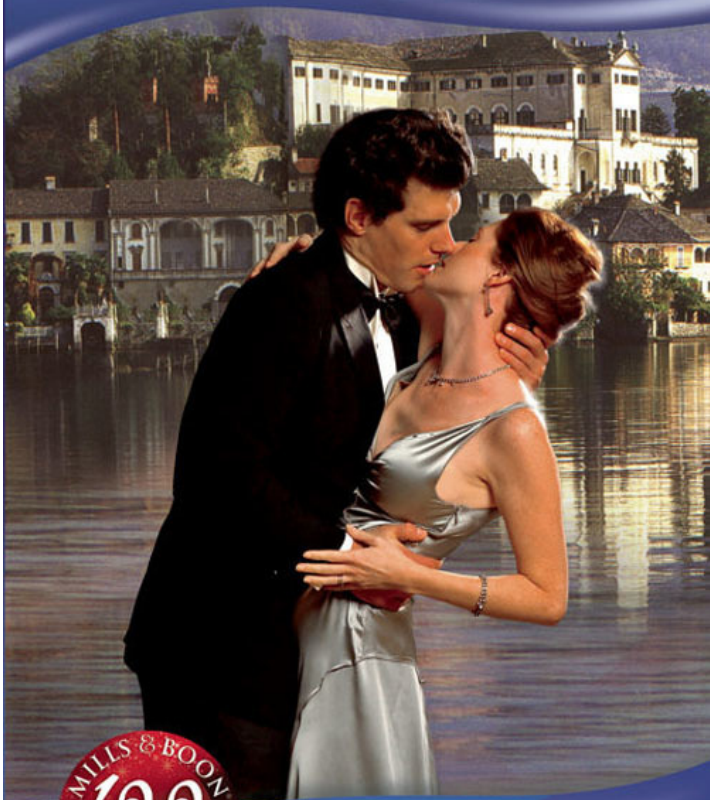


The De Santis Marriage
Michelle Reid



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Michelle Reid

The De Santis Marriage

Аннотация

Step into a world of sophistication and glamour, where sinfully seductive heroes await you in luxurious international locations. Blackmailed and bedded for a baby! Italian tycoon Luciano De Santis is breathtaking in every way – he has dark goodlooks, a decadent jetsetting lifestyle, power and success – and a devastating effect on women. Now Luc needs a bride – and he's demanding ordinary virgin Lizzy Hadley as his wife! He's trapped her, blackmailed her, and he's determined to claim her – and as Lizzy's family owe him millions of pounds, she won't be able to refuse. But there's one condition of the De Santis marriage that Luc forgot to mention – when she becomes his wife, she must produce an heir!

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‘You *will* marry me, just as everything has been arranged already,’ he countered. ‘You *will* accept with grace anything I choose to bestow on you, and you will *not* go back to work.’

Lizzy swung to face him and was shocked by the kick she received low in her gut because he was so— ‘Y-you can’t just slot me into Bianca’s place just like that,’ she fed, over what her body was trying to make her feel. ‘The authorities won’t allow it!’

‘At the risk of sounding boringly repetitive, money talks.’

Money talks. And so it did. ‘I think I hate you,’ she whispered.

‘Nevertheless you will take up Bianca’s place with pride and dignity, and fool the world into thinking it was you and I who discovered we couldn’t live without each other. And you will *not* pay me back with anything other than with our first child, seeded in your womb. With that goal in mind you will come to our marriage bed with warmth and honesty—which means you will not fight against what we both desire.’

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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CHAPTER ONE

THE WHOLE pre-wedding party thing was revving up like a gigantic engine and Lizzy had never felt less like partying in her entire life.

Now a night at La Scala, dear God, she thought heavily. For here she stood surrounded by luxury in this posh Milan hotel suite, about to put on a posh designer dress that must have cost more money than she dared let herself think about, so she could look the part for a posh gala evening spent at La Scala, while back home in England the family business was about to go under taking everything they owned along with it.

She had not wanted to come to her best friend's wedding but her father had insisted. Her brother Matthew had gone a whole step further and become really angry. 'Don't be stupid,' he'd snapped at her. 'Do you want Dad to feel worse than he already does about this mess? Go to Bianca's wedding as planned,' he'd

instructed, ‘and while you’re there wish her all the damn best from me with her super-rich catch.’

It had been said with such bite it made Lizzy wince to recall him saying it. Matthew was never going to forgive her best friend for falling in love with another man.

Then Bianca and her parents had put even more pressure on her to come to Milan and in the end it had been easier to give in and do what everyone wanted her to do when all *she’d* wanted to do was to be at her father’s side supporting him.

But instead she had to shimmy into this dress, Lizzy told herself, puffing back an unruly curl when it flopped across one eye as she settled the straps onto her shoulders then turned to the mirror to check out the finished effect.

What she saw reflected back at her sent instant horror pouring into her expressive face. The dress was way too clingy in all the wrong places and the silver-grey colour looked awful against her pale skin! And it was not for the first time in her twenty-two years that she wished with all her heart that she were a delicate and sweet fine-boned brunette like Bianca.

But she wasn’t. She was a long curvy redhead with an unruly long mop of glossy chestnut curls that just refused to stay confined no matter how much torture she put herself through in an effort to pin them up. Add skin so startlingly white it looked dreadful against the silver-threaded grey silk and it was like looking at a ghost!

When Bianca had bought the dress a couple of months ago

to wear to her betrothal party she'd looked fabulous in it— pure sensation on legs. Yesterday she'd tossed it at Lizzy in disgust. 'I don't know why I bought it. I hate the colour. The length is not right and my boobs don't fill it.'

Well, there was no chance of that problem here, Lizzy thought, small white teeth biting down into her full bottom lip as she hitched the tightly fitted basque top further up the pale plump slopes of breasts and grimly thanked the boning in the bodice for helping it to stay put.

The rest, she saw on second inspection, didn't cling quite as badly as she'd first thought it did and—Face it, Lizzy, she then told herself firmly, beggars cannot be choosers, girl, so you should—

The sudden knock sounding at her suite door diverted her attention. 'Are you ready, Elizabeth?' Bianca's mother called out. 'We must not be late for La Scala.'

Certainly not, Lizzy thought dryly. 'Just one more minute!' she called back.

La Scala waited for no man, not even the higher echelons of Italian society she was about to mingle with, she mocked as she slid her feet into a pair of high slender heeled silver mules, then turned to apply a coating of clear gloss to her lips. She refused point-blank to use the seduction red colour Bianca had supplied along with the dress.

Standing back to give her reflection the final once-over, she suddenly found the humour in standing here in her ill- fitting

borrowed feathers and laughed for the first time in weeks. All she needed now was for her best friend to toss her that fabulous diamond ring her betrothed had presented her with and she'd be sorted. All family debts paid via the first pawn brokerage she could find.

But Bianca wasn't quite that giving—not that Lizzy resented her for that. Bianca Moreno had been her closest friend since the day they had both found themselves stuck in the same strict English boarding-school feeling like a pair of aliens dropped in there from outer space. Bianca had come to the school directly from a carefree lifestyle in Sydney with her Italian born parents. They'd gone from ordinary to mega-rich overnight when an uncle in England had died suddenly making Bianca's father the main beneficiary of the London based Moreno Inc.

Whereas Lizzy, well, she had been sent to the same school after her mother had caused a terrible scandal by having an affair with their local, very married MP. She had been so mercilessly teased and bullied at her old school about the affair that her father had decided to remove her from the situation by placing her in a school hundreds of miles away from the fuss.

Did it stop the teasing? No, it didn't. Did she tell her father that? No, she did not, because he'd already been too cast down by the scandal and the fact that their mother had walked out and left them taking with her what funds she could grab. So Bianca had become her close friend and confidante. They looked out for each other. Bianca was the black-haired black-eyed spitfire

with a solid grounding in good Australian spunk and Lizzy the much quieter one with her natural spirit squashed by the bullies and a mother who'd never bothered to get in touch again after she'd walked out.

From the age of twelve to their present twenty-two, she and Bianca had rarely done anything without the other one knowing about it. Now her friend was about to marry into one of Italy's finest families and, despite not wanting to be here, Lizzy was ready to shelve her own worries and do whatever it was going to take to help make Bianca's wedding day next week absolutely perfect. It was Bianca's family who'd paid to bring her over here. They had provided her with everything from room and board to clothes to suit every glittering occasion, even if they were Bianca's cast-offs.

And she was grateful to them—she was, because she could not have afforded to come otherwise, no matter what her father had said. So here she was, one week into a two-week sabbatical from family troubles, joining in the partying runup to Bianca's glossy marriage to her super-rich, supersophisticated beau.

Luciano Genovese Marcelo De Santis, the thirty-four-year-old supreme head of the great and vast De Santis banking empire—Luc to his very close friends.

A tense little quiver made a sudden strike down Lizzy's front and in pure self-defence she snatched up a silvery silk crocheted snug from the bed and hurriedly tied it across her front while wishing to goodness that she didn't experience that same crazy

tense quiver every time she let herself think about him.

He was strange—a truly intimidating mix of smoothly polished cool sophistication and lean, dark, sexy good looks. Bianca purred around him like a sleek kitten, which seemed to amuse him, but then Bianca was Italian and as a race of people they were like that, open and warm and more touchy-feely than the British—*her*, Lizzy thought, making the rueful distinction.

She'd never purred around any man and couldn't envisage ever wanting to—which made the way she quivered around Luc De Santis all the more disturbing to her peace of mind. He wasn't her type. He was too much of everything. Too big and tall, too lean and dark, too sexy and handsome—too crushingly cool and terrifyingly enigmatic, she decided as she hooked up her little silver beaded evening bag and headed for the door.

They'd met only once before she's come to Milan, in London several months ago at the private dinner Bianca's parents had held to introduce their future son-in-law to their English friends. Luc had come as such a shock to Lizzy that she had not been able to stop her eyes from constantly drifting in his direction because he was so far away from her idea of the kind of man her friend liked.

'What do you think?' Bianca asked her.

'Intimidating,' she said, because that evening was the first time the tense quiver had struck. 'He scares me to death.'

Bianca just laughed, but then she'd been laughing at everything. Happy—in love again—high as a kite. 'You'll get used to him, Lizzy,' she promised. 'He isn't nearly as awesome

once you get to know him.’

Want to bet?

The next time she’d met him had been just a week ago, she recalled as she pushed the button to call the lift. He’d arrived here at the hotel looking for Bianca and found Lizzy standing in Reception having just arrived in Milan. He’d come over to her—of course, he would do with impeccable manners like his, she reasoned. Yet she still had not been able to stop the next quiver from making its strike.

He’d been angry that Bianca had not been at the airport to meet her—she’d seen the anger snap at his handsome dark features just before he’d blanked it out. When she’d said quickly that she hadn’t been expecting to be met, his wide, sensual mouth had tugged into a telling flat line of disapproval.

Cool, calm and used to ordering people about, he’d then taken it upon himself to organise her arrival by making sure she had a nice suite of rooms and had even gone as far as to escort her up here to check the suite out for himself.

It had been the moment when his hand arrived at the base of her spine to politely usher her out of the lift that the next quiver had struck, shooting down her front like a flaming arrow and making her jerk away from him like a scalded cat, only to feel really foolish for doing it. Other than to send her one of his cool, steady looks, he’d let his hand fall to his side and thankfully made no comment.

Now here she was waiting to ride the same lift down to the

mezzanine floor of the hotel where they were all gathering for drinks before they left. And if she'd avoided Luc De Santis like the absolute plague for the rest of this week Lizzy had a horrible suspicion she was not going to be able to do that tonight. The party was too small, the reserved boxes at La Scala too intimate. Her only hope was to manage to wangle it so she sat in a different box from him.

There was a mirror hanging on the wall by the lift and she diverted her attention to it to push the stray curl off her brow. It flopped back down again like a renegade. She should not have decided to pin it all up because it just wasn't going to behave, she predicted. But giving in and letting her hair hang down around her shoulders in a tumble of loose glossy corkscrews had only made her face look paler and her grey-green eyes look too big.

Like a frightened rabbit, she likened, wrinkling her nose as she gave the errant curl a teasing tug and watched it spring back into place again. *certed to keep the dismay*

It had to be that precise moment that the lift doors slid open to reveal none other than the great man himself. Their eyes clashed for a startled second. Knowing he'd caught her pulling silly faces at her own reflection was enough to flood colour into Lizzy's cheeks.

'Oh,' she said, just too disconcerted to keep the dismay from sounding in her voice. 'Are you staying here too? I didn't know.'

Brief amusement lit the unusual gold colour of his eyes. 'Good evening, Elizabeth.' He always called her *Elizabeth* in that dark,

deep, slightly lilting Italian accent of his. ‘Are you coming in?’

Coming in—heck, she thought, letting her eyes run over him. He was wearing a conventional black silk dinner suit and was leaning casually against the rear wall of the lift, which should have helped to diminish his daunting height a little and that overwhelming sense of presence he always carried around everywhere with him—but didn’t.

And the idea of stepping into a lift with him again did strange things to the nerves in her legs as she made them move. Finding a tense smile to flick his way, she then turned her back on him to watch as the doors closed them in.

Silence hummed as they waited. She could feel his eyes on her. Tension made her bite into the soft tissue of her inner lip.

‘You look very beautiful tonight,’ he murmured softly.

Lizzy had to fight down an inner wince. She knew what she looked like and she knew what he was seeing—the poor best friend decked out in the dress his betrothed had worn a couple of months ago at the party in London.

So, ‘No I don’t,’ she therefore responded curtly.

It was a relief when the lift doors opened onto the elegant splendour of the hotel’s mezzanine lounge bar. As she went to step out that hand arrived at the base of her spine again and this time she froze where she stood.

It just wasn’t fair. Why did she always do something like this around him?

‘Shall we?’ he prompted smoothly.

Lizzy made herself walk forward, stingingly aware how his hand remained exactly where it was this time—as if he was taunting her silly reaction to him. The first person her eyes focused on was Bianca’s mother, looking stunning in sparkling diamonds and unrelieved black.

‘Oh, there you are, Lizzy,’ she said, hurrying towards them with an anxious expression threatening to ruin her perfectly made-up face.

‘Luciano,’ she greeted, her dark eyes skimming warily over her future son-in-law’s face before she returned them to Lizzy. ‘I need a quick word with you, *cara*,’ she begged.

‘Of course.’ Lizzy smiled, automatically softening her tone for this tiny, elegant woman whose nervous disposition made her worry about everything—and everything usually encompassed her beautiful daughter. ‘What’s Bianca done now?’ she asked.

Meant as a light tease, it was only when the man standing behind her said coolly, ‘Nothing, I hope,’ that she realised she’d spoken out of turn in front of him.

Sofia Moreno went pale. Lizzy got defensive on Bianca’s *mamma*’s behalf because she’d noticed before that Sofia was not comfortable in Luc’s presence.

‘It was a joke,’ she said sharply—too sharply by the sudden stillness she felt hit the man behind her and the flick of tension she felt play along the length of her spine until it gathered beneath the light pressure of his hand.

Next second he was leaning past her to brush kisses to Sofia’s

cheeks. Having to stand here, trapped between the hard warmth of his body and Sofia's delicate one, Lizzy felt a twinge of remorse because his gesture was so obviously offered as a gentle soothe to his future mother-in-law's frazzled nerves.

'I will leave you both to—confide together,' he murmured then, and his hand slid away from Lizzy's back.

He strode away towards the bar to greet some friends, the loose-limbed elegance with which he moved holding Lizzy's gaze though she didn't want it to.

'Lizzy, you have to tell me what's wrong with Bianca,' Sofia Moreno insisted, setting Lizzy's eyelashes flickering as she moved them away from Luc. 'She is behaving strangely and I cannot seem to get a pleasant word out of her. She should be down here by now standing with Luciano to greet their guests, but when I went to her suite after I knocked on your door she wasn't even dressed!'

'She had a headache at lunch and went to her room to rest,' Lizzy recalled with a frown. 'Perhaps she fell asleep.'

'Which would explain the rumpled bed,' Bianca's mother said tensely, 'and the way she looked like she'd just fallen out of it *and* the way she snapped off my head!'

'Give her a few more minutes to get herself together,' Lizzy suggested soothingly. 'If she still hasn't put in an appearance, I'll go up and chivvy her on.'

'In the bad mood she's in, only you dare to do it, *cara*,' Bianca's mother said tautly.

Not Bianca's betrothed? Lizzy wondered dryly as she linked her arm through Mrs Moreno's and led her back to where the rest of the guests were gathered. A few seconds later she was being warmly greeted by Bianca's father, Giorgio, and introduced to a cousin of Bianca's she hadn't met before.

Vito Moreno was about her own age and blessed with the Moreno dark good looks and a pair of laughing blue eyes. 'So you're Elizabeth,' he said. 'I've been hearing a lot about you since I arrived here this afternoon.'

'Who from?' Lizzy demanded.

'My dear cousin, of course.' Vito grinned. 'Bianca insists you are the one person who saved her from a life of rebellion and wickedness when she had to leave Sydney to live in the UK and attend the "stufiest school around".'

Ah. 'You're one of the Sydney Morenos,' Lizzy realised. 'I recognise the accent now.'

'I used to be Bianca's partner in crime before you took my place,' he explained.

'You're *that* cousin?' She laughed up at him. 'I've heard all about you too.'

'That's my pulling power shot to death.' Vito sighed.

A long fluted glass of fizzing champagne appeared in front of Lizzy and she glanced up as she accepted it to find Luc standing over her like some dark towering giant.

'Oh—thank you,' she murmured.

He just nodded his dark head, sent an acknowledging nod

towards Vito and drifted away again leaving Lizzy feeling— odd.

Then Vito said something and with a mental shrug she pushed Luc De Santis to one side and wished to goodness he would stay there for good. The minutes wore on, the mezzanine bar slowly filled with guests and still there was no sign of Bianca. Eventually people began to get restless, checking the time on their watches.

Lizzy's gaze drifted towards Luc De Santis. He was standing apart from everyone else talking into his cell phone—and was not very happy by the stern look on his face.

Was he talking to Bianca? She would not be surprised because she'd seen him angered before by Bianca's habit of always being late.

Well, get used to it, she told him silently as she watched him snap shut his mobile and slide it into his jacket pocket. Bianca's blithe lack of awareness to time and space was the constant bane of her mother's and Lizzy's lives. He could count himself lucky if she managed to turn up on time at the church next week.

As the minutes dragged on, though, even Lizzy found she had to fight the need to keep checking her watch, and Sofia Moreno was sending her pleading looks. She was about to excuse herself to go and find out what Bianca was doing when there was a sudden stir by the lifts.

Everyone turned to look as one. The following silence held like a shaken heartbeat because there, at last, was Bianca, looking an absolute vision dressed in billowing gold silk. Her long dark hair was up in a dramatically simple style that showed off the

sweet perfection of her face and the slender length of her creamy smooth neck. Diamonds sparkled at her ears and her throat.

Thread a tiara into her hair and she could be a princess, Lizzy thought fondly as eyes like huge pools of liquid dark chocolate scanned her audience, then her soft mouth took on an apologetic tilt.

‘Sorry I’m so late, everyone,’ Bianca chanted quietly, and the mezzanine bar stirred to the sound of a beautifully directed indulgent response.

‘That’s my brave girl,’ Lizzy thought she heard Vito murmur beneath his breath and she glanced at him sharply, but saw nothing in his expression to warrant such a strange remark.

Then Luc was striding forward to take hold of Bianca’s slender fingers and lifting them to his lips. Whatever he said to his betrothed brought a sheen to Bianca’s eyes and a vulnerable tremor to her oh, so beautiful mouth.

He loves her, Lizzy realised in that moment. An odd little sensation clutched at her chest. Frowning slightly, she turned away from the two lovers and was relieved to feel the sensation fade.

They were ferried to the opera in a fleet of sleek limousines. Vito Moreno was obviously meant to partner her tonight and he made her laugh, which made her relax more and more as the evening wore on. La Scala was fabulous, an experience Lizzy really enjoyed—mainly because she’d successfully managed to avoid being placed anywhere near her best friend’s disturbing

fiancé. Afterwards they moved on to have dinner in a beautiful sixteenth century palazzo on the outskirts of Milan.

It was all very stylish, very much a glimpse of how the richer half lived. There was dancing as well as dining, and because Vito kept on filling her wineglass Lizzy was tipsy by the time Luc De Santis arrived by her chair to invite her to dance.

There was a hovering second while she hunted around for an excuse to refuse him, then his hand arrived beneath her elbow to propel her to her feet. 'Come on,' he said dryly. 'It is expected that the groom dances at least once with his bride's maid of honour.'

Lizzy thought that was supposed to happen after the wedding, but the telling quiver struck again making her too tense and too breathless to say it as he drew her against him on the dance floor and smoothly urged her to dance.

The lights were low, the music a slow romantic ballad accompanied by a female singer with a stirringly deep and sensual voice. She felt her heart begin to pump to a heavier beat as they moved together and she absorbed the full disturbing impact of his masculine warmth and his muscular hardness pressing against her tense, softer shape.

'Relax,' he prompted after a few seconds. 'This is supposed to be an enjoyable pastime.'

Lizzy looked up, caught the mocking glow in his eyes and felt the sting of heat flush her cheeks. 'I'm just not used to—'

'Being held this close to a man?' he mocked.

'Dancing in these shoes!' she corrected hotly. 'And that wasn't

a very nice thing to say.'

He just laughed, the sound low and deep and disturbingly intimate the way it resonated against the tips of her breasts. 'You are an unusual creature, Elizabeth Hadley,' he informed her then. 'You are very beautiful but you don't like to be told so. You are tense and defensive around me yet you can completely relax with a serial womaniser like Vito Moreno.'

'Vito isn't a womaniser,' Lizzy rejected. 'He's too laid back to be a womaniser.'

'Ring any telephone number in Sydney and just mention his name.'

And that was cynicism, not mockery, she noted. 'Well, I like him,' she stated stubbornly.

'Ah, I see he is beginning to reel you in.'

'And that wasn't very nice, either!'

His dark head suddenly dipped, bringing his lips very close to her cheek. 'I'll let you into a secret, *mia bella*—I am not very nice.'

He was so close now she could smell the masculine pull of his tangy scent. Lizzy jerked her head back. 'Well, you had better be nice to Bianca,' she warned loyally.

He just laughed as he straightened up again, then drew her even closer so he could control her movements with a cool, casual strength. He was taller than her by several impacting inches, which put her eyes on a level with his strong, chiselled chin. They didn't speak again, and as the dance wore on maybe it was the

fault of too many recklessly consumed glasses of wine that made her so aware of everything about him. Even the smooth feel of his silk lapel beneath her fingers fascinated her, and the bright whiteness of his shirt against the natural olive tones of his throat.

He was gorgeous. There was just no use in trying to deny it. Everything about him was so perfectly presented from the neatly styled gloss of his satin black hair to the length of his very Italian nose and the truly beautiful shape to his mouth.

And the singer droned on, low and soulful. Lizzy felt the sensual pull of the melody percolate her system as potently as the wine she had been drinking all evening and like a fool she closed her eyes and just let the sensation carry her away. One set of his long golden fingers lightly clasped her pale slender fingers, the other set rested low in the arch of her back. She had no idea how her fingers were stroking the silk lapel of his jacket or that she had moved in so close to him that her breath was softly feathering his throat. She just moved where he guided her, aware of the tingling tension affecting her body but unaware that it was affecting him too. His fingers moved slightly against her clasped fingers, the hand at her back glided upwards to the centre of her spine and gently urged her into even closer contact with him.

It was—nice. Kind of tingly and floaty and she hadn't a clue as to how much she had relaxed into him until she felt the living warmth of taut skin brush against her lips and tasted it on the tip of her tongue.

With a jerk of shock Lizzy flicked her eyes open and pulled

back her head. Dismay instantly curled its way through her body accompanied by a wave of mortified embarrassment that flooded like fire into her face when she realised what she had done.

She had just brushed her lips against Bianca's fiancé's throat and tasted him with her tongue!

CHAPTER TWO

'OH, MY GOD,' Lizzy gasped in skin quivering consternation.

They weren't even dancing any longer! And he was looking down at her with one of those dreadful mocking smiles tugging at the corners of his mouth!

Dropping her eyes to his throat, Lizzy wished with all her pounding heart that the ground would just open up and swallow her whole.

'I'm so sorry!' she whispered, stepping back from him so violently she almost went over on the spindly heels of her shoes.

'In truth I was rather flattered by the—compliment.' His hand snaked out to steady her. 'Fortunately I sensed it coming, which is why we are now standing outside on the terrace away from curious eyes...'

Outside—? Glancing dizzily around her, sure enough, Lizzy discovered that they were indeed standing on a shadowy terrace she had not even known was here! Realisation hit as to how engrossed she must have been in him that he'd been able to manoeuvre her through a pair of open French windows out into the cooler evening air without her even being aware!

Once again she took a shaky step backwards—right out of

his reach this time—and thankfully managed to remain safely upright. The music still droned somewhere in the near distance. Mortification riddled her blood. She wanted to die and she couldn't look at him—didn't know what to say in her own defence!

And he was so relaxed, his hips resting against a heavy stone balustrade, his arms lightly folded across his wide chest, and she had the sickly feeling he was thoroughly—thoroughly enjoying himself.

'Blame the wine,' he offered gently.

Lizzy nodded, pathetically grateful for the miserable excuse.

'I'm not used to drinking so m-much.'

'No,' he agreed.

'And Vito—'

'Was constantly filling up your glass.'

She hadn't been going to say that, but hearing him say it brought her eyes flickering up to his face. 'He wasn't!' she protested, then swallowed and added helplessly, 'W-was he?'

'Poor Elizabeth,' the cool brute murmured. 'Caught by the oldest trick in the book.'

Then she remembered what she had been doing with him and she dragged her eyes away from him to wave a decidedly uncoordinated hand towards the French doors.

'I th-think I should...'

'Go back inside to him so he can intoxicate you some more?'

'No.' The waving fingers tightened into a fist and dropped to

her side. 'You have a very nasty sense of humour, *signor*.'

'And you, *signorina*, have a very moist tongue and a warm, soft pair of lips.'

That was it, Lizzy couldn't take any more of this, he'd had enough fun at her expense. Spinning on her heel, she turned towards the doors.

'What are the two of you doing alone out here?' a new voice suddenly intruded.

And nothing, nothing in all of her twenty-two years, had ever made Lizzy feel as bad as she felt then when her friend—her beautiful, happily in love *loyal* best friend—stepped through those same French doors.

'Your—maid of honour was feeling the heat,' Luc responded evenly. 'She needed to breathe some fresh air.'

Barely holding herself together, Lizzy felt her insides squirm with guilt and shame when Bianca looked at her and said, 'Are you okay, sweetie?' with genuine concern. '*Dio*, you do looked flushed, Lizzy.'

'Blame your cousin,' Luc suggested. 'He is the one who's been topping up her wineglass all evening.'

'Vito? Oh, the wicked boy. And I told him to take care of you for me...' She floated across the terrace to place a comforting arm across Lizzy's shoulders. 'With your sternly temperate papa you're just not used to late nights and partying are you, *cara*? In fact you are *not* used to drinking alcohol at all!'

'My father isn't that bad,' Lizzy mumbled, feeling more

uncomfortable by the second.

‘No, he’s worse,’ Bianca said curtly, doing nothing to hide her dislike of Lizzy’s father, the man she still blamed for breaking up her love affair with Matthew two years ago. ‘I’m still surprised that he actually allowed you to come here knowing you would have to enjoy yourself! I even had to provide you with clothes so you were not forced to turn out in those terrible modest sacks he prefers you to wear!’

Wanting to curl up inside her own skin now at this small piece of insensitivity, Lizzy wondered helplessly if this was punishment for what she’d been doing with Bianca’s man.

Surprisingly it was Luc De Santis who came to her defence, ‘That’s enough, *cara*,’ he said to Bianca. ‘Modesty is not a sin. And your friend has a—headache,’ he offered up. ‘Hearing you chatter on about things she would rather not discuss in front of me is making it worse.’

‘Oh, sorry, Lizzy. I’m such a mean mouthed thing,’ Bianca said contritely. ‘Tell you what, why don’t I take you back to the hotel? We could both do with an early night and Luc won’t mind, will you, *caro*?’

This could only get worse if a rat jumped over the balustrade and told Bianca the full gruesome truth about why her best friend was out here with her man, Lizzy thought as she suffered Bianca’s contrition with a lump in her throat that was threatening to turn into tears.

‘Of course not,’ the smooth-voiced man himself agreed.

‘N-no—really.’ She was almost consumed by self-hate, ‘I can’t let you leave your own party. Vito said he was going soon to catch up on his jet lag. I’ll—I’ll go back to the hotel with him.’

‘No, I won’t hear of it,’ her wretched best friend said firmly. ‘And Vito can come back with us so I can tell him off for getting you sloshed. Luc will organise a car.’

Dutifully, Luc De Santis straightened out of his relaxed pose against the balustrade. Lizzy cringed inside and refused to look at him as he strode past them to go inside.

She should confess, she *needed* to confess—but how could she? Bianca would be shocked. She might never forgive her. Their friendship would be over for good.

But what if Luc told her first? What if he thought it would make an amusing story to relay to his betrothed? How was she ever going to live with it if he did?

They were about to step into the limo when Luc touched Lizzy’s arm. ‘Don’t do it, she will never forgive you,’ he warned so softly that only she could hear him, shocking her further that he could read her mind. ‘And if you have any sense you will steer clear of Vito Moreno,’ he added grimly.

Then he turned to his fiancée to offer her a brief kiss good-night.

Vito’s company in the car made the journey a whole lot easier for Lizzy because she could pretend to doze while he and Bianca talked. It vaguely occurred to her that the conversation was hushed and heated, but she assumed Bianca was keeping her

promise to give him a hard time for the trick with the wine so she didn't listen.

And anyway, she did have a headache, one of those dull, throbbing aches that came when you didn't like yourself and knew the feeling was not going to change any time soon. When the two cousins decided to have a last drink in the bar before they went to their rooms, Lizzy made her escape and spent the night with her head stuffed beneath her pillow, trying not to remember what she had done.

But she should have listened to what the other two had been saying, she discovered early the next morning when hell arrived with the sound of urgent knocking on her door. If she'd listened she might have been able to stop Bianca from making the biggest mistake of her life.

As it was, all she could do was stand and listen in growing horror while Sofia Moreno poured it all out between thick, shaking sobs.

'She's gone!' Bianca's *mamma* choked out hysterically the moment that Lizzy open her door. 'She just packed all her things in the middle of the night and left the hotel! All this time and she never showed a single sign that they were planning this between them! How could she? How could he? What are people going to say? What about Luciano? Oh, I don't think I can bear it. She has thrown away a wonderful future. How could she do this to us? How could your foolish brother just turn up here and steal her away?'

Having assumed that Mrs Moreno had been referring to Vito, ‘*Matthew?*’ Lizzy choked out in disbelief. ‘Are you sure you meant my brother, Mrs Moreno?’ she prompted unsteadily.

‘Of course I mean Matthew!’ the older woman shook out. ‘He arrived here yesterday afternoon, apparently. He was *hiding* in Bianca’s bathroom when I went to see her yesterday! Can you imagine it? She wasn’t dressed and the bed was rumpled! *Dio mio*, it does not take much to guess what had been going on! Did you know about what they were planning to do, Elizabeth—did you?’

The fierce accusation straightened Lizzy’s backbone. ‘*No*,’ she denied adamantly. ‘I’m as shocked about this as you are!’

‘Well, I hope that is true,’ Mrs Moreno said coldly. ‘For I will never forgive you if you played along with this inexcusable thing!’

‘I thought you meant she’d gone away with Vito,’ Lizzy murmured dazedly.

‘Vito? He’s her cousin! Are you trying to make this situation worse than it already is?’

Thoroughly chastened by the appalled response, Lizzy could only mumble out an apology.

‘Now someone is going to have to break the news to Luciano,’ Bianca’s mother sobbed. ‘Bianca has left him a note but Luciano went to his Lake Como villa last night to prepare for our arrival tomorrow and my husband has left for the city to see to some business this morning—he doesn’t even know yet what his wicked daughter has done to ruin our lives!’

The Villa De Santis stood on top of a rocky outcrop, its pale lemon walls kissed by the softening light of the afternoon sun.

Lizzy's stomach gave a nauseous flutter as she stepped from the water taxi onto the villa's private jetty with its newly painted ribs standing out in the brilliant sunshine against the darkness of the older wood. Another boat was already moored there, a sleek, racy-looking thing that completely demoralised the water taxi as it nudged in beside it.

Bianca's father had arranged for a car to bring her as far as Bellagio. They'd discussed if they should ring Luc to break the news to him, then decided he should be told face to face. At first Giorgio Moreno was going to make the trip himself, but he'd looked so ill that Lizzy had offered to come in his place.

His heart wasn't good and she felt responsible. How could she not feel responsible when it was her brother who'd caused all of this? But after her own utter stupidity of the night before the last thing she wanted to do right now was to come face to face with Luc De Santis.

The old quiver struck as she walked towards the iron gates that she assumed would lead to steps up to the villa. Behind her, she could hear the water taxi already moving away, its engines growling as it churned up the glinting blue water, leaving her feeling as if she had just been marooned on the worst place on earth.

A man appeared from out of the shadows on the other side of the gate, stopping her in her tracks with his piercing dark eyes

that looked her up and down. She had to look a mess because she certainly felt one with her hair hanging loose round her pale face. And she was still wearing the same green top and white capris she'd pulled on so hurriedly this morning when Bianca's *mamma* had knocked on her door.

'May I help you, *signorina*?' the man questioned in coolly polite Italian.

Passing her nervous tongue across her lips, 'I've come with a letter for Signor De Santis,' Lizzy explained. 'M-my name is Elizabeth Hadley.'

He nodded his head and produced a cell phone, his dark eyes not leaving her for a second while he spoke quietly to whoever was listening on the other end. Then with another nod he unlocked the gate and opened it. 'You can go up, *signorina*,' he sanctioned.

With a murmured thanks Lizzy was about to step past him when a sudden thought made her stop. 'I-I will need a water taxi back to Bellagio,' she told him. 'I didn't think to ask the other one to wait.'

'I will see to it when you are ready to leave,' he assured her.

Offering another husky 'thank you', Lizzy continued on her way to discover a set of age-worn stone steps cut into the rock face. At the top of the steps she found soft green lawns and carefully tended gardens and a path leading to a stone terrace beyond which stood the villa with its long windows thrown open to the softest of breezes coming off the lake.

Beautiful, she thought, but that was as far as her observations went. She was too uptight, too anxious—scared witless, if she was going to be honest.

Another man was waiting for her on the terrace. He offered her a small stately bow and invited her to follow him. It was cool inside the villa, the decoration a mix of warm colours hung with beautiful tapestries and paintings in ornate gold frames. The man led the way to a pair of heavy wood doors, knocked, then opened one of them before stepping to one side in a silent invitation for her to pass through.

Needing to take in a deep breath before she could make herself go any further, Lizzy walked past the servant into a beautiful room with high stucco ceilings and long narrow windows that flooded the room with soft golden light. The walls were pale, the furniture dark and solid like the richly polished floor beneath her feet. Shelves lined with books filled narrow alcoves; a heavy stone fireplace dominated one wall. As she spun her gaze over sumptuously ancient dark red velvet chairs and elegant sofas she finally settled on the huge heavily carved desk set between two of the windows—and the man who was standing tall and still behind it.

Tension instantly grabbed hold of her throat and sent her heart sinking to her toes. He already knew about Bianca, Lizzy realised. It was stamped right there on his grimly cold face.

‘You have a letter for me, I believe,’ Luc De Santis prompted. No greeting, no attempt whatsoever to make this easier for her.

But then why should he—? ‘H-how did you know?’ Lizzy dared to ask him.

His eyes made a brief flick down her front, then away again. ‘She was to be my wife. The position made her vulnerable to a certain kind of low-life out on the make, so of course I had a security team watching her.’

But they didn’t stop her running away with Matthew? Lizzy would have loved to have asked the question but the way he was standing there in a steel-dark razor-sharp business suit and with his face carved into such cold, hard angles, the question remained just a thick lump in her throat as she made herself walk forward, feeling as if she were stepping on sharp needles all the way.

Coming to a halt in front of the desk, she set down the letter. Her heart was pounding in her ears as he held her still with his gaze for a taut second or two before he reached out and picked the letter up, then let yet another few seconds stretch before he finally broke the envelope seal.

After that there was nothing, just a long, long numbing silence while he stood behind his desk reading the words Bianca had used to jilt him with, and Lizzy stood with her eyes fixed helplessly on his lean dark face, aware that the power of his innate pride had to be the only thing stopping him from diminishing to a used and broken man.

‘I’m—sorry,’ she mumbled, knowing it was a wincingly inadequate thing to say but—what else was there for her to say?

He gave a curt nod of his head, eyes like gold crystal set

between heavy black eyelashes still fixed on the single sheet of paper even as he slowly set it down on the desk.

‘You were offered no forewarning of this?’

Lizzy felt her nails bite into the tender skin of her palms as she closed them into tense, anxious fists. ‘Nothing,’ she answered.

‘Her family?’

She gave a helpless shake of her head. ‘Y-you were there last night—she looked radiant. She—’

‘My future bride basking in the glory of her good fortune,’ he drawled in a cold, mocking lilt.

Pressing her lips together, Lizzy lowered her gaze and said nothing. It was so obvious now that Bianca had been putting on a fabulous act aimed to fool all of them last night. Now it all felt so horrible, the extravagantly romantic glitter and gloss just a huge cruel con. She’d floated around like a princess in her gold silk. She’d clung to this man, smiled at him so starry-eyed and in love. And everyone had smiled as they’d watched her, everyone had remarked on what a fabulous couple they made. Even Luc with his rather sardonic way of looking at everything had smiled for his beautiful betrothed. In some dark corner of her being, Lizzy had been dreadfully envious because not many women got to live their childhood dream of falling in love with and marrying her prince.

Not that Luc De Santis was a prince, because he wasn’t. He was just formed from the same mould handsome princes came out of, with his tall dark good looks and his perfectly constructed

body and the added kudos of inherited vast wealth that had come to him down through centuries of careful De Santis bridal selection.

Dynasties, Bianca had called it. ‘I’m marrying into a dynasty because I have the right name and the right genetic fingerprint.’

It had been such a cynical thing to say that Lizzy had been shocked. ‘But you love him, don’t you?’

‘Are you joking, *cara*?’ she’d laughed. ‘You’ve seen him. What girl in her right mind wouldn’t fall in love with Luc? Even you if you were given the chance.’

Lizzy’s slender shoulders twitched in guilty response to the sound of that airy challenge ringing inside her head, because she knew she had already developed a kind of fascination for this man and it nagged her conscience to death—especially after last night. But she also frowned because it was only now as she stood here having to face the fallout from her best friend’s stunning deception that it was occurring to her just how cleverly Bianca had skirted around the question of her loving this man.

She watched as Luc picked up the letter again, long brown fingers lifting up the single sheet of snowy white of paper to re-read yet again what Bianca had written to him. His face remained cold—completely expressionless—yet Lizzy discovered that she couldn’t breathe. It had something to do with the way his lips were being held in such a steady flat line and the way his nostrils flared as he drew in a breath.

He was angry, she realised, and she didn’t blame him.

Whether his heart was devastated was difficult to tell. The few occasions she'd been in his company—even last night—he'd always struck her as someone who did not feel much of anything.

Cold, hard, unemotional, arrogant, she found herself listing as she stood here waiting for him to speak. She supposed she could tag on other words like tall, dark and disgustingly gorgeous but all those words did was to describe his potently masculine outer shell. It was the first description that really said it all about the inner man.

The long silence dragged until it picked at her nerve-ends. In one part of her consciousness Lizzy knew she should be getting out of here now that she'd delivered the letter, but she was oddly reluctant to leave him alone.

She still felt responsible—though her common sense told her she wasn't. She felt—pity for him, though she knew he would probably be utterly contemptuous of her for daring to feel it.

Strange man, she thought, not for the first time, as she stood on the other side of the desk unable to take her eyes off his face. For all of his wealth and his power and high standing in Italian society she had never seen him as anything other than a man who stood alone. Even when he'd been with Bianca she'd sensed a reserve in him she had never been able to adequately explain.

'I...I suppose you're wondering where your engagement ring is,' she blurted out, needing to say something to fill in the unbearably tense empty space, and the ring had come up in discussion when Bianca's mother had said the same thing.

‘No,’ he denied without any inflection whatsoever. ‘I would imagine that running off with a poor man has already sealed the ring’s fate.’

Lizzy winced, cheeks heating at this cool reminder of the other issue in all of this she was having to deal with—the fact that the man Bianca had run off with also happened to be her very own brother.

‘Matt isn’t poor.’ She felt compelled to defend Matthew’s middle class earnings. It was, after all, the only thing about him she felt she could defend right now.

‘In your estimation or mine?’

Oh, that was so very arrogant of him. Lizzy felt anger begin to rise even though she knew she didn’t have the right to let it. ‘Look—’ with a tense twist she turned to the door ‘—I think I had better leave you to—’

‘Running away like the other two?’ he mocked her.

‘No,’ she denied that. ‘I just think it’s better that I go before I lose my temper.’

‘So you have one?’

‘Yes.’ She swung back round only to find that he had come around the desk so quickly and silently she hadn’t heard him move. Now he was leaning against it with his arms folded across his chest, Bianca’s letter lying discarded on the desk behind him.

Surprise brought a soft gasp whispering from her throat. And a new kind of tension flared in the pit of her stomach at the way he was studying the little green top and white capris she’d pulled

on so hurriedly this morning, and the wildly unruly state of her hair.

Last night she'd made a fool of herself with him. This morning she'd been awoken by hysterics and accusations from Bianca's parents that still rang in her head. Now this— this deeply unsettling man she'd been sent to face because Bianca's parents couldn't bring themselves to do it—and he was looking her over as if he couldn't believe she would dare to walk out of her room looking as she did.

Well, you try applying make-up when your fingers won't stop shaking, she told him silently as she suffered his cool appraisal that was so spiked by the glint of contempt. You try wondering what clothes to wear for an audience with a jilted man when your nerves were shot to death at the very prospect.

'During the week you have been here in my country I've watched you play the straight man to Bianca's high-strung and volatile temperament,' he said so suddenly it made Lizzy blink. 'I've watched you soothe her, calm her and even humour her. But I do not recall seeing you threaten to lose your temper with her even when she took it upon herself to mock or embarrass you, so why do you feel the need to lose your temper with me?'

'Y-you attacked my family.'

'I *attacked* your brother,' he amended. 'You don't believe I have the right?'

Of course he had the right. This time yesterday he had been one half of a glittering couple, his marriage to Bianca only a short

week away. It was supposed to be the wedding of the year here in Italy, now it was about to become juicy fodder for every media outlet and it was her very own brother who'd turned it into that.

Lizzy moved jerkily, offering a small conciliatory flip of one hand despite feeling as though she were being whipped by his smooth cutting tone. 'I give you the right to despise my brother,' she acknowledged. 'I will even give you the right to be angry with me because I'm the sister of the man who ran off with your bride. But I will not—' and her chin came up, eyes sparking with challenge '—stand here and let you deride the fact that we are not rich like you.'

'I did that?'

Lizzy pressed her lips together and nodded. He wasn't the only one around her who'd had his pride battered today. She'd had to put up with some pretty mean observations from Bianca's parents about her brother that had been difficult to swallow down.

'Then I apologise.'

Lizzy didn't believe him. Facing up to him like this, she didn't see or hear so much as a hint of apology in his tone. But, 'Thank you,' she responded politely anyway. 'Now if you don't mind, I'll leave you to—'

'How did you get here?'

Once again she was about to turn away when he stopped her. 'By water taxi across the lake from Bellagio,' she said.

He nodded. 'Then it seems to me that you're stuck here until I arrange your return across the lake.'

‘Y-your man on the jetty said he would see to—’

‘It’s a case of priorities, Miss Hadley,’ he cut in. ‘My instructions take precedence around here, you see.’

He was pulling rank, Lizzy recognised, lips parting to say something then snapping shut again when it suddenly struck her that he was burning for a fight.

Did she take him on? The question lit up her brain while her common sense told her to just get the heck out of here because she wasn’t up to his weight. He lived in this fabulous villa on the banks of Lake Como, he owned a beautiful apartment in Milan, which was why she’d been so surprised to find he’d taken a suite at the hotel last night, and at least three more fabulous homes Bianca had mentioned set in different parts of the world. He lived the high-powered jet setting lifestyle of the world’s business heavyweights. He even flew the world in comfort in his very own executive jet.

And just out there tied to his private jetty floated his sleek glinting white private power boat that could spin her back across the lake in ten minutes—but he was refusing to give the order because he felt the need to kick someone around a bit and she happened to be conveniently there.

Lizzy looked away from him then back again, not at all sure what to do next. ‘You do know you’re being petty,’ she sighed out finally.

‘Green,’ he murmured.

‘Green—what?’ she flicked out, completely thrown by the

comment.

‘Your eyes when you’re angry,’ he provided. ‘Most of the time they are a soft placid grey.’

‘They can spit pretty sharp daggers too when I’m cornered,’ she reacted.

‘Let me test that,’ he offered. ‘You have known all along what they were planning.’

It was not a question. ‘No,’ Lizzy insisted. ‘I *told* you I did not know.’

But even as she said it her insides were creasing guiltily because perhaps she had seen it coming only it had been so much simpler to just block it out.

‘I did not have you down as a liar, Elizabeth,’ he said coolly.

‘I’m not lying!’ Frowning—annoyed with herself as well as with him *and* this horrible position she’d been put in, ‘I did not see it coming,’ she insisted a second time, ‘but I admit I feel some responsibility because I think I should have done.’

‘Because you knew they were lovers?’

Did he have to put it as calmly as that? Shifting her tense stance, ‘Yes,’ she answered, deciding to be blunt with him since he didn’t seem to possess a single sensitive nerve in his body. ‘For a while, several years ago.’

‘Childhood sweethearts.’ His hard mouth flicked out the semblance of a smile.

A bit more than that, she thought as she pinned her lips together and made no comment at all. Then, because she couldn’t

take the probing glint in his eyes, she let out a sigh. ‘You were right about the wealth difference meaning something. He’s never going to be good enough for her you know.’

‘Whereas I hit all the right criteria for a Moreno?’

Lizzy offered a shrug this time—what else could she do? He did hit all the right criteria. He was everything the Morenos expected their beautiful daughter to marry. Matthew wasn’t. Matthew came right out of middle class England. He’d enjoyed the necessary public-school education to give him a great kick-start in life but that was about it. Until this recent financial crisis her family had survived comfortably on its small business income—no more, no less. Matthew was expected to take over the business from their father one day and to marry some nice middle class Englishwoman who would not demand more from him than he was able to provide.

Bianca on the other hand was always going to expect more. She was always going to have what she wanted in life even if it meant providing it herself. Matthew wouldn’t be able to cope with that. His ego would take such a hard knocking he’d never be happy, whereas this man had so much money of his own he wouldn’t give a toss as to how his beautiful wife spent her own money, and *his* ego would stay firmly intact.

‘She will come back,’ she promised. ‘She just needs time to—sort her head out.’

‘Not her heart?’ The dry distinction made Lizzy wince.

‘I’m sure she loves you,’ she persisted. ‘She’s just not ready to

commit to marriage. If you just give her time, then I—'

Black eyebrows with a fascinating silken gloss arched her a curious look. 'Are you actually standing there, Miss Hadley, suggesting that I should wait for Bianca to sort her head out?'

Well, was she? Lifting her chin, 'If you love her—yes,' she insisted.

'Then you are a romantic fool because it is not going to happen.' He moved suddenly, straightening away from the desk. 'There is a wedding arranged for next Saturday morning and I intend to make sure that it goes ahead.'

Without a bride? Lizzy stared at him. 'You mean—you're going to find her and drag her back to marry you?' A silly kind of laugh left her throat at the very image of Bianca being dragged by this man down the church aisle kicking and screaming.

'No.' Reaching behind him, his long fingers picked Bianca's letter up again—this time to fold it with slow, neat precision. 'I mean to replace her with someone else.'

She was pretty much held in his thrall by now. 'Just like that?' 'Just like that.' He nodded and made her gasp as he ripped the letter into small pieces, then calmly dropped them into the waste-paper basket standing by the desk.

It was such a cold act of dismissal of Bianca and everything she should mean to him that Lizzy began to feel slightly sick.

'You will have to move quickly to put your life in order, of course, but with my assistance I think it can be achieved in time.'

She dragged her eyes up from the discarded pieces of paper.

It took a few seconds for his words to actually sink in— then they did sink in and Lizzy took a jerky step backwards.

‘M-my life is fine as it is.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ he acknowledged. ‘But will it be *fine* by tomorrow when I inform the authorities that your brother has emptied your company bank account?’

CHAPTER THREE

‘TH-THAT was not in the least bit funny,’ Lizzy husked out, her heart beginning to thump heavily against her ribs because this conversation had just taken a sinister turn for the bad. ‘I know you’re hurt and angry, and I accept you feel the need to kick someone around in response. But that doesn’t give you the right to lie about my family!’

‘Your *brother*.’ Once again Luc made the distinction. ‘I restrict my accusations to only one member of your family. The rest I will honour with the benefit of the doubt—for now.’

He was losing her with every cool word he threw at her. ‘You suspect my *father* of being a crook? Where do you get off believing you can say something like that?’

‘I “get off”, as you so nicely describe it, by being a banker,’ he responded. ‘And being a banker I am not prone to let my heart rule my head.’

‘You’ve lost me.’ Lizzy stared at him in bewilderment.

‘Then let me explain. Bianca is a very wealthy woman.’

‘I know that,’ she snapped out.

‘A little—shall we call it family ingenuity?—and she could

be misled into believing that her childhood sweetheart had hit it rich.'

'I think you need time on your own for some quiet contemplation,' Lizzy told him curtly, and did what she should have done minutes before and turned on her heel to leave.

'Your—close relationship to her made me curious,' he continued smoothly as she walked. 'So I decided it would be wise to have you and your family checked out.'

'Checked out?' Once again she swung round to stare at him. 'So where the heck do you get off *now* thinking you have the right to do that?'

'The right of Bianca's future husband who was—er— puzzled by your close friendship to her. You're not her type, Miss Hadley,' he stated bluntly. 'Anyone with eyes can see that Bianca comes from a different side of the fence, yet here you are, staying in the best hotel in Milan paid for with her family's money, wearing clothes she has bought for you so you would not look out of place in the company of her rich friends, and about to play the honoured role at her wedding as her chief bridesmaid.'

'*Was* about to,' she hit back, infuriated by the nasty slant he was putting on everything.

'Was,' he acknowledged with a cool dip of his dark head. 'So I decided to do some checking, and guess what I found out? Hadley's is not merely enjoying a temporary cash crisis as I was given to believe, it is about to go under altogether. Your father is in debt up to his neck. Your brother hates the whole engineering

scenario and resents the fact that he is expected to stay in the business.'

Lizzy flushed. 'Matthew wanted to be an artist.'

'Oh, how romantically right for him,' her persecutor mocked. 'With his golden good looks and his ravaged sensibilities he makes the perfect rescue for an impressionable thing like Bianca—whereas you,' he went on before Lizzy could say anything, 'you make the perfect level-headed foil to keep Bianca's starry eyes blinded to what your brother is really about.'

Lizzy straightened her trembling tense shoulders. 'Have you quite finished slaughtering my family?' she demanded, wanting to slap his face.

'Haughty,' he remarked. 'I like it.'

'Well, I don't like you!' she hit back. 'Bianca and I have been friends since we were twelve years old—her wealth or my lack of it has never been an issue between us because that's not what true friendship is about! *My* family works hard for its living, *signor*,' she defended proudly. '*All* of us work hard! *My* father did not waste his life swanning around the world enjoying the useless life of an overindulged playboy from a filthy rich but totally dysfunctional family from which you, sadly, were the cynical end result! And *if* my brother is different from the rest of us at least he knows he is loved! Whereas you, *signor*, with your untold wealth and your inherited arrogance, can't ever have been loved to be so cold and suspicious of everything and everyone that you have to dig into their lives behind their backs!'

‘Dysfunctional?’ His glinting gold eyes narrowed on her. ‘You have a very cynical view of *my* family history, Miss Hadley. It makes me curious as to where you collected *your* information and, more interestingly, why you did.’

Lizzy tensed as if he’d shot her. She’d walked herself right into that prickly trap. ‘I...Bianca,’ she said, hating the hot rush of colour that mounted her cheeks because she knew she’d been guilty of spending hours looking him up on the internet. ‘She described marrying you as joining a dynasty because she had the right name and the right genetic fingerprint,’ she crashed on. ‘It sounded so cold and businesslike to me that I thought she was joking at the time, but now I see that she wasn’t joking at all or you would be standing there too overwhelmed by your broken heart to even think of putting such a cold suggestion to me!’

‘Finished?’ he asked when she finally ran down to a breathless choke.

Shaking all over now, Lizzy pressed her trembling lips together and nodded.

So did he, and straightened from the desk. ‘Then with the character assassination over we will return to the subject of our wedding,’ he said.

‘I am *not* marrying you!’ Lizzy all but shrieked at him. Was he mad?

He moved round the desk. ‘You kissed me last night.’

The reminder forced her into dragging in a sharp intake of breath. She’d hoped he’d forgotten it. She’d prayed all night long

that she'd just dreamt up that awful, shocking stolen kiss.

'I was drunk—'

'You appeared to be.' He was opening a drawer now and taking out a thick folder which he placed on the desk. 'Of course, you could have been playing with me as diversionary tactics to keep my eyes blinded to what Bianca was up to.'

She was so stunned by that cynical slant on her stupid behaviour, when she opened her mouth nothing came out of it.

He smiled—coolly. 'Everything is open to misinterpretation, Elizabeth. When you—came on to me like some very tipsy sweet, shy virgin, I was—flattered. Now?' He flipped open the file. 'How different things can look in the cool light of day and with common sense re-established. Come and take a look...'

It was not a suggestion. Lizzy felt a tingling prickle spread across the surface of her skin as she forced her shaky legs to move back to the desk. He twisted the file around, then stabbed at it with a long finger to draw her eyes down.

She found herself staring at a bank statement—a bank statement with the Hadley name printed at its head. 'H-how did you get hold of that?' she whispered.

'I'm a banker,' he reminded her—again. 'With the right contacts and the right strings to pull I can get anything I want.'

There was a double meaning in that remark that did not pass by Lizzy.

'Look where I'm pointing,' he prompted.

She looked, then stilled as if turned to stone.

‘The date shows that your company account received a heavy injection of funds just two days ago,’ he spelled out what she had already seen.

Five and a half million...Lizzy had never seen five and a half million written down in black and white before. To her it was a gasping amount.

‘If you look at the next entry,’ her tormentor persisted, ‘you will see that the five and a half million pounds was withdrawn again on the same day.’

‘No,’ she breathed, refusing to believe what it was he was implying here.

Then she jerked out of her shocked stasis. ‘I need to ring my father.’ White as a sheet now, she turned dizzily and headed for the door.

‘You will not call anyone,’ that ruthlessly calm voice instructed. ‘At this precise moment I have control of this situation and I mean to hold onto it. Bringing someone else into it will risk that control.’

‘Control over what?’ Lizzy swung around to stare at him.

‘You,’ he provided. ‘Until you brought me Bianca’s letter I was still puzzling as to why your *father* had successfully negotiated the loan he needed to save his company only to instantly remove all the money and put it somewhere else.’

Lizzy suddenly needed to sit down somewhere. The only chair handy was the one placed several feet away from the desk. She sank into it. Her head was swimming, the complicated puzzle of

what was really going on here beyond her stunned capabilities right now.

‘Your brother is the only other person besides your father authorised to access this account. Put it all together, Elizabeth,’ he encouraged. ‘It does not take much effort to calculate that your brother has taken the money to fund his romantic elopement with Bianca. If you did play a part in their disappearance then I hope you have taken into account that you have been left here to carry the can.’

At that precise moment Lizzy didn’t care what position she was sitting here in. She was worried about her father. If—*when*—he found out what Matthew had done he was going to—

‘Of course, I must also point out that if you are genuinely innocent of any role in this, then you are still about to carry the can,’ that oh, so hateful voice injected, ‘because *I* want reparation for being taken for an idiot, and if that means putting you into Bianca’s wedding dress and marrying you in her place, then that is what is going to happen.’

‘For goodness’ sake!’ She jumped to her feet. ‘Don’t you think this situation is bad enough without you trying to fly to the moon?’

He *laughed*! Lizzy couldn’t believe she was hearing it! ‘You have a quaint way of expressing yourself.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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