

MELANIE MILBURNE



THE
SCANDALOUS
Sabbatinis

Melanie Milburne
The Scandalous Sabbatinis
Серия «Mills & Boon M&B»

Аннотация

The Sabbatini Brothers: Three powerful playboys from the richest dynasty in Europe! He'll have his child! Billionaire Luca Sabbatini may have ruthlessly cast Bronte from his life – but he hadn't forgotten the sweet ballerina. Now he's back, only this time he finds Bronte isn't quite so biddable! There's a secret she's hiding... He needs an heir! When penniless Maya met Giorgio Sabbatini, he married her, despite her lack of heritage. But Giorgio belongs to a blue-blooded family and when she can't give him an heir, Maya walks away after they have one last reckless night of passion... Commanded to marry... Notorious Nic Sabbatini doesn't respond well to ultimatums – not even those in a will! But when stunning, wilful Jade breezes into his office and announces their wedding to him and the world's media, Nic goes along. He won't turn Jade down again...

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About the Author

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

**The
Scandalous
*Sabbatinis***
**Scandal: Unclaimed Love-Child
Shock: One-Night Heir
The Wedding Charade**
Melanie Milburne



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Scandal: Unclaimed Love-Child

To Carey and Laura Denholm,

such wonderful friends and fabulous company.

Thanks for being there for us when we needed it most and thanks too for all the side-splitting jokes! XX

CHAPTER ONE

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

It couldn't be.

She must be imagining it.

Of course she was imagining it!

It couldn't be Luca.

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

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

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

'Hello, Bronte.'

Oh, dear God, it was him.

Bronte took a slow deep breath and straightened her shoulders

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She frowned as she studied his inscrutable expression. 'I

thought you worked in hotel management for your family?’

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

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

‘I have contacted them.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And now he was back as if nothing had happened.

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

you *really* here?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

evening?’ he asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWO

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

reminding myself of failure.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She was supposed to hate him.

She *did* hate him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER THREE

BRONTE couldn't think. Her mind was whirling like a fairground ride that had been set at too fast a speed. He wanted her to sleep with him. He wanted to resume their affair. He didn't want anything permanent. He was going to use her and discard her like he did before. Round and round the thoughts went until she felt dizzy and sick and heartsore. How could he do this to her? He was the one who had walked away. It wasn't as if she had done anything to hurt him. He had broken her heart, he had all but ruined her life and yet here he was acting as if she owed him!

She stepped back from him, biting the inside of her mouth until she tasted blood. She turned on her heel and began pacing the floor. She had to think of a way out of this. *Was* there a way out of this?

'Come here.'

Bronte felt his two word command like hammer blows to her heart. How ruthless he sounded! She was nothing but a chattel, a possession he had bartered for. She stopped pacing and stood her ground, her chin high, with her eyes flashing their hatred at him. 'If you want me then you'll have to drag me kicking and screaming for I will not come willingly.'

His lips slowly curved upwards in a sexy smile. 'Are you absolutely sure about that, *tesore mio*?' he asked in a low husky drawl.

Now that you mention it, Bronte thought in panic as she recalled his warm electrifying touch on her arm just moments ago. He had set spot fires all throughout her body with that one stroke of his hand along her upper arm. He had awakened every nerve of her skin, made her heart beat twice its pace and made a hole open up deep inside her, a hollow ache she knew from experience could only be filled by him.

He came back to where she was standing; actually, shaking was probably a more accurate description. He placed a broad fingertip beneath her rigid chin and slowly but surely lifted it until her eyes had nowhere to go but meet his. 'It's still there, isn't it, *cara*?' he said. 'The chemistry between us. I felt it the moment I walked into the studio this afternoon. I can feel it now. You can too. I can see it in your eyes. I can feel it when I touch you. You tremble all over.'

Bronte stopped breathing when he brought his mouth to the corner of hers. He brushed his lips against her skin, a feather-light touch that made her quiver in reaction, fulfilling every word he had just spoken about her response to him. Her body was her betrayer; she had no hope of disguising how he affected her. His warm hint-of-mint breath skated over her lips before touching down on the other side of her mouth, the same soft brush of lips on sensitive skin evoking the same heady rush of feeling inside her body. She heard a soft whimper and realised with a little jolt it had come from her mouth. Her lips had softly fallen open, her mouth an open invitation for the plunder of his.

But he didn't do it.

He smiled that lazy smile as he met her bewildered, uncertain gaze and then he slowly pressed a soft barely-there kiss to each of her eyebrows. 'You have the most amazing blue eyes,' he said, low and deep like a bolt of satin dragged across gravel. 'Like the heart of a flame, dark and fiery. They burn one minute and the next they shine like the surface of a deep ocean.'

She trembled all over as he ran his hands down both of her arms, his fingers encircling her wrists like handcuffs. She felt the soft tug that brought her flat against his body, her belly coming into contact with his arousal. Heat exploded inside her, pooling between her thighs, hot and fragrant with need. How could she still want him when she hated him so much? It didn't seem fair that her body would betray her so shamelessly. She hated herself for being so weak. She hated him for making her want him. She hated that she wanted to lean into him and offer her mouth and body to his to pleasure. The pressure of want was building deep inside her: an ache, a pulse, a drumbeat that would not be ignored.

'Beautiful, sweet Bronte,' he said just above her mouth. 'Do you have any idea how much I still want you?'

Bronte felt the proud probe of his hot hard flesh and felt an answering quake of want in her inner core. It was like a hungry beast growling for satiation inside her. Her body stepped up its demand for assuagement, torturing her with tiny exquisite reminders of the pleasure she had felt with him in the past. Her mind was full of images of them locked in erotic poses: his

body pinning her from above, from below, from behind or up against the nearest wall or even on the kitchen counter, his body pounding into hers, her arms locked around his neck or waist, her body coming apart time and time again.

‘Tell me you feel it too,’ he said just above her mouth, his warm breath a caress, a temptation, a torture. ‘Tell me you remember how it was between us.’

Bronte was beyond speech. She just wanted to feel his mouth on hers, even if it was for the last time. Surely it wasn't wrong to want that? Just a taste, a reminder of how it felt to have him kiss her senseless. She pulled her hands out of the loose grasp of his and linked them around his neck. She looked him in the eyes, drowning all over again in their dark brown depths. And then she rose up on tiptoe and pressed her mouth to his, somehow knowing that in doing so she was passing a point of no return.

It was like fire meeting fuel. A burn of longing that flickered and then roared, consuming everything in its path. Her mouth opened at the first searing, searching thrust of his tongue, her tongue dancing with his, darting away shyly at first and then flirting with his outrageously, boldly, wantonly. He groaned deeply as he deepened the kiss, his hands guiding her body as he backed her up against the nearest wall, his mouth increasing its pressure, its heat and its passion until she felt as if she was being sucked into a whirlpool of clawing, desperate need.

With the wall at her back, his body had more leverage against hers. She felt the hard ridge of him against her belly, the

pounding heat of his blood surging through his veins in primal response to his need to mate. She felt the urge too. It was beating inside her like a primitive tribal drum, the walls of her feminine core quivering in anticipation of the delicious friction of his commanding possession.

His mouth was like a naked flame against hers. His kiss was scorching her but she returned it with matching heat, her tongue darting and diving in a cat and mouse game with his. His hands slid up her body and cupped her breasts, gently but possessively, his thumbs claiming her erect nipples as his own to pleasure, to caress and to tease into submission.

Bronte arched up against him shamelessly. She wished she could rip her clothes off in one movement to feel his warm masculine hands on her bare skin. She tugged at his shirt, pulling it free of his trousers, sliding her hands up his chest, her fingers exploring the hard musculature that had delighted her so much in the past. She felt the hard, flat nubs of his nipples and the scratchy dusting of masculine hair over his chest. He was in every way possible a man: strong and capable, lean but hard muscled, fit and virile, potent and irresistibly sexy.

His mouth moved from hers to her breast; the hot moist feel of him caressing her made her spine turn to liquid. She made a soft sound in the back of her throat, something between a whimper and a gasp.

‘I have dreamed of doing this,’ Luca said throatily. ‘Touching you, feeling you respond to me. No one else has ever turned me

on quite like you do.'

It was just the reminder Bronte needed that she was not the only one he had been with and she was certainly not going to be the last. He had worked his way through a glamorous array of women since he was a teenager. She had known of his playboy reputation when she first met him but somehow hadn't been able to resist his seductive charm. She was older and wiser now. And she had responsibilities. Ella was her most important one. There was nothing she would not do to protect her baby girl. Denying herself this was a sacrifice she had to make. For now, at least, until she could find a way out of the honey trap Luca had lured her into.

She let her hands drop from around his neck, her eyes meeting his. 'I can't do this, Luca,' she said. 'Not here. Not like this. It's... it's too soon.'

His eyes seared hers for an endless moment, a muscle working in his jaw as he fought to control his rampant desire. 'Remember our deal,' he said.

Bronte slipped out from his arms where they were propped against the wall either side of her head and put a little distance between their bodies. She struggled to get her breathing to steady, difficult when her pulse was fluttering like a hummingbird inside her veins.

'Deal?' she asked with a scornful look. 'Don't you mean the bribe you put on the table, Luca? Money for sex.'

'That is rather a crude way of putting it,' he said.

‘It’s the truth, though, isn’t it?’ she asked. ‘You want to turn me into a whore. You open your wallet; I open my legs. That’s the so-called deal, isn’t it?’

A nerve ticked like a pulse at the side of his mouth. ‘Don’t cheapen yourself like that, Bronte.’

Bronte gave a choked laugh that was just shy of hysteria. ‘You tell me not to cheapen myself when you have insulted me more than any other person I know.’

He drew in a breath and moved across the room, standing at the windows that overlooked the shimmering lights of the city below. Bronte saw the stiff set to his broad shoulders, the straight spine and the long legs standing slightly apart.

She longed to go to him and wrap her arms around him, to take whatever he was offering, but she knew in the end it would only lead to further heartbreak. How could she ever trust he wouldn’t walk out on her again? She would not survive it a second time. It had nearly done her in the first time. It had only been the responsibility of Ella that had made her come to her senses and grow up—and grow up fast. But, even so, it was tempting. Oh, dear God, it was tempting. To feel his arms around her one more time, to have him hold her as if she was the most precious thing in the entire world. How she had dreamed and longed for one more time with him over the last two years.

‘Fine,’ he said after a long moment, his voice sounding hollow and empty. ‘You are free to go.’

Bronte felt her heart give a little start. ‘But I thought—’

He turned, his dark eyes hitting hers. ‘Go, Bronte. Before I change my mind.’

She swallowed and took a hesitant step towards the door, but then she remembered her clutch purse was sitting on the sofa. She glanced at it but, before she could move, he stepped forward and picked it up.

He came over to where she was standing and handed it to her. ‘This is all wrong, isn’t it?’ he said.

She rolled her lips against each other, not sure if he wanted an answer or not. Of course it was wrong. It was wrong for her to still want him, no matter what terms he laid down. It was shameless of her, needy and pathetic and desperate, but that was what he reduced her to. No man had ever made her feel so desperately in need. No man had made her heart ache with an indescribable longing. No man had made her want to throw herself at him in spite of everything.

She had to leave.

She had to leave *now*, before he saw how close she was to offering herself for further hurt. She had to leave before these minutes alone turned into an hour or two of stolen pleasure that, just like in the past, would trick her too-trusting, too-romantic mind into thinking they had any sort of future.

‘I have handled this all wrong,’ he said again with a rueful tilt to his mouth. ‘I should have called you first, given you some warning, perhaps. Maybe then you would not be so wary of me. You would have been better prepared, *sì?*’

‘Why didn’t you?’ she asked in a scratchy voice.

One of his broad shoulders rose and fell. ‘I wanted to see your instinctive response to me, not a rehearsed one.’

Bronte gave him a disdainful look. ‘You make it sound like some sort of social experiment.’

His eyes stayed on hers: dark, tempting, fathomless. ‘I would like to see you again, *cara*,’ he said. ‘Tomorrow night. No strings this time. No threats or bribes or blackmail, just two people having dinner together. If you like, we can pretend we have met for the first time.’

Bronte chewed at her lip, torn between temptation and uncertainty. Was this some sort of set-up? What if he still wanted to pull the financial rug from under her feet? ‘The rent thing...’ she said. ‘I don’t have that sort of money. I think you know that.’

‘Forget about the rent,’ he said. ‘I don’t want you in my bed because you have no choice in the matter. I know you will come to me, Bronte. It is inevitable. I knew that as soon as I walked into the studio.’

Had she been that transparent? Bronte wondered. ‘You are deluding yourself, Luca,’ she said with a proud hitch of her chin. ‘You mistook surprise for something else.’

His knowing half-smile travelled all the way to his eyes. ‘So beautiful,’ he said, trailing a slow-moving finger down the curve of her cheek. ‘So very beautiful.’

Bronte flinched in case she betrayed herself completely. His touch was like a feather and yet it set every nerve screaming for

more. ‘What’s going on, Luca?’ she asked, rubbing at her cheek as if he had tainted her.

His expression was like a blank stone wall. ‘What do you mean?’

‘This...’ She waved her arm to encompass the suite. ‘You. Me. Us. I’m not sure what’s really going on. I get the feeling there is far more to this than you’re telling me.’

He gave her a small twisted smile. ‘Is it so hard for you to understand I wanted to see you again? Would it not have seemed strange for me to travel all this way, knowing you lived in the same city where I would be based and not at least try and make contact with you?’

Bronte’s mouth tightened with cynicism. ‘Do you make contact with *all* your ex-lovers wherever you travel in the world? If so, I am sure by now your little black book would be classified as overweight luggage.’

His smile lingered for a moment as if he found the thought amusing. ‘There have not been as many lovers as you might think,’ he said. ‘I have been busy with... other things.’

Bronte wondered what *other things* had taken up his time. She knew he worked hard in the family business but he had found plenty of time in the past to play hard too. If he wasn’t squiring yet another wannabe model or Hollywood starlet like his equally single younger brother Nicolás, what had he been doing?

‘Did you drive here or catch a cab?’ Luca asked.

‘I caught a cab,’ she said. ‘I didn’t want to have to worry about

parking.’

He reached for a set of car keys on a nearby sideboard. ‘I’ll drive you home.’

Bronte felt a frisson of fear run through her like a trickle of ice-cold water. ‘You don’t have to do that,’ she said quickly. ‘I mean... it’s no trouble getting a cab. I would prefer it, actually...’

His eyes narrowed just a fraction. ‘What is the problem, Bronte? You surely trust me to get you home safely? I do know which side of the road to drive on here.’

‘It’s not that,’ she said. ‘I would prefer to make my own arrangements.’

‘Is there someone waiting for you at home?’ he asked.

‘My private life has nothing to do with you, Luca,’ she said. ‘Not any more.’

He continued to watch her, his eyes dark and inscrutable. He didn’t speak, which made the silence open up like a chasm between them.

‘Look,’ Bronte finally said, moving from foot to foot with impatience, ‘I have to work tomorrow. And I don’t want my mother to worry.’

‘Your mother?’ A deep frown appeared between his brows. ‘You live with your mother?’

She straightened her spine. ‘What’s wrong with that?’ she asked. ‘Property is horrendously expensive in Melbourne. I can’t afford the studio rent and a mortgage. I’m just starting out.’

‘How long have you been teaching at the studio?’ he asked,

still frowning.

‘About a year,’ Bronte said. ‘Rachel and I trained at the same academy together. She broke her ankle in a car accident a couple of years ago and had to give up dancing. We decided to set up our own ballet school.’

Another silence passed but to Bronte it felt like hours. Each second seemed weighted; even the air seemed heavy and too thick for her to breathe.

‘The audition you said you missed,’ he said, watching her steadily. ‘Did that by any chance have anything to do with me?’

Bronte felt her heart trip and carefully avoided his gaze. ‘W... why do you ask that?’

‘We broke up, what, about four weeks before you were due to audition, right?’

She gave a could-mean-anything shrug and fiddled with the catch on her clutch purse. ‘I didn’t see the point in trying for the company when my heart wasn’t in staying in London,’ she said. She brought her gaze back up to his. ‘It was time for me to go home, Luca. There was nothing in London for me. The competition was tough, in any case. I didn’t have a hope of making the shortlist. The audition would have been yet another rejection I just wasn’t up to facing.’

‘So you preferred to not show up at all rather than to fail.’ It was not a question but a rather good summation of what she had been feeling at the time.

Bronte hadn’t realised he had known her quite so well. She

hadn't spoken to him of her doubts about making the grade. Their relationship hadn't been the sort for heart-to-heart confessions. She had always felt as if he was holding himself at a distance, not just physically but emotionally, so she had done the same. 'Yes,' she said, deliberately holding his gaze. 'I did, however, speak to the head of auditions in person and explain I was withdrawing my application. I had at least the common decency to do that.'

There was another long drawn-out silence.

'I know you took it hard, Bronte,' he said in a husky tone. 'I didn't want to hurt you but I am afraid it was unavoidable. I had to end it. I had no other choice.'

Bronte blinked back the smarting of tears. She was *not* going to cry in front of him. She had cried all the tears she was ever going to cry over him two years ago. 'Was there someone else the whole time?' she asked in a cool crisp tone. 'You can be honest with me, Luca. I am a big girl now. I can take it. I wasn't enough to satisfy you, was I? I wasn't worldly enough for your sophisticated tastes.'

He gave her a brooding frown. 'Is that what you thought?'

She flattened her mouth. 'It's what I know,' she said. 'I was a novelty for you at first but it must have become annoying after a while. I was good enough to have sex with but not good enough for you to take on any of your trips abroad. But no doubt you had plenty of women to step into my place.'

He continued to frown at her. 'That is not the way it was, Bronte.' He raked one of his hands through his hair, making it

look as if he had just tumbled out of bed. 'I've always preferred to travel alone. It's less complicated.'

Bronte bit the inside of her mouth to control her spiralling emotions. Why hadn't she left five minutes ago before it had got to this? 'We went out for close to six months,' she said. 'Not once did you spend a whole night with me. Not once, Luca. You never even took me for a weekend away. Not even into the country. I was your city mistress. The easy girl you could bed any time you liked. You only had to pick up the phone and I was available.'

Luca came over and captured Bronte's flailing hands, holding them firmly in his grasp. 'Stop it, Bronte,' he said. 'You were no such thing. Not to me.'

She looked at him with tears shining in her eyes. 'You used me, Luca. You can't deny it. You used me and when you got tired of me you let me go.'

Luca looked down at her hands, struggling to get away from his. His hands were so olive-skinned and dark and big compared to her slim, small creamy ones. Her hands reminded him of small doves fluttering to get away. Her body was so slight. Everything about her was so dainty and elegant. Her dancer's body, the way she carried herself, the way her eyes looked so big and dark in the perfect oval of her face.

He looked into those big dark eyes and wondered how he could repair the damage he had done. He could see the pain his rejection had caused. It glimmered there amongst the sheen of tears she was so determined not to shed in front of him.

She was so unlike any other woman he had been with in the past. He had loved the fact he was her first lover. She had seemed embarrassed about it but he had secretly delighted in it. He wondered if that was why he could not forget her. She had touched him in a way no one else had ever done. There was a place deep inside of him no one had ever been able to reach and yet he had felt as if she had come so very close. He had not wanted to fall in love with anyone, not with his health the way it had been back then. But with Bronte he had come close. Too close. That was why he'd had to back off before he was in so deep he wouldn't be able to think rationally. The more time he'd spent with her, the more he'd realised how unfair it would be on her to tie her to him when there was no guarantee he could give her anything in return.

Luca released one of her hands so he could put his other hand in the small of her back, bringing her up against him again. He loved the feel of her body flush against his. She fitted against him as if she had been made for him. He felt his body stirring and wished he could show her what he found so hard to say out loud. But it would only scare her away. It was too soon. He had to take things slowly and carefully this time. She was like a shy fawn with an innate sense of danger. She needed time and careful handling. He had the patience for the careful handling, but time was something he didn't have at his disposal. A month was all he had to get her to come back to him, to see if the magic was still there so they could build some sort of future together. Would it

be enough?

‘Don’t fight me, Bronte,’ he said softly. ‘You are angry at me and I know I deserve it, but we still have something between us. You know we do.’

Her eyes flared like a cornered animal facing a dangerous predator. ‘W... we share nothing,’ she stammered. ‘I don’t want to see you. I don’t want to be your sex slave. I don’t want to be your... your anything.’

He brought her other hand to his mouth, kissing each of her stiff fingertips until he felt them tremble against his lips. He kept his eyes trained on hers, watching as the point of her tongue darted out nervously to anoint her lips. ‘I am not asking you to be anything but my partner for dinner tomorrow evening,’ he said.

She swallowed tightly. ‘And... and after that?’

He kissed the backs of her bent knuckles, still holding her gaze. ‘If you don’t want to see me again I will have to accept it,’ he said.

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. ‘You’ll let me go? Just like that?’

Luca stroked away the frown that had appeared between her brows. ‘If you frown all the time you will get wrinkles.’

She arched her head away from his touch. ‘You didn’t answer my question, Luca.’

Luca let out a sigh as he dropped his hand back by his side. ‘I didn’t have to blackmail you into my bed in the past,’ he said. ‘I don’t see why I should need to do so now.’

Her chin came up and her eyes flashed blue fire at him. ‘So you think I’ll just dive in head first then, do you?’

He examined her taut expression for a moment or two. ‘I think what will happen will happen, *cara*,’ he said. ‘We should leave things to fate, *si*?’

She continued to regard him warily. ‘Fate, huh? Like it’s fate that you’re suddenly my landlord.’

‘You’re not in any danger of being kicked out on the street,’ Luca said.

‘Can I have that in writing?’ she asked.

He stood looking down at her for a long moment, breathing in her scent, that hint of honeysuckle and sun-warmed sweet peas that unfurled inside his nostrils, making them flare to take more of her in. ‘You really don’t trust me, do you?’

She folded her arms across her chest. ‘No, strange as it may seem, I don’t trust you. I don’t like you and I can’t wait to see the last of you.’

Luca felt his spine tighten with irritation. Did she have to keep reminding him of how much she hated him? Did she think it would make him want her less? If anything, it made him want her more. Or was that her intention? Was she playing hard to get to teach him a lesson, or to get more out of the relationship this time around? Maybe the last couple of years had toughened her up. Maybe she had enrolled in the academy of gold-diggers and now knew how to use men to serve her own ends. Either way, it didn’t matter. He wanted her any way he could get her. If she

had changed, well, so had he. He was not the same person he had been two years ago. How could he be? Too much had happened.

He went over to where he had put their champagne glasses down before. He picked up her glass and brought it back to where she was standing. 'It would be a shame to let such good champagne go to waste,' he said, offering it to her. 'Why not stay a few minutes more and help me finish it?'

She looked at the glass as if he was handing her a poisoned chalice.

'It's just champagne, Bronte,' he said. 'Let's finish our drink and catch up on the last two years.' He took a sip from his glass, hoping she would follow suit. Anything to prolong the time he had with her in case she didn't show up tomorrow. 'Tell me about your teaching. Do you enjoy it?'

She took a tiny sip of her champagne and then held the glass with both of her hands around the stem. 'I do, yes,' she said. 'The children are lovely.'

He patted the sofa, indicating for her to sit down. She sat on the edge of the seat again, ready for instant flight. 'How many students do you have?' he asked, trying to put her at ease.

'We have sixty at the moment but I would like to see it go to about two hundred,' she said. 'I have plans for extension of classes. I would like to hire a couple more teachers for jazz and tap, and I want to incorporate some adult classes.'

Luca took a sip of his champagne. 'You teach adults?' he asked. 'Isn't it too late for an adult to learn? I thought ballet was

something you had to learn at a very young age, the younger the better.’

‘That’s true, but there are lots of women and some men, when it comes to that, who have studied dance in the past and have let it slip,’ she said. ‘Doing a weekly or twice weekly class with other adults is a good way of keeping in shape.’

Luca let his eyes run over her slim form. ‘Yes, well, it certainly hasn’t done you any harm,’ he said with a crooked smile. ‘You’re as slim as ever. How often do you practice?’

A light blush shaded her cheeks and she looked down at the contents of her glass again. ‘A couple of hours a day,’ she said. ‘I would like to do more but with El...’ She stopped mid-sentence and sank her teeth in her lip before continuing falteringly, ‘... I mean with everything there is to do around here I... I haven’t got a lot of time.’

Luca watched as her colour deepened even further. She reminded him of a shy schoolgirl, nervous, timid, not sure of herself in spite of all of her talent. It was so endearing he felt as if a large hand was pressing down on his heart. He thought of all the streetwise women who had thrown themselves at him in the past. They had used their looks and glamour and wily ways to get his attention. Bronte, on the other hand, had done nothing of the sort. She had always been reserved and held a lot of herself back. It made him all the more determined to draw her out of herself. She was such a rare find, so pure and unblemished. Like a rare diamond.

She got up from the sofa and put the glass down. ‘I’m sorry, Luca, but I have to go.’

‘What’s the hurry?’ he asked, rising to his feet.

She turned and faced him, her gaze quickly falling away from his as she searched again for her clutch purse. ‘My mother will be wondering what’s keeping me. I said I was only going out for a quick drink.’

‘Bronte, you are twenty-five years old,’ he pointed out. ‘Do you really have to check in and out with your mother as if you were fifteen?’

Her eyes gave him a hard little glare. ‘My mother has been very good to me. She has stood by me and supported me unconditionally. I don’t have to answer to her, but I choose to out of respect for all the sacrifices she has made for me.’

‘Surely she won’t begrudge you a night out,’ he said. And then, after a beat, added with a curl of his lip, ‘Or has it more to do with this other man you’re seeing?’

She sent him a challenging look. ‘What if it does?’

Luca felt a rush of jealousy hit him like a tsunami. His stomach clenched as he thought of her with another man. His skin broke out in a sickening sweat as he imagined them together. He felt nauseous thinking about it. He didn’t want to think about it. He *wouldn’t* think about it. ‘What is his name?’ he asked in a cool unaffected tone when inside his guts were churning.

Her small chin rose. ‘I don’t have to tell you.’

Luca put his glass down before he snapped the fragile stem.

He surreptitiously clenched and unclenched his hands, fighting for control. She was deliberately goading him, dangling her lover in front of him like a red rag to a raging bull. ‘Are you sleeping with him?’ he asked, not wanting to know but asking anyway.

‘That is none of your business.’

He watched as she snatched up her purse, which had slipped down between the loose cushions of the sofa. She clipped it shut and stalked to the door, throwing over her shoulder, ‘Thank you for the drink. Goodbye.’

‘We have a date for tomorrow,’ he reminded her.

She stiffened as if she had been snap-frozen from head to foot. ‘I won’t be able to make it,’ she said, not bothering to turn around and face him.

‘Damn it, Bronte, I am only asking for one night,’ he said in rising frustration. ‘Is that so very much to ask?’

She turned then, slowly, meeting his eyes with a glare of deep, bottomless blue anger in her own. ‘Yes, Luca, it is too much to ask. You never gave me a single night of your time the whole time we were together.’

Luca felt his jaw snap together like a steel trap. His teeth ached with the pressure of forming the words to speak. ‘So this is payback, is it?’

‘No, Luca,’ she said, opening the door. ‘This is justice.’

And then she shut the door in his face.

CHAPTER FOUR

LUCA didn't find the mobile phone until an hour after Bronte had gone. He had paced the floor in anger for half an hour before he stopped to pour himself another drink from the barely touched bottle of champagne.

He took the bottle and his glass over to the sofa where Bronte had been sitting earlier. He tossed the first glass down and then poured himself another, barely tasting it before he swallowed. Right at this moment he didn't care if he got drunk. It would certainly be preferable to this.

He swore viciously and pushed his hair back off his forehead. He had hoped the night would have turned out differently but he had obviously been fooling himself. Bronte was well and truly over him. She had walked out and made it clear she wasn't coming back. He had hoped she still felt something for him. It was a wild hope, a vain, perhaps even an arrogant hope, but a hope all the same.

She had taken a long time to admit to loving him but when she had finally said it he knew she had meant it. Back then he hadn't been entirely sure if what he felt for her was love; all he knew was he felt different when he was with her, unlike he had ever felt before. But at that time he hadn't been sure he had a future to offer her. So he had kept his feelings to himself. He knew he had often come across as cold emotionally. He was often

irritable and short-tempered with her on the days after he had been unwell and, while he knew it had confused her and made her feel insecure, he had never told her why he was feeling out of sorts. He hadn't wanted her to feel obligated towards him. She was the sort of person who would sacrifice herself and he hadn't been prepared for her to do that. It was his burden, his cross to bear and he had borne it and finally, thank God, got rid of it.

He reached forward to pour himself another glass of champagne, when something hard pressed against his thigh. He looked down and saw a slimline black mobile phone poking up through the cushions.

He smiled a slow smile as he pulled it out. It was the same model as his, only his was the newer upgraded one. He turned it over in his hand, pressing the silent switch on the side to ringtone. It immediately buzzed with messages; one by one they came up on the screen. It was impossible not to read them, even if his conscience told him it was an invasion of privacy.

How did it go?

What's he like?

Did you tell him about you know who?

Call me!!!!

Luca scrolled past the other icons, but his finger stilled on the photo gallery one. He hesitated for a fraction of a moment before he pressed it to open it. There were a lot of pictures of a baby girl. He couldn't determine the age but he thought she was under one year old. She was small, like a doll, with dark brown hair

and big blue eyes.

His gut seized and his hand shook as he scrolled through a couple more photos. She was a miniature version of Bronte. She was still in nappies; it looked as if she had only just started to walk. Luca felt a pain like a thick metal skewer go through the middle of his heart. He hadn't been expecting this. He hadn't seen it coming. He felt a fool for not realising. No wonder she didn't want anything more to do with him. Bronte had well and truly moved on with her life.

She'd had a baby.

She'd had another man's child.

The knowledge was too painful. His chest cavity felt too tight, suddenly too small to accommodate his organs. He couldn't breathe without pain. Each breath was like a knife between his ribs. His lungs felt as if they were going to explode.

He couldn't bear to look at any more pictures. He couldn't trust himself not to smash the phone if he came across the child's father in one of them. He didn't want to know who it was or what he looked like. No doubt it was some solidly dependable suburban type who had swept Bronte off her feet and offered her the security she longed for. Luca hadn't noticed a wedding ring on her finger but having a child with someone these days often came first. She had said she lived with her mother but did her lover and the father of her child live there too? No wonder she hadn't wanted him to pick her up or even know where she lived. *Dio*, he couldn't bear the thought of her going home to lie

in someone else's arms. Even now she could be making love with the father of her child, perhaps conceiving another one with him right at this very moment.

His fingers clenched around the phone as he laid his head back against the sofa cushions. He closed his eyes tightly, almost painfully, trying to block out the taunting images his brain concocted, thinking instead of how a few months could have changed everything.

The phone began to vibrate in his hand.

Luca opened his eyes and looked down at the screen. He slid the answer arrow across and held the phone up to his ear. 'Hello.'

There was a short silence marked by some rapid breathing.

'Luca?'

'Bronte,' Luca drawled, idly crossing one ankle over his thigh. 'How nice of you to call.' Another tight silence.

'You have my phone.' The words came out like small, hard pellets. 'It must have slipped out of my purse or something.'

'Yes, it must have,' he said. 'You want to come and get it or shall I bring it to dinner tomorrow night?'

'I...'

'Or I could bring it around to your place now,' he said.

'No!'

Luca curled his lip, trying to ignore the pain in his gut. 'It would be no trouble, Bronte. Where do you live?'

'I don't want you to come here, Luca,' she said stiffly.

'Lover boy wouldn't like it?' he asked.

The silence this time crackled with tension.

‘I need my phone,’ she said. ‘I will come and get it now... if that’s all right? I mean if it’s not too late or anything.’

Luca glanced at his watch and smiled. ‘I’ll be waiting for you.’

The call ended and he tapped his fingers against the phone where it rested on his thigh, his smile disappearing as a heavy frown pulled at his forehead.

Bronte pulled into the hotel’s arrival bay and reluctantly left the keys with the valet parking attendant. She had tried to explain she wouldn’t be long but hotel policy forbade parking out the front, even for short intervals. The tense exchange of words with the attendant on duty hadn’t improved her already overstretched nerves. The moment of panic when she’d realised she had left her phone behind had practically sent her heart into a fibrillation. A heart attack at twenty-five was unlikely but Bronte felt as if she was going to go very close.

Had Luca looked at the photos of Ella? There were literally dozens of them. Fortunately there were none of Ella’s firstborn ones or any from the first few months of her life. Bronte had transferred all her photos only a couple of weeks ago so she only had more recent photos on it.

But even so.

Would Luca see the likeness? Her mother had assured her it was unlikely. Ella was small for her age and had the same hair colour as Bronte and the same slate-blue eyes, dainty features and creamy skin.

Bronte wasn't so sure her mother was right, however. At times she could see a lot of Luca in her daughter. When Ella was concentrating over a puzzle or a toy she couldn't quite figure out, she frowned just like Luca frowned. And just lately, as Ella grew more and more adventurous now she was finally walking, she often gave Bronte a look of gleaming satisfaction that was Luca through and through.

Ever since she had realised she had left her phone behind Bronte had berated herself. Why hadn't she noticed the clasp on her purse was faulty? She should never have agreed to see him. What was she thinking? What good could come of it? It was perfectly clear he was after a quick affair. She had seen the intention in his dark, smouldering eyes. He wanted her. And that kiss! What had she been doing, responding to him like that? What madness had overtaken her? He was testing the waters and they were as hot as he had arrogantly expected.

Fool, fool, fool! Why had she fallen for it? She should have been more determined, more strident, more.... more... in control of herself.

She rested her hot forehead on the wall of the lift, trying to get her breathing to calm down. All she had to do was pick up her phone and leave. Simple. Just take it and leave. Don't talk, don't linger and for God's sake don't look at him too long in case he saw more than she wanted him to see.

The lift seemed to take ages to climb to the penthouse floor, or perhaps that was because Bronte was sweating out each heart-

stopping second in a rising state of panic.

Finally the lift arrived and she walked on legs that felt as spindly and unstable as a newborn colt's. Her brief knock on Luca's door was answered by him after an annoyingly lengthy interval. She wondered if it had been deliberate.

'Come in,' he said, holding the door wide open.

'No, thank you,' she said tightly. 'I'll just take my phone and leave.'

He folded his arms across his broad chest, rocking back on his heels in an indolent manner. 'Since you've driven all this way back here, why not stay a while and chat?'

Bronte held out her hand. 'My phone.'

Luca took her hand and tugged her into the suite, closing the door with a sharp click behind her. He smiled mockingly at her shocked and outraged expression. 'My way, Bronte, or you won't get your phone back at all.'

She glared at him with eyes as narrow as that of an embroidery needle. 'That's theft, you bastard.'

'You can have your phone after we've had a little talk,' he said, leading her into the suite.

She tugged at his hold to no avail. 'I don't want to talk to you, Luca.'

'Would you like a drink?' he asked, pointedly ignoring her attempts to pull away. 'I'm afraid there's not much champagne left. But I could always open another bottle.'

'I am not here to socialise,' she said through clenched teeth. 'I

just want to get my phone and go home.’

He held her in front of him, looking down at her flushed features and tightly pursed lips. ‘Why didn’t you tell me about your child?’ he asked. ‘I’m assuming it’s yours? She looks the image of you.’

Her face paled and her eyes looked stricken. ‘You looked at my photos?’ she asked in a hoarse-sounding whisper.

‘There was nothing too incriminating there, I can assure you,’ Luca said. ‘No boudoir scenes, for instance.’

Her face regained some of its colour, two hot spots on each cheek. ‘You had no right to touch my phone.’

‘On the contrary, Bronte, it was on my sofa and it rang while I was holding it,’ he said. ‘Did you want me to ignore your call?’

She gave him an icy glare. ‘That’s what you would have done in the past, wasn’t it?’

Luca had to admit she had won that round. He could hardly tell her now how hard it had been to see his phone ringing with her number showing on the screen and having to restrain himself from picking it up just to hear her voice one more time. In the end he had changed phones and numbers so in a weak moment he would not be tempted. And there had been many weak moments over the following months. ‘How seriously involved are you with the father of your child?’ he asked. ‘You’re not wearing a wedding ring so I am assuming you’re not married.’

She looked at him for a long moment, her eyes flickering with something he couldn’t quite identify. Her teeth caught at her

bottom lip, pulling at it until he was sure she was going to draw blood. ‘No, I’m not married... I... The thing is...’ She winced as if she found the subject painful to talk about.

‘You’re no longer together, is that it?’ he said.

She gave her lip another gnaw and finally released it. ‘Yes... something like that...’

‘Well, then,’ Luca said. ‘At least we’ve cleared up that little detail. There is a lot I would do to get you back into my bed, but taking on a jealous husband is not one of them.’

‘I am not going to—’

Luca put a finger against her lips. ‘Don’t speak so soon, *cara*,’ he warned.

Her eyes flared as he brushed his finger along her lips. The softness of her mouth had always amazed him. She had a classically bee-stung mouth, irresistibly kissable. He bent his head and gently brushed his mouth over her lips, tasting her sweetness, wanting more, but holding back to give her time to reveal how much he affected her. Her lashes came down over her eyes, her tongue darting out and depositing a light sheen of moisture over her lips before disappearing again. He felt her breathe, in and out, a ragged sort of sound that seemed to catch inside her chest.

He bent his head again, hesitating just above her mouth, waiting for her to meet him halfway. ‘Go on, *cara*,’ he whispered against her lips. ‘You know you want to.’

‘I don’t want to...’ Her eyes met his briefly before falling away

again. 'I don't want to see you. I don't think this is a good idea... you know... rehashing the past. It never works.'

He brought up her chin again, holding her gaze with his. 'We could make it work. Just you and me. No one else needs to know.'

She pushed against his chest and slipped out of his hold, crossing her arms over her body, turning away from him. 'There's not just the two of us to consider any more,' she said. 'I have a child. I have to consider her. She is my first priority. She will always be my first priority.'

Luca raked a hand through his hair. He didn't want to think about her love-child. It wasn't that he didn't love kids; he did and had always hoped he would have a family of his own one day. He just couldn't get used to the idea of Bronte being a mother to someone else's baby.

Had she had the child as a result of a rebound affair? That somehow made it so much worse. If things had been different, he would have loved to have married Bronte and had the family he knew she wanted. She had hinted at it once or twice but he had deliberately avoided picking up the bait. It had been too painful back then to think about the life he wanted and the life he had been given. The bond of a child was a big deal. What if she still felt something for this guy? The kid was adorable. How could Bronte not feel something for the father of her little baby girl?

Luca had a bigger fight on his hands than he had thought. If he was to somehow convince her to get involved with him again he would have to learn how to be a stepparent. And it was not the

easiest of relationships either. He had several friends who had never got on with their parents' partners. It had caused numerous arguments and resentments, some of which went on over years. Bronte's little girl was very young, but nothing could change the fact that Luca was not her real father. Circumstances had prevented him from having that privilege and there was nothing that he could do to change that now.

'How old is she?' he asked.

Bronte pushed a strand of hair back behind her ear and almost but not quite met his gaze. 'She recently turned one.' *Recently, as in two months ago*, she silently added.

His forehead creased as he did the numbers in his head. 'So you hooked up with her father what... a couple of months after you came back to Melbourne?'

Bronte hated lying outright but what else could she do? She hadn't had time to think this through. Everything had happened so quickly. Luca suddenly turning up at the studio—was it only that afternoon? And this evening's awkward meeting and the careless loss of her phone had not given her time to get her head around everything. 'Is that so wrong?' she asked, taking an evasive approach. 'You would have moved on just as, if not more quickly.'

'But to get pregnant to some guy you hardly knew—'

'Don't preach at me, Luca,' Bronte said in irritation. 'I did know him. I thought I knew him well. It just didn't work out.'

'Do you still see him?' he asked. 'Does he have contact with

the child?’

Bronte realised now how many lies it took after you told one to keep the others in place. There was going to be no way out of this other than more and more lies. She hated herself at that moment. It seemed so wrong to lie to him and yet the alternative was too terrifying. Maybe she could work up the courage over time. Maybe there would be a right time to tell him. Maybe they could become friends first and then she could tell him he was Ella’s father. Yeah, right, maybe she was kidding herself. She looked at his brooding frown and inwardly gulped. Yep, she was definitely kidding herself. ‘No,’ she said.

‘What? You mean he doesn’t want contact with his own flesh and blood?’ he asked with an incredulous look.

‘Look, Luca, I’d rather not talk about it,’ she said. ‘If I could just take my phone and—’

‘So how do you manage?’ Luca asked. ‘Does the father contribute financially to the child’s upbringing?’

The child. How impersonal he made it sound, Bronte thought. ‘Her name is Ella,’ she said. ‘And I manage perfectly fine without help from anyone.’

‘How do you work and look after a little child?’ he asked, still frowning darkly.

‘The same way thousands of other working single mums do,’ she said, ‘juggling, compromise and guilt.’

‘So that’s why you live with your mother.’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘It works out for both of us. She works part-

time and I work on her days off so she can mind Ella.’

He continued to look at her with a frown pulling at his forehead. His hands were thrust in his trouser pockets, the sound of his change and keys rattling the only sound breaking the heavy silence.

‘I really should get going,’ Bronte said. ‘Mum stays in the granny flat with Ella. She can’t go to bed back at her house until I get home.’

‘If I hadn’t ended things with you the way I did, do you think you would be in this situation now?’ Luca asked, looking at her intently.

Bronte felt the pull of his magnetic gaze, her heart stumbling like a long-legged horse stepping into a deep pothole. ‘There’s no point in discussing it,’ she said. ‘Life happens. It’s not as planned as we would like to think it is.’

‘Did you plan to get pregnant?’

‘No, that was an accident,’ she said. ‘But it’s not one I regret. Ella’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.’

Luca took the phone out of his pocket and handed it to her. ‘I guess you will need this,’ he said. ‘She’s very cute by the way. She looks exactly like you.’

Bronte felt a thick lump lodge in her throat. ‘Th... thank you.’ She clutched the phone to her thumping chest, blinking back tears of relief, regret and deep self-loathing.

He stepped closer and cupped her cheek, holding her face so tenderly more tears came to her eyes. ‘Why are you crying, *cara*?’

he said softly.

She swallowed and gulped back a sob. 'It could have been so different...' She blinked a couple of times but the tears still fell. 'I wanted it to be so different... but now it's too late...'

He brought her head against his chest, his fingers splayed in her hair, the deep rumble of his voice as he spoke tearing Bronte's heart in two. 'I know, but that is my fault, *mio piccolo*. I wasn't ready. I was in a bad place in my life. I wasn't able to give you what you wanted. But then I wasn't even able to give myself what I wanted. It was just not our time.'

Bronte stood in the circle of his arms, wishing she could stay there for ever. But after a moment he stepped back from her. His expression was hard to read. He was smiling but it wasn't a smile that reached anywhere near his eyes. There were shadows there instead, flickering shadows that gave no hint of what he was feeling.

'I should let you get home to your little girl,' he said, sliding his hands down her arms to her wrists, holding them loosely with his long fingers.

A pain deep inside her chest made it almost impossible for Bronte to speak. 'It was... it was nice to see you again, Luca.'

He brought one of her hands up to his mouth, pressing his lips to her bent fingers. 'I hope one day you will forgive me for how I ended things,' he said.

'It's OK,' Bronte said. 'I should have accepted your decision. I think I made a terrible fool of myself. Actually, I *know* I

made a terrible fool of myself. I practically stalked you. I was so desperate to tell you I was...' She stopped and quickly regrouped. 'I mean... I was so desperate to know if there was something I had done to upset you. I should have realised our relationship had run its course. You had never offered anything permanent and I was a fool to hope and dream you would. I was caught up in the whole romance of my first real love affair. I was too immature to see it. Perhaps I didn't want to see it.'

'Don't beat yourself up about it, Bronte,' he said. 'We have this chance now to see if we can make a better go of it.'

Bronte felt her heart give a flutter like a startled pigeon. 'You want to... I mean you still want to... I can't, Luca. I can't see you. I told you that.'

His jaw took on an uncompromising set. 'You told me yourself there is no one else in your life. What's to stop us revisiting our relationship if it's what we both want?'

'It's what you want,' she said. 'It's not what I want at all.'

'I don't believe that,' he said, tightening his hold on her wrists as she tried to get away. 'The way you kissed me earlier told me how much you still want me.'

'You made me kiss you,' she argued.

'Don't split hairs, Bronte,' he said. 'We were kissing each other. We want each other just as much as we ever did.'

'I can't have a casual affair with you,' she said. 'I have responsibilities now. I haven't got room in my life for you.'

'Make room,' he said and, tugging her close, brought his

mouth down on hers.

CHAPTER FIVE

‘GOSH, you look like you didn’t get any sleep at all last night,’ Rachel said as Bronte came into the studio the next day. ‘Was it your hot date or your darling daughter who kept you up all hours?’

Bronte gave her a don’t-speak-to-me-about-it look.

‘Come on, Bronte,’ Rachel pleaded. ‘You didn’t even return any of my texts. What happened? Did you tell him about Ella?’

Bronte blew out a sigh. ‘No, I didn’t get around to it.’

Rachel’s brows went up. ‘What *did* you get around to?’ She leaned closer and peered at Bronte’s chin. ‘Hey, is that what I think it is?’

Bronte put her hand up to the reddened patch on her chin where Luca’s evening stubble had left its mark. ‘It’s nothing,’ she said.

Rachel folded her arms in a you-can’t-fool-me pose. ‘Beard rash only happens when you get up close and personal,’ she said. ‘So the spark is still there, huh?’

Bronte pulled her hair back into a high ponytail, all the while trying to avoid her friend’s eyes. She felt so conflicted about last night. That final kiss had burned her like fire. The stubble rash on her chin was nothing to what she felt inside. She was still smouldering with want, a hot needy craving for more of Luca’s touch. He had ended the kiss and sent her on her way, only after

he had extracted a promise to meet him for dinner this evening. She had practically stumbled back to her car, her emotions on a roller coaster ride as she thought of the danger she was dancing with.

She had spent most of the night once she got home arguing with herself over whether she should have told him from the get-go about Ella. But then the counter argument was always the same: how could she trust him not to take Ella away from her? After all, he had left her in London without a single explanation as to why their affair was over. What was to stop him doing the same thing again, but this time taking Ella with him? It was just too risky. She had to protect her daughter. She had to protect herself.

‘So are you seeing him again?’ Rachel asked.

‘Yes,’ Bronte said, slipping out of her street shoes to begin her stretches. ‘Dinner tonight. I don’t know why I agreed to it. I know it’s only asking for trouble. He wants to resume our relationship as if nothing happened.’

‘That’s men for you,’ Rachel said, rolling her eyes. ‘So did he tell you why he broke things off before?’

‘Not really,’ Bronte said, frowning. ‘Just that it was a bad time for him or something.’

‘You think there was someone else?’

Bronte let out another long breath. ‘I don’t know what to think. When I spoke to the housekeeper at his place in Milan she was adamant he was involved with someone in LA.’

‘But?’

Bronte met her friend’s grey gaze. ‘I get the feeling Luca is not being totally straight with me. I don’t trust him. I don’t think I will ever trust him after what he did. He could have a woman in every country for all I know.’

‘You said he wants to resume his relationship with you,’ Rachel said. ‘But how are you going to do that without telling him about Ella?’

‘He knows about Ella,’ Bronte said. ‘He just doesn’t know she’s his. I left my phone behind and he saw some of the pictures I’d taken of her lately. I let him assume she was someone else’s child.’

Rachel frowned. ‘How’d you do that?’

Bronte gave her a sheepish look. ‘I sort of lied about her age.’

Rachel shook her head in disapproval. ‘That could come back to bite you, Bronte. You should have told him. It will only make things much worse the longer you leave it.’

‘I can’t tell him,’ Bronte said, pressing a hand to her aching head. ‘He could take her off me. You don’t know what the Sabbatinis are like, Rachel. They’re one of the most powerful dynasties, not just in Italy but all over Europe. They’re practically royalty. They have money and prestige and power beyond belief. I spent a bit of time on the Net last night when I couldn’t sleep, looking them up. His father died about three years before I met Luca, but Giancarlo and Giovanna Sabbatini brought their three sons up with more silver spoons than you could possibly count. Luca’s grandfather, Salvatore, is reputed to be one of the richest

men in the whole of Europe. Luca told me very little of his background when we were involved. I'm not sure why, maybe because so many women were attracted to him and his brothers because of their wealth. I didn't even know who he was when we met. He thought that was highly amusing. I think it might have been one of the reasons he let our relationship continue as long as it did as it was such a refreshing change from what he was used to. He was sick of people fawning over him. He once said to me it is hard to really know who your friends are when you have money.'

'You do realise that Ella is by birth entitled to some of that money, don't you?' Rachel said. 'She's got Sabbatini blood in her veins. And, according to what I read in the papers about Luca's older brother's marriage breaking up without an heir, Ella is so far the only grandchild.'

Bronte pressed her lips together. She hadn't thought of it quite like that. She hadn't thought about Ella's rights and entitlements as a Sabbatini heir. What if some time in the future her daughter resented her for not allowing her to get to know her father and his family?

'Look, Bronte,' Rachel went on. 'I know Luca hurt you and you don't trust him not to hurt you again, but you can't keep his own flesh and blood a secret from him for ever. For all you know, he might be surprisingly good about it. After all, he was the one who cut you from his life. You did your best to contact him so if anyone's to blame for him not being a part of Ella's first year

and a bit, it's him.'

Bronte's shoulders sagged. 'I know I have to tell him some time. It's just finding the right time to do it.'

'There's probably never going to be a perfect time to drop that sort of news into the conversation,' Rachel said. 'But it's better he hears it from you rather than from someone else or, worse, stumbles across the truth himself. Photos are not the same as seeing someone face to face. As soon as Luca walked in here yesterday I realised who he was. That's why I kept my mouth shut. Ella might favour you primarily, but no one could ever question she wasn't his daughter. Once he sees her in the flesh, he's going to see it for himself.'

Bronte tried to put her fears aside as she got on with her day but it was impossible to ignore the prospect of the evening ahead. She got home early enough to feed Ella her dinner and bathe her and have some play time before putting her to bed. Ella was a little grizzly and out of sorts and kept gnawing on her fingers, which made Bronte feel uneasy about leaving her.

'I think she might be teething again,' Bronte's mother said as she came into the granny flat to babysit. 'She was a bit grumpy yesterday too.'

Bronte placed her hand on her daughter's forehead, frowning as she felt its clammy heat. 'I'd better check her temperature. She feels hot.'

Tina produced the rapid test ear thermometer and handed it to Bronte. The reading was normal but still Bronte felt in two minds

about leaving her daughter in such an unsettled state. 'Maybe I should ring Luca and cancel,' she said. 'He gave me his contact details. Or I could just leave a message with the concierge at the hotel.'

Tina plucked the whining child from Bronte's arms and cuddled her close. 'Get it over with, love,' she said. 'Have dinner with him and then say goodbye and leave it at that. He'll soon get the message you're not interested. I know Rachel thinks you should tell him about Ella but I think you'd be better to let this particular sleeping dog lie.'

Bronte knew why her mother was so adamant about keeping Ella's paternity a secret from Luca. Tina was frightened her little granddaughter would be taken to live far away in another country. Apart from Bronte and Ella, Tina had very little in her life. A single mother herself from a young age, all she had was her work at a machinery parts factory, which could hardly be called a fulfilling career. Bronte and now little Ella were the entire focus of her life. She had never dated, rarely socialised and had few hobbies. Rachel had warned Bronte many times that her mother was living her life vicariously through Bronte but it had been too hard for Bronte to do anything about it. She had needed her mother, just as much if not more than her mother needed her.

'If she doesn't settle, promise you'll ring me,' Bronte said as she rummaged through her wardrobe for something to wear.

'She'll be fine,' Tina assured her. 'I'll nurse her for a while until she drops off.' She looked down at the infant in her arms and

continued wistfully, 'I love watching her sleep. It reminds me of when you were a baby. It was just you and me in those days. I don't know what I would have done if anything had happened to you. You were my whole world.'

Bronte smiled and leant down to kiss her mother and her little daughter. 'I won't be late,' she said softly. 'And thanks, Mum, for everything.'

Tina smiled back but Bronte could see there was a tinge of worry in her eyes as she watched her leave.

Luca straightened his tie and shook down his shirt cuffs, freeing them of his dinner jacket. He had had meetings all day and his head was buzzing with all the things he had to do over the next month. This trip to Melbourne was proving to be one of the best decisions of his career in the family corporation. He had begun the negotiation for plans for a boutique hotel development in the city as well as two more commercial property investments: a large office block in the CBD and a parking lot with the potential for expansion.

And then there was Bronte. He had found it hard to sleep last night once she had left. He still couldn't believe he had let her leave. He had been so close to pulling her back towards his bed and solving the issues over the past by doing what they had always done best. The trouble was he wanted her to come to him willingly. Seduction was easy; working on a relationship was harder. He didn't want to end up like his brother Giorgio with a bitter estrangement from his wife and very likely a costly and

acrimonious divorce pending. Luca wanted to get it right this time. He wanted to start again, put the past aside and work on his future—the future he hadn't been sure he would have. Life for him now was about living. Taking each day as a blessing and moving forward with renewed purpose. Bronte was his stumbling block to moving on. He had to know if he had a chance to make things right with her. To see if what they'd had was still there.

The issue of her child was something he found challenging but it wasn't the child's fault and he knew he would learn to love her as his own once he spent some time with her. His family might not see it quite that way but he would deal with them if and when the time came. The pressure for the acquisition of a Sabbatini heir had already caused the breakdown of his brother's marriage. Giorgio and Maya, in spite of several gruelling IVF attempts, had failed to produce the grandchild and great-grandchild his mother and rapidly ageing grandfather longed for.

There was a tentative knock at the door and Luca gave his hair one last finger-comb before he went to answer it. He had wanted to pick Bronte up but she had insisted on meeting him here. The restaurant was only a short walk along the Southbank complex so he had agreed, knowing that pressuring her too much would only bring her back up. It wasn't his intention to antagonise her. His intention was to get her back into his life and into his bed as quickly as possible, to reawaken the feelings he hoped she still had for him. It was a gamble but he couldn't rest until he knew for sure. He saw the way her eyes flared when they met

his, and the way she sent the tip of her tongue out over her lips as if anticipating his next kiss. He felt the tension in the air, the way the invisible current of energy drew them together, as it had always done in the past. She might have slept with another man since, but he felt sure she still wanted him.

He opened the door and she was standing there in a cocktail dress of an intriguing shade of blue. The colour made the dark blue of her eyes look like fathomless lakes. She smelt divine: a mixture of orange blossom and ginger this time, spicy and fragrant and intensely alluring. Her straight dark brown hair was loose about her shoulders, glossy as silk, held back from her face with a slim black headband. Teamed with the cocktail dress, it gave her a child-woman look that was amazingly sexy. She was wearing heels but she still had to crane her neck to meet his eyes. Her mouth was soft and shiny with lipgloss, but in those first few moments he noticed how her teeth nibbled at the inside of her mouth, as if she was nervous.

‘Bronte,’ he said, leading her into the suite. ‘How do you manage to always look so beautiful and elegant?’

She gave him a tentative smile but it was so fleeting he wondered if he had imagined it. ‘I picked this up at a second-hand clothing store. At ten dollars it was a steal. I don’t have too many fancy clothes.’

Luca wondered if she was deliberately reminding him of the different worlds they lived in. He had always found it amazing how money had never impressed her. She found pleasure in the

simplest things. He had learned a lot from the short time he had been with her. He had learned that money could bring comfort to your life and privileges but it didn't necessarily bring happiness and fulfilment and it certainly didn't guarantee good health.

He led the way to the lounge area and, once she was seated, he handed her a gift-wrapped package.

She looked up at him with rounded eyes. 'What is this for?' 'Open it,' he said. 'I thought after last night it might come in useful.'

She unpeeled the satin ribbon tied around the package and then carefully peeled back the layers of tissue to reveal the designer clutch purse he had bought in between meetings earlier that day. He watched as she ran her index finger over the designer emblem, before lifting her gaze to his. 'It's beautiful... thank you... but you shouldn't have spent so much money.'

'You'd better check to see if the catch works,' he said with a wry smile.

She bit down on her lip and she opened and closed the purse with a snap that sounded like a gunshot. He saw her slim throat rise and fall over a tight swallow and the way her fingers trembled slightly as she refolded the tissue around the purse. A small frown had lined her smooth forehead and when she looked up at him again he saw a shadow of uncertainty in her eyes. 'Luca...' She moistened her lips and started again. 'There's something we need to discuss... I should have told you last night but there didn't seem to be—'

Luca moved to where she was sitting and placed his hand on her shoulder. 'If you're going to make a fuss about me buying you things, then don't,' he said. 'I know you can't be bought with money. I shouldn't have pulled that stunt over the rent. I admire your independence. But this time just accept this in the spirit in which it is given.'

She rolled her lips together and looked down at the purse lying on her lap. 'It's very kind of you. I really needed a new purse. Thank you.'

He held out a hand. 'Come on,' he said. 'Let's get going to the restaurant. I made an early booking as I figured you would probably need to get home at a reasonable hour to your little girl.'

Her eyes darted away from his. 'Yes... yes, I will.'

Luca took her hand as they walked down to the restaurant. Her small fingers interlaced with his, but he sensed tension in them, a fluttering nervousness that made him wonder if she was having second thoughts about this evening. He had told her no strings, just dinner, but the pulse of electricity that already charged between their bodies was a heady reminder of all they had experienced together in the past. Was she thinking of how many times dinner together had led to mind-blowing sex soon after? His body twitched in memory, his blood surging to his groin as he walked his mind back through the images he had stored of them together. He had clung to those memories during his darkest hours. They had been a powerful motivation for him to fight his demons, to wrestle them to the ground so he could

finally reclaim his life.

The restaurant overlooked the Yarra River and the city beyond. There were clouds in the night sky, brooding clusters of tension that crackled in the eerily still air.

‘Do you think there is going to be a storm?’ Luca asked, pointing to a particularly furious-looking cloud bank in the distance. ‘It certainly feels like it, don’t you think?’

‘I heard something about it in the weather report in the taxi,’ she said.

Luca stopped to frown down at her. ‘I thought you were going to drive in. I would have picked you up. Why didn’t you call me and tell me you’d changed your mind?’

She turned her gaze to the grumbling clouds. ‘I was running late. Ella was a bit unsettled. I wasn’t sure I’d find a parking spot.’

Luca waited until they had resumed walking before he asked, ‘Is that why you’re so tense this evening? Are you worried about being away from her?’

‘It’s hard not to worry at times,’ she said, not looking his way, nor at the view but at the ground at her feet. ‘It’s part of being a parent. You never stop worrying from the moment they are born.’

‘I guess you’re right,’ Luca said. ‘My brothers and I are all in our thirties but my mother is always worrying about something or other to do with one or all of us. Mind you, I think there have been times when she has had good cause to be worried. The three of us have had our fair share of mishaps, and then, of course, there was the death of our sister when she was a baby that really

did the damage.’

Bronte stopped in her tracks and looked up at him in shock. ‘You never told me you had a sister.’

He gave a shrug. ‘It was a long time ago. I hardly even remember her, or only vaguely. She died when I was three and Nic was eighteen months old. He doesn’t remember her at all. Giorgio remembers her the most clearly. He was six at the time. It really affected him. He won’t talk about it, even after all these years.’

‘What happened?’ Bronte asked.

‘Sudden Infant Death Syndrome,’ he said. ‘Or cot death, as it was called back then. My parents went through a terrible time, my mother especially. There wasn’t the knowledge about the cause of it then. My mother felt everyone blamed her. The truth is, she blamed herself. The police who came to the villa after Chiara died didn’t help matters. It was a long time before my mother got over it, although, at times, I wonder if she really ever did get over it. She’s completely obsessed about having grandchildren, my grandfather too, especially after my father died. It’s made things extremely difficult for Giorgio and his wife. I am sure it’s one of the reasons they have separated. Maya couldn’t take the pressure of not being able to conceive.’

Bronte felt a hammer blow of guilt assail her. She even stumbled slightly, as if the blow was physical. Luca’s hand tightened on hers as he steadied her, his brow creasing as he looked down at her.

‘Careful,’ he said. ‘I don’t want you to break an ankle on our first date.’

She gave him a strained smile and continued walking. ‘I’m sorry about your family’s loss,’ she said after a moment. ‘I’m sorry too about your brother and his wife. It must be a very difficult time for both of them.’

‘It is,’ Luca said. ‘As much as I’d like to knock both their heads together at what they are throwing away, I’ve had to stay out of it. Giorgio can be very stubborn and once his mind is made up, that’s it. He’s too proud for his own good. But then, who I am to criticize?’

Bronte mulled over that while he led her into the restaurant. It was a while before they were alone again. The waiter brought drinks and discussed the menu and the day’s specials and then reappeared with warmed olives and freshly baked bread and a tiny dish of extra virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar, before discreetly moving away to leave them in their intimate corner.

Luca raised his glass to Bronte. ‘Here’s to new beginnings.’

Bronte’s hand shook as she touched her glass against his. ‘To... to new beginnings.’

The silence fell like a thick suffocating blanket.

Bronte could barely breathe as each second passed. The restaurant noise of dishes and cutlery and glassware faded and her ears filled with a roaring sound of impending doom. Outside, a loud crack of thunder sounded, making her flinch and almost spill her glass of wine.

‘Hey.’ Luca took her free hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. ‘Are you OK? Is the storm bothering you? Are you frightened of them?’

Bronte shook her head. ‘No, not really.’

He studied her for a moment. ‘You seem really on edge, *cara*. You don’t need to be. Just relax. We’re just two friends having dinner, remember? I’m not going to put the hard word on you at the end of the evening. We can take things as they go. No pressure, OK?’

Bronte felt sick with nerves. There was no easy way to say what she had to say. She had only made things worse by leaving it this late. She should have told him as soon as he saw the photos of Ella. Why had she made it so hard for herself by dragging it out so torturously? She took a large sip of wine to garner her flagging courage. The crisp dry wine moistened her dry throat but the shot of alcohol did nothing to settle her frazzled and frayed nerves. ‘Luca,’ she began, ‘I have something to tell you.’

‘Don’t say you don’t want to see me again,’ he said before she could continue. ‘We both know that is not the case. I know I stuffed things up before but I want to make it up to you. I think we have something special, Bronte. I think it could work if we just give it a try.’

Bronte toyed with the stem of her wine glass. ‘Are you saying you... you have feelings for me?’

His small smile was enigmatic. ‘You wouldn’t be sitting here with me now if I didn’t feel something. As to exactly what it is,

well, isn't it a bit early to be talking about that?

She ran her finger around the base of her glass this time, her eyes falling away from his. 'I'm not sure how to tell you this, Luca. I never thought I would be in this situation.' Her heart felt as if it was weighted. It ached with a bittersweet pain that made her want to break down and cry for how unfair life was. She had longed for him to give her some clue of his feelings in the past and yet, now he had, she was about to destroy them, she was sure.

She looked up and met his gaze across the table. 'When you left me in London I was devastated. I know you never promised me anything. I know I was much more in love with you than you were ever going to be with me. You never said what you felt. I know a lot of men are like that. Most of my friends experienced the same frustration of never knowing what the man they were dating felt about them. To be frank, sometimes I thought you didn't even like me, that you were just there for the sex. You seemed to give me so many mixed signals. We were all set for a date and then you would suddenly cancel half an hour before. And then you were grumpy and difficult one day and yet charming and attentive the next. I never knew where I stood with you, but I tried to be patient because I loved you so much.'

Luca reached for her hand again, lacing his fingers with hers. 'Back then, I wasn't in the position to offer you the sort of commitment you wanted, Bronte. I know that's not much of an explanation but I'd rather not go into the reasons why I acted the way I did. It's not relevant to here and now. All that matters is

we are together again and both committed to working at what we had before. We've been given a second chance. Let's not blow it. Let's work on getting to know who we each are now, not who we were back then.'

Bronte looked down at their joined hands and let a few more seconds thrum pass. It was like waiting for a bomb to go off, watching the timer countdown second by agonising second and being able to do nothing to stop it. She knew once she said the words nothing would ever be the same. She slowly raised her eyes to his, her aching throat going up and down over a convulsive swallow.

'Bronte!' A female voice spoke from behind her in the restaurant.

Bronte pulled her hand out of Luca's and turned in her seat as one of the young mothers from the studio approached the table, her husband in tow. It took Bronte a moment to gather herself and she worried that her smile might not have seemed wholly genuine. 'Hi, Judy... hi, Dan.'

Judy waggled her brows expressively as she glanced at Luca before returning her gaze to Bronte's. 'So... who's your date?'

'Um... sorry,' Bronte said. 'Judy, Dan, this is Luca Sabbatini. Luca, Judy and Dan's daughter Matilda does ballet at the studio.'

Luca rose and politely shook the couple's hands. 'I'm delighted to meet you both,' he said, smiling that killer smile.

Bronte saw the way Judy's knees practically buckled. 'Lovely to meet you, Luca,' Judy said. 'Wow, Bronte's been keeping you

a big secret. How long have you known her?"

'We met a couple of years ago in London,' Luca said.

'You're here for work, aren't you?' Judy's husband Dan asked. 'I'm an architect. The firm I work for are bidding for the contract for your hotel development.'

'Give me your business card,' Luca said, reaching into his jacket pocket for one of his own and handing it to Dan. 'I would be happy to look over your proposal with you. I have a temporary office in the city. My secretary will tee up a time for you to come in and have a chat.'

'That's very good of you, Luca,' Dan said, beaming.

'Does your daughter enjoy her ballet dancing?' Luca asked after a tiny silence.

'Oh, yes,' Judy gushed. 'She's mad about it, has been since she was Ruby's age. That's our other daughter, the baby. Well, not so much a baby now but we always call her that. They seem to grow up so fast. She's the same age as Ella. That's how Bronte and I met. It was in hospital having our babies, wasn't it, Bronte?'

Bronte nodded, barely able to get her voice to work. 'Um... yes.'

Judy prattled on, 'Ella and Ruby have the same birthday. They were born at exactly the same hour. Isn't that the most amazing coincidence?'

There was a split second as Bronte watched helplessly as the pin was finally pulled out of the grenade.

Judy said, 'They were both born on the fourth of July last year,

Independence Day. And at fourteen months old they are both headstrong and independent, aren't they, Bronte?

CHAPTER SIX

‘Y-YES,’ Bronte said lamely. ‘They are...’

Judy smiled up at her husband. ‘I guess we should get going to our table. It’s our anniversary.’ She turned back to Bronte and Luca, who hadn’t said a word, nor moved a muscle. ‘Lovely to meet you, Luca. I hope we’ll be seeing more of you.’

‘I am very sure you will,’ Luca said, shaking both of their hands once more.

‘And thanks for that offer,’ Dan chipped in. ‘That’s amazingly generous of you.’

‘Not at all.’ Luca brushed Dan’s thanks aside.

The couple moved on and Luca remained standing.

Bronte was looking down at her place setting, her slim shoulders rolled forward, with her teeth gnawing at her bottom lip.

‘We’re leaving,’ he clipped out, throwing some money down on the table to cover their ordered meal.

She looked up at him with a pinched look. ‘But... but people will wonder what’s—’

Luca snatched at her hand and pulled her to her feet. ‘I don’t give a flying you-know-what for what people think,’ he bit out savagely. ‘I am not going to discuss this in a public restaurant.’

Bronte stumbled out of the restaurant with him, desperately hoping Judy and Dan wouldn’t notice from their seats towards

the back of the room. The tension in Luca's hand as he held hers was almost brutal. His fingers were like savage teeth biting into hers as he pulled her along beside him, his mouth set in a hard flat line. His dark eyes were dangerously brooding, his frown equally so. Once they were outside, every step he took pounded the pavement with his fury. The storm that had been brewing earlier was now in full force, as if it had sided with Luca. The flashing lightning and booming thunder mimicked the expression on his face, the electrifying hatred in his gaze zapping her like lightning each time he looked at her.

Bronte ran her tongue over her dry lips. 'Luca... I was trying to tell you when Dan and Judy arrived.'

His hand tightened like a vice as he swung her to face him. 'You were trying to tell me what?' he asked. 'That you deliberately *lied* to me from the moment you saw me yesterday? You told me the child was one year old. I did the calculations and you knew I would, didn't you? That's why you cut a couple of months off so I wouldn't suspect she was mine.'

Bronte hung her head. 'I'm sorry...'

He wrenched her back along the pavement. 'It's a bit late for an apology, damn it. You have a hell of a lot of explaining to do. I am so angry at this moment you should be thanking God we are in a public place. But you just wait until we get back to my hotel. You had better have your excuses handy.'

Each of his words was like a blow to Bronte's chest. She had known he wouldn't take the news well, but to have heard it the

way he did had made it so much worse. He was shocked and angry and rightly so. He had missed out on the most precious first months of his child's life. Even though he had refused to see her after he ended their relationship, Bronte knew she'd had a responsibility to tell him, even if it had to have been in a letter addressed to his villa or house in London. He would have got it eventually. But her hurt at his rejection had made her act in a passive aggressive way. She could see it now. How she had secretly relished the fact he didn't know about Ella. It was her little payback for the heartbreak he had caused her. It was an appalling thing to do and she was deeply ashamed.

She couldn't give back what she had stolen from him. Each day of the fourteen months of Ella's life was irreplaceable. Sure, she had photos documenting every little milestone, but how could that compensate for the real thing? Even if he had not wanted a part in his child's life, he should at least have had the right to choose. She had denied him that right and now he was after revenge. She just knew it. Luca Sabbatini was not the sort of man to walk away from something like this with a shrug of his shoulders. He would want her to pay for what she had done and pay dearly.

The lift journey up to Luca's penthouse felt to Bronte as if she was being led to the gallows. As each floor number flashed past, her heartbeat escalated. She felt sick with anguish, guilt and nerves. Her stomach was curdled with the fear he would take Ella away from her. He'd already said how much his mother longed

for a grandchild. And what could be more perfect than a little girl to replace the one she had lost in babyhood? The odds were stacked against Bronte keeping custody. How could she afford to contest such a case? She earned too much to qualify for legal aid and too little to take on the Sabbatini dynasty. But she was not going to give up without a fight. She would do anything to stop him from taking her little girl away from her.

Absolutely anything.

Luca activated the swipe card and practically frogmarched Bronte into the suite. He shut the door with a bang that reverberated like a cannon boom. ‘Why the hell didn’t you tell me you were pregnant?’ he asked.

She looked at him with stricken features. ‘I tried to contact you time and time again but you refused to meet me face to face.’

Luca felt a knife jab of guilt but he pushed it aside to make room for his burgeoning anger. ‘How did it happen? You told me you were on the Pill and, in any case, I always used protection.’

‘I don’t know how it happened,’ she said. ‘I must have missed a dose or something. And then there was that time when the condom broke.’

Luca remembered that time as if it had happened yesterday. He had been so eager to see her after being away on a business trip. He had barely got the condom on in time and then it had broken. ‘When did you find out you were pregnant?’

‘A week after you told me our relationship was over.’ She bit into her lip again and another flick knife of guilt caught him off

guard.

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

He had a child.

A little girl.

Fourteen months old and he had not shared a second of it. He had not seen her growing in Bronte's womb; he had not been at the birth. He knew nothing about the birth, how long the labour was, whether she had given birth naturally or by Caesarean. He didn't know whether she had fed the child herself or given her a bottle. He knew nothing about his daughter: the sound of her voice, the feel of her baby skin, the softness of her hair or the touch of her little hands. How could he ever get that time back? How could he forgive Bronte for stealing it from him? It had already poisoned what he felt for her. He had come back with such hope at resuming their relationship. But now he felt as if he didn't know Bronte at all. She had changed. She was a scheming little thief, and his loathing of what she had done made him want to cut her from his life all over again. But he couldn't because of his little daughter. His heart tightened again at the thought of that little girl in the photos he had seen.

His daughter.

‘I wanted to tell you in person,’ Bronte said in a small voice. ‘But you didn’t return my calls or emails. I went to your villa in Milan but I was turned away at the door. Your housekeeper said you were with your mistress in the US.’

Luca felt an avalanche of guilt come down on him. He had made it impossible for her to contact him. He had covered his tracks so well, not even his family had been aware of where he was and what he had been doing. He had spun them the same tale: a whirlwind affair in the States. And it had worked, perhaps rather too well. ‘You could have sent a letter,’ he said, still not quite ready to take the whole blame.

‘Is that how you wanted to hear you had fathered a child?’ she asked.

‘It would be a damn better way than finding out in a restaurant in front of complete strangers,’ he shot back.

She lowered her gaze and did that thing with her bottom lip again. ‘I told you, I was about to tell you when they arrived.’

‘When?’ he asked. ‘Between the main course and dessert? How were you going to slip it into the conversation? “By the way, I had your child fourteen months ago; I thought you might like to know now that you’re here in Melbourne.” For God’s sake, Bronte, what the hell were you thinking?’

She looked at up at him with tears shining in her eyes. ‘I didn’t expect to ever see you again. You made it so clear our relationship was over.’

‘So you punished me by keeping my child a secret,’ he said.

'Is that it? Is that why you didn't try harder to get the message to me?'

Guilt flooded her cheeks a cherry-red. 'I didn't want any of this to happen.'

'Meaning you never intended for me to find out,' he said heavily. 'Well, I've got news for you, Bronte Bennett. I want my child. You have got one hell of a fight on your hands if you think you're going to keep me away from her.'

Bronte felt a rod of anger straighten her spine. 'You can't take her from me, Luca. I won't allow it. She's my child. I'll fight you until my dying breath.'

'You and whose legal team?' he asked with a malevolent look. 'You do realise who you are up against here, don't you? You haven't got a hope of winning this, Bronte. Not a hope.'

Bronte hated herself for doing it but right at that moment her temper got the better of her. 'First you have to prove she is yours,' she said with a jut of her chin. 'Have you thought about that, Luca? How do you know she isn't another man's child? You only saw me two or three times a week when we were together, sometimes even less. I had plenty of time to play around behind your back.'

His expression went as dark as the thunderous sky outside. His hands went to tight fists, his breath hissing out from between clenched teeth. 'A paternity test will soon sort out that. I will apply for one in the morning. If you don't agree, expect to hear from my lawyer.'

Instead of feeling she had won that round, Bronte felt as if she had lost much more than a few verbal points. She had lost his respect. She could see it in his eyes, the way they had stripped her bare. It was one thing for him to have the freedom to see who he liked when he liked but quite another for her to do the same. She had been his possession, his little plaything on the side, and it would infuriate him to think she had given herself to someone else while involved with him.

‘Who was it?’ he asked through tight lips. ‘Anyone I knew at the time?’

Bronte turned away. ‘I don’t have to explain myself to you. You certainly gave me no explanation for what you got up to when you weren’t with me.’

He grabbed her arm and spun her around to face him, his expression still as menacing as the storm raging outside. ‘Who the hell were you seeing?’ he asked.

Bronte tugged at his hold, squirming at the bite of his fingers. ‘Stop it, Luca. You’re hurting me.’

His hold loosened, but not by much. ‘Tell me who you were seeing, damn it.’

She felt tears approaching and fought them back valiantly. ‘Tell me who you were with in LA,’ she said. ‘What was her name? Was it someone famous or someone married so you had to keep it a big secret?’

His eyes flickered for a moment, his mouth pulled so tight it was white-tipped at the corners.

‘Was she very beautiful?’ Bronte asked, struggling now to keep her voice from cracking. ‘Did she love you? Did you love her?’

He dropped his hand from her arm and stepped away. He rubbed the back of his neck as if trying to soothe a knot of tension there. He didn’t speak. He just stood in front of the bank of windows and looked at the last of the storm’s activity outside. His back was like a fortress, a thick impenetrable wall she had no hope of scaling. In spite of his hostility, she wanted to go to him, to put her arms around his waist, to hold him, to breathe in the aching familiarity of his scent.

‘Luca?’

He turned to face her, his expression rigid with determination. ‘I want to see her,’ he said. ‘I want to see my child.’

Bronte took a little step backwards. ‘You mean... now?’

‘Of course I mean now,’ he said, scooping up his car keys from the coffee table.

‘But she’s asleep,’ Bronte said. ‘And... and my mother’s there and—’

‘Then it’s time your mother met the father of her grandchild,’ he said. ‘She’s going to have to get used to me being a part of the child’s life.’

“‘The child’,” Bronte said, throwing her hands out wide. ‘Can you please use her name? It’s Ella.’

‘Does she have a middle name?’ he asked, his eyes hard and black with contempt as they pinned hers.

Bronte compressed her lips. ‘Her full name is Ella Lucia

Bennett.’

He blinked and the strong column of his throat moved up and down over a swallow. ‘You named her... for me?’

She let out a small sigh. ‘I wanted her to have something of you, even if it turned out she never met you. I felt I owed you that. I felt I owed her that.’

A little muscle in his jaw worked for a long moment. ‘I want my name on her birth certificate,’ he said. ‘I don’t suppose it’s there?’

She shook her head. ‘No, I didn’t see the point at the time.’

‘Did you tell anyone I was the father?’

‘Not until recently,’ she answered. ‘My mother eventually pried it out of me. Rachel figured it out when you came to the studio yesterday.’

There was a small tense silence.

‘I’m starting to think a paternity test is going to be a waste of time,’ he said. ‘You didn’t cheat on me, did you, Bronte?’

She shook her head. ‘No. There’s been no one but you.’

Luca curled his fingers around his keys until the cold hard metal cut into his palm. He needed time to process everything. His head was still reeling with the knowledge he was a father. He felt as if he had been pummelled all over. He ached with a pain he couldn’t describe. It was worse than anything he had ever experienced. He couldn’t imagine how he was going to sort out the mess his life had suddenly become. Things were going to get a whole lot more complicated when it came down to the

practicalities. He lived between Milan and London. Bronte lived in Melbourne. Thousands of kilometres separated him from his daughter. That was one of the first things that had to change. ‘Let’s get going,’ he said, moving across to hold the door open for her.

‘Luca... wouldn’t it be better to do this tomorrow when we’ve both had some time to think about things?’ she asked. ‘To cool down a bit, think things through in a more rational state of mind?’

‘What is there to think about?’ he asked. ‘I want to see my daughter. I haven’t seen her once and she’s fourteen months old. I am not prepared to wait another hour, let alone another day.’

She moved past him with her head down, her expression shadowed with worry. Luca wanted her to be worried. He wanted her to be aware of what she had done. He wanted her to feel something of what he was feeling, how cheated he felt, how completely devastating it felt to have your world turned upside down without warning.

After asking for directions to her home, Luca retreated into a brooding silence. He couldn’t hope to keep something as big as this silent for long. The press would very likely get in on the news. He had to call his mother and brothers and his grandfather. He didn’t want them to read it in the press rather than hear it from him. And then there were legal things to see to, such as changing his will to make sure Ella was well provided for in the event of his death.

And then, of course, there was the issue of where to go from

here with Bronte. He glanced at her, sitting with her head bowed, her eyes on her knotted hands in her lap. A sharp little pang caught him off guard when he thought of her trying to contact him with the news of her pregnancy. He wondered what she must have been feeling, alone and abandoned, far away from her family and friends. He thought too of the audition she'd had her heart set on. A once in a lifetime opportunity she had relinquished in order to have his baby. So many women would have chosen another option but she hadn't. She had soldiered on, giving up her dream to give life to his daughter.

'Tell me about the pregnancy,' he said. 'Were you well throughout?'

She lifted her head to glance at him. 'I was sick a lot in the beginning,' she said softly. 'I lost a lot of weight in the first three months but after that things settled down a bit.'

Luca felt another jab of guilt. 'What about the birth? Did you have someone with you?'

'My mother was with me.'

He gripped the steering wheel tighter, thinking of what he had missed out on. That first glimpse of new life, hearing the miracle of that first spluttering cry. 'Was it a natural birth?' he asked once he got his voice into working order.

'Yes. I think the fact that I was fit and well helped a lot. I had a relatively short labour. It was painful but I wanted to do things as naturally as possible.'

'Were you able to breastfeed her?'

‘Yes, but it took a while to get things established,’ she said. ‘For something so natural it’s harder than you think to get things right. I weaned her a couple of months ago, just before her first birthday.’

Luca let silence build a wall between them. He wasn’t quite ready to let her off the hook. He knew he hadn’t made things easy for her by being so adamant about ending their relationship, but he still felt she could have tried harder, *should* have tried harder.

The closer he got to Bronte’s mother’s house, the more nervous he felt. His stomach was a hive of restless activity. It seemed like a flock of sharp-winged insects was inside him trying desperately to find a way out.

He was about to see his baby daughter for the first time. He would be able to touch her, to hold her in his arms, to feel her petite little body nestled up against him.

He already loved her.

That had surprised him. He thought he would have to meet her first, but no, as soon as he knew she was alive he felt something switch on inside him. The urge to protect and provide for her was so strong he couldn’t think about anything else. He was determined to give her everything money could buy, to give her the sort of childhood that would give her every opportunity to blossom and grow into a beautiful young lady, well educated, compassionate and ready to take on the world.

‘It’s the third house on the left,’ Bronte said. ‘The one without a fence.’

Luca parked in front of the small weatherboard house. As far as he could see, it was neat but in no way luxurious. Humble was probably a more appropriate word. There wasn't much of a garden, just a lawn and a few azaleas and camellias that lined the boundary of the block. The contrast with his family's villa, his childhood homes in Milan and Rome and the holiday villa at Bellagio couldn't be more apparent. He knew for certain there wouldn't be any household staff opening the door as they approached, nor would there be a team of gardeners to tend the block, nor a driver at the ready to run errands.

Bronte's car—he assumed it was hers as it had a baby seat in the back—was parked in the driveway. There was no carport or garage. The car was at least fifteen years old and looked as if it needed new tyres. The thought of his child being ferried about in that accident-waiting-to-happen appalled him but he decided to keep that conversation for another time.

The walk to the back of the block where a small granny flat was situated was conducted in a stiff silence. Luca could feel Bronte's apprehension coming off her in waves. One of the curtains twitched aside and he saw a woman whom he assumed was Bronte's mother staring at him with wide, nervous-looking eyes.

Bronte opened the door and led Luca inside. Her mother came towards them, her expression cold and unfriendly.

'You must be Luca,' she said, pointedly ignoring Luca's proffered hand.

‘That is correct,’ he said, dropping his hand back by his side.

‘Mum...’ Bronte gave her mother a pained look. ‘Do you mind if—?’

Tina Bennett ignored her daughter and addressed Luca. ‘What you did to Bronte was unforgivable. You left her pregnant and alone. She was only twenty-three years old. She had her whole life ahead of her and you ruined it.’

‘Mum, please—’

Tina continued her attack undaunted. ‘Did you ever think what had become of her after you threw her out of your life? Or did you simply move on to the next floozy, someone who was more your type?’

Luca seemed very tall as he stood looking down at her mother, Bronte thought. He contained himself well. He showed no sign of being angry at the way her mother was speaking to him. ‘Mrs Bennett—’ he began.

‘It’s Miss,’ Tina snapped. ‘Like mother, like daughter, Mr Sabbatini. I too was abandoned by the man I loved when I was carrying her. I have never married. Being a single mother makes it hard to find someone who is prepared to love your child as their own. You can ask Bronte about that. She’s had one date, one boring, going nowhere date that was really only a favour for her friend Rachel.’

‘Mum,’ Bronte spoke with firmness, ‘I want to be alone with Luca. There are things we need to discuss in private. Thank you for minding Ella for me.’

Tina tightened her mouth as she gave Luca a mother lion protecting her cub look. ‘I won’t let you hurt her again,’ she said. ‘You can be sure of that, Mr Sabbatini. Bronte and Ella are all I’ve got. I’m not going to stand by and watch some rich, spoilt playboy take either of them away from me.’

‘It is not my intention to hurt anyone,’ Luca said coolly and calmly. ‘I am here to see my daughter. That is my priority at this point. Bronte and I haven’t yet got around to discussing where we go from here but, as soon as we do, you will be the first to know.’

Tina looked as if she was about to say something else but, after another pleading look from Bronte, she turned on her heel and left.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LUCA turned his gaze to Bronte's, his expression rueful. 'Something tells me I didn't make such a great first impression.'

'I would have liked to have warned her you were coming,' Bronte said with a note of reproach in her voice.

'Don't talk to me about warnings,' he threw back. 'Yesterday I was a single man with no responsibilities apart from my work. Now I find I am the father of a fourteen-month-old toddler.'

Bronte worked hard at holding his accusing gaze. 'I know this must be a shock. And I'm sorry about Mum but she's just being a mum. She's frightened and uncertain about what happens next.'

'So she should be,' he said with a brooding frown.

Bronte felt a quake of unease rumble through her stomach. 'Wh... what do you mean?' she asked.

His eyes held hers for a tense moment, bitterness, anger and vengefulness all reflected there. 'Look at this place,' he said, waving his hand to encompass the small room and simple furnishings. 'This is not the place where I want any child of mine to be brought up. There isn't even a front fence, for God's sake. What if Ella was to walk out on the road? Have you thought of that?'

Bronte summoned her pride. 'There is nothing wrong with this place,' she said. 'The fence is going up as soon as we can afford it. And, anyway, Ella is only just walking and she is never left

alone. Not for a minute.’

‘That is not the point,’ he argued. ‘She deserves much better and I am going to make sure she gets it. Now, please lead me to her. I want to see her.’

Bronte clamped her lips down on her response and silently led him to the small bedroom next to hers. The blue angel night light was on, casting a soft luminous glow over the room. Ella was lying on her back, arms flung either side of her head, her rosebud mouth slightly open, the covers kicked off her tiny body. Bronte gently pulled the covers back up, conscious of Luca standing next to her, his eyes looking down at the sleeping infant.

The only sound in the silence was Ella’s soft snuffling breathing.

Luca looked at the angelic face of his child and felt a seismic shift inside his chest. He was totally overcome by emotion. Feelings surged through him, knocking him sideways. He swallowed against the lump in his throat, surprised to feel the burn of tears at the backs of his eyes. He blinked them back and, with a hand that was not quite steady, he reached down and brushed his fingertip across the velvet softness of Ella’s tiny cheek. She made a little noise, something between a snuffle and a murmur, as if she were dreaming, before settling back down with a little sigh.

Luca picked up one of her tiny hands. It reminded him of a starfish, the little splay of fingers with their perfect fingernails so small in comparison to his. Her fingers curled around one of

his, the tiny dimples on her knuckles appearing as she tightened her hold, as if subconsciously recognising she belonged to him. He could not explain how it felt. It was totally overwhelming. He longed to hold on to this moment, to keep it forever in his memory.

How would it feel as the years went by, holding this little trusting hand in his? Walking her into school for the first day, holding her steady as he taught her to ride a bike, her holding on his arm as he led her one day way off in the future to the man who would one day be her husband? It was too much to absorb all at once. Other men had nine months to prepare for it. He had been cheated of that. He was in catch up mode and it hurt—it hurt so much he could barely breathe.

‘You can pick her up if you want to,’ Bronte whispered at his side. ‘She usually sleeps pretty soundly.’

‘Can I?’ he asked, looking at Bronte for reassurance.

She gave him a tight little movement of her lips, her eyes suspiciously moist. ‘Of course,’ she said, reaching past him to ease back the covers.

Luca wasn’t sure how to do it but was too proud to ask for help. He had bounced the occasional friend’s baby on his knee but he had never picked up a sleeping baby before. Wasn’t there something about their neck you had to be aware of?

‘Just gather her underneath her shoulders and knees,’ Bronte offered in the silence, as if she had sensed his hesitancy.

‘Ri-ght.’ He did as she said and his little daughter nestled

against him as he lifted her out of the cot with another soft murmur.

‘There’s a chair over here.’ Bronte pushed it forward and he sat down, cradling Ella against his chest.

Luca couldn’t take his eyes off her. The perfection of her amazed him. She had the most beautiful face, like an angel. She favoured her mother, but now that he had her up close he could see traces of his own mother and even his long-dead baby sister. She smelt so sweet, a combination of talcum powder and baby that was indescribably beautiful. He traced a gentle fingertip over each of her tiny eyebrows and then the up-tilted button nose that was so like Bronte’s. Love flowed through him like a torrent. It filled him completely; there wasn’t a space inside him that wasn’t consumed with love for this child.

‘Would you like some time alone with her?’ Bronte asked after a long silence.

‘It’s all right,’ Luca said, carefully getting to his feet and carrying Ella back to the cot. He laid her down gently and pulled the covers back over her, tucking them in either side of her. ‘I don’t want to wake her. She might feel frightened at not knowing who I am if she should suddenly wake up.’

He stood back from the cot and took a steadying breath before turning to Bronte. ‘We need to talk.’

She nodded resignedly and led the way out of the room.

The kitchen–living room combined was on the small side but with Luca there it made it shrink to the size of a doll’s house.

There was nowhere in the room that kept her more than two metres away from him. It was intimidating to say the least. One step from him and a reach with one of those long arms of his and she would be snared. The most bewildering thing was, she wasn't entirely sure she would try to move away if he did reach out and touch her.

Bronte was so moved by watching him with Ella. She hadn't been sure what to expect but seeing the love on his face for his child had made her all the more certain he was not going to walk away from his little daughter. He would want to be an active father. He came from a strongly connected family background, a rich heritage that Ella was entitled to be a part of as a Sabbatini. The only trouble was, where did Bronte fit into it all according to his plans for the future?

'Would you like a cup of tea or something?' she asked to fill the silence.

'No tea,' he said.

She gestured to the one and only sofa. 'Would you like to sit down?'

'No, but you had better do so,' he said ominously.

Bronte sat down on the chain store sofa and pressed her knees against her hands to keep them from trembling. 'Don't take her off me, Luca, please, I beg you,' she said, the words tumbling out of her mouth in an agonised stream. 'I love her so much. I would do anything to make it up to you. I know it was wrong not to try harder to tell you. I realise it now. I couldn't bear it if you...' She

couldn't continue as the tears began to fall. She bowed her head and stifled a sob.

'Tears are not going to work with me, Bronte,' he said through tight lips. 'I have lost more than a year of my child's life. Do you have any idea of what that feels like?'

She looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes. 'I know how upset you must be—'

'You don't know the half of it,' he ground out. 'I look at Ella and every day I have missed is like a punch to my guts.'

'I have photos and some home videos to show you—'

'For God's sake, Bronte, a child's life is not like a movie I've missed when it came to the local cinema,' he said, raking a hand through his hair. 'I can *never* have that time back. I can never tell her when she is older what it was like to see her born. I can never tell her what it felt like to hold my hand over your belly to feel her wriggling in there. I can't tell her when she took her first step or when she first smiled.'

'She's still so young,' Bronte said. 'She won't even remember you weren't a part of her life in the beginning. Children don't really remember anything until they are about three years old. You have plenty of time to make up for what you've lost.'

'And how do you suggest I do that?' he asked. 'Aren't you forgetting something?'

Bronte pressed her lips together. She knew what was coming and took a breath to prepare herself for it.

'You live in Australia,' he said. 'I spend half my time in Italy

and the other half in London.’

‘I... I know.’ Her voice was a thready whisper.

‘Which means one of us has to move.’

Her eyes rounded, her mouth going completely dry. ‘You’d do that? You’d consider moving here to be closer to Ella?’ she asked.

His expression was derisive. ‘Not me, Bronte,’ he said, ‘you.’

‘Me?’ The word came out like a squeak.

‘Of course you,’ he said. ‘I can’t run a corporation the size of mine from this distance. You can teach ballet anywhere.’

Bronte got to her feet in one agitated movement. ‘Are you out of your mind? I can’t move to Italy or wherever you want me to. I’m building up my career. It’s just getting to the stage where I can expand and take on more teachers. And I have my mother and friends here. My support network is very important to me.’

His mouth took on a stubborn line. ‘You move or you lose Ella,’ he said. ‘I am not going to have her travelling back and forth in planes on access visits. I want to be fully involved in her life. I am not prepared to negotiate on this.’

Bronte opened and closed her mouth, trying to think of some way to make him see reason. She couldn’t believe his obstinacy. Did he really think she should uproot everything at his bidding? What role was she to play in his life? Was she just to be the mother of his child or was he expecting something more?

‘I want my family to meet Ella as soon as possible,’ he said. ‘And it goes without saying we will have to get married as soon as it can be arranged.’

Bronte stared at him in stupefaction. 'Are you crazy?'

'I am not going to be drawn into an argument about this, Bronte,' he said. 'Ella is a Sabbatini. She has certain rights and privileges as a grandchild and heir. I will have no one refer to her as a love-child. I want her to have my name.'

'She can have your name without you having to marry me,' Bronte said. 'I can have it put on the birth certificate.'

'Bronte, let me make something very clear,' he said with an intractable set to his mouth. 'We have a responsibility towards our child. She needs a mother and a father. The only way to see that she gets what she needs is for us to marry and stay married.'

'But I don't love you any more.' Bronte said it even though she wasn't sure if it was true. She didn't know what she felt towards him. She felt so confused about him. He had barged back into her life and was threatening everything she had clung to for security. The hurt over his rejection was like a wound that had been reopened. It ached deep inside her and she was terrified of being hurt all over again.

'I do not require your love,' he said. 'There are plenty of very successful marriages which exist on mutual respect and common interests. We will start with that and see where it takes us.'

Bronte sent him a defiant glare. 'I hope you're not expecting me to sleep with you because I'm not going to. If I have to marry you, it will be in name only.'

His eyes were like glittering black diamonds as they held hers. 'You are not the one dictating the terms here, Bronte,' he said.

‘You will be my wife in every sense of the word.’

Bronte’s heart gave a nervous flutter as his implacable statement hit home. She could see the fiery intent in his eyes. He wanted her and he was not going to settle for a sterile hands-off arrangement. The thought of sleeping with him was all the more terrifying because she was sure she would fall in love with him all over again. She couldn’t dissociate the intimate act like some of her peers seemed able to do. She felt the emotional connection deeply. In the past she hadn’t just loved him with her heart and soul, but her body as well. ‘You seem to have it all worked out,’ she said, trying to keep the wobble out of her voice.

‘It’s for the best, Bronte,’ he said. ‘In time, you will see that. I know it is a lot to ask of you to relocate, but your mother can visit any time she likes. And you can fly back for visits. You will not be under lock and key.’

She turned and paced what little space she had. ‘I need some time to think about this,’ she said, pressing her hand to her temple where a cluster of tension was gathering.

‘There isn’t time,’ he said. ‘We have to get moving on this. We have a wedding to arrange. I want it to be a proper one, not some hole in the corner affair.’

Bronte swung back to face him. ‘I haven’t said I will marry you, Luca. Don’t rush me. I told you I need some time to think about this.’

He came over to where she was standing, his expression so in control, so commanding, so indomitable, it sent a tremor of

unease through her. 'If you say no to our marriage, you are never going to see your daughter again,' he said. 'Have I made myself clear enough?'

Bronte bristled with outrage. 'You bastard,' she said in a snarling hiss. 'You arrogant, cruel, heartless bastard.'

His eyes glinted as they roamed her furious features, his body so close now she could feel the male heat of him. She had nowhere to escape. She was backed up against the wall, her heart going like a jackhammer in her chest as he planted his hands either side of her head, his strongly muscled arms making a cage around her quaking body. She sent the tip of her tongue out over her lips, a rush of unruly desire gushing through her like a flash flood.

His eyes went to her mouth, his lashes lowering in a smouldering manner. She held her breath as he came closer, the soft waft of his breath over the surface of her lips making her heart kick-start in reaction. When he finally touched down on her lips she felt an explosion of desire in her body. It roared like petrol thrown on a fire. Leaping flames of need rose up and consumed her. She opened her mouth to the possessive thrust of his tongue, a hollow pit opening in her stomach as it mated erotically with hers. This was no poignant tender kiss of a revisited relationship. This was a kiss of anger and out of control needs. Bronte tasted Luca's anger and frustration and gave plenty of her own back. She used her teeth on his lower lip, not the tender teasing little nips of the past, but savage wildcat bites that

drew blood. He took control of the kiss, pushing her further back against the wall, his aroused body hot, hard and urgent against hers.

It shocked her how much he wanted her.

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Her body had superseded any counter argument her mind tried to throw up to resist him. The simple truth was she wanted him to make love to her, to reclaim her body, to imprint it with the potency of his.

His mouth was still locked on hers as his hands lifted her cocktail dress, searching for the slick wet heart of her. He cupped her first through the lacy barrier of her knickers, which were already damp with want. She arched her spine as he pushed the lace aside to slide one finger into her. The sensations rippled through her, making her want more and more of his touch. She whimpered against the crushing heat of his mouth as his hand left her moist heat to unzip his trousers. She blindly assisted him, her fingers stroking along his steely length, delighting in the feel of him so aroused. It was something to cling to, this need he had for her. He might not love her, he might never find it in himself to forgive her for denying him knowledge of his child, but he wanted her with a fervency that secretly thrilled her.

She could have pulled away. She could have stopped things before they went any further but she didn't. She dug her fingers into the tautness of his buttocks and urged him on.

He thrust into her with a deep bone-melting thrust that sent

her head thudding against the wall behind her. He set a furious pace but she matched it. It didn't matter that they were still fully clothed; it didn't matter that no one had mentioned protection.

The friction of his thickened body brought her undone within seconds. She had never been able to come without added stimulation before but this time her body shattered into a thousand pieces, the convulsions of her inner core setting off his equally powerful release. She felt the pumping of his body as he emptied himself.

His breathing was still uneven as he stepped back from her and re-zipped his trousers. 'That should never have happened,' he said grimly. 'I hope I didn't hurt you.'

Bronte smoothed down her dress. 'I thought that was your intention—to hurt me as much as possible for keeping Ella a secret from you.'

His expression was contorted with regret. 'Anger is a dangerous emotion when it's out of control,' he said. 'I had no right to take it out on you in such a way. I'm sorry. It won't happen again.'

Bronte felt a little sideswiped by his sudden mood change. She wasn't sure how to deal with her own feelings, let alone his. Her body was still humming with the aftershocks of his lovemaking. She could still feel his presence inside her even now, the twinge of unused muscles and the damp heat of him reminding her of how much passion simmered between them. Those out of control needs were satiated for now, but how long was that going to last?

If she were to marry him and live with him there would be no way of ignoring the sexual tension that crackled like a current of electricity between them. She stepped away from the wall and wasn't quite able to disguise a little wince as her body protested at the movement.

Luca's frown deepened. 'I did hurt you, didn't I?'

Bronte felt her cheeks heat up. 'I'm fine. It's just been a long time... well, you know...'

There was an awkward little silence.

'It's been a long while for me too,' he said, rubbing the back of his neck again.

Bronte looked at him, wondering whether to believe him or not. When she'd met him he had a reputation as a playboy. What he wanted, he got. No woman could resist him. She couldn't quite see him adhering to a celibate lifestyle for longer than a week or two. He was too full of life, too full blooded, too intensely and potently male.

He looked at her with a wry expression. 'You don't believe me, do you?'

'Why should I?' she asked. 'You've told me practically nothing of your life over the past two years. For all I know, you've probably had numerous affairs, one after the other. A long time between lovers for you might mean a couple of days.'

He held her look for a long moment before shifting his gaze. 'It's not been like you think, Bronte. I've had other things going on in my life. There has been no one of any significance for quite

some time.’

‘How very restrained of you,’ she said with an attempt at sarcasm.

He ignored her comment and wandered over to the small bookcase and picked up a photograph of Ella. ‘You mentioned you had photos and DVDs of her. I would like to have copies made, if you don’t mind.’

‘Of course I don’t mind,’ Bronte said. ‘I’ll get them together for you. I’ll have to bring them to your hotel tomorrow, however. Mum has most of them at her house. There’s not much storage space here.’

He turned and looked at her. ‘Why do you live here instead of in the main house with your mother?’

‘I thought it was important to maintain some element of independence for me and for Ella,’ she said. ‘My mother—as you saw—is rather protective. She means well but at times she can be quite smothering. I make allowances for her because she’s been alone for so long. Living here is a sort of compromise. Mum is close by to help me with Ella but there is enough distance, small as it is, to establish some boundaries.’

‘How do you think she will take the news of our marriage?’

‘The same way I am taking it,’ she answered. ‘With a great deal of apprehension.’

Luca came back over to her and ran a fingertip down her cheek. She didn’t veer away, but he saw the way her eyes flickered with wariness. Her mouth was swollen from his kisses,

puffy and pink and all too tempting to kiss again. ‘There is no other way to do this, Bronte,’ he said. ‘You do realise that, don’t you?’

She snatched in a breath that seemed to catch in her throat. ‘You’re blackmailing me, Luca, can’t you see that?’

He steeled his resolve. ‘I admit it was not the most polished proposal, but the end justifies the means. I want my child. I want to provide for her. I want her to be a part of my extended family. I want her to embrace her Italian heritage, to learn my language. I can’t give her that at a distance and you can’t do it on your own.’

‘But a loveless marriage...’ Her eyes communicated her anguish. ‘Ella’s just a baby now but it won’t be long before she’s old enough to see things are not quite right between her parents. No amount of money can compensate for that. Surely you see that?’

Luca placed his hands on her shoulders, holding her gaze with his. ‘We will work at our relationship. There is no doubt of the attraction that still exists between us. That is a good enough basis to start from.’

‘You’re asking me to give up everything,’ she said, still with that worried look in her slate-blue eyes. ‘I have so much more to lose than you. I will be alone in Italy. I don’t speak the language, or at least only a few words here and there. What if your family doesn’t take to me? Have you thought of that? I have never met them. They will no doubt be just as angry as you are about Ella being kept a secret all this time.’

Luca dropped his hands from her shoulders. 'It won't be easy. I am the first to admit that. I will do what I can to make things go as smoothly as possible. My family will accept you. I will make sure of that. They will adore Ella and in time may come to adore you too. It will take time. You will have to be patient.'

He put some distance between them before he spoke again. 'I will compensate you handsomely for marrying me. I will have an agreement set up by my financial and legal people. That should help dissolve some of your current doubts.'

Bronte screwed up her forehead in a frown. 'You think you can pay me to be your wife? You think I can be *bought*?'

The look he gave her was cynical. 'One thing I have learned through business is that everyone has a price. I am sure you have one too.'

She glared back at him furiously. 'You think you can afford me?' she asked, not caring if she was goading him too far.

His top lip curled upwards with the same cynicism she saw reflected in his gaze. 'Name your price,' he said.

Bronte threw a figure at him, an astonishingly exorbitant sum that would have made most men flinch in response. Luca's expression was mask-like. It showed no emotion. It was as if they were discussing a business transaction.

'Fine,' he said. 'I will make sure the funds are deposited in your bank account as soon as possible. You will need to give me your banking details, unless you would like me to write you a cheque here and now.'

Bronte scribbled her details down on a piece of paper, a war going on inside her over what she had just done. She had sold herself. Her future was now in his hands. She handed him the note, her eyes not quite able to hold his. 'I will need to give the parents of my students some notice,' she said.

'I am sure your business partner will be able to see to everything,' he said. 'I want us to be in Italy at the end of the month. I want our marriage to be conducted at the family hotel in Milan. That way, all of my relatives can be there. It is too far for my elderly grandfather to travel all the way to Australia.'

Bronte's eyes flew back to his. 'Are you out of your mind? I can't possibly tie up everything here in less than three weeks!'

'I am a busy man, Bronte,' he said. 'I have commitments here that will now have to be put on hold until we get back.'

She frowned again. 'So you're expecting me to follow you back and forth across the globe?'

His eyes challenged her to defy him. 'That is what most loving wives would do, is it not?'

It took Bronte a moment to catch on. 'You... you want me to pretend our marriage is normal?'

'But of course,' he said.

She folded her arms crossly. 'That's out of the question. I won't do it.'

'It is not negotiable, Bronte,' he said. 'I will not be made an object of ridicule the world over for having a wife who hates the sight of me. You will at all times and in all places maintain the

guise of a devoted wife.'

Bronte fumed as she stood facing him. 'Is this marriage going to be an exclusive arrangement or are you going to continue with your philandering ways?'

He held her gaze for an interminable pause. 'That, *cara*, will depend entirely on you,' he said. 'Why would I stray if all my needs are being met at home?'

'And what about my needs?' she asked, giving him a glowering look.

He picked up his car keys and made his way to the door before he answered. 'I think I showed you only a few minutes ago how effectively I can meet your needs.' His dark eyes ran over her from head to foot, undressing her, caressing her, tempting her all over again. 'As my wife, Bronte, you will want for nothing.'

He closed the door on his exit and Bronte finally let out the breath she hadn't even realised she had been holding.

You will want for nothing, he had said. But what about what she wanted most of all? No amount of money was going to buy her the love she so desperately craved.

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