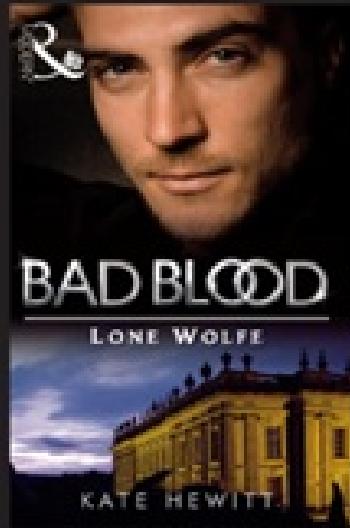
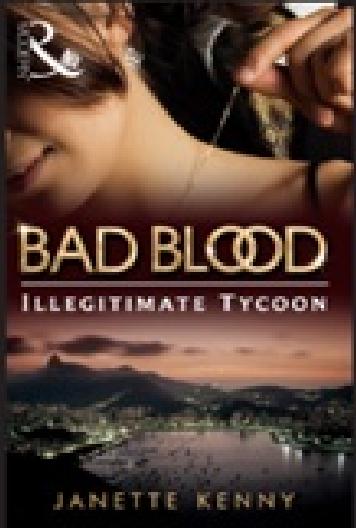
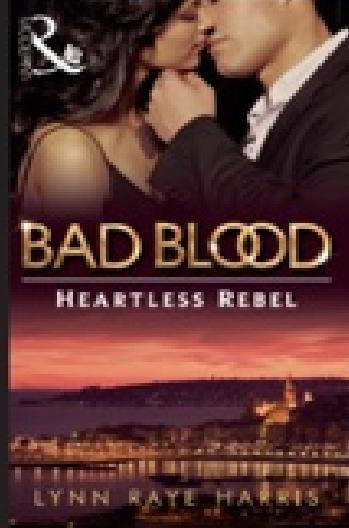
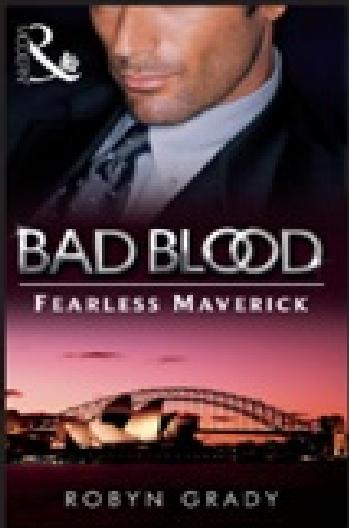
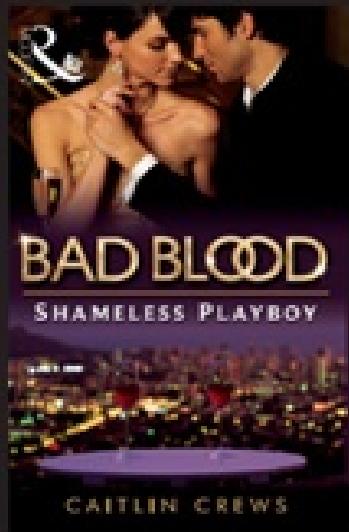
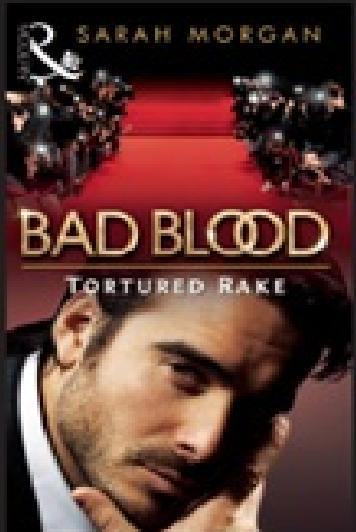




# BAD BLOOD

## COLLECTION



# **BAD BLOOD**

*A powerful dynasty, where secrets and  
scandal never sleep!*

## **THE DYNASTY**

Eight siblings, blessed with wealth, but denied the one thing they wanted—a father's love.

A family destroyed by one man's thirst for power.

## **THE SECRETS**

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It's said that even the blackest of souls can be healed by the purest of love ...  
But can the dynasty rise again?

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**TORTURED RAKE**

SARAH MORGAN

**SHAMELESS PLAYBOY**

CAITLIN CREWS

**RESTLESS BILLIONAIRE**

ABBY GREEN

**FEARLESS MAVERICK**

ROBYN GRADY

**HEARTLESS REBEL**

LYNN RAYE HARRIS

**ILLEGITIMATE TYCOON**

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**FORGOTTEN DAUGHTER**

JENNIE LUCAS

**LONE WOLFE**

**KATE HEWITT**



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SARAH MORGAN

**BAD BLOOD**

TORTURED RAKE

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*USA Today* bestselling author **SARAH MORGAN** writes lively, sexy stories for both Modern™ Romance and Medical™ Romance.

As a child Sarah dreamed of being a writer and although she took a few interesting detours on the way, she is now living that dream. With her writing career she has successfully combined business with pleasure and she firmly believes that reading romance is one of the most satisfying and fat-free escapist pleasures available. Her stories are unashamedly optimistic and she is always pleased when she receives letters from readers saying that her books have helped them through hard times.

*Romantic Times* has described her writing as “action packed and sexy” and nominated her books for their Reviewer’s Choice Awards and their “Top Pick” slot.

Sarah lives near London with her husband and two children who innocently provide an endless supply of authentic dialogue. When she isn’t writing or reading Sarah enjoys music, movies and any activity that takes her outdoors.

Readers can find out more about Sarah and her books from her website [www.sarahmorgan.com](http://www.sarahmorgan.com). She can also be found on Facebook and Twitter.

To my fellow ‘Wolfe’ authors—

Caitlin, Abby, Robyn, Lynn, Janette, Jennie and Kate. Working on this series with you was so much fun. You’re a fantastic, talented bunch of women and I can’t wait to read the final stories!

# CHAPTER ONE

*THEY were waiting for him to fail.*

Nathaniel Wolfe, bad boy of Hollywood and focus of millions of women's erotic fantasies, stood alone in the wings of the famous London theatre, listening to the excited hum of conversation from the waiting audience.

He knew they could roughly be divided into two camps. Women who had come to see if his face and body lived up to the promise of the big screen and men who had come to see whether he could really act.

The knives had been out for him since it had been announced that he would play the title role in a modern interpretation of Shakespeare's *Richard II*.

They thought he couldn't do it. They thought that the awards, the plaudits, the box office successes were all a result of clever camera work and a handsome face. They thought he had no talent.

A cynical smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

He was going to blast their prejudices into the stratosphere. By tomorrow morning no one would be questioning his talent. The headlines wouldn't be *Can the Big Bad Wolfe Really Act?* but *Big Bad Wolfe Silences Critics with Outstanding Performance*. He was going to show them an emotional range that had never before been seen in the theatre.

The director was hovering in the wings and they shared a single brief glance. It had been a stormy collaboration with Nathaniel insisting on playing the part the way he wanted to do it and the director fighting back. Between them they'd produced magic that both knew would go down in theatre history.

As the moment approached, Nathaniel closed his eyes and blocked out the outside world. It was the ritual he always used. Within moments, Nathaniel Wolfe ceased to exist.

He was Richard, King of England.

This was what he did. He turned a role into reality. He didn't just act that character, he *became* that character. At the age of nine he'd discovered it was possible to slip into someone else's skin and hide there. It had been a way of escaping from the dark that had licked around the edges of his life. He could be whoever he wanted to be. A knight, a ninja, a dragon slayer, a vampire, a superhero. Desperate, he'd given himself the strength and power to fight back. *To protect those he loved.* Acting had begun as an escape and quickly become a disguise. And that was how he lived his life. Alone and in disguise, depending on no one.

He had no trouble being someone else.

It was being Nathaniel Wolfe that gave him problems.

'The dress does *not* make you look fat.' Katie tightened the corset over rolls of flesh. 'The colour is really flattering, I think you look great. And anyway, you're the Duchess of Gloucester. You're supposed to look—' She broke off as the actress glowered at her. 'Statesman-like,' she finished. 'You're supposed to have gravitas.'

'So you're basically saying I look fat and *old*?'

'No! I picked the costume really carefully.' Realising how that could be interpreted, Katie braced herself for more abuse. 'You're playing the part of a grieving widow so you're not supposed to look bright and cheerful.'

'Are you trying to tell me how to act?'

'No. I'm telling you that you look perfect for the part. *Please* try and relax.'

'How can I relax when I'm cast alongside Nathaniel Wolfe? He is sarcastic, cutting, moody ... Yesterday when I made that one simple mistake—'

'He just looked at you,' Katie said soothingly. 'He didn't actually say anything.'

'You don't know how much can be conveyed by the eyes, especially when those eyes belong to Nathaniel Wolfe. When he looks at you it's like being zapped by a laser.' Increasingly agitated, the older woman waved her hand towards the door. 'Go. I need to be around people who understand my temperament.'

*Crabby and irritable?* ‘I still have to zip up your dress.’ Katie discovered that her hands were shaking. ‘Look, we’re all stressed—’

‘What do you have to be stressed about?’

‘Well ...’ For a moment Katie almost told her about the meeting she had with a top British costume designer and how much was riding on it. She almost blurted out that her debts were so scarily huge she spent her nights creating mental spreadsheets, trying to find a way of paying everything she owed. But if all went well tomorrow, then that would change. This was her big break.

Misinterpreting her silence, the actress made an impatient sound in her throat. ‘You have no idea what it’s like acting opposite a Hollywood star. You have no idea how it feels to know that every single person in that audience has come to see *him*.’ She turned the full force of her wrath onto Katie. ‘My dress could split and everyone would still be looking at him! I could be naked and no one would notice!’

Horrified by that thought, Katie took several deep breaths. ‘Please calm down. It’s just opening-night nerves. Everyone feels the same.’

‘Everyone except Nathaniel Wolfe,’ the actress snapped. ‘He’s as remote as Antarctica and every bit as icy. No one dares get too close in case they injure themselves on all that ice.’

‘And then they’d sink like the *Titanic*.’

‘Are you saying I look like the *Titanic*?’

‘No!’ Katie decided it was safer not to indulge in conversation. ‘You look gorgeous and the dress fits perfectly.’

‘Not for much longer. When I’m stressed I just want to eat. And acting alongside Nathaniel Wolfe stresses me. You’re young and pretty. Why aren’t you backstage wearing a push-up bra and a plunge top like all the other girls?’

‘I look ridiculous in a push-up bra and I’d die on the spot if Nathaniel Wolfe actually noticed me. Fortunately he doesn’t know I exist. He calls me “wardrobe.” Even when I was fitting him for his costume he didn’t talk to me. He was on the phone the whole time. Breathe in ...’ Katie struggled with the zip, praying that it would hold. She didn’t want to be the one to point out that eating a truckload of doughnuts between

costume fitting and opening night wasn't helpful. 'Nathaniel Wolfe is so famous I find it impossible to act normally around him. When he walks into the room my stomach churns, my mouth falls open and I stare like an idiot, which is *not* a good look. And anyway, he is the ultimate bad boy and I prefer men who are a little less scary.' She fastened the hooks at the neckline. 'There. You're ready. Good luck.'

'It's bad luck to wish an actress good luck. You're supposed to say "break a leg" or something similar.'

Katie sighed. *Break a zip?* 'I'm in charge of wardrobe, if anyone breaks anything it will be a problem because none of the costumes will fit over a plaster cast. And now I have to go and check on John of Gaunt.'

She escaped to the wardrobe department where her close friend and assistant, Claire, was munching a bar of chocolate and reading a celebrity magazine hidden underneath a costume. She glanced up guiltily as Katie entered the room.

'Oops. You caught me peeking into other people's lives—all for the purposes of research, of course.' Her grin turned to a frown as she looked at Katie's face. 'I'm guessing you've just come from sorting out the Duchess of Grizzly Gloucester. Did she fit into her dress?'

'Just.' Katie flopped into a chair. Pain stabbed behind her eyes. 'Dressing her in deep purple is great for the character she's playing, but dark colours are very unforgiving against exposed flesh and I have a horrible feeling that her dress is going to split. Do we have any headache pills left?'

'I just swallowed the last. And talking of headaches ...' Claire passed her the magazine. 'I don't know if you're going to want to see this, but there's a huge feature on your sister in here. *Is Paula Preston the Most Beautiful Woman in the World?* Well, duh—no, she's the most *airbrushed* woman in the world. How come you're Field and she's Preston? Why don't the two of you have the same surname?'

'She doesn't want anyone to make the connection. She likes to pretend her family doesn't exist.' Katie stared at the picture of her sister and then thought about how much their mother was struggling. Part of her just wanted to get on the phone and yell. She wanted to remind Paula about family loyalty and priorities. But she knew there was no point. 'When it

all came out about Dad's gambling problem, she was horrified. I was horrified, too, obviously, but Paula was just so *angry* with Mum for forgiving him and staying with him all those years. She blames her for the fact we had no money when we were growing up and says that if Mum loses the house now, then it's her own fault. She doesn't see why she should pay for what she sees as Mum's weakness.'

'Nice.'

'Sometimes I can't even believe we're related.' Katie chewed the corner of her fingernail and then caught sight of her sister's perfect nails and let her hand drop into her lap. 'It was all too grubby for her. She's created this perfect image for herself and she doesn't want it tarnished by Dad's sins.'

Claire snatched the magazine back from her and ripped out the offending article. 'There.' She scrunched up the pages and threw them in the bin. 'She's where she deserves to be. And now I'm going to watch the wicked Wolfe onstage. It's a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Are you coming?'

'No. I need to look at my drawings again and go over the script before tomorrow.'

'You'll never be able to work in Hollywood if you're star-struck.'

'I'm not star-struck.'

'Yes, you are. When you took his inside leg measurement, your face was like a tomato.'

'OK, maybe I'm Nathaniel Wolfe-struck.'

'The guy is smoking hot, that's for sure.'

Katie twisted the cap off a bottle of water. 'Yes, but he isn't *real*. How well can you ever really know an actor? How do you know when they're acting?' She sipped her water. She knew only too well how easy it was to think you knew someone and then discover you didn't. 'I mean, if Nathaniel Wolfe ever said "I love you" to you, are you seriously going to believe him?'

'I overheard him telling the director that *love* is a four-letter word and he never uses four-letter words. Do you know that the tickets for this sold out in four minutes? *Four minutes*. Incredible. Particularly when you think that Shakespeare is gobbledegook to lots of people. Macbeth

talking to skulls—’

‘Hamlet.’ Katie slipped off her shoes and flexed her toes. ‘It was Hamlet.’

‘Whatever. I was rubbish at English at school. I used to think Chaucer was something you rested your teacup on.’

‘That’s saucer, not Chaucer.’

‘My point exactly. Anyway, what I’m saying is that he could be reading his tax return and it would still be a full house. This is Nathaniel Wolfe we’re talking about. The man has won every award going, except the Sapphire Screen Award. That’s the big one.’ Katie thought about the massive hype that surrounded the most prestigious film award in the world. ‘He’s been nominated three times.’

‘I guess it’s every actor’s ultimate goal. He certainly deserves it this time round.’ Claire looked dreamy.

‘Even when he’s spouting Shakespeare and I don’t understand a word he’s saying, I still can’t stop listening.’

‘That’s what I’m trying to tell you—it’s mind control. It’s the voice. And those incredible blue eyes.’

‘Can you imagine what it would be like to actually have sex with him? I wonder if you’d stare with your mouth open all the way through?’

‘That’s one question I’m never going to be able to answer. He doesn’t even know I’m alive. Thank goodness.’ Katie put the top back on her water and returned the bottle to her bag. ‘Listen, about tonight—’

‘You are not backing out, so don’t even think about it. It starts at eleven and we need to look really sexy. Wear something that shows your cleavage.’

‘No way. I still have no idea how I let you talk me into speed dating.’

‘You’re gorgeous, Katie. You only think you’re fat because your sister is Paula Preston, supermodel.’

‘I feel so unfit. When this play is over I’m going to be more disciplined about exercise. I want to be toned and sleek. It’s depressing watching Nathaniel Wolfe. His body is packed muscle.’ Gloomy, Katie flexed her biceps. ‘I barely have the strength to lift my water bottle.’

‘He looks deadly in that leather jacket you picked out for him. You are utterly amazing at knowing exactly which costume will work best.’

‘The costume is supposed to mimic the character’s emotional journey.’ Katie glanced down at her ripped jeans. ‘I dread to think what my clothes say about my emotional journey but I definitely travelled economy.’

‘Your clothes say that you’re an overworked, underpaid costume designer with no time to worry about your own wardrobe.’

‘And with huge debts.’

‘You’re incredibly talented. One day someone is going to discover you.’

‘Well, I wish someone would discover me quickly.’ Panic streaked through her. ‘The house sucks everything I earn. It’s like a monster.’

‘You have to tell your Mum how much you’re struggling. She doesn’t really need three bedrooms, does she?’

‘It’s the home she lived in with Dad. It’s full of memories.’ Emotionally and physically exhausted, Katie closed her eyes. ‘Every time I go there she tells me that living in the house is the only thing keeping her going since we lost him. Despite every thing, theirs was such an incredible love story. Anyway, if I get this job it will all be fine. Another step up the ladder.’

‘I bet your sister would be interested if she knew you were working with Nathaniel Wolfe.’ Claire stretched out her legs. ‘Do you prefer him in *Alpha Man* or *Dare or Die*?’

‘*Alpha Man*.’

‘Seriously?’ Claire frowned. ‘*Alpha Man* was about a Special Forces soldier. I didn’t think it would be your sort of thing.’

‘I loved the fact he thought he had no heart and then when he met the daughter of his enemy—’ Katie’s eyes misted ‘—that bit at the end when he sacrifices himself to save her. I cried for days. I must have watched it a hundred times. Nathaniel Wolfe was crazily good in that movie. And totally gorgeous. If they awarded a Sapphire for Best Physique, he’d win.’

‘Talking of the Sapphires—’ Claire threw her the magazine ‘—flick

through the rest of that when you get a minute. There's an article on dressing for the big night. They're predicting who will wear what at the ceremony in two weeks' time. You might be interested.'

'Why? I'm never going to be invited to the Sapphire ceremony, which is just as well because I don't think you're allowed to wear holey jeans.' Katie slipped the magazine into her bag to read later and Claire glanced at her watch and jumped to her feet.

'Whoa, look at the time. Less than five minutes to go. Sure you won't change your mind and come?'

'No, thanks. You can drool for both of us.'

Nathaniel walked centre stage and stared into the darkness. He didn't see the audience. He wasn't thinking about the critics.

He was King Richard II, the doomed king.

He opened his mouth to deliver his opening lines to John of Gaunt when a spotlight illuminated the front row of the audience.

Holding the crown in his hand, Nathaniel looked down and his eyes locked onto a familiar face. Familiar and yet unfamiliar. Twenty years had wrought changes, but not so many changes that the features were unrecognisable.

Shock froze time.

The features blurred.

And then the past rushed forward with terrifying speed and his concentration shattered like glass dropped onto concrete. The momentary lapse released a lethal cocktail of memories and they swirled around his head, delighted to be free after so many years incarcerated in the locked vault of his brain.

*Shouts and terror. Stop it, stop it! And blood. Blood everywhere. Do something ...*

He felt helpless. Utterly helpless.

His heart pounding, Nathaniel stared down at his hands clasping the crown. There was no blood. His hands were clean. But still he couldn't move, his brain frozen by the ghosts of his own inadequacy. The knowledge that he hadn't acted, hadn't done something, gnawed at

him....

Guilt crawled over him like a poisonous insect and he wondered how it was possible to shiver and sweat at the same time.

Dimly aware of the ripple of speculation that slowly spread through the audience, Nathaniel fought with ruthless determination to close down that side of himself.

*Richard*, he thought desperately. *King Richard*.

He gripped the crown and tried to slip back into his character's skin. But it no longer fitted him. Control slid from him like a cloak.

Each time he opened his eyes he saw the same face looking at him from the front row reminding him that he wasn't King Richard II—he was Nathaniel Wolfe, an actor with a family background more dramatic than anything penned even by the Bard himself.

If Shakespeare had been alive, Nathaniel thought bitterly, he would have written the Wolfe family history as a tragedy in three acts.

No comedy. No happy endings. Just life at its darkest.

Desperate now, he tried to claw his way through that darkness back to the surface but he could feel himself sinking, drowning in the thick mud of his past.

Why choose this moment to come back? Why now, when they'd all rebuilt their lives?

Anger ripped through him, hot and sharp.

He had to warn Annabelle. That, at least, he could do. He had to contact her right now.

The ripple of speculation grew to a restless buzz from the audience. People who had assumed he was pausing for maximum effect, suddenly realised that something was terribly wrong. Silence turned to murmur and murmur to conversation.

Bracing his shoulders like a fighter poised for impact, Nathaniel tried one more time to deliver his opening lines but he couldn't even remember them. Sucked back in time, the layer he put between himself and the world simply melted away.

Stripped of his camouflage, he was forced into the skin of the one

character he'd avoided playing all his life.

Nathaniel Wolfe.

Last time, he'd let her down. This time, he wouldn't.

'Ladies and gentleman ...' His voice, cold and devoid of emotion, carried to the back of the auditorium. He made a point of not looking at the man in the front row. It took all his self-control not to stride into the audience, grab him by the throat and knock him out cold. 'Tonight's performance is cancelled. Please see the box office for a refund.'

Having finished her preparation for the interview, Katie rolled her aching shoulders and left the wardrobe department. Backstage, the theatre was eerily quiet. Everyone was watching Nathaniel Wolfe.

She stood for a moment, breathing in the smells and the atmosphere. History was embedded deep in the fabric of the building. How many famous actors and actresses had trodden the boards of this theatre?

For a moment she was a child again, six years old and playing dress-up with her sister, Paula.

*You can't be the princess, Katie, you're too fat and your hair is curly. I'm the prettiest so I'll be the princess. You can dress me.*

What had started as duty fast became a passion. When Paula had decided it wasn't cool to hang out with her dumpy little sister, Katie had continued to dress her friends. Every night after school they'd put on plays, and Katie had been the one who decided what they were going to wear. She'd loved experimenting with different combinations, loved the challenge of designing a costume that conveyed the essence of each character. A princess with a sword. A fairy in breeches and boots. She'd listened to her friends discussing roles and knew instinctively which costume they needed to fully express the part. She'd dressed her friends, she'd dressed dolls, she'd dressed her mother ...

The only person she never dressed again was Paula, whose modelling dreams had taken her far away from her humble roots.

But Katie had continued to dream.

A loud crash from the wings brought her back to the present.

Katie turned her head and listened. What began as a purposeful

masculine stride, suddenly increased to a run.

Frowning, she stood her ground, ready to point out to whoever it was that the noise could probably be heard all the way across London's West End.

Who could possibly be running? An inexperienced stagehand, presumably. Or possibly one of the hangers-on who had been lingering backstage in the hope of catching a glimpse of Nathaniel Wolfe's virile, muscular frame and flawless features.

Realising that the footsteps were coming straight towards her, Katie hurriedly stepped out of the way but she was too late. A powerful male body slammed into her and sent her flying. There was no time to gasp or cry out. Falling backwards, she braced herself to hit the ground but strong hands suddenly grabbed her and hauled her upright, holding on until she was steady.

Trapped against hard, packed muscle, something melted inside her. It was an elemental reaction that transcended common sense and the sheer power of it shocked her.

*Sharp bones, black hair and eyes that could make a woman forget her own name.*

'Er, Mr Wolfe, I didn't expect to see you here. I mean, obviously you're performing here so I did expect to see you, but not exactly right here at this precise moment and especially not running backstage.' *Oh, shut up, Katie.* 'Is something wrong? Well, I can see something is wrong,' she blurted out, 'otherwise you wouldn't be thundering backstage like a herd of elephants, but—'

'He's here....' His hands gripped her shoulders so tightly that Katie winced.

'Er, who?' She stared up at him stupidly, her heart hammering against her chest and her mouth dry as dust. Up close it was impossible not to stare. He was shockingly sexy, every line of his perfect features accentuating his masculinity. She tried desperately to form a lucid sentence but her brain felt as if it had been anaesthetised. 'Mr Wolfe?'

'Why now?' Those blue eyes were two glittering slits of fierce anger. 'Why?' He released her and punched his fist hard into a piece of

abandoned scenery, splintering the wood. Breathing heavily, he pressed his fingers to his forehead, barely coherent. ‘I can’t—I don’t—I have to warn Annabelle ....’

### *Who was Annabelle?*

‘Right, well, I can see you’re upset ....’ Katie took a wary step backwards, watching him as he drew his phone out of his pocket and keyed in a number. His knuckles were grazed and raw, but he didn’t appear to have noticed. In that single moment, she understood why Nathaniel Wolfe excelled at playing deeply troubled heroes—underneath that perfect physique and breathtakingly handsome face he was a man every bit as troubled as the characters he portrayed. And that was part of the attraction, of course. There was a side of him that was untamed and dangerous. Registering the hard set of his jaw and the grim line of his mouth, she thought about the Special Forces soldier he’d played in his recent action thriller, *Alpha Man*.

He was the hunter.

And right now he wasn’t acting. She *knew* he wasn’t acting. And there was no point in her trying to persuade him back onstage. He was a man who followed no one’s orders but his own.

Out of her depth, Katie glanced around, desperately hoping someone else would arrive and take over. Where were the stage managers?

He held the phone to his ear, his movements restless and edgy. Apart from onstage, acting, she’d only ever seen him supercool. He was occasionally sarcastic, frequently bored, but never out of control.

*Right now, he looked out of control.* The force field of cynicism that surrounded him had been replaced by something close to desperation.

‘Is there an exit that the press don’t know about?’

‘Exit?’ Katie tried to breathe but there was something about the intensity of his gaze that made it impossible to do anything except stare. This was closer than she’d ever been to him before and he was spectacular.

‘If Carrie finds out, this whole thing is going to blow up—Answer the phone, damn it ....’ Clearly no one did and he left a short, cryptic message before pocketing the phone again. Then he grabbed Katie by the

arm, his tone raw and desperate. ‘You have to get me out of here. Fast.’

Still absorbing the fact that he obviously had two women on the go at the same time, Katie looked at him sternly and then froze because she saw desperation in his eyes. And knew she’d made a fundamental mistake in her assessment of him.

He wasn’t the hunter.

He was the hunted.

*Someone—or something—was chasing him.*

‘There’s a fire escape in the wardrobe department. It leads into one of the side streets.’ Without pausing to question her actions, she grabbed his hand and dragged him back into the wardrobe department, locking the door behind them.

‘That will hold them for a few minutes. The fire escape is over there. Good luck.’

‘I can’t do this without help!’ He yanked her up close. ‘Where do you live? Is it far?’

The strength left her knees. ‘You have to be kidding. I mean, you have a suite at The Dorchester and—’

‘—and that is the first place they’ll look. The press have been camped outside since my plane landed.’

Katie tried to imagine Nathaniel Wolfe in her cramped bedsit and her face burned. ‘My place is really tiny. Honestly, I don’t think—’

‘Please.’ He cupped her face in his hands so that she had no choice but to look at him again. Eye to eye, she was dazzled. Tumbling into that intense blue gaze, she forgot where she was. She forgot *who* she was. Dimly she remembered him asking her something but her eyes were locked with his and—

‘Katie?’

In the grip of a sexual excitement she’d never experienced before, she swayed towards him. ‘Mmm?’

‘*Katie!*’ He snapped his fingers in front of her face and broke the spell.

Shaking her head to clear the buzzing in her brain, Katie felt as though she was coming out of a trance.

‘Y-you know my name.’

‘I make a point of knowing the name of every woman who has ever taken my inside leg measurement.’ Beneath the sardonic lift of his brows his eyes glinted. ‘Get us out of here, angel. I don’t want to be tonight’s meal for the paparazzi.’

Always a sucker for anyone in trouble and totally bowled over by the fact he actually knew her name, Katie ignored the inner voice that was telling her it was a big mistake. ‘All right, but my place is going to be a shock after The Dorchester. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.’ She grabbed her jacket and two helmets and thrust one of them towards him. ‘Take this.’

He stared at it blankly. ‘What for?’

‘If we’re escaping, then we need an escape vehicle. I have one outside. It’s nippy and great for getting through London traffic. Put the helmet on—it will cover your face. Not that your face isn’t incredible to look at but—’ Flustered, she pushed the helmet into his hands. ‘This will be a lot easier.’

The voices were outside now and someone rattled the door.

Katie took matters into her own hands. She reached up and jammed the helmet onto his head. ‘The fire escape will be icy. Watch your footing. I feel really stupid saying that to you—the guy who does most of his own stunts. I’m sure an icy fire escape isn’t going to present you with a challenge.’

He had his phone in his hand again. ‘I just need to make one more call ....’

‘You can make it when you get to my place.’ Katie didn’t point out that if he stuck to one woman at a time, then he wouldn’t be in this desperate situation. Telling herself that his complicated love life was none of her business, she tugged at his arm. ‘If you don’t want to get up close and personal with a hundred camera lenses, then we need to get out of here now!’

# CHAPTER TWO

THE sound of their feet echoed on the metal steps of the fire escape and Katie jumped the last few and landed in the alleyway next to her Vespa.

As the cold February air nipped through their clothing, Nathaniel stared at the scooter, one eyebrow raised in naked disbelief. ‘That’s your idea of an escape vehicle?’

‘It may not be a Ferrari, but—’

‘It definitely isn’t a Ferrari.’

‘It’s faster than it looks. And it has the added advantage that you wouldn’t be seen dead on one, which means that no one will be expecting to see you on it.’ As she swung her leg over the bike and fired up the engine, a pack of paparazzi came screaming round the corner like crazed animals.

Flashes exploded and Katie shrank. ‘I don’t want them to take my picture—I hate having my picture taken.’

Nathaniel vaulted onto the bike behind her, hooked his arm round her waist and pulled himself close. ‘Move. That’s if this thing is capable of moving.’

His hard body pressed against hers and awareness speared her from throat to pelvis. The raw burn of it shocked her. More powerful, more intense than anything she’d experienced before. Mortified to realise that he had his hand planted firmly on her stomach, Katie sucked it in and vowed that from now on she was going to do at least a hundred sit-ups a day.

Impatient, Nathaniel closed his hands over hers. ‘Go!’ Taking control, he twisted the throttle and the Vespa sprang forward with a force that threw Katie back against his chest. Caged by his strong arms and crushed against hard male muscle, some of the fear left her. Her helmet bumped against his shoulder and in that instant she thought about all the women in the world who would have given their life savings to swap places with her.

*Surreal, she thought. Nathaniel Wolfe on the back of her Vespa.*

And then suddenly she had a whole new reason to be afraid because he wasn't slowing down. Instead he was squeezing every last atom of speed from the bike. The wind blew in her face, the ends of her hair lifted.

'Slow down!' She hadn't known her tame, trusty little Vespa was capable of such speeds. Too late she remembered that Nathaniel Wolfe raced motorbikes as a hobby and that several directors refused to work with him because he was wild and a risk taker.

*The bad, bad boy of Hollywood.*

Fearless and bold he pushed her bike to its limits and Katie gave a whimper of panic. She didn't particularly like journalists, but she had no wish to kill anyone.

'Something wrong?' His laughing voice was close to her ear and she choked out one word.

'Speeding—'

'I'm doing my best, sweetheart, but next time do us both a favour and buy the fuel-injected version. This one sucks.'

They shot towards the crowd of journalists and Katie tried to scream but no sound emerged. Terrified, she tried to slacken back on the throttle but hard, strong fingers tightened on hers, controlling what she did, forcing her to maintain maximum speed.

'Relax.' His voice was molten seduction in her ear. 'They'll move.'

'And if they don't?'

'Then there'll be a few less journalists following me. Haven't you ever played chicken?'

'I'm vegetarian!' Katie squeezed her eyes tightly shut, coming to terms with the fact she was going to be the first person to get a speeding ticket on a Vespa. All she could hope was that she wouldn't earn herself a manslaughter charge to go with it.

Braced for impact, she thought to herself that the rumours about his physical strength hadn't been exaggerated. His hands were locked on hers in a death grip and the muscles of his shoulders were a solid wall

behind her.

'Hang on,' he growled in her ear, and Katie opened her eyes to discover that they were now close enough to the photographers to see the whites of their eyes. At the last minute the crowd scattered and the bike shot through the sudden gap and emerged onto the main road. There was a shriek of tyres as people swerved to avoid them, a cacophony of taxi horns and several warning shouts, and Katie was glad his hands were over hers because her palms were slippery with sweat and she knew that if he weren't controlling the bike, then she would probably have just slid in a heap to the pavement.

She heard him laugh and decided right there and then that Nathaniel Wolfe had a sick sense of humour.

Outside the theatre there was a crowd of people, mostly women, many holding banners saying *I Love Nathaniel Wolfe*. They'd queued for hours in the hope of catching a glimpse of the Hollywood megastar as he left the theatre. They didn't seem to care that he was notorious for not signing autographs. All they wanted was to catch a glimpse of those famous eyes.

*If they recognised him ...*

'Which way?' The voice next to her ear was firm and decisive and now it was her turn to take the lead because she knew these streets well. Soon she was weaving through the London traffic, putting as much distance as possible between her and the journalists. She turned off the main road and took an elaborate detour, choosing back roads and side streets.

As her heart gradually slowed and her panic eased, the enormity of what she'd done suddenly hit her.

It took twenty minutes to be sure that no one had followed her and another ten to double back across the river towards south London and her flat. And all the time she was aware of the heat of Nathaniel's body pressed against hers and his arm clamped around her waist.

He should have been cold, she thought, wearing only the leather jacket and black T-shirt that was the costume she'd selected for his contemporary portrayal of King Richard, but wherever their bodies touched, she felt warmth. Or maybe the warmth was hers. A fiery glow

burned her skin through her clothing.

*You're as susceptible as every other woman, Katie.*

Pushing aside that unsettling thought, Katie swerved into an alleyway adjoining a block of flats.

'This is where I live.'

He swung his leg off the bike and unfastened the helmet.

'Don't take it off,' Katie said quickly. 'Someone might recognise you. Let's get inside first. Walk as if you're ordinary, not as if you're a movie star or a Special Forces soldier on a mission. You need to melt into the background.'

'I'm six foot two. Melting into the background isn't easy.'

Katie rolled her eyes as she slid off the bike, her legs as floppy as string. 'You drove like a maniac. I thought you were going to kill us both.' She locked her scooter. 'I'm on the second floor. Don't look at anyone.'

'I'm wearing the helmet.'

'But you can still see your eyes.' And those fierce blue eyes were known the world over. Slightly slanting and fringed by thick, dark lashes that simply intensified that hypnotic gaze, his eyes were designed for sin and seduction.

Katie tried not to look at him. It was easier to concentrate if she didn't look. 'Just ... try and be invisible.' Their footsteps echoed around the stairwell and a door opened a slit as they passed.

'Is that you, Katie dear?'

Katie gestured to Nathaniel to stay back. 'It's me, Vera. Everything all right?'

'You're home already?' The door opened a little wider and the old lady peered through her glasses, 'And with a nice young man. That was quick. I suppose that's why it's called speed dating.'

'Vera—'

'I said to Maggie in 22A, if those guys have any sense they're going to all be taking our Katie's number.'

'Vera, I haven't—'

‘And you brought him straight back home. No messing around. Good for you. I envy you modern girls. In my day we had to sit through long boring dates and we didn’t even get sex at the end of it.’ Vera leaned forward and squinted at Nathaniel. ‘You look like a man who can handle himself. And you have good shoulders. I like a man with good shoulders.’

Melting with embarrassment and terrified that the old lady would recognise Nathaniel, Katie leaned forward and gave her neighbour a hug. ‘Go back inside now. It’s freezing tonight and you’re letting all the heat out. I’ll come and have a cup of tea with you soon.’

Vera was gazing at Nathaniel. ‘You look a bit like that lovely young man everyone is raving about—that movie star. You could get a job as his body double or one of those lookalikes. We had a Tom Cruise lookalike at the Day Centre a few months ago but he was very disappointing. The eyes were all wrong.’

‘Vera, we have to go ....’ Katie backed away.

‘Well, of course you do.’ Vera gave a knowing wink. ‘You have things to do. Speed dating. Just remember, not everything has to be done fast.’ She closed the door and Katie pulled her keys out of her pocket, so embarrassed she didn’t know where to look.

Flicking on the light, her embarrassment increased when she saw the state of the place. Pictures from her sketchbook were spread all over the floor from her late-night working session and dirty bowls and plates were still stacked in the sink waiting to be washed.

‘Sorry about the mess.’ Still not looking at him she closed the door behind them. ‘I did the early shift at the coffee shop yesterday and then I was working on a costume plot for a new production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. I didn’t have time to clear up.’

‘A shift at the coffee shop?’

‘I start at six. Mostly serving double-shot cappuccinos to tired commuters. Look, just give me a minute and I’ll clear the place up.’

Nathaniel dragged off the helmet and picked up the drawing closest to him. ‘Don’t you work on computer?’

‘Yes, but I prefer to draw when I can, especially in the early stages of

design. It's very important to understand what the costume says about the character.'

'This dress says "I like hot sex."' He studied the drawing. 'If that's for Katherine I'd say Petruchio is in for a good night. So ... you were supposed to be speed dating tonight?'

Katie snatched the drawing out of his hand. 'I was just going to keep a friend company.' She changed the subject quickly. 'Do you think anyone followed us?'

'I think you managed to lose them. You could give a few lessons to my security team.' He was cool and relaxed, almost bored, as if the entire escape plan had been engineered solely for her entertainment. There was no sign of the desperation he'd shown at the theatre. Instead he strolled around her tiny living room, examining photographs, picking up a book she'd left lying face down, glancing at a stack of magazines.

Magazines.

Katie froze in horror, but it was too late. He'd already picked up the one from the top of the pile. The one with the photograph of him naked from the waist up as Alpha Man.

'Why do you have pictures of me?'

Because she was human. Because she was a woman ...

'I used them for costume design.' She fished around for a plausible reason. 'I had to study your features—decide which styles and colours would look best for the part of King Richard.' *At least she hadn't stuck the pictures to her wall.*

He put the magazine down and picked up another of her drawings. 'You're good.'

Relieved that he hadn't gone through the rest of the magazines and discovered just how many photos of him she'd collected, Katie stood rigid and self-conscious as Nathaniel looked slowly round her small cramped one-bed apartment.

'Interesting choice of decor.' He lifted one of the red silk cushions piled on her sofa. 'What is this place—the harem? Are you auditioning for a part as the sheikh's concubine or something?'

Katie felt herself turn the same shade as the cushion. She so rarely

brought anyone back home that it hadn't occurred to her to think how it might look through someone else's eyes. 'I don't think I'm sheikh's concubine material.' *She didn't have enough experience to be anyone's concubine.* 'The place was kind of tired and depressing when I moved in. I got a bit carried away trying to make it homely.' She'd used her creative flair to make the cramped space welcoming. To conceal the damp patches she'd tacked fabric to the wall. The threadbare carpet was now covered by a large rug in deep shades of exotic red. Lamps provided subtle lighting and drew the eye away from the watermark on the ceiling. The single sofa had been left there by the previous occupants and she'd simply covered it with a bright throw and piles of jewel-coloured cushions that she'd made herself from scraps of fabric.

Imagining what he must be thinking, Katie blushed. 'It doesn't look like much, but actually the area isn't too bad as long as you stay indoors after midnight. And it's cheap—I'm paying off some debts at the moment. My dad died last year, which was devastating enough, and I only discovered after he died that he'd had a gambling problem for most of his life....' A lump lodged in her throat. 'Anyway, he'd borrowed money against the house and if I miss a payment the house gets repossessed and my mum loses her home ... so I'm working pretty hard.'

He looked slightly stunned. 'Do you always tell your life story to strangers?'

'If they stand still long enough to hear it,' Katie said lamely. 'Sorry. I don't mean to bore you. I'm just trying to explain why there hasn't been a lot of housekeeping going on around here.'

His gaze lingered on the unwashed cereal bowl in the sink. 'Breakfast?'

'Last night's dinner.' Katie replied without thinking. 'If I'm home late I can't always be bothered to cook so I just have cereal. Or toast. You know what it's like when you're on your own ....' Remembering who she was talking to, she gave an awkward shrug. 'Actually, you probably don't. If *you're* on your own you probably go to a five-star restaurant ....' Digging herself deeper and deeper into a hole, she felt herself turn redder and redder. 'Except that a guy like you is probably never on his own ... and anyway, no one in Hollywood ever eats carbs, I know that, so cereal and toast would be—'

'Do you ever stop talking?' He was watching her with those sexy slanting eyes that made grown women lose their grip on reality. And his mouth—*oh, God, his mouth* ...

Katie clamped her own mouth shut. This was her opportunity to intrigue him with scintillating conversation. At the very least she ought to be talking about something intelligent like films, global warming or space exploration. Instead she was talking about breakfast cereal.

'Sorry. I'm just not used to having a movie star in my living room. It feels—'

'How does it feel?' The way he was looking at her turned her insides to liquid. His eyes slid to her mouth and Katie felt the blood pound through her veins. Being the focus of his attention was the most heady, exciting thing that had ever happened to her. He was looking at her as if, as if—

Oh, God, Nathaniel Wolfe was going to kiss her.

*Why, oh, why, hadn't she stuck to her diet?*

Wound tight with sexual awareness, she swayed towards him. She saw him lower his head towards hers and then he gave a sharp frown and turned away abruptly, walking to the far side of the room.

Katie stood like an idiot, completely thrown off balance. What had she expected? Nathaniel Wolfe was a superstar. What on earth had made her think he'd want to kiss someone like her? Clearly she was delusional.

Delusional and untidy.

Absorbing the state of her flat in horror, she vowed that from now on she was going to be more organised in her home life. No more getting lost in work and losing track of the time. No more spreading her drawings over the floor. Taking advantage of the fact he had his back to her, she dropped stealthily to her knees and started scooping up papers.

And then he turned. Their eyes met and held.

The papers slipped from her hands. 'I told you you'd be better off at The Dorchester. You probably think I'm a mess, but I don't have a desk and I find it easier to spread out so that I can see the character progression.' Realising that he was just staring at her blankly, she sat back on her heels. 'You look awful,' she muttered. 'Are you sure you

don't want to talk about it? You seemed pretty upset in the theatre. If something is bothering you it's better to let it spill out, instead of bottling it up.'

Those famous blue eyes were blank of expression. 'Nothing is bothering me.'

*Liar.* Katie remembered the way he'd looked in the theatre. 'You don't have to pretend with me. When Dad died last year I would have gone under if it hadn't been for my friends.' She gathered up the papers again and stood. 'Do you want my humble opinion on the situation?'

'You have an opinion on my situation?'

'I can only give you the female point of view.' Katie hugged the drawings to her chest. 'You mentioned Annabelle and Carrie, so I assume you're seeing two women at the same time ...' She paused, waiting for him to contradict her but he simply stared at her so she stumbled on. 'That's only ever going to end badly, even if you're a movie star, but obviously that's up to you, and frankly my love life is such a disaster I wouldn't dream of passing judgement on anyone else's, but I *would* say that I think it's a seriously bad move to get involved with a married woman.'

A tiny muscle flickered at the corner of his mouth. 'What makes you think I'm involved with a married woman?'

'The way you rushed off the stage. You looked as though you'd seen Hamlet's ghost and you said something like—' Katie wrinkled her nose as she tried to remember. "He's here." Yes, that's right, you said, "He's here." Then you were muttering about needing to warn Annabelle and something about Carrie not finding out, so I assumed that the "he" you referred to must be a jealous husband—and then you punched a hole in a piece of scenery.' She glanced at his hand. 'Which reminds me, I'd better get you some ice for that before it swells up.' Putting down the drawings, she walked over to the fridge and pulled out a small packet of frozen peas.

'You have an overactive imagination,' he said harshly. 'When I said, "He's here," I was referring to a theatre critic from one of the newspapers—really nasty guy. I suddenly realised that I wasn't ready to play the part. Filming on my last project overran and that cut into the

rehearsal schedule. We just weren't ready. I stood there and it felt wrong.'

It didn't make sense to Katie. 'I saw you in rehearsal. You were incredible. Are you trying to say you had an attack of stage fright?'

'More an attack of artistic integrity. I'm a perfectionist. If it isn't going to be perfect, I won't do it.' His eyes were a deep, mesmerising blue and they drew her in, demanding her trust. It was like being hypnotised.

Katie felt her doubts fade.

If he said it was all about the performance, then maybe it was. Actors, singers—all artists were the same, weren't they? Focused on themselves and their craft.

And then she remembered that this man had won awards for his acting skills.

*And he was acting now.*

A mesmerising, compelling gaze didn't mean he was telling the truth. It meant that he wanted her to believe him. *Not* the same thing.

Her first impression had been correct. His reaction at the theatre was genuine. Under the surface, the tension was still there. And then there had been that phone call—the phone call she'd tried not to listen to—sparse on information but loaded with tension and urgency.

*He's back.*

Why would he say that about a theatre critic? And which one of his many women had he been talking to? His love life was obviously a complete mess.

Katie pressed the icy bag of peas to his hand. 'That looks really painful. Do you think you've broken something?'

'It's nothing.' He snapped out the words. 'What else did you overhear?'

'I don't know. Don't stress out about it. It doesn't matter.'

'Trust me, it matters.'

'Why?'

'Because I've just discovered you can talk for England.'

'That doesn't mean I'm going to say anything about you. It isn't as if I

even know Annabelle or Carrie so it isn't going to be awkward. The only thing I know is that they're going to be pretty upset when they find out about each other but I daresay they'll punish you in whatever way they see fit. The other day I read about this woman in Chicago who found out her husband was seeing someone else, and she—'

'Do you *ever* stop talking?'

Skewered by his lethal tone, Katie froze. 'I talk when I'm nervous and you're making me really nervous.'

'How am I making you nervous?'

'Just by being here!' Her voice rose. 'It's pretty weird having a movie star in my living room. I keep waiting for someone to shout, "Action!"'

His eyes grew slumberous. 'You're looking for action?'

Her body warmed and the room suddenly felt dangerously claustrophobic. 'I just mean this whole thing feels surreal. You, here. I warned you it wasn't The Dorchester.'

'If I wanted The Dorchester, that's where I'd be.'

Her living room seemed to have shrunk to half its size. She was aware of every movement he made—of every glance and every shift in his facial expression. 'Look—' she backed away '—I know you're desperate to phone your many women, so I'll just leave you to get on with it.'

'Thanks.' There was a heavy note of sarcasm to his voice that she didn't understand and she decided just to make herself scarce. There was a restlessness about him that was making her uneasy.

'I'll be—' she waved a hand vaguely '—in the bedroom if you need me.' *Oh, for crying out loud, Katie, think before you speak.*

A sardonic gleam lit those blue eyes. 'In the bedroom—ready for action?'

*Was he actually flirting with her?*

No, of course he wasn't. She was having delusions again. Not looking at him, Katie shot into the bedroom and closed the door.

The powerful surge of lust astonished him.

*What the hell was he doing, flirting with a woman who had pictures of him*

*in her home?*

It was asking for trouble and he already had more than enough of that.

He'd been running on adrenalin since that moment he'd walked off the stage and now the tension was a white-hot ball inside him. His carefully constructed life was crashing down around him like a full-scale demolition programme. There were things he needed to do and people he needed to speak to.

So why did his hand burn to reach for the door handle rather than his phone?

Why was he gripped by an inexplicable urge to break down that damn door and lose himself in her gorgeous breasts and sweet smile?

It didn't help that she wanted him too. Experienced at dealing with women far more sophisticated than

Katie, he'd read her easily—seen the exact moment her pupils dilated and sexual awareness had darkened those lovely eyes. He'd also seen how hard she was fighting that reaction.

Nathaniel gave a bitter smile.

He hoped she was having more success than he was. Right now, sex was the last thing he needed.

Hands thrust in his pockets, he stepped back from her bedroom door, disconcerted by the sheer strength of that craving.

He was no saint when it came to his relationships with women, but he knew better than to mess around with a woman who looked at him as if he had a first-class ticket to the end of the rainbow.

There were no rainbows in his life. Only thunderclouds. At the moment those thunderclouds were threatening a storm like no other.

Nathaniel checked his phone again, but there was no response from Annabelle. Had she even picked up the message? *Was she huddled in a heap somewhere, shivering with reaction?*

He felt the bite of guilt, as he always did when he thought of Annabelle, and something deeper, some thing uglier—something moulded deep inside himself.

Pushing the phone back into his pocket, he wondered why he was even bothering trying to contact her. It wasn't as if they were close. None of the Wolfe siblings did 'close.' The only common thread they shared was fierce independence. A reluctance to bond with anyone.

Nathaniel paced across the flat and glanced out of the window but the streets were empty apart from a lone woman slipping and sliding on the icy streets as she struggled against the icy wind.

There were no paparazzi. Miss Chatterbox-with-the-gorgeous-breasts had managed to lose them.

He stared blankly out of the window, and by the time the bedroom door opened again he had himself under control.

It was immediately obvious that she'd renewed her make-up and then scrubbed it off, afraid it would look as if she were trying too hard. Nathaniel gave a humourless laugh. She didn't need to try. Make-up or no make-up, her mouth was still the same full tempting curve that made a man want to dive straight in and sample the flavour. Even seeing her wild, curling hair tied back in an unflattering ponytail didn't kill the chemistry. All that chatter and unusual openness should have irritated him. Instead she was getting under his skin.

He wondered what she'd say if she knew how close he was to hauling her back into the bedroom. He wanted to lose himself. *He wanted distraction from the mess that was his life.*

'Are you—?' She cleared her throat, careful not to look at him. 'Are you going to answer that?'

Answer what?

Drowning in his private hell, Nathaniel realised that his phone was ringing and he hadn't even noticed.

It was his brother Sebastian and this time he took the call, conscious that Katie would be listening to every word of the conversation. 'Yes, he was there.... Rafael must have given him the ticket.... I've no idea. All we can do is manage the situation.' As he talked, Katie busied herself in the kitchen area, clattering away, trying not to listen. She was still wearing her skinny jeans and her bottom was a smooth curve straight from a bad boy's fantasy. Deep in that fantasy, Nathaniel realised he'd

missed half of what his brother had said. ‘Sorry? ... No, that’s way too risky. I’m going to leave the country. I’ll be in touch and you have my private number.... The most important thing is that we protect her.’

*What the hell was the matter with him?* He should be concentrating on damage limitation, not working out ways to remove Katie from those jeans.

He pocketed the phone. ‘Do you have any bourbon?’

Still with her back to him, she stacked a week’s supply of breakfast bowls. ‘Sorry, no.’ Her slender shoulders were stiff and Nathaniel felt a flash of irritation.

‘Look at me, will you?’

‘The only way I can behave even remotely normally is if I don’t look at you. Sorry if that seems rude, but that’s just the way it is. I don’t have bourbon but I do have water, or—’ Still not looking at him, she tugged open the fridge. ‘Milk?’

‘I haven’t drunk a glass of milk since I was three years old.’

‘It’s full of calcium and vitamin D. Good for your bones.’

‘Alcohol is good for my stress levels. What’s this?’ He picked up a bottle of red wine that was sitting on the side and read the label.

She glanced over her shoulder, the movement sending the ponytail swinging. ‘You won’t be interested in that. It could double as paint stripper.’

Nathaniel was tempted to confess that the way he felt right at that moment he would have considered the paint stripper. ‘It can’t be that bad.’ Without waiting to be asked, he reached past her and grabbed two glasses from the cupboard. The scent of her wound itself around his senses and he tried to block his reaction.

She closed the fridge and moved away carefully. ‘Don’t pour one for me.’

Wondering how sexual tension could still throb when two people weren’t looking at each other, Nathaniel ignored her and poured two glasses. ‘Drink. We both need it.’ He took a large mouthful and winced as his palate was assaulted by flavours not normally associated with wine. ‘On second thoughts, maybe we don’t need it.’

‘I’ve changed my mind. I think I do.’ Visibly flustered, she picked up her glass and drank.

‘Clearly you don’t have a very discerning pal ate.’

‘I can’t afford a discerning palate, Mr Wolfe.’

‘What’s it going to take to get you to look at me?’

Still holding the glass, she stared at a point in the centre of his chest. ‘I just—I’m finding it really hard to behave normally with you. Sorry, but ... aren’t you finding this at all odd?’

‘What’s odd about it?’

‘Well, I’m me.’ With a rueful smile, she glanced down at herself. ‘Jeans with a hole, tiny flat, modest job. And you’re—well, you know who you are. Let’s just say I feel as though I should buy a ticket before I’m allowed to look at you. I associate you with movies. I keep waiting for some bad guy to leap out from behind you with a gun.’

‘Talking of guys leaping out from behind me, is some jealous lover built like a sumo wrestler likely to turn up later and want to beat me to a pulp? Presumably not, as you’re speed dating.’

‘I live alone. Number of jealous lovers—zero. I’m going through a lean patch. Well, not lean as in *lean*, obviously.’ The words spilled out, uncensored. ‘Lean as in not much action. And not action as in—’

‘So you’re single.’ Why was he asking? *Why the hell was he doing this to himself?*

‘Completely single. Not that I mind being single,’ she added hastily, clearly worried he might think she was dropping hints. ‘Being single is good. I can do anything I like without having to check with anyone. I can be spontaneous. I can eat cereal for supper and wash up the breakfast things when I’m ready and until today no one ever knew or cared, although—’ she gave a tiny smile ‘—obviously from now on I’ll be tidier just in case a Hollywood star happens to drop by. And, being single, if I want to go and—and—well, whatever I want to go and do, I do it. Sorry. Talking too much again ...’ Her voice faded and she shrugged awkwardly. ‘The short answer to your question is yes, I live alone. And now I’ve said that I’m realising that actually you’re a complete stranger and I’ve invited you into my home. And that is why

this is weird. I feel I know you because I've spent so long staring at you in movies. I've seen you naked, but I don't know you at all.'

'You've seen me naked?' The nerves on the back of his neck prickled. This wasn't the way he'd intended the conversation to go. He should be on the phone, sorting out his monumental personal crisis, not flirting with a girl who had *romantic* stamped all over her.

'You did that indie film.' She stared down into her glass. 'I think I saw it once—or maybe twice ...' The colour of her cheeks told him she'd watched it at least a hundred times. 'The bit where you carried the daughter down to the beach was a bit of a cult scene when I was at university.'

Nathaniel struggled valiantly not to return the favour and imagine her naked. It didn't help that they were having the conversation surrounded by red silk cushions and a deep, inviting sofa. Gritting his teeth, he blanked out a sudden image of him taking her, there and then, on that sofa. 'I thought you studied costume design. Talk to me about what you do.' Talk about something. *Anything*. Anything, but sex.

'The naked body can be a costume—' she sounded breathless '—if it fits the role. All I'm saying is that it's weird to have seen you naked and yet actually not know you at all. You could be—well, I just don't know you, that's all.'

He bit back the suggestion that they get to know each other better. His life didn't have room for any more complications. It was already a mess and looking to get worse.

'You've worked with me for the past month so I'm not a stranger and I can assure you I don't have any nasty habits,' he drawled softly. 'Don't make the mistake of mixing me up with the parts I play. That's not who I am. Just for the record, the only time I'd rip your clothes off is if you were ripping mine off too.' *And right now that sounded like a damn good idea.*

'Honestly, I'm not thinking for one moment that you're going to rip my clothes off. I may be dreamy but I'm not delusional. I can distinguish between reality and fantasy, although—' she kept it light '—there were definitely moments on my scooter when you seemed to think you were Alpha Man. Do people often do that? Mix you up with the parts you

play? Mix fantasy with reality?’

‘All the time. The worst one was when I played a psychopathic doctor in *Heartsink*. For months people were coming up to me and asking me to diagnose their rashes.’ They were no longer talking about sex, so why was his body still throbbing? And why couldn’t he stop looking at her? ‘I haven’t thanked you for what you did tonight.’

‘You’re welcome.’

He was used to people behaving oddly around him—sometimes they were giggly, sometimes they were plain hysterical—but Katie was the first woman he’d met who was determined not to look at him. Exasperation flickered through him. ‘It’s really hard having a conversation with the top of your head.’

Finally she looked at him. Their eyes met and the explosion of awareness was mutual and instantaneous. ‘Are you feeling a bit better?’

‘Better?’

‘At the theatre you were incredibly stressed.’

‘Now you *are* delusional.’ He changed the subject smoothly. ‘Or maybe it’s the wine. How many glasses do you need to drink before you do the dance of the seven veils?’

Her laugh was nervous. ‘Your harem already seems a little crowded.’

‘It’s not crowded. Let me know any time you want me to play sheikh to your concubine. I could throw you over my shoulder and ravish you on that pile of silk cushions.’ *And he was sorely tempted.*

Who cared if she had pictures of him? He was more than willing to give her the real thing.

‘The sofa is really uncomfortable. Hence the cushions.’ Her cheeks were the same shade of scarlet as those cushions.

‘In that case I’ll make sure I’m the one on top.’ Without thinking, Nathaniel lifted his hand and stroked her face thoughtfully. ‘You’re very pretty. That’s why the Duchess of Gloucester has been so irritable for the past month. She hates working with people who remind her she’s ageing.’ His hand lingered and he saw her lips part as she snatched in a shallow breath.

It would have been so easy to kiss her....

So easy ...

'So—' she backed away from him, snapping the tension '—er, what are your plans tonight?'

He found her tendency to speak without thinking surprisingly endearing. In his world, no one spoke without thinking. 'I need somewhere to stay.'

'Oh—'

'That was your cue to invite me.'

'You want to stay *here*?' Her voice was a squeak. 'Are you mad? You could be in the penthouse suite at The Dorchester ordering room service and wallowing in luxury.'

Or he could be lying on her decadent sofa, listening to the rain and wondering whether she slept naked or not. 'Privacy is luxury. Can I sleep on your sofa?'

Her mouth opened and closed. 'You don't have any luggage. No pyjamas or anything.'

He managed to subdue the smile. 'I don't own pyjamas. So is that a yes?'

'I—well, if that's really what you want.' She looked faint, and despite the dark clouds rolling into his life he couldn't resist teasing her.

'And if I'm cold in the night?'

Their eyes met. He watched the dreams chase across her face just before she gave a little shake of her head.

'I'll go and fetch you some blankets. You won't be cold.'

# CHAPTER THREE

*HE WAS drowning.*

*The cold waters of the lake closed over his head, a murky coffin pulling him down to his death. As he opened his mouth to scream, the water poured into his lungs and the last thing he saw was the figure of a man as he walked away and left him to die.*

Nathaniel woke drenched in sweat and shivering. Every bone in his body ached and his muscles screamed a protest at having been cramped in such an unforgiving position for a whole night. Despite the blankets, he was bitterly cold. His head ached from the after-effects of cheap wine and lack of sleep but he didn't care. He was just relieved to be awake. If sleep meant the nightmare, then he'd choose insomnia every time.

He ran his hand over his face, still gripped by images of the lake. The vision lurked at the back of his head, refusing to fade. It had been years since he'd returned to the place—years since he'd had the dream. It depressed him to know that it was still lurking in the corners of his brain, waiting to burst to life. All it had taken was Jacob's return.

*Why the hell had he come back?*

*And why now?*

Through the gap in the curtains Nathaniel caught a glimpse of a miserably wet February morning. The sky was a cheerless grey and he could hear rain sheeting against the window. He thought longingly of his enormous and extremely comfortable bed in his Californian home. He'd built a different life for himself and yet happiness was always just beyond the horizon. He'd thought doing live theatre would be a welcome change from the empty glass bubble that was Hollywood. He'd thought that in London he'd be safe from his past—he hadn't reckoned on the past watching him from the front row on opening night.

Nathaniel stared up at the ceiling, reliving the moment when he'd been stranded in the spotlight, staring trouble in the face while a flabbergasted audience watched in shocked fascination.

Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he found a text from Annabelle, sent in the cold dark hours of the night. Just two words.

*I know.*

Nathaniel stared at the message, wondering what state she'd been in when she'd sent it.

Chased by his own thoughts, plagued by that feeling of powerlessness, he sprang from the sofa and stood for a moment in the centre of the tiny living room, forcing himself to breathe. He'd never been in a room where the walls were so close together. He was trapped with only his thoughts for company.

And he hated his thoughts.

A shout came from outside and Nathan moved silently to the window and glanced through a gap in the curtains to the street below.

Journalists and photographers were gathered four-deep, lenses poised, a sense of excitement in the air.

They were calling his name.

Nathaniel leaned back against the wall, cursing fluently, wondering why he was surprised. It was part of his life, wasn't it? In no country in the world could he walk down the street unrecognised. And there was always someone willing to sell his whereabouts to a gossip magazine.

He glanced towards the closed bedroom door, his mouth tightening as he remembered how much she'd talked the night before.

*'Nathaniel! Katie!'*

Hearing her name shouted alongside his, Nathaniel felt a flash of anger and launched himself towards the door she'd closed between them the night before. Without bothering to knock, he strode into the room. 'Wake up, Sleeping Beauty. We've got crowd control issues.'

She came awake in an instant, her tousled dark curls spilling over her bare shoulders and her green eyes still dazed with sleep. 'What? Who?'

*Beautiful*, Nathaniel thought, momentarily distracted by the arresting sight of a sleepy female. For a moment he thought she slept naked and then he caught a glimpse of the tiny lace straps of a camisole through the soft tumbling hair.

‘Thanks to your inability to keep a secret, we have company.’ Gripped by a vicious attack of lust, Nathaniel turned away and banged his elbow sharply on the wall. Pain arced up his arm and through his shoulder. The place was so cramped he could hardly move. He eyed the narrow single bed in disbelief. ‘How do you have sex in a bed that narrow?’

‘What do you mean, crowd control issues?’ She ignored his question. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Photographers.’ Three sketchbooks were stacked by her bed. Everywhere he looked there were sketches of glamorous dresses and yet he’d never seen her in anything other than jeans and boring tops. ‘Our own little pack of journalists have hunted us down and now they’re staking out the place, waiting to get a really revealing picture. You’re looking particularly savoury this morning, wardrobe. If you stand in front of the window like that you might even make the front page.’

‘Journalists?’ His words finally penetrated and she shot upright, her eyes wide. ‘Here? How did they find us?’

‘Surprising, isn’t it? Or perhaps it isn’t so surprising given that you warned me you talk too much when you’re nervous. They’re also yelling your name,’ he drawled, ‘so don’t waste your time pretending you don’t know how they got here.’

‘My name?’ She froze and stared at him, her lips parted as she drew in uneven breaths. ‘Oh, no—’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘I did *not* call the press.’

‘Well, someone did, angel, because they’re banging on the door as we speak.’

She flung the covers back and he had a glimpse of legs long enough to make a man lose his grip on reality. Dragging his eyes from slender perfection, he encountered pretty lacy underwear and then she was pulling on the same brown jumper and jeans she’d worn the day before. Sexy underwear—boring choice of clothes, Nathaniel thought absently. Strange.

‘Stop looking at me.’ With a flick of her hands, she freed her hair from her jumper. ‘Give me some privacy.’

'Like you gave me privacy?' Ruthlessly shutting down his libido, Nathaniel folded his arms and watched her performance with grim-faced anger. 'I need to know what you told them.' The thought of what discovery might do to fragile Carrie sent a blast of cold anger through his system.

*He'd promised he'd protect her and instead he'd exposed her.*

'You think I called them?' She pushed her feet into brown pumps. 'Are you mad?'

'Right now I'd describe my mood as moderately evil.'

'You were the one who grabbed *me*! You were the one who begged me to bring you here and let you stay the night—'

'I've never begged a woman in my life,' Nathaniel said coldly, 'and when I asked for your help at the theatre I was under the impression that you were a sweet, helpful young thing.' He tilted his head and gave a smile loaded with ironic self-mockery. 'But now we've cleared up that gross misconception, answer my question—who exactly did you phone and what *did* you tell them?'

'No one! Nothing!' Her voice rose and the horror in her eyes was replaced by anger. 'This is all your fault. You put me in this position.'

'The position of being able to make a mint from selling me out to the press?'

'I drove halfway round London last night to try and avoid the press. Why would I bother doing that if I was just going to call them anyway?'

'You tell me.'

'You think I brought you safely back here to my "lair" so that I could call the press, is that right? You think that's why I helped you?'

'If that isn't why you helped me, then tell me why you did.'

'Honestly? I don't know. Clearly I had a moment of extreme insanity.' Her voice was shrill. 'At the moment I wish I hadn't helped you because I certainly didn't need this in my life. I'm not the sort of person who wants to pose in front of a camera! And I don't know why you're so keen to believe the worst of me. Why would I sell you out?'

‘People do it all the time, usually as they snap a picture of me on their phone.’

‘I don’t even have a camera on my phone! It switches on and off and that’s about all it does.’ Her hands in her hair, she sank down onto the edge of the bed. ‘I don’t want them printing my picture. I *hate* having my picture taken.’

Nathaniel drew in a breath. ‘How much of my phone conversation did you hear? When you were in the bedroom, were you listening at the door?’

‘Do you have any idea how offensive you are?’ Her eyes were very green and very angry. ‘I do *not* listen at doors. I am a very decent person and I have the utmost respect for the privacy of the individual.’

‘You were in the bedroom for ages. What were you doing?’

Her cheeks reddened. ‘I was staring in the mirror feeling about the size of a spec of dust because I had Alpha Man in my living room and I was looking like something that had been pulled through a hedge backwards.’ She rubbed her hands over her knees in an agitated movement. ‘You want to know what I was doing in the bedroom? I was wishing I was someone else—like a beautiful, long-legged actress-model-type, someone with visible hip bones who wouldn’t have been phased to be entertaining Hollywood royalty.’

Distracted, Nathaniel looked at her in bemuse-ment. ‘Visible hip bones?’

‘Yes. Skinny women always have visible hip bones. I’ve tried for *years* to get visible hip bones but frankly I like food too much to starve myself and it can’t be natural to go round with your stomach rumbling the whole time, and normally I’m fine with the fact that I have hips and a bottom, but last night I let myself be intimidated by you and I *hate* myself for that because underneath that handsome face you’re just an ego on legs who thinks that everything in the world is about him—’

‘Katie—’

‘I wasn’t listening to your conversation, but in future if you’re that worried, *don’t* make calls when you have an audience, *don’t* have an affair with two women at once and *don’t* pull innocent bystanders into

it.'

Trying to ignore the incessant throb in his head,

Nathaniel pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose, vowing never to drink cheap wine again. 'I am not having an affair with two women at once.' He spoke with lethal emphasis. 'Listen—'

'No, you listen! You want to know why I helped you last night? It was because you looked desperate. For once, you weren't all remote and sarcastic. You weren't *acting*.' Shivering, she rubbed her hands over her arms. 'And I hate the way the press hound you. They've been camped outside the theatre since the day you arrived. You can't even breathe without them watching and actually I don't think that's fair. That's why I helped you. And then I get you back here and suddenly you're acting as if nothing is wrong and I'm imagining everything and I'm starting to wonder if I've gone mad.' The words came tumbling out unrestricted and Nathaniel suppressed the urge to flatten her to her single bed and turn all that red-hot passion into something physical.

'If you didn't tip off the press, then who did?'

'How would I know? I haven't even spoken to any—' She broke off in midsentence and a look of horror crossed her face, quickly replaced by guilt. 'Oh, no ...'

Nathaniel's mouth compressed. 'So you *did* call someone.'

'No.' Her eyes slid nervously to his. 'But someone called me.'

'And you couldn't help confiding. You're a girl, and girls just can't help gossiping to one another. It's that whole female bonding thing. Men share a beer. Girls share secrets.'

'No! I didn't share anything.' Her eyes were wide with dismay. 'My friend Claire rang when I was in the bedroom. We were supposed to be going speed dating together and she wanted to know where I was. Apparently the whole theatre was in a state of uproar because you'd vanished. She asked me if you were here but I denied it.'

He sighed. 'Not a born liar, are you? I need to give you acting lessons.'

'Claire would not have said anything,' she said loyally. 'No way.'

'Well, someone did.'

‘Yes, but—’ Katie broke off and frowned. ‘The Duchess of Gloucester.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Claire mentioned that the Duchess of Gloucester was revelling in the fact that you’d walked out. She was nearby when Claire phoned so it’s possible she overheard. And it’s not as if she likes you.’ Rubbing her forehead, she gave a regretful groan. ‘I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. I shouldn’t have brought you back here. I was crazy to think we could keep it a secret.’

‘No, it’s mine.’ *He should have known better.* If he’d been thinking, he wouldn’t have involved anyone else. But he hadn’t been thinking. He’d seen

Jacob in the front row and reacted. ‘As you say, I was the one who forced you to help me.’

‘But I shouldn’t have answered the phone. I should have been more convincing when she asked if I knew where you were. On the other hand, they probably would have guessed anyway.’ Her eyes were bleak and tired. ‘Last night, you and I were the only two people missing. The cast would have known that. And the press saw us together. It wouldn’t have taken much for them to work out who I was and tracked us down to this address.’

Forced to concede that such a scenario was not only possible but probable, Nathaniel tried to be practical. ‘They’re here. We have to deal with it. They’re camped outside the front of the flat and they know you spent the night with me.’

‘*What?* I did *not* spend the night with you.’

‘Yes, you did.’

‘Well, yes, but not in *that way*. They’re not going to think that for one minute. I mean, there’s you, a global sex object, and then there’s me—I’m not a global anything.’ Self-conscious, she pushed her hair out of her eyes. ‘No one in their right mind is going to think you spent the night with me so don’t worry about that.’

‘You’re incredibly sexy.’

Her eyes widened with shock and her lips parted. ‘You—you think *I’m* sexy?’

'Last night both of us were struggling to keep our hands off each other.'

'No! I mean, I—You didn't—' Her cheeks were scarlet. 'You're Nathaniel Wolfe.'

'What does that have to do with sexual chemistry?'

'Well, because—because ...' She gave a hysterical, disbelieving laugh. 'I've seen pictures of the women you date and they're very depressing to look at.'

'Equally depressing to be with. Perhaps it's because they don't eat breakfast,' Nathaniel drawled mockingly. 'And you're definitely underestimating your own charms. The press are going to take one look at you and assume we've been swinging from the chandeliers all night.' Looking at her lush mouth he wished he hadn't settled for the lumpy sofa. 'They're going to want to hear your story.'

And she was such a talker, she'd tell it. And that would be disastrous.

She didn't know much, but she knew enough to bring his nightmare to life. The fact that she'd drawn all the wrong conclusions was no consolation to someone who understood the unstoppable force of the media.

He thought about the number of years he'd kept his secret. *He thought about the possible consequences of discovery.*

There was no way he could leave Katie here alone and at their mercy. No way.

Katie tiptoed over to the window. 'Stop worrying. I don't have a story. *Movie Star Sleeps on Holey Sofa*. I can't see that headline grabbing anyone by the throat.'

'Don't look out of the window.'

Ignoring him, she peeped through the curtains. 'Holy crap.' Flattening herself against the wall she looked at him in horror. 'There are *millions* of them. Are you really that interesting?'

'Apparently.'

'There are really important things going on in the world and half the world's press is outside on the pavement.' Still plastered to the wall, she

seemed afraid to move. ‘I wish I’d never helped you. They’re going to take my photograph and everyone will make comparisons.’

‘Comparisons with whom?’

She stared at him, her breathing rapid. ‘Nothing ... this is a mess ...’

‘For once, we agree.’ Nathaniel contemplated that truth with grim resignation. ‘You’re the female equivalent of an unexploded bomb. If I leave you here you could go off at any moment.’

Her spine was stiff. ‘If you’re implying that I’d tell them anything, then you’re wrong.’

‘I thought we’d established that you talk when you’re nervous.’

‘I don’t know anything to talk about!’

‘You know enough.’ He opened her wardrobe and pulled out a coat. Brown. Wondering why everything in her wardrobe was the colour of mud, he threw it towards her. ‘Get dressed. We’re leaving.’

‘Where are we going?’ Flustered, she pulled on her coat. ‘Being seen with you has already got me in enough trouble. We need to separate.’

‘Unfortunately it’s way too late for that.’

‘No, it isn’t too late. All you have to do is open the front door and walk out.’

‘Katie, they will crucify you.’

‘I’ll keep my mouth shut.’ She compressed her lips and drew her fingers across in a zipping gesture. ‘*Silence* will be the word of the day. Except I won’t say it out loud, obviously.’

Forcing aside thoughts of alternative methods of keeping her mouth occupied, Nathaniel focused on her eyes. ‘As a matter of interest, what’s the longest time you’ve gone without speaking? Not counting when you’re asleep ...’

‘Actually, I talk in my sleep. If I’m really stressed about something, I talk about it.’ Her smile was obviously intended to be reassuring. ‘But don’t worry—I’m not going to sleep with any of the journalists.’

‘And that’s supposed to make me feel better?’

‘I’m just saying you have nothing to worry about. The press aren’t interested in me. I don’t know any details about Annabelle or Carrie. We

spent an evening together and you said nothing—just sort of glowered a lot in a brooding Heathcliff sort of way. I've never known a man say less and I've known some uncommunicative types in my time.'

'It's hard for a man to get a word in edgeways with you and, Katie, they *are* interested in you.' Intent on providing proof of that fact, Nathaniel removed his phone from his pocket and accessed the Internet with one stab of his finger. Following a hunch, he fed a series of keywords into the search engine and then clenched his jaw as the results sprang onto his screen. He held it up towards her. 'Here is an example of how *not* interested in you they are. They already have all the information on you, including name, age and your Internet dating profile.'

She stood rigid, staring at the screen. 'That's my picture,' she whispered. 'Where did they get my picture?'

'Here's another—'

'Wait a minute, when did they take that?' Snatching the phone from him, she read the headline. '*Is She the Reason Nathaniel Wolfe Walked Off the Stage Last Night?* Well, of course I'm not the reason! I rescued you! We have to tell them the truth! Go out there and tell them the truth.'

He had no intention of telling anyone the truth.

'The press aren't interested in the truth. The best we can do is absent ourselves and hope they go and hound someone else instead.'

'That isn't very nice for the someone else.'

'You'd rather they set up camp outside your flat? Stick cameras through your letter box? Interview your neighbours? Track down every boyfriend you've ever had?'

'That would take them less than five minutes!' Her face was pale. 'I really hate having my picture taken. You have no idea how much I hate it. I don't even share photos on Facebook.'

He frowned as he saw a sheen of tears in her eyes. Accustomed to spending time with actresses and models who would run their own mother over if it meant a decent publicity shot, he found it hard to believe she was genuine. But there was no doubting the misery in her face. 'Why do you hate it?'

She dipped her head and fastened the buttons on her coat. ‘I just do. And I don’t see why anyone would be interested in my love life.’

‘Because you’re with me,’ he said gently. ‘People love reading about other people’s scandals and misfortunes over their breakfast cereal.’

‘I don’t. I *hate* reading about bad stuff happening. I like happy stories. *Man Rescues Dog from Tree*—that sort of thing.’

‘You’re not an average person. Which gives us a problem. Pack a bag and grab your passport. You’re coming with me.’

‘You cannot be serious.’

‘If I leave you here they’ll feed on you like sharks attacking raw meat.’

‘If I’m the raw meat in that analogy, then it isn’t a very flattering description. No woman wants to think her thighs would provide sufficient food for one shark, let alone sharks in the plural.’

‘Katie—’ he stifled his exasperation ‘—just get your passport. Move!’

She planted her feet firmly and straightened her shoulders as if ready to repel an invading army. ‘I’m not going anywhere with you. Apart from the fact I can’t relax around you, I have a job, friends, family—I have a *life*.’ She broke off as his phone rang. ‘Tell whoever it is that they need to pick you up right now and get you out of here.’

Nathaniel checked the identity of the caller. ‘It’s my agent. I need to take this. Don’t go anywhere. I’m going to arrange for us to be picked up.’

How long before the journalists made the connection with her famous sister?

How long before the comparisons started?

Katie paced up and down the bedroom, trying to stay calm.

Honestly, she was a grown woman, not a vulnerable teenager. She should have got over this by now.

She was who she was. Comparisons might hurt her feelings, but they wouldn’t actually damage her physically. She just needed to get on with her life and hope the fuss eventually died down. Maybe she could take a sleeping bag to the theatre and camp there until this all blew over. The security guys had always been really kind to her.

Through the open door she could hear Nathaniel's cultured drawl as he issued a string of commands down the phone.

*He found her sexy.*

Gripped by a fit of shivering, Katie rubbed her hands up her arms.

'Nathaniel Wolfe, screen god and global sex symbol.'

Did he really find her sexy? She'd convinced herself that the chemistry was all wishful thinking on her part....

'Have you got your passport?' He was standing in the doorway, and the way he watched her with those slanting blue eyes made it impossible to think of anything but sex. Wild, crazy, animal sex—the sort she'd read about but never experienced.

Seriously unsettled, Katie turned away. 'I don't need my passport. I'm going to go straight to the theatre and lock myself in the wardrobe department. They have security there, and—'

'You're not going back to the theatre.'

'Of course I'm going back to the theatre. I have a job to do.'

'I walked out on the opening night. The play has closed.' He delivered the news bluntly and she felt her knees wobble.

Not her job.

No.

She had a plan. *She had a dream.*

'You're s-saying I've lost my job?'

'Yes, and that's *my* fault,' Nathaniel growled, 'and if you could try not to look as though I've just killed your favourite pet, I'd appreciate it because right now we have to get out of here and it isn't going to help to be weighed down with guilt and recrimination.'

*'I—I've really lost my job?'*

'Yes.' The word hissed through his teeth. 'But I'll fix it.'

'How? Are you going to go back on that stage?'

'No.'

'Then you can't fix it.' The implications thudded home. 'This play was an important part of my career plan. I was going to get noticed. It was

the first rung of the ladder ...'

'There are other plays—'

'Do you know how many people applied for that job?' Panic drove her voice up an octave. 'Eight hundred! And it's the same for every job. You have no idea what it's like—'

'I'll give you access to my address book.'

'I don't want to make it because of who I know.'

'Then you're being naïve,' he said coldly, 'because that's what success in this business is all about.'

Trying to think straight, Katie shook her head stub bornly. 'Apart from the fact I don't have any money, I have a really important meeting today with a costume designer. It's even more important now I'm jobless.'

Jobless. The word made her want to hyperventilate. She couldn't afford to be jobless.

Nathaniel sighed. 'What's her name?'

'Meredith Beynon.'

'Never heard of her. She'll do nothing for your career.'

'But—'

'What you need is an apprenticeship with one of the top costume designers. Have you heard of Alicia Brent?'

'Of course. Everyone has. But she's not going to talk to someone like me.'

'She will if I tell her to. Good. That's settled. Now, fetch your passport. We have to get out of here.'

Katie's head was spinning. 'You know Alicia Brent?'

'Yes. And if it doesn't work out with her, there are others.' His voice had an edge to it. 'Passport!'

Suddenly her future was hazy and terrifyingly unclear. A meeting with Alicia Brent wasn't going to pay off her debts, was it? *She needed work.* 'Where are you planning to go?'

'A journalist-free zone. I need to lie low until the Sapphire ceremony. A deserted island. Sun, sea and se—'

*'I am not having sex with you.'*

A ghost of a smile touched his mouth. 'I was going to say seclusion, but sex sounds good to me. You talk when you're awake and you talk in your sleep. It remains to be seen whether you talk during sex.'

# CHAPTER FOUR

*WHY the hell had he brought her with him?*

At the time it had seemed the only way to make sure she didn't talk to the press, but he was only now realising what her presence meant. He had company at a time when he wanted it least.

Not just company. He had Katie—a girl who believed that all would be right with the world providing you had someone with whom to share your problems. A girl who believed talking solved everything.

It was probably just punishment for dragging her into this mess.

She was furious with him.

He glanced at her tense profile, careful to reveal nothing of his own emotions.

'You don't have to look as though your world has come to an end,' he ground out. 'It was a small-time costume drama with second-rate actors. It would have been provincial and boring.'

'It was another step up the ladder.'

'How many steps does this ladder of yours have? You might want to think about taking two at a time or you're never going to reach the top.'

'Do you have to be sarcastic about everything?'

'That play would *not* have progressed your career.'

'I had some really original ideas for the costumes. My name would have been on the credits.'

'Which three people would have seen. Anyway, you'd never have got the job.'

'Thanks. So not only did you stop me going, but now you're telling me I'm rubbish at my job.' She turned her head deliberately and looked out of the window. 'Just because I don't work in Hollywood doesn't mean I don't have feelings. I think you're incredibly mean.'

'Mean?' Fighting an inexplicable urge to laugh, Nathaniel stared at the

back of her head. ‘I haven’t heard that word since I started at boarding school.’

‘I bet you were a complete nightmare at boarding school.’

‘I had my moments. And for your information, I wasn’t being “mean” or sarcastic, I was being honest. They wouldn’t have given you the job.’

Her shoulders grew a little stiffer. ‘I heard you the first time. You don’t need to repeat yourself.’

‘I saw the costume plot. Your drawings are in a class of their own.’

‘Just because I’m not—’ Her head turned. ‘What did you say?’

‘Your drawings are in a class of their own. You have great talent. And you would have terrified them. Your work is far too imaginative and original. They would have gone with something “safe” and predictable that has been done a thousand times before. Provincial, boring producers don’t want to rock the boat.’ That assessment was met with a long tense silence.

‘You think I have talent? You’re not just saying that because I’m angry with you?’

‘I’m saying it because it’s the truth.’

‘Oh.’ A confused frown pulled at her brows. ‘Well, that’s nice. Unfortunately you admiring my work won’t pay my bills or help me up the ladder. Not that I expect you to understand. You live in a world of private jets, bodyguards and limousines. I live in a world of rising debt and unemployment.’

*She knew nothing about his world.*

‘Relax, wardrobe. I’ll make some calls and get you work in Hollywood. If it doesn’t work out with Alicia, then I’ll call Rupert Schneider or Howard Kennington.’

Her mouth opened and closed. ‘You know *all* those people?’

‘Yes. And they’re always on the lookout for new talent. They’d love you.’

‘Y-you’d introduce me? Seriously?’ She looked stunned. ‘Well, thank you. It’s nice to know you do, in fact, have a conscience.’

‘Don’t endow me with qualities I don’t possess. I’m introducing you

because you have talent, and because I can't stand a woman who sulks, especially if I'm stuck on an island with her.'

'You should have thought of that before you forced me to come along with you. There is such a thing as karma, you know. You'll be punished in some way for doing this to me.'

'I'm already being punished. I'm about to be trapped on an island with a woman who can't stop talking. Man's idea of hell, believe me.' Smiling, Nathaniel leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes. Immediately, reality closed in and his thoughts turned dark. He saw Jacob sitting in the front row. Saw those dark eyes looking at him. Knowing. They were bound together by the past. Nothing was ever going to change that.

His smile faded and his eyes flew open.

*Oh, yes, he was being punished.*

'Are you all right?' Katie's big green eyes were full of concern. 'Only you're gripping your seat really hard.'

Nathaniel released his grip and the blood flowed back into his fingers. 'I'm a nervous flyer.'

'You flew a plane in your last film. You have a pilot's licence.'

'Precisely.' He hauled in all of his professional skills to make sure he didn't falter. 'I hate being flown by someone else. I'd rather be the one at the controls but I had a lousy night's sleep on your lumpy sofa and I didn't want to crash us into a mountain.'

Her steady gaze suggested that she wasn't convinced and he reminded himself that Katie Field noticed things. He couldn't afford to lower his guard. Which suited him just fine. Apart from last night, onstage, Nathaniel couldn't remember the last time he'd lowered his guard.

'So this island—' The hope of new contacts seemed to have cheered her slightly. 'Where is it? And how do you know we won't be followed around when we get there?'

'It's a tropical island off the coast of South America. And the reason I know we won't be followed around is because we'll be the only two people on the island.'

'Just us?' Her voice was a horrified squeak. 'You expect me to spend two weeks without a single person to talk to?'

'I believe there are two species of parrot found on the island. If you play your cards right, one of them might talk to you.'

'You may think you're funny, but I'm the sort of person who likes company. If you're the only person on the island—' her eyes narrowed '—then I'll just have to talk to you.'

'Talk away. Just don't expect me to answer.' Nathaniel watched her through the dark shield of his lashes. 'On the other hand, if it's company you want, I'm sure we can find some way of passing the time that doesn't include conversation.'

He was arrogant, overbearing—Katie sighed. *And insanely sexy.*

How could he be sexy when he was asleep? Strands of dark hair flopped over his forehead giving him a dangerous, rakish look. The bold black brows and darkened jaw were wholly masculine and as for that mouth—

She looked away quickly, her heart thudding against her chest.

*No, no, no.*

She wasn't going to do that to herself. Not again. No more fantasies about unobtainable guys. She knew who she was now and was comfortable with herself. Five minutes of idle flirtation with a hot movie star didn't change anything.

Blind with tiredness but totally unable to relax enough to sleep, Katie stared out of the window at the tropical islands that studded the sparkling ocean below.

Some of the tiredness sloughed away as she gazed beneath her. The sea was dotted with emerald-green islands, each framed by white sands and coral reefs.

Clear turquoise water lapped at secluded coves. *Paradise*, she thought, *with a twist.*

She sneaked a glance at Nathaniel, sleeping beside her.

*He was the twist.*

What secrets was he hiding? Who were Annabelle and Carrie? Why did he feel the need to bury himself on a deserted island?

The questions spiralled in her head until sheer exhaustion made her

fall asleep. When she woke it was to find Nathaniel staring out of the window.

For a few seconds she saw torment and anguish in his eyes and then he realised she was awake and quickly blanked it.

What was going on in his life? *What was he hiding?* ‘Have we arrived?’

‘We’re in Rio de Janeiro. It’s a short helicopter hop to Wolfe Island.’

‘This island—’ she retrieved her bag from under her seat ‘—you said your brother owns it?’

‘He’s a hotelier. Very convenient at times like this.’

‘Wolfe.’ Katie stared at him for a moment, wondering how she could have failed to make the connection. ‘Sebastian Wolfe is your brother?’

‘That’s right.’

‘I’ve heard of him, of course. I just hadn’t realised—you never talk about your family.’

‘And I don’t intend to start.’

‘You’re not close to your family?’

A muscle flickered at the corner of his mouth. ‘You certainly like to live dangerously.’

‘If we’re going to be trapped together for the next two weeks we have to know a few things about each other.’

Those sexy, slanting eyes were faintly mocking. ‘You need to know I’m dangerous when I’m cross-examined.’

‘And I’m dangerous when I’m deprived of human conversation. I’m not cross-examining you. I’m just asking about your family. I don’t see what’s wrong with that. I’m just being polite.’

‘Let’s set some ground rules, shall we?’ Thick dark lashes swept down to conceal his expression. ‘You don’t ask me anything personal and I won’t ask you anything personal. In fact, why don’t we just agree to a no-talking rule for the next two weeks? It’s fine with me if we keep our relationship purely physical. We can communicate via body language.’

Katie chose to ignore that. ‘You can ask me anything you like. I don’t have secrets. And I can’t not talk for two weeks. Talking is how I relieve tension.’

He leaned towards her, his blue eyes two narrow, dangerous slits of simmering sensuality. ‘Want to know how I relieve tension, wardrobe?’

‘No, I do not.’ Trapped by his gaze, she found it hard to breathe. He was a man who clearly understood the effect he had on women.

As if to confirm that, his smile was slow and confident. ‘Sure?’

‘Completely sure.’

‘But you’re curious.’ His voice was soft and seductive. ‘Admit it—you’ve been wondering how it is going to feel when we eventually stop all this self-control nonsense and kiss each other.’

‘I haven’t. It hasn’t crossed my mind.’

‘You’re a terrible liar.’

‘And you’re impossibly arrogant. And arrogance,’ she said breathlessly, ‘is never an attractive trait, even for the Sexiest Man Alive.’ Her heart was pounding and the blood hummed in her ears.

‘You think I’m the sexiest man alive?’

‘I was quoting opinion polls.’ Thoroughly flustered, Katie looked out of the window again. ‘We’re landing.’ *Thank goodness.* How come he always knew what to say and she never did? How come he never seemed to feel awkward?

He unbuckled his seat belt and leaned across to do hers. ‘Let’s move. The helicopter is waiting.’

The first thing that hit her when she stepped out onto the island was the intense heat and the colours. Deep green palm trees shaded milky white sand, and a parrot added a flash of exotic red as it took refuge in the trees clustered in the centre of the island. The hot sun was a ball of orange and the sea was a magic carpet of glittering jewelled blue.

‘Beats London in February.’ Nathaniel took her arm and drew her away from the helicopter. ‘Here we are. Home sweet home. Otherwise known as Paradise Villa. All the bedrooms open onto the terrace and overlook the sea. Take your pick.’

Feeling hot and sticky in her jeans, Katie walked into the house and stopped dead, stunned by what she saw. ‘Oh, it’s—’

‘Yes. My brother has flawless taste. It’s the jewel in his company

crown. VIP all the way.'

Katie gazed around her. The outdoor living area was cleverly designed to offer maximum shade while making the most of the breathtaking views. Exotic plants swayed lazily in the breeze and deep cream sofas invited relaxation and indulgence. The only sound was the swish of the sea as it rushed onto the sand. It was another world. 'Who can afford to stay here?'

'We can.' Nathaniel urged her forward. 'Most of the living space is outdoors, obviously, because of the view. Terrace, infinity pool, hammocks—you'll find everything you need to chill out and do nothing. If you get bored doing nothing, there are water sports.'

Katie felt faint. 'So when people come here, they book the whole island?'

'Indeed they do. They come here for peace and quiet and to experience the unique challenges of having hot sweaty sex in a hammock.' His smile was slow and sexy. 'You've never tried sex in a ham mock?'

'You're not funny.' Feeling as though she'd been plunged into a furnace, Katie pulled off her jumper. 'Is there somewhere I can buy some clothes? Next time you kidnap someone, warn them to pack for hot weather. I'm boiling to death wearing jeans in this heat.' Or maybe it wasn't the heat. *Maybe it was him ...*

That disturbing blue gaze was slumberous. 'The staff were instructed to put some clothes in your room.'

Great. Her worst nightmare. Someone else choosing her clothes.

Speculating on the sort of woman the staff would have expected to see with Nathaniel Wolfe and sensing major embarrassment, Katie's heart sank. She'd rather wear jeans and risk heatstroke. 'I can tell you now that nothing will fit.'

'If nothing fits, then you can walk around naked.'

'You're still not funny.' Lifting her chin, Katie walked across the terrace and back into the villa. 'I presume the bedrooms are this way?'

'That's the master suite. Unless you want to share it with me, you need to turn left.'

Katie turned left so sharply she almost fell over.

The door to another bedroom suite was open and she escaped inside, her eyebrows lifting as she saw the rose petals sprinkled on the white silk bedcover and the candles clustered around bowls of scented flowers.

It was a room for romance. A room for loving.

'Miss Katie?' A smiling woman ambled slowly into the room carrying soft fluffy towels. 'I'm Rosa, and if there's anything you need during your stay, you just have to ask.'

Katie frowned, confused. 'I thought—He said we were on our own.'

Rosa laughed, her smooth brown face alight with amusement. 'Bless you. This place has a staff of twenty. But we all live on the mainland. We arrive in time to make breakfast and leave after supper. So you have the best of both worlds. I arranged for some clothes for you, but if they're not right just let me know.'

They were going to be too tight, all the wrong colours and it was going to be hideously embarrassing. But Katie was too polite to complain. 'I'm sure they'll be perfect. Thanks very much.'

Perfect or not, it was a relief to peel off her jeans. After a deliciously cool shower in a luxurious bathroom with one side open to the beach, she wrapped herself in a soft fluffy white towel and wandered into the walk-in closet. *Oh, to live like this.* An array of colourful bikinis had been spread out for her and she gave them a single horrified glance and reached for a primrose sundress. Yellow was too bold a colour for her, but it was better than squeezing into a bikini in front of Nathaniel Wolfe.

She slipped on the dress, relieved to find it fitted perfectly. It was extremely pretty—in fact, the only thing wrong with it was the colour. It was so *bright*. And she never wore bright clothes. She preferred to blend into the background.

With a short laugh, Katie looked in the mirror and shook her head.

No chance of blending in dressed in yellow. Slipping her feet into a pair of pretty flip-flops, she walked back onto the terrace feeling as conspicuous as a sunflower in a vegetable patch.

Nathaniel had stripped off his shirt and was sprawled unselfconsciously on the white sun lounger in nothing but a pair of low-

slung board shorts that showed off his rippling abs. ‘It’s going to be hard to swim in a dress, wardrobe.’

Feeling about as appetising as a piece of uncooked pasta, Katie sat down neatly on the sun lounger furthest away from him. ‘I’m not swimming.’ *Strip almost naked and parade in front of a man who was fed a daily diet of size-zero women?* Please.

He glanced up from his phone. ‘You can’t swim?’

‘I can swim if I want to. I don’t want to.’

‘Why not? Swimming is the only way to stay cool.’

Katie slid off her sandals. ‘Actually, I’m not hot.’ A sardonic smile touched the corners of his mouth. ‘You look hot to me.’ Leaving that ambiguous comment floating in the air, he leaned across and passed her a glass of chilled lemonade. ‘What was wrong with the selection of bikinis Rosa bought you?’

‘Nothing was wrong with them.’

‘Then why aren’t you wearing one of them?’ Abandoning subtlety in favour of honesty, Katie glared at him. ‘Because there is no way I’m wearing a bikini in front of you!’

‘Why not?’

‘Is that a serious question?’ Judging from his blank expression, she decided it was. ‘Nathaniel, there are basically two types of women—the padded version and the unpadded version. You hang out with the unpadded version. I’m the padded version. You’ve probably never met one of me before.’

‘The padded version?’

‘I’m designed with extra cushioning,’ she muttered, ‘built for comfort, not speed. And now can we please talk about something else?’

‘That’s why you won’t wear the bikini?’ A slow smile spread across his face. ‘Because you’re worried about your body?’

‘Call me vain, but I don’t want to spend the whole day sucking in my stomach.’

‘So don’t.’ Smiling, he leaned back against the lounger and closed his eyes. ‘Women have such a distorted view of what a guy finds sexy. If the

rest of you is anything to go by, I'm sure you have a very sexy stomach. Put the bikini on, and I'll give you my verdict.'

Her gaze drifted to his wide shoulders and hard chest. He had the body of a man who lived a physical life. 'I'd rather boil alive than let you see my stomach.'

'Sweetheart, if you're going to spend two weeks on a tropical island, fully clothed, then you *will* boil alive.' The fact that he was laughing at her doubled her tension.

'Don't make fun of me.'

'For what it's worth, I think you're extremely pretty,' he drawled, 'so all this insecurity about yourself is misplaced.'

'Nathaniel, I saw your leading lady in *Alpha Man*. She was a sex goddess.'

'She was a spoiled princess with a vicious temper.'

Katie remembered the high-octane sex scenes that had held the entire audience gripped. 'You didn't seem to mind her too much on screen. I seem to remember that the chemistry between you was described as "superexplosive."'

'I'm an actor.' His tone was flat. 'It's what I do.'

'Kissing the most beautiful women in the world? Tough job.'

'It can be.'

And he was acting now. She didn't think for a moment that the man lounging across from her was the real Nathaniel Wolfe. 'So how does it work, preparing for a part like that? Did you have extra training for the part of *Alpha Man*?'

'I spent two months with the Special Forces.'

'You ran around the countryside with a big pack on your back?'

'Amongst other things.'

She could imagine him, hair cropped short, pushing himself to the limits. Nathaniel Wolfe, bad boy. 'Which Special Forces? U.S. or the UK?'

'If I told you that I'd have to kill you.' He spoke with that light, mocking tone that made her stomach curl. 'Let's just say it was the only time I've never been bothered by the press. Those guys are the definitive

alpha man. And they're a team. Better than any family.' Something in his voice made her glance towards him but his profile revealed nothing.

*Better than family.*

Apart from briefly mentioning his brother Sebastian, he'd already banned that topic, hadn't he? 'You're not the only one with a complicated family. When Dad died and I discovered all his gambling debts—to start with I was so upset. And angry. I couldn't believe he'd led this whole secret life. I kept thinking of all those years Mum had kept it to herself—we had no money as kids and twice we lost our home.'

Nathaniel tilted his head. 'So basically we agree that families suck.'

Katie thought about her sister. About the way she'd divorced herself from her family.

'I don't think families suck.' She dragged her eyes from his mouth, horrified to find herself thinking about sex. Again. 'But sometimes they're messy. I still think you should stick together. Is your brother older than you?'

His gaze was watchful. 'If you don't want to end up in the pool, you should change the subject.'

'Sorry. I'm not used to having banned topics of conversation. I'll try and talk about the weather. Or the gardens. This place is truly beautiful.' Katie looked around her and saw a mesh of palm trees and foliage, the green broken up by splashes of bright tropical colour. Spotting a large green gecko basking in the sun by the pool, she reached in her bag for a sketchbook.

'You're drawing him?'

'Why not? He's lovely.' Her pencil flew over the page and she took out a box of pastels and played with colour combinations. 'I love the mix of turquoise and tropical green. Those colours would be gorgeous in silk.' She narrowed her eyes, imagining it, spinning designs in her head.

'If you like colours so much, why do you always wear brown.'

Her pencil stilled. 'I like brown.' *And she was invisible in brown.* Katie tightened her grip on the pencil. Just holding it soothed her. 'I still love the feel of my pencil. It reminds me of when I was a child. I used to watch all the Hollywood movies and redesign the costumes.'

He locked his arms behind his head. Muscles rippled. ‘Favourite movie of all time?’

‘*Gone with the Wind*.’ She kept her eyes on her sketch pad and not on those muscles. ‘Fabulous costumes and so romantic. What about you? I guess it’s *Alpha Man*.’

‘I never watch my own movies.’ Dropping his arms, he leaned across and looked at her drawing. ‘I love the old Hitchcock films. *The 39 Steps* and *Notorious*—Cary Grant. One of the greatest actors never to win a Sapphire.’

‘Does it mean that much? Winning a Sapphire?’

His answer was to spring to his feet and dive into the pool.

Katie put down the pencil, feeling guilty

She shouldn’t ask him anything personal. It wasn’t as if they knew each other. They were just two strangers trapped together by unfortunate circumstances. And yet, after the emotion she’d witnessed at the theatre and in her flat, she felt as though she did know him. She knew little bits—Annabelle, Carrie—small pieces of a jigsaw that meant nothing because there was no picture.

Frustrated, she watched as he cooled off in the pool. The sweat prickled her back. The sundress felt like a coat but there was no way she was removing it.

The initial euphoria at finding herself in paradise, dimmed. It was only paradise if you could afford the time off. She couldn’t. If she couldn’t find herself another job fast, she wouldn’t be able to pay the mortgage. Her career would stall. Her dream would die.

And she wasn’t prepared to give up on her dream.

By the time Nathaniel pulled himself out of the pool her stress levels had reached breaking point. ‘Does this place have Internet access?’

He reached for a towel and dried his face. ‘Why?’

‘I need to look for a job. You said you’d introduce me to costume designers, but I don’t see how you can do that when we’re here. I need to do some job hunting.’

‘Wait there.’ Without enlightening her as to his intentions, he strolled

into the villa. Moments later he emerged carrying a thick sheaf of papers held together by an elastic band. He dropped it into her lap. ‘Read that. It’s the script for my next movie.

I’m finalising the funding soon. We haven’t chosen a costume designer yet.’

Katie stared at the sheets of paper, looking for the meaning behind the gesture. He felt guilty? No, Nathaniel Wolfe didn’t do guilt. Then why? Just to shut her up, she decided. To give her something to occupy her so that he didn’t have to spend time with her. ‘There’s no way you’d give it to someone like me.’

‘Do me some sketches and we’ll talk.’

She kept the hope ruthlessly in check. ‘Because your conscience is pricking you and you feel guilty that you lost me my job?’

‘I’ve already told you, when it comes to my work, I don’t have a conscience.’ Without a flicker of regret or apology, he confirmed her own thoughts on that topic. ‘I pick the best person for the job. I liked the drawings I saw in your flat. The question is, can you do it again with a contemporary script? This isn’t Shakespeare.’

*He liked her drawings enough to give her a chance?* ‘Are you acting or directing?’

‘Directing. Don’t think about actors when you read it—just think about the characters.’

‘So are you giving up film acting?’ Refusing to be intimidated by his silence, she tightened her fingers on the wedge of papers in her lap. ‘Was that why you agreed to a stint on the stage in London?’

‘Don’t you ever stop asking questions?’

‘Sorry. I’m not good with silences. I’m trying to be polite.’

‘We’re not at a palace garden party.’ His soft drawl brushed over her nerve endings and Katie looked at him.

‘You’re not the only one finding this situation difficult. You could be a little more friendly.’ And a little less intimidating. A little less masculine. A little less ... everything.

The smile that tugged the corners of his mouth definitely wasn’t

friendly. It was dangerous. ‘Change into a bikini and I’ll show you how friendly I can be.’

He was just baiting her, she knew that. He couldn’t possibly be serious. A man who had his pick of women wasn’t ever going to pick her.

Katie thought about her sister’s perfect bone structure and endless legs. Next to Paula, she’d never felt anything but depressingly ordinary and a man like Nathaniel Wolfe was never going to be interested in ordinary.

Her fingers tightened around the bunch of papers. ‘How long until dinner?’

If he wasn’t going to talk, she might as well read the script.

Nathaniel waited impatiently, his fingers strumming a rhythm on the table. Two messages sat unopened on his phone, both from Jacob.

His temper and his mood simmered along at one degree under boiling point. Even on the other side of the world, his past hunted him. ‘Did Katie say how long she would be?’

‘I knocked on her door but there was no answer. I thought she might have been asleep. You had a long flight.’ Ben poured chilled wine into a glass. ‘You want me to call her again?’

‘I’ll do it myself.’ Desperate for distraction, Nathaniel left the phone on the table and strode back inside the villa towards the guest suite. The door was shut. He tapped once and received no answer so he opened the door and walked in.

And stopped dead.

Katie lay on her stomach on the bed, dressed only in a skimpy lace plunge bra and an equally skimpy thong, both in the same shade of hot pink. The headphones from her bright pink iPod trailed from her ears and she lay with her chin on her hand, completely absorbed by the script. Her head bobbed in time to the music and occasionally she made a little sketch in the margin.

Nathaniel’s mind blanked. He forgot about the texts waiting for him on his phone. Instead he stood still, transfixed by the creamy curve of

her bottom revealed by the thong. He remembered the lacy camisole she'd worn to bed. Nothing about the way she dressed hinted at a secret love of sexy underwear. *Underneath all that boring brown she'd been wearing hot pink lacy silk?*

Engulfed by a scorching flame of lust, he felt himself harden. Dinner, he decided, was going to be delayed.

Kicking the door shut behind him, Nathaniel strolled into the room just as she glanced up and saw him there.

With a squeak of horror, she yanked the earphones out of her ears and scrambled off the bed, scattering pages of the script over the floor.

'Get out of here!' Her scarlet face clashing with the hot pink underwear, she grabbed the dress she'd been wearing earlier and clutched it to her chest, but not before Nathaniel had been treated to a full frontal display of her generous curves.

'Just for the record, you definitely don't need to suck in your stomach,' he drawled. 'And I thoroughly approve of the underwear.'

'Don't you *knock*?'

'I knocked. You weren't listening.'

'I was reading—'

'In your underwear?'

'I was *hot*.'

'Now, *that* we can agree on.' Nathaniel delivered a smile of undiluted masculine approval. 'Why do you always wear brown on the outside when you've got all that lacy pink going on underneath?'

Her green eyes flashed a warning. If he'd been keen on the safe route he would have left the room, but Nathaniel had always preferred to live dangerously so he strolled towards her, prised the dress from her rigid fingers and studied the smooth perfection of her soft curves. 'You have an incredible body.'

'*Get out of here!*'

He discovered that playing with fire distracted him from all the things he didn't want to be thinking about. 'Of all the secrets you've spilled in the past twenty-four hours, this one is definitely the best.' He tumbled

her back onto the bed, pinning her arms as she tried to roll.

‘What are you doing?’

‘You said you wanted to get to know me better. This is the quickest way I know.’ Without thinking he brought his mouth down on hers, capturing her soft lips with his, smothering her moan of shock. Her mouth opened and he tasted the sweetness and then desire slammed into him, the explosion of need consuming him like a fever. Nathaniel locked his hand in her hair and plundered that mouth, turning what had begun as an experiment into a kiss of such erotic intensity that the shock of it exploded right through his body. Sucked under by the sheer impact of raw physical chemistry, he slid his hand under the smooth curve of her bottom, bringing her into contact with the urgent thrust of his arousal. His need for her desperate, he teased her lower lip with his teeth and tongue and then lowered his mouth to her breast. Pink lacy fabric acted as a barrier between them and he dragged it aside with impatient fingers and fastened his mouth around one thrusting peak—and tasted heaven.

He heard the sudden snatch of her breath and felt her fingers dig hard into his shoulders. When he skimmed her breasts with tongue and fingers, she moaned under him, the sensuous movement of her hips unleashing a ravenous hunger inside him.

Nathaniel lost all sense of time and place.

His brain shut down and he responded with pure animal instinct.

Sliding his hand between her legs, he breached the barrier of her underwear and explored her slick softness with bold, gentle fingers. He felt her stiffen beneath him and then she shoved hard at his chest.

‘No.’

He heard her through a dark mist of ferocious, primal need.

‘*Nathaniel, no—*’

It was the tone that registered, rather than the words. That and the sharp bite of her nails in his shoulders.

Lifting his head, he stared into green eyes glazed with the same need that tore through him. He tried to speak but there was only one part of him that seemed to be working. Nathaniel licked his lips, realising that he hadn’t just found distraction, he’d found oblivion.

Shaken by his own lack of control, he rolled away from her. ‘Sorry,’ he drawled. ‘Blame it on the padding. For the record, it’s in all the right places.’

*What had happened to him?*

Seriously unsettled, he stared up at the canopy that draped the four-poster bed in soft creamy folds. *Romance*, he thought. The whole damn room was designed for romance and happy endings. And there wasn’t a happy ending within a million miles of him.

Nathaniel sprang to his feet and strolled towards the door. ‘I came to tell you dinner is served.’

‘Nathaniel—’

Behind him, he could hear the rustle of fabric as she pulled on her dress. He didn’t turn. Because he didn’t know what had happened, he couldn’t be sure it wouldn’t happen again.

His hand on the door handle, he gave a smile of self-mockery. ‘I’ll see you on the terrace, wardrobe.’

‘Nathaniel, for goodness’ sake, wait!’ There was a soft thud as her feet hit the floor. ‘You can’t just—We nearly—Damn it, do you ever talk about *anything*?’

*Not if he could help it.* He turned to look at her and then wished he hadn’t because her hair was mussed and sexy and her mouth was softly bruised from his kisses.

‘Do you have to talk about *everything*?’

‘Not everything—’ she looked confused, exasperated ‘—but you just ... we just—’

‘But we didn’t.’ Nathaniel opened the door. ‘You said no. I stopped. End of conversation.’

‘No, it isn’t the end of the conversation!’ She stalked over to him. ‘*Why* did you kiss me?’

‘You were lying semi-naked in provocative underwear on an enormous bed.’

‘So your criteria for having sex with someone is that you like their underwear. Don’t you ever want to get to know someone?’

*No, never.*

Nathaniel took advantage of the open door. ‘Dinner,’ he murmured, ‘is definitely served.’

# CHAPTER FIVE

KATIE felt dizzy and light-headed, as if her body might float off at any moment.

It didn't help to tell herself that his job had taught him how to make a kiss hot and seductive and how to make a woman feel irresistible. Nor did it help to remind herself that she'd been half naked, which was sufficient provocation for a red-blooded male like Nathaniel Wolfe.

In fact, nothing helped.

She still felt ... desirable.

Sneaking a look at him through the flickering candles that lit the dinner table, she saw that he was staring at a point in the distance, his dark brows locked in a brooding frown.

Unobserved, Katie looked at his mouth. How many times had she watched him on the big screen and wondered how it would feel to be kissed by him?

Now she had her answer. *It felt incredible.*

She had to remind herself it wasn't real. If she fooled herself that he'd been carried away by passion, then she'd be forgetting her own theories. He was an actor. He could play any part he chose.

Awkward with the extended silence, she spoke. 'I read the play ....'

'Play?' His blank look made her realise how distracted he was.

'Your play.'

'Right.' His face cleared. 'If you were gripped enough to read it in your knickers, presumably you liked it. Any ideas?'

Determined not to show him how much that one kiss had flustered her, Katie beamed at Ben as he served chargrilled vegetables. 'Yum. That looks delicious, thanks. You spoil me.'

Ben returned the smile. 'I'll be hovering right here if there's anything you need, Miss Katie.'

'No, you won't.' Nathaniel's voice was silky smooth. 'If we need anything, we'll call you.'

As Ben discreetly melted away, Katie rolled her eyes and picked up her fork. 'Do people always do exactly what you want?'

'Evidently not,' he purred, 'or right now you would be naked on that bed underneath me and we'd be indulging in a form of communication that certainly doesn't require conversation.'

'There's nothing wrong with conversation.'

'Fine. So let's talk. Tell me why you always wear brown.'

'I happen to like the colour brown.'

He leaned forward, his gaze disturbingly acute. 'Why don't you like having your picture taken?'

'Not everyone is born an exhibitionist.'

'Here's a hint—' he spoke softly '—when you're lying, you need to look someone in the eye and act sincere. You, Katie Field, are an appalling liar. And you have your secrets, just like anyone else.' He lifted his glass and took a mouthful of wine, watching her over the rim of his glass.

Not secrets, she thought. Insecurities. It wasn't the same thing.

Their eyes held and she felt the blood pound in her ears.

But *he* had secrets, that much was obvious. And she suspected they were dark secrets. Secrets he didn't share with anyone.

What surprised her was how much she wanted him to share them.

*How much she wanted to provide a listening ear.*

He was looking at her with those spectacular eyes and suddenly talking and listening were the last things on her mind. It was obvious that he was thinking about that kiss. And so was she.

Her pulse thudding dangerously fast, Katie put down her fork. Seeking a safe subject, she chose acting. 'Tell me more about how you prepared for the part of Alpha Man.'

She half expected him to refuse, but he relaxed back in his chair and proceeded to regale her with stories about filming. He was witty and sharp, his observations about his cast members so wickedly incisive that

she found herself laughing even though she'd promised herself she wasn't going to fall under his spell.

He was such amusing company that it was only after the last of the plates had been cleared away that she realised he still hadn't revealed anything personal. The whole evening had been spent talking about other people.

'So, how about you, little Miss Talkalot.' He leaned across and topped up her wine glass. 'How did you end up designing costumes? School play?'

*Make me something to wear, Katie.*

'Way before the school play.' She dismissed her sister's petulant voice from her head. 'I always loved costumes. Clothes. I used to make my own dolls' clothes. We didn't have that much money so I used scraps of fabric and old buttons from Mum's sewing kit. I hovered around thrift stores, car boot sales—anything I could find. My friends and I used to play Hollywood.' Afraid she was boring him to death, she broke off and took a sip of her drink.

'You used to *play* Hollywood?'

'We'd pretend we were a film studio. Martha was the director.' Katie grinned at the memory. 'She was the bossy one. Then there was Emily—she was the drama queen so she always had the leading part. Sally and Jenny took whichever parts Emily didn't want.' And then there was her sister, Paula. *I have to be the princess. I'm the prettiest.*

'And you?'

'I made everyone else look good.' She gave a simple shrug. 'All I ever did at school was draw and draw. We had a school prom and I designed and made everyone's dresses. My parents wanted me to read English at university, but all I was interested in was art, fashion, the movies and theatre. That's all I ever wanted to do and they were so good about it. Were your parents good about you wanting to be an actor?'

'I never asked their opinion.' His face was inscrutable.

'I read somewhere that you left home at sixteen and went to Hollywood. That's pretty young. My parents would have totally freaked out if I'd suggested crossing the Atlantic at that age.'

‘I had an opportunity. I took it.’

‘And your parents didn’t try and talk you out of it? Lucky you. I did my degree in London and my mum and dad were constantly worried about what would happen to me. Not that I’m complaining,’ Katie said hastily, ‘because at the end of the day you know it’s because they care. Yours were obviously pretty chilled about that sort of stuff.’

His eyes glittered and he rose to his feet. ‘Goodnight, Katie.’

‘Oh, but I—’ Her mouth opened and closed because she was talking to herself. Nathaniel had gone.

Katie spent the next few days poring over the script and making sketches.

She saw virtually nothing of Nathaniel.

After that first night, he’d kept his distance. They ate meals together and when he talked about films he’d made he was entertaining company, but she was acutely aware that he was acting a part. The part of host. He said nothing about himself and his conversation was delivered with the same air of bored mockery that characterised all his communication. The slightest attempt on her part to turn their verbal exchanges into something more personal was met by an impenetrable icy wall.

Increasingly lonely, Katie took to hanging out with the staff. She befriended Ben and even went out fishing with him early one morning. She spent time with Sylvia and Kylie who cooked for them. Soon she was firm friends with everyone.

Everyone except Nathaniel.

‘You talked to Ben for so long today he couldn’t get his work done,’ Nathaniel drawled one evening as they ate a delicious meal.

Katie put down her fork, trying not to feel hurt.

‘We were chatting. Do you know he only gets to see his girlfriend once a week?’

‘Lucky guy.’ Nathaniel suppressed a yawn. ‘He gets the sex and none of the rest of the junk that comes with a relationship.’

‘Do you always have to be sarcastic about everything?’

‘Who says I’m being sarcastic?’

Katie thought about his wicked reputation with women. ‘Haven’t you ever been in love?’

He threw back his head and laughed, genuinely amused. ‘That’s a question straight from Katie-land where the sky is blue and the sun always shines.’

Angry, she stood quickly, knocking over her chair in the process. ‘Actually, the sky isn’t that blue in Katie-land. I’ve had my share of problems. My life has bumps in it, just like anyone’s. Right now I’ve lost my job, thanks to you, and there is no way any bank is going to give me another loan when I don’t have work. Not that I expect someone like you to understand.’

‘So if it’s raining in Katie-land,’ he said softly, ‘why are you always so damned cheerful?’

Katie picked the chair up and sat down on it slowly. ‘I don’t know.’ She bit her lip. ‘I suppose I just prefer being happy to being miserable. Over the years I’ve learned what cheers me up.’

‘Talking?’

‘Yes—’ she flushed ‘—I like people. I find people interesting and generally very warm and friendly. Human contact is what makes life OK when things are tough.’

‘Really? Generally I find it to be the other way round.’ His beautiful mouth curled. ‘Human beings are what make life tough when things are OK. I presume your need to talk and make friends is the reason you’re distracting all the staff.’

‘I’m not distracting them.’

‘Sweetheart, you’re virtually on the payroll.’

‘I’d love to be on the payroll! At least then I’d be earning some money. And it’s better than being lonely by the pool.’

‘Lonely?’ Black eyebrows rose in incredulous surprise. ‘How can you possibly be lonely? You’re in paradise.’

‘It’s only paradise if you have someone to share it with. What’s the point of spotting a gorgeous bird if you don’t have anyone to get excited with.’ Katie poked at her food. ‘Today I was reduced to having a long conversation with a lizard.’

'I saw one unconscious on the path,' he drawled, deadpan. 'Now I know why. He'd been "Katied."'

'You think it's funny, but I happen to like talking to people.'

'I had no idea you were lonely. I thought you were working on my script.'

'I am, but I work better when I have people around me. My creativity is totally stifled otherwise.'

'You can talk to me.'

'You're hardly ever around. You avoid all conversation. You're no fun.'

A slow, dangerous smile touched his mouth. 'Any time you want me to demonstrate how much fun I can be, just let me know.'

'I don't mean that sort of fun.' Her heart galloped off at a frantic pace. 'I mean the sort of fun you can have just talking to someone—' She broke off as his phone buzzed. 'Aren't you going to answer that?'

'No.' He leaned towards her, those impossibly thick lashes shielding his gorgeous eyes. 'There's more fun to be had by not talking to someone.'

*Why was he ignoring his phone?*

'Stop playing games.' Katie wiped damp palms over her shorts. 'If we had sex, you'd really hurt me.'

'I promise to keep my caveman tendencies under control and be incredibly gentle.'

Her mouth dried and her cheeks flamed. 'I didn't mean it like that.'

'I know what you meant.' He leaned back in his chair. 'Wicked, bad Nathaniel would bring thunderstorms to Katie-land. It could end in serious flooding.'

'You're mocking me, as usual, but I'd rather be optimistic than a cynic like you.'

His phone started to ring again but he continued to ignore it and stood. 'I'm sorry I've neglected you.' He held out his hand. 'I'm sorry I've been in a vile mood. Let's walk on the beach. You haven't lived until you've seen a sunset on Wolfe Island.'

Her gaze flickered to the phone, abandoned on the table. 'Don't you

think you should see who was ringing? It might be important.'

His fingers closed over hers, warm and strong. 'Not as important as seeing a sunset.'

'I'd love to see the sunset, but ...' With a final glance at the phone, she followed him down onto the soft, white sand that curved below the villa, telling herself that it wasn't her business if he ignored his calls. Enjoying the beach, she stooped to pick up a shell. 'I never imagined that anywhere as idyllic as this existed. How often do you come here?'

'Whenever I need privacy.'

Katie curled her toes into the sand, loving the warmth and the softness. 'It's lucky your brother owns it. It's a great place for family gatherings.'

'When I come here, it's for solitude.'

So he didn't come here with his family. Deciding that she'd better keep her mouth shut on that subject, Katie walked in silence, clamping her lips together whenever she had the urge to speak.

When they reached some large boulders that protected the next beach, he put out his hand to help her over. 'The best view on the island is from here.' He vaulted over the last rock with athletic grace and stood, powerful and strong, staring over the sea. 'This is Turtle Cove.'

'It's beautiful.' Slinging her bag down on the sand, Katie sat and rested her chin on her knees. 'I did some preliminary sketches for your script, by the way. Just a few ideas. Might be completely wrong and not what you were imagining.'

'Do you have them with you?'

She reached into her bag and pulled out her pad, suddenly nervous. 'They're just ideas.'

He sat down next to her and took her sketch pad. Silent, he flipped through the pages. 'Brown?'

'Yes, because in this scene she isn't sure of herself. She doesn't want to stand out. Then later—' Katie leaned across and turned another page '—here, she's wearing bolder, more flamboyant colours and everything is tailored because she isn't hiding behind her clothes any more.' Suddenly she realised what she'd done and she felt a flash of mortification. *She'd*

*made it personal. ‘If you don’t think it’s a good idea I can—’*

‘I think it’s a great idea. I wouldn’t have thought of doing it like that. You’ve shown her character arc through costume.’ Nathaniel studied the drawings carefully. If he spotted any parallels, he didn’t comment. ‘They’re original. Clever.’

‘You really like them?’

‘Yes. Can you work up a costume plot?’

‘Do you have a computer I can use?’

‘You can’t do it the old-fashioned way with pen and paper?’

‘Yes, but it won’t look so professional and you won’t be able to email it to whoever you need to email it to.’

‘Good point. I’ll sort something out for you.’ He sprang to his feet and held out his hand. ‘Sun’s going down. If you want romantic, this is the closest you’ll get.’

She didn’t want romantic, did she? At least, not with this man. She wasn’t that foolish. But after a moment’s hesitation she took his hand and let him pull her upright. The chemistry sparked immediately.

She knew he felt it too, because she heard him swear under his breath.

For a moment she thought he was going to ignore the heat, but then he hauled her into him and the searing burn of his mouth on hers melted the last of her inhibitions. Flames licked at her nerve endings and a wicked thrill shot through her entire body. She felt his hand slide to the base of her back and he pulled her hard against him, his other hand locked in the soft mass of her hair as he used his mouth with erotic purpose.

His fingers massaged her scalp, his touch so inherently sexual that her excitement levels shot into overload.

Her eyes flew open and she found herself staring straight into his.

In that single moment she saw Alpha Man, the ruthless soldier about to possess the daughter of his enemy.

Confused by that vision, Katie pulled her mouth from his. ‘No.’ It was hard to breathe. ‘This is ... surreal. I look at you and I see the movie star, not the man.’

He lowered his forehead to hers. ‘You just kissed the man, Katie.’

She dragged herself out of his arms, and stepped backwards, the sand warm and soft under her feet. ‘I just assume you’re acting. Like earlier in the week—’

‘I wasn’t acting then and I’m not acting now.’

Of course he was acting. He could act desire every bit as convincingly as he could act daring and dangerous. ‘You know how to look at a woman in a way that makes her feel beautiful. The scary thing is I *know* that, but it still works on me.’

‘Katie—’

‘And much as I’d love to tell myself that I’m stunning enough to attract the world’s sexiest movie star, one look in the mirror reminds me that I’m not. You can look at a woman like that and not mean it, I know you can. You do it on the screen all the time. When you kissed the daughter of your enemy in *Alpha Man* you were so convincing that I actually believed that the two of you must be together in real life because I just couldn’t imagine how you could look at her like that and not mean it.’

‘I’ve already told you I couldn’t stand the woman.’

‘I know.’ Katie gave a confused laugh. ‘Which shows how good an actor you are! And that proves my point.’ She ran her tongue over her lips, wishing she’d never let him kiss her. Now she just wanted more and she knew that if she allowed herself more she’d be in dangerous territory. Whatever she shared with this man would be scorching and intense, but it would also be fleeting and ultimately painful. ‘You made me come here because you were worried I’d talk to the press, so I’m here. But I don’t want to do anything else. I’d be crazy to let myself fall for that whole movie-star thing. Just because you’re bored and you’ve been deprived of your diet of Hollywood women, doesn’t mean you can use me as a substitute.’ Her hand shaking, she rubbed her fingers over her forehead. ‘I don’t move in the same world as you. Quick meaningless sex just doesn’t work for me.’

‘Have you ever tried meaningless sex?’ There was humour in those eyes. But there was also gentleness and it was the surprising gentleness that ripped at her self-control.

'No.'

'You should try everything once.'

'In that case you should try opening up and trusting. You might find a meaningful relationship really satisfying.'

Still holding her hands in his, he backed her against the rocks. 'Right now I know exactly what I'd find satisfying.'

Sandwiched between smooth rock and solid male muscle, Katie's willpower faltered. Her body throbbed and ached and excitement was a tight ball in the pit of her stomach. Sexual tension pulsed between them, the heat so intense that it was like flying into the sun. She stared up into his face, trying to read those eyes ....

As he lowered his head towards her, she thought about the week they'd spent together. He'd told her nothing about himself. She knew no more now than she had when she'd worked in the theatre with him.

Katie planted a hand in the centre of his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart under her fingers. 'Are you ever yourself?'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You're playing a role. Do you ever play yourself, Nathaniel?'

The change in him was almost imperceptible but it was there. Shimmering desire faded and his eyes were guarded. A tiny muscle flickered in his jaw and he watched her without speaking.

Then he released her in a smooth movement and stepped away. The cynical, mocking look was back in his eyes. 'We would have been good together.'

Katie was glad she was leaning against the rock. Her knees were shaking so much she needed the support. Her hands ached to reach out for him, drag him back to her, lose herself in the heat of his mouth.

But she wanted it to be real, and this wasn't real.

They'd spent a week together, but she knew she hadn't spent a single moment with the real Nathaniel Wolfe.

His head throbbing from yet another sleepless night, Nathaniel flung snorkelling gear onto the deck while Ben and one of the other members of staff loaded food and equipment.

'Where are you going?' A soft, female voice came from behind him and he turned to see Katie standing on the jetty. Her feet were bare and her hands pushed into a pair of shorts. Even from a distance, he could feel her tension. Her cheeks were pale and there were dark shadows under her eyes.

Having spent most of the night wide awake in the hammock, it gave him some satisfaction to know that she wasn't sleeping any better than he was.

'We are going sailing. Given my misfortune of being trapped on this island with someone with your moral code, I need a distraction to take my mind off the total lack of meaningless sex.' *And a*

*distraction to keep his mind off the new messages waiting on his phone.*

He picked up the final box and stowed it on board.

Katie didn't move. 'I think it would be best if I stayed here.'

'No, it wouldn't.' Before he could talk himself out of it, Nathaniel scooped her into his arms and deposited her onto the boat, keeping his eyes averted from her long, bare legs. 'This is one of the best dive sites in Brazil. You'll love it.'

'You're afraid to leave me here in case I tell someone where you are. What do you think I'm going to do, Nathaniel? Send up smoke signals? Even if I wanted to call someone, I can't. You locked up my phone.'

He wished he'd locked up his own. Those messages gnawed at him, acting like a block jammed in a door he was trying to slam shut.

'You don't need a phone.'

'You're afraid I'm going to tell someone about Annabelle or Carrie, but I swear I'm not going to mention their names to anyone. I don't even know who they are!'

It was possible to feel cold, he discovered, even when the sun was pounding down from high in the sky. 'I want you to forget you ever heard those names.'

'Fine, I'll forget I ever heard them. But once in a while it would be good for you to just trust someone. It must be incredibly lonely living a life where you think everyone is out to get you.' She pushed aside the snorkelling gear and sat down on the deck with a thump. 'I've never

snorkelled. I'll probably drown.'

'You'll love it.'

'What if I inhale water?'

'I'll give you mouth-to-mouth.' Wishing he'd never allowed his mind to go in that direction, Nathaniel sprang onto the boat. 'Let's go.'

Under sail, the catamaran sped through the water, swift and smooth, responding well to the light winds. The water sparkled in the sunlight and shoals of colourful fish darted beneath them.

Katie stretched her legs out on the seat and tilted her face up to the sun.

Wondering whether he'd made a mistake bringing her, Nathaniel pushed the tiller away from him and sailed towards the wind, breathing deeply as the salty air touched his face. The position gave him a perfect view of her long slim legs, so he shifted slightly.

They sailed for several hours, past numerous deserted islands, and finally attached themselves to a mooring buoy so that they could snorkel around the reef.

Ignoring him, Katie stripped off her shorts and T-shirt to reveal a tiny red polka-dot bikini.

It was the first time she'd worn a bikini in front of him and he was starting to wish she'd stuck to drab, conceal-everything clothes. Sweat prickled the back of his neck.

Wishing he'd given her a wetsuit, he helped fit her mask and then they slid into the water.

'How deep is it here? On second thought, don't tell me. I don't want to know.' She held on to his arm tightly and looked around her. 'Is anything in this water going to want to eat me for lunch?'

*Just him.* Wondering if she'd even noticed he was aroused, Nathaniel showed her how to clear her mask and snorkel of water, trying to put some distance between them.

A shoal of parrot fish darted beneath them, playing hide and seek through fronds of tropical sea grass, and she gave a gasp of delight and dragged the snorkel out of her mouth. 'They're beautiful. Can we take a

closer look?’

It took only moments for him to realise that she was an excellent swimmer, her kick smooth and graceful as she slid through the water with the elegance of a sea creature. Seriously distracted, Nathaniel decided that if he didn’t concentrate he was going to drown.

Finally he gestured to the surface and they slid upwards through the sun-dappled water and emerged to hot sunshine.

Katie removed the snorkel from her mouth, laughing and gasping for air. ‘That was fantastic!’ Something over his shoulder caught her eye and she frowned. ‘Nathaniel ...’

He turned his head and saw that another boat had anchored only metres away from theirs. ‘Relax. They don’t know who we are.’

‘You mean they have no idea I’m the famous costume designer? Thank goodness for that. If there’s one thing I hate it’s signing autographs in the water.’ Giggling at her own joke, Katie watched the other boat. ‘Looks like quite a party. Better keep your mask on.’

‘Do you want to dive again?’

‘What sort of a question is that? I want to do this for the rest of my life.’ Without waiting for him, she ducked under the water and Nathaniel followed, surprised by how much he was enjoying himself.

They snorkelled for several hours, exploring different parts of the reef, careful not to touch or disturb any of the marine wildlife. Each time they surfaced she burst into a torrent of chat, telling him what she’d seen and asking question after question.

It was impossible not to make comparisons with the last woman he’d taken sailing who had spent her time lying on the deck topping up her suntan and protecting her hair. The mere suggestion that she might join him in the water had been greeted by unadulterated horror. Katie’s hair hung over her shoulders in thick wet ropes but she didn’t seem remotely self-conscious. Enraptured by what was going on beneath the surface of the water, she even seemed to have lost the awkwardness she felt around him.

When they finally climbed back onto the boat, her smile was as bright as the sun. ‘That was the best thing I’ve ever done.’ Her happiness was so

infectious that Nathaniel found himself smiling back.

The dark mood that had gripped him since the night he'd walked off the stage had lifted. Realising that she was the one responsible for the lightness inside him, Nathaniel frowned.

He couldn't ever remember enjoying himself with a woman so much.

Dragging his eyes from that smile, he reminded himself that the last thing he needed in his life was a woman who believed in happy endings.

He'd stopped believing in happy endings when he was nine years old.

Sipping her drink, Katie stared at the platinum-white sand of the distant beach. Her limbs ached and her skin stung from the combination of sun and sea water but she'd never felt happier. She'd even stopped sucking in her stomach.

Her gaze slid to Nathaniel, who was neatly looping a rope.

The chemistry between them had boosted her confidence.

And he wanted their relationship to go all the way. If he'd had his way they would have spent last night together.

He was Hollywood's hottest leading man, voted Sexiest Man by no fewer than ten leading women's magazines. Women screamed when he arrived at premieres.

And she'd said no.

*Was she mad?*

Raucous laughter from the nearby boat cut through her thoughts.

Katie glanced over her shoulder and saw two of the girls flirting with the men at the front of the boat. Missing the peace and wishing they hadn't chosen this part of the ocean for their sail, she was about to look away when movement caught her eye. Putting down her drink, she squinted into the sunshine. 'Nathaniel, that child is standing on the rail and she's not wearing a life jacket.'

As Nathaniel turned his head, the toddler leaned over a little too far and plopped helplessly into the deep water.

Katie shot to her feet in horror. She cupped her hands either side of her mouth and yelled, 'Hey!' at the top of her voice, but the distance and

the music drowned out the sound and the adults on the boat were too busy partying to notice that the toddler had fallen in. ‘Ben, turn the boat! Do something! We need to—’

There was a splash from beside her and droplets of water showered her as Nathaniel plunged into the sea in a smooth dive.

Still in shock, Katie stared as he powered through the water. It was an astonishing display of athleticism and if it hadn’t been for the urgency of the moment she would have stopped and watched in awe. Instead she was frantic. ‘Ben—’

‘I know ...’ Ben was pulling up the anchor and Katie stood, agitated, helpless and wanting to help.

‘What can I do?’

‘Sit down and watch for Nathaniel. He’s a strong swimmer. If anyone can get to the child, he can.’ Ben started the engine and turned the boat. ‘I daren’t get too close because of the propeller. Can you see him?’

‘No. He’s diving down exactly where the toddler fell in, but it’s so deep, Ben.’ Katie’s palms were slippery on the side of the boat. Panic weakened her limbs. ‘I’m going in too. I might be able to help.’

Ben didn’t try to stop her and Katie plunged into the water after Nathaniel.

He still hadn’t surfaced and it seemed impossible to her that he could have held his breath for all that time.

Under the water Katie realised that she should have grabbed the mask so that she could see more clearly. She kicked her legs and dived as deep as she could but her lungs were already bursting for air and she could see nothing. The mysterious underwater world that had captivated them earlier had now formed a deadly trap.

Heart pounding, her chest aching, she was about to surface when she saw Nathaniel a few metres away, manoeuvring something wedged under a large boulder. She saw a white arm and a leg and realised with a flash of panic that the child had somehow become wedged under the rock. The burning in her chest was so intense that she had no choice but to surface and breathe. How Nathaniel could have stayed under for so long, she had no idea.

The group on the nearby boat still hadn't noticed the absence of the toddler, their music and laughter drowning out everything around them.

Nathaniel surfaced next to her and dragged in a lungful of air. His dark hair was plastered to his head, his sodden lashes framing eyes blazing with determination. Almost immediately he dived under the water again.

A commotion from the other boat told her that the toddler's absence had finally been discovered and there was a pounding of feet and shrieks as they realised what had happened. They hung over the side, yelling the little girl's name and Katie felt hot tears scald her eyes, horrified by how quickly paradise had turned to hell.

She kept watching, hoping.

And then Nathaniel finally surfaced, the limp toddler in his arms.

'Ben—' The strain was visible as he swept his hand over his face to clear the water. 'Take her. Get her on a flat surface.'

Ben reached down and took the child in his large hands, laying her on the floor of the boat, and Nathaniel immediately put his hands on the side of the boat and levered himself out of the water in a smooth, fluid motion.

Envying his athletic ability, Katie struggled back into the boat. Nathaniel was performing mouth-to-mouth and chest compressions with grim focus. He seemed oblivious to the screams and sobs coming from the occupants of the other boat. It was as if this was one challenge he was determined not to lose. 'Come on, baby girl—' he turned his head to listen to her chest '—breathe for me, sweetheart. Breathe ...'

Moved by the tenderness in his voice, Katie dropped to her knees next to him. 'Nathaniel—'

The toddler coughed and vomited weakly and Nathaniel immediately rolled her on her side into the recovery position, his hands gentle and confident.

'That's a good girl. You'll be all right, now. You're going to be fine ....'

Weak with relief, Katie looked at him expecting to see similar emotion reflected in his face but instead saw a man who was clearly traumatised.

Underneath the bronzed good looks, his face was ashen.

Realising just how much the rescue must have taken out of him, she put her hand on his arm.

'You did it,' she croaked, wondering if he realised what he'd achieved. 'Nathaniel, you saved her. You were so brave. And determined. If it hadn't been for you—' Unashamed to discover that she was crying, Katie was about to say something else when the little girl wriggled weakly onto all fours, still choking and coughing.

'Want Mummy ...'

Nathaniel rubbed the child's back gently, his strong hands soothing as he comforted the toddler. 'You're going to be fine, angel.' But there were dark shadows in his eyes that Katie didn't understand.

Shouldn't he be celebrating?

There were shouts from the water and lots of splashing as two of the adults from the other boat swam the short distance towards Nathaniel's boat. '*Nina*? Is she alive?'

In a single decisive movement, Nathaniel rose and vanished into the saloon.

By the time the couple boarded the boat there was no sign of him.

'Oh, thank God, thank God ...' The couple scooped up the toddler and thanked Ben profusely.

He accepted their thanks calmly, suggested they take the child to be checked by the doctor who worked on the island and pointed out that the little girl should have been wearing a life jacket.

Katie wanted to yell that they were thanking the wrong person but she understood that Nathaniel hadn't wanted to be recognised and the couple were too relieved to have their child safe to show too much interest in the identity of the rescuer.

She sat, numb, as Ben skilfully moved the two boats alongside so that the rapidly recovering toddler could be transferred with the minimum of fuss.

Now that it was over, Katie found that she was shaking and shivering like a leaf in a storm. She grabbed a dry towel from the deck and wrapped it around herself but the shivering wouldn't stop. The sun shone high overhead, and yet she felt cold. *Really cold.*

If she felt like this, how was Nathaniel feeling?

Nathaniel leaned over the toilet, retching violently. The horror of it gripped him like a physical force. He'd taken refuge in the cabin, not because of the risk of being recognised, but because he'd been afraid he was going to humiliate himself right there in the middle of the boat.

Water. A drowning child. Sick panic.

*Wasn't it ever going to go away?*

Lifting his head, he looked in the mirror. Staring back at him was a face so deathly pale he would have made a corpse look healthy. And as for his eyes—he gave a humourless laugh—if the eyes were windows to the soul, then he was definitely in trouble.

Not wanting to see what was through those windows, he closed his eyes, but immediately saw the child flailing, helpless in the water. Drowning, her lungs screaming for air as she sank in her watery grave.

Nathaniel turned on the taps and tried to splash his face but his hands were shaking so badly most of the water landed on the floor. His stomach churned like the ocean in a storm and his body felt shaky and weak.

*Alpha Man?* He gave a bitter laugh at the evidence of his own weakness.

Under his feet, he felt the shift of the deck and realised the boat was moving.

*Ben,* he thought gratefully. Thank goodness for Ben.

He needed to get the hell off the water.

# CHAPTER SIX

KATIE lay in the hammock, her book unopened. Beneath her, a kaleidoscope of sea life darted through clear, turquoise water but her brain was too preoccupied to enjoy her idyllic surroundings.

The moment the boat had approached the island, Nathaniel had jumped into the sea and waded the last few metres to the shore without glance or conversation.

Maybe it was just delayed reaction. Maybe he needed time to himself.

If Nathaniel wanted to be alone, then there was no way she was going to force herself on him. In his position she would have been talking it through, but he was different, wasn't he?

Katie opened her book and stared at the first page. After she'd read the same line five times, she gave up and stared at the horizon. Images of Nathaniel diving into the water played across her brain. It wasn't the bold rescue that stayed with her, although that in itself had been impressive. What really affected her was the look on his face. The fierce determination in his eyes was something she'd never forget.

Remembering the mother's frenzied, hysterical relief as she'd held her child, Katie shivered.

Without Nathaniel it would have been so different.

*Alpha Man.*

Even she could see that with the Sapphire Award ceremony only a week away it would have been a perfect publicity opportunity. And yet he hadn't taken it. He'd made sure the child was safe and then he'd left the scene quickly before anyone had a chance to recognise him. It didn't make sense.

None of it made sense.

Katie gave up on the book and swung her legs out of the hammock. She'd just check on him, she told herself, and then she'd give him space.

Barefoot, she walked along the terrace that circled the villa, breathing

in the heavy scent of tropical plants. As she approached the terrace of the master bedroom she paused, still worried about intruding. It wasn't as if they had a relationship. They were castaways, thrown here together by accident. They weren't friends. They weren't lovers.

*Lovers.*

She shivered at the word, thinking of that first night when they'd come so close. And last night on the beach—

Impatient with herself, Katie breathed deeply and walked onto the deck. She was doing what any human being would do in the circumstances. Offering comfort.

She found him sprawled on the swing seat, staring out across the sea as the sun went down.

'Nathaniel? You didn't eat dinner. Do you want Ben to bring you something?'

'No. I want to be on my own.' Both words and tone were a warning to back off.

Katie ignored the warning and sat down next to him. The decision earned her a cautionary look.

'I never saw you as a risk taker.'

'Maybe you don't know me as well as you think.'

And she didn't know him, did she? She knew nothing about him. He let the world see the actor, never the man. 'You were amazing today. You know how to play the hero in real life as well as in the movies.' It still shocked her to think how quickly the day had changed. How death had lurked in those calm, clear waters.

'I feel pretty shaken up, so goodness knows how you're feeling.' She decided to take a risk and plunged. 'Talk to me, Nathaniel. Tell me why you're sitting here on your own, pushing me away.' *Show yourself to me. Don't hide ....*

The silence was thick and heavy. 'Talking isn't going to change the fact that she almost drowned.'

'But she didn't drown. You saved her. She's lucky you're such a good swimmer who loves the water so much.'

‘I hate the water.’ The confession was wrenched violently from somewhere deep inside him. ‘The reason I’m a good swimmer is because I *hate* the water.’ He turned his head and she saw such intense suffering that she sat still, immobilised by the agony reflected in those perfect features.

It was like a veil falling down. She’d wanted him to show himself, but the reality was almost too painful to watch. In his face, she saw nothing but dark, sinister shadows. They lurked in the depths of his eyes, settled around the line of his mouth and haunted the hard angle of his jaw. Emotion. Raw and brutally real. The actor had vanished and she was looking at the man.

Shocked into silence, as far out of her depth as the helpless child in the water, Katie felt a desperate need to ease his anguish in whatever way she could. She moved her hand towards his and then withdrew it, afraid of doing anything that might be a catalyst for his withdrawal. ‘Do you want to tell me why?’

His laugh was harsh. ‘Do you want to hear it?’

‘Yes.’ She held her breath, feeling the fragility of the moment and afraid to damage it with clumsy words. ‘Yes, I do.’

‘Are you sure? You and I don’t live in the same world. You live in Katie-land.’

‘Stop saying that.’

‘Why? It’s true.’ It was the low, warning growl of a wounded animal. ‘You believe that people are basically good and that happy endings come to those who wait. You believe in love.’ He spoke the word with cynical emphasis that said everything there was to be said about his own belief system.

This time she did take his hand and held tightly, refusing to let him pull away. ‘We’re talking about you, not me. Tell me why you hate the water.’

The silence stretched for so long she started to think that he was never going to talk.

And then he spoke. ‘There was a lake—’ his voice was hoarse ‘—in the grounds of our house. I grew up in this huge, soulless stately home.

Wolfe Manor. A privileged upbringing, or so everyone always told me. It was big. Big enough to play hide and seek and never get found, which was useful because hiding was part of how I lived.'

'Who were you hiding from, Nathaniel?'

He stared into the darkness, his eyes focused on nothing. 'The lake was huge. No matter how blue the sky, the water was always dark. Just below the surface you could see the weeds, floating like tentacles ready to grab an ankle. None of us knew how deep it was, but we did know that one of our ancestors had drowned there.'

Katie shivered, although whether it was the words or the tone, she didn't know. 'It sounds like a pretty menacing place.'

'When we were very young we used to believe that a monster lurked in the middle.'

Without thinking, she lifted her hand and smoothed her fingers over his face. Her fingertips registered the roughness of stubble and the perfect symmetry of his jaw. Those smouldering good looks belonged to the man. There was no trace of the boy in his face, but it was surprisingly easy to imagine how he might have been back then, a child, standing by that lake, fascinated and horrified in equal measure, terrified of the monster.

'What happened?' She asked the question in the absolute certainty that something had. 'Nathaniel?'

His blue eyes fixed on hers with a fierce intensity, revealing indecision and a deeply inbred reluctance to share with anyone.

After a moment he stood abruptly and paced to the front of the terrace. His hands curled over the railing, his knuckles white with the force of his grip.

'It was late evening. Dark. I'd been doing something I shouldn't—as usual. Messing about. My father picked me up and threw me in that lake.' His voice shook with repressed emotion. 'I don't know whether it was the look on his face just before he hurled me in or the words he spoke, but the shock froze all my reactions. I didn't even struggle. When I hit the water I thought, *This is it, I'm going to drown*. I remember wondering how long it would take and whether it was going to hurt. I

remember struggling below the surface, trying to get my legs free of the weeds, watching his back as he walked away, thinking, *He'll come back and save me in a minute*. He didn't.' He kept his back to her, his voice strangely flat as he recounted an incident so sickening that for once Katie found herself without words as she struggled to absorb the full implications of that driven confession.

'No.' Her voice trembled with uncertainty. She thought about her own father, of the games they'd played where he'd tumbled her upside down and tossed her in the air. 'It must have been a joke that went wrong. He must have been playing a game.'

'He wasn't playing. Afterwards I tried to rationalise it to myself. I'd been messing around instead of raking the leaves. I'd had it coming to me. I was so young I didn't really understand.' He recited the options in a flat tone. 'I thought it was me. My fault. I thought if I did the right thing, he'd love me. It isn't easy for a child to absorb the fact that isn't ever going to happen.'

He'd wanted his daddy's approval, the way all little boys did.

He'd wanted love. Wasn't that the minimum any child should expect from a parent?

Katie felt the numbness spread through her body. She'd never felt so inadequate, not even when her father had died and the whole ghastly mess he'd left had come to light. She wanted to say exactly the right thing but how could you say anything right about something so wrong?

Nathaniel turned his head to look at her. His eyes were hard and his mouth slanted into a cynical smile. 'Poor Katie. Now I've destroyed your essential belief that all human beings are good and that life always ends in a happy ever after.'

She roused herself. 'I don't think that. I don't think that all human beings are good, but ...' She drew breath, struggling to imagine how it must feel to have a father that brutal. 'What about your mother?'

'Ah, my mother ...' His expression altered. 'Well, the one thing you need to know about my mother was that she was in love with my father. She only ever wanted one thing and that was for him to love her back. He didn't, of course. My father didn't love anyone.' His tone was derisive and contemptuous, layered with bitterness and years of pain and

rejection. ‘He was the wrong guy for someone as sensitive and fragile as my mother. It was like placing Venetian glass under a sledgehammer. He shattered her. She ... left.’

Katie winced at the image he drew. ‘So you were left alone with your father?’ *The man he’d described was a monster.*

‘Not on my own. Some aristocratic English families collect Renaissance art or Louis XV furniture. My father collected women. And those women had children. Children my father was never interested in.’

‘He didn’t want children?’

‘My father was interested only in himself.’

Katie stood and the swing creaked. Her feet silent on the deck, she took two steps and placed her hands on his shoulders. Her fingers encountered knots of tension under hard solid muscle. ‘Who rescued you from the lake that day? How did you survive?’

‘My half-brother Jacob. He was nine years older than me and it wasn’t the first time he’d fished me out of the lake.’ Something flickered in his eyes. ‘His role in the family was to clear up my father’s mess. He hauled me choking out of the water, pumped the water out of my lungs and kept me out of the monster’s way until he’d drunk enough to forget I even existed.’

‘Nathaniel—’

‘It’s all right. You don’t have to try and find the right thing to say. In this case, there really isn’t anything. Even someone with your sweet, sunny nature can’t put a positive spin on a father like mine, although for years I tried to do just that.’

‘Is he still alive?’

‘No. He died when I was nine years old.’ His voice was savage. ‘You think you’ve heard the worst? Ask me how my father died, Katie. Ask me that question.’

The air around them felt thick and heavy. ‘How did he die?’

‘We were all home from boarding school for the holidays. My sister had taken advantage of his absence to sneak out of the house to a party in the village. She wasn’t even fourteen, but she was already stunning and that night she decided to flaunt it. Lipstick, miniskirt—’ He broke

off, his face several shades paler than normal. ‘It would have been fine, except that he came back early.’

‘Your father?’

‘He’d seen her flirting in the village and when he arrived home he took a whip to her.’

Katie flinched, her imagination making it all too easy to imagine the cruel bite of the whip. ‘He beat her?’

‘His intention was to make sure no boy would ever look at her again, but he was drunk and out of control and he beat her so brutally that he would have killed her if Jacob hadn’t stopped him. And the whole time I stood there shaking and yelling, “Stop it! Stop it!”’ He stared down at his shaking hands. ‘That night I learned how it felt to be helpless. Powerless.’

Katie’s face was soaked with tears. ‘Nathaniel, you were a *child*. What could you possibly have done?’

‘We should have fought him. But we shouted at him, Sebastian and I,’ Nathaniel said hoarsely. ‘And just when I thought it was all over, that he was going to kill her with us watching, Jacob walked through the door.’

‘He stopped him?’

‘He killed him.’ Nathaniel turned his head to look at her. His eyes were empty. Tired. ‘It was an accident—he was so drunk that he fell and his head cracked against the stairs and then ...’ His brow furrowed. ‘There was so much blood. My father’s blood, Annabelle’s blood, her beautiful face a torn mess. Jacob was frozen with shock. And my father was dead.’

Annabelle?

*Annabelle was his sister?*

Digesting that fact, Katie stood still, hopelessly inadequate in the face of so much pain. ‘I don’t know what to say. I’m so sorry.’

‘I wasn’t.’ He turned and locked his hand in the front of her shirt and hauled her against him, his eyes the deep, menacing colour of a sea in a storm. ‘I wasn’t sorry, Katie. I stood there thinking, *Now it will stop*. But I wasn’t sorry.’ His voice was thickened with a vile mess of emotion, from guilt to bitter anger. ‘So now you know. Now you know who I really am.

Your world and my world don't even overlap.' He released her so suddenly she staggered. The intensity of emotion pulsed from him like a living force and suddenly she realised just how much he kept locked inside, hidden away from the world.

'Do you feel guilty for not being sorry? Is that what's wrong? You were just a child, Nathaniel.' She slid her arms around his waist but he stood rigid and unresponsive.

'He was my father, and I hated him. That makes me the monster.'

'It makes you human.' Her throat thickened by tears, Katie rubbed her hands over the tense muscles of his back and then slid her arms around the strong column of his neck. 'You're not a monster, Nathaniel. You were a little boy who wanted, and deserved, to be loved by his father.'

'At the time I assumed it was shock.' It was as if he was talking to himself. 'I assumed I'd wake up one day and feel sorry that it had happened. I'm still waiting to feel sorry.'

She pressed her lips to his chest, as if her touch could heal his agony. 'You have no reason to feel guilty.'

'I didn't protect my sister.'

'You were a child!'

His beautiful mouth twisted into a cynical smile. 'We weren't allowed to be children.'

They stood for a moment in silence and then she lifted her head. 'What happened to Jacob?'

'There were expensive lawyers in sharp suits. They sorted it.'

So few words to describe such a hideous trauma.

'But that didn't make it go away, did it? You all had to live with that. Who took care of you?'

'To begin with, Jacob. Then one day he just took off.' In the dim light, his eyes shone a deep, glittering blue. 'That was the day I really thought Annabelle might die. I guess she saw him as the one stable person in our very unstable family. She loved him so much.' He gave a crooked smile. 'Big mistake. If you don't care, you can't get hurt. Annabelle cared, and she got herself badly hurt.'

And not just Annabelle.

*If you don't care, you can't get hurt.*

That was why he avoided relationships. Not because he didn't believe in love, but because he was afraid of love. He associated love with carnage, both emotional and physical.

'You must have felt so lost and vulnerable, losing your father and then Jacob.' Katie hesitated. 'When you walked off the stage that night, you kept saying, "I have to warn Annabelle." What were you warning her about, Nathaniel? What really happened on opening night?'

'Jacob was in the audience.'

'And you haven't seen him for a while?'

There was a long silence. 'I last saw Jacob twenty years ago.'

'Twenty years!' Katie couldn't hide her shock. 'You haven't seen him since he walked out?'

'We're not what you'd call a close family. As reunions went, this one wasn't exactly successful.'

Katie found it difficult to absorb. 'No wonder you reacted the way you did—no wonder you walked out.'

'I kept thinking about Annabelle. How his sudden reappearance would affect her. I just wanted to warn her he was back.'

So he hadn't been involved in some complex love triangle. When he'd said, 'He's here,' he'd been referring to his half-brother Jacob. And Annabelle was his sister.

When he'd walked off the stage, he'd been intent on protecting the sister he believed he'd failed all those years ago.

Her heart ached for the lonely little boy, hurt and abandoned by those who should have loved him.

The soft sound of the sea licked at the air and the smell of tropical flowers tinged the night with sweetness.

The stark contrast between the idyllic surroundings and his brutal, loveless childhood was acute.

His mother had left. His father had beaten him.

He had little or no contact with his family. No wonder he was hard and cynical when she talked about family. She winced, remembering all the things she'd said. Katie-land. She'd been insensitive. If she'd known ...

'Have you spoken to Annabelle?'

'We exchanged a text.'

'A text? That's it? No conversation?'

'This is the Wolfe family.' His tone mocking, he reached out and picked a brightly coloured hibiscus from the profusion of flowers that crowded the terrace. 'If our background taught us one thing, it was how to survive alone. A text is a lot for Annabelle.'

'But you love your sister.' She said it as fact, not as a question. 'And Jacob—'

'When I saw him in the front row of the theatre I felt nothing but uncontrollable rage, but those feelings were all mixed up with seeing my father beating Annabelle that night.' Nathaniel stared at the flower in his hands. 'I left without speaking to him. And I still don't want to speak to him. It's in the past. I don't want to go back there.'

Instinctively she knew who was making those calls he ignored. 'The two of you must talk.'

'Talk.' His tone mocking, he turned to her and slid the scarlet flower into her hair. 'Katie's answer to all life's problems.'

Katie blocked out the sensuous stroke of his hands in her hair. 'If you've never talked about that night, then surely it's time you did.'

'Why?' His eyes were bleak and empty. 'We can't change what happened. We can't change who we've become. It isn't possible.'

'But it is possible to change the future. And the present. And the way you feel about the past. You didn't let Annabelle down—you wanted to help her.' She tried not to feel disappointed as his hands dropped to his sides. 'I'm glad you told me.'

'Why? Because now you have a juicy story to tell the press?'

'You know I wouldn't do that.' She reminded herself that he was raw and hurting.

'Go to bed, Katie. We should never have started this conversation.' He turned away from her, his broad shoulders forming yet another barrier between himself and the world.

Braced for rejection, she placed her hand on his back. The heat of his skin burned through his shirt and she frowned.

'You're burning up.'

He turned, his eyes glittering dangerously—a cold, fierce blue loaded with warning. 'I don't want your sympathy. Go to bed.'

'Why? So that you can wallow and feel bad in private? I'm not leaving you, Nathaniel. You've tried dealing with this on your own. Now try the other alternative. I'm not walking away.'

'Why? What is it that you want?'

She stood, poised and breathless as a diver on the highest board about to plunge. 'I want you.' She'd never wanted anything so much. She wanted it more than she wanted to protect herself. Because of that, the words were remarkably easy to say. 'I want you.'

'I've been offering you that all week.' He kept his hands by his sides. 'You rejected it.'

'You offered me Nathaniel Wolfe, the actor. I'm not interested in him. I want the man. I want to know it's real.'

'You don't want the man and you can't handle real.'

Katie caught his arm before he could turn away again. 'Don't tell me what I want. Don't tell me what I can handle.'

'Real isn't always pretty, Katie. Most people prefer their reality tempered with a little gloss. That's why they go to the movies. They don't want real.'

'I do. I'm not afraid of that. I'm more afraid when you're acting because then I can't trust anything you say or do. Don't hide from me, Nathaniel.' Her fingers threaded through his and she felt his hesitation. And that hesitation punctured her confidence. Insecurity spread in widening ripples through her body. There was assertive and then there was pushy. He wasn't just 'a man,' was he? He was Nathaniel

Wolfe, A-list movie star and sex god. What if he didn't really want

her? What if the flirtation had just been his way of relieving boredom?

When he still didn't touch her, Katie took a step backwards, wishing she could vanish.

The embarrassment was hideous.

'Right.' She conjured up brightness to cover the oceans of humiliation. 'Well, obviously you can't always have what you want, so I'll just—' The words were crushed under his mouth as he hauled her against him, his hands rough and his body hard.

'Is this real enough for you?' He spoke the words against her lips and his eyes blazed hot into hers. When she didn't answer, he took her mouth, his kiss rough and demanding. His movements were jerky and unsynchronised and yet the desperation in his touch was more erotic than any of the smooth, choreographed movements of their previous encounters. The hands that dug into her hair shook slightly, and when he yanked at her dress he fumbled in his desperation to strip her naked.

'How does this—?' Impatient, he tore it from neck to hem and she gasped, excited and nervous at the same time.

'Nathaniel—'

'I want you.' His mouth was at her throat. Her head tipped back and her nerves exploded with heat. 'I want you so badly ....' His hands were rough as he scooped her up and deposited her on the bed but she revelled in the desperation she sensed in him.

For once, he wasn't in control.

It wasn't about camera angles or movements—it was about a primitive, elemental driving force that transcended everything. It was just about the two of them. And an explosive physical attraction like nothing she'd ever felt before. It felt real. It felt right.

His hands were in her hair, his hungry mouth awaking feelings so intense that she shook with the force of it. She ripped at his shirt and he helped her, his mouth still on hers as he tore it off so that she could touch him. And then he was crushing her against the bed. His fingers skimmed her body, exploring her intimately until fire licked through her veins and heated her skin. And she touched him too, fascinated by the dip and swell of muscle, by the contrast of sleek and rough.

Sounds mingled in the night air. The swish of the sea on the beach, a soft sigh from low in her throat as his touch grew more intimate. The pleasure rose to burning excitement, every part of her trembling and quivering as she writhed in a fever of anticipation.

And then he was above her and she sobbed in desperation as she felt the hard heat of him against her. With a single thrust he filled her and she gave a sharp cry of shock because it was so much more than she'd anticipated. Holding herself tense, she was aware of his harsh breathing, of the tension in his powerful frame as he forced himself to hold still.

'Katie—'

'I—I'm OK ... it's OK.' But she was afraid to breathe, afraid she couldn't accommodate the size of him.

With a soft curse, he started to withdraw but she closed her hands over his hips. 'Don't stop. I don't want you to stop ....'

His head dropped to her shoulder and he paused for a moment, buried deep, his breathing unsteady. Then he lifted his head and his eyes burned into hers.

'Look at me.'

And she did.

Holding her gaze, he lowered his head and kissed her gently, seducing her mouth with slow, practised kisses until her whole body was shivering.

'Relax, sweetheart ...' He murmured the words against her lips, holding himself still as her body melted around him, until she was moaning and quivering. Then he started to move, slowly at first, infinitely gentle as he taught her what her body could do.

It was overwhelming. Like nothing she'd ever experienced or imagined.

'Nathaniel—' Her voice broke and he slid his hand under her hips and drew her against him, controlling her pleasure.

The excitement was fierce and hot, clawing at her as he increased the rhythm, and she met each driving thrust with wild abandon. It was wild and crazy and the climax hit like a violent storm. As it crashed down on them, Katie clung to his slick shoulders, shattered by the violence of the

emotion that swamped both of them.

'It was your first time.' Nathaniel lay on his back, his forearm over his forehead, not sure whether he was supposed to feel guilty or smug. The truth was he didn't recognise any of the feelings inside him. He didn't know whether what they'd just shared was a mistake or a miracle.

*Damn.*

She snuggled against him. 'So?'

'If I'd known, I would have stopped.' *Or would he?* Nathaniel shifted uncomfortably, disturbed by how out of control he'd been. When had he ever felt like that before? Flirtation, dinner, jewellery, sex—it was a well-rehearsed sequence that required no thought, effort or emotional engagement.

What he'd shared with Katie was different.

He'd shared something with her he'd never shared with another person.

Himself.

The knowledge sat in a tight, uncomfortable knot in his stomach. Something close to panic gripped him. It wasn't just the fear of what she might do with the information that bothered him, it was the fact that he'd told her at all.

*Why* had he told her? He never talked about his family. He went to extraordinary lengths to conceal his past. He'd reinvented himself as someone different.

But rescuing the toddler had brought it all rushing back. He'd been a child again, plunged into the dark, oily waters of the lake. Unfortunately Katie's internal radar for anyone in distress was alarmingly sophisticated.

*And long range*, he thought grimly, remembering how she'd tracked him down.

Unlike other women who were only interested in the glitz and glamour of life, Katie wanted reality.

And he'd given her a hefty dose.

Realising that she was unusually silent, he turned his head to look at

her and discovered she'd fallen asleep, her hair a wild tumble around her shoulders, a smile on that gorgeous mouth. A strand of hair had curled itself around his arm and he lifted his hand and touched it, feeling the silken softness coil around his fingers.

She was the most optimistic person he'd ever met.

Apparently even the ugly truth of his childhood hadn't been enough to send her running.

She'd had sex with him because she believed she'd finally seen the 'real' Nathaniel.

And that, he reflected bitterly, had been his biggest mistake in this whole crazy mess, because he had no wish to be the real Nathaniel. He'd left the real Nathaniel behind decades ago and that was the way he wanted it to stay.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

KATIE woke with the sun on her face. A breeze whispered through the open doors and she could hear the soft lap of water against the edge of the pool.

Aching, happy, she opened her eyes and the first thing she saw was the empty space next to her.

Nathaniel had gone.

A shadow veiled her happiness but she pushed it aside. It was late, wasn't it? Of course he was already up.

He'd let her sleep late.

Refusing to allow herself to overanalyse what could simply be a thoughtful gesture, she took a quick shower and slid into her favourite canary-yellow sundress. Spotting the tropical flower he'd given her the night before, she slid it into her hair. The scent of it brought everything rushing back and her whole body was suffused with a warm glow. She felt special. Not because of the sex, although that had been incredible—no, the reason she felt special was because he'd confided in her. He'd trusted her with his darkest, deepest secrets—something she suspected he hadn't shared with anyone before.

As she walked out onto the terrace, she told herself it was ridiculous to feel nervous after the intimacies they'd shared the night before.

Nathaniel was talking on the phone. His hair gleamed in the sunlight and his striking blue eyes were fixed on a point in the distance. Distracted by his flawless features and sensual mouth, Katie's confidence faltered.

He looked like a superstar.

For a brief, crazy moment she wondered whether she'd imagined the whole thing.

Trying to forget that he was a movie star, she reminded herself that they'd just spent the most incredible night together. They'd connected,

not just physically but emotionally. *He'd trusted her.*

Waiting for him to finish on the phone, she walked forward, wishing she possessed his acting skills. ‘You should have woken me. I didn’t mean to sleep this late.’

‘I had some calls to make. It appears my agent has earned his keep. The situation in London has been smoothed over.’ Reserved and distant, he gestured to the empty chair. ‘Coffee?’

Disappointment thudded into her gut like a fist. *That was it?* That was what the night had meant to him? Only a few minutes ago she’d woken up feeling as though life couldn’t get any better. The gulf between expectation and reality was shocking.

‘Coffee would be great, thanks.’ Formal. Polite. Two people forced to live together on the island—not two people who had rolled naked and wild, tangling sheets between their heated bodies.

*Had it really meant nothing?*

‘Help yourself to pancakes and fresh fruit. We have an hour until the helicopter arrives.’

‘Helicopter?’ Katie put the cup down without taking a sip. ‘We’re leaving?’ She was disturbed by just how much that bothered her. A week ago she hadn’t even wanted to come here, and now—

‘Just the island. We’re going to spend some time in Rio.’ Still not looking at her, he scrolled through his emails as if it were the beginning of a normal working day while Katie stared sickly at the food on the table. Embarrassment washed over her. How long had he watched her while she slept? Had he seen her in daylight and regretted what they’d shared? Frustration and anger mingled with the pain. But the anger was mostly directed at herself. Had she really been naïve enough to think she’d interest a man like him?

‘Why are we going to Rio?’

‘I’ve had enough of being trapped on an island. There’s only so much solitude I can take.’ His casual dismissal fed her insecurities and Katie stood quickly, the chair scraping the floor. Her eyes stung.

The rejection sat like a solid lump in the pit of her stomach.

‘Thanks a lot. So the part you’re playing this morning is obviously

“utter bastard.”

His eyes narrowed warily. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘If you’d been playing “nice guy” you might have thought that what we shared last night was at least deserving of a morning-after smile. You’re making me feel horrid about myself.’

His eyes shone with incredulity. ‘How?’

‘Do you really have to ask? Are you really that insensitive?’ Katie wrapped her arms around herself, wishing she’d taken the time to put on make-up and do her hair before facing him. No woman with any sense would choose the ‘natural’ look around Nathaniel Wolfe. ‘We spent the night together and now you’re doing everything you can to get away from me.’ She felt really foolish for believing even for a moment that they’d shared something special. ‘I understand that what happened yesterday was awful for you. I understand it brought everything back and maybe what we did was heat-of-the-moment stuff. If you regret last night, just say so. But don’t act like nothing happened.’

‘Sit down, Katie.’

‘Why? So that you can make me feel even more insignificant than you have already? I don’t think so. You’re an incredible actor, Nathaniel, but I’m not interested in the actor and you don’t want to be the man.’ Totally squashed, utterly humiliated, she stalked off the terrace, throwing words over her shoulder. ‘Go to Rio. Go to hell. I really don’t care. Just don’t follow me.’

*What the hell did she want from him?*

His hand shaking, Nathaniel finished his coffee and ordered another one. It had taken all his willpower to leave the bed before she woke. In the end, what had driven him had been the fact that he’d wanted to stay there, wrapped around Katie for ever. And the terror had acted as a jet-propelled engine.

*For ever?*

He wiped the sweat from his brow with his forearm. Those were words he just didn’t use.

Utterly spooked by his feelings, he hadn’t even trusted himself to look

at her when she'd walked onto the terrace. He'd hoped for baggy brown clothes but she'd chosen bright yellow, the colour of sunshine and happiness.

Not that it had taken him long to kill that happiness, he thought bitterly.

Right now she was probably changing back into brown.

Ben brought the coffee to the table, his usually friendly smile absent. 'I just saw Miss Katie running towards the beach.' He thumped the pot down on the table and some of it sloshed over the side. 'Looked like she was crying.'

Nathaniel looked at the puddle of spilled coffee. 'She just needs space.'

'Not all folks need space when they're upset. Miss Katie is the sort who would prefer someone to talk to.'

Meeting Ben's accusatory look, Nathaniel felt fingers of ice trail down his spine. She wanted to talk about feelings and there was no way he wanted to even think about his feelings, let alone talk about them.

'You've known her five minutes—'

'Some people you get to know in five minutes because they're open and friendly. Others ...' Ben's gaze didn't shift. 'Others keep themselves locked away.'

*Locked away sounded good to him.* 'Everyone is different.'

'She's trying to help you. In all my years I never met a kinder, warmer person than Miss Katie.'

'I don't need anyone's help.'

'Depends where you're standing.' Ben picked up Katie's abandoned cup. 'I'll clear up this mess.' The message was clear. Nathaniel was supposed to clear up the other mess. The one he'd made.

Cursing himself for allowing his guard to drop, Nathaniel abandoned the coffee and strode along the little path that wound through the tropical gardens down to the beach.

*One conversation,* he promised himself. *One.*

He found her on the perfect curve of soft sand that was Turtle Cove, her yellow sundress blending with the sand, her dark hair tumbling

down her back.

Remembering the way she'd looked when she'd first arrived on the island, Nathaniel felt something twist inside him. She'd lost her dull, brown feathers and now she reminded him of an exotic bird. And last night—

'Katie ...'

She didn't turn but her shoulders grew a little stiffer. 'I want to be by myself.'

Nathaniel would have loved to have taken that claim at face value but Ben's voice was still ringing in his ears, and on top of that his conscience, which rarely even got out of bed in the morning, was now working overtime.

'Look—' his tone was impatient '—you have to understand that this isn't easy for me. I don't do relationships, not the sort you dream about anyway. I have short term, mutually convenient affairs with women who don't want any more connection than I do. You're different. For God's sake, Katie—' he dragged his hand through his hair '—you'd never even been with a man before.'

'I don't want to talk about this.'

He felt a flash of exasperation. 'Why not? You want to talk about everything else. I know you're upset because I didn't stay in bed this morning—'

'I'm upset because last night I saw the real Nathaniel, and now you've turned back into the movie star. I don't know you like this.'

*And that was the idea, wasn't it?*

Staring at the back of her head, Nathaniel felt as though there was a battle going on in his brain. 'I'm not good at being the "real Nathaniel,"' he ground out. 'I'm not good at letting people know me.'

'You prefer to hide behind the actor.'

'Yes.' The admission was easier than he'd thought it would be. 'It's what I've always done.'

She turned then and he saw the wetness on her cheeks. Guilt lanced through him, sharp as a blade. Usually when women used tears they left

him unaffected. Seeing Katie's reddened eyes made his insides clench with panic.

'Don't cry,' he breathed. 'Don't do that ....'

'Answer me something honestly.' Her voice was croaky. 'Is it Carrie? I know you said you weren't having an affair with her, but—'

'It isn't Carrie.' Just saying the name made him want to turn and run, but he fought it. He knew he ought to tell her the truth about Carrie, but he'd carried the secret for too long to part with it easily. 'It's nothing to do with Carrie. It's me. This is who I am.'

She was silent and that silence was another tug on his conscience. Nathaniel scanned her face. 'Say something. Yell at me. Tell me what I should be feeling, doing ...' He looked at her desperately. 'It's not like you to be silent.'

'You don't like it when I talk.'

'I do.' It came as a surprise to realise it was true. 'Yesterday when we were on that boat, and you were saying everything that came into your head—'

'I drove you nuts.'

'No, I enjoyed it. A lot. I really like the way you say what you're thinking.'

'You never say what you're thinking.' Her gaze was steady. 'And I find it impossible to tell what's real. With you, it's all too easy to get it wrong because you're so good at what you do.'

He tried to find a way to tell her that the whole idea of 'real' scared the hell out of him. 'Last night was real, Katie.'

'No, it wasn't. We had sex. I played the part of a gullible female and you played the part of the macho, virile caveman.'

'Are you saying I hurt you?' It was something that had worried him and he saw her cheeks redden.

'You didn't hurt me. Not last night.'

He'd hurt her this morning, with careless words and his own inability to let his guard down. Burying those thoughts, Nathaniel pulled her to her feet.

When she tried to resist him he tightened his hold and found her mouth with his.

‘Go away.’ She turned her head. ‘You regret last night.’

‘I don’t regret last night. At least not the part where you were naked and uninhibited. That bit was incredible. *You* were incredible.’ He took a breath. ‘And I’m sorry I hurt you this morning.’

‘I’m not going to say it’s OK.’

‘I don’t expect you to.’

With a sniff, she tilted her head and looked up at him. ‘So what happens now? Jacob is back, Nathaniel. You can’t change that and you can’t run from the past for ever.’

‘I’m *not* running. I just wasn’t in the mood for the whole family reunion thing.’

‘Surely the press must know about your father? Did you really manage to keep that quiet?’

‘It gets dug up periodically. I’m hoping that a Sapphire win will make them bury it and focus on my career rather than my personal life.’

‘That’s why you want to win a Sapphire so badly? To distract the press?’

‘It’s one reason.’ Nathaniel stood for a moment, staring towards the water. *He should tell her.* He should just tell her the rest of his story.

The sound of a helicopter cut through their conversation and she glanced up at the sky. ‘Looks like your ride to Rio is here.’

‘Our ride.’ He stroked his fingers through her hair. ‘You’re coming with me.’

She pulled away from him. ‘I don’t think so. I’ll be fine here.’

‘I want you with me.’ Just how much he wanted her with him shook him to the core. Jumping out of an aeroplane or scaling a sheer cliff face seemed less daunting than plunging into a relationship with Katie. ‘You’ll love Rio. It’s the most exciting city in the world. Please.’

She rubbed her foot over the sand, drawing a pattern. ‘If I came where would we stay?’

‘We’ll crash in Rafael’s penthouse.’

‘Who is Rafael?’

‘Another half-brother. As you can see, I’m plagued by half-brothers, but they do come in handy when you want somewhere exclusive and private to stay.’

‘Rafael?’ She looked dazed. ‘How many wives *did* your father have?’

‘Four? No, I think it might have been three, but it gets confusing because of all the mistresses. Do those count?’ Nathaniel slid his fingers through hers and they started to walk back along the beach. ‘His bedroom was busier than Hollywood Boulevard on Sapphire night.’

‘So is Rafael younger?’

‘We’re the same age. He’s the son of the woman my father slept with while my mother was expecting me.’

She stopped walking. ‘He—oh, my God. But you’re close?’

‘Close?’ Nathaniel frowned at the question. ‘I live in LA and he lives in Brazil. I have no idea how far that is. Ten thousand kilometres? More?’

‘No, I mean—’

‘Oh, you mean *close* as in brothers. That’s a typically Katie question.’ He didn’t know whether to be amused or exasperated that she wanted everyone to bond. ‘I use his place in Rio. He crashes at mine in LA If we happen to overlap, then we go and get drunk together. If you call that close, then we’re close. Does that satisfy the rules of Katie-land?’

Her expression was serious. ‘That must be a difficult relationship.’

‘What’s difficult about it?’

‘Well, because—’

‘Because my father slept with his mother? That wasn’t Rafael’s fault. He wasn’t there.’ Nathaniel gave a sardonic smile. ‘At least, not until nine months afterwards. And now that’s enough about my family. There’s only so much reminiscing I can stand in one day and we’re definitely into injury time.’

‘So, will I meet Rafael?’

She was imagining happy family gatherings. ‘No chance. We’re going to Rio so that we can have steaming-hot sex in the land of the steaming-hot samba.’

‘I’ve never even danced the samba.’

‘Don’t worry—’ he flashed her a smile and took her hand as they walked along the beach ‘—I’m going to teach you. The way you move your hips, you’ll be a natural.’

‘This place is incredible.’ Katie stared at the view from the terrace of the exclusive penthouse apartment. ‘Your brother must be very successful.’

‘He’s slowly taking over the technology world.’ Nathaniel leaned on the balcony and scanned the beach. ‘Rafael and I have got drunk on this balcony more times than I want to remember. Whatever you do, don’t touch anything. He’s a techno genius and this whole place is run by gadgets. If you sneeze some piece of electrical equipment will probably hand you a tissue. I’ve told him that the day he invents an app for my phone that will kill photographers, I’ll invest in his company.’ He slid his hand behind her neck and brought his mouth down on hers and Katie gave a low moan.

*All he had to do was kiss her and she melted every time.*

She was a total pushover.

Disturbed by that thought, she eased away from him. Last night she’d given him everything. Today she was a little more cautious. ‘Are we going sightseeing?’

‘Of course. This is Rio.’

Nathaniel took her everywhere. They drank in the spectacular views from Pão de Açúcar, Sugarloaf Mountain, and ate in a beachside restaurant packed with locals.

When they arrived back at the apartment it was late and Katie automatically walked towards the bedroom but he closed his fingers around her wrist.

‘Rio is just waking up. Tempted as I am at the thought of an early night—’ his kiss was swift but devastating ‘—we’re going to samba school.’

‘School? It’s almost midnight.’

‘It isn’t a school in the sense that you mean. The samba schools are part of the neighbourhood where people go to dance. Part of Rio’s

culture. They're all rehearsing for the Carnival in a few weeks' time. Here—' he picked up a box that had been delivered earlier '—I bought you something to wear.'

'You're in jeans.' Delving through layers of tissue paper, she retrieved a short dress in a vibrant shade of electric blue, dipping to the waist and ending in a flared skirt. 'I might as well go naked.'

'There's something else in the box.'

Katie shifted the tissue paper and found an emerald-green sequined bikini top. She blinked. 'Gosh. That's—'

'Perfect for dancing the samba.'

She hadn't worn brown since she'd arrived in South America. And that was because of Nathaniel. *He'd brought colour into her life.* Being with him had given her confidence. 'I love it.' Katie examined the flow and texture of the fabric and then disappeared into the bedroom to change.

Nathaniel followed her and she was conscious of him watching her as she pulled on the dress. 'Stop staring.'

'You have fantastic legs.'

'All the better for dancing.' She met his eyes in the mirror. *Felt the sharp stab of chemistry.* 'Shall we go?'

It was the most exciting evening of her life, although whether it was the dancing or just being with Nathaniel, she didn't know.

The samba was an innately sexual dance and Nathaniel was a hotly sexual man. Those heavy-lidded blue eyes and that slow, masculine smile soon drew the attention of every woman in the room—that and his enviable sense of rhythm and the effortless way he moved. He danced with a natural grace and an unapologetic sensuality that blurred the lines between bedroom and ballroom. Dancing with him was a hedonistic experience that was a full-on assault of her senses and Katie felt her head and her heart spin as their eyes held and their bodies touched.

Drowning in those blue eyes, Katie suddenly wanted to be alone with him. 'Can we go home?'

'You're not enjoying the samba, angel?' His smile was slow and knowing and her heart was performing its own version of the samba.

'I love the samba.'

The heat flowing between them was immense and he curved a strong hand over her hip and held her against him for a moment. The lazy humour in his eyes turned sharp and hungry. 'You're right. Let's go.' He took her hand and virtually dragged her out of the building and into the waiting car.

The instant the doors closed, they were kissing and they kissed all the way back to the apartment, their mouths frantic, hot, explosive as they feasted. His hands were under the flirty skirt of her dress and Katie moaned and curved her leg over his, urging him on. She loved the way he watched her, with eyes half shut and the promise of ecstasy shimmering in the depths of that blue gaze. The excitement of his skilled touch was intensified a thousand times by that raw masculine sex appeal. All over the world, women had posters of him on their walls. Just looking at him was a visual pleasure but Katie tried not to dwell on that because she didn't want to think about him as a movie star. As a movie star he was unobtainable, out of her league. As a man—

*They shared a fierce, explosive chemistry.*

'We're here.' His voice thickened by passion, he lifted his head, his eyes still on her mouth. 'We need to take this inside or we'll be arrested. Two minutes,' he promised thickly. 'We just have to get ourselves up in that elevator and into the apartment.'

Trembling with anticipation, Katie followed him out of the car, too embarrassed to look at the driver. They were kissing as they tumbled into the lift that led to Rafael's luxurious penthouse, and then Nathaniel lifted her so that she straddled him and pressed her back hard against the mirrored wall.

'Two minutes is too long.' He groaned and Katie was so desperately excited after dancing with him that she simply sobbed her encouragement as he unzipped his jeans.

Caught in a vortex of excitement, she was blind to her surroundings, blind to everything except him. He was silken warmth and hard masculinity and then he was inside her and the delicious shock of it made her gasp.

'Oh, yes ...' Her head tilted back against the cool, hard mirror as he

thrust into her. It was hot and primal, as out of control as that first night in the tropical gardens of Wolfe Island.

A gentle ringing sound indicated that they'd reached the penthouse. Without lifting his mouth from hers, Nathaniel slammed his hand against the panel of buttons, trying to hit the one that stopped the lift. Instead he hit the one for the ground floor and the lift started moving again.

'How do you stop this thing?' His eyes fevered with lust, he lifted his head impatiently and tried to focus on the buttons but Katie took advantage of the sudden shift in his attention to move her hips. He gave a thickened groan and turned his head back to her. '*Don't move. You're killing me ....*'

'I want—I need—' Her voice broke and his hands plunged into her hair and his mouth devoured hers in a hungry kiss.

'I have to stop this damned lift.'

He was deep inside her and she tried to match his rhythm but he held her trapped, controlling every movement, each virile thrust sending an explosion of sensation through her. Katie was sucked down into a world of dark, dangerous pleasure and she cried out his name and clung to his shoulders, feeling the strength and power under her fingers.

Breathing heavily, Nathaniel thumped his hand blindly against the lift buttons again and this time hit the stop button.

The lift jerked and then stopped and he gave an unsteady smile. '*Finally I can concentrate ....*'

Somewhere in the distance Katie heard bells ringing but she wasn't given the opportunity to focus on it because he was turning their sexual encounter into a single-minded orgy of sensation. Pleasure slid through her in smooth waves and then rushed forward, building in pace as he drove them both higher and higher.

It was sex at its most basic, sheer self-indulgence, the slaking of the desperate hunger that consumed both of them.

'Watch us,' he ordered in a thickened tone, 'watch us in the mirror.'

Her eyelids felt heavy but she opened them, looking first at him and then over his shoulder. And watching intensified everything. Reflected in the mirror, she saw the contrast between her sun-warmed skin and his

darker, hair-roughened thigh. Soft and hard. Tough and fragile. Male and female. It was his strength that held them in this position. His strength that drove them both forward towards the peak of pleasure. There was fire in her blood and a wildness burst from within her as sensation exploded through her body.

She cried out his name and he rode her hard, his eyes locked with hers, drawing every part of her into him. She felt him fill her completely, felt the male fullness of him as he thrust deep and she tore at his shirt, desperate to touch. Her heart was pounding, her breathing was shallow and uneven, and she clutched at the sleek muscle of his shoulders, feeling everything inside her fly free. Her climax hit like a lightning bolt and she tumbled over the edge into ecstasy, sobbing his name and holding tight as the explosion of passion took him with her.

It took a long time for everything to settle, for the world to return to normal.

Finally Nathaniel slowly lifted his mouth from hers. His eyes hazy and far from focused, he tilted his head. ‘What’s that awful noise?’

Katie struggled to breathe. ‘I think the alarm went off when you hit the stop button. You’re only supposed to press that button in an emergency.’

‘That’s fine, then—’ with a wicked smile, he lowered his mouth to hers again ‘—because it was definitely an emergency.’

She moaned against his mouth. ‘I expect there are a team of engineers on the way or something.’

Nathaniel lifted his head reluctantly and slammed his hand against the lift button.

Katie made a strangled sound. ‘Now we’re going down instead of up.’

Tearing his eyes from hers, he looked at the buttons. ‘Oops.’

He just had time to lower her to the floor and swiftly rearrange their clothing before the lift doors opened on the foyer.

Two of Rafael’s security team stood there looking perplexed.

Scarlet faced, Katie wanted to slide to the floor with embarrassment but Nathaniel simply smiled. ‘Having a good evening, guys?’

‘Er, was there a problem, sir?’

‘We had a slight malfunction, but I fixed it.’

Adopting his customary bored tone, Nathaniel threw an intimate smile at Katie and once again pressed the button that took the lift straight to the penthouse. ‘I’m good with my hands.’

As the door slid closed Katie sagged against the mirrored walls and covered her face. ‘Why did you have to say that? They knew what we were doing. Just *don’t* tell me there was CCTV in here.’

‘Why? I can give you some insider tips if you like. The secret of performing in front of the camera is to act as though it isn’t there. Although that definitely should have been a closed set.’ Laughing at her, he swung her into his arms and took her onto the terrace. ‘Where do you think? Day bed? Night bed? Floor? Wall? Shower? All of the above?’

Breathing in the sweet scent of exotic flowers, Katie stared up at his darkened jaw and felt ridiculously happy.

‘You’re insatiable.’

‘Guilty as charged.’ In the end he tumbled her onto the day bed on the terrace and proceeded to prove to her just how insatiable.

They fell asleep on the terrace and woke to the unforgettable sight of the sun rising over Sugarloaf Mountain.

Katie stared dreamily at the incredible view. ‘This place is truly amazing.’

‘Yes. Rafael has impeccable taste when it comes to real estate.’ Nathaniel stifled a yawn and kissed her. ‘Don’t get up. I have some business to attend to today. I’ll see you a bit later. Take a bath. Chill out.’ With a reluctant sigh and a last look at her mouth, he sprang from the bed and picked up a stack of papers and a glossy report.

Still half asleep, Katie sat up. ‘Business? What business?’

‘Rafael and I sponsor a drama project here. Disadvantaged kids.’ He hesitated and then dropped the report on her lap. ‘It’s full of heart-tugging stuff designed to make people with too much money part with some of it. I have to meet with the woman who runs it—it won’t take long.’

With the hiss of the shower in the background, Katie flicked through the pages. Then she turned back to the beginning and read slowly. When she lifted her head, her face was wet with tears. ‘The life some of these kids have led ...’

Knotting a towel around his hips, Nathaniel frowned. ‘Why are crying? You don’t know them.’

‘I’m crying because it’s awful.’ And because he was reaching out to children who’d suffered as he had suffered. Reading it made her think about what he must have experienced. Children in hell. *Was he even aware of what he was doing?* ‘It must be so rewarding to be able to do this. To watch them develop.’

‘I don’t actually “watch them.” I don’t meet any of the kids.’ Nathaniel thrust his arms into a fresh shirt. ‘I just write the cheques.’

‘You’ve never visited one of your projects?’ Katie stared down at the report in her hands. ‘Aren’t you interested to see who these people are?’

‘I know who they are.’ He snatched his shorts from the chair, his tone brittle. ‘They’re kids. The idea is to try and keep them off the streets and out of the gangs. Being involved in these youth projects stops the kids picking up a gun. That’s what the project does.’

‘But you’ve never met them?’ Katie slid out of bed and walked across to him. His hair was wet from the shower and flopped in dark spikes over his handsome face. ‘Aren’t you curious?’

‘No.’ The panic in his eyes was so swiftly veiled she wondered if she’d imagined it.

‘It would mean a lot to them to see Nathaniel Wolfe in person.’

‘I don’t get personally involved.’

‘So why help them?’

‘Because I earn enough to give some of it away.’

He could have given his money to any number of charities, Katie mused, but he’d chosen to give it to children from difficult, violent backgrounds.

There was no way that was a coincidence.

She wondered if he was even aware of his reasons for championing

that cause.

‘If you showed up, the children would be thrilled.’

‘And I care about that because ...?’

‘Because you care about helping the children. If you didn’t care, you wouldn’t be giving them money. You’d be giving the money to the cats’ home or some other worthy charity.’

He reached for his watch. ‘Maybe I’m the cold-hearted bastard they say I am.’

*He wasn’t.* She knew he wasn’t. But he wouldn’t allow himself to become close to anyone. ‘Cold-hearted bastards don’t risk their lives rescuing drowning children. And they don’t waste time and money sponsoring acting projects that the media don’t even know about. You should go and see what they do. Imagine how that would make you feel.’

‘Bored? I don’t do things for other people.’ He sank his hands into her hair and kissed her neck. ‘I’m intrinsically selfish.’

‘That’s what you like to think about yourself, but it isn’t true. Nathaniel ...’ She gave a low moan as his mouth found a sensitive spot. ‘Don’t. I can’t think when you—oh ...’

With a satisfied laugh, he tumbled her down onto the soft rug and it was another hour before either of them thought about moving.

‘I could help with the costumes.’ Katie curled herself around him, trailing her fingers down his body. ‘I have all those ribbons and pieces of fabric I bought in the market yesterday. Who makes their costumes at the moment?’

‘Don’t you ever give up?’ Nathaniel rolled her onto her back and looked at her, his blue eyes blazing in exasperation. ‘I was going to get this meeting over with and then take you sightseeing.’

‘I’d much rather help out at your acting project. Please, Nathaniel. You’ll make their day. Their whole year.’ The thought of what it would mean to the children excited her almost as much as what it could mean to him. She’d seen the compassion behind the tough exterior. She knew how much of himself he kept locked up. Maybe working with children would help unlock that part of himself.

Nathaniel swore fluently and sprang to his feet. His eyes menacing, he threw her a warning glance. ‘Cry once, *just once*, and we’re leaving. Understood?’

Nathaniel stood outside the building that housed his youth drama project, stomach churning. Any minute now he was going to be on his knees in the gutter, throwing up.

*Why had he agreed to this?*

Above them a chaotic maze of tin-roofed, wooden and unpainted brick shacks hung precariously from a steep hillside and wide-eyed, curious children watched them as they kicked a football in the dusty street.

The air was hot and sticky but Nathaniel had never felt colder.

He took a step backwards and then felt Katie’s hand close over his.

‘Let’s go inside and meet some of them.’

Nathaniel wanted to pull away. He wanted to go inside about as much as he wanted to shoot himself in the head. He didn’t want to get to know these people. He didn’t want to find himself back there but Katie was pulling him and he couldn’t find a reason to stay outside.

Inside the building a crowd of children of various heights and ages were milling around. The moment Nathaniel walked across the threshold the atmosphere changed. Everybody stopped talking and just stared. He was used to that, of course. It happened everywhere. But this was different. The eyes looking at him were different.

The silence lasted only seconds and then the room erupted into excited squeals and non-stop chatter as a crowd of children of various ages surged towards them.

Erecting the usual barriers between himself and the rest of the world, Nathaniel switched into actor mode and tried to distance himself.

But he wasn’t able to distance himself. Unlike adults, the children didn’t respect boundaries and soon several of the younger ones were climbing all over him, talking simultaneously, touching him to see if he was real.

He saw scuffed shoes and unwashed hair. He saw bruises and eyes that held stories no one wanted to hear. But most of all he saw enthusiasm

and excitement. Yes, there was trauma there, but it came a poor second to hope.

The sickness inside him faded. His hands relaxed.

He signed a few autographs before remembering that he never signed autographs.

‘*Oi, tudo bem?*’ He spoke in Portuguese and Gabriela, a slim dark-haired woman who ran the centre, clapped her hands and commanded silence.

‘We’re overwhelmed that you have chosen to visit us in person.’ There were tears in her eyes and Nathaniel tried to think of a slick, movie-star response but his tongue had tied itself in a knot and his acting cloak failed him, just as it had that night onstage.

‘Show me what you’re doing,’ he said roughly. ‘Maybe I—I can try and help.’ *Great. Now he couldn’t even string a sentence together.*

At first it felt awkward. Taking him to one side, Gabriela told him a little about each child and they acted scenes for him, proud to show off what they’d been doing. Some of them were wooden; others were better, and one or two had real talent. But it was the one boy who refused to join in who drew his attention. Watchful and tense, he stood close to the door.

‘That kid over there—’ Nathaniel wiped his forearm over his brow. ‘What’s his story?’

‘I don’t know.’ Gabriela handed him water. ‘He comes and watches sometimes. If you try and speak to him, he runs. I suspect he’s just hiding out here. Best to leave him and hope that one day he’ll have the confidence to join in. It happens sometimes. He isn’t the first.’

Nathaniel looked at the boy and felt an immediate flash of recognition. In those eyes he saw defiance, anger, curiosity—and fear.

It was the fear that made Nathaniel stroll towards him.

The boy edged closer to the door and Nathaniel almost stopped walking. *What was he doing?* He didn’t know anything about counselling kids. He didn’t even know how old this one was. Ten? Older?

The boy turned his head, torn between the lure of the escape route and the lure of the world’s most famous movie star. The movement

revealed the livid bruise darkening one side of his jaw. His mouth tightening, Nathaniel kept walking. He didn't know anything about kids in general, but he knew about damaged kids. *Knew he was looking at one.*

Anger shot through him but he checked it as the boy glared at him, fists clenched. 'It's all right—I'm going. You don't have to throw me out.'

'Actually, I was hoping you could help me out ....' Keeping what he hoped was a non-threatening distance, Nathaniel squatted down so that he was eye level with the boy. 'You're exactly right for this part—you ever act?'

The boy's fists relaxed slightly. 'I don't know anything about acting.'

'Good. It's easier that way than if you think you already know all there is to know.' Nathaniel held his gaze. 'So this is what you do—you forget all about being you, and pretend you're someone else. That's it. That's all there is to it. Easy.'

*He was willing to bet the boy dreamed about being someone else almost every day of his life....*

When a sheen of tears glazed the boy's eyes, Nathaniel didn't know which of them was more alarmed.

Out of his depth, he was about to call time and summon reinforcements in the form of Gabriela and Katie, when the boy grabbed his arm.

'I've seen your movies.'

Nathaniel felt a pressure behind his chest. 'Right. Good.'

'I—You've got plenty of actors here.' His voice was rough. Desperate. 'You don't need me.'

'Well, that shows how little you know.' Nathaniel saw the bruises on the boy's arms and the anger was a hard knot in his stomach. 'I need you really badly. So get your skinny butt on that stage and let's get to work.'

'No one has been able to persuade the boy to speak.' Gabriela was huddled with Katie, sewing costumes out of scraps of material. 'But now he's having an acting lesson with Nathaniel Wolfe. Katie, I just saw him laugh.'

'Don't. You'll set me off.' Katie blinked rapidly. 'I can't sew and cry.'

But Nathaniel's dogged determination to persuade the child to open up and participate had moved her. He'd refused to give up. Every time the boy had backed off, he'd been there, lowering his own barriers in order to help the child.

'Do you know how many times I've tried to get that boy to speak?' Gabriela threaded a needle. 'And now he has a part in the play. I have his name now—we can help him.'

Katie lifted her head and watched Nathaniel. He was demonstrating a movement to the children and they were watching, enraptured.

*He would make a fantastic father.*

The thought came out of nowhere and she froze, shocked by her own thoughts.

Oh, no, she wasn't going to do that, was she? She wasn't going to start thinking, even for a moment, that their relationship was more than a quick flash of fire.

Feeling a sharp pain, she looked down and realised she'd pierced her finger with the needle.

Katie grabbed a tissue and did a swift reality check.

Children? After his own scarred childhood?

Trying to distract herself, she sewed and produced costumes and made sure she was completely steady before she took a quick break and walked over to Nathaniel. 'You're doing well. I had no idea you spoke the language.'

'Rafael is Brazilian. We hung out together when we were younger.' He was watching two boys staging a fight scene, occasionally passing comment.

'Gabriela told me how much money you've ploughed into the project. She told me that you're the reason lots of those children are even alive today. How did you meet her?'

'Rafael sponsors education programmes—puts computers in schools, that sort of thing. He introduced me to Gabriela.' As the fight became rather too realistic, Nathaniel stepped forward and intervened. 'You're not actually supposed to beat each other. Do it like this—' He showed them how to make it look convincing without actually causing damage

and then turned back to Katie. ‘The whole thing snowballed. Sometimes our projects overlap. Two years ago Rafael sent me a script written by one of the kids he’d helped—it was good. We’ve turned it into a film.’

She was astonished. ‘You found a studio to put up the money?’

‘No.’ His hand shot out and he steadied the boy before he fell and hit the floor. ‘Rafael and I put up the money ourselves. It’s a low-budget film, premiering at one of the film festivals in May. *Carnival*. Gritty urban thriller. It’s about a boy from a violent family.’ He turned his head, his eyes on Carlos, the boy he’d persuaded to join them. ‘It’s the life story of many of the kids here. Except in *Carnival*, acting gives the hero a chance at a new life.’

And he couldn’t see the parallels? Acting had helped him escape from a difficult childhood and now he was offering the same escape to other children.

Katie swallowed. ‘Who gave you that chance? Did you go to drama school?’

‘Boarding school. My father couldn’t wait to get rid of us all. I was happier at school than I was at home.’ A frown touched his brows, as if that thought had only just occurred to him. ‘The school had a fantastic drama department. When I was sixteen

I was playing Romeo in a summer production. A Hollywood casting agent happened to be in the audience looking for an English teenager to play the lead in his coming-of-age blockbuster, *Summer Semester*. I was a complete unknown.’

‘But talented.’

‘I thought I was.’ His smile was loaded with self-mockery. ‘I just wanted to get the hell out of England. It was the ultimate teenage rebellion.’

*He’d wanted to escape from the horrors of home.*

‘So you were swept off to Hollywood where you wowed everyone. What then?’

‘I married my co-star.’

It felt as though something heavy had dropped on her chest. The noise around her faded and the only sound was her heart pounding in her

ears. ‘You ... married?’

‘You didn’t know?’

‘Why would I?’

‘Because people generally like to study my life in minute detail and it isn’t a secret. I thought you read celebrity magazines.’

‘I just look at the pictures—to see what people are wearing.’ *It didn’t matter*, she told herself. It was in the past. It didn’t have an impact on now. But it was just another example of why he was completely wrong for her. Information that she would have considered vital was locked away in the vault with restricted access. ‘I—I didn’t know you were married.’

He glanced at her. ‘Now I see dark clouds in Katie-land. Why should the fact I’ve been married upset you?’

Because she’d stupidly fooled herself that he’d never been this close to a woman before. But he’d cared enough to marry someone. ‘It doesn’t upset me. I’m just a bit ... surprised, that’s all.’

‘It was a publicity stunt. We were manipulated by the studio and the media—it was all about the movie.’ There was a cynical edge to his voice. ‘I never told her a thing about myself. In fact, I’ve never told any woman anything about myself, until I met you. You know more about me than anyone. If you’re counting points, you’re winning.’

‘I’m not counting.’ Katie’s heart pounded. Or at least, she didn’t want to be counting. All she knew was that something inside her had changed. That day on the boat when he’d saved the child—that night ...

Her heart flipped.

It wasn’t love. *Oh, no, no.* It couldn’t be love. She wasn’t going to let it be love. Not with this man.

Her stomach churned and she felt slightly sick. *How had it happened?* Less than two weeks ago she’d been going speed dating with Claire. She’d eaten cereal for every meal. She’d worn brown.

Nathaniel Wolfe had been someone she’d fantasised about from a distance. And now ...

She’d never considered herself to be reckless, but suddenly she was in

love with a man who lived his life in the spotlight. A complicated man, all hard edges and armour plating.

A man who found it hard to talk about anything, least of all his emotions.

If that wasn't reckless, she didn't know what was.

They spent three days working with the kids on the acting project. Three days in which Nathaniel felt himself getting sucked deeper and deeper into the emotional issues he'd always made a point of avoiding. Part of him wanted to walk out and go back to the anonymity of writing big cheques. Instead he found himself talking to Gabriela, discussing ways in which the project could extend the support it offered for children. When a young boy revealed that his father beat him regularly Nathaniel ignored the cold slime that crawled over his skin and listened.

The older ones were harder to connect with. They'd learned to lock it away, *as he had*.

Any attempt to touch on the subject was met with resistance. 'So I've got secrets.' The shrug was years older than the boy. 'Don't you have secrets?'

Yes, he had secrets. He had secrets he carried with him every day of his life. The past churning inside him, Nathaniel turned his head to look at Katie.

Sensing his gaze, she looked up at him and smiled and the smile cut him like the blade of a razor because he knew there was still so much about him she didn't know.

What had she said to him? *I want to know the real Nathaniel.*

She'd barely scratched the surface.

As if to taunt him, he felt the phone in his pocket buzz with another message.

Even without checking, he knew who it was and knowing was enough to shake his mood from light to dark.

Normally when the black clouds descended he chose to do something reckless. A motorbike on a slick road. Free climbing a vertical cliff. Any raw physical challenge that required such concentration that nothing

else could intrude.

Anything that helped him to forget ...

Riding the anger and the stress, he strode across the room and grabbed Katie, pulling her into his arms. 'We're going.'

'But—'

'Don't argue.' Nathaniel spoke briefly to Gabriela, said goodbye to the children and surprised himself by promising to come back again really soon. Then he propelled Katie into the waiting car and drove straight to the airport.

'What are you doing?' Breathless, laughing, she moaned as his lips found hers.

Nathaniel was rough. Hungry. *Take me away from this. Make me forget.* 'I don't have a motorbike here and I don't feel like climbing a vertical cliff ....'

Her eyes were smoky and soft. 'Is that supposed to mean something?'

'We're going back to Wolfe Island. I've had enough of sharing you.' He savoured her mouth, felt the punch of desire slam through his body, sought oblivion in the warm sweetness. 'I want you to myself.'

For the first time in his life he wasn't thinking of ways to end a relationship with a woman. In fact, he was looking for excuses to keep her with him.

He didn't want to share her with a bunch of children, however deserving.

Katie snuggled against him. 'And you think I'm going to argue with you? I love the island. And when it's just the two of us, you don't act. I get to see the real Nathaniel. No hiding. No secrets.'

No secrets.

Nathaniel felt cold fingers of guilt stroke his spine and the guilt angered him.

There was no reason why he had to tell her everything about himself. All right, so Katie had told him pretty much everything about herself, but that was her choice, wasn't it? Women were different like that. They liked to spill every thought and every feeling. Living like that would

drive him mad. Most of his thoughts and feelings didn't bear thinking about, let alone repeating.

'So how long are we staying on the island?' She was smiling at him, unaware of the conflict of emotions at war inside him.

'Two days. Then I have to go back to LA for the Sapphire Award ceremony.'

She didn't say a word but he saw the brightness dim.

'And you're coming with me.' He didn't know he was going to say the words until they left his mouth. 'I want you to come with me.'

'To the Sapphires?' Her jaw dropped. 'You can't be serious.'

'I'm deadly serious.' Being with her felt good, he reasoned. She was easy company. Unselfish. Cheerful. And sexy.

Why wouldn't he want her with him?

It didn't mean anything.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

IT WAS all very well having good intentions. Harder to stick to them when the man you were determined not to fall for was Nathaniel Wolfe.

Katie curled up on the sofa in his private jet, trying to hold hope in check. It wasn't just the thought of attending the Sapphire ceremony that excited her, it was the knowledge that Nathaniel wanted her with him.

He could have flown her home or left her on the island.

But he'd chosen to invite her. Not a skinny A-list actress with visible hip bones. Her. Katie Field. Costume Designer.

And he was no longer acting when he was with her. He was the real Nathaniel.

'We've extended the acting project—' he was reading an email from Gabriela '—and she says Carlos has been back every day.'

'That's great.' And it was. But what really warmed her was how involved he'd become. Far from shutting himself off, he'd opened himself up.

'He's emailed me. Gabriela let him use the connection from her office.' His smile was tinged with self-mockery. 'I'm going to regret that one. Never given my private email to a snotty kid before. Next thing, he's going to want to come and stay with me in LA.' But there was satisfaction in his voice and a smile on his lips as he tapped a reply.

Katie blinked back the tears that stung her eyes. 'I think that would be great.'

Nathaniel turned his head slowly and held her gaze. 'I'm glad I got involved. I wouldn't have done it if it hadn't been for you.' He leaned forward and kissed her. They'd kissed so many times over the past two weeks, and yet this kiss was different. She felt the difference. And so did he.

Lifting his head, he frowned. 'Katie—'

She waited, her heart in her mouth. She had no idea what he wanted

to say but she felt the tension and the shift in the atmosphere.

‘Five minutes to landing.’ The captain’s voice filled the cabin and Nathaniel pulled back from her, his eyes blank.

‘Nothing. We’ve arrived. Welcome to Los Angeles.’

They walked off the plane straight into a heaving crowd of reporters and photographers.

‘Nathaniel? Is it true you saw your brother Jacob on your opening night in London?’

‘Do you have any comment about why you walked off the stage?’

‘Have you spoken to him since that night?’

Shocked by the relentless battering by the press, Katie gripped his hand, horrified that all the things he hated talking about were being flung out there for public consumption. To her it seemed monumentally insensitive and cruel and she wanted to shout at them to leave him alone but she knew that wouldn’t help. They were like a pack of hungry hyenas converging on a juicy carcass. They showed respect for neither privacy nor personal space and she found the crowd and the cameras both threatening and intimidating.

The confidence she’d found on the island evaporated and suddenly she wanted to shrink into the background again.

In contrast, Nathaniel was cool and confident, striding through the ranks of photographers with a bored smile that was absolutely in character with his public persona. The man she’d spent the past two weeks with had vanished and he was every inch the remote, supersuccessful movie star.

‘I have nothing to say about my private life,’ he drawled, ‘but if you want to talk about *Alpha Man*, then contact one of my team.’

‘Do you blame Jacob for murdering your father?’

Nathaniel didn’t break stride, nor did he give any indication that he’d heard, but Katie thought that he gripped her hand a little tighter.

‘Do you think *Alpha Man* will win the Sapphire for Best Movie, Nathaniel?’

‘Katie, how does it feel to have trapped the wealthiest movie star in

the world? Is he paying off your debts?’

Before she had time to recover from the shock, Nathaniel sprang like a leopard trapping its prey. Lithe and lethal, he ploughed through the front row and grabbed the journalist by the front of his shirt, dragging him forward. ‘She did not “trap” me,’ he growled, ‘and what I do with my money is none of your business.’

Frozen with shock, Katie closed her hand over his arm and tugged. ‘Let him go. He isn’t worth it.’

For a moment she thought he hadn’t heard her, and then he released the journalist and the man staggered. His face was white and he looked shaken.

‘Don’t *ever* speak to her like that again or I’ll rip your throat out.’ Nathaniel wrapped a protective arm round Katie. ‘Now leave us alone.’

Touched by his violent defence of her, Katie suddenly wished the journalists would just vanish. At that moment she felt closer to him than she ever had, and when he lowered his head to kiss her in blatant disregard of the cameras, she felt happiness brim over.

Through the mists of pleasure and the explosion of flashbulbs she heard a voice—a clear, hard voice—shout from the back of the crowd. ‘What about Carrie? Isn’t it time you talked about Carrie?’

Because her mouth was pressed against his, she felt the change, felt the ripples of tension as he slowly lifted his head.

Anxious murmurings spread across the crowd from journalists worried that they’d missed an important story. People turned to one another, seeking enlightenment as to who ‘Carrie’ was.

The journalist who had spoken pushed to the front. She was an icy blonde who had ruthless ambition stamped over every centimetre of her carefully made-up face. Behind her was a cameraman determined not to miss a shot. ‘Must have been a hell of a childhood, Nathaniel.’

Confused, Katie glanced at the woman and then back at Nathaniel. His face was the colour of the palest marble.

‘My childhood was fine.’

‘Really?’ It was obvious that the journalist wasn’t going to let it go. ‘If I knew my mother tried to drown me when I was a baby, I don’t think

I'd be fine.'

*His mother?* Katie frowned, wondering how the woman could have got the story so wrong. It wasn't his mother who had tried to drown him, it was his father. She waited for Nathaniel to correct the woman but he stood silent, the black fury in his eyes sending an uneasy silence across the crowd of journalists.

The blonde took a step backwards but refused to abandon her story. 'You've been clever. You put out the story that your mother left, so none of us bothered looking. Why didn't you just tell people she had a complete breakdown and she's been in a psychiatric hospital ever since? You and your brother Sebastian should be proud that you used some of your many millions to build her a pretty cottage in the grounds so she thinks she's living a normal life. Why do you keep her a secret, Nathaniel? Are you afraid that if people find out about your mother, it will ruin your perfect movie-star image?'

Carrie was his *mother*?

She was in a psychiatric hospital?

Katie's first impulse was to leap to his defence and deny it, but one look at Nathaniel's white face and traumatised expression told her that the woman was telling the truth.

And this time he didn't attack. He didn't move. It was as if he'd been felled at the knees.

And the warmth inside Katie melted in an instant. *His mother*, she thought numbly. Hauling back the sick disappointment that he hadn't told her, she focused on the blonde journalist. The woman's smile said everything. She knew she'd hit the jackpot.

Pushing her own pain aside, driven by a depth of anger she'd never known before, Katie stepped forward. 'How *dare* you use someone's personal life for cheap entertainment and to make a name for yourself. Shame on you.' Her voice shook and she stared at the woman with contempt. 'Shame on you.'

Shaking with anger, Katie stepped backwards just as six bulky men arrived and surrounded them.

'You're late,' Nathaniel said flatly, and the largest of the men gave him

an apologetic look.

‘Terrible traffic in downtown LA, boss. Sorry.’

They were ushered out to a waiting limousine and Katie collapsed into the luxurious interior. The warmth she’d felt when he’d leapt to her defence had seeped away through the stab wounds made by this latest discovery. *Why hadn’t he told her?*

She glanced across at him but he sat in silence, withdrawn and remote. The Nathaniel she’d got to know on the island and in Rio—*the real Nathaniel*—was gone. Katie pushed aside her own pain. They’d only known each other for two weeks, she reasoned. For a man like him, that wasn’t long enough to establish real trust. She needed to be patient. ‘I’m sorry. She had no right to say all those things. How did she find out?’

Nathaniel tipped his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. ‘The surprise isn’t that she found out, but that it took everyone so long. Sebastian and I have been waiting for this for years. We tried to keep the secret—whenever there is press coverage about my father, it affects Carrie badly. She takes a lot of medication, but even with that, it isn’t good.’

He didn’t talk about it because he was trying to protect his mother. ‘Why do you call her Carrie?’

‘Because that’s how I think of her. I stopped thinking of her as my mother a long time ago. She wasn’t really capable of being a mother. She was too ill.’

‘Is it true that you built her a cottage?’

‘Sebastian and I wanted her to have as normal a life as possible. It’s easier to keep her condition stable when she isn’t around strangers. She lives in her own little world. Most of the time she’s happy enough. She has full-time carers who she sees as family.’

‘And what about you? Her real family?’

‘I see her whenever I’m in England. But she doesn’t recognise me. Or Sebastian.’ Nathaniel’s hands curled into fists. ‘Do you know the really frustrating thing? She talks about me all the time. “My son Nathaniel, famous Hollywood movie star ...” But she doesn’t actually know it’s me. She calls Sebastian “Nathaniel” but when I visit her, she can’t seem to

make the connection. Once she even asked me if I knew her son Nathaniel.'

Thinking about his bleak, loveless childhood brought a lump to her throat.

He'd learned to survive alone.

She slid along the seat and put her arms round him but he was rigid and unresponsive.

'I'm fine.'

'Nathaniel, you're not fine!'

'It's how it is. It's how it's always been. I need to warn the clinic.' Shrugging her away, he reached for his phone. 'They need to keep her away from newspapers and television. It could have a serious impact on her emotional stability. And then I need to increase security so those jackals can't get anywhere near her because she associates gangs of journalists with her disastrous marriage to my father. And the LA press don't have anything on the British tabloids.'

Katie sat there, helpless, trying not to feel hurt by his rejection. 'Are you going to call Sebastian?'

'I've just sent him a text.'

One by one the doors between him and the world were slamming shut. Katie wanted to put her foot in the final crack to stop him closing her out along with everyone else.

'You don't think a conversation might be helpful?'

'All he needs are the facts.'

Facts. Facts. Katie wanted to point out that there was more to conversation than an exchange of facts.

Picking up on her tension, Nathaniel turned his head and looked at her. 'You're upset that I didn't tell you—'

'No.' She pushed the words past stiff lips. 'It's how you cope with things. I understand.'

'Do you?' His voice was hard. 'Because if revelations about my family are going to shock you, then you're hanging out with the wrong guy. There are more skeletons in my family than in the average graveyard.'

The brittle tone rubbed over her nerves like sandpaper and Katie tried desperately to regain some of the closeness they'd had on the island.

'I understand why you didn't tell me. I understand how much you must be hurting.'

'I'm not hurting.' The shield was up and no one was getting through. 'I stopped hurting twenty years ago.'

Katie stared at the perfect lines of his profile, despair seeping through her.

Not hurting?

He was in agony.

And she had no idea how to reach him.

'This place is incredible.' They were high up in the Hollywood Hills, near the urban wilderness of Runyon Canyon. Beneath them, the sprawl of Los Angeles lay in a haze of early-morning sunshine.

Sunbeams danced on the infinity pool and the place was infused with the delicious scent of pine.

'An architect friend of mine built it.' Distant and polite, Nathaniel poured her a cup of coffee. 'Down there is Sunset Boulevard.' He gestured with his head. 'And to the left you can see the high-rises of downtown. Did you sleep well?'

'Yes. Thank you.' *Did he really think she would have slept when he hadn't come to bed?* She wondered where he'd spent the night. Awake on the terrace thinking about his mother? Pacing?

Feeling utterly exhausted, Katie stared down at the city. It felt like a million miles from London in February. A million miles from her real life. Only her real life hadn't gone away, had it?

In the past twenty-four hours she'd come back down to earth and she was still bruised from the rough landing. 'I need to do something about finding a job.'

'Howard Kennington will be at the Sapphire ceremony tonight. You're going to meet him along with Alicia. There's a project they want to discuss with you.'

For a moment their problems receded into the background. Her head

spun and excitement sparked inside her. ‘*The Howard Kennington?* The producer?’

‘That’s the one.

‘But ... how do you know the two of them will meet me?’

‘I’ve already set it up.’ Nathaniel was polite and formal and Katie felt as though her heart was being twisted in different directions. He was offering her a dream with one hand, while snatching back an entirely different dream with the other.

‘Thank you,’ she said quietly, ‘for doing that for me.’

‘I already sent your preliminary drawings and your costume plot. He’s impressed and so is Alicia. The rest is up to you.’ Nathaniel glanced at his watch, all brisk efficiency. ‘You need to start getting ready for tonight.’

She hadn’t even taken a sip of her coffee. ‘Already?’

‘This is the Sapphires.’ He gave a sardonic smile. ‘Most of the actresses started preparing at least two months ago.’

‘You’re kidding ...’ Awash with insecurities, she put her cup down on the table. ‘Suddenly I’m not so excited about going—how do you fancy an evening in front of the TV?’ Her feeble joke drew a flicker of a smile from him.

‘Think of it this way—you’re already at an advantage because you don’t need Botox, plastic surgery, teeth-whitening or a month with a personal trainer. You’re going to look fantastic and I predict much teeth gnashing among the glitterati.’

Panic set in. ‘Nathaniel, I can’t go to the Sapphires. For a start I don’t have a dress.’

‘Yes, you do. Follow me, Cinderella.’ He walked across the terrace towards the house.

‘I can’t wear something you’ve chosen. There are loads of fabrics and colours I just don’t look good in. And turquoise is fine for the beach, but it won’t do for the Sapphires.’ Wishing they were back on Wolfe Island where it was just the two of them, she followed him into the house. The vast windows threw sunshine and light over the polished wooden floors and elegant white furniture.

Silent and preoccupied, Nathaniel led her up the winding staircase to the master bedroom with its Brazilian wood balcony and views across the Santa Monica Mountains. But the last thing on her mind was the view.

Aware of the tension in him, Katie tried again to reach out to him. ‘Nathaniel ... about the press yesterday—’

‘I have two well-known American designers waiting to talk to you if you don’t like the dress.’ Without giving her the chance to turn the conversation into something more personal, he gestured towards the dressing room that was about the same size as her apartment in London.

Walking into a room that dazzled with glass and mirrors, Katie blinked in shock. Hanging from a rail was the dress she’d designed. Her dress. It was taken straight from the drawing he’d admired that night in her flat, even down to the sequins hand stitched to the gold silk. ‘Oh.’ She swallowed. ‘Nathaniel. How did you—? When did you—?’

‘I found another drawing of it in your pad and sent it to a designer friend of mine. He’s had a team of seamstresses working on it non-stop.’

‘It’s perfect. It’s—’ *An incredible gesture.* And she had no idea what to read into it. She’d never felt more confused in her life.

Nathaniel was watching her with an expression that she couldn’t fathom. ‘You approve?’

‘How could I not?’ Katie stepped forward, touching the fabric as she always did with any garment. ‘It’s exactly as I imagined it. Except that I didn’t imagine I’d be wearing it myself.’ Really touched, she flung her arms round his neck and hugged him. ‘Thanks. That was incredibly thoughtful.’

It was like hugging a stone pillar—a one-way experience. There was no response. Nothing.

Nathaniel gently disengaged himself. ‘I bought you something else ....’ His tone casual, he removed a box from his pocket and flipped it open. A beautiful diamond necklace winked at her from a bed of seductive black velvet.

‘Oh—’ Katie’s heart stopped and suddenly she couldn’t breathe. ‘That’s beautiful ....’

And it was a breathtakingly extravagant gift. No one had ever given her anything that generous before. She stared at it, stunned.

‘Pleased?’

‘Of course.’ And she was. It was crazy to think that what she really would have preferred was a hug. Or a kiss. Something intimate.

But Nathaniel made sure there was no opportunity for intimacy as he wheeled in a team of hairdressers, make-up artists and a top stylist.

By the middle of the afternoon, Katie had been primped and pampered and was feeling more and more nervous about the evening ahead. Why had she and Claire ever thought it would be fun going to the Sapphires? She was going to walk down that famous red carpet with some of the most beautiful women in the world on the arm of the sexiest man in the world. It didn’t take a genius to predict what everyone would be thinking. *Why her?* It would be like letting a mongrel loose in a dog show, she thought gloomily. There was no way she’d ever win Best of Breed.

When she finally stepped into the dress, the stylist stood back and stared.

‘You look totally awesome.’

Unconvinced, Katie turned to look in the mirror. And saw a stranger. They’d swept her hair up and the skilled use of make-up made her skin look flawless and her eyes huge.

‘The dress is stunning.’ The stylist sighed. ‘Who is the designer?’

‘Me.’ Katie stared at her reflection, trying to see herself through the layers of sophistication. ‘I’m the designer.’

‘Wow. Well, by the end of the evening everyone will know who you are, that’s for sure. I bet you’re nervous. Every woman in the world is going to be watching that ceremony tonight and hating you for being with Nathaniel. Not to mention that several of the actresses attending tonight would have given just about anything to be in your position. He’s a superstar.’

*Nathaniel Wolfe, superstar.*

Suddenly Katie wished they were back in Rio, helping the kids with their drama class. There, Nathaniel had been himself. She’d started to

get to know him, although there were huge parts of himself he still kept hidden.

*Like why he wanted to win a Sapphire so badly.*

She had a feeling it was more than personal pride.

Great actors went through their whole careers without winning, didn't they? Of course it would be a wonderful accolade, but was it really a matter of life or death?

She wondered if he'd talk about it on the way to the ceremony, but from the moment he strode into the room, she knew there was no hope of that.

There was no sign of the real Nathaniel. This was Alpha Man in person, impeccably dressed in a black tuxedo with a black satin bow tie at his throat. He exuded the raw, masculine glamour of the Hollywood leading man and Katie felt the gulf between them widen. It was like waking up from a wonderful dream and not being able to hold on to the images. She could feel him slipping away from her.

'Nathaniel ...' Desperate to break through those barriers, she tried to talk to him but he was distant and unapproachable. She was no closer to him than those audiences watching him up on the big screen.

His fingers were cool as he fastened the diamonds around her neck. 'You look beautiful.' It was as if he was analysing her quality as another accessory to be fed into the whole Sapphire machinery.

'Nathaniel—'

'This evening must feel daunting.' Stepping back, he scanned her with those sexy, slanting eyes. 'You have no reason to be nervous. You will outshine everyone.'

'I love the necklace and I love the dress.' She wanted to tell him that it wasn't how she looked that worried her, it was how she felt. How *he* felt. The Nathaniel she'd fallen in love with had somehow slipped away when they'd landed in Los Angeles. 'You must be feeling really nervous. I know tonight means a lot to you.'

'It's work. The Academy Awards are an important night in the calendar.' He was all movie star. Remote. Untouchable.

Katie caught his arm in a tight grip, trying to reach the man.

*'Please tell me what's wrong. Is it just because you want to win so badly?'*

'Of course I want to win.' His eyes burned brilliant blue. 'Winner takes all.'

Katie let her hand drop, wondering why she didn't believe him. 'So it's just your competitive nature.'

'We don't have time for a full-on Katie analysis session.' He held out his arm. 'The limo is waiting, as are the photographers. You might want to practise your smile.'

Katie hesitated and then took his arm and walked with him to the door. She'd been naïve, hadn't she? She'd congratulated herself on breaking down those barriers. She'd thought the man she'd spent the past two weeks with, the real Nathaniel Wolfe, was here to stay. She'd truly believed she had exclusive access, which showed how stupid she was.

It didn't matter what they'd shared. It didn't matter what had happened before.

Nathaniel Wolfe was gone.

It was a slow drive. The streets were closed off and people herded together and crushed against barriers, hoping to catch a glimpse of the stars. And then Katie found herself standing on the legendary red carpet, blinking in the blaze of the Californian sunshine. She touched the diamonds at her throat, listened to the screams and felt like a total impostor. It was controlled chaos, the sheer volume of people daunting, and she hoped that she didn't lose Nathaniel. She'd never find him again in this crowd.

A woman approached them, smiling and obsequious. 'Mr Wolfe, I'll walk you through. The cameras are waiting.'

Of course the cameras were waiting. *The cameras were always waiting for Nathaniel Wolfe.*

They headed along the red carpet and Katie spotted a sea of famous faces, but none as famous as Nathaniel, who engendered something close to hysteria in the watching crowds. They held banners and huge, blown-up photographs and yelled his name.

Calm and relaxed, he smiled and strolled as if he were walking on the beach, occasionally stopping to chat to someone or shake a hand. He was the megastar, the man everyone wanted to be or be with. Pushed into the reality of his world, Katie realised how hopeless it was. How had she ever thought, even for a moment, that this could work? Yes, she'd spent time with the real man, but he was also a movie star and that was never going to change.

There would always be cameras and screaming women. Beautiful women. Drowning in a wash of despair, she walked through the metal detectors, trying not to tread on the glamorous dresses and embarrass herself.

And then she was being urged forward towards the banks of photographers and press desperate to interview the stars.

Katie wanted to shrink into the background but shrinking meant losing Nathaniel and his was the only face she knew so she stood and distracted herself by examining all the dresses and mentally altering the cut, the colour or the fit.

If her career as a costume designer hit the rocks, maybe she could become a stylist, she mused. She was good at dressing other people.

After endless photographs a voice announced that the awards ceremony would be starting in five minutes and Nathaniel guided her into their seats at the front of the auditorium.

*Front row, she thought dizzily. She was in the front row.*

As the Awards progressed, she felt Nathaniel's tension increase. The suspense was agonising and Katie sat there, heart pounding, unable to enjoy the evening because she was so desperate to get to the part that mattered for Nathaniel. She wanted him to win because she knew how badly *he* wanted it.

Even when she saw the words *Best Performance*

*by an Actor in a Starring Role* flash onto the giant screen, it still wasn't over. Five beautiful actresses stood onstage to talk about each of the nominees and Katie held her breath thinking that if they didn't get on with it soon she was going to leap onstage and rip open the envelope herself. She ground her teeth as the women waxed lyrical about the

other nominees, but when it came to Nathaniel's turn for acclaim, she found herself listening intently. As the beautiful actress, his co-star, started praising his raw talent, his intuition and his skill on both sides of the camera, Katie realised with a flash of guilt that she always tried to ignore that side of him. She tried to forget that he was a great actor because thinking of him like that simply intimidated her. But he was world-class. And clearly he had the respect of his peers.

Knowing that the cameras would be focused on him, Katie kept a fixed smile on her face, while the same thought revolved in her head, *Please let him win, please let him win.*

Finally the talking stopped.

The glamorous woman who had won Best Actress the previous year walked onto the stage.

Tense as a bow, Katie listened as the names of the nominees were read out again and then the actress finally opened the envelope. Her mouth curved into a smile as she looked up at the audience.

‘And the Sapphire goes to Nathaniel Wolfe for *Alpha Man*.’

The applause exploded across the auditorium like a clap of thunder. Katie felt her vision blur and she turned to congratulate him, expecting to see him smiling. Instead he sat still, staring straight ahead.

‘Nathaniel?’ she choked out his name. ‘You won. You did it.’ She gave him a little push and he turned to look at her, his eyes blank. ‘Congratulations. They’re waiting for you onstage. You have to go and get it!’

As he rose slowly to his feet, so did the audience. One by one, they stood, saluting him in an unprecedented show of support. There wasn’t a person in the room who, by now, didn’t know the sad story of his childhood. There wasn’t a woman in the room who wasn’t thinking about his mother as Nathaniel walked slowly towards the stage. The noise was deafening and there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that it was a popular choice. Nathaniel could barely make it down the aisle for people hugging him, kissing him and shaking his hand. And Katie watched, pride lodged in her throat, tears stinging her eyes.

Eventually he extracted himself from the clinging hands and walked

onto the stage to receive his Sapphire from Hollywood's hottest female star.

The applause was tumultuous, and in the midst of her happiness Katie felt a wash of despair.

For a while he'd been hers. Not Nathaniel Wolfe, Sapphire winner, but Nathaniel Wolfe the man. For a while they'd laughed, swum in the sea and made love. He'd shared his thoughts with her. He'd told her about his family. She knew that underneath those famous blue eyes was a caring, strong decent man who guarded his emotions.

But now ...

Watching him lift the icicle shaped Sapphire trophy high in the air as a gesture of triumph, she felt her eyes sting.

He'd been a little boy trying to escape from the nightmare of the real world. And that little boy had fought his way to the top in the toughest business of all.

The achievement was outstanding.

When the applause died and the audience finally seated themselves, Nathaniel gave his trademark sexy smile, back in control. 'This is the part where I'm supposed to cry, isn't it?'

Laughter rippled across the auditorium and Nathaniel spread his hands in mocking apology. 'Sorry to disappoint,' he drawled, 'but I've always had a problem with the crying part. Unless I'm being paid, of course. Thank you for this amazing honour ....' He spoke fluently and with grace, thanking his co-star and all the people involved in the making of the film.

Then he paused and looked at the glittering trophy in his hand. Silence fell, as if everyone sensed that the obligatory thanks were over and that he was about to say something meaningful.

'I dedicate this Sapphire to my mother, Carrie.' His voice didn't waver and he spoke directly into the camera that was circling the front of the stage. 'Carrie, you are a beautiful, special woman and you always told me that one day your son Nathaniel was going to win a Sapphire. Well, you were right. I won. This is mine.' He held it high, a strange smile playing around his mouth. 'Maybe when you look at this on your

mantelpiece, you'll think of me.'

Katie heard a quiet sob come from a woman in the row behind her. A man cleared his throat.

To the rest of the world it sounded like a simple dedication, but Katie understood the true message behind those words. Finally she understood what Nathaniel was trying to do.

He was hoping that seeing him holding the Sapphire would trigger something in his mother's brain. He was hoping it was going to be enough to make her remember that he was her son.

Tears poured down her cheeks and she brushed them away quickly, realising that the cameras might be on her.

Nathaniel left the stage to even louder applause and Katie gave him a wobbly smile as he sat down next to her, expecting to see pride in his eyes. Instead his face had a greyish tinge and those famous blue eyes were empty.

'That was beautiful.' She covered his hand with hers. 'Will she be watching?'

'Yes. It's ridiculously late in England but she insists on watching the Sapphire ceremony every year. She even dresses up for it.'

A confused, lonely woman getting ready to watch the world-famous ceremony on a television.

Katie blinked rapidly. 'Well, you've made her night.'

He didn't respond and suddenly she wished they could just go home right now so that she could try and get him to talk to her. Instead they sat through the rest of the ceremony and then moved on to the Sapphire Ball.

Sparkling chandeliers sent a cascade of light over the decorated tables, the room a mixture of contemporary elegance and glamour. Nathaniel was immediately surrounded by people wanting to soak up his success and Katie found herself pushed back to the fringe of the group.

Wondering how anyone could feel invisible and conspicuous at the same time, she hovered. The falseness of the situation made her uncomfortable and she realised that this was why Nathaniel chose to hide himself. *You couldn't be real here, could you?* These people didn't

want real—they wanted the dream.

She was wondering whether to pay an extended visit to the bathroom, when a man with a friendly smile approached.

‘You must be Katie.’ He extended his hand. ‘Howard Kennington.’

Still worrying about Nathaniel, it took Katie a moment to register that she was in the presence of movie royalty. ‘Oh ...’ She felt tense and awkward. ‘Nathaniel said that he’d sent you my drawings, but—’

‘They’re awesome. As is that dress you’re wearing. Even Alicia is impressed and she’s one hard nut to crack.’ He drew her to one side and questioned her about her ideas and soon Katie was deep in conversation, talking non-stop as she spilled out a lifetime of dreams.

‘Sorry.’ Eventually she ground to a halt. ‘I’ve gone on and on—’

‘It’s been most illuminating. You don’t hide much, do you?’

‘Nothing.’ Katie turned scarlet. ‘But I’m trying to change.’

‘Don’t. It makes you unique and it’s hard to find anything unique in Tinseltown. You have real talent. As does Nathaniel.’

The famous producer smiled and they talked for another twenty minutes and when he gave her his card and invited her to meet both him and Alicia the following week, Katie felt her spirits soar. Howard

Kennington liked her work. It was more than a dream. It was a fantasy. Never in a million years had she ever thought she’d have this sort of luck. It was all she could do not to squeal with joy.

If she could prove herself, she could be working as a costume designer on movies.

Virtually dancing across the floor, she went in search of Nathaniel, wanting to thank him and share her excitement.

She found him alone in a room used for press interviews.

He was sprawled on the red sofa, eyes closed. His bow tie dangled loose around his neck and his jacket was slung carelessly over the arm of a nearby chair. The coveted Sapphire lay at his feet on the floor.

‘You look completely wrecked.’ Deciding that this wasn’t the time to tell him her good news, Katie walked over to him. ‘Do you want to go home?’

‘Are you kidding? The party is just getting started.’ His eyes opened and she saw instantly that he was well on his way to being drunk. ‘I won a Sapphire.’

‘I know—’

‘And with any luck, my mother might finally figure out who I am.’ Decades of hurt shimmered in those words and Katie felt her heart break in two as she saw his mouth curve into the familiar mocking smile.

‘Nathaniel—’

‘Don’t look at me with those big, sympathetic eyes. Life sucks, angel.’ His eyes shone hard and cynical. ‘You should know that by now. But you’re still hoping, aren’t you? You’re still dreamy enough to be looking out for that happy ending.’

‘I think sometimes you have to work on the happy ending.’ She eyed the bottle of champagne that lay empty on the floor next to him.

Ever since his plane had touched down in LA, he’d been under the most enormous pressure. And then the emotional turmoil of winning the Sapphire ...

‘Your speech was—’ she took a deep breath ‘—it was beautiful, Nathaniel. And I know how tough this whole thing must be for you.’ Katie sat down next to him. ‘Do you want to talk?’

‘No. Absolutely not.’ His eyes glittering like jewels, he slid his hand behind her head and pulled her mouth down to his. ‘There are lots of things I want to do tonight, but talking is definitely *not* one of them.’

Katie tried to ignore the flash of sexual excitement. *No*, she thought desperately. Physically he was pulling her close, but emotionally he was pushing her away.

‘Nathaniel—’ she dragged her mouth from his ‘—you can’t just run from this.’

‘Do I look as though I’m running?’ With a smooth, practised movement he shifted her under him and gave her a wicked smile. ‘I’m lying. With you.’

‘Yes, you’re lying.’ Desperate, she pushed at his chest, trying to ignore the way his body felt against hers. ‘You’re lying to yourself. You can’t just pretend nothing is happening ....’

'Nothing is happening—' he trailed his lips down her neck '—but it will in a minute. I'd better lock the door—I think this calls for a closed set....'

'No—' The chemistry threatened to suck her down. 'No! This is crazy.'

'Sex with you is always crazy.' His mouth was warm and skilled and Katie turned her head away, trying desperately to ignore the pulsing excitement building inside her.

'You're doing what you always do in a crisis—you're acting.'

Slowly, he lifted his head. 'You think I'm acting?'

'Not the sex ...' Her voice was husky. 'I think the sex is real. But it's the only thing that is. You can't keep running, Nathaniel—'

He said a word that shocked her and then he sprang to his feet and paced to the far side of the room. 'Why not?'

'Because it doesn't solve anything.' It would have been so easy to let the heat take her. *Take the easy*

*route*, her body sang, tempting her. *Put your arms round him and do what you're aching to do.*

Nathaniel was staring at her, his eyes a dark, dangerous blue. 'I've had enough talking.'

'Have you returned Jacob's calls?'

'What business is it of yours?'

Katie flinched. 'None.' Anger mingled with the frustration. 'None at all. I can see that now.'

'Don't sulk.' He strolled towards her, his mouth flickering into that familiar slanting smile that made her dizzy. 'Tonight we're going to party.'

Her heart thudded, a slow unfamiliar beat in her chest. The anger glowed and burned. 'You can party. If how you feel is none of my business, then there's nothing more to be said.'

Bold dark brows met in a frown. 'Katie—'

'No.' She held up her hand. 'I don't want a relationship that's just about parties and glitter. I want a proper relationship, and if that means dealing with hard stuff, that's OK. I'm used to dealing with hard stuff.'

What I can't deal with is secrets. My dad had a whole secret life going on and I don't want to live like that. I *won't* live like that.' Outside the room she could hear laughter and cheers, but inside the room there was silence as Katie was forced to accept that he didn't actually care how she was feeling.

Nathaniel inhaled deeply. 'Katie Field ...' A strange smile played around his mouth. 'Are you *dumping* me?'

'No. You're the one dumping me.' The anger burning red-hot, she stooped and picked up her bag. 'Face it, Nathaniel, you don't want a relationship. A relationship is about sharing—sharing the highs and the lows. And not just yours—everything isn't about you.' She swallowed. 'I came in here to tell you my news ... I was excited—'

'You have something to celebrate?' He reached for another bottle of champagne and Katie felt her frustration boil over.

'Don't you think you've had enough?'

'I don't think so. In fact, I don't think I've had anywhere near enough.' He lifted the bottle and popped the cork. Foam spilled over his hand and dripped onto the floor.

Katie had never felt less like celebrating in her life. She felt cold. *Terribly cold.*

'You need to speak to Jacob,' she said. 'He's trying to make amends. That's obvious from the fact he keeps contacting you. You need to stop running. Be brave.'

'Brave?' His laugh was mocking. 'I'm Alpha Man and I have the Sapphire to prove it.'

Sadness spread like dark clouds, blotting out the final rays of happiness. 'That Sapphire just proves you're a brilliant actor. But I've always known that.'

You've been the actor, Nathaniel. Now you need to be the man.'

'You want me to prove I'm a man?'

'No.' Ignoring his slow, suggestive smile, Katie straightened her shoulders and held his gaze. 'Everyone thinks you're exactly like your character in *Alpha Man*, but you're not because he wasn't afraid to face his fears. You run from yours.' The dangerous glitter in his eyes made

her wonder whether she should turn and run herself. Fast. ‘I’m not talking about the physical stuff—you do all that easily because you’re not afraid to take physical risks. I’m talking about the emotional stuff. That makes you feel vulnerable and you won’t allow yourself to be vulnerable. You won’t allow yourself to take emotional risks. Have you ever asked yourself why you take back-to-back roles with no break in between? It’s because you don’t want to leave a single chink in your schedule where you might actually have to be yourself. You don’t even know who you really are because you’ve been hiding and running for so long. You won’t go home because it reminds you of your past.’ She discovered that her hands and knees were shaking. ‘You avoid your family ....’

His face lost its colour. ‘My relationship with my family is none of your business.’

‘You seem to think you’re the only person in the world with a messy, difficult family, but you’re not! Mine isn’t exactly a picnic. We have our fair share of skeletons. I don’t care. But I wanted to help you. I still want that. I love you ...’ She said the words without shame or hesitation. ‘And I know that terrifies you but it’s the truth. And when I think about what you lived through as a child it makes me boiling mad, Nathaniel, but what makes me even madder is that you’re not prepared to face it and deal with it.’

A cynical gleam lit his eyes. ‘And I thought you were such a sweet, sunny little thing. Clearly I had you all wrong.’

‘Do you want to know what makes me most angry?’

‘No—’ he was icily polite ‘—but I’m sure you’re about to tell me.’

‘What makes me most angry is that you’re prepared to destroy what we have because you’re too cowardly to take a risk with your feelings. I know they hurt you, Nathaniel. Your father, Jacob—they all abandoned you. But are you really going to let the past dictate the way you live your life in the future? Before you can go forward, you have to go back. You have to talk to Jacob. You have to accept what happened and live with it, not just keep switching your phone off. You have to be who you really are.’

There was a long, pulsing silence. He watched her, his face

inscrutable. ‘Are you finished?’

Katie felt her heart crack in two. Hope drained away. The future, which a few hours earlier had seemed so bright, now seemed dark and empty. What they had was special. She knew that. *Why wouldn’t he fight for it?* Why was he just giving up? Caught in a whirl of despair, misery and exasperation, she allowed herself a final long indulgent look at his face. *Memories*, she thought. That was all she was going to be left with. Desperately she imprinted images in her brain—the brilliant blue eyes, their astonishing colour intensified by the jet of his eyelashes and bold brows; the straight line of his nose and the slow curve of his sensual mouth. But the image that was going to stay with her for ever wasn’t the movie star collecting his Sapphire, it was the man teaching disadvantaged children how to act. The man delving deep inside himself to help a vulnerable child.

Dredging up willpower she hadn’t known she possessed, Katie lifted her chin. ‘Yes—’ her voice was shaky and sad ‘—I’m finished. And so are we.’

Feeling as though someone had gouged out her insides with a blunt instrument, she turned and stumbled through the door. Her vision swam and she narrowly avoided crashing into a group of people who were laughing together.

Blind, she kept ploughing forward until she ran smack into one of Nathaniel’s security team.

‘I’m not feeling well,’ she choked. ‘Mr Wolfe would like you to take me back to the apartment and then to the airport.’

She still had a credit card, didn’t she? The fact that she’d never be able to pay it off was irrelevant. She’d book herself on the first flight into Heathrow and go home. She wasn’t naïve enough to think that the Howard Kenningtons of this world would be interested in her if she wasn’t with Nathaniel. It was all about who you know, wasn’t it? Contacts.

Katie hurried down the steps. Like Cinderella, she thought, running from the ball. Except that she hadn’t lost a shoe.

Both shoes were on her feet, but her heart was in pieces.

# CHAPTER NINE

*BEFORE you can go forward, you have to go back.*

In a dangerous mood, Nathaniel floored the accelerator of his Ferrari and shot down the long drive that led to Wolfe Manor.

He'd swum with sharks, leaped from moving vehicles, skydived and climbed vertical cliffs but none of those activities had left him shaking the way he was shaking now. *Fear*, he thought. It lodged itself in his chest and gripped him by the throat.

What if, by going back, he was unable to move forward?

Centuries before, his ancestors had carefully planted an avenue of horse chestnut trees and they added an air of grandeur which was abruptly shattered as the main house came into view.

In a state of crumbling disrepair, Wolfe Manor stood like an ancient aristocrat struggling to maintain dignity in the face of advancing years and little maintenance.

Nathaniel killed the engine and sat for a moment, his fingers drumming a rhythm on the steering wheel.

*What was he doing here?* How did torturing himself with the past help solve the issues in his present?

Swearing under his breath, he sprang from the car and prowled through the tangled, long-neglected gardens. After the warmth of California, the bite of a British winter was particularly brutal and he turned up the collar of his jacket and blew clouds in the freezing air.

Afterwards, he realised that it had always been his intention to walk to the lake—to *confront that part of his past*—but now, as his feet moved, he felt as if he were being drawn there against his will.

He kicked his way through grass that was untended and overgrown. It brushed against his knees and wrapped itself around his ankles, impeding every step, as if warning him about the danger.

And then there it was.

Bulrushes clustered at the edge of the water, tall and straight as sentries as they guarded the dark, sinister pool that had dominated his childhood. It had begun here, he thought, and it had almost ended here, in the depths of the lake.

‘You sank like a stone.’

His mind still trapped in another place, Nathaniel turned sharply to find Jacob watching him. Apart from that brief glimpse at the theatre, it had been almost twenty years since they’d laid eyes on each other and both had spent that time running. Isolating themselves from their past.

Nathaniel felt the anger rush down on him, vivid and scorching hot. The full force of twenty years of simmering resentment and pain powered the fist he slammed into Jacob’s jaw. Pain exploded through his hand and Jacob staggered. But he didn’t retaliate.

Nathaniel was shocked by how badly he wanted him to. *As if a good earthy physical pounding might right all the wrongs.*

Deep down he felt sick with himself because he knew the person he wanted to lay out cold had been dead for twenty years.

He stepped back. Let his hands fall. ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

Jacob touched his fingers to his jaw, checking for damage. ‘I thought it was time.’

‘Why? Because we’ve all grown up?’ Nathaniel heard the bitterness in his tone. ‘We did it without you.’

There was a long silence, broken only by the ghostly howl of the bitter wind. ‘Don’t you ever pick up your phone?’

‘Only when the caller is someone I want to speak to.’

‘You have every right to be angry. I’m sorry about what happened at the theatre. I should have warned you I was coming.’

‘Why did you come?’

‘I wanted to see you.’

‘Well, now you’ve seen me so you can leave.’ His emotions in turmoil, Nathaniel turned to walk away but Jacob caught his arm.

‘I’m not leaving. I’m here to stay.’

Nathaniel stood still, staring down at the hand that held his arm. Those hands had hauled him out of the lake and saved his life. Those hands had been responsible for the death of his father. Katie's words rang in his head. *He's trying to make amends—you need to stop running.*

Nathaniel scanned the rigid, forbidding lines of his half-brother's face and saw the same shadows that darkened his own life. And more. He saw pain and self-recrimination. Guilt and self-loathing. 'You look wrecked.'

'Thanks.' Jacob's laugh was devoid of humour. 'You look pretty rough yourself for a guy who's supposed to be the sexiest man on earth. Makes me wonder what the others look like.'

Despite the anger, Nathaniel's mouth curved into a reluctant smile. 'Ugly.'

'Too much post-Sapphire partying?'

Nathaniel didn't mention the fact that he'd skipped all the Sapphire parties to go after Katie. By the time he'd extracted himself from the hundreds of well-wishers and press, he'd arrived home to find the villa empty. She'd gone. Without telling him her news.

The emptiness in the pit of his stomach was something he'd never experienced before. This is what he did, wasn't it? He lived his life alone. He kept people at a distance.

*If you don't care, you don't have anything to lose.*

Jacob took a few steps forward, his eyes on the lake. 'What brought you back here?'

'Honestly? A woman accused me of being a coward so I thought I'd better just test the theory.' He blew clouds in the freezing air and Jacob gave a wry smile.

'You used to do that all the time when you were a kid. You pretended to be a dragon breathing fire. You were always entertaining us, pretending to be something. For you, it was a way out.'

'We did what we had to. You took up rugby to hide the bruises.'

Jacob's eyes were shadowed. 'Have you found a way to balance the make-believe with reality?'

Reality? *Reality was what he'd shared with Katie.*

And he'd walked away from it. Nathaniel stared at the glassy surface of the lake. No monsters, he thought. No ghosts. Just a dank, dark pool of water. 'I gave Carrie my Sapphire.'

'I heard your speech. Did she make the connection?'

Nathaniel was silent for a moment. 'I think she did. For a short time anyway. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking on my part.'

Jacob hesitated and then closed a hand over his shoulder. 'It was so hard for you and Sebastian.'

'Harder for Sebastian—she didn't even acknowledge his existence.'

'Whatever William may have told you, your mother loved you. When she took you into the water that night, she believed she was protecting you from our father. She was ill ....'

Nathaniel stood rigid and unresponsive. It was the first time a member of his family had touched him since the night Jacob had walked out years before.

'Why didn't you hit me back?'

'Just now?' Jacob gave a crooked smile. 'Because I deserved it. Don't worry, I'm only allowing you the one. I thought you were going to leap off stage and punch me that night at the theatre.'

'I couldn't believe it when I saw you in the front row.'

'I wanted to see you. I should have let you know I was coming, but I suppose I was afraid you wouldn't want to see me. I was cowardly.'

'Seems we've all been guilty of that.'

'I left you all—' Jacob's voice was raw '—and you were just children. I don't blame you for hating me.'

Twenty years of pain and resentment melted away. Emotions left over from childhood suddenly seemed irrelevant. 'I don't hate you. You were hardly more than a child yourself.' It was what Katie had said, and suddenly Nathaniel knew it was true. He stood, thinking about how it must have been for Jacob. Just eighteen, with the death of his father on his conscience and no one to turn to, his only human contact a ragged bunch of out-of-control children. *Damaged, all of them.*

Nathaniel stared across the water, allowing his mind to drift back to that time. Katie was right. Those memories were part of the past. They had no place in the present.

‘I was selfish.’ The words came from deep inside him. ‘I only thought about what it did to the family when you left. I only thought about us. Annabelle was distraught and watching her suffer made me feel as powerless as that night I watched William beat her. I didn’t think about what it must have been like for you, living with what happened. We had you, but you had no one.’

‘I shouldn’t have left but at the time I couldn’t see another way. I let you down.’

There was a tense moment and then they were embracing, holding each other tightly, the bonds of blood flowing from one to the other.

‘When I saw you in the front row of the theatre that night, I had to warn Annabelle that you were back,’ Nathaniel confessed in a raw tone. ‘She was devastated when you left.’ They eased apart, both of them awkward.

Clearing his throat, Jacob turned to look at Wolfe Manor. ‘Did you know they’ve served me with a Dangerous Structure Notice for this place? Apparently I have to take urgent action to remove the danger, remedy the defects and carry out works to make the building and structure safe.’ His laugh was edged with cynicism. ‘It’s hard to know where to begin. The roof is leaking, the brickwork is crumbling ... We’ve had numerous break-ins. According to the police, local kids dare one another to sneak into the house.’

‘The place was boarded up after we all left.’ Nathaniel stared at the crumbling, forbidding house that had been the backdrop for the dark drama of his childhood. ‘It feels strange, being back. It’s been so long since I allowed myself to think of the place. I pretended it didn’t exist. My whole childhood ceased to exist.’

‘After I left, who stepped in?’

‘Lucas.’ Nathaniel kicked a stone into the water. ‘Can you believe that? Naturally it wasn’t a role he volunteered for. Lucas’s idea of passing on fatherly advice was to teach us everything we ever needed to know about sex, how to avoid discipline and how to get drunk and still walk in

a straight line. And—’ he glanced at Jacob’s jaw ‘—how to fight.’

‘He taught you well.’ With a rueful smile, Jacob ran a hand over his face. ‘Although Lucas isn’t the best role model for impressionable children. He slept with at least half of the girls in the school.’

‘And a few of the teachers.’

Laughing, Jacob shook his head in despair. ‘Do you see him?’

‘Occasionally. He turned up late and drunk to one of my film premieres.’ Nathaniel grinned at the memory. ‘Staggered down the red carpet with some gorgeous blonde on his arm, winking at the paparazzi. I seem to remember the headlines were something like *Bad, Bad, Bad Brothers* ...’

‘Sounds like Lucas.’

‘I bumped into him at Annabelle’s Christmas party a few years ago. The one thing Lucas is good at is partying.’

‘But none of you came back here?’

‘Call me fussy,’ Nathaniel drawled, ‘but this place is lacking in party atmosphere.’

‘It’s full of memories.’

‘Most of them bad ones.’

‘Some. Perhaps it’s time to make new ones. Remodel the place. Let in some light.’

‘From what I’ve heard, you’re the man to do that.’

Nathaniel slid his hands into his pockets. ‘I looked you up once. And Rafael mentioned that you’ve built a successful design business. You’ve done well.’

‘And you. I haven’t congratulated you on your Sapphire. I saw the film. You were incredible.’

For a moment Nathaniel thought about confessing how empty it all felt, how meaningless, but his tongue wouldn’t form the words. What had Katie said? *Playing someone else is so easy for you, Nathaniel—it’s being yourself that you find impossible.*

‘Have you been inside the house?’

‘Yes.’ Jacob glanced at him. ‘Do you want to take a look?’

They walked, and Nathaniel was surprised by how easy it was to be with his brother. Easier than being in the house.

Pushing open that heavy oak door, he shivered. *So many ghosts*, he thought. *So many secrets*.

‘He’s gone.’ Jacob’s voice was flat. ‘William is gone. I was wrong to let the family drift apart, but I’m going to do something about that. Things are going to change, Nathaniel.’

‘Maybe it’s time for change.’

They paused at the foot of the grand staircase, now less than grand, each reliving private memories.

‘You used to slide down this banister.’ Jacob’s mouth twitched as he ran his fingers over the cracked, neglected wood. ‘It drove William nuts.’

‘That’s why I did it. Why did you leave when you did?’

‘Guilt.’

‘You saved Annabelle. Without you ...’ Nathaniel breathed deeply. ‘Do you know how many times I blamed myself for not saving her?’

‘You were nine years old. What could you have possibly done to protect her against a man like William?’

‘Nothing.’ Saying the word released something inside him. ‘You stopped it. You were a hero.’

‘Hero?’ Jacob’s mouth twisted. ‘I don’t think so. Annabelle was scarred for life. I should have prevented it happening in the first place.’

Nathaniel thought about William. ‘He was unstoppable. You did what you had to do.’

‘And I’ve lived with that every day of my life. The first time William hit me, I was six years old.’ Jacob stared at a faded painting on the wall. ‘He was drinking. I found him with a bottle of whisky in his hand. I didn’t know what whisky was. I just knew it was a drink that made him angry, so I grabbed it out of his hand and poured it away. I thought that was it. I thought after that everything would be fine. I kept telling myself that. When you’re a child you believe what you want to believe. And after he died—’ The words hung in the air, the rest of the sentence

unsaid. ‘You say you blamed yourself for that night—there’s nothing you can teach me about blame.’

Nathaniel realised just how much his brother was carrying. ‘We weren’t your responsibility.’

‘Yes, you were. And I let you down. If I hadn’t left, all of you might not be scattered around the world.’

‘If you hadn’t left, we might not be so successful,’ Nathaniel drawled. ‘Did you know Alex was the youngest driver to win the British Grand Prix at Silverstone?’

‘I watched it on television while staying in one of Sebastian’s hotels—the Singapore Grande Wolfe, I think.’ Jacob stooped to pick up a broken photo frame that lay abandoned and forgotten on the dirty floor. He stared at the faded, cracked picture. ‘We need to replace this with some of Annabelle’s. Her work is astonishing. She finds beauty in everything. And then there’s you—Sapphire-winning actor. Twenty million dollars for your last movie and a percentage of box office gross. What do you do with all that money?’

Nathaniel thought of the children in Rio and the projects he was exploring back in the U.S. ‘I give it to Jack and he doubles it.’

‘Yes, I gather he has rather a talent for investments.’

‘And poker. Even Lucas refuses to play poker with him.’

‘The tabloids have been full of stories about you and Katie Field. You’re lucky finding someone who loves you like that.’

Feeling cold inside, Nathaniel concentrated on the graffiti sprayed on the wall. ‘She walked out.’

‘And you let her? Because you don’t love her?’

‘Because I *do* love her.’ Acknowledging that for the first time, Nathaniel rubbed his fingers over his forehead, aware that Jacob was watching him.

‘So you’d rather spend your life with women you don’t care about?’ His tone was heavy with irony. ‘If there’s logic there, I’m missing it.’

‘If you don’t care, you don’t have anything to lose.’

‘But you *do* care,’ Jacob said quietly, ‘and it’s up to you to make sure

you don't lose. Although I'm guessing it can't be easy for a woman, being with you.'

'Because I'm screwed up?'

'You're no more screwed up than anyone else. No, I was thinking about the publicity. Cameras in your face wherever you go. Women wanting to marry you and have your babies. On the other hand, maybe she likes all that.'

Nathaniel thought of the brown jumpers. The way she tried to blend into the background. Beautiful, caring Katie. On Wolfe Island, there had been nothing but the two of them. The crazy, insane Hollywood world had been nowhere in sight.

Nathaniel stared at the crumbling walls of Wolfe Manor, at the dust and the cracks. The history. Jacob would restore the house, he thought. Build a future from the rubble. *He needed to do the same thing.* 'She hates all that. She thinks I'm a different person in front of the camera.'

'Is she right?'

'Yes.' Nathaniel traced his initials in the dust. 'I've always hidden behind the acting. I didn't want to be myself. Maybe I was afraid of more rejection. If people reject the character you're playing it's not as personal as if they reject the real you.'

'You should be proud of who you are.' Jacob's voice was soft. 'You're an incredible actor. I've watched your career from the very start. You have a ferocious talent, Nathaniel. But you're also a good man. I know about all your charity work—about the drama projects for disadvantaged children. Rafael filled me in.'

'I just wrote cheques,' Nathaniel said gruffly, 'until Katie made me roll up my sleeves.' He thought about the children in Rio. 'This boy has been emailing me—I think he has real talent. I'm going to pay for him to go to drama school.' And others—it was a decision he'd made when he accepted his Sapphire. He wanted to give other children the chance he'd had.

'You've played a lot of roles. Now it's time to play yourself. With Katie. Go.' Jacob gave him a push. 'We'll get together another time. All of us. I'm back now and I'm staying. I have to stop this place from

crumbling into the dirt and I intend to do the same for the rest of this family.'

Katie taped the lid of the last box. 'There.' She sat back on her heels and wiped her forehead with the sleeve of her jumper. *Keep busy. Keep busy.* 'I never knew I'd gathered so much stuff.'

'I can't believe you're packing boxes wearing a priceless necklace.' Claire put two mugs of tea down on the threadbare carpet.

'I'm just terrified I'll lose it.' Katie touched the diamonds at her throat. 'I haven't taken it off since I discovered I was still wearing it on the plane. I'll be relieved when it's finally gone.'

'Now you're talking rubbish. You'll be heartbroken when it's gone because it's the only thing you have of him.' Her voice gruff, Claire leaned forward and hugged her friend. 'You're so thin. I hate him for doing this to you.'

Terrified by how bad she felt, Katie pulled away. She'd never been in love before and she'd had no idea that it could hurt this much. The grief was huge and physical, a weight on her chest that she couldn't shift. 'Don't you dare cry or you'll start me off.'

'Sorry—I just can't believe you're going. What am I going to do without you? You're my best friend ... you tell me what to wear.' Claire's eyes narrowed. 'I'm loving that red jumper, by the way. What happened to all your favourite shades of brown?'

Katie felt her eyes sting. 'I moved on,' she said huskily. 'Now, stop making me sad. You can come and stay. And we can email and text and there's always Skype and Facebook—' She broke off as someone hammered on her front door.

Claire looked at her watch. 'The removal men are early.'

'Katie?' Nathaniel's voice bellowed through the closed door. 'Open this damn door!'

Claire shot to her feet, tea sloshing onto the carpet. 'It's him! What's he doing here?'

Katie put her tea down carefully. 'He's here for his diamonds. I should have texted him to tell him I was planning to return it.'

'I don't think men like Nathaniel would bother travelling to another continent just to retrieve lost property.'

'Well, there isn't any other reason for him to be here.' Feeling sick and dizzy, Katie stood and smoothed her jumper. She didn't want to face him. She just wasn't sure she could hang on to control. Wishing she'd couriered the necklace back to him, she walked to the door and pulled it open.

Nathaniel stood there dressed in black leather, a motorbike helmet tucked under his arm.

Her knees went weak.

How was she going to cope? How could she forget about him when Nathaniel Wolfe's insanely handsome face stared back at her from every billboard and every magazine?

'Hi, I know why you're here.' She must have learned something from him, she thought, because it was only acting skills that kept her afloat. 'You've come for your property.'

'That's right.' His voice was smooth and sure and he glanced over her shoulder and saw Claire. 'Hi, Claire.'

Claire looked as though she might faint. 'You know my name ....'

Katie put her hands behind her neck and unfastened the necklace. The diamonds seemed to symbolise all the reasons why this would never have worked. 'Here—' She held it out to him and he stared at it.

'Why are you giving me that?'

'You've come for your property.'

'That's right. But I don't want the necklace.' He studied her with those blue eyes that made women forget how to think straight and walk straight. 'I want you.'

There was a whimper and a thud behind her, but Katie was too busy keeping her own emotions under control to have any thoughts to spare for her friend. She wasn't going to fall for it. Yes, it sounded sincere. He was an actor. He earned a living making the unbelievable, believable. 'Take the necklace ...' She pushed it into his hand. 'Get on with your life.' *Get out of my house before I make a complete fool of myself....*

‘You have every right to be angry with me.’ Without waiting for invitation, Nathaniel walked into the flat and kicked the door shut behind him.

Panic fluttered in her chest. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’

‘You’re always saying that if there’s a problem, it’s better to talk, so we’re going to talk.’

Katie stood, mute, terrified to open her mouth in case this was the moment when she broke down and sobbed.

Nathaniel lifted an eyebrow. ‘I’m giving you permission to talk—to say everything that’s in your head.’

Katie said nothing.

‘I think I’ll just go for a walk.’ Claire’s voice was falsely bright. ‘This is one scene where you definitely don’t need any extras.’ Grabbing her coat, she melted out of the flat, shutting the door firmly behind her.

Nathaniel didn’t shift his gaze from Katie. ‘This isn’t like you.’ When she still didn’t answer, he gave an exasperated sigh. ‘All right, maybe this time I’ll do the talking. I went back to Wolfe Manor. I saw Jacob.’

Katie still said nothing, but her legs felt unsteady and everything inside her was churning.

‘I went to the lake.’ Something flickered in his eyes. ‘I told you that William tried to drown me there—what I didn’t tell you was that Carrie did the same thing when I was a baby. She’d just discovered that my father had produced a child with another woman. She was always emotionally fragile, but that night—well, it tipped her over the edge. Apparently she thought she was saving me.’

This time she found her voice. ‘Nathaniel—’

‘Are those your pictures of me?’ He stared at the pile of magazines that she’d stacked by the door. ‘Are you clearing them out of your life?’

‘Never mind that.’ She felt dizzy. ‘Who saved you that night? When your mother walked into the lake with you?’

‘Jacob and Lucas were home from the school holidays and were camping in the grounds. They waded in and rescued us both. Much to my father’s fury—he beat them both for saving his “mad wife” and her

unwanted child. That's me by the way.' His mouth twisted. 'I was the unwanted child. Apparently the only time my father was nice to my mother was when she was pregnant with my brother Sebastian. Unfortunately she made the mistake of thinking that history would repeat itself so she got herself pregnant again. *Big mistake.*'

Katie wrapped her arms around herself. 'Did she recognise you when you gave her the Sapphire?'

'I don't know.' His voice was soft. 'I think so but maybe that's just wishful thinking.'

'How is she?'

'Stable. On buckets of medication, of course, but happy enough in her own world. All we can do for her is protect her as much as we can.'

*But it wasn't the child's job to protect the parent, was it?*

Katie thought about her own childhood. Her father's hidden life didn't change the fact that she'd been loved. *Really loved.* 'I don't know how you survived.'

'I survived by becoming someone else. I acted my way through the most difficult years.' Nathaniel held her gaze. 'I was someone else pretty much the whole time until I met you. You're the first woman who has been interested in the man, not the movie star. The drama project in Rio—I just wanted to give money. I didn't want to know where it went. I didn't want to hear their stories. Maybe I was trying to get rid of the guilt I felt about not protecting Annabelle. If I helped some other child ...' He gave a careless shrug. 'And then you suggested I get involved. And it changed everything.'

'Nathaniel—'

'I don't do "involved." I don't get down and dirty with people's emotions—I'm not good with all that stuff. But those kids were—' He frowned. 'I thought I was the one helping them, but it turned out they were the ones helping me. Watching them made me realise that you cannot let yourself be defined by what went before. It's never too late to build a new life. To do something different. To *want* something different. And I want something different, Katie. I don't want to wake up every morning and act my way through the day. I want to live *my* life, not

someone else's.' His gaze burned into hers. 'And I want to live it with you.'

Her heart tried to fly but her brain wouldn't let it. *Don't be a fool, Katie.*

Nathaniel gave a crooked smile. 'Say something.'

'You won a Sapphire—' her voice was a croak '—you're the world's hottest movie star ....'

'That's just my job—' he took her face in his hands, stroking her cheeks with his thumbs '—that's not who I am. You taught me that. You're the only person who ever cared enough to look past the performance. The only person who ever wanted to know me. And I want to carry on being me, with you by my side. I love you.' When she still didn't speak, his smile faltered. 'That's the first time I've ever said those words outside a film set.'

Still Katie kept the excitement tightly leashed. 'This is all very sudden —and unexpected ....' She wasn't brave enough, was she? She wasn't brave enough to believe him. 'When did you decide that you loved me?'

'When I won a Sapphire and it meant nothing to me.' His eyes raked her face, searching. 'I wanted to win it for Carrie, but the moment you walked out that night, I knew I hadn't won at all. I'd lost.'

'Nathaniel—'

'I know you think I'm a coward—' he lowered his forehead to hers, his voice unsteady '—but give me the chance to prove to you that I'm not. I'm a tough guy. Want to feel my muscles?'

The tears came then. They brimmed in her eyes and then slid past her smile. 'I know you're not a coward. I just wanted to make it better and you kept pushing me away.'

'I won't be doing that again. *Don't cry. Please don't cry.*' Nathaniel swiped the tears away from her cheeks and took her mouth in a brief, desperate kiss. 'Katie, I really—Please ... I'm telling you I love you—say something.'

Terror and hope danced together. 'I can't let myself believe you. I don't know if you're acting.'

'You know I'm not acting. I love you and I want to spend the rest of

my life living with you in Katie-land. And you can throw out those magazines because you have the real thing.'

She made a sound that was half laugh, half sob. 'We're so different ....'

'Not so different. You hid behind brown clothes. I hid behind my job.'

'I haven't worn brown since Wolfe Island.' She sniffed and mopped her tears on the sleeve of her sweater. 'You made me feel beautiful.'

'You *are* beautiful.' Sliding his arms around her, he frowned. 'Have you lost weight?'

'I've been miserable.'

With a groan of remorse, he flattened her against him. 'I'm never letting you out of my sight again. I'm going to take you straight back to LA—'

'I'm already going back to LA' Katie pulled away from him and looked at the boxes stacked by the door. 'I spoke to Howard Kennington this week and he wants me to come out and work on his next movie. He really liked my work. I assumed it was because of you, but he was really cross that I'd flown back here without talking to him first. He sent me a flight ticket.'

'You won't be needing it because I'm going to fly you home. I knew your work was exceptional the moment I saw it.' He stroked her hair away from her face. 'I'm going to give up acting and concentrate on directing. We can work on films together.'

Together. Her heart twisted with emotion.

'Katie Field, Costume Designer.'

'Katie Wolfe, Costume Designer.'

She didn't dare move for fear of breaking the spell. 'Nathaniel—'

'I want you to marry me. Say you'll marry me.'

There was a buzzing in her ears. 'You want to *marry* me? But ... you—Oh, my God—you'd break a billion female hearts.'

'There's only one female heart I care about,' he said softly, and cursed lightly as her eyes filled again. 'Don't do that. I can't stand it when you cry—I never want to see you cry ever again.'

'This time it's happy crying.' Katie leaned her head against his chest. 'I

can't believe this ....'

'Usually when I ask a woman to marry me I already know the answer because it's in the script.' Uncharacteristically unsure of himself, Nathaniel gave a horrified groan. 'I forgot the ring.' He swore under his breath and delved into his pocket. 'I'm doing this all wrong. I had it all planned out, the whole on-the-knee thing, fairy tale, Katie-land style, and then I saw you and—sorry, I'm sorry, can we do another take?' He dropped to his knees. 'Katie Field, will you marry me? Will you love me and talk to me as long as we both shall live?'

Her laughter turned to a gasp as he slid a huge, glittering diamond onto her finger. 'Oh, my—'

'If you don't like it we can choose a different one. Maybe I should have let you choose it. I'm sorry—as proposals go I totally messed that one up.'

'No, you didn't ...' She could hardly make her voice work. 'It was perfect.'

'I forgot the ring and I forgot to go down on one knee,' he said dryly. 'What was perfect about it?'

'It was perfect because it was real. It came from the heart, not from a script. If you'd been fluent I would have thought you were acting.'

'Really?' His voice was raw and there was uncertainty in his eyes as he looked at her. 'In that case is there any chance of an answer some time this century?'

'Yes!' The word flew from her heart to her lips. 'Of course yes. I love you. You *know* I love you.'

Nathaniel rose to his feet and this time his kiss was hard and possessive. When he finally tore his mouth from hers, her head was spinning. 'Now you're wearing the ring and you can't back out, I need to break the news about my family. If you're hoping for conventional, then you might want to rethink. Jacob is determined to bring us all together so you'll be meeting them all over the next few months and you're going to wonder what you've got yourself involved in.'

'So will you ...' Katie wrapped her arms around his neck, unable to contain the happiness that bubbled up inside her. 'There's something I

haven't told you about myself.'

'You've been keeping secrets?' He started to laugh. 'You hypocrite—'

'Paula Preston is my sister.'

'Paula Preston?' He frowned. 'The super model?'

A horrible thought entered her head. 'Have you—? Did you ever—?'

'No. I definitely haven't. She's not my type. I assume she's the reason you wear brown and are a late developer.'

Katie bit her lip. 'It wasn't easy having her as a sister.'

'I can imagine. I met her once. Utter nightmare. But it's good to know I'm not the only one with colourful relatives. I think our wedding is going to be interesting.'

'You still want to marry me?'

'Of course. Why wouldn't I?'

'Paula is the beautiful one. People always make comparisons.'

He hauled her against him. 'There is no comparison. You're sweet, she's not. You care about people, she walks over people. And the biggest difference of all—' his smile was slow and sexy '—is your bottom. She doesn't have one and yours is every man's erotic fantasy. Want me to prove it?'

Katie blushed. 'If she comes to our wedding, she'll probably try and seduce you. None of your relatives can possibly be as embarrassing as my sister.'

'Don't you believe it. My brother Lucas doesn't think there's any point in going to a wedding if he can't try and have sex with the bride,' Nathaniel drawled. 'He will definitely try to seduce you at our wedding. Women love him, but I warn you that if you cast one look in his direction you'll be spending the rest of your life on Wolfe Island with just me for company.'

Katie slid her arms around his neck, feeling as if she were floating. 'An exotic island and the sexiest guy in the world? That sounds like a perfect ending to me.'

'In that case—' a smile touched the corners of his mouth and he lowered his head to kiss her '—it's a wrap.'

## **1992: Jacob leaves Wolfe Manor ...**

After the devastating events that took place at Wolfe Manor, Jacob knew he had to get far away from everything—and everyone—he loved. Too overwhelmed to think more than a day or so ahead, he left England for France, and a succession of jobs to make ends meet. But, after just a few weeks, restless Jacob would always leave and travel onwards. And, as Jacob travelled, he wrote endless letters to his beloved siblings that he never quite found the courage to send ...

## **Behind the scenes at Wolfe Manor ...**

### **Share a secret about Nathaniel or Katie?**

Nathaniel Wolfe has a few big secrets tucked away but I wouldn't be much of a friend to him (or you) if I gave them away without his permission, so I'll share a small one—he's not good with deep water.

### **Who is the biggest, baddest Wolfe?**

That's a difficult question because they're all big and bad in different ways. For undiluted shocking behaviour and for seducing anything female, I suppose it has to be Lucas.

### **Which Wolfe brother did you most fancy?**

Definitely Nathaniel. He's the world's hottest movie star, ferociously talented and the very best at what he does. Yes he's damaged and has a very dark side, but he has real strength and I find that incredibly sexy. And he's scorching hot!

### **Which is Nathaniel's favourite room in Wolfe Manor?**

Given all the things that happened to him during his childhood, Nathaniel isn't a lover of Wolfe Manor. If I had to pick one room it would probably be the main hallway because it was the quickest route out of the house.

### **How did Nathaniel pop the big question?**

Nathaniel has proposed to plenty of women in his movies but his words have always been taken from a script. He's a talented actor, capable of making every word sound heartfelt without meaning anything he says. So when it came to proposing for the first time in real life, he had a challenge on his hands. He had to convince Katie that this time he meant what he was saying. I think it's a very romantic scene because Nathaniel finally stops playing a part and reveals his true self to the woman he loves.

## SARAH'S WRITING SECRETS ...

**What do you enjoy most about writing as part of a continuity series; how does it differ from writing a single title?**

Writing is a solitary job. When you're writing a single title, you're on your own with your story and your characters all the way through. Being part of a continuity means having contact with other writers. Although you're still writing the book on your own, you have the opportunity to share those ups and downs that come with every book and you couldn't find a better bunch of people to share those moments with than the Modern™ authors. We started an e-mail loop so that we could voice any thoughts and ideas and ensure that what we were creating individually also made sense as a whole. Working with them and having that extra contact was great fun.

**What do you think makes a great hero/heroin?**

For me, a great hero has to have strength and bravery and by that I mean the ability to face up to anything life throws at him. I want to know that if things get tough he's going to be right by the heroine's side fighting for what they share, not walking away.

I like a heroine who can take care of herself and doesn't allow herself to be pushed around, but also someone who enjoys being a woman and isn't afraid to show her feminine side.

**When you are writing, what is a typical day?**

I start by checking my e-mails and dealing with anything urgent that has popped into my inbox overnight. Then I look at my schedule and check whether I have any other commitments in terms of blogging, etc. I don't have my own blog so I blog in other places, but that means remembering to keep track of where and when so that I can be around to comment and chat with people.

Having organised my day, I switch off the main phone (my kids have a different number they can call me on in an emergency) and then settle

down to write without disturbance. I try to resist the temptation to read over the beginning of the book every time and instead write fresh, pushing the story forward. I give myself a minimum daily word count so that I can be sure I'll meet my deadline. I take a short break for lunch and sometimes I'll go for a quick walk. Once a week I have lunch with friends—it's a great way to unwind and I often find it easier to work out plot problems when I'm relaxed and with other people.

CAITLIN CREWS

BAD BLOOD

SHAMELESS PLAYBOY

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**CAITLIN CREWS** discovered her first romance novel at the age of twelve. It involved swashbuckling pirates, grand adventures, a heroine with rustling skirts and a mind of her own, and a seriously mouthwatering and masterful hero. The book (the title of which remains lost in the mists of time) made a serious impression. Caitlin was immediately smitten with romances and romance heroes, to the detriment of her middle-school social life. And so began her lifelong love affair with romance novels, many of which she insists on keeping near her at all times.

Caitlin has made her home in places as far-flung as York, England and Atlanta, Georgia. She was raised near New York City, and fell in love with London on her first visit when she was a teenager. She has backpacked in Zimbabwe, been on safari in Botswana, and visited tiny villages in Namibia. She has, while visiting the place in question, declared her intention to live in Prague, Dublin, Paris, Athens, Nice, the Greek islands, Rome, Venice, and/or any of the Hawaiian islands. Writing about exotic places seems like the next best thing to moving there.

She currently lives in California, with her animator/comic-book artist husband and their menagerie of ridiculous animals.

# CHAPTER ONE

GRACE Carter glanced up from her computer, frowning at the figure that sauntered so confidently into her office high above the cold, wet February streets of central London, without so much as a knock on her door as warning.

And then she went very still in her chair. Something that felt like fire rolled through her, scorching everything in its path. She told herself it was indignation because he had failed to knock as any decent, polite person should—but she knew better.

It was *him*.

“Good morning,” he said in a low, richly amused and somehow knowing voice that seemed to echo inside of her. He seemed to smolder there in front of her, like a banked flame. She straightened in her seat in reaction.

“By all means,” she said, her voice cool, ironic. “Come right in.”

He was dressed in a sharp, sleek Italian suit that clung to the hard planes of his celebrated body and looked far too fashion-forward for the staid and storied halls of Hartington’s, one of Britain’s oldest luxury department stores, where *conservative* was the watchword in word, deed and staff apparel. His too-long dark chocolate hair was tousled and unkempt—rather deliberately so, Grace thought uncharitably—and fell toward his remarkable green eyes, one of which was ringed by a darkening bruise. It matched the split lip that failed, somehow, to dampen the impact of his shockingly carnal mouth. His cuts and bruises gave him a faintly roguish air and added to the man’s already outrageous appeal.

And well he knew it.

“Thank you,” he said, those famous green eyes bright with amusement, quite as if her invitation was sincere. His decadent mouth crooked to the side. “Is that an invitation into your office or, one can only hope, somewhere infinitely more exciting?”

Grace wished she did not recognize him, but she did—and this was not the first time she'd seen him in person. Not that anyone alive could fail to identify him on sight, with a face that was usually plastered across at least one or two tabloids weekly, in every country in the world. Showcasing exactly this kind of inappropriate behavior.

She was not impressed.

"Lucas Wolfe," she said, as a gesture toward good manners, though her voice was flat.

He was *Lucas Wolfe*, second son of the late, notoriously flamboyant William Wolfe, darling of the paparazzi, famously faithless lover to hordes of equally rich and supernaturally beautiful women—and Grace could not think of a single reason why this creature of tabloids and lore should be standing in her office on a regular Thursday morning, gazing at her in a manner that could only be called *expectant*.

"All six resplendent feet and then some," he drawled, his dark brows arching high above his wicked green eyes. "At your service."

"You are Lucas Wolfe," she said, ignoring the innuendo that seemed to infuse his voice, his expression, like some kind of molten chocolate. "And I'm afraid I am busy. Can I direct you to someone who can help you?"

"Too busy for my charm and beauty?" he asked, that wicked grin making his eyes gleam, his expression somewhere between suggestive and irrepressible—and surprisingly infectious. Grace had to fight to keep from smiling automatically in return. "Surely not. That would require hell to freeze over, for a start."

She ignored him, rising to her feet to regain the appropriate balance of power.

"I would invite you make yourself comfortable," she said with a tight smile, close enough to courteous, knowing her voice would make the words sound sweeter than they were, "except that seems rather redundant, doesn't it?"

Every instinct she had screamed at her to let this man know exactly what she thought of his kind. Womanizing, useless, parasitic, just like all the men her poor mother had paraded in and out of their trailer when

Grace was a child. Just like the father she'd never met, who from all accounts was yet one more pretty, irresponsible wastrel in a long line of the same. Just like every other idiot she'd had to slap down over the years.

But as a member of the Wolfe family Lucas was considered royalty at Hartington's, given that his family had once owned the company. The Wolfes might not own Hartington's any longer, but Hartington's board of directors loved to play up the connection—and as the events manager who was in charge of Hartington's centenary relaunch in a matter of weeks, Grace was expected to act in Hartington's best interests at all times no matter the cost to herself.

"I am always comfortable," he assured her, his voice a symphony of innuendo, his green eyes wicked and amused. "Making myself so at every opportunity is, I confess, very nearly my life's work."

She had a huge project to manage, which meant she had better things to do with her time than waste it on this useless, if shockingly attractive, man. Grace hated wasting time. *That* was the feeling that expanded within her, she told herself, threatening her ability to breathe.

"I'm sorry," she began, the polite smile she was known for curving her lips, though she knew her gaze remained cool on his. "I'm afraid I'm quite busy today. May I help—?"

"Why do I recognize you?" he interrupted her, languidly, because of course *he* had all the time in the world.

Grace was horrified to feel that rich voice of his wash through her, sending tendrils of flame licking all over her skin, coiling low in her belly. She *felt* it, and it panicked her. Surely she should be immune to this man's brand of practiced, cynical charm—she, who prided herself on being absolutely unflappable!

"I can't imagine," she said, which was a lie, but it was not as if she and Lucas Wolfe would ever speak again, would they? She could not fathom why they were speaking *now*—and why the cynical boredom she'd sensed in him in a chic and crowded hotel bar the night before had changed to something else, something dangerous and edgy. As if a dark fury lurked within him, just out of sight, hidden beneath his well-known and deliberately polished exterior.

But surely not. She was being fanciful.

"I know I've seen you before," he continued, his green eyes narrowing slightly as he looked at her, then warming as he let his all-too-practiced gaze drop from her face to skate over the figure she'd dressed in Carolina Herrera and other exclusive labels no doubt down-market to a man of his tastes. His lips moved, sensual and inviting for all they were cut, seeming to ... *suggest* things. "You have the most extraordinary mouth. But where?"

Heat danced through her, simmering in every place his green gaze touched her: her breasts, the indentation at her waist, her hips, her legs. Grace was forced to remind herself that a man like Lucas Wolfe more than likely looked at every single person he encountered in that very same way—that the promise of sex and intrigue that seemed to heat his expression meant about as much to him as a handshake meant to anyone else. Less.

She felt a strange sort of echo sound through her, a deep alarm, reminding her of that naive girl she'd been so long ago and had sworn she would never be again. Not with another man like this one, who would render her just as pathetic and deceived as her poor, trusting mother. Who would destroy her whole life if she let him.

That was what men like this did. Simply because they could.

Grace knew that better than anyone.

"He's more than a bit of all right, isn't he?" the fashion buyer from Hartington's had cooed to Grace last night, when she'd first seen Lucas—much drunker and far more disreputable than he appeared now, if that was possible—at an extraordinarily glamorous fashion show thrown by Samantha Cartwright, one of London's most beloved and avant-garde designers.

Mona had sighed lustily, gazing at Lucas from across the trendy bar as he'd flirted with Samantha Cartwright herself, oblivious to all the watching, judging eyes around them, Grace's among them. "And, of course, we're to treat him like a king should he so much as glance our way. Boss's orders."

Grace had nodded, as if she'd had the slightest expectation of interacting with the famous playboy, known as much for his devil-may-

care attitude as for his long and illustrious string of lovers. Not to mention his much-discussed allergy to anything resembling work, particularly for Hartington's, who had been after him for years to take a figurehead position with the company as his equally disreputable late father had once done.

She'd felt a potent mix of awareness and disgust as she'd watched him. How could a man like Lucas, who was unabashedly making a play for the much older, and very much married, Samantha Cartwright right there in full view of half the city, also manage to seem so ... *alive* and *vibrant*, in the midst of London's crème de la crème, as if he were the real thing and they were nothing but fluff and misdirection?

However, all his sexiness and charm had not prevented Samantha Cartwright's husband from expressing his displeasure at finding Lucas secluded with his wife sometime later—all over Lucas's pretty face.

The fact that she, personally, had had a strange moment, a near-interaction with this man, did not signify. He clearly could not recall it and she—well, if her sleep had been disrupted last night, what did that matter? It could as easily have been the espresso she should have known better than to order after dinner. It had to have been.

"I believe I saw you last night at the Cartwright show," she said now, and felt gratified when he blinked, as if not expecting that response. Grace smiled, razor sharp, and let her dislike for him—for all men like him, so careless and callous—flood through her. "Though I cannot imagine you remember it."

"I have an excellent memory," Lucas replied, his voice silky, and she had to admit that it got to her. It should not have affected her at all, the lazy caress of it, like bourbon and sin, but it did. The man was lethal, and she wanted nothing to do with him.

"As do I, Mr. Wolfe," she said crisply. "Which is how I know that we do not have an appointment today. Perhaps I can direct you ...?"

She let her words trail off, and waved her hand in the general direction of the door and the offices beyond. But Lucas Wolfe did not move. He only watched her for a moment. His battered, sexy mouth curved slightly.

"You knew who I was the moment you saw me." He looked amused.

Triumphant. She could not have said why that seemed to claw at her.

"I imagine every single person in England knows who you are," she replied briskly. She let her brows arch, hinting at disdain. "One assumes that must be your intention, after so many scandals, all of which are dutifully reported in the papers."

"And yet, you are not English," he said, shifting his body, making Grace suddenly, foolishly glad that her desk stood between them.

She was abruptly aware of how powerful he was, how well-tuned and whipcord tough his body was, for all he kept it concealed behind a lazy smile, calculating eyes and sophisticated clothes. Leashed and hidden, though the truth of it lurked beneath the surface. As if his playboy persona was a mask he wore ... but that was ridiculous.

"You are American, are you not?" His head tilted slightly to one side, though his gaze never left hers. "Southern, if I am not mistaken."

"I cannot imagine why it should be relevant, but I am originally from Texas," Grace said, in quelling tones. She did not speak about her past. She did not speak about her private life at all, come to that—never at work, and certainly not with perfect strangers. The origin of the accent she'd worked so hard to minimize was about as far as she was willing to take this conversation. "But if you will tell me why you are here, I can find a more appropriate—"

"Exactly what did you see me doing last night?" he asked, interrupting her again, his gaze amused, his grin widening. "Did I do it to you?" His gaze warmed, became more suggestive. "Do you wish that I had?"

"I hardly think you would have had the time," Grace said with a short laugh, but then his eyes gleamed and she recollected herself.

She had not worked as hard as she had, nor overcome so much, to ruin it all over someone like this. She didn't know why Lucas Wolfe, of all people, should get under her skin in the first place. Grace had been working in events management since college, and she had seen her fair share of huge personalities, the very rich and the wished-to-be-famous, and everything in between. Why was this man the first to threaten her renowned calm?

Lucas only gazed at her, his green eyes mild, though Grace could not

quite believe what she saw there. She had the sense, again, that it was all a mask—the shocking masculine beauty, the roguish appeal, the sexy swagger—and that beneath it lurked something far shrewder. But where did such an idea come from? She dismissed it, impatient with herself.

“If you will excuse me,” she said, her voice perfectly calm, betraying none of her strange internal struggle, “I really must return to my work.”

“But that’s why I’m here,” he said, an unholy glee lighting up those marvelous green eyes. His mouth pulled into a smirk, and he shifted again, as if bracing himself for a blow—a blow he was fully prepared to handle, his body language assured her.

A prickle ran through the fine hairs at the back of her neck, making her hands itch to smooth her sleek, understated chignon and make sure it continued to tame her wild blond hair into something appropriate for her position. Making her want to remove herself until she had reverted to the ice queen norm that had saved her time and again, and until she’d gotten the best of this baffling heat he seemed to generate in her.

“What do you mean?” she asked, hoping she sounded cold instead of anxious. Stern instead of thrown.

She was resolved to fire whichever member of her staff had let this man in here to unsettle her like this when all of her focus needed to be on the relaunch. Yet even as she thought it, she knew that no one who worked at Hartington’s could possibly deny this man anything—he was a Wolfe. More than that, he was *Lucas Wolfe*, the most irresistible of his whole compelling, colorful family.

Even she could feel that pull, that attraction—she who had long considered herself terminally allergic to men of his ilk.

“I am the new public face of Hartington’s, like my dearly departed father before me,” he drawled, his green eyes sharp and mocking, as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. “Just in time for the centenary relaunch.”

He smiled then, that famous, devastating smile that Grace discovered could light a fire within her even when she knew he must practice it in his own mirror.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked, desperately, though she already knew.

She could not seem to believe it, to accept it, and her stomach twisted in protest, but she knew.

That smile of his deepened, showing off the indentation in his jaw that had been known to cause hysteria when he flashed it about like the deadly weapon it was. The smile that had catapulted him into the hearts and fantasies of so many people the world over. The smile that drove so many women to distraction and regrettable decisions.

*But not me, she told herself desperately. Never me!*

“I believe we’ll be working together,” he confirmed, smiling as if he knew better. As if he knew *her* better than she could ever hope to know herself. As if he had that power already, had claimed it and who knew what else along with it. “I do so hope you’re the hands-on sort of colleague,” he continued, in a voice that should have infuriated her and instead made her feel weak. Susceptible. His smile deepened like he knew that, too. “I know I am.”

## CHAPTER TWO

SHE looked appalled, which was not a reaction Lucas often inspired in women. Not even in starchy, standoffish females like this one, not that he met a great many of that breed in the course of his usual pursuits.

“Working together?” she echoed, sounding as if he’d suggested something unduly perverse. “*Here?*”

“That’s the idea,” he said, smiling wider. “Unless, of course, you can think of a better way to pass the time in this dreary office.”

Normally, even the most constitutionally unimpressed—librarians and nuns and the like—melted at the very hint of his smile. He had been wielding it as the foremost weapon in his arsenal since he was still a child. It had felled entire battalions of females across the globe. It was, in his practiced opinion, even more devastating than that of his younger brother Nathaniel, who was currently up for a Best Actor Sapphire Screen Award and whose inferior smile could be seen via every press outlet on the planet. Lucas was not entirely certain why Grace Carter, prim events manager for bloody Hartington’s, should be immune when legions before her had dissolved at the merest sight of it.

In point of fact, she scowled.

“I certainly cannot,” she said, judgmental and starched stiff and horrified. “And I’ll thank you to keep your suggestive comments to yourself, Mr. Wolfe.”

“How?” he asked with idle curiosity, shifting toward her and watching her tense in reaction.

“How ...?” she repeated icily. “By exercising restraint, assuming you are capable of such a thing.”

“How will you thank me?” he asked, enjoying the flash of something darker than temper in her eyes, despite himself. “I am quite easily bored, you understand, and therefore only accept the most shocking and ingenious displays of gratitude these days. It’s my personal policy. One must have standards.”

"How interesting," she said smoothly. Too politely. "I was under the distinct impression that your standards were significantly more lax."

"A common misconception," Lucas replied easily. "I am not so much lax as *laissez-faire*."

"If by that you mean *licentious*," she retorted.

Her gaze flicked over his battered face. Her distracting Southern drawl went suspiciously sweet. "I certainly hope you won't be left with any unsightly scars."

"On my famously beautiful face?" Lucas asked, affecting astonishment with a small tinge of horror. "Certainly not. And there are always surgeons should nature prove unequal to the task."

Not that a surgeon would be much help with his other, less visible scars, he thought darkly. Lucas had not been particularly bothered by the appearance of Samantha Cartwright's movie-producer husband at a delicate moment the night before. It took more than a few punches to impress him, and in any case, it was only sporting to let a wronged husband express his ill will. There was nothing about the situation that should have distinguished the night from any other night, bruises included.

Except that, upon leaving the hotel, Lucas had not ordered the waiting car to take him to his soulless flat high above the Thames in South Bank. Instead, responding to an urge he had no interest at all in naming, he had ordered it to take him out into the wilds of Buckinghamshire to Wolfe Manor, the abandoned familial pile of stone and bad memories he had assiduously avoided since he'd left the place at eighteen.

He'd heard a rumor that his prodigal older brother, Jacob, had returned after disappearing some twenty years before and Lucas, with the typical measure of cockiness brought on by the liberal application of too many spirits, had decided this particular drunken dawn was high time to test the truth of that story.

But Lucas did not want to think about that. Not about Jacob himself, not about why Jacob had disappeared, nor why he had returned and certainly not about what Jacob had said to him that had spurred Lucas into a series of unlikely actions culminating in his arrival in this office. And so, as he had done with great determination and skill since he was

young, he focused on the woman in front of him instead.

The one who was still scowling at him.

"If I was someone else," he said, letting his gaze drift to that expressive mouth she held so tightly, "I might begin to think that scowl meant you disliked me. Which is, of course, impossible."

"Never say never," she replied, so very sweetly.

"I rarely do," he assured her in a low voice, lifting his gaze to hers and letting them both feel the heat of it. "As I'd be happy to demonstrate."

There was a brief, searing pause.

"Did you just suggest what I think you suggested?" she demanded, her dark eyes promising fire and brimstone and other such irritants. Her full mouth firmed into a disapproving line.

He couldn't have said why he was so entertained.

"I can't say that I remember what I suggested," he replied, smiling again. "But one gathers you're opposed."

"The word is *insulted*, Mr. Wolfe," she retorted. "Not *opposed*."

But he knew what that spark in her gaze meant, and it wasn't insult. "If you say so," he said, and let his gaze move over her body.

She was tall and slim, with rich curves in all the right places, bright blond hair and soulfully deep brown eyes, making her the perfect, long-legged distraction. Unfortunately, she was also wearing entirely too many severely cut articles of clothing, all of them designed to force a man's eye from the very places it was naturally drawn.

Add to that her scraped-back, no-nonsense hairstyle and it was abundantly clear that *this* woman was one of those stuffy, deeply boring career women who Lucas found tedious in the extreme. The only kind of distraction this woman would be likely to provide, he knew from painful experience, would come in the form of a blistering lecture concerning his many moral failings rather than a few hot moments with her long legs wrapped around his hips while he thrust deep and true.

*A great pity*, Lucas thought, grudgingly.

"I beg your pardon?" It was not the first time she had said it, he realized. She was still staring at him in a horror he found overdone and

on the verge of insulting, her honey-and-cream voice laced with shock. “I don’t mean to be rude, Mr. Wolfe, but are you by any chance still drunk?”

She might have gone out of her way to hide her many charms, but he happened to be a connoisseur of women. He could see exactly what her full lower lip promised and could imagine the precise, delicious weight of her full breasts in his palms. Why a woman would hide her own beauty so deliberately was a mystery to Lucas—and one he had no interest at all in solving.

Not today, when there were mysteries to go around. Not ever.

He moved to one of the chairs in front of her desk and lowered himself into it, watching the way her huge brown eyes tracked his every movement as he sprawled into a much more comfortable position. Not with the shell-shocked, often lascivious awe to which he was accustomed, but with a certain, unexpected wariness instead. He was interested despite himself.

“Not at all,” he said, smiling at her, knowing that one of his legendary dimples was even now appearing in his lean jaw. “Though a drink would certainly not go amiss. Thank you. I find I am partial to bourbon this week.”

“I am not offering you a drink, or anything else,” she said, a snap in her voice, though her smile remained nailed in place. “From what I observed last night, I can’t imagine you would ever require another one.”

“I’m sorry,” he replied easily, still smiling, propping up his jaw with one hand. “Did we meet last night—or were you simply one of the many onlookers? Part of the inevitable crowd? Perfect strangers do so love to watch my every move and make up stories to suit their own opinions of my character.”

It was meant to embarrass her, as Lucas knew well that even the most prurient gossipmonger hated to be called out as such, but she did not balk. Instead, she waved a hand at his black eye, his split lip, her eyes steady on his. Bold, even.

“Is a story required?” she asked from behind that veneer of politeness that he noted and knew better than to believe. “The truth seems sordid

enough, surely.”

He forced himself to sink even farther into the chair, every inch of him decadent and debauched, exactly as vile as she believed him to be. He knew more about veneers, about masks and misdirection, than anyone ought to know. It had always been his first and best defense. He thrust aside the dark cloud of memory that hovered far too close today, another offense to lay at Jacob’s prodigal feet, and forced a smile.

“The wages of sin,” he murmured, his voice suggestive, smoky.

She would see what he wanted her to see, he knew. The useless parasite, the indolent playboy. They always did.

“Sin is your area of expertise, Mr. Wolfe,” she said briskly. “Mine is events management.”

“And never the twain shall meet,” Lucas said with an exaggerated, theatrical sigh. “My heart breaks.”

“I rather think you operate from a different part of your anatomy,” she said, those dark eyes gleaming.

“I’m delighted you think about that part of my anatomy,” he replied smoothly. “Feel free to indulge yourself. At length.” He smiled. “No pun intended.”

He was fascinated by the color that showed against her high cheekbones, the way her full mouth firmed. She was dressed to exude a particular message—competence and elegance—and Lucas could see she hit those notes perfectly. But only a blind man could miss the fact that she was perfectly formed—which made him wonder about the rest of her, the trim body buttoned up tight beneath her layers of black and gray.

She held herself under such tight control. How could he not imagine what she would be like without it?

“I should tell you,” he said idly, flicking an imaginary piece of dust from his lapel as if he was not watching her closely, “I have never laid eyes upon something buttoned-up that I was not drawn to unbutton, whether I choose to indulge that urge or not.” He smiled as her hand crept toward the buttons on her suit jacket and then dropped sharply to her side as if she’d reprimanded herself. “It is one among my great many

personal failings.”

She crossed to the front of her desk and leaned back against it, folding her arms over her chest. In that position, as she was clearly well aware, she could look down her fine, delicate nose at him as he sprawled below her in the visitor’s chair. He was no doubt meant to feel his inferiority keenly. But Lucas had grown up subject to the uncertain temper and intermittent cruelty of the late, unlamented bully William Wolfe, also known as his deeply despised and little-mourned father, and he knew power games when people were unwise enough to play them in his vicinity. He also knew how to win them. After all, he was Lucas Wolfe. He was not a legend by accident.

Something moved inside of him, rolled over and shook itself to life.

“Let me be frank, Mr. Wolfe,” she said, smiling at him again, that bland, placid smile that he knew, with sudden certainty, was meant to manage and soothe him even as it hid her own feelings. Unfortunately, it only drew his attention to her mouth.

“If you have so far been less than candid, I cannot imagine the difference,” he drawled as those brown eyes narrowed. “Will I require full body armor?”

That sweet, fake smile sharpened. “Not at all,” she said, and her honey-and-cream voice seemed to pool in his groin, making him uncomfortably hard. Surprising him. Intriguing him. “I do apologize if I seem anything less than thrilled about what will be, I’m sure, a long and productive relationship between you and Hartington’s. As you know, Hartington’s greatly values its relationship with your family.”

His family. Lucas refused to think about them, the great damaged mess of them, much less the cavern of guilt that always yawned open when he considered his own epic failures where they were concerned. He shoved the thoughts, the memories, aside—cursing Jacob’s name, his sudden reappearance. And then, as ever, himself. He needed to sleep, he thought; he needed to regain his usual equilibrium, to reaccess his sense of humor, at the very least.

“Do you always speak in press releases?” he asked mildly, allowing no hint of his inner turmoil to color his voice. “Or is this for my benefit? Because there are far more interesting ways to secure my undivided

attention.”

“My focus is the centenary relaunch of the Hartington’s brand,” she continued, only the faintest flash in her milk-chocolate brown eyes to show him she’d even heard him. “You may not be aware that we will be throwing a gala event in just over three weeks to celebrate our hundredth year as we reintroduce Hartington’s to the modern age.”

“As a matter fact, I do know that,” he said, his gaze captured by the front of her stern jacket, where her crossed arms drew attention to the tempting valley between the breasts he saw only the barest hints of behind the gray silk of her blouse. He dragged his eyes north and bit back a laugh when he saw her eyes were narrowed even further in outrage. A different woman might have preened, but she didn’t, and Lucas found he was less disappointed by the fact she was not that woman than he should have been.

“Then you must also know that this is an exciting time for Hartington’s,” she said. Lucas did not think she sounded at all excited—rather, she sounded as if she would like to have him forcibly removed from her office. He was well acquainted with that tone, having heard it so often in his lifetime, even if, in her case, it was drenched in all that Texas honey. “I’m sure that a man of your stature will have a great deal to contribute.”

“And by ‘stature,’” he murmured silkily, unable, somehow, to look away from her narrowed chocolate gaze, and just as unable to rationalize his own behavior—why should he care what she thought or meant?—“am I to assume you, in fact, mean ‘notoriety’?”

“Yours is a face with which the whole of Britain, and indeed the world, is intimately familiar,” she said, her cool gaze at odds with her soft, velvety voice. “Your headline-grabbing antics are, truly, a gift to the public relations department. No publicity is bad publicity, after all.”

“I will have to schedule further antics at once,” he said, with bite, though she neither quailed nor colored as she gazed back at him, as she should have done. “I am certain there is no limit to the number of headlines I can grab, all for the greater glory of Hartington’s.”

“You are too kind,” she said sweetly, as if she had not picked up on his

sardonic tone, when he was more than certain she had. He could see that she had. She nodded at his battered face. “Though perhaps you might let those bruises heal a little bit first.”

Lucas realized, belatedly, what a powerful asset she had in that voice of hers, so soft and sugary and deadly all at once. A rapier-sharp blade sheathed in honey and cream. It was impressive.

But he did not wish to be impressed.

“In any case,” she continued, “I am truly delighted to have had this opportunity to meet with you, Mr. Wolfe—”

“By all means, call me Lucas,” he said quietly, weighing that soft, sweet voice against the steel he could sense beneath, and could even see in her gaze. “I insist that all character assassinations be made on a first-name basis.”

“—and I am certain,” she continued, that smile remaining firmly in place, “that I will have the pleasure of working with you sometime in the future, after we’ve had the relaunch. I’ll be sure to schedule a meeting with the PR team in the next few weeks, once you’ve had time to settle in and get your bearings....”

This time she trailed off as he shook his head, her brows rising in inquiry. Lucas found he enjoyed that far more than he should.

“You are Grace Carter, are you not?” He enjoyed saying her name—because he could see that she did not like the way he said it. As if he could taste the flavor of it with his tongue. It was his turn to smile. “Charlie assured me you were the person I needed to find.”

There was a slight, humming sort of pause. She blinked, and he felt it like a victory.

“Charlie?” she asked, an odd, slightly strangled note in her voice.

“Charlie Winthrop,” Lucas supplied helpfully, and was delighted when her cheeks reddened again—this time, he had no doubt, with temper.

It made him wonder what she would look like if it was passion that heated her. If it was him. “I am to be at your disposal,” he said, making his voice as suggestive as possible. “Completely.”

He was intrigued when the expression that flashed across her face was anger. Most women were not angry when flirted with, especially not

when the flirt in question was as accomplished as Lucas, without a shred of immodesty, knew himself to be. He had once made the queen smile while enjoying the races at Ascot. What was one embittered executive next to Her Royal Majesty?

“Of course,” she said through her smile, even as she glared at him as if she’d like to incinerate him on the spot with the force of her gaze.

“Perhaps you’ve heard of him,” he said, unable to keep the amusement from his voice. The hint of triumph.

Lucas found himself fascinated by the way she visibly wrested control of herself, wrapping her show of temper behind another wide smile and an extra helping of that sweet, sweet Texas honey with its swift, sure kick beneath.

“If, as the CEO of Hartington’s, Mr. Winthrop feels your contributions to the company are best utilized through my office,” she said, her voice smooth while her eyes burned, “then I am delighted to have you aboard.”

If he had not known better, he might have believed her. If he had not seen her mask slip, and the way she put it back on so skillfully. If he had not been as accomplished a master of disguise himself, he might not even have recognized hers when he saw it.

But, God help them both, he was.

And, worse—she intrigued him.

He shifted in his chair, deliberately emphasizing his idle bonelessness because he knew, somehow, it would infuriate her. He stretched his long legs out in front of him, nearly brushing her feet with his, and watched her spine stiffen as she deliberately did not move out of the way, did not cede her ground. More power games, presumably.

Lucas had never encountered a power game he did not feel compelled to win. That was how he was wired, to his own detriment. And, unfortunately for Miss Grace Carter of the too-dark clothes and the obvious disapproval, he never, ever lost.

Not in decades now. Not ever again.

“You are a liar,” he continued, letting his voice drop into an insinuating growl that he knew would get to her. “Lucky for you, so am

I.”

Their eyes met. Held. *Seared.*

“We should get along famously,” he said with a deep satisfaction, and then he let loose his smile, like the holstered weapon it was, and let it do its work.

\*

When Charles Winthrop had confirmed publicly that, indeed, Hartington’s was delighted to welcome the famous Wolfe heir aboard—and privately that he expected Grace to personally manage the wild-card playboy with her usual aplomb—Grace had smiled calmly, exuded serenity and comforted herself with visions of smashing every piece of china and shred of pottery she owned. The deep blue bowl from her first trip to Paris, in smithereens. The candlesticks from her holiday on the Amalfi Coast, in a million tiny pieces. *Bliss.*

When she had explained to her awestruck team—in full view of the smirking, flirtatious Lucas, who appeared to bewitch three-quarters of the staff simply by existing, or possibly by lounging across the cabinets so that his magnificent torso was on display—that Lucas was now a crucial component of their strategy for the fast-approaching centenary project, she had kept a suitably straight face and had imagined lighting a small, personal bonfire on her wraparound balcony and setting ablaze the art she’d hung on the walls when she’d moved in a year earlier. The painting she’d bought directly from the hungry-looking painter with the poet’s eyes on the Charles Bridge in Prague. The print of the first van Gogh she’d seen in the famous Metropolitan Museum in New York City. All smoke and ashes. It made her smile feel real.

“We are delighted to have you on the team, Mr. Wolfe,” she said as they walked together from the conference room, her smile sweet and her tone razor sharp. “But in future, please do try to contain yourself. The secretaries are not here to serve as your personal dating pool.”

“Have you asked them?” he asked lazily, his rangy body moving with a grace that should have seemed out of place in the dim light of the hallway. Instead, he seemed to take it over. “Because I was under the impression that my every wish was their command. I believe one of

them told me so."

"I don't need to ask them," Grace replied, smiling more sharply and pretending she was unaffected by his nearness. "I need only consult company policy."

"Hartington's has a Lucas Wolfe clause?" he asked, in that deeply amused drawl that wove spells through her and around her. "I don't know whether to be flattered or insulted." Against her will, hardly aware of it, Grace found herself standing still in the corridor instead of walking briskly toward her office. Standing, gazing up at him, like a moon-faced calf. How could he beguile her without even seeming to do so?

She could not afford it.

"Leave the secretaries alone," she said calmly, as if he had not slipped past her defenses somehow already. As if she had meant to stop there and look up at him.

"Happily," he said. His abused mouth tilted up in the corner. His green gaze was a banked fire that seemed to kick off echoes within her, hot and wild. "But tell me," he continued softly, pointedly, "where else should I direct my attention?"

"Perhaps to your brand-new job," she bit out, ignoring the way he looked at her, his eyes so hooded, so suggestive. "You may find it challenging, after all, having never had one before."

"I am so sorry to shatter your illusions," he said, laughing, though she thought it did not quite reach his eyes, "but despite my well-documented, dissipated, sybaritic existence, I have, in fact, held a job. We all have our deep, dark secrets, do we not?"

She had no intention of discussing secrets with this man.

"You understand, Mr. Wolfe, that when one says 'job,' one is not referring to your rather questionable relationships with somewhat older ladies of excessive means." She smiled. Hard. "There are other words for that."

"Someday you will have to teach me all the ins and outs of your vocabulary," he said, in a voice that seemed to demand she imagine what tutoring him might involve. Something powerful shook through her, stealing her breath. He smiled. "The job I held was somewhat less

illicit, I'm afraid."

"You?" she asked, in disbelief. "Who on earth would employ you?"

"Not everyone finds my face as distasteful as you seem to do," he said, challenge and mockery stamped across his expression. He angled his head toward her, too close, and she had to fight to keep herself from jumping back and letting him see how he got to her. "In fact, some people find it addictive."

"Are you referring to yourself?" she asked lightly, and smiled to take the sting away.

His smile then was as sharp, and far more dangerous. "I mean myself most of all," he said quietly, an undercurrent in his voice she did not understand. "I am my own heroin."

It was the ferocity in his voice that lingered with her even hours later, and the fact she could not dismiss the man from her thoughts made her fantasize anew about destroying all of her belongings in a dramatic—if private—show of temper.

But the sad truth, she acknowledged late that evening when she arrived home and looked around the carefully pristine, perfectly decorated penthouse apartment that normally made her feel happy and successful and tonight felt oddly empty, was that she was entirely too practical.

She could not let herself be so reckless, so careless. No matter how good it would feel. She'd learned that lesson the hard way.

"Women in our family are built to love," her mother had said with a shrug years ago, when Grace had collapsed in a sobbing mess on her bed, trying to handle the fallout of her first, doomed relationship. Back when her mother still spoke to her. "Too much and too long, and always messy. That's how it goes. It's our curse."

"You don't understand—" Grace had moaned.

"You're no different, Gracie," her mother had said, and shaken her head as she'd reached for another cigarette. "I know you want to be, but you're not, and the sooner you get your head around that the happier you'll be."

Now, so many years and miles away from that conversation, and all the betrayal and pain that had followed it, Grace sank down on her smooth, modern couch in the foreign country she called home, and reached back to let her hair fall, heavy and thick, from its place on the back of her head. She shook out the pins, and ran her fingers through the wild mess of it that she only ever dared let down when she was alone. It was too unruly, too untamed—too reminiscent of the girl she had been, who she preferred to pretend had never existed at all.

*I am my own heroin*, he had said, and she thought it was an apt description of his lure, his innate danger.

There was never any *something more* with a man like Lucas. There was only heartbreak and loneliness. She needed only to consider her poor mother's endless string of misery and despair, her life lived on the strength of broken promises and late-night tears, as one more man smiled like he meant it and Grace's mother *believed*. She always believed, and they always let her down. Always.

And Mary-Lynn never blamed the men. She always blamed herself, and so lost a little bit more of herself, her battered heart and the light in her eyes every time. Until the day she'd blamed her daughter instead.

Grace kicked off her shoes and curled up on the couch. She could not afford to be fascinated with Lucas Wolfe. She could not allow herself to be intrigued. She had to throw a relaunch party so fabulous that it cemented her reputation for years to come, and she could not permit any deviation from her plan, especially not in the form of a man who was clearly put on the earth to ruin every woman he touched.

It made her heart ache that she was so susceptible, as if it really was a genetic defect passed down from mother to daughter. When all this time, after everything that had happened in high school had changed her so completely, she'd truly believed she was immune. She would be different, no matter what her mother thought—no matter what she'd screamed at Grace when she'd thrown her out like so much trash. *She would.*

But she would start tomorrow, she thought, closing her eyes, succumbing to her weariness and letting all of her heavy armor drop from her for a moment. She felt the helpless fascination creep in and

take her over, and then curled up on the couch with the memory of his devastating smile raging through her like a wildfire she could not bring herself to put out.

Not yet. Not tonight.

# CHAPTER THREE

“I’VE remembered you,” Lucas announced, swaggering into her office like a conquering hero, his smile far too bright and much too wicked as it played over his mouth. “It came to me over the weekend.”

It was Monday morning, nearing eleven o’clock, and Grace was not feeling at all charitably inclined toward her new team member. She sat back in her desk chair and regarded him stonily.

It did not matter in the least that he looked even more delicious this morning, in yet another absurd, catwalk-ready sort of suit that made him seem like a sleek, wild, green-eyed jaguar set down among a fleet of tamed and corpulent house cats. His dark hair was still too long for civility—and the office—and stood about in what she imagined were spikes as carefully managed as his wardrobe. His perfect male form was still showcased to mouthwatering effect, his muscled shoulders and lean hips lovingly defined, his torso a work of art in dark wool. His beauty was still far greater, far more masculine and disturbing, than one would suspect from having seen him in photographs.

His bruises had faded considerably, she could not help but notice. His dizzying appeal had not.

Happily, she told herself with some internal rigor, her moment of weakness had passed. There was no genetic defect, no predisposition. Lucas Wolfe was nothing more than the human version of a well-known painting, widely regarded as beautiful in the extreme—even a masterpiece. One could appreciate such a painting the way one appreciated all forms of beauty. Lucas Wolfe was a curiosity to be admired, and then ignored.

“Mr. Wolfe,” she said now, smiling perfunctorily. “I understand that this may be a new experience for you, and I’ll try to be sensitive to that, but I think you’ll find the team is expected to make it into the office at nine o’clock sharp each morning, not at eleven. Even you, I’m afraid.”

“At Samantha’s party,” he continued, unperturbed. Quite as if she had

not spoken, much less reprimanded him. “It was when I went to get the drinks, wasn’t it? You were standing by the bar.” His dark brows rose in challenge, and something else she told herself she did not wish to explore, even as it slid intimately along her skin, kicking up goose bumps. “I knew I recognized you.”

“I’m afraid I can’t remember,” Grace said, lying coolly and without a single shred of remorse.

“Of course you do,” he said, with that easy confidence and a knowing gleam in his bright eyes that arrowed directly into Grace’s sex, making her knees feel weak even as she felt herself soften. *For him.* Her heart jumped in her chest. She was entirely too grateful that she happened to be sitting down. He was lethal.

*And impersonal,* she reminded herself sharply, crossing her legs beneath her desk. *You could be a random shopgirl. A bus driver. The bus itself. He has chemistry with the very air around him—he can’t help it.*

“Mr. Wolfe, really,” she said, frowning at him. “This project is doomed to failure if you cannot respect the most basic rules of the workplace. Allow me to give you a refresher course.”

“Less a refresher course, and more an introduction,” he amended, with a careless shrug and no visible sign that he was at all embarrassed he’d never worked a single day in his pampered, over-privileged life of sin and excess—whatever he might have claimed the previous week.

He certainly made it easy to dismiss him, Grace thought. She dearly wished that she could—that she had not been ordered to personally handle him. But she had been, and so she waited until she had his full, if amused, attention, and began to tick off her points on her fingers.

“You must knock and receive permission to enter before barging into an office,” she said briskly. “You must not ignore your coworkers when they are speaking to you, no matter if you think what you have to say is more interesting—it is unlikely that your coworkers will agree. And it is completely inappropriate to make insinuations regarding the private lives or thoughts of anyone you might work with, under any circumstances. Do you understand me?”

It was as if he lounged against something, though he stood in the center of her office. Such was his natural indolence. He reminded her of

the great cats she found so fascinating in the nature programs she often watched—a lazy grace, sleepy-eyed and seemingly harmless, and yet with all that predatory watchfulness and physical prowess hidden just beneath his sleek surface.

“Did I make insinuations?” he asked, not seeming remotely cowed. Only interested. And, if possible, even more amused. “I do beg your pardon. They cannot have been particularly interesting, if I cannot recall them.”

“One imagines that you are so used to insinuating inappropriate things about everyone you meet that it is rather like a comment on the weather for anyone else,” she replied sweetly. She let her smile widen. “Please do try to remember that this is not a yacht on the Côte d’Azur, brimming with starlets and debauchery—this is Hartington’s, a much-beloved and revered British institution.”

He thrust his hands into his pockets and regarded her with that cool green gaze that made her wonder, against her will, what else he hid behind all that sexiness and swagger.

“Rather like me,” he said after a moment, his mouth curving, *daring* her, somehow. “A bit tattered around the edges, perhaps, the pair of us, but I think somehow the gilt and glamour remain.” He smiled. “Don’t you agree?”

Grace eyed him, torn between the urge to laugh—or to scream. Or, worse, to give in to the hugely inappropriate and somewhat alarming urgings of her body and the heat he seemed to ignite within her without even trying. She did none of the above. She did not even fidget under his scrutiny, though it cost her.

“The team will be meeting in the conference room in a half hour for our daily status update,” she said instead, pointedly glancing at the slim gold watch she wore on her wrist, and then back toward her computer monitor, dismissing him. “If you don’t mind ...?”

“You were the only woman in the crowd who refused to smile at me,” Lucas said, in that silken voice of his that, she reminded herself sternly, had seduced millions in exactly the same way. No need to be the next in line in the endless parade. Not that she was considering it! “At first I thought you were one of the ones who scowl at me on purpose, to

distinguish themselves from the fawning fans, but you didn't do that, either."

"Are you sure it was me?" Grace asked, pretending to be bored with the conversation. "I remember your rather spectacular exit from the party, but very little else." She gazed at her computer screen as if she could read a single thing on it. As if she was not entirely too focused on the man who stood so close, just on the other side of her desk, commanding all the air in the room despite his seemingly languid slouch and his unkempt hair.

"Neither a smile nor a scowl. You simply looked at me," Lucas said, his voice like a caress, dark and unfair as it worked its way through her like fine wine, turning her too warm too quickly. She could feel him everywhere. Hot. Shivery. "Even after I said hello."

"Sorry," she said in mild yet clear dismissal, her attention on the screen in front of her, as if she could not feel the pull of him, the heat. "You must have me confused with someone else."

"No," he said, his gaze shrewd, considering. "No, I don't think so."

Grace would rather die than admit she remembered that moment—because she had been quite literally struck dumb to turn from the bar and find him so close, so glowing and impossibly compelling, sexy and rumpled and *male*. In painful hindsight, it ranked as one of the single most humiliating moments of her life. She, twenty-eight years old, a fully grown adult woman who oversaw teams of staff and high-level events, had been struck mute at the sight of this man. This waste of space, famous for no particular reason aside from his name, who used his considerable charm like currency. Yes, something in her had whispered, deep and sure—as, no doubt, it did in every silly female who laid eyes on him up close. But Grace had never forgiven herself for losing her head so spectacularly over a man back in high school, with so many horrible consequences; she would not compound the error now. She would not do it again.

"Yes, well," she said, proud that her voice remained cool, "perhaps I was simply astounded that you could manage to speak coherently. You do have the reputation of being somewhat consistently drunk, don't you?"

"Which means that I am rarely incoherent," he said, smiling faintly. "It is my finest skill. For all you know, I could be drunk right now."

But his eyes were too clear, too watchful. His voice too deliberately blasé. He was about as drunk as she was.

"I will keep that in mind in future," she replied briskly. She straightened in her seat and let impatience creep into her voice. "I'm sorry I don't remember meeting you at Samantha Cartwright's party, Mr. Wolfe. How embarrassing, when I am usually so good with faces. But then, it was a busy night for everyone, wasn't it?"

She could not seem to keep her own insinuations from creeping in, and she knew why when she saw his green eyes warm with a kind of rueful acknowledgment. With a kind of recognition she knew she should fight. Instead, something about him made her *want* to needle him, to get under his skin.

She could not bring herself to imagine what that might mean.

Meanwhile, he watched her with those cat's eyes, and he *knew*. Her secrets, her darkest corners. Everything. As if he could see right into her.

It should have horrified her. It should not have made her ache and her skin seem to shrink against her bones. It should not have made her breath catch in her throat, her mouth dry. It should not have made her want to show him all her secrets, one by one, even the ones that still made her cringe.

"It's that voice of yours," he said, musingly, as if he'd given the matter a great deal of thought. His head tilted to one side. "It's so surprising. It goes down like a good cream tea, and then a few moments later the sting sets in. It's quite a formidable weapon you have there, Miss Carter."

"I prefer Ms. Carter, thank you," she retorted automatically.

"You should be careful how you use it," he replied, and she knew she did not mistake the threat then, the sensual menace. It resonated between her legs, made her breasts feel too heavy, brought her breath too quickly to catch in her throat. He knew that, too—she had no doubt. His wicked, battered lips crooked to the side. "Ms. Carter."

"So you do, in fact, listen when others speak," she said as if delighted and smiled sharply at him. "One did hope. Perhaps next week we can

graduate to knocking before entering!"

"But where's the fun in that?" he asked, laughing at her. A real laugh—one that made his eyes crinkle in the corners and his head tip back. One that lit him up from the inside. One that seemed to make her chest expand too fast, too hard.

It was a good thing she had resolved to ignore him, Grace thought dimly, captivated against her will—or she might really be in trouble.

The novelty of his brand-new office wore off quickly, Lucas found. It rather made him feel like a caged animal, for all that it gleamed of dark wood and chrome and featured no-doubt-coveted views of London from the floor-to-ceiling windows that dominated the far wall. But while Lucas was many things, most of them damning, covetousness had never been among his flaws. Why should he covet anything? Whatever he wanted, he had. Or took. And yet he stayed in the grand leather chair, behind the immense desk, and pretended he could convey some kind of authority—*become* some kind of authority figure—by doing so.

But then, he was not sitting in his new office to feel good about himself or his life choices. He was doing it to prove a point. A long overdue point that should not have required proof, he thought, tamping down the surge of anger that seared through him.

"Hello, Lucas," Jacob had said that early Thursday morning, freshly risen as if from the dead. He had looked Lucas up and down from the great front door where he'd stood, the restored master of Wolfe Manor, his black eyes flicking from bruise to cut to disheveled shirt and making Lucas feel as close to ashamed as he'd been in years.

The very grounds around them had seemed infested with the malevolent ghost of William Wolfe and all the pain he'd inflicted on his unlucky children and wives—or perhaps that had just been the sleepless night getting to Lucas. Perhaps it was Jacob himself, taller and broader than in Lucas's memory—a grown man now, of substance and wealth, if his fine clothes were any indication.

For a long moment they had both stood there, the early-morning light just beginning to chase away the gray, sizing each other up as if they were adversaries.

On the one hand, Lucas had thought, Jacob had once been his best friend, his partner in crime and his brother. They were only a year apart in age, and had grown up sharing the brunt and burden of their father's temper. If Lucas could have been there that one fateful night to do what Jacob had done for their family, he would have. Happily—and without a shred of the agony he knew Jacob had felt for what Lucas had always viewed as a necessary act, if not long overdue.

On the other hand, Jacob had taken off without a word and stayed gone for well over a decade. He had left Lucas in his place—a disaster for all concerned. They had been boys back then, if much older than they should have been and far too cynical, but they were grown men now and, apparently, strangers.

But Lucas had not wanted to believe that. Not at first. Not after so long.

"It is lovely to see you, dear brother," he'd said when the silence had stretched on too long. "I would have slaughtered a calf in your honor, but the kitchens are in some disrepair."

"I've followed your exploits in the papers," Jacob had said in his familiar yet deeper voice. His black eyes raked Lucas from head to toe again, then back, missing nothing.

*Even Jacob*, Lucas had thought, something sinking through him like a stone. But he had summoned his most insouciant smile. He had not otherwise reacted.

"I'm touched," Lucas had replied, blandly. "Had I known you were so interested in my adventures, I would have added you to the annual Christmas card list. Of course, that would have required an address."

Jacob had looked away for a moment. Lucas had wanted to reach out, to bridge the gap, but he had not known how. His head had pounded ferociously. He'd wished fervently that he'd just gone home, slept it off and left the ghosts of his past alone. What good had this family ever been to him? Why did he still care?

"It's not as if we don't already know where this lifestyle leads," Jacob had said, so quietly that Lucas almost let it go, almost pretended he hadn't heard. Anything to maintain the fiction of Jacob he'd carried around in his head all these years. Jacob, the hero. Jacob, the savior.

Jacob, who knew him.

“My original plan was to prance off into the ether, abandoning family and friends without so much as a backward glance,” Lucas had snapped back at him. “But unfortunately, you’d already taken that role. I was forced to improvise.”

“You know why I had to leave,” Jacob said in a low voice, thick with their shared past and their family’s secrets, public and private.

“Of course,” Lucas had interrupted him, years of pain and resentment bubbling up from places he’d spent his life denying even existed. He’d laughed, a hollow sound that echoed against the stones of the manor house and inside of him in places he preferred to ignore. “You’re nearly twenty years too late, Jacob. I don’t need a big brother any longer. I never did.”

“Look at yourself, Lucas—don’t you see who you’ve become?” Jacob’s voice had been quiet, but had flashed through Lucas as if he’d shouted.

It was not the first time Lucas had been compared to his father, but it was the first time the comparison had been made by someone who shared his bone-deep loathing of the man who had wrecked them both. By someone—the only one—who ought to know better. It was a body blow. It should have killed him. Perhaps it had.

“I thought you were dead,” Lucas had said coldly, unable and unwilling to show his brother how deeply those words cut at him. “I’m not sure this is an improvement.”

“For God’s sake,” Jacob had said, shaking his head, his eyes full of something Lucas refused to name, refused to consider at all. “Don’t let him win.”

Staring out the windows of his luxurious office now, Lucas let out a hollow sort of sound, too flat to be a laugh. He had turned on his heel and left his prodigal brother behind—and had thought, *To hell with him*. He’d spent the whole long walk down the private lane pretending nothing Jacob had said had gotten to him. Yet when he’d reached the road, he’d flipped open his mobile and roused Charlie Winthrop from his sleep to announce he’d had a sudden change of heart and would, despite years of claiming otherwise, dearly love to work for Hartington’s in any capacity at all.

*Careful what you wish for,* he mocked himself now. Especially if you were Lucas Wolfe, and had a tendency to get it.

At half past eleven, Lucas dutifully walked into the conference room, expecting to be bored silly by corporate nonsense. Bureaucracy and posturing. It was one of the reasons he managed his own affairs almost entirely via his computer. But instead of a dreary presentation, he found the room in the grips of evident chaos. One did not have to know a single thing about business to know that something had gone wrong. The very fact that none of the events team seemed to notice or care that he had entered the room told him that—it was a rare experience for him and, strangely, felt almost liberating.

He sank into a seat at the oval-shaped table, reveling in the feeling. It was as if he was very nearly normal, for the first time in memory.

Even smooth, efficient Grace looked harried when she strode into the room a few minutes late, a frown taking the place of the competent, soothing smile he already knew was as much a part of her as her ruthlessly controlled blond hair.

“I’m so sorry, Grace,” one of the anxious-looking girls said at once, all but wilting against the glossy tabletop, distress evident in her very bones.

“Don’t be silly, Sophie,” Grace said, but that marvelous voice was tighter than it had been earlier, and tension seemed to reverberate from her in waves as she set down a stack of files in front of her. “You could hardly have foreseen a burst pipe when you found the place six months ago.”

Another team member rushed up to whisper something in her ear, making her frown deepen, and as the rest of the staff took their seats, Lucas took the opportunity to simply look at Grace.

He wasn’t at all certain why he found the woman so compelling.

There was absolutely nothing about the severe gray suit she was wearing that should have appealed to him. Lucas preferred women in bright colors, preferably showing swathes of tanned, smooth skin. He liked impractically high heels and tousled manes of lustrous hair. Glimpses of toned thighs and full breasts. Not a skirt that showed far too

little leg, a jacket he knew she had no intention of unbuttoning and another boring silk blouse in some pale, unremarkable pastel shade that covered her up to her delicate collarbone.

And yet. There was something about Grace Carter that he could not dismiss. That kept him captivated. That had plagued him throughout the long, boring weekend while he had been surrounded, as always, by the kinds of women he usually preferred yet had found unaccountably tedious and insipid this time. That had kept him awake and brooding until he'd placed exactly where he'd seen her before and why he'd noticed her in the first place. He'd thought her a boring prude, of course—but the point was, he'd remembered her.

That in itself was highly unusual.

"All right," Grace said, calling the meeting to order, her brow smoothing and that great calm seeming to exude from her once again. Lucas could feel the room relax slightly all around him. That was her power, he realized. The gift of that smile.

He felt something in him ease, which should have alarmed him—but, oddly, did not. Instead, he watched her take over the room without seeming to do so. It was almost as if he could not bring himself to look away.

"As many of you have already heard," she said briskly, "we've just had word from the centenary venue that their sprinkler system malfunctioned dramatically over the weekend and flooded the grounds. Completely. They expect that the space will be unusable for at least the next two months, which, of course, means we no longer have a location for the gala." She raised her hands when the murmuring from the staff increased in volume and took on the unmistakable edge of panic. "I suggest we all look at this as a challenge," she said. She flashed that smile. "Not a catastrophe."

She seemed so calm, so at ease. As if she expected no less than seven catastrophes before lunch every day, and what was one more? But Lucas could see something in her chocolate-colored eyes, something that seemed to ring in him. Like she was scared and fighting hard not to show it. Like she had as much riding on this as he did, however improbable. Like she might be someone completely different when she

was alone, and had nothing to prove, and was not performing for the crowd.

He could not have said why he wanted so much to believe that. Maybe that was why he opened his mouth, surprising himself as much as anyone else. More.

“Exactly what are you looking for?” he heard himself ask, as if from afar. “In terms of a location?”

Her dark eyes seemed to slam into him. She held his gaze for what seemed too long—and yet even as she smiled politely at him, he could see the wariness, the uncertainty, the panic she hid from the rest. It was almost as if he could *feel* it—he, who felt nothing. Deliberately.

“It must be the perfect melding of old and new, to stand as a showcase for Hartington’s—an updated classic.” She smiled that professional smile, the one that made him want to lick her until he saw the real one she must have hidden away in there somewhere. “Do you know anything that fits the bill?”

“As a matter of fact,” Lucas said, far too easily, “I do.”

He hadn’t known where he was going with this until it fell into his head, exquisitely formed, the perfect solution. Better by far than the miserable pile of stones and nightmares and broken childhood dreams deserved.

“It must also be suitable for a corporate event, Mr. Wolfe,” Grace said. Her dark eyes were level on his, her voice perfectly professional. “Not, for example, a den of iniquity.”

“Those are the only dens worth inhabiting,” he replied at once, aware of all the eyes on him, on them, as if they could see the same sizzle he felt. “I make an excellent guide to all the local dens of iniquity, in fact. Perhaps we should take a company field trip.”

There was a small titter from the group around him, but Grace, of course, merely flashed that calm smile.

“Tempting,” she said, though it was clear that she was anything but tempted, “and one has no doubt at all of your expertise—

“I should hope not,” he said, his lips curving. “I’m Lucas Wolfe.”

“—but I think we’ll have to decline.” Her smile took on that edge. He

should not have found it so fascinating.

“Never fear,” he said before she could dismiss him entirely. “I have something far more boring in mind for your event.”

“Wonderful,” Grace said, her brows raised. She did not trust him, of course. Who did? Who could? He had made certain it was impossible—and so he could not imagine why it should bother him now. “By all means, let’s hear it.”

She thought he was as much of a lost cause as his brother did, he knew. He had gone out of his way to make sure of it—to make sure he lived down to every single low expectation others had of him. The “famous Lucas Wolfe” was his own, best creation, and he’d taken pride in that for years.

So there was no reason at all he should want to alter her impressions.

“What you need is a place that is intimately connected with Hartington’s, yet adds a touch of exclusivity, as well. A destination location.” He had no idea what he was talking about, or why. And yet he could not seem to stop himself. He held her gaze. Challenge and demand. Mystery. He could not resist it. Her. “How would Wolfe Manor suit?”

The rest of the team exploded into excited noise, but Lucas could only see Grace. It was worth it, he told himself, to see her stunned expression, to watch her swiftly reevaluate him in that single split second. The fact that he might be a touch cocky in proposing this particular solution hardly signified, he told himself. He could *see* the wheels in her head turning, the possibilities occurring to her, a new plan taking shape.

And then she smiled the real smile he’d imagined, and time seemed to still. There was nothing fake or pointed about this smile—it was all that honey and shine, and he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that, no matter what, he would have this woman.

He had to.

# CHAPTER FOUR

RAIN drummed against the roof of the limousine as it made its way out of London toward Wolfe Manor the following day. Water tracked silken, wet paths across the windows in ever-changing patterns as the car slid through mile after mile of the wet and green British countryside—and yet all Grace could concentrate on was the six feet and more of Lucas Wolfe, stretched out with far too much lazy confidence and sheer male appeal next to her in the confines of the car.

“You can look at me directly,” he said in that low, insinuating, endlessly amused voice, far too close to her ear. “I can’t imagine why you would fight the urge. I am, after all, quite marvelously handsome.”

“I believe the word you’re looking for is *conceited*,” Grace replied, her gaze on the PDA in her hand as if he did not affect her in the slightest. And yet she could only seem to concentrate on the fact that he was much too close to her on the plush seat, his strong shoulders *just* a whisper away, his spicy, expensive scent—male and seductive and *him*—seeming to inflame her, to tease her and taunt her, every time she inhaled.

He laughed, completely unfazed, as ever. “Conceit cannot possibly be the right word,” he countered. She was much too aware of how he shifted in his seat, how he inched even closer. “I’ve had independent confirmation in the press for years. I am a glorious male animal. You may as well simply admit the truth.”

“You should probably not believe everything you read, Mr. Wolfe,” Grace replied airily. Easily. She wished she could feel the way she sounded. “It can lead to all sorts of issues. A swollen head, for one thing.”

She knew the moment she said it that she should not have used that word.

“My head is the not the part of me—” he began, evident delight in his tone and in his bright green eyes when she turned to frown at him.

"I beg you," she said crisply. "Let us preserve the fantasy that you are not, in fact, a twelve-year-old schoolboy. Please do not finish that sentence."

The wicked smile that should have irritated her, but somehow did not, flirted with his mouth even as his eyes darkened with a heat she wished she could not feel.

"I assure you, Ms. Carter," he said softly. "I am a grown man in all the ways that could possibly interest you."

She was all too aware that he was a man. Just a man, she reminded herself. No more and no less, no matter what the fawning press and her own reactions seemed to suggest. And no matter that, yesterday, he had seemed to sense how agitated she was when no one else had. She had no idea what that could mean.

He had discarded his suit jacket the moment he'd entered the vehicle, stripping it from his lean, masculine form in a manner she'd found entirely too disconcerting—and Grace was forced to note that his biceps were more muscular, his shoulders wider and harder, his torso more sculpted than she had imagined when he was covered in more than just a soft bit of linen. She shifted farther, trying to pull herself as far toward the opposite side of the car as possible without looking as if that was what she was doing.

"Tell me about Wolfe Manor," she said, dropping her PDA into her lap and facing head-on the dragon in its lair. An apt comparison for this man, who was all fire and heat and that coiled danger that no one ever seemed to mention, but which Grace found mesmerizing. And alarming.

His green eyes gleamed and his fine mouth crooked into a half smile as he considered her for a moment.

"If we are to pull off a huge party there in a very short period of time," she said mildly, reminding them both why they were there, together, "I really should know everything there is to know about the place."

"I can tell you that it has never flooded," Lucas said in that silken voice, a dark eyebrow arching high. Grace was forced to consider—and not for the first time—the unnerving possibility that he was much quicker and significantly wittier than any pathetic international playboy

had a right to be. She did not know why that thought should unsettle her. Why it should make her arms break out in goose bumps.

“Touché,” she said, but still gazed at him expectantly.

“What is there to tell?” he asked then, with a careless sort of shrug. “It is a manor house like any other. The country is infested with them. It is the ancestral encumbrance, passed down through generations, a monument to aristocratic greed. I thank the gods every morning for the great gift of primogeniture, which, as I am not the firstborn son, ensures I need never set foot there again unless I wish it.”

A moment passed, and then another. The tires swished along the wet roadway, the rain drummed against the roof, and still, Grace was too aware of the way his eyes met hers, bold and demanding, daring her to look away. To ignore him. To pretend he was not getting to her.

“Thank you,” Grace managed to say in her driest tone. “I’m sure that will be very useful information as we prepare to throw a gala there. No thoughts on an appropriate place to pitch the tent? Where to set up the catering? How to craft the perfect delivery system to ensure the guests are properly wowed as they enter the event?”

Lucas only continued to watch her, that wolfish smile and a silvery light in his eyes that made her feel as if she was made of sand, something insubstantial that would blow away at his next breath. Grace felt almost dizzy, and hated it. Hated *him*, she told herself fiercely, that he should be the reason she felt so wildly out of her depth when she was working—the one place Grace had always exerted complete control.

He was a devil, clearly. He was used to this, to using his incredible sexual magnetism to bend all he encountered to his whim. Simply because he could. But he was not the first devil she’d met, and she refused to be seduced. *She refused.*

“I imagined my role was to be rather more decorative than administrative,” he said, his eyes laughing at her.

“My mistake,” she said, redirecting her attention to her PDA as if dismissing him. “I thought for a moment in yesterday’s meeting that you were a creature of substance as well as style.” She smiled, to soften her words—to pretend she was still being professional, when she felt so edgy, so raw and unwieldy within. “But you can rest assured, Mr. Wolfe,

that your face alone is of great use to Hartington's, however else you choose to help. Or not."

"I know," he agreed, not appearing in the least chastened by her words. Or even particularly offended by them. "This is not the first time I have worked for Hartington's, Ms. Carter. Though it is true that when I did it last, I was still quite young."

She blinked at him, thrown. She could hardly think which was more astonishing—that he had ever been young, or that he had ever actually worked. Neither seemed possible. He was too dissolute to have ever been a child, surely, and far too committedly lazy to ever have worked for his living.

"Define 'worked for Hartington's,'" she suggested, mildly enough, trying to conceal her interest. She should not find him fascinating. She should not care that he was able to fence words with her so easily. She should not let that soften her. "Because, and do forgive me if I've misunderstood, I was under the impression that you took great pride in the fact that you've never worked a day in your charmed life. Aside, that is, from your vague claims last week of once having been employed."

"Perhaps my charmed life is more complicated than you might imagine," he said, a hint of chill in his voice and that uncannily shrewd gaze of his, but only for the barest moment. Grace was convinced she'd imagined both when he blinked, and that self-mocking smile of his returned. "My brothers and sister and I were once the Hartington's window display at Christmas," he said, his tone light and yet, somehow, Grace could hear only the sardonic inflection beneath, the hint of something much darker. "Decked out in matching outfits like the von Trapps, merry and bright. A true Christmas card come to life. The punters adored us, of course. Who could resist a brood of angelic children? They all but emptied their wallets on the spot."

"As a matter of fact, I've seen the pictures," Grace said quietly, uncertain of him, suddenly. Perhaps he was unaware that there were blown-up photographs of his family all over the executive office suite: seven bright-eyed, shockingly good-looking children arrayed around their attractive father, like a series of Norman Rockwell paintings. They all fairly exuded hearth and home and happiness. She was not sure he

would welcome that knowledge. The atmosphere inside the car had changed, and he seemed more dangerous, more unpredictable, though he had not moved at all.

She was imagining things, she told herself. But she remained on her guard.

“Such a happy family we looked,” Lucas said in a soft voice that Grace did not believe at all. “Beyond that, my brother Jacob and I worked in the store during every school holiday for years. My father felt it was character building, apparently.” His smile seemed knife-edged now, deeper somehow, and resonated through her, making her ache in ways she was afraid to examine. “I spent my time talking the shopgirls out of their pants rather than learning how to operate the till. I built my character carefully, and with excessive practice.”

Grace had a sudden, flashing vision of the teenaged Lucas, prowling about the gleaming sales floors of Hartington’s with this same lean and feral edge to him. He would have been much less restrained in his youth, she imagined—all green eyes and cocky swagger and far too much self-awareness. She repressed a sudden shiver. There was nothing safe about this man. She doubted very much there ever had been, even when he’d been small. *If.*

“It is difficult to imagine you young,” she said, voicing her thoughts without meaning to, her voice far softer than it should have been. Almost as if she cared.

Their eyes met then, and something bright and profound moved through Grace, searing into her through the gloom of the rainy day and the stuffy confines of the car. She found she was holding her breath. That she could not look away from him as she knew she should.

“It was a chronological situation, nothing more,” he said after a short pause, never moving his electric, arrogant gaze from hers. “I never had the opportunity to be naive or innocent.” He seemed to recollect himself and looked away then, that smile sharpening as he did. Grace felt it as if he’d cut into her, as if he’d carved symbols deep into her flesh. “But I doubt innocence would have suited me, in any case.” When he looked at her again, he had gone predatory. Male. Hot and knowing—and it made her melt and tremble, despite her best intentions. “I was always far more

proficient in sin.”

“So I have read,” Grace said primly, ignoring the clamoring need in her own body. “At length. It is what makes you such an excellent choice to head up the new Hartington’s campaign. All women have already had numerous fantasies about you, and all men wish they could be you. You are, yourself, the ultimate luxury brand.” She smiled. Professionally. “Kudos.”

“All women?” he asked, his eyes hard and gleaming on hers—as, she realized on some level, she must have known he would.

Had this man ever ignored a gauntlet thrust down before him? She knew, somehow, that he had not. He smiled that wolf’s smile, and it connected hard with that strange humming deep inside of her that grew louder the nearer he was. He was everything she had spent her whole life fearing, avoiding. He made her into someone else, someone lost in the shimmering heat that suffused her, the flame of interest in his gaze. He made her feel things she’d never believed she was capable of feeling. She could not seem to look away. For a long, spinning moment, she could not find it in her to fight him—to fight the weakness in herself.

And she knew that was as good as the death of her.

“Does that mean you’ve fantasized about me, Grace?” he asked, in his seducer’s voice, a low, sexy rasp that promised far too much she knew he could never deliver.

“I believe I have already asked that you call me Ms. Carter,” Grace said, sounding like a starchy, stereotypical schoolmarm sort of person, to her horror. Yet it was exactly the image she strove to project, with her severely cut suits and her scraped-back hair: efficient and competent. A vestal virgin, clutching her pearls.

But what other option did she have? She was trapped in the back of a car with a man who exuded sex—long, slow, all-encompassing, masterful sex, for that matter, from which one was unlikely to recover. And Grace knew what that kind of sex meant, the damage it could and did wreak. She had seen it happen too many times. She had lived it.

“You should have said no, Gracie,” her mother had said so long ago, her face hard and drawn, her eyes flashing the same censure Grace had seen everywhere else. Her own mother, who should have known better

—should have tried harder, Grace had thought, to protect her daughter. But Mary-Lynn had made her choice. “You should have said no, but you didn’t, and now you have to live with the consequences.”

Sex like that was a threat, Grace knew, shaking off the unpleasant past. Sex like that was about power, and, ultimately, pain. She had never wanted anything to do with it after the events of her senior year—but then, she had never met a man who fascinated her on all the levels this man seemed to do. For the first time in years, since she had set her course and focused exclusively on putting the past behind her and excelling in her career, Grace felt lost.

“Is that part of your fantasy?” Lucas asked, his voice low, suggestive. He shifted closer to her, and Grace froze—her entire body, her very being, focused on the heat he generated, on the length and strength of his lean, hard body mere inches away from hers. Only inches. A breath. “I’m happy to call you anything you like.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wolfe,” she said in that brisk, insultingly matter-of-fact voice that had gotten her out of sticky situations in the past. She pretended not to notice how hard it was to dredge up this time, how hard it was to employ. “But I doubt very much I’m the target demographic for your particular brand of charm.”

“You are a woman, are you not?” he asked mildly.

“Yes.” She smiled, bright and false. “But a discerning woman, I’m afraid.”

His gaze moved to her mouth, and she felt it like a touch. Hot and demanding. Sure.

“Excellent,” he said softly. “Can you discern my thoughts?”

She felt herself flush in helpless reaction, and could only hope that her legendary cool kept her skin from actually turning red and broadcasting her response to him. How could this be happening? She had never had trouble in the past, keeping her feelings and any unwanted attractions safely hidden away in the parts of herself she kept locked up tight. Soon enough, they’d disappeared, subsumed into the work she’d always known would save her. Anything to pretend her past belonged to someone else.

"I'm afraid not," she managed to say, forcing herself to sit there calmly, as if she was relaxed. "My psychic abilities only work on more ... intellectual subjects."

"That is a great pity, indeed," Lucas said, not at all discomfited. "My own abilities are far more universal. Shall I tell you what *you're* thinking?"

She wanted to know what she was missing, she knew suddenly—with a deep, new need that frightened her with its intensity. She wanted him to touch her, to taste her. To mark her. Brand her. Take her. She wanted to taste that wicked mouth with her own. She wanted him in ways she'd never wanted another man—even though it made no sense. Even though it made her everything her mother had ever called her. But none of that seemed to matter. *She wanted.*

But that didn't mean she planned to act on it.

"I doubt that would be wise," she said, and mustered up an approximation of her professional smile. "Mr. Winthrop wanted me to usher you through your first project, not mortally insult you."

His gaze moved up to meet hers once more, and his smile was far too satisfied, far too aware. As if he knew that all he needed do was touch her and she would collapse at his feet, as much his to toy with as any of the hundreds of women who had undoubtedly landed face-first at his trouser cuff before. He was the ultimate predator, and that should have repulsed her utterly—but it did not, and she could not account for it. Anger and fear and something else, something too much like yearning, collided inside of her, making Grace feel jangly and breathless, unnerved.

"It seems your luck has held, Ms. Carter," he said at last, laughter lurking somewhere in his voice, and that dark, sensual promise in his eyes. That was when she noticed that the car had slowed considerably. He inclined his head toward the window. "We're here."

Lucas did not mind when Grace all but leaped from the car the moment it rolled to a stop at the top of the winding drive, in the looming shadow of the great house he so hated. Let her run. He had always enjoyed the chase—not that, in truth, he had ever had to do much more in the way

of chasing than indicate his interest. But he'd always liked a new challenge to keep life interesting, and there were only so many times one could leap from a plane or climb a mountain when one did not, in fact, have a death wish.

He climbed out of the limousine after her, more focused on the sweet curve of her behind in the latest of her series of stuffy, corporate suits than in the fact that he was once more at Wolfe Manor.

Acquiescing to an urge he only belatedly realized was uncharacteristically chivalrous instead of calculating, he relieved the driver of his umbrella. He motioned the poor man back into the warm and waiting car, then followed the prickly *Ms. Carter* through the rain toward the front of the house, from where, he knew, she could see just about the whole of the property laid out at her feet. He loathed the very sight of it—all the picturesque British countryside spread out so prettily, with the charming little village of Wolfestone in the distance. He knew that appearances were deceiving: the prettier the surface, the uglier the mess beneath. He had not, perhaps, thought through his impulsive offer of this house for Hartington's use, much less considered that he would have to return here himself.

He concentrated instead on the woman standing with her back to him, frowning through the weather at what there was left of the once-famous view.

"You're wet," he said, close enough to her to see her start, and man enough to enjoy the flustered look she sent his way when he caught up to her. He indicated the rain, lighter now than before but still falling with no sign of stopping, and then moved even closer, shielding them both beneath the umbrella.

He doubted she knew the picture she made as she stood there, damp and inviting, her lush mouth soft, her usually sleek hair escaping from its confines and curling slightly, making her seem more wanton, more open. He felt himself harden and shifted closer to her.

"You failed to mention that this house is falling down," she said, her voice faintly accusing, her chin tilting up as she looked at him.

"Not yet," he said. He looked at the house, still regrettably upright and this time, thankfully, without his brother's disapproving presence on the

front stair. While it was certainly in a notable state of disrepair, it had not been reduced to rubble and a hole in the earth, as Lucas had often fiercely imagined while still forced to live here. “Though one can dream.”

But Grace was not looking at him any longer. She peered up at the house, then pivoted to look out over the wild, overgrown gardens and sweeping lawn that led down to the picturesque lake, pretty even beneath the onslaught of the rain. Her brow creased in fierce concentration, and she pulled her lower lip between her teeth as she let her gaze move from one dilapidated marker of the once-lush Wolfe estate to the next. She sighed and then turned her frown on him.

Somehow, he restrained himself from pressing his mouth into the indentation between her dark blond brows.

“I suppose we can set up a big tent on the lawn,” she said. “It will be pretty if the weather is fine, and there will be enough space if it isn’t. And the state of everything else could work for us. The house and grounds will add a bit of gothic splendor to the whole enterprise.”

Lucas laughed, the sound more bitter than he’d intended. “This is Wolfe Manor. The ghosts here outnumber the living, I assure you, and are all known by name. And there is not a person in the whole of England who does not want to come here and see it for himself.”

She looked at him, her expression warily polite, and he remembered belatedly that she was American, and was not, perhaps, as conversant on the Wolfe family and their tragic history as any citizen of the United Kingdom might be. He was not sure if he liked the possibility of her ignorance regarding all things Wolfe or resented that she might now have to learn all those terrible stories as if they were new.

He could not imagine why he should care either way. And yet he did.

“One of my ancestors supposedly drowned in the lake,” he said abruptly, jerking his chin toward it. “Regrettably, not my father. He died in the house.” He smiled, though he could feel it was not a very nice smile. It matched the dark memories that flew at him, each one a new knife in his gut. He shoved them all aside, ruthlessly. “The rest of us survived this place, in one form or another, but left the better part of our souls behind. I am not being poetic. There was never anything good

here. Ever.”

He looked down at her, unable to understand why he was speaking to her this way—as if it mattered to him that she see the truth about Wolfe Manor. He could not understand the urge.

“But it will make the perfect backdrop for your gala, I imagine,” he continued after a moment. “The only thing people like more than glamour is glamour gone wrong, left to crumble into dust and disrepair and salacious old stories.”

“You are so optimistic about human nature,” she said, her voice as tart as ever despite the sweet honey of it, and completely devoid of any cloying compassion—or, worse, pity. She did not quite roll her eyes at him, and he felt something fierce and hot expand in him. “It is no wonder your company is so sought after.”

“I am sought after because I am me,” he said, arrogant and deliberate, daring her to look away, to deny him. “And because anyone seen in my company is certain to be photographed and speculated about in the next day’s gossip rags. I am sought after because I am rich, sickeningly handsome and rumored to be excellent in bed.” He raised his brows at her, challenging her.

“And here I thought it was for your remarkable modesty,” she replied, as quickly and as sharply as he’d known she would. As he realized he’d hoped she would.

“I don’t require modesty,” he assured her. “I have a mirror—and, barring that, the great and glorious British press. I am more than aware of my charms.”

“Clearly.” She did not look remotely impressed. Or even interested. Which, in turn, he found uncommonly fascinating. “But to return to a slightly less important topic than your vast and staggering ego, I think that we can pull this off.”

She turned from him once more, to peer out across his history as if it was no more than a piece of property she was expected to transform. As if it was merely a venue.

Lucas wondered what she saw. What anyone who had not been abandoned here as a child—in his case, quite literally as well as

emotionally—saw. None of it could ever be anything simple to him—never just a house, a great lawn, an old estate. His few happy memories involved his siblings, especially Jacob, and the mischief they'd gotten into with their decided lack of parental supervision over the years, but there had never been enough of those moments to tip the balance.

Wolfe Manor was where he had been discarded on the doorstep as an infant, his mother's identity ever after hinted at, but never confirmed. It was where he had come to understand as a very young boy that while William Wolfe had viewed all of his children with a certain caustic disinterest, it was Lucas who he had actively hated. It was where he had learned to be the person he was today—ever merry on the surface, ever concealed beneath, ever the disappointment to all who expected anything from him.

But Grace could see none of that. No ghosts, no uncomfortable memories, no absentee mothers and vicious, cruel fathers. For her, perhaps, this was no more than an abandoned great house on a vast property—one more British eccentricity for her to work around. In the pouring rain, no less. He watched as she worried her lower lip with her teeth, and then pulled out her PDA and began typing into it.

"We'll put lights on the house to play up its mysterious past," she murmured. "A haunted house theme, but elegant."

He realized with some astonishment that she was no longer speaking to him. She was entirely focused on her PDA, and thus the job at hand. As if he, Lucas Wolfe, the greatest temptation on two feet according to the tabloids and any number of his former lovers, was ... no more than a business associate.

He found it surprisingly arousing.

"We'll have the design capitalize on the Wolfe saga at every opportunity," she continued in that same distracted tone. "The Wolfe touch on the Hartington's brand in the eighties is widely considered to be the glory days—we'll use that. Expand it into the new era."

She continued on like that for a few minutes more, while Lucas stood idly by, holding an umbrella over her head and waiting patiently. Like one more toothless member of her intimidated staff. Like her lackey.

He was sure it spoke to the deficiencies in his character that he'd been

hearing of all his life that he did not mind it as he should. That he found her deep concentration and ability to block out even him deeply, sensually intriguing. Would she be like that in bed? Would she gaze at her lover with that kind of rapt focus?

He certainly hoped so.

"What is it?" she asked, looking back at him as she slid her PDA back in her pocket, her brown eyes narrowing as they caught his expression "Why are you looking at me like that?"

The rain had picked up again, thudding hard against the umbrella and rebounding from the stones beneath their feet. They were both wet, cocooned together amid the noise of the storm. Lucas found it exhilarating. Or perhaps that was simply her presence—and the fact she was standing so close to him. Finally. She smelled like soap and rosemary and something fresher, more feminine, in the close embrace beneath the umbrella.

He could tell the very moment she realized that the pounding rain had trapped them even closer together, that she was near enough to be wrapped around him if she wished—that the only reason besides the downpour that would bring two people together like this had everything to do with the carnal heat that flared between them and nothing to do with the weather. He watched her chocolate eyes widen in alarm—and unmistakable awareness.

He reached across the scant space between them, and slid his hand along the side of her face, filling his palm with the soft skin of her tender cheek, letting his thumb scrape across her full lower lip, wishing he could test it against his teeth as she had. He was so unused to waiting. He could not recall the last time he'd had to wait for anything.

*Soon, he promised himself.*

"I want you," he said quietly. It echoed between them as more than a statement of intent. It was a promise. A vow.

He could read her so well, though he did not wish to analyze that unexpected ability. He heard her breath catch in her throat, saw her eyes heat with desire. He knew she wanted him. He could feel it in the fire that scorched the humid air between them, see it in the way her lips parted and the faint tremor that shook through her.

"I am afraid that *I* do not want *you*, Mr. Wolfe," she said in that brisk, professional tone, making him blink—though he did not drop his hand. The heat of her skin beneath his palm did not match the coolness in her voice.

"You are such a liar," he said, his voice low, intent on her heat, her passion. "I thought we covered this already."

He could already see them together, entwined, entangled. Her long legs wrapped around his waist, her breasts in his hands. Her lush mouth wrapped around his hardness. He wanted to take her where she stood, pull her skirt to her waist, and feel her soft heat with his hands, his mouth.

"Please do not touch me again, Mr. Wolfe," she replied. Her brown eyes were direct. Serious. She reached up and took his larger hand in hers, and pulled it away from her face. "It is completely inappropriate."

"Grace ..." He let her move his hand, but he curled his fingers around hers, holding her fast. Something urgent was overtaking him, almost shaking him. He had never felt anything like it. "Do you really think I don't know you want me, too?"

They were so close, the rain pounding down all around them, stranding them beneath a noisy umbrella—the only two people in the world. Wolfe Manor, with all of its howling ghosts and terrible memories, faded away until there was nothing but the weather, this umbrella and this overly polite, overdressed woman who had somehow wedged herself under his skin.

And she was dismissing him.

She even smiled, a studiously polite, faintly pitying smile. Lucas had never seen anything quite like it—and certainly not directed at him. She tugged her fingers from his grip, and he let her do it.

"I want a great many things that are no good for me," she told him. Not unkindly, but with an undercurrent of intensity. "I want to live on nothing but red velvet cake and dark chocolate. I want to spend my days lolling about on white sand beaches, reading romance novels and basking in the sun. Who doesn't?" She tilted her head slightly, still holding his gaze. "But instead I eat healthily and I work hard. No one should get everything they want. What kind of person would they be?"

"Me," Lucas said. But there was an odd note in his own voice, and it seemed as if the rain roared in his ears. His mouth crooked to the side. "They would be me."

"Well," she said after a long, searing moment. Her voice seemed thicker—or did he only imagine that? "Life is not about *want*, Mr. Wolfe."

Something passed between them, electric and alive, dancing in the breath of space between their bodies and jolting into him. He did not know what to make of it. He only knew he could not look away.

"You mean *your* life," he amended quietly, as if they stood in the presence of something bigger—something important.

"And in any event," she continued, squaring her shoulders as if he had not spoken, "I have a very strict policy against becoming personally involved with coworkers. I understand you've never really worked in an office before—"

"If I kissed you right now," he said, his eyes trained on hers and the truth he could see there—the truth that resonated in him no matter what words she threw out to deny it, "I could make you forget your policies. I could make you forget your own name."

That hung there like smoke for a heartbeat, then another, and then, impossibly, she laughed.

*At him.*

# CHAPTER FIVE

GRACE thought she sounded on the verge of hysteria—and that was certainly how she felt, her chest too tight and her skin on fire—but Lucas merely stared down at her, his beautiful face looking nonplussed and not a little disconcerted. His hand tightened around the handle of the umbrella he still held above them. She could still feel the places where he'd touched her face, her hand—as if he'd burned the imprint of his hand into her flesh.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, biting back the laughter before it gave her away, before he saw the truth. Before he realized she was putting on a desperate act to divert his attention. “I have no doubt you could do all of those things. You are Lucas Wolfe, are you not? You’re famous for doing all of that and more to the better part of Europe.”

“Never fear,” he said stiffly. His green eyes burned like smoky emeralds in the wet, gray air. “I am reckless with the feelings of others, perhaps, but never my own health.”

“I’m sure you’re all you claim to be,” she said, injecting a placating note into her voice, which made his eyes narrow and his full lips thin. But he was no longer touching her, which meant he was no longer turning her brain and body to smoke and need, and Grace felt she had to count her blessings where she could.

“You have no idea,” he murmured.

*I have more of an idea than I should,* she thought ruefully, pushing aside a host of dangerously vivid images that taunted her, teased her, made her yearn to throw herself headlong into the very thing she knew would destroy her. It was as if Lucas Wolfe had been created with every one of Grace’s preferences and secret desires in mind. The aristocratic drawl. The quick, smart wit that suggested an agile mind he chose to hide behind his famed laziness. The lean, arrogant swagger. The narrow, beautiful face that made Grace think of fallen angels and other impossible creatures, all seduction and compulsion, magic and wonder, wrapped up in a package that was unmistakably, devastatingly male.

"And that is yet one more reason I can't possibly allow anything to happen between us," Grace said as politely as she could, speaking more to herself than to him. She forced herself to meet his gaze fully and blandly. She forced herself to smile serenely, despite the wild tumult that raged inside of her, nearly knocking her from her feet.

"Grace ..." he began, but she had one more card to play. She splayed one hand over her chest, and let her smile take on just the slightest hint of something in the neighborhood of pity.

"I am, of course, very flattered," she said. Distinctly. Sweetly. Sympathetically.

She knew she'd hit the right note when he stiffened, his eyes narrowing to outraged green slits. She almost opened her mouth then to take it back, to tell the truth, compelled by a force she could not begin to understand. Why should she have the insane urge to protect him? To shield him—even from herself, at her own expense? What was happening to her?

It was the rain, she told herself with some desperation. The rain and a man she should never have met, who she could never allow herself to know in any way other than the superficial. Just the wet and the peculiarly British dampness that crept into the bones and stayed there, squatting, like a kind of grief.

It was the rain, she thought, and nothing more.

"I think we're done here," she said, when he only stared at her, affront and something else she was afraid to consider too closely written plainly across his face.

"Are you certain?" he asked coolly. "Surely you are only now warming to the subject. Just think, with some more time and energy you could flay my flesh entirely from my bones using only that sharp tongue of yours."

"Tempting," she could not help but reply, not wanting to think about her tongue near any part of him, not wanting to feel how much of a temptation he truly was, how completely he could ruin her if she let him. "But I think I'll pass." A kind of shadow passed across his face, darkening those fascinating eyes, and she felt an answering twinge in the vicinity of her chest. She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry if I hurt your

feelings—”

“Please contain yourself, Ms. Carter,” he interrupted her smoothly, with a touch of hauteur, all hint of shadows gone from his perfect features as if she’d imagined them. “I am Lucas Wolfe. I don’t have feelings, I have sycophants. I think, somehow, I will manage to survive the disappointment.”

She was surprised she was still standing, that they were still huddled together beneath the same umbrella—that she was not lying in pieces scattered at his feet after that lacerating tone of voice.

But this was a good thing, she reminded herself when she was tempted to let that affect her as it should not. When it came to this man, antagonism was the better part of valor. It was the hint of tenderness, the suspicion of emotion, that would be her downfall. But this—*this* she could handle.

She smiled her frostiest smile at him, the one that had helped earn her the title of ice queen from everyone who’d been unlucky enough to receive it.

“If you say so, Mr. Wolfe,” she replied in a tone as sharp as his had been, his formal name feeling bitter against her teeth.

Then she strode toward the car, grateful for the rain against her face because it was cold. Grateful for the cold because it snapped her out of the strange spell she’d been in since she’d gotten in the car with him in London. Grateful because finally—*finally*, she told herself—she felt like herself again.

Grace would have preferred it if Lucas had reverted to his expected type over the next few days—rolling into work at odd hours, drunk and disreputable and incapable of doing more than ogling the secretaries, which was just as everyone expected him to behave—but he did not.

Instead, he turned out to be good at his job.

He threw a press conference to announce his own new position at Hartington’s, deliberately starting the kind of media frenzy that would have taken anyone else a great deal of time and money to attempt to duplicate. And then he simply ... went out on the town, as he normally did. He attended all the usual parties, with all the usual people. Pop

stars and models, actors and Sloane Rangers. Up-and-coming artists across all mediums, and brash rockers known as much for their prodigious use of recreational substances as their music. And wherever he went, whoever he was with and whatever the event, when he was photographed—and he was always, always photographed—he talked about Hartington's.

He knew the very fact that he'd taken a job would be considered noteworthy, and so he milked the public's fascination with the idea of him at work for all it was worth. All the while talking so much about the Hartington's gala at Wolfe Manor that Grace was soon reading breathless reports on celebrity gossip sites about who was and who wasn't on the guest list, which artists were jockeying for a chance to perform—the kind of exposure and excitement she normally only fantasized about. With the centenary gala approaching so quickly, there simply could not be *enough* publicity—and certainly not of this kind and caliber.

Lucas Wolfe, it turned out, was a publicity machine, completely adept at using the press to his own ends.

"Your ability to manipulate the press is really very impressive," Grace told him at the morning meeting, the paper in front of her spread open to yet another story about the perennially shiftless Wolfe brother and his shocking newfound interest in corporate life.

Though she could not help but wonder—if he was this good at making the press do his bidding, had he been doing precisely this all along, creating the very image that even she now reacted to as if it was the gospel truth about him? Perhaps he really was as clever as she'd now and again imagined him to be, Grace thought, and could not have said why that revelation made her shiver slightly. Nor why he would have deliberately chosen to spend his life this way, to be known far and wide as this ... dismissible.

"Not at all," Lucas replied with a careless shrug, though there was a measuring sort of look in his eyes when he met Grace's gaze across the conference table. Something much too commanding for a lifelong layabout. Something dark. Aware. "Paparazzi have followed me around for the whole of my life. It's long past time they made themselves useful."

"Usefulness is apparently going around," Grace said, unnerved by the way he looked at her and determined not to show it in front of her team members, all of whom still gazed raptly at Lucas as if he descended to work each morning from Mount Olympus itself, complete with a thunderbolt and a golden chariot.

Lucas, meanwhile, only watched her with an undecipherable expression that made Grace distinctly uncomfortable. Wrenching her gaze from his, she returned to the business at hand, grateful that hers was a high-pressure career that had taught her years ago how to always, always appear calm and collected no matter what fires burned inside of her or around her.

No matter if she felt scorched.

This was what she had wanted, she reminded herself more stridently than should have been necessary when she was back in her office, away from his too-incisive green scrutiny. She wanted distance. She wanted him to stay away.

She did.

So there was no reason at all for her heart to skip a beat in her chest when she looked up from a frustrating email chain regarding the florist's latest temper tantrum about the changed location to see Lucas filling up her doorway, far too broad of shoulder and smoldering of eye.

Her smile felt more forced than usual. As if that odd interlude in the rain had happened only moments ago, instead of days. As if she thought that somehow Lucas could truly see inside of her, where she still shivered for him, still wanted him, still ached for him to put his hands on her, no matter how much she wanted to deny it.

"I need a date," he said, the corner of his mouth quirking slightly.

For a moment, one panicked beat of her heart and the next, Grace wondered if this was yet another in the succession of vivid dreams she'd been having about Lucas and this very office—all of which started innocuously enough, just like this, and then quickly became shudderingly, achingly carnal.

But he merely waited in the open door, his face particularly unreadable in the gray light from the window. Grace surreptitiously dug

a fingernail into her own palm and told herself she was relieved when the sharp little pain lanced through her.

She was awake. But he was still here.

“I’m sure you can auction yourself off for charity, or some such good cause,” she said briskly, as if there had been no strained moment at all. She leaned back in her chair and eyed him warily. “Or, alternatively, step into the street and announce you have a gap in your social schedule. I imagine eligible ladies will tackle you where you stand.”

That knowing smile flirted with the curve of his mouth. There was something especially untamed about him today, Grace thought helplessly. The suit he wore had been crafted with loving attention to every long, sinewy muscle he possessed, every hard, flat surface. His roguish dark hair fell over his forehead, begging for female hands to rake it back into place. But more than that, he seemed edgy. Determined. Words she would never have thought to associate with this deliberately languid, casual man.

But she would not have thought he could act in the interests of Hartington’s, either, a small voice whispered, nor in so skillful a fashion, and he already had.

“Those are both attractive options,” he said after a moment. “But my needs are more specific. You, to be precise.”

Grace felt her stomach drop out of her body. She carefully folded her hands on her lap to keep them from betraying her by shaking. She ruthlessly tamped down on any outward sign, any reaction, because she knew, somehow, that it would be far too dangerous to show him any hint of what those words did to her. Any whisper of the clamoring inside of her, her heart thudding against her chest, all of her *wanting* with a force that scared her—and she would be lost.

And then what would become of her? She was afraid she already knew—and shoved aside another guilty flash of memory, resolving she would call her mother later to assuage her guilt and attempt to make amends. But that did not mean she would *become* her.

“I am running out of ways to tell you I am not available to you,” she said with a great calm she did not feel. She met his gaze, her own firm. “Along with the patience necessary to keep saying it.”

"I received the message, believe me," he assured her, sounding wholly unrepentant. "Though I believe it was the laughing in my face that truly drove the point home."

His green eyes gleamed with amusement. She found the sight a relief, and then immediately wondered why she cared whether he found her entertaining, on any level. She should not care if he hated her. She should not care if he was entirely indifferent to her. And yet ...

"I apologize if I bruised your ego," she said, with a razor-sharp pretense of sympathy. "I will confess, I thought it impossible."

"Oh, it is," he said easily. "Which is why you can spare me a new lecture on appropriate behavior—it bounces right off my shiny, pretty surface." His mouth pulled into that self-mocking curve. "But I still need you to be my date tonight." He shook his head when she started to protest. "It is work-related, of course. I may be a desperate egomaniac, but I can, on occasion, listen."

His eyes were intent on hers, hinting at all the layers of himself he kept hidden that she could sense hovered there, just out of reach.

"Sometimes I am even capable of processing the information I hear," he continued, deep irony laced through his voice. "It is astonishing."

"There is no need for sarcasm," Grace said, trying to sound firm and in control but fearing she sounded unnecessarily prim instead.

He did not answer for a moment, and then, he casually dropped the name of the current reigning pop star sensation, the young woman who had recently taken the country by surprise with her debut album—an achievement made all the sweeter because she was the daughter of one of England's most beloved former football heroes.

Grace blinked, unable to track the change of subject. "What about her?" she asked, baffled.

"It's her birthday party tonight," Lucas said. "Quite the coveted invitation list. It should be one of the events of the year."

"And, naturally, you've been invited," Grace supplied for him.

He did not bother to address that absurdity, and Grace wondered why she'd bothered to say it. He was Lucas Wolfe. Of course he was invited.

"I thought you could accompany me and we could convince her to

sing at the gala,” he said instead, and there was the unmistakable light of challenge in the gleam of his eyes, the set of his chin. “I suspect she’ll do it if I ask. She’s had a crush on me since she was a schoolgirl.”

Grace shook her head at him. Getting the current number-one pop star to perform at the gala would, indeed, be a coup—but for some reason, that was not the part of what he’d said that she focused on.

“She is *eighteen!*” she chided him, even as she was caught up in the challenge in his gaze. The dare. Even as she found herself unable to look away from him.

“I said she had a crush on me, not that I returned the favor,” Lucas replied, unperturbed. His gaze grew hotter and seemed to light Grace up from within. “Besides, everyone knows I prefer my women older, desperate and married.”

Grace wanted to discuss his sexual preferences about as much as she wanted to fling herself out the window behind her to the cold street below. But that did not keep her mouth from drying out, nor her pulse from leaping at her throat.

“So you are pathetic rather than predatory,” she found herself saying, despite her best intentions. Despite the fact she knew it was not at all wise. “My congratulations.”

But Lucas only smiled.

“Nine o’clock,” he said quietly, his voice as low as his eyes were bold. He let his eyes fall over Grace’s tightly buttoned jacket, then back up, and his lips twisted. “But you cannot wear one of those ghoulish suits you love so much, not in front of the paparazzi in my company. And, I beg you, do something with your hair.”

His smoky gaze met hers—dared her, provoked her, made her want to throw the nearest paperweight at his inflated head—and then he smiled again.

No one should have a smile like that, Grace thought, hating herself for the flush that washed through her, the fire that licked into her—for her inability to tell him exactly what he could do with his sartorial suggestions.

“Anything else?” she asked tightly, furiously.

Because they both knew that she would do it. She would go to this party and she would dress more or less to please him. Because she had no choice, she told herself, because it was her job to do so, but still—she was surrendering, like all of her worst fears. His eyes gleamed with a hard, male triumph she could feel echo inside of her, making her soften instead of scream. Making her yearn.

“That should do it,” he said in that insinuating voice of his, the one that tickled and teased, and crept along her skin like the softest feather, the lightest touch. “And, Grace—I have a certain reputation to uphold. Don’t force me to choose an outfit for you. I guarantee that you won’t like it.”

She was the most irritating woman he had ever encountered, Lucas thought later that night, lounging on a suede settee in the middle of the celebrity-studded birthday party, under the all-glass dome of one of London’s most exclusive nightclubs. Yet for all his annoyance, he was unable to shift his attention from Grace, who was sitting beside him and yet, somehow, managing to ignore him completely.

He might have admired her fortitude had he not had this electric current of desire and temper surging through him, making him want to take out his frustrations on her very sweet flesh. All over her flesh, again and again and again.

But that was not a productive line of thought.

“No one is convinced by this act,” he told her. “The entire British press knows you are only pretending to ignore me for effect.”

“Just a minute ...” she murmured, not paying any attention. Not even glancing at him.

It was lowering, to say the least. Lucas almost laughed at himself. He was brooding in public, which was not like him at all. He, who was known for his ability to make all around him laugh and fall a little bit in love with his smile. But he could not seem to shift his attention from the woman next to him, as she blithely tapped away at that damned PDA of hers. She had taken him at his word regarding her attire—which perhaps he should have expected.

But he had not been prepared. He had suspected she was beautiful

beneath her gloomy clothes, of course—but he'd had no idea how correct he was.

For the first time since he'd met her, she was not wearing an undertaker's suit in black or gray. Instead, she had chosen to wear a dress so red, so bright, that it was all he could do not to gawk at the way it flowed over the mesmerizing legs she'd made even longer, even more wicked, in high platform sandals. The dress clung to her breasts as he would like his hands to do, spanned her waist with a lover's attention to detail and then flared out from her body to show only saucy hints of the magnificent legs beneath. She looked like a column of fire, and he wanted to burn them both beyond recognition.

But because she was Grace, and might possibly be the death of him, she had left her hair up. In a slightly more complicated knot, to be sure, with a few tendrils of golden blond waves left hanging to tease and entice, but it was ultimately no less controlled than her usual style. He felt certain it was a deliberate act of defiance on her part.

One step at a time, Lucas thought. He was that much closer to getting her naked and beneath him, and that, really, was what mattered. It was fast becoming an obsession.

He had presented her to the pop princess who had, as he'd anticipated, eagerly agreed to perform at the gala—an agreement that Grace had immediately set out to confirm with the girl's hovering management team while Lucas suffered through a series of indecent propositions that should have appealed to him more than they did. He had smiled obediently for the cameras, and then the princess and her entourage had moved on, leaving Grace behind to email back and forth with her team members about ways to update the design concept for the party to best showcase the new talent. And leaving Lucas with nothing to do but imagine removing that silky smooth red dress from her mouthwatering curves, tasting every inch of her heated skin as he went.

“All right,” she said finally, looking up at him, triumph bright in her eyes. “That was another fantastic idea. Thank you.” She slid her PDA into the clutch bag she held. “I’ll find my own way home, and see you in the office—”

“Home?” He tamped down on the unexpected surge of temper, but

still found himself glaring at her. “You cannot be serious.”

“Of course I’m serious,” she said, with that calm gaze of hers that he suddenly found enraging, not peaceful or relaxing at all. “I understand that you are used to all manner of late evenings and early mornings, and more power to you. I, however, require far more sleep in order to function.”

“This may very well be the party of the year,” Lucas said mildly, waving his hand at the parade of celebrities, the overwrought chandeliers up above, the walls draped in deep magenta and studded with crystals. “You miss a single moment of it at your peril.”

“It’s a bit early in the year to be making such pronouncements, don’t you think?” She shrugged. “Besides, I believe the intricacies of the London party circuit fall more within your purview than mine.”

“I want you to stay with me,” he said, baldly. He saw her stiffen, saw her eyes widen. He smiled. “After all, this is the perfect place to drum up excitement for the gala, is it not? Who knows what other luminaries we can rope into attending?”

Her brown eyes were wary—and furious, he noted with growing interest. Why should she be furious? But he suspected he knew. He felt it, too, the tightening noose around them. The pull of it.

The difference was, he was not fighting it. Much.

“Have I misunderstood something?” she asked in the tone of one who was quite certain she had misunderstood nothing. “I was under the impression that the collection of celebrities was your job—a job you are quite good at, actually.” She waved her hand at the crowd around them. “And, of course, these are your sort of people, anyway.”

“Famous?” he asked idly. “Shockingly attractive? Filthy rich and well connected?”

“Bored,” she retorted with that sharp smile and a matching glint in her eyes. “Desperate. As anyone would be, were their self-worth predicated on how many mentions they received in a glossy magazine.”

He eased back against the settee and watched the flush of heat that stole across her face. *Passion*, he thought with deep satisfaction. And she was not happy about it.

But he was.

"As opposed to the deep social and philosophical relevance of party planning for a department store?" Lucas asked mildly, baiting her. "I can certainly see where your exalted sense of worth comes from."

She froze, her eyes shooting sparks at him, temper storming across her normally impassive face. It fascinated him.

"I have a job," she said from between her teeth. "One that I am very, very good at. My self-worth derives from my achievements. Not my father's surname."

That might have landed a blow on a man less used to hearing such things and in far more offensive terms. But Lucas only relaxed against the settee, stretching his arm along the back and smiling at her.

"You just finished telling me that I'm good at the same job," he said, making his tone deliberately insulting, wanting to see the fire in her blaze higher. Hotter. "How difficult can it be?"

"Is anything difficult for you?" she asked, her voice scathing, her hands curling into fists in her lap. "Or do you just float through life making snide commentary and endless innuendos, forever the darling of the paparazzi and very little else? How proud you must be. How deep, indeed, your still waters run."

He was uncomfortably hard, and delighted with her temper, even though she directed it at him. He, after all, could take it. Temper did not upset him; it usually only intrigued him, since he so rarely lost his own. Still, he was a man, and her words made him long to teach her all manner of lessons. *Soon*, he thought, watching her proprietarily. *Very soon*.

"Are we discussing masks, Grace?" he asked quietly, angling close enough to breathe in her scent. "Because I've been waiting to talk about yours since the moment we met. What are you so afraid of?"

"Becoming you, of course," she threw at him immediately, with all of her customary ice and that fire that he instinctively knew was blazing bright underneath. "Becoming anything like you. A zombie with a million-dollar smile."

"That would hurt my feelings—" he began, fighting a smile.

"If you had any," she finished for him, and rolled her eyes. "I know full well that you don't."

"If I believed you," he corrected her, his voice quiet but firm. He waited until her gaze found his. "But we both know that you'll say whatever it takes to maintain this fiction of yours. That you do not want me. That you cannot feel this thing between us, this pull. What would happen if you told the truth, Grace? What then?"

The party was loud around them, a swirling cloak of laughter and music and the whirl of interchangeable faces, but Lucas hardly noticed any of it. There was only this forgotten settee in a darkened corner of the expansive room. There was only this woman. There was only this need.

"Oh," she breathed, not looking away, her eyes narrowing. "I didn't understand. This is still about your ego, isn't it? I won't fall at your feet and beg for your attention, so there must be a grand conspiracy. There must be a detailed explanation. Masks and fictions and *reasons*."

"Not at all," he said, unable to keep the laughter from his voice, though it only seemed to stoke the fire within him. "Only the truth."

"Here's the truth, then," she said, her voice dangerous, honey and fire. She shifted closer, her need to slap at him and show him her power clearly overcoming any common sense. He needed only to lean forward and he could taste her.

"I am all ears," he murmured, the laughter gone, every part of him focused on that lush, full mouth so close to his.

Her smile was like a razor, her voice like a whip. "If I were to make a list of all the things that I hate in a man, every single characteristic you possess would be on that list."

"I have no doubt," he said, raising his gaze to catch hers. Holding them both captive for a long, hot breath. "But that doesn't change the fact you want me inside of you. Right now. All night. Until you can't stand the pleasure any longer."

He saw her silent gasp as her breath fled her, saw the color flood her face, but most of all he saw the heat in her deep brown eyes. The carnal wonder. The need.

His, he thought. She was his.

"Your conceit is rivaled only by how deeply you are mistaken," she managed to say, but her voice was no more than a thread of sound, and her eyes were too wide.

"The facts remain the same," he taunted her softly.

"I don't want you," she said, enunciating every word. But he could see how it cost her, how she fought for control. "Is that clear enough for you? Is there any room for error? You bore me."

But she didn't move away. If anything, she angled her body closer.

He looked at her for a long, shimmering moment. The music pounded. The crowd surged. London sparkled and preened far below them, even as raindrops fell against the high glass enclosure above.

But all Lucas could see was Grace. Maddening, courageous, sharp-mouthed Grace. *His*.

Then, never breaking eye contact, he reached over and gently pressed his fingers against the delicate hollow of her neck. Where her skin was soft like satin and hot to the touch.

Where her pulse thumped out hard and then went wild beneath his hand.

"Liar," he whispered. Then he closed the distance between them and took her mouth with his.

# CHAPTER SIX

MOST first kisses were gentle, sweet. Lucas was neither.

He simply took her mouth with no hesitation—as if it was his, as if *she* was his, as if that devastating possession was his right.

It was like a bomb detonated inside of her, exploding through her limbs, white-hot fire and spiraling need combusting again and again and again, leaving her weak. Wanting. Her breasts ached. Her nipples hardened. Her core melted. And still he kissed her, taking her mouth with an easy command that made her tremble against him.

He kissed with a carnal demand, a sheer, arrogant certainty, that shook Grace almost as much as the feel of his mouth on hers.

Hot. Commanding. As if her entire life had led inexorably to this moment, to the incomparable feel of his lips against hers, sending desire swimming through her veins like alcohol and rendering her incapable of doing anything more than kissing him back.

As if she had never done anything else. As if she would die if she did not.

She raised a hand, and then forgot why as it found the rock-hard planes of his chest, the hint of stubble on his lean jaw, each new sensation igniting a flood of desire, each stronger and more thrilling than the last.

She ... forgot. Where they were. Why she was angry with him. Why she should not allow him to angle his mouth over hers with such skill and talent, nor rake a hand into her hair to anchor her head in place as he tasted her again and again and again. Everything that was not Lucas was like smoke, drifting away, signifying nothing. As if only he existed.

Without lifting his mouth from hers, without giving her even a moment to breathe, to collect herself, Lucas shifted on the small settee, his powerful arms sweeping Grace up and over him, settling her sideways across his lap. He murmured something she could not understand, could hardly hear over the pounding of her heart and the

wild rush in her ears, and then he claimed her mouth once more.

It was too much. He was everywhere. Hard beneath her thighs, hard against her body, and that talented, wicked mouth of his that took and took, until she could not think at all. She could only feel the heat. The fire. The slick fit and exquisite taste of him, expensive liquor mixed with that part that was purely him. Pure Lucas. Sinful and delicious and capable of making her head spin around and around while the very core of her pulsed with need.

One of his hands remained laced in her hair, and on some dim level she was aware that he was destroying her careful twist. The pins scattered at his impatient touch and the heavy, wild curtain of her blond waves cascaded down around them, shielding them, cocooning them. She could not find it in her to care. His other hand stroked a lazy path from her cheek to her neck, down the stretch of her bare arm to settle at her hip, his big hand holding her fast on one side with his arousal stark and unmistakable on the other.

Grace's hands went to his strong, sculpted shoulders and were lost, unable to keep from testing the stark physical power he held leashed there—the fine, chiseled lines of his lean and muscular form. Once again, her hand crept to his cheek as if she could hold him, understand him, make sense of him that way. As if she could keep him there, kissing her as if he was starved for her, kissing him back as if she had never been kissed before, as if he had switched a light on inside of her and she could only glow. And glow.

She had never felt this fine desperation, this coiling, insistent need. This fire. She was lost in him. Undone by him.

And still he made love to her mouth as if he could do so forever, as if he had all the time in the world, as if nothing existed but the two of them.

At first, the flash of light made no sense to her, though she pulled back and blinked, dazed, her breath coming in pants and her eyes too glazed to see. But then it came again, and again, and she realized with dawning alarm that it was not lightning. It was no storm. It was a camera. A flashbulb.

“Ignore them,” Lucas muttered, his hands still urgent on her.

Reality came crashing back, slamming into Grace with the force of a punch to her gut. Ice and horror washed through her, and for a long moment she was frozen, incapable of movement, like a stone as she stared down at Lucas.

At that wicked mouth of his, that some treacherous part of her still longed for. At his beautiful, fallen-angel face, that she now knew the feel of beneath her hands. At his bold, unapologetic green gaze, that tore into her like knives, leaving her jagged and despairing.

She could not speak. Words flashed across her mind, harsh and accusing, desperate and pleading, and none of them came close to addressing how she felt. What it meant to be the latest in his endless parade of interchangeable females. Who she had just discovered she was, despite everything, despite all her years of sacrifice and hard work, ambition and denial.

All it took, apparently, was a red dress and the world's most shameless playboy, and she transformed into her own worst nightmare.

She lurched to her feet, putting air and space between their too-heated bodies, letting her hair swirl around her—hoping it covered her face and concealed her identity from the cameras. She wished desperately she did not have to live through the next awkward, terrible moments, that instead she could simply disappear in a puff of smoke and avoid the consequences of her thoughtless actions altogether. But when had she ever gotten what she'd wished for?

Lucas reached out and snagged her small wrist in his big, elegant hand before she could turn away, forcing her to look down at him, sprawled there on the brushed suede settee like some kind of dissolute god. She wanted to scream, to curse. To throw things at him. To ruin that handsome face, as if that could change how easily she'd fallen for him, how quickly she'd melted all over him.

She bit back what felt like a sob—but could not be. She would not allow it. Not here. Not now. Not where too many people, too many cameras—and Lucas—could see.

“Don’t touch me,” she managed to grit out, past the lump in her throat and the tears that threatened to further disarm and expose her. “Haven’t you done enough for one night?”

"Grace," he began, his voice low, but she could not listen to him. He was all lies and seduction, and she had to go before she lost herself completely. She had to think. How could she repair the damage? It was as if a bomb really had gone off, and she was the wreckage, all splintered and shredded and strewn haphazardly about. There was nothing left of the Grace she had been before he'd kissed her like that.

And she would die before she let him see it.

She jerked her wrist from his grasp, all too aware, from the measuring gleam in his green eyes, that he allowed it. And then she spun around on her heel, ignoring his muttered curse, and threw herself into the crowd. She shoved her way past the avid gazes of the looming cameramen and bolted for the elevator that would whisk her away from this mess.

If only she could run from herself as easily.

She heard her mother's voice echo in her head, weathered from too many cigarettes and too many bad choices. "Someday you'll ruin yourself on some no-account man just like the rest of us. You'll see. Then maybe you won't be so high and mighty."

Grace felt a rolling swell of a multitude of things—none of them *high and mighty*. Maybe no one could escape her destiny. Maybe she'd been a fool to try so hard, for so long.

It was not until she'd made it down into the lobby of the exclusive luxury hotel that she realized she'd left her bag behind on the top level—behind the tight wall of high-level security that only Lucas's famous face had managed to breach. She sighed, a noise that was dangerously close to a sob.

Her keys. Her wallet. Her PDA. How could she leave without them? Where could she go?

She came to a stop in the middle of the marble floor, her legs feeling unsteady beneath her, her breath still too quick and her heart still so loud she was afraid it echoed in the hushed space.

"Grace."

Of course he had followed her. He was the reigning champion of this particular game, and she had just forfeited. All over him and on film.

It was not possible to hate herself more than she did at that moment,

but Grace tried. Oh, how she tried.

She did not turn around, but still, she knew when he drew close. Her body reacted as if his proximity was a caress. She felt an inevitable, breathless kind of heat slide from the nape of her neck to her breasts, then down between her legs where it coiled tight and bloomed into a fire. She found she was biting her lower lip and forced herself to stop. Just as she forced herself to raise her head and meet his penetrating yet oddly shuttered gaze when he stepped around to her front to face her.

For a moment, the world fell away. The glittering, ornate lobby, with its hint of tasteful music from above and the acrobatic flower displays in large ceramic vases, faded into a gray nothingness, and there was only Lucas. Only the things she told herself she did not, could not, see in him, because he was only surface no matter how he made her ache. Only the deep, abiding desire for him that rolled inside of her, the fire banked and smoldering, but too-easily kindled by the way he tilted his head to one side as he considered her, his mouth crooking slightly in one corner.

“I would almost say that you were running away from me,” he said quietly, his gaze too perceptive for such a supposedly shallow man, “if I did not know that such a thing were impossible. Women run *to* me, not *away* from me.”

“I must not have received that memo,” she said, attempting to match the lightness in his tone, if not his eyes—but her voice betrayed her. It was too rough, too emotional. Too fragile.

Wordlessly, he held out his hand, and that was when she noticed that he held her small, glittering clutch. She swallowed and reached for it, taking care not to touch him in any way. She knew, somehow, that it would ignite that fire all over again, and she was not so foolish as to think she could walk away from this man twice. She was not even sure she could do it now.

“I never took you for the Cinderella type,” Lucas said. Still that light, easy tone, but she could see something much darker, much more intense in his face, his gaze. As if he knew, too, that they danced around the same land mines, the same quicksand. That one false step would incinerate them both.

“I loathe Cinderella,” Grace said, trying to firm her spine, to breathe.

To retain control. “There is never any need to wear shoes so precarious that you might lose one should you need to run. And why was a ball so important to her, of all things? She’d have been much better off looking for a job instead of a prince.”

“I suspect you are missing the point of the fairy tale,” Lucas said in that same quiet voice. His dark brows rose. “Deliberately.”

She did not know why she stood there, simply looking at him. She did not know why the moment felt so heavy, yet so breakable, and why she could not seem to make her escape as she knew she should. As she knew she must.

“Come home with me,” he said, and it was a command, not a request. It licked through her, into her. She could not seem to breathe through the heat suffusing her, the tight, hot desire that coiled in her and pulled taut.

What terrified her was how tempted she was to simply do it. To give in to the demands of her body. To surrender to him and the pleasure she knew he could deliver. Had already delivered, little as she wanted to admit it.

But it was that terror that spurred her into action. She heard herself sigh, or perhaps she’d tried to speak, but then she stepped around him and headed for the grand entrance across the lobby. There was nothing to be gained by a discussion, because she could not be trusted around him. It was as simple as that. She had to get away from him—from this *spell* he’d cast that seemed to compel her to do the very thing she’d vowed she would never do.

The night outside was frigid and wet, but Grace welcomed both, gasping slightly as the cold slapped into her.

“This is absurd,” Lucas said from behind her, his voice clipped with impatience. “The weather is vile. You’ll contract pneumonia.”

“That would be preferable, at this point,” she said without thinking and heard his short laugh.

And then she was spinning around, because his hands were hot and firm on her bare shoulders, and then the world tilted again and there was nothing but the smoky green of his impossibly beautiful eyes. The

ones that saw too much, however unlikely that should have been.

"You would prefer the fate of an opera heroine to one moment more in my company, is that it?" he asked with a certain grim amusement, and were he any other man, Grace might have thought she'd hurt his feelings.

But this was Lucas Wolfe. He had none, as he would be the first to announce.

"Yes," she said, lifting her chin and wishing that alone could clear her head. "Consumption. Tuberculosis. Either is far better than being photographed as yet one more hapless female connected at the mouth to the infamous Lucas Wolfe."

The night was dark and the rain seemed to blur the edges of things, but, even so, Grace could have sworn that she'd wounded him somehow. Far more confusing than that possibility was her reaction. She wanted to apologize, to comfort him. To make that hint of vulnerability disappear.

She had no idea what was happening to her.

"Don't worry," he drawled, his eyes flashing as his fingers flexed slightly against the flesh of her shoulders before letting go. "I cannot imagine anyone will recognize you as my 'unnamed companion du jour,' or care. I doubt that it will even make the papers."

"I'm so glad," she bit out, unable to process why she was suddenly so angry with him—and not wanting to examine it, just as she did not want to examine why she felt so jagged, so messy, so ruined—as her mother had spitefully predicted all those years ago. She wrapped her arms around herself, her hands moving to absently cup the places he'd just vacated.

"Grace," he said, and her name was something between a sigh and a curse. "Come home with me," he said again. He shook his head slightly, as if he was as unnerved by his own tone of voice as she was. "Please."

"I ..." But she could not seem to finish the sentence. She could not bring herself to break the odd spell between them, the enchantment—as if doing so would cause him pain. And, she acknowledged with great reluctance, her, too.

He looked at her for an age, a moment, a heartbeat. Cars skidded past

them on the late-night street, the traditionally uniformed doorman hailed a cab with a shrill whistle and London carried on all around them, the city bright and noisy and shimmering in the winter rain.

And there was Lucas, brilliant against the night, as if nothing else had ever mattered, or could.

“Come with me,” he whispered, and held out his hand.

She could not speak, or move. She felt herself sway slightly, as if pulled to him by some invisible chain. She knew too much now—that his body was so strong, so warm, so incredibly *male*. That he could set her on fire with only that dark, stirring gaze even as the cold rain fell down on them both.

She felt the great gulf of the loneliness she spent her waking hours denying yawn open inside of her, reminding her of all the nights she’d spent alone, all the years she’d denied she was a woman, all the vows and promises she’d made to herself about how different she would be than her mother, than her own past. Than what had happened to her. But then Lucas had touched her, and she was nothing *but* a woman.

*Finally*, something inside of her whispered, and that word seemed to ricochet inside of her, leaving marks. Scars.

She wanted to reach over and slip her hand into his more than she could remember ever wanting anything else.

He was far too good at this, she thought in a kind of daze—and it was that sudden spark of reality that gave her the courage, the strength, to step back from him. To really *see* him again, instead of what she felt.

To remember exactly who he was, and what he did, and *why* he knew all the right buttons to push, and how best to tempt her. He could seduce a stone gargoyle. He probably had.

And if her heart hurt inside her chest, well, that was just another secret she would learn how to keep. And hide away, where he could never find it again to use against her.

“I can’t,” she whispered. “I won’t.” And then she turned away from him, blind but determined, and did not breathe again until she’d hurled herself into the nearest black cab and slammed the door between them.

Walking into the morning meeting the following day, with a smile on her face and exuding all the professionalism she possessed, was one of the most difficult things Grace had ever had to do.

If she could have, she would have called in sick. But she'd suspected that doing so would be far too telling—it would give Lucas far more of an advantage than he already had, and she could not live with that possibility.

*I am my own heroin*, he had said, and now she was terribly afraid he was hers, too. She felt very nearly strung out, and he had done nothing but kiss her. Just imagine ...

But she refused to go down that road.

“Good morning,” he said, along with the rest of the team as she entered the conference room—his voice seeming to arrow straight into the center of her, kicking up echoes and vibrations.

There was no need to look at him directly, she told herself as she took her place at the head of the table and confidently addressed those gathered. There was no need for anything so foolish, and anyway, she had already blinded herself staring into that particular sun. She had already flirted with her worst fears. No need to compound her sins.

But, unfortunately, she did have to look at him when the topic of the gala’s entertainment was raised. She glanced over, surprised to see that while he lounged carelessly in his seat like a pasha, his eyes were on the tablet in front of him. It should have felt like a reprieve. Instead, she felt a hollowness behind her breastbone.

“We have some exciting news,” she said crisply, infuriated with her own weakness. Again. “Once again, our newest addition has proven himself to be an invaluable asset to the Hartington’s team. If you’ll explain your latest coup, M—”

She never finished saying *Mr. Wolfe*. She didn’t even fully say the word *mister*, because his head snapped up, his green eyes fierce. Searing. Furious. Daring her to call him a name designed to distance him, after all that had happened. After they had tasted each other and burned in the same fire. *Daring her*.

There was a tense, tight silence. Grace felt herself flush. His eyes

slammed into her, and she was terrified that everyone could see—that everyone knew—that she might as well have been writhing in his lap there and then, making a fool of herself, a spectacle of herself just like before, every inch the names her mother had thrown at her....

She was losing it.

“Lucas,” she said, knowing as she did so that she should not have capitulated, that she should have prevented that gleam of deep male satisfaction from warming his gaze by any means necessary. That he had won something she could not afford to lose. “If you could share ...?”

She could not let this happen, she told herself as Lucas began to talk. She watched him play to the crowd, with a self-deprecating smile and that wickedly funny turn of phrase that had everyone on the edges of their seats, hanging on his every word.

And she was no better.

She was, in fact, everything her mother had predicted she would become.

Grace let that sit there for a moment, a shocking and breathtaking realization, cruel and all-encompassing—but it was true. How could she deny it? Lucas Wolfe possessed not one single redeeming characteristic, and still, she had melted, become a stranger to herself, at his slightest touch. How could that make her anything but ... loose? Easy? Ruined already, from within?

She thought of those strange, loaded moments in the rain outside the hotel last night. She thought of the arrested look in his eyes, as if he'd felt the same complicated rush of emotion and confusion that she had—

But she shoved that all aside, ruthlessly.

She would do whatever she had to do, but she would not let him destroy her. She would not let everything she'd worked for disappear so easily. She would not, could not, let herself be everything her mother had told her she'd be, sooner or later. Not now. Not ever.

He had expected a cold reception. He had even expected that she might pretend nothing had happened and carry on as if that was the case.

But Lucas had not been at all prepared for Grace Carter, the most

determined and prickly woman he could remember tangling with, to completely avoid his gaze. To blush in public. And then to bolt toward the door when the meeting had ended, quite as if she planned to run away from him altogether.

He wanted to feel something like triumph, but did not. It was something else, something closer to temper, that surged through him.

“Grace?” he called after her, not bothering to rise from his seat, but loud enough to carry to the rest of the team as they filed for the door. To force her hand. “If I could have a word?”

He saw her back stiffen, but when she turned, that smile of hers was firmly stamped across her mouth. Perhaps only he could see the color high on her elegant cheekbones. Perhaps only he noticed the storm in her dark brown eyes.

She waited by the door, smiling and exchanging a few words with her staff as they left, and then closed it behind the last of them, trapping them together in the great fishbowl of a conference room. It was glass on three sides, and sat in the center of the offices and cubicles all around them, so that anyone happening by in the halls could glance in and see what was going on.

He wondered if that made her feel safe. It made him ... twitchy. He remained in his seat, with the whole glossy width of the big table between them, because he knew that if he stood he would put his hands on her, and if he touched her again, he did not think he would stop.

“That is the ugliest suit I have ever seen,” he told her, his voice low, his careless posture at complete odds with the strange tightness that held him in a secure grip. “I cannot imagine where you find these things. It is as if you pay to deliberately obscure your figure and your natural beauty.”

“Is this what you wished to discuss in private?” she asked, her voice frigid even as her brown eyes shot flames at him. Even as she retained the razor’s edge version of that smile. “My fashion sense?”

“I think you mean your lack thereof,” he replied lazily.

“Your concerns are duly noted,” she said tightly. “And this is a world-renowned designer suit, for your information. But if that is all, I really

must—”

“Grace.” He liked the way her name felt on his tongue. He liked the sound of it in the air between them, the command in it. He liked how her eyes darkened in reaction. He wondered where else she reacted, and how it would taste.

“We are not going to discuss it,” she told him, her full lips thinning in distress. “Not any of it. We will never mention it again. I am deeply appalled at my own behavior and can only assume you feel the same—”

“I do not.” He arched his brow. She let out an impatient, aggrieved sort of breath.

“You should!” Her voice was harsh. Raw.

She cleared her throat, and smoothed back her hair with one palm. It did not require any attention—it was already ruthlessly yanked back into her typical slick twist, and all he could think of was the glorious fullness of it when it had fallen around them. The weight of it, the scent of it. Her delicate, intoxicating little moans against his mouth.

“I will thank you not to tell me how to feel,” he said mildly. It was only a figure of speech, he told himself. It was only to score a point. It did not mean he *felt*.

She looked away, and he could see that she fought with herself—for control, perhaps. He wanted her to lose that control, once and for all. He had already tasted it, and he wanted more. He wanted her wild and wanton and free.

He simply wanted her. It was no more complicated than that.

“I do not have time for this,” she said at last. “For you. For ... what happened. I can think only of the gala.”

He thought she sounded desperate. He told himself he wanted her that way. That had always worked well for him in the past. He ignored the small voice that insisted that this woman was not like other women. That she could see him. That she could know him. That she was Grace, and different.

“All work and no play ...” he began, teasing her, alarmed at the direction of his own thoughts.

Her eyes shot to his. “That is not a topic I suspect you have any

familiarity with at all,” she snapped out. She let out a breath, and when she spoke again, her voice was smoother. “It’s wonderful that you are able to help so much, that your connections are so useful. It really is. But that doesn’t change the fact that my florist is a prima donna or that the security firm keeps changing its estimate, does it? And those are the things that require my attention. Not you.”

“What are you afraid of?” he asked, almost conversationally.

But it was not a light question at all, and he knew it.

She stared at him for a long moment, until he felt something not unlike shame twist through his gut—though he knew it could not be that. He was immune, surely.

“Do not bring this up again,” she said, her voice soft yet firm, her gaze direct. Grace, in control. Grace, in charge. Grace, locked up and put on ice. Hidden. He hated it. “It is not something I am ever going to wish to discuss.”

She was lying. He knew it as well as he knew his own lies. It was as obvious to him.

But the walls all around them were made of glass, with too many eyes watching them from all sides, and so he had no choice but to watch her turn and walk away from him as if it were easy to do.

Again.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

THERE were any number of flashy, spectacular parties that Lucas could have attended, from club openings to birthdays to opening-night film screenings. All of them would, inevitably, be packed with scantily clad women who would smile invitingly at him and offer him anything he might possibly want. Their attention. Their interest. Their bodies. Themselves, on any available silver platter. And yet, for some reason he could not quite fathom, he'd chosen to spend his Thursday night sitting alone in his office instead, staring out over the cold March streets rather than enjoying himself down on the pavement.

He pushed back from his desk and raked his hands through his hair, irritated with himself. That might not have been a particularly new feeling for someone as committed to his own self-destruction as Lucas had always been, but he rather thought the cause of it was.

He had done most of the work that had been allocated to him, most of it relating to the public relations aspect of Hartington's relaunch, and the marketing and sales plans that went along with it. Lucas was as surprised as anyone else to discover that he had quite a knack for marketing, in addition to PR. It made a certain kind of sense, he supposed. After all, he had been involved in the guerrilla marketing of his own identity since his earliest days.

First, when he'd decided as a child that if he was going to be punished harshly no matter if he was good or bad he'd just as well make sure to be *really* bad. And then, of course, when he had spent his time at home diverting his father's violent attentions away from his younger siblings by any means necessary. Better he should take the hit than the younger ones, he'd thought—and anyway, he'd taken a certain, possibly sick pleasure in behaving as if he was, in fact, his father's worst nightmare.

*Is that the worst you can do?* he had taunted the usually drunken William, no matter how hard the blow or evil the insult. And no matter what his father came back with, Lucas had always laughed. And laughed. Even if it hurt. He'd always managed to enrage his father even

more—and refocus the old bastard's attention on a target who could take the abuse.

To his siblings he had been and apparently still was the smart-mouthed and charming ne'er-do-well: impossible to take seriously, perhaps, but quick to make them laugh and think of things other than the cruel master of Wolfe Manor. To his father, meanwhile, he had been the devil, taunting and disrespectful, and never, ever as afraid as he should have been.

Perhaps because of the roles he'd assumed so early on, Lucas had discovered quite young that one needed only to suggest a few key points, lay the right groundwork and the world jumped to the specific conclusions he'd intended as if of their own volition. It was all in the marketing, really, with a little PR polish to make it all sparkle.

He had only attempted sincerity once in his life, and that had not ended well. He felt his lips thin as he thought of the two-faced Amanda and how thoroughly she'd broken his young heart. He'd never made that mistake again. When she'd left him, he'd decided it was far easier to be what people expected him to be. Far safer, and far more comfortable in the long run.

Which meant, oddly enough, that he was well suited to the position he'd been given at Hartington's. Who would have thought it? He could not help a wry smile then. Lucas Wolfe had become what had long been his own worst nightmare: an office drone. By choice. It was the most extraordinary thing.

The iconic old building was dark and quiet all around him. What few noises there were echoed slightly down the abandoned halls. Very few employees were still around this close to midnight on a Thursday, but there was something about the emptiness of the usually busy place that appealed to him. Lucas sat behind his vast, powerful desk and stared out the window, wondering if he looked as much a fraud to the casual observer as he felt. The sudden and inexplicable businessman. The nouveau tycoon. He was certain that if he sat still long enough, he'd be able to hear the howls of derision rise from the wintry London streets far below.

And yet he could not seem to summon the necessary energy that

would be required to go out on the town as he normally would, wearing his overused public face and prepared to cavort in front of the cameras as expected. It was as if the Lucas Wolfe he had worked so hard to present to the world for so long no longer fit him as it should, and he did not know what to do about it. There had always been such a fine line between the way he behaved according to the low expectations of whomever he came into contact with and what he did in private, and that line had never, ever been crossed.

No one knew the truth about Lucas, and he liked it that way. Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to argue the point and find that one was suddenly expected to live up to a host of responsibilities that were completely beyond one's capabilities. Lucas was all too familiar with that brand of failure. That was why, among other things, he kept his particular flair for money management secret and allowed the world to speculate that he lived off the kindness of certain desperate patronesses like a bloodsucking leech.

He did not want to think about why those long-defended and maintained lines seemed to be blurring these days. He had not wanted to impress someone else in so long now that it seemed almost like an elaborate practical joke he was perpetrating against himself, this brand-new compulsion to do so. But he knew it was true. He wanted Grace Carter to think well of him. He could not think of a single reason why he should, and yet there it was, stark and impossible to deny, sitting in front of him like a wall he kept butting his head against.

It was absurd. Suicidal. And yet he still could not manage to get that woman out of his head. The cutting way she spoke to him, as if she expected better from him when she should know that he quite famously had nothing to offer. The grudging respect in her chocolate eyes when it turned out he was good at this PR game or that he knew his way around a marketing plan. The way she'd looked at him that night in the hotel lobby, as if she could see into him, into the places he'd denied existed for so long that he'd almost forgotten about them himself.

He was becoming maudlin, he thought derisively, annoyed at himself. What was next? Perhaps he could rend his garments and start talking about his terrible childhood in the streets, like all the other madmen. Perhaps he could write a self-pitying memoir and hit the talk show

circuit to weep crocodile tears and garner sympathy for his poor-little-rich-boy plight. He could not think of anything more pathetic.

So instead, he thought about Grace. She remained a mystery to him, and that had not happened in a very long time. A woman was not usually much more to Lucas than a pleasant diversion, especially not after he'd tasted her. He could not understand why Grace was so different. Why she resisted him, or why she should want to continue to do so. Twice now she had walked away from him. *Twice*. He could not imagine why anyone would deny the kind of chemistry that raged between them, so explosive he had forgotten himself completely in that party—had actually forgotten where they were. What was the point of denying something so elemental? Chemistry like theirs was hardly commonplace. Surely she knew that.

Or, he considered, rubbing a hand over his jaw, perhaps she did not. Perhaps she was as shocked by it as he had been. She did not strike him as the kind of woman who had had a battalion of lovers. Perhaps she was unaware that she should be chasing this kind of connection like the Holy Grail it was. That seemed so unlikely—she was so strong, so intriguingly self-possessed—yet what did he really know about her?

He leaned back in his decadently plush office chair and considered. He was all too aware that she took her job quite seriously—so seriously, in fact, that it had begun to rub off on him in ways he was not entirely comfortable with. The fact that he was musing over Grace while seated in his office instead of in a hot tub filled to the brim with nubile women whose names he would never learn did rather tell its own story, he reflected, wincing slightly.

He knew that she was quick, and smart, and not in the least bit intimidated by either his famous name or his admittedly formidable good looks, both of which had been known to overawe those who encountered him in the past. He knew she gave as good as she got, and could throw his own words back at him as if she was trying to best him at a game of tennis. He even knew that, on some level, she enjoyed the deliciously combative relationship they'd developed, because he found it surprisingly addictive—and he'd seen the look in her eyes that indicated she did, too.

He knew that she buttoned herself up like a latter-day Victorian maiden and reacted with the same level of overblown outrage when called on it. He suspected she did it deliberately, to hide the mouthwateringly perfect body he had now seen in clinging silk and felt with his own hands. He knew that she unfairly concealed her glorious mess of hair from view, which he felt was an offense against every aesthetic he possessed. Why would a woman allow her hair to grow like that, so wild and free and sexy, and then spend most of her life scraping it back and wrestling it into submission?

Grace was a mystery, and Lucas discovered that he did not much care for mysteries. *Not knowing* left too much to chance, and left him far too unsettled.

Before he knew it, Lucas found himself typing her name into the search engine on his computer, just to see what other tidbits he could come up with. There were pages upon pages of links to her name, most having nothing at all to do with the Grace Carter, events manager for Hartington's, that he knew. There were images of all kinds of Grace Carters, none of whom were *his* Grace.

He scrolled idly through the list, trying to imagine the Grace he knew as a production assistant in Los Angeles, a concert pianist from Saskatchewan, a book-writing missionary in the Côte d'Ivoire. And then his eyes fell on one link that did not seem to go along with the others. *Gracie-Belle Carter*, it read. It made Lucas laugh, even as he clicked through. *Gracie-Belle* sounded absolutely nothing like the Grace he knew —in fact, it sounded a lot more like the kinds of women, soft and smiling and always submissive, who had helped him solidify his reputation over the years.

But then the picture loaded on the screen in front of him, and Lucas froze in his chair. Desire and curiosity combined, rushing through him like something heady and illicit.

Because it was—yet also wasn't—the Grace he knew.

The woman before him in full-color photography was more properly a girl, all coltish limbs and ripe curves, hair flowing all around her, sexy and rumpled, wet and lush. One picture showed her in nothing but a pair of bikini bottoms, looking coquettishly over her shoulder at the

camera with big eyes and sultry lips, the line of her bare back an enticing, mesmerizing curve. Another featured an even smaller bikini, and a whole lot of sand plastered in interesting places, as she knelt on a dark rock and stared moodily at the camera, holding back her wild, wet hair with both hands. A third showed her lying on her back in some kind of hammock, eyes closed, a wet T-shirt showing the full swells of her breasts while her thumbs were hooked in her bikini bottoms as if she were about to tear them from her body and bare all.

She was delectable. Shockingly sensual in ways he had not imagined she could be, and he knew how she tasted.

It took Lucas longer than it should have to realize that he was looking at an old American sports magazine with a swimsuit photo shoot. It took even longer than that for him to accept that he was, without a doubt, looking at Grace. *His Grace*, listed as Gracie-Belle Carter from Racine, Texas. She could not have been eighteen when these pictures were taken. She was flushed with youth, yet still somewhat unformed—beautiful in the way young girls could be, but not yet as mesmerizing as she would become with the passing of the years.

His Grace, the born-again Victorian, a swimsuit model? That went against everything he thought he knew about her—and some deep, male part of himself loved it.

Alone in his office, Lucas smiled. He'd known it, hadn't he? He'd known that she was wild beneath that prim, severe exterior. He'd sensed it, and he'd tasted it. And now he knew for certain.

What would it take to bring the real Grace out of hiding? What would she be like if she let this part of herself free? He felt himself harden just imagining her fierce and unfettered, bold and sexy, hiding nothing.

He sent all the images he could find to the printer. *His Grace*, a wanton. *His Grace*, unrestrained and unbound by propriety. He was deeply, darkly thrilled. He couldn't wait to get under her skin and taste the truth of her, at last.

Grace slammed open his office door without knocking, which was his first clue that he'd riled her considerably. She was halfway across the room before he had time to react at all. When he did, he found he could

only watch her as she stormed toward him, the file folder he'd left on her desk gripped tight in one hand.

She was furious.

And glorious, he could not help but notice, with the flush of temper high on her cheeks and the light of battle in her eyes. She had hidden herself away in one more dreary corporate suit, a depressing gray with a long hem and a high collar, and he could not help but imagine her in nothing but her bikini instead. She stopped in front of his desk and slapped the folder of photographs down in front of him.

"I expected you to be contemptible," she told him in a low, angry voice. "After all, you quite famously have the moral standards of an alley cat in heat, but this is over the top, even for you."

"I don't know what you mean," Lucas said easily, leaning back in his chair and eyeing her. She was like a high-octane narcotic, a rush and a thrill, and he could not help the fact that he enjoyed it when she fought with him. "I am excoriated daily for photographs of me, many of which are taken without my consent. You, on the other hand, posed for these, did you not?"

"*I was seventeen!*" she gritted out from between her teeth, her hands in fists at her sides. "And *I* have not courted public opinion and infamy every day since!"

"I do not have to court attention, Grace," he replied, smiling slightly. "It finds me whether I want it or not." He indicated her presence before him with a languid wave of his hand, and was rewarded by the sparks that flashed like lightning in her eyes.

"That might have been more believable before you proved yourself to be a master manipulator of the press, the marketing department and anyone else you come into contact with," Grace seethed at him. She shook her head fiercely. "I don't believe your lazy playboy act any longer."

Lucas did not speak for a moment, watching the play of emotion across her face instead. There was fear behind her anger, fueling it. He found it fascinating—and disconcerting. Something turned over in his gut.

"What happened to you?" he asked her quietly, his eyes searching her flushed face.

He took in the inevitably sleek and perfect bun she'd wrapped her hair into, the severe and overly conservative cut of her suit. All she was missing was a pair of clunky black eyeglasses, and she could have completely embodied the stereotype. Why was she hiding? What was she hiding from?

And why was he so compelled to find out the truth about her?

"If you mean what happened to me *this morning*," she snapped at him, vibrating slightly with tension and fury and that incomprehensible fear, "I came into the office to discover that the resident Don Juan spent his free time digging around in a past I leave buried for a reason!"

"I mean, in your life," he said, shaking his head slightly. The look in her dark eyes made him feel restless, made him want to do things that were anathema to him—like try to save her, galloping in on a gleaming white horse and pretending to be someone who could. But he had stopped rescuing people a long, long time ago. "I could hardly believe these were pictures of you. Why do you hide all your joy, power, beauty? Why do you pretend that part of you never existed?"

"Because she never did!" Grace threw at him, her hands rising and then dropping against her thighs, her voice much too rough, too raw.

And then, to his horror, her dark brown eyes filled with tears.

\*

She could not cry. She would not cry—not in front of this man, who had managed to expose her darkest secret with the same lackadaisical smirk and easy carelessness as he did everything. Not here, not now, where she was already far too vulnerable.

She had almost passed out when she'd opened that folder after the morning meeting. Shame and horror had slammed into her with too much force, too much pain, and the fact that it had been Lucas who had found the pictures, Lucas who had seen her like that ... It made her want to sob. Or scream. Perhaps both.

Thank God she'd been alone in her office! Of all the things she'd

expected to see in a folder from Lucas, the very worst mistake she'd ever made had not been on the list. Sometimes, eleven long years later and a world away, she even let herself forget about it for long stretches at a time. She would tell herself that everyone had things they would prefer to forget tucked away in their history, that it hardly bore thinking about any longer.

That her mother had not been right. That she had not been ruined so long ago, when she had let it all happen. That she was not beyond the pale, as she'd been treated. That her mother should have believed her—and should not have disowned her.

But she had been kidding herself, apparently.

He had presented the glossy reminder of the worst year of her life to her in bright color photographs, in her office, the one place where *Gracie-Belle* had never existed. Could never exist. *Gracie-Belle* had died the moment those pictures were published, and she'd been so young and so stupid it had taken her far longer than it should have to recognize that fact. She'd needed money desperately enough to forget everything she'd learned about the way men were, and the way the world worked—and she'd paid for that. She was still paying.

Grace's hands curled into fists at her sides. How dare he throw those pictures in front of her as if he knew something about them—about her?

"I do not expect you to understand," she said coldly, stiffly, desperately fighting to sound calm—no tears, no sobbing, no shouting—and not quite succeeding. "You have never *needed* anything in your privileged, aristocratic, yacht-hopping life, have you?"

"Grace," he said, his green eyes growing dark as he stared at her, that confidence he wore like a second skin seeming to slip before her eyes, "you are taking this the wrong way. I only meant—"

"To humiliate me?" she interrupted him wildly. "To punish me because I refused to sleep with you?"

He looked appalled. Shocked. "What? Of course not!"

They stared at each other for a searing, tense moment. He swallowed, then shrugged, visibly uncomfortable. "I only wanted to remind you. Of who you are. Who you could be."

"Who I am?" she asked, hearing the bitterness in her own voice. She tried to shake it off, turning away from him toward the wall of windows and the lush little seating area grouped before them. "How could you possibly know who I am?"

"It's funny, isn't it?" His voice was deceptively mild in the quiet office. "We all think we know someone because we've seen them in pictures. Isn't that how you knew I was so contemptible?"

She did not want to admit that he had a point, throwing that word back at her, and she told herself it didn't matter, anyway. Rich men acting badly made the world go around. They could, like Lucas himself, wake up one morning wishing for a change, and just like that, executive positions were doled out like candy.

It was different if one happened to be born dirt poor. And a woman.

"Let me tell you a story," she managed to say past the lump in her throat and the tight ball of anxiety in her gut. "You'll have to use your imagination because it takes place far, far away from a sprawling estate in the English countryside or the glamorous Christmas windows of Hartington's."

She shot a look at him over her shoulder, not sure how she felt when she saw how he watched her, as if he really did know her—something almost tender in his expression. But what did that really mean? He thought the pictures he'd unearthed were a good memory, that they were something other than desperate. He did not, could not, know her at all.

"I grew up poor, Lucas," she said as evenly as she could. "Not 'Daddy refuses to pay my bills this month' poor, but real poor. 'Having to choose between rent and food' poor. A trailer park in a dirty little Texas town that nobody's heard of and nobody ever leaves, because there's no money for dreams in Racine."

"Grace ..." he said, but she was too far gone to stop. She could hear the emotion in her voice, could feel it pumping through her. She did not know why she was telling him this, only that she had to.

"Mama didn't understand why I couldn't just settle down with whatever boy would have me and live the same kind of life that everyone we knew lived, that she lived, but I couldn't." She shook her

head, as if that would help ward off the accent that returned when she talked about Texas, her words sprawling, her drawl thickening. “I read too much. I dreamed too hard. And even though there was a part of me that loved Racine more than words, because it was home, I knew I had to leave.”

She swallowed, as if she was still standing in that dusty trailer park, so blisteringly hot in the summer, and the wheezy old air-conditioning forever being turned off to save pennies—even though she could see London in front of her, sparkling and cosmopolitan through the windows.

“So while the other girls my age were making out in backseats and getting ready to marry their high school sweethearts,” she said quietly, as if remembered dust and despair were not choking her even now, “I was banking everything on a college scholarship.”

She could hardly bear look at him then, so beautiful and impossible, high-class and expensive, like a male fantasy made flesh. *Her* fantasy. The only man who had gotten under her skin in eleven long years. She didn’t know why it made her ache to see him as he sat there behind his big desk, as far away from her now as he had ever been. She told herself she wanted it that way. That the kisses they had shared, the odd moments of communion, were no more than an elaborate game to him, and she was not at all the worthy player he seemed to think. That he simply hadn’t known it, but he would now.

She told herself she was glad.

“It was one thing to be bookish,” she said, looking at the folder of the photographs that had damned her. “And something else to be pretty.” Her mouth twisted in remembered shame and trembled slightly. “And I was much too pretty. Mama’s new boyfriends were always quick to comment on it. Some of them tried to get too friendly when they were drunk. I kept my head down, hid in the library and studied. I was the top of my class—the top of the state, even. I knew I’d get some kind of scholarship—but I also knew it very likely wouldn’t be enough to cover my expenses. I’d have to do work/study, at the very least. Maybe more than one job, if I wanted textbooks. Or food. But I was destined for better things. That’s what I thought.”

"You were clearly correct." Lucas's voice was cool, crisp. His aristocratic accent seemed to cut through her memories of those hot Texas days like a knife through butter. But it only served to remind her how vast the gulf between them was, and how little he could ever understand her.

She did not want to think about why she wanted him to understand her in the first place.

"That fall my class took a field trip to San Antonio to see the Alamo," Grace said, forcing herself to continue, however little she wanted to keep talking. "And that was where Roger discovered me."

She didn't want these memories. She wished she could excise them from her head and throw them away as easily as she'd gotten rid of all the other things that had held her back from the future she'd so desired. Like her accent. Her roots. Even her mother, who hadn't wanted her enough, in the end. And it had all started with Roger Dambrot.

"He was a photographer," she said. She could feel Lucas looking at her, and she had no one to blame but herself. She had started this, hadn't she? "Quite a famous one, actually."

She had decided to share this story of her past, but that didn't mean she had to share all of it. Like her doomed, childish love for Roger, who had been as happy to sleep with her as he had been to disappear the moment she veered toward any emotion. She thrust the memory of that first, last heartbreak aside. She had been a colossal idiot, but wasn't every teenage girl? She'd been so pleased with the attention. So delighted that he could make her look like that with his camera. She'd thought she'd found her calling—her ticket out of Racine and into the bright future she'd always believed she'd deserved.

"Thanks to him," she said, fighting to stay calm, "I was offered a lot of money for a modeling contract, and it never even crossed my mind to refuse it." She smiled, unhappily. "I was proud of it! I thought it proved that I was different—that I was special."

"Grace ..." Lucas's voice was a caress. She shook it away.

"What I did not expect," she said tightly, "was that appearing in a bathing suit in a national magazine meant that every one in Racine would consider me a whore. The teachers at school. The other kids. My

mother's boyfriend."

She could remember it all so clearly, no matter how hard she'd tried to forget it over the years. Travis, her mother's latest boyfriend, with his copy of an American sports magazine in his hands and that knowing, lustful look in his mean black eyes. The tiny bedroom in the trailer that Grace had always considered her refuge. Travis's hands, touching her. His big body, reeking of stale beer and old cigarette smoke, pressing her back, pushing her down, making her freeze in panic and confusion.

And then her mother's appearance in the doorway—to save her, Grace had thought. *Thank God*, she'd thought. It had taken so long, too long, for her brain to accept that her mother's rage and fury was directed at *her*, not Travis.

"I should have known you would pull something like this!" Mary-Lynn had screamed at her. "This is how you repay me? After all these years?"

And the names she'd called Grace. Oh, the names. They were still lodged like bullets beneath Grace's heart. She could still feel them when she breathed.

"Once they think you're a whore," she said quietly,  
"that's how they treat you. Even my own mother. And more to the point, her boyfriend."

All the things she did not say hung there between them, and Lucas only looked at her, as if she was not more naked, more vulnerable, than she had ever allowed herself to be before. Grace felt a deep trembling move through her, climbing from her feet to her neck, and fought to breathe.

"I'm sorry," Lucas said, his voice too soft, so soft it made her eyes heat with the tears she refused to shed. "As it happens, I understand completely what it is like to be judged on photographs, and the conclusions about one's character that so many people draw from them."

"So one would imagine," she said. She turned around and met his gaze fully, not sure when he'd climbed to his feet and not certain she liked the reminder of his height, his surprising grace.

"Why do you care so much what so many ignorant people think?" he asked, still in that soft voice.

"Because they were *my* people!" Grace blinked to keep the wet heat from sliding down her cheeks. "Racine was the only thing I ever knew, and I can never go back. Do you understand what that feels like?"

"I cannot understand why you would wish to return to a place that scorned you," Lucas said, his voice low.

"Those pictures are the reason my mother threw me out of the house when I was seventeen," she said, as evenly as she could. "I hate them and every thing they stand for. I wanted to make some money for college, and instead I lost my family, my hometown and, for a long time, my self-respect. That's all you need to understand."

"But that was then," Lucas said, smiling slightly, encouragingly. "Now they are an acknowledgment that you were always, as you are now, a beautiful woman."

"I don't want to be a *beautiful woman*, whatever that is!" Grace cried, old and new emotions boiling too hot, too wild, inside of her. Why couldn't he understand? Her looks had never done anything but cause her trouble. She would have removed them if she could. The life she'd built had nothing to do with her body, her face. It had everything to do with how well she did her job, and she couldn't let go of the panicked notion that if everyone knew what she looked like half-naked that would be *all* they knew about her, ever after. Again. What would she lose this time?

"Why should you hide yourself away?" Lucas asked, in the same light tone, because what wasn't light to this man?

And it was just too much. Over a decade of anguish seemed to well up within her, threatening to spill over and drown her. She had already been down this road—she knew what happened. Let a man see her as a piece of meat and he would treat her that way, too. This was the truth about men. This was what Grace inspired in them. Hadn't she spent all these years completely immersed in her job, her career, to keep from having to face the uncomfortable truth? The loneliness? Why had she wanted so desperately to believe that Lucas was any different?

"Did you really believe I would be delighted to see these pictures?" she countered. Her eyes narrowed. How had she tricked herself into believing there was more to him than this shiny surface? When would

she learn that she knew nothing of men—especially not men like Lucas, who wielded sex as just one more weapon? “Or was this one more of the sick little games you play that mean nothing to you, because you are completely heedless of the damage you cause to the people around you?” She was unable to hide the hurt from her voice. “Because you can be?”

He stood there against his desk, an arrested look on his face, his smoky green eyes changing to something much darker, much grimmer. It was as if she watched him alter before her eyes. Gone was the sly, insinuating good-time guy, made of sin and rumor and utter carelessness. And in his place was this ... man. Different. Darker.

*Tortured*, she thought, her heart pounding like a drum, too fast and too hard. But how could that be? How could he be hurt?

And why should she care?

*He is like all the rest!* that old voice inside of her cried, still nursing the wounds her mother and Travis had inflicted so long ago. *Don’t listen to a word he says—don’t believe the things you think you read on his face!*

But she could not bring herself to move.

“You have no idea of the damage I can do,” he said, his voice thick with what could only be self-loathing, the lash of it making her blink and sway slightly on her feet. “And ferreting out a few perfectly tasteful pictures from a decade ago hardly match up to the destruction I can wreak. You should count yourself lucky, Grace.”

She did not want to care about this man. She did not want to feel that unwelcome tug in the vicinity of her heart, or want to soothe away the darkness that had overtaken him. She wished she did not know that he could feel pain, that he could react at all to the things she’d said. She wished he was no more and no less than the flighty playboy she’d believed him to be.

But if she’d truly believed that, why, the relentlessly logical part of her brain asked, had she told him the story she’d never told another living soul?

“Do not show those pictures to anyone,” she said, her voice shaking slightly, trying hard not to notice the way his mouth twisted, as if she’d

wounded him again.

"They are only pictures," he said softly, with a bitterness she could not understand. He swept the folder into his hand, and then pitched it into the wire trash bin that stood next to his desk. "And now they are gone. No lives ruined. But I am Lucas Wolfe, after all. I'm sure there are six or seven other lives I can destroy before the evening news."

Grace knew she should have walked away then. She should have turned on her heel and left the offensively luxurious top-floor office he'd done nothing to earn. She should have considered the matter finished, and comforted herself with the knowledge that he was the person she'd believed him to be from the start—shallow, conscienceless, empty.

But she did none of those things.

"Why do you want me—the world—to think the worst of you?" she asked before she knew she meant to speak. That odd tension that had gripped her in the lobby of the hotel and out on the street the other night returned, hovering between them, making the air feel heavy with portent and meaning. Regret and fear. Secrets. *Hope*. Or perhaps that was no more than the way he looked at her.

"It saves time," he replied, his voice strained, almost harsh. "There is nothing here, Grace. Nothing beneath the pretty face. Isn't that what you think? What everyone thinks? Congratulations. You are correct."

*His pain has nothing to do with you!* she cried at herself, but it was as if another person inhabited her body. Another person who swayed closer to him, whose hands itched to reach over and touch him—a person who could not let that much raw pain go unacknowledged. Especially when it was his. A person who could not believe he was who he said he was. Who would not believe it.

God help her.

"I think," she said, very quietly, unable to look away from him, unable to hide herself as she should, as she'd meant to do, because something about the way he was talking made her think he was grieving and she could not ignore that, she simply could not, "that your looks are quite probably the least interesting thing about you."

"Grace—"

He bit out her name, but she could not stop. She lifted her chin and did not so much as blink as she gazed at him. As she *saw* him.

"I think that you could teach lessons on how to hide in plain sight," she said. "That you do it all the time. That you are doing it even now."

# CHAPTER EIGHT

THE following afternoon, Grace forced herself to unpack her things from her suitcase and put them away in the wardrobe of her cozy room at the Pig's Head, the only inn and tavern in the quaint little village of Wolfestone—just down the road from Wolfe Manor. The honey-colored beams above her head and the cheerful fireplace in the corner should have made her feel relaxed, as if she was on holiday, but she could not seem to keep the wild tension swirling inside of her at bay.

In fact, she was not sure she'd breathed fully since that stark, upsetting scene in Lucas's office. She did not know what might have happened had they not been interrupted by Charles Winthrop's pursed-mouthed secretary, who had taken no notice at all of the crackling tension in the room and had invited Lucas to visit Mr. Winthrop at once.

It was only after he'd left that she had retrieved the photographs from his waste basket, because she could not leave them lying around, and certainly not in his office. She had shredded them with great relish in her own office, shoved the past back down into the vault where it belonged and told herself she'd had a lucky escape.

But somehow, she did not feel lucky at all.

She should be jubilant, she told herself now and not for the first time, that they had been stopped before they could go any further along that road of personal revelation. She had a feeling that they had hovered perilously close to a great disaster, and disaster was something she could not afford with the gala so close. It had been a relief to depart for Wolfestone this morning, knowing that this last stretch of time before the party was crucial—and that living immersed in the venue and on hand to deal with the inevitable issues that would crop up was necessary.

Necessary and convenient, Grace acknowledged ruefully. There would be little time to deal with the mysteries of Lucas Wolfe. Much less her own confusion regarding her reaction to him. So far she had discovered that she could neither keep her hands off Lucas nor her mouth shut

around him. Even his own behavior failed to give her pause. What was next? She shuddered to think.

There was a sharp knock at her door, and she walked over to wrench it open. A jolt of awareness shot through her when she found Lucas himself standing there, as if she'd summoned him.

Were they both thinking about those photographs? Grace wet, wild, debauched? She swallowed with some difficulty and felt herself flush.

Lucas smiled.

Up close, all hints of the tortured, wrecked man she'd seen the day before were gone. He lounged in the doorway as if he was the local gentry—which, of course, she reminded herself, he was. His wicked mouth crooked invitingly, making his lean and clever face seem positively sinful. One arm was propped up over his head against the doorjamb. His dark hair was artfully tousled, as if he'd just woken from a nap or had raked his fingers through the mess of it. Repeatedly. He was wearing a soft-looking shirt in bright blue that clung like a lover to the planes of his hard chest, thrown carelessly over a pair of denim trousers that fit him like paint, and Grace could not pretend to herself that he was anything but the most gorgeous man she'd ever beheld. He made her mouth run dry.

Or maybe that was her fear about what might happen next.

"Invite me in." The crack of command in his voice dragged her attention to his eyes, which were far darker and ripe with the tension between them than the rest of him let on.

She was doomed.

"Why would I do that?" she managed to ask crisply, as if she was affected neither by his stark male beauty nor the darker truths she could see move through his gaze. "Do you plan to suck my blood?"

"Is that a request?" he replied, but his customary easy charm was gone. She sensed it before she understood it—a whisper of trepidation that danced across her skin, snuck down her spine. *Something is different*, a small voice whispered in alarm. He seemed edgier. More dangerous. Less controlled. She remembered that dark fury she'd sensed in him the first morning he'd walked into her office. *Everything has changed*, she

thought. But she cast it aside.

If she pretended she didn't notice that the balance had shifted between them, that every breath and every moment seemed taut and terrifying and much too unwieldy to be borne, would that make it so?

"I had to see it for myself," he drawled, his eyes like green fire as they traveled over her, making her feel scorched. Making her *want*. Making the air seem to hum with everything that had changed, everything that was new and dangerous. "Up close."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Grace managed to say over the catch in her throat. She left him standing in the doorway, because it was that or risk much more than she dared, and moved back over to the bed as if she meant to finish unpacking. But she was aware only of Lucas.

"You do." He stepped inside the room and let the door swing shut behind him, which was not at all what she had planned. She jumped slightly and then turned to face him, her stomach dropping. The room seemed much smaller, suddenly, constricting around her. Trapping her—and yet she couldn't bring herself to run.

Worse, she did not want to run.

She meant to speak, to deny him again, to keep up the civil, professional pretense—but she couldn't seem to do it. It was the hungry look in his eyes as he moved closer, lean and big and more commanding than he should have been. More intense. More compelling. She could not tear her gaze away from him. It was as if, having seen a glimpse of what was behind the mask he wore, she could not see that mask any longer. She saw the man. Electric and consuming, and so much more real than he had seemed before—more real than was at all healthy for Grace. Her heart began to beat low and deep, the pace quickening—becoming ever wilder, more frenetic—the closer he came.

"I had no idea you even owned a piece of clothing that was not strictly stodgy and office appropriate," Lucas continued, that mocking note in his voice, the one that suggested he was being playful when she could all but *see* the tension shimmer through every tendon, every bone of his lean body. "Other than that one red dress."

"There is nothing in the least bit outrageous, or even interesting, in

anything I'm wearing," she said, trying to sound authoritative. In control. She had chosen the crisp denim jeans and smart black cashmere sweater deliberately, knowing that while her team might choose to dress more casually while away from the conservative head office, she could only allow herself to unwind so far. Her version of *casual* involved dry cleaning and clothes she would be comfortable wearing to business meetings with her superiors.

Was she really thinking about her clothes? With this man so near? So unpredictable? Did she think that would work?

He ignored her, and prowled closer, peering at the clothes stacked in her open suitcase and beside it on the thick white duvet. Grace felt frozen in place. She did not dare to move. He was much too close, so close she could smell him, heat and man and something expensively spicy. So close she could seem to do nothing at all but think of how his mouth had fit against hers—how demanding, how sure. Or recall how warm his skin was to the touch, or think about how she felt so shivery now, so hot and cold.

And he knew everything. There were no secrets.

Why should that make her feel even weaker? Even more aroused?

He leaned back against the bed, far too close to where she stood, crossing his long legs at the ankle and tucking his hands into the pockets of his jeans. His green eyes were hooded as he gazed at her for a long, hot moment while Grace could do nothing but panic. Her heart sped up and her pulse pounded. Her eyes seemed to glaze over with heat, while her mouth stayed far too dry. The very air in the room seemed to crackle.

"Will we talk about it?" he asked, that dark edge to his voice, as if he fought the same demons that Grace did. "Or will we continue this game of cat and mouse until we end up in bed? I love to verbally spar with you, Grace, do not doubt it. And I intend to take you to my bed. But I rather think there is more to this than that."

"More?" She did not *quite* stammer. Not quite, though her voice went up an octave or two, and she flushed.

"I am afraid you've seen behind the curtain," he said in a low voice, with that odd, stirring current beneath. The corner of his mouth flirted

with a smile, though his gaze was far too direct, too disconcerting. Too dark. Was this the real Lucas? The man behind the mask? Because Grace knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he was not joking. Not this time. “There are penalties for that. Taxes that must be levied. Those are the rules.”

She could not breathe. She moistened her lips and then clenched against a shocking flood of heat when his gaze dropped to her mouth and a stark, purely sexual hunger cast his face into wickedness. The kind of wickedness she wanted to taste, despite everything.

“I came to find you yesterday, after meeting with Charlie Winthrop,” he said, coiled there, just out of reach, about to pounce. And still, Grace could not bring herself to move away as she knew she should. His head tilted slightly to the side, his gaze measuring her. “But you’d gone.”

“I had a meeting,” she said faintly. An electric current was buzzing through her, skimming along her skin, burning through her veins. She felt almost light-headed. Almost dizzy.

“I do not understand this,” he said in the same quiet, serious tone he’d used yesterday. The same stark, brutal honesty. The same directness, with the same undercurrent of something like despair. The room seemed to contract, trapping them both in the same tight, bright grip. “I do not understand why I feel compelled to tell you things I normally do not speak of to anyone. I do not understand why I cannot stop thinking about you. I can’t seem to stay away from you.” His smile turned wry. “And the truth is, I do not want to.”

“You must,” she said, but her voice was insubstantial, the barest breath, and he ignored it, anyway.

“I have never been very good at doing what I must,” he said, a hard amusement flashing through those smoky green eyes. “It is among my many and varied character flaws.”

Grace did not want this. She could not want this—it was too much. *He* was too much. She felt as if the world shook, as if she shook with it, though nothing moved.

“I am not interested in your flaws, many though they may be,” she said, fighting desperately to return to familiar ground. *She could not do this.* “We have a job to do. Nothing more.”

"Yes," he said. "Our job. That has brought us here, to this village of the damned I vowed I would burn to the ground before I'd return to it, and all I can seem to do is wonder."

His voice was deceptively light, completely at odds with the intensity and fire in his gaze.

"Wonder?" she echoed, as if she did not take his meaning, but she knew.

She wondered the same things. She wondered so much and so heatedly, so breathlessly, that she had barely slept in days. Even the invocation of her past, of what had happened to her, had not changed the wondering, the imagining. And that was only the physical part of this. The easy part. The only part she planned to acknowledge. The inn seemed to spin and tilt wildly at the corners of her eyes, but at the center of it all stood Lucas.

And an uncomfortably reasonable voice inside of her whispered, *Why not?*

Grace fought to keep her breath even. She had told Lucas the truth and he had not looked at her differently. He had not reacted like a long-ago almost-lover in college had: he had not looked at her in that calculating way and asked if, in fact, she *had* been seducing her mother's boyfriend that day. If she had that scarlet letter blazoned upon her face, the way she'd always believed, Lucas had not seemed to see it. And if he already knew the worst but didn't believe the worst of *her*—what was the point in denying herself the pleasure that might go with that kind of uncomfortable honesty? The spoonful of sugar to sweep away the taste of the bitter pill?

And who was to say that this time she couldn't be the one to take control—to beat the player at his own game? Why not be the seducer instead of the seduced? Why not call the shots? *Why not*, indeed?

She blinked, dazed by her own trail of thought. And all too aware of the heat and sleek beauty of him, standing near enough to touch, watching her so closely.

If she'd learned anything from her mistakes, from her mother, from her own hard-won successes, Grace thought with a dawning sense of certainty, it was this: it was always better to be the one in control.

So if she was already doomed, she might as well dance.

It was as if a great weight fell from her then, and disappeared into the tense air between them.

"If you keep looking at me like that," Lucas warned, his expression hard with hunger, "I will not be held accountable for what happens next."

"I already know what will happen next," she said. She faced him—and herself—head-on, clear-eyed and somehow completely ready for what had been, only moments before he'd walked in this room, unthinkable. He'd had no compunction about throwing those photos in her face, so why should she worry about using his own weakness against him now? She raised her brows at him in deliberate challenge. "I only hope that after all of this talk and all these promises, you can live up to your reputation."

He was not in the least bit fazed. His eyes seemed to see straight through her, to all the places where she ached for him, yearned for him, dreamed of him at night. All the places where she was made of nothing save the want of him. And she would use that against him, she thought. She would get her own back. She would be the one to laugh when it was done, and leave, too.

He did not move from his position at the bedside, lounging there, watching her as if cataloging her every move, her every thought. It was almost too much. It was almost too real. He was quite obviously not a fantasy at all, as someone who looked like him should be—he was a man.

"I have to check in with the team," she said, teasing him, feeling the tension and electricity roll through her. It made her feel powerful. As if it really was hers. To wield. To use. To enjoy.

But he only laughed.

"The team is in the pub, and the last thing they need is the intrusion of their ice queen boss to force them into tediously good behavior and stilted conversation," he said. "The best thing you can do for them is give them tonight to blow off steam. You'll be in one another's pockets for the foreseeable future as it is."

"Well," she said, momentarily discomfited by his unexpected insight—not to mention the fact he knew the whereabouts of her staff when she did not. "That works out, then."

For a moment she did not move. He was the only thing she could see, green eyes and that crooked smile, as if nothing else existed. She let that wash over her, through her. Then she stepped toward him, closing the distance between them with a single step.

Surprise warred with desire in his gaze, on his face, but his hands moved to her hips—anchoring her against him as she moved to stand between his legs. She rested her hands against his sculpted chest, tested the softness of his shirt and the muscles beneath with her palms, eliciting a faint, rough laugh from him.

"Do you know what you're doing?" he asked, threading one hand into her bun and starting to pull the pins out, one by one, with an easy confidence, as if she was already his. His other hand tucked beneath the soft hem of her sweater, then moved hot and hard against the small of her back, urging her even closer.

She could do this. It might even be easy.

"Do you?" she countered. She leaned into him, pressing her heavy breasts against the wall of his chest, letting her body slide against his, bringing their mouths within a scant inch of each other.

She had the impression of scorching green fire and hectic color. Of exhilaration pounding through her like wine. And a sense of absolute rightness that might have scared her, had she not already decided to take him—on her terms.

And then, finally, she leaned up and kissed him, *taking control*, she thought, and everything burst into flame.

\*

Lucas allowed himself to remain surprised for roughly three seconds, and then desire took over. He did not care why she was doing this, only that she was doing it.

Finally.

He slanted his mouth over hers, determined to make her his,

determined to prove that she was no more than any other woman, no different, no matter what yesterday's uncomfortable conversation had indicated.

He had been alone forever, and he liked it that way. It was simple. Easy.

But she tasted like honey, like her Texas drawl, warm and sunny and sweet. She went straight to his head, until he could not seem to care about protecting himself as he knew he should, as had always been second nature to him before.

He did not like the feelings she aroused in him. The need to protect her, even from her own past. Yesterday's searing need to unburden himself. This obsession, this need, to lose himself in her. He hated it, he told himself, and so he kissed her again and again, deeper and harder and longer, surrendering himself to her exquisite taste, her scent, the sweet perfection of her body pressed against his.

This was sex, he told himself. Nothing but sex. And he happened to be particularly talented in that arena.

She pushed him back on the bed, and he let her, bemused by this sudden show of assertiveness. But who was he to argue? He lay back and watched appreciatively as she climbed up on the bed with him, straddling him.

He hissed in a breath as the core of her came up flush with his groin, making him harder than he could ever remember being before. *More*. He wanted more. He wanted to bury himself inside of her and lose himself entirely. He wanted to make her scream his name. He wanted to taste every inch of her body, every freckle, every moan. He wanted her in every possible way, all night long.

Only then, he told himself, could he exorcise her. Make these uncomfortable feelings disappear as if they had never been. Make her no more and no less than another conquest, indistinguishable from the rest. That was what he wanted. He didn't know how to want anything else.

She settled against him, her wild blond hair falling forward, making her look like some kind of goddess. *His goddess*, he thought and stretched out his hands to test her hips, the indentation of her waist. He pulled a long strand of hair to his mouth, rubbing it over his lips. She smelled

like rosemary and wine, and the feel of the long blond waves was like raw silk. But she batted his hands away, and then frowned down at his shirt as her fingers started to work the buttons.

Her fierce concentration, her focus on the task at hand, kept him from flipping her beneath him as every instinct shouted at him to do. That stern frown of hers made him stir against her, made the fire blaze even higher, even hotter, within him. She finally bared a swathe of his chest and bent over to taste it, him. Her tongue was soft, wet, maddening. He tangled his fingers in her hair and urged her up to eye level, taking her mouth with a swift possession that made some kind of bell toll, long and true, deep inside of him.

He ignored it, because he was tasting her—hot and female and deliciously, undoubtedly Grace—until he felt drunk from her. Wildly, fantastically drunk, and more than happy to stay that way.

But she had other ideas. She reared back up, and pulled her lower lip between her teeth as she returned to work on his shirt. When he moved to pull her close again, she shook her head at him. He was mesmerized by the silken fall of her hair across her shoulders, the way it teased her breasts, the way the length and wave of it softened her face, making her seem more flushed, more open, more *his*.

“Just lie back,” she said, bracing one hand on his abdomen, as if she thought she could keep him there against his will.

“And think of England?” he asked dryly. “I’m afraid that’s not my style.”

“It can be a brand-new experience for you,” she said in the prim voice that drove him crazy with need, her attention drifting back toward the bare skin she’d uncovered. “I doubt you have many of those.”

Lucas did not. But he had also never been one to wait.

He sat up, holding her flush against his hips, and only smiled against the delicate skin of her neck when she made a sound of protest. When she had settled against him, her arms loose around his shoulders, he let his hands skim down her back to slip under her sweater. The soft cashmere was almost harsh compared to the warm silkiness of her skin beneath. He tugged the sweater up and over her head, baring her to his view, then threw it aside.

She was perfect. Taut, full breasts encased in decadent black lace that said far more interesting things about the real Grace than the depressingly austere suits she preferred. Lucas cupped her breasts in his hands, dragging his thumbs slowly across the peaks, making her head fall back as she moaned out her pleasure. The sound was like petrol on a bonfire—he ached to be inside of her. He reached behind her, expertly unhooking the bra with a single hand, then caught a hard nipple with his mouth as he pulled the garment free of her flesh.

He heard her breath stutter as her body tensed and then shook beneath him. He tasted one breast, then the other, taking his time, learning her. He traced a path from her breasts to her collarbone, pressing kisses against her as he went, tasting her with his tongue, his lips, his teeth. He reached her mouth and took it in a hard, deep kiss, holding her face between his hands, his fingers deep in her wild mane of hair.

“Wait,” she whispered, pulling away. She shifted against him and then lifted shaky hands to his shoulders to push his shirt off, so that when she pressed back against him they were skin to skin.

Yes. So hot. So soft. So perfect.

He was delirious. He wanted more. And then still more.

Growing impatient, he swung her around and then rolled her under him in a swift, simple move. She blinked up at him, her chocolate-brown eyes molten with passion, her generous mouth faintly damp from his.

“You are not letting me take control of this,” she scolded him through lips swollen from his kisses, her breasts full against his chest, the taut peaks sending pinpricks of desire shooting through him, straight to his hardness.

“No,” he agreed, his voice rough with desire. “I am not.”

He propped himself up on one elbow, then traced a lazy pattern down her torso with his hand, stopping to worship each breast in turn. He continued on to her navel, testing that shallow valley, before he reached the waistband of her jeans. He had them unbuttoned and unzipped in a heartbeat, and she let out a shaky laugh.

He tested the upper edge of her lacy panties, pulling slightly on the

elastic that held them in place. She let out a slight moan, her legs moving restlessly against the coverlet. He looked down at her, smiled—then slid his hand beneath the lace, to hold her wet heat in his hand.

She gasped and shuddered, bucking her hips against his palm, her eyes drifting closed. She was so wet, so soft, deliciously, meltingly hot. She burned into him, making him sweat. *Yearn. Need.*

*Soon, he told himself. So very soon.*

“Are you sure?” he taunted her gently, his fingers learning her most intimate secrets, stroking her silken folds, then pressing inside. “I know you had some doubts, did you not?”

She made an incoherent noise, her head moving against the bed linens, her hips meeting his hand, matching him stroke for delicious stroke.

He wanted more. God help her, he wanted everything. He’d forgotten why. He only wanted.

“I want you to come,” he whispered, his mouth against her ear, delighting in her long, slow shudder, the way her hand speared into his hair, holding him as he held her.

He used one hand deep in her heat, his fingers moving to an age-old rhythm within her, and his mouth bold and demanding against her breast. One breath, another. Her head tossed back and forth against the pillows while her body tightened, her back arching and her hands curling into fists.

“Now, Grace,” he whispered, moving to her other breast and circling the nipple with his tongue. “Now.”

One tug on her nipple with his mouth, one hard rocking motion against her molten femininity with the palm of his hand, and she convulsed around him, shattering into pieces, her face flooding red and her mouth parting on a long, high sob.

She was the prettiest thing he’d ever seen. *His.*

And he was only getting started.

# CHAPTER NINE

GRACE barely had time to breathe, and no time to compose herself, before Lucas sat up and stripped her boots, jeans and panties from her body with more of that consummate skill that should have worried her deeply, but instead made her thighs clench against another thrilling wave of desire.

He removed the rest of his own clothes as quickly and then moved back over her as she lay, shattered, on the bed. Her heart was still pounding too hard, her breath still uneven.

She was supposed to be the one in control! She was supposed to be the one leaving him this undone!

“Lucas,” she began, not knowing what she might say. Not knowing where or how to begin. Not even recognizing the sound of her own voice.

“Shh,” he replied, and then he moved down the length of her body to rest between her legs. He slid his strong arms beneath her hips, and before she had time to react, to take back the lead and use it, he lifted her and settled his mouth against the hot core of her.

Passion exploded inside of her, a white-hot, searing heat that blanked out her plans, her fears. He licked her, teased her, took her—his mouth more wicked, more clever, more confident.

She arched against him, into him, as he kept her anchored beneath him, his mouth glued to her heat. She heard her own voice, moaning wordless sounds of desire, of pleasure, of ecstasy, as if from far away. Her breath came in hard, shallow pants, and she could not quite catch it, she could not calm down. And still he built that fire, stoking the flames with every swirl of his tongue, pushing her higher and higher until she toppled over the edge and dissolved all around him.

When she came back to herself, he was braced above her, surrounding her, his wide shoulders blocking out the world. She felt turned inside out, exposed, made more vulnerable than she had ever been before. She

did not know if she wanted to burst into tears—or kiss him.

“Pay attention, Grace,” he murmured, amusement and passion in his low voice, bringing himself down against her chest, his skin like hot satin over steel, rubbing against her taut breasts, making her sigh as the aftershocks still rolled through her.

And then he thrust inside of her.

Grace felt the leftover pleasure from her last climax coalesce and shiver through her, kicking into her as he began to move, slow and sure, building her up again when she would have thought she was more than sated.

Lucas rolled over, keeping himself deep inside of her, but bringing her on top of him. Dazed, Grace could only stare down at him for a moment.

“I thought you wanted control,” he said, pressing kisses to her jaw, the corner of her mouth, her neck. “By all means, take it.”

“Your concept of control is a bit more elastic than I’d intended,” she said, amazed that she could speak at all—astounded that she could hang words together, no matter how breathless her voice sounded.

He laughed, and she felt it inside of her, as deep as he was. She felt it radiate through her, pleasure coursing outward from where they were joined, lighting her up from within.

“I don’t much care for boundaries,” he said, pushing her hair back from her face, teasing her lower lip with his teeth. “Unless I set them.”

He was so hot and hard within her, so uncompromisingly male, and Grace felt suddenly restless, urgent. Unbelievably, she felt that tightening, that coiling desire, begin to pull taut inside her all over again. All that mattered was that feeling. She sat back, settling herself against him. Then she rolled her hips into a slow, steady pace and watched his eyes go dark with passion, reveling in the power she had over him just as surely as he could wield it over her.

But she didn’t care about the power. Not anymore. Not after what had just happened between them. She knew she should care about that, but she shoved it aside. She cared only about the pleasure, about the slick slide of their bodies, the thrust and the pull that made her feel wild, insatiable. She forgot about the photos, forgot about the past and the

pain, forgot about the lessons she'd decided she'd teach him. The truth was his hard length within her, his wild hands on her flesh. The truth was she wanted him with a desperation that should have terrified her, but instead made her yearning all the more intense. She was more hungry for him than she had ever been for anyone. Than she had ever imagined it was possible to be.

She was too hungry for him to protect herself. Perhaps she had known that from the start.

At a certain point, his hands gripped her hips, and Grace could no longer think, she could only feel. And when she shattered one more time, he spurred her on, his thrusts wild and urgent until he, too, fell over the edge.

She thought he even called her name.

Lucas knew how he was supposed to act. Smoldering, arch, easy. Hadn't he played the role a thousand times? He knew how to perfect the postcoital scene. He knew how to make a woman who had just bedded him feel like a queen, as if she'd never made a better decision in her life. He knew how to leave them wanting more.

But none of them were Grace.

Outside, the night had long since fallen, casting the room in shadows. Only the lamp on the antique desk shed any light, and it was the barest halo, yellow against the gloom.

He was still deep inside of her. She was still sprawled over his chest.

He had no idea why he felt a great sense of melancholy when he considered his next move, almost as disconcerting as the unusual sense of well-being that washed over him when he did no more than hold her and breathe.

So much for the exorcism.

She stirred. He had the strangest urge to pretend he was asleep, to keep her there against him, the perfect, soft weight of her holding him down, as if she anchored him to the world, to herself. But instead, he let her move away from him and disposed of the condom as she pulled herself to her feet on the opposite side of the wide bed.

She looked over her shoulder at him, thoroughly disheveled, and he felt a fierce stab of a kind of pride. Her hair was a wild cloud around her face, her lips still slightly swollen, her eyes not entirely focused.

"I am going to shower," she said, her voice still rough from passion. There was something awkward in the way she held herself, something uneasy. She did not quite meet his gaze, and he knew as she pulled an arm around herself that she felt the heaviness, the weight, that hung there between them.

He was a master at this scene. He should have sorted it out already, made her laugh, flattered her and teased her into pleased satiation. But his happy manners, his notorious charm, seemed to have deserted him completely.

"Grace." He did not know why he said her name like that, why he felt it reverberate through him, why he wanted to reach for her for no reason at all but to hold her close. To stay in this moment, not to let it go. He did not know why every part of him felt that could be disastrous to move forward, to keep going.

To admit that he was back in Wolfstone, with all that entailed.

He was descending into melodrama, and she was not even looking at him.

"Why don't you order room service?" she asked lightly, her tone not fooling him at all. But what could he do when he was not even sure what held him in this odd, tight grip around his chest? "We could use some food, I think."

And then he watched her walk across the room to disappear into the en suite bathroom, naked and more beautiful than any woman ought to be, her head held high and regal, the culmination of fantasies he hadn't even known he'd had.

He was in trouble. More trouble, he understood, than he had ever been near before.

"You accused me of hiding yesterday," he said without turning around, not moving from where he stood in front of the big bay window. "In plain sight."

He had heard the water shut off, had heard the old pipes cease their

chattering and clanking. He'd heard her move around in the bathroom, and then emerge. She brought a cloud of fragrance with her, something floral with a faint kick of spice. Her soap, shampoo, perfume. It teased his nose and made him harden again in the jeans he'd thrown back on to answer the porter's knock when their food had been delivered. Lamb with buttery mashed potatoes and peas. Hearty fare befitting a cold March night—and yet he could not seem to summon up an appetite.

"It was an observation," she replied in an even tone, closer to him than he'd expected, though he still did not turn. "Not an accusation."

"It was astute, either way," he said. "But I cannot seem to do it here."

He turned to find her just beyond his shoulder, her face carefully blank, her brown eyes noticeably wary, her hair piled haphazardly on the top of her head and curling at the ends. She was wrapped in a thin silk wrapper of a deep royal blue, her skin flushed pink and rosy from her ablutions. Or perhaps from what had happened between them.

She looked like candy, sweet and damp and all too edible. And he could not understand why tasting her again, though he yearned to, was not the urge that drove him. Why something else battled to take him over instead.

It was the ghosts again, he thought darkly. There were too many, especially in Wolfestone. Hadn't his run-in with Jacob taught him the folly of revisiting the past? And yet here he was, back in this village, as if he'd learned nothing at all. He'd even been the one to suggest coming here, so full of himself, never considering the consequences. The story of his damned life.

"I don't know what this is," he muttered. "If it is you—or this damned place. It brings back far too many memories. None of them good."

Her wary eyes searched his face, and he saw her swallow, as if fighting for calm. Oddly, that small sign of discomfort eased him. It made him realize that this woman—who knew something about hiding herself in plain sight just as he did—could understand. That he wanted her to understand.

"What happened to you here?" she asked in a soft voice, as if she feared he would not like the question.

He looked at her for a long moment, and then back out the window. The night was dark and blustery, with no hint of moon or stars. He could see only the wind-tossed branches of the trees across the lane, and the impenetrable country blackness beyond. But he still knew precisely where he was. He still knew that the Wolfe estate began just on the other side of the deceptively bucolic river that wound through the town, that the manor house hunkered out there in the dark, empty and brooding and marked, as far as he was concerned—forever marked as soulless and evil as its former owner had been.

What had he been thinking, to return here?

"I had the misfortune to be born William Wolfe's son," he said, a hollow laugh escaping him. "That is what happened to me. Do not let the tales of his fame, his great charisma and cult of personality fool you, Grace." He shook his head. "I've managed to put him from my mind for vast swathes of my life—but that does not work here, apparently. The things he did and the kind of man he was hang in the air in this village like smoke."

She was quiet for a long moment, and Lucas felt that ache inside of him expand. As if he had never known loneliness, not really, until this moment. But then she brushed past him, and sat down on the couch just beside the window and faced him, tucking her long, bare legs beneath her. She tilted her face toward him, and he saw ... nothing. No judgment. No arch, inside knowledge she might use against him. Nothing but her warm, steady gaze.

"He was a monster," Lucas said baldly. He felt his mouth twist and turned away, staring out the window once again, though what he saw was the past. He shrugged, as if he could will it away.

"And ..." Her voice was hesitant. "Your mother?"

"I never knew who she was," Lucas said, on a sigh. Funny that the truth could still sting, when he should have long since ceased caring about a relatively meaningless fact like that one. "He told me only that she could not stand the sight of me, and that was why she'd left me on his doorstep." He smirked a little bit then, ignoring the small noise she made. "I grew up rather amazed that what people saw when they looked at me was this remarkable face I'd been awarded in the genetic lottery,

when I knew the truth about how ugly I was. So ugly it repulsed my own mother, who was never heard from again. So ugly it made my father hate me. Quite a dichotomy.”

“And you had only your father’s word on that?”

Grace asked, and it was the lack of pity, the simple calm in her voice that made it all right, somehow, that he was telling her all of this. No matter that he still did not know why.

Lucas remembered then, unwillingly, the night he’d confronted William in his study with the birth certificate he’d found after hours of searching. He’d been a mere teenager then, angry and bitter that all of his siblings knew their parents—even Rafael, the other bastard son who lived in the village yet out of William’s view, had the comfort of his mother’s presence to ease William’s rejection of him. But Lucas had nothing. Only William’s lifelong loathing and a birth certificate with the mother’s name blanked out.

William had reacted predictably when Lucas had waved the document in front of him, and Lucas had still been too emotional, too small yet to fight back as he might have done later. It was only when William had him pinned to the wall that he’d relented at all—in true William Wolfe fashion.

“Your mother is a difficult woman to forget,” he had said, in a vicious sort of tone, designed to wound, confuse.

He had thrown a photo album at Lucas’s feet, sneered at the nose he’d bloodied with his own big fist and left Lucas to page through photographs of his uncle Richard’s wedding—to a woman who had Lucas’s own unusual green eyes. If what he had seen was true, it meant William had slept with his own sister-in-law. Lucas had been sick right there on the study floor.

The subject of Lucas’s mother had never been raised again.

“Yes,” Lucas said now. “I never discovered who she was. Not really.” He could not believe how much William’s behavior could still get under his skin, even all these years later. When it could not matter to anyone, not even to him. When the man had been dead for nearly twenty years. “Not for certain.”

"My father disappeared before I was born," Grace said matter-of-factly, wrapping her arms around her knees. "There are any number of John Benisons in the world, and none of them were interested in claiming me. I don't even have his name." She looked at him, her dark eyes intent on his. "There is no shame in being an accident, Lucas. There are only parents who are not up to the challenge."

"William was not up to any kind of parental challenge," Lucas said. "He was not what I would call a parent at all, aside from his biological contribution."

He looked at her then, taking in the way she gazed at him, his own near-overpowering urge to touch her, to hold her, to pull her close to him again and make him feel that fleeting sensation he'd felt in the bed, that he'd never felt before. He was afraid to name it.

"I told you before that there are ghosts here, Grace," he said quietly, but in that moment he did not know if he meant in Wolfestone or in himself.

She smiled slightly, seemingly unperturbed by his warning.

"Will they rattle their chains and scare the guests away with all their moaning?" she asked.

"They are more likely to dress in designer labels and behave as if they are normal human beings," Lucas replied dryly. "When they are not. Not one of them."

She searched his face for a moment, then twisted around to look out the window, as if she, too, could pierce the darkness with her gaze and see the dilapidated manor house in the distance.

"Is that why it was abandoned?" she asked, and he knew she meant the house, not him. "Too many ghosts?" She frowned slightly, as if trying to make sense of it. "Was it easier somehow to let it crumble into the ground?"

"If it were mine," Lucas said with a quiet ferocity, "I would demolish it and salt the earth on which it stood."

Her brows arched then, and another near-smile played over her generous mouth, drawing him like a moth to a flame. He could not bring himself to look away.

"That seems unduly dramatic," she said. "Surely you could simply choose not to visit. Or donate the place to English Heritage. It is only a house." When he did not speak, she shrugged. "And surely not all of your siblings share your opinion of the place?"

"We are not close," he said. He laughed slightly, a hollow sound. "Or perhaps it is more truthful to say they are not close with me. And why should they be?"

"Because you are their brother," Grace said quietly, as if she believed in him. As if she knew him. And he could not let her, could he? He could not let her think he was something other—something better, something less worthless—than he was. Not even if it felt as if she'd wrapped him in sunshine. This was meant to be an exercise in exorcism, not in intimacy.

He sat down next to her on the plush, bright couch, confused by the urge to be near her even when he planned only to disabuse her of any positive notions she might have of him. Then, even more confusing, he reached over and took one of her pale, slender hands in his. He did not understand himself, when he thought he had looked into every dark corner he possessed, and more than once, leaving no surprises. He had never been more of a stranger to himself than he was tonight.

"One night when I was eighteen," he said, striving for an even tone, "William got drunk. This would not have been of interest to anyone, you understand, except that on that particular night he worked himself into a temper over my sister, Annabelle." He smiled, though it was the barest sketch of a smile. "He brutalized her," he said, his voice growing raspy. He indicated his face with his free hand. "Slashed her face with a riding crop."

"Why?" Grace breathed, her eyes wide.

"He was a bully and a drunk," Lucas said caustically. "Did he need a reason?" He shook his head slightly. "My brothers tried to stop him," Lucas continued. "But they were too young. When my older brother, Jacob, came home, he waded right into it." He paused and looked at her, hard. "I was not there, of course. I was chasing a set of twins through Soho."

But she did not flinch, nor look away. So he did.

"When Jacob pulled William off Annabelle," he said, concentrating on their linked hands, "he punched the drunken bastard as he richly deserved. Hard."

Grace's hand tightened around his, as if she knew. "And then?" she asked quietly.

"He died," Lucas said matter-of-factly. "That was always the William Wolfe way." He let out a derisive sound. "He always did get the last laugh."

"I am so sorry," Grace murmured. "For all of you."

"It is my younger siblings you should feel sorry for," Lucas said, that jittery feeling washing over him, as it always did. Muted, somehow, but still there, making him restless. Making that old self-loathing glow and expand within him. "Once Jacob was cleared of any charges, he, of course, put his life on hold to be a guardian to us all, because that was Jacob. Generous to a fault. The perfect older brother. But he could not live with himself." Lucas shook his head. "What did that vile old bastard ever do to deserve regret? What did he do besides make us all miserable?"

He could hear the echo of his voice, raw and rough, and was glad there was no mirror nearby. He felt certain he would find himself unrecognizable. His heart was hammering against the walls of his chest and he felt unhinged, untethered, as if he might explode. But then Grace brought their linked hands to her mouth and kissed his knuckles, one by one, and Lucas let himself breathe.

"I dreamed every night for years that I'd killed William myself," he said quietly. He turned to meet her troubled gaze. "I hated him. I would not have lost a single night's sleep if I'd been the one to kill him, accidentally or otherwise, nor would the weight of him on my conscience, such as it is, have caused me a moment's pause."

"Then what does?" she asked, and he had the most uncomfortable feeling, once again, that she could read him. Much too easily, and far too closely. "Because," she continued, "it is clear that something weighs on you, Lucas. Heavily."

"It's only myself," he answered, with unflinching honesty. "When Jacob left, the role of guardian fell to me." His smile felt like acid. "I was

unfit for the position, to put it mildly. I abandoned them, too. Deserted them. That is the kind of man I am.”

The room was quiet. The enticing scents of the food set out on the room service tray perfumed the air, and the wind rattled the windowpanes.

“How old were you?” Grace asked after a moment, her gaze unreadable, her face calm.

“Eighteen.” He made a bitter sound. “A man.”

“Or, perhaps, a boy who had been brutally treated the whole of his life,” she said quietly, holding his gaze. “A boy who knew nothing at all about how a parent should act. I think you expected far too much of yourself. Unfairly.”

He looked at her for a long moment, his history shimmering between them, his failures and flaws lying out there with nothing to cover them. Not his charm, his wit, his face—none of the usual tools he’d used his whole life to prevent a moment like this from ever occurring.

And what was most unreal was that he had done all this himself. He had thrown all of this at her feet. And he still could not allow himself to think about why he had done it. He did not dare.

“This is what I was talking about earlier,” he said, reaching over to cup her jaw in his hand, his body thrilling to the feel of her soft skin, the way her lips parted slightly. “No one has ever expected anything of me, Grace. Least of all me. Why should you?” He stroked his thumb along her soft cheek. “Why do you?”

Her eyes were luminous. Deep and unwavering as she stared back at him.

She shrugged slightly, though her gaze never left his. “Perhaps it’s time you started.”

And then she turned her head, pressing her lips into the palm of his hand, and that simply ruined him.

# CHAPTER TEN

GRACE felt all the blood drain from her head, fast, as she stared at the tabloid newspaper in front of her. Her stomach twisted into a complicated pretzel and she thought for a moment she might simply pass out from the shock. Her knees wanted to give way beneath her. Her mind wanted to simply succumb to the spiral of dizziness.

But she did none of that, much as she might have wished otherwise. Instead, she could do nothing but read the paper the visibly embarrassed member of her staff had handed her when she'd arrived at the team breakfast meeting prepared to go over the last-minute details before the gala—which was tonight.

“I’m so sorry,” Sophie murmured in an undertone—or perhaps she shouted. Grace could hear nothing over the kettle-drum pounding of her heart.

The headline screamed in block letters: *LUCAS RELAUNCH? WOLFE UP TO USUAL TRICKS WITH AGING SWIMSUIT MODEL*. The article that followed featured not just the pictures of Grace kissing Lucas at the pop princess’s birthday party—fully identifiable despite her hair swirling around her and her eyes dazed with passion, sprawled over his lap as if she were made of syrup—but also the old American sports magazine photos that Lucas had unearthed. In full, unavoidable color.

Grace stood there like a stone and stared at the paper in her hands. This was what it felt like to have her entire life fall to pieces, she observed from an odd, stunned distance. This was how it happened, then: all of her years of hard work came to a screeching halt in a place called the Pig’s Head, while her entire body was displayed in a trashy newspaper for the whole of Great Britain to pore over. She was sure she would have some feelings about that, but for the moment she felt paralyzed, aware only of all the eyes fastened to her, waiting for her reaction.

*How could this be happening?*

The biggest party of her career was in a matter of hours, and her half-naked body was plastered all over the tabloids. Not exactly the classic yet modern sensibility Hartington's wished to portray, she was certain. And even worse than the swimsuit photos, everyone in the entire world—including the entire staff, all the executives, and the board of directors of Hartington's—would now know that she was sleeping with Lucas Wolfe.

She waited for that anguish to spill over, as it nearly had in Lucas's office, but it did not come.

"Sorry, Grace," Sophie muttered again, red-faced with embarrassment, as everyone else pretended to be absorbed in their morning tea and full English breakfasts. "But everyone was reading it and I thought you should know."

A quick glance around showed Grace that there were, indeed, copies aplenty of this particular tabloid rag—seemingly one on every table in the restaurant. No doubt on every breakfast table in all the world. Her mother was no doubt reading it even now in Racine, Texas, and nodding knowingly over Grace's behavior and patting herself on the back for stamping out the viper in her nest. *Terrific*.

"Thank you, Sophie," Grace said with every stitch of poise she could dredge up from inside herself.

It was her very worst nightmare, broadcast in lurid color, in the shape of her seventeen-year-old bikini-clad body. She knew what happened next. She knew how this scene played out. She felt her gorge rise in her throat, and wondered, still as if from a distance, if she might actually get sick in full view of her entire staff and half the village of Wolfestone, all of whom were packed into the Pig's Head to watch her with avid gazes only some tried to hide.

She simply could not allow that to happen.

Especially not when Lucas sauntered in from the lobby, looking sleepy and rumpled and as if he'd just rolled out of a decadent bed—which she happened to know that he had, as she had been in it with him. Every head in the room swiveled to track him as he wound his way through the tables toward her. Grace could hear the whispering, the muttering. She could feel the speculation heat up the room, as if gossip were an

electric current and she was being slowly, surely electrocuted.

Grace watched him approach, noting that easy lope, that careless swagger that called so much attention to his inescapable masculine beauty. She'd spent a week learning every last detail of his long, lean body, and melting under the sorcery of his clever hands, and her body wanted more. Now. It readied itself for him as if on command, melting and shivering, as if he had not been thrusting deep inside her, kneeling over her with his hot mouth fastened to the nape of her neck, one wicked hand wrapped around her breast and the other at her core, not twenty minutes earlier.

She had to clench her thighs together and force her bland, professional smile. Apparently, he was irresistible, even when the worst had happened. *Was happening*, she amended. *Right now*.

But something occurred to her then, as Lucas walked toward her. This had already happened. Lucas had seen these photos, and nothing had changed. He had still wanted her. *Her*, not some fantasy photograph of her. He had not called her names, or looked down at her. The world had not ended—if anything, the photos had been the catalyst for a whole new world of possibility she'd never imagined.

*Why do you care so much what so many ignorant people think?* he had asked.

And she could not help but ask herself, why did she?

Grace watched him read the room as he moved through it. She saw the cool calculation in his green gaze as he drew close, and could now tell the difference between the real Lucas and the self-mocking, lazy and careless Lucas he produced on cue, as he did now, smirking slightly as he reached the team's table.

She preferred the real one, but she was deeply grateful for his easy mask today.

"Has it finally happened?" he asked mildly, yet in a voice that seemed to accidentally carry throughout the room. He smoothed a hand down his chest, calling attention to his excellent physique, and the phenomenal way he'd chosen to package it today in a tight-fitting green designer T-shirt beneath a fashionable black sport coat and a pair of distressed denim jeans that transformed his delectable behind into sheer

poetry. "Have I become better-looking overnight?"

A wave of laughter swept through the room. Because everyone loved Lucas, Grace thought. How could they not? He was so good at pretending to take nothing seriously, least of all himself, and it was impossible not to laugh when he did.

Their eyes met, held. Something almost painful flared between them, silently, and she felt her practiced calm sweep through her. She saw that fierce light gleam in the depths of his gaze, the one she wondered if only she could see. The one that showed her the truth of him, that she craved more than she should. But she was forced to ignore it in front of so many interested gazes. She handed him the tabloid, keeping her face expressionless.

"Not yet," she said. "Though you are, apparently, as interesting to the press when you are shilling for Hartington's as when you are romancing minor royalty on the Continent."

She could see the nearly imperceptible way his body tensed. She could almost see, as well, the anger roll off him in waves. Was it the fact that they were in the tabloids, or the offhanded way she'd introduced the topic, as if she thought what had happened between them had something to do with Hartington's? She could not tell. And either way, no one else seemed to notice anything in his body language at all. All they could see was scandal, and the bright shining light that was the presence of Lucas Wolfe.

"Unfortunately, I grew bored of me years ago," he said in his everyday, mild and languid tone. He tossed the paper aside without so much as a glance at it, as if the article held no interest for him. He then sat down at the table with every appearance of relaxed ease, signaling the hovering waitress for hot coffee—the topic clearly closed as far as he was concerned.

Grace swept a quick look over the table as she took a seat opposite him, confident she exuded nothing but her usual competence in the face of all the averted eyes, the speculative glances. She would not give them the reaction they clearly wanted. She would not let them see her crack. She would be nothing but her usual ice queen self, ready for another day's work with a calm smile and a no-nonsense approach to even this.

They were only pictures, and the truth was, before Travis and her mother had sullied the experience, she'd *liked* them. They were gorgeous pictures, and just happened to be of her. They'd paid for her college education and, one way or another, they'd made her the driven, successful woman she was today.

Why should she be ashamed of them?

And what went on between her and Lucas was nobody else's business.

So she ignored the damned tabloid, and the too-beautiful man who watched her with hooded green eyes and a disconcerting intensity, and snapped open her event notebook instead.

"All right, then," she said briskly, as if this was any other morning. Any morning meeting on any normal day. As if everyone at the table had not seen what she knew they'd seen. Her nearly naked body, in so many suggestive poses. Her passion-flushed face. But there was nothing she could do about that now, and she'd be damned if she'd apologize for herself, so she shoved it aside. "We're in the final countdown, people," she said. "Tell me where we are and what needs to happen before tonight."

The irony, she thought as the staff member nearest her launched into his spiel, was that before she'd walked into the breakfast room this morning, she had been on track to thinking this had been the most magical week of her life.

The week in Wolfestone had passed like some kind of delicious, wickedly sensual fever dream. For the first time in her life, Grace had not analyzed, plotted or planned out her every last move. Nor had she let the past keep her locked down, hidden away. Once she had accepted the fact that she would not be beating Lucas at his own game, that she wanted him as much as he wanted her, and could neither fight it nor summon the will to try, she had simply ... lived.

The days were full to bursting with all the last-minute details involved in transforming the long-forsaken Wolfe Manor into the appropriate spot to celebrate the new Hartington's. Grace traipsed over every inch of the site with the designer and various contractors, nailing down the final details of placement, construction, access and out-of-bounds areas, parking and security. She had coordinated all the reports from her staff

regarding the floral arrangements, the dramatic ice sculptures and their delivery, the many food stations that would have to entice the guests yet never overpower the tented area with long queues—all stocked with delicacies available in the revered Hartington's gourmet food hall.

She went over set lists with the DJ and the band, debated the placement of the dance floor and spent hours placating both the talent and their often far more excitable representatives. She made sure the details of transportation for all of the A-list guests, talent and executives were nailed down and agreeable to all parties. She held the caterer's hand during a brief breakdown over the mini-Cornish pasties. She did her job, and she did it well.

And then, every night, she lost herself in Lucas's arms.

He was the least inhibited, most adventurous lover imaginable. He knew no boundaries, had no hang-ups and always maintained his wicked sense of humor. He was as happy to have her standing up against the wall as slippery and wet in the deep tub. He was as interested in exploring her body as in having her test his hardness in her mouth. He reached for her again and again, but he also held her so tenderly, and kissed her so sweetly, that it made Grace ache in ways she knew better than to consider too closely. He was not at all the man she'd thought he was when he'd first walked into her office, and Grace hardly knew how to reconcile all the different images she had of him in her head—much less in her heart.

It was easier, somehow, when they were both naked, and her body hummed with an overload of pleasure after another demonstration of his boundless enthusiasm for all things carnal in general and Grace's body in particular.

"I may require a stiff drink," she had said one night as they lay on the thick, soft rug before the fire, smiling as he toyed with the ends of her hair, curling the waves around his finger as she lay sprawled across his chest. "Perhaps several."

"To dull the pain?" he had asked in his mocking way, but she'd known him better by then and had known that he was teasing her—and more, that the mockery he used so skillfully was perhaps the only form of affection he knew how to give. It made her feel warm.

"To see which is more potent," she had said softly, propping her chin on her stacked hands and looking at him, as if she could memorize the artistic dream that was his beautiful face, so close to hers. "Hard liquor or you."

There had been a moment then, a heartbeat or two too long, when he had gazed back at her with an almost arrested look in his smoky green eyes, as if he could not quite work her out. She loved such moments—when she knew she was looking at the true, unadulterated Lucas. The real man, not the act.

"I imagine it very much depends on the bartender," he had said, but she had the sense he had wanted to say something else entirely. His smile sharpened. "I did used to be one, as it happens. In a former existence."

"What?" She had wrinkled up her nose as she gazed at him. "Yet another job? You continue to destroy my faith in your terrible reputation."

"Keep your faith," he'd suggested dryly. "I had no choice but to get a job—any job. I'd already blown through the first part of my inheritance with a group of disreputable malcontents all over London, and I was all of twenty-three."

"Only the first part of your inheritance?" she'd asked in the same dry tone. "Not the whole of it? That seems to lack commitment." She had not wanted to think about the amount of money that might have been, nor how he had managed to throw it all away. It might have sent her fiscally conservative heart into cardiac arrest.

"My father perhaps anticipated that his children might take his profligate, hard-partying example to heart," he'd said, with that challenging gleam in his eyes, daring her to swallow yet another example of how terrible he believed he was. "Or that I might, anyway. My inheritance was split in two. Half on his death, and half again should I survive to my thirtieth birthday. He expressed his doubts about the latter in his will."

"And you lost the first half by the age of twenty-three," she had said, forced to shield her gaze from his at that point. She'd looked at the hard muscles of his chest instead, the tempting valley between his pectorals,

the steel-hewn strength of his shoulders.

At twenty-three, she had used her carefully chosen, prestigious summer internship as a springboard into her first events management firm, and had been working on her first parties. She had never wasted a single penny in all her days. Her modeling money had paid for what her scholarship had not and then some, because she had always been obsessed with savings accounts, a retirement fund and the careful stewardship of conservative investments. She could not allow herself to imagine the kind of money Lucas had frittered away.

But then, she could not imagine the childhood he had had to live, either.

"I managed to charm my way behind a bar in one of the casinos in Monte Carlo," he'd said then, holding her to him as he'd shifted slightly beneath her.

"Monte Carlo," she'd echoed, shaking her head at him. She thought of the famous sweep of tall buildings cascading toward the yacht-studded marina, all of it huddled there between the craggy French mountains and the sparkling Mediterranean. "Of course. Where all the paupers naturally congregate."

He'd ignored her, though his eyes gleamed and he ran a possessive hand along the length of her spine, making her arch against him, feeling like a fat and satisfied cat.

"It was my first job, and I was shockingly good at it," he'd said with his usual modesty. "I was showered in fantastic tips, no doubt in enthusiastic recognition of my keen knowledge concerning all things alcoholic."

Grace had laughed, and had pulled herself up to sitting position, pulling her mess of hair over one shoulder to rake her fingers through it like a makeshift comb.

"No doubt," she'd agreed. But when she'd looked down at him he had a strange expression on his face. "What is it?" she'd asked.

"Do you remember the first time you fell in love?" he'd asked then, his expression unreadable. But she'd had no doubt it was not an idle question. Or, at least, it had not felt in the least bit idle to her.

Grace had felt the fine hairs on the back of her neck stand at attention, and had had to look away, to focus on the flames dancing merrily in the fireplace, crackling and popping. She'd told herself she was tired from all their lovemaking and the insanely busy days—that there was no other reason her face should feel warm, or there should be that worrying wet heat behind her eyes.

"Of course," she'd said quietly. "I was a teenager, and I was mistaken."

But his hand on her bare thigh was kind, and somehow she had found herself telling him the rest of the story about Roger Dambrot. How she had thought giving him her virginity was the same as giving him her heart, and how devastated she had been when he had been so contemptuous of both. How utterly destroyed. How her mother had spoken to her, and what she'd said. And then, so soon afterward, the scene with Travis. All those predictions, those curses. And worst of all, how Grace had always believed them—how she'd always thought falling in love and sex and emotion were inextricably linked with shame, loss, pain.

"I thought if I could keep myself apart, removed, I could escape the future she'd always predicted for me," she'd told Lucas. "Blood will tell, she said. Carter women were fated for heartbreak and misery." She'd bit at her lip. "And then, later, she said I was fated for far worse."

"Perhaps you were simply seventeen," he'd said gently. "Gorgeous and new, while she was simply jealous."

"Jealous?" It wasn't that Grace had never considered that possibility before; it was the way he'd said it. So matter-of-fact. As if, contrary to everything Grace had always believed, there had never been anything wrong inside of her. As if she'd never had any reason to be ashamed.

"Jealous," he'd said again. "And you were too young to know better." He'd met her gaze. "I was no better, let me hasten to assure you. The bar manager's name was Amanda, and I fell madly in love with her. She had the most adorable little girl." He'd smiled the kind of smile that made Grace want to weep, without even knowing why. "Her name was Charlotte, and I worshipped every angelic curl on her head with all the weight and gravity of my twenty-three-year-old heart."

"Why do I sense this does not have a happy ending?" Grace had asked.

"Because love stories never do," he had replied, his eyes crinkling in the corners as if he meant his words lightly. Grace had not been fooled. "Amanda started working all night shifts, but I hardly minded. I took care of Charlotte. I was dependable, stable. Good."

His voice had taken on that self-mocking lash again, harsher this time, deeper. Grace did not say a word; she merely laid back down beside him and pressed her lips to the place where his shoulder met his arm. And then against his lean, hard jaw, not sure he would speak again.

"It turned out she was having an affair with a wealthy older man," Lucas had said eventually, with a derisive smirk. "It was such a cliché. I believe I was no more to her than convenient child care. Poetically, I had been planning to tell her my true identity the very night she confessed."

He had not gone into details, but the bleak look on his face told Grace all she needed to know about Lucas and love. It was not necessary for him to draw her a picture. He had never had love, nor security, nor family, not really. He had felt responsible to his siblings when he could be the punching bag in their stead, but he was so convinced that there was nothing good in him, nothing worthwhile, that he had gone out of his way to prove it, again and again—even when his siblings could actually have used him as something other than the most convenient target. And then he'd found a brand-new family, and had dared to hope—only to have that hope cruelly crushed. Again.

She would have cried for him, had she not suspected he would hate her for it.

"Things did not end well for Amanda," he'd said, with evident satisfaction. "This may come as a great shock to you, as it did to me, but her marriage did not work out. Neither did any of her subsequent ones. I confess that I take greater pleasure in that than I should."

"And Charlotte?" Grace had asked, running her hand along his chest, letting her palm rest over the hard plane of muscle that covered his heart, broken though she knew it must be beneath.

"She was far luckier," he had said after a moment. His mouth curved. "It turned out she had a very generous and anonymous benefactor, who made certain that her mother's many reversals of fortune over the years never affected her. She is currently at a Swiss boarding school, where, by

all reports, she is thriving.”

“Lucky Charlotte,” Grace had said, hiding her smile against his warm skin. “But I thought you had lost all your money?”

“I made back my squandered inheritance, and then some,” Lucas had said, eyeing her with that air of challenge again. “By the time I was twenty-five. I found being discarded for a wealthier and far less attractive man exceedingly unpleasant. I much prefer to be cast aside for the defects in my personality, thank you.”

“As do we all,” she’d agreed, humoring him.

He’d smiled then, showing her that beloved dent in his lean jaw, that irresistible sparkle in his eyes. The sheen of vulnerability behind them. “But these are all deep, dark secrets, Grace. Can you be trusted to keep them?”

“You will just have to wait and see,” she’d said lightly, her heart aching for this man, who would have argued if she’d suggested he was a hero to the little girl he’d loved and still protected. Who could not allow himself even the smallest shred of compassion. Who was so convinced he was damned.

Who had, she’d understood that night with a deep, searing certainty that might have frightened her if she hadn’t felt the rightness of it, stolen her heart without her even having been aware of it.

“If I must wait,” he’d murmured, pulling her closer and twisting so that he came over her on the rug, settling in between her legs with his arousal jutting hard and proud against her, “then we really ought to while away the time more amusingly.”

“I can’t think of anything to do,” she’d whispered, caught by the emotion darkening his eyes, so at odds with the smile on his face, the lightness of his words.

“Neither can I,” he’d replied, and thrust into her, riding them both into oblivion.

Grace finished the morning meeting with her trademark minimum of fuss, and sent her staff off to attend to their duties. Her temples ached from the effort of maintaining her usual serenity, and she had an extremely unpleasant phone call to make to Charles Winthrop before she

could head out to the manor house and oversee the final preparations for tonight. She gathered up her things as the team left and strode from the restaurant as if she could not see the patrons still looking at the tabloid and then measuring her against it—and as if she was unaware of Lucas's golden, impossibly beautiful presence at her side.

"We should talk about this," he said in a low voice as Grace headed up the inn's stairs toward her room two floors above.

"There is nothing to say," she replied, clutching her mobile in her hand as it vibrated yet again—announcing, she knew, one more no doubt increasingly tense message from Charles Winthrop's secretary, ordering Grace to call in. "What's done is done," she continued. "The only thing to do now is minimize the damage—"

"Grace." It was the snap of command in his voice, or perhaps the darkness beneath it, the edge in it, that had her slow her steps and turn to face him.

They had rounded the corner of the stairwell, and stood in the no-man's-land between the floors. Though the bustle of the inn below them floated up the stairs, they were for all intents and purposes hidden away from all the eyes that had watched them so closely in the restaurant. Grace felt that same sweet, hot cocoon close around her, the way it always seemed to do when she was near him, as if there was some kind of bubble that they could disappear into when they were together. She did not know why she should feel it now, when she knew in the worst possible way that it was not true at all. That there was no bubble, there was nothing safe—there never had been. His world involved spies with cameras and was always monitored. She should have expected it.

"I have to call Mr. Winthrop," she said, her voice little more than a whisper.

She was too caught in his troubled green gaze, too afraid that if she stepped any closer to him she would melt against him as she always did, and if she melted, she would let out all the emotions that she knew must swirl around inside of her somewhere. And she could not let that happen. Not with this phone call to handle somehow, and the gala to pull off—assuming she was not summarily fired for indecency.

"I did not do this," he said, his voice fierce, his hands clenched into

fists at his sides. “I did not hand those pictures over. I am capable of many things, Grace, but not that.”

She was stunned. She blinked, and swayed toward him, putting a hand out to grasp his arm before she knew what she was doing. Before she remembered that she could not touch him without causing the very melting she was trying to avoid.

“That never even occurred to me,” she said, emotion beginning to flood in from wherever she’d been keeping it. Perhaps she should have suspected him—perhaps she should have imagined that Lucas might betray her, but she had not. It had not even crossed her mind. What did that say about what had happened to her in the past week? Since she’d met him? Did she really trust him? *Should* she? Or was this precisely the same path she’d watched her mother tread a hundred times—leading straight to Travis, the biggest liar of all? Was this the ruin that had always been her destiny?

The mad part was, she was not at all sure she cared.

“This is my fault,” he said in the same low, angry voice. “I will take full responsibility. I’ll ring Charlie myself—”

“I appreciate the offer,” she said, cutting him off. She shook her head, more at herself than at him. More at the panic she did not feel, the terror that was not dragging at her. Her lack of shame and despair. When had she stopped fearing what he could do to her? When had she decided to enjoy him instead? “But this is my mess, Lucas. I’ll handle it.”

“I am a great seducer of women,” Lucas said, the self-loathing crackling in his voice, turning his eyes nearly black. “I am sure he will have no trouble at all believing that I led you astray. That is what I do, after all.”

His pain, his toxic hatred of himself, was like a live thing pressed between them, electric and dangerous. It pushed against Grace, crowding her, making her want to fight back. To fight *him*. To show him the truth.

“You did not seduce me,” she reminded him, her hand tightening on his arm. “It was the other way around, if you remember—and anyway, it is none of Charlie Winthrop’s business, which I intend to make clear to him. I notice your mobile is not ringing off the hook. Why should mine

be?"

"I am a pollutant," he said bitterly, his eyes grim and focused on her, as if he was desperate for her to understand. As if his world hung in the balance. "I destroy everything that crosses my path, sooner or later. None of this would have happened to you were it not for me. This is what happens to the people I care about, Grace—and heaven help you if you care about me. Then I'll rip your heart out and make you regret you ever met me." He let out a hollow bark of laughter. "You need only ask my family."

"Nothing has happened," she said very distinctly, searching his face for the Lucas she knew, the Lucas who could be tender, gentle. Funny. Wry. Not this dark, angry man who she well believed could destroy himself and anything else in his path if he chose. "They are pictures, Lucas. Just pictures and nasty speculation. Who cares?"

"You do," he gritted out. "Charlie Winthrop does."

Grace considered him for a moment, and let her hand drop from his arm.

"I should care," she said, focusing once again on what was happening within her—and what was not. "I should care deeply. I keep waiting for it—I'm anticipating a tsunami of shame, anger, fear. All the things I felt when you left that folder on my desk."

"Because I am a prince among men," he said acidly. "And still you allowed me in your bed. Do you not understand this yet, Grace? The only thing pretty about me is this godforsaken face. Everything else is rotted and ugly. Putrid. Corrosive."

"That is ridiculous," she snapped at him. "The point is, the wave has yet to crash. I am worried about an embarrassing conversation with my boss, but that's about it." She shrugged, her eyes locked to his. "Those pictures were taken of me when I was very young. And I was, in fact, kissing you at that party. I never claimed I did not do those things. I never lied. I won't apologize for any of it."

"You should." It was stark, brutal. It hung between them.

Grace felt something move through her then, akin to the wave she'd been expecting, but so much different, somehow. It was as if something

had been ripped away from her, exposing her to a truth she'd been bending over backward to avoid.

She did not want to hide anymore. Not from herself. Not from life. Not from anything. She had been wearing a mask for years, but no more. The tabloids had made certain her past and her present were exposed, laid open before the world, and why had she been so convinced there was something wrong with that? Why did she feel she had to hide who she was, what she felt, what she'd done? Why was she so ashamed? Why couldn't she simply show her true face to the world, at last?

Why had she let her mother's fears, Travis's lies, control her for so long?

If being around Lucas had taught her anything, it was this: once someone saw behind the mask, it was impossible to go on wearing it. It no longer fit in the way it had. Once she had been seen—*known*—how could she settle for anything less?

And once she knew what she was hiding, how could she allow it to remain hidden?

"I'm falling in love with you," she told him matter-of-factly, because that was the only secret she had left. And he knew all the rest of them. She had turned over every last stone she had and showed him all the dirt she'd hidden away beneath. She laughed slightly, at her own daring, and her own folly. "Who am I kidding? I've already fallen."

"You don't mean that." There was an edge of something like panic in his voice, a certain shock in the way he looked at her then. "You are far too intelligent for that kind of nonsense."

"I am not telling you this because I expect anything from you," she told him quietly, holding his gaze, her head high and proud. "But because I suspect you believe you are inherently unlovable, as if you were somehow born undeserving of it, when nothing could be further from the truth."

"I've told you more about my past than I've ever told anyone else," he gritted out, moving closer and grasping her shoulders in his hands, holding her tightly—but not hard. Gentle, even now. "Damn you, Grace! You know more than enough to run!"

"I have no intention of running," she said, her voice crisp, despite the emotion she could feel searing through her, making her eyes glaze over. Despite the waves of deep emotion and long-denied truths that washed through her, over her. Changing her completely even as she stood there. Shaking her. Rendering her maskless forever.

No matter what happened.

"Then I will do it for you," he growled, but he did not let go of her. He did not back away. He did not, in fact, run.

"Are you saving me from yourself?" she whispered. "Is that what a man as bad as you claim to be would do, Lucas? Or is that a bit more noble than you normally allow yourself to be?"

"You have no idea how bad I can be," he insisted, a wildness to his voice, his gaze. "You have no idea what real ugliness is, Grace. But I do—and I have his blood running in my veins!"

He let go of her then, as if the invocation of William Wolfe brought his ghost between them to shove them apart.

"He is dead," she said, her voice low, intense. "And even if he were not, you are nothing like him. You are a good man, Lucas. A decent man. A man worth loving."

She heard the way her voice cracked with emotion, felt the way she shook where she stood, but all she could see was Lucas. All she could see was the shock on his face and the heavy curtain of denial that fell across it, obscuring him.

For a moment he only scowled at her, his big body vibrating with tension and fury, his green eyes gone black with all of his self-loathing, all his years of self-destruction, his whole lifetime of loneliness. She could see all of it.

She wanted to fight all the ugliness, all the darkness, all the lies he'd made truth over the years to fulfill his own prophecies. She knew about that. And now, today, she knew truths she should have seen long ago. She wanted to reach inside where he was so cold, so alone, and warm him. But she knew she could not do any of that, not really. Not without his help.

She had only one weapon in her arsenal. Only one chance.

"I love you," she said, letting the words hang there, strong enough, she hoped, to battle his ghosts. Because they were all she had. "I do."

"Then you are a fool," he said, his mouth twisting.

He brushed past her on the stair, turned the corner and was gone.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

LUCAS saw the solitary figure standing away from the scaffolded manor house and the commotion in and around the gala's big tent that commanded the better part of the grand lawn. He knew who it was. The figure stood down near the lake, facing away from the gathering crowds, and Lucas moved toward him before he could think better of it—before, in fact, he could fully register what he meant to do.

Lucas had been wandering aimlessly for hours, stamping about the property like some kind of wraith. He had made his way through the overgrown reaches of the estate, all of it so much the same and yet so different from the grounds he remembered combing every inch of as a child. Had there only been moors, he thought, he could have done an impression of Heathcliff to put his brother Nathaniel, recently awarded his first Sapphire Screen Award to international acclaim, very much to shame.

He had walked and walked, as if he could outpace his demons, as if he could leave his past behind him simply by remaining in motion.

He should never have returned here. He should have known better.

Grace was not the first woman to tell him that she loved him, but she was the only one he'd ever believed. The only one he knew had nothing to gain, everything to lose and absolutely no reason to lie to him. He wanted to deny it, even to himself, but he'd seen her face. He'd seen the truth in her deep brown eyes, heard the quiet conviction in her honeyed voice. Worse, he'd felt something shift inside of him, as if in answer.

It should have been impossible. Grace was determined and intelligent, resourceful and strong. She was more beautiful than she wanted anyone to notice, and far kinder than she should be. She had worked her whole life to get where she was, against the kind of odds Lucas could hardly imagine. What could she possibly see in a wastrel like him?

Was there anything to see? After a lifetime insisting there was not, why was he suddenly so worried that he was exactly as empty as he'd

always declared he was?

“Jacob,” he said in greeting when he reached his brother’s side. They both stared out over the deceptively placid water, watching it gleam in the late-afternoon light. Lucas thrust his hands in his pockets, aware as he did so that he and Jacob moved in concert. As if they still knew each other as they once had. It nearly made him smile.

“How thoughtful of you to ask for permission to throw an event here,” Jacob murmured, an ironic undertone to his voice. “In this house which, for better or worse, I own.”

“Oh, good,” Lucas said mildly. “You received your invitation.” He pivoted toward Jacob. “I did wonder, having only tossed it through the door.” That had also been his version of requesting permission. He looked back over the water, and pretended he did not care about the next question. “Does that mean you are staying?”

“I’m happy that Wolfe Manor could be used in such a creative manner,” Jacob said, with something like a smile, avoiding the question. Lucas felt the other man—the grown man and near-stranger who had taken the place of his long-lost brother—look at him, then away. “And that you took my advice so closely to heart.”

“I believe it was more a shot *to* the heart,” Lucas said dryly.

He did not press Jacob about his plans. He tried to summon the anger he had felt before, the dark fury that had propelled him away from this house, from his brother, but he realized in a dawning sort of amazement that it was no longer there. Where there had been all of that bubbling, simmering resentment and despair, there was now only Grace. He was not at all sure how to handle that knowledge. Nor how she had managed to become the thing that haunted him, even here.

“I never thought I’d see the day you held down an honest job,” Jacob said in a quiet voice.

“You are certainly not alone,” Lucas said. He smiled slightly, rocking back on his heels. “Though I think I might be rather good at it.”

“That does not surprise me at all,” Jacob said. Lucas let that sit there, afraid that if he looked at it too closely, paid it too much attention, it might disappear as if he had imagined it. He did not want anything to

mean so much to him, especially not one man's opinion. But then, this man's opinion was the only one that ever had.

Jacob shifted his weight, frowning, and Lucas instinctively braced himself for the inevitable blow. Would Jacob throw the latest tabloid report in his face? He would deserve it. Would he mention William Wolfe's rather notorious reign in the same position Lucas now held at Hartington's, fueled by cocaine and intemperate rages? He could certainly draw some pointed comparisons. There were so many ways Lucas could disappoint him without even trying that it was pointless to try to pick one on his own. He could only roll with whatever punch might come his way.

The way he always had.

Jacob turned so he faced Lucas, his dark eyes unreadable, his mouth a serious line. "You deserve more from life than to make yourself over into his ghost. That is all I meant."

Lucas thought of Grace's wide brown eyes, filled with emotions he dared not name, could not accept—even though he longed to do so. He thought of the peace he felt when he held her, the fierce, unexpected loyalty she showed no matter what story he told her, no matter how often he expected her to register her disgust with him. He thought of her bravery, her dignity in the face of a scandal that could have—should have—taken her to her knees.

He thought about her voice, all Texas heat and that sweet, Southern honey, saying, *I love you*. He thought about the way the words seemed to loosen things inside of him, open him up, make him feel as if there was light where there had only been dark and decay before.

"Do you know," he said conversationally, as if the world had not shifted beneath him, as if he was the same man he had been before, as if the very concept of *hope* was not foreign to him in every way, "I think you may be right."

The late-afternoon sun dipped closer to the land, casting shadows all around them. Behind them, lights blazed from a thousand clever lanterns Grace had placed every few feet, and the closed-off yet well-lighted manor house gleamed like a gothic wonderland, beckoning guests to venture near. Inviting the whispered stories, the half-recalled legends,

the tragic and celebrated and mythical history of the Wolfe family. *His* family.

Meanwhile, the rather less mythical truth was two men who might one day be friends again, but were in any case still brothers, standing quietly near an old family lake, putting ancient ghosts to rest.

"I will see you at your gala, then," Jacob said after a moment.

"Indeed you will," Lucas agreed. He felt some of his old mischief rise to the surface, and grinned. "I will be performing the role of Lucas Wolfe, England's favorite playboy, for all the assembled guests. Prepare yourself. I am quite good at it. No less than three-quarters of the crowd will end the night desperately in love with me."

"They always do," Jacob said, in the lightest tone Lucas had heard from him since his return. He reached over and clasped a hand on Lucas's shoulder, briefly, then let go as he turned toward the house.

They had not been a demonstrative family at the best of times, whenever that might have been, and Lucas felt the gesture for what it was. An olive branch. A bridge. It was not the twenty years they'd lost, but it was a start.

"Jacob," he said, staring ahead at the lake, as if all the answers lay just beneath the gleaming surface.

He heard Jacob pause behind him, and smiled then, more focused on the future than the endless, dreary past. More interested in who he could be than in who he'd been.

At last.

"Welcome home," he said quietly into the coming night, and was not at all surprised to discover he meant it.

Lucas shook every hand, posed for every picture and flattered every guest who ventured near him. The great tent was filled with golden, glittering light and hung with tapestries and chandeliers, and the people who filled it were strictly the crème de la crème of Europe. Celebrities, socialites, aristocracy. All mingled with the expected corporate kings, basking in the past and future of Hartington's with the members of the Wolfe family who had made an appearance.

Jacob, the mysteriously returned heir, was at least as interesting to the gathered press corps as the current reigning Hollywood idol, Nathaniel, and the brand-new fiancée he had on his arm. Even Annabelle, who was photographing the event and hid behind her camera and her great reserve as was her way, was a Wolfe and therefore noted, no matter how little she might have wished to interact with the guests. Or, for that matter, her brothers. And Lucas, of course, who the press could not help but love, so skillfully did he manipulate them at their own game, was always a paparazzi favorite.

“No more pictures,” he told his least-favorite photographer with a smile—when the man deserved his fists for taking those pictures of him and Grace. “Haven’t you caused enough trouble this week?”

But he laughed, as if there were no hard feelings, because that was how best to avoid having his next intimate moment broadcast to the entire world. It was better to work with them than fight against them, he knew. It was wiser to let them think they had control. He was certain there was a lesson in there somewhere, should he care to search for it.

It was, Lucas thought as he moved away from the photographer, straightening his tuxedo jacket with an expert jerk, a perfect night all around. Old Charlie Winthrop looked jovial and well pleased, sitting with the rest of the board of directors as they basked in the celebration happening all around them. The marketing and publicity departments had had their moment to shine and present the relaunch to great applause and many pictures, and Lucas had even said a few words before yielding the stage to the pop princess herself.

Yet Grace was nowhere to be found.

Lucas could see the other members of her team on the fringes of the crowd, weaving their way through the brightly clad groups to fix problems, relay information or put out the odd fire. But no Grace. Eventually, after he’d looked for her in vain for far too long, he flagged down one of the interchangeable girls who had always spent the morning meeting making cow’s eyes at him.

“Where is Grace?” he asked, impatient with the starry way the girl blinked at him. *You do not even know me*, he wanted to scold her, but did not.

"Oh ..." the girl breathed. She gulped. "Well, Mr. Wolfe, uh, she's been sacked."

The words did not make sense. Lucas stared at the girl before him, aware that he had lost his smile, that he had gone too still, that he was glaring ferociously at the poor creature.

"I beg your pardon?" His tone out-froze the towering ice sculpture nearby, and made the girl flush scarlet.

"M-Mr. Winthrop met with her just before the first guests arrived," she stammered out. "No one knows what he said, but she told Sophie to take charge and then she left." She sucked in a shaky breath. "That's all I know!"

But Lucas had already stopped listening to her. Temper roared through him, thick and vicious. He scanned the party, his eyes narrowing in on Charlie Winthrop, who was laughing merrily with his band of cohorts, completely unaware of the danger he was in. He wanted to rip the round little man apart with his hands, but there was a greater urgency moving through him then, something much closer to fear. He felt his hands clench into fists at his sides, and could only imagine what expression he wore when the girl before him made a squeaking sound and melted away.

He forgot her immediately. He looked around the glittering party, taking in all the famous faces, all the rich and the bored, the infamous and the outrageous. They were all the same. The same faces he had seen again and again, in every party, from London to Positano to Sydney and back again. The same gossip, the same stories, the same old game.

But he had no interest at all in playing, not anymore.

He had changed. He was not the same man he had been when he'd staggered up the drive to Wolfe Manor, battered and bleeding, all those weeks ago. He was not the same man he'd been pretending to be the whole of his life, and the pretense, the mask, no longer seemed to fit him as it should.

And the reason for that was not here, as she should be.

The great well of emotion, black and terrible, vast and unconquerable, that he had tried to outrun all day today swelled in him, nearly knocking

him from his feet, so intense he wondered if he could beat it back and maintain his balance. He did, but barely. In his whole life, only three people had mattered to him so much that their loss had altered the course of his existence. His mother. His brother Jacob.

And now, tonight, the woman whose absence seemed to alter the very air around him, making it impossible to breathe.

He had suffered through the other losses, had even accepted them. But not this time. Not this one.

Not Grace.

For the first time in a long time, maybe ever, Lucas wanted to—*had to*—fight for what he desired, what he needed, what he could not imagine living without. He had no other choice. He could not let Grace leave him, could not let her disappear, could not let her go. He could not.

Because for the first time in his life, he realized as his heart beat too hard and the panic raced through him like an electric charge, he had far too much to lose.

Grace sat in her room at the Pig's Head for a very long time, staring at nothing.

"We wanted you to *manage* Lucas Wolfe, Grace," Charles Winthrop had said, his round face screwed into a contemptuous sneer, right there in full view of the staff and Wolfe Manor itself. Grace had had no recourse but to stand there and take it. "Not manhandle him in public view."

So disgusted. So disdainful.

"Act like a whore and you'll be treated like a whore!" her mother had shouted years ago, as all of Racine gathered around their copies of an old American sports magazine to condemn Grace and whisper about her behind their hands. As Mary-Lynn threw Grace's meager belongings out the door into the dirt and screamed at her to stay out.

Charles Winthrop had not actually called her a whore, of course. He had murmured about propriety and reputation. He had made it clear that a woman who had had the bad taste to allow herself to be photographed in such a compromising position—he did not clarify if he meant on Lucas's lap or in her bikini at seventeen—was by definition no

longer the appropriate choice to represent Hartington's interests, much less their corporate events. He might as well have handed her a brand-new scarlet letter to wear on her forehead—perhaps even affixed it himself.

She had seen the way he'd looked at her, the way his eyes flicked over her professional demeanor, as if looking for the cracks in her veneer—as if, were he to look at her in exactly the right way, the whore would seep out and show herself.

Just as her mother had always predicted.

What was surprising, Grace thought now, rising to her feet and looking around the room, though she hardly saw it, was that she'd been furious, not upset. She hadn't been *hurt* that Charles Winthrop thought so little of her when faced with those pictures—she'd wanted to throw something at his head. That fury and indignation had carried her in an outraged silence all the way back to her room at the inn—where the reality of the situation had settled around her like a suffocatingly heavy cloak, and had forced her to sit there on the couch by the window for much longer than she should have.

Because she had lost everything.

Again.

The truth of that was starting to sink in now, the longer she stood in the room, still and silent. The more time passed. She knew the gala was happening even now—could even hear the music on the wind—and she was finished. It was all as she'd feared it would be. She'd lost her career. The respect of her peers. Everything she'd worked so hard for, all these long years. Hadn't she warned herself? Hadn't she had her memories of her mother's voice to chime in when her own had wavered? Hadn't she understood from the start that this very thing would happen?

She needed to go, she knew. She needed to pack up her things and head back to London. She needed to come up with a new plan for her life—a new direction. But every time she told herself it was time to get moving, she remembered some other bright, captivating moment that had happened in this room, with Lucas, and she could not bring herself to budge from her position. As if she was paralyzed.

He was the reason for her downfall, and even so, she yearned for him.

He had thrown her love back in her face, disappeared without a trace, and still, she longed for him. How could that be? How, even now, could there be a part of her that whispered fiercely that it did not matter what she'd lost, that she would do it again—that he was worth it. That all of this was worth it.

This was it, she knew, with a sickening certainty. This was the exact ruin her mother had foreseen. Grace just hadn't expected it to feel like this. So ... encompassing.

She had always known she would pay a high price for touching a man like Lucas Wolfe. She had never been in any doubt on that score. He was the proverbial rocky cliff, and she understood, now, why the hapless ship hurled itself against those rocks, again and again, until all that remained were splinters and painful memories, churning waters and the remains of what had once been a proud, sleek vessel.

She was surprised when she felt the wetness on her cheeks, and it was not until she raised her hands to her face that she realized she was crying.

Just as it took her long moments to realize that when the door opened and Lucas stormed in, it was really him, not just a convenient fantasy tossed her way by her desperate imagination.

He was breathing heavily, almost as if he had been running in his elegant black-tie evening wear, and his eyes were burning with a light that made her stomach clench in automatic response. Desire. Despair. Both.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, furious that her voice was hoarse, that there were tears on her face, that he would see her like this, brought so low. "The gala is happening right this minute!"

"How can you possibly care about that now?" he asked in the same tight voice, as if he fought to keep himself under control.

She should have left ages ago. Why was she still here? Had she lingered deliberately, hoping for exactly this? His reappearance? What did she imagine would come of this? She had told him she loved him, and he had walked away. What more was there to say?

She wished there really were rocks strewn in front of her, so she could

knock herself oblivious upon them. It could only be an improvement on the agony she felt coursing through her, making her feel weak. Making her want to be the kind of woman who begged. But she was not. She could not allow herself to be, not even for him. Not even now.

"I must pack," she said in a low voice, not daring to look at him as she jabbed at her eyes with the backs of her hands. She already felt too much. And she had already shown him too much, left herself too vulnerable. She was afraid there was nothing left. "And you must go back to that party. They need you."

"I am sure they do," he said, in a voice she did not recognize. Uneven. Rough. "But what about what I need?"

She jerked her eyes to his, and caught her breath, not at all sure she recognized the Lucas who stood before her, his fists clenched and his green eyes so bright with emotion.

*Out of control*, she thought, in a kind of wonder.

"Are you all right?" she asked, frowning.

He moved farther into the room, his big, lean body more tense than she had ever seen it, his beautiful face in an uncharacteristic scowl.

It occurred to her that she had never seen him like this. That this was, finally, the maskless, artifice-free Lucas Wolfe, all rampaging emotion and driving need—and he was in a towering rage.

She should not find that exhilarating. She should not allow that to let her ... wish.

"All right?" he asked, his tone murderous. He shook his head as if he could not understand her, and crossed the room until he was right in front of her, inches away, and still scowling. "I cannot live without you, you idiotic woman! How could anything ever be all right again?"

# CHAPTER TWELVE

“THAT’S lovely,” Grace replied, stung, her eyes heavy with tears yet again. “Poetic, really. Thank you.”

“Is this what you wanted?” he continued as if she hadn’t spoken, in the same thick, rough voice, the volume increasing even as Grace stared up at him. “Did you do this deliberately?”

“Did I ...?” She shook her head, fighting back the tears, wanting to reach over and shove him away from her—but too afraid that if she touched him, it would be to drag him closer. “What are you talking about?”

“What am I supposed to do now, Grace?” he demanded, outraged. “How am I supposed to carry on with my life? Have you ever thought of that?”

She felt her own temper kick in, the one that urged her to wreck things, punch things, cause damage and destroy her own property. The one she usually tamped down. It was better than the tears. Anything was better than the tears.

“I’ve been a little bit busy today, Lucas,” she threw at him, suddenly, deeply furious. “There was the invasive tabloid article, complete with photographs, and the gala I still had to prepare for while awaiting my boss’s arrival. Then I was summarily fired because of my whorish behavior. So, no—I’m afraid I have not spent a lot of time wondering what *you* might do with your life. I’m a bit preoccupied with my own!”

“You can’t just *do* this!” he cried wildly, throwing his hands out as if she’d wrecked him, somehow. As if he, the man who defined *ease*, was at a loss. He moved closer, to glare down at her. “You can’t show up in my perfectly constructed life, turn it inside out and then vanish into the night! Were you even planning to tell me what had happened? That you were leaving?”

“Was I supposed to?” she demanded, fire and anguish twining inside of her, making her stomach tense—as powerful as the urge to reach over

and touch him. Hit him. Caress him. She could not tell. “Before or after you stormed off and left me standing on that staircase? I told you that I loved you, Lucas, and you ran away.”

“I had to think!” he shouted, completely unhinged, and Grace stopped breathing.

Lucas Wolfe ... yelling? Truly out of control? Was this really happening? This was Lucas stripped down, laid bare, she realized. This was no more and no less than ... a man. Not the legend. Not a collection of pretty words and practiced smiles, one for every occasion, whatever the situation called for. This was just a man.

An angry, emotional man.

*Mine*, a small voice whispered, reigniting that flame of hope she’d thought he’d extinguished when he’d walked away from her.

“I had to think,” he repeated, his breath coming fast, his eyes hard on hers. Almost desperate. “Because I need you, and I have never needed anyone. Ever. It is not an easy thing, to change the habits of a lifetime —”

“Because, of course, it was so easy for me,” she interrupted, feeling unhinged herself, as if the world was starting to spin, around and around, drunk and erratic.

“I am not a good bet,” he threw at her, almost snapping out the words. “Quite the opposite, especially for someone who has achieved all that you have achieved, and all on your own. I have actively discouraged anything so much as masquerading as a commitment—even a second night in my company. I have never known any other way to be.”

“If that is your résumé, it leaves something to be desired,” she said, trying to sound fierce, tough, though she could hear the shake in her voice. The quake. And everything that was not Lucas tilted and whirled—or perhaps that was only her stomach.

He considered her then, seeming to take in her wet eyes, the slight tremor that shook through her, for the first time since entering the room.

“I may crash and burn at any moment,” he said, his voice softer, though not necessarily calmer. “There is nothing to suggest that I am not exactly the waste of space everyone believes me to be. Everyone

including me.” His green eyes searched hers. “Everyone save you.”

She was afraid to breathe. Afraid to move. Afraid that she was imagining this wild, electric moment.

“Are you?” she asked softly.

He let out a breath that was very nearly a laugh, and suddenly his nearness was overwhelming. She wanted to touch him more than she wanted anything else, wanted to burrow into him and hold him, even if it was to her own detriment. Even if it ruined her more than it already had. She did not care what that said about her, what that made her. A broken ship against the rocks. Her mother. None of that seemed to matter.

The closer he was, the more she felt free.

“No one else has ever seen beneath the surface,” he said, his voice low, intense. “But you—you saw through me from the start.” He reached over, taking her shoulders in his hands and bringing her flush against him. “If you give me a year, Grace, I will give you everything I have. I cannot promise it will be much, but it’s yours.”

She tilted her head back, and saw the warring emotion in his smoky green eyes, the fear and the hope. And something unfurled inside of her then, something strong and hard. Something right and true. Undeniable.

Because she could recognize truth when she saw it, when he shared it. When he offered her what she had given him earlier today, no matter what words he used.

The only words he knew, she thought. The only words he could.

“Are you offering me a test run?” she asked, over the sudden lump in her throat. “A year to see if you can work out all the kinks?”

“I could tell you that I love you,” he said in a low, intense voice, his eyes fixed to hers. “And it might even be true. I believe it is. But what does the word even mean to one such as me? What context do I have for it?” He leaned close, placed his forehead against hers, as if he needed her to help him stand. Grace felt herself shake against him, into him. With him. “I know that I should let you go—it’s the only thing I’ve ever been any good at—and instead I am here, making promises I have no idea at all if I can keep.”

"Qualified promises," Grace pointed out, emotion tangling in her throat, in her voice. "What every girl dreams of, I'm sure."

He let out a breath, and ran his hands up and down her arms, in an easy rhythm, building heat, spreading fire.

"My brother Nathaniel is getting married to his Katie next month," he said. "Will you come with me?"

She laughed then, unexpectedly, the tears spilling over, and she didn't care.

"Have we downgraded from a year to a month?" she asked, sneaking her arms around his narrow waist. "How much testing do you think you require?"

"I don't know who I am!" The words seemed almost torn from him. He pulled back and stared down at her. "Don't you understand? I want to give you the world, Grace, but I have no idea how to do it."

"I do not want the world," she said simply, sliding her hands up to hold his beautiful face between them. "I can get that for myself, if I wish it. I only want you."

"I am yours," he said, his words ringing through her, around her, with the force of a vow. "In every way."

"Then what else do we need?" she asked, and pressed her mouth to his.

Fire and wine. Lucas's wicked mouth, and her own needy little moan. He pulled back, his eyes dark with passion and something else, something she knew might take him some time to accept as truth. To truly believe.

But she was more than happy to wait.

"A date," he said, tilting his head back, his mouth crooking up in the corner. "I need a date to the gala. And you no longer work for these people, Grace, so really, no more of these appalling suits. I cannot bear it."

She did not ask how he managed to produce a midnight-blue gown from nowhere, one that clung to her breasts like a lover and then swept all the way to the floor, fitting her perfectly. And she did not argue when he

only looked at her when she emerged from the en suite bathroom, her hair in a French twist, and ordered her, in that dark, demanding voice, to take it down.

“Enough hiding,” he said, and then held out his hand. And this time, she took it without hesitation.

She walked into the gala she had planned for so many months with her head held high, her hair swirling around her shoulders, no longer pretending to be anything but what she was. A woman. A competent and confident woman who did not need to hide any part of herself away, no matter what Charles Winthrop might think.

“Grace,” her former boss said when he saw them come in, his round face creasing with concern. “What are you doing? I thought you understood that you were not welcome here.”

“She is with me,” Lucas bit off with absolutely no sign of his famous charm, and perhaps a shade too much of the seething danger she had always seen in him. “And by definition always welcome, is that not so?”

The other man paled. Grace put her hand on Lucas’s arm, and smiled her cool smile at Charles Winthrop.

“Don’t worry,” she said in her best calm, cutting way. “I am only a guest. But you can be sure that as of Monday morning, I’ll be your competitor. Who knows where? Perhaps I’ll go out on my own. But rest assured, I have no intention of simply drifting off into the ether because you fired me.”

She had enjoyed the look on his face more than she should have. But then, she had never claimed to be a good person, had she? And in any case, Lucas was smiling at her, in a way she knew he had never smiled at anyone else. In a way that was only hers. Theirs.

It heated her up like the Texas summers of her youth. The man was lethal, and she loved him.

“Come, Cinderella,” he said quietly, smiling as he drew her toward the dance floor. “It’s coming up to midnight. Do try to keep your shoes on.”

She did not care about the cameras, the staring and whispering former staff members, the entire rest of the world. She moved into his arms, and let him lead her into the music.

"I'm beginning to understand the point of the fairy tale," she said, smiling up at him, losing herself in the hot, bright gleam in his green eyes. "Who cares if I lose a shoe?"

"Who, indeed?" he asked softly, and swept them both away.

Much later, when the party had ended and most of the guests had dispersed, Lucas led her away from the tent and out onto the great lawn, where she could see the moon was just starting to rise over the trees. For a moment they stood there, side by side in silence, and gazed out over the darkened grounds. She shivered slightly when he turned to look at her, and told herself it was from the chill in the air.

"I walked around these grounds for hours today," he said quietly. "I thought I would confront myself—or my father's ghost. Perhaps I thought they were the same. But there was nothing here. Only an angry fool tramping about in the cold."

"It is just a house," she said softly. "Just some land. And he is only here as long as you keep him here."

He looked at her for a long moment.

"The only ghost I seem to be haunted by these days is you," he said, his voice a rasp against the thick night all around them.

"I am no ghost," she assured him, feeling a rush of heat to her eyes and fire to her core, an ache behind her ribs. "I am real and I am right here, Lucas."

"I have no idea at all how to build a new life without burning the old one to the ground," he said. "But I suppose we do not all need to be phoenixes, rising from the ashes, do we? Some of can simply walk on. Change."

"We can grow," she agreed in a whisper, heedless of the tears that overflowed and tracked down her cheeks, basking only in the great white heat of the joy that moved through her. "Live. Without ghosts and without fear."

Grace nestled against him, tucked into his side as if she'd been made to fit him that precisely, that well. As if she was meant to be his, and there, in the dark and facing all of his ghosts full-on, he let himself believe it.

The manor house stood behind them, covered in scaffolding, drenched in the past and lit up by the rising moon. Lucas took one last, hard look at it as the lights from the gala went off, one by one, leaving nothing to see but stone and brick and memories.

It was just a house. And he was free of it.

Finally.

“Yes,” he said, kissing her again. “All of that, Grace. I want all of it. And you.”

He took her hand in his, and together they walked down the great lawn toward the lane, toward the village and the world beyond, away from Wolfe Manor at last.

And straight on into their future.

### **1993: Jacob loses himself ...**

Alone with only his traumatic thoughts as company, Jacob spent his nights in bars, refusing alcohol, testing his self-control to the limits. An easy way out, drinking would only bring him one step closer to becoming the man he'd once despised. Women and meaningless sex block out the world, but the encounters never last and Jacob keeps moving on, with just the knowledge that he must never put down roots ...

## **Behind the scenes at Wolfe Manor ...**

**Share a secret about your hero or heroine?**

Lucas and Grace have a whole mess of secrets—that's what made their story so much fun to tell!

**Who is the biggest, baddest Wolfe?**

I suspect it must be Jacob. I can't wait to read his book!

**Which Wolfe brother did you most fancy?**

Lucas, definitely. I just adored him so much.

**Which is your hero's favourite room in Wolfe Manor?**

He would prefer to burn the whole place to the ground, actually.

**How did Lucas pop the big question?**

He hasn't yet! I imagine they'll wait a while, learn how to really trust each other, and then I think Lucas will simply ask. I think what they love most about each other is that they no longer have to hide behind their masks.

## **CAITLIN'S WRITING SECRETS ...**

**What do you enjoy most about writing as part of a continuity series; how does it differ from writing a single title?**

I was very nervous about it! But I found that it was a lot like a big puzzle. I had to take all these different elements and craft my kind of story out of it, rather than having all of that happen simultaneously and organically. I ended up loving the entire experience!

**What do you think makes a great hero/heroin?**

I love strong, passionate men and women who make mistakes, face their fears, and find a way to live a bit more true to themselves. And love each other with their whole hearts. No matter what.

**When you are writing, what is a typical day?**

I wake up, stagger to the computer with my tea, and check e-mail, various online sites, etc. I do this for far too long. Then I settle into the day's writing. I have a set amount I write each day, and I can't allow myself to do anything else until I've finished. On a bad day, this is a struggle. On a good day, I get carried away in the characters' stories and don't pay any attention to how much I've written until hours and hours have passed. The good days are what make this all so much fun!

ABBY GREEN

**BAD BLOOD**

**RESTLESS BILLIONAIRE**

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**ABBY GREEN** got hooked on Mills & Boon® romances while still in her teens, when she stumbled across one belonging to her grandmother, in the west of Ireland. After many years of reading them voraciously, she sat down one day and gave it a go herself. Happily, after a few failed attempts, Mills & Boon bought her first manuscript.

Abby works freelance in the film and TV industry, but thankfully the 4am starts and the stresses of dealing with recalcitrant actors are becoming more and more infrequent, leaving her more time to write!

She loves to hear from readers, and you can contact her through her website at [www.abby-green.com](http://www.abby-green.com). She lives and works in Dublin.

This is for my fellow ‘Bad Blood’ contributors—  
Sarah, Janette, Caitlin, Lynn, Robyn, Jennie and Kate—thanks for all  
your help and encouragement along the way!

# CHAPTER ONE

ANEEZA ADANI was stuck in a waking nightmare. She battled a surge of panic as her younger sister and aunts led her forward towards the place where her fiancé waited to make her his wife.

The elaborate wedding sari she wore constricted her movements, adding to the sense of cloying claustrophobia. Heavy jewels literally dripped from her head, ears, throat, arms and hands, weighing her down.

Fighting an overwhelming urge to break free and escape she told herself once again that she only had herself to blame for her predicament. If she hadn't been so blinkered, so unforgivably naïve ... so impossibly complacent, then she might not be here right now.

She was propelled forward again and suddenly her fiancé and her parents saw her arrival. A hush descended over the crowd in the huge and beautiful inner courtyard, lit with the seductive glow of hundreds of lanterns. This courtyard was the centrepiece in one of the most exclusive hotels in Mumbai—the jewel in the hotel's crown. The sheer opulence of it all terrified her now, the reality of what she was doing hitting her anew.

With an awful sick feeling of impending doom and fatality Aneesa reluctantly moved forward, but just then a small movement caught her eye from the side. She glanced around and, for a moment, was blinded by the icy blue gaze of a man. He was slightly obscured, in the shadows, but even that couldn't hide the fact that he was so tall and good-looking he momentarily distracted her from her surroundings.

As she registered the darkly handsome foreigner who had no doubt snuck in to ogle the most prestigious wedding of the year, reality slammed back into her again, heightened now by seeing him—as if he represented some kind of escape or freedom to her. And she knew in that moment that she hadn't been able to disguise the fear or turmoil in her eyes. He'd seen it all and she could only be thankful that he was a complete stranger. Tearing her eyes away, she mentally steeled herself

and walked forward to meet her fate....

\*

Sebastian Wolfe still reeled slightly from the searing glance he'd shared with the bride as she'd arrived. She'd looked around only briefly and yet had honed in on his gaze as if she'd felt the weight of it.

He shrugged off the prickling sensation. He had to admit that he didn't think he'd ever seen a more beautiful bride. He smiled cynically—not that he ever had any intention of watching one walk down an aisle towards *him*. Coming from a large family of mainly half-siblings, having been born to a man who'd married three times, had numerous affairs and begat eight children, to say that Sebastian had a jaundiced view of the holy sanctity of marriage was a huge understatement.

With an iron will, he concentrated once more on his surroundings and not the potential minefield of his family, who had dispersed from their ancestral home, Wolfe Manor, as soon as they'd been able to escape.

In the huge and ornately decorated inner courtyard a stunning marquee covered in silken swathes of material took up the centre space under a dusky evening sky. The bride, while being of average height, stood with a regal and graceful bearing that made her appear taller.

Her face was a smooth mask of intent concentration, and given the elaborate ritual of the traditional Indian wedding, he couldn't blame her. It seemed to him to consist of a dizzying array of minutely observed events, each as important as the last and all following a strict code. It had been going on for days now, culminating in this ceremony here tonight. Incense was burning, ladening the warm air around him with a rich and luxuriant smell.

A short while before, Sebastian had watched the arrival of the groom carried aloft on a gold chair, where, bedecked in a long tunic of spun silken gold and close-fitting matching trousers, he'd been greeted by his in-laws, his face obscured by a curtain of fresh marigold flowers.

And then the bride had been brought in, her slender arms encased in silver, red and gold bangles, led by attendant women. Sebastian had seen the intricate henna tattoo that adorned her hands up as far as her lower

arms. In her glittering red-and-gold sari and elaborate headdress and with a pearl-and-diamond jewel nestling at the centre of her forehead, she'd looked like an Indian princess from the Mogul Empire.

The memory of the look they'd shared hit him again with a jolt of sensation in his solar plexus. It was bizarre, but he thought he'd seen something close to panic and desperation in her huge brown, heavily kohled eyes.

He frowned; he must have been mistaken, because now, as he watched the bride and groom place garlands over each other's heads, she looked nothing but serene. And yet, had he just seen her delicate hands shaking? Sebastian mentally chastised himself—what did he care for the emotional state of a complete stranger on her wedding day? All he cared about was that everything went smoothly and they had no cause to fault their venue.

This hotel was just one in his hugely successful chain of hotels around the world. The uberluxurious Mumbai Grand Wolfe Hotel. And he was here merely on a whirlwind tour to oversee the society wedding of the year: Aneesa Adani to Jamal Kapoor Khan, two of Bollywood's hottest stars.

From the report his Indian PA had given him about the wedding, he knew that Aneesa Adani had been crowned Miss India some years before and following a successful modelling career she'd branched into Bollywood movies and had since become their biggest star, with a veritable list of number-one movies to her credit. The subsequent romance and wedding with fellow Bollywood star Jamal Kapoor Khan was going to make them the power couple of Indian cinema for years to come. They were at the very epicentre of mass adulation, which in a country of more than a billion people was no small feat.

Sebastian cast a quick look around, noting to his satisfaction the heavily armed security guards and plain-clothed police officers, amongst his own highly trained security team. Nothing had been left to chance and he was quietly confident of the strict security measures and discretion he could guarantee in all of his hotels. It was one of the reasons his hotel had been picked as the venue of choice for this wedding as well as for its ultralavish yet understated stylish

surroundings.

From where he stood he could see the rising moon shining over the Arabian Sea and the floodlit outline of the Gateway of India, Mumbai's most iconic landmark.

Sebastian waited for the usual sense of satisfaction to steal over him when he experienced a moment like this—the rare chance to stand back and survey his hard work. A moment when he lifted his head long enough to acknowledge the fruits of his success. But it didn't come. And it was only then that he realised that he hadn't felt it in some time.

Unused to and slightly disturbed by that thought and the impulse to self-examine which he didn't usually indulge in, he looked once again to the centre of the marquee where the bride and groom now sat side by side on regal thrones on a raised dais.

The bride's exquisite face was still a cool mask of serenity but Sebastian felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck as if he could somehow sense that it was just a façade.

And then he felt a pull of something much more earthy in his groin. Encased in the elaborate wedding costume he could only see snatches of her pale olive skin, an enticing view of the bare curve of her waist and top of her hip below the tight bodice. He could imagine the silky texture of that skin, that it would feel as soft as a fresh rose petal.

To his utter chagrin and disgust, Sebastian realised that he was ogling a *bride* in the midst of her wedding ceremony and that merely looking at her was arousing him to a level that he hadn't felt since his last liaison had ended some weeks previously. He realised, too, that on some very base level he felt *jealous* of the groom, that he would be the one to uncover the lush secrets of his new wife's exotic beauty.

Sebastian cursed himself. He'd no doubt that Aneesa Adani was like every other girl of her upper-middle-class upbringing. A little princess. Her marriage to this man was merely the next step in a life of luxury and inherent idleness, despite her career as an actress. And he'd no doubt, too, that she would be no blushing virgin on her wedding night. Despite the chaste lovemaking of the Bollywood movies, in the real world the stars were just as amoral and prone to bed-hopping as in Hollywood, and she'd had a highly publicised relationship with this man for months.

Despite those assertions, turning away took more effort than he liked to acknowledge and he saw one of his close aides waiting patiently in the wings for his next move. Sebastian welcomed the distraction and thrust aside disturbing thoughts of flashing kohled eyes that had emitted what must have been an imaginary beacon of distress, and equally disturbing erotic images of sensual half-hidden curves.

He walked out of the courtyard, leaving the wedding behind, and smiled grimly. His mind had been playing tricks on him, perhaps the ritual and incense had gotten to him for a moment. Striding across the main reception area which was a glorious fusion of classic Moorish and Portuguese design, he coolly ignored the admiring looks his tall and powerful frame drew. The attention of women was something that Sebastian and his brothers had never had to worry about. They'd effortlessly drawn it as soon as they'd been old enough to know what that attention meant.

Minutes later, after consulting with his hotel manager, he stepped into his private lift and felt the habitual constriction of being in a suit, and the familiar need to engage in something physical which would clear and quieten his mind. Exercise for Sebastian was a drug, an outlet he'd turned to for as long as he could remember. It had helped him escape the chaos of his dysfunctional upbringing and now helped him escape the rigid confines on his time. It also eased the niggling sense of dissatisfaction he increasingly felt, and helped him through the frequent nights where he was lucky to get three hours sleep, the curse of the chronic insomniac.

Sebastian didn't register the impassive lines of his hard-boned face in the mirrored elevator door; he'd long ago learnt the art of projecting a controlled front, even while inwardly he might be a mass of contradictions. But his thoughts helplessly veered back to the couple downstairs. He had no doubt that in time reality would strike and the sham that all marriages inevitably were would become apparent in theirs. And in a country which held one of the lowest divorce rates in the world he could almost feel a twinge of sympathy for the happy couple, for it was unlikely they'd be allowed to escape the confines of their union, especially if they had children.

He chastised himself mockingly—who was he to rain on their parade

or judge them? His mouth tightened with grim black humour—after all, hadn't he himself come from a far from normal family upbringing?

On that thought the elevator doors opened and Sebastian walked into the penthouse Grand Wolfe suite, the best in the hotel. As he started to rip off his tie and jacket he mentally wished the couple downstairs all the best in the world and firmly pushed the image of the luscious bride from his mind. They were welcome to each other and a lifetime of wedded disharmony.

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Aneesa was barely aware of the wedding ritual going on around her. She felt numb from the inside out and she knew on some level that this feeling was a form of self-protection, albeit dangerously flimsy.

Her head ached as it had done ever since her comfortable, privileged and secure world had been blown to smithereens just two evenings previously. She'd gone to Jamal's rooms at the hotel to surprise him, hoping that she might encourage him to take their chaste lovemaking to the next level.

The thought of being a virgin on her wedding night had inexplicably filled Aneesa with fear; perhaps even then she'd been aware that what she and Jamal shared wasn't normal and had wanted to provoke him in some way. She'd never understood his reticence in the physical side of their relationship.

But instead of finding him quietly reading his new script, which is what he'd told her he'd be doing, she'd found him in bed. With his assistant. His *male* assistant.

Aneesa knew she still hadn't fully assimilated the shock of that moment. She'd stumbled to the bathroom and had been violently ill. By then Jamal's lover had disappeared and Jamal had calmed down enough to go into damage limitation mode.

She could remember his smoothly handsome face, a mask of condescending pity, as he'd asked her how she hadn't already known about this when all their friends knew. And Aneesa had almost been sick again when she'd recalled the snide looks she'd often dismissed as petty

jealousy from their circle of friends. She'd also had to acknowledge uncomfortably that of her so-called friends who even now thronged the courtyard of this exclusive hotel, there hadn't been one she'd felt she could confide in.

It had been a harsh pill to swallow to acknowledge how shallow her life had become, and how easily she'd left good friends behind once she'd become more and more famous.

In the space of that one evening, her whole life had undergone a subtle but seismic shift. And in the couple of days since, Aneesa had changed from being a relatively spoilt young woman, who'd pretty much taken everything around her for granted, into someone more mature and less naïve. The urge to find comfort in blame had been futile, for she knew she was as much to blame for the situation she now found herself in, as painful as it was to acknowledge that.

Jamal's curt warning from that evening still rang in her ears and it had fatally inhibited her impulse to ask for help or advice: 'If you think for a second that you can walk away from this marriage you can kiss your career goodbye for ever. Who would want to marry you after such a scandal? Because you can be sure of one thing, if you walk away and try to save face by telling people the truth, I will deny it and fight you every step of the way. This marriage is my ticket to respectability for ever. Our children will make everyone believe that we have the perfect marriage. And who would even believe you over me? Their beloved Jamal Kapoor Khan?'

Aneesa had known he was right. If she even attempted to reveal the truth she'd be crucified by his millions of devoted fans. As famous as she was, he was a far bigger star. She'd be a pariah and would never make another movie in India. Apart from all of that, she was the first in her family to get married. Her beloved paternal grandmother was nearing ninety and maintaining that she was clinging onto dear life just long enough to see Aneesa wed.

Aneesa also knew that while the public perception of her family was that they had untold wealth, in fact, her father had been struggling to keep the family silk business afloat for some time now. Only she and her mother knew the reality, which was that this wedding was all but

crippling her father financially.

And yet, Aneesa also knew that her father would prefer to face financial ruin than the ignominy of not being able to pay for his first daughter's marriage. He was so proud that he hadn't even let Aneesa help financially. While her pay packet was nothing like her Hollywood counterparts, by Indian standards she was a wealthy woman in her own right.

And how could she have told her parents about Jamal's secret? They were conservative and solidly middle class. Respectability was their middle name; they would be devastated. The pressure in her head and behind her eyes suddenly increased now in an intense physical pain.

She could feel the weight of Jamal's gaze from her left and could barely bring herself to turn to him, anticipating all too well the false adoration that would be written all over his handsome features. It was a look that he'd perfected over many years in films. A look that she'd fallen for herself when they'd met on her first film, and a look that she'd fooled herself into believing was sincere.

No wonder he'd wooed her so easily, she recognised now with acrid bitterness. He'd seen her coming from a mile away: sheltered, spoilt, immature and unbelievably naïve. And she'd fallen for his act, hook, line and sinker—seduced by his smooth good looks and even smoother talking. Not to mention his intense attention and adulation of her. He'd appealed to all the worst parts of her and she'd live with the shame of that for the rest of her life.

Her train of thought and self-disgust was cut short abruptly when the priest officiating indicated for them to stand. They were approaching the most sacred part of the ceremony, after which Aneesa knew her chances of escape would be all but gone for ever.

The ends of her sari and Jamal's long jacket were tied together and they were about to walk around the sacred fire seven times, while seven blessings were said, each one for different aspects of their marriage. As they started to walk slowly around the fire, Aneesa felt again the rising tide of panic. The numbness was leaving her now and in its place she began to shake and tremble in reaction to what she was doing.

Any girlish dreams she'd had of falling in love and marrying had long

since been turned to dust. Her eyes were wide open now and with each step she took with Jamal around this fire, she was hurtling further into a future with no escape and certain pain and suffering. How could she possibly bring children into a marriage like that? When their father would be sleeping with their mother purely to procreate and maintain a façade?

In that second Aneesa recalled the piercing blue eyes of the man she'd seen in the shadows and suddenly an impulse stronger than anything she'd ever felt rushed through her. In the midst of the shock and panic she acted with an economy and sureness of movement that surprised her. She stopped and bent and swiftly undid the knot that tied her sari to Jamal's coat. She barely heard his indrawn breath and his hissed, 'Aneesa ... what do you think you are doing?'

Then she stepped off the dais. Heart thumping she went straight to her open-mouthed father and took his hand in hers. She was aware that everyone was frozen in shock and surprise and knew dimly that she had to take advantage of that. She brought her father's hand to her mouth and pressed a kiss against it and said with a hoarse voice, her eyes filling with tears, 'I'm so sorry, Papa, I can't do this. I'll pay you back. Please forgive me.' And she fled.

Aneesa was barely aware of where she'd run, she knew only that she wouldn't have long to capitalise on the shock of the wedding crowd before her father sent people to find her. She couldn't bear to think of her parents' confusion and dismay either, or else she'd falter altogether. And she couldn't turn back now.

She stopped for a moment, her heart hammering in her chest. She'd come up several flights of service stairs and now saw what looked like a staff elevator. All Aneesa hoped for was that it would take her somewhere far away from that courtyard and somewhere quiet, where she could assess the situation she now found herself in. She longed for fresh air, and her clothes felt more constrictive than ever.

The elevator slid silently upwards, and then came to a smooth halt. The doors opened with a muted whoosh and she found herself in what looked like a utility room. Albeit a very plush utility room.

She approached the one door and opened it with her heart in her

mouth. Peering out she could see that she was in a suite of rooms that went on and on. All was quiet and still. No one was here. She automatically assumed that she'd found one of the empty suites in this massive hotel. Heaving a huge sigh of relief, she emerged more fully and walked into a darkened kitchen. She could see a huge formal dining room and, through that, wall-to-wall sliding glass doors which led to an open terrace and balcony outside. She could see the skyline of Mumbai laid out like a glittering carpet. This was no ordinary suite, this was the penthouse!

When she thought of her own honeymoon suite with its king-size bed covered in rose petals she felt clammy and sweaty all over again. Almost tripping in her long sari she made for the glass doors, struggling to open them and get out to the fresh air.

Finally they slid back and Aneesa stumbled out, gasping now. She ripped the heavy garland of flowers from around her neck and let it fall to the ground. She was vaguely aware of a dim light coming from nearby but barely registered it. When she reached the wall she tipped her head back and breathed deep, the chaotic sounds of the crazy Mumbai traffic drifting up from far, far below.

Her heart finally started to slow down. So when she heard a deep drawling voice say, 'Please don't tell me you're thinking of jumping ...' Aneesa screamed.

# CHAPTER TWO

ANEEZA whirled around so fast her head spun and she gripped the wall behind her with both hands. And then she saw him in the dim light. She recognised him instantly by his intense piercing blue eyes, like chips of ice. It was the man from the shadows she'd seen downstairs. And now she also registered what she'd missed entirely in her distraught state: a state-of-the-art terrace pool, lit from underwater.

The man's arms were resting nonchalantly on the side of the pool, and crossed, as if he was quite used to hysterical women in full bridal regalia bursting onto his private terrace.

His hair was slicked back against a well-shaped skull and in the shadows the lines of his face were stark, his jaw hard. He arched one ebony-black brow and once again Aneesa had the gut-clenching realisation of how extraordinarily handsome he was. It was a physical sensation she'd never experienced with Jamal, even though she'd believed herself to be in love with him. The realisation sent shock through her system.

'Shouldn't you be kissing your groom about now?'

His laconically spoken words and their accompanying picture sent a wave of nausea through Aneesa. Barely thinking, she said numbly, 'All Jamal will be concerned about is his precious reputation.'

Hearing her own voice loud in the silence made shock grip her anew. She had to leave. Get away from here, but just as she started to move she realised that her legs had turned to jelly. To her utter horror and chagrin, she folded to the ground from the waist down like a rag doll, the previous minutes' events crippling her.

So quickly, that she didn't have time to register, the man had hauled himself out of the pool and was crouched beside Aneesa, water sluicing off his taut body. Big hands came under her arms and suddenly he was lifting her up as if she weighed no more than a doll.

Amidst the shock of reality hitting her, and his proximity, a torrent of

words clamoured to get out.

'I'm so ... sorry ... had no idea anyone was here. I ran ... had to get away. I'll go ... leave you alone ... shouldn't be here ...'

Aneesa was aware that her teeth were chattering and that the man was effortlessly supporting her as he led her back through the doors and into a luxurious living room, switching on low lights as he went. His arm around her was like a steel support, and the wet body she could feel through her sari felt like a warm wall of hard muscle.

He brought her over to a sumptuous couch and sat her down with a gentleness that belied his obvious strength. When she was seated he crouched down and looked up into her face. However handsome she'd thought him before, up close he was quite simply breathtaking.

Even though his hair was wet, she could see that it was cut almost militarily short. His blue eyes were deep set, over a patrician nose which gave him a look of royalty. A thin upper lip spoke of a cool control, but his full lower lip spoke of passion and an innate sensuality, and even though he was a complete stranger Aneesa had the almost overwhelming urge to run her finger along that lower lip and see if his icy blue eyes would darken with the promise of sensual satisfaction.

Aghast at the totally uncharacteristic and wanton direction of her thoughts she recoiled back and then wished she hadn't as it gave her a better view of his broad shoulders and tautly muscled chest, covered with a smattering of masculine hair.

Something flashed in his eyes and he drew back too, asking, 'Will you be OK for a minute if I go and put some clothes on?'

Aneesa's head nearly fell off she nodded it so vigorously. She couldn't even speak and just watched with a dry mouth as he stood to his full imposing height, and strode away. Helplessly, her eyes drawn to the sheer athletic grace with which he walked. He had a broad back, which tapered down to narrow hips and then lower to where his short swim trunks hugged the globes of his muscular bottom. His skin was a burnished olive as if he spent much time outdoors, and dimly she wondered if he might be some sort of professional athlete.

With a flood of heat rising from her belly upwards Aneesa finally dragged her gaze away and groaned, bringing her hands to her face.

What was wrong with her? She'd just sent her whole life into a tailspin and here she was drooling over some stranger's half-naked body.

The only thing stopping her from getting up and running at that moment was a curious sense of lethargy and also the very real fear that she'd collapse again. Also she owed this man an explanation for bursting into his penthouse suite. She told herself she'd just wait till he came back and then apologise and leave, and hopefully by then she'd be in a fit enough state to walk out with some measure of dignity, and find some other sanctuary where she could lick her wounds.

Sebastian stepped out from under the cold spray of the quickest shower he'd ever taken and roughly ran a towel over his body. He'd had to take a cold shower because merely putting his hands under Aneesa Adani's arms when he'd helped her inside had unleashed a flood of desire so forceful that he'd nearly lost control.

He could still feel the gentle swell of her breast against his side, the silky brush of her hair as it had swung against him and an enticing scent of exotic flowers. Her skin was as soft as he'd imagined it might be earlier.

He cursed himself as his body started to respond to the mental images again and he enforced rigid control, dragging on a pair of black trousers and a white shirt. Clearly she didn't feel the same level of intensely immediate attraction if the way she'd recoiled just now was anything to go by. And what the *hell* was she doing here anyway? She should be in the midst of her wedding right now, and yet she'd looked like a car crash victim. Albeit the most beautiful car crash victim he'd ever seen.

Grimly he recognised that he obviously hadn't misread her look earlier. Her mouth ... He had to grit his jaw just thinking of how it had trembled. How she'd pressed those lips together to try and contain her emotion. And how it had made him want to reach up and pull her head down to his so that he could press his mouth against hers and see if she tasted as sweet as she looked.

He'd just finished his first punishing set of lengths when she'd burst onto the terrace and for a second he'd believed he might be hallucinating. Or going mad. He'd spoken out loud as much to dispel the image before him, but then she'd screamed and turned around, clearly

stunned to find anyone there. And as soon as he'd realised that she was very real, his brain had gone into meltdown.

Chagrined to be brought to this level of lack of control, Sebastian took a deep breath and went back out to the living room.

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Aneesa heard the stranger returning and stood, but almost immediately she swayed. In a second he was by her side again—and dressed, she noted with relief. He pushed her back down onto the couch gently.

His voice was grim. ‘You’re not in any state to go anywhere.’

Before Aneesa could protest he was handing her a glass which held about an inch of dark golden liquid. She looked up and said huskily, ‘I don’t drink.’

He held it out. ‘Consider it medicinal. You need something, you’re clearly in shock.’

Belatedly she noted the English intonation of his accent. With a slight tremor in her hands she took the glass, relieved that their fingers didn’t touch, and wrinkling her nose, she took a sip, wincing as the fiery liquid burnt its way down her throat. Almost immediately she could feel it settle into her stomach and a resulting warm numbing glow spread outwards.

She sensed rather than saw him move away and when she could muster the courage she looked up to see him standing a few feet away with arms crossed, leaning insouciantly against the glass doors. The white of his shirt couldn’t disguise the powerful chest underneath, or the way the muscles in his arms bunched. He watched her intently and she flushed.

She bit her lip and then said, ‘I’m very sorry for disturbing you like this. I had no right to barge in.’

He frowned then, black brows drawing together over those mesmerising eyes. ‘How did you get in?’

Aneesa faltered for a moment, much of her journey here was hazy. ‘I think through a service lift, into a utility room ...’

His mouth tightened with displeasure and Aneesa read it to mean that he was angry with her. She started to apologise again. ‘I’m so sorry—really, I had no idea where I was going—’

He cut her off. ‘It’s not your fault.’

Just then a phone rang, making Aneesa flinch. Her heart started to hammer again and she looked from the phone on a nearby table to the man in horror. ‘They must be looking for me....’

As he pushed himself away from the glass doors he said, ‘I’ll have to answer it or they’ll send someone up.’

Aneesa stood in agitation, still gripping the glass. ‘Please, don’t tell them I’m here. *Please.* I’m not ready to deal with ... it.’

She watched as the man picked up the phone, answering with a curt, ‘Yes,’ his eyes never leaving hers.

Aneesa could just hear an indistinctly panicked voice. They must be phoning every room in the hotel. Her heart sank. This man was a complete stranger; he had no obligation to protect her. But even as she was thinking this and fearing the worst he cut off the babble on the phone and said, ‘I’ve seen no one. Please don’t disturb me again tonight unless it’s urgent. I’m sure the manager can deal with the situation.’

And he put down the phone. His eyes hadn’t left hers for a second.

Relief washed through Aneesa, dizzying in its intensity, even as her skin tingled, as if something unspoken had just passed between them. ‘Thank ... thank you so much, I know you have no obligation to help me....’

The man prowled close to her and took the glass from her white-knuckled grip, placing it down on a table. Curiously, she recognised that even though she didn’t know him, she felt safe with him. As if she could trust him. And that was a revelation when for days she’d looked at everyone around her with suddenly jaundiced eyes.

He straightened up again to his full intimidating height. ‘Perhaps we should introduce ourselves, because it looks like you won’t be going anywhere for a while. They have every guard combing the hotel for you right now. I think you must be aware that I know who you are.’

Up until recently she would have automatically expected that

response, but while this man knew who she was, clearly he wasn't in thrall and that gave Aneesa a heady feeling. New humility and untold gratitude for this sanctuary made her voice soft. 'Yes, I'm Aneesa.'

After a long moment she put out her hand, only becoming belatedly aware of what a caricature she must look like with the henna tattoo and all the elaborate jewels, and the wedding outfit. Her hand was enveloped in his much larger one, his grip warm and strong and sending a disturbing electric tingle right to her groin. He smiled and it was lopsided, making Aneesa feel dizzy again. She feared after tonight that she'd never get her equilibrium back.

'Sebastian ... at your service it would seem.' Sebastian had made a split-second decision not to mention his family name, feeling it hanging like a yoke around his neck, and was aware for the first time that he was in the presence of someone who didn't appear to know who he was. The thought was curiously heady.

A thread of illicit tension snaked through Aneesa at his words. As if he might be at her service in a much more carnal way. Shocked by that thought, and suddenly overwhelmed by everything and feeling more and more ridiculous, she said shakily, 'Would you mind if I used your bathroom?'

He stood back after a long moment, releasing her hand with deliberate slowness, and shook his head, gazing so intently at her that she felt flutters run all the way up and down her spine. No man had ever looked at her so explicitly. He gestured to the back of the penthouse. 'By all means, it's just through there.'

Aneesa walked away on still-wobbly legs and found the bathroom, slipping inside and closing the door. It was a relief to be away from that courtyard and the intense pressure, and a relief to be away from Sebastian's disturbing presence. Just then she remembered how it had been the memory of his eyes that had acted as a catalyst to make her run from the ceremony.

And now she was here, in *his* suite. And he was protecting her from the hordes.

She shivered slightly. She was a pragmatic person, not given to flights of fancy, but it suddenly felt very serendipitous to have arrived here.

Immediately that visceral physical response flooded her body in a way that had never happened before.

Even on the fateful evening she'd gone to Jamal's room to seduce him in her impossibly naïve way, she'd felt no physical anticipation, and yet in the space of the past few minutes she'd become more aware of herself and another man than she ever had been in her whole life. It was fast eclipsing the recent disastrous events.

She pushed away from the door and went to stand in front of the mirror; a soft light had come on automatically once she'd opened the door of the bathroom. She sighed deeply. When had she become so used to, or expected, such flippant luxuries?

She looked at her heavily made-up face and urgently wanted to feel clean again. As if she could get rid of the persona of Aneesa Adani, Bollywood's darling. She released the clip which held the jewel that sat in the centre of her forehead and laid it down carefully and with warm water in the sink she bent and splashed it over her face.

After a few minutes though, she could see that it was going to take a lot more than water to wipe it all away. A sense of futility washed through her and also pain, to know the upheaval she was undoubtedly causing within her family. Jamal she wasn't unduly concerned about; he would survive, especially now she knew he'd only seen her as a strategic pawn.

But her parents ... they had deserved better. She could picture the disappointment and humiliation on their faces right now. They loved her so much, and while she knew they were proud of her success, she knew that they'd have been equally proud if she'd become a housewife and had babies. They'd always accepted her unconditionally and this is how she repaid them....

Emotion surged; Aneesa was unable to stop gut-wrenching sobs from rising upwards. She hadn't really lost control yet, and the pressure of keeping it together nearly floored her now. She pulled at the bangles on her arms and rings on her fingers, uncaring of the pain as she ripped them off, dropping them to the counter. With shaking hands she untied the necklace from around her neck and it, too, fell under its own heavy weight.

Sobbing now in earnest, and with a sense of inner desperation mounting and anger at herself once again for having been so stupid and selfish, she tried ineffectually to wash the henna tattoo off her arms and hands, knowing that all the scrubbing in the world wouldn't remove it, only the passing of time.

Just then a knock came on the door, and Sebastian's voice saying, 'Aneesa, are you all right in there?'

She couldn't answer; the tears were streaming down her face now, streaking it with mascara. Her chest heaved with jerky sobs and she sagged back against the sink just as Sebastian opened the door, took one look and strode in.

She held out her dripping hands stupidly and looked up at him, struggling to regain control. 'I ....I can't get rid of the henna tattoo.... Do you have any idea what this means?'

Sebastian shook his head, looking grim. And gorgeous. Aneesa was aware of that even in this state.

She said brokenly, 'It's meant to symbolise my transition from innocence ... except now I don't even have a husband to seduce me! I'm going to be walking around with the physical mark of my shame for everyone to see for weeks!'

Sebastian just got a facecloth and wrung it out in the warm water. He came close and gently wiped at the trails of mascara running down Aneesa's cheeks. She could feel the backs of his lower arms brush against her chest as he wiped her face, and in an instantaneous reaction, her nipples stiffened, pushing against the hard material of her bodice top. Her inner agitation died away as a wholly new tension entered her body, flooding her belly with a hot tingling awareness, a sensation of melting.

A taut stillness entered the air around them as Sebastian washed her face. He finally put the cloth down and took a towel, drying Aneesa's hands.

Then he dropped the towel and brought his hands to Aneesa's jaw, his thumbs brushing back and forth against her cheeks. She was barely breathing now, hypnotised by the blue glitter of his eyes, by the heady sense of expectation in the air, by his intensely masculine scent. She could see his jaw clench as if he was exerting some control and inwardly

a hidden part of her trembled to think that he had to exert it because of *her*.

He didn't step away; he didn't take his hands from her jaw or face, and Aneesa felt like she was slowly being set on fire. Her gaze slipped down to his mouth and she ached to know how it would feel to be kissed by him. She'd never been properly kissed by any man, thanks to her sheltered upbringing and then the even more sheltered world of being Jamal Kapoor Khan's love interest, on and off the screen.

Sebastian's virile masculinity wound around her like a spell, rendering her oblivious to everything but him and this moment in time. Making her forget everything.

He asked with a gruff voice, 'What did you mean when you said your fiancé would only be concerned about his reputation?'

Aneesa blinked and welcomed his breaking of the seductive spell, but with that came the emotion surging again. Sebastian held her steady even when she felt one or two tears slip out, his thumbs merely catching them.

'I couldn't marry him. It would have been a lie. I could have done it if it was just for myself and to save my family from the shame ... but he expected us to have children. And I couldn't bear the thought of bringing a child into such a façade....'

Sebastian frowned. 'What façade? What do you mean?'

Aneesa tried to look down but Sebastian tipped her chin back up, not letting her escape. And in all honesty there was a part of her aching to tell someone about what had happened. And who better than a practical stranger she'd never meet again?

'Jamal is gay. His assistant has been his lover for years. Everyone knew apparently except me....' Bitterness tinged her voice. 'And I didn't know because I was so wrapped up in myself, in believing that everyone loved me and that my life was all perfect. I only found out because I walked in on him and his lover a couple of days ago.'

'He wanted to marry to project an image of respectability. Homosexuality might be legal now but it's still taboo here, especially in Bollywood. His career would be over if people found out. And I was the

perfect fool for him to seduce....'

Aneesa avoided Sebastian's eyes now, terrified she'd see his disgust and pity. But his hands just tightened on her jaw, tipping it up again so that she couldn't avoid his gaze. There was no pity in his eyes, only an intense *heat*. She felt as if she were being scorched alive from the inside out and there was a curious ache in the pit of her belly, an ache she knew instinctively that only *he* could assuage.

Sebastian was unable to stop a visceral emotion from rising; her eyes were two huge almond-shaped pools of dark brown, long lashed and full of swirling emotions. 'You're so beautiful....'

The old Aneesa would have taken the compliment for granted. But now all she could think of to say was, 'So are you.'

Sebastian let her face go but only to take her hand in his and lead her out of the bathroom.

Once in the living room again Aneesa tugged free of Sebastian's grip. Instantly she felt bereft, but fear of the way this man was making her feel so instantly out of control made her panicky. As if she were on a runaway train going faster and faster. 'I should really go. I can't impose on you anymore.'

She saw something indefinable flash in his eyes but he just said laconically, 'You're ready to go out there and take on the fallout of the bride fleeing the most high-profile wedding of the year? The place will be swarming with press by now.'

Aneesa felt the blood drain from her face to remember what lay outside this suite and heard Sebastian curse softly. He came close again but she stopped him with a hand and then looked down as if momentarily mesmerised. She looked back up and tried to smile wryly. 'Do you know that ever since I was a little girl I dreamt of the day I'd get married? I fantasised about the Mehendi ceremony. All of my cousins and female relations gathered to witness the drawing of the intricate henna design on my hands and feet ... in preparation for my husband to discover on our wedding night.'

Her smile wobbled. 'And yet when it came to my wedding, I insisted on a top Bollywood make-up artist and wouldn't let my female relatives have anything to do with it. At the last minute I tried to change it, but

the make-up artist kicked up such a fuss that I couldn't....'

It suddenly hit Aneesa then, the very real probability that she would not have a second chance to have the wedding night of her childhood dreams. No chance to make reparations with her relatives and do it properly.

An awful gaping emptiness wrenched her insides, the loss of a lifelong dream profound, even as she recognised that the wedding she'd just run from had been a million miles from the dream she'd visualised as a child anyway.

She looked at Sebastian and said huskily, 'I'll never have that first night with my husband.' She gestured with a hand over her whole outfit. 'This is all ... wasted.'

Sebastian's face was implacable, stern, and Aneesa could sense in that moment that he rarely lost control. And suddenly, Aneesa felt an overwhelming urge to see him lose that control. She had no idea where it was coming from but it was rising and gathering force within her.

Without even realising what she was doing she'd moved closer to Sebastian and she saw his eyes flare, bright blue. It emboldened something deep inside her. She blurted out without thinking, 'I wish I'd met you ... I wish that my first night could have been with you.'

Aneesa knew on some dim level the enormity of what she had said, but her heart had slowed to a steady deep beat, her blood was pooling low in her belly and her gaze dropped to Sebastian's mouth. She was simply speaking the truth and couldn't have held it back even if she'd wanted to.

Everything within Sebastian narrowed to this moment. Arousal so fierce that it was almost painful gripped him. Did she know what she was saying? Was she a virgin? That thought should be sending him running, fast, in the opposite direction.

But it wasn't; it was having an even more incendiary effect on his blood. Aneesa was looking at his mouth, her lips parting, eyes glowing like dark jewels, and he couldn't resist—he had to taste her, touch her. *Kiss her.*

Abruptly Aneesa tried to back away, the sudden dawning of realisation

in her eyes, and her cheeks flushing with what had to be embarrassment. Registering her emotion made Sebastian feel inordinately protective. He reached for her and captured her easily, spanning two hands around her slim waist, bare under the drape of the sari, her skin satin soft.

Gently, yet with unmistakable remorselessness, he pulled her towards him and bent his head. Never before had he been so achingly aware of every small move, the delicious anticipation of kissing a woman for the first time.

Aneesa was powerless to resist Sebastian's attraction. When he'd pulled her closer he had looked as if he wanted to consume her whole, and fire exploded along every vein in her body.

His mouth was so close now ... Aneesa could feel her eyes flutter closed, the intensity of feelings within her almost unbearable. And then their breaths mingled, his firm mouth touched hers and she was lost in a heady world of sensation that obliterated all the pain and turmoil as effectively as if she'd just lost her memory.

The kiss started off slow and gentle, a sensual exploration that made her tremble all over. Sebastian's hands moved up from her waist to hold her head loosely, fingers caressing her skull. She could feel her already unravelling hair coming loose.

He coaxed her lips apart and when she felt his tongue explore her open mouth to touch her tongue in an intimate caress, she gasped and fresh heat flooded into her belly, making her press her legs together when a pulse throbbed between them.

In a heartbeat the kiss became something much more primal and urgent. Sebastian struggled to hold back, but soon they were hurtling towards the brink of losing all control, faster than anything he'd experienced before.

Suddenly Aneesa wrenched her mouth away and surged back in Sebastian's arms, cheeks high with colour. He could feel the jerky breaths making her chest rise and fall enticingly, and he knew that she had no idea how utterly sensual she was ... and to think that her husband would not have appreciated *this*?

As he stood on the precipice of making a momentous decision—for there was no way he was letting Aneesa leave him now—he felt acutely

vulnerable. For the first time someone stood before him and didn't see the infamous Sebastian Wolfe of the scandalous Wolfe family. Nor the multimillionaire. She didn't know his history. She had no expectation of him.

It had been a long time since anyone had shown any vulnerability in front of him. Women wanted him because he presented a pleasing physical package but more for his link to notoriety and his huge fortune.

Even his own mother hadn't recognised him as her firstborn son since he'd been a child, due to her debilitating mental illness. She still, to this day, whenever she saw him, assumed he was her beloved Nathaniel, Sebastian's younger and only full-blood brother. The fact that she didn't recognise his brother either and hadn't for years, despite her obsession with him, offered little comfort. Sebastian had ceased to exist for her long ago.

He'd seen his mother only two days before, in the UK, and even though he expected nothing less after all these years, it still hurt each time to be reminded that she'd chosen to favour another over him.

So to have this woman look at him now and really see *him*, and want him for just who he was as a man, as Sebastian, was heady. For a long time desire had been largely an intellectual thing for him; he couldn't remember the last time he'd responded with such base carnality to any woman.

His hands tightened fractionally on her waist and to his intense satisfaction he saw her eyes dilate and the pulse at the base of her throat beat frantically. Her cheeks were still flushed. He had to bite back a groan of pure need. He took a breath and surprised himself by saying, 'I don't know you ... yet I feel as if I've known you forever....'

Aneesa melted inside and felt a tremor run through her. She couldn't break her gaze from his and just said huskily, 'I know ... me too. It's ... crazy.'

He lifted a hand to twine a loose tendril of long glossy hair around a finger and tugged her gently towards him. Aneesa all but fell back into his arms, and looked up, helpless to resist this vortex that was sucking them under.

His eyes were mesmerising, hypnotising. So when he said, 'I'd like you

to stay with me tonight ... let me give you the experience you've been denied ...' her heart stopped for an infinitesimal moment.

# CHAPTER THREE

ANEEZA could barely breathe as it was, especially with his big hand on her waist. She'd been drenched in mortification ever since she'd so boldly all but begged him to kiss her. Even now she burned. But in truth, ever since she'd seen him in the shadows earlier, on some level she'd wished for this moment, not even knowing that she'd see him again. Not even knowing what she'd really wanted. And what she wanted now, with a fierce need, was *him*.

'I ...' she began, and stopped. Was she really going to do this? Just throw caution to the wind? He subtly moved her so that her body was flush with his, so that she could feel his thighs against hers through the material of their clothes. When she felt a hard ridge she blushed even fiercer.

She stalled, trying with a desperate feeling of futility to cling onto some kind of sanity. 'I don't even know you....' An insidious suspicion struck her and she pulled back slightly. 'Do you do this often? I mean, it's easy for you to just offer to take women to bed like this?'

He quirked a smile, a devastating smile. 'I've never before met a woman and wanted her so badly that I've been aching to take her to bed within minutes of meeting her. Trust me. And trust that what's happening between us isn't usual for me on any level. Or, I think, *you*.'

Sebastian realised the import of what he was saying. It was true. He'd never been so overcome with a desire to bed a woman that he hadn't been able to take her out one night and then seduce her the next, but here now with Aneesa ... there was an urgency in his body he'd never felt before. It made him feel vulnerable enough to make boundaries clear from the outset. 'What I'm proposing is that we have just this one night, where we can act on this desire. Explore it to its fullness. And you ... can have your wedding night, not as you planned it ... but in your own way.'

Aneesa looked at him and tried very hard to be rational. 'You're not just doing this out of pity?'

He smiled again and there was a touch of pain to it. He pulled her even closer so that now she could be in no doubt as to the extent of his arousal. She almost groaned aloud, a liquid heat invading her lower body, making her tremble.

‘Does that feel like pity to you?’

She shook her head dumbly, incapable of speech.

‘I wanted you from the moment I saw you arrive in that courtyard—that’s the truth. Your fiancé used you to suit his own ends ... but you are an extremely desirable woman.’

He was effortlessly honing in on the insecurity she’d felt about herself as a woman for as long as Jamal had avoided making love to her. ‘I saw you in the shadows—I thought of you ... just before I decided to run....’

His hands moved up from her waist, brushing the sides of her breasts until he cradled her jaw, fingers tunnelling through her unravelling hair, caressing her skull.

This was right. She felt it in every bone of her body. The primal urge to mate with *this* man was almost overwhelming. She *wanted* him to be her first lover. She was meant to be here with him, tonight. And in the days and weeks to come when she would have to deal with the consequences of her actions, she would be able to hug this secret moment to herself. Tonight would be the oasis in the storm to come. This was her chance to become a woman with a man who truly desired her—*on what should have been her wedding night*—and she wanted that experience more than she’d wanted anything in her life.

‘I want you to make love to me, Sebastian. Just for tonight.’

He bent his head and came closer. Aneesa’s heart threatened to jump out of her chest, and just before his mouth met hers again he said, ‘Just one night ...’

She nodded her head. How could she explain to him that if her family found out about this on top of what she’d just done she might as well emigrate to Alaska forever? Anything beyond tonight was not an option and she knew that.

The kiss, like last time, started slow and gentle. But any restraint or gentleness fast disappeared in an escalating mutual fire of need. Aneesa

blindly took Sebastian's lead and their tongues duelled in a heady dance. Her hands were on his chest, ostensibly to cling onto something solid, but now they wound up and around his neck, bringing her into even more intimate contact with his lean body.

With a muffled groan that resonated right down to her toes, Sebastian's hands slipped down her back, skimming over the curves of her waist and hips, to cup her bottom and pull her into him even more. Her breasts were flattened against his chest, nipples chafing against her tight bodice.

When she felt the thrusting force of his arousal at the apex of her legs she broke away, breathing harshly.

Sebastian's face was flushed, eyes glittering a dark blue. Throatily he said, 'Aneesa, I know what we just said, but if you want to stop ... just say the word.'

Everything in her rejected that thought. She'd been living behind a façade of her own making for so long and suddenly things felt clear and bright for the first time in her life. She shook her head fiercely. 'No ... I don't want you to stop. Don't ever stop.'

In a tender gesture that made her heart flutter, he smoothed back some hair from her brow. 'Why don't we go somewhere more comfortable?'

She nodded and, taking her hand, Sebastian led her towards the bedrooms. That clarity hit Aneesa as they walked through the quiet and darkened suite—the magnitude of what she was about to do ... and yet she knew this was what she wanted.

In all honesty she had no idea what the immediate future held for her now, and *this* moment in time was something she had control over. Sebastian pushed open a door and they stepped in. Aneesa saw a huge room with floor-to-ceiling windows which looked out over a glittering night-time Mumbai. And then she saw the massive bed in the middle of the room. Her heart tripped once and then took up an unsteady beat.

He let her go briefly to turn on a lamp and it threw out a seductively low light, bathing the room in shadows and burnishing Sebastian with a kind of golden glow. Before she had time to think too much he was back, right in front of her and leading her close to the bed.

Gently he turned her around so that her back was to his chest. She felt him start to unbraid her hair and she dropped her head with a delicious shiver skating up her spine. Her hair fell in a sleek black curtain to just between her shoulder blades.

Then he took the ornately decorated end of the sari that was wound up and over her shoulder and pulled it away where it fell to drape over her arm. She could feel the air caress her bare skin where her bodice was revealed and cut very low. She heard Sebastian's indrawn breath and then felt his knuckles gliding over her skin. She shivered and said with a tiny moan, 'Sebastian ...' his name dropping effortlessly from her mouth as if she'd been saying it all her life.

He pulled her hair over one shoulder and pressed a kiss to the place where her shoulder met her neck and she realised that he was undoing the tiny fastenings holding her bodice together. It was loose in seconds and he pushed it apart to bare her back completely.

Aneesa couldn't and didn't want to stop him when from behind her he pushed her top down her arms until it fell to the floor along with the end of her sari. She was naked from the waist up and Sebastian came right up behind her and snaked his hands around her, trailing them with infinite slowness up over her belly to the underside of her breasts.

Eyes closed, Aneesa beseeched him silently and couldn't stop the convulsive shiver when his hands came up and cupped her breasts fully, trapping her nipples between his fingers. She arched her back which pressed her bottom into him and she could feel his arousal, rock hard and insistent.

Little moans were coming from somewhere as Sebastian kneaded her breasts, making her nipples stand even more erect, and she only realised then that *she* was the one making the sounds.

With a smooth move he finally turned her around to face him and Aneesa bit her lip, knowing she should be feeling embarrassed or shy, but unable to drum up anything other than intense need. Sebastian's eyes dropped to take in her breasts and down to where her hips flared out from a small waist.

Almost reverently he touched her curves. 'You're so beautiful, like nothing I've ever seen before....'

He slowly started to unravel the sari from around her waist, until he reached to where it was tucked into her underskirt. With a flick the voluminous material fell to the floor and he was undoing the catch on the skirt so that it, too, fell. Aneesa stood before him now, naked but for a gold chain around her waist.

She flushed hotly and felt the need to explain. ‘The women who got me ready had no idea that I wouldn’t be indulging in a traditional wedding night with my husband. They didn’t know that this would have been ... wasted on him.’

Sebastian’s eyes lifted and caught hers, his jaw clenched. ‘Well, it’s not wasted on me—it is an honour for me to see you uncovered like this.’

Absurdly Aneesa felt tears threaten. But then Sebastian was bending down to her feet where he lifted first one foot and then the other to take off her shoes. Taking each foot in his hand, he kissed where the henna tattoo snaked up in an ornate design to above her ankles.

And then he took her hands and pressed kisses into each hennaed palm. From where he was, crouched before her, he slowly slid his hands up her legs, first one and then the other, until she had to lean on his shoulders because she was afraid she might fall.

Her long hair slipped over one shoulder as she looked down. With one hand cupping her bottom Sebastian slid his other hand up between her legs, gently encouraging her to part them for him. Aneesa’s heart stopped dead and her breath caught in her throat as those long fingers delved through her dark curls to her most intimate place, stroking along plump moistness where she could feel a pulse throb.

Her legs wobbled, knees threatening to give out, as she gasped, ‘Sebastian ...’ Her hands tightened on his shoulders, as he seemed to effortlessly know just what to do to stoke her desire higher and higher. Her belly was clenched, her skin tingling all over and her head felt like it might explode.

‘It’s ... too much ...’ *It’s not enough!* The contradictory thoughts rang in her head.

She wanted him to stop and never to stop, and it was overwhelming. She nearly cried out when he took his hand away and stood again. He pressed a hot kiss against her mouth and said, ‘Sorry ... we’ll take it

slower....'

Aneesa was immediately contrite. 'No ... I mean, I don't know ... I just —'

He shushed her with a finger to her lips. 'You don't have to say anything ... it's OK. This is just the beginning.'

And then he started to strip, making her mind go blank. His shirt came off to reveal that stunningly beautiful chest again and then his hands were on his trousers. Helplessly her eyes dropped and she watched in fascination as he pulled them down over lean hips and dropped them to the floor. He stood before her, naked except for a pair of briefs and they bulged with his powerful arousal.

When he pulled them down too, lights exploded behind Aneesa's eyes to see him revealed in all his glory, massively aroused, and she longed to reach out and explore.

As if he'd heard her wanton thought, he said huskily, 'Touch me, Aneesa.'

Too scared to touch him where she really wanted, hesitantly she lifted her gaze and then reached out to run her hands over his chest, feeling how satin smooth his skin was under the light covering of hair. She scraped his blunt nipples with her nails, exulting in his indrawn breath and the hiss between his teeth.

And then because it was too hard not to, her gaze dropped again to take in that intimidating arousal which looked as if it had grown even bigger. Tentatively she reached out to touch him. His penis jerked and she bit her lip, reaching out again this time to wrap her hand around him.

She had a sudden memory of giggling over the *Kama Sutra* when she was in her teens with friends, when hilarity would disguise their genuine fascination with the explicit pictures they saw. She'd always felt slightly guilty by how fascinating the pictures had been to her, and when on a school trip they'd visited the sacred temples of Khajuraho, famous for their erotic sculptures, she'd been mortified at the achy hot feeling she'd felt in her belly after inspecting them, thinking that there must be something wrong with her.

But now Aneesa followed a feminine instinct as old as time and she bent down and took him in her mouth. He tasted salty and musky and her belly clenched with desire, but Sebastian was pulling her back up and she could see the fierce slash of colour across his cheeks and his eyes burning.

'Stop ... that's enough for now. I won't be able to go slowly if you keep doing that....'

When he'd seen her hennaed hand encircle him and felt the wet touch of her tongue, Sebastian had feared for his control when he'd never had to worry about it before. But something about the way she'd so innocently looked at him with such blatant hunger and had then bent down, giving him an enticing view of the curve of her waist and buttocks, had nearly sent him into orbit.

He took her hand again and led her to the bed, reaching out to a drawer nearby for protection as he did. He donned it with almost indecent haste and gently pushed her back onto the bed. Seeing her laid there, all curves, peaks and dark dips and hollows, he had to curb an animalistic instinct to brand this woman as his in the most primal way. All sense of urbanity was a mere illusion, and he struggled to claw back control. He bent down, over her, and took her face in his hands and kissed her passionately, exulting when her hands crept around his back and she kissed him with equal fervour.

Their bodies touched from head to toe, and Aneesa could have wept with relief when she felt Sebastian's heavy weight over her. She could feel him thrust one leg between hers, his hair-roughened thigh chafing exquisitely against her soft inner thighs, his erection between them.

Then he drew back and this time explored *her*, with a thoroughness that had her all but melting into a puddle on the bed. With his mouth on her breast, sucking a hard nipple deep, and his hand between her legs, fingers stroking and exploring her hot wetness, she was all but crying out for some elusive fulfilment she'd never craved before.

Time and reality had been reduced to this man and this room and this aching burgeoning feeling inside her, so when Sebastian moved over her more fully and settled between her legs, she instinctively opened up to him as much as she could.

‘Are you ready?’

She nodded, incapable of speech. And when she felt his blunt head thrust into her, she held in a gasp at the intrusive sensation. Sebastian was infinitely patient, going so slowly that she arched her back and hips towards him, making him curse softly.

He thrust again and she felt a stinging hot pain for a second but it was obliterated when she felt him slide even deeper inside her, causing her to move her hips experimentally. A delicious coil of sensation was building which was heightened when Sebastian started to move in and out. It rose higher and higher until she was panting in his arms, head back and eyes open wide as he took her on a journey of discovery of her own body.

She barely heard another muffled curse as his movements became more urgent and with a guttural groan she felt him tense for a long moment before his whole body collapsed over hers.

Aneesa was still trembling on the cusp of something that felt huge and momentous, but clearly Sebastian was finished. He was slumped over her now, breathing heavily, and she felt curiously dissatisfied, but also inordinately tender, stroking his back, even as she dimly wondered if this was what all the fuss was about.

A sense of disappointment rushed through her despite her attempts to block it out—what had she hoped for after all? Singing angels and blasting trumpets? She had no experience to call on....

Sebastian lifted his head then and looked down at her. He grimaced. ‘I’m sorry about that....’

Aneesa blinked up at him. He was still hard inside her and it was difficult to concentrate when they were so intimately joined. ‘Sorry ... for what?’

He shook his head. ‘That’s never happened to me before—I’ve never lost control like that.’

Aneesa could see the tortured expression on his face. She lifted a hand to stroke his cheek. ‘It’s OK ... really. I wasn’t sure what to expect.’

A steely thread of something made his voice husky. ‘I won’t let it end like this....’

'What do you ... oh ...' She trailed off as he started to move within her; by degrees she could feel him grow harder again. And suddenly that aching feeling was back and intensified, the coil of tension building to such an extent that it made Aneesa want to cry out. Every cell in her body strained to reach the pinnacle.

Sebastian was remorseless and relentless, stoking the fire inside her higher and higher until her legs wrapped around his back and her hips were moving restlessly beneath him, searching desperately for *something*.

He bent his head and drew one nipple into his mouth, sucking fiercely just at the moment that every nerve in Aneesa's body stretched taut and sang out with exquisite pleasure. When Sebastian thrust one more time, she reached the elusive peak and after a heart-stopping moment of sensation so intense it bordered on being painful, she fell down and down into another world of such acute pleasures that she cried out as she fell.

She could feel her body clenching around Sebastian's thick shaft and only then did he thrust again and, with a shout, joined her in her delicious descent, a flood of warm release within her making Aneesa want to clench her legs tight around Sebastian and never let him go.

This time she couldn't speak or rationalise anything. All she knew was that singing angels and blasting trumpets would have been a pathetic accompaniment to what had just happened. Because it had surpassed anything she might have ever tried to imagine.

A delicious feeling of satiety coursed through her body, defying description. She had an intense desire to stay joined with Sebastian. When he drew back slightly and tried to pull away she went with him. He gave a dark chuckle, and when he pulled away again, Aneesa dropped her legs and let him go, even though the desolate feeling nearly stunned her with its power.

She couldn't look at him; she was too overwhelmed with what had just happened. Her skin tingled all over and her blood flowed thick and heavy in her veins. He drew her into his side in a possessive embrace, and with one powerful leg flung over hers, Aneesa fell into a deep and exhausted slumber.

She woke a couple of hours later to see nothing but inky blackness and

stars twinkling outside. Sebastian lay with one arm flung over her, the other stretched out in abandon. The sheet was thrown aside and Aneesa felt greedy just looking at his glorious body. The protection was gone—dimly she realised that he must have taken care of it while she slept.

She moved slightly and winced when she felt the tenderness between her legs. Carefully she moved Sebastian's arm and lifted the sheet to see that there were spots of blood on her legs.

Stealthily she got out of bed and pulled her discarded sari around her as she found the bathroom. She closed the door softly and looked at herself in the mirror and almost didn't recognise herself. Her eyes were huge and slumberous, the kohl smudged, giving her a smokily decadent appearance. Her hair was tangled and tousled over her shoulders and her mouth was swollen from Sebastian's kisses.

And her whole body felt *different*, zinging with energy and yet deliciously lethargic. Wanting to wash away the blood, she turned on the shower and stepped in, after pulling her hair in to a messy knot on her head.

Standing under the sluicing hot spray, she didn't feel an ounce of remorse for what had happened even though she knew it would shock her fans and her family to know what she'd just done. It would just have to be her own secret, something she would hug to herself for a long time, perhaps forever....

After drying herself, she let her hair down again and wrapped the sari around herself once more, in a haphazard fashion. Uncertainty gripped her just before she opened the bathroom door. What would Sebastian expect now? Should she just leave and try to get out of the hotel without anyone seeing her?

Opening the door hesitantly she saw that Sebastian was still asleep on the bed and she crept over to the window to look out over Mumbai. Suddenly an acute sense of loneliness gripped her for just a moment, as well as a feeling of loss, that tonight was going to be the last time she would see him.

Sebastian woke with a start and for a second was thoroughly disorientated. He slept so rarely that it was disconcerting to realise he *had* slept, and more soundly than he had in ages. And then he saw her,

standing at the window, with her back to him and that black hair in a luxuriant tangle over her shoulders, the red-and-gold wedding sari wrapped around her naked body.

And then he felt even more disorientated; he *never* fell asleep while with a woman. He would lay awake while she slept, or he would get up and work and he would be impatient for her to wake and leave ... or else he would have already left. For a secret moment he regarded Aneesa's body and an acute rush of desire stunned him with its intensity. *Never* before had he felt such hunger for a woman he'd just bedded.

*She'd been a virgin.*

The memory of taking her, of thrusting into her tight body, nearly had him groaning out loud, his own body already responding forcibly. And he felt a curious tightness in his chest, along with a very unwelcome sense of possessiveness. As that emotion registered he immediately diverted his thoughts back to the physical. He'd never climaxed so hard —he'd practically blacked out for a moment that second time....

Sensing his wakefulness, Aneesa turned around and something clenched hard in Sebastian's chest to see her beauty anew. And to see the hesitation on her face. She walked towards him slowly, hands clutching her sari to her chest.

When she stood near the bed she looked at him and said huskily, 'Thank you ... for tonight.'

Sebastian smiled and felt his equilibrium return as desire surged effortlessly. 'My pleasure ...'

He held out an imperious hand, beckoning her to come to him. She stalled. 'Don't you want me to go?'

Sebastian in any other instance with any other woman would have answered in the affirmative but now he said a throaty, 'No. It's still the middle of the night. How far do you think you're going to get wearing a dishevelled wedding sari and looking like you've been thoroughly bedded and not by the right man?'

He saw the blush stain her cheeks and his body responded even more violently. His conscience and guilt struck him when he thought of how tight she'd been, how out of control she'd made him feel. 'Are you sore?'

She shook her head, flushing to hear it confirmed that he had noticed she was a virgin. ‘No ... I bled a little but I’m fine. I ... want to stay too, Sebastian ... I want to do that again. Is that awful?’

Her disarming honesty caught at him somewhere inside. He shook his head and reached out to grab her hand, pulling her to him. ‘No, it’s not awful at all. I want you too.... We have all night and if you’re not too tender—’

She shook her head. ‘We only have one night. I don’t want to waste a minute of it.’

A curious sense of loss assailed Sebastian at her words but he blocked it out. There was no room for such emotions in his life. He sat up and started to unwind the sari from her body. She turned around and around, as he unwound it, until it fell to the floor and she was naked again, adorned with nothing except the gold waist chain and the henna tattoo.

Pulling her down onto the bed beside him, he came up on one elbow and had to take a breath at how beautiful she looked with her hair spread out around her head, and his body tightened when he caught the tantalising scent of exotic musk. When he made love to her this time it was so slow and leisurely that she was the one who lost control and came helplessly, bucking against his hand as he explored her hot wet body, and when he slid into her, he made sure that she exploded around him first, before giving in to his own all-consuming need.

When Aneesa woke next, she was the one alone in bed. She could see the tentacles of pink in the dawn sky outside and felt a helpless lurch of pain, to know that another day was dawning and her night with Sebastian was over.

Just then he emerged from the bathroom with a towel slung carelessly around his waist, his taut body gleaming, wet hair slicked back. Instantly Aneesa felt her body melting on the inside and she had to draw up the sheet over her body as if he might see the depth of the need she felt for him, even now, after what had felt like hours of lovemaking. She’d lost count of the amount of times he’d brought her to orgasm, as if he’d had to make up for the first time.

He strolled over nonchalantly and, with a small hand towel, rubbed at

his short hair, making it stand up on end.

‘Morning.’

Aneesa blushed. ‘Morning.’ She sat up, holding the sheet to her body, and looked around for her clothes, not wanting to meet Sebastian’s too-inquisitive gaze right now, afraid that he might see something of the turmoil she felt. Especially when this situation was obviously something he was well used to. She could see one end of her sari on the floor near the bed and reached down to pick it up, jumping slightly when Sebastian got it for her and handed it over.

‘It’s probably not the best idea to wear that out of the hotel ...’ he said with dry humour.

Aneesa looked at him, his easy demeanour making her feel disgruntled and tetchy. ‘Well, what else can I wear? I didn’t exactly plan for this ...’

Sebastian’s eyes flashed at her tone and Aneesa said immediately, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to sound so ... short.’

‘I can ring down and have them send up some clothes for you—jeans and a jacket, something like that?’

Aneesa nodded. ‘Thank you. If I can just get out without anyone spotting me I might be able to salvage something of my ruined reputation.’

Sebastian went to the phone and called down. She barely heard what he said, his words just a deep rumble, and hoped that he’d got her size right. He turned back, and feeling very exposed in the face of his supreme assuredness, Aneesa got out of the bed and clutched her sari to her body, desperately trying to cover up, which she knew was silly when this man already knew her body more intimately than she did.

She garbled something about taking a shower and fled to the bathroom. Evidently Sebastian was only too happy that the night was over and he could say goodbye to the hysterical Indian Bollywood bride who had given up her innocence with the tiniest amount of persuasion.

When the bathroom door closed behind Aneesa, Sebastian had to battle the urge to follow her in and introduce her to the delights of making love in a shower. Just the thought of the water sluicing down over those exquisite curves was enough to make him bite back a groan

of need. And ultimately that's what stopped him following her in—the fact that she could bring about this lack of control so easily.

He'd just spent an entire night with a woman when he couldn't remember the last time that had happened. If ever. He had a fleeting moment of considering making her an offer to become his mistress, here in India, so that they could keep seeing each other. But that sense of vulnerability rose up again, making him feel uncomfortable. It wouldn't be right to ask Aneesa to be his mistress; she'd been innocent and she wasn't like the more experienced women he usually chose, who knew that he liked to keep things casual.

He told himself this and resolutely diverted his mind away from exploring the real reason he wouldn't be seeing her again.

When Aneesa emerged from the bathroom with her hair freshly washed and dried, she felt a little more in control. The bedroom was empty, and in a voluminous towelling robe she went to look for Sebastian, who she found in the main living area, pristine and more than a little intimidating in a dark grey suit which made his blue eyes stand out.

He was on the phone, speaking to someone in rapid-fire Spanish when she came in, and he picked up a big glossy-looking bag to hand to her. She took it, assuming it to be the clothes, and fled back to the bedroom.

In the bag she found underwear, jeans, flat shoes, a shirt and a baseball cap. She smiled at his thoughtfulness and even more when she saw a huge pair of dark glasses. When she was dressed she pulled her hair up into a ponytail and regarded herself in the mirror. She was a million miles away from the ornately decorated bride of the night before—she grimaced slightly—except for the distinctive henna tattoo on her hands.

'I got your size right....'

Aneesa whirled around to see Sebastian leaning against the door, watching her. Heat crept over her skin to think just how intimately they'd been entwined only hours before. How intimately he knew her.

'Yes, thank you ... I'm afraid I've no money to pay you for the clothes at the moment, but I could arrange for some—'

He cut off her words with a slashing movement of his hand, 'Don't

worry about it.' He flicked a glance at the watch on his wrist. 'I'm afraid I have to leave. I've got a meeting in twenty minutes across town.'

She tried to ignore the wrenching sensation in the pit of her belly and stammered, 'Of course, you're busy. My parents will be worried about me. I should go to them and explain.'

He quirked a brow. 'Jamal?'

Aneesa hitched up her chin. 'Jamal will be fine—he's made surviving in Bollywood into an art form and I'm sure he's already making sure he's being portrayed as the poor victim.'

Sebastian stood away from the door. 'I know a good PR person here, if you need someone to take care of you.'

Aneesa shook her head and fought the desire to say yes, as if to hold onto some tenuous link that he was holding out, but he was only being polite. 'Thanks but my agent will have someone lined up I'm sure....'

He started to walk away. 'I'll take you down to a back entrance. I've arranged for a car to be waiting for you outside, so hopefully that'll ensure you get away without being noticed.'

Aneesa nodded and put on the baseball cap. She'd transferred all of her wedding paraphernalia into the glossy bag. As much as she never wanted to see it again, she couldn't leave it behind.

So briskly that she felt a little dizzy, Sebastian led her out, and back into the service elevator which had brought her into the suite last night. All the way down to the ground floor she wondered what one said to the man with whom you'd spent all night in complete wanton abandonment.

She felt a desperate urgency rising within her and, inexplicably, tears pricked the backs of her eyes. She pulled the baseball cap down lower, as if she could hide from Sebastian.

They reached the ground floor where a discreet member of staff waited, and he led them to a back door where there was indeed a luxury saloon waiting outside. The member of staff melted away. It was just the two of them in a plain staff corridor and Aneesa took off her cap for a moment to look up at Sebastian.

She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. His face looked stark and expressionless. His eyes flinty blue. She had to go now or she'd

crumple, and while extending her hand, she garbled out, ‘Look ... thank you for ... everything. I don’t know what I would have done if—’

‘Aneesa.’ He took her hand and pulled her to him, his eyes burning in his face now. ‘You don’t have to thank me. Last night was an honour for me, even if it came on the back of your ruined wedding. I’m sorry you had to go through that, but I’m not sorry about what we shared ... but you know it can’t go any further than this, don’t you?’

Aneesa nodded and felt like she was breaking apart inside. She’d thought she’d loved Jamal but not once had he made her feel like *this*. As if on the one hand she was dying and on the other hand being reborn again every time she looked into his eyes. And God help her but she couldn’t look away.

With a look of something almost savagely intent on his face, Sebastian pulled her into his body and dipped his head. She had no defence for the kiss that followed, and heard a faint moan coming from her mouth. The kiss was harsh and brutal and yet more gentle than anything she’d experienced with him in the previous cataclysmic twelve hours.

That sense of inner desperation mounted—*she was never going to see him again*—and now she kissed him back as if her life depended on it, arms wrapped tight around his neck, their bodies straining together. When they finally drew apart they were both breathing heavily and Aneesa’s heart was pounding. She realised that she was clinging onto Sebastian like an octopus and took her arms down before he had to extricate himself.

With two hands on her waist he put her back and her legs felt wobbly. She bent and picked up the fallen baseball hat and put it on with trembling hands.

‘Goodbye, Aneesa.’

She couldn’t even look at him. ‘Goodbye,

Sebastian.’ And before she did something stupid, like throw herself at him and beg him not to let her go, she walked swiftly to the car, where the driver jumped out to open the door for her. The windows were tinted and she didn’t look back at Sebastian once.

The following morning Sebastian was getting ready to leave the hotel to

return to Europe, half listening to the news on the TV, when he heard Aneesa's name and turned to see her beautiful face filling the screen.

He turned the sound up, and then had to sit down when his legs felt suspiciously weak. It looked like a press conference and Aneesa was dressed in a conservative trouser suit, shirt buttoned up, hair tied back and sleek. Her face was pale and her eyes were huge and red-rimmed.

His hand clenched into a fist on his thigh in an unconscious reaction to the thought that she'd been upset. There was a barrage of questions but an officious-looking man to her right put up a hand. 'Miss Adani is only here to read out a statement. Please, no questions.'

Sebastian could see Aneesa's throat work and her hands shake slightly as she held a piece of paper. He saw the sleeve of her jacket pulled down as far as possible over the henna tattoo and his chest felt tight.

Her voice was hesitant at first but grew stronger; he only caught snippets of what she said, he was so distracted by seeing her.

*'... like to extend my profound apologies to Jamal Kapoor Khan and his family for any distress I may have caused by my actions, and also to my own family.... My reasons for not going through with the wedding are personal to me. I wish all the best for Jamal and that he will find a partner who will appreciate him far more than I ever could have. There was no third party involved in my actions—my decision was mine alone and I must live with the consequences. I would just ask for some privacy for my family at this time. Thank you ...'*

At that moment she looked up and straight at the camera and Sebastian felt winded all over again, as if she was looking directly at him. He had to laugh grimly at his fanciful reaction, no wonder she was a major star. She lit up the screen, even when she was at half wattage. And he felt inordinately proud of her; she'd said exactly the right things, almost implying that she'd felt she wasn't good enough for

Jamal so that she'd set him free to find someone more worthy.

A discreet knock came on the door and Sebastian flinched slightly, engrossed with watching how the media were braying for Aneesa's blood as she got up and walked away with a stiff back and heavy minders crowding around her. She'd slipped huge black glasses on and the flashing lights of hundreds of cameras lit up the screen.

Quelling an almost overwhelming urge to go and find her and pluck her out of that bloodthirsty horde, Sebastian flicked off the TV and reminded himself that she wasn't meant to be on his mind anymore. It had been one night, an interlude. And it was over. His jaw was hard as he lifted up his bag and strode to the door of the suite, not even glancing back once.

### *Five Weeks Later*

Aneesa was exhausted as she sank into the car that was to take her home from the film studios. She had just finished shooting a cameo role in a big budget movie. A cameo role that had been handed to her on a platter following the media furore after that press conference.

To her utter shock and abject relief, the Indian people and film lovers hadn't turned on her as she'd expected and feared. Her agent's strategy had worked; they'd made it sound as if she felt she couldn't be with Jamal as she wasn't good enough for him and the public had lapped this up, putting her in the role of a romantic martyr who was setting Jamal free to find someone else. It appealed to every level of the Bollywood-crazy film fans who thrived on similar melodramatic stories in the movies.

As the public fervour rose and they'd embraced the romantic lovelorn Aneesa, Jamal hadn't had a leg to stand on. In order to save face himself he'd had to come out and humbly thank Aneesa for running out on their wedding. She was the only one who'd read the daggers in his expression. She was the only one who knew the truth behind her desire for him 'to find someone who would appreciate him for who he really was.'

It was ironic, but at this busiest point in her career, she was turning down work and her agent couldn't understand why she wasn't signing the umpteen lucrative contracts being pushed under her nose every day now. He thought she'd lost the plot altogether.

*Before*, she would have signed every contract, terrified that she'd miss out on something.

Aneesa sighed deeply. But now, something fundamental had shifted inside her and she wasn't the same person anymore. She wasn't even sure if this was the life she wanted. She didn't like the person she'd

become in the industry and didn't want to be seduced by that shallow world again. She'd even started to try and reach out to old friends.

Thankfully the driver didn't make conversation as she watched Mumbai pass by outside in all its teeming and hectic, colourful glory. One thing remained constant though—the fact that she couldn't forget about Sebastian. At night she woke aching for his body and touch, her dreams all of him, and by day she couldn't get his hard-boned face and intense blue eyes out of her mind. The way he'd quirked a lazy smile when he'd introduced himself. The way he'd given her the experience of a lost wedding night.

She'd believed that he either had to be married, and had indulged in a fling, or else he was a serial seducer with women all over the world. And then only today she'd nearly had a seizure when she'd seen a picture of him in the *Mumbai Times*, where he'd been named as Sebastian Wolfe, the owner of the Mumbai Grand Wolfe Hotel. It had all slid into place. *That* was why he'd been observing the wedding, and that was why he'd had the best suite in the hotel. It was also why he'd been phoned by the staff the evening she'd sought refuge and how he'd managed to get her clothes with little more than a click of his fingers, not to mention a chauffeur-driven car....

On the heels of finding out his identity and surreptitiously looking for more information about him on the Internet, she now knew for a fact that he was not married, but *was* a serial dater of beautiful women. Not to mention the fact that he owned a string of luxury hotels in practically every major city, a private island in South America and that he came from a huge sprawling family with links to a scandalous past in Britain.

The large family of seven brothers and one sister had dispersed from the family home in Buckinghamshire, each one carving out their own destiny with their chunks of the huge inherited Wolfe fortune. There was a mention of Sebastian's younger full brother Nathaniel who was a famous Hollywood actor but very little else, almost as if some kind of embargo had been placed on the information.

It had been easier to unearth gossip about Sebastian's prowess with women, much to Aneesa's disgust and humiliation. It was rumoured that he had lovers all over the world who graced his bed whenever he called,

and he was never seen with a woman for more than a few dates.

When he hadn't even asked to see her again, despite his assertion that they'd only have one night, he'd obviously relegated *her* far beneath those other women, and that realisation had *hurt*. But was she really so pathetic that she would have settled for a few scraps from his table? A few furtive visits whenever he was in Mumbai? With a feeling of burning shame, she knew what her answer to that might have been.

Aneesa looked down at her hands to where the henna tattoo had just about faded away completely and wished that she could make the memory of Sebastian fade away too. And then the niggling worry that had been getting stronger rose up again, despite her efforts to push it to the back of her mind. Her period was late. Very late. She'd put it down to the turmoil of the past few weeks and reassured herself that there was no way Sebastian's condoms could have failed in their protection.

But even as she thought that, she remembered the sensation of warm release inside her and her heart started to thump ominously.

# CHAPTER FOUR

'JUST make sure it's done, Alain. I don't want to hear about this problem again.' Sebastian switched off his mobile phone and had to quell the urge to call his senior hotel manager in Paris back to apologise. He'd been like a bear with a sore head for weeks now. He knew the reason why, but as the implications of this set in, Sebastian scowled, earning a quick glance from his driver through the rearview mirror. His driver knew better though, than to engage him in conversation when he was silent like this.

The city of London slid past the car, as Sebastian tried desperately not to give into the urge to think of her *again*. It was getting worse. She'd invaded his dreams ever since India, and he'd conducted video conferences with his team in Mumbai rather than go over there again. As if he couldn't even trust himself to be in the same city.

His fist clenched automatically in rejection of that thought but he ignored it. Aneesa Adani was not like the women he sought out to be his lovers. She'd been innocent, going through a traumatic time. She lived in India and had indelible roots to the place.

And she was the only woman who had managed to somehow sneak under his guard to a place no one had reached. Ever. Not even his own family. And for that reason alone, she was danger with a capital *D*.

Sebastian had found out shortly after returning from India that his only full sibling, his younger brother Nathaniel, had seen their prodigal oldest half-brother Jacob when he had turned up at the opening night of Nathaniel's latest West End play after years of unexplained absence. Nathaniel had left the stage, which had led to a sequence of events that had forced Nathaniel to seek sanctuary from the press on Sebastian's private island.

It had sparked a revival in media interest in their scandalous family history, and in the whereabouts of his and Nathaniel's mother, something they could both have done without. While Sebastian got on with most of his siblings, even if he didn't see much of them now, his

relationship with Nathaniel was his closest one, albeit largely from a distance. The relationship with his oldest half-brother, however, had been non-existent for years.

Once, Jacob had been Sebastian's only anchor in a dark and unstable world. An adored and revered older brother. By the age of ten, Sebastian had witnessed more than any child of his age should have had to, and had dealt with seeing his mother being sent to a mental institution.

He'd always been the loner out of all his siblings, a cerebral child who had struggled in isolation to comprehend the mercurial moods of their charismatic father. But at a crucial point in Sebastian's life, Jacob had left the home with no warning and no explanation, and ever since then Sebastian had had no one who'd cared enough to coax him out of himself. From that moment on, he'd become even more withdrawn.

And without the anchor of their oldest brother, all the Wolfe siblings had inevitably drifted apart. Sebastian had buried the pain of that abandonment deep inside him and had channelled all of his energy into a single-minded desire to succeed. Which he had done many times over.

Jacob's return now was precipitating a whole host of unwelcome emotions within Sebastian, and so far he'd managed to avoid meeting him. However, Sebastian had just agreed to let Nathaniel use his London hotel for his upcoming wedding, and he knew that Jacob was due to attend, so even though he had no wish to avoid the rest of his family, if Jacob was going to be there, then Sebastian was planning on being unavoidably busy for the day.

Suddenly he knew the best solution to distract him from unwelcome thoughts of Aneesa *and* his family: he would take a new lover. He didn't need to be reminded that he hadn't slept with anyone since Mumbai and in his own head vehemently denied that it was because *she'd* ruined him for anyone else. That was a ridiculous thought. Bitterness gripped him—he was his father's son. He carried William Wolfe's warped genes and his father had never found peace with one woman. So why would Sebastian suddenly buck the trend? Or, worse, feel inclined to?

He picked up his phone again and made a call to a very persistent socialite he'd met at a party some weeks before. He hadn't been interested then, but suddenly he was very interested. Almost desperate,

in fact.

\*

Aneesa sat nervously in Sebastian's London office, in awe of the plush understated luxury and the mile-high view which took in the London Eye in the near distance. Her belly was tied in knots and she felt a semi-hysterical giggle rising up to think of what else was in her belly: *a baby*. Sebastian's baby.

But then the reality of what faced her made her sober up again fast. The irony of getting pregnant on her non-wedding night, and to another man, hadn't been lost on her.

She'd known for some time now and, in that time, had developed an indelible bond with the tiny being inside her. There was no question, but she was having this baby, no matter what the fallout, and she'd known well that her career most likely wouldn't survive this. The equanimity she'd felt when faced with that prospect told her that she'd definitely started to move on from the Bollywood world.

And in the past two weeks her suspicions had been proved right and events had led her here, to Sebastian's office in London. She'd tried the hotel in Mumbai first, but they'd told her that Sebastian had no immediate plans to come back to India. Aneesa had quashed the suspicion that that was because of *her*. Surely he couldn't want to avoid her that badly? Even now that thought made her feel ill inside. And then ... with everything that had happened at home, she'd had no real choice but to leave India, so she'd taken the opportunity to come to England and tell Sebastian face to face.

A noise outside and the familiarly deep rumble of a voice made her heart stop. A clammy sweat broke out over her skin. The door opened and she sat frozen on the couch as she watched the tall and achingly familiar figure of Sebastian stride in.

He didn't see her at first as her seat was partially hidden behind the door but as it swung shut she gathered all her courage and stood.

'Sebastian.'

That distinctively husky voice, the beguiling hint of an accent, had

Sebastian whirling round, half terrified his dreams were haunting him by day now. And when he saw her, he reeled.

Aneesa gripped her hands tight together. Sebastian looked as if she'd just driven a stake through his belly. For an awful heart-stopping moment she thought he didn't even recognise her. But before she could say anything he issued a curt, 'How did you get in this time? Did you materialise through another service elevator?'

Hurt lanced her and Aneesa fought not to quail at the clear evidence of his hostile reaction to seeing her. 'No.' She flushed. 'The security guard downstairs recognised me and when I explained I was looking for you he took me up here to wait. There was no one outside so he brought me straight in.'

She didn't want to go into the way the Indian guard had balked at the notion of someone like her waiting for Sebastian anywhere other than his office. Aneesa had surmised grimly that the news of her infamy hadn't reached as far as England yet. Blistering energy crackled off Sebastian for a long moment and Aneesa had to consciously not let her eyes drop and take in that gorgeous body, but even peripherally she could see the way his exquisite suit hugged his powerful frame. Heat washed through her and her belly tightened.

Abruptly Sebastian relaxed visibly and ran a hand through his hair which Aneesa noticed had grown longer since she had last seen him. She could see now that he looked slightly weary, with faint lines around his mouth and eyes that she hadn't noticed before. And it looked as though he'd lost weight.

'I'm sorry, there was no need for me to be so rude. It's just ... a bit of a shock to see you here. That's all.' Even now Sebastian had to wonder if he was going mad—was he imagining this? *Had* he inherited his mother's mental instability?

Immediately Aneesa felt obliged to rush and explain. 'I know we agreed that it would be one night only, that we'd never see each other again ...'

She drove down the hurt again at his reaction and steeled herself. Her life was about taking responsibility now and she had to keep going. 'But I've come to tell you something.'

He looked at her, head back. Aneesa's heart was racing. He wasn't making this easy for her at all. She took a deep breath and then said in a rush before she could lose her nerve, 'I've come to let you know that I'm pregnant ... with your baby.'

Sebastian blinked. Aneesa didn't disappear. She was still there, in front of him, flesh and blood. In tight jeans and a T-shirt, a soft figure-hugging leather jacket. Her hair down and her face pale and devoid of make-up. Almond-shaped eyes huge. And utterly, utterly beautiful. For a second he'd thought she was about to say that she'd come because she hadn't been able to forget about him, and even amidst the shock he felt a bubbling up of something which felt suspiciously like joy.

And then what she *had* said impacted on him, like a delayed reaction.

His eyes narrowed, he cracked out, 'Pregnant? You're pregnant, and it's mine?'

Aneesa looked hesitant. Unsure. And Sebastian had to drive down the immediate need to reassure her. This was too huge. Well-ingrained cynicism surged. He asked again when Aneesa didn't respond immediately. 'Is it mine?'

'Well, of course it's yours ... you're the only ...' She faltered. 'I've not been with anyone else.'

On a reflex Sebastian's eyes dropped to Aneesa's waistline where there was only the slightest hint of a belly. Which could be nothing, or could be something. *His baby*. He felt dizzy. He sought refuge in rising anger which he knew had something to do with the fact that she hadn't just made this trip because she couldn't forget him and wanted to see him again.

The anger rose up, directed at her now for being here, and invading his peace, when he had so recently been castigating her for that. A small voice mocked him: *Peace? Since when have you had peace in your life?* Like a coward, Sebastian ignored the memory of the long minutes he'd slept in Aneesa's company that night....

'I used condoms.' His voice was icy cold.

Aneesa flushed; imperceptibly her chin hitched up. 'I know. But it must have ... Something must have happened. This *is* your baby—why

would I come all the way here if it wasn't? Believe me, this was as much of a shock to me as it is to you.'

Sebastian crossed his arms. Aneesa shivered slightly.

'Did you decide to pass off your child as mine once you found out about the Wolfe family fortune? Or did you know who I was all along? It seems awfully coincidental now that you just happened to find your way to my suite that night. Perhaps like today, an eager fan let you in so you could stage your dramatics?'

All Sebastian was aware of was the need to drive Aneesa and her terrifying news back. Her mouth was open on a gasp as she took in his words, the colour leaching from her face, and he had a flash of memory at just how distraught she'd been, that look they'd shared at her wedding when she'd reminded him of a panicked and trapped animal being led to its doom.

He also had a memory of the moment when they'd made love and he'd all but blacked out ... Possibly in that moment, the protection had failed.

And even as he thought that, a grim cold certainty lodged in his belly. Aneesa was pale and stunned-looking. He knew she was an actress, but no one could fake *this*.

But it was too late. She was picking up her bag and heading for the door, back rigid.

She had her hand on the doorknob and she turned around, her face white. 'That is a despicable thing to say.' Her English got more stilted. 'I was in ignorance of who you were until five weeks after you'd left—believe it or not, I had other things on my mind. And I only found out because I saw you in a paper. If this is the way you react to finding out you're going to be a father, then I wish I'd remained in ignorant bliss.'

She finished caustically. 'And you can take your Wolfe fortune and jump off the London Eye for all I care!'

With that she opened the door and swept out with all the hauteur of a queen. Sebastian could hear his PA's startled exclamation as this exotic beauty emerged from his office. He was stunned for a second too, and then what finally galvanised him were her words: *you're going to be a father*. And just like that, the reality of what she was saying sank in and

he couldn't hide behind the anger any more.

Aneesa stood at the lift and pressed the button again impatiently; she was *not* going to cry, she was *not* going to cry. Even though her throat ached and the backs of her eyes burned. She could have laughed at her brave assertion just now *that she'd had other things on her mind*, when he'd been on her mind morning, noon and night.

He didn't believe that the baby was his, and she truly hadn't expected that. But her naivety mocked her. He must have women coming out of the rafters claiming to have his children. And he believed that she'd deliberately seduced him? That hurt the most. He'd tainted their magical night with cynicism. He was hard and unforgiving and not at all like the man she remembered.

The lift bell pinged just as she felt her arm taken in a strong grip. A familiar and evocative scent tickled her nostrils. The doors opened and she tried to pull free to step in, but couldn't.

'Don't go.' His deep voice sent a quiver through her body. 'Please. Forgive me for what I just said.'

She looked up at him and her legs went wobbly when she registered his closeness, and saw those eyes up close again. His hand warm on her arm through her jacket.

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said ... what I just said. It was unforgivable.'

The ache in Aneesa's throat diminished. 'Yes, it was. I just wanted to let you know—I felt you deserved that much.'

He tugged her arm gently. 'Come back inside. You look like you could do with a cup of tea.'

Reluctantly Aneesa let herself be guided back through to his office, barely hearing him ask his middle-aged PA for some tea and informing her that he shouldn't be disturbed for the rest of the afternoon.

When the tea was brought in, Aneesa sat on the couch, with Sebastian in a chair opposite her, for all the world now as if they were acquaintances catching up in civilised surroundings and not as if a bomb had just been dropped into the room, into their lives. Stalling, she took a sip of hot tea, relishing its calming heat.

'When did you arrive?'

She looked at Sebastian and hated the little lurch her heart gave. She knew it would be so, so dangerous to harbour feelings for him. He might have apologised but he certainly wasn't showing an inkling of the man she'd met that night who had been so tender and considerate.

She put the cup down. 'This afternoon. I came straight from the airport.' She looked him in the eye and steeled herself. 'The honeymoon period I had with the media after the wedding disaster is over.'

His eyes narrowed, brows snapped together. 'What are you talking about?'

Aneesa's hands twisted in her lap. 'Jamal and his boyfriend broke up and as a form of revenge his now ex-boyfriend outed him in the papers.' She took a breath. 'And on pretty much the same day, a nurse from the clinic I'd gone to for confirmation of the pregnancy leaked the news to the press for a sum of money.'

Her mouth twisted. 'The reality that I must have slept with someone other than Jamal close to the wedding was too much for the public to take. It would appear that they can take the news of Jamal being gay better than they can take the news of me becoming a single mother.'

Something in Sebastian's gut clenched. 'Is that what you want?'

*No!* Aneesa wanted to scream, but she just shrugged nonchalantly, avoiding Sebastian's eye.

'This wasn't meant to happen. But I want this baby and if I have to do it on my own, then so be it.'

'You won't be on your own. I'll be in the baby's life too,' Sebastian said gruffly, everything in him rejecting the notion of Aneesa and his child being alone. However, he didn't want to look too deeply into how that would work, when the very idea of anything like marriage or a long-term relationship was anathema to him. He'd been poisoned against that halcyon image since he had been a child. Nothing he'd experienced had demonstrated any kind of normal functioning relationship.

Aneesa dipped her head slightly. 'Thank you for that, but I really don't expect anything from you.'

'Where are you planning on staying while you're here?'

Aneesa flushed. She didn't want to reveal just how broke she was now. Or how she hadn't really stopped to think beyond escaping the media storm at home and feeling compelled to come and tell Sebastian face to face. She hated to think that Sebastian would feel obliged to take her in. She prevaricated. 'I ... I hadn't really organised anything but I'm sure I can find somewhere this afternoon.' Worry knotted her belly; she knew she wouldn't last long in a hotel.

'I'd offer you a room in my Grand Wolfe Hotel but it's booked out for a private function this week and weekend....'

Aneesa tried to wave his suggestion away; just the thought of the cost of a room at one of his hotels made her feel nauseous. Her life had changed so much in such a short space of time, before she wouldn't have even questioned the cost of such accommodation, and would have simply taken it for granted.

She hitched up her chin again in a way that Sebastian was beginning to recognise. 'I'll find somewhere to stay ... figure something out, get a job somewhere ... I'm really just taking it one day at a time at the moment.'

Suddenly restless, Sebastian stood and raked a hand through his hair, pacing back and forth. The news of his impending fatherhood was making him feel numb. He couldn't process it and said distractedly, 'It's not just your responsibility now, it's mine too. There were two of us there that night, and I didn't make sure you were adequately protected.'

He didn't see the colour flare in Aneesa's pale cheeks; he only remembered the heart-stopping urgency of desire that had led him into the most frantic coupling of his life. Willing down the images with an effort, he turned back to face Aneesa. 'You can stay with me. I can't have you wandering around looking for accommodation when I have a perfectly spacious apartment. I'll call my driver round and take you there now.'

Aneesa stood, relief mixed with trepidation warring inside her. 'Are you sure? I don't want to upset your routine. I know you must be busy. I can go to a coffee shop, wait until you finish work ...'

Sebastian quirked a small harsh smile and decided not to tell her how he'd quite regularly work till midnight before going home only to toss

and turn, or else head out and pound the pavements for hours, coming back exhausted at dawn. And then he remembered something and the smile faded. ‘No, really, it’s fine. I have to head home soon anyway as I’m going out this evening.’

Sebastian started to usher Aneesa out of the office and she bit back the urge to ask him if it was a date. He could even have a girlfriend—how would she know? Or perhaps he was meeting his London mistress? Stomach roiling, they picked up her bags from the overexcited security guard downstairs, who had somehow in the interim managed to get some DVDs of Aneesa’s movies. She autographed them, and posed for a photograph with the man wearing a fixed smile, and then was being ushered into the back of Sebastian’s luxury car with tinted windows.

Sitting in the back, listening to Sebastian take a call on his phone, he was a million miles from the man she’d met that night in Mumbai, and when she looked back on it now, it all seemed like a flimsy mirage, because this man was acting as if he wouldn’t kiss her again if his life depended on it.

‘... and then Daddy said that I simply must have the house in Holland Park, and I said ...’

Sebastian let the woman’s irritating voice tune in and out, nodding occasionally to signal his interest when really he had no more interest in the anaemic blonde sitting opposite him than he would in the overweight maître d’ who’d shown them to the table. Which was strange as up until recently blondes had been his preference—the cooler, the better. He scowled inwardly. Until he’d met an exotic Indian princess.

It had been too late this afternoon to cancel the date and some rogue part of him had wanted to keep it, make boundaries clear with Aneesa. But he hadn’t been able to get the wounded bruised look from her eyes out of his head all evening. Her eyes were so damn expressive. And beautiful.

She’d meekly followed him around his state-of-the-art penthouse apartment with its stunning views of London and had lightly asked, ‘Always the penthouse?’

And he’d answered glibly, ‘It’s the best.’ And had winced at how crass

that sounded.

His housekeeper, Daniel, a man in his fifties who Sebastian would trust with his life, had immediately taken Aneesa under his wing, and when Sebastian had been leaving, she'd been sitting in the kitchen on a high stool, looking about sixteen and discussing Indian curry recipes.

As his focus came back into the exclusive restaurant, Sebastian felt suddenly impatient. He cut abruptly across the woman, whose name he struggled to recall. 'I'm sorry but I'm afraid I'll have to go ...'

Her lipsticked mouth opened and closed, making a coil of disgust settle in Sebastian's belly when he remembered another mouth, with naturally red lips, full and infinitely more kissable. His body tightened in response.

He hustled them out of the restaurant, ignoring her protests, and bundled her into a taxi, and with that impatience rising he got into a taxi himself and headed home. When he got to his building, he strode straight past the concierge and into the lift.

And it was only when he went in his front door and let the quiet of the apartment wash over him did he realise how fast his heart was hammering. He prowled silently to the bedroom he'd shown Aneesa to earlier and pushed open the door. A bedside lamp threw out a halo of light over where she had fallen asleep half sitting up in the bed. A book lay open by her side and Sebastian went over and picked it up, only noticing then what the title was: *What to Expect When You're Expecting*.

With a funny feeling in his belly he put it down and looked at Aneesa. Her long lashes were fanned out, casting shadows on her cheeks. He'd only met her once before, as cataclysmic as that meeting had been, and yet, he felt as if he'd known her forever. Exactly as he'd told her that night, like a gauche teenager.

Seeing her again, having her here, a physical reality in his home, the knowledge that she was *pregnant* was a shock to his system that was only now beginning to wear off. And on the heels of that was a disturbing build-up of ambiguous emotions he didn't want to look at.

Physically he wanted her with a fierceness that scared him. And yet he knew if he so much as touched her, a storm would be unleashed. A storm he didn't want to deal with. A surge of emotion made his gut

clench even though he denied it furiously. He couldn't afford to forget that if she wasn't pregnant, she wouldn't be here now. *She wouldn't have come just because she wanted to.* He wouldn't have to be dealing with this. His conscience pricked—tonight's date would have still been a disaster, even without Aneesa's arrival. The truth hurt; he'd been dealing with her presence since that night in Mumbai....

His eyes drifted down, and feeling like a voyeur but unable to stop himself, he could see that the soft rise and fall of the swells of her breasts under her T-shirt looked fuller. Was that because of the baby? Suddenly the thought of watching Aneesa's body ripen with his child made him feel alternately euphoric and claustrophobic.

He backed away and out of the room again and it was only when he was fighting his usual losing battle with sleep some time later did he register his dominant emotion when he'd returned home to find her asleep in bed; it had been *relief*. To Sebastian's disgust, when he closed his eyes, all he could see was an image of storm clouds threatening over every horizon.

The following morning, when Sebastian returned from his regular six-mile run, the sun was rising in earnest and he was disconcerted to find Aneesa up and pottering about the kitchen. Her hair was tied back in a high ponytail and she was wearing sweatpants and a long-sleeved T-shirt.

Hardly out of breath, Sebastian said, 'You're up early.'

Aneesa whirled around, colour flooding her cheeks, and it made inexplicable satisfaction course through Sebastian. She recovered swiftly though; he could see that faint reserve return.

'I'm always up around dawn to do my meditation and yoga practice.' She looked at him steadily. 'Will that bother you?'

Sebastian shook his head and tried to ignore the vivid mental images flooding his brain of Aneesa doing stretches. He brushed past her and her fresh scent teased his nostrils. Almost angrily he yanked out the coffee beans to make fresh coffee.

Hesitantly Aneesa asked, 'Are you sure you don't mind? You seem a little ... edgy.'

Sebastian gritted his teeth. ‘I’m sure. I’m just not used to living with someone, that’s all. Was there something you were looking for here?’

Now she shook her head, wide eyed. ‘No, I just made some herbal tea, which Daniel got for me yesterday.’

She was standing by the solid-wood island, sipping her tea. There was feet separating them and yet Sebastian could feel sweat breaking out on his brow, which got worse when she asked politely, ‘Did you have a nice dinner last night?’

*No!* Sebastian wanted to shout, but calmed himself down and said smoothly, ‘Lovely, thank you—pleasant food and pleasant company.’

Now why had he said that when it had been anything but? Feeling seriously disgruntled he left the coffee and muttered something about taking a shower and walked out of the kitchen.

Aneesa watched Sebastian leave, taking his intense force field of energy with him, and sagged back against the counter. She put a hand on her belly and tried to breathe deep to calm her thundering heart. Surely this intense physical reaction every time she saw him couldn’t be good for the baby? But he’d smelt so *good*, of musky sweat and pure man. He’d obviously been out jogging, dressed in sweats like her and a T-shirt which had been all but welded to his damp chest.

If it hadn’t been for Daniel distracting her yesterday evening and making her feel thoroughly at home, she was afraid she would have let Sebastian see exactly how affected she’d been by watching him go out for the evening, dressed in a black suit and crisp white shirt. His subtle aftershave had told her, with a woman’s intuition, that he’d most definitely been going on a date.

And yet what could she say or do? He patently didn’t welcome her presence, baby or no baby. He had a life; he must have lovers. He’d been very clear that night in Mumbai that he didn’t want anything more to do with her. And yet here she was.

A wave of loneliness and homesickness washed over her and she escaped into her bedroom before Sebastian could come back and see her distress.

After pacing impatiently in the main drawing room of the apartment for

about an hour, Sebastian looked at his watch for the umpteenth time. *Where was she?* He needed to speak to her before he went out to work but there was no sign of her.

Finally he went to her room and knocked lightly on her door. Hearing nothing he went in and saw her sitting cross-legged in the middle of the room, eyes closed, back straight and palms facing up resting on her knees. She looked so serene and peaceful that Sebastian tried to creep back out again but just then her eyes opened. In a second she'd got to her feet in one graceful motion. 'Was there something ...?'

'Just what do you expect to happen here?' The words came out baldly and Sebastian winced inwardly. He seemed to lose any ability to be suave and smooth around this woman.

She frowned. 'What do you mean?'

He gritted his jaw. 'What I mean is that I hope you haven't come here with some notion that we can happily play house just because we have a baby coming. Because that scenario is not something I am interested in.'

Anger bubbled within Aneesa, and something more emotional that she valiantly tried to keep down. A dark flush rose into her pale cheeks; her eyes flashed. 'You're afraid that I've got some plan up my sleeve to get you to marry me and make an honest woman of me?'

Sebastian threw out a hand. 'How would I know? Isn't that what every woman wants?'

Aneesa's hands clenched to fists at her sides, the calming benefits of the past half-hour of meditation wasted. 'Not this woman. After what I have been through recently, marriage or getting married is the last thing on my mind, believe me. To be perfectly frank, I don't think I *ever* want to get married. It's obvious that this is all a massive inconvenience to you. I can leave today, it's no problem. The last thing I want to do is cramp your bachelor lifestyle.'

Anger blurring her vision now, Aneesa went to her suitcase which was still half unpacked. She hauled it to the bed and with hands shaking started to throw things in. 'I've told you about the baby, and that's enough. Now I should leave and let you get on with your life. I can let you know when the baby is born and perhaps we can come to some arrangement where you can visit when you want. That's if you're

interested.'

She stopped for a moment, her chest heaving and her eyes blurring with tears this time.

'And where exactly are you going to go?'

Sebastian's voice came from much closer and was so unexpectedly gentle that, to her horror, tears started to fall. She dashed them away angrily. 'I don't know. I'll think of something. This is one of the biggest cities in the world—I'm sure I can find somewhere. I should never have bothered you.'

She felt his hands on her shoulders and then she was being pulled around. Sebastian handed her a handkerchief. He led her over to the bed to sit down. She pulled back from him, her breath still jerky. 'I really didn't think beyond getting out of India so that the story could die down. I don't have some dastardly plan to trap you in a marriage or a relationship you clearly don't want.'

She shrugged one slim shoulder and looked at him. 'I felt I owed it to you to at least tell you face to face. Do you think I would have asked for any of this in a million years if given a choice?'

Aneesa bit her lip before continuing. 'By the time I was getting married, my father's business was almost bankrupt. The wedding was a huge burden on him financially. I've paid him back every penny and made him sell the apartment he bought in Juhu as part of my dowry. I couldn't stay and have them suffer the media on their doorstep every day. At least now they have some peace and my father is back on his feet and can provide for the rest of my family again. My career is over and

I'm going to have to start all over again. But right now that's the least of my worries.'

She felt fierce when she said, 'But I don't regret what happened between us that night and I don't regret becoming pregnant. This child will be loved, and wanted. And I'm not telling you this because I want your money. I can look after myself and I'll look for somewhere else to stay. I'm sure I can get a job....'

A look of stoic determination came into her eyes. 'I could work here for my board?'

Something about the way she'd asserted that their child would be wanted struck Sebastian deep down inside. The reality was sinking in more and more by now and he knew that despite his own woeful upbringing, he, too, wanted any child of his to have a stable and loving environment. However that might be achieved.

Drily he asked, 'When was the last time you did laundry or washed dishes or even shopped?'

Aneesa flushed brick-red. 'Once I might have been like that, but not any more. I'm a fast learner and I don't mind a bit of hard work.'

Something within Sebastian twisted at her innate pride and how far she'd fallen from her Bollywood princess pedestal. She wasn't at all like the vacuous spoilt woman he'd assumed her to be on her wedding day. He couldn't believe though that she wasn't resenting her abrupt fall from grace, even if she didn't show it.

She went on with a rush. 'Look—I meant everything I've just said. You just happen to be the father of this baby. I really don't expect anything from you at all.'

Sebastian tried to ignore the effect her huge shimmering eyes were having on his equilibrium. How could he feel dizzy sitting down?

He focused with effort. 'Quite apart from the fact that you've already got Daniel wrapped around your finger, he would have a fit to see you treading on his turf. You're welcome to stay for as long as you need.'

He quirked a smile and ran a hand through his hair, 'Hell ... we're having a baby.' His smile faded. 'It's just going to take me a while to absorb that. I'm not used to sharing my space....'

'I'll stay out of your way.'

Sebastian shook his head and took the handkerchief out of her hand to wipe at a stray tear on her cheek. 'No ... it's not your problem. It's my problem to deal with. This is your home now as much as mine. And we need to look into booking you in with a doctor and setting up appointments.'

'I can do all that, you're busy.'

Sebastian shook his head. 'I'll have my PA do some research.'

His hand was cupping her jaw now, and Aneesa had stopped

breathing. Her body was reacting, tightening, melting, *remembering*. For a second she thought she saw an answering heat in Sebastian's eyes but then he got up and moved away, becoming brisk. Cold again.

'I've got a meeting in Paris this afternoon. I'll be back late tonight, but as it's the weekend tomorrow I'll be off so we can discuss doctors and hospitals.' He frowned now. 'How long are you intending to stay?'

Aneesa's heart thumped to think that he might actually care, which was ridiculous. 'Perhaps a couple of months? Until the scandal dies down at home—my family will be worried if I stay away for too long.'

Sebastian shrugged, a dart of emotion slicing through him at her easy mention of family. 'Like I said, you're welcome for as long as you want.'

And then he was gone. Aneesa felt slightly stunned. She wasn't used to having emotional outbursts like that but she figured it had to be her pregnant hormones and the way Sebastian's less than ecstatic reaction to her arrival made her feel so vulnerable. And if that insouciant shrug just now was anything to go by, evidently he wasn't prepared to have much of a say in the baby's development, or birth.

Aneesa put her hand on her belly and said out loud, 'Looks like it's just going to be us, baby....'

When she got up and started to put away her things again, she resolutely pushed down the ache in her chest that told her of a very secret and treacherous desire that Sebastian's reaction to seeing her again might have been different. But reality was harsh and that was something she'd been getting a master class in recently.

# CHAPTER FIVE

By SATURDAY evening Aneesa was worn out. She'd spent the day with Sebastian and his assistant exhaustively going through the hospitals and prenatal doctor recommendations, before finally making some choices. And while for her it was hammering the reality of her pregnancy home more and more, if anything it seemed to make Sebastian retreat further and further.

Late this afternoon he'd absented himself from discussions and gone to his study. When Aneesa had been letting his pleasant middle-aged assistant out of the apartment, the PA turned to Aneesa and confided, 'I'm very happy for you both ... I've always hoped that Sebastian would   ',

The older woman had stopped abruptly and blushed and then said awkwardly, 'I'm sure you don't need to hear my ramblings. Goodbye, dear.'

And she was gone, leaving Aneesa wondering what on earth she'd been about to say. She whirled around with a guilty flush on her face as if she'd been caught out when Sebastian said from behind her, 'I thought we'd stay in to eat tonight. Frankly, I'm bushed.'

Aneesa looked at him carefully. He did look tired and her heart clenched. She nodded. 'That's fine with me. I'm tired too.'

He nodded. 'Good. Daniel will have dinner ready in about an hour if you want to take a rest beforehand.'

So solicitous, so polite. The perfect host. And the father of her baby even if he didn't want to deal with it. Aneesa let out a breath when she watched Sebastian walk back into his study, and she retreated to her room where she lay on her bed looking up at the ceiling.

She wondered churlishly if Sebastian was letting a woman down tonight. If he'd had to cancel a date with the woman he'd seen the other night? Acrid emotion scared her with its intensity and she turned over and struggled to take a nap, eventually giving up with a deep sigh and

having a shower instead.

She just couldn't relax knowing Sebastian was close by.

After her shower she got dressed in loose harem pants and a sleeveless vest, and left her hair down. When she went into the dining room where Daniel was just serving the starter, Sebastian stood and Aneesa felt inordinately shy. He'd obviously showered too, and his hair was wet. He was dressed in fresh jeans and a T-shirt. And looked handsome enough to make her step falter.

She cursed herself as she sat down; she was no better than a groupie with a crush.

Sebastian was grateful for Daniel's solid presence when Aneesa had appeared in the dining room. Or else he wasn't sure if he would have been able to restrain himself from smashing the heavy oak table aside and picking her up like some kind of caveman to bring back to his bedroom, to ravish her.

She was temptation incarnate. All at once deliciously curvy yet slender, silky olive skin and a tantalising glimpse of shadowy cleavage under her flimsy top. Her loose trousers merely hinted at the length of supple leg underneath and it didn't take much for him to remember how they'd felt wrapped around his back, squeezing tighter and tighter ... like the muscles of her—

'Wine?'

Sebastian looked wildly at Daniel for a moment, acutely aware of Aneesa sitting down beside him, her scent on the air. He finally got out a strangled, 'Yes, red, please.' And managed to sit down again too.

Aneesa smiled widely at Daniel, hoping that her inner turmoil wasn't evident on her face. 'No wine for me, thanks. I'll just have water.'

And then they were alone. Aneesa looked anywhere but at Sebastian, and the tension mounted, until suddenly, to her utter horror and chagrin, she heard herself say with an edge to her voice, 'I hope I'm not keeping you from any commitments tonight?'

Sebastian was to her left at the head of the table, one leg touched off hers, making her blush and move her own away from the contact.

'No.' He drawled, 'No ... *commitments*. I'm all yours.'

She looked at him abruptly—was he flirting with her? But even as her heart started to thump perilously, she saw that he looked far from flirtatious, more coolly stern. She let out a breath and struggled for equilibrium. ‘That’s good. I’d hate for you to feel like you had to entertain me.’

Sebastian had to curb his impulse to tell her exactly what he did want and at that moment Daniel returned with drinks. The thought that she might possibly be concerned about him seeing other people sent a rush of something far too disturbing to analyse through him. And when she was so close like this, it was hard to try and recall why he shouldn’t be wanting her.

Aneesa was relieved to have something else to focus on and concentrated on her starter and main course as if it was the most interesting thing she’d ever encountered. Right at that moment she couldn’t see herself sticking it out living in Sebastian’s apartment for longer than another day, never mind a couple of months.

‘So, how did you end up in Bollywood movies?’

His question took her aback and she looked at him to see that he was relaxed in his chair, watching her. Suddenly her appetite fled and she put down her knife and fork.

She took a sip of water, mouth instantly dry. She’d answered this question a million times, what was wrong with her? She just hated that she’d been so duped by such a shallow world for so long....

‘I was in a shopping mall with school friends when I was seventeen. We were in our final year and a scout from a model agency spotted me.’ She shrugged, feeling embarrassed. ‘The next thing I knew, I was being entered for Miss India and I won ... and after that the movie offers came flooding in.’

Sebastian’s eyes were narrowed on her. ‘You sound like you regret it.’

She shrugged again, avoiding his eye, fingers pleating the heavy linen napkin. ‘I was young and spoilt. I got seduced very easily into a world that’s very false.’ Her mouth twisted. ‘Unfortunately for a long time I believed everything people were saying to me, believed in a myth ...’

‘Believed that your fiancé loved you.’

Aneesa sucked in a breath and looked up into Sebastian's glittering blue gaze. He sounded so ... sympathetic. She nodded. 'Yes, that too. But it was my own fault. If I hadn't become so blinded and self-absorbed I would have spotted him a mile away.'

Sebastian grimaced. 'If only it were that easy. Hindsight is a great thing.'

Aneesa half smiled and saw Sebastian's gaze drop to her mouth, making it tingle. She blushed again.

His gaze lifted. 'So ... do you regret it? Do you miss it?'

Aneesa half shrugged and shook her head at the same time. 'I regret my own immaturity, but no, I don't miss it, and that's been a surprise. I've realised that it wasn't really me after all.'

She quirked a smile. 'Before I got so entranced by my own reflection I actually wanted to study medicine and had all the grade A's to back it up.' Her smile faded. 'And yet my parents stood by me and let me change course. And I repaid them by humiliating them in public in front of everyone they know.'

To her surprise Sebastian leaned forward and took the hand that was compulsively pleating the napkin. His hand was warm on hers, making tingles shoot up her arm, to her breasts where she could feel her nipples stiffen into points.

'You can't beat yourself up forever. You said yourself that you've paid them back.'

She was more than moved by the glimpse of the man she'd met that first night and terrified that he would see something of her reaction. She pulled her hand free. 'Perhaps you're right.'

She didn't see the way his jaw clenched. And to her utter relief Daniel came in at that moment and brought tea and coffee, and cleared away the dinner plates. Sebastian served them both and then indicated that they should take their drinks into the living room.

Aneesa curled up on a big chair far from the couch where Sebastian was once again sprawled out, his long powerful body attracting her eyes more than she could resist. He'd flicked a remote and the low soothing tones of jazz flooded the room from discreet speakers. To try and distract

herself from the seductive music she asked, ‘So what about you? How did you end up in the hotel business?’

He cast her a glance, clearly reluctant to divulge anything. Aneesa was just regarding him steadily.

Sebastian felt a constriction in his chest. He always did, whenever anyone wanted to probe into his life, and yet ... he’d just asked Aneesa about her life and was still reeling slightly from the depths she’d hidden from him, and the world.

He ran a hand through his short hair, the gesture unconscious. ‘I remember being taken to a hotel with my brothers and sister for one of our birthdays when I was much smaller. It was one of the best hotels in London and I’d never seen anything like it.’

He wasn’t about to reveal to Aneesa how it had made an impact on him because it had been so ordered and sleek. A world away from their chaotic home life in rambling Wolfe Manor, which had been too huge to instil any kind of order. He also wasn’t going to reveal how his father had got blind drunk and the staff had discreetly whisked him away to a suite until he’d slept the excess off. And how that was the first time Sebastian had ever seen anyone make his father and his embarrassing behaviour disappear.

On some level since then, he’d wanted to have that control, and as he’d grown older, he’d wanted to *own* that control. Ironically he’d never felt in less control right now.

Instead he just said to Aneesa, ‘I went to college and studied business and economics. Once I inherited my share of my father’s money, I invested it in a hotel in London which was just a shell of a dilapidated Georgian building. It’s right beside an old church, so I saw the potential for it becoming a wedding venue as well as being a perfect base for a hotel. I had an excellent architectural design team, and once that one had taken off, the rest followed all around the world.’

‘You must have been so young—that’s an incredible achievement.’

He looked at Aneesa and was blinded momentarily by the chocolate brown of her huge eyes, and the way she was backlit by the inky starry London sky. He cursed himself. What was wrong with him? He hated the pride that suffused him even as he clamped down on it.

The truth was, that for all of his success he'd long ago dismissed compliments as they invariably came with strings attached. But Aneesa had sounded utterly genuine. He came from a family of high achievers and had never felt that his had been any more than anyone else.

He looked away. 'I was young, yes, but no younger than you when you became a success.'

Aneesa felt the sting of his tone. He hated talking about himself and his innate modesty made something inside her feel weak, when she was used to dealing with huge egos.

'You have a lot of brothers and ... one sister?'

He glanced at her and again she had the distinct impression that he was only answering on sufferance and at any moment he'd clam up and tell her to mind her own business.

'I have five half-brothers and one full brother, Nathaniel, the actor.' Something indecipherable flashed in his eyes before he said, 'And yes, I've one sister, Annabelle. She's a photographer.'

'Do you see them much?'

He looked at her properly now with a clear warning in his eyes and answered tightly, 'We're all in different places and see less of one another now, but if we're in the same city we endeavour to try and meet up.'

'Your father ...?'

At that Sebastian rose to his feet with a fluid move. Tension crackling off his form. 'If you don't mind I have a couple of things to attend to in my study. I'll say goodnight.'

Aneesa nodded faintly and said goodnight, watching as he strode out of the room. *And I'll ask you not to poke your nose into my private life again* was all he hadn't said.

Aneesa put down her cup of tea and curled back into the chair. Sebastian was more of an enigma than ever. The fact that she was carrying his child clearly didn't give her access into his family history. And why was he so guarded about it? All she'd been able to glean from the tiny bit of research she'd done was that there had been some scandal, and that his father was dead ... and no matter that he said he

saw his siblings, evidently they weren't all *that* close.

Aneesa forced her mind away from the torrent of questions and waited until she knew Sebastian was likely to be well ensconced in his study before she went to bed.

A couple of nights later Aneesa couldn't sleep and sat watching the gloriously beautiful inky skyline of London from her bedroom window. The questions reverberating in her head were no less now than they had been. But Sebastian couldn't have made it clearer that she'd strayed too far off the path. They'd shared meals, but he'd skilfully diverted all questions away from himself and focused solely on her. He was as stubborn as a mule.

And through it all, making Aneesa go slightly crazy, was the ever-ratcheting sexual tension she felt, when she had no indication from Sebastian that he felt the same.

She caught looks every now and then but he'd look away and she'd feel like she'd imagined them. That she was fantasising. And, she assured herself now, she *was*. Sebastian was putting up with her, that was all. They'd had one night, and that was it. The only reason they were together now was because of the consequences of that night.

She sighed deeply and had to acknowledge that, despite everything, she'd settled into Sebastian's somewhat ascetic apartment. She'd noticed his patterns of sleeplessness over the weekend, hearing him get up and move around or go out only to return an hour later, because invariably she was awake too, her body too hot to sleep. Hot with the changes due to the pregnancy and hot because she couldn't seem to stop having lurid X-rated dreams about him.

And she'd also noticed his punishing regime of exercising. If he wasn't out jogging he was down in the private gym either swimming length after length or punching a boxing bag.

She remembered that he'd been in the pool that night she'd burst into his suite in Mumbai. She longed to ask him why he insisted on such a regime but knew he wouldn't welcome her curiosity.

Despite mentioning his extensive family, he had no pictures of them dotted around the apartment. Aneesa thought nostalgically of her own

chaotic family home in Mumbai where you couldn't move for knocking down a slew of pictures of her huge extended family.

If it hadn't been for Daniel, who lived in the apartment directly below Sebastian's, she would have felt very lonely. Aneesa had shown Sebastian her book on pregnancy and asked him if he wanted to read it, and when she'd seen the way he'd paled she'd hurriedly taken it back. She knew the baby hadn't been planned and that this was hardly a conventional situation but he seemed to react in such a viscerally negative way that she longed to know more about *why* that was. Even though she knew he was hardly likely to tell her.

Daniel had long gone home and Aneesa was in bed as Sebastian sat in a chair in his study and looked out at the glittering view of night-time London, with its millions of lives and stories unfolding.

The past few days had been torture for him. The reality of having Aneesa in his apartment—asking questions, under his feet, around every corner, her scent lingering in the air, listening to her husky laugh while talking to Daniel—was enough for him to think he was going demented. Her barrage of questions the other night had made him feel like a cornered animal. She'd pushed so many buttons at once that it had taken all his restraint just to get up and leave her.

And yet, curiously, he felt no compunction to see the back of her, which was a contradiction that did not sit well with him. As if by osmosis things had already started to appear—a bunch of flowers in a vase in the hall which Daniel had defensively declared had been for Aneesa, to brighten the place up; a cashmere scarf thrown casually over the couch in the living area; a pair of sneakers by the main door that looked tiny enough to belong to a child which had precipitated the memory of *that* night, when he had removed her wedding shoes and kissed her hennaed feet ... and there was still her scent, everywhere her scent.

The thought of taking another lover while she was here now was ... impossible. As impossible as it probably would have been even without her presence. She filled his every waking and sleepless moment. She was all he saw when he swam length after length, or as sweat dripped into his eyes when he punched out all of his nameless aggression; and

curiously for the first time the aggression was harder to pull up. He found the punch bag annoyingly ineffectual now. And he'd craved it all weekend.

And the baby—all the talk of doctors and arrangements about this tiny being who was still being formed had made him feel disconnected. Whenever Sebastian tried to think about it, he felt a leaden weight inside him, like he just couldn't connect with the reality. He envied Aneesa's clear bond; he saw the way her hand would unconsciously go to her belly and her face would soften, her eyes glowing with some secret light.

But the truth was, becoming a father terrified the living daylights out of him. There was so much to fear; that he would become as cruel and mercurial as his father had been. As irrational as it was, he had a visceral feeling that perhaps this could be passed down in the genes. And, how could he know that once Aneesa had the baby she wouldn't succumb to depression like his own mother had? It had been exacerbated to the point that eventually his mother had ended up in full-time care when he and his brother had still been tiny. The effect of that had been devastating, and was still felt today.

He didn't want to be responsible for creating an awful legacy like his parents had, and had nothing to go on in terms of seeing how his siblings might handle it, as none of them had had children yet.

Sebastian had known very few moments of stability in his life, so to try and contemplate it now was ... impossible. And in truth he didn't want to contemplate it because the memories it brought up were too painful. He'd already begun having *those* dreams again and knew it was the prospect of the baby that had sparked them ... because he was terrified that any child of his would endure what he had endured.

But eclipsing all that was the raging burning desire for Aneesa. Every bone in his body ached for her—for her touch, her scent. To have her surround him like she had that night, with such sweet openness, such innate sensuality. He sought it now on an instinctive level almost as if he knew that she might have the power to calm the demons in his head. Even while she was the cause of some of them.

He'd told himself she was danger with a capital *D*, and that, she undoubtedly was. He'd had to struggle to maintain control of his animal

impulses around her, and to rebuff her natural gregariousness and desire to know everything about everything, and everything about *him*.

At that moment, something inside him broke, some control he'd been clinging onto. She was here, in his life, pregnant with his child, and she wasn't going anywhere for the foreseeable future, and he needed release because he would explode if he tried to keep this wall up any longer....

With a rising sense of urgency and resolve firing his blood he stood and went straight to Aneesa's room. When he opened the door he saw that the bed was empty and immediately felt an uncomfortable lurch in his chest, but then he registered a movement near the window and saw her there, sitting on the wide window seat, legs tucked up under her chin, looking out at the view exactly as he had just been.

Except now she was looking at him and he could see those huge eyes widen. She wore a long T-shirt and her legs were bare and his body hardened in an instant. He walked over to her and she swung her legs down and stood.

'Sebastian? Was there something you wanted?' Her voice was husky and reached down inside him where he couldn't escape from this desire anymore.

He came right up to her and pulled her into his arms and already he could feel his mind settle, even as his heart thundered and his body ached. 'You, Aneesa ... I want you.'

Aneesa barely had time to register what was happening before she felt Sebastian's mouth settle over hers and she groaned in supplication. He'd walked right out of her fantasy and into her room and for a second she'd thought she was dreaming. But it wasn't a dream when she could feel his tall lean length against hers, and his arms were wrapped around her so tight she could barely breathe. The sizzling, simmering tension she'd felt *hadn't* been one-sided—the relief made her feel faint.

With impatient hands he tugged at her T-shirt until she had to lift her arms and let him pull it off. He stood back for a moment, his eyes raking over her almost feverishly, and Aneesa felt a dart of trepidation at the heated fervour in his eyes, almost as if he'd consume her with just a look.

He started to take off his own clothes, practically ripping his shirt,

yanking down his trousers, until he stood before her, naked. Not another word had been exchanged; they were both breathing heavily, desire saturating the air between them. The world could have stopped outside and they wouldn't have noticed, both greedily taking in the other's body as if relearning it.

With a shaking hand Aneesa reached out to touch Sebastian's chest before leaning forward to press a kiss against the hot silky skin. His hands tunnelled through her hair and caught her head, before he pulled her back up and looked down.

'You're so beautiful.' He shook his head as if in awe and something inside Aneesa was incredibly moved. His hands skated over her shoulders and moved down to cup her breasts which had grown bigger, and she sucked in a breath.

He stopped and asked, 'Are they sore?'

Aneesa tried to smile but felt too hot and desperate. 'They're a little oversensitive, but it's OK....'

With a touch so gentle it nearly made her cry, Sebastian cupped and felt the generous curves and then he bent his head and licked around one pebbled aureole before gently tugging the hard nipple into his mouth. The sensation was exquisite and on the knife edge of both pleasure and pain. Aneesa's head fell back, her hands holding Sebastian's head as he ministered lavishly to one breast and then the other.

And at that moment while the fire was raging inside her, she had a sudden memory of watching him leave the other night for his date, as well as all those pictures she had seen on the Internet of him with beautiful blonde women.

She pulled at his hair and yanked his head up. 'I won't sleep with you when you've been in another woman's bed so recently.'

Sebastian stood tall. His eyes glittered; his face was flushed, and he frowned. 'What are you talking about?'

Aneesa dropped her hands from his head and with every bone in her body protesting she bent down and picked up her T-shirt, slipping it on, back to front and inside out. She felt suddenly cold and wrapped her arms around herself.

'You were in another woman's bed the other night ...' And then she blurted out because she couldn't stop herself, 'And I know you've got a reputation. So I won't sleep with you just because you're bored or to tide you over between lovers. Because clearly that's what happened in Mumbai that night.'

She looked down and then turned around when all she could see was Sebastian's gloriously naked and aroused body. She heard him drag his trousers on.

'Aneesa ...'

She wouldn't turn around and she heard him sigh. She felt a hand on her shoulder turning her gently and then a finger under her chin tipping her face up. She averted her gaze stubbornly. He said,

'Boredom played no part in what happened that night, nor did it have anything to do with filling a convenient gap between lovers, nor does it now. Do you remember what I said to you? That I didn't normally do that?'

Aneesa half shrugged, still valiantly avoiding Sebastian's eye.

'It was the truth. I hadn't slept with anyone for weeks before that night. And then you came along and I've never felt desire so intense before.'

She still said nothing, wouldn't look at him. He sighed again.

'I didn't sleep with that woman the other night, and to be honest, even if you hadn't turned up on that day, I know I wouldn't have been able to sleep with her.' His mouth twisted. 'The only reason I arranged the date in the first place was because I couldn't get the memory of *you* out of my head. And then the only reason I kept the date was because it was a pathetic attempt on my part to deny how seeing you again made me feel.'

Aneesa's eyes darted to Sebastian now and she couldn't look away again. He held her chin firm.

'I haven't slept with anyone since that night in Mumbai. And the thought of sleeping with any other woman apart from you quite frankly turns my stomach.'

Aneesa blurted out, 'Why didn't you want to see me again?' She

stopped and faltered, hating the insecurity that prompted the question. ‘I mean, it seems as if you have no problem taking lovers, so why didn’t you want to contact me?’

Every self-protecting instinct within Sebastian locked into place and he gave her the only answer he could right now, knowing it was only the half of it.

‘Because I knew you were different. You deserved more than I could offer. But now you’re here ... and I’ve wanted you every day since that night. I’m not strong enough to resist you ... *this*.’

Aneesa looked into Sebastian’s eyes and treacherously all of her fight drained away. She trusted that what he said was true, and while she suspected there was more to it, for now it was enough. Even though she had the leaden feeling that he was still warning her not to expect anything beyond transitory pleasures, baby or no baby. She needed him too badly. She’d hungered for him, and *ached* for him, and suspected that he’d just offered her more assurance than he’d probably given any woman. *And she carried his baby, his seed.*

She knew he was waiting for her move, so she reached down and pulled her T-shirt up and off again, dropping it to the floor. And stepping right up to him, she wound her arms around his neck and kissed him with all the pent-up fervour she’d been pushing down for weeks.

Within minutes they were naked and on the bed, limbs entangled, hot and sweaty, an urgency driving them both to seek that heady blissful union again. And it was only when Sebastian thrust deep inside Aneesa and her body welcomed him back with a glorious spontaneous wave of pleasure that she realised how deeply in danger she was of falling for this man.

If Aneesa had assumed that sleeping with Sebastian would mark a progression in their relationship, then she’d been very naïve. While for her it had precipitated the most cataclysmic realisation of her life—she was falling for him—for Sebastian it seemed to be fulfilling the sole purpose of sating a physical need.

For nearly two weeks now they’d been sleeping together every night, invariably in her bed. And without fail, Sebastian would get up and go

back to his room. The one night when they'd ended up in his bed, he'd carried Aneesa, exhausted and sated, back to her own. When she'd protested he'd just bent down and pressed a searing kiss to her mouth and said, 'I'll only keep you awake ...'

And if anything, Sebastian had become even cooler, more distant. It was as if their physical relationship was having a directly negative effect on any kind of emotional closeness. And yet, Aneesa knew instinctively that if she attempted to stop the physical side of things, Sebastian would retreat even more.

He was the father of her child and she knew it was dangerously idealistic but she couldn't help but dream of a future for them. And if she was ever going to reach him, and discover the secrets he kept hidden, then she would just have to bide her time. But right now, she bit back a feeling of futility as she headed to a doctor's appointment on her own.

When it came to anything to do with the baby, Sebastian clammed up even more. He never asked her how she was feeling and, apart from discussing arrangements, showed no interest in his child, or her pregnancy. Even though when they made love she could tell he was aware of her small but growing bump.

He'd shown no interest in joining her at the doctor's today where she was due to have her first scan. When she came out of the appointment, the spring sunshine was strong. Relief was her predominant emotion—she was healthy and everything looked fine and normal with the baby.

She held the small printout of a picture of her baby in her bag, but she had no one to share the news with. People hurried past her on the street and a wave of loneliness and homesickness washed over her. She had a sudden feeling of empathy for all the Indian women who travelled to England each year to make a new life, quite usually with a new husband they might have not even met before.

A moment of inspiration struck her and she called the apartment from a payphone to let Daniel know what she was doing, in case he worried when she didn't arrive home. And then feeling chirpier than she had in days, she joined the throng of humanity and disappeared into a nearby underground station, armed with a tube map and instructions from

Daniel.

Sebastian stood at the window of his office, hands deep in his pockets. His insides roiled and he felt in turmoil. And whenever he felt like this, he retreated inwards. Which is what he'd been doing ever since he'd started sleeping with Aneesa again.

It had always worked for him in the past; at times of stress or crisis, he'd retreat inwards and be at his most productive outwardly. Or he'd go off and do a triathlon and lose himself in the most gruelling physical thing he could think of. As a child it had manifested itself in taking out the horses his father had owned and riding until both he and the animal were shaking and sweating with fatigue, but exhilarated by the adrenalin rush. His mind would be numb from all pain, and the sense of isolation that had dogged him since his mother's exit from his life, and the fact that she'd shown an almost fatal preference for his younger brother Nathaniel, would leave him momentarily.

But now ... the retreating inwards wasn't working the way it usually did. For a start, everything felt suspiciously close to the surface, as if there was a delicate shell around him that might crack at any moment. And even more worryingly, he didn't crave the opium of physical release the way he always had. Work held little interest for him. And the most disconcerting thing of all—he'd begun sleeping for long stretches, and waking at dawn, instead of arriving home at dawn, exhausted from a six-mile jog.

He consciously resisted the inevitable intimacy provoked by sex by retreating from Aneesa, maintaining a distance. And then guilt struck him hard. She'd gone to a doctor's appointment today—the first. He'd known about it, of course, and when she'd tentatively asked if he'd like to come, he'd issued a curt, 'No,' citing work. The thought of seeing that jumble of growing cells become a baby on a grainy black-and-white screen had made his innards seize with fear.

He grimaced now. The very work he'd cited hadn't held his attention because Aneesa was out there somewhere, and learning about her baby, *their* baby, without him. Galvanised into sudden action, Sebastian called the apartment and frowned when Daniel told him she wasn't home. He consulted his watch, a tendril of concern going through him. 'But the

appointment should have been over an hour ago, plenty of time for her to get home.'

Daniel replied, 'She called to ask me how to get to Brick Lane—she said she'd read about it in a book—so I gave her directions....'

Sebastian didn't hear any more of what Daniel said. He remembered his security guard's awed reaction to seeing and meeting Aneesa that first day. She was one of Bollywood's biggest stars and she was headed to one of the busiest hubs of Anglo-Indian life in London.

Real fear curdled his insides as he slammed down the phone and bellowed to his PA to get his car brought around. With his heart hammering Sebastian cursed the fact that he hadn't even thought to get Aneesa an English mobile phone, and prayed that today of all days she was wearing a baseball hat and sunglasses.

Aneesa had got off the tube and was wandering along the main street of Bethnal Green, looking for Brick Lane, happily browsing through the stalls, soaking up the atmosphere and loving the colourful vibrancy of the area. She'd spotted a DVD shop that had a poster of one of her movies on the door. Even just hearing her native language being spoken made her smile. She congratulated herself on coming here when suddenly a passing woman caught her arm and exclaimed incredulously, '*Aneesa Adani?*'

Aneesa was startled for a moment. She'd almost come to forget that people might recognise her. She switched on a smile and the woman was now shouting ecstatically to some friends to come over. Within seconds a small crowd had formed and Aneesa was being photographed with the group of women.

More and more people started to congregate as they noticed the fuss and saw who it was. They couldn't believe that a real-life Bollywood star was in their midst. Aneesa was starting to get jostled as people tried to pass and the newcomers wanted photos and her autograph. It was only when she was nearly knocked over that she felt the first real spiking of fear and looked up to see nothing but a vast sea of faces around her.

The crush of the crowd registered then and belatedly she started to try and turn back, smiling apologetically. She'd never had to deal with

anything like this before, as in Mumbai they'd always been surrounded by security teams. But now she was thousands of miles from Mumbai and surrounded by a growing crowd of complete strangers.

And then the mood started to change. An old woman pushed her way forward and spat at Aneesa's feet and issued an insult that made Aneesa blush. Evidently the news of Aneesa's pregnancy had spread to England from the tabloids in Mumbai.

And then another woman appeared and started to reach for Aneesa's head as if trying to pull her hair. Aneesa felt real panic set in, and fear that she and the baby might be harmed. She put a protective hand on her belly. She could see nothing but the crowd and knew that if she didn't escape soon she'd be sucked under completely. Even as she thought that, the crush got even more intense and people starting to fight one another, defending her and lambasting her in equal measure.

With a useless scream strangling her throat she tried to look around to seek escape and could only blink stupidly when she saw a car screech to a halt at the side of the road, and the tall grim-faced figure of Sebastian emerge from the back. He waded through the crowd with singular intent. When he got to her, he effortlessly plucked her up into his arms where she clung onto his neck and curled up as tight as she could into his chest. And it was only at that moment, as she could feel his strong body beneath hers, that she believed he was real and relief flooded her.

By the time they got to his car and were safely ensconced and driving away, she was still curled on his lap and trembling violently. Sebastian issued soothing words and stroked her back as if she were a child and finally she'd calmed enough to look up and stutter out, 'How ... how did you know?'

He tilted his head back so he could look at her and brushed some of her hair behind one ear. 'Daniel told me.' His jaw clenched and it was only then that Aneesa registered the extreme tension in his body. 'And thank God you'd told him where you were going. I saw the crowd just before we got to Brick Lane.'

Aneesa shook her head. 'I didn't even make it there. I had no idea—I didn't think for a second something like that might happen.' She started to tremble again as she recalled the way the crowd had just materialised

within minutes and crushed around her. And then that woman's face twisted with anger.

She shuddered. 'They were nice at first but then an old woman started saying the most vile things about me and my baby.' Tears threatened and Sebastian kissed her, placing his hand on her belly, touching her there for the first time with intent.

'They're a traditional community. Look at how you had to leave Mumbai. Anyone that threatens their traditions threatens them, and expats will cling onto that world even more fiercely.'

Aneesa nodded her head, biting her lip, struggling to regain control, but his hand on her belly was making her feel even more raw. She felt like she was always weeping all over Sebastian. 'I know ... but it was just a shock to see it up so close like that....'

And then Sebastian's hand tightened on her belly and he said gruffly, 'And it's my baby too. Our baby.'

Aneesa looked at him and also noticed for the first time how pale he was. He shook his head now. 'When I saw you in the middle of that mob ...' He couldn't finish. 'I'm sorry for not coming to the doctor with you today. I shouldn't have let you go on your own. I won't let that happen again.'

More stupid tears threatened. 'It was fine, really ... I don't mind. I know that it can't be easy for you to come to terms with this.'

He was grim. 'Nevertheless, I'm coming next time.'

Aneesa finally relaxed her death grip from around Sebastian's neck and he shifted slightly under her so that she fell into the cradle of his lap more. She blushed at the intimacy. She went to move off his lap but he pulled her back with a growl. 'Stay where you are. You're not going anywhere alone again without a team of bodyguards.' She felt him take a deep breath before saying, 'I know I've been avoiding lots of issues, especially around the baby, and I'm going to be there more from now on.'

Unable to halt the rising tide of tenderness because she could see something achingly vulnerable in his blue eyes, which she *knew* he would hate her to see, she just caressed his jaw and said softly, 'Thank

you.'

And she pressed a kiss to his mouth, weakly succumbing when his tongue sought hers and stoked the fires of their relentless desire.

For the rest of the day Sebastian treated Aneesa like she was made of bone china, to the point where she had to curb her exasperation when he insisted on carrying her from the dining table to the bedroom after dinner. It had been bad enough dealing with Daniel's guilt-ridden hand-wringing all evening too. The man had been beside himself to know that he'd unwittingly let Aneesa walk into certain danger, and nothing she could say would make him feel better.

But now all of her impatience melted when

Sebastian put her gently on her bed and asked her, 'Did you get a scan picture of the baby today at the doctors?'

Aneesa nodded and got up to fetch her bag, her heart thumping unevenly. There had been more than a hint of nerves in Sebastian's voice. She pulled out the scrap of paper with its distinctive black-and-white image and handed it to him, smiling wryly. 'It doesn't really look like much now.' She sat cross-legged on the bed beside him and pointed out the curved spine and the head. Then she put a hand on her belly and said wonderingly, 'I can't really believe that's inside me, especially when I can't feel anything moving yet....'

Sebastian was just looking at the paper, his face intent. Emboldened by this perceptible softening and the way he'd been so gentle and tender all evening she asked hesitantly now, 'I saw something in the papers about your brother Nathaniel's wedding in a few days at your hotel ... Are you going?'

Immediately Sebastian tensed beside her and Aneesa was afraid he'd get up and walk out. His jaw went taut but he didn't move and finally said in a tight voice, 'No, I'm not going to the wedding. And I'm not interested in discussing it.'

Feeling scared but knowing it was important, she asked, 'What if I want to discuss it?'

Sebastian avoided her eye. 'Please, Aneesa, don't push me on this.'

Before she could ask any more questions or her far-too-perceptive eyes

could see the effect that looking at the picture of his baby was having on him, Sebastian handed her back the printout, got up abruptly from the bed and muttered something about running a bath for her.

He escaped to the bathroom, feeling like an utter coward. But the truth was that his entire world felt like it had just tilted sideways. Her questions had cut far too close to the bone, especially now that he knew his brother Jacob was seemingly intent on getting everyone together. And the knowledge hit again; that grainy image he'd just held in his hand was his son or daughter ... And for the first time it wasn't the dreaded fear that threatened to overwhelm him but something that felt suspiciously like joy.

To his relief, after she'd had her bath, Aneesa seemed content to drop the questions. Sebastian didn't attempt to make love to her, even though his body screamed for it. And even though he felt a disturbingly primal need to brand her in some way—the aftermath of the terror he'd felt earlier was still in his system—but he controlled his urge. She was lying on her side, tucked into his body, his arms wrapped around her. He felt raw, like a layer of skin had been ripped away. Her breaths were deep and even and he told himself he'd get up and leave in a minute, but he couldn't stop his eyes from closing and the elusive tentacles of sleep bind around him.

The only way Sebastian knew he'd been having that dream again was because he was struggling for breath and something or someone was holding him down. He fought to get free and lurched off the bed, only realising then where he was.

Aneesa was looking at him with huge eyes, her hair tousled around her shoulders. 'You were having a dream ... crying out for someone to come to you....'

On jelly legs Sebastian walked over to the window. His heart was still hammering and his skin felt clammy. He spoke because something within him couldn't remain silent. He'd bottled this up forever.

'I was calling for my mother.'

'Yes,' Aneesa said quietly.

He was still half conscious and recounted the dream almost without

realising he was doing it. ‘I’m in my home where I grew up, Wolfe Manor, and I’m tiny. I’m in a dark corridor all alone, and I know something terrible has happened. I’m frightened and crying but no one comes and then suddenly there are lots of people—my half-brothers and -sister, our housekeeper ... my father. But they can’t see me and they keep rushing past me, even though I’m crying.’

Sebastian knew Aneesa had moved to sit on the edge of the bed. Silently he begged her not to come near him or he might crumble completely.

‘Sebastian it was just a dream ...’ Aneesa’s heart went out to the tall proud man who stood with his back to her.

He turned around then and she was shocked at the bleak look on his face. ‘That’s it, you see. It’s not just a dream. It’s a memory. When I was just over a year old, my mother walked into the lake on our estate and tried to kill herself and my brother Nathaniel. He was just a baby at the time, but my father was enraged because she’d been stupid enough to have another child. It was only because two of my older brothers saw her and saved them that they survived.’

Aneesa sucked in a breath. ‘That’s horrific ...’ He smiled but it was grim. ‘Yes. And there’s plenty more where that came from, like the fact that my oldest brother Jacob had a row with our father which resulted in his death.’ Aneesa tried to speak. ‘Sebastian—’ He made a slashing gesture with his hand. ‘No. I won’t discuss this anymore. You need to get back to sleep. I’m sorry for disturbing you.’

And he strode out of the bedroom. Aneesa just sat there for a long moment before curling back into bed, hugging her arms around herself. She didn’t want to be alone tonight—she still felt vulnerable after what had happened earlier—but she knew there was no way Sebastian would come back now. She’d just pushed him to his limit.

# CHAPTER SIX

WHEN Aneesa woke the next morning and went to get some breakfast, she wasn't surprised to see that Sebastian had already gone to the office. Daniel passed on a message to say that Sebastian would be working late, so not to wait up. Aneesa sighed deeply. They'd gone about five steps forward and three hundred back. All night she'd had broken and disturbed dreams about a small boy standing distraught in a dark corridor while people rushed past, ignoring him.

*Great, she thought to herself as she poured some tea, now I'm even taking on his nightmares.* But there had been something so sadly poignant about the image ... and even now she silently vowed to protect her own child from any similar scenario.

After breakfast she went into Sebastian's study which he told her she could use to make calls home or for the Internet. Feeling determined, she sat there for hours and trawled the Internet for every bit of information she could find about the Wolfe family. She managed to find out a lot more this time and it was only when Daniel knocked and called her for supper that she realised how engrossed she'd become.

Her head spun with information she'd found, but she'd ended up with nearly more questions than answers. By all accounts, William Wolfe, Sebastian's father, had been a charismatic and upstanding man of society. A vastly wealthy and enigmatic character, he'd had seven children, and a rumoured illegitimate son, the famous Brazilian entrepreneur Rafael da Souza. He'd clearly been a lover of women, with three marriages and at least a couple of love affairs to his credit. And yet all of his relationships seemed to have ended in tragedy, or mysterious circumstances. And exactly as Sebastian had said, he'd died by the hand of his own eldest son, although this tragedy had been ruled accidental.

There'd been one mention of Carrie Hartington, Nathaniel and Sebastian's mother, to say that she'd been committed to psychiatric care twenty-five years before, and nothing about where she was now. Aneesa could only guess, after what Sebastian had revealed, that perhaps his

mother had had some sort of severe postnatal depression, because surely her own husband couldn't have driven her to such a situation?

All in all, as she dropped exhausted into bed that evening, Aneesa knew that the real story of Sebastian's past lay between the lines of everything she'd read today, and she also knew that he would have to be the one to tell her. She woke up a couple of hours later when she felt Sebastian slide into the bed behind her, his naked body tucking around hers. On a wave of relief that he'd come to her, she silently turned to face him and took his face in her hands, kissing him on his mouth.

Her nightdress was discarded in a matter of seconds and Aneesa said nothing as she and Sebastian made love. Afterwards, when he tried to pull away to leave, she gripped his arms around her and said determinedly, 'No. Stay till I fall asleep.'

She could sense his struggle but finally he gave in, and for the first time, Aneesa lay awake while Sebastian slept. She prayed he wouldn't have the dream again, and finally fell into a dreamless sleep herself.

When she woke the next morning alone in the bed, Aneesa had to wonder for a moment if she'd dreamt that Sebastian had come to her the previous night, but then her naked and pleasantly aching body told her the truth.

Without even getting out of bed, she instinctively knew that Sebastian would be gone to work already and a small fire of anger and determination lit in her blood. She was *not* going to let him treat her as if she existed purely to keep his bed warm, and not even as a human being he could communicate with. She was carrying his child—she deserved better than that, no matter what secrets his past held.

Sebastian felt disgruntled and irritated. Ever since the horrific realisation that Aneesa had witnessed his most vulnerable moment, when he'd blurted out his dream, he'd been determined to do his best to mark out his territory again. Reclaim his *sanity*.

He'd gone into the office yesterday and had instructed his assistant to find apartments for sale or rent. He was going to move Aneesa out, or he'd move out if he had to. She could have the apartment and Daniel. He couldn't stay there any longer. With her. With those huge eyes watching

his every move, silently questioning him.

So last night he'd come home, with arms full of brochures for houses, determined to lay them all out and offer them up to Aneesa. He would set her up in style, so that she and his baby would never have to want for anything. He'd do the same in Mumbai if she so wished so he could keep them at arm's length and get on with his life.

And he would be calling a halt to the physical side of their relationship; it wasn't fair to keep sleeping with her when he had no intention of making her a permanent fixture in his life. He couldn't shake his visceral deep-rooted fears and simply could not envisage a future as a happy family.

But then ... he'd come into her room where she lay sleeping and a force greater than he could resist had made him shed his clothes and climb into bed with her. He'd *had* to touch her. And then she'd turned to him and kissed him so sweetly and he'd been lost ... and worst of all, afterwards he'd *slept*, until dawn had been breaking outside. His main feeling on waking up had been relief that he'd not had the dream again and his arms and hands had been full of soft, curvaceous and warm woman. One hand had rested across her belly, as if even in sleep it had gone there to protect the child within.

That soft yet hard swell had made a light sweat break out on his brow, but even so, the prospect of sending her away from him in that moment had sent panic through his system. So once again, with his head thumping with a mass of contradictions, he'd left so that he could avoid seeing her wake, seeing those eyes widen and the inevitable questions form.

That morning Daniel had gone out to do some shopping and Aneesa had declined to join him, still a little nervous of going outside, even though Daniel had informed her that Sebastian had two bodyguards standing by. Somehow Aneesa had known that the only person she would feel safe with was Sebastian.

So when she was passing the study and she heard the phone ring, she went in to answer it, her heart tripping to think it might be him. But it wasn't. It was another voice which sounded eerily familiar, deep and authoritative. When he asked for Sebastian and she said he was at work,

the man sighed deeply and then said, ‘Is this Aneesa Adani?’

‘Yes ...’ she replied warily. ‘Who is this, please?’

A long silence and then, ‘It’s Jacob Wolfe, Sebastian’s brother.’

‘Oh.’ Immediately Aneesa thought of the fact that this man had been responsible for his father’s death.

“‘Oh’ is right,” came the wry response. ‘Sebastian hasn’t responded to Nathaniel’s wedding invitation. Do you know that our brother is getting married this weekend?’

‘Yes ...’ Aneesa said, her head buzzing with questions. ‘I’d heard ... read about it in the paper. But I don’t think Sebastian intends to go.’

‘Somehow I’m not surprised.’ Another silence fell and then Jacob said, ‘Speaking of the papers, I saw you with my brother.’

Aneesa frowned. ‘What do you mean?’ And then she went paler and paler as Jacob described how pictures of Sebastian carrying her to safety from the mob on Bethnal Green had been tabloid front-page news for the past couple of days. She closed her eyes; she could just imagine the lurid headlines.

‘Do you mind me asking—is it true? Are you having a baby with my brother?’

Miserably Aneesa figured it wouldn’t have taken long for the hacks to get that information from the

Indian papers and answered, ‘Yes.’ She hadn’t even told her parents who the father was yet.

‘Well, then, you must come to the wedding, even if Sebastian won’t. You’re part of the family now, and everyone would love to meet you.’

Aneesa gripped the phone cord tighter. Here was a chance to get to know more about Sebastian’s past. Jacob was right; she was part of this family now whether Sebastian liked it or not.

‘OK ...’ she said huskily, ‘I’d like that very much.’

Jacob became brisker. ‘Good, we’ll see you at the weekend, then, and tell Sebastian I called.’

It was only when Aneesa put down the phone that some instinct made her pull open the top drawer nearest to her on the desk, and inside she

saw it—the invitation to Nathaniel’s wedding, torn neatly in half. The fact that he hadn’t destroyed it completely sent a flicker of hope through her. She picked the two halves out and, with a sense of determination, found some sticky tape and stuck them together again.

And then when she was on the way out of the study, her head still spinning, she spotted them. Sitting on the edge of the desk. A pile of glossy brochures, all detailing luxury one-and two-bedroom apartments for sale or rent just nearby Sebastian’s apartment. And worse ... luxury apartments in Mumbai.

Hurt lanced Aneesa so badly that she had to suck in a breath. And then she heard a door slam, long strides coming towards the study. The door was flung open and Sebastian stood there, resplendent in a dark suit. Every inch the successful and powerful titan of industry.

He frowned. ‘What’s wrong?’ And Aneesa knew she must look pale. She shook her head and bought time to recover.

‘What are you doing home?’ She cursed her tongue, *as if this was home*.

Carefully now Sebastian said, ‘I forgot a document I need for a meeting.’

Aneesa held the patched-up wedding invitation high in one shaky hand and said, ‘Was it this?’

And then with the other hand she held up the sheaf of glossy brochures. ‘Or perhaps it was these?’ She glanced at them, and back to Sebastian. ‘I haven’t had the chance to look through them properly yet but perhaps a penthouse apartment isn’t the most practical place for me to live once the baby gets here.’

# CHAPTER SEVEN

INARTICULATE rage boiled upwards within Sebastian. ‘How dare you go through my personal things!’

Aneesa stood before him, pale and intensely vulnerable-looking but with an unmistakably determined glint in her eyes. Her chin came up. ‘I dare because as your own brother just told me, I’m a part of your family now and will be for a long time to come, thanks to *our* baby.

‘Tell me,’ she asked conversationally, colour returning to her cheeks, ‘was last night just a quickie before you asked me to move out, or were you planning on taking your fill before my body becomes too rounded and repulsive to you?’

‘Stop it,’ Sebastian said curtly, the thought of her body growing more rounded having the complete opposite effect on his body. And before she could say anything else he asked, ‘What did you mean about my brother?’

Aneesa leaned back against the desk, still holding the wedding invitation and the brochures. ‘Jacob just called. He wants to know why he hasn’t been able to get in touch with you and if you’re coming to Nathaniel’s wedding.’

Acute pain lanced Sebastian to hear that name. ‘I’ve already told you I’m not going and it’s none of his business.’ He put out an imperious hand. ‘Give me the invitation.’

Aneesa held it to her chest. ‘No. If you want it you can come and get it. And you could have got rid of it properly but you didn’t, so what does that say?’

Sebastian strode towards her then, fury all over his face, but Aneesa didn’t feel scared. He stopped a couple of feet away and she could see the agitation on his face, in his blue eyes. His hands were fists by his sides. Tension bounced off him in waves.

Aneesa stood strong. ‘I’m not giving you the invitation because it’s not yours anymore. It’s mine. Jacob has asked me to go and I’ve said yes.’

Sebastian's jaw clenched. 'You can't go. You don't even know them.'

Aneesa glared up at him. 'I might not know them but apparently now that we've been splashed all over the papers, they want to get to know *me*. They, unlike you, seem to be coming to terms with the fact that I'm carrying a Wolfe heir a lot quicker than you!'

'He saw the papers ...' It wasn't a question.

'Yes. Why didn't you tell me?'

Sebastian raked a hand through his hair, exasperation evident. 'I didn't want you to be upset by it.'

'Perhaps you didn't want me to get any notions of permanency? You're forgetting that I'm not the one with the issues surrounding this pregnancy, *you* are.'

She looked at the brochures she held in her hand again and then stalked to Sebastian, pushing them into his chest where he had to catch them or let them fall. 'And it's apparent now that you're going to do your damnedest to get rid of all the evidence—shut your inconvenient ex-one-night stand away with her even more inconvenient baby.'

She walked past him to the door and turned back. 'I won't go to a place of your choosing like some pregnant concubine, Sebastian. I'd prefer to take my chances and return to India rather than endure that. And whether you like it or not, I'm going to your brother's wedding. I want my child to know his or her family.'

Aneesa was shaking by the time she reached her bedroom. Trembling all over. Standing up to Sebastian's rigid stance had been a lot harder than she'd thought, and still that awful hurt lanced her, right through her belly, to think that he would want to shut her and the baby away like that. And yet what else had she expected? Despair gripped her.

She was sitting on the window seat and looking out at the view, not really seeing it, just waiting for the inevitable sound of the front door slamming as it heralded Sebastian's return to work and away from her. But it didn't come. And when a knock sounded on her door, her nerves were so tightly wound that she jumped.

She stood to see the door open and Sebastian standing there, his tie ripped off, jacket gone and shirt open. And he looked so damned

gorgeous that every bone in her body wanted to melt. But she stood firm with arms crossed, fully prepared to tell him that she was going to return to India after the wedding if he was going to insist that she move out.

‘Don’t you have work or a meeting or something?’

I don’t want to be accused of disrupting your routine.’

Sebastian closed the door behind him and smiled grimly, making Aneesa’s heart thump unevenly. He rested against it and said without rancour, ‘I’ve cancelled my meeting, and my routine got disrupted the moment I first saw you in Mumbai.’

Hurt gripped Aneesa again. ‘Well, I’m sorry about that but—’

He put up a hand. ‘I’m not.’

And then he prowled towards her and she wished she could run but the window was at her back. Sebastian being cold and distant and prickly was one thing, but this more ambiguous Sebastian threatened every level of her already shaky equilibrium.

He stood before her, close enough to touch but not touching, eyes raking her face. Resting on her mouth with indecent explicitness before climbing upwards again where their heat nearly made her wobble.

He growled out, ‘You’re a thorn in my side, Aneesa Adani, but a thorn I’m finding impossible to ignore, no matter how much I try.

‘I admit that I had thought of offering you a place of your own to live, ostensibly to get out you out of my apartment ... but every time I try and push you away I find myself pulling you in again. I can’t have you near me and yet I can’t stand the thought of you not being here....’

Aneesa’s heart thumped crazily now. ‘That sounds messy.’

Sebastian grimaced. ‘It is. Very. Especially when my life up to now has been very clear and controlled.’

His eyes held her mesmerised. ‘I told you that I would take more time out for you and the baby and then I promptly went back on my word. I’m sorry.’

He came closer then and Aneesa found it hard to breathe, her gaze slipping to his mouth. His hands went to her waist, pulling her into him, and she could feel his arousal, her own body rejoicing helplessly, despite

all the turmoil in her head.

Valiantly though, she stayed rigid in his arms. She put her hands on his chest and tried to ignore the treacherous melting in her groin. ‘Sebastian, you can’t keep doing this, pulling me in, only to push me away again. It’s not fair.’

‘I know,’ he said quietly. ‘I don’t think I have the strength to push you away again.’

He sighed heavily and she felt his chest move against her hands. A slither of foreboding went down her spine. ‘But, Aneesa, I also can’t promise you a happy ever after. There are dark secrets in my family, bad things happened. It’s a long legacy of hurt and pain. And the last thing I want to do is visit that on my own child.’

Everything in her rejected that assertion. ‘But you wouldn’t—’

Sebastian put a finger over her mouth, stopping her words. ‘After everything I witnessed, I won’t commit just for the sake of propriety. My father wreaked havoc with his inconsistency and I can’t promise to be any better.’

An aching sadness welled inside Aneesa even though she appreciated his candour. He was basically saying his feelings for her weren’t strong enough to risk overcoming his fears. And was she strong enough to weather his stubbornness? To try and make him see that history didn’t have to repeat itself? What was the point if he didn’t even have feelings for her beyond physical desire?

And then as if he’d heard her thoughts, he said heavily, ‘If you want to return home, then I won’t stop you, and of course I’ll come to visit when the baby is due. But if you decide to stay in England, here with me ... you have to know that I can’t promise anything more than I’ve already given.’

Aneesa quelled the urge to cry at Sebastian’s searing honesty. He was offering her a no-win situation and only an extreme masochist would take the option she was about to. ‘I can’t go home yet, especially if the news has broken there as to who the father is. I should call my parents.’ Her eyes lifted from where they’d rested on a button on his shirt. ‘So I’m afraid you’re stuck with me for now.’

‘Are you sure about this, Aneesa?’

She nodded her head because, at that moment, she wasn’t sure at all but she knew that the thought of walking away from him was far harder to contemplate than the alternative.

‘Well, then, after you’ve called your parents we’ve got shopping to do.’

She frowned. ‘Shopping?’

Sebastian’s jaw clenched. ‘If you’re determined to go to this wedding, then you’re not going on your own.’

Aneesa held in a stunned gasp and damped down a spark of hope. Sebastian was saying one thing, but his actions were saying something else, and despite her head sending out warning bells, her heart couldn’t help but give a little lurch of treacherous hope. Grimly she answered, ‘I’m determined.’

Sebastian sighed. ‘In that case, I need to get a suit and you need to get a wedding outfit.’

Aneesa was not like any woman Sebastian had ever known. She was brave: brave enough to deal with the collapse of a successful career, to deal with ostracism and cross the other side of the world to face up to a huge personal crisis. And yet her eyes had filled with tears only that afternoon when they’d witnessed a harried mother clipping her small son around the ear on the street with enough violence to make him squeal with genuine pain. Afterwards Aneesa had apologised to Sebastian and said, ‘I’m sorry—it must be my hormones.’

But it had made Sebastian feel even more strongly about his reasons not to commit. When he’d seen the child being brutalised on the street, he’d just felt sympathy for him, but not shock. And it was that sense of being anaesthetised that scared him.

He’d grown up learning to duck from his father’s loose fists. He’d invariably been protected by one of his brothers and witnessed them getting a dose of physical violence, but none more so shocking than his beautiful older sister, Annabelle, the day their father had whipped her mercilessly, leaving her with permanent scars. He’d been too small to step in and help her and that sense of ineffectualness had stuck with him, heightening his sense of isolation. And his sense of fear that

perhaps he couldn't protect his own child.

When they'd bought his suit for the wedding, he'd led Aneesa to a well-known designer shop on Bond Street, but on the threshold she'd pulled back and he'd looked down to see her face, puce with embarrassment. He'd frowned. He would have thought she'd have been running in, eager to indulge. But when she'd refused to budge she'd finally admitted, 'I don't have enough money to pay for a dress here. Let's go somewhere else. *Please.*'

And gruffly, he'd assured her that he'd intended to pay for her outfit, but still, she hadn't budged until he'd promised to let her pay him back.

She'd been quick and economical, settling on a knee-length champagne-coloured dress that had swirled around her like a diaphanous cloud, with a clever empire line to disguise her swelling belly. And a short gold blazer jacket to go over it.

When he'd seen her emerge from the changing room and how much delectable silky olive-skinned cleavage was revealed in the dress, he'd had to bite back the urge to insist on a less revealing dress. But she'd looked so shyly pleased that he hadn't had the heart to say anything.

It was only when they'd been headed back to the apartment that he'd realised how much he'd genuinely enjoyed the afternoon when he normally abhorred shopping, and how little he'd been thinking of the upcoming wedding. Especially when he'd made a vow not to see his brother Jacob ever again. But right now, with Aneesa by his side, the prospect wasn't half as daunting as he would have imagined.

On the morning of Nathaniel's wedding, Aneesa woke up and rolled over in the bed. Lying on her back, looking at the ceiling, she didn't need to feel the bed beside her to know that Sebastian hadn't joined her last night.

He'd been out indulging in his punishing exercise regime again, swimming or punching a bag, or running—she didn't know which. His rising tension as they'd approached the wedding had had a direct effect on Aneesa, to the point where his pacing in the living room last night had irritated her so much that she'd announced that his hair was too long and had made him sit down in the bathroom so she could give him

a haircut.

He'd sat as meekly as a child while she'd moved around him, cutting his hair short, the way it had been when she'd first met him. When she was almost finished, he'd asked her gruffly, 'Where did you learn to do this?'

'My mother always cuts my father's hair. She taught me years ago.'

Their eyes had met in the bathroom mirror and she'd said drily but with a pain in her heart, 'It's just a haircut, Sebastian, don't worry. I'm not binding you to me for ever with some mystical Indian ceremony.'

But the truth was, she *had* found it more than a little erotic and all too easy to indulge in a fantasy of things being different. She'd never known what an intimate thing it was to cut someone's hair; perhaps it was because the other person was somewhat vulnerable. She'd always felt a little like a voyeur when she'd watched her mother tend to her father like that.

But afterwards Sebastian had got up and said an abrupt thanks and had all but run out, leaving Aneesa standing there holding the scissors, surrounded by hair. She'd felt like calling after him for a tip.

What she didn't know was that Sebastian had gone straight to his study where he'd poured himself a generous measure of whisky and downed it in one gulp. His hands hadn't been steady, the experience of having his hair cut by her affecting him more profoundly than he liked to admit.

Handing himself over to Aneesa like that—having her caress his head, push it forward, tilt it back and to the side ... running her fingers through his hair to judge where to cut, massaging his scalp ... feeling the tantalising brush of her breast against his body—it had been all he could do to just sit there and not yank her round to sit on his lap and sate the fire burning in his loins.

Since when was getting a haircut erotic? And yet at the same time deliciously soporific? For the first time in a couple of days, since he'd decided to go to the wedding, she'd once again managed to distract him and shut out the clamour in his head ... and he hated the feeling of vulnerability that gave him. The sense that, on some level, he *needed* her.

The elusive lure of losing himself in hard-core exercise had come to his rescue for the first time in days and he'd escaped to the pool where he'd swum himself to a point of exhaustion, finally falling asleep on a lounger by the pool as dawn broke outside.

Sebastian had told Aneesa that they would stay at his hotel the night of the wedding, so she'd prepared a small overnight bag, and when she emerged to the main reception area of the apartment there were butterflies in her belly to see the back of the tall, impossibly broad-shouldered figure of Sebastian in a steel-grey morning suit.

He'd been talking to Nathaniel on the phone and had agreed to be his groomsman. Apparently Nathaniel hadn't wanted a best man, and they were eschewing the traditional pomp and speeches for an informal late lunch after the ceremony. Sebastian turned around slowly now, increasing the butterflies in Aneesa's belly, and then she wondered if she was feeling the baby move for the first time?

But when his eyes hungrily took her in she forgot everything under his intense gaze. He'd seen the dress in the shop already, surely he liked it? She suddenly felt very insecure.

'Is it OK? It's not too short?' She pulled ineffectually at the dress and jacket.

'No,' Sebastian said curtly. 'It's fine.'

It was more than fine; she was quite simply the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. A vision in gold and soft champagne. Her skin was glowing. Her long black hair was down and she'd teased it into sleek movie-star waves. And her feet were encased in vertiginous gold sandals that drew the eye to her slender but stupendously shapely legs.

He frowned. 'Can you walk in those?'

She stuck one leg out and he had to bite back a groan. 'I'll be fine,' she said breezily. 'One thing the movies and being a beauty queen has taught me is how to stand around for hours in high heels.'

He held out a hand. 'We'd better get going—' he smiled grimly '—wouldn't want to be late, now, would we?'

She came forward with a determined glint in her eye and took his hand, making his chest lurch. 'No, we wouldn't.'

The marriage ceremony was taking place in the small Unitarian church just beside the Grand Wolfe Hotel, which was huge and impressive—exuding a classic timelessness that Aneesa could recognise was Sebastian's trademark signature style.

Aneesa stood on her own for much of the service as Sebastian stood alongside his brother. She recognised famous Hollywood actor Nathaniel, of course; his hair was dark like Sebastian's but longer. When he'd turned to greet Sebastian the two men had just looked at each other for a long intense moment before hugging fiercely. And with awful predictability emotional tears had pricked Aneesa's eyes.

Nathaniel's bride, Katie, was stunning in a beautiful long ivory gown with antique diamante details just below her bust and at the shoulders of the straps of the dress, showing off her slender willowy frame. A mass of brown curls was drawn up and away from her face, highlighting a long neck and the most amazing green eyes Aneesa had ever seen.

Aneesa had spotted who she assumed to be Sebastian's other brothers ahead of her by a few pews. They all cut tall intimidating figures. One she guessed had to be Jacob, as he looked the most austere. She'd caught a glimpse of his dark eyes when he'd turned to watch the bride walk down the aisle, and they'd been intense.

In the flurry of activity once the ceremony was over, Aneesa was surprised when Sebastian reached for her hand and pulled her from the pew so that she could walk with him up the aisle. She felt the fierceness of his grip and squeezed his hand silently, telling him that she understood, touched by his obvious desire to have her by his side. Once again that dangerous tendril of hope unfurled inside her and she had to dampen it down.

There were paparazzi everywhere outside, like a baying mob, being held back by a cordon of security men. But Sebastian had them whisked inside the hotel in minutes, and after checking with his manager that everything was running smoothly, they made their way to the main reception room.

Sebastian first introduced Aneesa to his sister, Annabelle, who Aneesa realised had been the photographer in the church and outside. She was beautiful—tall and slim, dressed with impeccably smart taste, with long

wavy blond hair and grey eyes which swirled with emotion. Instinctively Aneesa guessed Annabelle wouldn't want people to see that and felt a small bond form between them, and was touched when Annabelle congratulated them on the pregnancy.

And then in no particular order she was introduced to the happy couple, who only had eyes for each other, and two other brothers, Lucas and Rafael, who'd been polite and inquisitive. Lucas's girlfriend, Grace, had been there also, tall with blond hair. Rafael, however, had shown that sparky Wolfe trait she was coming to know so well when Sebastian had asked after his wife, Leila. Rafael's black eyes had flashed warningly as he'd issued a curtly succinct, 'She couldn't make it.'

An enigmatic look had passed between Sebastian and Lucas.

Through it all Sebastian had his arm clamped around Aneesa's waist and her face was starting to hurt from smiling so much. And then she felt him tense rigidly. She followed his gaze to see a man approach them, the man she'd guessed was Jacob in the church. Tall with thick black hair, dark eyes like Rafael. And a grimly determined look on his face. Aneesa could feel Sebastian's urge to turn and walk away and she silently willed him to stay. He did.

But as the two tall men squared up to each other the lengthening silence became unbearable. Aneesa might have been invisible for all the attention either man gave her, and then abruptly Sebastian issued a tortured sounding, 'I can't do this.' And letting Aneesa go, he strode away and out of the reception room.

Jacob's black eyes followed his brother and Aneesa could see the sorrow in them. She tentatively touched his sleeve and he looked down at her, finally focusing on her. Apologising, he introduced himself. 'I knew it wouldn't be easy for Sebastian after all this time, but I'd hoped ...'

Aneesa felt awkward. 'I don't know exactly what happened between you but I'm sure it'll work out.'

Jacob smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. 'I hope so, but the truth is that I was the one person who Sebastian turned to after his mother was sent away, and after our father died, he was always the intensely quiet foil to Nathaniel's extrovert showmanship. They each found their own

way of coping after their mother had to be committed ...' He trailed off and then said, 'After I left ... I knew that he might take it the hardest. But I had no choice.'

For a second Aneesa thought she had a flash of insight into Sebastian's psyche when she sensed that Jacob had felt unable to contain his own rage and emotions, and had left for that reason, to protect his own family. Did Sebastian share that fear? 'I'm sure you had your reasons ...' Aneesa stopped then, feeling utterly useless. Sebastian hadn't been exaggerating when he'd warned her of their dark past. 'I ... I should really go to him.'

Jacob caught her arm lightly as she turned to go. She looked back.

'I'm glad he has you, Aneesa.'

She just smiled but it felt brittle. She didn't think it the best time to get into the dynamics of her non-relationship with Sebastian. It looked like his brothers and sister had enough on their hands. But never more than now did she feel a sense of futility wash over her.

She went to the reception desk and got the key to their room, where their luggage had already been deposited. As the private lift whisked Aneesa silently upwards, she smiled politely at the slightly awed elevator attendant, who showed her to the door of the suite and opened it for her.

She slipped inside, heart thumping painfully. She walked through the rooms until she saw him, standing with his back to her, one arm above his head resting on the window which looked out over London's skyline. The other hand in his pocket, and his whole frame so rigid, her heart ached.

He didn't turn around. 'Not now, Aneesa, please. Just ... leave me alone.'

The raw pain in his voice meant she had no choice. And she knew in that moment with a fatal inevitability that she loved him. She walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her cheek against his back, pressing close against him.

At first he stiffened and he brought his hand out of his pocket to cover hers as if to take her hands away, but then she felt a shudder run through his powerful frame and instead of extricating himself he laced

his fingers tightly through hers and held her hands in place.

She could have wept for him and her throat ached at the turmoil she felt in his body. She knew he was crying but she guessed it wasn't with tears, she imagined it was like a kind of deep ache that went beyond tears, welling up from inside him. She could feel it like a physical sensation resonating within her. She didn't know how long they stood there like that with her arms tight around him, her body pressed against his, her bump pressing solidly into his buttocks, but at some stage Sebastian started talking, in such a low voice that Aneesa had to strain to hear.

He told her everything—about how utterly mesmerising his mother had been, but too fragile to be a real mother, and then how she'd disappeared into full-time care, which had been terrifying to a six-year-old. The constant crying and fighting between his parents before his mother had disappeared, and about his violent father and the highs and lows of his mercurial moods. How he would drunkenly wake them all up and initiate a magical ghost hunt in the woods surrounding the house on a midsummer night's eve which would then morph into a nightmare of gigantic proportions because one of the boys would have innocently provoked him into an uncontrollable rage.

He spoke about the fierce solidarity between his siblings who'd always looked out for one another, despite the fact that they weren't all full siblings. And about how, despite that solidarity, *he'd* never really felt a part of it, somehow always on the fringes, observing the action. He told her dispassionately about how his father had brutally whipped his sister, and about Jacob being the one constant who had never let him get too insular ... until the day he'd left for good.

The setting evening sun was streaking the sky outside with dusky pink ribbons when Sebastian finally turned around in Aneesa's arms. He looked down at her and she stifled a breath. He looked haggard, his eyes bruised.

‘Why are you here? Why are you listening to this?’

She gave a small shrug, her eyes never leaving his. ‘Because you needed to tell someone. Because you’re the father of my child, and because ...’ Her heart tripped for a second. She was half terrified she’d

reveal just how much she cared about him. ‘Because you were there for me when I needed someone ...’

He quirked a small smile and relief flooded her belly.

‘Yes, but instead of providing silent counsel and sending you on your way I threw you onto the nearest bed and made love to you within an inch of our lives.’

Aneesa took his hand from around her waist and pressed a kiss to his palm before saying, ‘And I’m glad you did.’

He shook his head then, his face sobering up. ‘I can’t go back down there. I can’t see him. I wanted to kill him. I’ve never felt such rage before.’

No, thought Aneesa, *because you’ve channelled it into physical things like burning your body out.*

He extricated himself from Aneesa’s arms and walked over to the drinks cabinet where he poured himself a drink. Gently Aneesa pointed out, ‘It’s not just Jacob who is down there, it’s Nathaniel and his new wife. And your other brothers, and sister. They all looked so happy to see you.’

He threw back the drink. She saw his fingers clench so tightly around the glass his knuckles shone white. ‘Yes, but it’s *him*. I won’t give him the absolution he obviously wants, it’s too late. He can’t just arrive back into our lives like this.’

Aneesa walked over and turned him around to face her. ‘So what? You’re just going to avoid seeing him ever again? That’s not exactly the adult response, is it?’

Before he could launch into an attack she said with soft determination, ‘I know he hurt you, and badly, but no one is perfect, least of all us. Look at the car wreckage my life has been for the past few months. I’ve caused untold shame and misery to my family but despite that they still love me, and I know how lucky I am to have that. For a long time I was seduced by a much more shallow world, and I wasn’t a particularly nice person. I took my family completely for granted, and yet when things fell apart they were still there for me.’

She pressed on. ‘What you and your family went through was horrific,

no one could dispute that, and from what you've told me, frankly I'm surprised that Jacob didn't leave a lot sooner. He obviously felt a huge sense of responsibility to you all.'

Sebastian issued a curt laugh. 'So huge that he left his vulnerable teenage sister still nursing the wounds of her attack from our father, and his younger brothers to the mercy of boarding schools and housekeepers for care?'

Aneesa said wryly, 'You turned out OK for all that second-rate care.' Then she bit her lip. 'Look, all I know is that my family had more than enough grounds to throw me out on the street and disown me after what I did to them. But they didn't. It's so much easier to see things in black and white and it sounds to me as if that's what your father did a lot of the time, fuelled by his drinking and rage.'

'Can you not try and see things from Jacob's point of view?' Aneesa asked. 'Maybe he was scared he would become like your father, and cause more pain and harm? Perhaps he felt that that was his only option —to leave you all behind. Who knows what the guilt of killing a parent would do to someone even if it had been accidental?'

Sebastian felt as if Aneesa was flaying him alive with her words. She was coming far too close to his own inarticulate fears that he, too, might have carried his father's twisted moods and personality. The rage he'd felt just now when faced with Jacob had scared him with its intensity. He lashed out, sneering, 'You didn't mention the psychology degree you did in your spare time between Bollywood blockbusters.'

And the instant the words were out he wanted to swallow them back. He saw Aneesa's face pale and her chin come up. She said with the utmost dignity, 'I'm going to ignore that comment and give you the benefit of the doubt. And I'm going to go back downstairs to join your family and get to know them a little more. If you feel like you can stop wallowing in your childhood hurt and join the present, then you'll know where to find me.'

And on stiff legs she walked out, the door shutting with incongruous quiet behind her.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

ANEEZA was sitting beside Annabelle at one of the round tables where they'd just finished coffees. She didn't need to look around to know that Sebastian hadn't reappeared. She was trying to concentrate on the conversation but was still smarting from his cruel words.

She was also reeling with the knowledge that this beautiful, immaculately turned-out woman had been so horrifically beaten. Annabelle was being very sweet and explaining that her twin brother, Alex, was a racing car driver based in Australia, and couldn't be there.

Aneesa put a hand to her bump, only realising what she'd done when she noticed Annabelle follow the movement. She grimaced. 'It's still small, but it seems to be getting bigger by the day now.'

Annabelle smiled politely but then looked away with a small frown forming between her grey eyes. 'Jack should be here too, our elder brother, but I haven't seen him yet. I know Jacob wants to talk to him....'

Annabelle's eyes snagged and widened on something or someone else at the entrance to the room and Aneesa followed her look to see that Sebastian had returned and was in the doorway, with Jacob. Relief flooded her, and her silly heart swelled with love and pride. As she watched, Sebastian put out his hand but instead of shaking it, Jacob drew him into a fierce hug.

Her eyes smarting suspiciously now, and feeling dangerously emotional, she made a garbled excuse to Annabelle, saying she wanted to get something from the room. The waiters were starting to clear the tables and encourage people to get up so they could rearrange the room for dancing, so she wouldn't be missed. Instinctively she felt the need to give Sebastian some space with his family.

Once in the suite though, fatigue overcame her and she lay down for a while, unable to resist the lure of a nap when her eyes felt heavy. She woke up when she heard the door open and close and sat up groggily.

Sebastian appeared in the doorway, his jacket off and tie undone, looking rakishly handsome. ‘Where did you get to?’

Aneesa sat up at the side of the bed and pushed her hair back. She felt at a disadvantage. ‘I must have fallen asleep. I lay down just for a minute....’

Sebastian walked over and sat beside her; his distinctive scent made her stomach clench with desire. His eyes glittered an intense blue, all earlier signs of haggardness gone. He took a tendril of hair that had drifted down over her shoulder and let it slip through his fingers. He looked at her. ‘I’m sorry for what I said earlier. I had no right to lash out at you, and you were too generous to give me the benefit of the doubt.’

‘I saw you talking to Jacob.’

Sebastian smiled ruefully. ‘You were right. We won’t be fine overnight but I think we’re going to be OK. Jacob is home for good. He wants to renovate Wolfe Manor, restore it to its former glory, maybe even sell it. And I also found out that he was involved as a secret design consultant for this hotel, which was my first. So in his own way he has been watching over me from afar....’

Aneesa put a hand to Sebastian’s jaw and felt the heady rasp of his stubble. Familiar heat coiled through her and she said huskily, ‘I’m glad, Sebastian. I really hope it does work out for you all....’

Sebastian turned to face her fully, and with a slow intensity that made her toes curl he drew her close and kissed her, his arms trapping her against his chest. When he exerted a slight pressure so that she lay back down on the bed, she couldn’t help the tiny moans of acquiescence and anticipation. He put his two hands on either side of her and pulled away, looking down at her. He ran the back of his hand down one hot cheek. ‘If it wasn’t for you I’d most likely be staring at the bottom of an empty whisky bottle now and cursing everyone and everything around me.’

She blushed and bit her lip. ‘I did nothing except tell you what you already knew.’

His face came closer and he pressed a sweet kiss to her mouth. He drew back. ‘It was more than nothing, and thank you.’

Suddenly breathless, she said, ‘You’re welcome.’

'How welcome?' he growled with a dangerous gleam in his eye. Molten heat seeped through Aneesa's veins and she wondered a little desperately if she'd ever not want him so badly. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him over her, relishing the friction of his chest against her breasts.

'Very welcome.'

Even as he kissed her and ran his hands down her body, Aneesa was conscious of a need to protect herself from the inevitable pain. And yet, when she felt Sebastian's hand travel up her bare leg under her dress, to find where she ached for him with such telling wetness, she couldn't concentrate on anything but his touch.

Pulling off her clothes first and then his own clothes with indecent haste, causing buttons to pop off his shirt and Aneesa to giggle, he came back over her and looked down into her eyes for a long moment. She was breathless, her naked breasts crushed against his chest, his body between her legs. And then without a word, he drew back and took her, with one cataclysmic thrust. So deeply that she could have sworn he touched her heart.

They didn't speak a word, but Sebastian's eyes never left hers, not even when she splintered around him with a small keening cry, her back arched. He just pulled one leg up, bending it back so that he could penetrate even deeper, and the next time she came within the space of minutes, just before he did. Aneesa couldn't stop helpless emotional tears trickling down her cheeks.

Sebastian just kissed them away, and turned them so that she was tucked into his chest with his arms tight around her, their hearts beating unevenly. But she couldn't stop the silent tears falling because she knew she was indulging in the fantasy that perhaps, just perhaps, this day and evening had marked a real change in their relationship. And she knew she'd be a fool to hope for that.

Aneesa woke at dawn to find herself alone in bed. Where Sebastian had lain close behind her was still warm, and guiltily she rolled back over and pressed her face into the pillow to breathe his distinctive scent deep.

Just then she heard a noise and looked up to see Sebastian emerge

from the bathroom with a towel slung around his lean waist. She flushed guiltily and had a moment of *déjà vu* to when she'd woken after their night together in Mumbai.

'Morning.'

'Good morning.' Ridiculously she felt shy. Sebastian barely glanced at her and Aneesa felt it like a slap in the face, after the intimacies they'd shared last night. She had to repress an inexplicable shiver. She'd stupidly believed that possibly—She bit her lip and got out of the bed, drawing a hotel robe on, not that Sebastian was even looking at her. He was too preoccupied with something.

Even as she was thinking that, he dropped the towel with an ease that she thought she'd never get used to and started to get dressed, saying over his shoulder, 'I have some things to attend to this morning. My driver can drop you home whenever you're ready.'

Aneesa bit back the urge to ask him what exactly he could have to attend to on a Sunday morning. Last night and how intensely intimate it had felt trickled back into her awareness. Not to mention the emotional turmoil of the day. An awful suspicion settled into her belly like a cold weight. As it took root and grew, she said faintly, 'Don't be silly, you obviously need the car. I can take a taxi back to the apartment.'

Sebastian just shrugged and said, 'Whatever you want. I'll wait for you and we can leave together. I'll be downstairs. I need to check that everything went OK last night.'

Aneesa mumbled something incoherent and got through her shower in record time. Within a half an hour, hair still damp, she was downstairs wearing stretchy leggings and a tight-fitting long T-shirt under her leather jacket. Sebastian was pacing the lobby, looking like a beautiful caged panther, speaking on his mobile. When he saw her with her bag he cut the call short and ushered her out. Hailing her a cab he asked again if she was sure, and with her skin feeling clammy with panic she just said yes.

The awful familiarity of the pattern was all too obvious. Sebastian had opened up to her, shown her something of himself and now he was retreating behind those fortified brick walls again. She hated to find herself thinking like a suspicious lover but she was. He was so distracted

he couldn't even look her in the eye.

He had to be seeking the habitual physical release he craved, except this time she had the awful premonition that it would be with a woman, and not through exercise. He must be hating the fact that she'd seen so much, that he'd been in any way vulnerable with her.

He barely waited till she was in the taxi before his own black tinted-window car was pulling away. Feeling ridiculous but compelled by a force greater than she could resist, she said to the driver, 'I know this is going to sound a bit silly but could you follow that car?'

The driver winked at her in the mirror and said in a broad cockney accent, 'I've been waiting forever for someone to ask me that!'

And with a none-too-discreet screech of tyres he executed an illegal U-turn and followed Sebastian's car.

They seemed to drive forever, and Aneesa saw signs for Surrey pass them by. Even the driver was getting concerned, asking her if she had any idea where he might be going.

Aneesa kept an eye on the metre and the money in her purse; as it was, she wouldn't have the return fare into town now and if Sebastian didn't stop soon—Just as she thought that, his car slowed and she begged the driver to keep back. The sleek black car stopped outside a pair of ornate gates and there was a discreet sign on the wall that said *The Grange*.

A house, a country house; it had to be. Where his mistress lived. Feeling nauseous, Aneesa instructed the driver to stop in a lay-by where she was just out of sight of Sebastian's car. She paid him and got out and watched him drive away. Feeling utterly ridiculous now, on wobbly legs she walked around the corner of the hedge fully prepared to meet a locked gate when she walked slap-bang into a solid wall of muscle.

Hard hands held her, blue eyes as cold as ice blistered down into her shocked ones. 'What the hell do you think you're playing at following me in that cab like some character in a bad movie?'

Too shocked to do anything but blurt out the truth, Aneesa just said, 'I thought you were going to meet a mistress or a lover so I followed you.'

Aneesa could see the play of emotions cross his face and even a glint

of humour. She could deal with his anger better than pity. ‘Don’t laugh at me.’

Sebastian’s face sobered and his hands became gentle on her arms. ‘And what exactly were you planning on doing when you caught me with this mystery woman? Because presumably you were going to wait until we were *in flagrante* ...?’

Aneesa shrugged but couldn’t look away. The absurdity of it all hit her now too, and she said, ‘Claw her eyes out?’

Sebastian just shook his head and said with a touch of weariness, ‘Well, if you’re so determined to meet this mistress of mine, then you’d better come with me.’

He took her bag, and Aneesa got into Sebastian’s car and they swept through the gates and up a long drive. She was pretty sure there was no mistress now, but she had no idea what to expect, until they approached a huge stately home and she saw some people being pushed in wheelchairs by nurses in uniform.

They didn’t stop there though; they kept going around the side of the house and down a nearby lane, shaded by the branches of huge oak trees. Finally they drew up outside a pretty cottage and a matronly woman opened the front door to greet them.

Sebastian came around to help her out of the car, and took her hand to lead her up to the path. The woman waiting for them spoke with a broad Irish accent. ‘Sebastian! She’s in good form today, looking forward to seeing you. She even got her hair done this morning.’

Aneesa followed Sebastian into a bright airy hallway and then into a sitting room where she saw a beautifully preserved woman looking out the window. She couldn’t have been more than about mid-fifties, Aneesa guessed, and could have passed for even younger. The resemblance was striking even from her profile; it was clear where Sebastian got his patrician features from, and his blue eyes. *His mother.*

She turned as they came in, her whole face lighting up with joy. ‘Nathaniel, darling!’

Sebastian squeezed Aneesa’s hand as if to say, *Go along with it.* He let her go then to greet his mother. After a couple of minutes he pulled

Aneesa around to introduce her, and to Aneesa's utter shock his mother took in her small bump which was revealed by the tight-fitting top and declared, 'You're pregnant! But how wonderful, my dear. Come and sit and tell me all about it. I do so love being pregnant too!'

Aneesa's head was reeling after a very bizarre conversation with Carrie where she'd constantly referred to Sebastian as Nathaniel, and seemed to believe she was pregnant as well. Eventually Sebastian said he'd take her out for a walk, and Aneesa took the hint and left them alone. The friendly Irish housekeeper came up to Aneesa and they watched Sebastian and his mother in the distance through the window.

The woman explained, 'I'm actually a psychiatric nurse, but she thinks I'm a housekeeper. I don't know how Sebastian does it, but every two weeks like clockwork he comes, and not once has she ever recognised him. He and his brother bought this old Gate Lodge for her so that she would feel as if it were her home. They thought it would be better for her than staying in the main psychiatric facility at the house. Also, here she's more protected, less chance of staff leaking stories to the press. She has full-time round-the-clock care....'

Aneesa asked hesitantly, 'Why does she think she's pregnant?'

The woman shrugged her shoulders and smiled sadly. 'We don't know for sure but it's obviously linked to when being pregnant was a happy time for her, so it's as if she's stuck there—in the past.'

After a few more minutes of polite conversation, the woman excused herself and Aneesa went outside. She told the driver where she was going, and started to wander back up to the main house, going in the opposite direction to the one Sebastian had taken with his mother. Her mind was buzzing, so many things falling into place.

It was time for Aneesa to face facts. It was glaringly obvious now where Sebastian's antipathy to becoming a parent stemmed from. He'd had no role model to speak of, and his brother, who had assumed both parental roles, had abandoned him at a vulnerable age. Her instinct that he would be a good father would hardly be enough to entice him to take on the role.

She and Sebastian might share an explosive chemistry, but clearly he resented it. Just as he resented the fact that she was seeing a side to him

that he kept well hidden from everyone else. His cagey and secretive behaviour this morning was because he'd had no intention of telling her about his mother. But she, as usual, had lumbered in with two left feet and forced the issue into the open.

She recalled the tortured sound of his voice when he'd declared she was a thorn in his side. It was becoming very clear to Aneesa that the longer she stayed with him, the more resentful he would become. Eventually despising her for upsetting his life beyond recognition. For seeing more than he'd ever wanted anyone to see. She didn't doubt that his desire for her would wane once she was gone, and he could get on with his free and independent lifestyle.

The logical thing would be to take him up on his suggestion of moving into her own place, but she couldn't do that. London wasn't her home, and she couldn't bear to see Sebastian get on with his life right under her nose, checking up on her out of a sense of duty and because she happened to be having his baby.

This visit to his mother told her how deeply ingrained a sense of duty was to him and she didn't want to become his *duty*.

Aneesa was sitting on a bench in the sunshine when Sebastian found her a while later. She still felt a little numb inside at the decision she'd made. He sat down beside her. She looked at him and saw the lines around his mouth and could only imagine the untold pain of visiting a mother who didn't even recognise who you were.

'I'm sorry for assuming you were visiting a mistress, but I'm not sorry I met your mother.'

'She liked you.' He smiled wryly. 'Very possibly because she thinks you both have a lot in common, being pregnant.'

'Why does she think you're Nathaniel?'

His mouth tightened. 'Because he's the one she chose to take into the lake when she tried to kill herself. He's the one my father didn't want.' He looked at her and she shivered at the bleak look in his eyes. 'The fact that she recognised him as little as me over the years was no consolation. She was still obsessed by him. Do you know that for a long time I felt jealous of Nathaniel—because she'd chosen to try and kill herself with him instead of me?'

Aneesa couldn't stop herself from reaching out to touch Sebastian's hand briefly. 'I think that sounds entirely normal. And I think on some level she knows exactly who you are. You're doing a wonderful thing not to challenge her beliefs.'

They sat in silence for a few minutes and then Aneesa blurted out what she had to say, afraid that if she didn't say it now, she'd be too weak later.

'I need to go home, Sebastian. I want to be with my family.' She couldn't look at him, too afraid of the relief she might see on his face. The thorn in his side would finally be gone.

'I'm ready to go back, and be a mother on my own—I have no problem with that, but I will need my family around me. I was going to return sooner or later, it might as well be now.'

Sebastian turned and, compelled, she glanced at him. She couldn't read his enigmatic expression.

When Sebastian had woken that morning, and the previous day's and night's events had come back to him—along with the intensity of what he'd shared with Aneesa both physically and emotionally—he'd shut down. Curled away inside. He'd gone into his default self-protection mode. But Aneesa hadn't allowed him to hide away. She'd come along for the ride, *again*.

Her words impacted him now like a punch in the gut. She wanted to go home. Coming on the back of just being with his mother, who didn't even recognise him, he felt flayed inside, but recovered quickly. Why should he care either way that Aneesa wanted to go home? It had always been on the cards. He had to repress a cynical smile. Why wouldn't she want to run back to normalcy after witnessing the freak show that was the Wolfe family saga?

And yet ... he knew plenty of women who would happily deal with such skeletons and bask in the glory of unlimited wealth and status. Hadn't his own mother done that when she'd taken on William Wolfe and his brood of children? Aneesa was pregnant with his child. She had him over a barrel, yet clearly wanted nothing of his fortune, so by declaring she wanted to go home, nothing here was attractive enough to hold her. *Including him.*

She was proving once and for all that she was nothing like his mother and nothing like any other woman he'd ever encountered.

Her big eyes were looking at him now, making something inarticulate rise up within him. He smiled. 'Of course you want to go home.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

He looked away and shrugged, cursing himself for showing that it bothered him on any level. 'You always said you would want to go home.'

He could feel her penetrating look and tensed. She sighed. 'Yes, I did. And I think the time to go is before I turn into a total caricature of some kind of jealous lover.'

Her honesty surprised him. He was so used to women being vague, indirect.

Before he could dwell on the significance of that, she stood and said breezily, 'You made it very clear what would happen here. What you wanted. So I really don't see the point in prolonging my stay. Things should have died down at home, and I need to get prepared for the baby coming.'

'That is—' her voice suddenly became more hesitant '—unless things have changed for you ...?'

Sebastian looked up at her. The sun was behind her and all he could see was her narrow framed silhouette. She had to be referring to the fact that he seemed to turn into a walking human emotional confessional around her. Was she asking him if he wanted her to stay because he might *need* her? Did she feel pity for him? Was she feeling a sense of responsibility to stay because he might have come to depend on her? Everything within him rejected that.

He stood, too, in an abrupt move and said curtly, 'No. Why would anything have changed?' He flipped out his mobile phone and called his car around.

When they were in the car, Aneesa tried not to let Sebastian see how she was trembling. It had cost her a lot to ask him if things had changed. She'd held her breath, hoping against hope that the past few days and all their revelations might have opened up a new intimacy. She hadn't

wanted to admit to being jealous, but obviously he just saw it as sexual jealousy, and not the corrosive emotional kind when you loved someone.

He looked at her and she prayed her eyes weren't giving her away when she felt like crying. She steeled herself.

'I'll come with you to India, of course. I need to meet your family. And attend to business in the hotel.'

Aneesa somehow got out, 'Please don't feel like you should. They'd be perfectly happy to meet you when the baby is born. Believe me, they've gone beyond shock and despair at this stage.'

'Nonetheless, I'll come.'

Aneesa bit her lip so hard she could feel blood. This was it. The line had been drawn. The affair was over. And she knew by going to India now that would be the end. Because he would return to Europe and she wouldn't. Because she would have no reason to.

The following day Sebastian sat in his office. He had any number of things clamouring for his attention, a veritable pile of paperwork that needed to be signed. But he was distracted. Last night, he hadn't slept with Aneesa. She'd been all but monosyllabic on their return from the Grange and had bid him goodnight with definite hands-off signals.

And yet what had he expected? She was going home. He was going to be getting on with his life. It wouldn't be fair to keep sleeping with her, when patently she didn't want it.

He'd just got off the phone to Jacob, who had been telling him some of his plans for Wolfe Manor, and curiously Sebastian felt a measure of peace. Which he'd never expected. It was as if a huge weight had been taken off his shoulders, and his chest. He'd always felt weighed down when he'd thought about his family, especially Jacob, but seeing them at the wedding, he'd realised that they, too, had their preoccupations, their demons. They really weren't as disparate as he'd always imagined.

He thought of the wedding .... It had been such a relief to go upstairs and find Aneesa in his bed ... even just knowing that she'd been there—Sebastian stood so quickly in reaction to that unbidden thought his chair went back onto the floor. He heard his assistant ask hesitantly through the phone intercom, 'Is everything all right, Mr Wolfe?'

He smiled grimly. ‘Fine, Meredith. Just fine.’ He righted the chair and his hand shook slightly.

Everything wasn’t just fine. Panic clutched at his gut; everything within him rejected the direction his thoughts had been going in. The last person he’d depended on had been Jacob, and when Jacob had disappeared a fundamental part of Sebastian had been annihilated. And a large part of his trust and faith in mankind had died too.

Depending on anyone was anathema to him and yet somehow Aneesa had infiltrated into that deep secret part of him that he’d vowed would always be invulnerable.

And it still was, he assured himself.

He was losing perspective. He would go to India with Aneesa, meet her family and walk away. She knew the score; at least she and the baby would be provided for.

He told himself that he would be glad, *relieved*, to see the back of her, at least for a while. She’d witnessed him at his most vulnerable too many times for him to even contemplate now. He didn’t need that, he’d never asked for that. And he didn’t like it. It was why he’d always kept his relationships so impersonal, but from day one Aneesa had come at him like an emotional bulldozer … and just kept coming.

He suddenly felt the urge to go to India that day, and not tomorrow, and had to curb the slightly panicked impulse. He told himself he’d stay at the Mumbai Grand Wolfe Hotel, and limit his time with her family as much as possible. And then get out, and get on with his life....

Sebastian couldn’t be making it any clearer that he was already over their relationship and now it was all about the baby, meeting her family and leaving her in India. Every time she felt like crying Aneesa cursed herself—she’d known exactly what to expect all along, from the moment she’d made the masochistic decision to stay in England.

They were in the first-class cabin of a commercial flight and even though Sebastian was beside her, he might as well have been a million miles away. He’d been brusque to the point of rudeness with her for the past couple of days, had made no attempt to come to her bed and was utterly engrossed in his laptop—as if it held all the secrets to life itself.

Aneesa wondered slightly hysterically if she just opened the emergency door and parachuted out would he even notice. Instead she reclined her seat and pulled a blanket over herself and tried to sleep.

When Aneesa curled up in a ball in her seat facing away from him, Sebastian finally looked over and sighed deeply. Her long black hair was spread out, making him want to run his fingers through its silkiness. The curve of her bottom under the blanket was an enticement to rest his hand there, caressing the tempting line. And her scent was a constant reminder of her innate sensuality which called to him like a homing beacon.

His hands curled into fists as he tried to curb his impulses around her. He put back his head and closed his eyes and wondered if he'd ever feel normal again. He smiled grimly—normal for him anyway. He valiantly blocked out the images that ran through his mind like movie stills of the life he'd always led. He also tried not to remember the way his perfectly unflappable and cool-as-a-cucumber housekeeper, Daniel, had been all but inconsolable saying goodbye to Aneesa, making her own huge brown eyes fill with tears too. Sebastian had felt like an absolute heel, when she was the one that wanted to go home!

He just had to endure a couple of days and then he would make his excuses and go home.

To Aneesa's relief, the press in Mumbai hadn't got wind of her return so their arrival went under the radar. She felt so brittle now that she couldn't have handled the media intrusion along with the prospect of Sebastian leaving in a few days. He hadn't said how long he'd stay but she could well imagine he was already itching to get back.

Mumbai greeted them in all its hot and steamy, chaotic glory. Horns beeping, traffic narrowly avoiding sacred cows and mopeds whizzing by carrying entire families with serene looks on their faces. A beautiful baby with black kohled eyes smiled up at its mother in an auto-rickshaw.

'You really love it here, don't you?' Sebastian asked from the other side of the car. Aneesa nodded. She couldn't look at him, she felt too emotional. So she just said, 'It's home.' But she knew that as much as she loved Mumbai, the minute Sebastian left, it would be flat and empty. Her home was where he was now, and she would never be the same

again. In that moment she hated him for doing that to her.

He asked then a little gruffly, ‘You should tell me a bit about your family ...’

Sudden fire within her made her face him and for the first time she let her guard slip. ‘What’s the point? I’m sure you’ve just carved out the minimum time required to meet them to be polite and have made sure you’ve got plenty of time for business meetings.’

Aneesa flushed. Immediately feeling contrite and terrified that he would guess where her turmoil stemmed from Aneesa said, ‘Forget I said that. You didn’t deserve that....’

She looked away for a moment and then back, and tried a smile even though it felt forced. Haltingly she started to tell him of her beloved indomitable grandmother who was now apparently clinging onto dear life to see her first grandchild born and had not a word of judgement about

Aneesa’s less than acceptable status as a single mother.

She told him about her beautiful younger sister who was determined to become a star just like Aneesa albeit without the scandal as she’d declared sunnily to Aneesa on the phone. And about her overweight younger brother who was determined to be a chef, much to their father’s chagrin; he just wanted him to love cricket and be a famous cricketer.

By the time her voice faded away she was smiling fondly in earnest, unaware of the tightening in Sebastian’s face.

‘You love them very much.’

She looked at him and tried not to let the intensity of his blue eyes distract her. ‘Yes. I do ... But for a long time I took them for granted. I’m lucky that they have loved me so unconditionally.’

Just then she looked past Sebastian out the window and said excitedly, ‘We’re here!’

Sebastian felt an uncustomary sense of claustrophobia and trepidation crawl over his skin. As the car pulled into a neat driveway he saw a big house emerge, and lined up outside was a veritable welcoming party.

Aneesa jumped out and suddenly a smaller, younger version of herself with a streak of black hair launched herself at Aneesa with a squeal—her

younger sister. Her younger brother who was indeed overweight was more nonchalant but one could see that he, too, loved his sister, hugging her with typical teenage awkwardness.

And then her parents ... The emotion on their faces nearly made Sebastian want to climb back into the car and drive far, far away. He'd never seen so much naked *love* and affection beaming from anyone. And this was their disgraced daughter?

Aneesa was aware of Sebastian hanging back and she was also aware that he was looking a little green around the gills. She could imagine all too well that this was not a scenario he was used to.

She turned back to him after hugging her parents and took him by the hand. Squeezing it gently, she silently said to him, *Just go with it*, much as he'd done with her when they'd seen his mother. She brought him up to her parents. 'Papa, Mother, I'd like you to meet Sebastian Wolfe.'

# CHAPTER NINE

THREE days later, sitting at the dinner table, Sebastian couldn't quite believe that he was still there, amidst the organised chaos of Adani family life. As soon as he'd been pulled into the house, it had been taken for granted that he had to stay. And not only that, but Aneesa's parents had clearly gone out on a limb and challenged their conservative beliefs to put him and Aneesa in a room together.

She'd looked at him miserably once they'd been alone in the bedroom. 'I had no idea they would do this. I'm as shocked as you, believe me. But if I cause a fuss they'll get embarrassed—'

He'd waved a hand. 'It's fine. It's not like we've not shared a room before.'

'No,' Aneesa had said, avoiding his eye. Evidently she hated this as much as he did and just wanted him to return to England so that she could get on with her own life and having the baby.

Something in her demeanour had made his voice sharp. 'Look, I'll stay a couple of days and then I'll have to return anyway, so we can put up with it till then, can't we?'

She'd shrugged insouciantly, making something even more caustic rise from his belly. 'Sure. I can if you can. I won't have a problem with *this*.' She made a flippant gesture to the king-size bed.

It was in that moment that Sebastian realised how deep was the chasm that had formed between them. It had started the moment she'd announced she wanted to come home. And even though every beat of his pulse cried out to touch her and he ached all over with wanting her, he couldn't touch her.

Now as he looked around the dinner table and took in the affectionate bickering between Akash, Aneesa's brother, and Amrita, her sister, he found that much to his surprise, he felt ... comfortable. There was something incredibly soothing about the inconsequential chatter, the fact that they could bicker and tease until Amrita would lean over and pinch

Akash's cheek affectionately. His whole life he'd felt on the fringes of things, on the fringes of his own family, and yet here, even though these people were little more than strangers, he felt included in their warmth in a way that stunned him slightly.

Aneesa came out of the kitchen at that moment holding a steaming bowl of vegetables. When she put it down she affectionately ruffled her brother's and sister's heads. They all touched one another all the time ... and earlier he'd seen Mr Adani pinch Mrs Adani on her bottom when he'd thought no one was looking.

Sebastian could remember rough-housing with his brothers growing up and his fragile mother's sporadic bursts of being affectionate, but it had never been consistent enough to depend on. He'd certainly never witnessed any kind of affection between his own parents. Their family housekeeper had been motherly but he'd never really felt comfortable when she tried to hug him and he'd get embarrassed when she got emotional after taking him and his brother on their monthly visits to see their mother.

He realised now that he'd always been intensely uncomfortable with any kind of physical intimacy that went beyond the bedroom, and yet with Aneesa, from day one, it had been second nature to touch her, or hold her hand. And he hadn't even noticed.

Watching everything with shrewd black eyes sunk in a wizened face was Aneesa's grandmother, who they all called Beeba. She hadn't said much to Sebastian but she looked at him all the time and he had the uncomfortably prickling sensation that she saw something that he didn't.

As Aneesa came around the table Amrita said, 'Your belly is nearly a proper bump, Neesa. Is the baby kicking yet?'

Mrs Adani chided Amrita and Sebastian felt something fiercely possessive rush through him, almost as if Aneesa's bump was *his*. And yet, it was ... but it wasn't, and he felt a wrenching sensation to realise that. And then *he* wanted to know if the baby had started kicking.

Aneesa deflected the attention and sat down beside Sebastian, and her delicate scent wound around him, making his body tighten. He seriously questioned whether he should ask to be put in a separate bedroom that night as the past few nights had been torture. He'd lain awake while

Aneesa lay curled up as far away as she could get, and had had to grit his teeth to try and curb his insatiable desires.

Gritting his teeth again, he smiled in answer to something Amrita had said with a flutter of her long black lashes and tried to block out the welling sensation of something elusively precious slipping out of his grasp.

Aneesa lay in the bed that night and tried to ignore the fact that Sebastian lay just inches away from her. After his initial reaction to her family which had been a bit like a deer stuck in the headlights, he'd somehow relaxed into their unique way of being and interacting. She'd seen him observing everything going on around him, as if fascinated, but not bored, or daunted.

Amrita already had a crush on him. He'd been her audience along with Aneesa when she'd tried out a Bollywood routine she was perfecting for an audition. Her parents were in awe of him, and Beeba, well, she just watched him the same way she watched everyone. And even though Aneesa wasn't in a traditional relationship with him, he'd already been tacitly accepted by her family on a level that Jamal never had been and she could see now how abrasive her ex-fiancé had been within her family.

She knew he was awake next to her and she sighed deeply. There was really no point in pretending anymore.

'Thank you for taking Akash to the hotel to meet with your Michelin-starred chef today. It's possibly the most exciting thing that's ever happened to him. I think you've become his number-one hero for ever.'

Aneesa could feel Sebastian's shrug in the bed beside her.

'It was nothing.'

The silence dragged out but unlike the previous nights when Aneesa had rolled over and gone to sleep after long torturous minutes, tonight it seemed to be an impossible dream.

Sensation skated over her skin and she was acutely aware of everything. The warm night air swirled around them with the motion of the fan in the ceiling; the scent from the fruit trees outside the window was heavy and luxurious. But worst of all was the mosquito net around

the bed which cocooned them in what felt to Aneesa like a sensual prison.

And itching inside her was this awful ravening need to touch Sebastian, to have him touch her. The tension reached screaming point for Aneesa and suddenly terrified that she wouldn't have the strength not to give herself away, she sat up and put on the light.

'Look, I know this is awkward for both of us. You don't want to be here. I'll go to another room. I'll sleep with Amrita.'

She was getting out of the bed when Sebastian snaked out a hand and took her wrist. His touch seared her skin like a brand. 'I thought you didn't want to embarrass your parents. The whole of Mumbai will know by morning if you go to Amrita's room.'

Aneesa tried to yank her wrist away but his grip was too strong. She was crying out inside. 'Well, then, I'll sleep on the floor, or something.'

'Why?' he asked silkily. 'I thought you didn't have a problem with *this*.'

Aneesa all but groaned, kicking herself for having faked such insouciance on that first day. *This* was Sebastian half sitting up, naked from the waist up, his skin burnished gold in the soft light, eyes glittering. Her breasts felt heavy, the peaks tight and tingling painfully. How could she ever not have had a problem with *this*?

Her pride was in tatters as it was. She gritted her teeth and said defiantly, 'So what if I do?'

Inexorably he started to pull her back towards him. 'I never said I didn't want you, Aneesa. I never stopped wanting you.'

She frowned minutely, still resisting his pull. 'But you never tried to ...' She trailed off ineffectually, giving herself away spectacularly. Even though she'd struggled to maintain the moral high ground and not give into the excoriating need to have Sebastian make love to her, she'd hungered for him desperately.

'Because I thought you didn't want it, and I thought it was for the best.'

*Because they were meant to be going their separate ways.*

'But now,' he continued with a glint in his eye that sent a spiral of

desire through Aneesa, ‘I can see that that reasoning was very flawed. I’ve been going through torture—wanting you and trying not to touch you.’

Aneesa felt a whole host of conflicting emotions take flight in her chest. On the one hand she wanted to say stop! That he’d been right to do the honourable thing because it would kill her to know the exquisite pleasure of his lovemaking again, but on the other hand ... she couldn’t imagine going to her death without knowing that pleasure one more time.

Hating herself for her weakness she let him pull her back until she was lying down on her back and he hovered over her. His head dipped but she stopped him with a finger against his lips.

‘Wait ... when are you going home, Sebastian?’ *I need to know so I can start to get over you.* ‘I need to know. I can’t ...’ She stopped. She was so close to showing him how hard it was for her to have him here and see him interacting with her family. ‘I just need to get on with things here, my life ...’

Something in his face hardened and Aneesa couldn’t understand it. Surely he should be looking relieved?

His jaw clenched. ‘I have business to attend to at the hotel tomorrow and then I’ll be leaving the next day. I’ll stay at the hotel tomorrow night.’

Aneesa felt her heart break. ‘Good. That’s good, then.’

With an almost savage intensity Sebastian slanted his mouth over hers and kissed her. Passion blazed up around them so fierce that Aneesa wondered how the bed didn’t catch fire. Her vest top was pulled off. She yanked down her knickers herself, and emitted a gasp of pure pleasure when she felt Sebastian’s hot naked body next to hers.

He palmed her breasts, making the peaks tighten into sharp points, and she drew his head down so that he could take a nipple into his mouth. Her belly tightened with pleasure as he suckled her roughly. She met him head-on, biting the skin on his shoulder, and then licking where she’d bitten, revelling in his unique musky taste.

Neither of them could wait, desperation fuelling their movements as

Sebastian pushed her legs apart and settled between them. Just before he thrust, with Aneesa's hands on his hips, her legs drawn back, he said with a guttural moan that seemed to be pulled out of him, 'I need this ... I need you.'

An ache lodged in her throat and emotion surged as he thrust deep inside her. And then they were caught up in the familiar dance, which took them higher and higher until every sinew was pulled taut, and when an explosion of intense pleasure gripped her and went on and on, Aneesa wondered how she'd ever be able to cope knowing she'd never have this again.

Long languorous minutes later, sated and lethargic, Aneesa was tucked spoon-like into Sebastian's chest. She could feel him harden again against her bottom and moved sinuously. No matter how tired she might be, she wasn't ready for it to be over yet. Reaching behind to caress his buttocks, she heard a throaty dark chuckle. And then he moved her hair over her shoulder so he could press hot kisses onto the back of her neck.

With a powerful move of his hips, he found where she still ached for him and thrust up, his arms a tight bind around her, one hand on her breast. Her head fell back, and as he thrust again and again until she couldn't breathe or think, he kissed her so sweetly that she couldn't stop the tears falling.

When the storm was over, Aneesa was replete and exhausted. Awash with emotion. She took his hand from where it was wrapped around her, entwined in hers, and pressed a kiss to it. And just before she let exhaustion take her away, she thought of the words that had been trembling on her lips for days now. 'I love you.'

Sebastian stilled. Had she just said—His mind blanked. Her breaths were already deep and even. Perhaps he'd imagined it? He couldn't process the information straight away, not when he couldn't think because his brain was mush after two of the most powerful orgasms he could ever remember having.

One hand rested on Aneesa's rounded belly and just as his head was beginning to whirl at the implication of her words, if she'd even said them, he felt the tiniest most subtle of sensations against his fingers. A mere flutter, like a small heartbeat. Holding his breath, he spread his

hand out and it came again, against the palm of his hand this time. Tiny, barely noticeable. But there. His baby.

He lay awake like that for a long time. Until the rising sun started to streak the sky outside with the most delicate pink trails.

And then he quietly slipped out of the bed and left.

# CHAPTER TEN

ANEEZA woke the next morning, her body feeling deliciously weighted down in the bed. She smiled and stretched and it was only then that she realised that she was naked and the previous night came back to her. Her eyes flew open.

She was alone in the bed and from the feel of where Sebastian would have lain, it was cold and had been for some time. They'd made love, and he'd left. A wrenching pain made Aneesa gasp and pull her legs up so that she curled in a foetal position. This was it. He was gone.

For a couple of minutes she felt so cold that she wondered if she might be sick. Which was crazy when it would be nearly thirty degrees outside.

Only when she was afraid her mother would come to see where she was did she get out of bed. But when she approached the kitchen and dining area she nearly stumbled. Amrita was exclaiming petulantly, 'I can't believe he would go without saying goodbye to me!'

Aneesa had to sit on the bottom step of the stairs. Her skin had gone clammy. Until that moment she hadn't known for sure that he had gone. She heard her mother's placating voice and heard footsteps.

'Aneesa, are you OK?'

It was Akash. She smiled and stood, feeling her blood rush southwards, and suddenly everything was swirling and blackness enfolded her.

She woke to a sea of concerned faces and struggled to sit up, finding that she was on the couch in the sitting room. She was pushed back down firmly.

'You, young lady, are not moving. The doctor is on his way.'

She protested but was drowned out. She wanted to cry out that she'd just fainted—she didn't need anyone or anything. *Just Sebastian and his undying love.* That ridiculously futile thought made her smile slightly and her mother smiled too, with relief, obviously misinterpreting it.

She fussed around Aneesa. ‘You need to be careful, Neesa, you’re taking after me. I fainted all the time when I was pregnant....’

The rest of the family slipped away and Aneesa asked her mother casually, ‘Did you see Sebastian before he left today?’

Her mother shook her head and then said, ‘I think he left something for you—a note. Let me get it.’

In the space of time it took for her mother to come back, Aneesa was nearly climbing the walls. She all but grabbed the note and when her mother wasn’t moving she said, ‘I think I need to rest for a bit ... I’ll be fine.’

With a kiss to her forehead, making her feel as if she was a teenager all over again, her mother left. Taking a deep breath, Aneesa opened the note and read the confident scrawl: *Can you meet me at my suite this evening—7:00 p.m.? Sebastian.*

Aneesa crumpled the note into her fist. She refused to acknowledge the treacherous flutters in her belly. It would only be because he wanted to sort out arrangements for coming back to see the baby or something like that.

The doctor came soon afterwards and declared that everything was fine and that Aneesa just needed to eat. So she was waited upon and force-fed for the entire day by her well-meaning family. But nothing could stop the sensation of cold sneaking into her bloodstream as if some life force was being cut off.

That evening, like an automaton, she got dressed to go to the hotel in a long stretchy black jersey dress. For the first time she’d noticed that she couldn’t get into her jeans anymore. She put makeup on her eyes purely to disguise the shadows underneath and to feel like she had some armour on. Slipping into flat sandals and draping a long shawl around her shoulders that she could pull over her head and belly to disguise herself, sari-style, she left the house for the hotel.

Despite her disguise, the minute she walked into the foyer of the luxurious hotel, a man stepped forward and said obsequiously, ‘Miss Adani?’

She nodded. And he gestured with a hand. ‘Please, allow me to show

you to Mr Wolfe's suite.'

Of course, she realised a little hysterically. It wasn't as if she'd ever gone to or come from his suite by the conventional route the first time around.

They ascended in a lift marked *Private* and came to a smooth halt all too soon. Aneesa's palms felt sweaty and her heart was beating unevenly. She prayed she wouldn't faint again.

The concierge, or manager, ushered her out and opened the door to the suite. 'Have a good evening, Miss Adani.'

And then the door was shut behind her. Aneesa let the shawl drop from her head to her shoulders. *Déjà vu* washed over her with bittersweet nostalgia. The suite was much the same as it had been that night. It appeared to be empty, only one or two lamps throwing out little halos of golden light.

She could see though that there were lights coming from the terrace, and the sliding doors were open, sending the evening breeze drifting through. The evening was a dusky opalescent colour outside and Aneesa could see the ubiquitous Indian kites floating against the darkening sky as people practiced off their rooftops.

A sudden feeling of anger gripped her. Why wasn't Sebastian meeting her downstairs in more anonymous surroundings, under brighter lights? She hated him for bringing her back into this seductive world. And where was he anyway? Aneesa suddenly needed air, needed to breathe before she saw Sebastian and faced the final demise of their relationship as lovers, before it became about the logistics of parenting from their respective countries and homes.

She made for the terrace and assumed he was in the office room, perhaps catching up on a call. She walked straight outside and went to the ornately carved stone wall. Gripping it, she took a deep breath, much as she had that night all those weeks before.

And, exactly like that night, a voice from behind her drawled seductively, 'Please don't tell me you're thinking of jumping.'

Aneesa's heart stopped, and started again with an uneven beat. This time she didn't whirl around in shock and surprise. She stayed where she

was for a long moment, and then steeled herself before turning to face Sebastian, and when she did she nearly fell down all over again. He was devastatingly handsome, even dressed in just a white shirt and dark trousers. But it was as if she was seeing him for the first time.

She smiled bitterly in reaction. ‘I had no intention of jumping that night, and I certainly have no intention of jumping now. No man is worth that.’

He strolled towards her then with hands in his pockets, making her want to take in his lean hips. She fought the urge to look.

‘But what you’re implying with that statement is that you’ve weighed up the possibility and found it lacking ...’

Aneesa snorted and felt a little bewildered. Why was Sebastian being so ... seductive? Why wasn’t he being all businesslike? Something caught her eye behind him ... *and why was there a table for two set for dinner complete with a softly flickering candle and an ice bucket with champagne?*

Pain gripped her so hard she saw stars. She garbled out, ‘Oh, God ... I’m sorry. You have a date. You were out here preparing and I came out ...’

She went to walk back inside but suddenly Sebastian was there, gripping her arm. Her shawl fell to the ground.

‘No, no one else is coming here, Aneesa, it’s just you and me.’

‘But ...’ Her voice wouldn’t work. She swallowed. ‘Why? Like this? I thought you just wanted to discuss arrangements.’

He dropped her arm from his grip and for the first time she saw a crack in his composure. He ran a hand through his hair. ‘I guess I do ... in a way.’

Aneesa felt seriously overwhelmed and was afraid that, much like last night, she’d end up doing or saying something to give herself away spectacularly.

Sebastian looked at her so intensely though that she couldn’t think straight.

‘Do you remember after we made love last night ... do you remember saying anything?’

Aneesa forced her sluggish brain to work. What on earth could he be —? She froze. Every part of her body froze. She remembered now, in chilling detail. She'd whispered the fateful words. She'd thought she'd just said them in her head. But she'd said them *out loud*. No wonder he'd left so fast this morning.

She tried to back away but couldn't because the wall was behind her. She alternately shook and nodded her head, her brain imploding. 'I ... I'm not sure what you mean ...'

Sebastian was grim. 'You said you loved me.'

Any hope of retaining dignity fled in an instant. Aneesa gulped. 'Well ... I may have ... I mean, I don't remember but perhaps afterwards ... but it didn't mean anything.'

A muscle in his jaw twitched. 'So it was just a helpless transitory emotional response to a physical act? Is that what you're saying?'

Aneesa gulped again. Sebastian looked so formidable. And then she seemed to regain some sanity, or at least equilibrium. 'Why, Sebastian? Why do you even care what I might have said? You've made it very clear all along that nothing would come of this relationship except two adults having a baby. From the moment I arrived in England you fought my presence.'

'So what on earth does it matter to you what I might have said, or what I might feel? You're leaving tomorrow.'

'Am I?' He laughed but it sounded pained. 'To be honest, I don't know if I'm coming or going and I've been feeling like that for a long time now....'

He brushed past her then to rest his hands on the stone balustrade, and dropped his head between his shoulders. Something about him looked so tortured in that moment that Aneesa had to fight back the urge to put out her hand to touch him in comfort.

His head came up and his eyes speared hers. 'But I've also been feeling alive, and *connected*, for the first time in my life.'

He stood tall again and Aneesa felt curiously weightless. He reached out a hand and curled it around her jaw, fingers around her neck under the heavy fall of her hair. She could feel a slight tremor in his hand and

her heart tripped.

'I never ... wanted to create a family. I never wanted to marry. I never wanted to fall in love. I had no frame of reference for all of those things that most people aspire to, and take for granted. I've always been terrified that something of my father's twisted genes was lying dormant in me and that basic happiness was something I could never have, as if I was jinxed in some way.'

'But seeing Nathaniel get married, and Jacob come home to try and make amends ... seeing him come to terms with the past, and the way he's trying to bring us together again, has changed my perspective. Hearing you say you love me last night—whether you meant it or not, it freed something inside me. I hadn't allowed myself to think that you could possibly have feelings for me. You'd only come to me because of the baby ...'

'These past few days, being with your family ... It's so ... easy. They're easy. Love for them is freely given and taken. You have no idea what it's like to witness that, to experience it as a reality, not just an elusive concept.' He smiled bleakly. 'Well, you do. You've grown up with it. It's why you're so open and so ... honest.'

Aneesa felt like cringing amidst the shock at what he was saying. He had to be referring to her constant nagging and questioning to get him to open up and spill his innermost secrets.

He seemed to struggle with something, his hand still on her jaw, and finally said, 'My family ... you've seen something of what we experienced. It's not an excuse but perhaps it's how I can explain to you why it's taken me so long to realise the most important thing of my life.'

Sebastian put his other hand on her jaw now and stepped in close. Inexplicably tears started to fill Aneesa's eyes and she wasn't even sure why she was crying. Sebastian smiled. 'Your eyes ... do you know that they are like two worlds of emotion? The first night we met I was in awe of how expressive they were.'

Aneesa struggled for control, but couldn't speak.

'Last night, I felt our baby move ...'

Aneesa frowned. She'd felt flutters for a few days now but had put it

down to Sebastian's effect on her.

'... and for the first time I really felt connected to him ... or her. This baby is mine, *ours*. And I don't want it to be brought up on two different continents, being shuttled back and forth on holidays. Isolated. A lonely child.'

Aneesa sobered up, her tears cleared. She had a feeling she knew exactly what Sebastian was getting at now, what he meant by 'the most important thing.' He wanted to do the right thing, take care of them, because now he felt he could deal with it. And because she'd stupidly revealed that she had feelings for him. She took down his hands.

'Sebastian, I know you've been through a lot with your family and I'm so sorry that you had to go through that. But believe me, with the greatest will in the world, a relationship that's not based on love is not going to be the best thing for your child. Our child. I'm sorry if that sounds impossibly idealistic to you and I can see that you've had some revelations, but please ... don't make us do this.'

She looked away because those damn tears were coming back. She felt rather than heard a movement and looked down when she felt her hand being tugged into Sebastian's. He was on one knee at her feet and the tears sprang in earnest.

She shook her head. 'Please, Sebastian, don't ... you don't know how cruel it is.'

He looked up at her. 'What would be cruel is if you were to turn your back on me and deny me the only chance of happiness I'll ever have.'

He gripped her hand tighter. 'You may or may not have meant what you said last night, but all day I've been praying that you did. Aneesa ... I'm in love with you. I'm so fathoms-deep in love with you that I'm drowning. I've been falling for you since the moment our eyes met that evening, when you looked at me and made my world go spinning in the other direction. But I had no idea what was happening. Not until we came back here ... and I saw what love is, and recognised it for the first time in my life.'

'It's as if I've had emotional dyslexia—every time you got a bit closer, I pushed you away because it threatened every bit of self-defence I'd built up over the years.'

He took something out of his pocket and Aneesa saw a ring, a simple princess-cut diamond, about half the size of her first engagement ring and already infinitely more precious. Her throat was clogged with emotion and shock and the incredible burgeoning hope that perhaps this was real.

‘I can’t live without you, Aneesa.’ His eyes were intense. ‘I would die. It’s that simple. And the thought of having this baby still terrifies me but I know that if you’re by my side, I might just have a chance of not ruining my child’s existence completely.

‘So please—’ with a shaking hand he put the ring on her finger ‘—will you wear this ring … and be my lover and my best friend, for ever. I want to marry you but I know how you feel about the prospect of going through that again and I wouldn’t do that to you unless you wanted it....’

Aneesa tugged Sebastian up until he stood before her. She finally managed to get out through the rising emotion, ‘I did mean it … last night. I couldn’t hold it in. I’d been holding it in for so long that I knew it would come out eventually. That’s why I wanted to come home. I thought you’d end up hating me for intruding into your life so much. I came to you because I was pregnant, yes, but I hadn’t stopped thinking about you since that night. I would have wanted to see you again no matter what....’

Sebastian took her face in his hands and kissed her so passionately that she felt dizzy and then he picked her up and carried her into the bedroom where they’d made love that first night. Where their baby had been conceived.

With tenderness infusing every moment, they made love again. And afterwards, wrapped in the circle of Sebastian’s arms, Aneesa said softly, ‘I feel like this is a dream. I’m afraid I’ll wake up and you’ll be gone.’

He pulled her right into him and put his hand over hers on her belly, over their baby, and said huskily with humour lacing his voice, ‘If I can believe, then you definitely can. And the baby agrees, can you feel him?’

Aneesa held her breath and there it was, the tiniest of flutters against their joined hands. They seemed to be growing stronger by the minute, along with her belief that this *was* real, and that with the indestructible

force of love between them, anything would be possible, even a second attempt at marriage.

As if Sebastian could hear her thoughts, he spoke close to her ear. ‘We could go to my island, and get married on the beach. With just my staff as witnesses ...’

Incredible joy bubbled up inside Aneesa and she turned so that she could look up into Sebastian’s face. It was completely open, no shadows or secrets lurking in those blue eyes anymore, and her heart turned over.

She smiled. ‘I’d like that.’

Sebastian frowned for a second. ‘Would your parents mind?’

Aneesa smiled ruefully. ‘I think they would be forever grateful not to have to go through anything approximating a public wedding again.’

Sebastian grinned and kissed her with achingly slow sweetness and then drew back. With a mischievous glint in his eye he said carefully, ‘You remember when you said you regretted the fact that you hadn’t asked your aunts and cousins to do your henna tattoo ritual when you had the chance?’

She nodded, feeling a flame start to ignite in her belly.

‘Well, if you wanted to give them the chance to do it over again, I wouldn’t mind....’

Aneesa looked mock shocked. ‘Sebastian Wolfe, are you telling me that you have developed a wedding henna tattoo fetish?’

He came over her then and she exulted in his solid weight between her legs which she was already opening to entice him to a more intimate position. Between kisses, he growled, ‘I have an Aneesa Adani fetish. Just be thankful that I got the whole unwrapping-the-Indian-princess-on-her-wedding-night out of my system. Otherwise I’d have you laden down with jewels and in a sari all over again. As it is I’m willing to settle for a simple white dress, no shoes, our baby bump and the tattoo....’

Aneesa twined her arms around Sebastian’s neck and arched into him. ‘Do you know,’ she said a little unsteadily, because she felt emotional at the thought of ‘our baby bump’ and also because Sebastian’s hand was exploring between her legs, ‘that when I have the tattoo done they’ll write your name within the design and you won’t be allowed to sleep

with me till you find it....'

'Well, then, tell them to make it small and hard to find because I'm going to enjoy making you beg for mercy and curse their artistic ingenuity.'

Aneesa gasped her pleasure out loud when he joined their bodies. And for the next few minutes, she was happy to forget about anything but this blissful moment which held within it the promise of all their blissful moments to come.

## **1994: Jacob's darkest days ...**

Nomadic Jacob finds his way to a devastated village in Nepal, where for the first time he feels he can be of use, helping these people rebuild their lives and homes. For the next two years, Jacob works tirelessly, the intense physical labour driving away the nightmares that continue to haunt him, but mentally Jacob is on a knife edge. Finally, exhausted, he collapses and is confined to his bed, where the demons of his past return, more vivid than ever.

Neighbouring monks hear of Jacob's plight and in return for his hard work at the village they offer him sanctuary at their monastery. Slowly, they help Jacob recover to full health, but whilst his body is getting stronger, Jacob's spirit is weak. Within the cool walls of the monastery the monks impress on him that control of the body is nothing without control over the mind. Jacob begins to see that whilst he can't change the past, he can control his future and slowly begins to put the darkness behind him, finding a new peace.

## **Behind the scenes at Wolfe Manor ...**

### **Share a secret about Sebastian or Aneesa?**

Aneesa was going to study medicine when she was discovered by a model scout in a shopping mall with school-friends, so she never followed that career path.

### **Who is the biggest, baddest Wolfe?**

Well, I'd have to say Sebastian of course: all that silent, brooding energy and tortured demons ...! But after Sebastian I'd say it has to be Jacob because he's the one overshadowing everyone until the very end.

### **Which Wolfe brother did you most fancy?**

Sebastian of course, again! But after Sebastian I think I fancied Jacob the most as he's the one with all the scars and pain. He's the most elusive and the one I'd be most curious about: who is he going to settle down with and how will he overcome his demons?

### **Which is Sebastian's favourite room in Wolfe Manor?**

I think his favourite room is his bedroom because he can lock himself away from all the chaos and turmoil outside.

### **How did Sebastian pop the big question?**

He got down on one knee like any good self-respecting hero and presented her with a gorgeous ring!

## **ABBY'S WRITING SECRETS ...**

**What do you enjoy most about writing as part of a continuity series; how does it differ from writing a single title?**

I like the idea of being given a structure, a storyline within which you can breathe the characters to life and give it your own twist.

**What do you think makes a great hero/heroine?**

I think what makes a great hero is depicting the kind of man who at first possesses all the qualities that can almost be seen as negative: he's dominant, arrogant, utterly self-reliant, rigid and uncompromising, all wrapped up in a gorgeous face and body of course. But then the chinks in the armour start to appear, and the human is revealed and then he becomes absolutely irresistible.

And what makes a great heroine is that we, the readers, can relate to her. So she has all the insecurities and fears that we have. And she's not the most beautiful woman in the world. But she has something special, and the hero sees that straight away, whether or not he recognises it. It's something he reacts to on a very deep and visceral level, so even when they're not getting on, he can't keep away from her ...

**When you are writing, what is a typical day?**

A typical, "good" writing day, is one where I get up around 8am, have some breakfast and a cup of tea, which is essential to the process. Then write until about lunchtime, have a walk and some lunch, and then get back to work around 3pm, until about 6pm. TV in the evening to relax, or read a book and bed early.

ROBYN GRADY

**BAD BLOOD**

FEARLESS MAVERICK

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

One Christmas long ago, **ROBYN GRADY** received a book from her big sister and immediately fell in love with Cinderella. Sprinklings of magic, deepest wishes come true—she was hooked! Picture books with glass slippers later gave way to romance novels and, more recently, the real-life dream of writing for Mills & Boon.

After a fifteen-year career in television, Robyn met her own modern-day hero. They live on Australia's Sunshine Coast with their three little princesses, two poodles, and a cat called Tinkie. Robyn loves new shoes, worn jeans, lunches at Moffat Beach and hanging out with her friends on eHarlequin. Learn about her latest releases at [www.robyngrady.com](http://www.robyngrady.com), and don't forget to say hi. She'd love to hear from you!

# CHAPTER ONE

THE moment Alex Wolfe's car went airborne, he knew the situation was bad. That's 'serious injury' or possibly even 'get ready to meet your maker' bad.

He'd been approaching the chicane at the end of a straight at Melbourne's premier motor racing circuit and, misjudging his breaking point, he'd gone into the first turn too deep. He'd tried to drive through the corner but when the wheels had aquaplaned on standing water, he'd slid out and slammed into a tyre stack wall, which provided protection not only for runaway cars and their drivers but also for crowds congregated behind the guard rail.

Like a stone spat from a slingshot, he'd ricocheted off the rubber and back into the path of the oncoming field. He didn't see what happened next but, from the almighty *whack* that had spun him out of control, Alex surmised another car had T-boned his.

Now, as he sliced through space a metre above the ground, time seemed to slow to a cool molasses crawl as snapshots from the past flickered and flashed through his mind. Anticipating the colossal *slam* of impact, Alex cursed himself for being a fool. World Number One three seasons running—some said the best there'd ever been—and he'd broken racing's cardinal rule. He'd let his concentration slip. Allowed personal angst to impair his judgement and screw with his performance. The news he'd received an hour before climbing into the cockpit had hit him that hard.

*After nearly twenty years, Jacob was back?*

Now Alex understood why his twin sister had persisted in trying to contact him these past weeks. He'd been thrown when he'd received her first email and had held off returning Annabelle's messages for precisely this reason. He couldn't afford to get wound up and distracted by—

Driving down a breath, Alex thrust those thoughts aside.

He simply couldn't get distracted, is all.

With blood thumping like a swelling ocean in his ears, Alex gritted his teeth and strangled the wheel as the 420-kilo missile pierced that tyre wall. An instant later, he thudded to a jarring halt and darkness, black as the apocalypse, enveloped him. Momentum demanded he catapult forward but body and helmet harnesses kept him strapped—or was that *trapped*?—inside. Wrenched forward, Alex felt his right shoulder click and bleed with pain that he knew would only get worse. He also knew he should get out fast. Their fuel tanks rarely ruptured and fire retardant suits were a wonderful thing; however, nothing stopped a man from roasting alive should his car happen to go up in flames.

Entombed beneath the weight of the tyres, Alex fought the overwhelming urge to try to punch through rubber and drag himself free, but disorientated men were known to stagger into the path of oncoming cars. Even if he *could* claw his way out, procedure stated rescue teams assist or, at the least, supervise occupants from any wreck.

Holding his injured arm, Alex cursed like he'd never cursed before. Then he squinted through the darkness and, in a fit of frustration, roared out in self-disgust.

'Can we try that again? I know I can cock up more if I really set my mind to it!'

Claustrophobic seconds crept by. Gritting his teeth, Alex concentrated on the growl of V8s whizzing past, rather than the growing throb in his shoulder. Then a different group of engines sped up—medical response units. Surrounded by the smell of fumes and rubber and his own sweat, Alex exhaled a shuddery breath. Motor racing was a dangerous sport. One of the *most* dangerous. But the monumental risks associated with harrowing speeds were also the ultimate thrill and the only life to which Alex had ever wanted to ascribe. Racing not only gave him immense pleasure, it also provided the supreme means of escape. God knows there'd been plenty to run from growing up at Wolfe Manor.

The muffled cries of track marshals filtered through and Alex came back to the present as a crane went to work. Bound stacks of tyres were removed and soon shafts of light broke through.

A marshal, in his bright orange suit, poked his head in. 'You all right?'  
'I'll live.'

The marshal had already removed the steering wheel and was assessing what he could of the car's warped safety cell. 'We'll have you out in a minute.'

To face a barrage of questions? The humiliation? And at some stage he'd have to tackle that other problem, which had set off this whole shambles.

'No chance of leaving me here, I suppose.'

The marshal took in Alex's sardonic smile and sent a consoling look. 'There'll be more races, son.'

Alex set his jaw. *Damn right there will be.*

The Jaws of Life arrived. Soon, sure hands were assisting him out and a world of fire-tipped arrows shot through that injured joint. Biting down, Alex edged out of the debris aware of fans' applause resonating around the park. He let go supporting his right arm long enough to salute to the cheering crowd before sliding into a response unit.

Minutes later, inside the medical tent and out of his helmet and suit, Alex rested back on a gurney. Morrissey, the team doctor, checked out his shoulder, applied a cold press, then searched for signs of concussion and other injuries. Morrissey was serving up something for the pain and inflammation when team owner, Jerry Squires, strode in.

The son of a British shipping tycoon, Jerry had lost an eye as a child and was well known for the black patch he wore. He was better known, however, for his staggering wealth and no-nonsense attitude. Today, with his usually neat steel-grey hair mussed, Jerry spoke in gravelled tones to the doctor.

'What's the worst?'

'He'll need a complete physical evaluation ... X-rays and MRI,' Morrissey replied, his glasses slipping to the tip of his nose as he scribbled notes on a clipboard. 'He's sustained a subluxation to his right shoulder.'

Jerry sucked air in between his teeth. 'Second race of the season. At least we still have Anthony.'

At the mention of his team's second driver, Alex pushed to sit up. Everyone was jumping the gun! He wasn't out of the game yet.

But then the pain in that joint flared and burned like Hades. Breaking into a fresh sweat, he rested back on the elevated pillows and managed to put on his no-problem smile, the one that worked a charm on beautiful women and bristling billionaires.

'Hey, settle down, Jer. You heard the man. It's not serious. Nothing's broken.'

The doctor lowered his clipboard enough for Alex to catch the disapproving angle of his brows. 'That's still to be determined.'

A pulse beat in Jerry's clean-shaven jaw. 'I appreciate your glass-half-full attitude, champ, but this is no time for a stiff upper lip.' Jerry glanced out the window and scowled at the churning weather. 'We should've gone with wets.'

Alex flinched, and not from physical pain. In hindsight, granted, he should have opted for wet-weather tyres. He'd explained his rationale to the team earlier when other pit crews were changing over. Now he'd reiterate for the man who forked over multiple millions to have him race as lead driver.

'The rain had stopped ten minutes before the race began,' Alex said, feeling Morrissey's eagle eye pressing him to button up and rest. 'The track was drying off. If I could make it through the first few laps—get a dry line happening—I'd be eating up the k's while everyone else would be stuck in the pits changing back to slicks.'

Jerry grunted again, unconvinced. 'You needed extra traction going into that chicane. Simple fact is, you called it wrong.'

Alex ground his back teeth against a natural urge to argue. He hadn't called it wrong ... but he had made a fatal error. His mind hadn't been one hundred percent on the job. If it *had* been, he'd have aced that chicane *and* the race. Hell, anyone could drive in the dry; handling wet conditions was where a driver's ability, experience and instinct shone through. And usually where Alex Wolfe excelled. He'd worked bloody hard to get where he was today—at the top—which was a far cry from the position he'd once filled: a delinquent who'd longed to flee that grotesquely elaborate, freakishly unhappy English manor that still sat on the outskirts of Oxfordshire.

But he'd left those memories behind.

Or he had until receiving those emails.

While Jerry, Morrissey and a handful of others conversed out of earshot, Alex mulled over his sister's message. Annabelle had said Wolfe Manor had been declared a dangerous structure by the council and Jacob had returned to reinstate the house and grounds to their former infamous glory. Images of those centuries-old corridors and chunky dusty furniture came to mind, and Alex swore he could smell the dank and sour bouquet of his father's favourite drop. The veil between then and now thinned more and he heard his father's drunken ravings. Felt the slap of that belt on his skin.

Clamping his eyes shut, Alex shook off the revulsion. As the eldest, Jacob had inherited that mausoleum but, if it'd been left to him, Alex would gladly have bulldozed the lot.

Still, there'd been some good times as kids growing up. Alex had surrendered to a smile when Annabelle's email also mentioned that Nathaniel, the youngest of the Wolfe clan—or of the legitimate children, at least—was tying the knot. A talent behind the lens for many years now, Annabelle was to be the official photographer. Alex had followed recent news of his actor brother in the papers ... the night Nathaniel had walked out on his stage debut in the West End had caused a terrific stir. Then had come his Best Actor win last month in LA.

Alex absently rubbed his shoulder.

Little brother was all grown up, successful and apparently in love. Made him realise how much time had passed. How scattered they all were. He best remembered Nathaniel when he was little more than a skinny kid finding his own form of escape through entertaining his siblings, even at the expense of a backhand or two from the old man.

Voices filtered in and Alex's thoughts jumped back. Across the room it seemed Jerry and

Morrissey had finished their powwow and were ready to join him again.

His eyebrows knitted, the doctor removed his glasses. 'I'll attempt to reduce that joint now. The sooner it's intact again, the better. We're organising transport to Windsor Private for those follow-up tests.'

‘And when the tests come back?’ Alex asked.

‘There’ll be discussions with specialists to ascertain whether surgery’s needed—’

Alex’s pulse rate spiked. ‘Whoa. Slow down. Surgery?’

‘—or more likely some rest combined with a rehabilitation plan. It’s not the first time this has happened. That shoulder’s going to need some time,’ Morrissey said, tapping his glasses at the air to help make his point. ‘Don’t fool yourself it won’t.’

‘So long as I’m back in the cockpit in time to qualify in Malaysia.’

‘Next weekend?’ Morrissey headed for his desk. ‘Sorry, but you can forget about that.’

Ignoring the twist of fresh pain, Alex propped up on his left elbow and forced a wry laugh. ‘I think I’m the best judge of whether I’m fit to drive or not.’

‘Like you judged which tyres to kick off the race?’

Alex slid a look over to Jerry Squires at the same time his neck went hot and a retort burned to break free. But no good would come from indulging his temper when the frustration roiling inside of him should be directed at no one other than himself. No matter which way you sliced it, he’d messed up. Now, like it or not, he needed to knuckle down and play ball ... but only for a finite period and largely on his own terms. Because make no mistake—if he had to miss the next race, he’d be in Shanghai for Round Four if it killed him.

First up he’d need to shake any press off his tail. After such a spectacular crash, questions regarding injuries and how they might impact on his career would be rife. The photographer jackals would be on the prowl, desperate to snap the shot of the season—the Fangio of his time, the great Alex Wolfe, grimacing in pain, his arm useless in a sling. Damned if he’d let the paparazzi depict him as a pitiful invalid.

Privacy was therefore a priority. Any recuperating would happen at his reclusive Rose Bay residence in Sydney. He’d source a professional who understood and valued the unique code elite athletes lived by. Someone who was exceptional at their work but who might also appreciate a lopsided grin or possibly an invitation to dinner when he

was next in town, in exchange for which she would provide the medical all clear needed to get him back behind the wheel in time for Round Four qualifying.

As the painkiller kicked in and the screaming in his shoulder became more a raw groan, Alex closed his eyes and eased back against the gurney.

When his shoulder was popped back in and those initial tests were out of the way, he'd set his assistant, Eli Steele, on the case. He needed to find the right physiotherapist for the job. And he needed to find her fast. He'd lost far too much in his life.

God help him, he wasn't losing this.

# CHAPTER TWO

AS HER car cruised up a tree-lined drive belonging to one of the most impressive houses she'd ever seen, Libby Henderson blew the long bangs off her brow and again spooled through every one of her '*I can do this*' and '*There's nothing to be nervous about*' affirmations.

As her stomach churned, Libby recalled how not so long ago she'd been a supremely self-confident type. Nothing had frightened her. Nothing had held her back. That verve had propelled her to dizzy heights—a place where she'd felt secure and alive and even admired. Twice Female World Surfing Champion. There were times she still couldn't believe that fabulous ride had ended the way it had.

From an early age she'd taken to the surf. Libby's parents had always referred to her as their little mermaid. Growing up she'd trained every minute she could grab—kayaking, swimming, body surfing, as well as honing her skills on a board.

Nothing had felt better than the endorphins and burn she'd got from pushing beyond her limits.

Being a world champion had been the ultimate buzz—fabulous sponsors, high-end magazine spreads, the chance to speak with and even coach youngsters eager to surf their way up through the ranks. Out ahead, for as far as she could see, the horizon shone with amazing possibilities. Her accident had changed that.

But, thankfully, there'd been a life after celebrity and elite athlete status, just a different life. When she'd overcome the worst of her accident, she'd thrown herself into the study she'd previously set aside and had attained a Bachelor of Health Sciences in Physiotherapy at Sydney's Bond University. She was beyond grateful her determination and hard work was paying off—today better than she'd ever dreamed.

As she swerved around the top end of the drive now, Libby recalled this morning's unexpected phone call. None other than Alex Wolfe, the British-born motor racing champ who'd come to grief at the weekend,

had requested her services. Mr Wolfe's assistant, an efficient-sounding man by the name of Eli Steele, had relayed that he and Mr Wolfe had researched specialists in her profession extensively and had decided that her credentials best suited Mr Wolfe's current needs with regard to the shoulder injury he'd sustained.

Libby had to wonder precisely what credentials Eli referred to.

She worked almost exclusively with injured athletes but she'd never treated anyone near as renowned as this man. Perhaps Alex Wolfe, or his assistant, was aware of her former life, Libby surmised, slotting the auto shift into park and shutting down the engine. But had they dug deep enough to unearth how the final chapter of that part of her life had ended?

After opening the car door, Libby swung her legs out. Pushing to her feet, she surveyed the magnificent ultra-modern home as well as the surrounding pristine lawns and gardens. Rendered white with ultramarine and hardwood trims, the Rose Bay double-storey mansion spanned almost the entire width of the vast block. She imagined numerous bedrooms, each with their own en suite and spa bath. An indoor heated pool would provide luxurious laps during winter while an Olympic-size outdoor pool with trickling water features and, perhaps, a man-made beach would be the go during Sydney's often scorching summer months.

Straightening the jacket of her cream and black-trim pants-suit, Libby craned her neck. A grand forecourt, decorated with trellised yellow-bell jasmine and topiaries set in waist-high terracotta pots, soared around her. Her eyes drifting shut, she inhaled nature's sweet perfume and hummed out a sigh. In her sporting heyday, she'd earned good money but nothing compared with this unabashed show of wealth. Of course, the lucrative runoffs from the Alex Wolfe range of aftershave, clothing and computer games would contribute handsomely to his fortune. Charm, money, movie-star looks. Hell, Alex Wolfe had it all.

A thoroughly sexy voice, with a very posh English accent, broke into her thoughts.

'I agree. It's a cracking day. Perhaps we ought to chat out here.'

It started in her belly ... a pleasant tingling heat that flooded her body

in the same instant her eyes snapped wide open. On that extensive front patio, directly in front of her, stood a man. *The man.*

Alex Wolfe.

An embarrassing eternity passed before her stunned brain swam to the surface. Frankly, she'd never experienced a sight—a *vision*—quite like the one openly assessing her now. His lopsided grin was lazy, carving attractive grooves either side of a spellbinding mouth. His hair was a stylishly messy dark blond, the length of which curled off the collar of a teal-coloured polo shirt. And what about those shoulders! Mouthwateringly broad. Ubermasculine.

And let's not forget, Libby warned herself, sucking down a breath, the *only* reason she was here.

Stopping long enough to think about which foot to put forward first, Libby pinned on a warm but businesslike smile and moved to join her newest client, whom, she noticed now, also wore a navy blue immobiliser sling.

'I believe you were expecting me. I'm Libby Henderson. I was just admiring your home and gardens.'

He surveyed the vast front lawns and nodded as a gentle harbour breeze lifted dark blond hair off his brow. 'I always enjoy my stints in Australia,' he said. 'The weather's brilliant.' Gorgeous soft grey eyes hooked back onto hers as he cocked his head. 'I'd offer you my hand but ...'

'Your right shoulder's giving you problems.'

'Nothing too serious,' he said, stepping aside to welcome her in.

Entering the foyer, which gave the modest size of her Manly apartment a decent run for its money, Libby considered his last comment. If Mr Wolfe's in jury had been enough to land him in hospital and warrant subsequent intensive treatment ordered by his team doctor, clearly it was serious enough. Her job was to make certain that full range of motion and strength returned and, despite any downplaying on his part, that's precisely what she intended to do. Men like Alex Wolfe wanted to get back to it, and *now*. She understood that. Unfortunately, however, sometimes that wasn't possible.

Forcing herself not to gape at the storybook multi-tiered staircase or the mirror-polished marble floors, Libby instead turned to her host as he closed the twelve-foot-high door. She suppressed a wry grin. Must be the butler's day off.

'Can I offer you a refreshment, Ms Henderson?'

As he passed to lead her through the spacious white, almost austere vestibule, Libby's thoughts stuck on what should have been a simple question. But his tone implied that rather than coffee, any refreshment he offered might include something as social as champagne.

'I'm fine, thank you,' she replied, unable to keep her gaze from straying to the fluid style of his gait in those delectable custom-made black trousers as he moved off. Would he detect any peculiarities in her stride if their positions were reversed—she in front, he behind? But surely a man who'd dated super models and at least one European princess wouldn't be interested enough to notice.

'We'll talk in the sunroom.' Stopping before a set of double doors, he fanned open one side and she moved through.

After he'd closed this door too, he headed for a U-shaped group of three snowy-white leather couches. Beyond soaring arched windows sat that magnificent outdoor pool she'd imagined as well as a glamorous spa and stylish white wicker setting. A pool house, which mimicked the main building's design, looked large enough to accommodate a family of four as well as friends. Positioned beyond the pool area was a massive storage block—she suspected a huge garage. All the world knew Mr Wolfe liked his cars.

He gestured to the closest couch. 'Please make yourself comfortable.'

Libby lowered back against the cushions and set her feet neatly together. Rather than taking up position on the opposite couch, Alex Wolfe settled down alongside of her. A flush crept up her neck and lit her cheeks. This man's magnetism was a tangible, remarkable thing. His proximity to her on this couch couldn't be deemed as inappropriate—at least an arm's length separated them—and yet she couldn't ignore the *pull*. Not that Mr Wolfe would purposely be sending out those kinds of vibes. He was simply ... well, he was only ...

Oh, dammit, he was sexy—beyond anything she'd ever experienced

before.

As a film of perspiration cooled her nape, Libby edged an inch away while, holding the sling's elbow, Alex stretched his legs out and crossed his ankles. His feet were large, the shoes Italian. She noticed those things nowadays.

'So, Ms Henderson, what do you have for me?'

'I've studied the MRI scans,' she began, her gaze tracing the line of that sling, 'as well as the orthopaedic surgeon's report outlining the details of the injury. Seems your shoulder didn't suffer a complete dislocation, but rather a subluxation. Do you know what that means?'

'My shoulder didn't pop completely.'

She nodded. 'In layman's terms, that's precisely it.'

When that amazing subtle smile lighting his eyes touched his mouth, Libby's tummy fluttered and she cleared her throat. *Yes, he's an incredibly attractive man but, for God's sake, concentrate!* Her goal here wasn't to get all starry-eyed but to have Alex Wolfe walk away from this episode fully recovered and bursting with glowing reports of her services. Hopefully, then, more of his ilk would follow and her reputation in her present career would be secured.

When she'd returned to her studies, she'd decided she wanted to work with elite athletes, that special breed that needed someone who not only understood how their bodies worked but also their minds, and who were prepared to do whatever it took to get back on top. Libby only wished she'd been given that option.

Centring her attention again, she threaded her fingers and set them on her lap. 'Your medical records outline ligament damage to that shoulder in your teens.'

His eyes clouded over for an instant, so stormy and distant she might have mentioned the devil. But then his smile returned, and more hypnotic than before.

'I came off a motorbike.'

She nodded. A natural thrillseeker, of course he'd have started out on two wheels. 'I see.'

'Do you like motor sports?'

'I was more a water girl.'

'Swimming? Skiing?'

That flush returned, a hot rash creeping over the entire length of her body. Feeling colour soak into her cheeks, she glanced down, unclasped her hands and smoothed the centre creases of her trousers. They weren't here to discuss her history.

'I have another appointment this afternoon, so perhaps we'd best stay on point.'

His gaze sharpened, assessing her, and he sat back. 'I imagine your practice keeps you busy, Ms Henderson.'

'Busy enough.'

'But not on weekends.'

'I work some Saturdays.'

'Not Sundays?'

She blinked. 'You think you'll need me Sundays too?'

'Let's make it every weekday for now.'

'Much of the work you can do without my help. Every second day would be sufficient.'

'Every week day,' he reiterated before smiling again. 'Don't worry, Ms Henderson. I promise my current predicament is extremely short-term.'

Libby's breath left her lungs in a quiet rush. This man was a living legend. Revered by millions all over the world. He was the sporting hero that boys chasing one another in parks pretended to be. Was he being intentionally snide? Or just plain 'I am invincible' arrogant? Libby knew better than most.

No one was invincible.

'We were discussing your previous injury,' she went on in an implacable tone, 'which could well have made you more susceptible to subsequent injuries. Let me explain.' She shifted back against the cushions. 'A joint dislocation, or *luxation* from the Latin, occurs when bones that join become displaced or misaligned usually through a sudden impact. The joint capsule, cartilage and ligaments become damaged. A subluxation, as occurred in your situation, Mr Wolfe, is a

partial dislocation, which can occur as a result of previous damage to the surrounding structures of the shoulder. Either way there will be a weakening of the muscles and ligaments which need physiotherapy to help stabilise the joint.'

He was looking at her, his head slightly angled, a peculiar, flattering gleam in his eyes.

'I see.'

She held her breath against an unbidden flare of emotion, cleared her throat and focused again. 'With your hands on the wheel, the impact from the accident jarred your right humerus, which then sat anteriorly from the—'

His deep soft laugh interrupted her. 'Rewind a little, doc.'

'I'm not a doctor.' She wanted to be clear on her qualifications. 'I have a Bachelor of Health Sciences with honours and am a member of the Australian Physiotherapy Association.'

'And for now you are the lady who holds my future in the palm of her hand. I'll call you "doc." With your permission, of course.'

Libby stiffened. Talk about pressure. But then, he was paying the bill. She gave a hesitant half-shrug.

'I suppose ... if it makes you feel more comfortable.'

His gaze dipped to her lips, then caught her eyes again. 'So—doc—you were saying.'

'Your humerus—' She stopped and bunched one hand to demonstrate. 'The *ball* slid partially out of its joint and needed to be manipulated back into the centre of your glenoid cavity, or socket.' She cupped her palm, pushed her fist in and locked the 'ball,' then disengaged it again.

'Right. The ball—' his own hand bunched '—goes into the socket.' He fit his big hard hot fist inside her still-elevated palm.

At the instant of contact, Libby's internal alarm blared and she jerked away.

Their eyes locked—his questioning, hers, she knew, wide and exposed. That tingling in her belly had intensified and the suddenly sensitive tips of her breasts tightened and ached.

But when one corner of his mouth hooked up the barest amount, Libby was brought back. As casually as possible, she scooped some hair behind an ear and willed her cantering heartbeat to slow. Crazy to even consider but ...

Was he *flirting* with her? She couldn't be sure. He was a superstar and ...

It'd been such a long time.

Her last intimate relationship had ended four months after her accident. She'd thought fellow pro surfer Scott Wilkinson had been the sexist man alive, but Scott was an amateur compared to Alex Wolfe. This man's power to captivate with a simple look, the slightest touch, was palpable. She'd like to meet the woman who was immune to the magic of that smile. Charm was as instinctive to this man as his taking a corner at death-defying speeds. That wasn't to imply he would in any way be interested in checking her track out, so to speak.

More to the point, *she* wasn't interested in a quick spin with him either.

Schooling her features, Libby straightened her spine and focused on business. 'We'll need to concentrate on a series of strengthening rehabilitative exercises.'

'Sounds good.'

'When would you like to begin, Mr Wolfe?'

'Call me Alex.'

A perfectly reasonable request, she decided, noticing how his grey eyes seemed to sparkle at her nod of accent. 'What if I set up a timetable —?'

'I thought we could start tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow's fine.' Her voice lowered to a serious note. 'I'm sure I don't have to tell you that we'll need to work hard. Consistently.'

'I've no doubt you'll bring me through in time.'

Frowning, she cast her mind back. Had she overlooked something?

'In time for what?'

'I'll miss Round Three this weekend.' A muscle in his cheek flexed

twice. ‘Can’t be helped, I’m afraid. Round Four’s three weeks subsequent to that.’

Libby almost laughed. He was joking. But while his expression might be relaxed, the set of his square jaw was firm. He’d never been more serious in his life.

‘I was told you’d been declared unfit by your team’s doctor to drive professionally for at least six weeks.’

‘We’ll prove him wrong.’

She sat forward. He should be set straight.

‘Your trackside physician wasn’t able to perform the reduction. As you’d have been told many times now, delay can cause complications. An axial view showed stripping of the inferior glenoid and rotator cuff tearing ...’

Her words dropped away as any patience she’d seen in his eyes on the subject cooled.

‘My assistant informs me,’ he said, ‘that your clients think you perform miracles.’

‘I’m not a saint, Mr Wolfe.’

‘Alex. And, believe me, I’m not after a saint.’

His eyes smouldered and that hot pulse in her belly squeezed and sizzled. When the beating slid to a lower dangerous point, Libby pushed to her feet, too quickly as it turned out. She tipped to one side and threw out an arm to steady herself. But Alex Wolfe was already there, standing close, an arm circling her waist, his solid frame effortlessly providing the support she needed.

She was five-six, but she had to arc her neck way back to look into his face ... which was a mistake. When those entrancing lidded eyes fused with hers, she imagined that his hold around her middle cinched, bringing her front to within a hair’s-breadth of his ... close to his chest ... to those legs.

Giddy, she broke his hold and took two steps back.

As she willed the fire from her face and got herself together, he asked, ‘Are you all right?’

'Perfectly. Thank you.' Shifting the bangs off her cheeks, she gathered herself and resumed a businesslike air. 'I presume you know where my practice is.'

'All treatments will be conducted here.'

Her brows shot up. 'My equipment's at work.'

'I'll be honest.' His free hand slid into his trouser pocket and his legs braced wider apart. 'I'm concerned about the press. I have enough on my mind without watching out for headlines speculating on whether I'm a washed-up cripple.'

Her insides wrenching, Libby flinched.

In the second it took to compose her expression, Alex frowned as if he'd glimpsed and wondered at her lapse. With knees locked, she offered an indulgent smile.

'I understand you might want to shield yourself. But I'm afraid—'

'Everything you need will be brought in. I'll have my assistant organise it. And I'll double your fee to cover any inconvenience and time difficulties.'

She shut her dropped jaw.

Was she reading him right? *Double your fee ...? We'll prove him wrong ...? You'll bring me through ...?* Did he think he could bribe her into cutting short his treatment so he could make his Round Four? Clearly Alex Wolfe wasn't familiar with the terms *caution* or *compromise*. He knew only one way to get things done. *His way*. If she didn't agree to his conditions—his offer—no doubt he'd find someone who would.

Which left her two choices.

She could bow to the inevitable, agree that all work be carried out on his private premises and take the fortune he offered as well as give the all clear when he deemed, whether he was fit to return to driving in her opinion or not. Or she could tell him she couldn't be manipulated by his charm or his pride. That her ethics were more important to her than money. More important than anything.

But there was a third option.

Decided, she looked him in the eye. 'I'll speak with your assistant. Get

the ball rolling. We'll start tomorrow morning.'

A shadow swept over his expression, so fast she almost missed it. She recognised the emotion. Disappointment. He'd thought she'd put up more of a fight before capitulating to his terms, even for show's sake. Pity she couldn't set him straight, but that would come ... when the time was right.

She headed for the door. 'I'll be back in the office in half an hour. Your assistant can call me any time after that.'

With long fluid strides he caught up, a satisfied smile tilting his lips. 'I do believe I'll enjoy working with you, doc.'

*Doc.* Walking side by side down the hall, Libby grinned.

'Perhaps I ought to wear a white coat and stethoscope when I call next,' she said, a slightly mocking edge to her voice.

'Feel free to wear whatever makes you comfortable. I will.'

'Oh, there won't be much need for clothes,' she said, stopping before the front doors. 'On your part, at least.'

His hold on the handle froze.

Swallowing the grin, she brushed his hand aside, opened the door and stepped out. 'See you tomorrow. Nine sharp.'

Walking away, she felt his surprise and curiosity drilling her back. But if her last comment was loosely inappropriate, she was okay with it. He'd needed to be pulled up and using his own level of language.

Alex Wolfe didn't know how well she understood his mind. She knew about burning passions. About setting a goal and never losing sight of it. She also knew how it felt to lose the capacity to chase and hold onto your dream. To have to reinvent yourself and leave that other more natural you behind.

Six weeks rehabilitation? Hell, Alex Wolfe didn't know how lucky he was.

But slow and steady won the race. *This* race anyway. She'd get him into a routine, he'd feel the positive results and when the time came she'd make him see how detrimental—possibly catastrophic—returning to the track too soon could be. Until then she'd be on her guard. She

couldn't deny that those subtle looks, his unmistakable body language, his casual touch, affected her, and Alex knew it. He assumed he could manipulate her, charm her, perhaps even intimidate her into getting what he wanted.

Unfortunately for Alex Wolfe ... not a chance.

Libby slid into the driver's seat. She was about to turn the ignition when her stomach twisted, like it had earlier when he'd tossed off that unconscious slap in the face. Her hand ran down her left thigh, over the patella. Then her fingertips traced the line where she and the lower limb prosthesis became one.

*Washed-up cripple ...*

Long ago she had finished crying and asking herself, *What did I do to deserve this?* With the support of family, friends and professionals she'd moved from beneath those dark clouds of self-pity. Helping to rehabilitate others had brought new and worthwhile meaning to her life. But sitting here, remembering the gleam in Alex Wolfe's eyes when he'd looked at her that certain way, she couldn't mistake the pang in her chest or the choking thickness in her throat.

Her hand skimmed the shin she couldn't feel.

Would Alex Wolfe see her as less of a woman if he knew?

# CHAPTER THREE

LEANING his good shoulder against a patio column, Alex kept his eye on Libby Henderson's silver sedan as it looped the circular drive and headed out. An intrigued smile lifted one corner of his mouth.

Ms Henderson was an attractive prospect, particularly with those large amber-coloured eyes that seemed to both cloak her emotions as well as swirl with boundless possibilities. Her hair, which flowed past her shoulders in soft waves, was a captivating silvery blond, a consequence, no doubt, of a lifetime spent in Australia's surf-and-sun conditions. Of medium height, her lithe figure had curves in all the right places. If she'd tried to hide that fact beneath her designer business suit, she'd failed and she knew it.

Perhaps best of all, he thought as he watched her car disappear beyond the auto iron entry gates, Libby Henderson had spunk.

She'd as good as accepted his offer—to work here on him, *with* him. However, she'd let him know that he didn't intimidate her, even if they were aware of each other in a primal man-wants-woman way. When her palm had cupped his fist, she'd felt the zap as much as he had. But her comeback regarding the insignificance of what clothes he did or did not wear during their sessions had been priceless. Few people could pull him up like that. Coming from Ms Henderson, he couldn't say he minded.

Clearly, she was the right person for the job. With his past, he didn't wait around for miracles, nevertheless he had faith that Libby Henderson's clients believed she could work them. Regardless, he would have little trouble persuading her and, as a consequence, others that he was indeed fit to drive again when he deemed it should be so. And if she needed a hand in helping her decision along, he wasn't opposed to the idea. In fact, now that he'd met her, he was more than intrigued by the prospect.

Recalling the natural wiggle in her walk, he pushed off the column.

Until that time, he needed to focus elsewhere. Needed to keep busy.

Tomorrow midday, a videoconference with the Australian CEO of his bestselling signature-brand aftershave was scheduled. Before then, he'd go through projection figures for an additional anticipated range. Along with earnings from his extensive investment portfolio, he certainly didn't need the money, but a man would be a fool not to strike when his iron was hot. Current and potential sponsors agreed: Alex Wolfe was *steaming*. He intended to keep it that way.

About to head in, he pulled up. Eli Steele's sleek black sports car was slinking up the drive. Grinning, Alex crossed back to the patio's edge. Not only was his assistant smart in a business sense, he had a good head for cars. Eli wouldn't be working for him if he didn't.

'I take it that was your physiotherapist driving off,' Eli said, easing out the driver's side door. 'How'd it go?'

'Well.' After Eli made his way up the steps, Alex clapped his friend on the back with his free hand. 'You did a fine job finding her.'

Eli drove a set of fingers over his scalp, ruffling his neat dark hair. 'So she's on board?'

'I've explained I need to be back in the seat no later than Round Four.' Two weeks shy of the six weeks the team doctor had insisted upon, which would leave him in a good position to retain his title.

Inside the vestibule, they hung a right and sauntered down the hall which led to Alex's home office.

'And she said she can accommodate?' Eli asked.

'Was there any doubt?'

'Only on my part, it seems.'

Frowning, Alex stopped. 'Run that by me again?'

Eli kept walking. 'Don't get me wrong. I'm convinced she does great work, but from what I've read she seems to have a granite mindset as well. I didn't think she'd roll over and agree to your time frame that easily.'

Outside the billiards room, Eli waited for his boss to catch up.

Digesting the information, Alex began to walk again. 'You sound unhappy about her being onside.'

'You want to race,' Eli explained, 'and you want to win. Clearly you can handle pain. But, Alex, you don't want to risk this injury getting worse. This is the second time that joint has given you trouble. Third time it'll be easier to damage still. If that happens you could be out for a lot longer than six weeks.'

They entered the office, its walls lined with framed shots capturing some heady moments on the track as well as the winner's podium—holding up a plate at Monaco, shooting champagne over an ecstatic crowd. Alex's favourite trophy by far was a homemade medal, which hung on a haberdashery store's dark blue ribbon. Made out of an inexpensive key ring and a portion of a wheel spike, the good-luck charm had been given to him many years ago by his mentor, a man to whom Alex owed everything—Carter White. Encouragement, belief. Carter had given the rebel teen Alex had once been the tools needed to succeed, which included the gift of a caring father figure Alex had sorely lacked at home. He really ought to pick up the phone and call Carter sometime.

Crossing to his desk, Alex collected the documents he'd received from that CEO and the bold *Alex Wolfe* logo caught his eye. Everyone was eager to see how far his brand-name net would fly and Eli was great to bounce new ideas and strategies off. He was more than an assistant; Eli was a first-class friend. They'd known each other only three years and yet Eli was closer to him than any of his brothers. Not that Alex blamed anyone for that ... or, rather, he blamed no one other than the man who had single-handedly torn his own family apart: William Wolfe, may he rot in hell.

And he was seriously giving too much thought to all this lately but, for once, he couldn't seem to avoid it.

Staring blindly at those documents, Alex recalled how he'd waited until he'd left the hospital to reread Annabelle's email and compose an adequate reply.

*Great to hear about Jacob's return and Nathaniel's upcoming nuptials, it had said. Can't*

*believe he's old enough to tie the knot! Will be in contact again soon. Hope you're well. Love to you, Alex.*

He'd thought about phoning; he had her number. But he knew Annabelle favoured email. Frankly, in this circumstance, so did he. Not that he and Annabelle didn't speak every couple of years or so ... but never about that night. Not about what a different girl Annabelle was now from the lively chit she'd once been.

Alex lowered into his high-back leather chair, only half hearing Eli's last remark.

'... I'm sure Libby Henderson explained that to you.'

Alex's thoughts slid all the way back. Eli was talking about the increased chance of incurring a similar injury to his shoulder in the future.

'I'll keep up the exercises,' Alex said, 'and whatever else she prescribes.'

'As long as you don't screw it up permanently in the meantime by going back to the track too soon.'

Alex tossed a wry look around the walls, covered with victory memorabilia. 'I think I've done fairly well so far.'

But when Eli's dark blue gaze dropped and he rubbed the scar above his temple the way he did whenever he had something more to say, Alex blew out a breath and set the document down on the desk with a slap.

'Spit it out.'

Eli edged a hip over the corner of the polished rosewood desk and gave a shrug that said he was perplexed. 'I guess I'd expected Libby Henderson to put up at least a half-decent fight.'

In truth, Alex had expected that too. She'd almost agreed *too* easily to his generous offer. Nevertheless, 'Money's a strong motivator. With that kind of dosh on the table and the endorsements I'll flick her way, she'd be a fool not to jump at this chance.'

'I wouldn't have thought she'd be motivated by money any more than you are.'

'Why's that?'

'You seriously don't recognise the name?'

Alex rolled it over in his mind and came up a blank. 'Sorry.'

‘Elizabeth Henderson was World Surfing Champion a few years back.’

Alex recalled her radiant can-do glow, the determined look in those swirling amber eyes, not to mention the alluring beach-babe hair and tan. Elizabeth Henderson, world champion surfer? He grinned. Sure. It fit.

‘I had no idea,’ he admitted. ‘Water sports aren’t my thing.’ He and Libby had even had that discussion.

‘I don’t much follow female sport either. Do they televise women’s surf championships?’

With a sardonic grin, Eli collected the document Alex had set aside. ‘For a smart man, you’re one hell of a chauvinist.’

Alex held his heart. ‘You’ve wounded me.’ Then he offered up a conciliatory smile. ‘Don’t worry. I’m on top of it. When Libby Henderson sets her mind to something, she does it her way and leaves the rest for dead. Which can only bode well for her performance as a physio.’

Dark brows knitted, Eli was flicking through the document, sifting through data. Eli was a hound for tracking down and assimilating facts. Which begged the question ...

Eyes narrowed, Alex swung his chair one way, then the next. Finally he asked, ‘Why didn’t you tell me about Libby Henderson’s past first-up?’

Eli continued analysing the pages. ‘I wanted you to meet her without any preconceptions.’

‘I don’t see how knowing about her sporting acumen could hurt.’

When Eli kept his focus on the document, Alex’s antennae began to prickle. Had being cooped up without driving privileges brought out a paranoid streak? Or was there something more to Libby Henderson? Something that Eli, for some curious reason, preferred his boss not discover?

He’d set out to hire someone who would be malleable to his needs. That objective hadn’t changed. And yet after a single meeting he couldn’t deny he was intrigued to learn more about this former surf queen turned sports star physio. Was his curiosity in part due to the fact that Libby reminded him of his sister? She and Annabelle conveyed a similar almost regal reserve, although Alex well remembered his sister in

her younger years—open and vibrant. So eager to experience all life had to offer. He'd wager Libby harboured a more effervescent side as well. Either way ...

Eli leaned over to point out some anomaly in the document but Alex found his thoughts still on Libby.

*An attractive option. Boundless possibilities.*

Yes. When Ms Henderson visited next, he'd be certain to dig deeper.

# CHAPTER FOUR

HALF an hour later, Libby walked through the entrance of her city office. Behind the front desk, her twenty-one-year-old receptionist, Payton Nagle, flicked back her waist-length chestnut hair and beamed out an enthusiastic smile.

‘Sooooo ... how was the superstar?’

Containing a grin, Libby crossed over and scooped up the morning mail from the counter’s top shelf. ‘Still shining bright.’

‘What’s he like?’ Eyes round, Payton tipped forward. ‘Is he as sexy in real life as he is on the TV?’

‘I’d have to say sexier,’ Libby replied, matter-of-factly. The man was so sexy, it was criminal.

Falling back in her seat, Payton sighed long and hard at the ceiling. ‘That strong square jaw, that deep to-die-for Brit accent ... Honestly, Libby, I don’t know how you stopped from swooning.’

‘I’m a professional, Payton,’ Libby said, shuffling through letters and invoices. ‘Professionals aren’t allowed to swoon.’ Or rather they weren’t allowed to let those kinds of unprofessional feelings show.

She set down the mail and drilled her receptionist with her most serious gaze. ‘Remember, not one word about my appointments with Alex Wolfe to anyone. He wants the press to think he’s flown back to the UK or the paparazzi would be all over this. He doesn’t want the situation with his shoulder made out to be any worse than it is.’

*Didn’t want to be projected as a cripple.*

Shaking off that thought, Libby stretched toward the keyboard to check her email account while Payton crossed her heart to seal the promise. ‘Did you tell him about your surfing?’

Libby recalled her thoughts from earlier, when she’d left Alex Wolfe and his premises. Other than the everyday reminder below her left knee, ‘That part of my life’s behind me.’

Payton's brows tugged together. 'But being a world champion ... it's something you'd have in common.'

'I'm not there for chitchat.'

Or here, for that matter.

Setting her mind squarely back on business, Libby moved toward her office. A long low whistle, the sound of a missile falling, came from behind.

Hands on hips, Libby rotated back.

Payton was twirling a thick strand of hair around an index finger. 'You really like him, don't you?'

Libby's eyes bugged out. *Like* him?

'Payton, he's impossibly arrogant. Consumed by his own celebrity. And besides that ...' Libby's fists loosened, her inflexible look melted and, beaten, she exhaled. 'Besides that, any woman with her full quota of hormones couldn't *help* but like him.' She shrugged. 'He's *drugging*. Same way honey is to a bee.'

'I wonder ...' An eyebrow arched as Payton twirled more hair. 'Are you the honey or the bee?'

Libby coughed out a laugh. If Payton was suggesting that Alex Wolfe found *her* irresistible ...!

'I'm neither,' Libby replied in an end-of-conversation tone. 'I'm a physiotherapist who has a full day ahead of her. As does her receptionist.'

Moving into her office, Libby shut the door and took two calming breaths to rein in the cantering pace of her heartbeat. She and Payton might be friends but foremost she was the younger woman's employer. Someone Payton should be able to hold up as an example. Revealing a vulnerable side—the purely female side that found Alex Wolfe absurdly attractive—had been foolish. And a onetime mistake.

Crossing to her desk, Libby told herself that Mr

Wolfe had fleets of starry-eyed admirers the globe over, women who dreamed about being with him, talking to him, *doing* for him. They would also dream about how that kissable mouth might feel sensually

closing over theirs, or the way he might move when he made hot, unhurried love deep into the night.

Resigned, Libby dropped into her chair.

Hell, she wasn't so different to those other mesmerised hoards. And that had to stop.

She knew Alex Wolfe's type. World Number Ones were all about staying on top. He would use anything and everything within his means to have her capitulate, wave her physio's green flag and get himself back on the track whether his injury was sufficiently healed or not. But no matter how distracting Mr Wolfe's looks and charm, she would *not* let herself be manipulated. There was only one thing for it.

Spine straight, knees together, she swept up her schedule.

From now on she would be nothing but objective in his company. Ruthlessly ethical. A consummate, non-sexual, iron-willed professional.

Ready to sort through the papers on her desk, Libby had collected a pen when a pang in her chest had her catching her breath. The thought had crept up on her like a frost on nightfall, and now that the reflection was formed she couldn't blot it out. Couldn't shake it off.

After her accident she'd thrown herself into study, then the practice. No energy was left over for window-shopping for knee-high dresses she would never wear or wondering if sometime, somewhere, she might meet someone new. She was too busy—too focused—and she preferred her life that way.

Now, for the first time in so long, she gave into the impulse, closed her eyes and remembered what it was like to be kissed by a man. How wonderful it could feel to be desired. She remembered the swell of want when tender words were whispered and steaming hungry flesh met flesh. Then she recalled the pure elation of spearing through a saltwater mountain and shooting free the other side. Her mind joined the two and drew a picture of a tall strong man, the lacy fringes of ocean waves swirling around his ankles, grey eyes smiling.

Squeezing the pen, Libby bowed her head. As well as she knew her own name, she was certain she would never return to the ocean. As much as she missed the water that was one challenge she didn't need to

face. But would she ever know romantic love again?

She hadn't let herself dwell before now but, in truth, she missed the company, the sense of sharing, the special warmth of intimacy. And as silly as it sounded, she couldn't help but wonder ...

What would it be like to have all that with Alex?

The next morning, her professional mask firmly in place, Libby arrived at Alex Wolfe's elite address smack on nine. As he had the day before, Alex greeted her at the door, escorted her inside, then led her into a spacious room—an elaborate home gym toward the rear of the enormous house.

Libby almost gasped. She'd seen licensed gyms less equipped than this. Every type of weight equipment, three state-of-the-art treadmills, six rowing machines, various balls, mats, presses and bars. A small double-glazed window set in an adjacent wood panelled wall indicated a sauna. Did the man host boot-camp parties? That indoor pool she'd imagined must be close by. Not that they'd be using it. She would always love the smell and look of water any way it came—sea, chlorinated or fresh from the sky. But her mermaid days were long over.

Arm in its sling, Alex sauntered over to join her. 'Should we start with a cup of strong tea before getting into the tough stuff?'

As usual that deep accented voice seeped through Libby's blood, making her syrupy warm all over. Ignoring the heat, aware of the dangers, she steeled herself, met his gaze and set her work bag on a nearby table. He might be king of his profession but during these sessions, like it or not, she was in charge.

'We'll begin with a full assessment.' She nodded at his immobilised arm. 'Now that we'll be concentrating on strengthening your shoulder, there won't be a need for that.'

With a speculative smile, Alex reached for a fastener. 'My shirt will need to come off too, I presume.'

'I'll help with the buttons.'

When she didn't hesitate to step forward and assist, his brows hiked but she didn't react. He could turn on the wicked charm all he liked, but if he'd hoped to put her off balance again today, he could think again.

She'd made a pledge and she intended to keep it.

Iron-willed.

Asexual.

Professional.

With the sling removed, she deftly unbuttoned his freshly laundered chambray shirt. The subtle smell of lemons drifted into her lungs, but the scent that truly caught her senses was musky. Pure male. A scent she wasn't unfamiliar with in her everyday work. But, of course, Alex Wolfe went a mile beyond 'everyday.'

Last button attended to, she eased the shirt off those dynamite shoulders, then manoeuvred around to release the fabric from his back. As the shirt fell away, her gaze gravitated to the muscular contours, the straight-as-a-die dent of his spine, the lean measure of his hips. Her heart began to pound. She thought she'd prepared herself but, frankly, the sight of this man half naked stole her breath away.

Thrusting back her shoulders, she once again set her mind on the specialist straight and narrow.

'Let's start with testing your range of movement.'

She asked that he first raise his arms in front, palm down, as high as possible, then at his sides. Next, internal and external rotation, with his hands behind his back.

While making notes—the ROM around the joint was not full, which meant passive work to help it improve—she said, 'Now we'll test the strength.'

His good shoulder squared. 'Ready when you are, doc.'

Navigating around to face him, Libby found herself analysing that amazing chest and powerhouse arms from a female rather than professional point of view. Big mistake. Her brain began to tingle at the same time her bones seemed to liquefy. She'd laid awake half the night telling herself she could handle whatever today might bring and yet she'd missed the turn-off coming here because she'd been contemplating precisely this moment.

Resisting the urge to wet her lips, she eased her gaze higher and met his amused look. Then one corner of his mouth slowly curved and her

face flooded with heat. Caught out, she stuttered an excuse. She hadn't been ogling. Merely ... *assessing*.

'You, uh, obviously work out,' she said, and then inwardly cringed.

*Stupid.* He was a World Number One. Of course he worked out. No doubt there'd be gyms in his other houses around the world, and the best personal trainers, as well as a food plan to sustain the mind and might of a champion.

She cleared her throat. 'What I mean to say is ... despite your injury, you look great.'

His lips tilted more at the same time he seemed to move slightly closer, lean faintly nearer, and the heat in her cheeks exploded, raging out of control as that natural male scent enveloped her completely.

His gaze skimming her cheek, he murmured, 'Thank you.'

Gulping back a breath, she averted her gaze and muttered, 'You're welcome.'

She imagined that he chuckled to himself before he asked, 'Where would you like me?'

With unsteady steps, she crossed to a mirror that covered an entire wall. 'We'll start here. You in front facing the mirror. I'll stand behind.'

He took up his position, steely legs in black athlete's shorts pinned apart. His slightly cleft chin angled up. 'How's this?'

Libby was torn between sighing and smirking at the magnificent reflection. As if he didn't know he looked better than fabulous.

'That's fine. Now hold your arms out at right angles to your body.' His arms rose easily. 'Any pain?'

'It feels ...' The chiselled planes of his face pinched. 'A little weak.'

She grunted. She'd bet more than 'a little.'

'I'm going to test that strength. I'll put one hand here on the uninjured arm and the other here, on your recovering arm.'

As she laid a palm on each bicep, she felt the vibration ... his chest rumbling, the sound of a big cat anticipating a full bucket of cream or, perhaps, defending it.

Locking off her imagination, she continued. 'Now I'll push lightly.'

'Would you like me to push too? You know—' his left bicep flexed twice beneath her hand '—push up?'

She met his poker-faced reflection and simmered inside. Damn the man! He'd done that little trick on purpose. This wasn't a contest or a show. Every session, every minute, counted. He needed to take this seriously.

Filling her lungs, she reassembled her patience. 'I'll push down and you try to resist.'

Gently she put weight on each arm. His left stayed parallel. His right came down.

His cool expression dissolved and a crease cut between his brows. 'That's no good.'

'With your injury, it's normal. We'll get there.'

'Yes, we will. In time for China.'

She held off gaping at his implacable tone. But she had no intention of arguing that particular point now. She had a job to do. His shoulder would be fit for a return to the track when she said it was and not a moment before.

'Would you go over there and lie down, please?'

Holding his injured arm, Alex looked her up and down, as if deciding whether it would weaken his position to comply. Then he reluctantly crossed the room, hitched up on the bed's white sheet and spread out.

Edging closer, she scanned the exquisite form lying before her and swallowed against the rapid pulse beating high in her throat. He looked even better on his back than he had standing. The rectus abdominis had been sculpted by a god. The tone of his trapezius and deltoids were exceptional. The pectoralis majors, dusted with crisp hair, were as first-rate an example as she'd ever seen—and she'd seen a few. Powerful, firm, prime flesh. Below that waist band, Libby imagined another well defined muscle and her mouth went dry.

He pushed up on his good arm and his broad shoulders slanted toward her. 'Maybe we should start with something more strenuous. You know, get the show on the road.'

'No, Alex. We shouldn't.'

His jaw shifted and eyes narrowed. ‘I can’t see what lying around will achieve.’

‘Leave that to me.’

His gaze pierced hers, challenging, testing. Finally he rolled back down, looking like a third grader forced to face some senseless spelling bee he hadn’t studied for.

He stared blindly at the ceiling. ‘What now?’

Alongside of him, Libby took both his hands, which felt as hot and strong as the rest of him looked. Her fingers curled around his and she brought them to lie near his navel. She refused to acknowledge the trail of dark hair descending in a particularly tantalising line to the loose band of his shorts, much less the subtle bulge further down.

‘No pain?’ she asked in a remarkably composed voice.

His gaze met hers and, confident, he grinned. ‘Not a hint.’

‘Good. Now slowly lift your arms.’

‘How high?’

‘See how you go. I’ll go through the exercise with you first.’ With his hands sandwiched between hers, a hot pulse beating through her blood, she began to move with him. ‘Up, two, three … hold and … down, two, three.’ Her words were even, regulated, the opposite of her clambering heartbeat. ‘How’s that feel?’

‘Up. Down. Up. Down.’ She felt his curious gaze on hers. ‘How much longer?’

‘A few more times.’

Any moment she expected him to protest again but as their breathing synchronised with the movements, he seemed to accept the inevitable. So while they finished the set, she focused on his shoulder, as well as his expression for signs of discomfort. Her gaze drifted to gauge the steady breathing of that glorious chest and before she could rein her straying thoughts in, she imagined her palms gliding over that granite surface and her lips brushing those small dark discs.

Hauling herself back with a start, Libby lowered their hands a final time and took a resolute step away.

‘That’s it?’ he asked, sounding pleased.

She patted her hair, which she’d worn in a low bun with multiple pins today. ‘Now I’ll show you an easy exercise to continue with.’ An active as opposed to passive version of the exercise they’d done together. ‘And we’ll work in some remedial massages along the way.’

But he growled. ‘I don’t need massages. I don’t want easy.’

What he really meant was, *This soft stuff is a waste of time.*

Tucking in her chin, Libby took stock.

This time with Alex Wolfe would be more difficult than she’d thought. She knew Alex was beyond eager to get back onto the track and that he was beyond confident about his abilities. She respected where that energy came from ... an unconquerable winner’s spirit. That quality, however, did not excuse his veiled attempt to bribe her, suggesting she convince the team doctor that he was fit and well to drive whether he was or he wasn’t. Nor did it excuse that forceful tone.

Regardless, the bottom line was that she’d taken on this case, which meant she would give it her all and then some, whether Alex Wolfe appreciated her own brand of zealousness or not. If he decided their relationship wasn’t working, he could sack her, but she wasn’t about to quit, or double guess herself at every turn. He’d thought enough of her credentials to hire her in the first place after all.

‘Alex, I appreciate your ... enthusiasm, but I’m going to ask you to leave the program to me.’

‘Just as long as we’re in tune with what I need.’

*What I expect, he should have said.*

Her smile was thin. ‘I know precisely what you need.’

His gaze pierced hers and she thought he might push his point to make himself clear. The simmering in his eyes said he would miss not one more race than he thought he had to. Every round he didn’t drive took him further away from the means to retain his title, and anyone who tried to stop him was public enemy number one.

But then the thrust of his shadowed jaw eased, his trademark grin returned and he added in a placated tone, ‘Pleased to know we’re on the same page.’

They continued to work out with similar isometrics. After thirty minutes, she caught him flinching so she called an end to their first session.

'That'll do for today,' she said, heading off to collect her bag.

He was standing, hands threaded behind to allow a gentle stretch between the blades. With his brow damp from rehabilitative work his body wasn't used to, he joined her. 'So you're leaving?'

'I have other appointments.'

She was sure he wouldn't be lonely. He must have acquaintances in Sydney he could catch up with. No doubt many wore skirts.

While she found her car keys, he eased into his shirt. Leaving it unbuttoned—an unabashed encore, she supposed—he escorted her out of the gym. Halfway down the long northern hall, that enormous storage block, visible beyond a set of soaring windows, caught her eye.

Curious, she slowed up. 'What do you keep out there?'

'Three guesses.'

She only needed one. 'Cars.'

He laughed and the deep, easy sound—as warm as a blanket on a cold night—made her forget what a privileged pain in the butt he could be at times.

'Come and have a look,' he said. When she opened her mouth to object, he broke in. 'Surely you can spare five minutes.'

Libby thought it over. Her next appointment wasn't for an hour, and she was intrigued as to how many and what types of cars a motor racing champion owned. She knew Payton would be interested to hear.

Relenting, and more than a little excited, she nodded. 'Five minutes.'

His grey eyes smiled, but in a different way—as if he truly appreciated her interest—and together they walked out the house, past the magazine lift-out pool and over the immaculate emerald-green lawn.

'Where did it all start,' she asked, 'this love affair with cars and speed?'

'My father owned prestige automobiles, everything from vintage classics to top-of-the-range sports cars. Every now and then I'd take one

out.'

'He must have trusted you a great deal.'

'Oh, I didn't ask. I became quite well known throughout Oxfordshire for my jaunts.'

'Known to the authorities?' He only grinned, his gaze distant and mischievous as he remembered back. 'What did your father say when he got a hold of you?'

He opened the huge end door and flicked a switch. An enormous space, filled with rows of gleaming prestige cars, materialised before them.

'What's your poison?' he asked. 'The red Ferrari F430 is extremely popular. Then there's the classic British sports car, which I can assure you is a very nice ride.'

The spectacle greeting her was so out of the world 'rich and famous,' Libby put her hand to her chest to try to catch a gasp. 'I hate to think of your insurance bill. Do you have as many cars in your other homes?'

They strolled further inside, under the overly bright lights, surrounded by automobile excellence and an atmosphere of wealth at its decadent best.

'This is my main stash. I have another healthy group hidden away in the French countryside. Some in England too.'

'Must leave your dad's collection for dead.'

Without commenting, he strolled on, and it clicked that he hadn't answered her previous question. What had his father done when he'd caught his son driving his prize cars? But then the obvious dawned and she guessed why he didn't want to speak about it.

She put a compassionate note into her voice. 'Is he still alive?'

Alex frowned over. 'Who?'

'Your father.'

He ran his left hand over the bonnet of a deep-blue muscle car. 'He's dead.'

Expecting that answer, she nodded. 'I'm sorry.'

'You must be the only person alive who is.'

Libby blinked several times and was about to ask him to explain. But his eyes were suddenly so shuttered, his face expressionless. Clearly this was a touchy subject. Seemed there was more to motoring superstar Alex Wolfe than met the eye, an obvious bitterness toward his deceased father for one. What else lay beneath his polished public persona?

But she was being no better than the press. Everyone was entitled to keep their past private, she and Alex included.

Still walking, she crossed her arms and looked down. ‘I apologise. I shouldn’t have dug.’

He tugged an ear and, thoughtful, focused on some far-off point. ‘Quite a bit of digging’s been going on recently,’ he admitted.

About his past? Who was digging? ‘Someone from your family?’

‘Yes. From the family.’

‘Who?’

‘My twin.’

‘You have a twin brother?’

‘Sister.’

‘What’s her name?’

It took a few seconds for him to answer.

‘Annabelle.’

‘Alex and Annabelle.’ She smiled. Cute.

‘She was in contact before my accident.’

‘Something to do with your father?’

‘His estate,’ he replied. Then he turned back to face her and his demeanour purposely lightened. ‘Seems our oldest brother has made an appearance out of the distant blue to renovate old Wolfe Manor before the council tears it down. A sound idea, if you ask me.’

‘This is back in England? Oxfordshire?’

‘An estate overlooking a quaint little village by the name of Wolfestone.’

Libby shook her head, amazed. How many people had a village named after their family? But Alex didn’t seem impressed by any of it. The

timbre of his voice was casual again but the light in his usually entrancing grey gaze had dulled.

'How long since you've seen this mysterious brother?' she asked, knowing she was being nosy again.

But Libby knew ghosts from the past could creep up when a person had time on their hands, and Alex wouldn't be used to being confined, cut off, the way he had been these past days. If he wanted to share—about his family and old Wolfe Manor—anything he said wouldn't go beyond her.

'Jacob left Wolfe Manor almost two decades ago. Disappeared one night without a goodbye.' He looked down at the same time his brow furrowed. But then he seemed to shore himself up, particularly when his gaze hooked onto another sporty car. 'I'd offer you a ride in my Sargaris TVR but I really need two hands to control it.'

She'd lost interest in cars. 'Do you have other siblings other than those two?'

'Three shy of a football team.'

'Do you see them often?'

'Not regularly. Never all together. I haven't seen Jacob since he left.' Alex hunkered down to inspect something that seemed to trouble him about one of the car's tyres. 'What about you?'

'Me?'

'Do you have brothers and sisters?'

'I don't have any siblings.'

'Your parents alive?'

'And well.'

'What did you do before becoming a physio?'

As he pushed to his feet, she saw a certain glint in his eye and her insides wrenched. Seemed he had a few questions of his own ... questions she wasn't entirely comfortable with answering. Time to pull up the brake.

She curled some hair behind an ear. 'I didn't mean to pry so deeply. We got sidetracked and I was interested ...'

Her words trailed off as he angled more toward her. The air between them seemed to crackle when he said in a deep sure tone, ‘I’m interested too.’

She let out a pent-up breath. The emotion in his eyes looked sincere. But how much was she prepared to divulge? Although her accident and subsequent amputation weren’t federal secrets, she’d made it her policy not to wallow in the past. She certainly didn’t want pity, which was often people’s first reaction.

Dismissive, she hitched up one shoulder. ‘My family history isn’t that exciting.’

‘I’m sure being the female world surf champion would’ve been anything but boring.’

Her stomach pitched and a chill crept over her scalp. She felt unsteady. Worse, she felt like a downright fool. He *knew* about her past? And he’d said nothing! What other information had he gathered?

Although she was boiling inside, somehow she kept her tone civil. ‘You should have mentioned that you knew.’

‘Perhaps you should have mentioned it first.’

Her hands balled. He might be world famous but, honestly, who did he think he was?

‘My past, Mr Wolfe, is hardly detrimental to my current career. If anything, it’s advantageous.’

He quizzed her eyes and the unspoken question hung between them. *Then why not put it in your résumé?*

The uncomfortable silence stretched out. Feeling off centre—trapped—she forged a look at her watch. Way past time she was gone.

‘I should leave,’ she said, rearranging her bag’s shoulder strap. ‘I’ll be late for my next appointment.’

After hesitating only a heartbeat, he nodded and agreed. ‘I’ll see you out.’

He moved to take her elbow. Instinctively she jerked away. Too friendly.

‘No need,’ she said. ‘You lock up here. I’ll see myself out.’

As she turned away, at the far end of the garage parked near a battered dartboard, a car caught her eye. Rusted, uncared for, the bonnet was buckled, as if the driver had slammed into a tree. What was that wreck doing among these trophies? But she wasn't about to ask. This conversation had got way too personal already.

Leaving Alex behind, she made a beeline for the garage's exit.

From now on she would keep her thoughts and questions to herself. And, as much as she could, her hands as well.

# CHAPTER FIVE

Two weeks later, Alex was shunting a hand through his hair, pacing the floorboards of his home office. Libby Henderson had left thirty minutes earlier. As usual she'd been the consummate professional at their regular morning session. Had performed her duties with routine perfection.

Alex stopped and glared at his feet.

That woman was driving him mad.

Not because she was inadequate with regard to his treatments. From time to time he might hint that things weren't moving quickly enough, but in truth her slow and steady approach seemed to be paying off; his shoulder was twice as strong as it had been. His problem with Ms Henderson—what niggled him to the core—was far more complicated than that.

Other than the brief time he and Libby had spent in his garage when they'd exchanged titbits about each other's pasts, she was a clam. Tight-lipped, focused only on business and, more to the point, doing it all *her* way. Although he hadn't wanted to commit to paper his confidential proposition with regard to China—fine fodder for blackmail should it fall into the wrong hands—he believed he'd been clear when they'd struck their deal. In conjunction with therapy, he needed her help returning to the track in not six but *four* weeks. In exchange for this service, he would pay an exorbitant fee and sing her praises the world over. She'd agreed they were on the same page. However, despite her verbal acceptance of his terms, he was far from convinced that Libby Henderson was anyone's man, so to speak, but her own. That troubled him.

But there was more.

When they were together in the mornings, despite her pronounced reserve, he'd become more aware of a certain thrumming connection. The soothing sound of her voice. Her unconscious habit of curling hair behind an ear. The slant of her smile when he'd performed some exercise to her satisfaction. She'd grown on him, and the longer she maintained

her emotional distance, the thicker the wall she put up, the more determined he was to knock it down. But neither charm nor mutual silence—not even obvious agitation—seemed to make a dent in her brickwork.

The homemade medal, hanging on its ribbon on the wall, seemed to call. As usual, memories of his gratitude to Carter and earliest commitment to his sport swam up. Alex couldn't change his mind about Round Four. He lived to race. To *win*. China meant valuable points that would tally toward this year's championship. So what to do about Libby? Would she or wouldn't she give him what he needed?

Other than Annabelle, he'd never met a woman like her. Polite but also unremittingly cool. This morning he'd asked how often she surfed nowadays. The look she gave could freeze the Gobi. Was conversing with him so distasteful?

Or was her reserve caused by something deeper ... some past hurt perhaps? He'd never tried to penetrate Annabelle's veneer; neither brother nor sister wanted to dig around those old wounds. But Libby ...

Filling his lungs, Alex hunted down his phone, punched in a speed dial and, mind set, waited to be connected. He'd been as good as locked away here, hell-bent on withholding any ammunition about his condition or imminent comeback to the press. But his arm was out of its sling. No one would guess anything was wrong with his shoulder. Frankly, he'd go stir-crazy if he didn't break out and soon.

He knew the perfect person with whom to share some R and R. The same person who needed to be asked a straight question and, in return, give a straight answer.

Phone ringing in his ear, Alex lowered into his chair, smiling.

He only needed to create the right atmosphere.

In her city practice, Libby sat at her desk, staring at a scramble of near-legible notes. Almost noon and she hadn't got close to nutting out the speech she needed to give this time next month. A formal national dinner with her peers, she wanted her words on the podium to shine and inspire. And yet here she was, scrubbing her brow, wishing she could focus on her words.

Instead she was thinking about the irascible Alex Wolfe and his penchant for being alternately charming or painfully difficult.

Each morning she'd show up at Alex's mansion, and just as routinely he would complain about whatever exercise she asked him to perform. Although his shoulder was free of its sling and they'd progressed to using resistance bands and light weights, clearly he considered the work needlessly repetitive and beneath him. But even demigods had to show humility and face their vulnerabilities sometime. Alex's time was now. Either that or he might find himself in hospital again—this time, perhaps, under the knife.

Lately, she felt at her wits' end. After that day in his garage when personal details had cropped up to momentarily misalign their relationship, she'd let him know that she was there for business and business only, and yet no matter what she suggested or how she suggested it, he seemed more committed to challenging her efforts or creating a more casual atmosphere than anything else. Clearly he didn't comprehend the possible consequences. But she wasn't about to roll over and let him run her show, even if a part of her understood his reluctance.

Doodling a shell alongside her speech salutation, Libby recalled a time when she hadn't let anyone get through to her either. Where Alex was too 'above it all,' during the first weeks of her rehabilitation she'd been filled with anger and frustration. She'd lost the surf, her fiancé ... heck, she'd lost a *limb*. To her mind she didn't need to work at getting well. What was the point?

Thank heaven that phase had soon passed and she'd come out the other end valuing, beyond anything, the perseverance of people who had not only stood by her, but had also said, with both patience and courage, how things needed to be if she wanted to get the most out of life. Like those people who had helped her, she wouldn't give up on Alex, no matter what trivialising tactic he used to try to manipulate the situation. His recovery meant a lot to him. It meant a lot to her too.

A harried padding of footfalls sounded on the corridor carpet. Short on breath, face flushed, Payton rushed into the room.

'You'll never guess who's here!'

Putting a lid on her surprise, Libby calmly set down her pen and sat straighter. ‘Given that blush, I’m guessing Alex Wolfe.’

A tall broad-shouldered figure was already stalking up behind Payton. Then Alex was standing in her doorway, smiling that irrepressible smile. Her autonomic reaction to his presence never failed to astound Libby. Her stomach muscles contracted, her insides warmed and glowed and, immediately light-headed, her gaze soaked up the hypnotic message in his eyes, then dipped to appreciate the intoxicating masculine tilt of his lips.

No wonder poor Payton was beside herself.

Looking as if she were about to melt, Payton kept her gaze on their visitor. ‘I said you wouldn’t mind if he came straight through.’

‘That’s fine, Payton.’ Libby pushed up on slightly unsteady feet. ‘The front bell just rang, if you’d like to see who it is.’

Edging around their visitor, Payton reluctantly headed off.

When they were alone, Libby skirted her desk and, leaning against the edge, crossed her arms. ‘This is a surprise.’

His brows shot up. ‘You don’t remember?’

Libby stopped breathing. Did they have an appointment she’d forgotten? Not possible.

‘Remember what?’

With that lazy delectable stride that sent her heartbeat racing all the more, he sauntered forward. ‘It’s our two-week anniversary.’

Libby couldn’t help it. She laughed. In between being chronically difficult, Alex could also be infinitely charming.

‘So it is. Happy anniversary.’ Her eyebrows snapped together. ‘You didn’t drive here, did you?’ She’d told him this morning that another couple of days off from civilian driving was safest.

‘Although I’m sure I could,’ he told her, ‘I got a ride.’

‘A taxi?’

‘Limo.’

Libby’s head kicked back. Hardly the transport of a man who wanted to remain inconspicuous.

‘I thought you wanted to lay low?’

He shrugged. ‘My accident is old news now.’

She understood his point; today’s headline was tomorrow’s back page small print. Although she couldn’t imagine any member of the paparazzi passing on the chance to catch a celebrity of Alex’s stature off the clock.

Then again Alex might have decided that now his arm was sling-free and stronger, he wouldn’t mind a spot of *positive* publicity. Either way his rationale on that subject had less than nothing to do with her.

Casually inspecting her office walls—her degrees, photos and that black-and-white aerial of Sydney circa 1960, predating the Opera House—he strolled further into the room.

‘Are you busy?’ he asked.

‘I’m always busy.’

‘But you’ll need to stop to eat.’

‘I usually get in a sandwich,’ she said, vaguely suspicious now.

He rotated to face her. ‘No sandwich today. Grab your coat.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I’m taking you to lunch.’

Libby’s hands fell to clasp the edges of the desk either side of her hips. Not for one moment had she imagined this visit was linked to anything other than his therapy. Since that day in the garage, she’d avoided any talk of a private nature. Having him acknowledge a two-week anniversary was curious enough. Now he was inviting her to lunch? She was near speechless.

She shook her head. ‘I don’t think it’s appropriate that our relationship should include ...’

But her words trailed off. Was that a puppy-dog face he was pulling?

‘You don’t want to hurt my feelings, do you, doc?’

‘Feelings,’ she announced, ‘have nothing to do with it.’ She rounded the desk and lowered purposefully back down into her seat. When their eyes met again, that knee-knocking smile had only spread wider.

‘Would it help if I said please?’

‘I’m sorry.’ Collecting her pen, she pretended to focus on her notes. ‘But I have work to do.’

‘Client appointments?’

‘Guest speech.’

‘I’m good with speeches. We can discuss it over lunch.’ From beneath her lashes, she saw him saunter across and her heartbeat began to flutter. ‘Or I can organise take-out. We can have a picnic in here.’ His attention zeroed in on a photo framed behind her. He squinted, then chuckled. ‘Hey, that’s you.’

Libby groaned. *This is why she’d never wanted him in here.* Questions. The answers of which were her business and nobody else’s.

Nevertheless, she acknowledged what was obvious. ‘Yes, that’s me, but a long time ago.’

She braced herself, waiting for him to ask about her current surfing habits again like he had this morning; she’d rather not discuss it. Instead his gaze swept over and he smiled.

‘C’mon, doc. The limo’s waiting.’

She reclined back and studied him for a drawn-out moment. Finally she huffed. ‘You’re not giving up, are you?’

‘I’ve done everything you’ve asked these past two weeks. We deserve some time-out.’

‘You’ve done *everything* I’ve asked?’

At her unconvinced look, he let slip a grin. ‘Well, sometimes you might’ve needed to ask twice ...’

A runaway smile stole across her face. Then her gaze fell to her disarray of notes. She’d vowed to have this first draft down by the end of the week. But her stomach did feel empty. Maybe her brain would work better after a good meal. And that was the *only* reason she was going. Although to believe conversation wouldn’t vie toward the personal was naive. She couldn’t help but wonder if he’d heard from his sister about his mysterious brother again.

Giving in, she unfolded from the chair, raised her chin and stipulated, ‘One hour.’

‘One hour?’ Alex broke into a broad smile. ‘We’ll discuss it over lunch.’

Twenty minutes later, Alex’s chauffeur-driven limousine parked outside a quaint-looking restaurant. The high-pitched ornate roof and rattan features suggested an oriental bent. Then Libby caught a whiff of spicy aromas and saw the establishment’s name.

Malaysian Pearl.

As the uniformed driver assisted her out, Libby sent Alex a look. ‘Is this place supposed to be a hint of some kind?’

‘I figure since I missed the race in Sepang I ought to enjoy some of the flavours of the country I won’t get to visit this year.’

‘You’re a fan of Malaysian food?’

Joining her, he set his palm lightly on the small of her back and winked. ‘The hotter, the better.’

Libby moved away from his touch. She wasn’t certain he was speaking about curries.

They moved up the timber plank path, past the peaceful trickling of a rock pebble water feature. Inside they were seated in a private corner, which was cloaked by palm fronds, bamboo dividers and bordered by generous windows overlooking the blue silk-stretched waters of the bay. The interior reflected Eastern symmetry, simplicity and serenity—a smiling Buddha sat on a podium facing the entrance, authentic wooden lamps featured on each table and background music offered the tranquil strains of flutes and tinkling bells.

Settling in, Libby set her bag aside. ‘You enjoy your stays in Malaysia?’

‘I don’t usually see much outside of Sepang. That’s the town and district where the race is held each year. It’s a hop from the international airport to the circuit.’

Alex sat back while a waiter, who had already seen to the placement of Libby’s linen napkin, now laid a starched white square on the gentleman’s lap. As Libby took in the surrounds and her compelling company, a thought struck her. This was the first time she’d been with Alex in public and she sensed others in the room absorbing and reacting to his appealing air of authority too.

Was it that some people in the restaurant, including the waiter, recognised Alex out of his racing gear? Or was it as she suspected? That no matter where he might be, Alex Wolfe radiated a presence that commanded attention. Even deference.

As the waiter moved off, Alex continued. ‘I plan to visit Malaysia purely for a vacation one day.’

‘Ever get tired of living out of a suitcase?’ she asked, feeling the beat of her pulse increase at the way his big tanned hand brushed the white tablecloth. His eyes searched hers and he considered her words.

‘That’s an interesting question coming from one who would know about such things.’

A wistful feeling drifted through her. She didn’t think often of those days, travelling the world over for her sport. Better to concentrate on the blessings she’d kept and new opportunities she’d created. But she could easily admit, ‘I loved the travel. Around Australia as much as around the world.’

His grey eyes glittered. ‘Your favourite port?’

‘Brazil is awesome. Malibu for the nostalgia. But ... Maui.’ Remembering the thrill of riding those two and a half metre barrels, she smiled. ‘Yeah. Definitely Maui.’

‘Sounds as if you were Australia’s answer to *Gidget*.’

She smiled at the connection. ‘A lot of people don’t realise the girl from that old movie and series was based on a real person.’

‘The first female world champion?’

‘*Gidget* was written in the fifties.’ Libby still owned the copy she’d picked up at a second-hand store the summer she’d turned thirteen. ‘The first female championship wasn’t until 1964. Won by a Sydneyite,’ she noted with pride. ‘She was awarded two hundred and fifty dollars, a new surfboard and several packets of cigarettes.’

He laughed, an easy sound that made Libby feel as if they’d known each other for years. ‘The things you learn on a date with your physio.’

Libby’s smile fell at the same time her heart rolled over. This wasn’t a *date*. This was lunch with a client. A handsome client with incredibly strong features and soft grey eyes that seemed to be inviting her in.

Shifting in her chair, Libby collected her food menu, although she suddenly felt so flustered she couldn't concentrate on the words.

Alex collected his menu too, and after a time commented, 'I rang my brother.'

Her gaze shot up and menu went down. 'Jacob?'

'Think I told you we haven't seen each other since he left all those years ago.'

'That must have been hard. Your oldest brother leaving without a word.'

'I don't think he had any option.'

When he beckoned the waiter over, Libby leaned forward. Elbows on the table, she laced her fingers and rested her chin on the bridge. After that day in his amazing garage when she'd learned Alex knew of her surfing history, she'd been taken so off guard, had felt so undercut, she vowed never to talk personal again. And she'd stuck to that.

But so what if the fact she'd had an accident happened to come up? It would make no difference to her attitude or commitment to their sessions, and shouldn't she give Alex the benefit of the doubt that he would still value her abilities as a physio? As a human being?

And what harm could come from hearing more about the mysterious Wolfe clan? In truth, she was beyond intrigued. A father nobody missed. A brother who'd escaped in the dead of night. Eight siblings in all, one of whom was Alex's twin, the sister who'd contacted him before his terrible crash.

After Alex ordered a bottle of cabernet sauvignon, Libby said, 'You and your brother must have had a lot to talk about.'

'It was a little awkward speaking again after so many years. I was only fourteen when Jacob left. But we'd always got along.'

He wove a fingertip aimlessly over the pearl etched on the menu, perhaps wondering if he ought to divulge anything more. For a moment she thought she glimpsed pain lurking in the shadows of his gaze and words of support rose up. Yes, she was curious but they could talk about something else if the past hurt too much to discuss. She understood, more than he might ever know.

But then he swept up his water glass, took a sip and met her gaze again.

‘Wolfe Manor has been declared structurally unsafe and a danger to the community,’ he said. ‘Jacob wants to repair the damage. No easy feat.’

Repair the damage ... Libby had the feeling Alex was speaking about more than fixing some dilapidated ancient house.

‘Does Jacob think it’s salvageable?’

‘Rising damp, holes in the roof, crumbling brick, grounds grown wild. Vandals did a number on it too. But apparently Jacob’s an architect now. He plans to refurbish the manor completely, then sell it on.’ His jaw tightening, Alex seemed to look inward. ‘Frankly, I can’t see how he can set foot in that place again.’ His gaze cleared as it darted over her shoulder and his chin kicked up. ‘Here comes the wine.’

As the waiter presented the label for Alex to acknowledge, Libby pressed her lips together. These weeks she’d tried to keep a professional distance between herself and Alex. He was the kind of man any woman could get distracted by. And in only a few moments of conversation, she was looking at him not as a client or even a world-renowned top athlete but a real person, with regrets and fears as well as the courage to overcome them.

She wanted to hear more about the ghosts that seemed to inhabit Wolfe Manor. She imagined streams of cobwebs, fallen-down stairs, skeletons in every closet. But how much more was Alex prepared to divulge?

Wine poured, Alex raised his glass. ‘Here’s to my speedy recovery.’  
‘Here’s to a healthy future.’

He grinned over the rim of his glass and sipped.

‘What other news did your bother have?’ she asked, savouring the wine’s oaky flavour while lowering her glass.

‘Now this is interesting.’ When he tipped forward, his shoulders seemed to grow as the space between them closed. Libby’s nerve endings began to hum. Thank heaven they would never kiss. She might go up in flames!

‘Another brother, Lucas, is involved with Hartington’s.’

‘The big UK store?’

Alex nodded. ‘The venue which was supposed to host the company’s centennial party pulled out at the last minute and Lucas ended up hosting the bash on the Wolfe Manor grounds. The place was apparently surrounded by scaffolds, but they’d restored a good portion of the lawns to their former aristocratic glory. Another brother, Nathaniel, was there on the night.’

Libby’s mind wound back. That Christian name gelled with Alex’s surname and then exploded in her head.

‘Not Nathaniel Wolfe the actor? The movie star who won that big award a couple of months ago?’

‘One and the same. There was a scandal surrounding his West End debut.’

‘I read about it.’

‘He hid away on a privately owned island off the coast of South America.’

‘Nathaniel owns an island?’

‘No. Another brother, Sebastian.’

Near overwhelmed, Libby blew out a breath. ‘The Wolfe kids did well for themselves.’

‘Despite all odds.’

Again Libby saw that shadow darken his gaze, drag on his mouth, and she shivered. Just how bad had his childhood been?

‘Anyway,’ he went on easily, pretending to himself that his past didn’t worry him when it was obvious that it did, ‘seems Nathaniel fell in love with the woman he kidnapped—’

She frowned. ‘Oh, now you’re making it up.’

He raised a hand—Scout’s honour. ‘And at this centennial night they announced their plans to marry.’

Emotion flooded her throat and a mist came over her eyes. Silly to have such a strong emotion, but that evening sounded like a fabulous fairytale ending. One any girl might dream of. *If* she were ready for that

kind of thing. If she'd found the right one.

'I hope they'll be very happy,' Libby said with the utmost sincerity.  
'Are you invited to the wedding?'

'I have a previous engagement.'

Questioning, she angled her head and realised he was talking about a race. But she didn't want to put a damper on their conversation, ask about dates and then get into the old 'you might not be fit to drive' argument. Today she didn't want to discuss that at all.

The waiter appeared, refilled their near-empty glasses and enquired,  
'Are you ready to order, sir?'

'Five minutes,' Alex replied, and pulled a mock guilty face as the waiter walked away. 'Guess we ought to make some decisions.'

Libby glanced at her watch and gasped. 'Where's the time gone?'

'Seems you won't make it back to the office in an hour.'

'That speech won't go away.'

'Precisely. It'll be there tomorrow. So let's enjoy what's left of today.'

When he raised his glass, she hesitated but then lifted hers too. Just this once, who said life had to be all work and no play?

# CHAPTER SIX

HE AND Libby took their time with their meals, savouring the exotic flavours and brilliant bay views. A dessert wine was ordered to go with pineapple tarts to end off. Now as the waiter took the empty dessert dishes, Alex moved to fill his companion's glass again, but Libby held up both hands.

'Thank you, but I've had more than enough.'

'You're not still pretending that you're going back to work,' he chided.

'But it's only—' She checked her watch, then, amazed, glanced around the near-deserted restaurant. 'Four o'clock?'

Alex smiled. He hadn't known hours could melt away so quickly either.

Libby was a different person away from her work—not cool or reserved at all. They'd talked about the places they'd travelled. The different aspects of their chosen sports. He'd learned more about her background, growing up on Sydney beaches with parents who cared about her and her dreams. Even now he couldn't imagine what it must be like to be the product of a happy home. Made him wonder for the first time about being a parent himself.

What kind of father would he make? Would he be overly protective because of his unhappy history or would the shadow of William Wolfe try to descend upon and direct him as it once had his older brother?

During their recent phone conversation, Jacob had opened up. He'd explained how he'd become increasingly agitated after the court case involving the death of their father and had jumped down poor Annabelle's throat that last day he'd spent at Wolfe Manor twenty years ago. Jacob had been afraid that if he stayed, he'd become the monster their father had been.

If Alex had been Jacob, he'd have run too. Better than filling his siblings, who had looked up to their oldest brother, with loathing and fear. He supposed they all had their crosses to bear, scars from their

childhood at Wolfe Manor, but perhaps none more than Annabelle. While Jacob had been there to save her that dark night, Alex had been the brother who had unintentionally sent his beautiful twin to face a horrible fate. It was all so many years ago and yet lately the memories had become more vivid. Harder to escape or play down.

Clearly because he had too much time on his hands.

With renewed energy, he set the bottle back in its ice bucket. ‘What say you give me a lesson?’

Libby was folding her napkin. ‘Lesson?’

‘Surfing.’ He cupped his right shoulder. ‘Might be just what the ol’ boy needs.’

She held his gaze before pushing her folded napkin away. ‘There’s lots of professionals who teach for a living.’

‘I was thinking more for fun.’

A diversion. Like today.

She sent a mild censuring look. ‘We’ll stick to our regular exercises.’

He persisted. ‘After listening to your surf tales, I’m obviously missing something pretty special.’

And he couldn’t think of anyone he’d rather have teach him. He couldn’t think of anyone he’d rather see in a bikini. Or out of one, for that matter.

Although he understood Libby’s attire during their sessions was meant to match her professional demeanour, those long white drawstring pants she wore weren’t terribly flattering. Once in a while a sensible pair of shorts wouldn’t hurt; a not so sensible pair wouldn’t either. Unfortunately he couldn’t see a change of wardrobe during work hours. Which meant he’d need to suggest some outing that would invite a less ... *restricted* look.

Yes. He wanted to see more of Libby and, after today, he believed she’d like to see more of him. Most importantly, this spending time outside of work-related matters had eased his mind about China. The open, supportive Libby he’d come to know today wouldn’t hold him back. And rather than pushing his point and possibly getting her back up, now he thought it wiser to simply keep her onside. When the time

came, just as she'd accepted today's invitation to lunch, she would also give his shoulder an early checkmark.

After signing the bill, Alex escorted his lunch date outside. They passed a wall displaying the restaurant's logo—a shimmering pearl bedded in a clamshell.

'If you were known as a mermaid,' he said, his palm coming to rest against her lower back, 'I'm betting pearls are your bling of choice.'

As she'd done earlier, she wound away from his touch. 'I'm not so much into jewellery.'

He cast a doubtful look. 'I thought every woman was into diamonds, at least.'

'Not this woman.'

Her smile was almost tight, which, after such a relaxing lunch, made him wonder.

Obviously she thought she needed to explain. 'It's not that I don't think gems are pretty. As a matter of fact, I think pearls are beautiful. I just don't own any. I'm more of a practical type.' She held up her wrist. 'I own a watch.'

Examining the piece, he frowned to himself. A sports dial, not at all feminine. He supposed some females weren't into rings and things. Or would Libby be flattered, like most women, to be given a stunning necklace, bracelet or something even more special?

As they slid into the limo, Alex stole a glance at his companion's hands while she excused herself to check her mobile for messages. Those fingers had been on display practically every day for two weeks. He'd known she wasn't engaged. That had come out in Eli's initial research. But was she seeing anyone on a more casual basis?

When his gut kicked, he scrubbed his jaw.

Well, why wouldn't she be? She was an extremely attractive, highly intelligent woman with a great deal to offer a man. And if she were indeed seeing someone, her usual 'I'm only about work' demeanour—the way she avoided his casual touch—made more sense. As for accepting his invitation to lunch today ... An important client showing up out of the blue? He hadn't given her much choice.

He swallowed a curse.

Just when he'd felt better about this whole situation. But the day wasn't over yet. Still time to find out more.

'It's going on four-thirty,' he said, when she slid her phone away. 'Too late to go back to the office.'

And you can't drive after the wine. I'll drop you home.'

Libby gazed off, no doubt considering her options. Clearly seeing the merit in his suggestion, she nodded and gave the driver her address, which was less than five minutes away. When the limo pulled up, Alex swung out, then helped her onto the footpath. With an almost shy smile, she looped her bag more securely over a shoulder.

'Lunch was a lovely surprise. Thank you.'

'I'll see you to the entrance.'

Other than her pupils dilating, her expression remained unaffected. 'There's really no need.'

'You'll offend my sense of chivalry.'

She blinked as though she wasn't sure if he were joking. While he kept a straight face—he *always* walked his dates to their doors—she thought it through, finally gave in to a shadow of a smile and walked alongside him toward her building. Once they reached the glass security door, however, she pulled up to her full height and faced him.

*End of the line.*

'Well, here we are and, uh—' she peered around him '—your driver's waiting.'

'That's what I pay him for,' he said. 'Driving and waiting.'

Done with pretext, she eased out a breath. 'I know what you're thinking. We've had a nice few hours and you'd like me to invite you up.' She shook her head. 'Not a good idea.'

'I disagree.'

Her amber eyes flared. 'Neither of us want this to get complicated.'

'Who said it has to be complicated?'

Growing more nervous, she wet her lips. 'We have a working

relationship we need to maintain.'

'This is working for me.' He stepped closer and his head lowered, close to hers. 'How about you?'

He hadn't set out to kiss her, but his mouth found hers, nevertheless. Then he told himself to keep it light, no more than a lingering brush of his lips over hers. But as they touched, an overwhelming need to explore broke through and instinctively his hands found her shoulders and winged them gently in.

White heat unfurled high on each thigh as the heavy beat of his heart echoed through his veins. He urged her nearer, until her breasts pressed low against his chest and, as he kneaded her flesh, the tight beads pushing against her blouse rubbed and hardened more. His tongue ran over her teeth and when her mouth opened wider, inviting him in as she dissolved, Alex forgot they were in public, in broad daylight, doing what should be enjoyed behind the privacy of closed doors. He forgot everything except the wonderful way Libby felt in his arms and his desire to know more.

He was taken off guard when her palms spliced up between them and, groaning, she pushed away. Short on breath, Libby avoided his gaze as she flattened a hand against the entry door to steady herself. 'Why did you do that?'

'You have to ask?'

Other than the deep rise and fall of her chest, she didn't move. Her cheeks scorched red, she merely lifted her gaze and glared at him. 'Alex, don't ever do that again.'

'Because you're my physio?'

Pressing her glistening lips together, she nodded deeply. 'Exactly. And ...' She rose up a little. 'I'm not after a relationship right now.'

He smiled softly. 'That's a shame.'

A flame leapt in her eyes and for a moment he thought she might reconsider and ask him up but then she punched a number into the security pad and, in a blink, disappeared inside.

On his way back to the limo, Alex went over every second of that delectable kiss as well as the steps which had led him to this unique

point in time. He'd gone from admitting that Libby Henderson had grown on him to openly confessing he wanted to broaden the scope on their relationship. This morning he'd merely wanted to get to the bottom of what lay behind her ice queen act, as well as confirm that she was still onside with regard to his plans for China. And yet now he found himself enjoying a woman's company like he never had before. Hell, he'd even winced at a spike of jealousy when he'd thought of Libby with another man.

Not good.

Standing guard by the limo, the driver opened the back passenger's door. Rubbing the back of his neck, Alex climbed inside.

He couldn't remember being rejected by a lady since tenth grade. Hands down it wouldn't matter so much if it weren't this particular one, because the bald-faced truth was that Libby had done *more* than grow on him. She'd burrowed under his skin. Was playing more and more on his mind. And that was a condition he was less than happy to entertain; he had enough on his mind as it was.

He needed to avoid unnecessary complications. *Ipsa facto*, this state of affairs had to cease and desist. If Libby wasn't interested in having him hold her, getting involved, as of this moment that went double for him.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

THE next morning, Libby strode into that lavish Rose Bay home with her head down and nothing but work on her mind. Or that's what she needed Alex Wolfe to believe.

He'd caught her unawares yesterday afternoon. After their lunch, she'd known he was hinting at an invitation upstairs into her apartment, but when she'd knocked him back she'd never expected him to *kiss* her. And what a kiss! For one dizzy moment, she'd almost reconsidered and dragged him inside. But then all those old fears had come creeping back in.

Although they'd had a better than good physical relationship, after her accident Scott hadn't wanted to be around, let alone *touch*, her. She'd thought Scott was the one, but when she'd needed him most—needed to know she could still be desirable—he'd not only let her down, he'd left her with a huge question mark hanging over her head. She hated to be a glass-half-full type and yet there were times when she couldn't help but wonder ...

What man wouldn't view her the same way Scott had?

Although she felt Alex's eyes simmering over her now as she moved off in front and down that long hall, she kept her demeanour neutral and, as she'd done every day for the preceding two weeks, set her bag down in its usual place in the gym. Despite her bravado, she felt the telltale signs of his close proximity already at work on her. Fluttering heartbeat. Elevated breathing pattern. The effervescent buzz her blood acquired simply knowing he was near. Those reactions had been bad enough in the past, particularly whenever her skin touched his. But after that heart-stopping kiss ...

Libby's mind froze.

*Would he try to kiss her again?*

'How are you feeling this morning?'

On her way past a treadmill, Libby's step faltered. That was *her* usual

pre-session question to Alex, not the other way round.

'Fine,' she replied, without meeting his gaze.

'I've already done some work on my shoulder this morning,' he told her in a level tone that suggested he wasn't comfortable with her being here today. Which answered her question about whether he might try to kiss her again.

Well, if he felt uncomfortable, she thought, taking up her position before the mirror, he had only himself to blame. If her rejection had stung, maybe he ought to join the rest of humanity and toughen up.

'Let's see where we are with your range of motion.' She felt his eyes on her reflection but she kept her focus on his shoulder and her mind on work. Finally, brooding, he wound out of his shirt and she instructed, 'Arms out front, please.'

As if his soles were lined with lead, he angled toward the mirror, braced his legs and both arms gradually went out.

'Raise them slowly,' she said.

She stole a glance at his expression. His unshaven jaw was drawn tight and his gaze was distant and stormy. If he wanted to make this morning more difficult than it needed to be, he could do his worst. As far as she was concerned—and, it seemed, he too—yesterday's indiscretions were behind them. Doubly good because now she didn't need to ponder over how Alex might behave if he discovered she wasn't all he presumed.

Alex was already lowering his arms but she noted he hadn't lifted them as high as he had been. Not anywhere near.

She moved to stand in front. 'Again, please.'

A muscle beat in the tight angle of that jaw, then he raised both arms again to that same point he had the first time. When he let them drop as if he couldn't be bothered, he moved to sweep up the shirt he'd cast off.

'That's it for today,' he told her. 'I'm done.'

Her physio antennae tingling, Libby followed as he marched off. He wasn't hiding anything. She'd caught his wince before he'd lowered his arms.

'Your shoulder hurts?' Knowing the answer, she went on. 'Describe the

pain.'

He eased his right arm through its sleeve. 'It's nothing.'

'You said you'd already worked out this morning.' She crossed to her bag, retrieved her apricot kernel oil and moved to the massage table. 'Can you come over here and lie down?' She added over her shoulder, 'Shirt off again, please.'

'Libby, I don't want a massage.'

She tried to ignore the ripple of frustration in his tone. Whether this morning was awkward was inconsequential. He'd overdone his exercises and a remedial massage was the right call. If he wanted to get back on track, he'd best suck it up and do as he was told.

'Sounds as if you've overexerted the muscles,' she said. 'I'm going to work over the accumulation of trigger points—those painful knots—that are restricting your range of movement.' His chin down, he exhaled and continued to glare the other way. She fisted her hands on her hips. 'Do you want to get back as soon as possible or don't you?'

His penetrating gaze hooked back onto hers at the same time his palm slid up his right arm. She wondered if his ego was dented enough that he might be done with it and order her out. But then he shrugged back out of his shirt and joined her.

Her stomach muscles squeezed like they did whenever he was near—particularly when he was half naked—but she clicked her mind onto professional mode, uncapped the oil and arranged some towels, which were laid on a tray near the table.

'Spread out,' she said. He hoisted himself up and lay down. 'Now just relax and we'll have those muscles loosened up in no time.'

Starting lightly, she kneaded the area to warm up the tissue. After finding several trigger points, she used her thumbs and fingers to press and manipulate, gradually applying more and more pressure. Five minutes in, when she began to drill a particularly stubborn knot, he jumped.

'Aahh! You're a bit vigorous there, doc.'

'Stay with me,' she said. 'We'll work out these problems, then you'll need to drop down your exercises for a few days and start back with

lower repetitions.'

'I don't have that time.'

Setting her jaw, she stopped rubbing. *Enough.*

'If you'd prefer, I can help you find someone else.'

Dammit, she knew what she was doing and he could either work with her or find another physio. She was over the tiptoe show, on every level. It was difficult but if she could control her inappropriate feelings toward him, surely Alex could shelf his as well.

The tension locking his scapulas loosened. He faced the sheet once again and muttered, 'Do what you have to.'

Half satisfied, Libby applied more oil and soon she was in the zone again, doing what she did best—letting her fingers work their magic, giving a client's impaired muscles new life.

Alex lay on that table like a good patient, gritting his teeth as Libby kneaded and rubbed and slid her hands over his apricot-scented knot-infested back. When she hit a spot that shot a hot bolt screaming through to his chest, this time he curled his toes and bit off the groan. He and remedial massages weren't strangers but he could tell *this* technique was truly hitting the mark. Not only that. The touching and rocking was also expelling barrel loads of all kinds of endorphins. Given he'd decided it wiser not to pursue those feelings where Libby was concerned, this was not a good thing.

For Libby's part, he knew this time was strictly about his shoulder. Nothing lay behind her tactile attentions other than her need to do the best she could for his recovering injury and rectify the setback he had brought about; trying to work Libby and memories of that kiss out of his system, he'd pushed himself too hard with the bands this morning. From *his* current position, however—a purely male point of view—her organic manipulations were working more than one kind of wonder.

He and Libby had touched before. Yesterday when they'd embraced, he'd dwelled on how good it would feel to experience more. Now, through this ultra hands-on method, he'd got a big insight into that and the buzz was having its effects in places he couldn't control.

'How does that feel?' she asked.

Eyes closed, he sighed. To be honest? 'Fabulous.'

Her palm gave one last glorious sweep of his warmed skin. 'Make sure you rest over the weekend.'

Frowning, he cracked open one eye. It was over?

'You can't leave yet.' He groaned, groggy—aroused—then, knowing insistence wouldn't work, he appealed to her professional sense of compassion. 'There's still a twinge in my traps.'

Her brows jumped. 'Oh?'

She inspected the area, shook out more oil and then her hands were working over his back again and that delicious buzz circulating through his system grew stronger. Burned brighter.

After a few moments, she asked, 'Does that feel better?'

With his cheek rubbing against the sheet, he hummed out a smile. 'Definitely.'

When her fingers lingered, then trailed slowly away, he wondered if a smidgeon of private pleasure had leaked into her professional sphere as well. After that kiss he didn't buy that she wasn't interested in him in a XY kind of way. He was close to certain she wouldn't stymie his return to the track earlier than Morrissey had subscribed. Therefore he didn't need to worry about building up more of a rapport ... doing what he could to make certain she was on his side. In fact, he'd decided trying to push the intimacy point now might prove detrimental to his primary goal.

Better for everyone concerned if he simply backed off, no matter how his current testosterone levels might object.

She left off to wipe her hands. 'All the bumps are gone now,' she said.

That wasn't entirely true, he thought as he pushed up and gingerly swung his legs over the table's side. Beneath his shorts, his erection was of the opinion that all this rubbing was deeply personal. Grabbing a towel off the tray, he let its tail hang and cover the front of his shorts as he fake-rubbed his chest.

'Drink plenty of water.' Recapping her oil, she gave a practiced smile.

'I'll see you Monday.'

As she crossed to her bag, still holding his towel, he edged off the table. No question, he should let her be on her way. Then maybe he could call up a few friends, organise a weekend in Paris or Milan. Anywhere away from here. All this tension ... He merely needed to shake loose and get out.

So what was stopping him?

He took two steps toward her, stopped, then, driven, took another.

'About yesterday ...' he began.

'It's in the past. There's nothing to say.' She stuffed the plastic bottle away and lobbed the bag over her shoulder.

He exhaled. Absently rubbed his chest again. She was right. He even said it aloud.

'You're right.'

'Remember, take a rest until I see you next.'

Clutching that towel, he walked forward to see her out. 'I won't lift a single weight,' he confirmed. 'I won't even think of this room.'

*I definitely won't think of you.*

Her brow slowly creased; she'd noticed him advancing and took a step back. 'I can see myself out.'

'If you prefer. There's just one thing.'

'What's that?'

'What happened ...' His hand fisted in the towel before he tossed it aside. 'It's not in the past.'

Her eyes rounded with alarm. 'Alex, you agreed. There's nothing more to say.'

'Correct. I'm all done talking.'

With his good arm, he reached and drew her near. He saw her eyes flare and knew a moment when she might have told him to back off and let her be. But then the breath seemed to leave her body, her lids grew heavy and he saw her heart glistening there in her eyes. He was right. This situation—this maddening push and pull—couldn't go on. Now was

the time to end it. And end it his way.

Even as Alex's head slanted over hers and Libby drifted off into the caress, some weak, desperate part of her cried out that this should not, *could* not, happen. But as the kiss deepened and her head grew light, eventually she forgot the reasons why. The slow velvet slide of his tongue over hers, the way his hands pressed her gloriously near ... she could only wonder at the amount of strength it had taken yesterday to tear herself away.

This may be dangerous, but it felt so infinitely right. This minute she only knew she was absorbed by sensation. Absorbed, and lifted up, by him.

Her palms ironed up over his bare hot chest at the same time his hands pressed down over her back. His head angled as he curled over her, his touch sculpting her behind, hooking around her thigh and urging it to curl around his hip as his pelvis locked with hers. She felt the perspiration building on his skin, the glide of his hand scrooping around her thigh, sliding lower toward her knee—

Breathless—terrified—she yanked away.

Oh, God, she'd vowed this wouldn't happen again.

*She didn't want him to know.*

'This is a working relationship,' she grated out, trembling.

'Who says it can't be more?'

Alex gathered her in and the next she knew they were kissing again, and this time he wasn't playing. Now he delivered his full punch, and the effects left her reeling, helpless. Giddy. He whipped up a hurricane inside of her, a dark powerful storm that tossed her off course and hurled her places that promised such blissful satisfaction. But the edges of her mind were still calling. As much as she might want to—and she wanted to so badly—she couldn't go through with any of this.

This time when she broke the kiss, their lips remained close. She couldn't get enough air. Couldn't stop the hot flood of emotion.

'You don't ... don't understand.'

His brow furrowed and eyes turned dark. He shook his head. 'No,

Libby, I'm afraid I don't.' He searched her eyes. 'Has someone hurt you?'

She wanted to tell him everything. Say, yes, as a matter of fact she *had* been hurt and deeply. She'd had a wonderful life, what she thought had been a wonderful fiancé, then the world had crashed in and she hadn't been with a man since. When Scott had rejected her—when his tight expression had told her the thought of touching her repelled him—it had left scars that made her leg injury seem like a scratch.

Alex's gaze pierced hers as a different light flashed in his eyes. 'Are you seeing someone else?'

*As if.*

'The point is, Alex, I didn't sign up for this.'

'Sometimes life throws us a curve ball.'

She coughed out a humourless laugh. 'Thanks for the tip.'

He studied her and finally blew out a long defeated breath. He even slid a foot back. 'Look, what if we calm down and give each other a break?'

'I like that idea. On one condition.' She implored him with her eyes. 'You don't ever try to touch me again.'

As Libby walked out, Alex's every muscle clenched, ready to leap and drag her back. Because he didn't believe her. She *wanted* him to hold her again. Kiss her again. What the hell was stopping her?

He tried to put himself in her shoes. Seemed her job meant everything to her, as much as his career meant to him. She didn't want to jeopardise her reputation or professional integrity by becoming intimately involved with a client who had made no secret of his need to attain an early checkmark for his shoulder.

But her need to avoid him went deeper than that.

Imagining her marching out his front door, Alex strode in the opposite direction, down toward the rowers, then he strode back and, fuelled by frustration, kicked a treadmill, and kicked it again. He hadn't felt this keyed up since he was a kid with no good way to expend his energy. But huffing around and fracturing his foot wouldn't help. Learning more about Libby might.

His mobile sat on the ledge outside the sauna. He snapped it up. When Eli answered, he got to the point. ‘What else do you know about Libby Henderson?’

Silence echoed down the line before Eli replied, ‘What’s wrong? She’s not doing her job?’

‘Eli, I’ll give you three seconds. What else do you know?’

Eli blew out a long breath before he began to talk, and as he explained and the pieces fell into place, Alex sank lower and lower until he was sitting, gobsmacked, on the floor. He cursed under his breath. Tried to shake off the tingles racing over his skin. He’d had no idea. Not a bloody clue. But now when he thought about Libby’s cool facade, about the way she’d literally jumped out of her skin today when he’d reached for her leg ...

His gut twisted and his head dropped to his knees.

How did you tell someone something like that? He’d never told anyone about *his* deepest wounds ... the hurts, and shame, he pushed aside every day.

‘Alex? You there?’

His stomach churning, Alex lifted his head. He felt wrung out, as if he’d spent a day behind the wheel navigating the toughest track on the circuit.

‘Yeah,’ he groaned, holding his brow. ‘I’m here.’

‘I’ll come over.’

‘No. I’m fine.’

‘It shouldn’t make a difference—’

‘You’re wrong, Eli,’ he cut in. ‘It makes a difference.’ Then he asked the obvious. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Because you didn’t need to know.’

Alex let go the breath he’d been holding. His friend was right. He hadn’t needed to know about Libby’s accident. When he’d hired her, those kinds of personal details were none of his business. Now ...

He pushed to his feet.

That detail changed everything.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

AFTER a very unsettling day that had started in the most unsettling way, Libby let herself into her apartment. Dropping everything, she filled the tub, peeled off her clothes, then sank into the wonderful warm suds. Her head resting against a vinyl pillow, she closed her eyes and sighed. She felt drained. Confused.

What was she supposed to do now?

This morning, despite her best efforts to avoid another incident, Alex had kissed her soundly again, and for a second time she'd kissed him back. Even now her cheeks burned remembering how easily she'd succumbed. Worse, despite ultimately turning her back and walking away, a silly self-destructive part of her couldn't help but wish he would take her in his arms again. One dose of Alex Wolfe had been bad enough. Now that she'd tasted him twice, she was in grave danger of becoming addicted.

After Scott, she'd let herself get close to only one man. Leo Tamms had gone to her university, majored in civil engineering and had asked her out three times. She thought they'd got on well. On their last date, they'd even kissed goodnight. One day in the cafeteria he'd asked why she walked with a limp—she hadn't perfected her gait back then. In his eyes she could see Leo suspected anyway, so she'd garnered her strength and told him her story. Leo had seemed interested, sympathetic, but he hadn't asked her out again. In fact, whenever he saw her coming, he slipped a one-eighty and streaked the other way.

That episode had hurt almost as much as Scott's rejection. It confirmed the doubt that had lurked at the back of her mind since the accident—that many people were shallow enough to judge others by their wrapping rather than what they really offered, which was underneath. Was Alex Wolfe one of those people?

Twenty minutes later, feeling more relaxed, Libby dried off. Tying the ribbon sash of her floor-length negligee, she moved into the kitchen, opened the fridge and eyed some leftover chicken stir-fry. But her

appetite had been MIA all day. Her stomach was too full of butterflies with her wondering what would come next in this ill-fated game Alex seemed intent on playing. So she poured a glass of milk to line her stomach and, sipping, crossed into the living room.

She could work on that speech, she supposed, or put on a movie, read a book. Or sit here all night wishing life weren't so complicated. She'd been content before Alex Wolfe had inserted himself into her life. She'd been at peace with herself and what she'd accomplished. Now it seemed she was weighed down with questions. Sometimes, like at lunch yesterday, she could almost convince herself that Alex was sincerely interested in her. But common sense said he was far more interested in how he could use her ... what she could give: a free pass to China.

When the building entrance buzzer sounded, Libby stiffened. But then she siphoned down some air and got a grip. Her imagination would be the death of her. Of course it wasn't Alex Wolfe buzzing. It was a friend dropped by. Or a delivery of some kind.

Chiding herself, she headed for the intercom, thumbed a button and said hello. The voice that resonated back was deep and hauntingly familiar.

'I hoped I'd find you home.'

Libby held her stomach as her midsection double clutched and a lump of anxiety lodged in her throat. She took one shaky step back and clapped shut her hanging jaw. Then she got her thoughts and courage together and, resolute, leaned toward the speaker.

'What are you doing here?'

'I brought you something.'

She frowned. Brought her what exactly? But she didn't want to know. He needed to leave.

He needed to leave *now*.

'You can give me whatever it is on Monday.'

'It might be dead by then.'

She stopped to think. Did he say *dead*?

His voice lowered. 'Please, Libby, let me up.'

She hugged herself as her stomach looped again and her thoughts scurried on. She ought to tell him to get in his limo, if that's how he'd got here, and cruise straight back to his palatial home. God knows she didn't need this aggravation.

The intercom crackled. 'Libby, I need to apologise for today.'

Her chest twisted and she screwed her eyes shut. She raised her voice. 'Go away.'

'Five minutes, then I promise to leave.'

Feeling ill, she bowed over. She didn't want to let him in. But then she wanted to so much. More to the point, Alex's mind seemed set. He wanted to apologise in person for his behaviour this morning and instinct warned her that he wouldn't leave until he did. That kind of one-eyed determination was a big part of the reason he was a World Number One.

Groaning, she hit the entry button, then retrieved a wrap from her wardrobe to cover her negligee. By the time she made it back, a knock was sounding on her door. After driving her damp palms down her sides, for better or worse, she reached for the handle and prepared to open up.

Alex waited outside the apartment door, clearing his throat, rocking on his heels, more nervous than he'd been in a long time. Since Eli had revealed Libby's secret earlier today, he'd thought of nothing but. The fact he'd seen her only in those long white pants, the way she wove away if ever he got too close ... now it all made sense.

His interest in her had started out as purely mercenary. He'd been determined to do what was necessary to keep his pretty physio onside and willing to sign off early on his injury. But even before this week's lunch date, he'd begun to see Libby Henderson differently. After that first kiss—the way she'd cut him off and strode away—he'd told himself no matter how much she intrigued him, it would be wiser to play the attraction down and forget that caress had ever happened.

Not possible.

This morning he'd kissed her again. After the initial merging of mouths and climbing of heat, she had broken away and served up an even frostier dismissal. *Don't ever try to touch me again.*

He couldn't do that.

Shifting his weight, he told his jangling nerves to quieten at the same time he looked down to inspect what he'd brought. A way to break the ice, get them talking. Hopefully get beyond this impasse.

God, he hoped she liked it.

Libby fanned open the door to find Alex standing on her threshold, looking as amazing as he had the other day when he'd appeared at her office out of nowhere. But tonight the sight of his tall broad-shouldered frame was beyond overwhelming. That slanted smile became more alluring—more tempting—every time they met.

Stepping closer, he held out his gift. 'This is for you.'

Her gaze dropped and, perplexed, she lifted one shoulder and let it drop. 'You're giving me a stick of bamboo?'

'It's a peace offering.'

'An unusual one,' she decided, accepting the stick. Then she noticed a fan of delicate flowers hanging from a shoot.

'Most bamboo only flower once every few decades.'

'Really? I didn't know that.'

'It has deep symbolic meaning in Asian countries.'

Understanding the connection, she half grinned. 'You mean like Malaysia.'

'There they speak of a legend where a man dreams of a beautiful woman while he sleeps under a bamboo plant. When he wakes, he breaks the bamboo stem and discovers that the woman is inside.'

Libby's heart beat high in her throat. Was he in some way comparing the couple in the legend to them? Gathering herself, she cleared her throat.

'That's a lovely story.'

'An old man in Sepang once told me that bamboo bends in a storm—he took the top of the stem she now held and slanted it to the left—and when the storm is over it stands straight again.' He set it right. 'It never loses its original ground ... its integrity.'

She held her breath against a push of emotion. Now he was definitely talking about her ... telling her that bending here, now, with him, wouldn't affect the respect she'd earned in her profession. He'd gone to a lot of trouble—finding this flowering piece of bamboo, looking into legends and symbols of the East. She was touched, and yet the voice of caution implored her to beware.

'Alex, why are you here?'

His gaze lingered over her lips and his voice dropped to that deep drawl that sent her heart pounding and common sense melting into a puddle.

'You know why I'm here.'

When his hand slid down the stem and covered hers, his skin on hers felt so good. In a strange way, familiar. Two minutes together, one small touch, and already she felt about to crumble.

But then she bit her lip and shook her head. She wanted to believe what she felt when they'd kissed was real. She wanted to be like so many other women who took a chance and were willing to see where things led. But she couldn't take the next step.

She was frightened to.

She lifted her chin. 'This shouldn't happen. We shouldn't get involved.'

The back of his free hand brushed her cheek. 'Too late.'

She was shaking inside and when his head lowered and his mouth skimmed her brow, overcome with deepest longing, she quivered to her toes.

Against her hair, he murmured, 'Say you're not angry with me.'

When his lips grazed her temple and his warm breath brushed her ear, torn in two, she groaned. 'I'm angrier with myself.'

'Let it go,' he told her.

And then she was lost in his kiss, a caress more beautiful, more erotic, than any she'd known. Perhaps because this time she'd almost surrendered. Almost submitted to what seemed inevitable. But was this what she wanted? Did she need to open up this much to a man she'd known only two weeks? Even if he seemed so sincere?

Needing air—needing space—she broke away and held her forehead.

‘Alex, you’re confusing me.’

‘I’m trying to be clear.’

His hands wound around her waist and his mouth claimed hers again. But she wanted to explain ... needed to let him know ...

The rest of that thought evaporated when reality ceased to exist and both her arms floated up to coil around his neck. His chest rumbled with satisfaction and she felt his smile as she liquefied like a dollop of creamy butter in the sun. But as his palm slid down over her hip, then her thigh, a sliver of reason shone through the drugging fog. If she truly intended to go through with this—make love—there was something he needed to know.

Reluctantly this time she drew away. His breathing heavy, he rested his brow against hers and smiled into her eyes. ‘You’re not going to say you’re still confused.’

‘There’s something I need to tell you.’

His lips nipped hers as he brought her gently flush against his body. ‘You don’t need to tell me anything.’

Her stomach pitched. ‘I really do.’

Stepping back, she caught her skirts and began to ease the satin up. But Alex kept his eyes on hers.

‘Libby ... I know.’

Her hands curled more tightly into the satin and, as her throat thickened, she frowned.

‘You ... know?’ *About my accident? About my leg?* When he nodded, her throat swelled more, cutting off her air. Growing light-headed, she shook her head. ‘You knew all the time?’

‘Only after you left this morning. I guessed there had to be more to the way you’d acted. I ended up discovering that you and I are more alike than you know.’

Her mind was caught in a whirlpool. She didn’t know which way to turn or how to respond, especially to that last remark.

‘Don’t tell me you wear a prosthesis because that’s something I

wouldn't have missed.'

His smile was brief and ... understanding. 'I know what it's like to live with the consequences of the past. To want to whitewash or, better yet, forget they ever happened.'

Her defences sprang up. 'I don't have anything to prove,' she lied.

'Then let me prove something to you.'

He kissed her again, this time with a deliberate care that asked for her consideration and her trust. When he angled down and swept her off her feet, this time she surrendered and didn't shy away. She did, however, think to murmur, 'Carrying me ... you might hurt your shoulder.'

He began to walk. 'It'd be worth it.'

With her cradled in his arms, Alex crossed to the centre of the living room, then spotted a quilted bed beyond an opened door. Moving through, he manoeuvred to flick the light switch with his shoulder, but Libby stiffened.

'Could we leave the light off?'

Alex studied the concern in her gaze. Perhaps it was the bond they shared through love of their individual sports. Maybe it was as simple as sexual chemistry combining and setting off sparks that wouldn't die. Whatever the reason, in a short time Libby had come to mean far more than an early ticket back on the track or just another available female. What he'd learned about her accident made no difference to those feelings. But he needed to let her discover that in her own time. In her own way.

In the shadows he smiled into her eyes. 'Whatever you want.'

He crossed the room and, beside the bed, he set her on her feet, eased back the covers, then returned to trail a series of soft kisses around her jaw while he untied the gown's sash and carefully peeled the sleeves from her arms. The tip of his tongue drew a deliberate line from the tilt of her chin down the curve of her throat while his touch drifted and cupped to measure the sensual swell of her breasts. Groaning at the jolt of pleasure, he grazed the pads of his thumbs over her nipples, making the already tight beads harder still.

While her fingers combed his hair and she told him with a breathy sigh how wonderful he felt, he bit down against the urge to go about this consummation with a little more haste. If she thought he felt good, she felt better than heaven. Better than anyone, or anything, he'd known before.

He tugged the silk bow beneath her bust as his mouth worked soft scorching kisses along the sweep of her collarbone. When he slid the thin straps from her shoulders and her satin sheath fell to the floor, he lifted his head to hold her with his eyes while his erection throbbed and hardened more. In the dim light, he saw the wince, her gaze drop away, and all the breath left his lungs.

She'd never wanted him to know about her leg. Now she was worried over what he might say or think when she had nothing to hide behind. And for a terrifying heartbeat, he wasn't certain *what* to do. Libby was beautiful. More than anything, he wanted to make her feel that way. What if he somehow botched this by saying or doing something unintentionally thoughtless? Where his apprehensions over Annabelle were concerned, that had translated into saying and doing very little indeed. Damned if he'd turn away from this, but how should he reassure Libby?

But then a feeling—a unique sense of awareness—settled over him and, like a light turning green, he knew and could go forward. He only needed to be honest. In coming here tonight, he'd put himself out on a limb. Now he would do everything in his power to let her know it was safe to do the same. With every stroke, every kiss, he'd let her know he was glad their meeting had come to this. Most important, he hoped she felt the same way.

He cupped her shoulders and murmured close to her ear, 'I'm one very lucky man.'

He heard her intake of air at the same time she tipped slightly back. In the shadows, her wide luminous gaze met his, then, gradually, a guarded smile touched the corners of her mouth.

'I should warn you ... it's been a while.'

He grazed his cheek tenderly against hers. 'Then we'd best make up for lost time.'

He swept her up and laid her on the sheet.

Libby was a quaking bundle of nerves. She wanted to do this, be with Alex this way, but she was also terrified to the marrow of her bones. One part of her cried out to trust him. He was a mature man who, better than many, understood about life; that she wore a prosthesis didn't factor into his feelings here. Another part, however, had reverted back to the uncertain, confused girl she'd been the first year after her accident. She felt lacking. Odd and incomplete.

But then he undressed, lay down, gathered her close and when his mouth covered hers again, those torturous dark feelings little by little fell away. Soon her arms went out, wrapping around his neck, then her fingers were splaying up through the back of his hair as they kissed hungrily, with all the passion they'd both tried at one time or another to deny.

Sighing into his mouth, she gave herself over to the magic. Let all her inhibitions wash away. The way he stroked her, adored her, was the highest form of bliss. Making love—*being* loved—had never felt like this.

When his lips left hers and his teeth grazed down one side of her throat, every nerve ending sizzled and her mind went to mush. Then he was dabbing warm firm kisses over her breasts, drawing one nipple into his mouth while he teased the other between a forefinger and thumb. All her other sensibilities fell away. She only knew his flesh on her flesh. Only felt his mounting desire stirring with hers. But when the caress of his mouth slid lower, and the glide of his hand did the same, all Libby's fears plumed up again, so thick and fast that they cut off her air.

On reflex, she gripped his hand.

In the misty light, his gaze snapped up and she saw his eyes round in surprise. He'd forgotten. Heck, she'd almost forgotten too.

Now, however, every muscle and tendon was gridlocked. Her heart was galloping but with an anticipation that had nothing to do with desire. In good faith, Alex might want to believe the state of her leg didn't matter, but, truth was, experience said that it did. And yet she hated herself for doubting his sincerity, for feeling this ... diminished.

With a raw ache pressing on her chest and her stomach sinking fast,

she closed her eyes, turned her head and gently but firmly urged his hand away.

Alex froze, as rigid and tense as Libby clearly was. He hadn't planned any moves. He was doing what felt good. What felt right. But as Libby had said, for her it had been a while. Had she not made love since her accident?

He wanted her to be comfortable with this. With him. At the same time, he wanted this joining to be everything it could be. Everything she deserved. For that to happen—to reassure her—he needed to persist. He wasn't giving up.

Tenderly, he brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. 'Did I hurt you?'

Keeping her eyes closed, facing away, she inhaled and shook her head. 'No.'

He tipped her chin toward him and waited until her glistening eyes dragged open. Then he willed her to feel, to understand. To find the kind of confidence in deep affection that could be borrowed from and fostered by another. That was here. She only needed to accept it.

In the soft shadows, he searched her eyes. 'Trust me, Libby. Trust yourself.'

Prepared to wait all night if need be, he smiled into her eyes and bit by bit the worry faded and her physical tension unlocked and eased. As he continued to stroke her cheek, gradually she began to smile too. When he was certain she was ready, when there was little chance she'd flinch again, he nuzzled against her neck and as his touch trailed lower—down her thigh, past that knee—he murmured near the shell of her ear.

'It makes no difference ... it doesn't matter....'

He gave her more time, letting his fingers glide, pressing meaningful kisses over her brow, at her temple. When her breathing had changed and he felt her stirring in that way that said she was drifting again, he let his mouth trail from her throat to the dip between her breasts. Finally his mouth closed over that pert tip again. As he drew her deeply in, her hips gradually arced up and his touch slid across.

He groaned with unreserved want.

She was so ready for him, wet and swollen.

He drew a flowing line up and down her cleft, then slowly circled and pressed that sensitive bud. When her hand wrapped around his and she trembled, he imagined her fire building, leaping higher, almost ready to consume. He could barely wait for the flames to take them both.

As her free palm fanned over and kneaded one shoulder, he moved up and stole another penetrating kiss while he brought her to the teetering brink. When she was trembling beneath him, he wove down the length of her body until he was kissing her again and hoping she could hold out longer even while feeling compelled to do everything within his power to make sure she couldn't.

Pleasure-filled noises hummed in her throat as he scooped under her behind and the tip of his tongue swirled and flicked. All too soon she was pressing down into the mattress, clutching the sheet, convulsing and flowing while her thighs clamped around his jaw.

He let her float all the way down before he slid back up and, in the shifting shadows, searched her eyes. They were happy, dreamy, more content than he had hoped. As her arms curved around the pillow beneath her head, with her hair splayed out, a silvery aura framing her glowing face, he knew he'd never know another moment like this, where he felt as if he'd seen and felt everything and yet still had so much to learn.

Libby slowly opened her eyes and put out her arms as the length of Alex's hard body joined with hers. Her mind was still spinning with tingling stars when he nudged inside. The pressure felt entirely natural and yet magical, like a king tide growing beneath a full moon, swelling so quickly, those stars were already building again. She arched up to meet him and, groaning against her lips, he thrust in deeply and all at once.

He hit a spot so high, so hot, she gripped his shoulders and gasped.

Pulling away, he combed the hair from her cheek and, concerned, searched her eyes. 'Libby, are you all right?'

Recovering, ready for more, she eased out a breath and nodded as her

palms ran down his slick sides. ‘Way better than all right.’

His smile came slowly. Then he filled her again. She felt his lidded eyes on her as the heat increased and the burn at her core condensed. When she didn’t think the friction he’d built could spark any brighter, his movements came faster, he drove in harder and a moan escaped her throat. She’d given herself over totally to this delicious sizzling sensation ... the intense force boiling through her blood.

When the pressure seemed too much, when she was on the scorching cusp again—

He dropped his head into her hair and, inhaling the floral scent, let the tide rise to an unprecedented high. He murmured her name, drove in to the hilt and held himself there, deep inside, while she moved and clutched around him. He didn’t want the feeling to end, never wanted to let her go. The force was so great. The pleasure too extreme.

At the instant his orgasm imploded, Alex arced his neck back and gave into the shuddering release that rocked every cell in his body. The climax throbbed again and again, and all the while a chorus hummed through his head and his heart.

*I’m one very lucky man ...*

Gazing through her bedroom window, Libby watched the glittering stars, listened to the rolling surf and cuddled up against her scrumptious man. After making love again she felt both exhausted and raised up. Her every surface buzzed from his attentions. Her mouth and breasts burned from the graze of his stubble. She’d never been more sated. Never wanted to know anything again so much.

Alex Wolfe was more than she could ever have imagined.

His deep voice rumbled out from the shadows.

‘You sleepy?’

‘No.’ She snuggled in closer. ‘You?’

Rolling to face her, he drew a tender line around her cheek. ‘Wide awake.’

Libby blew out a quiet contented breath. Was it imagination or did he

feel as blissful lying here as she did? Amazing, given she'd had little to no confidence these past few years as far as intimacy with a man was concerned. This was the first time she'd made love since before her accident but, with his help, she'd overcome her nerves. In fact, she felt more whole and desirable than she ever had.

For long peaceful moments, she lay there, absorbing the way he watched his fingers toy with her hair, sweeping back strands, curling a section behind her ear.

'I bet you looked unbelievable on a board,' he said.

She held her breath but the regret she sometimes felt when she recalled that lost part of her life didn't surface. Rather, this time when she thought back, she was filled with nothing but a sense of happy nostalgia.

'It came naturally,' she said. 'My gran said I could swim before I could walk.'

'Guess our talents come out early. I rode a push-bike at a little over two. Was doing stunts and mad stuff when I was six.' He touched his nose. 'Almost lost this when I came off shooting down a hill at warp speed.'

Imagining the blood, she flinched. 'Your mother must've been beside herself.'

A muscle in his jaw flexed. 'My mother died before my second birthday. Drug overdose.'

Libby's heart sunk. She couldn't imagine it. She'd known his childhood had been tough but to have lost a mother as well, and in such circumstances ... 'You wouldn't remember anything about her, then.'

From the wooden look on his face, she thought he might simply close the subject. He often looked so troubled when talk turned to his past. But then he tugged his ear and even found a lopsided smile.

'Apparently Amber, my mother, was a bit of a party girl but not much good at bath times or changing nappies. Still, from what I was told she loved her children. There are snaps of her dressing us up for games, taking us to the beach to build massive sandcastles. William even came along a couple of times. In their own unhealthy way, I think my parents

might have been happy. Amber seemed to bring out the best, as well as the worst, in him. A lot of people did.'

He dropped his gaze but not before she glimpsed the pain and regret lurking in the shadows of his eyes. Clearly he hadn't meant to go that deeply into it. Given just how dark his past was, she more than respected that. She wished she could go back in time and protect the innocent little boy Alex once had been. Since she couldn't, perhaps shedding a bit more light on her own yesterdays might help.

'I was surfing up in North Queensland on holiday with a friend when my accident happened,' she began. 'It was my fault. I should have been more careful.'

Focused again, he pushed up on one elbow. 'In what way?'

'Firstly, I should've waited for my friend before I plunged in. There was nobody else around. Number one rule broken.'

'If you get in trouble there's no one to help.'

She nodded. 'An onshore breeze was forecast. They turn a good swell to mush. But that morning when I first ran in, the waves were pumping.'

A shiver chased over her skin and she shrugged. 'I didn't realise there was coral nearby. After twenty minutes or so, I did see the fin, however. That's when I decided to double time it back in.'

He held her hand and squeezed. 'A shark.'

'I found out later it'd been cruising the bay for weeks. Should have done my homework. I caught a last wave in but it closed down.' She explained, 'The wave broke along its entire length all at once. When I wiped out, I felt a stab on my calf—the coral—and came up disorientated. I'm grateful I didn't see the fin a second time. Just felt the tug.'

His face pinched, Alex swore under his breath and squeezed her hand again.

'My buddy had arrived in time to see my spill.' She smiled, remembering how brave Barb had been. 'I've never been able to thank her enough for swimming out and saving me. She did what she could using regular first aid know-how, but we were miles from civilisation, surrounded by sand and palm trees. She sent out an SOS on her phone. A

rescue boat patrolling close by picked us up. At first the doctors thought they could save my lower limb but an infection set in and, well ... that was that.'

He blew out a long breath. 'My shoulder injury seems pathetic compared to what you've gone through.'

'It was hard at first.' She thought more. 'Confusing, really. But I was walking six months later. These days, people who don't know about the accident can't tell.'

'How do you feel when you go into the water now?'

She tugged the blanket up around her neck. 'I haven't been in since.'

'There must be a part of you that wants to?'

Her stomach muscles knotted. Odd. She could recall that day, her injury and recuperation, and be as close to okay with it as a person could be. But the thought of going back in the water ...

Shuddering, she drew the blanket higher still.

She didn't want to push herself that far. She simply wouldn't feel safe. But fearless Alex Wolfe didn't need to know that. Tonight she didn't want a pity party, then a pep talk.

'One day I might,' she said lightly, then added more truthfully, 'I bought an apartment on the esplanade so I'd be close to the sound and smell of the ocean. Hasn't enticed me yet.'

He lifted her hand and pressed his lips to her inside wrist. 'You must have had good people there for you afterward.'

'Unfortunately one of them wasn't my boyfriend.' When Alex's brows jumped, she qualified, 'Fiancé actually. We'd planned to be married.'

A growl rumbled in his throat. 'Please don't tell me he dumped you because of the accident.'

'Scott was a surfing pro with titles like me. We both lived for the water. At the time it seemed we lived for each other. We surfed the world's hot spots together. We were both totally dedicated to our sport. But after my accident, things changed. *I* changed. Scott didn't have too deep of an insight into how my injury had affected me ... affected every aspect of my life. Truth was he wasn't much interested in spending the

time or the effort to try to understand. Seemed if we couldn't surf together,' she explained, 'we had absolutely nothing in common.'

She cast her mind back and felt that same twinge of regret and awareness she'd acknowledged back then.

'Scott came to see me less and less often,' she went on. 'When he did visit, we had little to say. Our relationship had been that superficial—more about how I looked hanging off his arm at events than anything.'

She didn't add that he'd never touched her again after her injury, although from Alex's keen expression she wondered if he'd guessed.

Alex's voice resonated in the semi-darkness. 'So he broke it off.'

'I did. When I realised how separate we felt without the ocean bringing us together, seemed there was only one choice.'

Alex grunted. 'I hope he and his surfboard are happy together.'

She gave a wry grin. 'I'm sure they are. And I'm not bitter about that. I had friends who were fabulous through the whole thing. My parents, and Gran, of course ... even when I was being a pain and down on myself,' she admitted.

When he brought her close and grazed his lips over her crown, she closed her eyes and absorbed his masculine smell as well as his strength.

'You're being too hard on yourself,' he murmured.

She didn't bother saying she knew that she wasn't. But she'd survived—and flourished, in some ways, at least. Tonight with Alex had helped even more.

'I needed something else I could put my heart and soul into,' she said. 'Turned out to be something that I ended up believing in a thousand times more than collecting sports awards.'

'Helping others recover from their injuries. And you're wonderful at it.'

Her heart swelled. 'You really think so?'

'I know I've given you a rough time but I appreciate everything you've done. In fact, I think I'm in need of a little therapy right now.'

Alarmed, she studied his eyes for signs of physical pain. They had been pretty energetic beneath the sheets. 'Is your shoulder hurting?'

'Higher. A little ache—' he tapped his lips '—right here.'

Relaxing, she laughed. 'I can fix that.' She came forward and her kiss skimmed his bristled jaw. 'How does that feel? Or maybe I should try this technique.' Her tongue slid down to the beating hollow at the base of his throat.

He rolled her over and murmured against her parted lips, 'Libby, I'm aching all over.'

# CHAPTER NINE

THAT morning he and Libby ate breakfast at a local Manly café.

With the waves washing on the beach and traffic, both pedestrian and motor, passing at a leisurely weekend clip, they took an outside table and enjoyed the perfect autumn sunshine while ordering—fruit and toast for the lady, a full breakfast with bacon, eggs, fried mushrooms and tomatoes for him. He'd worked up quite an appetite, Alex realised, setting his napkin on his lap and considering something sweet to finish with ... not that he hadn't enjoyed 'sweet' all night long.

There had been a sour note, however, when Libby had told him about her so-called fiancé. She had to know she was better off without that dolt. What kind of a man would commit himself by giving a beautiful girl a ring and then—

The fork stopped midway to Alex's mouth.

What had happened to Libby's engagement ring? Was that why she wasn't into jewellery now? Bad memories of a lying solitaire?

Alex stabbed more egg on his fork.

He hoped she'd dropped it in an express post bag and sent it back to that son of a—

'Do you eat like that every morning?'

Snapping back, Alex assembled a smile. 'Today I was famished.' Before he brought the fork to his mouth again, he added, 'That's your fault.'

'We didn't get much sleep,' she admitted beneath lowered lashes as he chewed and set his cutlery aside.

'Sleep's overrated.'

'Why sleep when you can race, right?' She slanted her head and a waterfall of silvery blond cascaded over her shoulder as she leaned back. 'How did it all start? You mentioned taking your father's cars out and earning yourself a reputation.'

Needing time, Alex patted his mouth with the napkin. The subject of

his father could get tricky. Plainly put, he didn't like to discuss it. The topic caused his insides to crawl and made him ashamed that his last name was Wolfe. Still, if Libby had the courage to open up and come clean about her slug of an ex ...

Alex cleared his throat and sat back.

Guess he could share a little more.

'The first time I took off,' he began, 'I wasn't quite fourteen. My father ...' Alex's throat tightened and he grunted, remembering too well. 'William was being his usual obnoxious self. I needed to escape so I lifted his favourite sports car and tore off. That's the moment I knew what I wanted to do. How I wanted to live. I felt at home with the top down, the wind on my face, racing away as fast as four wheels could take me.'

Like it was yesterday, he recalled the thrill of that first time pitting himself against the curves and dips in the road, against the bona fide danger of excess speed. It never got old.

'And your father never caught you?'

Before he could contain it, Alex flinched. In time he hid the subsequent shudder. No wonder he'd rather not speak of those days. Preferred never to think of them, full stop.

Reaching for his juice, he resumed his more casual mask. 'Eventually he caught me. By that time, sneaking out with one of his cars had got to be addictive ... a regular event. He used to spot a scratch or dent now and then.'

The beatings that followed had been worth every minute he'd got to spend behind the wheel.

Libby's glistening eyes said she didn't know whether to be amused or shocked. 'You're lucky you didn't kill yourself. Or someone else.'

Of course she was right. Thank God he'd hooked up with someone who had taught him early about respect—for himself, for cars, as well for others on the road.

'If it's any compensation, my joyrides got me expelled at the end of summer term '91.'

Her face fell. 'Oh, Alex ...'

‘They also got me noticed by a gang who loved fast cars as much as I did.’ He smiled. Good times. ‘I bought myself a souped-up dirt bike and competed with the other guys in weekend meets. That’s where I got a taste for winning. We had our own races organised in the back streets on quiet weekends.’

Her smile was wry. ‘Sounds like a wild crowd.’

‘There were some parties,’ he admitted, taking a sip of his drink. Given that last one ... He set down his glass and pinned back his shoulders. ‘Probably too many parties.’

But that was a whole other story and one he refused to broach with Libby now. With anyone *any time*.

A touch on his arm had him glancing up to find her worried gaze.

‘Alex ... you okay?’

He shook off the image of Annabelle after that night and pasted on a smile. ‘Fine. I’m fine.’

‘Did you ever get in trouble with the law?’ she asked.

‘There was one night,’ he said carefully. ‘A police man took pity on me. Said he’d look the other way if I put my so-called talent to good use rather than playing the lunatic. He gave me the name of a racing buddy of his. A mechanic in Oxfordshire.’

Elbow on the table, she set her cheek in the bed of her hand. ‘And he took you under his wing?’

That’s when life took its first good turn.

‘Carter White became my coach in life as well as on the track.’ Alex’s chest grew warm the way it did whenever he thought of the difference that one man had made. ‘When I first went to his shop, I wanted to jump in the first car I could and tear up the road. But Carter taught me to value my skill and the vehicles I drove. He also made me promise to catch up on classes I’d missed after I was expelled for truancy.’

‘I thought you said you were expelled because of joyriding.’

His grin was lopsided. ‘That too.’

She coughed out a laugh. ‘Did this Carter White own a bag of fairy dust? How did he manage to turn such a wayward kid around?’

'With a chronically slow and steady approach.' Much like the technique Libby used on his shoulder, come to think of it. 'He had me work on cars and motorbikes for months before he let me drive or ride. At first I thought he was doing it simply to annoy me, but it didn't take long before I learned a deep appreciation for the way engines worked, the way bodies were put together. I learned to admire their beauty and power. After five years as a team, I thanked him and took off to pursue the bright lights.'

'Just like that?'

Her brows knitted ... as if she thought he ought to have stayed?

'It was with his blessing,' Alex pointed out. Carter had wanted his protégé to advance as much as Alex had needed to move on. 'He gave me a memento of our time together and to remember the faith he'd put in me. He made the medal himself. It has a big number one plunging through its centre.' Anyone who cared to read up on Alex Wolfe knew about the significance of that piece. 'Whenever and wherever I race, I carry that medal for good luck'. Ironic that after Annabelle's last message he'd forgotten to slip it into his suit before his crash. He'd never forget it again.

'It means a great deal to you.'

Understatement. 'That chunk of metal means more than all the cups and trophies I could acquire in a lifetime of championships.'

It represented not only everything he'd gained but everything he'd left behind and never wanted to visit again. Carter had told him to pass it on when he didn't need it anymore. To give it to someone who did. Hell, he'd rather cut out his own heart.

He could never give it up, just as he could never give up racing.

'When did you see him last?' she asked.

And Alex's breath caught in his chest. He couldn't remember the last time. He glossed over it.

'We keep in touch.'

'By email?'

He thought about it and nodded. 'Usually.'

Her gaze probed his as if she wanted to dig more but then she carried on with her earlier thread.

'They say you're fearless on the track. That there's never been a more focused champion.'

With a jaded grin, he gestured for the bill. 'Guess the press are good for something.'

'Did the other Wolfe children go off the rails before making good?'

God knows they'd all had their moments. 'The second eldest, Lucas, was always a handful. He never knew his mother. Never even knew her name. He was dropped on the Wolfe Manor doorstep when he was a newborn.' He squashed a spike of unease. Poor bastard. 'Our father took a particular dislike to him. Can't blame Luc for growing up to like women and booze a bit too much. But in her most recent email Annabelle said our shameless playboy sibling has found true love.' His grin was warm. 'Difficult to believe. She must be an exceptional girl.'

Alex's thoughts again turned to the woman sitting across from him. Seemed he'd met an exceptional woman too. Not that he was after marriage. Time, lifestyle, an unhappy childhood without parents ... there were a hundred reasons to remain single. Where women were concerned, he was careful not to insinuate anything else. He had never and *would* never promise what he couldn't deliver. Not like the jerk who'd let Libby down.

'What about Jacob?' she asked. 'Didn't you wonder about him after he walked out and never came back?'

'He ... had a lot weighing on his mind.'

She cocked her head as if trying to read his expression. 'Sounds as if you all had terrible things to reconcile.'

'Jacob perhaps more than any of us.'

Alex's back teeth ground together. He'd like to be completely honest but he didn't discuss that particular episode of his life. Still, sitting here with Libby now ...

For the first time in his life Alex felt an urge to open up.

'A year before Jacob left there was ... an incident,' he said. 'Charges were laid.'

Her face paled. ‘Serious charges?’

The waiter left the bill. Alex scrawled his signature and set the pen down. ‘Want to walk for a while?’

She scraped back her chair. ‘Love to.’

Five minutes later, they were strolling along the esplanade, the road on one side and the tumbling surf on the other. He wound his arm around her waist, then, looking out over the glittering blue-green waves, asked, ‘You okay with this?’ *Being so close to the water?*

With the breeze combing through her flaxen hair, she nodded. ‘I often walk along here. Just haven’t managed to get any sand between my toes lately.’ She snuggled up against his arm. ‘But we were talking about Jacob.’

Alex focused and suddenly all those old fettered memories strained to break free, pinpricks of murky light struggling through tears in a dark smelly rag. Looking back he didn’t know how he’d ever lived through those tragic years. How any of the Wolfe children had. But that was the secret, he supposed. Even with storms of brutality and madness and death swirling all around, the Wolfe kids had remained individual and strong—he grinned to himself—like bamboo.

‘My father had a foul temper,’ he began, looking out over today’s thunderous waves crashing on the shore, ‘which was a hundred times worse when he drank. And he drank often. We all suffered at his hand. All but one. Then one night—’

He bit off the rest. He didn’t need to go there.

Libby jumped to her own conclusion. ‘Alex, your father didn’t *kill* anyone?’

‘He might as well have.’

‘Who?’

Alex’s gut wrenched. Even now those memories left him stone-cold. He blew out a long steady breath and grated out the words he’d never wanted to utter.

‘He assaulted my sister.’

Libby’s heels dug into the pavement as her face filled first with anger,

then with pain.

‘Annabelle? ‘

‘He’d been out riding all day. Drinking most of it too. When Annabelle came home he said she wasn’t dressed appropriately.’

Alex remembered the micro mini, skyscraper heels and carefully applied makeup Annabelle had worn that night. She hadn’t looked like a fourteen-year-old. She’d looked more like a woman who knew precisely what was what. Truth was that Annabelle *was* an innocent. Or had been until that evening when innocence had been destroyed forever.

‘Our father railed at her, then pulled out his riding crop....’

Closing his eyes, Alex tried to shut out the scene he’d heard about second-hand. He couldn’t bring himself to say the words. To face the shame. His father’s or his own.

Libby had covered her mouth but her gasp escaped. ‘That poor girl.’

Alex studied her face. Libby had no idea that the revulsion she felt was as much his to bear as his father’s. Of all his siblings, he loved Annabelle best and yet he’d let her down, fobbed her off, when he should have been there to look out for her. Thank God Jacob came home when he did.

‘Jacob tried to protect her and pushed William away,’ he went on, his pace down to a crawl now. ‘My father staggered back and struck his head on the corner of the staircase. He died instantly.’

‘But surely it was self-defence.’

‘The jury acquitted my brother of all charges. But the weight of what he’d done ate away at Jacob.’

It sure as hell had eaten away at *him*.

Her gaze filled with sympathy and support, Libby stopped and held his gaze. ‘Do you and Annabelle ever talk about it?’

His stomach lurched and he frowned. The very idea knocked him completely off balance.

‘Why *would* we?’

He’d all but snapped it out, and Libby blinked several times before her gaze sharpened, trying to see through to places he didn’t care for her to

go.

'Is there something more, Alex?' she asked quietly. 'Something you're not telling me?'

His heartbeat thumping, he started off again.

He'd said enough. The incident had forever changed his sister and it was largely his fault. How could he and Annabelle ever talk about such cruelty, about her maiming—

'Alex ...?'

He brought himself back and was about to change the subject when a group, congregated around a picnic table, caught his attention. One woman held a folded magazine and was pointing their way. Looked like he was back in the news.

Defiant, he lifted his chin.

And so what if he was? His arm was out of its sling. Thanks to Libby, he was on his way to full recovery and after two and some weeks cooped up, worried about his future, he felt the greatest urge to venture out.

His gaze slid to his companion. Maybe she'd enjoy a break as well, to continue what they'd started here. Something fun and light, of course. Like the past few hours had been.

As the thought took form, his mouth went dry and Alex wanted to laugh. He was *nervous* about inviting Libby? Amazing what a couple of weeks away from regular social contact could do. She wouldn't say no.

Would she?

He cleared his throat, tugged his ear. 'What would you say to getting out of here for a while?'

She tossed a wary look around. 'You mean, off the street?'

'I mean out of Sydney.'

Libby froze. She'd heard Alex's suggestion. That he—that *they*—should escape the city. And when the shock wore off, her first reaction was to clasp her hands and exclaim, 'When do we head out?' What girl, who'd spent the night with such an amazing man, would think to refuse?

But at the same time a cloud blocked out the sun, darker reality sank

in.

She glanced around. Alex's presence radiated out even in this casual crowd, same way his charisma had turned heads in that Malaysian restaurant. An animated group by that picnic table had certainly picked up on who he was. It seemed, now that his shoulder was on its way to full recovery, he was no longer reticent about getting out and being seen. He didn't seem perturbed by that crowd's attention. Wherever he went, he'd be noticed. Which meant, if she were with him, she'd be noticed too.

Two things wrong with that.

Firstly, she didn't think it wise to make a habit of parading around with Alex as if they were romantically involved, which, she guessed, they were. Even here, in relatively relaxed Manly, people had phones with cameras and video capabilities and weren't afraid to use them. Maybe Alex accepted those kinds of intrusions into his private world but she was no longer a celebrity and didn't miss the spotlight. She didn't need her life, present or past, speculated upon in magazines or the internet.

He wanted to whisk her away?

While her teeth rolled over her bottom lip, he raised a brow.

'I see you're not racing home to pack a bag.'

'Alex, what if you're recognised?' She rephrased. 'Make that, what happens *when* you're recognised?'

'And someone snaps our picture for some celebrity magazine?' He leaned forward and stage whispered. 'We'll survive.'

*He'd* survive. But, 'You can understand that the perception that I'm involved with a high-profile client could damage my career.'

'We could wear dark glasses and Hungarian moustaches?'

He chuckled and, despite it all, she smiled too. Was she overreacting? Like she had when she'd thought he wouldn't be interested if he found out about her leg?

'Look,' he said more levelly, 'if you rather not, we'll stay in. I understand you want to shield yourself.'

She sighed. Now she felt bad.

What was so wrong with being the girl who'd experienced an incredible night and couldn't deny herself more? Life could be uncertain, but there didn't have to be a shark lurking behind every shadow. She'd felt so safe with Alex these past few hours. Where was the crime in wanting to prolong that?

She made a decision. Stood up tall.

'No. I want to go.'

He gauged her expression. 'You're certain?'

Libby held her breath. Her head told her not to go but her heart was saying loud and clear, *What's the worst that can happen?*

The sun came out at the same time she smiled broadly and announced, 'Commander, lead the way.'

Eli was sitting on the forecourt steps when Alex arrived home an hour later. Alex bet the magazine his assistant held was the same edition the picnic table crowd had been ogling earlier. Obviously it contained a shot of him. A file shot speculating on his comeback? Or had he somehow been snapped in Sydney these past weeks?

As Alex swung out of the limo and the driver headed off, Eli pushed to his feet. Alex's step slowed on his way up the steps. His friend's expression was closed. Not a good sign.

Eli offered the magazine, folded to a celebrity page. 'No prizes for guessing where you spent the night.'

Alex zoomed in on a picture; a chill sped up his spine and he swore.

Eli scratched his temple. 'I, er, take it you weren't aware this was out?'

'I ... had some idea.'

Alex let them inside and headed toward the office, that photograph imprinted at the forefront of his mind—he and Libby standing outside her apartment building, embracing. Kissing.

'Her face is hidden,' Eli said, following Alex down the hall. 'And her name isn't listed, but people will want to know who your new love interest is. What'll I say when the phone starts ringing?'

‘No comment.’

‘They’ll find out one way or another. Could be better coming from us.’

Alex swept into his office, fell into the chair behind his desk and came clean.

‘I asked Libby to come away with me this weekend.’

Eli’s brows jumped, then he slid his hands into his trouser pockets.  
‘Somewhere secluded?’

‘I was thinking the Gold Coast.’

When Libby had brought up her concerns over how she might be perceived should the press spot them together, he’d acquiesced. Speculations about sleeping with a high-profile client ... He understood Libby wanted to look out for her reputation. But he was pleased she’d decided to go with her heart and had agreed to a quick trip away. After this, however ...

Eli sauntered forward. ‘I might be wrong but when I spoke with Libby Henderson she didn’t seem the type to want back in the limelight. In fact, she seemed reserved. Private.’

‘Anyone knows if you work with celebrities some of the shine is bound to rub off.’

‘She’s doing more than *working* with you.’

Alex’s gaze snapped up from his hands, clasped on the desk. ‘She’s over twenty-one.’

Eli’s nostrils flared, then he held up his hands. ‘You’re right. It’s none of my business.’

Alex scooted the chair over to his laptop.

Eli was dead on. It wasn’t his business.

After tapping a few keys, images of a cosmopolitan skyline, bordered by miles of golden beach, flashed onto the screen. An hour’s flight, relaxed and at the same time full of life. Just the place for an overnight escape.

‘Can you organise the jet to fly out for the Gold Coast this afternoon at three?’ Alex asked his assistant. ‘I’ll need a car and driver at the airport and reservations for a penthouse suite at the casino.’

'Nothing like keeping a low profile,' Eli muttered.

Alex ignored it. 'Book tickets for the show too.'

'And if it's booked out?'

Alex pasted on a smile. 'As always, I know you'll come through.'

When Eli saluted his chief and strode out to get plans underway, Alex sat back and took stock.

He shouldn't be cut at Eli for having his say. That's what he paid him for and he only had his and Libby's best interests at heart. Certainly Libby was a nice lady who ought to be treated well—protected—particularly after that failed episode with her ex. But, as he'd told Eli, he wasn't taking advantage of Libby. She was an adult who wanted to make the most of what they'd shared while they could. She wouldn't be thinking long-term, not when she knew better than most how his work ate up practically all his time and energy.

Simply put, he wasn't the marrying kind. Eli knew it. All the *world* knew it. After hearing more of his lacklustre childhood today, surely Libby was smart enough to know it too.

# CHAPTER TEN

As COMMERCIAL as the Gold Coast had become, Libby had always adored this laidback yet glitzy part of the world. Many considered the beaches to be the whitest and finest of any. The restaurants and nightlife were first-rate. Still, when Alex had invited her to join him on a one-night whirlwind stay at Jupiters Casino at Broadbeach, initially she'd been reluctant. Even landing at Coolangatta Airport fifteen minutes earlier, despite her enthusiasm in accepting, she'd still had her doubts.

Catching a sidelong glance at Alex's classic profile now, sitting alongside him in another chauffeur-driven limo, Libby's cheeks toasted remembering the glorious hours they'd spent together last night. This morning when they'd woken and had gone to breakfast, she'd felt so comfortable in his company, almost as if they'd been 'a couple' for years. Alex had delved more into his childhood and the shocking Wolfe family secrets. She'd ended up all the more in awe of what this man had achieved under such oppressive conditions growing up. She also felt lucky to know that he trusted her enough to share the information. She trusted him more now too. Coming away with Alex this weekend felt right. If a photographer happened to catch them together ...

Her hands locking in her lap, she focused out the limo window at the beach shacks intermingled with high-rise resorts flying by.

She needed to take one step at a time ... even if secretly she'd caught herself daydreaming about joining Alex on other flights, to Spain, Turkey, Monte Carlo ... She shouldn't let her imagination roam like that, but they seemed well suited on so many levels, not least of all in the bedroom. When they were together, she didn't think about her deficiencies. She only felt desired and beautiful.

Of course she wasn't anywhere near as refined as the women he usually dated. Not anywhere near as glamorous. But the way Alex had treated and confided in her, she was convinced he wasn't as shallow and mercenary as she'd first thought. In fact, he was anything but.

Alex's voice broke into her thoughts.

‘I did mention the show tonight.’

Knowing the production, Libby crooned out a line about still calling Australia home and, while Alex chuckled, she added, ‘I’ve heard it’s fabulous.’

‘You like music?’

‘Sure.’

‘Dancing?’

‘Oh, I haven’t danced in years.’

‘We’ll have to change that.’

In all honestly she wouldn’t say that she *couldn’t* dance. Despite her prosthesis she was certain she had the stability and balance needed. Handling the surf was a different matter. In the ocean your balance was constantly challenged. When she’d been younger, leaping over the waves had seemed as natural and fun as eating ice cream. Now she could barely bring herself to think about finding the courage to venture out again.

The limo eased up the casino’s resort-style drive. The massive tiered building had been visible from the road for some time. With the huge orange sun sinking rapidly behind the hinterland horizon, banks of lights began to flicker on—iridescent gold and blue—creating the image of a colossal elaborate staircase, which led to the complex’s middle floors. The grounds were pristine and subtropical with masses of palm trees and colourful seasonal flowers in bloom. Libby felt as if she’d truly arrived in paradise.

As the limo rolled into the forecourt, a uniformed doorman strode up and opened the passenger’s door. Alex assisted her out and together they entered an establishment where multiple millions were gambled, won and lost, each day. Moving into the lobby, Alex kept his sunglasses on, surely not because he thought they might disguise who he was. He couldn’t walk into a room and go unnoticed anymore than Russell Crowe. From the way her green eyes widened, the brunette behind the reception desk knew precisely who this handsome guest was.

After checking in, they rode a lift to the top, while peering down over the lower floors through the clear windows of the cabin. When he

opened the door of their penthouse and ushered her inside, overwhelmed, Libby sighed long and loud. She felt thoroughly spoilt by the plush crimson carpet, extravagant matching window dressings and sumptuous leather furnishings. But she also felt strangely at home, or at least more at home than in Alex's grand Rose Bay residence. His house was beyond beautiful, but so large and a little sterile for her tastes. This suite, on the other hand, was big but also had colour and something of a cosy feel even amid all the crystal and gold fittings. She just knew they'd have a wonderful time here.

Alex wandered up behind her. His arms slid around her waist as his warm lips nuzzled her ear.

'You like?'

Smiling, she nodded. 'It's gorgeous.'

'I could extend our reservation.'

Her heart leapt, but there was no way. 'I have to be back in the office Monday.'

His hands skimmed down the front of her trousers. 'No chance of putting back your appointments?'

She didn't bother to reply. He knew her well enough to understand she would never put her personal agenda ahead of clients' prearranged appointments.

He chuckled against the sensitive sweep of her neck. 'I'll take that as a no. So until Sunday night, then—' he eased her around '—let's focus on us.'

He tilted her chin up, his mouth covered hers and the effects of his kiss spiralled through her centre, leaving her weak and instantly wanting. She'd been right agreeing to come here with Alex today. Every thing felt so perfect. His body pressed against hers. His words. Most of all, his kiss.

His lips left hers slowly but his mouth stayed close. 'You sure you want to go see this show? We could always stay in.'

Libby's pulse rate leapt. She was tempted but, 'I'm sure the tickets weren't easy to get a hold of.'

'Neither were you.' He took her handbag and blindly set it on the

lounge while his eyes smouldered into hers. ‘I’ll order up champagne and we can sip it in bed.’

In the middle of another penetrating kiss, Alex’s phone buzzed and he mumbled, ‘Ignore it.’

Dreamy, she murmured back, ‘Could be important.’

‘Don’t care.’

When the buzz sounded again, however, he groaned and reached for his phone. About to turn it off, he looked at the message ID and drew in a quick breath.

‘It’s Annabelle.’

He retrieved the message. When his brows crept in, Libby asked, ‘Is something wrong?’

‘She’s texting to see if I’ll be attending Nathaniel’s wedding next weekend. I’ve already said I’ll be racing.’

Libby’s insides pitched. He meant racing at his all-important Round Four in China. Holding her stomach, she moved off toward the palm-and-surf-fringed view. She couldn’t avoid it any longer.

‘We’re actually not certain about that yet.’

Feeling his eyes boring a hole in her back, Libby waited on tenterhooks. Although from the get-go she’d known that he’d planned to have her sign off on his injury before the stipulated six weeks, she’d never agreed to anything. Neither had she dismissed his goal outright. Nothing was impossible. Similarly nothing was set in cement.

In the preceding weeks, she’d wrangled her way around the issue. Now, for more reasons than one, she needed to be clear.

Assuming her professional mask, she rotated around. ‘Your shoulder is doing extremely well. But given that your doctor was firm about the time frame for recovery, I can’t make any decisions for or against just yet.’

His eyes narrowed. She could sense his mind ticking over as his chin came slowly up and he sauntered toward her. ‘You could give me a full evaluation early.’

‘Your cuff and lesser muscles have been under a great deal of strain,

and after the setback yesterday—'

'There's no reason we can't go through the exercise, is there?'

Well ...

Cornered, she exhaled. 'No. There's no reason.'

'Then I'd like the evaluation.' The tension in his jaw eased but his gaze still held that glint.

'I need you to know that I won't falsify my records.' She wouldn't do that for anyone for any reason. He must know that.

His gaze probed hers and a slight grin hooked one corner of his mouth. 'Of course you wouldn't.'

As her heartbeat thudded, she tried to read his eyes.

When they'd first met she'd believed she'd had his number. Nothing was taboo when it came to Alex Wolfe securing what he needed to benefit his racing career, including seducing his physiotherapist. Remarkably, in the past twenty-four hours, she'd come to respect Alex. Last night, this morning, flying here this afternoon, she'd even come to trust him ... trust that he wouldn't intentionally use or hurt her. Whatever his plans before they'd met, he would never try to manipulate her now.

'When do you need to let your doctor know?' she asked.

'I can call him Monday with a standby and give the heads-up as late as Wednesday.'

She kept her gaze on his, then eyed his injured shoulder, which looked as magnificent as the other beneath his casual cream button-down *sans* tie. He'd been superbly fit to begin with. His muscles and tendons had responded well to her program. In her opinion he wasn't there yet ...

But if they had until Wednesday and she tested his shoulder then, holding absolutely nothing back ...

She tilted her head. She had to ask.

'And if I decide your shoulder's not fit to race?'

He shrugged. 'Then we'll go to my brother's wedding in London.'

She coughed out a laugh, then realised he was serious. 'You said your other brother's hotel is off the coast of *South America*.'

'Yes, but Sebastian owns hotels worldwide. He has another hotel in London, that's where the wedding is being held. You have a passport?'

The room began to spin. Alex was asking her to a wedding? And not just *any* wedding. A Wolfe family occasion, with his brothers and the twin sister he so clearly adored. And missed, though he didn't want to admit it.

'I'd much rather take you to China with me,' he added, closing the distance left separating them. 'But let's make the Grande Wolfe Hotel our backup plan. For now ...' He took her hand and led her to the bedroom. 'Let's not wait for champagne.'

They dined in an award-winning restaurant overlooking the casino's dazzling atrium. The redwood and granite decor was exquisite, a perfect setting for the haute cuisine. They enjoyed basil salmon terrine and roast duckling before moving into the theatre to view a show that equalled in talent and score any lavish Vegas production.

Afterward, when they crossed out into the main area, close to where the gaming took place, Libby had thought she, at least, should be tired; the previous night had been a long one and she was an early-to-bed type of girl. And yet this evening had been so enlivening, the atmosphere so electric, she couldn't think about retiring to the quiet of their suite just yet. It was as if her every cell was on celebratory mode. Particularly when she thought about his suggestion that she accompany him to the Wolfe wedding. She would get to meet all the larger-than-life characters she'd heard so much about.

It all seemed surreal.

Of course, she couldn't pretend that she was the kind of woman others might expect to see accompanying Alex to such an event. She didn't have a manicure every week, or worry too much about fashion and A-lists. Eventually, she supposed, word would leak that she and Alex were involved. And when it did, what anyone else thought wouldn't matter.

But she was thinking too far ahead.

Slipping through the crowd, looking like the silver screen's latest version of James Bond in his dinner suit, Alex wrapped her arm around his and slid over a wicked grin.

'I think you ought to wear that gown to therapy Monday morning, doc.'

Libby swallowed a laugh. She did feel a little like a princess in this evening dress, which she'd bought for the physio guest speaker dinner next month. Beneath the sweetheart neckline, the strapless bodice, which was decorated with beads, fit snug to the hips. The gold leaf coloured satin skirt fell straight to the floor and featured an elegant chapel train. Beyond beautiful to wear on a special evening, however ...

She arched a brow. 'It wouldn't be so practical in your gym.'

'Who cares about practical?' He came close, nipped her ear and a bevy of tingles flew through her. 'Will we put a few in the slot machines?' he asked, changing the subject as he tipped away. 'Or are you more a blackjack fan?'

'I know we're in a casino, but I don't gamble. I don't mind watching the excitement though.'

He studied a croupier sweeping a tower of chips to the house and admitted, 'Not my vice either.' His eyes flashed. 'I know what I promised we'd do. *Dance.*'

Libby stilled. She was so not comfortable with that idea, but she didn't want to seem like a coward. Or ... inadequate.

Casting a quick glance around at patrons enjoying the beating lights and ringing bells, she hitched up her shoulders and let them drop. 'I don't think they have a dance floor.'

'Of course they do.' His eyes lighting up, he snapped his fingers. 'I have an idea.'

Before she could object, they were headed toward the reception desk. After leaving her by an elaborate water feature, he stopped by the concierge and spoke briefly to a middle-aged man who nodded enthusiastically and handed something over. Joining her again, Alex snatched a kiss from her cheek.

'All set.'

He wouldn't explain further, only led her to the casino foyer and out into the forecourt, where a sleek black sports car awaited. When a uniformed porter opened the passenger's side door, Libby hesitated only

a moment before giving into the spirit of adventure and sliding into the sumptuous dark leather cabin. After buckling up, Alex ignited the engine and, incredibly low to the ground, the car zipped out the hotel grounds.

Anticipation balling in her stomach, Libby looked across and took in Alex's classic profile, dramatically silhouetted against the moon and streetlights. 'So, where are you whisking me away to now?'

His mouth hooked into a grin. 'That's top secret, I'm afraid.'

They headed away from the bright lights until, looking around, Libby realised there were few lights at all. Minutes later, he drove into a darkened and otherwise empty car park positioned one side of a quiet stretch of sand dunes. While Libby racked her brains, trying to work out what came next, her door opened and Alex offered a hand.

A cool salty breeze filed through her hair as she pushed to her feet and scanned the peaceful scene.

The hum of traffic and lights from the city seemed an eternity away while the stars were a hundred times brighter and nearer than she'd ever seen. Beyond the dunes, the rhythmic wash of waves called. Seemed that Alex heard their call too. His hand folded around hers and he gave an encouraging tug.

'Let's walk.'

Her heart flew to her throat. 'On the *beach*?'

'Sure.' He squeezed her hand. 'Slip off your shoes.'

'Alex, you know I haven't—' Her throat convulsed and she swallowed. 'I haven't ...'

Cupping her face, he smiled into her eyes. 'You haven't been on a beach since your accident. Tonight, I think that should change.'

Tonight? Right *now*? 'You're serious?'

'More than you know.'

When he slipped off his shoes, Libby's breath hitched in her chest. Barefoot, he headed toward the dunes, then threw a glance back. 'You coming?'

Libby took a few deep breaths but her head still tingled with the heavy scratchings of panic. He didn't know what he was asking.

‘The sand’s cool and soft,’ he said before lifting his nose to the air. ‘I can feel the salt spray on my face.’

Closing her eyes, Libby lifted her face too. As moist briny air filled her lungs, pictures of her playing in the sand as a girl rushed up—carefree, innocent—and an unexpected urge gripped. When she opened her eyes, her pulse was thumping with the beginnings of excitement.

*Do it. Just do it!*

Before she could change her mind, she swept off her shoes and hurried to meet him on top of the grassy dune. Laughing, he snatched a kiss, grabbed her hand and together they navigated the downward sandy slope.

Libby found herself laughing too. Yes, the sand was cool and powder soft. It felt so good, she had to fight the impulse to fall to her knees and scoop the grains up in her arms like she used to. Should she have tried to do this sooner, or was now simply the right time? With the right person. She couldn’t say that she was completely anxiety free. But with Alex walking alongside of her, his hand fitted so firmly around hers, she could handle the unease and focus on the great memories rather than the sad.

Libby’s gaze slipped to Alex’s thoughtful profile as he watched the waves folding in several metres away. Was he thinking of how his mother had once taken him to the beach? Was he wishing he’d been old enough to remember? Good memories mixed with sad ...

Alex seemed to come back from wherever his mind had been and glanced down at her feet. ‘How’s it feel?’

‘Weird,’ she replied, then admitted with a happy grin. ‘Nice. Very nice.’

The sparkle in his eyes said he was pleased. ‘Someone once told me our only restrictions are the ones we place on ourselves.’

‘Carter White?’ He nodded and it made sense. But, to be fair, as Alex well knew: ‘Sometimes it can be a challenge to conquer them.’

Beneath a glittering stream of stars, his gaze intensified. Was he thinking of the limitations he put on himself in later life? Personal boundaries, cut-off lines he didn’t want to revisit even with all his success and world acclaim?

His pace slowed and he gestured to something up ahead. ‘Looks as if we’re expected.’

Libby’s spirits dropped. She’d thought they were alone, just them and the stars and the sea. But, yes, ahead up the beach sat a small enclosed marquee, barely illuminated by a handful of misty lights. Then the gentle strains of a symphony seemed to fade up out of nowhere. Violins, saxophones … an invisible orchestra was playing.

But as they ventured closer, it became apparent that the marquee, and immediate area, was vacant. Libby darted a look around and pricked her ears to catch any sounds of company. But Alex didn’t look the least surprised or curious.

Finally coming up to speed, she set her hands on her hips. ‘You organised this, didn’t you?’

He only laughed. ‘Guilty, Your Honour.’ He moved to an ice bucket, proceeded to inspect the champagne bottle’s label, then exclaimed, ‘Exceptional year. But we’ll open it later. For now …’ After replacing the bottle, he returned to stand before her. His warm hand twined around hers, he pressed a light kiss to her knuckles, then brought their clasped hands to his lapel. ‘We’re going to dance.’

*‘Here?’*

‘Yes, Libby. Here. Now.’ His gaze roamed her face. ‘You’re going to dance with me.’

Panic fisted in her windpipe. ‘But the sand … it’s so uneven.’

His other hand scoped around to support her back. ‘I’ve got you.’

Libby was ready to insist. She didn’t feel like dancing. Wasn’t getting her on the beach after so long breaking down a big enough fence for one night? But as his gaze continued to hold hers and his confidence in her radiated out, she pressed her lips together, inhaled one big steady breath and, sucking it up, let the music filter over her.

As the chorus of a well-known love song grew slightly louder, Alex took one step, then another, and gradually something strong and instinctive took over and Libby began to move too, stilted at first, feeling uncertain … awkward. But he continued to move along with her, then move a little faster. Next he was winding her under his arm. When he

brought her back, he swayed with her again before the music segued into something more dramatic.

He rested his forehead against her. ‘What do you think? Ready to go to town?’

Before she could say, ‘No! Definitely not!’ he did some incredible move and wound her under his arm again before dipping her Valentino style and leading her in a dramatic tango charge. Stunned—*amazed*—at any moment Libby fully expected to fall flat on her face. But although her moves were hardly smooth, she kept up. Kept up and more! When he changed direction and slid back the other way, she gave herself over to the impulsiveness of it, to the freedom. To the trust. And for the first time in years, it was true.

She lifted her face to the moon and laughed out loud.

She was *dancing!*

They danced until the night air grew too cold on her arms. Alex removed his jacket and, moving behind her, drew the warm black fabric over her shoulders. As he stood once more in front of her, she peered up into his gaze, dark grey and intense in the shadows, and suddenly the awareness of what throbbed between them, of what they’d shared in just over a day, became too much.

She thought she’d loved Scott but the feelings she had for her ex seemed childish beside the intensity of the sensations Alex brought out in her. From the first moment they’d met, he’d touched a place within her she hadn’t known about. What she felt now was beyond anything she could ever have believed could exist between a man and woman. It was exhilarating. Thrilling. And way more than a little scary.

She was feeling so much so soon. For so many reasons it wouldn’t be wise to let herself feel too much more.

Libby blew out a shaky breath and stepped back. She needed some space to get her whirling thoughts together, so she headed toward the water and gazed out over the dark undulating blanket of the sea. She filled her lungs with fresh briny air, not surprised that the constant crash of waves, the ocean’s thunderous heartbeat, matched her own.

At her back, Alex’s natural heat enveloped her and his rich voice

touched her ear, spreading ripples of intense pleasure over every inch of her skin.

‘You’re still cold?’

Smiling, she snuggled down into his jacket and huddled back against him. ‘I’m just right.’

‘Are you sure? That breeze is fresh. I flicked on the heater in case.’

She angled around. Sure enough, a tall outdoor heater was set up to one side of the marquee. Its large grate was glowing red. Deep inside the softly lit tent sat a plush divan with piles of comfy-looking cushions. A fluffy white blanket lay folded at one end.

She arched a brow. ‘This is all very convenient.’

Not bothering to hide a grin, he ushered her toward the divan. ‘Isn’t it?’

After settling back against a pile of pillows set in one corner, she waved away his offer of champagne. She only wanted to snuggle beneath that blanket and drink in the enchanting view with Alex’s strength and heat supporting her.

When Alex joined her, he shook out the blanket and tucked the soft folds in. ‘Warm enough?’

Burrowing into him, she sighed against his chest. ‘Now I am.’

They sat together, her legs curled up to one side, the heater emitting a warm ghostly glow while the moonlit sea stretched out before them to infinity.

With her cheek resting against his chest, he was stroking her shoulder when he noted, ‘The moon on the water looks like a net cast with pearls.’

She examined the sea, then sat up and gave him a curious look. ‘You really have a thing for pearls, don’t you?’

He chuckled. ‘Not before meeting you, I swear. Maybe it was our conversation the other day over lunch—’ his palm traced over her crown ‘—or perhaps it’s the lustre of your hair that reminds me whenever we’re together.’

Libby considered his words. She supposed pearls could be the jewel

for her. Diamonds sure as heck hadn't worked. The cluster she'd worn as an engagement ring had been gorgeous but had never been truly special to her, no doubt because Scott hadn't presented her with a ring when he'd proposed. After many embarrassing questions from friends and family, she'd gone and bought her own. After everything had fallen apart, she'd been so disillusioned she'd sworn never to wear another diamond on her finger. But pearls ...

Yes. Maybe pearls.

But then, 'My gran used to say pearls mean tears.' Guess that suited too; she'd shed a few in her life.

'In some religions pearls represent completeness.'

She laughed. 'Is there anything you're not an expert on?'

He leaned forward and his lips skimmed hers. 'I plan to learn a lot more about you.'

His mouth slanted over hers and any chill in the air seemed to evaporate into steam. As the temperature beneath the blanket climbed, Libby's thoughts drifted back to pearls, the mysteries they seemed to conceal, and how Alex continued to uncover so many previously depressed levels inside of her.

She trembled at the welcome pressure of his hand ironing over her bodice. Then he was delving beneath the cup, the pad of his thumb rubbing the tight aching peak and reducing her insides to liquid fire. Leaning in, she measured the broad expanse of his chest beneath his shirt, marvelling at how something as simple as feeling the crisp crinkle beneath her palm could bring out such intensely charged emotions. The invisible zip at the side of her gown came down and her breasts, and any remaining inhibitions, were freed.

As his touch brushed bare skin, remembered sensations from the night before and this afternoon transformed and condensed into a physical need, pulsing and burning until she thought she might faint from the hunger.

When he broke the kiss and urged her gently away, her nerve-endings were sizzling. She didn't want him to stop. She only wanted to feel him naked and bearing down. But when he lifted her chin, her heavy eyelids

dragged open and she realised with a start where they were. Away from prying eyes but still in a public place.

And she couldn't care less.

His voice was a drugging whisper at the shell of her ear. 'Your gown will be crushed.'

'Do you think I care?'

He smiled and she tilted her weight against him until he lay back on the pillows, then she made short work of his trouser fastenings. Over the distant thunder of waves, she heard the metallic burr of his zipper easing down. Alex's chest expanded on a giant breath and, his gaze burning, he tugged off his trousers at the same time she leaned forward and dropped a lingering kiss an inch above his navel.

Her tongue wove a trail down the arrow of dark hair that led to his thighs and soon her mouth connected with that part of him that didn't know the meaning of the word *reserved*. Circling the top of his shaft with her hand, she dragged her fingers down, then looped her tongue around the hot tip twice.

His hips arched up and he clutched a sequined pillow near her head. With him braced, she slid her lips down over the head of his erection at the same time her fisted hand came back up.

'Libby ...' She heard him swallow. 'This could get dangerous.'

She hummed out her approval and went down again.

\*

After organising a late checkout from the penthouse, she and Alex spent the remainder of the day in Surfers.

Midmorning they enjoyed an ice cream in famous Cavill Avenue, where great restaurants, beach umbrellas and micro bikinis ruled. For a bit of fun, they checked out the Wax Museum, the largest in the southern hemisphere, and marvelled at the lifelike replicas of so many singers, royal members and notorious villains. Libby commented in all sincerity it shouldn't be long before they commissioned a likeness of him.

For lunch, they stopped in for some live music, a couple of thick-cut

steaks and Queensland ales at the Surfers Paradise Tavern, a local icon established back in 1925 when Surfers was a small isolated town that went by the name of Elston. When someone started belting out the chorus of a famous Slim Dusty tune, everyone joined in, including Alex.

Alex was certainly a complex character—he could be alpha-annoying, inherently charming, and there were also times when he seemed so distracted and remote. But as Alex laughed and clapped and sang along with the crowd now, Libby knew this was who he wanted to be. Who he *could* be. Relaxed. Real.

Midafternoon, the limo collected them and started inland. No matter how much she begged, Alex wouldn't let on where they were going. Thirty minutes later they pulled into a magnificent rural property, with an extravagant ranch-style mansion.

Slipping out of the limo, Libby took in the spectacular far-reaching grounds. ‘This is yours?’

‘A friend’s.’

‘You want to catch up while we’re here?’

‘He’s in Italy.’

She frowned. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Darren’s an old driving buddy. When he retired, he missed the thrill so much, he built his own track.’

Understanding, she smiled. ‘You’re going to take a car for a spin.’ With her watching. Frankly, she couldn’t wait to see Alex in action—as long as he, and his shoulder, didn’t overdo it.

‘I am indeed going for a spin.’ He took her hand. ‘And you’re coming with me.’

Libby’s heart tripped over several beats. In her own car, she hated to go past 100 k’s. Surfing had its dangers, certainly, but simply thinking of the kind of speeds Alex merely cruised at on a track left her mind reeling and stomach somersaulting.

She stammered and stuttered and said she couldn’t possibly but, as usual, Alex wouldn’t take no for an answer. And when Libby remembered the night before—walking along the beach, dancing beneath the stars—amazingly she found she could find the courage for

this as well.

Ten minutes later they had donned helmets and were buckling up. The track unwinding before them looked very much like the professional circuits Libby had seen on cable. As Alex kicked in the engine, she told herself to relax and enjoy the experience. Didn't help that her knuckles had turned white, gripping her thighs.

'This here is one fast car.'

'Convertible,' she added, feeling even more vulnerable with the top down. She moistened dry lips. 'Just how fast are we going to go?'

He reached for her knee and squeezed. 'You don't want to know.'

Alex stepped on the pedal—floored it, in fact. The car flew off and Libby left a screaming laugh behind.

They went from naught to three thousand kilometres per hour in three point five seconds. Or that's how it felt. With wind blasting through her hair, scared out of her wits, Libby hung on and told herself she was not only in the hands of a professional, she was in the care of the best. Everything might be belting by in a blur. Common sense said if they crashed they would die. Just when she thought her pulse couldn't race any faster she saw the sweeping bend up ahead.

Her jaw dropping, she swung a horrified look at Alex's concentrated profile. His eyes were narrowed, his hands firm on the vibrating wheel, a smile of pure exhilaration tugged on his lips. He changed down, she held her breath and they took the turn with his foot still down. All four tyres skidded sideways, drifting around the arching corner as if they'd hit black ice. Libby let go a wailing scream.

Over the roar of the engine and whistle of the wind, Alex heard Libby's shriek of horrified delight and, righting the car, laughed out loud.

Priceless.

It hadn't hit until this minute but he'd never been in this situation before—in a car on a track with a woman. Until today, he'd never considered the possibility. But as he gunned the 650 horsepower engine down the far straight, he realised this was a first in more than one way.

Whenever he hit a track, he was unfailingly focused on bettering

himself, achieving his best, but today wasn't about career or proving anything. Not in the typical sense, in any case. He only wanted to have fun or, more correctly, he wanted *Libby* to have fun. From what he could see of the stretched smile on her face through the hair whipping around her head, it seemed he'd achieved precisely that.

By eight, they were back at Sydney Airport, where the limousine was parked ready to take them home. But Libby's mind was still spinning. The night away had been amazing enough without that unbelievable experience on the track this afternoon. She thought she had a good grip on who Alex Wolfe was, but she'd only known half of it. After that wild, hair-raising ride, she'd come to appreciate in a way she couldn't have before what got him so jazzed about racing and why he was fighting tooth and nail to keep on top: to hold onto that fabulous sense of freedom combined with the ultimate sense of control.

Alex waited until they'd pulled up outside her apartment block before he took her hand and said, 'Come back to Rose Bay with me.'

Wanting to so badly, she closed her eyes and shook her head. 'That's not a good idea.'

'I think it's a great idea.'

He leaned closer—his shoulders, his mouth—but she put both hands against his chest and explained, 'I need to be up early, and if I go back to your house I won't get any sleep.' They were both running on adrenaline as it was.

He seemed to think her excuse through, then reluctantly agreed.

'In that case ...' He reached into the limo's side door pocket and retrieved a small pink plastic bag. He looked at it awkwardly as if debating what to do with it. Then he offered it over.

'I bought you a gift.'

She blinked first at him, then at the bag. 'What is it?'

'Open it and see.'

With an uncertain smile, she accepted the bag and slid the contents into her palm. She sighed at what she saw. A gold clamshell, the size of a dessertspoon, held a bed full of glittering light blue stones. Dotted

amongst those stones sat three separate creamy beads the size of freshwater pearls. A clasp was linked to the top of the shell.

Beside her, Alex leaned close. ‘I picked it up at one of those tourist stores. The blue stones symbolise the sea. The pearls represent the past, present and the future. I thought it suited you.’

Libby’s heart beat high in her throat. It was a trinket, an inexpensive charm that he’d put real thought into, and she *loved* it!

Over the thickness in her throat, she murmured, ‘It’s perfect.’ She’d never known anything *more* perfect.

He curled some hair away from her flushed cheek. ‘I’ll walk you up.’

She lowered the charm. It had been an incredible couple of days but she couldn’t think about saying goodnight to Alex at the building entrance or her apartment door. He might suggest coming in and, the way she felt now—the way she’d felt all weekend—she wouldn’t be able to turn him away. Tonight she needed to.

‘If you walk me to the door,’ she said, ‘you’ll kiss me and, before I know it, I’ll be tugging you inside. We both need some sleep.’

His brow furrowed and a muscle in his jaw flexed twice but finally he nodded and knocked on the glass partition, signalling the driver to collect her luggage and open her door.

‘Thank you for a wonderful weekend,’ she said, her heart so full she thought it might burst.

‘We’ll do it again soon.’

But he didn’t mention specifics ... didn’t mention the wedding ... and after an all-too-brief kiss goodnight, the driver opened her door and carried her luggage to the building entrance. She let herself in, heard the purr of the limo’s engine as it pulled out from the curb, then she gazed down again at the pearl charm in her hand. If not for this, she might think it was all some fantastic dream.

Feeling so churned up inside, she held her stomach. Before this weekend she’d known Alex was scorching. Now she found his company positively irresistible and for way more reasons than his looks and his charm. Everything she’d learned about him ... everything she’d confessed about herself ...

Alex Wolfe was a complex person. A world-renowned celebrity. A man who had helped her face some fierce, long-held fears. He was more than any woman could hope for and Libby simply couldn't deny it any longer.

She was falling in love.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE next morning, Libby dragged herself into her office. She felt groggy. Not surprising given her lack of sleep the night before. After tossing and turning till dawn, in hindsight, it might have been easier if Alex *had* walked her to the door. At least she wouldn't have woken up lonely.

Instead she'd placed the pearl charm on her bedside table and had lain awake watching the imitation jewels sparkle in the moonlight while going over every moment of her amazing weekend with Alex Wolfe ... her client. Her lover.

The superstar sportsman with the shoulder she'd agreed to put through a thorough examination two days from now.

If she found him unfit to drive, Alex had said he'd take her to that family wedding. But he hadn't mentioned it last night when he'd dropped her home. He was banking on his injury passing her assessment. And if she found his joint needed more time to heal ... The former athlete in her said he wouldn't take the news well.

But she couldn't give him a green light simply to make him happy, she told herself, crossing her office's reception area. And if he was half the man she'd come to believe him to be, even if he were unhappy, Alex would understand her position. He might be upset with the situation but he wouldn't be angry. At least, not with her.

Behind her desk, Payton glanced up. Her mouth rounded before she dropped her head and disappeared behind the counter's top lip.

Libby looked around. Had she missed something?

'Payton ... everything all right?'

Peering back over the counter, Payton gave a coy look. 'How was your, uh, weekend?'

'My *weekend*?' Libby's stomach flip-flopped twice. 'How did you know —?'

Then she saw a celebrity magazine open on the desk and the half-page

shot of her and Alex checking in at the casino Saturday afternoon. All her strength funnelled through her middle and out her toes. Baby-fawn weak, she let the counter help hold her up while she croaked out, ‘Is that the only picture?’

‘In *this* magazine. There was another one out on Friday.’

From her desk’s top drawer, Payton slid out another magazine, folded to a page, to a snap, of Alex and some unidentifiable female he was kissing in the entrance of an apartment block.

Looking uncomfortable, Payton wriggled back in her seat. ‘I’m guessing the woman Alex Wolfe’s kissing is you.’

Libby remembered Alex’s hesitation on the Manly esplanade on Saturday morning when he’d noticed a small group studying him. She remembered that one of the group had held a magazine. Now she knew what had amused them so much: they’d seen her and Alex walking together and were speculating on whether he was really *the* Alex Wolfe and if she was the woman in the photo.

Slipping against the counter edge, Libby held her woozy head. This was worse than she’d ever imagined. As Payton suggested, it wasn’t certain who the woman in that kissing photo was but it wouldn’t be hard to put two and two together after this additional *clearer* shot taken on the Gold Coast.

She’d known this kind of a leak was a possibility and yet she’d gone ahead and continued to see him intimately anyway. Now the stark reality glared out at her. If she gave Alex what he wanted on Wednesday after her evaluation, who would believe she hadn’t been charmed or, worse, bribed?

She slipped her bag, holding the pearl charm, behind her back and muttered as she headed off, ‘I’m unavailable for calls.’

But Payton wasn’t letting her friend off that easily.

‘Libby, please. Talk to me. This is so *huge*. I mean ... ohmigod ... Alex Wolfe!’ She held her heart as if it were pounding and said solemnly, ‘I bet he’s an unbelievable kisser. Did you ever think for one moment that he’d fall for you like this?’

Libby stopped, shuddered and walked haltingly back. Maybe there

were some photos she hadn't seen yet. Good Lord, she hoped there hadn't been any telescopic lenses pointed at the beach that night!

'I was telling my friend, Tawny,' Payton went on, 'that when he was here the other day I thought he was looking at you with a real sultry gleam in his eye. And then when you didn't come back from lunch at all that day, I didn't want to say anything but my imagination went through the roof—'

'Payton.' Feeling her entire body erupt in a blush, Libby threw a worried glance toward the front entrance. 'I don't want you spreading gossip like that.'

Payton's eyebrows slanted in. She looked confused. Hurt. 'But, Libby, *everyone* knows. It's all over the papers and the internet. What's wrong? If I were you, I wouldn't give a tinker's tap what the press is saying.'

Her knees gone to jelly, Libby had slumped against the counter. The internet? She felt gutted. No. She was *numb*.

Libby stumbled into her office, fell into her chair and, holding her flushed cheeks, groaned. Once upon a time she'd thrived on publicity. In her day, she'd adored being Australia's poster girl. She'd been on fire, but she wasn't so hot anymore, and a huge diversion from Alex Wolfe's usual female fare. He had a reputation for seeing starlets and supermodels and positively no one who came close to resembling her. The press would try to crucify her.

But strangely she didn't care about that aspect. She knew how Alex felt about her. How he saw her and had helped her see herself that way again too. She might have given back mobility and strength to his arm but he'd given back infinitely more.

A scratching on the window had Libby swinging around. Through the glass she caught the fervent expression of a man with shaggy coffee-coloured hair before the flash of a professional camera went off and blinded her. Shielding her eyes, she lunged over and snapped shut the blinds at the same time Payton flew through the doorway.

'Libby, a reporter's in the foyer.'

A person was on Payton's heels. Peering over her shoulder, the young man with silver framed eyeglasses held up a mini recorder. 'I'm after a

quote, Ms Henderson. People want to know about Alex Wolfe's latest love interest.'

For an instant, rather than the reporter, Libby saw Alex standing there as he had almost a week ago when he'd asked her to lunch and she'd taken that first step toward her ordinary life being turned on its head. She loved being with Alex, but she wanted no part of this.

While Payton tried to crowd the reporter back, Libby struggled to assemble her thoughts, but the intruder was beyond eager to snare this ripe opportunity.

'You were Female World Surfing Champ years ago, Libby. Do you have any comment on your accident? Does Alex know that you wear a prosthesis? Do you compare yourself to the women Alex Wolfe usually dates?'

Growling, Payton grabbed the reporter's arm and tried her best to wrestle him out. But when Libby came steadily forward, the two stopped their battle, the reporter clearly anticipating a gossip worthy response.

'You'd like a reply,' Libby asked, and the reporter nodded. So she first held the doorjamb for ballast, swung back a leg and kicked him as hard as she could in the shin. When he jumped and howled, she announced, 'That's my answer.'

Payton gave an astonished way-to-go look before Libby closed and locked the door.

Libby listened to her friend herding the reporter away while delayed tears threatened to rise. The reporter hadn't said anything new ... about her accident ... her leg ... most particularly the fact that it seemed an anomaly that a man like Alex Wolfe should find her appealing. Sexy. Scott certainly hadn't after that day.

But they were different men. Different on so many levels.

Her cell phone rang. She reached her bag and retrieved the call at the same time she saw the screen blink out the caller's name. Alex Wolfe.

'Are you available for lunch?' he said down the line. 'There's a restaurant I want to take you to but it's difficult to get a reservation. I wanted to call early.'

'You know about those magazines, don't you?' she asked straight out.

The silence on the line finally ended in an expulsion of air. ‘Yes.’

‘That’s why you phoned. To see if I knew too.’

He exhaled again. ‘I’m sorry, Libby.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ she said. ‘It was bound to happen. I knew that as well as you did.’

‘You’re okay with it?’

Libby thought about the photographer scratching at her window, the reporter barging into her office and asking the rudest questions. But she wouldn’t tell Alex what that obnoxious man had said. No doubt the press would do all they could to ask Alex the same.

*What did he find appealing about a cripple like Libby Henderson?*

‘Libby?’

‘I’m fine,’ she said, then took a breath and told herself that she was. She’d weathered worse. She’d survive. ‘I’ll be over by nine for our session but I can’t go to lunch.’

‘Can’t or won’t?’

‘Alex, we have some intense days ahead of us. Let’s concentrate on that.’

His voice deepened. ‘You’re sure you’re okay?’

She said yes but wanted to add, *Or I will be.*

She couldn’t wait for Wednesday to come and go. She knew Alex couldn’t either.

She and Alex worked diligently together on Monday and Tuesday. She told him she’d feel happier not to see each other on an intimate basis until these hard yards were out the way. They didn’t discuss those photographs again. He didn’t mention whether any reporters had tried to get a quote. She couldn’t bear to go near her computer or the internet and told Payton to do her a favour and not fill her in on any goss.

When Wednesday dawned, Libby rocked up at the Rose Bay mansion and tested Alex’s shoulder. She held nothing back and was vigilant for any sign of weakness or pain, but he showed no trace of fatigue. Never came near wincing. After their setback on Friday, she found it difficult to

believe. She didn't want to make a mistake or have anyone assume she'd forfeited her ethics for her 'boyfriend.' Her client's best interests always came first. And in this case, it seemed, Alex's interests would be best served by returning early to the track.

Of course the team doctor would want to perform his own evaluation. But she couldn't see that he wouldn't concur. Seemed Alex Wolfe would be racing in China after all. Hopefully he would surge back to the top, and her reputation would be left intact. Of course they wouldn't be attending his brother's wedding, but she had a feeling that with the eldest brother's unexpected appearance after twenty years, there would be many more Wolfe reunions in the future. Hopefully she and Alex would continue to see each other ... which meant her privacy would be affected. She could barely tolerate the thought of being corralled by heartless members of the paparazzi as she had been on Monday. But it was a price she was prepared to pay.

With the evaluation complete, Alex shrugged back into his shirt. 'Well, doc, what's the verdict?'

Standing alongside him before the mirror, she crossed her arms and raised her chin. 'I have to say that based on what I've seen today and the progress that you've made ...'

He stopped buttoning and almost frowned. 'Is it a green light or a red?'

She smiled. 'Green. In my opinion your shoulder is strong enough to cope well under professional car racing conditions.'

Ecstatic, Alex punched the air, but he was wise enough to do it with his left arm. Then he brought her close and kissed her with a tender passion that left her heart banging against her ribs. When his mouth released hers, he smiled into her eyes and then, relieved and so pleased, he laughed and Libby discovered she was laughing too. She'd made the right decision, and now she only had to wait for Alex to win that race in Beijing and then contact her to discuss how, where and when they would celebrate. The world might see her as 'not up to par' but Alex wouldn't use her emotions, use her growing affection and trust, to get what he needed. Not after everything they'd shared.

Alex strode over to collect his phone off a ledge near the treadmills. 'I

need to call the team manager. The test driver needs to be told and forms have to be signed.'

Understanding completely, Libby headed off to collect her bag.  
'Absolutely. I'll be on my way.'

Phone in hand, Alex quizzed her eyes. 'Do you need to write up a letter? Sign something?'

'I'll fix it with your assistant when I get back to the office.'

He held her gaze, his expression lighter than she'd ever seen, but somehow she knew he wasn't really seeing *her*. Rather he was imagining the crowd cheering him on this weekend. He was anticipating the challenge and thrill of being back in the driver's seat, of doing what he was born to do. Race and win. He was excited. He had every right to be.

Of course he'd need to keep up with the specific stretches and strengthening exercises, not only for the short-term but for the rest of his life. He'd need regular physio checkups to be on the safe side. Given he wasn't permanently stationed here in Sydney, it didn't necessarily have to be *her*.

Libby chewed her lip.

How much time did Alex actually spend in Australia?

As if he'd read her thoughts, Alex set the phone aside and strode over. Looking proud and happy, but also distracted, he held her upper arms and spoke in an earnest voice she hadn't heard before.

'We can celebrate next week. In the meantime ... can you fly out later today?'

She could only gape. *Fly out?*

'You mean to *China*?'

'Practice laps start tomorrow.'

Libby held her swooping stomach. She couldn't get her mind around what he'd asked. She'd assumed that he'd board his private jet and, focused only on the finish line, leave her behind. He wanted her to fly with him to Asia?

But, 'I—I can't. I have appointments.'

Responsibilities. He knew that.

His mouth pressed into a thin line. ‘There’s no use trying to convince you, I suppose. But I can be back by Tuesday. We’ll go out on the town then.’

Holding that thought, she nodded, snatched a kiss and, grinning, headed for the door. ‘Great. Then I’ll leave you with it.’

‘I’ll see you out.’

‘No. Really, I’m fine.’

But he was already a step ahead of her.

As they walked down the hall, she tried not to dwell on the fact that he didn’t take her hand or rest his palm against her back as he had these past days. His mind was thousands of miles away. Understandable. She remembered well how intense psyching up before a competition could be.

After opening the front door, he accompanied her out on to the patio. Suddenly uncertain of whether to kiss him again, shake his hand or perhaps simply send a salute, she muttered a quick, ‘Good luck,’ then headed for the steps. About to take the first, a hand on her elbow pulled her up.

She turned and peered up into his smiling eyes. ‘One more kiss and I’ll let you go.’

He was bringing her near when Libby’s thoughts leapt upon those intimate shots taken of them last week. Then she thought of those horrible questions that reporter had shot at her, and she flinched and pulled away.

‘Let’s not.’ She skipped a glance around. ‘There could be some lenses pointed this way.’

But, smiling still, he only slid a step closer so Libby took a step back. Then the ground seemed to vanish from beneath her and she was falling backward with nothing to grip. Her arms had flailed in an arc over her head and her body was going horizontal when her waist was lassoed and she was tugged back up and onto her feet.

Out of breath, she got her balance, then her bearings. She looked over in time to see Alex’s right arm fall away from its hook around the nearby patio column ... in time to see him grimace and hold his shoulder while

his jaw clenched tight. When he saw her studying him, his hand dropped away, the contorted expression vanished and he rolled back his shoulders.

Holding her roiling stomach, she came closer and reached to touch the joint. ‘Oh, God, Alex, you’re hurt.’

Winding away, he seemed stuck between a scowl and a smile.

‘I’m *fine*.’

‘Please, Alex, let me see.’

He caught her hand. ‘You were on your way to write a letter.’

‘Are you in much pain?’

‘Not even a twinge.’

She studied his darkening gaze and swallowed back worry and regret. Her voice was choked. ‘I’m sorry—’ sorrier than he could ever imagine ‘—but I don’t believe you.’

His eyes narrowed at the same time his nostrils flared and a vein pulsed down the side of his throat. ‘You want proof?’ He fisted his right hand and brought it almost level to his waist before bringing it down again. Dying inside, Libby bit her lower lip. He hadn’t been able to lift his arm any higher.

She put a professional note in her voice. ‘We’ll get another MRI.’

‘No more tests, dammit! I’m ready to drive.’

‘I’m sorry, Alex, I’m so sorry.’ She knew what it meant to him. What he thought he was losing. *Everything*. ‘But I don’t think you are ready.’ She raised her hands in a calming gesture. ‘We’ll work on it, okay? Your next race after China is when? Two weeks? If we put all our effort into —,’

‘Right now I need to make a phone call,’ he cut in, something like rage and betrayal darkening his face. ‘If you’ll excuse me.’

He turned on his heel and left Libby gaping as the door shut in her face.

At one in the afternoon, Eli Steele arrived at Libby’s practice. Payton led him straight through to her office.

Eli was a tall, attractive man. Well-mannered, Libby remembered as she rose from behind her desk. And one hundred and ten percent dedicated to Alex Wolfe. She wondered if Alex had ever abused his assistant's trust like he'd so recently abused hers. Having that twelve-foot-high door shut in her face wasn't an event she'd soon forget.

'I have communication here from Alex,' Eli said, after taking her hand in a professional greeting. 'I wanted to deliver it in person.'

Her stomach churning, Libby murmured that she appreciated that and with shaking hands opened the sealed envelope. Holding her breath, she scanned the lines.

*Libby,*

*Thank you for all your efforts. After discussions with my team manager and doctor it's been decided my situation may well benefit from a different approach. I thank you for your time and dedication to date. I will be in contact after I'm back behind the wheel. Sincerely, Alex Wolfe*

Feeling as if a bomb had exploded in her face, Libby set down the letter.

'He's ... disappointed,' Eli explained, as if that could be an excuse.

Alex was disappointed?

She sank into her chair. 'So am I.'

Particularly that he'd had Eli do his dirty work. Bet it wasn't the first time.

Like a good assistant, Eli made an excuse. 'You have to understand ... racing is Alex's life. He couldn't be a champion if he didn't concentrate everything he had on showing up and winning.'

But she was still digesting the brevity and formal tone of that note. *I thank you for your time and dedication to date.*

Her fingers balled up the paper.

Where did he come off thinking he could treat her, treat *any* woman, this way? Three days ago they were together, laughing, racing around that track at incredible speeds. Making love. *Sharing!*

Swallowing the hurt and disbelief, she set the note aside. 'You can tell

Mr. Wolfe that I expected more from him ... but I shouldn't have. I hope you don't mind me saying, Eli, neither should you.'

Alex cared only about himself—his career—and he would use anyone for any purpose to get what he needed to get to and stay on top.

Eli rearranged his feet. Nodded at the ground.

Then he blew out a breath and headed out. 'Good luck, Libby.'

Libby was still sitting, getting more incensed by the second, when Payton edged in and closed the door.

'Want to talk about it?'

'I was an idiot,' Libby admitted, her face unbearably hot. 'I did precisely what I swore I wouldn't. I got involved with a client—and not just *any* client.'

She remembered Alex reaching to kiss her and how, worried about photographers, she'd pulled away. He must know, above all else, she only wanted his shoulder to mend. This morning had been a terrible accident. Like his spin-out on the track. Like her incident in the surf. But that didn't help, did it?

She should have stuck to the original plan, the one that would've worked for everyone. She should have kept their relationship professional, no matter the temptation. Instead she'd let herself be charmed, then dumped like an old pair of jeans.

She glared at the bunched note.

She'd never told Scott how little she'd thought of his behaviour toward her after her accident. Years on she wasn't so magnanimous. How dearly she wanted to teach this particular pompous ass a lesson in decency.

On returning from Rose Bay this morning, she'd told Payton everything. Payton had hugged her for a long time. Now her friend hugged her again.

'Libby, this wasn't your fault. You're only human.'

Libby groaned. 'Seems Alex doesn't have that problem.'

How would he have acted if she hadn't signed off on his injury after the evaluation this morning? Would he have closed the door in her face anyway, as he'd done after he'd caught her on the porch?

Feeling ill, she leant back in her chair and stared blindly at the ceiling.

She had to face facts. He'd used her. She wasn't inadequate as the press had depicted. It was worse.

She was an outright fool.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

Two weeks later, standing in the pits in Catalunya, Spain, Alex watched over his team as they ran their battery of checks on his car's precision instruments.

He usually got off on the noise of the pits ... tools clanging, crews conversing, motors revving. The smell of oil and rubber and elbow grease was normally a great stimulus. The anticipation of feeling tyres gripping asphalt as he zipped around another competition track was a huge buzz. Alex thought he'd never grow tired of it.

And yet today those much loved highs were noticeably absent. In fact, his gut was mincing, and not with its usual healthy mix of pre-performance nerves and adrenaline. His malady wasn't because he didn't believe in his ability, he decided, heading toward the team manager, who was watching a sequence on a monitor at the rear of the pit. He would not only race this weekend, he would *win*. He'd made sure he'd set Libby Henderson well outside his radar so he wouldn't have that distraction playing on his mind. No way did he need to combat the same kind of turmoil he'd endured before charging out at the track before his accident.

Six weeks on, he'd digested all the family news. Jacob had returned to the scene and was working to restore old Wolfe Manor. According to Annabelle's latest communication, Nathaniel was happy and married to his new bride. She'd even sent photos of the day. Sebastian's five-star hotel—the London Grand Wolfe—was certainly something.

And Annabelle ...

Frowning, Alex remembered Libby's question about whether brother and sister had ever discussed that tragic night. For twenty years he'd managed to keep those thoughts—his sense of guilt—from intruding on his life too much. And yet lately, the more he thought about that time, the more the fact that he'd never had the courage to look Annabelle in the eye afterward niggled the hell out of him. The real kicker was that in his heart he'd always known that by avoiding her gaze, brushing the

subject under that mat, he'd only hurt her more.

His focus wandered over to the recording that the team manager was watching on the pit monitor. He recognised the track, the car. He sure as hell remembered the crash. Alex shuddered. He understood everyone was eager for that kind of incident never to occur again. Every factor leading up to, as well as the accident itself, would be mulled over and dissected again and again in a bid to avoid a repeat performance. But, dammit, he couldn't bear to watch it even one more time.

As he pivoted away, that tendon in his shoulder twinged again. He hid his flinch, then slid a casual glance around. No one had noticed. Cupping the joint, he rotated his arm and felt the faint ache again, just for a second. His strength in his injured shoulder was so much better than it had been two weeks ago. Still, every now and then ...

Deep in thought, Alex moved out toward Pit Row.

Morrissey has been in communication with the replacement physio Alex had hired, and was happy with the subsequent report. After his own examination, Morrissey had cleared Alex for this round. Jerry Squires, however, had offered a stinging remark. 'If your shoulder doesn't hold up because of the incident with that woman, I'll sue for malpractice.'

Alex hadn't been certain which incident the team owner meant. Libby's fall, which Alex had caught and the new physio had reported on, or the affair?

Either way, no matter how their relationship had ended—and it hadn't ended well—Alex would never allow Libby to be hurt because of him. He'd hurt her enough already by refusing to see her. By saying goodbye with nothing more than a note. After what they'd had together, she must despise the sound of his name.

Alex pushed those thoughts aside as his ears pricked to a different kind of hype. Before a major competition, certain members of the public were permitted down Pit Row to see, firsthand, their favourite teams and drivers prepare for the big day. Rotating the arm again, Alex moved outside and scanned the clutches of people. His attention hooked on a particular boy, perhaps twelve or thirteen, wearing a shirt sporting Alex's team logo. When the boy recognised the World Number One, he bounced on the spot and his face split with a smile that warmed Alex's

heart to its core.

Remembering a time he'd been that young and enthusiastic, Alex came forward.

'You like racing?' he asked the boy.

'*Muchas. Sí.*' He translated into English. 'Very much.'

Smiling, Alex nodded. 'What's your name?'

'Carlos Diaz.'

'When you grow up, you'd like to race?'

Carlos's dark eyes flashed and his little chest puffed out. 'I want to be like you. Brave. Smart. The best there is, *señor!*'

His mother patted the boy's dark head and apologised. '*El chico*, he has no father, but he has his dreams.'

Lowering his gaze, Alex remembered back and murmured, 'Reaching for dreams is what keeps us alive.'

The boy beamed at him—all faith and pride and resolve—and a shiver chased over Alex's skin as he was taken back to a time when he'd raced through the Oxfordshire countryside, chasing wild dreams with no one of patience or knowledge to guide him. Then Alex felt that homemade medal resting in his pocket, heavy as it never had been before.

Thoughtful, he fished the medal out and examined the tarnished surface of his most prized possession. The rough-hewn circle had become so much a part of him; Alex had believed he would carry it to his grave. This medal represented the opening of his gate. His escape. A new beginning. But maybe after all this time ...

As he weighed the medal in his palm, his gut knotted and his fingers reflexively curled over to make a fist. But then an odd sense of calm settled over him, like a friendly hand squeezing his shoulder or patting his back, and exhaling, smiling, he reached out his hand to the boy.

'This might not look like much,' Alex said, revealing the medal again, 'but for me, it's worked miracles. It represents hope and determination and most of all it's about belief. Belief in yourself.' His opened hand nudged nearer. 'I want you to have it, Carlos.'

The boy's eyes bugged out. A heartbeat later he exploded into a

barrage of animated Spanish. His mother was beside herself, holding her brow and thanking Alex repeatedly too. A sense of relief—and right—washed over him.

Alex clapped the boy's shoulder, then ruffled his hair.

'I'll have my assistant come over and get your contact details. Let's see if we can get you started.' He held up a warning finger. 'But first you'll need to learn everything there is about cars. You need to learn to appreciate their power.'

*Then you can learn to harness and direct your own.*

Carlos grabbed Alex's hand and pressed his mouth to the knuckles. '*Gracias, gracias, Señor Wolfe.*'

As he walked away, first to find Eli to have him speak with the boy, then to the team manager to relay his decision about stepping aside, Alex faced the cold hard truth of what he had done and immediately found peace with it.

He might want to tell himself different, but he was less than a hundred per cent fit to drive. He might be fit enough in the future. He couldn't know that for certain. What Alex *did* know was that he was able and willing to face that reality, look it in the eye, no matter how uncomfortable. And Libby Henderson had helped him do that.

After such a horrendous start, he was grateful for the significant life racing had provided. Grateful for his fans and his sponsors. But today he understood there was more. So much more. Question was ...

After what he'd put her through, would Libby ever let him reach out and claim it?

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WHEN Libby's cell phone rang, she reached to pick up. Then she saw the ID and her hand snatched back.

She had no appointments this morning. She'd told Payton she'd be in late—her bookkeeping needed attention and she could do that away from the office. After dressing, she'd packed up her laptop, took a walk and had ended up here, at the café where she and Alex had breakfast together those weeks before. She'd ordered pancakes and had forced her mind upon work. Too much time had been wasted on the frustrating question of Alex Wolfe.

Whenever thoughts of the weekend they'd spent together seeped in, she thrust them away. Two weeks on, those couple of days simply didn't seem real. If she hadn't kept the magazine shots and pearl charm, she might think that time with Alex was nothing but some fantastic dream.

The public must have thought so too. After the day that obnoxious reporter had hounded her, the paparazzi's interest had died. Instinct must have told them there wasn't an ongoing story and instinct was right.

So why was Alex calling now? What did she have that he could possibly want? After the way he'd treated her, she sure as hell wanted nothing from him.

By the time her mind stopped spinning, the phone had quit ringing, and the smell of coffee and natter of early-morning café patrons filtered back. With a pulse drumming in her ears, Libby retrieved the message. As she listened to the rich timbre of his voice, her head began to tingle and, after a time, she remembered to breathe.

Alex wanted her to come to his Rose Bay home. He was there, waiting for her now. He could send a car if she preferred. Then his voice deepened and he said that he was sorry for the way he'd behaved, the way he'd dismissed her when she'd obviously felt so bad about what had happened.

Libby's back went up.

He was sorry?

So he *should* be.

But then she wondered. Today, Friday, was the first qualifying round in Spain. In the paper, on the sports news, everyone had been saying that Alex Wolfe was back and ready to take pole position this Saturday in Catalunya. And yet he was here in Sydney?

Libby quarrelled with herself for another ten minutes before she packed up, slid into her car and drove to Rose Bay with her fingers clenching the wheel and her heart in her throat the whole way. If he wanted to see her, hey, she wanted to see him too, but not for let's-kiss-and-make-up time, if that's what he expected. She could think of only one reason for Alex being here rather than in Spain. He'd re-injured that shoulder during practice and had decided to reinvest in his original blindly trusty physio. To even *think* he believed she would roll over and do his bidding after the way he'd cast her off made her blood boil.

When she pulled up at his lavish home, memories of that fateful first day resurfaced. Unbelievably, the nerves mixing in her stomach were even worse today. But that wouldn't stop her from finally giving Alex a piece of her mind. He'd better have hold of his seatbelt.

Stealing herself, Libby moved up those front steps, pressed the doorbell and, counting her heartbeats, impatiently looked around. About to press again, the door fanned open. She thought she was prepared for this meeting, but standing framed by that soaring doorway, Alex looked so regal and fresh and handsome and ...

*Near.*

Coming back, Libby straightened and balled up her hands. She would *not* let herself be distracted. She had a score to settle—an ego to cut down to size—and this was the time to do it.

Libby nodded a cool greeting. 'How are you, Alex?'

'I'm good. Great actually.' With his usual casual grace, he stepped aside. 'Please, come in.'

'I thought you'd be busy on the track,' she said with remarkable poise as she skirted around and moved inside.

As he shut the door, she turned, ready to tell him that if his shoulder was still troubling him, he had better find someone else because she was no longer available. And if purple pigs had begun to fly and he was after some female companionship, he could wind out his string and go fly a kite. But before she could start, Alex was explaining about Spain.

As they stood in the massive foyer's soft fans of light, he recalled the excitement in the Spanish pits and how his team manager had watched and re-watched his spectacular crash. He admitted that, although his shoulder had been cleared in time for Spain, at the last moment he accepted that his current weakened condition wouldn't do his team any favours. And so, unbelievably, he'd stepped aside from racing until further notice. Then he described a young boy he'd met in Pit Row. A boy who dreamed of racing and being just like his hero, Alex Wolfe.

Despite her agenda, as Alex's story unfolded, Libby found herself absorbed.

'I gave Carlos, that boy,' he explained, 'my medal from Carter White.'

Libby's head kicked back. The medal his mentor had made and given him all those years ago? It meant so much to Alex. She couldn't accept that he'd handed it over to a stranger.

'But why?' she asked.

'It was time.'

'Time for what?'

'To accept the past and move ahead with my future.'

He said this boy, Carlos, had no father. Alex had set up a personal sponsorship to help with the boy's education and passion for cars. While he was on sabbatical he intended to scout for more talented teens who could use a little help.

When he took her hand, Libby was so taken aback by all she'd heard, she lacked the presence of mind to pull away.

'I came back, Libby. I've missed you.' He searched her eyes. 'I was hoping that you'd missed me too.'

He looked at her with such intense emotion. With obvious desire. But instead of being moved the way he so obviously hoped she would be, all the feelings she'd unintentionally put on the back-burner since stepping

into this house came bubbling up in a thick hot rush. Tears prickled behind her eyes. How dare he lay all that on her, then tell her that he missed her, as if he hadn't discarded her so callously before he'd left. As if he truly cared.

'You haven't mentioned the note you had Eli deliver to me,' she said, struggling to keep her voice level. She was angry. Hurt. And, dammit, justified in feeling that way.

He looked sheepish. 'I needed to get back on track.'

'Pity you didn't quite manage it.'

His eyes flashed before he stepped closer and she had to arch her neck to look into his stormy gaze. 'Don't you understand what I'm telling you? Don't you know why I'm here?'

'Not to have me work on your shoulder?' she mocked.

His brows drew in. 'Of course not.'

'Then I'm guessing you'd like to sleep with me again.'

'Don't reduce it to that,' he growled.

Emotion swelled and clogged her throat. 'You shut the door in my face,' she ground out, 'flicked me away like a fly, and you honestly think I'll throw my arms around you now?'

'I said I was wrong,' he stated. 'I apologised.'

She glared at him, then turned to leave.

*Apology not accepted.*

But he caught her wrist. When her fiery gaze met his, his expression was set, assured ... and at the same time wary.

He almost smiled. 'You don't want to go.'

'You don't know what I want.'

'Then I'll tell you what *I* want.'

He scooped her close, and before she could think to wind away, his mouth was covering hers and all the nights she'd spent dreaming of him, all the times she'd wanted to cry, came leaping up. He'd left her. She'd thought he was never coming back, and yet here he was, holding her, kissing her, telling her that ...

*That he still wanted her.*

She didn't want to kiss him back. She wanted to break away. *Run away.* She had more self-respect, more moral strength, than this.

But as the kiss deepened, and the flames licking at her veins multiplied and spread, gradually, somehow effortlessly, she felt her arms lift, circling and helping to press her body against his. If this was a dream, God help her, she never wanted to wake up.

An eternity later, the kiss ended softly but the heat of his lips remained close. He murmured one simple word.

'Stay.'

Her heart squeezed. Despite everything she knew and feared, she wanted to. But she couldn't. She couldn't let her heart railroad her head when she knew later she'd regret it. She shouldn't have kissed him back. She should never have come. She dropped and shook her head.

'No.'

He folded hair back from her face. 'What's stopping you?'

'Sanity,' she said. 'Pride.'

'They're both overrated.'

She gave into a grin but then swallowed it back down. 'Dammit, Alex, I'm not supposed be amused. I'm supposed to be—'

But when his lips grazed hers, the tail of that thought evaporated as a tingling wondrous thrill ripped through her. The final bricks of that wall crumbled and fell, and any remaining doubt or annoyance were replaced by an energy of a different kind—an awareness so consuming and overpowering that the battle was all over.

She was lost.

Taking soft slow kisses, he kneaded her upper arms, making her blood heat and hum. He'd missed her.

She sighed against his lips.

She'd missed him more than air.

Seconds melted into scorching minutes. As he gathered her closer, she ironed her palms over his shoulders, his chest. Her fingers twined around his shirt buttons while their kisses grew steamier still. With him

leading her, they blindly headed for the stairs. His shirt fell halfway up, her shirt followed close behind. At the top of the stairs, breathing laboured, his mouth broke from hers long enough to smooth the pad of his thumb sensually over her lower lip, then guide her into the master suite.

The room was cool and dark and predictably large. The carpet and satin spread on the king-size bed were steely grey. The sheets were already folded down and the heavy curtains pulled against the morning sun.

He took her hand and, his eyes on hers, led her to one side of the bed before deliberately lowering his mouth to the curve of her throat. When his teeth grazed the skin, she shivered and sighed until all her breath was gone, then she arched her neck and offered more.

Their clothes came off quickly while they were standing, sitting, finally while they were caressing and writhing amongst the sheets. As he explored her every curve and valley, she gave herself over to the fantasy, only wishing it would never end. She thought she'd lost the chance to ever feel this beautiful again, and as he gently rolled her onto her stomach and traced slow hot kisses down her back, she had to be glad she'd succumbed one more time. She'd need these memories when it was time to let that harsh light back in.

By the time his mouth joined hers again, sparks were firing through her veins and that smouldering kernel of need at her core had begun to throb and burn. His body angled and covered hers, then he was filling her, moving with long measured strokes that pushed her, inch by inch, higher up that growing wave. His head dropped into her hair at the same time his hand fanned and gripped her thigh. He murmured her name and moved against her faster, until the powder ignited, the kindling went up and she was thrown a thousand leagues into the air.

Still throbbing above her, he dotted kisses over her brow, her cheek. When he shuddered one last time and exhaled on deep satisfaction, she drew her fingers around his bristled jaw and, short of breath, tipped up to feel his lips on hers one last time.

His mouth trailed her cheek, around her jaw. He murmured things close to her ear that almost had her believing that she was and would

remain the most important thing in his life. When he reluctantly shifted to lie beside her, her mind set, she rolled to her side off the bed. As she reached to collect her bra and panties off the floor, uncertain of what she was up to, Alex sat slowly up.

‘Don’t get dressed,’ he said lightly. ‘If you have appointments this afternoon, just this once, cancel.’

‘I don’t have any appointments,’ she said, fitting the bra’s clasp.

He leaned over and warm fingers traced her back. ‘Then lie down. I want to hold you.’

Lord, she was tempted. But it was out of the question. Alex had to know that. After what they’d shared, she didn’t want to argue. Still she had to say this and say it now. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she turned and looked him in the eye.

‘Alex, this won’t happen again.’

His brows knitted, then he sat up straighter and ran a hand through his thick crop of hair. Finally he shook his head.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Right or wrong, I love being with you. You can make me forget ... *everything*. It’s almost enough ...’ Emotion stuck in her throat and, wishing this was over, she lowered her gaze.

‘Enough for what?’

‘To make me forget what you did. How you treated me.’

*How you used me.*

‘Libby, for God’s sake. I did what you wanted. I wasn’t sure about my shoulder so I threw it all in and came back.’ He reached and gripped her hand. ‘I came back to you.’

Who was he trying to fool? ‘You shouldn’t have left like that in the first place!’

‘You honestly can’t understand what I was going through?’

‘I know what it’s like to be on top,’ she said, ‘and then have the rug pulled out from beneath you. It’s a huge shock. It hurts like hell. I get it.’ Of course she did.

His gaze pierced hers for a heart-stopping beat, then he flung back the

sheet and, in a temper, leapt out of bed.

'Don't make it sound like I'm washed up. Like I'm a has-been with nothing to look forward to.'

A surge of indignation ignited her cheeks. Of course he would see her as 'nothing.'

Clenching her jaw so hard her teeth ached, she thrust her feet through her trouser legs. She didn't need to stay here to listen to this. To Alex defending his precious title, even in the bedroom.

By the time her shoes were on, he seemed to have contained himself, although his voice was tellingly tight. 'I don't know why you can't put it behind you.'

'Same way you hope Annabelle's put it all behind *her*?'

She rotated to see his powerful silhouette seeming to grow larger against the shuttered light. A measure of her bravado slipped when he strode around the bed and, rigid with anger, loomed over her.

'I apologised, damn it. I've *explained*.' His eyes blazed with outright frustration. 'What the hell do you *want* from me?'

She sized him up. He wasn't blind. Neither was he stupid. If he couldn't see what she wanted—what any woman in her position would want—she sure as hell wouldn't tell him.

Defiant—poised—she crossed her arms. 'I don't want anything from you.'

A pulse in his cheek beat erratically at the same time his grey eyes darkened, like twin thunderstorms about to unleash. But then the breath seemed to leave his body and, after two long torturous beats, his chin tipped up.

'You want to punish me for what I did. But, Libby, you're punishing us both.'

'Punishing? Or protecting?'

A patronising look on his face, he reached for her but she wound away. His mouth pressed into a hard line at the same time his jaw shifted. When he reached for her again, this time he didn't try for her wrist. Now he demanded her full attention. As his hands seized her

upper arms, his mouth tilted on a sardonic smile.

‘Don’t tell me you’re sorry that today happened. Don’t try to tell me you really want to go.’

‘You’re right.’ *Dear God.* ‘I want to stay.’

But she couldn’t forget Scott, or Leo. More so, she couldn’t forget how Alex had dismissed her so heartlessly two weeks ago. Tears building in her eyes, she tried but couldn’t swallow past the claw opening in her throat.

‘But no matter how much I’d like for you to hold me—’ *kiss me* ‘—I won’t lay myself open to that kind of hurt again.’

The world seemed to shrink and press in on her lungs, on her heart, as the hold on her arms tightened. She wondered what he’d do next. Throw her out? Turn his back. Before her mind could grasp a third possibility, his mouth came crashing down, capturing and claiming hers without apology. Without reserve.

His caress was like a giant vacuum, devouring all memory other than the sublime sensory. As she lost herself to sensation, Alex curled over her more, driving her to surrender. Convincing her that she couldn’t break free. He wouldn’t allow it.

When his lips finally, grudgingly, left hers, their breathing was ragged and the room was spinning. His palms slid up over her shoulders to rest either side of her neck, and as his heavy gaze penetrated hers, she recognised the appeased certainty glowing in his eyes. His chest expanded as his focus dropped to her parted lips and his thumbs drew coaxing circles beneath her lobes.

‘Now did *that* feel as if I want to hurt you?’

‘I never said you wanted to,’ she got out, feeling giddy. Weak. ‘That doesn’t mean you won’t.’ That you won’t *again*.

His gaze hardened. ‘I won’t let you do this. I won’t let you push me away.’

‘No. You’d rather keep me hanging around until you’re ready to get back to what’s really important.’ His only true passion. Racing.

Growling, he threw his hands away from her and made to hold his head as if legions of demons were scratching at his brain.

‘Damn it, Elizabeth! Why do you have to be so *difficult*?’

‘Would you rather I was more like Annabelle?’ she shot out. He’d never been honest and open with her and, for whatever reason, his sister had let it slide.

His voice lowered to a dangerous pitch. ‘Keep her out of it. You know nothing about Annabelle.’

‘What’s worse is neither do you.’

‘Do not change the subject.’

As he enunciated each word, emotion filled her throat, stung her eyes, but she wouldn’t keep quiet. She wasn’t poor Annabelle.

‘You *use* people, Alex. You’d do anything—use anyone—to keep in front of the pack. You used Carter White. You use Eli Steele. You use your fans and your team and your money to put a divider between you and your past. You set out to use *me*—’

‘That’s not *true!*’ His roar echoed through the room before his resolute gaze wavered and finally dropped away. ‘Not after I got to know you.’

Libby slumped. But why should she feel so disappointed? Hadn’t she known it all along? Then. Now. She was no more than a tool for Alex to manipulate to get what he needed.

When he sank down to sit on the edge of the bed, suddenly all the fight went out of her too. What was left was dull, deep acceptance. The realisation this was over and it needed to be. She stood and, leaving him behind, made her way down the stairs and out that door one last time.

She understood why Alex was happier living behind his safety nets. She was guilty of it too. It hurt less. But no matter how hard Alex pretended to be together—whole—the sad lonely truth was he was more damaged than she’d ever been.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

‘THOUGHT I’d find you here. Which one are you thinking of taking out?’

At the sound of Eli’s voice, Alex held off throwing his third dart and turned to see his friend entering the Rose Bay backyard garage. After this morning’s emotional roller-coaster ride with Libby Henderson, he could use a little uncomplicated male company.

When Libby had left earlier, Alex had been at a loss. Since he’d received that email from Annabelle weeks ago his life had been like a dodgem car race, complete with bang-ups and standstills and mind-spinning turnarounds. He’d done the right thing in Spain. He felt good about mentoring that boy. As far as pulling out of the race, given the intermittent pain in his shoulder, he’d had no choice but to step aside. He hadn’t been so sure in predicting Libby’s reaction to his invitation to his home. Their meeting had started off fiery. When they’d moved to the bedroom things had only got hotter. After making love he’d assumed their differences were all squared away.

Not even close.

Alex hurled the last dart and hit an inch off bullseye—not bad for left-handed. Then he ambled forward, past the old beat-up wreck in the corner, and wriggled the darts from the cork.

‘I don’t feel like driving.’ Alex offered up the darts to his friend. ‘Want a throw?’

Eli tugged his ear. ‘I need to rush out and buy a hearing aid. Did you say you don’t feel like *driving*? Has your arm got worse? I thought you were fine for everyday conditions.’

He gave a shrug that let Eli know that wasn’t it.

Alex sat on a stool and twirled the darts between his fingers, watching the red and black feathers swirl one way, then the other, while he thought over what Libby had said ... about Annabelle and Carter and Eli. He couldn’t get her words out of his mind.

‘Have you ever let a woman get to you?’ Alex finally asked.

‘Get to me?’

‘You know. Get into your blood. Screw with your brain. She haunts me, Eli, and, I tell you, I’m done with it. I want her gone—’ determined, he flung all three darts at the board at once ‘—out of my head.’

Eli pulled up a stool. ‘You mean out of your heart.’

Alex stood to retrieve the darts. ‘Don’t talk to me about what I think you’re going to talk to me about.’

‘In three years, that’s the first time I’ve heard you ramble.’

Alex grunted and, darts in hand, took up his position behind the line. ‘That’s her fault.’

‘You’re one stubborn SOB, you know that?’

‘Nothing but compliments today.’ He threw the darts, one, two ... When the last one hit the wall, he took stock and caught Eli’s eye and apologised, which he didn’t do often.

‘Sorry. I’m out of sorts today.’

‘You’ve been on your own a long time, Alex.’

Halfway to the dartboard, Alex stopped and looked at his friend hard. ‘You’re not going all Dr Phil on me, I hope.’

‘What is it about Libby that frightens you?’

‘Why would I be frightened?’

‘Make that terrified.’

Alex wriggled the darts out again. ‘I simply know what I’m capable of.’ Or he thought he’d known.

She’d asked him if she was protecting them both and she’d had a bloody good point. He loved being with her. He couldn’t imagine finding that kind of connection again. But he wouldn’t pretend that he could promise anything and Libby had known it. He didn’t do commitment unless it was to the track.

‘If you ask me,’ Eli said, ‘and you did, you need to look at this from a wider perspective.’

‘It’s cut and dried. She wants something from me that I simply can’t give.’

‘Commitment. Maybe marriage.’

That’s what she wanted, all right. Then, like magic, the goodbye note and door shut in her face would be forgotten. *Poof!*

Alex pointed out, ‘I’ve known her a matter of weeks.’

‘And despite that she put her reputation on the line when she agreed to that early evaluation.’

‘That point is moot.’

After he’d hurt his shoulder again—catching Libby when she’d spilled off the patio—her evaluation had meant nothing. He’d had to start physio again. But he’d needed to work with someone else. He couldn’t abide any more distractions. His life had become too complicated as it was.

Eli pushed up to his feet, walked around the stool and crossed his arms. ‘Right. You don’t want to drive. Seems like you don’t want to talk. I’m sure you don’t want to sit around all week wishing you could swap these toys for a chance to be with her again.’ He paused to consider. ‘Did you tell her you understood how she felt?’

‘I’m pretty sure I showed her, Eli.’

‘Did you say you were sorry? It’s not so easy for us guys, I know.’

Alex was about to say yes, he’d apologised, and more than once. But then the words slipped away and he was left with the image of Libby, sitting beside him while he screeched around that private Gold Coast track. He was struck by the memories of how exhilarated and, to some extent, shaken he’d been afterward, knowing he’d never shared anything like that kind of experience before.

Wondering more, he angled his head.

Was he ....could he be ... in *love*? Did he *love* Libby Henderson in the forever-after way? Marriage, family, ‘can I truly move on from my gritty childhood’ way? She brought out emotions and admissions no one else could.

But then another image faded up ... Annabelle. And the old scarred memories that he wished to Hades he could forget came crashing down again. All those years ago Annabelle had so desperately wanted to be part of his ‘cool’ crowd. Instead of listening to her, protecting her that

night, he'd shoved her off home—shut the door in her face—and continued on with his own thing. As if it were yesterday he remembered the next morning, running from the police in that beat-up blue sedan over there, then facing the truth about the obscenities that had occurred the night before.

He'd felt responsible for so much of Annabelle's hurt and shame. If he hadn't turned her away, she wouldn't have been beaten by that worthless sod who'd dared call himself their father. Jacob wouldn't have had to bear the guilt of committing patricide, even if he was subsequently acquitted of all charges. Self-defence. He'd defended Annabelle. Defended them all. And Alex had lacked the courage to apologise to his twin for casting her off that night, for handing her over to that animal on a platter.

They all had their wounds. But was it too late to talk about it now? To give a part of himself he hadn't ever thought worth giving.

Alex dropped his head into his hands and, his chest aching, groaned aloud, 'Is it too late?'

'I don't think so,' Eli replied. 'But do it soon, mate. For both your sakes.'

After Eli left, Alex went into his office and clicked into his email account. He brought up Annabelle's address but then his gaze flicked to the phone. His sister, once so lively, was so reserved these days. She preferred a less personal form of communication but this time he needed to hear her voice, and she needed to hear his.

He punched in her quick dial, but when his stomach flipped he disconnected and dropped the phone on the desk. After such a long silence, did he want to do this? Could he bring up the most traumatic night of both their lives and be certain it wouldn't do more harm than good? What if she confirmed what he'd always feared most? That she hadn't forgiven him for thrusting her aside. Letting her down.

Just like he'd let Libby down.

His gut churning, Alex fell into the chair and held his brow.

These past weeks, this unease about the past had built until now he felt as if he were drowning. At this moment, it pressed down so heavily

he could barely breathe. Even if Annabelle's reaction was less than accepting, he *had* to get this off his chest. He had never meant to hurt his sister.

And Libby ...?

Setting his jaw, he collected the phone, punched in the quick dial again and, on tenterhooks, waited to hear if Annabelle picked up when she saw his ID.

Six rings. Seven.

A click and then ...

'Alex? Is that you?'

'*Annabelle.*' His pent-up breath came out in a rush. 'It's good to hear your voice.'

'Do you know what time it is? What's wrong?'

He glanced at the wall clock and cursed under his breath. He hadn't considered the time difference. She'd be half asleep. His throat tightened. Maybe he ought to phone back.

'Alex? Are you all right?'

Concern had deepened her tone. If he hung up now, she might be up half the night worrying. This might feel a thousand times more difficult than it should be but, for better or worse, he was committed.

He cleared his throat, pushed to his feet and rushed a hand through his hair.

'There's something I need to say. I'd rather say it in person, but I'm afraid it can't wait.' This had waited long enough. He swallowed his fear and confessed after twenty long years.

'Annabelle, I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. I'm sorry I turned you away.'

A long silence echoed down the line before, sounding unsure, uneasy, his sister replied, 'What are you talking about?'

'That night.' The night no one ever mentioned. 'I'm sorry I was a jerk and booted you out of that party when I should have taken care of you. I'm sorry—' His voice caught and he found himself swallowing hard against the pit in his throat. 'I'm sorry I wasn't there for you afterward. I

didn't know ...' He exhaled and, broken, admitted, 'I felt guilty ... I didn't know what to say. How to say it.'

When more silence wound down the line, a withering feeling sailed through him. He shouldn't have rung. Annabelle had built up a wall just as he had done. He had no right trying to break it down after so long. He should have left this buried—

But then he heard a snuffle, then a sigh, and a spark of hope lit in his chest.

'All these years,' Annabelle murmured, her voice soft and thick, 'I thought you were angry with me for causing so much trouble that night.'

Astounded, Alex coughed. 'What? No. I was never angry with you. I was angry with me.'

'We were children.' He heard the strain in her voice and imagined the glistening tears edging her eyes. 'It was nobody's fault.'

Wondering, Alex's hand tightened around the phone. Nobody's fault? Surely she hadn't forgiven their father. But something kept him from asking. William Wolfe was the monster behind all this pain, but Alex didn't want that name mentioned in this conversation. This was about him and Annabelle. About finally making it right between brother and his wounded and much loved sister.

'Can you forgive me?' he asked, trying not to flinch as his mind's eye called up that single red welt marring her still-beautiful face.

'Oh, Alex. No matter how far apart we've seemed, you're my other half. You always will be.'

His eyes misting over, Alex lowered into the chair and as he and Annabelle spoke more, for the first time in his life he knew a sense of true belonging. When he'd finished that phone call, despite knowing the time difference now, he called and spoke to his old friend, Carter White, and vowed to keep in touch.

He was finally making peace with himself and people from his past but he wouldn't rest until he had at least one other's. The person who had set this all in motion.

He'd given Libby parts of himself he'd never allowed anyone else to glimpse. But he'd given her much more than that. He'd given her his

heart.

God knows he hadn't meant to. The very idea was as foreign as it was ... *healing*. Although, after their argument today, he suspected Libby would rather consume hot coals than admit it, Alex more than sensed she felt the same way. He'd hurt her—deeply—just as he had Annabelle, and Libby wasn't prepared to be hurt again. He couldn't blame her. But now he knew to the depths of his soul what they could have together. What they *both* wanted and needed.

If it took the rest of his life, he wouldn't take her no for an answer.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

‘You amaze me, Libby. So many talents and you know your way around a hotplate as well.’

Collecting the plates from her dining table, Libby sent Payton an amused look. ‘Chicken and roast vegetables aren’t exactly haute cuisine.’

‘It is the way you do them,’ Payton said, following her friend into the kitchen.

Libby had invited Payton over for a meal, or rather Payton had suggested they go out, grab a bite, maybe catch a movie. But Libby had baulked at venturing out in public. Since breaking off with Alex last week, she’d tried her best to stay upbeat but, in truth, she hadn’t felt much like company.

Friday afternoon last, she’d confided in Payton about the goings-on of that morning. How she’d confronted Alex and things had taken a left turn. Although walking away that day was the right thing to do, her sense of loss cut so deep that sometimes it hurt to breathe. Reason told her that she had everything to live for and yet she had the hardest time convincing her heart to listen. When she forced her mind on work, she felt in some ways happier, but when she was alone she couldn’t help but remember and wish things had turned out differently. Payton had noticed her mood, which was why she’d prescribed some R and R tonight.

While Libby rinsed the plates, Payton put away the condiments. ‘If you’re not tired, I could go pick up a DVD. Or we could just talk.’

Libby appreciated the gesture, but it was getting late and they both had work tomorrow. She looked up from the running tap.

‘I’m fine, Payton, honest.’ She stacked the rinsed plates on the drainer. ‘You go home and get some shut-eye.’

‘Are you ready for bed?’

‘I might go for a walk.’

'At this time of night?' Payton disappeared into the living room. Libby found her shrugging into her bright pink coat. 'I'll come with you.'

Libby smiled. Payton could be a little on the flighty side but her heart was big and her concern was always sincere.

'The path along the esplanade's well lit.' Joining Payton, Libby touched her friend's arm. 'I'll be fine.'

Payton's mouth pulled to one side before she let out a lungful of air. 'Well, if you're sure you don't want the company.' She lowered her gaze, then caught Libby's again. 'You know there's no one I admire more than you. You're the strongest person I know.'

Libby's throat constricted. She'd always tried to tell herself strength was what mattered. If you kept that, you could do anything. She was alive and had wonderful family and a great practice and excellent friends. One day she'd find romantic love again.

One day ...

After she and Payton said goodbye, Libby packed the dishwasher, then wandered over to the opened curtains. Feeling hollow, she let her gaze trail over the moonlit waters of tonight's calm ocean. Once she'd been a mistress of those waves, and when that world had collapsed she'd knuckled down and had built another. In time this dull dead ache in her stomach would fade. Sometime in the future she would get over Alex Wolfe and his dazzling smile, his dynamite personality ... the unbelievably beautiful way he made love....

Growling at herself, Libby grabbed a light jacket and headed out to find that fresh air. She needed to get over this bout of self-pity, she decided, taking the lift to the ground floor. Maybe she ought to learn how to jog again. Nothing cleared the cobwebs and left you exhausted like a solid four-k run. And she really needed a holiday. Perhaps Thredbo. If she could dip and do the tango, there was no reason she couldn't relearn how to snow ski.

Five minutes later, she was moving down the same esplanade pathway Alex and she had enjoyed strolling along weeks earlier. The three-quarter moon smiled down, the powerful ocean breathed in and out, and yet, with all her tentative go-slay-'em plans, Libby's heart still felt horribly empty.

Stopping at a stairway leading to the beach, her heartbeat began to skip. The only time she'd felt sand between her toes since her accident had been that incredible night she'd spent with Alex. He'd forced her to face that fear and she'd conquered it. It had been a gigantic step. Would she ever have found the courage if not for him?

Libby took in a lungful of air, and another, then headed down the stairs. When she hit the uneven soft sand, she tipped sideways but not nearly enough to fall. Regaining her balance, she focused on her feet, half buried. She lowered onto the bottom step and removed her shoes.

A moment later, her toes dug into the cool powdery grains and Libby's heart flew to her throat as a thousand wonderful memories flooded her mind ... of when she was a child with her family, then as a teen with the world at her feet, and finally as a woman, finding true courage again while falling in love.

Gradually she pushed to her feet, then drew the clamshell pearl charm from a pocket. As she rotated the piece in her palm, the moonlight caught the stones and threw back dazzling prisms of blue light. In some ways, at least, she must have meant something special to Alex.

Hadn't she?

A bus roared past and Libby glanced off to the road. Tonight there seemed to be more traffic than usual—family cars, lorries, motorbikes. But their noise was gradually swallowed up by the throatiest, roughest engine ever slapped together. Libby pivoted further around and peered up the street. Was someone taking their steam train for a run?

The streetlights reflected in her eyes but when she squinted and refocused, she recognised the car. Her stomach pitched. It was one of a kind and she could imagine only one person ever driving it.

Same dull powder-blue paint job. Same massive dents and scratches. She took a few disbelieving steps nearer.

Why was Alex driving that wreck?

What was Alex doing *here*, full stop!

The car swerved into a park and the volcanic rumble from its engine shut down. Libby gathered herself as a rusty door squeaked and slammed shut. Alex glanced first at the building, then, as if guided by

radar, swung his gaze around. With half a football field between them, their eyes connected. The next instant he was leaping the beach wall and landing with an athletic grace and determination that left her weak. Without missing a beat, he continued his beeline to the spot where she stood.

When he stopped before her, looking larger than life and more handsome than she'd ever seen him, Libby wished she had a prop to lean against. He left her off balance. Dizzy with a flurry of emotions.

As a sea breeze tugged at his hair and his billowing shirt, she swallowed against the great lump in her throat. The question *Why did you come?* burned the tip of her tongue but she didn't feel ready to hear his response.

Instead she asked, 'Why are you driving that wreck?'

He owned so many amazing cars. That one sounded as if it were ready to cough out its last breath.

'I decided it was time to settle up with slices of my past and either unload or re-embrace them.' He jerked a thumb back at the bomb. 'I'm going to do her up again. She's still beautiful despite the beating she took. I owe it to her—me too—to make it right.'

Libby quizzed his committed gaze. There was more to what he'd said—to the expression on his face—but before she could ask, he went on. 'I didn't expect to find you down here, walking on the sand.'

She stole a glance over her shoulder, saw the tide was on its way in, and instinctively took two steps toward the road ... toward Alex. And that was dangerous. Whatever he was doing here—to apologise again, to seduce her because he knew he could—no matter what her heart said, she didn't want to hear it.

'I thought you'd be in another country by now,' she stated stiffly.

Beneath the moon-and streetlight, a ghost of a smile touched his lips. 'I have business to attend to.'

'Business?'

Holding her with his eyes, he stepped closer. 'Of the utmost importance.'

With her heartbeat pounding in her ears, she managed an offhanded

shrug. ‘Something to do with your aftershave?’

‘Something to do with you, Libby. To do with us.’

When that smile reached his eyes, her skin flashed hot. She dropped her gaze to the wet sand at her feet and held herself tight. His coming here, playing with her like this ... it wasn’t flattering or charming. After the way they’d parted, knowing the way she felt, this was plain cruel.

‘I need to go.’

She moved to angle around him but he blocked her path.

‘Libby, listen to me. *Please.*’

Trembling inside, she kept her gaze lowered on the damp ripples left on the sand by the tide. If she peered into those soft grey depths now, he might talk her into anything.

With a knuckle he lifted her chin and, when their eyes met, his searching hers so deeply, she felt her will being sucked away.

‘You said yourself. We understand each other. We appreciate each other too—’ his brows nudged together ‘—even if there were times I didn’t let you know like I should have. Maybe we wouldn’t share that understanding if our lives had been spared the tragedy. I wish my childhood had been different, that my father had been a loving, caring man who had cheered me on instead of either ignoring me or trying to crush me beneath his heel. I wish I’d known my mother.’ He took both her hands in his, so warm and firm. ‘And you must wish that you hadn’t gone into the surf that day. We’ve been dealt some bad cards but it’s the only hand we had to play.’ His arm slipped around her waist and he smiled softly. ‘We’re survivors. We brush ourselves off and we find a way to go on.’

A ragged breath caught in her chest. Her heart was squeezing so much her lungs hurt. And plump tears were rising, welling in her eyes. Dammit, he wasn’t playing fair.

‘You know how I feel about your childhood.’ She wished she’d been there as an adult to have rescued them all. ‘But what happened back then ...’ She swallowed against raw emotion. ‘Alex, it doesn’t have anything to do with now.’

‘I think it does.’ His voice lowered. ‘Everyone’s destined to take some

wrong turns, like me suggesting at the start that you go against your conscience. Like shutting you out that day.' A pulse beat in his throat as he drew her gently near. 'That was wrong. I knew it, but I was trying to convince myself that retaining the championship was more important. I wanted to keep what I had. What I knew. But being with you ...' His gaze intensified as it roamed her face. 'You've taught me there's more than wanting to drive fast cars. I've learned that I *want* more. Can *give* more. That I'm ready.'

Just as he'd asked, Libby had listened, with the wash of the waves coming closer and the hope of his words reaching mercilessly deep.

Her question was a hoarse anxious whisper. 'How much more?'

'I want it all,' he said simply. 'Marriage, kids. But only with you. I want us to have a life. Together I know we'll do it right.' His gaze dropped to her lips before finding her eyes again. 'I love you, Libby. I love you so much.'

She sucked down a breath at the same time a hot tear sped down her cheek. Was this a dream? Had she heard right?

'Are you saying ...?'

'I'm asking you to marry me.' His warm lips brushed her temple. 'God knows I can live without chequered flags. I can't live without you.'

Another tear fell, and another. He wanted her to believe in him. He *loved* her. Couldn't live without her. She wasn't sure which way to turn. What to say.

She swallowed back disbelieving, happy tears again. 'You're sure?'

'As sure as I know that together we can do anything. Go anywhere. Have everything.'

She gave in to the feelings that had haunted her these past days and, wanting so much to trust—to believe—she finally surrendered and let the words come.

'I love you too.' Her throat ached with the depth of her love. 'You can't imagine how much.'

Her words were barely out before his mouth claimed hers and every fibre in her body sparked like tinder and caught light. As his arms drew her closer still, she submitted, to his kiss, to his belief in them both. Most

of all she submitted to their love.

A series of car horns, blaring from the street, brought her back. She and Alex glanced toward the road. Some young men in souped-up cars were beeping and hooting at the couple shamelessly embracing on the beach.

Laughing softly, Alex brought his gaze back to hers, then cocked a brow. ‘You know what this means, don’t you?’

‘We’ll probably wind up in tomorrow’s newspaper?’

‘In that case, let’s give them something to talk about.’

His left arm hooked under her legs and then her feet were swinging in the air and she was cradled firmly against his chest.

She gasped. ‘Be careful! Your shoulder.’

‘I’m strong enough for this.’

When he moved toward the water, Libby’s blood pressure dropped and she stiffened to a board. ‘*What you are doing?*’

‘Don’t worry. We’ll do it together.’

‘You mean go into the water? Now?’

‘Do it this once,’ he said, ‘then, if you want, you can put it behind you.’

Her head began to prickle. She broke out in an all-over sweat. ‘I ... I can’t.’

But he began moving again, then she heard his feet swishing through the water and felt the cool spray of the sea on her skin.

‘I’ll keep you safe,’ he said. ‘From this moment on I’ll always be here for you. I’ll never turn away.’

Carefully she laced her arms around his neck but gasped when her foot swept through the cool wet.

Concerned, he pulled up. ‘You okay?’

She nodded, at first in reflex, then a second time knowing, remarkably, that she was, indeed, better than fine. Alex was right. She’d always needed to do this at least once, and now, safe in his arms, she knew that she could.

As the water reached higher, she told herself to relax and soon the familiar roll of the waves was lapping her body, as it had so many times before, and Alex was smiling down at her, love and pride shining in his eyes.

‘How’s that?’

‘A little weird,’ she admitted, ‘but mostly ... like I’m saying hello to an old friend.’

His smile said he’d known it all along.

‘So how about it, Libby? Will you be my bride?’

Tears slid from the corners of her eyes. Happy tears. Tears that made her feel as if she were the luckiest, most beautiful woman alive.

Alex Wolfe, the man she loved with all her heart, wanted to marry her.

‘There’s nothing I want more.’ She held his bristled jaw in her palm as the gratitude inside her swelled. ‘I love you.’

Those gorgeous grey eyes glistened and smiled into hers. ‘Say it again.’

As the waves gently lapped, she grazed her thumb over his bottom lip and confessed, ‘I love you ... like I didn’t know existed.’

As he kissed her again, he waded in deeper and those old affirmations swirled back into her mind.

*I can do this.... There’s nothing to be nervous about.... No need, Libby, to be scared.* And then that pleasant tingling heat flooded her body in the same instant a perfect sense of serenity descended and her eyes drifted shut.

The past would always be there but as long as she and Alex were together—for the lifetime that they’d share and be in love—their lives, their future, would be an open road. An accepting sea.

Nothing and no one would ever stand in their way.

## **1997: Jacob begins to recover ...**

After leaving the sanctuary of the monastery and empowered by the monks' calm approach to life, Jacob became eager to resume his new life. His path took him to South America and the building of a new hospital. But quickly he discovered that the release he had once found in physical labour was missing—Jacob needed more ...

Frustrated with the uninspiring designs for the building, Jacob worked on plans of his own, convincing people with his passion and overseeing a new vision for the building, inspiring everyone. Soon Jacob was headhunted by a firm eager to see more visionary designs from this enigmatic man. Jacob took the job, desperately trying to grasp at a normal life.

But Jacob's blood still thrummed with an unanswered restlessness and he soon tired of working for a huge faceless corporation. So Jacob did what he did best and left, setting up his own architecture business. Still unable to settle, he divided his time between his fledgling company and bland hotel rooms devoid of any soul, still believing he didn't deserve to call any place home ...

## **BEHIND THE SCENES AT WOLFE MANOR ...**

### **Share a secret about Alex or Libby?**

Alex Wolfe has won racing titles and trophies all over the world! But his most prized possession is a home-made medal his mentor awarded him when he was only a volatile, directionless teenager starting out.

### **Who is the biggest, baddest Wolfe?**

We certainly have an assortment to choose from! I wouldn't classify Alex as the biggest and baddest ... perhaps the most driven (and sexy!). I have a soft spot for Lucas. His way of coping with the past is both charming and self-destructive. He's a lucky man to have found a woman like Gracie-Belle.

### **Which Wolfe brother did you most fancy?**

Aside from Alex ... I'd have to say Jacob. As the eldest, Jacob had so much weighing on his shoulders, before and particularly after his beast of a father died. I love the way he made a commitment to bring the Wolfe pack back together. So much soul-searching, and adventure of every kind, happens along the way!

### **Which is Alex's favourite room in Wolfe Manor?**

Trick question! Although Alex retains snippets of fond memories growing up with his brothers and twin sister, Annabelle, in Wolfe Manor, by his teens he was *desperate* to escape the house that had caused him and his family so much grief. Rather than his favourite room, perhaps the area that haunts Alex most is the staircase. One night at the bottom of those stairs, so many Wolfe lives, including his own, were torn apart and changed forever.

### **How did Alex pop the big question?**

Although Australian Libby Henderson was once the female world surfing champion, due to a shocking accident that ripped her away from that profession forever, she avoids the sand and the sea. It's through knowing

Alex that Libby begins to overcome her fear and welcome again what had once been so much a part of her life. It's when she's walking along the beach, wondering what the future holds, that Alex surprises her with both revelations that leave her weak and never more wanting, as well as a proposal no woman could refuse.

## **ROBYN'S WRITING SECRETS ...**

**What do you enjoy most about writing as part of a continuity series; how does it differ from writing a single title?**

The Bad Blood series is my very first continuity! I was *thrilled* to be asked to join with authors I adore as a reader, and was blown away by everyone's generosity of time and information as we worked together to make sure this set of stories developed into the amazing romances they have. I was sorry to say goodbye to my gorgeous brave hero and the woman who made the difference in his life. But I'm thankful to have had the opportunity to become friends with such a great bunch of writers. It was wonderful to have company while I was creating and tapping away!

**What do you think makes a great hero/heroine?**

Strength coupled with a vulnerability that only one special person can truly identify with and have the ability to heal. Alex Wolfe is that quintessential blend of raw courage and tenderness. He so deserved a happy ending.

**When you are writing, what is a typical day?**

I write every day in some form or another! But a typical weekday means getting the kids off to school, answering e-mails, blogs, etc. Then reading over what was written the day before. Somewhere in between collecting the children, I work out with a personal trainer. (The body doesn't get much exercise sitting behind a laptop!) After homework, dinner and catching up for an hour or so with my wonderful husband, I'm back into it—sometimes until 2 or 3 in the morning and, on occasion, all the way through! What can I say? I'm addicted!

LYNN RAYE HARRIS

**BAD BLOOD**

**HEARTLESS REBEL**

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**LYNN RAYE HARRIS** read her first Mills & Boon® romance when her grandmother carted home a box from a yard sale. She didn't know she wanted to be a writer then, but she definitely knew she wanted to marry a sheikh or a prince and live the glamorous life she read about in the pages. Instead she married a military man, and moved around the world. These days she makes her home in North Alabama, with her handsome husband and two crazy cats. Writing for Harlequin is a dream come true. You can visit her at [www.lynnrayeharris.com](http://www.lynnrayeharris.com).

Many thanks to Sarah, Caitlin, Abby, Robyn, Janette, Jennie, and Kate for making this project so much fun to work on! The only thing that could have made it more fun was if we'd had a writers' retreat somewhere tropical while we worked. Maybe next time ...

# CHAPTER ONE

CARA TAYLOR wiped sweaty hands against the tight satin of her skirt, hoping she didn't leave an imprint. Tonight was the night. The biggest night of her career as a croupier thus far, and she'd just been dealt a blow she wasn't sure she could recover from.

Bobby wanted her to throw the game. Cara took a deep breath to steady herself. She could do this. She *had* to do this. The men who would arrive at her table in just a few minutes were some of the wealthiest, most daring men in the world. In many ways, though they made her job possible, she loathed them. They were accustomed to waging millions of dollars on one turn of the cards, and just as accustomed to losing as they were winning. This was child's play for them.

Did it matter if she was the instrument of their losses tonight? Not one of them would go home poor. Not one of them understood what it was like to lose everything they had, to fight and struggle for survival on a daily basis.

Cara knew. She'd been fighting to save her family since Hurricane Katrina blew through New Orleans over five years ago and devastated their home. And not only their home; Katrina had also blown away the diaphanous veil obscuring her father's dark secrets. With her father's betrayal and her mother's subsequent breakdown, it had been Cara's responsibility as the oldest to make sure her family was safe and well. It had taken a long time and a lot of work—not to mention putting her own dreams on hold—but she'd gotten them back on their feet.

Tonight, she finally had a chance to put financial worries behind them for good. She would set Mama up with enough money to make sure the house was paid for and the exorbitant insurance premiums covered. Since the hurricane, insurance companies had raised their rates through the roof. And Mama didn't want to move farther inland.

Though it often frustrated Cara, she also understood it in a perverse way: New Orleans was home. Mama had been born and raised there, and she couldn't leave it. Nor, it seemed, could Cara's sister, Evie. She

chewed the inside of her lip. If not for Evie staying home to help Mama and their little brother, Remy, Cara wouldn't be here. And since she was here, she owed it to them all to do everything she could to secure their future.

After tonight, Remy would continue to have the specialized care he needed, which was the most important consideration of all. The bonus Bobby had promised her when she'd agreed to come to Nice for the opening of his new casino would finally enable her to achieve all the goals she'd had when she'd left home.

But first she had to throw this game.

"You understand what you have to do," an oily voice said from behind her.

Cara turned smoothly, hoping her distress didn't show on her face. "Of course."

Bobby Gold winked as he tapped her on the ass. Cara did her best not to flinch. She'd never liked Bobby, but he was the king of the casinos in Vegas—and abroad, as this new multi-billion-dollar facility located in an old French palace in the center of Nice proved.

When she'd begun working as a croupier, it had been for one of Bobby's rivals. It hadn't taken long for Bobby to find her and offer her a job. She'd refused at first—but money, and her desperate need for it, had eventually won out. And, other than the occasional leering pass from the man, she'd had no reason to regret her decision.

Until now.

Bobby's gold tooth caught the light as he smiled.

She'd never been sure if it was an affectation, or if the man really needed a gold tooth. Nevertheless, it disgusted her.

"Keep the players happy, Cara. Use those beautiful breasts of yours to distract them as much as possible. And keep an eye on the man I point out to you. When the stakes get high enough, he'll give you the signal."

Cara's face burned, but whether from Bobby's casual suggestion she use her breasts to distract the players or from the idea of cheating—of going against her entire moral compass—she wasn't quite sure. She suspected it was a bit of both. Cheating wasn't in her lexicon, especially

after the devastation her father had caused. Adultery was a different kind of cheating, but the results were the same. It was simply wrong.

And she wasn't a cheater, period.

Cara slid a nervous hand down her skirt once more. She wanted to pull her shirt closed a bit more, but she wouldn't do so while Bobby leered at her. Usually, her uniform consisted of a long skirt and a high white-collared shirt with a bow tie.

Tonight, Bobby had given her a new uniform. Short, tight black satin mini, and deep-V crimson silk blouse. The bow tie was still a part of the uniform, only now it was around her bare throat.

*Just get through tonight, Cara, and you can go back home and never see Bobby Gold again.*

A pang of wistfulness shot through her at the thought of leaving Nice before she'd even gotten to explore it. She'd put her dreams of adventure on hold after Katrina's devastation, and now that she'd finally gotten to go somewhere wonderful, she was about to leave again.

"I'll do what I can, boss," she said.

Bobby's face grew hard, his gaze cold and cruel. She'd seen that look before. A shiver washed over her at the thought of all Bobby was capable of.

"Make sure that you do, Cara. I'd hate to have to punish you."

Before she could answer, he turned away and strode toward the bar. Cara let out a long breath. She turned back to the table as the black velvet curtain to the private entrance parted. A tall blond man strode into the room and went straight for the bar. She could hear his accent as he ordered. Count von Hofstein, then.

As the minutes trickled by, several more men entered the luxurious room that Bobby had set aside for this very special game. A fat sheikh, who wore a headdress with his three-piece suit and sported a huge ruby ring on the index finger of his left hand. An African man, tall and handsome with luminous ebony skin, came in and took a seat at the table. One by one, the seats filled.

The men were quiet, contemplating the game perhaps.

When there was only one chair left, the curtain parted again and

another man entered. Cara's pulse kicked up. He was tall, lean and impeccably dressed in a bespoke tuxedo. His hair was dark—black or brown—and his eyes were the most piercing shade of silver she'd ever seen. His jaw was strong, handsome, his lips almost cruel in their sensuality. Everything about him screamed money.

And everything about his demeanor said he didn't give a damn about anyone or anything.

Cara shivered as a chill prickled down her spine. She'd never had quite this reaction to the sight of a man before. She'd moved with her ex to Las Vegas, but she hadn't done so because her heart had fluttered when James had entered a room.

This man's expression, so cold and distant, grew even chillier as he looked at her. She quickly glanced away, cursing herself for staring.

Great. He probably thought she was one of those women working in a casino in order to snag a rich husband. She'd had more than one man assume she was looking for a good time, but she'd quickly set the record straight whenever any of them assumed she was up for sale along with the poker chips.

A touch on her arm startled her, and she jumped, her heart slamming into her ribs. Bobby pulled her away from the table. Cara folded her arms over her breasts, hating the way Bobby looked down her shirt, and hating that he knew it bothered her by the way he grinned at her.

"Don't get any ideas of being noble, Cara," he said. "That bonus I promised you will go a long way toward helping your sweet mama, so make sure you remember it." He leaned in close, ran a fat hand down her arm. "The man with the red tie is Brubaker. When it's time, pass the play to him. He'll take care of the rest."

"Yes, boss," she said, hoping her revulsion didn't show.

Cara returned to the table and took out her deck of cards. After announcing the rules of the game, she shuffled. Then she passed the deck to the player on her right, who also shuffled. After a series of shuffles and cutting the deck, Cara dealt the cards.

The man with the silver eyes was directly across from her. He picked up his cards. There was no flash of emotion, no indication whether he

was pleased or irritated, before he set them back down. During her time in Vegas, she'd seen her share of card sharks and amateurs. She'd always been able to tell what a player thought of his hand by the telltale little signs she'd observed at countless tables.

But this man was unreadable.

Until he looked up and caught her gaze. His eyes bored into hers, and her pulse skittered wildly. For the first time tonight, she was glad she wasn't wearing a high collar. Because she'd have been sweating beneath this man's gaze if she had been.

His mind did not appear to be on the cards lying in front of him. Slowly, his gaze slipped over her, lingering on her breasts, before sliding back up. His regard didn't repulse her the way Bobby's had. No, if anything, her skin tingled with awareness and heat.

Cara dropped her eyes to the green baize of the table. She had to concentrate on this game, had to be prepared to perform her task when the time came. She didn't have the leisure to gape at gorgeous men.

Gorgeous, useless men ...

Jack Wolfe thumbed the cards he held and waited for someone to call. He hadn't spent time at a card table lately, but when he'd heard Bobby Gold was opening a casino right here in Nice, where Jack had been spending a great deal of time for his business lately, he'd been unable to resist.

He and Bobby didn't know each other well, but they went back a long way—and not a moment of it was pleasant. Bobby never missed an opportunity to spew his rhetoric about lazy, inbred British aristocrats and their inability to manage their money. Jack knew it was a dig at his long-dead father, and though he couldn't care less what manner of disparaging things anyone said about that sorry excuse for a human being, Jack couldn't turn down the chance to beat Bobby at his own game.

Jack didn't frequent casinos—the stock market was far more challenging—but tonight was a special case. He'd once gone head-to-head with Bobby in a game of chance. It hadn't even been serious, just a random event set up by one of Jack's friends who'd been telling Bobby

that Jack was a whiz with cards. Bobby, as a new casino owner at the time, had been unable to resist. And when he'd repeatedly lost everything, he'd grown angry.

Yes, Bobby Gold was a mean brute of a man. Jack didn't need the money, but he would certainly enjoy watching Gold's fat face turn purple when he won the jackpot. He'd thought Gold might try to keep him out of the game, but the man merely nodded at him. It made Jack wonder what Gold had up his sleeve.

Cards weren't a challenge at all, not any longer. It had been years since Jack had enjoyed a game, but he'd never lost the ability to read those around him. And he never would. Reading people was second nature to him. Growing up, he'd needed to be able to tell what someone—his father—was about to do based on the twitch of a muscle, the tick of an eyelid or the jerk of the lips. Then, it had been a survival skill. That it was also a skill which translated to the card table was something he'd found out much later.

These days he preferred the high stakes of stock trading, the rush when he made a killer deal and the satisfaction of doing it all again just a short while later. The sums were much greater, the thrill much more intense. And the need to read people, still very necessary, was relegated to determining the behavior of the pack.

Jack looked up at the croupier again and lifted an eyebrow when she glanced away nervously. The instant he'd walked behind the curtain and seen her standing there, in her little top and even littler skirt, he'd felt like the evening would be much more interesting than he'd originally anticipated.

He'd watched with interest when Gold had taken her away for a word. Her body language was defensive and her face closed off, though he'd thought he'd seen a flicker of unease in the way she'd swept her long hair off her shoulder. When Bobby leaned in and ran a hand down her arm, Jack had to stifle the urge to leap across the table and punch the man in the face.

As the hand finished and the sexy croupier called the first break in play, the men got up from the table and filtered to various corners of the luxuriously appointed room. Some whipped out cell phones while others

chatted quietly.

Jack didn't move. He stretched out his long legs beneath the table and took a sip of his drink. Mineral water with a twist of lime while he was playing. He didn't drink alcohol when he needed his senses to be sharp.

The croupier straightened the chips with quick movements. Jack found himself mesmerized by the elegance of her long-fingered hands, the way she seemed to caress the chips before letting them go. He imagined those hands on his body and was instantly glad he'd decided to remain seated.

A waiter stopped at the table, round tray held in one hand, towel over his arm. "Would you like something from the bar, sir?"

"No, thanks," Jack said. "How about you?" he directed to the croupier.

The girl looked up then, her green eyes wide. She truly was extraordinary, from the long dark hair flowing down her back to the high round breasts beneath her obscenely suggestive shirt to the longest damn legs he'd ever seen. What would those legs feel like wrapped around him later tonight?

"N-no, thanks," she said, her voice throaty and musical—and surprisingly shy, he thought. She'd had no such problems when she was calling the play or rapping out the rules to disgruntled players. It intrigued him, fired his blood.

"I don't bite," he said lightly.

She glanced down again, then back up, her gaze fixing determinedly on him. A tiger, this one. "Whether you do or not isn't the issue, *monsieur*. I'm not allowed to accept drinks from the guests while on duty."

"Then perhaps when you are off duty."

He didn't think she was aware that she'd bit her full lower lip. "I don't think so."

"You'll be off duty then," Jack pressed.

"I don't know you," she replied. "But I'm certain by your presence at this table that we don't have anything in common—"

"How can you say that? I play cards, you deal cards. Much in

common, I would think.”

Her lovely throat worked as she swallowed. There was frost in her voice. “That’s not what I was talking about and you know it. Unlike the money on this table, I’m not up for grabs.”

Jack laughed. She had spirit, this woman. He liked that. He held out his hand. “Jack Wolfe.”

He didn’t think she would accept, but she gave his hand a quick squeeze before snatching hers back. His palm tingled where they’d touched.

“Cara Taylor.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Cara Taylor. *Very* nice.” She didn’t answer him, but a red flush crept up the creamy skin of her neck. Before he could say anything else, the players filtered back to the table, taking their seats and tucking away phones and PDAs.

Once they were settled, Cara dealt a new hand. Jack loved the way her fingers moved, loved the way she seemed so in control and calm when overseeing the game. It contrasted with the tartness of her tongue and that shy vulnerability she’d displayed when he’d been flirting with her. She was an enigma, this woman, and one he intended to explore in great detail later tonight.

He had no doubt she would succumb to his charm. Women always did.

That was part of the beauty of being a Wolfe, even if he despised the name and the man who’d given it to him. Jack knew how to be charming when necessary, and how to be utterly cool at all times. Nothing fazed him.

The play moved quickly, the pot piling up in the center with each hand as the men at the table grew bold. The sleek African drummed his fingers on the table almost silently. It was a nervous habit, and one Jack translated to mean he had good cards but not good enough. All the better, then.

At that moment, Count von Hofstein’s upper lip ticked up, oh so briefly, in the barest hint of a smile as he glanced down at his hand again. Jack felt a rush of contempt for the man. He was so easy to read,

so arrogant and sure.

“*Vun-hundret tousand euros,*” the count pronounced, his accent thick with excitement.

The other men at the table folded, a collective groan rippling over them. The African hesitated a moment longer than the rest, but he, too, threw his cards down. Jack tossed in his chips. “I’ll see that and raise you another hundred.”

The count’s eyes narrowed, but he flung the chips into the center. “Call.”

A wave of adrenaline flooded his veins. Jack loved this moment, loved when he unfolded the cards and revealed the winning hand. It was a rush like no other, a torrent of feeling that buoyed him and took away the anger and pain of his past, however briefly.

There was no way he could lose. Unlike the count, he wasn’t swayed by arrogance. The count’s hand simply wasn’t good enough, which the man would have known if he’d been paying attention to the play.

Jack glanced at Cara, saw the knowing smile on her face and wondered how she’d figured it out. Perhaps there was a mathematical mind behind all that beauty, after all.

Jack laid the cards on the table. The count deflated. Cara’s eyes sparkled. “A straight flush,” she pronounced. “The gentleman wins.”

It had been over an hour since the game began. Cara kept the cards moving, kept the men at the table. The African decided he’d had enough and left, but the rest of the men didn’t seem eager to go anywhere. Brubaker, Bobby’s ringer, chewed on a cocktail straw, the corners of his mouth tipping into a slimy grin whenever she made eye contact.

The jackpot was climbing to enormous sums. Each hand made the men bolder, the wagers more ridiculous. Jack Wolfe tossed chips into the pot like they were a child’s marbles, the gesture careless and unconcerned. He had a nice pile of chips built up beside him, however. She hadn’t figured out his angle, but he was very good with the cards.

She’d known professional card sharks in Vegas, but could a man throwing around this much money truly be nothing more than a professional gambler? The thought sickened her, and yet she knew it was

possible. He might be wagering for a boss, playing for the profit he would make when he won. It seemed like quite a risk for anyone to take in bankrolling this man, yet since he was good enough, she supposed the possibility of rewards outweighed the risk.

For a while, she'd thought he was counting cards. But he wasn't. He was just that smart at figuring out which cards were left. He folded when his hand wasn't good enough, though he'd also bluffed his way into the win a few times, as well. He seemed not to care, which translated to a high tolerance for risk, she supposed.

He caught her eye, winked. Liquid heat flowed through her even while she chided herself on reacting to him. She had an inner magnet that attracted her to men who were no good for her. When James had taken off with their rent money, and all the money she'd been saving for Mama, she'd sworn never again to get duped by a pretty face and a charming smile.

Jack Wolfe had both—as well as an extra dose of magnetism she couldn't quite put her finger on. But he was the kind of man who drifted from casino to casino, playing cards, living off his winnings, sleeping with the sort of women who frequented casinos looking for rich men.

Someone cleared his throat, and she realized the hand had ended.

“Gentlemen, let's take a fifteen-minute break,” she said, her skin feeling warm with embarrassment at getting caught daydreaming.

She moved away from the table, intending to slip into the back for a while and breathe without Jack Wolfe affecting her senses.

“Want company?”

Cara drew up short as he stepped into view. Mercy, he was a handsome man. Tall, dark, with the kind of brooding good looks that could grace a feature film. In fact, he reminded her of someone. An actor she couldn't quite think of at the moment. She hadn't watched a movie in so long that it was no wonder she couldn't come up with a name. That's what working twelve hours a day did for you.

“Guests aren't allowed in the staff areas,” she told him.

“Then don't go into the staff area,” he replied, the corners of that sardonic mouth turning up in a heart-pounding grin.

What would his mouth feel like on hers? Would those lips be as hard and demanding as she thought? Or would they be gentle, thorough and absolutely addictive?

Her vote went for absolutely addictive no matter what. Not only that, but she could listen to him talk for hours. There was something about a British accent that turned her into a puddle. It sounded so enchanting, as if every British person lived a life of glamour and knew exactly what to do in every social situation. Beside him, she felt small, insignificant. Unpolished.

Cara pushed a strand of hair over her shoulder, willing away the heat, the achiness, this man inspired. “You shouldn’t be talking with me, Mr. Wolfe. I have a job to do, and you’re a guest.”

“But I like talking to you, Cara.”

“Only because you think you can score,” she said, trying to infuse her tone with acid. It didn’t quite work because his smile didn’t waver.

“Ah, so now we come to the truth.” He set his drink aside, shaking his head at the waiter who hovered. The waiter disappeared. “Call me Jack.”

“I’d rather not.” Oh, but she would. Repeatedly. She imagined saying his name while they were entwined. The room would be dark, the atmosphere sizzling. She closed her eyes as a bead of sweat dripped between her breasts. Why was she thinking these things? She never did this, never wanted a man she’d only just met. Never wanted to sink into a hot, dark bed with him.

“I think you would,” he said, his voice a deep, sensual purr. “You feel this thing between us, too. You want to know more.”

Cara swallowed. “You’re mistaken, *Jack*. I want to finish this game, and I want to go home and get out of this outfit ...” Her words trailed off as the look on his face grew more intense.

“And I want to get you out of that delightful outfit.”

Her heart was pounding, thrumming, making her dizzy. “At least you’re honest.”

“But you aren’t.” His smile mocked her.

“I admit I find you attractive,” she defended, heat enveloping her.

Whether it was the heat of embarrassment or the sexual heat of being near this man, she wasn't quite sure. "But I don't know you, and I'm not in the habit of going home with men I don't know."

That was the honest truth, though she was beginning to wonder if she didn't need to let her hair down a little bit. She'd been so uptight since coming to Nice. And now, with the task she faced before this night was through, tension roiled inside her. Maybe a night with Jack Wolfe could relieve the tightness beneath her skin.

So long as he didn't figure out that she was the one responsible for him losing.

"Then perhaps we should get to know each other," he said.

"Perhaps," she replied, surprising herself in the process. Was she really considering this? Or was she letting the flattery of a man like him flirting with her go to her head? Or maybe she didn't know what to say, so she said the first thing that popped into her mind.

No matter what, however, she wasn't leaving with Jack Wolfe. Because as soon as this game was over, she was taking her money and going home to New Orleans. Her conscience pricked her, but what choice did she have?

*For Mama, Evie and Remy, she told herself. I'm doing it for them.*

He took a step toward her, his big body radiating heat and sexuality. She wanted to melt against him, wanted to let the big strong man rescue her. Except that's not what Cara Taylor did. She took care of herself, and she didn't need rescuing. Not ever.

"I look forward to it," he replied smoothly, his silver eyes darkening as his gaze slipped down her body. It was a blatantly sexual look—and she loved it.

What she didn't know was why. "It's time to return to the table," she said quickly, sidestepping him before he could touch her. Because if he touched her, she was afraid she wouldn't have the strength to do what she needed.

She caught Bobby's gaze as she made her way back to the table. His brows were drawn down, his face twisted into a cruel sneer. Her heart thumped for a different reason now. If she didn't do Bobby Gold's

bidding, there was no telling what he'd do to her. Money would be the least of her worries.

# CHAPTER TWO

IF NOT for Cara, Jack would have gotten bored a long time ago. The cards were too easy, too inconsequential. If he lost, he'd make it back on the stock market. But he wouldn't lose. He never lost. People thought he had the good luck gene in spades, but the truth was he'd learned to rely on his skill with probability and numbers because he had to. Once his father had died, once his brother Jacob had abandoned them—and then Lucas shortly after—the responsibility to take care of his younger brothers and sister had fallen to Jack.

He'd needed to use every resource he had in order to make money, but it wasn't enough. He could take care of his family's finances, but he couldn't heal the open wounds that refused to close. They'd all, every one of them, suffered at the hands of William Wolfe. He'd tried to fix it, but nothing would ever make it right. Annabelle, sweet Annabelle, would carry the scars of what William had done to her for the rest of her life.

Jack shook off the memories of his sister's scarred face and focused hard on the game. This was no time to get lost in thoughts of the past. Fifteen million euros in casino chips were piled in the middle of the table. The sheikh was sweating profusely and Count von Hofstein's brows had drawn into a permanent frown.

Even Cara looked pensive. She was biting her lip again, that luscious lip he longed to suck between his own. Her fingers, so certain and sure as she did her job, were trembling. One of the men at the table, an insignificant man with a red tie he'd recently loosened, seemed to glare at her as if he were trying to impart a telepathic message.

She looked up then, directly at Jack, and his gut clenched. She seemed ... uncertain. Her expressive eyes were wide and her creamy skin appeared to have lost a shade of color, making her appear pale and fragile.

“Sir?” she said.

It took him a moment to realize she was talking to him. And that it was his turn.

"Call," he replied, tossing his chips into the pile. Because he was tired of sitting here, because he wanted to get out of the dark, cloying atmosphere of this room and back into the fresh air. Because he wanted to talk Cara Taylor into getting into his car and going for a drive along the coast. He still had a few days before he had to be in London for Nathaniel's wedding. Spending it in bed with a vibrant woman like Cara seemed a perfect plan.

The man in the red tie, the only player who hadn't folded this round, laid his cards on the table with a smirk. "A full house, Mr. Wolfe," he said. "Queens and kings."

Jack only sighed. "That's excellent." And then he flipped his cards over one by one. Ten. Ten. Ten.

The man's brow glistened.

Jack flipped over the two of hearts and the man sucked in his breath triumphantly, his fingers reaching automatically for the pile.

"Not quite," Jack said as he turned over the last card. The man's jaw dropped.

Count von Hofstein groaned. "*Mein lieber Gott.*"

Cara Taylor looked at the last card and smiled. But the corners of her mouth wavered as she did so. "Four of a kind. The gentleman wins."

Jack stood. He didn't feel satisfaction or triumph. He simply felt *done*.

"If you will excuse me, gentlemen, I believe I'm going to cash out."

Cara's fingers definitely trembled as she gathered the cards. Red Tie glared at her furiously before turning to look over his shoulder. A prickle of awareness tingled through Jack. This wasn't good, and yet it was too late to change the outcome. Dammit, he'd known Bobby Gold was up to something.

As if in confirmation of the fact, Bobby stepped from behind a door at the other end of the room. He stopped to talk with one of the bouncers. A few seconds later, the man made his way toward the table. The other players were getting up to stretch their legs, but Jack didn't miss the look on Cara's face when the man stopped beside her and leaned down

to whisper something in her ear.

Beefy fingers spanned Cara's upper arm as she turned and walked toward the back of the room with him. Another croupier stepped from the wings—a blonde with fake breasts and a spray tan—and took out a fresh deck.

"Gentlemen," she cooed. "Surely you aren't finished yet. Mr. Gold would like to spot each of you fifty thousand euros as his gift to remain in the game."

Jack's intuition kicked him in the gut as Cara disappeared behind the door Bobby had just exited. He knew what fear looked like, knew the kind of terror an abusive man inspired. He'd witnessed it often enough growing up. Cara Taylor was scared about something.

And he couldn't leave without finding out what it was. He'd been unable to protect his siblings from William Wolfe's wrath, but he'd be damned if he'd let Cara get hurt tonight.

\*

Cara's cheek stung where Bobby had backhanded her. Blood trickled down her lip from where his ring sliced her. She sat on a small chair in a windowless room and cursed herself for her inability to do what he'd wanted.

But as she'd stood there, looking at the pile of chips in the center of the table, she'd known she couldn't cheat. Mama would be ashamed of her. She would be ashamed of herself. The only thing she had was her integrity. To allow someone else to take that away?

Unthinkable.

And yet she now wished she'd done just that. Because Bobby was furious. He'd hit her and screamed at her and locked her up in here. She didn't know what came next, but she was certain it wasn't going to be pleasant.

She dropped her head into her hands and sat there, waiting. Bobby was ruthless, but she didn't think her life was in danger. And once he got over his anger, he might let her return to the tables. She was very good at what she did, and Bobby knew it. But she wasn't willing to

compromise her integrity. She simply couldn't. If they knew where they each stood on the issue, then she could keep working and Bobby would never put her in a position like this again.

*Dream on, Cara.*

It was impossible and she knew it, but she couldn't help holding out a small hope everything would work out. If not, then she'd head home and start again. Starting over was nothing new for her. She'd find a way to make it work.

The door opened and her head snapped up. She expected Bobby—and she was ready to try and make him see reason—but the man who entered made her stomach drop to her toes. She shot to her feet, her heart thudding.

“What are you doing here? Get out before Bobby finds you!”

She felt Jack's gaze on her skin like a hot brand. His jaw hardened as he took in the welt on her cheek, the blood on her lip.

“I'm not afraid of Bobby Gold. Is he the one who hit you?”

Damn the man! He was going to ruin everything. All she needed was for Bobby to find her with a professional card shark—then he'd never believe she'd simply been doing her job honestly.

“I don't care if you're afraid of him or not! I can handle myself, and I want you gone before he finds you here!”

“Did he hit you?” Jack demanded.

Angry heat flowed through her. He simply didn't get it. “That's none of your business. Now go away.”

“I can't do that, Cara,” he said, his expression darker and more ruthless than any she'd ever seen on Bobby's face. It made her shiver and she took a step back instinctively. “Just go, Jack. I appreciate the concern, but I'll be fine.”

“I hardly think so—”

The door opened again, and Cara's heart sank. Two of Bobby's hired goons hulked into the room, followed by the man himself. If Bobby was surprised to find Jack Wolfe, he didn't show it. In fact, he seemed pleased.

"Well, well," he said. "If it isn't Jack Wolfe. You must like our little Cara, hmm?" He reached out and ran a finger down her bare arm. Cara flinched. "She is quite lovely. I can understand why you'd be tempted."

"You're nothing but scum, Bobby," Jack said. "No matter how hard you try, you'll never be anything more."

Bobby's expression grew positively evil. "I'm sad to say you won't be leaving here with my fifteen million in hand," he said. "It's really too bad you had to cheat. Met the lovely Cara and bribed her to cooperate, did you?"

"Bobby, that's not true!" Cara exclaimed. "I never saw him before tonight—"

Bobby's hand shot out and twisted in her hair. "Shut up," he growled before he slapped her again. The blow stung, but he hadn't cut her this time.

Tears sprang to her eyes, but she wouldn't let them fall. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Bobby shoved her down on the chair. Her hair covered her face and she dragged it back. But not before she heard a scuffle and a punch.

When she could see again, the two bodyguards were holding Jack between them as he jerked hard against them. Blood dripped from one of the guard's noses and Jack's knuckles were scraped.

"You will regret this, Gold," he growled.

"No," Bobby said, his voice full of menace, "you will."

Jack sucked in a torturous breath. His rib cage felt like an elephant had sat on it. He wanted to open his eyes, but it hurt to do so. Where was he? He didn't remember anything beyond the moment when Bobby's thugs had started to beat him. He'd fought back, but two against one were never good odds.

He was in a vehicle now, moving. He had to open his eyes, in spite of the pain, and see if he could figure out where they were going.

It was dark, but he could see the road in front of them and a flash of silver hood in the streetlights. He was sitting in the passenger seat, and the dashboard looked vaguely familiar. The throaty purr of the engine

was familiar, as well.

He turned his head on the seat back. Cara

Taylor's profile was the first thing he saw. She looked determined. His gaze followed her arms until he realized her hands were on a steering wheel. She was driving. They were driving. Somewhere. "How ...?" he asked.

Her head whipped sideways, back to the road again. "I told you to leave when you had the chance," she said from between clenched teeth. "I could have fixed it. None of this would have happened."

His laugh was rusty. God, he felt like he'd gotten into a fight with a freight train. "You weren't fixing anything, sweetheart. You cost Gold a lot of money."

It hadn't taken him more than a few moments to realize why she'd been pulled from the game, or why Red Tie had been glaring at her. He was Bobby's ringer, and she had been supposed to make sure he won the pot. That he hadn't figured the truth out sooner, he blamed solely on himself. Perhaps he was as arrogant as the count in his own way. He'd let himself be distracted by lascivious thoughts of Cara. Yes, he'd concentrated on the cards and the reactions of the players, but hadn't let his mind cast wider. If he had, he'd have understood the tension between her and Red Tie sooner.

She glanced at him again. "What makes you think that?"

"Because I know Bobby Gold."

"I figured that," she spat. "You could hardly do what you do without winding up in his casinos from time to time."

Jack shifted, stifling a groan at the sharp pain in his side. "And what is it you think I do?"

She snorted. "You're a gambler, Jack."

He would have laughed if it hadn't hurt so damn much. "How did you get us out of there?"

"Once they knocked you unconscious, Bobby left, but he promised they'd be coming back to finish the job, which I didn't think sounded like an option I wanted to stick around for."

"We're in my car," he said. He recognized the smell, the growl of the engine, the feel of the leather hugging his body.

"I got it from the valet. One of the waiters helped me get you out and put you in the car. I said you were drunk and that I had to drive you home."

He had to hand it to her for thinking of it. Because if they'd stayed in that room, he wasn't too sure that Bobby wouldn't have done a bit more permanent damage.

"And where are we going now?"

"I need to get you to a hospital. But first I thought it best we get out of Nice. Bobby knows people."

"I know people, too." Hell, he had his own security firm. One call to them, and Bobby Gold would be singing soprano for the next month.

"As soon as we get to the next town, we'll find a doctor."

Jack winced again. "I don't need a doctor. My ribs are bruised, not broken."

"How do you know that?"

"Trust me. I've seen enough injuries to know what is what." Thanks to his father. He'd rarely received the brunt of William's anger, because he could sense when his father was about to explode like a powder keg, but he'd seen the results of his siblings' beatings enough to know which injuries required a visit to the hospital.

"Fine, you don't have broken ribs. But you could have a concussion."

"Doubt it. But if I do, the cure for that is painkillers and rest."

Cara let out a long-suffering sigh. "Is there anything you don't know, Jack Wolfe?"

"I'm sure there are one or two things."

She didn't laugh. "If you'd just stayed out of it! I could have talked Bobby into forgiving me, could have kept my job and made everything right again."

"You are incredibly naive, Cara. You cost the man fifteen million euros. Do you really believe he would forget that?"

Her fingers tightened on the wheel. "Once I explained—"

“Explained what? That you aren’t a cheat?”

“Yes,” she said tightly. “Because I’m not. It’s no good now, though, because he believes I planned this with you. Especially since I’ve helped you get away.”

“Why were you working for a man like Gold, anyway?”

She snorted. “Are you telling me that I should have been a card shark instead?”

“Not at all. But you have a talent for numbers, Cara. Surely there are other things you could do.”

“Like what?”

“You could find a job in finance—”

“I don’t have a college degree. Besides, who are you to talk? Why did you decide to become a gambler?”

He figured he should disabuse her of the notion—but it was far too much fun to let her think he was a professional gambler. He was accustomed to women fawning over him for his money, his family name and his face. To have one angry with him because she believed he was an unscrupulous gambler? It was novel.

“Because I like taking chances.” It was true enough. He got a rush out of playing stocks. Sometimes he didn’t sleep for days as he moved between the international markets. Making money was easy. It made sense, unlike everything else in his life. He could control money. He couldn’t control the things that had happened to him, or the emotional scars his family bore.

“Well, I don’t,” she said. “I liked dealing cards. There’s no risk in it for me.”

“Apparently, there is.”

Her jaw tightened. “Tonight was a first.”

“It would not have been the last, should you have complied.”

She glanced at the gauges. “We’re going to need gas soon and I don’t have any money.”

So she didn’t want to admit she’d been in over her head. Fine. “I’ll take care of it.”

She was silent for a few moments. “Were you playing for someone tonight?”

“No.”

“Then you lost a lot of money by coming to look for me. You must regret that impulse.”

“It’s only money.”

She laughed, but it wasn’t a humorous sound. “Of course. Because there’s no one depending on you for the food on their table or the roof over their head, I suppose.”

His employees would no doubt disagree with that statement. “No, because people are more important than money. You were in trouble.”

“I really didn’t need rescuing, Jack. You gave up fifteen million for nothing.”

“If you weren’t in trouble, why are we speeding out of town?”

Before she could acknowledge the truth of that statement, they hit a bump and Jack groaned. Dear God, it felt like there was an alien trying to burst out of his abdomen.

“We need to get you to a doctor,” she said worriedly.

Jack swallowed the pain. “No. Because Gold probably *is* looking for us, and it would take too long for my men to arrive. Keep driving.”

Bobby Gold had the fifteen mil, but he was the kind of man who couldn’t stand to be made a fool of. He’d want Cara Taylor back so he could make her pay for her disobedience. Getting as far from Nice as possible wasn’t a bad idea.

Since there were no flights this late, and his private plane was in a hangar in London, they had no choice but to drive. Even if he called his pilot, it would be several hours yet before the plane would arrive.

He’d originally planned a leisurely drive across France on his way to Nathaniel’s wedding, anyway. He could have flown, but he knew he needed the time to think. This would be the first time in nearly twenty years that all the Wolfes would be gathered under the same roof—and he wasn’t sure how he felt about that. He especially wasn’t sure how he felt about seeing Jacob again.

Jacob, who'd betrayed them all when he'd left them without any explanation. Jack had looked up to Jacob, admired him—until the night Jacob had abandoned them.

"You're in no shape to spend the night in a car," Cara said. "A hospital  
—"

"Just do it," Jack ordered.

He expected an argument, but she flexed her hands on the steering wheel and didn't say anything for several seconds.

"Fine. Where do you want to go?"

Not where he wanted to go. Where he had to go. "England."

# CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS nearly two in the morning when they reached the outskirts of Lyon. Cara found a hotel off the expressway and pulled the car into a parking slot. It had taken her a few minutes back in Nice to figure out how to drive Jack's sports car, but once she had, the silver beast was a dream. She knew without asking that it was the most expensive car she'd ever been in, much less driven.

Jack dozed in the passenger seat and she took a moment to study him. Bobby's thugs had beaten him up pretty badly, though they'd hardly touched his face. If he hadn't groaned from time to time, she'd have thought he felt perfectly fine. As it was, she had no idea how badly he was hurt. He said he was only bruised, but she wasn't certain. And it was that uncertainty that had kept her behind the wheel for the past four hours. The farther they got from Bobby, the better.

And then she could talk Jack into going to a hospital.

The skin under his left eye was purpling, but even bruised, he was still devastatingly handsome.

Her pulse kicked up, and she chided herself for reacting to him. Jack Wolfe might be pretty to look at, but he was arrogant and irresponsible—and she had no time for men like that in her life, no matter how his flirtation earlier had made her want to melt in his arms.

She was here because it had seemed the best course to keep driving—especially since he'd been in no shape to do so—but now that they'd arrived in Lyon, she was determined to part ways with the enigmatic Jack Wolfe. Once she got him to a doctor, of course.

The thought of leaving discomfited her, but she shoved it down deep. Why on earth should she care if she ever saw this man again?

"Jack," she said softly.

Surprisingly, he came instantly awake. "Where are we?"

"Lyon. I'm too tired to keep driving. I thought we could get a couple of rooms for the night. If you can loan me the money, I'll pay you back

as soon as I can.”

It was disconcerting to be here without her purse or passport, but those things had been left behind in the casino when they’d fled. She simply hadn’t had time to retrieve them.

“One room,” he said. “I said I’d pay you back.”

“It’s safer. If Bobby really is looking for us, it’s better to be together.”

As much as she wanted to, she couldn’t argue with that logic. But when she went inside to make the arrangements, she asked for a twin-bedded room. The clerk gave her a key and she returned to fetch Jack. He was taller than she was, and far heavier, but somehow they managed to make it to the room with him leaning against her for support.

The contact sizzled into her. She was conscious of his raw heat, conscious of every single inch of his body where it touched hers. He made her heart pound with his nearness.

“Sorry,” he said, his mouth against her hair as he leaned into her while she fitted the key to the door. “You smell delicious,” he added.

“Thanks, but compliments will get you nowhere.”

“Sweetheart, you have nothing to worry about, I assure you. As much as I might like to have sex with you tonight, I believe the contact would kill me.”

The word *sex*, said with that wonderful accent of his, caressed across her senses and lit a flame inside her belly.

Cara swung the door open. There was only one bed. She hesitated. She could go back down to the clerk and tell him he’d made a mistake, but then she’d have to leave Jack here before returning and helping him to another room. But she couldn’t do that to him, not when he was like this.

With a sigh, she guided him over to the bed and sat him down on it. It wasn’t a very big bed. She would simply have to sleep on the floor.

“A hot bath would probably do you good,” she said, frowning at him as he winced.

One corner of his mouth crooked in a grin. “Do you plan to help me wash, then?”

The heat of a blush rippled over her skin. *Oh, yes.* “No.”

“Too bad.”

“I’ll run the bath for you.”

His expression was a mixture of devilishness and gravity. “I’m not going to be able to get into it without help.”

Cara’s insides went hot and liquid all at once. She hadn’t thought of that, but of course he was right. She wanted to refuse, and yet she couldn’t. If it would help him to feel better at all, she had to get him into the tub.

“Fine.”

He’d already loosened his bow tie earlier and undid the first few studs of his shirt. Cara resolutely slipped the jacket from his shoulders, her heart thudding at his nearness and heat. She had to stand so close to him, her thighs touching his as she stood between his legs. She was conscious of the deep V of her blouse, conscious of his eyes on the slope of her breast. Her skin tingled, her insides tightening.

“You really do smell wonderful,” he said.

“It’s just soap.” She felt self-conscious standing so close to him, felt as if her skin was too tight, as if she would splinter apart if she let this be anything more than a routine task she had to perform.

“Wonderful soap.”

“You’re a smooth talker, Jack Wolfe,” she said as she undid his studs. “But I’ve heard it all, believe me.”

She pulled his shirttails from his trousers. Slipping the shirt off, she tried not to react to the sight of his bare shoulders. They were muscled, not too much, but lean and hard and strong. It shouldn’t surprise her that he had the body of an athlete, but it was a bit disconcerting to find that what was underneath the clothes was every bit as enticing as the man in the tuxedo had been.

*Focus, Cara.*

Pulling the undershirt from his waistband, she lifted it very carefully over his head. Cara had to bite her lip at the broad expanse of bare, toned chest. He was tanned, with the kind of defined pecs and abs that

made her giddy—but there was some light bruising over his rib cage where Bobby's thugs had hit him. It would darken over the next few days.

"If I felt better, I might take the way you're looking at me as an invitation."

Cara's gaze snapped up. "Don't flatter yourself. I was looking at your bruises," she said, though she imagined the blush blooming across her cheeks gave away the lie.

He looked down. "It could be worse."

Her chest felt tight. He'd gotten those bruises because of her. Because he'd gone after Bobby when Bobby had hit her. Even if it had been unnecessary, even if she hadn't needed his help, she had to acknowledge that he'd gotten hurt because he'd tried to help. It made her angry and sad at the same time.

"I don't see how it could be worse."

"Trust me, it could."

"Are you accustomed to getting beaten up, then?" She was trying to inject a bit of humor into the conversation, but his expression said that she'd failed miserably. His jaw looked as if it had been carved out of granite. His eyes were flat, bleak. She sensed she'd stumbled into quicksand. "Don't answer that—"

He lifted a hand, traced his fingers over her bottom lip. Her heart raced like the powerful engine in his car, but she didn't move to stop him.

She couldn't. His touch felt too good, too raw and honest.

"Are you afraid for me, Cara? Afraid of what I might tell you?"

"I—" She didn't know what to say. Her heart was a painful knot in her chest. She sensed they'd crossed some sort of demarcation line, that there would be no going back now. Ever. "I should run the bath," she blurted.

Because standing here while this man touched her wasn't the best idea she'd ever had. He evoked sensations she'd never experienced, sensations she wanted desperately to explore. But he was all wrong for her. *This was wrong.*

He was a gambler, a card shark—he wasn't the sort of man a girl could rely on. And she didn't need a man in her life, anyway. It never turned out well. She needed to go, needed to run the bath—and she needed to get away from him as soon as possible, before her silly heart decided she liked his touch, his attention. Before she decided she wanted more.

"Does it hurt?" he asked, his fingers ghosting over the split in her lip.

"A little."

"Was this the first time?"

It took her a moment to figure out what he meant. "Bobby never hit me before, no. I didn't like him much, but the pay was good and the bonus he promised to those of us who came to Nice was even better."

"But you didn't get the money."

Cara sighed. "No. I don't suppose I ever will now."

Mama and Remy would be fine, though. Cara would find another job and keep sending money home just like always. And Evie was still there, working and helping Mama with Remy. A tiny voice in Cara's head asked when she would get to do what she wanted in life—but she shoved it aside angrily. She would do what needed to be done. Always. Daddy might have abandoned the family, but Cara never would.

She stepped back, out of Jack's reach. His hand dropped. He looked like a beautiful dark angel, his torso bare and bruised. He was delicious, tempting, and she was appalled that she thought so. Appalled that if he weren't hurt, she could picture herself pushing him back against the pillows, her mouth on his, their limbs tangling. She could picture the moment when he entered her body, the way she would shudder beneath him, her body rippling in one long, ecstatic wave.

"You're a cruel woman, Cara Taylor," Jack said, pulling her from her tangled thoughts.

"How can that possibly be?" she said softly. "I'm helping you, aren't I? I could have left you for Bobby to finish off."

"I almost wish you had. It would be easier than watching you look at me like I'm an ice cream cone. Do you want to lick me, Cara?"

Oh, God.

There was nothing to do but brazen it out. “You’re very handsome,” she said as coolly as she could, “but you already know that. I can enjoy the view, but that doesn’t mean I want to do anything about it.”

His laugh was raspy. “I’d like to enjoy the view, as well. How about you take some things off for me? Doesn’t seem fair you get to ogle and I don’t.”

If she turned any redder, she’d burst into flame. “No one ever said life was fair.”

The heat and humor in his eyes banked for a moment. For some reason, it bothered her. He was mercurial, Jack Wolfe. She wanted to know what he was thinking, what kind of memories had the power to dim the heat in those remarkable eyes. The thought it might be a woman did not comfort her.

No, it made her prickly. And that made no sense at all.

“Why don’t you go run that bath?” he finally said when they’d been staring at each other for several moments without speaking.

She felt like she should say something, but instead she went into the bathroom and turned on the tap. What was wrong with her? Why couldn’t she manage to string two coherent sentences together when he looked at her as if he wanted to devour her? She’d fielded plenty of come-ons from drunken gamblers during her time working in the casino —she knew what to say, how to deflate their ambition while also keeping them at the table. So why couldn’t she find that skill with this man?

When she returned to the bedroom, Jack had managed to stand on his own. He’d undone his belt and zipper, but his pants hung low on his hips, revealing smooth skin and a dark arrow of hair pointing the way to his groin. Cara swallowed as her heart picked up speed again.

God, she was acting like a timid virgin. She had to stop this nonsense, had to help him into the tub before she could lie on the bed and turn on the television. It was late, but she was too keyed up to sleep just now. A bit of mindless television was usually just what the doctor ordered when insomnia hit.

“Do you need help?” she asked, praying he would say no. His shirt

was one thing, but his pants?

For once, he looked apologetic instead of devilish. “I’m afraid you’ll have to take them off. Bending is hell at the moment.”

Cara thought of something her friend LeeAnn had once said. LeeAnn had gone to nursing school and now worked in the ICU, taking care of critical patients. According to LeeAnn, you got used to seeing naked men after a while. It was just a job, no matter how good-looking the man.

Cara squared her shoulders. Yes, this was a job, a mission of mercy. Jack Wolfe was attractive, but this wasn’t about attraction. This was about helping a patient into the bath.

Except that, even in this state, he seemed too big, too virile and male, to be a patient. He was stiff and sore, but he wasn’t incapacitated.

Determinedly, she pushed his trousers down his hips until all that was left were a pair of boxers.

“I should warn you,” he said when she hooked her fingers into the waistband. Cara looked up, met his silver gaze head-on. His eyes were both cool and hot and she wondered how he did that, how he managed to seem so in control and on the edge all at once. “I’m not unaffected by a beautiful woman removing my clothes, even in this state.”

Cara licked suddenly dry lips. Her throat felt like sand. Jack’s eyes darkened as he followed the movement of her tongue.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” she managed huskily.

And then she was bending and sliding his boxers down his muscled thighs until she could let them fall at his feet. Resolutely, she focused on his face as she stood again. She would not look down, would not look at that part of him she was suddenly dying to see.

“Seeing down your shirt just now didn’t help,” he added. “In case you were wondering.”

“You’re not in any shape to flirt with me,” she said firmly, “so you really should stop.”

“Can’t help it.”

Nor could she help it when her gaze dropped, in spite of her resolution not to look. Cara’s breath caught, held, until she felt dizzy from the lack

of oxygen. He was beautiful. And he was definitely aroused.

“Like what you see?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “You’re in no shape to do anything about it, as you’ve already noted.”

“I’m not.” He lifted an eyebrow in challenge. “But you are.”

Cara’s ears burned. Not because he shocked her, but because a part of her wanted to do it. She wanted him at her mercy, wanted to tame and control and possess. All she had to do was drop to her knees, take him in her mouth and—

“Forget it. I’m not some kind of good-time girl, Jack Wolfe. We’re here because you couldn’t leave well enough alone, not because I can’t resist your charm.”

“Too bad.”

“Come on,” she said as she slipped an arm around his waist—sweet heaven, his *bare* waist. “Let’s get you into the bath. The warm water will help.”

Somehow she got him into the bathroom and into the tub, though she got soaked in the process. He stretched out his legs—they were still bent since the tub was shorter than he was—and groaned.

“God this hurts.”

Her heart squeezed in sympathy. “I’m sorry, Jack.”

“Don’t worry. You can make it up to me later.”

Later. As if she would still be here. Cara shook her head. No, she wasn’t staying. She wasn’t succumbing to the need to be near this man.

*Need? Was it already that bad?*

No. Because she’d let herself be fooled once—at least for a short time—by her feelings for James, and she knew better now. She didn’t need a man. She liked men, enjoyed good sex, but she didn’t *need* a man. And definitely not *this* man.

“You never quit, do you?” she said, grabbing a towel so she could go into the bedroom and remove her wet clothes.

“Sweetheart, if I were dead I’d still want to have sex with you.”

“Charming.” But her pulse was pounding, fluttering.

“I’ll be in the other room. Yell if you need me.”

Cara changed out of her wet clothes and hung them on a chair to dry. Then she wrapped the towel around her body and climbed onto the bed, scooting back against the pillows as she turned on the television. But instead of finding anything she wanted to watch, her gaze kept straying to Jack’s cell phone on the bedside table.

It was early evening in Louisiana ...

“Jack?”

“Yes?”

She picked up the phone and went to the bathroom door. “Can I make a call to the States on your phone? I’ll pay you.”

He didn’t even look at her. His head was tilted back, his eyes closed. He lifted two fingers where they rested on the edge of the tub. “Go ahead.”

“Thanks.” She turned away, then stopped. “Do you need anything?”

“Nothing you’re willing to provide,” he said on a long drawl.

She shook her head as she went back to the bed and climbed onto it. Twenty seconds later, Mama’s voice came on the other end of the line. A flood of wistfulness washed over Cara. Oddly enough, tears pricked her. She pressed her eyelids to keep them from falling.

“Hey, Mama.”

The conversation didn’t last long, but it helped her feel better in the end. Remy was doing well. The money Cara had sent recently would pay for his therapy through the end of next month. Evie had just gotten a job as a secretary in a law firm downtown, and the insurance was paid up for the next two months. The ground beneath her family’s feet was firm, if not quite solid yet.

When the call ended, she laid the phone on the table and closed her eyes. They were doing well. Not great, but well. She could have used the money that Bobby had been about to pay her, but it wasn’t the end of the world. Besides, that had been dirty money, and Mama wouldn’t have approved of dirty money. Cara would just have to find a new job, work

harder and make damn sure her family stayed on firmer ground.

She roused herself and went to check on Jack. He looked up when she came in. The skin under his eye looked worse, but there was no swelling.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Stiff. I’m ready to get out of here.”

He pushed himself upright until she could get an arm around him and help him to stand. Grabbing a towel, she wrapped it around him, then handed him another one to dry his torso with. The towel she wore kept slipping as they walked toward the bed. She prayed it would hold until she got him into bed when she could tighten it again.

“Why are you still here?” Jack asked.

The question startled her. “Because you’re too stubborn to go to a doctor.”

“If I did, would you leave?”

She hesitated only a moment. “Yes,” she said, though the word wanted to stick in her throat.

“A good reason not to go, then.”

“Jack—”

“But where would you go?” he interrupted. “Where is home?”

He lay on the bed and she pulled the covers up. “New Orleans,” she told him.

“A grand city.”

“You’ve been to the casino there, no doubt,” she said a bit crisply.

“I have. But why aren’t you working there? It’s far safer than working for a man like Bobby Gold.”

Cara shrugged. She didn’t want him to know the truth. That she felt like she’d never make anything of herself if she stayed in Louisiana, that she wanted adventure and romance, and that she wanted to travel to far-flung places. It sounded childish when she said it. And yet those were the longings of her heart. She wanted to escape. She’d always wanted to escape.

Guilt stabbed into her. She had no right to feel that way.

"I thought there was more money to be made in Vegas." She picked up a pillow and clutched it to her chest. "Why don't you go to sleep now? It'll do you good."

He tipped his head at the pillow. "Planning to suffocate me in my sleep?"

"It's a thought," she said. "But no. I'm going to sleep on the floor."

He caught her wrist in a broad hand before she could turn away. "There's no need for that, Cara. It'll be uncomfortable."

"I'll be fine."

"This bed is big enough for two."

She wasn't sure this *room* was big enough for two when he was the other person sharing it with her. He encroached on her space simply by breathing. Made her jumpy and achy all at once.

"I'd hate to bump into your ribs in the night," she said. The words were hardly more than a whisper.

"I appreciate your concern. But I don't think that's the reason."

"Of course it is," she said.

"Get in the bed, Cara. You can put the pillow between us if it makes you feel better. To protect my ribs," he added.

Was that sarcasm she heard in his voice?

But she was tempted. Because the floor would be hard, and because she was so tired and achy already that she just wanted to sleep in a soft bed.

Tomorrow, everything would look better, especially if she slept well. Her head would be clear and she could think of what to do next. Of how to get home when her passport and all her money was back in Nice.

"Fine," she said. "But if you touch me anywhere inappropriate, I'll black your other eye."

Jack only laughed.

# CHAPTER FOUR

JACK slept fitfully. The injuries woke him from time to time, but it was the proximity of the warm woman next to him and the dreams he sunk into whenever he fell asleep that kept bringing him back to the surface. He wanted to reach for her, pull her into the curve of his body and just hold her. Because he wanted to be close to someone.

The dreams hadn't bothered him in years, but tonight they were back in force. His father was a chameleon, making them all laugh and building a fabulous tree house for them one moment, only to explode the next. The screaming and rage rained down on him, on his brothers and sister, like fire from above. The tree house was destroyed as the sobs of his younger siblings rent the air.

But Jack had never cried when his father raged.

Unlike the others, he'd always known when William was on the verge of cracking and he'd mostly avoided his father's wrath. But he'd ached for his siblings, for the ones who seemed to draw William's attention most of all. Tonight, it seemed as if he was destined to relive those memories every time he closed his eyes.

And he figured he knew why. Nathaniel's wedding ... the trip home. In a couple of days, he would probably come face-to-face with Jacob again. Jacob, who he'd looked up to and admired. Who he'd wanted to be exactly like when he was growing up.

Until Jacob had betrayed them. Until he'd left and they'd had to learn how to live without him there to guide them. He'd loved Jacob, but Jacob hadn't loved him—them—enough to stay.

Though it hurt like hell, he pushed himself up and swung his legs from the bed. If one of Bobby's men hadn't delivered a blow that had knocked him unconscious, he'd hate to think of the sort of shape he'd be in now. Because they would have kept punching until they did more damage than just a few bruised ribs.

"What are you doing?" Cara cried, scrambling up beside him.

“Looking for something to drink.”

“I’ll get it. You stay there.”

He hated being dependent, hated that she’d had to help him undress when it wasn’t for pleasure. But he let her get up and go to the minifridge. When she bent down and opened it up, the interior light shone on her bare legs, on the curves of her bottom beneath the towel she still wore. His body reacted, in spite of the aches and pains.

“There’s water, juice, soda—”

“Water’s fine.”

She twisted off the cap and brought the bottle to him. He took it and drank, his eyes skimming her lush body in the meager light peeking between the closed curtains.

“How do you feel now?” she asked.

“Like I’ve been run over by a train.”

“I need to leave,” she blurted. “My passport and money are still in Nice, and I can’t go home without them.”

Something inside him twisted at the thought of her leaving. “It’s too dangerous, Cara. You need to stay away from Gold.”

Her golden-green eyes sparked with temper. “Maybe you didn’t hear me, but I can’t leave Europe without my passport. What am I supposed to do, hide from Bobby forever? If I take some friends with me, he won’t bother me.”

Jack couldn’t help but laugh, though it hurt to do so. “Stay away from Nice, and stay away from Bobby.”

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts. Did she realize, he wondered, that the towel inched up and revealed a hint of what lay beneath? His body turned to stone. He didn’t even care that it hurt.

“I’m not your property, Jack. You can’t tell me what to do.”

God but she exasperated him. Was she that obtuse or did she just delight in contradicting him? “I’m trying to protect you.”

If anything, that statement only made her angrier. “Protect me? My God, if you hadn’t come barreling in like the Lone Ranger, it’d all be over with and I’d be on my way home again. I don’t *need* your help,

Jack. In fact, I'd be better off without it!"

Anger flashed through him. He'd taken a bloody beating for her, and she still insisted she'd have been fine. "Right. Because when Bobby's boys needed a punching bag, they'd have just had to do without because you're a woman."

"God!" She shoved both hands through her hair, whipping it off her shoulders and then letting it fall again, a silken waterfall down her back. "They hit you because you hit *them*. I've never seen Bobby abuse any of the girls. He was angry with me and he slapped me. But that's the extent of it. Or would have been if you hadn't shown up."

Jack reached for the watch he'd left on the bedside table—9:00 a.m. He was done arguing with her because it was pointless. She was determined to do her own thing—and maybe she was right.

Maybe Bobby's anger would have faded a bit since he'd gotten the jackpot after all.

Some people were determined to keep flying into the fire, even when they knew they would get singed. Jack knew better, had always known better. And he had little patience with those who did not.

"Fine, then. You go back to Nice. I'm going to London."

She didn't think he would be able to do it, but Jack managed to dress on his own. Then he made a call on his mobile. She heard him ask for a Dr. Drake, so at least he was finally planning to get checked out. The knowledge relieved her, made her not worry quite so much about what he would do when she was gone.

Twenty minutes later, there was a knock on the door. He opened it and took a package from a young man wearing jeans and a faded rock band T-shirt.

Cara ran the towel over her freshly washed hair as she watched him open the package and take out a couple of bottles. She'd put her clothes back on, though they were still slightly damp. It was uncomfortable, but that couldn't be helped. She had to leave, and she had nothing else to wear.

Except she had no cash to go anywhere. How would she get back to Nice when she had no money, no credit cards and no ATM card? She had

to ask Jack for money, and that galled her. She already owed him for the night in the hotel, and the phone call, and she hated that she had to ask for yet another loan. She was used to paying her own way, to taking care of herself, and to be dependent on this man she hardly knew for money to eat and sleep—and get back to Nice—bothered her more than she could say. She felt wrong asking, and yet she had no choice.

She *would* pay him back. Even if he didn't believe it.

Jack took a couple of pills from the bottles and washed them down with water. Cara blinked. What kind of man could call a doctor and have painkillers delivered twenty minutes later? It forced her to reevaluate her assessment of him. He might be a gambler, but he was obviously a very good one. Perhaps he came from money and never really had to worry about what would happen if he lost everything.

*Wouldn't that be nice?* Cara thought wistfully. He looked up, met her gaze. His expression didn't soften from the hard mask he'd donned when she'd told him she was leaving. Her heart flipped in response. She had to stifle an urge to go to him, to run her fingers through his hair, to caress his granite jaw and press her lips to his. He slipped a wallet from the tuxedo jacket he'd left lying on the bed. Then he took out some euro notes and tossed them on the bed. "You'll be needing that," he said.

Perversely, her eyes filled with tears. Angry tears, tears of frustration. She'd been worried about asking for cash, and he'd preempted her. She wanted to tell him to keep his damn money, and yet she couldn't. Without it, she'd be standing on a Lyon street by nightfall, singing *a cappella* and hoping she could earn enough coins to eat dinner.

"Thank you," she said instead, shame a living creature inside her belly. It roiled and twisted until she wanted to lock herself in the bathroom and heave into the toilet.

"Take care of yourself, Cara." He watched her for a long moment, as if he wanted to say something else—or maybe he was waiting for her to say something—before he turned and walked out the door. He didn't walk with the fluid grace that he had when she'd first seen him, but he still moved like a man in control of his life and destiny.

She heard the roar of the engine start after what seemed like forever. And then the tires were squealing out of the parking lot and she was

alone.

Cara let out the breath she'd been holding. He'd left her. Oddly, it hurt that he had. But she'd *told* him to go! Cara pressed her fingers to her temples and sucked in a sharp breath. What was wrong with her? She'd wanted him gone, wanted to be on her own again so she could think and plan and breathe without Jack Wolfe taking up all the oxygen in the room.

She clutched the bills in her hand, only now realizing that she'd not gotten his address or phone number so she could pay him back. He'd given her five hundred euros, and now she felt as if she'd opened his wallet and taken them herself. Because she had no way to ever repay him.

*But is that really the problem, Cara?*

It wasn't, and she knew it. She could track him down again, no matter how difficult the task. But the real problem was that Jack Wolfe had sparked something inside her, something she'd never quite felt before. She didn't know why that was—he was too arrogant, too entitled, too much of a good-time guy who worked the casino racket and made a living off the cards. He wasn't the kind of man she liked at all.

But the physical attraction to him had been off the charts. As if that were a reason to feel so forlorn that she'd never see him again.

Cara took one last look at the room. It was time to go, time to get a taxi to the train station. She didn't have the luxury to remember Jack's nude body, his raw male beauty and power. She only need step through the door and close it behind her and Jack Wolfe would be a memory.

Resolutely, she did just that. The hotel reminded her a bit of one of those cheap chain motels in the States, an industrial box of a building close to the autoroute. She looked at the traffic moving on the highway and imagined Jack was several miles away by now. He wasn't thinking of her anymore. He was thinking of home and how long it would take him to get there.

She hoped he would be okay, that he wouldn't push himself too hard when he was still recovering. Maybe she should have gone along with him, if only to drive him to his destination. What would another day or two matter? Perhaps Bobby's temper would have cooled even more by

then.

Cara walked toward the front office. Jack was gone and that was the end of it. She would ask the desk clerk to call a taxi for her and then she, too, would be on her way.

Before she reached the office, however, a familiar engine revved and she turned as Jack whipped into the parking lot and stopped beside her. Ridiculously, her heart leaped into her throat. Why was she so happy to see him?

"I have an idea," he said, that delightful accent rolling over her, making her shiver.

"I'm listening," she replied, keeping her voice as cool as possible in spite of her pounding pulse.

"I have to go to a wedding in a couple of days and I need a date." Cara frowned. "You want me to be your date?"

"I'll pay you. And I'll make sure you get your passport and bank cards back."

She was conscious of the cash he'd given her burning a hole in her pocket. "But why would you want to pay me to go to a wedding with you?"

He raked a hand through his dark hair. He looked tousled, sexy, and she found herself wanting to repeat the motion with her own fingers. No way on earth did this man need to pay for a date.

"You need a job, I need a date. Seems the perfect solution."

She stiffened as her throat felt suddenly tight with emotion. He thought she was the kind of woman who needed money so badly that she would do anything to get it. "I'm sure you know plenty of willing partners who don't need to be paid."

She felt cheap, dirty, disappointed in a way she hadn't when he'd given her the five hundred euros to get home. Now he was offering to pay her, as if she were a professional escort. It hurt.

She took the money from her pocket and thrust it at him. "I'm not for sale, Jack. I told you that before."

Jack groaned. "Cara, for God's sake, I'm trying to help you. Whatever

bonus Bobby was planning to give you, I'll double it."

"How can you say that? You have no idea how much—"

"So tell me."

"Twenty-five thousand," she ground out, certain he would laugh in her face at the sum.

He shrugged. "Fine, we'll make it fifty, then. What do you say?"

Cara's lungs refused to work. He couldn't be serious. And yet—

My God, she'd be able to take care of *everything*, be able to pay off the remaining debt on the house, pay the insurance premiums and make sure that Mama never had to worry again. Remy could get the extra therapy he needed without Mama sacrificing so much to do it. Evie could have a normal life.

Did it really matter if her pride stung or if it made her feel cheap that Jack had offered to pay her to be his date? She'd been willing to throw a card game for money, even if she hadn't actually done so, so why couldn't she be Jack's date?

It was much less onerous than cheating, after all. But still ...

"Don't be stupid, Cara," Jack said. "This is a far better deal than working for Bobby Gold."

Oh, God, was she really thinking about it? She was. The fact her feet were glued to the spot and she hadn't yet spun on her heel and walked away told her she was.

But it was more than the money. So much more.

She hadn't spent much time with Jack, but she'd spent enough to know that she was wildly attracted to him. More than that, she could trust him to deliver on his promise. He wouldn't leave her in the lurch the way James had. He'd live up to his end of the bargain.

All she had to do was go to a wedding. How hard was that?

She *had* to do it, regardless of the pinprick to her feelings.

"I know you don't think so," Jack continued, "but I'm not convinced Bobby won't hurt you if you go back. He's a small man, Cara, and he holds grudges. You crossed him—"

"Yes," she blurted before she could talk herself out of it.

Jack blinked. "You'll do it?"

*Oh, God.*

"Yes, I'll be your date." She went around and climbed into the passenger seat of the shiny silver beast. Her heart pounded with adrenaline and recklessness. "But don't you get any other ideas, Jack Wolfe," she said once she was belted in. "You've bought a date, not a bed partner."

Jack caught her hand and lifted it to his lips.

The touch of his mouth against the tender inside skin of her wrist sent a shiver prickling over her. "I know that. Because when you *do* come to my bed, it won't be because I've paid you to do so."

"Someone needs to prove to you that you aren't irresistible," she forced out, though her body was already beginning to sing from that single touch. Belatedly, as if just remembering, she yanked her hand from his grip.

"Maybe," he said with a grin. "But I'm hoping it's not you."

The kilometers ticked by in silence. Jack glanced over at Cara on occasion, but she seemed as lost in thought as he was. He'd been about to make the turn onto the autoroute when he'd realized he had to go back for her. She was stubborn and determined to be independent, and though he understood that, he couldn't allow her to return to Nice. Because there was no doubt in his mind that Bobby Gold would hurt her.

He didn't know Cara Taylor's story, but he wanted to. And, selfishly, he wanted to avoid any confrontations with Jacob or Lucas at Nathaniel's wedding. He'd almost decided not to go to the wedding, simply to avoid the unpleasantness of any conversations with his two older brothers, but it would hurt Nathaniel if he didn't show up. Having Cara with him seemed a perfect solution. With a beautiful woman by his side, his brothers wouldn't dare try and talk to him about things he had no interest in discussing.

What was there left to say?

He was still angry, still bitter. He knew it.

Jack's fingers tightened on the wheel. He didn't want to do this, didn't

want to think about those dark years when everything had fallen apart. He'd once been so close to his older brothers, especially Jacob ... and now there was nothing. Nothing but an empty void.

"Do you want me to drive?"

Jack glanced at Cara. Her long dark hair had dried in a tousled mess of spiral curls. It made her look so sexy and touchable when combined with the low-cut shirt and tight satin mini. He wanted to pull the car over to the side of the road and tug her onto his lap. Golden-green eyes gazed back at him coolly—but there was a hint of fire she couldn't quite hide. It gratified him, buoyed him. This attraction between them was mutual—and he knew they would act on it soon enough, even if she didn't. It was inevitable.

"I've got it for now," he said.

"You seem tense. I thought maybe your ribs were hurting."

Jack rolled his shoulders. He was tense, but not because he hurt. "They hurt, yes, but not too badly I can't drive awhile longer."

"Just let me know when you need me to take over, okay?"

"We won't go much farther. I have an apartment in Paris. We'll stop there for the night. Besides, we need to go shopping."

She folded her arms over her breasts in a self-conscious gesture. He wondered what had happened to the bow tie. She seemed to have lost it somewhere along the way.

"I'm sorry I'm not better prepared," she said.

"How could you be?"

She turned to him again, her face both serious and eager at once. "I don't dress like this all the time," she said. "I do have decent clothing."

"I never doubted it."

She waved a hand over her body. "This isn't even my usual uniform. Bobby said it was something special for the game, something to keep the men playing for high stakes."

"It certainly worked for me," he told her. "I kept hoping to get a glimpse every time you bent over."

Her face reddened—and then she laughed. "You lost fifteen million

euros because you wanted to see down my shirt? Wow, and here I thought a guy like you could get a woman naked whenever he wanted.”

“Can I get you naked?”

“No.”

“But you’ve seen me. I think I deserve a turn.”

The blush on her creamy skin was intriguing. She crossed her legs, those impossibly long sexy legs, and he grew instantly hard. She wanted him, no matter how she tried to pretend otherwise. He knew enough about women to know that—even if Cara Taylor was proving surprisingly difficult to read for the most part.

“This is business, Jack. Don’t forget it. And whatever clothes you buy for me, please take them out of the money you’re planning to pay me.”

“Fine, if that’s what you want.” Jack shook his head. She was unlike any of the women he’d ever dated. Most women would leap at the chance to have a designer wardrobe added to the pot, but not Cara.

“It is.”

“So why were you working for Gold in the first place?” He was truly curious about how a sweet girl like her ended up with a shark like Gold.

She sighed and turned her head on the seat. In the distance, villages perched in the center of rolling vineyards. Fields of sunflowers blazoned against the landscape at regular intervals. It was beautiful and peaceful, and he suddenly wished he could just keep driving, just the two of them in the car alone, talking and watching the scenery flow by.

“You may have heard of Hurricane Katrina,” she said.

“Yes.”

“My mama lost her house in the flood. It took months to clear the land and rebuild everything. In the meanwhile, we lived in a trailer provided by the government. It was tiny, cramped.”

She hesitated for a few moments, and he wondered if she would continue. Then she cleared her throat.

“There were some things that happened, things that Mama wasn’t expecting, but we finally got the house rebuilt enough to live in. Then I went to Vegas,” she said, shrugging. “It seemed like the thing to do at

the time. I was seeing someone, and he lost his job. He said we could make a lot more in Vegas, because tourism was strong, and I definitely needed extra money to help out at home. Tourism had dried up in New Orleans, you see ..." She took a breath, turned to look at him, almost as if she were daring him to say anything negative about her choices. "I waitressed for a while, but when one of the casinos announced they needed dealer trainees, I applied. The money was supposed to be better, and I wanted to send more home."

She shrugged again, as if it meant nothing—and yet he was certain it meant everything. "I worked for someone else for a while, but Bobby offered me more money. So I took it."

Jack's grip tightened on the wheel instinctively. He understood the drive to help family only too well. The need, the desperation, the necessity. They were more alike than she knew.

"So what happened to the boyfriend?"

Her fingers clenched in her lap. "We parted ways." She turned to him, fixed him with the full force of her wounded stare. He didn't think she could possibly be aware of all she revealed in that look. "He stole my money and ran off with an exotic dancer."

Jack wanted to grind his teeth. But he said, "Then he wasn't very bright, was he?"

She gave a little laugh. "You're too nice. But you don't really know me. Maybe the dancer was a better choice. Maybe I'm horrible or something."

It was his turn to laugh. "Not a chance, Cara."

"How do you know?" she challenged.

He glanced at her before concentrating on the road again. "Because you didn't leave me at Bobby's mercy. Because you sacrificed your job for me."

"I didn't do it for you," she interjected. "At least, not the job part."

"No, you couldn't cheat because it's not who you are. But I still feel responsible. Bobby's guy probably would have won without me there. He was the best player, besides me."

"It doesn't matter," she said. "What happened happened. There's no

sense crying over it now.”

She was strong, this woman. He admired that about her.

“How did you end up in Nice, anyway?”

She leaned back on the seat, her head lolling to one side. “Bobby took only his best employees, and he promised us all a huge bonus. It seemed like a good idea at the time. I’ve never been to Europe before,” she added in a soft voice.

“And is it everything you thought it would be?”

“I really don’t know.” She sighed, a soft sound that whispered over his senses and made him wonder if she would sigh like that in bed. “I’ve been working nonstop for the opening, so I never had a chance to explore. Bobby rented an apartment block to house us in and sent a van every day to pick us up. All I saw of Nice was from a car window.”

“Didn’t you ever have a day off?”

“No. I’ve only been in France for two weeks, and we worked every day.”

“Then maybe you need to do a little sightseeing.” The wedding was in two days, so he had plenty of time to get there. Besides, if he were in Paris, there would be no chance that Jacob would track him down before the wedding. “Tonight I’ll take you to a great café I know for dinner, and then perhaps a cruise on the Seine.”

Her face lit up as she turned to him. “I’d love that. I’ve always wanted to go to Paris, ever since I read Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* in high school.”

“I like seeing you smile,” he said. She dropped her chin, hiding her eyes from him. He wondered what he would see there, wanted very much to see it, but she kept her gaze lowered.

“I’m not sure what I’m doing here,” she said after a few moments of silence. “But I like you. I’m learning to trust you, Jack, and I hope you don’t disappoint me.”

Something squeezed tight inside his chest. Because he always disappointed the women in his life. He meant well, but he inevitably got bored. Once he’d played anything long enough—cards, stocks, women—it was time to move on to the next challenge. He wasn’t stupid enough to

think he hadn't left broken hearts in his wake. Wasn't stupid enough to think that Cara was different somehow. She had his attention now, but how long would it last?

"I like you, too," he said. And then, because he *did* like her, because he thought she was charming and naive and too trusting, he told her the truth. "But don't trust me, Cara. Don't ever trust me."

# CHAPTER FIVE

*Don't trust me.*

Cara stood at the window of the room she'd been given in Jack's apartment and stared at the Eiffel Tower in the distance. Below, boats moved along the Seine, and cars zipped down the streets while the sidewalks were crowded with Parisians going about their daily business. It was a beautiful city, so vibrant and alive, and she was giddy with the thought she was actually here.

But the way Jack had told her not to trust him kept popping into her mind like an annoying mosquito. She couldn't make it go away, couldn't forget how he'd said the words—so bleak and raw that it made her soul ache.

She hadn't known what to say then, had been embarrassed she'd said anything at all. It wasn't like her to open up to anyone, and especially not to someone like Jack Wolfe. She hardly knew him, and yet they'd been through so much together—and he'd seemed so honorable—that she felt she could maybe learn to trust him.

That he'd told her not to had shocked her into speechlessness, and they'd finished the drive in relative silence. At least until they reached Paris and she couldn't keep her awe to herself. Jack had once more become the solicitous, attentive host and he'd pointed out the sights as they drove. She'd gasped and closed her eyes more than once the closer they'd gotten into the center of town, certain that his lovely car was about to crash into another of the crazy drivers who frequented the streets.

But it never happened. Cars passed one another with only a hairbreadth between them, but somehow everyone made it unscathed. Jack had driven up to a grand building on a side street and touched a button in the car. A garage door cranked upward and he zipped the car inside.

It wasn't until they'd entered his apartment that the truth had hit her: Jack Wolfe was extremely wealthy. The apartment was glorious, with

high ceilings and original architecture—plaster friezes, ornate moldings and polished wooden floors that gleamed with the richness of age and frequent care.

The furniture was modern—sleek leather couches and chairs—and the views were spectacular. She could see so much of the famous city from the huge floor-to-ceiling windows running the length of the room that it took her breath away.

Jack had shown her to this room to freshen up. In the bathroom, she'd found all the toiletries she could need, a hairbrush, a toothbrush and a fluffy white robe. In spite of her morning shower, she'd taken another, washing her hair and blow-drying it so it hung smooth and sleek down her back.

A knock at the door startled her. Heart pounding, she moved toward the entry.

“Yes?”

“I’ve had some things sent up for you.”

Cara pulled the door open. Jack stood there, so tall and handsome that he took her breath away. His eye was black, but it didn’t detract from his male beauty. He looked more relaxed now, and more dangerous.

Jack Wolfe was not the sort of man she needed to get involved with. She no longer believed he was simply a gambler—oh, he was definitely a gambler, but that wasn’t the *only* thing he did—but she was certain he was bad for her. He was, she realized, a daredevil. She had little to base it on, other than the way he’d behaved at the card table and later when he’d come looking for her. He’d faced Bobby with contempt, and he’d fought hard against the men who’d punched him, never once begging for mercy.

But she knew she was correct, that she’d surmised the truth.

He thrived on challenge and adrenaline. He got a rush from danger. He was the worst kind of man in the world for any woman, but especially for her. She wanted someone who was dependable, who was stable and responsible. She wanted what she’d never had.

But why was she thinking *any* of these thoughts? She barely knew this man, and she certainly wasn’t planning to fall in love with him.

“Can I come in?”

Cara swallowed as she pulled the door wider. Heat blossomed in her belly, between her thighs, crept along her skin in a crimson wave. “Of course.”

He passed inside, carrying bags from a boutique, and set them on the antique table at the end of the bed. “It’s not much, but it’s enough to go out shopping and to dinner.”

Embarrassed, she went over and peeked inside one of the bags.

“If you don’t like it, I’ll have something else sent up. I had to guess at your size.”

“I’m sure you did fine,” she replied politely.

“Technically, it wasn’t me. I simply made a phone call and described you to the shopgirls.” His mouth crooked in a smile. A devilish smile. “Aren’t you going to look?”

“I am looking.”

“No, you’re peeking past the tissue. Take them out, see what you think. There’s time to send it all back if it’s not right.”

She withdrew a jewel green sweater set made of the finest tightly knit silk and a pair of cream slacks from one of the bags.

“The color suits you,” he said as her heart beat harder. “Matches your eyes.”

“Thank you.” The sweater set was gorgeous, expensive, and she adored the color. It was the kind of thing she’d have bought for herself, if she’d had the money to do so. Most of her clothes came from big-box stores, huge chains that thrived on quantity not quality. It was what she could afford, and she’d never once felt as if she looked cheap—until now. “Everything is beautiful,” she told him with a hard knot in her throat.

“I’m glad you like them.”

In the next bag, she found a box with a pair of strappy kitten heels. “The size is absolutely perfect.”

“I saw the bottom of your shoe when you had your leg tucked beneath you in the car.”

"No wonder we nearly ran into that yellow van," she teased. Because she didn't know what else to do. This moment was so intimate, so private and personal, and she felt out of sorts in a way. He wasn't her lover, yet he'd bought clothes for her.

*It's a job, Cara*, she reminded herself. There was nothing wrong with what she was doing, being here with him like this. It was different than any job she'd had before, true, but it was still a job. And she had no suitable clothes for the wedding. This was simply part of the process. She tried to ignore the fact she was in a bathrobe, and that she had nothing on underneath.

"Look in the pink bag," he said, eyes glinting silvery hot.

Cara's fingers touched silk. She pulled out a delicate white bra and thong—and shoved them back inside again as Jack laughed. She was so far in over her head that it wasn't funny. Had she really thought she was going to keep this about business between them?

"So modest. I like that about you," he said.

Cara straightened her spine as she stared at him. It was hard to be quelling when you were in a bathrobe. "I'm not in the habit of showing my underwear to men I hardly know. It's not polite."

He laughed again as he took a step toward her. "Can you really say we hardly know each other after last night?"

Heat enveloped her, wrapped her in its web, made her long for another look at his naked body. She'd tried not to look, but she hadn't succeeded. And she couldn't forget what she'd seen. The long, strong legs. The lean hips, the jutting sex. The flat abdomen and muscled torso. He'd had a tan line, she remembered, a boundary line where she could run her tongue and see if it drove him as insane as she imagined it would. *Stop*.

"Once again, Cara, there's an invitation in your eyes."

"You think too highly of yourself—"

He closed the distance between them much quicker than she'd have expected for someone still recovering from a brutal beating. And then he was threading a hand in her hair, tilting her head back, his mouth coming down on hers—lightly, sweetly, because of the cut on her lip. It

stung, and yet it was also heaven.

Sensation crashed through her, tightening her nipples, stretching her skin, leaving a fiery imprint in its wake. The kiss was nothing, and yet it was everything. They were sharing breath, sharing heat and scent and touch.

He slipped his other arm around her, pulled her close enough that she felt the hard hot heat of him through the woven cotton of her robe. His tongue traced the line of her lips, the touch sensual and overwhelming, and she opened her mouth to let him inside because she suddenly couldn't imagine doing anything else.

When their tongues met, she couldn't stifle the moan that emanated from her throat. He was so cautious, so gentle, and yet she wanted more, wanted him to unleash the fire. But he remained gentle with her, his tongue stroking against hers so deliciously, not overtly demanding and yet so compelling at the same time.

It was an intimate caress, this sensual slide of tongues together, and she shivered with the lusciousness of it.

She threaded her fingers into his hair, pulled his mouth tighter to hers. The contact stung, and yet she wanted it, needed it somehow. The kiss deepened, and her insides liquefied. Her body ached with need. It had been so long since she'd been with a man. Yet that wasn't what caused the ache.

It was him. Jack Wolfe. He was exasperating and exciting and dangerous and tender. She couldn't figure him out, but she knew there was something potent between them, something that would likely consume them both if they gave in to it.

And she couldn't afford that kind of annihilation, not now. She had to keep her head, had to keep her heart intact. She had to do the job she'd agreed to do and then she needed to find work. Maybe she'd even find something in London. Even if it were only temporary, at least she would get to have the adventure she'd always wanted.

Everything was going well at home, and with the money she was about to send, there would be nothing left to worry over. She could finally see the world on her terms.

Jack's hand slipped to the curve of her buttock, cupped her, and a shiver of desire shot straight to her core. His mouth grew bolder, more insistent, and she clung to him, enjoying the heady feel of his body against hers.

She trailed a hand down his arm, over his chest. But when his hands went to the belt at her waist, she stilled. What was she doing? How could she allow this? He was paying her to go to London with him, to attend a wedding, and she was about to let him make love to her? Did he think it was his right? Or was he simply acting according to the moment?

Because she didn't know, she somehow found the strength to push him away. "No, Jack. I can't," she said, aware that she didn't sound very certain of herself.

If he pushed the point, she was afraid she would succumb to his charm. Because he was handsome and glorious and she was strangely susceptible to him.

He gripped her upper arms, squeezed only a moment and then set her back a step. His chest rose and fell almost as quickly as hers did.

"I guess we know now, don't we?"

She looked up, met his gaze, her heart flipping at the intensity of those glittering silver eyes. "Know what?"

He tucked her hair behind her ear, ghosted his fingers along her jaw, let them trail down her neck. He stopped at the thrumming pulse point in her throat, smiled. It was a weary smile, a disappointed smile.

"That we could be very good for each other."

Cara tucked her hands into her folded arms, shivered. "Only in bed, Jack. And that's not enough, I'm afraid."

His head tilted as he studied her. She felt self-conscious, silly. Like a girl, not a woman. A skittish virgin. She wasn't the kind of woman who slept around, but she'd had her share of lovers. He made her feel like she had no experience whatsoever.

"You're looking for happy ever after, Cara?"

Her ears burned with embarrassment. It was so contrary to everything she'd ever experienced, and yet it was the truth. She *needed* to believe in

true love, even if she'd never seen it. That he'd seen to the heart of the matter should surprise her, and yet it didn't. "Isn't everyone?"

"What if it doesn't exist?"

She worried about that, too. Because hadn't she thought that Mama and Daddy were happy?

Hadn't she thought they had a wonderful, loving marriage? Until Daddy betrayed them all and left Mama brokenhearted and alone.

In spite of all that had happened to damage her faith in men and relationships, she stubbornly clung to the hope she needed. There had to be more to life than simply existing. There just *had* to be. "It's a chance I'll have to take, I suppose."

He looked at her as if he pitied her. "Seems lonely."

Cara turned away. It was too much, too close to home. "Thank you for the clothes, Jack," she said, fingering the green sweater set.

He let out an exasperated breath, but she didn't turn to look at him. "I'll leave you to dress, then. When you're ready, we'll go out."

And then he was gone, the door closing behind him, and she was alone. Cara sank onto the edge of the bed, trembling with adrenaline and thwarted desire.

She was in so much trouble here. She had to be careful, had to watch herself. Or she'd end up doing something she would most certainly regret later. Jack Wolfe was a player, a man who loved women and fast cars and dangerous pursuits. He wasn't the kind of man to be interested in her any longer than it took to win the chase. He would bed her and be done with her.

And she was afraid she couldn't bear it if he no longer looked at her the way he did now.

"Stupid, Cara," she whispered. Then she got up and began to dress.

Paris was indeed a feast for the senses. Cara sat at the table on the patio of the small café where Jack had taken her for dinner and gaped at the sophisticated Parisians as they passed by. The table was small, intimate, tucked into a corner of the patio that no one else occupied. The linens were crisp and white, and the food smelled delicious. Cara had worried

for a moment that she would feel uncomfortable in this chic city but everyone had been so friendly.

She felt so different in the clothes Jack had bought her, as if she were sophisticated and cultured, and she'd delighted in their reception at the café. The maître d', who'd treated her with absolute courtesy, seemed very happy to see Jack, as if he were a regular customer.

Which, she realized, he must be since he had an apartment nearby. Did he often bring his dates here? The thought was unwelcome. Not because she wanted to be the only woman he'd ever brought to this café, but because it was *her* experience of Paris—and she didn't want to imagine anyone else sharing her memory.

"Is there anything you don't like to eat?" Jack asked once they had been seated. "I don't think so."

"Do you trust me to order, then?"

"Yes."

He ordered in rapid French and the first course arrived shortly after. Cara couldn't wait to take a bite of the delicate foie gras. She spread it on a cracker and popped it into her mouth.

"Oh, God," she said, closing her eyes as she chewed. "That's amazing."

"I'm glad you think so."

When the waiter returned, she asked him to pass her compliments to the chef.

"I didn't realize you spoke French," Jack said once the waiter was gone again.

Cara smiled. "There's a lot you don't know about me, Jack. I'm from New Orleans, *mon ami*. We speak French, though it's a very different kind of French than they speak here, I have to admit. Which is why I don't trot it out very often."

"You are Cajun, then?"

"Half. My mama is a Broussard."

"And your father?"

Cara's grip tightened on her fork. "Just a plain old Taylor. The Taylors were from Mississippi originally."

"You are very far from home, then," he said. Not far enough sometimes, it seemed.

Cara swallowed guiltily. "You say that as if people don't ever travel anywhere."

"Yes, but you aren't traveling, precisely. You came to work."

Cara ducked her head, studied the pâté as she spread it over another cracker. "I wanted to experience new places. It's perfectly normal." She thrust her chin at him. "You're British, and yet you live here."

"This is only one of my homes."

Cara felt her jaw drop just a little. She snapped it closed again. "Gambling must be very good to you."

He laughed. "It can be."

"Aren't you afraid you'll lose it all on one turn of the cards?" Because she really didn't understand how he could do it, how he could risk so much and not blink an eye. She worked hard for every dime she had, and no way could she gamble it all on a turn of the cards or a roll of the die. Mama depended on her too much.

Jack shrugged. "Not especially. It hasn't happened yet. But, Cara, cards aren't how I make money."

She blinked. "They aren't?" Because he'd shown every sign of being a professional high roller.

"No." He took a drink of his wine. "I own an investment firm."

An investment firm. That seemed far more stable than gambler, and yet the knowledge didn't abate the feeling she had that Jack loved to take risks. Investing was simply another way to play the odds.

"I'm relieved to hear it," she said. "Once we part ways, I won't be worried that you'll be trying to rescue some other croupier from Bobby Gold's evil clutches."

He laughed, and she couldn't help but laugh with him. She loved the sound of his laugh, the way his voice grew richer and more potent when he did so. It was as if he needed a moment to figure out *how* to laugh, a moment to let his voice slide into the joy of doing so. It made her wonder if he didn't laugh very often, and yet that seemed an odd

thought because he'd laughed easily enough with her since they'd been together.

"You're an amusing woman, Cara Taylor."

"I try," she said, breaking a piece of bread and slathering it with butter. "So what about you, Jack? Where are your roots?"

His expression morphed, grew more cautious. Shadows drifted across his eyes. Cara shivered inwardly. With the blackened skin under one eye, it made him seem so dark and dangerous and hopeless.

What had happened to the light? The beautiful light was gone now, replaced by a mask of indifference. It made her sad to see him like this. "I'm British."

"I know that." Her heart pounded in her ears as she tried to make him laugh again with her tone. It didn't work.

"My parents are dead," he said, his fingers toying with the stem of his wineglass. He looked so remote and untouchable, nothing like the man who'd been gently teasing her only moments ago. Nothing like the man who'd kissed her so passionately earlier.

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "Don't be. My mother died when I was three. I don't remember anything about her. And my father ..."

He didn't say anything else for the longest time. And then he looked up, caught her gaze. Shrugged again. But his eyes.

His eyes burned so hot and dark that it made her reach for her wine. She took a gulp, let the acidic dryness scour her throat.

"My father died twenty years ago," he said. "But it wasn't soon enough for me."

# CHAPTER SIX

JACK couldn't believe he'd told her he was glad his father was dead. He'd never said it to anyone other than Jacob. Never voiced the words that damned him.

Cara's eyes were wide as she watched him. Now was the time when she would protest his cruelty, tell him he couldn't really mean it. She would be shocked, disgusted. She would want to leave, want to pull out of their arrangement.

He would let her go.

Because it was best, because she brought things out in him that shocked him, as well. He couldn't quite control himself around her. Couldn't control his impulses or needs. And that was dangerous, because he was a man who was always in control. Rigid self-control was one of the hallmarks of his success. He had the ability to stay in the game far longer than another man, because he controlled the fear of failure.

Men who feared made decisions based on that fear. Jack feared nothing. And because he feared nothing, he always won.

Cara reached across the table, grazed his hand. His skin sizzled where she touched, the current arcing between them with unbearable heat. He wanted so badly to bury himself in her sweet, lush body. To spend himself in a long, hazy, crazy night of hot lovemaking.

But he clamped down on the ferocious need, because her need was different. Because she would despise him now, after what he'd said. He hadn't said the words exactly, but she understood.

*I hated him. I'm glad he's dead.*

"I'm sorry, Jack."

"Sorry for what? That he's dead or that I'm glad?"

She withdrew her hand, sighed. "Sorry that you feel that way. Because you must have your reasons, and so I'm sorry for them, whatever they are."

The traffic zipped by on the street, hardly slowing. He was used to it, used to the idea that the world continued spinning without care while you felt as if it had left you behind somehow. He wanted it to stop, wanted to get back on board. But it never did. It never had.

“You aren’t shocked?” he asked.

Her eyes were so liquid, so warm and sad all at once. She shook her head. “No.”

Something flooded him, some feeling of relief and anger and pain all combined. Why? “You’re an odd woman, Cara Taylor.”

One corner of her mouth lifted in a soft smile. “You just told me I was an amusing woman. Which one is it?”

He couldn’t help but shake his head at the wonder of her. “Both, I think.” And then he reached for her hand, lifted it to his lips and pressed a kiss on the back before turning it over and kissing her palm.

He heard the intake of her breath, that slight catch that said she was as aroused as he was by the contact. “Jack.”

“I want you, Cara.”

She bit her lip, her skin flushing a delicate pink. It was such a sweet, innocent reaction—and it fired his blood, made him harder than the marble tabletop.

“I’m not ready for this,” she said. “So much has happened in the past twenty-four hours—”

“You need time.” His body ached for hers, and yet he knew that he shouldn’t push her. It wasn’t fair to push her. Perhaps, if last night had been normal, they’d have fallen into bed together and it would all be over. He’d be on his way to England, and she’d be getting ready to go to the casino. “I understand.”

“Do you really? Because I get the impression you’re very accustomed to getting what you want when you want it.”

He kissed her warm skin again, then let her hand go. “Some things are worth waiting for.”

She pushed a strand of her long, silky brunette hair over her shoulder. The sweater the boutique had sent up looked amazing on her. It brought

out the green in her eyes, the cream of her skin. The woman at the boutique had asked what Cara's coloring was. He hadn't realized the results would be quite so spectacular when he'd described her eyes and hair.

"I like you, Jack. But I'm not sure sleeping with you is a good idea. This is a business arrangement, nothing more."

A thought occurred to him then. Something he'd not thought of before because she seemed so earthy, so sensual, even while she had that edge of innocence.

"Are you still a virgin?"

She bit her lip, looked away. "No, I'm not. But that doesn't mean I'm in the habit of falling into bed with strange men." When she swung her gaze to him again, she looked fierce, determined. "I don't need to be a virgin to want to exercise caution."

"And here I thought I was irresistible," he drawled, more to make her laugh than anything. He didn't know why he liked making her laugh, why he laughed when he was with her. He wasn't the laughing kind, not usually.

"Incorrigeable, maybe," she said.

Yes, he was definitely that. Hopeless. Irredeemable. Most definitely irredeemable. "This isn't over, Cara."

"I didn't think it was. I'd be stupid to think so."

"Then you must realize the truth." Because there was no denying it, no possibility of denying it when the electricity snapped between them so strongly that the air was saturated with it.

"What truth is that, Jack?"

"That you want me, every bit as much as I want you. And we *will* end up in bed together, sooner or later."

Cara studied Jack as he stood on the deck of the boat they'd boarded to cruise the Seine. He looked comfortable, at ease, and yet she sensed the undercurrent flowing through him. He was a complex man. He was both very approachable and extremely distant. She had the feeling that if she spent years with him, she might never really know him.

And that saddened her most of all. Because she wanted to know him, wanted to understand how he could hate the man who'd fathered him. She didn't hate her own father, but she was bitterly, terribly angry with him. She knew how those feelings could take root deep inside and never leave you.

She didn't doubt Jack had reasons, good reasons, for the way he felt. But it worried her to imagine what they might be.

It was growing dark now, but the night lights of Paris were incredible against the blue-black sky. She tried to enjoy the sights, the Notre Dame Cathedral, the famous stone bridges, the people who walked beside the river, engrossed in conversation or, in some cases, kissing.

But it was difficult with Jack standing so close, with the remnants of their conversation so fresh in her mind. She wanted to go into his arms, wanted to stand in his embrace while the city slid by. She pulled her sweater tighter around her. April in Paris was colder than she'd realized.

Jack turned to look at her, as if he were somehow attuned to her distress. Without a word, he put his arm around her and pulled her close.

"Your ribs," she said.

"This side is fine. It's the other side that's bruised. Touch me there, I might scream like a little girl."

She couldn't help but laugh. "It's not funny."

"I'm not the one laughing, am I?"

"Jack."

He grinned and turned to look at the sights again. She thought he must be somewhat bored, since he had a home here and had surely done this before. It was such a touristy thing to do.

It warmed her, the knowledge he would do such a thing for her. It was getting late—perhaps he'd prefer to be home, soaking his battered body in the tub again. But he was here, and she was having a marvelous time.

After they'd finished dinner, he'd taken her shopping. She'd been so embarrassed, so unsure, but he'd told her it was okay, told her to let the shopgirls help her. He'd offered to leave if it made her more comfortable, but she'd told him no. She'd felt as if she would be

hopelessly lost if he weren't there. Her French was passable, but it was quite different from the French spoken here. The accents she'd grown up with, the lovely thick rolling of the tongue, the inclusion of Creole and other immigrant languages in the vocabulary, made communication a little more difficult when precision was required.

And she wanted to be precise when it came to her clothing.

"I don't want to spend more than two thousand," she'd told him, her pulse thrumming. It was a huge sum to spend on clothes, and yet she'd thought a smaller number wouldn't work in the kinds of boutiques they'd been in.

He'd given her that devilish grin. "Let me worry about that."

She shook her head adamantly. "No. Take it from what you're paying me already. I insist."

"Then we'll do it your way," he'd said without argument.

The boxes and bags had added up after she'd tried on several outfits. She'd grown suspicious then, insisted she didn't need so much for a wedding, but he'd overridden her protests.

"We'll do an accounting later, when I pay you," he said. And then he'd arranged for everything to be taken back to his place and brought her on board this boat.

She tilted her head up to look at his handsome profile. "This is nice, Jack. Thank you."

His warm body was comforting. She wanted to press even closer, but she dared not. For two reasons. One, she wasn't sure he was telling the complete truth about his ribs, and two, it was dangerous to want to be close to him. Dangerous for her peace of mind, for her willpower.

He'd said they would end up in bed together sooner or later. She knew he was probably right, and yet she was determined to fight it as long as possible. Because she knew it wouldn't be completely casual for her. He was a typical man, of course. He wanted into her panties. Once he'd gotten there, his desire for her would abate. She'd no longer be interesting, amusing or any of the other things he thought she was at the moment.

She'd just be another notch on his bedpost.

And the more time she spent with him, the less she could be satisfied with a casual encounter.

*Really, Cara?*

It was insane, and yet she knew it was the truth. Jack Wolfe was wrong for her—and yet she wanted him to be right. There was far more to him than she'd thought just yesterday—was it really only yesterday? —when he'd flirted with her at the casino.

But he was way out of her league. He was rich, amazingly so, and she was just a poor girl from New Orleans. She wasn't the kind of woman he'd truly be interested in. It bothered her, that feeling of not being good enough. Rationally, she knew she was a good person, a person worthy of love and tenderness.

But life had been so hard the past few years. Reality had crashed down when Katrina blew it to pieces over top of her. Until then, Mama and Daddy had sheltered her and Remy and Evie, provided for them, and made life seem so full of possibilities.

She'd been planning to go to college, to work her way through community college first and then apply to Tulane. Until Katrina had stolen her house and family away. Daddy had walked out, and nothing was ever the same again.

How could he have done it? How could he have lied for so long and left them once the truth was out? He'd chosen his other family over them, and she could never forgive him for it. She hadn't spoken a word to him in almost six years. Didn't expect she ever would again.

She stole another glance at Jack. Was he trustworthy? Or was he the sort of man who could turn his back on everything and everyone he'd known? She just didn't know if she could ever trust any man again. Daddy, James, Bobby—they'd all promised her things, and they'd all broken those promises. Jack would break his promises, too, if she were to allow him into her life any more deeply than he already was.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, turning his head to look down into her eyes.

She shrugged. "I was just thinking about how wonderful it is to be here, to see things I've only ever read about."

One dark eyebrow arched. “Is that all?”

“Have you ever been married?” she blurted, surprising herself as much as him. Now where had that come from?

“No.” His voice grew chilly when he said it, as if in warning. *Careful where you tread, little girl.*

“Why not?” She wanted to know. She wasn’t sure what knowing the answer would tell her about him, but maybe it would tell her something.

“Why the questions, Cara?”

“I’m trying to get to know you. You’re rich, successful, and it seems as if you would have been married with a family by now.”

His nostrils flared as he turned his head to look out over the dark water. “I guess I didn’t want the responsibility.”

Of all the answers he could have given, that was somehow the worst. He didn’t want the responsibility. Because being a rich playboy was easier. He didn’t need to care about anyone but himself. He could change women the way he changed clothes. He could drive fancy cars, stay out all night and get beaten up trying to rescue damsels in distress—even if the damsel preferred to rescue herself. He wasn’t the kind of man who would ever be happy tied down. He was exactly as she’d thought: unreliable for more than the moment, however long the moment lasted.

“What about you, Cara? Have you ever been married?”

The question startled her, probably because she hadn’t expected him to turn it back on her. But she could answer honestly. “No, not yet.”

“Never been close?”

She shook her head. “There’s been no one that important.”

“That surprises me,” he said. “What about the boyfriend you went to Vegas with? He must have been important if you were willing to leave home for him.”

“Maybe I thought so at first,” she said, staring out over the dark water. “But I realized he wasn’t.”

“When he ran off with the showgirl?”

“No, when I realized he was just an excuse.”

“An excuse?”

How could she tell him how desperately she’d wanted to escape Louisiana without it sounding bad? Without it sounding like she’d abandoned her family because she felt hemmed in by responsibility?

Did it even matter? Why did she care what he thought? She hadn’t abandoned them at all. She’d actually made things better by going somewhere that she could make more money. Because she had, her family was doing better than ever. They were no longer desperate to make ends meet.

“He was the excuse I needed to leave,” she said coolly. “I needed the shove out the door, and he provided it.”

“Ah,” he said. “And yet you still believe in happy ever afters.”

She refused to be embarrassed over it. “I think it’s possible, yes. Don’t you?”

“No, I don’t.”

Cara resisted the urge to snort. Of course he wouldn’t believe in love that lasted forever. Jack lived in the moment. And yet she felt like challenging him on it.

“What about this wedding we’re going to? Don’t you believe they’ll be happy together?”

“I hope so. Nathaniel deserves happiness.”

Interestingly, she was incensed for Nathaniel, whoever he was. “Does Nathaniel know you don’t give him very good odds of being happy with his new wife?”

Jack’s expression was wry. “I doubt he cares. He’s always done what he wanted. My opinion doesn’t matter much.”

“Sensible man,” she said. “How long have you known him?”

“All my life. He’s my brother.”

Her heart skipped a beat. He was taking her to a family wedding? She’d thought it was just a wedding, not a family function. It had seemed so much easier when it had been simply *a wedding*.

“What’s the matter?” he asked when she didn’t say anything.

Cara swallowed. “I didn’t realize I’d be meeting your family. That

seems much more personal than a business arrangement.”

“It’s not. We’re not a very close family.”

Something in his tone made her heart ache. She wasn’t close to her father, not anymore, but she couldn’t imagine life without Mama and Remy and Evie. It was true she wanted adventure, true she wanted to explore and do her own thing, but to not have them to go home to? To not have that safe haven that would always be there, especially now that she’d done so much to secure it for them?

It was unthinkable.

“I see this surprises you,” he said. “And yet, here you are, thousands of miles from home.”

“I left for many reasons, but we’re still very close.”

His gaze roamed her face. “Yes, I believe that. There’s a light in your eyes whenever you mention them. And you’ve clearly worked very hard to provide for them.”

“I love them,” she said. And then, because she couldn’t stop herself, she asked, “Aren’t you ever lonely, Jack?”

His expression was tired, bleak. She saw the wounded warrior now, the man behind the mask—or were there more masks, more layers of obfuscation? It wouldn’t surprise her if there were.

“I’ve been alone too long to be lonely,” he said.

“That’s ridiculous. How can you say that?”

He traced the line of her jaw with two fingers. “You’re very naive, Cara. We don’t all need the company of others to make our lives complete.”

She bristled. “I choose to think of myself as optimistic. There’s nothing wrong with hoping for the best. Nothing wrong with wanting to share my life with someone.”

The boat thudded against the rubber bumpers of the dock, signaling that the ride was over. Jack stepped back, took her hand in his as if she were a child.

“Wait,” she said when he tried to lead her toward the gangway. He gave her that look she was getting to know so well, the one that said he

was annoyed but tolerating her. Well, nothing said she had to stand for it. She wasn't letting him barrel through her life, giving orders and making plans—which was what he'd been doing since he'd walked in and sat down at her table last night.

"I'm not naive, Jack. Wanting more out of life and relationships is not naive. I'm a big girl, I know what I want."

He inclined his head. "No, maybe it's not naive to know what you want out of life. If only more people did. But, Cara, wanting more out of *me* is very naive."

"I didn't say anything about you, did I?" she threw at him. "Honestly, your arrogance is unbelievable sometimes."

She didn't wait for him to reply. She strode up the gangway, tears pricking at the backs of her eyes as a shiver of premonition skimmed up her spine. Because, damn her, she did want more from him. She wanted there to be something else besides this incredible heat and pull of attraction between them. She wanted there to be the possibility of a relationship at the very least. Even if it didn't work out, she wanted to know he would take her seriously for more than the time it took to get her into bed.

Honest to God, she should just leave. She should tell him the deal was off. But where would she go? She couldn't go back to Nice, and she couldn't leave Europe without her passport.

Cara shook her head angrily. For now, she would stay. She had no choice but to stay.

And she would remember that Jack Wolfe was off-limits, no matter how her silly heart wanted the possibility of more. He was hiding behind walls that were stacked to the sky and thicker than the duckweed that choked the bayous back home. The rare glimpses she'd gotten behind those walls were carefully controlled constructs that he trotted out for the sake of appearances.

No, the real Jack was buried too deep to ever break free. She didn't really know him—and she probably never would.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

THEY spent another full day in Paris before setting out for London on a private plane only a few hours before the wedding. Cara had never flown in such luxury before. The plane was furnished in blue and cream, its plush chairs overstuffed and comfortable. There was plenty of legroom, a table in front of her that didn't require anyone to fold down a tray and a sleek chrome bar where a uniformed attendant was stacking drinks in a refrigerator.

She'd hoped to take the train so she could experience the Chunnel, but Jack had informed her that her lack of a passport would be a problem. They were flying because, presumably, Jack knew people. At least she hoped he did, because she'd hate to be sent back to France when he'd gone to so much trouble.

"How does one go about renting a private plane?" she asked. The engines spooled up as they began to taxi down the runway.

"I own it," he said.

Cara could only stare at him. He owned a plane? *A plane?* She glanced around the interior. It seemed even more lush and rich than it had only moments ago. *My God.*

Jack picked up a copy of a British newspaper and flipped it open. Cara turned to look out the window while the plane gathered speed, shooting down the runway before lifting into the air in a stomach-dropping ascent. She glanced at Jack, but he didn't seem in the least perturbed. She hadn't flown often, and the experience was still both exhilarating and frightening every time.

As the plane climbed, she watched the countryside below. It was so beautiful, and vastly different than her home in Louisiana. Here, there were vineyards, cows, verdant fields and stone villages in abundance. At home, there would be swamps, a lot of flat wetlands, sand and pine trees.

A flight attendant came over and asked if she would like a drink.

When the woman returned with a glass of iced water, Cara thanked her, hoping she didn't look as unsophisticated as she felt.

*Real* glass on an airplane instead of plastic. A man who owned an airplane. Wealth and luxury like she'd never imagined she would ever personally experience. She'd seen plenty of luxury in the casinos, but she'd never expected to be on the other end of the luxury. Enjoying it as if she were entitled to it.

She felt like a fraud.

"Want the paper?" Jack asked.

Cara jerked her attention toward him. He'd finished the paper. The sections lay neatly folded on the table between them. She shook her head. "No, thanks." A moment later, she asked, "Do you think you might tell me a little bit about who will be at this wedding?"

"Scared, Cara?" The skin under his eye was black and blue, but he was still so handsome in his dark Italian suit. She ran a hand over the turquoise jersey dress she'd chosen for the wedding, marveling at the weight and texture of the fabric. At least she wouldn't look as if she didn't belong.

When she'd emerged in the dress this morning, Jack's eyes had gleamed hotly as his gaze slid over her body. She loved the way he looked at her, and yet it frightened her, too. Because she was coming to expect that little electric jolt, to need it, and she knew it wouldn't last. What happened when they were through with this wedding?

She would have to go, would have to break away from this pull between them, if she hoped to survive with her heart intact.

"A little bit," she admitted. "But I think I'll feel more awkward than anything."

Jack's expression said he didn't understand why she should. "There's not much to tell. Nathaniel is marrying a woman he met while doing his last play, I believe."

"Is he an actor? Or maybe a playwright?" Jack's brows drew together as he studied her. "You've never heard of Nathaniel Wolfe? You are quite sheltered, aren't you?"

Cara suddenly couldn't breathe. Nathaniel Wolfe? Jack's brother was

the award-winning actor? She was going to *his* wedding?

The panic she'd been holding in unwound in her belly. Oh, God, they'd see right through her! There'd be paparazzi, gossip columnists, movie people—and they'd all know she didn't belong. She couldn't possibly go to a *celebrity* wedding.

Cara gave herself a firm mental shake before she did something asinine like hyperventilate. Why on earth would any of those people care about her? They wouldn't. It was she who cared, she who was afraid. No one would even notice her.

Jack watched her, one eyebrow arched. As if he were waiting for her to implode. She refused to give him the satisfaction. She could handle this, she really could.

"I know who he is. I just didn't realize he was your brother," she said coolly. And now that she knew, she could see the family resemblance. Jack was older, she thought, but just as devastatingly handsome. More so, in her opinion. She didn't follow celebrity news at all, but she knew there'd been some sort of scandal about Nathaniel Wolfe, something to do with his father's death at the hands of a brother and sordid details about his mother trying to drown him when he was a baby.

Cara shivered. My God, Jack had grown up in that family?

"Nathaniel is my half brother," Jack said. "We had different mothers. Sebastian, another half brother, will likely be there, as well. Alex won't be there, but his twin—Annabelle—will. The three of us have the same mother."

"So you have four siblings." She couldn't remember how many Wolfes there were from the news reports. They'd never featured Jack, or surely she would have remembered that.

She realized he was in no hurry to respond. He flicked a spot on his trousers, studying it as if he'd found a blemish. When he looked up again, his eyes were startlingly blank.

"There are eight of us. Rafael is also my half brother, as are the two oldest, Jacob and Lucas."

"Wow, eight of you, then." Jacob. That was the brother who'd accidentally killed their father. As soon as he'd said the name, she'd

remembered reading it. Her heart squeezed for the man sitting across from her. He was so stoic, so controlled.

She wanted to hug him, but knew he wouldn't welcome the contact.

He gave a curt nod. It was clear he didn't want to talk about it. Clear he'd already said more than he wanted to say. And she had no wish to keep probing his wounds. *Oh, Jack ...*

"Is there anything else I should know?"

"That about sums it up," he said dispassionately, as if they were talking about the weather or game scores. "Except for Annabelle. Her face is scarred, though she hides it quite well. You probably won't even notice, but in case you do ..."

Cara drew herself up. "I would never be so crass as to ask her what happened!"

He sighed. "Of course not. Forgive me."

The bubble of her indignation popped. He was under a lot of stress, and she should have let it go without comment. "No, I should apologize. I'm sorry for snapping. For all you know about me, I might just be that rude. But I'm not, you can rest assured."

He nodded once, and then they lapsed into silence again. The closer they got to their destination, the more withdrawn Jack became. Cara could feel the tension in the air like a huge coil spring being compressed tighter and tighter and tighter. It was as if the miles piled up on his shoulders, their weight pressing him deeper and deeper into the ground.

She wished she could remember more of the details about his family, but she'd hardly paid attention to the fuss. It was all very recent, she remembered, but she'd been so busy working and then coming to Nice to open the new casino. She barely had time to check her email, much less read celebrity gossip rags.

By the time they arrived in London—after their plane was delayed in the air because of a problem on the ground—Cara was worried that Jack really would come unsprung. She wouldn't have called him a carefree person by any stretch, but his demeanor now, compared with yesterday, was night and day. This Jack was dark, closed in, and she ached for him. Wanted so desperately to reach out to him.

And yet there was nothing she could do. Whatever demons awaited him, she could only go along for the ride. She would not abandon him now, not when he might need a friend.

After they emerged from the private airport they'd flown into, a limo was waiting to take them to the Grand Wolfe Hotel. Cara was no longer surprised at anything she learned about Jack and his family. Finding out he had a brother rich enough to own a hotel in central London was par for the course these days. Just like finding out that Jack was rich enough to own a plane.

Cara shook her head. She'd been so wrong about him it was laughable. She'd always prided herself on reading people, especially as she worked the casinos, but Jack Wolfe was not as he first appeared. He had the sharp eye and fearless demeanor of a professional gambler, and yet he was so much more than a card shark.

After the delayed flight, they got caught in heavy traffic on the ride to the hotel. Jack didn't seem to notice. He stared out the window, his expression distant. More than once, she almost suggested they go back to the airport and return to Paris. He'd been happy there; they'd been happy together.

Now, he was so remote. A complete stranger to her. It felt ... odd.

Tentatively, she reached for his hand where it rested on his thigh. Just to show him she understood, that she was here. Her skin sizzled, as always, when her body made contact with his. He turned his hand over, opening it, and then their palms were touching, fingers entwining. It wasn't much, just a simple contact between two people who barely knew each other.

And yet it felt like everything, like their souls entwined with their fingers. Cara turned her head away, the cars and sidewalks of London blurring as she blinked back tears. She would not cry over something as simple as a touch. She would not allow it to mean more than it did.

It was touch. Warmth, companionship, light. Cara squeezed his hand gently. She didn't expect acknowledgment, didn't expect anything from him. But when he squeezed back, she knew she'd gotten through his shield, if only a tiny bit. It was a start.

Jack glanced at his watch as they arrived at the Grande Wolfe. He'd feared they would be late the instant they'd gotten delayed in the air. He'd planned his arrival to leave no time for socializing with his family. He'd made allowances for traffic, of course, but he'd not counted on the plane being late.

But he was here now and he had to get this over with. Had to go next door to the church for the ceremony, had to smile, had to be happy for Nathaniel—which he genuinely was—and had to hope Jacob avoided him. The last thing he needed was a confrontation with his brother.

Everyone else seemed glad—or at least resigned—that Jacob was back, glad that he'd returned to restore the broken-down manor where they'd grown up. But Jack couldn't care less about Wolfe Manor. Let it be torn down, let the past stay buried where it belonged.

Jacob hadn't cared about the place when he'd left them so many years ago, so why now? It was a ruse, quite simply, because Jacob didn't have staying power. Let the rest of them fall for Jacob's act, but Jack was not about to do so. If someone burned him once, they never got the chance to do so again.

Cara emerged from the limo and smiled up at him, and his world felt as if it were shifting somehow. It was the effect of what awaited him, he knew, and yet he was glad she was here with him.

A bellhop came to collect their luggage, and Jack took one last fortifying breath before grasping Cara's hand and walking next door to the church. The ceremony had probably already started, but they could sneak into the back and watch from there. Then they would escape with the first exodus and head for the hotel.

But the church was empty, except for a few ladies cleaning up. Jack blinked at the scene before him. A profusion of white roses decorated the pews and altar, their scent almost cloying. He pivoted and led Cara back outside.

She didn't speak as they headed into the depths of the hotel. He found the ballroom where the reception was being held easily enough, having stayed at Sebastian's hotel from time to time over the years, but the crowd was a bit lighter than he would have expected.

The room had been draped in white organza, and once more the scent

of roses filled the air. A few people danced to the elegant sounds of the band, but the tables were only about half-full.

Jack spotted Annabelle almost immediately. She had her camera out, taking photos. She looked as coolly elegant as she always did. She glanced over, made eye contact with him. And then she was making her way toward them, her camera held like a shield in front of her body.

“You’re late, Jack,” she said as she walked up. Her gaze flicked over his face, but he knew she wouldn’t comment on the bruise beneath his eye.

He gave her a brief hug. Annabelle didn’t like to be touched, really, but he always felt so damn sorry for her that he wanted her to know he cared. She returned the hug as well as she was able before stepping back into her own space.

“There was a problem at the airport,” he said. “Where are Nathaniel and Katie?”

“They’ve left for their honeymoon already. You missed everything.” Her voice was remarkably devoid of censure, but that was Annabelle. Cool and collected to the last.

Jack wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed. He’d known the timing was tight, but he hadn’t thought they would miss *everything* once they were delayed. He’d thought to see at least a bit of the ceremony. Then a quick stop at the reception, and he’d be gone again before too much time had passed. He’d intended to congratulate the happy couple, to speak to Annabelle and Sebastian at least, and then to retire to his suite for the night. He hadn’t wanted to insult Sebastian by refusing to stay in the hotel overnight, but as soon as he was able, he was taking Cara to his London home and leaving the Grand Wolfe behind.

He introduced Cara to Annabelle. They exchanged pleasantries, and then Annabelle said she needed to go and pack up her equipment.

“Did everyone come?” he asked her.

If she knew what he meant, she didn’t let on. “Everyone but Alex. Oh, and Rafael came alone.”

Jack shrugged. “Leila is probably working.”

“Perhaps. But he didn’t seem very happy.”

They talked for a few moments more, and then Annabelle was gone.

Cara was biting her lip again. He knew she must be disappointed that they'd missed the wedding as she worried that plump lower lip between her teeth. He wanted her to stop, and he wanted to bite it for her. A shot of pure lust rocketed through his body at the thought of doing just that. Maybe it was a good thing they had a hotel room after all.

"I'm sorry you missed meeting Nathaniel," he said. Because he was certain, though she'd not said anything, that she'd been looking forward to meeting his famous brother. Who wouldn't want to meet a movie star?

"I'm not," she said softly, her eyes more green than gold as she gazed up at him. "But I am sorry you didn't see your brother get married."

Jack shrugged it off. He'd wanted to be here for Nathaniel, but he had no one to blame but himself. If he'd flown in earlier—or yesterday, like everyone else—there'd have been no problem. "I'll see him again soon enough. He's far more interested in his new wife than in his family, anyway. As it should be."

"I'm glad I got to meet your sister. She's very pretty. And very serious."

"She wasn't always so serious," he said before he could stop himself.

If Cara wondered at that statement, she didn't allow her curiosity to show.

"So now what?" she asked, her pretty mouth curving in a soft smile. God, he loved her smiles. And he loved that she understood when he didn't want to talk about something. How could he tell her about the ugliness that had taken Annabelle's sweet innocence away forever?

Jack's eyes skimmed over her. The jeweled turquoise of her dress was magnificent. The fabric hugged her curves, displayed her assets to perfection. She had long legs, beautiful and toned, and he couldn't help but imagine them wrapped around him. He *wanted* them wrapped around him in the worst way.

Now that the tension of being here for the wedding was leaching away, a different kind of tension was taking its place. He wanted this woman, wanted to sweep her up and take her to the room where he

would slowly reveal every inch of her delightful body. And then he would make love to her for hours, exploring her, learning her taste and texture, finding out what made her sigh with delight and scream with pleasure.

His body was stone. Pure, hard marble.

And yet he knew he couldn't rush this, knew he wasn't quite in the right state of mind just yet.

"How about a drink in the bar?" he said. "We can't have got all dressed up for nothing."

"That sounds good."

They made their way back toward the sleek bar on the other side of the lobby. Heads turned as they passed, and he knew it was because of the gorgeous brunette at his side. They'd just found a table and sat down when Jack saw Jacob watching him from across the bar.

White-hot fury exploded inside him with a force he was unprepared for. The first time he'd seen Jacob's face in how many years? Nearly twenty goddamn years. Jacob was older—they all were—but his face was still so familiar. It was a shock on so many levels to see Jacob, and yet anger was by far the dominant emotion churning through Jack.

"Jack, what's wrong?" Worry laced Cara's voice, but he couldn't tear his gaze away from Jacob to answer her.

Jacob looked so cool, so unflappable. So goddamn smug.

Hatred boiled inside his gut, his brain, hatred that threatened to rip him apart at the seams it was so strong. And more. He didn't want to acknowledge the more, but he knew what it was. Disappointment, betrayal, rage, fear. Love.

It was the love that was worst of all. Knowing the love was dead and gone and there was nothing left but emptiness where a brotherly bond should have been.

He stood abruptly. "I changed my mind. Let's get a drink in our room," he said, holding his hand out to Cara.

Her brows drew together as she studied him. Then she sighed and unfolded those impossibly long legs.

Jack looked over to the bar again, but Jacob was gone. Cara was on her feet when the crowd parted and he caught sight of Jacob. His older brother was coming straight for him, his strides purposeful.

Jack's first instinct was to meet Jacob with a fist to the face. But he wouldn't do it. He was better than that, and he wouldn't allow Jacob to see how affected he truly was. "Jack—"

"Get the hell away from me, Jacob," he burst out. "I don't want to talk to you. The time for talking was when you decided it would be easier to abandon us than stick with us and do your duty. I have *nothing* to say to you."

Jacob looked almost serene as he endured Jack's tirade—which only made Jack angrier. Then Jacob held up his hands, as if to put a stop to the torrent of words.

"I understand this is a shock," Jacob said, "but I can see that now isn't the time. I'll talk to you when you've calmed down."

Jack took a step toward his brother, violence radiating through every cell, every nerve ending. "When *I've* calmed down? I'm not the one who ran away when I couldn't take the pressure! You can have nothing to say to me, Jacob. Nothing I want to hear."

Jacob's lips compressed, but then he nodded and turned away. Jack watched his brother's retreating back. Anger whipped through him, followed by frustration and even that old, childish sense of abandonment. Jacob had been the closest thing he'd had to a father figure.

"Jack? Are you ready?"

He felt Cara's hand on his arm, the comforting weight of it, the solidity of her body beside him. People in the bar had turned to look at them, but they turned away now that the drama was finished. "Jack?"

She was looking up at him with a mixture of concern and tenderness. He put his hand over hers where it rested on his sleeve. Any other time, he'd want to be alone. This time, strangely, he did not.

"Yeah, let's go."

They were sharing a suite, Cara realized, but she didn't protest. The suite

was luxurious, with a giant king-size bed and a couch in the living area for her to sleep on. She could have insisted on her own room now that he no longer needed her help for anything, but she couldn't leave him, not like this. She wasn't exactly certain what had happened in the bar, but the effect on Jack had been extraordinary.

He'd lost his temper, something she'd not seen him do even when threatened by Bobby and his men. He'd punched one of Bobby's guys, yes, but he'd been in control the whole time. The Jack she knew never lost control. But he had just now—spectacularly. She'd thought he was going to launch himself at Jacob. She didn't know anything about what had happened between them, but clearly it weighed heavily on Jack's mind. Had done so for years.

Jack stood by the window, hands thrust into his pockets. He hadn't spoken a word since they'd left the bar.

"Do you want me to order drinks from room service?" she asked. It wasn't that she wanted a drink, but she needed to say something, needed to fill the oppressive silence and see if she could get him talking again.

Anything to get him talking.

He glanced over at her. "Sure."

"What do you want?" She flipped through the menu, pretending a casualness she didn't feel. If she seemed normal, maybe he'd relax. Maybe he'd even open up to her. It wasn't likely, she acknowledged, but it was worth a try.

"Order a bottle of champagne," he said. "Or whatever you prefer."

"Champagne is fine." Cara picked up the phone and dialed room service. She'd never ordered room service in her life, had certainly never stayed in a hotel of this magnificence. The walls were papered in pale blue silk. The chandelier in the center of the suite was an ornate Venetian glass concoction shaped to look like flowers budding from a vase. The glass was multihued, beautiful beyond description.

There was a watered-silk chesterfield sofa flanked by two modern leather chairs sitting on the biggest oriental carpet she'd ever seen. Sleek glass-topped tables rounded out the living area. Huge silk panels hung on the windows, held back by ornate tassels.

It was without doubt the most luxurious hotel room she'd ever been inside. While she waited for the champagne to arrive, Cara drifted over to the antique desk. She recognized the style as French because she'd seen furniture like this back in New Orleans. It was polished walnut, inlaid with flowers and scrolls. Cara sank into the upholstered chair and opened the drawers one by one, just for something to do.

A deck of cards lay in the center drawer. She took them out and flipped open the box. The backs had London landmarks on them. Quickly, she shuffled, loving the feel of the cards in her hands. She was *good* at what she did, dammit. It wasn't fair that she'd had to leave the way she had, that she might never work in a casino again. Because Bobby had reach, that was a certainty. Not only would he never hire her again, he might also have her blacklisted in every casino she ever tried to work in.

A knock sounded on the door and she got up to answer. A man wheeled in a trolley with a champagne bucket and two glasses. Deftly, he opened the champagne and poured some in each glass.

Jack came over and handed the man some cash, and then he was gone.

Cara sipped her champagne and watched Jack. He took his glass over to the window and downed it.

"I found a deck of cards," she said as she took the bottle over and poured him another drink. "Why don't we play a hand or two of poker?"

His gaze swung toward her.

"I know you're used to winning," she said, "but you've never played me. I'll try not to embarrass you, though."

Jack couldn't resist a challenge. And she was going to challenge him if that's what it took. She didn't know if she could really beat him, but he didn't need to know she wasn't confident. She *was* good at cards, no doubt about it. And she was damn good at bluffing.

"What are the stakes?" he asked, and her heart soared. She'd intrigued him enough to shake him from his brooding.

"If I win, you take me to some awful touristy thing that I'd love, but you hate."

“For instance?”

“I don’t know.” She cast about wildly, thinking of the sort of nutty things they’d had in Las Vegas, before making up something suitable for London. “A Jack the Ripper ghost walk. Or a Henry VIII turkey-leg banquet.”

He almost grinned, she was certain. “And if I win?”

Cara shrugged. “We go somewhere you want instead.”

“Doesn’t sound like much incentive,” he said, taking a sip of the champagne.

His eyes narrowed, his gaze slipping over her body. Her skin warmed, her nipples tightening beneath the fabric of her dress. Any second and he would know the effect he was having on her.

“I have a better idea,” he said as his eyes met hers again.

“What’s that?”

“We play for the clothes on our backs. Or we don’t play at all.”

# CHAPTER EIGHT

CARA'S heart thundered in her ears. Strip poker. Could she do it? Because she knew what would happen if she lost.

Her body felt tight, achy, the tender area between her thighs melting, softening. Her body craved his so strongly it scared her. If they ended up in bed together, she didn't know what would happen after, but she feared he would be finished with her. This lovely feeling she had when she was with him would die.

And she wasn't ready for that to happen just yet.

Cara took a deep breath. But she wouldn't lose. She had just as good a chance of winning as he did. Maybe better, because she'd played from the other side of the table for so long that she had an instinctive feel for how things would shake out.

"Fine," she said. "We play for clothes."

Jack smiled for the first time in hours. It was a devilish smile, a supremely confident smile. Warmth curled inside her belly, flooded her limbs.

"There's only one problem," she continued. "What's that?"

"You're wearing more clothes than I am. Either you spot me a couple of hands, or you count that jacket, shirt and tie as one item."

He shrugged out of the jacket and tossed it on a nearby chair. "The shirt and tie count as one item."

She tipped her chin to his waistline. "And the belt?"

"Goes with the pants."

Cara picked up the deck of cards. If it got his mind off of what had just happened, if it gave her back the man she'd come to know, she'd risk it. "All right, then. I guess we're on. If you pull one of those chairs over here, we can play at the desk."

"The bed, Cara. It's bigger."

Her ears felt hot. Not from embarrassment, but from sensual overload.

She wanted to play strip poker on a bed with this man. And she wanted to win, because she wanted to see that magnificent body again.

“Fine.” She picked up her champagne. “Let’s go.”

“After you.”

She led the way into the bedroom, set the champagne on the bedside table and kicked off her heels before climbing onto the bed. When she turned around, Jack was watching her, his eyes smoky with desire.

“We could just skip the cards,” he said, his deep voice vibrating over her nerve endings. “Save a whole lot of time and trouble.”

“On the bed, Jack. Get ready to lose your shirt.”

He slipped out of his shoes and socks, then got onto the bed opposite her. The center of the king-size bed was a good playing surface, if a little unorthodox. Cara shuffled the cards and Jack cut. Then she dealt with quick, practiced movements.

“I love watching your hands stroke those cards,” Jack said.

“No trying to distract the dealer,” she answered coolly. Then she picked up her hand.

She glanced at Jack—except that he was looking at her, as well. Both trying to gauge the other’s reaction for a clue to the hand they held.

“You’re a good bluffer,” Jack said.

Cara arched an eyebrow. “Who says I’m bluffing?”

“I can always read people, but you’re good at hiding your emotions at the table. I noticed that in Nice.”

“Practice,” she said, though her heart was tripping along with adrenaline. No doubt his proximity had an effect, as well.

Jack tossed two cards down and smiled. Cara looked at her hand again. She had two fives, which was good, but she hoped for better.

Tossing three away, she dealt the next round. This time she picked up an ace, a two and another five. It wasn’t stellar, but it was a good hand.

“Call,” Jack said.

Cara laid down the cards. Jack only smiled. She’d seen that smile before, when Bobby’s man had thought he’d won the pot. Then Jack laid

down his hand. She scanned it desperately, relief flooding her when she realized he'd lost.

"Three of a kind beats two," she said.

"As I see it, there can be no losers here."

"Your shirt, please."

Jack's smile sent a shot of pure lust straight to her center as he began to loosen his tie. A second later he tugged it free and tossed it at her. Slowly, he unbuttoned the crisp white shirt he was wearing.

"You have a T-shirt on under that!" she exclaimed as the shirt fell open to reveal another layer beneath.

"You should have thought of it before. Too late now." He peeled the shirt off and dropped it on the floor.

Dammit, why did men wear so many more garments when they were dressed up than women did? It hardly seemed fair. She hadn't even worn stockings, which she was now regretting. But in the South, the weather was too oppressive to wear stockings; she'd gotten used to going without them whenever she wore a dress. Besides, her legs were good enough that she didn't need them.

Fortunately, Jack lost the next round, as well, his straight falling victim to her flush. He didn't seem quite as perturbed as she would have expected for losing two hands in a row and she began to wonder if he was doing it on purpose, toying with her to make her overconfident. She wouldn't put it past him, but she refused to be distracted by the ploy.

When he pulled the T-shirt over his head, Cara stifled a gasp. The skin on his left side was black and blue where Bobby's thugs had hit him.

"It looks worse than it is," he reassured her. "I have strong core muscles, which protected my ribs pretty well. Apparently, there is a benefit to working out."

Cara swallowed. The bruising did look brutal, and yet the smooth ridges of muscle were every bit as impressive as she recalled. He wasn't beefed up like a hard-core gym rat; rather, he was leanly muscled, sexy as hell. She wanted to run her tongue along those ridges.

Cara stifled her impulses and concentrated on the cards. She had to be careful, or Jack would take her down so quick she wouldn't know what

had hit her until too late.

But the next hand played out rapidly. The first clue she had that she'd lost was Jack's smug smile. Her gaze dropped to the cards. Two pair beat one pair. Damn.

"The dress, Cara," Jack said.

She thought about insisting on removing her panties instead—because at least she would have the coverage of the dress to protect her. But what if she lost another round? She couldn't get her bra off without removing the dress, so that would mean the dress would be next and she'd be sitting here in nothing but a bra.

Heat spread through her, permeating her bones, her blood, every cell of her body. But was it the heat of embarrassment or sexual heat?

She didn't know, but she shoved herself onto her knees and grasped the hem of her dress. Nothing left but to brazen it out. Because she wouldn't renege on a bet. Slowly, she peeled the dress upward, revealing her thighs, her belly, her breasts, before pulling it over her head and dropping it onto the bed.

Jack's eyes had darkened to pewter as he watched her. She knew what he was seeing. The white silk of her panties was thin, and the lacy demicups of her bra barely held her breasts in whenever she leaned forward. Her nipples had tightened some time ago. She had no doubt Jack could see the hard little bumps through the silk. "Satisfied?" she asked.

"Hardly."

"I believe it's my turn to deal again," she said.

She gathered the cards, leaning forward just enough to make him think her breasts were about to pop free. It was a cheap shot to distract him, but she didn't care. Jack wasn't going to give her any quarter; she needed to be as ruthless as he was.

"I don't believe I've ever seen anything as sexy as a woman dealing cards in her underwear before," he said, his voice deep and husky with desire.

She looked up, her heart skipping a beat at the intensity of his stare. "I'm surprised," she replied. "I would have imagined you'd played this

game quite often.”

“I have,” he said. “It doesn’t usually last this long.”

Cara blinked. “We’ve only played three hands.”

He lifted one eyebrow, his expression smug, superior. Her insides quivered. “The women I’ve played in the past usually prefer to lose rather quickly. The good part is what comes after.”

Cara tried not to imagine his naked body stretched out beside another woman. On top of another woman. *Playboy. Player. Man-whore.*

She had to think of him that way, or she would find herself in way over her head before this was over with.

“That’s nice,” she said crisply. “Now pay attention to the game and stop trying to distract me with sex.” She shuffled the cards and handed him the deck to cut. “I’m not going to be so easy to beat.”

Jack actually tsked as he cut the cards. “Haven’t you figured it out yet, Cara?”

“Figured out what?” She took them back and swiftly dealt the next hand. “That I never lose.”

“Neither do I.”

The next several hands passed with nothing happening, each one ending in a stalemate as one or the other of them folded. Jack got up from the bed. She watched his retreating back as he walked out into the living area, the way the muscles rippled and bunched as he moved.

When he returned with the champagne bottle, she forced herself not to stare. “Sure is hot,” he said. “More champagne?” Cara nodded. She was dying of thirst, but whether it was for liquid or because of him she wasn’t quite sure. He handed her the glass and she took a small sip and set it on the nightstand. She planned to drink it very slowly so as not to let it interfere with her head.

Because Jack already interfered with her head just by being so close.

It was important to keep playing, and just as important to keep the rest of her clothes on. Jack had lightened up considerably since they’d started. She didn’t fool herself he’d forgotten anything about what had happened in the bar with his brother. He’d merely shoved it to the back

of his mind while he worked to beat the clothes off her body.

But he seemed happier, seemed like the Jack she'd come to know, and she liked that he wasn't brooding any longer. Whatever had happened with Jacob, it clearly still bothered him a very great deal. She wanted to know, and yet she knew she couldn't ask him. Not yet. Maybe not ever. What right was it of hers?

It wasn't. Why did that thought sadden her?

Jack sat down and picked up the cards. It was his turn to deal the next hand, which he did with efficient movements. Cara's pulse kicked higher at the three aces she held. Jack tossed down three cards.

Sweat beaded her upper lip as she picked up the two cards he dealt her. Relief surged through her: two sevens.

"What do you say, Cara?" Jack asked. "Your bra against my trousers—or do you want to fold and preserve your dignity?"

Cara thrust her chin out. "Show me your hand, Jack."

"If that's what you want, sweetheart." When his cards hit the bed, she let out a shaky breath.

"Oh, Jack," she said, laying her cards down oh so slowly, "I'm looking forward to seeing your legs again. Get to stripping, darling." She couldn't stop the smug grin that popped into place.

Jack lifted an eyebrow, gave her a quelling look. "So the kitten has claws, I see. Nicely done."

Then he stood and slipped open his belt. The sweat on her upper lip didn't abate. Though she was sitting on a bed in her underwear, her body was burning up. Especially when he unzipped his pants and shoved them down his hips.

He was wearing a pair of white briefs, and her gaze slid to the bulge in them. The very large bulge.

"I'm very ready for you, sweetheart," he said. "We can stop this game any time and get to the good part."

She wanted to. Oh, God, how she wanted to. But it was a bad idea. Bad because she wanted it so much. Bad because she'd never wanted a man this much, and had no idea what would happen if she let herself go

with him. Would she fall in love? Would he break her heart?

Or would they have fantastic sex and go their separate ways as if it meant nothing at all?

Was she capable of meaningless sex?

She didn't think so. She'd never had a one-night stand, and she'd never slept with a guy she'd just met. She'd known Jack for three days—how could she possibly go to bed with him?

*You're playing strip poker with the man, for God's sake! How could you not be prepared for the possibility of sex with him?*

"I think you just don't like losing," she said.

He looked sinful, hot and dark and devilish. "I don't intend to lose, Cara."

"I'm not the one with only one stitch of clothing left," she retorted.

"Game's not over yet," he said. "Deal."

Cara picked up the cards and shuffled them. After he'd cut the deck, she dealt. The promise of the hand leached away with her next deal, so she folded. Three more hands passed with her folding each time.

"Are you trying to stave off the inevitable?" Jack asked.

"I haven't had a good hand," she said. "There isn't a time limit on this game, you know."

But another fifteen minutes passed before she got a hand she felt she could use. Only one card separated her from a flush. It was a risk, but when the next card came up diamonds, she breathed a sigh of relief. Inwardly, of course. She didn't want him to know she was confident in her hand.

This time, when the call came, she laid her cards down with a flourish. "Beat that."

His smile was not what she'd hoped to see. "I can do that," he said, spreading his cards out for her to see. A full house. Cara cursed inwardly. How had she let that happen? How had she not clued in to his body language on this one?

Because he was damn good, that's why. So was she. Usually.

"The bra," he said, eyes gleaming. "Off with it."

Heart tattooing the inside of her chest, she straightened her spine and reached behind her back to snap the bra open. Her nerve endings were singing, her body flooding with liquid heat. She lifted her arms and pulled the bra off first one side and then the other before letting it fall to the floor behind her.

She felt the heat of a blush rising up her neck, but she refused to acknowledge it. Instead, she tilted her chin up and put her hands on her hips, daring him to look his fill.

She didn't know what to expect next, but Jack clearly did.

"That's it," he said. "I forfeit."

Shoving the cards aside, he reached for her. Panic threaded through her, but she shoved it down deep and went into his arms. How could she deny that it was where she wanted to be? Where she'd known she would end up almost from the first moment she'd met him?

He stroked the skin of her shoulder, his fingers so gentle and light that she shivered, little goose bumps rising in the wake of his touch.

"You are amazingly beautiful," he said before his mouth came down on hers.

Her first thought was that if she wanted to preserve herself, preserve her heart, then she needed to push him away.

Her second was that she couldn't stop this thing between them from running its course. The tension had been unbearable for days now, tightening as they played this game, and this was the only form of release that would be acceptable to them both. Whatever happened, she was so entangled now that she could do nothing but enjoy the ride.

She wanted him inside her, on top of her, tangled up with her, loving her with the fierceness and ruthlessness that were the hallmarks of his personality.

She wanted him, all of him. Desperately.

Cara speared her fingers into his hair, loving the texture. She finally felt free to touch, to explore, to claim him as her own. With the loss of her bra, everything had changed. They'd crossed a line over which there could be no retreat. The only way out was forward.

Jack urged her closer until she was sitting with her legs on either side

of him. Then he put his broad hands on her bottom and pulled her against the ridge of his erection.

Cara gasped as sensation streaked through her at the simple contact of their bodies through the thin fabric separating them. It had been a long time since she'd been with a man. She hadn't realized how much she missed this kind of contact. Except that everything with Jack seemed to feel so much more intense than it ever had with anyone else.

He flexed his hips, pressing hard into her center, and her body responded with a surge of moisture. The kiss deepened, their tongues tangling with an urgency she'd never experienced before. The kiss was hot, intense, and deep—but it wasn't enough.

She tried to get closer, couldn't stop the moan that vibrated in her throat.

Jack immediately broke the kiss, leaving her empty and disappointed. "I forgot about your lip. I'm sorry."

"No," she said, "that's not it at all. Kiss me, Jack. Don't stop kissing me." He fused his mouth to hers again. And then he was lifting her, pushing her back onto the bed, coming down on top of her. His body was big and hard, and she loved the feel of him pressing into her.

When his hand closed over the slope of her breast, she arched her back, thrusting into his hand. He pinched her nipple, softly, expertly, until she was a quivering mass of sensitive nerve endings.

"Jack," she said, her voice breathy and thick. Tears pressed against the backs of her eyes. Tears of joy, of frustration, of unimaginable sorrow. She didn't know why she felt all these things with him, but the intensity of it physically hurt.

"I know," he replied before kissing his way down her neck, over her collarbone. His fingers shaped her ribs, the slope of her breast, the soft skin of her abdomen. She couldn't pull herself away now even if she wanted to.

And she definitely didn't want to.

The moment his mouth closed over her nipple, she cried out. The pleasure was so intense, so unbelievably intense, as he sucked the hard, tight bud between his lips. Her fingers clutched in his hair, on his

shoulders.

He slid a hand down her abdomen, beneath the silk of her panties, found the hot, wet center of her body. He groaned as his fingers sank between her legs.

Those fingers, those clever fingers that handled the cards so expertly, began to play her body like a fine instrument. Two fingers pinched and kneaded her clitoris, making her cry out with the pleasure. And then he was dipping lower, inserting a finger into her body, joining it with a second one as his thumb took up the rhythm above.

His mouth played her nipples while his fingers stroked her—and Cara came unglued at the seams. Her body tightened painfully, so very painfully, as she flexed her hips and tried to make his hand move faster.

She could feel the release gathering, feel it coming, feel every cell of her body vibrate with energy and need—

And then it happened. She reached the peak and fell off the other side, sobbing and gasping the whole way.

# CHAPTER NINE

JACK had never felt this kind of urgency before. When he made love to a woman, he took his time. He was in control, always in supreme control.

But not this time. Cara's breathy little moans, the way she curled her fingers into his skin, the sweet intensity of her voice as she shattered beneath his fingertips—not to mention the hot, wet feel of her, the way she sizzled and shook, the scent of her skin—he had to have her.

Right now.

His side hurt, but he didn't care. He'd never felt such sweet pain as the pain of his arousal. His injuries simply didn't compare.

Cara was still shaking from the power of her release as he practically tore the silk panties from her body. Then he was shoving off his underwear and settling between her legs again. She opened to him immediately, her long legs wrapping around his hips as he pushed inside.

He had no finesse. None whatsoever. He'd lost it somewhere along the way. Cara was ready for him, more than ready, but she gasped a little at his possession, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she waited for her body to accommodate him.

But he couldn't speak, couldn't ask her if she was okay, because it took every ounce of control he had not to take her hard and fast. His body urged him to cast off restraint, to use her sweet lushness for his pleasure, to spend himself wildly in frenzied lovemaking.

He held himself rigidly, fighting for control—and then she reached up with a soft hand, stroked it across his cheek.

"Jack," she said softly. "Oh, Jack."

Tears glazed her eyes, but he understood instinctively that they weren't tears of pain or unhappiness. My God, she was beautiful. And she was *his*.

Just like that, he lost whatever tenuous grip on his sanity that he'd

had. He began to move, relentless, stroking into her body. He rode her hard, but she met him all the way, her lush body tilting up to his, her hips opening to him, her lovely breasts bouncing with the force of their lovemaking.

It drove him insane. She drove him insane. He held on as long as he could, held on to the tight knot of pleasure gathering at the base of his spine until he felt her body tighten around him. A moment later and she was arching her back, thrusting her breasts up, gasping as her climax hit her. He sucked one of her nipples into his mouth, gloried in the sharpening of her cry as he increased her pleasure.

She was so incredibly responsive. When she collapsed on the bed again, he grasped her buttocks and lifted her to him, angling her until her body began to spark once more. It didn't take much to make her come again.

This time when she went over the edge, he went with her, spilling his body into hers with such force that his vision went black for a split second. It was the most amazing, most wonderful feeling to find his release in Cara's lush body.

But at the back of his mind, dampening the sensual afterglow, was the knowledge it wouldn't last. It never did. Nothing ever kept his attention longer than it took to establish his dominance. Not even a woman as sweetly sexy as Cara Taylor.

Cara awoke to the sounds of the shower running. Pushing herself up in the plush bed, she blinked and yawned—and then it hit her. Where she was. Who she was with.

What she'd done.

*Oh, God.*

Her body was pleasurable languid, though she acknowledged the slight soreness between her legs, as well. Her heart skipped a beat. They'd made love endlessly, it seemed. Sleeping, waking to tangle themselves together on the crisp, cool sheets, sleeping again, waking to make love once more.

She'd never had a lover like Jack, a man who was so attuned to her body that he could make her crave him with the slightest touch. It was

so dangerous, this feeling she had when she was with him. She could love him if she wasn't careful.

Cara sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees.

No. She would not go there. She was a grown woman, in control of her destiny and her body. She'd made love with Jack—had sex with Jack, she corrected—because she had needs and because he was mighty good at fulfilling them.

Women could have sex for the sake of sex, too. She'd just done so. Over and over again.

Cara tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and told herself to stop blushing. She could feel the heat in her skin, could feel the warmth creeping up her spine, her neck, over her cheeks.

What the hell was there to blush about?

She whipped the covers back and stood, stretched. She went over to the huge walk-in closet, where all her things had been hung up when they'd first arrived. A full-length mirror sat at the back of the dressing area, and Cara jolted to a stop. Who was that woman?

Her naked body glowed. Her skin was luminous, her long hair a wild tangle down her back. Her green eyes were slumberous. She looked tousled and sated, as if she'd been having sex for hours—which, she acknowledged, she had.

Her breasts were full and firm, the deep pink nipples budded tight in anticipation of her lover's touch. There were red marks on her shoulder, her neck, even her abdomen, where Jack's stubble had abraded her tender skin.

The marks on her abdomen stole her breath as she thought of how they'd gotten there. He'd kissed and licked his way down her body, spread her legs open and then taken her to heaven with his tongue.

Cara bit her lip at the memory. If Jack came out of the bathroom and wanted to do everything all over again, she'd jump at the chance.

Instead, she found a robe and belted it around her body. Then she selected undergarments and headed for the bath. Jack was standing at the mirror with a towel draped low around his lean hips, razor in hand.

He stopped when she walked in and turned to look at her. She didn't

know what to say to him after last night. She felt awkward, out of place, and it angered her. Because she hadn't felt that way before they'd slept together. She'd known she needed to keep her distance from him, but she hadn't done it.

Jack reached for her, pulled her against his damp, warm body. He smelled fresh and clean from the shower as he dipped to kiss her.

She opened her mouth beneath his, surprised with how much she still wanted him. She could feel him hardening, his penis pressing insistently against her thigh. She reached beneath the towel and took him in her hand. His velvety skin was hot. She squeezed ever so lightly.

Jack groaned. A moment later he was shoving the robe from her body, licking his way to her nipples while she threw her head back and moaned.

"I want you to see us, to see what you do to me," he said roughly, turning her until she faced the mirror. She was almost as tall as he was, but his body dwarfed hers. He was all lean, tanned muscle—and he quite simply took her breath away.

He clasped her breasts, his fingers tweaking her nipples, pinching and pulling them until she thought she would come apart simply from his touch. In the light of the bathroom, his tanned skin looked so stark against her creamy complexion. The contrast made her shiver.

"You're beautiful, Cara," he said in her ear, his breath sending pleasurable vibrations over her sensitive skin. "I want you again."

"Yes," she breathed.

She thought he would turn her to face him, would grab her hand and haul her back to the bed. But he didn't. Instead, he bent her over and gripped her hips.

Cara gasped. It was so erotic, what he was about to do. So raw. She wasn't a stranger to varied lovemaking—and yet she didn't think she could survive something so private, so sensual, as watching this man make love to her in the mirror.

But she didn't want to stop it. She wanted him again, desperately. She wanted to see his face, wanted to see her own, even though it frightened her. What would she see in her own eyes while he took her?

As he slid inside her body, their eyes locked in the mirror. Cara gasped again with the fullness of his possession—it was slightly different from this angle—but she didn’t want him to stop. She gripped the edge of the counter as he began to move. Their gazes remained tangled, as if it were a contest to see who could last the longest without looking away.

It was Jack who closed his eyes first. His head tilted back, and the look of sheer ecstasy on his face made her heart squeeze tight in her chest.

A moment later, his fingers found her clitoris and she could no longer concentrate on watching him. She could only feel, could only see the bigger picture of the two of them together, could only marvel at the sensations streaking through her and the shameless way she enjoyed everything he did to her.

They didn’t last long. Cara shattered within moments and Jack followed immediately after. She leaned on her elbows, breathing hard. It should have felt impersonal, the way they’d just had sex, but nothing could be farther from the truth. She felt as if their souls had twined, as if they’d seen a part of each other that no one ever had before.

In the next moment, she chided herself for being silly. Jack was highly sensual. He’d made love to many women. She was just the flavor of the week.

He disengaged from her body and she felt bereft with the loss of him. But then he turned on the shower and led her under the spray.

They didn’t come out for a very long time.

That afternoon, they checked out of the hotel. Cara thought they would return to Paris, but instead Jack took her to a grand apartment overlooking the Thames and the London skyline. Like his Paris apartment, this one was furnished in sleek, modern lines. Unlike the Paris apartment, this building was as modern as the furnishings.

“Why did we stay in the hotel last night when this is so close?” she asked as she scanned the view. There were the Houses of Parliament, Big Ben ... and so many other things she couldn’t even identify.

Jack turned from his perusal of a stack of mail. “It seemed like the thing to do at the time.”

Cara frowned as she watched him go through the mail. What had happened between them had been amazing—too amazing, if she were honest with herself. Because now she didn't want to do what she needed to do: she didn't want to ask him for the money so she could get back to her own life.

"Is there any word on my passport and bank card?" she asked.

He looked up again. "I have someone working on it. But no, not yet."

"You realize I can't go home until I have my passport back." There, she'd said it. She'd voiced her fear and given him a hint of what she intended. If he couldn't get her passport for her, she would go to the American embassy and apply for a new one. She wasn't worried about anyone using her bank card—they'd need her PIN to do so—but if she didn't get that back soon, she'd report it missing and get a new one sent to her here in London.

He tossed the mail aside and gave her a heated look that curled her toes. How did he manage that when they'd made love only a few hours ago now?

"In a hurry to leave me, Cara?"

"I've completed my end of the bargain," she said, her heart pumping hard and fast.

The heat in his eyes banked. "You'll get your money. And your passport as soon as I have it."

She suddenly felt as if she'd made a mistake. She wanted to go to him, wanted to put her arms around his waist and press her cheek to his chest. She wanted to tell him she was sorry, that she wasn't trying to rush away, but that she had to do it for her own good.

Because she cared about him. Too much. In so very short a time, Jack Wolfe had managed to worm his way beneath her defenses and make her care.

But she knew she couldn't trust him. Couldn't give him her heart. It never worked out, that kind of blind trust. Her mother had had it with her father, and look where it had gotten her. Brokenhearted and broke. Cara wouldn't suffer the same fate. Jack was gorgeous and amazing in bed, but that was the extent of it. She *wouldn't* love him.

She believed in happy ever after, but she knew that kind of love wasn't one-sided. It couldn't be. And there was absolutely nothing about Jack that said he was in danger of falling in love with her.

"This isn't going anywhere, Jack," she said. "You and I both know it."

He looked so dark and furious. "We've spent one night together. It's a little soon to be thinking about the future, isn't it?"

"Maybe for you," she said, stung. "But I have to find another job and get on with my life. I can't stay here as your—what? Paid companion?"

"That part is over," he said, his voice measured. "I paid you to go to the wedding. You went. We've moved on now."

"To what?"

His jaw flexed. "I have work to do," he said. "If you need anything, I'll be in my office. It's down the hall, on the left."

"Is this usually how you end your discussions?" she asked. "By walking away?"

He turned back to her. "What discussion, Cara? You've said you want to leave. I've said I'm working on it."

"You don't let anyone in, do you?"

Surprise flashed across his face. A moment later, he was as cool and unflappable as always. "As I said, I'll be in my office."

Cara stood with her arms wrapped around her middle as she watched him go. She was furious, and yet there was nothing left to say, was there? Angry tears pressed against the backs of her eyes.

She refused to let them fall. Crying over a man was weakness, even if she was crying in anger.

She was not weak. She would never be weak. The sooner she got control of her life back and got out of here, the better.

Jack spent the afternoon on the computer. The markets in New York had just opened; it was exactly what he needed to lose himself for a while.

He bought and sold thousands of shares, knowing just when to begin and end each transaction. The thrill of the chase was always exhilarating, always got his blood pumping and his adrenaline firing

along all his synapses.

But it was different this time. Different because he couldn't completely stop thinking about the woman in the other room. She'd accused him of shutting her out, of shutting everyone out.

He'd wanted to deny it, and yet he couldn't. Because relationships were unpredictable at best. If you couldn't count on the people you shared DNA with to be there for you, how could you ever rely on another person? Knowing that had saved him a lot of angst over the years.

Jack clicked another button. His game was still sharp, and he made money as always, but he wanted to stop, wanted to go and haul Cara against him. Wanted to strip her naked and lose himself in her delightful body again.

It was odd, this feeling. He was a highly sexual man, and he enjoyed making love to the women he dated—but he'd never quite been this obsessed with one. It was a shock to want her again so badly within moments of finding his release in her body. Sex was a pleasurable pursuit, but it wasn't an addiction.

Until Cara.

He was getting hard just thinking about her. He shoved thoughts of her aside ruthlessly, clicked on a "Buy" button. The transaction went through, but instead of feeling the elation he usually felt, he was frustrated.

Frustrated because he wanted to be with Cara. Wanted those legs wrapped around him while he thrust into her beautiful body. But more than that, he wanted to talk to her. He'd enjoyed talking to her before they'd lost control with each other, and he found that he wanted to talk to her almost as much as he wanted to make love to her.

He *liked* her.

Jack focused on the computer screen. She only cared about her money, and about leaving, so why was he thinking of her so much? There was nothing between them except great sex. And he could enjoy that for the next few days with her—assuming she was still speaking to him. He clicked a "Sell" button, his blood humming with anticipation as

he watched the money pile up in his account.

By the time he finished his transactions, it was after eight o'clock. Jack shoved back from the computer. He'd forced himself to concentrate, and he'd made money, but this restless hunger gnawing beneath the surface had grown stronger with the passing hours.

He found Cara on the balcony off the living room. Below, the city stretched out in a never-ending carpet of light and sound. Car horns and screeching tires filtered up from far below. Cara leaned against the railing, cradling a wineglass in one hand. She took a sip and returned her attention to the sights.

She still wore the sea-green sleeveless dress she'd had on earlier, but she'd taken off the heels she'd been wearing. She had one bare foot propped on the railing, the other flat on the polished stone of the balcony.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

She spun around, her hand over her heart. "My word, Jack Wolfe, you scared the living daylights out of me."

He loved her accent, especially when she got a little flustered. It was Southern, but there was a hint of something else, as well. The Cajun in her, he supposed. He'd listened to her speaking French in Paris and marveled at the sensual way she said the words, the thickness of them on her tongue. It was different, earthier, than the French he was used to. It called up thoughts of dark, sultry nights. Silk sheets, sweat and incense. He wanted to know her, wanted to know what had made her into this infuriatingly sexy and independent woman. He wanted, he acknowledged to himself, to own her... body and soul.

"What were you thinking about so intently?" As if he didn't know. He didn't regret walking away from her earlier, but he regretted not telling her he wanted her to stay because he liked being with her.

She tucked a long lock of hair behind her ear. "A lot, actually."

He moved onto the balcony to join her, took the glass from her. She willingly handed it over and he took a sip before giving it back. He refused to think about the intimacy of the gesture, the ease with which he could get used to this.

"Like what?" he pressed.

She sighed. "Home. Mama. You."

You. That gratified him. "What about me?"

Her eyes were warm and smooth, like green onyx. She studied him carefully. He got the impression she was trying to decide how to answer. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but it was too late to take back the question.

"I was thinking that I hardly know you. And that I wish I could've applied the brakes to this thing between us and backed up a few steps before last night."

"Fast can be good. Sometimes you have to live life on the edge, Cara."

"I'm not much good at living life on the edge."

Jack shrugged. "Actually, I'd say you're quite good at it."

She shook her head adamantly. "No, really, I'm not. This ... *whatever* this is with us ... has skipped a lot of steps for me."

He could tell that she was genuinely stressed by it, but it was too late for regrets. He had no intention of stepping back now. He needed her too much.

*Needed?* It was a strong word, and not one he typically used, but he couldn't think of a better one at the moment. And he had every intention of pressing his advantage. Because she wanted him, no matter what she said about this thing between them going nowhere.

Besides, to bed was somewhere—and that's where he intended to take her.

"What do you suggest?" he asked, taking the glass from her and sipping again.

She watched him drink. He wondered if she knew the hunger that was in her eyes, the answering hunger she called up in him.

And yet he knew she wasn't about to suggest they take this into the bedroom. He got the impression she was fighting herself very hard not to give in to her physical urges. He would let her do so, for now. But she would be his tonight, and every night so long as they were together.

He pushed aside thoughts of her passport, thoughts of her walking out

of his life. It didn't bother him, not really. He simply wasn't ready for this to end quite yet. And he didn't think she was, either, no matter what she'd said earlier.

She licked her lips, and his body turned to stone. "I think we should talk."

"Fine," he replied.

He expected the usual female chatter about feelings and plans for the future. He hadn't handled it well earlier, when he was still feeling raw and exposed, but he could do it. He knew enough about this kind of talk to navigate it fairly well. She would want to know about his childhood—he wouldn't tell her the truth of that, but he did have a prepared answer he usually gave. She'd want to know about his past loves, his goals and dreams and plans.

He knew what to say in response to those things. He'd done it before, many times. And when she was satisfied, he'd ask her the same questions. He was even looking forward to the answers.

But what she said was not at all what he expected to hear.

"Then tell me what happened yesterday in the bar."

# CHAPTER TEN

JACK'S gaze, which had been so full of heat and sexual promise that she'd had a hard time concentrating on what she wanted to say, had gone utterly cold.

But she didn't regret asking, dammit. In spite of what had happened earlier, she wanted to know where she stood with him. She'd had enough time to cool off and think. He'd pushed her away because he didn't want to let anyone in. And though it might be the smart thing to just wash her hands of him entirely, she couldn't quite do it yet.

But this was the line in the sand. If he brushed her off, then she knew exactly what he thought of her. Of them.

He took another long draft of her wine, then handed the glass back to her. "It's a long story."

"I have time."

"Here's the condensed version," he said, his words sounding as if he'd bitten them off. "Jacob left home when we needed him most. Lucas had to step up and be man of the house. But he couldn't handle it, either, so he left, too. And then there was me. I didn't run away."

Cara's heart was hammering inside her breastbone. She hadn't expected this much from him, she really hadn't. She'd been prepared to walk away, knowing she'd done her best. But he'd just thrown her a curveball.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. It wasn't the whole story, she was certain, and yet she could feel his pain as if it were her own. She knew about taking on responsibility that you didn't think you were ready for. About unfairness and duty.

"I was seventeen," he said bitterly. "And I had to take care of four younger siblings the best I could. It was Jacob's duty to be there for us. But he couldn't do it. He couldn't handle the pressure."

"But you could."

“Yes.”

“You might not believe this, Jack, but I understand the way you feel. Katrina changed a lot of things in my life. It’s not the same thing, I know, but I do understand the feeling of being trapped by doing what’s right.”

His eyes gleamed with anger and bitterness. “You can never understand what I’ve been through, Cara. Be grateful for that.”

“I’ve had to sacrifice things—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“All right. Then tell me.”

“I—” He shoved a hand through his hair.

“Dammit.”

She reached for his hand, squeezed. “It’s okay, Jack.”

“It’s ugly. You have no idea ...”

Cara bit her lip. She wanted to know, and she didn’t. The anguish on his face disconcerted her, made her search for something less difficult to talk about. “What do you think your brother wanted to say to you?”

She’d seen the way Jacob had looked at Jack yesterday. He’d seemed ... remorseful. As if he’d wanted to say something important, but Jack had exploded and shut him down before he could do it.

Jack opened his mouth. Closed it again, his expression turning to granite. “I don’t know. I don’t care.”

Then he reached for her, pulled her into his arms and nuzzled the skin of her neck. A thrill went through her, and a twinge of sadness, as well. He’d tried, but he didn’t really want to be close to her in any way other than physically. Sex was what he wanted. No doubt he’d been humoring her in order to get to that point.

Cara put her palms on his chest. His skin burned her through the fabric of the casual cotton polo he wore. So hot, always so hot. She licked her lips, her throat suddenly as dry as a desert.

She had a choice. She could pretend none of this had happened, pretend she wasn’t hurt by his unwillingness to share more with her—or she could go to bed alone. It wasn’t an easy choice, but she had to stand

up for herself. She wasn't simply his sex toy. She wasn't here just to fulfill his physical needs. She was worth more than that. If not to him, then at least to herself.

His mouth was magical where it skimmed along her throat. Another few moments, and she'd never be able to say no. Cara's fists curled into his shirt.

"I'm tired, Jack. It's been a long few days."

He stiffened. She wasn't sure what he would do, what he would say, but he let her go and stepped back. His eyes were pewter in the evening light. Already, she was regretting that she'd pushed him away. She wanted to press a kiss to his hard jaw, wanted him to soften and smile again. But she wouldn't do it. Not tonight, not with her heart breaking like this.

"Then I'll say good-night," he said. She waited for him to say something else, prayed he would say something else, but he didn't. He left her standing alone on the balcony with the night sounds of London ringing in her ears.

\*

What had Jacob wanted? That was the billion-dollar question so far as Jack was concerned. There was nothing Jacob could say that would ever erase the pain and anger of his abandonment. So why was Jack now wondering what his brother wanted?

And why was he thinking of Cara and the way she'd looked at him when he'd told her he didn't know and didn't care?

Damn her for making him wonder! Damn her for making him question his own reaction. He hadn't been able to control the rage that had burst from him at the sight of his brother, of that face he'd once loved and admired so much. He'd felt every sick moment of Jacob's betrayal then. The panic and fear when they'd discovered that Jacob was gone, that all he'd left was a note and that he wasn't coming back again.

It had hurt so much back then. He'd thought he was over it, but the moment he'd seen Jacob again, everything inside him had boiled over.

How could he explain it to Cara? Why would he want to? This thing

with Jacob had nothing to do with the two of them. He resented her for making it into an issue between them. He didn't want her to know about the ugliness of his life before, didn't want to have to see her pitying expression when he told her about it.

Jack threw down the pen he was holding and put his head in his hands. It was two in the morning and he was still thinking about this. Still thinking about *her*. He wanted to go to her, wanted to explain why he couldn't talk about this.

But why should he have to do that at all? What happened years ago had nothing to do with right now.

Goddammit. He wasn't doing this. He wasn't sitting here and beating himself up over it. It was his life and he'd do what he damn well wanted. What he'd always done.

Jack tapped a key on his computer, brought up the Japanese markets. They were already well into the trading day, but that wouldn't stop him from making a killing before it was over.

When Cara awoke, light was streaming through the shades and across the bed where she lay. She turned her head. She was alone. Jack's side of the bed hadn't even been slept in. Guilt shafted through her. Had he slept on the couch? Slept in his office?

Or had he left during the night?

Cara flipped the covers back and grabbed her robe. He wouldn't dare leave her alone here, would he? She didn't know why, but panic unwound inside her at the thought. She didn't pause to analyze it.

She burst from the bedroom and hurried through the vast apartment. He wasn't in the kitchen, the living room or on the balcony that ran the length of the apartment. She stopped, straining to hear any sound—and realized he was in his office. She could hear the clackety-clack of a keyboard as she got closer. Pushing the door open, she stopped and watched him.

"Have you slept at all?" she said, her voice rusty.

His head snapped up. And then he turned to look at the skyline outside his window, as if he'd only just realized it was broad daylight. Another click of the keys and then he was pushing back from the

computer.

“I lost track of time,” he said, as if it made perfect sense that he would do so.

“So you’ve been at the computer all night?”

“Technically, I suppose so. But it’s the end of the trading day in Asia.”

“Trading,” she repeated. He was up all night trading? Trading what? Not baseball cards, surely. As if a British man would be interested in baseball, she thought.

The shadow of his beard had grown into a day’s worth of stubble. Why did he look so unbearably sexy unshaven? And why did she want to go over and pull his head down to hers, kiss him until neither one of them could breathe?

*Stocks.* The word popped into her head, and she felt silly for not thinking of it sooner. Jack owned an investment firm. He’d told her that, and yet she kept seeing him as this maverick card shark, this daredevil who lived life on the edge.

Though perhaps trading stocks was a bit daredevilish.

“Did you make any money?” she asked.

He smiled. He didn’t look in the least bit weary. If not for his rumpled clothing and day’s growth of beard, she wouldn’t know he’d been up all night.

“A killing,” he said. “As usual.”

He had a knack for making money, no doubt about it. “I’m sure your clients appreciate your ability,” she said softly.

“They do. But I wasn’t using the firm’s money.”

Just as she’d thought, he risked everything on the vagaries of the market. Chance was Jack’s constant companion. She didn’t understand how he could stomach the uncertainty. But then, that was Jack.

“Then I guess it’s good you won.”

“It will be for a lot of people.”

Cara shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

Jack shoved his hands in his pockets, almost as if he were embarrassed

somehow. "I don't need the money," he said. "I like to use it where it'll do the most good."

Cara's heart was thundering for an entirely different reason now. "You're giving money to charity?"

His brows drew down as he studied her. "You seem surprised."

"No, not at all," she hastened to reassure him. But she was surprised, and it shamed her. Why had she thought he only cared for himself? That he was irresponsible with money and unaware of how lucky he was to have so much of it? She should have known better. The man who'd charged in—at great risk to himself—because he'd thought she needed rescuing was not the sort of man who would turn a blind eye to the suffering of others.

Jack shrugged as he shoved a hand through his hair. "No, it's all right. I understand. I've given you little reason to think otherwise, have I?"

Cara hugged her body as the heat of a blush flooded her. "I think I said before that we don't really know each other very well. Everything has been backward."

"Maybe we should work on that."

Happiness was a tangible force inside her. "Do you mean it, Jack?"

He reached out and stroked two fingers along her cheek, her jaw, down her throat. She shivered with the contact. How did he do this to her? How did he make her want to forget everything she'd ever learned about relying only on herself?

"I want to make love to you, Cara. But I want to know you, too. I want to know what makes you the way you are."

"The way I am?"

"Fierce. Independent. Unwilling to accept help when you need it."

"I didn't need your help," she said, knowing instinctively that he was talking about the night in the casino. "You made everything worse by coming after me."

He snorted. "You don't still believe that fiction, do you? Bobby Gold isn't a nice man, Cara. And you cost him fifteen million euros."

She thrust her chin up. She didn't want to admit that he had a point,

because to do so would be to admit that maybe she wasn't as in control as she liked to think. She was so used to taking care of herself, taking care of her family, that she'd never considered she wouldn't manage in that situation. But what if she hadn't? What if Bobby had decided to use her as an example for his other employees? If she'd disappeared in a foreign country, how long would it have taken for anyone to notice? It wasn't like she was a tourist, or that she called Mama every night.

"Fine," Cara admitted. "Maybe I didn't have it under control. But I didn't really cost him fifteen million. He kept it, remember? And he'd have found a way to do so regardless of whether or not you followed me. You'd have never made it out of the casino with the money. And you know it."

He was glowering at her, but then he suddenly grinned. It was as if a summer thunderstorm had unexpectedly broke apart and let the sun shine down. "Then maybe we helped each other, hmm?"

"Maybe so."

"Are you hungry?" he asked. Cara nodded.

"Get dressed and we'll go out for breakfast."

"But aren't you tired?" she asked incredulously. "I'll sleep later."

Cara showered and dressed in a pair of tan slacks and a pearl knit top. Jack was waiting for her when she emerged from the bedroom. He'd also showered and changed, and his face was freshly shaven. He looked happier this morning, as if a good night's sleep had done wonders for him.

Except that he hadn't slept. Cara frowned, but he showed no signs of slowing down. Instead of hailing a cab, they walked the short distance to a café he swore had the best coffee in all of London. Over a meal of bacon, eggs, toast, grilled tomatoes and coffee, they talked about mundane things like the temperature and the clear sky. It seemed odd after their charged evening, but Cara decided to just enjoy it for the moment.

She liked talking to him, even if it was about nothing.

"Tell me about you," Jack said after she'd commented on a woman and her dog in the small park across the street. The dog was wearing a

pink dress with a ruffle, which Cara found hilarious.

She swung around to look at him. “Dogs don’t wear pink dresses where I come from,” she said with a smile.

Jack’s silvery gaze was piercing, as if he’d wanted more from her than that. “It’s a crime against nature,” he agreed. He reached for her hand, threaded his fingers through hers—and she knew she’d been right. “But that’s not what I want to know.”

Her heart began to flutter. “What *do* you want to know?”

“Why you think you have to do everything yourself. Why you don’t want to accept help from anyone.”

Cara swallowed. “I can accept help. I’m just used to taking care of myself.”

“But why? What happened to you that you have such a strong need to be independent?”

Her skin prickled with heat. “Who said anything happened? I prefer relying on myself, is all. I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in my mouth.”

“Like I was, right?” His voice was a little harder, a little flatter.

“I didn’t say that at all.” She hadn’t even thought it when she’d spoken, but she understood how he could see it as a dig at him. She’d just meant that she’d always known what it was to work, whether it was watching her parents do so or getting her first job as a cashier when she was sixteen.

“This is supposed to be about you,” he said, as if he were accusing her of trying to turn the conversation.

And maybe she was, she admitted. But conversation was a two-way street. Give a little, get a little.

“No,” she said. “It’s supposed to be about us getting to know each other better.”

He let go of her hand and leaned back against his seat, his eyes hard. She didn’t feel like she’d won a victory. Instead, she felt as if she’d taken a wrong turn on a dark road.

“Fine,” he said, his voice clipped. “I was indeed born rich. It was a bit of a chaotic childhood, however.”

"Because your mother died and you hated your father," she said softly, annoyed now that she'd pushed him down this path.

"My father was a tyrant," he snapped out. "A beast with a temper. You asked how I could tell my ribs were bruised and not broken. I learned it from my father."

Her heart constricted at the thought of him cowering from his father's rage. What kind of man could beat children so severely? For all her father's faults, he'd never been violent. A liar, yes. Violent, no.

"I'm so sorry, Jack."

He looked murderously angry. His eyes burned so hot they seared her. But this time the heat wasn't good. It wasn't the flame of desire and passion, but the frozen burn of despair and pain.

She hurt so much for him she physically ached. And she suddenly knew she didn't need him to say another word. "You don't have to—"

"Yes, I hated him," he bit out. "If I'd been the one who killed him, I wouldn't have run away." He leaned forward, his eyes still burning. "He scarred Annabelle for life, Cara. He beat her so severely with a whip that she almost died."

Tears filled her eyes. She couldn't stop one from escaping and slipping down her cheek.

Jack's gaze hardened, but he didn't cease talking. "Jacob tried to stop him. He fell and hit his head and died instantly. It was an accident." He sucked in a breath as his fingers clenched into a fist on the table. "But you know the worst part, Cara? I'd have gladly killed him myself if I'd been there instead of Jacob."

"Don't say that, Jack—"

He shoved away from the table and stood. He was breathing hard now, as if he'd fought his way through a jungle. She imagined that he had. A jungle of dark memories and bitter emotions that he couldn't escape no matter how he tried.

"No. That's the kind of man I am, Cara. You wanted to know the truth about me. Now you've got it."

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

SHE let him hide out in his office for several hours before she decided enough was enough. Cara put down the book she'd been reading—she wasn't doing a very good job of distracting herself anyway—and marched down the hall to Jack's office. She could hear him behind the door, hear the clicking of the keys and the smooth timbre of his voice as he spoke to someone on the phone. She pressed a hand to the door and just listened.

He'd been awake for hours now, working nonstop, and she was worried about him. After his confession at breakfast, they'd returned to the apartment. He'd gone out for a while—on business, he'd said—but when he'd returned, he'd retreated to his office with hardly a word.

She'd wanted to give him his space. He'd pushed her away earlier; perhaps he thought he'd pushed her away for good with that confession about his father, but it was time she disabused him of the notion.

She hurt for him so much. If she could, she would take his pain way. It had horrified her when he'd said he'd have killed his father if he could have, but she understood where that kind of emotion came from. She'd never wanted to kill her father, but she'd been so angry with him for what he'd done. It had taken months to explain it to Remy, who only knew that his routine had been upset. He didn't understand why Daddy was gone, had cried and screamed endlessly when Daddy didn't come home as expected.

Cara shuddered with the memory. Then she gathered herself and pushed open the door. No knocking, because she wouldn't give him the chance to rebuff her.

He looked up as she entered. He was still on the phone, but she didn't care. She knew enough about Jack to know he always got what he wanted when it came to money. If the call were important, he'd find another way to complete the transaction later.

He looked so starkly handsome behind his desk, with the city spread

out behind him. She walked over to the windows and calmly closed the blinds. Jack's eyes followed her, but he still hadn't put down the phone.

Cara began to unbutton the long sheath dress she'd put on this morning. Buttons ran down the entire front of the formfitting black cotton.

"Yes," Jack said to the person on the other end of the line. But his eyes were glued to her. Cara smiled wickedly as she peeled the first part of the dress open to reveal the red lacy bra she'd put on beneath it.

"Um, whatever you say."

Cara unbuttoned the dress enough to step out of it. Then she turned around and laid it over a chair, knowing he would get an eyeful because of the matching red thong she'd worn.

"No, no. Nothing's wrong," he said, but his voice sounded strained. "Look, can I call you back?"

Turning, she marched over to him, reaching him right as he hung up the phone. She didn't give him a chance to say a thing before she pushed his chair back and straddled him. Gripping his face in her hands, she tilted his head back and crushed her mouth down on his.

Their lovemaking was not in the least bit tame. Cara tore at his clothes as he filled his hands with her breasts. He pulled the cups down and tweaked her nipples into tight points while she kissed him. Then he slipped a finger beneath the lace of her panty and began stroking her in that most sensitive of places. Cara shuddered and ground her hips against him.

But as much as she wanted to let him bring her to fulfillment, she wanted to take care of him first. This was about him, about how much she wanted him to understand that nothing he could ever tell her about himself would scare her away.

She shoved his shirt off his shoulders, then started to unbutton his pants. The instant she'd unzipped him, she slipped down his body and took him in her mouth.

"Cara," he gasped as she swirled her tongue around his hot shaft. She loved the size of him, the feel, the way he bucked against her tongue. It turned her on to know she was doing this to him, that he was fisting his

hands in her hair and groaning because of the way she made him feel.

But before she could bring him to completion, he pushed her away.

“Inside you,” he said, standing and lifting her onto his desk. Another moment and she was clinging to him as he thrust into her body.

Everything about the way they made love was intense. Cara’s head fell back as pleasure and emotion overwhelmed her. Was that her voice moaning and pleading for more? It shocked her, and yet she shouldn’t be surprised. She loved what they did to each other, loved the way he made her feel, and she’d missed this last night much more than she’d have thought possible.

They exploded together, gasping and grinding into each other for that last little bit of bliss, before collapsing on the desk in a boneless heap.

Sometime later, they made their way into the bedroom and made love again, slowly this time, with more control and more focus on making the pleasure last as long as possible.

Cara fell asleep in his arms, her body temporarily sated of her craving for him. When she awoke, he was gone. She sat up, disappointed. Had he gone back to his computer? They’d never spoken a word, other than those of hunger and need and pleasure.

And speaking of hunger, she smelled something cooking. Cara got out of bed and slipped into her robe.

Jack was at the stove. The smells of oil and garlic and tomatoes wafted up from the pan he was tending. He tossed in a handful of mushrooms and stirred. She took a moment to watch him, to marvel at the sight of an unbelievably sexy man moving around a kitchen like he knew what he was doing.

“It smells good,” she said.

He turned. “I thought you might be hungry.”

She leaned against the center island and watched him work. “I’m starved. What are you making?”

“It’s just pasta with a few fresh ingredients.”

“Wow, I’d have thought you had someone do your cooking for you.”

He didn’t turn back to her as he shook his head. “Not usually, no. I

don't like the intrusion of having someone around."

Her heart flipped at that statement. Was she an intrusion, too? Or, if not now, would she soon become one?

He finished the sauce and drained the pasta, then plated the food and set it on the bar. Cara climbed on the bar stool and twirled her fork in the pasta.

"It's good," she said after she'd had the first bite.

He was watching her eat, and she dipped her head again, embarrassed. Odd, considering how they had no secrets when it came to making love. He'd certainly seen more unguarded expressions on her face, had heard her make intimate noises in the throes of passion.

"I'm sorry about earlier," he said.

Cara looked up. "What's there to be sorry about?"

"I shouldn't have said what I did."

She dropped her fork and reached for his hand. "No, Jack, don't apologize for that. I don't blame you for feeling that way."

"I don't usually talk about it. In fact, I think you're only the second person to ever hear me say it."

Her heart quickened. "I'm glad you felt like you could tell me."

He blew out a breath and looked away. "It's so ugly, Cara. Everything that happened, everything I felt—"

He shook his head and she lifted his hand to her mouth, kissed his knuckles. "It's not your fault."

He leaned forward and caressed her cheek. She wanted to turn into the caress, wanted to stay like this forever. Her heart was so full of everything she was beginning to feel for this man. Surely he could see it in her eyes. She thought she should pull away, should guard herself better.

But she couldn't.

"I know that. Now." He squeezed her hand and then picked up his fork again. "It took a long time, but I know I wasn't to blame for William's rages. I escaped the brunt of them most of the time. The others ..."

Her heart felt as if someone had wrapped it in chains. She was bound

to him tighter and tighter with every word.

He shrugged, yet she knew he didn't feel at all carefree about what he said. "I could tell. I knew when he was going to explode. He rarely took it out on me because I didn't push his buttons. I never could understand why the others couldn't see it. I tried to warn them. It never worked. And then Annabelle..."

Cara shuddered at the thought that Annabelle's scars had been caused by her own father. The woman she'd met had been so lovely, so cool and collected. So reserved, hiding behind her hair and her camera. What must she feel every day of her life if her brother felt so much pain simply at the thought of it?

"He beat her because she was beautiful, because she'd dared to want to grow up. She got dressed up and snuck out to a party. When William saw her in her heels and lipstick, he went berserk." He took a deep breath. "I wasn't there. It was all over by the time I'd arrived. Nathaniel and Sebastian tried to stop him, but they were too young, too small. Jacob arrived and hit him."

It was so telling to her that he called his father by his first name. She'd been confused for just a moment, but then she'd understood. William. Not Dad. Not Daddy. Not Father.

She turned the words over in her head. *Daddy*. That was the word that stood out. It still made her ache just to think it. It was a kid's word, but she'd barely been more than a kid when her father had left.

"I don't think it's wrong to feel the way you do, Jack. But he's dead—" she couldn't say *father* when he wouldn't "—and the how no longer matters."

"I feel like I should have done something more for the others. If I'd been the one to kill him, then Jacob wouldn't have..."

"Wouldn't have what?" she asked when he didn't continue.

He shook his head, more to himself than to her. "He wouldn't have left," he said. "Now eat before it gets cold."

She wanted him to keep talking. He was on the edge of something she wanted to hear, but he said nothing more. And she wouldn't push him any further tonight. He'd already said so much, far more than she'd have

expected.

When they finished eating, she cleaned the dishes while he made espresso. They drank it at the table on the balcony, along with an aperitif, and then went to bed and fell asleep in each other's arms. It was domestic and peaceful—but Cara didn't fool herself. This was the calm before the storm. And when the storm came, the pain would follow. It always did.

Jack slept fitfully. Beside him, Cara was warm and soft and soundly asleep. But he kept running over the past. He hadn't thought this deeply about it in years, and now he couldn't stop. He kept seeing Jacob's face in the bar. What could Jacob possibly want to say after all these years? Did he expect to just waltz back into everyone's lives and be forgiven for abandoning them?

The others might not have a problem with that, but Jack did. If Jacob had run away once before, what was to stop him from doing so again? Jack wasn't willing to take that chance. Wasn't willing to care again, when caring would lead to disappointment.

Cara snuggled closer to him in her sleep. She was so sensual, so amazing, and he wanted her with a passion he hadn't felt in a long time. He'd wanted women before, but he couldn't remember ever feeling quite this level of desire. There was something strong and elemental between them, something that made sex a necessity rather than just a logical conclusion to their attraction. But he knew better than to allow it to mean more than it did. It was just sex. Hot, passionate, no-holds-barred sex.

As if thinking the words conjured the deed, Cara's hand slipped over his body with a deliberation that said she was no longer asleep. Though he wanted to roll her beneath him and thrust into her body, he waited to see what she would do. She caressed his chest, his abdomen, his hip, his bare buttock, her lips pressing to the hollow of his throat as she nuzzled against him. Though he'd had her only a few hours ago, he was hard and ready for her again.

Without a word, she pushed him onto his back and straddled him, taking him deep within her. She rode him slowly, deliberately, until he couldn't take it anymore. Until he gripped her hips and drove up inside

her again and again until she cried out with the force of her release. Her body gripped him, milked him with tiny shudders, and he let go with a harsh cry.

They stayed entwined for the longest time. Jack started to doze, but then she broke the quiet stillness of the night when she said, “I want to tell you something.”

Jack yawned. “I’m listening.”

She pushed away from him and sat up. The air wafting over his body cooled him and he wanted her against him again. But he resisted reaching for her because it was clear she needed to do this her way.

He could see her outline in the dark, and though he couldn’t see the features of her body, he imagined them. The high, pert nipples. Her narrow waist tapered down to flared hips, and the place between her legs—that wonderful place he adored—would still be sensitive to the touch. If he were to slide his fingers into that wetness, she would shudder and moan.

“Jack.”

“Yes, darling?”

“You aren’t listening.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Because your hand is on my breast.”

He would have laughed if he didn’t sense she was being serious, so he pulled his hand away with a sigh. “Sorry. Continue.”

“I’ve been thinking about what you said. About your, um, father and Jacob—”

“Cara—”

She put a hand over his mouth. “No, listen. Please.”

Her hand fell away and he didn’t say a word.

“I can’t pretend to know what you’ve been through, Jack. And I don’t want to make it sound like I’m trying to compare my experience to yours. But I want to tell you the truth about my family.”

He’d begun to think she wasn’t going to tell him anything. Each time he’d asked, she’d deflected the conversation without telling him

anything substantial—other than the hurricane and the deadbeat boyfriend. Perhaps she was embarrassed that she came from humble roots, or perhaps there were even darker things in her past than in his. Whatever the reason, he'd decided she intended to remain silent about it.

She pulled in a deep breath as if she were gathering her courage, let it out in a rush. "I told you that my mama lost her house when Katrina hit. But I didn't tell you that my dad left us shortly after. I thought they had the perfect marriage, but it turns out that my father had another family we didn't know about. He'd been having an affair for years with a woman in another town. They had a daughter together." She laughed, the sound breaking off. "I have a sister I didn't find out about until six years ago. I've never even met her."

"Do you want to?" he asked.

She seemed surprised if the way she hesitated were any indication. "I don't know. It's not her fault, and yet ..." She twisted the sheets in her hands. He waited for her to get to it in her own time. "I have another sister ... Evie. And a little brother. Remy. He's the sweetest thing alive, but he's, um ..."

She let out a harsh breath, full of anger and tears he sensed she hadn't let fall yet. "Remy was starved of oxygen at birth and he suffered mental difficulties because of it. He's eighteen now, but he has the mental capacity of a six-year-old."

He reached for her hand, squeezed it. She didn't pull away. "This is why you work so hard," he said, his heart pinching for her. It made so much sense now. Why she was so focused, so independent. Why she'd been so worried about money and why she'd taken a job with Bobby Gold.

She nodded. "Yes. Remy's therapy is subsidized by the state, but only to a point. He needs specialized care. And he's very sensitive to changes. The loss of the house devastated him because he couldn't understand why everything was different. We worked hard to get it back to normal as quickly as we could. Of course, by the time we'd done so, he was used to the trailer we'd been living in."

He knew what came next, what she hadn't yet said. "It must have been

difficult for him when your father left.”

“Oh, God, you have no idea.” She rubbed a hand across her brow. “I haven’t spoken to my father in six years, Jack. And watching you with your brother, it began to bother me. What if he wanted to talk to me? What would I do? Would I push him away? Or would I listen? I’m furious with him, and yet I wonder what he might say if I gave him the chance. Not that he wants to say anything,” she added. “But if he did ...”

He knew what she was trying to say. And he was caught between sympathy for her and the pain of old wounds.

“You think I should have let Jacob speak,” he said. Anger roiled beneath the surface, but it was the old anger, not anything new. He wasn’t angry with her, didn’t feel the need to lash out and defend his actions.

“I can’t tell you what to do, Jack. But maybe if you talked to him, you’d know whether it was right to go on being angry or whether it was time to let it go. Maybe you could move forward.”

“It was a long time ago. What makes you think I haven’t moved on?” Jack demanded. “I don’t spend my days thinking about this.”

“No, I know you don’t. But just like what happened with my family still bothers me, I think you’re still stuck with what happened to yours. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t have gotten so angry.”

Jack blew out a harsh breath. He’d gone entire months—years even—without thinking much about the past. Until Jacob returned. Now, he had to think about it—and he didn’t like it one bit.

“I’m not sure I can do it, Cara. Jacob was all we had. He was our father figure, much more so than William ever was. And when he was gone, it left a gaping hole in our lives. Lucas tried to fill it, but he failed, as well. I couldn’t fail. I had no choice.”

“It wasn’t fair that you had to step into Jacob’s and Lucas’s shoes,” she said. “It must have been hard for you. But you did it. You succeeded where your brothers didn’t. But what if Jacob needs you now the way you once needed him?”

He hadn’t thought of that. But then he also didn’t care. Let Jacob need him—need all of them—if that’s what it was. Let him fool the rest of

them with his remorse and his return to Wolfe Manor. He couldn't fool Jack.

"Sometimes the past belongs in the past," he said roughly. "Sometimes it's better that way."

She lay down again with a sigh and put her head on his shoulder. She smelled warm and sweet and sensual. Like flowers and sex.

"You're probably right," she said. "I just wanted to say it."

He ran his fingers up her arm. Her skin was so soft, like silk. He liked being here with her like this. The night was dark, conducive to secrets, and he found himself wanting to explain why he felt the way he did.

"I was seventeen when I had to be the head of the household. I had to figure out how to make sure we were okay, how to balance the books and keep everything running smoothly. I also had to deal with the emotional fallout of the younger ones."

"It's a lot of responsibility," she murmured.

"I didn't get to do what I wanted, Cara. Everything I did was for them. When I left school, I took a job in London and commuted from our home in Oxfordshire. I never even went to university. I worked. I didn't play, I didn't party, and I didn't do anything typical for my age."

Her hand curled into a fist on his chest. "You think he robbed you of that."

"Yes." And yet it was more than that. He'd admired Jacob, had wanted to be like him—but when he'd realized that Jacob wasn't as strong as he'd always believed, a part of Jack had feared that he would fail, as well. If Jacob couldn't do it, how could he?

But he had. He'd succeeded where Jacob and

Lucas had failed. The cost had been enormous, however. In some ways, he was still paying it.

"Maybe you need to tell him how you feel," Cara said. "Tell him why you're so angry."

As if that would do any good. If Jacob had cared—if Lucas had cared—they wouldn't have stuck Jack with the responsibility in the first place. They knew why he was angry. They knew why he couldn't forgive and

forget.

"Did you ever do that?" he asked. "Did you ever tell your father how you feel about what he did?"

He could feel her head moving as she shook it. "No. But I've never had the chance. You do, Jack."

He sighed. "It won't change what happened. Will you get those years back that you worked so hard to help your mother rebuild her house? Will you get back the dreams you gave up when your father abandoned your family?"

"No," she said softly. And then he felt something hot and wet hit his skin.

He reached for her, pulled her into the cradle of his arms. "I'm sorry, Cara. I'm sorry," he murmured, kissing away her tears.

And then he made her forget everything but him.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

FOR the next two weeks Cara shoved aside her doubts and fears about the future. She decided to live each day to the fullest. She didn't ask about her passport and Jack didn't offer. She'd managed to get her bank card canceled and a new one issued and mailed to her at the London address, so she would soon have access to her own money. That was a relief, at least.

Since that night when they'd spoken of their families and their pain, they'd not talked about it again. But in every other way, they'd grown closer. Jack took her to the opera, the theater, to dinner and for long drives in the country. He cooked her breakfast, surprised her with flowers and made love to her so thoroughly that she marveled she'd ever lived without him.

He knew what turned her on, knew how to drive her insane and knew what made her scream with pleasure. This need she had for him was an obsession. All he had to do was look at her—and she slipped her clothes from her body and shamelessly seduced him. They made love in the bathtub, against the wall, on the floor, in the car, on his desk and, on one memorable occasion, on the balcony in the middle of the night with all of London spread out below.

She was utterly shameless when it came to loving Jack. Because, yes, she'd finally had to admit to herself that she'd taken the plunge—that she'd fallen head over heels for Jack Wolfe. She should have left that first day, but she'd stayed. And now it was too late, because her heart was irrevocably lost.

She hadn't told him how she felt because she had the feeling they were living in a magic bubble—and if she spoke the words, the bubble would burst and reality would crash down on her once more.

He made love to her like he couldn't live without her, and yet he'd never spoken a word of tender feelings for her. He'd praised her body, praised her skill in bed and in the kitchen when she'd made him a pot of Mama's gumbo, told her she was beautiful and sexy and exciting—but

he'd never said a thing that made her think his heart was engaged.

For Jack, it was all about the physical. Sometimes they spent the entire day in bed, reading, talking and laughing between bouts of lovemaking. On days like that, they never dressed. They slept and ate and lost themselves in each other.

It was glorious and blissful, but it wasn't enough. She wanted *more*. She wanted to know she wasn't alone in this emotional need for him. She wanted his heart. If she knew she had his heart, then everything would be okay.

*Keep telling yourself that, Cara.*

"We've been invited to a cocktail party."

Cara turned at the sound of his voice. Her heart squeezed, like it always did, whenever he entered a room. Or, in this case, the balcony. The bruising under his eye was almost completely gone now. He was without doubt the most incredibly handsome male she'd ever seen—with or without a black eye.

"That sounds nice," she replied, smiling as best she could with her thoughts in turmoil. She searched his face for some hint of feeling, but he was carefully controlled as always.

Would she never break through his barriers? Was it a waste of time to try?

"Rupert is an old business partner of mine," he said, picking up her glass and taking a drink of iced water. "We don't need to stay long."

"Fine," she replied. She'd lost the ability to form sentences as she wrestled with her thoughts.

He set the glass down. "Is something wrong, Cara?"

She shrugged, smiled. "Of course not."

He frowned. "We don't have to go at all, if you don't want."

She sighed, wrapped her arms around herself in a protective gesture. "I don't mind going, Jack."

He looked at her a moment more, then came over and kissed her. "Good. I'll let him know we're coming. I have a few more things to take care of and then I'm yours for the rest of the evening."

If only he really was hers, she thought, when he went back inside. But he wasn't. And she didn't really think he ever would be.

The people in Rupert Blasdell's town house glittered. They literally glittered. Cara had never seen so many jewels in her life—and she'd seen some pretty gorgeous ones on women in the casino. Her own neck was bare. In her ears, she wore the same small silver hoops she'd been wearing when she'd first met Jack. She'd splurged on a silver bangle watch a few weeks back and she'd put that on, as well. It hadn't been expensive, and she felt the lack of its pedigree keenly tonight.

Which wasn't like her at all, really. She'd never cared about designer names before.

Still, she'd thought she looked pretty good in her pale pink silk sheath, sky-high designer shoes and silver jewelry. Until she'd arrived on the steps of this Mayfair home and seen the jewels pouring from the limos, Bentleys and Rolls Royces.

Jack seemed oblivious. She'd gone inside on his arm, holding her head high, but they'd ended up separated after he'd gotten her another glass of champagne. Now she stood in the middle of a packed room and sipped her champagne more out of nervousness than because she was thirsty.

He'd said it was a cocktail party, not a gala event for the richest people in all of London. She wouldn't be surprised if the queen showed up next. Yes, she and Jack had attended a few events together over the past week, but nothing had been this, well, *fancy*. Even the opera, to which he'd worn a tuxedo and she'd donned a long gown, had seemed like a down-home crawfish boil compared to this.

The crowd parted and she caught sight of Jack talking to a man and a woman. She thought they were a couple until the woman put her hand on Jack's arm. Her fingers caressed him possessively, sliding down his forearm. He pressed the back of her hand to his mouth as she leaned in and said something Cara imagined only he could hear. The man didn't bat an eyelash at her behavior, so clearly they weren't together.

Cara squashed the jealousy that flared to life inside her. Jack was with *her*. Not only that, but there were physical limits to what a man could

do.

Even a man as sensual as Jack. And she was confident she kept him far too busy in bed for him to consider straying elsewhere. For now.

And that was the rub, wasn't it? He wanted her now. He was with her *now*. No idea what tomorrow would bring. No idea how much longer it would last. His heart wasn't engaged.

But hers was. Irrevocably. Painfully.

*This* was why she'd always been independent, why she'd been determined not to need a man. This aching in her soul was the reason why. She felt so stupid, as naive as he'd once called her. She'd wanted to believe in happy ever after, but she hadn't wanted to risk her heart for it. How could she have been so blind? Love was all about heartbreak, whether you wanted it to be or not.

It wasn't containable or controllable. You couldn't orchestrate happiness.

She started to move toward him, but then she was cut off by a couple walking into her path. She stepped back, found herself near the champagne fountain. She started to move away again, but she heard Jack's name and stopped.

Two women stood together on the other side of the fountain, sipping champagne and looking in Jack's direction.

"Look at Sherry trying to get his attention again," one woman said. Long pink fingernails wrapped around the slender flute she held. She was tanned, but Cara didn't imagine it came from a salon. No, this woman had probably gotten that golden color in Saint-Tropez. On a yacht, of course.

"It won't do any good," the other replied. "He has a new mistress."

The woman with the pink nails gaped at her companion. "You don't mean that woman he came with tonight, do you? She cannot possibly be Jack Wolfe's new mistress. She has no polish, no glamour! She's as tall as a stick and not half as appealing!"

"Bob and I saw them at the opera. And I have it on good authority she's staying in his apartment. She's been there since his brother's wedding. American." The woman sniffed.

“I simply cannot believe Jack has gone slumming!”

Cara stiffened. She wanted to hear what else they had to say, but they moved away, heads bent together. Then they burst out laughing. Cara felt the heat of a blush—or was it anger?—prickling her skin beneath her dress. She didn’t belong here. She had a sudden urge to go outside, into the night air, and feel the coolness on her skin.

She moved in the opposite direction of the two women, seeking an exit. Surely there was a patio or a veranda—or whatever in the hell they called it around here. She felt like everyone was staring at her. People moved out of her way, cast glances at her, talked behind their hands or their glasses or whispered in each other’s ears.

Talking about *her*. About Jack Wolfe’s *mistress*.

She was no prude. She didn’t care if the whole world knew she was having sex with Jack. But that word—*mistress*—made it sound as if she were paid to have sex with him. It dehumanized her, took away her power in the relationship.

No, the word took away the *relationship*. She and Jack were no longer equals, adults who had a consenting sexual relationship built on attraction and mutual respect for each other. It took away the love she felt for him, cheapened her feelings.

She hated the word, hated the way it made her feel.

“Cara.”

She vaguely heard her name, but she didn’t stop.

“Cara!” This time, a hand closed around her arm and brought her up short.

*Jack*. His brows were drawn low over his eyes as he studied her. “Where were you going?”

She couldn’t take it any longer. Couldn’t stand the idea that he was everything to her and she was nothing but a warm body to him.

“Where’s Sherry?”

His expression grew thunderous. “Where did you hear that name?”

She tossed her hair over her shoulder. Jack took a step closer, crowded her toward a screen set near an archway. Her pulse leaped as his fingers

slid up her bare arm.

"The same place I heard someone say I was your new mistress," she flung at him.

She didn't know how he managed it, but they were soon outside, in a garden, moving away from the brightly lit house and into the darkness. Voices carried on the night air, people laughing and talking and clinking glasses.

Jack steered her between tall boxwoods, along a path, until they came to a row of stone columns. Cara jerked away and turned, leaning against the stone, thankful for the cold against her heated skin.

Jack gave her no quarter. He pressed his body against hers, trapping her between the stone and him. He gripped her hands, threaded his fingers with hers and raised them above her head.

Her breasts strained against the strapless sheath, her nipples aching with the need to be touched.

*No.*

"What's gotten into you?" he asked. "Sherry is someone I dated briefly, nothing more. It's you I need, Cara."

His lips dipped to the hollow of her throat, skimming her heated skin. She tilted her head back, swallowed her pain and anger. Desire blossomed. Always, always the desire.

"I won't be your mistress, Jack."

He leaned back to look down into her face. His silver eyes glittered in the ambient light. The scent of roses surrounded them, cloying and sweet.

"You already are," he said softly.

Pain stabbed into her, made her ache with the hot rush of it. "No," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. She would not let them fall. It was ridiculous—*this* was ridiculous. Semantics, she told herself. It's only semantics.

But it wasn't. Not to her.

"I'm not a *mistress*, Jack."

His lips nuzzled her skin again, trailed kisses along her jaw, nibbled

her earlobe. “Not a mistress, then. Definitely not a mistress.”

Then his hot mouth was on hers, and she was opening beneath him, kissing him with all the passion and hunger he always brought to life inside her.

And yet it felt different this time. Sadder, somehow. As if she’d been stripped of something vital to her understanding of what was between them. Because, as he kissed her in the garden of someone else’s home, with those fancy people inside that she knew looked down on her, she couldn’t summon up the idea that she belonged here with him.

That she belonged with him at all.

Jack let go of her hands, and she couldn’t stop herself from twining them around his neck. Her body arched against him as he splayed a hand over her buttock while the other cupped her breast. He flexed his hips and she felt his hardness pressing into her. Her inner core liquefied with need.

Her body wanted him, her heart wanted him and her head wanted him. But her head insisted she had to make a stand, no matter the consequences.

Jack’s hand spanned her thigh, lifted her leg to wrap it around him as his fingers slid beneath her hem.

“I want to make you come,” he said.

“Jack, I—”

Then he was beneath the lace of her panties, his long fingers finding the sweet center of her pleasure. Cara gasped as sensation rocked through her. She gripped his shoulders, her back arching against the column, her body greedy for the pleasure he could give her.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said. “I love watching you like this. Come for me, Cara.”

She wanted to tell him to stop, but she was incapable of speech. Incapable of pushing him away when she loved him so much. She felt as if she wasn’t in control of her own body, as if Jack owned it instead of her.

He slid a finger inside her, and then another. She was close, so close, her body tightening in upon itself almost painfully.

And then she shattered like a thousand stars splintering apart in the heavens. Jack caught her cries with his mouth, drank them greedily while she clung to him, shuddering from the power of her release. In that single moment when she was still suspended between bliss and reality, she prayed it would never end. That she would never have to acknowledge the truth.

But the moment didn't last, of course. Reality came back to her in degrees. The perfume of the roses, the chirping of crickets, the sound of a car somewhere. Then there was the laughter and the sounds of forks hitting delicate china plates that drifted from the house. Closer still, a woman laughed at something a man said.

As the reality of the night set in, Cara shoved against the broad shoulders of the man she loved. He took away her reason, her sense. He made her want him, no matter the consequences to her soul.

He stepped back, his expression wary.

And she suddenly knew that he'd done this in an effort to prove his mastery over her. He hadn't wanted to pleasure her because he loved her, because he couldn't get enough of her. He'd wanted to divert her from any conversation about them, divert her from asking hard questions or wanting something he wasn't ready—or willing—to give.

Fury and hurt roared through her. He'd made her into exactly what she'd sworn she was not—a woman who clung to a man who didn't love her because she couldn't face the alternative; because a life with him was preferable to a life without him, no matter how constrained that life may be.

*Mistress.*

This had not been about equality; it had been about dominance. And she despised him for it.

Cara straightened her dress. She had no idea what her hair and makeup were like now. No doubt she looked like a woman who'd been having sex in the garden during a house party. Shame filled her to the brim, threatened to bubble over and turn into angry tears.

"I want to leave now," she said.

"We've only just arrived," he replied. As if it made a difference. As if

she cared. "It would be rude to leave so soon."

Cara thrust her chin in the air. "You don't find it rude to leave the party for a tryst in the garden, but it's rude to go home?" She shook her head angrily. "I'm going, Jack. With or without you."

He took another step away, ran a hand through his hair. "Yes, of course. We'll go." And then, because he had to be as sensitive to the currents whipping between them as she was, "I'm sorry, Cara."

"Sorry for what?" she shot back. "For making me into your mistress or for making me care for you? Or sorry for what just happened?"

He was so remote, so untouchable. "I'm sorry for hurting you. You deserve more than this."

"I know I do," she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. The tears of rage and frustration she'd been holding back spilled over. She did deserve more, damn him! She deserved everything he had to give.

But he was too caught up in the past to let himself go. Jack Wolfe refused to let anyone inside. She'd known it and she'd stayed with him, anyway. Her fault for being so damn naive.

As much as it hurt her to realize it, she had to leave him now, before he took what was left of her soul and crushed it to powder.

"*You are* capable of more, Jack," she said. "But apparently I'm not the one who can make you see it."

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THEY took a limo back to his apartment. The ride passed in silence, Cara sitting as far away from him as she could get. If he touched her, she feared her resolve would crumble. In spite of everything, her body still hummed with need. All she required was his touch to set spark to the tinder and she would go up in flame.

When they exited the elevator into his apartment, she found the courage to speak. Though they were alone in this space where she'd been so happy with him, there was room to maneuver. She didn't have to be so near him, didn't have to smell his scent and listen to his breathing. She could stop the need to turn her face into his chest and just ask him to hold her if she could put distance between them.

"Am I ever going to be anything more than a *mistress* to you?" she asked, the words biting as she said them.

He turned to her, hands in pockets. He seemed so remote, so cool. "Still looking for the happy ever after, Cara?"

She trembled with helpless fury. And sadness. Such overwhelming sadness. "I believe it's possible to be happy with one person, yes. I believe it's possible to love and be loved and never need or want anyone else."

His eyes were flat. So flat and empty. "It's a little girl's fantasy," he said, his voice hard. "You should know this as well as I do. Look at our parents, sweetheart. I don't know about yours, but mine defined the word *dysfunctional*. And my father kept on doing it even after my mother was dead."

"Just because our parents didn't get it right doesn't mean we have no chance."

His bark of laughter was not reassuring. "You're so naive, Cara." He closed the distance between them and grabbed her arms. "Why do you have to want more from me? Why can't you just be happy with what we have *right now*?"

Tears pressed against the backs of her eyes. “What do we have, Jack? Tell me what we have, because I want to know.”

His face twisted, but whether from rage or frustration she did not know. And then he crushed his mouth down on hers. It was a hard kiss, a kiss of domination, of fear, of desperation.

Though she didn’t mean to do it, she kissed him back. Cara infused all her hope and heartbreak into that single kiss. Anyone witnessing their kiss would know they were engaged in a battle.

There was nothing tender in this kiss. It was all-out war, a fight for domination on the field of battle.

Somehow, Cara found the strength to break away first. She was breathing hard, her emotions whipping her with bitterness as she put a steady hand on the back of a couch.

Jack stumbled backward a step and ripped his tie loose. His chest rose and fell as rapidly as hers. It gratified her to know he wasn’t unaffected, and yet despair hovered behind the pain she felt.

Would he really let it end this way? Was he so determined not to let anyone in that he would throw away a chance at happiness?

Or maybe, Cara thought, he was right. Maybe he *was* giving all he was capable of giving. Maybe she was being unfair in asking for more. Why couldn’t she be happy with what they had now? Why did she want more?

*Because I deserve it.*

Leaving Jack was the right thing to do. She knew it in her heart, no matter how her heart seemed to be splitting in two at the thought. How could she ever rely on him if she didn’t trust that he felt the way she did? Would she turn out like Mama, loving a man who deceived her and left her brokenhearted, if she were to settle for anything less than the love she deserved?

“I care about you,” he said, breaking into her tormented thoughts. “I want you.”

Cara sucked in a shaky breath. “I’m sorry, Jack, but that’s not good enough for me. Because I do want the fantasy. I want love and marriage, even though it terrifies me, and I want to be someone’s life and soul. I

want to be with a man who can't live without me just as I can't live without him."

His laugh was bitter. "You just said love terrifies you. Because you know it doesn't last, Cara. You have your parents' example, just as I have mine. People leave when you need them most."

She shook her head. A tear slipped down her cheek. "I can't be like you, Jack. As much as it scares me to ever rely on another human being, I want that chance. I want to try, at least. I want to share my life with the man I love, and I want him to share his with me."

His eyes were so full of pain and frustration. She wanted to go to him, wanted to wrap her arms around him and tell him everything would be all right. But she wasn't really sure if it would ever be all right. She watched him, waiting for his response. Waiting for him to acknowledge what she'd just told him.

But if he understood that she'd confessed her love for him, he didn't show it.

"What do you want from me?"

"I think you know."

"This has been good between us, Cara. It doesn't need to end."

She pulled in a deep breath. "It has been good, you're right. But it's not enough. I want more. I don't want to go to parties and have people whisper behind my back that I'm just another mistress. I want people to know we're together, that I've chosen you every bit as much as you've chosen me. I don't want to be just another bought and paid-for companion."

And she was, wasn't she? Ever since she'd accepted his offer to come to London for the wedding, the balance of power had been thrown off. As much as she'd tried to convince herself it was a legitimate job, the truth was far different. Because she'd been fated to fall into bed with him from the moment he'd arrived at her table in Nice.

"You can't listen to gossip, Cara. People will try to hurt you if you let them."

"They wouldn't try if they didn't think it was true."

His jaw was hard, his eyes glittering. He swore vehemently.

"Fine, we'll get married if that's what it takes to make you happy."

Cara's heart skipped a beat. She couldn't imagine what it had cost him to say that. She would have laughed if her heart weren't breaking.

"Oh, Jack. You just don't get it, do you? It's not about marriage." She walked over to him, placed a hand on his chest. Felt the thundering pulse of his heart. "It's about what's in here. I want to know you. I want you to let me inside. And I'm not sure you ever will."

He gripped her hand where it lay against his heart. He looked so serious and so tortured at once.

"You do know me. As well as anyone."

She shook her head sadly. "But for how long, Jack?"

"As long as it lasts," he said.

"I can't do it. I'm sorry. I should have gone sooner, but—"

"What?" he prompted when she didn't continue.

Cara shrugged. "I didn't want to. I fell for you, Jack. And I kept hoping you'd love me, too."

"I care for you." His voice sounded as if it had been scraped over sandpaper.

Poor Jack. It was such a hard admission for him. And it was all she'd ever get.

She took a step back, wrapped her arms around her body. "It's time I went home. I need to find another job, need to move forward with my life...."

He swore. "Go, then," he bit out.

Her eyes filled with tears. "I still need my passport—"

"It's here."

Cara blinked. "You have it? Since when? Why didn't you tell me?"

"It came two days ago."

Two days? He'd had her passport for two days and he'd not told her about it? Was this why? Had he wanted to avoid exactly the conversation they were having now?

"Why didn't you tell me?" she repeated.

He walked over to the kitchen island, retrieved an envelope and tossed it onto the bar near her. “Does it matter? You have it now.”

Cara picked up the envelope and opened it. Her bank card was inside, as well.

“Your clothes and other belongings will arrive soon.”

“You managed to get everything from Bobby?” She’d hoped she’d get her passport back, but she’d never expected she would see anything else she’d taken to Nice with her. Fortunately, it had only been two suitcases full. Nothing that wasn’t replaceable.

Jack laughed, but there was no humor in it. “Believe it or not, Cara, I’m quite frightening when I’m not bound and beaten. Bobby was only too happy to cooperate once the situation was explained to him.”

Cara shivered at the menace in his voice. Having spent the past couple of weeks with him, she could fully believe he would intimidate Bobby under the right circumstances. He was immensely wealthy and extremely powerful. All of which she’d shoved to the back of her mind while she’d been here. She’d cared about him as a person, and though she’d known how wealthy he was, she’d been able to forget it when it was just the two of them together.

A mistake, clearly. If she’d remembered, if she’d forced herself to remember, she’d have known this could never work out between them. She had nothing he needed—not even love.

God, could her heart hurt any worse than it did right this moment? Could she feel any more hopeless?

“Thank you,” she said. It was the only thing she was capable of. Her throat hurt with all she wanted to say. She wouldn’t let it happen, though. It was too late. Useless. He didn’t love her and he never would. He’d only wanted to control her, just as he controlled everything around him. It was his shield, she realized, his attempt at making sure no one could hurt him ever again.

He stood with his hands in his pockets once more. He looked ... angry, helpless, frustrated. All the things she felt, as well.

“You don’t have to go,” he said.

Cara pulled in a deep breath. It was so tempting to stay, anyway, to

cast aside her fears and doubts and go to him. They would be explosive in bed, as always, and she could forget that he didn't love her when they were lost in each other.

She closed her eyes. *No.* She couldn't forget. That was the problem. Everything had changed and she couldn't turn back the clock no matter how much she might wish it.

"I'm afraid I do, Jack," she said. "There's nothing left for me here."

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SHE'D been gone for a week. Jack shoved back from the computer and stared at the sky out the window. Why was the sky blue? It should be steel-gray, the color of sadness and tears and pain, not bright and happy and buoyant.

Unbidden, the memory of their last night together crashed into his mind. He'd been an ass. He'd seen the despair on her face when she'd turned to him in Rupert Blasdell's house—and he'd simply *known*.

Known he was losing her. Known she was about to demand more than he could give her and that the end was fast coming upon them.

He'd been prepared to accept it. He'd expected it, after all. But then, as he'd stood there and looked into her expressive eyes—as he'd seen himself reflected in them, not as he truly *was*, but as she saw him—he'd felt so damn desperate, so torn and aching and he'd wanted her again. He'd wanted to make her forget what she was about to say, forget what she was thinking. He'd wanted to keep seeing himself through her eyes.

Because that Jack was better than he was.

But he'd failed. Instead of making her forget, he'd pushed her farther and faster to the end. He'd taken her love and twisted it against her in an effort to keep her. He'd wanted to dominate her, control her, and he'd acted without thought.

He'd never forget the way she'd looked at him in the garden, when he knew he'd gone too far. She'd been so disillusioned, so angry. He'd done that to her, and he'd hated himself for it in that moment.

Damn her for making him feel so much. Damn her, because he missed her.

Jack stood and went into the kitchen. It was empty, as always. The living room was empty. The balcony. The bedroom.

And suddenly, he didn't want to be alone. He was so damn tired of being alone. Grabbing his keys, he left the apartment and took the elevator down. Then he walked to the pub on the corner and went

inside. It was still early, and though the pub was occupied, it wasn't as lively as it would be later.

He wanted the noise, the press of bodies and yes, even the empty companionship of a woman, if he met one who interested him. A few hours in bed with another woman would surely take his mind off Cara.

Except the thought of taking another woman to bed was strangely abhorrent.

Jack found a corner table and sat down. A waitress came over and he ordered a pint. He closed his eyes and leaned back on the booth seat.

*Cara.*

“Hello, Jack.”

His eyes snapped open. Jacob stood in front of the table, an apparition from the past. The old anger and pain roiled in his belly, but he didn't feel the instinctive need to lash out that he had only a couple of weeks ago. He was too drained from thoughts about Cara to work up more than a mild dislike for his brother.

“What the hell are you doing here, Jacob?”

Jacob's dark hair was tousled as always. His black eyes seemed so bleak that Jack almost softened.

Almost, but not quite. If Jacob was tortured by what he'd done, it was nothing less than he deserved.

“I came to talk to you.”

Jack snorted. “What'd you do, lurk outside my apartment and follow me here? How the mighty have fallen,” he finished sarcastically.

One corner of Jacob's mouth lifted in a mocking grin. “Hardly. I was on my way to your place when I saw you leave. So yes, in that sense I followed you here. Sue me.”

He was on the verge of telling Jacob to get the hell out, but then he thought of Cara. *“What do you think your brother wanted? Maybe if you talked to him ... you could move forward.”*

He *had* moved forward. But his curiosity was piqued for the first time in years. What was Jacob so intent on saying? It wouldn't change anything, but maybe if he listened, he could tell Cara he'd done so.

*Tell Cara?*

“What do you want?” Jack bit out. “I want to apologize,” Jacob said. “For leaving.”

A chill crept over Jack. “It’s a bit late, don’t you think?”

Jacob’s nostrils flared. A sign of annoyance he recognized from their childhood. Jack practically laughed. So Jacob wasn’t here to play the penitent, after all. It was a relief, in a way. It made it easier for Jack to shrug off Jacob’s reappearance in their lives. He didn’t know what Jacob was up to, but he stuck by his belief that his brother wasn’t here to stay. The minute it got difficult, Jacob would run. Just like before.

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” Jacob said. “I know what it took for you to fill my shoes, and I’m sorry you had to do it.”

“Not sorry enough to come back, though.”

Jacob took the seat across from him. Jack would have protested, but his beer arrived. He took a drink and waited for what Jacob would say next. But Jacob looked away, like he was thinking of something, and Jack’s temper frayed.

“As touching as this reunion is for me,” he said, “I’d really like to be alone. So if you have something to say, say it. If not, get out and let me drink in peace.”

Jacob’s dark head swung back around. His black eyes glittered with anger. “You’ve turned into quite a bastard, haven’t you, Jack? Is that why the pretty lady left you?”

Everything inside him went dark and still. The urge to reach across the table and plant a fist in Jacob’s face was strong.

“Leave her out of this,” he growled.

“Why? Is she important to you? Is *anything* important to you, other than your own grief and rage?”

Jack’s gut burned. The beer went down hard and he signaled the waitress for another. “You’re a fine one to talk about what’s important, aren’t you, Jacob? You can’t do important. You’d rather run away from it.”

“My God. You’ve been shutting people out for so long you just don’t

know how to do anything differently.”

A prickle of awareness slipped across his soul. Cara had accused him of shutting people out. Of shutting *her* out. It was safer that way, wasn’t it? If you didn’t let anyone in, they couldn’t hurt you when they left.

The waitress arrived with his beer. “He’s leaving,” Jack said when she asked Jacob what he wanted. She shrugged and went away.

And suddenly Jack was tired of being angry. He just wanted this conversation over with. He wanted to drink until Cara was a blurry memory, and he wanted to be alone.

“Look, whatever you’re here for, whatever you think you’re going to accomplish by renovating Wolfe Manor, I don’t care. It’s been too many years, and there’s too much water under the bridge to go back now.”

“You think I’m leaving again,” Jacob said.

Jack shrugged. “You know, I really don’t want to do this. You don’t have to come here and talk to me and apologize and try to fix anything. It’s too late for that. As soon as you run across something you don’t like, some difficulty, you’ll leave again.”

“I don’t blame you for thinking so, but I’m not leaving, Jack.”

“The others may have fallen for your lies, but you’re wasting your time with me.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Jacob stood. “Maybe we can talk about this some day, but clearly it won’t be today. When you’re ready, I’ll be here.”

Jack looked at his brother, really looked at him for the first time in twenty years. There was anger and sorrow and regret in his eyes—and determination. Maybe that determination would see him through. Maybe he’d find the strength to face whatever demons he’d been running from.

But Jack still couldn’t accept that Jacob wouldn’t pull up stakes when things got tough. He’d spent too many years living in the shadow of Jacob’s mistakes, too many years trying to make it right again.

And yet a part of him wanted to believe. A very tiny part that missed the way they used to be close. It surprised him, that feeling. He hadn’t looked back in years. He made decisions and moved forward because it was a waste of time to dwell on the might-have-beens.

"We'll see," was all he could say.

Jacob nodded. Whether he took the words as an admission that a conversation was possible or a challenge that he would leave again, Jack didn't know. Or care.

After Jacob had gone, Jack toyed with the cold mug of beer but didn't take another drink. His head was tangled up with Jacob, with Cara, with events of the past. He thought of his brothers and sister, of the hell they'd been through. He thought of Cara, with her wide green eyes and her kissable lips—and he missed her like hell.

She'd filled that empty space inside him. She'd made him laugh. She'd made him think.

But not enough, apparently. Because he'd completely missed what she'd been saying to him about love and living and being. She was right that he never let anyone inside. And he suddenly wished he hadn't pushed her away.

Because he realized, as he sat there, that she wasn't just a woman he'd met in a casino in Nice. She wasn't just a woman he'd taken to a wedding, a woman he'd had incredible sex with.

She was *the* woman. The only woman who'd ever gotten to him on more than a superficial level. She was the one who filled his thoughts when he woke, his thoughts when he went to bed at night and his thoughts every moment in between.

She was the only woman he'd ever considered committing to, the only one he'd ever thought of marrying—even if his offer had been sullen and desperate and merely an attempt to keep her from leaving.

It hit him then that he was just like Jacob. That when he'd encountered something he couldn't handle, he'd run away from it. Emotionally, he was a coward. He'd castigated Jacob for leaving, and yet he'd left, too. He'd left the only woman he'd ever loved because he feared what loving her would mean.

He hadn't left her physically, but he'd pushed her away. Because he'd been determined not to fall in love with her, not to need her on an emotional level because needing meant vulnerability.

But the joke was on him because he did need her. Hell, he loved her!

He'd been able to mask the emotional truth behind the physical, to convince himself that's all it was, but the truth was shining down on him now with the force of a thousand brilliant suns.

He couldn't hide from that kind of illumination. He couldn't escape it, even if he wanted to. Jack shoved up from the booth and tossed a couple of notes on the table. He didn't want to escape the truth. He wasn't running away ever again.

New Orleans was far muggier than London had been. Cara hopped from the streetcar and walked the block to work. She'd only been home two weeks, but she'd managed to get a job in the casino. If Bobby had been planning to blacklist her, he must not have gotten around to it yet. She'd fully expected, when she'd applied, that she would never get a call back.

Instead, the manager had called her a few days later and asked when she could start. Tonight was her fifth night, and though it wasn't as exciting as Nice had been, she was happy enough. She was through with adventures for the time being.

Mama, Evie and Remy were fine, and the money she'd brought home had done so much good. She hadn't intended to take a dime of Jack's money after what had happened between them, but when she'd gotten home and seen Remy's sweet face, she'd known it was the right thing to do.

She hadn't even had to ask Jack for it. While she'd been on her way home, he'd deposited over seventy thousand dollars into her account. It was far more than their agreement, and even though the money was welcome, she'd already withdrawn the overpayment plus two thousand dollars for her clothing, and sent it back to him.

She would take what he owed her, for her family's future, but she wouldn't accept a penny more.

Cara paused to look at the palm trees lining the street. They made her think of Nice, and thinking of Nice made her remember that first night she'd met Jack. He'd been so vibrant, so much larger than life. He'd made the other men at the table pale in comparison. She'd recognized her attraction to him, but she hadn't recognized the danger he represented to her heart.

That had taken a little longer.

Cara went into the employee area and put her things away. She had to stop thinking about Jack Wolfe. He was out of her life, and it was better that way.

She stopped in the ladies' bathroom to check her makeup and hair before going onto the floor. The eyes looking back at her in the mirror were so forlorn.

"Stop it," she said to her reflection. "He's gone. He didn't love you and the sooner you stop loving him, the better."

"Amen, girlfriend."

Cara turned as Jeannie LaSalle emerged from one of the stalls.

"I didn't know anyone was here," Cara said.

Jeannie shrugged. "Sorry. But I had to reply." She washed her hands and dug out her lipstick from her purse. "You can't let a man ruin your day, honey. There's always another one around the corner. What you gotta do once you get thrown from the horse is get right back on again."

"I don't think I'm ready for that."

Jeannie pursed her red lips as she patted her bleached blond hair. "The first time is the hardest. You just gotta do it. Trust me, you'll feel much better."

Cara didn't really think so, but once she was at her table, dealing to the players, she got mad that Jack was occupying so many of her thoughts. Did he think of her so frequently?

Cara snorted. He probably didn't think of her at all. He'd probably called Sherry the ex the moment Cara was gone and even now was rolling around in bed with her. Entwined in her arms. Kissing her, thrusting into her body—*Stop*.

"So what are you doing after you get off work tonight?"

Cara jerked her attention to the man sitting to her right. He was holding his cards lazily, his mouth cocked in a confident grin, his blue eyes intense as they stared at her. She swallowed.

"Going home," she said.

He shrugged. "Maybe we could get a drink."

"I don't—" She cleared her throat. Get back on the horse, right? *Oh, God.* "Maybe."

His grin turned megawatt. He wasn't unattractive. In fact, he was downright cute with his tousled sandy-blond hair, high cheekbones and blindingly white teeth.

But her heart ached at the thought of spending time with any man who wasn't Jack.

Damn him. He was *not* going to control her life now that he was no longer in it.

"Are you from around here?" she asked, forcing herself to smile as she did so.

"Texas," he said. "You?"

"Born and raised." She dealt another hand.

"Name's Rand," he said, leaning to the side to check her out. He grinned at her again.

"Cara," she forced out, her heart pounding a million miles an hour. She could do this, she really could. It was just banter. A drink, maybe. Nothing else. Talking to this man didn't mean she was going home with him.

"I've about decided that Louisiana girls are the prettiest," Rand said.

"Aren't you sweet," she managed to say without rolling her eyes.

The hand ended and Cara collected the cards.

"Maybe we can turn that drink into dinner," Rand said.

"Maybe."

"She's not going to dinner with you," a voice growled.

Cara's head snapped up. She blinked at the man standing on the other side of the table. He was tall, menacing—and so damn handsome he broke her heart.

Rand was looking at Jack like he'd just taken away a lollipop. "I think she can decide for herself," Rand said. "Isn't that right, Cara?"

*Oh, God.*

She swallowed. Jack arched an eyebrow as he stared at her, his silver

eyes glittering with heat and anger.

A rush of hot emotion flooded her, followed by a quickening current of doubt. *Why was he here? Was this some kind of joke?*

"I haven't decided what I'm doing later," Cara said, her eyes never leaving Jack's. "I have no commitments."

She emphasized the word *commitments*.

Jack pulled a chair out and sat down. "Tell you what," he said to Rand, his gaze still not leaving hers, "I'll play you for her."

Cara sputtered. Rand grinned. "All right, dude," he said. "But I hope you don't mind losing."

Cara smacked the cards onto the table. "Gentlemen, your stakes are your casino chips. There are no other bets permitted."

Jack shrugged. "Fine. Whoever has the most chips gets to stay at this table. The loser disappears."

"Sounds fair," Rand agreed.

Fury bubbled in her veins, but she dealt the cards. One hand turned into two. Two turned into four. On the fifth hand, Jack laid down his cards with that infuriating blankness she'd come to expect out of him. Rand had no idea what was about to hit him.

"Four of a kind. The gentleman wins," she pronounced.

Rand whistled. Then he put his hand out and shook Jack's. "No hard feelings, buddy. Good luck."

She watched Rand go, stunned at how easily he accepted the loss. He'd be at another table in moments, flirting with another dealer. And he'd probably get that drink, and dinner, and a whole lot more besides.

She felt like an idiot. And she felt hot and angry and achy all at once. The man across the table from her seemed so calm and all she wanted to do was wrap her hands around his neck and choke him.

And then she wanted to kiss the living daylights out of him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, tossing the cards out in rapid succession. There were no other players at her table. She wondered if he'd somehow arranged that, too.

Jack picked up the cards. "Gambling."

"I can see that," she said crisply. "Why are you gambling, and why are you doing it in New Orleans?"

He folded the hand and met her even stare. "Because you're here."

Cara fumed. "Wonderful. Now why don't you go away and leave me alone?"

"I can't."

Her heart was never going to survive this. It thundered out of control. Her skin was so hot that she wished she could unbutton her white shirt and fan herself. The only way she was getting back to normal was if he left. "I want you to go, Jack."

"And I want to talk to you."

"You had your chance. What could you possibly want to say now?"

He looked out over the casino. The bells of the slots were ringing, people were talking and laughing, and the air, though cooled by massive air-conditioning units, felt heavy. She waited helplessly, because she couldn't storm away if she wanted to keep her job. He had her trapped, and no doubt he knew it.

His gaze settled on her again. "I have a lot to say. But I don't want to do it here."

A couple walked over and asked if they could join the game. Cara smiled and did her job, though her emotions were in turmoil. Jack stayed at the table for the next hour. When he finally got up and left, she breathed a sigh of relief. She didn't know why he was here. Two weeks ago, he'd let her walk out as if he didn't care that she was leaving. As if he could replace her in his bed as easily as walking into a store and buying a new shirt.

Which, she'd decided, he probably could.

He didn't return for the rest of her shift. By the time she got off work, she was angry with herself for caring. She'd kept expecting him to return. She'd looked for him, watched the entrances for any sign of him and casually walked through the casino on her breaks.

Jack had disappeared.

Which was no doubt for the best.

It was nearly midnight when she emerged onto the palm-lined street, and the air was still heavy with heat and humidity. Cara shouldered her bag to begin the walk to the streetcar stop.

"You are not seriously thinking of walking alone at night, are you?"

She spun around to find Jack watching her. With all the people mingling on the steps of the casino, she hadn't seen him standing there when she'd exited.

"It's not far," she said.

He came over and took her bag off her shoulder. "I'll walk with you."

"It's not necessary, Jack."

"I want to."

"And you always get what you want, don't you?" she said bitterly.

He shook his head. She was tall, but he was so much taller, and he towered over her, his presence both comforting and disturbing. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and she wanted to run away from him all at once. It hurt so much to see him again. And he was oblivious.

"I don't, actually," he said.

They walked several steps away before she spun around to face him. The street was well lit, but they were alone this far from the entrance. The air was so thick. She could smell the Mississippi flowing by, could hear the relentless roll of it in her soul. Nothing stopped the river, not even the levees. When the Mississippi grew furious, it rolled farther and faster than ever, devastating those in its path.

Jack was like that, she thought. He was unstoppable. And he devastated anyone in his path. Anyone who dared to love him.

"What do you want from me, Jack? Why have you come all this way? I want to know right now, because I'm not walking another step and waiting for you to decide when the time is right to speak. Say it now, or don't say it at all."

He laughed, a surprised bark of laughter. It warmed her from within, though she wouldn't let him know it. She had to be cool and collected, had to be prepared for whatever he unleashed. "Why did you send that money back?" Cara blinked. Her heart seemed to shrivel in her chest.

Because, yes, like a fool, she'd hoped he'd come for more.

"You overpaid me. The deal was for fifty thousand, minus two for the clothes."

"And I paid you fifty thousand."

"No, you paid me nearly eighty." This was inane! Why were they discussing this? "That's the exchange rate, sweetheart." Cara's jaw dropped. And then she turned without a word and strode down the street. He'd come all this way to argue about money? Because he'd paid her in pounds sterling—or maybe in euros; hell if she knew—when she'd meant dollars? It was ridiculous.

He caught her arm and spun her around. Cara tried to jerk away, but he wouldn't let go. Dropping her bag, he pushed her against the wall and trapped her there. Cara's eyes closed. He was so warm, so hard, and she'd missed him so much. His scent wrapped around her. She wanted nothing more than to tilt her head up and beg him to kiss her.

"Let me go," she ground out between clenched teeth. "I can't," he said. "Jack, for God's sake—"

"I love you, Cara."

She went completely still. A tremor flowed from his body to hers. But no, she had to be imagining it.

His head dipped and his lips touched hers. The kiss was light, so light and tentative, and her heart blossomed.

Her hands curled into fists on his chest—and then she pushed him away. "Stop, just stop."

He did, but the tremor was still there. Or maybe she was imagining it. Maybe it was the jarring of traffic on the road—not that anything had passed recently—or maybe the river was roiling against its barriers so hard it shook the city.

"I can't do this," she said, as much to herself as to him. Her heart was still so raw. It had only been two weeks since she'd left London—a little over a month since she'd met him—and she didn't know when she would ever feel normal again.

She was certain he cared about her—he'd told her so back in London—and certain he needed her physically as much as she needed him.

But he did not love her. He couldn't. How could he go from that cold, remote, disconnected man he'd been for most of his life to a man capable of letting her inside his heart in only two weeks?

It was impossible, no matter how much she wanted it to be true.

His hands dropped to his sides. She reached out and ran her palm along his cheek. His beautiful cheek.

"I appreciate that you want to try, Jack. But we both know you aren't capable of doing this. And it's okay. It really is."

Blindly, she reached for her bag and slipped around him. She felt ... bereft. She wanted to turn back to him, wanted what he'd said to be true, but she knew better. How could she ever trust that he wouldn't wake up one day and realize he'd been wrong? That he'd pushed himself into something he wasn't capable of simply because he enjoyed the sex?

She'd seen the reality of that before, and she wasn't prepared to experience it firsthand.

"I had no idea you were a coward, Cara."

His voice cracked across her ears like a whip. She stumbled to a halt and turned around.

He closed the distance between them, though he did not touch her this time. But he was so close, his presence so overwhelming. She wanted to step back, but she did not.

"You're afraid," he said. "You claim that you love me, that you want more from me, but you don't want to give it yourself, do you? You used this to push me away, just as I pushed you away for loving me."

"You're wrong—"

"But the truth is," he continued over top of her, "that we're both afraid and we did everything possible to make the other one leave."

"That's not true—"

He gripped her shoulders. "It is, Cara."

She felt her lip begin to tremble. Because she *was* scared, damn him. What if he really did love her? And what if she gave her heart to him only to have it smashed to bits someday down the road when he'd stopped loving her?

It had been easier to walk away while she still could.

“Listen to me,” he said roughly. “I told you I couldn’t give you more, but I was wrong. I’ve been blaming my brothers for leaving the family, for abandoning their duty while I had to stick around and make everything work. And I learned how to do it. I made it work by committing myself to doing it. But I let my ability to trust, my ability to love, atrophy. If I didn’t feel, then no one could hurt me.”

“Jack ...” He shredded her heart and soul with his confession. He’d suffered so much, was still suffering, and she hated it. But she was afraid, too. What if he let himself feel now, but his feelings changed later? How would she survive it?

“I saw Jacob after you left. And I realized that I was just like him. In trying to be what I needed to be for everyone, I became what I despised. I was there in body, but I’d let my spirit run away a long time ago.”

A tiny tendril of hope began to unfurl inside her. “You talked to him?”

He shrugged. “I could have done better, perhaps, but we spoke briefly.”

“Did it make you feel better at all?”

He blew out a breath. “I didn’t think so at the time. But maybe it did. Because it helped me to see what I’d been doing. With you. With my life.”

Cara bowed her head. His grip on her shoulders eased. “I want to believe you, Jack. But we’re so different. I don’t belong in your world—”

He said a very obscene word. “You belong wherever you want to belong, Cara. I’ve never met anyone like you. You’re stronger and more honorable than anyone I know. Who else would refuse to throw a fifteen-million-euro card game when so much was at stake personally?”

“I think a lot of people would. I don’t think I’m unique in that.”

Jack laughed. “Maybe not unique, but damn rare among the people I know. And I love you for it.”

“Now I know you’re not serious,” she said. “Because if that’s why you love me, what happens when you find out there are a whole lot of people who would do what I did? I could introduce you to quite a few while you’re here—”

He stopped her with his mouth. She vaguely thought she should push him away again, but she really didn't want to. Just one more kiss. One more night. She could do that, right?

"It's not the only reason I love you," he said against her lips. A shiver trickled down her spine. His tongue traced the seam of her mouth, dipped inside to tangle with hers again.

"Oh, God, Cara," he groaned as she arched against him. "I love you for so many reasons. Reasons that have nothing to do with that gorgeously wicked tongue of yours, though I'm damned if I can think when you've been kissing me like this."

"You kissed me," she protested.

"I'd like to kiss more of you," he said. "Much, much more."

Cara put her hand against his chest and took a step back. She needed space to breathe, space to think. He addled her brain. Liquefied her insides. Made her want to do utterly shameless things with him.

Right here, right now.

"I want to know what you expect to happen now that you've told me you love me."

His smile was confident, sure and completely heart-stopping. "What I expect is that you will agree to marry me. As soon as possible. Tonight would be best, but I'll wait until tomorrow—"

"You can't get married that fast anywhere, Jack."

He put a finger over her lips. "Yes, you can, sweet Cara. Las Vegas. But if that's unacceptable, if you must have a big wedding for your family, then I will wait for that day."

He took his finger away and kissed her, a quick peck that had her stretching up to him even as he pulled away and continued, "And to prove how serious I am, how desperately I want to spend the rest of my life with you, I vow not to make love to you until we are married. Whether that day is tomorrow or six months from now, your chastity is assured."

Joy was beginning to bubble up inside her soul. And certainty: the certainty this was absolutely right, that *he* was right for her and that their love would last forever.

"What if I don't want to be chaste?" she asked, slipping her arms around his neck and arching against him.

His body was stone. Hard, hot stone. He closed his eyes and groaned. Then he opened them and speared her with a glare.

"You will be, like it or not, until the day we are married."

Cara smiled, her heart racing ahead and making her almost dizzy. This was really happening. She was really going to do this. She was going to take the biggest chance of her life—and she wasn't scared any longer.

"Did you bring your plane, Jack Wolfe?"

His answering grin stole her breath. "I did indeed."

"Vegas?" she asked.

"Vegas."

# EPILOGUE

THEY were married in Las Vegas before the sun set the next day. And they were making love in a penthouse suite not an hour later. Though it had only been less than two weeks since they'd last been together, this time was like the first time. Jack worshipped her body with his own, bringing her to climax again and again before taking his own pleasure.

Later, when she'd recovered sufficiently, Cara returned the favor, teasing and taunting him to the edge of control before taking him over the peak.

They fell into a deep sleep, and then woke again before sunrise to make love when everything was quiet and still. When it was over, Cara fell asleep again. Her dreams were filled with Jack, and when she woke, he was there with a tray of food and a bouquet of fresh-cut roses.

"Do you think your mother minds very much that she couldn't be here for the wedding?" Jack asked as she smeared jelly on the last slice of toast.

Her heart turned over as she looked at him. He was clad in a pair of silk boxers—and that only so he could answer the door when room service came, she imagined. His hair was tousled, and his easy smile stole her breath away.

"So long as we have the big wedding back home, she doesn't care that we're already married. She couldn't have left Remy, anyway. He wouldn't understand."

"No, I don't suppose he would."

Mama had been so happy for her, and she'd loved Jack on sight. And when they eventually had the church wedding back in New Orleans for friends and family, Mama would be the proudest woman alive.

"What?" Jack said a few moments later, and she knew she'd been staring at him.

"I'm just thinking how much I love you. And how grateful I am for what you're doing for Remy."

The full-time nurse Jack had suggested they hire would make such a difference in Remy's life. In all their lives. Mama wouldn't have to worry so much about her son anymore, and Evie would no longer have to take turns watching Remy. She could pursue her own goals and have the life a twenty-three-year-old should have.

With additional therapy, Remy would be able to cope with changes much better than he did now. It was more than Cara had ever dreamed she would be able to provide.

"Your family is my family now. And your mother's a wonderful woman."

"You're just saying that because she told you to marry me quick before I changed my mind."

He leaned down and kissed her. "You weren't changing your mind."

He went over and opened his briefcase. When he dropped a thick packet on her tray, she frowned.

"What's this?"

Jack's smile was very self-satisfied. Like the proverbial cat that ate the canary, she decided.

"Open it."

Cara ripped open the packet and pulled out a thick sheaf of papers. Her jaw dropped as she realized what they were. "These are shares in Bobby's Nice casino."

"Majority shares, my love. Congratulations."

She blinked up at him. "You bought Bobby's casino for me?"

"Most of it," he said. "But Bobby still has a stake. What fun would it be if you couldn't torture him a bit?"

Cara laughed. "Oh, my God, you mean I'm Bobby Gold's boss?"

"If you'd like the other casinos, I'll get them for you."

She shook her head. "No, one is enough." Ridiculously, her eyes filled with tears. "Thank you."

Jack set the tray aside and pushed her back against the pillows. "Just think, every year on the anniversary of our first meeting, we can close the high-stakes room and play our very own game, just the two of us."

“What did you have in mind?” Cara asked as his lips found the pulse in her throat.

His sinfully sexy laugh vibrated against her neck. “Strip poker, of course.”

## **2000: Jacob becomes a success ...**

As Jacob's genius reputation spread, his designs became greatly sought after. But Jacob refused to be motivated by profit and instead specialised in projects for charity whenever he could. But as the years went by, Jacob became increasingly uncomfortable with the increasing media attention and stepped back, becoming a shadow again. He knew that taking the limelight would force him to face the past he had pushed so determinedly behind him.

But fate had other ideas, and just five years later Jacob's path crosses with one of his beloved siblings—Sebastian Wolfe. Shocked to hear his brother's name after so long away, something begins to stir within Jacob. Sebastian has submitted plans for the design of his new flagship hotel and, intrigued, Jacob ensures the job is accepted.

With just this small touch of intimacy with his brother—however far removed it might be—Jacob's ache of loneliness increases. He cannot bring himself to contact Sebastian directly and so pours his love for his brother into his design. The hotel was heralded as a work of genius, helping Sebastian's fledgling company find its feet.

To this day, Sebastian is unaware of Jacob's input.

## **BEHIND THE SCENES AT WOLFE MANOR ...**

### **Share a secret about Jack or Cara?**

Jack loves Cara's long legs, but when she was growing up she hated being so tall. She was always taller than the boys in her class and it made her feel gawky and ugly. Thankfully, she no longer feels that way!

### **Who is the biggest, baddest Wolfe?**

Jack would say he's the biggest, baddest Wolfe because he never, ever shrank from doing the hard things in life. Jack is tough and willing to go the extra mile.

### **Which Wolfe brother did you most fancy?**

Jack, of course! He was such a brooding, lonely, sexy man. He has a Bond-like quality to him. He's a loner and he's tough as nails. Nothing fazes him. You can absolutely count on him in any crisis.

### **Which is your hero's favourite room in Wolfe Manor?**

Jack isn't very fond of Wolfe Manor, but if he had to pick a room, it would be the kitchen. Because when he was little and feeling lonely or scared, he would creep into the kitchen and hide beneath the big prep table. The cook always knew he was there, however, and she'd lure him out with tasty morsels of food. He felt safe and loved in the warm kitchen with its delicious smells.

### **How did Jack pop the big question?**

You'll need to read the book to find out!

## **LYNN'S WRITING SECRETS ...**

**What do you enjoy most about writing as part of a continuity series; how does it differ from writing a single title?**

I enjoyed working with the other authors! We had an e-mail loop and we talked quite a lot about the details of the stories. When I'm writing a single title, I'm working alone. It was nice to have the support of the other authors.

**What do you think makes a great hero/heroin?**

I think a great hero and/or heroine needs to be passionate about something. Passion is at the heart of every strong character, whether it's a passion for a cause, a worthy goal, or even another person.

**When you are writing, what is a typical day?**

It depends on how close to deadline I am! In the early days, a typical writing day entails getting up early with my husband and going up to my office with a cup of coffee or tea. I work on e-mail and social media for a little while, and then I write. By the time my husband comes home again, I'm done for the day. But as I get close to a deadline, I end up working late into the evening until the book is done.

JANETTE KENNY

**BAD BLOOD**

ILLEGITIMATE TYCOON

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

For as long as JANETTE KENNY can remember, plots and characters have taken up residence in her head. Her parents, both voracious readers, read her the classics when she was a child. That gave birth to a deep love for literature, and allowed her to travel to exotic locales—those found between the covers of books. Janette’s artist mother encouraged her yen to write. As an adolescent she began creating cartoons featuring her dad as the hero, with plots that focused on the misadventures on their family farm, and she stuffed them in the nightly newspaper for him to find. To her frustration, her sketches paled in comparison with her captions.

Her first real writing began with fan fiction, taking favourite TV shows and writing episodes and endings she loved—happily ever after, of course. In her junior year of high school she told her literature teacher she intended to write for a living one day. His advice? Pursue the dream, but don’t quit the day job.

Though she dabbled with articles, she didn’t fully embrace her dream to write novels until years later, when she was a busy cosmetologist making a name for herself in her own salon. That was when she decided to write the type of stories she’d been reading—romances.

Once the writing bug bit, an incurable passion consumed her to create stories and people them. Still, it was seven more years and that many novels before she saw her first historical romance published. Now that she’s also writing contemporary romances for Mills & Boon, she finally knows that a full-time career in writing is closer to reality.

Janette shares her home and free time with a chow/shepherd-mix pup she rescued from the pound, who aspires to be a lap dog. She invites you to visit her website at [www.jankenny.com](http://www.jankenny.com). She loves to hear from readers—e-mail her at [janette@jankenny.com](mailto:janette@jankenny.com).

# CHAPTER ONE

THE crush of beautiful people in this small town on the French Riviera was a treat for the senses, but only one beauty captured Rafael da Souza's attention. She always had from the first moment he had met her in London.

His desire for her had never waned during the five years they'd been married. Nothing would ever change that.

He knew the exact moment strikingly beautiful supermodel Leila Santiago walked into a room, even if he was already prepared. And he was certainly ready for this reunion, body and soul!

Even before they had married, they'd mutually agreed to wait before starting their family. It had been important to both of them that they focus on their careers first. That they enjoyed life and especially each other.

And they had.

Well, almost ...

Rafael's brow pulled as he looked back on what was now the fifth year of their marriage. He could count the times he'd been with Leila over this past year on one hand. Her career and his had taken quantum leaps, bigger than either of them could have imagined, but such success came at a terrible price for it had pulled them both in different directions.

Leila had been involved on two whirlwind global tours, her beautiful face splashed on glossy magazine covers around the world. Rafael's time had volleyed between being technical adviser on one film and developing a cutting-edge mobile phone device that was light-years ahead of the competition.

He and Leila had only managed to find one fleeting weekend to spend together in Aruba following a photo shoot there. Moments alone, undisturbed by their busy careers, had always been precious between them, and although Rafael had tried to talk to Leila about his desire to start a family, the time had gone by too quickly.

"We'll talk about it at the film festival in France," she'd promised in Aruba as she'd planted hot kisses across the taut planes of his belly. And then she'd taken his mind off family and his dream with bold caresses and long leisurely kisses that he'd been starving for.

They'd ended up in bed, arms and legs entwined. Tongues dueling in carnal love. Bodies thrusting together in the most passionate sex he'd ever had with her.

When he was buried deep in her, clutching her to his heart, he felt whole, and they'd both gotten lost in loving the night away. And then their idyll had been over. Rafael had left with the rising sun after Leila had dropped the bombshell that she wouldn't reschedule an upcoming shoot in order to accompany him to his brother Nathaniel's wedding. He'd been too angry and hurt to do more than offer a clipped, "Fine, I'll see you in France."

Now, he certainly intended to do more than *talk* about starting a family. They would have an entire week together in France. While their days would be busy with promotions and such, their nights would be devoted to each other.

His heart warmed at the thought of having children with Leila, of having a home with her that wasn't empty or flat.

He'd never had that in his entire life. His mother had loved him, yes, but she had always held at least two jobs at a time to support them, and she had worked incredibly long hours. He had hardly seen her as a child.

As for a home, their small flat in Wolfestone might have been the place Rafael had been raised, but the memories there were painful, suffocating. Rafael had felt only freedom when he had left its cloying grasp. He had moved to a modern apartment in London and then, when he had married Leila, they had bought a luxurious penthouse in Rio, far away from the darkness of Rafael's past.

But though this was his and Leila's residence, it still lacked that life and energy of a loving family that he had felt missing for so long.

Rafael wanted a real *casa* with land where his children could play and make good memories to last a lifetime. A place they could call home, a place they'd feel safe. *Loved*. Everything his aristocratic father had denied him.

Leila knew how much this meant to him and she had shared his dream of having a family.

And, if they were very lucky, they'd realize that dream soon.

Now, as he saw Leila approach and close the distance separating them, his gaze hungrily licked over her like flames on dry tinder, consuming, scorching. It was always like this, the gripping desire that engulfed him whenever they were reunited.

As for his heart.

His heart warmed with emotions that seemed too huge to imagine. He was afraid to look away, to blink, for fear he'd awaken to discover that what he had with her had just been a fantasy.

She was absolutely gorgeous.

And she was his wife. *His*.

Under the rapid-fire flash of cameras, she strode down La Croisette with her million-dollar smile in place. He knew she wasn't focused on any one person or thing, that her stunning smile was for her legion of adoring fans.

She knew how to make love to the camera, and the lens loved her. And why wouldn't it?

She was a fantasy brought to life. The woman every man dreamed of making love to, the woman every woman wished she could emulate.

Perfection. *Seductive* perfection.

Her mass of golden hair was caught up in a tumble of messy curls that framed a face that had graced every major magazine since she was thirteen. But that gamine child that had launched her career was gone, replaced by a sensual woman who'd worked hard to make a perfectly toned body seem more desirable than voluptuous curves.

Her crimson dress caressed her upthrust breasts and gentle bow of her hips in the warm salt-tinged breeze. He knew every move she made was carefully orchestrated, right down to the metered strides of her long lithe legs supported by killer stilettos. Strong flawless legs that would wrap around his naked flanks in the throes of passion.

Their March rendezvous had reminded him just how much he'd

missed her this past hectic year. How he'd taken for granted the exact feel of her silken skin against his fingers and mouth, her erotic scent that clung to him and held tight, her sultry passion that drove him wild in bed and out.

He caught the slight hesitancy in her eyes before she stopped before him, her palms firm on his chest in a familiar way that had been captured on film a thousand times. A touch that left him trembling inside, remembering all that was good between them. All the passion, the pure joy, the bliss of shutting out the world and lying wrapped in each other's arms.

Her gaze made a slow sweep up to his face, and he felt his own lips pulling into a smile. His hands settled on her trim waist, firm and clearly possessive. Her soft lips beckoned him and he met her halfway for their customary kiss of greeting, but the moment was gone before he could savor it.

Her scent stayed with him though, a provocative perfume that teased the senses. That promised much more. This would be the new fragrance she was here to promote in conjunction with the release of the film of the same name, *Bare Souls*.

That certainly did not describe them!

For as close as they were with each other's bodies, they had both kept their own demons securely locked away since the day they'd met. He'd never told her how being William Wolfe's unwanted bastard had scarred him. She'd never divulged everything pertaining to the near disastrous bout of anorexia she'd suffered at a young age. But he suspected she was still haunted by that episode in her life, and he wondered now if she'd truly fully recovered from the disease.

Those big hazel eyes that had captured the heart of the world at thirteen locked on his and his concerns fled. For a heartbeat it was difficult to breathe. Impossible to think.

Then in a blink the look was gone, replaced with the seductive glint of a woman. The look that had men around the globe drooling after her.

He certainly was not immune! His body responded to the carnal energy arcing between them, and he reached out and cupped her jaw, a simple caress that drew whispers from the crowds.

But it was as if everyone else on the planet faded away until it was just them.

This reaction to each other, this look that they shared and which they had exploited, kept the paparazzi from hounding them with too many questions—specifically about the stability of their marriage this past year.

“How was Nathaniel’s wedding?” she asked.

“Everyone asked about you,” he said, still hurt that she’d not altered her plans for him. “I called you—”

“I know,” she said, her palms shifting against his chest in a small urgent circle, her eyes searching deep into his as if begging him to understand. “I *couldn’t* get away.”

He nodded, accepting that apology because now wasn’t the place to engage in a deeper conversation. But there was a strained note in her voice that had him wondering if she were having difficulties with her career, problems he didn’t know about.

If his brothers and sister had thought it odd that the most celebrated model of the decade couldn’t demand a day off to attend a family wedding, none of them had mentioned it to him. But then his family was already highly dysfunctional.

They all knew not to expect too much—they were all wary of loving too deeply. And yet love had happened for Rafael. A deep, passionate love that scared him, for he knew that such emotions were fragile. Priceless.

Being with Leila again, knowing she’d be his for an entire week during the film festival, made his skin tighten with anticipation. His heart pounded far harder. Desire. Lust.

Yet, those base emotions were wrapped up in much deeper emotion, like a tight wad that made his blood surge. They had been building toward a far stronger marriage before this past chaotic year.

He fully intended to pick up where they’d left off.

“Our suite is ready,” he said.

“Good. I’m eager to sit down someplace quiet for a while.”

He cut her a quick look as he took her arm. A sliver of uncertainty crossed her features again. There was paleness beneath her makeup as well. Had she been ill?

They walked together into the hotel, and he was grateful that velvet ropes kept the fans and paparazzi at bay. He'd never grown comfortable being in the spotlight—spawned from his youth of being pointed out as the Wolfe bastard. Now was no different.

Though he was no longer the subject of ridicule, he still hated the attention that crashed into his private life.

He took Leila's arm and escorted her across the elegant lobby, thankful that they met nobody along the way inclined to ask for an autograph or a quick chat. They were left alone still as they took the elevator to their floor, but Rafael didn't draw a decent breath until he shepherded his wife into their suite and closed off the world behind them. He'd asked for and received a magnificent view of the sea, complete with a private balcony.

"It's breathtaking," Leila noted, pulling free of him and crossing to the bank of windows, and Rafael thought how the view paled in comparison to her beauty. "When did you arrive?"

"Yesterday. I came straight from London." She faced him then, and backlit with the sun it made her look more fragile and pale. "Were you able to spend much time with your family?"

"I flew in the day of the wedding and left the next morning," he said, then shrugged when her smooth brow pulled into a frown. "Like you, my schedule was incredibly tight."

She nodded at that and looked away. How ironic that he'd kept bits of his past secret from her, yet he disliked it when the tables were turned. He simply saw no sense in divulging how despicable his father had been to him, how he'd suffered emotionally while his siblings had endured that plus physical abuse.

Some things were better left buried. He certainly couldn't see any reason to exhume the dark secrets of his past to his wife.

A good part of his success in business had hinged on his gut feeling to strike deals at opportune moments. This was no different.

“We should coordinate our schedules,” he said, smoothly steering the conversation away from his family and their murky past. “My publicist stressed the importance of us showing support for each other and our projects during the festival, though I can’t imagine not being there for you.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll get my mobile.” Was there a quaver of distress in her voice?

He glanced back only to find her riffling through a brand-new designer purse, seeming simply distracted. She was unquestionably the most beautiful woman he’d ever known, but her life was as screwed up as his.

They had been two rising stars who’d collided in a glitter of passion. She had reached the pinnacle of a career that now dictated the way she must live.

Leila was a millionaire in her own right—her name a brand that was copied. Emulated. She had endorsements. Fame. A demanding life far apart from his own.

This past year Rafael had moved from the realm of millionaire to billionaire, and the fasttrack world of computer technology meant he always had to stay one step ahead of the competition. He’d honed his rapier-edged instincts in fighting his way to the top of his world, and now he wondered if the changes he saw in Leila had been there all along. If he’d simply been too comfortable with his marriage to recognize his wife wasn’t her usual bubbly self.

She certainly seemed more sure of herself than in the past, yet there was a vulnerability about her that hummed about the edge of her success like a nervous hummingbird seeking nectar. There was something wrong that he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

They’d both achieved their goals, but at what price to their personal life? Was their marriage still as strong as it once had been?

He’d find out this week that they’d be together; he’d already planned to spend the bulk of his time in his wife’s company. He’d missed her more than he could possibly express, for tender words had never been easy for him to grasp, much less admit.

It had always been easier to show her how much he loved her with

gifts. Like his latest smartphone.

Rafael ran his thumb over the sleek new mobile that was the cutting edge of technology. This was his baby. The wireless device of the future that was featured in the movie *Bastion 9*, which would premiere here tonight.

But while the phones he'd donated for the elite festival gift bags were silver on black, like the ones that would go on sale tomorrow around the world, this device had a one-of-a-kind liquid magenta shell enhanced with thin black swirls.

Her color.

His mobile was the companion to hers, a reverse of the colors. His and hers phones. A design he'd created as the logo for her own personal line that she'd yet to launch.

"I found it," she said, holding her old mobile up and squinting at the screen.

He held his palm out for it. "It'll take me a moment to exchange the chip into the new one."

Excitement lit her eyes as she crossed to him. "Is that the new device that's all the buzz?"

He nodded.

"I didn't know they came in color."

"They don't, or at least not for a year and even then never with this design."

She reached out and laid her hand on his, stilling him. "Is this design your creation as well?"

"It is," he said, his body surging to life once more by her touch, by the wonder glowing in her eyes.

Her brow furrowed the slightest bit as she studied the intricate swirls. He knew the exact moment she understood the design was much more than lines and curlicues, when she realized this was cursive writing in Portuguese.

"My only love," she read, then pressed two fingers to her lips. "It's perfect."

He'd thought so too. Had believed she was the only woman he'd ever love from the first moment he'd met Leila five years ago.

Leila had been well into making a stunning comeback in the modeling world, but she'd still been a painfully thin waif with soulful eyes.

And it had been obvious she was very much under her dominating mother's control. He'd clashed with the "stage mother" immediately, for at the time he was just a developer in a huge software company in London. A nobody, save the unwanted notoriety of being William Wolfe's bastard, a fact he desperately tried to hide for the shame that it brought on his mother.

Leila Santiago had been the star, hired as the hot model to tout the cutting-edge personal music player he'd developed that recorded and held hundreds of songs.

He'd stood in the shadows of the set watching her, just as he'd watched his siblings play together from afar all those years ago. The longer he'd observed Leila, the more he realized she was dancing to the whims of her domineering mother.

Then as now, Leila's gorgeous eyes had met his. For a moment he'd seen the pain and uncertainty choking her. Seen the loneliness in her that mirrored his own.

That one look had called to something buried deep inside him. *Bare Souls*.

She, the lost waif in need of a hero, and he, the unwanted boy desperately needing to find the one person who'd make him feel whole. Make him feel worthy.

Everyone on the set had planned to hit the pubs after the shoot and Rafael had looked forward to getting to know Leila better, but her mother had made it clear that Leila needed to work out instead.

Though Leila seemed at her wit's end, she didn't object to her mother's dictates, as if she were used to acquiescing to the woman.

That had been all the incentive he'd needed to approach the alluring model. That and a good dose of arrogant Brazilian pride!

"Join me for a drink?" he'd asked Leila once he'd gotten her alone.

She'd smiled, though it'd been a nervous one. "My mother has already

made plans for a trainer to work with me tonight.”

He cast her plump mother a scathing glance, for if anyone needed a personal trainer it was her. “Why don’t you let her use the workout and you take the night off?”

“With you?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t even know you,” she’d protested, though it’d been a weak one that had encouraged him even more.

He’d introduced himself, and surely made more of his lowly title of software developer than was warranted. But even then he’d had grander dreams. Even then he’d secretly been working on something new and groundbreaking in the computer world.

He’d touched Leila, no more than a caress of her arm. But a jolt of awareness had rocked him to his soul. The sexual attraction jarred him, but not nearly as much as the odd awareness that they were kindred souls.

“Come with me, Leila,” he’d said.

She’d cast one look at her mother and bit her lip, but she’d gone with him. For one glorious night and day they’d played like young lovers on holiday.

He’d learned that just one year before she’d collapsed on the runway, and had spent the ensuing long months that followed in a special clinic recovering from the disastrous effects of anorexia. That she’d let her mother take charge of her life, and had yet to build up the confidence again to break free from her.

That he’d been right all along and she was as lonely as he.

That first impulsive date had sparked the whirlwind romance that had rocked the modeling world and set her mother at instant odds against him. He’d fallen under Leila’s spell—fallen in love, or as in love as he could be at that strained time in his life.

He’d only known that he’d wanted Leila for more than an affair. He wanted her as his wife. Wanted a family with her.

He proposed marriage, and Leila had eagerly said yes. But she’d made

it clear she wasn't ready to be a parent yet.

Neither was he. They'd agreed that family was something they'd start in a few years, after they'd both made their marks. After they'd exhausted the freedom of young love.

He'd known then that one day he'd have it all. A home. A gorgeous wife he loved. And children laughing and playing to chase away the lonely memories of his own childhood. To give him the family he'd craved, yet had been denied for the most part.

But their wait had stretched from three years into four without Leila and him having a real home. Without Leila being part of his life for one entire year.

No more! They'd both waited too long to see their dreams realized.

He slipped the memory card in Leila's new device and tested it.

"I've taken the liberty to add a few pertinent applications but you'll have to personalize it yourself," he said, and handed her the mobile.

Her fingers brushed his and she jolted, an external reaction to the same bolt of desire that had shot through him earlier, that still simmered deep inside him.

"It looks complicated," she said. "You'll have to show me how to use it."

"We have time to do that later." Once he'd doused his need to be with her. Once he'd wrestled his control back in place and he could simply enjoy this reunion with her.

He crossed to the tray that had been delivered to their suite and poured an iced coffee laced with *cachaça*. "Would you like a drink?"

"Water with a twist of lime," she said. "I had orange juice at the airport."

He grimaced at the near apology in that confession. She rarely drank anything other than enhanced water which added zero calories. He could count on one hand the times he'd seen her eat a full meal and he'd certainly never seen her binge on anything.

But then he was careful too, moderate. He didn't wish to follow in his own father's alcoholic footsteps.

He turned to offer her the drink and just caught sight of her rushing into the master bedroom. The closing of the en suite bathroom door echoed softly in the suite.

Not so for the sound of her becoming violently ill. If it were anyone else, he'd pass it off as a malady.

But Leila's troubled past gave him pause.

The unsettling possibility she'd suffered a relapse plagued him as he carried his garment bag and suitcase into the bedroom.

An economy of quick strides carried him into the facility moments after the toilet flushed. She was at the sink rinsing out her mouth, her face paler than before.

"Leila, what's wrong?" he asked.

She shook her head, her eyes bleak. "I've been ill. Some stomach virus that refuses to leave."

"Have you seen a doctor for this?"

"Yes, one who was on staff at the shoot gave me an antibiotic, but he did warn me that if this were a viral infection it would do no good," she said. "I'll be fine."

He gave her a more critical look, wanting to believe her. Yet they'd been apart too much this year, and she'd clearly lost weight.

And though he didn't want to admit it, there was a nervousness about her that hadn't been there before. A withdrawal, almost as if she were hiding something from him.

"Have you tried to lose weight quickly?"

Leila swung around to face Rafael. "No! I'm not a victim of bulimia or anorexia anymore. I simply have a stomach bug. But if you think I'm lying, Rafael, you are more than welcome to ask my agent or my doctor about my health!"

*Inferno!* He had not expected her to react with such anger, but then he supposed he deserved it for doubting her.

"Forgive me for insinuating you had suffered a relapse," he said, reaching for her, but she turned from him and left the bathroom. Left him standing there feeling like a fool for thinking the worst of her. "I

worry, Leila.”

She stopped short, shoulders slumping. “I know you do.” She brushed a hand through her hair in a show of impatience. “I worry about you as well, but this year—”

Her hand fluttered in the air, and he reached out and snagged it this time. Pulled her close to his heart where she belonged and was glad she didn’t resist.

“Things will change now,” he said, and gained a shaky nod from her in answer.

This past year had been difficult. Their brief weekend in Aruba sandwiched between her last shoot and his trip to L.A. to consult on the film. This time when they had parted, he’d resented her career more than ever, for it had pulled her from him. Her stellar status had taken precedence over their marriage. Over their plans to start a family.

He’d come close to demanding she take a hiatus from her work. That she embrace her role as his wife again with the same passion as she did her career.

But just realizing that was exactly how his tyrannical father would have acted stopped him.

His marriage to Leila was secure. She loved him and he loved her. They’d just let the outside world infringe too much on their dream.

No more.

Soon he’d plant his seed in her. They’d have their marriage back on track. They’d have a child born of love.

“Dare I ask what brought on your arrogant smile,” she said.

His gaze made a slow glide over her face, her breasts, her hips, before returning to her expressive eyes. “I was thinking of how beautiful you’d look pregnant.”

# CHAPTER TWO

THE thought of being with child pelted Leila like a cold icy rain. She couldn't go through that again, shouldn't attempt it blithely.

Yet like Rafael she longed for a child. A baby to love, to cradle to her bosom. Her and Rafael's child, born of love.

But she'd tried and failed.

Last year Leila had discovered she had been pregnant. But in September, when she had been just twelve weeks along, nature had taken a horribly wrong turn.

Leila had lost her baby. She'd lost a lot of blood. Lost weight. Lost heart over the tragedy.

Her mind ached from the doctor's warning following her miscarriage. Though she was well now, there would always be that chance that due to her anorexia, and the damage it may have wreaked on her body, she could fail to carry a child to term again.

The very last thing Leila wanted was to go through the pain of losing a baby again. She was afraid to try and fail, even though she still wanted to give Rafael the family he craved. Her own arms and heart ached to hold the child she'd lost. Rafael's baby.

But despite her deep yearning for a family, her fear of suffering another miscarriage had grown into paralyzing terror. More so her fear had been given strength when a fellow model, who'd also struggled with anorexia early in her career, had died in childbirth. A woman Leila had admired.

Yet as her friend's body had changed during her pregnancy, the young woman had relapsed into her old destructive habits. Leila had watched as her friend had struggled to regain control of her anorexia, but in the end the disease won, taking her friend's and the baby's lives.

That's when Leila's nightmares had really begun. Now, she wasn't able to think beyond the tragedy her friend had suffered. She had lost confidence that she'd be stronger than the disease.

Her inner turmoil turned into a living breathing hell, for though she still longed to have Rafael's child grow inside her, she couldn't—wouldn't—commit to having a child only to lose it. She suffered this devastation already and it had changed her. But how would Rafael, who wanted a family so desperately, bear it?

Guilt over keeping her terror and her past pregnancy from Rafael roiled in her until her fear became a dragon she didn't know how to slay.

How would he react when he learned she'd kept so much from him?

Not well, she feared.

At the time of her miscarriage he'd been away on some excursion in Brazil, and she knew she couldn't tell him such news over the phone. She could have told him when he returned, in between a break in her hectic schedule, but she'd been so devastated still, so terribly shocked, that she'd been unable to find the words. All too soon too much time had passed. Now?

Leila had no idea how to even begin to tell her husband what had happened! And the timing was once again all wrong.

Leila pushed past his finely honed form and hurried into her bedroom. She simply couldn't deal with it right now, not when her emotions were strained from the flight. Not when she wanted time alone with Rafael first before she voiced the truth that she knew could drive him from her.

She hated that. Hated the distancing between them this past year. But she feared getting close to him again as well. Feared losing control of her body.

And yet that's what her fear was doing now—taking control over her life, her plans, and destroying her dreams.

But how could she risk a repeat of the hell she'd gone through last year? She didn't know, and the uncertainty and fear were eating her alive.

She looked around the room wildly, desperate to regain control of her rioting emotions. Her gaze latched on to the rolling wardrobe clothes rack.

"Is something wrong, *querida*?" Rafael asked, his deep voice freezing her in place for a heartbeat.

*Tell him. Blurt it all out!*

She ached to turn around and run her hands over his strong muscular chest. Wrap her arms around him and hold him tight. Beg him to forgive her for holding the truth from him.

Leila desperately wanted to hold on to the only man she'd ever loved and savor the moment, for that's all they'd had in a year. Moments.

She'd wanted so much more. She wanted the early days of her marriage back. Wanted the tragedy of her miscarriage forgotten. Wanted to believe that she could bear his child without the mind-numbing fear, that she could be stronger than the disease that had nearly killed her as a teenager. That had killed her friend.

But she couldn't. Not now. Not before the premiere of the film he'd devoted so much to. Not when the truth could drive an even deeper wedge between them.

"I have to make sure everything I need is here."

She moved to the rack, desperately pushing those dark thoughts from her mind.

"Then I will leave you to your unpacking and make a few calls. The premier is at eight, two hours from now."

"I'll have just enough time to get ready."

Without his interference. Without him being so close she could pull him to her, hold him, kiss him.

She'd never intended to keep her miscarriage a secret from him, but her fears had sunk deep roots in her. Her only escape had been her career. It had become her anchor with a new twist. She'd developed a compulsive ritual to oversee her wardrobe, and to coordinate each shoot with the photographer beforehand.

She'd gotten to the point now where she would only work with a handful of noted photographers because they understood her process and brought the best out in her.

But her acclaimed status and demands had come at a price as well, for a few other, less experienced photographers had labeled her a control freak.

She frowned at that fault now, knowing on some level it was true. She tore into the array of garments her agency had provided and nearly an hour passed as she lost herself in the preparations, gaining control of her life and her fear again.

It wasn't easy being at the top of her game. There was no time to sit back on her laurels and savor her position at the top, for there was always a new breed of models eager to knock her off her pedestal.

Time would do that all on its own, of course, as the opportunity for aging models was few and far between. And a model close to thirty was already considered beyond her peak years.

Right now it was crucial that Leila remained focused on her career, and she desperately needed this last campaign to excel. The endowment she would establish off this shoot alone would provide more funding for her clinic for girls battling anorexia and bulimia. So far it had been running on faith and charity. She'd depleted her own funds to shore up their own, but she knew she couldn't keep doing that, knew she needed to do more.

So it was imperative that she let nothing interfere with the networking she must do here at the film festival to secure her clinic. But try as she might she couldn't stop thinking about Rafael.

She couldn't wait to be alone with him, to make love with him, for in his arms the world and its worries faded away.

Leila strode to the closet to hang her personal wardrobe and threw open the doors. And blinked not once but twice. It'd been too long since her things had been next to his. Too long since they'd shared more than a night or two together.

Several masculine suits hung on the rod. Men's fine leather shoes rested on the closet floor in front of a large wheeled case.

A smile curved her lips as she reached out to stroke the woolen sleeve on a charcoal designer suit jacket. When they'd met, he'd barely been able to afford an off-the-rack suit. Now he wore only ones custom-made to fit his long legs, trim hips and broad shoulders.

"Do they meet with your approval?" he asked, his deep rich voice vibrating along her nerves in a delicious hum.

She turned to him with a smile and felt her heart swell with love. With pride, for he'd come from nothing and worked hard to become one of the wealthiest men in the world.

"Yes, I'm impressed by the quality of the cloth and the cut. But then you won me over years ago wearing just faded jeans and a stark-white jersey that hugged your chest—" she paused, striding to him on legs that oddly trembled "—as I long to do now."

A deep growl of pleasure rumbled from his chest as she glided her palms over his honed muscles. "This past year that we've spent apart has nearly killed me."

"Me too," she said, her guilt once more threatening to steal the joy she felt at being in his arms.

Rafael was such a handsome man. So strong inside. So giving to her. So good.

Yet the core of steel within him could be unbendable as well. He was a proud man, slow to trust. And she'd betrayed that bond. Would he be forgiving when she confessed her lie?

"Why the sad look, *querida*?"

She took a breath and debated telling him now. Blurting it out in a rush, then suffering his anger in silence throughout tonight's premiere. No, it would ruin this night for him and he had worked so hard to get to this point in his career.

That smacked of being selfish, and of all her faults, she wasn't that. Nothing could be gained from telling him now.

She'd waited this long to purge her soul. She could wait another day or so until the time was right. Until she'd enjoyed the pleasure of being Rafael's wife and lover without any arguments or hurt feelings between them.

"I was just thinking how nice this would be if we didn't have so many obligations this week," she said.

He shrugged. "Say the word and we'll leave here, go somewhere more private. Just us two."

"So tempting, but you know I can't do that. *We* can't do that."

"When did our careers become more important than our marriage?" he asked.

"It never has been," she protested.

One dark brow arched up. "Hasn't it? In the past year we've only managed to be together once, and that was far too brief."

"I know, but we are both at crucial points in our careers," she said. "To have shirked our responsibilities and commitments would have had adverse effects we might never have recovered from."

Especially for her as a model. Right now it was crucial she kept her name out there. That she stayed on top, for that brought in the big money that enabled her to help others. It gave her purpose and pride to have succeeded so well at something. It gave her control.

But she admitted with a heavy heart that she'd also avoided any kind of close encounter with Rafael after the miscarriage. It had been wrong of her, but she had needed to protect herself. Ah, maybe she was selfish.

What else could explain why she'd done that to the one person she trusted implicitly? Fear, that's what. Losing their baby had been the first tragedy she'd suffered since her recovery from anorexia and it had almost destroyed her.

She had learned a painful lesson. That while she adored Rafael, deep inside was that fear of losing herself if she ever totally put her life in another person's hands again. She had to guard herself closely, for it would be easy to let one compulsion morph into another. For her to slip back to the destructive ways of her teen years.

"I think there is more bothering you than weariness," Rafael said, snapping her attention wholly back to him again.

And my God, but this man knew how to probe one's soul with one long scorching look.

She lifted her gaze just enough to break the magnetic pull that was drawing her closer to him. "I've been on a grueling pace for the past six months. Rest is a luxury I haven't afforded myself."

His dark eyes narrowed, assessing, as if gauging whether to believe her. "Then I insist you enjoy a good night's sleep tonight."

As if she'd be able to do that knowing she had only to reach over to

touch him! To slip her arms around that magnificent specimen of masculinity and claim him as her own. That all she had to whisper was *I want you* and they'd both be lost in a passion so deep and so consuming that nothing or no one else would matter.

“You won’t get any argument from me,” she said, but doubted sleep would come easily for either of them.

Showered, coiffed and makeup carefully applied, Leila slipped into the vibrant blue designer gown that had been provided for tonight’s premiere of *Bare Souls*. The skirt was sleek and straight with a side slit to allow ease in walking.

The strapless bodice hugged her middle and flared upward like flower petals to cover her breasts. She had just the right amount of faux tan to complement her natural golden coloring and make her skin glow with this electric shade of blue.

Fiery blue diamond studs sparkled at her ears and a matching pendant with a larger diamond would soon hang from a fine golden chain around her neck. She’d slipped a companion dinner ring on her right hand—all had been birthday gifts from Rafael that had stunned and surprised her.

But she still wore her simple wedding set on her left hand, and the tiny diamond solitaire and smaller stones in the wedding band winked back at her as if in approval. For years Rafael had insisted on replacing this set with a more lavish one, but she’d told him flat out she didn’t want to exchange these for new opulent ones.

These rings meant the world to her for they were the first pieces of jewelry Rafael had given her. These were the rings he’d slipped on her finger—the solitaire when he’d gotten down on one knee and proposed, and the delicate wedding ring when they’d stood before the priest and exchanged their vows.

She hadn’t known it was inscribed with *meu coração* until later when her mother had asked to see them up close and she’d reluctantly demurred removing it, the action seeming wrong to her newlywed status. Her pompous mother had scoffed at both the cheap set and the inscription.

But Leila’s heart had melted to know he’d done this, for while Rafael

was passionate, he wasn't prone to flowery words. She could still count the times he'd told her he loved her.

It was enough, for she believed they'd had a strong marriage based on love. They'd had ordinary dreams of a home and family.

Ah, but neither of their lives had been average. She'd attained great heights with her career again. And with new demands and opportunities came huge rewards.

As for Rafael ...

The boy born outside the privilege denied him reached success that trumped her own. That made her achievements pale in comparison.

In short, Rafael was a force to be reckoned with in the business world. More so now.

He'd changed the past year. He now had a ruthless edge that had only been hinted at before. An edge to him that she wasn't quite sure how to deal with.

Could they regain what they'd once had? Did he even want the same things anymore? Would he still want her when he learned what had happened?

For the first time in her marriage, Leila felt suddenly unsure of her place in Rafael's life. If he didn't want her anymore, if he tossed her aside, she didn't know if she could find the strength to go on. And yet she'd already suffered with worse. Hadn't she?

One sharp rap came at the door. She whirled to face it and froze, still caught up in the old pain and guilt, caught in that very human urge of fight or flight. Before she could move beyond the fear that was crippling her, the door swung open.

Rafael filled the opening, resplendent in black tie, his tux fitting his broad shoulders, muscled torso and long strong legs to perfection. He was, in essence, the embodiment of sexual charm and masculine charisma.

If she'd been startled when she'd stepped from her shower earlier to find him waiting to do the same, she was thunderstruck now. *He could have joined her under the warm spray and she wouldn't have protested!* God knew he had done the same many times before.

So why hadn't he done so this time? Why hadn't he pulled her back into the enclosure and made love with her?

Leila had gripped the counter to steady herself as a wave of hot desire had washed over her. He was simply beautiful. Well toned. Tanned. And aroused.

There'd been no mistaking that part of him.

Yet moments later as he'd stepped from the shower gloriously naked and padded into the bedroom, he'd not spared her a glance. She'd wanted to follow. Wanted to run her hands over his body, wanted to kiss him, taste all of him. She'd wanted to ease his need and hers as well, for in his arms she felt whole. Safe. Loved.

"God help us both," she'd muttered to herself, and had set to work finishing her hair and makeup. By the time she'd entered the bedroom, he'd been gone.

But now he was back. Tall. Solemn. Sexy as hell.

His dark gaze licked over her, slowly, exacting, a visual caress that left her trembling with need again. Finally, those dark magnetic eyes lifted to hers.

She saw appreciation there and some other emotion that defied explanation. It was a look she'd never seen before, there and gone in a blink. Yet it fed her earlier unease just the same, allowed it to gain a foothold. To grow into another obstacle she didn't need or want.

"We need to leave in five minutes," he said, his voice calm, steady, when her emotions felt as if they were bouncing off the walls.

She swallowed the sudden dryness in her throat and nodded, realizing she still held the blue diamond pendant in her hand. "I'm ready except for my shoes and this stubborn necklace. I can't manage the clasp."

His brows tugged into a disagreeable line for a heartbeat, then quickly smoothed again. "Maybe I can help."

He pushed from the doorway and came toward her, long legs moving with masculine grace. A predator tracking his quarry.

And she certainly felt trapped, for the guilt of withholding the truth from him was ballooning within her.

A shiver rocketed through her as he took the necklace from her and studied the clasp. Yet a smile touched her mouth as she watched him, knowing that rapier-quick mind of his was likely already designing a better clasp for the necklace, one that was user-friendly.

An odd heaviness expanded in her as Rafael fitted the necklace around her neck and managed the clasp with surprising ease. If only he could do the same for her health issues. But she'd seen a specialist, and the doctor hadn't been able to assure her that she wouldn't suffer another miscarriage.

The blue diamond pendant felt heavy and cold resting between her breasts. Not so for his hands that felt hot and possessive as he briefly skimmed her bare shoulders.

"You look stunning," he said. "Thank you. So do you," she said, pulling away from him as smoothly as she could so it didn't look as if she was running from him. "You'll clearly attract the eye of every woman here tonight."

He laughed, a rich sound she hadn't heard in far too long. And even that did odd things to her insides.

Good heavens, she would never be able to force a bite down tonight as nervous as she was in his company. Not the way her stomach had been of late.

She slipped her feet into strappy heels, the silver stilettos giving her added height. Now she was nearly eye level with him. On more of an equal footing. And that put her even closer to that devastatingly sensual mouth of his that she longed to kiss.

Damn! Why was she suddenly so obsessed with sex?

"Ready?" she quipped.

"Whenever you are," he said in that same rich tone that hummed along her senses.

She moved to the door. If they didn't get out of this quiet suite, they'd end up in each other's arms. In bed. Locked in passion.

Or battle?

Yes, because she couldn't keep her secret much longer. And she knew he'd be angry when he found out the truth.

She didn't want to fight with Rafael tonight. This was special to him. To them.

"I hope the lines aren't too long," she said, focusing on what was to come instead of Rafael da Souza.

"We'll soon see."

He closed the door behind her and kept pace at her side, not touching her but so close his aura seemed to encircle her. Dwarf her. That was an odd comfort that she grasped on to.

He'd always been her protector. Always had been the one person she could confide in.

*And yet she hadn't been able to when it had mattered most!*

The fangs of guilt eating at her faded away as they stepped into the limelight. Even in his presence, she still felt like a rare bird in a cage, photographed and ogled endlessly. Being out among the masses was vastly different from a shoot where it was just her and the lens. When she was in control.

She'd never liked this side of her career. This star worship that was as shallow and fake as the artificial minilights twinkling above them.

Before they reached the elevators, she saw the people clustered in the lobby waiting. An old panic began bubbling inside her and she immediately slowed, her gaze searching for another means to avoid this crush.

His hand came up to rest at the small of her back. "Take a breath, *meu amor.*"

She did, then another longer, deeper one. "I don't see anyone I know, at least not personally."

There was no shortage of celebrities waiting in their finery for the elevator. Though she was comfortable strutting her stuff in front of a camera, she hated competing one-on-one with her peers face-to-face!

In her eyes, she always came up lacking. She was still the chubby girl whom her mother had taken in hand and had taught how to rid herself of weight. Who'd learned a dangerous lesson that had nearly taken her life.

"This way," Rafael said, herding her to the last elevator on the left where three men and an elegant woman waited.

She didn't know them, but it was clear by their welcoming expressions that they knew Rafael well. It was the first time that she could recall someone recognizing him before her and the feeling was startling. Almost freeing.

"Good to see you, Rafael," the older of the men said as he extended his hand. "The new phones look fantastic in the gift bags. Before the festival is over, everyone will be clambering for one of them."

Rafael smiled as he shook hands with the man. "I certainly hope so. Please, allow me to introduce my wife, Leila Santiago. Leila, this is the producer of *Bastion 9*."

Introductions were quickly made, and Leila discovered the woman was the producer's wife. The other gentleman was the writer, having just won an award for his original script on a previous movie.

"Our daughter is a true fan of yours," the woman said, surprising Leila. "She dreams of being a model one day and you are the woman she's determined to emulate."

"I wish her much success," Leila said. And none of the heartache.

She fervently hoped that the girl was blessed with a body that remained lithe. That she avoided the pitfalls that had nearly cost Leila her life. That if she did fail, she would be able to find help quickly at a place like her private clinic, where Leila had already given aide to countless other young girls.

The elevator doors opened and they trooped into the waiting car. Before others could crowd in behind them, she saw Rafael punch the button to close the doors.

She flashed him a grateful smile which he acknowledged with a nod and wink that did odd things to her insides and calmed her as none of her inner talks could. If only he could shut out the rest of the world so easily.

"We have an exciting surprise lined up at the party," the producer said. "You must make an effort to be there at the launch of it."

"Of course," Rafael said before she could say a word. "We wouldn't

dream of missing it.”

She would. She’d prefer a night alone with her husband. She wanted to unburden her soul. But it would have to wait.

The elevator doors whooshed open and she pushed her way out, eager to get away from strangers. To catch a breath that wasn’t laced with the spicy scent that was uniquely Rafael’s.

But she got no more than three steps before he was at her side. “Are you all right?”

“You know I dislike small closed spaces,” she said.

“As much as I despise the cameras that follow us around.” He huffed a breath, and she felt his annoyance vibrate through her in a liquid wave.

Yes, this was her world. She’d gladly guide him through it—as long as he stayed close.

“This red carpet we’re about to trod down en route to the Palais du Cinéma is hellish for me too,” she admitted.

“You are serious?”

“Very. It’s different when it’s just me and the camera. I’m in control then. But they—” she nodded at the throng ahead of them “—they are calling the shots now.”

“Only if you let them, Leila.”

He was right, of course. Still it served to remind her how to get through this crush.

“Just smile. Pretend you see a dear friend just beyond the camera.”

“Is that what you do?” he asked.

“Sometimes.” But usually she looked for him in the crowd, even though she knew he’d not be there.

He took a breath, then nodded and touched his fingers to her back again. “Let’s go, then. The sooner we get through this ordeal, the sooner we can find our seats at the cinema.”

And then they’d face the endless swirl of afterpremiere parties, the first having already been decided by him. She didn’t mind, for one was just like the other. Privacy was a hard-won commodity here.

When they'd reached their plush seats at the cinema, Leila allowed herself to relax. Celebrities, movie moguls and industry professionals all moved to their seats before the lights dimmed.

Later, as the credits rolled, she was stunned at how much Rafael had invested in this film, and not just in the technical support he'd given. As the producer in the elevator had said, every complimentary bag held Rafael's new mobile device. They were as much the talk of the evening as the movie itself with those in the audience activating their phones now.

"I didn't realize they were all operational," she said.

He gave a careless shrug. "I simply provided a month's complimentary service."

The cost of such a move stunned her, for though she knew he'd achieved great wealth in the past year, she'd never dreamed he could afford such extravagance! Did she really know this man next to her at all?

The yacht had been decorated to mimic the set of the movie, a futuristic panorama right down to the uniforms of the waitstaff. The food was lavish. The drinks plentiful.

Stars glittered in an indigo sky and on the decks of the yacht as well. Leila had adored the nightlife in the early days of their marriage, and would party until dawn with Rafael. But the past few years her enjoyment of the jet-set gaiety had waned.

Even now the best French champagne tasted bitter to her. And the man she'd married seemed a powerful stranger.

He commanded attention. People knew his name. Influential people in all walks of life.

Gone was the carefree young designer who'd created some technological wonder at a time that everyone clambered for something new and groundbreaking. He was a star in his world just as she was in hers.

Only she'd been a comeback queen. It had been grueling to step back in front of the camera after her recovery and she'd been determined to succeed.

Rafael had been her savior then. He'd taken her away from the madness and the pressures of the modeling world. He'd become the barrier that her controlling mother could never break down.

He'd let Leila make her own decisions regarding her career and she had become strong. She owed him everything—including the truth that burned in her soul.

"Rafael da Souza is without a doubt the most handsome man here," a ravishing starlet said, a champagne flute dangling from her jeweled fingers and lust glittering in her blue eyes that were fixed on him.

"I agree," Leila managed to say in a controlled tone, her Brazilian blood bitten with jealousy that this young woman would openly flaunt her desire for Rafael in front of her! "But then, I've always thought he was the most handsome man I've ever met."

"You know him?" she asked, looking at Leila then.

Leila forced a smile, knowing the second when the actress recognized her. "I'm his wife."

And after delivering that statement, Leila walked straight toward her husband. She lifted a flute of champagne off a tray as Rafael turned to talk to a beautiful woman who'd just approached him.

A woman whom he seemed glad to see!

Leila downed the fine wine so fast that her head took a dizzying spin. She refused to rationalize that women threw themselves at Rafael often, for his finely chiseled features and intense dark eyes were too magnetic for any woman to resist, including herself. But he was her husband!

Her sting of jealousy was warranted. Wasn't it?

She wouldn't sit on the sidelines tonight and watch others flirt with him! God forbid if he welcomed their attention, as he seemed to be doing now with this green-eyed beauty at his side.

"There you are," Leila said in an affected purr as she slipped her arms around his muscled one, bringing his startled gaze snapping to hers. "I've missed you."

His brows slammed together, then smoothed one trebling pulse later. "Have you now?"

"I thought perhaps you'd give me a tour of the yacht."

"Later," he said, and flicked an apologetic look at the other woman.

Before Leila could protest, the woman who'd garnered Rafael's attention spoke directly to her. "I've admired your work for years. You make modeling look effortless when I know it is very hard work."

Again she trotted forth her patent smile when she felt anything but pleasant. Her head was still in the clouds from drinking two glasses of champagne on a nearly empty stomach.

"Are you a model?" Leila asked the woman who was as tall as she, enviably lithe and naturally beautiful with a crown of soft brown curls and arresting jade-green eyes.

"Katie is a costume designer," came a deep voice behind her, a voice laced with a distinct English accent. "An excellent one, I may add."

Leila whipped around and stared up at the intruder. The bottom fell out of her queasy stomach as a pair of royal-blue eyes locked on hers.

"Nathaniel," Leila said, noting that the film star was as tall and broad shouldered as Rafael. That their family resemblance was further established with features that were just as finely chiseled.

The look of love Nathaniel and Katie exchanged caught her by surprise. The celebrated star wasn't acting now. This was genuine affection.

"Katie and I were sorry you couldn't make the wedding," Nathaniel said, moving to his wife now and slipping an arm around her shoulders.

"As was I," she replied, her apologetic smile flicking from him to Rafael.

The accusatory glint in her husband's intense eyes scorched through her. He didn't add that she would have known who Katie was if she had accompanied him to his brother's wedding. He didn't have to, for his eyes said it all.

The yacht took a sudden dip and her stomach heaved along with it. Terrified she'd become ill in front of the world, she muttered an apology and fled toward the lower deck and the toilets.

She kept the contents of her queasy stomach, only to find that Rafael

had stayed on her heels and was waiting for her to exit.

“Are you ill?” he asked.

She shook her head, for how did one explain one was sick at heart?

“Absolutely not,” she said. “I drank too much champagne on an empty stomach. The movement of the boat made me woozy. Being on the water always does that.”

His brow narrowed, as if considering her words. “That is a convenient answer.”

“It’s the truth. I find these parties cloying,” she said. “Maybe I’ve just been on too hectic of a schedule of late to appreciate the party crowd, but right now I’d kill for some quiet time where I could just relax.”

He gave a curt nod. “Then let’s leave.”

She pressed a hand against the muscled wall of his chest and shivered at the heat and power beneath her palm. “Stay and enjoy your party.”

He closed his hand over hers, but his dark gaze gave nothing away of what he felt. “I wouldn’t dream of it. If we part company on the first night, the paparazzi will have a field day with speculation.”

All for show.

Nobody understood the need for publicity stunts more than she. She’d lend Rafael her support, and he’d do the same for her at the premier of *Bare Souls*. She never doubted he’d be there for her.

But would he once he’d learned what she’d kept from him?

“Besides,” he continued, “I’ve thought of nothing except getting you alone.”

“Very well,” she said. “Get me out of here.”

Rafael kept his thoughts secreted on the short boat ride from the yacht to the dock. He’d said nothing when the boat had picked up speed and Leila had taken his hand in a death grip.

The tremors rocketing through her told him everything he needed to know then. She wasn’t fine by any stretch of the imagination. She was putting on a brave front, and if there was one thing he understood, it was how to stand tall in the face of adversity.

His troubled childhood had taught him that bitter lesson!

That's when he'd buried his own pain of being William Wolfe's unwanted bastard into learning the intricacies of computers, discovering what made them work, and what to do to make them work better.

He suspected Leila did the same with her modeling. That was her escape, or perhaps her triumph and celebration, over her bout with anorexia.

His gaze lifted to La Croisette and the cluster of fans, paparazzi and celebrities moving about. The tents crowding the beach were the same, though the lights were more subdued. More intimate.

At one time they'd have enjoyed the nightlife. Now he selfishly wanted Leila to himself. The question remained if she was still eager to be alone with him.

"Would you like to take in the sights before turning in?" he asked, stopping well before the flood of lights spilling from the Palais du Cinéma.

She looked at the active scene they'd soon walk into and shivered. "No. I've no interest in becoming one of the hundreds in the nightclubs."

He released a sigh of relief. "What about the secluded beach? Just us walking, like we used to do."

Music danced on the balmy night air, but he felt the shift in her mood from tense to relieved.

"I'd enjoy that, as long as it takes me away from the spotlight."

He couldn't agree more, and was relieved she felt the same. There was a change in Leila that he'd never seen before, and wasn't quite sure how to deal with. But part of her seemed closed off even to him. Distant. What had happened this past year while they had been embroiled in their careers to put those shadows in her vibrant eyes?

Rafael certainly intended to find out once they were alone. He eased them past the barriers that served to keep the onlookers out and took a trail that wound to a secluded stretch of sand. It wasn't wide and it wasn't pretty, but it was quiet.

"I applaud you for avoiding the paparazzi and the guards," she said, pausing to slip off her heels before they started down the warm sandy

coast.

“I was lucky.” Just like he’d been all the times he’d sneaked into Wolfe Manor so he could play with his half brothers and sister, defying his father’s edict.

He shook off those old painful memories and held on to the good ones. He’d made a solid connection with his siblings over the years, though he didn’t keep in touch with all of them. But then his family had remained fractured, with each of his half siblings emotionally or physically scarred by their father.

Rafael had worried that he would not be able to love another person up until the day he’d met Leila. Even during that first year of marriage he’d wondered if what he felt was real. If he’d awaken to discover it had all been a dream.

He glanced down at Leila now, whose features seemed suddenly lighter, freer. He surrendered to his own smile, for there was something about defying the norm that made his own adrenaline surge.

“Feeling better?” he asked, twining his fingers with hers as they struck off down the beach.

“Much. The air is so refreshing.”

He made a sound of agreement, though every breath he took drew her sweet scent deeper into his soul. The tension of being the object of so much attention began easing, yet he sensed Leila hadn’t let go of it yet.

“I’ve missed this,” she said at last.

“The beach?”

“The peace and quiet with you.” The exact opposite of her lifestyle. Right now at this moment their separate worlds were miles apart. But if they didn’t put a stop to this madness they’d lived with for a year, their marriage would surely suffer. Perhaps it already had.

“Why push yourself so hard in your career now?”

“If I don’t fight to stay on top of it I could end up on the fringe of this business outside of a year.”

Rafael suddenly felt tension seep into his bones. Surely this would happen anyway once they started the family they’d agreed on? Or had

that changed?

“It sounds as if you intend to keep working.”

“I do,” she said without hesitating. Was she serious?

He wanted a wife and the family he’d long to have. A home. A normal family that he’d always been denied.

He wanted Leila back in his life now, not off somewhere on a shoot dragging their children along. Leaving him behind. Lonely. Forgotten. Rejected.

“And what about children, Leila? I thought we’d agreed that when we started a family, you would be a full-time mother. You’d place our children above everything, and most certainly above your career. Are you telling me now that has changed? “

# CHAPTER THREE

RAFAEL held on to his emotions as silence roared between them, obliterating the soothing sounds of the surf washing over the sands and the excited beat of music pulsing in the warm night air.

He'd asked a simple question, one they'd agreed upon before they'd gotten married. The answer should be instant, in keeping with her promise.

"Many mothers work as well as look after their children, Rafael," she said, which sounded like she was building up to an admission that she'd had a change of heart.

He bit off a curse and jammed his hands into his trouser pockets when every cell in his body goaded him to shake sense into his wife. The last thing he needed to do was lose his temper. He had to remain calm. Rational. Or as rational as he could be when his dreams of a family were teetering on the edge.

"Most women with children hold down a job because they have to. You most certainly do not need to work."

"I disagree with you," she fired back. "Many women work because it gives them purpose."

"You think being a mother won't do that?"

He wished he could see her face, but the velvet night swallowed up the details. The tension he felt rocketing through her though was very real, and very telling.

"I can't think of anything on earth that would be as soul-satisfying as having a child," she said at last, her voice breaking a bit with genuine emotion. "But that doesn't mean I couldn't work in moderation. I love my career, Rafael. Through it, I've been able to help other young girls who suffer with eating disorders. I've made a difference in their lives."

He was well aware of the clinic she'd established in Rio and he was proud of all she'd achieved. He was aware, too, that of late she'd suffered a financial setback there. A setback that he could have easily

funded for her. But when he'd offered to secure her clinic under his business umbrella in March, she'd thanked him before she'd flatly refused his help.

He'd not brought the subject up again, but now he had to know. "What about your business manager? Doesn't he oversee those issues for you?"

"Yes, but I have final say. Especially with the clinic. It's important to me that I keep a close watch over it," she said.

Leila had as much pride as he. She was also clearly set on having control over her career as well as her charity.

He understood that, for he was the same. But of late he suspected that her drive to make crucial decisions in her life had edged to the extreme. It wasn't just the little things she needed to evaluate. She was micromanaging *everything*.

Their marriage and future family as well?

She couldn't give up her career, and she wouldn't put the management of her charity into anyone else's hands. She insisted she could keep a finger in her work and still be a mother—which she was obviously again trying to put off starting.

He sucked in a breath, then another, but his nerves were still snapping like ribbons in the wind. He knew full well how part-time work could eventually suck up all the hours in a day. He knew, too, how devoted—no, driven—Leila was with her career.

Which made the thought of her being a working mother all the more troubling. A baby could easily be shuffled off while she was busy on a set, cared for by strangers.

Just like his youth? Passed from one neighbor to another while his mother cleaned houses for a meager living. And later, when he was left alone in their small flat when his mother couldn't support them and her various causes with just one job.

Rafael ground his teeth in annoyance, for he'd vowed at an early age that no child of his would endure that type of life. His children would have a home and two parents to come home to every day. They would know they were loved. Wanted. Cherished.

He took her hand and lifted it to his mouth, placing a light kiss on her fingers. A shiver rocketed from her into him, telling him she wasn't immune from him at least.

"Leila, I am tired of us being apart and waiting to start a family," he said. "I want a wife who lives with me again. I want a home and children."

He heard her clear her throat, felt another tremor skitter through her. "God knows I've missed you. But what you are asking me to give up right now is unreasonable."

"No, I am speaking from experience," he reasoned softly. "I lived with a mother who worked all her life, not one but two jobs. I know what it is like to be alone, and I will not put our child through the same."

Before she could answer, a couple's low laughter intruded on them, followed by a barbed comment from a man. He glanced at the sound, noting with irritation that two couples were coming their way, all close to being lost to drink, he'd guess.

"Let's return to our suite," he said, pulling Leila away from the approaching group. "Gladly."

By the time they'd wended their way through the crowd and into their hotel in brittle silence, Rafael's emotions were stretched to breaking point. At this rate any further conversation about children would likely end in an argument. Yet how could he rest until he knew what had changed Leila's mind?

Dammit, they'd made these plans long ago. Had he simply deluded himself into thinking their marriage and their love was strong?

"It is clear to me that you need to decide what you want," he said, his voice sounding suddenly cold. "A family with me. Or your career."

"Perhaps it is fate's choice to make and not mine."

There was something in her tone that chilled him. Something heart-wrenching in the shadows lurking in her eyes.

Without another word, she slipped into the bedroom. Instead of following, he stood there alone, dreading that there was far more to her prophetic comment than he would like.

Leila jolted awake at the tinny ring of the alarm. She fumbled to turn it off, then sprawled in bed, staring at the ceiling.

The short hours of sleep had left her horribly disoriented. But events of the past day quickly came back in a tumble of bruised memories.

She turned her head and stared at the empty place beside her. The bedclothes were rumpled, the pillow still holding the indentation of his head.

Rafael *had* joined her in bed, but had stayed on his side. He'd deprived her of his comforting arms.

No, that wasn't true. She had been keeping him at an emotional arm's length for too long.

She heaved a sigh and levered herself from the pillow-top mattress. It was certainly the first time they'd shared a bed and not made love. The first time she could recall when they'd gone to bed with harsh words between them.

He'd given her an ultimatum she dreaded to make, for if she gave up her career to start a family, she could lose her baby again. The pressures she had faced in getting to the very top of her career would be nothing compared to that devastation. Yet she knew Rafael would not relent. That he'd push her to be the wife and mother she had once promised and hoped to be.

If only it were that simple.

"Sleep well?" he asked.

She jerked her gaze toward the overstuffed chair by the window. He sprawled in it like a feral cat lazing in the sun.

Her mouth went dry. His broad shoulders and taut ribbed belly were more impressive bare. His skin was tanned. The light sprinkling of black hair on his muscled chest was soft, she knew.

"I rested," she replied, slowly lifting her gaze to his eyes that were wiped clean of the anger that had roiled in him last night. But she didn't kid herself into thinking all was well between them. "When did you come to bed?"

He lifted one broad shoulder. "Close to four."

And with so little sleep he still looked devastatingly handsome. Focused. In control.

She was certainly far from having power over her emotions now. Her eyes felt gritty. Her stomach was a jumble of nerves. And all the grief and guilt she'd suffered this past year seemed to have doubled overnight.

He had to know she'd already tried to be a mother and had failed. That the next try at having a child might not be successful either.

She wet lips that were dry and struggled to find just the right words to tell him about her miscarriage. That she was now terrified to get pregnant, but that her arms still ached to hold her baby close to her bosom. *His* baby.

“Rafael ...”

“According to the schedule, you have a shoot in one hour,” he said, his gaze now locked on his mobile, brow slightly furrowed.

He was clearly still angry with her and who could blame him. She couldn't very well tell him the truth now and then rush off to get ready for the shoot. He deserved so much more of her time.

“Do you need the bathroom?” she asked, thankful her voice didn't betray the war going on inside her.

“No. Be my guest.”

She wasted no time slipping inside the en suite bathroom and by the time she was finished she felt a bit more invigorated.

Yet as she stood in front of the mirror, she could see every new line that had etched her face. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the problem at hand, shoving thoughts of Rafael from her mind. If she excelled at anything it was applying makeup that looked natural, yet took years, and worries, off her face.

If she could only correct the problems with her body just as easily, problems she wouldn't have had if she hadn't developed an eating disorder. But the damage was done, and her guilt ran bone-deep.

Tucking those heartbreakingly emotions away, Leila mentally stepped into the role of top model. With her long hair blown dry and silky straight, she slipped on a strapless dress and stepped from the bathroom. To her surprise Rafael had added a crisp white shirt and brown shoes to

his ensemble.

*He could've been a model.*

It wasn't the first time the thought had crossed her mind. He was that put together. That sure of himself.

More sure than she was of herself at this moment and she hated that indecision in her. It had been that inability to make a stand for herself and her career when she had first started modeling that allowed her mother and agent to control her life. To make choices for her that had nearly cost her life. That left her now with damage that could prevent her from ever having a child.

*If she could overcome the fear of getting pregnant.*

Even then she'd never forget that first life conceived of love. That beautiful surprise that had been taken from her far too soon.

She blinked back sudden tears and checked her purse. Her new mobile rested within, the phone her husband had designed for her, a companion to his own unique one.

It took every ounce of fortitude to tamp her grief and guilt back in its niche. Longer still to remember how to bring up the calendar that would refresh her memory of the location.

She rattled off the address, carefully avoiding meeting Rafael's gaze. "I should be finished by noon."

"Good. We can take lunch afterward."

"That would be perfect. I'll call you when I am free." She slipped her bare feet into an empowering pair of designer slings and moved to the door with determined strides that she hoped wouldn't be interpreted for what they were—a desperate escape from the past that festered inside her.

"No need. I'll be there with you."

That brought her up short and whirling to face him. "What? Why? You'll be bored to tears watching a shoot—it could go on for hours."

His smile came quickly and rocked the hold she had choked on her emotions. "*Querida*, I will never tire of watching you."

A quiver of excitement skittered through her, but she quickly

reminded herself of his deepest desire—to convince her to give up her career and start a family, and she knew she had to be strong.

But as his dark gaze glided over her it made her feel weak. Her skin pebbled, her nipples hardened and ached for his touch, and the most damning was the heat in his eyes that melted her resolve.

Dangerous. He was the most dangerous man she'd ever met. A predator who knew how to stalk his prey—find its vulnerability.

Yet even knowing that, she couldn't find the strength to pull away from him. Moth to flame.

They'd certainly burn together.

He crossed to her, dark eyes intent, challenging her to argue with him. "Surely you have no objections."

She had dozens of them that all danced around her own guilt over lying to the man she loved beyond reason. But there was no point in voicing them right now, not when he was this close. Not when he looked at her with such wicked passion that she was forced to lock her knees to keep from swaying into him. Not when she desperately wanted him. Now. Tonight. And forever.

When the guilt of hurting him was killing her.

"Of course not. The first shoot is in an old château," she said, slipping her model's persona on and stepping from their suite, for when she was "the diva," she was in control. "A limo should be waiting to take me—" she flicked him a smile over her shoulder "—take *us* there."

"It sounds fascinating," he said, closing the door and following her down the hallway.

Tension pulsed in the elevator as the two of them rode it to the lobby. The possessive hand Rafael kept at her back as he guided her to the concierge desk heaped tinder on her guilt. Keeping secrets was a dangerous game she had never wished to play.

She'd tell him about the baby they'd lost after the shoot, when they were alone. She'd bare her soul about her health and hope he understood what had driven her to do what she'd done.

And if he didn't?

Fear crouched in her heart. God help them both then.

When they arrived at the shoot, the producer was waiting for her with a smile that looked strained. Leila suspected Siobhan's patience had been tested by the little man beside her who was the representative of the client—Coltere Fragrance.

It was well known that this client often caused trouble on the set. She only hoped that Siobhan could keep him in line.

That thought had barely crossed her mind before the client snapped, "Who's he?"

"My husband," Leila answered, aware the only way to deal with him was to dare the little man to object. "Is that a problem?"

"Guests are a distraction," the client said.

That was a fact she couldn't dispute. Especially tall, arrogant husbands who commanded attention! But Rafael had been to some of her earlier shoots and she'd not suffered from his presence. Surely now wouldn't be any different? And if it did?

She would take control. She was, after all, a professional. For this little man to assume otherwise was an insult to her.

"I've been in this business long enough to know how to focus," Leila said.

"Of course you do. Now let's be off," Siobhan said, putting an end to the man's rant.

Rafael kept his distance from the overbearing client by pacing the back of the vast hall in the villa. But he'd only retreated here after he'd seen that Leila and her producer had the client in control.

Watching his wife deal with her business made his chest swell with pride. She was nerves of steel draped in silk and poise. It was clear that she oversaw every detail on the set, and was quick to voice her opinion—and will—when necessary.

She commanded respect. And she got it without question. He could understand why she was reluctant to abandon her career, yet he couldn't see how she could do justice to this and motherhood too. *Why couldn't being his wife and mother to his children be enough for her, like she'd once*

*dreamed of?*

Rafael swore under his breath and paced the length of the hall again. Being in this mansion set him on edge, for it brought back memories of Wolfe Manor with its lush gardens and imposing facade.

But unlike his brothers' and sister's childhood home that had fallen into ruin, this villa was in excellent repair, from the ornate Y-shaped staircase that gleamed a rich walnut to the period furnishing that screamed opulence.

But for all its grandeur, he still felt oppressed here. Just like he had all those years ago as he'd stood at the back fence of Wolfe Manor and stared across the gardens at the grand house, where his half siblings had resided.

He'd longed to be invited inside. To play with his half siblings. To fully be a part of his family. But his father had denied him that right. William Wolfe had let it be known that Rafael didn't belong there among his other children.

The stigma of being unwanted burned his soul, even though his eldest brothers had welcomed him into the family fold well before William Wolfe had died. He'd still been the outsider, the one who went back to his squalid home at night. He'd never forged that connection siblings have just by living together, even though they'd all endured hell that their father had heaped on them. But Rafael still felt like the added appendage, there out of Jacob's and Nathaniel's good graces. Accepted, yet still distant.

Sadly, he felt much the same around Leila. He stood at the back of the room watching her, wanting to share every moment of his life with her again. Desperate to share the future with her as well, to grow old with her, to watch their children grow into adults.

To be content with Leila by his side.

But this past year had changed them both. She had become a different woman. There was a remoteness about her that troubled him. A shadow in her eyes that begged forgiveness. But from what?

His gut twisted at the possibilities. Had he been so driven to be a success, to prove that his eldest brother Jacob's money hadn't been

wasted on him, that he'd let the one good thing that had happened in his life slip through his fingers? Had he already lost her to her career? To another man?

No, he couldn't believe his Leila would cheat on him. It was simply that she was not ready to give up her career yet, which meant he had to convince her that the dreams they'd woven together before they married were just as strong now. Just as viable.

With his mind fixed on doing just that, Rafael turned back to the set where the photographer's assistants were busy checking the light. Amid the flurry of movement, Leila strode from the wardrobe tent which was cleverly concealed by an antique dressing screen, and his heart nearly stopped beating as he drank in her beauty.

Two pale gold straps of gathered fabric crossed at the front over her breasts before tying around her slender neck. From her upthrust bosom, the dress fell to midthigh, adding just enough fullness so the fabric moved with her.

And did she ever know how to move!

The low chatter among the crew stopped and he was certain all eyes turned to her. But instead of walking onto the set where the crew waited for her, she came right toward him.

He was certain his heart would pound out of his chest, that his blood would surely burst his veins the way it surged like a swollen river. She smiled as if she hadn't seen him in months and had grieved every second they were apart. It was a look that said she loved him with all her heart. That she ached to pull him into her bed and her body this very second.

She'd always been just as demanding in the bedroom as he. But she'd never fixed him with this "take me" look in public.

Even if he'd been prepared, he doubted he could have stopped his body from responding so quickly. His pulse quickened, his arousal grew swift and painful.

He ached to rip the filmy gold dress from her and make love to her here, deeply, savagely. To leave no doubt that she was his now and forever.

"Four minutes, Miss Santiago," the photographer said, his voice and

presence an irritation to Rafael.

"I'm ready when you are," Leila said, but her focus was on Rafael as she stopped before him.

She swept her hands up his chest to his shoulders, sending a tsunami of desire crashing through him. A low growl escaped him, and her eyes gleamed with wicked intent.

Such a vixen! Still his to have. To hold!

Slowly, her hands glided back down, the nails surely shooting sparks as she scored his shirt before her palms settled over the taut planes of his pectorals. "I was nervous about you being here, but now I'm glad you are. You've always been my rock at shoots."

"The only session I've attended in years was in March, *querida*." And that one had sparked a fierce jealousy in him as well as intense longing.

She lifted a hand and scraped a blunt fingernail along his jaw, and like a match to flint, hot flames of desire ignited within him, burning his resolve to ash.

"Yes, but you were always at the other shoots in my mind," she whispered so softly he wondered if he'd heard her right, her eyes now glowing with affection.

"Miss Santiago, may I remind you that we're on a tight schedule here. Time is money," the irritating client snapped.

With another toss of her sleek silken hair, she strode back to the set before the massive fireplace. A multitude of candles burned in the firebox and along the hearth, lending a warm glow to the gray marble.

But it was Leila that he watched. Leila that his blood heated for. Leila that he dreamed of having soon.

The photographer clapped his hands and his staff scampered to do his bidding. "Miss Santiago, if you'd recline on the fainting couch now," he said, and she immediately did as asked.

That was a personal hell for him, for the moment she stretched out on the couch he ached to join her. Her golden dress draped over her demurely, but a fan directed at her kept the hem fluttering like his heart.

The next hour passed in a blur of pictures of Leila stretching out on

the couch. Provocative poses. Innocent ones. Beckoning. Assured.

They ran the gamut and Rafael was only sure of one thing. He had never lusted for a woman as he had Leila. Never wanted a woman as much as he did her.

As lovers, there was no comparison. There never would be.

She looked over at him right then, her eyes beckoning, her head back and turned just so, her slender neck cast in light. And then from the shadows came a masculine hand holding a glass perfume stopper.

Rafael's mouth went dry as the tiny glass bulb glided down her throat leaving a thin bead of moisture in its wake. Almost immediately a seductive heady scent filled the air.

But it was the fluid arch of her back and moan that escaped her lips that nearly undid him. Her eyes were closed now in silent ecstasy. What was she thinking?

*You are always there in my mind.*

Dared he believe her?

# CHAPTER FOUR

“INCREDIBLE session,” Siobhan said at the wardrobe door.

Leila trotted forth a smile as the assistant helped her out of the gold dress. “I thought so too.”

Though the overbearing client had insisted on butting in, the photographer hadn’t bowed to the man’s demands and Siobhan had quickly hustled the client off the set. Through it all, Leila had kept her calm just by looking over to see that Rafael was still there.

He was on the phone, and she imagined he was involved in his own business. But still he’d come to the shoot and she could get very used to being around him this much again.

“Enjoy your afternoon,” Siobhan said, breaking into her thoughts. “The second session today is at five o’clock on the beach, and the swimsuits are wickedly delicious. Just don’t overindulge at lunch!”

As if she ever did. “I’ll watch it.”

Leila left the wardrobe and Rafael stepped forward, his expression pensive. “What would you like to do this afternoon?”

She glanced through the window at the hordes of paparazzi gathered outside the villa and cringed, for they’d surely follow them. “Anything as long as it’s someplace quiet where they can’t find us.”

“And here I was thinking you thrived before the camera.”

“Only when I’m on set working,” she admitted. “You know that I treasure my privacy.”

“As do I.” He caught her hand in his, and she shivered at that first jolt of energy that passed from him to her. “Come on. I know just the place to relax.”

In moments he’d pulled her out a side door covered by a portico. A uniformed driver stood beside a sleek red sports car.

“*Merci,*” Rafael told the man, who tossed him the key before walking back to a nondescript economy car where another man waited.

"How did you arrange a car so quickly?" she asked as Rafael opened her door.

"I have connections."

A fact she was well aware of.

"Were you so sure that I'd go off with you?" she teased.

His sinfully beautiful mouth pulled into a smile that left her tingling inside. "I can be very persuasive." As well she knew!

In moments Rafael had whipped through the congested streets toward the harbor. She leaned back in the seat and savored the vista of clear blue sea crowded with all manner of vessels, of the array of umbrellas strung along the beach like a string of colorful gems.

Of being alone with her husband. Maybe when they stopped she could find the words to tell him of their loss. Maybe then he'd understand her fears and the risks involved.

She studied the people crowded on the sandy beach, certain if she looked hard enough she'd catch sight of one of the noted celebrities. But as always Rafael drew her attention back to him, for he was the most fascinating man she'd ever met.

He handled the powerful car just like he did everything else—with an arrogant ease that she'd always admired. Quiet control. He'd exuded that aura when she had first met him, even though he had acted carefree. Reckless, almost.

Rafael da Souza had been oh so sure he'd succeed in business. And in love.

"You are going to marry me," he'd said that day he'd taken her away from the chaos of her world and off into a whirlwind jaunt into the mountains.

"Why would I do that?" she'd asked, though the idea of being married to him had thrilled her.

"Because you love me and I love you," he'd said with such surety that she'd fallen a bit deeper in love with him then and there. "We belong together, *querida*."

"Don't be too sure of that!" she'd quipped, though inside she'd agreed.

He was her other half. The one person she'd trusted with her life—her future. Her secrets.

She'd known immediately that Rafael was everything she'd dreamed of having in a husband. Determined. Charming. Fun. And oh so sexy.

He was everything she could ever want for in a lover. For the first time in her life she'd felt sexy, a major improvement, for when she looked at herself in a mirror, she saw a woman who was neither pretty nor plain. A woman lacking any remarkable feature. A woman who felt as lost as she often looked on film.

Yet he'd never ordered her about, never forced his will on her. Instead he'd allowed her the right to do what she'd been denied as a child—to play. To make believe.

Two months after meeting him, they married. A very private ceremony in Rio that her mother had hated, for it had robbed that bitter woman of basking in the limelight of a media wedding.

Leila smiled at the memory, clearly remembering

Rafael and herself rushing from the small church in Rio to the waiting car.

Just like now she'd had no idea where Rafael was taking them. But she hadn't cared. She was with the man she adored, and together they were embarking on a lifelong journey together. Together they would make beautiful love and babies.

How naive she'd been not to realize they'd face obstacles along the way. That the damaging effects of the anorexia she'd battled in her youth would threaten to steal her glorious dreams from her.

"You are awfully quiet," he said. "I was thinking of our wedding day and honeymoon."

He said nothing for the longest time, but she noted his fingers tightened on the steering wheel. Noticed that a muscle along his jaw grew taut.

"I regret I could only give you a poor man's tour," he said, his admission surprising her.

Was he serious? Did he really think that she wanted or needed to live lavishly?

"I certainly don't," she said, and gained a doubting frown from him before he turned his attention back to the winding road. "I reached superstardom at a young age, Rafael, and was under my controlling mother's rule for some time, as you know. I'd had my fill of extravagance by the time I'd turned eighteen."

"That is good to hear, *querida*."

"It's the truth."

She and Rafael had enjoyed a very simple honeymoon. They'd taken an auto tour of Europe, a leisurely journey where they had shunned tourist traps in favor of exploring each other in sensual detail in a staggering assortment of villas, châteaus, apartments and yachts.

What sightseeing they'd done had been just as laid-back. It had been the first time in her life that she'd totally relaxed. That she'd been someone beside the sought-after model.

Yet when their honeymoon was over, the real world had intruded. Her and Rafael's careers had become more demanding as time wore on.

Now here they were after a horrid year apart, her burdened with guilt and he expecting her to embrace the one thing that terrified her.

He parked in the harbor lot and pulled a small hamper she hadn't seen from behind his seat.

"Ready?"

"For a picnic? Of course."

"Good. If we hurry, we can catch the ferry to Île Sainte-Marguerite."

She blinked, her gaze traveling across the sea to the small archipelago. "Isn't that one of the places we stayed on our honeymoon?"

"It is. You asked for peace and quiet, and this was the first place that I thought of."

What a wonderfully romantic surprise! She pressed a hand to her pounding heart, so touched that tears sprang to her eyes.

"It's perfect."

"I am pleased that you like it," he said, and hurried her down the wharf to the waiting ferry.

Fifteen minutes later they set foot on the jeweled island. "Are you up

for a hike?"

It was as if history were repeating itself. "Of course."

She slipped her hand in his and let him lead her down to the coastal pathway lined with botanicals. For over an hour they walked quietly along the pathway, admiring the gorgeous scenery and laughing at the songs from the migratory birds clustered in the trees. The aroma of lavender, eucalyptus and an array of exotic flowers perfumed the air, while the peaceful quiet of the island soothed her soul.

Through the occasional breaks in the forest she could glimpse Fort Royal, but though the scenery was spectacular, she had difficulty taking her eyes off Rafael for long. This closeness between them was what she'd so desperately missed. Telling him now would be the right thing to do, the perfect timing, yet she knew that the truth would shatter this wonderful moment.

Right now she simply wanted to enjoy the day with Rafael. To remember the good times they had once shared and not be plagued by the guilt that rested heavy on her. So once again she tucked those errant thoughts away.

They prowled the old jail, and she laughed as he threatened to lock her up and have his way with her.

They walked hand in hand in companionable silence and at that moment she'd never felt closer to him. It was so easy to pretend all was perfect in their lives.

The trail opened onto a secluded cove where the glimmering turquoise sea lapped gently against the shore. "How beautiful."

"Indeed so. This would be the perfect place for our picnic," he said.

When was the last time he'd taken her on a picnic? Years ago, she was sure, for recently they had never had time for each other.

He spread a blanket while she kicked off her slings, the sand warm under her feet. "I wasn't sure what you'd be hungry for so I asked the hotel to arrange a sampling of light fare. They suggested rosé wine, but I remembered you had liked the sparkling French lemonade when we were here."

"It was wonderful," she said, touched at his thoughtfulness.

Not that her memory was less dim. She could clearly remember him on their honeymoon picnic here as well, how his ravenous appetite had made her giggle, how the wind had tossed his thick curly hair until it was an unruly mop.

How they'd lain on the beach and kissed passionately, working themselves into a fever that had sent them rushing back to their hotel.

"It appears we have cold roast chicken and Provençal salad," he proclaimed as he removed the items from the hamper. "And for dessert, fresh fruit tarts and grapes."

To her surprise her stomach actually growled. Her appetite had been nil of late, but today she was ravenous. For food. For Rafael.

"Me thinks the lady is in dire need of sustenance," he joked, and held a piece of savory roasted chicken to her lips.

"Mmm," she said as she ate from his hand, and then curled her tongue around his finger and drew it into her mouth, drawing deeply before nipping the flesh.

His dark eyes smoldered with sensual energy and an erotic growl rumbled from him. "Leila ..."

"You taught me everything I know about seduction, Rafael."

One dark eyebrow winged up in sharp rebuke, but the twitch of his lips proved the chastisement was all for show. "Everything, *querida*?"

She laughed, breaking the seductive spell, as she poured lemonade for them into tall glasses while he sprawled on his back, his devastating smile fixed on her. "I might have thought up a few things on my own."

"Experimenting, eh?"

She tried to mimic one of his careless shrugs. "Want to play guinea pig?"

He levered himself up, his lips mere inches from hers. "With you, I am game for anything."

Before she could guess if he was joking or serious, he pressed his lips to hers. Once. Twice. Nothing more than teasing kisses that heated her blood and had her straining toward him for more.

"I'm starving," he said, pulling away from her when she would have

preferred kissing him to eating.

But that too soon became an erotic treat for her senses. They sat facing each other and savored their lunch, each pausing from time to time to feed the other.

"I regret that we haven't done this more often over the years," he said as he glided a finger over her brows, along the shell of her ear and down her neck. "Though I don't think I could be the observer at another shoot like this last one."

Her skin pebbled even as her blood heated. "Was it that boring for you?"

He released a rough laugh. "It was agony watching you stretch and reach for your imaginary lover on that couch," he said, his voice dropping to a husky timbre that stroked over her flesh like an erotic caress.

How could he say such a thing when his hand was causing her undue agony? When she'd focused so intently on only him during that shoot that her own body had nearly betrayed her desire?

"I'm sorry you disliked it."

"On the contrary, *querida*. I ached to go to you, to cover you." He pressed a kiss on the side of her neck, then took a teasing nibble, and she couldn't contain her moan of pleasure. "To strip you of that scrap of gold cloth and make love with you."

A mewling sound escaped her lips, eliciting another sultry growl from him. She'd worked hard to emulate that beckoning look. But she hadn't been able to master it until a wise photographer had told her to envision her lover standing in the wings, watching.

*When you see him in your mind's eye, make love to the camera.*

And so she had.

But that feeling of satisfaction was nothing compared to truly being in Rafael's arms right now.

His eyes had turned a glittering black, searching, questioning. His beautiful mouth was just inches from hers. So close she could almost taste him.

*“Meu amor,”* he said, before his mouth swooped down on hers, hungry, demanding.

She let out a welcoming cry and threaded her arms around his strong neck, powerless to resist him, to deny them both what they so desperately wanted.

He fell back onto the blanket, drawing her down on top of him. He whispered erotic words of love against her lips, her neck, across the heaving swells of her bosom. She gasped, her back bowing into him, her lips straining toward his.

His kiss was demanding more, and she clung to him, burning for his touch, his possession, demanding the same.

Distantly she heard the birds in the trees. Felt the warm sea-tinged breeze sweep over them. Then a foreign sound intruded. Loud. Jarring. Breaking the mood.

“Damn,” he said as he pulled his phone from his pocket and glared at the display. But she knew what it was before he spoke. Knew and resented that her career had intruded on their privacy. “Your next session starts in less than an hour. We’d better catch the next ferry or you will be late.”

Two hours later Leila was running on pure adrenaline and willpower. The photographer had struggled to find just the right mix of sunlight and breeze to capture his effect and that had cost time. But the monotony of doing the shoot over and over was draining and, despite a liberal coating of sunscreen, Leila’s skin felt uncomfortably hot.

Even Rafael looked weary with his dark sunglasses shielding his eyes and his stark-white shirt snapping in the increasing wind. He hadn’t said a word the entire time, but his body language bellowed his arrogant vigilance of her with his rigid posture and crossed arms.

That made his presence as unnerving as it was welcome, for while she appreciated his support, she hated that he stood like a guard over her. Just one cross look had some of the crew taking a wide berth of him.

“That’s a wrap for today,” the photographer finally said. “We’ve lost the light.”

And she was fast losing her stamina.

The wind and sun had left her feeling baked. Her legs trembled and her knees were weak from holding a pose for so long. Her face ached from holding a sultry look.

But once she'd got over the annoyance of having her private time with Rafael ruined, she'd channeled her energy to the job at hand. In truth she did enjoy working with this photographer, for the emotions he could coax from her were always cutting edge.

Right now those feelings came across easily, for her nerves were still humming with the memory of their amorous picnic on Île Sainte-Marguerite.

She longed to return to their suite and finish what they'd started in that secluded cove, even though it wouldn't be long enough. The premiere of *Bare Souls* was tonight, followed by another lavish party by the client on board another yacht.

As the model for that scent, she had to be there. She had to be "on," pretending that all was perfect in her career and her marriage.

"Fabulous shoot, Leila. You are always a pleasure to work with," Siobhan said. "The white bikini you're wearing and accompanying wrap are compliments of the designer."

"Please thank them for me," Leila said.

She accepted the floral cover-up the assistant handed her and quickly donned it. Like most of the clothes given her, she'd donate it to the charity auction she sponsored, with the money going to fund educations for impoverished young girls in Brazil.

"Tomorrow's shoot is in a vineyard near Nice," Siobhan said. "The limo will be waiting for you in the morning."

She managed a nod and mumbled her thanks. If she stayed up late tonight, she'd be dragging in the morning. That was a laugh! She was exhausted now.

Leila wet her dry lips and took a dizzying step toward the cabana, her thoughts spinning as wildly as the lights strung between the tents. The intensity of the sun seemed far more brutal even though the temperatures were on the warm pleasant side now.

Her legs trembled with each step, as if she was moving in slow

motion. Not so for Rafael.

He came toward her with surprising speed. “Leila, what’s wrong?”

She blinked, but the yellow and black spots continued to dance in front of her eyes. “I don’t know.”

“*Maldição!*” Strong arms swept her up and carried her inside the cool confines of the cabana.

She felt him lower her onto the plush cushions, felt the breeze whisper over her body as the punishing glare of the sun was blotted out.

Something cool was pressed to her forehead, her throat, and she moaned her pleasure. She forced open her eyes, blinking rapidly as the blur of colors slowly cleared.

A moment of uncertainty hit her before she remembered what had happened. She’d fainted. She *never* fainted.

To do so was too close to the collapse she’d had as a teenager when her body had refused to continue down the destructive course she’d taken.

Her vision narrowed, focusing on Rafael alone. The stark worry striking bold lines around his eyes and mouth scared her more than her bout of dizziness.

“I’m fine,” she said, and made to rise.

He pressed her shoulders back on the chaise. “You are *not* fine, *querida*.”

He was right. She was tired. Exhausted. And the festival was just getting under way.

“Excuse me,” a stocky man said gruffly as he pushed his way through the crew gathered on the perimeter. “I am Dr. Dubois. How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” she said, as he opened a small black case.

“Hmm.” He pressed a stethoscope to her chest, listening, his features bland. “Have you been hydrating yourself?”

“Yes,” she said. “But this session was longer than most and the sun was brutal.”

The doctor gave her a superficial exam. “You should relax and get

some more fluids in you. If the dizziness persists, see a doctor immediately. Oui?"

"Yes, we will," Rafael said.

"I will be fine," she insisted twenty minutes later, more for her benefit than his when they returned to their suite.

"I know you will because I am going to be there to make sure you drink and eat and take care of yourself," he said, looking every inch the arrogant, demanding male.

She hiked her chin up in challenge, refusing to relinquish control of her life, especially when it came to what she ate and drank. "Do you intend to forgo your plans to shadow me?"

"If I must."

Such arrogance!

She kicked off her slings and dropped onto the sofa, hoping she projected an aura of elegant relaxation instead of exhaustion. "I just need to take it easy and I'll be fine."

He looked at her carefully, his early amorous mood vanishing. "You need to relax for a day at least, likely more."

"This isn't a vacation for us," she said.

"What if it were?"

Her head snapped up, her heart skipping a beat on its own. Them on vacation? Together? Like they'd been on the island?

The temptation to lounge and make love and do nothing but enjoy each other like they had in the early days of their marriage was oh so enticing. So terrifying too, for her own love for her husband gave him the upper hand. And Rafael could be so persuasive when he set his mind to it.

Still, she found herself asking, "Where would you want to go on this vacation?"

"Someplace without phones, without crowds, without distractions." His hot gaze slid down her torso and took a slow caressing glide back to meet her eyes. "Someplace where we could be alone to do whatever we wanted whenever the mood struck."

Her breath caught at that, for there had been many times of late when the same idea had seemed so enticing. The escape she needed—yet she didn't kid herself into thinking she'd get a lot of rest if Rafael was with her! Just thinking back to their picnic today proved how they'd likely spend their time.

*And wouldn't that be a dream come true, to have him alone without distractions, without plans encroaching on their idyll?*

"You'd grow bored without your gadgets," she said, struggling for a light tone.

"Not if you were there with me," he said. "I want my wife back in my life full-time."

The thought was so tempting. To be Rafael's wife and lover as she longed to be. To go to sleep each night in his arms. To wake with him beside her each morning.

Yet he'd made it clear that he wanted more. "You want a child. You want me to give up my career to be a mother."

His gaze caught and held hers. "There was a time when we both dreamed of the day we'd have a family. Were those lies to appease me at the time?"

"No, it's not that at all." She pressed her fingers to her temples, her eyes suddenly burning with tears, her heart aching for what she'd lost. What she could still lose.

*Tell him! Trust him to understand!*

"My God, I want to have your baby more than anything," she said, her voice cracking with emotion now. "But I'm afraid, Rafael. I'm afraid I'll suffer another miscarriage, or worse."

Rafael froze, his mind taking in her words, processing her admission. Leila had been pregnant before? She'd lost their baby? And what the hell did she mean by worse? What could be worse than losing their baby?

"Leila, you were pregnant?" he asked, gripping her upper arms and jolting when she nearly collapsed against his chest.

He folded her in his arms, absorbing her tremors. She was scaring the hell out of him now, for this wasn't like her. This wasn't the Leila that was always in control.

"I—I didn't kn-know, Rafael," she said between gulping sobs, her tears soaking his shirtfront and burning his skin. "I'm s-so sorry. So sorry."

He pinched his eyes shut and held her, stunned to know they'd conceived once. That the baby he had wanted so much had been created and lost.

No, that *they'd* lost this precious life, for it was clear Leila was just as heartbroken as he.

A thousand questions bombarded him, but he could only force one from his constricted throat. A question that he was sure he knew the answer to, for he hadn't touched her this past year until their quick rendezvous in March. "When did this happen?" he asked. She said nothing for the longest time until her sobs gradually eased. Until the tremors that racked her lessened to occasional shivers. "September," she said.

*Eight months ago!* He sucked air into his tight lungs, unable to believe she'd kept this from him for so long. That she was only just telling him now.

Anger surged through him, for how could she hide this from him when she knew how much he yearned for a family. "Why didn't you tell me when this happened?"

Her fingers splayed on his chest, but he gained no comfort from her touch, not when his heart was frozen with shock and grief. "You were away in Brazil when I miscarried, busy with your work, and when you returned I was off on location. I didn't see you again until March."

He swore, knowing she hadn't exaggerated. The past year had been a constant whirl of activity for both of them. It had been the turning point in his career just as her own had taken another upswing to launch her into superstardom.

"I wanted to tell you in March," she said, "but so much time had passed by then. And we had so little time together. I didn't want to ruin it by telling you. Please forgive me."

He was mad as hell that this had happened. Furious with himself for being away, that she'd suffered this loss alone.

That she'd grieved in solitude.

He should have been by her side. Holding her hand. Grieving with her. Instead he had been on location with the film company—a remote location deep in the jungle. His phone connection had been virtually nil.

He tipped his head back and let his anger drift from him like smoke from a spent fire, welcoming the pain of grief that quickly threaded inside him to wrap around his heart. Dammit, this hurt like hell.

His hands moved slowly, tenderly, up Leila's spine. He should have been with her, and he'd never forgive himself for being away so long.

She was still burrowed against his chest, but her sobs had lessened and her breathing was somewhat normal. Despite her sorrow, he sensed the steel in her spine, that unbreakable, unbendable will that he so admired. That inner strength that had allowed her to delve back into her work and excel.

"You saw a doctor?" he asked, needing to know why their first attempt at a family had turned out so wrong.

"A specialist," she said, her voice so small he had to bend close to hear her over his thundering heart. "There were more tests. Studies." She shook her head, looking close to tears. "This was my fault, Rafael."

Guilt. He understood it. Felt its fangs sink into him as well. His mind latched on to cold graphic reasons why she would be culpable, then he quickly flung them aside in disgust. Leila would never purposely do anything to put a baby at risk. The doctor wouldn't have looked so stridently for a cause if it had been obvious.

He drew on what little he knew of the chances of conception and miscarriage. "These things are often far from a women's control."

She pushed away from him, shaking her head more vigorously now, looking more miserable than he'd ever seen her look in their marriage. "No, I am to blame. The doctor explained it to me. There is a higher incidence of miscarriage when the mother has a history of anorexia. She said that though I was fully recovered from the disease and have been for years, I am still technically underweight."

The last was said with clear revulsion in her voice. But was she averse to gaining weight because of her history of anorexia? Or was she afraid how added pounds would impact her career?

He'd always accepted that Leila was slighter than the majority of women because of her career. All the top models were lean, without any excess body fat.

He'd come to accept Leila's thinnest as normal. Now a doctor had told her that her low body weight had a bearing on losing their child?

"Help me understand, Leila," he said. "If the risk of this happening again can be lessened when you gain weight and remain healthy, then why are you so gripped with fear?"

She wrung her hands, looking miserable. "I'm afraid, Rafael. I'm afraid I won't be able to cope with the weight I'll gain when pregnant. That I'll relapse. That I'll destroy our baby and myself this time."

"I won't let that happen!" he said, taking her in his arms, relieved she didn't pull away from him this time.

Leila let out a bitter laugh. "That is exactly what I told my friend who went through recovery with me. Who became a model when I did. Who got pregnant a few months before me."

She bunched his shirtfront in her fists and stared up at him with wide tear-filled eyes. "She worried about gaining weight too, but I encouraged her that everything would be fine. That I'd be there with her. That our babies would grow up to be friends. Yet in that month I was recovering from my miscarriage, she relapsed. She lost too much weight too fast and her heart just stopped."

He swallowed hard, feeling her fear and desperation clear to his soul. "I am sorry for your friend, but you are stronger than that, Leila. We are stronger together."

"I know you believe that. And I do want a child. Your child. But now —" Her hand fluttered up and down, much like his hopes for a family were doing. "Please understand. I need to wait."

Wait. They had waited years already to start a family. How many more before she could cope with her fears? Before she'd trust him to protect her?

He wished he knew. "Of course. You need time to heal."

Physically and emotionally, he realized, for Leila looked frail and vulnerable.

"The doctor suggested a year. That I gain weight before I attempt conceiving," she said, a husk of aversion in her voice.

He chose his words carefully. "How do you feel about that?"

"Nervous. But I've gained five kilograms in the past few months." She hugged herself and he caught her frown, a telling gesture that proved she was troubled even by that scant increase. "The change in weight has been hard for me to accept, but I'm trying. I realize I need to feel good at this size before I attempt to gain more."

*Meu Deus!* This wasn't simply a model concerned over the change in her body. Her statement smacked of a deep-seated fear.

For the first time his mind latched on to the real issue for Leila. The hidden one that she'd been hesitant to voice—to face.

Yes, she had every right to fear suffering another miscarriage. It was likely a concern of many couples, especially when they'd already lost one baby. But he'd never considered that she could suffer a relapse.

It didn't seem feasible to him that a strong woman like Leila would fall victim again to the disease she'd beaten before. But if she couldn't cope with gaining a bit of weight now, what the hell would she do when her belly was swollen with child?

"Perhaps counseling would benefit you again," he said, for when they'd met, she'd told him of the months of therapy she'd taken before she was able to eat normally, though for a model that was still slight portions.

"After my miscarriage, I saw a psychiatrist for weeks," she said, and her tone hinted she was not willing to continue that course of therapy.

Yet she was still blaming herself. But at least she was talking to him, now. That was a start, even though it wasn't what he wanted to hear!

Rafael scrubbed a hand over his mouth and paced the salon.

There were very real and dangerous issues at stake here. He couldn't arrogantly assume that all would be right just because he wanted it to be. Because in the end nothing could guarantee that Leila could have a healthy, happy pregnancy.

Leila ... She was his first order of business. He must find a way to help her cope with the guilt and fear that was eating at her. To make her feel

at ease with herself, to know that the scant kilograms she had gained only made her womanly curves more beautiful, more desirable to him and to the world.

"There will be no more long separations in our marriage," he said, his mind already figuring out a plan where he could spend the majority of his time with Leila. It was clear she needed him as much, if not more, than he needed her in his life on a daily basis.

That would be especially true once she was with child.

The soft bow of her lips trembled into a smile. "Good. I've missed you so."

That simple admission touched him more than any love profession she could voice. It stripped away their wants and fears and honed in on what they had always had. Each other.

He crossed to her, his hands trembling slightly as he gently cupped her face, his eyes adoring her. "We have a beautiful goal to work toward, *querida*. We have a good future ahead of us. One day we will have a child. A normal family. Trust me."

# CHAPTER FIVE

TRUST him? Hadn't he listened to a word she said? Hadn't he understood the risk to her and their unborn child? Her very real fears?

Of course not. It had taken her years to understand that she battled her eating disorder much like an alcoholic avoided strong drink. Because any number of triggers could throw her back into that vicious cycle of anorexia.

She'd stayed strong and healthy because her career demanded it. Because she had an average weight she must maintain to stay on top of her game. She was in total control of every aspect of her life. Being pregnant would be a completely different thing, for she'd have zero control over the changes in her body.

If she failed to cope with her pregnancy—if she was the cause of losing another baby—she'd simply lose her mind.

As for a normal family.

"Would either of us recognize a normal family if we saw one?" she tossed back at him, not bothering to hide the shame of her own troubled childhood this time.

"I know what it isn't," he said, serious as always when the subject of family came up. "Though your family was poor, you had a home, a brother and the love of both parents for much of your childhood."

Leila let out a bitter laugh at that assessment, for it was far from the truth. "Please, Rafael. You knew my mother. She was not an affectionate woman."

Selfish and demanding, yes. But never loving.

He gave an abbreviated nod, his brow furrowed, likely recalling the rows he'd had with her mother. He'd never been good enough for Leila.

"What of your father? Your brother?" he asked. "You've never spoken much of them, yet they were a big part of your upbringing."

What was there to say about people she hardly knew? About a place

that had only existed in her mother's imaginings?

"Home was a shanty in one of the largest *favelas* in Rio. No electricity. No water. After my father died, we were forced to move from our two-room 'home' into a one-room hut."

She glanced at him and took in his stunned expression. She'd shocked him, for like the world he'd believed her mother's lie. That they'd had a small home near the mountains.

Leila heaved a weary sigh and dropped onto the sofa, kicking herself for not unburdening this shame years ago. Her mother had woven a tender, tragic story of being a young widow and single parent that Leila had never disputed, for what was the use?

Unlike her mother, Leila had never courted sympathy from anyone—especially Rafael. But now? She still didn't want his empathy, for she had escaped the fate she'd been born into. But he was asking, and she couldn't continue the lie.

"I don't remember my father, other than he was a stern man who was always away working," she began, her fingers worrying her skirt as she searched her memories and found few good ones to draw on. "As for my brother, he was much older than I was and ignored me for the most part. He worked in the factory with my father, and both died the night it caught fire. After that, my mother sponged off anyone she could for support."

Rafael's brows pulled into a disagreeable V over his patrician nose while his beautifully sculpted lips flattened into a thin hard line. "Why didn't you tell me this years ago?"

She simply stared at him. "What's the use? You never asked, and the truth changes nothing about me. And unless I'm mistaken, you've never divulged everything about your childhood or your family in England."

He jerked his head to the side, his expression hardening, but only for an instant. "You are right. Neither of us had a normal family."

She waited for him to go on. Hoped he would, but he remained silent.

It was just as well. One set of lies revealed in a day was enough for any marriage.

The past was over. Leila had never dwelled on what would have

happened to her and her mother if a talent scout hadn't "discovered" the teenaged Leila in Rio. How ironic that her mother had gone to the mall that day to beg for a handout from an aunt who had a soft heart and a job.

Of course that truth had never made the headlines. Instead it was reported that the young beauty had simply been shopping with her mother in the mall.

But that had never mattered to Leila. Modeling had been her chance to have a better life and she'd taken it.

From that day forward Leila had become the breadwinner—the hungry young model who was all the rage, the big-eyed waif to millions and the rising starlet on the fashion scene. Nobody knew the truth about her past life in Rio. Nobody but her mother.

She pushed aside the old shame and anger and chanced another peek at Rafael. He was far too pensive for her peace of mind. "You're angry with me," she said. "Yes," he snapped, and she flinched at the fury in that one word. "Before we married, we vowed we'd never keep secrets from each other. That we'd never set out to deceive each other."

She looked away, blinking back the sudden rush of tears, for there was nothing more she could say in her defense. She *had* lied. She *had* deceived him.

"What's done is done. We reaffirm our vow to be honest with each other always and move forward." Strong masculine fingers cupped her jaw and turned her to face him, face the determined intensity of his eyes boring into her soul. "I am not giving up on our goal or us, *querida*."

She swallowed hard, helpless to stop the tears from slipping from her eyes. He was right. Yet she dreaded to be brutally honest with him about their future as parents. "Maybe you should."

Silence swirled around them, raising the hairs on her nape, twisting her nerves into knots that pulsed and burned and jumped. "What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"I don't know if I will ever be able to give you the family you want, Rafael! Even if my body can carry a child, I'm not sure my fears will allow me to do it."

“I will not let what happened to your friend happen to you!”

“I know you believe that—”

“Because it is true,” he said with so much conviction she almost believed him. Almost. “Our love is strong, Leila. *We’re* strong. I will see you have the best doctors. The best care. That you are spoiled and pampered and assured daily how beautiful you are.”

Leila released a watery laugh that eased some of the tension gripping him. “I doubt that my agent, clients and photography crew will appreciate me playing the role of diva.”

“It doesn’t matter what they think, for once you become pregnant you’ll give up modeling.”

Rafael felt her slender spine stiffen and knew he’d hit a raw nerve. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

Just like that, all the tension that had drained from him went taut as bowstrings. “Isn’t it obvious? You are concerned about having a healthy pregnancy. About a relapse. Work would be a great risk.”

“One has nothing to do with the other,” she said, trying to pull away, but he held tight, refusing to let her run away from him or this issue that stood between them, knowing it would only fester if they left it alone.

“Doesn’t it? We are wealthy beyond measure. There is no need for you to be a working mother, to devote your time to a career instead of your family.”

Her chin came up. “There is pride, Rafael. You don’t want me to work because your mother slaved to provide for you.”

“That is some of the reason,” he said with a nod.

“Well, I refuse to be like my mother, who never worked a day in her life even when we were close to starving,” she said. “She was content to let her husband hold two jobs, and to see her only son follow him to the factory even before he was old enough to do so.”

He yanked her flush against him, feeling the thunder of her heart against his chest. Feeling anger course through her at breakneck speed.

“You aren’t like her at all,” he said. “You could *never* be like her even if you were a full-time mother.”

She was shaking her head before he finished. "I will work, Rafael. Maybe not full-time. Maybe only on occasion. But I refuse to give up who I am, what I have worked for."

"I wish you could see yourself as I do, Leila.

Then perhaps you wouldn't feel so compelled to prove your worth."

Her chin came up. "Do you really see me, Rafael? Do you truly understand my passions? What drives me? My career funds my clinic and that is very important to me. I won't give it up."

He cut the air with a hand. "You don't have to. I have told you before that I can fund that or any other cause of yours for as long as you wish."

"Yes, but it would be just another appendage of you, instead of mine," she said, fist pressed to her heart.

Frustrated and weary, he threaded his fingers through his hair and paced to the window. On the beach below people laughed and frolicked in the late-afternoon sun. Many couples strolled the edge of the sand hand in hand, just like he and Leila had done earlier today before they had sliced open old wounds and let them bleed freely.

"It's getting late," she said. "I have to get ready." And then she walked slowly into the bedroom.

The soft click of the door echoed in the stillness and reverberated along his nerves. In an hour they'd present themselves to the throng. They'd smile and pretend everything was perfect when it was far from it. That they weren't at loggerheads over their future.

With a curse he slammed a fist against the panel, frustrated, angry that she'd let fear come between them. That she'd kept so much from him.

From this moment on, he would do all in his power to convince her that their marriage was more important than anything. He would somehow vanquish her fears.

Leila stayed in the shower until her skin threatened to pucker, letting the temperature go from a soothing warm to a bracing chill in hope that the cold would ease the puffiness her crying had surely created.

Her thoughts were a jumble of wanting him. Loving him. Yet his

demands veered into unreasonable. What happened to the carefree man she'd picnicked with today? The question eluded her as she stepped from the shower.

She hadn't expected Rafael would be there waiting to take her place, waiting to hand her a thirsty towel. Waiting there gloriously naked and aroused with a look of intense need carved on his handsome face.

Her breath seized as his hungry gaze swept over her, his expression so hot that she felt the water droplets sizzle on her wet skin. But his eyes soon narrowed, staring deeply into hers as if suspecting she still held a secret from him.

His distrust sent a glacial shaft spearing through her, freezing any desire that had quickly kindled to life.

Without a word, Leila grabbed the towel and escaped into the bedroom. But she couldn't stop shaking until she heard the blast of water hit the marble enclosure. Couldn't calm the rapid pounding of her heart until she'd dropped on the bed and dragged air into her lungs.

She was in no mood to party, but to stay here would likely prompt Rafael to do the same and right now she couldn't go through another round of intense questioning about their future.

So she went about her toilet mechanically. She dried her hair. She donned her red gown—a strapless creation from an up-and-coming new designer, and try as she might, she couldn't get the memory of Rafael's glorious body from her mind.

But right on its heels remained the biting words they'd exchanged. The truths they'd revealed. The soft challenges they'd each issued.

Why on earth had she told Rafael that he might be better off without her and their dream? What would she do if he decided she was right? If he walked out of her life?

By the time the water cut off in the shower, she was applying her makeup but was nowhere near calm. How could she be when Rafael was just on the other side of a partition wall, either naked or nearly so as he readied himself for tonight's events?

Leila couldn't be at ease, not as long as she and Rafael were at loggerheads.

She was no longer the young ingenue. She no longer had the fat fortune to squander, having used much of her money to fund her free clinic for young girls with eating disorders. Poor girls like she'd been with little hope of bettering their lives. Girls who starved themselves in the hopes that they'd fit in.

With the last of her makeup expertly applied to where it looked as if she wasn't wearing any at all, she dabbed the perfume she was promoting between her breasts, at her nape and on her wrists. The heady fragrance warmed on her skin, the intensity of it more pronounced, more haunting, than its name.

"Have I ever told you I hate wearing a tux?" Rafael said as he stepped into the bedroom.

"Yes, every time we've attended a black-tie event."

She smiled and reached for the diamond Y necklace Rafael had given her for Christmas last year, a gift that had been delivered to her holiday shoot in Italy by courier. She'd been shocked by his extravagance, yet deeply touched by the gift and the accompanying note.

She'd called him immediately to thank him, and had been relieved to know he'd liked the watch she'd given him. And during that brief conversation she'd felt suddenly sad and alone, for being apart from the man she loved was no way to spend a holiday.

Shoving that sad fact from her mind, she concentrated on securing the clasp, on the feel of the platinum and diamonds against her skin. This would be the first time she'd worn it, and the weight and size of the pendant was perfect, the blue and brilliant diamonds near blinding when the light hit them just right.

After adding diamond earrings that dangled along her neck, she turned to where she'd dropped her shoes. And her heart nearly stopped beating.

Her imagination didn't begin to capture the raw power and indisputable status of her husband. He could easily go toe to toe with any of the top male models with his devastating good looks, exquisite physique and unhurried predatory stride that brought all that pent-up need coursing back to the surface.

His dark wavy hair was slicked back to reveal a strong profile that was classic and intense. If he'd just stop scowling ...

Her gaze dropped to his hands, busily fumbling to fasten his tie. He was making a knotted mess of it, and that realization brought back old memories of her helping him with this task many times before.

Clearly he'd yet to master it! That fact popped the tension that had bubbled up in her earlier.

She slipped her feet into her stilettos, crossed to him and pushed his hands aside. "Let me help you before you strangle yourself."

He flung his arms to the side, his expression one of fierce self-disgust. "Whoever invented a bow tie should be hanged."

She tried not to smile but her lips twitched anyway, for she'd never seen her strong powerful husband become so flustered over something as simple as a tie. She made quick work of loosening the knots and starting over. In less than a minute she'd fastened the perfect bow for him.

"There," she said, giving his muscled chest a pat.

With effort she stepped back from him, for one pat called for two. One more lingering touch. Like a caress.

He turned to the mirror but his fierce scowl didn't lessen a fraction. "You always make this look so simple."

"It's really not that complicated. A shoot I was on long ago required me to remove a gentleman's tie and put it on," she said. "Since we had to do many sessions to get it right, the lesson stuck with me."

"You undressed a gentleman?"

"I took his tie off," she said, surprised Rafael was still jealous of her.

"How did I miss that ad?"

It took her a moment to realize he wasn't joking. That realization totally blew her away, for it implied that he'd seen the bulk of her spreads. That he had taken an interest in what she'd done.

The lesson of learning to tie a proper bow was all but forgotten, for it had transpired in the waning days of her reign as the waif model. Back when she was a victim of anorexia, barely eating enough to stay alive in a desperate attempt to stop her bosom from expanding and her hips from

rounding.

If she hadn't been so naive, perhaps she would have realized that her efforts were in vain. That all she would accomplish would be to jeopardize her health.

She'd had a lot to think about during her long recovery—a lot to learn about herself and her controlling mother. Her road to recovery had been arduous and doubts about her ability to stage a successful comeback had plagued her night and day.

But she'd pushed forward. She'd fired the agent who had listened to Leila's mother instead of her, and she began ignoring her mother's demands.

With her new curves and determination, she set her sights on becoming the next hot model that woman ached to emulate and men longed to bed. But she hadn't realized she'd truly succeeded as a woman until she'd met Rafael.

She glanced at him under the sweep of her lashes. Such a handsome man. Such a determined one.

He'd made her feel beautiful from that first moment they met. He'd turned her into a sensual woman.

Could he turn her into a mother as well? Dare she hope it was possible to overcome the fear choking her?

Time would tell. She only hoped it didn't run out for them before she could find her inner strength.

The next five days were a grueling repeat of elegant premieres, demanding parties, personal interviews for him and fascinating photo shoots for her. Rafael had never shied away from the limelight or the chance to tout his innovations, but he found little enjoyment doing the same thing over and over.

The days were incredibly long. The nights achingly short and a torment for him to endure.

The king-size bed afforded them ample space, yet in the velvet hush of night he would awake from the sleep he'd finally found when she would curl up against him. Any of those nights he could have taken her,

aroused her with hot kisses and hotter caresses until she begged for his possession.

But he wouldn't take her by surprise. He wanted her awake. Willing. Wanting him as much as he wanted her. So far that hadn't happened. So far they hadn't gone beyond a few kisses, hot caresses and scorching looks.

But then her demanding schedule exhausted her. He'd seen it in her eyes, in the weary steps she took once they were in their room alone.

He knew she needed to get away from the hustle of endless shoots, interviews and the constant expectation of the perfumery to tout their fragrance along with the film. He knew, too, that she wouldn't rest on her own.

So he began stealing time from his schedule so he could whisk her away from the crowds. Time hadn't allowed them to do more than slip away for a few hours. Shopping. Sightseeing. And occasionally indulging in a tempting dessert at one of the many cafés which he considered a personal boon.

Because today was the last of her shoots, he'd driven them to Nice where they'd dined on a Provençal dinner of salt-crusted sea bass served with a violet artichoke salad.

For dessert, he ordered a tiramisu that he and Leila were sharing, just as they'd done when they were young lovers. When sharing was all he could afford and only then just barely.

"You are a very bad influence on me," she said as she took another taste of the feather-light dessert, her lips closing around the silver spoon while her eyes closed in what was clearly gastronomic ecstasy.

"I am a good influence on you, because I let you be yourself, *querida*," he said, and they both knew it was the truth whether she would admit it or not.

She smiled and looked away, but not before he caught the glimpse of sadness in her hazel eyes. He knew before she spoke that their lighthearted jaunt was ending.

"My agent told me during the last wardrobe change that I have been offered a contract with a top designer to be their model for their spring

selection,” she said. “It’s a fabulous opportunity that I was afraid I wouldn’t land.”

He waited for her to expound, to say how much she regretted having to turn them down, before he realized the obvious. “You’ve accepted the offer.”

“Yes. My agent and I will have to go over details point by point before I sign,” she said, excitement ringing in her voice, “but we’re tentatively scheduled to begin shooting in a little over a month.”

Damn! He’d been afraid something like this would happen, that a designer or company would dangle the right carrot in front of her to tempt her from him again.

But he’d also thought she was already contracted for a shoot after the film festival and asked her just that.

“I was, but it was with a local designer and would only have lasted a couple of days,” she said, carefully folding her linen and laying it beside her place. “This offer exceeds anything that has been sent my way in far too long. The profits from it alone will establish a trust that will keep the free clinic afloat in lean times.”

The clinic! That was clearly where her heart rested.

It was quite obvious to him that she’d jumped at this chance, not for the small fortune she’d make but for the escape it offered her.

The hazy picture of family that had begun to form in his mind blurred to gray. The pinch of profound loneliness that had tormented him since childhood grew into a hollow ache. Would he forever be without family? A real home? Love?

Rafael shrugged into his jacket, his anger and hurt banked under a careful mask. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

His hungry gaze swept over his breathtakingly gorgeous wife, and his blood heated. He had waited long enough. They might not be starting a family now, but he wanted her in his bed. And he’d have her there tonight.

The premiere of an animated feature must have been charming, for the

majority of the audience laughed uproariously. But Rafael found it difficult to concentrate on anything but the woman beside him.

When he'd gone to Aruba to join her in March, he'd hoped they could start their family then. Of course he'd had no idea she'd suffered a miscarriage six months earlier, that she was nowhere physically or mentally near ready to begin a family.

"Is that all you think of anymore?" she'd asked as they lay together replete after their lovemaking.

It had been his main train of thought for far longer than he cared to admit, and for the life of him, he hadn't been able to explain the restlessness in him. He just ached to have that close connection, which he'd been denied as a child, with someone.

The past year had been a chaotic yet lonely grind. He'd realized then just how much he missed and loved Leila. How much he wanted to move their marriage to the next level. Family.

"I am tired of living like we do, Leila," he'd said at last. "We didn't even spend Christmas together this year."

"I was on a shoot," she'd said. "You could have joined me."

And he might have, but he hadn't known anything about it until the last minute. By then he'd already promised his mother he'd help her deliver much-needed supplies to the São Paulo poor marooned in the mountains. He'd not disappoint her or the children, for the memory of being on the receiving end of charity was never far from his mind.

"Your schedule is always so full, as is mine. There is hardly time for us anymore," he'd said, annoyed that his own career kept him from his beloved wife.

He'd reached across and took her hand, entwining his fingers with hers, savoring the jolt of awareness that always ripped through him with they touched.

"We'll have a week together in France, and though the days will be hectic, the nights will be ours."

"Yes," she said, speaking to his throat instead of meeting his eyes. "We can talk about it then."

He'd wanted to argue the point, to get her to commit. But the fact

remained he'd gone eight long months without seeing his wife. Without holding her. Kissing her. Making love to her until they both fell into an exhausted sleep.

But the elation that had surged through him after adoring her with his hands, mouth and body had been shattered when he'd asked her to accompany him to his brother's wedding the following week. She'd refused, claiming she couldn't postpone an upcoming shoot. Perhaps that was true, but she'd made no attempt to even try.

She had chosen her career over him and his family.

Rafael blinked as the score blared in the theater and the final credits began rolling on the film. He couldn't believe it was over. Just like he didn't want to believe this week with Leila was nearly at an end.

"Which party do you wish to attend first?" he asked as they left the cinema, their movement slowed by the crush of celebrities and the inevitable waiting as pictures were taken on the red carpet.

"Actually, I'd prefer to return to the suite. It's been a long day."

"Then that is what we will do."

"You don't have to leave the parties just because I am," she said.

He took her hand, struck with a sense of bittersweet failure. Yet another need pulsed hot and heavy in him too.

"I've grown bored with the parties, *querida*. I'd rather spend this night with you."

She pressed a hand to his chest and her wide eyes met his. He read uncertainty, fatigue and something he couldn't place in those most celebrated hazel orbs.

"You're sure you won't regret leaving the gaiety?"

"Positive."

There would always be parties. But his week with Leila would be over soon. Too soon.

He fully intended to make the most of their remaining time together. Wanted this night with her without further arguing. A night filled with nothing but lovemaking so he could brand each second on his memory.

"I want you, Leila."

“Then let’s get out of here.”

# CHAPTER SIX

RAFAEL'S blood was on fire as he skirted the crowd as quickly as possible, his fingers entwined with Leila's. They reached their suite in less than ten minutes, though it felt as if hours had crawled by.

He swept them into the room and locked the door, heart thundering in his chest. Her fragrance was totally erotic, mingling with her own musk to drive him wild with desire.

His mouth came down on hers. Hard. Demanding. Savage in intensity, in raw primal need.

She slid her arms around his neck and strained against him, her kiss ripe with promise and passion. She tasted of honey and lemon.

A deep growl of satisfaction ripped from him. His mouth left hers to trail kisses down her slender neck, laving, nipping, reveling in the sultry mewls she made, the desperate way she clutched at him.

He stepped back just enough so he could cup her breasts, lifting them until they nearly spilled over the top of her low strapless dress. They seemed fuller, tighter, and he was suddenly thankful for those five kilograms she'd grudgingly gained.

His head bent to taste one silken globe, nuzzling her dress down to bare her to the waist. He swirled his tongue around one taut nipple before he sucked hard on it.

"Yes," she moaned, her fingernails raking his back, her spine bowed to press her breasts closer to his mouth.

Heart hammering in his chest, he suckled her hard, nipping at her, then laving. It seemed an eternity had passed since they'd made love in March.

A lifetime of wanting her. Dreaming of her. Now she was in his arms. Now he'd take his time with her, he thought, drawing deeply on one breast and then the other until they gleamed with moisture, until the nipples were hard and rosy.

Until she quivered in his arms and his arousal had grown painful.

"I can't take it." She grasped both ends of his tie and pulled him into the bedroom, back to the enormous bed.

A tremor rocketed through him, far stronger than he'd ever felt before. He was nearly blind with lust now as he pushed her red dress to the floor and stared at her, clad only in a sheer crimson thong. Perfection. Her breasts were high and firm, her waist slender, her hips rounded just enough to be feminine.

"Please," she said, rubbing against him, her fingers desperately trying to loosen the studs on his shirt.

"With pleasure."

He picked her up and tossed her on the bed, then hooked his thumbs under her thong and yanked it off, eliciting a startled squeak from her. "You are exquisite."

"And you are overdressed," she said, her smile a beckoning taunt of tease and passion.

"Vixen."

He tore off his clothes and fell on her, pressing them both into the sumptuous mattress. Their lips met in a maelstrom of passion, tongues dueling in slick, strong thrusts that left him hard and aching, teeth nipping with erotic intent to make her gasp and purr in turn.

His hands were all over her, memorizing the thrusts of her breasts, the tautness of her nipples that he tasted and tormented until she cried out again.

She glided her hands down his back, her fingers digging into his buttocks to hold him close even as she arched against him, grinding her pelvis against his length. Was she as desperate as he to be inside her?

He slipped a hand between them to find her slick folds were plump with desire, wet from wanting him. His body hardened more, jolting now with the need to drive himself into her. To take her now and be done with it, then take her again and again until they were both too tired to move.

Lust pounded through his veins in hot surges as he pressed his mouth to her flat belly, sliding lower to the caramel curls damp with desire.

God, how he'd missed this with her.

"Rafael," she whispered, her voice low and throaty, her hands clutching his head.

He slid his palms up her inner thighs and pushed her legs apart, baring her to him. In March, the sex between them had been fast. Fierce. The second time had been just as urgent.

This time he would savor her, give them both what they craved. He settled between her creamy thighs, his palms cupping her tight buttocks as he bent to press one hot kiss on her tender flesh.

She cried out, her back bowing, her fingers holding his head at the apex of her quivering thighs. He emitted a low growl and speared into her with his tongue, tasting her, seeking the sweet spot that would drive her wild for him.

There was no finesse now, just primal instinct as his mouth tasted and tormented her hot swollen nub again and again.

His heart hammered as his tongue mimicked what the hard length of his sex ached to do. He felt the tension coiling in her, felt her tremble beneath him, felt himself growing hard as a rock.

He groaned as his body did the same, as if there were an invisible thread between them that pulled them both taut. That bound them together forever.

Ruthlessly shoving that fact to the back of his mind, he channeled his thoughts on pleasuring Leila. He wanted her to remember every erotic stroke, every ravenous kiss, every thrust of his tongue and fingers and sex, when this week ended.

He wanted her to wake in the night and ache to be with him instead of on a shoot at some barren location. He wanted her to think of him and the family they should be starting instead of her career.

His fingers slipped inside her silken core, thrusting harder, giving him that opportunity to watch passion sweep over her in a rosy flush, see her open just for him. Her inner muscles clamped down hard on his fingers even as tremors shot through her.

Her head thrashed on the pillow, eyes pinched shut, incoherent sounds bubbling from her. Sweat beaded his forehead and slicked his back.

He hurt from holding his own need back. But in this, he refused to be selfish, for her pleasure made his all the more intense.

When her climax finally came, it swept over her in one long shuddering cry that sang through his blood. She pressed her head into the mattress and went stiff, his name bursting from her in a reedy litany.

Nothing could be more beautiful than watching her now. No woman was as giving of herself. No woman could ever be this trusting in his arms.

If she could only extend that to him outside the bedroom ...

With a savage growl, he surged into her with one long powerful thrust, her spasms pulling him in deeper. So deep he felt the burn of her flesh against his own, felt her passion sear him from the inside out.

They reached their climax together in a glittering burst of color that rivaled the display of fireworks on the beach.

His name burst from her lips. This was perfect. Nirvana.

In the aftermath of such an explosive joining, they sprawled on the bed, spent. Sated.

They dozed. Then they woke to explore each other at leisure in the dark of the night.

They made love again, slowly, drawing it out until they couldn't stand the wait another moment.

And somewhere in the wee hours of the morning they finally fell asleep in each other's arms.

Leila came awake slowly, caught somewhere between lusty dreams of Rafael and that state of confusion of not quite remembering the day, the time. His spicy scent clung to her skin, to the bed coverings, proving their sex had been real.

She stretched in the bed and turned to Rafael, her body protesting the workout. Her welcoming smile vanished as she stared at the empty bed.

Memories of March rushed back to her, of him leaving their bed without a goodbye. Without even a damned note.

Her hand swept over the pillow and over the place he would have slept. It was cool. The suite was quiet and dark.

*He wouldn't leave. Wouldn't leave her like this again. Would he?*

And then she heard it. The creak of a chair in the salon.

She scrambled from the bed, gathering the bedsheets as she did. Her heart felt as if a vise were squeezing it. She had to remind herself to breathe.

Leila stepped from the bedroom and scanned the salon. She sagged against the doorjamb, nearly weak with relief.

Rafael sat at the desk, his fingers flying over the silent touch pad on his innovative laptop. He wore khaki shorts and nothing else. His hair was mussed. The broad bronzed width of his shoulders racked tight as he concentrated.

"What time did you get up?" she asked.

He whipped around, seeming startled that she was there. "An hour or so ago. I received an urgent text regarding the integrated graphics on the new phone."

She knew from the early days of their marriage that he'd spend long hours poring over such problems. She knew, too, that he would not rest until he'd found a solution.

"You'll be busy working all day, then," she said, disappointed to have their last day in France disrupted.

"No. I have isolated the problem and sent details back to my manager already."

"Wonderful."

His response was a clipped nod.

The awkward moment stretched out when she wondered at his thoughts, when concern skipped along her nerves. "Is something wrong?"

He frowned, his gaze sweeping down her body. But when his eyes met hers again, she couldn't read anything in their glittering black depths.

"Would you like me to order room service?"

"Please, I'm hungry."

He pushed to his feet and padded toward her, his stride long and graceful. This time a slow smile curved the beautifully chiseled contour

of his mouth. “Do you have anything scheduled this afternoon?”

She shook her head as a different hunger swelled within her. “Nothing. Do you have something in mind?”

He leaned over her and trailed one finger along her cheek, across her lips. She tipped her head back as that same finger glided down her throat.

“I want to make love with you,” he said, tugging the sheet free.

Before it hit the ground, she was in his arms.

That’s where she stayed for the rest of the afternoon. In bed. On the sofa. In the shower.

They ate a light breakfast, feeding each other. They played, they laughed and they loved. And when the afternoon bled into night, Leila mourned that this week with Rafael was now over.

And she dreaded what tomorrow’s parting would bring.

Leila walked down the hall toward their room on a wave of giddy excitement. The festival ended tonight with the awards ceremony, and she knew that Rafael was exceptionally proud of Nathaniel for winning the prized trophy for his directing of *Carnival*.

It was a total departure from the films Nathaniel had starred in thus far. The indie film was also the first one made by Nathaniel’s and Rafael’s fledgling production company formed in order to make this movie, a gritty urban thriller set in Rio.

The rags-to-riches flick had left Leila shaken and stunned, for the film spoke to her deeply as she, too, had started with nothing, escaping poverty in the *favelas*.

It also confirmed that she and Rafael had something profoundly in common, for only someone who understood the plight of the desperately poor Brazilians trapped in the violent slums could depict the raw emotion and angst on film with such heart-wrenching detail. It made her love Rafael even more.

She’d longed to quiz him on the details but she held back when he waved aside any accolades as they had left the theater. If he didn’t wish to talk about how he knew exactly how life in the slums were, she would

not press him.

"I just contributed money," Rafael said when congratulated for the award. "Nathaniel did all the work."

An exaggeration she was sure. But since he declined attending the many parties that would reign on the yachts and in the clubs up and down La Croisette until the wee hours of the morning, all touting the brilliance of the film, she kept her questions to herself.

As Nathaniel and his wife did the same, even bowing gracefully out of having dinner with them tonight, she was even more sure that this movie had a far deeper and personal meaning for the half brothers. That alone troubled her, for it made her wonder what their childhood had really been like.

Rafael had never divulged much, even when she'd asked. She certainly wasn't about to pry now, for he'd been in an odd mood since the film ended.

And in truth, she was relieved that Rafael hadn't made other arrangements for them tonight. She longed to return to their room, to spend this final night with him alone like they had last night. But she dreaded that he would press her for her decision on a family again, and that this might be the end of their marriage. She simply couldn't deal with that now.

She chanced a peek at him and her breath caught. The chiseled lines of his face seemed more intense, his eyes darker and more troubled. Was he thinking that their idyll was drawing to an end too?

God knew the precious moments in Rafael's arms were without compare for her. There just hadn't been enough of them at this festival. Now it was nearly over, and she couldn't ignore that niggling of doubt that he was already pulling away from her.

"So what are your plans after the festival?" she asked, sliding her long silk scarf from around her neck and letting it trail behind her.

"There are things I need to attend to in Brazil," he said, closing the door behind him, shutting out the world again, shutting them in for one last night.

She faced him then, noting the tension that had gripped him during

the film was still in force, still creating an invisible wall between them. “More trouble with your business?”

“No, that’s under control now.” He shrugged out of his tuxedo jacket and flung it on a chair, his expression as taut as the tension now humming in the room. “I’ve neglected the *fazenda* of late.”

He owned a farm? In the early days of their marriage that was all he’d talked about—building a home for them away from the city. A place where they could escape the rigors of their careers. Where they could raise a family in peace.

It had been the dream she’d held as well, until she’d lost their child. Until she’d realized that the hope of having a real family might be far beyond her reach.

“You’ve bought a house, then?” she asked, trying to sound conversational and light when she was hurt that he’d never told her he’d moved forward with their dream home. “Tell me about it.”

He crossed to the balcony and threw open the door to admit the welcoming salt-tinged breeze. “The land is rich and producing fine crops, and the staff is smaller but above par. I trust you will approve.”

“I’m sure I will,” she said, then wondered when she’d get the chance to go. Certainly not in the next month or so.

He glanced back at her, his smile relaxed, though there was a pensive set to his mouth that kept her from feeling at ease. “It is a typical farm *casa* with large airy rooms. There is space for you to have an office if you wish. I had one built for my needs.”

“Ultrahigh-tech?”

“It is what I do,” he said with pride.

And her own pride stung, for while he would never give up his career or even partial control of it, he expected her to embrace full-time motherhood.

She waited for him to go on, to tell her more about the house he’d dreamed of building one day for them. Of the bedroom they’d share, and the nursery he was intent on filling.

But he simply resumed his study of the sea, both hands braced on the jamb, his white shirt stretching tight over his muscular back. And maybe

that was for the best, for the last thing she wanted to do now was engage in another discussion about starting their family.

Leila pulled her scarf through her hand again and again as unease crackled along her nerves. “What time is your flight tomorrow?”

“Seven in the morning.”

Her plane didn’t depart until eleven. Though she’d hoped they could travel to the airport together, she didn’t wish to spend hours there waiting for her flight.

“I suppose you should get some rest now,” she said, feeling awkward when she longed to blurt out her needs.

“I can sleep on the plane, *querida*.” He turned to face her this time, and the need in his gaze reached out to her, stroked her desire and sent a hum of want crashing through her.

She shook her head, afraid this easy mood would be broken. “Good, because I need you tonight.”

“And I need you, Leila,” he said, his smile sad. “I hope one day you’ll realize just how much.”

Leila walked up to him, noting the catch in his breath, the flaring of his nostrils, the darkening tinge on his cheeks. She looped her scarf around his neck and gave it a tug, and passion exploded in his dark eyes.

“Show me how much,” she said, giving the scarf a hard tug.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

RAFAEL set his teeth. It was damned near impossible to resist her when her eyes were blazing with desire. And why should he when this was their last night together?

With an erotic growl, his mouth swooped down on hers. The kiss was a consuming fire, but Leila welcomed the heat, for she could taste his passion, feel his need pulse in his muscles and vibrate into her on a dulcet sigh.

She raked her fingernails down his back and held on tight as he backed her up against the wall. He let out a primal hiss, his pelvis grinding against hers. His tongue plundered, retreated and staked claim to her mouth again.

“I don’t want this week to end,” she said, her fingers making short work of freeing his gorgeous length from his trousers, wanting him in her, desperate to hold on to him any way she could, for something had shifted in their relationship yet again, something that threatened to pull him from her.

“It doesn’t have to,” he said, his voice gruff with hope.

Had he finally succeeded in reaching her?

The thought of returning to the empty penthouse or the *casa* sickened him. He was so damned tired of living alone. He selfishly yearned for his wife in his arms and his life.

She claimed she felt the same, yet for all her protestations she was still placing her career first.

The thought went up in flames as she scraped her hands over his chest, and he marveled that he didn’t see sparks crackling in the dim light of the room. He was on fire for her, consumed with need.

He shoved her gown to her waist with one hand and snapped the thin strap of her thong with the other, the near-violent action more titillating than she could have imagined.

She kicked what remained of her panties free in a desperate rush to get rid of the encumbrance.

He growled his approval and lifted her by her waist, holding her against the wall for a heartbeat before he brought her down on his thick hot length. Sparks of passion rocketed through her.

She cried out and wrapped her legs around his lean hips, clutching him tightly to her, her face buried against his neck as that first wave of sensations tore through her. Her head spun from the sheer power of him inside her, making them one again.

Her heart thudded strong and she wished this would go on forever.

He hissed out a breath and shuddered, going still as if he, too, had nearly passed out from this explosive joining, as if savoring every quiver of flesh against flesh, every slick sweet glide within. As if he were afraid to move for fear it would shatter to pieces.

She clung to him, focused on his pulse pounding through her in an erotic beat that made her heart sing. Her muscles stretched to accommodate his length before instinctively tightening around him to milk him—draw out all he could give her. Hold him tight, as if by doing so she'd never lose this moment. Never lose him.

*“Meu amor,”* he said, pulling nearly out of her before slamming back in where he belonged. His mouth came down on hers, the kiss as greedy as the need gnawing away inside her.

She threaded her fingers through his thick hair and ground her mouth against his even as her pelvis moved against him, matching his thrusts, his passion. She kissed him deeply, determined to leave no doubt in his mind that he was her only lover. That he was her love.

They broke apart on a gasp, desperate to draw air into lungs that burned. Her skin was on fire now, the blaze within her so hot and fierce that she was certain this time the heat would consume them.

He tossed his head back, his features cast in bold relief, an erotic deity come to life, the emotions stark and clear. Passion. Pain. Possession.

He controlled the moment. Controlled her with an iron will that left her panting for more, that left her at his mercy.

She couldn't have continued her sensual assault a moment longer. Raw

passion crashed through her with the force of a tidal wave, sweeping her away on a wave of bliss.

Every inch of her was ultrasensitized, from the aching tips of her breasts that drilled into his chest to her heart that pounded in time to his —hard, fast. Wanting more. Wanting all he could give her. Wanting to hold this moment forever.

She lifted her head and stared into eyes that smoldered with black flames of passion, so intense she trembled as the carnal fire licked through her veins. She burned deep inside, forever branded by his passion, her skin so sensitized that the slight abrasion of his fingers stroking her quivering body was sweet torture.

They had made love every way imaginable, but never with this explosive passion. Never this intense and consuming. Never so powerful that she actually thought if she died now, she would die blissfully happy.

Her trembling hands stroked down his powerful back that quivered at her touch. She pinched her eyes shut, imbedding this joining on her memory, for surely she wanted this moment to last forever, to hold him in her arms, in her body, until the end of time.

For when they were locked in love, the world faded into oblivion. She focused on him moving on her, in her. They were one, their breaths mingling, their hearts pounding in tandem to a sensual melody only they could hear.

The pressure inside her was cataclysmic, propelling her into the stratosphere. She gasped and reached toward that crystalline brilliance of completion just out of her reach. A place where she could only feel and not think. A nirvana where she simply lay sated in exquisite splendor.

With Rafael.

If he wasn't with her, she couldn't go.

She held him tighter, determined to take him with her into her glorious climax. But that was ripped from her as her body splintered with sensation, trembling, tossing her up among the stars.

She screamed his name and reached for him, their entwined fingers her lifeline that surged with a maelstrom of passion. But that, too, grew

dim, a ghost image that was beautiful to see, a memory that was seared on her soul.

She was dimly aware of his body straining against her own, her body pressed against the cool wall. Of his final thrust as he reached his climax with a hoarse shout that made her smile, for she'd given him all she had to offer.

It was much later that her brain began to function, when the ruckus from the beach and the clubs became an intrusion on this special moment. She rested lax in the cradle of his embrace, the wall cold and unyielding against her spine, his body hot and hard against her own.

Her arms hung at her sides, her hands free. Her only remaining connection to him now was that he was still buried deeply inside her. But that, too, ended as he slowly eased out of her.

"That was incredible," she said, pressing a kiss against his damp chest and smiling as his skin puckered against her lips.

"You are incredible," he said, his hands curling over her bare bottom and simply holding her close.

She glided her palms up his arms to his damp shoulders, lifting her head from where she'd pillowied it on his chest to look at his face. "If I am, it is only because of you, my love."

"Everything ends eventually," he said, the note of finality in his tone threatening to dim her joy. "Then new memories can be made."

She took a relieved breath and pressed her mouth to his, grazing his lips once, twice. "Then let's make new memories tonight."

His big body tensed a fraction, and for a heartbeat she feared he'd refuse. What would she do then?

"You know what I want, Leila," he said.

She took a breath. Then another. But in the end she couldn't lie.

"I know, but I fear I might never be able to give you that, Rafael."

Rafael swore under his breath. There was no joy in knowing nothing had changed. In knowing that Leila did not trust him enough to help her overcome her fears. He was torturing himself by making love with her, knowing she'd go her way in the morning, in control of her life, but

alone.

His mouth closed over hers, not with brutal passion or driving lust but a gentle kiss that made his soul sing even as his heart clenched over at his failure to make his marriage work. At his failure to make his beautiful wife see the future they could have together, if only she would trust him.

He selfishly wanted more memories of her to hold long afterward even though that would be a torment to his soul as well. He wanted this night. Wanted all she could give him, as little as that was.

Regrets and guilt could torment him tomorrow. Tonight was theirs.

He tore his mouth from hers and she mewled a protest, pressing her mouth to his throat instead, nipping, laving, moving down his chest to suckle his skin.

Desire bolted through him like lightning. His sex jolted and snapped taut.

“You are insatiable,” he said thickly, giving her bare bottom a squeeze that brought her body pressing tightly against him again.

Such exquisite torment!

“But you like me that way,” she said, her voice a throaty purr again.

It was true. He liked that she wasn’t shy in bed with him. That she knew what pleased him, what made their pleasure all the more memorable.

If only he could calm her fears about motherhood now. How ironic that in the early days of their marriage, he’d been afraid that he’d not be a fit father, just like his own. His greatest fear was that his father’s evil would eventually come out in him, that he’d somehow turn into the monster who could turn his back on his own flesh and blood. Who could inflict pain with a cruel smile. That his life was too busy to be burdened with children yet.

It had been his suggestion to put off having a family in the early days, sure that he lacked the patience to deal with the bonds of parenthood when his marriage was so new. When he was still at the beginnings of launching his career.

Yet just two years into marriage and the lonely ache in him had

expanded. He'd realized that he needed Leila to make him whole. To ground him. To complete him. His desire to be with her and start a family with her had overwhelmed him.

He and his siblings had little contact. His mother was deeply involved helping the indigenous people, a cause he supported.

But he had vowed to keep his yearnings to himself until their third anniversary. His and Leila's careers were at crucial stages and he understood and respected that. But each day he had poured his heart into his work, and each night he had come home to a cold empty house.

He was miserable. He missed Leila terribly and he dreamed of her having his babies. Ached to spend every day and night with her, and the ache to have his own family had nearly consumed him.

But Leila wasn't ready. She may never be. He had to give her space, maybe let her go forever.

"Join me in Malibu," she said, tracing his jaw with a fingernail.

"I'm tied up in Brazil for the next month."

"Rio after that, then?"

"Yes, we'll spend the next months back home."

"That sounds good."

Rafael tightened his hold on her and strode into the bedroom, his mind too fogged with passion to think logically now.

He longed to lie beside her, cover her, have her straddle him. He'd adore her with his hands and lips and tongue until they could no longer move. Until they were sated in body and spirit.

"You will be exhausted in the morning," he promised as he stretched out beside her on the bed. "As will you."

He smiled at that, for she was right. But he craved that sweet exhaustion. He wanted to leave knowing he'd given her all the pleasure that he could. He wanted her to wake in the night and miss him being beside her.

"I will hold you to that promise, *querida*."

"As long as you hold me."

He would do that and more. Much, much more.

He splayed a hand on her flat belly and smiled as her silken skin quivered beneath his palm, the flesh warm. Smooth. Perfection.

"Make love with me," she said, reaching for him.

"With pleasure."

His fingers brushed through the carefully trimmed hair at the apex of her thighs and she shifted, lifting her hips in silent invitation. His lips captured hers in a kiss that commanded and teased in turn. He bit her full lower lip, then laved the swollen flesh even as his fingers toyed with the plump folds between her thighs.

"Please," she said, digging her fingernails into his sides to bring him closer, setting his skin on fire with her passion. "Hurry."

But he was in no rush to see these last hours slip away. He'd pleasure her with care. He'd savor every second she remained in his arms, for it could be months before he saw her again.

"Beautiful," he whispered as he trailed kisses down her neck, taking love bites that made her quiver and send a fresh rush of blood to his already engorged sex. "You were made for loving. You were made for me."

He speared one finger into her hot tight core, groaning that she was as tight and sweet as a virgin still. Sweat popped out on his brow and slicked his back. Blood roared in his ears.

He thrust another finger into her while his thumb found her pleasure point, rubbing hard and fast.

She bucked and cried out, her plea captured in his mouth, branded on his soul.

He would make this last night special for her. For him.

He set a fast tempo, drawing the moment out. His thumb found her pleasure spot and rubbed insistently as his lips captured one tight nipple and suckled hard. He laved each ripe breast until both tightened. His hand rode her hard toward an explosive climax.

He rocked back and watched her, his heart hammering so hard with need he could barely draw a breath, thinking he'd never seen anything as beautiful as Leila lost in passion. Reaching for her climax, coming undone at his touch.

She was free now. Her features open. Natural. More passionate than any professional still shot could convey.

*His.*

Before the last tremors left her, he settled between her lithe thighs and thrust into her quivering heat with a husky shout of completion. She clutched him to her with her arms, her core muscles, her sultry eyes gleaming like cut ambers.

Sweet, sweet oblivion called to him, yet he moved with slow deliberation, drawing this moment out, committing this to memory. Her nails raked down his back creating rivers of fire. Her long lean legs wrapped around his hips, holding him close, demanding his all.

He gritted his teeth, pumping into her, fingers twined now, eyes locked on each other. “Remember this,” he charged, driving into her hard, fast, pushing her into the stars that surely glittered just for her.

“Always,” she said, her voice no more than a breath.

Then she was lost, her body trembling as her climax overcame her. He sank into her once more and let himself go, lost in the flickering carnival lights of passion with her.

The last thing Rafael wanted to see was the dawn of a new day. But it came anyway.

He rolled from the bed without waking her and took a shower, but the pounding spray failed to ease the tension gripping him this morning. Last night was a clear poignant memory.

Now it was over.

He dressed, then stood by the bed, watching her sleep. He’d promised he’d wake her before he left, but what was the use in depriving her of much-needed sleep?

“I will miss you, *querida*,” he whispered.

Then with a heavy heart, he slipped from the suite.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

NEARLY two weeks had passed since they'd parted in France and still Leila had to struggle to find the strength to get out of bed each morning. Even the tranquility she felt at her home perched high in the Malibu hills was absent this time.

Part of that was because for the first time ever she'd had great difficulty falling asleep to the soothing wash of the tide. But most of her anxiety could be blamed on her heartache over being apart from Rafael.

What little rest she got was fitful—plagued with images of him loving her, his arms open for her return. Him asking her what she wanted most —her career or a family.

Dammit, she wanted both. But her fear over one drove her full tilt into pursuing the other.

Perhaps that was the reason she'd seen a return of the nightmares that had tormented her after her miscarriage.

If she hadn't received such favorable reports from the clinic regarding a critically young girl who'd reminded her of herself at that age, she'd have found it difficult to function at all. But the money spent on the girl's care was worth the heartache—worth the sacrifice. At least, that's what she tried to tell herself.

"You've put in horribly long hours this past month," her agent said when Leila finally confessed she was worried about her stamina. "I'm concerned with your exhaustion. It's showing on your face and that won't do."

Leila was well aware of that! As exhausted as she was, she'd never be able to keep up with the demands expected of her when the real work began.

"Have you seen a doctor?" her agent asked. "No. When do you expect them to send over a contract?"

"Any day now," her agent said, frowning again as if annoyed that she'd changed the subject. "Once you sign, they'll want you to be ready

to work. It would be crushing to your career if you fell off schedule and were unable to work. Or worse, if you go there looking as exhausted as you do.”

A model’s nightmare. And at her age, maintaining a youthful look was crucial. She had to do something, and if it meant taking medicine for depression again, then that’s what she’d do.

“Very well,” Leila said. “I’ll ring my physician today.”

But due to her doctor’s busy schedule and Leila’s celebrity status he agreed to see her after hours.

“Congratulations on being the spokeswoman for *Bare Souls*,” her doctor said by way of greeting, proving that even a professional whom she admired for his bluntly honest demeanor was awed by Leila’s stellar success. “I trust the festival was as exciting as the video clips of it suggested.”

“It was an experience of a lifetime,” Leila said, her heart warming over the memory of unbelievable bliss with Rafael. “Unfortunately I caught a bit of a bug there and can’t seem to shake it.”

The doctor quickly launched into his professional persona. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Exhaustion and a queasy stomach.”

“This started in France?”

She frowned. “Actually, I arrived with an upset stomach. At the time I thought I hadn’t recovered from a stomach virus.”

The doctor patiently listened as she described how food—even the smell of it—would turn her stomach. How she’d feel perfectly fine one moment only to become violently ill the next.

“It didn’t last more than a few days and then I felt fine. Except for being tired,” she admitted as the doctor gave her a careful examination.

“I’ll ask you this once because, considering your medical history, I have to rule it out,” the doctor said. “Have you had a relapse with your eating disorder?”

She’d expected the question. “No. I’ve adhered to a healthy diet and have not been tempted to revert to anorexia once since my recovery. In

fact, I have gained weight.”

“Good for you,” the doctor said after weighing her and announcing she was five pounds heavier than the last visit.

The weight gain shocked her, for though she noticed her clothes fit snugger, this was a much greater increase than she’d ever had. She’d been trying to put weight on, had promised Rafael she would, but she had always believed that this would be impossible for her to actually achieve! She had thought that when she had reached her desired ten kilos extra her first erratic impulse would be to begin an immediate and rigid diet. But she had hardly noticed the gain. It certainly hadn’t been at the forefront of her mind.

For a moment she still felt that initial gut impulse to diet, to starve herself if she must, but it wasn’t anywhere near as strong as she had feared. Was there hope for her and Rafael and the future they had once dreamed of?

But almost as soon as this joyous feeling settled in Leila’s heart, she shook herself. She’d still had a negative reaction to her weight gain, even if only slight. Added to her desolation over her miscarriage, this only confirmed her fears about pregnancy and the belief that she’d never be able to cope with the body changes she’d endure while pregnant. What if she tried, only to fail again? Where would that leave her and Rafael then?

“Leila?” The doctor smiled as she looked up and flushed, embarrassed to be caught lost in internal thought. “Let’s focus on what could cause your problems. As for the exhaustion, I imagine your schedule was intense.”

“Extremely so.”

The passionate nights she’d shared with her husband had cost her much-needed sleep. But she couldn’t divulge something that personal, that precious to her.

The doctor frowned and made a few notes. “Yet, you’ve been tired since the festival ended?”

“Yes. I can’t seem to get my energy back no matter how much sleep I get,” she said.

“What about rest? Are you having difficulty falling asleep?”

“Yes,” she admitted, and because he knew he’d ask more, she simply stated, “I have some personal issues that have troubled me of late, so sleep eludes me.”

“How is your mood? Are you depressed?”

“No,” she said, though she missed Rafael more than ever before. “But I’ve had nightmares about my miscarriage again.”

The doctor frowned. “Before I give you a prescription for an antidepressant, I want to run blood tests and see if something shows up there. It’s very possible you have an infection that is being relentless. If so, the right medicine should set you to rights in no time.”

“I hope so. I can’t afford to be sick now.”

Thirty minutes later, Leila had given blood and urine samples for office tests and was sitting in the empty reception room waiting for preliminary results. Seeing her face on so many magazine covers at once was a shock.

Each one held a variant of the same expression—a woman assured of her status.

Such a lie.

The doctor strode into the waiting room, his expression somewhere between curious and worried. “Leila, are you still taking contraceptives?”

“Faithfully,” she said, that query bringing her to her feet.

“You’re sure you didn’t forget once or twice?”

She shook her head, the first slice of worry scoring her tenuous calm. “Not once.”

He rubbed his chin, stretching the moment out. Pulling her already frayed nerves so taut she was sure they’d snap.

“When was the last time you took an antibiotic?”

“In March,” she said. “I was in Aruba on a shoot and the doctor on staff gave me an antibiotic for a urinary tract infection.”

He nodded, but his pensive expression kept her on edge. “Did you have intercourse during that time or shortly thereafter?”

She felt her face burn, for that memory, too, was one she would never forget. "Yes. My husband joined me there."

"That explains it."

Her blood turned to ice, chilling her to the bone. "What do you mean, that explains it?"

"Antibiotics can decrease the effectiveness of birth control medicine. Did you use condoms?"

Her cheeks burned hotly from the implications that sprang to mind. And the fear ... Dear God, the fear of what was wrong with her was becoming glaringly clear.

*I'm on the Pill*, she'd said at that tense moment when they were ravenous for each other again. And Rafael had needed no further urging that time or the one following it.

"What's wrong?" she asked the doctor, near frantic now, for his line of questions breathed life into her deepest fears.

"You're pregnant."

Those two words slammed into her with enough force to drop her back in her chair. "I can't be!"

"Yes, you can. The blood tests will tell for sure, but at this point I suspect you are about three months along."

His words sent instant terror crashing through her. She closed her eyes, then snapped them open again, unable to bear the memories of her miscarriage that flashed through her mind. Of losing her precious baby. She couldn't go through that again.

"Oh, my God, this can't be possible!" she said, more to herself than him, hands automatically splayed on her belly.

What an odd twist of fate. While she had been in France, adamantly telling Rafael she didn't feel ready to start a family, she had already been with child.

Rafael would be elated. As she thought of him now and the joy he would feel, her own heart lifted. A baby. Rafael's baby! If only her choking fears would allow her to feel the same intense joy now. If only she could be confident that she and her body would carry this child

safely to term. Another fear reared up to send her heart racing. “Can taking the Pill harm my baby?”

“No, but let’s suspend it until we get the tests back.” Her doctor, always to the point, added, “Leila, having a baby isn’t impossible for you, but you will have to take extra precautions because of your history with anorexia. I insist you see a topnotch obstetrician who specializes in high risk.”

“Of course.” Just like she’d done the last time. And look where that ended. “I’m terrified that I’ll have another miscarriage.” Or worse, that she’d have a relapse and destroy her baby and herself this time.

The doctor rested a hand on her shoulder, his smile understanding. “Calm down, Leila. Wait for the blood tests to come back because this could be a false positive.”

“All right.”

The next twelve hours were sheer hell, but she held her worries inside for most of them, not telling a soul of her fears, her hopes, her worries. Not calling Rafael, for she didn’t want to get his hopes up only to have them dashed.

But on the following morning, her agent dropped by with the new contract for her to sign. Of course they were needed immediately. Leila had no choice but to tell her the truth. “A pregnancy now could end your career,” her agent had said, and though both knew it could signal much more than that, neither brought it up.

“I know that,” Leila said. “But if I am pregnant, it’ll be another month at least before I’m unable to conceal it. I could work up until I have to bow out.”

And if she was pregnant, she would desperately need to hold on to her career, for the baby’s sake. She would need the regimen and control she had over that aspect of her life to help her stay relaxed over the changes to her body. And she needed Rafael.

Her agent tapped a mauve fingernail on the contract she’d just delivered. “Maybe I can get them to act fast on this deal and shoot the first round of the campaign before you have to take maternity leave.”

“I’d be more than willing to do that,” she said, suddenly allowing a

glimmer of hope to bloom inside her that there might be a way around this. If only she didn't miscarry this time.

"Right." Her agent didn't sound or look hopeful as she laid the contract on Leila's desk and jotted something on a note. But her next words shocked Leila to the very core. "In the event that you are pregnant, you could always decide to terminate. It's obviously unwanted and unplanned. Here's the name of a good clinic. They've been there for several of my clients. I'll do all I can for you, Leila, but this is your career and your choice to make."

Leila stared blindly at the address her agent handed to her before she jammed the note in her purse. Without a doubt her mother would have insisted she rid herself of a baby that would put her career on hold, just as she'd convinced Leila to be anorexic.

But the very thought of an abortion curdled Leila's stomach. She still had nightmares about her miscarriage. This baby may have been unplanned, but unwanted? Rafael longed for a child and she knew he would make a wonderful father. When she had discovered her pregnancy last time she had been ecstatic at the idea of becoming a mother, of holding her tiny baby in her arms. Then her own body had rejected that baby and the loss of that dream had left her desolate. Purposely ridding herself of her child was unthinkable, and yet she knew if she did carry this child to term a relapse would do the same thing.

"Call me as soon as you get the results," her agent said. "I need to know what you intend to do as soon as possible."

The rest of the day Leila's emotions bounced between fear, hope and despair.

"You're definitely pregnant," her doctor said.

Leila stared out at the waves crashing to the California shore through a sheen of tears. She'd never been more afraid in her life, never wished that Rafael was by her side as much as she did now.

She'd failed her first pregnancy. Had failed both him and their child. But, despite her fear now, she knew she would do everything in her power to protect this one.

"I insist you see an obstetrician," her doctor said. "Shall I arrange it?"

She took a breath and let it out slowly. “Please.”

Rafael broke the surface of the clear water and levered himself from the terrace pool. After an exhausting day poring over specs with his IT techs in Rio, he’d returned to his penthouse and headed straight for his private gym.

But even after a grueling workout, he’d not been able to rid himself of the tension that had tied him in knots since he’d left Leila. Even doing countless laps in the pool hadn’t beaten the pent-up anger that threatened to consume him over Leila’s refusal to face her fears about starting a family.

A part of him was angry with himself too, blamed himself for allowing this terror to take hold of his precious wife. He, more than anyone, understood her concerns, her trepidation. But still in the back of his mind was the old sense of rejection that had tormented him all his life.

His father had refused to acknowledge him. His relationship with his siblings was strong now, yet he had always been the odd one in the group. The bastard.

Even his own mother had spent any precious time they might have had together working for other families. He remembered one Christmas Day when he had been only small and she had dragged him along to help prepare the meal for another family. “It’s better this way, for now you will be able to eat a good meal,” she’d told him when he’d complained.

But though the leftovers had been excellent, he had been consumed with jealousy as he had watched the other children eat their meal with their parents. Had envied the presents and the laughter and just once had wanted to share such moments with his mother to himself.

But that had rarely happened.

He’d feared he’d always be adrift. Always be the one on the outside looking in at other people’s lives.

Then he’d met Leila and his hopes had surged along with his passion and love. Such beautiful plans they’d made. And yet when it came time for them to move their relationship to the next level, when having a family was just within their reach, she was too gripped with fear to try.

She lacked faith in him to believe he'd be there for her, that together they could move mountains. That he'd do whatever was necessary to help her through a pregnancy.

Though she professed she still loved him, still wanted to be a mother, in the end she had rejected him in favor of returning to her dazzling career. She clung to her fears instead of him and the bright future that was right there in their grasp.

Dammit! His money could buy anything. Take him and Leila anywhere they wished to go. He could ease the suffering of thousands with his charities. But his riches couldn't buy the close marriage he'd once envisioned he'd have with Leila. It couldn't buy her trust. All the wealth he'd accumulated wouldn't ensure she could have a healthy pregnancy.

Leila. She was always on his mind. A fever in his blood. Why the hell had she phoned him earlier today? Why hadn't she left a message?

The question needled him, for when he'd returned her call much later, there had been no answer. Was she all right?

He wrapped a thirsty towel around his hips and padded across the white terrazzo floor, calling himself a fool for worrying. Leila likely had a change of plans for her upcoming shoot. Perhaps she'd gotten another offer, one that would tear her away from him for another holiday, he thought sourly.

A trio of wide steps descended into his spacious living room. He damned sure didn't want to go on like this, living apart from his wife. Virtually living alone. Putting his dream of a family with her on hold yet again while she struggled to cope with her fears and devoted more and more time to her career.

If she couldn't, or wouldn't, take a chance on them, on a family, he could be stuck in this marital limbo for years.

That prospect rested heavily on him as he drew a *bam gelado* from the bar cooler, the bottle of beer was so cold that ice coated the outside. At least this small pleasure in his life was perfect!

He opened it and drank deeply, welcoming the shock to his senses. But when the drink was finished, the quiet penthouse still felt oppressive.

Rafael cursed loud and long. He had to get out of here before the

solitude drove him mad. Maybe he'd hit the clubs along Ipanema Beach tonight, see if he could connect with friends. With life.

Before he could take an impatient step toward his bedroom, the bell on his private elevator dinged. His brow furrowed in annoyance. Who had the audacity to pay him a visit without calling first? He certainly was in no mood for company.

But that was exactly what he was going to have, for his elevator was moving upward. Someone was coming. He intensely disliked surprise visitors and this time was no exception.

Hopefully it was just Nathaniel and his wife needing to crash here. If so, they could have the penthouse for as long as they wanted.

Certain that was who was paying a surprise visit, Rafael turned to the elevator with a forced smile just as the doors opened. The last person he expected to see stared back at him with huge hazel eyes, her gorgeous reflection caught in the many mirrors.

*“Leila? What in the hell are you doing here?”*

“We have to talk,” she said, and stepped inside the suite, dragging a small overnight case behind her.

A blast of anger and desire erupted within him, both vying for prominence, both confirming he was far from over her. “You should have returned my call.”

“I thought about it, but this was something that needed to be said face-to-face.”

He didn’t like her grave tone or the tension carving lines in her face. Had she, too, made a decision regarding their future? Did she want to end their marriage once and for all?

“So talk,” he said, striving to be light but failing as the words came out clipped. Sharp. Cold.

She took a shaky breath. Then another.

He took an instinctive step toward her, his insides twisting with concern now. She looked pale. Tired. Terrified.

Something was very wrong.

“Very well,” she said. “I’m pregnant.”

# CHAPTER NINE

RAFAEL prided himself on his iron control of his emotions, but that admission nearly brought him to his knees. His gaze scanned her body with exacting detail, but her loose clothes prevented him from seeing the evidence that proved her claim. Leila was pregnant.

He'd dreamed of it. Wanted it badly. Yet the realization that she carried his child, that they would be parents, floored him.

"You are sure of this?" he asked.

"Positive. My doctor ran blood tests to confirm it," she said, eyes wide with obvious fright. "According to the doctor, I conceived in March. That's when we met in Aru—"

"I remember, *querida*."

Remembered every delicious detail of that reunion.

He swiped a hand over his mouth, sorting this out in his head. That had been the first time he'd been with his wife in eight long months and he'd been ravenous for her. Hell, they'd been starving for each other.

He gave a nervous laugh at the tremor that rocked through him. It was unbelievable. It was a dream come true.

"You are ... what? Three months along?" he said, the reality of being a father in less than six months staggering him.

She nodded. "The reason I got pregnant was because I was taking an antibiotic at the same time as my pill, and it diminished the effectiveness of the birth control." Her eyes closed on a groan. "This is just such a shock. So much to cope with."

"Which you will do with me by your side now that the choice of having a child has been taken from you."

That earned him a pointed glare, but he shrugged off her annoyance at his choice of words. Call it a miracle. Fate. Everything he'd wanted was in his grasp. He wasn't about to jeopardize her health or their child's.

That meant he, too, would have to make major changes in his life.

Quick decisions.

A baby changed everything, his life and hers. He hoped Leila came to realize that quickly.

He crossed to her then and wrapped her in his embrace, the towel falling to the floor forgotten. His heart soared and he longed to shout for joy, but he tempered his excitement in the face of her shock.

She was unnaturally stiff, and an occasional tremor skittered through her. He had to handle her and this situation carefully.

“Perhaps it’s as you said in France,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to her temple, her forehead. “Perhaps conceiving in the face of such odds was fate’s choice to make.”

She took a stuttering breath, her body marginally losing its unbending steel. “However it happened, it was still unplanned. Is still difficult to accept, to face my worst fears.”

“We will get through this together.”

He heard her swallow, felt her tension vibrate along his own taut nerves. “There’s more, Rafael.”

He’d never seen Leila act this serious. This worried. This terrified.

*God, please don’t let there be something wrong with our baby. With Leila. Give us this.*

“Go on,” he urged gently, his own breath held now.

She took another shaky breath and stepped back from him, though still caught in the circle of his arms. Her worried gaze lifted to his. “The ultrasound I took yesterday revealed there are two babies.”

It took a moment for that to sink in. “Twins?”

She gave a wooden nod, looking as if she’d be ill any second. *Meu Deus!* She’d gone through hell trying to have one baby. How would she cope with bearing two?

For the first time he felt the sharp talons of fear scrape down his spine. Every complication he’d ever read about was now twice as dire.

“It will be all right,” he said, hoping to hell that would prove true.

“Rafael, I’m terrified.” She took a step backward, her eyes suddenly frantic. “I came here because.” She blinked rapidly, yet tears slipped

from her eyes anyway. “I don’t know what to do. I’m so afraid I’ll fail us again.”

He was at her side in an instant, gathering her close with hands that trembled. “Do not say that. Don’t even think it. Remember that together we can do anything.”

She trembled in his arms, but this time she clung to him and the fear gripping his heart eased. “You are so arrogantly sure of yourself I want to believe you.”

“Never doubt I can keep you safe, *querida*.”

Since he’d seen Leila in France, he’d endlessly researched the risks attributed to recovered anorexics during pregnancy and he had a better grasp of the inner demons she battled. He had decided then that if she’d give them a chance at this, he’d make sure that not one day went past without him telling her she grew more beautiful to him. More cherished. More loved.

“I’ll hire the best doctors. You will be fine,” he said, conviction in his voice that he desperately wanted to believe.

He shoved those doubts away and focused on the woman pressed to him now. His eyes closed and his throat worked.

She was his wife. Soon to be the mother to his children.

He was going to be a father. He would have Leila back as his wife. He’d have his family. He’d have everything.

“We’ll relocate to the *fazenda*,” he said, knowing a phone call would alert his small staff to prepare for their arrival.

“I have to return to California first.”

He was shaking his head before she finished. “There is no need when you can have your things shipped here.”

“I was afraid you’d do this.”

She twisted out of his arms and stepped back, far enough that he’d have to take a step to reach her, enough distance to force him to realize that she’d wrestled control of her emotions.

He spread his arms wide. “I am merely doing what I promised by taking care of you and our babies.”

"For now. But I know you." She lifted a hand, holding her thumb and forefinger a millimeter apart. "You are this close to turning into a tyrant."

The lightly said quip was too damned close to the horror he'd lived with all his life. His father had been a brutal autocrat and mentally unstable thanks to an indulgence in booze and drugs.

Though Rafael had never spent a moment in the man's company, he'd lived with the fear that those dark traits would show up in him one day. For Leila to suggest such a thing, even in jest, jarred him.

He took a deep breath, then another, determined to keep a clear head.  
"Why would you need to fly back to California?"

"I have a doctor's appointment that I can't miss."

"There are equally qualified obstetricians in São Paulo," he said.  
"Since you will be living here, wouldn't it be wise to align yourself with one now?"

Leila frowned and gave the room a quick glance. Looking flustered. Or was that cornered?

She bit her lip, then huffed a breath and met his gaze. "I also have a shoot next week. My final one that wraps up this contract."

Was she crazy? "I forbid you to work now that you are pregnant!"

"You forbid me? That is not your decision to make, Rafael!" she said, her hazel eyes as hard and glittering as cut ambers now.

"The hell it isn't! These are my children you carry and you are my wife!" He raked his fingers through his hair and swore. "My God! You just came here crying, worried sick that you would do something to harm our babies. And yet you insist on working?"

She pressed her palms to her head and let out a cry of frustration. "Stop it! I've discussed the dangers of finishing this contract, and my doctor assures me that I am fine as long as I stay hydrated, am careful to rest between takes and don't take risks on the set."

"I don't like it, Leila."

"I know, but hear me out." She crossed to him slowly, eyes locked on his. He read the fear and worry and love in her gaze as she slipped her

arms around him. “My agent was able to convince the designers to move the dates on the campaign so I could work without great risk at this point. Rafael, the shoot will only last a week, maybe less. I’ll be close to my doctor there.”

He didn’t like this one bit, but all the arguing in the world was not going to change her mind. Short of locking her in a room, he couldn’t hold her here.

“All right. When are you flying back to L.A.?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Fine,” he bit out, grabbing his mobile and punching in numbers. Distancing himself from her in space and emotion. “I’ll go with you.”

“That isn’t necessary ...”

He slashed the air with one hand, cutting off whatever she was about to say. “We will never be apart again, not even for a day. I won’t stand on the outside and watch my family live away from me! My children will know me.”

“You think I plan to stay there without you?” she asked, her brow drawn. “That I’d separate you from the children?”

He clamped his jaw tight, his cheeks burning from the memory of his youth. She didn’t know all the details. Couldn’t imagine the hell and shame he’d endured.

“Rafael, what’s wrong? What aren’t you telling me?”

He shrugged off her concern, determined to valiantly keep his shame hidden. “It’s nothing.”

“Yes, it is. Please. Tell me what is haunting you so,” she coaxed, her hands light on his back, her breath warm on his skin. “I’m your wife. There’s nothing you can’t tell me. Nothing.”

He hung his head, eyes pinched shut. She was right, but knowing that didn’t make it any easier to unburden his soul.

“You don’t know how hard this is,” he said, afraid to give voice to his fears.

“Then tell me so I understand.” She slipped her arms around him, and warmth seeped into him, thawing the icy dam holding his past hostage.

"You know my father disowned me," he said, his fingers digging into the window casing so hard that they went numb. "That he barred me from setting foot in Wolfe Manor."

"I remember you telling me," she said, her hands soothing. "But your eldest brother defied him and included you with your brothers and sister."

He bobbed his head, forever grateful to Jacob for that and so much more. Jacob had done more than include him. He'd left his own inheritance for Rafael upon Rafael's eighteenth birthday.

Rafael had used it wisely, eternally grateful to his brother for giving him the opportunity to make a better life for himself and his mother. Rafael had longed to thank Jacob personally, but after William Wolfe's death Jacob had suddenly left Wolfe Manor without a word. Rafael hadn't seen his elder brother until a number of years later at a computer and technology conference in Rio.

Though he'd been unable to catch his brother that night, he'd eventually tracked him down. Their initial meeting after so many years apart had been tense at first.

But as Rafael had talked about their siblings' successes and his own rapidly expanding company, Jacob had acted like his old fun self. At least to a degree, he remembered with a frown. For Jacob had shared little of his own life.

And to Rafael's frustration, Jacob had refused to take back the fortune he'd given to Rafael so long ago. "Give it to charity," Jacob had said, sending his love on to Rafael's mother before he disappeared again.

One day he'd repay Jacob for his largess. One day.

He shook off the memory and focused on Leila again.

"Because of William Wolfe's refusal to acknowledge me or to even lend financial support, my mother was forced to work two jobs," he said, again telling her what she already knew as he eased into the subject that tormented him. "She was rarely home. Her solution to keeping me occupied and out of trouble with the wrong crowd was by supplying me with outdated computers to tinker with."

It was then that he discovered what he loved most. What he could do

better than anyone. It hadn't bothered him when he discovered those early computers were the castoffs of his half brothers. To him they were golden opportunities to learn, to let his imagination soar.

"She obviously succeeded," Leila said.

He heaved a troubled sigh and faced her then. "She did all she could, Leila. One year she scrimped and saved so she could give me twenty pounds sterling for Christmas, but the real surprise was when she took me to London for a day so I could see the holiday finery and buy whatever I wanted."

"That's a beautiful memory," she said.

"It would have been," he said, the old pain of rejection returning full force. "Except, we walked by Hartington's, and there in the front window was a lavish Christmas display with the latest toys being enjoyed by my brothers and sister."

"Your father's store."

He managed a curt nod, seeing it all unfold as if it were yesterday. The cold. The pristine sprinkling of snow.

The family he longed to be part of together. Happy.

Just like then, the pain of rejection and hatred sliced through him with the precision of a honed blade, leaving him emotionally bleeding.

"My father was there as well, standing to the side of the display, watching his children perform for the crowds gathered outside." He swallowed hard, but the bitter memory lingered on his tongue, the despondency and wretched exclusion that engulfed him then was still almost unbearable. "When he saw me and my mother standing there in the cold and snow, his eyes glittered with hatred while his hard mouth twisted into a cruel smile."

Leila let out a cry of despair. "How could a father treat his child so abominably?"

It was a question that Rafael had asked himself thousands of times but could never answer. His father had been a victim to violent mood swings egged on by drink and later drugs, he'd discovered.

That realization kept Rafael from envying his siblings for what they had, for they had to suffer their father's wrath daily. When Jacob passed

his inheritance down to Rafael, his mother had bought him the best computer on the market.

And in two months he'd channeled all his past hurt and shame into a wildly creative endeavor and reprogrammed his old computer to make it even better.

There had been no stopping him from achieving what he wanted from then on.

There wouldn't be now either.

He turned and cupped her narrow shoulders, staring down into her worried face and thinking he was the luckiest man on earth to have found her. "That is why I refuse to be an absentee father, or allow us to live apart."

"Oh, Rafael! Can't you see you are nothing like that man?"

"For now. But, Leila, if those horrid traits ever emerge in me, promise me you will pack up our babies and leave me. Get as far from me as you can and don't look back."

Her face bleached of color, like driftwood left too long on a sun-baked beach. "I can't do—"

"Promise me!"

One tear slipped from her wide eyes, then another. "I promise. But I know it will *never* come to that."

He managed a stage smile, wishing he had just an ounce of her confidence.

# CHAPTER TEN

WHILE Leila slept during the flight back to Los Angeles, Rafael tended to business. Delegating was not something he did willingly or often, yet this time he had no choice.

He had made the decision to be with Leila this week, even though he had a crucial meeting planned. His family came first now.

With a few keystrokes, he'd placed his next in command in charge of the meeting. The next hour had been spent sending accompanying documents for the meeting with a lengthy letter detailing Rafael's stand on the next big step the company was to take.

He'd never left such a monumental decision in an employee's hands before. He damned sure wasn't comfortable doing so now.

But a greater risk was at stake here.

His wife. His children. *His family!*

He was ever mindful that Leila had gone through part of this before. Alone.

Try as he might, he couldn't forget the grief in her eyes when she spoke of losing their first baby. Of her very real fears now. She'd taken the knife of trust and sliced open an emotional vein, bleeding onto his heart, his soul.

He couldn't fail her. Fail them.

Rafael closed the browser on his PDA and exhaled heavily.

He was certain Leila had been honest with him. That she held no more secrets. No more demons.

If only he could say the same!

He'd yet to tell her the whole truth surrounding his birth. A fact he'd learned at the tender age of eight when cruel villagers had revealed his mother's dark secret—that William Wolfe had paid her to have sex with him.

He'd not been entirely sure what that had meant at the time. When

he'd asked his mother, she'd flushed and told him to forget about it, but he'd not been able to.

In time he learned what being paid to sleep with a man signified. A painfully demoralizing lesson that he'd never forgotten. That had left him hating his mother for nearly a year. Hating her nearly as much as he hated the brutally cruel William Wolfe!

*Yet you learned to trust your mother again, to understand her reasoning.  
To be proud of her for*

*doing what she had to do, knowing it would mark her for life.*

And what of Leila? She had deceived him by keeping her miscarriage secret. Yet his conscience was quick to remind him that he was just as much at fault for leaving her alone.

He drew in a slow deep breath and then expelled his pent-up tension in one long shuddering exhalation. The lack of sleep and emotional stress were playing hell with his mind.

He glanced at the woman softly dozing beside him and felt his heart warm even as his gut clenched with concern. If he lost her and their babies, he'd never forgive himself.

Leila's mobile began singing a haunting melody by a popular Celtic singer that disrupted the silence. Even though he found the music appealing, he was annoyed that the call would rob her of much-needed sleep.

Mouthing a curse, he followed the direction of the music to find her mobile was quite visible in her open bag beside her chair. He didn't hesitate to reach down to mute it. But he hadn't realized that in grabbing her phone, he'd pulled out a scrap of paper too.

With her phone now silent and returned to her bag, he retrieved the note that had dropped on the floor. A clinic's name was jotted on it with a Canadian address.

He certainly didn't recognize the place. Yet the hair on his nape stood on end just the same.

She had a Californian doctor. Why would she need one in Canada as well? Was there another shoot planned there that she'd neglected to tell him about?

In a matter of seconds, he'd tapped the clinic's name into his web browser. Two things happened at once.

The jet hit a pocket of air and dropped a jarring degree in altitude, waking Leila with a startled cry. And his browser window opened to reveal that the clinic was one that specialized in abortion.

A red cloud of rage drifted over him.

Had her paralyzing fear and grief convinced her that this was a possibility? Had she considered ridding herself of their babies?

"I hope we're nearly there," Leila said, oblivious to his darkening mood.

He cut her a sharp look and had the satisfaction of seeing her flinch. "Why are you carrying around the name of an abortion clinic? Were you thinking of doing this vile thing?"

Her mouth worked, but the only sound that came out was a sputtering moan that was too high-pitched and too shaky. "My agent gave me the name of that clinic in case I wanted to pursue that option. I'd forgotten I even had it."

It galled him that she'd sought her agent's advice when she should have come to him immediately! Okay, so she had come to him in the end. But what if she hadn't? What if she'd been pressured into doing the unthinkable because of her damn career?

He remembered well what she'd told him of her first rise to fame in modeling. That when her waif image began changing as she matured her mother and agent had taught her how to control her meals to the extreme. How she had often binged on food as she had been so hungry, before purging herself and then starving herself for days. How they had both nearly killed her.

"Did you even consider this?" he asked.

She reeled back as if he had slapped her. "That you would ask such a question proves you don't know me at all!"

He stiffened, ready to argue that he did know her. And in that split second he saw a distorted image of himself, railing like a crazed man consumed with rage. *Like his father?*

The comparison was sobering. Chilling. He was shamed at his own

actions.

"The greater question to ask is why is that note in your hands?" Leila asked. "Did you search my purse? Do you distrust me that much that you have to look through my possessions as if I were a rebellious teenager?"

"The note fell on the floor when I pulled your phone out to silence it."

She simply stared at him, as if expecting more.

He swore, not at her but at himself. "I'm sorry, *querida*."

Her shoulders bowed, and she almost seemed to cave in on herself. Before he could reach out to support her, she stiffened in her seat.

"After all I've told you about losing our first baby, how could you think for one moment that I'd do something like that?" she asked.

This was the steel he'd recognized in Leila from the moment he'd met her. A core of strength that hinted at a young woman who had escaped her humble beginnings and had seen more than she should have seen. Who'd been scarred by her past, much like he'd been emotionally scarred.

Yet he, in his arrogance and shock, had lashed out first. All his old doubts and fears that he'd become a monster reared its head. Yet he refused to give them breath. Refused to allow that fear to suffocate him again.

He reached over and cupped Leila's silken cheek, and breathed a sigh of relief when she didn't pull away from him. "I only wanted you to rest, *querida*."

"You have a strange way of showing concern."

For a moment he thought she'd say more, but she shook her head and closed her eyes, shutting him out as securely as if she'd slammed a door in his face. His face burned, as did his conscience.

Everything he'd ever wanted had been placed before him now. Yet here he was, being an overbearing, arrogant ass, interrogating her over an address he'd found in her purse. Assuming the worst of her instead of trusting her.

"I had to know the truth," he said.

Again she didn't reply. Didn't so much as look his way.

He swore, not waiting for his jet to taxi to a stop before ripping off his seat belt. So far he'd handled this very badly.

He knelt beside her chair and took her stiff hands in his, his gut clenching as she trembled. "Don't shut me out, *querida*."

She shook her head and he caught the telling quiver of her lower lip. "I don't want to, Rafael, but when you act so strong and dominant, I instinctively rebel against you. You cannot control me, Rafael."

He downed his head and sighed, for her pregnancy seemed to bring out the worst in him. It shamed him. Enraged him to be this way with her.

"I only want to protect you and our babies. It is clear I failed you before," he said, well aware he needed to calm the storm brewing in her soul.

"I won't fail you again. Tomorrow you will go to your shoot and I will escort you to the location and will simply be a quiet observer. No control."

She cast him a wary look. "Okay."

Okay. That was a start.

In moments, he hailed a cab to take them to her residence. And he was quickly hit with another surprise to learn that she no longer lived in the mansion in Brentwood.

When they'd met, she'd just bought the massive house. He'd seen it once and thought it garish in the extreme, but her mother had adored it and had deemed it her residence.

"When did you move?" he asked as he caught a glimpse of the low, squat house the moment the limo passed through the security gate.

"Seven months ago," she said as the taxi pulled up in front of the house that nestled back in the woods, nearly hidden.

He frowned. That would have been shortly before her miscarriage.

"Why didn't you tell me you'd moved?" he asked.

"Perhaps for the same reason you never told me you now owned a farm in São Paulo," she said, and then with a shrug, added, "You were away then, and by the time you returned ..." She shook her head and

stared out the window.

By then she'd lost their child. Recovered. And had dived right back into her career.

Her house was a blend of Spanish and American architecture and instantly reminded him of his *casa*. She would like their *fazenda*, he thought as he followed her inside. She would make it a home.

The salon was alive with color and heavy black ironwork, more of an old California than Spanish flavor. The land was thickly forested hills, broken by large grassy fields.

The concern that needled him earlier doubled. From the large expanse of glass, the view of the ocean was spectacular, but the house was fairly remote with only the occasional rooftop of neighbors tucked into the hillside marring the vista.

"Do you have guards?"

She laughed, as if the idea was ludicrous. "Electronic ones. The house and grounds are equipped with a state-of-the-art security system. It can detect when anyone breeches the perimeter."

*Not always.* Even sophisticated systems like this could be overridden by a clever hacker.

"A gated community would be safer."

She cut him a dubious look. "Because we all can be sure that our neighbor is the trustworthy sort?" Before he could respond to that, she snorted and went on. "I don't want to live that way, Rafael. I never did. Being that close to neighbors reminds me of the *favelas*. There was no privacy. No security. Everyone knew everyone's business there."

He nodded in understanding, for while he'd grown up in a small flat, there had been no secrets in the village. Which is why he preferred his hacienda carved out of the rain forest. It was a compound with an adequate staff who knew how to make themselves blend into their surroundings.

There he felt free.

And once Leila moved in with him, once their children were born, he'd no longer feel so alone, so adrift in this world.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, dropping her bag on the terrazzo floor and striding into the kitchen, her heels tapping out a beat that matched the pounding of his heart.

"Ravenous," he said, the sway of her hips leaving him carnally aching for her.

He ruthlessly tamped down that desire and joined her in a kitchen that was light and airy. After reading about the dangers Leila could face, he wouldn't make love to her until he'd spoken with a doctor. Even then he wasn't sure that *he* was willing to take that risk just to satisfy his lust.

"Where would you like to eat?" he asked, kicking himself for not insisting they stop at a restaurant before they got to her house. But then he hadn't known she'd moved out into the hills. He hadn't guessed she didn't have a housekeeper or cook on staff. "Right here."

*Leila? Cook?* She surprised him by preparing huge salads teeming with fresh vegetables, ripe cheeses and a blend of native olives. For his benefit, she added steamed chicken and a crisp Californian chardonnay.

He carried the food out onto the patio that overlooked the cliffs, marveling at how domestic she clearly was. He hadn't known that about her, but then they had spent a year apart. The meal was light, the warm breeze refreshing and the view of the glowing orange sun dipping into the sea breathtaking.

Yet he found himself more content to watch her. To just be in her company and share this quiet time with her.

And it was quiet. Isolated. How long would it take her to get medical help from here? Who'd know if she needed help if she was here alone?

"I would like to visit your doctor," he said.

Her brow narrowed the slightest bit, and for a moment he was sure she'd argue.

"I have an appointment tomorrow after the session. You're welcome to come along."

As if he needed an invitation!

"How long does it take you to reach your doctor or the hospital?" he asked.

“If the traffic is moving, I can get there in forty-five minutes.”

“That’s too long in an emergency,” he said, his insides clenching at how much precious time would be wasted to get her to a hospital. “It is less than twenty minutes from the *fazenda* to the highest-rated obstetrician and hospital in all of Brazil.”

“You’ve researched every aspect of this already?”

He gave a brief nod, for once he realized the risks she faced, he couldn’t stop until he’d left no stone unturned. “I want the best for you and our babies.”

“You want me under your control in Brazil.”

“I want you safe,” he reiterated, the ringing of her mobile an irritation he could have lived without.

While he would have preferred she let it ring, she pushed her half-eaten salad aside and took the call. “Yes, I know the place. Is the second session there as well?”

*Second session?* When had this come about?

“Okay,” she said. “It’s better to get it all done in one day if possible. Thanks for the update.”

“I gather that was your agent,” he said, rocking back in his chair to savor his wine after she ended the call.

“Yes, she always gives me a courtesy call before a session, especially if there has been a change.” She tried to stifle a yawn and failed. “The photographer wants to do both sessions tomorrow because he won’t be back in L.A. for six weeks. By then I will be showing.”

By then Rafael hoped for them to be settled into their home in São Paulo. But he resisted bringing that topic up now.

She got to her feet and yawned again. “Two flights so close together have exhausted me, so forgive me for seeking bed so soon.”

He waved aside her apology, more concerned that she was this weary. Was that normal? Should she call her doctor? Should he?

His mobile vibrated in his pocket, and he frowned, annoyed that someone had chosen that moment to ring him. He spared a moment to check the display and swore. His manager wouldn’t ring him unless it

was urgent.

“Sorry, I can’t ignore this,” he said to Leila, looking up with an apologetic frown. But she had already gone inside the house, leaving him alone with his worries and his hopes rattling through him.

The rest of the evening was lost for him in business, long phone calls and even longer hours poring over designs on his laptop. By the time he’d finished it was after midnight. His back ached and his head swam with numbers and codes, none of it making sense to him any longer.

The house was dark. Quiet.

He found the bedroom, stripped off his clothes and crawled into bed beside her, pulling her into the curve of his body. His palm splayed over her flat belly.

She moaned in her sleep and snuggled closer. He smiled, his heart full, but worry quickly intruded.

His wife. His babies. He’d never forgive himself if he failed to keep them safe.

That mantra whispered through him the following morning as he drove Leila to the session, the powerful car maneuvering the winding coastal highway with ease. The site of the shoot along the jagged rocks that spilled into the ocean was breathtaking and hinted of danger.

The photographer applauded her professionalism and Rafael appreciated his wife’s poise and beauty against a backdrop of stone and sand and sea. She made her job look effortless when he knew it was demanding.

However, the afternoon session farther up the coast in a small seaside town was entirely different, all because by the time the light was right, Leila’s sizzling energy was fading. While her body was perfect and her smile captivating, there was a remoteness in her eyes.

“Just a couple more, Leila,” the photographer said after she’d taken a break to refresh her makeup and hydrate herself. “Work with me. Let’s do this right in one so we can get out of here.”

Leila shook her arms, stretched, then struck a pose that was pure seduction. His entire body hummed with want of her.

“That’s it,” the photographer said, rapidly snapping shots and shifting

his position to capture her in a variety of angles. "Now go for the kill."

Rafael made to step back. But her gaze swung to his and locked. Hot. Glittering with challenge and sensual promise.

His mouth went dry as blood surged through him in hot urgent pulses. His sex grew heavy and stiff. Just like at the shoots in the south of France.

But unlike then, he quickly got caught up in this new dangerous game. An alarmingly public game.

It was the first time he'd let down the walls of his own control where anyone but Leila could see him. But nobody was watching him. Just her.

And right now her smoldering eyes were blazing into his.

He paced, stoking the fires of her passion with his eyes, tossing more kindling on his own. *I want you naked and under me, querida!*

She lifted her chin, quick to join him in this visual foreplay, tracking him with her eyes. As if challenging him to take her now!

There was something deeply erotic in standing in the shadows with her under the spotlight making love to him with her eyes. Of knowing everyone in the room was watching her. Aroused by her expressions, her seductive poses.

"That's it," the photographer said, rapidly snapping pictures. "Move with it, Leila. Come on, sweetheart, pour it on."

And she did just that, her hot gaze stroking every inch of Rafael until he thought he'd go up in flames. Surely his eyes smoldered with passion as they caressed the full swell of her upthrust breasts and the nipples that had hardened in want of his fingers and lips.

He ached to move with the provocative sway of her hips. To feel the press of her tight round bottom against his erection and stroke the sweet silken flesh between her thighs that would be wet and ready for him now.

By the time the photographer gave a satisfied nod and ended the session, Rafael was in agony with his unquenched desire. Leila looked ready to rip off her clothes and seduce him then and there.

But when he escorted her to the passenger door of her car, he heard

her wince. "What's wrong?" She eased onto the seat, her eyes seeming too huge, her face too flushed. But it was the hand pressed to her stomach that sent a chill streaking down his spine.

"I had a sharp pain in my side just then," she said. "I must have stayed in one position too long on the set."

Though it was possible she was right, his concern that this could be the start of a more dangerous issue stormed through his mind. But saying that would alarm her, and that was exactly what he wanted to avoid.

He slammed behind the wheel and took off down the highway toward L.A. as fast as he dared. "Call your doctor and see if he wants you to come to his office, or go to the hospital."

"I'm sure you are overreacting," she said, but she was making the call while she spoke.

Impatience crashed through him in cold icy waves as he listened to her explain her pain to whoever answered the phone. "I don't think so. No, just the one time. Okay, we are on our way."

"Where?" he asked, forcing his voice to remain calm when he was far from calm.

"The doctor's office," she said, and gave him directions.

Due to a traffic snarl, the hour and a half drive took close to two hours. Rafael's nerves stretched to the breaking point and snapped. He careered into a parking slot and slammed on the brakes, his blood as hot as the powerful engine. "It takes far too long to get from one point to another in this city."

"The traffic can be unpredictable," she said, her features tight, not with pain but concern.

He took her hand, entwining his fingers with hers, his heart skipping a beat as her tremors passed through him. "I know you trust your doctor, but I will rest easier when you are back in our home in São Paulo."

Again she nodded, and he sensed before she spoke that she wouldn't balk, that today's snarl on the freeway had proved his point. "Yes, so will I."

He finally drew a decent breath, then lifted their joined hands to place

a warm kiss on the back of her smooth flawless skin. “Good. Let’s see this doctor now.”

After the doctor examined Leila, he ordered an abdominal ultrasound. Hearing his babies’ hearts beat, seeing them move inside Leila, was a joy that was beyond anything Rafael had experienced. His emotions were so overwhelming that he was glad the room was dark and nobody asked him to speak.

“You suffered mild heat cramps caused by too much sun and a strenuous workday,” the doctor said later. “I’d recommend you cut back on your work, Leila.”

“I am,” she said, and Rafael heaved another sigh of relief.

He thanked the doctor and took Leila’s hand, loving her more than words could say. “Let’s go home, *querida*.”

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

IN THEIR five years of marriage they'd called only two places home. The first apartment they'd shared in Rio, and later the penthouse.

They'd always lived in the midst of excitement. The bustling life of Rio or the exciting nightlife along the coast.

But as Rafael's private jet landed some hours later in Ribeirão Preto, she admitted she looked forward to the change of pace. A limo was waiting to take them from the airport.

Though she was tired, her gaze devoured the beauty of the farmland. Many of the red fields lay bare, or riddled with stubble. But the fields of sugarcane teemed with workers harvesting the crop.

This life was vastly different than what either of them had known. Though he'd always talked of buying land one day, she'd never wondered why until now.

"What made you want to live out here?" she asked.

He took a deep breath and smiled. "I can breathe out here. Relax."

She nodded, finding it refreshing that they shared this. "I felt the same way about Malibu."

"You'll like it here."

And she did.

The *casa* was fabulous, though not nearly as large as she'd expected a billionaire would own. Another surprise was the house staff, which was small, almost invisible.

He gave her a brief tour of the *casa*, pride ringing in his voice. Though she could see the historical dignity of the old coffee plantation had been kept intact, his office was as he'd told her—the ultimate in high-tech.

As for the bedroom they would share, it was simply sumptuous. But it was obvious he hadn't spent much time here. The closets and dresser were nearly empty!

Just staring at that void was a shock, for no matter where she'd lived,

she was surrounded by a vast array of clothes, most supplied by the various companies she'd worked for. Always more than she'd ever need, which was why she auctioned the majority of them to help her clinic in São Paulo.

And secretly, there was another reason she felt at ease when faced with the latest wardrobe she was to model. They were all the same size —the size she was to maintain. How would she cope with a closet full of maternity clothes, all designed to accommodate her increasing abdomen? Who'd know if she gained extra pounds, or lost them? *Don't think that way!*

She wouldn't let the past ruin her future. The doctor had given her a chart that listed what weight she should safely gain during her pregnancy. As long as she stayed within those parameters, she'd be okay. She *had* to be okay!

But there was still the worry over how to spend her days. Though Rafael had promised to spend the bulk of his time here, she knew that he'd still have to put in long hours working.

She'd be alone in an area where she knew nobody. Where she had nothing to do but think. For someone with her past history, that could be a dangerous thing. More dangerous than if she worked.

So what was she going to do for the next six months? How could she keep from going stircrazy?

She crossed to the window and took in the old plantation from a new angle. She had expected a highly efficient compound, and Rafael's *fazenda* was that and more, right down to the small army of men in the fields.

“Do the workers live here or in town?”

“Most live in the dormitory I built for them.”

He pointed to a fairly large building off to the right.

She frowned, for it didn't look near large enough to house the workers plus their families. Surely Rafael wasn't exploiting the poor, not after producing a film that cut right to the heart of Rio's poverty issues.

“Isn't that terribly crowded for families?” she asked.

“The few families that I employ have their own cottages,” he said.

"The field laborers that you see are young men from the Rio slums."

She blinked, not expecting that. She looked from them to him. "All of them?"

He nodded. "I met most of these boys over a year ago when I visited the *favelas*, gathering research for our film. Some came from fractured homes, with a parent either disabled or dead from the gang wars. Most were homeless."

How well she knew that life! How desperately she'd wanted to escape it after her father's and brother's deaths.

"All of these boys were extremely eager to work for us then." Rafael frowned, as if troubled by a memory. "When the project was over, I couldn't just walk away from them."

The apprehension that had seized her lost its grip in one long exhalation. "So you gave them jobs."

"Yes, but I also gave them the chance to better their lives if they wished. Each boy is given the opportunity to take classes," he said simply. "If they have an education or steady job, they are less likely to return to the gangs."

She stared at the young men again until tears stung her eyes. They all looked healthy. Happy.

At that moment, she loved Rafael more than she thought possible. Though he was austere and often demanding on the surface, deep inside beat the heart of a very compassionate man.

Though she was proud of the clinic she'd established to help the poor girls of São Paulo afflicted with the same disease she'd battled, his work far outshined her efforts. For he was not only saving lives, he was saving the future of Brazil.

If only an opportunity like this had been offered her father and brother ...

To her surprise sudden tears filled her eyes. She blinked, trying to hold them back. But the effort was futile.

"*Querida*, what's wrong?" he asked, pulling her against his chest.

She shook her head, hating to tell him a lie. Yet how could she open

the door on the past she had locked away? How could she expect him to understand why she'd never been able to tell him about the horrible event that changed her life forever?

He gripped her arms and held her from him, his gaze boring into her, his features taut with worry. "Leila, you are scaring me. What is it that's troubling you?"

She bit back a watery laugh born of nerves, her hands finally finding purchase on his incredibly broad chest. She splayed them over hard muscle and warm flesh, letting his heat seep into her and thaw her choking fears.

"Everything that you depicted in the film *Carnival*, I lived through to one degree or another. Everything," she emphasized, hoping he'd understand that she had seen every vile thing one person could do to another at a young age, that she, too, had lived in that poverty-ridden war zone.

Rafael cared for the desperately poor. The way he managed his farm and provided for the boys he'd rescued from the slums proved that to her.

"There were no saviors like you in the *favelas* when I was a child. If there had been, perhaps my father would still be alive. Perhaps my brother would too, and have his own family and home because of the largess of someone like y—"

He pressed a finger over her lips, silencing her. "There is still much to do. You and I have the chance to make a difference for our people. That is a good thing, *querida*."

The tears she'd thought were spent stung her eyes. "We could work together on this?"

"If you wish, though I understand how much you need to control your clinic."

Fire streaked across her cheeks. How stupid she'd been to think her efforts would have gotten lost under his corporate umbrella. But then she hadn't realized his own work among the desperately poor was this extensive.

"I love you," she said.

"And you are my heart as well." He bent and kissed her tear-streaked eyes, her nose that was surely red, her lips that were raw from her nervously biting them. "Rest. I'll call you when dinner is served."

She nodded again and reluctantly pulled from his arms. The bed was monstrous. Yet she crawled on it and curled on her side, intending to rest a few minutes. The worst was over.

Or was it? she wondered, her hands sliding protectively to her stomach.

Leila woke an hour later, much rested. And ravenous! The enticing aroma drifting down the hallway only increased her appetite. When had she eaten last?

Perhaps she could beg a snack from the cook.

The thought fizzled like cola on her tongue as she stepped into the bright airy kitchen and her gaze lit on the handsome man standing at the stove. He wore snug jeans that hugged his lean hips and long legs, and a white T-shirt that emphasized his broad muscular back and golden skin.

A skillet sizzled before him and a spicy aroma escaped a pot of beans and rice, the enticing smells drifting on the warm air.

"I'm impressed," she said, coming closer. "And very grateful you're fixing what I hope is our dinner."

"*Feijoada*. My mother used to cook it when I was a boy. Coming home always makes me hunger for it." His dark eyes flicked over her. "Much like I hunger for you, *querida*."

"It's safe to say you have an unquenchable appetite," she said in a teasing tone, hiding the worry that clung deep inside her. Would his hunger for her still be as consuming once she began to grow? Would he still be as attentive?

*Stop thinking that your worth is equated with your weight!* But right now the old fears were playing hell with her hormones, a thing her doctor had warned her about.

"I hope you have fresh vegetables too," she said, breaking the intense gaze of his by moving to the refrigerator.

"Always," he said. "I suspected you would turn up your nose at

Brazilian comfort foods in favor of a salad.”

She hadn’t used to, but it seemed a lifetime ago when she had been a child as thin as a string bean and able to eat anything without putting on a gram. But once she’d turned that corner into adulthood and had begun to gain weight, she had learned to acquire a taste for fresh vegetables seasoned with the lightest dash of olive oil and enhanced with herbs.

“How is your mother?” she asked as she placed an array of vegetables on the island counter and began making a salad, smoothly switching the subject, and her thoughts, from her eating habits.

“She is well. Busy,” he added with a frown. “She manages a day care center in her village which commands all her time.”

Did she hear a note of resentment in his tone?

“That’s admirable.”

He gave a halfhearted shrug. “It’s unnecessary! I have provided well for her. She doesn’t need to hold a job.”

She wasn’t sure whether to pity him for feeling abandoned by his mother or angry with him for being so dictatorial. “Have you ever thought that she takes pleasure working with children? That she feels good about herself when she stays busy?”

“Exactly what she claims,” he said with no small degree of annoyance. “Tell me, Rafael. Are you opposed to the majority of women working or just your mother and wife?”

He cut her a sharp look, then turned his attention back to monitoring his meal which was far more tempting than her fresh vegetables. Like the man?

“My mother is of an age where she should be enjoying her life. Traveling. Taking it easy,” he said with an arrogant lift of his chin. “As for you, you know how I feel about you working once the babies are here.”

“Actually, I think something else troubles you deeply than the mere thought of me working. What it is I can’t imagine.”

He crossed to her in three angry steps and cupped her chin, forcing her to look into his dark eyes that snapped with annoyance and a deep and troubled glint that made her heart ache, made her breath catch and

a shiver pass over her.

"You want to know what concerns me about you returning to your career after the babies are born?" he bit out, heat blazing in his voice. "Fine! I'll tell you. I know you, *querida*. You are obsessed with every aspect of your career."

"I am a perfectionist," she clarified, jerking free of his grasp and the accusation she didn't want to face.

That earned her a derisive snort. "You won't be able to simply work an occasional session. One shoot will turn into three. Before long, you will be jaunting around the world again on campaigns." His eyes blazed into hers. "Who will care for our children then?"

She hiked up her chin, but her bravado just as quickly fizzled. "I will, with the help of a nurse or nanny."

He flung a hand upward and cursed. "You would leave our children in the care of a stranger so you could return to your career?"

"No! I'd take them and the nanny with me—"

"Like hell!"

There was anger and something else she could not identify in his expression. But its raw intensity startled her. Touched something in her that defused the last of her anger.

He raked a hand through his hair. "The children will live in their home. I won't have you drag them around the world."

She wasn't about to argue, for he was right. She did have control issues to deal with. And though she flung out that scenario, she wouldn't want to tear her children away from their home. To leave them subjected to the paparazzi while a session wore on and on.

"Okay. Point made," she said, conceding that easily.

He gave a clipped nod, still oddly tense. Had she touched on something else that troubled him? Something that he didn't want to face?

"I'm glad we are in agreement," he said.

"We aren't." She held her ground as his head snapped up, dark eyes locking on hers again. "I won't argue that the children are better off

staying here with me for the most part. But know this. I'm cutting back on my career, but I'm not giving it up."

He planted both hands on his hips when she suspected he was tempted to drive them through a wall.

She took in his challenging posture and carefully blanked expression and knew he'd shut her out. Knew she'd have to cut to the heart of what troubled him before they could resolve this battle. And though they'd kept their voices tempered for the most part, it was clearly a battle of wills.

Leila affected a sweet smile that had him scowling even more. "While *I* am working, I thought you could watch our children those few times I'm away. After all, they deserve to know both of their parents."

"The children will know me. I will spend much of my time here," he said. "Yes, working."

"I will make time to be with them."

"How good of you," she said, knowing that she'd touched on an issue that troubled him deeply.

"Rafael, all you have talked about since we met was having a family. You say you don't want me to work, you want me to stay home and be with the children. Yet you plan to continue with your career and *make time* for your children. Is that the kind of family you want?"

Rafael didn't respond. In fact, he didn't say a word as he took plates from a cabinet and turned back to the stove.

Leila huffed out a weary sigh. When the subject got too personal, he retreated into his shell. Right now that broad back was racked tight with tension while he focused all his attention on cooking, using it as his shield to stop her from prying beyond the tiny bit he was willing to reveal.

It was almost as if he were afraid to be responsible for his own children! As soon as that thought crossed her mind, she knew what troubled Rafael. Her proud, strong husband was afraid to be *alone* with his children. To be responsible for them. That's why he wanted her to be at home all the time, so he wouldn't have to care for his children without her. And she knew exactly who to blame.

My God, such emotional scars that beast of a man had left on the son he refused to claim!

Rafael placed a generous portion of barbecued meat on a plate and passed it to her. She took it automatically, willing him to open up to her. But he didn't say a word as he prepared a plate for himself.

Leila set her meal on the table and dropped onto a chair. Though the intense aroma was so enticing she nearly drooled, her stomach was so tied in knots she doubted she would be able to swallow a bite.

"You're not like him, Rafael," she said when he finally joined her, every inch of his gorgeously honed frame taut with glacial tension. "You'll be a good father."

"You don't know that." The uncertainty in her brave husband's voice terrified her.

She reached over and ran her palm over his corded arm, feeling the tight coil of tension that held him stiff. "I know you are gentle. Kind. Loving. Our children will adore you, and you'll spoil them rotten."

He downed his head, breathing hard, taking it all in but saying nothing. She bit her lower lip, more concerned about his fears than her own right now. And that's what had him in its grip. Fear that he would be like his father. That he might harm their children.

That was an emotion she understood far too well, she thought as she stared at her plate. She'd barely touched a bite, but then their conversation had pretty much killed her appetite.

"I need your help, Rafael." That brought his gaze up to hers, and she cringed at the inner pain reflected in those dark troubled eyes. "I'm afraid that as I grow, I won't be able to cope with the changes. That I'll skip meals. Lose weight."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Watch over me," she said. "Help me turn into the mother I want to be, and I'll do all I can to prove to you that you're a far better man, and father, than your own ever could be."

He stared at her for the longest time. Finally, he turned his hand over, the palm up in a silent plea that tugged at her heart.

"All right," he said.

Leila swallowed the well of emotion clogging her throat and reached over, resting her hand in his. His long fingers clasped hers, not tight, but she felt the intense connection clear to her soul.

A ghost of a smile touched his mouth, and the tension that pounded through her started to lessen. But they still had a mountain to climb.

Her gaze lowered to their joined hands again. This was the invisible thread that bound them together. Fragile. Tenuous.

It wouldn't take much to break it. To shatter them as well. Could two damaged souls mend the wounds of their pasts?

She hoped so, for it wasn't just about them anymore. Two precious lives depended on both of them to triumph.

\*

Much like they'd done at the film festival in France, they fell into a lazy routine that carried them through the next few weeks. She became familiar with the small house staff, immediately liking the housekeeper and cook. She learned that the gardener was from the same small village as her mother.

She and Rafael had also visited with a noted obstetrician in São Paulo. Though much of her initial fears had been eliminated at that first visit, she was still guarded about her pregnancy and her own ability to accept the inevitable changes in her body.

The days passed with her and Rafael lounging on the patio taking in the sun, watching a film together in his home theater and strolling in the garden hand in hand. Neither spoke of their fears.

She told how she'd like to decorate the nursery, hoping to get his feedback as well. His reply was that she could buy whatever she needed and hire as many as it took to get the work done. As if she didn't have the funds to do what she wished.

At night they slept in each other's arms, holding on tight as if afraid this would suddenly end. The doctor had even told them that lovemaking was fine as long as they didn't do anything too physical. But Rafael still hadn't made a move to seduce her, and she'd been so afraid he'd rebuff her that she'd not attempted any seduction.

It was those little things that needled her more and more, making her feel as if she were just another of his possessions. As if all she'd said to him that day was for naught.

She almost looked forward to the hours he was called in to his office in Rio on urgent business, an event that was occurring much more often.

Leila knew that before long Rafael would be consumed with his company again, that she'd be alone here in this beautiful hacienda, growing fat with her babies and more uncertain of what the future would hold for her career, and her marriage. And with her state of mind, for as her body began to distort, she found herself growing more and more restless.

One month after her return to Brazil, Rafael excused himself to attend to business after lunch, leaving her to enjoy the serenity of the beautifully tended garden alone. But this time one hour turned into three.

While she knew that he was indeed worried about a glitch in his new hardware that his techs had yet to perfect, a tiny voice in her head used this solitude to feed her deepest fears.

He had to have noticed the drastic changes in her body just this week. Breasts that were fuller, the nipples supersensitized to his lightest touch.

The baby bump had altered her perfectly toned body into something she'd never dreamed she'd see.

Her hands slid over the sun-warmed dress covering her belly, the increased roundness a shock that sometimes threatened to erupt into panic. She had to focus on the fact she was pregnant with twins. That the changes were normal and were to be cherished.

But it was hard to toss off the old neurosis of an eating disorder. If she had something to do besides read or watch the TV.

Frustrated and far too emotional of late, Leila swung her long tanned legs off the chaise longue and cradled her face in her hands. She'd been able to cope with having nothing to do as long as Rafael was around. Now that his company was tugging him from her, the isolation was driving her crazy.

She loosed a perturbed groan and surged to her feet. Perhaps a walk in

the garden would expend some of the restless energy building inside her.

Before she'd taken two steps toward the pebbled path, her mobile rang. She stared at the phone, the sound almost foreign to her ears as her agent hadn't called since she'd taken a maternity hiatus.

"Hello," Leila said in greeting, giddily delighted that she hadn't been totally forgotten.

"How are you feeling now?" her agent inquired.

"Wonderful." Unless she counted anxious and worried about far too many things that were out of her control. "The morning sickness is a thing of the past," she added, along with her formerly honed figure.

"Good! Are you ready to work, then?"

Leila blinked, not sure she heard her right. "I thought—God, yes!"

Her agent laughed, and in an instant a good deal of Leila's anxiety fell away. "First off, how much are you showing?"

"It's very obvious I'm pregnant."

"Excellent," her agent said, stunning her. "You've been offered a fabulous opportunity. *Fit Pregnancy* wants you to grace their cover, and I have another publication on the verge of offering for you as well. Interested?"

She danced around in a circle, literally giddy with relief. "Of course I am! Please, tell me more."

Her agent explained the allure of celebrity pregnancies in exacting detail. The first magazine wanted her to grant an interview and they wanted it right now. The second was a small spread for a major designer of maternity wear that likely wouldn't occur until next month or later.

"When word got out that you'd taken maternity leave, the offers started coming in," her agent explained. "These two are the most lucrative and will not be intrusive on your privacy. Both will do wonders at keeping your name out there."

Leila wiped the tears of joy from her eyes and laughed, feeling more energized than she had in weeks. "When do I start?"

"Tomorrow, if possible. I'll send the contract to you via courier today."

"Great! I'll sign and return them to you immediately."

She clutched the phone, eyes pinched shut and smiling like a fool.

“Good news?” Rafael asked in a tight voice that set off alarms in her head.

She whirled to face him, wondering how much he’d overheard. His expression gave nothing away, but the deep creases fanning from his dark unreadable eyes didn’t imbue confidence either.

Considering his earlier stance regarding her career, he’d not see this as good fortune. In fact, he’d likely see it as traitorous since she’d been sure that the shoot in L.A. was the last she’d do until well after she’d given birth.

“It’s fabulous news,” she said, willing her former assurance to assert itself in the face of the anger sure to come. “I’ve been offered a contract for a leading magazine with another in the offing.”

“I trust you refused.”

“I accepted.”

His handsome features pulled into a fierce expression that made a chill slip down her spine. “I forbid it!”

She shoved caution aside and hiked her chin up in a show of defiance. “You can’t order me around! This is my career and my decision to make.”

He crossed to her in an economy of fierce steps and splayed both large hands over her baby mound, his touch far hotter than the winter sun that bore down on them. “These are my children and I’ll not allow you to jeopardize their health so you can feed your own ego and continue working.”

Heat blazed in her cheeks and burned holes in her indignation. If she thought she was putting her babies in danger, she’d never agree to this. But her doctor had assured her that she was healthy.

And she was bored. So very bored just sitting here day by day.

“You’re being unreasonable.”

“I am being sane,” he said.

No, he was being a bully. “I wouldn’t put it past you to post guards to ensure that I don’t leave here.”

“I would if I thought it necessary.”

She stamped a foot, so angry she could scream.

“I hate you!”

He had the audacity to smile, a raptor’s grin that only spiked her temper. “No, you don’t, *querida*. You are angry and behaving petulantly. Once you calm down you will agree that a woman in your delicate condition should not be flying here and there, working long hours.”

She curled her fingers into fists so hard her nails bit into her palms. She absolutely abhorred that he expected her to concede defeat, but taking in the rigid set of his broad shoulders clad in a suit jacket clearly tailor-made to his impressive physique, and noting the resolute line of his arrogant jaw, told her that arguing would resolve nothing.

“Our children’s safety comes first,” he said.

Her shoulders slumped, for while she felt fine and able to work, he was right about one thing. A flight could be very taxing.

He cupped her chin, his touch gentle. “Ring your agent and tell her that you won’t be flying to any shoots.”

“Fine. You win.”

“Good.” He dropped a kiss on her mouth, lingering longer than usual, tempting her with how good they’d been in bed, how much she ached for his possession. How she longed to feel desirable in his arms again.

But he’d taken that from them too, and depriving her of that fed her other fear—he no longer found her attractive now she was gaining weight.

He ended the kiss too soon and stepped back, seeming unruffled when her blood was surging with anger and desire.

“I must be going.” He lifted his arm to check his wristwatch.

She froze, really looking at her husband this time.

The impeccably tailored suit. The dress shoes. That brusque attitude he wore whenever he was about to embark on a business trip.

“You’re leaving,” she said, annoyed with herself for being too mad at him to notice what he was wearing earlier.

“I must fly to London today and see to this dispute myself. I shouldn’t

be gone more than a few days.” One shoulder hiked in a careless shrug, a charming gesture she was sure he was unaware he even did. “A week at the most.”

He must have reached this decision this morning. It was clear that he’d never intended for her to accompany him, even if it was only to the penthouse in Rio so she would have a change of scenery.

No, he was making it quite clear that her place was here.

“Have a safe trip,” she managed to get out, feeling suddenly abandoned. Again he nodded. “You’ll phone your agent?” Her smile was so tight her face ached, the pain nearly as great as the emptiness yawning in her heart. “Of course.”

She pressed the auto dial and seethed with anger that he wasn’t going to budge until she caved in to his demand. But when her agent answered with a cheery greeting, she swallowed her anger and got right to the point.

“My husband and I have decided that it’s too risky for me to leave Brazil right now and endure a day’s session,” she said.

“Are you joking?” her agent quipped and not pleasantly.

“I’m serious. My pregnancy is high-risk, and I can’t take the chance of flying anywhere,” she said.

Rafael bent to place a quick kiss on her forehead before he strode away, clearly smug in the belief that all was well now that she wouldn’t leave Brazil.

Her agent muttered something Leila couldn’t catch. “You make it sound as if he has you under lock and key.”

“That’s uncomfortably close to the truth.” She was equally sure that he’d instructed his guards to keep her here. “I don’t know. Rafael is very overprotective.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of overbearing, but it comes out the same,” her agent said. “So that’s it. You’re passing up this gem?”

Leila closed her eyes, thinking about what she was agreeing to, carefully examining the idea that just popped into her head. Dare she?

“No,” Leila said at last when the purr of Rafael’s car faded in the

distance. “There is a way around this.”

She bit her lip and stared at her beautiful prison. The one thing that she and Rafael had always guarded closely was their privacy. It was what had allowed them to live in relative peace so many years.

If she acted on the impulse pounding inside her, she would invite the world into their home. She would infuriate Rafael!

But then, she thought with renewed ire, she was just as furious with him for his autocratic ways. He had brought this on himself, she thought.

She was bored out of her mind. Edgy. And growing more afraid of a relapse as her weight increased and Rafael absented himself from their life.

“Just because I must stay here doesn’t mean we can’t hold the shoot at my house,” she said.

“Hmm, interesting idea. But won’t your husband stop you?”

“He just left for London and won’t return for days, possibly a week,” she said. “How soon can the crew get here?”

“We can move fast. I’ll contact them now and call you with their answer.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

# CHAPTER TWELVE

RAFAEL stalked from his plane, his mood as gray as the winter clouds scudding over the São Paulo airport. This trip to London had taxed his patience to the extreme.

The glitch in production should have been dealt with swiftly from that end, yet the board had insisted that *he* be there to handle the implementation. After a rough start all had gone smoothly. The new software would be ready for its release date.

Now that problem had been sorted, he could return to Brazil. To Leila and the babies nestled in her womb.

Not a moment went by when he hadn't thought of her. Being away from his wife made him realize how very much he missed her. He'd accused her of believing her career defined her. Laughable in light of this recent business trip. He was just as guilty of the thinking the same thing.

He'd gone from computer whiz kid to techno wizard developer. He had built his company alone, had been in control of it from day one. But it had taken this latest screwup in London and a recanting of his last standoff with Leila to make him realize that it was time to delegate more duties and hand over the reins to someone else.

And at home he had to embrace the role of father.

She'd peeled the skin back and exposed his deepest fears. Could he trust that she was right? That having one bad parent didn't mean those vile traits would turn up in him.

He was willing to trust her judgment. To open himself up to having a close relationship with his children. To be the parent he'd envied other children having.

But right now the only need pounding in him was for his wife. The urge to hold her, kiss her, make love with her, built inside him as he sped along the rolling highway toward his *fazenda*, toward Leila. Because of her past health issues, and her high-risk pregnancy, he'd held

her at arm's length when he longed to do more.

As he'd promised before, there would be no more long separations. He was home to stay for the next few months.

He spared a passing glance at the coffee trees that covered the vast hills. Of the sugarcane fields that came into view.

It was all beautiful. All worth a great deal. But his family was his most cherished possession.

Family. He still wasn't accustomed to thinking in those terms. To know this time when he returned home she'd be there waiting for him.

The thick gray clouds drifting over his *fazenda* left him more anxious. It wasn't cold, but there was a chill in the air and his concern turned to Leila. Perhaps a few weeks spent in Rio would be welcome right now, for the winters there were much milder than in the Ribeirão Preto highlands.

By the time he sped up the driveway toward his *casa*, he was shaking with the need to find Leila and assure himself she was all right. The last thing he expected to see was a minivan parked in front of the house. He frowned, not recognizing it. A closer look revealed a sticker in the rear window that proclaimed it was a rental vehicle.

He could not guess who was visiting his wife, but a niggling thought in the back of his mind told him he wouldn't like it. Even if this was a welcome guest, their presence annoyed him for he wouldn't be able to have Leila to himself now.

The moment he strode in the door, his gaze sought out the housekeeper. His question to her regarding Leila's whereabouts withered on his tongue as he stared into the salon.

A woman who was a stranger to him was barking out orders like a general to the half dozen people rushing around doing various jobs. Their role instantly became clear.

His salon had been transformed into a set.

He moved forward on stiff legs, anger pulsing through him the closer he got. Auxiliary lights cast a warm glow over a cleared spot in the corner. To the left two plush chairs were angled slightly toward each other. One was empty. Leila sat in the other looking regal but weary.

"Let's try this again and get it right this time," the woman said.

Leila glanced up, her gaze locking on Rafael's. She immediately came to her feet. His tense gaze flicked over the pale blue dress that conformed to her full breasts and well-rounded belly.

The change in her pregnancy was nearly as startling as her defiance. How dare she bring a crew into their home! How dare she tire herself with work!

He set across the salon only to find the way blocked by camera cases and various accessories. "Is this the offer you promised you would refuse?"

"I'll explain later."

Leila moved onto the impromptu set, looking gorgeous and skittish and so damned determined that he knew he was in for a battle with her. A battle he certainly didn't wish to engage in considering her condition and the strangers watching and listening to their every word.

But he couldn't let things ride either. "You went against my wishes."

The color drained from her beautiful face.

"Please, Rafael. Not now."

"I'm getting a shadow on the set," the photographer complained, his voice an irritating intrusion.

A touch on Rafael's arm had his dark gaze swinging to the manager who stood at his elbow. "If you'd just step back, sir."

The roar of tense silence finally penetrated his anger. He gave the room a scathing glance, his cheeks heating uncomfortably to realize that all eyes were on him. As if he were the intruder in his own home!

"Of course," he said, moving out of the way when that was the last thing he wanted to do.

One by one the crew returned to their tasks and a low din resumed in the room. His gaze stayed on Leila, but she refused to look at him now.

He willed her to glance his way, and when that failed he willed his thoughts to penetrate her stubborn mind. *Why did you do this? Does your career mean more to you than us? Than our babies?*

"Mr. da Souza, I presume?" asked a woman. He glanced down at the

lady dressed in a tailored suit standing by his elbow. He noted the small writing pad clutched in her hand and swore silently.

"I'm sorry. I don't give impromptu interviews to the paparazzi." Especially those who invaded his privacy!

The woman smiled. "I thoroughly understand. But I'm a staff writer with the magazine, not a roving reporter. Your wife gave us a wonderful interview on her shift in priorities now that she'll be a parent. It's sure to resonate with our readers who are working mothers and must juggle both."

He chose his words with care. "I've no doubt that people are eager to hear her opinion."

"Exactly. Of course she's in a position to set demands—but knowing she places her family first and will only take choice contracts is admirable. She's a role model for many of us," she said. "Anyway, I just wanted to add my congratulations to you on your impending parenthood."

He inclined his head. "Thank you."

Her compliment had the effect of dousing cold water on his raging anger. But his stance hadn't changed regarding his wife working in her present condition.

Down deep he was worried that he and Leila would slip back into the grueling routine that had kept them apart for a year, that they'd slowly drift apart. That he'd lose not only his wife but his children. He couldn't let that happen, which is why he'd insisted she retire.

But looking at her now in their home, poised and gorgeous in her pregnancy, made him realize that he'd destroy what they had if he did force her hand. He'd destroy her if he succeeded in bending her to his will.

It was a chilling realization for him to face.

For the first time in a long time he looked at Leila—really looked at her as a professional. Not his lover. Not his wife. Certainly not the mother of his children.

Yes, she seemed a bit weary. But it was also clear that she was in control, that in her world people rushed to do her bidding—not his. That

he was simply the husband of supermodel Leila Santiago.

"Corbin, I need you to loosen up," the photographer said. "You're portraying the adoring father here, so let's get into character. Slide your arms around Leila and rest your hands on her stomach."

A tall lean man he'd not noticed before stepped from the shadows and moved to Leila. He did as the photographer asked but the action looked as strained as Leila's smile.

"You're still too tight," the photographer said. "Leila, maybe if you leaned into him."

She gave a brief nod and stepped back into the man's arms.

"Okay now, relax," the photographer said as he quickly snapped shots, moving to capture different angles. "Bow your head a bit as you come closer to her. A little more. More."

The man was now close enough to kiss her nape, and Rafael stood without breathing, watching. Hating the jealousy that coursed through him like poison.

"That should be it," the photographer said, and the man promptly dropped his hands from Leila and stepped back from her.

Rafael drew air into his starved lungs, calling himself a fool for enduring this particular torture. Though he was well aware she had posed with men many times in her career, often with little clothes on, this stretched his patience to the max.

The whole thing seemed to take an eternity when in fact it was over in a few minutes. But to watch some man lay his damned hands on his wife —on their babies!—was too much for him to tolerate.

He turned to leave, knowing if he stayed he'd likely make a fool of himself.

"Corbin's expression is wrong again and the body language was stilted," the manager said in a clearly perturbed tone that chaffed along Rafael's already frayed nerves. "I'm sorry, Leila, but we'll have to shoot this over."

Rafael turned back in time to see her shoulders droop, to hear her sigh eddy toward him. To feel her frustration reach out to him.

"If she'd relax I wouldn't feel so tense," Corbin said.

How dared this man place the blame on Leila?

"Come on, let's do it again and do it right this time," the photographer said. "We have a plane to catch in two hours."

Rafael took in the set again, jaw clenched so tightly he was sure he'd shatter bone. He was surely better off not being around to watch, and he would have left if he hadn't caught the belligerent glower the male model fixed on Leila.

That snapped the frail thread on his patience. Muttering curses in Portuguese and English, he stormed onto the set.

"What the hell are you doing?" the manager snapped.

"What I should have done earlier." Rafael shot Corbin a look that warned him to back off, which he readily did.

Leila laid a hand on his arm. "Calm down, Rafael."

"I am perfectly calm," he said in a near roar. "They want a picture of you with your husband's hands on your babies, then I will show them how it should be done."

Ignoring the dropped jaws of the manager and photographer, Rafael did what he'd ached to do since he'd walked in the door. He slipped his arms around his beautiful wife and splayed his fingers over her very round belly.

*His wife. His children. His life.*

In that instant he knew that he could lose all his earthly possessions, his company, his millions. He'd be a rich man as long as he had Leila. As long as he still had her love.

His throat felt thick, his eyes burned. "*Meu amor*," he murmured as he pulled her flush against his front, groaning as her firm bottom pressed against his groin.

Her light flower scent was divine. She felt like heaven in his arms.

He bent his head and nuzzled her nape, dropping a featherlight kiss on her silken skin. A moan tore from her to mingle with his own husky groan.

She leaned against him, her fingers curling around his wrists in a slow

sensual caress that stroked him clear to his soul. He felt the tension escape her and heaved a great shuttering breath as his followed suit.

"That's it," the photographer said. "Keep it up."

But Rafael had no intention of stopping.

This was no act. This was very real.

He'd waited five long days to hold his wife again and he wasn't going to cut this short.

He dropped kisses along the shell-like curve of her ear, the slender column of her neck and then along the gentle slope of her shoulder. He marveled at the change in her body, anxious to see more. To touch, and taste, and lose himself in her.

Dimly he heard the photographer say, "That's a wrap."

Leila turned in his embrace, her face lifted to his. His mouth came down on hers, hungry, demanding.

Her kiss was just as greedy. She threaded her fingers through his hair and held his head still, kissing him in kind. They pulled apart at last, both gasping for breath. Her chin rested on his chest. His forehead was pressed to hers.

The only sound in the room was their mingled breaths and the rapid thud of his heart. A glance at the salon confirmed the others had left. For good, he hoped.

"I am glad that is over," he said after long moments passed and their breathing returned to normal.

She stiffened in his arms, and he knew before he looked down at her face that he'd said the wrong thing to her. "So am I," she said with a good degree of heat. "I am shocked that even you would do something so brazenly arrogant as to storm onto a set and take it over."

It was, by his own admission, beyond bold. But he'd made his point. He'd gotten Leila where he wanted her—in his arms. And he'd gotten the crew out of his house.

But she was clearly not seeing it that way.

She pushed free of him, chest heaving so hard he was sure her ripe breasts would spill from her dress. And just realizing that had him

stepping closer, his hands itching to capture them. To help them free of the silky halter constraining them.

To kiss her and hold her and silence this fight before it escalated out of control. “*Querida*, don’t you see that I am simply worried about your health and our babies?”

She shook her head, and two fats tears slipped from her eyes. “Yes,” she said in a choked voice. “But *I* can’t live like a bird in a cage, waiting patiently here for you to set me free for a day. To pay me any attention while you go on with your life.”

He drove his fingers through his hair and swore. Of course she was right. She wasn’t his trophy to keep hidden away. Today confirmed that more than ever, yet how could he let her return to a career that would take her from him?

He couldn’t.

Unbidden came the memory of him when he was very young, of catching a small hare in the alley outside their cottage in Wolfestone. Of him begging his mother to let him keep it.

“I’ll take care of it,” he’d promised with all the sincerity a boy of eight could manage. “I’ll feed it and love it and keep it safe.”

“Rafael, what life will it be for the rabbit who has only known freedom?” his mother had asked.

He’d shrugged, not knowing the answer. Only thinking of what he wanted.

“But I love it,” he’d said, near tears for he’d wanted a pet so badly. Wanted a pet to love.

His mother, wise and patient, had merely smiled. “If you love something, set it free. If it doesn’t return, it was never meant to be. Remember that in all things, Rafael.”

It was a lesson he’d forgotten until now.

Leila was his wife, not his possession. To hold her prisoner here would only make her hate him one day.

“You’re right,” he said, hiding his frustration and anger and longing behind a bland mask. “I have no right to forbid you to return to work.

To force you to stay here. But I won't let us return to the hellish life we led a year ago. My children will know me, Leila. Know us!"

She pressed her palms to her head. "Rafael, I have no intention of working full-time, and I certainly don't want to live apart from you again. I had a fabulous year professionally, but on a personal level it was the worse year of my life. I lost our first child. I was terrified I'd lose you too."

"But you still want to work," he said, still worried that it would consume her again, that what he had in his grasp would slip through his fingers.

"Only when it's a worthy campaign. When it won't interfere with our family." She stepped forward, pressing a hand over his heart that was beating far too fast and too hard. "I want us to escape the pasts that haunt us. Our children deserve a mother who is healthy in mind and body. They deserve a father who is there for them as well. Who'll play with them. Teach them. Who'll love them unconditionally."

"And you think I don't want all of that as well?"

"I thought you did, but of late you've held everything inside," she said, earning a scowl from him. "You only let me see a small part of you and it isn't enough. I want you beside me. The man I can discuss my dreams and fears and wants with. My protector. My lover. But most of all, I want you to love me as I love you."

"You think ..." But he couldn't finish for she'd already accused him of holding his emotions inside.

She'd admitted she loved him. Admitted that she feared it was one-sided. How to answer that!

He did hold his thoughts and emotions close, for he had never completely felt certain of their depth before. But now he couldn't continue ignoring the truth.

"Come. I will show you how I feel." He clasped her hand and pulled her down the hall.

"You think sex solves everything?" she cried out, trying to break free, but he merely tightened his hold.

"There is almost nothing I enjoy more than making love with you," he

said, “but that isn’t my intention right now.”

“Wonder of wonders,” she said, her tone holding a peevish edge. “You could just tell me how you feel.”

He ignored her and walked straight past his office to the next room that she’d assumed was for storage. With a twist of the knob, he pushed the door open and hauled her inside.

“There is a saying my mother favors,” he said. “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

The retort Leila had been poised to voice withered on her tongue as he pulled her into the large airy room. The light tan walls were covered with framed pictures of her. Magazine covers. Layouts. Stills that she’d forgotten she’d even had taken.

She turned in a circle, certain these depicted the past five years of her marriage and a few before she’d even met Rafael. Yet not one showed them together. Just her.

It was like a shrine. The supermodel. The star shining brightly all alone.

“Why?” she asked, unable to wrap her brain around what this display meant.

“I refurbished this house with great plans to bring you here. To make this our home. But your career took another megaboost that made that impossible.” He stared down at their clasped hands, looking far too tense. Too sad. “I have never been as alone as I was then. When a box of your pictures was delivered to the penthouse, I went through them. Just seeing you made me feel alive.”

She swallowed hard, unsure if she should be flattered or concerned. She stared at her images on the walls, at Rafael, whose dark eyes glittered with some emotion she’d never seen before but that made her want to go to him, comfort him. Love him. As if she’d ever stopped doing that!

“Oh, Rafael, I wish you would have told me about this house, your plans.”

He laughed, the sound having a nervous edge to it. “That would have required me to admit that I was either needy or a romantic fool and my

pride wouldn't allow either. So I hung the pictures in my empty house and convinced myself that as long as I could look at your face, I wasn't alone."

"Did it work?" she asked after a long tense pause.

"No, for the longer I stayed here, the more I mourned what we'd lost as a couple," he said. "What I'd lost and feared I'd never regain."

"You never lost me," she said, moving into his arms, cupping his handsome face in her palms. Looking into his intense eyes and finally seeing the little boy who'd stood outside a window in London, looking at the family he'd been denied.

All he'd wanted was a home. A family. Love.

"I loved you from the moment I first met you. But after I lost our first baby, my heart broke knowing I was too afraid to give you want you wanted," she admitted, voicing the truth, making it more painful to bear. "I longed for your child, Rafael, but I feared that if I couldn't give you what you wanted I would lose you and myself."

He bit off an oath in Portuguese. "I am a fool. An idiot who doesn't deserve your love."

"We both lost our way by putting our careers first," she said, voicing the obvious and gaining a grimace from him. "While I don't regret what I've achieved, I, too, have had an epiphany here."

"And what would that be?" he asked, sliding his arms around her, holding her loosely in the circle of his embrace so she could slip free if she wished.

"That in my quiet times I desperately missed you," she said. "That I'd lie awake and wonder if you were thinking of me. That I'd begun to worry that while I was off somewhere alone and exhausted, you'd found someone else to share your life with."

"Never!" he said with enough passion to convince her. "No woman has ever captured my interest but you. I love you, Leila. I've always loved you and always will. But I won't force you to live here—"

Her heart stuttered and she pressed her fingers over his seductive mouth. "Wait! Say that again."

She felt his lips pull into a sexy smile that made her breath catch and

her body hum with a different need. “I won’t force you to live here because I—”

“No, tell me what’s in your heart,” she protested, blinking back tears that threatened to fall.

“Because I love you, *meu amor*. Today, tomorrow and forever.”

His lips closed over hers, soft, seeking, so tender that the tears she tried to hold back broke free. He loved her, and that was all that mattered to her. It had been so long since she’d heard those words. Too long.

“We can live wherever you wish,” he said.

“I don’t care as long as you’re with me.”

He gave a shaky nod, his eyes growing suspiciously moist. “As for your career, I promise I won’t stand in your way.”

She skimmed her fingers over his devastatingly handsome face, over the broad shoulders that had carried the weight of far too much grief in his life.

“I already told my agent that after this next shoot, I won’t do anymore until after the babies are born,” she said. “And then, I will be very selective about the shoots that I take because my family comes first in my life. I need to focus on these precious babies inside me, Rafael. Our babies. I still worry about relapsing, but I know if you are with me, beside me, I will be stronger. You make me strong, Rafael, and you make me feel beautiful and cherished.”

“Good, because I have handed over the day-to-day issues of my business so I can spend more time with you. Together we can do anything, Leila, and I will always be there for you no matter what happens. But I fear I will need your help, too, in being the best father I can be. I need you to show me how to care for our precious babies,” he said, his hands sweeping down her back, pulling her closer, fitting her where she belonged—next to his heart.

“Oh, Rafael, you will be an amazing father, and

I will help. We will help each other, my love, forever.” And she kissed him, showing him by her actions how much she loved him.

Ahh, in this they were always in sync. “So what do you suggest we do

with all this free time we'll have?"

"I've an idea or two," he said, his mouth returning to hers for a kiss that left no doubt of the pleasures he vowed to share with her.

Today. Tomorrow. And for the rest of their lives.

## **2008: Jacob meets Rafael ...**

Jacob's one brief encounter with his brother Sebastian might have left him intrigued by his other siblings, but Jacob knows he must leave the past where it is. A business trip to Brazil helps to clear his mind, and as Jacob sits and watches the successful young businessmen collecting their awards, his mind drifts elsewhere until he hears a familiar name being called to the podium, a familiar face from his past—and his heart simply stops in his chest ...

Jacob knows his brother Rafael has seen him. Terrified of speaking to him or facing him again, Jacob leaves hastily. But Rafael was never one to give in and he easily tracks Jacob down, requesting a meeting. Torn, Jacob isn't sure he can meet with Rafael after all this time, the shame is too much, but he knows that the time has come to face his fears.

Seeing Rafael again and talking to his beloved brother is actually easier than Jacob had ever expected it would be. As Jacob learns about his other brothers and sister he feels his heart begin to crack, pleased that they are all doing well ... without him. However, Jacob also learns that the family is not as close as it once was and, for the first time since he left, Jacob begins to consider what might have been lost by shutting himself off so completely ...

## **BEHIND THE SCENES AT WOLFE MANOR ...**

### **Share a secret about Rafael or Leila?**

Rafael was secretly afraid he would end up unloved, unwanted, without ever having a family of his own, without a real home and genuine love.

### **Who is the biggest, baddest Wolfe?**

Lucas Wolfe. He was the loose cannon—the man who had nothing at all to lose, for William Wolfe had cruelly robbed him of the identity of his maternity because of his own deep shame.

### **Which Wolfe brother did you most fancy?**

Oh, that's a difficult choice to make. I love reckless playboys and fearless race car drivers, so I was drawn to both Lucas and Alex. Of course there is Jacob, who at such a tender age proved he was a hero. And it's a given that I have a soft spot for the illegitimate son, I did so enjoy writing about Rafael! Can I say I thought they were all fascinating?

### **Which is your hero's favourite room in Wolfe Manor?**

The private parlour in Wolfe Manor. It looks out on the vast gardens and dilapidated fence, and that was where Rafael first sneaked onto Wolfe Manor property. To be inside the manor looking out is a major triumph for him, though it will never make up for all those lost years of his father denying, and disowning, him.

### **How did your hero pop the big question?**

Totally spontaneously after a night with Leila in Rio. He felt a connection to her that he'd never felt with another soul and knew he couldn't let her go.

## **JANETTE'S WRITING SECRETS ...**

**What do you enjoy most about writing as part of a continuity series; how does it differ from writing a single title?**

I loved the vast scope of a continuity, for it provided countless possibilities for each character to explore. It was also wonderful to share this sisterhood of writing with such a talented group of authors.

**What do you think makes a great hero/heroine?**

Their inner struggle. The thing that they refuse to acknowledge, but that they must vanquish in order to ever find true happiness.

**When you are writing, what is a typical day?**

Ah, my writing days are far from typical! I have a full-time job, so I write before I go to work, say from 5:30 to 7am, then after dinner and a tiny window of relaxation, I write again from 8pm to midnight. Weekends I juggle a personal life with writing. Often the writing wins out because of deadlines.

JENNIE LUCAS

**BAD BLOOD**

FORGOTTEN DAUGHTER

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

JENNIE LUCAS grew up dreaming about faraway lands. At fifteen, hungry for experience beyond the borders of her small Idaho city, she went to a Connecticut boarding school on a scholarship. She took her first solo trip to Europe at sixteen, then put off college and travelled around the US, supporting herself with jobs as diverse as gas station cashier and newspaper advertising assistant.

At twenty-two she met the man who would be her husband. After their marriage she graduated from Kent State with a degree in English. Seven years after she started writing she got the magical call from London that turned her into a published author.

Since then life has been hectic, with a new writing career, a sexy husband and two small children, but she's having a wonderful (albeit sleepless) time. She loves immersing herself in dramatic, glamorous, passionate stories. Maybe she can't physically travel to Morocco or Spain right now, but for a few hours a day, while her children are sleeping, she can be there in her books.

Jennie loves to hear from her readers. You can visit her website at [www.jennielucas.com](http://www.jennielucas.com), or drop her a note at [jennie@jennielucas.com](mailto:jennie@jennielucas.com).

# CHAPTER ONE

*SHE'D BEEN WARNED ABOUT Stefano Cortez.*

As Annabelle Wolfe climbed out of her vintage 4x4, she surveyed the sprawling white hacienda with a feeling of dread. She'd been warned constantly over the past few months: Stefano Cortez could not be trusted.

*Be careful, Miss Wolfe. You won't be able to resist him. No woman can.*

Guard your heart, miss. The broken hearts he's scattered are as infinite as stars.

I have nothing to worry about, Annabelle told herself fiercely. Stefano Cortez might be the equestrian world's most famous playboy, but he would have no effect on her. She wouldn't let those stupid warnings make her lose her nerve!

But her body still trembled, and she knew it wasn't just from all the coffee she'd gulped down on the long, dusty drive from Portugal to northern Spain.

Slamming her truck door with a bang, Annabelle stretched her stiff limbs, trying to shake off her nervous fear. It didn't work. Warnings about Stefano Cortez's charm had been repeated too often lately, repeated everywhere she'd visited for her photojournalism series on Europe's top-ten horse ranches for *Equestrian* magazine.

Stefano Cortez's ranch, Santo Castillo, was the final one of her assignment. He sold the most expensive, exclusive horses in the world, and even then, only to customers he deemed worthy. Wealthy buyers fell over themselves to get the reclusive ranch owner's approval. But that was nothing compared to what women did for his attention.

*The world's number-one stud farm, the current joke went, is owned by the world's number-one stud.*

Annabelle rolled her tight shoulders. If Stefano Cortez was even a fraction of the man he was reputed to be, he would definitely try to lure her into bed. Most men usually did, unfortunately. It was a long-standing

joke to all her colleagues and assistants.

But Stefano Cortez took seduction to a whole new level. According to rumor, no woman had ever turned Cortez down. *Ever*. And what if the rumors were true? What if by some horrible chance Annabelle fell into his bed like all the rest?

*No way*, she told herself, biting down on her lip. Annabelle didn't have a passionate bone in her body. She was cold and proud and rude—didn't men always say so after she refused their advances? At thirty-three, she was a confirmed spinster, immune to any playboy's charm. After everything she'd been through, she'd never let any man close to her.

She would be on her guard with Stefano Cortez, and if he tried any smooth moves on her, she'd laugh in his face.

Wouldn't she ...?

Looking around her, Annabelle took a deep breath. So where was he? Where was the famous playboy who would apparently try to drag her into his bed the moment he saw her?

She saw half-wild horses racing across wide gold-colored fields, beneath a blue sky that stretched forever. She heard the burble of a nearby stream and birdsong rising from the forested hills. June in northern Spain. It was so beautiful here that she turned to reach through the truck's open window for her camera bag on the seat.

A man's deep voice spoke behind her.

"So you have arrived at last."

Annabelle froze. Slinging her bag on her shoulder, she braced herself and slowly turned around.

*And nearly gasped.*

Stefano Cortez stood before her, his eyes dark and luminous as fire beneath the Spanish sun. At five-ten, Annabelle was far from petite, but she had to tilt her head back to look into his gorgeously chiseled face.

He was even more devastating in person than in photographs. At thirty-five, he was breath-takingly handsome, dark-haired and strong with a lean, muscular physique. His worn jeans fit snugly against trim hips. The sleeves of his black shirt were rolled up, revealing tanned forearms laced with dark hair, showing he clearly was not afraid of

physical labor. His chin-length dark hair was pulled back into a leather tie at the base of his neck.

He held his powerful body absolutely still as his dark eyes raked slowly over her.

Annabelle's breath disappeared from her lungs. She felt vulnerable and exposed, like a hapless gazelle beneath a lion's lazy gaze. She felt the restrained hunger of a well-fed predator who had absolute confidence in his power over her.

"Welcome to my home, Miss Wolfe," he said in softly accented English. His sensual lips curved into a half smile. "I have been waiting for you."

Their eyes locked. Heat flashed through her, heat so sudden and unexpected that she nearly stumbled back. Annabelle had to force herself to keep her face impassive, even as her trembling hands tightened around the strap of her camera bag.

"You—you have?" she said faintly.

"Your reputation precedes you." Stefano Cortez's lips curved as his gaze traced slowly down her body. "The famous Annabelle Wolfe. The beautiful photographer who travels to every corner of the world on assignment."

Struggling to hide her flushed skin and pounding heart, Annabelle lifted her chin. "And you are Stefano Cortez—the greatest stud of Santo Castillo."

She'd meant to offend him, but he only gave a low laugh. The sound of that deep, masculine amusement caused another strange flutter through her body.

He moved closer, and she licked her suddenly dry lips.

"You are as charming as I'd hoped. *Mucho gusto*," he whispered, looking down at her. "*Encantado*."

He didn't touch her, but his words were like a caress, as if he'd kissed her hand. As if he'd pressed his warm lips against her skin. His masculine power pressed upon her consciousness from all sides. She felt the power emanating off his tanned skin, the virile strength of his lean, muscular body.

She swallowed, gripping her camera bag with both hands as she muttered, “Nice to meet you.”

His sensual mouth curved, as if he knew why she did not hold out her hand in greeting, much less her cheek.

“I look forward to seven days of your company, *señorita*,” he said. “I can see this week will be pleasurable indeed.”

His dark eyes gleamed with the promise of untold delights, and Annabelle’s breath quickened. He was so close she could feel the heat emanating from his skin. She felt vulnerable. *Feminine*. She felt a strange, deep longing to let herself go, to melt her tense body into his warmth and fire.

Dear God, what madness had come over her? She had to get a grip! Even a legendary Spanish playboy couldn’t have this much power, this fast!

She set her jaw. She would show both of them that she was no fool. Because she knew, however beautiful a playboy’s face might be, his soul was always selfish and cold. She’d learned that long ago.

Annabelle drew back, glaring at him.

“How flattering,” she said acidly. “But surely you don’t intend to spend the entire week with me, Mr. Cortez. I’ve heard from multiple sources that your interest in a woman rarely lasts longer than a single night.”

Annabelle waited for him to scowl at her rudeness, but to her chagrin he only looked amused.

“In your case, Miss Wolfe,” he said softly, “I might make an exception.”

Her heart leaped in her throat. She swallowed, trying to slow her quick, shallow breath.

*Do not trust his charm. Do not*, she told herself fiercely.

“I work best alone.” She raised her chin. “So thanks, but I won’t need your company. Or want it.”

He blinked.

Annabelle took a deep breath, remembered how hard *Equestrian* had

fought to get this exclusive at Santo Castillo, and tried to modulate her tone. “Forgive me if that sounds harsh. I just don’t like to have anyone hovering over me as I work.” She tried to smile. “And I’m sure you have a great deal to do for your charity gala this weekend ...”

Abruptly, he lifted his hand toward her. She jumped back, wide-eyed and jittery as a colt. He frowned. “Allow me to carry your bag, Miss Wolfe.”

Oh. So that was why he’d reached for her. A warm blush curled her cheeks. “That’s not necessary.”

“You are my guest.”

“Thank you, but I can manage my own equipment.”

“*Por supuesto.* But it seems a great deal for one person.”

“Usually I have an assistant ...” Annabelle stopped, thinking of Marie who was now in Cornwall with her husband and newborn baby. She took a deep breath. “But I’ll be fine. Don’t worry. My photos of your ranch will be fine. The project will be fine. I work best alone,” she repeated.

“So you said.” Stefano looked down at her, and she felt a bead of sweat break out between her breasts.

“Why do you keep looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you.” Her voice trailed off as she struggled to think of words that wouldn’t sound ridiculous. *Like you want to rip off my clothes. Like you want to drink me for tea. Like you want to fling me over your shoulder, throw me*

*into your bed and lick every inch of me.* She finished awkwardly, “Like you’ve never seen a woman before.”

He barked a laugh. “I’ve seen many, as you know. And yet ...” He paused. “I cannot stop looking at you.”

“Why?”

“Because you are more beautiful than I even imagined.”

She swallowed. “I ... I am?”

He gave a single nod. “The photos I’ve seen of you hardly did you

justice.”

A chill went down Annabelle’s spine.

*The photos I’ve seen of you.*

Which photos did he mean? Recent pictures of Annabelle at her brother’s society wedding in London? Pictures of her sunburned face as she’d traveled on assignment through the Sahara and the plains of Mongolia earlier that winter?

Or ... images from nearly twenty years ago, when her drunken father had tried to kill her as a teenager?

Had Stefano Cortez stumbled upon the before-and-after images that had once been in every British newspaper—the first showing Annabelle as a blonde, smiling fourteen-year-old with rosy cheeks, the second showing her with a monster’s swollen face, her eyes like slits, a savage red whip slash peeling back her skin?

Annabelle searched Stefano’s expression with hard eyes. But only a smile curved his sensual mouth as he looked back at her.

She exhaled with a flare of her nostrils. Good. He didn’t know about her past. As juicy and notorious as the Wolfe family scandal had once been, the world had moved on. People had forgotten.

But not Annabelle. She would never forget. She still had scars to prove it. On her body. On her face. Beneath her carefully applied makeup and long blond bangs, the vestige of the violent red scar from her father’s whip would always remain.

Tilting his head, Stefano frowned down at her. “You do not care for compliments.”

“Why do you say that?” she evaded.

“You look almost ... angry.”

“It’s fine.” He was far too observant. Annabelle smoothed imaginary crumbs off her light-gray suit, then looked up. “But you should know I am well aware of your reputation. I do not intend to be another notch in your bedpost. You are wasting your compliments on me.”

His dark eyes gleamed. “No compliment on a pretty woman is ever wasted. And you are more than pretty. You are. *belleza*.”

"You're wasting your time, Casanova," she said sharply. "I am quite impossible to seduce."

His gaze deepened with interest, as if she'd just offered him an irresistible challenge. A few strands of his chin-length black hair escaped the leather tie at the nape of his neck, falling forward to frame the brilliance of his dark eyes. "So I have heard."

Pulling the heavy camera bag up higher on her shoulder, she muttered, "Afonso Moreira told me you'd be like this."

"Ah. My Portuguese rival." He lifted a sardonic eyebrow. "What else did he say?"

"He said you're a playboy who steals women's hearts, along with their virtue. He said I should lock my door."

As she looked up at him, white sunlight lit his black hair like a halo. He looked like a dark angel as his eyes became like endless pools of night.

"Moreira is right," he said quietly.

Her mouth fell open. She hadn't expected that reply in a million years. "He—he is?"

"Sí." His sensual lips curved upward. "That's exactly the kind of man I am."

Annabelle's heart pounded in her throat as she stared up into his darkly handsome face. She was dimly aware of the warm wind against her skin, loosening her chignon, blowing blond tendrils across her cheek. For an instant, she was lost in the swirling darkness of his gaze.

His eyes weren't black as she'd first thought. They were a multitude of colors as infinite as Spanish earth, obsidian and sable, coffee and burnt sienna. Full of warmth. *Full of life.*

He reached his hand toward her cheek, his fingers a millimeter from her skin, so close she could almost feel the warmth of his fingertips.

Annabelle felt her heart slow, then stop. She was only dimly aware of her feet turning in the dusty courtyard, ready to bolt back to her truck, back to London.

Stefano frowned, his forehead furrowed as he stared down at her.

Abruptly, he pulled away, dropping his hand.

"Yes, you are a beauty, Miss Wolfe," he said almost casually. "No doubt many men find you attractive. But I..."

His voice trailed off.

Annabelle's lips parted. "But you ... don't?"

Stefano gave her a half-lidded smile. "Let's just say you're not my usual type."

His words should have come as a relief to her. Instead, they felt strangely like a rejection, a low dull hurt she hadn't expected. She pressed her lips together. "Oh. Good."

"So you see," he said quietly, looking down at her, "you have no reason to be afraid of me."

Annabelle looked up at him, horrified. Had he seen her fear? Had he known she'd been briefly tempted to run away—from Santo Castillo, from her assignment, from *him*—like some terrified virgin?

But that was exactly how he made her feel. Every inch the terrified virgin she was.

But her job and reputation were on the line. Straightening her shoulders, she tossed her head and lied, "I'm not afraid of you."

"*Bien.*" He moved closer, his eyes locked with hers as he whispered, "I promise you have no need to lock your door."

Feeling like a fool, she looked away, her cheeks hot with embarrassment. She'd been so sure that the notorious playboy would try to seduce her. But she *wasn't his type*. She was apparently the one woman on earth who left him cold.

While Annabelle felt differently. She felt ... warm. More than warm. She felt hot every time he looked at her. Just being near him made her skin flush pink and her core melt.

For the first time in Annabelle's life, she felt a physical shock of awareness. Of attraction. Of. *desire*.

And he wasn't even trying to seduce her.

Funny. Either Stefano Cortez didn't realize the effect he had on women, or he didn't care. Either way, no wonder he'd left a trail of

broken hearts in his wake.

"You must let me help you." Reaching around her, Stefano opened the back of her truck. He pulled out her suitcase and duffel bag, then looked at all the photography equipment behind it. "I'll come back for the rest."

"It's not necessary."

"It is to me." He lifted her heavy suitcase on his shoulder, then casually added her duffel bag on top, as if the weight were nothing. "Follow me to your bedroom, *señorita*."

Balancing both bags easily on his shoulder, he started walking toward the whitewashed house on the other side of the courtyard.

*Follow me to your bedroom.*

Staring after him, Annabelle shivered. She tugged her camera bag up higher on her shoulder, wishing—not for the first time—that she were truly the ice queen that everyone believed her to be. Because she traveled the world for her career, people thought she was fearless. The truth was that when she wasn't behind her camera lens, she felt vulnerable. Afraid. Unable to trust anyone. *And always so alone.*

Annabelle took a deep breath. She could hear the leaves of the shadowy trees waving in the hot wind above her. Her assignment would be over in a week and she'd never have to see Stefano Cortez again. One week with him. How hard could it be?

She watched the way he moved, his long, leonine strides as he carried her bags toward the hacienda.

Stefano Cortez was the most dangerous playboy she'd ever met.

Thank heaven he was not attracted to her. God help her if he ever really tried to seduce her. She would not survive the onslaught of that sensual charm.

If he ever chose to take her ...

Would she be able to resist? Or would his fire consume her, leaving only the charred ashes of her heart behind?

Her feet shuffled in the dust, ready to run, ready to jump back in the Land Rover, start the engine and not stop till she reached London.

Instead, Annabelle forced herself to be professional and do what she

must. She slowly walked across the courtyard.

*He doesn't want me, she told herself. I'm perfectly safe.*

But as Annabelle approached the doorway of the house where he waited for her, his dark eyes seared hers. And she shivered.

All the warnings about Stefano Cortez ... were *true*.

# CHAPTER TWO

SEDUCING ANNABELLE WOLFE was not going to be easy.

But then, Stefano Cortez thought in lazy amusement as he led her down the shadowy hallway of the hacienda, truly enjoyable experiences in life rarely were easy. It was the difficulty of a challenge that gave any goal its true flavor and delight.

“We have all tried,” Afonso Moreira had growled over the phone that morning. “We tried and failed. The woman is made of ice.”

“Then you have barely tried,” Stefano had replied scornfully.

“I used all my best tricks. Woman is immune. No man could seduce her. Not even you, Cortez.”

“I can seduce any woman,” Stefano had replied arrogantly. “You’ve said it yourself.”

The older man snorted a laugh. “Annabelle Wolfe is just what you need. The ice queen will set you down a peg or two. You will not win this time, Cortez. I’ll relish your failure.”

Now, Stefano glanced back at the beautiful English photographer as she followed him down the hall. Her eyes were lowered to the tile floor. She kept her distance as they walked, careful not to touch him.

No. Seducing her would not be easy. The famously elusive Miss Wolfe had evaded most men who’d tried to hunt her. Only a few had battled their way into her bed, most famously her old tutor and mentor. Patrick Arbuthnot, a famous photographer himself, had visited Gabriel’s charity event at Santo Castillo a few years ago, and he’d sung the praises of Annabelle’s passion and the bliss of her body, claiming he’d been the man who broke her.

*The ice queen.* Stefano had heard the epithet everywhere but he couldn’t understand it. From a distance, he supposed she was attractive in a cool, restrained sort of way. If he had to pick a color for Annabelle Wolfe it would be gray, gray like her suit, gray like afternoon shadows, like twilight in winter.

But from close up, he'd been astonished by the glory of her natural beauty. She wore makeup on her skin, but no lipstick or mascara. Strange. Her eyelashes were blond, as were her eyebrows. She was tall and slender and beautiful, and yet strangely the ultimate effect was to evade notice.

Icy? No. She was prickly and rude, but her body—ah. Stefano could read what her body was telling him, and it was far warmer. He'd seen the roses in her cheeks, the warmth of her creamy skin and tremble of her slender body when he'd reached toward her in the courtyard. When he even looked at her.

He wanted to break through her cool reserve. To find out how wild she could be once she lost that restraint. Once she clutched his naked body to her own with a gasp as heat and sweat and passion mingled between them.

He could hardly wait.

And ... for the first time in a decade, he might actually have to wait. It would take time to woo this woman. Perhaps he might not have her in bed tonight. Perhaps not until tomorrow.

The challenge intrigued him. It offered a pleasurable distraction this week, his least favorite week of the year, when his land and home would be invaded—first by event planners, then wealthy tycoons and their fur-dripping wives. Stefano held his annual polo match and gala for a good cause, to help poverty-stricken local villages, and yet he hated it every year.

So he would think of Annabelle Wolfe instead. Looking at her willowy figure in the shadowy light of the hallway made his body tense in an entirely different way. It was delicious.

He paused, smiling down at her. “Would you care for a tour of the house?”

“A tour around the house?” She stared up at him, her brow furrowed. “While you’re carrying my luggage on your back?”

“So?”

She squinted at him doubtfully, then shook her head. “It’s your funeral. Sure. I would love a tour so I don’t get lost. Just make it short.”

Her words were abrasive, but Stefano could read her body. He saw the stiffness of her shoulders and tremble of her wrists. Beneath her cold demeanor, she was desperately trying to hide her attraction.

Testing her, Stefano placed one hand on the small of her back, as if to guide her.

He heard her intake of breath, the hiss through her teeth as she jumped away. She glared up at him with wide-set gray eyes.

He hid a smile. Maybe he wouldn't have to wait until tomorrow, after all.

He looked back at her innocently, motioning down the hall. "This way, Miss Wolfe."

She set her jaw, hitching her leather bag up her shoulder as she growled, "You're the tour guide. You go first."

She clearly didn't want him to touch her, not even briefly, not even over multiple layers of her buttoned-up, businesslike clothing. *Hostia*, the woman was aware of him. And she was skittish, in spite of her defiant words.

He'd never seen a woman who so badly needed to be kissed. With her hair in a tight blond chignon, she had the cool poise of Grace Kelly, and the same hint of simmering fire beneath the surface.

Stefano wanted her. Not just for the novelty of a challenge. He wanted her for pure pleasure.

But Afonso Moreira had been right. This was not a woman who would easily be tamed. Her guard was up far too high. If Stefano wooed her too strongly, she would flee. He'd seen that in the courtyard. So to calm her fears, he'd implied he did not want her, and allowed her to draw her own conclusions.

*Let's just say you're not my usual type.* It wasn't even a lie. His usual type was beautiful, willing and uncomplicated. A pretty tourist passing through the nearest village. A French socialite or New York debutante he would see once a year, or better yet, never again.

Annabelle Wolfe was unique. Special. And he would have her.

Stefano walked ahead in the hallway, listening to the clack-clack of her two-inch heels on the tile floor behind him.

"This is the main salon," he pointed out as they passed the wide arched doorway. They continued down the hall past an old suit of armor, gleaming in the dull light. "Through that door is the library. And that hallway there leads to the kitchen."

"This place is like a maze." Her voice was cool, almost sardonic. "Will I need a map?"

He slowed, walking beside her. "Somehow I doubt that. You spend your life traveling the world, do you not? From Zanzibar to the Yukon, I've heard."

"Yes."

"Don't you have a home?"

"London." Her voice was clipped, as if reluctant to give even the smallest tidbit of personal information.

"And yet are you ever there? That's hardly a home."

"The world is my home," she bit out.

"I do not envy your life," he said softly.

She lifted her chin, and her gray eyes glittered like silver shards in snow.

"For the past few months," she said, "I've visited horse ranches all over Europe. I'm curious to see how your ranch can possibly be the best. Because so far I can't see it."

He knew she was baiting him, but he still felt annoyed in spite of himself. It was one thing to criticize him, something else entirely to insult his horses or his home. "You can't?"

She shrugged. "It's a beautiful place ..."

"But?" he demanded.

Her eyes met his. "You charge double for your horses as compared to other breeders, and you often refuse to sell to customers for no reason. You make your buyers jump through ridiculous hoops."

"My horses are precious and rare. The only men who should own them are those who deserve to win races. It is not just a question of money."

"And yet you charge a vast fortune." She tilted her head and said doubtfully, "Maybe your horses are worth it ..."

“Or?” he said sharply.

“Or maybe ... you’re just a brilliant huckster who understands how to trick rich fools out of their money.”

He stared down at her. She gave him a tranquil smile, as if to say, *I have more armor than you can possibly comprehend.*

His whole body tightened painfully. His interest in bedding her now went beyond desire for her cool beauty to the passion for the hunt. For the thrill of victory. He wanted to best her.

He wanted to hear her cry out his name in the breathless sensual gasp of need.

He wanted her more than he’d wanted anything for a long, long time.

Narrowing his eyes, he evenly returned her smile. “I will be delighted to show you why we’re the best, Miss Wolfe,” he said. “I will leave you in no doubt.”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously at his tone. He kept his expression bland, then turned away.

“Come.”

Stefano walked through the wide, dimly lit hallway. As she followed him, he matched his pace to hers. If she increased her speed, so did he. If she slowed down, he did the same. He gave her brief touches, crowding her space—innocently, of course, and always in the context of pointing out various beautiful items in the house, some of them antiques of great value. He guided her past an old Spanish painting of a woman ...

“Is that a Goya?” she demanded breathlessly.

“Yes, I believe it is,” he said.

Then he led her into a large room with high ceilings of stucco and slatted wood. “This is the dining hall.” He motioned toward the long wooden table surrounded by chairs. “I eat here with the stablehands. Mrs. Gutierrez, the housekeeper, does not care for our rough manners and so often keeps to her own room. But I don’t stand on ceremony. We are equals.”

Annabelle’s pink lips curved. “Except for the fact that you own the place.”

He gave a sudden sharp grin. “*Exactamente.*”

They smiled at each other for a moment before Annabelle’s smile fell. Turning away, she gestured toward a faded family coat of arms painted on the high whitewashed stucco wall. “That’s your family crest, I suppose.”

“Mine?” He snorted a laugh. “No. My parents were servants here when this *pazo* belonged to an aristocratic family. But the family’s younger generation disliked living here and moved to a flashy *palacio* in Madrid. This house was abandoned. I bought it at a bargain price, using earnings from my brief and glorious show-jumping career.”

She gave him a sideways glance at his sardonic use of *brief* and *glorious*. “I heard about that.”

“Did you?” he said coolly.

“All the other ranch owners couldn’t wait to tell me how when you were nineteen, you stopped your horse before a jump in the middle of the London International Equestrian Show. You would have won the show-jumping prize. Instead, you dropped out of the event and never competed professionally again. No one could tell me why. Care to share?”

“Maybe some other time,” he said, never intending to do so. He turned toward the coat of arms in faded paint on the wall. “When I remodeled the house, I left that painting on the wall because it amused my mother.”

“That’s sweet. Are you close to your parents?”

“I was. They died. My mother only lived here a year.”

She looked up at him. Her gray eyes were sympathetic and even seemed to gleam with tears. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “My own mother died when I was just two.”

“I’m sorry,” he said in a low voice. “But your father? Is he alive still?”

She averted her face. Her voice was strangely muffled as she asked, “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

She’d deliberately changed the subject. He wondered about it but just said, “I’m an only child.”

“I have seven brothers,” she said. “But I rarely see them.”

He looked at her, trying to see her face.

"Your house is lovely," she said softly, refusing to meet his gaze. "But I've seen enough. Please take me to my room now."

Without waiting for his reply, she turned on her heel and left the dining hall.

Stefano followed her, watching Annabelle as she walked. She was graceful, like a dancer. She was quiet, he thought, but not hard or cold as people called her—at least, not when she wasn't actively trying to push back his advances. She was gentle. Wistful. Even sad.

Why did no one know this? Why had no one ever seen it in her?

Annabelle's steps floundered as she paused at the base of the stairs. He saw the pink color in her pale cheeks. "I don't know where we're going. You need to lead."

"Yes," he said soothingly. Leading was what he did best. Going up on the sweeping staircase—noting the way she shrank back when he passed her—he led her to the second floor.

He'd remodeled the house when he bought it, but he'd changed very little of the look. He liked the solid old furniture, the traditional architecture. He'd added modern wiring and wireless internet, replacing the windows and appliances to make them more environmentally sound. But he preferred the house as it was. It was not just home—it was a symbol of what mattered and what did not.

His father had been a lowly stable keeper, and now the stables belonged to Stefano. His mother had once been a maid here, and now he possessed every stick of furniture.

His parents had been proud of their son's success. They'd loved him. For one year, before his mother had died, they'd been happy here. If only Stefano had known sooner about her illness.

He froze the thought cold, and stopped abruptly in front of a door. "This is your room, Miss Wolfe."

Annabelle stared at him with eyes the swirling gray of storm clouds. For a moment, she frowned up at him, as if bewildered by his sudden change in mood. Then she walked past him.

It was the best guest bedroom in the hacienda, the largest except for

his own. He entered the doorway and relaxed at the comfort all around him. The room was bathed in beams of warm sunlight from the windows. The large bed had a lathed wooden frame, and a handwoven rug covered the clay tile floor. In a separate sitting area, an old desk held framed vintage photos of flowers, and an overstuffed sofa overlooked a small fireplace.

He set down her suitcase and duffel. “Will this do?”

She blinked, setting down her camera bag as she looked slowly around her. “It’s lovely.”

She glanced at the corner by the fireplace. “I can store the rest of my photography equipment there.”

“*Bien.*” He watched her face, waiting for the moment when she would see the magnificent view out the windows. He wasn’t disappointed.

Annabelle’s eyes widened. Her full pink lips parted in astonishment as she walked across the bedroom and pushed open the French doors.

Smiling, he followed her onto the veranda. Like her, he saw horses crossing the golden fields beneath the verdant sharp mountains and blue sky. As always, his heart rose in his throat at the vision of his land.

“It’s so beautiful,” Annabelle whispered, leaning on the railing and staring out at the vast view. “I’ve never seen anything so lovely.”

Stefano exhaled. He hadn’t realized until then how much her earlier words about the ranch had wounded him. But of course she hadn’t meant them, not truly. How could anyone not see the miraculous beauty of his home?

He leaned on the railing beside her. “Every morning I wake,” he said softly, “it’s like waking up in heaven. I can hardly believe Santo Castillo is mine.”

“No wonder you rarely leave here.” She threw him a sideways glance. “Your women must love it.”

“Women?”

“Your queue of lovers.”

“I don’t bring any women here. If I wish to, as you say, take a lover, I go to the village tavern and rent a room for the night.” Leaning his

elbows against the railing, he looked up at the wide blue sky. “I do not allow strangers here.”

“Except for this Saturday.”

He stared at her blankly.

“Your polo match. The charity gala,” she said with exaggerated patience. “The most exclusive event of the horse-racing world.” She shook her head with a laugh. “Did you already forget?”

He inhaled.

“Yes,” he said flatly. “I did.”

For a few happy moments, he’d forgotten his land would soon be overrun by service trucks and hired staff and white tents, by flashy cars and the sharp stiletto heels of skinny women in slinky dresses, by the flashy horse trailers of rich men who wouldn’t know a good horse from an old ass.

Annabelle blinked, staring at him. “You don’t like hosting the charity event?”

“No,” he said, looking down. “I dread it every year.”

“So why do it?”

He leaned back from her. “Perhaps I do it for publicity. Perhaps that is why my ranch is so exclusive,” he said coldly. “To get good press, to charge higher prices for my horses.”

“If you wanted more press, you would do the celebrity circuit in New York and London, you would do the horse-racing circuit in Kentucky and Dubai,” she observed. “But you stay here. You rarely even give interviews. That’s hardly the way to get press coverage.”

He looked at her. “Then perhaps I do it because I’m just *a brilliant huckster who understands how to trick rich fools out of their money.*”

An awkward pause fell between them. They were side by side, inches apart, leaning over the railing on the veranda.

“Maybe,” she said doubtfully. He heard her hesitate, then she added quietly, “Although I heard that you donated your fee for participating in this cover story to your charitable foundation. Most men would brag about something like that. You almost go out of your way to avoid

credit."

He stiffened. "So?"

"So," she said quietly, "are you some kind of saint, Mr. Cortez?" Snorting a laugh, he looked at her. "A saint?"

He gave her a sensual, heavy-lidded stare. "You know very well that I am not."

She frowned at him. "I'm just trying to understand. For the cover story. Who are you, Mr. Cortez? Who are you really?"

He stared down at her for a long moment, then left the railing. "I will go get the rest of your equipment while you unpack."

Abruptly, he opened the French doors and went back inside. But to his surprise, she followed.

"I'm coming with you to get the equipment," she said, lifting her chin.

He shook his head. "You are my guest. And it is silly how you fight me every time I try to do you the smallest kindness."

"I'm not your guest." She glared at him. "And you don't know anything about my equipment. You might break it."

"I won't," he said indignantly.

"I know you won't, because I'm coming with you."

Her cool gray eyes challenged him. Defied him. *Tempted him.*

In the cool shadows of her bedroom, standing so close in front of the bed, Stefano looked down at her. He heard the sound of her breath, saw the pink flush of her pale skin. They were so close. The temperature between them was already hot and rising.

He had the sudden impulse to push her back against her bed, to run his fingers through her lustrous blond hair and pull it down from its tight chignon. He wanted to rip off her prim suit and see her lingerie beneath, to kiss and lick and suckle her skin.

He wanted to show her how unlike a saint he really was.

He'd already taken a step toward her before he stopped. *Dios mío.* This was not his style! He was known for his seduction—not for throwing women down on a bed like a rough brute!

His hands tightened.

The more she pushed him away, the more he wanted her. The harder he would pursue her. The more absolute became his need to possess her.

He would see those cool gray eyes turn bewildered with sensual need. She would press her lips against his skin and he would hear her soft sigh. First, her surrender. Then, her release.

She would be completely his.

But not like this. Not like a barbarian. He would take her like a civilized man—by stealth. By seduction.

This time it was his own rough breathing he heard in his ears as he turned away from her.

“Unpack your suitcase,” he ordered. “I often carry equipment far heavier than yours.”

“Wait,” she bit out.

He stopped halfway to the door. “Sí?”

“I forgot to mention one condition of my work. One I insist upon with every assignment.”

He waited, folding his arms with a guarded expression.

She gave him that small, tight smile he was starting to recognize came before an attack. “You will agree not to interfere with my work. I must be allowed to speak to anyone at Santo Castillo, and photograph anything I like.”

Stefano didn’t like the sound of that. He’d had one or two reporters write about him over the past decade, and though he’d always managed to gloss over questions he didn’t wish to answer, he despised the thought of having his privacy invaded. He’d bargained only on having a few photos of his land taken in exchange for the magazine’s generous payment that local villages so sorely needed. Bad enough that he already had to dread the charity event invasion on Saturday. He would remain in control of all photographs of his home. Always.

He gave Annabelle a gracious smile, holding out his hands in a conciliatory gesture.

“We will compromise,” he said, meaning he would win. “I’ll just need

the last word on all photographs, and final approval before you send anything to the magazine.”

Annabelle’s brow furrowed in disbelief as she snapped her camera bag shut. “Give you control over my work? Absolutely not.”

Watching her from beneath hooded eyes, he shrugged with a practiced carelessness. “Then perhaps we should tell the magazine to cancel the cover story. Perhaps you should leave now.”

“Agreed.” To his shock, she picked up her suitcase and lifted her camera bag back onto her shoulder. “I’ll drive back to London and explain to *Equestrian* that you’ll be returning their fee. Grab my duffel, will you?”

Carrying her suitcase and camera bag, she headed for the door in those sturdy beige shoes.

Stefano cursed softly under his breath. A woman who not only electrified his body, who not only shied away from his pursuit, she called him on a bluff?

### *Who was this woman?*

“Wait,” he said harshly. She stopped, then turned around in the shadowy doorway. She waited, arms folded. He could not remember the last time he’d had to entice a woman, to lure her, to play the game, using all the skills of his body and mind to tame her. He could not remember the last time a woman had defied him—*beaten* him—and it made him want her all the more. He stalked toward her.

“*Vale*. You keep the final word,” he said, then added in a low voice, “But I ask you to consider the feelings of the younger members of my staff and villagers. Do not publish anything that will leave them feeling exposed or embarrassed.”

Annabelle’s eyes widened. For a moment she seemed to go pale as if in memory.

Then, throwing her head back, she glared at him. “Do I look like a celebrity gossip reporter to you?”

His eyes traced slowly over her. The truth was that she looked just like what he needed. A long, tall drink of water to a thirsty man. A mirage. Beautiful. Untouchable. And, oh, he could hardly wait to touch her. “No,

you do not."

Visibly mollified, she gave a single nod. "I will give you my word not to deliberately hurt any innocent person. Is that enough? For you?"

Stefano narrowed his eyes, looking at the determined sincerity of her face. "Sí." He held out his hand to seal the bargain. She hesitated, staring down at his hand outstretched hand. Biting her lip, she slowly placed her hand against his.

*And it was like being struck by lightning.*

Stefano felt her hand in his own, skin against skin. Shock sizzled through him as her slender fingers trembled in his rough grasp. He tightened his grip, pressing their palms together, pulling her close in a visceral reaction.

He felt staggered by sudden violent hunger. His mind filled with vivid images, of ripping off her clothes, running his hands down her bare skin. Of pulling her down on the bed, taking her, filling her as her fingernails dug into his back, as he made her scream with savage pleasure.

With a ragged intake of breath, Annabelle ripped away her hand. Her cheeks were red as she turned away.

But the damage had already been done.

*Dios mío.* Stefano's breath was shallow. She was the ultimate mystery. She was cold and hot, gentle and cruel.

He stared down at her, his body vibrating with need.

Soon, he vowed grimly, she would be pliant in his arms, spread naked across his bed. He would make her weep with pleasure. He would give her everything. He would *take* everything.

Nothing on earth would stop him from seducing her now.

# CHAPTER THREE

ANNABELLE HADN'T WANTED to shake his hand. No way. But he'd stood there with his outstretched and left her no choice.

Touching Stefano's hand had been like touching fire.

Annabelle had nearly gasped when she'd felt his naked palm, hot and rough against her own, when she felt his calloused fingertips brush the tender spot of her wrist. Electricity sizzled up her arm and ripped through her body. Her earlobes tingled, her breasts became heavy. Tension crackled through her like a lightning storm.

*Just from touching his hand.*

With a harsh intake of breath, Annabelle ripped her hand away, her cheeks burning hot. Even with her limited experience, she'd never felt anything like this.

"You win," she said hoarsely, fighting to keep her voice even. "Go get my equipment. I'll unpack."

She heard something from him that sounded like a purr of satisfaction, but she was afraid to look at his face, afraid of what he might read in her eyes. Confusion. Fear. *Desire*. "Give me the keys to your truck," he said. "It's unlocked," she muttered, still not looking at him.

"I will park it when I'm done unloading." She heard sudden amusement in his voice. "That is, unless you fear you cannot trust me not to break your car while driving it into the garage."

Reaching into her camera bag, she tossed him her keys with the merest sideways glance. But in spite of her efforts not to meet his gaze, she could not resist one tiny peek. Their eyes locked and she held her breath, caught, unable to look away. He was so beautiful.

Beams of sunlight from the windows illuminated his black hair as his dark eyes ripped through her. Stefano Cortez was so brutal, so masculine.

Her pulse hammered in her throat. Men had hit on her before, but

they'd left her completely untouched and unmoved.

Stefano made her tremble from within. *He doesn't want me*, she told herself desperately, fighting her humiliating desire to flee. *I'm not his type.*

But his dark gaze was so intense. Almost ... hungry. She saw the shadow of his chiseled jawline, the silhouette of his Roman nose, the masculine beauty of his face. He was like his house, she thought suddenly. As distant and foreign to modern life as his vast, remote ranch. Like a medieval Spanish *caballero*.

A warm breeze blew in from an open window, causing the tendrils of her hair to sweep against her cheek as their eyes held.

"*Bien*," he whispered finally. "I'll go. But I am glad you are here, Annabelle. I look forward to it. To all of it."

As he left, it was as if he took the warm sunlight with him, leaving her in darkness and cold.

When she was alone, Annabelle sagged back against the large bed. Her knees collapsed and she sat down hard on the white down comforter. Her camera bag was still clutched in her lap as she stared blankly at the beam of sunlight against the white wall.

How was she going to get through this week?

How was she going to make it?

Every time Stefano looked at her she felt weak. Just touching his hand had made her jump out of her skin.

Did every woman feel like this? No wonder she'd been warned. But all the warnings hadn't helped. She still ... burned.

Annabelle covered her face with her hands. She had to calm down. Get ahold of herself. Everywhere she traveled, from Chile to Chelsea, men of every age and social rank had thought her single status and apparent freedom was a license to make a play for her. A farmer in South Africa had once tried endlessly to entice her into his bed, but every single time she had refused his endeavors. She'd laughed when the overweight, middle-aged man had pouted like a child when he'd realized that she wasn't going to take him up on his offer. To assuage the man's hurt feelings, Annabelle had ultimately bought him a short whiskey in

the bar of the hotel she was staying in before sending him on his way.

The South African farmer hadn't been a bad sort, really. At least he'd been obvious and clear about his intentions. She preferred that straightforward attitude over the slimy, underhanded things that rich tycoons had tried, such as when an American billionaire had set up a fake "photography session" on his private island in the Caribbean. Or when a married duke had invited her to a party in the Highlands, and she'd arrived at his castle to discover his party was only for two. All of them clearly thought Annabelle, with her independent status and liberated career, was fair game and an easy lay.

Of course, Patrick's ugly lies about her, so many years ago, was probably a big reason for that.

Perhaps it would have been better if she hadn't ever gone to London to study photography. After her father's death, she'd buried herself at Wolfe Manor for years, hiding there like a ghost until she was almost twenty-two. If she'd stayed there, she wouldn't have to fight so hard now in the outside world.

But she couldn't believe that. She looked down at the camera bag in her arms. Taking pictures—whether of raucous revelers after a football match in London or of hunters pursuing deer in Africa—was the only time Annabelle felt alive. Working brought her peace. And more than peace: contentment. Even joy.

She didn't want to give that up. She wouldn't. Not for all the harassing men in the world.

"You want this by the fireplace?"

Annabelle looked up with an intake of breath to see Stefano striding into her room, barely visible beneath all the photography equipment covering his shoulders and arms.

"Yes, thank you," she said, rising unsteadily to her feet.

He set down the cameras, the umbrellas and scrims, the battery packs and studio lights, her laptop and sleek portable printer, stacking them in a well-organized arrangement into the sitting area of her bedroom. It completely filled the corner between the white fireplace and the old sofa.

Turning back to her, Stefano lifted a dark eyebrow.

“Care to see if I’ve broken anything?”

“Um,” she said incoherently, biting her lip. Staring at the equipment, she looked up at him in amazement. “You carried all of it? In a single trip?”

“It’s more efficient that way, don’t you think?”

“How on earth did you manage it?”

He shrugged. “Perhaps I’m not as clumsy as you thought.”

“I never thought you were—”

His dark gaze went through her, and her throat closed. She forgot what she’d been saying.

Stefano’s sensual lips curved into a smile. “I’ll go put your truck away now. Dinner’s at eight in the dining hall. By the way, meals are casual here.” His dark eyes seemed to twinkle as he looked over her designer suit. “If you think you can manage *that*.”

Without waiting for a reply, he turned on the worn heel of his black leather boot. It took several seconds for her to come to her senses.

“I can do casual!” she yelled after him indignantly, but he was already gone.

She exhaled, staring at the closed door. Stefano Cortez was like no other man she’d met. Beyond his masculine beauty and deviltongued charm, he had a physical strength and power that amazed her.

He’d carried all her gear. In one trip.

Usually, it took Annabelle—even with Marie’s help—four or five trips. And yet he’d carried it all on his back with ease, and then stacked it all efficiently. Looking through the equipment, she saw it was all perfectly in order. She opened the extra cases with her cameras inside, pristine and safe. She took a deep breath, trying to make her heart grow calm and her warm cheeks return to their usual cool state.

She was attracted to him, yes. But it was worse than that. She almost ... liked him. And that frightened her most of all.

Annabelle exhaled.

*Work.* That thought calmed her as nothing else could. She glanced at

her watch. She had most of the afternoon, and would make good use of it.

Not bothering to change out of her gray skirt suit, she grabbed an extra camera and put it into her bag. Going downstairs, she went out the front door.

Past the house, on the other side of the courtyard, she saw a whitewashed stable. She peeked inside. There were only twenty stalls, all filled with tall, powerful horses. The stable looked like the remnant of another era, as if she had gone back in history two hundred years to the time of carriages. Closing her eyes, she appreciatively breathed in the smell of fresh hay, horse sweat and leather.

She took a few pictures, then went on to explore the ranch farther. The fields around the sprawling, whitewashed house were wide and beautiful. She saw horses galloping beneath the sun, heard the lazy buzzing of bees in the soft air. The warmth of Santo Castillo was lush and lovely as a childhood summer.

Walking past a grove of trees, Annabelle saw a huge, modern, well-lit building behind the courtyard. A second stable? Annabelle shook her head, laughing at herself. Of course there was another stable. The Cortez horses were famous, after all, and twenty antiquated stalls were hardly enough for all the animals they raised here. Of course the ranch would be modern where it counted.

Opening the door, she walked inside the second stable.

It was enormous, with endless stalls and more horses than she could count. Then she heard laughter. She peeked around the corner and saw five young stablehands, perhaps eighteen or nineteen years old, dark-haired and skinny in T-shirts and jeans. They were working hard, two shoveling hay and three brushing down the horses, but even while so industriously employed the boys were still joking and scuffling. They reminded her of what Stefano must have been like at that age.

One of the teenagers saw her, and he cleared his throat. They all straightened, greeting her respectfully in Spanish.

*“Buenas tardes, señorita.”*

*“Necesita ayuda?”*

She shook her head. “I’m going to take some pictures, all right?” she replied in the same language.

They nodded, then went back to work. They seemed self-conscious under her scrutiny, but were too disciplined to do more than give her a shy glance or two beneath their dark lashes.

Annabelle took pictures of the smiling teenagers, of the vast white stable, of the beautiful horses, using her smaller camera with a portrait lens.

“*Gracias.*” After she left, she went out and took preliminary photos of the golden fields and sharp green mountains, testing the sunlight. She used her telephoto lens on the largest digital camera to capture some shots of the dappled brown horses galloping so gracefully, tossing their heads.

Annabelle took pictures for hours, lost in her work. By the time she came back to herself, the sun was starting to fall gently into the western horizon. The light had changed to soft gold, the color of ripe peaches.

She rubbed the dust and sweat off her forehead as she looked at her watch. Seven-thirty. She looked quickly through the images she’d taken with her digital camera. They were good, but the composition didn’t quite do justice to this magical place. Some critical component was still missing. But what?

She’d have to figure it out tomorrow. The sunset was deepening, the golden light slanting. She tucked her camera back in her bag. Work was over. Now she had no choice but to deal with the problems of the real world.

Like how she would be able to be around Stefano Cortez for an entire week.

Even having dinner with him tonight scared her. *We won’t be alone*, she told herself. Hadn’t Stefano said everyone at the ranch ate together at the long table in the dining hall? She would just sit far away from him, talk to the laughing teenagers and pretend Stefano wasn’t there.

A childish action, to be sure. But it seemed her only hope. Because as much as she tried to tell herself that her body’s strange reaction to Stefano had been a one-off, and all the warnings she’d heard must have

just thrown her, she didn't quite believe it. She would just have to be icily polite to him from now on—a layer of ice on top of a glacier, she told herself.

But she didn't believe that, either.

Even just thinking of him caused a shiver of heat down her spine. Why did her body react this way? Why?

Annabelle hurried toward the house. As she passed the large modern stable, she saw the boys were long gone. She was going to be late.

Rushing upstairs to her bedroom, she raced down the empty hallway and jumped into the shower of her en suite bathroom. She was toweling off her hair in two minutes flat. She pulled her wet hair back into a tight ponytail. Far from optimal for scar coverage, but it was all she had time to do.

Her hands trembled as she tried to hurry with her makeup, putting on thick foundation and cover-up over the long red scar that crossed her cheek and forehead. She'd repeated this routine every day, often multiple times, for almost twenty years. She could have done it blindfolded. Drawing back to survey her face in the mirror, she exhaled. At least her scar was invisible.

But she was going to be late, and she was never late for anything. Her cheeks went hot as she imagined Stefano's darkly amused drawl: *Did it take you an hour to find something casual to wear, Miss Wolfe?*

And it might. Annabelle zipped open her carefully packed suitcase. *I can do casual*, she'd told Stefano defiantly, but as she dug through her suitcase she had a sinking feeling in her heart.

Her former assistant had always packed something casual for her on every trip just in case. Unfortunately, now Annabelle was packing for herself, and she hadn't thought casual clothes were necessary. She double-checked, but the results were the same. Her only "casual" choices were an old silken robe she'd bought in Hong Kong, or a single pair of flimsy flipflops. Great.

Exhaling, she sat back on her haunches. She missed Marie.

Marie had been the most capable assistant she'd ever had, but she'd put her photography career on indefinite hold to raise her family. *My*

*camera will always be there, she'd told Annabelle, but time with my babies will be short and precious.*

Just thinking of her assistant's happy, exhausted face when Annabelle had visited her in the hospital, remembering the way Marie had cooed to her newborn baby as her accountant husband beamed at them both with an adoring, protective smile, Annabelle felt a pain in her throat as sharp as a razor blade.

With an intake of breath, she squared her shoulders. She told herself that self-pity was ugly and ridiculous and she must stop it, she must stop it *at once*.

Fine, she thought grimly as she reached for a clean pantsuit and pulled it over her sensible white cotton underwear. Let Stefano and his young ranch hands laugh at her in her dressy clothes. She didn't care. In fact, it would make it easier.

She stared at her expressionless face one last time in the mirror and pulled her blond bangs forward over her now-invisible scar in an automatic gesture. She glanced at her watch: 7:59.

Closing her door behind her, she walked through the darkened hallway and down the sweeping stairs. Though the hacienda had only two floors, it was deceptively large, perhaps even the size of Wolfe Manor. When she finally approached the dining hall, she knew she was late. She came almost at a run.

But when she reached the doorway, she slid to a halt. Her mouth fell open.

She'd expected the dining hall to be brightly lit and filled with the noise of hungry teenaged boys fighting over the bread basket across the long wooden table.

Instead, the upper corners of the soaring ceiling were dark. A cluster of white candles flickered against the whitewashed walls.

Stefano was alone at the table.

When he saw her, he rose slowly to his feet. He looked dark, powerful, like a conquistador from a savage, brutal age. Emotion pulsed through her, a longing that tore at her heart.

He looked at her with eyes glimmering and black as night. Pulling out

a high-backed wooden chair from the table, he said in a low voice, “You’re late.”

Annabelle froze, unable to move.

The flickering candlelight cast shadows on his chiseled cheekbones and shadowed, sharp jawline. His dark eyes were illuminated, as if lit by a deep fire.

He walked toward her. Stopping directly in front of her, he looked her up and down. His gaze skimmed over her tight ponytail, her designer pantsuit and low sensible heels.

“You have a funny idea of the word *casual*,” he murmured.

It broke the spell. She exhaled.

Folding her arms, Annabelle glared up at him. “It was either this or my pajamas.”

His dark eyes glinted with amusement.

“Next time,” he said, his lips curving wickedly as he looked over her body, “choose the pajamas.”

His gaze made her catch her breath. She turned away sharply to look around the dining hall. The candlelight didn’t quite reach the soaring ceilings, leaving the high windows the scarlet color of sunset. The stone fireplace on the other side of the room was shadowy and unlit.

Annabelle swallowed. “Did the electricity go out or something?”

“No.”

“Why the candles?”

“Romance, *querida*,” he said softly.

She stared at him, shocked. He looked down at her with heavy-lidded eyes, and her heart turned over in her chest.

“After all,” he said, his lips turning up in a smile, “you are here to show the readers of the magazine why Santo Castillo is the top-ranked ranch in Europe. I wanted you to see my home as it might have looked three hundred years ago. I wanted you,” he said in a low voice, “to see the magic.”

*Magic?* Annabelle already saw the magic. She was looking right at him.

"Come," he said, holding out his hand. "Join me."

She stared down at his hand, remembering what had happened last time. She looked up at his handsome face with dismay. How on earth was she supposed to keep her distance with just the two of them like this? A romantic dinner with Stefano Cortez, alone together in a candlelit hall, was not on her agenda!

Keeping her hands at her sides, she licked her lips. "But where is everyone?"

His gaze fell to her mouth. "Who?"

"The stablehands. The rest of your staff. You said they always joined you for dinner."

"Oh." Dropping his hand, he shrugged. "They finished eating an hour ago."

She exhaled. "They ate early?"

"Sí."

"Why?"

He looked down at her. "I wanted to be alone with you."

She stared up at him, her mouth a wide O. "But why—why would you want that?"

"So we could talk."

"Talk? Talk about what?" He smiled. "About your photography project, of course."

"Oh." Her cheeks burned. *Of course, she thought, angry at herself. What else would he want to talk to me about?* "Right."

Stefano walked back to the long wooden table. Against her will, Annabelle's eyes traced his lean hips and muscular thighs in his dark jeans. He'd showered and changed his clothes before dinner, and unlike her, he was decidedly casual. And so, so sexy. His black hair was still damp, pulled back tightly with a leather tie. Her eyes traced over his curved biceps to the tanned arms peeking out from his black shirt.

Going behind the table, he pulled out a chair.

"If you please," he said.

Annabelle's legs felt as if she were wading through water as she followed him to the table. She felt his gaze on her with every step. She fell into the chair.

Courteously, he pushed her chair forward under the table. He didn't touch her at all, and for about the tenth time since she'd arrived at his ranch, she felt incredibly foolish for thinking he was coming on to her. He was just being polite. Of course he was, she yelled at herself. He'd outright told her he wasn't interested in her. So why did she keep imagining that she saw molten desire in his dark eyes?

Clearly she was going mad. When she had been ten years old, her twin brother Alex had used to tease her when she played in the woods on their estate, digging in the stream, pretending each frog was a prince, every field was a distant country and that she could fly around the world in an invisible plane. Alex had laughed himself silly, telling her she was crazy, and he feared his sister would someday go all the way around the bend. Perhaps he'd been right, and all her years of loneliness had finally caught up with her.

Annabelle jumped in her chair as Stefano sat right beside her. She'd thought he would sit across from her, not next to her. He was too close. Way too close. And he smelled so good, like saddle soap and sunlight. Woodsy and clean and masculine. She took a deep breath. He smelled like everything good. Everything *dangerous*.

Trembling, she tilted as far away from him as she could without falling out of her chair. *Subtle, very subtle*, she thought sourly, but it was the best she could do when her body was screaming for her to run.

Trying to hide her pounding heart, she grabbed a linen napkin from the table and spread it across her lap. As casually as she could manage, she said, "So, what's for dinner?"

As if he hadn't noticed her leaning diagonally away from him, Stefano opened a bottle of wine. "Mrs. Gutierrez has prepared some of my favorite dishes to welcome you to the hacienda. I hope you will enjoy them."

Pouring red wine into two antique crystal goblets, he held one of them out to her. The wine shimmered crimson in the flickering candlelight. Careful not to brush his fingers with her own, she took the glass.

Looking down at her, he held out his own goblet in toast. “To every delicious pleasure.”

She clinked glasses and then drank deeply, tilting her head back and closing her eyes, waiting for the wine to hit her empty stomach. Her nerves badly needed bracing.

Stefano lifted a large silver lid off a tray and served them both. Annabelle looked down at her filled plate. Her stomach growled at the sight and mouthwatering smell of the country-style Spanish dishes: steaming hot *empanadas*, red rice and marinated chicken, spicy Basque *chorizo*, cheese and green olives. She realized that she hadn’t eaten since breakfast—coffee and a granola bar she’d devoured at a gas station on the road from Portugal—and she was starving. She put down her glass and picked up her fork.

“It’s delicious,” she blurted out after the first bite of chicken.

“*Gracias,*” Stefano said as he refilled her nearly empty wineglass with red Rioja wine. He took a sip of his own wine and Annabelle realized he’d barely had any yet, while she was apparently on her second glass. She would need to slow down. *No more Dutch courage*, she ordered herself, and she dug into her *empanada* with gusto. He smiled, watching her with satisfaction.

She hesitated, suddenly self-conscious, but the baked Spanish pastry filled with fish and tomato was so flavorful and delicious she couldn’t stop herself from taking another big bite.

“I’m probably making a pig of myself,” she said with an embarrassed laugh. “But it’s so good.”

His lips curved with approval. “On the contrary. I like a woman with appetite.”

Nervously, she wiped her mouth with a napkin and washed down the last bit of *empanada* with a bit more wine. “You’re not eating?”

“I am,” he said, taking a bite of chorizo. “I just keep getting distracted.”

“By me?”

His dark eyes gleamed. “Sí.”

Her cheeks went hot as she put down her fork. *He’s not flirting*, she told

herself fiercely. *He's probably just never seen a woman eat properly before. He's used to dating actresses and stick-figure models.* Annabelle gulped another long drink of wine, then picked up her fork again. She tried everything on her plate. When she looked up, she saw Stefano refilling her wine again. She hadn't even realized her glass was getting low.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?" she demanded with a laugh, only half joking.

"Would it be difficult?"

No. She felt half-drunk already just being near him. But she lifted her chin.

"I can handle my liquor," she said, although the truth was she handled liquor mainly by staying away from it. She was famous for always sipping mineral water. She'd been teased for it, but having a drunkard for a father and drug addict for a mother tended to make a person more cautious.

And by the increasing dizziness in Annabelle's brain she was drinking too much wine, too fast. Candlelight flickered against the high stucco walls of the dining hall as she looked at him. She suddenly realized her body had shifted in the chair. Instead of leaning away, she was now leaning forward, almost touching him. He could move a few inches and touch her.

*Her attempt to calm her nerves with wine wasn't working.*

"You're different than people say," Stefano said in a low voice. His dark eyes caressed her face.

Annabelle stiffened, hating the thought of being the subject of gossip. She knew people called her an ice queen. People could be so vicious, even cruel, not caring whom they hurt in their own amusement. "I have no interest in hearing what people say about me."

He shook his head, smiling.

"Yet another way," he murmured, "in which you are different from any woman I've met."

"Because I don't swoon at your feet?"

Stefano gave that same low, sensual laugh.

“*Sí*,” he said with visible amusement. “Most women do swoon, believe it or not. But it’s more than that.”

As he looked at her, searing her with his intense gaze, she felt her skin flush with heat and her body start to melt. *Please, don’t let me swoon*, she prayed. *Don’t let me make an utter fool of myself.*

Setting her wineglass down, she sat back in her chair. “You said you wished to talk about work. Let’s talk about that.”

“Is work really all you care about?” “Yes.”

“I can hardly believe such a beautiful woman would say such a thing,” he said softly.

Was he flirting with her? Was he?

She started to reach for her wine, then caught herself and angrily pushed it away.

Stupid wine!

Stupid candlelight!

Stupid handsome man who was like a dark prince out of a sensual dream!

“My work is all that matters,” she bit out forcefully. “It is all I care about.”

He stared at her, his brow furrowed.

“That’s wrong,” he said. “You are a young, desirable woman. Enjoy your work, yes. But there’s so much more to life.”

“Not for me,” she said, lifting her chin.

“Especially for you. I admire your work a great deal, Annabelle. You have an eye like no other photographer today. So take my advice or leave it, as you choose.” He sat back in his chair casually, breaking the spell. “But you might consider taking pictures of the yearlings on the upper slope ...”

As they discussed various aspects of the ranch, he gave her suggestions about people and animals and the best angles of his ranch’s rugged landscape. They finished their dinner, but just as Annabelle started to relax into a business discussion, he suddenly asked with gleaming eyes, “So have you decided about me yet?”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you decided if I am *a brilliant huckster or a saint?*”

She flushed, then met his gaze steadily. “I haven’t decided yet. Maybe neither. Maybe just a man.”

He leaned toward her.

“I want you to know me,” he said softly. “All of me.”

She felt hot beneath his gaze, then he leaned back again in his chair. “I set the price of my horses high for a reason. No one buys them who is not prepared to treat them like gold.”

She snorted. “Because they are just as expensive, pound for pound.”

“You think I am greedy?”

“No. I think you are arrogant and proud.”

His lips curved as he said softly, “What else do you think you know about me?”

Annabelle swallowed. She already knew too much. She knew he was impossibly beautiful, like a dark angel, and every time she was around him her body felt tight with her heart in her throat. She knew he made her feel the warmth of sunlight and a soft sultry breeze of awareness every time he was near. “I think you’re a playboy who toys with women’s hearts.”

Frowning, he leaned forward.

“I do not toy with anyone’s heart,” he said sharply. “Women who come to my bed know it will be for a short time. I am always clear. If a woman deceives herself into believing our affair will last, she has only herself to blame.”

Annabelle sucked in her breath. “So you actually admit you’re a womanizer.”

Stefano’s gaze traced slowly over her in the candlelight. Prickles of heat spread across her skin beneath her linen suit. “Does it bother you?”

“Morally, you mean?” Setting her jaw, she shook her head. “No. Why would it?”

“It frightens you.”

"Frightens?" She forced out a laugh, and then told the biggest lie of all. "I'm not the least bit frightened of you."

"But you are." His dark eyes glimmered. "I can see that. What I don't quite understand is why."

"Don't think you know me. We just met," she bit out. "You don't know anything about me!"

He swirled his goblet, making the red wine gleam like rubies in the candlelight. "I've already learned a great deal by watching you." Tilting his head, he observed her. "I know, for instance, that you always behave rudely when someone's getting too close."

"Don't be idiotic!"

Stefano's black eyes burned through her.

"Exactly."

Annabelle's cheeks went hot.

"You're being ridiculous," she mumbled, looking away.

He leaned his elbow against the dining table, looking at her in the candlelight. "Why are you so defensive? What have men tried with you?"

She stared at him, then said stiffly, "I don't see how that's any interest of yours."

"Oh, come on," he said with a cajoling smile. "Just this morning, Afonso Moreira was complaining to me on the phone, saying you were quite impossible to seduce. An ice queen, I think his words were."

"Moreira is a fool," she retorted. "His idea of seduction was to make smacking sounds with his lips every time I passed him in the hallway. When I ignored him, he slapped my backside."

Stefano's eyes widened. "What did you do? Slap his cheek?"

"I had no need to resort to violence," she said uncomfortably. "I simply let him know that his attentions were not appreciated."

His smile spread into a grin that made his eyes twinkle. "Yes, I bet you did," he said. "I can only imagine. He's probably still frozen solid in a chunk of ice from your response."

Annabelle felt a lump in her throat at the criticism. "You think I'm

cold and horrible, then?"

"To the contrary, *señorita*." His dark eyes met hers. "I think you're magnificent."

Her breath caught in her throat. She looked at the floor. "So what has worked with you?" she mumbled. "With women?"

He took another sip of wine, then glanced at her with a playboy's careless smile. "Usually this is what works. Flirting, asking questions, drinking wine. Why?" His smile spread to a grin. "Is my charm starting to get to you?"

She felt her cheeks grow hot. "That's not what I meant. I know you think no woman can resist you. But what about you? Has any woman ever gotten under *your* skin?"

"Oh." The smile on his face faded. He lifted a dark eyebrow, then looked toward the faded paint of the crest of arms on the far wall. "Did you know, as a boy, I used to steal horses from this estate?"

Was he changing the subject? Frowning, she gave an incredulous laugh. "Really? I can't believe it."

"All right, not steal," he said. "*Borrow*. I felt sorry for the horses because the owners ignored them. I took them for exercise when my father wasn't looking. Then I was caught riding a stallion bareback by one of the guests—the coach of a famous show-jumping team. Instead of denouncing me to the owner, he invited me to join his team. I said no. I was only eighteen and didn't want to leave my family. Until ..." His lips turned downward. "Until the coach's beautiful blond daughter asked me in a way I couldn't resist."

A dull ache filled Annabelle like a thud. Why? She couldn't be jealous! What did she care about some blond girl who'd once had power over Stefano? She didn't! "So what happened?"

Again that shrug. "Last I heard, she married a wealthy man in Mexico City. But I cared for her, once. When I was too young to know better. Until I discovered the kind of woman she really was."

"What kind?"

"The wrong kind." He looked at her. "Is that what you wanted to know?"

She licked her lips. “You speak of the coach and his daughter so scornfully. But ... they took you from poverty, didn’t they? They gave you your start?”

“In a way,” he said grudgingly. “I used money from my year of show-jumping to buy this ranch sixteen years ago.”

She shook her head, furrowing her brow. “Then I don’t understand why you stopped your horse at the equestrian show. Why turn on the people who’d helped you?”

He looked away. “I had my reasons.”

“And—”

“I answered your question,” he said. “Now it’s your turn.”

“What do you want to know?” she said hesitantly.

“Why are you so alone?”

She stared at him in shock, her mouth open.

“You came here without an assistant,” he continued silkily. “I’d imagined most photographers of your caliber would travel with an entourage.”

Ah. So that was what he’d meant. For a moment she’d thought he’d meant ... that he’d somehow seen.

*The loneliness of her entire adult life.*

Annabelle’s lips turned down. “My assistant had a baby last week. She’s with her husband in Cornwall. Until I replace her,” she said in a small voice, “I’m on my own.”

“Ah. *Que lástima*” He held out his arms expansively. “But at least you are not the one to be tied down, *sí*? No dilapidated cottage garden for you to weed, no tiny babies crying and keeping you up all night. No husband to cook for every day, ironing his shirts and washing his socks. *Sí*,” he said approvingly. “An artist like yourself must always have solitude and freedom.” He lifted his goblet, looking down at her. “To freedom.”

Her throat hurt as she lifted her wineglass.

“To freedom.”

They clinked glasses, and he drank deeply. Annabelle took a tiny sip,

but the wine now tasted sour. She'd had freedom, yes. For many, many years. Practically all her life.

What was the difference between freedom and emptiness? What was solitude, but loneliness?

Annabelle put down the glass, feeling suddenly weary. She placed her elbows on the long wooden table, leaning her forehead against her hands as she rubbed her eyes with her fingertips.

"Are you not feeling well?" he asked with concern.

"I think I've had too much wine," she said in a low voice.

"I will escort you to your bedroom."

*Back to her bedroom?* She looked up sharply. "No!"

He stared at her, his brow furrowed.

She exhaled. "What I mean is ... I'm not ready for bed. I just need some fresh air."

"Of course." Tossing his linen napkin on the table, he rose gracefully to his feet and held out his arm. "Let me take you outside."

Annabelle stared at the muscled, bare forearm revealed by the rolled-up sleeve of his shirt. She was afraid to touch him again, afraid of the reaction she knew it would cause. She placed her fingers as lightly as possible on his arm.

As her fingertips felt the rough dark hair of his warm skin, she felt the same sizzle as before. She could feel the strength and grace of his body as he walked beside her. She trembled, looking up at him through her lashes.

The sprawling house was quiet and dark as he led her down the hallway. Apparently, the stablehands and housekeeper had all gone to bed. The only sound Annabelle heard was the echo of their footsteps.

They were alone.

She nervously glanced up at him through her lashes. It took a great deal of willpower, all her pride, not to turn and run away. She thought again of her truck parked in the garage. She could be back in London in seventeen hours, less if she pushed hard on the gas pedal.

As soon as they were out on the terrace, she dropped his arm, exhaling

in relief. Then she blinked in amazement at the view of the wide-open night sky and moon-drenched fields beneath.

She felt the cool air against her skin and took a deep, cleansing breath. Then Stefano spoke from the darkness beside her.

“So Moreira failed to seduce you,” he said in a low voice. He looked at her. “How would a man succeed?”

Silvery moonlight frosted his hard-edged cheekbones, the hard masculine edge of his jawline. She couldn’t look away from the sensual shape of his mouth, illuminated in soft silver light.

“Annabelle,” he said softly, and her name on his lips was like music.

With an intake of breath, she stumbled back from him, grabbing a stone column on the terrace for support. He grabbed her upper arm. She felt his warmth through the linen of her jacket sleeve and shivered.

“How could a man seduce you?” His voice was low, but his eyes were fierce.

Annabelle took a deep breath.

*Like this,* she thought. Everything about him seduced her. Candlelight and conversation. The comfort and beauty of his home. The strength of his body. The power of his will. The intensity of his dark eyes.

But she couldn’t tell him that. He was probably just making small talk. How great a fool would she be to tell him she was already falling for his playboy charm? He didn’t need another gullible female believing the lying promises of his gaze.

“I told you.” She looked away. In the distance, she saw the dark shadows of the craggy hills against the pale violet of the moonlit horizon. “I am impossible to seduce.”

He moved closer. “I don’t believe you.”

She pulled away, looking at him with narrowed eyes.

“Why do you care?” she said. “You have enough women queuing up for your bed. You certainly don’t need one more falling at your feet.”

Silence fell, the only sound the distant call of night birds. He looked down at her, his body absolutely still, so close and yet not touching her.

“Ah,” he said quietly, “but you’re the woman I want.”

*He wanted her?*

With a sharp intake of breath, Annabelle looked up. He couldn't have just said what she thought he said! She felt the soft night breeze against her skin. Saw a wispy cloud pass in front of the full white moon above. She licked her suddenly dry lips and tried to contain the tremble of her body from within.

"But you said ... you said I'm not your type," she stammered.

"You're not."

"Then—"

"You're not a *type*," he cut in. "You're different than any woman I've met before. Beautiful, independent, talented, restrained. I've had many lovers. But never a woman like you."

Shaking, Annabelle stared up at him, feeling hot and cold all over. Her only armor against her own traitorous body's desire had been her belief that Stefano didn't want her. Hearing he *did* want her was the spark. It caused the dry timber of her lonely heart to burst into fire.

She tried to fight it. Crossing her arms, she turned away. "Why?" she said bitterly. "So you can brag about your conquest of the ice queen to your friends?"

He sucked in his breath. "Who made you like this?"

She lifted her chin. "Like what?"

He set his jaw. "I do not brag. I have no need to. And I do not see why you would even have such a fear. I've only ever heard one man boast about you. The rest of your lovers have been remarkably discreet. Even of such a glorious conquest as you."

*The rest of my lovers?* Annabelle thought over the lump in her throat. There were no *rest*. There was not even *one*, just Patrick, a spurned would-be lover, the former mentor whom she'd thought to be her trusted friend. Until the day he'd tried to drag her into bed, and when she'd refused, he'd struck back at her in the lowest way he could.

Annabelle sucked in her breath as Stefano cupped her face with his large hands. The feel of his palms, rough and calloused against her soft skin, caused a tremble down her body.

"All other women fade into shadow beside you," he said. His dark eyes seared her. "I want you, Annabelle. And I intend to have you. I will seduce you slowly, bit by bit, until you cannot resist me. Until you are mine. In my bed. At my pleasure."

Her heart was hammering in her throat. Swallowing, she lifted her chin. "Many men have tried, Stefano—tried and failed."

"But I will not." His fingertips brushed her skin and it felt like the hot breeze of summer after a long winter. His thumb stroked her sensitive lower lip, and her whole body shuddered with repressed need.

Stefano lowered his head until it was inches from hers, and she closed her eyes, even as her body trembled for flight.

"Soon I will show you, *querida*," he whispered huskily against her skin, his breath warm against her hair. "Soon, I will show you the depths of the fire inside you."

She felt his hands on her skin, felt his powerful body against hers, and her knees went weak. She sagged in his arms as warmth and the exquisite anguish of desire flooded her body.

She could not resist ... could not....

Then one of Stefano's fingers brushed lightly over her raised scar. The effect was electric. She heard the harsh echo of a man's voice.

*You're ugly beneath that make-up, Annabelle. A hideous monster. No wonder your mother overdosed on drugs when you were a baby. No wonder your father tried to kill you.*

With a choked gasp, Annabelle ripped away from him.

"Never," she spat out. Her eyes glittered at him in the moonlight. "I don't care how charming or sexy or powerful you are. I'm no man's one-night stand." She lifted her chin. "You'll never have me, Stefano. Never."

# CHAPTER FOUR

STEFANO SAT UP STRAIGHT in his bed.

For a few seconds, he stared across his empty bedroom, looking at the slanted moonlight on the wall. It was still the middle of the night. Had he heard a noise? Or just imagined it?

He held still for a minute, listening; but when he heard only silence, he lay back against his pillow with a disgruntled sigh.

*I'm no man's one-night stand.*

After Annabelle had stomped off the terrace last night, leaving him standing there alone, Stefano had been shocked. He'd never been refused by a woman before—and in such a way!

*You'll never have me, Stefano.*

Why was he failing? What had he done wrong? He'd been so close to taking her in his arms and kissing her senseless. He'd thought he read her body's signals correctly. He'd seen the flush of desire on her skin and the deep yearning of her eyes in the moonlight. Cupping her face in his hands, touching her soft skin, he'd felt her tremble. Even her words had confirmed what he'd already known from her body: she thought he was charming. Sexy. Powerful. In short, she'd been putty in his hands.

Then she'd run away from him, practically sprinting in those two-inch heels.

Scowling, Stefano tried to straighten the cotton sheets twisted around his feet. He generally rose early in the morning, taking the rhythm of sunrise and sunset for his work on the ranch. He only made exceptions when he had been up all night making love. But the exception had not been required.

*Never.*

Irritated by how much her words bothered him, Stefano plumped his pillow, turned on his side and tried to get comfortable. After her rude rejection, he'd gone to bed early, but it had taken him a long time to fall

asleep. Now ... he looked at his clock—2:00 a.m. And his mind was already filled with the way she'd mercilessly crushed his pride. How she'd exposed his arrogance for what it was—unfounded.

He set his jaw. She was even infiltrating his dreams. He'd awoken when he imagined he'd heard her scream. Clearly it was only his own injured pride that was so shocked by her rejection that—

Then he heard it again.

*Annabelle was screaming.*

He leaped to his feet and raced barefoot down the hall in only his boxer briefs, his feet slapping against the cool tile floor. Cold fear gripped his heart as he pushed open her door and ran across the darkened room to the four-poster bed.

He found Annabelle asleep, her eyes squeezed shut, as she twisted and turned on the mattress. Her fingers clutched the white blankets, her body tense. In the shadowy darkness of the room as she gave a sudden heartbreaking cry.

"Annabelle," he said urgently. Sitting on the bed beside her, he gripped her shoulders.

"Annabelle! Wake up!"

With a gasp, she opened her eyes. Her gaze was wide, terrified. Then she saw him and burst into tears. Not quiet, ladylike tears, either, but great gulping sobs.

Stefano felt his throat go tight. He pulled her into his arms.

"Shh," he whispered, stroking her hair, comforting her like a crying child. "You had a bad dream, but it's over. You're safe. You're safe."

He repeated those words over and over as she clutched him like a life preserver that would save her from drowning in the cold ocean.

She held him tight, weeping against his bare shoulder.

As Stefano held her, he looked down at her in the dim shadows, unable to clearly see her face pressed against his chest. "What did you dream?" he asked in a low voice. "What happened?"

She clutched him closer, her fingers pressing against the bare skin of his back. When she spoke, her voice was sodden and muffled. "I don't

want to talk about it."

Seeking to comfort her, he reached for the small light on the nightstand. But her arm whipped around him, quick as a flash to turn it off.

"No light," she choked out.

No light? He frowned, looking down at her head. "I only want to chase away your fears. Whatever dark terrors filled your night, *querida*," he whispered, stroking her soft hair, "they cannot hurt you now. Not while I am here."

He felt her tremble. "Thank you," she whispered almost too softly to hear.

He held her for a long time; he did not even know how long. As the thin slant of moonlight slowly moved across the far wall, she gradually relaxed in his arms. Her breathing became steady and even. But still she held him tight, like a desperate child.

He could hardly believe this was the same woman who'd so coldly pushed him away just hours before. Where were all her vaunted defenses? Where were her armored walls?

He breathed the scent of her hair. She smelled like apples and sunshine with a hint of soap. And she felt even better, soft and womanly and warm. She was wearing only a button-down pajama top of thin cotton and—he groaned when he felt the brush of her bare thigh against his—no pajama pants.

They were both half-naked. Holding each other on her bed. In the dark.

His body tightened with need.

No! Stefano set his jaw. He'd come to comfort her, to make sure she was safe, not to seduce her when she was defenseless. Not to take advantage of her weakness like a coward! He took a deep breath.

"You are safe now, *querida*." He kissed her temple softly, over the sweaty tendrils of her hair. He started to push away. "I will leave you now, to your sleep ..."

"No!" The cry seemed to come from her heart as her hands pulled him back to her. Her lovely, delicate hands. He could feel the stroke of her

fingertips against his naked skin, against his back and hip, pulling him against her on the bed. Where he wanted to be. He nearly groaned.

“What are you asking of me?”

For a moment, she did not answer. Then she said in a low voice, “I want you to stay with me while I sleep. Please ... won’t you?”

He wanted to tell her no. He wanted to leave her and return to his bed, far away from the temptation she offered. *Madre de Dios*, he was only a man.

But her request had been timid, almost fearful, as if she were already bracing herself for his inevitable refusal. As if she expected some cutting reply, and yet her need was so great she’d had no choice but to ask, anyway.

How was it possible that such a beautiful woman, an international star of photography, a wealthy girl from an aristocratic family, could sound so timorous and pitiable when asking for the merest human kindness?

Stefano exhaled. Swallowing, he put his head down on her pillow. Stretching out his long, lean body, he pulled her down beside him. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against his chest, and tried to ignore the feel of her soft, plump breasts beneath his arms. He closed his eyes, willing himself not to notice the feel of her sweetly curved backside pressing back against his groin, with only thin cotton fabric separating them. He took a deep breath.

“Go to sleep,” he whispered against her hair. “I will watch over you tonight. I will keep you safe.”

And he did. For hours. He held Annabelle, listening to the rise and fall of her breath as she slept. He breathed in the scent of her hair, their heads on the same pillow. He held her body in the darkness, caught between the need to protect her and the agony of not making love to her.

He’d never slept all night in bed with any woman. Even Rosalia, the subject of his youthful infatuation sixteen years ago. He always left a woman’s bed after he was done making love to her. He’d never slept with a woman like this. As Stefano held Annabelle in his arms, listening to her rhythmic breath, even in his torment of sexual need he found

himself lured into a strange sense of peace. Of home. He closed his eyes.

“*Stefano.*” Annabelle suddenly turned around in his arms, wrapping her arms around him. She clutched him closer to her naked, nubile body as he tasted the sweetness of her skin, suckling her breasts as she moaned his name in bed.

He woke from the sensual dream with a start, realizing his hands had started to reach for her breasts in reality.

*Maldita sea.* He sucked in his breath, wiping his forehead as he glanced out the window. He was overwhelmed with relief to see the first pink curls of dawn appearing over the eastern horizon. Morning, at last. Thank God. He looked down at Annabelle. She was turned in the opposite direction, curled up with a pillow clutched in her arms. He was unable to see her face but knew she was asleep by the soft rhythm of her breath.

The night of torture was over.

He had passed his test.

Carefully, Stefano moved away from her, rising from her bed. He stared down at her for a moment, then fled on silent feet back to his own bedroom and the cold shower he sorely needed.

After toweling off and putting on clean jeans and a white T-shirt, he went downstairs to the kitchen. It was dark. Even Mrs. Gutierrez wasn’t up yet. Making himself a breakfast of dry, slightly burned toast rather than wake the elderly housekeeper, he gulped down a *taza de café* drunk so black and hot it burned his tongue.

Grimly, he went outside.

The world was still quiet and dark in the hush of dawn. He went to the old stables and took a deep breath of the saddle soap, horse sweat and clean hay. He was desperate to start work, determined to grind out his body’s tension through hard labor. *Annabelle.*

How on earth had he managed to sleep nearly naked in her bed all night without touching her?

He exhaled. He’d wanted to kiss her and never stop, and yet ... she’d been so bewildered, so frightened by her dream. More than making love to her, he’d wanted to protect her and keep her safe. He’d never felt this

way about any woman.

Annabelle was so strong. And yet, vulnerable. Almost. *innocent*.

What dream could have possibly affected her so horribly?

Stefano looked around the old stables. The ancient stalls had been meticulously repaired. The tools and equipment that were always carefully put away in their place had been cleaned and brought to shine. He grabbed a pitchfork and furiously shoveled piles of fresh hay, putting his back into it.

He thought again of how she'd sobbed after her dream, how she had refused to tell him about it, how she hadn't even allowed him to turn on the light.

He paused, leaning on his pitchfork.

Perhaps he was making a mistake, getting involved with Annabelle Wolfe. His instincts were starting to warn that an affair with her would not be light. Or simple. Or easy. All the things he usually insisted upon in a brief relationship.

But she intrigued him. Her cold exterior was just armor to protect her vulnerable heart. She might be from an aristocratic English family, he thought, but she was nothing like the rest of her class.

As a boy, Stefano had once envied wealthy men such as his father's employer, who bought and sold horses and lavish estates, and could change other people's lives on a whim. It had taken Rosalia and her father's long-ago betrayals to teach Stefano how artificial and heartless those people truly were. Now, he despised the cold, glittering world of the international jet set. He stayed away from the cities and the racing circuits where the upper crust traveled, and only had to endure their company once a year.

His annual polo match and gala raised money for his charitable foundation. Important.

Valuable. But, oh, how Stefano dreaded it. Just a few days more.

He exhaled, shoveling another pile of straw, and pushed his thoughts back to a more pleasurable topic.

How many lovers had Annabelle had? Not many, surely. She was too prickly for that. And she could certainly afford to be choosy. So how

many men had she invited to her bed? Less than ten? Less than five?

Stefano scowled. It irritated him to think of Annabelle with other men. Hypocritical of him, surely, since he'd taken so many lovers himself. He could barely recall half of the women he'd made love to, any more than he could remember satisfying other physical needs over his lifetime. Sex was a physical need like any other. He couldn't remember every single blanket he'd used in winter, every glass of wine he'd drunk or every bite of food he'd eaten. Why would he remember every woman who'd warmed his bed?

But if he ever made love to Annabelle. He shuddered. *That* he knew he would remember.

But would he have her?

*You'll never have me, Stefano. Never.*

So she'd said. But training horses had taught him to pay attention to nonverbal cues. And in many ways body language was the same for women as horses. The way her eyes wouldn't meet his. The way she skittered from him, backing away. The way she resisted his touch. The way she seemed to tremble—and if he drew too close, the way she would lash out. Whatever she said with her words, he could read her body as clear as day.

Seducing her was going to be far more challenging than he'd thought. But he would not fail. Could not.

Stefano heard a noise and looked up. Through the stable window, he saw a shadow and recognized Annabelle's slim figure silhouetted against the gray-and-pink dawn.

Strange. He'd once thought of her color as gray, but now he realized he'd been wrong. She wasn't like winter twilight at all. Annabelle was a January dawn. Cold, brittle—and yet with a pale mist curling upon the edges, soft pink promise like a whisper, wistfully dreaming of spring.

*My work is all that matters. It is all I care about,* she'd said.

*Madre de Dios,* that a woman like Annabelle should think such a thing!

He wanted to free her from that tight self-control. He wanted to see her smile, give her joy, hear her scream with pleasure—

“Oh.” With an intake of breath, Annabelle stood blinking in the stable

doorway. Her blond hair was pulled back in her regular tight chignon, and she wore a soft pink linen pantsuit and plain, sensible shoes. She pulled her camera down from her face. “I didn’t expect you to be up so early.”

“I couldn’t sleep.” He looked her over, relishing the image of her slim body. “Not after I left you.”

“Oh. Right.” She bit her lip. “About last night. Thank you for staying with me. I’m rather embarrassed by the whole thing ...”

“Don’t,” he said sharply. “You had a bad dream. It happens to everyone at times.”

Turning away with an unintelligible mutter, Annabelle lifted her camera and snapped pictures of the wood-slatted ceiling, of the horse in the closest stall, of the dust motes floating in the air from the first light of sunrise flooding through the open door.

*The camera was her protection, Stefano suddenly realized. It was her mask.*

“Put the camera down,” he said.

“I’m almost done,” she replied, taking pictures of the well-swept wooden floor. “Then I’ll leave you alone.”

“I don’t want you to leave me alone.”

Reluctantly, she lowered her camera. “I did have a question.”

“*Sí?*”

She pressed her lips together. “I wondered. if there was any reason you left my bedroom this morning,” she said finally. “If you ... saw something ... that made you leave.”

He stared at her. “I left because of you.”

She looked up at him, her lovely face stricken. “You did?”

“I wanted you so badly it almost killed me not to touch you.” He gave a low, self-mocking laugh. “It was a new skill for me to learn, sleeping next to a woman I desire without seducing you. By dawn, my self-control was almost entirely lost.”

“Oh.” The creamy complexion of her cheeks turned the color of roses. “That was very ... gentlemanly of you.”

He snorted. “I’m no gentleman. But I know you did not ask me to stay in your bed last night for sex. You needed comfort. So that is what I gave you.”

She lifted her eyes. “Thank you,” she whispered.

He broke eye contact deliberately. He looked at her clothes. “Another elegant suit.”

She looked down at her designer pantsuit in pale pink, then lifted her chin. “I always wear a suit. I’ve dressed like this in the Gobi Desert,

Tahiti, everywhere. Why should I treat Santo Castillo any differently?”

“You might prefer jeans and a cotton shirt for the hard work we do here,” he said frankly. “I could send for some new clothes for you in Algares.”

She shook her head. “I’m fine as I am.” Stefano set down his pitchfork. He started to pull off his white T-shirt. “Work as you please, then.”

She stared at him with an intake of breath. “What—what are you doing?”

“Working as *I* please.” He dropped his sweaty T-shirt to the floor, leaving his chest bare. Annabelle’s eyes fixed on his chest, her eyes the color of hot embers as her gaze slowly followed the trail of dark hair down his bare chest until it disappeared beneath the waistline of his jeans.

“Annabelle.”

Her eyes looked up. “What?”

Her tone was belligerent, but beneath her defiance he could see the flush of her skin and the way she swayed forward—even as her feet inched away.

If he hadn’t been hard for her before, he would be now. Painfully. “Come here.”

“What do you want?”

He looked down at her.

“I want to kiss you,” he said in a low voice. “I want to pull that suit off your body and kiss your naked skin all the way down to your feet. I want to take you right here. I want to push you down against the soft,

clean hay and make love to you until we're both hot, sweaty and exhausted with pleasure.”

Her jaw dropped.

“That is what I want,” he said quietly. “But for the moment, I will be satisfied just to talk to you. If you will come closer.”

“I ... I can't,” she choked out, backing away. “I need to get back to work.”

“Are you still afraid of me?”

She clutched her camera in one hand, staring up at him. Then she tossed her head.

“Why would I be afraid of some Spanish playboy?”

“If you're not afraid, prove it,” he whispered. His gaze fell to her lips.

With a gasp, she jumped back two steps. Stefano wondered if she even knew she'd done it, or if it had been pure reflex.

The beam of morning light from the door illuminated Annabelle's hair, making it a million shades of gold. She licked her pink, heart-shaped mouth, staring up at him with her big gray eyes.

Stefano swallowed. He'd never felt desire like this before. It was magic. He was caught, ensorcelled by desire.

“You're so beautiful, Annabelle,” he whispered. “I've never seen your equal.”

She stared at him for a long moment, her eyes wide. Then she clenched her hands.

“Just because you comforted me last night, I won't fall at your feet now.” She shook her head fiercely. “I won't let you seduce me.”

Beneath her defiance, Stefano saw the increasing tremble of her body. He saw her nervousness and fear. He knew if he came closer to her, even a single step, she would flee. Even now, her feet were inching back toward the stable door. It was only the knife's edge of pride that held her.

“Why are you so afraid?” he asked in a low voice.

“I'm not!”

"You're trembling. You're so afraid of me, that if I take one more step toward you, you'll bolt for the door."

She tossed her head, but he saw the desperation hidden beneath the bravado. "Don't be ridiculous!"

Slowly, deliberately, Stefano raised his black leather boot above the rough wood floor in a single step.

With a hoarse intake of breath, Annabelle stumbled back, dropping her camera with a clatter as she turned and fled the stables.

Annabelle had barely taken a dozen pictures so far that morning, testing the early light, before she'd found him in the stables. The last person on earth she wanted to see.

*Stefano.*

He'd seen her at her worst last night when she'd screamed in her recurring dream, the horrifying nightmare that always clung to her like cobwebs after she awoke. Annabelle could never awake from it completely. She'd lived it.

*"Please don't hit her! Stop it, stop it!"* her little brothers had screamed and cried over the rhythmic *thwack-thwack-thwack* of the whip cutting her flesh as her drunken, enraged father savagely beat her in Wolfe Manor. Annabelle was curled up in a ball on the floor, too weak to protect herself from the continuing blows. She knew her father wanted her to cry and beg for mercy, but she couldn't do it. If she did, she feared his anger would turn on the little boys crying behind him.

She could barely see little Sebastian and Nathaniel through the sheen of blood as she gasped to them, "Stay away! Run, get out of here!" But they wouldn't abandon her, even at such risk to themselves.

Then Jacob had burst into the hallway. Her eldest brother, so tall and strong at eighteen, had knocked their father aside with a shout, snatching up the whip as he punched their father away from her with a single resounding blow. Annabelle saw their father fall, fall, fall as if in slow motion. She heard a loud terrible bang as his head hit the bottom step of the staircase, and their father's violent life had come to an abrupt end.

It was always the same nightmare when she was under stress, ending

with the same shocked look in her father's eyes.

His death hadn't been her fault. She'd told herself that again and again. But she didn't quite believe it. He'd stared straight at her as he'd died. Whenever Annabelle had the dream, she always woke with a sob, woke to loneliness and despair.

But last night, like a miracle, she'd woken to find Stefano's arms around her. She'd felt safe. Comforted. With him beside her, she'd fallen back asleep, knowing nothing bad could happen when he was keeping watch over her.

Then she'd woken up and he was gone. Her embarrassment that he'd seen her in a vulnerable state was bad enough. Then she'd wondered if he'd seen the scar on her bare skin in the morning light, and it had been her ugly face that drove him away.

*You're ugly beneath that makeup, Annabelle. A hideous monster.*

Rising from her bed, she had showered and dressed. She'd pulled back her hair and applied her makeup with a trembling hand. Then, not wanting to face Stefano at breakfast, she'd gone straight outside. She'd tried to focus on taking pictures, but amid the silence of the morning, his low, husky voice invaded her soul.

*I want you, Annabelle. And I intend to have you. I will seduce you slowly, bit by bit, until you cannot resist me. Until you are mine. In my bed. At my pleasure.*

When she'd found him in the stables, when he'd challenged her after everything that had happened between them, she'd been overwhelmed. Blood rushed through her veins as she'd tried to hold her ground. She'd clung to her pride.

Then he'd taken off his shirt.

She'd seen a man's bare chest before. But looking at his tanned torso, taut and lean with muscle, with a scattering of dark hair pointed downward like an arrow, she hadn't been able to look away.

Stefano had taken that single step toward her, and a surge of fear had ricocheted down her body. She couldn't explain what happened next. She'd just bolted. Her feet had scrambled back, nearly tripping as she fled. She hadn't stopped running until she was across the farthest field

and gasping for air.

Now, as Annabelle finally caught her breath, she became slowly aware of the morning songs of birds, the noisy rippling of the stream. She was alone in the forest, standing by a stream of water on a rocky hillside. She looked up at the beams of morning light shimmering through the dark, shadowy trees.

She blinked. How far and fast had she run?

Breathing in the fresh, cool air, she knelt by the stream and splashed cold water on her face. Gradually the rapid pounding of her heart slowed. As she rose from the rocky banks, she looked around the forest.

No doubt Stefano was still laughing himself silly back at the stables.

Why did he have this effect on her? Even now, she craved his touch. It frightened her. She couldn't allow herself to be vulnerable to any man—but especially not Stefano! As protective and kind as he'd been last night, a playboy had only one objective. To bed a woman ... and forget her.

Annabelle's cheeks became hot as she recalled the look in Stefano's dark eyes as he'd taken that single step toward her in the stables ... and how, in spite of all her defiance, she'd fled from him like a coward. Like a pathetic virgin.

But a virgin was exactly what she was. She closed her eyes. A pathetic virgin.

"C'mon, don't act like some pathetic virgin," the older boy had said, leering at Annabelle's low-cut lace top. She was just fourteen, and she'd snuck out of Wolfe Manor to follow her twin brother Alex to a party in the village with his older friends. Then her brother had seen her.

"Damn it, this is no place for you, Annabelle!" Alex had marched her straight to the door. "Go home, where it's safe!"

Her brother hadn't known she would go home and walk smack bang into their father, who'd just returned drunk from a frustrating day of hunting. Alex hadn't realized that their father would take one look at Annabelle all tarted up and explode into murderous rage at his daughter for the first time—and the last.

Annabelle's hand went unwillingly up to her forehead and cheek,

feeling the hard ridge of the scar beneath her makeup, the scar that had never completely faded.

*Go home. Where it's safe.*

Her lips twisted with bitterness. No place was ever safe. Especially not home.

And no person was safe, either. People died, like her mother. People turned on her, like her father. People left, like her assistant. Or they betrayed her, like Patrick.

Better to just be alone.

Closing her eyes, Annabelle took a breath of the fresh mountain air. She heard the ragged sound of her breath over the birds of the forest and stream.

"There you are," a deep voice growled behind her.

She whirled around. The cold feeling in her heart exploded into heat that almost brought her to her knees.

"Stefano," she whispered.

Still shirtless, he stood before her, his muscular body and jean-clad legs planted on the ground before her. He looked powerful, rugged. Dangerous.

She licked her lips. "What are you doing here?"

His dark eyes looked at her across the shadows of the forest. "I came for you."

"You followed me?"

"It wasn't difficult."

She tried to glare at him, but she was so tired of fighting. So tired of running. "I ... I don't appreciate you sneaking up on me. Can't you see I'm here trying to ... to work?"

Sunlight and shadows shifted over the muscular curves of his half-naked body as Stefano walked toward her. In the slanted sunlight, dust motes floated lazily through the golden air. He seemed like a handsome gypsy, a dark prince from a fairy tale.

Then, wordlessly, he held out her camera.

Looking at it, Annabelle felt the blood rush from her face. Reluctantly, she reached out to take the camera.

Their fingers touched, and the shock of his rough fingertips against her skin caused a seismic tremble through her body. She started to pull away.

With a low Spanish curse, he grabbed her hand. “Why are you so afraid?”

She felt like she was falling apart. Desperately, she lifted her chin. “Afraid? Of you?”

“Yes, of me, damn it,” he said harshly. “Of everything. Of *life!*”

His words hung between them, echoing in the cool air. She took a shaking breath.

“Because I don’t want you to seduce me.”

“But you do.” He lowered his face until it was inches from hers. “You want it badly.”

He knew too much, saw too much. Her heart hammered in her throat.

He abruptly released her. “You didn’t run into this forest to take photographs,” he said harshly. “You ran away from me because I was getting too close. And that’s how you use your camera, your rudeness, your coldness. To keep people at a distance.”

She swallowed, looking away. When she spoke, her voice was almost too quiet to hear.

“Yes.”

“Why?” he demanded. She took a deep breath, lifting her chin. “Because,” she whispered, “it ends badly if I let anyone close to me.”

Stefano’s eyes were suddenly gentle as he reached his hand toward her cheek. “But, *querida*, just because a journey sometimes ends badly, doesn’t mean it’s not worth taking—”

Annabelle jerked her head away before he could touch the makeup that hid her scar. She flashed him an angry glance. “I’m not like you, all right? I’m not promiscuous. I don’t try to seduce total strangers. I don’t have one-night stands in hotels, with anonymous lovers I don’t even want to bring home!” He sucked in his breath. “No,” he said in a low

voice. His eyes glittered. "Instead, you have no home. You share yourself with no one, because you are afraid!" She gritted her teeth. "You don't know me!"

"No?" His eyes narrowed. "Your body reveals the truth. You turn to me, *querida*, like a flower to the sun."

She gasped in outrage at hearing the truth spoken aloud. "No, I don't!"

His dark eyes electrified her as he stepped closer. "Even now, you want me to take you in my arms," he said. "You want me to kiss you so badly you're trembling."

"I'm not!"

His handsome face was brutal, his body lithe and powerful, and he moved closer until only an inch separated them. She could feel the warmth emanating off his naked skin, feel the dark hair of his chest brush against the fabric of her jacket.

"Are you sure?" he said softly.

Ruthlessly, he took her in his arms. His broad, rough hands cupped her chin, tilting her face upward. She saw his lips curve wickedly beneath the dappled sunlight.

And he lowered his mouth to hers.

She tensed, expecting him to ravish and plunder her mouth, almost expecting him to roughly take her with force.

Instead, to her shock, his lips were warm and tender. His sensual mouth moved against hers gently, luring her, tempting her to pleasure, and against her will, she melted into his arms.

She felt dizzy, swirling in a whirlwind of bliss and need. She felt his hard chest crushing her breasts. His skin was hot and silky beneath the trail of hair. He was so powerful. He could have taken her at his will. But he had no need to force her.

Annabelle found herself kissing him back with trembling, innocent lips.

He deepened the embrace, pulling her more tightly into his arms. Her lips melded with his as he guided her, teaching her the rhythm. His hands softly stroked her back, up and down. He parted her lips with his

tongue, and as she felt him brush inside her mouth, a gasp of pleasure came from the back of her throat.

Annabelle's knees trembled. She twisted her arms around his neck, holding on for dear life. His hands moved to her hips and he held her firmly, keeping her close and tight against his body.

His tongue teased her mouth, tasting the corners of her lips, entwining and dancing with her trembling tongue. Pleasure cascaded in waves down her body. His kiss was hungry, his body hot and hard against hers. He held her against him, not allowing her to escape or deny his sensual demand. As if she could ...

*Her first kiss.* She was lost in sensation, overwhelmed with desire. The whole world seemed to shrink to their physical points of contact, to his strong arms around her, to his hard, naked chest, to the fiery heat of his lips against her own.

His kiss changed. His lips no longer softly lured her. They became more demanding. Stefano no longer tried to convince her. He simply took what he wanted. He kissed her savagely, hungrily, hard enough to bruise. Clutching his shoulders, Annabelle kissed him back with the same force, with all her pent-up need of her lonely life.

Her mind was long gone, her body possessed. She only knew she had to kiss him or die. And it was so good she almost wept ...

It seemed minutes or hours later that Stefano pulled away.

"And you still say," he breathed against her temple, "that you did not need to be kissed?"

Eyes still closed, Annabelle pressed her cheek against his chest. Her heart was beating so fast. Her lips were bruised. She felt warm sunlight on her skin. His strong arms felt like a shield, protecting her from the hard, cold world.

He stroked her hair tenderly. "How long has it been, *querida?*"

"What?" she whispered, dazed.

He smiled down at her. "Since you last took a lover."

She blinked. Then she stared up at him in slowly dawning horror. Her heart pounded in her throat as all the passion and heat and fire turned to cold ash inside her.

*You'll never have me, Stefano, she'd said. Never.*

She'd lied. The playboy was seducing her.

Annabelle sucked in her breath as waves of fear whipped through her. She couldn't let it happen. She couldn't! If she gave her virginity to a playboy like Stefano, she would lose everything. Her heart. Her soul.

While thirty seconds after Stefano had possessed her, he would forget her and move on to his next conquest!

With a gasp, she pulled away. Turning, she started to stumble back through the shadowed forest.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

She tossed back over her shoulder, "I quit!"

"Running back to London? The fearless Annabelle Wolfe?" he taunted behind her. "Over one small kiss?"

She paused, looking back at him, her heart still pounding. "It wasn't *small*."

Stefano stood motionless, staring at her. Overhead, the green trees swayed in the warm breeze, causing dappled sunlight to scatter over them both like topaz.

"You hated it so much?" he said softly.

Hated it? No. She hadn't hated it. That was the problem.

Stefano's kiss had exploded her world. For the rest of her life, her memory would be divided in a new *before* and *after*. Today would forever be the day when she knew, without a doubt, how deep her loneliness and hunger went. And that she'd always be alone.

Annabelle felt a painful sting beneath her eyelids. She wanted to rush back into the warmth of his arms, to cling to him and beg him to kiss her again, to hold her tight and never let go.

But she knew how it would end.

*You won't be able to resist him. No woman can.*

*The broken hearts he's scattered are as infinite as stars.*

All the warnings hadn't saved her. He'd still penetrated her defenses. If she stayed at Santo Castillo, he'd have her flat on her back in a week!

A week? She shuddered. She wouldn't last the night.

"I'll tell the magazine to send another photographer," she choked out. Clutching her camera, she whirled around, her eyes blinded with tears. Her foot stumbled over the uneven ground on the edge of the stream, causing her to trip forward into the shallow water.

She fell hard against the rocks. A wrenching pain in her leg made her gasp, clutching her ankle.

"Annabelle!" Stefano was instantly at her side in the cold stream. "Don't move."

His touch was gentle as he lifted her out of the water and set her gently down on the banks of the stream. Her calves were wet and cold as he pushed up her pink linen pant leg. As he ran his hands along her ankle, she was mesmerized by the feel of his fingers against her bare skin. Then he brushed her ankle and she winced.

He looked up at her. "That hurts."

It was a statement, not a question. Reluctantly, she nodded.

"I'll carry you back to the house," he said grimly.

She blinked. "Carry me? In your arms?" He looked down at her with his ruthless dark eyes. "Si."

*Ohmygodohmygod.* She shook her head vigorously. "No, I'm fine. Really! I can walk!

See?"

Rising, she tried to show him how well she could walk, only to wince and stumble when she put too much weight on her right foot.

Stefano's black eyes blazed as he growled a

Spanish curse. Without asking for permission, he swept her up in his arms. She felt the warmth of his bare skin, the fire of his touch as he held her against his chest.

He looked down at her, his eyes as hot as fire.

"No more arguments," he growled. "Now ... you are mine."

# CHAPTER FIVE

ANNABELLE FELT DAZED, in a dream, as Stefano carried her out of the forest. A soft wind blew through the trees, moving the dark branches high above as beams of golden sunlight moved in patterns against Stefano's face.

When they reached the field, she felt the warm Spanish sun against her skin. She felt the shifting muscles of his arms and bare chest as he held her, heard the rustle of jean-clad thighs as he walked through the swishy grass.

Annabelle looked at Stefano's tanned forearms encircling her. She closed her eyes, shivering as she pressed her cheek against his rough, hair-dusted chest. Over the sigh of the wind through the grass, she could almost hear his heartbeat.

She hadn't been this close to anyone. Not for twenty years. Even before that. She hadn't been held like this by anyone, not since her mother had died when she was a baby. She'd had no embraces by lovers, not even a long hug from a friend. She hadn't allowed it. She wouldn't have allowed it now if he'd asked her, but Stefano had simply taken it as his right.

She was overwhelmed with feelings. Of safety. Of longing. Of need.

As they grew closer to the hacienda, some of the young stablehands saw them. Three came running with a shout.

"Get a doctor," Stefano ordered in Spanish. "Miss Wolfe has been injured."

"I don't need a doctor," Annabelle said in English. "You're making too much of a fuss!"

Ignoring her protests, he took her inside the house and up the stairs. Carrying her as if she weighed nothing, he brought her to her bedroom and set her down carefully on the bed. Then he glowered at her.

"Wait here."

A moment later, he returned with an ice pack. Sitting beside her on the bed, he grabbed a pillow and put it in his lap. Pulling off her shoe, he put her bare foot on the pillow and pressed an ice pack gently against her ankle.

Annabelle's cheeks burned as she submitted to his care. Looking up at his face, all she could think about was the way he'd kissed her in the forest. The way his body had felt against hers as he carried her back to the hacienda beneath the warm morning sun. And the way he looked now, still shirtless, sitting on her bed. Annabelle's eyes unwillingly traced the muscles of his tanned chest. They were so close, alone in her bedroom. It would be so easy to.

*No!* She couldn't even think that!

But her gaze fell to his mouth. His sensual, masculine lips had taught her to kiss. Taught her to *want*. With one heartbreakingly fierce embrace, he'd taught her the meaning of the word *desire*. Her lips tingled, spreading heat down her limbs to the molten core between her thighs.

"Annabelle," he ground out. She looked up. "What?" His dark eyes burned through her. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you want me to push you back against this bed. And make love to you until you scream."

She sucked in her breath, then licked her lips nervously. "I ... I don't. Want you to kiss me."

"So you keep saying. *Lying*. To me. To yourself." Moving the pillow and her ankle off his lap and onto the bed, he stood. He handed her a blanket and said tersely, "The doctor will be here soon."

She felt vulnerable, lying in the large bed with him standing over her like a giant. "I told you, I don't need a doctor."

"You'll do as I tell you."

"You're not listening to me." She started to rise from the bed. "I don't want your help. I don't need it. I don't want you. I already quit this job. I'm going back to London—"

With a low snarl in Spanish, Stefano pushed her back against the bed. For a long moment, he held her there, his hands holding her shoulders

against the mattress, his half-naked body hard alongside hers.

Their eyes locked, and Annabelle couldn't breathe. She was lost in his dark gaze, in the sensation of his body pressing her forcefully into the bed. They were alone, and if he chose, he could strip her bare—in every way.

Stefano's eyes fell to her lips.

"Why do you fight me so constantly?" he said in a low voice. "Why do you refuse to let me take care of you?"

Annabelle's heart pounded in her throat. "I can take care of myself."

"It's all right to rely on others for help," he bit out.

"No, it's not." She looked away. "I'm better off on my own."

"Do you really believe that?" Against her will, Annabelle looked back at him. She could smell his woodsy masculine scent, like saddle leather and scorching sun. Like heat and hardness and fire. *And she yearned.*

With a softly muttered curse, Stefano pushed away from her. He stood beside the bed, glaring down at her. "Stay here until the doctor comes. Don't make me lock the door."

"Fine," she said, still shaking from her desire.

"You give me your word?"

"Yes," Annabelle said. "I'll see your doctor. Then I'm gone."

He moved slowly around her bedroom and sitting room, closing all the blinds until it was quiet and dark. A soft breeze blew from the ceiling fan high above, moving the air against her skin.

A moment later, there was a knock at the door. The elderly Spanish doctor inside gave her a kindly smile. As the man checked over her ankle, she submitted to the examination stoically, aware at every moment of Stefano watching her.

The gray-haired man finally turned and spoke in the Galician dialect of Spanish to Stefano, who suddenly smiled down at her as he translated.

"It's fine. A mild sprain. He says to keep ice on it and stay off it for the rest of the night."

"I told you," Annabelle said, exasperated.

The doctor patted her hand and left. As she started to rise, Stefano came to the bed.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Like I said, back to London."

He sat down on the bed beside her. "Because I kissed you?"

"Yes."

His dark eyes glittered in the shadowy light from the shuttered windows. "Are you saying I kissed you against your will?"

Annabelle remembered the way her knees had trembled as he'd kissed her, how she'd wrapped her arms around his shoulders as waves of pleasure had exploded down her body. She remembered how she'd gasped, how she thought she'd die with need.

Swallowing, she looked away. "I can't work with a man who clearly thinks all women are his own personal toys."

"I don't think that," he said in a low voice, his body inches away from hers on the bed. "I respect you, Annabelle."

*Sure,* she thought bitterly, he respected her. And he would keep on respecting her, right until the moment she surrendered in his bed.

When he'd comforted her last night after her nightmare, she'd felt cherished, protected, even safe.

*Safe?* She mocked the thought. Stefano Cortez, *safe?* He was the opposite of safe. He was a heartless, selfish playboy. If she allowed him to seduce her, if she gave him her virginity, he might give her pleasure, yes. But he'd be gone by dawn. And she'd have sold her soul for that brief illusion of being cherished and protected.

"You don't respect me." Annabelle shook her head stonily. "I'll have the magazine send another photographer."

"You're the only one I want."

"You should have thought of that before."

"You can't drive to London," Stefano said roughly. "You heard what the doctor said. You need to stay off your feet."

"I'll take a taxi to the airport and send for my truck later."

“I won’t let you go.”

Folding her arms to hide the tremble of her hands, Annabelle glared at him. “You can’t keep me here against my will.”

In the gray shadows of the shuttered bedroom, Annabelle felt warm air blow against her skin from the ceiling fan. She felt the dark power of Stefano’s gaze and shivered. Maybe she was wrong. Santo Castillo was his own private estate, the empire he ruled, with a staff loyal to him alone. For all she knew, Stefano *could* keep her here against her will.

The air between them hummed with electricity as he started to move toward her.

Swiftly, Annabelle swerved her feet around the side of the bed, starting to rise to her feet. Stefano stopped her with a heavy hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t go,” he said quietly. “Rest. We’ll talk later.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Let me go.” He exhaled. “Please.”

That single humble word stopped her as nothing else could. His dark eyes gazed at her with passion, yearning.

He looked at Annabelle as she’d dreamed her whole life of a man looking at her.

“You’ve had a difficult time,” he said in a low voice. “Traveling from Portugal. Your bad dream last night. You’re exhausted. Please. Stay. Rest. Then we’ll talk.”

Annabelle looked at the hard lines of his body. She thought of fighting past him to call a taxi, or physically trying to hop her way on one foot downstairs to her truck in the garage. Not appealing. Nor was it a happy thought to imagine dropping out of her assignment at the eleventh hour. Aside from what it would do to her professional reputation, she would personally know she’d fled here like a coward.

She could just imagine the juicy gossip that would be whispered behind her back. *The stud of Santo Castillo, people would nod knowingly, has claimed even the ice queen as his victim.*

Annabelle hissed through her teeth at the thought—of having the whole world think Stefano had seduced her.

He stared down at her. “Please, *querida*.”

Crossing her arms, Annabelle glared at him.

“Fine. I’ll stay. For a while.” He gave a single nod. “Did you have breakfast?”

She shook her head.

“I’ll bring you a tray.” Rising to his feet, he pointed toward a button beside the bed. “Ring if you need anything.” He paused. “You promise you won’t try to leave?”

“I won’t try to hop down the stairs on one foot or fling myself out the window, if that’s what you mean.”

“*Bien*,” he said. “As long as I have your word.” Taking her hand, he started to lift it to his lips. A deep tremble went through her, but he stopped before his lips touched her skin.

“Ah,” he said. “I almost forgot. You do not wish me to kiss any part of you.” Looking down at her with his inscrutable dark eyes, he straightened with a mischievous grin. “Rest now.”

Rest? She fidgeted. “What am I supposed to do in bed all day?”

His lips curved. “I’m sure you’ll find a way to keep busy.” He brought her laptop and printer from the desk over to her side table. “Here. Now you can work. Although—” he tilted his head, his dark eyes bright “—if you ask me, there are far more interesting ways you could spend a day in bed....”

She scowled. “I’m not interested in hearing what you like to do in bed!”

“You’re already thinking about kissing me, aren’t you?”

“No!”

He gave her a wicked half grin. “You’re wondering what it would be like, how it would feel, if I pulled you into my arms and stroked your skin.” He leaned forward. “If I slowly kissed up and down the length of your body. Your breasts. Your thighs. If I tasted you with my tongue.”

Heat roared through her, and she couldn’t breathe. “I ...”

With a low laugh, he turned away. “Perhaps I can’t kiss you, *bella*,” he said, “but I can dream of you tonight. All night long.” His voice was

almost a purr as he walked away from her. “Ah,  
*querida*, the things you let me do to you in my dreams ...”

“I wouldn’t do any of that!” she cried after him. But he’d already left, closing the door behind him.

Annabelle stared at the closed door sulkily.

*The things you let me do to you in my dreams ...*

Lying in bed, with her ankle still propped up and wrapped in ice, she stared out through the open French doors of her veranda. Even from here, she could see the green forest where he’d kissed her. Her lips still tingled from the memory of his mouth on hers. She could still feel how he’d held her against his hard, naked chest as his lips had seized hers, pushing her mouth wide, taking her as his right—

*Stop!*

She would work. Yes. Work. Booting up her laptop, she opened up her email and scanned new messages. There were invitations to various lavish parties in London and work-related notes from *Geography World* magazine about her upcoming trip to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. Annabelle blinked when she saw an email from Mollie Parker, the daughter of their former gardener at Wolfe Manor. Mollie was a kindhearted soul, one of the few friends that

Annabelle still remained in contact with from her old village. She opened the message.

Just got back from Italy, and I’m feeling like a new woman. Except I’d barely decided to change my gardening business to landscape design when your brother Jacob insisted I make Wolfe Manor my first project. I’ll spare you the gory details, but he left me no choice. After so many years, it’s strange and a bit overwhelming to see him every day now. But he has thrown himself into renovating the house like a man possessed.

Wolfe Manor had fallen into disrepair after Annabelle had left to study photography in London, but it was now being renovated. Jacob was back in England after all these years. Annabelle hardly knew which surprised her more.

Jacob. Annabelle closed her eyes. If he hadn’t saved her from their

father almost twenty years ago, she would have died at fourteen. She had no doubt of that. Someday, she would have to thank him. But after all these years, she was afraid to even speak of those terrible days. The last time she'd tried to talk to Jacob about it, he'd left Wolfe Manor the next morning, and disappeared into two decades of exile.

She'd driven him away with her heartbroken tears that night. She drove everyone away, somehow.

With a deep breath, Annabelle looked back at her laptop screen.

*It's strange and a bit overwhelming to see him every day now,* Mollie had said. Annabelle remembered the helpless schoolgirl crush the gardener's daughter had once had on Jacob. Her eldest brother, the Wolfe heir, had barely noticed her.

Annabelle wondered morosely if any woman ever knew how to love a man in a way that was good for her.

Staring through the window at the blue Spanish sky and distant green forest, she touched her lips. After thirty-three years, she'd finally been kissed. And her first kiss had been from a master.

For the second time in her life, there would always be a mark. Another *before*. Another *after*. All because Stefano Cortez had kissed her.

Work, she ordered herself. She turned resolutely back to the screen. She typed a reply to Mollie, then, plugging her camera into her laptop, she transferred the newest images to her computer. She looked through one shot after another of wide golden fields, cragged green mountains, horses galloping through the slowrising mist of dawn.

Annabelle paused, her fingers stilled over one image.

The single picture she'd taken of Stefano in the stables that morning shone with vividness and energy. She'd caught him unaware, while he was shoveling straw. The slant of dawn's golden light from the windows illuminated the sheen of his tanned skin. Dark hair laced the muscles of his bare, muscled chest. His masculine beauty made her catch her breath.

She paused. She closed her eyes.

And she deleted the picture.

She nearly cried doing it. Her photographer's soul screamed not to

destroy the beautiful image. But it was her only hope of survival—to erase Stefano from her heart.

There was a knock on her door. She looked up, her cheeks hot with guilt and grief. “Come in.”

“Here’s breakfast.” Stefano brought in a tray and put it on her lap. She looked down to see ham and eggs, toast and fruit. “I got this from the kitchen. I brought both coffee and tea, since I didn’t know which you’d prefer.”

“Thanks.” Mechanically, she took a bite of toast. She poured cream into her tea, then drank a sip of the hot black coffee. She looked up at him and said in a dead voice, “I’ve decided to stay and finish my assignment.”

A smile lit up his handsome face. “*Bien*. I knew you would—”

She held up a hand, cutting him off. “You must never kiss me again.”

His brow lowered. “Why? You disliked it?”

She sucked in her breath. “No. That would be a lie. When you kissed me ...” She swallowed, then tried to keep her voice even as she said, “You kiss very well. Of course you do. You’re famous for it.”

He blinked at her cool tone.

“But being close to you impairs my judgment,” she said. “It impairs my ability to do my job with clear eyes. And like I said ... my work is what matters.”

“But, Annabelle, surely.” He reached to take her hand, but she pulled it away, folding her hands tightly in her lap.

He stared down at her, his eyes dark.

“Do not pursue me,” she said. “Please. Let me finish the job I came here to do.” In spite of her best efforts, her voice trembled and broke as she looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “If you have any mercy in your heart,” she whispered, “leave me alone.”

# CHAPTER SIX

STEFANO RUBBED HIS HAIR with a towel as he got out of the shower. Lathering his face in front of the mirror, he shaved with a straight razor. He froze at the sight of his haggard face.

He'd had three days of staying away from Annabelle now. Three days of leaving her alone. Three days of telling himself it was all for the best.

*Three days of hell.*

Setting his jaw, he towed off the rest of his body and left the en suite bathroom, padding naked across his bedroom to the closet. He was still furious with himself.

He should have known better than to kiss her in the forest. He'd tamed enough horses to know that rushing Annabelle into a kiss, after she'd just run away from him in blind fear, was a mistake.

And yet he hadn't been able to stop himself. What a kiss. When she'd kissed him back with her trembling heart-shaped mouth, it had been heaven. He'd very nearly ripped off her clothes right then and there in the forest, and taken her against the rocks. Against a tree. In the water. Anywhere.

Annabelle's kiss had been so raw, so un-practiced, so real. She'd clearly taken very few lovers in her life, a chosen, sacred few. He'd felt it when he'd kissed her, in her shaking lips as they separated beneath the force of his caress. She did not surrender herself lightly. He'd felt her shock, her hesitation. Then, like a miracle, he'd felt her fire.

A man would die for a kiss like that.

Stefano should have felt privileged beyond imagination. Instead, he greedily wanted more. Hungered for it. Thirsted.

If once he'd been intrigued by her, now he was obsessed.

But Annabelle's face had been so wan as she lay stretched out on the bed, her injured ankle extended and wrapped in ice. She'd looked up at him, her expression heartbroken as she'd whispered, "If you have any

mercy in your heart, leave me alone.”

He’d sucked in his breath at the pain in her eyes.

“Is that truly what you wish?” he’d replied.

She lifted her chin fiercely, her gray eyes glittering with tears like melted ice.

“It is.”

“Then I give you my word,” he’d said in a low voice.

And he’d left her, when all he’d wanted to do was take her in his arms and kiss away the gleaming tears he’d seen in her eyes. It had been the first moment of hell, and since then, it had only gotten worse.

For three days, he’d had only glimpses of Annabelle as she photographed the ranch. He’d seen her laughing with the boys in the dining hall, even chatting with the elderly housekeeper about her grandchildren in the nearby village.

Annabelle Wolfe, an ice queen? He gave a single hard laugh. She was charming and warm with everyone. Everyone, except him. When she passed Stefano in the hall, if she met him in the stables, her eyes seemed to glaze over as if she saw right through him. He’d become invisible to the woman he wanted most on earth.

Now, setting his jaw, Stefano pulled a clean T-shirt and jeans from his wardrobe. Sitting on his bed, he put on his black work boots. Then he paused, staring blindly across his masculine, Spartan bedroom.

For three days now, he’d tried to convince himself it was better this way—better for her, better even for him. He shouldn’t risk getting more involved with a woman who cried out with nightmares she wouldn’t explain, a woman so powerful on the outside but so fragile inside.

He’d already slept an entire night at her side. He’d put her needs ahead of his own. Shocking. He’d never wanted a weighty affair. All he’d wanted with Annabelle Wolfe was a pleasant challenge and bit of fun. This was getting too serious. He should let her go.

But his body wouldn’t listen. *He wanted her.*

Gripping his hands into fists, Stefano rose to his feet. Going downstairs, he went to the dining hall for breakfast.

He found the plump, gray-haired housekeeper, Mrs. Gutierrez, setting down bowls of freshly baked rolls on the long table. All the young stablehands bounced around her, noisy in their hungry eagerness. The teenagers, as usual, stacked food on their plates perilously high as they cheerfully wished him *buenos días*. Stefano growled out a reply and went straight to his usual chair, where he poured himself some black coffee. He drank deeply of the hot, bitter brew, burning his tongue.

“Good morning,” he heard Annabelle’s sweet voice say. Stefano put down his cup on the table and looked up.

*The sight of her took his breath away.*

She was sleek and professional as always, wearing a pantsuit in creamy ivory and glossy black shoes beneath. Her blond hair was pulled back in her usual tight chignon. Small gold hoops gleamed in her ears and she carried a black leather case.

But the ivory of her suit was nothing compared to the creamy color of her skin. The gold of her earrings was dull compared to the lustrous blond gleam of her hair. Her bare lips were naturally pink and full, her big gray eyes fringed with light blond lashes. And it was all Stefano could do not to fall to his knees before such beauty.

Annabelle froze when she saw him. Then her soft gray gaze became inscrutable. She turned away.

He wondered what she was thinking. If the past three days had been as difficult for her as they’d been for him. Usually women fell over themselves to share their thoughts. But Annabelle didn’t say a word.

The young stablehands saw her and rose to their feet to greet her, clustering around as they asked about her welfare in Spanish and accented English.

“*Señorita*, good morning!”

“Miss Wolfe, did you bring the pictures?”

“You fool, don’t ask her yet. Let her sit down first!”

Annabelle gave a laugh like the ripple of cool water in a mountain stream. “Yes. I brought the photos. Just let me have a bit of breakfast and I’ll be glad to show you.”

The boys cheered, then escorted Annabelle to her seat on the other

end of the long table. Stefano tightened his hands on his coffee cup, willing himself into self-control.

At any other time, he would have been proud of the teenagers for showing such good manners, falling over themselves to make a guest comfortable. But as he saw the delighted, warm smile that Annabelle bestowed upon them, something like a growl rose to the back of his throat.

Stefano wanted to be the recipient of that smile.

He wanted Annabelle to look at *him* like that.

It was a strange feeling for him to be ignored by the woman he wanted most. Mrs. Gutierrez, smiling, brought her a plate and she calmly served herself. Stefano watched Annabelle eat pastries, cooked eggs and ham with gusto while he drank only black coffee, feeling surly. He saw her smile and laugh as the boys entertained her with jokes, tossing rolls at one another. As usual, the teenagers were rowdy and full of laughter as they gobbled down their food and drank gallons of milk.

Beneath the dining hall's high ceilings of vaulted wood, Annabelle sat in her tall wooden chair at the end of the table, holding court like a princess, laughing at the boys' antics. And Stefano suddenly wondered why, at almost thirty-four, she had no children of her own. She would make a wonderful mother. Why had she never settled down and started a family?

Because she couldn't commit? Because she was a workaholic? Because she was constantly on the road and didn't need, or want, a real home?

All good reasons, he thought. All bad reasons.

Annabelle finally finished the last of her tea.

"Now?" the boys demanded.

She smiled. "Clear the table."

The long wooden table was clean in seconds. As the boys clamored around her, even Mrs. Gutierrez came over to see what all the commotion was about. Annabelle reached into the black leather case at her feet and withdrew a stack of colorful printed images.

"Here's a sampling of the pictures I've taken so far. Just preliminary pictures off my travel printer," she warned. "The final versions will be

far better.”

She placed the stack on the table, and the boys snatched them up. Immediately, they started exclaiming with praise over the beauty of the photographs she’d taken of Santo Castillo.

“You are truly a wonder, *señorita*.”

“Sí—you even made Juan look less ugly in this one!” another boy snickered, only to be punched in the shoulder by the first boy.

“My goodness, these are beautiful,” Mrs. Gutierrez cooed. “The prettiest pictures I’ve ever seen.” The housekeeper looked over at Stefano. “Don’t you think so, *señor*?”

Annabelle’s gaze met Stefano’s across the table, and he heard her intake of breath. The smile on her face fled.

Setting his jaw, Stefano walked toward her. Reaching for the papers, he looked through the images. He saw Santo Castillo’s landscapes, the golden fields around the hacienda, the dappled forest, the horses in the stables, even the boys working. He saw Mrs. Gutierrez cooking in the modern kitchen as she made a meal for seven hungry men.

Technically, the pictures were all perfect.

And yet ... they didn’t move him. Something was missing. Something like passion. *Like life*.

“Well?” He looked up to see Annabelle biting her lip. “What do you think?”

It was the first time she’d spoken directly to him in three days. He could not tell her the cold hard truth—that these pictures did not touch his heart. What did he know about photographs? What did he know about art? Nothing.

Waiting, she licked her lips nervously. He had the vision of that pink tongue flicking at the corners of her full mouth. He felt himself tighten as he imagined those sweet pink lips against his rough skin, gasping her pleasure, crying out his name.

No—he had to stop torturing himself!

But he’d never experienced anything like this, being so close to a woman he desired without being able to possess her. Did she even know

the power she had over him?

“Stefano?”

“The pictures are fine,” he muttered. Roughly, he pushed the stack of photographs aside and turned away.

“No.” The sharpness of Annabelle’s voice stopped him. “Don’t be polite, Stefano. I want to know what you actually think.”

He slowly turned back to face her.

“I think they are unremarkable,” he said quietly. “*Verídicamente*, I expected better from you.”

She blinked, clearly shocked. “What?”

“There is no passion in your photographs. No heat or wildness.” Lifting the stack of printed pictures from the table, he placed them gently back into her hands. “I’m sorry, Miss Wolfe. But you have completely failed to capture the essence of my ranch.”

She stared at him numbly. “You … you don’t like them?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then—”

He shook his head. “The pictures are beautiful, but have no life. They are like a beautiful corpse.” He looked her straight in the eye. “Your pictures are frozen, Annabelle. They are dead.”

Annabelle choked out a gasp. He might as well have slapped her in the face.

*Your pictures are frozen. They are dead.*

She’d never felt so empty or so alone as she had for these past three days. Mrs. Gutierrez had taken care of her almost like a mother, packing snacks and tea for her when Annabelle went up to the old Moorish ruin, now just a pile of rocks overlooking the valley. Even the boys had looked after her, reminding her of her own brothers in childhood. It had almost been like … a family.

Except for the constant ache in her heart.

She missed Stefano.

She hadn’t had any more nightmares to wake him. She hadn’t

dreamed at all, in fact. Her mind was blank. She had nothing but emptiness in her heart as she tried to throw herself into her work. She'd dragged her heavy camera bags and lighting equipment all over the ranch, taking photographs with her camera tripod and long-lensed cameras, using her lights for closer portraits inside the house.

But the truth was that she'd barely noticed the images she photographed. Not when it took all of her focus not to rush back into Stefano's arms.

So with a trembling heart, Annabelle had waited for Stefano's verdict as he looked through the pictures spread across the table. She'd prayed that somehow, by some miracle, he would think they were good. Instead, she'd never had her skill so thoroughly scorned.

*I'm sorry, Miss Wolfe. But you have completely failed to capture the essence of my ranch.*

Now, as his brutal judgment still echoed across the dining hall, Annabelle stared up at him in horror.

The boys started mumbling out excuses in Spanish.

“Better check on the new colt.”

“Need to go shovel something.”

“Need to be ... somewhere else.”

The teenagers grabbed the last pastries from the table before filing out of the room with surreptitious back glances. After one last reproachful look at her employer, Mrs. Gutierrez followed them, closing the door softly behind her.

Annabelle looked up at him with wide eyes.

“Why would you say something so cruel to me?” she whispered. She felt like she was floundering, drowning. “You’re—you’re just trying to hurt me, because of ... before.”

Stefano set his jaw. “Do you really think so little of me?” he said harshly. “It gave me no pleasure to tell you this. Believe me. But you wanted the truth.”

The truth. The truth was Annabelle felt like her heart was being ripped out of her chest.

But she could see in his face that he wasn't trying to hurt her. He truly thought that her work was frozen and dead. A beautiful corpse. Just like Annabelle herself.

She'd always known she would someday be exposed as a talentless fraud. Barely holding back tears, she turned away. "I ... I should go ..."

Stefano grabbed her wrist. "Don't."

The pressure of his hand on her wrist left her light-headed as the pace of her heartbeat quickened. She ripped her hand away. Stuffing the pictures back in her bag, she lashed out, "What more can you possibly say?"

He looked at her. "You are a brilliant photographer, Annabelle. I have seen your work. You can do better than this."

"Maybe I can't."

"You have observed Santo Castillo from a distance. But you need to feel it. You need to live it." His dark eyes plundered her soul. "You need to come work with me."

She stared at him in confusion. "Work? With you?"

"Sí. With the horses."

Annabelle thought of shoveling hay, rather than watching through the safe cool distance of her camera lens. She thought of the sweat, the hard work, the risk of her makeup smearing and revealing her scar. And worst of all, she thought of being so close to Stefano, when it took all of her effort not to throw herself in his arms and beg him to make love to her.

She pressed her fingernails painfully into her palm. "Why would you want my help with the horses?"

"It is you who needs the help." He brushed against her in a touch that seemed accidental, but she knew was not. The slow burn of his nearness sent tingles down her spine, causing her lips to tingle and her toes to curl. "To understand the ranch, you must feel it—" reaching up, he put his hand over her heart, not quite touching her blouse "—right here."

She looked up at him. She could feel the radiant heat of his hand. Annabelle's heart pounded even harder, slamming against her ribs.

Then he took both her hands in his own.

"Will you come with me?" His fingers enfolded hers, his bare skin against hers. He did it gently, like a lover's tender clasp, and yet her limbs burned, as if coming back to life after a long winter.

Annabelle knew she was in danger. Knew it to her bones. He wasn't trying to seduce her body now, but her heart. Even as she shook with need for his warmth, his touch, she was scared of his power over her, and the knowledge that if she surrendered, a love affair could come to only one sad end: her own destruction.

She swallowed. "I ..."

He cupped her cheek with his hand. "Come with me today, Annabelle," he whispered. "No camera. Just you." His hot, dark gaze fell briefly to her lips, and her mouth tingled, making her feel dizzy. "For one day, leave your camera behind. Look with your eyes. Look ... with your heart."

"Why do you care so much?"

A smile traced his sensual mouth. "I want your photographs of Santo Castillo to shine. To leave no doubt that my ranch is the best in the world."

"The best in *Europe*."

He gave her a grin. "That is a difference of opinion."

She laughed at the gleam in his eyes, then sobered. "Is that the only reason?"

"No," he said quietly. "I look at you and see an innocent, bright young woman that's been hurt by the world. Beneath your cold exterior, Annabelle, I see a broken heart."

She nearly gasped. How did he know? How did he see?

Setting his jaw, he shook his head. "It infuriates me. Like seeing a promising yearling with its spirit broken."

Annabelle tried to hide her emotion beneath sarcasm. "So you're comparing me to a horse?"

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Let me help you," he whispered. "Let me at least try."

Pressing her lips together, she looked up into his gleaming dark eyes.

“But what if I fail?” He gave a low snicker. “Fail? You’ve already failed.”

She choked out a laugh. “You have a funny way of trying to reassure someone.”

“Failure is liberating. It sets you free. If you are brave enough to fail and still do not quit, you will prevail,” he said softly. “And I do not take you for a coward, *querida*”

A breathless, almost painful hope filled her.

“You don’t?”

He shook his head.

“In fact,” he said huskily, moving closer, “I think you are a woman who would rather die before you’d give up—on anything.”

Their eyes locked. She swallowed, feeling prickles of fire spreading down her body.

“You just need to remember,” he said, touching her cheek.

“Remember what?” she breathed.

“Who you were before your heart was broken.” He lifted her chin. “And who you were born to be.”

# CHAPTER SEVEN

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” Annabelle asked as he led her across the courtyard.

As they walked, Stefano smiled down at her, looking confident and completely irresistible as he pushed open the door to the old stables. “To the paddock on the upper slope. It’s where we train the colts.”

She halted inside the door, looking with trepidation at the monstrous-size horses inside the wooden stalls.

“You should change your clothes,” he said yet again, looking down as her designer pantsuit and glossy black heels.

“If I leave now, I’ll lose my nerve,” she breathed.

It had been nearly twenty years since Annabelle had last ridden a horse. The same August day she’d decided to sneak out to the party in the village. She’d felt so powerful that day. Fearless. Free.

But by the end of that night, she had been in the hospital, and Jacob arrested for their father’s murder. Her brother was acquitted, the verdict being accidental death in self-defense, but their family—and Annabelle—had never been the same.

She swallowed. The last time she’d ridden a horse, she’d been so innocent. So unafraid. *So young.*

Coming up behind her, Stefano put his hands on her shoulders. She felt his warmth and strength like a burst of sunshine through rain. “Do you know how to ride?”

“I used to.” She slowly reached up to stroke the horse’s nose. “I used to race to keep up with my older brothers.” She stopped her hand in midair, not quite touching the animal. She whispered, “I used to be fearless.”

“You can be again.”

She swallowed, then looked back at him. “Can I? Can I ever be that girl again?”

"Yes," Stefano said steadily.

With a deep breath, Annabelle turned back toward the horse. Then she hesitated. "But what do I do? How do I start?"

Coming closer, he smiled down at her. "First, you will choose the right horse. Not Picaro, he is a brute for all of his innocent face. Do not believe his deceit." He pulled her farther back into the stables. "Now this is Josefina, she is gentle. She will care for you like a mother."

He swiftly saddled the horse, then turned back to her.

Her eyes locked with his, and suddenly, climbing on the horse's back seemed easy compared to being this close to Stefano, to enduring the searching intimacy of his dark eyes.

Ignoring his hand, Annabelle went around him. Putting one foot in the stirrup, she threw her leg over the back of the saddled dapple-brown mare. To her surprise, she discovered that she hadn't forgotten how to do it. Her body somehow still remembered how to use her thighs to grip the saddle, her hands to hold the reins lightly.

"*Excelente*," Stefano said approvingly. "You have not forgotten how to sit a horse." Swiftly saddling a horse in the nearby stall, he swung up on the black gelding in a single movement of beauty and grace. "Follow me."

Annabelle couldn't take her eyes from Stefano as he led them out of the stable. He moved so well, and never more so than on horseback. She stared at his muscular backside, at his tree-trunk thighs splayed across the saddle. Then as he rode away from her, she blinked and clumsily urged her horse to follow. The gentle mare took pity on her and obeyed.

The wind blew against them as they rode away from the hacienda. Stefano glanced back at her with a wicked smile, then urged his horse faster with a low whistle. Watching him ride ahead of her, Annabelle was mesmerized by the image of the darkly handsome Spaniard riding the black horse across the wide golden field.

He looked back at her, his horse rearing back on two legs.

"What are you waiting for?" he shouted.

Annabelle felt a fierce answer in her own heart. Leaning low over her mare, she lightly tapped her heels and her horse raced forward with

excitement that matched Annabelle's own. She soon caught up with Stefano. Smiling at him coquettishly, Annabelle gave a wild, joyful laugh, and raced past him.

She heard Stefano's shocked laugh behind her, then the rapidly approaching pounding of hooves as he caught up with her.

"The upper paddock," he called to her. "It's this way."

Annabelle felt strangely free, her heart light. *She felt young again.* They raced their horses side by side and, in the distance, she could see the far-off ocean echoing deep blue into the sky above, as the fields shimmered and waved around them like a golden sea. They rode side by side, hooves flying beneath them as Annabelle looked at him.

Stefano was laughing, his dark eyes alight with joy. "How could you ever give up riding?" he shouted to her. "How could you ever give this up?"

"I don't know," she cried. She felt like she'd been sleeping for twenty years, and in this moment, *she awoke.*

They reached a plateau high in the green craggy hills. Following his lead, she tied her reins as she climbed down from the horse, feeling slightly sweaty but exhilarated as her feet touched the soft earth and her weary legs nearly buckled beneath her. The ride had tired her more than she'd expected. But it was worth it.

Was this all it took for Annabelle to reclaim the girl she'd been? One ride across the fields with a handsome man? If so, why hadn't she done it before?

Stefano went inside a large shed, and she surreptitiously checked her hair and makeup in the compact mirror from her jacket pocket. Her hair was ruffled but her makeup still in place. Perhaps working on the ranch wouldn't be as difficult as she'd feared.

Stefano came out of the shed with a rope lariat hanging around his neck, then brought out the first of the young foals from the nearby paddock out into the large pen.

"Stay close," he told Annabelle when she tried to move back to the shade. "You're going to do this."

For hours, he worked tirelessly to train each young colt to respond to

his command, whether given by voice or gesture—to walk, to stop, to change direction or speed. When he returned each colt to the paddock, he brought out another, then another. Some of the animals obeyed. Some refused at first. But Stefano never lost patience. He worked each foal hard, and as the sun beat relentlessly down on them, his skin soon glistened with sweat.

Annabelle felt a bit sweaty herself, watching him with trepidation. He finally turned back to her, holding out the rope. “Now you.”

She felt a surge of terror. “No, I really.”

“Here.” He pushed the rope into her hands. “Now walk him,” he ordered in a quiet, soothing voice, as if training *her* as much as the horse.

Annabelle tried her best to follow Stefano’s instructions, but it was physically demanding work. The wily young horse didn’t obey her commands as it had Stefano’s. He kept pulling away, resisting her, yanking hard on the rope until it ripped out of her hands, chafing her skin.

When he was done, Stefano brought out another horse, then another. He kept forcing Annabelle to try again, until all she wanted to do was return to the house and collapse weeping in her bed.

But his words kept echoing in her mind. *I think you are a woman who would rather die before you’d give up on anything.* So Annabelle didn’t give up. She grimly kept trying. She didn’t want to prove him wrong. Stefano’s regard had become important to her, as had the hope he’d given her for a different kind of life, a life of fearless passion and joy.

But by the time they took a lunch break, Annabelle’s whole body was shaking with exhaustion. The white-hot sun beat down upon them as Stefano took the rope from her. “I’ll take the colt back to the paddock.”

Annabelle exhaled, nearly crying with relief.

“We’re done?”

But Stefano barked a laugh. “The day has barely started, *querida*. But the color in your face suits you.” He smiled down at her. “I think you’re starting to understand what it means to feel alive.”

Agony flooded through her. “I don’t ...” she whispered, then

swallowed. “I can’t ...”

He looked down at her. “You can.”

They sat down at a table beneath a shady tree to eat the sandwiches from Mrs. Gutierrez, but lunch was over all too quickly. It was all Annabelle could do to hold back her tears when they went back to work. As the afternoon wore on, her body ached and her head throbbed from dehydration and heat exhaustion. She could see why he’d wanted her to wear jeans. Her designer pantsuit was dirty and ripped, her black glossy heels impossibly muddy and scuffed.

Surely they’d be done soon, she told herself desperately. Surely they couldn’t do this much longer. Could they?

The sun beat down on them, growing hotter by the minute. And the more exhausted Annabelle felt, the less the foals seemed inclined to obey her. Her hair was a mess, her clothes covered with sweat and grime and her pale skin was turning pink in the sun.

Worst of all: she knew with sickening certainty that the makeup covering her scar was starting to melt.

When Stefano brought out yet another new yearling to train, she wanted to scream.

“See this mare?” he said softly. “You wouldn’t know it, but she was beaten by her first owner. I have trained her for months, to help her learn not to be afraid.” He thrust the mare’s rope into her hands. “Hold tightly to the rope.”

Looking up at Stefano, Annabelle imagined she saw pity in his eyes. A hard lump rose in her throat as she choked out, “I’m meant to be like the horse, right?”

He frowned. “What?”

“Come on. The poor old horse who was once beaten and afraid. She’s me. You’re winning my trust, taming me as you did her. That bit about making me fearless—it’s a trick! It’s all a trick!”

“I’m trying to help you!”

“I don’t believe you!” she cried. Part of her knew she was being unfair but as she felt tears rise behind her eyes, she was beyond being reasonable. “Are you torturing me for your own amusement? To finally

get me into bed?"

His eyebrows lowered. "You're tortured?"

"I don't need your pity!" She felt vulnerable and raw. "I'm not going to fall for you. I'm not. You can just ... forget it!"

With a choked sob, she dropped the horse's rope as she covered her face with her hands.

"Don't drop the rope!" he said tersely, but it was too late. As soon as the mare was free, the animal immediately took off at a run, the rope flying behind her in the wind.

Stefano chased the horse down, caught the rope, soothed her with his touch and soft words, then led her out of the pen. When he finally came back to Annabelle, she could see the grim line of his body, the way he clenched his hands at his sides.

"I've saddled your horse. Go back to the house."

He was sending her away? "Fine," she said over the lump in her throat.

He came closer, his jaw set, his voice hard. "I was trying to help you, you know," he said. "I was trying to be unselfish for once in my damned life. But have it your way. Go back to your solitary, lonely world. Enjoy being alone and closed off from the world."

She flinched. She'd gotten what she wanted—she'd driven him away. He'd given up on her. Just what she expected. She drove everyone away sooner or later.

"Fine," she repeated. She rubbed her aching temple, then wiped away tears with an angry fist as she turned away.

"What happened to your face?" he demanded harshly behind her.

Annabelle froze.

She realized she must have rubbed off the last of her makeup. Now, to top everything else, he'd seen her scar. He knew how vulnerable and ugly she really was.

"It's nothing," she said. She quickened her pace, desperate to get away.

She heard him come up swiftly behind her. "Stop," he said roughly.

“Let me see your face!”

Annabelle wanted to collapse on the ground and sob. He’d given her the kiss of a lifetime. For the space of a few hours, she’d almost thought they were friends. Now ... this is all he would remember of her. The ugly scarred monster.

Slowly, Annabelle turned.

“Oh, my God,” he breathed, coming closer. “What happened to you?”

Beneath the merciless sun, she lifted her bangs, turning her face upward so he could see the deep red scar stretching down her face.

“Are you satisfied?” Tears streamed down her cheeks. “This is who I really am. A *monster*. Why did you have to give me hope I might ever be more than this?”

Stefano stared down at her, his expression a mask of shock. Annabelle looked up at his wide, dark eyes and saw horror and disgust.

With a choked sob, Annabelle turned and ran blindly, streaking over the wooden fence toward the forest.

*This is who I really am.*

Her choked, tear-sodden words still echoed in Stefano’s ears as he stared after her, overwhelmed by the vision of her ruined, lovely face. The ugly red line had slithered down her forehead and cheek like a poisonous snake. *A monster.*

His heart pounded in his throat. What had happened to her? Had she gotten the scar by accident? Or by the hand of man?

With a sob, Annabelle had turned and run.

With an intake of breath, Stefano ran after her. But this time, she was faster than he’d ever expected. She didn’t want to be caught. Grimly, he crashed through the underbrush and into the forest. He saw Annabelle just ahead, her long blond hair streaming behind her. His stride was longer, his legs were faster, his stamina greater. He caught up with her on the other edge of the forest, pushing her into the bright, open meadow beyond.

“Let me go!” she cried.

“No,” he said, tightening his grip on her wrists.

Annabelle struggled and kicked as he pushed her past the trees into the vivid field of red poppies. Shackling her wrists with his large hands, he looked down at her.

She looked half-wild. Her cheeks were flushed, her chignon gone as her blond hair fell in waves down her shoulders. Her pant leg was ripped, her ivory jacket dirty with splattered mud.

From this close, he could see every detail of the jagged scarlet line slashing down her beautiful face. But that wasn't what disturbed him the most. It was what was beneath the scar: the anguish in Annabelle's trembling face.

"What do you want?" she cried. "Why do you keep trying to hurt me?"  
"I'm not! I want to help you!"

"You can't." She shook her head as tears streamed down her sunburned face. "No one can."

Amid the waving flowers, she looked so beautiful that his heart turned over in his chest. He took a deep breath. "How did you get your scar?"

She looked up at him with big eyes, like pools of gray after rain.

"Please." His hands gentled their hold. "Tell me."

"It hurts too much," she whispered. "It's better to be numb."

"No," he said urgently. Looking down at her, he put his hands on her shoulders. "Pain is how you know you're alive," he said, searching her gaze. "If you are too afraid to feel pain, you'll never know joy." Annabelle turned toward the green mountains jutting into the wide blue sky. With a deep breath, she looked back at him.

"You think I'm hard and distant and cold." She shook her head, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "I wasn't always like that. My father had eight children by five different women. He hated all of us. He drove each of our mothers away, by force, death or insanity. But we children couldn't leave." Blinking fast, she looked down at her hands. "He hit my brothers for the slightest excuse. But not me, never me. I looked too much like my mother, you see. I thought I was lucky. And then ..."

Swallowing, she looked away. "At fourteen I decided it would be fun to sneak away to a party, dressed in a low-cut shirt to see if any of the village boys might notice me."

Stefano set his jaw. “And did they?”

Annabelle sank to her knees abruptly, sitting in the field of red poppies and purple flowers. Her eyes stared blindly at the blue sky.

“My brother sent me home early from the party to protect me. But I found my father drunk, just returned from an unsatisfactory day of hunting.” She blinked. “He was furious when he saw me. He screamed at me as he raised his whip. ‘You whore,’ he said, ‘no boy will ever look at you again!’”

Stefano felt a sickening rage inside that nearly turned his vision to black. But she was looking up at him through her lashes, nervously waiting for his reaction. Clenching his hands into fists, he forced himself to sit down beside her amid the flowers.

“Go on,” he said tersely.

She exhaled. “My brother saved me,” she said. “Jacob knocked my father aside and pulled the whip out of his hand. My father fell and hit his head on the bottom stair. He died almost at once. And we were glad,” she said dully. “We were all of us glad.”

“I’m sorry,” Stefano said in a low voice. His hands were still clenched, wanting to punch someone long dead.

“Now you know.” Annabelle looked down at her own hands, and for the first time he saw that the tiny red lines he’d thought were scratches were actually scars. “Now you know how ugly I really am inside.”

Stefano stared down at her.

“Ugly?” A warm breeze ran through the meadow, causing the flowers around them to dance softly in waves of red and purple. Fiercely, he grabbed her by the shoulders. “You are not ugly. You are beautiful and strong. Far stronger than the past actions of a coward like your father.”

She looked away. Blinking back tears, she whispered, “You were right about what you said. I like being behind a camera. It makes me feel ... like I’m invisible. So after living alone for years at Wolfe Manor, I went to university to study photography. But my most trusted mentor, the one I thought was my friend, turned on me after my first success. He was twice my age, but tried to seduce me. When I refused him, he called me a monster. He said no one would ever love a scarred woman like me. He

said he'd only tried to seduce me out of pity."

Stefano sucked in his breath. "Was that Patrick Arbuthnot?"

She looked away, not meeting his eyes. That was answer enough.

"I met him once, did I tell you?" Stefano said flatly. "The man came to my charity event a few years ago. When I refused to sell him a horse he wanted, he bragged about being your first lover. I think he was trying to impress me." He set his jaw. "Say the word and I'll go hurt him for you."

Annabelle gave a surprised laugh, then shook her head tearfully. "He was thirty years older than I was, and weighed over twenty stone. He died last year of a heart attack while in bed with a Ukrainian model." She took a deep breath. "But still. What he said about me was true. No one can ever truly love a scarred monster like me."

Stefano cursed in Spanish, so loudly and fluidly that her eyes went wide. "You are beautiful. Talented. Lovely and kind. I've never wanted any woman as badly as I want you, Annabelle," he said harshly. "I've been tortured with wanting you."

He saw her blink, heard her ragged intake of breath. "You really think I'm still beautiful?" she whispered. "Even like this?"

He took a shuddering breath. Reaching forward, he traced her scar with his fingertip. "This is only a small part of you. You are more than this. You are also *this*," he said, lightly running his fingertips down her soft, unblemished cheek. "And this," he said, stroking her long, creamy neck. He moved his hand to her sensitive lower lip, unable to look away from her pink, full mouth. "And this."

He felt her tremble beneath his touch. He wanted to kiss her so badly he couldn't bear it. But he forced himself not to do what every cell in his body screamed to do.

He'd given his word not to kiss her. So dropping his hand, he turned away.

Then, like a miracle, he felt her soft hand on his cheek, turning him back to her. He had a brief vision of her eyes, shining like a summer mist.

And she kissed him.

He felt the tremble of her mouth as her lips parted. He felt the softness

of her skin. *Dios mío.* His body shook as he kissed her back ferociously, with all his pent-up need.

A gasp came from low in his throat. He needed more of her. *All of her.* He'd never wanted any woman like this. Feeling her slender body against his own, wrapping his arms around her, was like embracing pure fire.

With a shuddering intake of breath, he wrapped his arms around her. "I want you, Annabelle," he breathed. "I think I'll die if I don't have you."

Her gray eyes shone at him with trust and desire. Placing her hands on his cheeks, Annabelle kissed him with sweet, trembling passion. He tasted her tongue in his mouth and gasped.

Roughly, he pulled her down against him. Kissing her with every ounce of force he possessed, he rolled her beneath his body, laying her down amid the waves of purple and red flowers.

Now. He could wait no longer. *Now.*

# CHAPTER EIGHT

AS STEFANO PRESSED HER back into the flowers, Annabelle felt the cool damp earth beneath her ripped suit, felt the warmth of his hard body over hers. She'd fallen into a dream.

When he'd told her she was beautiful, when she'd seen the truth shining in his handsome face, she hadn't been able to stop herself from kissing him. Now, she felt his hands move over her skin, caressing her sunburned face. Poppies blew against them, red and purple petals tangling and twisting in her hair.

He kissed her so deeply that she didn't know where he ended and she began. His lips moved against hers, his fingertips lightly stroking down her neck, beneath her bare collarbone. His tongue flicked inside her mouth, teasing hers like a sensual whirlwind. A tingle of sensation flooded her body. Her nipples tightened as she gasped, clinging to him. His calloused hands moved downward, stopping at the edge of her neckline. She held her breath, waiting for him to reach beneath her silk camisole. Instead, after a pause, his hands moved over the linen jacket, cupping her high, firm breasts.

Electricity ricocheted down her body, jagged and raw. Her breasts felt heavy, straining against the camisole, her nipples pebbling to tight aching points.

With a shuddering breath, he pulled away to look at her.

"You think you're not beautiful, Annabelle? You think you're not lovable?" he whispered. "Let me show you."

His hands cupped her breasts before he moved the weight of his body against her, kissing her so long and hard that she felt lost in her own fiercely answering need.

Annabelle looked up at his face. Above him she could see the wide blue sky as the wind fluttered purple flowers and red poppies down upon them. He was so handsome, so impossibly handsome, with his tanned skin and lean, muscular body. Tendrils of chin-length black hair had

escaped the leather tie at the base of his neck and hung down around his face, giving him the look of an eighteenth-century pirate.

His dark eyes were hungry for plunder. For her.

Somewhere in the back of her mind Annabelle knew that giving her virginity to a Spanish playboy would do worse than break her heart—it would destroy her. But she couldn't push him away. Not now. She needed his warmth, his light, his touch. She needed to feel. *She needed to live.*

Stefano stroked her face with the pads of his thumbs, making her shiver in the hot sun. He cupped her face, looking down at her amid the flowers. "Never hate your scar. It is a badge of honor. It is beautiful."

She choked out a disbelieving laugh.

"*Sí*," he insisted. "It reveals your strength and courage, a far greater beauty than flawless skin. I would kiss your every scar if I could."

Annabelle's heart pounded in her throat. Could her scar really be something to be proud of, rather than something to hide?

She swallowed, licking her lips. Trembling at her own boldness, she lifted her hair to reveal a scar on the base of her neck.

"I have one here," she whispered.

He smiled at her. Then, lowering his head, he kissed her neck.

She felt his lips against the scar, leaving a trail of hot and passionate kisses down her neck to the crook of her shoulder. Prickles spread down her body like wildfire, crackling with need, burning through her like a dry forest.

When he drew back, she shyly pulled off her ripped linen jacket, revealing the white silk camisole beneath. She pointed at a long, jagged scar along the length of her right upper arm.

"And here."

Taking her slender arm in his rough hands, Stefano slowly kissed up her scar. She felt his lips caress her skin, felt his slick tongue along her puckered flesh as he nibbled her with the edge of his teeth.

Again, he drew back. His dark eyes devoured her, as if only the barest thread of will held Stefano back from ripping off her clothes and making

love to her amid the flowers.

Annabelle should have been afraid. Terrified.

Instead, she felt strangely fearless, like the fourteen-year-old girl she'd once been. The girl who wasn't afraid to pursue what she wanted most.

She pulled the neckline of her silken camisole down to reveal a single extra inch of skin.

"Here."

Slowly, so slowly, he kissed the long-faded scar that stretched along the top of her naked breast. She nearly gasped at the new waves of pleasure, of tension and need. No man had ever done so much to her.

The white sun beamed down on them, the flowers blowing softly in the hot wind. On the distant hillside Annabelle could see the ruined pile of rocks of the old Moorish castle. She felt out of time, out of place. Ancient magic, a sensuality older than memory, wove through her. It made her weak; it made her strong. It flooded her body with sharp euphoria and a breathless hush of expectation.

"I want you," Stefano breathed, cupping her face. "I've never waited so long for any woman. *Annabelle*."

His lips were hard and hungry as he kissed her. She felt his fingertips stroking softly down her body, her neck, her waist, and she forgot to breathe. She needed him more than she needed air. She gasped as he slowly kissed down her neck, tasting her bare shoulder as his hands cupped her breasts beneath the fabric. Her nipples tightened, and he moved his mouth to suckle her through the silk.

Her fingers gripped his shoulders as she gasped aloud.

He pulled her arms upright and yanked the silk camisole up off her body. Her white lacy bra came next. Her upper torso was completely bare as he pushed her back amid the flowers. She shivered in the hot sunlight, beneath the dappled shadows of tree branches swaying in the wind, as he looked down at her.

For several seconds, he stared at her in awe, whispering incomprehensible words of reverence. Then he swiftly pulled off his shirt. He looked like an ancient god of passion and war. Dark hair laced the tight, hard muscles of his chest and the flat plain of his belly. His

shoulders were powerful and wide, his arms strong enough to fight a thousand men for her.

His body fell against hers. She felt his hard chest crush her breasts as he moved against her, the heavy weight of his body pinning her against the cool earth. His lips plundered her mouth in a kiss of seduction and fire. His hands moved down her half-naked body, stroking and caressing every bare inch of her skin. He suckled her earlobes, kissing along her neck to the hollow between her breasts. Her breaths came quick and fast as he slowly kissed down her naked belly. He flicked his tongue into her belly button and she moaned, shifting her weight beneath him. Desire pooled low in her belly. She felt a driving need for more ...

He wrapped his hand around the mound of one breast and suckled her taut, naked nipple. She felt him take her inside his wet, warm mouth and arched her back with a soft cry. He swirled his tongue against her, teasing her nipple gently with the sharp edge of his teeth. As she gasped, writhing beneath him, he moved to her other nipple, licking and suckling her. She felt his hands move down her naked waist, down to the waistline of her pants. Over the fabric, he stroked her hips, grazing lightly over her thighs.

He lifted her legs around his hips.

She felt his hardness through multiple layers of fabric. It was unmistakable. He felt so hard and huge, pressed up against her. He swayed, moving between her legs, and her breathing came in haggard gasps.

She'd never known it could be like this. *She hadn't known....*

Suddenly, Stefano choked out a low, guttural curse. As the sun moved behind a cloud, a shadow shifted across Stefano's face as he ripped away from her.

It took a minute before she remembered how to speak, before her lips could even form words. "What—what's wrong?"

He stared down at her furiously, his jaw hard. "We have to stop. I never thought ... I'm not prepared. Damn me to hell!"

Even through her pants and his jeans, she'd felt him against her, rock hard and huge. "You seemed pretty prepared to me."

"I didn't bring a condom," he bit out, scowling in fury.

Looking at him, a laugh escaped her. "You mean you don't carry one in your wallet? You? The playboy everyone warned me about?"

"A mistake I will soon rectify." Standing, he yanked her camisole back over her chest. Wadding the rest of their clothes into a ball, he picked Annabelle up from the flowers. Carrying her against his bare chest, he strode swiftly out of the meadow and back through the forest.

"Put me down!" she said. "I can walk!"

"Not until you're in my bed," he said grimly, never breaking stride as he crashed through the forest. "I'm not giving you the chance to change your mind."

Back at the paddock, he carried her to the gentle mare he'd saddled for her. As if she weighed nothing, Stefano lifted her onto the dappled horse, then swung onto the saddle behind her. Thrusting their crumpled-up clothes into the saddle's pack, he wrapped both of his arms around Annabelle. With a flick of the reins, he tapped his heels against the horse's sides.

The mare leaped forward, and Annabelle rested her head back against Stefano's chest. She closed her eyes, hearing his heartbeat, feeling protected in his arms. They flew forward through the trees and back down the hillside, back toward the golden fields that surrounded the hacienda.

Sitting in Stefano's lap astride the horse, leaning against his muscled chest with his arms wrapped around her, Annabelle drowsed in a sensual dream. Her lips were bruised from his kiss. Her silk camisole clung to her bare skin where he'd suckled her with his wet mouth. Red and purple flower petals flew from her loose blond hair, whirling in the breeze as the horse soared over the ground, sharp hooves flying.

With every leap of the animal's long stride, Annabelle felt the warmth and strength of the powerful man who held her. She felt how much he still wanted her.

Annabelle twisted her head to look back at him as he guided the horse. His dark eyes were focused intently on the horizon. He looked like a knight, she thought, riding a charger to save a medieval castle. She felt

every jarring step of the horse's fast gallop against the earth. She saw the sharp hooves and the distance to the ground, but in Stefano's arms, she wasn't afraid. Not even of what waited for her.

His bedroom.

*His bed.*

When they arrived in the courtyard, Stefano pulled the mare to a stop with a low whistle. Tossing the reins to one of the young stablehands, he leaped down. Not bothering to explain, he lifted Annabelle into his strong arms.

She had a single vision of the teenager's shocked face as Stefano carried her to the house.

His fast stride never wavered as he took her upstairs. They were inside his bedroom before Annabelle's eyes had adjusted from the bright sunlight to the cool darkness inside. She blinked and saw his bedroom, the mirror of her own but with Spartan, masculine furniture.

Stefano put her down on his enormous bed. He looked down at her, bare-chested, dark-eyed and impossibly handsome. The rest of the world disappeared. She could see only him. Wanted only him.

*Even if it destroyed her.*

Stefano pushed her back against his pillows. He kissed her, his lips deliciously hard, and she felt his hands reach for her camisole. Roughly, he ripped the silk apart in his bare hands and dropped it to the floor.

"Don't rip my clothes!" she gasped.

"I want it all off," he growled. "Now."

Flinging himself on top of her, he moved his hands down her body, stroking her naked breasts to her flat belly. His gaze locked with hers as he undid the zipper of her pants and yanked them down over the curve of her hips, past her feet, before tossing them to the floor.

Annabelle's mouth parted in shock as he knelt at the foot of the bed.

Roughly pushing her legs apart, he kissed up the inside of her naked thighs. He cupped the mound between her legs over her underwear, causing her to tremble and arch her back, rising to meet him. She closed her eyes, gripping the white cotton sheet in her fists, as if she were

afraid she might otherwise go spinning upward into the sky. His mouth moved to the edge of the cotton fabric, licking just beneath the elastic with a flick of his tongue. Then he ripped it off her body entirely, and she gasped.

She realized she was naked, spread-eagled across his enormous bed. No man had ever seen her naked before. She opened her eyes.

Looking at the hunger in his eyes, she sucked in her breath. Slowly, never taking his gaze from hers, he took off his jeans and dark boxers. Naked, he knelt before her on the bed. Staring up at him in the half shadows slatted with streaks of light from the blinds, Annabelle sucked in her breath at his masculine beauty. He was so hard, and so ready for her. But he was so huge. How would he ever fit inside her? How badly would it hurt?

Biting her lip, Annabelle looked up at him, her eyes dazed with wonder and desire and fear. With a groan, he lowered his head to kiss her. He kissed her softly on the forehead, her eyelids, then finally her mouth with a long, intense kiss.

“Look at me,” he whispered, biting her lower lip, “and ask me if I think you’re beautiful.”

He pulled away, his knees braced on the mattress as he straddled her hips, and even as the question rose to Annabelle’s mouth, she had no need to ask. The physical proof of his desire jutted hard from his body.

“Touch me,” he said roughly. “And ask if I want you.”

She’d never *seen* a naked man before, let alone touched one. Timidly, she reached out a fingertip and stroked him from the tip along the shaft. He jerked beneath her touch. Gaining confidence, she took him fully in her gentle grasp. He exhaled. He was so huge in her hand, and so hard. When she looked up in wonder at his handsome face his expression was strained, as if he were fighting to keep control.

“You want me,” Annabelle said softly. It was a statement, not a question.

Stefano looked down at her, spread across his bed. His dark eyes seared her skin. She realized he could see all the scars on her whole body. Everything that surgery and time had not healed, everything she’d

hidden for twenty years, *he could see.*

But to her surprise, she wasn't afraid. She wasn't ashamed. Beneath his eyes, she was beautiful.

He lowered his body over hers, and as he kissed her, she felt it all over her body. The intensity of his embrace felt like Christmas, like home, like love itself. She felt the hard roughness of his thighs against hers, felt his muscled, hair-covered chest slide against her plump breasts. They were so different and yet, as he held her beneath him, they were the same. They were one.

She felt him between her legs, sliding over her most secret core, demanding entrance. His hands cupped her breasts as he suckled her nipples and stroked her breasts. She gasped as she felt his fingers move down her flat belly to her hips and finally between her thighs, closer and closer to the sweet aching place that begged for his touch. He teased her, making her tight with longing and desire as he licked and stroked her body. Finally, when she was nearly half-mad with need, he brushed her molten core with his fingertips, in the barest whisper of a touch.

Her hips jerked forward in the explosion of sensation, and she gasped. He touched her again, so softly. With his other hand, he pushed a single exploratory fingertip inside her, and she gripped the sheets in her hands, twisting back and forth, wanting deeper. Wanting more, but not knowing how to ask.

But he already knew. In a swift motion he moved down her naked body, placing his head between her legs. Pushing her thighs apart, he tasted her with the full width of his tongue.

She cried out, arching her back beneath the electric arc of pleasure. The shock was intense. She tried to move away. He held her down with his hands, making her submit to incredible pleasure such as she'd never known.

He slowly licked her, his tongue lapping the hot wet center of her need, flicking against her hot aching peak, swirling in progressively tighter circles until she was writhing in sweet agony. Her body was so tight and taut, and climbing higher still. Her breathing came in ragged, short gasps as the edges of her vision started to go dark. The tension was unbearable, making her shake and twist beneath the savage, ruthless

lapping of his tongue. The pleasure was building. Exploding. She clutched the back of Stefano's black hair, trying to pull him away before she ... before she ...

But he wouldn't let her escape—he wouldn't—

Her world exploded and waves of bliss poured over her like colors, the blue of the Spanish sky, red poppies, deep brown earth and the black of her lover's eyes. She screamed out his name and Stefano moved, sheathing himself in a condom in a fast movement before he braced his hands on either side of her body, positioning himself between her legs.

In a single rough movement, he pushed himself inside her.

Pain shot through Annabelle as he ripped through her, splitting her apart. She heard the intake of his breath as he broke the unexpected barrier inside her.

"Annabelle?" he said in a strangled voice. "How is it possible ... how can you be a virgin?"

She twisted her head away, her eyes tightly shut at the shock and revulsion she imagined she heard in his voice. He started to pull away from her, but she couldn't bear for it to end, not like this!

"I'm not a virgin," she whispered, gripping his shoulders, holding him inside her. "Not anymore."

She heard his low, hoarse gasp. "Look at me."

Shaking, Annabelle opened her eyes, waiting to see scorn in his handsome face. Instead, she saw only shock and something else—wistfulness?

"I don't want to hurt you," he said quietly.

"It's too late," she said in a low voice. "It's done."

"If I'd known you might be a virgin—"

"Don't stop now," she choked out. She shook her head, blinking back tears she struggled to hide. "Please don't leave me like this."

Stefano closed his eyes, then with a ragged intake of breath, he slowly pushed back inside her. The movement was slow, impaling her inch by inch. His jaw twitched with the tight ferocity of his control.

She gritted her teeth, bracing against expected pain.

But instead, as he moved slowly inside her, she was shocked by a new feeling that rose above the pain. Pleasure rebuilt inside her like dark clouds of a thunderstorm on a hot summer day. Darkening. Building. Ready to explode.

He filled her so deeply. With each thrust, he went deeper still. She saw by the tension of his body what it cost him to hold back like this. He was so careful—so gentle. His eyes were closed, his jaw twitching with the effort of self-control.

She loved him for that. Reaching up, Annabelle pulled him down and softly kissed his lips. The last vestiges of her body's pain dissipated and the tension coiling low in her belly started to fill her with every thrust. She gripped his shoulders as he rode her, digging her fingernails into his skin, desperate for more, to feel him harder, deeper. And with a ragged gasp, he obliged her. Annabelle's head fell back as she gasped for breath, lifting her hips to accept each hard thrust as he rode her. He was so huge, so hard, and as he held her down with his weight, slamming into her so deeply, she cried out from pleasure so intense it almost felt like pain.

His low growl built to a roar as he gripped her hips, pushing inside her with one final shattering thrust. He was so deep, deep, deep inside her that when he shouted her name in the hard ecstasy of his release, joy exploded through her and she screamed as her world went black.

When Annabelle came back to herself moments later, she found herself cradled against Stefano's naked body, wrapped in the powerful shelter of his arms. She looked around in amazement. The bed looked as if it had been hit by a tornado, with white sheets and covers twisted and ripped around them. Everything else was chaos, but she and Stefano were at peace, the eye of the storm.

Annabelle exhaled in wonder, hardly able to believe what she'd experienced. She pressed her cheek to Stefano's naked chest and felt the rhythm of his breath. She closed her eyes, listening to his heartbeat, feeling closer to Stefano than she ever had to anyone on earth. Nestled in his strong, protective arms, Annabelle smiled in wonder and joy as happiness washed over her.

Then her heart almost stopped in her chest.

Her eyes flew open. Stefano was a playboy. Every joy he'd just given her was sweet sugar laced with poison. She'd let her inhibitions go and surrendered everything to his conquest. Her feelings were in his hands now, but how long would he be interested in her? A day? Two? Or was he already done?

She'd just given herself to a man who always lost interest in every woman after he bedded her.

She'd given him her virginity. Her trust. Her ... heart?

No. Annabelle shuddered. Please God, she couldn't be that foolish. She wouldn't give her heart to a man who would betray and desert her in a matter of days, if not hours.

Would she?

"So what happens now?"

Still half-asleep, Stefano opened his eyes lazily at the trembling sound of Annabelle's voice. Both of them were still naked and lying across his bed amid the ransacked white cotton sheets. He smiled to himself. *Dios mío*, he'd never felt such passion for any woman. Beneath that cool reserved exterior, she had even more fire than he'd ever imagined.

When he'd first kissed her in the meadow beneath the wide blue sky, breathing in the scent of the flowers—the scent of her—Stefano had thought he would die if he didn't have her. But making love to Annabelle had exceeded his wildest expectations.

Now, to his shock, he wanted ... more.

"What happens now?" he repeated, a tender smile on his lips as he looked down at her cradled to his bare chest. He frowned as if in thought, then grinned. "We go downstairs for dinner?"

"We slept together," she pointed out.

"Yes," he murmured, kissing her temple. "I noticed that."

But Annabelle's beautiful face had an unhappy, pinched expression. "You must have a usual procedure after you've bedded a woman. How does this end?"

Stefano blinked. A usual procedure? *Sí*, he did have one. After he made love to a pretty woman who was barely more than a stranger, he

always got dressed, told the woman he'd never forget their night together, left the hotel room and promptly forgot her.

But this ... this was different. This was *Annabelle*.

She was a virgin. He'd made love to her in his own bed. Most of all: he knew her. For the first time in his life, he'd become friends with a woman before he'd slept with her. He'd been forced to wait so long to seduce her, he'd had to fight so hard to win her, that he'd actually started to ... care.

"So." Annabelle took a deep breath, her lips turning downward unhappily in the deepening shadows of his bedroom. "What happens now?"

"I don't know," Stefano said slowly. Trying to brush aside her question, he gave her a sudden wicked grin. "We could always do it again."

But she pulled away from him. "I'm serious," she insisted.

"So am I." Looking at her now, soft and naked in his bed, was the culmination of all his dreams. He stroked her soft skin, caressing her naked body. He could see the faintly pink pattern of scars on her skin, like the veins of a flower. She was so sweet and soft, like a pale pink rose.

He would never forget the taste of her. He would never forget the feel of her pebbled nipple in his wet mouth or the soft pleasure of her breasts. He'd never forget the sound of her gasp when he'd pushed her legs apart and licked her, when he'd thrust himself to the hilt inside her tight sheath. The pleasure of that had nearly overwhelmed him. He would never forget how it had felt to fill her, to hear her cry out his name, to bring her to gasping fulfillment before he'd shuddered and shattered inside her with his own orgasm.

He was already hard for her again. How? How was that possible? Usually, he lost interest in a woman immediately after he'd bedded her. But this time, instead of being satiated, he didn't want to let Annabelle go.

He softly kissed the top of her head, and even that small movement caused a new shudder of desire to course through his body. He said in a

low voice, “How is it possible that you were a virgin, Annabelle?”

She swallowed. Folding her arms, she looked up at the white plaster ceiling. “I know. It’s a bit pathetic, isn’t it? Most women my age have boyfriends, husbands, children. I’ve never had anything. Or anyone.”

“So—why did you choose me?” he whispered hoarsely, hardly able to believe it.

She looked at him for a long time, then finally said, “I’ve been chased by many men, but never one like you. You pursued me with such single-minded passion. Such ... devotion. And such skill. I could not resist you. In the end, I didn’t want to resist, no matter what it might cost me.” She took a deep breath. “How long do you want me to stay?”

He frowned, not understanding. “In bed? Stay as long as you like.”

She looked at him in the shadows of twilight, then gave a harsh laugh. Abruptly, she sat up. Her gray eyes became hard and flat as slate.

“Let’s be honest and call this what it is,” she said coldly. Her cheeks flushed red over her faint pink sunburn. “A one-night stand.”

“No.” He immediately sat up beside her. “Not a one-night stand. That’s not what I want.”

She exhaled, and the coldness in her eyes fell away. She suddenly looked vulnerable and painfully young. “It isn’t?”

Swearing softly in Spanish, he snorted a laugh. “*Dios mío*, Annabelle. I don’t want any other woman. I want you. Don’t you know that by now? I’ve never had to try so hard to win a woman. I don’t want you to leave my bed. I’ve barely had a chance to enjoy you yet.”

Looking at him, she licked her lips. Then slowly, she lifted troubled gray eyes. “Then ... I’ll stay.” She took a deep breath and added quickly, “Just until my assignment ends here on Saturday. When your charity gala is finished, I will leave Santo Castillo.”

He scowled at her. “You can stay longer than that.”

She laughed at his expression, then sobered. “No, I’d better not.”

“Why?”

Annabelle rose from the bed. Naked, she reached for her linen skirt and silk camisole now crumpled on the floor, ripped and dirty from her

work with the horses.

"I want an answer," he said steadily.

She stopped, then. Folding her arms over her naked breasts, she looked at him with clear gray eyes.

"People can't change who they are, Stefano," she whispered. "I've learned that the hard way. My father was a brute. My mentor was a liar. They both treated me differently at first. My father beat my brothers, but not me. Patrick lied to other people, but not me. I thought I was special. But ultimately they treated me like all the rest."

"I'm nothing like Arbuthnot or your father," he said angrily.

She shook her head sadly. "You're wrong. Whatever you might think now, you will someday treat me just as you treat all other women. You will hurt me. And I've already given you too much." Turning away with her clothes in her arms, she whispered, "If I were smart, I would leave now ..."

Leaping to his feet, he caught her wrist.

"No," he growled.

She looked down at his hand, then gave him a trembling smile. "You are a playboy, Stefano. It was the first thing I heard about you. You will someday leave me for another."

"Maybe," he exploded. "But not today! Not next week!"

"No, not today." She gave him a wan smile. "But soon. How could you not? We are all wrong for each other. You love this ranch and hate to leave it, while I will never settle down and have a home."

"So? I could visit you in London, you could visit me here ..."

She shook her head. "It's more than that." She looked down at the floor unhappily. "I know you will betray me. I can't bear to just wait for it to happen."

"But, Annabelle." He stared at her. "We could have weeks, months, together. Why do we have to decide now how it ends? Why not just enjoy it while it lasts?"

Blinking back tears, she gave him a tremulous smile. "You asked me how I could be a virgin at thirty-three. It's because I don't let anyone

close. I don't give my heart easily.”

Her heart? He frowned. “We haven’t said anything about love. We’re talking about sex.”

“For you, I know they are not the same. But for me.” She shook her head. “That’s why I need to leave. Before I.” Her eyes glimmered in the light as she took a deep breath. “Before I love you.”

His eyes went wide.

Staring at him, Annabelle shook her head with a laugh. “You needn’t look at me like that. Don’t worry, I know you are the worst possible man I could choose to love. You will never be faithful to any woman. And I couldn’t take another betrayal, Stefano. I really couldn’t.”

He scowled. “Annabelle—”

“Stop.” She put her finger on his lips. “There’s nothing more to say. You know I’m right. We’ll just enjoy the rest of this week and then … we will part.”

Stefano swallowed.

*People can’t change who they are,* she’d said. And in his heart of hearts, he knew she was right.

And yet.

And yet.

In this moment, Stefano couldn’t bear the thought of her leaving him. Not now. Not yet. For the first time in his life, he wanted more of a woman after bedding her, and she was pushing him away!

He shook his head angrily, not wanting to accept her decision. “Stay an extra week after the gala,” he argued. “Surely a week won’t hurt.” He tried to smile. “That won’t make you love me. I’m not that adorable.”

She snorted, then shook her head. “I can’t,” she said. “I’ll need a week in London to edit and develop the photographs of Santo Castillo for *Equestrian*, then I immediately leave for Argentina on assignment for *Geography World* magazine. No.” She took a deep breath. “Our love affair —whatever you want to call it—must end when I leave on Saturday. It’ll be a clean break. For both of us.”

He swallowed. “I don’t want you to go.”

"It's for the best." Her eyes were luminous in the fading light. "Let's enjoy the four days left. Then we'll say goodbye before it gets serious. Before anyone gets hurt. All right?"

He sucked in his breath.

"All right," he said heavily. "Four days."

He didn't like this. Didn't like it at all. But he couldn't argue with anything she'd said. He didn't want to hurt her, but knew he probably would.

Four days would have to be enough. He'd somehow make it be enough. Then he would forget her, like all the rest. Wouldn't he?

Standing beside her, Stefano entwined his fingers with hers. "Only four days," he said softly. "Let's make every minute count. We still have the rest of the evening. We still have all of the night."

Her gray eyes flashed up at him, looking breathless and mysterious. "After all our hard work today—"

Taking her hand, he pulled her back toward the bed. "I couldn't exactly call it work."

She giggled, allowing him to draw her two steps toward the bed before she stopped. "But I'm starving."

"Me, too," he growled, pulling her into his arms. Holding her against the length of his naked body, he kissed her.

With a sigh from the back of her throat, Annabelle melted. Her wadded-up clothes fell from her hands as she wrapped her arms around him. Stefano smiled to himself, knowing he'd get his way. He relished the feel of her soft body against his, the feeling of paradise.

Then they heard a loud shout downstairs, as the young stablehands headed noisily into the dining hall.

Annabelle pulled away from his embrace.

"We should go downstairs," she said, blushing. "Everyone might wonder what we're doing if we don't show up for dinner."

"Let them wonder." Smiling down at her, he stroked her cheek. "We'll ask Mrs. Gutierrez to bring up dinner. We have no reason to even get dressed."

She looked scandalized. “We couldn’t!”

“Why not?”

“Well—” she bit her lip “—it would set a bad example for the boys. I wouldn’t want them to think it’s acceptable behavior to sleep with their girlfriends before they’re married....”

“Ah, *querida*,” Stefano said tenderly, laughing. “You’re an old-fashioned girl.”

She stiffened in his arms. “I suppose I am.”

He stopped her with a kiss, then looked in her eyes. “I meant it as a compliment.”

Naked, they faced each other. But for once, Stefano wasn’t looking at her body. He took her hands in his own, staring in wonder at her beautiful face. Her gray eyes were endless pools of light.

He felt her warmth, heard the hush of her breath in the shadowy room. He realized he couldn’t see the scar on her face anymore. All he saw was her beauty—inside and out.

He’d never felt like this before.

He ... cared for her.

*You are the worst possible man I could choose to love.* The echo of her voice rang hollowly in his ears. *You will never be faithful to any woman.* *And I couldn’t take another betrayal, Stefano. I really couldn’t.*

A cold jolt went through him, but he pushed the feeling away. He would just enjoy their four days. It would be a short, hot affair. That was all he ever wanted, anyway. Right?

Right?

He dropped her hands and turned away. “If we’re going downstairs to have dinner, I’d better go take a shower.”

“I’ll miss you,” she said wistfully behind him, then gave a goofy laugh. “Isn’t that ridiculous? How can I possibly miss you for ten minutes while you’re in the shower?”

Four days. Only four days. And the clock was ticking.

Ignoring the lump in his throat, he turned back and crossed the room in three steps.

“You won’t miss me, *querida*.” He looked down at her, and his body went hard as his heart turned over in his chest. “I’m taking you with me.”

# CHAPTER NINE

ANNABELLE LISTENED TO Stefano's even, quiet breathing as he held her naked against his chest, lying in his bed. She looked down at their intertwined fingers. Even though he slept, his hand was wrapped around hers, their intertwined clasp lit with soft gold in the fresh morning light.

Every new hour, every new minute, Annabelle spent with Stefano over the past two days had increased the depths of her joy. She'd never known life could be so wonderful.

Her camera bag and expensive photography equipment had been left in her bedroom, gathering dust. Instead, she'd lived the warm, busy, physically demanding life of the ranch, caring for the horses, going on long rides through the fields, feeling the wind and sunshine on her face. She'd even pulled vegetables from the garden and felt the earth against her fingertips. She'd taken lots of pictures, but only using her smallest digital camera, the one she could easily tuck into the back pocket of her oversize jeans. Being Stefano's mistress took precedence over everything else.

At midnight last night, long after the rest of the staff was asleep, she and Stefano had been suddenly starving after four solid hours of lovemaking. So they'd scampered down to the kitchen, where Stefano had insisted on showing her how to prepare his favorite Spanish rice dish of *paella*.

"Just in case you ever want to cook for me," he said with a wicked grin, his hands stroking over hers as he helped her stir the pot.

"Cook for you? The very idea!" she'd teased, flashing him an indignant look. "I'm a busy woman. You should cook for *me!*"

For answer, he'd grabbed the belt loops of the oversize jeans hanging low on her hips and turned her to face him. Her wooden spoon had clattered to the tile floor as he pulled her close to him in the kitchen.

"I'd love to cook for you," he'd whispered. "Every time I look at you, I boil."

He'd kissed her hungrily. Then, shoving aside the empty bowls and shattering them to the floor, he'd roughly pushed her back against the kitchen counter. As he lifted her into his arms, she'd wrapped her legs around his waist as he held her against him, pressing her back against the counter.

They'd very nearly made love right then and there, but Annabelle had suddenly remembered Mrs. Gutierrez, who was a light sleeper and probably heard the bowls smashing to the tile floor, and the impressionable teenagers who slept through anything but might wake up and wander into the kitchen for an extra meal.

Stefano had tried to reassure Annabelle that the housekeeper and boys were all exceedingly deep sleepers, long abed in a distant hallway, but she'd been steadfast. So with a growl, he'd carried her in his arms, running up the stairs to his bedroom, where they'd made love for another two hours behind closed doors.

It was only later they'd remembered the *paella* in the cold pot downstairs. Throwing on robes, they'd gone back to the kitchen and reheated their late-night dinner in the microwave, washing it down with a cold bottle of white wine at the tiny table in the dark kitchen.

Then they'd gone back upstairs, and again, one thing had led to another ...

Annabelle sighed, wriggling her toes in pleasure at the memory. Her body felt wonderfully sore and she kept yawning from lack of sleep, but she'd never been so happy.

There was only one shadow on her happiness. The future.

Half their time together was already gone.

After the first time they'd made love, Annabelle had wanted to be with him so badly, she'd made a compromise with her soul: bargaining for four days of happiness at the expense of a little pain in the future. She'd told herself she couldn't possibly fall in love with Stefano in four days. As he'd said himself—surely he wasn't that adorable!

She still had two days left, she tried to comfort herself.

Two days. But only one night.

Tomorrow night, she would be the official photographer at his annual

charity polo match and gala. Then, late at night, she would pack up her equipment and drive back to London. She'd go edit the photographs of Santo Castillo for *Equestrian*, then catch a flight to Argentina.

She'd looked forward to visiting Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. But now, she couldn't bear the thought of leaving Stefano, her first lover. Her only lover.

The man she loved.

No! Annabelle's hands flew to her head in consternation. She couldn't let herself love him. Stefano Cortez would never commit to any woman. She would have to be barking mad—or utterly masochistic—to let herself love a man who'd never love her back!

Trembling, Annabelle carefully pulled away from his arms and crept out of his bed. She took a shower in his en suite bathroom, then got dressed in clothes she'd borrowed from his wardrobe: an oversize white cotton shirt and jeans cinched to her hips with his leather belt.

Looking down at her clothes, Annabelle smiled. Stefano had been so gleeful to finally get her out of her dressy suits. She'd finally given up her sleek and professional outfits as impractical, and instead relished the comfort and good sense of Stefano's oversize cotton shirts and rolled-up jeans.

He'd sent for new work boots for her in the village. He offered to get her new clothes, as well. But she'd refused. She loved wearing Stefano's clothes. It was intimate. She sometimes thought she caught his scent of saddle soap and sunlight. Feeling the worn, soft cotton against her skin felt like being in his constant embrace.

Now, she looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. And for once, it wasn't the angry red scar across her face that drew her eyes. It was her mouth.

She touched her bruised lips. She could still feel Stefano's kiss. His perfect body. She'd been sleeping in his bed every night. His sensual, powerful body commanded her without words. He gave her such pleasure, made her feel so *alive*....

"There you are," she heard him growl behind her. "Why did you leave bed so early?"

Annabelle looked up at the mirror and saw him behind her, standing naked in the open doorway. In spite of their many days together, she blinked in astonishment at his masculine perfection. His shoulders were so broad, his body muscular and lithe. She couldn't look from his image in the mirror as he walked into the gleaming white bathroom. Her eyes traced downward from his handsome face and dark, chiseled jawline to his hard chest and flat belly and lower still ...

He wanted her to come back to bed. A lot.

His darkly amused eyes met hers in the mirror and she licked her lips, blushing. Coming behind her, he turned her around in his arms.

"I missed you." He looked down at her. "I was disappointed to wake up alone."

Closing her eyes, she breathed in his woodsy, masculine scent, in the pleasure and comfort of his embrace.

*Only one night left.*

Swallowing, Annabelle pushed away from him, tucking her smallest digital camera into the back pocket of her oversize jeans. Trying to hide the emotion on her face, hiding her desire to cling to him forever, she said sadly, "I have to work today."

"Forget work," he commanded, stroking her cheek. "Stay in bed."

She shivered with longing, staring up at his handsome face. "I've forgotten work too much already," she said. She shook her head. "*Equestrian* will wonder what on earth I've been doing all week here."

"Then let's both give back their advance," he said, nuzzling her neck. "I would happily lose a hundred thousand euros for a single hour of having you in my arms."

Annabelle sighed. Looking up at his handsome face, she was beyond tempted. She wanted nothing more than to stay here, in the warmth of his bedroom, with its rustic furniture and incredible view of the vast fields and horses outside. She wanted nothing more than to stay here in his arms forever.

No. No, she couldn't give in to that feeling! *I don't love him*, she told herself desperately. *Absolutely not ...*

A loud bang came from outside the house. Crossing to the bedroom

window, Stefano peeked through the blinds, then winced at the roar and hum of moving vans and the shouting of men outside.

“We’re under siege,” he said grimly, pulling away from the window.

She grinned. “You invited them here.”

“I hate this time of the year.”

“You only gave the party planners a single day to set up for tomorrow. What did you expect? What else could they do but send an army? And it is for charity.”

“I still hate it.” He scowled, then lifted a dark eyebrow with a wicked half smile. “Come distract me ...”

She tilted her head as if considering. “I suppose I could use your services today.”

“Aha—”

“.as my assistant,” she finished.

He pouted, then brightened. “Taking any photographs in the meadow today?” he suggested sweetly.

She snorted, then turned back to the mirror and reached for her simple diamond stud earrings, which she put on one at a time. Her makeup and toiletries had already taken up residence across his private bathroom counter. Grabbing her small collection of tiny brushes, she put on her makeup, carefully covering the scar on her face. “Sadly, no. I need to go to the village. For my story.”

“Go to Algares? Why?”

“You grew up there—many of the young stablehands you now employ came from there.”

“So?”

“It’s the first village you helped with your charity foundation, long ago. I want to see how it’s changed. The village is part of the story. I have to include it.”

Stefano looked irritated, and was just opening his mouth to argue when they heard another loud bang outside, and the sound of a truck’s loud, incessant beep as it backed up in the courtyard. Men started yelling in Spanish and they heard a woman’s loud voice in French telling

them they were setting it up all wrong. The men answered angrily in Spanish, and the multilingual dispute had the ranch's dogs barking in a cacophony of noise.

"On second thought," Stefano growled, "I'll come with you."

"You will!" Annabelle said, thrilled she didn't have to leave him in order to finish her work. So much for guarding her heart, she thought to herself sourly.

Stefano swiftly showered and put on a cotton shirt and jeans that fit him far better than they fit her. He didn't need a belt to keep the jeans snug against his lean hips. After he pulled on his boots, they walked to his six-car garage, where he climbed into an old 1950s Willys Jeepster. Getting in beside him, Annabelle looked at the rare open-topped truck with appreciation. "Nice," she said. "Not flashy. Real."

"Glad you like it." He started the engine. Maneuvering his truck around the vans and trucks sprawled all over his lawn, past people unloading supplies from food to flowers to polo equipment, Stefano drove past the chaos and down the peaceful tree-lined avenue. They passed the old stone gate, crenellated and covered with moss in the shade, and Annabelle realized it was the first time she'd left the ranch for almost a week.

She wasn't sure she wanted to go back into the real world, to be honest. But the village was only a few miles away, down the slender road clinging to the edge of the rocky green hills. All too quickly, they arrived at Algares, a tiny, prosperous village of whitewashed houses tucked in the valley.

The moment they arrived, a crowd of children appeared, rushing from the houses, running in the dust behind the Jeepster. They joyfully shouted Stefano's name.

"Children are following us," Annabelle said, looking back in amazement.

Stefano glanced back in the mirror. A smile lifted the hard edges of his mouth. "I know."

Parking the truck on the street, Stefano climbed out and held out his arms. "*Hola, mis amigos!*"

The laughing children ran to him eagerly. Bending to their eye level, he patted one little girl on the shoulder as he smiled at another child and asked him something in Spanish.

Annabelle climbed slowly out of the truck. Children were bouncing all around Stefano, a little girl in pigtails and a pinafore tugging on his shirt to get his attention, an older boy excitedly telling him a story in Spanish about a football game. From nearby doorways, she saw mothers, young and old, coming out the doorways of their gleaming, tidy homes to smile at their children who held the total attention of the tall, powerful Señor Cortez.

Annabelle slowly looked around her. *This was Algares, which ten years ago had been called the poorest village in Spain?* Now, it was charming, picture-perfect, a scene of warmth and domestic happiness. With a slow intake of breath, she raised her camera and took pictures of the village, the children and the tall, handsome man smiling at them.

Stefano and Annabelle spent hours visiting different families in the village, all of whom clamored for the honor of making their lunch. The people were so warm and friendly, she thought. Both children and parents clearly thought the world of Stefano. Annabelle took tea in more than one snug house, and when they heard she was doing an article, they insisted on telling her all about how Stefano had saved their jobs or improved their lives, how his foundation had built a playground for the old park and bought supplies for schoolchildren. About how he'd helped their sons, after the boys had gotten into trouble with the law and started down the wrong path, by hiring them as stablehands and giving them not just a job ... but a vocation.

Stefano had helped them, as he helped everyone he cared about.

Annabelle took pictures of everything. She took photos of Stefano most of all. When he looked at her, she lost her breath. When he smiled, her heart lifted to her throat.

After they'd visited practically every house in Algares, Annabelle's arm was wrapped companionably around his as they walked down the street. He was so much more than a playboy, she thought, sneaking sideways glances at him. She'd known his charitable foundation was important to him, but she'd never realized what a difference he made.

What an amazing man, Annabelle thought. She swallowed. The way she really felt about him now.

Clumsily, she stumbled over her feet.

“Careful, *querida*.” Stefano caught her before she fell face-first into the street. “You seem tired,” he said, tilting his head at her. He pointed at the village pub. “Why don’t we stop and have a drink?”

Trembling, Annabelle looked at the building across the street. The tavern was two stories high, on a corner lot with a painted sign dangling cheerfully from the eaves. It was charming and cheerful and, as Annabelle stared up at it, she hated it on sight.

*If I wish to, as you say, take a lover, I go to the village tavern and rent a room for the night.*

“One drink before we leave,” Stefano suggested. “You can even take a picture or two, if you like. This place is a local landmark.”

“I just bet it is,” she muttered with a surge of bitterness, and lifted her camera.

When she was done, they went inside. The pub was fairly empty and very well-swept. Annabelle tried to hide the way her body was shaking as Stefano led her to the small table in the window. As she sat down across from him, she wondered how many women had already joined him at this very table. And how many more would sit with him here in the coming weeks.

“Your usual, *señor*?” the bartender called in Spanish.

“Sí,” Stefano replied with a grin. “And the lady will have.” He turned to her, waiting. “I’m not thirsty,” Annabelle said. “Come, you must have something. One drink.”

“What are you having?” she asked him listlessly.

“A beer.”

“I’ll have the same.”

He lifted an eyebrow in approval, then relayed her drink to the bartender. Turning back to her at the small table, he asked abruptly, “Can I see the new pictures you’ve taken?”

She bit her lip. “Will you tell me honestly what you think of them?”

"Do you really want me to?"

Reluctantly, Annabelle handed him her digital camera. The camera seemed tiny in his large hands as he looked slowly through the digital images she'd taken of the village, and the ranch before that.

Watching him, she licked her dry lips. She adored these new pictures. The photographs she'd taken over the past few days seemed rich and vibrant, full of life, even to her artist's critical eye.

But would he scorn them as he had her last pictures? Would he call them *frozen and dead*?

Trembling, she peeked over his shoulder as Stefano went through picture after picture. And Annabelle suddenly noticed something she'd never seen before. Her eyes went wide with shock.

No wonder she loved these pictures. There was Stefano in the village, bending on one knee as he talked to the children. Stefano tilting his head back, giving advice to the young stablehands at Santo Castillo. Stefano standing alone in the paddock at sunset, training a yearling. Even her pictures of the wild, vast landscape somehow had his blurry elbow on the edge of the frame. *Every single picture had Stefano in it.* She'd even taken one of him last night, at a private moment in his bed. She'd wanted to capture the tenderness and passion of his dark eyes, and so she'd taken a picture of him as the red-and-orange sunset from the window cast a halo over his dark head, like fire.

Stefano was in all her pictures now. He was in her soul. In her heart. Annabelle gave a strangled, silent gasp. *She was in love with him.* She'd tried desperately to fight it. She hadn't wanted to love him. For days, she'd denied her feelings, even to herself, because she knew loving him would destroy her.

But her photographs didn't lie.

Stefano had become the center of her whole world. The only man for her.

*She loved him.*

The bartender came over with their two drinks, and stared at her openly. She tried not to notice his knowing smirk before he left. He clearly thought she was Stefano's newest easy woman, here today and

gone tomorrow.

Which was exactly what Annabelle was. She blinked, hard.

With a quick sip of his beer, Stefano continued to turn through the digital images. Ignoring her own drink, Annabelle stared at him, fighting back tears.

Would he notice he was in every picture? Would he understand what it meant?

*Please, God, she prayed. Don't let him notice.* If he did, her humiliation would be complete.

Finally, he looked up at her, and his dark eyes glowed.

"These pictures are perfect, full of passion and life," he said with a smile, handing back the camera. "I see your love and appreciation for my ranch in every image. Well done," he added softly.

Not just her love for Santo Castillo. She swallowed, her cheeks feeling hot. "Thank you."

*They show my love for you. All for you.* Her breath caught in her throat as she waited in agony for him to say something more, anything.

*Annabelle, why am I in every picture?*

*Annabelle—surely you have not been stupid enough to fall in love with me?*

Stefano cleared his throat.

"There were some good pictures of Mrs. Gutierrez and the boys. Perhaps you could make copies and send them to the boys' parents."

She blinked. "Sure."

His brow furrowed as he looked down at her, his dark eyes warm and tender. "Everything all right?"

"Yes," Annabelle whispered over the lump in her throat. But it wasn't all right. It would never be all right again.

He threw some money on the table to pay the bill and rose from his chair. "Let's head home."

On the drive back to the ranch, Annabelle stared out the window at the sunset shimmering in the west. The light turned the undulating green hills into silken ribbons of scarlet and coral and magenta.

Rolling down the window to lean her elbows against the frame, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath of the fragrant air, redolent of oranges and earth and the distant sea. She loved this beautiful, wild, half-arid landscape.

As they drove back, the simple brush of Stefano's hand against her knee as he shifted the gears caused a thrill through her body, even as it caused a jagged pain through her heart.

Then he spoke.

"Don't leave tomorrow, Annabelle," he said in a low voice. "Stay here. With me." She looked at him with an intake of breath.

"I wish I could."

"Why can't you?"

Because her heart was already breaking, and she didn't know how much longer she could hide her love for him, love he would never return. "Because ... I can't."

His eyes looked black, then he turned back to the road and switched gears, hard. She sat in stricken silence as they drove back through the gates of Santo Castillo.

The chaos at the ranch had only increased. He navigated past the delivery vans and horse trailers parked along his gravel drive, skirting around the people setting up for the polo match and gala dinner afterward. By noon tomorrow, Annabelle knew, Santo Castillo would be overrun by the world's most beautiful, sophisticated, experienced women. Just thinking of it, she felt sick inside.

Stefano parked the truck in the garage and turned off the ignition. Setting his jaw, he faced her.

"Come to my bedroom," he said. "So we can discuss this."

"I'll come to your bedroom, but there's nothing to discuss."

"There is."

"Don't ruin our last precious night by trying to change things that cannot be changed."

"Anything can change. We are the ones who know what we want and how we want to live. You have three minutes to get to my bedroom."

The hard set of his jaw frightened her. “Or I’ll carry you. Right now.”

“Everyone would see!”

“Three minutes.”

He got out of the truck, slamming the door behind him.

Annabelle sat in the darkened garage in shock. When she finally got out of the truck and left the garage, Stefano’s broad, muscular back was disappearing behind a brightly colored horse trailer as he pushed through the throngs of caterers and party planners and hired help.

She stared at him, and felt like crying.

Leaving him was the last thing she wanted to do. But she had to do it. The longer she stayed now, loving him, the more vicious her heartbreak would be. She’d never loved anyone like this. If she let herself stay, his ultimate betrayal might kill her. Her only hope of saving herself was to leave. Immediately.

Annabelle slowly started to walk through the crowds toward the house. But she had a sinking feeling that it was already too late.

# CHAPTER TEN

THREE MINUTES FELT LIKE an eternity.

Stefano paced across the cool tiles of his bedroom floor. He was not going to let Annabelle leave tomorrow. Not now. Not yet.

He had to persuade her to stay. With words. With his body. Whatever it took. The more time he spent with Annabelle, the more he knew they were meant to be together—if not forever, then at least for longer.

Stefano heard her knock, and flung open the door.

Annabelle's beautiful face looked both sad and determined as she folded her arms. "All right, I'm here," she said. "But I'm not going to change my mind about tomorrow. So let's not talk about it, we have so little time left already...."

Stefano held open the door. "Come in."

He could see the uncertainty and longing across her lovely, expressive face as she entered his bedroom.

"Sit down," he said. "I want to tell you something."

She stood in front of him with a spine straight as steel and shook her head. "I'll stand."

"I want to tell you," he said quietly, "the real reason I gave up my show-jumping career at nineteen, in the middle of the London International Equestrian Show."

Her mouth fell open. Her gray eyes were wide as she sank onto the bed.

Stefano looked down at her. He hadn't wanted to ever explain this, but it was the only thing that might help her understand. He forced himself to speak, and the words came slowly.

"I told you I was lured into joining the show-jumping team by the coach's daughter. Rosalia," he said in a low voice. "I thought she loved me, and we would someday marry. The night before the horse show, I was unable to reach my parents back in Spain. My mother hadn't

answered her phone for weeks. I was worried so I went to see my coach, who I believed cared for me as a son.”

“What happened?”

Stefano’s lips curved sardonically. “He thought I was asleep in my hotel room. I overheard him laughing with another coach about how he’d convinced my parents to keep my mother’s illness a secret. *Stupid peasants with no money*, he called them. He’d convinced them it would be selfish to ask me to leave my team and be with my mother before she died.”

“Oh, no,” Annabelle whispered, her face stricken.

He took a rough breath. “I left without him knowing I’d overheard. I went to Rosalia’s room, to tell her what happened. I found her in bed with the captain of the show-jumping team.” His lips twisted. “I’d never even slept with her. I was still a virgin with this idealistic goal of marrying this perfect woman. But she’d never given a damn about me, just for the pretty trinkets I bought her. The next day, I got my revenge. I stopped my horse before the jump and went back to Spain. I used my small savings to buy Santo Castillo for my mother. She lived for a year, and my father did not live long without her. But I never forgave myself ... for foolishly valuing a woman’s lies over what really mattered. My home. My family.”

“Oh, Stefano.” Annabelle reached for his hand, and he saw tears in her eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

Standing beside the bed where she sat, he held her hand for long moments of silence. His hand tightened over hers as he looked down at her.

“I know you think you can’t trust me, Annabelle,” he whispered. He lifted his chin. “But you can. Being with you, for the first time since I was nineteen, I have found a woman I trust. A woman I believe in. I believe in you.”

Visibly trembling, Annabelle rose to her feet.

Pulling her into his arms, he nuzzled her temple. “Don’t leave tomorrow, Annabelle,” he whispered against her hair. “Stay here with me.”

He felt her hesitate, felt her start to melt in his arms. Then she pushed away angrily. "How dare you use your charm on me!"

He blinked. "Charm?"

"You know you have power over me!" she raged. "You always make me do anything you want!"

Stefano liked the sound of that. He came closer to her. "Do I really have such power?"

"You know you do," she whispered.

He hid a smile. Wrapping his arms back around her, he pressed his lips to her ear. "Then before you make any decisions about leaving tomorrow," he whispered, "listen to the rest of the argument in my favor...."

Cupping her face in his hands, he kissed her with all the emotion he could not express in words.

He felt her hands try at first to push him away. But he held on to her forcefully, kissing her passionately, until her hands grew still, then gripped his shoulders as a sigh of pleasure escaped her.

Her lips were sweet magic, luring him with the promise that he could be the man she needed, if only for a while. A few weeks. A few months. A year?

Her small hands reached beneath his black shirt, stroking his bare chest. *Teasing him.* With a growl, he turned on her and ripped her white shirt open, popping off the buttons. He pushed her against the bedroom wall.

Kissing down her neck, he stroked her breasts until her head fell back with a gasp of pleasure. He unhooked her bra and dropped it to the floor, licking the valley between her breasts as if they were covered with sticky sweet jam.

But Annabelle was no longer a shy, timid virgin. She loved this game and reached for his shirt, yanking it up over his head. He pushed against her, his bare chest to her breasts, hungry to feel her heat, her warmth, her softness. He nipped at her neck, sucking and biting her until he knew he'd left his mark. He felt her nails in his back as he kissed her mouth, hard and deep. He felt her teeth bite his lower lip and he gasped. He

nearly exploded right then and there.

His innocent mistress had become a fiery, fearless temptress.

Moving his hands down her naked belly, he undid her belt. Her oversize jeans dropped to the floor. Kicking them aside, he ripped off her panties.

He needed her. Right now. He barely got his jeans unzipped and grabbed a condom and he was roughly inside her, shoving her against the wall, plunging deep as she wrapped her legs around his hips with a hot gasp. She was so wet, three thrusts and she gasped out her climax in the same instant that he pumped deep inside her with a shout.

Afterward, they were so spent they collapsed onto the bed. There, he held her, stroking her without words in the early-evening shadows. He kissed her softly, gently, stroking her cheek as he gazed down at her. He could not get enough of looking at her face.

But within minutes, he was hard for her again. This time, after taking her like an animal, he intended to go slowly. Rolling Annabelle gently back against the soft pillows, Stefano slowly kissed down her neck, her breasts, all the way down her belly and thighs and knees to the hollows of her feet. He kissed and sucked and stroked every inch of her body with his lips and fingertips until she shook all over, begging wordlessly for him to take her.

Moments earlier, he'd done so with rapid, explosive violence. Now, he moved slowly, torturing her with an hour of teasing and touching and suckling. Only when she begged for release from her agony did he finally show mercy. But even then, he tortured her. He gradually thrust inside her, impaling her inch by inch, until she wept with need.

Then ... he slammed inside her. Hard. Fast. Her fulfillment came almost instantly and she arched her back in a sharp cry like the sun bursting through dark clouds.

That was the moment. The best moment. Stefano watched her luminous face, and knew if he lost her, he would lose the sun.

He would convince her to stay. He would find a way.

Hours later, as the pale light of dawn crept through the blinds of his bedroom window, Annabelle woke up smiling from a delicious dream.

Except it wasn't a dream.

She was still in Stefano's arms, lying against his naked body as he slept. She exhaled, exhausted to her toes. Sore. And yet so happy. She couldn't remember ever feeling so happy.

They'd made love three times last night. Or was it four? She counted.

*One.* Shocking. Rough. Hard and brutal against the wall.

*Two.* She shivered. He'd tortured her with his sensual hands for hours, it seemed, before he'd finally thrust inside her.

Then, putting on robes, they'd snuck down to the kitchen for sandwiches, giggling like children trying to stay quiet and failing miserably before they returned to his bedroom with a tray.

After the brief repast of sandwiches and wine and strawberries in bed, they'd slept in each other's arms before she'd been woken by the touch of his hand.

*Three.* He'd kissed her, deep and hot, then as she'd moaned with pleasure he'd rolled her over to take her from behind, plunging inside her, wrapping his hands around her body to hold her breasts as he thrust inside her like a stallion covering a mare. He was so deep inside her, touching her womb, stretching her to the hilt, she'd exploded almost at once.

Sweaty and sticky, they'd fallen back against the twisted cotton sheets. Laughing at the way their bodies seemed to stick together, they'd decided to take a shower.

Inside the enormous glass shower of his en suite bathroom, they'd washed each other's hair, scrubbing each other's bodies until they were pink with heat and fragrant with soap. He'd lightly massaged her shoulders and she'd closed her eyes, leaning back against him with a sigh as the hot steam surrounded them. Then abruptly, he'd turned her to face him.

*Four.* He'd fallen to his knees before her. Lifting one of her knees over his shoulder beneath the warm spray of water, he'd licked and suckled between her legs until she'd had a fourth explosion of shattering pleasure.

Afterward, she'd been exhausted, utterly spent. He'd tenderly towed

her off and carried her back into his bed, cradled in his arms.

He'd set her, damp and naked, gently on the white sheets, and she'd briefly had a glimpse of his dark eyes in the moonlight. He'd looked obsessed, almost haunted.

For an instant, she'd wondered if he could be falling in love with her, too. If a miracle could happen and Stefano would tell her, *You're the only woman I want. For the rest of my life.*

Then the moment had passed. Stefano had pulled away, kissing her softly in bed and pulling her against his naked body as they slept the few remaining hours before dawn.

Now, as Annabelle blinked in the early dawn light, the smile slowly slid from her face.

Today was their very last day.

The last morning she would wake up in Stefano's arms. Tonight, after the gala, she would leave for London.

Today was the last day Stefano would be hers.

And even today, he wouldn't truly be hers, she realized with a sinking heart. Within an hour or two, guests would start to arrive for the late-morning pre-polo breakfast. Annabelle closed her eyes, imagining beautiful, sultry socialites swathed in diamonds and miniskirts, and no doubt experienced in the ways of luring and pleasing a man.

Annabelle swallowed, blinking back tears. She'd never know again how it felt to be Stefano's woman, to have him kiss her, to have him hold her in his strong arms as his dark eyes burned through her soul.

It had taken her thirty-three years to fall in love. Now, there'd be no more warmth. No more fire. No more Stefano.

Unless ...

*Unless what? a cold voice mocked. Do you think if you tell him you love him, he'll miraculously say he loves you, too?*

Annabelle took a deep breath. Maybe.

*Forget it, the voice mocked. All he'd feel would be pity.*

I don't know that. His eyes tell me he could love me. His body tells me

he could love me. We might have a chance.

*If you want to keep your dignity, the voice said scornfully, you'll stay silent. You'll walk away.*

Stefano stirred in bed beside her, yawning. Still half-asleep, he instinctively pulled her close to his chest, wrapping her tightly in his arms. And how was it possible he already wanted her again? She could feel him hard behind her. Smiling in spite of her turmoil, she turned around in his arms.

She found his dark eyes looking down at her. His whole face shone with contentment.

*"Buenos días, querida,"* Stefano said huskily. He leaned forward to kiss her.

She pulled away.

"I have to tell you something," Annabelle said, entwining her hands in his. She licked her lips. "For all my adult life, being a photographer has been the only thing that made me feel alive and safe." She looked back at him. "Until I met you."

Stefano gripped her shoulders. "Does that mean you'll stay?"

She stared at the floor. Her eyes stung as if pricked with needles.

*Tell him,* her heart pleaded.

*Don't tell him!* her brain ordered.

"Forget about London," Stefano said. His dark eyes glowed in the early gray light. "Forget your assignment in Argentina. Don't leave, *querida*," he whispered. "Stay with me."

Annabelle's whole body trembled. She didn't know what to do. All she knew was that her choice at this moment would change the rest of her life.

Pushing away from him, she sat up in bed and rose unsteadily to her feet. Feeling dizzy, she paced five steps, then turned back to him. "Before we talk about that, there's something I need to tell you first," she said unsteadily.

"*Sí?*" He looked up at her.

Shivering, she grabbed her short silk robe with the colorful dragon

and tied the silk sash around her waist. Pacing past the window, she glanced through the blinds. The delivery trucks were gone. Instead, she saw two polo players, and three young women in hats walking across the field toward an enormous white tent. Some of the guests were apparently so eager for the day's events that they'd arrived unfashionably early.

Annabelle took a deep breath. "It will feel odd to have strangers here." Her lips turned down grimly. "Your guests are starting to arrive."

His voice was low. "I know."

Annabelle turned away. "I should really get ready. I have a lot to do today...."

He stopped her with his stark question.

"Annabelle, what did you want to tell me?"

She didn't turn around. "Why should I tell you?" she whispered. "What more is there to say?"

*Except I love you. I love you.*

She closed her eyes. Her heart was beating so fast she thought it might explode.

She heard him rise from the bed and walk toward her.

"Whatever it is," he said, putting his hands on her shoulders, "you can tell me."

Annabelle tried to hide the tremble that went through her at his words. She took a deep breath and opened her eyes.

He was standing in front of her, naked and so brutally strong, even as his dark eyes shone with tenderness. She looked up into his face, and could no longer keep silent.

Slowly, she lifted her chin.

"I love you," she whispered.

Stefano sucked in his breath. Drawing back, he searched her face. Fear and hope coursed through Annabelle like a storm, leaving her knees weak.

"You love me?" His voice was husky and low.

Unable to speak, she nodded. “And I need to know ... how you feel about me.”

He blinked, then looked down at the floor.

“I care about you, Annabelle,” he said. “More than I’ve ever cared about any woman.”

His last words were quiet. But she could hardly hear anything over the loud thrumming of blood rushing through her ears.

Suddenly, she was freezing. The air in the bedroom was icy. She was surprised she couldn’t see her breath. The soft woven rug felt sharp as rocks beneath her feet.

*He didn’t love her.*

The mocking voice had been right. *It was happening again.* Every time she loved someone, they hurt her. Every time she gave someone her heart, they crushed it into dirt.

She felt like she was going to faint.

“You *care* for me?” she whispered. “I just told you I’m *in love* with you!”

Stefano’s fingers tightened around hers.

“Yes,” he said sharply. “I care. It’s all I can offer you right now.” Looking down at their intertwined hands, he took a deep breath. “And it’s the most I’ve ever offered any woman. I care for you. I want to be with you. And as long as we are together, I will be faithful.”

“Faithful?” She tossed her head, looking at him coldly. “For how long? A day? A week?”

He lifted his head, and his dark eyes glittered like a January midnight. “I don’t know,” he whispered. “But as long as we are together, *querida*, you will have all of me.”

Staring at his handsome, tortured face, Annabelle wanted to fall to her knees and weep. Of course it had ended this way. *Of course* it had.

She folded her arms, willing herself to feel as numb as everyone believed her to be. But bitter anguish seeped through her soul like acid.

“All *of you* would mean love. Commitment. A promise. What you offer me is a long series of one-night stands. *That* is all a man like you can

offer any woman!"

With a harsh intake of breath, Stefano stumbled back from her words, as if she'd shot him with a rifle.

Heartsick, stricken with tears, Annabelle turned to go.

"Wait. Don't go." His voice was low and hoarse. "It's all happened so fast. I never expected this. I need more time. You have to give me more time."

"No. I don't." Turning away, she started toward the door, desperate to escape before she collapsed into humiliating sobs.

"Wait!" He raced across the room. Gripping her shoulders, he looked down at her fiercely. "Just wait, damn it!"

"I don't need to wait," she whispered. "I already know how this ends."

"You don't!"

"And I hate feeling like this, feeling I can't live without knowing if—if  
—"

"If what?" he ground out.

She exhaled. "If loving you will kill me."

Stefano paced in front of her. He stopped, his jaw clenched. Furiously, he raked his dark hair back with his hand.

"What do you want from me, Annabelle?" he said. "Should I give you a list of pretty promises to keep you here with me? I'm telling you the truth! Should I lie and tell you I love you, when I don't even know what I feel right now?"

Annabelle choked out a gasp.

*Should I lie and tell you I love you?*

Turning with a sob, Annabelle went to his wardrobe and grabbed the tattered linen suit she'd worn the first day he'd made love to her.

Dropping her robe, she yanked on her underwear and suit and shoes as fast as her trembling body would allow her.

"What are you doing?"

Grief ripped through her. "Leaving." Tears fell unheeded down her cheeks. "Right now."

“You can’t leave! You’re the official photographer today. It’s part of your cover story for *Equestrian*—”

“I don’t care,” she choked out. “I can’t stay another minute!”

“You’re being ridiculous!”

“I know,” she choked out. “See what you’ve made of me?”

“Annabelle!”

But she didn’t listen. She ran down the hall to her bedroom. Leaving her equipment and camera bag, she grabbed her wallet, passport and car keys and fled down the stairs.

She could hear his heavy footsteps behind her. She could hear his shout. But her vision was misty with tears as she went to her old Land Rover in the garage. Starting the engine, she roared out of the garage.

Stefano ran in front of her truck, stopping her. Their eyes locked through the windshield.

“Don’t go. I know you think I will hurt you, you think I will betray you, but ... you’ve changed me,” Stefano said hoarsely. “Can’t you believe that?”

She looked at him.

“No,” she whispered, and she drove away.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

BY THE time HER LAND Rover approached the French city of Châtellerault that afternoon, Annabelle had cried until she had no tears left.

A loud honk from a passing truck made her focus her attention on the road. Sweat broke out on her forehead. She'd just nearly had an accident. Had she wanted to crash?

*Had she?*

Her heart pounded. She saw an exit and pulled off the motorway. Parking beside a gas station, she turned off the ignition and cried, leaning her head against the steering wheel.

She wished she could talk to someone who'd give her a reason why she shouldn't crash her truck into a tree right now. Her heart yearned for Stefano. But he was lost to her now forever.

Who else could she turn to for comfort? Who? Her ex-assistant Marie was busy with her husband and newborn baby. Annabelle's brothers were getting married and settling down. They didn't need to be bothered by their poor pathetic sister yet again.

Then she thought of one person who'd remained at Wolfe Manor all these years, even after Annabelle's brothers had left. One person who'd refused to completely let Annabelle fall off the face of the earth.

Mollie Parker.

Annabelle turned on her mobile, and sudden hope rose to her throat. She looked to see if Stefano had left any messages, messages like *I changed my mind. I love you. I need you.*

But there were no messages.

And Annabelle realized she did have tears left, after all.

She was being stupid. She'd be back in London by midnight, she told herself, wiping her eyes. Soon, she'd be home.

Except her empty flat didn't feel much like a home anymore. Now, home meant blue skies and wide golden fields, laughing teenagers and a

kindly, plump-cheeked housekeeper keeping them all in line. And most of all, home meant Stefano.

Gone. All gone.

Huddled in the driver's seat of her parked truck, she wiped her eyes even harder. She'd throw herself back into her career just like always. She'd forget Stefano. She'd bury herself in work until she died.

But the thought just made her cry harder. Once, she'd been numb and content in such a life, with her heart frozen and dead. Stefano had changed that. He'd brought her to life.

Then ... he'd taken it all away.

With a shaking finger, Annabelle dialed Mollie's mobile number in the U.K. But she reached only voice mail. "Hi, this is Mollie."

Annabelle didn't leave a message. Desperately, she rang the main house instead, praying that Mollie would be there.

Instead, she heard a man's deep voice.

"Hello?"

"Jacob?" she said in shock.

"Annabelle?" Her brother sounded surprised, too. "Is that you?"

"I didn't expect you to be at the house," she stammered. "Mollie said you were in London all week ..."

"I was, yes, but then something happened and—"

Nervously, Annabelle spoke over him. "Actually, I was ringing for Mollie ..."

"She's not here." He paused. "But can I help you with anything, Belle?"

Her first instinct was to say no, to make an excuse and ring off. But instead, something made her grip the phone to her ear and take a deep breath, which came out as a sob. "Have you been crying?" Jacob demanded.

"What's happened?"

"No." She choked in answer to his first question, then, "Yes. But I can't tell you."

“Why?”

“Haven’t I already done enough to you?” she said fiercely. “Everything you did to save me, with Dad.” She took a shuddering breath, remembering that awful night her father had nearly killed her in a drunken rage. “It wasn’t enough that I forced you to protect me, and made you go through those horrible months of the trial. Then I finally drove you away from England with all my whining and complaining.”

“You weren’t whining.” His deep voice was gentle. “You were going through a hard time. You felt scarred and isolated and alone. I never blamed you for that, Belle. Never.”

She looked up at the busy gas station nearby. The colors of the cars blurred. “But you left!” she cried. “The next morning you were gone. You didn’t come back for twenty years!”

She heard his deep intake of breath.

“All this time, you’ve thought it was your fault?” he said. “You came into the study seeking comfort. I was drinking and nearly. I could see myself turning into ...” He choked back his words. “You all were better off without me.”

“But can you forgive me?” she whispered. “For ruining your life?”

“You never ruined my life,” he said in a harsh voice. “I left because it was the only way to protect you—all of you.”

“Protect us—from what?”

He paused. “From me.”

Something about his dark, bleak tone reminded her of another man’s voice.

*What do you want from me, Annabelle? Should I give you a list of pretty promises to keep you here with me? I’m telling you the truth! Should I lie and tell you I love you, when I don’t even know what I feel right now?*

“Oh, my God,” she breathed aloud.

“Belle? What is it?”

Stefano hadn’t taken her home away from her.

She’d done it to herself. Her fear and lack of faith had demanded a promise for him that he wasn’t ready to give. She’d accused him

constantly of being a faithless playboy, but the truth was that, for Stefano, a commitment was a sacred thing. He hadn't wanted her to go. But he'd accepted her decision, rather than lie to her.

She'd been so afraid he would someday hurt her, but she'd beaten him to the punch. She'd deserted the only man she'd ever loved. All because she was afraid.

*Pain is how you know you're alive*, he'd once said to her. *If you are too afraid to feel pain, you'll never know joy.*

Closing her eyes, Annabelle took a shuddering breath. Her life had been so full of pain already. It was a cold, cruel world. She'd learned the only way to be safe was to be alone.

But what if ... that wasn't true?

What if playing it safe just was playing dead?

Memories came through her like the burst of dawn. The sound of Stefano's joyful laugh. The depth of his black eyes. The way he'd held her so tight against his naked body in the tender, sacred night. He made her feel safe. He made her feel loved.

*I care for you, Annabelle. More than I've ever cared for anyone.*

He'd wanted her to stay. She was the one who'd run away.

For too long, she'd lived in fear. But from now on, she would be brave enough to become the woman she was born to be.

Annabelle gripped her mobile phone. "I have to go."

"What? Why?"

"Bless you, Jacob," she whispered. "I love you. Talk to you more soon."

Her hands shook as she started the engine of her truck. Backing it out of the parking lot, she got back on the motorway—headed not north toward Calais, but back toward the Spanish border. Back home. Back to Stefano.

People didn't change, she thought.

Except ... when they did.

Stefano had lost that afternoon. Lost big.

And as he walked through the enormous white tent that night after dinner, his teammates were not being terribly forgiving about it.

"Nice going," his polo team's number-two player snarled as Stefano passed by in his tuxedo.

"Did you have to take us all down with you?" his number three growled from the dance floor.

"Were you drunk?" the fourth member of his polo team jeered from the bar.

"Not yet," Stefano muttered, heading toward the opposite bar. "But I will be."

The enormous white tent, erected in the biggest field near the hacienda, had been turned into a glamorous ballroom. Lilies and greenery decked with fairy lights overlooked the dance floor, which was filled with guests now that the surrounding dining tables had been cleared of dinner plates. Four different bars lined the edges of the tent and everyone was guzzling champagne like water. People would dance all night, Stefano knew. They'd dance till the music stopped.

But for Stefano, the music had already stopped hours ago.

"Bartender," he growled, holding out his hand. Fifteen seconds later, he took a long gulp of a double Scotch.

The polo game should have been close. On paper, the players were evenly matched. Instead, it had been a rout. Stefano's team usually won but this time, for him, each chukka had been worse than the last. Even Stefano's pony kept rolling his eyes at his rider's pathetically weak performance.

Stefano's heart hadn't been in the game. His heart had left the ranch that morning in a battered 1973 Land Rover.

Ignoring all the sexy women who were, even now, trying to get his attention, Stefano turned away from the frivolity of the dance floor. He stared bleakly at the white canvas of the tent behind the bar and loosened his tie. He could still hear her sweet, trembling voice.

*I love you.*

*Should I have lied to her? he snarled at himself. Should I have told her I love her when it's not true?*

At this moment, he almost wished he had. He took another gulp of Scotch, and the amber liquid burned down his throat like fire. Setting the glass back onto the bar with a hard clink, Stefano wiped his mouth. Yes, he wished he'd lied. He wished he'd said any damn thing to keep her at his side.

Because he missed her. He missed her like he'd miss his heart if it had been ripped out of his chest.

He had the sudden destructive urge to smash his glass against the bar. To insult his famous guests and order them off his ranch. To sell all his horses for a single euro. What difference did it make, when he'd lost everything he'd cared about the instant Annabelle Wolfe had disappeared through his gate?

He felt a small hand on his arm. For an instant, he held his breath. Then he turned.

Instead of Annabelle's angelic face and blond hair, he saw a brunette in a slinky red dress. The woman seemed familiar. Maybe he'd slept with her before. Or maybe all women just looked exactly the same now—none of them were Annabelle. "Care to dance?" she said in a sultry voice. Stefano finished off his drink and slammed the empty glass down on the bar. "Sure," he said harshly. "Why not?"

As he led the brunette onto the dance floor, she pressed against him. "Don't feel bad about losing the game," she purred, softly stroking his upper arm. "There are other prizes to be won tonight."

Her offer couldn't have been more blatant. Stefano stared at her. What better way to draw the line, to put Annabelle forever behind him, than to accept her offer?

But the thought of it sickened him. Even as self-destructive as he felt right now, there was only one woman he wanted. Only one woman he would ever want. Ever.

He stopped.

Annabelle was his first thought in the morning. His last thought at night. She was his sunlight. His moonlight. She lit his way. Her goodness. Her vulnerability. Her heart.

Ever since he'd been betrayed at nineteen, Stefano had been unwilling

to commit to any woman. He'd thought he'd never love anyone again.

But his youthful infatuation for Rosalia had meant nothing. The truth was, he'd been waiting all these years for the right woman. The woman who would be his heart. His home.

He'd been waiting for Annabelle.

With an intake of breath, Stefano suddenly knew he could be faithful forever. But only for her. Only Annabelle. She was his woman. The woman he wanted. The woman he adored.

The woman he loved.

His hands clenched. He loved Annabelle. He loved her. And. *he'd let her go.*

"Well?" the brunette murmured as she swayed her body against his, barely in time to the music. "What do you think?"

Looking down at the woman, he stopped.

"Sorry," he said roughly. "I changed my mind."

Turning, he left her on the dance floor. He had to find Annabelle. Right now. He would drive to London. Fly around the world. Cross the Sahara or climb Mount Everest. *He would find her and make her his own.*

As he walked off the dance floor, he heard a man give a low whistle behind him. "Look at that woman, mate. Great pity that."

"What? Who?" another man said.

"At the door. Beautiful woman scarred across the face."

Sucking in his breath, Stefano turned. There in the parted doorway of the tent, beneath the beams of fairy lights from above,

Annabelle stood dressed in a white gown. Her wavy blond hair cascaded down her shoulders.

He saw her pause, watched her search the crowd with her eyes.

Then she saw him.

Stefano couldn't wait. He went toward her, shoving recklessly through the crowds.

Once they were in front of each other, in the moving shadows beneath the swaying fairy lights, Stefano stopped. Looking at her beautiful face,

the rest of the crowds disappeared. And he sucked in his breath.

For the first time in public, Annabelle wore no makeup over her scar. He could see the harsh red line slashing her lovely face, but it did not hide her incredible beauty. Nothing could.

“You—you’re showing your scar,” he whispered.

“Yes.” Her gray eyes were shining. “I’m not afraid anymore. I’m not afraid of anything, except ... losing you.”

She held out her hand.

Stefano stared at it, then looked up at her face. She looked like an angel. Like a dream.

She looked like the answer to the question of the rest of his life.

Stefano took her hand. He exhaled, almost shuddering at the exquisite bliss of her touch. He hadn’t realized how much he’d feared she was a mirage, a ghost who would disappear if he tried to touch her. The feel of her hand proved otherwise. She was no ghost. She was flesh and blood.

Like a miracle, she’d come back to him. *Dios mío*. Stefano’s hand tightened over hers. What had he done, what good thing had he ever done in his life, to deserve this second chance?

“Forgive me, Annabelle,” he said in a low voice.

“Forgive you?” Her voice was gentle and soft as water as she shook her head. She laughed, and it was like the chiming of bells. “I am the one who is sorry. I tried to force you to make a promise you weren’t ready to give—”

“But I am.” He took a deep breath. “I thought I’d lost you, and it nearly killed me,” he whispered. “I never want to feel that way again. I never want to lose you.”

He pulled her into his arms, and passionately kissed her.

Around them, he heard shocked whispers and gasps. He pulled away from Annabelle, and from the corner of his eye, he saw the people in the tent starting to elbow one another and point.

Stefano didn’t care. He fell to his knees before her.

Annabelle gasped. Her gentle hands brushed against his hair. “What are you doing?”

The whispers built in noise. The dancers halted on the dance floor. Even the musicians stopped playing their instruments.

Or maybe Stefano just couldn't hear the music over the pounding of his own heart.

Closing his eyes, he pressed his cheek against her waist. Then he looked up at her.

"Annabelle, I love you."

She bit her full, pink lip. Putting her hands on his cheeks, she looked down at him, her face bemused and uncertain. "Are you sure?"

Rising to his feet, he cupped her face, stroking her tearstained cheeks. "Look at my face. And ask if it's true."

She searched his gaze, then tears filled her eyes. "I love you, Stefano," she whispered. "So much."

Her lips trembled and it was too much for him to resist. He kissed her with passion so searing and pure it burned through his heart, and he knew his love for her would last forever.

He heard whistles and ribald comments from nearby guests. Pulling away, Stefano looked down at her beautiful face. Her eyes were still closed, her lips still swollen from their summer days of endless kisses. He wanted to kiss her forever.

But what he felt for Annabelle was private. Tucking her hand over his arm, he led her away from the gossiping, chattering, madding crowd.

Outside the white tent, the warm Spanish night was dark with illuminated stars like scattered diamonds. Stefano heard the distant call of birds and whinny of horses. He loved this land with all his heart.

No. It now took second place in his heart. His guiding star, his love, stood before him now in a white dress.

"I have a question for you," he said, pulling her into his arms.

Beneath the night sky, she looked at him. She didn't push. She just waited, her gray eyes glowing with trust and love. He stroked her cheek, tilting her head back beneath the dark canopy of stars. Her sweet, innocent, beautiful face held such love and promise that it brought tears to his eyes. He loved her more than life. He never wanted to be without

her ...

“Marry me,” he said.

Her lips parted. She looked up, searching his face.

“Marry me,” he demanded, more forcefully. With a choked gasp, she threw her arms around his neck.

“Yes,” she said. “Oh, yes.” Pulling away from him, she vowed, “I will cancel my assignment in Argentina. I will cancel everything. I never want to leave you again.”

But he frowned, furrowing his brow. “But photography is your passion.”

She pressed her cheek against his chest. “Fou are my passion.”

He stroked her hair softly, his heart aching with love. But he could not allow her to make the sacrifice. Looking down at her, he took a deep breath. “I will come with you.”

She looked up in shock. “But I’ll be away for a month.”

“So?”

She shook her head, tears in her eyes. “I can’t ask you to leave your home!”

“Oh, Annabelle.” Holding her face in his hands, Stefano looked down at her with adoration. “Don’t you understand? It’s you, *querida*.” With a low laugh, he shook his head. “You. *you* are my home.”

A month later, flying first class back from Buenos Aires to London, Annabelle was so nervous that she could barely hold still in the white leather seat.

“Champagne, Señora Cortez?” the flight attendant asked, holding out a silver tray.

*Señora Cortez.* She and Stefano had married in a simple ceremony at Santo Castillo, the day after she’d turned in her photo essay to *Equestrian* magazine. When the magazine’s editors had seen her pictures, they’d instantly forgiven her for missing the polo match and gala. They’d retitled the cover story to *Stud Ranch Wedding: Stefano Cortez Elopés with Equestrian Photographer in Whirlwind Affair*. The publishers had already ordered a double printing as they expected the gossipy exclusive to be

their best-selling edition ever.

Fortunately, Annabelle and Stefano had left it all behind, spending the past few weeks in Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia. Had it already been a month since she became Mrs. Cortez? Annabelle's new name still sounded like music to her. But Annabelle shook her head at the flight attendant's question, refusing the champagne.

"*Sí, gracias,*" her husband said beside her, and took a sip from the flute before leaning back in his chair with a satisfied sigh. *Her husband.* Looking at him still made Annabelle flutter inside—as did the memory of the lavish four days they'd spent at a luxury hotel in Buenos Aires for a belated honeymoon.

Annabelle shivered. They would have to go back to Buenos Aires sometime and actually remember to leave their hotel suite. All she'd seen of the city had been from their veranda at midnight, when she'd gone out to see the twinkling lights and feel the cool breezes of the Rio de la Plata against her skin. But even then, she'd been swiftly distracted when her new husband followed her on the veranda wearing only a robe. He'd kissed her passionately in the darkness and, well, one thing had led to another....

She blushed. Stefano was an amazing lover. And even more—an amazing partner. He'd worked well as her assistant as she'd photographed the Pampas, and seeing his innocent wonderment over the beautiful landscape had given her such pleasure. Though hardly an equal recompense to the pleasure he gave her at night.

Annabelle's smile spread to a grin. She would accept fewer photography jobs from now on, taking only the truly fascinating assignments. She craved time nesting at Santo Castillo. She was even, at this moment, feeling the strange urge to learn how to sew and bake.

Her old assistant, Marie Thompson, had sent flowers to the Buenos Aires hotel yesterday when she'd heard of their marriage. Annabelle had immediately telephoned her in Cornwall for a nice chat. Just six weeks ago, she'd envied Marie for being loved by an adoring husband. Now she knew what that felt like.

And she would soon know something else Marie had experienced, as well ...

Annabelle's legs bounced with nervous energy as she glanced out the airplane window. She looked down at the scattered, wispy clouds over the green continent of South America beneath them. She tried to gather her thoughts, but her heart was soaring higher than the plane.

Stefano stopped the bounce of her legs by putting his hand on her knee. "Are you really so nervous?" he murmured, smiling. "Just by the thought of going back to Wolfe Manor?"

"I am excited to see my brothers again," she admitted. "We haven't all been home together for almost twenty years. I can't wait to see how Jacob has fixed up Wolfe Manor. And tell them all the news."

Stefano's smile spread into a grin. Putting his arm around her, he kissed her on the temple. "You mean the news that you're my wife?"

"Yes." She looked at him with a sudden smile. "And there's more."

"More?" he said lazily, stroking her knee. "You mean that I can't keep my hands off you? They'll see that for themselves."

"More than that." She took a deep breath. "We're going to have a baby."

Stefano's jaw dropped as he stared at her.

Then his joyful shout reverberated across the first-class cabin as he gathered her in his arms.

"Oh, *querida* ... Are you sure?"

She nodded, smiling through tears of happiness. "It must have been our very first time ... after."

"A baby." He looked awestruck, then adorably anxious as he demanded, "But how are you feeling? Can I get you anything? Should you be resting?"

She wiped tears from her eyes. "I'm wonderful."

"You're crying," he said accusingly.

She shook her head, laughing. "I'm pregnant." Reaching up, she stroked his cheek and looked up into his ruggedly handsome face. "But I've never been so happy."

Pulling her into his lap, Stefano kissed her, so long and hard and passionately that it made the people around them in first class smile.

When the kiss ended, Annabelle closed her eyes as he held her in his arms, tenderly against his heart.

She'd once been warned about Stefano Cortez.

*Be careful, Miss Wolfe, they'd said. You won't be able to resist him. No woman can.*

All the warnings had been true. He'd taken her body. Her heart. Her soul.

"I love you, Annabelle," Stefano whispered. Lowering his mouth over hers, he breathed, "I will love you forever."

As he kissed her tenderly, his hands resting protectively over her flat belly, she had never felt so cherished, so adored. The plane flew them back to England, back to Wolfe Manor. And it was somewhere over Brazil that Annabelle knew for certain that she would be safe, and loved, for the rest of her life.

## **2010: Jacob faces his past ...**

Curious after his meeting with his brother Rafael, Jacob begins to wonder about his siblings he left behind ... what are they doing with *their* lives? Intrigued, Jacob begins to follow their adventures in the newspapers and on the internet. At first Jacob was content to observe them all from a distance, and certainly wasn't ready to walk back into their lives. How could he after abandoning them all so terribly so many years ago?

But then he receives a call that changes everything ... Wolfe Manor, the home he has spent his life trying to escape, is crumbling. Jacob's first instinct is to tear the dilapidated building down. His second is that he couldn't allow such a landmark building to be destroyed. And finally, he's starting to feel his past closing in around him. It's time to go home ...

Now Jacob is ready to face crumbling Wolfe Manor and reunite the family he abandoned. He knows this won't be easy and his homecoming rekindles all the nightmares from the past he has tried desperately to run from. But Jacob cannot run forever and hiding has left him feeling empty.

Can Jacob heal his black soul, and reunite his siblings? Will the Wolfe dynasty rise again?

## **BEHIND THE SCENES AT WOLFE MANOR ...**

### **Share a secret about Stefano or Annabelle?**

Everyone thinks that Annabelle Wolfe really has it together—that she is so independent and powerful with her international photography career. The truth is that she is insecure and has a broken heart, at least until Stefano forces her out of her shell.

### **Who is the biggest, baddest Wolfe?**

Ooh—I think I'd have to go for Jacob. Kate Hewitt wrote his story, which follows mine and is the eighth book, the culmination of the whole series **Which Wolfe brother did you most fancy?**

Jacob. Naturally I'd be attracted to the biggest, baddest alpha.

### **Which is Annabelle's favourite room in Wolfe Manor?**

Annabelle grew to despise the manor as a prison, after so many years feeling trapped there when she was scarred after her father's attack. But she has fond memories of playing in the woods and streams on the estate as a child.

### **How did your hero pop the big question?**

In the dark Spanish night, beneath stars scattered like diamonds.

## JENNIE'S WRITING SECRETS ...

**What do you enjoy most about writing as part of a continuity series; how does it differ from writing a single title?**

It's more social—I loved collaborating with the other authors of the series.

**What do you think makes a great hero/heroine?**

I think a great heroine is someone I can identify with and sympathise with, maybe a woman who works really hard and takes care of others, but who doesn't feel very valued or adored. And I love it when a hero really shows her how beautiful she truly is.

**When you are writing, what is a typical day?**

I write when my kids are napping or at pre-school. If I'm close to deadline, I might also write during nights and weekends, although I prefer not to do that. I work on a laptop while sitting on the sofa or stretched out on the floor listening to music. I drink lots of coffee in the morning and diet soda in the afternoon, and snack constantly while I work—a habit I'm trying to break! But I feel so lucky and that I truly have the best job in the world writing love stories.

KATE HEWITT

**BAD BLOOD**

LONE WOLFE

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**KATE HEWITT** discovered her first Mills & Boon® romance on a trip to England when she was thirteen, and she's continued to read them ever since. She wrote her first story at the age of five, simply because her older brother had written one and she thought she could do it too. That story was one sentence long—fortunately they've become a bit more detailed as she's grown older.

She has written plays, short stories, and magazine serials for many years, but writing romance remains her first love. Besides writing, she enjoys reading, travelling, and learning to knit.

After marrying the man of her dreams—her older brother's childhood friend—she lived in England for six years and now resides in Connecticut, with her husband, her three young children, and the possibility of one day getting a dog.

Kate loves to hear from readers—you can contact her through her website: [www.katehewitt.com](http://www.katehewitt.com).

To my fellow writers in this continuity: thanks for making it such a fun journey!

# CHAPTER ONE

WOLFE MANOR was no more than a darkened hulk in the distance when Mollie Parker's cab pulled up to its gates.

'Where to now, luv?' the driver called over his shoulder. 'The gates are locked.'

'They are?' Mollie struggled to a straighter position. She'd been slumped against her bags, the fatigue from her flight catching up with her, making her content to doze gently in the warm fug of the taxi. 'Strange, they haven't been locked in ages.' She shrugged, too tired to consider the conundrum now. Perhaps some local youths had been wreaking havoc up at the old manor house yet again, throwing stones at the remaining windows or breaking in for a lark or a dare. The police might have needed to take matters a step further than they usually did. 'Never mind,' Mollie told the cabbie. She reached into her handbag for a couple of notes. 'You can just drop me here. I'll walk the rest of the way.'

The cabbie looked sceptical; not a single light twinkled in the distance. Still, he shrugged and accepted the money Mollie handed him before helping her take her two battered cases out of the cab.

'You sure, luv?' he asked, and Mollie smiled.

'Yes, my cottage is over there.' She pointed to the forbiddingly tall hedge that ran alongside the gates. 'Don't worry. I could find the way with my eyes closed.' She'd walked the route between the gardener's cottage and the manor many times, when Annabelle had been living there. Her friend had rarely left the estate, and Mollie, the gardener's tear-away daughter, had been one of her only friends.

But now Annabelle was long gone, along with her many brothers; Jacob, the oldest, had started the exodus when he'd turned his back on his family at only eighteen years old. He'd left the manor house to slowly moulder and ruin without a single thought of who might age along with it.

Mollie shrugged these thoughts away. She was only thinking this way

because she was tired; the flight from Rome had been delayed several hours. Yet as the cab drove off and she was left alone in the dark without even the moon to cheer her or light her way, she realised it was more than mere fatigue that was making her rake up old memories, old feelings.

After six months travelling through Europe, six months she'd put aside, selfishly, just for herself and her own pleasure, coming home was hard. Coming home was lonely. There was nobody—had been nobody for so long—living at Wolfe Manor except her.

And she wouldn't be here very long, Mollie told herself firmly. She'd pack up the last of her father's things and find a place in the village or perhaps even the nearby market town, somewhere small and clean and bright, without memories or regrets. She thought of the notebook in her case with all of her new landscaping ideas, a lifetime of energy and thought just waiting to be given wings. Roots. And she would make it happen. Soon.

She straightened the smart, tailored jacket she'd bought at a market in Rome, and tugged a bit selfconsciously on the skinny jeans she wasn't used to wearing. Her knee-length boots of soft Italian leather still felt new and strange; she generally wore wellies. The clothes, along with the notebook of ideas, were all part of her new life. Her new self. Mollie Parker was looking forward.

Smiling with newfound determination, dragging her cases behind her, Mollie made her way along the high stone wall that separated the manor from the rest of the world. The high hedge met the wall at a right angle, and although it was dense and prickly Mollie knew every inch of it; she knew every acre of the Wolfe estate, even if none of it belonged to her. She'd only been in the house a handful of times—it had always been an unhappy place, and Annabelle had preferred the cluttered warmth of the cottage—but the land she knew like her hand, or her heart.

The land felt like it was hers.

Halfway down the hedge Mollie found the opening that had always been her secret. No one, not even the boys from the village who snuck up here on dares, knew about this hidden little entrance. She slipped through the gap in the hedge, and headed towards home.

The gardener's cottage was hidden behind yet another high hedge, so that it was completely separate from the manor house. The small garden surrounding it was cloaked in darkness, yet Mollie wondered just how overgrown and weedy it had become. She'd left in midwinter, when everything had been barren and stark, rimed in frozen mud, but from the heady fragrance of roses perfuming the air she knew the garden—her father's garden—had sprung to life once more.

A lump, unbidden, rose to her throat. Even in the velvety darkness she could picture her father bent over his beloved roses, trowel in hand, gazing blankly around him. The world had shifted and changed and moved on and Henry Parker had stayed in the crumbling confines of his own mind until the very end ... seven months ago.

Mollie swallowed past that treacherous lump and reached for her key. Starting over, she reminded herself. New plans, new life.

Inside, the cottage smelled musty and unused; it was the smell of loneliness. She should have asked a friend from the village to open the windows, Mollie thought with a sigh, but communication with anyone had been difficult. Now she reached for the light switch and flipped it on.

Nothing happened.

Mollie blinked in the darkness, wondering if the bulb had gone out. Had she left the lights on six months ago by accident? Yet as she gazed through the gloom she realised there was not one sign of electric life in the cottage. The clock on the stove was ominously blank, the refrigerator wasn't humming in its familiar, laboured way; everything was still, silent, dark.

The electricity had been turned off.

Mollie groaned aloud. Had she forgotten to pay a bill? She must have, even though she'd paid in advance in preparation for her trip. Perhaps there had been a mixup. Something must have happened, some annoying piece of bureaucratic red tape that left her fumbling in the darkness when all she wanted to do was have a cup of tea and go to bed.

Sighing, Mollie kicked her suitcases away from the door and reached for the torch she kept in the old pine dresser. She found it easily, and flicking the switch, gave a grateful sigh of relief as the narrow beam of

light cut a swath through the darkness.

Yet her sigh ended on something sadder as she shone the torch around her home. Everything was as it should be: the table tucked into the corner, the sagging sofa, the old range and ancient refrigerator. Her father's boots were still caked in mud, lined up by the door. The sight was so familiar, so dear, so *right*, that she couldn't imagine them not being there, and yet.

All around her the house was silent. Empty. At that moment Mollie was conscious of how alone she was, alone on the Wolfe estate, with the huge manor house vacant and violated a few hundred metres away, the cottage empty save her. Alone in the world, as the only child of parents who had both died.

Alone.

Jacob Wolfe couldn't sleep. Again. He was used to this, welcomed insomnia because at least it was better than dreaming. Dreams were one of the few things he couldn't control. They came unbidden, seeped into his sleeping mind and poisoned it with memories. At least his active, conscious brain was under his own authority.

He left his bedroom, left the manor house, not wanting to dwell in the rooms that held so much pain and regret. No, he corrected himself, refusing to shy away from the truth even in the privacy of his own mind. Not wanting—not *able*. Living at Wolfe Manor for the past six months as he oversaw its renovation and sale had been the most harrowing test of his own endurance.

And now, as sleep eluded him and memories threatened to claim him once more, he feared he was failing.

He stalked past his siblings' bedrooms, empty and abandoned, forcing himself to walk down the curving staircase that was one of Wolfe Manor's showpieces, past the study where nineteen years ago he'd made the decision to leave the manor, leave his family, leave himself.

Except you couldn't run away from your very self. You could only control it.

Outside the air was fresher, soft with night, and he took a few deep cleansing breaths as he reached for the torch in the pocket of his jeans.

The memories of the manor still echoed in his mind: *Here is where my brother cried himself to sleep. Here is where I nearly hit my sister. Here is where I killed my father.*

‘Stop.’ Jacob said the single word aloud, cold and final. It was a warning to himself. In the nineteen years since he’d left Wolfe Manor, he’d learned control over both his body and brain. The body had been far easier—a test of physical strength and endurance, laughably simple compared to the mind. Control over the sly mind with its seductive whispers and cruel taunts was difficult, torturous, and no more so than here, where his old demons—his old self—rose up and howled at him to escape once again.

The dreams were the worst, for he was vulnerable in sleep. For years he’d kept the old nightmare at bay and it had ceased—almost—to hurt him. Yet since he’d returned to Wolfe Manor the nightmare had returned in full force, and even worse than that. Even in its aftershocks he could feel his clenched fist, hear the echo of trembling, wild laughter.

He took another breath and stilled his body, stilled his mind. The thoughts retreated and the memories crouched, silent and waiting, in the corners of his heart. Jacob flicked on the torch and began to walk.

He knew most of the gardens now, for he’d taken to walking through them at night. He doubted he’d ever cover every corner of the vast Wolfe estate, but the neat paths, admittedly now overgrown, soothed him; the simple order of flowers, shrubs and trees calmed him. He walked.

The air cooled his heated skin, and his mind blanked, at least for a little while. He thought of nothing. He walked with purpose, as if he were going somewhere, yet in reality he had no destination.

*Renovating the manor to sell it? You’re just running away again.*

His brother Jack’s scathing condemnation echoed emptily within him. Jack was still angry with him for leaving in the first place; Jacob had expected that. Understood that. He’d already seen the flickers of disappointment and pain in all of his siblings’ eyes during their various reunions, even though they’d forgiven him. He’d reconciled with everyone except Jack, and while he’d steeled himself to accept the pain he’d caused, he hadn’t realised how much it would *hurt*.

How the regret and guilt he’d pushed far, far down would rise up and

threaten to consume him, so he couldn't think of anything else, feel anything else. He'd abandoned his brothers and sister, and even though he'd accepted the fact and even the need of it long ago, the reality of the hurt and confusion in their faces near crippled him again with the old guilt.

Where was his precious control now?

Jacob stopped, for something danced in the corner of his vision. His senses prickled to awareness, and he turned his head.

Light.

Light was flickering through the trees, dancing amidst the shadows. Had teenagers broken in again and started something in the woods? Fires, Jacob knew from his long experience on building sites, could easily get out of control.

He strode through the copse of birches that divided the once-ordered, once-organised garden from a separate untamed wilderness. Determination drove him; he had a purpose now.

He stopped short when he emerged through the trees into another, smaller garden, a place he'd never been before. In the centre of the garden a little stone cottage was huddled like something out of a fairy tale, complete with a miniature turret. And the fire was coming from inside, illuminating the window-panes with its flickering light.

Jacob had never even known about the existence of this cottage, but he sure as hell knew it was on his property. And so was the trespasser inside it. The dream he'd just escaped still flickered at the edges of his mind and fuelled the anger that made him march towards the cottage.

He stopped in front of a stable door whose top half was made of pretty mullioned glass, and in one brutal, effective movement, kicked it open.

He heard the scream first, one short, controlled shriek before it stopped, and in the gloom of the cottage's small front room he blinked, his vision focusing slowly. A woman stood by the fireplace hearth, half bent over as she tended to its flickering flames. The light from the fire danced over her hair, turning it the same colour as the flames.

She straightened now, a log still held in her hands. A weapon.

Of course, as a weapon it posed no threat. With nearly twenty years'

training in the martial arts, Jacob knew he could disarm the trespasser in a matter of seconds. But he wouldn't hurt her. He wouldn't hurt anyone ever again.

His gaze flicked over her appearance; she was not what he'd expected. Auburn curls cascaded down her back in an untamed riot, and her skin was as pale as milk. She wore some stylish, trendy outfit, utterly unsuitable for a life in the country.

What was she doing here?

And then her eyes, already dilated with shock, widened even further and the log dropped from her hands.

'Jacob?'

Mollie hadn't recognised Jacob Wolfe when he'd burst through her front door like a madman from a horror film. She'd only screamed once, the sound abruptly cut off as truth dawned, and with it shock. Jacob Wolfe—the lord of Wolfe Manor—had returned. He was older, of course, and bigger, his body sinewy and yet with the muscles of a man. Even in her shocked state Mollie took in the way the faded grey T-shirt and old jeans clung to his powerful frame. His hair was dark and rumpled and just a little long, his eyes dark too, black and cold. He held a torch in his hand, and its beam was pointed directly at her.

It was impossible. He was gone, maybe dead, disappeared in one afternoon, leaving seven siblings broken-hearted. He hadn't been seen or even heard from in twenty years.

And yet now he was here. *Here*, and as Mollie stared at him, she felt a confusing welter of emotions: surprise, relief, even a strange joy. And then, suddenly, a sharp needle of anger stabbed her. She'd seen how Jacob's departure had affected his siblings; from afar she'd witnessed their own sorrows and struggles. And she'd struggled herself; in the long, lonely years since Jacob had left, Mollie had wondered if the crumbling of the manor and the wild ruin of the garden had speeded her father's own descent into dementia. She'd often imagined the seductive *what-ifs* ... what if Jacob had stayed, if all the Wolfes had stayed, if the manor had remained loved and lived in, and the gardens as well ...?

Yet now it was too late. Now her father was dead, the Wolfes all gone,

the manor a falling-down wreck. Now Jacob was back, and Mollie wasn't sure she was glad to see him.

Standing there now, staring at him, at his coldly composed face, so handsome, so blank, she felt the bitterness rush back, filling the empty spaces in her heart and mind.

'You know me?' His words were careful, controlled and completely without emotion.

Mollie let out a short, abrupt laugh. 'Yes, I know you. And you know me, although you obviously don't remember. I know I was always easily forgotten.' Even that rankled. She'd watched the Wolfe siblings play together, seen them tramp off to London to go to their fancy department store, and in some desperate corner of her childish heart she'd been jealous. Their lives had been torn apart by unhappiness and despair—who didn't know that? Yet at least they'd always had one another ... until Jacob had left.

Jacob's eyes narrowed, and his gaze swept around the dismal clutter of the cottage. Her bags still lay in a heap by the door, and Mollie was conscious of all the things she hadn't thrown out before she'd left, because she hadn't been ready to. Her father's pipe and tobacco pouch on the mantel, his coat hanging on the door. Even her father's post was stacked on the table, a jumble of flyers and bills and letters that no one would ever answer.

'You're the gardener's girl.'

Indignation rose up inside her; it tasted sour in her mouth. 'His name was Henry Parker.'

Jacob turned to face her again. His eyes were cold and grey and so very shrewd. 'Was?'

'He died seven months ago,' Mollie replied stiffly.

'I'm sorry.' Mollie nodded jerkily in acceptance and Jacob's glance flicked to the suitcases by the door. 'You just returned ...?'

'I've been in Italy.' Mollie realised how it sounded; her father died and she swanned off to Italy?

She refused to explain herself. Jacob Wolfe could think what he liked. She would not make excuses. He did not deserve explanations.

'I see.' And Mollie knew just how much he thought he saw. 'And you returned to the cottage because ...?' It wasn't so much a question as an accusation.

'Because this is my home,' Mollie replied. 'And has been since I was born. You may have run out on Wolfe Manor, but that doesn't mean the rest of us did.'

Jacob tensed, his body stilling, and Mollie felt the sense of latent anger like a shiver through the room. Then he relaxed and arched one eyebrow, the expression eloquently contemptuous. 'Wolfe Manor is your home?' he inquired with a dangerous softness.

Fury raced through Mollie's veins and burst in her heart. 'Yes, it is, and always has been,' she snapped. 'Even if you never thought of it that way. But don't worry,' she continued before Jacob could say something scathing in reply, 'I'm not staying long. I just came back to pack up my things and then I'll be on my way.'

Jacob folded his arms. 'Very well.' His glance took in the small, cluttered cottage. 'That shouldn't take too long.'

Mollie's mouth dropped open in indignant outrage as she realised what he was implying. 'You want me to leave *tonight*?'

'I'm not completely heartless, despite what you seem to think,' Jacob said coolly. 'You can stay the night.'

Mollie swallowed. 'And then?'

'This is private property, Miss Parker.'

Staring at him now, his eyes so black and pitiless, his expression utterly unyielding, every grudge and hurt she'd held against Jacob Wolfe crowded her mind and burst from her lips.

'Oh, I see,' she managed, choking a little on the words. 'You don't have enough space up at the manor. You need this little cottage as well.'

'It's private property,' Jacob repeated. His expression didn't flicker.

'It was my *home*,' Mollie threw at him. Her voice shook, but only a little bit. 'And my father's home. He died in the bed upstairs—' She stopped the words, the memory, because she didn't want Jacob sharing it. She certainly didn't want him to pity her. Besides her four years doing a degree in horticulture, this had been the only home she'd ever known.

It churned in her gut and burned in her heart that Jacob Wolfe was going to throw her out without so much as a flicker of regret or apology, especially considering how her father had given his very life for the wretched Wolfe family.

Yet how she could protest? She'd been living here rent-free for years, and Jacob was right, it *was* private property. It had never been hers. She'd grown up with that knowledge heavy in her heart; she could certainly live with it now. She swallowed, lifted her chin.

'Fine. I need a little time to go through my father's things, but then the cottage is all yours.' It hurt to say it, to act so nonchalant, yet Mollie forced herself to meet Jacob's hard gaze. He was just speeding up her plans by a few days or weeks, that was all.

Jacob continued to look at her, his expression considering. His gaze swept over the cluttered room, seeming to rest on various telling items: her father's boots, his pipe, her suitcase. 'You have somewhere to go,' he said, more of a statement than a question.

'I want to let a place in the village,' Mollie said. It was not precisely a confirmation, because she did not in fact have any arrangements made. Jacob must have realised this, for his gaze sharpened as it rested on her; it felt like a razor.

'And what will you do with yourself? Do you have a job?'

Mollie bit her lip. 'I run a gardening business,' she admitted reluctantly. 'But I'm hoping to expand into landscaping and garden design.'

'Oh?' His eyebrows arched as he took in this information. Then he nodded once, briskly, as if coming to a decision. 'Well, in that case perhaps we can come to a mutually beneficial arrangement.'

Mollie stared at him in bewilderment. She could not imagine how anything between them could be mutually beneficial. 'I don't—'

'If you'd like to stay in the cottage,' Jacob cut across her, 'you can earn your bed and board. You'll work for me.'

## CHAPTER TWO

HE REMEMBERED her now. She'd followed him—all of them—when they were younger, gap-toothed and tousle-haired, peeking at him and his brothers and sister from the tangled limbs of a tree or behind a hedge. She'd barely registered on his radar; he'd had seven siblings to protect and provide for. The gardener's daughter had been completely outside his authority or interest.

More recently he'd seen her image plastered over the walls of Annabelle's room. His sister must have taken Mollie Parker's photograph a hundred times. And he could see why: with her pale skin and tumbling, auburn hair, she possessed a Titian beauty that seemed almost otherworldly, especially considering how he'd stumbled upon her in this enchanted little place. It had taken a moment to connect this flashily dressed interloper with the laughing, graceful girl on his sister's bedroom walls, but now Jacob recognised the tumbling curls and creamy skin. She was beautiful, stylish, and he had no idea why she would be in this place. On his property.

Why had Mollie Parker gone off to Italy the moment her father had died? Why had she returned? And what was he going to do with her now? The look of uncertainty and fear in those soft, pansy-brown eyes annoyed him, because he didn't want to deal with it. He didn't want to deal with the outraged Miss Mollie Parker. He had enough to worry about, managing the renovation and sale of Wolfe Manor, and attempting, as best as he could, to repair his fractured family. Concerning himself with a stranger's well-being was not on his agenda. He didn't need the feeling those proud yet pleading eyes stirred in him: something between curiosity and compassion, something real and alive. He hadn't felt anything like that in ... years. Nineteen years.

And he wasn't about to feel it again.

He watched her gaze steal to the boots by the door. Her father's boots, he suspected. Seven months on, she would still be grieving. He felt an uncomfortable jab in his conscience as he realised he could have been

more sensitive; the unexpectedness of her presence, and her vulnerability, had caught him on the raw. For a single moment, with her fancy clothes and her trip to Italy, he'd assumed the worst. It had not taken long to realise his mistake, but then, it never did.

Still, Jacob didn't want to have to deal with her. Think of her. Be affected by her. And yet something in her eyes reached out to him, spoke to him, and despite his misgivings and even his fear, he answered that silent call.

He would help her and at the same time assuage his own conscience. He'd given her the commission of a lifetime.

'Work for you?' Mollie repeated incredulously. She felt another sharp stab of anger. 'My father worked for you for fifty years, and for the past fifteen he didn't even get a pay cheque.'

Jacob stilled. Mollie realised she'd surprised him. She wondered if he'd thought of her father at all in the past nineteen years. He obviously hadn't concerned himself for a moment with her. 'I'm not talking about your father,' he replied after a moment. 'You are the one in need of a place to stay, and I happen to be in need of—'

'I won't be your maid. Or your cook. Or—'

'Landscape designer?' Jacob finished softly. Mollie almost thought she heard laughter lurking in his voice. She must have imagined it, she decided, for Jacob's expression was as coldly foreboding as ever.

'Landscape designer?' she repeated, testing the words. 'You can't—'

'You told me you were planning to start a garden design business. And I happen to need someone to landscape the estate's gardens.'

Mollie blinked, realisation dawning. 'That's—that's a huge job,' she replied faintly.

Jacob lifted one shoulder in an indifferent shrug.

'So?'

'But ... a job like that.' She paused, her heart beating with sudden, frantic desperation. She didn't want to disqualify herself for such an amazing opportunity, but her own conscience required that she explain to Jacob the absurdity of what he was suggesting. 'An offer like that

should go to a much more experienced landscaper,’ she said quietly. ‘It’s a huge commission.’

‘I know,’ Jacob replied drily. ‘And you do too, apparently, yet you’re throwing it away with both hands.’

‘Why are you asking me?’ Mollie persisted. She could not fathom why Jacob Wolfe, after so many years away, would now offer her such a huge commission, and without even reviewing a CV or reference! Looking into his cold, hard eyes, he did not seem like a man to be moved by pity. So what did he want?

‘Because you’re here,’ Jacob replied, his voice edged with impatience, ‘and I need a landscape designer. I also need to turn around this place quickly, and I don’t have time to trawl through endless CVs of hopeful gardeners.’

‘Turn around?’ Mollie repeated. ‘You’re *selling* Wolfe Manor?’

Jacob’s mouth curved in a smile that was both bitter and mocking; there was nothing warm or funny or even human about it. Yet somehow the sight of that cruel little smile made Mollie feel only sad. No one should smile like that. She couldn’t even imagine the feelings that lay behind it, inside him. ‘Too much space for just one person,’ he said softly.

Heat flooded her face as she recalled the words she’d thrown at him. *You don’t have enough space up at the manor.* Well, she’d been angry. And she still didn’t know what Jacob Wolfe was about. Was he doing her a favour? Was this really *pity*? The thought made her want to throw the commission right back in his face, even if it was the stupidest thing she’d ever do in her life. ‘Still—’

‘It’s late,’ Jacob cut her off. ‘And frankly, when I went for a relaxing midnight stroll, intruders were not on my mind. If you’re so concerned about your own abilities, you can show me some initial designs tomorrow.’ He turned to the door he’d so unceremoniously kicked in just moments before. ‘And if you don’t, you can start packing tonight.’

Mollie watched him leave, his tall frame swallowed up by the darkness, and she sagged against the fireplace hearth. She glanced at the cosy glow she’d created moments before; all that was left was smoking ash.

Her mind spun in dizzying circles. It was all too much to process: coming back home, seeing her father's things, meeting Jacob Wolfe again and now this commission ... The past and the present had come together with an almighty crash.

Sighing wearily, Mollie pushed her tumbled thoughts to the back of her already disordered mind and, after closing the door—Jacob had as good as vanished into the night—she retrieved her torch and headed upstairs. It didn't matter that there was no light, or water, or even food in the non-working refrigerator. There were sheets on the bed, only a little musty and damp, and she was exhausted.

Kicking off her Italian leather boots, shedding the clothes that she'd never truly felt comfortable in, Mollie tumbled into bed and then gratefully, blissfully, into sleep.

She woke to bright summer sunlight streaming in through the diamond-paned windows of her bedroom. She blinked, groggily, yet within seconds it all came crashing back: the cottage, the job, *Jacob*.

She leaned back against her pillow and closed her eyes, yet the image of Jacob danced before her closed lids. He'd looked so much older, so much more rugged and weary somehow. What had he been doing for the past nineteen years? Why had he come back now? Was he in need of a little cash? Was that why he was selling Wolfe Manor?

Mollie told herself not to rush to conclusions. She'd thrown enough accusations at Jacob last night. She'd tried and judged him years ago, even when Annabelle, who as his younger sister had far more cause, had not. Annabelle, when she'd talked of her family, which had been rarely, had always seemed willing to forgive Jacob, to assume the best.

Last night Mollie had assumed the worst.

Had Annabelle seen Jacob? Did she know he was back? Did any of the Wolfe siblings know? So many questions. So few answers. And, Mollie acknowledged, sighing, none of it really concerned her anyway. She'd always danced on the farthest fringes of the Wolfe family, watching as Jacob and Lucas took their younger siblings out for a picnic, or played hide-and-seek amidst the vast grounds. No one had ever known she existed, until Jacob had left and Annabelle, scarred both inside and out,

had retreated to the manor, refusing to show her face in public again. Then Mollie had been a friend, because she didn't have any others.

But the other Wolfes—Jacob included—had never so much as looked in her direction. And they'd never considered what it would mean to her or her father to let Wolfe Manor fall into such desperate disrepair.

Shrugging these thoughts away, Mollie got out of bed. Now was the time to think of the future, not the past. Jacob Wolfe wanted some landscaping designs by the end of today, and she'd give them to him. Mollie didn't know when she'd decided to accept the commission; but when she'd awakened in the morning she realised she already knew. This was too important to throw away in a moment of pique or pride, and there was something redemptive, something *right*, about restoring Wolfe Manor's gardens to their former glory. She wasn't doing it for Jacob, or even for herself. She was doing it for her dad.

She pulled on her old gardening clothes—jeans and a worn button-down shirt of her father's—and tied her hair up in a careless knot. No point impressing Jacob Wolfe with her stylish new clothes. He hadn't looked impressed last night, and the effort would be useless considering without water she couldn't even have a shower or so much as brush her teeth. Armed with her notebook and a couple of pencils, Mollie put on her wellies and headed outside.

It was one of those freshly minted days of early summer, when the trees, impossibly green, glinted with sunlight, and every furled flower was spangled with diamond dewdrops. Mollie took several deep breaths, filling her lungs with the fresh, damp morning air. She felt a rush of feelings: happiness, homesickness, sorrow and hope. Excitement too, as she left the cottage's little garden for the unkempt acres beyond.

Over the years, as her father's condition had worsened and he'd been unable to tend to his duties—few as they were—on the estate, Mollie had taken over what she could. She'd kept up the small garden surrounding the cottage, enabling her father to exist in his own little make-believe world where the manor was lived in and the gardens were glorious, the roses in full bloom even in the middle of winter. Meanwhile, all around them, the estate gardens had fallen into ruin along with the house.

Now she walked down a cracked stone path, the once-pristine flower beds choked with weeds. Sighing, she noticed the trees in desperate need of pruning; for many, pruning wouldn't even help. There was enough dead wood to keep the manor stocked with logs for its fires for a year.

The manor's rose garden was a particular disappointment. It had once been the pride of the estate—and her father—designed nearly five hundred years ago, laid out in an octagonal shape with a different variety of rose in each section. Henry Parker had tended each of these beds with love and care, so often absorbed in nurturing the rare hybrids that bloomed there.

Mollie's heart fell as she saw what had befallen her father's precious plants: as she stooped to inspect one, she saw the telltale yellow mottling on the leaves that signalled the mosaic virus. Once a rose bush had the infection, there was little to be done, and most of the bushes in the garden looked to have contracted it.

She straightened, her heart heavy. So much loss. So much waste. Yet there were still pockets of hope and growth amidst all the decay and disease: the acacia borders were bursting with shrub roses and peonies; the wildflower meadow was a sea of colour; the wisteria climbed all over the kitchen garden's stone walls, spreading its violet, vibrant blooms.

She found a bench tucked away underneath a lilac bush in the Children's Garden. Her father had known all the names of the formally landscaped plots, and he'd told them to Mollie. The Rose Garden, the Children's Garden, the Water Garden, the Bluebell Wood. Like chapters in a book of fairy tales. And she'd loved them all.

Now she laid her notebook on her knees and took out a pencil, intending to jot down some ideas, but in truth she didn't know where to begin. All she could see in her mind's eye was the weeds and waste ... and her father's lined face, concern etching his faded features as he worried about whether

Master William, long dead, would be disappointed to see the beds hadn't been weeded.

Perhaps landscaping the Wolfe estate gardens was too big a job for her. She had so little practice, so little experience, and the thought of ploughing under even an inch of her father's beloved flowers and trees

made her heart ache. Yet clearly this couldn't just be a patch-up job; the Rose Garden alone would have to be nearly completely replaced.

Leaning her head back against the stone wall, Mollie closed her eyes and let the sun warm her face, the sweet scent of lilacs drifting on the breeze. She felt incredibly weary, both emotionally and physically. Too tired even to think. She didn't know how long she sat there, her mind blank, her eyes closed, but when she heard the dark, mocking tones that could belong to only one man her eyes flew open and she nearly jumped from the bench.

'Hard at work, I see.'

Jacob Wolfe stood in the entrance to the garden, his hands in the pockets of his trousers. He wore a steel-grey business suit, his cobalt tie the only splash of colour. He looked coolly remote and arrogantly self-assured as he arched an eyebrow in sardonic amusement.

'You can't rush the creative process,' Mollie replied a bit tartly, although her mouth curled up in a smile anyway. It was rather ridiculous, having Jacob catching her practically taking a nap. She straightened, aware that unruly wisps were falling from her untidy bun and her clothes were sloppy and old. Jacob, on the other hand, looked cool and crisp and rather amazing.

'I wouldn't dare,' he murmured, and Mollie's smile widened. Were they having a civil conversation? Or were they—unbelievably—*flirting*? 'I've just been walking through the gardens to assess the damage,' she explained, her tone a little stilted. Her heart was beating just a little too hard.

'So you'll take the job.'

Now she actually laughed. 'I suppose I should have said that first.'

'Never mind. I'm glad you got right to it.'

Jacob looked so grave that Mollie's tone turned stilted again. 'Thank you. It's an amazing opportunity.'

'You're welcome.' He glanced around the enclosed garden. 'I don't think I've ever been here before.'

'It's the Children's Garden.'

'Is it?' He continued looking around, as if he'd find a stray child hiding

underneath one of the lilac bushes like some kind of fairy or elf.

'I always thought there should be something more childlike about it,' Mollie admitted ruefully. 'Like toys.'

Jacob nodded in the direction of the fountain that reigned as the centre piece of the small space. 'I suppose that's where it gets its name from.'

'You're quick,' Mollie said with a little laugh. 'It took me years to suss that.' She glanced at the fountain of three cherubic youths, each one reaching for a ball that had just rolled out of reach. It was dry and empty now, the basin filled with dead leaves.

'Did you come here as a child?' Jacob asked, and Mollie nodded.

'My dad took me everywhere. I know these gardens like my own hand, or I did once.' She gave a small, sad laugh. 'To tell you the truth, it's been years since I've walked through them properly.' She lapsed into silence, and when Jacob did not respond, she cleared her throat and attempted to change the subject, at least somewhat. 'When are you hoping to sell the manor?' she asked, a bit diffidently, for she wasn't even sure how she felt about the manor being sold. It had been Jacob Wolfe's home, but it had encompassed hers as well.

'By the end of the summer. I can't stay here longer than that.'

'Why not?' She couldn't keep the curiosity from her voice; she had no idea what Jacob did or had been doing with his life. Did he have a job? A home? A wife?

Mollie didn't know why that last thought had popped into her head, or why it left her with a strange, restless sense of discontent. She shrugged the feeling away.

'I have obligations,' Jacob replied flatly. He obviously wasn't going to say any more. 'Why don't you come back to the house? We can discuss whatever you need to begin your landscaping, and agree on terms.'

'All right,' Mollie agreed. She glanced down at the blank page of her notebook, and wondered just how much they would have to discuss. If Jacob wanted to hear her ideas, she didn't have any yet. The sun was getting warmer as she followed Jacob back to the manor, and while she felt her own hair curl and frizz and sweat break out along her shoulders

and back, she noticed a bit resentfully that Jacob looked utterly immaculate, as unruffled as stone, as cold as marble. Nothing affected him. Nothing touched him.

Was that why he'd been able to walk away? To leave his brothers and sister, his entire family, without so much as a backwards glance?

And what of his father? Mollie felt a chilly ripple of remembrance. She'd only been eight, but she remembered the furore of the press, the gossip of the village, when Jacob had been arrested for the murder of his father. In the end he'd been let off; everyone agreed it was self-defence. And William Wolfe had been a brute in any case. The entire village had rallied around Jacob, and there had never been any doubt that he'd been simply protecting himself and his sister. Yet walking behind Jacob, Mollie could not keep herself from thinking: *he killed a man*.

Almost as if he guessed the nature of her thoughts, Jacob paused on the threshold of the house, turning around to give her the flicker of a cool smile. 'I realise that as we're the only two living on the estate, you might feel, at times, vulnerable. I want to assure you that you are completely safe with me.'

Mollie flushed with shame at the nature of her own thoughts. They were utterly unworthy of either her or Jacob. She might be a bit angry at him, and bitter about all the lost years, but she was not at all afraid. In fact, there was something almost *comforting* about Jacob's steady presence, and she realised that despite the fact he'd broken into her cottage last night, she did feel safe with him. Secure. The thought surprised her, even as she acknowledged the rightness of it.

'Thank you for that reassurance,' she said a bit pertly, desperate to lighten the mood even a little bit, 'but it's really not necessary. I know I'm safe.'

Something flickered in Jacob's eyes, and his mouth twitched. She might feel safe with him, but Mollie knew she had no idea what he thought. Felt. He gave a brief nod and led the way inside.

Outside, the manor was covered in scaffolding, and inside, Mollie could see how much work was being done. The floor was draped with drop cloths, and ladders lay propped against different walls; nearly all the furniture was covered in dust sheets. From somewhere in the

distance she heard the steady rhythm of a hammer.

'You're hard at work, I see,' she said, parroting his words back at him, and was rewarded with a tiny smile, one corner of his mouth flicking gently upwards. It was, Mollie realised, the first time he'd smiled since she'd seen him, and it did something strange to her insides; she felt as if she'd just gulped too much fizzy soda and was filled with bubbles.

Then he turned away from her and she was left flat.

*Uh-oh.* She didn't want to be feeling like that, didn't want to have any kind of ephemeral, effervescent reaction to Jacob Wolfe. She knew what that kind of feeling signified, what it meant.

Attraction.

Desire.

*No way.* Jacob Wolfe was not a man to dally with. Yes, he might exude a steady presence, but that control had a ruthless, unyielding core. He'd walked away from his family and responsibilities without a single explanation, had remained silent for nineteen years, letting his siblings fear and think the worst. She could not, would not, allow herself to be attracted to him even for an instant, even if he was incredibly good-looking, even if she'd always thought he had the same perfectly sculpted look as the prince in her old book of fairy tales, except with dark hair and no smile.

Even when he was younger he hadn't smiled much—at least, not that she could remember. He'd always seemed serious, preoccupied, as if the weight of the world rested on those boyish shoulders. Of all the Wolfe children, Jacob had fascinated her the most. Something in his eyes, in his beautiful, unsmiling face, had called out to her. Not that he'd ever noticed.

He turned back to her again, and she took in the clean, strong lines of his cheek and jaw. She smelled his aftershave, something understated and woodsy.

'Right this way,' Jacob murmured, and led her into what seemed to be the only room that remained untouched by the renovations. William Wolfe's study.

Mollie gazed around the oak-panelled room with its huge partners'

desk and deep leather chairs and a memory flooded over with her such sudden, merciless detail that she felt dizzy. Dizzy and sick.

She'd been four or five years old, brought here by her father, holding his hand. The office had smelled funny; Mollie remembered it now as stale cigarette smoke and the pungent fumes of alcohol. Of course she hadn't recognised those scents as a child.

Jacob must have seen or perhaps just sensed her involuntary recoil as she entered the room, for he turned around with a wry, mocking smile and said, 'I don't particularly like this room either.'

'Why do you use it, then?' Mollie asked. Her voice sounded strange and scratchy.

Her father had been asking for money, she remembered. He was a proud man, and even at her young age Mollie had known he didn't like to do it.

*I haven't been paid in six months, sir.*

William Wolfe had been impatient, bored, scornful. He'd refused at first, and when Henry Parker had doggedly continued, his head lowered in respect, he'd thrown several notes at him and stalked from the room. Still holding her hand, Henry had bent to pick them up. Mollie had seen the sheen of tears in his eyes and known something was terribly wrong. She'd completely forgotten the episode until now, when it came back with the smells and the sights and the churning sense of fear and uncertainty.

She looked at Jacob now; he was gazing around the room with a dispassionate air of assessment. 'It's good for me,' he said at last, and Mollie wondered what that meant. She decided not to ask.

She moved into the room, stepping gingerly across the thick, faded Turkish carpet, her notebook clasped to her chest as if she were a timid schoolgirl. The memory still reverberated through her, made her realise —a little bit—what Jacob and his siblings had endured from their father. She'd experienced only a moment of it; they'd had a lifetime. Annabelle had never really spoke of her father to Mollie, never wanted to mention the terrible night that had given her the scar she was so self-conscious about.

Mollie was starting to realise now just how much she didn't know.

'Here.' Jacob held out a folded piece of paper. 'This is yours, I believe.' Mollie took it automatically, although she had no idea what it could possibly be. Nothing of hers had ever been at the manor. 'I had the water and electricity turned back on at the cottage,' Jacob continued. 'So you should be comfortable there for however long the landscaping takes.'

Mollie barely heard what he'd said. She had opened the paper he'd given her, and now gaped at it in soundless shock. It was a cheque. For five hundred thousand pounds.

'What ...?' Her mind spun. She could barely get her head around all those noughts.

'Back pay,' Jacob explained briefly. 'For your father.'

Ten years of back pay. Her fingers clenched on the paper. 'You don't —',

'Whatever you may think of me, I'm not a thief.'

Mollie swallowed. How did Jacob know what she thought of him? At that moment, she didn't even know herself. And she was beginning to wonder if the assumptions and judgements she'd unconsciously made over the years about Jacob Wolfe were true at all. The thought filled her with an uneasy curiosity.

'This is more than he would have earned,' she finally said. 'A lot more.' Jacob shrugged. 'With interest.'

'That's not—'

'It's standard business practice.' He cut her off, his voice edged with impatience. 'Trust me, I can afford it. Now shall we discuss the landscaping?'

What had Jacob been doing, Mollie wondered, that made half a million pounds a negligible amount of money? Stiffly she sat on the edge of the chair in front of the desk. She slipped the cheque into her pocket; she still didn't know if she ever would cash it.

'Thank you,' she said, awkwardly, because how did you thank someone for giving you a fortune, especially when it seemed to matter so little to him?

Jacob shrugged her gratitude aside. ‘So.’ He folded his hands on the desk and levelled her with one dark look. His eyes, Mollie thought, were endlessly black. No silver or gold glints, no warmth or light. Just black. ‘You mentioned there was damage. Besides the obvious?’

‘It looks like a virus has claimed most of the bushes in the Rose Garden. There are a lot of dead trees that need to be cleared and cut, and of course all the stonework and masonry need to be repointed.’ Jacob nodded, clearly expecting her to continue. ‘I don’t want to take away from the beauty of the original design,’ Mollie said firmly. ‘The gardens’ designs are at least five hundred years old in some places. So whatever landscaping I do, I’d like to maintain the integrity of the original work.’

‘Of course.’

‘Like you’re doing with the house,’ she added. ‘Aren’t you?’

There was a tiny pause. ‘Of course,’ he said again. ‘The house is a historic monument. The last thing I want to do is modernise it needlessly.’

‘Who is overseeing the renovations?’

‘I am.’

‘I mean, what company. Did you hire an architect?’

Another tiny pause. ‘J Design.’

Mollie sat back, impressed. ‘They’re quite good, aren’t they?’

Jacob gave her the faintest of smiles. ‘So I’ve heard.’

She glanced around the room; even with the windows thrown open to the fresh summer day, she thought she could still catch the stale whiff of cigarette smoke, the reek of old alcohol. Or was that just her imagination? She felt claustrophobic, as if the house and its memories were pressing in on her, squeezing the very breath and life out of her. She could only imagine how Jacob felt. He had so many more memories here than she did. ‘When are you hoping to put the manor on the market?’

Jacob’s face tightened, his mouth thinning to a hard line. ‘As soon as possible.’

'You won't miss it?' Mollie asked impulsively. She didn't know what made her ask the question; perhaps it was the force of her own memories, or maybe the way Jacob looked so hard, so unfeeling. Yet he'd cared enough to give her her father's back pay and then some. Or was that just out of guilt or perhaps pity? Did the man feel anything at all? Looking at his impassive face, she could hardly credit him with any deep emotion. 'It was your home,' she said quietly. 'Whatever happened here.'

'And it's time for it to be someone else's home,' Jacob replied coolly. Mollie could tell she'd pushed too far, asked too much. He rose from the desk, clearly expecting her to rise as well. 'Feel free to order whatever you need to begin the landscaping work. You can send the bills to me.'

The thought was incredible. The greatest commission she'd probably ever receive, with carte blanche to do as she liked. It was like a dream. A fantasy. Yet she still felt uneasy, uncertain ... and no more so than when she looked into Jacob's dark eyes. It was like looking into a deep pit, Mollie thought. An endless well of ... sorrow. The word popped into her mind, as unexpected as a bubble—the bubbles she'd felt earlier. Perhaps sorrow was an emotion he felt.

'Thank you,' she finally said. 'You're putting an awful lot of trust in me.'

Jacob's face twisted for no more than a second, and something like pain flashed in his eyes. Then his expression ironed out, as blank and implacable as ever. 'Then earn it,' he replied brusquely. 'Starting now.' He walked out of the study, leaving Mollie no choice but to follow.

# CHAPTER THREE

MOLLIE threw herself into the work. She wanted to, and it was easier than dealing with the other demands of her life ... packing up her father's things, or thinking about her own future, or wondering about Jacob Wolfe.

She spent an inordinate amount of time doing the latter. She wanted to ask him where he'd been, what he'd done, why he'd come back. She never got the chance. In the week she'd been back at Wolfe Manor, she'd hardly seen Jacob since she'd walked out of his study.

Emails from Annabelle didn't clarify the situation too much. Now that the electricity was working in the cottage, she'd finally managed to check her email. There were at least a dozen from Annabelle, detailing Jacob's arrival at the manor, warning Mollie that he didn't know she was at the cottage. Wryly Mollie wished she'd thought to check her email while in Italy. Access had been limited, and frankly she'd been happy to escape the world and all of its demands for a little while.

It felt good to work hard with her hands all day, to get sweaty and dirty and covered in mud. She came back to the cottage every night to shower and fall into bed, too tired even to dream.

And yet still, in her spare and unguarded moments, her thoughts returned to Jacob again and again. She wanted to ask him questions. She wanted to know what he'd been doing all these years, and what he was doing now. She wanted to see him again. Just to get some clarity, Mollie told herself. And some closure. Explanations that would justify why he'd left everyone in such a lurch. Nothing more.

Except even as she told herself that was all, she knew it wasn't. She thought of the darkness of his eyes, the crisp scent of his aftershave, and knew she wanted to see him again, full stop.

A week after Jacob gave her the commission Mollie was still removing all the weeds and dead wood in preparation to actually begin the landscaping and give the garden new life. She'd hired a tree surgeon

from the neighbouring village to come to the manor and cut some of the larger trees down, yet when he didn't arrive and the hours ticked on, annoyance gave way to alarm.

She rung the man's mobile, only to have him explain without too much apology, 'Sorry, but I called the manor to check on some details, and was told to cancel.'

'What ...?' Mollie exclaimed in an outraged squeak. 'Who told you that?'

'I dunno ... someone there who picks up the phone, at any rate. Sorry.'

And Mollie knew who that would be. There were only two of them here after all. And she wasn't supposed to feel *vulnerable*. Well, she didn't. She felt bloody cross. She'd wasted a whole day waiting for someone who had no intention of coming, and Jacob had not even had the courtesy to inform her he'd cancelled her arrangements. She was operating on a tight schedule already, and she certainly didn't need his interference.

After rearranging a time with the tree surgeon, she stalked to the manor. If Jacob Wolfe was going to interfere with her job, she wanted to know why. And she'd also tell him to butt out. She looked forward to the sense of vindication. Yet when she knocked on the manor's front doors so hard her knuckles ached she received no response. She peeked in the windows and rattled the doorknob, uselessly, for the house was locked up. Above her the sky was heavy and dank, and she felt as if its weight were pressing on her. It looked ready to pour, and she was too annoyed and out of sorts to head back to the gardens in this weather.

Mollie decided to return to the cottage. She'd take the opportunity to start sorting through her father's things, something she'd put off for far too long already. As she headed down the twisting path through the woods, the first fat drops began to fall.

An hour later, freshly showered and dressed in comfortable trackie bottoms and a T-shirt, Mollie started through her father's things. She'd picked the least emotional of his possessions: boxes of old bills and paperwork that had never managed to be filed. Yet even these held their own poignancy; Mollie gazed at her father's crabbed handwriting on one of the papers. He'd been jotting notes about a new rose hybrid on the

back of a warning that the electricity would be turned off if a payment wasn't made. She thought of the crumpled notes William Wolfe had thrown at her father, and how he'd picked them up. Her heart twisted inside her.

As if on cue, the lights flickered and then went out, and Mollie was once again left in darkness. She sat there in disbelief, the notice still in her hand. Then anger—unreasonable, unrelenting fury—took over. First the tree surgeon was cancelled. Now the electricity was turned off—again! If Jacob Wolfe had changed his mind about having her stay here, he could have just said.

Without even thinking about what she was doing, Mollie yanked on her wellies. She reached for her torch and her parka and slammed out into the night.

It had been pouring all afternoon, and the deluge from the heavens had not stopped. Despite her rain gear, Mollie was soaked in seconds. She didn't care. Righteous indignation spurred her onwards, stalking through the trees, all the way up to the manor house steps. She knocked on the door as hard as she could, but the sound was lost in the wind and the rain. She knocked again, and again, sensing, *knowing*, that Jacob was home, despite the darkened windows. And even if he wasn't, she refused to slink back to her servant quarters yet again. She wouldn't be stopped by a closed door. Not this time. With a satisfying loud thwack, Mollie kicked the door.

'Owl' The door swung open, and hobbling on one foot, she practically fell into Jacob's arms.

'Are you all right?' Unruffled as ever, he righted her, his hands running down her arms, pausing on her waist and then examining her calves and feet. Even in her outrage and pain, Mollie registered a curious tingle as he touched her, so lightly, so impersonally, yet with obvious concern, his fingers deft and sure. 'Did you break a bone?' She thought she detected the tiniest trace of amusement in his voice, yet she had to be mistaken. His touch and his expression were both impersonal, emotionless.

'No, I just stubbed my toe,' she snapped. She stepped away from him and those light, capable hands. He reached behind her to close the door.

'Is something the matter?' Jacob inquired, and Mollie let out a sharp laugh.

'I'll say something's the matter! Why did you cancel the tree surgeon I'd arranged? He's booked solid through June, and I only got the appointment by calling in a favour. And if you had to cancel, you could have at least told me—'

'I'm sorry,' Jacob replied coolly. 'I'm afraid it was an oversight. I was in London for the day on business and I had all my calls routed through my office. My assistant must have cancelled the appointment.'

'Oh.' Mollie didn't know what to say after that. She found herself imagining the assistant, some sexy, polished city girl in red lipstick and kitten heels. 'Well, why did you turn off the electricity?' she finally demanded, blustering once again. 'If you'd changed your mind about me, you could just—'

'I turned off the electricity?' Now Jacob looked truly amused. 'I'm afraid I don't have that much authority. The wind and the waves do not obey me.' He glanced around the foyer, and suddenly Mollie saw just how dark the manor was. She noticed the torch in Jacob's hand, and understood, far too late, that the electricity must be off in the manor as well.

It was a *storm*, for heaven's sake. Even though she was shivering with cold, her cheeks reddened. She was a complete idiot, coming in here full of fury, and for what? Jacob had a reason for everything.

'Oh.' She shifted, and muddy water leaked out of a ripped seam in her boot. She stared at the spreading stain on the rug, and saw that Jacob was looking at it too. 'I'm sorry,' she mumbled, feeling both foolish and stupid. 'I jumped to some awful conclusions.'

'So it would appear.' Jacob let the silence tick on rather uncomfortably as he gazed at her for a moment, and Mollie suffered through it. Perhaps this would be her penance. 'Well, I can hardly send you out in that storm the way you are now,' he said, sounding resigned. 'Fortunately the plumbing has already been repaired. Why don't you dry off upstairs? Have a bath if you like. You can change into something of Annabelle's.'

Mollie's eyes widened as an array of images cartwheeled across her

brain. ‘I couldn’t—’

‘Why not?’ Jacob challenged blandly. ‘Surely there’s nothing waiting for you back at your cottage? I was just making myself some dinner. I only got back from London an hour ago. You are free to join me.’

Free, not welcome. Mollie was under no illusion that Jacob actually wanted her company. She was an obligation; perhaps she always had been. Perhaps that was what lay behind the cheque she still hadn’t cashed, as well as the commission he’d given her. Just his wretched sense of duty.

Yet he obviously hadn’t felt any sense of duty to his family; why should he feel it for her? Confused by her own thoughts, Mollie found herself nodding.

‘All right, I will. Thank you,’ she said, and heard the challenge in her voice. Maybe now was the time for the clarity and closure she wanted. Maybe now she’d get some answers.

‘Good. You know the way?’

Mollie nodded again, and Jacob turned from here. ‘Take all the time you need. I’ll meet you in the kitchen when you’re done. Don’t forget your torch.’

Without waiting for her to respond, he walked away, swallowed by the darkness.

As he stalked down the hall back to the kitchen, Jacob wondered why he’d just invited Mollie Parker to share his dinner. He wished he hadn’t. He didn’t want any company, and certainly not hers. She gazed at him with an unsettling mix of judgement and compassion, and he needed neither. He refused to explain himself to her, yet he couldn’t stand the thought of her jumping to more asinine conclusions.

She’d assumed he’d turned off the electricity again, just as she assumed he’d walked out on his family to follow his own selfish desires. He saw the condemnation and contempt in her eyes, had heard it in her voice that first night.

*You may have run out on Wolfe Manor, but that doesn’t mean the rest of us did.*

Jacob closed his mind to the memory. There was no point in thinking of it, of her, because he had enough people to apologise to and enough sins to atone for without adding Mollie Parker to the list. He'd give her dinner and send her on her way.

Yet even as he made that resolution, another thought, treacherous and sly, slipped into his mind.

*You invited her here because you want to see her. Want to talk to her. You want her.*

He'd avoided her this past week for too many reasons, on too many levels. Yet now her auburn curls and milky skin flashed across his mind; he could almost *smell* her, damp earth and lilac, and his gut clenched with a helpless spasm of lust. He was annoyed—and angry—with himself for indulging in such pointless, useless thoughts. Desires.

He'd had enough meaningless affairs, engaged in enough no-strings sex, to know when a woman was off-limits. And Mollie Parker, with her pansy eyes and tremulous smile and fearsome fury, had strings all over her. There was no way Jacob would ever get involved with her beyond the barest of business details.

The day he'd left Wolfe Manor, he'd made a vow to himself never to hurt anyone again, never to allow himself the opportunity. It was a vow he intended to keep; he knew his own weakness all too well. And *anyone* included Mollie Parker.

\*

It was strange to be in Annabelle's room. Mollie had only been here a few times, and then not for years, and she now saw that the walls were covered in photographs: artful pictures of a rainy windowpane, a bowl of lilies. And her. Many of the photos were of her; she'd forgotten how Annabelle had asked her to pose. She'd been her first reluctant model. Mollie stepped closer, shining her torch over the photos, now faded and curling at the corners. In half the photos she was posing rather unwillingly, looking both silly and pained. The other half were candids.

Annabelle had caught so many emotions on her face. It was strange, to see yourself so unguarded. There was a photo of her at age thirteen,

gangly, awkward, a look of naked longing in her eyes as she stared off into the distance, caught in the snare of her own daydream. Her at sixteen, dressed up for a date—an unusual occurrence—looking proudly pretty. Nineteen, her arm loped around her father's shoulders. He was smiling, but there was a vague look in his eyes that Mollie hadn't seen then. The descent to dementia, unbeknownst to her, had already started.

She turned away from the photos, feeling shaken and exposed. Jacob must have seen all these pictures. He'd glimpsed these moments of her life that she hadn't even been aware of, and it left her feeling vulnerable and even a little angry. Annabelle should have taken the photos down. Jacob should have.

Pushing the thoughts away, she turned towards the en suite bathroom. She'd intended just to dry off with a towel, but when she saw the huge marble whirlpool tub she gave in to the decadent desire for a long, hot soak. The cottage's old claw-footed tub and sparing amount of hot water made it especially tempting. She turned the taps on full and within moments was sinking beneath the hot, fragrant bubbles, all thoughts of the photographs and everything they revealed far from her mind.

Half an hour later, swathed in a thick terry towel, a little embarrassed by her own indulgence, she reluctantly rifled through Annabelle's drawers. Clothes from her teenaged years filled them; making a face, Mollie gazed at styles years out of date and several sizes too small. There was nothing remotely appropriate. Then she saw a T-shirt and a pair of track bottoms, along with a leather belt, laid out on the bed. Jacob's clothes.

On top of them was a note: *In case the others aren't suitable.*

She stared at his strong, slanted handwriting, a strange tingle starting right down in her toes and spreading its warmth upwards. She hadn't expected him to be so thoughtful.

Yet why shouldn't she? Mollie asked herself. He'd been thoughtful to the tune of half a million pounds already. Yet somehow his thoughtfulness in the little, hidden things meant even more than a scrawled cheque. She picked up the grey T-shirt, worn to softness, and held it to her face; it smelled like soap. It smelled like Jacob.

He'd been in here, just a few metres away from the bathroom, while

she'd been soaking in the tub. Naked. Groaning a little, Mollie buried her face in the T-shirt. Why was she thinking this way? Feeling this way about *Jacob Wolfe*? He was so inappropriate as boyfriend material it was laughable. She couldn't even believe she'd mentally put *boyfriend* and *Jacob Wolfe* in the same sentence. She did *not* still have a stupid schoolgirl crush on him, she told herself fiercely. She didn't even want a boyfriend, or husband, or lover of any kind. Her business was going to take up all of her time and energy, and after five years of caring for her father, her emotional reserves were surely at an all-time low. She didn't need the complication of caring for another person.

But what about desire?

She couldn't ignore the fact that Jacob Wolfe was quite possibly the most attractive man she'd ever seen, or that her body responded to him in the most basic, elemental way.

Still, Mollie told herself as she slipped Jacob's T-shirt over her head, she didn't have to act on that attraction. She didn't have to do anything about desire. And she wouldn't have the opportunity anyway, because as far as she could tell Jacob didn't even like her very much.

She slipped on the track bottoms, which engulfed her, and rolling up the cuffs, she cinched them at the waist with the belt. She looked ridiculous, she knew, but it was better than wearing clothes that were two sizes too small and a decade out of date.

Taking her torch, Mollie started down the corridor, in search of the kitchen.

There was something a bit creepy about walking through the darkened, dust-shrouded manor on her own. She wondered how Jacob felt living here. Surely a hotel or rented flat would be more comfortable. As she made her way downstairs she peeked into several rooms; some looked as if they'd been cleaned but others were frozen in time, untouched save for dust and cobwebs. She pictured Jacob in the manor, moving about these rooms, haunted by their memories, and suppressed an odd shiver.

She finally found the kitchen in the back of the house, a huge room now flickering with candlelight. Jacob had brought in several old silver candelabra and positioned them in various points around the room so

the space danced with shadows.

'You made it.' Jacob turned around and in the dim light Mollie thought she saw his teeth flash white in a smile. 'I hope you didn't get lost.'

'Almost.' She smiled back. 'Actually, I just had a good long soak in the tub. It felt amazing.' She gestured to the clothes she wore. 'Thank you. This was very thoughtful.'

'I realised Annabelle's clothes were undoubtedly musty. They haven't been worn or even aired in years.'

'It's strange,' Mollie murmured, 'how forgotten everything is. I haven't been inside the house in years. I didn't realise how much had been left.'

Jacob stilled, and Mollie could feel his tension. She knew the exact moment when he released it and simply shrugged. 'Everyone made their own lives away from here.'

'I know.'

He reached for two plates, sliding her a sideways glance. 'Yes, you must know better than anyone, Mollie. You watched it all happen. You were the one who was left last of all, weren't you?' He spoke quietly, without mockery, and yet his words stung because she knew how true they were. She'd felt it, year after year, labouring alone.

'Yes,' she said quietly. 'I was.'

'Have you stayed here the whole time?' Jacob asked. He laid the plates on the breakfast bar in the centre of the kitchen. 'Did you never go anywhere, except for Italy?'

He made it sound as if she'd just been waiting, a prisoner of time and fate. Even if it had felt that way sometimes, to her own shame, she didn't like Jacob Wolfe remarking on it.

*Yes, I was waiting. Waiting for my father to die.*

'I went to university,' she told him stiffly. 'To study horticulture.'

'Of course. But other than that ... you waited. You stayed.' He glanced at her, his eyes dark and fathomless, revealing nothing, but she felt his words like an accusation. A judgement.

'Yes,' she said in little more than a whisper. 'I stayed.' *Even if I didn't*

want to. *Even if sometimes ...* She swallowed and looked away. ‘Something smells delicious,’ she said, trying to keep her voice light and bright and airy. Trying desperately to change the subject.

Jacob opened the oven and removed a foil pan. ‘I’m afraid I’m not much of a cook. It’s just an Indian takeaway, but at least the oven runs on gas so it’s warm still.’

‘Thank you,’ she replied, her voice still stiff. ‘It’s very generous of you to share your meal.’ As Jacob pried off the foil lid from the chicken dish, Mollie realised she was starving. She’d been so involved in going through her father’s things that she’d completely forgotten about dinner.

Jacob ladled the fragrant chicken and rice onto the two plates and then gestured to one of the high bar stools. ‘Come and eat.’

Sliding on a stool opposite of him, Mollie was conscious of how intimate this felt. *Was.* All around them the kitchen flickered and glimmered with candlelight. The house yawned emptily in several acres in every direction; they were completely alone.

She took a bite of chicken. She knew that now was the time to ask Jacob what he’d been doing all these years, why he’d left, if he’d ever spared a single thought for any of the people he’d left behind—all the questions she wanted answers to, deserved answers to, for that supposed clarity and closure. So she could move on from this place, just as all the Wolfes had, just as Jacob would again.

Yet the words stuck in her throat, in her heart. Did she really have a right to ask—and know—such things? She wasn’t even part of the Wolfe family. She might have spent her whole life on the Wolfe estate, in the family’s shadow, but she’d never been one of them. She knew that, had always known that. She’d been an observer, a silent witness, a peeping Tom. Never part of the family, not even remotely close. Her friendship with Annabelle and her father’s faithful service were the only links to the family whose actions had played such havoc with her own life. Why should she have ever expected the Wolfes to feel any sense of obligation or responsibility to her or her father? Annabelle’s offer to let them stay at the cottage had been a kindness, an act of charity that no one else had known about.

And yet Jacob obviously felt responsible; he’d shown her with that

cheque. Yet she didn't want money, even if it was deserved. So just what did she want from Jacob Wolfe?

'So what have you been doing all this time?' she asked. Her voice sounded too loud, too bright. Jacob stilled. He was good at that, Mollie thought. She knew she'd caught him off guard only when he became more cautious, more careful, his movements both precise and predatory.

'Many things.'

'Such as?'

'Work.'

'What kind of work?'

'This and that.'

Mollie laid down her fork, exasperated by his oblique answers. 'Why don't you want to say? Was it something illegal?'

Jacob's brows snapped together in a dark frown. 'No, of course not.'

She shrugged. 'Well, how am I supposed to know? You never sent a letter or left a message. Annabelle waited—'

'I don't,' Jacob told her, his tone turning icy, 'want to talk about my sister.'

Mollie refused to back down. 'She's my friend too.'

'So I gather from the photographs plastered on her wall.' Now he sounded mocking, and Mollie flushed. She hated the thought of Jacob seeing those photos, gazing at her in so many awkward and emotional stages.

'Well, if it's not something illegal, I don't know why you can't tell me,' she resumed after a second's pause. Jacob's eyes flashed blackly.

'And I don't know why you're so curious, Miss Parker,' he drawled, his tone soft. Yet there was nothing soft about his body or expression; everything was hard. Hard and unrelenting and cold.

Mollie swallowed. Suddenly this had stopped being a conversation. It had become a battle, and one she wasn't sure she wanted to fight. She had a feeling Jacob would win. She lifted her shoulder in a shrug and lightened her tone. 'Of course I'm curious. You mentioned yourself how I'm the one who has been here for so many years. How I waited. And I

did. I waited and I watched everyone leave, one by one, starting with you. So yes, I'd like to know what started the exodus.' Somehow, as she'd started speaking, her tone had hardened and darkened. Mollie stopped, her lips still parted in surprise at just how bitter she sounded. She felt a little flicker of shame.

'So,' Jacob said after a moment, his voice still sounding soft and yet so very hard, 'you don't just want to know what I've been doing, but why I went.'

Mollie's breath escaped in a soft, surprised rush. She might as well see this through. 'Yes.'

Jacob leaned back, his position relaxed even though his eyes were wary and alert. 'Why don't you tell me why you think I left?' Mollie stared at him, speechless. She hadn't expected *that*. She had no idea what to say. 'Or,' Jacob suggested softly, 'I could guess what you think. I could guess what you think quite easily.'

Her mouth was dry, the food like dust. She swallowed and licked her lips. 'Could you?'

'Oh, yes,' Jacob assured her, his voice laced with laughter. Mocking, cold and cruel. 'I could. You think I left because I was bored. I'd had enough of playing daddy to my brothers and sister and I decided they could fend for themselves while I went in pursuit of my own pleasure. I never wrote a letter or called or came back at all because I just didn't care. Not about them, and certainly not about you, the ragamuffin gardener's daughter who always followed me around with her heart in her eyes.'

Mollie let out an involuntary choked cry. Even though she should have known, should have expected it, she hadn't. She hadn't thought he would be so cruel. To *her*.

'Isn't that what you thought, Mollie?' Jacob asked in a silky whisper, and in a sickening flash Mollie knew she was as cruel as he was. She'd thought everything he'd said, more than once. She'd thought it in the anger and hurt of being left behind, unimportant and forgotten. She'd judged him again and again in her own heart, condemned him without a trial, without an explanation.

And now, seeing the pain flash in Jacob's dark eyes, she suddenly

wondered if she'd been wrong.

Jacob laughed. It wasn't a sound Mollie liked to hear. 'Don't bother answering,' he said as he slid off his stool and took his plate—he'd eaten everything—to the sink. 'I know what you think. Every emotion and thought is reflected in those lovely eyes.'

*Those lovely eyes?* Now Mollie was thrown in a completely different direction, her body suddenly tingling in response to that throwaway compliment. Jacob turned to face her, bracing one hip against the kitchen counter. The candlelight threw his face into half-shadow, flickering across his features.

'I'm sorry,' Mollie said after a moment. She didn't even know what she was apologising for, yet she felt, deep inside, that the words needed to be said. She'd made so many judgements, in her loneliness and hurt, and she shouldn't have. She didn't deserve an explanation or even an apology. Yet she still didn't know what Jacob thought ... or why he'd left. And now she wanted to know, for an entirely different reason. One she couldn't quite name.

'Don't,' Jacob said brusquely. He averted his face. 'Don't apologise for the truth.'

'The truth?' Mollie repeated in confusion. 'What are you saying, Jacob?'

'I did abandon my brothers and sister,' Jacob said flatly. His voice was without emotion. 'It was a price I was willing to pay, but the cost was high.' Questions clambered in Mollie's mind. The price for what? And the cost was high—for who? His siblings? *Himself*? 'Come on,' Jacob said after a moment. He sounded resigned and yet also strangely gentle. Mollie looked up. He'd pushed away from the counter and held out his hand. Without even thinking about what she was doing, Mollie slid off the stool and took his hand.

His fingers curled around hers, warm, dry, strong. A shiver of awareness rippled from his touch all the way through her body, making her breath hitch and her blood pump and everything inside her come alive. Bubbles again, so sweet and tempting and dangerous.

'What—?'

'I want to show you something,' Jacob said. And still holding her hand, he led her from the room.

# CHAPTER FOUR

JACOB hadn't meant to hold her hand. He hadn't even meant to show her what he'd found; she probably already knew, and even if she didn't, he could have slipped it in an envelope and left it on her doorstep.

He didn't want to draw closer to this woman who asked him pointed questions, and yet stared at him with a shock and hurt *he'd* caused.

Yet here he was, leading her through the shadowy corridors, his hand laced with hers, her fingers small and slender under his, trusting and fragile despite his harsh words of just a few moments ago. It felt good. Too good. It had been so long since he'd felt another human being's gentle touch. Years since he'd allowed himself to get that close to anyone. Mollie Parker drew him in with her sweetness, her softness, and even her determination and strength. He didn't want to be drawn, and yet still he was. Still he wanted.

Yet he knew he couldn't want this. Jacob had returned home for one purpose, and one purpose only: to sell the manor. Reuniting his family was a necessary and important part of that, but seducing Mollie Parker was not.

For that was all it would be. A seduction: pleasurable, pointless. That was all he ever allowed himself to have, because he knew it was all he could ever give.

He was empty inside, empty and aching. Or worse, Jacob corrected himself, he was *full*. Full of poisoned memories, treacherous regrets. Full of the truth of himself, of what he was capable of. He had nothing to give Mollie Parker. Nothing she would want.

Except a rose.

'Why are we going back here?' Mollie asked, for Jacob had led her into the study. The room still felt suffocating to her, despite the windows open to the night. The smell of rain and roses carried on the breeze.

'I found something when I was going through my father's papers,'

Jacob said. He'd dropped her hand and retreated behind the big oak desk, leaving Mollie with the sweet memory of his touch. Her fingers tingled. He began to riffle through the papers on his desk. 'He had the most atrocious filing system,' he continued. 'Which of course isn't very surprising.'

'I didn't know much about your father,' Mollie said cautiously. 'Except ...'

Jacob glanced up, his eyes flashing. He had stilled, again. Watchful and wary. 'Except what?' he asked quietly.

'What people said. Whispered about in the village.'

'And what did they whisper about in the village?' Jacob asked, his tone deceptively mild.

'That he was charming,' Mollie answered hesitantly, 'and a drunk.'

'He was both. Unfortunately he wasn't much of a father.'

He spoke so dispassionately, as if it hardly mattered, that Mollie was compelled to ask, 'You must regret that.'

His eyes narrowed as he looked up at her. 'I do. I've regretted it my whole life.' She heard something in his voice, a raw, jagged note she hadn't expected; it cut beneath his cold, composed exterior, hinted at the hurting man underneath. 'I regret it for my brothers and sister,' Jacob continued. 'I wasn't much of a replacement.'

'But you tried.'

He lifted one shoulder in a dismissive shrug before turning back to the papers on the desk, his manner brisk. 'My father did, amazingly, have a few redeeming qualities. Such as this.' He held out a piece of thick parchment paper, yellowed and crackling with age, towards her.

Hesitantly Mollie took it. 'What ...' she began, her breath coming out in a soft rush as she gazed down at the paper. A dried rose, its petals brown and faded yet still perfect, had been affixed to the parchment. Underneath, in an unfamiliar hand, was written *The Mollie Rose*.

Her throat thickened, unexpectedly, with tears, and her fingers clenched on the fragile parchment.

'Careful,' Jacob said, and he gently loosened her fingers' death grip

with his own.

‘Sorry. I—I didn’t—How did he—your father—get this?’

‘As far as I can tell, your father showed him.’ Jacob pointed to some more handwriting, smaller and slanted, underneath the rose’s name.

*A new hybrid Parker named after his daughter. Sweet.*

‘It must have touched my father in one of his more lucid moments.’

‘My father was always experimenting with roses,’ Mollie said in a voice she didn’t quite recognise as her own. ‘Sometimes I thought—it seemed—as if he cared more for them ...’ She shook her head, not wanting to taint her father’s memory with regretful recollections. Yes, he’d loved his beloved roses, been obsessed by them even, but she’d always known he’d loved her more. She’d never doubted that, even in the darkest moments of his disease. She looked up at Jacob. ‘He never told me—I never knew he named one after me.’

Jacob glanced down at the pressed petals, now leached of colour. ‘I wonder what colour it was. Red, perhaps, like your hair.’ He reached out to gently tuck a stray curl behind her ear. His fingers barely brushed her skin, yet Mollie felt as if they lingered. Her whole body reacted to that touch, the whisper of skin against skin. Instinctively she leaned into it. Abruptly Jacob dropped his hand, took a step back.

Mollie realised she was holding her breath, and she drew it in with an audible gulp. ‘Thank you for showing me this,’ she said. She tried to ignore the fact that her heart was hammering and her ear and cheek still tingled from his touch.

‘You can keep it.’

‘Thank you. It means a lot.’

‘You were close to your father?’ He sounded almost wistful.

‘Yes ...’ Mollie realised she sounded hesitant, unsure. How could she explain the kind of relationship she had with her father? He’d adored her; she’d always known that. It had just been the two of them, together, forever, and for so long she couldn’t imagine life without him.

Yet living alone with a forgetful father who was obsessed with the quality of soil and the new fertilising techniques had been difficult at times; Henry Parker had not always known when she needed new

clothes, or a listening ear, or a simple hug. And then five years of dwindling into dementia had left Mollie feeling more alone and bereft than ever.

His death, in some ways, had been a relief. It was a thought that made her cringe inwardly with guilt and shame even now.

'I know it was nothing like—like your father,' she said stiltedly, 'nothing at all. But ... sometimes ... it was lonely.' She felt ashamed to say it, especially considering what Jacob and the other Wolfes must have endured under William's unforgiving hand.

Jacob gave her the faintest of smiles. 'We all carry our own sorrows. Just because they're different, doesn't make them any less.' He gestured to the rose. 'I'm glad you have that.'

Her throat too tight to speak, Mollie could only nod. She felt humbled by Jacob's willingness to accept her own pain. He could have easily shrugged it off, told her she had no idea, nothing to cry about ...

Or was that just how *she* felt?

She looked up and saw that Jacob was regarding her with a certain thoughtfulness that made her think he saw too much. Knew too much.

And she didn't know anything.

'Tell me about him,' she said, and he stiffened.

'There's not much worth telling,' he said after a moment. Mollie was glad he didn't pretend to misunderstand. She was talking about William Wolfe, his father, the author of his own sorrows. The man he'd accidentally killed—and must have hated. 'I wish.' Jacob said, and then stopped.

'Wished ...?' Mollie prompted softly.

'I wish there was more to tell,' Jacob said, a brusque note entering his voice. 'I wish I had—we all had—more happy memories with him. I wish my siblings had had a proper father, rather than—' He stopped abruptly, but Mollie, just as before, felt she could have finished his thought. *Rather than me.* He gave her a bleak smile. 'If wishes were horses, eh?'

'Something like that.' The intimacy of the moment still seemed to wrap around them. 'Annabelle never spoke about him,' Mollie said quietly. 'Not that I asked. I was only eight when—'

'He died.' Jacob's voice was flat, cold. Mollie realised she shouldn't have said anything. They could have moved on, away from this startling intimacy, the sharing of memories, secrets. Yet even now she didn't want to. She wanted to know.

'It must have been so hard,' she whispered. 'For you, especially.' Jacob flinched at her words. Mollie wished she knew what to say. No words seemed adequate, appropriate, so she said the only thing she could think of, the only thing she knew she really meant. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered.

'I told you, you don't need to apologise for the truth,' Jacob told her. His expression hardened into something unfriendly and even mean. It was hard to believe that a moment ago he'd made her heart beat with awareness and desire. Now, taking in his tightened mouth and narrowed eyes, so endlessly dark, it hammered with something close to fear—yet not for herself. She was afraid for him. 'The truth,' he continued in the same brutal tone, 'was that he was an utter bastard. He terrorised his wives and his children, he drank away the family's money, and when he died I felt—' He stopped suddenly, his face twisted in an agony of grief. He drew a shuddering breath and looked away, every muscle tensed.

'*Jacob* ...' Mollie said, inadvertently, instinctively, for something deep in her called to the broken-ness she saw in the man before her. She lifted her arms, reaching out as if to do—what? *Hug him?* Even though she knew Jacob Wolfe would probably be appalled by the thought of a hug, she couldn't help herself. She wanted to reach him. Touch him.

His face cleared, as if a veil had been drawn across that deeper, darker emotion; he hid the broken edges, the jagged memories, and coated them with blandness. 'You asked,' he said. 'And now you know.' His mouth curved in a slow smile. 'Satisfied, Mollie?' he asked, touching her cheek with one finger. Mollie jerked under the caress, for that was surely what it was. Slowly, thoughtfully, his face still a hard mask, Jacob trailed his finger down her cheek, igniting sparks of awareness along her jaw, to the sensitive curve of her neck. He lingered there, his finger touching her pulse, a witness to its frantic hammering.

Mollie remained rooted to the spot, amazed at how such a simple, little touch could affect her so utterly. So disastrously. She felt as she was filled with bubbles once again, bubbles made of the most fragile

glass, and they were popping one by one. She didn't know what would be left when they were gone. She didn't know what would happen, what could happen.

What Jacob wanted to happen.

He watched her carefully, noting her reaction, and in her appalled shame Mollie wondered how the mood could have changed so suddenly, how the charged atmosphere of anger and regret had turned so quickly to something just as dangerous.

She swallowed convulsively as Jacob rested just one finger in the curve of her neck, stroking that smooth, secretive skin lightly, as if he were learning a landmark. And she didn't move away. Didn't protest. Didn't do anything except submit, her body yearning for his deeper caress.

After a long, pulsating moment, the only sound the hitch of her own breath, he trailed his finger from that curve to her collarbone, pausing to stroke the hard ridge of bone, the skin stretched so achingly taut over it, and then let it drop lightly yet quite deliberately to the V of her T-shirt —*his* T-shirt.

Mollie heard her sharply in-drawn breath as his finger nestled there in the soft dip between her breasts, stroking the skin softly, as if asking a question.

She felt heat flood through her—and he was touching her with only one finger! She glanced up and saw the clinical, detached look on his face and shame replaced that liquefying heat. He wasn't affected at all.

'Don't—' she whispered. She didn't even know what she wanted to stop, the look on Jacob's face or the touch of his hand. Her body certainly didn't want him to stop; her body wanted hands, mouths, lips. Everywhere, everything.

'Don't what?' Jacob asked in a voice of lethal softness.

'Don't tease me,' Mollie said, for surely that was what he was doing. He used seduction—sex—like a weapon, the most powerful one he had. She wished she had the strength to step away but she didn't. She closed her eyes, briefly, in silent supplication, then opened them. She drew a steady breath. 'What do you want from me, Jacob?'

'Now, that's an interesting question.' Smiling faintly, Jacob drew his finger back along her collarbone, up her neck and then lightly across one cheek. She felt as if he'd marked her, as if she'd see a livid red line where he'd touched. She even glanced down at herself to check; there was nothing.

His hand rested on her cheek, his thumb caressing the fullness of her lips. 'I'm attracted to you, Mollie,' he said, and inside she quavered at the knowledge, both with wonder and trepidation. 'And you're attracted to me.' His thumb rested fully on her mouth; she couldn't speak even if she wanted to. 'We're alone here, for the foreseeable future. Why not make the most of it?'

He sounded so reasonable, so affable, so bland. *Why not make the most of it?* As if it could—or would—be so simple and easy. She knew it would not. She knew Jacob knew it too; she could see it in the blazing blackness of his eyes. He was provoking her with this seductive suggestion. It was a challenge, a reaction to her intrusive questions, her instinctive sympathy. It wasn't the easy suggestion he made it sound. It was a punishment.

Somehow she found the strength to step away; Jacob let his hand fall, easily, without regret or apology. 'You mean an affair,' she stated flatly.

He paused, his eyes narrowing slightly. 'Call it what you will.'

'No strings,' she clarified, because even though it was so obvious she still had to say it. Jacob Wolfe was not a man who cultivated relationships.

'None.'

And for one gloriously tempting moment, despite the dark reasons for his suggestion that she could only guess, she could imagine it. Every nerve and sinew of her body clamoured for it, because when had she ever indulged in something so sensual, so basic and pleasurable, as an affair? She'd had a few mediocre relationships in university, but nothing that remotely came close to what Jacob Wolfe was offering. And for the past five years she'd been living the life of a reclusive nun, caring for her father, working as much as she could, barely able to make ends meet. Even in Italy she'd been too busy visiting gardens and healing her own grief to really pay attention to any men.

Yet here was Jacob Wolfe, darkly dangerous, utterly beautiful, suggesting they have an affair.

*Sex.*

It was outrageous. Incredible. A little alarming. Tempting.

And yet she couldn't do it. And she knew Jacob knew it too. Perhaps that was the only reason he'd suggested it in the first place.

She'd seen something in Jacob's eyes, something real and dark and wounded, and knew that she couldn't get involved with this man. Couldn't keep her body and heart separate. Jacob Wolfe would hurt her. Maybe he wouldn't mean to, maybe he wouldn't want to, but he would.

She would let him. She didn't know how to have a no-strings affair, and she wasn't about to start with a man like Jacob Wolfe.

'I ... I can't.' She took another step away, and then another. Jacob didn't say anything; in the shadowy room she couldn't quite make out his expression. And she suddenly didn't want to know it, didn't want to wait for his mocking reply. So she did the only thing she could think of, the only avenue left to her.

She ran.

Jacob watched Mollie flee the room, heard the distant slam of a door. He pictured her stumbling through the gardens, tripping on tree roots, her hair a molten stream behind her.

What a mess. What a mess he'd made. And he'd done it intentionally, out of a sense of self-preservation so basic and elemental. It had been a warning, both to her and himself: *don't get close to me. I don't know what I'll do. What I'm capable of.*

Sighing heavily, he pushed away from the desk and nearly stepped on the parchment Mollie had dropped in her surprise and distress.

The Mollie Rose.

Jacob had no idea what had possessed his father to preserve the rose like some child's drawing; all he could think was that his father had been in one of his rare, sweetly lucid moments. Like when he'd built them a tree house, or brought them Christmas hampers from Hartington's. Moments the children had revelled in with hesitant

incredulity, they'd been so rare. Of course, when he'd burned the tree house down a week later, or destroyed the hamper's contents in a drunken rage, Jacob was the one left picking up the pieces, taking the hits.

Until that one night, when he'd refused. In that moment of defence—*defiance*—he'd ended one life and changed everyone else's for ever.

He sighed again, the sound halfway to a groan, hating that these memories still claimed him. Over the years he'd pushed them so far down he could almost pretend they didn't exist. Had never happened.

Almost.

In dreams they taunted him. They claimed him and made him their captive.

And now, back at Wolfe Manor, it was worse than ever. He felt them rise up inside of him, felt the ghosts clamour around him, whisper their taunts in his ears.

*You're a thug. A drunk. A murderer. There's no good in you at all. You hurt everyone who comes close.*

And he'd proved that yet again, when he just tried to seduce one of the sweetest, most innocent women he'd ever met. He recalled the look of astonishment and even hurt in Mollie's eyes when he'd suggested their no-strings affair, the exact thing he'd intended not to do, knowing Mollie would refuse. Knowing she'd be bewildered, offended. Knowing it was *wrong*.

And yet he'd done it. And Jacob knew why.

She'd asked too many questions. Drawn too close. Seen something inside of him he wouldn't even acknowledge to himself.

*Jacob—*

She'd reached for him, and he'd almost wanted to go, to find comfort and safety in her arms. What a joke.

So he'd done the one thing he knew would make her back off. Run away, even. He'd propositioned her.

Jacob straightened, shaking off the thoughts and recriminations. He closed his mind, allowed a comforting, controlled blankness to steal over

him in a numbing fog. He felt his heart rate slow, his body still. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. *Better.*

Striding from the room with grimly focused purpose, he told himself what had happened was a good thing. At least he wouldn't be seeing Mollie Parker for a while.

Mollie ran all the way home, her chest heaving, her sides aching. She didn't stop until she was in the cottage, the door slammed and bolted, as if Jacob was the big bad wolf and she was Little Red Riding Hood.

She laughed humourlessly at her rather bad pun. Jacob *was* a Wolfe, and he *had* been chasing her, after a fashion. Unlike Little Red Riding Hood, however, she hadn't stood her ground.

The electricity had thankfully come back on, and Mollie quickly put the kettle on and built up the fire. She stripped off Jacob's clothes and kicked them in a corner, knowing she would have to wash and return them at some point but not able to think of it now.

A cup of tea would soothe her. Stabilise her. A cup of tea, Mollie thought as she swathed herself in her father's old terry robe, could make everything better.

Yet when she had finally seated herself in the rickety rocking chair by the fire, a steaming mug cradled in her hands, she felt neither stabilised nor soothed.

She felt like a complete ninny.

What would Jacob think of her, running from the room like a spooked little girl, a frightened child? Why on earth couldn't she have said something cutting and clever, worldly and wise? Instead she'd blushed and stammered and *ran*.

Groaning, Mollie leaned her head against the back of her chair as the memory of what had just happened washed over her in a shaming wave. She hadn't had enough experience of men, of *people*, in the past five years to be able to handle a proposition like Jacob's with the ease and grace she wanted to. For too long the only person she'd really talked to had been her father, and he hadn't always been able to remember her name. The heavy toll of the past five years weighed on her now, crippled her with its memory. She wanted to throw it off, had been about to

throw it off when she'd returned from Italy, yet with Jacob's return and her enforced stay at Wolfe Manor she found herself spinning on the same endless wheel as before. Only this time she spun alone.

Tears—sudden, stupid—pricked her eyes. When was she going to get over the hand life had dealt her? When would she come to terms with the pain and loss of her parents' deaths and her own resulting loneliness? When could she start to live out the dreams she'd woven so optimistically, dreams she'd detailed and embroidered during her time in Italy, when she'd been so ready to take up the reins of her life again and really start living?

Now they felt completely wrecked, their fragile threads unravelling and frayed.

Restlessly Mollie rose from the rocking chair, her mug forgotten on the side table. The cottage felt cramped, its walls pressing in on her with its memories and regrets. She could almost picture her father standing by the door, dressed in his work clothes, expecting to walk out into the gardens he'd loved like another child, Wolfe Manor in its heyday. Instead she'd had to lull him back to this very rocking chair, take off his boots and tell him lies about how it was raining or a holiday because he didn't understand the truth: Wolfe Manor was falling apart and the only people left amidst the shambles were the two of them.

*Master William needs me, Mollie. He's expecting me.*

Sometimes her father had remembered that William was dead, that the children were fatherless: *Master Jacob needs help, Mollie. We need to help him the best way we can, by tending the gardens in our care....*

Yet by then Jacob had been long gone, as had all the other Wolfe children. Save Annabelle, none of them had said goodbye. None of them had even really known she or her father existed.

Groaning aloud, Mollie shook her head as if she could banish the painful memories. She'd spent too much time in this cottage, watching, wondering, waiting. Too much time in these gardens, caring for someone else's land. She had to get out of here. Now.

She didn't even bother with a coat, just slipped on her boots and headed out into the damp night. A chilly wind blew over her, cooling her heated face. She veered away from the landscaped gardens and

headed instead for the lake. She hadn't been to the lake since she'd returned to Wolfe Manor; it was far from the house and not necessarily in the realm of the gardens. Family lore said it was haunted, that someone had once drowned in it. Even the villagers regarded it with a certain amount of suspicion. Now its smooth black surface gleamed darkly under the moon, and a few weedy reeds grew at its edge. Mollie stood there for a while, breathing in the cool, fresh night air, letting it fill her lungs and buoy her sagging spirit.

She couldn't change anything about the past, not the way her mother had died when she was born, or her father's lingering illness, or even the way she'd responded to Jacob that very night.

But she could change the future. The future—her own fate—was in her hands, and only hers, and she intended to make some changes. Starting tomorrow she would reclaim her dreams. She'd get her own life back, the life she'd envisaged in Italy, the life she had been dreaming for years of having. Independent, purposeful, far from Wolfe Manor. She took another breath and let it out slowly, and then she turned from the still waters of the lake and headed back to the cottage.

She nearly tripped over the envelope that had been left on the flagstone doorstep. Picking it up, Mollie slid out a piece of parchment. Her rose. And she realised that Jacob must have delivered it while she'd been out at the lake.

They'd both been unable to sleep, wandering in the dark, lost in memories. At that moment she felt a sorrowful companionship with him, one she'd never expected to feel. Slipping the parchment back into its envelope, she headed inside, knowing that no matter how close she and Jacob might be in some matters, he was still a stranger to her.

The next morning was one of those fresh, clean days that only came after a rainstorm. The sunlight glinted off every puddle, made the trees and leaves shimmer with dew. Dressed in her smartest pair of trousers and a pretty, feminine top of pale lavender, Mollie headed over to the manor. She wore clothes she'd bought in Italy, and they felt like armour. Weapons to reclaim the life she'd envisaged for herself, before Jacob Wolfe had scattered all her plans.

She lifted the heavy brass knocker on the manor's front door and let it

fall, the sound echoing sonorously through the empty house. After a long, tense moment, Jacob opened the door.

Mollie's gaze swept over him in an instant; he was dressed in a pair of loose grey trousers and a black T-shirt that clung to the defined muscles of his chest and torso, and his hair was damp with sweat. He didn't smile.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Were you busy?'

'Nothing too important.' Jacob didn't move to let her pass. His tone, Mollie decided, verged on unfriendly. 'May I help you with something?'

'I need to talk to you.'

He hesitated, and she realised he didn't want to let her inside. Had she offended him by running away? Or just bored him? 'If it's about last night,' he finally said, 'I apologise. I never should have suggested such a thing.'

And even though Mollie knew she should only feel relief, she felt disappointment. Ridiculous, but real. 'It's not about that,' she said, her voice stiff with awkwardness. 'Although thank you for your apology.'

Jacob lifted one shoulder in a shrug. He still didn't move. Mollie felt the beginnings of a tension headache, as well as a growing sense of exasperation. 'Could you please let me in? I prefer not to have conversations on doorsteps.'

Jacob waited another long moment, so Mollie thought he might actually refuse. Out of instinct she placed one hand flat on the door, as if she was afraid he'd shut it in her face. At this gesture, Jacob gave her the faintest flicker of a smile and stepped aside.

'Come into the kitchen,' he said as he led her down a long narrow corridor. 'It's the most habitable room in the house.'

This morning the kitchen was awash in sunlight, not flickering with tempting shadows as it had been the night before. Mollie saw the two plates from their dinner were washed and stacked by the sink, and the aroma of coffee scented the air.

'Would you like some?' Jacob asked, gesturing to the pot on the worktop.

She nodded. Best to keep this professional. A business meeting, over

coffee. ‘Yes, please.’

Jacob poured her a mug and handed her the cream and sugar bowl before pouring his own, which he sipped black. He arched one eyebrow. ‘How may I help you, Mollie?’

She got shivers every time he called her by name. It wasn’t often. Yet there was something strangely, sweetly intimate about hearing Jacob saying her name, as if it were a choice he made rather than a simple form of address.

She pushed the thought away; it would hardly help her now. ‘I want to resign this commission.’ Jacob’s expression didn’t flicker and Mollie went doggedly on. ‘It’s too big a job for me. You need someone more experienced.’

‘I disagree.’

‘You don’t even know,’ Mollie returned, frustration firing her words. ‘Do you have any experience with garden design?’ She’d meant to scoff, but Jacob took the question seriously.

He cocked his head. ‘A bit.’

Mollie blew out her breath in exasperation. ‘Well, even so, I can’t do it.’

‘You made an agreement.’

‘I didn’t sign anything.’

His eyebrow arched higher. ‘I thought your word was enough.’

Mollie flushed. He’d backed her into a corner and she hated it. She needed more *space*. ‘You could find someone else very easily,’ she said. She heard the desperation creeping into her voice. ‘Someone more qualified—’

‘I told you, I never should have suggested there be anything between us but a professional business arrangement,’ Jacob said. His voice was cool, with a bite of impatience. ‘So if you’re worried—’

‘No.’ Her face felt on fire, right to the roots of her hair. She must look like a carrot. ‘It’s not that.’ Jacob didn’t answer, and Mollie knew he wasn’t convinced. He must think her the gauchest kind of girl, she thought miserably. She’d run away last night, and she’d marched here in

the morning to resign. Yet Jacob's offer—tempting, treacherous—had been a catalyst, not the reason. She swallowed. Now was the time for honesty. 'It really isn't, Jacob.' His name sounded strange on her lips. Another intimacy. 'It's this house. All the memories. Don't you feel them?' She had instinctively dropped her voice to a whisper, as if the ghosts crowded around them, listening. Jacob stared at her, utterly still. His eyes had widened, his mouth parted slightly.

'Yes,' he said after a long moment, his voice quiet and sad. 'I do. But I didn't think you did.'

Mollie could only imagine what kind of memories tormented Jacob. Actually, she *couldn't* imagine. Her upbringing had had its own sorrows, as Jacob had acknowledged, but nothing like what he must have experienced. Her one experience of William Wolfe told her that. How could she fault him for wanting to leave such an unhappy place? She wanted to now. She'd wanted to years ago.

'Mine are different than yours,' she said slowly. 'My father loved me, and I loved him, but—' She drew a breath, made herself continue. 'For the past five years I'd been nursing him through dementia. I didn't want to put him in a care facility, because I knew he'd be happiest here, where he spent all of his life. But ... it was hard.' She tried to smile, but felt her mouth wobble instead. She didn't like to talk about her lonely years with her father, and who wanted to hear about it anyway? She saw Annabelle so rarely these days that even her closest friend barely knew what Mollie had been enduring. 'Really hard,' she continued after a pause, 'and really lonely. I went to Italy because I needed a change.'

'I'm sorry,' Jacob said quietly. 'I can only imagine how difficult it must have been to stay.' His words held a certain poignancy, as well as a silent acknowledgement of the fact that he *hadn't* stayed. He really could only imagine.

'Anyway,' she said, trying to inject a firm, bright note into her voice, 'I never intended to stay in the cottage for more than a few days. I wanted to pack up my things—and my dad's things—and let a place in the village, as I told you that first night.' Jacob made no reply, and Mollie continued, her voice finally sounding firm, 'And that's what I need to do. Being here—alone—is too difficult for me. I came back from Italy

planning a fresh start, and that's what I'm going to do.'

Jacob said nothing for a long moment. Mollie didn't either; she'd said all she could.

'How can you start fresh,' Jacob asked after a moment, 'without first dealing with the past?' Mollie had the odd feeling he was talking as much to himself as he was to her.

'Is that why you came back?' she asked.

'Partly.' He took a sip of coffee. 'The other reason was the house was violating building codes.' He smiled wryly, lightening the moment just a little, and Mollie smiled back, although part of her longed to ask Jacob more. She knew he wouldn't give her answers. 'Don't go, Mollie,' Jacob said quietly. 'Don't run away. You stayed all those years, when it was far harder than it is now. Finish the job not for me, or for your career, or the manor, but for yourself and your father. Restore these gardens to the glory he once knew, and walk away proud. You'll be glad you did.'

Tears pricked her eyes. She hadn't expected *that*. She'd been prepared to argue with a coolly mocking Jacob, not with this man whose heart, for once, seemed reflected in his eyes. They weren't endlessly black; they held their own light coming from deep within. 'And what about you?' she whispered. 'Will you walk away proud?'

Jacob didn't answer for a long time. Mollie saw the shadows cloud his eyes once more, the darkness that hid a pain she couldn't yet understand. 'I'll walk away,' he finally said, and his voice was flat enough to make Mollie not question his words.

# CHAPTER FIVE

SHE stayed. Mollie wondered if she'd ever really intended to leave. Certainly the desperate impulse had been abandoned from the moment she'd heard Jacob's heartfelt words. All it had taken was one quiet plea and she'd melted.

And, she was honest enough to acknowledge, there was truth in what he'd said. It was why she'd accepted the commission in the first place; she wanted to see the gardens restored. She wanted to do it herself. Then she'd be able to move on with a clear conscience and a light heart.

If she survived.

Yet she hardly needed to worry about Jacob tempting her yet again, for he kept his distance as June bled into July. Mollie occupied herself with work. There was so much of it, and even though she hired some men from the village to do the heaviest jobs, she could still stay in the gardens from dawn to dusk and never have an idle moment.

She'd yet to consider how to redesign the parts of the estate that could not be restored, like the Rose Garden. She walked along the octagonal pathways and inspected the rose bushes, now dry and shrivelled, wondering how she could replace something that had been one of the estate's crowning glories, her father's proudest achievement. She'd sketched some ideas, perused catalogues of the latest hybrids and perennials, yet anything she came up with seemed a poor second to what had already been there. How could there not be a Rose Garden at all?

Still, the work of simply restoring the gardens to what they had once been was enough to occupy her, both mind and body.

Almost. Her mind—and her body—still wandered away from the task at hand, wondered what Jacob was doing. Thinking. Feeling. Wondered how it would feel if he kissed her, if she told him she'd changed her mind and she wanted his no-strings affair after all.

Mollie knew she never would. Not only was such a possibility still too dangerous, it was also terrifying to imagine Jacob's cool rejection. What

if he'd changed his mind? What if he didn't want her after all? What if that suggestion had been nothing more than a mockery?

And since he stayed away from her week after week, that seemed more than a possibility; it was surely a likelihood.

And a good thing too, Mollie told herself. She didn't need complications. She didn't need Jacob Wolfe.

Even if she wanted him.

In early July, when the country was in the grip of an unexpected heatwave so the very air seemed to shimmer, he found her in the Rose Garden. She'd gone there, as she often did, to pace those familiar pathways and wonder just what she was going to do. She'd reluctantly removed the rose bushes and turned over the earth; the beds were ready for planting. She just didn't know what to plant.

'You look like you're trying to solve a particular complicated maths problem.'

Mollie whirled around, her heart already starting to thump at the sound of Jacob's voice. He stood in the entrance to the little garden, the hedges dark around him. He wore jeans and a faded T-shirt, yet even in such casual clothes he looked amazing. Mollie drank him in, her gaze lingering on the sinewy muscles of his arms and chest, the way the jeans emphasised his trim hips and powerful thighs, the loose grace of every movement.

She realised she was staring and jerked her gaze away. 'Something like that. I'm trying to decide what to plant in this garden.'

Jacob glanced at the empty beds. 'This was the Rose Garden, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' she said. 'There have been roses here for five hundred years.'

'Time for a change, then.'

She laughed; she'd honestly never thought of it that way. 'I suppose,' she said. 'We can't plant roses, at any rate.'

'Why not?'

'The soil is depleted. That's what made the plants vulnerable in the first place. After a long time, even new rose bushes will fail to thrive if

they're planted in soil where roses have been before.'

'Rather difficult creatures, aren't they?'

A smile tugged at Mollie's mouth, surprising her. 'Yes,' she agreed, 'they are. Temperamental and fragile and damned hard to grow.'

'So it seems like something else should grow here.'

'Every manor house has a rose garden,' Mollie said. Jacob arched an eyebrow.

'All the more reason not to have one, I'd say.'

'You are a contrary person, aren't you?' Mollie said, half teasing, half serious. He shrugged, offering her that faint, cool smile.

'So some people say.'

A silence descended, awkward and uncertain, and Mollie gazed at the empty flower beds, trying to think of something—anything—to say. 'What have you been doing?' she finally blurted. 'I haven't seen you around.'

'I've been busy.' His tone was cool and a bit impersonal, and Mollie knew that he was keeping her from asking more questions. Yet somehow she just couldn't help herself.

'You mentioned before that you went to London on business. And you have an assistant, so you're obviously engaged in some kind of work.' She tried to keep her voice light, friendly. 'What is it that you do, Jacob?'

He hesitated, and Mollie wondered why he was so reluctant to tell her. Then he gave a little laugh and said, 'I don't mean to be so much the man of mystery. I'm an architect actually.'

'An architect?' Mollie remembered that he had said he was overseeing the renovation himself. 'J Design,' she realised aloud, and saw Jacob's expression flicker before he spread his hands and smiled.

'You sussed me out.'

She shook her head in disbelief. 'J Design is an amazing company. You work for them?' He didn't answer, and Mollie thought of the five hundred thousand pounds he'd been able to give away with such ease. 'You started it,' she stated. 'You're the founder. J is for Jacob.' He gave a

shrug of acknowledgement, and Mollie let out a little laugh.

‘And I told you they were quite good!’ She laughed again at the absurdity of it, and was gladdened to see Jacob smile back. ‘But that’s fantastic. Why do you hide it?’

‘I’ve been a very private person for many years,’ Jacob said after a moment. ‘I suppose it’s hard to stop.’

The nineteen years Jacob had spent away seemed to lie between them, heavy with memories and experiences she could neither know nor understand. And none of his family had known either. At least Annabelle hadn’t.

Yet Annabelle had forgiven Jacob; that much was clear in her emails to Mollie. She simply wanted to see her family reunited and happy once more. Mollie was the one who had wanted explanations, apologies, and she deserved neither. Not as much as the Wolfes did anyway.

‘I thought I should give you these,’ Jacob said, finally breaking the silence. He held a bulky plastic bag aloft, and Mollie took it with surprise.

‘What is it?’

‘Something I thought you needed.’

Mollie peeked in the bag and saw a spectacular pair of high-end rubber boots. With purple polka dots. She thought of the way the ripped seam in her boot had leaked muddy water across Jacob’s rug, and she looked up, both touched and unsettled. He noticed everything—and he did something about it. ‘Thank you. That’s incredibly thoughtful. And I suppose I should, in kind, give you a new entry rug.’

Jacob gave her the glimmer of a smile. ‘Hardly necessary. That rug was nearing the end of its life as it was. You simply dealt the necessary death blow.’ His words seemed to echo between them, and Mollie saw how he stiffened. She’d stiffened too.

Death blow. The words—the innocent expression—brought to mind a crowd of ugly, unpleasant memories.

‘Well, thank you,’ she finally said again. ‘Really.’

‘There’s something else,’ Jacob said.

Mollie raised her eyebrows in surprise. ‘Oh?’

‘I’m going to London tomorrow for a design expo. J Design is featuring some of its newest projects, along with several other architectural firms. There will also be a landscaping element that I thought would interest you.’

Mollie blinked. ‘Me?’

‘Yes,’ Jacob said, and she heard humour—rare, precious—in his voice. ‘I’m asking you to go with me.’

Jacob had made the decision to ask Mollie to accompany him quite suddenly. He’d fully intended to keep out of her way until her work on the gardens was finished, and so far he’d managed that. Occasionally he spied her from the study window, a flash of coppery hair amidst the vivid tangle of green in the garden, and something in him constricted, an unfulfilled ache he knew was more than just simple lust.

All the more reason to stay out of her way.

Yet when the expo came up, and he saw the landscaping displays, he thought of her, thought of how the manor seemed as much a prison to her as it was to him. And for a few days they could both break out of it.

That was the only reason he was asking her, Jacob told himself. Out of kindness. Pity, even.

He’d lived too long in the confines of his own mind to believe such self-deception.

Yet he refused to think of what the other reasons could be.

Now he watched as surprise flashed in her soft brown eyes, turning them golden, and she bit the pink, rosebud fullness of her lower lip in obvious uncertainty. She hadn’t expected to be asked. She probably wondered why he was asking. Was she afraid he’d proposition her again?

He wouldn’t. Of that Jacob was certain. He surely had enough control over his own mind and body to keep from embarrassing and frightening her again.

Yet he couldn’t keep himself from wanting to spend a little more time with her, to revel in her soft beauty even if he knew she was out of

bounds. He *liked* just being with her, Jacob knew; she saw something in him that no one else saw. And while that thought half terrified him, it also made him want more. Want to be known and understood, even the darkest, most hidden parts of himself—the *truth* of himself—he was afraid ever to reveal. Now, *that* was surely pushing things too far.

‘Go with you?’ Mollie repeated. She heard the blatant surprise in her voice and blushed. Her heart had already started thudding again, and her palms grew slick with nerves. Already images were dancing through her mind, a hazy montage of seductive possibilities that had no business taking up space in her brain. ‘To London?’ she clarified, because she had no idea what to say.

‘Yes, to London.’ Jacob shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans, and Mollie couldn’t help but notice how the action emphasised the broadness of his shoulders, the T-shirt clinging to the ridged muscles of his abdomen. She swallowed and looked away. Already she knew how dangerous such a trip would be. London. With *Jacob*. ‘I have a suite at the Grand Wolfe,’ Jacob continued, naming his brother Sebastian’s flagship hotel. ‘The expo goes over two days, so we’d need to stay the night.’ He cleared his throat. ‘I don’t want you to be—’

‘No,’ Mollie said quickly. She really didn’t want to hear Jacob assure her yet again that he had no intention or interest in making his no-strings affair offer another time. ‘I’m not—Don’t worry ... you don’t need to be—’ She was babbling, and she swallowed hard. Jacob smiled, a sensual tugging of his mouth that Mollie neither expected nor was prepared for. His eyes glinted darkly, and she suspected he knew how frazzled she was. She watched his lips quirk upwards, mesmerised by the simple movement, how it transformed Jacob’s face, lightened it, so the shadows fell away. She wished he smiled more. She was glad, fiercely so, that she had made him smile now, even if it was to her own embarrassment.

‘All right,’ he said lightly. ‘I won’t.’

‘Sorry,’ Mollie mumbled, and Jacob reached out and brushed her cheek. It took Mollie a few stunned seconds to realise he was simply brushing away a smudge of dirt. Even so her heart hammered all the more and her cheek tingled.

'I've told you,' he said softly, 'you don't need to be sorry for the truth.'

*But I don't know what the truth—about you—is.* Mollie swallowed the words and just nodded.

'Anyway, it could be fun,' Jacob said, smiling again. 'And inspirational. The landscaping displays are meant to be quite good. And I think we could both use some time away from this place.'

Mollie nodded again. She seemed incapable of managing a coherent sentence, yet she agreed with everything he said. She knew there were things to think about, worry about, questions and concerns and dangers. Yet in that moment all she wanted to feel was the bubbles that raced through her like champagne, that made her feel excited and alive in a way she hadn't felt in years. 'Yes,' she said, firmly, quickly. 'I'd love to go with you.'

It was surprisingly easy to leave. She left instructions with the men from the village and packed a single bag. She decided she wanted to feel smart—never mind what Jacob thought—and so she threw in her clothes from Italy, including a sexy little cocktail dress in a shimmery lavender silk that she surely wouldn't have any need for. Even so, she tucked it underneath her trousers and then closed the lid of her case, zipping it firmly.

Jacob had told her to meet him up at the manor at nine, and so, lugging her case behind her, Mollie headed through the gardens, now neat and trimmed and ready for planting, towards the house.

She stopped in surprise when she saw the red convertible, parked in the circular drive. Jacob stood next to it, the keys in his hand. He looked relaxed and comfortable in a pair of tan khakis and a white button-down shirt, open at the throat. Mollie couldn't quite take her eyes from the base of his throat, the skin looking so warm and sun-kissed that she wanted to touch it. Touch *him*. She determinedly turned towards the convertible.

'Nice car.'

'Not when it rains.' Jacob responded with a grin as he reached for her case. 'Sorry, I should have picked you up at the cottage. I'm not even sure how to get there by car, though. Is there a road?'

‘No, just a path.’

Jacob put her case in the car’s boot and then went round to open Mollie’s door. She slipped into the sumptuous interior, feeling as if she were Alice and had fallen down the rabbit hole into an unimaginable world of luxury. Jacob slid into the driver’s seat and turned on the engine, which purred smoothly to life.

As Jacob pulled away from the house, the wind ruffled Mollie’s hair and the sun was warm on her face. She leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes.

‘I never even knew about that cottage until the night I saw you,’ he said. Mollie opened her eyes.

‘Not many people did. It was Annabelle’s idea to let us stay on after you’d left. She said no one would even notice we were there.’ She knew she was speaking a bit defensively; even now Jacob’s implication that she’d been freeloading off his family rankled just a little. Jacob, however, did not rise to the challenge of her words.

‘How did it feel to be invisible?’ he asked softly as he slid her a sideways glance that managed to be all too knowing.

Surprised by his perception, Mollie let out a little laugh and looked away. ‘I’m not sure I knew anything else,’ she said. She didn’t want to sound self pitying, so she cleared her throat and added more robustly, ‘There are worse things to be, in any case.’ She paused, then dared to add, ‘I’m sure you wanted to be invisible on occasion.’

He shrugged. ‘Not so much me,’ he said, ‘as everyone else.’

‘You mean your father?’

He gave a short laugh. ‘That might have been handy, but no. My brothers and sister. If they’d been invisible ...’ He lapsed into silence, his fingers tightening on the wheel, and Mollie felt a little aching tug on her heart. No one should have such regret in their voice, etched into the lines on their face.

‘You couldn’t save them all,’ she said quietly. She spoke the words from instinct; what did she really know about Jacob and his family? Only what Annabelle had told her, which wasn’t very much at all. Jacob had been her big brother; he’d tried to protect her from her father’s

blows which had ended in her scar and William Wolfe's death. He'd left just a year after William's death; his absence had created an aching void in the family. Those were the bare facts, yet Mollie knew she had no idea what had gone on in the Wolfe family, day after day. How had they endured their father's drunken fits and rages? How had Jacob endured? As the oldest and the most responsible, what had he suffered? What had he *felt*? And what had finally driven him to leave?

'I didn't save them all,' Jacob said flatly, interrupting her tumultuous thoughts. 'I didn't save anyone.'

'You can't save anyone,' Mollie told him, her voice surprisingly fierce. 'I learned that with my dad. I couldn't save him from dementia or death. I could only ease the way.' She laid a hand on his arm, the skin warm under her fingers. Warm and tense. 'You take too much on yourself, Jacob.'

She felt the muscles leap and jerk under her hand and he threw her a scoffing sideways glance. 'You speak as though you have years of experience.'

She knew he was trying to draw away from her, to hide behind mockery. She shrugged. 'A few years, at least.'

Jacob didn't speak for a moment, and his silence felt like an acknowledgement. 'You don't know anything about me, Mollie,' he finally said, his voice quiet and a little sad. 'Or what I am. Our experiences are entirely different.'

'Then tell me. Tell me about yourself.'

He pressed his lips together. 'I'm not sure much bears repeating.'

'Tell me how you started J Design, then,' Mollie said. She refused to be put off. 'That's a story worth telling, I should think.'

'I fell into it, more or less,' Jacob said. He flexed his arms, his hands on the wheel, and Mollie could tell how uncomfortable the whole conversation made him. He wasn't a man used to talking—or even thinking—about himself. 'I did some building work, and had a look at the designs. I thought I could improve them, and so I tried. The developer liked my suggestions, and it sort of went from there.'

Mollie thought it sounded like an incredibly oversimplified version of

what she was sure would be an engrossing and inspiring story, but she decided not to press. ‘J Design does a lot of work for charity, doesn’t it? Is that your choice?’

‘I like to help those less fortunate,’ Jacob replied with a shrug. He glanced at her, his eyes narrowing. ‘I noticed you haven’t cashed your cheque.’

‘Am I less fortunate, then?’ Mollie asked lightly, although his implication stung just a little.

‘That’s not what I meant. Although I consider it unfortunate that your father worked for so long without being paid. Why didn’t you deposit the cheque?’

Mollie shrugged. ‘It didn’t feel right.’

‘You deserve that money, Mollie—’

‘Do I?’ she challenged quietly. ‘I might have flung a few accusations at you, but the truth is my father didn’t work a full day for years. He was too ill.’

‘And why do I think that you carried his slack?’ Jacob questioned, his voice soft.

Mollie looked away. ‘Besides, it’s not as if a gardener was necessary when no one lived in the house and it was half falling down anyway. It was only Annabelle’s charity that gave us a place to stay. We didn’t need to be there.’ She took a breath and let it out slowly. ‘And you certainly don’t need to pay us for the privilege.’

‘I’m sorry if I insulted you by giving you the money,’ Jacob said after a moment.

‘It was very generous of you,’ Mollie said quickly. ‘I wasn’t insulted.’ She had been, bizarrely, hurt. As if money could fix the heartache and loneliness of those years. Write a cheque and be done with it.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jacob said quietly. ‘I hurt more people than I even realised by leaving.’ Mollie’s heart twisted. For so many years she’d imagined Jacob leaving carelessly, without a thought or concern for the people he’d left behind. She’d seen Annabelle check the post every day for letters, and when none had come Mollie had assumed Jacob didn’t care enough to write. She’d pictured him partying in some glamorous city,

too involved in his own pleasure to think of his family or Wolfe Manor. She had, Mollie knew, tarred Jacob with the same brush as his father, and she knew now that wasn't fair.

Yet why *had* he left? How could he have done such an agonising thing, knowing the pain it would cause his family? She still didn't know him well enough to understand, or ask the question.

'It's okay,' she said now. 'It's time to move on.' She paused, then dared to add, 'For both of us.' Jacob didn't reply.

They didn't speak for a while after that, and Mollie was glad. She'd much rather enjoy the day, as Jacob forewent the motorway for country lanes with their bright hedgerows, the fields dotted with primroses and buttercups, and the sun shone down benevolently upon them.

Mollie started to relax, the tension slipping away from her the farther they travelled from Wolfe Manor. Jacob seemed to relax as well, for his grip on the steering wheel loosened and he draped one arm along the back of the seat, so his fingers nearly brushed her shoulder.

Not that she should be so achingly aware of his nearness, Mollie told herself, or tempted to close that tiny distance. It would be so easy to shift in her seat so he was actually touching her—barely, but she knew she'd feel it. She'd feel it right down to her toes. Just the thought sent a blush firing her body. She was so amazingly, agonisingly aware of him, her body attuned to his in a way that was both pleasure and pain.

Despite this aching awareness the hours passed in a happy haze; it was so pleasant to be speeding along in a fancy car with a gorgeous man at the wheel. Mollie decided to enjoy the moment—and the whole weekend—for what it was. Something surreal, out of time, and certainly wonderful.

They arrived at the Grand Wolfe, and an officious-looking concierge showed them to their suite himself. Sebastian, he told Jacob, was out of town with his new wife, Aneesa.

Mollie noticed the speculative and envious looks a few women in the lobby slid her way, the respectful deference of the entire hotel staff towards Jacob. He strode through the lobby unaware of the admiration, yet clearly accepting of the respect. Mollie was suddenly conscious that

Jacob was a *Wolfe*, the head of a noble English family, and she felt a swell of pride that she was on his arm.

Once in the hotel suite Mollie took in the set of elegant rooms, all of which looked to be equipped with every imaginable luxury. She peeked into an en suite bathroom that had a huge, sunken marble tub, glanced at the wide private terrace that could easily hold fifty people and marvelled at the living room with its plush sofas and hidden widescreen television; the concierge showed them how the painting that hid it folded back at the press of a button.

And of course she noticed the bedrooms—two of them—positioned at either end of a hallway so they could both have adequate privacy. Even so, the sight of the canopied king-size bed with its smooth, silken sheets made something in her bump unsteadily, for there could be no question that this luxury suite was also romantic.

Yet neither of them was here for romance.

'You can change if you like,' Jacob said once the concierge had left them alone. 'And then we can head off to the expo.'

Mollie nodded. 'I'll freshen up and be right out.' She disappeared into the bedroom; her suitcase lay on a luggage rack, already opened, her cocktail dress hanging in a huge walnut wardrobe. Mollie hesitated, because she hadn't actually brought enough clothes to change after just a few hours. Were you *supposed* to change on arrival at a place like this? She had no idea. She'd never stayed in a hotel like this before. The closest she'd come is when she'd splurged on a *pensione* in Florence that actually had its own en suite bathroom, a tiny cubicle with peeling lino and a leaky tap.

Shrugging this aside, Mollie pulled a brush through her hair which had, of course, become unbearably tangled during the drive. She washed her hands and face and reapplied her lipstick, finishing off with a spritz of perfume. She gazed at her reflection in the mirror with critical glumness; her hair was still wild and her cheeks were pink from the sun. So was her nose. She had more freckles than usual, and if not for the fact that she was no longer gap-toothed she could have passed for herself when she was eight years old, going the entire summer with bare feet and skinned knees.

Sighing, she turned away from the mirror and slipped on the fitted jacket she'd worn that first night Jacob had seen her. She added a scarf in primrose yellow, deciding this constituted enough of a wardrobe change, and headed back out to the living room.

Jacob was opening a bottle of champagne as she came into the room. 'Compliments of the hotel,' he said with a flicker of a smile as he reached for two crystal flutes. 'I thought we could toast the weekend.'

Mollie felt that unsteady bump inside again. She was afraid it was her heart. 'That sounds lovely,' she said, and took the proffered glass.

Jacob clinked his flute lightly with hers. 'To a change of scene,' he said, and Mollie nodded.

'Hear, hear.' She drank, and as she did she saw that Jacob's dark eyes were fixed on hers, and despite the apparent lightness of the moment his expression had turned brooding. So many hidden thoughts. So many unspoken memories.

She put her glass down on a side table and gave him a bright smile. 'Shall we?'

'Yes indeed.' Jacob set his glass down next to hers, and Mollie noticed that he hadn't drunk any of his champagne. Then she watched with relief as he smiled, the brooding expression replaced by something far lighter, and holding out his arm so Mollie could—all too naturally—slip hers into his, he led her from the room.

The expo was amazing. Even during her university days Mollie had seen nothing like it: display after display of architectural plans and blueprints, models of houses and buildings, gardens recreated in tiny, exquisite spaces, all innovative, unique and completely wondrous.

She wandered through the exhibition halls, Jacob at her side, her eyes as wide as a child's. Her mind buzzed with ideas of new techniques, hybrids and landscaping concepts, and she couldn't quite seem to help herself from sharing it all with Jacob.

'I've never seen an arrangement like that before ... There are so many new kinds of water features now ... Did you see the use of wildflowers in that exhibit? Most gardeners would consider them weeds....'

And Jacob listened, and made comments, and asked questions, so

Mollie felt like he was genuinely interested. Like he genuinely cared.

*Uh-oh. Don't go there, her mind warned. Don't start to believe some nonsense like he is interested in you ... could *love* you....*

*Love* was not a word she'd ever associate with Jacob Wolfe.

Yet as they strolled through the various displays and exhibitions, Mollie wondered what word she *would* associate with him. What kind of man was he? She'd assumed so much, and now she felt those assumptions were being swept away—yet replaced with what? Jacob never talked about himself, never offered any information or preferences or opinions. He was so self-controlled, so self-contained, that the man was practically a cipher.

Yet then she saw a flash of something in his eyes, something deep and dark and *raw*—and she knew there was far more to Jacob than she could ever imagine or understand.

While he was talking to some colleagues—they treated him with a wary, deferential respect—she perused the expo's programme, noting in its write-up the number of prestigious awards J Design had garnered.

*J Design has always had the unique ability of creating a space with the individual needs of its client first in mind, so that the building takes on the characteristics of the client rather than the architect ...*

Even in his business Jacob revealed nothing of himself. The omission, Mollie decided, was intentional. Jacob didn't reveal anything because he didn't want to be known.

Why?

He joined her again as she stood in front of a

Japanese Zen garden, admiring the raked sand, the careful placement of stones and the little painted bridge that led into the tranquil scene.

Jacob gazed at it a moment with her before asking, 'What do you think?'

'It's very peaceful.'

'Yes, gardens are meant to be places of stillness and tranquillity in Eastern culture.' He pointed to an assortment of rocks that had been arranged off-centre. 'Nothing in a Zen garden is symmetrical, because

according to their belief system nothing in life is.’

‘Nothing in life is symmetrical?’ Mollie asked, frowning slightly as she considered this.

‘Nothing in life is perfect.’ Jacob gave her the ghost of a smile. ‘We must embrace the imperfections in the world as well as in ourselves in order to achieve peace or happiness.’

She turned to him. ‘Do you believe that?’

‘I try,’ Jacob replied wryly. ‘I have no trouble believing the world possesses imperfections,’ he added. ‘Or that they exist in myself. But to embrace them ...’ He trailed off, glancing at the garden with a frown, and Mollie wondered what he was thinking.

‘You seem to know quite a bit about Zen gardens.’

‘I spent some time in the East. My first building project was in Nepal.’

‘Really?’ Mollie had had no idea he’d travelled so far in his years away. She laid a hand on his arm. ‘Thank you for taking me here, Jacob. It’s been a wonderful experience.’

He turned to her with a smile. ‘Yes, it has. I’ve enjoyed watching you take everything in.’ Mollie blushed with pleasure at this admission. ‘I’d like to take you out to dinner,’ Jacob continued. ‘As a way to finish a wonderful day. Did you bring anything to wear in the evening?’

Mollie’s blush deepened. ‘Yes,’ she admitted, for the very fact that she had made her think he knew she’d been hoping there would be such an occasion to wear it.

‘Good,’ Jacob said briskly. ‘Why don’t we go back to the hotel and freshen up? Our reservation is for eight.’

Jacob prowled through the living room of the hotel suite as he waited for Mollie to finish dressing for dinner. He felt restless and edgy, and that numbing control he kept around him like a comforting blanket seemed to have slipped away completely.

Coming to London had been a bad idea. No, he corrected himself savagely, bringing Mollie to London had been a bad idea.

He’d enjoyed it too much.

Moodily Jacob gazed out at the cityscape laid out before him; the

darkened streets twinkled with a steady stream of cars and taxis. He'd fully intended to keep his distance from Mollie; hadn't that been the point of his sordid little proposition?

Even if it had, Jacob could not pretend to himself that he'd been relieved when she'd rejected him. He'd been disappointed.

He'd wanted her. He wanted her still. He wanted her warmth and sweetness, found himself seeking the suddenness of her smile, the lightening of her eyes to amber, the barest brush of her skin, like warm silk. And while he'd told himself he'd brought Mollie to London for her own sake, so she could escape the confines of Wolfe Manor and actually enjoy herself, he knew he was a liar.

He'd brought her to London for his sake. His pleasure. He'd loved seeing Mollie looking so interested, so excited, so vibrant and alive. He'd loved sharing the sights of the expo with her, of hearing her talk and exchanging ideas and simply being together. He'd been alone for so long, contained, controlled, and yet when he was with Mollie, he didn't feel alone. He didn't feel lonely.

It would be so easy to get used to that feeling, to revel in the companionship, to surrender to the desire. For Jacob knew he didn't want just companionship; he wanted surrender. Sex, if he was going to be blunt. To bury himself inside the yielding softness of her body, to lose himself in the sweetness of her kiss. A chance to forget who he was and what he'd done and maybe even find something new. Something better.

And yet he knew that was impossible. There was nothing new or better—not for him. And he couldn't bring Mollie down with him, down into the darkness and chaos of his own mind, the danger of his memories, and he knew he would if he let himself get close to her. Care for her, and let her care for him. Sex alone would accomplish it, for their relationship had already moved past a soulless sexual bargain. It would mean more to Mollie. It might even mean more to him. He would sully her with his own sin, and the truth of who he was—who he could become if he allowed himself the opportunity.

He'd already seen the darkness in himself, the darkness that had caused his father's death and his family's fracture. He couldn't bear for Mollie to see it.

Jacob swung away from the window, impatient with his own maudlin musings. He'd had plenty of time to get used to the darkness of his own soul. He lived with it the way others lived with a more obvious handicap. Constant, endurable. Just.

Yet in his bleaker moments he felt as if he were filled with nothing *but* darkness; it seeped out through his eyes, his pores. People felt it. He knew Mollie did; he'd seen her look at him with a sad, puzzled frown, a little wrinkle of distress marring her smooth forehead. And he knew he couldn't explain.

How did you tell someone about the blackness of your soul? How did you admit the things you'd thought and done, and how they tormented you still? How did you seek absolution from the one person who could never give it? Yourself.

He could never forgive himself for what he'd done. He'd relived the moment of his father's death over and over; he saw it night after night in his dreams. And while he knew that memories were faulty and dreams hardly reliable, what he remembered made him wonder. Doubt. What he remembered made him afraid ... of himself.

'I'm ready.'

Jacob whirled around, blinking several times before he could focus properly on the vision in front of him. Mollie frowned.

'Jacob?' she said, hesitation in his name. 'Are you all right?'

Too late Jacob realised he was scowling ferociously, still in thrall to his memories. He made himself relax, felt his face soften into something close to a smile.

'Sorry, I was a million miles away.'

She took a step forward. 'It wasn't a nice place, wherever it was.'

'No,' Jacob agreed quietly. 'It wasn't.' He gazed down at her, taking in her slender frame swathed in lavender silk. 'You look beautiful, Mollie.' The dress clung to her curves and made his palms ache to touch her. She'd attempted to tame her wild curls into some sort of smooth chignon, and he could see the soft, vulnerable curve of her neck. Her skin was pale and covered with a shimmering of golden freckles. He wanted to touch his fingers to that hidden curve, brush it with his lips,

feel its petal-softness as he had that night in the study. He took a step away.

Tonight was about control, not only of his body, but his mind. Jacob knew he would need every lesson he'd learned during his time in Nepal, every shred of experience and practice, in order to resist the greatest temptation he'd ever faced, far more than a whisky bottle or a clenched fist: the intoxicating sweetness of Mollie Parker.

# CHAPTER SIX

‘THIS is lovely.’ Mollie gazed around at the restaurant on Park Lane with its heavy linen tablecloths and tinkling crystal glasses. The menu was so heavy she’d laid it in her lap, and when the waiter had brought a basket of rolls she’d actually dropped hers on the floor.

She felt completely out of her element, inexperienced, nervous, ridiculous. She’d seen the looks women had given Jacob, lascivious and full of longing. Then they’d looked at her, incredulous and envious, and Mollie knew they were wondering what she could possibly be doing with Jacob Wolfe. She was wondering the same thing. The gardener’s daughter and the lord’s son, and she had an awful, horrible feeling that Jacob was taking her out tonight simply out of pity. Perhaps that was what the whole weekend had been about: a mercy mission.

‘Do you think so?’ Jacob asked, and he sounded amused. ‘Because you’re frowning quite ferociously at the moment.’

‘Am I?’ Mollie felt herself add a flush to the frown and she suppressed a groan. ‘Well, if I am, it’s only because I dropped my roll and I hate doing things like that.’ If she couldn’t be sophisticated, she might as well be honest.

‘You’re frowning that much over a roll?’ Jacob said, and he sounded even more amused.

‘It’s not the roll,’ she explained. ‘It’s the fact that I’ve never been in a restaurant like this, or had a weekend like this, while you’ve been sipping champagne out of a silk slipper your whole life!’

Jacob said nothing for a moment. He went still, as Mollie knew he always did. It made him utterly inscrutable—and annoying.

‘Sipping champagne out of a silk slipper,’ he repeated musingly. ‘Now, I’m quite sure that’s something I’ve never done.’

‘Because you don’t drink champagne,’ Mollie returned, the words slipping out before she could stop them. ‘Do you?’

‘No, I don’t,’ Jacob confirmed quietly. Mollie gestured towards his

untouched glass.

‘And you’re not going to drink that, are you?’

‘No.’

‘Why did you pour it, then?’ Curiosity, a need to understand Jacob, drove her to the demanding questions.

Jacob hesitated for a single second. ‘Because I didn’t want you to feel uncomfortable,’ he finally said, and colour rushed once more into Mollie’s face.

‘Oh.’ She lapsed into silence, and Jacob reached across the table to lightly lay his hand across hers. Despite the gentleness of the touch, Mollie started as if he’d just prodded her with a live wire. The warmth of his hand covering hers flooded through her body, made heat pool deep inside of her.

‘Mollie, what’s wrong?’

Mollie looked at him; all the harsh remoteness had softened into an expression that was both serious and sorrowful, and a sudden, inexplicable lump rose in her throat so she could barely speak.

‘I don’t know. I suppose I’m a bit ... self-conscious. We’re so different.’

‘That’s not a bad thing,’ Jacob said quietly, and suddenly Mollie’s discomfort about the difference in their life experiences seemed ridiculous—and unimportant.

‘Don’t say that,’ she said, leaning towards him. ‘It’s not true.’

‘You don’t know what’s true,’ Jacob said, his voice light, although his eyes looked dark, blacker than ever.

‘Then tell me,’ Mollie said, imploring, and Jacob just shook his head.

‘Hardly dinner table conversation.’

Mollie suppressed a sigh of exasperation. ‘I don’t mean who we are as people anyway. I mean class.’ There. She’d said it.

‘Class?’ Jacob repeated in blatant disbelief. He sat back in his chair, folding his arms, one eyebrow arched. He was so clearly sceptical that he made her feel as if she were living in the pages of a Victorian novel while he had a wholly modern outlook on life.

‘Yes, class, Jacob,’ she replied a bit tartly. ‘And it’s been my

experience that people in the upper classes don't think such a thing exists.'

'Mollie, we're living in the twenty-first century. Class constructs are irrelevant.'

'Maybe to you, but they're not to me. Not when all this—' She swept out an arm to encompass the restaurant, the hotel, his world, and knocked over her water glass. It clattered to the floor with an almighty crash, the crystal shattering into dangerous-looking shards. 'Oh.' Mollie bit her lip, mortified. She looked up to see Jacob observing her calmly, completely unruffled by her undignified display. 'I think,' she said, 'I just illustrated my point perfectly.'

And then Jacob did something she'd never seen or heard him do: he laughed. The sound startled her; it wasn't dry or mocking or cold. It was a pure, joyous peal that rang clear through her, and made her smile and then laugh as well, despite her initial embarrassment.

'Oh, Mollie,' Jacob said, leaning over to clasp her hand with his once more, his fingers curling warmly around hers, 'whatever differences there are between us, I wouldn't change a thing about you. Not one blessed thing.'

And with his hand still on hers and his laugh still echoing in her ears, Mollie thought she wouldn't change anything at that moment either.

A waiter had hurried to clean up the mess, and within seconds he'd whisked the shattered crystal away and replaced Mollie's glass on the table. Jacob sat back, slipping his hands from hers, and his expression cleared so it was almost as if that wondrous moment of shared laughter had never been.

Mollie gazed down at her menu. She didn't know why she'd brought up the class differences between them. Jacob was right, they were irrelevant. She had a gnawing suspicion that her complaint had really been just a cover for what she really felt: fear. Fear that she was starting to care for Jacob. Fear of what might happen if she let herself fall all the way. It wouldn't, perhaps, be that great a distance.

'Now *you* look a million miles away,' Jacob said quietly, and Mollie looked up, trying to smile.

'I suppose I was. But never mind.' She pushed the thoughts away and tried to smile.

'Mollie ...?' Jacob prompted gently. A smile quirked the corner of his mouth. 'Tell me the most wonderful thing you saw today.'

And filled with a sudden, buoyant relief at having an excuse *not* to think or fear, Mollie did.

The rest of the dinner conversation flowed smoothly, surprisingly so, for as Mollie let all those prickly concerns and doubts slip away for a little while, she found Jacob wonderfully easy to talk to. He listened with that grave stillness she'd come to appreciate, and yet after an hour when several courses had been cleared and she was toying with the last of her chocolate mousse gateau, she realised she'd been talking about herself the whole time; Jacob hadn't said anything. Shared anything.

'I must be boring you,' she said with a little laugh. 'Talking so much.' She placed her fork on a plate with a clatter.

'Not at all.'

'Tell me something about yourself.' Jacob said nothing, and Mollie thought what an appropriate response that was. 'Tell me about Nepal,' she said.

He gave a little shrug. 'What do you want to know?'

'What made you go there? What did you do there? What was it like?' She propped her chin in her hands and gave him a teasing smile. 'I've never travelled, except for my one trip to Italy. Tell me everything.' Jacob hesitated, and Mollie felt as if she'd just asked him to extract his eyeteeth and hand them to her. 'Why is it so difficult to talk about it?' she asked softly, and he gave her the glimmer of a smile.

'I told you, I've been a very private man.'

'I'm not asking you to spill state secrets, am I?' Mollie said. She kept her voice light, her smile mischievous. Yet even so, she found herself asking something she knew instinctively was far too personal. 'Why have you been so private? What are you trying to hide?'

Jacob stilled, stiffened. Mollie realised she might have offended him. She bit her lip, then opened her mouth to utter a hasty apology, when Jacob spoke first. 'Everything.' He spoke the word lightly, almost as a

joke, yet one look into those fathomlessly black eyes, and Mollie knew it wasn't.

She knew it was the stark, literal truth, and it made her ache with a nameless sorrow. She could only imagine how it made Jacob feel.

'Well, then,' she said after a moment, 'let's keep it about Nepal. Did you go to Kathmandu? Did you see the Dalai Lama? Oh, that's Tibet, isn't it?'

He laughed lightly. 'Yes, it is. I didn't see him, I'm afraid. But I did spend some time in a monastery.'

'Really?' Intrigued, she leaned forward. 'Why? I mean ... it's not exactly a usual holiday destination, is it?'

'I wasn't on a holiday. I worked my way across Europe and Asia, and ended up in Nepal. I stayed in a small village that had been devastated by flooding from the local river, and so I helped them to rebuild.' He gave her a small smile. 'My first building project.'

'And then?' Mollie asked. She loved hearing about him, about what he'd done.

'I kept working.' His hand, lying loosely on the tabletop, tightened briefly. 'As much as I could. When I worked, I didn't have to think. Or sleep.'

'Sleep?' Mollie repeated. 'Why didn't you want to sleep?'

Jacob shrugged, and Mollie could tell he regretted what he'd said. 'I just enjoyed working,' he replied in a tone of unmistakable dismissal. 'Seeing something being built, made good.' He took a sip of water. 'Anyway, I worked too much and ended up becoming quite ill with a fever. The villagers took me to the nearest monastery to recover, and I stayed there for several months, getting stronger and learning from the monks.'

'What did you learn?'

'Control, over the mind as well as the body.' He paused, his fingers toying with the stem of his water glass. 'Control is crucial.'

Mollie said nothing. What was Jacob trying to control? What part of himself needed such a stern hand? The man she'd come to know was kind, thoughtful, thinking of others before himself. Yet by the harsh light

in Jacob's eyes, Mollie knew he didn't see himself that way ... the way she did.

'Well,' she finally said in an effort to break the silence, 'it sounds fascinating, even if you didn't get to Kathmandu.'

Jacob looked up, a smile now quirking the corner of his mouth. 'Maybe next time.'

'Next time,' Mollie agreed, and then they both lapsed into a silence that seemed suddenly heavy with tense expectation. Mollie was achingly conscious that they were in a beautiful restaurant, having eaten a wonderful meal, and that in just about every way this evening should have been a date. Surely people thought they were on a date, lingering over the last crumbs of their dessert, gazing into each other's eyes?

She realised she wanted it to be a date; she wanted Jacob to smile lazily and say—

'Care to dance?'

Mollie stiffened in surprise. She had no idea if Jacob had said that or if she had just imagined it, fantasised she'd heard it because she wanted it so much.

'Pardon?'

Jacob smiled, gesturing towards the jazz band that was playing a slow, sensual tune in the corner of the restaurant.

'Do you want to dance?'

Mollie swallowed. Jacob had asked lightly, as if it meant nothing, but she could see that dark, intense gleam in his eyes and knew how dangerous it would be to let herself glide in his arms.

How much she wanted it.

'Okay,' she said, her voice no more than a whisper, and then wordlessly she took Jacob's outstretched hand and rose from the table, following him onto the dance floor.

Control was crucial. So he'd said.

As Jacob slid his arms around Mollie's slender waist, he felt his control stretching to a single frayed thread. He shouldn't have asked her to dance. He shouldn't have tempted himself so far, knowing how he could

break. Want.

Hurt.

He closed his eyes, drawing her closer, inhaling the sweetness of her hair, something between lilac and soap. She smelled clean. Fresh. Pure.

He felt her hesitation; it travelled through her body in a trembling wave and then she relaxed into him, her breasts brushing his chest, her hair his cheek in a silken whisper. He heard her give a small, soft sigh, and he knew she'd surrendered to the dance, to him.

If he wanted her, he could have her. He could take her upstairs and strip that lavender dress from her slowly, let it pool at her feet and then take her for his own. Obliterate his own wretched self in the soft yielding of her body. She wouldn't resist. Wouldn't be able to, for she felt that treacherous tug of desire as much as he did.

It would be so easy. So wonderful. So *wrong*.

Jacob closed his eyes and tried to summon his control. His strength. He needed it now more than ever, for he couldn't do what he wanted. He knew that, had accepted it. The women he'd taken to his bed had always been as worldly and jaded as he was, perfectly willing to accept his soulless conditions. Sex was a transaction, mutually satisfying, emotionally barren. No chance of anyone being hurt by him. He had nothing to give—nothing worthwhile—and he wanted nothing in return.

Yet now he wanted. He wanted Mollie in ways he'd never wanted a woman. Not just in his arms, but in his thoughts. His head. Even his heart. He'd enjoyed talking with her, had wanted to tell her more. He'd felt her interest and her sympathy touch a dark, raw place inside of him that no one ever saw.

When Mollie asked him questions, he wanted to answer. He wanted to brush the curl that lay against her cheek and kiss her sweet mouth, already puckered into a thoughtful frown. He wanted to smooth her forehead and brush his lips against the freckles that shimmered across her shoulders. He wanted all of her, body and mind and perhaps even soul and heart, and that thought terrified him more than the worst nightmare he'd ever had.

For what came after, what would surely happen if he gave in to such

desire, was perhaps worse than what he'd already done. He'd accepted that he'd hurt his siblings by leaving, had made peace with it because the decision had been so necessary, so absolute.

He couldn't accept hurting Mollie, which would surely happen if he stayed with her. Loved her. Eventually his true self would be revealed, just as it had been the night he'd raised his hand to his father. The night he'd ended one misery, and embarked on another. He would never be free. You couldn't be free of yourself.

Control. Jacob instinctively tightened his grip around Mollie, pulled her closer still. He didn't want to let her go. One dance. One dance in a public place was safe enough. He could give himself that.

And then ... then he would walk away. Just as he always did.

They didn't speak. Mollie knew words would break what was growing and stretching between them, this silent, sensuous dance that was still edged with desperation. She felt it when Jacob pulled her closer, she recognised it in herself. She didn't want it to end.

She laid her cheek against Jacob's shoulder and breathed in the scent of him, the faint tang of his aftershave, the warm musk that was simply him. She felt him stiffen slightly in surprise, and then his fingers splayed along the curve of her hips so that she was pressed against him from shoulder to thigh.

When he touched his finger to her chin and tipped her face upwards, it seemed utterly natural and right for Mollie to let him do so, to wait, her eyes half closed, her lips parted for him to kiss her. She knew, at least in one fuzzy part of her brain, that she was offering herself in a silent, yearning invitation. She recognised that, and didn't care. Shame and pride had ceased to matter or even exist.

There was only this moment, silent, wonderful, *hopeful*, and yet ...

He didn't kiss her.

His finger still touched her chin, cool and dry, and Mollie opened her eyes to find him gazing down at her with such an expression of conflicted torment that she gasped involuntarily.

'Jacob ...' she whispered, just as she had once before, when just as now he'd touched her with one finger and looked at her with such pain.

What kept him from kissing her? Was even this about control?

The word died on her lips as he bent his head and finally closed the distance between their lips as she'd so wanted him to. He stole the very breath from her as his lips touched hers, moving over her mouth as if exploring this new, precious territory. Then he deepened the kiss, pulling her even closer so their bodies felt joined, seamless, and desire plunged deep in her belly; her hands fisted in his hair, awareness of anything but Jacob and the desperate sweetness of his kiss fading to nothing.

For it *was* desperate. The kiss was imbued with a longing that made Mollie feel like this was all they would have, all Jacob would allow, and she pressed closer, wanting more. Asking for more.

Jacob broke the kiss, his breath a raw shudder. 'It's late,' he said. His voice sounded hoarse and he stepped away quickly, leaving Mollie half stumbling in the remnants of a dance. She gathered herself quickly, straightening her shoulders and nodding even though her breath came in gasps and her lips stung from his kiss.

She didn't dare speak, couldn't, as she followed Jacob from the dance floor. He walked stiffly, his body radiating a new tension.

They didn't speak all the way up to the hotel suite. Mollie felt unbearably flat. There was no heady expectation, no sensual tension.

Mollie didn't know why Jacob had stopped, why he'd felt he had to stop. So much for his proposition. He must have known she would have accepted tonight—and yet he'd refused. For that was what the ending of that kiss felt like: a refusal. A rejection. And why? He wanted her; she knew that. She'd felt that. Yet something—some memory, perhaps—kept Jacob from acting on his instincts, fulfilling his desires. And perhaps it was for the better, because if anything happened between them it would surely end up causing her pain.

Even if, for a moment, for a night, it would be so very sweet.

Still silent, Mollie followed Jacob into the suite. In their absence the staff had tidied up and left a few low lamps burning, so the huge space seemed cosy and intimate.

Jacob ignored it all, ignored her, as he crossed the living room to his bedroom at the end of the hall.

'Good night,' he said, without even turning around.

Mollie retreated into her own bedroom; the sheets had been turned down, a silk robe laid out on the end of the bed. She touched its luxurious softness briefly, sighing again, amazed at how unhappy she felt when the evening, the whole day, had been so wonderful.

It was only a little past ten o'clock, yet the evening was already over. Reluctantly Mollie slipped off her dress and reached for her pyjamas. She didn't feel remotely tired; her mind and body still fizzed and ached, and she knew it would be hours before she could sleep.

Hours to think and remember and *want*.

She stretched out on the bed, too restless even to close her eyes. What was keeping her from leaving her bedroom right now, and going to Jacob? Telling him she'd accept his no-strings suggestion?

*I never should have suggested such a thing.*

Would he reject her if she actually came to him, told him what she wanted? Showed him, even? Could she risk it?

And, the far more important question was, if he didn't turn away, if he accepted her offer, could she risk *that*?

There was only one way to find out.

Abruptly Mollie sat up. She'd lived life on the sides and in the shadows for too long: most of her childhood, most of her adult life. There had been a few sweet years in university when she'd felt a part of things, happy and *normal*, but the rest of her life had been cloaked in isolation.

No more. She was tired of it, tired of the loneliness. She wanted to live. She wanted Jacob.

Quickly, before she lost courage, Mollie threw off her pyjamas. She could hardly seduce Jacob in nubby fleece, yet she wasn't quite bold enough to go stark naked. She put on her silk dress instead; she felt beautiful in it, and she needed that boost.

Then, taking a deep breath, she opened her door and headed out into the darkened hallway.

The entire suite was bathed in silence, and she could hear the steady

ticking of the clock—or was that her heart? Letting out a little breath of laughter, Mollie pressed her hand against her wildly beating heart, far faster than the clock. Heaven help her, she was so nervous.

She tiptoed along the hallway towards Jacob's forbiddingly closed door; no light shone from underneath. Maybe he was asleep. Maybe he had no reason to feel restless and edgy and aching, the way she did. Maybe she'd imagined it all. Mollie hesitated for a second, her hand hovering over the doorknob. Then, possessed by both a boldness and a courage she'd never known she had, she turned the knob and, with another deep breath, pushed the door open.

The bedroom was empty.

Mollie felt it before she saw it; it took a few moments for her eyes to accustom to the darkness. At least the hallway had been lit from the lamp left on in the living room.

The room *felt* empty, the door to the dark en suite bathroom ajar, and Mollie saw the bed was untouched.

Jacob had gone.

This was the test: a tumbler of whisky, glinting under the low lights from the bar. Jacob placed it in front of him and folded his arms. Then he waited.

He hadn't performed this test in years, for it had become too easy. He needed greater challenges, bigger proofs of his self-control.

*I am not that man.*

Yet now he'd been reduced to what he always feared: that he *was* that man, the man his father had been, the man he'd shown himself to be when he'd lost control that terrible evening ... no matter what the justification. He was just like his father.

*No.* He could conquer that impulse, control it. He had to, because if he didn't—? What then? He would be no better than his father. No better than the boy who had placed his fist in his father's face with so many years of pent-up rage, who had raised his hand to his own precious sister in a moment of anger.

He *was* that man.

Yet when he performed these tests, and succeeded, he felt, at least for a moment, that he wasn't. Tonight he needed an easy victory. God only knew walking away from Mollie—from her mouth and her eyes and the sweet scent of her hair—had been far too hard.

Yet victory, tonight, did not come easily. He stared at the tumbler of whisky for twenty minutes. Once he reached for it. His hand trembled and he was appalled. He hadn't reached for the glass in years. A decade, at least. He jerked his hand back, folding his arms so his fingers curled around his biceps hard enough to hurt.

He was so weak.

'You going to drink that?' The bartender glanced rather sourly at the untouched glass; undoubtedly he'd been hoping for a more lucrative barfly. Jacob smiled tightly. 'Leave it.'

Shrugging, the bartender turned away. It was only a little past eleven, but Jacob was the only customer in the hotel bar. This wasn't the kind of place to encourage drunks to order another round. Everyone else had retired to their far more comfortable hotel rooms.

Jacob knew he couldn't go there. Not when Mollie would be so close, maybe even waiting. He'd fail that test for sure.

'Jacob ...?'

Jacob stiffened. He turned slowly to see Mollie standing in the entrance to the bar. She still wore her beautiful dress, but her hair was wild and unruly, her face pale and shocked. He could see the freckles standing in bold relief on her nose.

He almost reached for the whisky again.

He curled his fingers tighter, his nails biting into his own flesh, and nodded tersely, feeling something close to resignation. There would always be a test he could not pass. A way to fail.

'Hello, Mollie.'

# CHAPTER SEVEN

MOLLIE stepped into the bar, amazed to find Jacob there. She'd been wandering through the hotel, down empty corridors, disconsolate, uncertain, wondering where he'd gone, *why* he'd gone.

And then she'd found him here.

Cautiously she slipped onto the stool next to him and nodded towards the tumbler. 'You aren't going to drink that, are you?'

'No.'

'Why?' she asked softly. There were so many whys: why was he here, why did he look so conflicted, why didn't he want to kiss her any more? She left it simply at *Why?* and let Jacob choose which one to answer.

'The point,' he said carefully, his tone clinical and even a bit cold, 'is *not* to drink it.'

'Why?' Mollie asked again.

Jacob paused. He smiled, and it looked brittle, fragile. Like his whole face, his whole self, might splinter apart. 'It's a test,' he said simply. 'How long can I sit here without touching it.'

'You've been here a while already,' Mollie said quietly. 'How long do you intend to torture yourself, Jacob?'

He laughed rawly. 'You have no idea.'

'No, I don't,' she whispered. 'Tell me.' Jacob shook his head, the movement no more than an unsteady jerk. 'Is it because of your father? Are you worried you might have the same problem with alcohol that he did?'

'Alcohol is the least of it.'

She laid a hand on his arm. 'What happened?'

'Annabelle never told you?'

The question startled her. *Annabelle?* 'No ...' Mollie felt as if she were spinning in a void of uncertainty, a world of ignorance. There were so

many things she didn't know.

Jacob drew in a shuddering breath. 'After my father died—after I killed him—'

'Don't—'

'It's the truth, isn't it?' Jacob smiled grimly. 'Never apologise for the truth.' He lowered his head, his hand lying on the table now, a grasping fist, closer to the tumbler. 'You *can't*.'

'It was an accident, Jacob,' Mollie said firmly. 'And you were protecting Annabelle. Everyone knows that. You did the right thing ...'

'And I didn't protect her, did I? Everyone can see the scars.'

What about your scars? Mollie wanted to ask. Who sees them? They were all on the inside, and for so long she'd had no idea they existed at all. How could she have assumed that Jacob had left all those years ago without a care in the world, selfish, self-centred? How could she have judged him so utterly? Yet she had, and his siblings had as well. Everyone had.

Especially himself.

'It doesn't matter,' he said roughly. He pulled his hand away from the bar. 'The point is I failed—just as my father failed.'

'No—'

'The day I left, Annabelle found me in my father's study. It was noon and I was already half drunk on his whisky.' He spoke with revulsion, but Mollie refused to give in to it.

'And so one moment of weakness condemns you, nearly twenty years later? I don't believe that, Jacob.'

'There's a lot you don't know,' he told her in a low voice.

'I'm sure there is. There's a lot you don't know about me too. One morning when my father was ill, he couldn't remember anything. Not my name, not that my mother had died decades ago. He was confused and scared and he started to cry.' She drew a breath, the memory still shaming her. 'And I yelled at him. I yelled at him like he was a naughty child. As if he could help it.' Her voice trembled. 'I'm ashamed of that.'

'You shouldn't be ashamed.' Jacob's voice was low. 'You stayed,

Mollie. You saw it through.'

'And you blame yourself because you didn't stay?'

'No. I blame myself because I *couldn't*.' Jacob drew a shuddering breath. 'If I did ...' He stopped, shaking his head, closing himself off. Mollie wouldn't let him.

'Our mistakes don't define us, Jacob.'

Jacob's voice was so low she could barely hear it. 'This is more than a mistake. This is who I am.'

The raw grief in his voice shook her. Why did he think so badly of himself? What was he not telling her? 'You're the boy who took care of his family, Jacob,' she said firmly. 'The man who saved his sister ...'

Jacob shook his head, the movement violent and instinctive. 'You don't know—'

'No, I don't. I never could. I know your whole family suffered under William's hand, although I'm sure I could never guess how much. And,' she added softly, 'I'm sure, as the oldest, you endured the most of all.'

'It's not that.'

'Why do you carry so much guilt, Jacob?' Mollie asked softly. 'Why is it all your fault?' 'Because ...' He stopped, shaking his head.

'Tell me.'

'No!' The word was a roar. He dropped his head in his hands, his fingers raking through his hair. 'I can't. If I told you ...'

'What? What would happen?'

'You might hate me.' His voice dropped to a whisper. 'I couldn't bear that.'

Stunned and humbled, Mollie remained silent. Then she acted out of both instinct and a newborn confidence. She reached out to draw Jacob's hands away from his face, his head still bowed. He lifted it as she took his hands in hers, curling her fingers around his as she half slid off her stool to do what she'd wanted to do for so long, what she needed to do.

She kissed him.

Jacob's lips slackened under hers in surprise for a single second before he responded, his arms coming around Mollie's shoulders and drawing

her closer to him so she leaned against him, half sprawled on his stool.

He kissed her with a pent-up passion that felt like fury and yet tasted so achingly sweet. *He* tasted sweet, and as she surrendered to the kiss he'd made his own she knew she would never get enough.

He pulled away for a brief, aching moment and shook his head. 'Not here.'

Mollie nodded, accepting, and then he took her hand and pulled her with him away from the bar, flinging a few crumpled notes on its polished surface. She followed him across the hotel's opulent lobby towards a gleaming bank of lifts; trepidation curled in the pit of her stomach. She was afraid this silent walk would give Jacob space and time to change his mind. To decide he didn't want her after all.

He jabbed the lift button and the doors swished open. The moment they closed again, Jacob turned to her, pulling her into his arms and kissing her with an abandoned hunger that thrilled Mollie to her core.

She responded, every inhibition and uncertainty scattering to the winds as she tangled her fingers in Jacob's hair and pressed her body against his, wanting and needing to feel all of him. Wanting and needing this, only this, this moment, this kiss—it was everything, her whole world wrapped into one embrace.

They stumbled back against the wall of the lift, fingers scrabbling at each other's clothes, their breathing ragged and desperate and yet the kiss went on, urgent, endless, demanding and satisfying at the same time. Jacob's hand pulled at the zip of her dress and he tugged impatiently; in one slithering movement it fell to the floor of the lift. Mollie kicked it off, pulling at the buttons of his shirt and hearing them pop and scatter across the floor as the lift began to slow.

She could hardly believe she was being this daring, this reckless; she was in a hotel lift in nothing but her bra and panties. And Jacob ... to have him so urgent, so hungry. He was losing control, and it thrilled her.

He pulled her towards him, kissing her again with that same deep urgency. The doors whooshed open and in one easy movement Jacob scooped her into his arms and carried her into their suite.

He brought her to the bed, laying her gently down before he reached

for the buttons of his shirt, most of which she'd already wrenched apart. Mollie watched him undress with desire-dazed eyes; he was so beautiful. He shrugged out of his shirt, the muscles of his shoulders and chest rippling with the simple movement. His hair was rumpled, his breathing ragged, and his eyes—

Oh, his eyes. There was so much pain in those black, black eyes, it made Mollie want to weep. She lay there, her mind still fogged with desire, and yet the pain she saw reached out to her and wrapped around her throat. Her heart. She could barely speak, barely breathe, so she just held her arms out to him in silent supplication.

He came to her.

He fell upon her with a hunger and a need Mollie hadn't expected, even now. It humbled her, excited her, made her feel sexy and beautiful and, God help her, even loved.

He buried his face in the curve of her neck, his hands roaming over her body, down to her stomach, his fingers skimming across the tender flesh of her inner thighs. She gasped under his touch; it had been so *long*. It had been for ever, because it had never been like this before.

'Mollie ...' Her name sounded like a plea, and she rose to answer it.

'Yes.' She didn't want his doubt. She was sure, so very sure, and she wanted him to be as well. She held his head between her palms, dragging him forward so she could kiss him, as if her kiss was a balm she was bestowing upon him to take that pain from his eyes. From his heart.

And he accepted it, the tension leaving his body as he kissed her again, this time with a new, slow languor, a kiss to savour. He bent his head to her breasts, taking his turn with each, as Mollie gasped at the exquisite sensation. She felt Jacob smile against her skin, and then he moved lower. He covered every inch of her body, moving over her with his lips and hands, testing and tasting, treasuring her. Mollie arched beneath him, her voice a restless plea as the ache within her intensified, demanding release.

Finally he rolled on top of her, and Mollie welcomed his weight, eager for the joining of their bodies. She started in surprise as she felt Jacob touch her closed eyelids. 'Look at me.'

Her eyes fluttered open. ‘Jacob ...?’

‘Look at me,’ he said again as he entered her, filling her to completion, the moment of union so surprisingly, stingly sweet that she had to blink sudden tears. Jacob braced himself on his forearms as he looked down at her, his eyes still so dark, his forehead furrowed. Silently he brushed the trace of a tear from the corner of her eye, and Mollie let out a gasping cry.

‘It’s all right....’

It was more than all right; it was wonderful. She felt consumed, filled, *whole*. And as her body spiralled into a climax, with Jacob still gazing at her with such heartfelt solemnity, she felt that this was what it was to be known. And Jacob felt it too. No matter what questions or secrets lay between them, he *knew* her.

And she knew him.

Then the thought—all her thoughts—splintered apart as her body convulsed around him and she cried out in a pleasure so sweetly intense it felt almost akin to pain. Jacob buried his face in her neck as he found his own release, and moments later, their bodies still slick with sweat, he rolled off her, one arm thrown over his eyes.

What had just happened?

She lay there, naked, a little cold, conscious of him next to her, silent save for the ragged tear of his breathing. She rolled towards him, placed a hand lightly on the ridged muscles of his taut stomach. She couldn’t see his face. He placed his hand on hers, and Mollie’s insides lurched with disappointment as he made to push it away. Then, to her surprise, he stilled. After a second’s hesitation his fingers curled around hers and he kept her hand there, wrapped in his. They lay together, holding hands, not speaking, until, exhausted, Mollie eventually fell asleep.

Jacob listened to Mollie’s breathing slow as she relaxed into sleep. From the corner of his eye he could see the brightness of her hair against the pillow, the soft, smooth curve of her cheek. She let out a satisfied little sigh and everything in Jacob clenched.

What had he just done? Where was his control *now*?

He let out a ragged sigh and raked a hand through his sweat-

dampened hair. His body felt good, satisfied and replete in a way he'd never experienced before, but his mind screamed and seethed in an agony of remorse. He'd done—again—what he'd sworn he wouldn't do. He'd hurt someone. He'd hurt Mollie ... or at least he would, when he let her down. When she discovered just what kind of man he really was.

*You're not that man.*

Carefully Jacob shifted on his side so he could look at her. He kept her hand clasped in his, needing her touch even now. She was curled on her side, her mouth softened in a smile, her chest rising and falling gently in her sleep.

She was so beautiful. So innocent. So good.

How could he have seduced her? How could he have resisted her?

Restless yet not wanting to disturb her, Jacob slipped from the bed. Mollie's fingers clenched around his as he attempted to extricate his hand from hers; gently he laid it palm up on the sheets. He reached for his boxers and shrugged them on, then stalked to the darkened privacy of the suite's living room.

He stood in the centre of the room, listening to the distant noise of traffic, the relentless beat of his own heart. Corrosive guilt poured through his craven heart, seeped into its many cracks. He closed his eyes.

He should have left her alone. He shouldn't have touched her, taken her, dragged her down with him. For surely that was what he would do, if she ever knew. If he ever told her.

Suddenly Jacob opened his eyes. He stared unseeingly out at the twinkling lights of the city below him, his own thoughts reverberating through him.

*If he told her.*

What would happen?

What would happen if he told Mollie the truth of that night, if he admitted to her the fears that lurked inside of him? If he told her just how like his father he really was?

It was a question Jacob had never asked himself. He'd never dared. It was too terrifying, too dangerous, to even think of telling anyone about

the darkness inside him. Yet now, with the rush of damaging emotions coursing through him—regret, guilt, fear—he felt the faint life-giving trickle of another emotion he'd forgotten about, for he hadn't felt it in so long.

Hope.

What would happen if he told Mollie everything? If he gave her—*them*—a chance? A chance at what? His mind scoffed. After everything, what was he capable of? What did he have left to give?

Jacob knew he couldn't answer that. Not yet. But he would never get the chance to answer it if he didn't do the first: tell Mollie. Tell her everything.

His heart raced and his hands trembled as he paced the living room, stalking its corners as if it were the prison of his heart. He felt more restless than ever, anxious and uncertain and yet still pulsing with the faint heartbeat of hope.

He could do it. He could tell her, risk her knowing. Risk her rejection, even her revulsion. What did he really have to lose?

He'd lost everything already.

Even so, the thought of being honest with someone who already mattered so much to him was an unwelcome thought. A terrifying one. It would be so much easier, safer, to stay the way he was.

Alone.

Yet Jacob knew he was so utterly tired of being alone, exhausted by loneliness. He'd lived the past twenty years of his life as a restless workaholic, a wandering nomad who made acquaintances and lovers, yet no friends. No love.

He could hardly believe he was contemplating changing that. Risking it.

Yet with Mollie.

*Why do you carry so much guilt, Jacob? Why is it all your fault?*

He could risk it with her. He needed to take the risk, because God only knew he couldn't take much more of the life he had. He wanted more. He wanted the risk.

He wanted Mollie.

Jacob drew in a deep breath and let it out again in a slow shudder. Resolute and yet at peace, he turned back to the bedroom.

Mollie still lay curled on one side of the bed, her hand resting palm open where he'd left it. She let out another soft little sigh. Jacob slid into bed next to her. In her sleep Mollie curved into him, so it was utterly natural—utterly right—to take her into his arms, to fit her warm body against his. She nestled naturally into him, and she reached for his hand, her fingers threading through his. Their bodies *fitted*.

Resting his chin on the softness of her hair, Jacob closed his eyes and slept.

The dream came for him that night. Of course it did; in his greedy hope he had made himself vulnerable. Always, always it was the same, except this time it was worse. *He* was worse.

It came to him in a red mist of rage. It was as if he saw everything—Annabelle, William, his younger brothers—through a hazy scarlet curtain. The house was dark all around him; Annabelle huddled on the floor, her knees drawn to her chest, her face already covered in blood. She was still, silent, although he heard his younger brothers' broken pleas to *Stop, please stop, Dad*.

His father didn't stop. William Wolfe's hand was raised, the riding crop curled around his fist, his face twisted in a terrible anger.

Jacob saw the whip, the blood, and he felt something in him snap; it was as if he heard the sound deep within, the very core of him crumbling under. *Too much.* It was finally, *finally* too much.

Acting out of instinct, he pushed his father hard on the shoulder, felt the flat of his palm connect with slack muscle. He felt his own strength and his father's weakness. Then William let out a bellow of rage, and he hit Annabelle again, the crop slicing through the air and whistling as it connected with her bloody flesh.

Jacob's fists clenched; he felt powerful with fury. He felt like he could do anything, he *would* do anything in that moment, to save his sister. To hurt his father. He heard the deadly venom of his voice, except it sounded like the voice of a stranger. A demon.

*You will not touch her again.*

And then, the worst moment of all, the moment that revealed and defined him. The moment Jacob could never escape or forget.

He raised his clenched fist. His father raised the riding crop again, preparing to bring another blow onto his daughter. Jacob knew he could not allow that to happen. He would not. And so he hit his father with all the force and fury of fifteen years of anger, hurt, disappointment and despair. He hit him as hard as he could, and in that second of vengeance he felt a fierce sense of satisfaction, of relief.

And then, worst of all, a sound rent the air. A sound of wild laughter. Jacob never knew who had laughed—who *could* laugh in such a moment. Had his father laughed at the thought of his son turning against him? Had *he* laughed because it had felt so good—in that one brief second—to finally fight back?

In the dream the sound echoed through him, a raucous, wild peal. It was the laughter, Jacob always thought, of a madman. Two madmen—for surely they both were, he and his father, in that moment.

‘Jacob, Jacob!’

The red haze was starting to lift as Jacob heard the voice, high-pitched, familiar, frightened. His eyes jerked open and he awakened as if he’d been doused in ice water. He felt like he had, for his body was drenched in a cold sweat.

Mollie half sat in bed, clutching a sheet to her, her face pale and shocked, her eyes wide and dilated with fear.

*Oh, God.*

Revulsion swept through Jacob in a humiliating, sickening wave. He knew what Mollie had seen. He knew what she’d heard.

His stomach lurched and in one abrupt movement he rolled out of bed and slammed into the bathroom.

He retched, disgusted with himself more than ever before. From outside he heard a timid knock.

‘Jacob ... are you ... are you all right?’

He rinsed his mouth out and braced his forearms against the sink. His

heart was throwing itself against his ribcage as if it had a death wish. Perhaps it did.

He'd never felt so low, so wretched, and that was saying something. That dream defined him. It revealed him, and Mollie had seen him at his worst. His worst ... and she was afraid.

'I'm fine,' he said. His voice sounded hoarse. In the mirror his face was pale, his eyes as dilated as Mollie's, his hair dampened and spiky with sweat. Jacob washed his face and resolutely opened the door. He knew how things would have to be now.

He had been a fool ever—even for a single night—to believe in hope.

Mollie stood in the centre of the room, still clutching the sheet to her chest. Jacob ignored her. He reached into his suitcase for a fresh T-shirt and shrugged it on, raking his fingers through his hair, his back to her.

'Jacob ...' Her voice sounded so very small.

'What?' He didn't turn around.

'What ...? What was ...?' She hesitated and then said very quietly, 'Tell me what happened.'

Jacob shrugged. 'It was just a dream.'

'What kind of dream? You looked as if—' She swallowed. 'Strange.'

Jacob almost laughed again, this time the dry, humourless laugh of the utterly despairing. He turned around. 'People sometimes do strange things in dreams, Mollie,' he told her, his voice sharp with a mocking edge. 'Did I scare you?' He made it a question of no real interest to him.

'No, of course not,' she said quickly. Too quickly. 'Your dream scared me,' she clarified. 'It looked like it was ... terrible.'

'Really?' He sounded bored now. It was all too easy to affect these poses, to push her away. He'd had so much practice.

Mollie shook her head, her eyes wide. 'Do you remember the dream?'

He hesitated, finding it surprisingly hard to lie. Suddenly it wasn't so easy any more, because even now, when he knew he couldn't, when he knew how he'd terrified her, he wanted to tell her everything. He swallowed. 'No.'

Mollie nodded slowly, and Jacob couldn't tell if she believed him or

not.

Mollie stared at Jacob, wishing she knew what words to say, and that she had the strength to say them. His face looked blank, bored, yet his body was nearly quivering with a tension, an anger, that Mollie couldn't understand.

What had he dreamed about? Why had he been making that sound—that horrible sound—something halfway between a laugh and a sob? It had been such a terrible, lonely, awful sound; she hadn't even realised it had been coming from Jacob, and when she'd rolled over to look at him she'd seen him in the throes of a terrible dream, a nightmare, the look on his face one of utter agony.

She'd assumed for so long that he was cold, emotionless, even soulless. Now the idea seemed laughable. She'd thought, even that very night, that he'd walked away from his family because he didn't care enough, didn't feel their pain.

Now she knew he felt too much.

'It's late,' Jacob said into the silence of Mollie's own spinning thoughts. 'You should get some sleep.' He walked towards the door.

'Jacob—' Mollie reached one hand out towards him even though his back was to her. She felt the moment slipping away from her, the opportunity to question and comfort and maybe even understand gone—perhaps for ever. 'Aren't you going to come back to bed?' she whispered.

He turned to flash her a grim smile. 'I've had enough sleep for one evening,' he said, and then he walked out of the bedroom, closing the door behind him with a final click.

Mollie stood there for a moment, the sheet still clutched to her naked body. She felt cold and alone and afraid. Too afraid to open that door and ask Jacob to tell her—what? Did she even *want* to know what caused that dream, what memories and regrets lurked inside of him? Could she accept the truth?

Her own cowardice shamed her. Disconsolate, uncertain and suddenly, unbearably sad, Mollie turned back to the bed. Curled up on one side, she had a feeling she wouldn't sleep any more either.

Morning dawned slowly, pale grey fingers of light creeping across the

floor of the bedroom. Mollie shifted, every muscle aching. Her eyes were dry and gritty. She must have dozed at least a little bit, but she didn't feel as if she had.

She slid from the bed and tiptoed out of the room, glancing around almost furtively for Jacob. She didn't see him anywhere though, and she retreated to her own bedroom, still filled with a miserable uncertainty. She had no idea what to do now, what would happen next.

A stinkingly hot shower helped, as did a fresh change of clothes. Her Italian clothes, a close-fitting cashmere sweater in soft, pussy-willow grey and a pair of skinny designer jeans bolstered her confidence and gave her courage. She pulled her hair back with a scarf and repaired her still-pale face with make-up, then taking a deep breath headed out into the rest of the suite.

Jacob sat at the desk in the living room. He had showered and changed as well, and now wore an immaculate grey suit that made him look gorgeous and very remote. He looked up from his laptop as she entered, and gave her a small, cool smile.

Mollie's heart sank. So that was how it was going to be.

'Would you like some breakfast?' His voice was scrupulously polite, carefully devoid of emotion, just as it had been when she'd first seen him at her cottage. He was a stranger, nothing but a beautiful stranger. He gestured to a table tucked into the corner of the room. 'There are muffins and croissants there, as well as a pot of tea. If you'd prefer something more substantial, I can order it for you.'

Mollie didn't think she could manage a morsel. 'No, thank you,' she said quietly. 'This is enough.'

Jacob turned back to his laptop. 'I'm afraid I can't go to the expo with you today,' he said in that awful, polite voice. 'I have some business to attend to. But I hired a car to take you there.'

'I'm perfectly capable of taking the tube,' Mollie returned stiffly. 'I lived in London for three years.'

Jacob's gaze remained on the screen of his computer. 'If you have the opportunity, why not take it?'

Mollie swallowed down the words *Because I don't want anything from*

*you when you're like this.* She reached for a muffin. ‘Are we still returning to Wolfe Manor tonight?’

Jacob glanced up, his body stilling, his eyes so very dark. ‘Yes,’ he said quietly. ‘We’ll go back tonight.’

Mollie crumbled the muffin onto the plate. ‘Jacob.’ He waited, saying nothing, and she made herself go on. ‘Why are you being like this? So ... remote? Last night—’

‘Last night shouldn’t have happened,’ Jacob cut in, his voice flat. Mollie felt the blood drain from her face. She should have expected this, based on his attitude this morning, yet it still hurt, like blood drawn straight from her heart.

‘Why not?’ she whispered.

Surprise flashed briefly across Jacob’s features, as if he hadn’t expected her to ask that question. She wondered if he would answer it honestly, or at all. ‘Mollie ...’ He began, his voice low, and she knew this was all the opening she would ever get.

‘Jacob, what happened last night was real. I know it was. This—’ she flung an arm out as if to encompass the tension tautening the very air between them ‘—this isn’t. This is *fake*.’

‘You don’t know what’s real,’ he said quietly.

‘The dream wasn’t,’ Mollie told him. She could feel her heart pounding so hard it hurt. She spoke from a deep instinct that the dream had changed everything. Ruined it. And right now she was damned if she would let it. ‘That dream wasn’t real, Jacob. It was just a dream. A nightmare. Why won’t you trust me?’

He didn’t answer, just stared at her with that infuriatingly blank expression. What seethed beneath the surface? Why wouldn’t he tell her?

‘Jacob, what do you dream about? What haunts you so, even now? Was it something that happened in your childhood? Is that why you ran away?’ She felt as if she were stumbling through the dark, her hands stretched out in front of her like a child’s. ‘Is it your father? Or Annabelle—’

‘So many options,’ he drawled. Mollie recoiled from that light, scornful tone. ‘I had such an *unhappy* childhood. A therapist would have

a field day.'

'I'm not your therapist—'

'You sound like you're trying to be.'

'No,' Mollie retorted, her voice rising in frustration. 'I'm trying to tell you that we can work through this ... together—'

'Stop it, Mollie.' He snapped his laptop shut, rising from the desk in one graceful movement. His back was to her. 'Forget the dream. Forget it all.'

'I can't.' Her throat felt as if it were closing in on itself, as if she could barely speak. 'Can you?' she managed. She saw his shoulders stiffen, his body tense. She waited, afraid to say any more, afraid she might beg. Cry.

'I have to,' Jacob said. His voice sounded quiet and even sad. She saw his head bow, his shoulders slump for an instant before he straightened again to his normal militarily precise posture ... just as he'd been doing his whole life. Being strong. Taking all the weight. All the guilt.

'No, you don't,' Mollie said. 'You don't.'

He shook his head, his back still to her. 'There are things you don't understand.'

'Stop using that as your excuse and *tell* me.'

He shook his head again, and she thought she heard him make a choked sound, almost like a cry. Yet when he finally turned around, she wished he hadn't. He looked so resigned, so resolute, so sad. 'I don't want to tell you. If I do, it will change how you think of me, and I couldn't bear that.'

Her heart twisted, tore. A tear trembled on her eyelash and then slipped silently down her cheek. 'And you're not willing even to risk it? For ... for us?'

'There is no us.'

'There could be.' She was begging. And crying.

'No, Mollie.' Now Jacob sounded regretful, and very, very final. 'I'm sorry, but there isn't and there will never be. There can't be.' He paused, drawing a shuddering breath. 'Sometimes I wish there could. I wish I

was different but I know myself and I know what I'm capable of—what I have inside of me. And it's not enough for a woman like you.'

'What is that supposed to mean?' Mollie asked. She heard the brokenness of her own voice; she couldn't even hide her heartache.

'It means that you are a warm and wonderful and loving person, and you deserve and need someone far better than me.'

'That sounds like an excuse.'

'I wish it was. That would be easier.' He rubbed a hand across his face, looking so tired and lonely and lost that Mollie wanted to put her arms around him and draw him to her. As if sensing that need in her, Jacob looked up sharply. 'You can't save people, Mollie. Just like you said. You were right.'

'I know you can't save people, Jacob. I told you that yesterday. I don't want to *save* you—'

'You do. You might not think you do, but I can see it in your eyes. You think you can help me. Heal me. But you can't. And trust me, I'm not worth saving anyway.'

Mollie let out a sound that trembled between a laugh and a sob. 'Yes, you are.'

He shook his head. 'If you knew—but it doesn't matter. *I* know. And I know there can be no future for us. I'm sorry to have taken advantage of you last night. I thought I could control myself, but I—I couldn't.' His voice trembled for an instant. 'I failed. I failed you ...'

Rage tore through her heart, spilled into her words. 'Last night was *not* a failure. Last night was a success, one of the most beautiful things that has ever—'

'It was,' Jacob agreed quietly. He smiled, sadly, and Mollie felt her heart break. It was a physical thing, as if her body were being cut in half. She could hardly breathe for the pain of it, and she understood why they called it a break. It wasn't an ache, or a soreness, or a twinging pain; it was too agonising for that. Too final. Jacob crossed the room and reached out to wipe the tear still trickling down her cheek. 'It was beautiful,' he said, and still smiling that achingly sorrowful smile, he turned away. 'I'll have my driver get the car for you,' he said, and then

he was gone.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

MOLLIE walked through the expo practically on tiptoes, as if she were made of glass. Bubbles, and they were popping slowly, one by one, so that when they were all gone there would be nothing left.

She barely took in the sights that only yesterday had fired her imagination. Everything seemed to hold a memory; she could hardly walk through the hall without picturing Jacob by her side, listening to her wild ramble of ideas, offering his little suggestions, smiling faintly.

How could it hurt so much, after so little time?

She felt only relief when the day came to a close, even though it meant she'd see Jacob again, which she both desired and dreaded.

In fact, she didn't see him until he lightly touched her shoulder. She'd been standing in front of the Zen garden exhibit again, recalling his words from yesterday: *I have no trouble believing the world possesses imperfections. Or that they exist in myself. But to embrace them ...*

She understood what he meant now. Not only could Jacob not accept the imperfections in himself, he couldn't forgive them. Forgive himself.

What could he not forgive? Mollie wondered helplessly. Was it the night he hit his father? Surely he knew that was self-defence. Or was there something else—something she was afraid to know? *Would* it change everything, like Jacob had said?

'Did you have a good day?' Jacob asked, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder for only a second, and startled, Mollie turned around.

A good day? Was he *joking*? 'Not really,' she said rather flatly, and Jacob simply nodded in acceptance.

'The car's outside.'

No more red sports car, Mollie soon saw. This was not a joyful jaunt in the countryside with the top down. Instead Jacob had hired a limo with acres of space between them and a driver at the wheel.

She slid into the leather luxury with a sharp little smile. 'What

happened to the convertible?’

He shrugged. ‘I’m leaving it in the city for a bit. I’m afraid I have to work on the way back.’ He didn’t sound remotely apologetic as he snapped open his briefcase and took out a sheaf of papers. Mollie turned to stare out the window. It was a good thing they hadn’t taken the convertible, she thought drearily. It had started to rain.

As the limo turned off the motorway and Mollie saw the sign for Wolfestone with a little tremor of dread, she finally summoned the courage to break the silence.

‘So what now?’

Jacob stilled. He looked up, his expression composed, although Mollie saw a flicker of wariness in his dark eyes. She was good at reading him now, at even understanding him. Even though she still didn’t understand—or know—enough.

‘What now?’ he repeated carefully. ‘I imagine you have a bit more work to complete on the gardens.’

‘Another fortnight and it will be finished. I’ll be finished,’ she emphasised starkly. Jacob said nothing and she made herself ask, ‘So we just go on for the next two weeks as if nothing has happened?’

*As if you didn’t come in and shatter my world?*

‘Perhaps it would be better if we didn’t see each other,’ Jacob said after a moment. ‘A clean break.’

Mollie shook her head slowly. ‘You really have some nerve, you know that?’

‘I know you’re hurt, Mollie—’

‘Do you?’ She thrust her face towards him, her eyes sparkling with both tears and rage. ‘Do you *know* that, Jacob? Empirically? Intellectually? What about with your heart?’

‘I told you—’

‘Oh, I know.’ Mollie slapped her hand to her forehead. ‘That’s one thing I know, right? Because you told me. But all the things you *won’t* tell me—about the man you supposedly really are—I’m just supposed to take that on trust. Right?’ She didn’t wait for him to answer. ‘How very

convenient for you,' Mollie told him. 'You can just walk away when it gets too much because you're so *sorry* but you can't help it. You've got all these terrible secrets, but you won't even tell me what they are! You know what that makes you, Jacob?' She glared at him, trembling with anger and hurt, but Jacob's expression didn't even flicker.

'What does it make me?' he asked quietly.

'A coward,' Mollie spat. Vindication didn't feel nearly as good as she wanted it to. 'It makes you a coward.'

Jacob accepted her scorn without comment. He nodded his acceptance as the limo pulled up to Wolfe Manor. It was raining heavily now, a steady, drumming downpour. Mollie stared at him, wanting *something*, but he didn't speak. He didn't even change expression. And with a choked sob, she wrenched open the car door, grabbing her case from the driver, and headed off into the rain.

Jacob watched the rain and fog swallow Mollie as she stormed away from him, disappearing through the hedges that were no more than dark shapes in the sudden storm. He closed his eyes for a second and steeled his soul.

Calm. Control.

*Coward.*

He deserved her scorn, he knew. He accepted it as his due. How could he accept anything else, when she had no idea why he'd walk away from the best thing in his life? No clue as to just what kind of man he was?

The kind of man who could hit his father in cold, cold blood. Who raised his hand to his own sister. Who walked away.

Jacob slammed out of the limo. He didn't need thoughts like this. He didn't need to lash himself with the whip of regret. He'd felt its unrelenting sting too many times already. He'd moved forward in his life, and part of that was accepting what was and was not possible. What he could and could not have.

He'd made peace with it long ago, or at least he thought he had.

Then he'd returned to Wolfe Manor, to his old life, and all the old ghosts and memories rose up to taunt him with what he could never have. Who he could never be. And in the middle of it all, Mollie. Making

him wonder and wish and want in a way he never had before.

Striding into the manor, Jacob shrugged off his suit jacket and dropped his briefcase by the door. All around him the manor echoed emptily, silently, yet he still heard the whispers. Felt them.

His gaze, as it so often did, travelled to the sweeping staircase, rested at its foot where his sister had huddled in a helpless, foetal ball while his father whipped the very life out of her. Standing there, Jacob could almost see her, hear his brothers' desperate cries as they tugged on their father to stop his brutal abuse.

*Stop it, Dad. Please, stop it ...*

And he felt—as he so often did these days—the answering rage in himself when he'd seen that pathetic, terrible scene; it was a rage that flowed like fire through his veins and made his pulse hammer and his fists clench. He felt it, even now, twenty years later, and it was an anger so consuming it nearly frightened him.

This he did not know how to control.

This was why he would never let someone like Mollie into his life, someone who could be hurt, or even destroyed by what he was.

Someone he could love.

Mollie threw herself into her work with the energy and drive of the obsessed. She woke as dawn was spreading its pearly fingers across the sky, pulled on her boots and her work clothes and headed out into the gardens when they were still fresh with dew. She worked all day, weeding and pruning and planting, only stopping to drink some water and eat an apple or a quick sandwich. She returned to the cottage at night, when darkness finally made it impossible to continue, and fell into bed sweaty and exhausted, yet still with enough energy to think. Remember. And wish things—*Jacob*—could be different.

As the days passed she told herself that it was better this way, for both her and Jacob. She asked herself if they could have ever really had a relationship, and made herself answer no.

The reasons were obvious and unrelenting. Other than these few short weeks on the Wolfe estate, they had separate lives. Separate dreams. Separate everything.

And Jacob had too many dark secrets, deep regrets. Mollie knew she could never understand or come to love until she knew those ... and Jacob clearly had no intention of letting that happen.

And what did love have to do with it anyway? she asked herself as she headed back to the cottage one afternoon to change into more decent clothes. She was meeting the tree surgeon at two o'clock and knew she should look at least somewhat presentable. She hurried upstairs, distracted by her own racing thoughts.

Love had nothing to do with it. She didn't even know Jacob well enough to love him, or wonder if she could love him. They'd spent a handful of days together, days out of time, out of reality. It was ridiculous to think it could amount to anything. It was absurd to still feel so bereft.

Yet she did. Memories played through her mind like music, haunting, discordant notes that created a symphony of longing. She saw Jacob's small smile, that little tug on the corner of his mouth that reached right down inside of her. She remembered how he'd thought to show her her father's rose, and how he'd given her the gift of boots after the rip in her own had ruined his rug. And then the more painful memories of lips and hands and skin, of feeling complete and whole and *known* in his arms, and wanting it again, wanting it for ever.

Groaning aloud, Mollie changed quickly and dragged a brush through her unruly curls.

'Stop it, stop it, stop it,' she muttered, and hurried towards the narrow, twisting staircase she'd gone up and down a thousand times. Her foot caught on the broken brass runner at the top of the stair and in slow motion, so she almost felt as if she were witnessing the whole excruciating episode from a distance; she fell down those steep, narrow stairs, head over heels, feeling each jarring bump in every bone in her body, before she landed at the bottom, smacking her temple hard against the stone hearth of the fireplace.

She heard the resounding thwack; it was the last thing she heard. Before she could even register a thought besides *That hurt*, her world went black.

Jacob had been feeling out of sorts ever since he had returned from London and left Mollie storming off in the rain.

He hadn't seen her since. He'd glimpsed her from a distance, working in the garden, and he'd wanted to go out there and snatch her into his arms, kiss away his reservations and regrets, forget the past and its awful secrets, or at least pretend they didn't matter.

He didn't.

He couldn't.

Instead he immersed himself in work, overseeing the design of a new eco-friendly office building in Rio de Janeiro. He checked on the work on Wolfe Manor, telling himself he was relieved to see that it was progressing nicely. He could put the place on the market by the end of the month.

Why did that thought now make him ache in a way he never had before? He'd never had an affection for this place, never wanted to darken its door again. Yet the thought of leaving it, leaving all the memories behind as if they'd never been, suddenly seemed both unwanted and impossible.

*How can you start fresh, without first dealing with the past?*

He'd asked that question of Mollie. He'd convinced her she needed to stay and make the garden whole, that it would be a way of redeeming those lost, lonely years with her father.

Redemption was possible for her.

He'd never thought it was for him. He couldn't start fresh; he couldn't deal with the past.

*You've got all these terrible secrets, but you won't even tell me what they are ...*

The only way he could deal with the past was to speak of it. Admit the truth to Mollie. Even if he lost her, at least he would have been honest.

*You know what that makes you, Jacob? A coward.*

Yes, Jacob thought, Mollie was right. He was a coward. He'd told Mollie she didn't know or understand him, and he knew why.

*Because you never gave her a chance.*

The sound of someone knocking at the front door of the manor jolted him out of his thoughts, and he strode to it, feeling relief at the interruption.

‘Mr ...’ The man on the doorstep looked down at his work order dubiously. ‘Wolfe?’

‘Yes?’

‘I was supposed to meet your landscaper at two o’clock at the garden gate. Nobody showed up and she hasn’t answered her mobile so I wondered if you knew what was going on?’ His voice lilted upwards hopefully, and Jacob frowned as he checked his watch. It was half past two. If Mollie had made an appointment, he knew she’d keep it. She’d been working feverishly these past few days. He’d seen her in the garden as dawn lit the sky and as dusk settled.

‘She’s not here,’ he told the tree surgeon tersely. ‘She’s probably in the gardens somewhere, and she lost track of time.’ Yet he realised he was speaking as much to himself as to the man in front of him, and he heard the thread of fear in his voice, felt it snake coldly through his body. ‘I’ll go have a look,’ he said, and the man followed him around the house to the gardens.

By silent, mutual agreement, they separated, moving in different directions to cover more of the extensive grounds. Jacob strode through the terraced gardens, their neat rows open and exposed, seeing quickly that Mollie wasn’t there. He went to the Children’s Garden, remembering how she’d sat musing under the lilac bush, her smooth forehead puckered into a frown, the way she’d smiled when she’d seen him. She wasn’t there. The Rose

Garden was completely empty, the beds still neatly ploughed under. *Where was she?*

Finally he headed to the place he probably should have checked first: the cottage. It sat in its hidden little garden, dark and still. He knocked on the front door, but the sound just echoed.

After a second’s pause Jacob turned the handle and poked his head around the door. ‘Mollie ...?’ he called, and then he saw her.

Jacob cursed viciously as he flung the door wide and hurried over to

where Mollie lay sprawled at the bottom of stairs, blood trickling down her cheek. For a moment he felt a terrible sense of *déjà vu*; it roiled through him in a sickening wave and he nearly stumbled.

Again. It had happened again. And once again he'd been too late.

He bent, turning her over, feeling how light and fragile she seemed in his arms. Her head lolled back and he saw the vivid purple bruise on her forehead.

She'd fallen, he realised. She'd fallen on the damn stairs. He scooped her up, cradling her against his body as he reached for his mobile, and with his free hand stabbed the numbers 999.

Mollie came slowly to consciousness, like a swimmer rising to the surface of the water. She felt heavy, as if her limbs were weighted down. And her head throbbed abominably.

Her eyes fluttered open and she blinked at the bright light. She was in a hospital room, sterile and neat, a view of sky and trees visible from the one window. And Jacob stood next to it, his back to her, staring out at the darkening sky.

She must have made some small sound, for he turned suddenly, gazing at her with an intense anxiety that had emotion clogging her throat and stinging her eyes. She tried to smile.

'How bad do I look?'

'Pretty bad.' Jacob gave her a small smile, although Mollie could see his eyes were still dark and shadowed. 'And wonderful. I was worried about you. You've been unconscious for six hours.'

'Goodness.' Mollie closed her eyes again as the world swam sickeningly. 'How stupid of me.'

'Do you know what happened?'

'I think I fell down the stairs.' She winced. 'Rather hard.'

'If you hadn't had that appointment with the tree surgeon ...' Jacob said, breaking off suddenly. Mollie opened her eyes and saw his face tense, twist.

'What ...?' she whispered.

'You could have lain there for hours,' Jacob said savagely. 'And

nobody would have known. You could have died.'

She tried to smile, but even that hurt. 'I would have woken up and crawled to the phone.'

'I'm serious, Mollie. I've been staying away from you for both of our sakes and look what happened.'

'Tell me you're not going to blame yourself for this too,' Mollie said. 'Please.' Jacob felt silent, and she shook her head. 'Jacob, you cannot take the whole bloody world on your shoulders. You're not God. You're not even Atlas.' His mouth tightened, his eyes flashing, but she continued anyway. 'I fell down the stairs. It was an *accident*.' She thought of Annabelle, and how her father had whipped her at the bottom of the manor stairs. She knew that much. 'It's not like before, Jacob,' she whispered. 'It's not your fault.'

'If I—'

'No ifs.' She cut him off, even though it made her head throb. 'What were you going to do? Check up on me every half-hour? Tuck me into bed?' That made her think of other things, other memories, so she hurried on. 'I'm an adult. Accidents happen. I'm just glad the tree surgeon had the foresight to seek you out when I didn't show up.' She smiled at him, wanting to smooth the deep crease between his eyebrows. 'And that you had the tenacity to look for me—and find me.'

Jacob met her gaze, saw her smile. Mollie felt the tug between them; it was still there. It had always been there, perhaps even when she'd been a child. Even then she'd been drawn to him, to his tall, dark presence, to the strength and stability of him. 'Even so,' Jacob said, his words final, 'it won't happen again.'

Mollie leaned her head back against the pillow. 'Well, I'll try not to trip. I need to fix the runner.'

'No,' Jacob replied. 'You're not going back to the cottage. You'll stay at Wolfe Manor with me.'

# CHAPTER NINE

‘*What?*’ Mollie struggled up to a sitting position, only to fall back against the pillows, exhausted. ‘That’s not necessary—’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘For you, maybe, and your overblown sense of duty,’ she snapped. She was tired of Jacob’s staggering sense of responsibility for everyone and everything. She couldn’t compete with it. ‘I’m perfectly fine without you.’ That wasn’t completely true, but she could certainly live alone like any normal adult.

‘That may be, but I’m not risking something like this happening again.’

‘Why don’t you just put a monitor on me?’ Mollie demanded waspishly. ‘Or imbed a computer chip in my head?’

Jacob smiled faintly, although his eyes were hard with determination. ‘That’s not a bad idea.’

Mollie let out a short, dry laugh and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath. ‘Jacob,’ she said, opening them, ‘you are not responsible for me.’

‘You’re my employee,’ Jacob replied calmly, ‘so, in point of fact, I am.’

‘Not like that.’ He said nothing and Mollie knew there was something bigger going on here, something that stretched back into the years, its roots going deep into the spoiled soil of the Wolfe family. ‘It’s not your fault I fell down the stairs,’ she said clearly. ‘It’s not your fault your father hit your sister, or did any of the terrible things he did.’ She paused, for Jacob had gone utterly still, his expression seeming to close in on itself, blank and fathomless. ‘It’s not your fault,’ Mollie continued quietly, ‘that things fell apart when you left. You need to—’

‘You’re going to tell me what I need?’ Jacob cut in. His voice was polite yet very cold. Now Mollie was the one to still.

‘I just—’

‘But you blamed me as much as anyone else, Mollie,’ Jacob told her softly. ‘It’s my fault your father didn’t have a job for so many years. It’s

my fault the two of you were struggling alone for so long, forgotten, invisible. Hell, maybe it's my fault that he suffered from dementia. Maybe it wouldn't have happened if I'd stayed, if the manor had been something he could hold onto.' Mollie stared at him, what little colour she had draining from her face, too shocked to utter a word. 'So,' Jacob continued in that same soft, lethal voice, 'why should I believe you now? If you thought all that was my fault, how do you think my brothers and sister felt?'

From somewhere Mollie found her voice, hoarse and scratchy. 'They've forgiven you, Jacob. I know Annabelle has ...'

'I know they have,' Jacob told her. He sounded scornful. 'I've seen every one of them since I've been back. I've faced their anger and their confusion and their hurt. And I've asked for their forgiveness.' He paused, his breath coming fast now. 'Do you think that makes any difference?'

Mollie could only stare. His words were hammer blows to her heart, for she knew he'd spoken the truth. She *had* blamed him. They all had. Jacob had shouldered all the guilt and all the responsibility, and they'd let him, they'd given it to him, even though she—and undoubtedly all his siblings—had said they hadn't.

'I'm sorry,' she finally whispered, and shrugging a shoulder, Jacob turned away.

'It doesn't matter,' he said, his back to her, his voice low. 'It's not just about what you see as my overblown sense of responsibility.' He drew a breath. 'I blame myself, Mollie, because of who I am and what I did ... not what I *didn't* do.' He turned to face her, his eyes bleak. 'There's no escaping or forgiving that.'

Mollie stared at him, speechless, unable to think of any comforting words. She felt as if Jacob had retreated farther from her than ever before ... and she couldn't help but wonder if this time it was her fault.

The next day the hospital released her. Jacob drove her back to Wolfe Manor. When he pulled up in front of the big house, Mollie made no objection. She followed him into the house's dim, cool foyer, knowing that after all that had been said—all she'd realised—she wasn't going to

stand on her self-righteous pride and indignation now.

'I chose one of the newly renovated bedrooms for you,' Jacob told her. 'I hope it's suitable.' He spoke in that awful, distant voice that made Mollie want to cry. It made it hard to believe that he'd ever kissed her tears or held her in his arms, or that they'd made love.

'I'm sure it's fine.'

'The doctor told you to take it easy for at least a few more days,' Jacob continued. 'I hope you will abide by that. I've made arrangements for some day labourers to come in and do the heavy work in the garden.'

'That's fine. I can give instructions from here. It's just a matter of doing the manual work, except for the Rose Garden.'

'The Rose Garden?'

'I haven't settled on a design,' Mollie admitted.

Every time she thought of it, the whole idea defeated her. The Rose Garden had been her father's idea of landscaping perfection. How could she change it, much less design something of her own? 'I think I'll go rest now,' she said, because she couldn't stand to be near Jacob when he was like this, cold and formal and so very distant.

'I had your things removed from the cottage. They're in your bedroom.'

Mollie nodded and turned away. She felt Jacob watching her all the way up the stairs.

The next few days fell into a disheartening pattern of impersonal solicitude. Jacob excused himself to the study most of the time, and Mollie didn't bother ever going in there or even knocking on the door. She hated that room, and she had a feeling Jacob did as well.

She worked on designs for the Rose Garden, although every sketch she began she ended up tossing in frustration. All her plans just seemed like a shallow version of what had already been there.

Yet the rest of the garden was nearly finished. From the window she saw the new paving stones, the weeded flower beds, the pruned trees. The grass on the terraced lawns glittered like emerald velvet. The house, too, was emerging from its chrysalis of dust cloths and scaffolding; the

downstairs was completely finished, the paint fresh, the window coverings and carpets restored or replaced as needed. It was beautiful, if impersonal, and Mollie wondered who would buy the house when Jacob actually put it on the market. Who would live there, love it? Even with its new patina of fresh paint, the house still seethed with unhappy memories ... or so it felt to Mollie, as she wandered its empty rooms.

Upstairs the bedrooms had been renovated as well; the photographs on Annabelle's walls had been removed, and Mollie wondered what Jacob had done with them. Perhaps a decorator had thrown them out. Perhaps Jacob hadn't cared about them at all.

Mollie knew she was being contrary. A few weeks ago she'd been annoyed and embarrassed that Jacob had seen all those revealing candids of her. Now she wanted him to be a hiding a snap under his pillow? She was ridiculous.

One rainy afternoon when even the labourers had to leave the garden work, Mollie wandered upstairs to the third floor of the manor. From the peeling wallpaper, a faded pattern of blowsy cabbage roses, to the cobweb spangling every corner, it appeared this floor had not yet been renovated or even touched. Mollie wondered if it had been completely forgotten.

Curious and a little wary, she made her way up the narrow stairs, and pushed open the door at the end of the hallway.

Pale, watery sunlight, breaking through the rain clouds of earlier, streamed through the long, narrow windows, revealing a thick layer of dust on the old wooden floorboards. They creaked as Mollie carefully moved across the room, taking it all in.

It was a nursery. It looked like something out of a Victorian novel with a moth-eaten rocking horse in one corner, an elaborate wooden dollhouse in another. Rusted tin soldiers lined up on one windowsill, ready to march.

There were some newer toys too—some building bricks, a few tatty board games, signs that the Wolfe children had once lived and played here. The air was thick with the dust Mollie had stirred up simply by walking across the floor, so with some effort she opened the windows and breathed in the rain-damp air. Then she turned back to the room.

A few childish drawings and scribbles had been taped to the wall, and she moved closer to inspect them. A princess drawing by Annabelle, an elaborate map of the estate, laboriously inked in intricate detail, with two childish signatures in the bottom corner: *Jacob and Lucas Wolfe, ages 9 and 8*. On a rickety table in one corner there was a model of the house, built, she saw, from lolly sticks and toothpicks. She smiled faintly, thinking of how Jacob must have cherished architectural dreams even at a young age. She imagined him here, concentrating on his precious model, the other children looking on in interest. Perhaps this house did hold some happy memories.

Another paper taped to the wall had an important-looking list of everyone's birthday, as well as what kind of cake they preferred and what presents they wanted. Mollie's gaze ran down the list, stopping in surprise when she saw Jacob's birthday was, in fact, tomorrow. And when he'd been eight years old he'd wanted a double chocolate cake and a chess set.

'What are you doing here?'

Mollie whirled around, stirring up more dust. Jacob stood in the doorway, and from the tone of his voice and the expression on his face Mollie didn't think he was very glad to see her here.

'Sorry ... I was just poking around. I don't think this place has been touched in twenty years.'

'More like thirty. I saw the door to the stairs was open and wondered if the renovators had finally made their way up here.' Jacob glanced around the room with a dispassionate air. 'It's filthy. I'll have to get them to clear it all out. Everything else is just about finished.'

'Oh, don't,' Mollie said impulsively. 'There are so many memories here —'

'I know.' The two words were clipped.

'Good ones though,' she persisted. 'At least, they feel that way to me. Look—did you make this?' She pulled on his arm, surprising them both by her touch, and after a second's pause Jacob reluctantly let her lead him to the corner of the room. He glanced at the model of the house without any expression at all. 'Yes, I made it.'

'It's amazing! You showed your talent even then.' He shrugged, but Mollie persisted, feeling some deep-seated need to show Jacob all these treasures, to help him reclaim the good parts of his past. 'Look at this ... you and Lucas drew this map?'

Now he smiled faintly. 'Yes ... I'd forgotten about that. We spent ages on it. We were measuring the lawns with a slide rule, trying to make sure we got it exactly to scale. One inch for every one hundred yards, if I remember correctly.'

'It's incredibly complex, considering how young you were.' She glanced around again at the dusty room. 'Did you spend much time here?'

'No, not really. Holidays mostly. Lucas and I went to boarding school when we were quite young.' He paused, and Mollie held her breath, knowing he was going to tell her more. Perhaps he even wanted to. 'My father never came looking for us up here,' Jacob said softly. 'Sometimes it felt like the only place we were really safe.'

Mollie blinked, swallowed the sudden thickening of tears in her throat. Silently, because there were no words, she reached for his hand. To her surprise and joy, Jacob let her fingers slide through his, and held on.

After a moment he nodded towards the old dollhouse. 'Annabelle could play with that for hours. She used to rope me into playing with her. I was always the father.' He smiled wryly, his eyes now alight with memories. 'And Nathaniel loved the dress-up box.' He gestured to a chest in the corner; Mollie saw the dull gleam of a knight's helmet and toy sword. 'We used to have mock battles.' Lost as he was in a rare moment of nostalgia, Mollie knew he didn't hear the thread of love in his voice, or realize how he'd made sure all of his siblings had memories they could cherish ... memories he'd made happen.

He turned slowly around in the room, taking it all in, the sunlight breaking through the clouds and washing over him, his features softened with remembrance. And in that moment Mollie knew she loved him.

It seemed so amazingly apparent, so utterly obvious. So *simple*. As the realisation rippled through her body, her heart's answering response was, *Of course*.

Of course she loved him. She'd started to love him even when she was a child, peeking between the hedges. She loved the boy he'd been, trying to take care of his family, and the man he'd become, responsible, gentle, utterly trustworthy.

Her mind had tried to convince her she didn't love him, that she didn't even know him well enough to love him, but in that moment Mollie knew she did. Perhaps she always had.

Yet she knew she couldn't tell him now. Her heart was filled to overflowing, yet Mollie swallowed it back down. It would be too much for Jacob now. So she just smiled and touched his arm. 'How wonderful,' she said, 'that you all had one another.'

Jacob looked at her, blinking as if he was surprised by the realisation. 'Yes,' he said slowly, 'it was.'

With the realisation that she loved Jacob, everything else seemed to slide into place. It was as if her love for him was the key that unlocked not just her heart, but her mind. Her ideas. Now she knew just what to do with the Rose Garden.

Yet first there was something more important to attend to: Jacob's birthday. Since he'd closeted himself in the office for most of the day, preparing was easy. She left him a note in the kitchen letting him know she'd gone into town, and walked the quarter mile to the bus stop in the centre of Wolfestone. Her shopping took less than an hour, and when she returned to the manor she saw that Jacob had not seen her note or even left his study at all.

Just as well, Mollie decided with a new, optimistic determination. This would give her more time to make things just as she wanted them.

That evening she changed into a strappy top and a summery skirt that swung about her legs, tamed her hair and touched up her make-up. Then she went to Jacob's study and rapped sharply on the door.

'Mollie ...?' His voice, from behind the thick oak, was muffled.

'It's eight o'clock, Jacob. Aren't you going to stop working?'

'I'm sorry. I have a great many things to do.'

Mollie sighed. She'd anticipated this. 'It's just that I'm feeling a little

woozy all of a sudden ...’ She let her voice trail off, and within seconds Jacob had thrown open the door, his face harsh with concern.

‘What happened? Are you—?’

‘I’m fine.’ Mollie grinned at him. ‘That was the only way I could think of getting you out of there.’

Jacob stared, completely thunderstruck. ‘You lied to me?’

‘It was for a noble purpose.’ She tugged on his arm before he could work up any real indignation. The man’s moral code was unfaltering. ‘Come on.’

‘What ...? I have to—’

‘You don’t have to do anything right now,’ Mollie said. ‘Except follow me.’ She led him into the kitchen, where she’d dimmed the lights. ‘Close your eyes.’

‘What ...?’

Laughing, Mollie stood on her tiptoes and reached up to cover Jacob’s eyes with her hands. ‘I mean it.’

Jacob let out a short, irritated breath, and Mollie knew he had no idea what she was doing, or why.

She led him into the centre of the kitchen, her hand still covering his eyes. ‘Now, I have to let go for a minute, but no peeking, all right?’

‘Right.’ He still sounded annoyed.

Mollie dashed over to the light the candles on the cake—all thirty-eight of them. She picked up the cake and brought it front of Jacob; his eyes were still closed.

‘All right, you can open them now.’

Jacob’s eyes flew open, and Mollie smiled. ‘Happy birthday, Jacob.’

He stared at the cake as if he didn’t know what it was. He looked so nonplussed Mollie was afraid she’d made a terrible mistake. ‘Haven’t you ever seen a birthday cake before?’ she teased.

His eyes met hers and he gave her a rueful smile. ‘Not one for me.’

Mollie stared at him, too surprised to dissemble. ‘Not ever?’

He shrugged. ‘Not that I remember. My birthday always fell at term

time, and the school didn't run to making cakes.'

'Well, I made your favourite,' she said with a smile. 'Double chocolate. At least, that's what you wanted for your eighth birthday. I don't know about now.'

'I love chocolate,' Jacob said, and his voice sounded almost hoarse. Mollie felt the tension spin out between them, tautening and stretching, and her hands nearly trembled as she held the cake.

'Here.' She placed it on the worktop. 'Make a wish.'

Jacob's gaze remained fastened on hers as he bent down to blow out the candles. Mollie held her breath. She certainly knew what she would wish for.

'What did you wish for?' Mollie asked after he'd blown them out. She sounded breathless.

'Now if I told you, it wouldn't come true.' A smile, slow and sexy, curled Jacob's mouth. Mollie felt heat flood through her body. She'd never seen him smile like that before. It made him look unbearably desirable, so that she could barely hold the knife steady as she turned to the cake.

'Let me cut you a piece.' She cut a generous slice and put it on a plate, yet his smile still warmed right through her and gave her the courage to take a forkful and hold it aloft, offering him her own wicked smile. 'Ready?'

Jacob's gaze, dark and hot, never left hers as he obediently opened his mouth. Mollie fed him the cake, her heart starting an uneven, heavy rhythm at the sheer sensuality of the action. She loved him so much. She wanted him so much.

His lips closed around the fork, his hand brushing her fingers. She nearly shuddered aloud. He ate, swallowed and then took the fork from her. 'Now your turn.'

'Wh ... what?' Smiling, Jacob reached for the cake. Mollie watched, mesmerised, as he discarded the fork and took a piece, sticky with chocolate, in his fingers and held it aloft. 'You like chocolate, don't you?'

'Oh ... yes.' She opened her mouth obediently, like a little bird. Jacob fed her the cake, his thumb brushing her lip; and as she ate, her tongue

touched his thumb and made her whole body quiver with desperate awareness. Somehow she managed to swallow, speak. ‘Jacob ...’

He pulled her towards him, easily, for she offered no resistance. Her head fell back as his lips brushed hers so briefly, so barely, and Mollie waited, hoping that he would deepen the kiss.

He didn’t.

His lips hovered over hers for a torturous second before he stepped back. ‘A birthday present,’ he said, trying to smile. ‘For me.’ Even though his voice remained light Mollie saw the struggle in his eyes. She knew he wanted to kiss her again, and more deeply, and even more than that. And yet he wouldn’t, whether it was because of responsibility or fear or guilt Mollie couldn’t even guess. She wanted to shake him. She wanted to tell him that she might be the best thing that ever happened to him, if only he’d let her love him.

Yet she swallowed the words, because she knew Jacob wasn’t ready to hear them. She wasn’t sure she was ready to say them. She certainly was not prepared for the possible—maybe even probable—rejection.

So she smiled, as if that kiss hadn’t stripped away her defences and left her shaken and exposed before him, and reached for the box she’d left on the table. ‘Actually, I have another present for you.’

‘You do?’

‘Don’t sound so surprised. It is your birthday after all.’

‘It’s just ... no one’s ever given me a present before. On my birthday.’

Mollie frowned, the box still in her hands. ‘Nobody? What about your brothers and sister? What about the list up in the nursery?’

‘List?’

‘On the wall. It’s how I knew you liked chocolate. It was a list of everyone’s birthdays and what they wanted for a present.’

‘Oh.’ Jacob’s expression cleared and he smiled in memory. ‘I wrote that list. To keep track, so I wouldn’t forget anyone’s birthday.’

‘Oh, I see.’ And she did. How she loved this man.

Mollie swallowed past the lump in her throat. She didn’t need to ask who remembered Jacob’s birthday. The answer was obvious. ‘Well,

here's your first present.' She handed him the box. Jacob took it, turned it over in his hands. Mollie gave a little laugh. 'You're meant to open it, you know.'

'Yes.' He smiled ruefully, his eyes glinting. 'I suppose I'm just savouring the moment.' Almost reluctantly he slid off the ribbon and tore the wrapping paper.

He gazed down at it for a long moment until Mollie felt compelled to say, 'It's ... it's a chess set. On that list you wrote—'

'Yes,' Jacob said quietly. 'I remember.' He was still staring down at the set Mollie had bought in town. There hadn't been too many options, and suddenly she wished she'd bought something else, something better, or at least a better chess set, one with marble pieces or a fancy board. She'd bought him a *toy*, for heaven's sake, and he was a millionaire. He could buy a thousand chess sets if he wanted, or one made of solid gold.

Jacob looked up, his eyes bright. 'Thank you,' he said quietly, and Mollie heard the raw note of sincerity in his voice. 'Thank you, Mollie.'

And then she knew she'd bought him the right gift. 'You're welcome.'

They remained there a moment, hesitating, awkward, and Mollie wanted to close the space between them and wrap her arms around Jacob, smooth the furrow from his forehead, kiss his faint smile into fullness. Yet she didn't, because she could see even now Jacob was trying to distance himself, struggling with the gratitude and joy he felt and the guilt and shame that seemed constantly poised to overwhelm him.

Yet she had to touch him, if only a little bit, so leaning forward, she placed a hand on his cheek. Jacob started at the touch, and his eyes closed briefly before he snapped them open, stared at her with those fathomlessly dark eyes so she had no idea what he was thinking. 'Good night, Jacob,' she whispered, and she left the room before he could.

It was too much. He *felt* too much. After years, decades, of nurturing that numbing control, it was finally starting to splinter. And Jacob didn't know what to do without it. How to act. How to be. What to feel.

He let out a long, shuddering sigh as he heard Mollie climb the front stairs. He imagined he could still feel the warmth of her hand on his

cheek, and every impulse urged him to follow her up the stairs, to take her in his arms, to stay there for ever.

This was no longer about seduction or sex. He wasn't dealing with the seemingly simplistic matters of a physical transaction, or resisting it.

No, now something far greater was at stake. It played havoc with his mind. It wrecked his resolutions. It destroyed his self-control. *Love*.

He was falling in love with Mollie Parker, with her warmth and kindness and generosity of spirit, with her pansy-brown eyes and her tumble of auburn hair. With everything about her, and it terrified him.

Jacob spun away from the kitchen and the sights of his cake and his present. They were too much as well, more than he'd ever had before. He'd learned long ago not to expect presents, surprises, kindnesses of any sort. He'd trained himself not to want them.

Yet now his defences were crumbling. He felt it at night, when he fell asleep deeply enough to dream. The old nightmare came for him nearly every night now, and in it he was always worse than ever. He was a madman, a monster, and that awful laughter was his. The sound echoed endlessly through him.

Every time he woke up, sweating and shaking, he remembered the look of shock on Mollie's face when she'd seen him in the depths of that dream, and his determination to tell her the truth about himself, of what had happened and how he'd felt, to spill all his secrets, trickled coldly away.

He *couldn't*.

And yet still he wanted to. He was desperate to talk, to tell her everything in a way he had never wanted or even envisaged before. It was crazy, the way the words rose inside him, bubbled up so he could barely keep them in. Already he'd told her more than he had shared with any other person.

*And she isn't walking away. She's still with you. Caring for you. Maybe even loving you ...*

Raking his hands through his hair, Jacob headed out into the damp night. The grass was wet with rain and the sky black and moonless above him. He walked and breathed and tried to empty his mind of

thoughts.

That old trick didn't work any more. The thoughts came anyway, memories rushing in to fill the empty spaces of his heart and mind, and the strange and surprising thing was they were *good* memories. They were memories of Mollie.

Memories of her seemed to fill the gardens and house; he could picture her bent over a plant, hard at work. Curled up on a bench in the Children's Garden, smiling wryly at being caught dozing in the sun like a contented cat. Sloshing through mud puddles in the boots he'd bought her. The memories were small, yet they still made him smile. Made him want.

He wanted to let her know the truth. He craved the kind of exposure and honesty he'd been running from for twenty years, and yet even so, it was terrifying. Impossible.

If he told her.

*What? What would happen?*

Would she reject him, if he told her just what—and who—had made him leave? Himself. The horror of his own self had forced him away from his family, before he hurt them. Before he became even more like his father.

And even more terrifying, what if he hurt Mollie? What if the old demons claimed him, and he hurt her just as he'd hurt Annabelle—or worse? That thought scared him most of all. It made his eyes darken and he turned back to his father's study, the knowledge of who he was—who he would always be—hardening inside of him.

# CHAPTER TEN

THE next few days Mollie worked outside, determined to finish the renovation of the Rose Garden, although she could hardly call it that now that there were no roses in it.

She told herself she would tell Jacob she loved him, yet he'd been avoiding her again, silent and foreboding, and her courage failed her. It was so hard to say those words when you had no idea what the other person thought or felt, or whether such a declaration would even be welcome. She never found the right moment—or the courage.

The moment came when Mollie wasn't looking for it. She wasn't even ready. She was sweaty and tired from working in the garden, and came into the house for a drink of water. Yet as she stood in the kitchen, the summer sunlight slanting through the windows, she was conscious of a creeping sense of desolation; she had only one more day of work on the garden, and then there would be no excuse to stay.

She let out a long, slow breath, half wondering—half believing—that it was for the best. The weeks of Jacob's solicitous silence had started to take their toll. Maybe she loved him; maybe it didn't matter.

Sighing, Mollie gazed at the gardens in all their restored glory. She'd been so sure of her love for Jacob just a few days ago, so serene in her certainty. Yet now she felt the creeping of fear, like the most tenacious and poisonous weed, curling its destructive tendrils around her hopes. Her heart. And she didn't think she had the courage to tell Jacob anything.

She could, at least, tell him the garden was almost done. That, Mollie hoped, might give her a sense of how he felt about her leaving. Yet even that thought was nerve-racking; what if he greeted the news with calm disinterest, a careless shrug? How could she tell him she loved him *then*? How could she tell him she loved him at all?

Sighing again, Mollie went in search of Jacob in the place he spent most of his time, his father's study.

She could tell the room was empty before she even entered in. The door was ajar and a breeze blew in from the open window, ruffling the scattered papers on the desk. Mollie knew she shouldn't enter; this was Jacob's private space, his sanctum. Yet the remnant of her own memories forced her inside, to stand in the centre of the hated room and remind herself that it was just a room, in a house, and it held no power over her or even over Jacob. She could smell the clean scent of cut grass from the window, and it banished the memory of stale smoke and an excess of alcohol.

She wondered if the memories could be banished for Jacob. Coming back to Wolfe Manor had made him a slave to them, and she felt his bonds more keenly than ever. Would he ever be free? Could she help him be free?

Could her love?

A breeze ruffled the drapes once again and a few pages blew off the desk. Automatically Mollie stooped to retrieve them, and then stilled as she saw the words on the page.

*Dear Annabelle. Today is your sixteenth birthday.*

Mollie knew she should stop reading. These were letters, old letters, letters that had never been sent. And even though common courtesy—not to mention common sense—told her to put these pages back on the desk unread, a deeper instinct made her keep reading.

*I wonder what you are doing, and I hope you are able to celebrate. I hope you have cause to celebrate, for not a day goes by when I don't think of you, and pray that you are safe and loved. I left because I loved you, but I know you can't understand that now....*

Tears stung Mollie's eyes. A lump formed in her throat. She kept reading.

*I don't expect you to understand it, or even forgive. But I want you to know that I am thinking of you, and imagining your big butterscotch cake, with sixteen pink candles to blow out. Make a wish.*

*Your loving brother, Jacob*

Mollie turned to the desk. A stack of papers lay on it, and she knew instinctively what they were. Letters to Jacob's family, letters he had never sent. How many had he written over the years? By the size of the stack, she guessed dozens. Maybe hundreds. She placed Annabelle's letter back on top, wanting to read the others yet knowing she had no right. Reading one letter might be forgiven, but reading them all was not.

Yet she longed to, for she knew these letters were Jacob's heart. He may have left, for whatever reason he felt so necessary, but his heart hadn't. His heart had remained with his family, and it made her love him all the more.

'What are you doing?'

Mollie froze. Jacob stood in the doorway, his face dark with suspicion and rising fury.

'Jacob,' she said weakly, and he strode into the room.

'May I help you with something?' he asked with cold politeness, and then his gaze went to his desk, and the pile of his letters. The very air in the room seemed to shiver, freeze. Jacob went utterly still, and Mollie knew he hadn't realised he'd left the letters out until that very second.

That awful second.

His gaze, dark and pitiless, swung back to her. 'Did you have a good look?' he asked, as if it was a question of nominal interest. His eyes were blacker than Mollie had ever seen.

'I—I'm sorry. The papers blew off the desk and I went to replace them.' She swallowed, knowing a full confession was required. 'I read your letter to Annabelle. I'm sorry. I know it was private, but it was beautiful, Jacob—'

'You shouldn't have.' He stalked over to the desk and swept the letters into a folder.

'Why did you never send it—them? If Annabelle could read that letter, she would—'

'She would what?' He swung around, suddenly dangerous. 'She would forgive me?'

'No, no,' Mollie said quickly. 'Just ... understand. More.'

Jacob said nothing for a moment. ‘Well, I’ve already spoken to her,’ he said finally, his voice still cool. ‘Several times. As a matter of fact, she’s returning here next week. With her husband.’

‘Her husband?’ Mollie repeated incredulously.

‘Yes, his name is Stefano, and she met him in Spain.’ Mollie just blinked. She’d known from her friend’s emails that she was doing a photography shoot in Spain, but *married*? She hadn’t checked her email in ages, and she wondered if Annabelle had written her. She would have to write and offer her congratulations.

‘It seems as if all of my siblings have found their happily ever after,’ Jacob continued in that same cold voice. ‘I’ve talked to them all, you know. We’ve made our peace with one another. If you think I’m still suffering with guilt over *that*, you’re quite wrong.’ Mollie opened her mouth to speak—to demand what it was that enslaved him now—but Jacob rode over her with his words. ‘It’s really very sweet. At least I know they’ll be taken care of when I leave.’

Dread pooled in Mollie’s stomach, ate away at her courage and conviction like the most corrosive acid. ‘You’re leaving?’

‘Yes.’ He met her gaze with his own bland stare. ‘You always knew that, Mollie. I’m leaving, and so are you. The estate goes on the market next week. You *are* almost done the gardens, aren’t you?’

She swallowed. ‘Yes, but—’

‘But?’ Jacob prompted. He did not sound very interested.

‘You could have yours too,’ Mollie blurted. Desperation fuelled her words so she barely knew what she was saying. ‘Your happily ever after. You could have it … with me.’

The ensuing silence, Mollie thought, was worse than anything Jacob could have said. He just stared at her until she felt like the gap-toothed, tousle-haired tomboy she’d always been, peeking through the hedges. Unseen, invisible. At least, she *wished* she was invisible now, based on the incredulous way Jacob was looking at her.

‘Of course no one’s happy all the time,’ she continued shakily, knowing that no matter how humiliating or horrible this was, she had to see it through. ‘I wouldn’t expect us to be. But we could take the joys

and sorrows together—sharing them.’ She sounded like a greeting card. Swallowing, she tried again, in the only way she knew how. The only way left to her. ‘I love you, Jacob.’

‘No, you don’t.’ He spoke flatly, with such finality that Mollie blinked.

‘Yes, I do.’ Were they actually going to *argue* about it? ‘Trust me, I know I do.’

Jacob let out a sharp bark of laughter that ended on a quiet, ragged note. ‘You don’t love me, Mollie, because you don’t *know* me.’

‘I tried to believe that,’ Mollie told him. Her confidence was growing, amazingly. She felt it come back like wind into a sail, buoying her hope. At least he hadn’t told her that he didn’t love her. Yet. ‘I told myself that, because it was easier. Safer. But I do know you, Jacob. I know what is important, what is true—’

‘No,’ Jacob cut her off, his voice sharp with anger. ‘You don’t.’

She took a step closer to him. She could feel the anger and even the hurt coming off him in hot, pulsating waves. Yet instead of scaring her, it made her sad. *Enough*. Enough of this sorrow and heartache, this endless guilt and despair. That time was past. She looked up at him, her eyes wide, her face calm. ‘Why don’t you want me to love you, Jacob?’

‘This is a pointless conversation ...’

‘Or is it that you’re afraid I won’t love you if I discover who you truly are? This terrible secret you have?’ Mollie didn’t know where she found the words; they came from a deep place inside her, spilling out, as only truth could. She took another step towards him and laid a hand on his arm, as gentle as a breeze, and waited.

‘I know you won’t,’ Jacob said in a low voice.

‘Tell me.’ Mollie tightened her hand on his arm. ‘Tell me why you left all those years ago. Tell me what is so terrible, that I’m not supposed to know or understand.’

‘I *can’t*—’

‘Why not?’ Mollie challenged. ‘Is it because I might hate you? Why should that matter, if you don’t love me and you’re leaving anyway? You never have to see me again. Why should you care what I think?’

'I'm not as heartless as that,' Jacob told her quietly. The corner of his mouth turned up in the smallest, saddest of smiles. 'I've spent most of my life observing the people I love from a distance. A very great distance.' He gestured to the folder still on the desk. 'I wrote those letters because I wanted to have a connection with my brothers and sister. I never posted them because I couldn't bear them to think less of me, even from far away. The memory of their love for me was what sustained me for so long.'

'And you think the memory of my love for you will sustain you?' Mollie finished. 'Why do you have to be such a martyr?' And then, to her surprise, she was suddenly angry. And she let it show. 'Tell me, Jacob, do you love me?'

He looked startled, but he didn't avoid the question. He didn't even avert his eyes. 'Yes.'

Mollie wanted to groan. Or scream. She also wanted to sing with joy. 'Then why did you just tell me you were leaving? Why can't we work through this, Jacob? Whatever it is? Isn't that what love is all about? Trust?'

'It's not you I don't trust,' Jacob said quietly. 'It's me.'

'You don't trust yourself?' Mollie repeated blankly. She trusted Jacob so utterly the very thought was bewildering. 'Why?'

Jacob didn't speak for a long, tense moment. The silence ticked on, tautening the very air. The wind rustled the papers on the desk again. Mollie didn't say anything. Didn't move. She just waited.

'I remember the first time my father hit me,' he finally said, his voice quiet, calm, as if he was simply telling a story. 'I was six years old. I'd come home from school for Christmas, and I knew something was different. Wrong. Even the little ones could feel it. My stepmother, Amber, Annabelle's mother, had died—of a drug overdose, I learned later—the year before. I thought my father was sad because of that, and perhaps he was in his own way.' He took a breath and let it out slowly. 'I wanted to comfort him. I knew he wasn't like other fathers, the way dads are *supposed* to be, but as a child I kept trying to act like he was. I think I thought if I acted that way, perhaps he would too.' He gave her a fleeting smile, a humourless curving of his lips. 'But of course it didn't.'

You can't will things into being. And I think, looking back, that my attempts to comfort him—to make him seem normal—frustrated him. Perhaps he realised the magnitude of his own failings.' He paused. 'That is a hard thing to bear.'

After another pause he resumed his story. 'In any case, that Christmas he was worse than ever before. Drunk most times, although it took me a while to realise it. It was as if ...' He stopped, searching for the words that seemed to come from the very depths of his being. 'It was as if he'd surrendered to the worst part of himself, and allowed it ... control.'

Mollie made some inarticulate sound, as it all started to make such terrible sense. Jacob's determination to remain self-controlled. His refusal to drink. And he'd seen this all when he was six.

'We had a series of temporary nannies to take care of us, and one morning the nanny left without even telling my father. I can hardly blame her—we were a ragtag bunch. Jack was four and Annabelle and Alex were barely two.' He shook his head, remembering. 'Anyway, I went in search of my father, and found him in bed with a bottle even though it was nearly noon. He was a mess. Weeping and raging at turns.' Jacob's mouth twisted in memory. 'In that moment I was so angry because I knew he should be taking care of us and he wasn't. At least with Amber we'd had some kind of mother. I remember her being fun and loving, at times. But William alone ...' He shook his head again. 'So I took those whisky bottles and dumped them in the sink. I was so full of self-righteous fury, much good it did me. My father was unbelievably angry. I'd never seen him like that before ... he was incoherent with rage.'

He hit me then, and Lucas too, and we took it because we were too young and too surprised to know what to do. He'd never hit us before.'

'Oh, Jacob ...'

'I knew then how it would be,' he finished flatly. 'How it would always be. My father may have had his good moments, when he played with us, or gave us presents, but underneath I knew what he was. So did he, and he could never escape from it. Sometimes I pitied him. Most of the time I hated him. And I always promised myself I would never, ever be like him.' He turned to face her, his expression bleak yet determined.

'You're not like him, Jacob,' Mollie whispered. 'Not one bit.'

'Yes, I am,' he returned flatly. 'I am just like him. Sometimes I hide it better, and most of the time I keep it under control. But underneath? Where it matters? We're the same.'

He spoke with such absolute conviction that Mollie wanted to cry, both for him and herself. It was hopeless. He'd never be convinced he was different, or that he was worth loving. 'I don't believe that,' she told him in a choked voice. 'I don't believe that at all.'

'You wanted to know the truth, Mollie, and now you have it.'

'This is your terrible secret?' she demanded. 'This distorted, guilt-ridden version of the past?'

'There's more.'

'Then tell me,' Mollie said, folding her arms. 'Because I want to hear it.'

'What do you want?' Jacob snarled. 'Examples? A list of all the times —'

'Yes,' she retorted. 'Yes, I would. Just when were you so like your father, Jacob? When you took care of your family? When you saved Annabelle—'

'Saved her?' Jacob repeated in scathing disbelief. 'I raised my hand to her.' Startled, Mollie's mouth snapped shut, and Jacob nodded as he saw her response. 'I *raised my hand*. I barely kept myself from hitting her, just as my father did. She saw it. She saw my hand, and she saw the rage in my eyes, and she *cowered* from me.' He drew in a shuddering breath. 'It was after ... after everything. She'd come to find me with tears in her eyes, because she needed someone to talk to. She was so lonely, shut away in the house, and so young ...'

'So were you,' Mollie whispered. 'You were only eighteen, Jacob.'

'I was old enough to know better,' he returned savagely. 'Old enough to control myself.'

'You did control yourself.'

'That time.' He looked at her bleakly. 'That one time. But I knew there would be others, and who knows if I could control myself then? I didn't.'

There was a new, darker note in his voice now and Mollie felt a tremble of fear ripple through her. Jacob saw it and knew what it was. He nodded. ‘You’re right to be afraid of me.’

‘I’m not afraid of you,’ Mollie returned hotly. ‘No matter what you tell me now.’

‘All right, then,’ Jacob said. His voice was like a terrible caress, a low, silky whisper. ‘Here’s the truth, Mollie. Here’s what you don’t know. What nobody knows.’ His eyes met hers, glinting blackly with challenge, and Mollie lifted her chin, ready for the worst.

‘The night my father died,’ Jacob told her, his voice still a soft whisper that coiled right around her heart and *squeezed*, ‘I was out at a party. I liked to go out to parties. Going out and getting drunk was about the only respite I had.’

‘That hardly shocks me, Jacob.’

‘That’s nothing,’ he dismissed. ‘It’s what happened when I came home.’

‘I know William was whipping Annabelle with a riding crop,’ Mollie told him. ‘She spoke of it once to me. And Nathaniel and Sebastian were trying to stop him.’

‘They couldn’t,’ Jacob confirmed. ‘They were too young. They were crying, although Annabelle was silent. She was curled up on the floor, covered in blood. I thought she was dead.’

Mollie closed her eyes. She could hardly bear to imagine the scene, and yet Jacob had lived it ... and still lived with it, nearly twenty years later.

‘In that moment,’ Jacob told her in a cold, detached voice, ‘I felt anger like I’d never known before. It was a red mist before my eyes, in my heart. It covered me. It *controlled* me, and I raised my hand to my father.’

‘To save your sister,’ Mollie finished swiftly. ‘To save her. It was the right thing to do, Jacob. It was self-defence.’

‘Was it?’ he asked quietly. ‘Don’t you think there could have been another way? I could have grabbed the riding crop, or wrestled him to the ground, or taken Annabelle away from him.’

'Perhaps, but you could hardly consider all your choices right then,' Mollie argued. 'It was the heat of the moment.'

'Exactly. The heat of the moment. And in that heat, I wanted to hit him. So that's what I did.' He spoke with such self-loathing that Mollie felt helpless in the face of it. 'I was so angry, as angry as he'd ever been with me.'

'It's different, Jacob,' Mollie insisted. Tears crowded in her eyes and thickened her throat.

'How is it different?' His gaze suddenly swung back to her, pinning her mercilessly with its bleak truth. 'How, Mollie? I saw myself just as I really am in that moment. Someone controlled by anger, who acted on the most base instinct—'

'The instinct to protect your sister?'

'I hit him as hard as I could, Mollie. *As hard as I could.* I punched him with all the anger I'd ever felt, all the abuse I'd ever taken, and—' he drew in a shuddering breath '—in that moment, before he fell, it felt good.'

'Of course it did,' Mollie returned. 'He'd been abusing you and your brothers and sister for years, and you never fought back.' Her voice rose in an anger of her own. 'Why are you defining yourself by that one moment, instead of all the other moments when you protected your family, when you did what was right and good?'

'I have a dream,' Jacob said in a low voice. 'I dream of the moment when I hit my father—over and over again. I can't escape it. And in the dream—you heard me, didn't you? The night we were together. I laugh.' His voice shook. 'I *laugh*.'

'It's a dream, Jacob,' Mollie said steadily. 'Not the truth. Dreams distort reality, they make it worse.'

'I scared you, didn't I?' Jacob said, gazing at her bleakly. 'That night. I scare myself. I can't let go of the anger—I feel it every night, when I have that dream. And that's the truth of who I am.'

Mollie stared at him. He might laugh in a distorted dream, but now tears were running down his face, unchecked. Mollie didn't think Jacob even realised he was weeping. And without considering what she was

doing, simply *needing* to, she closed the space between them and reached up to put her hands on Jacob's face, forcing him to look at her, her thumbs wiping away his tears. 'Do you know what I see when I look at you, Jacob? I see a man who sacrificed everything—even his own happiness—to protect his sister. I see a man who, time and time again, showed how much he loved his family. I see a man who has so much compassion and concern inside of him that he would do anything—*anything*—to keep from hurting the people he loves.' Jacob stared at her, unresisting, taking in every word. Mollie leaned forward, on her tiptoes, so her lips were a breath away from his. 'I see the man I love.' And then she kissed him; she could feel his shoulders shaking as she drew him towards her.

The kiss, which had started as a healing balm, turned into something hungry and urgent. Jacob's hands cupped her face and desire leapt low in Mollie's belly, scattering all the sorrow and regret.

Jacob softened his kiss, deepening it as his hands stripped away her clothes, buttons popping and scattering. Mollie fumbled with his tie, his blazer, his belt, kicking off shoes and socks and underwear until they were both naked, both breathless and desperate with longing.

Jacob drove into her in one deep stroke, filling her to completion as she pulled him even closer to her, wanting their bodies to be joined, fused from shoulder to ankle, the final healing.

'I love you,' she whispered, and he let out a choked sob. Mollie placed her hands on either side of his face, forcing him to look at her. His eyes were still full of torment, an agony she longed to wipe clean away. 'I love you,' she said again, forcefully, and then there were no more words as the desire became too great, spiralling dizzily inside her, higher and higher, until with a cry she found her release, and Jacob collapsed against her, his face buried in her shoulder.

He rolled away from her almost instantly, his arm thrown over his face. Mollie's heart hammered and her breath tore. She was naked and sweaty and sticky. She reached for him.

'Jacob—'

He shook his head. 'No. Don't.' He took a few ragged breaths, his chest heaving. 'You should leave me,' he said at last.

'No.' She pulled at his arm. 'I'm not leaving you, Jacob. Not now, not ever. I love you, and you love me. We're working through this.' Her voice shook and tears started in her eyes. 'We are.' He shook his head, a tiny movement, but Mollie felt it all the way through her. She pulled at his arm again. 'Look at me, Jacob. *Look at me.*' Finally he lowered his arm and gazed at her. In the darkness Mollie couldn't see his expression. 'I love you,' she said, her voice choked. 'I love you and I need you. Don't walk away from me. Don't think you're doing me a favour, or the right or noble thing, by leaving, because you aren't. Stay with me. Show me you love me by staying.'

Ever so gently Jacob brushed a tendril of damp hair away from her cheek. 'I'm so afraid of hurting you,' he whispered. 'More afraid of that than of anything in my life.'

A tear slipped down Mollie's cheek. 'You're a better man than you think you are, Jacob,' she whispered. 'So much better. You're a *good* man.'

Jacob gave her the faintest of smiles, yet the sight of it made Mollie want to sing or perhaps weep with relief. 'As long as you think so.'

'I do,' Mollie whispered. 'I do. You're worth saving, Jacob. Worth loving. And I love you.'

'I love you,' Jacob told her, his voice hoarse as he pulled her to him. They lay together for a long moment, neither speaking, a new peace settling over them. Yet even so, despite the relief flooding her heart that they had got this far, Mollie knew they hadn't yet made it to the other side.

The memories were still there. The sorrow and heartache and bone-deep guilt.

*As long as you think so.*

Yet Jacob needed to think so too. He needed to believe—in himself.

As the darkness deepened around them, Jacob stirred and finally rose from the study floor. He scooped Mollie up in his arms, smiling as she curled into him, as contented as a cat.

'I think we need a bed,' he said, and she nodded against his shoulder.

The house was swathed in darkness as he strode down the hallways to the foyer, paused at the foot of the great staircase. He'd always hated this place, hated the mental image the stairs alone conjured. Annabelle bloody. His brothers weeping. His father dead. Yet now, as he stood there for a moment, the images didn't rise up the way they usually did, and their absence gave Jacob a little flicker of hope. Perhaps the past could be forgiven. Perhaps Mollie was right.

Mollie looked up at him, her face open and so very trusting. 'Jacob?'

He smiled down at her before mounting the stairs, and she curled into him once again.

Up in his bedroom he peeled back the duvet and laid her on the bed gently, as if she might break, though he already knew how strong she was. She looked up at him, still and waiting. Jacob slid in next to her and pulled her close.

The only time he'd spent the night with a woman in the past twenty years had been the night with Mollie in the London hotel. He didn't let women close enough to see him vulnerable, to witness his sleep—or his dreams.

That night he'd been so buoyed with hope he'd risked it, with disastrous consequences. Yet now he knew there was no risk. Mollie had already seen him at his worst, at his most appalling and abject, and she loved him anyway.

She *loved* him. It felt like a miracle.

He rested his head on the softness of her hair and closed his eyes. He slept.

The dream came. Even as it attacked the fringes of his mind, Jacob felt resignation settle in his soul. He'd known this would happen. He was so agonisingly familiar with this dream; it had played in a relentless loop in his mind for too long.

Yet this time it was different. This time he wasn't in the dream; he wasn't even himself. He was a silent, invisible spectator, watching that terrible moment unfold like a scene in a play. He saw Annabelle huddled on the floor, his brothers begging their father to stop, tears in their eyes. He saw William, the riding crop raised over his head, and he saw

himself.

It was strange, to look upon himself like another person, yet it also felt right. This was the truth, untainted by fear or uncertainty. He watched as his hands curled into fists; he waited, his own heart pounding, as he raised those fists. He saw his father raise the riding crop again. And then he watched himself hit his father. He heard that awful laughter.

Except it wasn't a laugh, not the laugh of his dreams, that shout of manic glee that had tormented him for so long. This was halfway to a sob, a groan of despair and anguish over what he'd just done ... what he'd had to do.

And in that moment he understood himself in a way he had never had before. He understood the anger and sorrow and even that brief second of satisfaction he'd felt when he'd hit his father, and he accepted it.

He let it go.

Jacob opened his eyes, coming awake with ease and peace. Mollie was still curled close to him, asleep. His own heart rate had slowed, and he wasn't drenched in sweat as he usually was after the dream. He hadn't laughed aloud. He hadn't laughed at all.

He lay there, quietly, letting the feeling of calm acceptance spread through him. He felt different. He felt at peace. He drew Mollie close again and closed his eyes, and this time when he slept there were no dreams at all.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

MOLLIE woke to sunlight and the heavy warmth of Jacob's arm across her. She shifted, and his eyes flickered opened. 'Good morning.'

She smiled, blinking the sleep from her own eyes. 'Good morning.' She gazed at him, his features softened into a smile, and she realised she'd never seen him look so relaxed before. So at peace. 'You're different,' she said softly, and he smiled back at her.

'I feel different.' He captured her hand in his own and pressed it against her cheek. There could be no denying that this peaceful morning was a world apart from the shattered aftermath of last night's revelations. Mollie chose not to ask Jacob why. Not yet. He would tell her when he was ready.

'Come on,' she said instead. She slipped from the bed, reaching for one of Jacob's T-shirts, discarded on a nearby chair, and slipped it over her head. 'I want to show you something.'

'Show me?'

'Outside.'

Once they were both properly dressed, fortified with a quick breakfast of coffee and toast, Mollie led Jacob through the gardens. The world was bathed in fresh, lemony light, the leaves of every tree a vivid green, glittering with dew.

'You've done a marvellous job,' Jacob told her as they walked along the neat, repointed paths, the flower beds well weeded, the soil freshly turned and black. 'It's like a completely new place.'

'It is a new place,' Mollie said firmly, for what had come to her through working in the gardens—and being with Jacob—was that Wolfe Manor didn't have to suffer as a prisoner of the past, just as Jacob didn't. Just as *she* didn't.

'Where are you taking me?'

'The Rose Garden,' Mollie told him. 'Although it doesn't have roses

any more.' Funny, how difficult it had been to let go of the roses. It had felt, a little bit, like letting go of her father. That garden had been so much a part of him, so dear to his heart, and yet Mollie knew he would have approved of what she'd done. Henry Parker had always believed in gardening from the heart, with both passion and purity. He would have agreed the roses had to go, even though his heart would have broken just a little bit. And she hoped—believed—he would have liked the changes she'd made. She only hoped Jacob liked them.

'Here.' She stopped at the entrance to the old Rose Garden, the hedges blocking what she'd done from Jacob's view. She stood on her tiptoes to cover his eyes. 'Don't peek.'

She felt his smile against her hand. 'Certainly not.'

Smiling back, her heart starting to beat just a bit faster, she led him to just inside the garden. 'Okay.' She took her hand from his eyes. 'Look.'

Silently Jacob surveyed the transformed space. Although the garden was still octagonal in shape, no remnant of what it had been remained. It was entirely new.

Mollie watched him take in the hand-crafted stream that marked the perimeter of the garden, and the little wooden bridge—painted red for joy—that spanned it. Slowly he walked forward, over the bridge, coming into the garden itself.

Nerves made Mollie speak, stumbling over the words. 'I—I got the idea from you, you know.'

'A Zen garden?'

'Well, yes, but not just that. At the expo I read that one of the hallmarks of J Design is how each building reflects the spirit of the owner rather than the designer. And I wanted this garden to be like that—a reflection of you.'

Jacob turned to her, startled. 'Me?'

'Yes,' Mollie said, smiling at Jacob's surprise; he looked as if he could hardly credit anything being about him. 'You're the owner of Wolfe Manor,

Jacob. And you're quite an amazing person, you know.'

He caught her hand, his fingers twining with hers, and drew her to his side. ‘Show me what you did.’

So Mollie did. She’d been nervous to over-explain all the choices she’d made in the garden, but with Jacob it was natural and easy to share her ideas: how she’d planted the plum trees as a symbol of resilience, since they flowered without leaf, and the pine tree as a symbol of strength. The wrought iron frog perched at a bend in the stream was a symbol of sudden enlightenment, and Jacob recognised it right away.

“Old pond, frog jumps in, splash.” He quoted the old Japanese haiku about sudden enlightenment softly, and Mollie grinned. ‘My epiphany came last night,’ he told her, drawing her close again, ‘thanks to you.’

He paused as they came to the main showpiece of the garden. Slightly off-centre, in a bed of raked sand, Mollie had placed eight stones. She’d chosen them carefully, from the one with glittering gold flecks that reminded her of Nathaniel’s acting talent, to the smooth, grey oval whose seamless surface made her think of Annabelle’s cool, collected persona. Yet the stone that drew the eye to the centre of the arrangement was the tall pillar of rough-hewn granite that presided over them all, a guardian, a gatekeeper, strong, silent, *there*. Always. She felt Jacob’s hand tighten around hers as he silently counted the stones, his gaze sweeping over them and taking in the significance of the arrangement.

The stream that surrounded the garden came to its source at the top of the little rock garden, where a gradated slope turned it into a waterfall, allowing the water to spray over the rocks, bestowing them with diamond drops, before gathering in a basin below that funnelled it back to the stream bed.

Water, Mollie knew, was the symbol of rebirth, of both life and healing, and every rock was bathed by it. Jacob stretched out his hand and let the water wash over his fingers in his own silent baptism.

Then he turned to Mollie and said in a voice low with heartfelt sincerity, ‘Thank you.’

They strolled through the rest of the gardens then, their hands clasped, fingers entwined, and Mollie showed him all that she had done, loving how easy it was talk to him, to point out the challenges and

difficulties of each part of the project, the plants she'd worked hard to save and the ones she'd had to let go. She shook her head mournfully at the ragged stump of a huge oak tree.

'I left the stump to commemorate it,' she admitted sheepishly. 'No tree that old should just be forgotten, the stump removed like it never even was.'

'No indeed,' Jacob agreed. 'That's where we had our tree house, you know.'

'I don't remember—'

'No, my father tore it down in one of his rages.' Mollie found herself tensing slightly at the mention of William Wolfe, as if even now he held some power over Jacob, and his—their—future happiness. But Jacob just squeezed her hand and shook his head. 'It's over,' he said softly. 'I only feel sorrow now, for the man he was, and the man he could have been. The father we could have had.' He stopped, gazing at the manor, the sunlight touching its roof in gold. 'I've lived so much of my life in the shadow of what happened that night,' he said quietly. 'And not just that night, but everything that came before. Everything that led up to it.' He sighed, the sound soft, sad and accepting. 'I know I'll always regret the kind of childhood we suffered, but you've shown me that it doesn't have to cripple me. That moment doesn't have to define me.' He smiled at her, and Mollie saw that the shadows from his eyes were gone.

The night was cool and damp as Jacob rose from the bed. He left Mollie curled on her side, her hand tucked under her cheek, a smile curving her lips even in sleep. Jacob smiled at the sight of her before he pulled on a pair of drawstring trousers and a T-shirt and left the room.

He'd become accustomed to walking the manor and its grounds by night, the only respite from the hell of his nightmares. Yet tonight he'd had no dreams; he hadn't had one for nearly a week, since his ghosts had been exorcised and he'd felt the healing balm of forgiveness. He forgave himself, which seemed an incredible and amazing achievement, to seek something from within that he had not thought he'd been capable of possessing in the first place.

In the past week he'd found himself walking through the rooms of the

house with a different, sweeter set of memories than he'd had before. *This is where Sebastian took his first steps. This is where Jack sledged down the back stairs on a baking tray and blacked both his eyes. This is where Lucas and I stole a batch of biscuits from Maggie and ate them until we were sick.*

He paused at the foot of the grand staircase. *This is where I saved Annabelle.*

Annabelle had rung him several weeks ago, needing his forgiveness, feeling guilty for her own sorry part in the events of that terrible night, believing herself to be responsible for driving him away. And Jacob had given it freely, without reservation or regret, for he'd never once thought she had anything to be guilty for. Yet all the while he'd held onto his own guilt, let it burn into his soul like the most corrosive acid. It was only with Mollie's help that the scars were now healing over, fading away.

He was thankful now, in a new, quiet way, for his own hand in the events of that night. It was strange, to feel gratitude after living with the souldestroying guilt and fear for so long. Strange to let them go, and letting something cleaner and stronger take their place.

As dawn broke over the gardens, Jacob knew he had one more place to visit before the night was truly over.

Mollie woke alone. She sat up in bed, saw the first pink streaks of dawn slant through the window and illuminate the room in pale morning light, touching everything with gold. Jacob wasn't in bed; he wasn't in the room.

She slipped out of bed and quickly dressed. He was probably just working, she told herself, or perhaps just enjoying some early-morning solitude.

Yet that same fear that had been eating at her contentment all week now rose again inside of her, like a hunger that could never be satisfied. This week had been wonderful, so unbearably sweet, yet even so a pall of uncertainty hung over it. Neither she nor Jacob had talked about the future, and Mollie wondered when—or if—they would, or what kind of future they could even have. Jacob still seemed set on selling Wolfe

Manor, and travelling who-knew-where.

Still, she was not about to go in search of Jacob this early in the morning and ask questions or demand answers. Instead she slipped on a pair of boots and headed out the back door, to the garden.

She left the ordered gardens behind, heading to the distant areas that had been outside her domain: the smooth, unrippled expanse of the lake, the copse of birches that was beautiful in its unexpected wildness, all the parts of the estate that were lovely without being landscaped. She loved this place, she thought with a pang of sorrow. She would be sorry to see it sold, and not just for what it might mean for her and Jacob.

She paused, coming out of the shadow of the trees, for on a hill above the woods she could see a lone figure standing in the family's private cemetery. Mollie had almost forgotten about the little graveyard on the far corner of the estate, its iron fence rusted, the gate nearly falling off its broken hinge. Her own father was buried in the local churchyard in Wolfestone. All the Wolfes, however, were buried here. Slowly she walked up the hill and slipped through the half-open gate to where Jacob was standing.

Most of the headstones in the family plot were mossy and falling down, their engraved dates worn clear away by time and weather. A few more recent headstones were in the far corner, where Jacob stood. She passed by William's wives: first Amber, then Penelope, whom she knew was Jacob's mother. She joined Jacob in front of William's grave.

Neither of them spoke. Mollie glanced at the headstone; besides the dates of William's birth and death there was a simple epitaph: *Have Mercy*.

Silently she slid her hand into Jacob's.

'It was all I could think of,' he said quietly. 'The epitaph. My father made such a mess of his life.'

Mollie said nothing. She was humbled by Jacob's selflessness, his willingness to plead for his father even while he denied himself that same mercy.

'I've been angry for so long,' he continued, his fingers tightening on hers. 'And I'm not any more. It's such a strange feeling, a lightness, not

to carry that burden around. I spoke to Lucas this morning, on the telephone, and even he could tell something was different. Better.' He paused, his gaze still fixed on William's headstone. 'I only feel pity for him now. Pity and love for the man he sometimes was, the man I know he wanted to be.'

'And it's good you remember that,' Mollie told him. 'His life wasn't an utter waste, if you can hold onto that.'

The sun was breaking through the morning clouds, and the day was turning hot. Jacob turned to smile at Mollie. 'I want to show you something,' he told her. 'Something new.'

Several hours later, dressed and showered, Mollie followed Jacob out of the manor and stopped in surprise at the car parked in the drive. The little red convertible.

'You brought it back from London?'

'I had it driven.' Jacob went round to open her door. 'It's a beautiful day. We can ride with the top down.'

Mollie slipped into the car and Jacob closed the door. 'Where are we going?' she asked as they drove down the sweeping lane and then through the estate's wrought iron gates.

Jacob gave her a teasing, glinting smile. 'You'll see.'

She still wasn't prepared when, a half-hour later, they arrived at a private airstrip, a jet waiting on the tarmac. Mollie turned to him, her eyes wide.

'Jacob.?"

'Come on.' He parked and opened the door, and disbelievingly Mollie followed him towards the plane.

'A jet? But where ...? I don't have anything ...' She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, thinking he'd meant to show her something on the estate. At least she'd brushed her teeth and put on a dab of makeup, but other than that ...

'I've taken care of it all,' Jacob assured her. His eyes glinted as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. 'Everything.'

Mollie gave a little laugh. This was so out of her realm, she was

spinning. She decided to go with it. ‘Okay,’ she said, and headed up the stairs to the waiting plane.

A few minutes later the jet taxied down the airstrip and then took off into a cloudless blue sky. Across from her Jacob was grinning like a little boy with a secret. The interior of the jet was upholstered in luxurious white leather, with a mahogany coffee table between the sofas. It felt like a living room in the sky. A steward silently came forward with a bottle of sparkling cider and two flutes.

‘This is amazing,’ Mollie said as Jacob handed her a glass. He raised his in a toast, and she did the same.

‘To amazing surprises.’

They both drank, and Mollie felt the bubbles from the cider fizz low in her belly at Jacob’s heavy-lidded look. She loved everything about him, from the way his eyes glinted darkly to the low note of languor in his voice as he said, ‘Come here.’

Mollie didn’t pretend to misunderstand. ‘Jacob, the steward—’

‘He knows not to come back.’

She glanced around the little cabin, the door closed to the staff quarters on one end and the cockpit on the other. They were completely alone.

‘All right,’ Jacob said easily, ‘if you won’t come here, then I’ll come to you.’

He rose from his seat with easy grace, and even after a week of exploring and learning every inch of his body Mollie’s heart began to thud with expectation as he closed the space between them, sitting next to her on the sofa before pulling her onto his lap, her legs sliding across his, her breasts grazing his chest. Even now the contact felt so good, made the breath dry in her throat and the thoughts evaporate from her brain like bubbles.

Bubbles. She was filled with bubbles, light, airy, wondrous. They were miracles, really. How did they float? How did they not pop?

Jacob smiled, his hands sliding through the silk of her hair, down to her shoulders, his thumbs coming round to brush the already aching sides of her breasts.

‘Jacob ...’ she said, but it was only a half-hearted protest as she felt the hardness of his thighs against her, and her hands came up to flatten against the wall of his chest, then slid up of their own accord to his shoulders, to draw him even closer still. He was very close now, so she could smell the woodsy tang of his aftershave and see the glint of dark stubble on his chin. If she leaned forward just an inch she’d feel his lashes brush her own cheek. He was still smiling faintly, and all Mollie could think about was how much she loved him ... and how much she wanted to touch him *now*.

He dipped his head lower to hers and nipped at the corner of her mouth, his teeth gently scraping the softness of her lips, playful, provocative. With a groan she closed the space between their mouths and Jacob claimed her for his own in a deeper kiss, one hand coming up to fist in her hair and angle her head closer to his, the other spanning her hips and moving her so she sat straddled him, the juncture of her thighs so achingly snug against his.

‘Jacob ...’ she said again, breathlessly, half protest, half plea.

He smiled and reached for the zip of her jeans.

Mollie gasped at the feel of his fingers sliding against her skin, dipping under the elastic band of her underwear. She moved even closer so she felt the hardness of his erection pressing into her most sensitive place, and she buried her head in his shoulder, shifting her body as if that alone could ease the building ache inside of her.

Jacob eased her jeans over her hips, pushing aside his own clothing so nothing prevented their perfect joining. His hands clasped her hips as he entered her, and his lips grazed her jaw, nudging her to look at him. She lifted her head and met his gaze straight on, amazed at both the pleasure and the power of their united bodies, the deep sense of satisfaction that was as emotional as it was physical, the feeling of completeness that overwhelmed her so she was robbed of words or even thoughts save one.

*Home.* This was home.

An hour later they were in Paris. Mollie had ducked back into the bathroom to rearrange her clothing and hair, wryly noting her flushed cheeks and swollen lips. Her eyes glowed with an inner light, and she

knew nothing could disguise what had just happened. She looked like a woman who had been loved.

A limousine was waiting for them as they left the airport, and within minutes they were speeding away towards the centre of the city.

‘Where are we going?’ Mollie asked, and Jacob just smiled. Mollie shook her head. ‘All these secrets.’

‘No, no secrets,’ he told her. ‘Just surprises.’

He took her to an exclusive hotel, and a concierge led them up to the executive suite, with its acres of plush cream carpet and a king-size bed piled high with silk pillows that Mollie knew they would put to good use.

As the concierge quietly closed the door, she spun to face Jacob, her hands on her hips. ‘I’m wearing jeans.’

He just smiled, jangling the keys in his pocket. ‘I told you I took care of everything.’

And he had. A few minutes later Mollie heard a knock on the door, and a young woman in a crisp white uniform told her she was ready for her spa treatments.

Instinctively Mollie glanced down at her grime-encrusted nails. She’d never even had a manicure, and for good reason. The woman glanced briefly at her workmanlike hands and smiled sweetly.

‘Nothing is too much, mademoiselle. You will enjoy, you’ll see.’

And she did. Three hours of manicures, massages and a plethora of other treatments left her feeling new and shiny, as if her very skin sparkled. As if she really was full of bubbles, floating down the hallway.

And then she saw the dresses.

Half a dozen haute couture gowns were laid out in the bedroom, and Mollie almost didn’t want to touch all that silk and satin, afraid she’d get them dirty. Then she realised she wouldn’t, because she was as clean and shiny as a freshly minted penny. She picked one and held it to her, let her breath out in a slow hiss.

‘That one is lovely,’ another uniformed assistant said crisply, bustling into the room. ‘But I think the brown one will suit your colouring better.’

‘Brown?’ Mollie dropped the pink satin gown she’d been clutching. Who really wanted to wear a brown dress?

Except this dress wasn’t brown at all. It was taupe, shimmering, with a ruche of cream ruffles at the daringly low neckline, and a halter neck tied with cream silk ribbon. When she slid the dress on, she felt nearly naked, only better. The dress clung.

She stared at herself in the mirror, amazed at how her curves had been accentuated. She had never even realised she had a figure like this. She’d never worn a dress like this.

‘*Parfait*,’ the woman said, and dumbly Mollie nodded. This whole day was *parfait*.

Next came hair, her now-lustrous waves pulled into a sleek coil at the nape of her neck, and then make-up, finished with a dusting of shimmery powder, and finally Mollie slid on a pair of diamond-encrusted stilettos. The assistant handed her a matching beaded clutch and a wrap of spangled silk in the same creamy taupe as her dress.

‘Where ... where’s Jacob?’ Mollie asked. ‘Mr Wolfe?’

‘He sent a car,’ the assistant told her, and Mollie followed the woman downstairs to where a limo waited in the rain-washed Parisian night.

Within minutes she was speeding away to an unknown destination, and when she rapped on the tinted glass that separated her from the driver and attempted to ask where she was going and, more importantly, where Jacob was, she simply received a Gallic grunt in reply.

Sighing, Mollie leaned back against the leather seat and decided to simply—and literally—enjoy the ride.

A quarter of an hour later the limo pulled up to the front of a tall, modern building, elegant and spare in its lines. Mollie saw, to her surprise, that it was a museum of modern art, recently constructed.

As the driver opened the door of the building, she saw a small, commemorative plaque—*J Design*—and she felt a frisson of excitement.

‘Top floor, *mademoiselle*, the driver told her, and disappeared.

The museum was deserted, although Mollie glimpsed several works of priceless art hanging on the walls. Jacob had to have some serious pulling power to be allowed into a museum without security, and she

couldn't help but be impressed as she rode up in the lift and the doors whooshed open to the glassed-in penthouse, with every side open to the incredible city view.

And in the middle of all that elegant space stood Jacob.

Mollie stepped forward, taking in the table for two set with creamy linen and sparkling crystal, the two tall candles in the centre casting dancing shadows over the penthouse. She glanced around the room, and saw a few modern sculptures artfully placed.

'I feel a little overdressed,' she finally said, laughing a bit, for although Jacob looked amazing in a charcoal-grey suit, she was dressed like Cinderella about to go to the ball.

'You look beautiful.' Jacob stepped forward so the candlelight flickered over his face. 'And this is a special occasion, so you're dressed as you should be.'

'It feels very special,' Mollie admitted. She was still a little overwhelmed. She walked towards the window, gazing in amazement at the City of Light spread before her. Even though she'd never been to Paris before, she could still pick out the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe. She felt Jacob come to stand behind her, and she leaned a little against him, revelling in his strength, and that it was hers. At least for now.

They still hadn't talked about the future, and she had a horrible, creeping suspicion that this whole surprise might be Jacob's way of saying goodbye. Go out with a bang. Or was she just being terribly insecure, because their relationship was so new and untested?

Jacob touched her lightly on the shoulders. 'I have something for you.'

'You do?' Her stomach lurched, just a little bit. She turned, smiling up at him. His eyes glinted in the candlelight.

'Yes ... and it took a little doing.' He moved away from her, and when he returned seconds later he was holding something. A flower, Mollie saw. A rose.

Yet it wasn't just any rose. She could tell that as she took it and inspected the deep red centre, the orange petals a creamy white at their tips.

'It looked just as I imagined it,' Jacob said, a smile in his voice. 'Like your hair.'

'My ...' Mollie gazed up at him in wonder. 'This is my father's rose.'

'The Mollie Rose,' Jacob confirmed.

She gazed down at the flame-coloured flower again, tears stinging her eyes. 'But how ...?'

'A lot of favours and pulling strings.'

'I'm speechless.' She laughed a little even as she blinked back tears. 'Thank you, Jacob. This—it means a lot to me.'

'I didn't mean to make you cry,' he said softly, and touched his thumb to the corner of her eye.

'Good tears,' Mollie managed. She could still feel the imprint of his thumb on her skin.

'Then I might as well go ahead and give you all the surprises at once,' he said, and Mollie's heart bumped as he withdrew a small box of black velvet from his trouser pocket. She could only stare, speechless, incredulous and with dawning joy, as Jacob dropped to one knee in front of her. 'Mollie Parker,' he said, his voice a low, heartfelt caress, 'will you marry me?'

## CHAPTER TWELVE

‘MARRY you?’ Mollie repeated, as if they were words in another language, and in a way they were. In all her distant dreamings of a possible future with Jacob, she had never been so bold as to imagine this.

‘Yes, marry me,’ he told her, and she heard a hint of laughter in his voice at her obvious surprise. ‘I’m deeply, desperately in love with you and I want you to be my wife. For ever.’

For ever. What wonderful words. ‘I never thought—’ Mollie began, because she really never had.

Jacob smiled. ‘I didn’t either,’ he told her softly. ‘I never thought such happiness could be mine. I never even dared to dream or hope for it. For the past nineteen years, Mollie, I’ve been living a half-life, or even less than that. I let myself become consumed with work because it was all I had, all that made me value myself. When I worked, I didn’t remember. Didn’t think. Didn’t dream.’ Jacob’s face had become serious, his gaze still holding hers, and Mollie knew he needed to say this. She needed to hear it. ‘I never let anyone close enough to find out who I really was, or at least who I thought I was, underneath.’

She reached out to touch his cheek. ‘You aren’t though.’

‘And you made me realise that. You made me look at myself in a way I’d never been able to before. Do you know the night after I told you everything I had the old dream again? Only this time I saw it as I really was. I saw myself in a way I never had before, and I saw that I’d been tormenting myself for so long, for no purpose.’ He shook his head, his lips brushing her fingers.

‘Guilt has a way of getting right inside of you,’ Mollie said softly, ‘and keeping you captive.’

‘But you set me free from it,’ Jacob told her. ‘Loving you has set me free, and I want to keep doing that for the rest of my life, if you let me. Will you, Mollie? Will you marry me?’

The answer was so wonderful, so easy and obvious and right. ‘Yes,’

Mollie said, and she held out her hand for Jacob to slip on the ring.

He held her hand gently, and she gazed in wonder at the antique diamond flanked by two perfect sapphires. ‘The diamond is from my family,’ Jacob explained, ‘and the sapphires are new. Because we may not forget what we’re from, but together we can make—and be—something better.’

‘I love it,’ Mollie whispered, and both laughing and crying just a little, she drew Jacob up from his knees and stepped into the loving circle of his arms.

The morning of her wedding dawned clear and bright. It had rained the night before, but now the last shreds of grey cloud were vanishing on the horizon, leaving nothing but pale blue sky.

Mollie stood at the window of her childhood bedroom; she’d decided to spend her last night as a single woman here. After they were married, the little gardener’s cottage would be renovated and turned into an office space for her new landscaping business.

After Jacob had proposed, he’d told her he wanted to live in Wolfe Manor and make it a home. ‘I don’t want to put it on the market, and walk away from it like it never existed. Just like that big stump of yours in the garden. Wolfe Manor is my home, and it’s yours too. I want to fill it with the new memories we’ll make, good ones. I want to hear the laughter of our children ring through the halls, if we should be so blessed.’

Smiling, Mollie gazed out at the gardens, now touched with the gold of autumn. Staying at the manor had felt so right; she realised she couldn’t imagine living anywhere else, and she was filled with joy that Jacob felt the same.

The past few months had been a whirlwind, preparing for what some magazines claimed was the ‘wedding event of the year’ as all the Wolfe siblings and their new spouses came back to the estate for Jacob’s marriage.

Mollie had been amazed and overwhelmed to see them all together; she knew Jacob felt it too, even more than she did. Last night they’d all sat down to a catered dinner after the rehearsal, and the table had been

full. The house was full. Her heart was full.

Wolfe Manor was a home again.

Mollie heard a light knock at her bedroom door and Annabelle, her matron of honour, peeked her head round the corner. ‘How are you doing? I came to help you dress.’

‘My stomach is full of butterflies,’ Mollie admitted as she turned away from the window. ‘Good ones though.’

‘It’s a big day,’ Annabelle agreed.

‘Are you feeling all right?’

Annabelle patted her slightly rounded middle and made a face. ‘Fine, as long as I eat every few hours. The morning sickness is mostly gone now, but it strikes every so often.’

‘Well, you look amazing,’ Mollie said. She’d never seen her friend more radiant. Gone was the carefully applied layer of make-up to hide the livid red scar that cut across one cheek. Now Annabelle held her head proudly, her eyes shining with the love she had for her husband, Stefano. Gone also was the cool distance she’d cloaked herself in as a way to protect herself from the world. She smiled at Mollie and squeezed her shoulder.

‘Come on, then. We’d better get moving. The photographer wants you dressed and ready to smile in an hour.’

It was going to be a big wedding. Mollie had, briefly, argued for a small, quiet affair, and Jacob would have gone along with it, but as she talked to his brothers and sister she came to accept that their older brother’s wedding was the perfect event to reunite the family, as Jacob had always wanted to. How could Mollie stand in the way of that?

Now she slipped into her wedding gown, an ivory silk sheath that rippled over her skin. She wasn’t the kind of girl to do ruffles or lace, and the gown made her feel sexy. Beautiful. Loved.

Annabelle twitched the gossamer veil over Mollie’s bare shoulders. ‘Gorgeous,’ she murmured. ‘Jacob is going to fall over when he sees you. Either that or grab you and head to the nearest—’

‘Annabelle!’ Laughing, Mollie wagged her finger at her friend. ‘Actually, I think Stefano is far more likely to grab you and make a run

for it. Every time he looks at you, I can see the love in his eyes. You both glow.'

'We've both been blessed, haven't we?'

'And all your brothers too.' For in the past year all the Wolfe siblings had found love, and Mollie saw the peace and happiness in each of their eyes. It was both a blessing and a bit of a miracle.

'Jacob sent this over,' Annabelle told her, reaching for a white box. 'I think it's your bouquet.' Mollie lifted the simple arrangement of flame-coloured roses from its nest of tissue paper. Annabelle made a small sound of admiration. 'I've never seen roses like that before.'

'No,' Mollie agreed quietly as she lifted the blooms to her face and inhaled their heady scent, 'you wouldn't have.'

Jacob shifted from foot to foot as he stood at the front of several dozen rows of white folding chairs set out on the estate's grand lawn. He still wasn't used to being the centre of attention, the focus of so many pairs of eyes. He wanted Mollie to make an appearance just so people would stop looking at him so much.

He also wanted to see her. Touch her. Hold her in his arms and promise to make her his for ever. The thought, even now, had the power to bring him to his knees, so utterly thankful for the mercy that had been shown him.

From his position beside Jacob, Lucas murmured out of the corner of his mouth, 'Don't break down yet. She hasn't even made an appearance.'

Jacob gave his best man a rather crooked smile. He knew Lucas understood how big a day this was. All of his brothers knew, and his sister as well; they were all married. All in love. All happy.

It was more, so much more, than he'd ever dared to dream of. Hope for. He straightened as the other groomsmen—Alex, Jack, Nathaniel, Sebastian, Rafael and Annabelle's husband, Stefano—joined him at the front, radiating out from his side.

The minister gave a tiny cough, and Jacob jerked his gaze to the back of the rows of chairs. The first bridesmaid, Aneesa, Sebastian's wife, was coming down the aisle, waddling a little as her first baby was due any day now.

Jacob's gaze followed each lovely woman as she came down the aisle, smiling with the joy of the upcoming ceremony and the serenity of knowing she already had that happiness and love for herself. After Aneesa, came Alex's wife, Libby, and then Nathaniel's wife, Katie, now six months pregnant and utterly radiant. Jack's wife, Cara, followed, and then Grace, Lucas's wife. Rafael's gorgeous wife, Leila, also very heavily pregnant with their precious twin babies, came next—somewhat slowly—and lastly Annabelle, smiling, her scar barely noticeable.

And then Mollie. Gorgeous, loving, wonderful Mollie. Jacob could see the sparkle in her pansy-brown eyes from the front, felt the love radiating out from her in warm, giving rays. His face broke into the widest, most ridiculous grin.

He was so *happy*.

And as Mollie joined his side, her smile matching his own, the minister gave another little cough and said, 'Shall we begin?'

Two hours later Jacob was tired of smiling, yet somehow he still couldn't stop. They'd been taking photographs for hours, and even though they'd already agreed on the deal to sell the snaps to a celebrity magazine for a huge sum, all of which would go to a charity for the prevention of child abuse, he was ready to be done with it. He wanted to eat. He wanted to dance. He wanted to go upstairs and make love to his wife.

'You're looking a little hot under the collar,' Jack remarked as he came to stand beside Jacob. Jacob smiled wryly.

'Just a bit tired of the photos.' He glanced sideways at Jack, knowing that the rift that had grown between them had not yet truly healed. He hadn't had a chance to speak privately with his brother, not since Jack had accused him of running away a second time by selling Wolfe Manor. He glanced up at the stately house he would always know as home.

He was finished with running away. 'Jack, I know the last time we spoke—'

Jack shook his head. 'I was angry....'

'You had good reason,' Jacob said quietly. 'I'll never take lightly how much I hurt you all by leaving.'

'It's finished, Jacob.'

‘I know it is.’ And he did, deep within.

Jack gave him a crooked smile. ‘Look at us all now. We’ve made it through all right, I’d say.’

‘Thanks to some amazing women,’ Jacob half joked, although his eyes were on Mollie.

‘And one amazing man. I’ve never seen Annabelle look so beautiful.’ Jack clapped his brother on the shoulder. ‘The past really is finished.’

Jacob nodded and pulled his brother into a quick, fierce hug before letting him go and nodding towards Mollie. ‘And now it’s time I claim my bride.’

Jacob pulled Mollie away from the circle of guests, leading towards the sheltered privacy of the gardens.

‘Where are you taking me?’ she asked, laughing a little. ‘Our guests, Jacob—’

‘I’m taking you away,’ he told her. ‘Somewhere. Anywhere. I just want to be alone with you.’

Under an oak tree, in a pool of dappled sunlight, he drew her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly—although not as thoroughly as he wanted to, or as he certainly would later.

Mollie tipped her head up, smiling into his eyes. ‘This kind of happiness almost doesn’t feel real. Like a dream.’

‘Not a dream,’ he assured her, tucking a stray tendril of hair behind her ear. ‘No more dreams, no more regrets, no more looking back.’ He kissed her again, filled with a deep sense of peace, overwhelmed with a lasting, buoyant happiness. ‘This is real. This is our future, Mrs Wolfe.’

## **BEHIND THE SCENES AT WOLFE MANOR ...**

### **Share a secret about Jacob or Mollie?**

I think all the big secrets come out by the end of the book! But something that didn't make it into the actual story was that Mollie didn't like her ginger hair—I've always wanted wavy auburn hair myself, so I was quite jealous of her.

### **Who is the biggest, baddest Wolfe?**

I'd have to say William Wolfe, the father, is in many ways the real big bad wolf of the story, but all the Wolfe brothers seem to have their own tortured secrets.

### **Which Wolfe brother did you most fancy?**

Jacob, of course! I explored his character so thoroughly that I fell in love with him myself. But I'm sure all the heroes are just as wonderful, and also very different from each other, which makes me look forward to reading all the books.

### **Which is Jacob's favourite room in Wolfe Manor?**

The nursery on the top floor of Wolfe Manor figures in the story as a place where Jacob and his siblings had some happy memories, and actually felt safe, so I think that must be his favourite room.

### **How did Jacob pop the big question?**

On the penthouse terrace of a museum he designed in Paris, right at the end of the story!

## **KATE'S WRITING SECRETS ...**

**What do you enjoy most about writing as part of a continuity series; how does it differ from writing a single title?**

I enjoy writing continuity books because I get such a lovely sense of being part of something bigger than just myself. Writing can often be a lonely enterprise, and I love hearing from editors and authors about all the elements that go into the continuity. And the moment when I crack open the “bible” that tells all the back story of the characters and their world is very exciting—and then I get to jump right into it!

**What do you think makes a great hero/heroine?**

I love heroes and heroines who are vulnerable in their weaknesses, and yet find their hidden strengths through loving each other.

**When you are writing, what is a typical day?**

After the morning school rush I usually sit down with a cup of coffee and answer e-mails and do more business-type things. Then I'm full on being a mum (my children are in school, except for my youngest daughter who is two) until nap time. When she goes down for a sleep, I grab the chance to write for a couple of hours before the other children come home and all becomes happy chaos once more.

All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author, and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all the incidents are pure invention.

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Mills & Boon, an imprint of Harlequin (UK) Limited,  
Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1SR

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Special thanks and acknowledgement are given to Sarah Morgan, Caitlin Crews, Abby Green, Robyn Grady, Lynn Raye Harris, Janette Kenny, Jennie Lucas, Kate Hewitt for their contributions to the Bad Blood series

ISBN: 978-1-408-93656-6

**53-0811**