

The Sicilian's Baby Bargain
Penny Jordan



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PENNY JORDAN

The Sicilian's Baby Bargain

Аннотация

Claimed by the most powerful man in Sicily! Annie has only her baby... But the most precious part of her life is now at risk! Falcon Leopardi has come to claim his late half-brother's child – and no one refuses the dark-hearted tycoon! But back in Sicily family duty wars with justice. Annie and her baby are caught in the midst of a dynastic battle. The magnificent Falcon will protect Annie with the kind of searing passion only the most powerful of Sicilians can bestow... The women of the sultry island will mourn: Falcon Leopardi is taking a wife! The Leopardi Brothers Sicilian by name. . . Scandalous, scorching and seductive by nature!

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‘Falcon.’

Annie could hear the relief in her own voice as she half ran and half stumbled across the room, all but flinging herself into Falcon’s arms, but she simply didn’t care.

‘They’re trying to take him from me. They’re trying to say that I’m a bad mother.’

‘The child is a Leopardi,’ she could hear the old Prince insisting. ‘His place is here with—’

‘With me.’ Falcon stopped his father in mid-rant. ‘And that is exactly where Oliver will be from now on. With me and with his mother, since she has agreed to be my wife. I shall be formally adopting him as my son.’

Falcon’s arm was round her, supporting her, tightening in warning as she made a small, shocked sound of protest.

‘And I should warn you that there is no law in this land or any other that will remove from me the right to be the guardian of my stepson, a child of my own blood, and the protector of both him and his mother.’

THE LEOPARDI BROTHERS

Sicilian by name... Scandalous, scorching and seductive by nature!

Three darkly handsome Leopardi men believe it is their duty to hunt down their missing heir—as Sicilians, as sons, as brothers!

Falcon has found the child, and he has found its mother...

but he has also discovered the dark secrets of his late half-brother.

'There is something I have to say to you,' Falcon told Annie. 'Your right to your sexuality has been stolen from you by a member of my sex, and the damage that has been done has been compounded by a member of my family. As a Leopardi, and the eldest of my brothers, I have a duty to make recompense to you and to restore to you what has been taken away. That is the law of the Leopardi family, and the code by which we live.'

In November look out for Penny Jordan's new Modern™ Romance just in time for Christmas!

Penny Jordan has been writing for more than twenty years and has an outstanding record: over 170 novels published, including the phenomenally successful A PERFECT FAMILY, TO LOVE, HONOUR AND BETRAY, THE PERFECT SINNER and POWER PLAY, which hit the *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* bestseller lists. Penny Jordan was born in Preston, Lancashire, and now lives in rural Cheshire.

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THE SICILIAN'S BABY BARGAIN

BY

PENNY JORDAN



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PROLOGUE

FALCON LEOPARDI grimaced in distaste. This was supposed to be a memorial gathering to mark what would have been the birthday of his late half-brother Antonio. It was their father's idea, and one that strictly speaking Falcon did not approve of—especially not an excuse to get drunk. But then the majority of Antonio's so-called friends obviously shared his late half-brother's love of over-indulgence just as they had shared his love of a louche lifestyle.

One of them was breathing alcoholic fumes over Falcon now, as he leaned drunkenly towards him confidingly and spoke to him.

‘Did Tonio ever tell you about that woman whose drink he spiked in Cannes last year? He swore to us all that he'd get his revenge on her for turning him down, and he did that, all right. Last I heard she was trying to claim that he'd fathered the brat she was carrying.’

Falcon, who had been about to move away in disgusted irritation, turned back to look at the unpleasant specimen of manhood now reeling unsteadily in front of him.

‘I seem to remember him mentioning something or other about the situation,’ he lied. ‘But why don't you refresh my memory?’

The drunk was more than happy to oblige.

'We'd seen her at Nikki Beach. She wasn't joining in the fun like the other girls there, even though she was with one of the film outfits. Always turned up in a blouse and skirt, looking like a schoolteacher. Antonio soaked the shirt with champagne for a joke, trying to get her to lighten up, but she wasn't having any of it. Really got his back up, she did—the way she treated him. Rejecting him like she was something special. He told us all he was going to have his revenge on her, and he certainly did that. He found out where she was staying, then he bribed one of the waiters to slip something into her drink. Knocked her out flat. It took three of us to get her back to her room. Of course Antonio swore us to secrecy, threatened us with a whole lot of bad stuff if what he'd done ever got out. 'Course, me telling you now is different, 'cos he's dead and you're his brother.' He hiccupped and then belched, before continuing. 'Tonio made us keep guard outside. He told us afterwards that she was so tight she must have been a virgin.'

The man's expression began to alter and his manner changed from one of swaggering confidence to something far more sheepish as Falcon's cold silence penetrated his drink-befuddled state, bringing home to him the true shameful reality of the horrific tale he was relating. 'Not that Tonio got away with it,' he rushed to reassure Falcon. 'He told me that her brother came after him, saying that he'd got her pregnant. But that there was no way he was going to do as she wanted and provide for the kid she was carrying.'

Falcon hadn't said a word whilst his late brother's friend had been speaking. He found it easy, though, to accept his late half-brother's role in the nasty, sordid little incident the other man had described to him. It was typical of Antonio, and underlined—if any underlining had been necessary—exactly why Falcon and his two younger brothers had so disliked their half-brother during his short life and had not mourned his passing.

‘What was her name? Can you remember?’ he asked the drunk now.

The other man shook his head, and then frowned in concentration, before telling Falcon, ‘Think it might have been Anna or Annie—something like that. She was English—I know that.’

As though Falcon's cold contempt chilled him, the drunk shivered and then staggered away. No doubt keen to find himself another drink, Falcon reflected as he looked across to where his two brothers and their wives were seated with his father.

Their father, the Prince, had worshipped and spoiled his youngest son, the only child he had had with the woman who had been his mistress during his marriage to the mother of his elder three sons' mother—his wife once she was dead.

He had claimed, after Antonio's death in a car accident, that Antonio's last words to him had been to say that he had a child—conceived whilst Antonio was in Cannes—and he had demanded that this child be found.

Falcon had believed that he had left no stone unturned trying

to do this—without any success—but now realised that he had overlooked the fact that his brother had lived his life among the slimy waste of humanity that was expert at scuttling away from the too-bright light of overturned stones.

He knew what he had to do now, of course. The only question was whether or not he told his brothers before or after he found the woman his half-brother had drugged, raped and impregnated with his child—because find her he most certainly would. Even if he had to turn the whole world upside down to do so. His honour and his duty to the Leopardi name would accept nothing less. On balance, telling them first would be easier....

CHAPTER ONE

ANNIE rubbed her eyes. Well shaped and an intense shade of almost violet-blue, with thick long eyelashes, they were eyes any woman could be proud of—if they hadn't been aching with tiredness and feeling as though they were filled with grit. She lifted her hand, its wrist so slender that it looked dangerously fragile, pushing the heavy weight of her shoulder-length, naturally blonde and softly curling hair off her face. Normally she wore it scraped back in a neat knot, but Ollie had grabbed it earlier when she had been giving him his bath, and in the end it had been easier to leave it down. She loved her baby so much. He meant everything to her, and there was nothing she wouldn't do to protect him and keep him safe. Nothing.

She had been reading all evening. Part-time freelance research work didn't pay very well—certainly not as well as her previous

job, which had been working as a researcher for a novelist turned playwright. Tom had paid her very well indeed, and he and his wife had become good friends. Annie's face clouded. The lighting in her small one-bedroom flat didn't really give off enough light for the demanding work she was doing—even if it was energy-efficient.

Next to her work on the cramped space of the small folding table there was a letter from her stepbrother amongst the post forwarded from her old address. She shivered and looked over her shoulder, almost as though she feared that Colin himself might suddenly materialise out of the ether.

Colin was living in the house that had originally belonged to her father, which should have been hers. He had stolen it from her—just as he had stolen... She flinched, not wanting to think about her stepbrother.

But there were times when she had to do so, for Ollie's safety. Her stepbrother disapproved of the fact that she had kept Ollie, instead of having him put up for adoption as he had wanted her to do. But nothing could make her willingly part with her baby—not even Colin's attempts to make her feel guilty for keeping him. He had insisted, that someone else—a couple—would give him a better life than she could as a single mother. Colin could be very convincing and persuasive when he wanted to be. She had been desperately afraid that he would win others over to his cause.

Sometimes she felt that she would never be able to stop looking over her shoulder, afraid that Colin had tracked them

down and that somehow he would succeed in parting her from her son.

She would never even have told him about her pregnancy, but Susie, the wife of the author she had been working for when ‘it’—her rape by Antonio Leopardi—had happened, had thought she was doing her a favour by writing to him and telling him what had happened. Susie had been thrilled when Colin had offered her a home after Ollie’s birth, and all the support she needed.

Annie had refused his offer, though. She, after all, knew him far better than Susie did. Instead she had stayed in her flat, using the excuse that she wanted Ollie to be born at the local hospital because of its excellent reputation.

Colin had refused to be put off and had insisted on continuing to visit her. Initially he had even pretended that he agreed with her decision to keep her baby once it was born, but that pretence had soon vanished once he’d realised that Antonio Leopardi was not going to respond to Colin’s demand for financial support for his son.

Not that Colin had said anything of this to Susie and Tom, who had been so kind to her.

In the end Annie had begun to feel so desperate and so pressured, afraid that somehow Colin might succeed in forcing her and her baby apart, that a few weeks after Ollie’s birth, whilst Colin had been away in Scotland, sorting out the affairs of an elderly cousin of his father’s who had recently died, she had decided not to renew the lease on her existing flat and to move

away instead, to start a new life for herself and Ollie.

Without telling anyone what she was doing—not even Susie and Tom, who had so obviously been taken in by Colin—she had found herself a new flat and new work, and then she had simply disappeared, leaving strict instructions that her forwarding address must remain confidential. It had been easy enough to do in a big city like London.

That had been five months ago now. But she still didn't feel safe—not one little bit.

She had felt guilty not saying anything to Susie and Tom, but she couldn't afford to take any risks. They didn't know Colin as she did, and they didn't know what he was capable of doing—or how intensely single-minded he could be. She shivered again, remembering how unhappy she had been when their parents had first married, and how she had tried to explain to her mother how apprehensive and ill at ease Colin had made her feel, with his concentrated focus on her, watching everything she did.

He had been away at university then, aged nineteen to her twelve, but after their parents had married—he had decided to change courses, and had ended up living at home and travelling daily to his new university.

Colin had taken a dislike to her best friend Claire, and Annie's mother had suggested to Annie that it might be better if Claire didn't come to the house any more after an incident during which Colin had nearly reversed his father's car into Claire whilst she had been riding her bike.

And now Colin had taken a dislike to Ollie. Annie shivered again.

She had never known her own father. A soldier, from a long line of army men, he had died in an ambush abroad before she had been born. But Annie had been very happy growing up with her mother.

Her father had left them very well provided for—there had been money in his family which had come down to him, and Annie's mother had always told Annie it would ultimately come down to her. But now it was Colin's, because her mother had died before her second husband, meaning that the house had passed into his hands and then into Colin's. The home that should have been hers and Oliver's was denied to them.

Automatically she looked anxiously towards her son's cot. Ollie was fast asleep. Unable to resist the temptation, she got up and went to stand looking down at him. He was so beautiful, so perfect, that sometimes just looking at him filled her with so much awe and love that she felt as though her heart would burst with the pressure of it. He was a good baby, healthy and happy, and so gorgeous—with his head of silky dark curls and his startling blue-grey eyes with thick black lashes—that people constantly stopped to admire him. He was bright too, and full of curiosity about the world around him.

They adored him at the council-run nursery where she had to leave him every weekday whilst she went off to her cleaning job—the only other work she had been able to get without too

many questions being asked. Most of the others on the team of agency cleaners she worked with were foreign—hard working, but reluctant to talk very much about themselves.

Her present life was a world away from the world in which she had grown up and the future she had expected to have. Ollie's childhood, unlike hers, would not be spent in a large comfortable house with its own big garden on the edge of a picturesque Dorset village. The area of the city where they lived was run-down, with large blocks of flats—once she would have been horrified at the thought of living here, but now she welcomed its anonymity and its fellow inhabitants, who neither welcomed questions nor asked them.

Ollie opened his eyes and looked up at her, giving her a beaming smile. Annie felt her insides melt. She loved him so much. What an extraordinary thing mother love was—empowering her to love her son despite the horror of his conception.

She flinched again. She tried never to think about what had happened to her in Cannes. Mercifully she had no memory of her ordeal, thanks to the drug that had been slipped into her drink. Susie, who had found her in her room, still drugged and dazed late in the morning after the night of the rape, had wanted her to go to the police but she had refused—too much in shock and too fearful to trust them to believe her. Susie had been wonderfully kind to her. Annie missed her kindness and her friendship.

Like Colin, Susie had felt that her rapist should be forced at

least to financially support his child, and it had been Susie who had supplied her stepbrother with Antonio's name—something Annie herself had refused to do.

Annie hadn't been surprised when Antonio had refused to do anything, and she had felt relieved when she had read in the papers about Antonio's death. Now there would never be any need for Ollie to have to learn about his father or how he had been conceived. Unless Colin found them.

Her stomach clenched. He couldn't. He mustn't. And she mustn't think about him doing so just in case somehow her thoughts enabled it to happen.

She thought of herself as a logical, realistic sort of person, well aware of the harsh reality of life, but sometimes at times like this, when she felt so dreadfully alone, she wished that there were such a thing as fairy godmothers who, with one wave of a magical wand, could somehow transport her and Ollie to a place where they could be together and safe, where Colin simply couldn't reach them.

If she believed in fairy godmothers, guardian angels and wishes then that would be her wish—but of course she didn't. And wishes couldn't come true just because one wished them.

The foyer of the five-star hotel was empty of any of its wealthy guests as Annie got down on her hands and knees to remove a piece of trodden-down chewing gum from the marble floor. Her shift was actually over, but the receptionist—who seemed to have taken a dislike to her—had insisted that she pick up the litter

dropped, Annie was sure quite deliberately, by the woman who had walked through the lobby a few minutes earlier. Her high heels had clacked on the marble floor, and her look of contempt for Annie had been all too plain as she'd smoothed down the skirt of her no-doubt expensive outfit and then dropped the chewing gum on the floor.

The sun was shining outside, its brilliant rays getting in Annie's eyes and dazzling her. She blinked, raising her head in an attempt to avoid the too-bright light.

Falcon wasn't in a very good mood. He had flown into London earlier in the week and had gone straight to a meeting with the head of what was supposed to be the country's best missing person tracking agency, only to be told that whilst the agency had initially managed to identify Annie Johnson as the mother of Antonio's child, she had disappeared five months ago, taking her baby with her, and they had not as yet managed to find her.

Falcon had spent a fruitless afternoon with Annie's stepbrother, to whom he had taken an instant dislike, and now he had received a message from his youngest brother Rocco, telling him that their father's health had suffered a sudden decline.

'He's stable now, and back at the *castello*.' Rocco had told him. 'But the hospital says that he is very frail.'

He needed to be in Sicily, Falcon knew, he had a duty to his family to be there. But he also had a duty to this child conceived so casually by his half-brother, and denied by him as though he was no more than a piece of detritus. Falcon had never liked

Antonio. He hadn't thought it was possible for his contempt for him to increase, but he had been wrong.

As he stepped into the foyer of his hotel, his eyes shielded from the glare of the sun by gold-rimmed discreetly non-logoed Cartier glasses, the first thing he saw was a cleaner, kneeling on the floor beside her bucket of dirty water. She was wearing a body-shrouding, washed-out blue overall and her hair was scraped back from her make-up-free face, but when she lifted her face to avoid the sunlight glaring into her eyes, Falcon's heart turned over inside his chest and his heart started to race.

It was her. There was no mistake. After all, he'd only just left the office where her photograph had been pinned to the file in front of him. There was no mistaking those intensely blue eyes, nor that elegantly boned and beautifully structured face, with its small straight nose and its softly full mouth—even if right now her skin was drained of life and her expression etched in lines of exhaustion.

The hand she'd reached out to remove the flat grey-white pat of chewing gum that someone had left on the otherwise immaculate floor was red and swollen, her wrist thin and fragile, and her scraped back hair was out of sight beneath some sort of protective cover. But it was her. By some miracle, it was her.

The receptionist was still glowering at her, causing Annie to feel a sudden rush of anger. She had worked over her allotted hours, time for which she would not be paid, and the chewing gum wasn't her responsibility. She stood up abruptly—and then

gasped as her action brought her into immediate physical contact with someone. Not just someone, she recognised as male hands came out to grab her, somehow sliding up under the gaping arms of her overall to fasten round her bare skin. His intention was to fend her off, she imagined, rather than save her from stumbling, since such a man was hardly likely to care about the fate of someone like her. He was wearing an expensive suit, his eyes shielded from her inspection by dark-lensed sunglasses, and his hair were dark and his skin tanned.

He was still holding her—waiting for her to apologise for daring to breathe the same air as him, she thought bitterly. She tugged away from him, only to have his grip on her arms tighten. She looked up at him. A discomfiting feeling was running through her body, its source the point of contact between his hands and her skin. Her pulse had started to jump and she was breathing too fast as her heart raced. She felt dizzy, her lungs starved of oxygen as though she had forgotten how to breathe and yet she *was* breathing—although very unsteadily.

Sensations like the mechanics of a long-unused piece of machinery were coming to painful life inside her. She wanted, she discovered in bemused disbelief, to lean into him, to have his arms come fully around her so that she was held against his maleness. A shudder ripped through her, and her body was hot with guilt and shame.

The most extraordinary feeling had Falcon in its grip. He didn't know what it was or where it had come from. The only

comparison that came readily to his mind was a memory of being young and standing on the edge of one of Sicily's most dangerous clifftops in the middle of a fierce storm, feeling the wind buffet him, knowing that it could take him and do what it wished with him. He had both wanted to fight its power and give in to it. What he'd felt was a mixture of awe and exhilaration, an awareness of a great power and a desire to test himself against it. It was a sense of being alive, heightened and stretched taut, of being on the edge of something dangerous and compelling.

The receptionist had left her desk and was coming towards them. Somehow Annie managed to wrench herself free and pick up her bucket so that she could make a speedy exit. She could hear the receptionist apologising as she did so.

CHAPTER TWO

SACKED. She had been sacked because a hotel guest had—shock, horror—had to *touch* her. The hotel receptionist had obviously reported the incident, and a complaint had then been made to the firm that employed her. Her manager had been waiting for her when she had returned with the other workers to the depot, to give her the news. As a part timer she had no comeback. She was now out of a job.

It was supposed to be summer, but the morning's bright sunshine had now gone and it had started to rain. As she stepped out into the street Annie hunched into her raincoat—a good-quality trenchcoat that belonged to her previous life, a life before the death of her mother and the birth of her son.

She was twenty-four years old, she reminded herself. Far too old to cry because she was alone and vulnerable and desperately worried about how she was going to hold everything together without her cleaning job.

The city streets were busy now, and she didn't want to be late collecting Ollie from his nursery. There'd been a notice pinned up in the nursery asking for teachers' assistants at the nearby primary school. Annie would have loved to have applied, but it was too dangerous. They'd check up on her and discover that Antonio's clever lawyers had threatened to sue her for claiming that he'd raped her, saying that in reality she had consented to having sex with him. Her reputation would be ruined. She had no proof that she had been raped. It had been her word against his and she couldn't even remember what had happened. She knew beyond any shadow of a doubt, though, that she would not have consented.

Her stepbrother had been furious when he had received that telephone call from Antonio's solicitors. He had been so sure that Antonio would pay up. She shivered, even though it wasn't cold, and then pinned a forced smile to her face as she climbed the short flight of stone steps that led to the door of the nursery.

The sunny yellow-painted hall walls were decorated with the children's brightly coloured artwork, and Mrs Nkobu, one of the more senior staff, greeted her with a warm smile.

'There's a man waiting to see you. Mrs Ward wasn't for letting him—she told him it was against the rules—but it's plain to see

that he's the kind that doesn't pay attention to anyone's own,' she told Annie she told Annie conspiratorially.

Fear iced down Annie's spine.

Colin had found them.

Strictly speaking the nursery wasn't supposed to allow anyone not authorised by a parent to have access to any of the children, but Annie knew how persuasive Colin could be. Nausea curdled her stomach. He would try to take over her life again. He would say it was in her best interests. He would remind her that their parents had left their assets to him because they trusted him to look after her—even though her mother had told her that the house would come to her, because it had belonged to her father.

She mustn't think about any of that now, she told herself. She would need all her energy and strength to survive the present; she mustn't waste it on the past.

'He's in the carers' room,' Mrs Nkobu informed her, referring to the small fusty room with a glass wall through which parents and guardians could watch the children whilst waiting to collect them.

Annie nodded her head, but instead of going to the carers' room she went to the nursery, busy with other mothers collecting their children. Ollie was sitting on the floor, playing with some toys, and as always when she saw him Annie's heart flooded with love. The minute he saw her he held out his arms to her to be picked up. Only once she was cradling him tightly in her arms did she feel brave enough to look through the glass panels into

the room beyond them.

There was only one person there. He was standing with his back to the glass and he was not Colin. But any relief she might have felt was obliterated by the shock of recognition that arced through her, sending through her exactly the same tingling sensation of deadened sensory nerve-endings awakened into painful life as she had felt earlier in the hotel lobby, when he had held her.

A long-ago memory of herself as a young teenager came back to her. Inside her head she could see herself, giggling with a schoolfriend over a handsome young teenage pop idol they had both had a crush on. She had felt so alive then—so happy, and so unquestioningly secure in her unfolding sexuality. She held Ollie even tighter, causing him to wriggle in her arms at the same moment as the man from the hotel lobby turned round.

He wasn't wearing his sunglasses now, and she could see his eyes.

The breath left her lungs with so much force that it might as well have been driven out by a physical blow. She knew who or rather *what* he was immediately. How could she not when the eyes set in the scimitar-harsh maleness of his face were her son's eyes? That he and Ollie shared the same blood was undeniable—and yet he looked nothing like Ollie's father, the man who had raped her. Antonio Leopardi had had a soft, full-fleshed face, and pebble-hard brown eyes set too close together. He had been only of medium height, and thickset. This man was tall with

broad shoulders, and his body—as she already knew—was hard with muscles, not soft with over-indulgence. He smelled of clean skin, and some cologne so subtle she couldn't put a name to it, not of alcohol and heavy after-shave.

He was clean-shaven, his thick dark hair groomed, whereas Antonio had favoured stubble and his hair thickly gelled.

Everything about this man said that he set the highest of standards for himself even more than for others. This man's word, once given, would be given for all time.

Everything about Antonio had said that he was not to be trusted, but despite their differences this man had to be related to her abuser. Ollie was the proof of that.

She wanted to turn and run, fear tumbling through her as she felt her defences as weak as a house of cards; but her fear was not fear of the man because he was a man, Annie had time to recognize. It was a different fear from the one that lay inside her like a heavy stone. Instinctively she knew that this man was no threat to *her*, and that *she* was in no danger from him. His focus wasn't on her. It was on her son—on Ollie.

Her mouth had gone dry and her heart was pounding recklessly, using up her strength. There was no escape for her. She knew that. Still she tried to delay the inevitable, her hands trembling as she strapped Ollie into his buggy and then reluctantly pushed it to the door.

He was waiting for her in the corridor, one strong, lean brown hand reaching for the buggy, forcing her to move her own hand

or risk having him close his hand over her own.

Falcon frowned as he registered her reaction to him. Was her recoil part of the legacy Antonio had left her? He had been struck when he had seen her earlier by her vulnerability, and by his unfamiliar desire to reassure her. Now that feeling had returned.

Falcon wasn't used to experiencing such strong feelings for anyone outside his immediate family. He had never denied to himself his protective love for his two younger brothers, nor his belief that, as their elder, in the absence of their father's love and their mother's presence in their lives, it was his responsibility to protect and nurture them.

He had grown up shouldering that responsibility, but he had never before felt that fierce tug of emotional protectiveness towards anyone else.

It was because of the child, of course. There could be no other reason for his illogical reaction.

It had taken him several hours of impatient telephone calls and pressure to track her down via the agency that had employed her—thanks to that wretched receptionist preventing him from following her at the hotel.

This morning he had felt sorry for her. Now he was motivated solely by his duty to his family name to make amends for what Antonio had done, he assured himself. And of course to ensure that Antonio's son grew up knowing his Leopardi heritage. It had taken him longer than he had wished and a great deal of money to track him down, but now that he had there could be no doubting

that the child was a Leopardi. He had known that the minute he had seen him at the nursery. The boy's blood was stamped into his features, and Falcon had seen from the woman's expression when she had looked at him that she knew that too.

They were outside now, with no one to overhear them.

'Who are you?' Annie demanded unsteadily. 'And what do you want?'

'I am Falcon Leopardi, the eldest of Antonio's half-brothers from our father's first marriage.'

Colin had mentioned Antonio's family to her—or rather he had tried to. But she had refused to listen. Antonio had, after all, refused to acknowledge his son.

'You are Antonio's *brother*?'

The tone of her voice betrayed disbelief, and Falcon detected a deeper core of something that sounded like revulsion. He could hardly blame her for that. In fact, he shared her revulsion.

'No,' he corrected her grimly. 'We were only half-brothers.'

How well she understood that need to differentiate and distance oneself from a supposed sibling. But how ridiculous of her to allow herself to imagine that she and this man could have anything in common, could share that deep-rooted antipathy and guilt that had been so much a part of her growing up.

Even now she could still hear her mother saying plaintively, almost pleadingly, 'But, darling, Colin is just trying to be friends with you. Why can't you be nicer to him?' She had tried so hard to tell her mother how she had felt, but how could you explain what

you did not understand yourself? In the end it had driven a wedge between them—a gulf on one side of which stood Colin, the good stepchild, and on the other side her, the bad daughter.

Where had she gone? Falcon wondered, watching the shadows seeping pain as they darkened her eyes. Wherever it was it was somewhere in her past, he recognized. The quality of her silence held a message of her helpless inability to change anything.

It was the present and the future that he was here for, though.

She must resent Antonio—more than resent him, he would have thought. Although her love for her child was obvious, and backed up by all the information his enquiry agents had been able to gather. She was an exemplary and devotedly loving mother. Apart from the fact that for some reason she had turned down her stepbrother's offer of a home under his roof. Colin Riley had not been able to furnish him with a logical explanation for that, although he *had* implied that there had been some kind of quarrel which she, despite all his attempts to repair the damage, had refused to make up.

'She's always been inclined to be over-emotional and to overreact,' he had told Falcon. 'All I wanted to do—all I've *ever* wanted to do—is help her.'

'There was no love lost between the three of us and Antonio.'

Falcon's voice, his English perfect and unaccented, brought Annie back out of the past.

'I will not seek to hide that fact from you—nor the fact that Antonio was our father's favourite son. I can also assure you that

Antonio's choice of lifestyle was not ours. It could never have been and was never condoned by us.'

Annie looked at him, and then looked away again, her heart jumping as it always did whenever she had to think about Ollie's conception. Falcon Leopardi was obviously trying to tell her that he and his brothers were not tarred with the same brush as their younger half-brother. His choice of the word '*assure*' suggested that convincing her that his morals were very different from his half-brother was something he was determined to do. But why?' 'As to what I want...'

He paused for so long that Annie looked at him again, hard fingers of uncertainty and unease tightening round her heart when she saw that he was looking at Ollie.

'Before his death,' Falcon continued, 'Antonio told our father that there was a child. But he died before he could give more details. Such was the love our father felt for Antonio that he demanded that this child be traced. When no child could be found we assumed that laying claim to its existence had been another example of Antonio's enjoyment of deceit.'

Falcon paused again. She'd kept her gaze fixed straight ahead of her whilst he was speaking, but he could see from the way her grip had tightened on the buggy how tense she was.

The tale of what had been done to her was one of breathtakingly callous cruelty that would fill any decent person with revulsion. The only merciful aspect of it was that she herself apparently had no recollection of what had occurred. There was

no doubt in Falcon's mind that the rape had been a deliberate act of punishment, intended to humiliate her—not conducted because Antonio had hoped to arouse her to passion and desire for him. That fitted in so well with everything Falcon knew about his half-brother's warped personality.

‘Naturally, when it came to my knowledge that there might after all be a child, I had to find out the truth.’

He had stopped walking now, forcing Annie to do the same.

‘How...how did it come to your knowledge?’ She had to force the words out.

Falcon looked at her. He believed strongly in telling the truth. The truth, after all, was the only worthwhile foundation for anything that was worth having.

‘A friend of Antonio's told me about your drink being spiked, about what he did, and I put two and two together.’

Annie had a childish desire to close her eyes, as though somehow by shutting everything out she could magically make herself disappear. Just to hear him say those words was as searingly humiliating as though she had been stripped naked in the street. Worse, because they ripped away her protection, laying bare her private shame.

‘I know you contacted Antonio to tell him of the birth of his son—’

‘No.’ Annie checked him immediately, her pride reasserting itself. ‘I didn't contact him. I would never—It was my stepbrother who did that. I didn't know about it until...until Colin told me

that Antonio was denying that—that anything had happened.’

Falcon frowned. Was this perhaps the cause of the quarrel between them?

‘Your stepbrother didn’t mention anything about Antonio denying he had fathered your child when I spoke to him. He was most concerned about you, and asked me to keep him informed of any progress I might make in my search for you.’

Annie felt as though her heart had stopped beating.

She turned towards Falcon, imploring him. ‘You haven’t...you haven’t told him where I am, have you?’

Falcon’s frown deepened.

‘He told me that his sole aim is to help and protect you.’

To help and protect *her*, but not Ollie. Colin didn’t want anything to do with her baby, and if he had his way, Ollie would be removed from her life for ever.

How long did she have before Colin found her and started waging his relentless war to make her have Ollie adopted all over again? Panic clawed at her stomach. Everyone had always said how lucky she was to have such a devoted stepbrother, but they didn’t know him as she did.

‘He mustn’t know where we are.’

In her panic she had revealed more than was wise, Annie recognised as she saw the way Falcon Leopardi was watching her. He was waiting for her to elaborate, to give him a logical reason as to why she didn’t want Colin to find them.

‘Colin believes that it would be better if Ollie was adopted,’

she eventually managed to tell him.

Because he had not been able to get Antonio to pay up? Or because he felt it was the best option for the child? Falcon didn't think he needed to spend much time considering the two options. Colin had asked him specifically if there were any assets likely to come to Oliver from Antonio's estate or his family.

'But you don't agree with him?' Falcon asked now.

'No. I could never give him up. *Never*. Nothing and no one could ever make me do so.'

The passion in her expression and her voice changed her completely, bringing her suddenly to life, revealing the true perfection of her delicate beauty.

Falcon felt as though someone had suddenly punched him in the chest, rendering him unable to get his breath properly.

'I agree that a child as young as Oliver needs his mother,' he told her, as soon as he was back in control of himself. 'However, your son is a Leopardi—and as such it is only right and proper that he grows up amongst his own family and his own people in his own country. It is my duty to Oliver and to my family to ensure that he is raised as a Leopardi—and that you, as his mother, are treated as the mother of a Leopardi should be treated. That is why I am here. To take you both back to Sicily with me.'

Annie stared at him. His talk of duty was a world apart from the world she knew. Such a word belonged to another time, a feudal ancient time, and yet somehow it resonated within her.

‘You want to take Ollie and me to Sicily—to live there?’ she asked unsteadily, spacing out the words to clarify them inside her own head and make sure she had not misunderstood him.

His ‘yes’ was terse—like the brief inclination of his head.

‘But you have no proof that Ollie is—’

The look he was giving her caused her to go silent.

‘The evidence of his blood is quite plain to both of us,’ he told her. ‘You have seen it yourself.’ He paused and looked down at the stroller before looking back to her. ‘The child could be mine. He bears the Leopardi stamp quite clearly.’

His! Why did that assertion strike so compellingly into her heart?

‘He doesn’t look anything like Antonio.’ He was all she could manage to say.

‘No,’ Falcon agreed. ‘Antonio took after his mother, which I dare say is why our father loved him so much. He was obsessed by her, and that obsession killed our own mother and destroyed our childhood, depriving us of our father’s love and our mother’s presence. That will not happen to your child. In Sicily he will have you—his mother—the love and protection of his uncles, and the companionship of his cousins. He will be a Leopardi.’

He made it all sound so simple and so...so right. But she knew nothing of him or his family other than that he had taken the trouble to track them down because he wanted Ollie.

How could she trust him—a stranger?

As though Falcon sensed her anxiety, he asked, ‘You love your

son, don't you?"

'Of course I do.'

'Then you must surely want what is best for him?'

'Yes,' Annie agreed helplessly.

'You will agree, I think, that he will have a far better life growing up in Sicily as a Leopardi than he could have here?'

'With a mother who works as a cleaner, you mean?' Annie challenged him.

'I am not the one who makes the rules of economics that say a financially disadvantaged child will suffer a great deal of hardship in his life. And besides, it is not just a matter of money—although of course that is important. You are alone in the world—you no longer have any contact with your stepbrother; you are all the family Oliver has. That is not healthy for a child, and it has been proven that is especially not healthy for a boy child to have only his mother. In Sicily, Oliver will have a proper family. If you love him as much as you claim, then for his sake you will be willing to come to Sicily. What, after all, is there to keep you here?'

If his last question was brutal it was also truthful, Annie admitted. There was *nothing* to keep her here—except of course that you did not go off to a foreign country with a man you did not know. You especially did not do so when you had a six-month-old beloved child to protect.

But in Sicily there would no Colin to fear. No dread of waking up to find her stepbrother leaning over Oliver's cot with that fixed

look on his face, as she had once found him when he had visited her shortly after Ollie's birth.

Something—she didn't know what, other than that it was some deep core instinct—told her that in Falcon Leopardi's hands her precious son would be safe, and that those hands would hold him surely and protectively against all danger.

But what about her? What about the disquieting, unwanted, dangerous reaction she sensed within herself to him as a woman to his man? Panic seized her but she fought it down. It was Ollie she had to think of now, not herself. His needs and not hers. Falcon Leopardi was right to say that Ollie would have a far better life in Sicily as a Leopardi than he ever could here in London alone with her. When she added into that existing equation the potential threat of her stepbrother there was only one decision she could take, wasn't there?

As she struggled to come to terms with what the surrender of herself and her son into Falcon's care would mean, she reminded herself that only this morning she had laughed at herself for wishing for the impossible—for the magical waving of a wand to transport her somewhere she and Ollie could be safe.

That impossible had now happened, and she must, *must* seize the opportunity—for her son's sake. For Ollie. Nothing mattered more to her than her baby.

A strange dizzying sensation had filled her, making her feel giddy and weightless, as though she might almost float above the pavement. It took her several seconds to recognise that the

feeling was one of relief at the removal of a heavy weight.

People would think she was crazy, going off with a man she didn't know, trusting her son to him. If she confided in Susie and Tom, who had been so kind in drumming up research work for her among Tom's writing friends while she was pregnant, they would ask questions and warn her to be careful. Susie would remind her of Colin's offer and look reproachfully at her. Susie had never understood why she hadn't accepted Colin's offer of a home. She had thought him kind and concerned. She had agreed with him about the benefits of having Ollie adopted.

How desperately she regretted letting slip to Susie in a moment of weakness that she had a stepbrother, and then letting Susie coax his name and address out of her. Susie had meant well when she had contacted him behind her back, believing that she was doing the right thing, and Colin had behaved in an exemplary fashion—playing the role of caring stepbrother to the hilt during her pregnancy, taking charge of everything.

'What happens if I refuse?' Annie asked now.

Falcon had been expecting her question.

'If you refuse, then I shall pursue my rights as Oliver's blood relative through the courts.'

He meant it, Annie recognised.

'You're asking me to accept a great deal on trust,' she pointed out. 'I have no reason to trust your family and every reason not to do so.'

'Antonio was never a true Leopardi. By his behaviour he

dishonoured himself and our name, just as he dishonoured you. It is my duty to put right that wrong. You have my word that you will come to no harm whilst you are under my protection—from anyone or anything.’

Feudal words to match his feudal mindset, Annie thought, more affected by what he had said than she wanted to admit. He was offering her something she already knew she craved: respite and safety. What option did she have other than to take them when they were offered?

She sucked in a steadying breath, and then asked as calmly as she could, ‘When would we have to leave?’

She had given in far more easily than Falcon had expected. Was that a reason for him to feel suspicious of her? Suspicious? No. After all, he knew all there was to know about her. But curious? Perhaps, yes.

‘Soon,’ he answered her. ‘The sooner the better. My father isn’t well. In fact, he is very frail, and it is his greatest wish to see Antonio’s child.’

‘There are things I shall need to do,’ Annie began.

The reality of what she had committed to—not just herself but more importantly Oliver too—was only just beginning to sink in. But she could tell from Falcon Leopardi’s expression that he would not allow her to have any second thoughts.

‘Such as?’ he questioned, confirming her thoughts.

‘I shall have to notify Ollie’s nursery—and the council. And I’ll need to check to see if Ollie needs any special injections for

Sicily.'

'He doesn't. And as for the nursery and your flat, you can safely leave all that to me. You will, however, both need clothes suitable for a hot climate. It is high summer in Sicily now.'

New clothes? How on earth was she going to afford those?

Humiliatingly, as though he had guessed what she was thinking, Falcon continued smoothly, 'Naturally I shall cover the cost of whatever is needed.'

'We aren't charity cases.' Humiliation made Annie snap. 'I'm not letting you buy our clothes.'

'No? Then I shall have to telephone ahead to one of my sisters-in-law and ask them to provide a suitable wardrobe for you both. They are both English, by the way, so I expect you will find you have a great deal in common with them. My youngest brother Rocco and his wife already have one adopted child—a boy the same age as Oliver.'

His brothers had English wives? She would have other female company? A little of Annie's anxiety receded—only to return as she wondered how his brothers' wives would react to her.

'Do you all live together?' she asked uncertainly. She had only the haziest knowledge of Italian family life—and none at all of aristocratic Sicilian family life.

'Yes and no. Rocco has his own home on the island, whilst Alessandro and I both have our own apartments within the Leopardi *castello*, where my father also lives. A suite of rooms will be made ready for your occupation.'

‘Mine and Ollie’s?’ Annie checked.

‘Of course. His place is with you. I have already said so. Now —’ Falcon flicked back his cuff to look at his watch ‘—we shall meet tomorrow morning in order to do necessary shopping. I shall call for you both at your flat and then with any luck we should be ready to leave for Sicily tomorrow evening. I shall request Alessandro to have a private jet made ready for us. As for all the necessary paperwork with regard to your life here, as I said, you may safely leave all of that to me.’

‘And you won’t tell Colin that you’ve found me?’

She hadn’t meant to ask, and she certainly hadn’t meant to sound so pathetically and desperately in need of reassurance, but it was too late to wish the plea unspoken now. Falcon was looking at her, searching her face as though seeking confirmation of something? Of what? Her fear of Colin?

‘No, I won’t tell him,’ Falcon confirmed. She was afraid of her stepbrother. He had guessed it already, but her reaction now had confirmed his suspicion. But why?

‘If he finds me, he’ll only try to persuade me to give Ollie up for adoption.’ Annie felt obliged to defend her plea.

Falcon nodded his head and repeated, ‘I won’t tell him.’

It was well into the early hours when Annie woke abruptly out of an uneasy sleep, her heart thudding too fast and her senses alert, probing the darkness of the unlit room for the source of the danger that had infiltrated her sleep. Outside in the London street beyond the flat a motorbike backfired, bringing a juddering

physical relief to her tensed nerve endings.

She looked towards the cot where Ollie lay sleeping, and prayed that she had done the right thing in agreeing to go to Sicily—that she hadn't exchanged one form of imprisonment for another. As long as Ollie was safe that was all that mattered. Nothing else. *Nothing*.

CHAPTER THREE

TRUE to his word, Falcon Leopardi had arrived at the flat early in the morning to collect her and Ollie in the chauffeur-driven car he had hired. He had taken them to Harvey Nichols, where they had spent over an hour and more money than Annie liked to think about equipping Ollie with suitable clothes and a large amount of baby equipment for his new life.

Now, surveying what looked like a positive mountain of small garments, Annie felt guilty. She had been enjoying herself so much, choosing everything for him.

'I'm sorry.' She apologised to Falcon. 'I've chosen far too much, and it's all so expensive. Perhaps we should think again?'

'I shall be the judge of what is and is not expensive—and we don't have time for second thoughts. You still have your own wardrobe to attend to—although, I imagine that is something you can do far more comfortably without my presence.'

He pushed back the cuff of his suit jacket—a habit of his, Annie had noticed. In a different suit this morning, in a light tan that looked very continental, he had had all the super-thin and super-pretty salesgirls turning their heads to look at him.

‘I’ve booked a personal shopper for you, so I’ll leave you to it and come back in an hour.’

Annie nodded her head. He was leaving her to her own devices because he had other things to do—not because somehow or other he had known how on edge the thought of him standing over her whilst she selected hot weather clothes had made her. She mustn’t start elevating him to the status of something approaching a mind-reading saint. But she did feel more comfortable knowing that he wouldn’t be standing there, silently assessing her choices, ready to point out all the reasons why it wasn’t suitable.

As a little girl she had loved pretty clothes and going shopping with her mother, just the two of them, but all that had changed once her mother had remarried. Colin had complained that she wasn’t giving their new extended family a chance to work when she told her mother that she didn’t like shopping with her stepfather and Colin in tow. He had always had the knack of knowing when she had complained to her mother about him—and the knack of making sure she regretted doing so.

The personal shopping suite was a revelation to someone who couldn’t even remember the last time she had shopped for clothes for herself. To her relief Ollie, who had earlier been torn between enchantment and excitement, surrounded by all the toys in the babywear department, had now fallen asleep in his buggy.

Her personal shopper looked as though she was around her own age, although she was wearing clothes far more fashionable

and body-hugging than Annie would ever have felt comfortable wearing.

‘I’ll measure you first,’ she announced, after she had introduced herself as Lissa.

‘I’ve always been a size twelve,’ Annie told her, causing the elegantly arched eyebrows to arch even further.

‘Different designers have differing ideas of what a specific size is, which is why we prefer to take proper measurements,’ Lissa informed her with a soothing smile. ‘And as for you being a size twelve—I’d bet on you being closer to a size eight. A ten at the very most. We find a lot of customers experience a change in their body weight and shape post-baby—although not many of them actually drop a size without working at it. Have you any specific designers or style in mind?’

‘No. That is, we’re going to be living in Sicily, so I shall want clothes suitable for a hot climate—but nothing too expensive, please. I prefer simple, plain things.’

‘Daywear and evening things? Will you be entertaining? What kind of social life—?’

‘Oh, no—nothing like that,’ Annie interrupted her quickly. ‘No. I’ll be spending all my time with my son. Just very plain day things.’ It was hard to sound as firm as she would have liked to with Lissa encircling various bits of her body with the tape measure.

‘Just as I thought,’ the other woman declared triumphantly once she had finished. ‘You are an eight. Now, if you’d like

to help yourself to a cup of coffee—’ she gestured towards the coffee machine on the table ‘—and then get undressed and put on a robe, I shall go and collect some clothes. I shan’t be long.’

She wasn’t, soon returning accompanied by two other girls and a rail packed with clothes.

Two hours later Annie felt like a small and very irritating child. Even worse, she was humiliatingly close to tears. Lissa was very much out of patience with her, she could tell.

She was back in her below-the-knee A-line denim skirt, under which her cheap tights shone in the overhead lights. The skirt was worn with a short-sleeved cotton blouse that she had bought in the latter stages of her pregnancy, which covered her from neck to hip. She felt hot and uncomfortable, and she was longing to escape from the store and from Lissa’s obvious irritation.

‘I’m sorry,’ she apologised miserably, for what felt like the umpteenth time, ‘but I just couldn’t wear any of them.’

She had, she recognised, lost Lissa’s attention—and the reason for that was because Falcon had just walked into the room.

‘All done?’ he asked, quite plainly expecting that it would be. Annie had to say something.

‘Well, not really...’ she began—only to have Falcon frown.

‘Why not?’ he demanded.

‘It seems that everything is “too revealing”,’ Lissa answered smartly for her, very plainly wanting to voice her sense of irritation and injustice.

Annie couldn’t blame her. The clothes Lissa had shown her

were beautiful—sundresses in perfect colours for her skin, with tiny straps and softly flowing skirts, well-cut narrow-legged Capri pants in white and black and zingy lime, and a shade of blue that almost matched her eyes, strappy tops, sleeveless V-necked dresses... Clothes meant to allow as much sun as possible to touch the skin. Clothes that would catch the male eye. Clothes that women wore when they wanted to attract male attention. In amongst them had been swimsuits and bikinis, wraps, sandals with no heels and high heels, underwear in cotton so fine that it was transparent—everything that any woman could reasonably need for a long sojourn in a hot climate. But Annie had rejected it all. Even the heavenly white sundress with embroidered flowers that had—ridiculously, given its sophistication—reminded her of a dress she had had when she'd been about six years old.

‘Too revealing?’ Falcon looked at the rack of clothes that the salesgirl was now gesturing to with her hand. He was Italian, and an architect by training and desire. Good lines were important to him, and he couldn't see anything in the clothes he was being shown that in any kind of way merited the description ‘too revealing’.

He turned from the clothes to Annie, his eyebrows snapping together as he studied her appearance in the over-large dull top and the denim skirt, his frown deepening in disbelief as he realised that she was wearing thick-looking tights.

‘The temperature can rise above forty degrees centigrade in Sicily in the summer. You will need clothes that are cool and

loose. It will be impossible for you to continue wearing the kind of clothes you are wearing now.' He turned to the salesgirl and told her firmly, 'We will take everything.'

Everything? All of it? He couldn't mean it. But quite patently he did.

Was this how things were going to be from now on? Was he going to continually tell her what she could and could not do? Automatically she stiffened in rejection of allowing that to happen. Perhaps she had acted too impulsively and in doing so had jumped from the frying pan into the fire? Perhaps...?

'We need go get moving. My brother has arranged for one of his fleet of jets to fly us out to Sicily in four hours' time, so I suggest that we now return to your flat. I have spoken with the council, by the way, and cancelled your tenancy.'

'Cancelled it? But what if I change my mind and I want to bring Ollie back?'

'Back to what? Your stepbrother rang my office this morning, and left a message for me asking if I had managed to trace you as yet.'

Had he told her that deliberately, to put her off insisting that she might want to come back? Was he trying to manipulate her? Had she made a terrible mistake?

How her mood now contrasted with and mocked the gratitude she had felt towards him last night. Why was she such a fool? Her mother had often said that Annie was a bad judge of character. Those had been her words to Annie as she had shaken her head

over a boy from university who had asked her out, and over Rachel, a schoolfriend her mother had said was a bad influence on her. And clearly she had misjudged the extent of Antonio's malice towards her, and what it would lead him to do.

She had made more than enough mistakes, enough bad judgements, and had paid the price for doing so. She wasn't going to let Falcon Leopardi browbeat her into making yet another mistake.

She lifted her chin and challenged him. 'What will you tell him?'

'Nothing. He is your stepbrother, and so it is up to you to decide what you do and do not want him to know.'

His answer took the wind out of her sails, completely deflating the hard bubble of anger inside her and leaving her feeling foolish.

'I'll have you dropped off at your flat, so that you can pack everything that you want. Don't bother about packing any baby stuff. I've phoned Rocco and asked his wife to order everything you're likely to need to be ready for you. You'll need your passport, of course. I don't expect you have one for Oliver, so I've arranged for the British passport office to get one rushed through. They'll need a photograph, needless to say, so we'll get that done now, and we can go before I drop you off.'

Falcon had thought of everything, Annie admitted tiredly later, when the chauffeur-driven Mercedes limousine came to a halt on the runway, only a matter of yards from where a sleek jet

was waiting for them.

The last time Annie had flown anywhere had been when she had gone to Cannes with Susie and Tom, in her capacity as Tom's researcher. He had been attending the showing of a film based on one of his books, as well as using the trip to source some background information on his new book, set against the backdrop of the jet set. That was why she had been on Nikki Beach—because Tom had felt that she could get a better insight into a woman's perspective of the scene there than him. She had tried to protest that she wasn't that kind of researcher, and that she preferred working amongst the books of the British Library, but Tom had refused to listen.

He had been devastated after what had happened to her, blaming himself until she had begged him not to do so. Both he and Susie felt that it was for the best that she couldn't remember anything of what had happened after she had swallowed her drugged drink until she had started to come round, when Susie had found her, but Colin didn't share that view. He had pressed her over and over again, insisting that she *must* remember something.

He had never known anyone whose eyes were so extraordinarily expressive when she didn't realise she was being watched, Falcon acknowledged. He could see quite clearly the pain and fear darkening them, and he wondered who or what had caused them.

'Let me take Oliver for you,' he offered, reaching for the now

awake baby as the chauffeur opened the car door.

Immediately Annie recoiled, holding her baby tightly.

‘I can manage, thank you,’ she said, stiff and uncompromising.

She was very protective of her child, Falcon admitted, and told her dryly, ‘I *am* his uncle.’

‘And I am his mother,’ Annie pointed out, quickly and defensively.

‘You will find that in Italian families it is expected that babies are passed around amongst the relatives, so that everyone in the family can share in the joy of having them there,’ Falcon informed her calmly.

Stupidly, his words made her eyes sting with emotional tears. There was nothing she wanted more for Ollie than a large and loving family who would take him to their hearts and accept him and love him. And her with him?

The chauffeur helped her out of the car, and a uniformed steward came forward from the plane to greet them, followed by the pilot. Neither of them seemed curious about her. Too well trained, Annie decided. They were probably used to Falcon Leopardi boarding private jets with a woman in tow. But not a woman like her, Annie thought, uncomfortably aware of her shortcomings. Falcon’s women would be *soignée* and confident. They would wear designer clothes that showed off the sensuality of their bodies. They would definitely not be dressed as she was, nor holding his disliked late half-brother’s child.

What was she doing, comparing herself to them? The type

of woman Falcon dated and Annie Johnson were worlds apart—so very many worlds apart. Suddenly out of nowhere she felt a sharp stab of almost physical pain for all that she had lost, all that was denied to her. It was so intense that it almost made her cry out loud. *Was there a woman in his life? A special woman? A woman who he planned would ultimately bear his children?* The pain intensified, seizing her in its claws and mauling her so badly that she almost cried out.

What was the matter with her? She had everything she wanted. The sexuality and happiness of some unknown woman meant nothing to her. Her life was what it was. It was for Ollie's sake and not her own that she had even felt what she had, she defended herself. Because he would never know what it was to be the child of two people who had created him out of their love for one another, who were there with him to show him that love. She knew what it was like to grow up without a father, and she hated knowing that Ollie would suffer that same loss.

'Let me take him now.' Falcon reached for Ollie, taking from her before she could stop him, and leaving her no option other than to allow the steward to guide her up the steps and into the plane.

She tried not to be impressed, but it wasn't easy. She had never imagined that the interior of a plane could be like this—furnished more like a sitting room than the kind of aircraft interior with which she was familiar.

Falcon had followed her into the plane, and was pointing out

to her the sky cot that had been prepared for Ollie. The baby was wide-awake now, and gazing round in wide-eyed delight.

He really was the most beautiful baby, Annie thought on a wave of love. She had dressed him in one of his new outfits—little chinos, with a blue and green checked shirt and a V-necked pullover, matching socks encasing his small baby feet. He looked adorable, and she suspected he knew it. She, on the other hand, was still wearing her dull top and her denim skirt—although she had put on her trenchcoat, as well, even though the early evening was mild and dry.

Oh, yes, his new family were bound to love Ollie she decided after the steward had discreetly shown her how to fasten herself into her armchair-like seat and they had begun to take off.

They would love *him* but how would they feel about *her*? How much did they know about her?

She was worrying about something, Falcon thought as he watched the now familiar darkening of her eyes. Although obviously it wasn't her appearance. He had never known a woman less concerned about how she looked. Antonio's drunken friend had mentioned her buttoned-up appearance, but Falcon hadn't paid much attention to his description until now. What made a young and potentially very attractive woman dress in such a way?

The seatbelts sign went off and Falcon unfastened his. What did it matter what motivated her to dress the way she did? It was her child who was his concern, and the duty he owed was to him. But what about the duty he owed *her*, being the brother of the

man who had abused her?

Annie couldn't contain her anxiety any longer. Her fingers trembled as she unfastened her seatbelt and leaned towards Falcon Leopardi.

'Your brothers and their wives—what...what do they know about me?' she asked, her body tense with her anxiety.

'They know that you are Oliver's mother and that he is a Leopardi,' he answered her.

Colour now stained her skin, but she ignored it, pressing him determinedly, 'Do they know how I came to have Oliver? Do they know...?'

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