

CAROL
MARINELLI

Contracted: A Wife
For The Bedroom



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MARINELLI C.

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A marriage is forever, not just for convenience...Hunter Myles: this Australian's worth billions and can buy any woman he wants! Lily Harper: perfect for a convenient marriage and she needs Hunter's help! Hunter's ring is on her finger, but Lily knows it'll only be there for twelve months. Soon, a year doesn't seem quite long enough. Lily has fallen in love with her temporary husband!

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Contracted: A Wife for the Bedroom

Carol Marinelli



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CHAPTER ONE

‘SMILE!’

Using the rear-view mirror to paint on her lipstick, Lily could almost hear her childhood ballet teacher’s affected tones calling out for her to look happy and relaxed as she performed some excruciatingly painful manoeuvre.

And tonight’s group session was going to be excruciating—happy and positive were the absolute last things she felt this evening. Even an hour spent in front of the mirror, sweeping her blonde hair back in a smart French roll, carefully applying her make-up and dressing in her most snappy navy suit hadn’t enabled Lily to muster the confident air that usually surrounded her. No amount of power dressing was going to save her tonight! The only thing she had to show for weeks spent wrestling with banks, real-estate agents and mortgage brokers was a pounding headache and the appalling realisation that, this time, she couldn’t protect her mother.

Now she had to go in there, into the community centre, and imbue confidence, try to convince these people that they could be anything they wanted to be, could attain any goal, if only they truly set their minds to it.

She felt like a charlatan.

Dabbing a touch of concealer on a tiny pimple on her chin, Lily wished that life was so easy—that she could wave her magic wand and make problems disappear. Only problems didn’t disappear, Lily thought darkly, watching as, despite fifty dollars a dab, her pimple shone through.

Slipping off her silver thongs, Lily rummaged on the passenger floor for a pair of high-heeled sandals, slipping her feet in and doing up the thready laces, wishing she were actually taking them off—wishing that this day, this night was well and truly over.

Not that they weren’t divine.

A mere inch of suede had somehow been crafted into the softest, most divine of foot couture—accentuating her duskily painted toe-nails—the spiky heels magically elongating her ankles, somehow adding that extra oomph Lily so badly needed tonight.

‘Come on, shoes,’ Lily whispered, feeling a touch like Dorothy clicking her heels. ‘Do your stuff.’

Thick, heavy dots of rain hitting her windscreen dragged her out of her introspection and Lily knew that if she didn’t want being drenched to add to her woes, then hiding in her car wasn’t an option. The end of a long hot sultry spell that had hit Melbourne was, according to the forecast, about to be broken by a storm. Dashing across the car park, Lily just made it into the centre before the rain took hold, and as she stepped inside and saw her clients waiting for her, some standing alone and nervous-looking, as if they might flee at any moment, some mingling in groups, drinking the questionable coffee all turned to greet her as she entered. Lily’s smile wasn’t as false as she’d anticipated—she felt genuinely glad to see the familiar and new faces of people who were looking to her to help them change their lives.

‘Good evening, everyone.’ Lily glanced up at the clock, glad to see that she was ahead of schedule. ‘Carry on chatting among yourselves for a while. I’m a little early so we’ll give everyone a chance to get here before we start.’

Pulling paperwork out of her briefcase, Lily did a brief head count, ticking off the names on her list and putting out self-help brochures for the group to take away if they wished. She smiled warmly as a very new, very nervous, participant entered the room. Blushing and painfully shy, the newcomer blinked as she looked around the room, wringing her hands nervously as she stood there, and Lily’s heart went out to the stranger. She admired the huge step this woman was taking by coming tonight and immediately crossed the room to welcome her.

‘My name’s Lily,’ she said warmly, offering her hand. ‘Welcome to New Beginnings.’

‘Amanda,’ came the nervous reply. ‘I didn’t know if I needed an appointment.’

‘Not here,’ Lily said. ‘I just need you to fill in a form and then you can grab a coffee and start getting to know a few people—we really are a very friendly lot!’

Helping Amanda through the form took a little while longer than normal. Amanda, as Lily found out, had recently lost a huge amount of weight, followed by her marriage, followed by the little confidence she’d possessed, but Lily could tell that behind the shy façade was a very strong woman and one Lily couldn’t wait to see emerge.

‘Right, that’s all the paperwork done.’ Taking the clipboard from Amanda, Lily was about to suggest that she get a drink when her attention was caught by the door opening—well, not so much the door opening, more the man that was coming through it!

Her first thought was that he must be lost.

He didn’t look lost—anything other than that but men like the one appearing in the doorway did not belong at a self-help group meeting at the local community centre.

No, men like this one belonged in the middle of a glossy celebrity magazine or strutting his stuff down the catwalk, or—Lily gulped, blushing at the thought—they belonged in the giddy realms of a very private erotic dream.

She’d seen him somewhere before, Lily was sure of it, though simultaneously she doubted it because, if that were the case, surely she’d remember exactly the moment, for he was stunning.

Stunning!

Tall, long-limbed and lean with rakish good looks, his very dark brown hair, which was clearly superbly cut because as he dragged a hand through it it spiked into a perfect messy shape—his ice-blue eyes worked the room. Lean but certainly not skinny, Lily decided as he peeled off his jacket and shook the rain from it; beneath his white cotton shirt you could just tell his body was toned and muscular. His presence was so commanding it literally stopped the room, every head turning as he stood there for a moment, holding out his jacket as if he expected someone to collect it for him.

Someone did collect it for him!

Jinty, the housewife who till recently had washed down her morning cereal with a glass of vodka and orange, was first in the queue, taking his expensive jacket and hanging it on a peg as everyone else in the room, Lily included, sucked in their stomachs like a reflex action, staring in open-mouthed admiration at this Adonis who quite simply didn’t belong in suburbia.

‘Can I help you?’ Lily attempted to greet him as she would any other newcomer to the centre, by walking across to him and trying to put them at ease—not that this man appeared remotely uncomfortable. Quite literally he oozed confidence. It was Lily who was having trouble remembering how her legs worked, Lily feeling like a child in her mother’s high heels as she teetered across the room and offered her hand to this stunning stranger. ‘I’m Lily Harper.’

‘Then I’m in the right place,’ he drawled in a very well-schooled voice, ‘I’m here to join the New Beginnings Group.’

‘Oh!’ Lily blinked, and then corrected herself, trying to remember to treat him like a mortal, trying and failing not to judge, to attempt to fathom what could possibly have bought him there. ‘Well, welcome!’ She was still holding his hand, pumping it up and down as if she expected to find water! ‘I just need you to fill in a form.’

‘Sure.’

Sure, Lily repeated to herself, peeling her fingers from his hot grasp, trying not to appear flustered as she made her way to the table and handed him a clipboard with the necessary form attached. Only she was flustered—very!

He smelt divine, like walking past the aftershave counter at an exclusive department store, Lily thought as she absorbed the heavy scent he emanated, trying not to notice the piercing blue of his eyes or the chiselled planes of his impossibly handsome face. ‘Do you need a pen?’

‘Please.’ He stared at the rather grubby, very well-chewed pen that was being offered and then without a word declined, heading over to his jacket and producing one he, no doubt, deemed more suitable, before coming back to the table where Lily was now thankfully seated. The chatter in the room resumed again, but rather more subdued now, everyone’s ears on elastic, trying to hear his answers as Lily walked him through the form.

‘There’s no need to put your surname,’ Lily commented, ‘or your address, though we do ask for your postcode.’

‘Fine.’ He was sitting loosely cross-legged beside her, resting the clipboard on one long slender thigh, leaving it for Lily to guess where he was up to on the form. ‘I like your sandals, by the way.’ Somehow he managed to address the form and run an experienced eye along the length of her calves right down to her toes, which Lily felt curl on cue.

‘Thank you.’ Lily coughed, every exposed inch of flesh blushing as she tried to concentrate on the blessed form. ‘We ask for your salary range—if it falls in one of top three categories—’

‘It does,’ he interrupted.

‘Then in that case...’ Lily gave another small cough—more than anything she hated discussing money. ‘We ask if you’d consider paying towards the cost of the session—depending what category you’re in...’

‘The top one.’ He squinted at the piece of paper. ‘Easily.’

‘Then we ask you to contribute fifty dollars, but you can always pay next time if you don’t have it with you tonight, and if for some reason finding the money is a problem, please, don’t let it stop you from coming to the sessions—it really is a voluntary contribution.’

‘It’s no problem.’ He pulled out a very sleek wallet and peeled off a note.

‘I’ll write you a receipt.’

‘There’s really no need.’ He resumed filling in the form as Lily ignored him and started to fill in a receipt. ‘Tell me something.’ Thick beautiful eyebrows almost met as he frowned over at her. ‘Why, if someone is earning in the top category, would you offer for them not to pay? It doesn’t make good business sense.’

‘This isn’t a business.’ Lily smiled. ‘New Beginnings is a community-funded programme—it’s available to everyone, rich or poor. Anyway, for all I know...’ She stopped talking then, but still he stared.

‘Go on.’

‘Well, you might have just come from the casino and lost everything, your business might have collapsed. There are many reasons people find themselves at this sort of group—it certainly isn’t for me to judge your circumstances solely on the box you tick.’

‘Glad to hear it.’ He frowned down at the last bit of the form. ‘What exactly do you want to know here?’

‘Well, as the question suggests, we’re trying to find out what brought you to New Beginnings.’

‘It was suggested to me.’ He shrugged.

‘What do you hope to get out of it, then?’ Lily smiled patiently. ‘Most people are here for a reason, they’re hoping to change a part of their life or want some guidance with goal setting, to help them move onto a better one—it just helps me if I know what you’re hoping to achieve...’ Her voice trailed off as he started writing again, and she couldn’t be sure but there was a slight smirk on his mouth as, tongue clearly in cheek, he finished off the form and handed it back.

‘Thank you,’ Lily said, deliberately not peeking at what he had written, though she was aching to! ‘Here’s your receipt. Now, we’ll be moving through to the meeting room in five minutes or so. If you’d like to grab a coffee before we start, you’re very welcome.’ She pointed over to the urn, but he shook his head.

‘Just an iced water, thanks.’

He was joking, surely! But from the expression on his face he was clearly expecting her to stand up and fetch it for him, clearly very used to having people run around after him.

Well, not here!

It was Lily shaking her head now, managing not to smirk as she answered his rather derisive request.

‘There’s a water fountain at the entrance.’ She gave a very sweet smile. ‘Please, help yourself to a polystyrene cup!’

Hunter.

She stared at his extravagant handwriting, trying to glean a little more from his rather sparse summing-up on the form. He was 32 years old, he came from an exclusive city suburb and earned in excess of the top box. None of that came as a surprise—everything about him screamed of excess, from the exquisite tailoring of his suit that skimmed his sculpted body to the flash of a heavy gold watch on his wrist and the bunch of notes he’d peeled the fifty-dollar one from. Even those icy blue eyes hinted at excess, slightly bloodshot with purple smudges beneath them, and the tiny squint as he had filled in the form had Lily wondering if he was recovering from one too many nights on the town.

Hunter Myles—even though he hadn’t put his surname down, suddenly it came to her—that rather dangerous face placed now. He was a brilliant financier—not that Lily read the business pages much, she only skimmed through them if they’d moved her horoscope—but Hunter Myles had become somewhat the darling of housewives everywhere, writing the odd quirky little piece in magazines and offering share tips that over and over had proven golden. And now he appeared occasionally on breakfast television and regularly in all the social pages—a loose cannon in the staid world of finance, his party lifestyle legendary in the last year or so since...Lily frowned in concentration. There had been some tragedy, some accident, something that had sent him skidding off the rails in such spectacular style...Oh, what was it, now? And what, Lily wondered, was he hoping to achieve from New Beginnings? Staring at the form, Lily raised a neatly plucked eyebrow.

Inner peace!

Oh, his tongue had been firmly in cheek as he’d written it. Lily had seen the smirk on his face, known that he was being glib—but there was one tiny chink in his impressive armor that she’d noticed, manicured but undoubtedly bitten nails had drummed on the table as he’d spoken and there had been a restless energy that had belied his confident stance. He might have been joking when he’d written it but, like everyone else, maybe inner peace was what Hunter was seeking.

‘Welcome, everyone.’ Lily beamed around the meeting room. ‘Tonight we have two new members—Amanda and Hunter. Now, the point of a group session is to share and encourage, so let’s take our time to introduce ourselves.’

Lily listened as the group worked clockwise, listening as Richie told of his hopes for a deeper, more meaningful relationship after the demise of his marriage, as Jinty spoke about her battle with the bottle and her hope for a more sober, fulfilling existence and onwards until they came to Amanda.

‘Well.’ Blushing furiously, she looked down at her knees. ‘My marriage ended recently. I thought that if I lost weight it would help to save it, but it just made things worse.’

‘How much have you lost? If you don’t mind my asking,’ Lily checked.

‘Over fifty kilograms. I know I’ve still got a way to go—but I feel as if I’d like to join the world again.’

‘That’s a huge achievement.’ Lily smiled as the group clapped their encouragement, all except Hunter, that was. Apparently bored rigid by the proceedings, he was practically falling asleep in his chair and Lily resisted the urge to give him a sharp kick on the shin before turning her attention back to Amanda. ‘When you say you’re ready to join the world again, in what way?’ Lily asked, nodding encouragement.

‘I’m trying to get up the courage to join a gym,’ Amanda said shyly. ‘I know I should just do it, it’s just the thought of walking in there, having everyone looking at me.’

Lily made a note on the pad in her lap as Amanda carried on talking. 'I'd like to look for a job as well and who knows? Maybe one day...'

'Go on,' Lily said gently, as Amanda's voice trailed off. 'You're among friends here.'

'I'd like to think about having a relationship—you know, get out there...'

Everyone in the group was nodding encouragement, offering congratulations on her huge achievement, everyone that was except Hunter. He was leaning back on the sofa, yawning unashamedly, not remotely moved by Amanda's story and clearly thoroughly bored with the whole proceedings. Lily felt a flash of anger—what the hell was he doing there if he thought he was so superior? Well, she was going to find out—if this Hunter thought his story was so much more interesting than everyone else's, it was time to hear it!

'Hunter.' Lily snapped him to brief attention. 'Perhaps you'd like to introduce yourself to the group, share with us all a little of what bought you here tonight.'

Perhaps not! The silence was interminable as he stared back at her and she felt impossibly hot and uncomfortable under his scrutiny and annoyed, too, that he could be so at ease with the pause in the proceeding he had created. 'You've written that you're hoping to achieve inner peace.' She flashed a brittle smile. 'That doesn't tell us anything, Hunter—everyone in this room is hoping to achieve that.'

'The teacher, too?' There was more than slight insolence to his question and Lily determinedly didn't redden, that bubble of anger in her starting to swell as somehow he managed to mock the proceedings that were taking place.

'Yes, Hunter, even the teacher.' Almost imperceptibly her eyes narrowed but her smile stayed intact—she was determined not to judge until she'd heard his story but years of working with people had given her an incredibly sensitive radar and it was bleeping loudly now. For reasons she couldn't fathom, this man was here under false pretences, wasn't in the slightest bit interested in joining in with the group. He was quite prepared to just sit there and let the whole group share their innermost thoughts and give absolutely nothing of himself. She knew all about shyness, knew all about people who needed some time and space before they could even begin to open up, but Hunter exhibited none of the usual nerves. 'Most people come to a group like this for one of two reasons—either a major life event has forced them to reappraise their goals or they've realised after some soul-searching that something is missing in their lives and they would like to make more of themselves.'

'Really.'

'Are you happy in your work, Hunter?'

'I don't really have time to stop and think about it.'

'Do you make sure that you have some time when you're not thinking about work?'

'I never think about work when I'm in bed.' He gave her a very small but very suggestive smile and despite herself Lily felt the beginning of a blush spread over her cheeks. This man was incorrigible, but he redeemed himself slightly when finally he addressed the group. Not that he needed to redeem himself to them—they were eating out of his hand. 'Well, as you probably all know, my main expertise is in futures, though I do have other interests.'

'You're a medium!' Jinty breathed, gaping in admiration.

'Hunter's referring to the stock market,' Lily corrected, smothering a smile as Jinty inadvertently brought him down a peg or two. 'Am I right?'

He gave a gracious nod.

'What about your personal relationships?'

'What about them?'

Lily sucked her breath in in irritation, he was playing them all along and quite simply she wouldn't allow it. She looked around at the eager, kind faces of her clients and knew she had to protect them. Putting down her clipboard on the table in front of her, Lily wasn't smiling any more, her green eyes very serious as she faced him, her mouth opening to speak, to tell him what she'd never told a client before—that their time at New Beginnings was about to end—now!

He'd pushed her too far—as easily as he read financial spread sheets, Hunter could read women, and he knew, just knew that this was one unhappy lady. And she really was a lady, from the tip of her blonde hair down to her prettily painted toenails, her trim figure soft and voluptuous in all the right places. She had naturally what so many manufactured—effortless beauty and grace. He flashed her a winning smile, but it failed to move her, those gorgeous almond-shaped green eyes narrowing, tense lips opening, and Hunter realised that for once flirting wasn't going to save him. He was almost tempted to add another flip comment, curious, actually, to see how she handled herself, but, remembering the reason he was there, Hunter halted himself.

Emma.

His stomach tightened—the guilt that was ever present these days upping an uncomfortable notch as he recalled Emma's pale, anxious face when she'd asked him to check out New Beginnings for her. And for that reason alone Hunter deigned to concede.

A touch.

'I've actually just broken up with my girlfriend.' Hunter's remorseful words beat Lily's sharp ones and, giving a beautifully timed, regretful shrug, he played the sympathy card perfectly, cast his net to the engrossed audience and dragged them all willingly in. 'We were about to get engaged—she'd even chosen the ring.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.' Surprised by his admission, Lily took a second to regroup—she'd been so sure another smart reply had been about to come, had been positive he'd reveal absolutely nothing about himself. She was also certain, well as certain as one could be from reading the glossies that Hunter wasn't in a serious relationship—but pushing her doubts aside, remaining professional, Lily dealt with the facts as Hunter saw fit to give them. 'How long did the relationship last?'

She watched as he squinted, tried and failed not to notice just how gorgeous he looked as he did so, dark hair flopping over his forehead as he counted on his fingers. 'Two,' Hunter started. 'No, maybe three...' His voice faded out as he did the maths and magnanimously Lily tried to help him.

'Two years might not sound like a long time to some here.' Lily smiled over at Richie, whose ten-year marriage had recently ended. 'However, just because Hunter's relationship is marked in years rather than decades—'

'Not years,' Hunter broke in, 'months. We were together for two months.'

An interminable pause followed—Lily casting her eyes around her group and trying to fathom how to incorporate Hunter into it, trying to give this impossible man a chance. 'The end of a new relationship can be devastating,' Lily attempted. 'That first flush of passion, the sheer heady emotion of those first few weeks can evoke intense feelings of grief when it ends. Isn't that right?'

'I guess,' Hunter admitted, to Lily's relief. After all, Abigail had cried her eyes out.

'Overwhelming feelings of loss,' Lily offered.

'Well.' He nodded. 'Abigail did seem very upset.'

'Who ended this relationship, Hunter?' Lily asked, confused by his response.

'Me,' he answered, as if the answer should be obvious and giving her a slightly startled look, which Lily chose to ignore.

'And you chose to end it because...'

He frowned before answering, actually looked as if he was thinking about the answer, and Lily found she was holding her breath.

'She bored me,' Hunter answered finally, as Lily's head jerked up. 'I mean, she was great to look at, fabulous in bed but, at the end of the day I guess that she just bored me. They always do in the end.'

'In what way?' Lily asked, remembering her training, though sorely tempted to slap his cheek. 'Is it the woman herself that bores you or the thought of monogamy?'

'I've never really given it much thought,' Hunter shrugged, clearly bored with the subject, but Lily smiled and nodded.

‘Well, the end of a relationship is always a good time for introspection—a time to look at needs and wants that may have been stifled, to work out what we really want, not just from a partner but from ourselves. What would your ideal relationship be, Hunter?’

‘As I said.’ He sounded just a touch irritated now. ‘I haven’t really given it much thought.’

‘Well now’s your chance!’

He stared at her for the longest time and Lily decided there and then that his name was very apt—he looked like a hunter, someone who chose his prey carefully then pounced, because those blue eyes on her were hypnotising in their effect. He was so utterly a predator that Lily felt the hackles on her back rise in defence as he eyed her thoughtfully.

‘I want to wake up with someone in the morning and actually want to hear what she has to say. Someone who embraces her feminine side but isn’t intimidated by my masculinity. I guess what I really want...’

‘Go on,’ Lily croaked, suffused suddenly with images that were surely inappropriate—his masculinity, his good looks, his raw sensuality were not only intimidating but incredibly thought-provoking, and trying to stay objective and focused as Hunter discussed his needs and wants was almost an impossible task.

‘An equal,’ Hunter finished, blinking at his own admission. He was getting quite good at this, he thought. ‘An equal, though not an identical half.’ He elaborated a touch.

‘That’s very perceptive,’ Lily said, running a tongue over dry lips and dragging her eyes away from his to address the group at large. ‘Hunter has made a very valid point. Equality in a relationship is vital for its success—both partners valuing the other’s contribution to it and embracing the other’s individuality. All too often, however, I hear people saying that they want a relationship as if it’s the solution to all their problems. The relationship that you need to nurture is the one with yourself. I believe first and foremost in self-love—’

‘I don’t have any problem with that,’ Hunter interrupted. ‘But as a last resort, of course, I prefer the real thing!’

Lily swung her head around, and she wasn’t the only one. The whole group gaped at Hunter, who didn’t look remotely abashed as he happily bought up the most delicate of delicate subjects.

‘When I refer to self-love...’ Lily cleared her throat, wishing that she’d bought her own polystyrene cup of water into the session ‘...I meant self-respect, actually liking yourself, knowing your own opinions, being at ease with your own company. Only when you’ve achieved that can you truly step into a relationship as an equal.’

‘Oh, that!’ Hunter dismissed.

By the time the rest of the group had introduced themselves, Hunter had dozed off, his head drooping forward slightly, those knowing eyes mercifully closed. Lily decided that rather than waking him, to just let him sleep off whatever excess he was suffering from. But as the meeting continued, though she tried to give her all to her clients, tried to listen intently as Jinty spoke at length of her hope for staying sober and finding a new partner, and Richie spoke shyly about his first date in a decade, Lily could sense her own distraction, her eyes constantly drawn to him. Even while asleep he unsettled her; even while quiet he interrupted her thought process at every turn.

What was he doing there?

CHAPTER TWO

‘HUNTER!’

The third and final call had absolutely no effect. All the plastic chairs had noisily been put away and yet nothing had woken him up.

For a second Lily actually considered walking away, throwing his jacket over him and leaving him for the cleaners to find in the morning. But integrity took over, and finally, almost scared to touch him, she tentatively reached out and shook his shoulder, feeling the solid mass of flesh beneath her fingers.

‘Hunter, the session ended fifteen minutes ago.’

‘Did it?’ Lazily he stretched and yawned, testing every inch of her patience as he languorously stood up and peered around the room, locating his jacket and rather unsteadily putting it on.

‘Is there any chance of a coffee?’

‘The urn’s been put away.’ Lily frowned at him. Gorgeous he may be, but those stunning eyes were clearly having trouble focusing. ‘Are you OK to drive?’ Lily checked; her natural assertion and training enabling her to deal confidently with this potentially difficult situation. ‘If you’ve been drinking, it might be wise to call a taxi.’

‘I don’t drink,’ Hunter answered.

‘At all?’

‘I tried it once and didn’t like it.’

‘You seem...’ Lily gave a small nervous swallow. If he hadn’t been drinking then he must have taken something—he was swaggering slightly as he walked.

‘If you have taken something then you really ought to think about—’

‘I’m not on drugs!’ He caught sight of her worried frown and actually smiled. ‘Unless you count an overdose of caffeine. I’m fine, just a bit jet-lagged.’

‘Jet-lagged?’

‘I flew in from New York this morning, or was it yesterday?’ he squinted down at his watch. ‘It’s still yesterday there.’

‘Have you slept since?’ Lily asked, worried now about him driving and feeling just a touch guilty for her earlier assumptions—he had every right to look a little the worse for wear.

‘Just then.’ He gestured to the room they’d left. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. Tell me something,’ he asked suddenly. ‘Do you really believe that if you set your mind to something you can make it happen?’

‘To a point,’ Lily answered carefully, wondering where this was leading and realising that even though apparently asleep he’d taken in more of her session than she’d realised.

‘That anyone can better themselves.’

‘Of course.’ Lily answered immediately. ‘Unless, of course, you’re already perfect.’

Her stab at sarcasm just drew a lazy smile from him. ‘Oh, I’m far from perfect, and I certainly don’t wake up in the morning and kiss the mirror and tell myself I’m beautiful and worth it.’

He was teasing her and again Lily realised that he’d actually been listening all along.

‘I don’t actually kiss the mirror but, yes,’ Lily admitted, ‘I do encourage self-affirmation.’

‘Till true love comes along and then he can do it for you?’ He raised his eyebrows, mocking her with his words, but Lily stared right back and shook her head.

‘You have no idea what I believe, Hunter. I encourage self-love because I actually believe that the only relationship you can truly rely on is the one you have with yourself. A lot of people don’t want to hear it so I don’t say it. I hopefully get them to a point where they’re happy and confident in life and then the rest is up to them.’ She knew he didn’t quite get what she was saying, those knowing eyes narrowing slightly, a vertical crease in that perfect brow, and she told him her truth—revealed to him what she actually thought. ‘The truth is, I don’t actually believe in love.’

‘Really?’

‘Really.’ Lily nodded. ‘I believe in lust. I believe in romance. I believe in mutual respect. But I truly don’t believe there’s one love for everyone, one love that can last a lifetime.’

‘Amanda will be very disappointed,’ Hunter said.

‘Amanda’s not going to hear it from me,’ Lily retorted equally quickly, assuming the conversation was over and turning to head for the door. But Hunter lingered, the derisive note gone from his voice now.

‘What about someone with, say, disabilities?’ Hunter frowned. ‘I mean, suppose for instance that someone had been told they could never walk again. Are you saying that if they really set their mind to it...?’

‘I’m not offering miracles, Hunter,’ Lily answered softly, ending the verbal sparring, sensing for the first time genuine confusion behind his words, wondering if perhaps she was about to find out what really had bought Hunter there tonight. ‘If someone who’s been told they’ll never walk again is focusing solely on proving the doctors wrong, they’re missing out on a lot of other opportunities. Maybe it’s better to expend that energy on different goals...’

‘Give in, you mean?’

‘I’d prefer to call it acceptance.’

‘That’s how you make your living I guess.’ Hunter barbed response didn’t faze Lily this time—she knew his anger wasn’t aimed at her.

‘Just who are we talking about here, Hunter?’

‘No one.’ He flashed a brittle smile. ‘It’s just a hypothetical question. Right...’ For Hunter it was clearly conversation over. He held out several thousand dollars’ worth of the finest, most beautifully spun wool. ‘Do you want to borrow my jacket?’

‘Your jacket?’

‘It’s pouring outside,’ Hunter needlessly pointed out as they were having to raise their voices now to be heard above the driving rain that was bouncing off the roof.

‘I’ll be fine,’ Lily declined, smiling to herself at the thought of using such a beautiful garment as a temporary umbrella and filled with strange regret that once he stepped out into the night she’d never see him again, that whatever her group offered it wasn’t something he needed. Lily was filled with curiosity, too, as to why on earth he had come. He intrigued her. He was so utterly, utterly confident, so breathtakingly opinionated, and yet, on occasion—she looked at the proffered jacket—when Hunter wanted to be, he was disarmingly nice.

‘Take it,’ he offered again, his hand completely steady as he held it out to her, a curious half-smile on his face, but as she raised her hand to accept it suddenly everything changed. In that instant Lily knew, just knew that it was more than a jacket that Hunter was offering, knew from the way he was looking at her that the seemingly simple gesture had dangerous connotations and that stepping out into the night with him would be like stepping out with the devil himself. Brutally aware they were alone now, she felt like Snow White with the dwarfs all out at work, a tempting apple being thrust unexpectedly in her face. Telling herself she was crazy, that she was completely overreacting, she struggled to centre herself, to push away the ridiculous thoughts that were flooding her mind.

‘Lily?’ Softly he questioned her indecision but she couldn’t answer. His chest was at her eye level, the rate of his breathing matching her own, awareness, attraction swirling around her like a heavy fog, seeping into her clothes, her flesh, her mind.

She could smell them—not just the mingling scent of their colognes, but the perilous undertones beneath, the thick lusty yet indefinable smell of arousal, and it made her feel dizzy, confused and more than a little claustrophobic.

‘No!’ She didn’t even attempt politeness, instead snapping the word out, his unvoiced question meriting no well-mannered response.

‘Your choice.’ Hunter shrugged.

And it was surely the right one.

Watching as he stepped out into the night, Lily dragged a shaking hand up to her hair, staring around the room and blinking at the normality of it. Surely somehow the windows should be broken, tables and chairs should upended, that there should be some evidence of the seismic shift that that had just taken place.

What the hell had happened there? Lily tried to fathom, her breathing still coming out short and uneven, her heart still thumping loudly in her chest, every sense on high alert as if she'd just chased out an intruder. He'd offered her a jacket, for heaven's sake, yet she felt as if they'd kissed, more than kissed... She felt as if he'd seen inside her, felt inside her.

Flicking off the lights and stepping out into the pelting rain, Lily was actually grateful for the sting of the wind and rain, the cool change incredibly welcome after such a scorching encounter. Locking up behind her, Lily made a mad dash across the car park, her suit clinging to her drenched body, her French roll uncoiling as she unlocked the car door and, shivering, jumped inside, dreaming of a bubble bath up to her neck to soothe away the tension of the day...

It wasn't over yet!

The day that had started so badly with a phone call from her mortgage broker went from seriously bad to downright disastrous as her engine spluttered noisily, emanating a huge grating sound that seemed to get louder with each and every frantic turn of her key. A mechanic Lily wasn't—truth be known she didn't even know where the catch was to lift the bonnet—but even to Lily's untrained ears the sound was perilous enough to tell her that the only journey her car was taking tonight was on the back of the vehicle rescue truck.

The passenger door opening momentarily panicked her—she'd thought the car park was empty and Lily wasn't sure if it was the force of the rain and wind that caused her to catch her breath or the gorgeous but somewhat intimidating sight of Hunter climbing in beside her.

'Most people knock on the window,' Lily reprimanded.

'I'm not like most people. 'Problem?' he added, stating the obvious for the second time since he'd climbed in the car beside her, because he really wasn't like most people.

He disturbed her.

Spun her into a state of heightened nervousness, though not for her safety. An excellent judge of character, there was nothing in his personality that made Lily feel that her safety was compromised, her nervousness, her state of hyper-vigilance when he was around entirely due to the dangerous feelings he evoked.

'Do you know anything about cars?'

'I like silver ones.' He gave a dry smile as Lily gritted her teeth. 'I suppose I could do the macho thing and ask you to pop the bonnet and stand there staring for a few thoughtful moments—are you wearing stockings?'

'What?' Lily did a double-take. 'What on earth has that got to do with anything?'

'I saw it on a film, I think...' He frowned for a moment. 'Or did I read it? Anyway, it's entirely irrelevant because I'd have no idea what to do even if you were wearing them—I haven't a clue about cars.'

'Well, thanks for your help.' Lily gave a tight smile.

'I haven't given you any help yet,' he pointed out. 'Why don't I give you a lift home? You can sort out the car in the morning.'

'I'll be fine,' Lily said, reaching for her mobile phone. 'I'll ring the rescue service.'

'They could be a while. Cars will be breaking down and skidding into each other all over the place tonight.'

'Then it's just as well I'm a patient person.' Despite her curt refusal of his offer, Hunter made no move to go. In fact, he didn't even shift himself as Lily was forced to lean over him and delve into her rather messy glove box and retrieve her car manual. He sat drumming his fingers on his leg as

Lily rang the number and after an impossibly lengthy time of being placed on hold she gave in and punched in the number for a taxi.

‘No luck?’ Hunter asked needlessly, having listened to her rather exasperated one-sided conversation.

‘I’ve been placed in the queue.’

Which meant she was there for the duration. Staring out into the dark night, the rain lashing at her windscreen and no prospect of escape for the next couple of hours at best, Lily decided that if he offered again she’d let him take her home. After all, she’d been worried about him driving—this way she could make sure that he was OK and give him a quick coffee before he headed off to his house.

Happy with her decision, she waited expectantly, a frown forming on her face as Hunter opened the passenger door.

‘Well, good luck,’ he said. ‘I hope you’re not waiting too long.’

Damn! Lily cursed in her mind as he swung his legs out, yet still she was sure he was testing her, sure that he would offer again.

But clearly he wasn’t into games. Even as the thought formed she was privy to the rather gorgeous sight of him, lean and long-legged, briskly walking across to his car, and Lily knew if she didn’t do something she’d be stuck here for ages, knew that he’d left it to her to make the next move.

A man like Hunter didn’t need to offer his services twice.

Even as she threw her keys and phone in her bag and opened the car door, even as she locked her vehicle and dashed across to his sleek silver car, Lily knew the decision she’d made, though on the surface it appeared rational, was perhaps the most dangerous, illogical thing she’d done in her life. Thumbing a lift on the freeway would possibly be more sensible—better the devil you didn’t know perhaps. Yet she wanted to do this and was curiously elated that fate had intervened and her brief dalliance with this unforgettable man wasn’t yet over.

His headlights came on, illuminating her in the darkness, and for a second Lily froze, blinking into them, drenched and exposed. She could envision the glint of the triumphant smile that was surely gracing that surly, beautiful mouth. This was a man who liked to be in control.

Unlike Hunter, who’d so boldly climbed into her vehicle, Lily went to tap on his window, but already he’d opened it, staring up as if he’d been expecting her, his hair damp and flopping over his forehead, music wafting out of the car’s stereo, his hands loosely holding the leather-covered steering-wheel. Never had a car looked more inviting or more dangerous.

‘That lift you offered.’ Her teeth were chattering and it had nothing to do with the temperature. Despite the pelting rain, the night was still warm, the shiver running through her having everything to do with his eyes lazily drifting over her before finally deigning to meet hers. ‘If you still don’t mind...’ Still he stared, not saying anything, forcing her to ask him outright. ‘I’d love a lift home.’

‘Sure.’ With the tiniest motion of his head he gestured to the passenger side and Lily dashed around, her heart in her mouth as she opened the door and climbed in, feeling the soft leather on her damp legs, the warmth of his car stifling, the music too loud, his erotic scent stronger in the stuffy, luxurious confines, every sense bombarded with confusing messages as she momentarily entered the world of this intriguing man.

CHAPTER THREE

HUNTER had turned down the music as she'd given her address and Lily felt she had to fill the rather awkward silence that ensued.

'I'm sorry if this is out of your way.'

'It isn't.'

'It really is very kind of you...' Her voice trailed off and Hunter did nothing to fill the painful silence, made absolutely no attempt at small talk. Truth be known, where she lived wasn't particularly out of his way, she knew from the form he had filled in the suburb where he lived, but had she not been in the car no doubt he'd have taken the freeway and driven the rather more direct route to the city. Instead, he moved the car skilfully along the wet roads and took the longer but infinitely prettier beach-road route that would take them to her bayside apartment.

The view was divine. Staring out the window, Lily stared into the inky waters of the bay. Rolling clouds obliterated the moon, just angry spears of lightning illuminating the bay, the moored boats bobbing in the storm, the waves pounding the piers as his car silently gobbled up the distance. But the electric tension in the air outside was nothing compared to the energy in the car, the atmosphere so thick she had to drag the air into her lungs, the silence deafening as a million questions buzzed unvoiced between them. Never had her apartment complex looked so welcoming—normality soothing as the end to this strange encounter was finally in sight and Lily gestured for him to pull up. 'This is where I live.'

'Where do you park?'

And it sounded like a normal question, only it wasn't. He should have indicated and pulled into the kerbside, perhaps waited for her to offer him a drink, but instead he was gliding the car into the driveway as his eyes searched for her private parking space. It felt incredibly invasive as he glided into it and pulled the handbrake and turned off the lights and ignition, just assuming that he was going to be asked in.

'I could really murder that coffee.' He flashed a beautiful smile as she gave a tense nod, her whole body rigid as he followed her through the concrete maze of the car park and into the entrance of the apartment complex. She fizzed with awareness, even the most normal of tasks, like walking, made infinitely more difficult, her feet slipping inside her saturated sandals. She was excruciatingly aware of her damp clothes clinging to her body as he casually strolled along beside her. As she turned the key and pushed open her door, Lily blinked in wonder at the untidy familiarity of her own apartment, as if somehow it should have prepared itself, should somehow have known who was coming home with her tonight.

Her dinner plate and mug was still on the coffee-table, a top and bra she had pulled out of her closet and promptly discarded when getting ready lay strewn over the back of her sofa, and a pile of magazines and newspapers lay lazily next to a mountain of bank papers.

'Excuse the mess.' She marched through to the kitchen, hoping he would follow so she could dash out in a couple of moments and do a frantic clean-up, but Hunter wasn't going anywhere, except to the sofa. He sat down and stretched his long legs out, crossing them at the ankles. Her lacy pink bra hovered, apparently unnoticed a few inches from his cheekbone, as he picked up a magazine and idly thumbed through it.

'Nice apartment.' He glanced up briefly.

'It is when it's tidy,' Lily answered.

'I like it like this.' He went to turn back to the magazine then changed his mind. 'I usually get the more sanitised version of a woman's life.'

'Sorry?'

‘Immaculately tidy, fresh flowers in the vase, a few highbrow books on the coffee-table...’ Lily gave a shocked giggle of recognition as he described how her apartment would have looked had she known he was coming. ‘I prefer the real you.’ He held her eyes for an indecent amount of time and Lily could feel herself colouring under his scrutiny, his blatant flirting unnerving her. She wanted to go and get changed, put something warm and safe on, yet she couldn’t imagine heading to her bedroom while he was in her home. Thankfully he averted his eyes and turned back to the magazine he was reading as he dismissed her. ‘Three sugars, please,’ Hunter said, not even looking up as he relegated her to waitress. ‘And lots of cream.’

‘You’ll be lucky if I’ve got any milk,’ Lily muttered, heading off to the kitchen, flicking on the kettle and pulling out only one mug, choosing instead to pour herself a glass of wine from a bottle in the fridge. After the day she’d had—was still having—surely she deserved it.

A quick coffee and he was out of here, Lily decided, watching her shaking hands attempting to spoon coffee into a mug. Perfectly behaved he may have been since he’d set foot in her apartment, sitting quietly on her couch, reading, pleasant about the mess, even adding a ‘please’ when he’d requested his sickly sweet beverage, but she felt as if there were a wild animal in her lounge, a sleek black panther—infinitely beautiful yet dangerously unbridled, an untamed predator—just a few feet away.

Do not feed the animals. Staring into her rather bleak pantry, Lily managed a wry smile—she couldn’t if she wanted to.

Taking a deep, calming breath, Lily headed back to the lounge, but any attempt at composure vanished as she saw Hunter sitting on the sofa, calmly reading her financial papers and barely looking up as he offered his unwelcome opinion.

‘You can’t afford it.’

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Shaking with rage, Lily just managed to put the drinks down without spilling them before ripping the papers out of his hand. ‘You don’t read people’s private documents!’

‘Why not?’ Hunter shrugged, completely unperturbed by her fury. ‘There’s no quicker way to get to know someone. Tell me, Lily, why on earth would you want to take on such a massive mortgage?’

‘That’s none of your business.’

‘On the contrary—money is my business.’

‘Oh, that’s right,’ Lily flared, ‘because you work on the stock market, because you’re featured in some magazines and appeared on television, you think you’re entitled to poke your nose into everyone’s private affairs?’

‘I don’t work on the stock market—I work the stock market,’ Hunter corrected calmly, an utter contrast to Lily’s trembling rage. ‘More often than not to my advantage. People pay a lot of money for my opinion and I’m giving it to you free—I’d listen, if I were you.’

‘I don’t have to listen,’ Lily bristled. ‘I already know that I can’t afford it—I already know that the banks are not going to lend me the money and that the house...’ Suddenly it all caught up with her, the tension of the past few weeks, the frustration of feeling so helpless all culminating into this moment, all her fears magnified as this impossible man forced her to confront what she already knew. Tears stung her eyes as she resumed talking, her words more to herself than Hunter as she admitted the unpalatable truth. ‘It’s going to have to be sold.’

‘Sold?’ Hunter frowned, staring again at the papers. ‘I thought you were looking to buy... Oh, I see.’ He flicked over a couple of pages. ‘This is your parents’ house.’

She was too exhausted to be angry as he shamelessly delved further into her documents, the anxiety that had propelled her in recent weeks utterly depleted now. Sitting on the sofa beside him, Lily took a sip of wine and leant back, closing her eyes as Hunter questioned her further.

‘My mother’s,’ Lily corrected him her voice a monotone. ‘My father died two years ago.’

‘So it’s solely in your mother’s name?’ Without even a murmur of acknowledgment to her loss, Hunter dealt with the facts. ‘Why do you want to buy it?’

‘Because my mother can’t afford it—she’s defaulted on her loan.’ Lily let out a long tense breath. ‘She was planning to turn it into a bed and breakfast in the hope of keeping it. She’s up in Queensland now, talking to her sister about coming in with her, but things have just started to snowball. I just found out that there’s going to be a mortgagee’s auction in two weeks and unless she comes up with the money...’

‘But if she can’t afford it, surely she’s better off downsizing,’ Hunter responded, his voice utterly void of emotion, just as the bank manager’s and the umpteen lenders she had dealt with over the past few weeks had been. For Lily it was the last straw.

‘Says who?’ Lily’s voice was shrill. ‘She’s lived in that house for thirty years, all of her memories are there—her life. Why should she lose it?’

‘Because she hasn’t got the money to keep it,’ Hunter said blandly, utterly unmoved by her emotive outburst. ‘Why does she owe so much if she’s been there so long?’ God, he was direct—no skirting around the edges, no gently feeling his way into a conversation. He was business personified. ‘Didn’t your father have insurance?’

‘They took out a new mortgage to pay for my father’s treatment and to spend his last year travelling.’

‘That was rather selfish!’ Hunter rolled his eyes. ‘Didn’t he realise the mess he’d be leaving for your mother?’ Lily’s mouth gaped open, stunned at what she was hearing, reeling that he would say such a thing, but Hunter stared coolly back. ‘Don’t tell me you haven’t thought the same.’

‘Maybe...’ Lily blinked rapidly, feeling sick at her confession to a stranger. ‘Perhaps a bit, but you don’t know the circumstances, and you have no right—’

‘Fine.’ Shuffling the papers into a neat pile, he placed them down on the table and picked up his coffee, dropping the difficult subject, leaving Lily to freefall with all the emotion he’d just triggered as he calmly drank his coffee in a couple of gulps then stood up. Even though she hadn’t wanted him to stay, suddenly she didn’t want him to leave, curiously deflated as this wild animal took one sniff of the air and seemingly meekly walked away.

‘Thanks so much for the lift.’ Lily stood up and walked him to the door.

‘No problem. Thanks for the coffee.’

‘You’ll be OK to drive?’

‘Why? Are you worried about me?’

‘You’re a client...’ Lily attempted, but he shook his head.

‘No.’ Very deliberately he excused himself and Lily felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up as he took away that moral dilemma and plunged her into a rather more personal one. ‘I was never there for me—I was checking the place out for someone else. So, you see, I’m not your client, which means you have absolutely no need to worry about me—unless, of course...’ boldly he stared ‘... you want to.’

‘But you said...’

‘I’m not into group therapy.’ Even the most bland of words were laced with innuendo when Hunter said them, even the most subtle flick of his eyes had her head spinning. ‘I prefer things to be one on one. I really was just there to make sure that things were aboveboard for...’ He hesitated for a fraction. ‘A friend.’

‘And were they?’

‘Very.’ He nodded. ‘And the coffee was most welcome, but now it’s time to go, I can tell that I’ve annoyed you.’

‘A bit,’ Lily admitted, ‘but that’s my problem, not yours.’

‘Do you do it all the time?’ Hunter asked, still staring unashamedly, but it was his mouth rather than his eyes that held Lily’s attention now, thick sensual lips that barely moved as he spoke, but his

words were all silkily measured. 'I mean, everything someone says—do you analyse it? How can my obnoxiousness be your problem?'

A sliver of a smile shivered on her own lips, countered by a nervous pink tongue bobbing out, and it was as if they were writing their own rules for flirting, the manual that said eye contact was so important tossed aside as they both concentrated on a more subtle erogenous zone. For Lily the effect was devastating, her mouth rendered almost immobile, words stammered out in a breathless voice as her lips ached for his. 'It-t i-isn't—my reactions are m-my own.'

'Well, I'm glad I can evoke a reaction.' The irony of his statement wasn't lost on Lily. Never in her life had a person evoked such a reaction, her mind, her body spinning with awareness, dizzy from a host of new sensations. 'And I am sorry if I offended. I have this terrible superiority complex, you see. I know I'm always right.'

She was actually smiling now, terribly reluctantly but she was definitely smiling, and in that unguarded second he pounced, well, not pounced, but for the first time he touched her, his fingers picking up a strand of damp blonde hair and tucking it behind her ear. Even though she stood stock still his touch felt like a dam was bursting somewhere inside, rivers of awareness, arousal coursing through her as his free hand took the glass she was clutching and placed it carefully on the hall table.

'Tonight's been...' He paused while he chose his words. 'Unexpectedly pleasant.'

'I'm glad I didn't bore you.'

'Far from it.' He frowned quizzically at her. 'Can I ask you something?'

'Why bother checking?' Lily gave a rueful smile, but it covered a nervous swallow. She somehow sensed what was coming next, almost knew what he was going to ask her. 'Why would a pretty little thing like you give up on the pot of gold?'

'I don't understand.'

'Oh, but I think you do!' He was pinning her with his eyes as he voiced a question most would never have dared. 'How did someone as young and as beautiful as you get so cynical?'

'Cynical.' Lily smiled and frowned at the same time—cynical was the last word that she'd use to describe herself. She adored her life, her family, her friends, was happy, motivated and truly believed that the world and the opportunities it offered were there for the taking.

'Yep, cynical,' Hunter insisted. 'All this talk about not believing in love—maybe you shouldn't knock it till you try it.'

'I tried it once and didn't like it.' She threw his own words back at him but despite her best attempts Lily's dismissive voice couldn't disguise the pain that was there.

'What happened?'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

'For someone who makes a living getting people to open up, you're incredibly reluctant to share.'

'There's not much to tell.'

'Try me.'

Her eyes jerked to his, saw the challenge that was there and met it head on. 'OK, then. I was engaged for two years—we were actually going to bring forward the wedding in the hope my father would be able to come.'

'But?' Hunter asked because clearly there was one.

'My father took a sudden turn for the worse—and two days before he died I found Mark, my wonderful fiancé, in bed with my supposed best friend. There—is that enough information for you?'

He didn't respond to her sarcasm and again he offered no sympathy, didn't even acknowledge her pain, just fired another direct question. 'So you ended it?'

'No.' She watched his eyes narrow at her response. 'I was too busy dealing with my mother, the hospital. There was just so much going on...' Her voice wobbled a touch and Hunter jumped in.

'You didn't even confront him?'

‘Nope...’ Her eyes glittered with unshed tears. ‘I just put it in the too-hard basket. The last thing Mum needed was more upset—she was really close to Mark, and for all the world Mark was the perfect fiancé when my father died. You should have seen him take over, calling relatives, arranging the funeral, even holding my hand through the service. I can still hear everyone telling me how lucky I was to have him—in fact, if I hadn’t seen it with my own two eyes, I’d never have believed he could be unfaithful. I’d probably be married to him now if I hadn’t found out—still be living in a fool’s paradise.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘With Janey—my one-time best friend. Apparently, as Mark likes to tell it, I was a bit depressed after my father died and froze him out—they still insist that nothing happened for months after we broke up.’

‘You’re better off without them.’ Hunter shrugged, not remotely moved by her story. ‘But one swallow doesn’t make a summer.’

‘Sorry?’

‘So, your ex was a bastard—hardly enough to judge an entire species by.’

‘It was enough at the time,’ Lily countered, but two spots of colour were burning on her cheeks, his scrutiny unnerving as he refused to accept her sorry tale.

‘Come on, Lily, you’re a sensible girl—relationships end for far less—you probably were a right old misery to be with at the time. Now, I’m not saying he was right to do what he did, but I’m sure you can see where the relationship started to go wrong.’

‘Are you always this sensitive?’

‘Not always.’ Hunter responded to her sarcasm with a brand of his own. ‘But given we’ve only just met, I didn’t want to be too harsh.’ He stopped teasing then, his eyes assessing her for the longest moment, his voice serious when finally it came. ‘What else happened to you, Lily?’

‘Nothing!’ She answered him too quickly, her voice a touch too shrill, and if she’d been strapped to a lie detector it would have blown a fuse at her pathetic attempt at denial. ‘Isn’t that enough to be going on with?’

He stared at her through narrowed eyes and Lily dragged hers away, his scrutiny unnerving, as if somehow he could see deep inside her. But just when she thought he’d push harder, just when she was on the verge of maybe even telling, thankfully, regretfully even, he pulled away. ‘For now,’ Hunter said, pulling his car keys out of his pocket, and turned to go. ‘Thanks again for the coffee.’ He smothered a yawn as he walked out of the door and no doubt out of her life. Lily was gripped with something akin to sadness, biting down on her lip she fought the impulse to call him back, not realising that Hunter was battling with demons of his own.

He didn’t want to go home.

Didn’t want to ring Emma and tell her about his evening—didn’t want a night rattling around his apartment on his own. But more than that, he didn’t actually want to leave Lily.

And it wasn’t just because she was gorgeous—beautiful women were ten a penny in his world. If it was just sex or company he wanted, he had plenty of willing participants—it was this gorgeous woman that enthralled him.

Drenched, miserable and exhausted, she’d still given him her time—and unlike so many others she expected nothing from him.

Nothing!

Jangling his key on his index finger, heading for his car and a music-fuelled ride home, something stilled him.

Something he couldn’t define made him pause and turn around.

‘I really am fine to drive...’ Very slowly, very deliberately he turned to face her. ‘I’d just rather not.’

Her eyes jerked to his and the lust blazing in them was so blatant there was no question of mixed messages, his meaning utterly, utterly clear. As Lily stared back, transfixed, she begged for reason to descend, for her usually ordered mind to focus, to give an appropriate response to his terribly inappropriate proposal.

She wanted to say yes!

One hand was leaning on the wall behind her as his other smoothed another imaginary lock from her forehead, tracing again the path he had blazed so easily before, infinitely kissable lips literally a breath away, the taste of him an imagined delicacy on her tongue, and lust battled with reason. Surely she'd regret this. To contemplate sleeping with this man was something every woman in his path surely did, but to actually fathom it, to know that for tonight at least all this could be hers, was a conundrum Lily had never in her life envisaged. He was as out of place in her bedroom as he had been at the community centre, a divine prototype that didn't belong in the parameters of her existence. Yet here he was, adoring her with his eyes, lifting the silver lid and tempting her with laden, flambéd plates of passion—the ultimate, most elicit dessert menu thrust in front of her to break her diet. She toyed mentally with the delicacies on offer, knew that a flavor of nectar would surely sour her tastebuds for ever, that to taste him now could only render any future offerings lacking.

But she wanted this.

Wanted to taste him, to feel him, wanted that moment on her lips to spend a lifetime in her memory...

The brush of his mouth on hers almost made her faint, her flesh swelling with ripeness as he graced her with his presence, a tiny shocked gasp as instead of a kiss, first he licked her, his tongue tracing the Cupid's bow of her lips, then bit her lower lip, and if it had been anyone else she'd have recoiled, but not with Hunter, it was the single most erotic thing she had ever experienced in her life—and it wasn't transitory, tasting her, circling her lips, till he had to stop, till he had to end this delicious torment with a kiss...only he didn't. Instead, he gently bit into her lower lip, sucking her till she was swollen, till her body was writhing with want, yet his hand was still leaning lazily on the wall behind her as he urged her body closer with sheer magnetism.

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