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\$3.75 CAN.  
November

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# DIANA HAMILTON

*Never a Bride*



# **NEVER A BRIDE**

**Diana Hamilton**

*The perfect match ... in name only!*

Jake Winters was every woman's fantasy - and, as his P.A., Claire had been groomed to become his perfect partner. She was the ideal assistant, hostess...and wife!

Their wedding had been a mutually beneficial business arrangement; their marriage a paper affair. Claire had never felt like a real bride: she was just a beautiful possession to Jake, who seemed more interested in the seductive Lorella.

Now Claire had made a big mistake: she'd fallen in love with her husband!

## CHAPTER ONE

'I'M AT the London apartment, so it won't be long before I can see you. Yes, Jake's away... No, no I haven't told him. We'll discuss it when I see you. Must go now, darling, but see you soon, I promise.' Claire Winter replaced the receiver, a tender smile softening the classical loveliness of her features before she felt her scalp tingle with warning, felt the skin on her face go stiff. She slowly turned on the silk brocade-covered sofa, her aquamarine eyes shocked by the accuracy of her precognition as they homed in on Jake's narrowed grey gaze.

'You're in Rome,' she babbled, and immediately hated herself for her inaccurate inanity, despised herself even more when her stupid remark gave him the excuse to hitch up one dark sardonic brow and drawl mockingly,

'Kind of you to put me right. I actually thought I was in Mayfair.'

She watched him lever himself away from the door-frame where he'd been leaning, listening... How much of her telephone conversation had he heard...? And God, but he was beautiful. Every time she looked at him she was struck anew by his male magnificence. He was the dark stranger who haunted every woman's secret dreams, a fantasy of masculine perfection come to life. And he knew it. He had more sex appeal than was good for him, so his arrogance over the opposite sex was understandable. Every woman he met drooled over him, fell at his feet. Even her own mother looked at him with a definite sparkle in her eyes and she, more than most, had good reason to be wary of anything in trousers. He had the looks, the wealth, the power and personality to turn the sanest woman's head.

She was firmly on her feet now, perfectly in control, presenting the image he expected—no, demanded. Cool, expensive, exquisitely groomed, her silky black hair cut stylishly short, the black and white heavy silk two-piece she was wearing emphasising the elegant lines of her tall, slender body.

'I didn't expect you for at least another couple of days.' She schooled her voice to coolness but couldn't disguise the trace of accusation; it came through despite her best efforts and Jake picked it up, obviously, because he said drily,

'So I gathered. Who were you phoning? Or is that a question a husband shouldn't ask his wife?'

'Liz,' she answered, perhaps too quickly. Something made his narrowed grey eyes glitter. He didn't believe she'd been talking to her mother.

Watching him walk further into the beautiful main room of their London apartment, shedding the jacket of his exquisitely tailored grey suit, she lifted her chin, her eyes stubborn, giving no hint of the alarm she felt at the way her heart was behaving so unusually. It was thundering around inside her chest, frightening her.

'And how is she? Well?' He hooked a finger in the knot of his tie and dragged it away from the collar of his crisp white shirt. 'I find myself with two unexpectedly free days. Perhaps we should visit her? I could persuade her to divulge whatever it is you haven't been able to bring yourself to tell me yet.'

So he had heard. And the unmasked derision in the look he sent her made her face turn to fire. And she felt too disoriented to invent something on the spur of the moment so she chose to attack, her slender fingers reaching unerringly for the folded newspaper on the rosewood coffee-table. She had opened it, spreading the newsprint on her lap far too many times throughout this long, quiet Sunday, knowing she shouldn't yet be unable to prevent it, like probing an aching tooth with her tongue.

The paper fell open to the right page, out of habit, she supposed, her eyes darkening as the now all too familiar photograph of her husband leapt out of the grey print, his arms around a woman who was achingly, unfairly beautiful.

'Stripping assets of the romantic kind?' The letters of the caption danced beneath Claire's eyes. 'Multi-millionaire Jake Winter caught playing away from home with the darling of Roman society, the irresistible Principessa Lorella Giancetti.'

'The paparazzi must have had a field day,' she clipped, flicking the photograph with a pearly oval fingernail, her eyes frowning as she watched

a tiny smile curl at the corners of his hard, beautiful mouth while he scanned the page, anger battering at the wall of her chest.

'Jealous, Claire?' Mocking grey eyes held hers for a second before lowering, drifting down over her elegantly clad body, the mockery still to be glimpsed, though shadowed by thickly tangled black lashes, because he was comparing her slender, definitely understated curves with the voluptuous ripeness of the *principessa's* body which was almost flowing out of the expensive skimpiness of the glamorous evening dress she'd been pictured wearing.

'No.' She made the denial both mentally and verbally. 'Disappointed. Before we married we made certain commitments. One of which, if I remember correctly, promised complete discretion in the possible area of extra-marital affairs. This--' she flicked the newsprint again '—can't, by any stretch of the imagination, be called discreet.'

'No.' His frown was sudden and ferocious as he agreed. 'I apologise.' He tossed the paper aside, rocking back on his heels, the whippy muscles of his long, lean body held together with a tension that had to be down to the unpalatable fact of discovery, Claire decided with weary cynicism as she set about collecting his discarded jacket and tie, settling into mundane domesticity rather than meet his eyes. Eyes that stalked her every movement, as the ripple of awareness down her spine attested.

'Apology accepted,' she stated, her fingers curling into the soft mohair and silk fabric of his jacket. The warmth of it. His warmth. It made her voice shiver unaccountably as she tacked on quickly, 'I suggest we forget it.' Then she took herself in hand. She was nervous, that was all. And why shouldn't she be? She had turned the tables, fending off his questions, his disbelief, with the printed evidence of his own misdemeanours. But that didn't mean he wouldn't turn back to his own attack.

'Can I get you something to eat? To drink?' It was too late to go out to a restaurant and she'd had her own sparse supper hours ago. There was little food in the apartment. She hadn't expected him. He unfailingly let her know where he would be, and when, so that she could be there for him, getting everything organised, oiling the wheels of his busy life. This evening's

deviation, colluding with that piece in the Press, his eavesdropping on that private phone conversation, had thrown her.

His lack of response forced her to turn, and she masked her reluctance with the lie, 'You look tired.'

He didn't, of course. He never did. Restless, energetic, he was never happier than when he was on the move, making things happen. At the age of thirty-seven and looking ten years younger, he was a millionaire several times over, his fortune made from asset-stripping—buying up large, moribund companies all over the world, splitting them into smaller, leaner, profitable components, selling some of them off as soon as they were viable but keeping the pick of the bunch, personally overseeing every last one of them. He had the energy, dynamism and enthusiasm of ten ordinary mortals and the enviable ability to switch off immediately.

As he was doing now. He was utterly relaxed as he sprawled out on one of the two matching sofas which flanked the hearth—the genuine Adam surround setting off a state-of-the-art coal-effect gas fire.

'I ate on the plane, but I could use a drink.' Relaxing, his eyes closed, he looked completely composed, but there was a tightness in his voice that made her drag her lower lip between her teeth. Was he still thinking about that phone call, turning it over in his mind? Hadn't the photographic evidence of his own indiscretions thrown him off the scent?

Time to attack again, perhaps, before he started asking questions, demanding answers she wasn't ready to give him.

Unusually, her fingers were shaking as she poured two fingers of the single malt he preferred into a glass and added just the right amount of bottled spring water. Her composure—one of the things he frankly admired about her—had been leaching away over the last few days. She was going to have to take herself in hand, think things through to find a logical, inevitable conclusion and act on it. That was something else she was good at. Usually.

And would be again. Starting as of now.

She hovered above him, patiently getting her breathing under control. His thick dark lashes lay heavily on those high, jutting cheekbones, softening them, and, like this, relaxed, the hard, arrogant line of his mouth was transformed into a thing of pure male beauty. Eminently kissable. Which, no doubt, the *principessa* had discovered, to her endless delight.

The lancing pain that sent her heart into spasm was an unwanted revelation. She hadn't believed herself capable of such a reaction. They had been married for almost two years and she had often wondered how many women he'd bedded. No one could doubt his virility—it shouted through every line of his lean, tough body, blazed in the depths of his knowing grey eyes. But he had promised discretion—they both had—and he had broken his word. Maybe pain was a shattered promise, she thought bleakly, her hand tightening around the glass.

Leaning forward, she touched the cool surface to his artlessly open palm and watched him snap to full alertness in the disconcerting way he had. His hand closed around the glass, deliberately trapping her fingers, and she felt the little colour she did have in her pale ivory skin wash out of her face.

He never touched her. He had always been almost painfully careful not to, not even accidentally. Not even when their coolly constructed 'perfect marriage' was on public display.

If she struggled to free her hand the whisky would go all over the place, and there was no room for such indignities in their relationship. Aquamarine eyes battled with incisive grey until she saw the sudden flare of hard mockery and lowered her lids and he transferred his glass to his other hand, releasing hers, asking grimly, 'Do you dislike being touched, *per se*, or is it only by me?'

'I don't think that question deserves a response, do you?' she uttered calmly, forcing herself to retreat with slow and careful dignity to the opposite sofa and not fly headlong from the room as every cell in her body urged her to do. But as she sank into the comfortably upholstered depths nothing on earth could prevent her snapping out acidly, 'I'm surprised you cut your Italian trip short. Wasn't the *principessa* as irresistible as she's made out to be?'

She was appalled at herself. They never quarreled. Never came near it. She didn't know what was happening. And when he announced, with languid grace, 'I couldn't possibly comment, my dear,' she wanted to hit him. Wanted it with an intensity that shook her to her soul.

'What's bugging you? I'd have marked you down as a woman who could handle a slice of unpleasant publicity with a sophisticated shrug of one superlatively elegant shoulder.' He took a reflective sip of his drink, his narrowed eyes never leaving her. 'We were pictured leaving the opera. If you'd been there—you were invited, remember—it wouldn't have happened. And you would have enjoyed it. *La Traviata*. Juanita del Sorro sang Violetta. She was quite superb.'

'I'm quite sure she was.' Only by forcing herself to respond could she stop her teeth from audibly grinding together. Was he saying his public lapse from grace was all her fault? How dared he?

And of course he had expected her to be in Rome with him. Although he did a fair amount of business there they didn't own an apartment in the city for her to turn into a home on the hoof. They always used the same small, privately run hotel near the Piazza Venezia where she acted—as was her part of the bargain—as PR officer, private secretary, mistress of the wardrobe, companion and sounding board. Everything she had been happy to be for the past two years.

The visit to Rome had been scheduled for months and she'd been looking forward to another all too brief trip to her favourite city until that phone call from the UK. Thankfully Jake had been out so she'd had the Manhattan apartment to herself. If he'd been in she wouldn't have been able to avoid his inevitable questions. She would have had to tell him the truth. And although she knew she owed it to him, that honesty within their relationship had been something they'd both decided on, right from the start, she knew she couldn't face it, not quite yet.

And when he'd turned up, all fired up with the successful completion of yet another brilliant business deal, she'd dealt with the pressing emergency and had come up with a believable excuse for backing out of the Rome trip.

'It's the first time I've ever let you down, Jake, but would you mind if I skipped Rome? Say if you do. But suddenly I feel tired.' She'd felt drainingly guilty at his swift look of concern and had had to force herself to add, 'I could spend an extra, quiet day here, fly back to England and have the London apartment ready for when you get home from Rome.'

She had needed a few days' grace, time to face up to the consequences of telling him the truth and what would be the inevitable ending of their marriage. But he'd returned two days ahead of schedule, and she didn't know why, but she still hadn't worked up enough courage to tell him. Just thinking about it made her ask now, suddenly in deadly earnest, 'Jake—you and the *principessa*— is it serious?'

It had been part of the bargain, the let-out clause. If either of them, at any time during their paper marriage, met someone, felt serious enough about them to want a real marriage, then the other wouldn't stand in their way. There would be an annulment, followed, if Jake was the one who wanted out, by a healthy financial settlement. If she invoked the clause she would forfeit the settlement, but she could live with that now. She wouldn't give the lack of the kind of lifestyle she'd enjoyed during her marriage a second thought.

'Of course not.' He sounded as if he was on the point of yawning. And, moments later, did. He stood up, stretching, the fabric of his shirt pulled tight against his strong, lean torso. 'I'm for bed. I'm surprised you weren't tucked up hours ago, considering how desperately tired you were supposed to be.'

She ignored that, the acid tone, everything. She didn't know why she felt so buoyant, as if she'd won a reprieve, when she should be feeling thwarted. If he'd told her he'd fallen in love, at last, found a woman he genuinely wanted to spend the rest of his life with—for all the right and natural reasons—then that would have created a way out for her.

She didn't understand herself. She managed a cool goodnight and took herself off to her own peaceful room, and decided she was being dog-in-the-manger about it. She didn't want him to walk out on her. That was what

it boiled down to. If their marriage ended—and it had to, of course—then she needed to be the one to do it. A matter of pride, perhaps?

She fell asleep not liking herself very much but feeling strangely comforted.

However, any feelings of comfort, undeserved or otherwise, flew straight out of the window the very next morning.

Jake, as always, was up before her, his energy making her feel tired. Breakfast was prepared—eggs and fruit and coffee.

'All I could find. The cupboard is bare. Not to worry.' He flashed her the sudden white grin that had the mega-watt power to make unwary females quake at the knees. 'I've been making phone calls.

Eat--' he gestured to the table in the immaculate high-tech kitchen '—before the eggs get cold, and I'll tell you what I've arranged.'

In this mood, he made her feel as if she was in the middle of a whirlwind. Not a morning person herself, she'd taught herself how to handle his restless energy by simply letting it wash over her head until she'd dragged herself together sufficiently to cope with it. She would watch him with sleep-drugged eyes, rarely taking in much of what he said. But this morning he shocked her into full and definitely unpleasant wakefulness as he told her, 'As I said, I've made a couple of calls. As soon as we've eaten we'll drive up and visit with Liz and Sal. I know you speak to your mother regularly--' his eyes pinned her to her seat '—but she's looking forward to seeing you. Us. And tomorrow we'll go on from there to Litherton. I'll leave you in Emma's capable hands until I join you for Christmas. She'll see you get all the rest you need. And feed you up. You've lost weight recently.' His dark brows rose, as if inviting her to explain why, and she suddenly felt desperately conscious of her body, even though it was adequately concealed by her heavy peacock-blue satin robe.

She put down her fork, her throat clogging up. He wasn't stupid—far from it. He knew something was going on. He'd walked in on that phone call and didn't believe her swift assertion that she'd been talking to her mother. So he was going ahead, making sure he found out—or forced her to tell him.

There was no doubt about his genuine wish to visit Liz, see that she was comfortable, had everything she needed, find out from Sally Harding, her mother's companion, if the elderly lady was as well as she always assured them she was. For Jake had been wonderful with her mother. Liz had never been physically strong and the hard life she'd had meant that her health had suffered, and her future care and downright cosseting had been offered as part of Jake's side of the marriage bargain they'd made. It, and it alone, had been the factor that had made Claire agree to tie herself to what was, in fact, a purely business arrangement.

But there was more to the visit than that. He was suspicious, and had decided to manage and manipulate her. He'd try to get to the truth through Liz, and if he didn't—or not completely—he had made other contingency plans. Shut her away at Litherton Court, the Winter family home, where his younger sister, Emma, would keep an eye on her until he turned up for the usual family Christmas. Christmas was two weeks away. She straightened her spine, lifted troubled sea-blue eyes to his and said quietly, 'I have something to tell you.'

## CHAPTER TWO

JAKE put his coffee-cup back on its saucer, the tiny click of the china sounding desperately loud in the hollow silence that had followed her statement, making her feel as if she was in a vacuum, the act of breathing impossible.

Her fingers twisting together nervously in her lap, she watched him go very still, the tension coming from him like a physical blow, making her helplessly nervous. Brimming with agitation, she lifted her eyes to his and saw an uncharacteristic look of wariness there, as if he, and not she, were the one who was trapped. And then it went, hard grey steel back in place, his mouth grim as he invited, 'So? Tell me.'

Aware that she'd been holding her breath, Claire dragged in air. What she had to tell him meant the beginning of the end of their relationship. A dreadful, draining reluctance took her by the throat but she managed thickly, 'Liz has news. She heard last week that an uncle had died and left her a fortune. It was totally unexpected. She hadn't seen him in years. He never married and ended up as a complete recluse. Liz was the only relative he had. I met him once but don't really remember him. I was seven.'

It had been shortly after her father had walked out on her mother and one bleak day Liz had dressed her in her best clothes and taken her to visit her great-uncle. A dreary journey entailing three separate bus rides, an even drearier welcome. Claire recalled only one thing about that meeting—the cynical way he had said, 'Just because your mother was my sister, don't come looking to me for handouts. It's not my fault your husband chose to run away with another woman. It's up to him to support his child, not me.'

They'd left at once. Her mother's mouth had trembled as they'd walked through the cold rain to the bus-stop and Claire had clasped her hand, transmitting her sturdy love, feeling the fragile bones beneath the scratchy, hand-knitted gloves. But later, during the tedious journey home, Liz had brightened and told her, 'You have to be sorry for him. He thought I was after his precious money when all I wanted was what was left of our family. He has no one but we have each other. That's worth far more than any amount of money. We're the lucky ones.'

'In the end he must have decided to will everything to his niece,' Claire told Jake reflectively. 'He wasn't the sort of man who would leave anything to charity, no matter how deserving.'

'I'm pleased for her,' Jake said warmly, but she saw the question deep in those unfathomable eyes of his before he voiced it. 'And that is all you have to tell me?' His long, lean fingers were drumming silently on the table-top. Her lashes swooped down, hiding her confusion. The way he was looking at her made her feel guilty even though she had nothing to feel guilty about. And when he slid in, his voice coldly silky, 'You don't want to tell me about the lover you were speaking to when I disturbed you last night? Don't be shy about it; the eventuality was provided for in our agreement, with the accent being on discretion. I take it you are being discreet?' she bit out with brittle haste,

'Unlike you and that Italian!' Shocked by the stab of pain that prompted the outburst, she reined in her temper and stressed with stony-voiced patience, 'I was speaking to Liz—as I told you. She wanted to know if I'd given you her news yet.'

'Oh, of course!' he countered with heavy irony. 'It's always nice to hear good news—I fully understand her desperate urgency.'

'Don't be sarcastic!' She snapped to her feet, the breakfast he'd prepared for her barely touched. He didn't believe she'd been talking to her mother. He took lovers, so why shouldn't she? That was the way he would look at it. 'To Liz it is urgent. She wanted you to know so that you could stop the allowance you make her. Stop paying Sal's wages- she can well afford to do that herself now. It was all I could do to prevent her from insisting that she repay every last penny you spent on Lark Cottage.'

'I deeded Lark Cottage to her on our wedding- day,' Jake said grimly, and stood up too, turning and walking through to the living-room. Claire followed, her eyes puzzled. For a moment she thought she'd glimpsed a flicker of pain in his eyes, as if it hurt him to think of Liz throwing the generosity of the past two years back in his face.

He had his back to her, his fists bunched into the pockets of his trousers, staring down at the quiet street from one of the tall sash windows that graced the elegant room. And although her softly slipped feet could have made no sound on the thick carpet he clearly knew she was there because he muttered tightly, 'There's no question of Liz repaying the cost of the cottage. And as for the comfortable living allowance I make her—that was part of our marriage agreement. I have no intention of going back on it.'

Claire walked slowly towards him, noting how tightly the muscles on his impressive shoulders were clenched. The allowance he'd made Liz over the past two years had been far more than merely comfortable. He'd been generous with his time, too, making sure they visited the elderly lady whenever they were in England, keeping in close contact by phone when they were not, making time in his packed schedule for them to take Liz and Sally Harding to the Italian lakes for ten days each spring, sending her books he thought she'd like to read. Little things, granted—set against his immense wealth—but meaning so much, and going far beyond the letter of the agreement they'd made.

She couldn't bear him to think his generosity was being tossed back in his face. She couldn't bear him to be hurt.

Not stopping to analyse the depth of her feelings or the impulse that made her move quickly to place her body in front of him, reach out to touch his perfectly hewn features, she said gently, 'Liz would hate you to think she was ungrateful. It's the last thing she'd want. But her pride is all she's ever had, remember. And now she finds herself in a position to provide for herself she's walking on air. Don't try to deny her that.'

She wasn't conscious of the way her cool fingertips were softly stroking his temple, the palm of her hand gently laid against the hardly sculpted side of his face, until he turned his head, his eyes holding hers with lancing intensity as his lips moved erotically against the suddenly unbearably sensitised palm of her hand. She gave a small, shaky gasp as wildfire sensations seared through her body and saw his hooded eyes grow speculative. She snatched her hand away.

Touching hadn't been part of their contract. Non- consummation had been agreed on. She was too fastidious to contemplate sex without love and he wouldn't want a sexual relationship, with all its inherent emotional complications, to put their down- to-earth and mutually beneficial partnership in jeopardy.

Was that why he had gone out of his way to avoid any physical contact—even the most innocent? Had he known something she had never even suspected—that his slightest touch would send her up in flames?

Praying she wouldn't betray her humiliation with something as uncool as a blush, she stepped briskly back and squared her shoulders, summoned her normal, politely friendly tone and stated, 'If we're going on to Litherton from Lark Cottage then I'd better throw a few things in a bag. But I warn you, much as I like your sister, don't expect me to bury myself down there for the next two weeks. I'd be bored out of my skull.'

Not true. She and Jake had spent a wonderfully relaxing time at Litherton Court last Christmas, plus a gloriously lazy long weekend in the early autumn, but she wasn't going to admit that she would be miserable if she didn't see him for two whole weeks, because she wasn't ready to admit it to herself.

And despite having been the last to speak she had the distinctly edgy feeling, as she swept out of the room, that she hadn't had the last word.

Four hours later Liz said happily, 'Oh, it's lovely to see you!' and stood on tiptoe to plant a kiss on Jake's lean, hard cheek, smothered in the bulk of his sheepskin jacket as he hugged her, then turned to her daughter for her embrace. As Claire's arms went round the tiny frame she thought, She's not nearly as frail as she used to be, and felt tears of gratitude for all Jake had done sting behind her eyes and clog her throat.

'Come along in, out of the cold. As soon as we heard your car come round the corner of the lane Sal went to put the kettle on. And your rooms are ready, so go along up if you want to freshen up before we snack.'

As the door closed on the cold grey mist of the December afternoon Jake's height and breadth and alarmingly magnetic male presence filled the tiny, cheerful hall and Claire grabbed her suitcase, suddenly needing the quiet privacy of her room, space to breathe, away from that throat-grabbing presence. But Jake, shrugging out of his sheepskin, said, 'I want a private word with you, Liz, before we do a damn thing.'

'Does that dour tone tell me that Claire has at last got around to giving you my news?' Faded blue eyes twinkled up into commanding grey slits. 'I ! always think it's bad taste to get excited over a legacy. But in Uncle Arnold's case I think I can be excused. He never cared about anyone in the whole of his life and in the end no one cared about him.' Her mouth drooped at the corners as she added, 'Though I sent him a card each Christmas, keeping him up to date with whatever news there was, even after he...'

Her voice tailed away and Jake took her arm in a gentle but inescapable grip, urging her towards the door that led to the sitting-room, his voice firm as he told her, 'Stop trying to soften me up. You've got some serious explaining to do. What are families for, if not to help each other when possible? I hope you're not going to tell me you found what little help I gave a burden you're delighted to shrug off?'

Although his words were tough his voice was soft around the edges as he ushered Liz into the sitting- room. Claire sighed briefly and mounted the stairs. The question of his allowance was something they'd have to thrash out between them and she was deeply thankful that she'd been able to persuade her mother that her decision to reimburse Jake fully for the purchase price of Lark Cottage, and everything in it, would have been seen as gross ingratitude, and hurtful.

She was thankful, too, that she'd made Jake promise never, in any circumstances, to divulge that his care of her mother had been the only reason she'd agreed to marry him.

As she reached her room and closed herself in with the cottage pine antiques, the lemon-yellow and grey and cream fabrics which picked out the main colours of the sunny sprigged wallpaper and the thick scatter rugs on

the oak-boarded floor, her mouth twisted wryly as she remembered how appalled Liz had been, the first time they'd visited, when she had explained that, being modern and sophisticated, she and Jake had decided on separate rooms.

But Liz would be even more appalled, and permanently so, if she knew that her daughter's marriage to the son-in-law she openly adored and respected was nothing but a business arrangement.

She hung her mulberry-coloured wool coat in the wardrobe, unpacked the few things she'd need for the two days Jake had said they would be spending here and allowed the tranquillity of the cottage, set as it was on the outskirts of a tiny Shropshire village, to soothe her unaccustomedly ruffled soul.

There really was nothing to get in a state about, she assured herself. She and Jake had agreed that their paper marriage would end when it was no longer useful. And as far as she was concerned its usefulness had ended with that legacy. And as for Jake, well, his unprecedented lack of discretion over the *principessa* affair had to signal that he wanted his freedom—even if he wasn't fully aware of it yet.

So their days were numbered, the last hours ticking away, and it truly didn't matter, did it? she asked herself as she sank down on the window-seat and gazed down on the garden that, even at this dead time of year, was her mother's pride and joy.

With a sense of inevitability, the tying up of loose ends, her mind slid back over the years, looking at everything that had happened, taking her to the point when she had agreed to marry Jake.

The foundations had been laid in her childhood. She barely remembered her father because he'd gone by the time her seventh birthday came around. Apparently, he had never wanted the responsibility of children and Liz had been thirty-eight when Claire was born. Liz had never been physically strong and after the birth she had had to give up her job working for a florist, pushing even more responsibility on to the man who hadn't wanted it in the first place.

So no, she wouldn't recognise her father now if she passed him in the street, but she could remember the build-up of tension as the weekends approached, when her father, a company rep, would be home. Recall how her mother had seemed frightened of him, of his sudden bursts of temper, his long sulks.

Once, long after he'd disappeared, and the eventual divorce, Claire had asked her mother why she had stayed with him as long as she had. Liz had looked blank, as if such a thought had never entered her head, and simply imparted that she'd made her marriage vows in good faith and, having made them, wouldn't be the one to break them. It was then Claire had realised that her father had taken a naive, trusting, loving soul and turned her into a doormat, and she had made a private vow never to allow it to happen to her.

When her husband had walked out on them Liz had had to find work to support them. She'd brought a child into the world and loved her devotedly, and no way was that child to be deprived of decent food and respectable clothes. They'd moved to a small flat because Liz couldn't afford the rent on the house they lived in, but somehow there had always been treats—a coach trip to the coast each summer, a birthday party to which all her friends were invited, a visit to the local theatre for the Christmas pantomime.

All at the expense of her health, Claire had realised years later.

Never strong, Liz had taken only part-time menial work because while her daughter was at school she'd insisted on being there when Claire came home. So she had often been exploited, poorly paid, having no qualifications which might have opened more lucrative, less physically gruelling doors for her.

After gaining her secretarial qualifications and a year's practical experience, Claire had joined a top- quality agency because she could earn more that way, insisted that Liz give up all her part-time jobs, and had been filling in for Jake's personal secretary—the one who went everywhere with him, and who was recovering after an appendectomy—when Liz had had a heart attack.

Claire had been out of her mind with worry. Just as she had begun earning enough to allow her mother to take life more easily, fate had dealt this blow.

Jake had been wonderful, far more sympathetic and supportive than her ephemeral position as a temp could have led her to expect. He had insisted on waiting with her through that dreadful night at the hospital when she hadn't expected her mother to survive the attack, metaphorically holding her hand and, somehow, drawing her whole life story out of her.

And later, when her mother's recovery had been assured—this time, so her consultant had warned— Jake had broken the news that his personal secretary had decided to call it a day. Her fiancé apparently took a dim view of the unsocial hours she was often called upon to work, the times—many of them—when she had to be out of the country, dancing attendance on her employer.

'I've a proposition to put to you,' he had told her. And now, without even having to try, she had total recall of every last inflexion of his voice, the way the pale afternoon winter sunlight had been streaming through the long sash windows of the London apartment, sheening his raven-wing hair, highlighting the taut, olive-toned skin on his jutting cheekbones, throwing those enigmatic grey eyes into deepest shadow.

He'd waved aside the bunch of faxed reports she'd just brought through from the study. 'Sit down, put that sharp brain of yours into receiving mode, and listen.'

She'd sat, the slight smile his choice of words had brought to flickering life quickly fading because she couldn't put her concern over Liz's future to the back of her mind as a good secretary should.

The excellent salary she was earning through the agency meant that her mother no longer had any pressing financial worries. On the other hand, working for the agency meant that she often had to travel to distant parts of the country, and that, in turn, meant there was no one to keep an eye on Liz, see that she ate properly, took the regular periods of rest that were so important to her long- term recovery.

And she wouldn't put it past her, as soon as she was back on her feet, to trundle out to find some kind of job. Liz had her pride, didn't want to be a burden, was inclined to mutter on about Claire being able to spend some of her hard-earned salary on herself instead of using it to support her parent in idleness.

'As I've told you, Anthea won't be coming back, which leaves me, again, without a permanent personal secretary,' Jake growled. 'They come weighed down with all the right qualifications and good intentions, and before you know it they find some lame excuse or other to quit.'

So a disgruntled fiancée, Anthea's love-life, was considered to be a lame excuse, was it? Controlling the upward twitch of her mouth, Claire pushed her own worries out of her mind and concentrated on his.

While she sat, composed and still, he paced the floor, displaying all that restless energy she had grown to admire, and marvel at. He smacked a fist into the open palm of his other hand and grated, 'They know what's required and receive a blinding salary to compensate for any minor inconveniences! And God knows, I'm not a monster to work for, am I, Claire?' He glared at her, his brows bunched, as if he couldn't believe anyone fortunate enough to work for him would ever willingly depart—for any reason under the sun—and she clamped her teeth tightly together to control the grin that threatened to break out and gave him back a soothing, if necessarily tight-lipped smile, a confirming shake of her head.

Not a monster, never that. Demanding, brilliant, restless, capable of long, sustained bursts of energy that left lesser mortals feeling drained and giddy, sometimes impossible and sometimes staggeringly, generously thoughtful and kind. But never a monster.

'Any suggestions?' He had come to a standstill, hovering over her, his hands now bunched into his trouser pockets.

Disregarding the bluntly aggressive tone, she lifted cool eyes to meet the piercing blaze of his and replied calmly, 'Hire someone who's not interested in a love-life. A widow-woman, say, well into her fifties.' She was trying very hard to keep a straight face. 'Or, better still, a man. A man with a family

to support, who would be grateful for a spectacular salary and the opportunity to escape the kids from time to time.' A touch of bitterness there? she wondered. Memories of the way her own father had been?

'Would a man take charge of my laundry, cook the occasional meal, buy my socks?' he scorned. 'And would your putative widow-woman have the stamina to keep up with my schedules?'

His smile was tight, almost feral, as he swept her suggestions aside. Then, with one of the mood swings she had come to expect, he dropped on to the opposite sofa, swinging one immaculately trousered leg over the other, tipping his head on one side as he gave her a long, considering look, before saying with languid smoothness, 'Having wiped out the options, I want you to consider my proposition. Take the job; work for me. Permanently. And, to ensure you don't dredge up some flimsy excuse to terminate your employment, I will marry you.'

Marriage! Her stomach muscles shivered, then clenched. She had expected him to offer her a permanent position, had been reluctantly prepared to turn it down because if she was on the other side of the globe with him who would keep an eye on Liz—but marriage! That was the last thing she'd expected him to offer! Quite out of the question!

'And before you verbalise what's written on your face,' his voice came through the whirlpool of her thoughts, silky soft yet carrying the core of that iron will of his, 'listen, absorb and contemplate. Firstly,' he ticked off on a lean, long forefinger, 'the marriage will not be consummated. To the outside world it will appear the perfect match, but privately you will function as my personal secretary. No more, no less. Your salary will be paid in the form of an allowance—and you won't find me ungenerous. Secondly, you will enjoy the financial security, the luxury, my wife would naturally expect. In return, I will have the loyalty and continuity of service I need.'

'This is crazy!' Ignoring the fluttery sensations that invaded her insides, Claire fixed him with a cool, sea-blue stare. 'I won't pretend I wouldn't jump at the job offer if it didn't mean leaving Liz to her own devices, but you don't need to tie yourself down to that extent, surely? When you find someone suitable you could insist on a watertight contract.'

'In which a clever lawyer could find any number of leaks!' He shook his head, leaning forward a little, his superbly hewn features softening with an obvious need to understand. 'We get along well together and I can't fault your work—the past few weeks have demonstrated that. And during that night when you feared you would lose Liz—and I'll come to her in a moment—you were open enough to tell me of her disastrous marriage, confide that her experience, plus the way you'd seen quite a high proportion of your friends' marriages go down the drain, had put you off ever making that commitment yourself. So tell me, where do you find the problem in my proposed business agreement?'

'You,' she said with stark honesty. Then wondered why her mouth had gone dry. Avoiding his eyes, she flicked her tongue over her lips and made herself elaborate, 'Who you are, what you are.' She didn't need to go further, tell him what he already had to know—that with his looks, all that sexy charisma, his wealth and staggering power he could have the pick of any woman he fancied. Instead she said primly, 'I can't believe you're a stranger to the opposite sex. And I can't believe the day won't dawn when you'll fall in love and want a real marriage, a family to enjoy the empire you've created. And when that day does arrive I'll be the first to go, with nothing but the dubious honour of being the first, and discarded, Mrs Jake Winter.'

Hearing the rising note of bitterness in her voice and not having any way of understanding it, she slumped back against the soft cushions and waited to hear how he'd get out of that. And she went into a state of shock, or something very like it, when he simply turned the power of his wide white smile on her, explaining lightly, 'I won't even try to pretend I'm a stranger to your sex. However, much as I enjoy female company I know myself well enough to avoid making any long-term emotional commitments. To make a marriage happy, secure and stable you have to work at it. I wouldn't find the time. My business gives me all the challenge I can handle. It's as addictive and demanding as playing chess at the highest level—I'm not looking for anything more. I could handle a paper marriage—I've neither the time nor the inclination to work at a proper one. Inevitably I'd get bored and restless. And, as I've experienced, paid secretaries and housekeepers can be a pain. I need someone who will be emotionally undemanding, always there when needed, wherever I happen to be. I hate hotel life as a general rule, so have my own apartments in most of the major capitals around the world, and I need someone there to organise some kind of home life as well as business

breakfasts, lunches or dinners, put on her secretary hat when needed and, as I mentioned--' his grin was sapping all her strength '—buy my socks. Or whatever. And as far as I'm concerned, unless and until I make a family of my own—which, at this moment in time, I can't see myself ever contemplating—any children my sister and her husband might have would become my heirs. And I suppose there should be an opt- out clause,' he clipped, his change of tone suddenly making her see how seriously he was taking this plethora of alarming nonsense. 'In the unlikely event of my deciding I wanted to be free to remarry, you would receive a substantial settlement in money and property. If you wanted out, for the same reason, then I wouldn't stand in your way. You would, however, forfeit the settlement.'

The smile he gave her was chilling, sending shivers riding down the length of her spine, and, shifting uneasily against the cushions, she was about to decline his offer politely when he forestalled her, knocking the breath out of her lungs as he added, 'About Liz. As an added and, in my opinion- having spoken at length to her consultant- necessary inducement, I guarantee to keep her in comfort for the rest of her life. In a house of her own and your choosing, with a resident companion—medically trained—to keep an eye on her health and wellbeing, keep her company, do all the little jobs around the place she shouldn't be allowed to tackle. Think about it, Claire. Think carefully, and give me your answer in the morning.'

He stood up, terminating the crazy interview, and Claire, her legs feeling unbelievably unsteady, tottered off to the study, finishing up there and driving home in a daze, not able to bring herself to say goodnight to him because everything inside her head had gone on hold.

It was the promise he had made regarding Liz's future that tipped the balance. True, the actual job he was offering was a challenge that was difficult to resist, and she could live with the marriage part of it. She would look at it as a strange type of job description, the utter sterility of the relationship a secret between Jake and herself. But it was the thought that her mother would at last be able to relax, live a life of comfort and ease, having a cosy home of her own and the lush country garden she had always dreamed of—with the added bonus that wherever Claire found herself she would know that Liz had someone close at hand to keep her from being

lonely, watch that she didn't overtire herself, make her go for regular check-ups—that brought Claire to Jake's London apartment, an acceptance of his offer of marriage firmly lodged in her head.

Jake received her acceptance with a calm, 'Thank you. You won't regret it,' but persuading Liz to accept his charity was a different matter.

She had met Jake, of course and, although bemused by the suddenness of it, was delighted by the prospect of the marriage. Her darling girl had fallen in love with a man who would care for her, provide handsomely for her, for the rest of her life. What mother could ask for more? But living on charity was something else altogether.

Not until Jake was brought in to fight Claire's corner were matters resolved. He simply told her, 'In three weeks' time I am marrying your daughter. That makes you, like it or not, part of my family. And what type of man—especially one who has more money than he can count—leaves a valued member of his family to mooch around in a mediocre flat in an unlovely London backstreet?'

And so Lark Cottage was found, furnished with every comfort and convenience, Sally Harding, an ex-nurse, forthright but kind, employed, everything—even their paper marriage—running smoothly until now. Until her mother's legacy had set her free.

An impatient rapping on the bedroom door had Claire dragging her eyes from the window-pane. The winter darkness had descended. She'd been looking at nothing. Blinking, she watched Jake enter the room, his impressive height and sheer physical presence seeming to diminish everything in it. His features were expressionless, yet his eyes pierced her, his voice harsh as he said, 'Liz is presiding over the tea-table, staring with longing at the teapot. As is Sal. Might I suggest you join us and put them out of their misery?'

She rose slowly to her feet. She'd lost count of time. Eating her share of one of Sal's massive teas- three different types of dainty sandwiches, mountainous sponge cakes, slab cake, a wild selection of home-made biscuits—was not, at the moment, very appealing.

She sighed, and he heard it. His eyes narrowed. He made an 'after you' gesture as she reached the door and his tone when he spoke, silk cloaking iron, rasped on her strangely jangled nerves.

'Liz's delight in finding herself so unexpectedly and independently wealthy was so transparent, I hadn't the heart to insist that she continue to live off my allowance. However,' he added, his mouth straightening in a grim line, 'that doesn't give you an opt-out, grounds for terminating our agreement. Only one thing can do that, so don't you ever forget it.'

## CHAPTER THREE

"ONLY one thing". The only opt-out Jake would accept was if one or other of them fell in love.

Claire fastened her seatbelt as Jake slid into the driver's seat. She didn't look at him, concentrated instead on waving goodbye to Liz and Sal, doing her best to look relaxed and cheerful.

For some reason the couple of days they'd spent at Lark Cottage had been a strain. Normally, it was no such thing. Claire valued any time she was able to spend with Liz, and her pretend marriage hadn't been a problem before because Jake had the ability to make everyone relax. When it suited him, that was. And it always suited him when he was around Liz.

So she couldn't put her edginess down to him, or only obliquely. The only reason she'd agreed to marry him had been to secure her mother's future welfare. But, for him, the fact that he'd no longer be supporting Liz didn't count. He'd made that abundantly clear. And what troubled her was the stupid, surging relief she'd felt when he'd spelt it out!

'Still adamant about not staying on at Litherton until I join you for Christmas?' Jake asked tautly as he smoothly negotiated the big car through the tangled network of narrow country lanes that would, in around twenty minutes, bring them to the Winter family home.

She shrugged, biting down on her lip, staring fixedly ahead. She was all churned up inside, her emotions warring. She didn't want to stay on at Litherton without him; she had already acknowledged that much. And when she'd believed that Liz's legacy would inevitably lead to the end of their marriage she had been—well, 'disconsolate' was the word she thought she was looking for.

It would be madness to allow herself to become dependent on his company. Sooner or later the marriage would end, and probably sooner, if his indiscreet relationship with the *principessa* was anything to go by.

Without being aware of it she had allowed herself to be drawn into the false security of dependency. It was time she did something about it. And so she told him with a lightness she was far from feeling, 'No, I've had second thoughts. Long walks in the fresh air, coming back to roaring log fires and Emma's marvellous cooking—just what I need.' And she cursed herself for feeling so miserable because she'd done the right thing, committed herself to two whole weeks without him. Which only went to show how uncomfortably real the danger was becoming.

She opened her eyes very wide at the look of frowning suspicion he darted her then closed them on a spasm of unadulterated pain when he returned his attention back to the road and told her, 'Good. I'm glad you've seen sense. There'd be no point in your kicking around on your own in London. I'll be in Rome, plunging into some rather exciting unfinished business.'

The voluptuous *principessa*, of course. And did he have to be so crude about it? Any other time he would have wanted her there with him, arranging meetings, sitting in on them wearing her secretarial hat, acting as a sounding board for his involved thought-processes as they shared a nightcap together back at the hotel.

But not this time. And she didn't have to be a mind-reader to know why.

Half reluctantly, she turned her head and allowed her eyes to dwell briefly on his savagely handsome profile. Was he aware that the rot had set in, that his indiscretions were pointing the way to the final break-up, that he had at last found a woman for whom he was happy to throw caution out of the window?

She looked quickly away again, misery darkening her eyes. In agreeing to stay on with his sister and her husband she had done exactly the right thing. The process of weaning herself away from him was about to begin.

Litherton Court had been in the Winter family for generations. The sturdy stone house, built in the reign of Elizabeth Tudor, looked particularly lovely

on this bright, crisp morning, Claire thought as she emerged from the copse, looking down on the house in its smooth green hollow of land.

Sunlight glittered on the tiny panes set in elegant mullions and made the pale building stone look warm and mellow. Claire wondered, not for the first time, how Jake could have turned his back on the property, handing it and the vast estates over to Emma when she'd married Frank.

But it was impossible to imagine the restless, dynamic Jake Winter settling down to run a country estate, she acknowledged, pushing her hands deeper into the pockets of her sheepskin coat. And that being the case, what could be more natural than his handing over his inheritance when Emma married? When he had been twenty-five and already a force to be reckoned with in the business world, and Emma a sheltered eighteen, their parents had been killed in a motorway pile-up. The double blow had traumatised them both, particularly Emma. It had taken her a long time to get over it and Jake had become very protective of her. Until the advent of the *principessa* Claire had believed that Emma was the only female under sixty Jake had any tenderness or respect for. The way women had always thrown themselves at him had made him cynical. So did he know he was ready to fall in love, ready to make a lasting, worthwhile commitment? An expert at second-guessing other people's moves, correctly judging their motivations, had he recognised his own slip for what it was—a willingness, in the case of this one special woman, to give the world at large advance notice of his intentions?

If it had been a slip then it had been a deliberate one. No one could ever accuse him of being a man who didn't know what he was doing. During the two years of their marriage he must have had the occasional short-lived affair; he was too virilely male not to have done. But there had never been a breath of scandal, never a hint.

So this was different.

Her fine brows knotted together, she set her booted feet on the downward track, heading back towards the house. How many times during the five days since he had left for Rome had she worried away at the conjectures that kept rearing up inside her head? Was he with Lorella Gancotti now, at this

very moment? Was he explaining about his paper marriage—something that had been their secret up until now? Making plans, promising to get an annulment very soon, asking her to marry him?

With a savage spurt of temper she kicked out at the loose stones in her path, sending them skittering. The decisions he made about his private life didn't matter, did they? She had entered into marriage for purely practical reasons, with her eyes wide open. In spite of his offhanded denials, she had always known that this was on the cards, accepted that he would fall in love one day and ask her for an annulment. So why did she feel as if her whole world was falling apart?

Because the breakdown of their marriage would mean the end of her job, she answered herself staunchly as she unlatched the gate in the high stone wall that surrounded the gardens proper, keeping them separate from the rest of the estate.

Relief poured through her like a flood of sweet warm water and she whistled cheerfully for the two young Labradors and the pensioned-off sheepdog who had accompanied her on her morning walk, smiling as they bounded towards her. She had heard Emma say that she could never have too many dogs and they seemed to be all over the house, curled up in armchairs and sofas, heaps of them on the rug in front of the Aga, basking in the warmth. And because Frank was devoted to his prettily plump wife he tolerated them cheerfully.

Ushering the dogs through the gate, she closed it securely behind her, feeling light-hearted for the first time in days.

She loved her job, thrived on the challenges and hassles, the praise Jake gave so generously, the companionship that inevitably built up when you worked so closely with someone you admired and respected. But she certainly couldn't keep it after they separated. It would look very odd to the rest of the world if she were to continue to work for her ex-husband after he remarried.

So the prospect of losing her job had to be responsible for the bleak mood she'd been in ever since she'd seen that photograph and realised the implications behind his first ever indiscretion. And before that, even,

beginning when Liz had told her about that legacy and she'd thought—wrongly, as it happened—that Jake would terminate their agreement because the conditions were no longer being met and he, above anything, was an honourable man.

And the relief that she had worked it all out must have shown on her face because when she walked into the big, cosy kitchen Emma, heating milk on the Aga to add to the mid-morning coffee, turned and said, 'What's happened to cheer you up? You've been looking like a wet Sunday since Jake left. I said you were missing the brute but Frank thought you were sickening for something.'

Claire didn't like to think she was so transparent, but she hid her unease with a smiling shrug and offered, 'Fresh air and exercise does wonders! It's a beautiful morning and you don't feel the cold if you keep moving. The dogs enjoyed it, too.'

Thankfully, the mention of dogs deflected her, as it had been meant to do. Emma petted and crooned over the dogs which had just returned, sitting at her feet, pink tongues lolling. Claire rescued the milk.

She and Emma had taken an instant liking to each other the first time they'd met. Jake had insisted she spend that first Christmas here. They'd just got 'engaged'—one of the shortest on record—and he'd brought her down to meet the only family he had. And last Christmas they'd been here as a married couple, he giving the same reason she had for their preference for separate rooms, and they would be here together again this year. For the very last time, she expected.

Jake always spent the festive season at Litherton, and was openly impatient for Emma to provide him with nieces and nephews for him to spoil and play with. But Emma was in no hurry to oblige. She had her dogs and her husband, not to mention the absorbing business of running the big estate like clockwork, with the occasional input from Frank, who was Jake's personal accountant, handling his impressively massive portfolio.

Claire deeply regretted being unable to let her sister-in-law get really close. Emma was open and bright and bubbly and would have liked nothing better

than to have long heart-to-heart chats with her brother's wife, but Claire, recognising the dangers in that, put on an act of reserve and refused to be drawn. No one but she and Jake knew what a sham their marriage was. They both wanted to keep it that way.

'There's just the two of us today,' Emma remarked as Claire finished making the coffee. 'Frank's spending the day with Liz. He'd have asked you along too, but they'll be spending the time talking investments. Boring!' She pretended an exaggerated yawn and Claire's mouth twisted in a wry smile. One of the first things Jake had done after they'd arrived at Litherton was to tell Frank of Liz's newly acquired wealth.

'At the moment it's swilling around in her bank account. I want you to go and see her. You can do better than that for her.' His tone had implied 'or else', and that was typical of the type of man he was. Claire pushed him quickly out of her mind and the wall-mounted phone rang.

She was already—more or less successfully- thinking of her marriage in the past tense so when she realised Emma was talking to Jake the shock made her stomach curl up in a ball and turn to ice. And they were obviously talking about her, because Emma was saying, 'No. Only to do some Christmas shopping. She borrowed one of the cars and took off for the day.' Claire watched the puzzled frown gather between her sister-in-law's eyes and just knew he was checking up on her. He was still suspicious about the phone call he'd interrupted, and that made her coldly angry because who was he to poke and pry into her affairs when his was splashed all over the papers? He would want their marriage to end when the time was right for him. He wouldn't want her jumping the gun, painting him in the guise of a cuckolded husband!

'Of course I didn't go with her,' Emma was saying, running out of patience. 'I always get mine done early, you know that. No. No--Look, she's right here; ask her yourself.'

She handed Claire the receiver with an upward hunch of her shoulders and Claire managed coolly, 'Ask me what?'

The tiny ensuing silence was electrifying and, for no reason that she could fathom, her heart began to beat like a drum gone out of control; then cold anger took over as he told her without an atom of shame, 'Just checking up on how my wife spends her time. Get all your shopping done, did you? Or perhaps you forgot something vital? Find you have to spend yet another day in town?'

If theirs had been a normal marriage she would have thought he was harbouring deep suspicions, half believing she was seeing someone else, was blisteringly jealous. As it was, she knew he was simply anxious not to be made to look a fool.

She hated it when they were like this together. Up until his return from Rome they had got along fine, becoming really close companions. Squashing the impulse to reassure him, because getting back on to a best friends footing again would only make the inevitable break-up much more difficult, she gushed, 'Now however did you guess? Such a bore! Was there anything else you wanted to check up on, or can I go? My coffee's getting cold.'

'No, you may not go.' The tone of his voice set all the nerves in her body on edge. It was the tone she had heard him use when dealing out reprimands to underlings who had earned his displeasure. He had never used it to her before. And now that clipped, arrogant voice was telling her, 'I'm buying a property in Haveling. The agent will deliver the keys to you in the morning. As soon as he does, I want you to drive over there and wait for me. I should arrive around lunchtime. Got that?'

She answered, 'Yes,' but was talking to silence. Her face went red. He'd put the phone down, just like that! How dared he treat her as if she were a mere employee he'd suddenly lost patience with?

But an employee was all she was, all she had ever been, she reminded herself with a swift return to rationality, and maybe the brisk arrogance he'd used on her for the very first time was his way of easing them apart, phasing out the strange but special relationship they'd had.

'What was that all about?' Emma wanted to know. 'I've never heard him so snappy—someone been giving him a bad time?' She was cutting fruit cake and suddenly looked deadly serious. 'You? Before he left he asked me to keep an eye on you,' she went on slowly, as if thinking things out and not liking the conclusions she was reaching. 'He said he was worried about you. You'd got overtired, I must make sure you had plenty of rest and didn't go racketing round on your own. But just then he sounded on edge, as if there was a lot more to it than that. Is there?'

'Of course not. What more could there be?' Claire sat down at the table, tried to look relaxed as she cupped her hands round her coffee-mug. Emma wasn't stupid. Jake must have been unguarded enough to allow his sister to deduce that he hadn't been merely checking up on his wife's wellbeing. Her fingers tightened around the mug. It wasn't like Jake to be unguarded. He was the most controlled person she knew.

Falling in love with the *principessa* had obviously knocked him for six. But Emma mustn't know there was something wrong. Give her the slightest hint and she'd worry away at it until you gave her the truth out of sheer exasperation!

'He's buying a property in Haveling, or so he said,' Claire offered as a red herring. It was nothing unusual. Two months ago he had purchased a tract of land and a decaying plantation house in the Caribbean and was currently in the process of transforming it into a mind-bogglingly exclusive hotel. 'The agent's delivering the key tomorrow, Jake's returning from Rome and I'm to meet him there.'

'Haveling! Oh, it's one of the prettiest villages you could hope to see, and only a dozen or so miles from here! I've told him and told him it's time he had a proper base—the London flat's magnificent, of course, but it hardly counts—not if you're thinking of putting roots down at last and starting a family. It would be wonderful, wouldn't it? We'd be practically neighbours, and you could see Liz much more regularly, couldn't you?'

As a diversion, it had worked wonderfully, and Emma wasn't to know how far she was from reality. Grinning, caught up in the fantasy of her own manufacturing, she put a slice of cake on a plate and slid it over the table.

Claire shook her head, declining. The thought of eating anything made her feel ill. Emma had painted a rose-coloured picture but to Claire it was black. She caught herself wishing it could be true, and slapped that treacherous notion right on the head, hating herself for being so impossibly stupid.

'Now, let me think...' Emma ruminated over a mouthful of cake. 'It's a while since I went through Haveling. There's a handful of gorgeous cottages, but they'd be much too small. A Georgian place that used to be a rectory at the back of the church—that's a possibility—and a lovely Queen Anne house, a bit away from the village proper—lots of ground, lovely gardens. Harnage Place, I think it's called. Now that would be perfect. I can't wait until the agent gets here and we can find out for sure. You should have asked Jake to be more specific. Never mind--Oh, isn't it exciting?'

Claire stopped listening. It was far too painful. There could be any number of reasons why Jake had decided to buy a property in this area. A hotel conversion, conference centre, health farm—any number of possibilities. But the one that made the most sense was the one that Emma had mooted.

Jake had fallen in love, wanted to tie his *principessa* to him for the rest of his life, wanted her to be the mother of his children, needed, at last, a settled home. It didn't bear thinking about, so she wouldn't, and she gave all her attention to those of the dogs who had sniffed out the presence of cake, breaking her own unwanted slice into equal pieces, taking endless care to make sure it was fairly distributed.

And Emma had been right on both counts, she decided dully as she drew her borrowed car up on a broad sweep of paving slabs at twelve the next morning. Harnage Place was the house Jake was buying, and yes, it would make a perfect family home. It was spacious enough to house half a dozen children and, from the outside at least, extremely beautiful. But not large enough to make it a profitable commercial proposition.

Her heart dropped sickeningly. This was just one more clue to what was going on. But she didn't need clues, did she? The moment she'd seen that picture in the paper she'd known. It had been like a window opening on to her future.

Her legs feeling like lead, she let herself out of the car and the cold grey wind cut through her, making her shudder and drag the collar of her woollen coat higher around her ears. Rows of windows watched her blindly from the tall, elegantly graceful facade of the house, and she ignored them, squaring her shoulders and marching straight up to the main door.

It was a job, that was all, she reminded herself, perhaps one of the very last duties she would be called on to perform. She was paid very handsomely to iron out life's little wrinkles for him. Being here to open the house up would save him having to make a detour to pick the keys up himself. Jake didn't believe in wasting time or effort. Both were too highly prized to be squandered. And that was the only reason she was here.

With a sinking sensation she slotted the key into the lock. She hoped, with a sense of deep desolation, that she would find every interior aspect of Harnage Place quite repellent. She didn't want to have to like anything about Jake's future home— the home he would make with his *principessa*.

It was ironic, truly ironic, she thought grimly as she pushed open the door, because today was her second wedding anniversary.

## CHAPTER FOUR

CLAIRE fully expected the empty house to be cold and dank, with cobwebs and dust and damp patches on the walls. But it was none of these things. Not even empty—not completely.

The parquet floor of the beautifully proportioned hall gleamed with polish, as did the delicately carved, richly dark banisters which curved up to the first floor. And the walls, not only in the hallway but in the room on the right that she poked her nose into, had been recently colour-washed in sophisticated shades that contrasted superbly with the deep, white-painted skirting-boards and architraves.

'Goodness!' she breathed out loud, knotting her brows. It was pleasantly warm, too. She undid the buttons of her winter-weight wool coat. The vendors must have left the central heating on. The place could only have been on the market for a very short time; it didn't feel lifeless as houses often did when their owners decamped, taking everything with them. This place felt vitally alive, yet tranquil too, and not all the furniture had gone because there were one or two pieces in this room, lovely antiques that looked as if they had been created especially for this particular house.

She wandered slowly back into the hall, still puzzled. How long had Harnage Place been on the market? Jake had been out of the country a great deal just recently, so how had he heard of it? And if he'd been negotiating for it for any length of time she would have known. For the last two years he hadn't made a move, finalised a deal, without discussing it fully with her.

Had he acquired it since meeting the *principessa* ? Deliberately kept the negotiations secret? Had he asked her, Claire, to be here today because he was ready to tell her their paper marriage was over, and why?

I can't bear it, she thought tumultuously, her stomach churning sickeningly. But she knew she had to, and when she heard the arrival of a car, the deep silence after the engine had been cut, she knew she wasn't ready to hear what he had to tell her and she dragged the edges of her coat around her as she began to shiver all over.

Somehow, with the motivation of near desperation, she pulled herself together as she heard the unmistakable clunk of a car door closing, heard his quick, firm footsteps on the stone slabs, the steps leading up to the door.

Everything was going to be fine, she reassured herself sternly. No worries. She would find no problem getting another job, even though it wouldn't be as stimulating as this one. She had qualifications galore and, with Jake, the type of high-level work experience any other would-be personal secretary would give her eye-teeth for, not to mention every last one of her molars.

But the moment the door swung open she knew her job had nothing to do with it. He was wearing the continentally styled black micro coat she had personally picked out for him when they'd been in Italy last year, his dark hair slightly ruffled and spangled with the fine drizzle that was falling outside, his stunningly handsome features wiped clean of expression, and she knew she would miss him like some vital part of her own self, that when they parted something inside her would die.

For the timeless seconds while they faced each other wordlessly, she knew that despite the controlled, unspeaking features he was brimming over with restless mental excitement. It was there in the slightly flaring nostrils of his slim, aquiline nose, the heightened glitter of his silver-grey eyes.

Those eyes held hers with an intensity that was like a physical blow, sucking the breath out of her lungs, making her flesh quiver. Gazing helplessly into those glittering, mesmeric depths, she wondered how long she had loved him, when, precisely, the process of falling in love had begun for her. And why, in the name of sanity, it had taken her until this one fragment of time to admit that knowledge into her consciousness. It had jumped at her out of the dark, knocking her senseless.

Why did it have to hit her now? Why now, when everything pointed to his desire to marry the woman he loved?

The need to hide her internal torment turned her face to stone and when he asked, 'Like it?' she looked away from the gleam of suppressed excitement deep in those silver eyes and answered stiltedly,

'I haven't investigated further than one of the rooms, but yes, it seems to be a desirable property.'

If he noted the aura of distance she was deliberately projecting he didn't comment. Perhaps he was too enmeshed in his own private anticipations to notice anything about her, she thought as he closed the door behind him, shrugged out of his coat and tossed it haphazardly over the newel-post of the banisters as if marking the house with his ownership.

'Good,' he remarked, apropos of nothing, she decided. She wished now she'd insisted that the estate agent accompany her. She didn't want to be alone with him, not now. It hurt too much. And she had suggested it, but the elderly man who had delivered the keys had looked astonished, waving the suggestion aside, looking at her as if he thought she was two bricks short of a load.

'You're thinking of buying it?' she asked in the same cool voice. She was building a wall between them. It was necessary. But she hated it, mourned the old days of innocence when she had looked on him as her best friend, and he pushed his hands into his trouser pockets, rocking back slightly on his heels, one brow arched as he tipped his dark head on one side.

'Bought it. Signed and sealed six weeks ago. The electricians, plumbers and decorators moved out a few days ago. The key they used was left in the safe-keeping of the agent who delivered it to you this morning.' He slanted her a droll look. 'Amazing what a loud voice and a blank cheque can do, isn't it?'

Six weeks ago they'd flown in from Hong Kong. Just for a day or two, he'd said, for a breather. She'd lunched with old friends, catching up on their news, gone shopping. He, so he'd said, had relaxed at the London apartment, 'messaging about', as he put it, which meant, she knew, recharging his batteries, listening to taped opera, wallowing sensually in the pure beauty of sound. But in reality he'd been seeing solicitors, signing deeds, engaging tradesmen—no doubt the best in their individual fields because he wasn't the type to settle for less than excellence.

Devious. Never, to her knowledge, had he kept anything from her in the past. The hurt was almost impossible to contain.

His affair with Lorella Giancetti must have been going on for far longer than she'd realised. There had always been times, towards the end of their stay in any particular country, when she would be expected to go on ahead of him to their next port of call, especially if they were planning on staying in one of the apartments he owned. To get it ready, aired and functioning, set up meetings.

He would have used that time to be with his lover. The *principessa*, and his plans for her, could have been the only reason why he'd kept the transaction secret.

'Why?' she asked tightly, not wanting to hear the answer, and he gave her a crooked grin, shrugging loosely.

'To live in, of course. After years of rolling it's time I gathered moss. And where better? I was fascinated by this house when I was a boy. I did a lot of riding in the area and was drawn to the place like a magnet. When I was around fourteen I made up my mind to live here one day. I handed Litherton over to Emma when she married, as you know— and I don't regret that. So when I first began to think of settling someplace I thought instinctively of this house. I made the owners an offer they couldn't refuse.' He glanced at his watch. 'Come; let's take a look around.'

He was almost bristling with pent-up energy, she noted, the lump in her throat growing larger by the minute. She could feel the enthusiasm vibrating through his tall, lean body.

She shivered, swallowing hard. A tour of the house was impossible. Out. She couldn't smile and make pleasant noises while they walked through the rooms that would be his and his lady's, imagining them eating, relaxing, laughing, making love...

She took a deep breath and pushed out, 'I'd rather not. And shouldn't Lorella Giancetti be the first to see it? You bought this house for her, didn't you? You want to marry her, settle down; don't try to deny it.'

There, it was out. Now he would have to stop pretending that all was as it ever was. He would have to tell the truth. The prospect made her shake inside. And pushing herself to the point of bringing it all out into the open had exhausted her.

'What do you mean she should be the first?' His look of astonishment confused her. She closed her eyes on a wave of disbelief and heard him tell her, laughter just below the surface of his dark voice now, 'If you can see the *principessa* living in the depths of the English countryside you've a better imagination than I have. She's strictly a city bird.'

She could hear him getting closer and her eyes winged open, wide and deeply blue. His voice was so warm, his eyes crinkling at the corners. He looked enormously pleased with himself.

'I have no intention of marrying La Giancesetti. I am married to you, remember? I'm not about to invoke the opt-out clause—you're far too valuable an asset. Shall we begin?'

Just like that! She stared at him blankly. Did he really mean what he'd said—that he had no intention of ending their agreement because she was too valuable to him? So he wouldn't be marrying his voluptuous Italian princess—she would have to make do with being his pampered, indulged, sated mistress! And she, Claire, would have to turn a blind eye and be a good little drudge! Not that she'd ever considered her job in that light--

She gave herself an impatient mental shake. Drudgery or joy, what did it matter? It had to end; that was all she knew. She couldn't go on as before, not loving him the way she did... not with La Giancesetti a sensual threat, forever in the background...

She ignored the invitation to accompany him on a tour of the house, standing her ground, telling him, her voice very tight, 'Might I suggest you use a little more discretion if you don't want rumours about the possible break-up of our perfect marriage--' she invested the words with scorn '—on the front page of every newspaper in the country? I'm sure your recently reported outing with that woman wasn't the first, and won't be the last. But do try to keep yourselves out of the limelight in future.' Hopefully, that constraint

might make him think twice about wanting to have his cake and eat it, the restrictions on conducting a wild affair with the luscious Lorella too irksome for him.

Just saying the words, bringing them out into the open, made Claire's stomach churn with nausea, but her pale skin flared with vivid colour when he said softly, very close to her now, 'I do believe you're jealous.'

'Don't be absurd!' The words of denial flew off her tongue like arrows, instinctive, defensive words that she reinforced by adding, with a hastily gathered calm, 'We both knew something like this was bound to happen, sooner or later. Why else would we have agreed on the opt-out for just such a contingency? If you've had affairs before, no one's known about them, least of all me. You're either slipping, in this case, or serious.'

She turned and tramped away, down the hall, her back rigid. She was probably heading for the kitchen regions. She neither knew nor cared. If he intended to settle here, put down roots, delegate more perhaps, he would need a permanent housekeeper. A place like this couldn't be left to its own devices as were the apartments he had scattered around the globe. And she wouldn't be around to do the honours.

Somehow she was going to have to make him agree to end their relationship, which had now become untenable—at least as far as she was concerned—without exacting too many penalties.

But he was a man of honour; he kept his word and expected others to do the same. His wrath, as she had witnessed once when a business associate had tried to pull a fast one, was terrible, his retribution swift and sure and quite, quite deadly.

If she just upped and left him, sought an annulment, he could make sure she never worked again. At least not in the field she was qualified for. He made a good friend and a bad enemy.

'You're going in the wrong direction.' The touch of his hand on her shoulder made her jump out of her skin. He turned her round, using two hands now. She was facing him and felt brittle, as if she would shatter into a million

pieces, because he was near to her, touching her, and touching each other was an unwritten taboo. Or had been in the past. He seemed increasingly inclined to break it, which was treachery—in the circumstances.

Her soft mouth trembled and the small gleam of amusement in his eyes disappeared—his eyes were kind now, his voice softer than she had ever heard it, as if he understood what she was going through, as if he wanted to ease her pain.

But he couldn't, she thought wildly. He couldn't know how she felt about him—she had only recently known herself! And he hadn't even tried to deny that he was having an affair with that woman!

'Loosen up, Claire,' he murmured, the silver discs of his eyes softened by the lowered thickness of black-as-night lashes. 'Why so tense? Tell me what's wrong.' His hold on her tightened, the tips of his fingers sending shafts of electrical excitement deep into the most secret parts of her body.

She gasped, desperately trying to ignore the sweet, insidious sensation, curling her tongue round her lips to moisten them because this was her opportunity, the best she would probably get, and she managed at last, thickly, 'I must warn you—all the plans you're making for the future—this house.' She knew her words were fractured and disjointed, and that wasn't at all like her. He probably thought she was going simple. But there wasn't much she could do about it. She dragged in another breath, aware now of her skittering heartbeat, and added, less decisively than she would have liked, 'I want to call it a day, Jake. Our agreement, I mean. I— It worked well, it suited us both. But not any more.'

The sudden sensation of utter silence, the cold, empty absence of any sound, was horrible. And even more awful was the aching void inside her when his touch lightened, his hands falling away, the stark sharpness of his tone ripping through her when, at last, he asked, 'Why? It suits me fine; what's happened to make you want out?'

What could she say? That she loved him? That she couldn't continue living with him as his wife— and yet not his wife at all—in such circumstances? That the arrangement which was a smooth convenience for him was now,

because she loved him, nothing but a nightmare for her, a nightmare that would intensify with every moment they were together?

'I'm bored; I need a new challenge.' She tried to invest the tiny shrug she gave with a touch of insouciance, but didn't know whether she'd been successful, didn't know anything; how could she when he'd turned the situation on its head, looking relieved—of all things?

She'd fully expected disbelief, scorn, a display of pricked pride. After all, who could have the temerity to be bored in The Presence, dynamic as it was? What she hadn't expected and couldn't handle was the sudden wicked gleam in his eyes, the upward quirk of his deeply sensual lower lip, the way he said, 'Is that all?' as if what she'd said were totally irrelevant. 'I think I can remedy the boredom,' he told her, his voice a soft drawl, sending shivers down her spine. 'And if it's new challenges you want, I'll think of something.' He placed a hand in the small of her back, urging her to move, but she resisted stubbornly.

The last thing she wanted from him was a challenge. Working as closely with him as she had, she'd coped with enough of those to last a lifetime, handled everything with what he had been generous enough to term grace and intelligence. But that had been then and this was now, and everything was different.

Perhaps he was joking. She hadn't the courage to look up at him and find out. But she knew he wasn't taking her seriously and her voice was blank, underlining her resolve not to take defeat so easily, as she told him, 'I mean it, Jake. I need to move on. Nothing stays the same forever.'

She risked a glance at him then, going cold when she saw the intent assessment in his eyes. She knew that look only too well. He was using his mind like a computer, sifting through every known fact, making projections, finding a path that would lead to the truth.

He didn't want to lose her 'valuable services'; the thought of having to rely on possibly fickle hired help again would make him blisteringly angry. But did he really think she would be content to leave things as they were

indefinitely, acting as his secretary, sounding board and nanny, as well as housekeeper and cook when they were at one of the apartments?

She had never led him to believe that things would stay as they were until she was in her dotage. He had been made fully aware that she'd agreed to his preposterous proposal because of Liz. Her mother's consultant had warned that she wouldn't make old bones, but that with care and cosseting, freedom from anxiety, the next and probably fatal attack could be delayed.

So no, she had never said it would be forever.

'Is that a fact?' His eyes were cold and uncompromising. 'You calmly tell me you need to move on and cite boredom as your excuse.' His mouth twisted in a cruel parody of a smile. 'You'll forgive me, my dear, if I think you're lying. Shall we put it to the test?'

His dark voice was heavily laced with irony and she shuddered, not knowing how to answer. Of course she'd been lying. She'd never been bored for a moment during the past two years. She didn't know how he intended to disprove her statement, wasn't going to ask, and didn't intend hanging around to find out. 'I have to go.' An ostentatious look at her wrist- watch and the way she busily re-buttoned her coat gave her remark credibility, she hoped, and although she was prepared for his snapped out 'Where to?' she found the probing intensity of those silver eyes totally unnerving.

'Back to Litherton,' she managed to get out without faltering too much. 'Emma will wonder where I've got to.'

She wouldn't; of course she wouldn't. And Jake picked that up with smooth scorn, telling her, 'Are you going to make a habit of lying? Emma is fully aware of where you are and whom you're with, as you very well know.' He cupped his hand firmly around her elbow. 'Stop behaving badly. We're wasting time. I've got something I want you to see. Humour me.'

The touch of his hand, the closeness of his body as he herded her through the house, made insignificant crumbs of her resolve. Their relationship had undergone a remarkable sea change ever since he'd returned from Rome and she'd waved that newspaper under his nose. He'd never been angry with her,

or scornful, or frogmarched her anywhere. Theirs had been a relationship of equals, made comfortable and pleasant by friendship and courtesy.

She no longer felt equal; she felt dominated. Jake Winter in masterful mood, uncaring of her wishes, was difficult to take. But she wasn't fighting him, because she knew she wouldn't win, and besides, she thought, swallowing around the lump in her throat, no harm could come of humouring him, as he had demanded. Their time together was marked, each passing second bringing them closer to the end, whether he liked it or not.

She was breathless, dangerously close to tears as he whisked her through the library, the empty shelves protected by elegant mahogany and gleaming glass, his long, loping stride relentless until they faced a panelled door at the very far end. Here he paused, one hand on the painted porcelain knob, the other sliding away from her elbow to take her hand, lacing their fingers together. Shock-waves of sensation crashed through her as her fingers gripped his convulsively, powerless to let go because the feel of her flesh and bone cleaving to his, the scalding of skin against skin, was a craving, a drug that could so easily become an addiction.

Pushing a half-crazed whimper back into her throat, she steeled herself to drag her hand from his. She must not betray the way she felt, this longing to be his, the desperate need to stay with him always, loving and loved.

But he forestalled her too long delayed attempt to remove her hand, his voice deep and soft and tinged with triumph as he challenged, 'Tell me this bores you and I'll call you a liar. For the third time in under an hour,' and pushed open the door, leading her into paradise.

## CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS like stepping into another world. Perennial summer in the bitterly cold depths of December. It took Claire's breath away. All she could do, for several long moments, was stare around her, her soft lips slightly parted, her eyes very wide.

The Victorian conservatory was immense, the huge glass dome arching high above catching the pale winter light, magnifying it, layer upon layer, until it was a shimmering opalescent glow, filtering down through the rich, jungly growth that was like wave after wave of a scented, exotic sea.

'I'm speechless!' She turned to him, her eyes glowing, her sudden smile wide and beautiful, the pain of loving him momentarily knocked out of her mind by the unexpected loveliness of this sumptuous, scented, exotic and quite perfect place—until he answered her smile with the brilliance of his own and the pain returned, battering her, slashing her with the points of a thousand knives. Holding herself together somehow, she untangled her fingers from his and turned away, praying the hurting wouldn't get worse, get so bad that she wouldn't be able to hide it from him.

'It affected me that way too, the first time I saw it all those years ago,' he told her as she walked further in, her heels tapping on the black and white tessellated floor. 'I'd tethered the horse at the edge of the orchard, out of sight of the house, and made my way down here. As I told you, the house fascinated me, but I hadn't known of the conservatory until I saw it glittering in the sunlight. One of the doors was open and I looked in, careful not to be seen—the then owners, an ancient man and his sister, were reputed to be extremely well-connected but half crazy. They didn't like people and lived for their plant collections. That was the moment I promised myself I'd own the house one day.'

'I can understand that.' She was in control again, determined to think about what she was seeing, exclude everything else, enjoy and appreciate, because tomorrow, all her tomorrows, would be bleak and dreary. He wouldn't be part of them so how could the future be anything other than a series of months and years to be plodded through, gradually, and probably slowly, learning to exist without him?

'Do you know the names of all these plants?' she asked stiltedly, for something to say. She could recognise the obvious—the orchids, lilies, camellias and sweet-scented jasmine—but the majority were exotic strangers to her. 'And, more importantly, do you know how to look after them?'

'No, but I know a man who does.'

She heard the laughter in his voice as he walked beside her and she bent to run her fingers gently over the feathery arching leaves of a miniature date palm, turning her head away to hide the ache that must show in her eyes as he explained, "The couple I bought the house from—he inherited it from his uncle, the old man who lived here with his sister when I was a boy—knew nothing about the plant collection and cared even less. They employed a gardener to look after it full time, and I kept him on—along with the two men who look after the grounds and a couple of part-time cleaners who come up from the village each day.'

He had everything organised—had she expected anything less?—but he was going to discover that he couldn't have everything his own way, no matter how minutely he planned. He couldn't make her stay with him, not the way things were, the way things had changed.

But she wasn't going to think of that, not now. She stepped past him, moving round a stand of orange trees planted in white-painted square wooden tubs, and stared with wide-eyed wonder at the sudden revelation of a wide expanse of quiet water, the edges thickly planted, graceful statuary half hidden by lush, jungly growth and reflected in the still surface, large golden carp moving serenely in the clear depths, flicking laconic tails.

'Unbelievable!' she breathed.

'Boredom gone?' he drawled, and she flicked him a quick, warm smile, forgiving the little dig because she had earned it.

'You know how to spring a surprise,' she granted. 'This place is utterly fabulous, like a fairy-tale! It's so beautiful, calm and--'

Her powers of description failed her, the sensory delights of sight and scent taking over, and he ran a soft finger down the curve of her cheek and supplied, 'Sensuous is the word you're looking for. The air in here is thick with sensuousness.' His fingers hovered at the corner of her mouth and she looked up at him, her eyes drowning in his, her lips parting.

She couldn't help it, this instinctive betrayal of all she had meant to hide, and his head dipped, as if he was about to kiss her, and her pulses began to race because their relationship wasn't physical and he had never shown the slightest desire to have it any other way. She would have picked it up if he had, but if things had changed for him, as they had for her...

But he didn't kiss her; of course he didn't. Why should he, when he had the Italian woman to gratify that kind of need?

'You look like a child in wonderland. Gratifying,' he said, sounding smug. 'Let me take your coat. You must be sweltering.'

So the danger, that moment of utter confusion, was past, and she allowed him to help her out of her coat because she couldn't think what else to do and couldn't find anything to say. She had wanted him to kiss her so much it hurt. She could only pray that he hadn't been aware of it.

Jake draped her coat over his arm and glanced at his watch. It wasn't the first time he'd done that and she guessed he had an appointment lined up— lunch perhaps, or maybe a flight to catch later in the day. Back to Rome—or was the Italian woman here in England, maybe at the London apartment, eagerly waiting his arrival? She wasn't going to ask because she didn't want to know. Ignorance was less painful than the truth.

Even without her coat she was still too warm and she resisted the impulse to undo the buttons of her suit jacket, remembering just in time that she was wearing nothing but a serviceable, no-nonsense bra beneath it. Without thinking she had chosen to wear the Romeo Gigli softly structured deep olive suit in preference to the jeans and sweaters she'd lived in while staying with Emma.

Because she knew he liked it? Because he admired the elegance she had learned to acquire during her time with him? Had she, unconsciously, been dressing for the man in her life all this time—in love with him and not knowing it?

She was learning truths about herself and was having difficulty coping with them, and although she knew she should insist on leaving right now, and drive back to Litherton to work out how she could force him to agree to end their arrangement, she found herself mindlessly tagging along without a trace of resistance when he took her hand and led her to the opposite side of the indoor lake.

Unlike her, he was casually dressed, wearing soft black chinos and a cream-coloured heavy silk shirt which enriched the olive tones of his skin. He looked magnificently sexy, overwhelmingly, potently male, and the touch of his hand was like dynamite, creating frantic explosions of sensation all over her body.

He Was lethal, she thought, subsiding weakly on to the padded seat of one of the Edwardian cast-iron chairs set around a decadently ornate matching table. Quite lethal and a threat to the entire female sex.

'Time for lunch,' he said, his gaze tangling with hers, his smile hungry, as if she were on the menu, and that made her feel distinctly nervous. But his blunt statement knocked her theories about a pressing appointment right on the head and she said dourly, trying to douse down the ridiculous sense of relief which, with the jumpy, jangly nervous state she was in, was making her feel utterly confused,

'Brought a packet of jam butties, did you?' And she didn't have to wait for a response to her feeble joke because two white-coated waiters suddenly appeared, gliding out of the tropical growth, one with a trolley, the other with a tray of champagne on ice and two glasses.

'I think I can do better than that,' he murmured, smiling blandly as the champagne was poured into the carved-crystal flutes, the Russian caviare in its bowl of crushed ice placed on the table, with the succulent wedges of

lemon and the blinis that went with it. And only when the two waiters had discreetly moved away could Claire find her voice at all.

'Don't tell me you inherited those two from the previous owner. Do they live here all the time? Where have they been hiding?' She knew she was babbling but couldn't help it. She felt as if she had stepped inside a dream, where anything could happen, and probably would.

Jake, heaping the black caviare on to a corner of a hot buckwheat pancake, told her, 'They and the chef have been in the kitchen for an hour or so. They were hired to give us lunch. No mystery. Their instructions were to serve the food exactly one hour after my arrival.' So that was why he had been checking up on the time. But, 'Why?' she found herself asking. Her smooth brow wrinkled. Why go to so much trouble? Was this lavish gesture his way of celebrating his acquisition of the house he had coveted since boyhood? Must be, she told herself, taking nervous sips of the deliciously cold champagne. It was a pity it had come on such an inappropriate day, the day when she had made up her mind, quite firmly, at last—to ask him to agree to end their marriage.

'Why not?' Grey eyes sparkled like moonlight on a silver sea. 'But if you're getting prosaic in your old age and need a cut-and-dried reason for celebrating, isn't the date sufficient? It's our second anniversary after all. Or had you forgotten?'

Claire winced. He was unconscious of the irony, of course, but that didn't prevent her feeling as if he had stabbed her in the heart. She clutched at her glass again, the surface cool and dewed with condensation, and sipped, just a little, and then a little more, trying to ease the aching dryness of her throat.

'I hadn't forgotten,' she husked out at last. 'It's simply that ours is not that kind of marriage, and you know it.'

'Who better?' he responded drily. And then, leaning back a little, he watched her in silence, his hooded, enigmatic eyes sliding over her classically lovely features, the stylish wings of her silky dark hair lying smoothly against the clear whiteness of her skin.

She looked down quickly, aware that her fingers were shaking as she tore a blini into tiny pieces, aware for the first time of the soft whirring of the classic colonial bronze-bladed fans that stirred the air high above, suspended beneath the soaringly splendid, multi-faceted glass dome.

If she met the challenge of his eyes she knew she would see resentment in the way he was looking at her. He couldn't enjoy having his personal life controlled by his ingrained beliefs that hired help, no matter how handsomely paid and fulsomely recommended, was not reliable, knowing that the one person who could be utterly relied upon to iron out all life's wrinkles for him was the one person who stopped him openly enjoying his passionate affair with the *principessa*, perhaps even marrying her, giving her his children.

So of course he must resent her.

Longing for the waiters to return, collect the debris and break the taut silence, she went very still as his voice, lowered to a sultry whisper, sent her nerves and pulses skittering.

'But that could change, couldn't it, my dear? As you pointed out yourself, nothing stays the same forever. Our arrangement has worked perfectly. Would you enjoy meeting the challenge of a change within it?'

Going into a blind panic, she looked back at what she had said. So was he suggesting that their relationship should change, their marriage become a real one—with all that implied? If he had suggested it months ago, before she'd known about his affair with the Italian woman—which he had definitely not denied—would she have jumped at the opportunity? She knew without the shadow of a doubt that she would have done. She'd been falling in love with him for ages, putting her happiness at being with him down to the stimulation of the work she did for him, her enjoyment of his clever, restless, lavish personality.

He expected a response, she knew that, but speech was beyond her. Her tongue felt like a lump of wood and she was sure her throat muscles had gone into spasm, and she had never been so pleased to see anyone in her life when the two waiters appeared silently along the path that meandered

through the semi-tropical plantings. One cleared the debris while the other set out half a dozen small bowls of different salads and served a herby melee of mixed mushrooms casserole in red wine, and to Claire's utter yet wary relief Jake made no more mention of making any change to their relationship, and even the wariness evaporated as the meal progressed through a light-as-air cold raspberry soufflé to savoury Angels On Horseback, with limitless champagne and his unrivalled ability to put her at ease.

He bewitched her, there was no other word for it, she thought muzzily, snatching greedily at this one, and possibly last, interlude of happiness as he captivated her with the rapier-sharp wit she had come to treasure over the time she had been with him, and with the ability he had to laugh at himself, which she had always found so endearing, making him, despite his great power, wealth and terrifying drive, seem more human and lovable than anyone she had ever met. Lovable...

It all came down to that in the end, didn't it? She held his eyes, her own shimmering. At this moment it was something she simply accepted. She could do no other. She was beyond fighting love; he had intoxicated her—more than the wine or the exotic, perfumed surroundings. And when he rose to his feet and held out his hand, she took it, rising fluidly, bonelessly as he instructed one of the waiters, 'We'll have coffee on the loungers and then you might as well call it a day. We can look after ourselves from now on.'

Speak for yourself, she whispered inside her head. She couldn't vouch for herself. She had wandered into a dream, where logic, responsibility and control over what happened didn't exist. She could no more look after herself than fly! And the waiter, his young face bland—as if he and his colleagues cooked and served long, sybaritic lunches for two in huge glass domes every day of the week—silently departed. And Jake led her to a secluded terrace, arbour'd by vines which in the summertime she guessed would be thick with heavy clusters of grapes, to an intimate arrangement of padded loungers and low tables, just right for relaxing.

She needed no invitation to sit; her legs felt decidedly wobbly, which was down to the unusual intake of vintage champagne with lunch, she decided

blithely. Perched on the edge of one of the loungers, she watched while he poured the coffee. His movements, as always, were deft and economical. She could watch him for hours, no problem—he was visual poetry—but she tried self-protectively to make her face go blank and unrevealing as he looked sideways at her, suddenly, taking her unawares, catching the unfocused, dreamily loving look on her face during that tiny unguarded moment before she'd frantically tried to rearrange her expression.

Had he recognised the look on her face, translated it correctly? she wondered, horrified. It seemed so, the way he was watching her now with narrowed, calculating eyes. She felt as if he'd stolen from her, like a thief, taking her innermost, private thoughts without her permission. She shivered slightly, suppressing the sensation of spiritual violation, then saw the hard silver glitter of his eyes soften to gentle misty grey and heard him tell her, 'You look as if you've got a train to catch. Relax. Didn't the champagne work after all?' he queried softly, shaking his head, teasing her as he eased her back against the slightly tilted, padded back of the lounge. 'You were uptight when I arrived, your beautiful head full of nonsense, but I'll be damned if we leave here before I've got you to unwind.'

The trouble was, the champagne had worked *too* well; it alone had to be responsible for the way she sank back against the comfortable upholstery without even the sniff of resistance. And did he really think she was beautiful? In the same class as the *principessa*? Of course not, how could he? she answered herself, lowering her eyelids to hide the sudden, silly surge of tears. He'd accused her of talking nonsense, so he had to be referring to the way she'd told him she was bored, needed a new challenge, wanted to end their arrangement.

And, as far as he was concerned, that was what it was. Nonsense. Something to be categorically dismissed because it didn't suit him. He wanted to have his cake and eat it.

But for the life of her she couldn't dredge all that up again, not right now; she felt too muzzy, boneless and weak. And he was sitting at the foot of the lounge and slowly, one by one, he was removing her shoes, his lean fingers curling round her high, arching insteps, stroking so softly, so sensually, and all at once she didn't have the wit or the will to do anything about it. Like

telling him to back off, leave her alone because touching each other was a no-no.

Her eyelids fluttered. The sensation was indescribably erotic and she knew she really should put a stop to it, especially when one of his hands slid stealthily along the calf of one leg, sliding beneath her knees, ruffling the hem of her skirt, then higher, inexorably higher, until his fingers found what they had been seeking and he drew down the tiny zip at the side of her skirt.

'Better? More comfy?' He had moved slightly. Now his hipbone was nudging hers. And just as she had been powerless to stop him removing her shoes, loosening the waistband of her tight-fitting skirt, she also appeared to have lost the power of speech. No answering words would come. But 'Better', 'More comfy'—that was crazy!

She was burning with a heat that came from deep inside her, freaking out on it, and she made a tiny moaning sound in her throat that could have meant anything and actually welcomed the release when his cool fingertips brushed her skin as he began to undo the buttons of her jacket.

The near-tropical temperature made the wearing of a fine woollen suit sheer and sudden purgatory, the touch of the costly, soft fabric against her unbearably sensitised skin quite unendurable. And her head drifted back, like a broken flower on the slender stalk of her neck, as he part lifted her, easing the beautiful jacket away, allowing it to drop to the floor as if it were a rag.

Slowly, very slowly, he eased her back against the padding, and even with her eyes closed she knew he was looking at her body. She could feel it, sense it, knew it because of her responses, because of the way her tummy muscles tightened, the spiralling heat that suddenly and violently formed deep inside her, the way her breasts surged and pushed against the cotton of her prosaically ordinary bra.

And she knew she should be feeling shy, or something. But didn't. It was Jake who was undressing her so that was all right. More than all right. It was wonderful, a release from the frustration that had been building for ages without her being aware of it.

Fighting up out of the layers and clouds of delicious languor that had been keeping her drugged and supine, a piece of meat he could play with at will, she decided she just had to join in and peeped at him through the fringing veil of her black lashes.

His awesomely honed and beautiful features were dewed with tiny beads of sweat, darkening and highlighting his olive skin tones, and that added to the magic, the male mystery of him, and his jaw muscles were taut, tightly contracted, as if he was trying to hide something. She didn't know what and didn't think she cared, and wriggled a little to allow him better access because his long fingers were dealing with the formidable back fastening of her sturdy white bra.

And even the grim practicality of that garment couldn't embarrass her. Although she had always spent lavishly on what she wore, to please him and fit the image he wanted her to project, some puritanical streak in her nature had ensured that she cut sternly back on the things that didn't show, buying plain, serviceable undergarments and nightwear, and, although he had never actually seen her wearing the stuff before, you couldn't travel the world with a man, share the same homes, without his being aware of what went into the laundry.

She felt the sudden release of the fastening and chuckled irrepressibly. He had wanted her to lighten up, and she had, irredeemably so, it seemed. She was so light she was buoyant, floating on air, and the slow-burning intensity of his eyes, the way he was looking at her—as if she were the most desirable woman in the world—the slight, responsive indentation of his very male mouth did nothing to bring her back down to earth. She didn't think her feet would ever touch the ground again.

And then her arms took on a glorious life of their own, reaching up and wrapping themselves around his neck, her fingers buried in the thick dark hair at his nape, and she watched his eyes change, saw the turbulent darkness alternating between the silver gleam of satisfaction, and his voice was thick and soft, like melted honey as he said her name.

'Claire, my love...' Then his head came down and he took possession of her mouth and her whole body and soul turned to brilliant, soaring incandescent

flame as she submitted to his demanding lips, and knowing this was right, so very right, that she was where she had been born to be, took what she knew to be her birthright, let him know how desperately she wanted him and made demands of her own, lips tasting and plundering, withdrawing and teasing, her body becoming softer, pliant and responsive, moving explicitly against his, clinging to him because she couldn't bear this to end.

Eventually, he broke away, only to hold her with savage possession, her head imprisoned against the strong arch of his shoulder, his hand stroking her hair as he murmured her name, over and over, his voice thick. Claire clung to him dizzily, knowing that they had embarked on a journey that could have only one ending, wildly exultant because of the inevitability of it.

Had he known, for two long years, the thing that she had never suspected until recently—that he had only to touch her to turn her into an insatiable wanton? Was that why he had kept an almost clinical distance between them physically, waiting until the time was right? Right for them both.

She could feel the heavy beat of his heart and her fingers walked unsteadily up his broad chest, undoing buttons, and she hadn't noticed before, but the short winter afternoon was dying and as it did so tiny lights sprang automatically to life, myriads of them, glowing, gleaming and glittering among, above and below the lush green foliage, the stands of tall, stately lilies, the rambling, exuberant tropical chaos, and she sighed blissfully as he laid her back on the lounge and, his hands unsteady, began peeling off her skirt.

No woman alive could hope for a more beautiful setting for her first journey into ecstasy with the man she loved. Ecstasy and beyond, she acknowledged feverishly as her flesh shuddered responsively beneath his seductive hands.

And the perfumed silence was broken by the music of his ragged breathing, her own gasps and tiny moans of heated pleasure an erotic counterpoint, and he told her thickly, his hands and his lips exploring her body with tormenting sensuality, 'I'm going to make this as long and as sweet and as memorable for you as I know how. So tell me what pleases you most—we have all the time in the world, remember. And when I've taken you to the

limits and beyond, we'll wait just a little while and I'll take you there again...'  
And then he went still, as if turned to stone, and Claire, even in her delirium, heard it too. The intrusion of pattering feet, Emma's raised voice.

'Are you in here, you two? I've looked all over the house. Your cars are outside so you've got to be somewhere!'

## CHAPTER SIX

CLAIRE did her best to empty her mind of the way Emma had walked in and interrupted them late yesterday afternoon—and just what she had interrupted.

But her mind had other ideas and vivid, nerve- shattering images kept gatecrashing, scalding reminders of the way she had felt—awash with the sensation of tarnished glory—as Jake had swung to his feet, rapidly rebuttoning his shirt, his muttered expletive low but blistering as he'd walked, soft-footed, away, to intercept his sister. She had been left to dress herself with fumbling fingers, aching with frustration, burning with the far greater pain of knowing that if it hadn't been for Emma's timely interruption she would have belonged to Jake, body and soul, mortgaging her future, emotionally tying herself to him forever, knowing her love would never be returned, always wondering whom he was with when he was away.

Pausing for breath now, she leant against one of Litherton's impressive gateposts. She didn't want to have to face him, to begin the deception. But she had been out for three hours, ever since first light, marching across fields and down green lanes, scrambling through thickets and fording streams, and exhaustion and common sense told her she had to go back. She couldn't hide forever.

Last night it had been easy, relatively so. She'd been feeling sick with anguish when Jake had come back with the voluble Emma, actually shaking with it, barely able to dredge up a smile when her sister- in-law had hugged her, bubbling over with excitement.

'He has actually bought it, he tells me! Oh, I did so hope it was on the cards—we'll be neighbours, practically! You don't mind me coming along and poking my big nose in, do you? Only I couldn't stay home wondering a minute longer! And isn't this the most gorgeous conservatory ever? If it were mine I'd live in it, never mind the house!'

And she'd insisted on being shown all over, right down to the last broom cupboard, and Jake had done the honours, and if his sister's inconvenient curiosity had left him feeling frustrated he hadn't shown it. And as for the

way she'd felt herself as she'd tagged along, not really registering the lovely rooms, well, 'empty' would be an apt description—drained of self-respect, empty of hope, the foolish hope that he might have fallen in love with her, as she had with him.

If she hadn't been bewitched by the magic of his hands, his lips, his eyes, if the flame of her own desires hadn't burned out her ability to reason, she would have read his intentions correctly, been able to handle him—and her own needs. But she had been bewitched and her ability to think clearly had been a long while returning, but by the time they'd got back to Litherton, in separate cars, she'd known what she had to do, only she hadn't known how to do it.

The plea of a headache—no fabrication—had guaranteed her an early night. Emma had said, 'What about supper? I've made lemon chicken- Frank's favourite. If you can't face that, how about some hot milk and biscuits? I'll bring it up to you. I must say you do look pale and peaky. Let's hope you're not coming down with flu—I hear it's running round the village like nobody's business.'

Declining, Claire had edged out of the door, making her escape while Jake was still in the hall, talking to Frank, who had just returned from his professional visit with Liz. Slipping through the kitchen and up the back staircase, she'd turned the key in her bedroom lock, deciding that if anyone came up—Emma with her hot milk, or Jake to get down to unfinished business—she would pretend to be deeply asleep.

And this morning she'd slipped out before anyone was around and not even the dogs had clamoured to go with her. They'd probably thought she was crazy; it was barely light outside, and the deep sofas and armchairs, soft rugs and the background central heating were far more appealing than the grim dawn light of a bleak December day.

Crazy or not, the long solitary walk had cleared Claire's mind of emotional debris. She had worked out What she had to do and she had to stick with her decision because although the alternative was dangerously appealing it was unthinkable.

Staying with him, allowing their marriage to become a real one in every detail but the honouring of the vow to forsake all others, would inevitably become the ultimate in degradation and pain.

She wasn't about to commit emotional suicide.

Her head high, her stride long, she headed back to the house, to be greeted by the usual sea of dogs and Emma's relieved nagging.

'Where do you think you've been? You must have been out for hours! Are you feeling better? You don't look quite so washed out. And Jake's been looking all over—he's not long got back. If I know him, he's already rounding up a search party.'

'Why? Because I went out for a walk?' She smiled as she unlaced her walking boots, but one finely arched brow rose ironically. A flurry of anxiety might come naturally to a loving husband, but Jake only wanted to keep tabs on his possession. He had invested a great deal of money in her, one way or another, and he meant to keep her valuable services. While Liz had been dependent on his allowance he'd had no fears that his smart little helper would hand in her notice—and the paper marriage had acted as a kind of cement, ensuring that she grew accustomed to the glamour and luxury of their shared lifestyle.

But Liz was no longer dependent and the first murmurings of discontent from his smart little helper had set wheels turning in his devious, tricky mind. He'd bed her and bind her; making love to her now and then wouldn't be too much of a hardship—she wasn't hideous.

'No, of course not,' Emma chided good-humouredly. 'Last night you looked on the point of collapse and this morning you'd vanished into thin air. Jake took you breakfast in bed and there was nothing there. Anyway, go and put him out of his misery. There was a phone call for him and he took it in the study. He said if you showed up while he was busy you were to go to him immediately.'

Claire went; she had no option. But she didn't go willingly. She and Jake had never had a formal employer-employee relationship, not even when she'd

been working as his temp, standing in for yet another personal assistant who'd found the going too hectic. Theirs had always been a relationship of partners, as if one couldn't function on all cylinders without the back-up of the other. And today, for the very first time, she felt as if she was a very junior dogsbody being summoned to appear before the chairman of the board.

Emma's study, one of a warren of rooms at the rear of the house, was its usual clutter of box files, books on estate management, forestry and stock rearing leaning drunkenly against each other on the shelves, paperwork littering every inch of the big oak table that served as a desk.

Claire closed the door quietly behind her, psyching herself up. Jake was still using the phone, his broad black leather-clad back to her as he faced the window overlooking the paddocks. Whoever he was talking to was obviously not flavour of the month, judging by the terse, bitingly arrogant tone, the barely leashed impatience as he edgily paced the length of the desk, never moving away from the window.

Was he anxious, watching to see if she returned from that direction? Was he still wearing the leather jacket because he'd meant to set out again, searching for her, but had been delayed by this call? Was it possible that he might worry about her? Care?

She swallowed convulsively. She would not think along those lines. Then she made him aware of her presence, speaking out with cool clarity, 'Emma said you wanted to see me,' and was braced and ready to face whatever strategy he meant to employ. Even if he mentioned what had happened yesterday she was sure she could handle it, yet she couldn't prevent an inner shudder as, after one tiny, frozen second, he swung round on the balls of his feet, snapped, 'See to it. Now!' into the receiver before slamming it down, adding, in the same savage breath, 'Where the hell do you think you've been?'

Grey eyes had darkened to charcoal beneath the black, frowning bar of his brows, the strong jaw ominously clenched. He looked, she decided coolly, as if he would like to strangle her on the spot. An impression strengthened

by his wrathful, 'I've spent most of the morning scouring the countryside looking for you!'

His anger was in stark contrast to the mood of the previous day. Then he had been the essential male predator, intent on seduction. But she couldn't think about that, not if she wanted to stay cool and collected, so she turned her back on him, idly tidying the bookshelves, her tone nice and light, with just a tiny undertone of sarcasm, exactly what she had in mind, as she told him, 'Somehow I didn't think I had to get your permission to go for a walk. How silly of me!'

'No, not silly,' he said in a voice as cold as ice. 'Bloody thoughtless. Or do you enjoy worrying the socks off me?'

Of course she didn't, she thought despairingly. How could she, when she loved him more than life? She had been too bound up with her own dark problems to give a thought to the way he might react to her disappearance. And never, in her wildest imaginings, would she have expected him to worry.

Recognising that her hard-won sense of detachment was rapidly splintering in the face of his concern, she gave the merest sketch of a shrug, said, 'There's no need to snarl. Since I've been staying here I've got into the habit of taking long early morning walks. I imagined Emma would have told you,' and swept to the door, knowing she had handled what could have degenerated into a fraught situation with coolness and dignity. But then the self-congratulatory bubble burst around her head as he intercepted her swiftly, taking her arm, swinging her round into close contact with the hard length of his body.

Too close a contact, she thought as her flesh relished the secret pleasure, her whole body taut with trembling expectancy as the heat in the pit of her stomach turned into ravaging flames.

'Don't ever think of walking out on me again.' He gave her a tiny shake. His voice was dark but that achingly attractive wry half-smile shook her soul, held her motionless, in thrall to the magic of him, held her where she knew she should not be. 'I over-reacted. I'm sorry. But you looked like death last

night. I believed Emma when she said she thought you were coming down with flu. When I brought you a hot drink and some aspirin you didn't answer when I knocked on the door, so I thought sleep the best preventative medicine. I've been imagining all kinds of horrors since I discovered your room empty at eight-thirty this morning. Am I forgiven for snarling?'

How could she answer him when her throat was clogged with pain? He had cared; he had been anxious for her wellbeing. How could she have forgotten the compassion he was capable of, when it had been he who had been with her all through that long and dreadful night when she'd feared Liz wouldn't pull through, comforting and supporting her, holding her together?

But remembering was counter-productive; she had too many reasons for loving him, and she wasn't going to add to the burden. Making a supreme effort, she tried to pluck his fingers away but his grip tightened, his voice low and rough as he told her, 'We have to talk. About what happened between us yesterday, about the future, our relationship.'

He pulled her closer, holding her in the gentle, seductive prison of his strong arms, and she yearned to melt into him. When she was with him now everything in her was programmed to be warm and pliant and feminine, but the instinct for self-preservation was fighting on her side, enabling her to make her body go rigid in the circle of his arms, to say distantly, 'There's not a lot to talk about, is there?'

'Only your crazy idea that we split up,' he countered softly. 'We make a good team. The best. Why spoil it?' His voice was a honeyed tease but there was nothing teasing about the masterful way his strong, lean hand cradled her head, pulling it against the proud breadth of his chest. He had her and he meant to hold her, she recognised fuzzily as she inhaled the heady scent of soft leather and warm, vital male.

She made a small, distressed sound in the back of her throat, protesting against the way her body burned to wriggle even closer to his, and he brushed her neck with his lips and she felt giddy, delirious, hearing his softly teasing voice through a swirling mist.

'We'll go over to the house, get Emma to pack a picnic lunch—and promise not to come near! We have furnishings to acquire, and although I already have one of the best teams available on the job I want your input on our future home. But, more importantly, we need the privacy to talk. I want to make our marriage a real one. Yesterday proved how good we'd be together. If Emma's damned curiosity hadn't got the better of her we'd have been man and wife in every sense of the word by now.'

Did he think she didn't know that? His words made her go cold. Everything he appeared to be promising was cruelly tempting. But he'd said no word of love, said nothing that could be construed as such. And she had never allowed herself to hope he would. All the same, the forlorn realisation gave her a wicked stab of grief.

He knew, only too well, how he affected her; those clever eyes had watched her go up in flames of desire beneath his roving hands and demanding lips, become a wanton, willing, eager slave to his magnificent male dominance. He believed he only had to take her into his bed to bind her more closely and permanently than their agreement—albeit made with honour and integrity on both sides—could ever have done.

And he was right; of course he was. Devastatingly right. But somehow she had to make him believe he was wrong. It was going to be the hardest thing she had ever had to do.

She pulled away from him, using her hands as levers, and forced herself to tell him, 'Sounds a cosy offer, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to pass.'

And she turned her head quickly, not willing to let him see the haunted look in her eyes, and flinched when he said grimly, 'I've never known you to be before, but recently you seem to be doing an awful lot of it. Are you honestly asking me to believe you weren't more than willing to consummate our marriage? Don't forget how well I know you. You're highly intelligent, loyal, fastidious and sexually unaware—or were, until I took you in my arms. Are you trying to tell me it meant nothing?'

'I was drunk,' she said thickly, and felt her face go bright with colour. 'I'm sorry—it shouldn't have happened. I shouldn't have let you believe--Oh,

hell!' She began to pace the small room, wrapping her arms around her body. She felt cold inside, as if she would never be warm again, as if her blood had stopped flowing and had turned to ice, frozen by the dreadful thing she was doing. She was denying her love, her need, her plain old-fashioned adoration. She was lying. She would never find another man to match him. 'The champagne, the lunch, the atmosphere in that place—it made me behave stupidly,' she flung at him.

There was a frighteningly hard glitter in his silver eyes and she wished she hadn't risked that defiant glance in his direction, and turned her attention to the window, not seeing anything, muttering, hating the way her voice emerged so sullenly, 'I did mean it when I said I wanted to move on.'

'Just like that?' he asked with humiliating distaste and she shook her head wretchedly. Oh, no, it hadn't been a spur-of-the-moment, selfish whim. Just a matter of her own emotional survival.

But she couldn't tell him that; she could only pull her former character—the serene and unflappable, morally sound part of herself that he knew so well—out of the corner it had been hiding in, and deny, 'No, not just like that. Give me some credit. As I explained, I need to move on, but I'll certainly carry on as usual, doing my job, until you find a replacement—provided you find him or her within a reasonable amount of time,' she added, not trusting him not to pretend that every applicant he saw was a waste of space.

'And what's Liz going to make of it?' he wanted to know, his voice dry. He flung himself down on the office chair, his endless legs stretched out in front of him. 'She thinks we're the perfect couple, beloved by the gods. What sort of state is she going to get herself in when you tell her the marriage is over?'

'She'll be upset,' Claire said tightly. She wasn't going to let him get to her with emotional blackmail. She'd square it with Liz, perhaps even tell her the truth—that her marriage to Jake Winter had been a matter of convenience, for both of them. But circumstances had changed, again for both of them. She would be horrified, probably, but she'd get over it. 'She's an essentially sensible lady,' she told him. 'She wouldn't expect me to stay married forever to a man I don't love.'

He gave her a hard look. 'If I double the amount paid into your account each month, would that make any difference?' And at the impatient shake of her head he got to his feet. 'No, I thought not. I don't understand what's going on here,' he brooded. 'But I'm working on it.' He walked to the door then turned, his face impassive. 'You mentioned a reasonable amount of time for finding a replacement. Exactly how long will it be before you walk out?'

She wanted to tell him, Until this time tomorrow, but couldn't do that to him. The sooner the arrangement was terminated, the better from her point of view. Every second that passed made her die a little more inside, but she told him stiltedly, 'Two months should give you ample time. But I'd appreciate it if you could make it sooner.' She watched him dip his dark head in acknowledgement, his features blank, as if he no longer cared, had washed his hands of her and consigned her to the past.

Then he disappeared.

Wondering how she'd find the energy to leave the study and make like a house guest, Claire tried to look as if her world wasn't falling apart when Emma breezed in through the door.

'Good. I can call my office my own again.' She shuffled through the papers scattered all over her desk. 'I don't know why I'm expected to fill in endless forms and stuff. Still, needs must--Look, sweetie, Frank's home for lunch. Pop a pizza in the oven, would you? And there's salad stuff in the fridge. Half an hour suit? That husband of yours drove off like a bat out of hell. I bet he forgot to buy your Christmas pressie! Otherwise you'd both be lounging around in that gorgeous conservatory—I know I would, given half a chance. And when are you going to start measuring for curtains and stuff?'

Claire forced a smile and closed the door on the happy burblings. If she told Emma she wouldn't be sharing Harnage Place with Jake, that in two months' time, at most, their marriage would be over, her sister-in-law wouldn't believe her ears. She would leave Jake to drop that particular bombshell, she would have a tough enough time of it when she came to shatter all Liz's fond illusions.

In the meantime she knew she had to act as if everything was right in her corner of the world, and made herself look enthusiastic when, lunch over, Emma suggested the two of them set off in the Land Rover and cut holly and ivy for decorating the house, and outwardly, at least, didn't bat an eyelid when Jake phoned from Heathrow just before supper with the blankly imparted news that he was catching a flight to Rome and would be back some time on Christmas Eve.

'He'll have to get rid of those itchy feet when you've moved into that gorgeous house,' Emma grumbled as the three of them sat over supper. 'I mean, you can't own a place like that and leave it empty for nine-tenths of the year. You'll have to put your foot down, Claire. It isn't as if he needs to keep hopping around the world. He could delegate a lot more than he does, couldn't he, Frank?'

Claire never heard his reply through the dull roar in her ears which came from the battle with a threatened crying jag that was going on inside her head. She somehow managed to get through the rest of the evening until it was time to say her good- nights and seek the privacy and solitude of her room.

But the threatened tears had all dried up, solidified into a hard, painful knot behind her breastbone, and she stood at the window, looking out into the dark night with empty eyes.

She had done and said what she had decided on, put her foot on the road that would lead to their separation. She had begun to deceive him because it was the only option open to her. And the utterly heartbreaking aspect of it was his acceptance. He'd offered and she'd refused. As far as he was concerned that was the end of it. He could do no more, and would do no more.

Had she secretly hoped he would use the shattering charm he could call on at will, use that powerful sexual magnetism, to make her stay where he wanted her to be? She knew, in the aching depths of her heart, that she had. No matter how degrading the inevitable outcome, she had secretly wanted him to persuade her.

But after his initial offer he had accepted her lies when she'd laid the blame for her behaviour on the sparkling wine. Accepted it, it now seemed, with indifference. Had cut his losses and gone to find consolation and pleasure in the arms of his *principessa*.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

NEVER before had Claire been so thankful to see the back of the Christmas season. Liz and Sally Harding joined them, of course, staying until the new year had been well and truly welcomed in, and the constant strain of having to pretend that she was enjoying herself, that she and Jake were a doting couple, had left her feeling a wreck.

As he had promised, Jake had appeared late on Christmas Eve, looking utterly exhausted, earning himself dark mutterings from Emma about never knowing when to call a halt, working himself into an early grave for no good reason that she could see.

Claire had never seen him look like that, totally drained, weariness scoring lines on his harshly crafted face that hadn't been there before, making his features austere, an unreachable quality leaching the light out of his eyes. He'd looked as if willpower alone was responsible for keeping him upright and she'd almost voiced her own sharp and sudden concern, but had remembered in time precisely why he would be looking this way.

The *principessa* must have given him an ecstatic welcome—and then some. He'd probably had no sleep at all over the past few days. And maybe the sexy Italian woman had been giving him a hard time, too, demanding that he spend more time with her, send his unloved wife packing, marry her to give her the legal entitlement to the physical and financial favours that at the moment were only granted when it suited him.

Lorella Giancetti obviously didn't know the brute as well as she imagined she did. She probably thought she could bring him to heel. Claire, for a time, had believed that, too, that he had at last found the one woman he could put before all else. Until events had shown otherwise. Jake had said himself, when he had proposed their sterile marriage arrangement, that he couldn't be bothered with long-term emotional commitments, that making a proper marriage work would take time, and he was too involved with his various business enterprises to give that precious commodity to a permanent relationship.

He wanted the best of all possible worlds. The freedom to enjoy affairs as long as his interest was caught, and a presentable 'wife' in the background to run the more tiresome aspects of his life with grace and efficiency, like a good little woman; and if he had to bed the good little woman from time to time, to keep her sweet and willing, then so be it.

So Claire had flattened all that sharp, instinctive concern, making herself give him a cool little smile, fixing him a drink, just the way he liked it, asking, 'How was Rome? Did everything go to your complete satisfaction?' knowing that he and she were the only people in the room who knew what she meant. But she'd been unprepared for his blank stare, the slight deepening of the frown-lines between his weary eyes. And then, shaming her, because he'd known what she was driving at, he'd flashed her a gratified smile.

'Superbly satisfying, thank you. You are looking at a completely fulfilled male animal.'

'Looking at a complete wreck, you mean!' Emma had snorted, not catching the double meanings because why should she? She thought they were a devoted couple. And her remark had given Claire the opportunity to fade into the background, smothering her rage, her impotent jealousy.

The bastard had offered to consummate their marriage—had had the gall to pretend he actually wanted it. But he'd met her refusal with indifference and walked away. How right she'd been to think with her head instead of her wayward heart- not to mention her wretched hormones!

'And not to be wondered at--' Jake had ruffled his sister's hair '—given all I've been through the last few days. And nights. Which reminds me...' He'd pushed himself to his feet. 'If you'll all excuse me, I'll go catch up on some sleep.'

The following morning he'd been his usual energetic, vital self. Eight solid hours of uninterrupted sleep had worked a miracle, Claire had thought sourly, doing her best to keep her mind off why he'd got himself into such an exhausted state, finding her own energy and good humour slipping through

her fingers as each day of the holiday dragged past, the effort of acting the part of a happy wife becoming more and more intolerable, harder to sustain.

But now, settled back into the London apartment, away from the eyes of her unsuspecting parent and in-laws, she must steel herself to begin her campaign. It couldn't be put off any longer. It wouldn't be pleasant and it wouldn't be fun, but it had to be done or she would be destroyed.

As it was, each day brought a deepening sorrow, a greater awareness of loss, a larger sense of separation from the man she knew she would always love.

It was past time she did something about it, she thought, clipping the concise set of notes she'd made to one of the endless projection reports he'd been calling in from each and every one of his enterprises, handing them to her for her comments.

Loving, and knowing she would never be loved in return, had plunged her into a limbo of misery, robbing her of the ability to make things happen. Maybe if he had tried to make love to her again, or renewed his verbal offer to make their marriage a real one, she might have dragged herself together enough to do something about it. But, as had happened during most of their time together, he had carefully avoided even the most casual touch.

Straightening her shoulders, she looked across the xoom which functioned as an office. He was, as usual, engrossed in one of the earlier reports, occasionally scribbling furiously in the margin of the notes she had attached. His itchy feet hadn't been in evidence since they'd returned from Litherton. Neither of them had left the apartment, the woman who came in three times a week from the domestic agency they used being delegated to bring in essential foodstuffs.

She stood up, smoothing her slender dark grey alpaca skirt over her hips, then carried the latest report to his desk. A slight movement of his lips was the only acknowledgement she got as she dropped it on the relevant pile. He had withdrawn into solid hard work, allowing neither of them time to draw breath, only remembering she was human when they took a break for mealtimes, or called a halt at the end of the day when he decided it was time for sleep.

But she was used to it. She'd worked through several of these marathon stints during her time with him and knew that just when she was about to drop from mental exhaustion he would push his swivel chair away from his desk, cross his arms behind his head, give her that devastating grin and announce, 'Right, that's sorted. Time to play.' And he would whisk her out to the theatre and supper, to dinner and a nightclub, to an island retreat, which he just happened to have heard about, for a few sun-soaked days, bringing as much restless energy to his chosen method of relaxing as he did to his work.

This time, though, she wouldn't allow that to happen. Circumstances had changed, and she with them—of necessity—and so she interrupted his chain of concentration, her voice clipped and expressionless as she told him, 'It's time I advertised my position. I'll sift through any applicants we get and compile a short list for you to interview.'

'Don't bother. I'll see to it.' He didn't look up from the paperwork, just slashed an underlining pen beneath part of the text, tossed the report aside and dragged the next one from the pile.

'That won't be necessary,' she stated firmly, letting him know she was in control in that department. If he was left to his own devious devices, the advertisement would never be placed. He was probably right when he believed that very few people would put up with his eccentric work habits!

And he probably believed that if a replacement wasn't chosen within the time she had stipulated he could work on her sympathies, her loyalty, the two years they had shared and persuade her to stay on... and on...

'I know exactly how to word the job description, what qualifications are needed, how to stress the importance of the right attitude to your far from normal working hours,' she added tartly. 'I do know what you want.'

'Do you? I wonder!' Grey eyes impaled her, the lancing silver gleam almost her undoing. 'In fact, I'm quite sure you don't, but that's something I'm prepared to work on.' He dipped his dark head again, intent on his paperwork, informing her, almost offhandedly, 'Put the problem of your replacement out of your head and concentrate on the job in hand. I already

have someone in mind. I make plans for each and every contingency—you, of all people, should know that.'

That pushed all her hard-won control out of sight. Clamping her jaws together, she stared at the back of his head. She very much wanted to hit him.

So he had already found a replacement, had he? He must have conducted that particular search at the speed of light! Had he proposed a paper marriage—with lots of lovely financial embellishments—to some other poor idiot? The arrangement to take effect just as soon as he'd rid himself of the present incumbent?

'Stop grinding your teeth,' he said, sounding just slightly bored. 'It could develop into an irritating habit. And don't slam the door on your way out.'

Had he always been able to second-guess her reactions, read the way her mind worked? she asked herself stormily as she stalked out of the room and found herself slamming the door behind her with a crash which reverberated around the sumptuous apartment. And was it her imagination, or did she really hear a deep masculine chuckle from behind the smooth wood panels?

Telling herself she didn't care either way, she walked away, and only realised she was standing in the centre of the kitchen when Mrs Fellows, from the agency, busily cleaning the inside of the windows, imparted, 'I put the fish and the eggs in the fridge, and the fruit's on the dresser. Give me a list if there's anything you want me to bring on Friday when I'm in next.'

'No, nothing, thanks.' Claire managed a smile and hauled her brain together. 'I've one or two personal bits and pieces to get; I can pick up any provisions we need at the same time.'

Whether Jake liked it or not, he was going to have to learn that she wasn't a mindlessly willing appendage, bound to his side by a length of convenient, invisible, unbreakable string.

Besides, the personal bits and pieces were a vital part of the plan she'd formulated. And maybe if she dug her heels in and became really

uncooperative he would get his act together and install her replacement—whoever that might be—with all possible speed.

Deciding to find out over lunch who the replacement was, and when he or she could be expected to put in an appearance, Claire glanced at her watch and broke eggs into a bowl for an omelette. Lunch would be a good hour earlier than normal, thanks to the way she had stormed out of the office in a temper, and if he objected to the timing he could do without.

But he didn't, and he didn't give her time to raise the subject of her replacement, talking business all through the light meal, but informally, as always, bouncing ideas off her, really listening to what she had to say, so much his usual irrepressively incisive, dry and clever self that she wanted to cry. She loved him so much, loved every single damn thing about him.

And the pity and the pain of it was, she had to leave him.

'... let the Caribbean thing drop. I'll off-load it, and if I make a loss it can't be helped. Get a fax through to the architect—Richardson—Gerald Richardson, isn't it?'

'Jethro,' she supplied automatically. 'He won't like being pulled off the job.' She'd been with Jake when they'd wandered, with the infectiously enthusiastic young architect, around the neglected plantation house on the wooded spur that overlooked one of the loveliest tropical beaches she had ever seen.

'He might not like it, but he'll be well-paid,' Jake replied, his ruthlessness tempered by his well-honed business acumen. 'And as I'll recommend his excellent services to the buyer when we find one, he need shed no tears.'

'I'd have thought you'd have wanted to hang on to the property,' she objected as she left the table to fetch the coffee. 'It has enormous potential.'

'I don't touch anything that hasn't,' he replied cuttingly, helping himself from the fruit bowl. 'As you must know. But in this case I don't think the eventual rewards will be worth the hard work and hassle, the time I'd have to put into the project.'

Quickly, she poured his coffee, noting dispassionately the unsteadiness of her hand. That last statement of his said it all, confirmed everything she had thought. He had viewed his offer to make their marriage a real one as a way to combat her alleged boredom, her need to move on. And perhaps he had cynically decided that that was what she'd been angling for all along. But he'd backed off at her first refusal. The eventual rewards—ensuring that she stayed safely put, more bound to him than ever—hadn't been worth the trouble of trying to persuade her.

He couldn't have known how little persuasion she would have needed. A kiss or two and she would have been lost to reason, to everything, jeopardising her future happiness and peace of mind for passionate love of him.

No, he hadn't known, and probably hadn't cared too much either. He was an expert at cutting his losses, putting them behind him and getting on with his brilliant life. So he'd given a mental shrug and walked away, leaving immediately for Rome and that woman, and was now acting as if nothing had changed, waiting to see if she would carry out her threat to leave him and throw away all the financial benefits that came with their arrangement.

And if she did walk out, well, he could live with that. He'd already found a possible replacement.

'I'll go and put a message to Jethro Richardson together,' she told him tightly. 'I don't want coffee.' Her pale features set, she left him and went to the office. He could be a callous bastard. She didn't know why she was stupid enough to love him. The true state of his feelings for her—total indifference—should make her radiant with relief for her lucky escape—not like a cold, wet Sunday, she told herself tartly, hovering over the phone, waiting until she heard him approach the door. And when he walked through she dropped the receiver back on its rest, her pale ivory skin stained with the feverish flush of a guilt that was in no way contrived because she was hating what she was having to do.

But he had brought it on himself.

'Who were you phoning?' The tone of voice was almost offhand, but the sharp, bright query in those silver eyes gave him away. There was more than idle curiosity there, and that was what she wanted.

'Oh, no one,' she answered, her voice bright and just a little too shrill. 'Wrong number.'

'Really? I didn't hear it ring.' As he would have done if it had—there were extensions in almost every room in the apartment. She could tell by the sudden slitting of his eyes that he knew she was lying.

Claire turned away quickly, shrugging, and he rewarded her duplicity by snapping rapid-fire dictation at her all afternoon until her head, wrist and eyes were aching and she was driven to interrupt, 'Does my replacement know what a slave-driver you can be? And when does she start? It is a she, I take it? A mere male couldn't be expected to cook your meals and choose your clothes and sort your laundry!'

Which got her precisely nowhere because he merely gave her a look which told her he hadn't listened to a single word and carried on dictating. And from what she could gather from the content he had digested the mountain of reports they'd been working on all week, decided which of his varied enterprises he would keep on, which he would offload—no doubt at huge profits—and as it would appear that he would be off-loading the majority she sourly deduced that her replacement would have a much easier time of it than she had ever had!

And she was beginning to have serious doubts about her plan of action. When she'd first told him she wanted out he had as good as dismissed the idea. He'd gone out of his way to tell her that Liz's new-found financial independence didn't negate their original agreement. But it now seemed that he had accepted it. He'd gone to the trouble to find her replacement, so that meant she didn't have to go ahead with her plan to invoke the opt-out clause, she thought wearily.

He called a halt for supper at eleven. Eleven hours since they'd had that omelette. When he was in furious-work mode he never seemed to remember to eat or take even a short breather. Claire had gone beyond hunger now and,

bleary-eyed and aching with fatigue, grilled the fish for him, put a potato in the microwave and prepared a salad which was far below her usual high standard.

He was punishing her, not only for her temerity in telling him she wanted their agreement to end, but for that lie about the phone call. Even when he was working flat out, driving himself beyond the capabilities of any other mortal, he had always insisted she take a break, waving her away when she suggested that he do the same.

He wandered through to the kitchen, which was where he preferred to eat, just as she put his solitary meal on the table.

'You're not joining me?'

'Not hungry,' she answered listlessly, wondering how he could look as fresh as a daisy while she felt like-a four-week-old lettuce. He gave her a narrow-eyed, disapproving glare and she asked, because if she didn't her stupid, over-tired brain would worry away at it all night and deny her weary body the sleep it craved, 'You told me you'd already found my replacement. Will you want me to show her the ropes? When does she start?'

'I have absolutely no idea.' He grinned at her, his eyes full of wickedness. Then he sat at the table, piling salad on to his plate, boning his sole with his usual expertise and beginning to eat with every sign of enjoyment. 'Let's forget about your replacement, shall we?' he suggested infuriatingly, his eyes caressing her stiff little face. 'You know you don't want to leave me.' He made an expansive gesture with one hand. 'So why don't you sit and we can talk about it?'

She had opened a bottle of light, crisp Moselle. It was on the table, with one glass. He poured some of the wine and edged it over the table.

'If you're too wound up to eat, drink a little wine to help you relax. Then we'll talk this thing through like two sensible people,' he purred, the glint in his eyes telling her what she already knew. In this mood he was doubly dangerous.

'No,' she got out in a strangled voice. When he looked like that, spoke like that—as if they were closer than lovers, dearer than friends—he could persuade her, and any other female in existence, to anything. 'I'm too tired to think straight. I'm going to bed.'

And too angry to argue coherently, score logical points. Running away from a battle wasn't her style, but she needed all her wits about her—and then some—to outwit Jake The Devious, The Machiavellian. She would need a very clear head indeed. Ragged rage wouldn't win this particular battle, she fumed as she dragged her plain cotton nightshirt over her head.

He had lied. He hadn't found a replacement at all. His airy 'I have absolutely no idea' said it all. In his arrogance he was still sublimely confident that he could persuade her to stay on—when he got round to putting his mind to it.

She was going to have to stick to her original plan. Make him believe she had fallen in love with someone else. Invoke the opt-out clause in their agreement. Not even he could argue with that!

## CHAPTER EIGHT

SPANGLES of snow glittered on the soft dark silk of her hair and her cheeks were flushed a delicate pink from the cold east wind as she entered the apartment, the black carriers with their classy gilt logo dangling from her kid-gloved fingers.

It was very quiet in here, the understated luxury doing nothing to soothe her taut nerves. Too quiet. A hushed stillness that boded no good at all. Claire dragged in a long, deep breath, slid open the mirrored doors of the wardrobe and hung up her coat, fingering the slim gold chain around her neck, undoing the top button of her sleek scarlet suit jacket, and reflecting that her deception was costing an arm and a leg, and not only financially. Deceiving Jake was making her hate herself.

But there really was no other way. If she had come straight out with it, cold, and told him she had fallen in love, wanted to end their agreement because she was going to marry the man in question and live happily ever after, he would have immediately wanted to know who the man was, where they had met, demanded to meet the guy to satisfy himself that he would make her a fit second husband because, as she knew very well, he had a strong sense of duty.

This way, sowing seeds of suspicion, letting him figure out for himself exactly what was going on, was the best, the only way. Even if it did leave a spectacularly nasty taste in her mouth.

His suspicious reaction to her phone call to Liz, all those weeks ago, had given her the idea. And she'd been working on it ever since they'd come back to the apartment, over six weeks ago now. The phone calls she'd made sure he interrupted, the new, ultra-feminine clothes she'd splurged out on, the sultry perfume, the excuses she'd made to pop out for an hour or two...

And it was working; she knew it was. The evidence of that was all there in the way she would sometimes look up and see him watching her, catch the hard, speculative look in his eyes, note the grim line of his mouth.

Not that she'd given him anything concrete to base his suspicions on up until now, just hints, a change in her behaviour patterns. Like the way she'd put on a sulky act when she'd had to accompany him to Hong Kong on business a couple of weeks ago, the untypical and total lack of interest she'd shown in the way he was selling off the majority of his interests, backing out of her role of hostess when, as today, for instance, he'd asked her to set up a working lunch with a couple of bankers, his UK company lawyer and an overseas buyer for Harlow's, manufacturers of high-quality glassware.

Harlow's had been the first ailing company he'd bought out, pruning and streamlining it, making it a highly profitable and prestigious world leader. And because it had been his first venture he had always had a special affection for the company and why he was off-loading it now was a mystery to her.

As were other things. It wasn't like him to liquidise so many of his assets in one fell swoop. If he went on like this he'd have nothing to do but sit on his millions and grow fat. And bored.

Unless, of course, he was planning on spending far more time with his *principessa*. But that didn't make a whole load of sense because, apart from the occasions when she'd deliberately absented herself for a few hours, he hadn't been out of her sight since he'd returned from Rome on Christmas Eve. There'd been no contact between the two, as far as she knew. And if the Italian woman was content to wait in the wings until he'd settled his affairs, she, Claire, was the Emperor of China.

From the photograph she had seen, Lorella Giancetti looked wayward and spoiled, far more capable of petulance than patience.

She dragged in a shuddering breath, feeling wretched. His plans wouldn't affect her, of course. But they were keeping secrets from each other, for the first time in two years, and it hurt more than she would ever have believed possible.

Still clutching her carriers, she headed for the office. From the silence in the apartment, the absence of strange overcoats in the wardrobe, she knew the

business lunch was long over. Knew, with a sensation of deep inner dread, that Jake would be furious, and rightly so.

And his face, when he turned from the window where he had been watching the quiet London square, told her how right she'd been to anticipate his fury.

A shudder wrenched through her slender body but she suppressed it, unwilling to let him know how deeply everything about him could affect her, and deliberately opened her eyes very wide, in a painfully achieved parody of innocence, when he rasped, 'So you finally decided to float back. I'm beginning to find your excuses of exhaustion more than a little tiresome. I made my own notes; you'll find them on my desk. It's your problem if you can't make sense of them.'

The grimly savage line of his mouth tore at her heart. She wanted to fling herself into his arms, tell him she was sorry, sorry for everything, confess that she hated having to act this way. The temptation, for a moment, was almost more than she could cope with. But resist she must; the other was unthinkable; it would negate everything she had been forcing herself to do.

'Oh, don't be such a grouch!' She made herself smile but wasn't quite able to meet his eyes now. 'I offered to get the agency to send round a secretary to sub for me, but you refused point blank, remember? And I engaged the best caterers I could lay my hands on, so the lunch, at least, must have been a success. And if I'd sat in on it my head would have exploded.' She wandered over to her own desk, doing her best to look relaxed. 'You've worked my socks off these past few weeks; you know you have. So is it any wonder I need a few hours' leisure now and then? I'm just about fit to drop.'

'From where I'm standing, you don't look it.' A threat was threaded through the hard, dark irony of his voice. Claire gulped. What could he possibly threaten her with? Nothing. She sat down behind her desk, airily tossing the carriers to the floor where they proved the distraction she desperately needed as the exotic contents spilled out, as she had intended they should.

Slinky, slithery wisps of silk and satin and cobwebby lace. Seductive underwear fit for a siren. As far different from her normal sensible choices as it was possible to get. Keeping her eyes on the little pile of froth and

frivolity, she heard him cross the room, saw one well-polished leather toe-cap touch an ice-blue satin teddy, and felt her face go very red as he asked with frozen venom, 'Blossoming out, Claire? Who's the lucky beneficiary— or shouldn't I ask?'

So the suspicions she'd so carefully planted in his mind had taken root, blossoming into certainty. Everything was working out better than she'd expected.

She didn't know why she suddenly wanted to cry. But she did.

Swallowing hard, she scrambled from her chair, on to her knees, and began thrusting the tell-tale garments back into the bags, and the ring suspended on the fine gold chain around her neck swung freely from the neckline of her jacket, as she had planned that it should at some time during the afternoon.

With a flare of hectic colour that she knew must look like guilt, she tried to push it back into hiding, but he was too quick for her, bending and grasping her upper arms, dragging her to her feet, one lean, steel-fingered hand snapping the chain from her neck, holding it out, the showy paste ring dangling, glittering with a faked brightness that suddenly seemed obscene.

Enclosed in a prison of raw emotion, he held her eyes with his own, with a savagery as harsh as the vice of his single hand. And his words came slowly, precisely enunciated, utterly damning in the silence that was broken only by her fluttering heartbeats. 'Who gave you this?'

His eyes bemused, confused her, held her. Black with emotion. She might have called it pain, if she hadn't known better. Anger she could understand. He wouldn't want to be seen as a cuckold in the eyes of the world. But there was more than that, she would swear to it. But what? She felt disorientated, her breathing ragged, pulses beating frantically in her throat...

'Tell me, Claire.'

His hand gave her arm a little shake while the dreadful ring swayed hypnotically from the fingers of his other hand, and she scrabbled around in

her mind, dredging up the lie she had thought of for just this scenario, and croaked, trying to sound bright and flippant and failing dismally, 'It belongs to Liz. She asked me to get it altered. It's too big.'

He dropped her arm immediately, stepping back from her, dropping the ring on the broken chain on to her desk. The heat of intense emotion dissipated, coldness creeping round her. He didn't believe it. He hadn't been meant to believe it. Liz wouldn't be seen dead wearing such a gaudy, graceless thing. He knew his mother-in-law very well, certainly well enough to know that her tastes wouldn't run to such cheap ostentation.

She watched him walk to the door, picking up his discarded grey suit jacket on the way, hooking it over his shoulder. The blank look in his eyes made her want to throw back her head and howl. She loved him more than life itself, yet she was building a sordid barrier of deceit between them, one that would never be breached, something that would push all the warm and stimulating companionship that had once been the hallmark of their relationship right into the background where it would wither and die and be completely forgotten, by him, at least.

Soon now, very soon, she would tell him she had met someone she wanted to marry, to share the rest of her life with. He wouldn't be able to argue with that—she had carefully planted all the false evidence—and he would have to let her go.

The prospect of never being able to see him again, talk to him, share her life with him, filled her with dread. But there really was no sensible or sane alternative.

'If you're not too exhausted...' he paused at the door, his eyes pinning her to her seat '...you can type up my notes, get the relevant letters written and off. And if you'd wanted a ring, my dear wife--' his mouth tilted cruelly '—you only had to ask. I'd have given you the real thing, not a piece of tat.'

The real thing, she echoed inside her head as he closed the door decisively behind him. He might have given her diamonds instead of paste, but only because he wouldn't touch anything that wasn't the best. But when it came to affairs of the heart he wouldn't recognise the real thing if it bit him.

Their marriage, such as it was, had been a sham from the start. A living lie. And, even when he had tried to persuade her to make it a real one, that had been another kind of sham, a cruel decision to take advantage of her weakness. And, had she gone along with it, it would have degenerated into a living hell. So no, he wouldn't recognise the real thing, a truly loving relationship, if one walked right up to him and took his hand and introduced itself!

Feeling as if her heart was being wrenched in two, she dropped the showy ring into the top drawer of her desk, retrieved his notes and spent the rest of the afternoon at the keyboard, trying to decipher his impatient scrawl. And she couldn't believe her eyes when he strolled into the room just as she was finally finishing up.

He looked serene; that was the only way she could describe it to herself. She couldn't understand it and it made her feel confused.

'I've put the notes on the computer and the letters on your desk for your signature,' she informed him stiltedly, blinking at the warmth of his smile. It was as if the sour altercation of a few hours ago had never happened, she thought, hating the way a simple smile could take her breath away.

'Good girl,' he approved. 'That takes care of just about everything.' His mouth twitched, making her poor, stupid heart judder all over again. 'I've made supper, as a reward.'

A reward for what? For doing what she was handsomely paid to do? And Jake make supper? Unheard of! No one could come less domesticated than him. He appreciated good food, but only if it was exquisitely prepared and put in front of him, just as he always insisted on wearing the best but relied on someone else—her, as it happened—to look after his wardrobe. Left to his own devices he would appear in jeans and a dinner-jacket and two odd shoes because his clever mind was too bound up with his huge business empire to have much time for anything else.

So this was a peace-offering? she wondered warily, following him from the room. She could face his culinary attempts with equanimity; she was perfectly willing to settle for what would probably turn out to be a hunk of

bread and a lump of cheese—but this forgiving attitude, this let's-pretend-it-never-happened scene gave her considerable cause for alarm.

She neither wanted nor needed his forgiveness. Good grief, if he'd decided to overlook what he would surely class as a sneaky affair, return to the status quo and turn a blind eye if she upped and went at totally inconvenient times, returning drenched with unfamiliar perfume, all flushed and flustered, that would mean that all her carefully laid clues had been a total waste of time. Not to mention all the misery she'd given herself all through the deception.

And the wariness increased, almost making her cut and run when she realised that, far from supping at the kitchen table on whatever cold scraps he'd dragged out of the fridge, he'd pulled out all the stops. The elegant dining-room was lit by the twin glittering chandeliers, the inlaid oval table set with the exquisite china and cutlery that was only ever used on the occasions when they entertained in style.

'My, my, you have gone to town!' She'd hoped to sound vaguely amused, condescending, but had to admit privately that her voice could have belonged to a sore-throated frog. And no one could have faulted the meal he'd produced, simple but perfect, the spaghetti cooked just as she liked it, the sauce rich and aromatic, the side-salads a creative masterpiece.

'I aim to impress,' he told her softly, serving her lavishly before serving himself and pouring the Chianti Classico, and she felt her eyes go bleak because impress her he certainly had, but she didn't know why he'd bothered, things being as they were, and she wasn't going to ask because the answer might frighten her silly.

'Both Lungarotti's banker and mine were more than satisfied with the arrangements for the Italian buy-out,' he told her, expertly winding spaghetti round his silver fork. 'You would have liked him, had you met him. He's what I'd call a creative corporation man, with the rare bonus of a great sense of humour, style and wit. Harlow's will be in safe hands.'

Claire concentrated on her plate. Despite having skipped lunch she wasn't hungry. It was difficult to swallow. As difficult as his strange change of mood. She had fully expected him to be righteously wrathful at the way

she'd let him down over today's important meeting, bunking off, only telling him of her intention, the arrangements she'd made with the caterers a scant hour before his guests were due to arrive.

And let him down for what? A clandestine meeting with a lover during which she'd been presented with that awful ring, followed by a quick flip around one of the most expensive boutiques in the city to stock up on frillies to add spice to her affair.

So why wasn't he still stingingly angry? Why was he discussing his complicated business affairs with her, giving her information that would have set the stock market on its ears? Because he still trusted her implicitly, believed her sneaky love-affair— though annoying because it was the first he had found her out in—would soon fizzle out, leaving her more than content to stay put, despite her stated contrary intentions, because those he obviously regarded as hot air.

Over the two years she had been with him she had become adept at reading his mind, congratulating herself that she was probably the only person who could. But now he confused her, troubled her, and if eating the food he'd prepared was a very private problem, then trying to figure out what he was up to while, at the same time, endeavouring to make intelligent comments was another.

'That was delicious,' she told him when she judged she'd eaten just about enough to be polite. 'You've been keeping secrets from me. I had no idea you were such an excellent cook.'

'I am?' He seemed mildly astonished as he leaned forward and replenished her glass. Claire flicked her eyes away. The taupe silk shirt he was wearing above classical, narrow-fitting dark grey trousers highlighted the superb configuration of the sleek muscularity of his chest and shoulders. 'I can't remember when I last cooked anything remotely resembling a meal. I recall helping my mother make cheese straws when I was about six.' A dark brow lilted upwards, his mouth wry. 'After all, it's merely a matter of common sense. I decided to feed you for a change, and when I decide to do something I approach it with enthusiasm and do it properly.'

His words disclaimed his new-found ability with herbs and sun-dried tomatoes and rich olive oil but his eyes were telling her something else.

She buried her nose in her wine glass, hoping to hide her sudden, unwelcome and totally unsophisticated flush. She knew all about his enthusiasm, his total dedication to whatever he had in hand. Harmless enough as a comment on his particular, vital personality, yet wicked because his eyes were telling her he remembered—and was making sure she remembered, too—the enthusiasm and expertise he'd brought into play when he'd decided, on that never-to-be-forgotten occasion, to make love to her.

It was something she refused to think about. She couldn't afford to remember how nearly he'd persuaded her to consummate their marriage, how easily...

So maybe now was the right time to invoke the opt-out clause, tell him she'd fallen in love? That, at least, wouldn't be a lie because she had. With him. And the bald statement would at least put a stop to this awful forgive-and-forget magnanimity of his. It was dangerous; it made her melt with love for him, made her feel so guilty, mean and besmirched...

But the moment was gone, the painful resolve to verbalise the lie she had merely, up until now, told through her actions melted away, she weakly yielding because, after all, the telling was utterly distasteful, and she dismissed it without any real regret at all, just for now, as he began to gather the used dishes and plates, telling her, 'Our estimable home help can deal with this lot tomorrow. I've got a few phone calls to make so why don't you get off to bed? Perhaps a really early night might help with that exhaustion you're plagued with,' he ended on a sardonic drawl that made her cringe inside and meekly do as he had suggested because her lies had rebounded on her and she really did feel exhausted in body and mind, unable to cope with the strain, unable to think on her feet and come up with answers.

It probably served her right, she thought drearily as she crawled into bed. And the only thing she could do to end the present misery was to steel herself to tell the final lie first thing in the morning, demand that he release her, allow her to walk out of his life, and try, somehow, to come to terms

with the fact that the man she loved would never love her, never see her as anything more than a useful right hand, the perfect cover for his uncommitted affairs.

Try, if she could, to get over him.

## CHAPTER NINE

'MOVE it, small sloth! Drink your tea—it's a great day out there. Sun's shining, snow's gone. Did you know you snore? I learn something new each day— ain't life fascinating?'

'I do not snore!' Claire argued sleepily, pulling the duvet over her head and settling more neatly into the nice warm nest of her cosy bed. And how would he know, anyway? He was making it up. And how any normal person could be expected to cope with his early morning vitality was beyond her, but she'd been working on it for the past couple of years, and was probably getting there, because she didn't even scowl when he tweaked the covering away from her head, just gazed up at him blearily as he repeated,

'Drink your tea.'

Since when had he started to bring her a wake- up cup of tea in the morning? she wondered fuzzily. Since never. With the tiny part of her mind that was just beginning to show some signs of intelligence from the middle of the fogs of sleep, she registered that he was casually dressed in black cord trousers topped by a chunky Aran sweater, looking more vividly alive than anyone had a right to be before ten in the morning at the earliest.

'Go away,' she grumbled good-humouredly. 'Go dig a hole in the road and bury a bus, use up some of that dreadful energy out of my sight.' Making a determined attempt to wriggle further down the bed, she gasped as she felt his hands on her arms, hauling her up against the pillows. And the touch of his strong warm hands on her naked skin was all that was necessary to bring everything back, all the awfulness of what was happening.

She bit hard on her lower lip and her fingers gripped the cup and saucer he placed in her hands. Just for a few moments, before she'd come properly awake, she'd forgotten. It had been wonderful. Imagining she'd been back in the safety of their old harmonious and mentally stimulating relationship—before she'd spoiled everything by falling in love with him—had been blissful, a balm to her troubled soul and a comfort to her poor aching heart.

'Thank you,' she said stiffly, meaning for the tea. 'I'll get up just as soon as I've had this.' Because she expected him to observe the proprieties and leave, agitation made her a nervous wreck as he did no such thing, sitting casually on the side of the bed, watching her from those inscrutable silver eyes.

Was he comparing her plain cotton sleeveless nightshirt with the frothy bits of nonsense she'd made sure he saw in all their glory yesterday afternoon? Was he wondering how she would look in that wicked black silk nightdress, for instance, all perfumed and melting as she waited for her lover in some sleazy hotel room, where such clandestine assignations were made?

'Get dressed in something comfortable and pack a load of warm gear,' he instructed, astounding her.

She had expected some reference to her recent behaviour, his own deductions, perhaps even a little speech, telling her that he would turn a blind eye to her affair, provided she was sensible about it and, above all, discreet. She had not expected instructions on what she would wear today. And why should she pack? They weren't going anywhere.

But apparently they were. She finished the last of her tea in a painful gulp as he imparted, quite at ease, not looking for ructions, 'We'll be spending the next two weeks or so in a cottage in Wales. Tucked away in the mountains of Dyfed.' He rolled the word around his mouth as if savouring the sound of it and Claire thought wildly, That's impossible.

She snapped defensively, 'You're not expecting me to spend a couple of weeks on a mountain at this time of year, are you?'

And he picked that up immediately, of course he did, doing her character an unknowing injustice as he questioned, 'Why? Too uncivilised for you?' His hard eyes mocked her. 'You've grown immensely in sophistication and, hopefully, maturity over the past two years. But don't forget there are other things in life besides the jet-setting, push-button life of luxury you've got used to.' He eased one long, lean, formidably strong black-clad leg over the other, but the would-be casual movement didn't hide the inner tension that

encroached on his beautifully hewn features. 'Or is there another, stronger reason than a fastidious dislike for roughing it?'

Now was the right time, the absolutely perfect time, for coming out with the speech she'd rehearsed so often in her head. The other man, the love of her life... But she floundered, the words jumbling up in her brain like a tangle of mangled knitting, making no sense at all, taking no recognisable shape. Mutely, she shook her head to try and clear it and the moment was lost and he was telling her succinctly, 'I don't believe you, but we'll leave it for now. I have a project in mind and I need you there.' He added with a dangerous softness, 'You are still working with me, remember?'

That did it, she thought weakly, leaning back against the pillows as he walked from the room. He didn't know it, of course, but his whole attitude had the ability to touch her deeply. He had always insisted she work with him, not for him. And he still did. Even though he knew she was trying to squirm out of their agreement, and had to suspect the reason why, he still regarded the two of them as the close-knit working item of happier, better days.

She wondered, a little wildly, if there happened to be such a word as 'unwomaned'. Because if there was that was precisely what he did to her.

Two hours later, driving out of London in the brand-new four-wheel-drive vehicle that had been delivered to the apartment at ten that morning, Claire still felt disorientated, as if daylight reality had been invaded by strange, misty, shifting dreams where nothing was ever as it seemed.

The last couple of hours had been hectic. She'd packed for them both while Jake had been making long, complicated phone calls, telling Mrs Fellows, who had come in as usual, that she wouldn't be needed for a couple of weeks, finally coming across Jake in the kitchen stuffing the contents of the fridge and storage cupboards into carriers, which, with last night's successful venture into the culinary arts, added up to an interest in things domestic that she would never have expected from him in a million years.

'We're going to have to fend for ourselves,' he'd told her, a wicked gleam in his eyes. 'There'll be no delivery service where we're going, no Harrods food hall around the corner. It should be fun.'

'Really?' she'd answered dully. Two weeks with Jake in pioneer mode might just be more than she could take. Enthusiasm had lit his strong-boned, handsome face and the dark hair, the short, conventional style—the end result of exceptionally expert cutting—had been ruffled, making her fingers clench at her sides, aching to run through the soft, warm thickness of it. 'I don't understand why you're interested in an isolated cottage,' she'd followed on quickly because her thoughts were running in directions they had no business taking and that sensual, beautiful male mouth of his seemed on the verge of laughter—at her expense, no doubt. 'Recently you've been more interested in off-loading than acquiring.'

'Do you know, sweetheart--' he'd tipped his dark head consideringly on one side, that grin breaking out, blinding her '—you look gorgeously sultry when you try to be prissy? And I'm not acquiring, merely borrowing.'

'Why?' she'd asked stiltedly, doing her best to ignore the sweetly painful lurch inside her. She didn't know how she would handle it if he decided to amuse himself by flirting with her.

'Well, that's for me to know and you to find out. All I'm prepared to tell you is that it has important implications for the future.'

She'd almost drawled, Really? again, but had stopped herself just in time. As far as she was concerned the going-nowhere conversation was over. Taking one of the bulging carriers, she'd exited huffily, dumping it in the elegant foyer where the suitcases she'd packed were waiting. He was impossible, and she didn't know why she was going along with this latest madness, why she hadn't taken the heaven-sent opportunity to tell him the lie that would end everything.

But she knew why, she'd thought sadly as she'd waited while he activated the complex security systems and called down to the janitor's office to advise on the length of their probable absence. She knew perfectly well why she had let the opportunity go without any fight at all. She hated lying to

him and she wasn't going to start lying to herself. She wasn't brave enough, or strong enough, to take the final, irreversible step on the road that would lead to a permanent separation. That was the shameful truth.

Since then she had retreated into her cool little shell, sitting mutely beside him as he handled the big vehicle with consummate ease through the snarl of mid-morning traffic. He wasn't to know how desperately she was trying to replace the backbone that seemed to have gone missing, and he wouldn't realise how that contained vitality of his, hitting her with violent shock-waves in the confined space, interfered so diabolically with her good intentions.

She hadn't been born weak, or been brought up to be that way. Quite the opposite, in fact. But here she was, meekly going along with him—his reasons for going at all not making sense—just because she needed and craved every last moment she was able to spend with him, hoarding them up against a barren future.

Loving him had made her a mental wreck. She should have left him weeks and weeks ago, the moment she'd realised she loved him. But all she'd done was plot and plan, prevaricate, make endless excuses for lingering, prolonging the sweet torment.

She despised and loathed herself.

'Sulking?' he asked, breaking the silence at last, and she shot a wary sideways glance at his clean profile. It told her absolutely nothing. He had accused her of doing just that on the Hong Kong trip, and she hadn't argued because she'd been putting on that act, letting him know she was far from happy at being away from London, leaving him to come up with the reason.

She gave a non-committal shrug, knowing his attention was on the road, that he wouldn't see it. Knowing, too, that he would sense it. He didn't miss a thing. He never had, which was one of the reasons why his high-flying career had been the success story of the decade.

'Just thinking,' she gave him the truth, leaving him to make what he liked of it—hopefully that she was devastated because he was enforcing a distance between her and her lover.

'Tell me,' he commanded lightly. 'I like to know what goes on inside your head.'

She wasn't going to rise to the provocation and ask him why. The seeds of suspicion she'd sown had grown into the sturdy plants of conviction, surely? Let him wonder; it would only help her sorry cause in the end. Bringing out the subject that popped straight into her mind, she said idly, 'I take it the house has been put on the back burner. Or is that yet another of the projects you've lost interest in?'

She couldn't help the sting of bitterness. He'd soon lost interest in her as a 'project', hadn't he? That particular inconstancy still had the power to hurt unbearably. The place hadn't been mentioned since they'd been back in London and she didn't know why. He had been so pleased with it, his newest acquisition—though 'pleased' was too tame a word to describe the deep, simmering satisfaction of that time. And in some strange, counterproductive way she had been piqued because he hadn't asked for her input, as he had said he would.

Could he see the inevitability of their separation, even though he was trying to deny it would happen? Was he already—maybe only unconsciously—beginning to shut her out of the private, personally important part of his life?

'Harnage?' The brief glance, the tight turn of his head, was at once intense and demanding. Then he returned his attention to the road. 'No way,' he disabused her. 'We're both going to be putting a considerable amount of time in on the house in the near future.'

He left it at that, as if that explained everything, leaving nothing left to be said, and Claire slumped deeper into her seat, foolishly, fiercely glad.

By the time they came to the end of the stony track and the sturdy vehicle was parked in front of a squat stone cottage that appeared to be halfway dug into the bleak mountainside, the day had lost all semblance of an early spring and had slid back into an unarguably wintry afternoon.

A shrill wind blew out of the immense, darkening sky and the vast, empty miles of mountain ranges were painted in shifting shades of silver and grey, and Claire huddled into her coat while Jake dug in his pockets for the door key. She sniped, 'Whoever you borrowed this place from has to be a masochist.' Because she couldn't let him know, could she, that being alone with him here, just the two of them, in this wild and splendid isolation, would test her to the limit of her endurance?

'You should see it in the summertime.' The quality of the light toned his skin to dusky olive. His teeth gleamed a white contrast. 'Martin Beck, the guy who owns it, was at school with me. We never completely lost touch.' He slotted the key into the lock and pushed open the heavy wooden door. 'He heads one of the busiest advertising agencies in London and whenever he feels he's in danger of losing his marbles he brings his family out here. He owes me a couple of favours and I called them in last night over the phone. He sent me the key by special messenger and we have the run of the place for as long as it takes.'

For as long as it takes for what? Claire thought dizzily, following him inside, her legs feeling like lead. She had believed she knew him as well as one person could ever know another, but his behaviour and his motives right now were frankly beyond her and, just as obviously, there were huge chunks of his past life she knew nothing about. Was never likely to now.

The stark realisation caused her unassuageable grief.

But she was going to have to live with it, wasn't she? she told herself derisively. That she was here at all was entirely her own fault. She'd had the chance to do something positive, tell him their marriage was over because she'd found another man, and walk right out. So she'd just have to grit her teeth and muddle along for as long as it took, she thought, echoing his own earlier phrase, still with no idea of what he'd meant, and blinked when he lit an oil-lamp and the room they were in flickered to life.

The stone walls had been washed in a soft apricot colour and the furniture was chintzy or pine, with warm-coloured rugs on the slate floor and enough accumulated chill to freeze the bones.

'Apparently we have a generator in a shed at the back,' Jake said, as if he couldn't wait to get his hands on it. 'Lamplight's romantic, but we need the power for the fridge and the hot-water supply. Why don't you fetch the stuff in from the car while I get it going and root around for the makings of a fire?' And he disappeared through a door at the far end of the room.

Claire wondered if his old schoolfriend had given him a detailed description of the layout over the phone and trudged outside again to do as she'd been told.

If playing Girl Friday to his unexpected Robinson was what it took, then she'd comply because simply by being here she had no option, but 'romantic' she could do without. She was under enough emotional pressure as it was, without him rabbiting on about the effects of lamplight.

By the time she'd deposited the suitcases in the living-room and stowed the foodstuffs they'd brought from the apartment into the quietly humming fridge in the huge, homey kitchen, Jake had built a fire, and as he was washing his hands in icy cold water at the deep stone sink Claire was wound up enough to forget that she'd decided not to ask, and wanted to know, 'Now what do we do? I still don't know why you wanted to come here.'

'We're here to relax,' he told her, his slow, burning smile turning her bones to water, making all her nerve-ends jump. 'Makes a change from tropical islands or tiny Spanish fishing villages.'

Claire turned quickly, walking stiffly into the other room. She had to remove herself from those clever, gleaming eyes. She would give herself away, let him see how much she loved him, how desperately she needed him. He couldn't know how cruel he was being.

Harsh tears choking her, she knelt in front of the youthful fire and poked at the barely burning coals savagely, for something to do, something to drain away just a little of the building tension. And Jake said behind her, his voice

warm and slow, 'You'll put it out if you do that. Leave it.' He cupped his hands beneath her elbows, hauling her to her feet, his hands sliding down to her waist, pulling her against the steely strength of his body.

She stood rigidly still; it was the only way to maintain her shaky self-control. If she moved, against him, the sensation would be her undoing, her ruin. And she almost cried aloud when he said with a soft compassion that tore at her heart, 'Something's going badly wrong. It started when Liz received that legacy. And we're here to talk it out, put it right. But not yet.' His head dipped briefly, resting against her own, and she held her breath, terribly, terribly afraid that she would turn in his arms and bury her head against the warmth of his body, tell him everything, the truth, that she loved him, couldn't go on living with him, couldn't quite see how she would live without him... She bit down hard on her lip, tasting blood, and he lifted his head, released his hold on her and said lightly, 'We both need a few days to relax and unwind first. So why don't we go upstairs and see what sleeping accommodation's on offer before we settle down and make a meal?'

And three days later a kind of magic had eased away the last of the tension. They had fallen into a comfortable companionable routine, and Claire wasn't questioning it. While it lasted it was lovely, doubly precious to her because she knew it couldn't go on for very much longer. Sooner or later he would want to know what was wrong, and she would tell him that nasty looming black untruth. And that would be the end of it all.

After twenty-four hours she had stopped holding her breath every time he opened his mouth to speak, fearing that he would begin to question her. They talked all the time, the way it had always been, nothing contentious, nothing dangerous. They were comfortable, close, the spice of his dry wit making her crack with laughter, just like in the old lost days of her innocence. Before she had done the unforgivable and fallen in love with him.

They'd walked each morning, high in the tumbled mountains, because the weather pattern remained the same, spring-like until mid-afternoon, then back to winter, and then the sturdy stone house, the warm fireside beckoned. But today was different. They'd been running low on provisions, so had

spent the morning shopping together in the nearest small market town, and were now taking their walk in the afternoon.

'It looks like rain. We'd better make tracks before you freeze to death.'

Claire's eyes drifted to him helplessly. With the collar of his dark, oiled jacket turned up against the cold wind, his black head flung back on the strong, corded support of his neck, he looked like a wild pagan god, king of these recklessly rambling mountain ranges.

The cosy, companionable fireside, soft mellow lamplight, the lazy preparation of the evening meal with its attendant laughter-edged, friendly bickering was a pleasure to look forward to, lodged in her mind as something to be savoured, treasured. As was the here and now, together with him beneath the wild sky, a joy to be clung on to, not willingly relinquished, even for the pleasure in store, because each hour of each day marked the passing of time, marching closer and closer to the inevitable, the final break.

'If we climbed to the top of that spur,' she said dreamily, deliberately extending this particular fragment of time with him, 'would we be able to see the sea?'

He gave her a laughing glance. 'Don't even think it, goose-brain. I'm not hauling you up there to find out. Tell you what, though--' he caught her gloved hand in his, tugging her back along the narrow sheep track '—we could drive down to the coast in the morning. Would you like that?'

Her fingers clung tightly to his, as if they would never let go. She could allow herself this small rapture because he wouldn't think anything of it. The track was steep, the going rough, and if he thought about it at all he would put her eager compliance to the physical contact he'd initiated down to that indisputable fact.

'Maybe,' she answered, her breathing ragged. And he could put that evidence of the effect that touching him had on her down to the terrain, too. And maybe she'd veto that trip to the coast. Even out of season there would be locals about. Up here it was just the two of them and the wild birds; even the sheep had been taken down to more sheltered pasture.

Being here with him, like this, growing closer than even before, couldn't be so wrong. Leaving him, as she must, would cause her more pain and anguish than she had previously imagined possible. This sweet time of deepening friendship couldn't make it worse; nothing possibly could. And it would be something to remember, something infinitely precious, helping her to discount the dark things—how he'd offered to make her his wife in more than name, his lovemaking binding her more closely than any shackles, simply because she was, in his opinion, unbeatable at her job. How he'd made no attempt to deny his affair with the Italian *principessa*, and his confession that he had no inclination to form a lasting relationship with the woman—his meaning clear: that he would continue to take mistresses, as and when it pleased him.

So all that was something that this time with him would help her to push out of her mind, edit out of her memories of him. She didn't know that things were already changing, the accent shifting, not even when she hovered uncertainly on a slippery stone in the tumbling stream they were crossing and he held out his arms and commanded, 'Jump, sweetheart. Close your eyes and jump. I'll catch you.'

And she did. Unquestioningly. There was no doubt in her mind that he would fail to keep her safe, the only doubt creeping in when he caught her, holding her for a spellbinding moment in the strong haven of his arms before sliding her slowly, oh, so breathtakingly slowly, down the powerful length of his body.

But he couldn't possibly know how her flesh immediately burned with the tumultuous, leaping, ravaging flames of desire, how every nerve-ending responded wildly to his fierce masculinity, leaving her weak and vulnerable, open to him in every way there was. No, of course he couldn't. How could he?

Sternly, she made her clutching fingers release his arms and pushed herself away, hoping she didn't look as flushed and utterly wanton as she most certainly felt, babbling distractedly, 'Thanks. You saved me from getting a thorough soaking. I just know I was about to lose my balance and fall! I'll put your name down for the mountain-rescue team any time you like--' She only bit off the rest of the gushing, breathless nonsense when she saw the

long, speculative look take control of his eyes and knew she was in danger of giving herself away.

In the end they both got a soaking because the skies opened while they were still half a mile away from the cottage, and when they arrived back Jake, not even slightly out of breath despite their last frantic dash down the track, told her, 'Get straight into a hot bath while I make the fire, and don't get out of it until you're warm right through.' And he patted her bottom, as if helping her in the direction of the stairs. As she went up them Claire wondered dizzily if that playful pat hadn't been playful at all, if it had lingered rather too long, the tap from the palm of his hand turning into something else entirely as his long fingers had curved, holding, exploring, relishing the softly rounded, feminine shape of her.

Of course not, she assured herself firmly as she ran her bath and began to strip off her sodden clothes. She was letting her imagination run away from her. An imagination already heightened beyond sanity by the very close contact with the body she desired so intensely way back at the stream.

Her brows knitted together as she struggled to get out of her rain-soaked cord jeans, she recalled that for the greater part of their time together he had carefully avoided touching her at all. That had changed after Liz had become financially independent, and Claire knew why. And refused to think about it. He wasn't about to make another pass at her. He had tried it once, to no avail. He wouldn't be bothered to try again. So she had to be crazy even to allow the idea any room in her head. The casual touching meant nothing; it was just part and parcel of their ever-increasing closeness, a deepening friendship that would be irretrievably shattered—for him, at least—when she confirmed his suspicions.

As for herself, all she asked was the privilege of keeping those few days as a precious memory, remembering him not as her boss or her paper husband, but as her best friend. She couldn't remember him as her lover; nothing, not even her need for him, could bring her to allow that to happen—even if he wanted it to, which he probably didn't—so she would settle for friendship.

Climbing into the hot, scented water, Claire lay back and made a determined effort to relax and empty her mind. And she succeeded so well that by the

time she was dressed in an old pair of denim jeans, gone soft and pale with washing, and a raspberryied lambswool sweater, and was walking downstairs to be welcomed by a blazing fire, she felt soft and boneless and remarkably tranquil.

Jake walked out of the room as she walked in. He didn't say a word, but his eyes were warm, as if he liked what he saw. To her deep amazement, she felt her breasts peak and harden, push against the warm, soft lambswool, even though he wasn't near, wasn't stroking her body with that long, burning, appreciative gaze.

As if in a dream, she walked slowly into the tiny hall where a three-quarter-length mirror hung on the wall. Over the past few days he would have been seeing her in a different light, too.

To suit her position as his wife she had spent freely of the huge allowance he made her, always appearing impeccably groomed, speakingly elegant. Even when he had whirled her away to relax in some impossibly exotic spot her casuals had borne top designer labels.

The jeans and anoraks she'd worn up here were relics of the days before she'd gone to work for him, dug out of forgotten suitcases, because, thrifty by nature and early upbringing, she had never been able to bring herself to throw anything away.

Almost unconsciously she stroked her hands down over her body. Her sleek, short hair still looked tousled, even after brushing, and the warm red of her sweater imparted a rosy glow to her pale, translucent skin, while the pert, rounded thrust of her breasts, lovingly moulded by the soft wool, belied the boyish slenderness of her hips and legs encased in the worn old denim.

Had his eyes been telling her the truth? Did he really like what he saw? He had always been satisfied with—no, frankly admired—the elegant style she had acquired for him. But perhaps he hadn't been seeing her as a real woman then. Only as an accessory, an adjunct to his high-powered lifestyle. Maybe, over these past few days, he'd been seeing her as a flesh-and-blood woman for the first time?

Dangerous thoughts. But she was bewitched, taken over by something beyond her control. She was not going to worry over anything right now. Not even dangerous thoughts, even more dangerous dreams. Everyone should be allowed to dream, just sometimes.

Idling back into the living-room, she noted the opened bottle of red wine, set to breathe on a low side-table, and took herself off into the kitchen to prepare a salad to go with the steak they'd decided to have for supper. She was chopping walnuts and celery when she felt warm hands at either side of her tiny waist and leaned back instinctively into his hard male body, then turned in his arms, because she couldn't help herself. And she breathed in the freshly bathed smell of him, and something else that was essentially, simply Jake, letting her hands rest against the soft cotton of the loose black shirt he was wearing now, feeling his heartbeat, feeling the raw contraction of his muscles as he said softly, 'It's too early to eat. Come with me.'

And she went. Too foolish, bewitched and bemused to do anything else.

## CHAPTER TEN

THE lamp had been lit, adding its gentle glow to the flickering firelight. Jake turned to face her, his eyes dark and unreadable, and slowly he raised his long-boned, hard hands to cup her face and she just stood there, immobile, as if she had wandered into a dream, couldn't move, couldn't speak, could only love him, want him...

His thick, midnight-dark lashes drifted down, hiding his expression as his gaze rested on her mouth. Her lips parted weakly on a silent gasp as her whole body ignited, trembled, swayed and burned with fever in that wicked conflagration; he was going to kiss her and that mustn't happen.

And it didn't. He said, 'Time to talk, sweetheart,' the words spoken so gently that it hurt, tore at her heart and broke it. The moment had come. The awful, inevitable, black moment. Not of truth, but of lies. And once they were told there would be no going back, not ever.

But she couldn't go back to the way things had been. That avenue had definitely closed when she had fallen in love. There were two ways open to her, the one unthinkable, the other deplorable. Choices to be made. And she had made hers.

Her breath came on a long, fractured sigh and his hands slid down, his arms going round her, holding her with a tenderness that made her want to cry. A sob built up, cramping her lungs, and his hold on her tightened, as if he knew what was happening, and his dark voice whispered softly over her, 'There's no problem too big to be solved.' One of his hands traced the line of her spine and she shivered convulsively, fighting the fatal desire to melt bonelessly against him and allow fate and her love for him to take over. 'You don't have to say a thing, sweetheart. Simply relax and let me sort it.'

And he could so easily, with his hands, his lips, his fantastic male body. And then she would be his, for all eternity, with no peace of mind, ever, the deepest human need forever ungratified because he didn't love her.

The sob burst then, aridly, painfully. Desperately she tried to fight the traitor inside herself, pulling out of the sweet prison of his arms, but he scooped her

up as if she weighed no more than a child, settling her on his knee as he sank down into one of the armchairs.

Weakly, only for a moment, she told herself, she allowed her head to rest against the wide span of his shoulder. Just gathering her resources, she assured herself frantically. Just one more minute and she would have got herself together, would ask him what he thought he was doing. Unhand me, you villain! she could hear herself saying, and she shook with hysteria.

Jake picked up on the deepening tension and murmured against the top of her glossy dark head, 'There's nothing to get uptight about, believe me. You've been seeing another man—no, please don't try to deny it, sweetheart,' he injected warningly as she went rigidly still against him. 'You left too many clues around—which is one consolation, I suppose, because if you'd had several lovers, one after the other, you'd have learned how not to spread evidence all over the place. And there were dozens of clues. Right from the time I came home early from Rome and found you deep in an animated phone conversation. You said you'd been talking to Liz. But the guilt on your face said that wasn't the truth. Then the sudden crazy desire to end our fantastic working relationship for no better reason than you were restless and bored. Oh, yes, sweetheart, the clues were endless. I won't go on to give you chapter and verse.'

The breath she hadn't known she'd been holding came out of her lungs in a whoosh. She could hear the steady, controlled rhythm of his heartbeats. Hers were racketing around like the drumbeats of a lunatic. Add to that chilling little fact the total absence of anger—never mind jealousy—and it pointed unmistakably to what she already knew. His complete lack of emotional involvement where she was concerned.

The only thing he loved about her was her ability to organise his hectic life to his complete satisfaction. Something, he'd often told her, no other employee had been able to do.

'I won't pretend I like the situation,' he told her now, making her twist her lower lip between her teeth, feverishly wondering if she could have been wrong and her supposed affair might wrest some declaration of personal, hurting involvement from him. But not so, she decided defeatedly, that

small, silly whisper of hope denied her as he went on, 'But I do understand, and you mustn't feel guilty, because the greater blame is mine.'

She whimpered inaudibly into the soft fabric of his shirt, the heat of his body burning her up. She closed her eyes. He had left her nothing to do, nothing to say. All she had to do was confirm his deductions.

It had all been far too easy. She'd imagined a dreadful scene, his anger cold and cutting as he ordered her to keep well away from her lover until their marriage was legally over. How he would hate the gossip columnists to dip their pens in vitriol and titter about his straying wife in the Press, making him look a laughing-stock, people talking and smirking about him behind their hands.

Yet that didn't seem to have occurred to him, or perhaps he'd decided he was big enough to rise above it. Whatever, it was difficult to think clearly when one of his hands was stroking her hair so gently, soothing her as if he wanted to take all her troubles on his own broad shoulders...

'You'd made it clear, before I suggested our current arrangement, that the commitment of marriage held no appeal. Fine and dandy. We were two of a kind—although for different reasons. I didn't think it out properly,' he confided tersely, the first hint of tension coming through as he shifted beneath her, his arms tightening round her. 'You have all a normal woman's physical needs and you're much too beautiful to have any trouble at all finding a man panting to assuage them. The way things were between us, it was bound to happen--'

'Was it really?' Stung to long-overdue fury, she found the strength to push away from him, to sit bolt upright though still shackled by the steely, indomitable strength of his arms. He was bringing it down to the level of basic biology, talking as if she were a bitch on heat. He insulted her! 'The way it was "bound to happen" between you and the Italian woman?' she spat, her eyes glittering, her high cheekbones slashed with heated colour. 'Her and how many others? Or have you lost count?'

'Ah!' The utterly infuriating gleam of sinful satisfaction in those silver eyes made her want to slap him for the decadence it implied. Was he simply

thinking of that voluptuous Latin body, or gloating, relishing all the others, those in the past and those still to come? 'La Giancesetti. I wondered when you might get around to mentioning her.'

His mouth softened, appallingly sensual, and Claire stared at him wildly. Hating him. Hating him for making her love him. Her small fists beat at him in a frenzy as she struggled to get free, and she gasped in outrage as one of his arms tightened around her hips, the other binding her shoulders, his voice thick as he commanded, 'Quit wriggling, woman, or I won't be responsible. We still have some talking to do. I'm trying to stay calm but I can't answer for myself--'

Was he implying that she was responsible for this—this unlooked-for arrangement of bodies? Claire snorted, her little face pinched, not a hint of sophistication left now, just fury and hurt and a desperate need somehow to defend herself.

'So talk!' she huffed against the side of his neck, powerless to move when his arms held her prisoner. 'But let me go. I don't have to be jammed right up against you. I can sit on the other side of the room and still hear you. I'm not deaf, you know!'

But he appeared to be. He ignored her demands and if anything his hold on her tightened, his voice raw-edged as he rasped out unforgivably, 'You need a full, loving relationship. I understand that and blame myself for not having seen it long before now. I did offer, remember?' Pressed against his wide chest, she heard the disgust in his voice. 'But not with the finesse you deserve and obviously expect. So I'm asking you to let me try again—for old times' sake, if for no other reason, I think I deserve a second chance.' His voice lowered alarmingly, sweet, soft, dark honey. 'I promise to make you forget him, whoever he is.'

Just as if she were a woman with an itch to be scratched and didn't care who offered the relief! The ball of tight fury inside Claire almost exploded. Never a word of need from him—the driven need that took her by the throat and shook her senseless every time she looked at him. Never a word of love.

But what else had she expected? He wanted her to stay within the bounds of their agreement, that was ail. And if her hormones were playing up, well, he could understand that—after all, his obviously did, and he took great delight in placating them behind her back. She had never felt so insulted and degraded in the whole of her life!

The coil of tension inside her exploded in a rush of fury and she beat at his chest with her fists again, this time using every last atom of her strength to push away, and he let her go, but only so far, trapping her, his hands clamping on her hips, keeping her on his lap, an impotent bundle of rage.

'What the hell do you think I am?' Her words lashed him with disgust, her eyes narrowed scornfully on his face, her hands itching to slap him for that slow, soft smile.

'A beautiful, intelligent, utterly desirable woman.' His eyes glowed into hers, the planes of his face golden in the lamplight, softened and sensual in the dancing strokes of radiance from the flickering fire, and all her love came surging back— she couldn't stop it—and when his hands rotated gently against the swell of her hips she burst into tears because it was all too much.

He looked appalled. 'Don't cry. I never want to have to see you cry!' He shifted in the chair, holding her against his body, his big hands soothing, stroking the line of her spine, his voice gentle, oh, so gentle, murmuring, 'Leave it all to me. I'll make it better, I promise.' As if she were a child with a tiny problem that could be eased out of the way with adult common sense.

But she wasn't a child, she was a woman. And the woman in her cried out desperately for the man she loved, and, far from soothing, his stroking hands were driving her wild. Her hands clutched at his shoulders as the storm of her weeping abated, and she burrowed her tear-wet face against the rough triangle of naked skin at the base of his throat as he whispered, 'Better, sweetheart?' and captured her hands in his, dragging her upright again.

She was too boneless now, and soft, to make the effort to scramble off his lap, and she blinked the last of the tears away, seeing the brilliant silver

glitter of his eyes, the near-violent expansion of his chest as he dragged breath raggedly into his lungs.

'Here—you might need this. I know I do.' His voice sounded slurred as he reached out to the low side-table and poured wine into the two waiting glasses. He handed one of them to her; her shaking fingers clutched it as if it were a lifeline and she drained half the contents as if she were dying of thirst.

Gently, he took the glass from her and put it on the table beside his untouched one and she said shakily, because the wine and her need for him had rushed straight to her head, 'I thought... I thought you said you wanted a drink.'

'Not like that.' He eased himself forward. His head was above hers now. It dipped towards her, his lips against hers as he whispered, 'Like this.' The tip of his tongue lapped her soft, wine-wet mouth. 'This is all the intoxication I can handle.'

The throaty words were a soft seduction, his sensual lavng of her mouth creating a tumultuous explosion of sensation inside her that went far beyond the teasing, voluptuous tasting of her lips, and at her deep, shuddering response his hands began a slow, glorious shaping of her body, sliding from her hips to her shoulders and tenderly back again. The slow, lingering caresses set her body on fire, eating away at her will-power, eroding the functions of her mind, and her hands curled round his wide shoulders, holding him to her, and the teasing stopped as his mouth opened in a kiss that was almost barbaric in its intensity, reaching deep into her soul, making her body melt bonelessly into his as his restless hands slid beneath the hem of her sweater, moving urgently against the soft, warm silk of her skin, enticing quivers of sexual tension wherever he touched until she was shaking with ecstasy, with the promise of still more to come.

When he lifted his head her lips felt swollen and bruised, branded by his possession, and she made a wild cry of protest in the back of her throat that changed to a guttural moan of pleasure as his hands curled round her breasts, his thumbs brushing back and forth over her aroused nipples.

'Sweetheart, you belong to me. I won't let you leave me.' His eyes were black now except for the sharp, bright, possessive gleam that exhilarated, enslaved her. Enraptured, she wanted to be his, only his, on any terms. For always. Trembling, she reached out her hands and placed them on either side of his beloved face, her heart bursting within her under the magic of his hands as she waited for him to tell her he couldn't live without her, that he loved her, would never let her go... And still his eyes held hers with an intensity that might have frightened her if the spell of her loving hadn't been so strong. Her thumbs stroked the deep clefts at either side of his mouth, all her love in her eyes as she held his pinioning gaze.

Briefly, his eyes closed and beneath her fingers she felt the clenching of his jaw. He swallowed hard and his hands slid down, balling into tight fists at the side of her hips. Bewildered, she felt a slight tremor rack its way through his body and her hands dropped down, on to his shoulders. He opened his eyes, and it might have been a trick of the light but she thought she saw a slicing glimmer of pain; but she knew it had all been in her fevered imagination when he whispered, 'We could make our marriage whole. What's happening to us now proves it.' Again he swallowed, his throat tightening, his voice low and hard as he told her, 'Sort out the other guy or I will. Don't tell me anything about him, I don't want to know—unless he gives you trouble. In that case, I'll make him wish he'd never been born.'

His mouth went tight. Brusquely, he put his hands on either side of her waist and set her on her feet, standing up himself, looming remotely above her. And even through the haze of tears she could appreciate the effort he was making to get back to normal, but was in too deep a state of shock to do or say a single thing as he said gently, 'Right now I want you desperately. But we'll both have to wait until you've done what you have to do. Write him a letter.' The wide, hard shoulders lifted grimly, but he was almost smiling as he added, 'You can't disguise how much you want me. And I'll make it better than good for you, I promise.' He brushed the back of his hand lightly over her rigid face. 'But for now I'll make supper and tomorrow we'll get things sorted.'

He went through into the kitchen as if nothing had happened, as if she hadn't seen a glimpse of heaven then had the door to paradise slammed in her face.

Shakily, she refilled her wine glass and sipped slowly, watching the fire go out. She was too drained of energy now to overcome her inertia and cross the room to do anything about it.

So nothing had changed. He still believed she was starved of sex, needed a man. Any man. So he had offered himself, like a stud, anything to keep her content and make her stay.

'You belong to me', he had said. 'I won't let you leave'. As far as he was concerned, possession was ten-tenths of the law. She suited him and he wasn't letting her go, no matter what it took. He would even overlook the trifling business of a lover in the background, so long as she gave him the push. And she, poor fool, had simply hung around, letting him take the seduction scene as far as he thought necessary, without putting himself to the trouble of going all the way, waiting to hear the words of love which would never come.

He didn't love her and never would and that made her hate him almost as much as she hated herself for being so stupid.

The smell of grilling steak made her feel ill. Dragging herself to the doorway, she told him woodenly, 'I don't feel like eating. I'm going to bed. See you in the morning.'

And she would, just to say goodbye.

She didn't sleep. She couldn't. And she didn't hear him go to his room, but then she wouldn't.

Her mind was frozen, on hold. If she allowed herself to think, to feel, she would probably go to pieces, remembering the flickering instant of time when she had believed, truly believed, that he was about to confess his love for her. Or she might truly absorb the injustice he'd done her, the way he'd implied that all she needed to keep her sweet and under his thumb was a romp between the sheets now and again. And if she really let herself think about that insult she might find herself sticking a knife between his ribs as he slept.

So she didn't think at all. She packed methodically then sat on the edge of the bed, huddled beneath the duvet, watching the window until the coming of dawn obliterated the reflection of her small, pale-face.

Moving slowly, like a very old woman, she brushed her teeth, ran her fingers through her hair, draped her anorak round her shoulders and carried her gear downstairs.

She could smell coffee, but Jake was nowhere around. The sound of splitting wood drew her outside. If the early morning air was cold, she didn't notice. Jake was at the log pile, the axe slashing with rhythmic violence through the air as he split the wood into more manageable sizes, and the same violence was stamped on to his taut features as he glanced up, aware of her presence. Then it slid away and he simply stood there, his breathing fast but his eyes gentling as he chided, 'Don't stand around getting cold, sweetheart. I've made coffee. Pour yourself a cup. I'll join you as soon as I've finished up here.'

Just as if everything were right as rain. Perfectly normal.

'I'm leaving.' Her voice sounded hollow. Her throat was dry. Fever raced through her blood, making her shake all over. She met his suddenly narrowed eyes, noted how white his knuckles were as his hand clenched around the heavy handle of the axe and made herself go on because she couldn't stop now. She had to go, and make him believe it. If she stayed her love would destroy her in the end.

'You were wrong about him,' she said thinly, feeling the wind cutting through her clothing now and shivering suddenly, uncontrollably. 'I want to be free to marry him. I love him quite desperately. Freedom, no recriminations. That was written into our original agreement for such a contingency. Remember?'

For a moment she thought he would come to her. Then he imposed the rigid control that he possessed in such great measure. Just stood there, watching her with hard, dark eyes. Saying nothing. Because he couldn't? What could he say to a statement like that?

'May I use your mobile to phone for a cab?' she persevered grimly, not wanting to ask him for anything. He had given her everything except the one thing she needed.

'You can't mean this.' The harsh words seemed dragged from him. 'After what happened only last night, the way you turned on for me--' The axe fell from his hand and she looked away, her stupid heart lurching.

But that said it all, didn't it just? she told herself bitterly. 'Turned on', as if he knew he could push the right buttons, make her do what he wanted her to do, be what he wanted her to be.

'Oh, that,' she dismissed, shrugging. 'Believe me, I'm not proud of myself. I've... I've been missing him dreadfully.' The stumble over her words only worked in her favour; he wasn't to know how much she hated the lies he was making her tell. 'We love each other and you haven't made it easy for us to be together.'

She refused to look at him, even when she heard the harsh drag of his breath. If she did she might not be able to prevent herself from flinging herself into his arms, weeping, telling him that none of this was true, that she loved him, only him, would stay with him always if only he would try to love her, just a little.

**SHE WALKED BACK INTO THE COTTAGE, HER SPINE VERY STRAIGHT. HE WOULD NEVER KNOW HOW MUCH THIS WAS COSTING HER.**

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

OLYMPIA GORES-TAMLYN rose majestically from behind the highly polished, uncluttered mahogany desk and held out the telephone receiver as if it were something too unpleasant to mention.

'It's for you. Please be brief. And tell whoever it is not to contact you during working hours again. I thought you understood my ruling on that.'

Swallowing a very rude retort, Claire left her own small desk which, burdened by piles of heavy, dusty old books and an ancient thump-and-pray manual typewriter, threatened daily to disintegrate. It was cheap and flimsy, expressly chosen for those very qualities, she guessed, to remind her of her lowly station.

Time to think of moving on, she told herself as she traversed the acres of carpet. Olympia insisted it was a family heirloom, and perhaps it might have been a couple of hundred years ago, but now it was threadbare, with no discernible colour or pattern.

Applying for the position of the formidable old woman's secretary six months ago had seemed like a good idea at the time. Buried away in the Gores- Tamlyn family home—a bleak stone barracks of a place in deepest Northumberland—she had believed it would give her the time she needed to lick her wounds, get herself back together again, with no chance at all of being anywhere where she might accidentally bump into Jake.

But six months of being treated as if she were a servant of the most inferior variety, of typing out Olympia's deadly boring memoirs—which nobody in their right mind would want to read, let alone publish—and researching her family background—Olympia's maternal great-grandmother had been the youngest daughter of an impoverished duke—and the 'duke' bit was brought into every conceivable conversation—as well as organising her social calendar, which, in the time Claire had been here, had included nothing more exciting or demanding than making the arrangements for her to open the village flower show in a strange hat and giving an uninspired dinner party for five dreary people, was, Claire decided, more than enough.

Ignoring her elderly employer's haughty black eyes, Claire took the proffered receiver and that lady imparted icily, 'Grice should have my coffee ready. I shall take it in the drawing-room. When I've finished, I want you to wash my hair. Grice is getting much too rough-and-ready in her old age.'

It was a miracle that Mrs Grice, the mainstay of the mouldering old place, hadn't strangled the misery decades ago, Claire huffed to herself as she turned her back and said a puzzled hello into the mouthpiece.

She had explained to Liz and Sally about not contacting her before eight in the evening and no one else knew she was here. But it was Sally Harding and what she said sent a tide of ice tumbling down Claire's backbone.

'Can you come? I don't want to panic you, but it's Liz. She's asking for you.'

'She's ill,' Claire stated hoarsely. Of course she was; there could be no other explanation. That highly independent mother of hers wouldn't dream of asking her to drop everything for anything less than a dire emergency. 'Where is she? Which hospital?' she demanded.

Sal mumbled quickly, 'No, she's here. Lark Cottage.'

On the point of asking what was wrong, what the doctor had said, Claire changed her mind and clipped out quickly, 'I'll leave straight away. Tell Liz I'll be with you by early evening at the latest.' The sooner she got there, the sooner she could find out for herself what was wrong, weigh up the situation.

Liz couldn't be too desperately ill, she tried to console herself as she hurried out of the room. She hadn't been hospitalised and Sal was too sensible and forthright to allow her condition to be neglected.

Yet something must be deeply wrong if she had sent for her, she worried as she tapped briefly on the drawing-room door and walked straight in.

As always, the huge, heavily over-furnished room was chilly, despite it being a sweltering August day. And Olympia put down her coffee-cup and

snapped, 'I'm not ready for you yet. Come back in half an hour and continue typing from this morning's dictation in the meantime.'

'I have to go,' Claire said. Her employer's haughty attitude no longer affected her. She had other, more worrying things to think about. 'The phone call was from my mother's companion. Liz— my mother—is asking for me. She's not strong, has already had one heart attack. It's not something I can ignore.'

Not waiting for a reaction, she walked swiftly to the door, then turned, tossing out, 'I don't know how long I'll be away. I'll let you know. But I think I should warn you I'll be handing in my notice when I return. I'll get in touch with the agency myself and ask them to find a replacement.'

Niggles of guilt were her uneasy companions during the long drive. Six months ago Liz had been visibly stunned when Claire had broken the news of the break-up of her marriage, even though she'd done her utmost to present it as gently as possible.

'You've always said he was the best son-in-law any woman could hope to have,' she'd said, and, recognising the note of abject apology in her voice, had tried to iron it out, affecting a lightness she was far from feeling as she'd followed up, 'And I'm not expecting you to cross him off your Christmas card list, only to understand that it wasn't working out, for either of us. Our separation is for the best, believe me.'

It had been hard, so desperately hard, to pretend her heart wasn't breaking, to ignore the tears in Liz's eyes as she'd come out with what Claire had braced herself to hear—that all marriages went through stale patches, that all couples argued, that goodwill and patience on both sides could work wonders... on and on until Claire had had to bite her lip to stop herself from screaming, from demanding to know how Liz could be so sage on a subject she knew nothing about. Her own marriage had been a disastrous failure, after all. It was either that or fling herself, weeping her heart out, into her mother's arms, confessing that their marriage had never been a real one, that she had only agreed to be his wife because he'd promised to look after Liz financially, that she'd ended up loving him more than life and had had to leave to salvage her sanity.

And that Liz must never know. So Claire had extricated herself from a situation that had been growing more painful by the moment, going to the kitchen to brew a pot of tea, and the subject hadn't been raised again, only her mother's occasional heartfelt sigh, the way she opened her mouth as if to say something, then abruptly closed it again, showing that she was still brooding.

And two weeks later when she'd accepted the job with Olympia Gores-Tamlyn, through the agency she had been with until the time of her marriage, Liz had seemed resigned to the situation. But who knew how it had affected her? How much she had privately worried and fretted about her daughter's broken marriage?

Clake knew that Liz had seen her glittering marriage to 'the best man outside a saint' as a compensation for what she considered her own failure in that area. And maybe, she thought, chewing on the corner of her mouth, she should have thought less about her own untenable situation and more about Liz's peace of mind, gritted her teeth and stayed married to the man she loved, even though she had known he would never love her, just to keep Liz from fretting...

But what was done was done and couldn't be changed, she told herself roughly. Her marriage was over and she was doing her level best to forget him. And not succeeding. Every day brought a deepening of the pain, of the regret—not that she had learned to love so overwhelmingly, but that it had been the wrong man, a man who couldn't love her in return.

Maybe if she heard from his solicitor, through hers, that he had started divorce proceedings she might be able to face the reality of it all and begin to put her life together. But she hadn't heard a single thing from him, or of him, ever since he had wordlessly driven her back to the London apartment, delivered her to the doorstep, and immediately driven away...

It was early evening when she parked the car outside Lark Cottage. The garden was alive with late summer flowers but the house itself looked sombre, closed in on itself. No windows were open to catch a welcome breeze and the front door was firmly shut.

Claire had expected to find Sal on the doorstep or, at the very least, watching for her arrival from one of the windows.

A dread that Liz's condition had worsened since Sal had relayed that worrying message, making hospitalisation inevitable, clutched at Claire's heart as she hurried up the path. And it solidified into an awful certainty when she tried the front door and found it locked.

Scrabbling in her handbag for her keyring, Claire refused to think the worst. She had lost Jake; she couldn't bring herself to face up to the fact that she could lose her mother too.

Her voice strained, she called out as she walked through into the hall but no one answered and the silence was deafening. The beginnings of panic clawed round the edges of her mind and intensified spitefully, making her feel ill, when she spotted the glaring white envelope propped up against the telephone on a small side-table.

She reached for it, her suddenly icy cold fingers shaking as she ripped it open. But at least she would learn what was happening. Knowing she was already on her way, Sal would have scrawled a message for her. Claire could hardly bear to read it.

But she sagged with relief when her mother's neat handwriting practically leapt off the page. Whatever had happened, she couldn't have been feeling too ill to set pen to paper. The relief turned to outrage as she quickly scanned the contents.

Darlings,

I do hope my message didn't give you too much cause for concern. Try to forgive me, if it did. And I do want to see you, both of you, but must forgo the pleasure this time. First and foremost I want you to see each other, and talk, properly talk until you've ironed things out. We've left plenty of food in the fridge, and Jake, dear, you'll find a particularly good champagne there too. You see, I'm so sure you'll find celebrations in order! In the meantime, Sally and I will be

relaxing in comfort in a marvellous hotel in Bath. And keeping our fingers firmly crossed!

The sneaky old besom! Claire balled the sheet of paper and hurled it in a corner, angry tears clogging her throat and stinging her eyes. Had Liz no feelings at all? Couldn't she have guessed how racked with anxiety she, Claire, would be? How could she do that to her own daughter? Didn't she know she and Jake had nothing to talk about, that being forced to meet him again would give her nothing but heartache and pain?

Her instinct was to get right out of there, jump in her car, drive to Bath and comb the hotels until she located her devious, manipulative parent and blast her into orbit with a few well-chosen words! But her knees gave way and she groped for the chair by the telephone table, sagging down on it, relief that her mother was fit and well overriding everything else, making her feel exhausted after all that anxiety.

And of course Liz couldn't know how even the thought of seeing Jake again made her feel as if she was coming unstitched. Liz believed their marriage had been the love match of the decade, that love conquered all, that forcing them into each other's company would be as good as waving a magic wand.

Claire groaned hollowly. She had to get out of here, and fast. Even now Jake would be on his way, summoned, no doubt, by the same misleading message.

But she couldn't leave him to face the same anxiety she'd experienced when she'd found the house locked and empty. She wouldn't put him through that, and, forcing herself to her feet, she retrieved the crumpled sheet of paper and smoothed it out. She would pin it to the outside of the door, together with a brief apology for her mother's antics. He would be justifiably angry but he had always been fond of Liz and, like herself, he would be relieved that the elderly lady wasn't fighting for her life in some hospital bed.

Hurrying to the desk in the sitting-room where Liz kept her writing materials, Claire extracted a sheet of paper—and froze. She had been too occupied by her thoughts to hear a car in the lane outside, but the sound that

had penetrated her consciousness was definitely the opening and closing of the front door.

She was too late, had lingered too long, she thought, her stomach lurching sickeningly as she heard Jake call out, just as she had done a scant half an hour ago.

She bit her lip. Much as she would have liked to be able to crouch down behind the sofa and hide, she knew such craven behaviour was out of the question. She had to face him, face the man she loved more than her life, and see the cold contempt in his eyes. That was her punishment for giving her love where it wasn't wanted.

He called out again, his voice sharper this time, betraying his anxiety, and she stiffened her spine, pulled in a deep breath and walked out into the hall.

'I'm here, Jake.'

He'd had his back to her and when he turned her heart squeezed with shock. He looked older, harder, as if they had last seen each other six years ago, instead of six months. And the cold, unyielding expression on his starkly hewn features, the immaculate pale grey suit he wore put a more effective distance between them than all the miles in the world. He gave her no greeting, asking immediately, his tone curt, 'I had a message from Sally Harding. It sounded urgent. Where is Liz?'

Claire swallowed thickly. He was letting her know that as far as he was concerned she no longer existed. But she hadn't expected anything else, had she? Silently, she castigated her mother all over again for putting her into this painful and embarrassing situation and, because it had to be done, she held out the letter. It would do all the explaining for her. No need for her to say a single word. He would read it and walk out. She expected no comment.

Despising herself for the forbidden painful pleasure it gave her, she allowed her eyes to dwell on the honed, hard features as he read the words Liz had written, and apart from an obvious tightening of his tough jaw the import made no impression. She deeply envied his control. Or maybe control didn't

come into it. Maybe he had so successfully wiped her out of his life that the crazy schemes of an old lady to bring them together again couldn't even raise a flicker of annoyance for the way she had interrupted his day, wasted a few hours of his precious time.

'So you didn't tell her the truth?' he drawled coldly, dropping the letter down by the phone, and Claire's pulses leapt with shock. She'd convinced herself that he would simply walk away. He wouldn't want a post-mortem. She had said everything that needed saying when she'd told him about the other man.

'How could I?' she asked jerkily, instinctively wrapping her arms around her slender body. 'Her own marriage was so awful. She thought ours was wonderful. How could I disillusion her and tell her the truth—that it had never been anything other than a cold-blooded commercial arrangement?'

'I meant the truth about the ending of it,' he countered dismissively. 'The other man. The man you couldn't live without. I'm surprised you haven't done anything about it. I take it you still want to marry him?'

His tone of indifference was frightening. She was shaking inside, and what could she say? Tell him more lies? She simply couldn't. She shrugged helplessly but he didn't let it go, his cruelty uncompromising as he clipped out, 'But you don't need to go through a wedding ceremony to have all the fun, do you? I had ample evidence of that during the final weeks of our--' his hesitation was minute '—arrangement. Is that why you look so drawn? Why you've lost weight? Doesn't he let you get any sleep at all?'

Stung, she retorted savagely, 'Pot calling the kettle black? I don't suppose you've changed your habits and missed out on your fun! Still keeping the *principessa* in a darkened cupboard, are you? Or have you grown bored and moved on to some other glitzy bimbo?'

For sue long, hateful months her image had been just about the last thing that had entered her head. But his deliberately unkind comments on her appearance made her suddenly aware of her body beneath the severely styled saxe-blue lightweight linen suit she'd been wearing when that worrying message from Liz had come through. Once elegantly slender, she

was now gaunt, and she could well imagine how the months of unremitting heartache had taken their toll, making her look drawn and exhausted.

Her blistering come-back drew a flash of silver anger from those narrowed eyes but then he shrugged those impressively wide shoulders and pushed his hands in the pockets of his narrow-fitting trousers.

'It's too late to rake over the past,' he told her bleakly. 'And it's too damned hot to fight. I could use a drink. I dropped everything, walked out of a meeting, when I received Sal's cryptic message. Shall I make it, or will you?'

He was moving towards her, heading for the tiny kitchen. She retreated backwards as he advanced, the coward in her making her want to put as much distance between them as possible.

Scurrying to one of the cupboards, she bent down to fish out the coffee-maker and swayed dizzily, stumbling, putting a hand out against the work surface to stop herself from falling, and his big, impatient hands were on her shoulders in a split-second, pushing her on to a chair, withdrawing with insulting rapidity—as if he couldn't bear to touch her at all—as he instructed brusquely, 'Sit down before you fall down. I'll make coffee; you look all in.'

And whose fault was that? she wondered numbly, watching with dazed eyes as he flung open windows to let in the welcome, fresher evening air, then dealt with the filter machine. She loved him so much and loving him had forced her to leave him, and his attitude told her quite plainly that he held in her contempt, that her present frailty was regarded as a nuisance, enough to draw a couple of scathing comments, and that was all.

Perspiration was beading her forehead yet she shivered convulsively as Jake put a mug of steaming coffee on the table in front of her. He gave her a narrow-eyed stare then turned to the fridge. Within moments he had assembled the makings of a meal— a golden-brown cold roast chicken, a salad Sal must have prepared before they left.

He shrugged out of his suit jacket and draped it over the back of a chair, rolling up the sleeves of his crisp white shirt, and she looked away quickly, the very sight of the hair-roughened, olive tones of his skin making every pulse beat cry out with longing.

She would swallow some of her coffee, make an excuse and leave. She couldn't take much more of this torture. She reached for her mug and watched him carving the chicken, putting two finely cut slices of white meat on a plate and sliding it towards her.

Shaking her head, she pushed the plate away with a shaky forefinger, took a mouthful of coffee and heard the clatter as he flung down the knife in exasperation.

'You have to eat, dammit!'

Raising her eyes to him, she tried to tell him she wasn't hungry, but the words wouldn't come. She was too churned up inside to force anything down. His mouth was a hard, compressed line and she shook her head again in sheer perplexity. Why should he care whether she ate or not? As far as he was concerned she was beneath contempt.

'What are you trying to do to yourself?' he asked bitterly. 'Or, perhaps more to the point, what is he doing to you?'

She frowned, not understanding, and then she remembered her fictional lover and felt herself go impotently scarlet. She had got herself caught up in the web of deceit she had woven and there was no way out.

He turned brooding eyes on her, his voice tight as he lashed out, 'The bastard's hurt you, hasn't he? And don't lie; it's written all over you. You should have stayed with me. I would never have let you down. I loved you, dammit!'

He turned and stalked across the room, his back firmly to her as he stared from one of the windows. She watched him, frowning. She had misheard him, misunderstood him. She couldn't allow herself that much hope. But, to be absolutely sure, she asked him to repeat himself, and his shoulders went

rigid, the tense line of his shoulders telling how hard he was fighting to keep in control as he said cynically, 'That I loved you? Why? Does hearing me say it give you a kick?'

Her heart gave a terrifying leap and she put a hand to her breast to steady it, her voice shaky, still not quite able to believe what she was hearing as she reminded him, 'You were having an affair with that Italian woman—still are, as far as I know—so how could--?'

'La Giancesetti? Hilarious, isn't it?' he cut in, turning, his mouth curving in a humourless smile. 'Your obvious jealousy when you pointed out that press photograph gave me my first real hope. She's the complete extrovert, incorrigibly high-spirited. When that picture was taken she was telling me how much she'd enjoyed the opera. The man in the background is her father. I'd opened business negotiations with him and his senior partner, Lungarotti, regarding the sale of Harlow's, and we'd all attended the opera together. You would have been there too if you hadn't cried off.'

He turned back to the window and his voice was so low that she had to strain to hear it. 'But you had cried off. While we were in the States you told me you Were too exhausted to face the trip to Rome. I could see the strain on your face. And it hit me like a bombshell. I loved you. It had been coming on since I'd first set eyes on you and I'd been too stupid to see what was happening. It was then I decided to cut down drastically on my holdings.'

The life we led, the pace I set, was wearing you out. I was going to take things easily, try to make you fall in love with me, and when I saw you were jealous of Lorella I thought I stood a chance. So I said nothing to deny the rumour; I even turned the knife a little. You're highly intelligent; I knew it wouldn't be long before you worked out why you were jealous, admitted you cared for me, even if only a little. I set about buying a home for us—Harnage, if you remember.' His mouth twisted. 'And suggested we make our marriage a real one, set out to prove I could make you want me physically. What I didn't bargain for was the other man. Not at first.'

'When I cut short my stay in Rome,' he told her bleakly, 'getting back to London as quickly as I could because I was worried about you, and found you on the phone, calling someone "darling" and saying you'd meet up soon,

that I was still away, and no, you hadn't broken the news to me yet, I was deeply suspicious, agonisingly jealous, but told myself I was being paranoid—the reaction of a man deeply in love for the first time in his life, unsure of himself for the first time in his life.'

'Oh, Jake...' Claire pushed herself unsteadily to her feet, her huge eyes swimming with tears. He had loved her all this time, and she hadn't known it. The lies, the deceit, had all been for nothing, hurting them both. She still couldn't quite believe this was happening. She needed to go to him, to fall in his arms and confess how much she loved him, but he stopped her in her tracks, his voice brutal as he bit out, 'Don't! I can do without your pity. I lost out to that bastard but I can live with it. It's not the end of the world, so you can save your pretty speeches. I don't need them.'

Her fist went to her mouth to push back a sob of sheer wretchedness. Her darling didn't understand. He had talked of loving her, but it had all been in the past tense. He was an expert at cutting his losses. And now he looked as if he loathed her, she realised weakly. But he would never understand unless she explained, so she said thickly, 'Jake, I lied. There never was another man. I made him up.' Her voice wobbled dangerously. She was shaking all over. He looked as if he would like to kill her. 'The interrupted phone calls, my unexplained absences, the frilly knickers—everything. All lies. To make you believe there was another man. I knew it was the only way to make you release me from that agreement. I had to get away, I--'

'Was I so obnoxious to you?' he interrupted savagely. 'If what you say is true, then that has to be the case.' He reached for his jacket, his eyes like grey stones, flat and lifeless. 'As soon as Liz became financially independent you couldn't wait to get away from my distasteful presence, so you lied, played tricks, hurt me beyond bearing, all the while laughing at my attempts to prove I could be a good husband—one who was even prepared to forgive and forget your little fling!' He shrugged into his jacket, not looking at her. 'I wonder why it took me so many years to realise what a fool I am? But don't let it worry you; I'm a survivor.' He walked to the door. Turned and faced her for a bleak, final second. 'I'll get things moving on the divorce. I don't want you bearing my name. As far as I'm concerned, you're dead history.'

**AND HE WALKED AWAY.**

## CHAPTER TWELVE

SHOCK paralysed Claire for long blank moments. Wide eyes stared at the space where he had been. And then a surge of white-hot anger flooded her bloodstream and sent her racing out of the cottage, down the twilit path.

How dared he? Who the heck did he think he was? How dared he treat her like a worm, not fit to carry the Winter family name?

He'd said he'd once loved her. He couldn't have done. He wouldn't be able to treat her this way if he had! She had opened her heart to him, poured out her soul, confessed to those shameful lies, and all she had gained in recompense had been contempt and scorn.

She would see him in hell before she allowed him to walk out on her this way!

His car was parked behind hers in the lane. He was unlocking it, not hurrying. He didn't seem desperate to get away. He had the set, arrogant features of a man who had just emerged from a distasteful episode, determinedly unscathed, had put it firmly behind him, not allowing himself a single regret, and was ready to get on with his life, in his own time, on his own terms.

At that moment she hated him. Hated him with a violence she had never believed herself capable of. She bounced out of the gate like a whirlwind, snatching his arm, her fingers digging into the hard flesh and bone beneath the immaculate suiting.

'Don't walk away from me like that!' she spat. 'Don't treat me like dirt!'

He barely moved, his features unyielding as his shuttered eyes dropped from her furious ashen face to the pale fingers that were gripping his arm. Disdainfully, he dislodged them, one by one, insulting her with his total lack of involvement on any level whatsoever. And when the last gripping finger had been prised away he dropped her hand with cool contempt, and without a split-second's thought she brought it up, stinging through the air, all her weight behind her as she slapped his arrogant face.

The ringing retort was followed by an utter, deadly silence, the blistering glitter of his eyes penetrating the dusky evening light. Claire held her breath, appalled by what she'd done, stunned and overwhelmed by it. She had never used physical violence against anyone in her entire life.

And then everything inside her broke at once and she covered her stricken face with her hands, distraught sobs tearing at her chest, racking her too slender frame. She didn't think her heart was capable of containing so much abject misery without exploding, shattering into a million pieces.

When she felt his hands on her shoulders she made an instinctive, desperate attempt to get away, to crawl back into the cottage and weep until there were no tears left in the universe and then, and only then, begin the long painful process of putting herself back together again.

But the pressure of his hands increased, defeating her, and she hung her head with beaten shame, fighting against the loss of control, the tears that were pouring down her face.

'Don't cry,' he muttered harshly. 'I told you before, I can't bear to see you cry.'

'I can't help it,' she howled. 'You hate me. I can't take that. I didn't mean to hit you. I was hitting your contempt. I might deserve it, but I'm not strong enough to take it.'

'Claire...' His arms wrapped round her. 'I don't hate you, and I probably deserved that slap.' He sounded weary, as if something had got through all his impeccable defences, defeated him, too. And his iron control was getting thin round the edges; she could feel his big body trembling against hers.

Blinking away the tears, she put her hands flat against the wide span of his shoulders and tried to push him away. Whatever else she deserved, it wasn't the torturing agony of being held so closely against him, and his arms fell away immediately, as if he deeply regretted the quixotic impulse that had made him try to comfort her.

'I was too harsh,' he said flatly. 'I apologise. I found the idea of you deliberately setting out to lie to me, deceive me, abhorrent. The honesty, the closeness we'd had had been something infinitely precious.' He stepped away, putting more distance between them. 'If you'd told me the truth, explained that you couldn't bear to breathe the same air, to be in the same room, let alone share my name, I would have let you go immediately. There would have been no need to go to such lengths, believe me. I may be impossible, but I'm not a monster.'

He turned back to his car and somewhere in the warm, dark night an owl hooted—a poignant, mournful sound that tore at Claire's aching heart—and she said thickly, 'You're a fool! It wasn't like that! I lied because I could see no other way out. Are you too stupid to understand? I was in love with you, you big ape! And married to your work- not you. And I thought you'd got a mistress—you never once denied it. And even when you suggested we make our marriage a real one I knew it was only because you wanted to make sure I stayed on, running around after you as usual. You were devious and tricky. Even when I'd told you I wanted our arrangement to end and offered to advertise my position, you said you'd already found a replacement—just to torment me. You had no intention of losing my invaluable services. So I had to resort to deception. There was no other way. I couldn't stay with you, loving you, knowing you didn't love me, thinking about your mistresses— and—well, everything,' she finished lamely, sniffing, belatedly wishing a final spurt of rage hadn't led her into that tirade.

Because he still had his back to her. He hadn't moved a muscle. He was bored. He had believed himself in love with her, once. Just for a little while. But her lies had killed all that. The reasons behind them didn't matter. His own integrity wouldn't let him love a liar.

Her shoulders slumping, she walked silently back to the cottage, closing the door behind her and leaning against it wearily. She had fouled up, and how. Ruined her future and tainted her past.

Spent and drained, she pushed herself away from the support of the door just as it opened behind her. He had come back to torment her, she decided dully, too emotionally exhausted to do anything other than hold herself

rigid, trying to contain her grief. Torment her with the cold comfort of his pity. His deeply ingrained sense of duty must have forced him to make sure she was all right. Make sure you eat something, he would tell her. You're too upset to drive, so stay here tonight. It was too much to ask her to bear, she thought wildly. She didn't want his pity, his disinterested concern!

But he simply spoke her name, with a soft warmth that lapped her body with delight, and, not knowing whether she was dreaming or not, making things up because she wanted them to be true, she melted against him when he pulled her into his arms.

'For an intelligent woman you can be impossibly stupid,' he murmured against her hair. 'Of course there wasn't a replacement; how could there have been? You're irreplaceable, my darling. I was so sure, at the time, that I could persuade you to stay, persuade you with love to stay with me, be my true wife. Why do you think I kept the negotiations for Harnage Place such a secret? I wanted to surprise you, overwhelm you—it was to be my second wedding anniversary gift to you. And why do you think we were going through all those reports so minutely, selling great chunks of my holdings, if not because I wanted to off-load the bulk of my business responsibilities, giving me time to put down roots with you?'

'Oh, Jake!' She wrapped her arms around his neck, lifting her face to his, drowning in his steadfast eyes. 'You haven't stopped loving me, have you? Tell me you haven't!'

Her arms tightened. She was holding on for dear life. Even if this was a dream, she had no intention of letting it go. And her heart soared as he answered her thickly, 'Never for a single moment. I've lived in hell these past six months. Missing you with every breath I took, aching for you, thinking of you with that other guy...'

'I'm sorry—I'm sorry—I'll never be able to say it often enough!' she cried. 'He never existed—loving you, how could I have looked at another man?'

He cupped her face with his hands. 'No more tears,' he said softly. 'I accept the lion's share of the blame. Even when all the evidence pointed to your having a lover I was too bloody arrogant to allow the possibility of losing

you into my head.' He touched her lips gently with his and her body melted as she heard the deep passion in his voice. 'We had so much going for us, you and I. And I'd discovered, to my half-crazy joy, that when I touched you you went up like a torch. I could make you want me, so it followed that I could make you love me—or so I reasoned in my arrogance. I wouldn't lose you to any man. I should have told you how I felt, laid my soul bare and placed my heart at your feet—allowed you to make your own decisions.' His mouth quirked, disarming her. 'But humility had never been my strong point--'

'Past tense?' she injected, not believing it for a second. And he smiled down at her, his silver eyes soft with love.

'Deeply past,' he grinned. 'And to prove it I humbly ask if you will be my true wife, stay with me always, love me forever.'

'You know I will.' She sighed contentedly, snuggling up to him like a happy little cat. 'But aren't you forgetting something?'

His hands were stroking her back, his body hardening against hers, and his voice was thick as he said roughly, 'So remind me, witch.'

'Aren't you supposed to kiss the bride?' she murmured shakily, her whole body on fire, her mind spinning in orbit because his love had been all she had ever craved. And now she had it and it all seemed too impossibly beautiful to be true.

And then there was no room in her dizzy head for any thoughts at all as he covered her mouth and kissed her until she felt herself dissolve right into him, and she felt all his magnificent control begin to disappear as his body shook with the intensity of his desire. She knew now that when he'd called a halt that night in the mountain cottage he'd been giving her choices, refusing to seduce away her right to make her own decision.

'You'll never know how much I love you,' she murmured breathlessly against the possession of his mouth, and he assured her hoarsely,

'I will, my darling. You are about to show me.' And he lifted her into his arms, mounting the stairs, no trace left in him of that very short-lived humility as he told her, 'We are both going to show each other, beyond any shadow of doubt. And then--' he set her gently down on her feet in the room she had always used when staying here '—when we've got our breath back, my love, we'll talk about our wonderful future.'

Tenderly, he undressed her, his adoring eyes darkening as he stated, 'And feed you up. You need pampering and cossetting.' His hands stroked her too slender body, hardly touching, as if afraid she would break.

She trembled, her voice uncertain as she whispered, 'Please don't tell me you hate skinny women!' trying to turn it into a joke, then sighing with joy as he buried his head against her throbbing breasts and said raggedly, 'I love you so much—so very much. You are my life.'

Dawn was breaking and they were curled up against the pillows, each drowning in the eyes of the other, drowning in love, in the bright joy of finding each other, and Jake leaned forward and tenderly pushed her damp hair away from her forehead, his voice drowsy as he instructed, 'Stay right where you are. We need to build up our strength. That scheming mother of yours will have enough sense to stay away for another twenty-four hours, at least. I'll fix us some food and then we'll see if we can't lose our breath all over again.'

Her drowsy eyes revelled in his perfect, unashamed nakedness as he rolled off the bed and walked out of the room, and she held out loving arms to him when he walked back in, champagne and two glasses in one hand, a plate of thickly cut chicken sandwiches in the other, and as he slid in beside her she mentally composed the note she'd leave for Liz: We drank the champagne. Thank you.

'Later, wicked one!' He untwined her arms, plumping up the pillows and lifting her up against them. 'Now we eat. And talk.' He handed her a sandwich and bit into his own. 'I keep only a few enterprises going. Just enough to keep our hands in. And if you don't want to wear your PA hat,

then throw it away. I'll hire that keen young family man you babbled about. After all--' his eyes smiled sinfully into hers '—you'll be around to buy my shirts. And there'll be so much more for us to do—furnishing Harnage exactly as we want it, playing with our children, playing with our conservatory—you did love it, didn't you, sweetheart?'

'Every inch,' she said truthfully, remembering how close they'd come to making love in that lush, exotic place, recalling how much pain they'd both had to go through before they'd each admitted their love.

But she wasn't going to think about that time and her eyes smiled into his as he handed her a glass of the foaming wine and sipped from his. 'To you, Mrs Winter, my dearest love. And while I remember ...' He put his glass aside. 'Liz told me you were working, for a writer, some woman or other.'

'You knew where I was?' She wrinkled her nose at him and the bubbles. Liz had to have told him, and she'd promised faithfully--

'Not where. Only that you were working, and who for. Liz said she'd agreed not to tell me where you were, but told me she would, if I asked.'

But his pride, and his pain, hadn't let him ask. So Liz had taken matters into her own hands. Claire forgave her, utterly, whole-heartedly.

'You were living in, I believe?' And at her affirming nod he dictated, 'Then tomorrow we drive up and collect your things.'

'I'm supposed to work a month's notice,' she said sweetly, her eyes sparkling at him over the rim of her glass.

'Not allowed,' he said firmly, and she put her half-finished food and drink aside and slid into his waiting arms, sparing a tiny, flickering, pitying thought for the formidable Olympia Gores-Tamlyn.

In Jake Winter she would at last have met her match. More than her match. 'You'll break the news to her for me, won't you my darling?'

And she drowned his murmur of assent with a series of tiny, teasing kisses that took them on the pathway to heaven again.