

2 BOOKS IN ONE

Michelle Smart

A PASSIONATE *Reunion* IN FIJI

Melanie Milburne

CINDERELLA'S *Scandalous* SECRET

MILLS & BOON

MODERN

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Michelle Smart

A Passionate Reunion In Fiji / Cinderella's Scandalous Secret

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A Passionate Reunion in Fiji A chance to rekindle their marriage!Workaholic billionaire Massimo has convinced his estranged wife Livia to accompany him to Fiji. Trapped in paradise, an explosive reunion is on the cards, but only if their passion can burn away their past…Cinderella's Scandalous Secret The maid has a secret that's getting harder to hide!Isla is carrying famous hotelier Rafe's baby! No-one can know—the last thing she wants is to make the headlines. But when Rafe learns about her pregnancy, he's intent on marrying her!

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MICHELLE SMART's love affair with books started when she was a baby and would cuddle them in her cot. A voracious reader of all genres, she found her love of romance established when she stumbled across her first Mills & Boon book at the age of twelve. She's been reading them—and writing them—ever since. Michelle lives in Northamptonshire, England, with her husband and two young Smarties.

MELANIE MILBURNE read her first Mills & Boon novel at the age of seventeen, in between studying for her final exams. After completing a master's degree in education, she decided to write a novel, and thus her career as a romance author was born. Melanie is an ambassador for the Australian Childhood Foundation and a keen dog-lover and trainer. She enjoys long walks in the Tasmanian bush. In 2015 Melanie won the HOLT Medallion, a prestigious award honouring outstanding literary talent.

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A Passionate Reunion in Fiji & Cinderella's Scandalous Secret
Michelle Smart and Melanie Milburne

MILLS & BOON

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About the Publisher

A Passionate Reunion in Fiji

Michelle Smart

A remote island paradise…

A chance to rekindle their marriage!

Nothing fazes workaholic billionaire Massimo Briatore. Not even the idea of his estranged wife, Livia, accompanying him to Fiji for a family celebration. He's sure he'll have no problem pretending for one weekend that their whirlwind marriage is still intact. Until he lays eyes on her again…

Trapped in paradise, Livia can't escape from the memories of the tenderness and heat that once bound her to Massimo. An explosive reunion is on the cards, but only if their passion can burn away their past!

This is for Keanu Reeves,
my teenage object of lust,
who, like a fine wine, grows only better with age.

CHAPTER ONE

LIVIA BRIATORE CLIMBED the metal steps to the sleek jet's cabin, her heart hammering so hard she felt the vibrations in the tips of her hair. The sun was setting, the growing darkness perfectly matching the darkness that had enveloped her these recent months.

The flight crew, the same crew from when she'd first boarded this plane over two years ago, greeted her warmly but with questions ringing from their eyes.

Livia responded with a smile but the effort was such the muscles of her mouth protested. She didn't think she'd smiled once these past four months.

Sick dread swirled in her stomach. Clamping her teeth together, she straightened her spine and raised her chin, then stepped into the luxurious cabin where she was destined to spend the next twenty-six hours flying to Fiji.

Immediately her senses were assailed by the familiar smell of expensive upholstery mingled with the musky yet citrusy scent of the man on the plush leather seat, a laptop open before him.

She almost doubled over with the strength of the pain that punched through her stomach.

The first time Livia had stepped on this plane her heart had pounded with excitement and anticipation. Her body had run amok with brand-new feelings.

That first time in this plane, taking off from this very same airport in Rome, she had been filled with more happiness than she had known existed. The man whose attention was currently fixed on his laptop had hardly been able to wait for take-off before dragging her into the bedroom to make love to her.

All that was left of the flame of the passion that had seen them married within a month of meeting was ashes.

She blinked the painful memories away and forced her leaden legs forward.

She'd made a promise and she would keep it, however much it hurt.

The plane had four luxury window seats facing each other with the aisle between them. Massimo had raised his partition and when she took the seat diagonal to his, all she could see of him were his shoes. They were as buffed and polished as they always had been, a quirk she had thought adorable. Her husband was the least vain man she had ever met but he always took pride in his footwear.

She fastened her seat belt then laced her fingers tightly together to stop herself giving in to the need to bite her nails. She'd had an expensive gel treatment done on them the day before, masking that they were all bitten to the quick. She didn't want Massimo to see them like that. She couldn't bear for him to look at her and see the signs of her broken heart.

Livia had patched her heart back up. She'd licked her wounds and stitched herself back together. That was the only good thing about her childhood. It had taught her how to survive.

She would survive the next four days too. Four days and then she need never see him again.

The captain's voice came over the tannoy system, informing them they were cleared to take off. His words brought Massimo to life. The partition acting as a barrier came down as he closed his laptop and stored it away, then fastened his seat belt. Not once did he look at her but Livia was aware of every movement he made. Her heart bloomed to see the muscles of his tall, lean body flex beneath the expensive navy shirt with the sleeves carelessly rolled up, the buttons around his strong neck undone. No doubt he'd ripped the tie he would have worn to the conference from his neck the moment he'd left the venue. A maverick even by usual standards, Massimo conformed to rules only when *he* judged it necessary. She supposed the engineering conference in London he'd been guest of honour at had been an occasion he'd decided was worthy of bothering with an actual suit.

Livia only knew he'd been in London because his PA had casually mentioned it in her email when they'd been making the arrangements for today.

It wasn't until the plane taxied down the runway that the soulful caramel eyes she had once stared into with wonder finally met her gaze. It was the briefest of glances before he turned his attention to the window beside his head but it was enough for Livia's stomach to flip over and her throat to tighten.

Massimo's face was one she'd been familiar with long before they'd met. Employed as his grandfather's private nurse, she'd stared at the large Briatore family portrait that had hung in his grandfather's living room too many times to count. Her gaze had always been drawn to the only member whose smile appeared forced. It was a beautiful face. Slightly long with high cheekbones, a strong Roman nose and a wide firm mouth, it was a chameleon of a face, fitting for a construction worker, a banker or a poet. That it belonged to one of the richest self-made billionaires in the world was irrelevant. She would have been drawn to that face no matter who he was.

Seeing him in the flesh for the first time, in the church his sister was getting married in, had been like having all the oxygen sucked out of her.

The first time she'd seen him smile for real her insides had melted as if she'd been injected with liquid sunshine. *She* had brought that smile out in him. She couldn't even remember what she'd said, only that after hours of sidelong glances at each other throughout the wedding ceremony and the official photographs, she'd gone to the bar of the hotel the reception was being held in and suddenly the air around her had become electrified. She'd known before even turning her head that he'd come to stand beside her. Her tongue, usually so razor sharp, had tied itself in knots. Whatever she'd said in those first awkward moments had evoked that smile and in that instant all the awkwardness disappeared and it was as if they had known each other for ever.

And now he couldn't even bring himself to look at her.

She had no idea how they were going to get through a weekend with his family, celebrating his grandfather's ninetieth birthday, pretending to still be together.

* * *

Massimo watched an illuminated Rome disappear beneath the clouds and tried to clear the hot cloud that was the mess in his head.

When he'd agreed to speak at the engineering conference in London, it had made sense to fly to Rome afterwards and collect Livia en route. It had been logical.

He'd assumed that after four months apart, being with her again would be no big deal. He hadn't missed her in the slightest. Not that there had been time to miss her with all the hours he'd been putting in. Without the burden of a hot-tempered wife demanding his attention, he'd been able to devote himself to his multiple businesses just as he had before she'd collided into his life and torn it inside out. The day she'd left, he'd bought himself the bed for his office which the mere suggestion of had so angered her. He'd slept in it most nights since. It was far more comfortable than the blanket on the sofa he'd used the nights he'd worked late and decided it wasn't worth driving home.

He hadn't anticipated that his blood would become hot and sticky and his hands clammy just to land in his home city and be under the same sky as her again.

And now that she was here, in the cabin of his plane, every cell in his body, dormant all this time apart, had awoken.

He could curse his logical mind. Why hadn't he insisted she fly to Los Angeles, where he was scheduled to refuel, and board his plane there? He couldn't have her fly all the way to Fiji separately from him—that would defeat the whole purpose of her being there—but he could have engineered things so they only had to spend a minimal amount of time on his plane together, not the full twenty-six hours it would take to travel to the other side of the world.

For the return journey he would fly with her to Australia and charter a plane to fly her back to Italy.

He'd listed all the excuses he could have made to avoid bringing her with him but it had all boiled down to one thing. This was for his grandfather, Jimmy Seibua. His terminally ill grandfather, who'd

taken a cruise from Rome to Fiji with his family and an army of medical personnel in attendance and had arrived on the island three days ago. This weekend was all that had been keeping his grandfather alive, this one last visit to the homeland he'd left as a twenty-two-year-old the spark giving him the fight needed to beat the odds. Jimmy would celebrate his ninetieth birthday on the Fijian island of his birth, now owned by Massimo, with the family he loved. His grandfather thought of Livia as part of his family. He loved her as a granddaughter. His only regret at Massimo marrying her was that it meant he lost the private nurse who had tended to him with such care during his first battle with cancer.

And, whatever his own feelings towards his estranged wife, Massimo knew Livia loved Jimmy too.

'Are you going to spend the entire flight ignoring me?'

Massimo clenched his jaw as Livia's direct husky tones penetrated his senses, speaking their native Italian.

That was the thing with his wife. She was always direct. If she wasn't happy about something she made damned sure you knew about it. For a long time the object of her unhappiness had been Massimo. Her declaration that she was leaving him had come as no surprise, only relief. Marriage to Livia had gone from being passionate and invigorating to being like a war zone. And she wondered why he'd spent so much time at work? The nights they had spent together those last few months had been with her cold back firmly turned to him. She'd even started wearing nightshirts.

He swallowed back the lump that had suddenly appeared in his throat and finally allowed his gaze to fall on her properly.

The lump he'd tried to shift grew but he opened his mouth and dragged the words through it. 'You've had your hair cut.'

Her beautiful thick, dark chestnut hair, which had fallen like a sheet down to her lower back, now fell in layers to rest on her shoulders in loose curls. It was lighter too, streaks of honey blonde carefully blending with her natural colour. Livia was not the most beautiful woman in the world but to his eyes she was stunning. It was the whole package. A sexy firecracker with a dirty laugh. He'd heard that laugh echo through the walls of the church while they'd waited for his sister, the bride, to arrive and when he'd spotted the woman behind it he'd felt the fabric of his existence shift. He'd grabbed the first available opportunity to speak to her and had been blown away to discover she had a thirsty, inquisitive mind. He'd been smitten. In Livia he'd found the woman he'd never known he'd been searching for. Or so he'd thought.

Her dark brown eyes, always so expressive, widened before a choked laugh flew from her mouth. 'That's all you can think to say?'

She didn't wait for a response; unbuckling her seat belt and springing to her feet.

She'd lost weight, he noted hazily.

Her kissable plump lips were tight as she stalked past him, the bathroom door closing sharply a moment later.

Massimo rubbed his jaw and struggled to get air into his closed lungs.

He hadn't expected this to be easy but it was a thousand times harder than he'd envisaged.

Livia sat on the closed toilet seat and hugged her arms across her chest, willing the threatening tears back. She hadn't expected this tumult of emotions to engulf her or for the ache in her chest to hurt so much.

She had shed enough tears for this man, so many she'd thought herself all cried out.

Massimo had never loved her. That was the truth she needed to keep reminding herself of.

But she had loved him. Truly, madly, deeply.

And in return he'd broken her.

The worst of it was he had no idea. For all his high intelligence, her husband had the emotional depth of an earthworm. She'd just been too blind to see it.

She closed her eyes and took three long inhalations.

There was no point in driving herself crazy with her thoughts. She had loved him once and while echoes of that love still beat in her heart they weren't real. She didn't love him any more. She was only there to honour the promise she'd made to him the day he'd let her go without a solitary word of fight to make her stay.

He'd wanted her gone. He'd been relieved. She'd seen it in his eyes.

Three more deep breaths and she got back to her feet and flushed the unused toilet.

She was Livia Briatore, formerly Livia Esposito, daughter of Pietro Esposito, Don Fortunato's most trusted clan member and henchman until her father's gangland murder when she'd been only eight. She'd been raised in the Secondigliano surrounded by drugs and brutal violence and she'd learned from an early age to show no fear. To show nothing.

Escaping Naples to study nursing in Rome had been like learning to breathe. Dropping her guard had not been easy—constantly checking over her shoulder when she walked a street was a habit it had taken many years to break—but she had forged a new life for herself and the joy it had given her had been worth the anxiety that had gnawed at her to be separated from her siblings. Life had gone from being a constant knot in her belly to being an adventure. She'd learned to laugh. With Massimo she had learned to love.

But her old protective barrier had never fully gone. It had sat patiently inside her waiting to be slipped back on.

To get through the next four days she needed that barrier. She needed to keep her guard up, not as protection against Massimo but as protection against her own foolish heart.

She took her seat and was not surprised to find Massimo working again on his laptop.

This time he raised his eyes from the screen to look at her. 'I've ordered us coffee. Did you want anything to eat?'

'I've eaten,' she answered with strained politeness, not adding that all she'd eaten that day had been half a slice of toast. Her stomach had been too tight and cramped to manage anything else. The countdown to seeing Massimo again had wrecked the little equilibrium she'd regained for herself.

It was hardly surprising that there was an awkwardness between them but they had a long flight ahead and she didn't want to spend it in uncomfortable silence. 'How have you been?'

He pulled a face and turned his attention back to his laptop. 'Busy.'

She dug her fake nails into her thighs. How she hated that word. It was the word he'd always used to justify never being there. 'Are you too busy to stop working for five minutes and talk?'

'I have data to interpret and an analysis to send.'

Two years ago he would have explained both the data and analysis to her, assuming rightly that she would find it interesting. The truth was she had found everything about Massimo interesting. Enthralling. The workings of his brain had never failed to astonish her. How could they not? This was the man who'd used his downtime from his computer engineering degree to create a web-based platform game that had taken the world by storm and which he'd sold upon his graduation for two hundred million US dollars. That money had been the linchpin for his move to America, where he'd formed his company, Briatore Technologies, whilst simultaneously studying for a PhD in energy physics, followed by a second PhD in applied physics and material sciences. His company, of which he was still the sole owner, now employed thousands worldwide, creating environmentally friendly solutions for many of the world's greatest carbon-related threats. He was on a one-man mission to save the planet one invention at a time. That he'd earned himself a fortune in the process was almost incidental. Only a month ago he'd been named in the top thirty of the world's most powerful people and in the top fifty of the world's richest.

It would have been so easy for him to make her feel stupid but he never had. Anything she didn't understand—which when it came to his work was most things—he would explain patiently but never patronisingly, his face lighting up when she grasped the finer details of something, like how a lithium ion battery worked and what carbon capture meant on a practical level.

She had been so thrilled that this man, clever, rich, successful and with a face and body to make the gods envious, had been as seemingly enthralled with her as she had been with him that she'd been blind to his emotional failings. Once the first flush of lust had worn off he'd retreated into the all-consuming world he'd created for himself, hiding himself away from the woman he'd married.

She wished she knew what she'd done to make him back away from her but every time she'd tried to get him to open up, the further into his shell he'd retreated.

The silence, filled intermittently by the sounds of Massimo tapping on the laptop's keyboard, grew more oppressive.

She watched him work. The familiar furrow of concentration was etched on his brow. How could he tune her out so effectively?

But as she watched him she noticed subtle changes. Flecks of white around the temples of his thick black hair that had never been there before. The full beard, as if he'd given up the bother of shaving altogether. Dark rings around his eyes as if he'd given up sleep along with shaving. Not that he had ever slept much. His brain was too busy for sleep.

Livia swallowed back the pang that had crept through her. Massimo was thirty-six years old; old enough to not look after himself if that was what he wanted.

He reached absently for the strong black coffee on the desk beside his laptop and took a large sip. His attention did not stray from the screen before him. He tapped something else onto the keyboard. The sound was akin to nails being dragged down a chalkboard.

Suddenly she could bear it no more. Jumping back to her feet, she took the three steps to him and slammed his laptop lid down.

CHAPTER TWO

MASSIMO CLENCHED HIS teeth together and placed a protective hand on his laptop to prevent Livia from snatching hold of it and throwing it onto the floor. 'What was that for?'

Diminutive though she was in height, in presence she was larger than life and right then, standing over him, she seemed magnified, the anger rippling from her in waves. 'We've been in the air for an hour and you've spared me only ten words.'

'Twenty-six,' he corrected through gritted teeth. 'I have spoken twenty-six words.'

'And now you're being pedantic as well as rude.' She pulled her hair together in a fist then released it. 'How are we supposed to convince your grandfather and the rest of your family that we're still together if you won't look at me or talk to me?'

'I'm not being rude. This is a very important time for me. On Monday we are running the prototypes on…'

'I don't *care*,' she interrupted with a cry. 'Whatever you're working on, I do not care. I'm here as a favour to you for your grandfather's benefit. The least you can do is treat me with some respect.'

'If I'm being disrespectful then I apologise,' he answered stiffly, biting back the retort of *what did you expect?* Livia had been the one to walk out on their marriage, not him. She had been the one to laugh in his face when he suggested they have a child. How did she expect him to be around her?

Damned if *he* knew how to act around her. Focusing his attention on the screen before him was the only tool he had to drive out the tumultuous emotions ripping through him. That these emotions were still there defied belief but Livia had always been able to induce feelings in him that had no place in his world, feelings that went far deeper than mere lust and friendship. She took up too much head space. She distracted him. That would have been easy to deal with if she'd only distracted his head when he'd been at home.

'I don't want your apologies. You don't mean it. You never do. Your apologies are meaningless.'

It was an accusation she had thrown at him many times and usually preceded an escalation of her temper, which only got wilder when he refused to engage. Massimo disliked meaningless confrontation, considered it a waste of energy, and would walk away when she refused to listen to reason.

Unfortunately, right now there was nowhere for him to walk away to. To escape to.

Keeping his own temper in check—keeping a cool head when all those around him lost theirs was something he took pride in—Massimo inhaled slowly through his nose and gazed at the angry face before him. 'What I'm working on is important. I'll be finished before we land in Los Angeles. We can spend the time between Los Angeles and Fiji talking if that's what you want.'

She laughed without any humour then flopped onto the seat opposite his and glared at him. 'Great. You're going to do me the huge favour of talking to me if *I* want. Thank you. You're too kind.'

She'd folded her arms across her chest, slightly raising her breasts. He knew she hadn't done it deliberately—intimacy between them had died long before she'd called time on their marriage itself—but it distracted him enough for a sliver of awareness to pierce his armoury.

Livia had a body that could make a man weep. Even dressed as she was now, fully covered in tight faded jeans and a roll-neck black jumper, her feminine curves were undeniable. The first time he'd made love to her he'd thought he'd died and gone to heaven. Her virginity had surprised and delighted him. Surprised him because he would never have believed a twenty-four-year-old woman with such a dirty laugh and who carried herself with such confidence could be a virgin. Delighted him because it had marked her as his in a primal way he'd never experienced before.

Sex had never been a great need for him. When he'd shot up from a scrawny teenager into the frame he now inhabited, he'd suddenly found women throwing themselves at him, something that had only increased when he'd sold his web-based game after graduation and become worth a fortune. If

he'd been in the mood he'd been happy to oblige, finding sex a satiating yet fleeting diversion from his work. Livia was the first woman he'd been truly intimate with. When they had first got together they'd been unable to keep their hands off each other. For the first time in his life Massimo had found himself consumed by lust.

The loss of that intimacy had not been his choice. Their marriage had disintegrated to such an extent that the nights he had made it home, they'd slept back to back. A man could take only so much rejection from his own wife before he stopped bothering.

Had she taken a lover? It was a thought that sent a stabbing motion plunging into his chest and for a moment he closed his eyes and breathed the pain away.

It was none of his business if she'd taken a lover and it would be unreasonable to expect her to have remained celibate during their separation. If not for his grandfather they would already be divorced.

'When did you last see your grandfather?' she asked suddenly, cutting through his attempts to concentrate on the screen in front of him rather than the bombshell opposite.

Livia felt only fleeting satisfaction to see the caramel eyes raise to meet hers.

'Why do you ask?'

'Because when I saw him the day before he set sail for Fiji he complained that you hadn't been in touch. I emailed Lindy about it.'

Lindy was Massimo's PA, a dragon of a woman who ran his business life. She was the only person in the world who knew their marriage was over in all but name. As far as their respective families were concerned, they were still together.

When they'd married, Livia had hoped Massimo's new status would encourage him to see more of his family but it hadn't worked that way. In their two years of shared life they had spent one Christmas with his family and that had been it. Livia had made numerous visits from their house in Los Angeles to Italy alone, visiting her youngest brother and dropping in on Massimo's family, all of whom she adored.

Since they'd gone their separate ways, her frequent visits had continued. They were used to her visiting alone so Massimo's absence had gone unremarked. Only Madeline, Massimo's sister, had the perception to see that anything was wrong but as she had a newborn child to take care of, her perception skills were less honed than usual. The ache that formed in Livia's heart as she held Madeline's baby only added to the ache already there but she would have been helpless to resist cradling the tiny bundle in her arms even if she didn't have a show to perform.

None of the Briatores or Espositos had any idea she was back on Italian soil permanently. Whenever she was asked about Massimo—who rarely bothered to message his family and had never met his niece—she would say he was busy with work, satisfied that she wasn't telling a lie. Massimo was *always* busy with work. Always. She'd lived with his grandfather as his private nurse for nine months and in that time Massimo hadn't made one trip home. She'd accepted the family line that Massimo was too busy to fly home from California regularly but had come to her own private conclusion during their marriage that it was nothing to do with his schedule preventing him from spending more time with his family. He simply didn't want to.

She would be glad when these evasions of the truth could be done with and they could tell his family they had separated. She hated lying, even if only by omission.

'Lindy mentioned it,' he admitted stiffly.

'Did you do anything about it?'

'I called him on the ship. He sounded fine.' His gaze dropped back to his laptop.

'He isn't fine.' Livia's heart had broken to see how frail Jimmy had become. The elderly yet vital man who'd waged such a strong battle against his first diagnosis of cancer was fading, too weak to fly both legs of the mammoth journey to Fiji. It had been decided that a cruise was the safest way to get him to the other side of the world. Jimmy wanted to spend his ninetieth birthday with all his

family around him, see corners of the world he'd never visited before and tread the soil he'd been raised on one last time.

Everything for him was now one last time.

'I know that.'

'Will you spend some proper time with him this weekend?' she asked. It was pointless adding that spending real time with Massimo was Jimmy's greatest wish. It was his parents' greatest wish too.

Massimo thought the gift of his money was enough. When he'd made his fortune, he'd bought his entire family new homes of their own and a car each. As his wealth had increased so had his generous gifts to them. It had been Massimo who'd paid for the private treatment during Jimmy's first diagnosis and all the associated costs including the agency fees for Livia's wages as his live-in nurse. It was Massimo who had bought the island his grandfather came from and spent a fortune building a complex for the entire family to stay on. It was Massimo footing the bill for the cruise the rest of the family were taking with Jimmy to reach the island. He'd chartered an ocean liner for their sole use.

Yet for all his generosity, he was spectacularly blind to the fact his family would much rather have his presence than his presents. He also seemed blind to the fact that time was running out for his grandfather.

'Yes.'

'You'll leave your laptop and phone switched off?'

'You know I can't do that.'

'I know you *won't* do that.'

His jaw clenched. 'We can talk about this later.'

She laughed mockingly. 'Later. Of course. Everything is always *later* with you, isn't it?'

Without any warning, Massimo slammed his fist against the panel beside his seat. 'And everything still has to be *now* with you. I said we could talk once I have completed my work but, as always, you don't listen. This is important and needs my attention. If you can't wait patiently for me to finish then I suggest you take yourself to the bedroom and give your mouth a rest.'

Massimo refused to feel guilt for his outburst, even when Livia's face paled before him.

True to form, she refused to let him get the last word, getting to her feet slowly and glowering at him. 'If anyone has a problem with listening it's you. If it doesn't involve your precious work then it's insignificant to you. It's been four months since you last saw me and you haven't even cared to ask how I've been. If I'd had any doubts that leaving you was the best thing I could do, an hour in your company has proven me right. You never cared for me. You've never cared for anyone.'

She walked away, not to the bedroom but to her original seat. There was dignity in the way she moved that, despite the acrimony that thickened the air between them, touched him. Livia was a strange mix of toughness and vulnerability, traits that had first moved him then infuriated him. Her toughness meant she did not know how to back down from an argument but the underlying vulnerability found her easily wounded. He'd never known the words to say to repair the wounds he'd unwittingly inflicted on her. Eventually he'd stopped trying.

Her partition rose and she disappeared from sight.

Massimo sighed his relief and rubbed his eyes. He hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours and was exhausted.

Ringing the bell, he ordered a fresh coffee when the stewardess appeared. Caffeine and sugar would keep him awake long enough to get his analysis done. Maybe then he'd be able to catch some sleep.

He tuned out Livia's husky voice when the stewardess turned her attention to his wife.

But he couldn't tune out her presence.

The data on the screen before him blurred. His head felt so heavy. All of him felt heavy, a weight compressing him from the top down and, even with the importance of the work that needed

to be done, he found his thoughts drifting to the early days of their marriage, days when he'd believed nothing could come between them.

Nothing *had* come between them. Only themselves.

* * *

Livia tried to concentrate on the movie she'd selected from the thousands stored on the in-flight entertainment system—a system Massimo had had installed for her benefit—but the storyline passed her by in a haze. The first movie, a comedy, had passed her by too. This second one was a critically acclaimed thriller guaranteed to keep her tear ducts intact but, even with the sound on her headphones turned up high to drown out the incessant tapping of Massimo's fingers on his keyboard, he was all she could think about.

How had it come to this? How could a marriage formed with such passion and joy disintegrate into such bitterness?

Movement caught her attention and she removed her headphones and straightened as the head stewardess approached to see if she would like anything.

'A blanket would be nice, thanks,' she replied. The air-conditioning on Massimo's jet was always set to freezing.

The blanket delivered, Livia was suddenly struck by the cabin's silence.

Lowering her partition, she looked across at Massimo.

He'd fallen asleep.

His laptop was still open but the man himself was fast asleep, upright in his seat, his mouth slightly open as he breathed in and out heavily.

A tightness formed in her chest as she watched until, without thinking, she got to her feet and padded over to him.

For a long time, hardly daring to breathe, she drank in the features of the man she had once loved so much. His Fijian ancestry was stronger in him than in his sister. His skin was a deep olive, his thick hair the most beautiful shade of ebony. She'd liked it when he forgot to cut it, and had spent many happy hours snuggled on the sofa with him, Massimo talking, his head on her lap, Livia content to simply listen to his wonderful rich, deep voice and run her fingers through his hair. It was the closest to peace she had ever felt in her life.

She'd tried so hard to hold onto what they had but he had slipped away from her with the same ease her fingers had run through his hair.

Her throat closed, Livia carefully draped the blanket she'd been about to use for herself on his lap. She wanted to press the button that would tilt the chair back and turn it into a bed but was afraid the motion would wake him. Struck again by the dark circles around his eyes, she wondered when he'd last had a decent night's sleep. Or the last time he'd had a decent meal.

The compulsion to reach out her hand and stroke her fingers over his high cheekbones, to feel the texture of his skin on hers, to run her fingers through his hair…it all hit her so fast that her hand was inches from his face before she realised what she was about to do and stopped herself.

Her heart thumped wildly and for a moment she couldn't breathe.

Putting her hand to her chest, she backed away, afraid to be this close to him.

Afraid of what it did to her.

* * *

Massimo's eyes opened with a start.

He blinked rapidly, disorientated.

His laptop was still open but had put itself into sleep mode.

Had *he* fallen asleep?

Getting to his feet to stretch his legs, he felt a sudden chill on his thighs and gazed down in astonishment at the blanket that had fallen to the floor.

Where had that come from?

He stared over at Livia. Her partition was still up but, standing, he could see her clearly. She'd reclined her chair and was watching something on the television with her headphones in. A blanket covered her whole body up to her chin.

'Did you put a blanket on me?' He didn't mean to sound so accusatory but the thought of her doing that…

Her face turned towards him and she pulled the headphones off. 'Did you say something?'

Before he could answer one of the cabin crew entered. 'We will be landing in twenty minutes.'

The moment they were alone again, Massimo turned back to Livia. 'How long was I asleep?'

She shrugged.

He swore under his breath. He hadn't finished his analysis. Damn it, he'd promised the project manager that he would have it in his inbox before he reached the office that morning.

He bit back the demand he wanted to throw at her as to why she hadn't woken him and sat back down.

Livia had put the blanket on him. He knew that with a deep certainty and he didn't know if it was that simple gesture or that he was now behind on where he needed to be workwise that made his guts feel as if acid had been poured in them.

He felt close to snapping. Virulent emotions were coursing through him and his wife, the cause of all his angst, was reclined in her seat as nonchalant as could be.

But knowing her as well as he did, he knew her nonchalance was a sham. Livia did not do nonchalance.

Why had she put a blanket on him?

His eyes were better able to focus after his short sleep but, with their landing imminent, he put his laptop away and folded his desk up and secured it, all the while hating that he was fully aware of Livia sorting her own seating area out, avoiding looking at him as much as he avoided looking at her.

Los Angeles couldn't come soon enough.

Not another word was exchanged until the plane had landed safely.

Needing to escape the strange febrile atmosphere that seemed to have infected his flight crew as much as them, Massimo grabbed his laptop and got to his feet but the moment he left his seat, Livia was there facing him in the aisle, holding her bag tightly, clearly ready to make her own escape.

He stepped to one side to let her pass but she stepped to the same side too.

Their eyes met. Their gaze held, only momentarily, but long enough for him to see the pain she had become a master at hiding from him.

A sharp compression lanced his chest, as if his heart had become a rose in full bloom, its thorns spearing into him.

And then she blinked, cast her gaze to the floor, murmured, 'Excuse me,' and brushed past him.

Massimo swallowed away the lump in his throat and left his plane by the other exit.

CHAPTER THREE

TWO HOURS AFTER landing in Los Angeles, they were cleared to take off for the second leg of their mammoth journey to Fiji.

Livia had returned to the plane before Massimo. She guessed he'd gone to the private executive lounge in the airport to work. She'd taken herself for a walk, keeping her phone in her hand for the alert that the plane had refuelled and she could get back on, and tried to get hold of Gianluca, her youngest sibling. He hadn't answered and hadn't called her back either. She'd had no wish to go sightseeing or do any of the things most visitors with a short layover at LAX would do. Just breathing the air brought back the awful feelings that had lived in her the last dying months of their marriage.

She hated Los Angeles. She hated California. She'd loathed living there. For a place known as the Golden State, her life there had been devoid of sunshine.

At first, she'd enjoyed the novelty of it all. Compared to Naples and Rome it was huge. Everything was so much bigger. Even the sky and the sun that shone in it appeared greater and brighter. But then loneliness had seeped its way in. She had no friends there and no means to make them. Unlike Massimo, who spoke fluent English, her own English was barely passable. The glass home they'd shared was forty kilometres from downtown LA. An intensely private man, Massimo had deliberately chosen a home far from prying eyes. There were no neighbours. The household staff spoke only English and Spanish.

She'd become sick with longing for home.

Massimo hadn't understood. He hadn't even tried.

But there hadn't been any sunshine since she'd left him and returned to her home in Italy either.

It was strange to experience taking off in her second sunset of the day. She should have slept during the first leg of the journey but sleep had been the last thing on her mind, the last thing she'd been capable of. The sun putting itself to sleep now in LA would soon be awakening in Rome.

She yawned and cast her eyes in Massimo's direction. His partition was raised again but she could still hear the tapping of his fingers on the keypad. So much for talking. Silence for them truly had become golden.

A member of the cabin crew brought her pillows and a duvet and turned her seat into a bed while Livia used the bathroom to change into pyjamas, remove her make-up and brush her teeth.

She thought of the plane's bedroom and its comfortable king-sized bed. An ache formed in the pit of her stomach to remember the glorious hours they had spent sharing it. Massimo would never begrudge her sleeping in it now but she couldn't do it. She couldn't sleep in a bed they had shared knowing that when she woke the pillow beside her would be unused. That had been hard enough to deal with when they'd been together.

Massimo was on his feet stretching his aching back when Livia returned to the cabin clutching her washbag. It was the same washbag she'd used when they'd been married and his heart tugged to see it.

She looked younger with her face free from make-up and plain cream pyjamas on. More vulnerable too.

The threads tugging at his heart tightened.

'I'm going to have a nightcap. Do you want one?'

Surprise lit her dark brown eyes before they fixed on his own freshly made-up bed. 'You're finished?'

He nodded. 'My apologies for it taking so long. I didn't factor in falling asleep.'

Her plump lips curved into the tiniest of smiles. 'I would have woken you but you looked exhausted.'

She looked exhausted. Her seat had been made up into a bed for her too but, however comfortable it was, it was not the same as sleeping in a proper bed. 'Why don't you sleep in our bed?'

Now the tiniest of winces flashed over her face. 'I'll be fine here, thank you. You should use it—you only napped for a couple of hours.'

The only time he'd been in the jet's bedroom since she'd left him was to use the en-suite shower. Sleeping in the bed he'd shared with her…the thought alone had been enough to make his guts twist tightly.

To see the same reluctance reflected in her eyes twisted them even harder.

He removed a bottle of his favourite bourbon and two glasses from the bar as the stewardess came into the cabin with a bucket of ice. Massimo took it from her and arched an eyebrow in question at Livia.

She hesitated for a moment before nodding.

As the stewardess dimmed the lights and left the cabin, he poured them both a measure and handed a glass to Livia.

She took it with a murmured thanks, avoiding direct eye contact, carefully avoiding his touch. He could smell the mintiness of her toothpaste and caught a whiff of the delicately scented cream she used to remove her make-up and the moisturiser she finished her night-time routine with. The two combined into a scent that had always delighted his senses far more than her perfume, which in itself was beautiful. The perfume she sprayed herself with by day could be enjoyed by anyone who got close enough. Her night-time scent had always been for him alone.

Had any other man been lucky enough to smell it since they'd parted?

She sat on her bed and took a small sip of her bourbon. As she moved he couldn't help but notice the light sway of her naked breasts beneath the silk pyjama top.

Her nightwear was functional and obviously selected to cover every inch but the curves that had driven him to such madness were clearly delineated beneath the fabric and it took all his willpower to keep his gaze fixed on her face.

But her face had driven him to madness as much as the body had. With Livia it had always been the whole package. Everything about her. Madness.

After a few moments of stilted silence she said, 'Are you going to get some sleep too?'

Massimo knew what Livia was thinking: that having his own seat made into a bed was no indication that he actually intended to get any rest.

He shrugged and took a large sip of his bourbon, willing the smooth burn it made in his throat to flow through his veins and burn away the awareness searing his loins.

'If I can.' He raised his glass. 'This should help.' Enough of it would allow him a few precious hours of oblivion to the firecracker who would be sleeping at such close quarters to him.

'How long do we have until we reach Fiji?'

He checked his watch. 'Nine hours until we land at Nadi.'

'We get another flight from there?' Livia already knew the answer to this but the dimming of the lights seemed to have shrunk the generously proportioned cabin and given it an air of dangerous intimacy.

What was it about darkness that could change an atmosphere so acutely? Livia had grown up scared of the dark. The Secondigliano was a dangerous place in daylight. At night, all the monsters came out.

The dangers now were as different as night and day compared to her childhood and adolescence but she felt them as keenly. With Massimo's face in shadows his handsome features took on a devilish quality that set her stomach loose with butterflies and her skin vibrating with awareness.

'I've chartered a Cessna to fly us to Seibua Island.'

'You managed to get the name changed?' She couldn't remember the original name of the island Massimo's grandfather had been born and raised on.

'The paperwork's still being sorted but I've been reliably informed it's been accepted.' He finished his drink and poured himself another, raising the bottle at her in an unspoken question.

She shook her head. Marriage to Massimo had given her a real appreciation of bourbon but too much alcohol had a tendency to loosen her tongue, which she was the first to admit didn't need loosening. It also loosened her inhibitions. She'd never had any inhibitions around Massimo before but to get through the weekend in one piece she needed them as greatly as she needed to keep her guard up around him. All of this would be easier to cope with if her heart didn't ache so much just to share the same air as him again.

'Are you going to buy a Cessna of your own to keep there?'

He grimaced and finally perched himself on his bed. The overhead light shone down on him. 'The yacht's already moored there and can be used as transport. Whether I buy a plane too depends on how often the family use the island.' The resort created on the island would be available for the entire extended family to use as and when they wished, free of charge. The only stipulation would be that they treated it with respect.

'Knowing your sister it will be often.' It was doubtful Massimo would ever use it. His idea of a holiday was to take a Sunday off work.

She caught the whisper of a smile on his firm mouth but it disappeared behind his glass as he took another drink.

'When did your family get there?'

'They arrived three days ago.'

'Have you been to the island yet?'

'I haven't had the time.'

She chewed her bottom lip rather than give voice to her thoughts that this was typical Massimo, never having the time for anything that didn't revolve around work. He'd jumped through hoops and paid an astronomical sum for the island but those hoops had been jumped through by his lawyers and accountants. He'd spent a further fortune having the complex for the family built but, again, he'd had little involvement past hiring the architects and transferring the cash. Livia had signed off on the initial blueprint for the complex in the weeks before she'd left him. She had no idea if he'd even bothered to do more than cast an eye over it.

There was no point in her saying anything. It would only be a rehash of a conversation they'd had many times before, a conversation that would only lead to an argument. Or, as usually happened, it would lead to her getting increasingly het up at his refusal to engage in the conversation and losing her temper, and Massimo walking away in contempt leaving her shouting at the walls.

In any case, Massimo's sidelining of anything that wasn't work-related was none of her business. Not any more. If he wanted to blow his own money on projects and assets he had no intention of enjoying then that was up to him. If he wanted to keep his family on the fringes of his life for eternity then that was up to him too. He wasn't an adolescent like her youngest brother, Gianluca, who'd been born seven months after their father's death.

There was hope for Gianluca. Unlike their other siblings, who had succumbed to life in the Secondigliano, Gianluca's humanity was still there. The question was whether he had the courage to take Livia's hand and join her far from the violence and drugs that were such an intrinsic part of the Espositos' lives before it was too late and he was sucked into a life of crime from which his only escape would be in a coffin.

It was too late for Pasquale, who like their dead father had risen high in Don Fortunato's ranks, and too late for Denise who had married one of Pasquale's equally ambitious friends and was currently pregnant with their second child. Livia's siblings and her mother all knew Livia's door was always open for them. Gianluca was the only one she allowed herself to hope for. He could still leave without repercussions just as she had but time was running out. He'd recently turned eighteen. Should Don Fortunato decide Gianluca was worthy of joining his guard he would strike soon.

The man Livia had married, a man who abhorred violence and anything to do with illegal drugs, had made his choice when he was only a few years older than Gianluca. He'd chosen to leave Italy and leave his family, just as his own grandfather had done seventy years before him. The difference was his grandfather had left Fiji for the love of his life, an Englishwoman, and set up home with her in England. When their daughter Sera had married an Italian, Jimmy and Elizabeth had moved again, this time to Italy so they could stay close to their daughter. For them, family came first above all else. They were as close as close could be. All except for Massimo himself.

He didn't want to change. He saw nothing wrong with how he lived his life, nothing wrong with keeping a physical and emotional distance from the people who loved him. That was the choice he'd made and Livia had to respect that. She couldn't change it. She'd tried. When the realisation hit that his emotional distance from his family extended to her too, along with the recognition that this too would never change, she'd had no choice but to leave him.

She hadn't clawed her way out of the Secondigliano to spend her life as a trophy in a glass cabinet masquerading as a home.

While she had spent the past four months trying desperately to fix herself back together, for Massimo there had been nothing to fix. He'd got on with his life as if she'd never been a part of it.

Finishing her drink, she put the empty glass in the holder beside her bed and got under the covers. 'I'm going to get some sleep. Goodnight.' Then she turned her back on him and closed her eyes.

* * *

Massimo lay under his bed sheets, eyes wide open. He'd drunk enough bourbon to tranquillise an elephant but his mind was too busy. Except now it wasn't the project he'd spent over a year working on that stopped his mind switching off.

Turning his head, eyes adjusted to the dark, he watched the rhythmic rise and fall of Livia's duvet. He guessed she'd been asleep for around an hour now. He always knew when she was properly asleep and not just faking it. When she faked it, she lay rigid in absolute silence.

They'd slept together the first night they'd met—once they'd got talking at the hotel bar he hadn't let her out of his sight—and both of them had known it was no one-night stand. He'd been dozing in the aftermath, Livia wrapped in his arms, his body thrumming with the delights they'd just shared, when she'd mumbled something. That was his first experience of her sleep-talking. He'd quickly discovered that she talked a lot in her sleep. Sometimes the words were distinct. He remembered the feeling that had erupted through him the first time she'd mumbled his name. It had been ten times the magnitude of what he'd felt to be offered two hundred million dollars for the stupid game he'd developed during his boring university evenings.

But her dreams hadn't always been good. At least once a week he'd had to wake her from a bad one. The darkness of the life she'd lived until she'd left Naples at eighteen still haunted her.

Had another man woken her from the nightmares since she'd left him?

He pinched the bridge of his nose and willed the pain spearing him away.

Livia's sex life was no longer his business.

The thought of her with a lover was something that hadn't even occurred to him until she'd stepped onto his plane and now it was all he could think of.

In the four months since she'd left him, his own libido had gone into hibernation. From the feelings erupting through him now, he realised he'd shut down far more than his libido.

He'd shut down long before she'd left him.

Their marriage had begun with such high hopes and such certainty. They'd both been too foolish to realise that it was nothing but lust, a flaming passion that could only burn itself out.

He'd been intoxicated by her. He'd never met anyone like her: tough on the outside but marshmallow-soft inside. Straight talking. Capable of lancing with her tongue. But tender and compassionate. Someone who would drop everything if she were needed. Someone who would give

everything they had if it were needed. Massimo had never been one for showing his emotions but being tactile with Livia had come naturally. She'd brought that side of him out right from the start.

And then the tide had turned. His assumptions that he would be able to continue his life and work in the same way he always had but with his beautiful, vivacious wife to come home to had been quickly dispelled.

He should never have married her, that was the truth of it, but he'd been so swept up in the need to tie her to him and make her his in every way possible that he'd blinded himself to what marriage to a woman like Livia would actually entail. It entailed far more than he could give.

* * *

It was still dark when Livia woke. Groping for her phone, she looked at the time and was relieved to see they only had a couple of hours left until they landed.

Creeping out of her bed so as not to wake Massimo, she took her overnight bag from the compartment and made her way to the bedroom. She needed a shower. It was pure misfortune that the main bathroom was reached through the bedroom.

The moment she opened the bedroom door and stepped inside, she realised her mistake. The bathroom light was already switched on and the scent of Massimo's shower gel seeped through the gap in the door. Before she could beat a hasty retreat, the door opened and he stepped over the threshold as naked as the day he was born.

Startled caramel eyes met hers. All the air flew from her lungs.

Seconds passed that stretched like hours as they did nothing but stare at each other.

A compression formed in her chest and tightened her throat.

For a man who rarely worked out, Massimo had a physique to die for. Lean but muscular, his deep olive skin had only the lightest brush of fine dark hair over his defined pecs and the plane of his washboard stomach. The hair thickened considerably below his abdomen to the huge…

Her own abdomen contracted, heat rushing through her pelvis as she noticed—couldn't *help* but notice—his growing erection.

The heat in her pelvis spread. It suffused her cheeks with colour and she tightened her hold on her bag, crushing it against her chest.

Slowly, his features became taut, his nostrils flaring. His caramel eyes swirled with something she recognised, something that should have her spinning round immediately and leaving. But she couldn't. Her feet were rooted to the floor.

He'd had more work done on his tattoo, she noticed dimly, trying desperately hard not to let her gaze fall back below his waist, trying even harder to contain the rush of sultry warmth flooding her veins. His tattoo covered the entire bicep around his left shoulder, all in bold black lines. The large sun, the centrepiece that he had once told her symbolised his rebirth and represented the way he strove for perfection in all he did, was encircled by sharks' teeth, which represented power, leadership and protection, and they were now encircled by spearheads. She didn't know what the spearheads represented but knew they must mean something to him.

Instinct told her they represented something to do with her.

The sensation in her fingers that had almost had her touching his sleeping face earlier tingled again. An ache to touch his tattoo. To touch him. A yearning to feel the heat of his powerful body flush against hers, to be swept in his arms and to lose herself in the wonder she had always found in his lovemaking. It all hit her so quickly that if he had reached out for her she would have fallen into his arms in an instant.

More seconds stretched without a word exchanged but with that thick, sick chemistry shrouding them.

And then Massimo closed his eyes.

When he next looked at her, the swirling desire had gone.

He’d shut down again.
He turned and walked back into the bathroom, locking the door behind him.

CHAPTER FOUR

LIVIA GAZED OUT of the window of the Cessna they'd transferred to after landing at Fiji's Nadi airport and soaked in the oval-shaped patch of land that rose like a majestic tropical oasis from the South Pacific below. Ringed with golden sand and light turquoise shores that deepened to ultramarine, Seibua Island was far more beautiful and exotic than even its namesake had described.

Livia had only ever travelled from her Italian homeland to the US; the scents that exploded through her airways when she stepped onto the small airfield were ones she'd never had the pleasure of smelling before.

She stared up at the rising sun before closing her eyes and savouring the sensation of the most incredible warmth on her skin.

Then she cast a glance at Massimo to witness his reaction at his first steps on his grandfather's homeland.

Far from savouring anything, he'd immediately headed to the waiting golf buggy and was introducing himself to its elderly driver.

Like Livia, who'd changed into a knee-length red sundress, Massimo had donned summer clothing too, opting for a pair of black canvas shorts and a fitted navy T-shirt with the cover of a hellraising rock band's album on it. Ever the chameleon, he looked as divine in these casual items as he did in a full dinner jacket but it only made her think that he never looked better than when he wore nothing at all, and she had to push hard to rid her mind of the vivid image of him standing before her naked. It was a battle she'd been losing for the past four hours.

She forced a smile at the two young men who were removing their luggage from the small plane and loading it onto a second buggy, and walked over to Massimo, who introduced her to the man he employed to run the island for him, first in English then in Italian for her benefit.

She shook the extended hand from the friendly looking man and carefully said, 'It is nice to see you.'

She caught the dart of surprise that flashed in Massimo's eyes but he said nothing about her attempt at English, indicating only that she should get into the buggy.

She slid into the back and was relieved when Massimo climbed in the front beside the driver.

'How long until we get to the complex?' she asked. The island was bigger than she'd envisaged. Naively, she'd imagined something around the size of a small field with a solitary palm tree as a marker.

'Not long. Five or ten minutes.'

Soon the thick, scented flora they drove through separated and the golden sand she'd seen from the air lay before them, glimmering under the glorious sunshine.

Stunned, she craned her neck to take in the thatched chalets nestled—but not too closely together—along the length of a high rock formation that ended on the shore of the beach. A long wooden bridge led the eye to a further thatched chalet that appeared to rise out of the ocean itself. On the other side of the thatched cottages and lower down, separated from the beach by a wall, lay the chalet designated for Massimo's grandfather. Beside it lay a handful of smaller though no less beautiful chalets. To the right of all these dwellings was the centrepiece, the huge, multi-purpose lodge behind which, virtually camouflaged by the coconut palms and other tropical trees and foliage that thrived on the island, were the structures that housed the great kitchens and the island staff's living quarters. Further to the right, where the beach curved out of sight, were the mangrove saplings, recently planted in their thousands to protect the island from erosion and rising sea levels.

Everything Massimo had envisaged for the island of his grandfather's birth had come to life in spectacular fashion.

The driver stopped in front of the main lodge and said something to Massimo before jumping out.

Livia's heart almost dropped to her feet when Massimo followed suit and held his hand out to her.

Confused at this unexpected gesture, especially since they'd spent the past four hours after she'd inadvertently walked in on him naked ignoring each other's existence, she stared into the caramel eyes that were fixed on her with an intensity that belied the easy smile playing on his lips.

A child's cry rang out and in an instant she understood. Massimo's family were already there. He was holding his hand out because they must be watching.

She reached out and wrapped her fingers loosely round the waiting hand.

At the first touch of her skin to his, her heart flew from her feet to her throat and her fingers reflexively tightened.

For that one singular moment in time, the world paused on its axis as she stared into his soulful eyes and a rush of helpless longing swept through her, long-buried emotions rising up and clutching her throat.

And then the ground beneath her feet began to spin.

These were emotions she'd buried for a reason—because they had never been returned with the same depth with which she'd held them.

Turning her head and blinking the brief spell away from her vision, she was thankful to see Madeline on the steps that led to the main entrance of the lodge holding her infant daughter, Elizabeth. Dropping Massimo's hand, Livia hurried over to them and embraced her sister-in-law, careful not to squash baby Elizabeth, who immediately grabbed at her hair.

Massimo watched his wife and sister's embrace, watched them exchange enthusiastic kisses, watched his wife rub a finger against his niece's chubby cheek before lifting the child into her own arms, and had to fight to keep a lid on the emotions threatening to overwhelm him.

Livia had laughed at his suggestion that they have a child.

Slowly he made his way towards them, bracing himself for the rebuke that was certain to be coming.

Madeline didn't disappoint. After the obligatory kisses, she took Elizabeth back from Livia and hitched her to her hip. 'Massimo, meet your niece, Elizabeth. Elizabeth, this is the uncle you've heard about who's been too busy saving the world to meet you.'

Were it not for the large blue eyes of his six-month-old niece staring at him with fascination, he would have sworn at his sister. 'It's been a long journey here. Can you save the harassment until I've said hello to everyone else?'

His sister smiled beadily. 'Sure. The others are in the lodge waiting for you.'

The others were, in fact, his grandfather and his army of carers, and Massimo and Madeline's parents. Tomorrow night his grandfather's surviving siblings and their spouses, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren would either fly or sail to the island for the birthday party. It would be the first time his grandfather had seen all but one of his siblings since he'd left the island paradise, one of the remotest and smallest of all the Fijian islands, for Europe. He'd been the first Seibua to leave. In the almost seventy years since his emigration the rest of the Seibuas had, one by one, left the island of their birth too in search of better opportunities to raise their families. Most had settled on Fiji's largest island, Viti Levu. The soon-to-be renamed Seibua Island had been uninhabited for over a decade before Massimo had purchased it.

The main lodge was everything the architect had promised. Massimo had wanted a space large enough to accommodate the entire extended family, whether it was for a sit-down meal or a party, and it had been created accordingly. Dining tables lined the walls to the left, plush sofas lined the walls to the right. A bar ran the length of the far wall. The space in between was large enough for a

hundred people to dance or for an army of children to skid on and scuff the expensive flooring. He estimated that tomorrow evening there would be a minimum of fifteen children there to test it out.

For now, though, it was only immediate family there and the knotted weight of expectation that came with being them. Massimo hadn't seen any of them in over a year. But Livia had, and he watched her embrace his parents as if she were the child of their loins and not a mere daughter-in-law. She had never understood where his ambivalence to his family had come from. In his wife's eyes, he'd been raised with everything she'd wanted and been denied.

Livia's childhood had been torrid; filled with violence and menace, her father murdered before she reached double digits, her mother the manager of a wedding dress shop who sold drugs for extra cash along with the white lace creations. Her mother also received a monthly payment from Don Fortunato, the mafia boss Livia's father had protected. Blood money, Livia always disdainfully referred to it as. Money had never been an issue in the Esposito home. She'd told Massimo once of going into the back storeroom of her mother's shop and finding wads of cash wrapped in elastic bands in one of the boxes that was supposed to store garter belts. She'd estimated it at half a million euros. Money that belonged to Don Fortunato, stashed away until he came to reclaim it and launder it back into the world.

It had taken more guts than Massimo could comprehend for Livia to claw her way out of that violent, narcotic-infested world. She saw his childhood as idyllic, had no comprehension of what it was like to walk rain-lashed streets with holes in the soles of her shoes or to be the butt of school tormentors' jokes because the clothes you wore were two sizes too small and threadbare. He could have coped with being the butt of all the jokes if his parents had worked hard, as his one close friend's parents had, the father holding down two jobs, the mother working school hours, but they didn't. They hadn't. His father had worked in a shoe repair shop. By mutual agreement, his mother hadn't worked since Massimo's birth.

Life was for living! his father would proudly proclaim. Not for being a slave!

What did it matter if they could only afford to eat meat once a week? Their vegetable patch grew an abundance of nutritious food!

What did it matter if they couldn't afford to buy Massimo a new calculator when his was flushed down the toilet by his school tormentors? His brain was advanced enough to be its own calculator!

His brain was advanced enough to be its own calculator out of necessity, not design. And it had been advanced enough to know that if he wanted to make anything of his life it would have to come from him alone. From the age of thirteen, he'd worked for anyone who would employ him: running errands, stacking shelves, working on market stalls, cleaning offices. You name it, he'd done it. He'd bought his own computer and a phone, the rest of the money he'd stashed away for university, which was just as well as when it had come time for him to leave home for the wonder that was higher education, his parents had not had a single cent spare to help him.

It was during his university years that he'd created the platform game that had made him his initial fortune and also brought him closer to his grandparents. They'd moved to Rome when their daughter had married Massimo's Italian father and, their apartment being much closer to his university than his parents' home, had insisted he visit regularly for home-cooked food and a comfortable bed. It was in these years that he'd learned more about his grandfather's roots and heritage.

And now he was here in the place he'd visited only in his imagination, about to be closeted with his family for the first time in two years.

His parents' eyes were alight as he approached them.

What he intended to be a sedate, functional greeting was quickly turned into a greeting worthy of Hollywood. His father ignored his outstretched hand and pulled him into an embrace that would have squeezed the life out of a weaker man, then his mother did the same. Their exuberantly delivered words were lost amidst the planting of paternal and maternal kisses all over his face.

When he was finally able to disentangle himself, he turned to greet his grandfather and found himself faltering.

The wizened man sitting in a wheelchair with an oxygen tank attached…that was his grandfather? This was Jimmy Seibua?

Getting down to his haunches, Massimo stared into the filmy eyes that had once been the darkest chocolate then gently embraced him, his heart pounding with shock and pain.

It was like embracing a skeleton.

He hid his shock with the widest smile he could conjure. From the periphery of his vision he saw Livia speaking to one of his grandfather's medical team. He would talk to them too. Soon. When he was confident he could speak without ripping their heads off.

Soon the entire family was reclining together on sofas dragged together to form a square, his grandfather wheeled over to be with them, fresh coffee, pastries and fruit brought out for them to devour.

This should be a moment of great satisfaction for him but instead Massimo felt as if he'd been hit by an articulated lorry. His chest felt tight, as if all the air had been sucked out and his lungs and heart vacuum packed. He detested small talk at the best of times but right then he could hardly move his tongue to form simple words, responding to his brother-in-law's chat with grunts and monosyllables.

At his sister's instigation, he'd arranged for them to spend the day on the yacht he'd bought for the island, sailing out to a tiny atoll twenty kilometres away. This atoll was circled by a protected coral reef even more spectacular than the one surrounding Seibua Island and which cruise liners were forbidden from visiting.

Only another forty-eight hours to go until he could leave and return to his home and work in America.

He had a feeling these were going to be the longest forty-eight hours of his life. The distance between them had never felt greater. This was his family but he'd never felt a part of it. Part of *them*. Always he'd felt like the cuckoo in the nest. If he didn't have such a strong physical resemblance to his father and the colouring of his mother, he could easily believe he'd been adopted.

The only person he'd ever felt completely at ease with had been Livia but he now knew the ease had been a dopamine-induced illusion. She was sitting on the opposite sofa chatting to Madeline with baby Elizabeth on her lap, uncaring that her hair was being pulled by a tight, pudgy fist.

His estranged wife was more comfortable with his family than he was. The woman who'd laughed at having a child with him was laughing now, pretty white teeth gleaming where the sun's rays filtered through the high windows and bathed her in their light.

It was only when their eyes met that he saw the effort it was costing her to maintain a carefree front. When he'd walked out of his bathroom naked and found her standing there…

He'd wanted to touch her with an ache that came from the very centre of his being.

The desire he'd thought had died with their marriage had come back to life as if it had never left. Livia still breathed in his blood. She pumped through his veins in a hot, relentless motion that seeped through his every pore, making his skin feverish.

There could be no going back. She was only there because of her love for his grandfather and her affection for the rest of his family.

Massimo waited until he'd drained his coffee before getting to his feet. 'I need to stretch my legs,' he announced. 'I'll see you all on the yacht in an hour.' Without waiting for a response, he strode out of the lodge and into the blazing sun.

His chalet was the one over the bridge and he headed towards it without breaking stride. His family didn't need him to entertain them. They were already settled in and relaxed in their surroundings, already tanned and glowing. All except his grandfather…

'Massimo, will you *wait*?'

Muttering a curse under his breath, he turned his head. Livia was hurrying in his direction, her hair flowing in a stream behind her.

'Problem?' he asked tightly when she reached him.

Livia snatched a breath of air. It had been years since she'd walked so quickly. 'I was going to ask you the same thing.'

His family had all turned their questioning eyes to her when he'd left the lodge. She'd shrugged apologetically and murmured that it had been a long flight before following him out.

He grunted and set off again.

'Are you going to tell me what's on your mind?' she asked when she caught up with him. Her short legs made double his strides to keep pace.

'I'm going to call the owner of the agency.'

'What agency?'

'The one who supplied the nurses and carers who were supposed to look after my grandfather. The agency *you* used to work for.'

They both stepped onto the wooden bridge without changing pace. It felt as substantial beneath her feet as the earth itself. 'Why?'

'I chose that agency because my previous experience with them was positive. I am disgusted that they've allowed him to get into this state. He's skin and bone. When was the last time he had a shave? My grandfather has shaved every day of his adult life and now he looks like a homeless drug addict.'

They'd reached the door to their cabin but before he could open it, Livia placed a hand on his wrist.

'I tried to warn you,' she said gently when he finally met her gaze. A pulse throbbed in his jaw.

He closed his eyes then shook her hand away. 'I know his cancer is incurable,' he bit out. 'That is no excuse for allowing him to get in such a state.'

She sighed and followed him into the chalet. After closing the door, she rested her back against it and tried to think of the words to use that wouldn't add to his distress. For she was quite certain that his anger was nothing but a mask for his anguish at seeing first-hand how close to death his grandfather really was.

'He's lost so much weight because he can't handle solid food any more,' she told him quietly. 'They can't shave him as often as he would like because his skin's become too sensitive. He can only cope with them doing it once a week.'

'You would make excuses for them,' he retorted scathingly. 'The medical profession always protects its own.'

'Even if I was still on the agency's books I wouldn't make excuses for medical negligence.'

The usually soulful eyes glittered menacingly. 'You accept they've neglected him?'

'No. They have given him exceptional care. The problem is it's been so long since you last saw Jimmy that the changes are more obvious to you.'

'I knew it wouldn't take long for you to get around to *my* supposed neglect of him.'

Livia sighed again in lieu of biting her tongue and in a vain effort to temper the anger rising in her. This was a weekend for celebration, not recriminations. Massimo was the one who had to live with his conscience, not her.

'Your grandfather is very ill, Massimo, but he's as comfortable and as pain-free as he can be. He's here on the island he loves with the family he loves. *You* made this happen, all of it. Don't spoil things for him by taking your anger at his condition out on those who have done their best for him.'

His jaw tightened as she spoke. For a long time he didn't respond, just stared at her until his nostrils flared and he gave a sharp nod. 'I need to call in with the office.'

This time her sigh was one of exasperation.

'I need to answer any questions the project manager has about the analysis and data before we set sail. Okay?'

She was glad he turned his back on her and strode through to the chalet's living room, his wretched phone already in his hand. It meant he didn't see the sheen of tears that suddenly filled her eyes.

CHAPTER FIVE

LIVIA TAMPED DOWN the gulf of feelings knotting her belly and boarded the white yacht. Although dwarfed in size by the cruise ship it was moored next to, it still dazzled with elegance. After their mammoth journey to the island she would have preferred to spend the day relaxing but this was the trip Madeline had forced Massimo to concede to. Livia knew what her sister-in-law was thinking: that forcing Massimo into close quarters would stop him hiding away.

Unfortunately, Madeline hadn't reckoned on Massimo boarding the yacht with his laptop case slung over his shoulder and his phone sticking out of his shorts pocket and Livia saw her lips pull in tightly. When they set sail, Livia was the only one secretly pleased when he made his excuses and disappeared inside.

Disappointment was writ large on his family's faces.

She met Madeline's gaze and shrugged apologetically.

Barely three hours with Massimo's family and she'd already made two silent apologies for him.

Sailing at a steady pace over the calm South Pacific, it took only an hour to reach the atoll. They whiled the time away in a lazy fashion, dipping in and out of the swimming pool and chatting. The captain anchored the yacht at a distance far enough away not to cause any damage to the precious reef but close enough for them all to see the clear turquoise water teeming with brightly coloured fish and all other manner of sea life. Madeline and Raul donned their snorkelling gear and jumped in, leaving baby Elizabeth in Sera's capable hands.

Livia looked out at Madeline and Raul having the time of their lives in the water, at Sera playing happily with her granddaughter, at her father-in-law Gianni, book in one hand, large cocktail in the other, at Jimmy napping in his wheelchair in a shaded part of the deck, at the chefs cooking up a storm on the barbecue and felt a sharp pang rip through her chest.

Massimo should be there with them.

She hurried down the stairs and slipped inside in search of him.

The interior of the yacht was vast and as sleek and as elegant as the exterior and refreshingly cool after the hazy heat on deck. It took a few minutes before she found him hidden in an isolated section of the saloon, tapping away on his laptop. So engrossed was he in his work that it took a few moments before he noticed her presence.

'Lunch is almost ready,' she said briskly.

'I'll be ten minutes.'

'And then you'll turn your laptop off and leave it off?'

'I can't.'

She inhaled deeply to smother her anger. 'Your family have been looking forward to spending time with you.'

'And they will.'

'When?' she challenged. 'Tomorrow, everything will be about the party and then you go back to LA. Today is the only day when it's just us and you're missing out. You've travelled thousands of kilometres to be here. It's not going to kill you to turn your laptop off and spend some time with your family.'

His jaw clenched, his fingers now drumming on the table rather than tapping on his laptop.

Looking at the obstinate set of Livia's jawline, Massimo knew she wouldn't give him a moment's peace until he joined the rest of them on deck.

It wasn't that he disliked spending time with his family. Not really. It was that they were all so different from him. His approach to life was alien to them. They believed he worked too hard, never understanding that it was only when he was immersed in his work that he felt at peace with himself.

It would be easier to handle these few days with them if Livia weren't there. It was hard enough dealing with his family's suffocating love without adding his estranged wife and all the intense emotions she'd drawn back out of him into the mix.

How could he find ease in her company when his attention was consumed by her every movement? She stood a good five feet from him but awareness thrummed through him, a buzz on his skin, an itch in his fingers. Her black swimsuit was designed for functionality and not for flaunting her body but still he reacted as if she were wearing the skimpiest of bikinis. The itch in his fingers became unbearable when he noticed the smudge of mascara under her left eye from where she'd dried her face after her swim. He wanted to rub the smudge away.

He breathed in deeply through his nose and nodded. 'I'll turn my laptop off and join you in ten minutes.'

She inclined her head and backed away. Just when he thought he was rid of her she fixed him with a hard stare counteracted by a quirking at the corner of her lips. 'If you get your phone out at all while we're on this yacht, I can't promise that it won't become fish food.'

* * *

Two hours later and Livia almost wished Massimo would return to the saloon and do more work.

After they'd eaten their long lunch; barbecued fish freshly caught that morning and an array of salads, she'd gone snorkelling with Madeline and climbed back on board to find Massimo had removed his T-shirt and draped it carelessly on the back of his chair.

Trying hard to blur his magnificent physique from her sight, she wrapped her beach towel around her waist while Madeline went straight to Raul, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed the top of his balding head. In response, he twisted in his chair and squeezed her bottom.

Livia couldn't stop her eyes from seeking Massimo, her heart throbbing as she remembered a time when they'd been as tactile and affectionate together as his sister and brother-in-law were. Her insides heated to match the warmth on her skin when she found his gaze already on her. Was he remembering those heady, carefree days too…?

His eyes pulsed before he looked away and reached for the jug of fruit cocktail. He refilled his glass then filled another and pulled out the empty chair beside him. Livia sat, accepting the drink with a murmured thanks, and tried again to blur out his naked chest. Even with the parasol raised to shade them from the worst of the heat, the sun's rays were slow-roasting them. One of Jimmy's carers had taken him inside for a nap.

Madeline pulled a bottle of sunscreen from her bag. Once she and Raul had slathered themselves in it, she passed the bottle to Livia, who rubbed the lotion over her face, covered her arms, shoulders, the top part of her chest not covered by her swimsuit and her neck. But she couldn't reach all of her back.

'Here, let me.'

Of course Massimo would offer to help. They had a watching audience, just as they'd had when they'd arrived at the lodge and he'd offered his hand to help her out of the golf buggy. His offer was for their benefit. If not for them, he would probably let her burn.

Trying valiantly to keep her features nonchalant, Livia gave the bottle to Massimo and twisted in her seat so her back was to him.

The anticipation of his touch was almost unbearable. And when it came…

Her breath caught in her throat.

Darts of awareness spread through her, memories flooding her of the first time he'd applied sunscreen to her skin. They'd been on their honeymoon in St Barts. They'd sunbathed naked, secure in their privacy. Massimo had rubbed the lotion sensually over every inch of her skin. By the time he'd rolled her onto her back and driven deep inside her, she'd been wet and aching for him. It had been the quickest she had ever achieved orgasm.

Now, he applied the lotion to her back briskly. His indifference made her heart twist with sadness but she worked hard to keep her lips curved upwards.

His hands pulled away with an abruptness that made the twist in her heart turn to an ache.

'Turn around and I'll do your back,' she ordered, proud that her voice was as bright as she intended for their watching audience.

As he was so tall and broad, there was a lot more skin to cover than the small area of exposed flesh on her own back.

Resisting the temptation to squirt it straight onto his back and have the fleeting enjoyment of watching him squirm at the quick shock of cold on his warm skin, she placed a healthy dollop into her palm, rubbed her hands together to spread it equally between them then placed them on his shoulder blades.

He still flinched.

She worked as briskly as he had to rub the lotion into his smooth skin.

When had she last touched his back? She couldn't remember. The coldness that had entered their marriage hadn't appeared overnight. It had accumulated over time until one day there was nothing but ice where once there had been love.

She had forgotten how much pleasure she got from simply touching him. Massimo carried so much on his shoulders. She'd loved to massage his knots away and feel him relax beneath her fingers. There were knots there now beneath the pads of her fingers, at the top of his spine and around his shoulder blades. Big ones.

Livia gritted her teeth and, dragging her hands from the knotted shoulders, swept down to the base of his back and covered the last bit that needed protection from the blazing sun.

The weight on his shoulders and the knots formed by it were none of her concern.

The moment she was done she pulled her hands away with the same abruptness that he'd done with her then breathed a quick sigh of relief when the captain appeared on deck, distracting everyone's attention. It was time to sail back.

* * *

His family's natural exuberance, which Massimo had never inherited, made sailing a noisy affair. The three women were in the pool swimming with his niece, laughing and splashing, leaving him at the table with his father, grandfather and brother-in-law, answering questions as best he could about the carbon filter he was days away from testing the prototype of. He could see the effort it was taking for them to concentrate.

He couldn't help his gaze drifting to the swimming pool, his attention as attuned as it had always been to Livia's every movement.

He was also intensely aware that she'd left her phone on the table and intensely ashamed that he wanted to snatch it up, take it somewhere private and trawl through all her communications over the past four months. He wondered how she would react if he were to throw it overboard and give it the same fate she'd threatened his own phone.

As if it were aware of his attention, her phone suddenly burst into life.

His father peered at it. 'Livia, Gianluca's calling,' he called to her.

'Coming!' She scrambled out of the pool, snatching her towel as she padded to the table, but her brother's call had gone to voicemail before she reached them.

Her brow furrowed. 'Excuse me a moment. I need to call him back.'

As she climbed the stairs to the top deck, Massimo's mother got out of the pool and joined them at the table.

'How is Gianluca doing?' she asked him in an undertone, concern writ large on her face. 'I know Livia has been very worried about him.'

But he never got the chance to ask what she was talking about for Madeline had sneaked up behind him and suddenly thrust a soaking Elizabeth into his arms. 'Here you go, Massimo. You can hold Elizabeth for me.'

'Where are you going?'

'Nowhere.' She stood at the balustrade with a cackle of laughter that produced laughs from his parents and a sound that could have been laughter too from his grandfather.

With a wriggling baby thrust upon him, Massimo filed away his mother's comment about Livia's youngest sibling as something to query later. Gianluca was the only member of Livia's family he'd met. He'd turned up at their wedding looking furtive, constantly looking over his shoulder. His behaviour, Livia had later explained, was a mirror of her own when she'd first left Naples, a habit it had taken her years to break.

He hoped Gianluca hadn't finally fallen into the life Livia had escaped from and which she'd so dearly hoped he would follow her out of.

Teenage boys were pack animals. That was Livia's theory for why he hadn't attempted to escape yet. He went around the Secondigliano with his gang of friends on their scooters, chasing girls, playing video games, employed by the brutal men who ran the territory to keep watch for enemies and the police. Livia was convinced that it was a life her brother didn't want but Massimo was equally convinced that Gianluca had been as seduced by it as the rest of her family had been and that sooner or later he would be seduced into committing a crime from which there would be no going back. Livia's strength of mind and moral code were rare.

He stood his niece on his lap and stared at her cherubic face and felt the tightness in his chest loosen. This little one would be raised with security and love. She would never be exposed to the danger and violence his wife and her siblings had lived.

Huge blue eyes stared back. Unable to resist, he sniffed the top of her head. She smelled of baby.

'When are you two going to have one of those?' Raul asked with a grin.

Ice laced like a snake up Massimo's spine in an instant.

All eyes focused on him…and the presence he sensed behind him. Livia had returned from her phone call.

She sat back down, phone clutched in her hand. 'It's not the right time for us to have a child,' she said and shrugged apologetically. 'You know the hours Massimo puts into his work.'

'You would work those hours if there was a child?' his mother said, looking at him with an air of bewilderment. It was a look he'd become used to during his childhood, a physical expression that the differences between Massimo and his family were felt as keenly by them as they were by him.

'My work is important,' he pointed out cordially. He didn't expect her to understand. To his parents, work was only important in as much as it paid the bills. That hadn't stopped his parents from accepting the luxury home he'd purchased for them and for which he footed all the bills *and* the monthly sum he transferred into their bank account for everything else they could possibly need. He did the same for his sister and his grandfather and for his father's siblings and their offspring. He would have done the same for his mother's siblings if she'd had any.

He had stopped them ever having to work again—work being something none of the extended Briatores had been enamoured with either—and still his work ethic bewildered them. He provided for them all and the source of their wealth came from the technology he was creating that would, hopefully, allow baby Elizabeth, along with future generations of Briatores, to live on a planet that wasn't a raging fireball. And still they stared at him with bewilderment, unable to comprehend why he worked as hard as he did.

'I know, but…' His mother must have sensed something from his expression for her voice trailed off.

Livia had no such sensibilities. Pouring herself a glass of fruit cocktail, she said, 'Your son is a workaholic, Sera. It makes for a lonely life for me. I could not bring a child into that.'

'You could get help,' his mother suggested hopefully.

Livia shook her head. 'In America, any help would be from English speakers. I've been trying to learn but it's very hard. I had a cut on my leg last year that needed stitching and it was very stressful trying to understand the staff at the hospital.'

Talk of that incident made Massimo's guts clench uncomfortably and his gaze automatically drift down to her leg. The scar, although expertly stitched and incredibly neat, was still vivid. Livia had gone for a swim in their outdoor pool in LA. One of the pebbled tiles around its perimeter had broken away leaving a sharp edge that she had sliced her calf on when hauling herself out of the pool. He'd been at his testing facility when she'd called to tell him about it, saying only that she'd cut her leg and needed help communicating with a medical practitioner about it. He'd sent Lindy, fluent in Italian, to deal with it and translate for her.

He'd been furious when he'd returned home that night and seen the extent of the damage. Seventeen stitches, internal and external. Her reply had been the coolest he'd ever received from her —up to that point anyway—Livia saying, 'I didn't want to make a drama out of it and worry you while you were driving.' He'd stared at her quizzically. Her lips had tightened. 'I assumed you would come.'

It wasn't his fault, he told himself stubbornly. He wasn't a mind reader. He couldn't have known how bad the damage had been.

The damage it had caused to their marriage in the longer term had been far more extensive.

'Look!' His sister's exclamation cut through his moody reminiscences.

Everyone followed Madeline's pointed finger. Holding Elizabeth securely in his arms, Massimo carried her to the balustrade. Swimming beside the yacht, almost racing them, was a pod of bottlenose dolphins.

Around thirty of the beautiful mammals sped sleekly through the water, creating huge white foams with their dives. It was as if they'd come to check them out and decided to stay for a while and play.

It was one of the most incredible sights he had ever seen and it filled him with something indefinable; indefinable because it was nothing he'd ever felt before.

He looked at Livia and the awed joy on her face and experienced a fleeting gratitude that she'd forced him from his work and enabled him to enjoy this priceless moment.

Elizabeth wriggled in his arms. He tightened his hold on her to stop her falling and, as he did, Livia's blame as to their childless state came back to him and the brief lightness that had filled his chest leached back out.

* * *

Livia tried her hardest to keep a happy front going but it only got harder as time passed. Gianluca hadn't answered her returned call and he hadn't called or left a message since.

And then there was Massimo.

The excitement of the dolphins racing so joyously alongside them had waned once they'd finally swum off and the lightness she'd witnessed in his eyes had quickly waned too. Was she the only one to notice his underlying tension? She would bet the knots on his shoulders had become even tighter.

Her assumption that he would keep the reasons for his anger to himself was dispelled when they returned to the island. His family retired to their chalets for a late siesta before dinner, leaving them together on the terrace of the lodge drinking a coconut and rum creation the head bar steward had made for them.

The moment they were alone, he fixed her with hard eyes. 'Why did you say all that rubbish about a baby?'

'What rubbish?'

'You let my family believe the issue of us not having children lies with me.'

'I'm prepared to pretend that our marriage is intact but I'm not prepared to tell an outright lie.'

'You're the one who didn't want a child. Not me.'

Confused, she blinked. 'When did I say I didn't want a child?'

His jaw clenched. 'You laughed when I suggested we have one.'

'Do you mean the time you suggested we have a child to cure me of my loneliness? Is that the time you're referring to?' Of course it was. It was the only time the subject of a baby had come up since their first heady days when they'd spoken of a future that involved children. 'I laughed at the suggestion, yes, because it *was* laughable. And even if you hadn't suggested a child as a sticking plaster for my loneliness I would still have laughed and for the reasons I shared with your mother—ours was no marriage to bring a child into.'

His hand tightened perceptibly around his glass. 'You made it sound like you're a neglected wife.'

'I *was* a neglected wife,' she bit back. 'Why do you think I left you? To pretend otherwise is demeaning—'

'You're here this weekend so my grandfather can spend what is likely to be his last birthday on this earth believing everything is fine between us,' he interrupted.

'We're not going to do that by pretending that you've suddenly turned into a model husband, are we? Your grandfather isn't stupid—none of your family are, and they're not going to believe a leopard can change its spots. I visited your family on my own and made excuses for you for over a year before I left and I've been doing the same for the last four months and they have been none the wiser about the state of our marriage. When we finally come clean that we've separated, the only surprise will be that it's taken me so long to see sense.'

Livia knew she was baiting him but she didn't care. She wanted him to argue with her. She'd always wanted him to argue back but he never did. It was a circle that had only grown more vicious as their marriage limped on; her shouting, him clamming up.

True to form, Massimo's mouth clamped into a straight line. He pushed his chair back roughly and got to his feet but before he could stride away as she fully expected him to do, he turned back around and glowered at her. 'Unless you want a fight over any divorce settlement, I suggest you stick to the plan and stop putting doubts about our marriage in my family's head. I don't care what my parents or sister think but I will not have my grandfather having doubts about us.'

'If you want a fight over the settlement then I'll give you a fight,' she said, outraged at his threat, 'but I *am* sticking to the plan! You've neglected your family for so long that they think it's normal that you neglect your wife too.'

'I'm not having this argument again.'

She laughed bitterly. Her hands were shaking. 'We never argued about it. Whenever I tried to tell you how unhappy I was, you walked away from me. You never wanted to hear it.'

'You were like a stuck record.' He made crablike pinching motions with his hands. 'I'm bored, Massimo,' he mimicked. 'I'm lonely, Massimo. Why do you work such long hours, Massimo?' He dropped his hands and expelled his own bitter laugh. 'See? I *did* listen. Maybe if you'd ever paused for breath between complaints I might have felt more incentivised to come home earlier each night.'

'I only complained *because* you work such stupid hours!'

His eyes were cold. 'I didn't force you to move to America. I didn't force you to marry me. You knew the kind of man I was before we married but you thought you could change me. Instead of solving your problems for yourself you sat around the house wallowing and complaining and expecting me to fix everything for you.'

'I never wallowed!' she said, outraged. Of all the things he'd just accused her of, for some reason that was the one that immediately bit the hardest. 'And as if I would have expected you to fix anything—you aren't capable of fixing anything to do with the human heart. You've spent so much time with your machines and gadgets that your heart has turned to metal.'

He took the three steps needed to smile cruelly down at her. ‘You did nothing *but* wallow. And sulk. And complain. For the first few weeks after you left I thought I’d gone deaf.’

And then his smile turned into a grimace as he turned on his heel and, parting shot delivered, strode off leaving Livia standing there feeling as if he’d just ripped her heart out.

CHAPTER SIX

MASSIMO LOCKED THE bathroom door. He didn't trust Livia not to barge in.

He'd expected her to follow him to the chalet. Every step had been taken with an ear braced for a fresh verbal assault.

But the assault never came.

He turned the shower on and closed his eyes to the hot water spraying over his head.

Livia's defiant yet stricken face played in his retinas.

Guilt fisted his guts. He'd been cruel. The words had spilled out of him as if a snake had taken possession of his tongue.

Being here…with Livia, with his family, seeing how close to death his grandfather really was… it was all too much.

Hearing accusations of neglectful behaviour towards those he loved had driven like a knife in his heart.

He'd done his best for his family. They might not see him as much as they would like but he made up for his lack of presence in other ways.

And he'd done his best in his marriage. That his best did not live up to his wife's exacting standards was not his fault. Neglect seemed to suggest that she was a child who needed taking care of when they both knew Livia was more than capable of taking care of herself. This was the woman who'd survived the Secondigliano without being seduced by its violent glamour. This was the woman who'd discovered an affinity for nursing when the local doctor the neighbourhood gangsters visited to fix their gangland wounds recognised her coolness under pressure when one of her cousins got shot in the leg. From the age of fourteen Livia had been paid a flat fee of fifty euros a time to assist the doctor whenever required. Like Massimo, she'd stashed it away. Unlike Massimo, who'd saved his money in a box in his bedroom, never having to worry about his family stealing it from him, she'd kept her cash in a waterproof container under the vase in her father's grave. As she was the only mourner to place flowers on the grave, it was the only safe place she had for it.

She'd refused to be sucked into a life of crime. The only vice she'd picked up in her years where drugs were cheap and plentiful was cigarette smoking, which she'd quit when she'd achieved the grades needed to study nursing in Rome and taken all her cash and left the life behind her. She was as tough as nails. To suggest she needed caring for was laughable.

Finished showering, he rubbed his body with a towel then wrapped it around his waist. Bracing himself, he unlocked the door and stepped into the bedroom.

He'd been right to brace himself. Livia was sitting on the end of the bed waiting for him. But the fury he expected to be met with was nowhere to be seen. Her eyes, when he met them, were sad. The smudge of mascara was still visible.

After a moment's silence that felt strangely melancholic, she said, 'I don't want it to be like this.' It was the quietest he'd ever heard her speak.

He ran a hand through his damp hair and grimaced. 'I thought you wanted me to argue with you. Isn't that what you've always said?'

'Arguing's healthy, but this…?' Her shoulders and chest rose before slumping sharply, her gaze falling to the floor. 'I don't want us to be cruel to each other. I knew things would be difficult this weekend but…' Her voice trailed away before she slowly raised her head to meet his gaze. There was a sheen in her eyes that made his heart clench. 'This is much harder than I thought it would be.'

Massimo pressed his back against the bathroom door and closed his eyes. 'It's harder than I thought it would be too.'

'It is?'

He nodded and ground his teeth together. 'I shouldn't have said the things I said. I'm sorry.'

'I didn't know you felt like that.'

'I don't.' At her raised, disbelieving brow, he added, 'Not in the way I said it.'

'You made me sound like a fishwife.'

His lips curved involuntarily at the glimmer of humour in her tone. 'I was lashing out. Being with you…' The fleeting smile faded away. 'I can't explain how it makes me feel.'

'It just makes me feel sad,' she admitted with a whisper. Then she rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands and took a deep breath. 'When the time is right for us to file the divorce papers, I won't be wanting a settlement.'

'I didn't mean it about fighting you. We can come to an—'

Her head shook. 'No. No settlement. You've given me enough money since we married. I've hardly spent any of it. I've enough to buy an apartment—'

'You were going to buy one when you went back to Rome,' he interrupted. 'You were supposed to let my lawyer know when you'd found somewhere.' He'd informed his lawyer and accountant that Livia would be purchasing a home in Italy in her sole name and that funds should be made available to her when she got in touch with them about it, no questions asked. He didn't care what she spent.

He'd specifically told them to go ahead without notifying him. He hadn't wanted to know when she'd made that last, permanent move out of his life for reasons he couldn't explain, not even to himself.

Massimo ran his eyes over his finances once a year when it was tax season and that was for scrutiny purposes. He would have noticed then, he supposed, that she hadn't bought herself a home.

'I've been renting my old place.' Actually buying herself a home of her own had felt too final, Livia realised. It would have been the ultimate confirmation that their marriage was over for good.

Had she been living in denial? And if so, what had she been holding out for? Miracles didn't exist. The cruel truth was that she and Massimo were wholly incompatible and she'd been a fool for believing differently. She'd known it when she'd left. It hadn't stopped her heart skipping every time her phone had buzzed only to plummet when his name didn't flash on the screen. It hadn't flashed once since their separation.

'Once everything's out in the open, I'm going to go back to nursing,' she added, fighting back a well of tears. To cry in front of him would be the final indignity.

He rested his head back against the bathroom door with a sigh. 'You don't need to work, Liv.'

The simple shortening of her name…oh, but it made her heart *ache*. Massimo was the only person in the world who'd ever shortened her name. And then he'd stopped calling her Liv and started calling her Livia like everyone else. And then he'd stopped calling her anything.

Blinking away the tears that were still desperately trying to unleash, she sniffed delicately and gave a jerky nod. 'I need a sense of purpose. I like knowing the money in my pocket is earned by my own endeavours. I never wanted to be a kept woman.'

His throat moved before he gave his own nod. 'At least let me buy you a home like we agreed I would. The law entitles you to much more.'

And he would give it, everything the law said she was entitled to and more. If only he were as generous with his time as he was with his money…

But those were pointless thoughts to have. Massimo was who he was, just as Livia was who she was. They'd tried. They'd failed.

She just wished she could find a way to stop her heart from hurting so much.

'Thank you.' Swallowing hard to dislodge the lump in her throat, she got to her feet. 'I'll leave you to get changed. I'm going to make myself a coffee—would you like one?'

'That would be great, thank you.'

She smiled and left the bedroom and kept smiling as she made the coffee, smiling so hard that eventually the tears sucked themselves dry and her cheeks ached miserably in their place.

It didn't occur to her until she was standing under the shower an hour later that this was the first real conversation she and Massimo had had that hadn't descended to insults and recriminations in over a year.

* * *

The cloudless sky had turned deep blue, the sun a deep orange shimmering on the horizon when Livia ventured out of the chalet in search of Massimo. She found him on the wrap-around veranda drinking a bottle of beer and looking at his phone, wearing a pair of old battered jeans and a crisp white shirt, a booted foot hooked casually on his thigh.

It was the first time she'd been at the rear of their chalet and she tried hard not to let sadness fill her as she recalled poring over the architect's designs for it, imagining all the happy times she and Massimo would spend here. This chalet had been the only part of the complex Massimo had taken a real interest in. They'd chosen to build it high on the jutting mound of earth that, when the tide was low, could be walked to along a sandy pathway created by nature at its finest. This was supposed to be their own private hideaway in their private paradise. Their horseshoe swimming pool, garden and veranda were entirely hidden from prying eyes.

She hadn't been able to bring herself to think about the sleeping arrangements that night. Their chalet only had one bed. It was a huge bed but, still, it was only the one bed. She supposed she could sleep on the sofa. Massimo's long frame would never fit on it.

His eyes widened slightly when he looked up as she approached and he unhooked his foot and straightened.

The vain part of her bloomed to see his response. Although it was only a family meal they were going to have, she'd applied her make-up and done her hair with care. She'd been mortified to look in the mirror and see a huge smudge of mascara under her left eye.

But it wasn't vanity that had propelled her to make an effort. It was armoury. When she looked her best it had the effect of boosting her morale and for all the unspoken truce they'd forged, her emotions were all over the place. She needed every piece of armour she could find to hold herself together.

Massimo turned his phone off and tried hard to temper the emotions crashing through him. Livia had dressed casually in a pair of tight white three-quarter-length trousers and a shimmering red strappy top that stopped at her midriff. On her feet were high, white strappy sandals that elongated her frame but did nothing to diminish her natural curves.

A lifetime ago he would have beckoned her over, put his hands on her hips and pulled her to him.

The instant awakening of his loins proved, as if it needed proving, that nothing had changed. He still wanted her with an ache he felt deep in his marrow.

Inhaling deeply through his nose, he willed the thudding of his heart to steady.

'You're ready?' he asked.

She nodded.

He finished his beer and got to his feet.

In silence they walked the veranda to the front of the chalet and headed to the lodge. The tide had risen in the past two hours, the sandy path now mostly submerged beneath the powerful ocean and the colourful, tropical fish that swam in it. Its gentle rhythm was soothing.

His family had beaten them to the lodge and were all sitting around a set dining table chatting noisily. One of his grandfather's carers sat discreetly in a far corner of the lodge reading a book.

The meal passed quickly. His grandfather was tired and, fed by Massimo's mother, ate only his soup before retiring for the night. Madeline and Raul quickly followed, taking an increasingly fractious Elizabeth, who'd turned her nose up at all the offerings they'd tried to tempt her with. Considering it looked like mushed vomit, Massimo didn't blame her for smacking the plastic spoon

out of her mother's hand. When his brother-in-law attempted to feed her, her little face turned bright red with fury. If Massimo had been offered that excuse for food, he'd have been tempted to screw his face up and bawl too.

He was about to rise and retire to the chalet to check in on work, when his father's suggestion of a game of Scopa, the traditional Italian game played with an Italian forty-card deck, gave him pause.

His mother's hopeful gaze made his ready refusal stick on his tongue before he could vocalise it.

He didn't need to look at Livia to know she was beseeching him with her eyes to accept too. Her earlier insistence that his family wanted only to spend time with him kept ringing in his ears.

He stretched his mouth into the semblance of a smile. 'Sure.'

The beaming grins made his chest tighten.

He signalled to the barman. Soon, a bottle of bourbon, a bucket of ice and four glasses had been taken to the outside table they now sat around. Massimo and his father formed a team and sat opposite each other, the ladies playing as the opposing team. Livia sat beside his father, his mother beside Massimo. He shuffled the cards, dealt them three each and four face up on the table. The first game of Scopa began.

What began as a sop to please his parents turned into a couple of hours' mindless fun under the warm starry sky. His parents were the most laid-back, easy-going people on the planet but when it came to card games, they became ultra-competitive.

And Livia's competitive streak came out too. His wife and mother were both determined to beat their spouses and were not above cheating to achieve this. When the women were two nil down, suddenly they both found it necessary to halt the game for frequent bathroom breaks.

Soon after this mysterious onset of bladder issues, he spotted his mother furtively pulling something out of her handbag, which, when she was challenged, turned out to be a king with a value of ten points. Rather than display any shame, his mother giggled. Livia though…her throaty cackle of laughter filled his ears and suddenly he was thrown back to his sister's wedding and the first time he'd heard it.

It was a sound that speared him.

Firmly dragging his mind away from that fateful first meeting, he confiscated the card but then found he couldn't stop his own burst of laughter when, barely a minute later, Livia stood to use the bathroom for the fourth time and two high-value cards slipped out of her top.

'Shameless,' he chided with a stern shake of his head.

'All's fair in love and war,' she replied, a gleam in her eye he hadn't seen for so long that suddenly he could fight the swelling emotions no more, body blows of longing and pain ravaging him.

He couldn't tear his gaze from her.

In the beat of a moment her amusement vanished and her dark brown eyes were swirling with more emotion than there were stars in the sky.

Hardly single-digit seconds passed as their stares remained fixed on each other but those seconds contained so much weight he felt its compression on his chest. He knew with a bone-deep certainty that she was thinking about their first meeting too and that the memory lanced her as deeply as it did him.

Then Livia turned her gaze from him.

'I really do need to use the bathroom,' she murmured, reaching down to pick up the illicit cards and placing them on the table.

In the plush ladies' room, Livia put her hands on the sink and dragged air into her lungs.

For a moment there her heart had felt so full of so many emotions that it had felt as if it could burst out of her chest.

Teaming up with Sera against their husbands had been so wickedly joyful that for a while she had forgotten that she and Massimo were estranged and preparing for a divorce.

For a short, glorious time, it had been like slipping on a pair of shoes that transported them to their early days when there had been as much fun in their marriage as there had been desire and love.

She had adored making Massimo laugh. He was such a serious person that to see his face light up had brought her more joy than anything. Laughter had been in short supply in her childhood so to discover this side of herself with him had been joyful in its own right.

Like the smiles she'd been unable to form in the four months since she'd left him, laughter had become a distant memory too. Until tonight.

Back outside in the warm evening air, she found the cards had been put away and the glasses empty. Sera and Gianni got to their feet as she approached the table and both apologised for having to call it a night. They were tired and needed to get some sleep.

Kissing them both goodnight, Livia poured herself another bourbon and watched them walk away.

The silence they left behind was stark. Apart from the white noise in her ears.

'I suppose we should go to our chalet too,' she said, avoiding Massimo's stare.

They'd spent a whole day travelling between time zones quickly followed by a day out at sea. All of this, when added to her frazzled nerves brought about by being with him again, was a recipe for exhaustion. Yet she felt anything but tired.

When he didn't answer, she stared up at the sky. The stars were in abundance that night, twinkling like gold diamonds in the vast blackness. She'd thought the sky in LA was big but here, on this island, it seemed to stretch for ever.

'I'll sleep on the sofa,' she added into the silence.

'No. You take the bed.' She felt his eyes on her. 'I've work I need to get on with.'

'The sofa's too small for you, and you can't work all night.' But he could. She knew that. He'd worked through the night on many occasions.

'I'll work for a few hours then sleep on the hammock.'

'We have a hammock?' That was the first she'd heard of it.

'I'm surprised you didn't notice it earlier. It's on the veranda by the outside table.'

'I probably didn't register it,' she murmured, taking a hasty sip of her bourbon.

She wouldn't have noticed any hammock because when she'd stepped out onto the veranda her eyes had been too consumed by Massimo to register anything else.

They finished their drinks and, as silently as they'd made the walk from their chalet to the lodge, walked the return journey together. The incoming tide now lapped the beach noisily, so deep beneath the bridge that if this had been her first sight of the island she would never have believed it could ebb back far enough for a sandy pathway to open up between the main island and their private peninsula.

But as much as she tried to distract herself with their surroundings she couldn't block out Massimo's lean frame striding beside her.

When they reached their chalet, he picked up the briefcase he'd left on their dining table.

Everything about this chalet was supposed to be theirs. Everything had been designed to their exact instructions; a love nest they'd imagined themselves escaping to whenever time allowed, designed and dreamed up before Livia had realised time would never allow it. For Massimo, time existed only for work.

He stared at her for a moment before his chest rose sharply. 'I'll work on the veranda. Sleep well.'

Her goodnight to him came out as a whisper.

He closed the door quietly behind him.

* * *

Massimo powered his laptop but, other than reply to a few urgent emails, found he didn't have the concentration to work.

Sighing heavily, he ran his fingers through his hair and closed his eyes.

It felt as if he'd slipped into a time loop, taken back to the days when he'd worked from the sprawling building that homed Briatore Technologies and found his concentration fighting a war with himself. Livia had taken back possession of his mind. She'd been all he could think of then. She was all he could think of now.

It didn't matter, he told himself grimly. One more full day and night and then that would be it for them. She would live her life in Italy and he would live his in LA.

Thinking he could do with another drink before attempting to sleep in the hammock he'd instructed be erected when he'd remembered the chalet he would share with his estranged wife had only one bed, he padded quietly back inside. Before he could switch the light on and head to the bar, he noticed a slant of light coming from beneath the closed bedroom door.

His heart fisted.

He'd left her over an hour ago, plenty of time for her to do her night-time beauty routine and fall asleep. Was she reading?

Was she wearing the cream pyjamas that managed to be both modest and yet revealing…?

He stepped closer to the bedroom door, his ears craning when he heard her voice. She was talking to someone.

A lover?

Hating himself yet unable to stop, he put his ear to the door. The wooden barrier muffled her words.

She laughed. It sounded pained. And then she said something distinguishable even through the muffling.

'Please. I love you.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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