



A Debt
PAID IN THE
MARRIAGE BED

MODERN™



JENNIFER HAYWARD

Mills & Boon Modern

Jennifer Hayward

A Debt Paid In The Marriage Bed

«HarperCollins»

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The unwilling Ricci wife...Angelina's world is shattered when Lorenzo Ricci walks through the door of her engagement party and demands she call off the wedding —because she's still married to him! She left the formidable Italian to save her heart, now with her family business at stake, Angelina must consider his terms...In need of an heir, Lorenzo will use any means to reclaim his wayward wife and return her to their marriage bed. He'll make her debts disappear if she repays him...in desire! The chemistry may be alive and well between them, but can they survive their tempestuous reunion unscathed?

Содержание

MILLS & BOON	7
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	22

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"What are you insinuating? That you'll pull the plug on the aid you're giving to my family, toss me out on the street, if I don't agree to come back to you?"

"I prefer to think of it as incentive. We owe our marriage a fair shot before we relegate it to the history books. You come back to me, we try and make it work, I pull Carmichael out of its financial difficulties before it becomes a footnote in the list of great American dynasties. It's a *win-win*."

A *win-win*? Angelina stared at Lorenzo, disbelieving. "You would really hold that over my head?"

"You didn't play fair when you walked out on me, *tesoro*. You just cut and ran. So, yes, I will use whatever means required to make you see the light. To do the right thing."

"I asked you to go to counseling. I begged you to. I tried to save our marriage and then I left."

"You expected us to solve things overnight. It doesn't happen that way."

Her fingers curled tight around the delicate stem of her champagne flute. #“Putting the two of us back in a marriage where we'll destroy one other is *not* doing the right thing.”

"We're both older and wiser. I think we can make it work."

She shook her head. "That's where you're mistaken. That's where you've played the wrong card, Lorenzo. Because I will never become your wife again."

She turned on her heel and left. He let her go, because he knew she'd be back. He'd never gambled on a deal he couldn't win.

JENNIFER HAYWARD has been a fan of romance since filching her sister's novels to escape her teenage angst. Her career in journalism and PR, including years of working alongside powerful, charismatic CEOs and travelling the world, has provided perfect fodder for the fast-paced, sexy stories she likes to write—always with a touch of humour. A native of Canada's East Coast, Jennifer lives in Toronto with her Viking husband and young Viking-in-training.

Books by Jennifer Hayward

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For my dad—a gifted surgeon, teacher, woodworker and master of anything trivia, you were also the greatest father I could have hoped to have.

There is a piece of you, Dad, in every hero I write, because you were larger than life. I can't imagine a world without you, where I can't ever pick up the phone again and pick your brain on a storyline. I only know if I live a life half as courageous and remarkable as yours I will be happy. xx

[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

“SIR.”

Lorenzo Ricci pocketed his phone and lengthened his stride, pretending he hadn't witnessed the appearance of his portly, balding, middle-aged lawyer in the hallway behind him. Fifty minutes back on US soil, the last thing he needed was to discuss the fine print of the complex acquisition deal he had been negotiating, a subject bound to make his head ache even more than it already was.

Tomorrow, after a shot of his favorite whiskey, a steam shower and a face-plant into the Egyptian cotton sheets his housekeeper had procured for his very comfortable king-size bed, would be soon enough to endure that brain-throbbing task.

“Sir!”

Dio. He pulled to a halt, turned and faced the man doing his best to catch up to him on short, stubby legs, his outward appearance the very antithesis of the pit bull he was in the boardroom.

“I’ve been traveling for sixteen hours, Cristopher, I’m tired, I’m in a vile mood and I need sleep. Trust me when I say tomorrow is better.”

“It can’t wait.” The edge to his lawyer’s voice commanded Lorenzo’s full attention. Not once in five years of completing difficult and sometimes downright antagonistic deals together had his legal counsel ever looked this rattled. “I need five minutes of your time.”

Expelling a long sigh, his stomach souring at the thought of attempting to interpret the finer points of legalese when what his brain officially needed was sleep, Lorenzo waved a hand toward his office. “Bene. Five minutes.”

Cristopher followed him into the sleek, black-and-chrome offices of the Ricci International executive team. Gillian, Lorenzo’s ultraefficient PA, gave him an apologetic I-tried look. He waved her off. “Go home. We can go through everything in the morning.”

She murmured her thanks, got to her feet and started gathering her things. Cristopher followed him into his office, hovering in front of his desk while he dropped his briefcase beside it and shrugged off his jacket. The apprehension skittering up his spine deepened. His lawyer didn’t hover. Ever.

He walked to the bank of floor-to-ceiling windows framing a magnificent view of a dusky, indigo-lit Manhattan—one of the perks of being CEO of his family’s international Italian conglomerate, a shipping dynasty he had evolved into a diverse empire that included hotel chains, cruise lines and real estate arms. He loved the view, but tonight, it barely penetrated the fatigue clouding his brain.

Turning, he leaned back against the glass and crossed his arms over his chest. “All right,” he said, “give it to me.”

His lawyer blinked behind gold-rimmed spectacles, flicked his tongue over his lips and cleared his throat. “We have a...situation. A mistake that’s been made we need to rectify.”

He frowned. “On the deal?”

“No. It’s a personal matter.”

Lorenzo narrowed his gaze. “I didn’t invite you in here to play twenty questions, Cris. Spit it out.”

His lawyer swallowed. “The legal firm that handled your divorce made an error with the filing of the papers. An omission, actually...”

“What kind of an omission?”

“They forgot to file them.”

A buzzing sound filled his ears. “I divorced my wife two years ago.”

“Yes, well, you see...” Another long swallow. “You didn’t actually. Not in the technical tense because the papers were never filed with the state.”

The buzzing sound in his head intensified. “What are you saying?” He asked the question slowly, deliberately, as if his brain was having trouble keeping up. “Just so we’re clear?”

“You’re still married to Angelina.” Cristopher blurted the words out, a hand coming up to resettle his glasses higher on his nose. “The lawyer who handled your divorce had an insane caseload that month. He thought he’d asked his clerk to file the papers, was sure he had, until we went back to look at the specifics after the conversation you and I had recently.”

When it had become clear Angie was never going to touch a penny of the alimony he gave her each month.

“My wife announced her engagement this week. To another man.”

The lawyer pressed a hand to his temple. “Yes... I saw the piece in the paper. That’s why I’ve been trying to track you down. It’s a rather complicated situation.”

“Complicated?” Lorenzo slung the word across the room with the force of a bullet. “How much do we pay that firm an hour? Hundreds? Thousands? To not make mistakes like this. Ever.”

“It’s not acceptable,” Cristopher agreed quietly, “but it is the reality.”

His lawyer squared his shoulders, looking ready to be verbally flogged to within an inch of his life, but Lorenzo had lost the power of speech. That his short-lived marriage to his wife, a disaster by its ignominious end, had, in fact, never been legally terminated was too much to take when heaped upon the other news his father had delivered today.

He counted to ten in his head, harnessing the red-hot fury that engulfed him. This he did not need as he attempted to close the biggest deal of his life.

“How do we fix this?” he asked icily.

Cristopher spread his hands wide. “There are no magical solutions. The best we can do is hope to expedite the process. But it could take months. It will still mean—I mean you’ll still have to—”

“Tell my wife she can’t marry her boyfriend so she doesn’t commit bigamy?”

His lawyer rubbed a palm across his forehead. “Yes.”

And wouldn’t that be fun, given Angelina was set to celebrate that engagement in front of half of New York tomorrow night?

He turned to face the jaw-dropping view, blood pounding against his temple in a dull roar. He was shocked at how much the idea of Angie marrying another man repulsed him even though he had once convinced himself if he never saw his wife again it would be too soon. Perhaps because her vibrant, sensual, Lauren Bacall-style beauty haunted him every time he thought about taking another woman to bed... Because every time he tried to convince himself he was ambivalent about her, he failed miserably.

The conversation he’d had with his father before leaving Milan filtered through his head like some sort of cruel joke, had it not been of an entirely serious nature. The chairman of Ricci International had fixed his impenetrable, ice-blue stare on him and dropped a bombshell. “Your brother Franco is unable to produce an heir, which means it’s up to you, Lorenzo, to produce one and produce it soon.”

His dismay for his younger brother, his bewilderment Franco hadn’t told him this the night before over dinner, had evaporated under the impact of his father’s directive. Him marry again? Never happening. Except, he conceded with bitter irony, he was apparently still married. To the woman who had walked out on him and said he had no capacity to love. The woman who had stolen the last piece of humanity he’d possessed.

“Sir?”

He turned around. “Do you have any more bombshells to add to the pile or is that it?”

“That’s it. The deal is fine for the moment. We’re still negotiating the smaller points and you need to clear those last couple of tricky items with Bavaro, but other than that we’re on track.”

“Bene.” He waved a hand toward the door. “Go. I’ll take care of Angie.”

His lawyer nodded. “Do you want me to file the papers? Get the process started?”

“No.”

Cristopher gave him a stupefied look. “Sorry?”

“I said leave it.”

His lawyer left. A wise decision. He walked to the bar and poured himself a whiskey. Padding back to the windows, he lifted the glass to his mouth and took a sip. Began to feel vaguely human as the spirit warmed his insides and smoothed out the raw edges—raw edges that had been festering ever since one of the clippings in his daily press briefing had buzzed about his former wife...current wife’s betrothal plans to a prominent Manhattan lawyer.

He had pushed the news of Angie’s engagement aside. Refused to acknowledge how it sank its claws into his skin, dug into his insides—inspired dark, inexplicable thoughts he couldn’t have

identified if he'd tried. Angie had ended a marriage that had descended to the very deepest depths of acrimony, a marriage many would have left for dead. So why did it still sting so much?

Why was he still so angry, still so damn angry it was like a disease inside of him, eating away at his soul? He itched he was so angry.

Why hadn't he asked Cris to file those papers? Ended something that should have been ended two years ago?

He stared out the window for a long time, sipping the whiskey, watching night fall over a light-strewn Manhattan. Considered his duty to the Ricci line. The fifteen-billion-dollar acquisition deal in front of him—a deal that required every bit of his concentration—that would make Ricci the top luxury hotel chain in the world if he landed it.

The solution to his predicament, when it came, was shockingly, simplistically clear.

* * *

Why wasn't there any air in this room?

Angie took the glass of champagne the bartender handed her, turned and leaned against the lit glass surface, surveying the cocktail-dress-attired crowd mingling in the elegant, whitewashed art-gallery space. Shimmering light from the antique chandeliers cascaded onto gleaming black marble floors, while directed lighting spotlighted the stunning artwork on the walls. A perfect, sophisticated backdrop for her and Byron's engagement party, everything they'd envisioned to celebrate their upcoming nuptials. Why then did the room seem to have drained of oxygen as the night wore on? Why this restless pull in her veins she couldn't explain?

She should be ecstatic. She had the career of her dreams as one of New York's most buzzed-about new jewelry designers, the freedom she'd always craved from life as a Carmichael and a wonderful man waiting in the wings. What more could she ask for?

And yet something still felt...missing.

It did not, she told herself firmly, have anything to do with the man who haunted the edges of her happiness. Who had shown her what having everything looked like, then taken it away in the next breath. Because she knew now that kind of an adrenaline rush was for fools. What went up must come down, and in her and Lorenzo's case, had come crashing down.

A searing pang throbbed in her chest. She took a deep breath of the nonexistent air. Perhaps that's what she needed—oxygen to clear her head.

Byron engaged with a business colleague across the room, she seized the moment. Winding her way through the buzzing crowd, around the live jazz band to the elegant staircase that led to the second level, unused tonight, she climbed the stairs and headed for the small terrace that opened off the upper level.

Hot, thick summer air hit her like a wall of heat as she stepped outside. She walked to the edge of the beautifully landscaped space, rested her elbows on the railing and drank it in. The frenetic activity in the street below as cabs and pedestrians battled for supremacy on a sticky Manhattan night was a familiar refrain that soothed her senses.

Another sensory impression seeped in. Spicy, masculine, it was imminently familiar. Disturbingly, distantly familiar.

Cold fingers clamped down on her spine. Her heart a drumbeat in her throat, she turned around. Her brain flatlined as she took in the tall, dark-haired, olive-skinned male dressed in an exquisitely tailored suit standing in front of her. She lifted her gaze to his hard, dark eyes, as treacherous as black ice. Moved them down over Lorenzo's prominent Roman nose, the day-old stubble lining his jaw, his beautiful, sensual mouth that knew how to wound and pleasure in equal measure.

For a disturbingly real second or two, she thought she'd conjured him up. That he wasn't actually here, but was a product of the strange, restless mood she was in. That, in this fantasy of hers, he'd heard about her engagement and come here to stop it. That he still cared about her, because once, during the stormy complexity of their marriage, she'd sworn he had.

A panicked pulse echoed through her. What if he had? What would her answer be? She was terrified she'd cave like a ton of bricks.

She pressed her champagne glass to her chest before her shaking hands spilled it. Before she allowed herself to start conjuring up the fairy tales she'd always had about this man. That maybe he'd wanted her when he'd married her. That what they'd had in the beginning had been magic, instead of the reality that had materialized like a harsh slap to the face.

That he had married her for political expediency, to secure his heir, and when she'd lost their baby he'd lost all interest in her. Shattered her.

She took a deep breath, shifted her weight to both feet in an attempt to gain some equilibrium. "What are you doing here, Lorenzo?"

His lethally handsome face twisted in a mocking look. "No 'Hello, Lorenzo'...? 'You look well, Lorenzo'...or even a 'How are you, Lorenzo?'"

Her mouth tightened. "You've crashed my engagement party. I hardly think pleasantries are in order. We abandoned those at about month six of our marriage."

"Did we last that long?" He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the railing. She forced herself not to follow the ripple of muscle in that powerful body. To acknowledge how he seemed to have hardened into an even more dangerously attractive version of the man she'd known.

He lifted a shoulder. "My apologies for showing up out of the blue, but I have business we need to discuss."

"Business?" She frowned. "Couldn't we have discussed it over the phone?" She flicked a nervous glance toward the door. "Did Byron—"

"No one saw me. I blended in with the paint. I did get a chance to listen to the speeches, though. Touching as they were."

She stared at him, horrified. "How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to see you clearly have Byron roped and tied, as my rancher friend, Bartlett, would say. Fully enamored with your considerable charms...ready to let you run the show. Is it everything you ever dreamed of, Angie?"

Her blood heated, mixing with the panic fizzling her veins. "I never wanted to run the show. I wanted equal billing in our relationship—something you, in your arrogance and chauvinism, refused to give me."

"And our good friend Byron does?"

"Yes."

"What about in bed?" His eyes glittered with deliberate intent. "Does he satisfy that insatiable appetite of yours? Does he make you scream when you wrap those long legs of yours around him and beg? Because he doesn't look man enough to me, cara, to deliver it the way I know you like it. Not even close."

Lust slammed into her hot and hard. An image of Lorenzo's beautiful, muscular body imprinted itself on her brain, filling her, pushing her to the limits of her pleasure, his voice a hot whisper at her ear, demanding she tell him if it was good, not satisfied until she'd begged to let him know it was, until she'd screamed, because yes, he had made her scream.

Blood rushed to her cheeks, her stomach contracting in a heated pull. She'd been so desperate for his love, for his affection, she'd taken whatever crumb he'd been willing to throw at her. In the end it had been all they'd had.

She sank her teeth into her bottom lip. Lied. "I have no complaints in that area, either."

His eyes hardened, a dark glimmer stealing across their ebony depths. "Too bad it just isn't going to work out."

A frisson of apprehension swept through her. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, you see, there's been a...hiccup in the paperwork for our divorce."

"We are divorced."

“So I thought. The firm handling the paperwork failed to file the correct papers with the state. The error was brought to my attention yesterday after I asked them to review the document.”

Her knees went weak. “What are you saying?”

“We’re still married, Angie.”

The floor gave way beneath her feet. She grasped the railing, wrapping her fingers around cool metal to steady herself. Blinked as she tried to work through the fog enveloping her brain. Married? She and Lorenzo were still married?

She swallowed past a paper-dry throat. “I’m marrying Byron in three weeks...in St. Bart’s. We’re eloping.”

His stare was bold, aggressive, like the predator he was. “Unless you plan on committing bigamy that would be impossible.”

She struggled to get her brain in working order. “You need to do something. Fix this. It’s your firm’s fault. They should fix it.”

An indolent shrug. “There’s only so much they can do. These things move at a snail’s pace. It could take months to push it through.”

“But you know people. You have influence in all the right places...you could make it happen.”

“Perhaps.”

Her blood ran cold at the hard, unforgiving lines of his face. “But you don’t plan to use it.”

“No. It would be an unnecessary calling in of favors.”

Unnecessary? A red mist descended over her vision. “I am getting married in three weeks. It’s all planned. How is that unnecessary?” She shook her head, pinned her gaze on his. “Are you still angry with me? Is that it? You want to punish me for walking out on you? For God’s sake, Lorenzo, you knew our marriage was doomed. You knew it was never going to work. Let me move on.”

He stepped closer, six foot three inches of far too intense male vibrating just centimeters from her. His expression, when he looked down at her, was full of leashed aggression. “Our marriage was not doomed. Our marriage failed because you were too young and selfish to realize that marriages take work. Effort, Angelina. Instead you put all your energy into rebelling against what I asked of you. Into ignoring what I needed.”

She lifted her chin. “You wanted a perfect society wife without a mind, a purpose of her own. You should have hired a beautiful robot to fill the role. It would have been the perfect match for you.”

His eyes flashed. “Don’t be sarcastic, cara, it doesn’t suit you. I liked your mind, you’re well aware of that. I offered you all sorts of chances to get involved in the charitable efforts Ricci supports, but you didn’t have any interest in them, no matter how challenging.” He pointed his glass at her. “As for being my society wife, you knew what you were getting into when you married me. What the reality of my life was.”

Had she really? Twenty-two, pregnant and wildly infatuated with her husband, she’d had no idea she’d been exchanging one lonely existence for another. That instead of finding the love she’d craved, she’d be giving up the very independence she’d been searching for, the dreams she’d had of being a jewelry designer. That she’d be following in her mother’s footsteps in falling for a man who had no capacity to love—the one mistake she’d sworn never to make.

She lifted her chin, chest tight. “I thought you, of all people, would understand my need to pursue my passion. My need to be something.”

“I did understand it. You had a fledgling online business. I helped you nurture it. What wasn’t going to work was to play start-up with a boutique that would take up the lion’s share of your time. Our life was too busy.”

“Your life was. It was never about my life. Yours was more important.”

“That’s not true.”

“It damn well is.” Champagne sloshed the sides of her glass as she jabbed it in his direction. “All you wanted was for me to stay in line, to look the part...to warm your bed. And even then, I was a possession to be enjoyed and discarded according to your whims.”

His jaw hardened. “Our intimate relationship was the one thing about us that didn’t need fixing, cara mia. Don’t sully it with your sharp tongue.”

“Didn’t it?” Her mouth twisted. “You never truly let me in—not in bed or out of it. Emotional intimacy was simply not on the table with you.”

A glimmer of something she couldn’t read passed through those dark eyes. “You are right,” he agreed in a clipped tone, “that I, too, bear responsibility for the breakdown of our marriage. We both bear responsibility for it. Which is why we’re going to fix it together.”

Her jaw dropped. “Wh-what?”

“Franco cannot produce an heir. That responsibility falls to me now. Since we are still married, it leaves me with only one option.”

Oh, no. She backed away from him. “That’s insane. You are insane. I’m sorry for Franco, but I am engaged to be married.”

“I’ve just explained why that’s impossible.”

She absorbed the hard set of his jaw. My God, he’s serious.

“Lorenzo.” She adopted her most reasonable tone. “It can’t work between us. We’ve been through too much. We want different things. I have a life I’ve built, a career. I’m not giving that up.”

“I’m not asking you to give up your career. We’ll find some middle ground on that. But I do intend to have my wife back, that part is nonnegotiable.”

She bit down hard on the inside of her cheek, the salty tang of blood staining her mouth. Once, she would have given anything to hear him say that—that he wanted to fix what they’d broken. In those first few weeks after she’d left, terrified she’d made an irreversible mistake, it had been all she’d wanted to hear. But she knew from experience people didn’t change. You couldn’t heal them no matter how much you loved them. People broke your heart over and over again.

“I won’t do it,” she said quietly. “You can drag the divorce proceedings out as long as you like, but you’re crazy if you think you can just snap your fingers and I’ll come back to you and deliver you an heir. I’m engaged, Lorenzo. I’m in love with my fiancé.”

* * *

Lorenzo absorbed his beautiful wife’s lie with the confidence of a man who’d had enough practice reading her reactions to know it was exactly that. A woman didn’t pronounce her love for another man and mean it while she ate you up with her eyes like she’d been doing with him. When he could tell he had every nerve in her curvaceous body on edge.

The thought of her offering that body to another man made his blood burn. Watching her make that toast to her fiancé when she was technically still his. When she would always be his.

He dropped his gaze to the thrust of her breasts beneath the delicate silk of her dress. Down over the swell of her hips...the length of her amazing legs atop stiletto heels. His body throbbed with a need that had eluded him for so long his skin went tight at the intensity of it. The injustice of it. Always Angelina. Never anyone else.

He returned his gaze to his wife’s face, studied the heat that stained her cheeks with a savage satisfaction. “You think,” he drawled, “that if I touched you, I couldn’t make you forget about him in about sixty seconds? Because you know I could. There’s this thing that happens between us, Angelina, that is undeniable. Pure biological chemistry.”

Her mouth tightened, a layer of ice settling over her face. “I’m not playing any more of these games. Byron will be looking for me. I’d advise you to go ahead and have your lawyers fix their mistake or I will sue you and your law firm for incompetence.”

A smile twisted his lips. “The thought crossed my mind, too. Then I realized it must be a sign we are meant to fulfill the responsibilities we assumed three years ago.”

“You are crazy.” She spun and walked toward the door. “Get out, Lorenzo, before anyone sees you.”

The antagonism in him darkened. She had walked out on him at one of the lowest moments of his life, left him to face a firestorm of Manhattan gossip, to break the news to their family and friends while she’d gone vacationing in the Caribbean. Left their marriage in ashes...

She would not walk out on him again.

“Oh, but I’m not finished.” His quiet words stopped her in her tracks. “You didn’t think I came here empty-handed did you? Without some bargaining power?”

His wife turned to face him, blue eyes apprehensive. “The Carmichael Company is bleeding money,” he told her. “Has been for quite some time. I’ve given your father two large loans to keep things afloat.”

She blinked. “That’s impossible.”

That had been his reaction when Angie’s father had come to him for help. That the Carmichael Company, an over two-hundred-year-old textile dynasty, an American icon with its name on the main campus of one of New York’s most prestigious design schools, could be in the red, deeply in the red, had been inconceivable to him.

He watched the color drain from his wife’s face. “If you bothered to go home, you would know. So many countries are in the mix now, producing high-tech fabrics. Things haven’t been good in some time.”

She shook her head. “If this is true,” she said faintly, “why would you help my family?”

His lips curled. “Because I am loyal to the relationships I form, unlike you. I don’t run when things get rocky. Who do you think is underwriting your studio?”

She frowned. “I pay the rent on my studio.”

“You pay one quarter of the rent. It’s my building, Angie.”

Her mouth slackened. “I hired that real estate agent. Found the space...”

“You found what I wanted you to.” He waved a hand at her. “It made me sleep better at night knowing you were in a safe part of town.”

Her face crumpled as realization set in. “What are you insinuating? That you will pull the plug on the aid you’re giving to my family, toss me out on the street if I don’t agree to come back to you?”

“I prefer to think of it as incentive. We owe our marriage a fair shot before we relegate it to the history books. You come back to me, we try and make it work, I pull Carmichael out of its financial difficulties before it becomes a footnote in a list of great American dynasties. It’s a win-win.”

A win-win? She stared at him, disbelieving. “You would really hold that over my head?”

“You didn’t play fair when you walked out on me, tesoro. You just cut and ran. So yes, I will use whatever means required to make you see the light. To do the right thing.”

“I asked you to go to counseling. I begged you to. I tried to save our marriage and then I left.”

He ignored the stab of guilt that piece of truth pushed through him. “You expected us to solve things overnight. It doesn’t happen that way.”

Her fingers curled tight around the delicate stem of her champagne flute. “Putting the two of us back in a marriage where we’ll destroy one other is not doing the right thing.”

“We are both older and wiser. I think we can make it work.”

She shook her head. “That’s where you’re mistaken. That’s where you’ve played the wrong card, Lorenzo, because I will never become your wife again.”

She turned on her heel and left. He let her go, because he knew she’d be back. He’d never gambled on a deal he couldn’t win.

CHAPTER TWO

ANGIE RETURNED TO the party, shaken to her core. Palms damp, heart thrumming in her chest, a frozen numbness paralyzing her brain, she made a beeline for Abigail. Mouthing an apology to

the well-known philanthropist her sister was speaking to, she extracted Abigail from the conversation and pulled her toward a quiet corner of the room.

Her sister eyed her. "What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Lorenzo is here."

Abigail's eyes widened. "At your engagement party?"

"Someone screwed up our divorce papers, Abby. We're still married."

"Married?" Her sister's jaw dropped. "What do you mean 'screwed them up'? Who?"

"Lorenzo's legal firm. They forgot to file the papers with the state."

"Is he fixing it?"

She closed her eyes. "He won't."

"What do you mean 'won't'?"

"Franco can't have a baby. Lorenzo needs to produce an heir. He wants me to do my duty and put our marriage back together. Give him a baby."

A gasp escaped her sister. "That's outrageous. You're engaged."

"Am I?" Panic skittered up her spine. "If I'm legally married to Lorenzo, what does that make Byron? My illegitimate fiancé?"

Her sister looked dumbfounded. "I don't know... Regardless, we'll sic our lawyers on him. This has to be negligence."

"He's angry," she said quietly. "So angry at me for leaving."

"You did what you had to do. Lorenzo wasn't an innocent victim in all this. You both had a role to play in what happened."

Angie pushed a hand through her hair. Fixed her gaze on her sister. "Is the Carmichael Company in trouble? Is there something you haven't been telling me?"

A guarded look wrote itself across her sister's face. "What does that have to do with this?"

"Lorenzo says he's given Father two loans. That he will bail Carmichael out of its financial problems if I try and make our marriage work. Incentive, he called it."

Abby's eyes turned into hard, bright sapphires. "That bastard."

"Is it true? Did he give father those loans?"

"Yes." Her sister's admission made her stomach plunge. "At first it was the need to switch over equipment to compete with other high-tech manufacturers. But Carmichael never really recovered from the new technologies taking over the market."

Angie's breath left her in a sharp exhale. She'd been hoping against hope it wasn't true.

Abigail's lips firmed. "You aren't doing this. Father's been burying his head in the sand for years. He didn't want to see the writing on the wall. It's his problem to fix, not yours."

"Why didn't you tell me?" She swallowed past the lump swelling her throat. "You promised you wouldn't carry the load alone."

"You needed time. You were shattered when you walked away from Lorenzo. The last thing you needed to know was that your ex-husband was bankrolling the Carmichael Company."

Blood pulsed against her temple. "And Mother? How is she handling this?"

Abby frowned. "Ange—"

"Tell me."

"She's become more unstable since the financial difficulties began. It—" She waved a hand. "It may be time to check her into a program. She doesn't want it. She swears she won't go, but I got a call from Sandra last week while they were on a girls' night out. I had to pour her into bed."

Emotions she'd long held at bay welled up inside of her, causing her throat to constrict and the knots in her stomach to twist tighter. "What was it this time?"

"Gin."

She closed her eyes. She'd distanced herself from her family for her own self-preservation—because picking up her mother again and again had left her in a million pieces. Because she just

couldn't do it anymore while she'd been trying to pull herself back together after the demise of her marriage. But the guilt surrounding the difficult decisions she'd made was always there in the background, impossible to escape.

It wrapped itself around her now—tight, suffocating. For when Della Carmichael started sliding down her slippery, alcoholic slope, the bottom came fast and furious.

“Angie.” Her sister's firm voice brought her head up. “I won't allow him to do this to you. This is not on you.”

But Angie knew her sister was wrong. The only solution to this was her. Her convincing Lorenzo this was insane, that it would never work. Because she knew tonight hadn't been the end of it.

* * *

Her dilemma was still raging in her head as she put down the phone the following evening having assured Byron she was fine—that the headache she'd pleaded to extract herself from the party just before midnight was gone. The same headache that had made her slide out of her fiancé's kiss and leave him on her doorstep, a frown on his face.

Dammit. She gave up on the idea of work, pushed to her feet and walked across her bright studio space to stand looking out at the street. SoHo at night was still busy with foot traffic, the city thick with tourists at the height of the summer. A good thing for the boutique she ran below the studio that featured her work. The bell announcing visitors had been ringing all day.

The purple awning bearing her name whipped in the breeze below. Carmichael Creations. It rankled, more than she could say, to know this studio she loved, that she was so proud of, had been contaminated by Lorenzo's powerful reach. She'd wanted—needed—to prove so badly she could do this by herself. To follow her heart and forge a successful career as a designer after Lorenzo had dismissed it as a hobby, when in fact, self-expression was as necessary to her as breathing.

She watched a group of young girls walk by, laughing and jabbing each other in the ribs as they pointed at a slick-suited handsome male in front of them. Her heart gave a painful squeeze. She'd been like that when she'd met Lorenzo—desperately innocent, utterly swept away by his powerful aura.

The memories flooded back, tumbling one over another in painful succession until she was standing by the pool at her parents' legendary winter party in Nassau clad in the sexiest silver lamé gown she owned, butterflies in her stomach knowing the gorgeous, ruthless corporate raider Lorenzo Ricci would be in attendance. Her father had been doing friendly business with Lorenzo rather than serving as one of her husband's hostile takeover targets, but Alistair Carmichael's directive had been clear to his daughter—leave Lorenzo alone, you're way out of your depth.

And she had been. But smarting from an argument with her father, needing to escape her miserable, lonely existence for just one night, she couldn't resist. Every woman had wanted to catch Lorenzo, the most desirable widower in Manhattan, perhaps because none ever had. She'd taken her best friend Becka's dare to ask him to dance and shockingly he'd said yes. That dance had led to a kiss in the garden and a hot, heated assignation that had shaken her innocent foundations to the core. She'd gotten her one night with Lorenzo Ricci plus way more than she'd ever bargained for.

She closed her eyes, an ache pulsing low in her chest. She'd thought she could be the one, the one who could make her husband love again because what they'd had had seemed earthshaking to her twenty-two-year-old self. That by offering him her unrequited love, she could help him get over his late wife, Lucia, who popular consensus had said he was still hung up on. Until Angelina had learned love was an emotion her husband reserved exclusively for his late wife, an emotion that would never be on offer to her.

Blood throbbed at her temples. She couldn't change the past as much as she wished she could, but she could—would—fight Lorenzo on this.

She could postpone the wedding until her divorce came through. Move to a cheaper studio space. But that still didn't address the financial difficulties the Carmichael Company was in. The responsibility that lay on her shoulders.

A chill crawled through her at the thought of the cold, hard stranger she'd faced on the terrace last night. Lorenzo had always been tough, carved by his experiences, shaped by the cutthroat scion of the Ricci family, Salvatore Ricci, but last night she'd seen a whole new lethal side of him.

Had her walking out on Lorenzo made him this heartless? Or was that just the man he'd become?

Guilt fought a battle with anger. Anger won. She'd been right last night—too much had passed between her and Lorenzo to ever resurrect their marriage. He needed to see reason.

She stalked to her desk, pulled her purse out of the bottom drawer and headed for the door. She was not letting Lorenzo bully her, steal her happiness. Force her back into a life that had nearly destroyed her because he needed an heir for the illustrious Ricci dynasty. She had grown too strong over the past couple of years to let him ride roughshod over her.

Her husband was about to find out just how much she'd changed.

* * *

Lorenzo was easy to find. Another hot, steamy Manhattan night bathed the city in a smoky heat as Angie stepped through the doors of her husband's Park Avenue building. The doorman's face lit up when he saw her. Federico's gray brows rose just a fraction before he lowered them back into place and ushered her into the private elevator.

Lorenzo didn't bat an eyelash when the doors opened on the top-floor penthouse. He waved her in as he talked on his headset. As if he'd been expecting her.

Dressed in black jeans and a T-shirt, he looked less corporate shark tonight and more deadly male, the jeans riding low, hugging his lean hips and muscular thighs, his black T-shirt skimming rock-hard abs he kept in premium condition at the gym where he pushed himself as hard as he did everywhere else.

Hell. She banished the frisson of sexual awareness that pulsed through her and walked past him into the luxurious dark brown and chrome space. Lorenzo in casual clothes, which made him look like a mere mortal rather than the deity Wall Street painted him as, had always been her weakness. Perpetuated her belief he had a heart when in fact he did not.

Eyeing the bottle of wine and two glasses that sat on the marble bar, she wondered if he'd been that confident she would show up or whether he'd been expecting someone else. Her stomach contracted into a tight ball. Bringing her back teeth together, she walked to the bar and looked for a bottle of sparkling water in the fridge. Lorenzo covered the microphone and told her to open the wine.

She did. If only to give herself something to do other than absorb the pure physicality of the man pacing the room. She poured two glasses of wine, picked up one and took a sip. Lorenzo rattled off a series of instructions for whoever was on the call and ended it.

"Scusami," he murmured, as he pulled off the headset, tossed it on a chair and walked toward her. "I'm in the middle of negotiations for a company we're looking to acquire."

When wasn't he? "You didn't know I was coming," she said, holding out a glass of the expensive French red he'd provided to put a physical barrier between them. He noted it with an amused twist of his lips.

"I apologize if you were expecting company."

"I was expecting you." Instead of taking the glass, he wrapped his elegant, long-fingered hand around hers and drew her to him.

Her heart slammed against her chest. "Lorenzo..."

He dipped his head toward hers, a dark glimmer of intent in his beautiful eyes. "We forgot our manners last night. Perhaps we should start again."

Her breath caught in her throat. He was going to kiss her. She opened her mouth to protest, to say absolutely not, but his firm, sensual lips landed on her cheek instead. Lingered just a little too long for civility's sake...

An electric current charged through her as he repeated the gesture on her other cheek, little pinpricks of heat exploding across her skin. Thoroughly flustered, she stepped back. "I'm not here to accept your proposition."

He lifted a brow. "So you are here to..."

"Talk reason with you."

"All right," he said calmly in the placating tone he'd always used to soothe her like some high-spirited racehorse he'd paid millions for. "Over the wine, then. I've had a hellish day."

Was she allowed to find that secretly enjoyable? She handed him the glass and followed him to the sitting area, where she sank down into one of the chocolate-brown leather chairs she'd always loved to read in.

"What company are you acquiring?"

"The Belmont Hotel Group." He lowered himself into the sofa across from her, splaying his long legs in front of him.

The Belmont? One of the world's most historic luxury hotel chains, it boasted boutique properties in some of the world's most glamorous, exotic locations.

"I'm shocked it's for sale."

"It's not."

"Ah." She took a sip of her wine. "A hostile takeover, then."

"More like a reluctant bride that needs to be brought to heel. She wants to be there but she can't bring herself to admit it."

She eyed him coolly. "Isn't it all the same? It's your specialty, after all. Find a vulnerable company, strip it of its assets, then relegate the rest to the scrap heap. Symbolism, tradition, be damned."

He cocked a brow. "Is this you setting the tone, cara mia? I thought you wanted to keep things civil."

She lifted a shoulder. "I don't care for what you do."

"You didn't always feel that way. You used to think it was hot, the power I wield. It was an aphrodisiac for you."

Heat stained her cheeks. "And then I grew up. I saw the hundreds of people you put out of jobs. How you relegated iconic companies to the history books if you could profit from it. It was always about the almighty dollar."

"Most of the companies I acquire would eventually fail. It's only a matter of time. In Belmont's case, they have lost sight of what the luxury traveler is looking for—their profits have nose-dived. Call it being cruel to be kind."

"A wolf in sheep's clothing is still a wolf..." She pointed her glass at him. "The question is, when is it all going to be enough, this obsession you have with owning the world?"

He rested his glass on his thigh. "What would you have me do? Rest on my laurels? Tell my shareholders I've proven myself—'so sorry, but that's all the profit you can expect this year...'"

She set her gaze on his. "You could try addressing the demons that drive you."

His dark, spiky lashes swept down. "We aren't here to talk about the past. We're here to discuss our current situation."

"Oh, that's right," she murmured, "that subject is off-limits. I forgot the rules of the game."

His jaw tightened. "Stop baiting me, Angelina, and tell me what's going on in that head of yours."

"Your proposition is outrageous. To expect me to dissolve my engagement and come back to you, simply to ensure the continuation of the Ricci line..."

He shook his head. "I told you, it's about more than that. It's about both of us putting the effort into this marriage we should have in the first place. About living up to the vows we made."

"You divorced me."

“It was a mistake.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “What do you mean ‘a mistake’?”

“I mean you like to run from your problems, cara. And maybe I was running, too. But given the current circumstances, given we are still married, technicality or not, we need to rectify that mistake. I did not intend on marrying twice. I certainly don’t intend on marrying a third time.”

She came back to reality with a crashing thud. “You don’t want me,” she said flatly, “you know that. You want a nice little Italian wife your mother will love who will host your dinner parties, charm your business acquaintances and greet you at the door every night in sexy lingerie. That would be your idea of perfection.”

An amused glint entered his gaze. “I’m fairly sure I would be bored with an obedient wife after you. But you are right on the lingerie—that would be my idea of perfection.”

She said a very bad word in her head. “You don’t even know who I am anymore. I’m different. Changed. Not the woman you married, nor will I ever be again.”

“Then I look forward to finding out who that woman is.” He gave her an appraising look. “I’m prepared to make concessions to make this work. Your career is a case in point. You’ve clearly become very successful. You’ve worked hard to get where you are. As long as it doesn’t interfere with our important commitments, we’ll make it work.”

We’ll make it work? Heat rose up inside of her. He had no idea what her work meant to her. The sanity it had been throughout her rocky life.

“As for my mother,” he continued, “she had certain...preconceived notions regarding our marriage you never dispelled with your behavior. You also never made an effort with her. If you do so, I expect you’ll find her a different woman.”

Her fingers curled into a fist. “She thought I deliberately trapped you into marriage.”

“Not an unreasonable assumption when our one night together resulted in a pregnancy. I did, however, make it clear that the responsibility lay on both of us.”

“How big of you.” A red mist of fury wrapped itself around her brain. “What other concessions are you prepared to make, Lorenzo? Are you prepared to let me beneath that impenetrable layer of yours? Talk to me instead of shutting me out? Confront our issues instead of pushing me to the outer fringes of your life until I cease to exist?”

“Yes.” The low rumble in his voice vibrated through her. “I understand I was distant at times...emotionally unavailable if you like. I recognize that as a fault of mine I need to work on. But let’s just be clear, Angelina, you locked me out just as surely as I ever did you with those cast-iron defenses of yours.”

After the big chill had begun. Because eventually it had become too painful to give and never get anything back.

Hurt contracted the muscles around her heart. The wine warming her blood, loosening her inhibitions, made her reckless. “If we’re going for the brutal truth here,” she growled, “if we’re not going to pull our punches, then let’s get all the skeletons out on the table shall we? The real reason our marriage failed was Lucia. Because you would have preferred to stay in your cave, pining for your dead wife. Instead you had to marry me.”

The color leached from his olive skin. His face tightened, cheekbones standing out like blades. The cold fire that engulfed his dark eyes told her she’d gone too far this time. “It was your obsession with Lucia that you wouldn’t let go of, not mine.”

Her chin lifted, heart pounding in her chest. “Tell yourself that enough and you might even start to believe it.”

The silence in the room was deafening. Chest tight, she pushed to her feet and crossed to the floor-to-ceiling windows that framed a magnificent view of Central Park lit up at night. Hugging her arms around herself, she took a deep breath and attempted to regain her equilibrium.

“You aren’t this heartless,” she said after a long moment, turning to face him. “I don’t believe you will let the Carmichael Company fail. You like my father too much.”

His eyes were a purposeful, dark velvet cool. “Then don’t make me. I meant what I said, Angie. I want you back. I want us to give this marriage the shot it deserves. You come back to me with your heart and head fully in it and I will ensure your legacy survives.”

The confusion swirling in her head deepened, thickened. She wrapped her arms tighter around herself, struggled to contain her emotions, but they spilled outside of the edges of her barely shored-up walls. “Wasn’t it enough for you?” she asked, voice trembling. “Every second, every minute of those last excruciating months together? We couldn’t even be in the same room without tearing each other’s throats out. And when we did, it didn’t feel any better...it felt worse.”

He got to his feet and prowled toward her. “We lost a baby. It was painful, Angelina, it hurt.”

A rock climbed into her throat. “And here we are hurting each other again.”

He stopped centimeters from her. Her body reacted to the heat of him, the familiarity of him, vibrating with an internal memory she couldn’t control. She pressed her fingers to her cheeks, trying to hold it in, trying to stop the insanity midflow, but he saw it, read her as he always had, eyes darkening with heat.

“The point is to get past the pain. To deal with what we should have dealt with years ago.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head, fear bubbling up inside of her like magma, threatening to push her on a course she knew she’d regret. “I’m engaged, Lorenzo. I love him.”

Fire licked his gaze. “You know that’s a lie.”

“It’s not a lie. It’s the truth.”

“You are my wife.” Curving an arm around her waist, he drew her to him. She swallowed as her vibrating body swayed perilously close to the wall of heat that drew her like a moth to a flame. She flattened a palm against his chest, but her feet wouldn’t seem to take her anywhere and her eyes locked on his. “Kiss me like you don’t belong to me,” he said huskily, “and I might reconsider.”

“No.” Her sharp response sounded as panicked as she felt. “Why are you doing this? Why are you being so cruel?”

“Because I should have stopped you the first time you walked out. Because the thought of you with another man drives me insane...because you haunt me, Angelina, every time I’m with another woman. All I can see is those beautiful blue eyes of yours and those vows we recited...” He cupped her jaw in his hand, fingers closing possessively over her skin. “Because we are not over, mi amore. We never will be.”

Her heart stuttered, an ache enveloping her that seemed to go soul-deep. “You can’t do this to me,” she said hoarsely. “Throw threats at me one minute, then say these things the next and just expect me to—”

He lowered his head, breath mingling with hers. “Prove you feel nothing for me. Prove what I’m saying isn’t true and I’ll walk away.”

“No.” But even as she said it, his mouth was covering hers in a whisper-soft caress that switched on every cell in her body. She closed her eyes. Just do it, Angie. Prove it to him, then walk away.

He slid a hand up her back, flattened his big palm against her spine. Warm, possessive, his touch seeped into her senses, stroked a wounded, jagged part of her that had never healed. Warning bells went off in her head, a blaring, unmistakable cautionary signal she should stop this now. But she had to convince him it was over.

Slow, infinitely gentle nudges of his mouth demanded a response. She held herself rigid, determined to end it. Tightening his fingers around her jaw, he tilted her head back and took a deeper possession of her mouth. The alarm bells in her head grew louder as the sweet intoxication of his kiss melted her bones.

“Lorenzo—”

He slicked his tongue across her lower lip. Erotic, intimate, it sent shock waves of pleasure rocketing through her. Her mind blanked, stomach clenched, fingers curling around a handful of his T-shirt. He did it again, stroking soft, vulnerable flesh with a deliberate possession that made her quiver.

When he flicked his tongue along the seam of her lips and demanded entry, she obeyed, lost in a sea of sensation. He rewarded her with a hot, toe-curling caress that made her moan low in her throat, grab hold of him more firmly.

He brought her closer with the palm of his hand at her back. Swept it down to cup the flesh of her buttock. The kiss turned needy, desperate, her hips arching against his burgeoning arousal. Thick, hard, he was so potently virile he turned her blood to fire.

Reality slammed into her like a bucket of ice dropped over her head. She shoved a hand against his chest and pushed back. Breathless, her mouth bruised from his kisses, she stood staring at him.

How had that happened? How had she let that happen?

“I hate you,” she breathed. “I really do.”

His mouth twisted. “That makes two of us. Sometimes I really hate you, too, tesoro. It’s the rest of the time that messes us up.”

She shook her head. Backed away from him. Turning, she snatched her purse off the chair and walked out without looking back.

What had she done?

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