

# DIANA HAMILTON

The Mediterranean  
Billionaire's Secret  
Baby



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«HarperCollins»

## **Hamilton D.**

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She's carrying his baby—so she will be his bride! Italian billionaire Francesco Mastroianni was captivated by Anna. But their passionate affair was cut short when Anna's father attempted to blackmail Francesco into marrying her. Seven months later, Francesco is shocked to see Anna again. She's struggling to make ends meet and she's visibly pregnant! If she's carrying the Mastroianni heir, that can mean only one course of action for Francesco: marriage!

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## CHAPTER ONE

DARK brows clenched in irritation above narrowed smoke-grey eyes, Francesco Mastroianni drove through the gathering gloom of a chilly March evening. Vicious rods of rain hit the windscreen of the throatily growling Ferarri, adding to his already sour mood.

Visiting this part of rural Gloucestershire wasn't his idea of a picnic—there were too many uncomfortable memories—but there was no way he could have excused his way out of it. He was too fond of Silvana even to think of turning the weekend invitation down and spoiling her pleasure in showing off her new home.

Trouble was, his cousin Silvana and her husband Guy had recently moved from their swanky London abode to a newly renovated manor house in a county that sent a shiver through him whenever the name was mentioned.

He didn't do cringing, and he found the grossly unwelcome experience infuriating.

Per l'amor del cielo—just get over it! he instructed himself toughly, gritting his teeth until his jaw resembled something carved out of rock. However painful the experience, he'd learned a priceless lesson—hadn't he?

Francesco had been cynical where the female sex was concerned since he'd entered his late teens and learned that his family's wealth was a powerful magnet. It was hard to credit that he'd actually been besotted and bewitched into allowing himself to believe that, against all his previous expectations, he'd finally found one woman he could trust. Actually to believe she was the one woman in the world he could trust with his life and his love until the day he died.

His sweet Anna—his mouth curled with cynical derision.

Yeah. Right.

He'd been well and truly suckered! Behaving like a callow youth instead of a mature and worldly-wise hard-nosed thirty-four-year-old!

She'd turned out to be as bad as all the others who'd targeted his personal fortune—worse, even. Pretending—oh, she'd been good at pretending—that she had no idea who he was, pretending she believed he was just a regular guy, earning a crust whichever way he could by fishing, acting as a part-time tour guide, taking casual work wherever he found it. That was the impression she'd seemingly arrived at, and although he hadn't lied he hadn't disabused her, too delighted to have found himself falling for the beautiful, gentle Anna who, so it had seemed, had been in love with him, the man, not with his financial clout.

Expelling a savage hiss of breath between strong white teeth, he slowed down to a crawl at a fork in the narrow lane and peered out through the murk at the signpost.

Left towards his cousin's new home. Right towards the village where Anna the sneaky gold-digger lived. Rylands. The name of her home was burned into his brain.

He was powerless to prevent his mind flicking back to the last time he'd made this journey.

'Make your way there—I'll tell my folks to expect you and make a bed up. You will stay overnight, won't you?' She'd sounded breathless with excitement when he'd phoned from London to say he was on his way to see her. 'It's a real pain—but I won't be back until around ten. I'll be working this evening. And, no...' a breathy sigh, a sigh that had seemed to his bamboozled self to hold every last ounce of the world's regrets '...I can't cancel—wish I could! Oh, Francesco, I can't wait to see you!'

Replacing the receiver on one of the bank of phones that sat on the gleaming expanse of his desk in the glass and polished teak office of his London headquarters, he'd grinned wryly. He'd already cancelled three scheduled meetings to be with her. But that wouldn't occur to her. Why should it? She hadn't a clue that he headed the vast Mastroianni business empire that ran like well-oiled clockwork from offices in Rome, Brussels, New York and Sydney.

Buzzing through to his senior PA, he'd imparted the information that he was leaving—with a proposal bursting to trip off his tongue and a ring fit for a queen in the breast pocket of his pale grey business suit—reflecting that, though the delay of a few hours in seeing her was more than he could bear, it would at least give him the opportunity to get to know her parents.

Her father had been waiting to greet him. A large, florid figure in shabby tweeds, he'd bounded down the short flight of stone steps like a boisterous overgrown puppy, hardly giving him time to take in the proportions of the seventeenth-century building constructed of mellow golden Cotswold stone. Or the general look of dilapidation.

'So you are my little girl's fella!' His hands grasped in a knuckle-crushing grip, he'd watched the older man's eyes widen in recognition and then narrow as he as good as licked his lips. 'Welcome to the ancestral home! Anna's told us all about you!'

Led through a huge stone-flagged hall, empty apart from a solitary sorry-looking chair, he'd found himself ushered into a smallish panelled room cluttered with shabby sofas and a scuffed pine table and treated to the most blatant begging spiel he'd ever had to endure.

'Thought I'd get this in before my good lady joins us—you know how it is; they don't understand business matters, bless their pretty little heads! Thing is, old son, I've got this fantastic idea. Can't lose! Great investment opportunity for a man like you. You'd be a fool to turn it down, and from what I've read about you, you're not that!'

Dismissing the crackpot scheme—something to do with wild animals—he'd felt his heart twist with the shock of betrayal, his face stiffen with anger. So Anna had told her father all about her 'fella'? You bet she had! Got him primed and ready to swoop!

No wonder she'd sounded over the moon when he'd phoned to say he was on his way. Congratulating herself that she'd successfully reeled him in!

Had the working excuse been just that? A lie, giving her father the time and space to wheedle a million pounds from him? Would his sweet Anna have swanned in when the deal was done and dusted, widening those big green eyes and fluttering those thick lashes, exclaiming with a pout of her luscious lips that she didn't understand boring business stuff, confident that fantastic sex would hold him?

His voice like a razor, he'd cut the older man off mid-flow. 'I've never been begged for money more clumsily.' Then he'd asked for a sheet of paper. Scrawled a message for his 'Sweet Anna', and left. Despising himself. Hating her.

Hating her for turning him into the sort of fool who could be led from the heart instead of the head.

He who prided himself on his cool, calculating brain, his inborn ability to recognise a gold-digger at a hundred yards, had come within a whisker of being taken for the ride of his life.

He was deeply ashamed of himself.

Gunning the engine, he took the left fork and told himself to forget the whole distasteful episode. And hoped with savage impatience that Silvana—an incorrigible matchmaker—hadn't included a wannabe billionaire's wife/mistress in her weekend invitation. He had no interest in the opposite sex. Hadn't had since—oh, forget it!

Her hands pressing against the aching small of her back, Anna Maybury regarded her feet, shod in comfy old black flatties. She was sure her ankles were swelling. One of the penalties of being seven months pregnant.

Her hands slid round to rest lightly on her bump, which was only partially disguised by her voluminous pale green working overall. Despite the discomfort, she loved her coming baby more than she'd ever thought possible.

A termination, as suggested by a couple of her friends, had been completely out of the question, and her parents' nagging on about her right to contact the father and demand financial support had been met with stubborn refusal.

This was her baby, and she loved him or her with every atom of her generous heart. She would manage without any input from its father. The very idea made her seethe. He was an utter cad! He might be more handsome than was good for any man, and, as it had turned out, filthy rotten rich, but he was still a callous, womanising louse!

Annoyed with herself for giving him space in her head, breaking the staunch vow she'd made never to think of him again, she tucked a straying strand of her mane of long blonde hair back beneath the unflattering snood and gave her attention to the makings of dinner for four. The pre-prepared items were waiting in the cool box, and the leg of lamb spiked with garlic and rosemary, for the main course, was sizzling nicely in the oven of the huge old range.

An Italian menu, as stipulated. Anna didn't want to think of anything Italian. Maybe that was why she'd dropped her mental guard and allowed herself to give her baby's father head-room—something she'd successfully avoided ever since she'd discovered she was pregnant.

Apparently her client, Silvana Rosewall, was Italian, married to some well-heeled English banker. So she'd have to get herself comfy with that and not give in to self-pity just because the lady of the house had stipulated an Italian menu.

She was a professional chef, and her home catering business was doing OK. More than OK. Though she could have done with her friend Cissie's help tonight, to take over the actual serving.

But Cissie had a promising date, and when she'd first offered to join Maybury Catering in a dogsbody and PR capacity she'd stressed that she would only be filling in time until Mr Right and Rich came over her horizon.

She had to hand it to Cissie, though. Her family had all the right social connections, and a word here and there had produced some good bookings—like tonight's—and they were infinitely preferable to the others that came in—mostly childrens' parties or buffet lunches for leisured ladies—handed to her like patronising favours because people knew her family and were sorry for them.

But she was not, not going to think about the very real prospect that Rylands, the family home for over three hundred years, might be taken from them. It was a scary thought, because she knew that losing her family's home would break her mother's already frail heart. And agonising over such scary thoughts would be bad for her unborn baby. So she wouldn't let herself.

'My guests have just arrived.'

A smile lighting her heart-shaped face, Anna turned as Mrs Rosewall entered the huge kitchen. Relief that things would now start moving, occupy a mind that annoyingly seemed inclined to brood, flooded through her. The kitchen was way at the back of the rambling manor, so she hadn't been able to hear car tyres crunching on the gravel of the main driveway.

'What do we have?' Silvana Rosewall picked her way over the uneven slate flooring slabs that had been in situ since the house was built. A woman in her early thirties, she was beautiful in a blue silk gown, spiky high heels, with a cluster of jewels somehow fixed in her upswept dark hair.

'Tiny hot potato cakes with mozzarella to start, followed by swordfish kebabs, then thin slices of Tuscan-style lamb, with roasted Mediterranean vegetables, and to finish we have zabaglione with caramel oranges,' Anna reeled off confidently. 'And coffee, of course. And I managed to get hold of some of those special Venetian biscuits.'

'Eccellente.' Silvana nodded her approval. 'We eat in half an hour.' A slight frown marred the perfection of her smooth-as-cream brow as her eyes swept Anna's dumpily pregnant figure. 'You are alone? You can manage—in your condition? I would have thought some other person to wait on the table...'

Someone slim and attractive, not likely to put her guests off their food, Anna translated wryly as her client finally closed the kitchen door behind her. Well, she'd do her best to melt into the background. She had the sort of curves that would have looked great on a six-foot Amazon, but in her own eyes they made her five-two frame decidedly dumpy. Normally she was saved from

complete rotundity only by her once tiny waist—although recently that had ballooned with her large and growing larger vigorous baby!

Dismissing her apple-like shape, Anna opened the first of the two large cool boxes which held everything that could have possibly been prepared at home and got on with what she did best. Cooking.

Exactly half an hour later the biggest tray she could find was loaded with four plates of sizzling hot potato cakes topped with melting, slightly browned mozzarella and garnished with fresh basil, and she was on her way, her heart light because all was going as it should. The lamb was resting now, before carving, and the swordfish, tomato and lemon wedge kebabs were ready to put under the grill the moment she was back in the kitchen after unobtrusively serving the antipasto. Hopefully the Rosewalls and their two guests would be so knocked out by the delicious food she was serving they wouldn't notice her, and her appearance wouldn't be an embarrassment to her fastidious client.

But her blithe confidence took a shattering nosedive when she entered the panelled room and stared straight into the eyes of...him!

The loaded tray almost followed the abrupt direction of her confidence. Clinging to it for dear life, she felt her face flame. His eyes impaled her. The last time she'd looked into them they'd glimmered between the unfairly long and thick sweep of his dark lashes, smoky with desire. Now they were hard, glitteringly dark and dangerously narrowed.

Gunfighter's eyes, she thought crazily, and swallowed down a cry of outrage. She dropped her transfixed gaze, willed the fiery colour to leave her hot face, and handed the plates around, her hands shaking.

Scuttling out of the room, her dignity long-lost, she made it back to the kitchen. Her heart pounding, Anna leant back against the solid wood of the closed door and tried to pull herself together. Seeing him here—smooth, urbanely handsome, in the sort of beautifully tailored suit that must have cost an arm and a leg, looking at her as if she were something quite unspeakable—had been a cruel shock.

The taunting words he'd scrawled on that note he'd left for her were etched in acid behind her closed eyes.

Nice try. But I've changed my mind. You've a lot to offer, but nothing I can't get in spades elsewhere.

Sex. He'd meant sex.

Her stomach lurched and she thrust a fisted hand against her mouth. Dad must have read the note. Nothing else could have explained his hangdog expression when he'd handed it to her, mumbling that her new fella had only stayed for ten minutes, then left. So her father knew she'd been given the runaround, and that had made her feel even worse, if that were possible.

At first she'd thought that he'd believed she was loaded—hadn't she and Cissie been staying at that ruinously expensive hotel, patronised by the seriously wealthy? He'd thought he was onto a good thing—until he'd faced the reality of Rylands, denuded of anything worth selling, neglect evident everywhere you looked.

That had been before. A few weeks later Cissie had thrust one of the glossy society magazines her mother took under her nose, a scarlet nail jabbing at a photograph.

'That's the guy you hooked up with on Ischia. I thought he looked sort of familiar, but I couldn't place him—it must have been the scruff he was going around in. He must have been incognito—not a minder or a fancy yacht in sight! He's always in the gossip columns of the glossies. He's worth trillions—you lucky cow! Do you keep in touch?'

'No.'

'Pity. Hook him and you'd be set for life! Mind you, to be honest, these holiday flings aren't meant to last, and I guess he'd be a handful—terrible reputation with women!'

Shrugging, she'd turned away, barely glancing at the photographed Francesco Mastroianni, his white dinner jacket contrasting with his fatally attractive dark Latin looks, complete with arm candy. Her mind had felt fried. He hadn't been after her non-existent family money, as she'd first thought.

Just sex.

But in the short time between arriving in London and phoning her he'd met someone who could give him better sex—someone more sophisticated. Creep! Oh, how she hated men who used women as playthings, to be picked up and then chucked away when a more exciting prospect came into view!

So what right had he to look at her now as if she were beneath contempt?

Heaving herself away from the door, she told herself that if anyone deserved contempt it was him, and rushed to turn on the grill.

She was a professional. She would do the job she'd been hired to do, ignore him and, when the evening was over, she'd put him right out of her head again. She would not, not 'accidentally' knock his wine glass over into his lap, or drop a loaded plate on his hateful head. She couldn't afford that sort of satisfaction. To get a reputation for gross clumsiness would mean she'd never work in the area again.

But if he dared give her that contemptuous look one more time she'd be sorely tempted!

She was pregnant!

His?

Francesco had to force himself to eat. Force himself to ignore Anna Maybury as she served them. Force out the occasional monosyllable that was his sole contribution to the otherwise animated conversation, oblivious to the come-ons that were steaming his way from the sultry redhead his cousin had produced for his delectation.

Not interested. Not remotely. Grimly sifting facts.

Anna had been a virgin. He hadn't used protection that first time, too blown away to even think of it.

Lost. He'd been lost in a wildly churning maelstrom of unfettered emotion—an experience so new and vivid he'd felt as if the whole of his life up until that moment had been a theatre of shadows.

The child she was carrying could be his. Unless—

Aiming for casual, he leaned back, hooked an arm over the back of his chair and, ignoring the redhead's pouting smile, tossed into the conversation, 'Your caterer? How pregnant is she, do you know?'

Three pairs of taken-aback eyes stared at him. It was Silvana who wanted to know, 'Why do you ask?'

Because I might be about to be a father and not know it. Aloud, he responded with deceptive idleness. 'I wondered if we, collectively, might be required to act as midwives.'

An irritating tinkle of laughter from the redhead—he couldn't remember what she was called—and an apprehensive glance from Guy towards his wife, who answered. 'Seven months, according to Cissie Lansdale. Cissie's a sort of partner on Anna's catering business—a bit feckless, I think the word is. She usually helps out with the waiting—but not tonight, apparently. Guy, darling—our glasses are empty.'

As her husband did the honours with a second bottle of Valpolicella, Silvana confided, 'Personally, I think a woman in her position should be resting, not—' she waved a languid hand over the table '—doing this sort of thing. Of course she doesn't have a husband to lay the law down, and her mother's a feeble thing—not in good health, I hear. Besides, I suppose they need the money. The father's hopeless. He married into that family. They once had real standing in the area. But he squandered everything or lost it.'

'Bad investments followed worse ones, I hear,' Guy put in as he sat down again.

'You seem to know a lot about them,' Francesco commented, reflecting uneasily that seven months was spot-on. The child would be his unless immediately on her return home Anna had jumped

into bed with someone else. But that didn't seem likely, given that at that time she'd been banking on reeling him in. She'd been expecting him to follow her to England, so she would not have wanted some other guy hanging around to stir up trouble, he decided forensically.

Making a huge effort to stop a black scowl from forming, and stopping himself from marching straight into the kitchen and demanding to know the truth, he listened to his cousin's answer.

'It was necessary when we first came here to introduce ourselves to the better families so they could advise us on local reliable and honest tradespeople. A permanent housekeeper is to arrive next week, but there are others.' She took a sip of her coffee and arched one finely raised brow at him over the central flower arrangement. 'Plumbers, electricians, a man to do the garden, caterers—that sort of person. The pregnant girl came highly recommended.

'Now, why don't we retire to the sitting room while the pregnant one clears away? One Grappa, I think, and then Guy and I will go up and leave you two to relax by the fire and get to know each other properly.' A big smile in Francesco's direction as she got to her feet. 'I know Natalie wants to discuss some charity ball I'm sure you'll be interested in.'

Like hell he would! Deadpan, he met the redhead's over-sugared smile. Introduced by Silvana as 'a friend from London'—an organiser of glittering events for some charity or other—she was certainly a looker. And available. And he was going to have to endure a weekend of having his cousin throwing them together. He would have to let this Natalie know that he was as interested in the female of the species as he was in settling down to read through the telephone directory from cover to cover. And try to be kind about it.

And tomorrow, first thing, he would visit Rylands and demand to know if the child the woman who'd made an idiot of him was carrying was his.

The dishwasher had finished its cycle. Warily, Anna replaced the contents back in place in the huge Victorian floor-to-ceiling cupboard. Her feet were burning and her back was still aching.

Half an hour earlier Mrs Rosewall had found her repacking the cool boxes and handed her a cheque.

'The meal was perfect. Are you almost finished?'

'Everything will be back as it was in half an hour or so. I'm just waiting for the dishes to finish. Unless you'd prefer me to leave now?' Said without any real hope.

She'd been longing to get away—well out of the orbit of Francesco and his current woman. But from experience she knew that her clients wanted their kitchens to look as if they'd never been used. That was what they paid her for. And they wanted full value for money.

And this one was no different. 'No hurry. I just wanted to tell you that my husband and I are retiring for the night, but my cousin and his young lady will be in the sitting room and I don't want them to be disturbed. Just let yourself out quietly. And, while I think about it, could you cater for lunch on Sunday? My guests will be driving back to London in the afternoon, so nothing too heavy, I think.'

Anna hadn't even considered saying yes! The fee would be more than welcome, but no way would she put herself anywhere near that womanising creep again!

'Sorry,' she'd declined, resisting the urge to rub her aching back. 'That won't be possible.'

Now, after a final look at the spotless kitchen, she got into her old raincoat, shook her hair free and let herself out. Too tired to hurry, she was drenched when she reached her van and loaded the cool boxes in the back.

It had been a nightmare of a night. The shock of seeing him again had got to her, brought it all back when she hadn't wanted to so much as think about him again. But it was over now, she reminded herself with almost tearful gratitude, and she forced herself to look on the bright side.

Sensibly telling herself that she never need set eyes on him again, she clambered in behind the wheel.

The way that redhead had been positively drooling over him had made her feel nauseous, and the horrible feeling that he must have noticed her pregnant state—how could he miss it?—put two and two together and know that the baby was his had been argued away as she'd grilled the kebabs.

Callously, he wouldn't want to know. What had happened on Ischia was just one in a long line of forgettable flings. He would dismiss the matter, reasoning that if she had fallen pregnant it was her own fault and she could deal with it.

Which was fine by her!

With his heart successfully painted as black as his midnight hair, Anna pushed him roughly out of her mind and turned the key in the ignition.

The engine gave a tortured whine—and died. After the fourth attempt Anna had to concede that the battery was dead. Sternly resisting the temptation to bawl her eyes out, she rooted in her handbag for her mobile. It was entirely her own fault. Nick had advised her to splash out on a new battery, but she had kept putting it off because every spare penny was needed to pay the service bills at Rylands and put food on the table.

The fruitless search for her mobile continued—until Anna had to concede that she must have left it at home. Banging her small fists against the steering wheel, she yelled 'Stupid! Stupid!' then slumped in exhaustion in her seat, facing the unpalatable fact that she would have to go and knock them up.

'Them' being Francesco and his current squeeze! The Rosewalls had long since retired for the night. And for all she knew so had Francesco and his lady. The thought galvanised her. It had to be all of eight miles back to Rylands. It was pouring with rain. If she weren't pregnant she would walk it. But as it was—

Francesco permitted himself a small Grappa as the redhead vacated the room. Huffily.

Too edgy to settle, he paced the room, glass held loosely in one hand. Used to fending women off, he usually managed it with finesse. Not tonight. He hadn't been brutal. Just cold, clipped, concise.

Tickets for the charity ball she was organising didn't interest him. Neither did meeting up for lunch when they were back in town. His schedule was too tight to allow room for any socialising in the foreseeable future.

At which point she'd gone to bed. Alone.

So he should be able to relax. But he couldn't. Seeing Anna Maybury again had rekindled all the shaming memories, had brought everything he was doing his damndest to forget back into unbelievably sharp focus, and her advanced state of pregnancy had deeply unsettled him, raising questions he knew he had to have answered.

The morning, when he could confront her, seemed an unendurably long way away.

Her heart quailing, Anna pressed the doorbell. The rain had turned her hair into dripping rats' tails, and the front of her overall was soaking because the bump meant she couldn't fasten her old waterproof. She felt sick with nerves, and knowing she must look pretty dreadful didn't help.

But she had to contact Nick—ask him to come and collect her—and that meant facing Francesco, speaking to him, asking for the use of the Rosewalls' phone.

The alternative was trudging home along narrow, isolated lanes. The chance of flagging down a passing motorist was a remote one at this time of night, and the likelihood of seeing a light at the windows of one of the scattered cottages or farmsteads was almost non-existent.

As the door swung open in answer to her summons at last she stiffened her spine, barely glanced at Francesco's hard, handsome features and managed to get out, in a disgracefully wobbly voice, 'My van won't start. May I use the phone?'

Silence. Then, above the relentless sound of the rain, she heard his harsh indrawn breath, found her eyes tugged up to his. Hardened grey steel.

And not even the beguiling accent could soften the impact of his rawly savage question. ‘Tell the truth, for once in your life. Is the baby mine?’

## CHAPTER TWO

FLOUNDERING, stunned by such an in-your-face enquiry, Anna decided that it would be more dignified to ignore the question rather than give in to the compulsion to fling *What do you care?* at him.

Woodenly, she elaborated on her request, hammering home the fact that a way out of her present dead van difficulty need be the only point of contact between them.

‘I need to call Nick to ask him to fetch me, and for that I obviously need to use a phone.’

Aware of steel-hard eyes boring into her, one sable brow elevated in what looked like disbelief, she squirmed inside. Was he asking himself how he had ever managed to make love—amendment, have sex—with such a creature? Lumpen, hair like wet string, clumpy shoes, old school mac out of which loomed a stomach as big as the Millennium Dome!

Fighting the appalling fizzy upsurge of hysteria, she forced herself to calm down, to forget she loathed and despised him, and to explain, slowly and clearly, flattening dangerous emotions out of her voice. ‘Please let the Rosewalls know that Nick and I will collect my van first thing in the morning. All it needs is a new battery.’ Fingers crossed! No way could she pay a big repair bill if there was anything more serious amiss.

Shivering now, wet, cold and intensely weary, she felt desperation claw at her as she took a step forward. ‘May I come in?’

Glancing up at him when he made no move to allow her entry, she felt her heart twist in alarm. His eyes were grim and his beautiful, sexy mouth was set in a cruel slash. The handsome features were taut, throwing those classical cheekbones and the arrogant blade of his nose into harsh relief.

Was he going to tell her to get lost? Force her to walk back?

He moved then. Towards her. Taking an elbow in a grip of steel, turning her. ‘I’ll drive you.’

‘That’s not necessary.’ She couldn’t hide the note of urgency in her voice, dreading the thought of being cooped up in a car with him, him repeating *That Question*, getting personal. ‘Nick will be more than happy to fetch me.’

His grip tightened. The pace he was setting as he steered her unwilling and yet too exhausted to fight self through the darkness to the far side of the manor house quickened. ‘I’m sure he will,’ he remarked sardonically. ‘However, you need to get out of those wet things and into a hot bath as quickly as possible.’ He tugged her to a halt before she could blunder into the parked Ferrari. ‘You do not have just your own well-being to consider now.’

He meant the baby, Anna conceded guiltily as she shoehorned herself into the passenger seat. And he was right. The whole evening had been disastrous, and she needed to get dry, warm and relaxed for her baby’s sake, but the comparative speed of that operation against the delay of waiting for Nick meant Francesco would have ample opportunity to ask *That Question* again, and she didn’t know how to answer him.

Her spine rigid with apprehension, she felt hot tears of sheer exhaustion flood her eyes, and she bit into the soft underside of her lower lip to stop them falling.

Tell him it was none of his business? Would he accept that? Absent himself smartly, relieved that she wouldn’t be making a nuisance of herself, demanding financial support, and—heaven forbid—making herself known to his family and causing him huge embarrassment?

It seemed a definite possibility. As a psychological profile of a guy who would trample a poor girl’s heart with as much compunction as he would trample a fallen leaf, it fitted.

Unless she steeled herself to tell a whopping lie and name some other fictional guy as the father? Claim she was just five months pregnant, putting him right out of the frame? But, given the size of her, would he be gormless enough to believe that?

Bracing herself, Anna waited. But the only question he asked was, 'Do you still live with your parents at Rylands?' Receiving a breathless affirmative, he said nothing more until he halted the car at the head of the weedy drive. Then he told her grimly, 'Don't think I've finished. I'll be here first thing in the morning. And if I'm told you're not available I'll wait until you are.'

Driving back at the sort of speed he had earlier carefully controlled in deference to his passenger, Francesco cursed himself for failing to demand to know the identity of the father of her child.

Once set on a course of action he always pursued it with surgical precision, letting nothing stand in his way. He was single-minded, known to be ruthless when the occasion demanded—he'd had to be. Taking over the almost moribund Mastroianni business empire on the death of his father ten years earlier, he'd dragged it kicking and screaming, into the twenty-first century—not a task for an indecisive weakling.

And as for compassion for fools and knaves—forget it!

So why hadn't he pressed home his advantage when she'd asked to use the Rosewalls' phone? Why had he allowed her to avoid answering the burning question? No one else on the planet would have got away with it!

He should have forced the truth from her. He'd had the ideal opportunity.

Except—

She'd looked so vulnerable. Exhausted. Wet and bedraggled, like a half-drowned kitten. His primary emotion had been rage that a woman in her condition was forced to slave for those too privileged to do anything but issue orders and then sit back and wait for them to be carried out. That had been swiftly followed by the need to transport her to where she could find comfort and rest.

He expelled a harsh breath through his teeth. He had to be getting old, losing his touch!

And who the hell was Nick?

Clutching her hot water bottle, Anna crawled into bed. The bathwater had been tepid at best and her bedroom was draughty, with damp patches on the ceiling where the venerable roof leaked.

Her throat tightened. She shivered convulsively. She was being threatened. He really did mean to drag the truth from her, against all her earlier expectations he wasn't going to shrug those magnificent, expensively clothed shoulders, discount the fact that he might be about to become a father and leave her to get on with it.

She'd read somewhere that the Latin male was deeply family orientated. The reminder made her shudder.

If only she hadn't accepted the Rosewalls' catering job! They wouldn't have set eyes on each other again. And if only she'd been able to fall in love with Nick and accept the offer of marriage that had been made when her pregnancy had begun to show she'd have been a married woman, and Nick would have sworn blind the child was his. He would do anything for her. The thought depressed her.

She and Nick had been best mates since they were toddlers, and he was the kindest, gentlest person she knew. They were deeply fond of each other—always had been—and that had prompted his proposal, and the vow to care for her and the baby, look on him or her as his own.

He cared for her—she knew that—but he was not in love with her and he deserved better. One day he would meet someone who took his breath away. And she wasn't in love with him either. What she felt for Nick was nothing like what she'd felt when she'd fallen for Francesco—

Oh! Scrub that! Punching the pillow with small, angry fists, she buried her head in it and tried to sleep.

Anna gladly left her rumpled bed at daybreak. Dressing in a fresh maternity smock, she bunched up her hair and pinned it on top of her head. Her eyes looked huge and haunted as they stared back at her from the mirror.

Turning away, disgusted with herself for being scared of the Italian Louse, because he couldn't make her do anything she didn't want to do, she stuffed her feet into a pair of beat-up old running shoes. The comfy flats she'd worn last night were still sodden.

She hunted for her mobile.

Nick sounded sleepy when he answered, and Anna apologised. 'I woke you. Oh, I'm sorry! But listen—'

Briefly she explained what she needed, feeling awful for calling him so early. But Francesco hadn't specified a time—just 'first thing'—and if she and Nick were on their way to the manor with a new battery when Francesco turned up, tough. He would have to kick his heels until she decided to return home. And it wouldn't be running away, she assured herself staunchly. No. It would simply be giving her the upper hand.

'No probs,' Nick was saying. 'Give me half an hour. Didn't I tell you you'd get trouble? How did you get home? You should have called me.'

'I was going to. But one of the Rosewalls' guests insisted on driving me.' She skated over that bit quickly. 'And Nick—thanks.'

'What for?'

'Thanks for coming to the rescue.'

'Any time—you know that. Or should do.'

Ending the call, Anna plodded down to the kitchen, collecting her old waxed jacket on the way. A swift glass of juice, and then she'd set out to meet Nick. Thankfully, last night's rain had stopped, and fitful sunlight illuminated the dire shabbiness of the interior.

No wonder poor old Mum seemed to be permanently depressed as she watched her beloved old family home start on the unstoppable slide into decay. Frustrated too. Beatrice Maybury had always been frail—something to do with having had rheumatic fever as a child—and was unable to do anything practical to change the situation. She'd had to stand by and watch her husband William lose everything through one sure-fire money-making scheme after another, all predictably and disastrously failing.

Sighing, she pushed open the door to the cavernous kitchen—and stopped in her tracks.

'Mum?'

Beatrice Maybury, her slight body encased in an ancient candlewick dressing gown, greying hair braided into a single plait that almost reached her waist, her feet stuffed into rubber boots, lifted the kettle from the hotplate and advanced towards the teapot. 'Tea, dear?'

'You're up early.' She watched, green eyes narrowed, as her mother reached another mug from the dresser. Mum rarely surfaced before ten, on her husband's insistence that she rest. William had always treated his adored wife as if she were made of spun glass. It was a pity, Anna thought in a moment of rare sourness, that he hadn't treated the fortune she'd inherited the same way. 'Is anything wrong?'

'No more than usual.' Beatrice's eyes were redrimmed and watery in the pallor of her face, her smile small and tired as she put two mugs of steaming tea on the table. 'Your father's worn out. I think that job's too much for him. I insisted he had a little lie-in.'

She sat, cradling her mug in her thin hands. Swallowing a sigh, Anna followed suit, beyond hope now of setting out to meet Nick on his way here and thereby avoiding The Louse if he had literally meant 'first thing'. She couldn't just walk out and leave Mum—not while she was so obviously troubled. As far as Anna could remember her mother had never insisted on anything, meekly allowing others to make all decisions, content to follow, never to lead.

Dad had always been as strong as an ox, but maybe labouring for a firm of local builders was proving to be too much for a man well into his sixties. The wages he earned went to make a token payment to his creditors, while the money she earned paid the household bills—just about. Between them they kept Rylands itself in a type of precarious safety. For the moment.

‘I said I’d feed Hetty and Horace and let them out. No egg this morning. I think Hetty’s off-colour.’

Anna grinned. It was the first time she’d felt remotely like smiling since she’d clapped eyes on The Louse again. ‘She’s probably just miffed because you keep taking her eggs. We should let her sit, increase the flock.’

The cockerel and the fat brown hen were the only survivors of a fox raid—the only survivors of Dad’s self-sufficiency drive. It had been announced with his unending brio, hazel eyes alight with this new enthusiasm, grin as wide as a barn door. ‘Fruit and veg, hens, a pig, a goat. The lot. Keep ourselves like royalty; sell the surplus in the village. Goat cheese, bacon, free-range eggs—you name it! Forget big business—back to nature. That’s the life for us!’

The goat had never materialised. The pig had died. A neighbouring farmer’s sheep had got in and trampled or eaten the fruit and veg, and the fox had taken the hens.

‘And...’ Beatrice raised soft blue eyes to her daughter, ‘We had a little tiff. He was upset, I’m afraid.’

Anna put her mug down on the pitted table-top. She didn’t like the sound of this. Her parents doted on each other. The love they shared was the staunch prop that kept their lives from collapsing around them, becoming a bitter nightmare. Mum had never said a cross word, had never blamed Dad when his bad investments and wacky money-making schemes had gone belly-up. She blamed everyone else instead, always encouraging him in his next, ill-fated ‘Big Idea’.

If they were starting to fight, if love and loyalty were slipping away, then what hope was there for them?

Anna loved them both dearly. She felt protective towards her frail mother, and was exasperated by her father, but she loved him for his boundless energy and enthusiasm, his warmth and gruff kindness.

‘Well, I’m afraid I’m going to have to put my foot down. Rather firmly.’

‘I see,’ Anna said gently, astonished by this departure from the norm. But she didn’t. ‘About...?’

She wasn’t going to get an answer, because the clangs of the great doorbell reverberated through the house. She rose. ‘That will be Nick. Look, I’m sorry, but I have to go. We’ll talk later.’ Grabbing her old waxed jacket, wriggling into it, she added automatically, ‘Make sure you have breakfast. There’s enough bread for toast. I’ll pick up another loaf on my way back.’

A detour to the village to pick up a few essential provisions once the new battery was fitted would do nicely. She meant to avoid Francesco Mastroianni for as long as she possibly could, placing herself in a controlling position, hoping she’d be better able to handle the interrogation he obviously intended. Provided, of course, that he didn’t emerge from the manor and catch them mid-operation. The thought made her feel vaguely sick as she opened the main door to admit a blast of chilly morning air.

And him.

Francesco swept inside, past her stunned personage. Her tummy flipped. Why did he have to be up and about so early? Couldn’t his latest luscious bedmate have kept him glued to her for longer? And this morning he was looking quite unreasonably spectacular.

Six foot two of dominating Italian masculinity—midnight hair superbly styled, midnight lashes narrowed over glinting steel-grey eyes, handsome mouth a sardonic twist as he remarked, ‘Going somewhere?’

To her great annoyance Anna felt her face grow hot and pink. To think she had once believed herself fathoms-deep in love with this domineering, sarcastic brute! He'd expertly hidden that side of him from her when he'd set out to seduce her. And dump her.

The immaculately crafted pale grey designer suit emphasised his fantastic physique, his classical features. The crisp white shirt darkened the tones of his olive skin and the shadowed jawline that remained just that, no matter how often he shaved.

He was an intimidating stranger.

On the island he'd always worn old cut-off denims, canvas deck shoes that had seen better days, and round his neck a fake gold chain that had left green marks on the sleek bronzed skin of his magnificent torso. Those tell-tale stains had made her heart clench with aching tenderness, had made her love him all the more.

Now she didn't love him at all.

She loathed him, and all he stood for.

And she most certainly wasn't about to give him an answer, open the way for any conversation. Leaving the main door open, she sent up a swift and fervent prayer for Nick's speedy arrival and her consequent escape.

'Is there somewhere more comfortable where we can talk?' His tone told her he was running out of patience, and the unnerving steely scrutiny he was subjecting her to told her he didn't like what he saw.

A shabby nobody who might or might not be carrying his child.

'No.' She didn't want to discuss her baby's paternity with him. With anyone. And because she already loved her coming child with all her generous heart she was deeply afraid.

If Francesco knew he was the father he might be more than happy to wash his hands of the whole thing—dismiss it with a shrug. Or—and this was what made her nerves jump—he might come over all macho, wealthy Italian male and demand custody.

And then what would she do? Could she fight him through the courts and win?

'Anna—who is it?' Beatrice appeared from the kitchen region. She stopped dead, clutching the neckline of her shabby robe to her throat. 'I heard voices. It didn't sound like Nick.'

Well, it wouldn't, would it? No one could mistake Francesco's deep, cultured and slightly accented voice for Nick's comforting country burr, Anna thought wearily, wishing her mother had stayed firmly where she was. How was she supposed to introduce him? By the way—this is the man who seduced me, lied to me and dumped me!

It was Francesco who took over, his compressed lips softening into a staggeringly devastating smile as he advanced towards the older woman, his bronzed and far too handsome features relaxing.

'Mrs Maybury. I'm so happy to meet Anna's mother.' He held out a well-shaped hand. After a moment's hesitation, and a swift look at her daughter, Beatrice took it, and went bright pink when it was lifted to the stranger's lips.

'Anna?'

'Francesco Mastroianni,' Anna introduced stiffly. She wanted to shake her mother for simpering and fluttering like a silly schoolgirl, but resignedly forgave her—because no woman alive would be able to stay sensible when bombarded by the charm he could turn on at will when it suited him.

'I met Anna again last night when she catered for my cousin's dinner party,' he was saying. 'I am now here to enquire as to her health.'

Like hell you are! she fumed inwardly, hating him for his ability to lie and deceive, for looking so sensational, so poised and self-assured, and loathing him for her own helplessness to do anything about it.

Mum had obviously picked up on that word again, judging from the way she arched a brow and gave a little moue of a smile. Then, 'How kind of you, signor. Won't you come through to the kitchen? It's the only warm room in the house, I'm afraid. And, darling, do close the door. Such a draught!'

Lumbering over the vast expanse of empty hall, Anna was fuming. Mum wouldn't let him over the threshold if she knew the truth. Underneath that fantastic exterior lurked a black devil—a heartless deceiver who would seduce a virgin, tell her he loved her more than his life, ensuring a more than willing bedmate for a couple of weeks to satisfy his massive male libido, his huge conceit, then callously dump her when a new and better prospect shashayed over the horizon.

Preoccupied, it took her several seconds to register that Nick was walking in through the wide open doorway. With his cheerful open face, his mop of untidy nut-brown hair and mild blue eyes, his sturdy body clad in oil-stained jeans and an ancient fleece, he looked so safe and ordinary she could have wept.

'Ready?' His smile encompassed Beatrice. 'Hi, Mrs Maybury!' If he had registered the presence of the superbly groomed stranger he didn't show it. 'Got the van keys?' Assimilating Anna's edgy nod, he supplied, 'Then we'll make tracks. Dad said no need to rush to pay for the battery. It'll wait until it's convenient.'

Anna ground her teeth and felt heated colour flood her face. Nick's father owned the village garage and he, like everyone else around here, knew of their dire financial situation. His offer of deferred payment was a kind one, but she wished it hadn't been voiced in front of Francesco. She did have some pride!

'That won't be necessary,' she put in stiffly, heading for the door, the back of her neck prickling in her need to put as much distance as possible between herself and Francesco whose very presence affected her like an arrow to her heart.

An imperiously drawled, 'Wait!' stopped her.

Exuding sophisticated cool, Francesco stepped forward. 'Nick? I take it you are he?' Receiving a startled glance that he took as an affirmative, he ordered with the sublime confidence of a man who expected to be unquestioningly obeyed, 'There's no need for you to wait. Fix the battery. I'll take Anna to collect her van later.'

'Now, hang on a minute!' Incensed by his assumption that he could call the shots, Anna swung round to face him—and then wished she hadn't. Because just looking at him, at the upward drift of one strongly marked sable brow, the slight querying smile on that wide sensual mouth as he waited for her to expand on her explosive objection, made her heart leap, her mouth feel as parched as desert sand, her pulses race as she remembered—

Smothering a groan, feeling the fight ebbing out of her like water down a drain, she capitulated.

Pointless to avoid the interrogation any longer. The longer she spent dodging That Question, the more uptight and jittery she would become. It couldn't be good for her baby.

Flinging Nick an apologetic smile, she said dully, 'Thanks, pal. I'll see you later. There's stuff I've got to talk over with—him.' And if that sounded rude or ungracious, tough.

She didn't feel even remotely gracious as Francesco ushered her in her mother's wake as the older woman headed back to the kitchen. Just sick to her stomach.

## CHAPTER THREE

'I REALLY must go and dress properly. What can you be thinking of me?' Beatrice fluttered as she held the door open for them to pass through and tried to hide her ungainly rubber boots beneath the hem of her dressing gown at the same time—a feat which required considerable contortion. With a sideways curious glance at Francesco's darkly handsome, smoothly polished yet formidable bearing, she added on a breathy rush, 'I won't be a moment, and in the meanwhile—Anna, do offer your guest coffee.'

She did no such thing, forcing herself to stand her ground and not be intimidated by her unwelcome guest's aura of remote and chilling dislike.

So he was appalled by the thought that he might have fathered a child on a nobody who came from a family that was seriously down on its uppers? A nobody who was OK for a brief, easily forgotten holiday fling, but as for anything more meaningful or long term—definitely not.

'Well?' Anna sliced into the stinging silence. She lifted her chin to a proud angle, then winced as her baby gave her a hefty kick to remind her of its sturdy existence. Hopefully her unborn child wasn't picking up on the bad vibes between its parents, she thought worriedly.

Automatically she laid a reassuring hand on the mound of her distended stomach—a gesture which Francesco followed with glittering grey eyes.

'I think you know the answer to that,' he stated, his smooth-as-rich-chocolate voice edged with the harshness of acid. 'And before you tell me whether or not I am the father of your child, be warned. The truthfulness of your answer can be verified, or not, by a simple DNA test.'

He meant it, too! Her half-formed plan to name some fictitious guy and then wait for him to accept it with thankfulness and make a smart exit from her life bit the dust.

As that uncomfortable fact sank in, every scrap of colour leached from her face, leaving her features pinched and her deep green eyes enormous. Since his callous betrayal it had been a relatively simple matter to thrust him out of her head and keep him out, using all her will-power and her instinctive need to protect herself and her precious baby from hurt.

But seeing him again, up close and personal—and what could be more personal than making a baby between them?—was doing terrible things to her emotional equilibrium. Swaying on legs that were no longer strong enough to hold her upright, she pressed her fingertips to suddenly aching temples.

At the speed of a jet plane in a hurry two strong hands were steadying her, easing her down on to a hard kitchen chair.

His starkly explosive expletive brought colour back to her face as he straightened and stood back a pace, his feet planted apart, his fists bunched into the pockets of his beautifully tailored trousers. Towering above her, he looked darkly menacing, impatience stamped onto each impressive feature.

Stiffening her spine, and dredging up the resolve that had served her so well in the past, refusing to be intimidated, Anna clipped, 'There's no need to swear! And, since you ask—yes, you are the father. You were the first and the last!' She huffed in a deep breath, furious with herself for ever fancying herself in love with such a callous, arrogant creature.

He had the information he had come for now. No way was she going to wait and see which way he ran with it. She said firmly, 'Just understand this: I want nothing from you. Ever. No one will ever hear of your relationship to my baby from me. So you might as well go back to your latest squeeze right now!'

Stark silence greeted her outburst. The strong features were taut, pallor showing beneath the warm olive tones of his skin. Anna tried to guess what he was thinking and couldn't even begin to.

'That is the truth?' Narrowed, penetrating eyes received her mute nod of confirmation and Francesco turned, paced over the uneven flags to stare out of the dingy window.

His child. Flesh of his flesh! His heart clenched.

Dark eyes blazed. His child! Sired on a woman as sneaky as a feral cat. Playing the part of a wide-eyed innocent, pretending she didn't know who he was, enchanting him. And all the while plotting and scheming. Cleverly manipulating a hardened cynic into the sort of lovelorn idiot that a male over the age of fifteen had no right to be!

And priming her ham-fisted father. How else would he have known that a mere million was peanuts to the man his daughter had ensnared, his for the asking?

Her one mistake.

Besotted, he'd been on the point of asking her to be his wife, offering a lifetime of devoted commitment—something he'd set his face against since he'd been in his late teens. Had she told her father to keep his greedy mouth shut, have patience, then, still besotted, he would have married her, showered gifts on her, secured her family's financial future and lived to bitterly regret it once the scales—as they inevitably would have done—had fallen from his eyes and he'd seen the woman he'd believed to be the love of his life for what she really was.

And as for that vehement statement that she wanted nothing from him—he'd sooner believe the moon was made of cheese! Wait until the child was born, and she'd be there with her demands.

At the sound of the door opening Francesco swung round, his mind assessing the problem he faced like a well-oiled machine, emotions relegated to the area of his brain labelled 'non-productive', fit only to be ignored.

'Signora.' Beatrice Maybury's slight frame sported a shabby tweed skirt and a twinset of indeterminate colour. Her long plait was wrapped around her head like a coronet. 'Is your husband in? I would like to speak to you both.' And get this mess sorted out once and for all. No arguments.

'I—' About to chide her daughter for her uncharacteristic lack of manners—for just sitting there like a block of stone, not providing coffee for her guest or even asking him to sit, by the look of it—she changed her mind. Recognising authority, troubled by the sudden and unwelcome feeling that yet another catastrophe was about to descend on her weary head, she nodded in mute obedience and fled.

'There's no need to drag my parents into this.' Anna, petrified by his now brooding silence, was stung into speech. 'They don't know you from Adam.'

'I have met your father,' Francesco countered on a splintered bite. 'Remember?'

How could she forget? He'd dropped by, stayed long enough to scribble that Dear John note, and left to take up a more exciting project. 'I'm surprised you reminded me!' she uttered furiously, scornful of the arrogance of a man who could calmly introduce the subject of his bad behaviour without turning a hair.

Some of her abundant crinkly hair had fallen down into her eyes. She swiped it away and stated, 'I'm trying to explain—if you'll shut up and listen—that they don't know who the father of my child is. Nobody does. And as that's the way it's going to stay, you might as well leave right now!' she tacked on, incensed by the way he was looking at her—as if she were a boring child having a tedious tantrum.

Fully expecting him to swing on the heels of his handmade shoes and make a swift exit, after yet another deliberately inelegant slice of rudeness, Anna sagged back against the chair, feeling dizzy and drained, stingingly aware of the spectacular, darkly narrowed eyes that never left her.

'Just go,' she uttered tiredly—and too late, because her father had made an entrance. Or rather, she amended, crept in, closely followed by her anxious-looking mother.

'Well—this is a surprise!' Two paces into the room and her father had pulled himself together, Anna noted. He was trying to smile now, rubbing his big, work-coarsened hands together in a show of bonhomie.

Only a show, though. She could detect apprehension in his eyes, discomfort in that smile. Sympathising, she put it down to understandable bewilderment following on from that first meeting, when this Italian had breezed in and handed him a note to pass on to his daughter, all those months ago.

‘We’ll sit.’

Typical! Anna fumed. He Who Must Be Obeyed had spoken! Francesco was taking charge, as if they were in his home, not he the uninvited and as far as she was concerned unwanted guest in theirs—as if they were a clutch of dim-witted underlings about to receive a right royal dressing-down.

It annoyed her to see Dad meekly comply, his head bowed, while Mum dithered, making fluttery noises about the provision of coffee, receiving Francesco’s softly spoken rejection of the offer. The faint smile that failed to reach his eyes hid impatience. He must think they were all pathetic!

Taking her time about it, Anna stood, swung her chair around to face the table, impeded by her bulk, and eventually sat.

Across the table her father raised his head just a little. He looked anxious, cowed. Anna couldn’t understand it. He was usually so good with people—cheerful and outgoing even when speaking to his creditors, full of his plans, so ebullient. Even the most hard-nosed amongst them had—probably reluctantly, given his track record—believed the energetic William Maybury would get over what he blithely termed a ‘temporary blip’, and come good.

So what was it about the Italian that made him look as if he was trying to shrink into himself? It should be the other way around, with Dad showing Francesco Mastroianni the door because he knew how he’d treated his daughter.

All those months ago she’d found him pottering about in the greenhouse he’d constructed out of old planks and polythene. ‘Dad—while I was on holiday I met this fantastic Italian—Francesco. I’m crazy about him! And it’s unbelievable, but he feels the same way about me! He’s just phoned. He’s in England to see me. He’ll arrive this evening. But, listen—I’m catering for a WI meeting in the village hall, so I shan’t be here. Until I get back make him comfortable, will you? And don’t bore him with all that safari park stuff!’

She hadn’t been able to hide the fact that she was almost delirious with happiness, that she was fathoms-deep in love for the first time in her life.

So Dad knew what Francesco done, and yet he couldn’t raise a single objection to being bossed around in his own home—much less stick up for his wronged daughter and show the black-hearted devil the door!

So it was up to her! Glancing swiftly at the man who had mangled her heart, who was lording it at the head of the table—where else?—she said flatly, ‘Well? If you have something to say, get on with it. Some of us have things to do.’

He ignored her. Leaning forward, long fingers laced on the table-top, he addressed her parents. Anna Maybury, who had once meant all the world to him, now meant nothing except as the carrier of his child. Her wishes in this matter were unimportant, not to be considered.

‘Your daughter is carrying my child. We met when she was staying on Ischia.’ His mobile mouth hardened as his eyes pinned down William’s. ‘As of course you know. My point is that as the mother of my child your daughter is now my responsibility.’

‘Now, look here!’ Incensed by that out-dated assumption, the pointed way he was excluding her from the dialogue, Anna tried to cut him down to size, to point out that she was an adult woman and responsible for herself. But she subsided, red-faced, when he turned his attention to her mother, speaking as if her interjection had no more meaning than the irritating buzz of a fly.

‘You must agree, Beatrice—I may call you Beatrice?—that it is not wise for a woman in the latter stages of pregnancy to be working hard all hours of the day, rushing around in hot kitchens until late at night?’

He was turning on that devastating charm now, and her mother was lapping it up, Anna noted sickly. Her eyes bright, her mouth curving with pleasure, no doubt she was enjoying the fact that she now knew the identity of the father of her coming grandchild. ‘Don’t think I haven’t said as much myself, dozens of times!’ the older woman concurred quickly. ‘She works too hard—and it worries me—but she won’t listen. She was always stubborn, even as a baby!’

Thanks a bunch! Anna ground her teeth. So, OK, Mum had regularly twittered on about the long hours she worked. But, as Anna had pointed out, they needed the money she earned just to survive. No way was she going to repeat that incontrovertible fact and shame her family, highlight their dire poverty, in front of this brute. He was a stranger to financial problems—would have no idea how it felt to have creditors breathing down his neck.

‘So, as I am responsible, Anna will stay at my London home until the birth. I shall not be there, except on the odd occasion, but my excellent housekeeper and her husband will look after her every need,’ Francesco stated, with a blithe disregard for any opinion she might have. ‘She will have every possible care, and the rest she needs for the well-being of the child. Arrangements will be made to have her admitted to a private clinic when the time comes. After the birth—’ his eyes swept between her parents ‘—I will organise a meeting between our respective solicitors to set up a trust to provide for the child’s upbringing, schooling and general future welfare.’

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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