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MICHELLE REID

The Man Who Risked It All

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Аннотация

This fearless playboy has everything to lose…For Franco Tolle, the golden boy of Europe's jet-set society, life is just a playground – filled with racing speedboats on the azure Mediterranean Sea. When you're rich and famous money is no object…and to hell with the consequences! But he once took a risk with a price bigger than he was willing to pay…In a rush of red-hot infatuation he put a glittering diamond wedding ring on Lexi Hamilton's finger, yet within months they were living separate lives. Now Franco's daredevil life has caught up with him – but he'll risk it all for the one thing he craves…his estranged wife!

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‘Look at me, then—up here where my eyes are.’ He indicated with the movement of one of his hands. ‘Just one brief eye-to-eye contact, *cara*, and I promise I will step back.’

Thinking it was a bit like asking her to strip naked, because

making eye contact with Franco had much the same effect on her already edgy senses, Lexi pushed out a short sigh, then lifted up her chin.

He dared to smile, with his lips and his eyes—a tender kind of gentle humour that struck like a flaming arrow directly at her heart. 'I wish you weren't so handsome,' she told him wistfully. 'Why couldn't you have a bigger nose, or something? Or a fat, ugly mouth?'

'You know …' reaching out to run his hands around her slender waist, he carefully drew her closer '… your open honesty will shame the devil one day.'

'Are you the devil in question?' She didn't even try to stop her progress towards him.

Franco grimaced. 'Probably … I suppose—yes …' he admitted. 'Because I am about to break my promise to you and …' He did not bother to finish that. He just closed the gap between their mouths.

About the Author

MICHELLE REID grew up on the southern edges of Manchester, the youngest in a family of five lively children. Now she lives in the beautiful county of Cheshire, with her busy executive husband and two grown-up daughters. She loves reading, the ballet, and playing tennis when she gets the chance. She hates cooking, cleaning, and despises ironing! Sleep she can do without, and produces some of her best written work during the early hours of the morning.

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The Man Who Risked It All

Michelle Reid

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PROLOGUE

A FEVER of hopeful expectancy had spread through the crowds waiting to see if the race would begin. Suited up and ready to go, Franco Tolle stood inside the *White Streak* team marquee with his safety helmet held in the crook of his arm and his eyes fixed on the monitor, watching for the race organisers' decision to show up on the screen. The wind had picked up, whipping the glass-smooth surface of the Mediterranean into a turbulent boil—not ideal conditions in which to race notoriously temperamental powerboats at sixty metres per second.

'What do you think?' Marco Clemente, his co-driver, came up beside him.

Franco offered a shrug in response. The truth was he wasn't worried so much by the racing conditions as he was by Marco's determination to race with him today.

'Are you sure you are up for this?' he questioned, keeping his voice level and his eyes fixed on the monitor screen.

Marco hissed out an impatient breath. 'If you don't want me in the boat with you, Franco, then just damn well say so.'

And there was the reason why Franco had asked the question in the first place. Marco was on edge, uptight, volatile. He'd spent the last hour pacing the marquee, snapping at anyone who spoke to him, and now he was snapping at Franco. It was not the best frame of mind for him to be in control of the boat's powerful

throttle.

'In case you have forgotten, Franco, half of *White Streak* belongs to me—even if you are the one with the design and build genius.'

The petulance in his tone made Franco set his teeth together to stop him saying something he might regret. So they co-owned *White Streak*. So they'd raced both her and her sister boat across Europe under the co-owned White Streak company name for the last five years. But this would be the first time in three of those years that they would be climbing into the same boat together. This was the first time that Franco had given into the pressure and agreed to let Marco take the seat next to him.

And why had he done that? Because the championship hung in the balance with this one last race of the season and his usual co-driver had gone down with the flu yesterday. Marco was, without question, the best man to have sitting in Angelo's place when the stakes were this high, so he'd convinced himself that despite the rift in their friendship the two of them could be professional about this. What he had not known until he'd turned up here today was that Marco was not behaving like the laid-back guy everyone was used to seeing around the place.

'We used to be good friends,' Marco husked with low-voiced intensity. 'For almost all our lives we were the closest of friends. Then I made one small mistake and you—'

'Sleeping with my wife was not a small mistake.'

As if the wind outside had found its way into the tent, the chill

of Franco's voice struck through his own protective clothing to his skin.

Marco seemed to breathe that chill in deep. 'Lexi was not your wife back then.'

'No.' Franco turned his head to look at Marco for the first time since the conversation had begun. They stood the same height, shared the same lean athletic build, the same age and the same nationality—but there the similarities ended. For where Marco was fair-haired, with blue eyes, Franco was dark: dark hair, dark eyes, a darker demeanour altogether. 'You, however, were my closest friend.'

Marco tried to hold his gaze. Remorse and frustration vied inside him for a couple of seconds before he sighed and looked away.

'What if I told you it never happened?' he posed abruptly. 'What if I said I made up the whole thing to break the two of you up?'

'Why would you want to?'

'Why would you want to throw your life away on a teenager?' Marco hit back, and revealed that frustration had won out over remorse. 'You still married her anyway, and left me feeling like the worse bastard alive. And Lexi did not even know I'd said anything to you, did she? You didn't tell her.'

As grim and silent as a corpse, Franco looked back at the monitor screen, the naturally sensual shape to his mouth clamping into a hard straight line.

‘She can’t have known,’ Marco muttered, as if he was talking to himself. ‘She was too nice to me.’

‘Is there a purpose in this conversation?’ Franco asked with a sudden flash of irritation. ‘We have a race to attend to, and it must be obvious that I have no wish to discuss the past with you.’

‘OK, *signori*, we have the go!’ As if on cue, the shout from their team manager across the tent broke through the tension eddying around the two men.

Franco began to walk away, but Marco grabbed his arm to hold him still.

‘For God’s sake, Franco,’ he murmured urgently. ‘I’m sorry if I messed things up between you and Lexi, but she has been out of your life for over three years now! Can’t we put the whole stupid incident behind us and go back to how we—?’

‘Shall I tell you why you’ve decided to drag all of this up?’ Franco swung back to him, icy contempt contorting his face now. ‘You are in debt to White Streak to the tune of millions. You are scared because you know you need my goodwill to keep that ugly truth under wraps. You have heard the rumours that I am thinking of pulling the plug on powerboat racing and it is scaring you to death—because you know the whole financial mess you’ve placed us in is likely to blow up in your face. And just for the record,’ he concluded icily, ‘your lousy attempt at an apology for what you did has come three and a half years too damn late.’

Tugging his arm free, Franco turned away from Marco’s frozen expression. In truth, he hadn’t expected Marco to drag this

up—and it didn't help the way he was feeling to know that back in his apartment divorce papers from Lexi sat waiting for him to find the stomach to read them.

He strode out of the marquee into the hot sunlight, cold anger fizzing like iced nitrogen in his blood. This was Livorno; his home crowd was out there. But he barely heard their rousing cheer. A red mist had risen across his eyes, in the centre of that his once closest friend lay entwined in the heaving throes of passion with the only woman he had ever loved. He had lived with that image ever since Marco had planted it in his head almost four years ago. He had taken it with him into his brief marriage to Lexi. It had coloured the way he had treated her and even made him suspect that the child she had carried was not his. It had changed the pattern of his life. It had embittered him until there was nothing left of the man he'd used to be, and when Lexi had miscarried the baby that image had shadowed the way he had reacted to the loss.

And the hell of it was that Marco was right: Lexi had never known why he'd behaved that way. The one small salve to his own wounded pride was that she'd never known how her betrayal of him with his best friend had broken his damn stupid, gullible heart.

Like a nemesis he could not shake off, Marco appeared at his shoulder again. 'Franco, *amico*, I need you to listen—'

'Don't speak to me about the past,' Franco cut in harshly, before Marco could say any more. 'Focus instead on the job in

hand, or I will take the decision to fold up the White Streak company. And the financial mess you've placed it in will come out.'

'But you will ruin me,' Marco breathed hoarsely. 'My family's reputation will be—'

'Precisely.'

He watched Marco go pale, aware of the reason behind his terror. The famous Clemente name was synonymous with fine wines, honesty and charity. It headed some of the biggest charitable organisations in Italy alongside the Tolle name. Their two families had been close for as far back as he could remember—which was the reason he'd kept his rift with Marco so low-key. They still shared a business relationship. They met often at charitable and social events. He'd allowed Marco to laugh off rumours about the cooling of their friendship, and he knew he'd let him get away with it because it was less cutting to his ego than to let anyone learn the real truth.

'Hey you guys, wave to the crowd,' their team manager prompted from behind them.

Like an obedient puppet Franco raised his arm and waved while beside him Marco did the same thing, switching on his famously brilliant smile and charming everyone as he always did. Franco put on his helmet to give his hands something else to do. The moment he did so he lost his own smile. The two of them climbed into the boat's open cockpit. They strapped themselves in. Their race advisor was droning the usual information into his

earpiece about wind speeds, the predicted height and length of the ocean swell. They did their pre-start checks, working with the unison of two people used to knowing what the other was thinking all the time. They had been childhood friends, through adolescence and into adulthood together. He would have staked his life on Marco always being there as a deeply loyal friend through to his dotage. Growing old together, kids, grandkids … Warm summer evenings spent watching the sun go down while drinking the best wine the Clemente cellars had to offer and reminiscing about the good old times.

The twin engines fired, their throaty roar a sweet song to Franco's marine engineer's ears. They took her out towards the start line—a streak of bright white amongst the dozen other powerboats splashing the glistening ocean with bright primary colours and bold sponsor logos, all of them holding back on the throttle like crouching dragons, ready to roar into action the split second they were given the go.

He glanced sideways at Marco. Franco didn't know why he did it—the old sixth sense they'd used to share making him do it. Marco had turned his head and was looking at him. There was something written in his eyes … a stark desperation that clutched like a giant fist at Franco's chest.

Marco broke the contact by turning away again, then Franco heard the low sound of Marco's voice in his ear. *'Sono spiacente, il mio amico.'*

Franco was still fighting to grasp what Marco had said to him

as the engines gave a throaty roar and they shot forward. It took all of Franco's concentration to keep them on a straight line.

Too fast, his brain was registering starkly. Marco had just said he was sorry, and he was taking them out much too fast …

CHAPTER ONE

LEXI was in a meeting when the door to Bruce's office suddenly flew open and Suzy, the very new junior assistant, burst in.

'Sorry to interrupt,' she rushed out breathlessly, 'but Lexi has just got to see this—'

Her riot of blonde curls bouncing around a pretty face flushed with excitement, Suzy snatched up the television remote from where it lay next to the coffee machine and aimed it at the television. Everyone else gaped at her, wondering where she'd got the nerve to barge in here like this.

'A friend sent this news link to my Twitter,' she explained, hurriedly flicking through channels. 'I'm seriously not into mega crashes, so I almost stopped watching, but then your face flashed up on the screen, Lexi, and they mentioned your name!'

Crystal blue waters topped by deep azure skies suddenly filled the fifty-inch flat screen. A second later half a dozen long streaks of raw engine power suddenly shot across the water, flying like majestic arrows and kicking up huge plumes of foaming white spray in their wake. Before anyone else had even clicked on what was happening, an icy chill of recognition made Lexi jerk to her feet.

High-speed powerboat racing was for the super-rich and reckless only—the whole sleek, surging, testosterone-packed

spectacle was a breathtaking display of excess. Excess money, excess power, excess ego—and an excessive flouting of the risks and the dangers that held most people awestruck. But for Lexi it was like watching her worst nightmare play out in front of her eyes, for she knew what was about to happen next.

'No,' she whispered tautly. 'Please switch it off.'

But no one was listening to her, and, anyway, it was already too late. Even as she spoke the nose of the leading craft hit turbulence and began to lift into the air. For a few broken heartbeats the glistening white craft stood on its end and hovered like a beautiful white swan rising up from sea.

'Keep watching.' Suzy was almost dancing on the spot in anticipation.

Lexi grabbed hold of the edge of the table as the mighty powerboat performed the most shockingly graceful pirouette, then began flipping over and over, as if it was performing some wildly exciting acrobatic trick.

But this was no trick, and two very human bodies were visible inside the boat's open cockpit. Two reckless males, revelling in sleek supercharged power that had now turned into a violent death trap as shards of debris were hurled out in all directions, spinning like lethal weapons through the air.

'This highly dangerous sport suffers at least one fatality each season,' some faceless narrator informed them. 'Due to choppy conditions off the coast of Livorno there had been disputes as to whether this race should begin. The leading boat had reached

top speed when it hit turbulence. Francesco Tolle can be seen being thrown clear.'

'Oh, my God, that's a body!' somebody gasped out in horror.

'His co-driver Marco Clemente remained trapped underwater for several minutes before divers were able to release him. Both men have been airlifted to hospital. As yet unconfirmed reports say that one man is dead and the other is in a grave condition.'

'Catch her, someone.' Lexi heard Bruce's sharp command as her legs gave way beneath her.

'Here …' Someone leapt up and took hold of her arm to guide her back down onto her chair.

'Put her head between her knees,' another voice advised, while someone else—Bruce again—ground out curses at Suzy for being such a stupid, insensitive idiot.

Lexi felt her head being thrust downwards but she knew even as she let them manhandle her that it wasn't going to help. So she just sat there, slumped forward, with her hair streaming down in front of her like a rippling river of burnished copper, and listened to the newsreader map out Francesco's twenty-eight years as if he was reading out his obituary.

'Born into one of Italy's wealthiest families, the only son of ship-building giant Salvatore Tolle, Francesco Tolle left his playboy ways behind him after his brief marriage to child star Lexi Hamilton broke down …'

The ripple of murmurs in the room made Lexi shiver, because she knew a photograph of her with Franco must have flashed

up on the screen. Young—he would look young, and carelessly happy, because that was how—

'Tolle concentrates his energies on the family business these days, though he continues to race for the White Streak powerboat team—a company he set up five years ago with his co-driver Marco Clemente, from one of Italy's major winemaking families. The two men are lifelong friends, who …'

'Lexi, try and drink some of this.'

Bruce gently pushed her hair back from her face so he could press a glass of water to her lips. She wanted to tell him to leave her alone so she could just listen, but her lips felt too numb to move. Locked in a fight between herself, Bruce and the sickening horror she had just witnessed, suddenly she saw Franco.

Her Franco, dressed in low riding cut-offs and a white T-shirt that moulded to every toned muscle in his long, bronzed frame. He was standing at the controls of a slightly less insane kind of speedboat, his darkly attractive face turned towards her and laughing, because he was scaring the life out of her as he skimmed them across the water at breakneck speed.

'Don't be such a wimp, Lexi. Come over here to me and just feel the power …'

'I'm going to be sick,' Lexi whispered.

Squatting down in front of her, the oh-so-elegant and super-cool Bruce Dayton almost tumbled onto his backside in an effort to get out of the way of the threat. Stumbling to her feet, Lexi stepped around him and moved like a drunk across the room,

a trembling hand clamped across her mouth. Someone opened the door for her and she staggered through it, making it into the cloakroom only just in time.

Franco was dead. Her dizzy head kept on chanting it over and over. His beautiful body all battered and broken, his insatiable lust for danger brutally snuffed out.

'No …' she groaned, closing her eyes and slumping back against the cold tiled wall of the toilet cubicle.

'Not I, *bella mia*. I am invincible …'

Almost choking on a startled gasp—because she felt as if Franco had whispered those words directly into her ear—Lexi opened her eyes, their rich blue-green depths turned black with shock. He was not there, of course. She was alone in her white-walled prison of agony.

Invincible.

A strangled laugh broke free from her throat. No one was invincible! Hadn't he already proved that to himself once before?

A tentative knock sounded on the cubicle door. 'You OK, Lexi?'

It was Suzy, sounding anxious. Making an effort to pull herself together, Lexi ran icy cold trembling fingers down the sides of her turquoise skirt. Turquoise like the ocean, she thought hazily. Franco liked her to wear turquoise. He said it did unforgivably sexy things to her eyes …

'Lexi … ?' Suzy knocked on the cubicle door again.

'Y-yes,' she managed to push out. 'I'm all right.'

But she wasn't all right. She was never going to be all right again. For the last three and a half years she had fought to keep Franco pushed into the darkest place inside her head, but now a door had opened and he was right here, confronting her when it was too late for her to—

Oh, dear God, what are you thinking? You don't know he's dead! It might be Marco—

It might be Marco.

Was that any better?

Yes, a weak, cruel, wicked voice inside her head whispered, and she hated herself for letting it.

Suzy was waiting for her when Lexi stepped out of the toilet cubicle, her pretty face clouded by discomfort and guilt. 'I'm so sorry, Lexi,' she burst out. 'I just saw your face and—'

'It doesn't matter,' Lexi cut in quickly, because the other girl looked so upset and young.

The same age Lexi had been when she'd first met Franco, she realised. Why was it that, at only twenty-three now, she suddenly felt so old?

'Bruce is threatening to sack me,' Suzy groaned, while Lexi stood at a basin washing her hands without being aware that she was doing it. 'He said he doesn't need a stupid person working here because we have enough of those, what with the wannabe starlets we …'

Lexi stopped listening. She was staring in the mirror at the small triangle of her face framed by her rippling mane of copper-

brown hair.

'It catches fire in the sunset,' Franco had whispered once as he ran his long fingers through its silken length. 'Hair the colour of finely spun toffee, skin like whipped cream, and lips … mmm … lips like delicious crushed strawberries.'

'That's so corny, Francesco Tolle. I thought you had more style that that.'

'I do where it counts, *bella mia*. See—I will show you …'

No crushed strawberries colouring her lips now, Lexi noticed. They looked colourless and faded.

'And you haven't been with him for years, so it never entered my head that you might still care about him.'

Lexi watched her eyelids fold down over her eyes then lift up again. 'He's a human being, Suzy, not an inanimate object.'

'Yes …' The younger girl sounded guilty again. 'Oh, but he's so gorgeous, Lexi.' She sighed dreamily. 'All that dark, brooding sexiness … He could be one of the actors we have on our …'

Lexi tuned the younger girl out again. She knew Suzy had no idea what she was talking about. She didn't mean to hurt, prattling on like that; she was just doing a really bad job of making amends for the huge gaffe she had made, but—

She turned and walked out of the cloakroom, leaving Suzy chatting to an empty space. Her legs felt weak and seriously unwilling to do what she wanted them to do. After she'd shut herself into her own office she just stood there, staring out at nothing. She felt hollow inside from the neck down, except for

the tight little fizz of sensation currently clustering around the walls of her heart, which she knew was slowly eating away at her self-control.

'Lexi …'

The door behind her had opened without her hearing it. She turned that unblinking stare on Bruce, lean and sleek, very good-looking in a fair-skinned and sharp-featured kind of way. The grim expression on his face sent a wave of knee-knocking alarm shunting down through her whole frame.

'Wh—What?' she jerked out, knowing that something else truly devastating was about to come at her.

Stepping fully into the room, Bruce closed the door, then came to take hold of her arm. Without saying a word he led her to the nearest chair. As she sank down into it Lexi felt tears start to sting the backs of her eyelids and her mouth wobbled.

'You … you'd better tell me before I have hysterics,' she warned unsteadily.

Leaning back against her desk, Bruce folded his arms. 'There is a telephone call for you. It's Salvatore Tolle.'

Franco's father? Twisting her fingers together on her lap, Lexi closed her eyes again—tight. There was only one reason she could think of that would force Salvatore Tolle to speak to her. Salvatore hated her. He claimed she had ruined his son's life.

'A cunning little starlet willing to prostitute her body to you for the pot of gold.'

She'd overheard Salvatore slicing those cutting words at

Franco. She did not know what Franco had said in response because she'd fled in a flood of wild, wretched tears.

'I asked him to hold,' said the indomitable Bruce, who bowed to no one—not even a heavyweight like Salvatore Tolle. 'I thought you could do with a few minutes to … to get your act together before you listened to what he has to say.'

'Thanks,' she mumbled, opening her eyes to stare down at her tensely twined fingers. 'Did … did he tell you wh—why he was calling?'

'He wouldn't open up to me.'

Attempting to moisten the inside of her dry mouth, Lexi nodded, then made an effort to pull herself together yet again.

'OK.' She managed to stand up somehow. 'I had better talk to him then.'

'Do you want me to stay?'

Well, did she? The truth was she didn't have an answer to that question. In her life to date, first as a fifteen-year-old thrust into fame by the starring role she'd taken in a low-budget movie that had surprised everyone by taking the world by storm, Bruce had already played a big part—working alongside her actress mother, Grace, as her agent. Later, when Lexi had gone off the rails and walked away from her shining career to be with her handsome Italian boyfriend, Bruce had not allowed her to lose touch with him. When her mother had died suddenly, Bruce had been ready to offer her his support. But back then she'd still had Franco. Or she'd believed she still had Franco. It had taken months of pain

and heartache before she'd finally given in and flown home to Bruce in a storm of heartbreak and tears.

Now she worked for him at his theatrical agency. The two of them worked well together: she understood the minds of his temperamental clients and he had years of rock solid theatrical experience. Somewhere along the way they had become very close.

'I'd better do this on my own.' Lexi made the decision with the knowledge that this was something Bruce could not fix for her.

He remained silent for a moment, his expression revealing not a single thing. Then he gave a nod of his head and straightened up from the desk. Lexi knew she'd hurt his feelings, knew he must feel shut out; but he'd also understand why she had refused his offer to stay. For the phone call involved Franco, and where he was concerned not even Bruce was going to be able to catch her when she fell apart if the news was bad. So she preferred to fall apart on her own.

'Line three,' was all he said, indicating the phone on her desk before he strode back across her office.

Lexi waited until the door shut behind him and then turned to stare down at the phone for a few seconds, before tugging in a breath and reaching out with a trembling hand.

'Buongiorno, signor,' she murmured unsteadily.

Across hundreds of miles of fibre-optic line a pause developed that made her heart pump that bit more heavily and her fingers clench around the telephone receiver so tightly they hurt. Then

the emotionally thickened voice of Salvatore Tolle sounded in her ear.

'It is not a good day, Alexia,' he countered heavily. 'Indeed, it is a very bad day. I assume you have heard the news about Francesco?'

Lexi closed her eyes as a wave of dizziness broke over her. 'Yes,' she breathed.

'Then I can keep this conversation brief. I have made arrangements for you to travel to Livorno. A car will collect you from your apartment in an hour. My plane will fly you to Pisa and someone will collect you from there. When you reach the hospital you will need to show proof of who you are before you will be allowed to see my son, so make sure you have the relevant —'

'Francesco is—alive?' she shrilled on a thick intake of air, feeling as if someone had hit her hard in the solar plexus.

Another pause on the line pounded and thumped in Lexi's head for a couple of seconds before she heard a softly uttered curse.

'You believed he was dead. My apologies,' Franco's father offered brusquely. 'In the concern and confusion since the accident it had not occurred to me that reports have been confused about … *Si*.' His voice sank low and thickened again as he gave her the confirmation she was waiting so desperately to hear. 'Francesco is alive. I must warn you, however, that he has sustained some serious injuries. Though how the hell he …'

He stopped again, and Lexi could feel the fight he was having with his emotions. Trapped in a spinning swirl of aching relief and fresh alarm due to those injuries he'd mentioned, she recognised that Franco's father must be suffering from a huge shock himself. Francesco was his only child. His adored, his precious, thoroughly spoiled son and heir.

'I'm—sorry you've been put through this,' she managed to whisper.

'I don't need your sympathy.' His voice hardening, Salvatore fired the words at her like a whip.

If she'd had it in her Lexi would have smiled, for she could understand why this man did not want sympathy from her. Loathing the likes of which Salvatore felt for her did not fade away with the passage of time.

'I simply expect you to do what must be done,' he continued more calmly. 'You are needed here. My son is asking for you, therefore you will come to him.'

Go—to Franco? For the first time since the news had tossed her into a dark pit of shock, Lexi blinked and saw daylight. It was one thing to know that Franco had finally taken one wild risk too many, and even to stand here experiencing the full horror of the result, but—go to him?

'I'm sorry, I can't do that.' It felt as if the words had peeled themselves off the walls of her throat, they were so difficult to utter.

'What do you mean, you cannot?' Salvatore ground out. 'You

are his wife. It is your duty to come here!'

His wife. How very odd that sounded, Lexi thought as she twisted around to face the window, her eyes taking on a bleak blue glint. Her duty to Franco as his wife had ended three and a half years ago, when he—

'His estranged wife,' she corrected. 'I'm sorry that Francesco has been injured, *signor*. But I am no longer a part of his life.'

'Where is your charity, woman?' her father-in-law hissed in an icy tone that was more in keeping with the man Lexi remembered. 'He is bleeding and broken! He has just lost his closest friend!'

'M-Marco is … dead?' It was yet another shock that held Lexi frozen as the shattering chill of loss seemed to crystallise her flesh.

She stared blindly at the grey skies beyond her office window and saw the handsome laughing face of Marco Clemente. Her heart squeezed with aching grief and the sheer unfairness of it. Marco had never done a bad thing to anyone. He'd been the easygoing one of the two lifelong friends. Where Franco had always been the high charged extrovert, the reckless daredevil, Marco had tagged along because, he'd once told her, he was lazy. It was easier to go with Franco's flow than waste energy trying to swim against it.

Knowing Franco as she did, he was probably crucifying himself right now for involving Marco in his thirst for danger and speed. He would be blaming himself for Marco's death.

'I'm so very sorry,' she whispered across the fresh ache in her throat.

'Si,' Salvatore Tolle acknowledged. 'It is good to know that you feel sadness for Marco. Now I ask you again—will you come to my son?'

'Yes.' Lexi said it without thought or hesitation this time, for no matter how hurt and bitter she felt about Franco, his losing Marco had just changed everything.

Marco and Franco … One without the other was like day without night.

Lowering the phone back onto its rest, Lexi began to shiver again. She just could not stop herself. Lifting a hand to her eyes, she covered the threat of tears stinging there and wished she knew if she was feeling like this because she was relieved that Franco was alive or because poor Marco was … not.

'He's alive, then?'

Spinning around to find that once again Bruce had entered the room without her hearing him, Lexi pressed her quivering lips together and nodded her head.

Bruce's slender lips twisted into a grimace. 'I thought the lucky swine would be.'

'There is no luck involved in being flung through the air with a load of lethal debris, Bruce!' Lexi reacted fiercely.

'And the other one—Marco Clemente?'

Wrapping her arms tightly around her body, she gestured a mute negative.

‘Poor devil,’ he murmured.

At least that comment conveyed no sarcasm, she noticed. She pulled in a deep, fortifying breath of air. ‘I am going to have to take some time off.’

Bruce stood regarding her through narrowed eyes and Lexi could tell that he was not impressed by that announcement. ‘So the Tolle effect still holds strong with you, then?’ he said eventually. ‘You’re going to go to him.’

‘It would be wrong of me not to.’

‘Even though you are in the process of divorcing him?’

Flushing in response to that challenging question, Lexi half wished that she had not told Bruce that the papers had gone out to Francesco’s lawyers two weeks ago.

‘That isn’t relevant in this situation,’ she defended. ‘Marco and Franco were like twin brothers. It’s only right and fitting that we put our differences aside at a time of tragedy like this.’

‘That’s just bull, Lexi,’ Bruce denounced. ‘I’m the guy you ran to when your lousy marriage blew up in your face,’ he reminded her with sardonic bite. ‘I saw what he did to you. I mopped up the tears. So if you think I am going to stand by in silence and watch you walk back into that poisonous relationship then you can just think again.’

Raising her chin, she turned back to face him. ‘I’m not about to walk into a relationship with Franco.’

‘Then what *are* you doing?’

‘Visiting a grieving and seriously injured man!’

‘For what purpose?’

Opening her lips to let fly with a heated answer, Lexi flailed for a second and closed her lips again.

‘You still love him,’ Bruce stated contemptuously.

‘I don’t love him.’ Walking around her desk, she found herself making hard work of hunting through drawers for her bag.

‘You still lust after him, then.’

‘I do not!’ She found the bag and pulled it out of the drawer.

‘Then why are you going?’ Bruce persisted doggedly as he prowled towards her, reminding her of a sleek hunting dog gnawing on a particularly tough bone.

‘I’m only taking a couple of days off, for goodness’ sake!’ Lexi breathed out heavily.

‘Did he find time to come to *your* bedside when you were losing his baby?’ Bruce thrust the words at her like a fisted punch. ‘No. Did he give a damn that you were heartbroken, frightened and alone? No,’ he punched again. ‘He was too busy rolling around in a bed somewhere with his latest bit of skirt. It took him twenty-four hours to turn up, and by then the well-laid bitch had made sure you knew where he’d been. You owe him nothing, Lexi!’

‘None of that means that I have to behave as badly as he did!’ Lexi cried out, pale as parchment now, because everything he had just said was so painfully true. ‘He’s hurt, Bruce, and I liked Marco. Please try to understand that I would not be able to live with myself if I didn’t go!’

‘At the expense of us?’

The *us* held Lexi trapped as she stared at the sharply attractive man standing in front of her desk, looking the epitome of sartorial elegance in a cool grey suit, and she felt the ache of wretched tears return to her throat. Bruce was thirty-five years old to her twenty-three, and the glossy patina of his maturity and sophistication sometimes threatened to drown her in intimidating waves. The cold anger glinting in his pale blue eyes, the cynical edge to his grimly held mouth … Bruce rarely showed this side of himself to her, and in truth she’d never dreamed he would do this—bring out into the open what the two of them had been carefully skirting around for months. Bruce was her mentor, her saviour, her closest friend, and she loved him so much—in a very special way she reserved just for him.

But not in the way she knew he wanted her to love him, though she so desperately wished that she could.

‘No, forget I said that.’ He sighed suddenly, throwing out a hand as if he was tossing the explosive challenge aside. ‘I’m angry because the—’ He stopped to utter a softly bitten curse before he continued, ‘Franco has raised his handsome head again just at the point when you were …’ A short sigh censored the next words too. ‘Go,’ he sanctioned in the end, turning away to stride back to the door. ‘Perhaps seeing him again after this length of time will make you recognise that you’ve grown up, while he’s still the … I just hope you find closure on your feelings for him and when you get back you will finally be able to get on with the

rest of your life without that bastard in it!'

Standing behind her desk, clutching her bag to her front and fighting the urge to run after him and beg him to understand, Lexi knew right then, in that struggling moment, that something else had just been brought to a close: her long relationship with Bruce. Tears burned hot as she took on board what that revelation truly meant. She'd been a fool—unfair, selfish. She'd known how he felt about her but had crushed the knowledge down so she didn't have to face up to it and deal with it. In the last few months she'd even started to convince herself that an intimate relationship between them would be possible—they worked so well together and liked each other so much.

But liking wasn't enough, and she knew it—had probably always known it. She had not been playing fair with Bruce from the moment she'd recognised how his feelings towards her had changed from good friend and mentor to prospective lover.

With her tongue cleaving tautly to the roof of her mouth and her lips pinned tightly together in an effort to stop them from trembling, Lexi dragged on her coat. She didn't have the time right now, but when she got back from Italy she knew that she and Bruce were going to have to have a long talk about where their relationship was heading.

Or not heading, she amended bleakly. If today's shock had done anything, it had made her take a hard look at herself. She was only twenty-three years old, and already she'd fallen in love with a rich, irresponsible playboy, become pregnant with

his child, become his wife, learned how to hate him for using her, learned how much he'd resented her for turning him into a husband, lost their baby and lost him.

So why are you walking back into his life?

Lexi was still grappling with that question late that afternoon as she made her way out onto Pisa's busy airport concourse, a long delicately built figure of medium height, wearing skinny stretch blue jeans and a soft grey jacket, with a scarf looped loosely around her throat. Her hair was loose, floating around her strained, pale face; and her tense blue-green eyes were scanning the crowds in front of her for a sign to tell her who would be there to pick her up. Almost immediately she spotted a familiar face.

Pietro, a short, dapper man with a shock of silver hair and smooth olive skin stood waiting for her by the barrier. Pietro was Salvatore's personal chauffeur, and his wife Zeta was housekeeper at the fabulous Castello Monfalcone, the Tolle private estate situated just outside their home town of Livorno. Both Pietro and Zeta had always been coolly polite to Lexi; that had been a small something in a place filled with animosity and resentment.

Striding forward, Pietro greeted her sombrely. 'It is good to see you again, *signora*, though not so good the circumstances.'

'No,' Lexi agreed.

Taking charge of her small bag, he indicated that she follow him. Ten minutes later he was driving her towards Livorno in the kind of luxury car she had once turned her back on without a

single pang of regret. Strange, really, she pondered as she stared out at the familiar sights sliding by the car window. She had come to love Livorno itself during her brief stay there, even if she'd hated everything else.

Her escape, she recalled, from tension and disapproval. A nineteen-year-old pregnant married woman—still just a girl, really—made to feel like an interloper and an outcast at the same time. Salvatore hadn't been able to stand looking at her. Francesco had reminded her of a beautiful golden eagle who'd had his fabulous wings clipped and his freedom to fly wherever he wanted to ripped away. He'd snapped at anyone who dared to approach him, picked fights—with his father most of all. He'd resented Salvatore's attitude towards Lexi, to his marriage, to their coming child. He'd hated it that he couldn't defend her because he had never been certain that she hadn't set him up in a baby trap as his father had accused her of doing.

'Why did you bother to marry me?'

Lexi moved with a jolt as her own shrill voice echoed inside her head.

'What else was I supposed to do with you? Leave you and the baby to starve on the streets?'

When true love turns bad, Lexi thought bleakly. She was still able to recall the aching throb of raw hurt she'd carried around with her for long lonely months until …

Oh, bring on the violins, Lexi, she told herself impatiently. So you had this amazing love affair with this amazingly sexy and

gorgeous playboy and you got yourself pregnant? So you married the playboy and lived to regret it and lost your baby—which, to most people, was a huge relief? Grieve for your baby, but don't grieve for a marriage that should never have happened in the first place. And *don't*, she warned herself sternly, go all self-pitying again, because it earned you nothing back then and will earn you even less now.

The car slowed down and she focused back on her surroundings as they turned in through the hospital gates. It was a bright white, very modern, very exclusive place, set in the seclusion of its own private grounds.

It was the same hospital she had been rushed to three and a half years ago. As she climbed out of the car and looked at the building a whole rush of old emotions erupted inside. She did not want to walk back in there. She felt herself go cold at the thought. Her baby … her tiny baby … had been stillborn within those walls, those whisper-quiet corridors, that luxury accommodation.

'Signor Salvatore asked me to accompany you, *signora*.' Pietro's arrival at her side made Lexi jump. She blinked, fighting—*fighting*—to push back the memories, the strangling agony of old feelings, of painful emptiness and grief.

'It is this way …'

Somehow she placed one foot in front of the other. A security man guarding the front doors asked to see her passport before he would allow her to step inside. Her lips and her mouth felt paper

dry as she rummaged in her bag to find it while Pietro became angrily animated, insisting that the precaution was not necessary when he could vouch for *la signora's* authenticity.

Lexi just wished he would leave the guard to do his job. This was all beginning to be too much for her. Francesco didn't need her. It wasn't as if he was alone in the world. He had a huge network of family and friends who had to be more than willing to gather around him. If she had an ounce of good sense she would turn around and walk right back out of there.

But she didn't turn and walk away. She followed Pietro across the hospital lobby and into a waiting lift that carried them up. Yet another walk down a hushed white corridor and Pietro was opening a door and standing back to allow Lexi to precede him inside. Beginning to feel as if she was floating on a current of icy air now, Lexi filled up her lungs and stepped into the room.

It took a couple of foggy seconds for her to realise that this was an anteroom. Comfortable chairs stood grouped around a low table topped by a small stack of thick glossy magazines. The aroma of fresh coffee permeated the air. A pretty nurse with her ebony hair neatly contained beneath a white cap sat at a desk behind a computer monitor.

She looked up at Lexi and smiled, 'Ah, *buona sera*, Signora Tolle.' She surprised Lexi by recognising her on sight. 'Your husband is sleeping but you must go in and sit with him,' she invited. 'He will be more comfortable once he knows you are here.'

Lexi walked across the room towards the door the nurse had indicated. Her heart was thumping, beating like a drum in her ears. She pushed open the door, stepped through it, then swiftly closed it behind her so she could lean back against it, light-headed with fear of what she was about to see.

The room was bigger than the one she'd stayed in. A large white cube of space, shrouded by soft striped shadows cast by the slatted blinds angled against the golden light of the afternoon sun. And she could feel every pore absorbing the hush of perfect stillness as she stood glued to the spot by the sight of the drips and tubes leading to a monitor alive with graphs and numbers that silently flickered and pulsed.

'You can come closer, Lexi. I won't bite.'

CHAPTER TWO

THE sound of that dry, slightly hoarse voice ran through Lexi in shivering stings of sharp recognition and she dropped her gaze to the bed, unaware that she'd been avoiding it in fear of what she was going to see.

She discovered that she could not see anything other than a swathe of starched white linen. She saw no pillows, and a cage had been erected over his legs. Her wildly skipping heart suddenly felt all curled up in her chest, cowering, as if something was threatening it. For when someone was forced to lie flat it usually meant a back injury. A cage usually meant broken legs. And whatever those tubes were feeding into him made her squirm, because she hadn't bothered to ask anyone what his injuries were. Not the nurse, not Pietro … Perhaps she should go back out there and—

'Lexi …' Franco murmured impatiently when she took too long to answer him. 'If you are thinking of making a quick exit —don't.'

'H-how did you know it was me?' she asked.

'You still wear the same perfume.'

She was surprised he remembered, bearing in mind the trail of different perfumes that had passed through his life since her. Dozens of women listed in celebrity magazines. All smooth, sleek, sophisticated, with—

'Since I cannot move, have some pity on me, *cara*. Come over here where I can see you, *per favore*.'

Curling taut fingers around the shoulder strap of her bag, Lexi peeled herself free of the door and walked forward on limbs that shook. Pulling to a halt at the foot of the bed, she felt her hectic breathing dry up altogether when she got her first glimpse of Franco's powerful length, laid out flat on the bed like a corpse. A white linen sheet covered three-quarters of him—his upper torso left uncovered to reveal the muscled solidity of his wide shoulders and arms like a splash of polished bronze against the starched white. White bandaging formed heavy strapping around his left shoulder and bound his ribs, and she gulped as a wave of distress broke through her when she caught sight of the dark, inky bruising spreading out from beneath the edges of the strapping.

'Ciao,' he murmured, in a husky low tone that sounded scraped.

Lexi gave a helpless shake of her head as her eyes began to sting with hot aching tears. 'Just look at the state of you,' she whispered.

Franco did not care that he was really pleased to see the evidence of those tears appear like deep pools in her beautiful eyes. He *wanted* Lexi to be upset. He even wanted her to pity him—was in fact ready and willing to push her sympathy buttons for all they were worth.

Dio mio, she looked good, he thought as he lay there waiting for her to look directly into his face. Her hair floated around

her slender shoulders like a burnished halo, framing the exquisite triangle of her face with its wide spaced eyes and cute little nose and pointed chin. He did not care that she was pressing her soft lips together in a failed attempt to stop them from trembling, or that the grey patterned scarf she wore looped around her neck was as unflatteringly drab as the grey jacket she was wearing, which hid away from him all that he knew was softly curvy and gracefully sleek. For him she was still his first glimmer of sunlight in the darkest days of his life.

'Look at me,' he urged, feeling her fierce tension throb between them like an extra heartbeat. He could feel the fight she was waging with herself over allowing her eyes to make contact with his, and he understood why it was a fight. Once upon a time they hadn't been able to look at each other without wanting to devour each other. When they'd stopped looking their whole fated relationship had gone into an acute downward slide.

'Please, *cara*,' he husked, then watched as her eyelashes fluttered, the long dusky crescents rising upwards to reveal the depth of the ocean swirled by a hundred different emotions; that caused a clutch of agony so deep inside him the machine behind him started bleeping like mad.

Lexi shot a startled look at it, her breath lurching free from her strangled throat. Things were happening. She hadn't a clue what a normal pulse or blood pressure should read, but the flickering numbers on that machine were rising fast, and it scared her enough to send her shooting round the edge of the bed.

‘What’s wrong?’ She reached for his hand where it lay on the bed, only to stare down in horror when she found herself clutching hold of a plastic shunt with tubes coming out of it. But before she could snatch her hand away Franco turned his hand over and imprisoned hers inside his warm, surprisingly strong grip.

‘I’m OK,’ he said, without enough strength to convey confidence.

The door suddenly flew open and the nurse swept in. With a brief vague smile at Lexi, she went around to the other side of the bed and began checking things.

‘I think your wife must have surprised you.’

Lexi translated the nurse’s smiling tease from Italian to English.

‘She did *something* to me anyway,’ Franco returned ruefully.

Catching onto his meaning, Lexi tried to reclaim her fingers but Franco just tightened his grip, and after a second or so compassion took over and she let her fingers relax in his. The moment she did so he closed his eyes and inched out a very controlled sigh. Almost immediately the number readings began to ease downwards. Flanking each side of the bed, the nurse and Lexi watched the monitor—the nurse with her fingers lightly circling his wrist, Lexi with her fingers still enclosed by his.

By the time everything seemed to have gone back to normal Lexi felt so weak she reached out with her free hand for the chair positioned to her right, drew it closer to the bed and sat down.

Franco didn't move or open his eyes, and as the room slowly settled back into quiet stillness, Lexi let herself look at his face again. She was instantly drenched by the old fierce magnetism that had always been her downfall where Franco was concerned.

He was, quite simply, breathtakingly handsome. There wasn't even a cut or a bruise to distort the sheer quality of masculine perfection stamped into that face. Working at a theatrical agency had, she'd thought, made her immune to so much male beauty, because she dealt with handsome men on a day-to-day basis. But everything about this man set her own blood pressure rising, she acknowledged helplessly—soaking up every small detail while he lay there, unaware of her scrutiny. The smooth, high and intelligent brow below ebony hair cropped short to tame its desire to curl. The subtle arch of his eyebrows above heavy eyelids tipped with eyelashes so long they rested against the slanting planes of his cheekbones. Half of his blood was pure Roman on his mother's side, and the line of his long, only slightly hooked nose, gave credence to that; while the wide, sensual contours of his well shaped mouth belonged to his proud Ligurian father.

Though right now that mouth was pressed shut and the corners turned down a little due to the pain he must be suffering, the agony of overwhelming grief.

'I'm so very sorry about Marco,' she murmured painfully.

Instantly the machine started beeping again. The nurse sent Lexi a sharp frowning glance, then added a faint shake of her head to convey the message that Franco was not ready to talk

about Marco.

Her own lips pinching together in an effort to control a painful surge of understanding, Lexi looked back at Franco. A stark greyish tint had settled like a veil across his face, and she knew he was looking that way because he was blaming himself for Marco's death. Where Franco led Marco always followed. Anyone who knew the two friends knew that. But the slavelike loyalty Marco had bestowed on Franco had been both flattering and a burden—as Lexi knew only too well, since she had enslaved herself to him in the same way. And look at the burden *she* had become.

Was that the reason she had come here? Because she knew her slavish love and total dependency on him had become a terrible burden and she now felt guilty about that?

Right there, Lexi fell back in to that long summer four years ago when, at nineteen years old, she had finally done something all by herself after years of being sheltered by her over protective mother, Grace—beautiful Grace Hamilton, who'd sacrificed her own acting career to manage her daughter's surprise rise to fame.

But the year Lexi was nineteen Grace had fallen in love for the first time in her life and married Philippe Reynard, a French entrepreneur with all the outward trappings of celebrity and wealth so yearned for by Grace. He'd owned a fancy apartment in Paris and a rambling château in Bordeaux; and a yacht on which he'd spent most of his summers. He'd made Grace feel like a princess, and encouraged her to loosen the chains on her daughter

so that the two of them could enjoy an extended honeymoon sailing around the Greek Islands on his yacht.

Lexi had been allowed to travel to the Cannes Film Festival without her mother playing strict chaperone.

Excited about striking out on her own for the first time in her life, she had let the freedom go straight to her head and she had become sucked into the glamorous high life. She had proceeded to live it with the destructive blindness of a junkie—until it had been over her ability to think straight about anything … especially what she was doing to herself.

From Cannes to Nice, Cap Ferrat, Monte Carlo, San Remo—

San Remo …

Lexi closed her eyes and saw the same radiant blue skies and glistening waters she'd seen on the television screen. She saw the rows of fancy yachts berthed in exclusive marinas, the stylish boulevards lined with fashionable designer shops, and the pavement café bars frequented by the spoiled offspring of outrageous wealth. Places for the golden people to hang out, with their golden skins and golden smiles and glittering golden futures already mapped out for them. She could hear the golden ring of their laughter—feel the wildly seductive tug of their totally unflappable self-belief. When they'd allowed her entry into their select assembly she'd truly believed that she was one of them—the current golden girl of movie fame.

And of course there'd been Franco, the most golden of them all. The one possessed of all the male beauty his richly

aristocratic Italian heritage could bestow. Older than her, so much more experienced than her, the leader of the pack of those super-exclusives. And she'd caught him. She, little Miss Totally-Naïve-and-Sheltered, had won the jewel in the crown without bothering to question how she had done it. Not once had it occurred to her that her new friends had found her naivety hilarious—a novelty worthy of turning into a highly entertaining game.

Lexi shivered as the cold, cold truth of her complete humiliation simultaneously creeped up her and chilled her to the bone.

Six months after it had all started it was over—the wreck of her life floundering amongst the wreckage of so much more destruction. Her mother and her new stepfather killed in a freak car accident. The shattering discovery that Philippe Reynard had lived his whole life in hock and, during his short marriage to her mother, had neatly and cleanly stripped Grace of all the money Lexi had earned until there was none of it left.

He'd called it 'investing in Lexi's future.' What a sick joke.

And even all that was not what had dropped her into the lowest, darkest place to which she had ever sunk. No. Her pale face was pinched as she stared at the man who had taken over her life. Lexi recalled the other damning piece of information that had really shattered her. She'd finally learned about the bet her new friends had placed to see which male ego would relieve her of her so obvious innocence before the end of that golden

summer. She'd learned about the way all those people she'd stupidly called friends had watched and wagered and eventually laughed their exclusive heads off when Franco had won the prize. If she lived to be a hundred she would never be able to blank out the video someone had sent to her phone of Franco collecting his winnings. She still saw the date, the time and his lazily complacent smile. The only thing missing had been photographic evidence that he had actually bedded her. But that did not mean such evidence had not been around. Once the veils had been ripped from her eyes about Franco, she'd been able to believe him capable of anything. She'd been nothing but a big joke to him, and when the joke had backfired he had not known how the hell to cope.

In the way fate had of balancing things out, Francesco Tolle, golden boy of Europe's glittering society, had found himself punished for his callous treatment of her when she'd found herself orphaned, pregnant and broke.

Lexi blinked back to the present as a door closed, and she realised the nurse had left them alone. Looking back at the monitor, she saw that everything had settled back down again while she'd been taking a walk down memory lane.

Franco still did not open his eyes, and Lexi began to wonder if he'd fallen asleep. She looked down at their hands still clasped together, his long strong fingers totally engulfing hers in the same way they'd used to do—only without the worrying shunt piercing the back of his hand, feeding liquids and drugs into his veins.

Hands that knew her more intimately than any other pair of hands, she thought, shifting on the chair when the thought became a physical memory that skittered across the surface of her skin. Lexi frowned, annoyed with herself for being so susceptible to a mere memory. It wasn't as though he had the smooth caressing hands of an office dweller. His were firm, slightly callused capable hands, because Franco was at his happiest when he was hauling sail ropes on his yacht, *Miranda*, which he'd lived on that summer—or covered in grease and grime taking a boat engine to bits before he painstakingly put it back together again. Franco was a mariner through to his soul. Sailboats, powerboats, natty fast speedboats—even the giant supertankers and cruise liners the Tolle shipyard constructed near Livorno. As a qualified marine engineer Franco was in his element, no matter what size the craft. That he could also be successful at the business end of the Tolle empire was an extra string to his talented bow.

Then there was his well documented success with women. And why not? Lexi thought, unable to stop drifting her eyes over his powerful form, most of which was now hidden beneath the sheet. Leonardo da Vinci would have loved to meet Franco, she decided, for he *was* his 'Vitruvian Man.' Everything about him was in perfect proportion—even the strength reflected in his squared chin. He badly needed a shave, she noticed, feeling her fingers start to tingle with an urge to run them over the rough shadow that gave him the look of a reckless buccaneer.

That he was—reckless, anyway; or he would not enjoy racing a supercharged powerboat at such dangerous speeds.

It was no wonder she'd fallen for him like an adolescent, dazzled by his larger than life personality. Physically he was every woman's secret fantasy man, complete with that other vital ingredient—a powerfully magnetic sexual virility. It radiated from him even as he lay there, bruised and weakened.

Lexi tugged in a small breath, overcome by the desire to stroke her fingers over the rest of him, let her senses reconnect with all that glorious male beauty laid out in front of her like a sacrifice. As a lover he'd been wildly exciting—the kind of lover who loved to be stroked and petted as much as he loved to do both. As a companion he'd possessed enough lazy charm and captivating charisma to blind her to all his faults.

He was kind to old ladies and animals. He could laugh without constraint at the absurd, and—all the more potent—he could laugh at himself. He had a brilliant technical brain that had allowed him to design and build his first sailing yacht at the age of thirteen. He was super-confident and totally fearless when it came to any sport that took place on water. And he could lie in the sun for hours without moving. Relaxing for Franco was as important as competing in some crazy sport or his other favoured pastime: sex. Long afternoons and nights of deeply sensual, stunningly uninhibited loving was the sweet honey that gave him his boundless energy.

And he could be cruel enough and ruthless enough to take on

a bet to seduce the naive interloper in his circle of elite friends because he liked to be challenged and he liked to win—to hell with the cost to the targeted victim.

Something else swept through Lexi. It was the rumbling of a hurt she had buried so deep it still had not worked its way back to the surface—though she was letting herself remember all the things she had shut away with that hurt. Things like the hard clench of dismay on his face when she'd broken the news to him that she was pregnant. The change in his eyes, as if someone had splashed the warm brown iris with a glaze of ice. Then there was the quiet sombre way he'd taken responsibility for his mistake and ultimately taken responsibility for her.

Where had her pride been when she'd let him do that? Smothered, by blind love and the desperate fear of losing him. Lexi was ashamed of that. But she felt more ashamed knowing that, for all the unforgivable things Franco had done to her all those years ago, she'd more or less walked into marriage with him to punish him for that ugly, humiliating bet.

And maybe that was the reason why she had come here—because she'd always known deep down that she had behaved no better than Franco had.

Looking up, she collided full on with a pair of stunning dark eyes the multicolours of tiger's-eye quartz. Yet another heated flush flared through her body, leaving her feeling stripped bare and exposed. Because she knew him. She knew by his carefully impassive expression that he'd been lying there so still because

he had been reading her every thought as it had passed across her face.

Pulling her hand free of his grasp, she sat back in her chair, tense now and skittish. 'I don't know why I've come here,' she confessed in a helpless rush, laying something else bare for him: the battles she'd been having with herself.

Franco wished he did not feel so damn weak. There were tears in her eyes again, though she was trying her best to fight them. And her hair was catching the sunlight streaming in through the slatted blinds, setting it on fire with a thousand different shades of gold and red.

'I had this h-horrible premonition you were going to die, and if I didn't come I would always regret being so m-mean to you.'

'Would it help you to feel better if I complied with your premonition, *cara*?' he offered flatly. 'It would make you a rich widow, at all events.'

'Don't talk like that.' Lexi speared him with a pained look. 'I never wished you dead and I don't want your money.'

'I know you don't—which makes this situation all the more ironic.'

Ironic? 'Where is the irony in you lying here all battered and broken?'

'I am not in as bad a condition as I look.' The quiet assurance sent her restless gaze tracking over him once again.

'Explain your definition of a not bad condition.' She waved a trembling hand to encompass all the evidence in front of her,

including the computerised machine monitoring him as well as feeding all sorts of drugs into him via the shunt in the back of his hand. 'You're lying fl—flat on your back and you've got a cage over your legs.'

'I am lying flat as a mere precaution, because I wrenched a couple of vertebra and the only thing wrong with my legs is a gash to my left thigh, which had to be stitched up.'

Her restless eyes moved to his bound chest. 'And all that strapping?'

'A couple of cracked ribs and a dislocated shoulder they had a fight manipulating back into place.'

She went pale as her tummy churned squeamishly at the image he'd just placed in her head. 'Anything else?' she squeezed out.

'A sore head?' he offered up.

A sore head … No broken bones, then. No crushing brain damage. No life-threatening injury to justify his father's insistence that she come here … Lexi lurched out from the strains of anxiety to embrace the sting of annoyance in the single release of her breath. 'You're supposed to be seriously ill,' she said accusingly.

'You don't see these injuries as serious?'

'No.' The summer she'd met Franco he had been cruising the Mediterranean while convalescing after breaking a leg so badly he'd required several surgeries and countless metal pins to get the leg to mend. 'Your father gave me the impression that you—'

'Wanted to see you?'

‘Bleeding and broken and asking for me!’ She quoted Salvatore. ‘That implied you were in a coma or s-something.’

‘People in comas don’t speak—’

‘Oh, shut up.’ Jumping to her feet, Lexi paced restlessly away from the bed—only to swing right back again. ‘Why did you want to see me?’

The heavy veil of his eyelids lowered to screen his thoughts. ‘Lose the bag and take the jacket and scarf off before you roast.’

‘I’m not stopping,’ Lexi countered edgily.

‘You’re stopping,’ he contended, ‘because you took one look at me and now you can’t help yourself staying around to keep on looking.’

She dragged in a strangled breath. ‘Of all the conceited—’ Fiercely she breathed out again.

‘Dio mio,’ he ground out. ‘Even as I am lying here injured and in pain, and pretty damn helpless, you could not resist mentally stripping me of the covers so you could reacquaint yourself with what I look like.’

‘That’s not true!’ Lexi denied hotly.

He just smiled the smile of a cat who’d cornered the mouse. ‘I might be physically flattened, but all my other faculties are in good working order. I know when I’m being lusted after. You look sensational too, *bella mia*,’ he diverted smoothly. ‘Even trussed up in all those clothes you’ve got on.’

‘It’s cold in England.’ Why she’d said that Lexi didn’t have a single clue.

‘Glad I didn’t make it there, then,’ Franco responded. ‘September should be a glorious month. English weather has lost its good taste …’

He closed his eyelids all the way now, as if he didn’t have the strength to hold them up any longer. Lexi chewed on her bottom lip for a few seconds, wondering what she should do next.

‘You’re tired,’ she murmured. ‘You should rest …’

‘I am resting.’

‘Yes, but …’ She slid a restless glance over him again. ‘I should leave you to do it in peace.’

Irritation tightened his facial muscles. ‘You have only just arrived here.’

‘I know …’ She was uncomfortably aware that she had moved back to the side of the bed. ‘But you know you don’t really need me here, Franco. It’s just—’

‘I was going to come to London to see you after the race, then—this happened.’ The impatient flick of his unencumbered hand adequately relayed what *this* was. ‘There are things we need to talk about.’

None that Lexi could bring to mind, except—A sound of thickened horror broke free from her throat. ‘Are you saying it was because I sent you divorce papers that you crashed your boat?’

‘No, I am not saying that,’ he snapped, then let out a groan, as if even getting angry hurt him.

Lexi’s eyes went straight to the monitor. ‘You OK?’

'Si,' he muttered, but she could see that his breathing had gone shallow, his beautifully shaped mouth drooping with tension. 'Damn ribs kill me every time I breathe.'

'And you look ready to pass out,' Lexi said anxiously, watching the grey pallor wash across his face again.

'It's the drugs. I will be free of them by tomorrow, then I can get out of here.'

About to remark on that overconfident statement, she held back because she could tell he was only voicing wishful thoughts.

A silence fell between them. After shifting from one foot to the other a couple of times, Lexi gave in to what she really wanted to do, but didn't really want to do, sit down again. It was exhausting to be locked in this constant battle with herself, she admitted as she sat watching his breathing become less shallow and the tension in his face relax.

She just wished he didn't look so achingly vulnerable, because that didn't help her at all. Nor did it help when an old memory slunk into her head, showing her a moment—a short space in time in their hostile marriage—when Franco had sat beside her bed all night long. They'd had a horrid row, she recalled. Just another one of many rows—but this one had ended with her spinning away to walk out of the room, only to end up dropping at his feet in a faint. She must have been out for ages, because when she'd eventually come round she'd been in her bed and a doctor was leaning over her, gravely viewing the blood pressure band he had strapped around her arm.

Glancing up at the flashy screen that was monitoring Franco's vital statistics, she grimaced. His must be scoring an OK blood pressure because the thing wasn't beeping, whereas the old fashioned version she'd felt squeezing her arm had given her no clue at all that her pressure was a cause for concern.

She looked back at Franco. His hair had gone curly, she noticed for the first time. If he knew he would be mad. Franco went to great expense to make sure his hair didn't show its natural tendency to curl. His hair had been curly the night she'd fainted. He'd stood like some brooding dark statue at the end of her bed but it was only now, looking back, that she remembered the ruffled curly hair and the same grey cast to his face that had been swimming over it today.

'Your wife needs rest and no stress, Signor Tolle,' the doctor had informed him. 'I will come back in the morning.' He'd then spoken to Lexi herself. 'If your blood pressure has not fallen by then you will be going into hospital.' It had been both a warning and a threat.

'I'm sorry.'

Lexi blinked, because that gruff apology had sounded in her head as if Franco had only just said it.

'Go away and leave me alone,' she'd told him, and turned her back to him.

He hadn't gone away. They say that misery loves company, and it had certainly been true for the two of them that long and miserable night, when he'd pulled up an armchair and sat in it, a

grimly silent figure in the darkness, watching over her.

Sliding back into the present, Lexi was surprised to discover that the room had slowly darkened while she'd been sitting there, lost in her memories. Franco still had not moved so much as a glossy black eyelash as far as she could tell.

What was it they had been arguing about? She couldn't remember, though it was likely she'd been the one who started it—she usually had. When love turned to hate it was a cold, bitter kind of hatred, she'd discovered. The target for your hatred could not do or say anything right.

Good time to make your silent exit, Lexi, she told herself—not wanting to feel like the person she had turned into back then. Stooping down to pick up her bag from where she'd placed it on the floor, she rose to her feet and turned towards the door.

'Where are you going?' Franco murmured.

Surprise stung down her spinal cord. 'I thought I'd go now and let you sleep.'

'If I promise to fall into a deep coma will you stay?'

Lexi swung back round. 'That wasn't even remotely funny, Francesco!'

Through the gloom she saw his mouth stretch into a mocking kind of grimace, 'You sound like a really snappy wife.'

'And that was even less funny, considering my track record in that particular role.' She sighed heavily.

'And I was the selfish husband from hell.'

Yes, well, she had no argument with either assessment.

Neither of them had been any good at being married. Great at being lovers—warm and carefree, fabulously imaginative and gloriously passionate lovers—but as for the rest …

'Listen … 'She heaved a deep, fortifying breath. 'I hope you get better soon. And I am truly sorry about—about Marco.' She had to say it, even though the nurse had indicated that Franco wasn't ready to talk about his best friend. 'But you must know as well as I do that I don't belong here.'

'I want you here,' he stated grimly.

Lexi shook her head. 'You're going to be OK. In a couple of days you'll be wondering why you wanted me to come here at all.'

'I know exactly why I want you here.'

Ignoring that, 'I'm going back to London,' she said.

'Go through that door and I will pull out these tubes and come right after you, Lexi,' Franco warned her flatly.

She uttered yet another sigh. 'Why would you want to do something as stupid as that?'

'I told you.' The line of his mouth was severely compressed now, 'We need to talk.'

'We can talk through our lawyers.' Lexi continued determinedly towards the door.

'You will have this particular talk to my face, *cara*, because I don't want a divorce.'

She swung round yet again. 'Until today we haven't so much as spoken a word or set eyes on each other for three and a half years!' Lexi reminded him. 'Of course you want a divorce. I want

a divorce.'

That said, she turned and reached for the door handle, heard a sound from behind her that sent a cold chill racing down her spine, and spun right back to discover that Franco was sitting up and attempting to pluck out the shunt from his hand. But his coordination was obviously wrecked by the drugs.

'What do you think you are you doing?' Shrieking alarm sent Lexi darting back to the bed to cover his hand and the shunt with her both of her own hands in an effort to stop him, but he just changed tack and threw back the covering sheet instead. Even as she tried to grab it the cage went flying onto the floor. The next shock wave hit her when she saw for the first time what the cage and sheet had been covering up. More bandaging strapped one powerfully structured thigh, but it wasn't that that shocked. Even in the gloom she could see the sickening extent of his bruising, which spread right the way down his left side.

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