore off a hunk of bread, added a slice of *pecorino* and some olives and

pushed the plate towards her. 'And don't tell me you don't like it. The fact that you love *pecorino* is one of the few things I *do* know about you.'

A tiny frown touched her smooth brow as she stared at the plate and then back at him.

Santo sighed. 'When you hid in the boathouse you always brought the same food.' For a moment he thought she wasn't going to respond.

'I didn't want to have to go home to eat.'

'You didn't want to go home at all.'

'I know.' She gave a strangled laugh and pushed the plate away. 'You do know this is ridiculous, don't you? Just about the only thing you know about me is that I like *pecorino* and olives. And all I know about you is that you like really fast, flashy cars. And yet you're suggesting marriage.'

'I'm not suggesting marriage. I'm insisting on marriage. Your grandfather approved.'

'My grandfather is old-fashioned. I'm not.' Her eyes lifted to his. 'I run a successful business. I can support my son. We would gain nothing from marriage.'

'Luca would gain a great deal.'

'He would live with two people who don't love each other. What would he gain from that? You're punishing me because you're angry, but in the end you will be the one who suffers. We are not compatible.'

'We know we're compatible in the one place that counts,' Santo said in a raw tone, 'or we wouldn't be in this position now.'

Colour darkened her cheekbones. 'You may be Sicilian, but you are far too intelligent to truly believe that all a marriage takes is good sex.'

Santo took the chair opposite her. 'I suppose I should be grateful you're at least admitting it was good sex.'

'You're impossible to talk to.'

'On the contrary, I'm easy to talk to. I say what I think, which is more than you do. I won't tolerate silence, Fia. Marriages are about sharing. Everything. I don't want a wife who locks away her feelings, so let's get that straight now. I want all of you. Everything you are, you're going to give it to me.' Clearly she hadn't expected that response from him because she turned white.

'If that's what you want, then you really do need a different wife.'

There was a certain satisfaction in having flustered her. 'You've taught yourself to be that way. That's how you've survived and protected yourself. But underneath, you're not like that. And I'm not interested in the ice maiden. I want the woman I had in my boathouse that night.'

'That was ... It was ...' she stumbled over the words '... that wasn't me.'

'Yes, it was. For a few wild hours you lost control of this persona you've constructed. That was the real you, Fia. It's the rest of this that is an act.'

'Everything about that night was crazy—' her fingers were curled into her palms '—I don't know how it started, but I do know how it ended.'

'It ended when your brother stole my car and wrapped it around a tree.' He'd hoped the direct approach might shake her out of her rigid control but apparently even the shock of his blunt comment couldn't penetrate that wall she'd built around herself.

'It was too powerful for him. He'd never driven anything like it before.'

'Neither had I,' Santo said icily. 'I'd only received it two days earlier.'

'That is a monumentally tactless and unfeeling thing to say.'

Then show some emotion. 'About as tactless and unfeeling as the wordless implication that I was in some way responsible for his death.'

There was a throbbing silence. 'I have never said that.'

'No, but you've thought it. And your grandfather thought it. You say you don't know me, so learn this about me right now—I'm not good with undercurrents or people who hide what they're really thinking and I sure as hell am not going to feed this damn feud that we've both grown up with.'

It ends here, right now.’ The fire burned hot inside him, strengthening his resolve. ‘If what you said to me this morning is true then I presume you want that, too.’

‘Of course. But we can kill the feud without getting married. There is more than one way of being a family.’

‘Not for me. My child will not grow up being shuttled from one parent to another. We’ve never talked about that night, so let’s do it now. Whatever you’re thinking, I want it out in the open, not gnawing holes in that brain of yours. You blamed me for the fact that he took the car. And yet you know what happened that night. I was with you. And we had other things on our mind, didn’t we, *bellissima*?’

‘I never blamed you.’

‘Really?’ His sardonic tone made her lift her head and look at him.

‘Yes, really.’

He waited for her to elaborate but of course she didn’t and that failure to break through her defences exasperated him because he wasn’t a man who liked to fail. Jaw tense, he breathed deeply, his emotions at war with each other. ‘It’s late and you’ve had a hell of a night. One thing I know about toddlers is that they don’t lie in just because adult life is collapsing around them. What time does he wake up?’

‘Five.’

His working day frequently began at the same hour. ‘If you’re not going to eat, then get to bed. I’ll lend you one of my shirts to sleep in.’

A faint smile touched the soft curve of her mouth. ‘So you don’t have a wardrobe full of slinky nightwear for overnight guests? The world would be disappointed to discover that.’

‘I don’t encourage overnight guests. They can grow roots fast.’ He watched her steadily. ‘This once, I’ll let you retreat. Make the most of it because once we’re married there will be no hiding. Be sure of that.’

‘We’re not getting married, Santo.’

‘We’ll talk about it tomorrow. But everything I said in my office still stands.’

‘No, it doesn’t. You were concerned that Luca had been harmed, but you can see now that he has had a happy childhood.’

‘I admire your efforts to create the family you didn’t have, but my son doesn’t need paid employees to fill that role. He has the real thing. A family ready and willing to welcome him. He’s a Ferrara and the sooner we make that legal the better for everyone.’

‘Is it?’ Her voice suddenly seemed to gain strength. ‘Is it really better for him to be brought up by parents who are strangers?’

Santo’s mouth tightened. ‘We’re not going to be strangers, *tesoro*. We’re going to be as intimate as it’s possible for a man and a woman to be. I’m going to rip down those barriers you’ve built. When you’re with me you might as well be naked because there is going to be no hiding. Now get some sleep. You’re going to need it.’

As intimate as it’s possible for a man and a woman to be.

What was intimate about that cold, emotionless statement? He was blisteringly angry. Furious. How did he think they could achieve intimacy under those circumstances?

She wasn’t going to marry him. It would be wrong.

Once he calmed down, he’d see sense. They’d come to an agreement about how to share Luca. And perhaps the three of them would spend some time together. But there was no need to make it legally binding.

Worry about her grandfather mingled with worry for her son and herself and Fia curled up in the bed, but there was no rest to be found in sleep, the dreams racing over her in a dark, tangled rush of disturbing images. Her mother, huddled in a corner of the kitchen, trying to make herself as small as possible while her husband lost his temper. The sight of her walking away, leaving her

eight-year-old daughter behind. *'If I take you, he'll come after me.'* Standing with her grandfather as they buried her father after the drunken boating accident that had taken his life, knowing that she was supposed to feel sad.

She awoke to find herself alone in the bed. A lurch of fear was followed by a brief moment of relief as she heard the sound of Luca giggling. And then she remembered that they weren't at home, but in Santo's deathtrap apartment.

Almost tripping in her haste to get to her child, she shot out of the bedroom and followed the sound, ready to drag him out of trouble.

Expecting to find an energetic Luca fearlessly scaling a cupboard or plunging his curious fingers into a piece of high-tech electrical equipment, she instead found him sitting on a chair in Santo's sleek, contemporary kitchen watching as his father deftly cut shapes out of *brioche*.

Weak with relief, Fia paused in the doorway, astonished by what she was seeing. Father or not, Santo was a stranger to Luca. A tall, powerfully built intimidating stranger who was in an undeniably dangerous mood since he'd made the unexpected discovery that he had a son. It was true that he'd helped and supported her the night before, but nothing in his demeanour had led her to believe that there was any softening in his attitude.

She'd assumed that some of his anger would reveal itself in his interaction with the child and yet Luca was clearly not only comfortable, but vastly entertained and delighted with the masculine attention he was receiving along with his breakfast.

Judging from his damp hair, Santo had not long left the shower and it was obvious from his bare feet and bare chest that he'd tugged on a pair of jeans in haste, unable to finish dressing before Luca had demanded his attention. But the real change wasn't in his dress—or lack of it—it was the way he carried himself. There was no sign of the forbidding, intimidating businessman who had called all the shots the day before. The man currently entertaining one small boy was warm and approachable, his smile indulgent as he wiped his son's buttery fingers. He looked as though he did this every day. As if this was part of their morning routine.

As she watched, Santo bent down and kissed Luca and when the child giggled, he kissed him again as if he couldn't get enough of him.

Tears sprang to her eyes and Fia leaned against the doorframe for support.

Watching them made her heart clench. Luca had never had that, had he? He'd never known a father's love. Yes, she'd surrounded him by 'family' but even she couldn't pretend that what she'd created came close to the real thing. One day Gina would move on, Ben would marry and Luca's 'family' would disband.

Yesterday she'd been so sure that marriage between her and Santo would be the wrong thing for her son. She'd seen no benefit to him in being forced to live with two people whose only connection was the child they'd made.

But of course there *was* benefit and she was staring at it right now.

If they married, Luca would have his father. Not at prearranged times, like single snapshots taken on a camera. But permanently.

Santo still hadn't noticed her and, as he spoke to their son in lilting Italian, Fia found that she was holding her breath. When Luca replied in the same language pride mingled with emotions she didn't even recognise.

She was normally the one who gave Luca his breakfast. It was their morning ritual. And yet here he was happily pursuing that ritual with his father as if the two of them had been doing it for ever.

There was a lump in her throat and the lump grew as Santo leaned forward and kissed his son again, indifferent to buttery fingers that grabbed at his hair. He blew bubbles into Luca's neck and made him giggle. He pulled faces and tickled him.

He had nieces, she remembered, so he was obviously used to children, but still—

She couldn't ever remember being kissed by her father and she'd certainly never been kissed by her grandfather. And yet here was Santo, openly demonstrative with his child.

'Mamma—' Luca saw her, wriggled off the chair and hurled himself at her, *brioche* squashed in his fist.

Across the top of his head, her gaze met Santo's.

As she scooped up her child, she swallowed down that lump that still threatened to choke her.

A quizzical gleam lit his eyes, as if he were asking himself how long she'd been standing there. And suddenly she was very conscious that she hadn't even paused to brush her hair before sprinting from the bedroom.

There was something inappropriately informal about greeting him with her hair spilling wildly over her shoulders while wearing nothing but the shirt he'd lent her. Their attire suggested an intimacy that didn't exist and she felt herself flush with mortification as his eyes slid down her body and lingered on her bare legs.

'*Buongiorno.*' He injected the word with familiarity. As if this was a scene they both woke up to every morning.

Even though he'd dragged on his jeans in a hurry he looked utterly spectacular. Indecently handsome and more masculine than any single member of the species had a right to look. He didn't need the handmade suits to look good, she thought numbly, her eyes tracing the smooth swell of muscle that shaped his broad shoulders and drifting to his board-flat abdomen.

'Fia?'

She was so distracted by his naked torso that she'd missed the question he'd asked her. 'Sorry?'

'I asked you which language you use when you speak to him. English or Italian?'

'English—' Thoroughly flustered, she sat Luca back down on the chair. 'My grandfather spoke to him in Italian. We thought that would be less confusing.' She braced herself for criticism of that approach but he gave a brief nod.

'Then we will do the same. You do the English. I'll do the Italian. That's what I did this morning and he seemed to understand. He's very bright.' Pride in his eyes as he looked at Luca, he rose to his feet with that easy grace guaranteed to draw the female eye. The fabric of his jeans clung to the hard length of his long legs and she saw the muscles in his back ripple as he reached into a cupboard for a mug. *She'd drawn blood*, she remembered. She'd been so driven out of her mind by him, she'd scratched the skin of that smooth, muscled back. The craving had been so intense, the pleasure so deliciously erotic that she'd dragged her nails down his flesh. Not that he'd been gentle. The recollection set her skin on fire. The whole thing had been a hot, hard, violent explosion of earthy animal instinct.

And now she was hyperaware of every move he made. Of the flex of muscle in his strong wrist as he made her coffee, of the dark hairs that shadowed his chest and then narrowed down and disappeared below the snap of his jeans. Everything about him was overtly, unapologetically male and everything about her response was overtly, unapologetically female.

He was the hottest guy she'd ever laid eyes on. Always had been. And that was what made this situation so much harder.

His gaze flicked to hers, those slumberous eyes darkening as he read her mind. Despite the presence of their child, the brief moment they shared was wholly adult.

Desperate to break the connection, Fia blurted out the first thing that came into her head. 'My phone battery has died. May I use yours to call the hospital?'

The sardonic curve of his mouth told her he knew she hadn't been thinking about phones or hospitals. And neither had he. Just being in the same room created something so intense that it was almost tangible. It crackled the air between them and snapped the atmosphere tight.

‘I’ve already called.’ He placed coffee on the table without asking her how she took it. ‘Your grandfather had a good night. He’s still asleep. The consultant will be at the hospital in half an hour. I’ve said we’ll meet him there.’

We?

She watched as Luca slid off his chair and wrapped his arms around his father’s legs. Santo scooped him up. ‘I’m starting to understand why you were worried last night,’ he drawled. ‘He’s extremely active.’

‘But you’re coping well,’ she said quickly, ‘so he can stay with you while I go to the hospital.’ She needed respite from the unrelenting stress of being with him. Most of all she needed respite from the constant assault on her senses and the memories that kept replaying in her head. Her heart was going crazy. She was so conscious of him that she couldn’t breathe properly.

He lowered Luca to the floor. ‘I’m coming with you.’

‘I’d rather go on my own.’

‘Of course you would.’ His eyes glinted with deadly mockery. ‘You’d rather do everything on your own, but you’re never going to learn differently if you don’t practise, so you can start this morning. We’ll go together. Say the word after me, Fia. *Together*.’

Fia stared at her coffee. ‘Do you have milk? I like milk in my coffee. Not that I’d expect you to know that because you don’t really know anything about me, do you? Just as I don’t know anything about you. And that is why this is so ridiculous.’ But the heat had gone out of her argument. Last night she’d been certain, now she was just confused.

‘Stop trying to pick a fight. I’ll win.’

She breathed, ‘All right, we’ll go together. But in that case I need to use a phone. I’ll call Ben and ask him to pick up Luca. He’s too little to be in a place like that for more than a short time.’

The change in him was instantaneous. Any trace of humour was wiped out. It was like watching a cloud suddenly pass over the sun, darkening the land beneath. Those eyes went from burnished gold to deadly black, the threat in them unmistakable. ‘You will *not* call Ben.’

‘I don’t want Luca at the hospital. It’s exhausting for my grandfather and stressful for him.’

‘I agree. Which is why I’ve arranged—’ He broke off as they both heard a commotion at the entrance of his apartment.

‘Santo?’ a female voice sang out and then a beautiful dark-haired girl strode confidently into the room. Clearly familiar with the layout of the place, she kissed Santo soundly. ‘You,’ she purred, patting his cheek with her hand, ‘are a *very* naughty boy.’

Fia sat still, frozen to the spot by the sight of this beautiful creature and the ease with which she interacted with Santo. And, to make her pain even worse, he didn’t even have the gall to look embarrassed. Instead he simply unpeeled the woman, gave her a smile and kissed her on both cheeks.

‘*Ciao, bellissima.*’

Wounded by his lack of sensitivity, Fia stood up abruptly and was about to snatch her son and leave them to it when the woman turned to look at her.

Braced for bared teeth and female jealousy, Fia found herself suddenly wrapped in a tight, effusive hug.

Apart from Luca, no one ever hugged her. The shock of it kept her rigid, but before she could work out who the woman was she’d released her and turned her attention to Luca.

First she covered her mouth with her hands as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Then she scooped an unsuspecting Luca up and showered him with kisses, talking in rapid Italian as she danced round the kitchen with him.

And, instead of howling, Luca seemed delighted by the attention, responding to the woman’s infectious smile with gurgles of laughter.

Fia wanted to snatch her son out of the woman’s arms.

Which one of Santo’s many women was she?

She racked her brain to recreate all those media images of Santo she'd tried to obliterate from her mind. Santo Ferrara and a lean brunette at the opening of the Taormina Filmfest, dining out with a sleek blonde on his arm, leaving his private jet at the airport with a redhead in tow. She'd tried to blot out the female faces, not commit them to memory.

She was just about to make a taut comment when a small girl, a little older than Luca, rocketed into the room and slammed into Santo's legs.

'Up!'

'I think you mean, "up, please", but your wish is my command, of course.' His amused drawl suggesting that this was a frequent request, Santo scooped the child up. 'You need to put in some overtime on the manners here.' He glanced at the woman and his expression softened. 'Thanks for coming.'

'Anything for you.' With a cheeky smile the brunette put Luca down, dropped her bag on the chair and looked at Fia. 'I'm really sorry to hear about your grandfather. You must be worried sick, but honestly the hospital is just brilliant. And I expect Santo has them hopping around because he always puts a bomb under them. And you're not to worry about Luca. We'll keep him with us until you're ready to pick him up. I can't wait to get to know him better.'

Fia felt a flash of fury. Santo expected her to leave her son with one of his women? 'There is no way—'

'Dani is my sister, yes? Daniela Ferrara. Although technically she's no longer Ferrara since she married Raimondo.' Interrupting smoothly, Santo put the little girl down on the floor. 'This is Rosa, her daughter. Luca's cousin.'

Cousin?

Startled, Fia looked at Dani, who looked right back. 'Er ... you didn't know I was Santo's sister?'

'I didn't recognise you.' Fia's voice was a croak and Dani's eyes widened in contrition.

'Oh, no! You must have thought—' Looking at her brother, she gave an exaggerated shudder. 'Nightmare. We'd kill each other in two minutes. I like to be in charge in my relationships. Talking of which, Raimondo is parking the car. We thought we'd take Luca back home with us because we have all Rosa's toys there so it's easier.' She caught Fia's anxious look and smiled. 'You're thinking you can't let him go with a stranger, I know you are because I'd be thinking the same thing in your position. But honestly, he's going to have a great time and better with us than in that vile hospital or here. Santo's apartment is a deathtrap. You two can spend as long as you need to at the hospital and then go out to dinner or something. Don't rush. Do something romantic.'

'*Cristo*, you are like a one-woman talk show. Breathe, Dani!' Santo cast his sister a look of raw exasperation. 'Give someone else the opportunity to speak! You accuse me of being controlling and then you steamroller people with words. Conversation is supposed to be a two-way thing.'

'Well, no one else is saying anything in this room!' Dani bristled and Santo ground his teeth.

'Was there an opportunity? *Accidenti!* I don't know how Raimondo puts up with you. I would strangle you within two minutes of being alone together.'

'I would have strangled you first.' Dani turned to Fia. 'Don't let him bully you. Stand up to him; it's the only way to handle Santo, especially when he does his threatening act. I used to see you sometimes on the beach but you've obviously forgotten me.'

No, she hadn't forgotten. She just hadn't recognised the other woman and now she didn't know what to say. How much did Daniela know? What exactly had he told his family?

It should have been a horribly awkward moment but Dani clearly didn't tolerate 'awkward' in her life. She said something in Italian to her little girl, who eyed up Luca, clearly decided he looked like someone she could play with and promptly dragged him off towards Santo's living room, leaving the adults alone.

'There. See? They're friends already.' Oblivious to her brother's glowering disapproval, Dani followed them out of the room. 'I'll watch them. There is nothing you can teach me about intercepting

toddler trouble.’ At the doorway of the kitchen, she glanced over her shoulder. ‘I’ll leave you two to discuss wedding details. And Santo, it doesn’t matter how rushed a wedding is, a woman still needs to look her best so you’d better take Fia shopping. Or, better still, give me your card and *I’ll* take her shopping because we all know you hate it.’

Santo’s expression went from irritated to dangerous. ‘Your help with Luca is welcomed. Your interference in any other aspect of my life is not.’

‘Just because you’ve done all this in the wrong order is no reason not to make it romantic,’ Dani said tartly. ‘A woman wants romance on her wedding day. Remember that.’

She vanished to supervise the children, leaving Fia with her face burning.

Romance?

Whatever was between them, it certainly wasn’t romance. What was romantic about a man being forced to marry a woman he didn’t even like?

Santo drained his coffee cup and thumped it down on the table. ‘I apologise for my sister,’ he breathed. ‘She still hasn’t learned the meaning of the word “boundary”. But if she will take Luca for us today, it will make everything a lot easier.’

Nothing, absolutely nothing, would make this situation easier.

The tension between them was like a dark storm brewing in the room. She couldn’t imagine ever being able to relax with him. She was wound so tight that every reaction and response was exaggerated. Her senses were heightened so that the slightest glance was all it took to set her heart pounding.

The look he sent her told her that he felt it too. ‘It is good that she has taken Luca because we need to talk. Properly.’

Fia thought about Luca being hugged and kissed by his father.

Santo clearly interpreted her silence as refusal. ‘You can throw as many obstacles as you like between us,’ he said softly, ‘and I will smash through all of them. Be sure of that. You can say no a thousand different ways and I will find a thousand different ways to tell you why you’re wrong.’

‘I’m not saying no.’

‘*Scusi?*’

‘I’m agreeing with you. You said that you thought marriage was the best thing for Luca, and I’m agreeing with you.’ Her voice wasn’t entirely steady. ‘Last night I was sure that marriage wasn’t in Luca’s best interests but this morning ... well, I saw the two of you together and ... and, yes, I think it would be the right thing for Luca.’ Oh, God, she’d said it. What if she were wrong?

Silence pulsed.

‘So you’re doing this because you think it’s the right thing “for Luca”?’

‘Of course. What else?’

He strode across the kitchen towards her.

Fia forced herself to stand still, expecting him to stop, but he didn’t stop until he had her with her back against the wall and nowhere to go.

Jaw tight, he slammed a hand either side of her to block her escape. She was boxed in by rock-hard muscle and testosterone and because she didn’t want to look at him, she looked at his bare chest and that was a mistake too because everything about him made her think of that night. She didn’t need a close-up of his physique to know how strong he was. She’d felt that strength. *Why the hell hadn’t he pulled on a shirt?* The world around her seemed to fade. She forgot she was in his kitchen. She forgot about her grandfather in the hospital and the cheerful sounds of her child playing in the next room. She forgot everything.

Her world became this man.

‘Look at me.’ His thickened command told her that if she didn’t, he’d make her and so she lifted her gaze and the look they shared unlocked something dark she’d buried deep inside herself. Something she hadn’t dared examine because she was so afraid of it.

The way she felt about him.

Breathing shallow, she stared into those burnished dark eyes that changed colour according to his mood.

‘This is not just about Luca and I need you to acknowledge that because I don’t want some martyr in my bed.’ He lowered his head, his mouth as close to hers as it was possible to be and yet not touch her. He spoke so softly that he couldn’t possibly be overheard and yet each word was delivered with such force and power that she knew they’d be forever embedded in her memory. ‘If we do this, then we do it properly.’

If she licked her lips now, she’d touch him. If she made that single move she’d be kissing him. And she knew how that would feel. Knew how *he’d* feel. Even after more than three years, she’d never forgotten it. ‘Yes. We do it properly. We ... get to know each other.’

‘I already know a lot about you—’ That wicked, sensual mouth held hers hostage. ‘I may not know how you like your coffee, but I know other things about you. Want me to remind you?’

‘No.’ She didn’t need reminding. She’d forgotten nothing. Not the way he tasted nor the way he touched her. And now those memories were unlocked and she could feel herself melting—feel the heat of her own arousal spread through her body and the hard pressure of his.

His hand came up to cup her face, those same fingers that knew how to drive her wild, now firm and determined as they forced her to look at him. ‘Sure? Because if this is going to work for Luca, it has to work for us.’ His mouth was just a breath away from hers, the heat of him a pulsing, throbbing force. ‘I have to get to know all of you, particularly the bits you’re hiding. And you have to get to know all of me, *tesoro*. Everything.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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