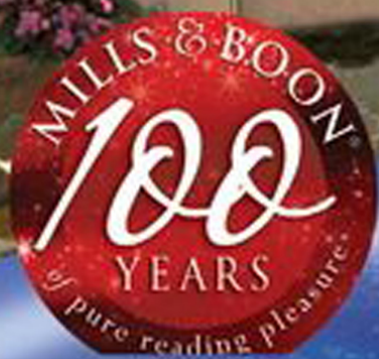
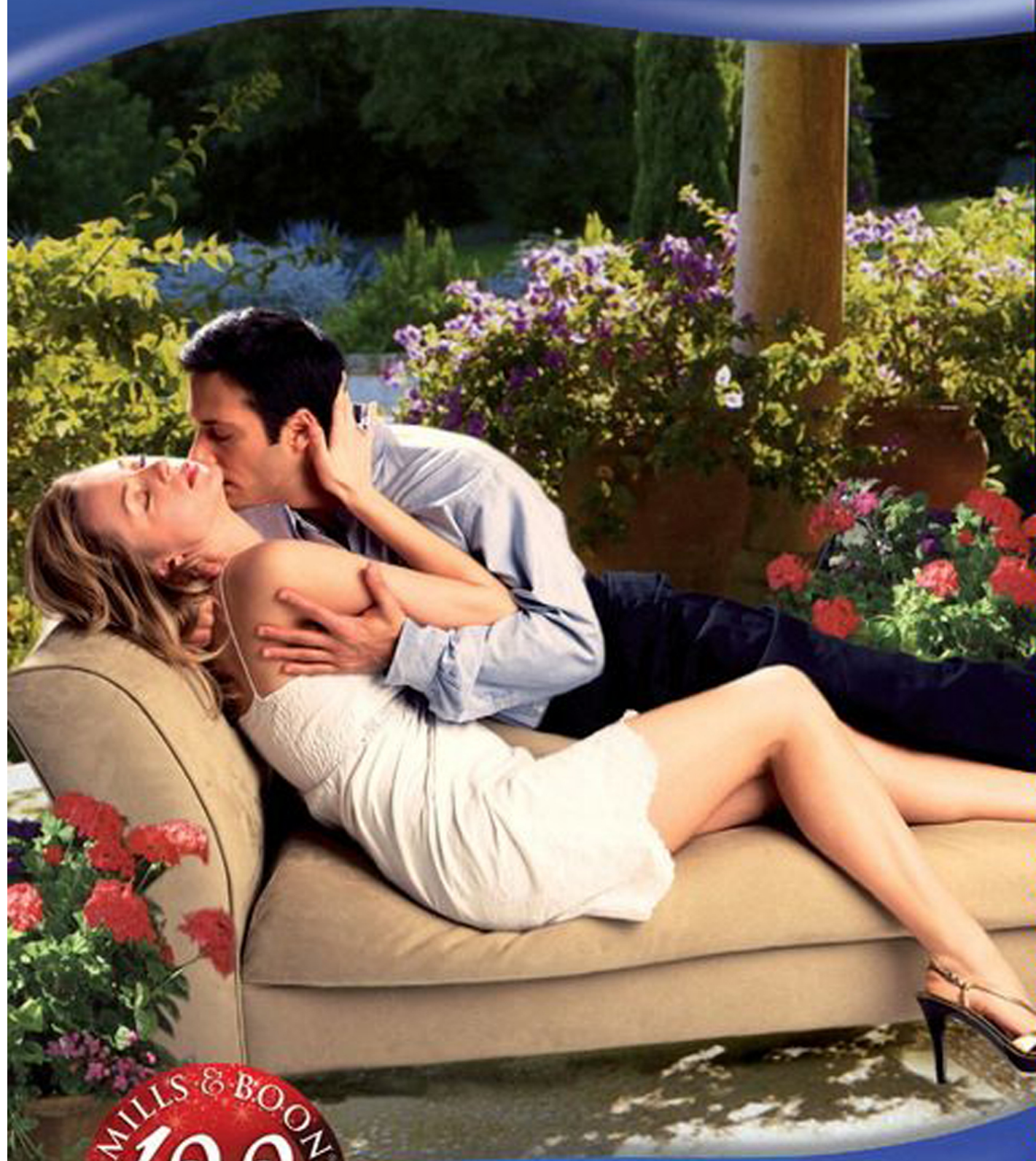


The Italian's Unwilling Wife

Kathryn Ross



MILLS & BOON[®]
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Kathryn Ross

The Italian's Unwilling Wife

«HarperCollins»

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The Italian's Unwilling Wife / K. Ross — «HarperCollins»,
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Step into a world of sophistication and glamour, where sinfully seductive heroes await you in luxurious international locations. The Italian's secret baby revenge! Making money was Damon Cyrenci's number one passion – until he met sweet innocent beauty Abbie Newland. Seduced by her charms, he let his guard down – and paid the ultimate price: gold-digging Abbie took everything from him, and kept secret the fact that she was pregnant with his child! Damon won't let Abbie get away with it! Now more powerful than ever, he'll bring Abbie to her knees and make her his convenient bride. As the mother of his son, Abbie will be the most valuable asset in his portfolio! And seducing her will be the ultimate revenge...

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‘I’m still weighing all the possibilities up—I assure you. Trophy wife versus convenient mistress?’ Damon shrugged. ‘Or should I just take custody of Mario and walk away...? The choices are endless.’

‘You wouldn’t get custody of Mario,’ Abbie told him heatedly. ‘And I wouldn’t marry you if you were the last man left on the planet and lived in a gold-plated palace.’ She angled her head up proudly.

Damon laughed at that. ‘Oh, but we both know that you would.’

‘You always did have an inflated opinion of yourself.’

‘I just know how Ms Abigail Newland’s gold-digging mind works.’

‘You know nothing about me. I would rather die than go along with the idea.’

Kathryn Ross was born in Zambia, where her parents happened to live at that time. Educated in Ireland and England, she now lives in a village near Blackpool, Lancashire. Kathryn is a professional beauty therapist, but writing is her first love. As a child she wrote adventure stories, and at thirteen was editor of her school magazine. Happily, ten writing years later, *DESIGNED WITH LOVE* was accepted by Mills & Boon. A romantic Sagittarian, she loves travelling to exotic locations.

Dear Reader

I’m wishing a very happy 100th birthday to Mills & Boon. It is a pleasure to follow in the long and wonderful tradition of all that is great about romantic fiction.

THE ITALIAN’S UNWILLING WIFE is my thirty-fourth novel for Mills & Boon. I got the idea for this story when I was horse-riding on a beach in St Lucia. It was such a beautiful setting, and my imagination took over. I conjured up a heroine who lived alone there with her secret baby, and an Italian hero who had ruthlessly pursued her to find his child.

My hero Damon is a passionate man. He wants his son to be brought up with all the traditions that he holds dear, and he also wants the heroine back—but this time on his terms. So he sweeps both away to his home on the warm shores of Sicily, where he is planning a wedding.

I invite you to that wedding now, and hope you enjoy their story.

Love

Kathryn

THE ITALIAN'S UNWILLING WIFE

BY
KATHRYN ROSS



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MILLS & BOON

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PROLOGUE

REVENGE was an ugly word. Damon Cyrenci preferred to think of his actions in more clinical terms. He had seen a business opportunity and had taken it.

The fact that he'd had his eye on the Newland Company for a while, and that this takeover gave him a greater sense of personal satisfaction than any other, was irrelevant. What was important was that John Newland's days of trampling his opponents into dust were almost at an end.

As his chauffeured limousine travelled along the Strip, Damon watched the sun setting in a pink glow over the Las Vegas skyline. This was the city where his father had lost everything. It was also the city where Damon had made the mistake of allowing a woman to get under his skin. It seemed fitting that it should be the place where he would put everything right, get back what he wanted.

They passed the MGM Grand, Caesar's Palace, New York New York and, as the pink of the sky turned to the darkness of night, the desert lit up with fiercely glittering light.

The limousine pulled up outside the impressive façade of the Newland building, and Damon allowed himself to savour the moment. His target was almost achieved. In a few moments he would meet John Newland face to face, and have him exactly where he wanted him.

For a second his thoughts drifted back to the last time they had met. How different that meeting had been.

Two and a half years ago it was John who had held the balance of power. He had faced Damon across a boardroom table and had calmly refused his request for a stay of execution on his father's business.

One week—that was all Damon had needed in order to release valuable assets that were in his name and save everything. But Newland had been coldly adamant. 'I am not a charity, Cyrenci; I'm in the business of making money. Your father must honour his commitments immediately and hand over the title deeds to all of his properties. However...' He'd paused for a moment's reflection. 'Your family home in Sicily is listed as one of the company's assets. I might allow you to keep that—on one condition.'

'And what's that?' Damon had asked coolly.

'You walk away from my daughter and never see her again.'

Damon could remember his incredulity and the hot fury in his stomach as he had looked across at the man. Somehow he had remained calm and impassive. 'I am not going to do that.'

And that was when John Newland had laughed at him. 'Abbie really fooled you, didn't she? Let me enlighten you, Cyrenci. My daughter has been brought up with a certain standard of living. She enjoys a luxurious lifestyle—a lifestyle you can't match now the family business has gone. I assure you, she won't be interested in you now.'

'That's a risk I'll take,' Damon had told him smoothly.

'Your choice.' John Newland had shrugged. 'But you lose all ways round. Abbie only dated you in the first place as a favour to me. I needed you out of my hair, and she was the perfect distraction. You think your weekend away together in Palm Springs was a wild impulse?'

John had asked the question scornfully and had shaken his head. 'It was planned—all set up by me. Abbie knew I needed some time to finish my business with your father, and she was happy to help me—but then, just as long as the money is flowing, Abbie will be there. Believe me, she won't hang around you now the game is over and your money is gone.'

The chauffeur opened up the passenger door for Damon, letting in the intense heat of the desert night, a heat almost as intense as the anger he had felt back then. It hadn't been hard to discover that for once John Newland was telling the truth. Abbie had known what her father had been up to, and had in fact assisted him.

Just like her father, she was nothing but a cold-blooded, money-grabbing trickster.

Snapping out of his reverie, Damon stepped out of the limousine.

It had been a lesson hard learnt. But Damon had picked himself up and with strong determination he had seen to it that their fortunes had been reversed.

Briskly he walked up the red-carpeted steps into the cool of the air-conditioned foyer. The entrance to the Newland hotel and casino was palatial; gold-leafed ceilings and stained-glass windows gave it the air of a cathedral, and only the rolling sound of nearby slot machines revealed the truth.

With just a cursory nod to the hotel staff, he headed for the lifts. He knew his way to the boardroom and he strode with confidence towards the door he wanted. This was the moment he had been waiting for.

John Newland was sitting alone at the far end of the long polished table. The lighting in the room was dimmed, his face in shadow. Behind him the picture windows gave a panoramic view of Vegas, glittering like a mirror-ball in the night. But Damon wasn't interested in the view.

'I believe you are expecting me.' He closed the door quietly behind him.

There was silence.

Damon advanced until he could see his nemesis clearly: grey-haired, thickset with glittering hooded eyes. The last time they had met, the man's features had been alight with triumphant disdain. Today, however, his expression was carefully schooled, but Damon could see the signs of strain in the pallor of his skin and the tight way he held his mouth.

It was hard to believe that this was Abigail's father. For a second a picture of her drifted into Damon's mind.

He remembered the day he had met her. She had been swimming here in the hotel pool, and he had watched as she'd pulled herself out. Water had dripped in silver beads over her toned skin. He remembered the sensational curves of her body in the scanty bikini, the perfection of her features, the wide blue eyes, the softness of her lips.

How he had wanted her.

The sudden memory of how badly he had wanted her made heat rise inside him.

'You're early, Cyrenci. The board isn't due to meet for another half an hour.'

John Newland's terse words focussed Damon's thoughts back to where they should be. He would have time to concentrate on Abbie later.

'We both know that the board meeting is just a formality, Newland.' Damon put his briefcase down on the table and opened it. 'You are on your way out.'

John Newland blanched. 'Look—Damon—we've had our differences in the past. But I hope we can put all that behind us and perhaps come to some mutually acceptable deal.' The brusque tone was gone now, replaced by pure desperation. 'I've spoken to a few members of the board—'

'It's over,' Damon said coolly. 'I think you would be advised to just accept that.'

'But you could help me if you wanted to.'

Was the man serious? Damon looked at him with incredulity. 'Why would I do that? To quote something you said to me years ago, John: I'm a businessman, not a charity.'

'I have a few bargaining chips left.' The man shrugged.

'Such as?' Damon was barely listening. He was taking papers out of his case and his eyes were running down a list of the company's assets—assets that now belonged to him. He knew John Newland held no aces, because they were all right here in his hand.

'Well—I recall you once wanted my daughter...'

The words trailed away as Damon fixed him with a cool, penetrating stare. He could hardly believe what he was hearing.

'In fact, you wanted her so badly you were willing to give up your family home for her,' John reminded him tentatively.

'We all make mistakes.' Damon's voice was icy.

'She had her twenty-first birthday last week, and I assure you she is even more beautiful now than she was,' John Newland continued swiftly. 'And her mother was Lady Annabel Redford, you know. Abbie has some influential connections in England that could open doors to a businessman like you.'

'I'm not interested.'

'I think you should be. And if I were to have a word with her...'

'Still at Daddy's bidding, is she?' Damon remarked scathingly.

'I have influence.'

'You have nothing,' Damon put his list of the company assets down on the table in front of the man.

'That's her, isn't it—the property that's marked a few lines underneath my old family home in Sicily?' Damon pointed to a line almost at the bottom of the page. 'Redford Stables, St Lucia.'

John Newland made no reply, just stared down at the list.

'Do you think Abbie will be happy to assist you, John, when she finds out her luxurious lifestyle and her home are lost as part of the company's assets?'

Still the man made no reply, but he started to drum his fingers with agitation against the table.

'No, I didn't think so. As we both know, Abbie's loyalty is to the highest bidder. So I don't believe you or indeed your daughter are in any position to negotiate,' Damon continued smoothly. 'But rest assured I will be looking over my new property with close attention to detail. In fact, I'm heading out to St Lucia tomorrow. Have you any message you would like me to pass on to your daughter?'

There was a moment's considered silence before John looked up. 'No, but I have one for your son—tell him his granddad says hello.'

John Newland watched the shock hit Damon Cyrenci and felt a gleam of satisfaction.

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS hurricane season in St Lucia and the warnings had gone out. 'Michael' was a category three, but was gathering pace at sea and heading for shore. The weathermen were predicating a direct hit sometime within the next twenty-four hours.

But for now the sun was setting in a perfect blaze of glory over the lush rainforests, and not a breath of air rustled the tall palms that encircled the stables.

Abbie, however, was not taken in by the deceptive calm. She had experienced the full force of a hurricane the previous year; it had taken the roof off her house and almost decimated the stables. It had taken a long time to put everything right, and financially she was still reeling from the disaster. She couldn't afford another direct hit.

So she had spent the afternoon trying to prepare. She had nailed down everything she could, and long after most of her hired help had gone home for the day she was still moving heavy equipment into the storerooms.

'Abbie, your father has been on the phone for you again,' Jess called across to her as she came out of the house. 'He's left another message on the answer machine.'

'OK, thanks.' Abbie brushed her blonde hair distractedly back from her face. She had nothing to say to her father, and she wasn't interested in his messages, but she couldn't help but wonder why he had started ringing her again.

Putting the last of her work tools away, she headed up to the veranda. Mario was in Jess's arms, and as he saw his mother walk towards them his eyes lit with excitement and he held out his arms to her.

With a smile, Abbie reached to take her baby. He snuggled in against her and she kissed him, breathing in the clean scent of his skin. Mario was twenty-one months now, and adorable. He was the one thing in Abbie's life that made everything worthwhile.

'Do you want to get off now, Jess? You've got a date tonight, haven't you?' she asked as she cuddled the child.

‘Yes. If you are sure you can manage, that would be a great help.’

‘Absolutely. You go and have a good time.’

For a moment Abbie stood and watched as the young woman strolled towards her four-wheel drive. At eighteen, Jess was the youngest member of her staff, and also the hardest working. Not only was she a qualified child-minder and a superb horsewoman but she helped out a lot around the stables. Sometimes Abbie wondered how she would manage without her.

She waved to Jess as she reversed and pulled away down the long driveway.

Darkness was closing in now. The stables were on a lonely track leading down to a deserted cove. Her nearest neighbours were miles away, and very few cars passed this way. Usually Abbie didn't mind being on her own; she enjoyed the solitude. But for once as Jess's car disappeared she was acutely conscious of her isolation.

It was probably the approaching storm that was making her feel so on edge, she told herself as she went back into the house. Plus all these phone calls from her father.

As she stepped inside, her eyes were immediately drawn towards the phone, where a flashing light proclaimed there were now ten messages.

Whatever her father wanted, she wasn't interested. She would put Mario to bed and delete the calls later, she told herself as she headed for the stairs.

The child went down into his cot easily. Abbie set the musical mobile playing above his head and watched over him until he fell asleep. Then, leaving the night light on, she crept from the nursery to her bedroom across the corridor to shower and change.

Abbie had just put on her silk dressing-gown and was about to go back downstairs to make herself a drink when the phone in her room rang again, and the answer machine clicked on.

‘Abbie, where the hell are you?’ Her father's irate tones seemed to fill the house. *‘Have you received any of my messages? This is important.’*

It was strange how just hearing his voice made her nervous. She supposed it was all those years of conditioning—of being afraid to ignore his commands.

Wrapping her dressing gown more closely around her body, she reminded herself fiercely that her father no longer had a hold over her—he couldn't hurt her any more.

‘Do you hear me, Abigail?’

He probably wanted to summon her back to Vegas to host one of his parties. She shuddered at the thought. She'd escaped from that life over two years ago—she would have thought he'd got the message by now. His bullying blackmail tactics no longer worked. She wasn't going back.

She was on her way across her bedroom to switch off the machine when she heard him mention a name—a name that made her freeze and the world start to zone out as darkness threatened to engulf her. *Damon Cyrenci.*

For so long she had tried to block that name out of her mind, pretend he had never existed. And the only way she had been able to do that was by filling her every waking hour and making herself so bone-tired that personal thoughts were a luxury. But, even so, sometimes in the silence of the night he would come to her as she slept and she would see his darkly handsome face again. Would imagine his hands touching her, his lips crushing against hers, and she would wake with tears on her cheeks.

‘I've lost everything, Abigail—everything—to Damon Cyrenci, and that includes the stables because they are part of the company's assets.’

Through the turmoil of her thoughts, Abbie tried to concentrate on what her father was saying. The stables were hers, weren't they?

‘And he's on his way out there now to look over his property.’

The words hit her like a hurricane at force five. Damon was on his way here! Her heart raced—her body felt weak. Damon—the love of her life, the father of her child, the one man she had given herself to completely. The memories that went along with all those facts twisted inside her like

a serpent intent on squeezing her very soul. And along with the memories there was a fierce longing—a longing that had never really gone away, a longing that she had just learnt to live with.

She sat down on the bed behind her; it was either sit down or fall down. *Damon was coming here.* It was all she could focus on.

What would he look like now, what would he say to her? Would he still be angry with her? What would he say when he discovered he had a child?

Had he forgiven her? The wrench of yearning that idea brought with it was immense.

As the phone connection died, she buried her head in her hands.

She remembered the day she had first met Damon. She remembered that the blistering heat of the midday sun had come nowhere near matching the heat he had stirred within her. She remembered shading her eyes to look up at him as she'd climbed out of the pool. He was tall—well over six-foot-four and he had been wearing a lightweight suit that had sat perfectly on his athletic build.

'You must be Abbie Newland?' he had said quietly, and the attractive accent had added fuel to a fire that had quietly and instantly started to blaze inside her.

He was ten years older than Abbie, Sicilian, with thick dark hair and searing, intense dark eyes, and to say he was good-looking would be an understatement of vast proportions. He was quite simply gorgeous.

'I'm Damon Cyrenci. Your father said I would find you here.'

The disappointment inside Abbie was almost as intense as her attraction for him. Because this was the man her father had ordered her to date. The command had infuriated her, but she wasn't at liberty to refuse; her plan had been to snub him, then just walk away. Then she could honestly tell her father that he hadn't invited her out. But, as soon as her eyes met with the handsome Sicilian, her body didn't want to comply with that idea at all.

'Do you want to join me for a drink?' He nodded over towards a bar that was cocooned in the tropical shade of the gardens.

'Maybe just for ten minutes,' she found herself saying. 'I haven't got much time.'

'Why, what else have you got to do?' The question had been asked with a glint of humour, and it had been apparent right from the outset that he had judged her as little more than a social butterfly.

She didn't really blame him. To the outside world, that was probably exactly how her life appeared, but the remark still smarted. She wanted to tell him that appearances could be deceptive, that she was in fact trapped within her gilded cage, forced to dance attendance on a father whose every whim was her command. But of course she didn't—he wouldn't have been interested and anyway, if word got back to her father that she had said anything, the consequences would have been dire.

So somehow she just forced herself to shrug. 'Let's see. I'm the rich, spoilt daughter of a millionaire—what else could I be doing this afternoon?' She slanted him a sardonic look. 'Apart from lying in the sun, shopping and visiting the beauty salon, you mean?'

He smiled, unapologetic. 'Must be a tough life.'

'It is. But someone has to do it.' Although she tried to sound flippant, something of her annoyance or distress must have shown in her eyes, because suddenly his tone softened.

'Shall we start again?' he asked, and held out his hand. 'I'm Damon Cyrenci, and I'm in town to negotiate the sale of a chain of restaurants owned by my father.'

She looked at the hand he held out, and she hesitated a moment before taking it. What exactly was her father up to? she had wondered. What harm would following his orders do?

Then her eyes met with Damon Cyrenci's and she told herself that, no matter what her father was up to, this man was more than capable of looking out for himself.

'Abigail Newland.' The net was cast as she placed her hand in his. She liked the touch of his skin against hers, liked the feeling in the pit of her stomach when he smiled.

She remembered having dinner with him that night. She remembered him kissing her, a searing, intensely passionate kiss that had made her long for so much more.

She had dated him for five short weeks, but with each meeting her feelings for him had intensified. Her hands curled into tight fists just thinking about the way he'd made her feel. But because of the situation she had always forced herself to pull back.

Damon hadn't been used to a woman pulling away from him, and somehow it had made him all the more determined to pursue her.

Yes, the net had been cast—but she had been the one caught in its fine weave, because somewhere along the way in those few short weeks she had fallen in love with Damon Cyrenci.

The phone rang again, interrupting Abbie's thoughts, and she listened as once more the answer machine cut in.

'Abbie, please pick up the phone.'

Abbie just sat numbly, listening. She hadn't spoken to her father since her mother's death just over two years ago. And, no matter what was at stake, she still couldn't speak to him now.

'This is about revenge, Abigail—and you are next on Cyrenci's list. He knows what you did—knows you were perfectly complicit in his father's destruction.' Her father's voice was abrasive. *'But luckily I'm still thinking for both of us. I told him about Mario. He was shocked and angry, I could see it in his face. But the child gives us a bargaining chip—it means he doesn't hold all of the aces.'*

Abbie felt sick inside. She hated her father—hated the sordid, horrible way he even thought.

The line went dead again. Abbie didn't know how long she just sat there after that. Her father stopped phoning, but the silence of the house seemed to swirl around her with his words.

Then she heard the distant sound of a car engine.

He's on his way out there now to look over his property...

Certainly, whoever was in that car was heading for this house—there was nowhere else out here.

CHAPTER TWO

THE shrill ring of the doorbell cut through her. And for a few moments she was immobilised.

Was Damon really outside her door? There had been moments when she had dreamed of this, dreamed that he'd come to her when he found out about his child, and that he would forgive her.

But they were just dreams. She was sensible enough to realise that the reality was encapsulated in her father's phone messages.

Damon wasn't going to forgive her—she'd known that at their last meeting, when he had angrily confronted her about what she had done, and she had tried desperately to explain her actions. He hadn't wanted to listen; all he'd been able to think about was the fact that she had assisted in his father's downfall. Even when she had falteringly tried to tell him that she was as much a victim as his father he had cut across her contemptuously.

'You must consider me really naïve if you think I'm going to fall for any more of your lies. I know what you are. I have evidence to support exactly what a lying, conniving, deceitful—'

'Damon, please!' She had broken across him tremulously. *'Please believe me, I never wanted any of this to happen. The time I spent with you was special to me, and I—'*

'Give the acting a rest, Abbie.' The scorn in his voice had cut through her like a sword. *'At least the one good thing about this whole sorry mess is the fact that, as far as I was concerned, our time together was all about sex—I felt nothing for you, other than the pleasure of taking your body. Nothing at all.'*

There had been a harsh coldness in his words and in his eyes that she had never seen before. It was as if a mask had been ripped away at that moment and she had seen the true Damon for the first time. It had shocked her to the core, and it had hurt. God help her, it still hurt!

But it also made her very sure that if it was Damon outside he wasn't here for any sentimental reasons, and he certainly wouldn't be interested in the fact that she'd had his child.

The shrill ring of the doorbell sliced through the night again, and Abbie tried to focus on what she should do. There were a few heartbeats of silence whilst whoever it was gave her a moment to come to the door. When she didn't, he put his finger on the bell again and held it there.

It had to be Damon! If there was one thing she should have remembered about him, it was his determination to get what he wanted.

He was going to wake Mario up! Her son was a deep sleeper, but he had his limits.

Suddenly anger surged to Abbie's rescue. She wasn't going to hide up here, feeling guilty about the past, because the truth was that it hadn't been her fault. She had been forced to do what she did. And nobody had a right to roll up here and make such a racket at this time of night.

Drawing her dressing gown closely around her slender figure, she marched downstairs, and, taking a deep breath, she threw open the door.

Damon Cyrenci was standing on her porch, leaning against the door jamb with his finger on the bell. Even though she had been expecting to see him it was still a shock.

He stepped back as the door opened, and silence reigned.

For a second his eyes swept over her with audacious scrutiny, taking in everything about her from her bare feet to the wild tumble of blonde curls around her shoulders.

And the strange thing was that for a moment Abbie was transported back to their first meeting, when he had looked at her in exactly the same way. She felt a tug of sexual attraction rising from somewhere very deep inside her. His appearance had hardly altered. The business suit he wore emphasised his fabulously well-honed physique, and the dark thickness of his hair was unchanged. Maybe there were a few silver strands at the temples, but they just made him appear all the more distinguished.

As her eyes held with the dark, searing intensity of his, her heart lurched crazily. He was the same drop-dead-gorgeous man who had stolen her heart away—except that man had only ever been an illusion, she reminded herself fiercely. Despite the heat of the passion they had once shared, she had never meant anything to him. Behind the façade the real Damon had just been a seducer—a predator who'd enjoyed the thrill of the chase and nothing more.

Falling in love with him had been a mistake, and she had learnt her lesson.

The memory helped her to pull herself together and focus her senses.

'Hello, Abigail. It's been a long time.'

His voice was coolly sardonic, and yet the attractive accent still managed to lash against the fragility of her defences.

'What are you doing here, Damon?' Somehow she managed to sound calm and controlled.

'Is that all you can say after all this time?' Again there was the same mocking tone to his question. 'How about "nice to see you, Damon—why don't you come in?"'

The strange thing was that one part of her—the wild, illogical part—wanted to say those words, but his manner forbade it. Something in the cool tone and the glint of his eye told her very clearly that although he was here on her doorstep nothing had changed from their last meeting, and his opinion of her was as low as you could get.

'I haven't got time for games, Damon,' she grated unevenly.

'Really? Strange how you had plenty of time for games in the past.'

Her father's words reverberated through her consciousness. *This is about revenge, Abigail—and you are next on Cyrenci's list.* She swallowed hard and slanted her chin up. 'Obviously this isn't an impromptu social call, so just say whatever it is you've come to say, Damon, and then go. You'll forgive me if I don't invite you in.'

'No—I don't think I will forgive you, Abbie.'

Although he said the words matter-of-factly, there was an undercurrent that struck her and hurt—and that in turn made her angry. Why should he still have the power to hurt her like that? She tightened her hold on the door. 'Well, you are not coming in.'

He shook his head. 'I really don't think you are being very friendly, and I'm sure given the circumstances you can do better than that—in fact, your father assured me that you could.'

What had her father been saying to him? 'I don't know what's been going on between you and my father. I believe you now control the Newland empire—well...' she shrugged '...I don't care. It has nothing to do with me.'

'That's where you are wrong, Abbie. This has everything to do with you.'

The chill certainty in his voice flayed her.

'I just want you to go now.' To Abbie's distress, her voice faltered slightly.

'I'm not going anywhere.'

'Well, you are certainly not coming inside my house.' She started to try and close the door but she didn't move quickly enough, and he put his foot in the way, effectively stopping her.

'Let me spell things out for you a little more clearly.' His voice was suddenly very serious. 'We have unfinished business, and I'm coming in whether you like it or not.'

'Damon, it's late and you're scaring me.'

'Good.' He sounded cold and unyielding.

'I'll have to ring the police if you don't go now,' she threatened shakily.

'By all means, you do that.' For a second his eyes narrowed. 'At least that way we can speed things up.'

'Speed what things up?'

'The legal side of things.' He watched impassively as the colour drained from her face. 'As you have so rightly pointed out, I'm in control of the Newland assets now. And according to company records no rent has been paid on this place for—oh, quite some time.'

'That's because the place belongs to me!' she hissed furiously.

Damon shook his head. 'No, it belongs to me,' he corrected her quietly. 'And I'm here to take stock of my belongings.'

'Well, then, you'd better contact me through my solicitor.'

Damon smiled at that. 'Oh, don't worry, I will be doing that. Because I also want access to my son.'

The words dropped into the silence like a bombshell, and Abbie's limbs suddenly felt as if they didn't belong to her.

'So are we going to do things the easy way or the hard way?' he enquired silkily. 'It's up to you.'

She couldn't answer him. Her hands dropped from the door, and as she momentarily lost her hold on the situation he took his opportunity and walked past her into the house.

His eyes swept over the lounge area, taking in the brown leather sofas, the polished wood floors and the huge stone fireplace. The place was very stylish, but it wasn't what he had been expecting. The furniture, when you looked closely, was old, and everything had a slight air of faded opulence. But Damon wasn't interested in décor; he was searching for telltale signs of something that interested him far more. He found what he was looking for as his eyes lighted on a box of toys by the far end of the sofa, and a discarded teddy bear on a chair. At the sight of those toys his insides knotted with a fierce anger.

'So, where is he?'

As he rounded towards her again, Abbie sensed a seething fury that made her truly afraid. She could hardly think straight for a moment, never mind answer him.

'Where is my son, Abbie? You may as well tell me now, because I will find him even if I have to go through every room in this house—or every house on this island.'

The determination in those words stunned her, but they also brought an inner answering strength welling up inside her. 'You keep away from him, Damon. He is not a belonging listed under the company assets. He is a little person in his own right, and I won't have you marching in here upsetting him.'

'And what about his right to have a father—or doesn't that count in your twisted logic?'

The question smote Abbie's heart. It was something she had asked herself time and time again—something that had kept her awake long into the lonely nights when she had discovered she was pregnant. Yes, she wanted Mario to have a father—a loving father who would put his needs first. But Damon had left before she'd realised she was pregnant, and she hadn't known where he had gone. She'd tried to track him down, but to no avail. She had consoled herself with the fact that he wouldn't have been interested in his child anyway. Damon didn't go in for commitment, he led a playboy lifestyle. He'd told her that when they'd first met.

But the strange thing was that when he'd held her in his arms she had imagined that his feelings for her were different, that what they had shared had meant something. But of course she had been fooling herself. That had been quite clear when he'd walked away from her.

The memory hurt so much that she wanted to tell Damon that the little boy upstairs was not his, and that he had a father in his life—a wonderful, loving father, a man who also loved her. She opened her mouth but the words refused to come.

When it came right down to it, she couldn't lie about something as important as that.

'Of course having a father counts,' she said shakily instead.

'Right—which, of course, is why you came to me and told me you were pregnant?' Damon's tone was scathing.

'And if I had would you have wanted to stay around and play happy families? I don't think so. We had had a few weeks together of wild sex—it meant nothing.' Even as she said the words, the memories that flared inside her made her hot, made her voice tremble with suppressed feeling. 'You said as much yourself—you said...' She shook her head and pulled herself together before the tears could gather in her voice. 'Anyway, all that is in the past and irrelevant. The truth is that I didn't find out I was pregnant until after you'd gone. I didn't know how to get in touch with you. You hadn't left your address or contact numbers. I didn't know where you were.'

'You are good at making excuses.' Damon shook his head. 'No, Abbie, you didn't tell me because your father held the purse strings and you thought I had nothing. That was a more important consideration for you at the time.'

'That's not true!'

'Like hell it's not. You forget, Abbie, that I know you exactly for what you are.' Damon's eyes raked contemptuously over her, but as they did so he couldn't help noticing the sensational curves of her figure beneath the silk of the dressing gown. How come her beauty could still blow his mind? he wondered hazily. How come when he looked at her now after all this time he could still remember exactly how she had felt when he touched her—how she had tasted, how she had moved beneath him?

Back then she had been firm and pert and he had wanted her like crazy—but he could excuse that because he hadn't known the truth about her then.

How come he could feel the same stirrings now?

'We're wasting time,' he grated, furious with himself for being sidetracked even momentarily like this. 'And I've already wasted enough of that.'

To Abbie's horror Damon started to head towards the stairs with a look of determination.

'You can't go up there.' She hurried to stand in his path, tried to grab hold of his arm, but he brushed her away as if she were an annoying fly and swept past her.

'Damon, you have no right!' Her voice caught on a sob as she raced after him, but he didn't break his stride.

'Actually, as the child's father, I think you will find I have lots of rights.'

The words brought a strange kind of helplessness washing over Abbie. It was the same feeling she used to get when dealing with her father. It was the knowledge that someone more powerful than you could dictate your life, and there wasn't anything you could do about it, because if you didn't comply the consequences would be more than you could bear.

She watched as he pushed doors open along the landing into deserted bedrooms.

'Stop it!' The anguished whisper made him halt in his tracks to look back at her.

'Don't bother to try and turn on the false tears, Abbie, because it's not going to work,' he told her acerbically. 'I don't care how you feel—in fact I couldn't give that—' he clicked his fingers softly '—for your emotions.'

'I know,' she said softly. 'I've always known that.'

Something about the way she said those words caught at him, and for a brief second he felt a tug of some long-forgotten emotion as he looked into the blue depths of her eyes. He remembered the first night that they had made love. He remembered the vulnerable way she had looked up at him as she'd allowed him to unfasten the buttons of her dress, almost as if she'd been afraid to trust her emotions to him.

The memory infuriated him. Abbie Newland was an actress—there had been nothing remotely vulnerable about her. She had been playing the part her father had set for her, and she had done it very well, and had enjoyed a little fun along the way.

His dark eyes hardened at the memory. 'Well, at least we understand each other.'

'Yes, at least there's that,' she whispered numbly. 'But you should also understand that my child is more important to me than anything and if you upset him in any way I will make you pay for it.'

She tried to draw herself up as she said the words. It was probably a bit like facing down a lion without any real weapons, but she wanted him to know that she would fight to the death if necessary for her child.

'Just because I don't care about your feelings doesn't mean I don't care about him.'

The answer should have reassured her slightly, but it just stung at raw nerves. Still she held his gaze with determination. 'He's in the room at the far end of the corridor,' she said quietly. 'Let me go into the room first, just in case he's awake. You are a stranger to him. I don't want you scaring him.'

Damon considered her words for a second, and then stepped back to allow her to lead the way.

Her whole body felt as if it were shivering with reaction as she walked past him. She guessed she was in shock.

Why did Damon want to see his son? She couldn't believe it was out of any paternal interest. Those sentiments didn't fit with the man she knew him to be. Maybe this was just curiosity. Maybe he would take one look at his child, make a token pretence of being interested, before getting back into his car to get on with the real things in life that mattered to him, such as revenge and money and power... And, of course, womanizing.

Yes, that was probably what would happen, she told herself as she opened the door to Mario's room.

She was relieved to see that the child was still sleeping. He was lying on his back, his face turned sideways against the pillow. He looked the perfect picture of peaceful innocence, his cherub mouth slightly parted, his long dark lashes resting against the satin-smooth skin.

She glanced back at Damon. 'You can come in, but only for five minutes.'

'I think your days of being in charge of this situation are over, Abbie,' he said quietly as he stepped past her.

The words hit Abbie like a punch to the solar plexus. But the feeling was nothing compared to the reaction she felt, witnessing the powerful intensity on Damon's features as he looked down at his sleeping child.

She felt her heart racing against her chest as the realization hit her that this was about far more than just idle curiosity, and to try and dismiss what was happening in such a way would be to vastly underestimate the situation.

For a long moment Damon just looked at his son. Then abruptly he turned and left the room.

For a second Abbie couldn't move. Her mind was reeling with confusion—she couldn't get a handle on this situation at all. What were Damon's intentions? Why was he really here? Hastily Abbie followed him back out onto the landing.

He was already at the other end of the corridor. 'So, now you've seen him,' she said breathlessly. 'Where do we go from here?'

He made no reply; he didn't even look around at her, just headed down the stairs. The front door was still lying wide open, and he marched through it without closing it behind him.

'Damon, where do we go from here?' she asked again, a note of desperation in her voice. She needed to make some sense of tonight, needed to understand what Damon was thinking—and she couldn't let him walk away without giving her some clue as to what was to happen next.

'Damon?' She followed him downstairs and out onto the porch. 'Damon, *please!*'

His footsteps slowed and then he looked around. 'That's better.' There was a gleam in his eyes as he looked over at her. 'If you keep that tone in your voice, we just might get somewhere.'

The cold churning in the pit of her stomach intensified.

'I agree that we need to talk rationally about this situation.'

He made no reply, and she thought he was going to climb into his car and drive away, but then to her surprise he went to the back of the vehicle and took out a small bag.

With the flick of a switch the car was locked again, and then he was heading back towards her with resolute strides.

Although there was a part of her that was glad he wasn't just going to drive away, leaving her wondering what was going to happen next, she didn't like the look of this latest development at all. Her heart thumped nervously against her ribs. 'Where do you think you are going with that bag?'

'I'm bringing it inside my house,' he said curtly. 'And then I'm going to have a drink and get into bed, because it has been a very long day and I'm tired.'

'You can't stay here!'

'Why not?'

'Because...I don't want you here.'

He stepped past her and into the house. 'Tough.'

The door slammed closed behind him.

CHAPTER THREE

FOR one horrible moment she thought he was going to turn the key in the lock, leaving her stranded outside in the dark in her dressing gown. But to her relief the door opened easily as she turned the handle.

With a mixture of trepidation and fury, she glanced around. His bag was at the base of the stairs and she could hear him opening and closing cupboard doors in the kitchen.

She followed the sounds and watched from the doorway as he found a bottle of vodka and poured himself a drink. 'What are you playing at?'

'I think I just told you.' He lifted the glass in a mocking salute.

With difficulty she reined in her temper. This situation was not going to be resolved by losing her cool.

'Damon, you can't stay here. It's not appropriate.'

He laughed at that. 'As if you'd know anything about appropriate behaviour! I have to say, all those years mixing with the aristocracy at those English boarding schools weren't wasted, were they? You've certainly learnt the art of pretending to be genteel.'

With difficulty she ignored the insult. 'This isn't solving anything. Why don't you go and check into a hotel for tonight and then come back tomorrow? We can talk properly when we have both calmed down and are thinking rationally.'

'I am calm.' He took a sip of his drink and regarded her levelly over the rim of the crystal glass. 'And I'm thinking very rationally. It's one in the morning, there's a storm coming in, and I have no intention of going to a hotel now—especially as I own a perfectly good house here.'

'Damon this is ridiculous!' Her voice rose in panic. 'You are not being at all reasonable.'

One dark eyebrow rose. 'Really? I think given the circumstances I'm being extremely reasonable. Let's look at the facts, shall we? You don't actually own this property. In fact, you are heavily in debt and behind with rent—'

'I am no such thing!'

'Plus you've hidden my child away from me, depriving me of precious time with him,' Damon continued as if she hadn't spoken. 'I don't think any court is going to look too kindly on you at all. In fact, I think you will be the one who is judged unreasonable.'

'You're twisting the facts!' She pushed a distraught hand through her blonde hair. 'I didn't know I was pregnant until after you'd gone. I didn't hide anything. And will you stop pretending that you give a damn about having a child? We both know that you would still have walked away from him even if I'd told you I was pregnant.'

'Do we?' Damon's voice grated with sarcasm. 'You don't know the first thing about what I would have done, because you don't really know the first thing about me.'

'I know that you are a playboy who likes to roam the pleasure fields.'

'Certainly.' He inclined his head. 'And I never planned on having children of my own. But you've changed that.'

Damon looked at her pointedly. 'Enlighten me, Abbie. What were you planning on telling my son when he gets older? That his father is dead? Or that his father didn't want to know him?'

Abbie hesitated. 'I wouldn't have lied to him. I'd have handled it.'

'Believe me, no matter how you handled it, it still wouldn't have been right.' Damon's voice was heavy. He remembered all too well what it was like growing up without a parent. His mother had walked out of the family home when he was eight. It was so easy to screw up a child's life. Maybe that was why he had avoided settling down and having children. The responsibility was awesome, and he believed implacably that a child deserved two parents and a stable home.

'You had no right to keep Mario a secret from me.' Damon's eyes burnt into hers. 'Any court will tell you that.'

'He wasn't a secret. And will you stop talking about courts and judgements!'

He shrugged and took another sip of his drink. 'Courts and judgements are very much the reality; you better get used to it.'

'Why are you being like this?' The question sprang from her lips with anguish.

'Like what?'

'So...brutal...as if you want to punish me.'

He looked at her then, and gave a short, mirthless laugh. 'Why do you think?'

The sardonic question tore at her. 'My father was right—this is all about revenge, isn't it?' She made herself say the words, her voice trembling with emotion.

He took another sip of his drink, and then threw the remaining contents of the glass down the sink.

'You're angry about what my father did, and I understand that.' Abbie tried very hard to remain calm. 'And I'm sorry for my part in it. But as I tried to explain long ago, it wasn't my fault I—'

'Of course not. But then shallow, spoilt socialites like you don't believe in taking responsibility for your actions, do you? You think you can do what you want, and sorry is just a word.' His voice grated with sarcasm. 'But let me assure you that angry is a bit of an understatement for how I'm feeling right now.'

Abbie glared at him furiously. 'I am none of the things you have accused me of being.'

'And Father Christmas really does slide down chimneys on Christmas Eve.'

The scorn in his voice made Abbie's temper soar. But, as much as she would have loved him to know the truth about the past, she knew she could never tell him about her mother now. She had tried to explain her actions to him at their last meeting. She had braved the contempt in his eyes, and had haltingly started to open up to him, only to have him laugh scornfully in her face and cut her

off. She couldn't go through that again. The pain of trying to tell him something so raw, so deeply personal, was beyond endurance. And why should she put herself through that when it was clear his opinion of her hadn't changed? He thought she was a liar, and he wouldn't listen to any explanation—wouldn't believe her, anyway. It all hurt far too much.

Some things were best left in the past, she told herself firmly. What mattered now was her child's welfare.

That fact made her swallow her fury and keep her cool. 'So you want to punish me,' she forced herself to continue. 'I can handle that. But going to a court to get access to a child you don't want—that isn't going to make this right. Please don't take this out on Mario.'

'How do you know I don't want him? You're making sweeping assumptions.' Damon's voice was cool. 'What did you think was going to happen when your father told me I had a child? Did you think I'd just throw money at you and disappear? If that's what you want, then you are dreaming. Because, believe it or not, I'm thinking about what is best for my son now. Something you seem incapable of.'

'I have always put my son first,' Abbie told him fiercely. 'And I don't want anything from you.'

He fixed her with a look that told her in no uncertain terms that he didn't believe her.

She swept an unsteady hand through her hair. Obviously he was never going to believe that she was anything other than a scheming witch. 'So what are you going to do?' she asked quietly. 'What do you consider *best* for Mario?'

Damon didn't answer her immediately. He appeared to be thinking about his options. Abbie could feel her nerves twisting and stretching. Was he deliberately trying to torment her? Was this part of his revenge? Maybe she should be flinging herself on his mercy instead of being confrontational.

But on the other hand maybe that was what he wanted. Her father used to enjoy controlling her through fear. When she'd tried to rebel, he'd reminded her of what he could do, and she would be yanked quickly back into line.

The memory made her angle her chin up defiantly to meet Damon's cool gaze. She had sworn that no one would ever have that power over her again. 'If you go for custody, I'll fight you every step of the way.'

'That's your prerogative.' He shook his head. 'I admire your spirit—but of course I will break it.'

He watched the bright glitter of fury in her eyes. She was so very beautiful—more so than she had been at eighteen; her father had been right about that. The thought stole, unwelcome, into his mind and he found his gaze drifting down once more over her body. He could see the firm curves of her breasts through the thin silk of the gown, and because the bright lights of the lounge were behind her he could also see the long, shapely outline of her legs.

She had always been attractive, but she had matured into a stunningly desirable package. Pity about her cold, mercenary heart, he thought dryly.

Abbie noticed the way he looked at her—noticed, and bizarrely felt her body throb, as if his eyes were actually touching her. She tried to ignore the feeling, tried to pretend it wasn't happening. How could she feel like this when her mind was racing with fear—when she hated him? 'Maybe you just have rage issues that need to be readdressed, Damon,' she said evenly.

He laughed. 'Maybe you are right.' He put his glass down on the draining board with a thud.

'So what are you going to do?'

'Right now, I'm going to bed,' he said calmly.

'You can't!'

'Why not?'

'Because you can't make statements like that and just leave things! I need to know what your intentions are regarding Mario. You are not really thinking of fighting me for custody, are you?'

Damon stared at her for a moment. When John Newland had told him he was a father, he had been shocked—then he had been furious. All kinds of emotions had been racing through him

ever since. Some of the feelings had come as a complete surprise to him—such as the feeling of protectiveness when he had looked down at his sleeping child.

Yes, he'd decided a long time ago that he wasn't going to settle down and have children. But the fact was he had a child, and abandoning him wasn't an option. He couldn't walk away from that responsibility; he strongly believed in doing the right thing.

But what *was* the right thing in this situation? His eyes flicked over towards Abbie, and for a second he found himself thinking about her father's words to him in the boardroom.

Abbie could be of use to him.

The words sizzled provocatively through his consciousness. Abruptly he tried to dismiss them. 'I'll sleep on the problem, and we'll discuss terms in the morning,' he grated tersely.

He was so arrogant! So infuriating! She watched as he walked past her towards the lounge.

'I don't want to discuss terms in the morning. I want to discuss terms now! And it may have escaped your notice but there are no spare beds in the house. All the rooms you looked into tonight are empty. The only other bed in the house is mine.'

He turned slowly and looked at her. 'Is that an invitation?'

He watched the flare of heat under the creaminess of her skin with detachment.

'You know it's not.'

'Do I?' He shrugged. 'Nothing you would stoop to would surprise me. In fact, when I faced your father in the boardroom at Newland he made me a very bizarre offer.'

'What kind of an offer?'

'The deal was that I help him retain his place on the board, and in return I get you.'

'What do you mean, you get me?' Her voice was stiff.

'Just what I said. In return for my help getting him back on the board of directors, he said he could arrange for you to... Well, accommodate me in whatever way I saw fit, really. I'm not sure if he was selling you as a trophy wife who would have very useful business connections, or the convenient mistress there to entertain me in bed, plus play hostess when required—that kind of thing. Of course, the second option caught my interest more at first. As you know, I'm not the settling-down type. But then, I didn't know I had a child at that point.'

He watched the colour flooding back into her cheeks. 'Don't worry, I turned him down. My motto has always been to cut out the middleman. Dealing direct is a much more satisfactory solution, don't you think?'

'What I think is that you are just as vile as my father.' Her voice trembled alarmingly. Just when she thought her father couldn't get any lower in her estimation, he sank to new depths. She felt degraded and humiliated by him—soiled by association.

'Dear me, have you had a fall-out with darling Daddy?' Damon walked back towards her and reached out to trail a finger down over the smoothness of her skin. 'What's the matter, are you annoyed because he can't bankroll you anymore?'

She flinched at the touch of his hand. She didn't know what hurt more, her father's disgusting business proposition or Damon's glib acceptance that she would be in any way amenable towards it!

His eyes held with her glittering gaze. 'Never mind. Although I've cut your father out of the equation, I'm still weighing all the possibilities up, I assure you. Trophy wife versus convenient mistress...' He shrugged. 'Or should I just take custody of Mario and walk away... The choices are endless.'

'You wouldn't get custody of Mario,' Abbie told him heatedly. 'And I wouldn't marry you if you were...if you were the last man left on the planet and lived in a gold-plated palace.' She angled her head up proudly.

Damon laughed at that. 'Oh, but we both know that you would.'

'You always did have an inflated opinion of yourself.'

'I just know how Ms Abigail Newland's gold-digging mind works.'

‘You know nothing about me. I would rather die than go along with the idea.’

Damon smiled ‘You didn’t pass away with righteous indignation when you got involved with your father’s deals last time.’

He watched her lips part noiselessly, watched the shadows flicker across the beauty of her eyes. ‘That was different.’

Damon shook his head. She was a good actress, he’d give her that. ‘You go where the money is—your father told me that about you over two years ago.’

He watched as her hands clenched and unclenched at her sides. She had such slender hands. Everything about her was so feminine; even her rage was simmering, contained—lady-like. Although, he remembered that in bed she hadn’t been quite so restrained—not once he’d taught her what he liked and how he liked it.

He wished he could stop thinking about that. But the fact was he couldn’t.

From the moment she had opened the front door to him tonight, he’d known that sexually he still wanted her.

He wanted her now. The strength of that need totally infuriated him. How could he feel like this when he knew her for what she was—disliked her, even?

He hated that. But it was a fact, and no matter how he kept telling himself to ignore it he couldn’t. So what the hell was he going to do about it?

His eyes moved up over her body slowly, appraisingly. He had no doubt in his mind that she had known about her father’s offer to him and had been hoping to play it for all it was worth.

Maybe the best thing to do here was to take control and play her at her own game. The more he thought about that idea, the more he liked it.

‘So...’ His tone was measured, his mind ticking over his options. ‘You want to talk terms? Let’s talk terms.’

The way he was looking at her was anything but clinical, yet the tone of his voice was detached, objective. What the hell was running through his mind now? Abbie wondered nervously. She moved her hands to draw her gown more tightly around her body, unaware that the instinctively protective gesture only showed her figure to clearer advantage.

She wanted to tell him to get out, that she wouldn’t talk to him after the things he had said to her—the things he had insinuated. But she forced herself to calm down and think about what was important. And that was Mario. ‘My terms are that my child stays where he belongs, and that’s with me. Let’s face it, Damon, you are a businessman who jets off around the world at a moment’s notice. You sit in meetings that run on until the small hours. That doesn’t fit with looking after a twenty-one-month-old baby. He’s a full-time commitment.’

‘Yes, he is. And that’s the one reason I’m prepared to offer you a good deal.’

‘What kind of a good deal?’ The words were out before she could consider them, and she instantly regretted them as she saw the way his lips curved in a cool smile.

‘You see? The Abigail Newland I know is never far away, is she?’ he hissed. His eyes swept over her body again with a hard gleam of male appraisal. ‘In a nutshell?’ He shrugged. ‘I guess your father’s idea isn’t completely off the wall. I suppose you would be a convenient package. You are the mother of my child and we understand each other. And, I have to admit, the whole idea of having a lady in the lounge and a whore in the bedroom does appeal.’

Fury swept through her at those mocking words. ‘Well, maybe you’d better put an advert in the paper, because I sure as hell am not interested.’ Her eyes flashed fire at him. ‘The thought of you laying one finger on me makes me nauseous.’

She would have marched past him and out of the room at that point, but he caught hold of her arm and pulled her back.

‘We both know that’s not true.’ Although his hand was holding her firmly, the touch of his skin against hers was like an electric shock sending weird little darts through her body, intruding on her rational mind—making her tremble deep-down inside.

He was right—it wasn’t true. It was a long time since they had made love, but she remembered how much she had liked it—remembered how blissful it was to lose herself to the masterful dominance of his caresses, his kisses.

Why was she thinking like this? She hated him, she reminded herself fiercely. He had just insulted her beyond belief—hurt her beyond belief. Had she no self-respect?

‘Let me go.’ Her voice was harsh with reaction.

‘You haven’t heard the terms of the deal yet.’

‘I don’t want to hear the terms of the deal. I’m not interested.’

‘Of course you are.’ Damon smiled, but his eyes were singularly lacking in amusement. ‘Your father has lost everything, and that means you have lost the goose that lays the golden eggs—you’ve even lost this place. But I can make everything better again.’

‘All I have to do is prostitute myself to you—is that it?’ Her voice was raw.

‘Actually, as the mother of my child I’m prepared to offer you a better deal than that.’ Damon spoke calmly, but his eyes seemed to bore down through hers. ‘All you have to do is come back to Sicily with me and play at being the perfect wife and mother. Of course, you will have to share my bed. But in return I’ll keep you in the style and comfort that you are used to.’

Abbie stared at him, her heart thundering against her chest. She just couldn’t believe what she was hearing, or the fact that he was saying these things to her in such a clinical and calculating fashion.

‘You’ll have to sign a prenuptial agreement, of course. But as long as you abide by my terms and stay in the marriage you will have everything you want.’

‘That’s supposed to be a good deal, is it?’ Abbie suddenly found her voice, but she was almost spluttering with rage. ‘You really think I’d marry you? You’ve got a high opinion of yourself, haven’t you? I don’t even *like* you.’

‘It’s the best deal you are going to get, Abbie. The prenuptial agreement is non-negotiable.’

The harsh tone took her breath away.

‘Your arrogance is incredible. You think I’d tie myself into a loveless marriage for...for—?’

‘For wealth, security and all the baubles and trappings of luxury you could possibly want?’ Damon cut across her dryly. ‘Yes, I do. So let’s just cut the pretence, shall we?’

‘Yes, let’s.’ Her voice trembled. ‘Because the truth is that even for all the money in the world I wouldn’t want to share a house with you, never mind a bed. The very thought leaves me cold.’

Damon laughed.

‘What is so funny?’ She glared at him.

‘You are. We both know that there’s nothing cold about you. Maybe we don’t like each other very much.’ He shrugged. ‘But we have a certain thing called chemistry. When I touch you, you come alive. Sex was always good between us.’

‘As I said, you are the most conceited, arrogant man I have ever—’ She broke off as he started to pull her closer.

‘What are you doing?’ She tried to wrench away from him, but he wouldn’t let her go.

‘I’m going to kiss you and prove a point.’

‘Don’t you dare!’ Her eyes blazed up into his.

He smiled at her. ‘The sooner you accept the fact that I’m calling the shots now, the easier it’s going to be all around.’

‘I will accept no such thing!’

Her breathing was coming in short, uneven gasps from anger and from the effort of struggling against him.

‘You are just making life difficult for yourself.’

'No, you are making my life difficult! But that's what you want, isn't it?'

'No, Abbie, right now that's not what I want.'

There was something husky about those words, something strangely inviting. His gaze moved to her mouth.

And suddenly, as his head moved lower, she stopped struggling. She wanted him to kiss her. It was as if a tidal wave of desire suddenly hit her out of nowhere, flooding her entire body, pulling her under into very dangerous currents.

His lips touched against hers, gentle at first, and then as they tasted her acquiescence they became hard, demanding and brutal. She found herself kissing him back with equal strength, as if she couldn't get enough of him, as if she were intoxicated by his strength, by his passion.

Then suddenly, as she reached up to touch him, he pulled back from her.

She looked up at him, dazed by what had just happened. His gaze moved from her lips, down to the plunging neckline of her robe.

She noticed the look, and was suddenly very aware of the fact that if he reached out with his other hand he could pull her robe down from her shoulders, leaving her naked to his gaze.

For a shocking moment she wanted him to do that! She wanted him to touch her intimately, wanted to melt in against the powerful contours of his body. The feeling of longing overwhelmed her, rendered her helpless.

His dark eyes returned to hold hers, and there was a gleam of satisfaction there. 'You see, Abbie? You don't need to like me to make this *arrangement* work. All you need is to be your hot-blooded self and, of course, the perfect mother for Mario.'

Shame washed through her in waves. Why the hell had she kissed him back like that? *Why?*

She angled her chin up and forced herself to glare at him defiantly. 'I kissed you.' She shrugged. 'So what? Maybe I just wanted to give you a taste of what you are missing when I walk away from... from your offer.'

'Well, well,' he drawled softly. 'You really are—how is it you English say?—a chip off the old block, aren't you? Trouble is that, like your father, you have very little ground for negotiation. I'm not going to up my offer, Abbie. The prenuptial agreement is non-negotiable. You take what's on the table or you walk away.'

Her lips parted in a gasp as she realised he thought she was trying to make him increase his offer to her.

'You really are insufferable.' She grated the words unevenly, furious that he should make such an assumption. 'I'm not remotely interested in your offer, or in you.'

The sensual line of his mouth curved into a smile as his eyes once more moved down over her body, to where her breasts were straining against the satin material. She knew he could see the hardness of her nipples through the thin material, shamefully giving away the fact that even though his hands hadn't touched her she had been totally aroused.

'But you are interested, Abbie, because power and money are powerful aphrodisiacs for you. You want me more than you can say.'

She shook her head. 'I hate you!'

For one wild moment she thought he was going to pull her back into his arms to prove otherwise.

His lips stretched into even more of a mockingly amused smile. 'Of course you do, and you hate my money even more.'

To her relief, he stepped back from her. 'Well, why don't you run along to that bed of yours? That's if you really do want to go up there on your own.'

She didn't need telling twice; she almost fell over herself in her haste to get away. 'And why don't you get out of my house?'

He ignored that, merely smiled. 'Nice talking terms with you,' he called to her as she moved through the lounge towards the stairs. 'Think about my offer, because I'm only going to leave it open

until tomorrow. After that, you will be doing all your negotiating with my lawyer. And, believe me, he won't be nearly as accommodating.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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