



MODERN

DAPHNE CLAIR

The Riccioni Pregnancy



Mills & Boon Modern

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The Riccioni Pregnancy

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Clair D.

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For the baby's sake... Zito and Roxane Riccioni were still married when they accidentally conceived their baby. But they hadn't lived together for over a year! Roxane's unexpected announcement left Zito in no doubt—the marriage was definitely back on. Roxane knew Zito would want their baby to have two parents. Still, she didn't expect him to move in right away! But they did have less than nine months to sort out the past. Including why Roxane had run away from her husband in the first place...

Содержание

“I’ll take responsibility for this,” Roxane said.	6
The Riccioni Pregnancy	7
MILLS & BOON	8
Contents	9
CHAPTER ONE	10
CHAPTER TWO	14
CHAPTER THREE	21
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	26

“I’ll take responsibility for this,” Roxane said.

“We both will.”

Zito looked briefly dangerous. “If you think that I’m going to hand you money and leave you to it,” he said, “think again. You must know this changes everything.”

Her small laugh was slightly hysterical. “You don’t need to tell me that!” Already her life was in the process of turning upside down.

“You can’t be left on your own.”

“I’ve been on my own for over a year! I won’t be the first single mother.”

“You’re not a single mother! This child has a father.” With deceptive quiet, Zito added, “I won’t leave you to fend for yourself while you carry my child.”



Relax and enjoy our fabulous series about couples whose passion results in pregnancies... sometimes unexpected! Of course, the birth of a baby is always a joyful event, and we can guarantee that our characters will become dedicated parents—but what happens in those nine months before?

Share the surprises, emotions, drama and suspense as our parents-to-be come to terms with their new babies. All will discover that the business of making babies brings with it the most special love of all....

Celebrate our new arrival,
The Riccioni Pregnancy
Daphne Clair

The Riccioni Pregnancy

Daphne Clair



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Contents

CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER ONE

SHE was being followed. Silently, invisibly, but the prickling sensation at her nape and between her shoulder blades gave a primeval warning. Behind her the night hid a hunter.

She had walked down this narrow, sloping street hundreds of times, in daylight and darkness, and never been nervous. Until now.

The street lamps were obscured by trees that lined the narrow verge and cast deep shadows, wayward roots making treacherous humps and cracks underfoot. She should have changed her shoes before leaving work. The heels of her navy courts were high enough to be dangerous in the dark.

She tripped, let out a whispered exclamation, and cast a hurried glance over her shoulder, her heart accelerating.

Nothing. But it would be easy for anyone who didn't want to be seen to dodge behind a tree or one of the parked vehicles along the street. Few of the houses had room for a garage. They'd been built huddled cosily together before the motor car became a way of life.

Instinct quickened her pace, one hand fumbling for a key in the bag that swung from her shoulder.

At her neighbour's gate she paused, casting another glance behind her. Was the moving shadow under one of the trees a trick of the faint night breeze stirring the leaves in the inadequate lighting, or...?

Briefly she pictured herself pounding on the door, pleading for entry, saw the cheerful, phlegmatic Tongan family taking her in, sending out their muscular menfolk to deal with the lurking stranger. But no lights showed, no sound of the teenagers' music videos or the adults' rich, rapid voices floated into the street.

And what if she was mistaken? Fleeing some phantom attacker who didn't exist?

Her own gate was only yards away, and the safety of her home, the two-storey cottage that recalled New Zealand's colonial past.

Don't run. A few quick strides, a practised fumble with the latch and then she was on the short brick pathway, the gate clanging shut behind her, the drooping leaves of the kowhai brushing the shoulders of her suit as her fingers closed at last on the key in her bag.

She was on the second of the three worn wooden steps to the tiny porch when the gate clanged again, and she whirled, backing up the last step as a tall male figure materialised, closing on her.

One high heel caught in a gap between the worn boards, and she lost her balance, flinging out a hand to steady herself and losing her grip on the key.

She grabbed at a painted post, heard the key clatter to the brick path, saw the dark bulk of the man's wide shoulders as he stooped and picked it up.

There was no way she could get past him. She was trapped with a locked door behind her. And before her, a man with her key in his hand, already straightening.

She lifted her head, opened her mouth, drawing breath into her lungs ready to scream and hope someone would hear—someone who would help.

He took the steps in one stride, and a large, warm hand clamped over her mouth, strangling the sound at birth.

Smartly, viciously, she lifted her knee, but he was already behind her. She tried to bite, her teeth finding no purchase against the broad, suffocating palm. She kicked backward with a lethal heel but he was obviously prepared for the ploy and she found only empty air. Her elbow, aimed for his solar plexus, was caught in a hard hand that slid to her wrist, then his arm went around her, bringing her against an equally hard masculine body.

Then his breath was in her ear, his voice low, harsh. 'Darling, don't.'

Darling? Her whole body went rigid within the iron circle of his arm across her midriff.

Darling? Fury replaced fear.

Her temples throbbed as if her heart were sending all her blood there, and her limbs went hot and boneless. His imprisoning embrace slackened a fraction, and she used the moment to twist away and face him, her right hand swinging up with all her weight behind it, delivering a slap that resounded in the quiet street like a gunshot, the force of it almost rocking him off his feet.

'Bastard!' Her voice was shrill and wavering and she wished she'd kept her mouth shut. Now he knew she was panicked, a hysterical woman shrieking futile insults because she'd been frightened out of her mind by a man looming from the night.

His face was invisible in the darkness but she saw him lift a hand, and in a blind, useless attempt at avoidance she retreated the few inches that were left to her before her back collided with the locked door.

And then he laughed.

She heaved air into her lungs. Her head was buzzing and she seemed to be floating somewhere in space—dark, disorienting space. She had to take another breath before she could speak. Gritting her teeth, making her voice hard and steady, she said, 'Give me my key.'

He held it out to her, waiting for her to take it.

She snatched at it, but for a fraught moment he didn't release it, and her fingers were touching his.

Adrenalin raced from her fingertips and through her body, making it weightless, every nerve humming with electricity. Then he relinquished the key and she whirled and tried to fit it into the lock, unable to find the tiny slot because she was shaking so badly.

Strong male fingers closed over hers, and she jumped, then he was taking the key, efficiently inserting it, turning it, his hand on her back as he opened the door and thrust her ahead of him.

Now they were both inside and he'd shut them into a deeper darkness, together. Her eyes useless, her other senses at screaming pitch, she could hear the faint sound of his strangely uneven breathing, smell clean cotton and wool, soap and a hint of something woody—and underneath it the long-unfamiliar, earthy and shockingly seductive scent of male arousal.

His hand was still at her waist, and his arm came further about her, pulling her to him. 'You're trembling,' he said. Her temple was grazed by the subtle rasp of a shaven chin. 'I'm sorry.'

'So you bloody should be!' Anger was a defence against shame and confusion. She wrenched away from him, reached blindly for the light switch and blinked in the sudden cruel glare at watchful burnt-sienna eyes, black brows drawn together in a frown above a masterful nose, and a mouth fixed in a taut line that failed to hide its sensuous masculinity.

His eyelids lowered as he studied her face in return. 'You're pale,' he told her.

She felt pale. 'Have you been stalking me?' she demanded.

The upward jerk of his head dislodged a strand from the severely combed sleekness of salon-styled night-black hair. 'Stalking?'

'You were following me. Don't tell me you weren't trying to hide.'

'I was trying not to frighten you.'

She almost laughed. 'You what?'

'I thought if you saw—or heard—a man behind you in this lonely street you'd have reason to feel afraid.'

'So what the hell did you think I'd feel, knowing someone was there and deliberately keeping out of sight?' Agitatedly she slipped the bag from her shoulder, dumping it next to the phone on the half-round table near the door.

'I didn't think you knew.'

He reached out and took her hand, placing the key into the palm and closing the fingers over it. And then he bent his head and pressed his lips briefly to the fine skin of her inner wrist, sending the pulse wild and making her tremble even more.

Immediately he lifted his head, and even as she tried to tug away he scanned her face again, his eyes far too prescient. ‘You need a drink,’ he said.

He looked about them and saw the door to her living room behind him, the furniture dimly discernible. Before she knew it he was drawing her into the room, switching on the light. She made another effort to pull away but he took no notice. ‘Sit down,’ he ordered, guiding her to the couch set at right angles to the small fireplace, with a solid, beautifully-grained pale rimu coffee table before it.

She sat down because she still felt as if her bones had deserted her. ‘I don’t need a drink, and if I did I’m quite capable of getting it myself.’

His withering look said he didn’t believe either claim. He swept a hawkish gaze about the room, and went to the glass-doored corner cabinet where a half dozen bottles occupied one shelf and a neat array of tumblers and goblets another.

Knowing he would ignore any further protest, she tightened her lips and waited until he came back with amber liquid in a squat crystal tumbler and handed it to her.

She gulped half of the brandy, making her throat burn, and her eyes water so that involuntarily she closed them.

The seat cushions beside her depressed, and she opened her eyes and stiffly turned her head.

One long arm resting on the back of the couch, he watched colour burn into her cheeks. The brandy, she told herself. She wished he wouldn’t sit so close—his thigh, encased in well-pressed dark pants that matched his superbly cut jacket, almost touching hers where the skirt of her lightweight suit bared her knees.

‘Drink it all,’ he said.

She should tell him to go to hell, that she didn’t want him or any man pushing uninvited into her home, ordering her about and deciding what she needed. It wasn’t hard to guess what he thought she needed...

Lifting the tumbler, she emptied it. Dutch courage. Her hand stayed clenched about the cool, delicate glass; a wonder that it didn’t break.

He said, ‘Do you live alone here?’

‘That’s none of your business.’ The answer snapped out before she’d thought.

Damn. Why hadn’t she claimed a boyfriend—a big, burly, protective boyfriend? Or a half dozen flat-mates, due home at any moment. Although the cottage wasn’t big enough for that many, with only two bedrooms. ‘How long have you been following me?’ she asked.

‘I saw you get off the bus in Ponsonby Road. Do you often walk home alone in the dark?’ He sounded condemnatory.

Ponsonby Road was popular for its eclectic mix of businesses, where homesick Pacific Island immigrants could buy taro and yams, pawpaw and bread-fruit, and Fijian Indian women their jewel-coloured saris in tiny, crammed shops cheek by jowl with airy galleries of trendy local and imported art. But the long, busy road was best known for its restaurants and sidewalk cafés. Crowded and well lit, it was only a few hundred yards uphill from the cottage.

She said, ‘I’ve always been perfectly safe until tonight.’

‘You were safe tonight. I made sure of that.’

‘Thank you for your concern,’ not concealing her sarcasm, ‘but it was unnecessary.’

‘Once I had seen you it was totally necessary,’ he contradicted her. ‘Do you mind if I pour myself a drink?’

‘Yes. I do mind.’

Black brows silently rose. The slightest flicker of his eyelids conveyed displeasure. ‘So rude?’

Stupidly, she felt reprovèd. As if he had a right to scold her for bad manners.

He looked at her for a moment or two, then without haste rose and went back to the cabinet, where with some deliberation he poured vodka into another glass. ‘Anything more for you?’ he inquired with equally deliberate courtesy.

Seethingly silent, she shook her head, and he returned to her side.

Damn him, he knew she couldn't bodily throw him out. He was establishing his physical superiority, claiming territory. But this was her territory, and he was an intruder.

Looking down at the vodka without drinking, he said softly, 'You surely don't expect me to walk away now?'

If only. But she owed it to herself to try. 'Would you,' she inquired baldly, 'if I asked you to?'

He was still staring into the depths of his glass. The liquid didn't move—his hands were perfectly steady. Unlike hers. Her whole body was racked with tiny, invisible tremors. It was a moment before he said, 'Are you asking?'

She stopped breathing. She was sure she could hear her heart beating, slow and heavy, and her throat was locked.

Say it. 'Yes.'

She'd said it, not as decisively as she'd have liked to, but clearly enough, even if her voice was low in her throat.

Seconds ticked by. Then he lifted the glass and swallowed, lowered it again, holding it in both hands. He turned his head and she received the full force of the ferocious blaze in his eyes, so that she recoiled, her lower lip briefly caught in her teeth.

'No,' he said.

She shot to her feet, then halted because the sudden movement had made her a little dizzy—the damned brandy again—and besides, where was there to run to? He could corner her easily before she'd taken half a dozen steps.

As if to confirm it, he downed the remainder of his drink and stood up too, leaving the glass on the carpet by the couch. 'No,' he repeated. 'You can't run from me any more, Roxane.'

CHAPTER TWO

‘I’M NOT running.’ It made her sound as if she’d fled without thought, in blind fear. The room tilted, and she hastily sat down again. ‘I’ve never run from you.’

‘What would you call it, then?’ he demanded.

‘It was a decision. A rational, sensible decision.’

His lip curled. ‘Rational? Sensible?’

A sensation sickening in its familiarity washed over Roxane. Helplessness, despair, and mingled with it a deep, inexpressible longing. ‘You don’t think I’m capable of that. But it was the best decision of my life.’

His jaw tightened and a small muscle in his cheek kicked almost invisibly. The anger that still smouldered in his eyes turned bleak before thick black lashes hid them. ‘Was it necessary,’ he asked bitingly, ‘to be so dramatic—cutting off all contact, swearing your parents to secrecy, making me communicate through your lawyer as if I were some brute who had beaten you?’

‘I told him you hadn’t,’ she said swiftly, looking down at her hands, wound tightly into each other. The solicitor had jumped to obvious conclusions, and she’d made sure he didn’t retain them. ‘You’re not a brute, Zito.’

‘God—’ he breathed the word as if it rasped his throat ‘—I thought I’d never hear you say my name again.’

Roxane winced, thankful that her head was still bent and he couldn’t see her face, shadowed by the shoulder-length sable fall of her hair. But the change in his voice forced her to look up, her clear green eyes wondering.

To find his expression rigid and unreadable, his gaze cool, almost indifferent. ‘Did it occur to you that if I wanted you back I could have found you?’

‘I know you could have.’ She tried to ignore the gibe in his caveat, if I wanted you... Zito could afford to pay any number of private detectives, for as long as it took.

‘You’d made it clear you didn’t want to be found.’ He paused, a corner of his mouth curving satirically. ‘Or were you hoping that I’d somehow do it anyway and come running after you, begging you to return to me?’

Sometimes, weakly, she had fantasised that he would track her down regardless of her efforts, that he’d come to her with apologies and promises and a new understanding—a changed and humbled man, and everything would miraculously be all right. There had been long cold nights when the fantasy had helped her through to another dawn.

But it would be fatal to admit it. ‘No!’

She thought she saw a brief flare of some emotion—frustration? disappointment?—before he resumed the guarded watchfulness he’d shown earlier. She must have been mistaken, falling prey to all-too-familiar wishful thinking. ‘I’m glad you didn’t,’ she said.

He swung away from her, pushing back the jacket of the perfectly tailored suit by shoving his hands into the pockets of his trousers.

Zito’s clothes had always been impeccable, discreetly expensive but worn with an insouciance that made them part of the man, not any kind of status symbol to impress others.

Now he was inspecting the walls that she’d painted palest jade green and hung with cheap reproduced art, along with a couple of originals by local unknowns.

His gaze next disdained the calico covers hiding the shabbiness of her comfortable secondhand couch and the mismatched armchairs facing it across the low table that bore the honourable scars of a chequered life. For a few seconds his attention was caught by the worn, silky antique rug that Roxane had spent too much on but loved all the more for it.

He swept another sharp-eyed glance about the room, before he turned to her.

Roxane asked defiantly, 'Don't you like it?'

He didn't answer immediately, and when he did his voice was expressionless. 'It's very attractive. Small but...cosy.'

'I like small.'

For a moment the wicked, teasing sexual humour that had attracted and excited and confounded her when they first met gleamed in his eyes, lifting one eyebrow and a corner of his mouth in subtle disbelief. And damn, she responded to it as always, with a frightening mix of inward laughter and sheer wanton, bone-melting desire.

Keeping her expression blank, she hoped her eyes wouldn't betray her.

The laughter died and his mouth went hard. To her considerable surprise, he looked away first. 'Is the house yours?' he asked, almost as if it were a random question plucked from the air.

'Mine and the bank's.'

Her stock answer, but she should have expected the sudden stabbing quality of his stare. 'If you needed money you could have asked me. Through your lawyer if necessary. I told him—'

'I don't want your money. I have a good job and I can afford the mortgage.'

'Mortgage!'

He made it sound like a dirty word. Roxane smiled thinly. 'It's what we little people have when we need to buy a house.'

'You have no need to buy a house. I can give you anything you need—hell, I did give you everything!'

'Not everything,' she said softly, sadly. Not the one thing she needed above all.

Furious, he said, 'I loved you!'

She wouldn't even think about what that past tense meant. 'I know. I know you did. In your own way.'

He thrust a hand savagely over his hair, the frown turning to a scowl. 'I gave you my heart and my soul, everything that was in me. I don't know any other way.'

Of course he didn't. Maurizio Riccioni never had done a thing in his life except in his own inimitable, confident, and usually hugely successful way. Why should he have ever imagined that his marriage, his wife, might not succumb to that combination of self-assured charm and incisive decision-making?

Almost compassionately she said, 'It wasn't all your fault. I was too young, and I should have said no when you asked me to marry you.'

'You did,' he reminded her.

Yes, she had, the first time he asked her, showing a shred of common sense. But her opposition hadn't lasted long. She'd soon had her fears and scruples overturned one by one under the onslaught of Zito's clever brain, unswerving will, and devastating kisses. He had even talked her parents round, despite their misgivings about their only daughter marrying at nineteen.

He'd reluctantly waited until she turned twenty, and on her birthday she'd stood beside him while they exchanged their solemn vows in the cathedral in Melbourne, with all the trimmings and before several hundred guests.

But marriage was more than a frothy white dress and a champagne reception. And theirs hadn't stood the test.

'I should have stuck to my refusal,' she admitted.

'Thank you.' His voice held an acrid note. 'Sometimes I wish I had beaten you.'

'Zito!'

He managed to look both shame-faced and impatient. 'You know I'd never hurt you, or any woman! But it would give me a reason for your desertion—something that made sense.'

He started prowling round the room again, stopping at the small desk that she'd found in one of the few remaining Ponsonby junk shops that didn't have pretensions to being an antique store. When she'd sanded and polished it the grain of the timber had come up nicely.

Zito took a hand from his pocket and idly shifted aside a 'personal invitation' to subscribe to a book club at a 'once-only' price, revealing the envelope underneath.

'Those are private!' Not that she had anything in particular to hide. There was only more junk mail, bills and a letter from a cousin in England.

He looked at her unseeingly, his finger stilled on the sheet of paper, then lifted his hand, looking down again. Finally he turned fully. 'Ms Roxane Fabian?'

Why did she feel guilty? Roxane shrugged.

'You told me you were happy to take my name,' he said, his voice thickening, 'when we got married.'

'I didn't mind...it was no big deal.'

'It was to me. A very big deal.'

Just as reverting to her maiden name had become important for her. She supposed it was symbolic. 'An ownership thing?' she accused, trying for mild amusement.

He controlled his temper, covering it with a hard laugh. 'If you thought that, then you were too young.'

Or too stupid, his tone implied. 'You didn't think so...then.'

His reaction was barely noticeable, but Roxane was so attuned to his every tiny movement she saw the stiffening of his muscles, the infinitesimal recoil. She'd pierced the armour of his self-confidence, however minutely.

The elation she felt disconcerted her. She had never deliberately set out to wound Zito. Of course she'd known he would be upset and angry when she left him, but she'd had no thought of revenge or punishment, only a dire need for self-preservation.

In her long and probably incoherent farewell letter she had assured him that she didn't hate him, and he shouldn't blame himself for what he couldn't help. She had tried not to hurt him any more than the simple fact of her departure inevitably would.

Maybe the hurt had gone deeper than she'd expected. He'd had more than twelve months to get over it, but his jabbing little remarks weren't accidental.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I suppose it was too much to expect you'd understand.'

'Was there another man?' he asked abruptly. And looked around again, as if searching for evidence. 'Have you left him too?'

Roxane's temper snapped. 'Oh, for God's sake!' He couldn't conceive that she'd just wanted to be alone, that she could manage on her own? 'Another man, after living with you for nearly three years?'

At her scorching tone he looked arrested, almost confused. She added, 'And how dare you suggest I was unfaithful?'

Her anger seemed to give him pause. He shot a look at her from under his brows. 'For months I tortured myself with the thought...'

It hadn't even occurred to Roxane that he would think that. How could he have...? This was further proof that he'd never really known her, never bothered to comprehend her deepest needs. A small ache shifted from somewhere near her heart and lodged in her throat, stifling her voice. 'You were wrong.'

A lifting of his shoulder, a tilt of his head, seemed to indicate it was not important. But of course it was. His pride would have suffered, and he had a surfeit of that. If the truth were known, pride was probably the real reason he had refrained from sending someone looking for her, rather than respect for her stated wishes.

'You broke your other marriage vows,' he said. 'Why not that one?'

‘It’s different!’

‘How?’

The question was unanswerable. ‘Anyway, you were wrong,’ she reiterated.

He gave her a piercing stare, and nodded as if accepting that. ‘And now?’ he inquired softly.

‘Now?’ About to snap a hot rejoinder, Roxane paused, her chin lifting. ‘Now my private life is my own.’

His eyes narrowed, and she had to resist an instinct to let hers skitter away.

A shrill burring made her jump, and she said foolishly, ‘That’s my phone.’

Careful not to rise too hurriedly this time, she went to the hallway to lift the receiver. ‘Yes?’

Zito stood regarding her through the open door while she tried to give her attention to the caller. ‘Yes, Leon.’

Wrenching her gaze from Zito’s inimical stare, at the corner of her eye she saw him swing round and disappear from her line of sight.

‘Saturday?’ Roxane forced herself to concentrate. ‘Yes, it is short notice. Wait while I get my diary.’

She dug it from the bag she’d left by the phone. ‘You do mean Saturday next week? What kind of party? If it’s black tie formal...’

Leon assured her it wasn’t. An impromptu welcome home, he said, for a son returning from overseas with his new fiancée. ‘A family affair. About a hundred guests.’

‘Just an intimate little gathering?’ Roxane felt sorry for the unknown young woman. ‘So the relatives get to cast their eyes over the bride-to-be?’

‘It could lead to more introductions. These people are some of Auckland’s best-known socialites. I hope you’re free to supervise as well as make the arrangements?’

Roxane’s own social life was low-key and intermittent. ‘I’ll be there on the night,’ she promised.

‘I know I can rely on you.’

Silly to feel a glow of satisfaction at the banal words, but when she returned to the little sitting room after hanging up, her lips were curved in pleasure.

Zito was standing at the long old-fashioned window. He faced her as she paused inside the door, and his eyes didn’t match his casual tone when he spoke. ‘Boyfriend?’

She didn’t have a boyfriend, but the suggestion made her hesitate before answering. ‘Business.’

‘Business?’ he repeated sceptically. ‘At this time of night?’

‘It’s not that late.’ She checked her watch. Just after nine.

Zito brushed that aside. ‘Saturday night—a party? An intimate party. Did you really need to consult your diary, or was that just to keep him on his toes?’

‘You’re being absurd.’

He came away from the window. His eyes were obsidian, glowing with a dark fire, his high cheekbones outlined with dusky colour under his natural tan. ‘Absurd, am I?’

‘Yes!’

Maybe it was the fierce contempt in her tone that stopped him, just a few feet from her. Certainly it was the first time she’d ever stood up to him like this.

‘So who is this bride-to-be?’ he shot at her. ‘You? Because if so, you’ve forgotten a small detail, haven’t you?’

Roxane was so astonished she laughed.

And saw again, with a surge of strange triumph, that she’d unsettled him. She had never seen Zito wrongfooted so many times in the space of—what? Half an hour?

It was a peculiarly heady sensation.

Tempted to let him retain his hasty assumptions, she decided that would be unnecessarily childish. Crisply, she informed him, ‘That was my boss. We organise and cater events, mostly for

corporates and big business, but he was asking me to make the arrangements for a private welcome home and engagement party for a client's son.'

Zito stared at her as if trying to decide whether she was telling the truth, then he sank abruptly onto the nearby couch and bowed his head, his fingers combing through the black strands, and muttered something she couldn't catch.

After a small hesitation Roxane sat in one of the armchairs facing him. Knees and ankles pressed together, she folded her hands in her lap. Capable hands, the nails allowed to grow just over the tips, and glossed with clear satin polish. Ringless hands. Hastily she covered the left one with her right.

When she looked up Zito was leaning against the couch cushions, looking disgruntled, his long legs sprawled in front of him. 'I've been stupid tonight,' he said unexpectedly. 'Clumsy and stupid.'

Startled by the admission, Roxane didn't argue, regarding him warily.

His eyelids drooped as his gaze lowered to her mouth, and then without haste traversed her body, making her skin prickle pleasurably in reluctant response. 'I should have caught up and stopped you after you got off that bus,' he said.

'Instead of scaring me witless?'

'When did you know it was me?'

When he'd called her 'darling' in his unforgettable, dark-melted-chocolate-and-brandy voice, that she'd always imagined held a trace of his Italian ancestry, although he was a second-generation Australian.

'Just before I hit you,' she told him.

He laughed. She remembered that he'd laughed then too, although the slap must have hurt.

Old emotions stirred, treacherously. Against the quickening in her blood she curled her hands, gripping one inside the other.

To quell the memories she said, 'What were you doing in Ponsonby Road, anyway? For that matter, what are you doing in Auckland?'

'We're thinking of opening a New Zealand branch of Deloras. I was dining at GPK.'

'Checking out the possible competition?' Zito's grandfather had arrived in Australia as a penniless assisted immigrant, and worked as a dishwasher and kitchen hand until he opened his own small restaurant, and then another, and another. Over the years the family business had become a multi-million dollar Australian institution.

And now they were planning to expand across the Tasman Sea and conquer the New Zealand market?

'Combining business with... pleasure,' Zito said.

Her skin tightened. 'You were with a woman.'

Of course he hadn't been eating alone. And of course his companion had been female.

'A woman I won't be seeing again.'

'I'm not surprised, if you left her flat in the middle of a meal.' The waspishness of her voice was simply on account of his unusual lapse of manners, Roxane assured herself. She had no right to be jealous. And of course she wasn't. 'What on earth did you say to her?'

'I apologised, gave her some money for the meal and a taxi, and said I'd phone her in the morning.'

Poor woman. Roxane very nearly laughed. 'You'll be lucky if she accepts the call.'

'I'll send her some flowers,' he said dismissively.

'Oh, that's sure to bring her round.' That and his notoriously irresistible charm. 'You'll have her eating out of your hand in no time.'

She'd irritated him. 'As a gesture of apology,' he said. 'I told you I won't be seeing her again. She's a casual acquaintance—nothing more.'

Who had probably hoped to be much more. The woman would never know what a lucky escape she'd had.

Roxane knew she was being unfair. An older, more sophisticated woman, more sure of herself than Roxane had been when she married Zito might have been perfectly happy—and made him happy too. She took a deep breath, blinked fiercely and stared at a blank spot on the wall.

‘What’s wrong, Roxane?’

Strangely, he sounded as if he really cared about the answer. Roxane blinked again and made herself look at him, saying the first thing that came into her head. ‘I haven’t eaten since lunch. I’m hungry.’

The remark must have spilled out of her subconscious, perhaps triggered by his talk of an abandoned dinner.

And for some reason it seemed to make him angry again. ‘Will you never learn to look after yourself?’ he asked.

‘I have,’ she replied icily. ‘If you hadn’t attacked me and dragged me in here and poured brandy down my throat, I’d have had something to eat by now.’

That was probably half the reason for her sluggish light-headedness—shock followed by alcohol on an empty stomach.

‘I can fix that.’ He got up. ‘Where’s your kitchen?’

‘What?’

‘Never mind.’ He was already leaving the room. ‘I’ll find it.’

‘Zito...’ She stood up too, following after him while he strode along the short passageway and unerringly found the kitchen at the back of the house. ‘Zito,’ she repeated as he switched on the light, ‘I don’t need you to fix anything for me.’

He turned and gave her his most dazzling smile. Generations of charismatic Italian genes had produced that smile.

Taking her arm, he drew her to the small round table in the window corner, pulled out one of the aqua blue spray-painted wooden chairs and planted her on the cheerful patterned seat cushion. ‘I’m still hungry too. And there’s no reason you should have to cook for me. Just sit there and tell me where everything is.’

He slipped his coat and tie off to hang them over the other chair, and rolled his sleeves up muscular olive-skinned forearms as he went to the sink to wash his hands.

This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be. She’d been tired after working late, she’d probably gone to sleep at the desk in her inner city office, and this was all a bad dream. Zito wasn’t really here in her kitchen, opening cupboards to haul out pans, finding a jar of pasta on a shelf, demanding to know if she had red onions and tomatoes, was the garlic bulb he’d discovered with the onions all she had, and were there any cloves?

‘In the cupboard next to the fridge,’ she answered automatically, as she’d answered all the other questions. She watched him shake cloves into his hand and sniff at them, eyes closed, his long lashes a black crescent against golden-brown skin as he inhaled the sweet-pungent scent.

He’d always done that, checking for freshness and potency the way his grandfather had taught him.

Every time the staff who had run their big white house in Melbourne had their days off, Zito had taken Roxane down to the huge, spectacularly well-equipped kitchen and they’d make a meal together.

‘Smell that,’ he’d say, after doing so himself, and she’d bend over his cupped palm, breathing in the scent of newly ground pepper, an exotic spice or a freshly chopped herb before he tipped it into whatever dish he was preparing.

He’d pause in the middle of slicing an apple or a crisp, barely ripe cucumber, taste a piece and then turn and hold out another bit for her to take in her mouth.

Sometimes she'd playfully nip his fingers, inviting retribution in kind. He'd scold her for distracting him from the serious business of cooking and promise her an erotic punishment, deferred until the evening.

But not always deferred after all, so that much later they would rise from a tumbled bed and after showering together return to the kitchen, perhaps wearing only a robe apiece, and resume the interrupted preparations. The food tasted even better for the delay in one kind of gratification to the satisfaction of another.

Making a meal had been foreplay, a seductive art that Zito practised with the same unselfconscious, epicurean enjoyment that he brought to their lovemaking.

An art that had not diminished in the last year. Despite the inadequate work counter and the inconvenient placing of fridge and cooker, he demonstrated the same competence and controlled flamboyance that he had in his perfectly planned workspace with its acres of tiles and stainless steel. He even managed, apparently by instinct, to avoid hitting his head on the low-hung cupboards.

A bad dream? No, rather a blissfully sweet one, but unbearably nostalgic.

Roxane had told him once that his cooking style was like Russian ballet—so much honed masculine muscle disciplined to graceful and occasionally extravagant use within a defined space reminded her of the male dancers.

Zito laughed and said, 'Aren't they all gay?'

'Not all of them,' she'd protested, and he'd demanded to know how she knew, playing the jealous Latin lover, and finally swept her off to bed to prove that he was definitely, unmistakably heterosexual.

CHAPTER THREE

UNCONSCIOUSLY Roxane's lips curved in a wistful, reminiscent smile.

He'd had no need to prove his sexual orientation to her. It had been blatantly obvious from the first time she'd looked into his eyes. Despite her inexperience Roxane had recognised with a small starburst of excitement the quickly controlled but unmistakable flame of sexual desire. A flame that had ultimately consumed her, leaving behind the ashes of a marriage and a troublesome, glowing ember of reciprocal hunger.

An ember, she admitted with inward dismay, that removing herself from his dangerously flammable orbit, settling in another country, rebuilding her life without him, had failed to destroy. The sound of his voice, his breath warming her temple, the touch of his lips on the vulnerable skin of her wrist, had been enough to bring it flaring back to instant life.

'You had a bottle of Te Awa Farm Boundary in that cabinet in the other room,' Zito said, lowering a handful of spaghetti into a pot.

Roxane mentally shook herself, irrationally glad that she needn't be ashamed of her choice of that increasingly less rare commodity, a good New Zealand red. Zito had taught her to recognise decent wines. 'I'll get it.'

'No, stay there.' His hand pressed her back into the chair as he passed her on his way to the door.

But she got up all the same, needing to do something to banish the bittersweet memories. By the time Zito came back carrying an already opened bottle and two glasses, she had spread a cotton cloth on the table and set two places. And was standing staring at them, thinking, Why am I doing this? If I had any guts I'd have shown him the door and told him not to come back.

He poured wine into glasses, handing one to Roxane. 'Sit.'

She sat.

Habit, she told herself, watching a knife flash through an onion. During their marriage she'd become accustomed to letting him tell her what to do, and it had taken her less than sixty minutes to slip back into the mould he'd shaped for her.

Zito picked up a tomato and cut easily through the shiny red skin. Always buy good knives. That was something else he'd taught her. On moving into the cottage she'd treated herself to the best German stainless steel, although she could ill afford it.

Subconsciously she had still been under the spell he'd woven about her.

This mood of stunned acquiescence was due to shock. When they'd eaten she would assert herself, thank him politely and then tell him to go.

She shifted her gaze from his lean, strong fingers pinching tips of fragrant thyme from the collection of herbs on the window ledge, and reached for the luminous ruby wine, letting it slide down her throat like liquid satin.

Zito poured wine from the bottle into the concoction he was stirring on the cooker, intensifying the tantalising aroma that was making Roxane's taste buds come alive.

Soon he set before her a plate of spaghetti coils dressed with butter and herbs, topped by a mouth-watering garlic-scented sauce and garnished with fresh basil.

Then he sat opposite her, lifting his wineglass in a silent toast before picking up a fork and expertly winding spaghetti around the tines.

Instead of eating it he offered it to her, leaning across the small table, and automatically Roxane opened her lips and accepted the delicious mouthful.

Nobody cooked spaghetti sauce like Zito. Involuntarily she closed her eyes to better appreciate the taste. This too was a remembered ritual, and behind her tightly shut lids tears pricked.

She swallowed, licked a residue of sauce from her lower lip, then dared to open her eyes, hoping Zito would be concentrating on his meal.

He was smiling at her, his gaze alert and quizzical and a deliberate sexual challenge as it moved from her mouth to her eyes.

‘It’s...’ Roxane cleared her throat. ‘It’s great, as always.’

He never made exactly the same sauce twice, varying the ingredients and the amounts according to his mood and what was available—or according to his assessment of her mood of the moment. But each variation was a masterpiece, and tonight’s was no exception.

‘Good.’ As if he’d needed her seal of approval, he applied himself to his plate. ‘It would have been better if I’d made the spaghetti myself, but this is not bad.’

‘It’s made on the premises I buy it from.’ He’d spoiled her for the ordinary supermarket kind.

Roxane had never mastered the tricky business of twirling spaghetti round a fork without some strands trailing all the way back to the plate, or having the whole lot perversely slide off just as she lifted it to her mouth.

Zito let his fork rest several times as he watched her efforts, a quirk of amusement on his mouth.

‘Don’t laugh,’ she said finally, exasperated. ‘You know I’m no good at this.’

He did laugh then, openly. ‘Look—like this.’ His hand came over hers, his fingers manipulating the fork, lifting it to her mouth with every strand neatly rolled.

She pulled her hand from his as she swallowed the proffered morsel. Dozens of times he’d tried to teach her, yet she’d failed to learn, maintaining it was in his genes, that he’d been born with a silver spaghetti fork in his mouth.

‘I’m out of practice.’ And with him critically studying her technique, she was clumsier than usual. ‘I hardly ever eat pasta now.’ What they were having was left over from a recent dinner she’d made for a couple of friends.

‘No wonder you’ve got thinner.’ His penetrating glance at her figure disapproved.

‘I’m not thin!’

‘Thinner, I said,’ he corrected. ‘You’re as lovely as ever—’

‘Thank you.’ Her voice was brittle.

‘—but you’ve lost weight.’

‘I’m getting more exercise than I used to. It’s healthy.’ She’d begun walking to work to save the bus fare when she’d been living in rental accommodation and her casual job wasn’t paying much. But she’d enjoyed the early morning exercise, except when Auckland’s fickle weather turned nasty. Her present job being largely desk-bound, walking to the office was a good way of keeping fit. ‘Do you still play squash?’

‘Yes.’

At one time he’d been a state champion; trophies lined the bookcase in his study where he sometimes worked at home. But after he turned twenty-five the business had gradually absorbed more of his energies. His grandfather had retired and his father had been anxious to groom the heir to take his place in the family firm.

‘How is your family?’ Roxane inquired.

‘Do you care?’

There it was again, that flash of acrimony like a searing flame darting through the steely armour of politeness.

‘Yes, I do,’ she said steadily. ‘I like your parents, and I miss your sisters, they were fun and very good to me. And your grandfather is a darling.’

‘But not his grandson.’

Roxane stopped trying to persuade a stubborn strand of spaghetti onto her fork and looked up. ‘I told you, Zito, it wasn’t—’

His closed fist thumped on the table, making the glasses jump, the wine shiver and sparkle in the light from overhead. ‘You told me nothing! Nothing that made any sense!’

Roxane had jumped too, and she felt her face go taut and wary.

He said immediately, wearily, 'I didn't intend to scare you again. This can wait.'

Zito had never believed in mixing food and argument, maintaining it spoiled both of them, that each deserved to be enjoyed in its own way. Nine times out of ten, he said, after a good meal an argument didn't seem worth the effort.

Nine times out of ten he'd been right. And the tenth time, his way of resolving any issue between the two of them had been to make love to her until she could no longer think, until nothing seemed to matter but her need for him, and his for her, and every problem dissolved in the aftermath of passion. They had never, she thought with surprise, had a real quarrel.

'Eat,' he said, and she realised she'd been caught in a net of insidious remembrance while her food cooled.

A childish spurt of rebellion urged her to put down her fork and tell him she didn't want any more. Instead she twirled more spaghetti and lifted it carefully to her mouth.

'Do you feed yourself properly?' he asked her.

'I have perfectly adequate meals. Salads, lean meat, fish...soup in winter, and vegetables.'

He made a sound deep in his throat as though he didn't think much of that. 'Do you entertain?'

'My personal entertaining tends to be impromptu and informal.' The cottage couldn't comfortably be used for large gatherings. Even the dining room that previous owners had carved from the original big old-fashioned kitchen didn't have space for more than a table for six and a sideboard.

'Tell me about this job of yours,' Zito invited.

'I started work with Leon's catering firm soon after I arrived in Auckland, as casual labour. At first I was just serving food and laying tables, working lots of overtime...' She'd needed the money. 'After a couple of months he asked me to join the permanent staff.'

Leon had been impressed by her quickness, her reliability and her initiative. She remembered the inordinate thrill his praise had given her. 'I could see,' she went on, 'that some clients would have liked more than food. Someone to organise invitations, publicity, venues—take care of the details of running a successful affair.'

'You could see?' Zito tilted his head.

That wasn't disbelief, Roxane told herself. It's just interest. Don't be touchy.

'Yes,' she said firmly. 'So I ran the idea past Leon and he said, "Let's try it," and put me in charge.'

'Just like that.'

'Just like that,' she confirmed, and tried not to look smug. 'I'm very good at what I do, and now I have the salary to prove it.' Soon she would be able to afford new furniture and a few luxury items.

'Congratulations.'

'It's small beer compared to the Riccioni empire, but so far we're a roaring success.'

'Deloras isn't an empire, it's a family business,' Zito argued testily.

'A family business worth millions.' Maybe billions. She had never been privy to financial details.

'That isn't a crime. We all work very hard.'

'I know you do.' It was true of the men in the family anyway. The women weren't expected to take part directly, as had been made very clear to her.

She was to keep house, which in practice meant 'ordering' a staff of three experienced people for a household of two, preside at parties and formal dinners for which the catering was performed by Deloras chefs and waiters, and attend functions that often seemed to have no other purpose than to allow the Deloras men to parade their success in the form of the clothes, jewels, beauty and breeding of their womenfolk.

At one of these extravaganzas, she'd complained to Zito that she felt about as useful as the magnificent carved ice centrepiece that graced the table before them. He'd smiled down at her and said, 'You're far more beautiful, and not nearly as cold.'

His eyes gleaming wickedly, he'd folded her into his arms and swung her onto the crowded area of polished floor where other couples were dancing under dimmed coloured lights to a slow, romantic tune.

Swaying rhythmically to the music, his cheek resting against her temple, he murmured to her reminders of the heat that they generated each time they came together as man and woman, his wonderfully sexy voice thickening as he described to her in explicit detail how she had reacted to him only the night before, how her responses had delighted him, how much he had enjoyed watching her total abandonment to pleasure. And what pleasure she had given him in return.

'Zito, don't!' she'd finally begged him, embarrassed by the flush that burned in her cheeks, indeed over her entire body. 'This is a public place.'

'No one can hear,' he assured her, bringing her even closer to him as he looked at her with glittering eyes. He had succeeded in arousing himself as much as he had her, she realised. His lips inches from hers, he said, 'Shall we find somewhere private?'

She was trembling. 'Here?' The function was held in the ballroom of one of Melbourne's historic houses. The whole ground floor was in use, and the upstairs region had been cordoned off.

'Outside,' Zito whispered. He leaned forward a little more, his lips barely touching hers for half a second. But instead of drawing away he bent to press another kiss to the smooth skin just behind the delicate silver and diamond pendant, one of his many exquisite gifts to her, that hung from her earlobe. The tip of his tongue traced the tiny groove, and every one of her nerve ends came alive.

Her teeth bit into her lip to stop a telltale moan escaping her throat, where her heart seemed to have lodged, a wave of sensation racing from the sensitive spot he'd teased, all the way to her toes, throbbing between her legs. For a horrifying moment she was afraid she would climax right there on the dance floor.

Pulling away, she looked at him with glazed eyes, her voice low and hoarse. 'Find somewhere.'

Without a word he turned her, a hand on her waist just below the daringly dipped back of her bronze chiffon gown. He cut a ruthless swathe through the dancers and the chattering groups gathered at the edge of the room. Someone spoke to them and Roxane tried to smile in response, her facial muscles stiff, her cheekbones heated.

Zito curtly returned the greeting but didn't slacken his stride, his arm sliding further about her waist and urging her forward.

Then he'd found a door and they were outside, where a few couples holding champagne flutes stood about on a narrow terrace lit by rows of coloured lightbulbs. It was cooler here, but not cold.

Zito didn't hesitate, plunging down a shallow flight of steps and along a brick path that narrowed as it entered a darkened thicket of shrubs and trees. Behind them Roxane heard a woman laugh, a man rumble some remark.

'Zito,' she hissed. 'People are going to guess what we're—'

'Let them.'

'Zito... ' She made an effort to slow, stop.

Zito halted, both arms going about her. 'Do you care?' He kissed her quickly, thoroughly, his mouth covering hers, making her open it to him, his tongue feathering the roof of her mouth before withdrawing. His teeth gently nipped her lower lip.

'No,' she confessed recklessly, when he left her an inch between their mouths for her to reply.

Not speaking again, he propelled her further along the path, and they came on a small, unlit summerhouse. Inside Roxane saw the flutter of a light-coloured dress, heard a man's slow voice and a whispered feminine answer.

Zito gave a smothered laugh and steered Roxane off the path between a couple of white-starred shrubs, the perfumed flowers brushing her arms and leaving a subtle sweet scent on her skin. They crossed a small moonlit lawn sheltered by surrounding growth, and under the shadow of a huge old

tree he paused. The night was black here, the egg-shaped half moon that hung in the sky nearly obscured by leafy branches overhead.

He kissed her again, long and deep, and his fingers found the short zipper of her dress. It was the sort of dress that didn't allow a bra, and when he slid it from her shoulders it fell about her feet.

Roxane gasped, and Zito bent, one hand still on her body, skimming down her back, and picked up the light, flimsy thing to drape it over a nearby branch.

'Are you cold?' he asked her, his hands touching her, caressing.

'No.' She was shivering, but her skin was on fire, her blood hot and heavy.

'These next,' he muttered, and her skimpy satin and lace panties joined her dress in the tree. Even through the increasing clamour of her senses, screaming for release, she was dimly grateful for his care of her clothing. Feeling silly wearing nothing but her high-heeled shoes, she slipped out of them, and a thin carpet of fallen leaves cooled her bare feet.

Somehow that added to the eroticism of this mad sexual escapade.

'You're incredibly beautiful,' Zito told her. He stood only a breath away, but not touching.

Her eyes were adjusting to the night, and she could dimly discern the contours of his face, see the glint of his eyes. 'You can't tell,' she argued shakily. 'It's dark.'

His hands came to rest on her hips. 'There's moonlight.'

There was, filtering in moving shards through the breeze-ruffled leaves overhead. His shirt glimmered in shifting patterns of white contrasting with his dark jacket and trousers. The fact that she was naked and he was still fully dressed in formal evening clothes was suddenly a fierce turn-on. Unfair but unbelievably sexy.

'You're a nymph,' he said. 'A naiad. Something out of a fairy tale.'

But Roxane knew she was all too human, her body was telling her so, loudly. Surely he could hear the singing in her veins, the roaring tide of desire that made her temples throb, shutting out all sound but her own quickened breathing and the seduction of his voice.

Slowly he moved his hands up to her breasts, and she gave a muffled cry, placing her own hands over his to press them to her, arching her body, her head flung back.

His mouth found the taut curve of her throat, roughly exploring it, and she removed her hands from his, undoing the zipper on his trousers, freeing him with clumsy fingers.

A breath audibly dragged in his throat, and then his lips were on hers again, his tongue plunging into her mouth, and she welcomed the intimate penetration, encouraging his aggressiveness. She felt both his hands lift her, cupping her as he backed himself against the solid trunk of the tree, and she opened her thighs, letting him enter her smoothly, deeply, satisfyingly, making her give a sob of pure relief. 'Love me,' she whispered, begging unashamedly. 'Oh, Zito, love me.'

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