

Valenti's One-Month Mistress
Sabrina Philips



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Blackmailed! Faye Matteson cannot believe the nerve of Dante Valenti! The arrogant Italian expects her to become his mistress in exchange for his help with her failing business. Defiant! She fell for him when she was just an innocent – but he took her virginity and left her heartbroken. She'd sworn, Never again! Taken! But no one should ever underestimate the power of Dante Valenti's sensuality. If he wants her, he will have her...

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‘I am not here for your pleasure.’

‘Aren’t you?’ Valenti put down his knife and fork and challenged her with his full attention. It sent a shiver down her spine, and she felt suddenly conscious of the thin layer of fabric between her breasts and the cool air of the restaurant.

‘No. I am not.’ Faye concentrated on sipping her mineral water. ‘I am here because, before you rudely cut short our business meeting this afternoon, you suggested you had something worth saying.’

‘Ahh.’ His pause was arrogant, his eyelids low. ‘So *you* prefer to digest an idea *before* your food. Very well. I *am* willing to take a chance and transfer a small advance to your business account now.’

‘You are?’ Faye was so shocked that she almost knocked over her glass. But he had refused point-blank earlier. This made no sense. He hadn’t even looked at her proposal.

‘On one condition,’ he continued, his eyes glittering in challenge. ‘For the next month you will take up where you left off six years ago.’

Sabrina Philips first discovered Mills & Boon® one Saturday afternoon in her early teens at her first job in a charity shop. Sorting through a stack of pre-loved books, she came across a cover which featured a glamorous heroine and a tall, dark, handsome hero. She started reading under the counter that instant—and has never looked back!

A lover of both reading and writing since childhood, Sabrina went on to study English with Classics at Reading University. She adores all literature, but finds there’s nothing else *quite* like the indulgent thrill of a Modern™ Romance—preferably whilst lying in a hot bath with no distractions!

She grew up in Guildford, Surrey, where she now lives with her husband—who swept her off her feet when they were both just sixteen. When Sabrina isn’t spending time with her family or writing, she works as a co-ordinator of civil marriages, which she describes as a fantastic source of romantic inspiration and a great deal of fun.

A decade after reading her very first Mills & Boon®, Sabrina is delighted to join as an author herself, and have the opportunity to create infuriatingly sexy heroes of her own, which she defies both her heroines—and her readers—to resist! Visit Sabrina’s website: www.sabrinaphilips.com

VALENTI’S ONE-MONTH MISTRESS is Sabrina’s debut book!

VALENTI'S ONE-MONTH MISTRESS

BY

SABRINA PHILIPS



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To Mum, for your unquestioning support, always.
And to Phil, for exceeding every dream I ever had.

CHAPTER ONE

WOULD she look him in the eye and plead? he wondered. Or would she be reluctant to meet his gaze, knowing that the last time she'd held it she'd had her legs wrapped around him and had given herself to him so freely? Dante spread the report across his expansive mahogany desk and his mouth hardened. No, he doubted that. Reluctance was not a word to be associated with Faye Matteson.

Leaning back in the wide leather chair, he glanced at her name amongst the appointments in his electronic diary. When his PA had come to him last month, asking if he would agree to see her, he had immediately deduced what it was that she wanted. He knew only something like this would bring her back to Rome. But she needn't have bothered making the trip. *How* she stated her case would make no difference. He smiled wryly. It amused him that she actually believed he might be willing to help her. Like hell he would. But then why would she consider any outcome other than the one that *she* wanted? She never had before. He doubted six years had changed her. Yet it had changed him. The once angelic English waitress with the come-to-bed eyes no longer posed a danger. This time he knew she was a witch.

'Miss Matteson is here, Mr Valenti,' his receptionist purred over the intercom, interrupting his thoughts.

Dante stood up, preparing to savour the revenge.

'Send her in.'

Nothing had changed, then, Faye thought to herself as she took a deep breath and sank down tentatively on the pristine sofa indicated by the svelte redhead—the final obstacle between herself and his office. His empire might have grown, but the set-up was the same: employees still orbited around him and every woman gravitated in his direction like flowers towards the sun. No doubt he still plucked whoever took his fancy and then left them to wilt.

Faye shuddered and tried to relax her shoulders. The tension was only partly due to the after-effects of the cramped seating on last night's flight. Now was not the time to dwell on *back then*. She looked around the luxurious reception area. This world—his world—was unfamiliar to her now. Had she ever really been a part of it? She suspected that was just another delusion. There was no point even wondering. She had not *stayed* a part of it. After all these years she doubted he even recalled her name. But then it had dawned on her during the metro journey here that Dante Valenti did not allow his PA to make appointments for anyone he had not fully vetted first. So he must remember, and he had agreed for her to come anyway. Which meant... What did it mean? That the past was nothing to him, she supposed, and that business came first. *And business is all that matters now*, she berated herself silently. *It's about time you started thinking the same way*. The fact that he had agreed to see her surely meant there was a chance that he at least might be willing to help, didn't it? And there was no way she was going to blow Matteson's last hope by dwelling on a stupid, childish disappointment.

Faye checked her watch for the third time, catching sight of her freshly manicured nails, so alien to her, clutching the proposal. This had to work. It *had* to. She watched the immaculate redhead murmur into the intercom, feeling self-conscious, and swept a tendril of her own fair hair back into

the clip which held it away from her face. Her budget had not stretched to a professional cut too. This would have to do.

'Mr Valenti will see you now.' The woman spoke as if bestowing upon her an undeserved honour, and ushered her towards the elaborately panelled door.

Faye smoothed down the skirt of her new grey suit unnecessarily, her heart racing, the pressure echoing at her temples. She had spent over six years believing she would never have to lay eyes on him again, and now she had brought it upon herself. But what choice did she have? Over the course of the last year she had appealed to every bank, every possible investor she could think of, but no one would lend her a penny. At first it had been disheartening, worrying. Now it was desperate. There *was* no other choice—because it was this or watch her family's restaurant go bankrupt before her eyes. And that wasn't an option. Not just because she felt instinctively that it was her daughterly duty to prevent that happening, but because *she* loved the business. So much so that she was sure even if she had been born into an entirely different family she would always have been drawn—like a bird to the south—to the simple yet deep pleasure which came from seeing other people sit together around *her* table, enjoying good food. The way people once had at every table in Matteson's. Which was why there was nothing left to do but to walk, as confidently as she could feign, into the enormous room.

He did not speak at first. Faye was silently grateful. For, though she had only dared flick a glance in his direction, the action had rendered *her* speechless. She had prepared herself for facing the old Dante, and that had been painful enough. What she had not taken into account was how time would have changed him. It was not the plush new office—he had always exuded wealth and class—nor the atmosphere of power that seemed to emanate from the ground where he stood. No, the years had somehow refined *him*. His luxurious dark hair seemed thicker, the irresistible slant of his jaw more chiselled, the curve of his full lower lip even more sensual. And those dark eyes, thrown into relief by that smooth olive skin, were the most changed of all: more piercing, more commanding—like ice. And, formidable though he looked, he was still the sexiest man she had ever met, and her treacherous eyes wanted to drink in every inch of him. Her memories had been distorted in so many respects, but she had never been wrong about that. No matter how much she wished that she had been.

'To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure, Ms Matteson?' His cut-glass enunciation of the English language with its seductive Italian undertone was as impressive to her now as it had been at eighteen, and sent long-dormant senses into overdrive. 'I can only *imagine*.'

She raised her head tentatively, not able to focus her eyes above his broad chest. He gestured brusquely for her to sit on one of the black leather chairs flanking the enormous desk whilst he remained standing, making him seem even taller than the city buildings outside the window. She perched on the edge of the chair. She wished he'd remained silent, for she had not predicted the arousing effect *that* voice would have on her in spite of the damning intention of his words. She felt the blood course faster around her veins, making her aware of pulse-points even her unrelenting nerves had not discovered.

'Hello, Dante.'

'No formalities, Faye? You need not have booked this appointment through my PA if this is, after all, a personal call.'

Faye had been more than relieved last month, when she had been able to arrange this meeting without actually speaking to Dante himself. Now she suspected this whole charade would have been easier over the phone. She had mistakenly presumed she could be more persuasive face to face, but she had she failed to anticipate the sway his physical presence seemed to have over her.

'Very well, Mr Valenti,' she said, mimicking his formal address though her throat was dry and constricted. 'I have come because I have a business proposition for you.'

'Really, Faye?' he counteracted. 'And what could you possibly have that would interest me?'

The colour rose in her cheeks and she felt utterly exposed—all the more so because of his hawk-like advantage over her. She could feel the intensity of his gaze burning through the fabric of her suit

and she wanted to take off her jacket—but she didn't dare remove the layer of protection for fear that her cami would reveal the tingling buds of her breasts that thrust against the thin fabric against her will. *Straight on with the speech*, a voice inside her prompted. *Don't let him see he's getting to you.*

'My family and I are keen to find some additional investment for Matteson's, in return for a percentage of the profits. As someone who once showed an interest in our restaurant, I thought you might be eager to see the proposal.' Her voice trailed off as she remembered his presence there back then: the delight that his approval had given her parents, the life he had breathed into it for her. She opened her folder on the desk and pushed it towards where he was standing at the other end. He ignored the papers.

'Eager?' She did not need to look at his face to catch his sardonic tone. 'You may have been fool enough to presume I had any interest whatsoever in *the restaurant* back then.' Dante dipped his eyes as he spoke, shaking his head. 'But you must be plain stupid if you think I don't know that Matteson's is on its last legs.'

Faye stiffened, wondering if there was anything he could have said that would have hurt more. So it had all been a facade. He had seen the opportunity to use *her*, nothing more. And if he believed Matteson's was irrecoverable, she might as well give up here and now. The thought spurred her onto the defensive. 'Much as it might please you to believe me to be *plain stupid*, Dante, for your information Matteson's is not on its last legs. I admit we need an injection of cash to continue updating some elements, but—'

'An injection of cash?' Dante cut in. 'You need a miracle. Who in their right mind is going to pump money into a business running at a loss?'

'We are *not* running at a loss.'

'But let me guess—you are not making a profit either?'

The shocking accuracy of Dante's judgement caused her cheeks to burn, and the air in the room was suddenly stifling. When her father had fallen ill, he had been unable to devote the time that Matteson's demanded, and yet he had been too proud to seek extra help, too stubborn to allow Faye to pull out of university and share the responsibility. Faye swallowed down a lump in her throat; she admired her father for that as much as she regretted his obstinacy. But since his death things had gone from bad to worse. No matter how hard Faye had tried to turn things around profits had continued to fall, and if they didn't increase soon she wouldn't even be able to afford to pay the staff their wages.

'Perhaps if you had gained a little more experience before taking on this venture, you might not have found yourself in this position, sì?'

The insinuation hurt. *He* was exactly the reason the broadening of her experience had been cut short. 'I have had experience. Just because it wasn't all under your guidance it doesn't mean it wasn't worthwhile. There *are* hotels and restaurants that aren't owned by you. Or hadn't you noticed?'

'I do not doubt you have had plenty of other experience since then,' Dante said slowly, deliberately running his eyes over her figure. 'But clearly none of it was quite good enough, since here you are standing before me. And we both know that means you must be desperate.'

Faye ignored the insult. He might be right about the last part, but he would mock her all the more if he knew how wrong he was about what else he was implying.

'Every business needs capital spent on it periodically. Circumstances dictate that Matteson's needs to look for an external investor now, for the first time in fifteen years. I don't consider that a failure.'

'Then open your eyes.' She recognised the harsh professional side of him she had once respected, but had never thought she would find directed at her. 'You didn't need cash back then because Matteson's was current, contemporary. Now it's fallen so far behind it's dropped off the radar. People need change.'

Was that his personal motto? Faye wondered bitterly. And did he really suppose she was so dense that she didn't know that? She *had* tried her utmost to keep the place up to date, to turn things

around after her father had passed away. But there was only so far she could get using a home printer to modernise the menus, or spending her own paltry savings on paint for the walls. She knew Matteson's needed a complete overhaul, and was desperate to give it one, but to do so she needed the means.

'It is our intention to use any funding to update the kitchens, the interior—'

'It's too late.' Dante's voice seemed to echo every rejection ever thrust her way. 'Matteson's is a failing brand.'

'Then we must agree to disagree.'

Faye raised her head, and her eyes met his for just a second before she looked back at Rome's skyline. He did not speak, but finally moved from the window towards her, making the room behind him seem larger, brighter, but the space around her feel minute. At last he rested on the desk next to her, one immaculate charcoal-suited leg casually resting over the other.

She could see the powerful thrust of his thighs and smell the earthy, masculine scent that was so distinctly his that she was transported back to another afternoon, so different from this, altogether too painful to contemplate. But forcing the images from her mind did not help to ease the old familiar pooling in her belly. She rose, unable to stand his close proximity. She wanted to scream for him to get away from her, though they must be at least a metre apart. There was no point remaining here in this room with him, enduring his vehement loathing and torturing herself when there was no hope left that this meeting would have the outcome she had wished for. No matter that when she had forced herself to consider this failure in her mind, she had thought the saving grace would be that when she walked away she would know that the way she had felt about him back then was all down to schoolgirl infatuation. She ought to be accustomed to finding that she was wrong where he was concerned.

'In that case I will approach alternative sources of funding,' she continued. His silence was unnerving. She leaned forward to retrieve the proposal, her voice laced with false optimism. 'Thank you for sparing me a moment of your precious time.'

He did not allow her to make even one complete step in the direction of the door. Before she knew what was happening he had blocked the entire movement of her body with the powerful grasp of one large, lean hand on her small wrist. Faye caught her breath.

'Leaving again so soon?' His voice was as mocking as before, only now it was cold and devoid of all humour. Faye was paralysed. 'Yet again you have done what *you* came for, but not waited to hear what I have to say. What a surprise.' The feel of his touch set her nerves skittering, enflaming her in places beyond the small area he touched.

'You have something else to say?' Her eyes were questioning, and suddenly she was the Faye of six years ago, her heart longing for some explanation to undo all the pain.

'The location *is* excellent.'

Dante released his grip on her wrist and moved back to lean against the desk. His words were like a fog and she searched within them for some hidden meaning, rooted to the spot despite the absence of his grasp.

'Wh...what?'

'You have not asked me outright whether I am interested in any aspect of your proposal—another business *faux pas*, you understand. As you rightly interpreted, I have no interest in funding Matteson's. There is, however, something that I do find extremely desirable.' Faye's head was reeling. 'The restaurant is in an exceptional location. It is in an outskirt of London I have been hoping to expand in for some time. I might consider buying the *site* for a very reasonable sum of money, if that is on offer.'

Swivelling round to face him, she felt things begin to fall into place in her mind. So *that* was why he had agreed to see her. She swallowed hard. It was his intention to finish her off completely, to usurp her family business with another Michelin-starred Valenti enterprise like the one in central London that she had taken pains to avoid for the last six years—not that she could afford to do anything but walk past. Hadn't he conquered enough already?

‘Over my dead body. It is not for sale.’

‘Not yet, perhaps.’ He was smiling now, and it infuriated her. ‘But I’ll wait.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Ahh—of course. How could I forget that waiting is a virtue that so eludes you, Faye? What I mean is I’m guessing it won’t be long before it *is* for sale.’

Faye felt the colour rise hotly in her cheeks, as much at the accusation of loose morals he had just made as at the realisation of just how much he knew. For Dante was not the kind of man who *guessed* anything. He hadn’t become a billionaire by burying his head in the sand. He clearly knew more about the financial state of Matteson’s than she had originally thought, and it wasn’t because of any distant interest he might have had in the restaurant, or in her. It was because he had seen an opportunity for himself. The thought was like a waterfall of ice down her spine. So now, if their profits failed to increase, Matteson’s wouldn’t just slowly fade away. He would be there to launch his brutal takeover attack.

‘Well, it looks like I’ll have to try my powers of persuasion elsewhere, doesn’t it?’ she retorted, raising her eyebrows and flashing him a smile right back. She would not let him have the satisfaction of thinking this was a *fait accompli*. So what if he had been her last possible resort? There was no harm in calling his bluff. Faye saw the wave of anger that momentarily crossed his face disappear as quickly as it had come. She suspected it was a rare thing for a woman to refuse him whatever it was he had set out to get.

‘Perhaps we can come to some arrangement,’ he ground out.

‘Meaning what, exactly?’

‘A compromise, of sorts.’

Faye doubted he knew the meaning of the word.

Suddenly the intercom in the middle of the room burst into life. ‘I am sorry to interrupt you, Mr Valenti, but Mr Castillo from the Madrid office is on the line, and he says it’s urgent.’

Dante swooped down to the device on the desk. ‘Thank you, Julietta. Please ask him if he would be so kind as to hold for just a few minutes. I am almost finished here.’

‘Of course.’ The woman’s voice was silky, reverent. As hers must have once been, Faye thought wretchedly. She could not help shuddering at the seductive way in which he had spoken the woman’s name in return, the compassionate response that suggested he was actually something other than a cold, calculating bastard. Something like jealousy coursed through her veins, and she hated herself for it.

‘Where are you staying?’

‘Sorry?’ His question caught her unawares.

‘In Rome—where are you staying?’

‘At a guesthouse near the airport. Not that it’s any concern of yours.’

‘No, you’re not. I will have someone collect your bags, and my driver will take you to Il Maia.’

Il Maia? What was he talking about? She had never wanted to see Rome again, let alone his hotel. Now he had made it clear he had no intention of helping her, she planned to catch the next flight home. ‘Even if I could afford to stay at Il Maia, it won’t be necessary. I fly home tonight.’

His voice was dangerously low. ‘No, you won’t, Faye. Unless you want to sit back and watch the remains of your family’s business crumble around you. I am willing to reconsider your proposal—on *my* terms. I will be in the hotel bar at eight, and we will discuss this over dinner.’ He spoke matter-of-factly, as if the prospect could not be more unappealing. ‘Since I recall that you never fulfilled the duration of your previous stay, I will kindly overlook the cost.’ He motioned towards the door. ‘I have more pressing business now. Julietta will show you out.’

‘I am not agreeing to this when all you’ve told me so far is that you wouldn’t touch my proposal with a bargepole!’ she exclaimed, incensed by both the idea of returning to Il Maia and the prospect of spending an entire evening in his company. For one thing, she hated the thought that she might feel

indebted to him, and for another, the emotions he had evoked in her during this short meeting alone quite frankly terrified her. But he was already on the intercom, telling Julietta to arrange a driver, and to put through the call from Madrid.

‘Give me one good reason why I should consent to your ridiculous proposition!’ she fired out helplessly, her eyes burning with defiance.

Dante took a deep breath and turned to face her, shaking his head patronisingly. ‘Because your consent is not a requirement, Miss Matteson. You will do what I tell you because I am going to make you an offer that you can’t refuse, and because if you don’t I’ll ruin you.’

And with that he switched into perfect Spanish, and continued with his call.

Dante replaced the phone in its receiver, having rectified Castillo’s supplier crisis without issue. Faye had stormed from the room the instant he’d turned his attention away from her, exactly as he’d anticipated. It was not the first time a woman had left his office sulking when things had not gone her way, and he doubted it would be the last. And yet, as he glanced at the chair where she had been sitting, he had to admit that he had been wrong about one thing. She had practically refrained from looking him in the eye for the entire meeting. The only time she had met his gaze had been when she was being bloody defiant about the dire financial state of her restaurant, and then she had looked away again just as quickly. It frustrated the hell out of him. Did she think she could fool him all over again with that feigned look of modesty?

But she had been innocent last time, hadn’t she? a voice piped up in the back of his mind. It was accompanied by something else that felt disturbingly like guilt but which he refused to give any such name to. For her apparently artless innocence—which had to have been the trigger for the uncontrollable attraction she had once awakened in him—had lasted all of about five minutes! Yes, she had soon proved just how keen she was to rid herself of the *burden* of her virginity before moving on to her next victim. How long had it been? Two weeks after she had gone before she was swapping sexual favours on the other side of the Atlantic?

But God, she was just as tempting now—if not even more so. Once was not enough. Despite her coming to him begging for his money in clothes he knew she could not afford—no wonder Matteson’s had reached rock bottom!—with her fingers artificially manicured when everything about her had used to be so natural, he still wanted her. It surprised him. He had felt it as soon as she had entered his office. Just like the moment he had looked up from the menu at Matteson’s all those years ago to find a girl unlike any other looking back. A shy and talented young English waitress with hair like honey and legs to die for he had forbidden himself to touch. Her innocence had proved to be as false as those nails, but she still turned him on.

Saying no, telling her that the closest she was going to get to what she wanted would be watching him buy the land from under her, was not going to be enough. He needed *her* under him again. He would make her gaze into his eyes and cry out his name in pleasure, powerless to look away. Even if it did mean changing his plans a little. The end result would be the same: she would be forced to sell everything to him, to realise that if only she had been capable of a little restraint she might have been a success. He had once thought her to be unique, deserving of his respect, and he had given her the opportunity to learn from him. But she had proved that she was the same as every other woman who had tried to sink her claws into him. And now she wanted his help? Well, she had made her bed, and he was going to make damn sure she lay in it, whenever and however he chose.

CHAPTER TWO

FAYE slammed the door as soon as the hotel porter was out of sight, and flung her suitcase onto the bed. She could not remember another time in her life when she had felt her independence so utterly undermined. Yet what choice did she have but to acquiesce? She couldn’t go home knowing that Dante might have considered a compromise that would stop the family business from going bankrupt and her own dreams from being torn to shreds—that rather than sacrifice her pride and go along with his egotistical demands she had decided to fly home instead of hearing him out. How could she?

It was just dinner, she supposed. When it came down to it, she had nothing to lose. If he offered her some ridiculously small sum of money for Matteson's she would simply refuse again, then get a taxi back here and head straight to the airport, knowing she had done everything she could.

Therefore, forty minutes earlier, Faye had begrudgingly followed his assistant to a car, exactly as he had instructed. Thankfully she had managed to persuade the driver to stop at the guesthouse so she could at least gather her own things on the way, rather than have someone else collect her luggage as Dante had suggested. And now here she was, back at Il Maia.

It was a very different arrival from that scorching hot July day when she had first set foot here, just over six years ago. That day her life had never felt so full of promise. Six weeks before she had been working at her parents' restaurant, waiting tables, when the most alarmingly attractive man she had ever laid her eyes upon had strolled in with such self-possession she had felt as if she was part of a film set and the star of the movie had just walked in.

'Catch of the day,' one of the other waitresses had said, and winked at her, following her line of sight.

Faye had blushed and turned away, but despite being far from alone in her awareness of him she had suddenly found herself to be the only waitress not attending to a customer. Clasp the pen and pad to her chest like a schoolgirl hugging her books, she had tentatively approached him.

'What can I get you, sir?'

He paused for a long moment, his head down.

'Whoever is responsible for this,' he said, tapping the menu with what looked to be utter disgust.

Faye froze, convinced that he was about to launch into a heated complaint. She cursed her chances for being the one to bear the brunt of it.

'Our chef is responsible for the choice of dishes on offer, sir. If there is something in particular you'd like...' Faye smiled as placidly as she could and took a step back towards the kitchen, in a gesture she hoped suggested it would be no trouble to ask.

'Not the food,' he ground out. 'The person who is responsible for this design.'

Faye felt the liquid pink that had slowly begun to drain from her cheeks rising with a vengeance.

'Actually, I am,' she said, hoping she didn't look as small as she felt.

'You?' His tone was disbelieving as he raised his head to study her face, but for one long, earth-shattering moment his eyes seemed to look deep into her soul with a burning intensity unlike anything she had ever experienced before. He shook his head and continued, 'You have this incredible talent, yet you are *waiting tables*?'

Faye was too taken aback to notice the censure in his voice, for it was then that he invited her to sit and Faye explained everything. That this was her father's restaurant and she was working there temporarily, whilst awaiting her A-level results, and that she had a passion for the whole business of hosting which came second only to her love of designing things. And that was why, whilst she was debating going to university or trying to get a job in marketing, this summer her father had finally let her loose on his menus.

When he had finished asking her every question imaginable, she realised she was beaming all over her face. It felt as if she had been invisible her whole life and that he had just bathed her in sunshine and seen her for who she really was.

'My staff, who have had years of training,' he said, lost for a moment in his admiration for her enthusiasm and talent, 'are incapable of producing something even half this original.'

And that was the moment her life had changed for ever. For in response to her wide-eyed amazement, he had announced that he was the owner of the most successful new restaurant and hotel in Rome, and that there was no way he was leaving this restaurant until she agreed to become part of his team.

It had felt as if she had just won first prize in a competition she'd never even known she had entered. Out of nowhere had come this man, as far from boys her own age as wine was from water,

well-dressed, exotically Italian, with a charisma that held her in its thrall, who had created the best there was in the industry she loved. And he'd wanted *her* to work for him.

Faye remembered the feeling of pure excitement, the sensation of having arrived in every sense of the word when she had waved goodbye to her proud parents and then arrived at Rome International Airport, to find him waiting for her in his bright red sports car to personally oversee her safe arrival. But she had fallen under his spell even before that. For he could have arrived on a moped and revealed that he was actually a pizza delivery boy and she would have been just as captivated. But he *had* been everything he had said he was—and more besides. Just as the hotel had been beyond her wildest imagination—Il Maia: goddess of growth, indeed. Here, she had not only been introduced to the glamorous world of five-star hospitality, she had also lost her innocence and her heart.

Yes, this arrival at Il Maia was a very different one. Rather than being filled with a sense of freedom and anticipation, now she felt trapped here, because it was the only hope she had. But if being forced to relive the desolation of six years ago meant there was even a small chance of saving Matteson's, she was just going to have to face it.

Filled with a grim determination, Faye opened her suitcase and began hanging what few outfits she had brought with her in the enormous wardrobes along one side of the room. She sighed. She had not packed with *any* kind of dining in mind, let alone dining at one of Dante's exclusive restaurants. Eating out was, ironically, a rare thing for her these days. Though she occasionally went out for a drink with some of the girls from the restaurant when she could, it had been a long time since she had been out on this scale—and longer since she had agreed to a date. Not that this was a date, she reflected, pushing something like regret to the back of her mind.

She held up the only dress she had brought with her. It was a high-street fern-green wrap-over number that was rather too short, but she had brought it knowing the temperature here in September could still be stifling during the day. It was her only option. So what if he wouldn't consider it appropriate? He could hardly have expected her to have planned for tonight. She had spent the last of her savings on her suit for the meeting, stupidly thinking she could fool him into believing that the restaurant just needed a little extra cash to expand its already adequate profits. But now she knew he was only too aware of their dire financial situation there was no point pretending.

Faye looked in the mirror and unclipped her hair, fanning its honey-coloured length over her shoulders. In two and a half hours' time he would be downstairs, waiting for her. A frisson of anticipation shot through her. *Stupid girl*, her reflection seemed to mock. So her body still wanted him? So much was different. So much of what she had believed to be real back then was not. But she had never been wrong about the level of desire he evoked within her. She had thought it was the rose-tinted glasses of nostalgia that made her remember how her body had gone into meltdown the moment he touched her, how she had longed for his hands upon her whenever he was near, but today proved that nostalgia had nothing to do with it. Even when his touch had been simply to restrain her, rather than designed to ignite her sexually, she had not wanted it to end. Or maybe that had been precisely its purpose? she speculated as she collected fresh underwear and headed for the luxurious bathroom. She'd only had to see the way Julietta eyed him so coyly to know that he had the same effect on all women. And Dante was not the sort of man who was unaware of his own appeal. It would be exactly his style to torment her with the way he made her feel for his own ends. But it was just sexual attraction, she reasoned. Though her body might be weak, she most definitely was not. Once she had naively fallen for his charms, gladly surrendered her virginity and then slipped out of his life compliantly. But she wasn't eighteen anymore. She was older, and wiser, and had absolutely no intention of surrendering anything.

Eight-twenty. He saw her the moment she entered the room. So he would not have to go up to the suite and drag her down here. Pity. To his annoyance, several other men at the bar turned on their stools and gave her the once, then twice over. No wonder, in a dress that damned short; she always had had the most fantastic pair of legs he had ever seen. He fought the urge to walk straight up to

her, wrap his hands in that golden mane of hair hanging loose over her shoulders and claim her as his own with all the force of his kiss. All in good time, he thought.

He finished the remainder of his wine and stood up before she reached him. 'I trust you had no trouble finding your way here?' he mocked, eyeing the watch at her wrist and looking upwards, as if through to the floors above.

Faye did not answer him. She had had no intention of arriving on time, even if she had been ready since seven forty-five.

'Our table is ready—do not let us refrain from the pleasure any longer.' Dante motioned for Faye to walk ahead of him.

'I agree. Let's get this over with.' She felt him place one hand lightly at the small of her back and begin to guide her through the bar into the restaurant. His touch was electric. The heat of his hand spread throughout her body. She swallowed, wanting to yell at him to back off, but she was aware that eyes were upon them. No doubt wondering what the hell the head of Valenti Enterprises was doing in one of his restaurants with *her*, and not one of the usual supermodels he did more than dine with, if the tabloids were anything to go by.

Like the rest of the hotel, the Tuscan restaurant had been simply and elegantly updated, Faye acknowledged as he led her to their table, and she didn't need to be in the restaurant business to know it remained one of Italy's most celebrated.

'Please, sit.' He held out her chair for her. 'Welcome back to Perfezione.'

Faye raised her eyebrows. Perfection; she had forgotten. Along with the rest of the staff she had known the restaurant affectionately as Fez during her month here. How had the egoism of the name never struck her back then, even if he did have a point?

'I have explained to the staff that we have important matters of business to discuss this evening. They have assured me that their disturbance will be minimal.'

Faye was not sure that was necessarily a good thing. They were seated in a fairly isolated corner. The tables cleverly concealed by vines that were the restaurant's trademark. If it was possible Dante looked even more forbidding than earlier, in a dark lounge suit and a maroon shirt open at the neck that revealed a potently masculine sprinkle of dark hair.

'I trust your room is satisfactory?' His politeness was utterly unnerving.

'*Perfezione, naturalmente.*' Two could play at the butter-wouldn't-melt game.

'I should hope so. You approve of the changes?'

'It is beautiful,' she answered genuinely, thinking how contradictory it was that in her desperation to see Matteson's tables filled with people enjoying themselves once more she had forgotten to allow herself the pleasure of eating out for what must have been months—too many to count.

Dante nodded and turned his attention to the menu. Faye watched him, unable to focus on her own. She wondered if he had any involvement in deciding what was served these days. She was not sure he would have time for the kind of attention to detail that had once so impressed her now he was based in a separate office, with restaurants all over Europe. He seemed to be looking critically, his thick, black eyelashes, outrageously long for a man, shrouding his eyes. She remembered how they had felt against her cheek, and subconsciously raised her hand to touch her face.

'I recommend the seafood.' He looked up at her, mistaking her gesture for puzzlement. 'I took the liberty of ordering an accompanying wine at the bar, but if you would prefer something else I will order another.'

'The seafood will be fine, thank you.' Faye shut her menu. 'But I will pass on the wine.'

'A mistake, you realize?'

'Perhaps.' Faye did not trust herself to keep her head on anything more than mineral water.

'And the seafood will be better than fine.'

'I don't doubt it.' Faye forgot herself for a moment, her nerves making her garrulous. 'My father used to say, "To eat well, look to the plate of your host."' The memory conjured up a childhood image of her father serving up his favourite glazed chicken and rosemary dish as the whole family waited expectantly. She remembered announcing loudly at the very same moment that she wanted to do her Brownie hostess badge.

'A wise man,' Dante agreed, his voice unusually soft. 'I was sorry to hear that he is no longer with us.'

Faye was taken aback. She had not expected Dante even to know of her father's death, let alone offer his sympathy. She could bear anything but that. Much, much easier to remember that the reason he knew was because he was waiting for Matteson's to fail in the aftermath. She nodded swiftly.

'So tell me,' she said, changing the subject, 'what offer is it that you are going to make that you think I can't refuse?'

'Patience, Faye. My grandfather used to say to me, "Do not chew over an idea until you have digested your food."'

Great, thought Faye, as Dante swiftly made their order with the waiter. *He intends to keep me dangling.*

'So, tell me, what you have been up to since...we last saw each other?' he asked, his hands together in front of him, his eyes upon her, their intensity stifling.

Trying to forget you, Faye thought, forcing down the parting image of his naked body pressed to hers.

'I travelled for a year.' Her tone was polite, stilted; she did not notice the nerve working at his jaw, her head too flooded by truths she would rather not acknowledge.

I left the country indefinitely because I couldn't bear looking up at the door in the restaurant every time it opened, jumping at the phone every time it rang, hoping it was you, finding it wasn't. Funny, how her travelling always sounded like the single most important thing she had done with her life when it had been nothing but an escape. At least going to the States to do research with Chris, who couldn't have been any more different from Dante if he'd tried, had vaguely taken her mind off him. It had beaten sitting at home wondering if she would ever hear from him again. Learning not to hope had become second nature as the months had passed. A pity forgetting him altogether had not.

'And I studied marketing,' she continued without elaboration. 'I graduated just before my father passed away. After that I naturally returned to the restaurant.'

'And that is where you wish to stay?'

At the time she had never stopped to consider whether or not it was what she wanted. That hadn't come into it. All that had mattered was that her father had devoted his life to Matteson's and there was no way she would let everything he had worked for fade to black just because he was gone. But when she thought about it, despite their dire financial situation, deep within her she knew that the restaurant business was so close to her heart that it *was* where she belonged.

Faye nodded. 'In particular my passion still lies in the design side of the business, when I get the chance.' Though that was rarely, now she was practically managing the place as well as doing shifts waiting tables.

'Really?' He raised his eyebrows. 'I was rather convinced your *passion* lay elsewhere.'

Faye's face dropped immediately. She felt as if she had been foolish to let her guard down even for a second.

Buon appetito. Enjoy.'

The waiter had placed the seafood in front of them, the meals an artwork in themselves. Was the service always this immediate, or did they have every dish on standby when he was in the house?

Dante lifted his fork and looked down at his plate, his face breaking into an unadulterated smile. Faye wondered if this was another deliberate attempt to turn her on, because it sure as hell was

working. She forced herself to look away, emotions warring within her. *This is the man who made love to you and then walked away.*

'You're not hungry?'

She shook her head. He looked insulted as he watched her move the food around her plate. But that only frustrated her more, for she knew damned well it was as important to him as it was to her that guests enjoyed their meal—it was just one of the things about him that had once appealed so much to her. But she didn't care; she couldn't force her appetite right now if her life depended on it. Even the very act of sitting opposite him made every muscle in her body contract.

'Contrary to popular belief, a man who takes a woman out to dinner does not find it alluring to see her eat a single lettuce leaf.'

If the misogynist in him had not been apparent earlier, it had just been biding its time. 'I am not here for your pleasure.'

'Aren't you?' He put down his knife and fork and challenged her with his full attention.

It sent a shiver down her spine, and she felt suddenly conscious of the thin layer of fabric between her breasts and the cool air of the restaurant.

'No. I am not.' She concentrated on sipping her mineral water. 'I am here because, before you so rudely cut short our business meeting this afternoon, you suggested you had something worth saying.'

'Ahh.' His pause was arrogant, his eyelids low. 'So *you* prefer to digest an idea *before* your food? But patience has its rewards.'

Did it? she wondered. What good had the months of hoping he would call done for her?

Dante signalled for the waiter and spoke to him briefly in Italian.

'Very well. You came here to join my marketing team six years ago, and you made it perfectly clear that your interest in doing so was—how shall we say?—*to gain experience of a different kind*. Once you had achieved that goal, you vanished.' He trailed his finger pensively across his jaw, as if she was a rather irritating conundrum that had just fallen out of a Christmas cracker. 'And yet you presume you have the knowledge to run a successful business? Perhaps if you had stayed longer and paid a little more attention your family's restaurant would not be where it is now.'

She had heard it all now. Was he actually arrogant enough to suggest that if she had hung around it would have prevented this whole crisis? Had he actually *expected* her to stay and face the humiliation of his rejection when he had practically packed her bags for her? She shook her head in disbelief.

'But still, despite your failing in this, Matteson's is in an excellent location,' he continued.

Here we go again, she thought. *He's just trying to convince me that I'm such a failure I might as well sell now.*

'Therefore I am willing to take a chance and transfer a small advance to your business account now, with the rest of the sum you desire to follow in a month.'

'You are?' Faye was so shocked that she almost knocked over her glass. But he had refused point-blank earlier. This made no sense. He hadn't even looked at her proposal.

'On one condition,' he continued, his eyes glittering in challenge. 'For the next month, you will take up where you left off six years ago, and you will learn everything you need to make Matteson's a success. Then, and only then, will I loan you the full sum you request. When you return home you will have one further month to double your profits.'

Faye looked at him, wanting to see something in his expression that would suggest he was joking. It wasn't there.

'And if I fail?'

'The restaurant is mine.'

CHAPTER THREE

TAKE up where she'd left off? Her chest constricted at the thought. As Faye reeled from his ultimatum and all it spelled for Matteson's, that was the only thing her brain seemed capable of processing. Surely he didn't mean—? She shook herself. He was talking about her *work* experience.

Yet even the thought of living back here at Il Maia, where she had spent the best and worst four weeks of her life, filled her with alarm. Where would that leave *her* at the end of the month? How could she see this man every day when she was torn between wanting to scratch that triumphant smile from his lips and wanting to taste them?

It seemed a foregone conclusion that she was ruined whether she accepted his ridiculous proposal or not. Doubling the turnover within such a short space of time was near impossible. Yet refusing his offer was out of the question. For if she did she'd be willing to bet he'd make sure Matteson's folded in double-quick time, just so he could pick up the pieces, work his multimillion-dollar magic and then flaunt his success in her face.

'I suppose the fact that what you expect me to achieve within a month is impossible is part of the joke?'

She watched his lean fingers with their neatly shaped nails stroking the stem of his wine glass ominously. His eyes rested threateningly upon her, as if she were his prey and the slow kill was his preference.

'I never joke about business. You asked for my help. These are my conditions.' His arrogance was almost tangible. He sat completely still. It only seemed to emphasise that, to him, this whole affair was barely worth his energy.

'This is a game to you, isn't it?'

'Life is a game.'

'People's livelihoods are at stake.'

'Then win.'

Faye leaned back in her chair, feeling the pulse throb at her temples. 'Could I not have the full sum now? Have the renovations well underway by the time I return?' She subconsciously shook her head as her mind tried to fathom some way of achieving the unachievable.

'Ahh, what a surprise. Miss Matteson is both loath to wait and unable to see that the *priceless* offer of working with me is worth more than any payout.'

'You always did have the most monumental ego.'

'And yet you have come back for more?'

Faye glowered at him.

'Silence, Faye? Just when I was growing so fond of your new spirit.'

Anger bubbled within her veins like volcanic lava, and her eyes dropped to her glass of water. She was racked with a sudden desire to see it splashed all over his smouldering features. Only the buzz of other diners made her hesitate. He second-guessed her.

'Go right ahead,' he challenged, as her eyes darted around the room. 'You think it will hurt *my* reputation? You're the one who will be working here. I, on the other hand, am used to the childish behaviour of clients unable to control themselves when they do not get their own way.'

'And what about when *you* don't get your own way, Dante? You blackmail your *clients* until they do?' Faye rose, placing her serviette on the table.

'Blackmail?' He made it sound as if she'd just accused him of murder. 'I think you'll find I've offered you a lifeline.'

She'd hate to see him offer the opposite.

'Sit, Faye.' Could he be any more patronising? 'If you walk away, my offer is withdrawn, and the day you go under I will be there—waiting. I will offer you even less than the site is worth, and you will be forced to accept. Now, sit down.'

His tone was low and silky, and the effect it had upon the muscles in her legs would have made the decision for her even if the cold truth of his words had not. Slowly she resumed her seat, her face stony. She could not bring herself to look up at the expression of self-satisfied triumph he undoubtedly wore.

'Dessert.' She was grateful for the interruption as the waiter positioned large plates in front of them.

'Torta di Ricotta,' Dante announced.

Faye did not answer him. She could be eating ambrosia, the food of the gods, and it would still taste bitter to her.

'You imagine that Matteson's will be able to cope without me?'

'Presumably someone has been running it the last couple of days.'

Technically, Faye's mother was in charge of the restaurant in her absence, but whilst Josie Matteson was desperate to see Matteson's restored to its former glory, she had always played a supportive role. In reality the workload would be spread between the head waitress and the chef. She trusted them both, but it was far from ideal.

'Do not tell me that you, who are so critical of my ego, consider yourself indispensable, Faye? I can assure you, you are not.'

No, she doubted any woman was indispensable to Dante Valenti. How long had it been after he had walked away from her bed before he had taken another lover. Hours? Days?

'Impetuous change may be part and parcel of your hectic lifestyle, Dante, but I can assure you it is a rare thing for us lesser mortals.'

'Ah, but when there is opportunity you are only too eager?'

'Not on this occasion.'

'And how coincidental that your reluctance comes when it means not getting your cash at the click of your fingers.'

'I can assure you that my reluctance has nothing to do with your money and everything to do with you.'

'And yet you used to be so keen for both?' His voice was husky now, and Faye almost dropped the first spoonful of dessert that she had taken. 'Or has it slipped your mind that you once begged me to make love to you?'

So he was not going to let her forget it. Though she had been trying to prevent herself reliving that fateful afternoon since the moment she had arrived, he had every intention of using it against her. She sank back in her chair, feeling defeated.

It had been the first of August. Saturday. She would never forget the date. The evening before they had worked ceaselessly to meet a deadline, with Faye sketching idea after idea for the new hotel brochure. Production meetings had run late into the night. Not that Faye had noticed the unsociable working hours. She had been too exhilarated that she was a part of all this.

In fact, even during her time off she'd caught herself wishing she were back at the office, with that feeling of awareness zipping around her veins at a double-quick pace just at knowing he was close by, which quadrupled when he looked at her. And there had been many times in the course of the last four weeks, unbelievable though it was, when she had caught him doing just that. And not in the way that an employer usually looked at his employee. More in the way an art lover might examine the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. But he would always look away the moment she noticed, his brows furrowed, as if he had really been contemplating some complex business problem and had just alighted upon the answer. Which had left Faye caught between believing she was too young and too awkward for him to see her as anything other than the teenage girl she was, and sensing something else within him that he seemed reluctant to acknowledge.

'Faye?' He had spoken her name as if coaxing a child from sleep. She'd finished off the section of the cover design she was working on and attempted to steady the pounding of her heart before looking up to see him standing before her desk.

'I'm almost done.'

'It's late.' He looked at his watch and raised his eyebrows. 'It's the weekend, and I've been working you like a Trojan. Go and get some rest.'

Faye's eyelids did indeed feel heavy. 'OK. I'll pop back tomorrow morning—get this finished before Monday.'

'No, you won't,' he said, his voice insistent. 'You deserve a break. Go out—soak up Rome at the weekend.'

Faye nodded hesitantly. She had taken herself out on a sightseeing bus tour the weekend after she had arrived, but magnificent though the sights were, seeing them by herself, without anyone to share her amazement, had somehow diminished their appeal.

'Perhaps.'

It was then that Dante looked around the room thoughtfully, at the rest of his team slowly packing up and making their ways home.

'I suppose there isn't really anyone else here your age.' His expression was guilty. 'I'm sorry.'

Faye knew it was true, although it was not something that had bothered her. Until he had pointed out how young she was again. She didn't *feel* young.

And then he said it.

'I could always show you the sights tomorrow, if you like.'

And those words changed everything.

For the Dante who was waiting for her in the lobby the next morning—a Dante without the immaculately pressed suits he wore to work—was everything she had hoped for and more besides. It felt as if somehow they were equal, like any other couple getting lost amongst the crowds. For not only did he make the sights come alive—from the wonder of Vatican City to the Baroque fountains hidden amongst the lesser-known ancient sights—he also had insisted she experience the intimate *trattorie*, the sensational boutiques in Piazza di Spagna.

She marvelled at their windows, not daring to go in. Until he called her over to one particularly exclusive display and she saw the most exquisite red evening gown she could ever have imagined. The kind most women never got to wear, let alone own.

'Go in,' he commanded, sensing her appreciation. 'Try it on.'

'Oh, Dante—don't be ridiculous. Why would I try on a dress like that? The assistants will only have to take one look at me to know that I don't have the money to even buy the hanger, let alone an occasion to wear the dress.'

'Nonsense,' he said, as if she had just suggested the earth was flat.

And the sudden understanding of just how powerful and how rich Dante really was began to seep in as she was ushered to a fitting room that was so large it could have given the entire upstairs in her parents' house a run for its money.

The dress fit like a glove, but it was with some trepidation that she stepped out, feeling like a peasant masquerading as a princess. Slowly he turned around, and then did a double-take, as if to check it was really her. She hadn't anticipated that it would be the way he looked at her rather than the dress itself that would make her feel as if her whole body was glowing. But she knew she wanted to bottle the feeling and keep it for ever.

'Faye...*bella*,' he said guardedly, his voice a purr. 'You look ...' He shook his head like a man torn and turned to the shop assistant. 'We'll take it.' The woman smiled from ear to ear and waltzed off to the till.

'Dante, what are you doing?' Faye protested under her breath, trying not to move for fear she might damage the priceless gown. 'I can't afford this!'

'Think of it as a thank you for all your hard work,' he said abruptly, avoiding looking directly at her. 'Now, go and get changed.'

And, despite her protestations, Dante paid for the dress before she even emerged from the changing room.

Feeble though it was in comparison, she insisted she buy him a *gelato* in return. Puzzled by her insistence, he reluctantly agreed—on the condition that he take her to the best place to sample

delicious ice cream. But just as they were approaching the winding street he had in mind, the heavens opened.

By the time they had run back to Il Maia, her hand reaching for his to stop them losing one another in the crowds of shoppers, her light summer dress was soaked through and stuck to her body, and his pale shirt was clinging to his broad chest, his jeans moulded to his lean hips. Finally they reached her room, and, breathless and laughing, she unlocked the door and flew in.

Dante hesitated in the doorway.

'My apartment's only a few blocks away. Let me head back and get changed. I'll meet you downstairs.'

'Dante, it's raining even more heavily now—here, have a towel.' Faye slipped off her shoes and flitted through to the bathroom. He stood there, poised like a man who had been asked to do a bungee jump without a rope.

'No, Faye, I shouldn't—'

'Come on, you'll get cold.' Faye pulled him into the room, laughing, and put the towel around his shoulders, shutting the door behind him.

And the moment the catch clicked shut, something snapped. The air in the room changed, and her naturally quick movements seemed to slow as she became conscious of every move her body made. The smell of rain mixed with her faint floral perfume and his musky cologne. Their damp clothes seemed to long to be removed. She was thrilled at being caught out by nature, as if it was urging them to come together.

She stood before him, the intensity of the look he gave her making her nipples peak beneath the wet cotton of her dress. His silence was unbearable.

'Let's get out of these clothes,' she said, reaching her arm behind her back, turning around. 'Help me with this zip.'

He did not answer, but she felt him move behind her and his hands begin to release her dress, agonisingly avoiding contact with her skin. Faye heard her breathing fall in time with his. It was as if those lingering glances had reached fever pitch and there could be no more looking away. Faye...*bella*. The words echoed around her mind, refusing to be forgotten, and her body was crying out for him as the rivulets of water ran over her body, mingling with its own heat.

'Touch me, Dante.'

She did not know where the words came from. She whispered them in a voice she did not recognise as her own—knew only that she needed him in a way she had never understood needing anything before. His warm breath stirred the hairs on the back of her neck, but still he did not move.

'Please.' She turned round to face him and looked up at him, her eyes wide, imploring. 'Please, touch me,' she urged.

Dante drew in a ragged breath, his eyes boring into her with unfathomable intensity. She saw his hands move up as if to encircle her waist, and then drop to his sides again.

'I want...' Her voice was bolder now, seeing his temptation. 'I want you to make love to me.'

'Damn you, you little temptress,' he bit out, his voice thick as he shook his head slowly. 'Don't you know what you do to me?'

She nodded slowly, her lips parted. And then he raised his head and looked deep into her eyes for one final moment, before he brought his mouth crushing upon her own.

And it was then that Faye truly learned what it was to be touched. To feel the exquisite pleasure of being claimed by the man you loved in the most intimate way there was. And the sudden searing of pain was replaced by a mounting pleasure which exploded with all the unexpected welcome of a late-afternoon storm. A sensation which, to Faye, was only surpassed by the feeling of lying beneath a cool white sheet, with Dante just inches away afterwards, and the sound of the easing rain outside the window. The sound of his breathing was steady and deep.

'Couldn't you just stay here for ever?' she whispered.

It was the eye of the storm she had never seen coming.

‘I thought you had got everything you wanted.’

Faye’s face crumpled. She didn’t know what he was supposed to say *afterwards*, but she knew that wasn’t it. Seconds before he had been crying her name in ecstasy—and now? Now the harshness of his tone made it sound as if he almost *despised* her.

Faye rolled away from him, whipping the sheet around her. ‘What are you talking about?’ She suddenly felt as if she was playing a complicated game and no one had told her the rules.

‘I’m talking about little girls who cast all dignity aside the minute they get a taste of the high life.’ He glanced towards the designer bag containing the dress and curled his lip in distaste. ‘Those who are so hot for a man they do not see the value of their virtue amidst their haste to lose it.’

He swung his legs over the bed, shameless in his nakedness, and reached for his damp jeans.

‘You came here to learn, *bella*? Then today you learn this is not the kind of behaviour which makes a man *stay* anywhere. Why would he, when he has taken all that is worth taking?’

And with that he scooped up the rest of his clothes and headed towards the door. Suddenly it didn’t feel like a game at all.

‘What are you talking about?’ she repeated helplessly, searching his face, willing him to take the words back.

‘Your true colours, *sì*?’ he said with finality before closing the door calmly behind him.

As Faye stared helplessly at the door, nausea rising in her belly, she felt her heart break in two. Felt all the humiliation of loving so blindly, of discovering just why it all felt so unreal. Because it was. Every moment, from the instant they had met until now, turned sour in her mind, as if someone had poured acid into her brain. And something changed irrecoverably within her. Not because she had just made love to a man for the first time in her life. But because all her foolish childhood dreams had just crashed out through the door with him. She had wanted to give herself to him, and he detested her for it. How could she have got it so wrong?

Faye choked back the sobs as realisation seeped in, and suddenly she was caught by a need to get dressed—as if angry at her own body, determined to cover its nakedness. The open wardrobe caught her eye, with its skirts and blouses neatly ordered for her weeks of work ahead. Yes, she thought, there *was* something worse than this: staying around to face the humiliation day after day, having him look at her thinking he had *taken all that was worth taking*, having him look at her at all.

And so she packed her bags. Understanding that her leaving would have about as much impact on his world as a pebble skimming the surface of the ocean, but knowing it was preferable to being swallowed up by the ocean completely.

* * *

Faye raised her head to look at him, sitting opposite her, her heart numb with the steady ache she had not allowed herself to feel for so long. She felt ashamed—that she had had no choice but to swallow her pride and return, that she had allowed him to get to her once more—and she felt terrified that she was capable of letting him do it all over again.

‘As you said yourself, Dante, we all make mistakes.’

He seemed oblivious to the pain in her eyes. ‘You mean you realised that you could have got more for your virginity than a few weeks working here?’

What was he talking about? She had wanted nothing from him but for it to have been real. Yet *he* was angry with *her*? She looked at his cruel, arrogant, despicably handsome face. He seemed to tire of waiting for her to answer. She was glad.

‘It was fortunate that you were offered *opportunities* elsewhere, in spite of having come straight from me.’

‘Not everyone is such as Neanderthal as you, Dante. Some men do not consider a woman’s virginity the only thing she has to offer,’ she bit out, furious at his assumptions, and even more furious that she had never brought herself to take up any such *opportunities*, as he put it, on the occasions

when they had come her way. But what would have been the point? She hadn't even once got close to feeling anything like she had felt that afternoon with anyone. Until she had walked into his office again today, she thought wretchedly.

'Faye, do not misinterpret me. I meant opportunities in the business world. Not many people walk out on a contract with Valenti Enterprises and are still offered work elsewhere.'

Bastard, she thought. Like hell you meant that. And as for business opportunities—those that had come her way since, she had had to turn down for the sake of Matteson's. Faye felt all the tension in her shoulders return as she put down her spoon.

'Champagne to finish, I think. A toast to my new...right-hand woman for a month.'

Faye gritted her teeth. There was no reason to refuse. She had sold her soul to the devil. If she was worried about losing her head, it was too late.

As he chinked his glass against her own, the blood in her veins slowed to a more languorous pace, no less insistent. She wished she had brought her *faux* pashmina to cover herself from that penetrating gaze which lingered upon her as she took a sip. Did he want her? He hated her, wanted to ruin her—she knew that. But she also knew that was not an issue he'd have difficulty putting aside if he did. The bubbles fizzed on her tongue. She took a deep breath as the alcohol reached her bloodstream, making her more conscious of her surroundings. Two days ago she had woken up to face a day like any other at the restaurant: vacant tables, piles of bills, tired décor, tired people. And now here she was, sitting in Perfezione, the antithesis of her life back home. Surrounded by so much luxury, so much life, in a restaurant where it took months just to secure a booking. Unless you happened to be accompanying the man who had haunted her dreams to this day. For a moment she wondered if she had conjured up this whole scene in her imagination.

'I will have a contract drawn up, which you can sign tomorrow.'

No, not a dream. She nodded reluctantly. He *was* the devil in disguise. So she had no choice but to stay, but she did not have to stay *here*. She would return to the guesthouse. Even if it meant having to put it on a credit card and negotiate the busy metro every morning, she needed her escape.

'Excuse me.' Faye caught the attention of a passing waiter, ignoring Dante as he stiffened. 'Please could you order me a taxi to Piazza Indipendenza? *Grazie*.'

'That won't be necessary, Michele. I will drive Miss Matteson. Thank you,' Dante interjected, almost before she had even finished. The waiter was dismissed instantly and was so professional that not a hint of perplexity crossed his face.

'You've been drinking. You're not driving me anywhere!' Faye made no effort to tone down the volume of her anger now. She had had enough of this rollercoaster of emotions. One minute he was masquerading as a reasonable human being, and the next he was verging on the tyrannical.

'I'm glad you agree. I will not be driving you anywhere, because we have established that you will stay here—have we not?'

'I have agreed to *work* for you. Where I stay has no bearing upon that. I will make sure I am on time, if that is your concern.'

'That is not my concern, and it shall not be yours either. Living here is as much part of your experience as your work here during the day. It is not up for debate.'

No, nothing *he* decided was up for debate, was it? And no wonder, when his world was full of people pandering to his every need, treating his every word like the Holy Grail. But whilst he might get her diffident agreement, he would not have this ridiculous facade of civility any longer. She would get on with what she was here to do, and spend as little time in his company as possible.

'I wish to go to bed. I had a late flight.'

'Bed? Why, you should have said earlier.' He rose, his hand moving to her elbow and his mouth lifting into a lazy lopsided grin that was at odds with the brooding intensity she had seen on his face for most of the day.

How was he allowed to look so good when he was so damned unscrupulous? She tried not to notice. She had allowed him to trample over her youthful emotions wearing that sexy smile once before, and she was not going to let him do it again.

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