Signed

OVER TO SANTINO

MODERN™

MAYA BLAKE

Майя Блейк
Signed Over To Santino

Аннотация

Santino’s six week mistressReeling from a family tragedy, champion figure-skater Carla Nardozzi loses her virginity in one uncharacteristic night of oblivion with Spanish aristocrat Javier Santino. She flees the next morning not knowing her rejection has earned her a black mark…Three years later, Carla needs Javier’s help and he seizes his opportunity for retribution: Carla must become his lover to save her home. Javier should be satisfied; his ice princess is thawing once more. But as the passion heats up between them, Javier realises he’s found something even sweeter than revenge!

Javier stopped Carla by pressing his lips against hers, hot and hard, and then pulled away before temptation got out of hand. 'Take the night, think about it, and give me your answer in the morning. I know you'll choose wisely.'

'You're so certain you know what I'll decide?'

He shrugged. 'Besides the pleasure you'll receive in my bed, there's the added benefit that once your father knows you're mine—truly mine—he'll think twice about threatening you again.'

'So those are my choices? Choose you or choose him?'

'The writing's been on the wall for a while, Principessa. This way you know you're backing the right horse.'

He flung the door open and grabbed her hand. In the bright light of the foyer he caught a clearer glimpse of her outfit and cursed himself for giving her the night to agree to his demands. The ache in his groin alone threatened to fracture his mind.

Although his every instinct screamed at him to go after her, when she'd muttered goodnight and made a beeline for her bedroom Javier stayed put.

Morning would come soon enough.

Carla Nardozzi would be his.

MAYA BLAKE's hopes of becoming a writer were born when she picked up her first romance at thirteen. Little did she know her dream would come true! Does she still pinch herself every now and then to make sure it's not a dream? Yes, she does! Feel free to pinch her, too, via Twitter, Facebook or Goodreads! Happy reading!

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Maya Blake

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PROLOGUE

CARLA NARDOZZI TOOK the chauffeur's proffered hand, stepped out of the luxury SUV and was immediately bombarded with the sights and sounds of New York City. The journey from her Upper East Side hotel to Midtown had been as tense and chilly as the air conditioning blasting from the vents.

To her right, her father, Olivio Nardozzi, stood stiff and seething.

Carla would've summoned a genuine smile for the driver had she been able to function in anything other than a complete state of ongoing shock.

The past seven days had unfolded in a series of bombshells she could scarcely wrap her head around. Bombshells she'd struggled to navigate without going under until she'd eventually, exhausted, settled in a place of icy numbness. But the biggest trial of all lay ahead of her. Or more accurately, it lay above her, sixty-six floors up in the office of the man she'd hoped never to set eyes on again.

As if pulled by powerful magnets, her gaze slid up the glass façade of the building housing the esteemed J Santino Inc.

An opportunity beyond your wildest dreams.

A once-in-a-lifetime endorsement deal.

A collaboration even a figure skater with your prominence

would be insane to turn down.

For the better part of a year, those words had been impressed upon her by her father and her advisors. Lately, they'd been uttered in the solemn, no-nonsense tones of her agent and friend, Draco Angelis, who'd been at a loss as to why she was resisting the life-changing deal.

She'd listened and nodded in all the right places but had known she would never accept the deal. Never have anything to do with the man heading the globally successful luxury goods company.

She'd kept her secret for three years and Carla had had no intention of facing it, or the man it involved, ever.

Until her reality had drastically altered.

A shiver that had nothing to do with the blustery March spring day rattled her bones.

In a few minutes, after long years of strictly regimented avoidance, she would be face to face with Javier Santino.

The man who'd taken her virginity. The man who'd granted her the most sensual, intensely unforgettable night of her life. The man who'd then absorbed her shocked, poorly delivered words the morning after with granite-faced hatred, then proceeded to banish her from his life with the cold incisiveness of a scalpel-wielding surgeon.

Years later, Carla still couldn't recall those harrowing hours without the naked blade of fear striking her heart.

It was the reason she'd avoided Javier Santino at all costs. It was the reason this was the last place she would've willingly

placed herself.

'Come on, the deal isn't going to finalise itself with you standing out here staring at the building.'

The numbness that had wrapped itself tightly around her eased for a cracked moment, replaced with myriad volatile emotions as she stared at her father. Disappointment. Sadness. Anger. A deep and painful burgeoning acceptance that Olivio Nardozzi had a vastly differing definition of parental love than most normal fathers had for their children.

Bitterness surged high. 'We wouldn't be here if you hadn't gambled away—'

'Don't start this again, Carla.' He stepped closer on the busy sidewalk so they wouldn't be overheard by the trio of lawyers who'd accompanied them and now stood on the sidewalk, ready to escort her into Javier's presence. 'We have aired this out many times already. I don't particularly want to air it once again, especially in public. You have an image to maintain. A faultless image we have both worked hard for. In less than an hour's time, our financial worries will be on their way to being a thing of the past. We have to look forward.'

Look forward.

How could she when her immediate future entailed placing herself in the heart of the lion's den? A lion whose deathly silence had been even more unnerving than the roar she'd expected at any point during these past three years?

Sucking in a shaky breath, she placed one foot in front of the

other, walked through the revolving doors and stood in the lift as they were whisked upward.

The office décor of J Santino Inc. was the last thing Carla expected. Sure, the place pulsed with the core efficiency needed to run a billion-dollar enterprise. But while Carla had expected glass and chrome and futuristic art pieces, she exited the lift and stepped into a vibrant foyer with colourful walls, exotic flowers and employees relaxing on lounge chairs and giant futons. Exquisite Latin American art dotted the vast space, and she was unwillingly reminded of Javier's passionate Spanish side.

Closing her mind to it, she followed a statuesque receptionist down a burgundy-carpeted hallway to a set of wide double doors, which swung open with an electric whine.

'Mr Santino will be with you in a moment.'

Carla's heart climbed into her throat as she entered a vast conference room.

Absently, she heard murmurs as her team took their seats, but she couldn't think past the coming meeting, her insides twisting hard as she drifted past sumptuous chairs and a polished cherry-oak table towards wide windows with impressive views of Manhattan.

Would those gold-brown eyes that had snapped cold fire at her the last time they'd seen her still blaze with hatred? Over the last year, since she'd first been approached with the endorsement offer, she'd wondered why Javier Santino would want her anywhere near his company. Sure, her world-number-

one-figure-skater status placed her in a certain would-kill-for echelon, but there were a few dozen other sports figures in a similar position. Despite her management's insistence that she was being pursued because she was the right person for the job, she'd wondered whether it'd been a carefully set trap.

But not once had Javier attempted personal contact, choosing to communicate through his lawyers and executives. Folding her arms, Carla swallowed and allowed a little hope to grow. Maybe Javier had moved past the events of the morning after their night together. Perhaps the abhorrence she'd glimpsed during their fraught exchange, the deep trepidation that what had happened between them had been life-altering, and the long months following when a peculiar ache had lodged itself in her chest every time his name had crossed her mind, had all been in her overblown imagination.

Javier had moved on to other conquests, and had continued to aggressively pursue his work hard, party harder lifestyle if his presence in the tabloids was any indication.

So maybe her trepidation was for nothing, maybe she was just overthinking this—

'Do you intend to conduct the meeting standing up, Miss Nardozzi?'

Carla flinched and turned at the flat, detached tone.

Her breath locked in her lungs, every cell in her body clenching in freeze frame as she stared at the man sauntering down the side of the conference table.

In a dark grey pinstriped suit that accentuated his broad shoulders and a white shirt and navy tie that screamed understated elegance, Javier Santino didn't need the tough lawyers who flanked him to underscore his supremacy and importance. He was still hugely formidable and domineeringly sexy. His overpowering masculinity would continue to draw eyes to his sculptured cheekbones and uncharacteristically full mouth, which held a perpetual reddish tinge as if he'd been thoroughly and expertly kissed, long after he was well past his prime.

He stopped opposite her and, even across the vast polished surface, the sheer dominance of his aura slammed into her. Gold-flecked brown eyes pinned hers, one eyebrow lifted in cool, arrogant query.

Deep inside, past the numbness and the fear, something wild and hot and dangerous sparked to life, and she felt the ground shift beneath her feet.

She shouldn't have come... Then again, what choice did she have?

'Very well. I'll take that as a yes.' His gaze conducted an impersonal inspection of her face and body, then swung from her, releasing her from the disturbingly deep frisson that had taken hold of her. Striding to the head of the table, he pulled out a chair, unbuttoned his jacket in one deft move, and sat down. 'Since you also didn't answer my PA when she asked whether you wanted refreshments, I'll assume you don't want any?' Javier continued, the deep, smooth tenor of his voice igniting the flame higher.

Carla swung her head towards the departing PA, her mind unfreezing itself long enough to wonder how long she'd been caught in the dangerous tide of the past.

'No, I'm fine. Thank you.' She raised her voice slightly to catch Javier's PA. The woman turned and nodded with a cool smile before leaving the room.

'Good. Shall we begin?'

The magnetism that had gripped her outside as she'd stared at Javier's building returned full force. Her gaze returned to him, her heart beating faster as she stared at him.

There was no trace of the censure she'd expected, no hot-blooded Latin lip curl or even a hint of the fact that this man had seen her naked once, had done things to her body that still had the power to make her blood pound hot and hard through her veins.

He was going for impersonal. Stony. Businesslike.

As she shakily pulled out the chair he indicated to his right and sat down, Carla told herself it was okay to breathe in relief.

If Javier wanted to proceed with no acknowledgement of their past, then so would she. In fact, it was a brilliant thing. No need for further angst.

'I believe everything's been settled between our lawyers? You're finally willing to agree to the quarterly payment terms and the performance-related incentives stipulated in the contract, correct?'

Carla dragged her eyes from Javier to glance at her father. She spied the haughty desperation there, the silent command

that their dirty laundry not be aired. She wanted to rail at him, demand to know what had possessed him to gamble away all her money, to jeopardise everything she'd worked for and bring her to the brink of bankruptcy. She didn't doubt that he'd have another blithe explanation, the callous hauteur he'd often displayed towards her as a child their only means of communication nowadays.

She glanced away again, deliberately numbing herself to the pain and disappointment. Steeling herself, she focused on Javier once more.

'Yes, I agree to your terms.'

'Unless, of course, there's any way you'd reconsider a larger, upfront payment?' her father suggested, squaring his shoulders as he planted his elbows on the table.

Javier's gaze didn't shift from her face. 'No. If you came here under the pretext of signing the final agreement only to try and renegotiate the terms, then you've wasted all of our time. I sincerely hope that's not the case, Miss Nardozzi.' The cold edge in his tone matched the look in his eyes.

Another shiver rippled over her. 'No, the clauses agreed upon are fine.'

Her father exhaled. 'Carla—'

'Everything is fine.' She struggled to keep her voice from wobbling through the lie as tension escalated in the room. 'Can we get on with it, please?'

Javier's gaze sharpened. 'You understand that, due to the delay

in getting this signed, the cooling-off period will no longer apply? This contract, once signed, will be final and binding.'

Her fingers started to curl into her palms. Inhaling deeply, she placed them on the cool surface of the table and strove for composure. 'Yes. I really don't see why we're going over this again. My lawyers have explained everything to me. I'm ready to sign your document. All I need, Mr Santino, is a pen.'

If she'd been expecting a reaction, Carla realised she would be sorely disappointed. His gaze flicked with almost cruel lack of interest from her to his lawyers. An imperious nod, and the documents were produced and laid out before them. An elegant ball pen bearing his name arrived before her.

Shakily, she picked it up, signed and countersigned where indicated. The contracts were witnessed and exchanged. And her fate was sealed.

She would become the exclusive face of carefully selected J Santino products, called upon for advertising campaigns and publicity events whenever he chose.

It was done. With any luck, she could now negotiate further time with the bank back in Tuscany and save her family home. Not that it'd ever been a real home. These days it was more a showpiece property for her father to bask in the success he claimed she wouldn't have achieved without him.

But it was the only remaining roof over her head. The New York condo was gone, as was the chalet in Switzerland. Everything was gone.

Carla set the pen down and stood. ‘Thank you for your time, Mr Santino. Now if you’ll excuse us—’

‘You’re not free to go just yet, Miss Nardozzi.’

Her breath stumbled as Javier rose with fluid grace.

She stared up at him, meeting that stony expression once more. ‘What...what more could we possibly have to discuss?’

A tight smile pursed his lips. ‘It’s confidential. Come into my office.’ His gaze flicked over the table’s occupants in a dismissive glance. ‘Alone.’

Without waiting for a response, he headed for a set of double doors opposite from where she’d entered.

Her palms grew hot and she fought the urge to rub them against her thighs. Every instinct screamed at her to get up and walk out. She’d made it this far relatively unscathed. She’d seen Javier again, withstood his imposing presence, heard his voice, inhaled that singularly unique scent without losing her composure. What she’d dreaded most was over.

Yet she couldn’t move.

‘Now, Miss Nardozzi,’ Javier insisted in cutting tones.

The atmosphere shifted again, men in expensive suits fidgeting beneath ricocheting tension.

‘Carla,’ her father’s warning tone rumbled over her.

She ignored him, looking past him to the doors that led to freedom. Could Javier stop her from leaving? From retreating back to that numb place where she was marginally cocooned from pain and betrayal?

Yes. Because she was now bound to him, a contracted employee who couldn't refuse reasonable requests.

Swallowing the hysterical laugh that rose in her throat, she stood, ignoring the collective muted sighs of relief that floated round the table.

Carla entered Javier's office and drew to a stunned stop. Unlike the rest of his company's workspace, this was an unapologetically masculine domain. From the massive walnut desk and throne-like armchair set back against a solid wall, to the studded black sofas grouped around a glass and gold TV and entertainment centre on one side, the space shrieked a dominance that made her flesh tighten with acute premonition.

But no.

So far Javier had been cold and brutally businesslike. Uninterested in her, other than as another financial asset for his company. She had nothing to fear.

Behind her the door swung shut, followed by another distinct click.

Her gaze flew to Javier, to the tiny remote in his hand. A second later, he flung the control away, then advanced towards her with slow, precise strides. Her breath uselessly trapped in her lungs, Carla tilted her head to meet his gaze and the blood rushed from her head in a dizzying surge.

Because those mesmeric eyes were no longer cold. No longer impersonal. A very specific, very dangerous light blazed in their depths. A light that threatened to stop her heart altogether.

‘At long last, here you are,’ he murmured.

The savouring, triumphant statement made every nerve in her body jump.

‘Here I am? What does that mean?’ she retorted, fully aware her voice was bled of any power.

He stepped closer, amplifying his power and might by a thousand degrees. ‘It means I never thought this day would arrive. You won’t believe how many times I nearly threw in the towel. But revenge is a dish best served cold. Isn’t that what they say?’

Ice filled her veins. ‘Revenge?’

He bent his head closer, as if sharing a salacious secret. ‘Luckily, I’m a very patient man,’ he whispered. ‘I knew, sooner or later, I could count on you and your father’s greed to bring you back to the contract table.’

Carla’s mouth dropped open, her heart falling to her toes.

‘Dio mio.’ Her voice snagged on the words.

He leaned back and smiled. A pure evil smile that drew her dumbfounded gaze to his sensual lips. ‘Sí, this is the expression I’ve been waiting three years for.’

He’d been scheming. Laying the perfect bait for her downfall. And like a lamb to the slaughter, she’d walked right into his trap.

Just as she’d been a weak, trusting lamb throughout her father’s machinations, childhood fears of abandonment unconsciously stalking her into adulthood so stealthily that she hadn’t realised she was being taken advantage of until it was too late. She’d sacrificed herself for her father.

And now she was to be a sacrifice for Javier Santino.

A sheer wall of dread rose before her, every single brain cell frozen as she was caught in suspended animation.

From far away, she heard Javier speak but she couldn't rouse herself from the horror of her circumstances.

Firm hands caught her elbows. Eyes fringed by thick lashes narrowed. 'What is wrong with you, Carla? Or should I call you The Ice Princess? Isn't that what the media calls you? You're certainly dressed for it.'

Numbly, she glanced down at her white palazzo pantsuit. The jacket's severely cut style opened at the elbows when she lifted her arms, and the sleeves dropped almost to the floor. Teamed with a white silk camisole and white stilettos, the ensemble broadcasted a cutting-edge style suitable for a woman at the top of her game. Or so the stylist had insisted when she'd arrived with the clothes this morning. Staring at the get-up, she suddenly saw differently.

White, for innocent sacrificial lambs.

White, for fools.

The hysterical laughter she'd tried to stem bubbled up from her chest and burst free. It sounded strange in the impressive, masculine room. But the crack in her self-control felt good.

So good she couldn't stop laughing.

Javier blinked, then jerked her once. 'Carla!'

Laughter cut off like a light switch. 'I thought I was only Miss Nardozzi to you?'

Puzzlement tracked over his face. ‘What’s wrong with you?’ he demanded again.

‘What do you care?’ she flung at him.

‘I don’t, except I’d prefer not to have a conversation with a woman who’s acting like a walking, talking zombie.’

‘Right in this moment, I wish I were one.’

A dark frown clamped his brow. ‘Excuse me?’

Another bubble of laughter bursting free, she shook her head. ‘You should see your face, Javier. Is this not going how you expected? Did you expect me to be a quivering idiot in the light of your revelation? Did you—what are you doing?’ she screeched as strong arms lifted her off her feet.

In half a dozen strides he pinned her against a wall. They stared at each other for a charged, timeless second. Then someone moved. Her gasp was swallowed by the mouth that slanted over hers, the domineering possession so electrifyingly potent, every trace of numbness was instantly zapped from her body.

In its place raw, intense emotion flooded. Every sensation she’d retreated from surged in a tidal wave of feeling, concentrating in that powerful connection of their fused lips. From one heartbeat to the next, they tore at each other. Tongues duelled, groans fought for supremacy, hands searched and groped. And Javier came out on top each time, his indomitable will pounding into her, into the kiss until she was a seething ball of sensation, ready to be done with as he pleased.

Gradually the other emotions receded, leaving her with a deep, decadent arousal she'd only believed existed in her dreams. The realisation that it did not had her surging up on tiptoes, eager to experience more of it.

Javier deepened the kiss, his hands moulding her, his teeth nipping at her full lower lip. Powerful thighs parted hers and he planted himself firmly between them, the evidence of his arousal unmistakeable.

Dio, but he felt glorious. And he made her feel alive!

About to spike her hand through his hair, demand more, more, more, she was brought back to earth when her arms were wrenched from around his neck and pinned ruthlessly to her sides.

'Do I have your attention now?' he rasped.

White lamb. Sacrificial fool.

She glimpsed the menacing look in his eyes and her insides turned to useless jelly. 'Wh-what do you plan to do to me?'

Teeth bared in a cruel smile, he dropped his head and rubbed the tip of his nose against hers in a gesture so divorced from affection, it staked a cold knife of fear in her heart.

'Where would be the fun in laying it all out for you, Principessa? All you need to know is that by the time I'm done with you, you'll know that you should never have used me the way you did three years ago. Before I'm done with you, Carla Nardozzi, you'll get on your knees and beg my forgiveness.'

CHAPTER ONE

One month later

'SIR, I THINK you'll want to turn on the TV.'

'And why would I want to do that?' Javier Santino drawled, not lifting his head from the graphics spread on his desk. His designers had done an exemplary job, the sample bottles for the launch of his new and exclusive tequila line truly exquisite.

About to reach for the glossy image he'd settled on, he paused when his PA rushed to the far side of the room and grabbed the remote.

Javier sighed. Had she not been ruthlessly efficient, he wouldn't have forgiven her occasional bouts of excitable behaviour. Making a mental note to crush that tiny irregularity out of her, he turned from the view of Manhattan spread beyond his corner-office window and watched her flick on the TV.

'You asked the PR department to alert you if and when any of our clients make the news. They just called. Carla Nardozzi is on every channel.'

Javier froze.

In all his nearly thirty-three years, only two names had possessed the power to stop his breath. For the first three decades of his life, it'd been his father's name. The day after his thirtieth birthday, Carla Nardozzi's had joined the list. Both names sent icy chills of rage down his spine. Both robbed him of the ability to speak.

Three years after the event, his brief dalliance with Carla and how it'd ended still stuck between his ribs like the sharpest

stiletto. As much as he detested himself for his weakness, he'd never been able to put it behind him.

It didn't matter that he knew why. The fact that he'd been unable to do anything about it angered him even more. In the grand scheme of things, Carla Nardozzi should be forgettable. A blip in his memory that shouldn't be worth his time or effort.

And yet all efforts to consign her to the ex to forget pile had been fruitless. He'd even gone as far as to pull her further into his orbit, just so he could tackle this particular thorn in his side once and for all.

'That will be all, Shannon,' he forced out, his gaze on the pictures flickering on the muted screen. He didn't recognise the building the paparazzi were crowded in front of, but the medical vehicles flashing past had him striding across the room.

His PA's retreat barely registered as Javier activated the sound.

'Miss Nardozzi's condition has now been downgraded from critical to serious but stable. Doctors are monitoring her closely following her awakening from her brief medically induced coma and she's responding well to treatment at this top medical facility in Rome.

'To recap events, Carla Nardozzi was airlifted from her father's estate and training facility in Tuscany following a fall during training. Unconfirmed allegations suggest the world number one figure skater's trainer, Tyson Blackwell, is being questioned by authorities following the accident...'

Javier flung the remote down. 'Shannon!'

The door opened a second later. ‘Yes, sir?’

‘Tell my pilot to ready my jet. We leave for Rome immediately.’

‘Of course.’

Before the door had shut, he was picking up his phone. He knew the number by heart, although these days his dealings with Draco Angelis were more business than pleasure. The reason for it pierced another jagged blade of anger through him. Javier gritted his teeth as he pressed the receiver to his ear.

‘You’ve heard the news,’ the deep voice rumbled.

‘When did this happen and why wasn’t I informed immediately?’ Javier snapped.

‘Cool it, amigo. I’ve had my hands a little full on this side of town,’ Draco responded.

Javier’s ire didn’t abate. ‘You have people in place to ensure the right parties know what’s going on. I should be at the top of your list of people to communicate with when it comes to Carla Nardozzi.’

A brief, pregnant pause. ‘Agreed. You would’ve been informed before the hour was out. You just beat me to it.’

‘For the sake of our continued working relationship, I’ll choose to believe that.’

Draco exhaled. ‘Is there anything else going on here I should know about, Santino?’

Javier reined himself in with effort, tightening his control on the emotions rumbling beneath his skin. This was business.

Nothing else. 'Aside from the fact that I've invested several million dollars in your client and am about to invest several more? You think I should have to find out about her accident from the media? I don't appreciate being placed in a position where I'm caught unawares by situations like these.'

A deep sigh echoed down the line, and Javier got the impression that the formidable Draco Angelis had something on his mind. 'Point taken.'

'When did all this happen?' Javier was aware of the distinct bite to his voice but he didn't soften his tone. Any hint of softness was seen as a sign of weakness. And he'd sworn an oath a very long time ago never to be seen as weak or gullible.

'Yesterday.'

'And this induced coma?' he pressed.

'It was only overnight until they were sure there wasn't any brain damage. She's awake and the doctors are optimistic she's out of the woods.'

Javier exhaled. He released his death grip on his phone when the plastic creaked. 'I should be wheels up in an hour but I'd appreciate frequent updates on her condition.'

'You're coming to Italy?' Draco's voice expressed surprise.

Javier snapped up his briefcase shut and headed for the door. 'Considering how much I've invested in our mutual client, I believe a personal interest in her recovery is well within my rights. I'll see you in seven hours.'

He hung up and walked past his PA's desk.

‘Cancel all my appointments until further notice.’

She opened her mouth then immediately shut it.

In his limo minutes later, he tried to wrestle his fury under control.

So what if Carla Nardozzi had rejected him in a way only the father who’d barely acknowledged his existence had done? After years of biding his time, he’d finally found a way to get his own back. The Ice Princess would be taught a salutary lesson. All he needed was to ensure she got back on her feet in order for him to deliver the punishment she truly deserved.

His emotions had nothing to do with this.

This was a matter of business. And of his pride.

Nothing else.

* * *

Carla tried to lift her head off the pillow and was immediately engulfed in a fog of pain and confusion.

‘No, signorina, don’t try and move.’

She relaxed, and the pain receded a touch. But the confusion remained. She’d been sure she was dreaming. And yet the voices and images flitting through her mind had been so vivid, so real.

Her father’s voice had been unmistakeable. He’d been there the few times she’d woken up in the strange, sterile room.

But it was the other, deeper voice she’d heard the last time she’d woken that confused her and made her heart race. The change in the lighting suggested she’d fallen asleep some time after hearing him.

By all accounts that voice didn't belong here...wherever this cold, grey here was.

The last time they'd met, he'd been icily indifferent, a ruthless businessman intent on one thing—getting her to sign along the dotted line.

Or at least, he had been...until he'd had her exactly where he wanted her. Until that kiss.

Like a blurred lens swinging into sharp focus, the memory of the kiss burned bright and insistent. Along with the recollection of the way he'd looked at her afterward.

Javier Santino had looked at her with pure hatred. And she didn't blame him. After what she'd done three years ago, he had every right to detest her. It didn't help that her will power withered away to nothing in his presence. But since that unfortunate day a month ago, she'd summoned enough strength to assure herself nothing would happen.

Javier hated her. She'd dealt his ego a great blow. And a ruthlessly powerful and charismatic man like that would never forget an insult to his pride.

Which bemused her as to why he'd kissed her in the first place.

Or had she kissed him...?

Memory blurred and confusion remounted. Carla lifted her hand to her head. Tracing her fingers gingerly over a particularly sore spot, she gasped as pain ricocheted through her. A dull throb in her other wrist brought her attention to the fact that it was in

a cast.

'Where am I?' she attempted, swallowing painfully around a dry throat.

The buxom woman bustling around her paused and Carla noticed her nurse's uniform for the first time. 'In a private hospital in Roma,' she replied, smiling her sympathy. 'You suffered a bad fall and a particularly nasty concussion.'

Of course. Memories of her accident resurged. The row with her father. Then with her trainer, Tyson Blackwell. Her instincts screaming at her in the moments before the accident to walk away. Then the sickening twist and the ice rushing towards her, one arm out in front of her in a vain attempt to break her fall.

She curled her fist and rested it in her lap. 'How long have I been here?'

'Three days. You've been asleep for most of the time since you came out of surgery, but it's great that you're healthy. You'll be on the mend soon. I'll get the doctor now, then you can visit with your family. They've been quite anxious to see you awake.'

'They?' she echoed, puzzled. Her father was her only family. Had been since... Carla swallowed as tears pierced her eyelids, surprising her.

She hadn't cried since that fateful night when she was ten years old. She'd known then that tears would earn her nothing but a sharp tongue and dire punishment and had quickly wised up.

'Sì,' the nurse responded. 'Your papà has been here throughout. He left about an hour ago, just before your young

man arrived. He's been haunting the halls ever since his arrival.' The older woman cast her a sly glance. 'You're lucky to have such a passionate man in your life.'

'I...what...?'

The nurse patted her hand. 'Don't fret. The doctor will be here soon.' She exited, leaving Carla in a deeper state of confusion than before.

Pull yourself together.

Grabbing the remote that adjusted the bed, Carla slowly raised herself up, just as the doctor arrived.

'Signorina Nardozzi, it's good to see you awake.'

Carla nodded a reply, then lay there patiently as she was checked over, the fog clearing with each passing second, and with it a heart heavy with foreboding and regret.

The accident had happened because she'd been fleeing her demons. Pushing herself beyond her endurance in light of what her father had done and their ongoing rowing. Finally understanding why he'd been even more callously demanding these past few months had done nothing to alleviate the pain lodged beneath her breast.

She had well and truly reached a crossroads with her father.

Carla forced herself to listen to the doctor's prognosis. The state of her health was directly connected to her career. Despite the changes she intended to make, she needed to ensure her health remained optimal. The very roof over her head was dependent on it.

‘Your father mentioned you’re eager to return to training?’ the doctor disclosed once he’d reeled out his list of dos and don’ts. ‘Your next figure-skating event is in two months, I believe?’

‘Yes,’ she replied. It wasn’t a championship event, but an important one nonetheless.

The portly man frowned. ‘I advise against any form of training for a few weeks. Two weeks of total rest if you heal fast enough. Four weeks just to be on the safe side before you begin any strenuous exercise. Your wrist on the other hand will need a little longer than that.’

‘What about publicity work—photo shoots and such? I have commitments to fulfil.’ Her contract with J Santino Inc. didn’t include lying about in hospital beds. She was surprised Javier hadn’t sent his lawyers after her already considering the stringent clauses in her contract.

The doctor’s frown deepened. ‘I strongly recommend that you take at least two weeks without any stress on your body. After that, perhaps if you agree to engage private care—’

Carla shook her head. ‘That won’t be necessary. I can take care of myself—’

‘She’ll have private care from the day she’s released. You have my word on that, Doctor.’

Carla’s breath caught in her throat at the deep voice that preceded the sleek, powerfully built man who entered the room.

So...she hadn’t been dreaming after all.

Javier approached. From the top of his dark wavy hair to the

tip of his handmade designer shoes, he commanded a formidable, absorbing presence that reduced the rest of the room's occupants to mere spectators as his intense, dark brown eyes locked on her.

Tongue-tied, she watched him approach with measured, self-assured strides until his broad shoulders filled her vision.

'What are you doing here?' Her vocal cords, rough from disuse, rasped the words.

Javier's eyebrows arched, his gaze cuttingly cynical. 'News of your terrible accident has been all over the media. Your adoring fans are camped outside the hospital. You think me so uncaring that I would stay away at a time like this?'

His voice was smooth. Deep and warm and beautifully nuanced with inflections from his Spanish mother tongue. Mesmerising enough to disguise the vein of cruel cynicism to anyone but her.

Carla heard it loud and clear. It cut right to the heart of her. But she refused to look away. Whatever Javier intended for her—he'd spent the better part of a year dangling the lucrative sponsorship carrot in front of her father just so he could get to her, after all—she would face it head-on. She'd spent far too long bowing her head down. It might have taken her the best part of twenty-four years to stand up for herself. But she was done taking orders from anybody. A part of her regretted that it had taken this long, that her actions might have caused ripples she'd never be able to reverse, but it was better late than never.

'Thank you for your concern, but, as you can see, I'm in private

consultation with my doctor, so if you'd excuse me?'

A nervous throat cleared. 'I'm sorry, signorina, but I understood from your father that Mr Santino was permitted to be here,' the doctor offered.

She forced her gaze to remain on Javier's. 'The permission wasn't my father's to give.'

Tense silence descended on the room. Javier's eyes gleamed, an almost unholy relish in the mahogany depths before one corner of his mouth lifted. 'Are you suggesting the doctor throw me out, Carla? Or are you not up to dealing with me right now?'

Her stomach hollowed, the unspoken threat in the words gnawing at her. 'I'm up to dealing with anything. I just don't think this is the right time or place. Perhaps you could come back later.' Or never.

His jaw flexed. 'I could, but why bother? I think what the doctor was trying to say was that you need further rest when you leave here. In light of what's happened, I'm prepared to suspend any commitments to J Santino Inc. until you're well enough to commence your sponsorship duties. You'll also have round-the-clock care by medical professionals.'

The doctor nodded eagerly. 'That's a very wise decision—'

'That's very generous of you, but I won't be needing your help with my recuperation,' she bit out, hiding her shock that Javier would be prepared to go to such lengths to help her recovery. She didn't doubt he had his motives for his overt generosity, but they were none she intended to subject herself to.

She held her breath as he moved closer to the bed. She was forced to tilt her head up to look at him; her head swam as the magnitude of his persona hit her full force.

'You may have forgotten the small print in the contract you signed, Carla, so I'll refresh your memory. It included my company, and therefore me, being made aware of and taking steps to ameliorate any new medical issues that might adversely affect our agreement. You being out of commission for several weeks has the potential to reflect badly on our association. Unless I choose to be...magnanimous.'

Carla managed to pry her gaze from the sensual mouth that dripped poison onto her skin. 'I'm sorry that my accident inconveniences you.'

'It's unfortunate, yes, but I'm willing to work with you provided you don't resort to stubbornness. Or perhaps you wish me to get my lawyers to pry that information from the hospital administrators?'

'How dare you?' she breathed.

Javier's narrow-eyed gaze flicked to the doctor and nurse who watched them with unabashed curiosity. 'If you've finished, Doctor, perhaps I can speak to Miss Nardozzi in private? You have my assurance that we'll reach agreement about the best way forward for her aftercare.'

Carla's heart climbed into her throat as the doctor nodded almost reverently before leaving, trailed by the nurse, who most unwillingly pried her eyes from Javier's body.

The moment the door shut behind them, the private hospital room shrank. Every inch of her focus zeroed in on the man who stood watching her in utter, dread-inducing silence, dark eyes piercingly intense.

Slowly, inexorably, his gaze wandered over her, lingering in places that made her breath catch.

She became hyperaware of the thin, insubstantial hospital gown and blanket that covered her body. The almost debilitating weakness in her limbs that had nothing to do with her health and everything to do with how this man made her feel just by being in the same room as her.

It'd been that way from the moment they met, three years ago, in Miami. The weekend from hell was firmly engraved in her mind. A naive twenty-one-year-old, striking out against the rigours that battened her down. A dangerously captivating man who'd represented the exact opposite of the caution she should've exercised that night, he'd been like a blazing comet in her dark world.

Except with morning had come the brutal realisation that she'd risked much more than her independence.

'Suddenly you have nothing to say?'

'I have plenty to say,' she rasped through a painful throat. 'But you seem to be in the mood to throw your weight about. I thought I'd just wait until you tire yourself out.'

A grim smile chased across his lips. 'Have you forgotten, cara? I don't tire very easily. Especially when it comes to the things I'm

passionate about.'

Raw heat replaced the weakness in her limbs, firing her blood and making her head pound.

He advanced a few final steps, and stared down at her. Then he reached for the water jug on her bedside table. Still keeping his eyes on her, he poured a glass of water, inserted a handy straw and held it to her lips.

'Drink.'

She wanted to refuse. But her throat hurt. She was beyond thirsty. And getting back on her feet as quickly as possible was imperative. She couldn't begin to take control of her life from a hospital bed.

She dropped her gaze from his imperious regard, and parted her lips. Sucking on the straw, she drew the cool water into her mouth and shuddered with relief as the soothing liquid assuaged her ravaged throat.

He let her draw another mouthful, then he pulled the straw away. 'Take it easy, you don't want to make yourself ill again.'

The sound that emerged from her throat felt blissfully less abrasive. 'Your audience is gone. Please stop pretending you care about my health.'

He returned the glass to the nightstand. 'The state of your health is directly connected to the millions I stand to lose if you don't meet the terms of your contract. Trust me, there's no pretence on my part. Tell me what happened with your trainer.'

Carla frowned as the unwanted memory sliced across her

thoughts. She'd let her emotions get the better of her. Had refused to listen to her instincts even though she'd known training with Tyson Blackwell had been a mistake. Hell, her agent and friend, Draco, had warned her repeatedly about Blackwell.

Further regret made her purse her lips. 'He was a mistake that never should've happened.'

The moment the words left her lips, she felt the blood drain from her face. It took a single glance at Javier to see that he was just as affected by the words.

They were almost identical to what she'd said to him three years ago. The dark curl of his unbelievably sensual lips condemned her poor choice of words.

'I... I meant—'

'I'm well aware of what you meant. You seem to make a habit of collecting and leaving a trail of mistakes in your wake. You asked me what I was doing here. It's quite simple, querida. It's time to honour the promise I made to you a month ago.'

CHAPTER TWO

CARLA'S STOMACH HOLLOWED. 'What is that supposed to mean?'

He didn't answer for a minute. Instead, he strolled to the single window that let in bright sunlight, glanced out for a moment, then turned.

If anything, his silhouette was even more formidable, his almost god-like stature drawing her gaze to his captivating frame.

'The reason you were chosen to be the face of the J Santino

luxury line was because you're an expert at blending the illusion of innocence with ruthless ambition.'

'If there's a compliment in there you expect me to thank you for, I'll need a moment or two to think about it,' she replied.

The haloed outline of his shoulders lifted in a shrug. 'The results speak for themselves. Or at least they used to.'

'Is there a point to all this?'

'Your choices lately have been...disappointing, to say the least.'

'My choices?'

'You dragged out your negotiations with Draco Angelis's agency until he threatened to walk away. I'm guessing you realised, almost too late, that playing hard to get with him would get you nowhere? Then you insisted on associating yourself with a trainer whose reputation should've made you stay well clear of him.'

Carla swallowed hard against the need to tell him why. But she could see no way to set the record straight without pointing a direct finger at her father. And in a way, hadn't she also been at fault for desperately clinging to a familial bond that was only in her mind? 'My last trainer retired. Tyson Blackwell was only supposed to be temporary—'

'He was known to push his trainees too hard. You should've had nothing to do with him,' he cut across her.

Her breath shuddered out. 'I didn't want to. My father made a deal with him without my knowledge,' she muttered.

Disapproval vibrated off him. 'Then you should've hired someone else.'

She wanted to blurt out that she'd said the same thing to her father, instigating yet another row. A row during which she'd discovered she had no choice but to work with Blackwell because there was no money to hire anyone else. A row that set in motion a series of disagreements that still remained unresolved. Ones she wouldn't be able to brush under the carpet this time, even though it meant facing the hard truth—that her father loved the prestige and financial reward she brought him much more than he loved her.

Staunching the anguish before it bled into her voice, she replied, 'We both know why you pursued me to sign with you. So why are we having this conversation?'

'Because aside from our impending private matters, your father made an excellent case on your behalf by convincing me you were a good bet.'

'Wasn't it the other way round? Didn't you pursue him because you convinced him you were a good bet for my image?'

'Is that what he told you?' he enquired silkily, his tone taunting.

She pursed her lips and glanced away. When her fingernails cut into her palm, she forced herself to relax her fist. For the past few months, ever since she had broached the subject of untangling her father from his active role as her manager, their relationship had grown more strained than ever. Tensions had increased until an argument last month when he'd branded her

ungrateful and irresponsible. Carla hadn't fooled herself into thinking the haggard look her father had worn in the past few weeks had anything to do with familial concern for her well-being. Time and hard lessons had taught her otherwise. But she hadn't known the reason behind her father's almost visceral reaction to her wanting to take a different path in her career. Not until six weeks ago, after the lavish charity event he'd given in their home in Tuscany. A weekend where her eyes had been opened in more ways than one.

Carla steeled her heart against the pain she'd never managed to suppress. Appearances were everything to Olivio Nardozzi, enough for her to know she was nothing but a meal ticket to the man who had raised her. Any threat to the lifestyle her father believed was owed to him had been disposed of with ruthless efficiency the moment Olivio became aware of his daughter's exceptional talent.

It was the reason her father had relinquished control to her when she'd come of age, but had legally tied up his role in her career as her manager. Twenty-one and reeling from her mother's sudden death, she'd fooled herself into thinking that the working collaboration with her father would ease a relationship whose foundations had been decimated when her mother had walked out on them both when Carla was ten.

With the passage of time, Carla had been prepared to forgive the fact that he'd chosen to tie her in knots professionally at the moment when she'd been most vulnerable. She'd chosen to

believe that, somewhere deep down, her father had loved her mother and was reacting just as strongly to her death. What she couldn't forgive was her father cunningly plotting three years later to cement a lucrative business association by attempting to marry her off to Draco Angelis.

Willing calm into her body, she lifted her gaze as Javier paced closer. 'So you're here to do what exactly? Ensure I toe some sort of line set by you?'

'Among other things, I intend to ensure this...' he touched a hand to the wound dressing above her right temple '...and this...' a drift of his fingers over her cast-bound wrist '...don't happen again.'

Carla gritted her teeth against the heat dredging through her. On top of everything else, she didn't need the reminder that this man's touch elicited the most decadent sensation inside her. She jerked her arm away, hiding the twinge of pain in her wrist. 'Please don't touch me.'

His fist balled for an unguarded second before he dropped his hand. She didn't need to look up to know she'd succeeded in angering him further. 'Your co-operation in seeing to your own health would help matters proceed smoothly. And please look at me when I'm talking to you.'

A childish urge to refuse surfaced. Reluctantly she raised her gaze, squashing the electricity that fizzed through her when his eyes locked on her. 'As I told you, I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. Once I'm back home in Tuscany—'

‘You’re not returning home.’

She frowned. ‘Of course I am. It’s my home.’ Albeit a home that felt more like a museum and her father’s way of congratulating himself for what she’d achieved. But it was the only home she had left, and the only thing standing between her and losing that home was her contract with Javier.

‘In Tuscany, the nearest adequate medical facility should you need one is over sixty miles away. You were lucky this time that there was an air ambulance nearby when you fell. Tempting fate again is unwise. Besides, I want you where I can keep an eye on you.’

‘Fine, I’ll stay here in Rome. I can rent an apartment here—’ She stopped speaking when he shook his head.

‘No. New York or Miami is a much better option.’

‘For you, you mean?’

‘Of course. As much as I love your fair city, I have an important launch in a few weeks that needs my attention. I can’t hop on a plane whenever you make an unfortunate choice. Besides, you were contracted to be in New York for your sponsorship duties sooner rather than later. And before you trot out an excuse about talking to your father, I already have. He’s agreed.’

Bitterness dredged her insides. As much as she wanted to vocally condemn her father, she kept her mouth shut. Doing so would only hand Javier further ammunition against her. She would deal with her father later. ‘So do all your clients get this

special attention from you?'

'No, querida, I reserve this for ice princesses who believe they're above the mores that govern normal human beings,' he drawled.

'I don't—'

'Save the denial. I have first-hand experience of the way you operate, remember?'

The accusation stung deep. Licking dry lips, she shook her head. 'That was a long time ago, Javier. What happened three years ago...that wasn't me... I shouldn't have—'

His hiss of anger stopped her words. 'Stop before you dig yourself in deeper. Our association only requires you to recite rehearsed lines and act as if every J Santino product you endorse is as essential to you as the air you breathe. And when you're healthy enough, that is exactly what you'll do. In the meantime, keep pretending you're the perfect creature the public perceives you to be. But when we're in private, do me a favour and spare me the lies. I find it demeaning and frankly embarrassing.'

The rock that had lodged itself in her throat with each harsh word from his lips almost prevented her from speaking. 'Is your ego so badly bruised that you can't put what happened between us behind you? And don't pretend you're here just to protect your investment. You have over a thousand employees and a team of lawyers who could've relayed your instructions as effectively as you. You didn't need to fly all this way just to...'

'Just to what?' he invited smoothly, his tone almost bored as

he flicked a non-existent speck off his sleeve.

'Can you tell me honestly that you don't want to make me suffer for being the only woman who didn't fall for Javier Santino's world-renowned machismo?'

A careless shrug. 'Why would I be bothered about machismo when you fell so readily for something far more...earthy? Much more satisfying?' he taunted.

Her face flamed, memories she couldn't stem rushing to the fore. 'If it was so satisfying, then why do you hate me so much?' she blurted before she could stop herself. Carla berated herself for asking so obvious a question. She knew why he hated her. Still on shaky ground after her first full-on rebellion against her father, she'd fallen headlong into Javier's arms. Only what she'd imagined would be a casual encounter had been much more. So much more that she'd been reeling the morning after, desperately aware that what had happened between them was in no way a casual fling. She'd deliberately stricken the heart of his pride, the almost self-destructive trajectory she'd set herself on seemingly impossible to veer from. It wasn't a moment she'd been proud of.

'Hate is a useless emotion, one I don't waste my time practising. Self-respect on the other hand, especially when it reflects on my reputation, is of paramount importance to me.'

She frowned. 'What are you talking about?'

'You may have the public fooled, chiquita, but we both know you have no shame. Throwing yourself at a man who doesn't want you is one thing. Throwing yourself at a man who is engaged to

another woman is a different matter entirely. I didn't delegate this trip because you need to be made aware of the consequences of a scandal should you choose to be so unwise as to keep pursuing Angelis.'

Carla flinched. 'Draco? I'm not pursuing him. I haven't done anything wrong...' She trailed off, the look on Javier's face inviting her to not bother.

'Are you implying that the pictures of you on social media actively throwing yourself at him at your father's charity event six weeks ago were fake?'

Flames of guilt lit her insides. 'It wasn't what it looked like...it didn't mean anything.' Draco Angelis was the brother of her best friend, Maria Angelis, and the big brother she'd never had. Sure, at one very brief point during her teenage years she'd fancied herself infatuated with him, and had even used him to protect herself against unwanted male advances a few times. Six weeks ago, with her budding resolve to take a more active role in her life and career still shaky, she'd leant on him more than perhaps had been wise.

Luckily he'd understood and hadn't held her less than stellar behaviour against her, and neither had his fiancée, Rebel Daniels. Watching Javier's expression, she knew he wouldn't be as accommodating of her explanations.

'Things are never as they seem with you, are they?' he confirmed.

Suddenly weary, she sagged against the pillow, her head

beginning to throb. 'Think what you will. I don't need to justify my private life to you. If you've finished saying what you came here to say, please leave.'

Silence greeted her response. She didn't need to look at him to know his gaze would be heavy with anger and condemnation. 'Agree to return to New York with me and I will.'

'You make it sound as if I have a choice. Isn't this part of your grand revenge scheme?'

'Perhaps it is. But I'm happy to delay what comes next. As long as I get what I want.'

Carla sighed and squeezed her eyes shut. 'Sì. You win. New York. Rome. I don't really care. Just leave me in peace for now, if you can bring yourself to.'

* * *

Javier stood looking down at her. The soft, delicate arch of her lashes fanned against her cheek as she kept her eyes closed. Her complexion was alarmingly pale, and he experienced a twinge of guilt for wearing her out when she needed to rest. A second later, he pushed the feeling away. He of all people knew just how Carla Nardozzi's outwardly delicate frame hid a core of icy steel. She hadn't risen to number one in her chosen profession by being a wilting flower, no matter how much she outwardly projected an air of shy, innocent fragility.

His jaw clenched as he recalled that her innocence had been real once upon a time. But it had been ruthlessly sacrificed on the altar of what she'd wanted more—the attention of Draco Angelis.

Some men collected virginities as trophies. He'd never been one of them. But his preference for a more experienced bed partner had abandoned him the moment he'd met Carla Nardozzi three years ago.

He gave a grim smile. A lot of things had abandoned him during those insane few weeks, including his common sense.

High from closing the deal of a lifetime that had seen him propelled into the echelons of world richest the week before his thirtieth birthday, he'd thrown a series of lavish parties in his homes across the world, the wildest and most decadent of which had culminated in Miami, the place he called his true home.

The place he'd experienced Carla.

Javier jerked himself from the memories. The reminder of the gullible idiot he'd been in the days following raked rough and jagged over his senses.

Never again.

It took several minutes to realise she wasn't deliberately ignoring him and feigning sleep. Carla had truly fallen asleep, her breathing soft but deep, the lines of exhaustion he hadn't wanted to acknowledge now smoothing out on her face.

He stepped back from the bed before another guilty twinge lanced him. He'd come to reiterate the message he'd delivered to her in his office a month ago. Standing there watching her sleep—her perfect face relaxed and enthralling—was an inane exercise.

About to turn away, he paused as a niggling thought impinged.

It was the same sensation he'd experienced when she'd turned up in his New York office to sign the contract.

Despite her spirited words just now, an air of apathy surrounded her that seemed at variance with the woman whose ambition had made her competitors cow before her on the ice rink. Magnificence like that didn't happen overnight, and Carla Nardozzi was known for her indefatigable dedication to her discipline. And yet, she'd seemed a shadow of herself during their meeting in New York. It was that inkling of ennui he'd sensed that had propelled him to get a rise out of her...by kissing her.

It was what was stopping him leaving the room right now.

Having never experienced such an emotion, Javier wasn't sure how to deal with it. And not knowing how to deal with a problem wasn't a scenario he readily accepted.

He told himself it was the reason he was sitting in the armchair in the corner of the room, watching Carla sleep two hours later. After all, he was a firm believer in confronting an issue before it grew out of hand.

He'd confronted the man he'd been told was his father when he was seventeen. And again when his mother had died. Both times the results had been traumatic enough to fell a lesser man. He'd chosen to absorb the experiences as the hard lessons he'd needed to forge his path in life. So what if being termed a bastard by the man whose blood ran through his veins had left an imagined hole in Javier's life for a long time? He'd learned with

time that he could live without the soft trappings of family and endless entanglements of relationships that were, more often than not, fraught and tedious. The ideal family life he'd envied from afar as a child had proved to be nothing more than a cluster of blood relations fighting over what remained of a once prestigious aristocratic name.

He'd achieved more in his lifetime than his so-called ancestors had managed in several generations.

But the rejection still hurt...

Javier shrugged tense shoulders, ferociously denying the voice in his head, and looked up as Carla murmured in her sleep.

Clinically, he examined her, forcing himself to assess what had drawn him so inexorably to her. She certainly wasn't his type. Slim and far too delicate where he preferred his women curvy and vivacious.

Yet, from the first moment he'd laid eyes on her, he'd been captivated by the combination of ethereal beauty that comprised silky caramel-streaked chocolate hair, vivid green eyes and a figure that begged for masculine hands, his hands, to mould and possess.

And despite everything that had happened—her deliberate, callous insults and her flaying rejection the morning after their passionate night together—he couldn't help the rush of heat to his groin as he lingered on her full mouth and the steady rise and fall of her breasts.

He surged to his feet, disgusted with himself for ogling a sick,

bedridden woman.

But Carla Nardozzi wasn't just any woman. She epitomised the very thing that Javier had struggled all his life to effectively deny.

She'd rejected him because he hadn't been good enough. Not once, but twice, she'd looked upon him as if he hadn't been worthy to address her.

The family he didn't want or need had been allowed to get away with treating him like that.

She would not.

And before their association was over, he would make sure she took back every dismissive word, every scathing look and gesture she'd spurned him with.

CHAPTER THREE

EVEN BEFORE CARLA came fully awake, she knew he was still there. His presence was too oppressive, too hyper-intense, to dismiss.

Thankfully, her headache had lessened, and, even though her broken wrist throbbed, Carla felt much better and in control of herself than she'd been a few hours ago.

So she opened her eyes, and glanced at the occupant of the armchair.

Javier was asleep.

That in itself was shocking enough to observe—the man was larger than life, a demigod who surely didn't require the rejuvenating needs of mere mortals. But it was the transformation

that had overcome his face that made her eyes widen. That made her stare shamelessly.

His arms were flung over the sides of the chair, his long legs splayed in front of him. The position offered an unfettered view of the stunning landscape of his body. Powerful taut thighs tapered to lean hips and a trim waist before veering up to display a torso that would've made any athlete proud. His deep chest and broad shoulders rose and fell and his slightly relaxed jawline drew attention to the stubble that had grown in the hours he'd been here. Almost reluctantly, her gaze traced his face.

Sinfully gorgeous, Javier's features had always been a subject of acute fascination for her and this time was no exception, despite his less than formidable demeanour in repose.

Heat dragged low in her belly as she recalled what that mouth had done to her, what she'd begged him to do to her during that mad, reckless night in Miami.

He'd fulfilled her every wish, and more, with an intensity that had sent her running for cover in a blind panic the next morning. Carla had known that Javier was bad news for her. His healthy sex life and reputation for strictly temporary liaisons with women hadn't been a secret. She'd known even before she woke up in his bed that it was only a matter of time before he notched her name on his bedpost and moved on. Dio mio, she'd barely kept up with him during their night of passion, her inexperience blazing through every fumbled kiss and caress that had made his sensual lips twitch with tender humour. But it was the risk to her own

emotions that had finally sent her scurrying.

That had made her strike out before he'd got round to rejecting her first.

'You stare at me with such fascination, it's almost enough to make me forgot the horror on your face when you looked upon me once upon a time.'

She jumped, her mind dragging itself to the present and to the ragged contempt in his voice. She forced herself to meet Javier's gaze. 'It wasn't horror. At least not at you.'

One sleek eyebrow lifted. 'Is that supposed to make me feel better, pequeña? That you were horrified with yourself for choosing me to be the man you lost your innocence to?'

'Is there anything I can say that will make you stop condemning me for what I said the next morning?'

The gleam in his eyes slowly hardened to merciless chips. Still splayed out in indolent abandon, he linked his fingers over his washboard stomach. 'You told me sleeping with me was the worst mistake of your life. Of course with the benefit of hindsight I see that I was being used all along. But even if I hadn't believed you then or found a way to excuse that insult, your behaviour since has proven your words to be true. Why should I believe that anything you say now isn't just to save face?'

'Save face?' she said, confused.

'Angelis is engaged to another woman, is he not? He's made his choice and it wasn't you. It's natural you wouldn't want the world to know how you truly feel about him.'

‘I’m not in love with him. I’m really not,’ she stressed when mocking disbelief draped his face.

‘Then why were you seen kissing him at your charity event in Tuscany last month?’

‘Would you believe me if I told you it was a mistake?’

He surged to his feet in one smooth bound, a volatile emotion bristling from his large frame. ‘No. The fact is your obsession with him continues, and you don’t seem to be interested in the small matter of him being committed to another. You just want what you want, don’t you, Carla, and to hell with the consequences?’

‘No, of course I don’t. I’d never do that—’

‘But you did.’ He strolled closer, a predator stalking his prey, until he stood over her. ‘The evidence speaks for itself.’

She shook her head, unable to believe she was having this conversation with Javier. ‘It’s obvious you’ve made up your mind about me. I said I’d return to New York with you. So why are you still here? I’m not exactly in the position to make a run for it.’

A dark frown clamped his brows. He shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. ‘You fell asleep before I got your word that you’ll stay away from Angelis from now on.’

Carla sat up gingerly and swung her legs over the side. The wave of dizziness that washed over her was blessedly brief. ‘He’s my agent. Avoiding him will be impossible. And counter-productive, don’t you think?’

‘You can and you will. Angelis has enough executives to ensure

he has no personal dealings with you from now on. I'll contact him myself to make sure the request is understood.'

'Are you going to forbid me from letting him become my trainer too, which was his suggestion?' She shook her head. 'If I didn't know better, I'd think you were jealous. And you don't wear it particularly well.'

Deep, unamused laughter erupted from his throat, mocking her every word. 'Don't delude yourself. Scandal may sell newspapers, but my company has remained free of it up till now and I intend to ensure it stays that way. As for training you, we've agreed that it would be better if someone else assumes that role.'

Her unhurt hand gripped the side of the bed. 'You've been discussing me with Draco behind my back?'

'I've been trying to minimise the impact of what's happened—what are you doing? You shouldn't be on your feet.'

Carla swayed for a moment before she managed to steady herself. 'I should if I want to use the bathroom. Or are you going to forbid that too?'

A faint wash of colour highlighted his sculpted cheekbones and his lips pursed for a moment. 'Don't be ridiculous.'

She wanted to protest the ridiculousness of the whole situation. But she was too busy wincing as she placed her weight on her left foot. Too late, she remembered she'd landed hard on her hip. A second later, she was swung off her feet.

The shock of the sudden action halted her breath for a second before she regained her senses. 'What are you doing? Put me

down!'

'No. You're in no fit state to be walking anywhere.'

He hoisted her up, his steps sure and confident as he strode into the adjoining bathroom. Painfully aware of her dishevelled state, she buried her reddening face in his chest. And was immediately bombarded with the unique, undeniably male scent of him. The urge to take greedy gulps of him assailed her, forcing her to do the opposite and hold her breath as he slowly lowered her to her feet.

Unable to stop herself, she risked a glance at him, to find his burnished bronze gaze on her.

'Umm...you can let me go now,' she ventured, her senses screaming at the electrifying grip he had on her arms.

He frowned. 'Will you be okay?' he asked brusquely. 'I'll go and get the nurse—'

'There's no need. I'll be fine.'

He stared at her for a few more seconds. Then he carefully stepped back. 'Don't lock the door,' he instructed.

Carla resisted the urge to perform an uncharacteristic eye roll. 'I'm not made of glass, Javier. I've suffered more falls in my career than most people will in a lifetime.'

If anything her answer drew an even deeper frown from him. 'Is that supposed to reassure me?'

'I wasn't aware that you needed my reassurance. Just my acquiescence to your every demand.'

His eyes darkened. 'You laid down the rules of our

relationship, querida. Don't complain now that I'm playing by your standards.'

Carla was puzzling over that cryptic remark when he shut the door and left her in peace for the first time since waking up in hospital. She didn't doubt that she'd invited some degree of the hell Javier seemed intent on visiting upon her. But overall his actions pointed to a deeper reaction to what she'd done to warrant his almost volatile anger. Had she really bruised his ego that much? How could she have, when he'd been associated with some of the most captivatingly beautiful women in the world, both before and after their unfortunate one-night stand?

To complete her ablutions, she limped to the sink, washed up, and lifted her gaze to the mirror. With growing horror, she examined the bags under her eyes and the unkempt nest of her thick hair. She almost giggled hysterically at the thought of her father seeing her this way. For as long as she could remember, Olivio had demanded perfection in everything she did. She'd granted it. Because to do otherwise would've incurred his wrath. Besides, it'd been easier playing the perfect princess. It provided the flawless façade to hide behind. Seeking and attaining perfection meant she didn't have to acknowledge the flawed individual behind the mask.

Carla stared into the mirror, her heart thumping hard as she acknowledged that the shell had well and truly cracked. Her eyes looked bruised and haunted. But then what was new? Pain and betrayal were effective tools in eroding any chance of finding

peace even while doing what one loved—

'Carla?'

The harsh rap of her name brought her up short. Quickly running her fingers through her hair, she took a deep breath. She would deal with her father and their acrimonious relationship once she got out of here.

First she needed to deal with the man intent on making her pay dearly for her one monumental mistake.

* * *

The moment the doctor gave her the all-clear to leave later that afternoon, Javier swung into action.

'Your father is having your things brought over. We'll stay at my hotel tonight and fly out in the morning.'

She smoothed her hand over the dark orange dress and matching shoes she'd found in her hospital closet. With the help of the nurse, she'd taken a quick shower and pulled her hair into its customary bun. The effort to make herself presentable had been worth it when she'd emerged from the hospital to find a crowd of fans cheering at her apparent recovery. As always, she'd been silently awed and a little intimidated at being the object of such intense scrutiny. Although she hadn't been willing to admit it at the time, she'd been grateful for Javier's solid presence beside her. Especially when she'd caught a glimpse of the latest newspaper headline.

'Don't I have to deal with the police, seeing as Tyson Blackwell is to be charged?'

‘We’ll deal with it this afternoon, if you’re feeling up to it. If not, we’ll handle it later. I’ve spoken to the authorities. They don’t really need your statement to charge him.’

‘They don’t?’

He shook his head. ‘Angelis had a member of your father’s staff watching over you. Blackwell was filmed on video pushing you into making that dangerous jump.’ His jaw tightened, his features cast in shadow as the car moved through traffic. ‘Why did you do it?’

Her breath emerged shakily as memory slashed across her mind. Her father had finally confessed, after condemning her for wanting to sever their professional relationship, that he’d gambled all her money away. Their only asset—albeit a heavily mortgaged one—was the estate in Tuscany.

‘I had a lot on my mind that morning. I wasn’t thinking clearly. And before you think me completely foolish, I’d done the jump successfully over a dozen times in the days before.’

‘Was your lack of concentration to do with Angelis? Or the chaos your father has made of your finances?’

She gasped. ‘You know about that?’

‘Your father has been pursuing this deal for the better part of a year, each time asking for more money. You didn’t think I’d do my homework on why he was so eager to sign you away?’

Her insides chilled. ‘So you know—’

‘I know everything, querida. And I have you in the proverbial palm of my hand. I can ruin you with the snap of my fingers.’

That debilitating state of ennui that had assailed her on and off over the past few weeks wove over her again. The urge to give up, walk away from it all, now, rather than later as she'd tried to discuss with her father, was so strong it caught her breath.

'Did you hear me, Carla?'

'Loud and clear. You can ruin me. You can breathe fire. You can command the very heavens to crush me into a speck of dust. I acknowledge your almighty power over me. But please excuse me if I don't genuflect. I'm battered and bruised enough as it is.'

A dark look entered his eyes. 'What's wrong with you? And I don't mean physically. Your apathy is unbecoming in an athlete of your calibre. You haven't risen to number one by being cowed by a few challenges.'

She laughed, the sound scratching her throat. 'So you not only expect me to jump when you say how high, but I should have an attitude when I do it?'

'I'm saying representing my company with such a defeatist demeanour will not work.'

'I'll work on practising my positive mental attitude before I step in front of the camera. Is that enough for you?'

'This isn't a joke, Carla.'

'Trust me, I'm well aware of that.

She felt his probing stare for several minutes. But thankfully, he didn't press her further before they drew up to the five-star hotel in the heart of Rome.

The hotel was renowned for its ultra-private accessibility to

celebrities and she breathed a sigh of relief when they were ushered through a discreet entrance and into the private lift that serviced the penthouse.

Carla walked into the sumptuously decorated room and halted when she saw her father. Beside him, several familiar-looking suitcases were stacked neatly on a caddy, which a butler was in the process of wheeling away.

The ragged notion that she was once again being managed, herded where Olivio Nardozzi wanted her to be, tore through her.

'I have a few phone calls to make,' Javier announced once he'd acknowledged her father's greeting. 'I'll leave you two to catch up. Carla, dinner will be served at eight. Make sure you rest before then.'

Before she could respond, he strode off down the hallway. She told herself his abrupt absence didn't affect her as much as the mild hollowing of her stomach indicated.

She stiffened as her father placed the crystal tumbler he'd been drinking from on a nearby antique cabinet and crossed the room.

'Mia figlia, it's good to see you on your feet again. I wanted to be there when you were released, but I was assured that everything was in hand. How are you feeling?'

She didn't react as he leaned forward and kissed her cheeks. When he stepped back, she glimpsed the tight, haggard look on his face.

'I'm fine,' she replied, desperately squashing any heartache she felt over the state of their relationship. Her father had long driven

home to her that he abhorred any show of emotion, especially that of weakness. In all things she was expected to be poised, controlled. Emotionless. It was the reason their ongoing rows writhed like a live wire between them.

'I hope your time in hospital has brought you to your senses?' he murmured in Italian.

Anguish ripped through her. 'If by my senses you mean I've given up my bid to lead an independent life, then I'm sorry to disappoint you but my wishes remain the same,' she whispered fiercely. 'I'm still taking a break from ice skating, and no, I haven't made up my mind how long that break will be. When I decide, I'll let you know.'

'Does Santino know about this ludicrous decision of yours? I don't believe that he does, or your contract would be in serious jeopardy by now and we'd be on our way to court.'

She bit her lip. Her contract with Javier's company didn't specifically state that she couldn't make the decision she intended to take, but she doubted he would be pleased to learn she might lose her number-one-ranking status before she'd fulfilled the full terms of her sponsorship deal.

'Contracts can be renegotiated. Nothing is set in stone yet. I'll tell him when I'm ready. And I'd thank you to stay out of that decision.'

Her father's espresso-coloured eyes hardened. 'You forget yourself, girl. You wouldn't be where you are today without me.'

'Without your punishing strive for perfection and the strict

rules that ensured I had no life outside figure skating, you mean?' she sniped, the ennui rushing away to be replaced by the haunting reality of what she'd let her life become. And she couldn't even fully blame her father for that.

'I moulded you and ensured your iconic place in the history books!'

'Through fear and intimidation. At each turn you threatened to abandon me just like—' She pulled herself up short, sucking in a deep breath.

'Go on, say it. Just like your mamma left you?'

Her hurt escalated until her whole body was engulfed in pain. 'And we both know why she left, don't we?'

He slashed an angry hand through the air. 'I refuse to indulge you in this childish need to revisit the past. Your mamma is gone, and you dishonour her memory with this petty squabble you insist upon.'

'How dare you accuse me of dishonouring her memory? When you didn't even tell me she was dead until the morning of her funeral?'

Olivio's frame tensed, his five-foot-nine stature rigid with banked fury. 'You had a competition to win. I didn't think the news would do anything but throw you off your game.'

Her blood turned cold. 'Every time I think there's a shred of humanity in you, Papà, you prove me wrong.'

His face tightened into a hard, implacable mask. 'I don't know what has got into you these past few weeks. Whatever it is, I

suggest you take the time in New York to reassess your priorities. This deal with Santino will be the making of us, if you don't mess it up. In the beginning, I was against him staggering the payments on the basis of your performance, but now I see it's a good thing. It might not be enough to save us from the bank's red letters, but if it helps keep you in line—'

'You forget I'm no longer a child. Your threats of abandonment don't frighten me any more!'

'And I haven't come this far for you to suddenly develop whimsical delusions. Only has-beens and losers scurry away with the excuse to find themselves. You're number one and you'll remain number one—'

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