

Chapter One

His brother was an idiot.

Marcus La Rocca rocked back on his heels and stifled the urge to yell. The damn kid knew what was at stake, knew his assigned role. He'd agreed to the marriage months ago. *Dannazione*, he'd agreed enthusiastically. So why was he playing with fire at this late date? If his younger brother stood in front of him right now, he'd wring his sorry neck. But what good would it do? Matteo had been a thorn in his side from the moment he'd entered his life and would continue in the role for the foreseeable future.

Or until he succeeded in dragging the idiot to the altar.

"He doesn't know what he's doing." His mother, Serafina, sobbed into her lace handkerchief. She sat in one of several burgundy leather office chairs across from his steel-and-glass desk. The bright overhead light shined with a harsh glare on her dyed-black hair.

With wry amusement, he noted there was no smearing of her makeup and her eyes weren't red. His mother was a master at many things; she was pure genius at emotional manipulation.

"He's twenty-five."

"A mere baby."

He snorted. Ten years ago, when he'd been twenty-five, he'd been running this company, making million-euro deals. Not running around and screwing around.

Her hands fisted and she threw him a glare. "You're never sympathetic."

"I ran out of sympathy a long time ago."

"You are always too hard on him." Her voice rose to shrill. "This is all your fault."

A phrase he'd heard so many times it could be tattooed on his brain. "Calm down."

"How can I calm down when my baby is in a whore's clutches?" She jumped from the chair and began pacing, her thin body trembling with anxiety.

Examining the photos his mother had provided, he silently questioned her conclusion. The woman seemed more like an innocent girl, not the seductive siren his mother seemed to fear.

"She appears harmless."

"*Uffa!*" She threw her hands in the air and stopped, pinning him with another glare. "Those are the women you have to watch out for."

Assuming what she claimed held a kernel of truth, this was a problem. However, the last thing he needed was his fiery mother going off on a tangent. If he didn't rein her in, she'd likely screech to a tabloid, or worse, gossip with her gaggle of crows. The society crows would pass the information along faster than the tabloids could print their sheets. He had to tamp this down, buy some time so he could address this situation in his usual purposeful manner.

He shrugged his shoulders and gave her a blank stare.

"You don't believe me," she wailed.

"Momma," he replied. "Be reasonable. Matteo is engaged."

"*Si, si, si*, and that is why—"

"For all my little brother's faults, he would not betray his commitment. Nor his family."

"He wouldn't mean to."

"Supposing what you say is true, he's only having a last fling. Meaningless."

The handkerchief waved his words away. "She's moved in with him."

"What?" He stiffened and his eyes narrowed.

"*Si*," she proclaimed triumphantly. "One month before the wedding!"

Marcus paced to the wall of windows lining one side of the room. Looking down, he noted the London traffic coursing through the financial district where his office building stood.

Maledizione. He did not have time for this. He had to fly to Madrid tomorrow and then to New York a few days later. Why the hell couldn't his kid brother keep his pants zipped? Didn't he understand what this marriage meant to the business? This deal would ensure Rocca Enterprises would be a big player in the emerging equity markets in Eastern Europe.

Hell, the kid had liked the girl. Had declared he was pleased. If Matteo had objected, Marcus would have let him off the hook and found another way to get the deal done. But he hadn't, and this deal and marriage had been on the books for months. If the marriage fell through now, there'd be no way to salvage the contract. Not with the Casartelli bride's pride and honor at risk.

"You're sure of this information?"

"*Si*."

He glanced over his shoulder. "You've been keeping an eye on him."

“It's a mother's prerogative.” She met his gaze with a defiant one of her own.

He turned and leaned on the window. The cold November wind blowing outside cooled the glass. And his irritation. Slightly. “I want all the information you’ve collected.”

A gleam of victory lit in her dark eyes. “Now you are listening.”

“If what you say is true—”

“It is.”

“Then this is a problem that needs to be nipped in the bud before the Casartellis find out.”

“*Si! Si!*” His mother's arms waved in the air, her eyes flashing.

“Momma.”

His cool tone stopped her agitated movements and her gaze met his.

“I'll take care of this.”

The magic words she'd been waiting to hear. He knew it and she knew it.

Her smile beamed through her happy tears. “Marcus—”

“I need to get back to work.” He ran his hands through his hair, trying to stifle his irritation.

Rushing over, she threw her arms around him. “Your father would be so proud.”

“Momma—”

“Matteo's father would be so thankful.”

Unlikely in both cases. But what did it matter? Both men had been dead for years and the responsibility for everything had been on his shoulders for what seemed like forever. It was his job to keep this financial empire intact and it was clearly his job to deliver his stupid brother to the wedding. The wedding that would ensure Rocca Enterprises' continuing prosperity.

Assuming his mother didn't babble and his brother didn't renege.

“No talking to your friends, Momma.”

“Well, I don't think—”

“Momma.”

She eyed him, gauged his temper as only a mother could do, and made the right decision.

“I will leave all this in your capable hands, Marcus.”

“*Grazie.*”

With a flurry of lace and purse and flounce and drama, his mother left the room. Leaving him with the mess.

As usual.

* * *

Darcy Moran was a fighter.

At first she'd had to be and now, it was second nature. This situation, obviously, called for a fighter. It made no difference that her knees were doing some serious knocking below the edge of her one good dress. And it made no difference that the office building standing before her was a bit more grand and glorious than she'd imagined.

She had a fight to win.

It was the least she could do for her best friend.

He'd come through for her many times—the latest being when her ugly, old landlord had objected to another overdue rent payment. If not for Matt, she'd have ended up on the streets. She had figured she'd take a couple of weeks to get her feet back under her and then she'd start searching for another flat. Until then, she'd bunk on Matt's sofa.

But last night, she'd found out she could have his whole place in a month.

All to herself.

“Married?” She hadn't believed him at first. “Forced to marry?”

“I'm afraid it's true.” Matteo Costa's big brown eyes shone with despair. She knew he used them all the time for effect, but still. Still.

“How could you let him do this?”

“He's the head of the family.”

Her hands fisted in her jeans pockets. “He's not your lord and master.”

“The next best thing.” Her friend's expression grew more mournful.

“You must confront him,” she instructed. “You need to tell him to go to hell.”

“You don't know my brother.”

“Thank God.”

He sighed. “It's about the families. The connection. This seals the deal. In many ways, the marriage makes sense.”

“You’re being barmy.” Darcy frowned. “No one gets married to seal a business deal.”

“No one but me.”

“Don't give in,” she cried. “Don't you ever give in!”

“That's your rally cry, not mine.” He leaned his head back on the flat’s kitchen wall and closed his eyes. “At least Viola is pretty.”

“You have got to be kidding.” As if the pretty factor of his potential wife would have any impact on whether or not they'd be happy.

“No,” he said, one eye opening to squint at her rigid figure. “She is pretty. And stop shouting.”

“You've got to tell your brother you made a mistake.”

“He'd kill me.”

“Better a quick death than a long protracted death by marriage.”

“Cynic.” Matt's stare turned shrewd.

“Realist.” He'd asked and questioned, but she had no desire to confide about her past. He didn't know how she'd grown up and no amount of talking would ever give him a sense of what it had been like. What it had been like to see her parents fight and split and fight and split. What it had been like to land in foster care at the age of twelve. What it had been like to know she was all alone. Out of long practice, she'd shut the conversation down before the questioning went any further. She had more than enough information anyway.

By midnight last night, she'd made a decision.

The only decision she could make.

Matt had saved her many times. Now was the time she'd pay him back. She didn't know exactly how she was going to convince his big brother to stop the marriage, still she'd figure something out. Once she met the guy, she'd find some way to wrap him around her finger or bring him to his senses by finding his weaknesses and exploiting them. She'd become good at both a long time ago. Sure, he was a billionaire, but that didn't mean he had super powers. He was just a man.

Darcy lifted her chin and stared with fierce intent at the massive building in front of her.

Time to make this happen.

She marched across the busy London street, ignoring the well-heeled crowd swirling past her. Marshaling her arguments, she lined up her words. She'd first have to get through the walls of security and secretaries before she reached her goal, but she had charm. A quick tongue. Other talents.

ROCCA ENTERPRISES

The sign swept over the entrance, silver and elegant. Impressive. Intimidating.

She found it hard to picture her best friend coming from this environment. When she'd met him, she'd assumed he was like her: poor. The news that his brother was a billionaire, who ruled an entire empire of various businesses, had been a huge shock. The Great Man, Matt called him. With annoyance, yet sometimes she noted a hint of affection underlining his words. Still, there was nothing affectionate about this situation.

Her friend didn't have the courage to confront his brother.

But she did.

Pushing through the doors, she entered the foyer. Sculptures of silver glass speared toward the cathedral ceiling. A wide wall of glimmering elevators lined the end of the foyer, swishing open and closed, filling and emptying with a dizzying number of women dressed to the nines and men dressed to impress. All rather overwhelming. For a moment.

Keep your focus.

She peered past the girth of an elderly woman walking by her and spotted the first hurdle.

Security.

Planted behind a wide desk, four uniformed guards scanned the crowd with sharp attention. She was short, but not short enough to sneak past sight unseen. Plus, her dress didn't come close to competing with the high-fashion women surrounding her. If she didn't act fast, she'd be spotted. Stopped.

“Not on your life,” she muttered.

She'd managed to pry a few critical pieces of information from Matt, without letting him know what she had planned for his benefit. For example, everyone who worked for Rocca got a blue ID card, which they had to wear to get past security. All she needed to flit past this hurdle

was one of those cards. Too bad her friend didn't have one. His brother wouldn't even allow him on the premises without prior approval.

Another strike against the Great Man. What an egotistical tyrant he must be.

Focus. Focus.

Scanning the crowd, she found a promising target. A behemoth of a man ambled toward the elevators, his jacket slung across his arm, his blue card flopping on the polished wool.

Well, actually, it was her blue card.

She slipped beside him, her keen gaze focused on what she needed to know. "Hi, John."

The man stopped and looked down and down into her smiling face.

He blinked.

"How lovely to see you." She beamed at him and angled herself so his large body stood between her and the security desk.

Blinking again, he smiled back. "I don't think I know you."

"John, John." She batted her eyes as her hand deftly did its work. "How could you forget what we had together?"

"We...we..." The man sputtered to a close and blinked once more.

"Well, I guess I'll have to let you go, then." She turned and walked away, swinging her hips as her mum had shown her long ago.

"Wait!" His voice didn't stop her.

Darcy smiled and snapped the lovely blue tag on her lapel. Nothing ever stopped her.

The Great Man had no idea what was about to hit him.

* * *

"Boss." Blake Reston, head of his security, stepped into his office. "She's no longer at your brother's flat. We've located her."

Marcus had taken two days to calculate what had to be done. After reviewing the information his mother had collected, within hours his security team had filled in the rest of the details on one Ms. Darcy Moran. In his methodical, careful way, he'd mulled over the situation when he'd been in Madrid and made a decision. Now it was only a matter of tracking down the prey and springing the trap. He glanced away from his computer screen. "Well?"

A gruff laugh escaped the blond man. "She's here."

"What?"

"She's been able to glide through the security on the ground floor and is currently on her way to..." Blake focused on his phone, scanning his messages. "It appears she's here to see you, big guy."

"Interesting." Standing, he slipped on his suit coat. "I can't remember the last time a person I was hunting came right to my door."

"I wonder what she's up to."

"Whatever she's up to, she's playing right into my hands."

The head of security stared at him with a knowing gaze. "You've figured out a plan."

"*Certamente.*"

"Willing to share?"

Marcus gave him a wry grimace before sitting down once more. "Don't I always share my plans with you?"

"Since I am usually a part of the plan, it's smart of you to do so."

"In this case, I don't believe I'll need your help." Flipping open the lone file on his desk, he once again examined the report about his target. It never hurt to be thorough, although he'd committed all of the data to memory. "The information we've collected about Ms. Moran shows she's got not a quid to her name."

"That is a fact."

"This would explain why she attached herself to Matt when they both were attending art school several years ago."

"Your cynicism is showing. Maybe they became friends because they liked each other."

"My cynicism is hard won and holds me in good stead." He scanned the documents one more time. "She's been playing her cards carefully, building rapport. However, the upcoming marriage has pushed her to act."

"Snag Matteo while she can."

"Correct."

"And now we come to your plan."

“My plan is to offer Ms. Moran a bigger prize.”

The blond man eyed him, then laughed. “You.”

“I plan to sweep her off her feet.”

“Which you have quite a lot of experience doing with women.”

“True.” His smile faded. “Once Matt is safely married and our business deal is done with the Casartellis, Ms. Moran will be given a nice piece of jewelry and told to take a hike.”

Blake walked to the window and looked down. “There is a chance she’ll refuse.”

“Not likely. But if she’s stubborn enough to say no, I’ll use the other key bit of information you found out about her.”

The man stilled. “Her father.”

“Si.”

“You are one ruthless bastard.” Blake said the words as he shook his head, yet the undertone of respect told Marcus what he needed to know. The head of his security thought his plan was solid.

“Do I detect judgment in your tone?”

His friend waved the question away. They’d gone through too many tense situations not to know what the other really thought.

He leaned back in his chair and contemplated what he had to do in the next few weeks. His voice hardened with resolve. “I do what I have to do to protect my family and my business.”

“There is a chance she’s actually in love with him.”

His sardonic chuckle filled the office. “Please.”

Blake surveyed him with amusement. “At some point this cynicism of yours is going to trip you up.”

“I doubt it.”

The intercom crackled. “Mr. La Rocca?”

“Yes, Angie.”

“There’s a woman here to see you.” His PA’s voice held annoyance. “She’s not on your schedule, sir. Yet she’s very insistent.”

Marcus threw a mocking grin at the other man. “I love insistent women.”

“Sir?” Angie’s voice blurred into confusion.

“Show her in.”

“Yes, sir.” The intercom went dead.

“Want me to stay?” Blake gave him an ironic smile.

“I don’t believe I need your supervision to seduce a woman.”

The head of his security snorted. “Then I’m out of here. I wish you luck.”

“I don’t need luck. I merely need to follow through with my plan.”

Shaking his head again, the blond man slid through the private side door leading into the conference room. At the same time, the main office door opened with a crash.

To his PA looking irritated and flustered. Which was unusual.

And behind her stood...

A fairy sprite.

A dainty nymph.

A sublime elfin creature.

She would barely reach his shoulder. Even in high heels. Certainly not in the clunky, plodding shoes she had on. The dress she wore did nothing for her—brown, ugly. Yet, it could not hide the body beneath. All lithe and elegant. Fine boned, but still with a delicious womanly curve to the hip and bust. The photos his mother had brought him had not done her justice. Had not shown the reality of her true beauty.

Every inch of his skin tightened and a particular part of his anatomy hardened. A flashing thought crossed his mind. He was glad he was sitting.

“Sir.” Angie regained some of her moxie and stepped forward. “This is—”

“Darcy Moran.” The delicate nymph stomped into his office, her dark, feathered brows held in a frown. “I have something to say to you.”

Struggling to regain his control, Marcus eyed his prey. “I can see that.”

“Mr. La Rocca—”

“You may go, Angie.” His gaze never left the tiny woman who’d stopped stomping and now stood inside the room in rigid anger.

The door shut with a soft thump.

Her face was a lovely oval, her chin slightly pointed. Her black hair was cut short and curled around her petite ears. Her mouth was pure perfection. Plump, pink, and lush. Her eyes flashed with fire. He couldn't quite pick out the color across the length of the room, but they were light. Filled with the light of battle at the moment.

Remarkable. The air between them sizzled. He would not have been surprised if electric shocks sprang from both of their bodies.

Dio. He could almost forgive Matteo for moving this piece of art into his flat.

The woman crossed her arms in front of her. "You have a lot to answer for."

"I usually do." His tongue felt thick. His mouth dry.

"You can't force Matt to marry this Viola woman."

"Mmm." He clamped down on his libido and focused on the task at hand. The task at hand that had become remarkably more desirable in the last few minutes. This was no longer a chore; it would be a pleasure to take this woman to bed. In fact, having sex with her was now his primary aim. How lucky for him this coincided with his ultimate goal of detaching her from his brother.

"That's all you have to say for yourself?"

"Matteo has been whining? In his usual way?"

"He isn't whining. He's upset." Her graceful hands lifted and sliced the air with curt, angry movements. "He's in despair. Because of you."

"I'm sorry to hear it." He watched, fascinated as her whole body vibrated with energy.

"No, you're not. Or you'd do something about the situation." She began to pace.

"Whatever I have to do, I'll stop you from doing this to him."

The passion in her voice when she talked about his brother sliced fury right through his lust. The sudden picture of Matteo and this nymph in bed together pulsed through his brain, sending him into a full-throttled rage. Which astonished him. He rarely lost his formidable temper. But it was definitely temper knotting in his throat. He couldn't help the biting words spitting from his mouth. "You are close to Matt."

Her eyes widened at the tone of his voice. "Definitely."

"My brother is a lucky man."

Something, a spark of shrewdness or cunning, flashed across her face. “Yes,” she said slowly. “He is lucky to have me.”

“So you have come to plead for your love.”

Her body stilled. A pause of breathless silence passed between them. Then she finally nodded. “That’s right. That’s exactly right.”

The knot in his throat grew, still he couldn’t help tightening it further. “You love Matteo.”

“Yes.” She walked to the edge of his desk, staring at him across the shiny surface. “And for the sake of this love, I’m asking you to call off the marriage.”

Her eyes were blue. The deep, vibrant blue of a Tuscany night sky. They were filled with emotion. *Love*. Something he long ago stopped believing in.

“No.” He stared right into her eyes. “Never.”

“Please,” she whispered. “This would make me very happy.”

“I will make you happy.” He stood with an abrupt jerk. “But in an entirely different way.”