

SIX

In the foulest mood imaginable, Liam pulled on his jacket. He'd actually tried to do the right thing. He'd left Victoria to get on with it. She didn't want complication—not even for a night.

Only she'd come onto him in the alleyway of the garden and torn his resolve to bits. She wanted to spend time with him. *Really?* What a horrific joke. Sure, he could text her. Tease her. Talk to her over the phone. But get him into the same airspace as her and all he wanted to do was kiss her. He couldn't see straight for wanting her. Lust in another league from anything he'd ever experienced.

He'd enjoyed his relationship with Aurelie. But in truth most of the time they'd been a couple, they'd been apart. Him competing in one ocean, her surfing in another. It had been convenient and easy and he'd always been able to walk away.

It had nearly killed him to walk away from Victoria in the garden this morning. He didn't like it. He didn't like feeling *tied*. Even if it was only a sexual bond.

He frowned at his reflection. Today his suit gave him a social veneer, but in reality he worked in a competitive,

ruthless, isolated world. He was away for weeks, months at a time. The only relationship that could possibly survive that was with one very tough chick. Victoria wasn't anywhere near tough enough. He feared he'd tangle up her emotions. He knew he'd done that to Aurelie for a while— by taking what he wanted and not giving her enough. It eased his guilt, and pleased him, that she'd gone on to find what she needed with another, better man. Love— and that security and grounding.

Liam didn't do grounding. Liam did freedom—sailing fast over the water. He didn't want to feel as trapped as he had all his childhood. All he'd ever wanted to do was sail and keep on sailing. It wasn't a family gig. It wasn't a safe gig. And he didn't want to be dependent on anyone else. He liked to be alone. Just like his father. They were not family men. He wasn't having a kid only to ignore him the way his father had ignored him. And he would, because being on the water was the most important thing to him.

Victoria had always tried to give all of herself to everyone else—doing what she thought she had to to keep their affection. She had needs he couldn't meet. She'd be unfulfilled. And more importantly, she knew what she wanted now and she was going for it and he wasn't going to get in her way.

But he still wanted. And so did she. She'd wanted him back then—he'd seen it written all over her face. There was the irony. To anyone who'd bothered to look, her emotions were obvious. It was just that Oliver hadn't looked— not hard enough. Nor had her parents.

Oliver had cared more about himself than he did about her. And as a result her confidence had been crushed. She'd got less than she deserved.

But *Liam* too was so much less than she deserved. He

couldn't give her the security he believed she still wanted. She'd been hurt already. Any kind of a relationship with him would see her hurt again.

But he could give her physical pleasure. He could show her. He ached all over wanting to give her that. He snorted at his own arrogance. So shallow. The best thing he'd done was shut it down and walk away.

Two hours later he watched Aurelie and Marcus exchange vows and wondered about Victoria's wedding. How had she looked on that day? His stomach cramped. He'd never been able to imagine it. He'd avoided all mention of it amongst his friends of the time, certainly avoided any pictures.

Now jealousy of that past wedding boiled in his gut. He really needed to sort his head out. He'd go back to the coast early and train hard.

He followed the other guests through to where the tables were set, the silverware gleaming in the candlelight. Her calligraphy marked each guest's place. It was overwhelmingly romantic. He sat and picked up the card bearing his name. Victoria's letters were pretty and polite and flourishing. He ran his thumb along the edge of the card and then flipped it over. He suddenly felt as if he'd been shot straight into the sun. What was written on the back was penned by the same hand, but the flourishing swirls were absent.

One night. Tonight. Everything. Agreed? V.