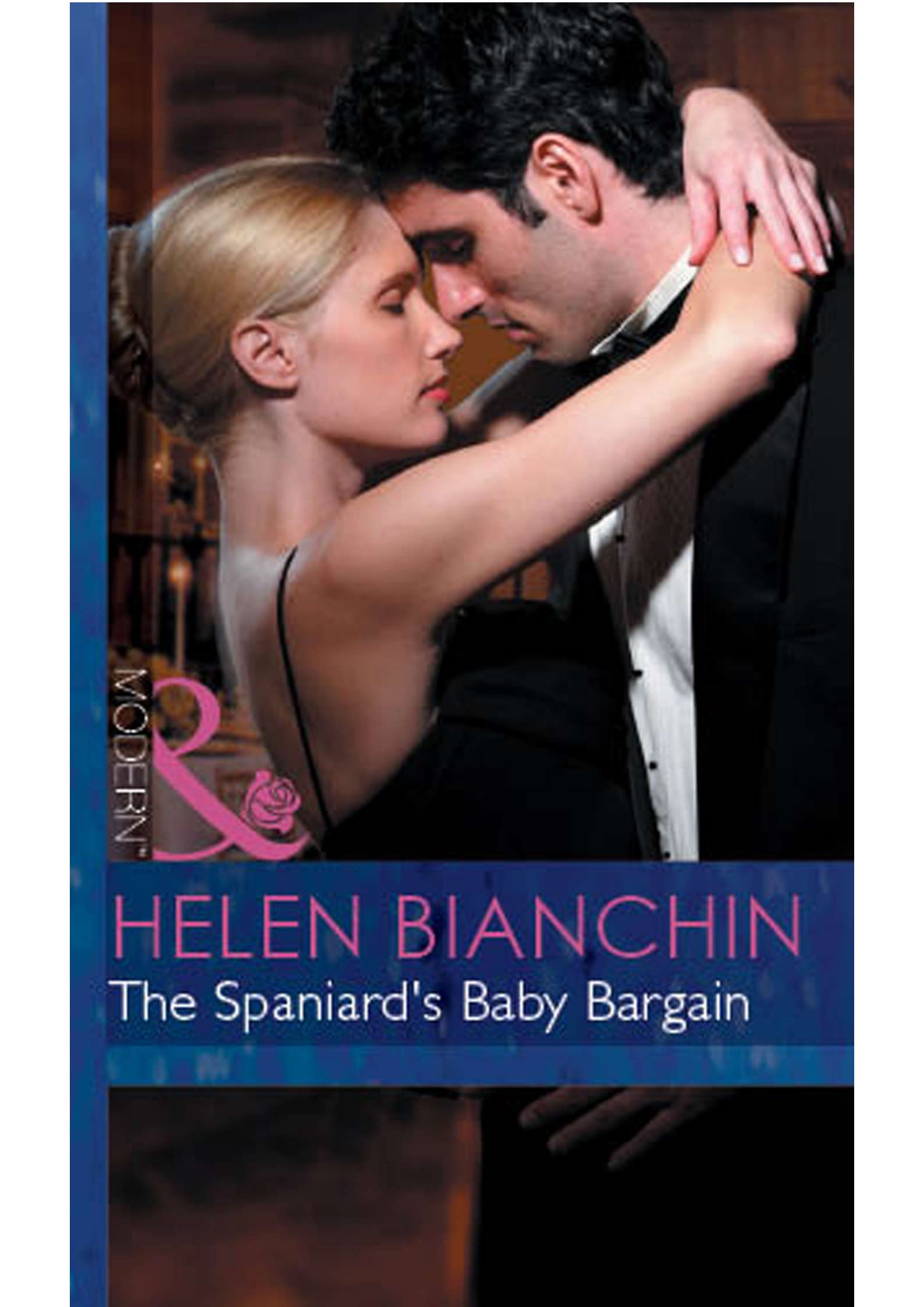


A romantic couple in formal wear. The woman, with blonde hair in a bun, is wearing a black dress and has her arm around the man's shoulder. The man, with dark hair, is wearing a white shirt and a dark jacket. They are looking at each other in a close embrace. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting an indoor setting with warm lighting.

MODERN™

HELEN BIANCHIN

The Spaniard's Baby Bargain

HELEN BIANCHIN

The Spaniard's Baby Bargain

«HarperCollins»

BIANCHIN H.

The Spaniard's Baby Bargain / H. BIANCHIN — «HarperCollins»,

Billionaire Manolo del Guardo has been dumped—by his nanny. He needs someone to care for his six-month-old daughter...fast!Ariane Celeste is a Sydney TV reporter sent to interview the rags-to-riches tycoon, and she's surprised to find out that he's also a devoted father...in a bind!Ariane is persuaded to look after the baby...temporarily. But Manolo wants to keep Ariane—not just in the nursery, but also in the bedroom. So he wastes no time in proposing a new bargain: that Ariane take over permanently—as his wife!

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“Do you perceive embarking in another career direction?”

She met the query head-on. “Such as?”

“Marriage.”

“Doubtful. Why repeat a mistake?”

“We agree Christina needs a mother. I’m proposing you take on that role.”

It got her attention, as it was meant to do. “As my wife,” Manolo added, to clarify any misunderstanding.

She just looked at him. “You’re insane.”

“Am I?” He trapped her gaze.

Lovers and friends. Just the mere thought of having him as a lover sent her emotions spiraling out of control.

HELEN BIANCHIN was born in New Zealand and travelled to Australia before marrying her Italian-born husband. After three years they moved, returned to New Zealand with their daughter, had two sons then resettled in Australia. Encouraged by friends to recount anecdotes of her years as a tobacco sharefarmer’s wife living in an Italian community, Helen began setting words on paper and her first novel was published in 1975. An animal lover, she says her terrier and Persian cat regard her study as as much theirs as hers.

The Spaniard's Baby Bargain

Helen Bianchin



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CHAPTER ONE

MANOLO paid the cab driver, collected his valise, and mounted the few steps to the main entrance of his harbour-front mansion set high in Sydney's suburban Point Piper.

The front door opened before he could extract his keys.

'Good evening, Manolo. Welcome home.'

Some welcome, he qualified silently. His home in an uproar, the third nanny in as many months about to walk, and, God help him, a media journalist and cameraman due to descend in less than an hour to begin a weekend documentary he'd agreed to do over a month ago.

'Santos,' he acknowledged to the ex-chef who'd served as his live-in factotum for several years, and offered a grim smile as he entered the spacious foyer. 'What in hell happened this time?'

'Little Christina is teething,' the manservant relayed. 'The nanny resents her own lack of sleep.'

Manolo raked restless fingers through his hair. 'Where is she?'

'Packing,' Santos declared with succinct cynicism.

'You've arranged a replacement?'

'Tried to. Unfortunately our record with nannies elicited the response the agency has no one sufficiently qualified to fill the position until next week.'

'Mierda.' The oath escaped with soft vehemence.

Santos lifted one eyebrow. 'My sentiments exactly.'

He'd deal with it. Have to. There was no other option. 'Maria?' The house-cleaner came in five days a week, but left each day at four to care for her large family.

'She assures she can give an extra few hours to help out.'

'Any messages?' It was merely a general query, for anything important reached him via cellphone or email.

'I've put the mail and messages in the usual place. Dinner will be ready in half an hour.'

Time to shave, shower, dress, then eat before he was due to greet the media crew. But first he needed to see his young daughter, deal with the departing nanny.

He stifled a grimace, and resisted the temptation to roll his shoulders. Hell. The last thing he felt like doing after a long international flight was to exchange small talk with a media representative.

What on earth had possessed him to agree to this personal profile documentary in the first place? Ah, yes, the stipulation it would showcase his favourite charity. Plus the fact the interview would be conducted by Ariane Celeste...a petite ash-blond woman in her late twenties, whose television persona intrigued him.

The nanny was on her way down the wide curving staircase as he reached the first step, and he paused, waiting for her to draw level.

She was young, too young, he decided as he viewed her set features. 'Would a bonus persuade you to stay on until I can arrange a replacement?'

'No.'

He could press the point, imply she was obligated to give a week's notice, redress his legal right as an employer...but dammit, he wasn't sure he wanted someone harbouring unwillingness and resentment to care for Christina. 'Santos will order a cab. My cheque will be sent to the agency.'

'Thanks.'

Her brief, almost impolite response incurred a dark glance from Santos, which Manolo met and dismissed in silence as he turned and ascended the stairs.

The volume of his daughter's voice increased as he reached the upper level, and a hand closed over his heart and squeezed a little as he entered the nursery.

The small face was red with the force of her cries, the dark hair damp from exertion. Worse, she'd soiled her nappy, and her legs were pumping in active protest.

‘Por Dios.’ The soft imprecation brought a second’s silence, followed immediately by louder cries that rapidly dissolved into hiccups.

‘Shh, pequeña,’ he soothed as he lifted her from the cot and cradled her close. ‘Let’s tend to you, hmm?’

With competent movements he did just that, trying to coax the distress from those tear-filled dark eyes.

His, he accepted silently. But unmistakably the child of his late wife... a woman who’d connived to bear his name by fair means or foul. And had succeeded, he determined grimly, by deliberately tampering with a prophylactic so she could fall pregnant with his child.

It didn’t sit well, even now, that the sole reason for the pregnancy had been to extract a large financial settlement from him and a meal ticket for life.

The thought of a child of his being a victim of its mother’s scheming was unconscionable. He’d made Yvonne a handsome offer her avaricious mind wouldn’t refuse. Subject to his paternity being proved by DNA, they’d enter the shortest marriage in history to give him legal parental rights, she’d agree to give up the child into his sole custody, then he’d initiate divorce proceedings.

All tied up in a legal contract, on which she had signed her name with a speed that had sickened him.

If there was such a thing as divine justice, he reflected, Yvonne had reaped it. A month after Christina’s birth he’d been in New York when he received the news Yvonne had died in a fatal car accident late at night after attending a party. The man with her had shared a similar fate.

He’d taken the next flight home and picked up the pieces, dealt with the media rumours, a departing nanny and employed another.

The second of four in five months, he conceded with grim cynicism. The longest any one of them had stayed was seven weeks.

The small babe in his arms gave a shuddering cry and latched onto her tiny fist.

‘Hungry, pequeña?’ Her needs held importance over his own, and he crossed to the large storage cabinet, opened it, checked the small refrigerator, witnessed several bottles of made-up formula and breathed a sigh of relief.

A minute in the microwave, and the temperature was right.

He sank into the rocking chair and began feeding his daughter... not a moment too soon, given the desperation with which she took the bottle.

‘Need any help?’

Manolo met Santos’ measured gaze, lifted one eyebrow in silent cynicism, and offered with droll humour, ‘What do you suggest?’

They shared a long history and unconditional trust. A friendship, despite the employer-employee relationship, that went back to the days when he’d become streetwise from an early age in a tough New York neighbourhood where self-survival was a priority. It wasn’t a youth he was particularly proud of, but one that had shaped him into the man he was today.

Hard-edged, ruthless, a risk-taker who’d worked in three jobs, studied, and existed on minimum sleep to gain millionaire status in his early twenties. Something he’d multiplied almost a thousand-fold over the past fifteen years.

No one dared toy with him without paying the price. Love wasn’t an emotion he had been familiar with during any part of his life.

Manolo checked his watch and suppressed a grimace. Fifteen minutes to shave, shower and eat wasn’t enough. So he’d be late.

‘I’ll welcome the media duo when they arrive, show them to their rooms, offer them a drink,’ Santos declared smoothly. ‘That’ll allow you a timely entrance.’

Home security was a necessary addition to any rich man’s property, but the high, elaborate wrought-iron gates attached to equally high concrete walls, the mounted surveillance camera...

Overkill, or did Manolo del Guardo have reason for such hi-tech protection?

‘Who is this guy? Croesus?’

‘Not quite.’

‘Done your homework, huh?’ came the nonchalant response as the car drew to a halt in front of the imposing gates.

‘Can you recall a time when I didn’t?’

Ariane knew exactly who Manolo del Guardo was. She’d compiled a file on him. Together with a detailed list of questions...some of which, she conceded, were guaranteed to evoke a strong, even heated response.

However, that was the purpose of her interview. To dig beneath the surface and provide an insightful and, at times, provocative look at the lives of those who had risen to notoriety and fame.

Not necessarily together, but in the case of Manolo del Guardo there was a connection to both.

‘OK,’ Tony initiated as he undid his safety belt. ‘Let’s go do this.’

State-of-the-art security, Ariane corrected as she observed Tony present his ID tag and driver’s licence for verification.

She was aware of a disembodied voice seconds before Tony slid in behind the wheel, then the gates opened with electronic precision.

Summer daylight-saving allowed a view of the curved driveway with its magnificent floral borders, lush, manicured lawn, sculpted shrubs and topiary.

A beautiful foreground to showcase the del Guardo mansion, Ariane conceded, suppressing her surprise. Information she’d gleaned revealed Manolo del Guardo had bought the property for its panoramic view of the Sydney harbour, gutted the existing home, and rebuilt.

A château, designed in the classical French Napoleonic style, she perceived, and not something reflecting his Spanish roots.

She would kill to capture it on film. Except one of the stipulations set down in granting this documentary was no external photographs of the house were to be shot. Internal only, and/or featuring the view, with the proviso each shot required Manolo del Guardo’s approval.

Who did he think he was? God?

‘Where,’ Tony attempted mildly as the SUV slowed to a crawl close to the main entrance, ‘do you suggest I should park?’

At that moment the huge, elaborately carved double wooden doors swung open and a formally attired manservant descended the few steps.

‘Good evening. My name is Santos.’ The voice was clipped and bore a slight accent. ‘If you would drive to the service entry.’ He indicated the direction with a sweep of his arm. ‘You’ll find the door unlocked. I’ll meet you there. You can unload your gear and store it in the storage room.’

Without a further word he retraced his steps and closed the massive front doors behind him.

‘Should we assume we’ve been subtly made aware of our place?’ Tony arched as he eased the SUV round the side of the house.

It took only minutes to transfer their equipment indoors, then, overnight bags in hand, they followed Santos through to the main foyer.

Priceless travertine marble floors, expensive oriental rugs, objets d’art, original oil paintings, luxurious furnishings, high vaulted ceilings, a breathtaking crystal chandelier, and a wide curving double staircase leading to an upper gallery level. The balustrade was a work of art in itself, its black wrought-iron filigree pattern capped by dark mahogany.

No doubt all the rooms reflected similar accoutrements, and Ariane complimented his taste... or should that be his interior decorator?

‘I’ll show you to your rooms,’ Santos informed as he proceeded towards the staircase. ‘Mr del Guardo will meet with you in fifteen minutes.’ He indicated an open doorway to his left. ‘Please assemble in the informal lounge.’

Formal, informal...casual living? It figured in a mansion this size.

Assemble? There were only two of them, for heaven's sake...hardly a media horde.

The stair-treads were marble, extending onto a tiled foyer and a circular gallery.

Private quarters to the right, guest suites to the left?

The reverse, she determined as she followed Santos to a suite that topped any luxury hotel accommodation.

Muted pastels blended to perfection, exquisite mahogany furniture, sage-green carpet. A large bed, small desk, telephone, television.

Tony's suite was situated close by, and equalled her own, although the colour scheme employed various shades of coffee and cream.

'I'm sure you'll be very comfortable.'

Tony's soft whistle of appreciation resulted in a wry smile from Manolo del Guardo's factotum. 'I'll leave you to confer and unpack. Refreshments will be served in the informal lounge.'

'All this,' Tony said quietly as soon as Santos had disappeared out of earshot, 'screams serious money.'

'The early gathering of which is shrouded in mystery,' Ariane reminded.

'A fact you intend to uncover?'

'If I can.' She checked her watch, and spared the cameraman a faint smile. 'Eleven minutes, and counting. See you in ten.'

Unpacking wasn't an issue, for she travelled light, necessities scaled down to the minimum, and as to freshening up...a quick glance in the en suite mirror revealed her hair was tidy, the soft colour on her lips intact.

The muted burr of her cellphone triggered the usual stab of irritation. Right on time, she perceived grimly, as the call went to message-bank.

Common sense warned she should ignore it. Advice given by her lawyer, endorsed by the legal court, and enforced by the restraining order in place against a man who'd succeeded in making her life a living hell through his delusional psychotic behaviour.

A man who'd kept such traits well-hidden during their brief courtship, she reflected, remembering vividly when they had begun to emerge on their honeymoon.

His desire for children had matched her own. What she hadn't expected was the level of his disappointment when she didn't immediately fall pregnant. He had belittled her ability as a lover, damned her with harsh accusations as to her possible sterility...a fact soon endorsed by the medical professionals.

Roger's physical rage at the diagnosis was the last straw, and Ariane had packed her belongings, moved into an apartment, and begun divorce proceedings.

Instead of removing her from the line of fire, it had pitched her right into it as her life became a nightmare, with confrontations, abusive calls...

Calls which had continued with sickening regularity over time, despite a divorce decree, which merely heightened Roger's refusal to move on.

Fat chance, she reflected grimly.

Admittedly the confrontations had subsided, but the text messages were a constant, despite her changing her cellphone number numerous times, opting for private listing, yet still he managed to bypass her security measures.

On this occasion the text message was brief, in the shorthand favoured by seasoned SMS users, but nevertheless it sent a chill shiver down her spine.

He knew where she was, who she was with, and the duration of her stay. How? Almost as soon as she asked herself the question, the answer followed...it wouldn't be too difficult if he employed devious means and managed to bypass the television company's security.

Something Roger could manage with one hand tied behind his back.

‘Ready?’

The sound of Tony’s voice intruded, and she offered him a slight smile, then collected a slim briefcase. ‘Yes.’

The job at hand demanded her concentration, and she preceded the cameraman into the hallway, choosing a leisurely pace to the head of the staircase before descending to the ground floor.

‘To the right,’ Tony indicated, and she sent him a nod in acknowledgement.

‘Got it.’

Focus, she demanded silently as she switched mind-set and summoned a polite, businesslike smile.

Manolo del Guardo.

She’d seen photographs of the man in newspapers and the social pages of glossy magazines. Read his official biographical details, and scraped the surface of the unofficial.

Yet nothing prepared her for the man’s physical presence.

Or for her own reaction to him.

Tall, with the build of a warrior...albeit a well-dressed one in dark trousers and an equally dark shirt. Hand-tooled shoes, unless she was mistaken, an expensive watch visible beneath rolled-back cuffs.

Dark, well-groomed hair, dark, almost black eyes, and broad sculpted facial features that owed much to his Spanish heritage.

And something else she couldn’t define. A man who’d seen much, weathered more, and developed an impenetrable barrier against any intrusion in his personal life?

Whatever, he resembled a predator indolently at ease. A dangerous one, she perceived, and she fought off the chill shiver threatening to slip down her spine as he moved towards her.

‘Ariane Celeste.’ It seemed important to get the first word in ahead of him. She summoned a brisk smile as she indicated the cameraman at her side. ‘Tony di Marco.’

She extended her hand, and resisted the temptation to hold her breath as he took it firmly within his own, held, then released it before extending the courtesy to the cameraman.

The sizzling heat fizzing through her veins came as a surprise. Accompanied by sensation spiralling from deep within, the combination wasn’t something she coveted, and she deliberately banked it down, capped it, and adopted her usual businesslike façade.

‘I’d like to thank you for inviting us into your home.’

One eyebrow slanted in musing query. ‘The proposal was your own.’ The words held an intonation that was pure New York.

Statistics revealed he’d been born to a single mother in the Bronx who raised him until his mid-teens, when cancer claimed her, leaving him to survive alone.

His success story was legend. His philanthropist interests well-tabled. In his late thirties, he owned homes in various capital cities around the world. Including Sydney, which for the past five years he’d chosen as his base.

‘One you agreed to,’ Ariane responded with polite civility, and glimpsed his faint smile.

‘There were conditions, if you recall?’

‘Of course. I intend to abide by them.’

Manolo del Guardo inclined his head, then he swept an arm towards a clutch of buttoned leather chairs. ‘Please, take a seat. Can I offer you something to drink? Alcohol, coffee, tea?’

Coffee, definitely. The aroma of an expensive fresh brew teased her senses. ‘Coffee, black,’ she requested. ‘One sugar.’

‘Ditto,’ Tony added.

Manolo del Guardo’s dark gaze speared her own, and her chin tilted fractionally. ‘I’ll reserve the alcohol for tomorrow evening,’ she ventured sweetly. ‘I may need it by then.’

Was that a glimmer of a smile, or did the edge of his mouth merely effect a faint twitch?

'You anticipate I'll be a difficult subject?'

Oh, he was smooth. Too smooth. And three steps ahead of her.

'It's my job to provide an interesting, informative and thought-provoking documentary detailing your rise through the ranks to highlight the man you've become today.'

'Thirty minutes in the life of...' he indicated. 'Edited from twenty-four hours of film?'

He did cynical amusement well. But then, so did she. 'I would hope to wrap it up in twelve.'

Manolo del Guardo poured the coffee, added sugar, and handed them out, then he took a chair opposite.

'Perhaps, Ariane, you will provide me with an overview of the questions you intend to ask?'

The sound of her name on his lips caused goose-pimples in the most unlikely places. For heaven's sake, she mentally chastised in self-disgust. Get a grip.

With deliberate control she extracted two printed copies from her briefcase, handed him one, attached her copy to a clipboard, then sat with pen poised.

'A verbal overview, Ariane.'

There they were again...more goose-pimples. How would he react if she dismissed convention and called him Manolo?

Damn him. If he was needling her... 'You prefer the informality of a first-name basis?' She could play, too.

'As we're going to be in each other's company fairly constantly over the next two days, relaxed informality will ease any subsequent tension, don't you think?'

Yeah, right. No one relaxed in the presence of a predator, animal or human. And instinct warned Manolo del Guardo was dangerous in either guise.

'It's my understanding you were given a written overview prior to agreeing to the documentary.' She tempered her words with a conciliatory smile. 'However, I'm quite willing to recap.'

Which she did, with a succinct professionalism that didn't falter. When she was done, she met his studied gaze with equanimity. 'Is that sufficiently extensive?'

'Yes. For now.' He rose to his feet in one fluid movement. 'If you'll excuse me? I have matters to attend to. Please help yourself to more coffee. Feel free to enjoy television in the entertainment room situated in the room adjoining this. There is a selection of DVDs, or cable if you prefer.' He inclined his head to Tony, then turned towards Ariane and lingered a little long. 'Santos will serve breakfast at eight.'

He moved from the room with the ease of a man in command of the situation.

Dangerous, Ariane accorded silently. Definitely dangerous.

'Do you imagine that gives us carte blanche?'

Tony, ever the satirist.

'You're kidding, right?' Ariane crossed to the chiffonier. 'More coffee?' She refilled her cup, added sugar, and turned to face the cameraman.

She'd worked with him on various assignments in the past, and they'd formed an easy camaraderie that had its base in friendship and a mutual respect for each other's talent.

'No, thanks.' He checked his watch. 'Anything you want to go over before we hit the sack?'

Ariane surveyed him over the rim of her cup. 'I want this to be hard-edged, not a piece of condescending fluff,' she specified, and glimpsed his faint smile.

'You don't do fluff.'

No, she didn't. What was more, she'd earned a reputation for being able to dig deep and get the facts.

So why did she have this niggling feeling it would be Manolo del Guardo who controlled the interview, and not her?

She finished her coffee and returned the cup and saucer to the chiffonier.

'OK, let's get an early night.' Tomorrow she needed to be bright-eyed and mentally alert.

Instinct warned parrying words with Manolo del Guardo would be the antithesis of a walk in the park.

So, she'd go over her notes one more time, explore a few angles and fine-tune some of the questions.

Ariane preceded Tony from the room and walked at his side as they ascended the stairs to the upper floor.

'See you at breakfast.' Tony offered a slow smile as they paused outside their adjacent suites. 'Relax. It'll be fine.'

She shot him a quizzical glance. 'Breakfast?'

The smile widened. 'Sleep well.'

Usually she did, but a leisurely shower followed by an hour with her notes did little to ease the faint edge of tension, and she switched off the bedside lamp in a determined bid to gain a good night's rest.

In the darkness her thought-train remained with Manolo del Guardo and the possible scenarios the next day would bring.

It was impossible not to dwell on the man himself...the sheer physicality of his height and breadth of shoulder, raw-boned facial features, a strong jawline and a sensual mouth.

As to her electrifying reaction to his presence...what the hell was that?

CHAPTER TWO

ARIANE woke bathed in sweat, still caught up in a disturbing dream so hauntingly vivid it left her on the brink of fear. There had been the distant cry of a baby, and she wasn't able to distinguish whether it belonged in the dream or was seated in reality.

She lay still for a few minutes, checked the time, and opted to shower and dress. It was early, but it would give her an opportunity to go over Manolo del Guardo's personal profile, check details she'd highlighted in order to delve more deeply into his past, then she'd appear downstairs at the appointed time for breakfast.

Alone, she determined as she entered the dining room an hour and a half later. The table was set for one, and an elegant chiffonier held a covered dish, a carafe of steaming coffee, and a jug of orange juice.

The morning newspaper lay folded within reach, and she scanned the newsprint as she ate, then when she was done she returned to her suite to freshen up and gather her notes.

Five minutes to showtime, she determined as she entered the informal lounge, and found Tony checking the audio equipment. The video recorder was set up in readiness.

'Hi.' He glanced up from the task in hand. 'Sleep well?'

'OK.' There was no point in admitting to a restless night. 'You?'

'Fine. Woke early, did a few warm-ups in the gym, then swam a few lengths of the indoor lap pool.' He offered a grin. 'Santos granted permission.'

A gym? It figured. As to an indoor lap pool...she might need to avail herself of it in order to cool off after a day parrying words with Manolo del Guardo!

'I'm impressed.'

Tony raised a quizzical eyebrow. 'With my early-morning zest for exercise?'

'That, too.'

His soft laugh brought an answering smile, only to have it die as the soft burr of her cellphone signalled an incoming text message. Business...had to be. Yet it didn't stop her stomach muscles clenching with nervous tension as she read the script.

Is he good in bed, darling?

Roger. Stepping up his ongoing campaign to stalk and harass. Didn't he have anything better to do?

Stupid question. She was his obsession, the focus of his delusion. And he was clever... sufficiently so to fool the legal system.

He intruded into her everyday life. Appearing wherever she happened to be, silent but there... among the occupants of a café where she happened to meet a friend for coffee; a restaurant where she chose to dine; in a supermarket; the cinema. On the fringes, never making direct contact, but ensuring she was aware of his presence.

It was irritating, maddening...as he meant it to be.

'Problems?'

Ariane deleted the message. 'Nothing I can't handle.'

Tony didn't appear convinced, and she sent him a reassuring smile. 'Really.' She spared her watch a glance. 'We did say nine, didn't we?'

'Indeed.' The faintly accented drawl held a degree of cynical humour. 'Although I was unaware of the need for a strict timetable.'

Their host and the subject of the interview stood just inside the doorway, looking totally at ease in black tailored trousers and white chambray shirt with the top few buttons left undone and cuffs turned back.

He moved with the lithe grace of a jungle cat, for she hadn't heard a sound.

Lean-hipped, broad-framed and tall, Manolo del Guardo cut a dynamic figure. Raw-boned facial features, a sensuous mouth and eyes that didn't miss a thing. Aware of his background, she had to concede a compelling ruthlessness lurked beneath the surface of his control.

'Good morning.' He included Tony in the greeting. 'I trust you both slept well?'

Ariane met his gaze with level coolness. 'Thank you.' Nerves were something she'd learnt to disguise, and it irked her that this man unsettled her more than most.

Recognition of sexual chemistry, that's all it is, she rationalised, and did her best to dismiss it.

She was here to do a job. What was more, she had no interest in men. Especially someone of Manolo del Guardo's calibre.

'Tony is about through checking the sound equipment.' Professionalism was everything. 'Is there anything in the questionnaire you'd like to discuss at this point?'

One eyebrow rose. 'I'm familiar with the interview process.'

'Yes, of course.' A conciliatory smile offered a soothing salve. 'As you're aware, we intend to focus on three key elements: your background; business success; your nominated charity interest. With sufficient personal details to give the interview an individual touch and tie it all together.'

Doing that would be a challenge. Perhaps more than she bargained for. This man was no pushover, and far too warily astute to be led into any indiscriminate revelations.

She'd suggested 'smart casual wear' for the morning session. Trousers by Armani, shirt by Versace. She was willing to swear both styles had been worn by male models in a fashion show she'd compared recently.

A deliberate choice on Manolo del Guardo's part?

'Perhaps we could make a start?'

Ariane studied his features with analytical appraisal, and steadfastly ignored the tension coiling inside her stomach as he held her gaze.

'Something bothers you?'

You do. In spades. 'I'd like to apply a light make-up.' She turned towards a small cosmetic box she always carried for just this purpose. 'Just the merest touch.'

'No.'

The drawling voice held a silky softness that caused her to momentarily freeze before swinging back to face him. 'We're talking a faint coverage of translucent powder, nothing more.'

'No.'

It wasn't much after nine in the morning, and they'd already encountered a hiccup. She sought to appease. 'It's standard procedure.'

'But not one I choose to observe.'

OK, so make-up was a no-go. She could handle that.

'Would you care to take a seat?' It wasn't so much a suggestion as a directive, and it earned her a contemplative look.

'And if I prefer to stand?'

He was toying with her. 'Mr del Guardo—'

'I thought we agreed on informality?'

This was going to be one hell of a weekend. 'Manolo,' she conceded, and he inclined his head.

'Gracias.'

'Let's get you wired.' Tony moved forward with two remote microphones, handed one to Ariane and fixed the other to the V of Manolo del Guardo's shirt.

The ball is in your court, you're in charge, you have control.

Sure, Ariane conceded with silent cynicism. And cows jump over the moon!

Dealing with an ego was part of the job, and she'd dealt with a few in her time. 'I'd like to keep this as relaxed and informal as possible.' She deliberately held his gaze. 'Visual and audio will be edited, and you'll have control over final content.'

His eyes held a dark intensity that could sear the soul. Could they also soothe?

Oh, hell, where had that come from?

'I'll remind you, any attempt at clever journalistic tactics on your part will be met with silence.'

Oh, my. Ariane drew herself up to her full height and took a slow, steady breath. 'Point taken.'

She even managed a faint smile. 'Shall we begin?'

An hour later she had nothing more on Manolo del Guardo than what was already available in previous Press releases. Which meant she had to work a little harder.

'Tell me what it was like growing up in the 'hood.'

The faint smile didn't reach his eyes. 'You want I should draw a picture?' Street gangs, poverty, where survival meant being one step ahead of the law in alleyways where one false move could bring a knife in the ribs...or worse?

'I imagine it was tough.'

He doubted her imagination stretched as far as the reality. Except he'd managed to get out and move on. Lean years when he'd worked his butt off twenty by seven, taking risks only the brave or a fool would touch.

'The prime motivation was to survive.'

His voice held an edge of mockery, and a wealth of living lurked in the depths of those dark eyes. Elements she could only guess at.

'Perhaps you'd care to elaborate?'

'I don't see the need to provide a vicarious insight into the days of my youth.'

OK, so he was going to play hardball. 'Self-protection, or a need to bury your past?'

He didn't move, yet she had the sensation his powerful body suddenly went on full alert.

The silence in the room became a palpable entity, and she held her breath, waiting for a display of temperament.

It didn't happen, and there was little she could detect beneath his obsidian gaze.

Supreme control, she registered, and wondered what it would take to break it. A faint shivery sensation threatened to slither the length of her spine at the thought of what direction his anger might take...certain in her mind it would be laser-swift and deadly.

Ariane's attention was so focused on the man that at first she didn't register the faint sound of a baby's cry.

'You'll have to excuse me.' Manolo rose to his feet in one fluid movement and crossed to the door.

It was then she heard the angry wail of a distressed babe, a sound that rose to a crescendo in seconds.

Ariane signalled for Tony to cut, and followed Manolo del Guardo into the foyer.

The sight of him cradling a baby in the curve of his arm caused the breath to catch in her throat.

At that moment he turned, and she stood locked into immobility at the ruthless intensity of his gaze. 'Your intrusion is not welcome.' His voice was dangerously soft, and the infant's wailing increased.

She had the unbearable urge to take the child and attempt to soothe its pain. 'The camera isn't on, nor is the sound.'

The fate of Manolo del Guardo's late wife was common knowledge; so too was the existence of their daughter. Except no photos of the child had reached the media.

'Ensure it remains that way.'

The infant's wailing intensified, then subsided into a series of cross, hiccuping cries.

Ariane couldn't help herself. 'She has colic.'

'And you know this...because?'

She wanted to hit him. Instead she held her breath and counted to three before releasing it. She even managed a negligible shrug. 'We can take up where we left off when you've settled your daughter into the nanny's care.'

'Difficult, when the girl walked out yesterday, and a replacement isn't due until mid-week.'

'I'm sorry.'

Was that genuine concern? Or a polite act? Manolo opted for the latter. 'We'll reconvene after lunch.' He glanced at his watch. 'At two.'

He headed towards the stairs, and Ariane retraced her steps to find Tony running a review of the morning's taping.

'We're taking a break?'

'Dismissed until two.' She crossed to where he stood. 'What do you think?'

'So far so good. He's ice.'

'And won't crack?'

He shot her a direct look as the tape went into rewind. 'Waste of time to even try.'

Ariane viewed the morning's session with an analytical eye, then retrieved her notebook, made a few notations and returned it to her briefcase.

There was half an hour until lunch, and she felt the pressing need for some fresh air. 'I'm going to take a walk in the grounds.'

'And examine the plant life?'

'You have a better suggestion?'

Tony offered a wicked smile. 'You could go pound the punching bag in the gym.'

'Talk to me at day's end. Although kickboxing is more my style. You could join me.'

'Sorry, sweetheart. I'm not into masochism.'

She wrinkled her nose at him. 'I might let you win.'

He lifted both hands in mock-capitulation. 'Do me a favour, and go smell the roses.'

'While you do...what?'

His slow grin held a teasing quality. 'Kick back and anticipate this afternoon's verbal interaction.'

Ariane rolled her eyes. 'How come you get to have all the fun?'

He waited a beat, then offered quietly, 'Watch out for yourself.'

A friend, as well as an associate, he saw too much. 'Always.'

The automatic assurance didn't fool either of them, and Ariane collected her cellphone before making her way to the rear of the house.

French doors led onto a large terrace, and she crossed it, then descended a set of stone steps to a paved courtyard.

The grounds were larger than she'd expected, with an expanse of immaculate lawn. Garden beds abounded with an array of flora in bloom, a riot of colour and green foliage, exquisite topiary. There was a gazebo, painted white with a peaked roof and decorative scrolls. A water fountain stood nearby, and she sighted a marble birdbath.

Shrubbery, garden seats—it was close to picture perfect, and she wondered if Manolo del Guardo surrounded himself with beautiful objects because he genuinely enjoyed them, or whether they were merely the possessions expected of a wealthy man. Suggested, supplied and maintained to create an image.

The house...mansion, she corrected mentally. Had he employed a team of interior decorators and given them carte blanche?

Her cellphone beeped and promptly went to mes sage-bank, providing a reminder she should check the morning's incoming calls.

Three, she determined a few minutes later, two of which were from Roger. A sick feeling twisted her stomach at the brief, crude words.

Ignore him, she counselled silently, hating the wiliness of his psychosis. He rarely rang from the same number twice, switching SIM cards, using numerous pay-phones in a game devised to fool her so she'd engage each call or message. Even in the few seconds it took to hit the erase button, he managed to achieve his objective.

Roger was the reason she'd taken up martial arts. For the discipline and control...as a form of protection and a means of channelling her anger against his intrusive harassment.

Ariane pocketed the cellphone and deliberately focused her attention on her surroundings. It was a beautiful summer's day, with only a few drifts of cloud in the sky. The warmth of the sun caressed her skin, and the air held the sweetness of flowers in bloom, their colours, some muted, many bright, a visual delight.

A short while later she returned indoors, freshened up, then she joined Tony in the dining room for lunch. Thin slices of veal, Parma ham, salads and fresh bread, followed by a delectable fruit salad.

There was time to retouch her make-up and smooth her hair before joining Tony in the designated interview room, where she went over her notes and the questions she wanted to pose during the afternoon taping.

Manolo del Guardo appeared shortly after two, in, unless she was mistaken, a change of shirt. White, top few buttons undone, with cuffs rolled back, the difference in style was minimal, and probably unnoticeable to the untrained eye.

She attempted to qualify it as an integral part of the job, and knew she lied. Everything about this man caught and held her interest.

The animalistic sense of power combined with a dramatic mesh of elemental ruthlessness and latent sensuality. Add leashed savagery, and it became a lethal mix.

Be professional, think interview quality, and ignore the exigent magnetism, Ariane advised silently. A derisive laugh rose and died in her throat. Sure, as if that was likely to happen.

'This afternoon I'd like to concentrate on your entry into the business arena,' she began. 'A few early breaks, your motivation to succeed, risks.' She met his gaze and held it. 'Highlights charting your career.'

Manolo took in her slender frame, ash-blond hair in its sleek style, hazel green-flecked eyes, the small but determined chin, her lush mouth.

Had anyone told her those eyes became dark green when she was angry? An emotion she hid well, and one he found intriguing.

She'd done her research, he conceded as he answered her questions and offered information already known to the media.

'No dabbling in illegals in a quest to build your empire?'

For years he'd walked on the right side of the law, but there were some deals done in his early teens of which he was not particularly proud.

'Perhaps you'd care to define "illegals"?'

His drawling tone was silk-smooth and dangerous beneath the dispassionate imperturbability.

'Does it need defining?'

'The implication covers a broad spectrum.'

'Could one assume your evasion of the question supplies its own answer?'

'Are you levelling an accusation?'

Oh, lord, he could have a team of top-flight lawyers breathing down her neck in an instant. 'No.' Her tone was steady, and she effected a polite smile. 'Merely voicing admiration for the extent of your wealth in relation to the time in which you've achieved it.'

'I'll accept that as a compliment.'

He wanted to strangle her. She could sense it beneath the surface of his control.

A few more questions and she was done for the afternoon. She watched as Manolo del Guardo rose from his chair, inclined his head and walked from the room.

‘He let you get away unscathed.’

Tony’s comment should have brought her some satisfaction. Instead she could only wonder at the ease with which Manolo del Guardo had allowed her to dance so close to the line between the provocative and the sensational.

‘Yes.’ She gathered paperwork and slid it into her briefcase.

‘It’s a shame we can’t wrap it up tonight.’

Ariane slung the leather strap over one shoulder. ‘I understand our host has a pressing engagement for the evening.’

Tony placed the camera in its case and locked it. ‘We could go grab a pizza, take in a movie.’

‘Count me out.’ She moved towards the door. ‘I’m going to try out the lap pool, have dinner here, then catch an early night.’

‘Maybe that’s not such a bad idea. We were given permission to avail ourselves of the entertainment room. Maybe Santos will let us microwave popcorn?’

‘In your dreams.’ She offered him a musing grin. ‘Does this look like a home that has popcorn in the pantry?’

With that parting salvo she crossed the foyer and ascended the stairs, choosing to check her cellphone messages as she made her way to her room.

Roger...again. Twice, she determined, and stifled a pithy oath. Would the man ever cease with his harassment? Catching his first few words before she hit erase was almost as bad as listening to the entire message, for the damage was done. He’d succeeded in reaching her, and in his book that was enough.

Let it go. They were only words. Take a deep breath.

Ariane repeated the silent mantra as she slipped out of her clothes and donned the swimsuit she’d tossed into her bag on the off-chance she might use it. Then she pulled on jogging-bottoms and top, caught up a towel and made her way down to the lower level.

The gym was impressive, the equipment expensive, and she crossed to the indoor lap pool, slid into the water and began a punishing series of laps, back and forth until she could feel the pull of muscles.

It felt good to expend pent-up energy, and she emerged, crossed to the shower, then donned sweats and returned to her room to change for dinner.

After a pleasant meal, they took coffee into the entertainment room and watched a movie on DVD.

When it finished Ariane rose to her feet. ‘Goodnight.’

Tony slotted in another movie, then sank back into a comfortable chair. ‘See you at breakfast.’

CHAPTER THREE

ARIANE was unsure what woke her. Only that something had, and she lay still, listening to the silence, wondering if she'd slipped into consciousness from a dream.

Then she heard it, the distant cry of a fractious babe. Manolo del Guardo's daughter. Awake and, from the sound of it, in pain.

What time was it? She checked her watch...almost midnight. Any second now Manolo or, if he hadn't returned home, Santos would tend to Christina.

The cries continued, and Ariane didn't pause for thought as she slid out of bed, snagged her robe and shrugged into it, then made her way along the gallery.

Electric wall sconces turned low provided a dim light, and she moved quickly past a few closed doors, then paused outside the room where the sound seemed the loudest. A slight qualm caused a momentary hesitation, then at a further wail she discarded it and opened the door.

Ariane barely registered the room with its soft lighting as she crossed to the cot. Her attention was focused on the distressed babe.

'Poor little petite, hmm?' She scooped the child up and held her against one shoulder, instinctively soothing the small back. 'Let's guess, shall we? You're hungry? Wet? In pain?' She touched her cheek to the small head. 'Or all three?'

At almost six months of age, was she still having a late-night bottle? There had to be a feeding schedule around somewhere. But not in plain sight, she registered.

'OK, little one, let's do a nappy change and see if that helps any.'

Ariane heard a sound and turned towards the door to discover Santos framed in the aperture. 'I heard her crying via the monitor, and came as quickly as I could.'

She laid the babe on the bed nestled against one wall and deftly effected a nappy change, speaking softly as she did so. 'There we go, angel. Now, if only you could talk, we'd know if it's a tooth ready to come through, or a tummy pain.'

'I'll take over.'

She spared Santos a measured look. 'Because you feel you should, or you doubt my ability to cope?'

'On the contrary. You seem to be doing just fine. Christina has stopped crying.'

A very satisfactory burp issued forth, and Ariane smiled. 'Any more, sweetheart?' Almost on command there was another. 'Does she usually have a bottle? I couldn't see a feeding schedule.' She stroked a soothing finger over the babe's cheek.

'Probably because the last nanny didn't keep one,' Santos offered drily.

Obviously nannies, plural, were a sensitive subject.

'I gave Christina a bottle at eight, and she has, I understand, been sleeping through until around five in the morning.'

But not tonight. Poor wee mite. No mother to cuddle her, a father who left her in the care of professionals and was too busy adding millions to his incredible fortune...

'Problems, Santos?'

Think of the devil, and he appeared.

'Christina is finding it difficult to settle.'

Manolo shrugged out of his dinner jacket and tossed it over a chair, then he loosened his tie and turned back the cuffs of his shirt.

Even to Ariane's jaded eye he was too ruggedly attractive for his own good. The height, breadth of shoulder, his stance, and compelling facial features.

'My apologies. I was unexpectedly delayed.'

Was it her imagination, or did she catch a telling glance pass between Manolo del Guardo and Santos?

‘Ariane heard Christina’s cry and reached her ahead of me.’ The explanation came from Santos, and Manolo inclined his head in her direction.

‘Thank you for your concern.’

But you can go now? The implication was apparent. It was totally weird, but she wanted to delay the inevitable a little longer. Holding the babe felt so...good. Almost in silent unison the babe nuzzled a little, and Ariane eased the knuckle of her little finger close to the babe’s mouth. Almost at once the babe began suckling as Ariane continued to stroke the tiny cheek.

Manolo’s gaze narrowed fractionally. ‘I’ll take Christina.’ He checked his watch. ‘I guess it won’t hurt to give her another bottle.’

‘She might settle back to sleep without one.’ She could hardly hold the babe any longer, and she gently eased her towards her father.

Christina’s protest was immediate, and voluble.

Ariane’s heart turned over at the sound, and she resisted the impulse to reach out and soothe the babe.

‘It would appear you have a certain empathy with the young.’

A compliment? Should she admit to having had some practice? ‘I reported the effects of war on children during the conflict in Kosovo.’

Very few were aware her experience was hands-on, that she’d spent time in severely understaffed hospital wards, helping out, or that she’d chosen to stay until trained staff arrived on the scene.

‘Where chaos reigned and depleted medical supplies were the norm.’ Manolo subjected her to a steady appraisal.

A calculated guess, based on media releases at the time?

‘You were given the opportunity to fly out with departing media staff, yet you refused,’ he continued. ‘Instead you ate rationed food, opted to sleep on a mattress on the floor of an infirmary and tended the sick twenty-four seven.’

He couldn’t know that, unless—

‘No one enters my home without undergoing a full investigation,’ he informed quietly.

No one?

‘No.’

Oh, hell, that was just what she needed...someone who could read her mind.

Christina uttered a cry in protest, then settled into full voice with renewed fervour.

Ariane’s hands itched to take back the babe, heat a feeding bottle and cradle her close. Yet she didn’t have the right.

‘Goodnight.’ Her voice came out sounding stiff and incredibly polite.

‘Thank you.’ There was no cynicism apparent, and she turned as she reached the door.

‘No problem.’

It was Ariane’s suggestion stage three of the interview be taped in Manolo del Guardo’s study... or library, office...whatever he chose to call the room where most of the business action took place away from his corporate offices.

For this occasion she’d requested formal attire, and he didn’t disappoint.

An impeccably tailored suit, blue cotton shirt and matching silk tie conveyed the outer trappings of a very successful businessman.

‘I imagine it won’t take long to set up your equipment?’

‘I can do that while Ariane gives you a run-through,’ Tony assured.

Ariane was tempted to ask if Christina was OK, whether she'd slept well...and barely managed to pull herself up as she followed Manolo through the foyer to a spacious room lined with floor-to-ceiling bookcases.

There was a large executive desk, comfortable leather buttoned chairs, the usual fax, computer, printer.

She checked her clipboard, then studied the room. The natural light seemed fine. 'I think we'll begin with you seated behind the desk. After a few questions you can stand, perhaps cross to the bookcases.' She glanced towards Tony. 'You could do a slow pan with the camera.' He gave a nod in silent agreement. 'Then we can conclude with Manolo seated in one of those chairs.'

In a few hours they'd be able to wrap it. Then they could pack up and leave. Another job done. Well, there was the grunt work of editing and mixing. Tony already had a sweeping external shot of the tall, modern, downtown building housing the Del Guardo Corporation, together with a small footage of the luxurious entry foyer.

As per detailed instructions, there would be no external shots of his private home or an indication of its location. No outward display of his cars, the cruiser he was purported to own, or the private jet.

Manolo del Guardo could easily have become an 'if you've got it, flaunt it' type of tycoon. Instead, he guarded his home and daughter with the type of hi-tech electronic privacy reserved for royalty and the Hollywood glitterati.

'This morning we'll focus on your charity interest, how and why you founded the organisation, your contributions, achievements and goals.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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