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# KATE HEWITT

The Innocent's One-Night Surrender



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«HarperCollins»

## **Hewitt K.**

The Innocent's One-Night Surrender / K. Hewitt — «HarperCollins»,

Seduced by her rescuer...Desperate to escape a predatory suitor, Laurel Forrester has no one to turn to in Rome but her stepbrother, Cristiano Ferrero. A dangerous chemistry has always burned between them, even if he does believe her to be exactly like her manipulative mother. And, trapped in his luxurious penthouse, Laurel realises how vulnerable she is to his raw magnetism...Cristiano desires Laurel just as much as he despises her. Intent on getting her out of his system, he proposes one night of sin. But Laurel's surprising inexperience only increases his thirst for her, and makes Cristiano determined to entice her to surrender again... and again!

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'Where am I to sleep?' Laurel asked.

'There's a guest bedroom across the hall.' Cristiano pushed open the door opposite his own.

She turned to glance at him and that was her mistake. Her breath came out in a rush as heat flared between them. He put his hand on her wrist.

'Don't, Cristiano,' she whispered.

'Don't what?'

'Don't touch me.'

'Don't tempt you?' He stroked the silky skin of her inner wrist with his thumb. 'Is that what you mean?'

Laurel remained frozen, her pulse hammering.

'Why deny what is between us, bella?'

'There's nothing between us.' She had to nearly gasp the words out.

'Your body begs to differ.' Cristiano could see the indecision in her fractured gaze...the desire as well as the doubt. 'Stop worrying so much. What are you afraid of?' he murmured, his lips very nearly brushing hers.

'This...' she whispered, and then Cristiano kissed her.

After spending three years as a die-hard New Yorker, KATE HEWITT now lives in a small village in the English Lake District with her husband, their five children and a golden retriever. In addition to writing intensely emotional stories, she loves reading, baking and playing chess with her son—she has yet to win against him, but she continues to try. Learn more about Kate at [kate-hewitt.com](http://kate-hewitt.com).

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The Innocent's One-Night Surrender

Kate Hewitt



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To Jenna,

Thanks for spurring me on with this book! Love being able to chat with you.

Love, K.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

LAUREL FORRESTER BURST from the hotel room like a bullet from a gun, aiming for the lift down the hall. Her breath came in tearing gasps and she stumbled in the heels she wasn't used to wearing—stupid, sky-high stilettos her mother had insisted on.

She heard the sound of the door to the executive suite being wrenched open behind her and then heavy footfalls.

‘Come back here, you stupid little—’

With a mewling gasp of terror, Laurel put on a burst of speed, racing around the corner. The gleaming black doors of the lift shimmered ahead of her, a promise of freedom.

‘Wait until I...’

She closed her mind to Rico Bavasso's threats and stabbed the button for the lift with a shaking finger. Please, please open. Save me...

Bavasso came round the corner, moving swiftly for a man pushing sixty. Laurel risked a glance back and then wished she hadn't. Three diagonal cuts slashed one of his lean cheeks, where she'd scratched him, blood oozing down his face in crimson, pearly droplets.

Please, please open. If the lift doors didn't open, she didn't know what she'd do. Fight for her safety, for her life. Go down kicking and screaming, because go down she would. Bavasso might be older but he was big, strong and angry, and she was five-foot-four and just a little over a hundred pounds soaking wet.

With a glorious ping the doors opened and Laurel threw herself inside, bruising her shoulder against the far wall before she scrambled upright. She pushed just about every button she could, anything to get her away from the hell that had erupted with Bavasso's demands and grabs, his insistence that he would get what he'd paid for. What her mother had promised him.

Bile rose in Laurel's throat at that memory and she choked it down. She didn't have the luxury of memories or even thoughts in this moment. This was about basic survival. She pushed the 'door close' button repeatedly as Bavasso stumbled towards the lift, a smile of triumph curving his cold mouth, his glowering face thrust forward. His bow tie was askew, his tuxedo shirt straining against the buttons as he reached one hand forward to keep the doors from closing. Laurel shrank back against the lift wall, her heart beating in her chest like some wild, winged thing.

'I've got you, you little slut.'

Laurel kicked off one of her wretched stilettos and swung it at Bavasso's grasping hand. He let out a howl of outrage and yanked it back, his palm impaled by the dagger-sharp heel. The doors closed and then the lift was soaring upwards and Laurel was safe, safe.

She let out a sob of both terror and relief, her senses overwhelmed by what had happened—and what had almost happened, but thankfully hadn't. Her trembling legs felt weak and watery and she sank onto the floor, drawing her knees up to her chest as shudders wracked her body. That had been so close.

But she wasn't out of danger yet. She still had to get out of this hotel, out of Rome. Bavasso had her handbag in his hotel room, as well as his security detail waiting down in the foyer. Laurel had seen them when he'd been playing baccarat, standing around like stony-faced gorillas, eyes darting around the casino floor, looking for threats. And now she was one.

What would he do? Over the last two days' acquaintance he'd been sleek and charming, although admittedly paying her more attention than she'd have liked, considering he was her mother's latest love interest. He also seemed arrogant and entitled, and she feared he might not let this lie. And what about her mother? Was Elizabeth safe? Would Bavasso turn on her—or had she really been part of it all along, as he'd implied? I'm only taking what your mother promised me.

Surely not? Surely her mother wouldn't have sold her off like a cow at auction? With another cry Laurel covered her face, the tumult of the evening too much to bear. She should never have agreed to come to Rome, to play a part so she could get what she wanted. And yet she had. She'd weighed it up in her mind and she'd decided it was worth it. One last favour and then she'd finally be free. Except she wasn't free now. She didn't feel remotely free.

The doors opened and Laurel lifted her head, shrinking back, half-expecting Bavasso to be there, waiting. But, no; the lift opened directly into what looked like a private suite, twice as elegant and spacious as the one Laurel had just fled.

She scrambled to her feet, pulling on the hem of the short sparkly dress of silver satin that had also been her mother's choice. Bavasso wants to see a lovely young woman in her prime, not some dowdy wallflower. He's a discriminating man, Laurel. Now she was afraid she understood all that had meant.

Laurel knew she couldn't stay in the lift; the doors would close and then the lift would start heading down again, back to Bavasso or his goons, somewhere she definitely didn't want to be. Cautiously Laurel took a step out, onto a floor of polished black marble. Floor-to-ceiling windows were visible in every direction, giving a panoramic view of the Eternal City, lights shimmering in the darkness.

Modern-looking sofas of black leather and gleaming chrome were scattered around, the soaring space lit only by a few minimalistic table lamps, so it took Laurel a stunned second to realise there was someone in the room with her.

A man stood at its centre dressed in black trousers and a charcoal-grey shirt that was open at the throat. His hair was black and cropped close to his head, his eyes a piercing grey, the same colour as his shirt. His arms were folded, emphasising impressive biceps, and everything about him radiated power. Control. Danger.

Laurel's breath hitched and she froze where she stood, dawning realisation, relief and fear colliding inside her with an almighty crash. Could it be...?

Then he spoke, a voice like molten silver, pitched low. His tone was both authoritative and sensual, winding around her shattered senses, pulling them tight.

'Hello, Laurel.'

She gave a little gasp of surprise even though she'd known, deep inside, that it was him. That it had to be him. The awareness she felt of him didn't make sense, considering they were near strangers, yet she wasn't surprised by it at all.

'Cristiano.' She let out a little laugh of relief; the adrenalin still coursing through her body made her feel shaky and weak. Or maybe he was making her feel shaky and weak, standing there like a rock-solid pillar, arms still folded, face expressionless in the dim light. 'Thank God.'

He arched one dark slash of an eyebrow, his gaze travelling to her tiny, torn dress. 'Things get a little out of hand?'

Laurel glanced down at her dress, an embarrassed flush sweeping over her along with all the other overwhelming emotions. The dress was practically indecent, a spangled slip that revealed far too much thigh and cleavage. One of the straps had torn from the bodice, so the dress gaped even more. She wasn't even wearing a bra, only a tiny scrap of a thong. And, from the hard look in her stepbrother's eyes, Laurel suspected he knew it—and wasn't impressed.

She took a deep breath, trying to gather her scattered wits. Her head was spinning from everything that had happened, and her legs still felt weak. She longed to sit down, to breathe, to figure out how she'd got here and what on earth she was going to do next. 'I didn't even know you were here.'

'Didn't you?'

'No, of course not...' Laurel frowned, belatedly registering Cristiano's cool tone, the look of mocking censure in his iron gaze. And then she remembered the last time she'd seen him, ten years ago, when she'd been a silly fourteen-year-old to his manly twenty-three, and when she'd practically thrown herself at him as part of a stupid teenaged dare.

'I don't even know where I am,' she said, trying to smile, but her lips didn't seem to be working properly. They just wobbled.

'You're in the penthouse suite of La Sirena. My private home.'

'Oh.' So she'd pushed that button? But how had she been granted access? 'Well, I'm glad the doors opened up here. Very glad.'

'I'm sure you are.' There was a note of sardonic amusement in his voice that Laurel felt too scatter-brained to understand at the moment. It sounded as if he was referencing something she was meant to know about and didn't. Unless he was referring to her stupid schoolgirl crush all those years ago. Laurel doubted that. She doubted her one clumsy attempt at a kiss—he'd pushed her firmly away before she'd so much as made contact—had stayed in Cristiano's memory for more than a millisecond. He'd been that unimpressed.

‘Do you mind if I clean myself up?’ she asked. ‘I feel...’ Dirty. She felt dirty. But Cristiano didn’t need to know that. He was already looking at her as if he thought she was, a realisation that made heat scorch Laurel’s face once more. She knew she was wearing a slinky, slutty get-up, but did he have any right to judge her? Although, considering her actions tonight, perhaps he did.

‘Be my guest.’ Cristiano gestured towards a corridor that led to the suite’s bedrooms. ‘You’ll find everything you need in one of the bathrooms.’

‘Thank you,’ Laurel answered, her tone turning a bit haughty to cover her confusion—and her guilt. If she could have picked the circumstances in which she ever saw her stepbrother again, these would not have been them. Not by a million awful miles.

Was it just the way she was dressed or was there another reason he was being so cold? Not that they’d ever had much of a relationship, or one at all. Her mother had been married to his father for three years, but in that time Laurel had only met Cristiano twice. Once after the wedding, when he’d had a blazing argument with his father, Lorenzo Ferrero, and then stormed out. And the second time when he’d come home for some reason and she’d attempted, in pathetic, girlish naivety, to impress him.

Six months later Lorenzo had divorced Elizabeth and Laurel and her mother had high-tailed it back to Illinois, with nothing but a pocketful of jewellery to fund Elizabeth’s often exorbitant lifestyle. Ferrero had had a water-tight pre-nup, and her mother did like to spend money...

Cristiano was still staring at her, arms folded, the emotion in his silver eyes fathomless. What had she expected him to say? Do? He’d never expressed any familial concern or even interest in her before.

She was a stranger to him, or near enough to it, just as he was to her—or should be, except for the fact that out of idle curiosity—or perhaps, shamefully, something a little deeper than that—she’d followed his exploits on social media and scanned the many tabloid articles about his playboy lifestyle. She’d always been fascinated by this man who had loomed on the periphery of her life, dark and powerful, when she’d been an innocent teenaged girl emerging shyly from her chrysalis of gawkiness into uncertain womanhood.

It truly stunned her that she was in his penthouse now, although she supposed, if she stopped long enough to think rationally about it, she shouldn’t have been that surprised. She’d known the hotel where they’d met Bavasso was owned by Cristiano. She just hadn’t expected actually to see him.

Cristiano’s mouth curved in a smile that held neither humour nor warmth. His eyes glittered like burnished mirrors, reflecting nothing. ‘You said you wanted to clean yourself up?’ he prompted.

‘Yes.’ Laurel realised she was staring but it was hard not to stare at a man who was so starkly beautiful, so arrogantly attractive. The silk of his shirt clung to his well-defined pectoral muscles and the narrow trousers emphasised lean hips and powerful thighs. But beyond the impressive musculature of his body was the aura he possessed, the lethal authority and latent sexuality he emanated from every perfect pore—and that was what made Laurel stare. And not just stare, but imagine, shadowy, vague thoughts and images that danced through her mind, awakening longings that been dormant for her whole life. Thankfully they remained shadowy, falling back and leaving a streak of restless heat in their wake.

Staring at him now, taking in the arrogant tilt of his head, the dark, winged eyebrows, the sculpted mouth formed into a hard, hard line—he looked just the same as he had ten years ago. Perhaps he was a bit more muscular now, a bit more powerful. He’d made his own millions in the last decade, she knew, in property, casinos and hotels, at the highest end of the market.

He’d also, according to the tabloids, had dozens and dozens of mistresses—Hollywood actresses and European supermodels who graced his arm like the most expensive accessories, and, if the papers were to be believed—and Laurel suspected they were—were discarded after a matter of days.

It seemed incredible to her that she'd actually tried, in a clumsy, desperate way, to make him like her gawky teenaged self. The realisation made her cringe even now—especially now—yet surely Cristiano didn't remember that? He'd swatted her away like a fly.

Just the memory made flustered confusion sweep through her and quickly she turned away, afraid that Cristiano would see her uncertainty. He'd seen too much already, starting with this skimpy dress.

'Thank you,' she mumbled again and then, not wanting to prolong her agony, she hurried down the hall.

\* \* \*

Cristiano watched Laurel scurry down the hall like a frightened rabbit. A sexy frightened rabbit, wearing far too little clothing for his comfort, and only one shoe. He turned away, his jaw tightening, the flare of sexual attraction arrowing through him annoying him further. He hadn't expected to feel it quite so strongly, especially now that he knew what she was like.

When he'd seen Laurel Forrester swan into La Sirena this evening, dressed like a hooker and on the arm of a man who made his skin crawl, he'd felt shock slice through him. It was ten years since he'd last seen her; she looked a whole lot more grown up now, yet he'd recognised her. Instantly.

That second of stunned amazement had morphed into a deep, sick disappointment that settled in his gut, a leaden weight that was absurd, because if he'd had to think about it for a second he'd have known Laurel would be just like her mother—a craven, amoral gold-digger playing for her best chance. She'd shown her true colours at just fourteen years old, after all, and heaven knew the apple didn't usually fall far from the tree.

Which was why he had been so determined to cut off all his ties with his own father. The last thing he wanted to do was make the mistakes Lorenzo Ferrero had, chasing after some ridiculous and ever-elusive happily-ever-after and becoming increasingly more desperate to find it. Letting himself be used, hurt and humiliated, and for what? An amorphous emotion that didn't really exist, or at least shouldn't. Love.

Cristiano strolled towards the window, shoving his hands deep into his trouser pockets as he mused on what lay in store for Laurel...and for him. He'd watched her on the casino floor, draped on Bavasso's arm, her attempts at flirting cringingly over the top and obvious. She might be many things but what she definitely wasn't was a good actress.

Bavasso, of course, had lapped it up and demanded more. A lot more, apparently, because after Cristiano had left the floor he'd stayed by the bank of security cameras in his flat, watching her, waiting—but for what? He was acting obsessed, which was stupid, but he hadn't been able to keep himself from doing it.

He'd told himself it was because of their past—because he knew her mother was a thief and he had no intention of letting her fleece any of his customers, even one as unpleasant as Rico Bavasso. He'd told himself that, but he didn't completely buy it.

Then everything in him had frozen and clenched hard when he'd seen her leave the casino floor, Bavasso holding her hand, practically dragging her towards the lifts. But she'd gone. She'd been smiling. For some reason that smile had reached a vulnerable place he hated the thought of even possessing.

Cristiano didn't know what had happened upstairs in the hotel suite but he could guess all too easily. Still he'd stayed by the cameras, which was why he'd seen her running for the lifts, as if the hounds of hell were chasing her—or just one lascivious one. Whatever game she was playing, she'd decided not to see it to the finish. And, while Cristiano certainly believed in a woman's right to say no whenever she chose to, it didn't change his opinion of Laurel Forrester one iota.

On the cameras he'd watched her hit all the buttons, including the one for the penthouse. The lift doors to the penthouse were always locked, but with one flip of a switch Cristiano had sent Laurel straight up to him.

And now here she was.

The only question that remained was, what was he going to do with her?

He narrowed his gaze as he looked out of the window, the Colosseum lit up at night, a beacon to the city. He'd brought Laurel up here because she'd needed rescuing and he was a man of honour.

But honour only extended so far. And now, with the lift doors locked again, the only person Laurel needed rescuing from was him.

## CHAPTER TWO

LAUREL PEEKED INTO the first room on the left, a sumptuous bedroom with an en suite bathroom, and then she tiptoed over thick, white pile carpet, past a huge king-sized bed on its own dais with a rumpled black satin duvet. This was where Cristiano slept, and she sensed him in every sleek and powerful line of the room. She smelled him too—that spicy aftershave and something else, something infinitely more male that wound through her senses and ignited fireworks in her belly. Fireworks she was going to do her best to ignore.

Her curious gaze took in the room's stark elements—bed, bureau, view. No personal objects or mementoes, no photographs or knick-knacks. Not even a book. No sign of a woman, either, so perhaps he was between mistresses. But why was she looking? Laurel bolted for the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

The bathroom was just as elegantly stark as the bedroom, and almost as big. An enormous sunken black marble tub with gold taps, a separate infinity shower bigger than her bedroom back home and double sinks. Laurel registered the heat coming through the quarry tiles beneath her feet and let out a shuddery sigh, the events of the last few hours slamming into her all over her again.

The endless evening at the casino, while Rico had played baccarat and given her lascivious looks that Laurel had told herself were in her imagination. They had to be. Bavasso liked her mother. Her mother had said she was hoping for a ring, for goodness' sake. He wouldn't look at her. The only reason she was meeting him was to give her mother her blessing.

Wasn't it?

Then the moment when he'd asked her to go upstairs, and Laurel had given her mother a frantic look. Elizabeth had smiled and had told her she'd be along in a few minutes and they'd all have champagne to celebrate. And Laurel had believed her. Of course she had believed her. Elizabeth was her mother and, while she'd done some questionable things over the years, she'd never done anything like this.

Laurel closed her eyes as she tried to will back the pain of the betrayal. Although, betrayal wasn't the right word, not really, because Elizabeth hadn't promised anything but the cold, hard cash she knew Laurel needed... And Laurel had been willing to take it. Did that make her any better than her mother, a woman who was always on the prowl for a man to fund her lifestyle?

Taking a deep breath, Laurel opened her eyes and then shrugged off the satin slip of a dress. It pooled at her feet and, overcome suddenly with a remorse so strong it felt like a physical illness, cramping her stomach and making her gorge rise, she kicked the offending garment into the corner of the room.

But that wasn't enough—Laurel could still see the dress, a rumpled pile of silver, and with a little cry she snatched it up and pulled. The thin fabric tore easily, and within seconds the dress was in bright, glittering ribbons that she stuffed into the bin. Then she realised it was remarkably unwise to destroy the one piece of clothing she had. Was she meant to go confront Cristiano in nothing but a lacy thong? That would go over well.

With a groan, Laurel turned on the shower. She needed to wash and scrub off the scent of the expensive, cloying cologne that Rico Bavasso wore before she thought about what could she do—or what could she wear.

She stepped under the powerful jets, letting the water stream over and wash away her regrets...if only it could. She never should have agreed to her mother's plan. Never should have sold her soul for a flimsy promise her mother now might not even keep. And if she didn't...

Laurel's heart lurched. It didn't feel fair that she wanted so little, worked so hard and might still end up with nothing. But she knew there was no point in whining or crying about it. She'd made her own choices, and they hadn't all been good ones. Some of them had been extraordinarily bad. Somehow she had to rescue what she could from the rubble of the last few hours.

She stayed in the bathroom for as long as she could, first under the soothing spray of the shower, and then brushing her hair. Thankfully there was a thick navy terrycloth robe hanging on the door and she swathed herself in it, grateful that it covered her from her neck to her toes. She needed the armour, flimsy as it was.

She also needed time to figure out a plan—and how to present it to Cristiano. She had, unfortunately, extremely limited resources or options. She'd left her handbag behind in Bavasso's hotel room, with her money, driving licence and hotel key. Her passport, at least, was in the safe back at the shabby pensione where she and her mother were staying. But how was she going to get there? What if Bavasso was waiting for her?

Taking a deep breath, she decided it was time to face the music. Face Cristiano...a prospect that made her insides lurch with alarm even as a little ripple of anticipation shivered through her. She was looking forward to seeing him, even sparring with him, although heaven knew she shouldn't be.

The relief she'd felt at being rescued, however accidentally, from Rico Bavasso's clutches had dissolved, replaced with an uncomfortable realisation that there was no love lost between Cristiano and her, or Cristiano's father and her mother. A bitter divorce had put paid to any family reunions, and if he remembered Laurel's schoolgirl crush he certainly didn't do so fondly. But surely he'd help her, a woman so obviously in distress and need? Cool and remote he might be, but he was—she hoped—a man of honour.

With nothing left to lose, Laurel headed back out to the suite's sitting room. Cristiano was stretched out on one of the sofas, his long, muscular legs propped on a glass-and-chrome coffee table, his high-tech smart phone in one hand as he scrolled through messages. He slid it into his pocket and stood up, all graceful, fluid urbanity, as she came into the room.

'Feel better?' he asked with a sardonic lift of one eyebrow.

'Yes, thank you. Your shower is amazing.' Her voice sounded thin and wavering, the voice of a girl rather than a woman. Laurel straightened. Cristiano might reduce her insides to quivering jelly—it was hard not to be affected and, yes, dazzled, by a man who exuded so much potent, masculine sexuality—but she could still take control of this conversation. 'I need to ask a favour of you.'

Cristiano looked unsurprised. 'Oh?' His voice was mild and enquiring, yet something dark pulsed underneath that innocuous tone, something that made Laurel feel even warier than she already did.

'Could you please send someone—one of your staff, perhaps—to my hotel? I need my things—my clothes and my passport.' She lifted her chin, forcing herself to meet his sardonic, silvery gaze. 'I'm intending to leave Rome as soon as possible.'

He cocked his head. 'Things not work out to your satisfaction here, then?'

She couldn't miss the mocking note in his voice and a flush swept over her. Still she kept his gaze. 'No.'

'Rico Bavasso doesn't like to be thwarted, you know,' Cristiano said after a moment when he continued simply to study her, an inspection so thorough Laurel felt as if he could see beneath the big, bulky robe she wore.

'I guessed as much, which is why I'm planning on leaving the country.'

'You think it will be that easy?'

Unease tightened in her gut and flared through her insides. 'What do you mean?'

‘Bavasso is a powerful and unpleasant man,’ Cristiano stated flatly. ‘You chose the wrong mark, bella.’

She stared at him, that one word reverberating through her. Mark. So he thought she was a con artist, one step up from a prostitute, perhaps. She shouldn’t care. She shouldn’t even be surprised. She’d been acting like one, more or less, all evening, even if she’d never meant things to unravel the way they had. Shame burned deep, singeing her conscience, her soul. Why had she been so stupid; so desperate?

And as for Bavasso being both powerful and unpleasant...having it confirmed was the last thing she needed right now.

‘He’s not my mark,’ she said. Cristiano merely looked disbelieving. ‘You have no right to judge me,’ she snapped, her nerves strung tight. Cristiano was hardly the person to be angry with, but no one else was available, and frankly she could use a tiny bit of sympathy right then. ‘So what do you suggest I do?’

‘Lie low for a while,’ Cristiano stated carelessly, as if it was all of very little concern to him. And, of course, it was. She might have been semi-cyber-stalking him for the last ten years but Laurel very much doubted he’d given her so much as a thought. She was half-amazed he’d even remembered her name.

‘Lie low,’ she repeated, and she was the disbelieving one now. ‘How? And where? I left my handbag in his hotel suite and all my belongings are back in the pensione.’ She drew a quick, sharp breath. ‘Will you please send someone to fetch them? It’s a small favour...’

‘A small favour? I’m hardly about to send one of my staff into a very difficult situation, bella.’

‘Don’t call me that,’ she returned tightly. She knew he didn’t mean it and it felt mocking. A sneer she couldn’t stand when she already felt scraped raw, everything about this situation making her feel intensely, painfully vulnerable.

‘Why not?’ Cristiano challenged, his voice turning soft, seductive. ‘You are very beautiful. I am merely stating fact.’ His gaze lingered, caressing her, making her respond. She felt heat unfurl in her belly and pool between her thighs, a treacherous and most inconvenient heat she was doing her best to deny.

‘Why is it difficult?’ she persisted, trying to pretend he wasn’t affecting her. That a blush wasn’t sweeping in a scorching tidal wave over her entire body.

‘Because Bavasso is an unpleasant man and he is likely to make things difficult for anyone who helps someone who thwarted him. I have no doubt he will have his security detail waiting at your hotel. If someone shows up asking for your room key, they’ll know.’

‘But couldn’t you...couldn’t someone be discreet?’

Cristiano’s eyes narrowed. ‘You might feel entirely at ease with putting an innocent person in such a situation, but I am not.’

Laurel swayed as she was hit afresh by what an awful mess she’d managed to get herself into. Feeling as if her legs might give way beneath her, she walked to the sofa across from Cristiano and sank onto it. ‘What am I going to do?’ she whispered, more to herself than to Cristiano. She dropped her head into her hands and closed her eyes. ‘What am I going to do?’

\* \* \*

Cristiano suppressed the pang of sympathy he felt for Laurel. The sight of her sitting there with her head in her hands, her hair falling in a golden-brown waterfall around her face, her robe gaping open to reveal slender, golden thighs... What man wouldn’t be affected? Not just by sympathy, but by desire. He suppressed that too. It was inconvenient at the moment, although he’d noted Laurel’s obvious response to him with interest. He’d also noted her attempt to cover it. For whatever reason, she didn’t want him knowing how he affected her, and she hadn’t made any attempt to ask to stay, so what game was she playing?

‘The answer seems fairly obvious,’ he remarked as he strolled to the window and gazed out at the view of Rome’s skyline by night. ‘You stay here.’

He glanced back at Laurel; she raised her head, her aquamarine eyes wide with shock, the exact colour of the sunlit Aegean Sea. Her hair hung in damp ringlets around her heart-shaped face and her robe—his robe, actually—had slid off one shoulder, revealing its perfect curve.

‘Stay here?’ She frowned, her expression of confusion almost comical and definitely suspect. She was putting it on quite thickly for his benefit, and why? This was surely what she’d wanted. What she’d been hoping for. He was a far better bet than Bavasso. So did she think her reluctance would somehow earn her brownie points or, heaven help him, trust?

He trusted no one, especially not a woman like Laurel Forrester.

‘Yes,’ Cristiano answered, his voice clipped, touched with impatience. ‘Stay here.’

‘For how long?’

‘As long as is necessary.’ He paused, letting his gaze sweep over her once more. The robe gaped at her chest and he could see the shadowy vee between her breasts, almost glimpse their sweet, apple-like curves. ‘As long as I want you to stay.’ She drew in a quick, sharp breath, colour flooding her face. She almost looked outraged. ‘You don’t need to look quite so bewildered,’ Cristiano drawled.

‘Why shouldn’t I be bewildered?’ Laurel demanded. ‘It almost sounded as if...’

‘As if what?’ Cristiano prompted silkily. She bit her lip and looked away.

‘Nothing.’

Cristiano almost laughed at that. She didn’t want to overplay her hand. She was so obvious, it amused him. Almost. The trouble was, he hated game playing. All his liaisons had been conducted with discretion and honesty, from their businesslike beginning to the expected end of the transaction. This would be no different, but he’d humour her for a little while...just to see where she’d go with this. What exactly she was trying to get? How much?

‘So how long would that be?’ Laurel asked, straightening as she drew the robe closed at her throat, every inch the outraged virgin. ‘Because I don’t even have any clothes.’

‘A day or two at most. Bavasso will have moved on by then, no doubt.’ He let his gaze linger. ‘As for clothes... I’m not at all sure they’ll be necessary.’ She gasped and he laughed. ‘Relax, bella. I’m only joking.’ Sort of. ‘I’ll arrange for some clothes to be brought up to you.’

‘Thank you,’ she said stiffly and looked away. Cristiano propped one shoulder against the floor-to-ceiling window, taking the time to study her. The puppyish roundness of her teenage years had melted away, leaving behind a lithe yet curvaceous body. She was slender, verging on petite, yet her legs seemed endless and golden, her hair a cascade of colours, from chestnut brown to tawny orange to pure gold. She must pay her hairdresser a fortune.

‘So where is home, out of interest?’ he asked. ‘Since it’s obviously not Rome.’

She darted him a quick, suspicious glance before answering, ‘Illinois.’

‘Illinois?’ That surprised him, although he knew she and her mother were American. His father had picked up Elizabeth Forrester in a third-rate casino in Miami and had married her just four days later. ‘Chicago?’ He would have expected Los Angeles or New York, somewhere where she could be seen and admired—and where she could find a sugar daddy.

‘No, a small town you’ve never heard of.’ Her tone was repressive. ‘Are you going to order those clothes?’

‘You’re being quite demanding, for a woman who has nothing to offer... Unless you do have something to offer?’ He intentionally let a note of innuendo into his voice and saw how her pupils flared in response. This was so easy.

‘My gratitude,’ Laurel bit out. She turned her head away, refusing to look at him.

‘Ah, well, the question remains, how is one’s gratitude expressed?’ He enjoyed toying with her, enjoyed the way her breasts rose and fell with every agitated breath. A rosy blush swept across her

collarbone. She had the most delectable skin, all golden cream and roses. He couldn't wait to touch it. Taste it.

'I would hope a simple thank you would do.' In one abrupt movement she rose from the sofa, pulling the huge robe more tightly around her slender frame. 'I don't understand you, Cristiano. An hour ago I was attacked. Why are you toying with me like this? Do you enjoy being cruel?'

Annoyance sparked. 'You call this cruel?' He took a step closer to her, noting the gold sparks in her eyes, as well as the ones firing between them. 'How, bella, am I toying with you?'

'You know.' She kept her face averted, her breath coming in quick, ragged bursts. She didn't want to say it. Admit it. And Cristiano realised he very much wanted her to.

'I don't know, actually. I need you to enlighten me.'

She drew a tortured breath, looking anywhere but at him. 'Fine. You're almost sounding as if...as if you expect me to...something to happen between us.'

'Something is already happening between us, bella,' Cristiano answered softly. 'Can't you feel it?' He certainly could. He felt it in the tautening of the air, the heightened awareness he had of her: of every draw and tear of her breathing; the pearly sheen of her skin; the way his loins tightened when she touched her lips with her tongue.

'I just want to go home,' she said, her voice low. 'This isn't my world. I don't belong here.'

'You were certainly acting as if you belonged here earlier in the evening.'

Finally she looked at him, horrified realisation and hurt flashing in her aquamarine eyes. 'You saw...?'

'I saw everything. You on the casino floor with Rico Bavasso—practically sitting in his lap, laughing at his jokes, letting him paw you while your mother watched. She taught you well, I suppose.'

She shook her head, curls bouncing. 'It wasn't like that...'

'It was exactly like that and you know it,' he answered, a hint of steel entering his voice. 'Now what I'm wondering is, why are you acting like an outraged virgin now?'

She let out a cry and whirled away, stalking towards the lift doors. Cristiano watched her, darkly amused, as she pushed the button.

'You intend to go down to the lobby, to face Rico Bavasso and his security, in my dressing gown? Because that is not a tactic I'd recommend you employ. It will end badly for you. Very badly indeed.'

'I'll take my chances,' she said, her whole body taut and quivering, his robe trailing the ground.

'That's quite a risk you're willing to take, then.'

'And one I prefer.'

Her games were getting tiresome. What on earth did she possibly hope to gain from them? She had his interest already. Playing hard to get, or as if she were some offended innocent, was both pointless and aggravating. 'Unfortunately it's one I do not prefer,' Cristiano said lazily. 'The lift is locked, bella. You're not going anywhere. Not until I say so.'

### CHAPTER THREE

LAUREL WHIRLED AROUND, the breath leaving her lungs in one almighty whoosh. Cristiano lounged against the window, his hands in his pockets, looking for all the world as if he were out for a summer stroll. Not as if he'd just threatened her. Not as if he'd just intimated that she was as captive in this hotel suite as she would be in Rico Bavasso's.

'Out of the frying pan and into the fire, it seems,' she managed, trying to keep her voice from shaking. Cristiano was not hiding the heat that simmered in his eyes, but she could hardly believe it. Ten years ago he'd batted her away like an annoying inconvenience. So now he wanted her, and she had no say in the matter?

'Fire has much to recommend it.'

She stared at him, caught between confusion and outrage. Was he teasing her? She couldn't believe that he wanted her badly enough now to keep her captive in his penthouse. She couldn't believe

he wanted her at all. He had his pick of the most beautiful and glamorous women in the world, and she was an inexperienced hick from nowhere, Illinois. What could he possibly see in her?

‘What do you want, Cristiano?’ she asked slowly, not entirely sure she wanted to hear the answer.

He lifted his chin, his silver-grey eyes blazing, but with ice. Cold and hot at the same time—but didn’t it feel like a burn, when you touched something icy and incredibly cold? That was how Cristiano felt to her. A cold blaze of danger.

‘It’s simple,’ he said. ‘I want you.’

He couldn’t put it more plainly than that, yet still she was sceptical. ‘Why me? You could have any woman you wanted.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Why should either of us pretend otherwise? You’re in the celebrity gossip magazines often enough.’

‘Why, bella, are you keeping tabs on me?’

‘It would be hard not to, considering how often you feature in the press—and please don’t call me bella.’

‘All right, Laurel.’ He spoke quietly, with a sincerity she hadn’t heard before, his tone of voice low and heartfelt, affecting her in a way that his barely leashed looks had not. That tone left her feeling unsteady. Uncertain. And, shamefully, wanting.

‘Well?’ she demanded unsteadily. ‘Why?’

‘Why do I want you?’

‘Yes.’ She could hardly believe they were having this conversation. Cristiano’s tone made it sound as if he were chatting about the weather.

‘Why not?’ Cristian answered with a shrug.

‘That’s it? “Why not”?’ She stared at him, trying to fathom what was going on behind that inscrutable face, the negligent shrug of his powerful shoulders. Was it simply that a woman was available, a woman who he obviously assumed made free with her body, so of whom he intended to take advantage? The thought made her feel physically sick.

‘You take issue with my response?’ he enquired.

‘Yes. You’re practically threatening me—’

‘There are no threats, Laurel.’ Cristiano’s voice cut across her, quick, lethal and very, very sure. ‘Nothing I have said or done is a threat. And nothing will be.’

She flung one arm towards the lift doors. ‘And the locked doors?’

‘The last thing you want is for anyone to have free access to my flat.’

‘Because of Bavasso?’

‘I believe you underestimate him. Admittedly, he is able to turn on the charm when he wishes, but he can be a vicious man.’

She suppressed a shudder as she recalled Bavasso’s hands on her, reaching, grabbing. ‘I believe you,’ she said. ‘But I still don’t appreciate feeling like a prisoner.’

‘For your own safety, as well as my own, I must take precautions. I’m sure you understand.’

He was so smooth, so aggravatingly assured, that Laurel felt her protests falling away, unspoken. Cristiano had locked the doors, yet here she was, the one who felt as though she was being unreasonable.

‘And if I insist on leaving?’ she asked. ‘What then?’

Cristiano shook his head slowly, his expression one of patently mock regret. ‘But you see, I could not live with putting a woman into potential danger on my conscience. Especially one I was once, however happenstance, related to.’

‘We were never related.’

He inclined his head in a regal nod. ‘It is as you say, of course. Stepsiblings hardly count as blood relations.’

‘And surely you exaggerate?’ Laurel persisted. She had to believe that. ‘Rico Bavasso isn’t that dangerous.’ When she’d first met him, he’d seemed charming, just as Cristiano had said: silver-haired, hazel-eyed, all smooth urbanity. Admittedly something about his assured manner had made Laurel uneasy, but her mother had seemed happy, and Laurel had just wanted her money. Shame licked through her again at the thought.

Cristiano dropped his expression of fake regret as his gaze turned startlingly serious. ‘Do you really want to take such a risk?’

Wordlessly Laurel shook her head. Bavasso had been so angry. She had no desire to run into him again, especially not any time soon.

‘How well do you know him?’ Cristiano asked. His voice was mild, even friendly, but with a ripple of darkness underneath that nearly made Laurel gulp again.

‘I don’t know him,’ she said quickly. ‘That is, not very well at all.’ She didn’t really want to go into the how and why of her acquaintance with Rico Bavasso, yet it seemed Cristiano had already assumed the absolute worst.

Which wasn’t all that far from the truth, unfortunately—yet it felt different. It was different, at least to her. She hadn’t thought Bavasso had been interested in her.

‘You seemed as if you knew him quite well while you were on his lap, whispering in his ear,’ Cristiano said in that same awful, mild tone.

‘I wasn’t on his lap,’ she snapped.

‘Close enough.’

Laurel shook her head. ‘It wasn’t what it looked like.’

‘Funny, I think it was exactly what it looked like.’

‘You would.’ Clearly Cristiano was going to think the worst of her. And Laurel knew it had looked bad. How could she explain that she had never meant to lead Bavasso astray; that when he’d started cosying up to her she’d frozen inside, appalled and uncertain? And, with her mother smiling and nodding the whole while, she’d assumed it was all in her head, that she was being paranoid and oversensitive. If only.

‘I believe you, as a matter of interest,’ Cristiano drawled. ‘I don’t think you know him well. If you had, you would not have tangled with him so precipitously.’

‘No, I wouldn’t have,’ Laurel agreed. Had her mother known what Bavasso was capable of? Had she been in on it? Had she realised that, if Laurel had known what Bavasso really wanted, she never would have agreed to set foot in all of Italy, much less a casino in Rome? Cristiano’s casino. ‘Can I have some clothes, please?’ Her voice sounded high and thin, as if she was scared.

And she was scared—of everything, at the moment. Scared of a future she couldn’t even begin to fathom, a freedom she longed to grasp but which felt further away than ever. But she wasn’t, Laurel realised, actually scared of Cristiano. Despite his determination, his desire, she believed him. She had to believe him, believe that he wouldn’t threaten or force her to do something she didn’t want to do.

But the trouble was, he wouldn’t be forcing her. Already she felt a dark, honeyed ribbon of longing wind its way through her, melting her resistance. Already she was imagining the feel of his lips on hers. Already she was anticipating the delicious, icy burn of his touch. His caress.

‘Of course you can have some clothes,’ Cristiano answered smoothly, thankfully distracting her from her fevered imaginings. ‘As a matter of fact, I already ordered them while you were in the shower. You seem to think I am some sort of brute, Laurel, which I confess I find a bit ironic, considering the man you just fled. I hope the contrast between us is more than apparent.’

It was. Oh, it was. Laurel didn’t trust herself to answer so she turned away, walking towards the windows, taking in the incredible view.

She heard Cristiano move and then she felt him come up behind her. Her breath froze in her lungs and her heart felt suspended in her chest. Every nerve was strung tight, every sense on overload. And he wasn’t even touching her.

Then Cristiano laid a hand on her shoulder. Even through the thick terrycloth robe she felt the press of his palm like a brand, a burn, and it took everything she had not to respond—although she didn't even know how she would. Move closer or further away? Her body would betray her.

'I should tell you now,' he said in a soft voice, 'That I abhor game playing of any kind. Every transaction I've had with a woman has been straightforward and intensely pleasurable. So, if you think you can gain something more from me than what I have already offered by playing the coy miss, think again.'

He squeezed her shoulder lightly, a warning, while Laurel's mind spun. Everything he'd said was offensive, appalling. She didn't even know how to begin to respond. A transaction? Intensely pleasurable? Coy miss? She nearly choked with affront at it all.

'What exactly are you offering?' she finally asked in a shaky voice when she'd managed to kick her mind back into gear and could form at least one coherent sentence. 'Out of curiosity?'

\* \* \*

At last, a straightforward question. And he would give a straightforward response. Finally they were getting somewhere.

'My protection,' Cristiano said as he stepped away from her, deciding he needed a little space to stay cool and level-headed. When he'd been standing behind her he'd inhaled her scent, something light and fresh, a hint of lemon and violets. He'd felt her heat, warm and seductive, and the desire to slip the robe from her shoulders and feel the silky skin underneath had been so strong his palms had itched. His body had ached.

'Your protection?' she repeated. He couldn't quite gauge her tone, veering between tremulous and infuriated.

'From Bavasso.'

She stayed where she stood, staring out at the darkness, a slight, slender figure swathed in dark blue. 'Do I really need protection?'

'For a short time, yes.'

'And how can you protect me? By keeping me here?'

'Initially, yes. Bavasso is like a child with a toy when it comes to women. The best way to get him to forget you is for you to be seen to belong to someone else.' He paused, waiting for that to sink in, then continued, 'Bavasso enjoys the use of my hotels and casinos. If he discovers that you are with me, he will not pursue you.' Bavasso was a vicious man, but only with those weaker than him. Cristiano was confident Bavasso would not bother with Laurel once he realised she was off-limits. And he very much intended her to be off-limits...to anyone but him.

'With you?' Laurel's jaw hardened, her mouth set in a line as she continued to stare out into the night. 'Is that a euphemism?'

'It is fact.' Their affair was only a matter of time. Surely she realised that? Surely she felt it in the desire that shimmered and pulsed between them, an energy force neither of them could deny?

'And so I exchange one man's unwanted attention for another.' She spoke flatly and Cristiano prickled with irritation. He did not believe his attention was so unwanted.

'Again you are comparing me with Bavasso, and I will remind you of the contrast.'

'Oh, you're certainly more attractive,' Laurel said as she turned around, true bitterness spiking her words. 'I'll grant you that. Although, Bavasso is good-looking in that "silver fox" kind of way.' She tossed the words out, but beneath the blaze of anger he felt they'd cost her. 'And your...seduction would no doubt be far more assured and deft,' she added. 'But it still amounts to the same thing.'

'It does not.' His whole body was twanging with both indignation and awareness. How dared she compare him to sly, sleek Bavasso? And how could he want her now, more than ever, when she was verbally repelling him as best she could?

Laurel lifted her chin, her eyes flashing blue-green fire. 'Tell me how it doesn't, then.'

Cristiano stared at her for a long moment, his jaw clenched, fists too. He felt angry, aware and wanting. 'I told you before, I do not threaten. I certainly do not force. Trust me on that, Laurel.'

'Why should I trust you on anything?' she challenged. 'And, in any case, there are different kinds of coercion.' She looked away, a flush staining her cheeks, her teeth sinking provocatively into her full lower lip. Realisation dawned and bloomed inside him, making him smile. She wasn't afraid of him forcing her. She was afraid she wouldn't need to be forced.

'Coercion?' he asked softly. 'Or seduction?'

She drew a shuddering breath, lifting her chin and tossing her hair back, forcing herself to meet his knowing gaze. Because he did know—he knew that she wanted him, just as he wanted her. Why she was fighting the attraction, however, remained a mystery. Was she holding out for more? 'What else do you offer?' she asked. 'Besides protection?'

'Pleasure.' He watched her eyes flare, but to her credit she held his gaze. 'Of that you can be certain.'

'You are appallingly arrogant.'

'Merely sure.'

She shook her head slowly. 'And how long would this...arrangement between us last?'

'As long as I want it to.' He felt the first flickers of triumph, mingled with a strange and unsettling disappointment. After all her maidenly outrage, Laurel was acting exactly as he'd expected her to, needed her to...and he found he didn't quite like it.

'And how long would that be, do you think?' she asked. Her eyes flashed and her lips trembled, fury and fear mingled together. 'Judging from what I've read in the tabloids, your mistresses don't last more than a week. And we are talking about me becoming your mistress, aren't we? That's the position I'm being interviewed for, isn't it?'

'Call it what you like.' He'd had straightforward discussions with previous mistresses, but for some reason they hadn't felt quite like this: so cold and mercenary. Although, mercenary was exactly how he'd always wanted to be, especially when it came to women. Any softer emotion, never mind actual love, was for fools. Fools like his father, who had been both fleeced and heartbroken by grasping women like Laurel's mother and the wife before her. As for his own mother...

'So for how long?' she asked, a catch in her voice. 'Roughly?'

Cristiano's eyes narrowed. 'For as long as it takes for Bavasso to be satisfied that you're off-limits.' And as long as he still wanted her.

'It's my safety you're thinking of, is it?'

Now he was getting seriously irritated. 'Among other things.'

'How kind of you,' she drawled, and he could not mistake her sarcasm. He watched her walk across the room, the sash of his robe trailing the ground, her long, wavy hair cascading over her shoulders. She looked like a young, hesitant queen and, in spite of everything, or perhaps because of it, for a moment he admired her.

'Your safety is important to me,' he said, 'whether you believe it or not.'

'Why should it be? I doubt you even thought of me once in the last ten years.'

'Then you thought wrong.'

She stilled at his tone, which was quieter and more sincere than he'd meant it to be. 'Any thoughts you've had of me can't have been good ones,' she said, her tone as quiet as his, and equally sincere. 'Can they?'

'Some were...interesting.'

'Interesting?' She turned around to face him. 'I thought you might despise me, Cristiano.'

'Despise is a strong word.'

'Your father despises my mother.'

'I am not my father and you are not your mother.'

‘No.’ She drew a quick breath. ‘But you’ve judged me just as you’ve judged her. Tarred us both with the same brush.’

‘And I have had obvious reason to do so. Are you telling me differently?’

She looked away. ‘You wouldn’t listen.’

Cristiano could not imagine any scenario that could excuse or explain her behaviour with Bavasso on the casino floor. ‘I’d listen,’ he said mildly, ‘but whether I believed you or not is another matter. In any case, why do you care what I think of you? Emotions have no place here, bella. This is about something else entirely. Something basic and very, very pleasurable.’ He started walking towards her slowly, and she stilled, trapped, mesmerised by his lazy yet purposeful words. Perhaps now it was time to show her just how pleasurable it all could be.

‘You paint such an appealing picture,’ Laurel said huskily. She didn’t move. ‘No emotions, no concern for feelings, just sex. For maybe a week.’

‘Sounds perfect to me.’ He kept walking until he was standing right in front of her. She hadn’t budged, and he knew he had her. ‘Stop playing your games,’ he whispered as he reached for the sash of her robe—his robe—and tugged her towards him. She came, reluctantly, perhaps, but her pointless act of protest was already being revealed as the masquerade he’d known it was. Her hips nudged his and heat flared bright and white-hot inside him. He sucked in a hard breath and tugged again at the sash. Her eyes widened as she felt the evidence of his arousal.

He touched her chin with one fingertip, tilting her face to his. ‘This can really be very simple.’ ‘To you.’

‘And to you. Why not?’ He stroked her cheek and she closed her eyes. A shudder went through her. ‘See how you respond to me?’ he murmured. ‘And I haven’t even kissed you yet.’ He stroked her cheek again, enjoying the silky feel of her skin, the tremor that went through her whole body. ‘We are going to be very, very good together, bella. I feel it. I know it.’

She let out a shuddering gasp and then opened her eyes, wrenching herself away from him as if she had to break steel bonds to be free. Her eyes shot blue-green sparks at him as she clutched the gaping robe together with one hand.

‘What I know, Cristiano, is that you’re an arrogant, manipulative bastard and I have no intention of making any sort of deal with you, now or ever. So why don’t you practise your so-called charms on some other woman who wants them?’ With another gasp that sounded halfway to a sob, she turned from the room and ran down the hall, slamming the bedroom door behind him and then turning the lock with an audible click.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

LAUREL FELT AS if she needed another shower. She paced Cristiano’s bedroom, her heart racing, her whole body tingling despite the storm of indignation raging through her. No matter what big words she’d just thrown at him, she’d been tempted—seriously tempted—and for one glorious second she’d been sure he was going to kiss her, had imagined the sensuous slide of his lips along hers...

What was happening to her? How had she fallen down this rabbit hole of manipulation, sex and greed? She lived a quiet life in a small town in Illinois, working as a nurse, possessing a handful of casual friends, and no boyfriends, ever. For a second she pictured her grandfather’s farmhouse—its floorboards of weathered, honeyed oak, the view of rolling fields from the kitchen window, the friendly glimmer of the pond in the distance. She ached to go home, for things to feel familiar and safe again. Boring, even. She didn’t want this. She didn’t want any of this—not her mother, not Bavasso, not Cristiano.

Liar.

She silenced that taunting inner voice by sheer strength of will and tried to think practically about what she should do now, since she seemed intent on burning her bridges both left and right.

She couldn't leave Cristiano's penthouse, not yet anyway. She took his warning about Bavasso seriously...just as she took his offer of no-strings sex seriously.

Why wouldn't you become the man's mistress?

Frustration bubbled inside her and she paced the room, feeling both frantic and caged. She wouldn't become the man's mistress because she had more self-respect than that. More pride. And more of an instinct of self-preservation. Sex with Cristiano would burn her up, leaving nothing but cinders. She felt that in her very bones, knew it from the way she'd reacted to his hand on her shoulder, the merest brush of his hips against hers...

Heat flared through her at that potent memory and she whirled away from the window, pacing the room to the bathroom and back. At this rate she'd wear out the thick pile carpet.

A knock sounded on the door and she stilled, every muscle tense, every sense on high-octane alert. 'Yes?'

'Your clothes have arrived.'

She couldn't tell anything from Cristiano's tone. Warily Laurel opened the door. He stood there, one hand outstretched with several luxury shopping bags dangling from his long, lean fingers.

'Thank you,' Laurel said stiffly, taking the bags. 'You didn't have to get so much.'

'Who knows how long you will be here, bella?' Cristiano answered lazily.

'Not very long, if I can help it,' Laurel retorted. 'I'm going to get dressed and then we need to talk.'

'Excellent. I've ordered some food, so we can talk as we eat.'

It all suddenly seemed so civilised, Laurel thought with a savage twist of humour as she closed the door. Almost as if Cristiano wasn't keeping her captive, intending for her to be his mistress. To keep her here for sex. It seemed ridiculous, laughable, yet she felt the seriousness of the situation all the way through her body, right down to her toes.

She emptied the bags on the bed, blinking at the sight of the elegant clothes, which included several outfits, including undergarments. How on earth had he managed to know her bra size? she wondered as she picked up a push-up bra in nude lace and coffee-coloured satin. Although, on second thoughts, Cristiano no doubt could gauge a woman's bra size from across a crowded room.

She chose the most conservative outfit, a swishy knee-length skirt in pale blue and a matching silk T-shirt top. Now that she was finally dressed in something that was neither revealing nor inappropriate, she felt a little more restored to herself. Almost as if the last seventy hours had never happened. Almost, but not quite.

In addition to the clothes, Cristiano had thoughtfully provided a bag of luxury toiletries, and Laurel took advantage of them, putting on a little discreet make-up, brushing her hair and twisting it up into a knot.

Taking a deep breath, she headed out of the bedroom. She found Cristiano in the dining area on the far side of the living room setting out food on a table that looked as if it had been carved from a single piece of ebony.

Laurel inhaled the tantalising scents of basil and lemon, and realised she hadn't eaten anything since lunch. All evening Bavasso had plied her with cocktails she'd tried not to drink and no food.

Her stomach growled audibly and Cristiano looked up, humour glinting in those silvery eyes. Laurel managed a little laugh. 'I'm hungry.'

'So I hear.' He gestured to one of the chairs, made of gleaming black wood. 'Come sit down.'

Laurel hesitated, discomfited by this apparently new normal. Then she decided she would take what civility Cristiano offered, and she slid a chair out and sat down as he lifted the silver domes off several dishes.

'What would you like?' Cristiano asked as he lifted a plate. Laurel glanced at all the different dishes of Italian specialities, from fiore di zucca, a Roman dish of courgette fritters, to pasta carbonara and several delicious-looking salads.

‘It all looks good to me.’

‘Then I shall give you a bit of everything.’

Laurel watched as he ladled the different dishes onto her plate, feeling as if she’d fallen down yet another rabbit hole. Why had Cristiano changed his tune so drastically? Why was he being so nice?

‘Thank you,’ she murmured as she took her plate from him. Cristiano filled up his own and sat down on the opposite end of the table.

‘Dig in,’ he said in the same mild tone he’d been using since she’d emerged from the bedroom. ‘I’m glad the clothes fit,’ he said with a nod to her skirt and top. ‘That colour of blue was a good choice. It brings out your eyes.’

‘Um, thank you?’

He arched a dark eyebrow. ‘Can you not accept a compliment?’

‘It just sounded...’ Laurel hesitated, wondering if she was being hypersensitive. ‘Proprietary.’

‘Proprietary?’ His smile and eyes both gleamed. ‘About you or the clothes?’

‘Both.’

Cristiano sat back in his chair. ‘Stop fighting it, bella,’ he said, his tone turning lazy. ‘It would be far more pleasant for both of us if you did.’

‘Stop fighting it? Or you?’

‘Both.’

They stared at each other, a stand-off, and one that made fireworks fizz in Laurel’s middle. There could be no mistaking the, yes, proprietary gleam in Cristiano’s silvery-grey gaze. And definitely not just about the clothes. But, instead of feeling outraged and objectified as she knew she should, Laurel felt...excited.

Excited to know the heat simmering in those silvery depths was for her. She might be no more than a convenience, the expedient option, but he still wanted her. And, Bavasso’s odious groping aside, Laurel had precious little experience with being wanted.

So why was she fighting it? Her body battled with her brain, with both sense and self-preservation. The look stretched and lengthened between them and Laurel fought to hold onto all the reasons why she should not engage in some temporary, tasteless affair with Cristiano Ferrero.

Because this was his world, not hers, and she was already out of her depth. Because she had enough experience of people who loved and then left you, starting with her own parents—as well as Cristiano’s father, Lorenzo. She didn’t need another reminder. Because she was too innocent, too naïve, and too darn hopeful to survive the kind of arrangement Cristiano was suggesting.

Because he was dangerous, as dangerous as holding a firework in your hand and letting yourself be mesmerised by the fizz and spark. It wouldn’t take long for it to blow up in your face. To ruin your life.

Laurel dragged her gaze away from Cristiano’s simmering, steady one. ‘I want to ask about my mother,’ she said when she trusted her voice to sound normal. Her body was still reacting, little electric pulses going off in the strangest of places. Low in her belly. Between her thighs.

‘Your mother?’ Oh, that mild, enquiring tone. Already she knew to suspect it.

‘Yes. If Rico Bavasso is as unpleasant as you say, then I’m worried for her.’

‘Bella, if there’s one thing I know, it’s that your mother can take of herself.’

Laurel glanced up sharply. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Let’s not pretend when it comes to your mother,’ Cristiano answered. Gone was that mild tone, replaced by something far harder. Something that hinted at the unrelenting steel she knew lurked beneath his smooth urbanity. ‘We both know what she is.’

‘Which is?’ Laurel threw at him. She wasn’t under any illusions about what Cristiano Ferrero or his father thought of her mother, but some perverse, determined streak in her still wanted to hear him say it out loud.

‘She is a craven, amoral, shameless, gold-digging liar,’ Cristiano stated with flat and final authority. Laurel opened her mouth but nothing came out. She hadn’t expected him to state it quite so plainly. So coldly. ‘And,’ he continued, ‘I have no reason not to think you are the same.’

\* \* \*

Cristiano watched the colour drain from Laurel’s face and wished he didn’t feel guilty for speaking so plainly. Aggravatingly, at every step it seemed he had to remind himself to act in the manner to which he’d become accustomed—matter-of-fact to the point of ruthlessness.

Anything else smacked of weakness or want and was completely unacceptable. He would never succumb to either option, as his mother did, or manipulation and lies, as his father did, letting himself get ensnared in a sticky web of a woman’s deceit.

No man was an island, but he was doing his damndest to try. But Laurel didn’t have to look so wounded. As if he’d sucker-punched her when he’d been stating the obvious.

‘Well.’ Her voice was shaky as she placed her napkin next to her plate of barely touched food. ‘Don’t sugar-coat it.’

‘I see no need to sugar-coat anything,’ Cristiano replied shortly. ‘Surely we are both aware of the facts surrounding our parents’ divorce?’

‘If you mean, did Lorenzo Ferrero cut my mother and me out of his life without so much as a goodbye, then yes, I’m aware.’ A bright spot of colour appeared on each glorious cheekbone, enflaming and annoying him in turns.

‘You almost sound as if you were the one who was betrayed.’

‘I was.’ Laurel pressed her lips together, as if she’d revealed too much with that statement. She looked away, blinking hard. ‘But clearly you don’t think I have any right to that feeling. Clearly you think, even without knowing me at all, that I am one step up from a prostitute.’

For a second Cristiano paused. He could see Laurel was battling intense emotion, and he didn’t think she was faking it. ‘I accept that you were young at the time of our parents’ divorce,’ he said after a moment. ‘You might not have been aware of your mother’s actions.’

‘And yet you said you judged me as you judged her,’ Laurel returned. Her lips were white, her eyes huge, the only colour in her face those two bright spots.

‘I said I had no reason to think you were different. Prove me wrong if you can.’

‘Why should I bother?’ she flung back at him. ‘You’re...you’re disgusting.’ She rose from the table, her body taut and trembling. ‘You disgust me. You act so superior, as if you’re standing above everyone, judging their actions when you have no clue, no concept, of what our lives are really like. And meanwhile your actions are just as reprehensible as my mother’s, or even those of Rico Bavasso.’

‘Don’t compare me to that man,’ Cristiano warned in a low voice.

‘Why shouldn’t I? You trapped me here—’

‘I rescued you.’

‘You propositioned me and still you refuse to let me go. At least I managed to escape Bavasso’s clutches.’ She shook her head, her lip curling in genuine disgust. She was repulsed by him. The realisation was shocking and deeply, deeply unsettling. For the first time Cristiano didn’t wonder what game she was playing, but whether she was playing one at all. And right now he didn’t think she was. He’d been trying to get her to be honest, and it seemed he’d succeeded in that goal. It just hadn’t turned out at all as he’d expected.

‘Your mother doesn’t matter to me,’ he said swiftly. ‘We never should have talked about her in the first place. She is not relevant to our discussions.’

‘We talked about her because I’m worried for her safety, no matter what you think of her or her actions of ten years ago. Can you please see that she is all right? Regardless of what you think of her, surely you have that much honour?’

Elizabeth Forrester had always struck Cristiano as the kind of woman who knew exactly on which side her bread was buttered, but for Laurel’s sake he nodded tersely. ‘Very well.’

‘Thank you.’

A truce, then, of sorts. Laurel glanced down at her plate and then, her chin tilted at a haughty, proud angle, she sat down and started to eat again. It seemed Laurel Forrester knew on which side her bread was buttered as well.

‘How did you feel betrayed by my father?’ Cristiano asked abruptly. The remark had niggled at him.

Laurel looked up warily. ‘Because one minute we were all playing happy families, and the next my mother and I were on the plane back to Illinois, and I never even saw him again. Not so much as a text.’

‘And your mother had two million euros in her private bank account,’ Cristiano reminded her flatly.

‘Two million euros that your father got back,’ Laurel retorted. ‘Thanks to his water-tight pre-nup agreement. She didn’t see a penny of it.’

‘That makes it better, then? Just because she was caught?’

Laurel had the grace to look away. ‘Caught doing what, exactly?’ she hedged. Did she think he didn’t know?

‘Caught stealing from my father,’ he snapped, annoyed that she was practically defending her mother’s indefensible actions. ‘Taking his money and squirreling it away.’

‘Is it stealing, when they were married?’ Laurel asked quietly. ‘She took money from a joint bank account. Technically it was hers too.’

‘Technically,’ Cristiano agreed, the word bitten off and spit out. ‘Fortunately the law did not consider it a technicality.’

‘Still,’ Laurel persisted. ‘What’s yours is mine and vice versa, isn’t that right? Or do you not believe in marriage vows?’

Cristiano sat back, starting to fume. He really hadn’t wanted to rake up old memories of Elizabeth Forrester’s betrayal of his father, but Laurel was forcing his hand. ‘She was stealing from him, bella, no question.’

‘I admit it might have looked like that, but she didn’t mean it the way you—’

‘She was siphoning money from various accounts and putting it in an offshore account under a different name!’ Cristiano cut her off, his voice like the snick of a blade. ‘Are you actually defending her?’

‘Not defending,’ Laurel answered, a flush rising to her face. ‘I know she’s...’ She stopped and shook her head, clearly at a loss, because she couldn’t defend her mother even if she wanted to. Elizabeth Forrester was so clearly indefensible.

‘And what was that money for?’ Cristiano continued, relentless now. ‘The day when she left him for some toy boy? Considering her behaviour since then, it seems likely.’

Laurel’s face went pale again. ‘What do you know of my mother’s behaviour since then?’

‘Tonight was not the first time she has come into La Sirena.’ He didn’t make a point of following Elizabeth Forrester’s romantic entanglements, but he’d seen her enough times over the last ten years—usually on the arm of some puffed-up aristo, fawning, flirting and making Cristiano nauseous—to know that she lived by her wits and fading beauty. Every time he’d seen her he’d felt vindicated in telling his father about the private account he’d discovered ten years ago.

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