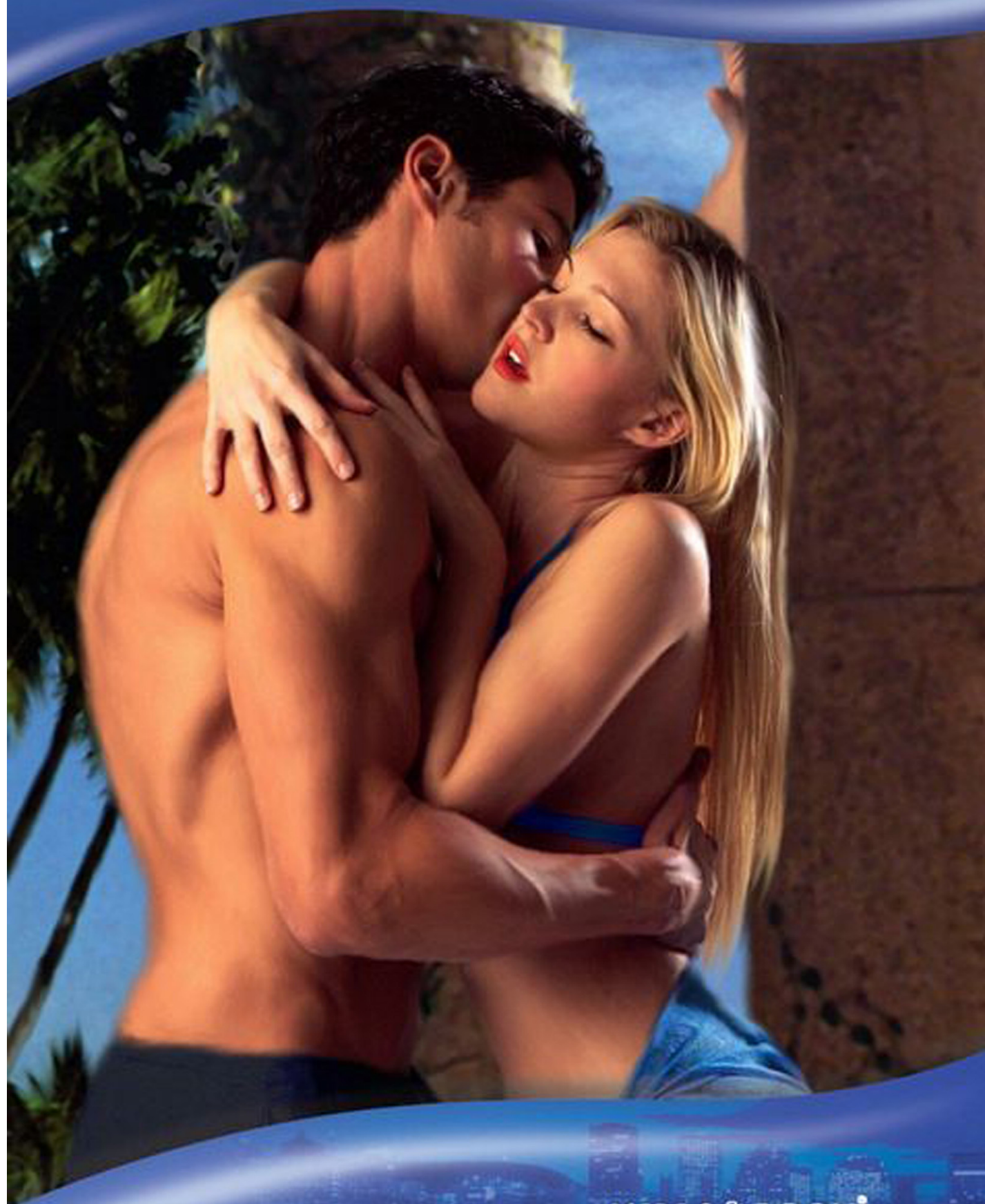


Mistress to the Merciless Millionaire
Abby Green



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Abby Green

Mistress to the Merciless Millionaire

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She's his – for as long as he wants her... It's been ten years since Tiarnan Quinn humiliatingly rejected Kate, and she's still smarting. As a famous model she can have any man she wants. But there's something about the cold-hearted millionaire that makes her go weak at the knees. So much so, she agrees to jet off to his luxury villa in Martinique. Kate knows Tiarnan can't give her what she wants: true love, a family. But as the sultry nights close in she begins to see hints of a different man beneath the hard exterior...

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‘You said one kiss.’

Tiarnan looked at her for a long moment, and Kate felt her breasts crushed to his chest. Her whole body was crying out to mould into his, to allow it to go up in flames.

She repeated herself, as if that might change the direction things had been taking since he’d walked up to her on that stage in San Francisco.

‘You said one kiss.’

Tiarnan snaked one arm around her back, pulling her in even tighter. The other went to the back of her head. She was his captive, and couldn’t move even if she’d wanted to.

‘I lied.’

Abby Green got hooked on Mills & Boon® romances while still in her teens, when she stumbled across one belonging to her grandmother in the west of Ireland. After many years of reading them voraciously, she sat down one day and gave it a go herself. Happily, after a few failed attempts, Mills & Boon bought her first manuscript.

Abby works freelance in the film and TV industry, but thankfully the four a.m. starts and the stresses of dealing with recalcitrant actors are becoming more and more infrequent, leaving more time to write!

She loves to hear from readers, and you can contact her through her website at www.abby-green.com. She lives and works in Dublin.

**MISTRESS TO
THE MERCILESS
MILLIONAIRE
BY
ABBY GREEN**



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This is for Lorna Muga and Anne Warter,
whose friendship I value so much.

PROLOGUE

KATE LANCASTER stood at the very ornate stone font where her two-month-old goddaughter was being christened. The holy water was being poured onto her forehead as the priest said a blessing in French. The ceremony was achingly beautiful, in a tiny ancient chapel in the grounds of her best friend Sorcha's new home, a stunning château just outside Paris. Kate had been at her wedding in this same chapel just nine months previously, as maid of honour.

And yet this moment in which Kate wanted nothing more than to focus fully on the christening was being upstaged effortlessly by the tall man who stood to her right. *Tiarnan Quinn*.

He'd also been at the wedding, as best man; he was Sorcha's older brother.

Kate tried to stem the pain, hating that it could rise here and taint this beautiful occasion, but she couldn't stop it. He was the man who had crushed her innocent ideals, hopes and dreams. The man who had shown her a moment of explosive sensuality and in the process ruined her for all other men. And yet she knew she had no one to blame but herself. If she hadn't been so determined to— She ruthlessly crushed that line of thinking. It was so long ago she couldn't believe it still affected her. That it still felt so fresh.

Despite her best efforts to block him out she could feel the heat from his large body envelop her, his scent wind around her, threatening to burst open a veritable Pandora's Box of memories. The familiar weight of desire she felt whenever she was near him lay heavy within her, a pooling of heat in her belly, between her legs. Usually she was so careful to avoid him, but she couldn't here—now. Not at this intimate ceremony where they were being made godparents in this traditional ritual.

She'd survived the wedding; she'd survive this. And then walk away and hope that one day he wouldn't affect her so much. But how long had she been hoping for that now? A sense of futility washed through her—especially as she recognised that if anything her awareness of him was growing exponentially stronger.

Her jaw was tight from holding it so rigid, her back as straight as a dancer's. She tried to focus on Sorcha and Romain. They were oblivious to all except themselves and their baby. Romain took Molly tenderly from the priest, cradling her easily with big hands. He and Sorcha looked at one another over their daughter's head, and that look nearly undid Kate completely. It was so private; so full of love and hope and earthy sensuality, that it felt voyeuristic to be witnessing it. And yet Kate couldn't look away or stop her heart clenching with a bittersweet pain, momentarily and shamefully jealous of what they shared.

This was what Kate wanted. This was all she'd ever wanted. A fulfilment that was so simple and yet so rare. Tiarnan shifted beside her, his arm brushing against hers, making her tense even more rigidly. Against her will she looked up at him; she couldn't *not*. He'd always drawn her eyes to him, like a helpless moth to the certain death of a burning flame.

He was looking down at her and her heart stopped, breath faltered. He frowned slightly, an assessing look in his gaze as he seemed to search deep within her soul for her secrets. He'd looked at her like that at the wedding, and it had taken all her strength to appear cool. He was looking at her as if trying to figure something out. Figure *her* out. Kate was so raw in that moment—too raw after witnessing Romain and Sorcha's sheer happiness and love. It was worse than the wedding. She had no defence here with a tiny baby involved—a tiny baby she'd held in her arms only a few moments ago. Holding that baby had called to the deepest, most primitive part of her.

Normally she coped so well, but with Tiarnan looking at her so intently her protective wall of icy defence was deserting her spectacularly, leaving in its place nothing but heat. And she couldn't do anything to stop it. Her eyes dropped betrayingly to his mouth. She quite literally yearned to have him kiss her, hold her. *Love her*. Look at her the way Romain had just looked at Sorcha. She'd never wanted that from any other man, and the realisation was stark now, cutting through her.

Against her volition her eyes rose to meet his again. *He was still looking at her.* Despite everything, she knew the futility of her secret desires; the feelings within her were rising like a tidal wave and she was helpless to disguise them, caught by the look in his eyes. She also knew, without being able to stop it, that he was reading every raw and naked emotion on her face, in her eyes. And as she watched his blue eyes darkened to a glittering shade of deep sapphire with something so carnal and hot that she instinctively put out a hand to search for something to cling onto, seriously fearful that her legs wouldn't support her.

He'd never looked at her with such explicit intensity...it had to be her imagination. It was all too much—and here she was, pathetically projecting her own desires onto him...

It was only after a few seconds that she realised Tiarnan had clasped her arm with a big hand. He was holding her upright, supporting her...And right then Kate knew that all her flimsy attempts to defend herself against him for years were for naught. He'd just seen through it all in an instant. Seen through *her*. Her humiliation was now complete.

CHAPTER ONE

One month later. Four Seasons Hotel, downtown San Francisco

KATE felt even more like a piece of meat than usual, yet she clamped down on her churlish thoughts and pasted on her best professional smile as the bidding continued. The smack of the gavel beside her made her flinch minutely. The fact that the gavel was being wielded by a well-known A-list Hollywood actor was not making the experience any easier. Despite her years of experience as a top model, she was still acutely uncomfortable under scrutiny, but she had learnt to disguise it well.

‘Twenty-five thousand. Twenty-five thousand dollars to the gentleman here in the front. Am I bid any higher?’

Kate held her breath. The man under the spotlight with the unctuous grin was a well-known Greek shipping magnate. He was old, short, fat and bald, and his beady obsidian eyes were devouring Kate as he practically licked his lips. For a second she felt intensely vulnerable and alone, standing here under the lights. A shudder went through her. If someone else didn’t—

‘Ah! We’ve a bidder in the back—thirty thousand dollars from the new arrival.’

A rush of relief flooded Kate and she tried to strain to see past the glaring spotlights to identify who the new bidder was. It appeared as if the ballroom lighting technicians were trying to find him too, with the spotlight lurching from coiffed person to coiffed person, all of whom laughed and waved it away. The bidder seemed determined to remain anonymous. Well, Kate comforted herself, whoever it was couldn’t be any worse a prospect to kiss in front of all these people than Stavros Stephanides.

‘And now Mr Stephanides here in the front is bidding *forty* thousand dollars... things are getting interesting! Come on, folks, let’s see how deep your pockets are. How can you turn down a chance to kiss this lovely lady *and* donate generously to charity?’

Kate’s stomach fell again at Stephanides’ obvious determination—but then the actor spied movement in the shadows at the back. ‘*Fifty* thousand dollars to the mysterious new bidder. Sir, won’t you come forward and reveal yourself?’

No one came forward, though, and inexplicably the hairs rose on the back of Kate’s neck. Then she saw the look of almost comic indignation on Stephanides’ face as he swivelled around to see who his competitor was. The Greek’s expression visibly darkened when someone leant low to speak in his ear. He’d obviously just been informed as to the identity of the mysterious fellow bidder. With an audible splutter Stephanides upped the ante by raising the bidding in a leap to one hundred thousand dollars. Kate held in her gasp at the extortionate amount, but her smile was faltering.

She became aware of the ripple of hushed whispers and a distinct frisson of excitement coming from the back; whoever this person was, he was creating quite a buzz. And then whoever it was also calmly raised their bid—to a cool two hundred thousand dollars. It didn’t look as if her ordeal was going to end anytime soon.

Tiarnan Quinn wasn’t used to grand, showy gestures. His very name was the epitome of discretion. Discretion in everything: his wealth; his work; his life, and most definitely in his affairs. He had a ten-year-old daughter. He didn’t live like a monk, but neither did he parade his carefully selected lovers through the tabloids in the manner so beloved of other men in his position: a divorced heterosexual multi-billionaire male in the prime of his life.

None of his lovers had ever kissed and told. He made sure that any ex-partner was so well compensated she would never feel the need to break his trust. He always got out before any messy confrontations, and he always kept his private life very private. None of his lovers ever met his daughter because he had no intention of marrying ever again, and to introduce them to Rosalie would be to invite a level of intimacy that was reserved solely for his family: his daughter, sister and mother.

His lovers provided him with relief. Nothing more, nothing less.

And yet here he was now, bidding publicly, albeit discreetly for the moment, in the name of charity, for a kiss with Kate Lancaster—one of the most photographed women in the world. Because something in his mind and body was chafing, and for the first time in a long time he was thinking discretion be damned. He wanted this woman with a hunger he'd denied for too long. A hunger he'd only recently given himself permission fully to acknowledge and to believe it could be sated.

And it had been a long time building—*years*. He could see now that it had been building with a stealthy insidiousness into a subconscious need that was now very conscious—a burning necessity. His mouth twisted; those years hadn't exactly been uneventful or allowed much time for contemplation. A shortlived marriage and an acrimonious divorce, not to mention becoming a single parent, had taken up a large part of that time. If he'd had the luxury of time on his hands he might have realised a lot sooner—He halted his thoughts. No matter. He was here now.

His attention came back to Kate, focused on Kate, and he had the uncanny sensation of being in the right place at the right time. It was a sensation he usually associated with business, not something more emotional. He corrected himself; this wasn't about emotion. It was desire. Unfulfilled desire.

Perhaps it was because he'd finally allowed himself to think of it again—that moment ten years ago—but it was as if the floodgates had opened on a dam. It had been little more than a kiss, and yet it was engraved more hotly onto his memory than anything he'd experienced before or after. It had taken all of his will-power and restraint to pull away from her that night. Since then Kate had been strictly off-limits to him for myriad reasons: because that incendiary moment had shaken him up a lot more than he cared to admit; because she'd been so young *and* his little sister's best friend.

He remembered the way her startlingly blue eyes had stared directly into his, as if she'd been able to see all the way into his soul. As if she'd wanted him to see all the way into hers. *She'd looked at him like that again only a few weeks ago.* And it had taken huge restraint for him to allow Kate to retreat back into her shell, to ignore his intense desire. Until *now*, when he knew he could get her on her own, could explore for himself if what he'd seen meant what he thought it did.

His sister's wedding had sparked off this burgeoning need, this awareness. He hadn't been thrown into such close proximity to Kate for years. But all through the ceremony and subsequent reception she'd held him back with that cool, frosty distance of hers. It was like being subjected to a chilly wind whistling over a deserted moor. He'd always been aware of it—yet that day, for the first time in years, it had rankled. His interest had been piqued. *Why* was she always so cool, distant?

Admittedly they had a history that up until now he'd been quite happy not to unearth. He knew on some level that that night ten years ago had marked a turning point for him, and perhaps it was one of the reasons he'd found it so easy to relegate Kate to a place he had no desire to re-explore. Her studied indifference over the years had served to keep a lid on those disturbing memories.

And yet he knew he couldn't deny the fact that he'd always been aware of her—aware of how she'd blossomed from a slightly gauche teenager into a stunningly assured and beautiful woman.

He'd thought he had that awareness and desire under control, but one night some years ago a girl had bumped into him in the street: blonde, caked in make-up, and wearing an outfit that was only a hair's breadth away from a stripper's. The feel of her body slamming into him, her huge blue eyes looking straight up into his, had scrambled his brain and fired his libido so badly that he'd sent his date home that night with some pathetic excuse and hadn't been able to look at another woman for weeks—turned on by a girl in a tarty French maid's outfit because she'd borne some resemblance to—

Tiarnan halted his wayward thoughts right there. He chafed at the resurgence of something so minor he'd thought long forgotten—and at the implication that Kate had occupied a bigger place in his mind than he'd admitted to himself. He reassured himself that he'd had his own concerns keeping him more than occupied—and lovers who'd been only too warm and willing, making it easy to shut out the frosty indifference of one woman. Seeing Kate just once or twice a year had hardly been conducive to stoking the embers of a latent desire.

But just a few weeks ago...at the baptism...she'd turned and looked at him and that cool façade had dropped for the first time. She'd looked at him with such naked blatant need in those fathomless blue depths that he'd felt as if a truck had just slammed into him. For the first time Tiarnan had seen the heat of her passion under that all too cool surface. It was a heat he hadn't seen since that night, when it had combusted all around them. It could have ended so differently if he hadn't found a thread of control to cling onto.

In one instant, with one look, Tiarnan had been flung back in time, and all attempts to keep her off limits had been made redundant. It was almost as if he'd been put to sleep after that night, and now, with a roaring, urgent sucking-in of oxygen, he was brought back to painful, aching life.

She'd clammed up again after a few moments, but it had been enough of a crack in her armour...

Blood heated and flowed thick through his veins as he took her in now. She was dressed in a dark pink silk cocktail dress, strapless, showing off the delicate line of her shoulders and collarbone, her graceful neck. Her long, luxuriant blonde hair—her trademark—hung in loose waves over her shoulders, a simple side parting framing her face. And even though he was right at the back of the room those huge blue eyes stood out. Her soft rose-pink lips were full, the firm line of her jaw and straight nose transforming banal prettiness into something much more formidable. True beauty. There was fragility in the lines of her body, and yet a sexy lushness that would have an effect on every man in that room—something Tiarnan was very aware of. Uncomfortably so.

He felt a proprietorial urge to go and sweep her off that stage and out of everyone's sight. It only firmed his resolve, strengthened his sense of right.

His eyes drifted down with leisurely and very male appreciation, taking in slender shapely legs, it was clear why she'd become one of the most sought-after models in the world. She was, quite simply, perfect. She'd become a darling of the catwalks despite their predilection for a more emaciated figure; she was the face of a well-known lingerie company among countless other campaigns. Her cool, under-the-surface sensuality meant that people sometimes described her as cold. But the problem was he knew she wasn't.

He had the personal experience to know that she was very, *very* hot.

Why had he waited so long for this?

Tiarnan clamped down on looking again at what had made him suppress his desire for so long—apart from the obvious reasons. He dismissed the rogue notion that rose unbidden and unwelcome that she'd once touched something deep within him. It must have been an illusion, borne up by the fact that they'd shared a moment in time, imbuing the experience with an enigmatic quality.

She'd displayed a self-possession at the age of eighteen that had stunned him slightly. He had to remind himself that he'd overestimated her naivety. She'd known exactly what she'd been doing then, and she was a grown woman now. Tiarnan's body tightened in anticipation. She was a woman of the world—the kind of woman he could seduce. She was no longer an innocent...A sharp pain lanced him briefly. It felt awfully like *regret*, and Tiarnan crushed it back down. He didn't do regret. He would not let her exert this sensual hold over him. He would not let her bring him back in time and reduce him to a mass of seething, frustrated desire with one look because of a *kiss!* He would seduce her and sate this lust that had been burning for too long under the surface. It was time to bring it out into the open.

All he could think about was how urgently he wanted to taste her again, touch her. She had once tried to seduce him. Now it was his turn. And this time they wouldn't stop at a kiss.

His attention came back to the proceedings. He saw Stephanides bid again. He had no intention of letting that man anywhere near Kate's lush mouth. But the Greek was stubborn and out to prove a point—especially now that he'd been informed who it was bidding against him. He and Stephanides were old adversaries. Tiarnan casually made another bid, oblivious to the gasps and looks directed at him, oblivious to the whispers that came from nearby as people speculated if it was really *him*.

People's idle speculation and chatter was of little interest to him. What was of interest was Kate Lancaster, as she stood there now, with her huge doe eyes staring straight at him but not seeing him. She would—soon enough.

Stavros Stephanides finally admitted defeat with a terse shake of his head. A sense of triumph filled Tiarnan and it was heady. He hadn't felt the sensation in a long time because triumph invariably came all too easily. With no idea as to how much he'd finally bid for a kiss with Kate, and not in the slightest bit fazed, he stepped out of the shadows and strode forward to collect his prize. Not just the kiss he was now due, but so much more. And he *would* collect—until he was sated and Kate Lancaster no longer exerted this mysterious pull over his every sense.

Kate simply didn't believe her eyes at first. *It couldn't be*. It just could not be Tiarnan Quinn striding powerfully through the seated awed crowd towards her, looking as dark and gorgeous as she'd ever seen him in a tuxedo. Her face flamed guiltily; he'd been inhabiting her dreams for weeks—and a lot longer—jeered a taunting voice, which she ignored. Only the previous night she'd woken shaken and very hot after a dream so erotic that she was sure it must be her rampant imagination conjuring him up now.

Fervently hoping that it *was* just her imagination, she took him in: the formidable build—broad shoulders, narrow hips and long legs—the loose-limbed athletic grace that hinted at his love for sports, his abhorrence of the gym. His hair was inky black, cut short, and with a slight silvering at the temples that gave him an air of sober maturity and distinction. As if he even needed it. Kate knew his darkly olive skin came from his Spanish mother. She felt weak inside, and hot.

His face was uncompromising and hard. A strong jaw and proud profile saved it from being too prettily handsome. He was intensely male—more intensely male than any man she'd ever met. Years and maturity had added to his strength, filled out his form, and it was all hard-packed muscle. But his most arresting feature was his eyes—the strongest physical hint of Celtic lineage courtesy of his Irish father. Icy blue and utterly direct. Every time he looked at her she felt as though he saw all the way through her, saw through the paltry defences she put up against him. She tried so hard to project a professional front around him, maintain her distance, knowing that if he ever came near her he'd see in an instant how tenuous her control was.

And he had. The memory sickened her. Just a month ago, at Molly's christening, he'd caught her in that unguarded moment when her naked desire for him had been painfully evident. It had been just a look, but it had been enough. He'd seen it, and ever since then she'd been having those dreams. Because she thought she'd seen a mirror of reaction in his eyes. And yet she had to be wrong. She wasn't his type—she might have been for a brief moment, a long time ago, but it had been an aberration.

A dart of familiar pain gripped her momentarily. She knew she wasn't his type because she'd seen one of his incredibly soignée girlfriends at close quarters, the memory of which made her burn with embarrassment even now. She'd been out with a group of girlfriends, visiting her in New York from Dublin, celebrating a hen night. Kate, very reluctantly, had been dressed in a French maid's outfit, complete with obligatory fishnet tights and sparkly feather duster, when she'd walked slap-bang into Tiarnan as he'd been emerging from an exclusive Madison Avenue restaurant, an arm protectively around a petite dark-haired beauty.

Kate had felt about sixteen and fled, praying that he hadn't recognised her. And then, to add insult to injury, one of her friends had chosen that moment to relieve the contents of her stomach in a gutter nearby...She'd never forget the look on Tiarnan's face, or his date's, just before they'd disappeared into the darkened interior of a waiting chauffeur-driven car.

Bitter frustration at her weak and pathetic response to him burned her inside. Would his hold over her never diminish? And now she was imagining him *here*, walking towards her, up the steps. Coming closer. Desperation made her feel panicky. When would the world right itself and the real person be revealed? Someone else. Someone who wasn't Tiarnan Quinn.

She was barely aware of the Hollywood actor speaking in awed tones beside her, but when he said the name *Tiarnan Quinn* everything seemed to zoom into focus and Kate's heart stopped altogether. Reaction set in. It was him—and he was now on the stage, coming closer and closer, his eyes narrowed and intent on her.

Kate's instinct where this man was concerned was always to run, as far and as fast as possible. And yet here and now she couldn't. She was caught off guard, like a deer in the headlights. And alongside the very perverse wish that she could be facing anyone else—even sleazy Stephanides—was the familiar yearning, burning feeling she got whenever this man came near.

'Kate.' His voice was deep, achingly familiar, and it impacted on her somewhere vulnerable inside, where she felt her pulse jump and her heart start again. 'Fancy meeting you here.'

Somehow she found her voice—a voice. 'Tiarnan...that was you?'

He nodded, his eyes never leaving hers. Kate had the strongest sensation that she'd been running from this man for a long time and now it was over. But in actual fact he'd caught her a long time ago. A wicked coil of something hot snaked through her belly even as she clamped down desperately on every emotion and any outward sign of his effect on her.

With a smooth move she didn't see coming, Tiarnan came close and put his hands around her waist, thumbs disturbingly close to the undersides of her breasts. His touch was so shocking after years of avoiding any contact beyond the most perfunctory that she automatically put her hands out to steady herself, and found herself clasping his upper arms. Powerful muscles were evident underneath the expensive cloth of his suit. Her belly melted and she looked up helplessly, still stunned to be facing him like this. Shock was rendering her usual defences around him useless.

He was so tall; he'd always been one of the few men that she had to look up to, even in the highest of heels. He towered over her now, making her feel small, delicate. She was aware of every slow second passing, aware of their breaths, but she knew rationally that things were happening in real time, and that no one was aware of the undercurrents flowing between them. At least she hoped they weren't.

'I believe you owe me a kiss?'

This was said lightly, but Tiarnan's grip on her waist was warm and firm, warning her not to try and run or shirk her duty. She nodded, feeling utterly bewildered; what else could she do in front of the wealthiest, most powerful people in San Francisco? How much had he paid in the end? She'd forgotten already. But it had been a shockingly high amount. Half a million dollars? She had the very strong feeling that he was claiming far more than a kiss, and that coil of heat burned fiercer within her.

He pulled her closer, until their bodies were almost touching, and all Kate could feel was that heat—within her and around her. It climbed up her chest and into her face as Tiarnan's head lowered. Overwhelmed at being ambushed like this, and feeling very bewildered, Kate fluttered her eyes closed as the man she'd failed so abysmally to erase from her memory banks pressed his firm, sensual mouth against hers. It had been ten years since they'd kissed like this, and suddenly Kate was eighteen again, pressing her lips ardently against his...

Kate put a shaky finger to her mouth, which still felt sensitive. As kisses went it had been chaste enough, fleeting enough, but the effect had been pure devastation. She'd been hurtled back in time and Pandora's Box was now wide open. A flare of guilt assailed her; she'd fled the thronged ballroom as soon as she'd had the chance.

They'd been grabbed for photos with the press pack behind the stage straight after Tiarnan had claimed his kiss. Dizzy with the after-effects, she'd stood there smiling inanely. His hand had been warm on her elbow, his presence overwhelming. It was still a complete mystery to her as to why he was here at all, but she hadn't even had the wherewithal to stick around and make small talk. She'd run. Exactly like that night in New York on the street.

Bitter recrimination burned her. She was falling apart every time she saw him now, and if she'd not already made an ass of herself in France, mooning at him like a lovesick groupie, then tonight

would certainly have him wondering what on earth was wrong with her. How was it possible that instead of growing immune to him she was growing ever more aware of him? Where was the law of physics in that?

She'd fled, not really thinking about where she was going, and now she realised that she was in the hotel bar, with its floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing a glittering view of downtown San Francisco in all its night-time vibrancy. The sound of a siren wailing somewhere nearby failed to root her in reality. The bar was blissfully dark and quiet. A pianist played soothing jazz in the corner. Kate took a seat at a table by the window. After a few minutes someone approached her. She looked up, thinking it would be the waiter, but it was a stranger—a man. He was wearing a suit and looked a little the worse for wear.

'Excuse me, but me and my buddies—' he gestured behind him to two other men in crumpled suits at the bar, who waved cheerfully '—we're all agreed that you're the prettiest woman we've ever seen. Can we buy you a drink?'

Kate smiled tightly, her nerve ends jangling. 'Thanks, really...but if you don't mind I'm happy to get my own drink.'

He swayed unsteadily, with a look of affront on his face, before lurching back to his friends. Then she saw one of the other men make a move towards her, as if taking up the baton. She cursed her impulse to come here, and turned her face resolutely to the window, hoping that would deter him.

She heard a movement, a deep voice, and then a looming dark shape materialised in the glass. She looked up and saw the face of her dreams reflected above her own. Disembodied. Throat dry, she looked round and up. Tiarnan stood there, looking straight at her, eyes like blue shards of ice against his dark skin. Her heart leapt; her palms dampened.

A waitress appeared next to him, and when she asked if they'd like a drink Tiarnan just looked at Kate and said, 'Two Irish whiskeys?'

Kate nodded helplessly, and watched as Tiarnan took the seat opposite her, undoing his bow tie as he did so and opening the top button on his shirt with easy insouciance. His voice, that distinctive accent with its unmistakable Irish roots, affected her somewhere deep inside. It was a connection they shared—both being half Irish and brought up in Ireland.

He jerked his head back towards the men sitting at the bar. 'You could have sent me packing too. They must be devastated.'

A dart of irritation and anger sparked through Kate at Tiarnan, for being here and upsetting her equilibrium. Her voice came out tight. 'I know you. I don't know them.'

His brow quirked. A hint of a smile played around his mouth. Kate felt very exposed in her strapless dress. Her breasts felt full against the bodice. She strove for calm, to be polite, urbane. This was her best friend's brother, that was all. They'd bumped into each other. That was all. On the surface of things. She wouldn't think about what was happening under the surface, the minefield of history that lay buried there. She smiled, but it felt brittle.

'What brings you to San Francisco, Tiarnan?'

Tiarnan's eyes narrowed. He could see very well that Kate was retreating into that cool shell he knew so well. The shell that for years had deflected his attention, made him believe she didn't desire him. But he knew better now, and he saw the pulse under the pale skin of her neck beat hectically even as she projected a front so glacial he could swear the temperature had dropped a few degrees.

He fought the urge to say, *You*, and instead drawled, 'Business. Sorcha mentioned you were here for the annual Buchanen Cancer benefit.' He shrugged easily deciding not to divulge the fact that he'd specifically booked into the same hotel as her. 'I'm staying here too, so I thought I'd come look for you. It would appear that I found you just in time.'

A vision of being kissed and groped by Stavros Stephanides came back into Kate's head. She lowered her head slightly. Some hair slipped forward over her shoulder. She longed for something to

cover herself up, and berated herself for not going straight to her room. What had compelled her to come here? She forced herself to look up. She couldn't go anywhere now.

'Yes. I never thanked you for that.' And then curiosity got the better of her. 'How much did you pay in the end?'

'You don't remember?'

Kate burned as she shook her head, knowing very well why she didn't remember.

He seemed to savour his words. 'Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. And worth every cent.'

It would be. Tiarnan watched her reaction, the shock on her beautiful face, those amazing blue eyes framed with the longest black lashes. Saw the way the candlelight flickered over her satin smooth skin, the slope of her shoulders, the swell of her breasts above the dress. His body hardened and Tiarnan shifted, uncomfortably aware that he wasn't used to women having such an immediate effect on him. He enjoyed always being in control, and yet he could already feel that control becoming a little shaky, elusive...Sitting here with Kate now, the thrill of anticipation was headier than anything he'd felt in a long time.

He'd paid over half a million dollars, just like that. The amount staggered Kate, and yet she knew to Tiarnan it was like small change. That was a fraction of what he gave to charity every year.

'At least it's for a good cause,' she said a little shakily.

The waitress arrived then, with two glasses. She placed napkins down, and then the drinks, and left.

Tiarnan reached out a strong, long-fingered hand and raised his glass towards her, an enigmatic gleam in his eyes. 'A very good cause.'

Kate raised her glass too and clinked it off his. She had the very disturbing impression that they weren't talking about the same thing. Just then his fingers touched hers, and a memory flashed into her head: her arms wrapped tight around his neck, tongues touching and tasting. Tiarnan's hands moving to her buttocks, pulling her in tight so she could feel the thrillingly hard ridge of his arousal. She could almost hear their heartbeats, slow and heavy, then picking up pace, drowning out their breathing—

Kate jerked her hand back so quickly that some of her drink slopped out of the glass. Her skin felt stretched tight, hot. She couldn't believe this was happening. It was like her worst nightmare and her most fervent dream.

She took a quick sip, all the while watching Tiarnan as he watched her, hoping that he couldn't read the turmoil in her head, in her chest. The whiskey trickled like liquid velvet down her throat. She wasn't used to this, that was all. Tiarnan didn't seek her out. She only ever saw him with Sorcha, or when lots of people were around. When Sorcha had lived with her in New York and Tiarnan had called round or invited them out to dinner Kate had always made an excuse, always made sure she wasn't there as much as possible.

But facing him now...that kiss earlier...She was helpless to escape the images threatening to burst through the walls she'd placed around them. Tiarnan leant back, stretching out his long legs, cradling his glass as if this were completely normal, as if they met like this all the time. The latent strength in his body was like a tangible thing.

Kate had to close her eyes for a second as she battled against a vision of him pulling back from kissing her, breathing harshly—

'So, Kate, how have you been?'

Her eyes snapped open. What was *wrong* with her? Normally she managed to keep all this under control, but it was almost as if some silent communication was going on that she knew nothing about—something subversive that she was not in control of, messing with her head. She'd never been so tense. But she told herself she could do this—do the small-talk thing. And after this drink she'd

make her excuses and get up and walk away—not see Tiarnan for another few months, or even a year if she was lucky.

So she nodded her head and smiled her most professional smile, injecting breeziness into her voice. ‘Fine. Great! Wasn’t Molly’s christening just gorgeous? I can’t believe how big she is already. Sorcha and Romain are so happy. Have you seen them since? I’ve been *crazy* busy. I had to go to South America straight after the baptism. I got back a few days ago and I flew in tonight for the benefit—’

She took a deep, audibly shaky breath, intending to keep going with her monologue, thinking *Just talk fast and get out of here even faster*, when Tiarnan leant forward and said with quiet emphasis, ‘Kate—stop.’

CHAPTER TWO

KATE'S mouth opened and closed. With just those two words she knew that he was seeing right through her—*again*. Silly tears pricked the backs of her eyes. He was playing with her, mocking her for her weakness, as if he'd known all along. So she asked the question, even though she knew it would give her away completely,

'Tiarnan, what are you *really* doing here?'

His face was shuttered, eyes unreadable. The dim lights cast him half in shadow, making him look dark and dangerous. Like a Spanish pirate. His shoulders looked huge. Kate's insides ached as only the way a body recognising its mate ached. Its other half.

Her soft mouth compressed. She'd tried to tell herself that what had happened between them hadn't been unique, hadn't been as earth-shattering as she remembered, but...it had. Since that night, no one had ever kissed her the way he had—with such devastating skill that she'd never been able to get over him. He'd imprinted himself so deeply into her cells. Just one kiss, a mere moment, that was all it had been, but it had been enough.

She repeated the question now, a throb of desperation mixed with anger in her voice, even leaned forward, put her glass down. She wanted to shout at him to just leave her alone, let her get on with her life so she could realise her dream: find someone to love. Have a family. *Finally get over him.*

'What are you doing here, Tiarnan? We both know—'

'We both know why I'm here.' His voice was harsh. The piano player was between numbers, and the words hung almost accusingly in the soft silence. Time seemed to hang suspended, and then the piano player started again and so did Kate's heart, and she desperately tried to claw back some self control and pretend that he *wasn't* referring to that night.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Tiarnan took a swift drink and leaned forward to put his empty glass down on the table. The sound made Kate flinch inside.

'You know perfectly well what I'm talking about. That explicit look you gave me in France, and what *didn't* happen that night.'

Oh, God. Kate felt the colour drain from her face. She was officially in her worst nightmare. She *knew* he'd seen her weakness in France—but she just hadn't been able to hide it. And if Tiarnan Quinn was known for anything, it was for sensing weakness and exploiting it ruthlessly.

She forced herself to meet his gaze, even though it was hard, and her voice came out low and husky. 'That night was a long time ago—and you're right. Nothing happened—' She stopped ineffectually. What could she say? *If you're thinking if I still want you, even after a humiliating rejection, then you're right.* Bitterness rose within her.

He was still sitting forward—predatory, dangerous. He said softly, in that deep voice, 'I'd call that kiss something happening, and that look told me that you've been just as aware of this build-up of sexual tension as I have.'

Kate shook her head fiercely, as if that could negate this whole experience. Shame coursed through her again at her youthful naivety, and yet her body tingled even now, when humiliation hung over her like the Sword of Damocles.

Why was he bringing this up *now*? Was he bored? Did he think he'd seen an invitation in her eyes that day at the christening? She burned inside at the thought and rushed to try and fill the silence, the gap, to regain some dignity.

'Tiarnan, like I said, it was a long time ago. I barely remember it, and I've no intention of ever talking about it or repeating the experience. I was very young.'

And a virgin. That unwanted spiking of regret shocked Tiarnan again, and suddenly the thought of other men looking at her, touching her, made him feel almost violent...

He said nothing for a long moment. He couldn't actually speak as he looked into clear blue eyes not dissimilar to his own. They were like drops of ice but they couldn't cool him down. Tiarnan fought the urge to reach across the table and pull her up, crush her mouth under his, taste her again. Instead he finally said, 'You're a liar, and that's a pity.'

Kate felt winded, breathless. The way he was looking at her was so *hot*—but she didn't think for a second that it meant anything. She didn't know why he was bringing this up now. She just wanted to stay in one piece until she could get away.

'I'm not a liar,' she asserted, and then frowned when she registered what he'd said. 'And what do you mean, it's a pity?'

Tiarnan sat back again, and perversely that made Kate more nervous than when he'd been closer.

'You're a liar because I believe you *do* remember every second of that kiss, as well as I do, and it's a pity you don't intend repeating it because I'd very much like to.'

Kate sat straight and tall. Somewhere dimly she could hear her mother's strident voice in her head: *Kate Lancaster, sit up straight. I won't have you let me down with sloppy manners. Show your breeding. You're a young lady and you will not embarrass me in front of these people!*

Her focus returned to the room. She wasn't ten years old. She was twenty-eight. She was an internationally renowned model: successful, independent. She struggled to cling onto what was real: the pianist was playing a familiar tune, the dark, muted tones of the bar, the lights glittering and twinkling outside. The waitress appeared again, and Kate could see Tiarnan gesture for another drink. His eyes hadn't left hers, and she thought that she might have misheard him. He might have said something entirely different. But then she remembered the way his hands had felt around her waist earlier, how close his thumbs had brushed to her breasts. The way he'd looked at her. The way he was looking at her now.

Ten years on from one moment with this man and she was a quivering wreck. Despite a full and busy life, despite relationships... If he had decided, for whatever reason, that he wanted her, and if she acquiesced, it would be like opening the door, flinging her arm wide with a smile on her face and inviting catastrophe to move in for ever. If she was this bad after a kiss, what would she be like after succumbing to the sensual invitation that was in his eyes right now? Because that look said that a kiss would be the very least of the experience. And awfully, treacherously, any insecurity she'd harboured since that night about her own sexual appeal died a death in a flame of heat. But it was small comfort. He had rejected her clumsy, innocent advances and she had to remember that—no matter how he might be making her feel right now.

The fact that this moment was a direct manifestation of her most secret fantasies was making her reel. The waitress came and deposited more drinks, taking away the empty glasses. Kate shook her head, feeling her hair move across too sensitive skin. She knew all about Tiarnan Quinn—she'd always known all about him. One of the perks of being best friends with his sister. So Kate knew well how he compartmentalised women, how he inevitably left them behind. She'd witnessed his ruthless control first-hand. She wouldn't, *couldn't* allow that to happen again. Not even when his softly spoken words had set up a chain reaction in her body that she'd been ignoring for the past few earth-shattering seconds.

She shook her head harder, even smiled faintly, as if sharing in a joke, as if this whole evening wasn't costing her everything.

'I don't think you mean that for a second.' She took a drink from her glass, put it down again and looked at Tiarnan. 'And even if you did, like I said, I've no desire to re-enact that kiss for your amusement. If all you're looking for is a convenient woman, there are plenty available. You don't need me. I don't think I need to remind you that you made your rejection of my advances quite plain that night.'

Tiarnan chafed at her sudden assuredness—and at her reminder of his clumsy rejection. That feeling of regret spiked uncomfortably again. Her smile was almost mocking—as if she pitied him! He'd never been an object of pity, and he wasn't about to start being one now.

He smiled tightly and saw Kate's eyes widen, the pulse trip in her throat.

'I rejected you because you were inexperienced, too young, and my little sister's best friend.' His jaw clenched. '*Not* because I didn't desire you, as you may well remember. I'm looking for a lot more than a re-enactment of that kiss, and believe me, I don't expect it to be amusing. I'm not looking for a convenient lay, Kate. I'm looking for *you*.'

All of Kate's precious composure crumbled at his raw words.

'You can't possibly mean that...that you—'

'Want you?' He almost grimaced, as if in pain. 'I want you, Kate. As much as you want me.'

'I don't,' she breathed.

He arched a brow. 'No? Then what was that look about at the christening, when you all but devoured me with your hungry blue eyes? And the way you trembled earlier under my hands?'

Kate flushed brick-red. 'Stop it. I wasn't. I didn't.' This was too cruel. Her humiliation knew no bounds. The sword had fallen spectacularly.

Tiarnan grimaced again. 'Don't worry. It's mutual.' His blue eyes speared hers. 'You've never forgotten that night, Kate, have you? It's why you always freeze me out every time we meet.'

She shook her head, his intuition sending shockwaves through her whole body. 'Don't be ridiculous. It was so long ago...of course I've...' She hitched up her chin defiantly. 'I've more than kissed men since then, Tiarnan. What did you think? That I've hugged my pillow to sleep every night, dreaming of you?'

The awful thing was, she could remember the mortification that had led her to rid herself of her virginity as soon as was humanly possible after that night—and what an excruciating disappointment it had been.

His mouth had become a thin line of displeasure. 'I wouldn't imagine for a second that you haven't had lovers, Kate.'

He reached out and took her hand, gripped it so that she couldn't pull away, and Kate was caught, trapped by her own weak responses: lust, and the building of guilty exhilaration. Her heart beat frantically against her breastbone.

'But did any of them make you feel the way I did after just a kiss? Did any of them make you want them so badly that it was all you could think about? Dream about?'

Tiarnan felt momentarily shocked by his words and the emotion behind them; until recently, until he'd set on this course to seduce Kate, he'd never really allowed himself to acknowledge what her effect on him had been. Touching her now, confronting this for the first time, was bringing it all back in vivid detail. Her hand felt small, soft and yet strong. He could feel her pulse beating under the skin.

Kate saw a red mist descend. The exhilaration dissipated. His words were so close to the bone—*too* close to the bone. She pulled her hand from his grasp and curled it tight against her chest.

'How dare you? How dare you come back into my life like this, making assumptions? Judgements? Asking me about things you've no right to know?'

Tiarnan looked at her and felt more sure than ever.

'I have a right, Kate, because one kiss clearly wasn't enough. This has been building between us all these years...this *desire* to know what it might have been like.'

Anger rushed through her, gathering force, and she used it before she could dissolve again. She stood up on shaky legs and looked down as imperiously as she could. But then Tiarnan stood too, altering the dynamic, taking some of the fire out of her anger, making her remember just how tall he was, how broad and strong.

She hitched her chin. 'I think *dormant* is a more appropriate word, and dormant is how it'll stay, Tiarnan. What's brought on this revelation? The fact that you thought you saw something in

France? You saw nothing except what you wanted to see. I've no intention of becoming a notch on your bedpost just to satisfy some belated curiosity on your part.'

She walked around the table, as if to leave, but Tiarnan moved too and blocked her way. Kate saw a couple of people looking at them in her peripheral vision. She stalled and looked up, tried to shut out the way looking into Tiarnan's eyes had always made her feel as if she was drowning. She gritted her teeth.

'Could you please move? You're blocking my exit.'

'Need I remind you,' he said silkily, 'that *you* were the one so determined to score that notch in the first place? We both know that if I hadn't stopped when I still could I would have taken your innocence on the rug in front of that fire...'

Those softly spoken words smashed through the last vestiges of Kate's dignity and defence. She looked up at him and beseeched with everything in her. 'Please. Get out of my way, Tiarnan.'

He shook his head. 'I'm walking you to your room.'

'I'm perfectly capable of walking myself, and have been for some time now.'

His voice had steel running through it. 'Nevertheless, I'll walk you to your room—or do you want me to make a spectacle of both of us and carry you out of here?'

One jet-black brow was arched. Kate didn't doubt him for a second. Tiarnan had never been one to give a damn about what people thought.

She felt unbelievably prim as she bit out, 'That won't be necessary. You can escort me to my room if you insist.'

He finally moved aside to let her pass, and Kate stalked towards the entrance of the bar feeling stiff all over, her shoulders so straight and tense that she felt as if she'd crack if someone even touched her. She pressed the button for the lift and looked resolutely up at the display above the door as she waited. Tiarnan stood beside her, a huge, impossibly immovable force. Heat and electricity crackled between them. There was such tension in the air that Kate wanted to scream.

No one reduced her to this. *No one*. She was dignified, calm, collected. She knew she had a reputation for being cool and it hurt her—she was the least cold of people. She could turn it on when it suited her, but it wasn't really her. Cold histrionics and dramatics had been the territory of her mother. Kate had learnt at an early age to be a pretty, placid foil for her mother's effervescent beauty.

The lift arrived and the bell pinged, making Kate jump and then curse silently. She hadn't thought about her mother like that for a long time; Tiarnan's disturbing presence and even more disturbing assertions were effortlessly hurtling her back in time.

He stepped into the lift with her, and the space contracted around them when the doors closed. Kate pressed the button for her floor and looked at Tiarnan irritably when he didn't make a move to do the same. 'Which floor?'

Tiarnan looked at her glaring up at him. She was so beautiful. All fire and brimstone underneath that icy façade. Her eyes were flashing, her cheeks were pink and her breasts rose and fell enticingly under the bodice of her dress. She was rattled, seriously rattled, and he had to admit he was surprised at what was so close to the surface.

In truth he'd imagined this happening much more easily. He'd imagined a sophisticated woman embarking on a wellworn groove, both of them knowing and acting out their parts. But right now he was rattled too. She was resisting him. He couldn't think. All he wanted was to stop the lift, drag her into his arms and plunder her soft mouth. It had been too long since he'd tasted that inner sweetness, and the brief all too chaste kiss earlier had only proved to make his desire even more pronounced. But he knew he couldn't. He had to tread carefully or he might lose Kate for ever—and he didn't like the panicky feeling that generated. He didn't *do* panic.

Kate turned and folded her arms crossly, inadvertently giving Tiarnan an even more enticing view of her cleavage. She was sending out desperate silent vibes: *Get away from me! Leave me alone!* And as the lift climbed the floors with excruciating slowness that was exactly what he did. He actually

moved further away. Back towards the wall. And when Kate sent him a suspicious glance she saw that he was leaning back, hands in his pockets, looking at the ceiling. He was even whistling softly.

The lift finally came to a smooth halt and Kate all but ran out through the doors, taking her door key from her purse as she did so. She expected him to be right behind her. She'd seen a new side to him tonight: implacable, ruthless. Determined. It intimidated her. *It excited her.* She got to her door and slid the key into the slot, her hands barely steady after that revelation.

But if he thought for a second that she was going to meekly turn around now and invite him in—Kate turned and pasted on a bright smile, words trembling on her lips...only to find the corridor empty. For a split second she had the bizarre and terrifying notion that she'd imagined the whole thing. Dreamt it all up.

But then she saw him. Leaning against the open lift door nonchalantly, one foot stopping it from closing, his huge shoulders blocking the light inside. That was why she hadn't seen him straight away. He inclined his head,

'Goodnight, Kate, it was good to see you again. Sweet dreams.'

And with that he stepped back in and the doors closed with a swish. Kate's mouth dropped open. All she could see in her mind's eye was that nonchalance and the bright dangerous glitter of blue eyes under dark brows. All her pent-up fury dissolved and she literally sagged like a spent balloon. She stepped inside her door and closed it, stood with her back against it in the dark for a long moment. Her heart beat fast, her skin tingled and her lips still felt sensitive. And yet more than all this was the ache of desire. She felt raw, as if a wound had been reopened.

Damn Tiarnan Quinn. He was playing her—playing with her. She didn't believe for a second that he was going to meekly walk away. No more than she would have meekly let him into her room. He was undoubtedly the most Alpha male she'd ever known. He always had been. He'd been born Alpha. And she'd set him a challenge with her refusal to acknowledge what had happened between them. There was no sense of excitement in knowing this, no sense of anticipation. She'd been too badly hurt in the past. She'd spent too long disguising her feelings, pretending to herself that she didn't want him. Hiding it from others, even from Sorcha.

She couldn't help but feel—knowing his reputation, which was legendary albeit discreet—that she was posing a challenge to him in large part because he'd let her get away. Was this the banal satisfaction of some long-forgotten curiosity? Kate knew well that there would be a very small number on Tiarnan Quinn's list of women who had resisted his charms, for whatever reason. She had the uncanny prescience that hers might be the only name. And yet that night it had been *he* who had stopped proceedings, not her. He was absolutely right; if she'd had any say that night ten years ago they would have made love on that rug in front of the fire.

For whatever reason, he'd obviously decided that he wanted to carry on from where they'd left off. And Kate knew with every bone in her body that if she didn't resist him she would be the biggest fool on this earth. The one shred of dignity she'd clung onto all these years was the very fact that they hadn't slept together.

Tiarnan stood at the window of the sitting room in his luxurious suite. The best in the hotel. He felt hot and frustrated, hands deep in the pockets of his trousers as he looked out at the view, not seeing a bit of it.

All he could see was his own reflection in the window and the slightly tortured look on his face—tortured because Kate Lancaster was lying in bed some floors below him in the very same hotel, and right now Tiarnan would have gladly given over half his fortune to be in that bed with her. She'd emerged from the mists of memory to assume a place that no other woman had ever assumed.

He could smell Kate's light floral scent even now. And yet she'd walked away, resisted him. Tiarnan couldn't remember a time when any woman he'd wanted had resisted him. From the moment the divorced wife of one of his father's friends had seduced him as a teenager he'd seen the manipulative side to women and had been initiated into their ways.

His mother had dealt him his first lesson. Cold and martyred. He'd seen how she'd made life hell for his father. Not happy to have been brought to inclement Ireland from her native Spain, she'd subjected his father and him to the frost of her discontent, eventually driving his father into the arms of another woman who'd been only too happy to accommodate him. Tiarnan could remember his father's secretary, how she would cajole and plead with him to marry *her*. He'd witnessed those scenes as he'd played outside his father's office, listening to the crying and hysterics. And then she'd taken the drastic step of becoming pregnant in a bid to secure her own happiness, and Tiarnan had been forced to collude in a devastating lie.

He forced his mind away from dark memories. He'd witnessed too much as a child. He knew well enough that his father had been no innocent party, but the machinations of the first female role models in his life had inured him to their ways and moods as he'd grown up. He'd vowed long ago not to be at the mercy of any woman, and yet despite everything, all his lessons learnt, he'd been caught too. Rage still simmered down low in acknowledgement of that.

A ripple of cynicism went through him. Even in Kate's innocence ten years ago she'd been manipulative too, just like the rest. Her innocence had been hidden beneath a veneer of sophistication that had fooled him completely until the moment he'd felt that hesitation. A telling gaucheness, an untutored response. It had cut through the haze of lust that had clouded his judgment that night.

Tiarnan could remember the spiking of betrayal and desperation he'd felt. He'd believed her to be experienced. For a second he'd been seduced into believing them to be on equal ground, both knowing what was happening.

Certainly there'd been no indication when she'd found him alone in the library. He'd offered her a drink and she'd taken it... Her hair had gleamed like spun gold in the firelight. A storm had howled outside. There had been a Christmas party going on in the house. Tiarnan had been making a rare home visit...

She had been wearing a dark red silk dress. Ruched and short, it had clung to her breasts and the curve of her hips. Her long legs had been bare, she'd worn high heels. She had taken the glass of whiskey and smiled at him, and for the first time Tiarnan had allowed himself to really notice her. In truth he'd noticed her as soon as he'd arrived that evening, and he hadn't been able to take his eyes off her. Some defence of his must have been down.

He'd noticed her before—of course he had—he'd have to have been dead not to. But strictly as his sister's friend. They'd both been tall and gangly, giggling blushing girls, but that night for the first time Tiarnan had seen that Kate had become a woman.

It was a quality that his own almost eighteen-year-old sister still hadn't quite achieved. But he'd had to concede that Kate had always possessed a quiet air of mature dignity, of inherent sophistication. A quiet foil to Sorcha's rowdiness and effervescence. Sorcha, his sister, had just come through a traumatic time after the relatively recent death of their father, and Tiarnan had taken the opportunity to thank Kate for being there for her.

Kate had blushed and looked down into her glass before looking back up, something fierce in her eyes. 'I love Sorcha. She's the closest thing I have to a sister and I'd do anything for her.'

Tiarnan could remember smiling at her, seeing her eyes widen in response, and then the flare of his arousal had hit so strong and immediate that it had nearly knocked him sideways. The air around them had changed in an instant, crackling with sexual tension. Even though Tiarnan had tried to deny it, to regain some sanity.

Standing there with her skin glowing in the firelight, her lush body firing his senses... He could remember how choked his voice had felt with the need to push her away when all he'd wanted to do was kiss her into oblivion.

'You know I've always considered *you* like a sister too, Kate.'

For an infinitesimal moment Kate had just looked at him, and then she'd carefully put down the drink and come closer to him, her blue eyes glittering, pupils huge. And she'd said huskily, 'I don't see you as a brother, Tiarnan. And I don't want you to see me as a sister.'

His arousal had sky-rocketed. On some level Tiarnan hadn't been able to believe he was being so wound up by an *eighteen-year-old girl*. But in fairness she wasn't like other eighteen-year-olds. She'd already been a model for a couple of years, was already living independently in London. And he couldn't believe she was standing there and seducing him. Or how out of his depth he felt in that moment. At the age of twenty-eight he was no novice around women, but he'd felt like one then.

She'd stepped right up to him and placed her hands around his face. Then, stretching up, she'd pressed her mouth to his. He'd put his hands on her waist, to try and set her back—but he'd felt her curves, and then she'd leaned closer into him, her soft breasts pressed against his chest...and he'd been lost. From that moment Tiarnan had been overtaken for the first time in his life by pure, unadulterated lust. It had felt like the most necessary thing in the world to pull her even closer, to deepen the kiss, taste her with his tongue.

Things had become heated and urgent in seconds, and only that telling movement she'd made, which had brought him back to sanity, had stopped the night ending a lot differently.

Tiarnan's focus came back from the heat of that memory. The vividness of it shocked him. He knew if he was asked he wouldn't be able to recall his last sexual liaison with such clarity. He stepped away from the window with a jerky movement and did the only thing he could do to ensure he'd have a modicum of sleep that night. He took a cold shower and vowed to himself as he did so that very soon he'd have Kate Lancaster in his bed—once that had happened these provocative memories would return to where they belonged: in the past.

Madrid, one week later

'Signorina Lancaster, you have a call.'

The phone felt slippery in Kate's hand. She knew who it was, and her body was already responding as if he was right there in the room with her.

'*Gracias.*'

She heard a click on the line and then a voice, deep, authoritative. 'Kate.'

His voice reached right down inside her and caused a quiver. She pressed her legs together and gripped the phone even tighter.

'Tiarnan. What a surprise.'

'Hardly,' he responded drily. 'I live about ten minutes from your hotel, and Sorcha told me you'd got the messages I've left. Apparently you've been too busy to get back to me.'

'I did speak to her earlier—and, yes, I've been extremely busy.'

'But now you're finished working?'

'Yes.' Relief rushed through her. Escape was in sight. She was still getting over the shock of having been sent on this lastminute assignment to Madrid—right into Tiarnan's territory, and so soon after their last meeting. Which she had no intention of repeating.

'I'm going home tomorrow—'

'Evening,' Tiarnan finished smoothly for her. 'So you have plenty of time to let us take you for lunch tomorrow.'

'I'm afraid I—' Kate stopped. He'd said *us*.

'Rosie is here. She'd like to see you.'

The words of a lame excuse died in Kate's throat. As much as she hated him for doing this to her, she knew that he would never in a million years use Rosie in any kind of manipulative way. He would know that she'd spent time with Rosie, but probably had very little idea just how much. Kate liked Rosie. She'd used to help Sorcha look after her whenever Tiarnan was in New York on business—which had been frequently enough, as he had offices there. He had sometimes left Rosie with

Sorcha for a night or two a couple of times a year when she'd been younger. It had always turned into a joint effort, as Sorcha had been living with Kate in New York until just before she'd met her husband.

Sorcha, up until her pregnancy and the birth of her own daughter, hadn't possessed a maternal bone in her body, so Kate had always been the one to make sure Rosie was wrapped up warm, had eaten well and was tucked in at night. Sorcha used to joke that Kate had been born with a double helping of maternal instinct to make up for the lack of her mother's. The three of them would go to Central Park on adventures, or to the movies and for ice cream afterwards. Kate had always felt a kinship with the small, serious dark-haired child, whose mother had all but abandoned her after her divorce from Tiarnan.

'I'd like to see Rosie too. It's been a while.' Kate's voice felt husky, and already in her head she was rationalising giving in. She *was* leaving tomorrow evening, and with Rosie at lunch too Tiarnan was hardly going to ravish her, was he? And then once she got back to New York she'd be safe again...it would be fine.

'Good. We'll pick you up at midday from the lobby. See you then, Kate.'

And with those softly spoken last words, almost like a caress, the phone line went dead and Kate had the horrible feeling that everything was *not* going to be fine.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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