

Italian Marriage: In Name Only
Kathryn Ross



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The Italian's marriage bargain
With her livelihood hanging in the balance, single mum and restaurateur Victoria Heart has one choice – a shocking proposal from arrogant hotelier Antonio Cavelli: he'll secure her future, but take her freedom! Antonio has no time nor want for love, but it is expected he will marry and produce children. A convenient wife would suit him perfectly – especially one with a ready-made heir! But Victoria's body responds so willingly to his slightest touch he's not sure how long their arrangement will stay strictly business!

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‘I’m in need of a wife.’

The statement was made so nonchalantly that Victoria wondered if she had heard Antonio correctly. ‘Sorry, did you say...a wife?’

He smiled. ‘Don’t look so worried. This is a marriage for business purposes only.’

Victoria shook her head and tried to gather her senses up from the fragmented emotions whirling inside her. She knew full well that Antonio Cavelli could have any woman he pleased. ‘So... run this by me again. Why exactly do you need a wife? And why are you asking me to do this?’

‘I’m asking you because you’re convenient. I’m in need of a ready-made family for a short-term period, without any strings or complications. You will do nicely.’ He reached for the calendar on his desk. ‘It’s a case of being in the right place at the right time,’ he added with a smile as he flicked through the pages.

‘Lucky me, then.’ Her voice was low and tight as she fought to suppress the anger rising inside her...

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.

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CHAPTER ONE

‘SO WHAT’S the script on this place?’ Antonio Cavelli asked his accountant as the limousine pulled up outside the glass-fronted restaurant.

Tom Roberts referred to his notes. ‘We purchased the building last summer, the leaseholder is one Victoria Heart. So far she has turned down two offers from us to buy her out, so we’ve increased her rent. She’s now struggling to remain open. So I think she’ll sign on the dotted line this time.’

Antonio frowned. He’d just flown in from his office in Verona, and he’d only been in Australia for a few hours but already he was questioning Tom’s handling of his business. ‘This should have been a straightforward purchase,’ he growled. ‘And we are now six months down the line—what are you playing at?’

The accountant’s face turned an interesting shade of purple and he brushed a hand nervously through his thinning hair. ‘It’s all under control, I assure you,’ he muttered nervously. ‘We’ve had a few problems, I know...but...’

Antonio’s mobile phone rang and he halted Tom’s stuttering apologies midsentence as he saw that it was his lawyer on the line. Right now he had more pressing problems than the simple takeover of an insignificant little restaurant. Right now the whole future of his company was hanging in the balance, as his father attempted to play out the most bizarre and ridiculous charade in order to bend him to his will.

Antonio’s mouth tightened in an angry line. Nobody told him what to do, he thought as he snapped open the phone. *Nobody*—least of all the one man in the world for whom he felt nothing but contempt.

‘Ricardo, have you got good news for me?’ He switched to his native Italian language as he addressed his lawyer.

The silence at the other end of the line was answer enough.

‘I’ve been through all our options a million times, Antonio,’ the lawyer said finally, his voice heavy with regret. ‘And there’s not much we can do. We could take him to court—human rights, and all. But in my opinion all that’s going to do is make for one hell of a media splash. You’ll be sensationalizing the family’s personal business, opening up the rift between you and your father for the world’s scrutiny, and at the end of the day we probably won’t win. The fact of the matter is that you may have built up the company into the success story it is today, but your father still owns sixty percent of Cavelli Enterprises. It’s his to do what he wants with.’

Antonio’s dark eyes flared with fire. He didn’t care if the entire world knew what he thought of his father, but he did care that it would be opening up his mother’s name to the humiliation of the past—and he couldn’t do that. She’d suffered enough at the hands of his father already. Her memory should be left with dignity.

So how should he handle this? As Antonio’s anger simmered, his sharp business mind kicked in to look for an answer. He wasn’t going to allow his father to win this battle. Luc Cavelli may be the chairman of the company but he was a mere figurehead these days—Antonio was the brain, the one who had turned his father’s provincial chain of Italian hotels into a global success story. He smiled to himself, because he had done so very much against his father’s will. Luc hadn’t wanted to expand the company—he had liked being a big fish in a small pond, able to control and manipulate everyone. But Antonio had forced his hand when he’d inherited his mother’s shares, had dragged the company forward and had enjoyed doing it—had enjoyed seeing his father get further and further out of his depth until he was floundering.

So what now? He could call his father’s bluff, sell his forty percent and walk away, leaving the old man to follow through with his threat and sell off the rest of the company. He would find it wasn’t worth as much without him at the helm, anyway. But why should he, he thought furiously, when he

had put so many years of his life into building it all up? ‘There will be a way around this.’ He spoke in a low tone, almost to himself.

‘Well, if there is I can’t see it. I’ve read your father’s correspondence to you and the bottom line, Antonio, is that if you are not married and have not produced a child by the time you are thirty-five your father will sell his shares. He thinks that, as you are his only son, you have a duty to ensure the future of the Cavelli family. He also says that he wants to see you happily settled down.’

A curl of contempt swirled inside of Antonio. What a hypocrite! This was the man who had walked out on him and his mother when he’d been just ten years of age. He hadn’t given a damn about family commitment back then, had been too busy humiliating his wife by parading his string of mistresses in public.

‘He seems very determined,’ his lawyer added softly.

‘Yes, well, not as determined as I am to thwart him.’

‘Hmm...’ There was a moment’s silence. ‘The good news is that if you do comply with his wishes he will immediately sign over all of his shares in the company to you. I have it in writing.’

‘Have you now...’ A cold hard resolve closed around Antonio’s heart. OK, if his father wanted to play these games, then he would rise to the challenge. But he would not allow him to win. He would find a way around this and gain control of everything—and then he would make him regret the day and hour he had tried to dictate terms to him. ‘And I will be pleased to take control of his shares, but not by doing exactly as he wants.’

‘Well, I can’t see any other way around it. Your father wants you to get married and produce a child. And, in effect, he’s served notice on you. Given you two years.’

‘There is a solution to every problem Ricardo. Email or fax me with the relevant documentation so that I can see exactly what he has put in writing, and I’ll speak to you later.’ Antonio hung up and looked across at the man sitting opposite. ‘So where were we...?’ he enquired, switching to perfect English as he compartmentalized the problem of his father and focused on the business at hand.

Tom looked at him warily. He hadn’t understood a word his boss had just said but he’d seen the anger in his eyes and he knew he should now tread very carefully. Antonio Cavelli had a reputation for being fair in business but also a reputation for being ruthless when it came to getting rid of people who didn’t attain his high standards or displeased him in any way. ‘I...I was just saying that I will sort the purchase of the restaurant out—’

‘Ah, yes,’ Antonio cut across him. ‘This is dragging on too long, Tom. And frankly I’m starting to question your handling of the situation.’

‘Sir, I realize this is taking longer than you would want but I assure you I am handling the matter in the best way possible.’ The accountant shifted earnestly forward on the leather seat. ‘For instance, I’ve made sure that Ms Heart doesn’t realize your involvement or interest in her business. I’ve used your subsidiary company, Lancier, for all communications with her.’

‘What’s the point of that?’ Antonio’s eyes narrowed. ‘I don’t do business by the back door, Tom.’

‘I can assure you that this is all perfectly legal and above board!’ The man sat up straight now. ‘What I have managed to do is keep the price down for you, as she has no idea of the strategic importance her building has for us.’

‘Just increase the offer, Tom, and wrap the deal up,’ Antonio told him dismissively. He had more important matters to deal with than this.

‘With respect, sir, we don’t need to increase the offer. I think Ms Heart’s reticence to sell has been down to the fact that she is emotionally attached to her business—oh, and she’s worried about her staff losing their jobs.’

‘Well, then, arrange for their redeployment somewhere else within my company. I’m opening a new hotel next door to her, for heaven’s sakes. I’ll leave it with you.’ Antonio picked up his briefcase and reached for the door handle. ‘Meanwhile I’ll take lunch here.’

‘Here?’ Tom looked startled.

‘Why not, it looks like a fairly decent restaurant and I’m right outside it. I suggest you go back to the office, crunch numbers and finalize the agreement this afternoon.’

The heat of the street hit Antonio like warm nectar after the air-conditioned cool of the car. It was pleasant to be outside after the long flight from Europe, pleasant to be away from Tom Roberts. The guy really was a barracuda. But then that was why he was employing him, Antonio reminded himself sharply. He needed men on the ground at each location overseeing things. Tom was his man in Sydney. His remit was to keep the company lean, mean and able to survive the tough economic climate. And on the whole he was doing a good job. They had expanded down under; this was their tenth hotel on the Australasian continent. However, the man did need reining in—he seemed to enjoy the power trip of his position too much at times.

Antonio took his time and strolled across the wide pavement, taking in the aspects of the restaurant. Ms Heart certainly had picked herself a good location; the restaurant was on a main road beside a small leafy park, yet close enough to the sea to have sweeping views of it from the upstairs terrace. Pity it happened to be practically tagged onto the side of the building he had just purchased. If he raised his head he could see the new Cavelli hotel towering behind her restaurant, taking up more than two blocks of the Sydney street. He was having the place completely remodelled with no expense spared. The Cavelli name was synonymous with luxury and elegance and it was already booked out ahead of the doors opening in two months’ time.

Ms Heart was literally a thorn in his side. Her restaurant had to go to make way for some designer boutiques and a new side entrance.

As he entered the main reception area he noticed with some surprise the polished wooden floors and the pale sofas strategically placed to overlook the greenery of the park. Ms Heart had good taste; the layout and design was impressive. And from what he could see the main body of the restaurant was fairly busy, with a clientele that seemed to consist mainly of business people taking lunch. But there were a few spare tables.

There was no one behind the reception desk and he was about to go straight through to the restaurant when the door behind the desk opened and a young woman came out. She had a pile of files in one hand, a pen in the other and looked as if she were deep in contemplation.

‘Good afternoon, sir, can I help you?’ She asked the question distractedly without looking over at him as she put the files down.

‘Yes, I’d like a table for lunch.’

‘How many for?’ Still she didn’t look at him; she seemed to be searching for something amongst the files.

‘Just for one.’ His gaze moved slowly over her. He guessed she was in her early twenties but the dark suit she wore was more the preserve of an older woman and did nothing for her slender figure, whilst the white blouse beneath was buttoned securely up to the neck.

She looked rather like an old-fashioned schoolmarm, or a librarian from the early nineteenth century, he thought with amusement. Her long dark hair was swept severely back from her face and secured into a tight chignon, and she was wearing dark-rimmed spectacles that seemed too heavy for her small face.

Victoria found the file she was looking for and glanced up, intercepting his detailed critical analysis of her appearance. And suddenly she found herself blushing.

She’d already decided he was Italian with an accent that was bone-meltingly sexy, but the fact that he was also incredibly attractive made her feel even more acutely embarrassed. Why was he looking at her like that? How dare he!

‘So do you think you could fit me in?’ he asked nonchalantly.

‘Maybe... just one second and I’ll take a look.’ She knew very well that she had several spare tables. But it didn’t do any harm to bluff a little. ‘Yes...’ She traced an imaginary line in her appointments book. ‘Yes, you are in luck.’

He looked amused at that. And she had the feeling that he knew very well that she hadn't really needed to consult the book.

He was very irritating, she decided vehemently. And those bold, piercing dark eyes of his were unnerving her completely.

OK, he was probably the most handsome man she had ever set eyes on—but *didn't he just know it*. The suit he was wearing looked designer and expensive and he had the most perfect, powerful physique.

Quickly she pulled herself together; she didn't want to give him the satisfaction of thinking that she was interested in him, because she wasn't. He was well out of her league—a man like him would only date the world's most beautiful women and that certainly wasn't her.

But anyway, she had more important things to think about—namely, trying to save her restaurant. She had a meeting with her bank in an hour and she needed to be able to convince them that she could ride out this recession, otherwise...well...otherwise she could lose everything.

'I'll get someone to show you to your table.' Hastily she looked around for her receptionist, Emma, but she was nowhere in sight.

Where was she? Victoria wondered anxiously. She really didn't want to leave the security of the desk. There was something about the way this man was looking at her that was making her unbearably self-conscious.

Their eyes clashed across the counter. 'Sorry about this—won't be a minute.'

'Perhaps you should show me to the table,' he said briskly. 'I'm on a tight schedule.'

'Oh...yes, of course.' Annoyed with herself for being so pathetic, Victoria tipped her chin up and moved. She didn't know what was wrong with her. One of her strengths was that she had good people skills. She dealt with customers every day without a bother; in fact, her regular clientele loved it when she was front of house because she always remembered them and was able to engage them in conversations about themselves.

Antonio watched as she walked around from behind the desk and then led him through the busy restaurant. She was wearing flat heels that did nothing for her. But she did have nice ankles, he noticed, and her legs looked decent enough...well, the little he could see of them. His eyes moved upwards over her body. It wasn't that she looked a mess, because she didn't; in fact, she was smartly dressed. It was just that she was—what was the word for it?—*staid*, yes, that was it. For a young woman she was definitely staid. It was as if she were afraid that a man might look at her in any way that was sexual.

The notion intrigued him.

As she turned to pull out a chair for him she caught the way he was looking at her and immediately a red-hot wave of embarrassment seared through her. She'd imagined she could feel his eyes on her, assessing her from top to toe as they walked through the restaurant, but she'd told herself not to be silly. Now she was sure he had been looking at her, weighing her up with that gleam in his dark eyes as if she were some sub-species worthy of amusement.

Obviously he thought she was a real plain Jane. Not that she cared whether he found her attractive or not. She didn't have time for such things, but strangely it still hurt.

'I'll get a waitress to take your order,' she mumbled.

'No.' He detained her before she could move away, his manner firm, as if he were used to issuing orders and having them obeyed. 'As I said, I'm in a hurry. So you can take my order.'

She watched as he reached for the menu that was sitting on the table. Part of her wanted to just walk away and ignore the command. But for the sake of good customer relations the sensible side of her wouldn't allow it. 'OK...' She tried to snap back into work mode and forget everything else. 'I can recommend the chef's lunchtime specials. The Penne Arrabiata and the cannelloni.'

‘Is that so?’ He looked up at her with that gleam in his dark eyes again and she could feel the precious grip she had on her composure starting to slip. Probably recommending Italian dishes to an Italian wasn’t her best move.

‘They are very good.’ She tried to angle her chin up further. She had the utmost confidence in her chef. ‘Better than my Italian pronunciation of them, I assure you.’

He laughed at that. ‘Actually, I didn’t think your Italian pronunciation was too bad. You just need to roll your tongue around the words a little more.’ He proceeded to pronounce both dishes again in a slow smooth tone that made her blood start to heat up to boiling point. How did he manage to make two ordinary dishes from a menu sound like some kind of prelude to lovemaking? she wondered distractedly. ‘Well...I’ll...I’ll bear that in mind,’ she retorted stiffly.

‘Yes, you do that.’ Once more there was that glimmer of amusement in his eyes and then he returned his attention to the menu.

She knew her manner was uptight, yet she couldn’t seem to help it. He was having the strangest effect on her. He made her feel gauche and unsure of herself...and *he made her aware of herself as a woman...*

The knowledge trickled through her like ice.

Antonio glanced up and caught the vulnerable light in her green eyes. It was only there for a second before it was hidden behind a sweep of long dark lashes, replaced by that wary, guarded look of hers.

‘So have you made up your mind?’ she asked him, now fiddling nervously with the pair of glasses that sat perched on the end of her nose.

For a second he was distracted from thoughts of food as he wondered what had prompted that expression in her eyes—strange really, because he wasn’t interested in her. She certainly wasn’t his type.

He snapped the menu shut and handed it back to her. ‘Yes, I’ll go with your recommendation and have the Penne Arrabiata.’

‘And to drink?’ She pushed the wine list in his direction.

‘Water, thanks, I need to keep a clear head for business this afternoon.’ ‘OK.’ She started to turn away from him but he detained her. ‘By the way, is your boss in today?’ he asked idly.

‘My boss?’ She looked back at him with a frown.

‘Yes. The owner of the establishment,’ he enunciated clearly.

‘You’re looking at her.’

The surprise on his handsome features amused her.

‘You’re Victoria Heart?’

‘That’s right. Was there something you wanted to speak to me about?’

‘No, not really.’ For a second his eyes held with hers. For some reason he’d expected her to point out the woman now standing by the front reception area. ‘You’re younger than I expected you to be.’

‘Am I?’ She looked at him in puzzlement. ‘I’m twenty-three. Sorry...but why are you interested?’

‘Just curious.’ His mobile phone rang and he took it out to answer it. ‘Thanks for the lunch recommendation.’ He gave her a brief smile and turned his attention to the call.

She knew she was being dismissed and she would gratefully have hurried away, except before she could move she heard him say, ‘Yes, Antonio Cavelli speaking.’

Antonio Cavelli. She stood rigidly where she was. Was this *the* Antonio Cavelli who had purchased the hotel next door to her? She didn’t pay much attention to gossip sheets, nor did she get much time to watch TV programmes, so she really wouldn’t know him if she fell over him. But now she came to think about it she had heard that the multimillionaire was very attractive, very sought after by the opposite sex.

As she still made no attempt to move away, he covered the receiver of his phone and looked up, 'Thank you but I would like my lunch as quickly as possible.' His voice was curt.

'Yes...yes, of course.' Pulling herself together she hurried across to place his order with the kitchen.

It was quite a relief being within the warm busy hustle of the kitchen.

'Everything all ready for your meeting with the bank, Victoria?' Berni, the head chef, asked her as he put two plates down on the counter top, ready for one of the waitresses to collect.

'Yes, all the paperwork is in order.'

He nodded. 'You've been running a highly successful business here for the past few years. They can't say that you don't know what you are doing.'

'No, they can't say that.' Victoria smiled. When Berni had first come to work for her a year and a half ago he'd treated her with a kind of wary disdain. Then one day a few members of staff hadn't turned in and she'd rolled up her sleeves and worked alongside him. Since then they'd rubbed along together very well. And telling her she knew what she was doing was indeed an accolade coming from the temperamental chef.

'I'm sure it will all be fine,' he said blithely now.

The words made the tension that had been escalating inside her all morning twist. She didn't want to tell Berni that she wasn't quite as optimistic as him. His wife had just had a baby and he needed this job—but then so did all the other members of her staff. Not that the bank would care a damn about that. Neither would they care that she was a single mother of a two-year-old little boy and that she would be practically destitute if the business went under. All she was to the bank was a number on a sheet of paper.

Berni was right, her business had been very successful, and the bank had got more than their pound of flesh out of her in bank charges and interest over the years. But all they would look at now was the fact that her takings were down and her expenditure was significantly up, thanks to her new landlord—Lancier. So she had a horrible feeling that her visit to the bank today wasn't going to be pleasant. And given the present economic climate the odds were against them extending her loan.

Which meant she either sold up to Lancier or went bankrupt.

The very thought made her feel sick. She'd rather have sold to a flesh-eating monster than to the company who had deliberately tried to squeeze her out. But if the bank said no, then Lancier's offer was her only alternative.

Unless.

She moved back to the kitchen door and glanced out of the round porthole window towards Antonio Cavelli's table.

He could be her salvation.

She'd devised a whole new business plan around the fact that the Cavelli hotel was opening up next to her. The simple fact was that her premises would be an ideal access point for his hotel. She got a lot of passing trade on the busy main road, whilst his hotel was set back in secluded gardens. She'd been trying to get in touch with Antonio Cavelli for the past three months to tell him this and to run a few ideas by him—ideas that would give his customers a side access to his hotel, in return for her still being able to operate her business under the umbrella of his. They wouldn't even need to make any structural changes; there was already a connecting small patio garden off the back of her restaurant. They could just open the doors and walk through.

She'd emailed both him and the chairman of the company, Luc Cavelli, practically every week. Had even sent spreadsheets and business projection figures. But to no avail—they hadn't replied to one of her emails.

But now here he was, sitting in her restaurant about to have lunch.

Maybe it was fate. Or maybe he'd read her ideas and liked them. After all, he had enquired about the owner of the restaurant—*he had known her name.*

‘Berni, take special care with the order for table thirty-three, will you?’ she murmured absently as she moved to get a jug of ice water. Berni glanced over at her with a raised eyebrow.

‘I take special care with all the orders,’ he said gruffly.

She smiled. ‘Yes, I know—it’s just that this lunch might be the most important of the year.’

CHAPTER TWO

ANTONIO looked up as Victoria put the jug of water down on his table. He'd finished his phone call and was now browsing through some papers from his architect's office regarding the plans for the new boutiques that were to replace this restaurant.

'Thanks.' He acknowledged the water with a nod, and returned his attention to the papers. But after a moment he became aware that she was still standing next to him.

'Was there something else?' He looked back up at her enquiringly.

'Well, actually, yes. I was wondering if I could talk to you for a moment?'

He didn't make an immediate reply, just sat back in his chair and regarded her with that cool dark gaze of his.

It took all of her courage to continue. 'You're my new neighbour, aren't you? Antonio Cavelli, the hotel magnate?'

He inclined his head.

'I can't tell you how pleased I am to meet you. Do you mind if I sit down for a moment?' She didn't wait for him to reply but pulled out the chair opposite and sat down. OK, he terrified her to death—and she didn't want to do this—but she was desperate.

'Actually, I have been emailing you with some business propositions. I wonder if you got any of them?'

One dark eyebrow rose. 'No, I can't say I have.'

'It's just that as my restaurant is practically attached to your hotel, I thought we could do some business together.' She leaned forward and poured them both a glass of water as she spoke.

Despite everything Antonio found himself intrigued. When she talked about business he noticed there was a complete transformation in her manner. Her green eyes were bright with enthusiasm, her body relaxed. And she was very eloquent. It seemed she had identified the fact that a side entrance to his hotel would be of benefit to him, and had put together some kind of proposal to incorporate her restaurant within his hotel. In fact, she had worked out a whole business strategy, which did sound surprisingly competent. She obviously had a good head for figures and was very bright and very astute, but it wasn't something that he would want.

As soon as she paused for breath he held up a hand.

'Ms Heart.'

She smiled expectantly. 'Call me Victoria, please.'

'Victoria. I'm sorry, but I'm not interested—'

'But you would gain by having this entrance and—'

'Even so, I'm still not interested,' he cut across her firmly.

He could see the disappointment in her eyes.

'Really?' She paused. 'It's just that I thought maybe you'd got one of my emails and it was why you'd come in here today for lunch.'

'I haven't received any of your emails,' he told her honestly. 'I was inspecting work that's being carried out next door. And the only reason I came in here for lunch was that it was convenient.'

'I see.' She bit down on her lip for a moment. She had very soft lips, he noticed; in fact, she had a nicely shaped mouth. 'Well, seeing as you are here, maybe I could leave my business plan with you?' She looked over at him hopefully. 'I have it all printed out in the office. I can put it in a folder and leave it at the reception for you to take.'

He had to hand it to her, she was tenacious. 'You can leave it if you want and I'll take it. But it's a no-go as far as I'm concerned.'

'Well, you never know—you might think differently when you look at it.' She smiled at him.

The waitress brought his food and Victoria pushed her chair back from the table and got up. 'Thanks for taking the time to listen to me,' she said politely. 'I hope you enjoy your lunch.'

After her appointment at the bank, Victoria picked Nathan up from kindergarten. And then following their usual routine she pushed him through the park in his stroller.

The sun was sending dappled light onto the path through the tracery of green branches and there was a fragrant smell from the eucalyptus trees. Hard to believe that on such a beautiful September day her life was falling apart. But it was. Because the bank had said no to her and that was her last hope.

Deep down she'd known that they wouldn't extend her credit, but it was still the most dreadful disappointment. Now it seemed that everything she had worked so hard for was slipping away.

And what on earth was she going to tell her staff? They all seemed to have the utmost faith that she would sort the business out.

How had this happened? she wondered in anguish. How could she be the owner of a successful restaurant one moment and be staring bankruptcy in the face the next? The situation had crept up on her so gradually as to be almost insidious.

Nathan wriggled impatiently in his stroller. He wanted to get out and although he didn't talk much yet he was making the fact very clear.

Victoria stopped and went around to unfasten his safety harness. 'OK, honey, you can toddle for a while now,' she told him softly, and he gave her a winning smile, his dark eyes sparkling up at her full of life and mischief.

At least she had Nathan, she thought, her heart swelling with love. He was the most important thing in her life. Everything else could be worked out.

But what would become of them now? The question made fear coil inside her like a snake. Everything she had was tied up in the business.

Victoria had experienced poverty as a child, had watched her parents scrimping and scraping to get by. They'd tried to hide the problems from her but she remembered all too well the cold hard reality of it. Her father had died when she was thirteen—the family home had been lost and for a while she and her mother had lived in a small flat in an inner city suburb of London. That had been a truly terrible time and her mother had died less than a year later, leaving Victoria under the care of social services until her mother's sister in Australia had been found and she had been sent to live with her.

She'd never met her aunt Noreen until the day she'd stepped off the plane in Sydney and she had been incredibly nervous. All she had known about the woman was that she was her mother's older sister but they hadn't been close. Deep down Victoria supposed she had been hoping for a kindly aunt—someone who resembled her mum, someone who would help heal the loneliness and loss she felt. But it had been immediately apparent that Noreen was not the sentimental type and looking after a heartbroken fourteen-year-old girl was not something she had wanted at all. In fact, she'd made it very clear from the start that she had only taken her in because she'd felt obliged to. There had been no warm hug of welcome, no platitudes about how sad the situation was—just a cool handshake and a let's-get-on-with-it attitude.

Noreen had been in her late forties, single and a formidable businesswoman. She owned a small restaurant out at Bondi Beach and she put Victoria to work there almost as soon as she arrived. 'You'll have to pay your way, girl. I can't afford passengers,' she'd told her as she tossed an apron in her direction. 'You can have two evenings off during a school week, the rest of the time you start work at six-thirty.'

Those years had been hard and the hours unsocial but Victoria had done as she was told, and had in fact shown a natural aptitude for cooking as well as for business. And Noreen had been pleased. An emotionally cold woman, she had no time for the fripperies of being a female but she had taught her well in the ways of business, encouraging her to go on to college to get business qualifications and qualifications in catering.

When she was twenty, Victoria was running Noreen's business for her single-handedly. But the hours were long and hard and she had little time for herself. And it was at this point that she had met Lee. He was a highly respected member of the business community and ten years her senior.

Looking back now she realized how naive she had been to fall for his smooth lines. But she had been very lonely and he had made her feel special—had looked at her and admired her and showed interest in her, and she had lapped it up.

But it had been a big mistake. As soon as she had gone to bed with Lee he had stopped being interested and had cut her dead and moved on to his next conquest.

She felt a wave of shame now as she remembered going to him to tell him she was pregnant, remembered the way he had calmly told her to have an abortion and had written a cheque and slid it across the desk to her.

Victoria hadn't wanted to cash that cheque; she'd wanted to tear it up and fling it in his face. She'd had no intention of having the abortion. Neither had she had any intention of allowing Noreen the pleasure of throwing her out, which her aunt had coldly insisted she would do if she went ahead with the pregnancy. Instead she'd taken a leap of faith and had used the money as a down payment for rent on a small bedsit.

'What the hell are you playing at?' Noreen had demanded as she had watched her pack a suitcase to leave.

'I'm doing what you told me I should do. I'm standing on my own two feet.'

She remembered her aunt's rage. 'You're just like your mother! Well, don't think you can come back here when the going gets tough because you can't. I'll want nothing to do with you.'

'That's OK. I won't be coming back. And just for the record my mother may have been pregnant with me when she married my dad but they were very much in love. But you wouldn't understand feelings like that.'

'Oh, I understand all right. I understand that your mother stole the only man I ever cared about, trapped him when she fell pregnant with you...'

The bitter words spilling out into the silence had explained so much about Noreen's cold, derogatory manner over the years—her almost vehement disdain for Victoria at times, the veiled insults.

She'd never seen Noreen again. Two months later on her twenty-first birthday Victoria had received a solicitor's letter. It seemed her mother had taken out a life insurance policy that had paid out on her death and the money had been invested and held in trust for Victoria.

She'd broken down and cried on the morning that letter had come. It had been a precious last gift from her mother at a point when she had needed it most, and she had made a conscious decision that she would use it to make a better life for her and her child.

And she'd done that. She'd known if she just banked the money and used it to pay rent that it would be gone in no time, that she needed to make it work for her, so she had decided to start her own business. She'd found a little bijou café to rent and had started out just selling teas and coffees and her homemade cakes. By the time Nathan was born she had been able to afford to take on another girl to help her. Six months after that she had extended her premises, and with the help of a bank loan had turned the business into a thriving restaurant with a small studio apartment attached for her and Nathan.

She'd sent Noreen a letter at that point telling her she was doing well and had even sent some photographs of Nathan, but her aunt had never acknowledged them and had never visited. Probably frightened in case she was asked for help.

She would never be that desperate, Victoria promised herself fiercely. She was a survivor—she would find a way around her problems. After all, she'd got them this far. And no matter how broke she was she would always find a way to provide for Nathan, to care for him and love him.

Nathan wanted to push his pram himself and she allowed him to take it over, smiling to herself as she watched the toddler's unsteady yet resolute progress. He'd only just turned two. But he was filled with a stubborn sense of purpose that reminded her a lot of herself.

Her phone rang and she fished it out from her pocket with a feeling of hope. Maybe it would be Antonio Cavelli—maybe he'd read her business proposition and had second thoughts about it.

'Ms Heart, this is Tom Roberts calling you from Lancier Enterprises. Just reminding you of our appointment today at four-thirty.'

Of course it wasn't Antonio Cavelli; he'd told her he wasn't interested in her proposal. Victoria swallowed on a hard painful knot in her throat. But she wasn't ready to admit defeat and sign away her precious business yet, she told herself fiercely. *Especially to Lancier!* 'Ah, yes, Mr Roberts. I rang and left a message with your secretary earlier today, stating that I was unable to make our appointment. Unfortunately I've no child care for my little boy. Could we reschedule for later in the week?'

'Later in the week doesn't suit, Ms Heart.' The man's tone was furious. 'May I suggest you bring your child with you into the office. We need to discuss terms today. Otherwise I can't promise that this generous offer for your business will be on the table tomorrow.'

'How's it going?' Antonio's lazy question coming from the doorway made the accountant jump nervously as he put the phone down. He hadn't noticed his boss standing there.

'Everything's in hand.' The words were firmly decisive, but Tom Roberts looked anything but in control of the situation. In fact, he looked completely flustered.

'I take it Ms Heart is still trying to give you the runaround?' Antonio moved further into the office.

'She's trying to be a little elusive but it's nothing I can't handle.'

'Hmm.' For a second Antonio remembered the way Victoria Heart had approached him with her business idea this afternoon, fixing him with those wide green intelligent eyes.

Why he was thinking about that he didn't know. He really had more important matters on his mind right now. He sauntered over to the fax machine by the side of Tom's desk and took out the documents his lawyer had sent for him.

The sooner he relieved his father of his shares in the company, the better, he thought angrily as he scanned the details of his directive. The old man had obviously lost his sanity completely—either that or he was having some kind of laugh at his expense!

This pretence that he was giving him an ultimatum because he cared about him and wanted him to settle down instead of working so hard was frankly ludicrous! The only thing that Luc Cavelli had ever cared about was himself. And he'd always had an overinflated sense of his own importance, an arrogance that seemed to have spilled now into some kind of obsession with Antonio providing him with the future generation of the Cavelli family.

Please!

Antonio shook his head. He'd told his father once that he had no intention of ever marrying; and he'd meant it. He knew his limitations and he knew he wasn't the settling-down type. He enjoyed his freedom too much, enjoyed playing the field. In that respect he was probably like his father—but unlike his father he thought about the consequences of his actions, and he believed in being honest with himself and with the women he dated. The mess of his parents' marriage had been a stark warning against anything else.

As for bringing some poor unsuspecting child into the world just to gain some shares in a business, or to fulfil his father's ambitions! Well, the man could think again. A child was the biggest commitment of all and definitely off Antonio's agenda.

The old guy really had lost it if he thought for one moment he would do something so irresponsible!

But if the old guy had lost it—*really lost it*—what would that mean for the future of the company? The thought occurred to Antonio that whilst he could walk away back to his other company unscathed, there were thousands—literally thousands—of jobs on the line at Cavelli.

‘Anyway, I laid the law down to her,’ Tom Roberts was saying smugly. ‘Told her the deal wouldn’t be on the table tomorrow if she didn’t get herself down here.’

Antonio was barely listening. He had his back to the guy and was reading the directive from his father and the attached documentation.

I’m not getting any younger, Antonio. All I ask is that you marry and provide me with a grandchild. Once you have done that I will happily hand over all of my shares in the business to you.

‘Anyway, she came to heel pretty quickly. She knows we’ve made a damn good offer.’

Tom’s voice was like an annoying drone. ‘Great...’ Antonio murmured distractedly. He looked up from the papers in his hand and out of the window at the street below.

There was a taxi pulling up at the curb, and as Antonio watched he saw Victoria Heart step out onto the pavement.

It looked as if Tom was right. Well, that was one less problem to sort out, he told himself wryly. He was about to turn away when he noticed that she had a child in her arms and that she was struggling to get a pushchair out from the back seat.

He frowned. ‘I didn’t know that Ms Heart had a child.’

‘Yes, she’s a single mother. I did some digging when I was researching her. She’s never been married and there’s no man on the scene and no maintenance for the child.’ Tom’s voice was derisive. ‘Another reason why she can’t afford to turn us down.’

Antonio stilled.

‘Anyway, leave it with me,’ the man told him briskly. ‘I’ll have the deal signed and sealed for you within the next hour.’

‘I’ve changed my mind...’

‘Sorry?’ Tom looked over at him in surprise.

‘I’ve changed my mind. Tell Victoria Heart when she arrives that this deal is off and then get my secretary to show her through to my office.’

‘But...’ Tom turned an interesting shade of beetroot. ‘But...’

With a smile Antonio returned to his office. He’d found the perfect solution to the problem his father had posed. And that solution was Victoria Heart.

‘What do you mean the deal’s off?’ Victoria looked at the accountant in horror, all colour draining from her face. She’d thought that the worst thing that could possibly happen was selling her business to Lancier but now she knew differently. The worst thing was if this sale fell through, because it meant bankruptcy for certain.

‘My boss has changed his mind.’ Tom shrugged. ‘I told you not to delay—I warned you.’

Victoria transferred Nathan over to her other arm as the child wriggled to get down. She was trying very hard to keep calm, but as she stood watching the man coolly shuffling papers on his desk, the feeling was getting further and further away. ‘But we only spoke a few moments ago on the phone!’

‘As I said, it’s nothing to do with me now.’ Tom shrugged again. ‘Take it up with the owner of the company. He said you could go through and see him.’ He closed the files in front of him and looked up. ‘It’s the door at the end of the hallway. I’ll get his secretary to show you through—’

Before he had finished speaking Victoria had swung out of the room and was heading down the hallway. She wasn’t waiting around for any secretary; she needed this sorting out—now.

Without knocking she opened the door and strode into the large sunlit office. And for a moment she thought she had entered some kind of parallel universe as her eyes met with the man’s behind the desk.

Antonio Cavelli!

What was he doing here? Her mind struggled with the situation and she stood nonplussed, holding onto the child in her arms as if he were her only lifeline to sanity.

Antonio by contrast seemed perfectly relaxed; he was lounging back in the leather chair behind his desk, talking in Italian to someone on the phone. He glanced over and motioned for her to take a seat opposite to him. 'Won't be a moment,' he told her in English before returning to his conversation.

Victoria didn't move. She was aware of the secretary from the outer office coming into the room behind her and whispering a rather breathless apology about Victoria's intrusion, but she was waved away dismissively. Then the door closed.

'As far as I can see this is the perfect solution,' Antonio told his lawyer in Italian as his gaze moved slowly over Victoria, inspecting her from the tip of her flat-heeled shoes up over the unflattering mid-calf-length skirt before lingering on her left hand to make sure she wore no ring. He smiled. 'But don't get me wrong, Roberto. This will just be a marriage on paper—a business move. I'll divorce her once the shares are mine. But what makes this so perfect is that she already has a child.' His eyes rested on the little boy in her arms as he listened to what his lawyer had to say and he noticed how protectively she held him in against her slender body.

'I've read the documents, Roberto. The old man has forgotten to stipulate that the child must be a direct bloodline to the Cavelli family. He hasn't even said anything about the Cavelli name. So you see where I'm going with this... a marriage of convenience to a woman who already has a child is perfect.' Antonio's lips curved in a triumphant smile as he imagined his father's horror when he realized his mistake and yet still had to hand over all of his shares in the business. It was the perfect revenge. In fact, Antonio could hardly wait now to tie the knot and present this woman as his wife—was looking forward to seeing the expression on his father's face when he saw her and her illegitimate child and realized he'd been outmanoeuvred, had lost control of the business.

'I'll leave it in your capable hands, Roberto—I want a watertight contract and prenuptial agreement drawing up immediately.' He leaned forward and flicked through the calendar on his desk. 'I'm due to fly home to Italy next Monday. So I could marry her that afternoon... Yes, I have a couple of hours free before the flight—that gives you over a week to do your magic with the legal side of things. I'll get all her details, child's full name, et cetera, and get back to you.'

Antonio replaced the receiver and silence fell in the office like a blanket of ice. She was glaring at him, her green eyes narrowed like a cat, wary, cornered and ready to pounce.

'Take a seat.' He spoke in English again and waved her towards the chair opposite but still she didn't move. She hadn't understood a word he'd been saying on the phone but she'd noticed the way he had looked at her and her whole body was still tingling in consternation. He'd made her feel as if she was some kind of object being weighed up ready for auction and found wanting.

How dare he look at her like that! Who the hell did he think he was?

'So what exactly is going on here?' Her voice wasn't quite steady and she hated herself for that. She wanted to be in control, and she certainly didn't want him to know just how nervous he made her feel. 'I take it you're the man behind this takeover deal for my restaurant?' She tipped her head up proudly. 'And that you've been hiding behind another company's name?'

'I am Lancier. I own the company.' He sounded completely at ease.

'That's as may be, but it's a fact that you conveniently forgot to mention when you were in my restaurant today!'

'I was in your restaurant to have lunch, not discuss business.' He sat back in his chair and regarded her steadily. 'As you know, my accountant, Tom Roberts, has been running the Australian side of my business. I've just flown in to look over things.'

'And you've decided you no longer want to buy the lease on my restaurant?' Her voice was softer now—all the anger and recriminations buried behind a far heavier weight of worry.

'I've had second thoughts about the situation... yes.' Antonio was distracted slightly as the child in her arms turned to regard him with steady dark eyes.

‘Do you mind telling me why?’ She whispered the question numbly as she transferred her son to her other hip.

For a moment the shapeless jacket was twisted to one side, revealing a glimpse of what appeared to be a very shapely body.

Antonio felt a dart of surprise and his eyes drifted over her more slowly, deliberately assessing her again—but the jacket was back in place now and it was hard to tell what her body was like under its baggy shape.

Realizing what he was doing, he stopped suddenly. This was about business, he reminded himself angrily, nothing else.

‘I was getting around to my reasons.’ He nodded towards the chair. ‘Sit down, Victoria.’

Their eyes clashed and he realized she had noticed his momentary interest and that she was blushing. He cursed himself.

‘Sit down, Victoria,’ he said again, and this time his tone was even more briskly businesslike.

Victoria did as she was told, her legs shaking. Had she just imagined that second bold assessment of her body? Her eyes met with his and the flame of heat inside her intensified.

How mortifying! She knew damn well that Antonio Cavelli was not remotely interested in her—that he was so arrogantly sure of himself that he probably looked at every woman in the same way. Yet here she was, blushing like a school girl! She needed to get a grip!

‘Have you read my business plan?’ she asked suddenly, angling her chin upwards again and meeting his gaze.

She was still blushing. Antonio found it quite amusing. He was used to sophisticated women of the world and her reaction to him intrigued him.

His gaze drifted over her face. And he found himself wondering abstractedly what she would look like without the glasses that were still perched on her nose—they completely dominated her face and did nothing for her.

‘Business plan?’ For a second he couldn’t remember what she was talking about. Then he remembered the folder her receptionist had handed to him earlier today. ‘Oh, that—no. I thought I made it clear this morning. Your idea isn’t something I would consider.’

‘But—’

‘Victoria, I have a plan that could bail you out with the restaurant but I’m on limited time here. I have an important meeting in twenty minutes so if we could press on.’ He leaned forward impatiently and she shrank back into her chair.

There was an aura of power about him that unnerved her completely, or was it that raw sensuality that seemed to blaze from his dark eyes? He was everything a man should be and more. The clothes he wore were expensive and sophisticated, his features chiselled in a ruggedly handsome way, the square jaw accentuating his masculinity. He made her aching aware of her own femininity and inadequacies.

‘Tell me, are you married?’ he asked abruptly.

‘Married?’ The question took her completely aback. She shook her head in confusion. ‘No, why are you asking me that?’

‘And you live alone? There’s no man in your life?’ he pressed on.

‘That’s...really none of your business!’ she stammered. ‘What’s all this about?’

‘I’ll take that as a no, shall I?’ He brushed aside her question and then held up a hand as she started to interrupt him. ‘You’re right, it’s none of my business.’ He conceded the point easily. ‘The thing is, I have a proposition for you.’

She could feel her heart thudding unevenly against her chest. ‘What kind of a proposition?’

He caught the nervous look in her wide eyes and his lips twitched with amusement. ‘A strictly business proposition, I assure you.’

The dry note in his voice made her skin start to heat with embarrassed colour again. But she managed to hold his gaze defiantly. OK, he was making it clear that he wasn't interested in her sexually—but she wasn't interested in him either. All she cared about was her business. 'Good, so perhaps you'd better make yourself clearer. Do you want to buy the lease on my restaurant or not?'

'To be perfectly honest, I've never wanted to buy your restaurant. What I wanted was for you to vacate the premises. I have redevelopment plans for that area.'

The blunt reply wasn't at all what she had expected. 'You mean you want to knock the place down...?'

'Pretty much...yes, but I'm prepared to be very generous to you, Victoria,' he cut across her smartly, one eye on his watch. He couldn't waste much more time on this. 'What I'm proposing now is that I relocate your business to a position of your choice within the city. I will bear all costs including staff's wages for the transitional period, fittings and fixtures for your new premises, plus advertising costs, and I will handsomely compensate you for the inconvenience. Shall we say double the amount of money we offered you in the first instance?'

Her eyes widened. 'So what's the catch?' her voice was huskily unsure. 'Why are you suddenly prepared to pay so much?'

'Because I want something from you in return.'

Nathan was wriggling on her knee. He was bored and wanted to get down, but she held him where he was safely wrapped in her arms. 'You mean apart from my allowing you to bulldoze my lovely restaurant?'

'I think I've covered that with a more than generous offer,' Antonio replied easily. 'You'll be financially made for life if I back you in your new venture. No, what I want from you is a little piece of your time.'

Her eyes narrowed on him suspiciously.

'I'm in need of a wife.'

The statement was made so nonchalantly that at first Victoria wondered if she had heard him correctly. 'Sorry, did you say...a wife?'

He smiled. 'Don't look so worried, this is a marriage for business purposes only. I don't want you in my bed—and there will be nothing improper about the arrangement.'

Victoria shook her head and tried to gather her senses up from the fragmented emotions whirling inside of her. She knew full well that Antonio Cavelli was the type of man who could have any woman he pleased, and that she wouldn't be on his list of most desirable females. 'So...run this by me again. Why exactly do you need a wife? And why are you asking me to do this?'

'I'm asking you because you're convenient. I'm in need of a ready-made family for a short-term period without any strings or complications. You will do nicely.' He reached for the calendar on his desk. 'It's a case of being in the right place at the right time,' he added with a smile as he flicked through the pages.

'Lucky me, then.' Her voice was low and tight as she fought to suppress the anger rising inside of her. 'But perhaps you'd care to explain in a little more detail exactly what these business reasons are.'

'You don't need to worry about details, Victoria.' He reached for a pen on the desk. 'It's complicated and to do with a transfer of shares within my company. Nothing for you to concern yourself with.'

The patronizing tone made her head snap up and her eyes blaze into his. 'Too complicated for someone like me...is that what you are trying to say?'

'No, that's not what I'm trying to say.' He stopped what he was doing and looked at her. 'You're obviously an intelligent woman so let me rephrase that for you—*it's none of your business.*'

There was a steely strength behind the words that let her know in no uncertain terms that he was the one calling the shots—and that he was only doing her a favour humouring her questions to a point.

She swallowed nervously but forced herself to continue. ‘I have a child to think about, Mr Cavelli—a child whose welfare comes first above everything else in my life. And I think as you are asking me to marry you I have a right to know exactly what is going on?’

He frowned. ‘I thought I made myself clear—this isn’t a real proposal. I am not interested in you or your child on a personal level—this is just business.’

‘Yes, you’ve made that point.’ Victoria’s cheeks started to turn a bright rosy red. ‘But I still need more information—’

‘The only information you need is that the arrangement is perfectly above board and that I will treat you and your son with the greatest care and respect for the time you are under my roof and legally my obligation.’

‘Under your roof...’ Victoria started to shake her head. The thought of spending time in the same house as this man made her senses fly into panic. ‘No...I don’t think so. It’s one thing putting my name on a piece of paper for you and quite another moving in with you.’

Antonio looked vaguely amused. There were women queuing around the block who were desperate to move in with him...women who would marry him in an instant with just the snap of his fingers. And yet this...plain woman was looking at him as if he were an ogre from the blue lagoon. Amazing!

However, it made her even more perfect for his requirements, he thought as he transferred his attention to the calendar again. He would never ask one of the women waiting in the wings to do this. It would be too fraught with emotional complications, and that was something he was determined to avoid at all costs.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll probably only want you for about...let’s see...’ Antonio paused to calculate how long it would take to transfer his father’s shares into his name. The old man would probably kick up a hell of a fuss but as everything was in writing...‘Say about a month—give or take a few weeks,’ he finished resolutely. ‘As soon as my business transaction is completed we can have the marriage dissolved and go our separate ways—no need to see each other ever again.’

The cool words whirled around like a cyclone inside of her. ‘You don’t have much respect for the institution of marriage, do you, Mr Cavelli?’

‘As I said before, this is business.’ Antonio looked over at her with a raised eyebrow. ‘But if the deal isn’t for you, then I’ll get someone else.’

Victoria nodded in relief. She really wasn’t comfortable with any of this. ‘I think that might be best.’

Antonio frowned and leaned back in his chair. He really hadn’t anticipated that! Most people would have snatched his hand off for this kind of money! ‘Best for whom—certainly not your son?’ His eyes drifted to the child on her knee. The little boy was playing with a button on her jacket, a look of absorbed concentration on his young face. Antonio couldn’t help noticing that the material of the jacket was rather worn, whilst the child’s clothes seemed new by comparison. ‘You do realize that this will make all the difference to his life, don’t you? It will mean private education and a nice home. And what’s your alternative? I’ve looked at your accounts, Victoria, and even by the most optimistic of calculations you only have two to three weeks left before your business folds and the bailiffs turn up at your door.’

She’d been in the process of gathering the child up and getting to her feet but she sank back down again now. ‘You mean the deal is off completely?’

‘What did you expect?’ He spread his hands.

‘I thought...I thought you might go back to your original offer for the place?’

Antonio made no reply, just shook his head and there was a steely expression on the handsome features now.

‘But you need me out of those premises, Mr Cavelli, you said so yourself.’

‘I can wait.’ His eyes held with hers calmly.

Desperately she tried to swallow down the panic that was rising inside of her again. ‘Well, I’m not going anywhere without a fight.’ From somewhere she found the strength to hold her ground.

Antonio couldn’t help admiring her spirit. But he really didn’t have the time or the inclination to be philanthropic and allow her to walk away. He wanted this deal wrapped up before his father got wind of his mistake and started to backtrack. Besides, this deal would benefit her in the long run.

‘Hard to fight without money, and believe me, Victoria, you don’t want to lock horns with me because you will be crushed.’

The hard cold words hit her like a punch.

In that moment she hated him—hated his arrogance and his confidence and his power. And more than anything hated the fact that he was right. She could bluster all she wanted but there was no way she could win a fight against this multimillionaire tycoon.

He noted the vulnerable look flickering over her young face and knew with the experience born from many a successful business deal that it was now time to reel her in. ‘Anyway, your loss. I’ll get my secretary to show you out.’

‘No!’ She stopped him before he could reach for the phone and he smiled at her, a light of triumph in the darkness of his eyes now.

‘I thought you’d see sense.’ He lifted his pen and put a red X on the calendar. ‘I have two hours free next Monday afternoon. We’ll sign the paperwork at two...get married at two-thirty.’

Victoria said nothing. The marriage wasn’t going to happen, she reassured herself fiercely. She was just agreeing with him to buy herself time. By next week she’d have found a way out of this. There had to be a way out—*there just had to be*.

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