DIANA HAMILTON

The Italian Millionaire's Virgin Wife



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«HarperCollins»

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The Italian Millionaire's Virgin Wife / D. Hamilton — «HarperCollins»,

Mercy Howard's childhood was sheltered, and her job as housekeeper to sexy Italian businessman Andreo Pascali makes her realize that she needs a makeover!A new haircut and some clothes later, Andreo discovers his housekeeper is no longer a mouse — but a fox! He wants to add mistress to Mercy's list of duties, but she's not going to settle for a no-strings affair…

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CHAPTER ONE

ANDREO PASCALI, cursing the day the admirable Knox had left his employ, taking retirement to make her home with her recently widowed sister in Kent, impatiently lifted the final sheet of paper, scanned it in a nanosecond and even more impatiently tossed it aside.

'No details,' he dismissed tersely, his wide sensual mouth tightening with annoyance, lancing a look of displeasure at his current lover.

Though current was on the verge of becoming past. Trisha was becoming far too demanding and clingy—definitely against his emphatically stated ground rules.

Only last evening he'd returned from the agency with the intention of wrestling with the problem of how to come up with an idea for a sensational TV commercial, one bearing the inimitable Pascali stamp of excellence and selling clout for something as deeply uninspiring as a brand of ready meals, only to find that Trisha had let herself in and was waiting for him with a wretched Chinese takeaway festering in the oven. She'd done that fluffing up thing with her hair, accompanying it with the usual pouty mouth bit—once sexily amusing but now utterly boring—and had told him, sounding deadly serious, 'What you need, light of my life, is a wife. Then you wouldn't be facing these dreary interviews and wasting the time you say is so precious.'

His scowl darkened. As a hint, it seriously raised his annoyance threshold. She knew darn well he didn't need or want a wife. He wanted an unobtrusive housekeeper and at this rate it didn't look as if he was going to get one!

'The last two girls seemed perfectly fine,' he snapped. 'Though, I grant you, the first applicant was a nightmare.' Eighty if she was a day, even though her letter of application had given her age as fifty, dotty as they came. He'd had Trisha make her a cup of tea and had personally put her into a taxi. She'd given the address of a retirement home to the driver and waved maniacally as she'd been driven away.

'There was nothing wrong with the other two,' he reiterated tightly. Vital energy, constrained for too long, had him on his feet, pacing the confines of his home office. 'Good qualifications, excellent references,' he reminded with a bite.

'Darling,' Trisha soothed with a sycophantic smile. 'Don't get cross. I offered my help and advice when you said you didn't do domestic stuff. And my advice is that both those girls wouldn't stay for longer than a few weeks. Reasonably bright, passably pretty, leave to get married in no time. You need a middle-aged home body. And there are no details because she didn't send a letter of application; she simply phoned yesterday afternoon and asked for an interview.'

Had sounded bossy, too. Andreo wouldn't find bossiness in the least bit sexy. Whereas either of the previous two…

And having seen her when admitting her to Andreo's darling home, and again when seeing the third applicant out, she'd reached the conclusion that Mercy Howard would do very nicely. Twenty-two years old, so sadly not middle-aged, but plain as a house brick and decidedly, wholesomely dumpy—no competition. Beginning to feel on shaky ground herself, she didn't want the complications of round the clock competition. Andreo never gave a thought to marriage. Before the start of their relationship he'd stated that he didn't do long-term stuff. She'd gone along with that. Well, she'd have been a fool to throw a spanner in the works at that stage. Her sole aim was to make him change his mind, decide he wanted her as his wife, setting her up for a life of ease and giving her access to untold wealth.

No, the woman who didn't find Andreo Pascali's perfect bone structure, tall lean physique and dark charismatic Latin looks seriously lust-worthy—not to mention his wildly impressive bank account—was yet to be born. The Howard female wouldn't be any different, but darling Andreo wouldn't be remotely tempted to take any notice of her no doubt clumsy attempts to hit on him.

'You might as well see her since she's here,' Trisha cooed, running her fingers through his midnight hair. 'You never know, she could well be just what we're looking for.'

Disliking the proprietorial 'we' bit and even more disliking the impression of being humoured, Andreo jerked his head away, stiffened his impressive shoulders and positioned himself behind his desk again, a massive frown bringing his brows down in two straight black bars. Trisha's time was definitely up. He'd have his PA select a suitably expensive piece of jewellery and deliver it to her apartment first thing in the morning accompanied by his standard note saying farewell and no regrets.

And, unless the fourth applicant was over eighty and completely doolally, the job was hers. He had important creative work to get stuck into.

The moment she'd found the address she was looking for, Mercy had felt horrible qualms. A converted warehouse in one of the trendiest Thames-side areas was hardly the right setting for a humble country bumpkin. How often had Carly teased, 'Get streetwise, kid,' when she'd confessed to being appalled, mystified or downright scared of the frenetic life of this great cosmopolitan city? Despite being in London for two years, she was still an old-fashioned country vicar's daughter at heart with old-fashioned values and a yearning for the much slower pace of life she'd been used to.

But she had determination on her side and, clutching her large shabby handbag, had marched up to the fine wooden door, pressing a bell. Startled by a voice issuing from some sort of discreet metal contraption, she had obeyed instructions and given her name and business.

Eventually the door had swung open as if by magic and she'd found herself walking into a huge vestibule, the ceiling of which soared three storeys high, with a staircase winding up and leading to balustraded floors. To be met by a big-haired blonde of such magnificent proportions, shown to full advantage by pink harem pants and a toning glittery, clingy top, that Mercy had immediately felt like a small fat grey mouse, her modest five-three seeming to diminish to a mere inch or two.

Consulting a clipboard, the blonde had announced, 'You must be Ms Howard.' A wide white smile followed a minute scrutiny of her less than flattering boxy grey suit, sensible shoes and unwieldy handbag. 'I'm Signor Pascali's—' the coy arching of one artfully darkened brow, followed by a huskily stressed '—friend.' A meaningful simper, then, 'He is interviewing at the moment, so if you'd like to take a seat I'm sure he won't keep you waiting for too long.'

The leather and chrome seat she located beside a glass-topped table was surprisingly comfortable. But Mercy couldn't relax even though she planted her feet together and cradled her comfy old handbag on her lap. The qualms had begun first thing this morning when Carly had gleefully apprised her of the exact identity of her hoped-for future employer.

'I sat up half the night on the net researching the guy. Get this—he's a living legend and he's only thirty-one! He owns, directs and literally is the creative genius behind the Pascali Ad Agency. Worth billions in his own right, not counting a load of family dosh. His main home is here in London —presumably where you'll be working and living—plus he owns a villa near Amalfi and an apartment in Rome. Interested in modern art. No wife and kids, so there won't be much for you to do other than flick a duster over his Picassos and Hockneys!' Shrugging into the navy tailored suit jacket, the one with a discreet embroidered logo of the world-famous cosmetic company she worked for on the narrow lapel, the dark colour of the sleek fabric drawing attention to her enviably straight jaw-length ash-blonde bob, she blew Mercy a kiss. 'Must dash before I'm late again. And the best of luck—and remember, you've got a beautiful smile, so use it a lot!'

Bleary-eyed from lack of sleep, having been up most of the night cleaning offices, which was increasingly the only type of work the domestic agency found for her because, according to one of her workmates, she was always reliable, thorough and never ever called in sick, she had found it impossible to grab the customary two hours or so of rest, getting more and more het up about the coming interview.

Coming across the job vacancy as she'd browsed through an up-market magazine while waiting for a routine six-monthly dental check-up yesterday lunchtime, it had seemed that her guardian angel was working overtime on her behalf. A live-in housekeeper was required for an Andreo Pascali, the salary quoted large enough to make her eyes pop out of her head.

On that kind of money, no living expenses—and presumably she'd be fed as well as housed—she could do a huge amount to help her brother James through his medical training, far more than she was managing at the moment even though she scraped together every penny that wasn't needed for her share of the rent and food.

Hopelessly impractical where money matters were concerned, he'd feel utterly at sea if he finished his gruelling training—and already he was talking about eventually going on to take a higher degree in surgery—and woke up to the fact that he was saddled with a mountainous student debt.

Convinced that the job vacancy she'd happened across had been heaven-sent, she'd phoned and stated—well, more demanded, she recollected with a flush of discomfiture—that she needed an appointment for an interview. It had all seemed to fit so perfectly, given that only the day before Carly had dropped her bombshell.

The old school friend she'd shared the tiny flat with for the last two years was moving out, moving in with her boyfriend, marriage definitely on the cards.

She'd been genuinely happy for her, of course she had. How could she be otherwise when Carly had been so good to her? Two years ago, days after her twentieth birthday, she'd been at her wits' end, stricken with grief at the death of her remaining parent, not knowing how she would manage to help her brilliant brother through his long years of training and exist on her odd job earnings now that her mother's church pension had died with her.

Leaving school herself at sixteen on the death of her father, she'd agreed with her mother that it was her duty to earn something to put by for her much brighter younger brother's education. She'd taken any work she could find in the village where the family had moved from the vicarage to live in a small cottage owned by the church authorities which was a guaranteed home for their mother's lifetime.

Times had been hard but contented. She'd been planning to work full-time towards a qualification in catering and housecraft to open up a future of professional housekeeping or, more adventurously, starting up her own business catering for private dinner parties and weddings. That ambition had been put on hold but, even so, she had enjoyed the work she did find. Cleaning, tidying gardens, shopping for the housebound, dog-walking.

It had been Carly who'd stepped in at that worrisome time. She worked as a beautician in a swanky London store and had offered, 'You can share with me. The flat's not much bigger than a shoe box but we'd manage. You could share the rent so you'd be doing me a favour. And there are loads of domestic agencies just crying out for recruits. I could fix up some interviews. Okay?'

So she'd got a home and a job and her father's spinster aunt, a retired schoolmistress, had offered James a home during his vacations. A quiet Cornish village where he could revise and study in peace and quiet before returning to the famous London teaching hospital for his next term of training.

Now, as the statuesque blonde escorted a tall, graceful, fine-featured brunette—probably with a whole pile of qualifications tucked up in her smart leather shoulder purse—over to the front door, telling her, 'You will be contacted within the next day or two to let you know whether you are on the short list,' Mercy's spirits dropped through the soles of her brown lace-ups. She felt totally out of place.

And if that with-it, confident-looking woman might not even make a short list, what hope had she? And had been left for a further ten minutes to stew, torn between the desire to slope away, advertise for someone prepared to share the tiny flat when Carly moved out at the end of the week and carry on as before, scratching to save every penny she could, and the need to tough it out, give it her best shot. After all, she had nothing to lose except the tube fare.

Still dithering, the decision to flee or fight was taken out of her hands when the blonde bombshell beckoned from the doorway of the room she'd previously entered on the far side of the vast vestibule.

Heart thumping at the base of her throat, Mercy rose to her feet, wishing she'd at least had something more impressive to wear than the sober and sensible suit that had been bought for her father's funeral all those years ago.

But then she heartened herself by deciding that 'sensible' would be a quality any employer would look for in a housekeeper, so sensible and practical was the way she would pitch it. A girl didn't have to be a vision of loveliness to wash dishes and polish floors, did she?

And the legendary, super well-heeled Signor Pascali was only a human being, just as she was, wasn't he?

But there were human beings and human beings was her first insane thought when the too-handsome-by-a-country-mile specimen viewed her dumpy personage across the cluttered expanse of his desk.

His lean, strong face was taut with barely concealed impatience and there was an aura of predatory stillness about the honed, whiplash tight, power-packed frame that suggested a tendency to leap on anyone who stepped out of line and tear them apart limb from limb.

The dark grey eyes continued to assess her until she felt like squirming through the floorboards. His eyes spoke of a vital volatility, though, and that eased her somewhat because if he really was a creative genius then he probably wasn't noticing the toffee-coloured corkscrew curls that made her look as if she'd been in a wind tunnel for hours no matter how hard she tried to tame them, or her plain face. He was probably miles away on some fantastically creative plane or other.

But the comforting illusion was shattered when those eyes finally got down as far as her clumpy shoes. A terse hand movement gestured her to take the hot seat opposite him and he simultaneously turned to his hovering blonde 'friend'.

'I need coffee, Trisha. Now.' He would conduct this final interview on his own, without annoying twittered interruptions regarding qualifications, experience, references. He'd wasted too much time already.

Sensing a reluctance, he added, 'And a cup for—' he consulted a sheet of paper '—Ms Mercy Howard.'

The command, delivered in that slightly accented rough velvet voice had the blonde—Trisha—scurrying away, Mercy noted, an odd squirmy feeling starting up inside her as her eyes homed in on his wide, sensual mouth. Never having thought of any part of any male before in those terms, it gave her a decidedly peculiar feeling.

With his about to be ex-lover out of the way, Andreo lounged back in his chair and regarded the final applicant from beneath lowered lids, not prepared to waste a moment more of his valuable time. He had two options. Contact either one of the two earlier candidates and offer the job or hire this one.

His smoky eyes narrowed further. He took advice from no one, but in this case maybe Trisha did have a point, he reluctantly conceded. Both of the other two women had been lookers, beautifully turned out and groomed, self-assured and confident in themselves. Hire one of them and wait to see how long it would take for her to persuade some poor sucker to slip a plain gold band on her wedding finger.

Then he'd have to go through this whole charade again.

With this one he wouldn't run nearly the same risk, he decided. A plump no-nonsense—apart from her weird hair—little personage, the only sign of discomfiture showing in her rapidly pinkening unremarkable face.

The job was hers.

'Experience of running a household?' he barked out. Better go through some of the motions. Unless some serious flaw was unearthed, he had another housekeeper after two irritating weeks

without one. His life would go on as before, letting him concentrate on what was important without having to bother about tiresome domestic matters like finding clean socks and figuring out how to make a decent cup of coffee.

Mercy breathed a short sigh of relief. The way he'd been looking at her, as if she were a previously undiscovered life form, had seriously unnerved her. Clasping her hands together, she answered in a rush. 'I ran my mother's household for four years, plus holding down several part-time jobs. And I began studying catering and housecraft at night school, but had to—' About to explain the circumstances that had led to her abandoning the course, namely her mother's deteriorating health, she found herself robbed of speech when Signor Pascali slotted in, 'Boyfriends?'

Her mouth falling open as she swallowed her words, Mercy floundered. What had that to do with her ability to housekeep? 'No,' she finally answered when the impatient tightening of his mouth indicated that he'd waited too long for a response he'd expected to receive at the double.

'Any family commitments?' Then, as if the question needed elaboration, 'Any children? Aged relatives with health or drink problems who will expect you to drop everything and deal with regular minor emergencies?'

Mercy stiffened, primming her innocent of make-up full lips. Despite his devastating looks, this man was a bully. Time to stand up for herself; she probably wouldn't make the short list in any case.

'Signor Pascali, my father was a man of the cloth. Apart from a sip of Communion wine, alcohol never crossed his lips. My mother was a gentle soul who never once made an unreasonable demand. Sadly, they are both gone. I do have a great-aunt in robust health and, as she lives in Cornwall, I'm hardly likely to rush to her side should she have the misfortune to suffer a head cold—not that she would dream of expecting me to. And, as for children, of course I don't have any. I am unmarried.'

'The unmarried state doesn't necessarily indicate the absence of offspring, in my experience,' he remarked in what she considered to be deep cynicism, but his sudden grin splintered her prickly mood, rendering him so handsome it made her eyes water. And he had laughing eyes, she noted, quite transfixed as he shot forward in his seat with an excess of energy, briefly consulting the sheet of paper on the desk in front of him, complacently reflecting that as a vicar's daughter she would probably have old fashioned moral values and be unlikely to do drugs or throw wild parties during his occasional absences.

'If you accept the position, Howard, you will have your own suite of rooms which you will keep to when off duty. You will manage all domestic matters unobtrusively. I do not wish to be informed or consulted on such trifles. For example, should a water pipe spring a leak you will contact a plumber and get it fixed without bothering me. You will deal with my laundry—I use two shirts a day. I rise at six-thirty and breakfast at eight after my usual run and shower. I rarely spend the evenings at home but when I intend to you will be notified and will prepare a meal for nine o'clock. On the occasions when I entertain, whether à deux or a dinner party for up to twenty you will contact the firm of caterers I always use and make all the necessary arrangements. And if I have an overnight guest then her requirements will be conveyed to you. Any questions?'

Mercy snatched in a ragged breath. Was it possible that he was about to offer her the job? It would be a life-saver! Her mind churning, her eyes widening as she struggled to come up with something both pertinent and sensible to ask him, not a single thing occurred to her except a disapproving need to know if the overnighting female guest was always the big blonde or whether he liked to ring the changes. And, as that would mark her down as being unbearably prissy, she was reduced to shaking her head and giving him a breathy 'No, I don't think so.' Gathering herself and thankfully finding a competent tone from somewhere, she tacked on, 'It seems quite straightforward.'

Plainly keen, Andreo decided. None of the usual questions about days off or holiday entitlement. His mind made up, he smiled into a pair of startlingly blue eyes. He leaned back, his indolent pose at odds with his driven inner need to be done with the whole business, see a housekeeper

installed right now and wash his hands of the horrifying range of chores needed to ensure a smooth-running domestic life that had so unexpectedly loomed up since Knox had so inconveniently retired.

'Welcome on board, Howard.' He rose, his height and the intimidating breadth of his dark-shirted shoulders looming over her, a strong, finely made hand extended. 'You take up your duties as of tomorrow.'

Mercy's poleaxed gaze flicked up from that extended hand to lock with those dark pewter eyes. She'd got the peach of a job! Just like that! Her soft mouth dropped open then firmed decisively as she told him, 'Thank you. However, I can't possibly begin tomorrow.'

'And why not?' emerged on a bite as he dropped back into his seat at speed, his classic features hardening.

He was going to be a handful, Mercy labelled, refusing to quail beneath all that feature-darkening displeasure. Plainly he was used to getting all his own way. It was about time that someone taught him that life wasn't like that. Despite her self-acknowledged unprepossessing mousy appearance and her willingness to bend over backwards to help everyone, she was capable of putting her foot down if circumstances warranted it.

Giving him a moment to stew, she told him firmly, 'I am presently employed through a domestic agency. I am required to give a full week's notice. Of course I could merely leave and sacrifice a week's wages—which I would expect you to reimburse. But I never go back on a commitment. I would be happy to take up the position when I've served my notice,' she enforced, desperately hoping that she hadn't blown it.

Andreo's intimidating frown dissolved. The most glamorous, self-assured females around had been known to fall over backwards in their desire to comply with his slightest wishes, but now he'd been put in his place by a frumpy little glorified char-lady who should, by rights, have been willing to tie herself in knots in order to secure such a highly paid position. It was a novel experience and one which set his mouth twitching.

The twitch grew to a full blown grin as he shot to his feet. 'Then I'll expect you to take up your duties in one week, Howard. When the coffee finally arrives would you ask to be shown over the property?' Long legs propelled him towards the door. At least she'd proved she had integrity, he excused his uncharacteristic acceptance of non-compliance to his dictates, his mind sharply dismissing her and homing in on the work awaiting him at the agency.

Still reeling from the effect of that devastating smile, plus her good fortune in landing the job, Mercy composed herself to wait. The legendary Andreo Pascali wasn't as intimidating as she'd feared he would be.

Not if he was handled firmly.

CHAPTER TWO

THE alarm woke Mercy at six-thirty. She lay for a moment luxuriating in the blissful comfort of the huge double bed in the housekeeper's suite on the top floor of the conversion, enjoying both the April dawn light as it filtered through the gauzy white curtains at the large windows and the squirmy, excited feeling which was occupying the pit of her tummy.

Her new boss rose at this hour and breakfasted at eight. She would show him what she was capable of. She had seen him only briefly as she'd arrived yesterday morning. He'd let her in, shooting a penetrating look at his watch, not seeming to actually see her as he'd stated, 'Punctual. Good. I'll be out all day, Howard. I won't need a meal this evening. Settle yourself in and make the laundry your priority.'

Watching him stride away, hailing the taxi that seemed to appear by magic, she had marvelled, wide-eyed, at the excess of vitality that emanated from that tall frame, the sober, exquisitely tailored business suit at odds with all that barely leashed raw physical energy. Then she'd dragged her gaze away and had turned to begin her first day in his employ.

She'd really enjoyed it too, Mercy reflected as she rolled out of bed and headed for the en suite bathroom. She'd had the fantastic place to herself—not a sign of the blonde bombshell—and had hustled around really making herself useful.

Mildly tutting as she'd collected the garments strewn all over the bedroom and bathroom he occupied on the floor below hers, sorting the coloureds from the whites in the laundry room, her face had grown hot at the intimacy.

Too silly.

While they'd been at home together she'd done James's laundry, so she was well acquainted with male underwear. Though her brother's things hadn't sported labels bearing the names of top designers. So no need for her to get all hot under the collar, was there?

Shelving that recollection, she hoped he'd noticed the shirts hanging in pristine perfection in his vast wardrobe, the fact that his bedlinen had been changed, his bedroom dusted and vacuumed to within an inch of its life, and buttoned herself into one of the pale grey overalls she'd found lying on her bed, still in cellophane wrappers awaiting her arrival. She hoped so. She really did need to impress him with her quiet efficiency. She had to hang on to this job. She had spent the fifteen minutes she'd allowed herself for a lunch break yesterday working out just how much more she would be able to pay into her brother's bank account.

The resulting sum had made her hug herself with glee.

Tying her unruly, crinkly hair out of the way into two bunches—it was so thick and wild that one ponytail bunch wouldn't cut it—she decided that whoever had ordered her overalls must have had a grossly inflated idea of her size, then dismissed the thought as vanity because what she looked like—the side of a house—didn't matter one iota. All that mattered was that she impress her boss with her housekeeping skills.

By the time she heard the whirlwind that heralded his return from his morning run and his entry into the shower room off the entrance vestibule she had laid a single place setting at the starkly modern dining table that would seat twenty with comfort and was mentally setting aside something from her more than generous wages for the purchase of flowers to soften the severely masculine ambience of smoothly polished wooden floors and austere white walls which were adorned with a couple of oil paintings she couldn't make head nor tail of.

Fifteen minutes to eight. Shooting through to the state of the art kitchen, she had breakfast ready by eight on the dot and tracked him down to the room where she'd been interviewed. Standing just inside the door while he finished his call, which consisted of him telling someone he wouldn't reconsider and that was final, she was wondering if the correct procedure would be to smartly absent

herself when Andreo ended the call, dropped his mobile into the clutter on his desk and, his face a picture of aggravation, demanded, 'Well?'

'Breakfast is ready, sir,' Mercy announced dispassionately. On what he was paying her she could afford to overlook snippy behaviour. Obviously, whoever he'd been talking to had rattled his cage and she just happened to be on the receiving end of the fallout.

Spectacular dark eyes dropped to her empty hands. 'I don't see it.'

Momentarily distracted by the way the morning light touched the gleaming luxuriance of his dark hair and emphasised the heart-stopping planes and hollows of his amazing Latin looks, Mercy could only stare, her soft mouth dropping open until she remembered that rudely gawping wasn't exactly the on-the-ball behaviour expected of a super-efficient employee.

'The dining room, sir,' she put in rapidly, at pains now to project effortless competence to make up for that dismaying lapse, essayed a slight smile, opened the door and stood aside for her boss to precede her.

Only he didn't.

'I take it in here,' was his quelling rejoinder. Then that knock-'em-dead smile had her melting all over as he amended, 'Sorry, Howard. You weren't to know that, were you? Knox should have left you precise instructions—' Then, his smile fading at the speed of light, he reached for his trilling mobile, snatched it up and spoke in a voice like ice daggers. 'I don't do patience; you should know that. If you call this number one more time I shall have you prosecuted for harassment.'

Mercy scurried, her face pink. How awful! If he talked to her like he'd spoken to the unfortunate on the other end of the phone she would curl up and die! Or, more likely, ask him who he thought he was talking to and get the sack! He obviously had no inhibitions about bawling out anyone who displeased him. She would have to watch her step and then some or she might find herself and her meagre belongings ejected straight out of the front door.

Finding the largest tray the kitchen had to offer, she loaded it with Andreo's breakfast things and tottered back to his study. She would have to clear a space on that immense cluttered desk. Really, she thought, out of breath with her exertions as she thrust the study door open with her hip, it would be far more convenient if he ate in the dining room. But it wasn't her place to tell him so. He paid her wages; he was, she supposed, entitled to call the tune.

He was intent on what he was doing, keying text into a computer housed on a work station at the far end of the room. Mercy placed the loaded tray on the floor while she cleared a space on his desk, hefted it into position and announced briskly, 'Your breakfast, sir.'

'So?' He sounded abstracted, on another planet. Then exasperation crept in. 'Bring it here, woman.'

Mercy ground her teeth together. Give me strength! was the plea that sprang to her lips, successfully smothered by her almost level, 'There isn't enough room on that bench, sir.'

She saw the wide shoulders stiffen beneath the crisp pale blue shirt he was wearing tucked into immaculately tailored narrow fitting dark grey trousers. 'Not room?' He turned to glare at her disbelievingly, then got to his feet in one fluid movement, his magnificent eyes landing on a plate of eggs sunny side up, grilled bacon and tomatoes, a rack of toast, butter dish, honey, the teapot and accessories.

Andreo felt his face go blank as he briefly closed his eyes and swallowed the impulse to shout, You're fired! Knox plainly hadn't done as he'd instructed and made a list of all his requirements to leave for her successor.

His voice gritty with the determination to be evenhanded, he stated, 'There are things you should know, Howard. I'm busy and about to get busier. I don't have time to eat my way through enough to feed a small army. I simply require a cup of strong, unsweetened black coffee—nothing else—on the dot of eight before I leave for my place of work at eight-ten.' Making a huge production of it, he

consulted the wafer-thin platinum watch on his wrist and pointed out drily, 'It is already eight-fifteen. And I do not need or want a heart attack on a plate. Take it away!'

Mercy drew herself up to her unimpressive full height and shot him a look of mild disapproval. During her odd job days when her mother had been alive, she had often looked after Mrs Fletcher's two-year-old strong willed son and could recognise the onset of a temper tantrum with the best of them.

Sure of her ground, she pointed out with the breezy firmness tantrums demanded, 'It is good wholesome food. Bacon and eggs once in a while did no one any harm. Having just black coffee to start the day on—' she made a tutting noise '—won't do at all. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, and while I'm employed to look after you and your home a decent breakfast is what you'll get. Eat it before it goes cold.'

Then, belatedly reminding herself of her subservient position and her need to hold on to it, she tacked on, 'Will you be in for a meal this evening, sir?'

And wondered why those dark grey eyes had widened as he simply stared at her for long moments, charged moments that set up a peculiar sensation deep in her tummy, robbing her of breath and turning her face brick-red before he muttered, 'No, Howard, I won't.'

Safely tucked away in the kitchen, Mercy gave up her attempts to eat her own toast and marmalade as her ears strained to hear the sound of his departure.

She so hoped she hadn't blown it. The legendary Andreo Pascali wouldn't stand for an underling telling him what to do. The trouble was that from the age of sixteen she had become used to running the household as she felt fit, looking after the family's slim budget, because her mother, poor darling, had gone to pieces after her husband's death and their consequent removal to the tiny cottage. And when she'd come up to London she'd swiftly been put in charge of her own team of cleaners so she'd grown used to deciding how and when things should be done. And maybe that wouldn't go down well with an Italian creative genius!

Yet she knew she was right. Her boss must work really hard to make such a success of his agency. He needed a decent breakfast. After all, he employed her to look after him, and that was what she would do.

The day flew by. Heartened by the growing conviction that she wasn't about to be made unemployed—an inspection of the breakfast tray informed her that Signor Pascali had eaten a slice of toast and one rasher of bacon, which meant that he hadn't taken her well-meaning lecture too badly —Mercy cleaned windows and polished furniture with gusto, making a mental note to ask him what his former housekeeper had done about ordering provisions and paying for them.

Apart from wine and coffee and a few ready meals languishing in the freezer, the cupboard was bare. She had had to pop out and buy the makings of today's spurned breakfast, and tomorrow's, out of her own slender resources. She'd thought her brother was undomesticated but her boss was in a league of his own!

At eight o'clock she called it a day. She was hot, grubby and smelled of floor polish and her feet ached. Popping a frozen meal in the microwave oven and assembling a tray, she promised herself a relaxing hour in front of the television in her own quarters, a hot bath and an early night. Grimacing because she knew Carly would say she'd been born middle-aged, she dropped what she was doing and hurried to answer the summons of the doorbell.

Signor Pascali? Forgotten his door key? She so wished she didn't look such a complete mess. No time to tidy herself up.

The opened door admitted a cooling river breeze and the blonde bombshell.

'I'm afraid he's out,' Mercy stated, breathing in an overpowering lungful of heady perfume.

'I know.' Trisha headed for the stairs. She was wearing a black dress that glittered as she moved. It clung to her magnificent bosom and voluptuous backside. 'He always stays late on a Tuesday. Brainstorming session, he calls it. I will wait for him in his bedroom. Be a good girl and bring a bottle of wine and two glasses.'

Despite her highly moral upbringing, Mercy wasn't a prude. People had 'partners' and 'relationships' instead of marriages. That didn't mean they didn't truly love each other. And a male as magnificent as Andreo would automatically choose a partner to match. So why did she sigh as she went to do as Trisha had asked?

Envy?

Utter nonsense!

'You didn't say whether you wanted red or white,' Mercy said brightly minutes later, entering Andreo's bedroom. 'So I brought both.'

The blonde was inspecting herself in the full length mirror, turning this way and that as if looking for reassurance. Glancing up after placing the bottles and glasses on the night table that flanked the bed—a heavily carved statement of opulence in the otherwise severely masculine room—Mercy noticed for the first time that the other woman was looking quite peaky underneath all that make-up, her full mouth trembling.

'Are you all right?'

'Just open the wine! No, the red,' she said as Mercy's hand reached for the white. 'I need some stiffening.' Sinking down on to the bed, she kicked off her high heels with edgy force and the hand that took the brimming glass was shaking.

Seeing the blonde sprawled out on the richly embroidered silk covers made Mercy's stomach roll over sickly but her intention to make a smart exit was stymied by a breathy, 'Keep me company for ten minutes?'

Regretting her by now cooling supper, because surely hunger pangs alone were responsible for the queasiness that had afflicted her on pairing the blonde with Andreo's bed, Mercy lowered herself down on the very edge of the mattress and asked bluntly, 'So what's wrong?' because something patently was. Beautiful, self-assured women didn't seek the company of mere underlings unless they were troubled and couldn't bear being alone with their problems.

The glass swiftly emptied, Trisha swung her endless legs to the sage green carpet and gave herself a refill. Lifting her magnificent shoulders in a minimal shrug, she answered, 'Nothing that can't be sorted. I hope.'

As the 'I hope' bit had emerged on a decidedly wistful note, Mercy said bracingly, 'Think positive. Whenever I've had a problem—and, believe me, I've had a few—'

Uninterested in Mercy's problems, past or present, Trisha put in, 'You might as well know, it's common knowledge. Andreo and I—' her voice wobbled '—had a falling out. He was on the brink of asking me to marry him when it happened.' She slanted Mercy a sideways look. 'Do you know if he's seeing someone else? If some little harpie's got her claws into him?'

'I wouldn't know,' Mercy confessed, her ready sympathies aroused. She could understand any woman falling deeply in love with a stunner like the Italian legend and feeling utterly desolate if she thought she'd lost him. 'But if he's in love with you and was about to propose, then he's hardly likely to take up with someone else in a hurry, is he?' she soothed. 'It would have been a lovers' tiff, nothing serious. My friend Carly and her Darren were always having them. And they always kissed and made up. In fact they're soon to be married. So just hang on to what's positive—that you're both madly in love with each other.'

As her heartening speech had no effect other than earning herself a look of incredulous scorn, Mercy, wanting her supper and a well-earned spell of relaxation, got to her feet, adding a generous, 'You're so lovely, he's not going to risk losing you over some little disagreement.'

She had reached the door when Trisha said, visibly brightening, 'You're right, of course. So right! And, by the way, make yourself scarce, would you? His mood can be tricky after a Tuesday session. Don't want to make it worse, do we? No offence, but you're hardly a sight to make a man glad to be home, are you?'

Was that remark catty or what? Mercy fumed as she clumped down the stairs. Or had the other woman merely been stating the glaringly obvious?

Andreo paid the taxi off and sprinted over the paving blocks, his door key at the ready. At last he had it! The great idea—the idea that would make Coronet Ready Meals walk off the shelves.

Chewing over the new project after a hectic day's work, none of his team had been enthusiastic. Dreary and boring being the general consensus. Used to projects aimed at the wealthy and glamorous, something as mundane as frozen pies and peas in gloopy gravy was a challenge they didn't want to rise to. Who could make such dull stuff appear trendy or even remotely glossy, even if it was organic, low fat, low salt and boringly good for you?

'We're aiming at a different market,' he'd snapped. 'Forget the glitz. We've got to pitch good old plain wholesomeness—'

And then he'd had it—just like that! The earnest expression, the frumpy little personage telling him to eat his breakfast like a good little boy! All he had to do was persuade her, soft talk her if absolutely necessary. Of course he could hire a professional, set Make-up to work on her—fat suit, wig, that sort of stuff. But Howard was a natural. Just as she was.

Closing the door behind him, a clumping sound alerted him to the progress of the object of his thoughts descending the stairs. A slashing grin spread over his features as he watched her. Swamping overall, dumpy shape, manic hair, big shoes. Perfect!

Mercy faltered slightly then pressed on. He wasn't supposed to see her. According to Trisha she wasn't a sight that would make a man glad to be home, brighten his spirits. But he was in a good mood. He was leaning back against the door, his superb frame relaxed, the smile that made her feel all wobbly blindingly in evidence.

'Still working, Howard?' Should he broach the subject now? Perhaps not. She looked tired and not what he'd call receptive. The morning would be better.

There was a wealth of warm concern in those honeyed tones but Mercy ignored it. She wished he wouldn't call her by her surname. It made her feel completely sexless, light years away from the blonde sprawled out on that sinfully opulent bed, waiting for him.

'Just finishing, sir.' Mercy gathered her senses. What did it matter what he called her? As far as he was concerned she was sexless. An object hired to keep his home clean and his laundry under control. Then, discounting Trisha's final cutting remark because the woman was plainly upset and nervous, she descended the final steps and confided, 'Your girlfriend arrived a short while ago.' And, greatly daring, 'She's in your bedroom and very upset over your falling out,' and watched his dark eyes fill with outrage.

'Trisha?' Anger flamed in the look he trained on her.

'Of course.' Unable to keep the censure from her voice—how many girlfriends did he have?—she advised, 'It's no use getting cross. I don't know what caused the lovers' tiff and I don't want to, but you should talk it through calmly then kiss and make up. She's still the woman you wanted to marry and she's crazy about you and—'

'Just shut up!' Lean fingers fastened around her slender wrist. 'Upstairs. I need a witness.'

Hauled back upstairs at what felt like the speed of light, Mercy gasped, 'Have you gone crazy?' fell over her feet and gasped some more as a strong supporting arm whipped round her, forcing her on.

'No,' he gritted. 'Just furious! You will never let that woman into my home again, and that's an order.'

No reply was possible. The effect of being held against that lean hard body had taken her breath away, turned her legs to water and brought on that peculiar and rather shaming squirmy feeling deep inside her.

This was what being caught in a hurricane must feel like, Mercy decided wildly as she was abandoned just inside his bedroom door, staring at the inviting tableau on the bed. Trisha's big hair was artfully arranged against the pillows, the hem of her dress hiked indecently high. Her reaction when Andreo loomed over her was one of a purring kitten having its tummy tickled, turning to spitting fury as her sultry eyes landed on Mercy, who was still breathless and oddly shaky.

The hurricane had now been transformed into an iceberg. The chillingly sculpted features looked merciless as he used his mobile phone, his voice an arctic blast as he informed, 'A cab will be here in five minutes to take you home. I suggest you wait for it outside. The affair is dead, as you very well know. It could have ended amicably. You know the rules. As it is, if you try to contact me, come within a hundred yards, I shall slap a restraining order on you so fast you won't know what hit you.'

As the other woman headed for the door, her lovely face a mask of vindictive anger, Mercy plopped down on the linen press at the foot of the bed, not trusting her legs to hold her upright a moment longer. 'That was so cruel!' she gasped, her huge eyes wide with pained condemnation.

His frown pleating his brow, he turned glinting, incredulous pewter eyes on her as if, Mercy thought edgily, a speck of dust beneath his feet had suddenly flown up and bitten him on the nose. But she soldiered on regardless because she had never been able to abide injustice. 'The poor woman is plainly in love with you. She didn't deserve that sort of treatment.'

Bang went her job, she decided sickly as icy silence fell around her, making her skin prickle. Her castigation might have been excused had she been an old and valued retainer, looking after him since he'd been two days old.

She'd been with him two days and already she was lecturing him on his bad behaviour! Why couldn't she learn to keep her thoughts to herself? Her hands twisted nervously in her lap.

Santo cielo! How dared she call his actions into question, moralise, spout such nonsense? Andreo questioned with grim incredulity. Opening his mouth to tell her to get out of his sight and watch her tongue in future if she wanted to hang on to her cushy job, he reminded himself of the favour he wanted of her and smartly closed it again.

A woman of her strait-laced and probably sheltered background wouldn't have a clue, he told himself tersely, relaxing his shoulders. He wouldn't have involved her in this unpleasantness but he'd needed a witness in case he had to go for a restraining order.

'I'm sorry you think that,' he ground out. He never explained himself to anyone but now, in fairness, he supposed he had to bite the bullet. The righteous fire had left her eyes—stunning eyes, he noted with a stab of surprise—and she was now looking downtrodden and dejected.

Smothering a huff of impatience, he wheeled away. He had no reason to feel sorry for her. She was more than capable of standing up for herself. He'd been on the receiving end of more lectures in the short time she'd been working for him than he'd had to endure during the whole of his thirty-one years!

Pouring wine into the unused glass—clearly part of the kiss and make up scenario Trisha had had in mind—he handed it to her and said with a gentleness that further surprised him, 'Don't tell me that alcohol never passes your lips, Howard. It will help you recover from the unpleasant scene I forced you to witness.'

Stung, her fingers closed around the stem of the glass. What did he think she was? Some kind of hopelessly pious prude? Just because her father had been a man of the cloth!

'I do take the occasional drink, signor.' A barefaced lie. She had never been able to afford the stuff. 'And I don't wear a hair shirt, either!'

'Touché!' Andreo's sensual mouth quirked as he watched her drain the glass in two reckless gulps. 'And to put the record straight, I never had any intention of marrying Trisha Lomax—or tying

myself down to any woman, come to that. She knew it. She knew exactly what to expect, I promise you. While the affair lasted—and it turned out to be of short duration—she would enjoy my complete fidelity, and when it was over there would be no hard feelings and a handsome gift as a token of my regard and respect.'

Wondering if she had the remotest idea of how these things worked, and further wondering why he should care, Andreo sat beside her on the press, prising the empty glass from her fingers and setting it on the floor, informing her drily, 'Such arrangements aren't unheard of.'

Mercy's head was swimming. This close to him she felt light-headed, hot and bothered all over. 'It sounds immoral to me,' she muttered. Her mouth felt numb and peculiar. She really should have fought the nervous tension that had led her to swallow all that wine like that. 'Have you thought that the poor woman might have fallen in love with you?' As any woman with eyes to see and a spark of life left in her body would.

Dio mio! Give me patience! Andreo stemmed the impulse to tell her not to talk such juvenile rubbish. For the time being he needed her on side. 'A woman whose feelings were deeply engaged would have returned the suite of diamonds—the parting gift, remember?' he enforced through gritted teeth. 'Neither would she have hung on to the numerous costly trinkets she batted her eyes at during our time together. The only thing Trisha Lomax loved, apart from herself, was the size of my bank account, which goes a long way to explaining why she was misguided enough to believe she could change my mind about marriage.'

About to inform him that that was a highly selfish and jaundiced view, Mercy fell silent when he went on to tell her without a hint of self-pity, 'Since I reached my late teens women have been throwing themselves at me. As a testosterone-fired young man I thought I was in heaven until my grandfather, the wisest man I have ever known, warned me. The hearts that beat within those delightful breasts are full of avarice, he advised—from experience—pointing out that the size of the Pascali family fortune was well known. Enjoy the lovely creatures by all means, but never commit, he said to me. Marry when the need for an heir becomes paramount but choose a bride with wealth of her own, even if she has a face like a dustbin—glamorous mistresses are ten a penny.'

'I've shocked you,' Andreo commiserated, misconstruing his housekeeper's appalled expression. Springing to his feet, he paced across the room to refill her wineglass. 'But I wanted you to know where I'm coming from and to stop you accusing me of breaking that woman's heart. The only difference between her and the rest is that she didn't stick by the rules. She decided she could persuade me to marry her. As if!'

His brow suddenly clenching, Andreo vented an impatient sigh. He never explained himself, as he'd reminded himself once before this evening. So why break the habit of a lifetime now? Howard was his housekeeper, hired to iron his socks—or whatever was done to them—not to be privy to his lifestyle.

Handing her the glass, his brow cleared. Those amazingly big blue eyes were drenched with sympathy—maybe something could be done about them—mud-coloured contact lenses, perhaps?

Lowering himself beside her, he congratulated himself that at last she was on side. After what he'd told her she would be seeing through whatever sob story Trisha had come out with. No more righteous and misguided accusations of cruelty to make her prim her mouth and categorically refuse to do as he wanted.

Her heart swelling with pity and something else entirely as the devastating Italian again joined her on the press, Mercy stared at the glass in her hands. She hadn't asked for it and didn't want it—already her head was feeling peculiar. But she felt so achingly sorry for him she just couldn't bring herself to thrust it back at him. Poor, poor thing!

He was so gorgeous, so vital, how could he believe no woman could love him for himself and not his bank balance? She could throttle his cynical old grandfather for planting the idea in his head! He must feel so lonely!

'Howard…'

'Yes, sir?' Mercy glanced up at his low-pitched murmur then hurriedly transferred her gaze back to the glass she was holding. His eyes were a gleam of pure silver beneath the heavy dark fringe of his lashes and the long line of his mouth had softened with outrageous sensuality. Like a man looking at an object of desire.

Her cheeks blossoming with wild colour, she berated herself for thinking like a lunatic and buried her nose in her glass for something to do with herself just as he said, 'Cut out the "sirs". We're friends, right?'

He'd angled himself so that he was looking directly at her and here, in the intimacy of his bedroom, with him so close, close enough to smell the faint lemony drift of his aftershave, feel his body heat, it made her insides curl up with tension, her breath come in strange little gasps, her entire body tingle in a way she had never experienced before.

'Er—right,' she gulped strainedly and frantically tried to pull herself together. 'Friends' was okay. Normal, really. And with his track record he'd be used to looking at a woman—any woman from one-year-old to a hundred—that way. Just a habit. She was busy blaming her silliness on her unaccustomed intake of alcohol until he said, his dark velvet voice liberally smeared with honey, 'I have a proposition to put to you.'

CHAPTER THREE

‘AND that is?’ Mercy tried her best to sound bright and interested. Difficult when her tongue felt three feet thick. If this was what being tiddly was like she hated it. Cursing her foolishness in so innocently drinking that first glass as if it were as innocuous as fruit juice and then taking polite sips of the unwanted second, she did her best to concentrate on what he was saying.

‘I want you to model for me.’

For a moment she could only gape at him. Had the alcohol affected her hearing too? Messed with her brain? Mercy’s poleaxed eyes clung to his. Big mistake, she groaned inwardly. He was looking at her that way again, soft silver lights in those stunning eyes as they held her own confused gaze, his bewitching lips parted in a sensual half smile. She swallowed thickly and shook her head, trying to clear it of the muddle inside.

‘What did you say?’

‘That you’d be perfect for a project I’m currently working on.’

To her intense amazement and quivering delight his lean long-fingered hands softly cupped her face, lifting it to his openly assessing gaze. Mercy shook with inner tremors as her whole body seemed to catch fire, burn and shiver at the same time.

He looked as if he were about to kiss her, she thought wildly as her veins pulsed with dangerous excitement. Unbidden, her soft mouth parted with yearning anticipation as his eyes roamed over every feature then slowly dropped to what he could see of her body—mainly and shamingly the way her regrettably generous breasts were pushing against the now rather grubby grey fabric of her overall.

‘You’d have the small but absolutely pivotal role in the commercial we’re about to film…Just a few hours of your time…Coronet…You’d be so perfect…’

There was a strange buzzing sound inside her head. Mercy simply couldn’t process what he was saying. It all sounded so incredible she didn’t have a clue to how she could begin to understand it. She only knew she deeply mourned the loss of the sizzling, paralysing effect of his cool skin against her burning cheeks when he dropped his hands and took the dangerously tilting wineglass from hers, then mentioned a payment that sounded so crazily huge she could only gulp in frantic disbelief.

‘Think it over,’ he advised, still employing the silky-soft seductive tone that made every muscle, bone and nerve-ending she possessed go into meltdown. Elevating his lean frame with effortless ease, he took her hands and drew her to her feet, her body brushing against his as she rose, making her need, quite desperately, to sit straight back down again because her legs had gone.

But he was crossing the floor, long energetic strides taking him to the door. Holding it open for her, he gave her the benefit of that totally charismatic smile. ‘If you agree you’d be doing me a big favour. Sleep on it, and we’ll iron out the details in the morning.’

Having to call on every scrap of will-power she possessed, Mercy managed to stay upright and relatively steady as she left the room and headed for her bed, all thoughts of supper and the hot bath she’d promised herself abandoned in the pressing need to seek oblivion. All the while she shakily promised herself that she’d figure out exactly what had happened in his room this evening when her brain wasn’t in shock and fuddled with alcohol.

‘Oh, wow!’ Carly screeched.

Mercy snatched the mobile phone off her ear and shifted in one of the comfy armchairs in her private sitting room, only returning to the conversation when she judged she was in no further danger of having her eardrum split.

‘I didn’t take it in properly last evening—’ she came clean ‘—I’d had the best part of two huge glasses of wine and—’

'You never!' Carly groaned theatrically. 'You know it goes straight to your head! Remember that Christmas when you got squiffy on one spoonful of rum sauce!'

'Well, the wine was given to me with all good intentions and it seemed rude not to drink it,' Mercy excused lamely then went on to recount what she'd thought had been said, editing out her crass stupidity in thinking for one moment that he had been about to kiss her. As if!

'But he cleared it up this morning when I took him his breakfast.' A warm smile lit her features. He'd looked really pained at first but he'd eaten every scrap of the kedgeree after she'd told him, very firmly—no messing—that fish was good brain food. 'I'm to go to the studio next Monday and present myself to Make-up and Wardrobe. They'll start filming my part some time after midday, depending on how the location shots go, apparently. And he's paying mega bucks so I'll really be able to make a huge difference for James. He can forget about taking out further student loans in the forseeable future.'

Carly heaved a sigh. 'I don't believe this!'

'No, neither do I,' Mercy confided. 'How anyone could think I'd be a perfect model for a TV ad—'

'I mean I don't believe you wouldn't want to spend at least some of all that dosh on nice things for yourself,' the other woman corrected tartly. 'For as long as I've known you, you've always put yourself and what you wanted last on your list of priorities! But I guess nagging won't change you.' Her tone lightened. 'And I do believe you'd make great model material. Your brilliant boss must have taken one look at you and seen the potential. Haven't I always told you you could be drop-dead-gorgeous if you took trouble with your appearance? Stopped buying the dreary stuff you call essentials from charity shops, had your hair done properly and let me do your make-up. He obviously looked at you and saw star material!' she enthused as Mercy struggled not to hoot out loud at that unlikely scenario. 'And how about inviting me over one evening? I bet his pad's fabulous—I'm dying to see inside! And what will your ad be plugging?'

'I'm not sure,' Mercy confessed, feeling foolish. 'He mentioned something about Coronet and something or other last night. And I didn't like to ask him to repeat himself this morning. He would only have thought I hadn't been listening to a word he'd said.' Which she hadn't. Only she couldn't, for shame, further confess that she'd been too busy wondering if he was about to kiss her and coming over all silly and unnecessary!

'Coronet,' Carly mused. 'I'd have heard, surely, if there was a new ultra-expensive brand of perfume or make-up about to hit the market. Whatever, it's bound to be something eye-wateringly glamorous! Jewellery, perhaps? His agency's famous for handling the top end of the glitz market—they don't touch dreary stuff like washing powder and loo cleaners!'

After listening to a lot more on the same lines—like her face would become a national byword for all that was glamorous and sophisticated, not to mention her fortune—and promising to ask Andreo if she had his permission to invite Carly over one evening, Mercy ended the call, curled up more comfortably and wallowed in what her friend had said.

Could it really be possible that the super-charismatic, utterly gorgeous Italian legend had seen something that her mirror had staunchly withheld from her? That he had looked at her with desire? That he had been about to kiss her but had held back, afraid such an action might spoil their working relationship? The idea sent delicious tremors zipping down her spine.

Then, coming to her senses, obliterating the schoolgirl fantasies, which up until now she had never been prey to, she posed another question.

Could pigs fly?

In any case, she wouldn't want him to kiss her, would she? she told herself firmly, regaining her fabled common sense. No doubt he'd be very good at it, whirling a girl off to paradise with practised ease. But what girl with any self-respect and half a brain in her head would want to be romanced

by a man with the morals of a feral tom-cat and the attention span of a toddler where the females in his life were concerned?

Sitting in front of a huge mirror, dazzled by lights that were shining straight into her face, Mercy could hardly contain her excitement or the nerves that were making her bloodstream fizz and her stomach lurch.

Having delivered her, Andreo had disappeared, and Make-up and Wardrobe were in a huddle in the doorway. Several utterly lovely scantily-clad females and one blond male model type had wandered through during the time she'd been left here to stew. And wonder. If she knew what she was supposed to say and do…

Smartly switching that thought off because it only served to make her even more nervous and more convinced than ever that she couldn't act to save her life and would be thrown off the set and lose the fat fee that would be such a help to James, she turned her mind to calmer thoughts.

Since she'd agreed to do as he'd asked, her boss had been sweetness and light, coming home for supper every evening, inviting her to join him and entrancing her with the dry humour that made for effortless conversation. He hadn't even shown the slightest irritation with her unclued-up state when she'd broached the subject of housekeeping money, merely giving her that toe-curling smile and explaining, 'Knox ordered whatever was needed from Harrods. All you have to do is pick the phone up, take delivery and leave me to pay the bills.'

'Such profligacy!' she'd scolded, quite unable to help herself. 'I could shop much more cheaply. I have plenty of time to spare to head for the markets and find bargains! Have you never heard the saying—look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves?'

He'd thrown back his handsome head and roared with laughter, covering her with confusion and making her blush to the roots of her hair as she considered the fact that the super-wealthy would never need to bother themselves with penny-pinching trifles. In future she'd keep her mouth zipped on the subject of economy drives.

They'd rubbed along remarkably well, considering, she reflected. And she'd got over her silliness. Of course she thought he was an absolute dish—what woman wouldn't? And she could be excused for being unable to take her eyes off him, couldn't she? He was so exotic. Like a peacock in a flock of grey geese. So of course she would find him utterly fascinating; she wouldn't be human if she didn't. That didn't mean she was interested in him in a man/woman way. As if!

No, the right man for her would be steady and reliable, faithful, good husband and father material, and it wouldn't matter a toss what he looked like or how much money he had stashed away in the bank!

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