KATE WALKER

The Christmas Baby's Gift

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They had both longed for a child. That was enough for Peta and Liam to decide to get married. Love would never have to enter the equation.But one year later, Peta is devastated to realize that she's fallen in love with her husband, despite their agreement. There's also still no sign of their much-wanted child, and the heartbreaking reason for that is threatening to tear them apart. Then, just before Christmas, a baby girl is abandoned on their doorstep….

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“So that’s all I was to you—just a brood mare?”

“Not even that, it seems. You don’t want my child.”

Not true. Oh, not true! She wanted Liam’s baby so badly that it was like a permanent ache in her heart. But she didn’t dare admit it. Not to him; not even to herself. If she so much as let the thought into her mind, she was terrified that he would see the truth in her eyes.

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But he’s never said…

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The Christmas Baby's Gift
Kate Walker

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CHAPTER ONE

MARRY in haste; repent at leisure.

Peta turned her head up to the pulse of the shower and let the hot water pour down over her face until the heated pounding numbed her skin. And all the time she wished, deeply and fervently, that she could also make it numb her thoughts.

But nothing would erase the uncomfortable phrase from her mind.

Marry in haste; repent…

'No!'

The word escaped her on a cry of desperation and rejection and she hastily reached up and snapped off the shower, closing her eyes against the unwanted feelings.

In the sudden silence, the sound of her uneven, ragged breathing was unnaturally loud and disturbing. The sound of a harried animal, hunted and trapped, cornered with its back against the wall—and knowing there was no way out.

'No…' she said again, more softly this time, shaking her head so that drops of water spun off from the long, deep brown strands and spattered against the elegantly tiled walls of the shower cubicle. 'Oh, no…'

The silence was too much for her. Too heavy. Too disturbing. She had to turn the shower back on to escape the thoughts that plagued her.

'Peta?'

The sound of another voice—male, deep, and resonant, only just avoiding being drowned under the fresh rush of water—came to her from the direction of the doorway between the bathroom and the adjoining bedroom, making her lids fly open, blue eyes staring at the cubicle door in shock.

Blurred and distorted through the thickly frosted glass, she could just make out the shape of her husband's tall, powerful figure, the rich colour of his hair. But she didn't need to see him clearly. Her memory and her imagination could instantly supply every detail of the rest.

And that imagination swiftly sketched in the strongly carved, harshly stunning features: powerful cheekbones, a long, straight nose and darkly lashed brilliant green eyes. The vibrant, glossy gleam of his hair, closely cropped against an unruly tendency to wave, the deep brown shot through with lights of fiery copper that made it burn and glisten in the sun. And all of that set on the tautly muscled body of a natural athlete with wide straight shoulders, broad chest, narrow hips and long powerful legs. Legs that always seemed to be planted so firmly on the ground, as if he was staking his claim to the earth on which he stood, marking it out as his.

'You in here?'

'Who else would you expect to find in your shower—your bathroom?'

Her voice didn't have quite the strength or the genuine lift of humour that she aimed for, but she was struggling with too many other feelings to be able to control it properly. Even at a distance of several metres, just knowing that Liam was there, in the doorway, made her naked skin tingle all over. It was as if the low, faintly husky rasp of his voice was like a caress over her exposed flesh, bringing the blood springing to the surface, and setting a pulse throbbing at her temples.

'Our.'

'What?'

Peta pulled her head from under the running water to listen more clearly.

'What did you say?'

'I said, our. Not my shower, but ours. Our bathroom too.'

The reproof was low, light, good-humoured, but all the same it sent a shiver running down Peta's spine, chilling her blood in spite of the warmth of the water.

Our bathroom. Our shower.

Did he know what it did to her to hear those words on his tongue? To catch the deep, dark, faintly possessive note in the sensual voice? To recognise just what it was that had put it there?

To know that what he really thought he possessed was her?

To the rest of the world Liam Farrell might be her husband, the man with whom she was supposed to be celebrating her first wedding anniversary this late December evening. But Peta knew that the real truth was very much more complicated than that. And that was what had set her mind on its restless, disturbed pattern of thought for some days now.

'Shall I join you in there?'

'No!'

There had been nothing in the least bit dangerous or threatening in the question. As a matter of fact, it had been asked in the easiest, most laid-back way. But all the same it had Peta stiffening in instant rejection, her heart lurching into pounding in double-quick time.

'Don't!'

It was his silence that gave away his change of mood. The sudden total stillness of the blurred figure seen through the steamed-up glass of the shower door that revealed far more than anything he might have said just how much he disliked her response.

'I—I mean I was just coming out.'

It was simply the idea of him doing as he had said that had sent her thoughts into overdrive, her body into the sort of tension that made her nerves scream in protest, her skin colouring in a rush of blood that had nothing to do the warmth of the shower. But at the same moment the image in her head made her pulses race, her heart pounding in heavy excitement. Under the fall of the water, her already heated flesh tingled in sensual anticipation of the pleasure that had become such a dangerous part of her life.

'Okay. Come on, then.'

She could see through the frosted glass that he was reaching for the huge, thick white towel, shaking out its folds, holding it ready. And she knew that she had no excuse not to do as he said. To keep him waiting any longer.

'Peta…'

Was she hearing right? Had there really been a note of warning in the low, steady use of her name? The noise of the still running water made it difficult to decide if it had truly been so or if it was simply her already over-sensitive mood that had made her believe it was there.

'Peta…'

No mistaking that voice! The ominous undertone had her rushing to switch off the water once again, smoothing back the sodden dark strands of her hair.

How could she face him, feeling the way she was right now? There was only one way to do it, she told herself. Play it his way. The way it had been from the start of this marriage. The way she knew that Liam wanted it to be, because he had declared that openly to her face when he had not so much proposed as outlined a business venture to her. But for the past few months she had known that she couldn't go along with the original terms of their arrangement, and she had tried desperately to find a way of telling him so.

Marry in haste; repent at leisure. Once more the phrase echoed inside her head as she opened the door of the shower cubicle. But she pushed it away with all the strength she could muster, desperately dragging up the smile that she knew he would expect from her and praying it would hide the truth.

Marry in haste; repent at leisure.

The words had been plaguing Liam's thoughts all day long. He had woken up with them running on a loop through his mind and he hadn't been able to switch them off for more than a moment since.

He supposed it was inevitable that today, the first anniversary of his ill-considered rush into matrimony, would bring such thoughts to the surface. But, if the truth was told, he hadn't expected the feeling of self-reproach, the kick of What the hell have I done? to be quite so savage.

That wedding, just four days before the previous Christmas, had seemed like the answer to so many prayers—so many problems. But uncharacteristically he hadn't thought things through. There had been many developments along the way that he had just not anticipated. And this latest change in his circumstances was one that had knocked him completely off balance. How had he ever got himself into this situation?

'Peta, damn you, are you coming out of there or do I have to come in and—?'

The words evaporated on his tongue, choked off hastily as the shower-cubicle door was pushed open and his wife stepped out.

Damn, damn, damn it! Did he really need to ask himself how or why he had trapped himself in this marriage? If he did, then just to look at her gave him his answer.

Silently he cursed his body's instant response to Peta's physical appearance. He only had to see her to want her—and want her with a force and a hunger that came close to actual physical agony. The swift, brutal tightening below his belt, the twist of desire, was so sharp, so savage he had to bite back a cry of pain, of protest.

'Or you'll come in and…what?'

Did she know just how provocative she looked, standing there, trails of water still running down her stunning body, the normally pale ivory of her skin flushed pink by the warmth of the shower? Did she know what it did to him to see her lush form exposed so blatantly, revealing the high, full breasts, narrow ribcage and waist, the long, smooth lines of hips and thighs, sweeping down to the delicate ankles and feet?

Of course she did! She couldn't be unaware of it. She saw and felt the results of her impact on him in bed every night. It was what had brought them together in the first place. What had pushed them into this ill-considered marriage in such a rush.

Sex, pure and simple. Though there was nothing remotely pure about his thoughts right at this moment.

'Liam?'

His silence had disturbed her. Her sapphire eyes were narrowed in confusion, a frown drawing her fine, dark brows together.

Deliberately he switched on a grin that was wickedly provocative, letting his own green gaze sweep over her from the deep brown hair clamped tight around the fine bones of her skull by the water, down to where her small pink toes curled on the soft bronze carpeting.

'Do you have to ask? You know what would have happened… If I'd joined you in that shower you wouldn't have been able to get out. Instead we would still be in there, having wild, passionate sex.'

It was only what she had expected him to say, after all. Only what he had always said, all through the three hundred and sixty-five days of their married life. If he had said anything different now, then it would have rocked the boat desperately, shaking the foundations they had built this relationship on. And that would be dangerous. It would risk her coming to suspect that things had changed. That they were no longer how they seemed.

And that was something he wasn't prepared to admit to himself yet, let alone to her.

'We still could.'

Invitation sparked in her eyes, lighting their blue depths, and an enticing smile curled the rich fullness of her mouth.

'If you want…'

He was tempted. God help him, but he was tempted when she looked at him like that, with that wicked sparkle in her glance, that curve to her mouth. He could even see just the very tip of her pink tongue where it rested on the edge of her lip. She looked like nothing so much as some small, contented cat that was watching a saucer of cream being poured, anticipating its rich taste with delight.

She was totally unembarrassed by her nudity. Standing tall and proud and straight, completely unfazed by the fact that she wore nothing at all while he was still fully dressed in the elegant silver-grey suit, darker grey shirt and silk tie that he had worn for a business meeting that day.

But then she had to know that she was beautiful. Surely no woman could see her own face as it was now—with its high, slanting cheekbones, the richly coloured full mouth, the deep, deep blue of her eyes—in all the purity of its essential beauty, every trace of make-up and any other artifice washed away, and not know how stunning she was in masculine eyes. In anyone's eyes.

'But you'll have to get rid of the posh suit. You wouldn't want to ruin it…'

The provocation was too much. His heart lurched, his blood heating, a stinging tightness below his belt telling him instantly how much at the mercy of her seductive teasing he was. He had never been able to resist. Couldn't do so now.

For the space of another couple of heartbeats he almost followed her lead. The habits of the past year almost reached out and entangled him in their grip again, unthinking response driving him in an automatic direction before he had time to reconsider. He had even tugged at his tie, loosening it at the knot, smiling into the darkness of her eyes all the time, when reality caught up with him sharply, kicking him hard in the ribs, and made him rethink.

'Perhaps not…'

He tried to make it sound relaxed, casual, indifferent even, and wasn't at all sure whether he'd come anywhere close. Then he saw the change in her expression, the shadows that had clouded the clear blue, and knew that he had succeeded better than he had ever anticipated. Better than he had ever wanted.

But it was too late to back out now.

'Here…'

He held out the white towel, forcing himself to ease the revealingly tight grip on the soft material.

'Better wrap yourself up.'

Reproach flashed from those beautiful eyes, a reproach he fully expected her to put into words. If there was one thing he had learned about this wife of his, over the past year, it was that she didn't mince matters. If she felt angry, or disappointed, or dissatisfied, she said so. But to his surprise she bit her lip visibly, and a faint shiver shook her slender form.

'You're cold.'

He was grateful for the extra impetus to get her to move. A single drop of water had escaped from the darkness of her hair at her shoulders and was trailing a slow, delicate path over the creamy surface of her skin, and down… It slipped across the curve of one lush breast, touched the rose-tinted tip and hung for a composure-shattering second from the tight bud of her nipple.

Once more hot desire gave him a harsh, burning kick in the gut. Liam swallowed hard, spoke hastily, hunger making his voice rougher than he had anticipated. 'Come on, Peta—don't just stand there! Wrap yourself in this towel and get dry.'

Perhaps he'd been mistaken. Seeing reluctance where there was none. Now she moved forward, into the enveloping folds of the towel, without hesitation, without protest.

The towel enfolded her slim form easily. So easily that it twisted something deep inside Liam. That slenderness was part of the problem. Part of what was fretting away at the fabric of the marriage they had built up together. Peta wasn't still supposed to be as slim as on the day he had married her. Kids had been a major part of their agreement—and one year later there was no sign at all of any baby on the way.

'Thank you—I'm fine now.'

Peta forced herself to say it. She had to say something to fill the uncomfortable silence that had descended. Something to distract him from his awkward question. How could anyone be cold in the superbly heated, luxurious bathroom of Liam Farrell's home?

But of course it hadn't been cold that had made her shiver so revealingly. Instead it had been the disturbed state of her thoughts.

'I'd better go and dry my hair or I'll never be ready in time.'

The ease with which he let her go only added to her confusion and mental discomfort. She had been prepared for an argument, some sort of protest at least. This wasn't the Liam she knew so well. This Liam was in a very different mood from the one she'd assumed he was in from the moment he'd first made that provocative remark about the shower, pushing her to reply in similar vein.

She'd expected that he would try to kiss her, to hold her close. To assert once more the powerful sexual attraction that always flared between them. The same attraction that had had her whole body throbbing in response simply to the sound of his voice. And she had been prepared to handle that.

But not this strange, almost cold indifference.

Something was very wrong here. Something that she had been aware of for days, like the throbbing ache of a tooth that needed filling and wouldn't stop nagging.

Dear God, please let it not be that he had guessed the way she was feeling.

'What's wrong?'

The question came so unexpectedly from behind that she actually jumped like a startled cat as she padded her way, bare-footed, across the rich bronze carpet towards her dressing gown.

'Wrong? What do you mean, wrong?'

Her voice was uneven and rough, revealing her inner turmoil, and the hand that reached out to grasp her hair-brush was not perfectly steady.

'How could anything be wrong?'

'I don't know. You tell me.'

Unhelpful as well as enigmatic.

'Liam, I'm fine.'

His response was an inarticulate sound of sceptical disbelief that had her clamping her fingers too tightly round the brush handle, the skin showing white at the knuckles.

'All right!'

Impetuously she swung round to face him, then immediately wished she hadn't as she met the full force of those brilliant, stunning green eyes head-on.

'All right,' she tried again, less forcefully this time as a new wave of tension gripped her. 'Seeing as you obviously don't believe me—why don't you say what's wrong? Why don't you explain what made you ask that question in the first place?'

His shrug was a masterpiece of controlled indifference, one that seemed to shake off her question as totally unimportant. But the casual nonchalance of the gesture was belied by the laser-like intensity of his gaze, the burning focus of those deep eyes on her face. Peta shifted uncomfortably under its scrutiny, feeling as if a much-needed protective layer had been scraped away from her skin, leaving her disturbingly raw and vulnerable.

'I would have thought that today of all days you'd be feeling happy and relaxed. That you'd be looking forward to the party tonight with excitement and anticipation. Instead I find that you're nervy and distant…'

She was distant? What about the way he had been the past few weeks? What had made him so difficult, so unapproachable, just at the moment when she had most needed to try and talk to him?

The question almost escaped Peta but she bit it back just in time.

'And if I am distant as you say—have you ever considered that it might just be the party tonight that's making me feel that way?'

Another rough sound of disbelief escaped him and he actually shook his proud head in dismissal of her comment.

'Oh, come on, darling! You know that isn't true—I know it can't be true.'

'And why not?'

‘You know why.’

‘Tell me.’

Liam moved away from the doorway at last, strolling across the room to stand beside her, looking down into her wary blue eyes.

‘I’ve never seen you nervous—or even unsettled before any sort of social event. Nothing fazes you. And especially not tonight.’

‘No.’ Peta shook her head, sending her drying dark hair flying around her face.

‘No?’

That sceptical note was back in his voice.

‘No, nothing fazes you—or no, nothing’s wrong?’

‘No—not “especially not tonight”,’ Peta quoted back at him. ‘I don’t see why you think I should be so easy in my mind about tonight.’

‘And why the hell not?’

It was clear that his grip on his temper was wearing thin. The relaxed, drawling voice was becoming rather ragged at the edges.

‘There can’t be anything to worry you about tonight.’

‘Oh, can’t there?’

‘No—it’s a happy event. You know everyone who’s going to be here—family and friends. They’re all coming to help us celebrate—’

‘And that’s just it!’ Peta broke in, unable to hold the words back any more.

The double meaning of that ‘happy event’ was more than she could bear. She knew what ‘happy event’ Liam had been anticipating by this stage in their marriage. She was supposed to be pregnant by now. It was what they had both wanted at the start. What she still wanted, but not in the way she had originally thought.

‘What’s just it?’ Liam frowned impatient confusion. ‘Peta, you’re not making any sense.’

‘Maybe that’s because none of this makes sense.’

Peta began dragging the brush through her long dark hair, the rough, abrupt movements mirroring the edginess of her thoughts. The bristles caught in a couple of tangled knots but she didn’t pause, wincing faintly as she tugged them down.

‘What the—?’

Reaching out, he caught hold of her hand, stilling the nervy gesture with a grip so strong that she could do nothing but submit to his control.

But she didn’t have to look at him. She couldn’t look at him for fear of what she might read in his face. And so she kept her own head stubbornly averted, staring fixedly down at the carpet as if fascinated by the sight of his polished black leather handmade boots planted firmly on the thick carpet.

Staking his claim again. The memory of her own thoughts earlier came unwillingly to her mind, dousing the fire of her mutiny like a bucket of cold water tossed over a leaping flame.

‘Peta, sweetheart, are you going to explain just what is going on inside that delightful head of yours? What is it that is bugging you—and why?’

That ‘sweetheart’ was just too much. He used it casually, easily, without even thinking. He didn’t mean it. Not really. It was just a word, one he dropped into conversation without a care. It was what people—outsiders—expected a husband to say to his wife.

But not this husband. Not to this wife.

And she knew he never thought about the effect it might have. That he never for one moment considered how she might feel, hearing him direct that apparently loving term at her and knowing that it had no place anywhere inside their marriage.

Because love had no part at all in this relationship between herself and Liam.

At least, it had had none at the very beginning. The arrangement was a marriage of convenience from start to finish. No emotions involved in any way. Or, rather, that was how it was supposed to have been. How it had always been on Liam's side. And on hers at first—at the very beginning.

But not now. Now things had changed. Changed so fundamentally that she was no longer convinced that she could continue with this marriage in the way they had decided just over a year ago. She didn't think she could continue with it in any way at all. Not unless things changed in a way that just didn't seem possible.

She had told herself that she would do as Liam wanted. Play it his way. But it was getting so much harder with every day that passed. Because she hadn't stuck to the guidelines, the rules they had so carefully laid out from the moment they had agreed to this marriage of convenience. Instead, she had committed the worst sin of all.

She had fallen head over heels, totally, recklessly, blindly—impossibly—irretrievably in love with this husband of convenience of hers. And that love was the last thing he wanted from her.

And the knowledge of that fact had driven her to desperate measures. For the last few months, she had been actively taking steps to make sure she didn't conceive the baby that she knew Liam wanted, even though it had almost broken her heart to do so.

CHAPTER TWO

‘DON’T call me sweetheart! I don’t like it!’

It was the nearest she dared come to expressing the whirling thoughts in her head, the pain that was burning in her heart.

‘First I’ve heard of it—but—fine!’

The nonchalance of his answer made matters even worse, heaping coals on the fires of misery she was already struggling with.

‘Is that what’s bugging you?’

His expression made it plain that he thought she was really way over the top if she was making such a fuss about a simple word.

‘What? No, of course not.’

‘Then would you mind explaining just what is?’

The way the words were cut off, sharp, cold and clipped, left her in no doubt at all that whatever control he had had over his temper was now rapidly wearing thin. All it would take was one more hesitation, an attempt to dodge the issue, and he would lose it completely. And Liam in a temper was something she didn’t want to risk, especially not tonight.

‘It’s—it’s this party—’ she tried again.

‘What about the party?’

‘I’m not sure it’s—it’s right.’

‘Right?’

The word was clearly the last one he had expected to hear.

‘Right?’ he repeated, frowning his confusion. ‘Precisely what is wrong with it.’

‘Nothing’s wrong with the party. It’s just that I’m not sure that it’s right for us to be celebrating like this. No—listen…’ she put in hastily when he drew a swift, sharp breath in through his teeth, obviously priming himself for some sort of cutting retort. ‘It’s the first anniversary of our wedding day.’

‘A fact that I am only too well aware of.’

The black irony of his tone made her wince but she forced herself to ignore it so that she had the nerve to continue.

‘But it wasn’t exactly the sort of wedding day most people have. The sort they’d want to celebrate. Ours isn’t that type of marriage. It never was and it never will be.’

But she had dreamed that it could be, and that was the problem. She had dreamed of love and happy ever after and those dreams had been stronger even than her longing to become a mother. But it was only as the mother of his children that Liam had wanted her.

‘And yet we’ve invited all these people. My family—your grandfather—friends…’

‘They wanted to come. Besides, it’s Christmas, and everyone loves a party at Christmas.’

Liam was being deliberately awkward. Surely by now he knew exactly what she meant. She didn’t have to spell it out.

But it seemed that she did.

‘They wanted to come to help us celebrate. But they don’t know the truth of it. They don’t know that our marriage is really little more than a business arrangement and not the love match they believe it to be. I don’t feel that we have the right to expect them to celebrate something that is little more than a lie.’

‘A lie!’

She’d caught him on the raw there, somehow. And it was clear he didn’t like it. The stunning features darkened swiftly and with a rough movement he twisted the hair-brush from her hands, tossing it aside, careless of the way it fell to the floor with a soft thud and spun away across the carpet.

The next moment hard fingers closed over her arms and she was wrenched up close to him. So close that she was forced to tilt her chin sharply in order to look up into his face. It was either that or bury her head in his shoulder, and with every one of her senses instantly on red alert at simply being near him she didn't dare to risk any close contact. Already the warm, clean scent of his skin was coiling round her, unbearably provocative, instantly arousing. And his beautiful, sensual mouth was almost exactly at eye level; the temptation to lift her head just a little higher and press her lips to his was almost irresistible.

She could kiss him out of this mood, she knew. At least, she'd always been able to do that in the past. But now, after that awkward moment in the bathroom when he'd completely blanked her, she didn't think she dared to risk it. The thought of another rejection was frankly more than she could bear.

And besides her conscience was troubling her badly, as it had been for months now. When she had mentioned a lie, what she had really meant was her own recent behaviour, the guilty truth she was holding back.

'A lie,' Liam repeated, more quietly, but no less harshly. 'This marriage is no lie, sweetheart. It's exactly what we wanted. It's exactly what we've made it—and that makes it a lot more honest than most.'

'But…' Peta tried to break in, nerving herself to tell him, but he swept on, totally ignoring her attempted interjection.

'Believe me, there are many of those who start out believing that their love is for ever who don't even last to their first anniversary. Plenty of marriage vows break at the first hurdle. They fall out of love as swiftly as they fell into it. One crisis and it's over—done. They hate each other and never want to see the other person's face ever again. So…'

Somewhere along the line he'd made a dangerous mistake, Liam told himself; the swift rush of his thoughts faltering, making him lose his train of argument. He should never have come so close. Never have caught hold of her like this. Never have crushed her up against him until they were almost melded into one, thigh to thigh, hip to hip, the softness of her breasts pressed against his chest. The clean, fresh scent of her skin, tantalisingly combined with the delicately perfumed shower gel she had been using, coiled around him, teasing his senses, making his head swim with desire.

His whole body was on fire. So hot that he could only be grateful for the fact that the double thickness of the towel that wrapped her acted as insulation between her skin and the burn of it. That, and the achingly swollen demand of his hunger for her that pressed urgently against the cradle of her hips.

Swallowing hard to ease the raw dryness of his throat, he tried again.

'So—what we have is well worth celebrating.'

'But…'

'But nothing! What we have is what's right for us! And that's all that matters in a marriage. That the two people involved in it are getting what they want from it. That it makes them happy…'

A sudden, nastily uncomfortable twist of his conscience almost brought him up sharp, but he forced the uneasiness down again and hurried on, praying she hadn't sensed his hesitation. There wasn't a problem. These things took time.

'We're celebrating a year together—no matter what the circumstances. That's the truth.'

A sudden movement of her shoulders distracted him, drawing his eyes irresistibly to the rounded smoothness of her naked skin, still faintly flushed from the warmth of the shower. Instantly his thoughts were distracted from the argument he was trying to express, diverted on to other, more sensual, more inviting paths.

'The truth is…' Peta began, but he wasn't listening to her.

That shoulder was too tempting. The skin on it was so soft, so delicate. He couldn't resist lifting a hand to touch it, to stroke the gentlest of caresses over its curve, feeling the muscles beneath flex faintly, the shiver of response she was unable to hold back.

'The truth, darling?'

It was a blend of husky sensuality and shaken laughter. He still hadn't got a grip on the way this woman made him feel. The incredible immediacy of his response to her, the instant, burning heat of arousal he felt as soon as he touched her.

'Oh, lady—this is the truth…'

Lowering his head, he pressed his lips to edge of her shoulder, where the smooth length of her arm began, and heard Peta's involuntary murmur of delight.

'This…and this…'

His mouth trailed slowly, deliberately, towards the fine, arching line of her throat, stilling over the spot at the base of her neck where a heated pulse raced unevenly. With his face concealed against her skin, he let his mouth curve into a smile of sensual triumph as he sensed her instant response, the sudden change in the rhythm of her blood underneath his soft caress. With careful control he nipped gently at her flesh, eliciting another sigh of abandonment.

'This is the truth between us, darling. The only truth we need.'

His hands were on her skin too, now, fingers drifting over its satin warmth, reminding themselves of the familiar lines of her bones, the dips and curves of her shape. One tangled in the still-damp fall of her hair, tugging lightly, while the other followed a dancing path along the front of the towel, finding the bunched-up spot where she'd knotted it firmly across her breasts and lingering provocatively.

'The truth…'

Peta's echoing of his words was part agreement, part groan of surrender, and against her neck his smile widened. Just the tip of his tongue snaked out and traced an erotic pattern from under her ear to the point where her heated blood raged in a frantic pulse. Then he kissed his way back up again, this time letting his mouth drift round, over the fine plane of her cheek and down, to capture her lips. Her instant response, the way her mouth softened, opening immediately under his, allowing the intimate invasion of his tongue, gave him the encouragement he was seeking.

'The only truth,' he muttered thickly, letting his fingers tiptoe back along the top of the towel, the tiny stiffening of her slender body betraying her unspoken disappointment. 'Our truth…'

This time he trailed his hand slowly, ever more slowly, towards its chosen target. Each movement of his fingertips described a graceful arc, then a full circle, coming close—closer—then drifting away again. Peta's mouth didn't leave his for a second, her kiss was still as strong, as deeply intimate as before, but he knew from the tension of every muscle, the watchful tightness of her whole body, that every ounce of her concentration was centred on just one thing. She was as aware of his touch on her skin as he was, waiting—and wanting—him to achieve his aim.

And when he once again reached the spot where that knot held place—loosening rapidly now under the pressure of the tiny wriggles and twists of response that Peta was unable to hold back, he simply let his hand stay still. Simply let it rest with the heat of one wide, hard palm covering the exposed upper slope of her breast, one long finger tucked just inside the white towelling, between it and the warmth of her skin, hidden in the scented, secret valley of her cleavage.

'Liam!'

His name was just a sigh, forced out from her in the moment that her whole body froze, her entire being centred, or so it seemed, on that one small, burningly intimate point of contact between them. The point where all he had to do was make one tiny movement—either out and away upwards, leaving her skimpy protection secure and intact—or up and away, towards his chest, taking the towelling with him, breaking the weakening knot once and for all.

And still he waited.

‘Liam!’

It was more impatient now. Very definitely a protest. The smile grew, became a wicked, beguiling grin that he knew she must feel against her cheek. They were so close, so very close.

‘Yes, sweetheart?’ he murmured softly, and saw her deep blue eyes fly open at the calculated provocation of the word.

He met the indigo burn of her gaze head-on, fixing and holding it so that there was no way she could look away, look anywhere but directly into his eyes.

‘Our truth,’ he said, low and huskily, and saw the surrender in her eyes before she even had a chance to open her mouth.

‘Our truth,’ she whispered on a note of submission, a note that yielded the victory to him—at least in this battle, if not the entire war.

And for Liam it was enough. It was all that he had been waiting for. If he was honest with himself, he couldn’t have held out for a moment longer. The force of his desire was like a fire in his blood, the ache in his loins threatening to drive all hope of control from his mind, push him into the sort of wild behaviour that left no room for thought or consideration. And it took every last trace of control that he possessed to kiss her just once more before he made the movement they had both been waiting for.

Up and away, towards his chest.

A twist, a tiny tug, and the white towelling fell to the floor, pooling on the carpet at their feet. In the same instant the soft, heated weight of her breasts tumbled free and he held them securely, one in each of his hands, the whiteness of her skin shocking against the darker tones of his fingers.

The truth, Peta thought, adrift on a sea of wanting. Of need.

Our truth.

The truth was that they couldn’t keep their hands off each other. Hadn’t been able to from the start, and still couldn’t now. And so she had known that as soon as he touched her she was lost. That the wild, primitive pin-pricks of fire that started all over her skin would swiftly merge into one total, blazing conflagration that would take control of her, leave her totally at its mercy. And when he kissed her she felt the response deep inside, where everything tightened, tensed, woke to stinging need.

His hands against her breasts and the touch of his mouth on her skin was turning her blood molten, making it pound fiercely in her veins. All the fears, all the doubts of the day, of only moments before, had evaporated, burned up in the blaze of heat inside her.

‘Want me?’

It was a low, husky whisper against the curve of her ear, his breath feathering against her skin. And as he spoke his hands were working a wicked, tormenting magic, thumbs describing tiny, erotic circles over the delicate surface, moving closer and closer to the tight pink nipple, making her shiver in convulsive delight.

‘Want me?’ he said again. And when she didn’t answer he punished her by closing a finger and thumb over each straining bud, tugging softly until she moaned aloud in a conflict of rebellion and abandonment.

‘Peta?’

‘What do you think?’

She was incapable of answering in any other way. Incapable of hiding her feelings from him. Incapable of pretending she felt anything more than the yearning, demanding hunger that had uncoiled deep inside her and was throbbing uncontrollably, low down in her body.

‘I think…’

There was a tremor in his voice that revealed the struggle he too was having to keep control over his powerful physical feelings.

‘I think that I’m wearing rather too many clothes for this. Why don’t you help me out of some, hmm?’

And when she turned faintly confused, passion-blurred eyes on him, frowning in an effort to drag her thoughts back from the erotic paths they were following, he grinned and then kissed her again, tugging his tie free at his throat as he did so. Discarding the sliver of silk somewhere over his shoulder, he lifted Peta's hands, laid them on his chest, just on the button band of his shirt.

'Help me…' he whispered again.

But this time Peta needed no further urging. As soon as her fingers touched the soft linen of his shirt, felt the heat of his skin, the hardness of bone, the power of muscle, she was suddenly in the grip of a desperate hunger. She knew she couldn't rest until she could touch him, really touch him. Until she could feel his body without the barrier of any form of clothing between them at all.

And so she fumbled and wrenched at the small, pearly buttons, snatching them open, tugging, until one finally spun away to land with a small clatter somewhere on the nearby dressing table.

But neither Peta nor Liam saw it go. Or cared where it fell. They were both intent on getting rid of as many clothes as possible, as quickly as possible, no thought for anything else.

Liam had already kicked off his shoes, yanked open his belt. He paused only for a moment as Peta slid down his zip, peeled the elegant trousers over his hips and down the muscular length of his legs. Even as he freed himself from their clinging coils round his ankles she had made her way back up his body, hooking her thumbs into the sides of the black shorts, easing them away from the heat and pressure of his fierce erection.

Liam's breath hissed in again sharply and he froze instinctively. The instant reaction made Peta bold, erasing all the insecurity and the uncertainty that his earlier negative response had created. Pausing mid-movement, she looked up at him, blue eyes gleaming, a provocative smile tilting the corners of her mouth.

'No?' she teased, making as if to undo her action and let the fine cotton fall back into place.

'You dare!'

Liam's voice was low and rough, thick with the hunger that had scored two streaks of colour along his broad, slanting cheekbones.

'You witch!' he added even more rawly as she still hesitated, delighting in the power she had to reduce this big, strong, and normally totally self-contained man to this state of yearning need.

'So now I'm a witch, am I?' She laughed, never taking her eyes from the darkness of his. 'Well, if that's the case, then perhaps I should put you under a spell.'

'You already have, and you know it! Peta…'

His control was slipping fast. And, if he only knew it, so was hers. Her pulse was pounding so hard that her head felt light, her thoughts swimming. She wanted to take his mouth again, to taste him on her lips, on her tongue. She wanted him to enfold her in his arms, to take her down onto the bed with him, cover her with the hard weight of his body, fill her, take her—take her with him to the fulfilment they both knew was the inevitable, the only end of this shivering excitement.

And yet, at the same moment, she wanted to delay. Wanted to hold onto this thrill of anticipation for as long as she could, so that that fulfilment, when it came, would be beyond anything she had ever known before.

But, even as she hesitated, Liam took matters out of her control. Capturing her wrists in his hard grip, he held both of them prisoner easily in one hand while his other arm scooped her up off her feet and swung her over onto the bed, dropping her down onto the softness of the covers. While she was still recovering from having her breath snatched away by the suddenness of his response, he dispensed with what little remained of his clothing and came down beside her, pulling her roughly towards him.

'Tease me, would you, you little witch?' he muttered, imprisoning her beneath him and pushing strong fingers into her hair, dragging the dark silk back from her flushed face. 'Make me wait?'

His mouth crushed hers fiercely then danced away again, tongue and teeth tantalising her skin, stroking, tasting, nipping at the softness of her earlobes.

‘Well, I’ll show you what teasing’s really like. How it feels to want someone so much that you feel you’ll die if you don’t have them. That your head will burst, that your heart will stop beating. I’ll make you ache with needing me, bring you to the point where you won’t care if the world ends—because you won’t even notice it happening. All you’ll care about is that I’m here, with you—in you! You won’t want to know about anything else. Oh yes, I’ll show you, lady!’

Deep inside, Peta shivered, her whole being seeming to turn to jelly. She had no doubt at all that he could do everything he had promised. All that and more. And she could only lie there, waiting, wanting everything he could give.

It wasn’t as if they had never made love before. A year together had given them knowledge of each other’s bodies and all the secret pleasure spots that each of them possessed. It had created an understanding of how they both felt, how they reacted, what they liked and what they wanted. When to touch lightly, softly, gently and when to increase the pressure of a caress or the urgency of a movement until it was not just a stroke but more a demand without words.

But this time it was as if everything Liam did had a new skill, a new sensuality. Within seconds of his whispered threat Peta was quivering under his hands, reduced to a shameless, abandoned wreck of hunger, only able to express her need through moans of delirious abandon. Several times she moved her restless body against his, yearning, pleading, seeking the ultimate fulfilment of his possession, only to have him shake his dark head in refusal and subject her to even more erotic torture. Only at last, when she was sure that she would die if he didn’t take her now, did he move over her and consummate their lovemaking with one wild, fierce thrust of his body.

It seemed to Peta that the world splintered around her even in those first few seconds of possession. There couldn’t be any more pleasure, her whirling mind told her. Or if there could, then she couldn’t cope with it.

It only took a few seconds to learn that she was wrong on both counts. There was more, and in spite of feeling that she would split apart if she experienced it she now realised that it had only just started. Her blood singing in her veins, her pulse throbbing, she met and matched every forceful movement Liam made, gave back kiss for kiss, caress for caress, demand for demand. Between them they rode the wild, blazing waves of passion, each time going higher, higher, higher, until at last there was nowhere else to go. The summit had been reached, the peak of passion scaled, and, with each other’s name escaping in a hoarse, shaken cry, they tumbled over it and down the far slope into oblivion.

CHAPTER THREE

PASSION was what their marriage was built on, Peta told herself as she watched Liam dancing with one of her friends later that night.

The spectacular ballroom of Hewland Hall was brilliantly lit by a dozen glorious crystal chandeliers. In the far corner of the huge room, an enormous Christmas tree reached almost to the ornate ceiling, and red, gold and green garlands festooned the walls. It was a gorgeous, wonderful scene, but all she was conscious of was the tall, powerful figure of her husband.

A smile curved her mouth, her eyes becoming darkly dreamy as she recalled how it had felt to be in his arms just a few minutes before, the way he had held her close to the heat and strength of his body, his cheek pressed against hers.

Passion was what had pushed them into the marriage of convenience that had suited them, and pleased both their families. The sort of passion that had consumed the two of them in its fires earlier, so wild, so all-powerful that even now she could still feel her blood heat and her skin tingle just to think of it. The sort of passion that was so overwhelming that it couldn't be denied. It had brought them together, held them in thrall for the past year, and had seemed so overpowering that, in the absence of any other, stronger feeling, it had seemed enough to hold them together for as long as they wanted.

Passion and the longing for children.

The smile left her mouth abruptly, leaving her face looking bleak and pale. All her life she had dreamed of becoming a mother She had enjoyed her work as a PA, knew she'd been good at it, but a child—children—of her own had always been at the centre of her thoughts. So it had come as something of a shock to her to find that, at twenty-six, almost twenty-seven, she was not only not yet a mother but also still single, without even a fiancé, or yet a boyfriend on the horizon. The fact that her brother, three years younger, was already the father of a two-year-old boy, with another child on the way, had only added to her feeling of emptiness, the yearning to have a family of her own.

And it had to be a family. She didn't want to be a single mother. A child had the right to two parents who loved and cared for it, and she was determined that her baby would have the best she could give it. So when Liam had told her how much he wanted children too, it had seemed like the perfect answer.

But then she had had to go and ruin things completely by falling in love.

Her hands closed over the long skirts of her midnight-blue dress, crushing the fine velvet dreadfully. This hadn't been on the cards. Hadn't been part of the bargain they had agreed between them.

'But what happens if this isn't enough?' she remembered asking Liam when he had first made the suggestion that they marry for lust rather than for love. 'What if one of us meets someone else? Falls for them…?'

'Falls in love?' Liam had finished for her, when she'd hesitated. 'You said you didn't believe in it.'

'I said I didn't know what it meant! And I don't. I've never known that sort of devastating, irresistible feeling for anyone. Never felt that without a certain someone in my life I would want to die, that my existence wouldn't be worth having. I've never experienced it and I'm not sure that I ever will.'

She had now, Peta thought wretchedly as her clouded blue eyes followed Liam around the dance floor, hungrily absorbing the lean, powerful lines of his body in the superbly cut dinner jacket and gleaming white shirt. She knew that feeling all too well, and didn't know how to handle it.

She couldn't drag her gaze away from this man who had been her husband for the past twelve months, and yet, in many ways, was still a total stranger to her. The subdued elegance of the classic black and white suited his tall frame to perfection. The fit of his jacket emphasised the broad, straight shoulders, the width of his chest and long, long legs under the fine fabric of his trousers.

In the light of the huge glittering chandeliers that hung from the high ceilings of the ballroom, the rich chestnut of his hair gleamed and shone, the copper lights in it seeming to catch fire and burn spectacularly. And the dark green of his eyes had the glimmer of polished jade, deep and impenetrable.

Those stunning eyes had looked just that way when she had asked him that question on the night before their wedding. When she had raised the possibility of one of them falling for someone else.

At the time she had felt that she had to broach it, just so that there was no possibility of a problem cropping up later, one that they couldn't handle. And it had been Liam that she had foreseen might find himself in love with someone else. After all, out of the two of them he was the one who had had some experience, however brief and unhappy, of the feeling that the world called love. The woman he had adored had walked out on him when he was twenty-three, and since then there had been no one, no single person that he'd felt more than a passing fancy for. Nothing that came anywhere close to love.

She had never expected that she would fall a prey to that elusive emotion herself. And least of all that she would feel it for the man she was married to.

'We'll tackle that when we come to it—if we come to it,' Liam had said. 'But I don't think it's likely—do you? After all, it's not as if we're both naïve adolescents who don't have enough experience of life to know what we're doing.'

She felt like a naïve adolescent right now, Peta reflected wryly. Like some newly sexually awakened teenager, launched on her first major crush on the opposite sex. Thoughts of Liam crowded every second of her waking day. Dreams of him filled her nights. Heated, erotic, sensual dreams that had her waking restlessly, her heart throbbing, her breath ragged, and her skin so damp with perspiration that she felt sure that Liam, sleeping peacefully at her side, would sense it and, waking, want to know the reason for it.

In the beginning, in the days when passion had been all that held them together, she wouldn't have had any trouble in telling him how she was feeling. She'd done it more times than she could count, reaching for him and entwining her arms around him to draw him closer. She had pressed her mouth to his, tangled her fingers in his hair, holding her body against the hard length of his, coiling long smooth limbs around his equally naked, hair-roughened ones.

'I want you,' she had been able to whisper to him then. 'I want you more than I can say. I want you to make love to me—want you inside me—and I want it now!'

Then, passion had made her brave, need had made her forthright. She had been totally direct about her feelings because they had been that basic, that uncomplicated. But as her emotions had changed, so had her approach to this husband of hers.

I love you was just three little words—no more, no less than I want you, but so much harder to say. Impossible to say when she knew that they were the words Liam didn't want to hear. The last thing that he wanted to hear from her. The last thing that he could offer her in return.

And so she had kept silent, and that silence had grown wider and deeper as the days and the weeks had passed. If it would have been difficult to speak at the beginning, it would be impossible to break her silence now. She had grown so accustomed to hugging her secret to herself that she knew the words would shrivel on her tongue if she so much as tried to express them. It was easier to keep silent. But keeping silent had also meant keeping her distance, and she knew that Liam had noticed her withdrawal. How long would it be, she wondered, before he started to question the reasons for it?

'Penny for them?'

The softly spoken question jolted her from her memories with a start, dragging her back to awareness of the fact that the music had stopped. The dance had ended, and her husband and friend had come to where she was standing at the side of the room, Liam's arms snaking round her waist and pulling her close with a casual possessiveness that made her heart thud high up in her throat.

‘For—for my thoughts?’ she hedged awkwardly, playing for time. It was a struggle to speak, to ignore the warm weight at her back, the knowing hand that rested on her hip, blunt fingers splayed out over the curve of her buttock. ‘They’re not worth much. Not even a penny, really.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

It was Stephanie, her friend, who spoke, laughter warming her voice.

‘I saw the way you were looking at us just now, watching every move we made out there on the dance floor. And I don’t kid myself that it was admiration for my dancing that held you spellbound in that way. Or that you were envying my dress—not considering that lovely creation you’re wearing!’

‘Well, thank you.’

Peta bobbed a laughing curtsey, hoping against hope to distract her friend from the path her thoughts were following. She knew that that narrow cut of the deep blue velvet dress suited the slender lines of her figure, and that the sleeveless, tight-laced bodice revealed the creamy skin of her shoulders and arms, the beginnings of the curves of her breasts, the shadowy suggestion of the fullness of her cleavage.

‘So I suspect it was the person who gave you that spectacular necklace who was really in your thoughts. I take it that was an anniversary present from Liam?’

Peta’s fingers went instinctively to touch the brilliant diamond necklace that her husband had fastened around her neck just before they’d left for the party at Hewland Hall, his grandfather’s home. She had swept her dark hair up at the back of her head, exposing the full length of her throat and neck, so displaying its beauty more effectively, while at her ears sparkled matching earrings which he had given to her only that morning.

‘Yes, Liam gave it to me.’

‘I must say that this husband of yours has excellent taste.’

‘But of course.’

Liam’s arm tightened possessively around Peta’s waist, tucking her up against the warmth and strength of his body.

‘I chose Peta as my wife, didn’t I? We’re the perfect combination of breeding and money.’

He made it sound like a joke, and clearly Stephanie took it that he meant it flippantly, but deep inside Peta felt something twist sharply at the thought that in fact he had spoken nothing but the truth. The Hewland family, whose only daughter Liam’s mother had been, were long-established landowners in the county. But by the standards of her own family, they were newly wealthy. The Lassiters could trace their ancestry back to the Norman Conquest, but as a result of too many death duties and some desperately unwise speculation on the Stock Exchange they were cash poor.

That was why her parents and Liam’s grandfather, who had been friends for years, had come up with the idea of a marriage that united their two families. That way, they’d reckoned, they would have the best of both worlds.

‘Breeding?’

A new masculine voice took up the conversation. Tony, Stephanie’s husband, had joined them, catching the tail-end of Liam’s remark.

‘Who’s talking about breeding? Liam—Peta—have you got some news we should know? Or has my wife been letting you in on our little secret?’

‘News? No.’

Peta answered hastily, looking anywhere but into Liam’s face. She could feel the colour ebbing from her own cheeks as her conscience stabbed at her painfully, reminding her of the deception she was practising on her husband. It didn’t matter that she had very good reasons for doing so. Liam would never see it that way. He wouldn’t understand her motives; the way things had changed so much since she had realised just how she really felt.

‘N-no—no news.’

‘But we have!’

Stephanie didn't have to explain just what her news was. It shone out of her eyes, was there in the glow in her face, her smile. Peta's stomach lurched painfully. Her friend had been married only half as long as she had. Just six months ago she and Liam had been guests at Stephanie and Tony's wedding, and now her friend was announcing the fact that she was pregnant.

'Congratulations, Steph!'

She made herself say it, praying that her hurried movement forwards to hug her friend, the way that her face was muffled in Stephanie's tumbling blonde hair, would explain the catch in her voice, the jerky unevenness of the words.

She'd married Liam to have children. But as her own feelings about her husband had changed, so had her thoughts on bringing a baby into this marriage. And now here, right in front of her, was the image of exactly why she had felt forced to take the decision she had. Stephanie and Tony were so obviously deeply in love. They were a couple in a way that she and Liam could never be, the sort of parents that she dreamed of providing for her own child when the time came.

'That's wonderful news.'

She couldn't even make it sound genuine, Liam reflected bitterly. Oh, perhaps someone who didn't know their private background might be convinced. They might actually just take the words at face value and not hear the bleak emptiness that threaded through them, draining them of any real warmth and delight. But to someone who was as sensitive to everything about this woman as he was, it was obvious that her heart wasn't fully in her response. That there was something at the back of it, throwing a dark shadow over her happiness.

And she wouldn't even look him in the face. Couldn't meet his eyes. Ever since he'd made that damn stupid remark about breeding she had been avoiding him quite obviously.

He could have bitten his tongue off as soon as he had said it. It had come too close to the truth. To the sort of dynastic marriage their families had wanted and that, at first, they had both been so determined to resist. He had trampled right in, reminding her of one of the reasons—apart, of course, from fancying the pants off each other so that they couldn't keep their hands, or other parts, to themselves—for their union. And now Stephanie had reminded her of the fact that he had failed to deliver on his promise.

Luckily at that moment the announcement of the fact that supper was being served proved a very welcome diversion. For once he was grateful that the formality his grandfather insisted on for these occasions meant that he and Peta, as the guests of honour at this event, had to lead everyone else into the dining room where the elegant buffet meal was laid out.

'What can I get you?'

'Oh—anything—I'm not really hungry.'

She still seemed distracted. Still wouldn't meet his eyes.

'Okay, then—you go and sit down and I'll bring you something over. I think I know what you like.'

Did she have to look so relieved to be given the chance to move away? It was obvious that she had chosen a table on the far side of the room, where she could sit on her own, away from everyone else. People would be thinking that they'd had a row—not the best possible image to present on their first anniversary, particularly not when they wanted everyone to believe that theirs was a successful, happy marriage.

'What's up with that pretty wife of yours, then, my boy?'

Joshua Hewland's tones sounded gruffly behind him, making Liam wince inwardly. He supposed that compared to his grandfather's eighty-two years just turned thirty must seem young, but he had never quite adjusted to the way the old man kept referring to him as 'my boy'.

'Nothing's wrong. She's just a little tired, that's all.'

'Tired?' Joshua's response was a blatant snort of disbelief and disapproval. 'Tired!'

The old man's watery blue eyes looked sceptical and the glance he turned in Peta's direction was frankly disapproving.

'Tired! At her age! Young people these days have no stamina! Why, when I was—'

Abruptly he came to a halt and Liam groaned inwardly as he saw the disapproval fade and a newly speculative expression take its place.

'Unless, of course… Do you have something to tell me?'

Ruthlessly Liam squashed down the angry retort that rose to his lips. Telling his grandfather that it was none of his business was not the way to handle this, even if it was the reply he most wanted to give. Joshua's obsession with the Hewland line, the inheritance of the great house and the acres of land that went with it, was positively feudal. It was something that Liam normally respected, something he partly shared, but right now it touched on a very uncomfortable spot indeed and was not something he wanted to talk about, particularly not in such a public place.

'When and if we do have "something to tell you",' he declared stiffly, 'we'll tell you in our own good time and not before.'

His grandfather wasn't pleased. The way the thin old mouth clamped into a tight, hard line made that only too clear. That and the way his bristling white brows drew together in a disapproving frown.

'Well, don't mess about with this, lad!' he ordered brusquely. 'I'm not getting any younger and I don't have many years to waste waiting for you to provide me with an heir.'

'Don't you mean a legitimate heir?' Liam snapped back, anger flaring almost out of control.

It had been impossible to come to terms with the way that his grandfather had never fully accepted him, and when the old man harped on about having an heir to Hewland Hall it simply drummed home the way that Joshua was prepared to dismiss the fact that he had once had a daughter. Liam's mother. But Anna Hewland had offended her father's old-fashioned principles by having a baby and not even staying with, never mind marrying, the father.

'At least this child will be born into a legal marriage,' Joshua returned coldly. 'Though of course that wouldn't matter if only your mother had had a child by the man who had the decency to put a ring on her finger.'

'But she didn't,' Liam growled. 'And so you're stuck with me.'

As his stepfather had been, he reflected bitterly, recalling just how plain his mother's husband had made it that he resented having to support Anna's bastard child while she'd given him none of his own. Nigel Hastings had made his stepson's life a misery from the moment he had married Liam's mother, doting openly on the son and daughter he had brought with him from his first marriage and making sure that Anna's child had felt very much lower than second-best.

'Believe me, Grandfather, I want a child from this marriage every bit as much as you do.'

More, perhaps. As a lonely, unwanted adolescent he had escaped into dreams of his own home, his own family, a baby that was truly his. When his turn came to be a parent, he had vowed to himself, he would be the best father he could possibly be, erasing all the emptiness of the past in the warmth of his relationship with his child.

'I want to hold my great-grandchild in my arms before I die,' the old man stated flatly. 'What's so wrong with that? What're you doing, lad? Firing blanks?'

Hell!

It was meant to be below the belt, he knew that. But the fact that it hit home with more cruelty than Joshua had been aiming for was solely down to the thoughts that had been running through Liam's head for weeks. The private fears that had nagged at him in his lowest moments.

Clamping his mouth tight shut, he bit back the savage retort that almost escaped him, concentrating fiercely on pouring himself and Peta a glass of wine and adding them to the tray on which he had already placed the plates of food.

'I'm working on it,' he growled furiously when he felt able to speak without exploding. 'Believe me, if I have anything to do with it you'll have that great-grandchild of yours by this time next year.'

He'd almost given himself away there, he thought cynically, cursing the display of temper that had somehow escaped even his ruthless control. It had alerted his grandfather's suspicions. He could almost feel the old man's gaze burning between his shoulders as he made his way across the room to where Peta sat.

She did look rather washed out, he thought. Unusually pale, and, now that he studied her more closely, there were faint shadows under the beautiful eyes. Shadows that the skilful application of make-up hadn't quite concealed.

Under the elegant jacket and shirt his heart gave a sudden jolt, thudding against his ribs as a sudden suspicion slid into his head. Was it possible…?

'What did your grandfather want?' was her first question, as he had known it must be. But at least this time he was prepared. He'd been imagining things earlier, he told himself privately. There couldn't be anything wrong. He didn't feel as if there was anything wrong. And, if he'd read the signs right, then maybe Peta had news for him that would put all his concerns aside once and for all.

'Oh, just to congratulate us.'

He had himself almost back under control now. His tone was as even as he wanted, the smile he directed into her eyes apparently easy and without a care. He'd guessed her secret, he told himself. All he had to do was to give her the opportunity to tell him.

'Congratulate?'

Peta had reached for her glass of wine but now she paused with it lifted just partway from the tray.

Congratulate? Just the thought sent tremors of shock running through her. Had Liam said something that had made his grandfather think his dearest wish was coming true?

'On our anniversary, of course.' He said it lightly enough, but suddenly there was a new note in his voice, one that hadn't been there before—and one that she couldn't begin to interpret properly.

'He didn't look congratulatory—if anything he looked annoyed. Liam?' she tried again when he didn't answer her, instead reaching for a bread roll and breaking it open roughly. 'Was he angry about something?'

Somewhere she'd overstepped some invisible line, crossed a boundary that she didn't even know existed. Liam didn't say a word but a sudden stiffening of his long body, the way the strong fingers tightened, a disturbing change in his eyes, all communicated silently the fact that he didn't want to answer the question.

Which of course only made her all the more anxious for him to do so.

'What did he say?'

For the space of a couple of uneven heartbeats she thought that he wasn't going to respond, and all the nerves in her body stretched taut in tension at the fear of just what he wanted to hide from her. But then suddenly Liam shrugged dismissively and lifted his clouded green gaze to her face.

'Not angry,' he said carelessly, dropping the mutilated roll and reaching for his own glass in turn. 'It was more that he was disappointed that Steph and Tony beat us to it in the baby stakes.'

'Ohh!'

Hastily Peta put down the glass that she had lifted to her lips; suddenly knowing that she couldn't drink from it. Not now. Liam's words had made her throat close over abruptly. There was no way she could swallow anything without choking desperately.

'It means that much to him!'

'I told you he wants an heir for this place. But you knew that when you agreed to marry me.'

And it had all seemed so much easier then. So much less complicated. But she hadn't been thinking straight.

She hadn't been thinking at all.

They had both known from the start that her parents and Liam's grandfather had been matchmaking with a vengeance when they had arranged for the two of them to meet. Peta had been

away in America for five years, working in Seattle, and before that she had been at university, only coming home in the holidays. So she had only seen Liam once or twice, and then perhaps for a brief moment or two. The boy, and then the adolescent she had known vaguely, had grown into a dark and devastating man. One she had been instantly drawn to and one who, if it hadn't been for her parents' interference and manipulation, she would have been glad to get to know better.

'It was why he and your parents introduced us in the first place.'

Liam's tone of voice, the expression in his eyes, told her clearly that he too was thinking of the way they had met, the part their elders had played in getting them together.

'They weren't exactly subtle about it, were they?'

She aimed for airy lightness and missed it by a mile. It still stunned her to reflect on the way that, meaning to deliberately sabotage the matchmaking plan and go their own free way, they had in fact fallen in with exactly what the Lassiters and old Mr Hewland had wanted, though in the end for their own private reasons.

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