

Chapter One

The anger surprised her.

This rush of pure rage. Of bitterness she thought she'd erased long ago.

She'd practiced this meeting for years. Rehearsed how she'd act, what she'd say. But it all fell out of her head and heart. Slipped away from her mouth and tongue.

His hand held hers in a light, formal grip. Yet his heat overwhelmed her senses, pulsing down her arm into the core of her—the old, cold pain. Everything around her faded: the warm night air behind her, the noise of the party behind him. A haze of unreality blurred everything around her.

Except for his heat.

“Ah,” he finally said. “Little Lara Derrick. All grown up.”

She looked at him then, looked into hooded eyes set in a face of stark angles and planes. For a moment, she saw only a stranger. This was a man's face—a ruthless man, tough and implacable. Exactly as she remembered from the last time they'd stood together.

Nothing like the boy she'd once thought of as her best friend.

His eyes narrowed. Something sparked between them. The old bond, the feeling she'd carried through her childhood...of belonging...of being loved...

No. Wait.

Her wits stirred to life and with them the hard-won truths she'd learned over the past years. There had never really been anything. All her fantasy, all silly girlhood imaginings. Not reality. He'd made that brutally clear with his actions against her.

In a rush, the fury surged once more. Surprised again at its power, she sucked in a deep breath and stiffened her spine. A nod at the man in front of her was the only thing she could manage. If she started to talk, she might yell. If she moved another muscle, she might hit. If she looked at him again, he might see what was in her eyes.

And then he would know what he'd done to her.

“Nothing to say?” His hand held hers in a light grip, his touch soft. “If I remember correctly that is unusual for you.”

The slight teasing in his tone made her itch to strike out. She jerked her hand from his, and a wave of relief welled inside her when her father stepped up behind her, providing needed distraction, stopping her from doing anything stupid. But for a long moment, she still felt the coolness of the man's dark gaze, felt the heat of his body.

The haze threatened to blur her surroundings once more.

Then it was gone with her father's booming hello, the lighter tones of her brother's laughing joke. The man's deep, smooth voice, greeting them and welcoming them into his home without a trace of warmth, cleared the haze inside her like a good gale of icy English wind.

Thank God.

Lara walked past him into the cool marble foyer. Laughter and chatter drifted out of the large drawing room on the right and she moved quickly, losing herself in the crowd of neighbors and friends celebrating the upcoming nuptials of his youngest sister. Exchanging a wave of greeting with a cluster of friends across the room, she ignored his sister's invitation to join them. Instead, she swiped a glass of champagne from a waiter, leaned on the wall and sipped.

Her fingers shook as they clutched the crystal.

A fresh spurt of anger, at herself this time, ran through her. He meant nothing to her. He'd meant nothing to her for a long time. She'd made sure of that.

So why?

Why was her stomach churning, why were her hands damp, her eyes blurry with tears? This reaction gave him too much credit. Too much power. Something she would not tolerate.

She needed some air.

With a stiff gait she walked through the crowd, past the laughter and talking, and eventually out onto the terrace. Closing the door behind her, she let the Italian night surround and soothe her. The gentle lap of the Mediterranean Sea, meters away, slid through and around her. Calming her.

It was over. She'd met him again and survived the experience.

"He doesn't matter to you," she whispered to herself.

So he'd changed the course of her life and certainly not for the better. Yet she'd managed to come through her experiences stronger and smarter.

The beat of her heart throbbed in her chest.

She'd been a foolish child then, bent on destroying any link to him. Systematically, she'd cut herself off from her childhood, isolated herself in a new life. Done exactly what he'd wanted her to do...disappear.

How stupid she'd been.

Because this place, these people, were part of her and always would be. Not him. Never him. Everything else, though, she wanted back. Her life in Italy, her family, the friendships she had with his sisters.

She also had a goal now, something not tied to a man or his wishes and desires. Her school would be the declaration of her power as a survivor. For the foreseeable future, it would be her life. Precisely as she wanted it to be.

Lara turned and looked through the pane glass of the terrace doors. The colors of the women's dresses blended into a kaleidoscope of silk and satin and status. The men's dark suits, white dress shirts, black tuxedos, offered contrast. The flash of diamonds, the sparkling light of the chandeliers, the glint of class and glamour.

Her bittersweet memories blurred her gaze for a moment.

She'd played dolls in this elegant room, with the rain splashing the terrace doors. She and his sisters had used the chic settees as castles, the antique tapestries lining the walls as backdrops, the marble statues as pawns in their play. The room had been merely their playground, nothing to be impressed with.

Not aristocratic. Haughty. Intimidating.

Like he'd shown himself to be.

Then and now.

He moved through the room as if he owned it all, which he did, and owned everyone who scattered before him. He never smiled; instead he nodded with cool arrogance. Lara watched as grown men almost genuflected before him. He accepted it as if it were his due. What pride. What an ego. Nothing like years ago. Then he'd been a lanky teenager who grinned and laughed. Who hadn't hidden everything he was thinking behind a cold mask.

Who hadn't been capable of betraying those who loved him.

However, that had been a lie too, her memory of him as someone other than an imperious aristocrat. Another of his lies. Or maybe she'd been lying to herself.

Not anymore. Never again.

She was no longer a dreamer. She was a realist.

She took a deep sip of champagne and turned away to stare at the rolling lawn darkened with night shadows. She would get through this week, suffer his presence at his sister's wedding, and then odds were, she'd rarely see him. After all, since she'd been back in Italy, she hadn't seen him at all. He'd been wheeling and dealing in Dubai or someplace exotic. Inevitably, he'd leave for another important business deal somewhere else in the world. Leaving her free to make a new life where she belonged.

The click of the door opening made only a slight sound, but it shot through her. The air immediately hummed with life, catching her off guard. It was him. She knew it. The realization shook her—she still felt this old instinctive bond.

It shouldn't be. It shouldn't happen.

“So,” he said from behind her. “You are back.”

A flutter of panic slid across her skin at the thought of being alone with him. She thought about running down the steps, into his park, away from this. But she'd learned to confront now, learned to stand instead of run.

She turned around to face him.

The golden light spilling from the terrace doors slid across his shoulders, highlighting their broad length. Gilding his black hair, the glow brushed along the tough edge of his jaw. The rest of his face was hidden in shadows.

“Yes.” She looked at the shadowed garden once more. She would ignore him. Ignoring wasn't running. And honestly, she had nothing to say to him, not anymore. He'd made clear he felt nothing except contempt for her.

Why was he here, then? Why had he followed her out here when he could so easily be surrounded by the adoring crowd inside? What could he possibly say to her that hadn't already been said?

She breathed in the warm air, redolent with honeysuckle and the tang of salt. Pulling her wayward emotions together, she reminded herself of what she'd practiced over and over. The words she'd say, the actions she'd take when she at last saw him.

Distance. Disdain. Dismissal.

He moved to stand beside her. A faint whiff of his cologne drifted to her, the clean bite of citrus mixed with a deeper cut of spice. Beneath it lurked the smell of him, musk and man. Unique to him. His impact on her defied her determination to pay no attention to him. She hadn't planned for this awareness of him, this draw, hadn't realized how hard this would be.

"Back for good?" he murmured.

"I've been here for more than three months. This isn't a holiday." She needed some space. She wasn't running away, she only needed to find her composure. Setting the empty champagne glass on the terrace ledge, she moved past him, stepping down the marble steps onto the gravel of the garden path.

Cravenly, she hoped and prayed he would stay behind.

He didn't.

The crunch of his shoes on the gravel told her he was following.

Walking with a measured pace, she tried to impose a tight ball of discipline on herself. But her brain buzzed with scattered thoughts and her emotions bubbled in her heart with a frantic beat. Stopping at the fountain, she dipped her hand in, hoping it would cool her down.

"Your father is happy you are back."

He wanted to make small talk. Chat. Overlook all the harsh words lying between them. Bitter antagonism flashed through her, pulsing. "I know," she managed through gritted teeth.

"He missed you during these years."

Her head came up. "Do I detect criticism in your tone?"

"I merely made an observation."

"Keep your observations to yourself." The snap of her words spat into the night.

"Ah." The burn of his dark stare singed her face. Watching her. Analyzing. Stupidly, she'd let him see into her, note her resentment.

But only for a moment.

“I didn’t mean to be so sharp.” That was the best she could do as far as an apology. He didn’t deserve more. She forced herself to give him a steely smile.

The moonlight slanted over his face, highlighting the strong jut of his nose, the stark line of his jaw. He was not a pretty man. He hadn’t been a pretty child either. At the time, she hadn’t cared. What were mere looks to a child’s pure heart? Yet that fateful night many years ago, she’d seen something cruel and brutal, and the impact had never left her. His manner tonight reinforced what she’d realized in that last confrontation between them.

He was cold to the core.

What did it really matter, though? He was not a part of her new life and never would be. He’d made that decision for both of them and she heartily agreed with it. Now. “I’m a bit tired. It meant nothing.”

“Nothing? I would say it’s at least interesting.” He put his hands in his pockets and her gaze tracked the movement, noting how the linen of his pants stretched across narrow hips and strong thighs.

“Not interesting at all.” She moved around the fountain.

He followed. “I detected a bit of irritation in your voice.”

“Not true—”

“Maybe even a bit of dislike.”

Lara managed a laugh. “I don’t know you. How could I dislike you?”

“We grew up together.”

“That was a long time ago.” Memories flooded her heart in a poignant wash. “I’ve been gone for twelve years.”

“True.” He stopped, inches from her side. “This is why I find it interesting you are irritated. I would say even angry. At me.”

His distinctive smell reached her for a second time, spice mixed with man.

He was too near, too close.

Legs trembling, she sat on the fountain ledge. This couldn’t be. She couldn’t let this man, of all men, cause a physical reaction in her. As the years had passed, she became accustomed to being immune to men. Immune from desire or need or want.

Her dead husband had made sure of that, hadn't he?

Brushing the thought aside, she stared at her clenched hands. Why was this old attraction for this stranger from her past still alive? This was awful, horrible. Not only did it worry her, yes, it made her angry. "I'm not angry. With you or anyone."

The night shadows played around them. The trees whispered above, the fountain sparkled and spat, a roosting pigeon warbled. Why didn't he go away? The man appeared completely content to let the silence continue. He stood, a tall silhouette upon the night sky, his arms now crossed on his chest.

"Carlotta appears happy." Maybe mindless chatter was her best defense against everything he stirred inside her.

"My sister will be happy with Sandro. She listened to my advice."

"What?" she bristled. "You chose your sister's husband? And she agreed?"

A dark brow arched. "That's not quite what I said."

"But close."

"I knew Sandro through business. I liked what I saw and checked him out—"

"You had him investigated?" Disbelief filled her voice.

"*Si.*" He gave her a calm look. "We are talking about my sister's happiness."

"And once he checked out, you put them together."

"I introduced them. That is all."

"Let me guess." Lara heard the edge in her words, yet couldn't help it as they splattered from her mouth. "You chose every one of your sisters' husbands."

"I met them through business, true, but—"

"Let me guess one more time." Antagonism burned in her throat. "They are all very successful in business or have family wealth."

"*Naturalmente.*" He slid his hands into his pockets again.

"Is that one of your rules?" she shot back. "You would only allow your sisters to marry successful and rich men? Only allow them to marry the right sort of man?"

"Right sort of man?" His words came out slowly as if he couldn't understand them.

"Rules?"

“Or perhaps I should say commandments.”

“I do not follow—”

“God forbid if one of them fell in love with a simple teacher.” The harshness of her accusation cut through the soft night air. “With no aristocratic heritage of a thousand years.”

“As you did?” His tone iced with sudden derision.

“It wasn’t your business then, and it isn’t now.” The old familiar rage filled her; still she managed to push away the memory of his scathing words before she reached up and hit him. The message he’d left for her to find when she got back from her honeymoon had never been forgotten, and it still made her blood roar. She’d been so close to admitting her mistake, but that one message had changed her mind. “We aren’t talking about my decisions, though. We’re talking about your sisters.”

His hands fisted in his pockets. “My duty is to make sure my sisters are well taken care of. It is important they marry men of honor and integrity who can provide for them.”

“Honor and integrity only reside in men with money?” she scoffed.

“That is not what—”

“Your sisters aren’t capable of providing for themselves?”

“They will be busy with the children.” He looked at her as if he were talking to an imbecile.

The sudden ache in her heart at the word *children* competed with the fury his words caused her. She’d yearned for years, knowing there was no hope for children. She clamped down on the old pain and instead focused on the clear condescension in his voice. No one, certainly not this man, would ever again be allowed to talk to her like she was stupid. Her emotions spilled over into her mouth and she lost control of her tongue completely. “In your world everyone is placed in the box you’ve created for them and you expect them to do as you say.”

He stilled. “You appear to have made many conclusions about me. In such a short time, and especially since, as you say, we no longer know each other.”

“Conclusions are easy. When they stare you right in the face.”

“And your conclusion about me...is?”

“You’ve turned into an arrogant ass.”

The cool air seemed to heat between them. She felt him, felt his coolness turn to fire. The words had spat from her before she could stop them. A nearly uncontrollable compulsion ran through her to take a stick and poke him until he turned into a human. Into the boy she remembered. Which was crazy. That boy had been a figment of her imagination. She could poke for a lifetime and find only ice.

“A fascinating conclusion.” His voice held no emotion, only a dry edge. “How quickly you have sized me up.”

She was stupid to bait this man. If she kept going at him, it might appear she still cared. Better to offer another olive branch and make a wise retreat before she let any more of her inner turmoil spill out for his inspection. “That was uncalled for.”

“Yet it is good to know where I stand.”

A grim silence settled between them.

She made a move to rise, to escape, but he had moved too close. For some reason, she couldn't take the chance of actually touching him. Not even a whisper of a touch.

She wiggled back onto the hard stone.

The silence continued. The man made no attempt to cut into it with light chatter or pleasant commentary.

In desperation, she struggled to find a neutral subject. “I can't believe all five of your sisters are married, or almost. It seems like only a few years ago we were just kids.”

“You married too.” His voice matched his body language. Cool and composed. “Even after my advice against it.”

“Was that advice?” Every thought of keeping things neutral fled. “I took it as a threat.”

“Either way, you ignored it.”

His reaction astounded her. Although he was putting on a good front, his words were filled with fury. His tone was crisp, yet she heard it, the burn beneath the words. All these years and he was still angry she hadn't immediately fallen in line with his instructions. He had the gall to be mad after a decade of silence between them because she hadn't run home to Italy when he demanded it. “Unlike the rest of your world, I don't have to follow your commands.”

“You've developed a sharp tongue.”

“Which isn’t to your liking, is it?”

“Sarcasm. Delightful.”

His rejoinder ripped at the last remnant of her determination to stay distant. “Clearly, we don’t like each other.”

“Another conclusion. You make them so quickly, I am impressed.”

“You do sarcasm well yourself,” she countered.

His black stare pinned her to the stone seat. “Tell me about your husband.”

His change of subject shook her. Gerry was the last thing she wanted to talk about. Especially with him. “What is this? Why should you care?”

“I care.” The two words slipped from his mouth, dark and almost desperate.

A shiver of something, something astonishing or horrifying slid down her spine. Desperate? This man didn’t do desperate.

He stepped back. Cleared his throat. “I am merely trying to have a conversation.”

His voice had returned to calm, cool. Not an iota of anything that spelled out emotion or feeling or caring. Her shiver stopped, turning into a block of ice at the bottom of her gut. Obviously, she’d read his tone all wrong. This man’s idea of caring for people was ordering them around. She, better than anyone, knew that.

However, he had given her one thing she wanted. He’d given her enough space to leave without touching him in any way.

“I’m not interested in conversation with you.” With an abrupt jerk, she came to her feet.

“There it is again.” His stare was sharp, assessing. “The anger. At me.”

She couldn’t take any more. She would admit this only to herself. He was too much for her. Bloody hell, she didn’t have to take anything from this man. Ever again. “I’m going to return to the party.”

“*Un momento.*” His hand encircled her elbow and brought her to a halt right beside him.

Staring down at the broad male hand, a shot of pure heat zipped through her bloodstream, making her mouth turn dry. “Let me go.”

“Not until I experience something I have been contemplating for quite some time.”

Resentment surged at his high-handedness. The emotion gave her enough courage to meet his calculating gaze. “I’m not interested in experiencing anything with you.”

“I am afraid we will have to disagree then.” With a twist, she found herself in his embrace.

His overwhelming presence hit her with stark clarity. The warmth of his body enwrapped her. The strength of his arms stilled her involuntary struggle. “Are you crazy?”

“I might well be,” he said.

And his mouth came down on hers.

This kiss was nothing like before. Nothing like her fevered memories. Before, she'd searched desperately for a reaction from him, for some slight response that would tell her he felt what she felt. But there'd been nothing.

Now? Now was completely different.

His kiss didn't match what she knew him to be. Instead of controlled and cool and in command, it was passionate and hot and—desperate.

The kiss splintered every one of her perceptions of him.

His arms tightened around her. A thick wall of heated muscle and searing passion burned along her body. One hand grasped her hip, dispensing with any finesse or kindness. No, this was a total taking, her hips pressed so closely to him the imprint of his belt buckle pinched the softness of her belly. And below...

She wrenched herself from him to take a gasping breath. “I want you to—”

His lips moved back over hers, taking advantage of her words to slip his tongue deep into her mouth. He tasted of the intoxicating champagne served at the party and something unique to him—some spice of wildness mixed with pent-up frustration. Beyond this, a calling, not to her brain but to her blood.

The kiss, the call, her response was too overwhelming to take in.

She let him sip and taste until her mind went misty and her body sagged in his arms. She'd lived with this dream for so long, aching in her memory. This kiss, his kiss pulled all the old strings of her heart she'd been sure she cut long ago. So she did something very stupid.

She took one willing sip, one tiny nip of his mouth.

His big body stiffened in reaction. He raised his head to stare at her. The black of his eyes blazed with a blinding light of...victory.

Victory.

She gulped. Gulped in a deep, deep breath of complete horror. With it came some sense, some realization of how foolish she was being. “Wait.”

He ignored her, dipping his head to reach for her mouth once more.

Which was exactly what she needed. Animosity immediately vibrated inside her. Never being listened to, never being respected. Merely a chattel, an object to be won and used. She pushed hard against his chest with both hands, trying to disregard the lure of the heat spilling from him. “Stop.”

The inflection of her one word must have alerted him. He lifted his head, a grimace on his face. Clearly, victory had turned into his defeat. “Lara.”

Pushing out of his arms, she took a step away. “No more.”

His hands fisted by his sides as if he were ready to grab her.

She took another step away.

The edge of his mouth quirked. “Do not worry, *bella*. I have control over myself. I will not pounce. For now.”

The old nickname twisted inside her. “Don’t call me *bella*. And don’t pounce.”

“Something you must remember about me—”

“I don’t want to remember anything—”

“I do not follow directions well if I don’t agree with them.” The quirk appeared once more on his mouth. “Actually, I don’t follow them at all.”

“Listen to me, Dante Casartelli.” She glared at him from several safe feet back. “I want nothing to do with you. I’m not interested in you. Leave me alone.”

Meeting her glare with a bland look, he stood silent.

“Did you hear me?”

“*Si*,” he murmured. “I heard you.”

“Good.” She turned and walked away without looking back.