



Sara Craven

THE INNOCENT'S

One-Night

CONFESSION

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Sara Craven

The Innocent's One-Night Confession

«HarperCollins»

Craven S.

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«HarperCollins»,

One night with Zandor marked Alanna as his... Now he's returned—to claim her forever! Zandor awakened Alanna to an unknown sensuality! Overwhelmed by her response, she fled, never expecting to see him again. But when he shockingly reappears in her life Zandor's charisma reminds her of the heat they shared. And this time she can't run from the sizzling intensity of their connection...

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SARA CRAVEN was one of Mills & Boon's most long-standing authors. Sadly she passed away on November 15th 2017. She leaves a fantastic legacy, having sold over thirty million books around the world. She published her first novel, *Garden of Dreams*, in 1975 and wrote for Mills & Boon for over forty years. *The Innocent's One-Night Confession* is her ninety-third book.

Former journalist Sara balanced her impressive writing career with winning the 1997 series of the UK TV show *Mastermind*, and standing as Chairman of the Romance Novelists' Association from 2011 to 2013.

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For Leo, stern critic and amazing support.

Thank you for everything.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

‘SO, COME ON, BECKS. Tell all. What’s he like in bed?’

Alanna Beckett nearly choked on her mouthful of St Clements as she cast an apprehensive glance round the crowded wine bar.

‘Susie—for heaven’s sake, keep your voice down. And you can’t ask things like that.’

‘But I just did,’ said Susie, unruffled. ‘I have a thirst for information that even this very nice wine can’t satisfy. Think about it. I go to America for six whole weeks, leaving you alone in the flat and doing your usual imitation of a hermit crab. I come back terrified that you’ll have adopted a cat, started wearing cameo brooches and signed up for an evening class in crochet—and, instead, you’re on the brink of getting engaged. Hallelujah!’

‘No,’ Alanna protested. ‘I’m not. Nothing like it. He’s just invited me to his grandmother’s eightieth birthday party. That’s all.’

‘An important family do at the important family house in the country. That’s serious stuff, Becks. So, let’s have some details about—Gerald, is it?’

‘Gerard,’ said Alanna. ‘Gerard Harrington.’

‘Also known as Gerry?’

‘Not as far as I’m aware.’

‘Ah,’ Susie digested this. ‘Complete physical description, warts and all?’

Alanna sighed. ‘Just under six foot, good-looking, fair hair, blue eyes—and no warts.’

‘As far as you’re aware. How did you meet?’

‘He saved me from being run over by a bus.’

‘Good God,’ Susie said blankly. ‘Where—and how?’

‘Not far from Bazaar Vert in the King’s Road. I was thinking of something else and just—stepped off the pavement. He snatched me back.’

‘Well, God bless him for that.’ Susie stared at her. ‘That’s not like you, Becks. What on earth were you daydreaming about?’

Alanna shrugged. ‘I thought I’d seen someone I knew.’ She hesitated, thinking rapidly. ‘Lindsay Merton, as a matter of fact.’

‘Lindsay?’ Susie repeated, puzzled. ‘But she and her husband are living in Australia.’

‘And I’m sure they still are,’ Alanna returned brightly, cursing herself under her breath. ‘So I nearly got squished for nothing.’

‘What did Sir Galahad—aka Gerard—do then?’

‘Well, I was naturally a bit shaky, so he took me into Bazaar Vert and got the manageress to make me some very sweet tea.’ She shuddered. ‘I’d almost have preferred being run over.’

‘No you wouldn’t,’ Susie corrected briskly. ‘Think of the unfortunate bus driver. And how come your knight errant has so much influence with the snooty ladies in Bazaar Vert?’

‘Someone in his family—his cousin—owns the entire chain. Gerard is its managing director.’

‘Wow,’ said Susie. ‘Therefore earning megabucks and ecologically minded as a bonus. Darling, I’m seriously impressed. Don’t they say that if someone rescues you, then your life belongs to them for ever after?’

“‘They”, whoever they are, seem to say a lot of things, most of them plain silly,’ Alanna returned evenly. ‘And there’s no question of belonging—on either side. Or not yet, anyway.’ She shrugged. ‘We’re simply—getting acquainted. And this party is another step in the process.’

‘Seeing if Grandma bestows the gold seal of approval?’ Susie wrinkled her nose. ‘Don’t think I’d like that.’

‘Well, it can work both ways. Anyway, it’s a weekend in the country, so I intend to relax and just—go with the flow. Which will not carry me into sleeping with Gerard,’ she added. ‘In case you were wondering. It’s strictly separate bedrooms at Whitestone Abbey.’

Susie grinned. ‘With Vespers thrown in by the sound of it. But he might know where to find a convenient haystack.’ She raised her glass. ‘To you, my proud beauty. And may the weekend make all your dreams come true.’

Alanna smiled back and drank some more of her orange juice and bitter lemon. After all, she told herself, it might even happen.

And perhaps she could, at long last, dismiss her secret nightmare to well-deserved oblivion. Begin to live her life to the full without being crucified by memories of the private shame which had turned her into a self-appointed recluse.

Everyone made mistakes and it was ludicrous to have taken her own lapse so seriously. Even if it had been totally out of character, there’d certainly been no need to continue beating herself up about it, allowing it to poison her existence for month after dreary month.

‘But why?’ Susie had wailed so often. ‘It’s party time so forget your authors and their damned manuscripts for one evening and come with me. Everyone would be thrilled to see you. They ask about you all the time.’

And, invariably, her mind flinching, she’d used the excuse of work—deadlines—an increased list—and the very real talk of a possible takeover, to be followed, almost inevitably, by redundancies.

Explained, perfectly reasonably, that, to make sure of her job, she needed to put her heart and soul into her work. Which wasn't any real hardship because she loved it.

And, as reinforcement, she'd created this new office persona, quiet, dedicated and politely aloof. Confined her cloud of dark auburn hair in a silver clasp at the nape of her neck. Stopped enhancing her green eyes and long lashes with shadow and mascara, restricting her use of cosmetics to a touch of lipstick so discreet it was almost invisible.

And only she knew the reason for adopting this deliberate camouflage. She hadn't even told Susie, best friend from school days and now flatmate, who'd provided her joyfully with the refuge she needed from her solitary bedsit, and was now equally delighted to welcome her apparent renaissance.

Not that she planned to abandon her current version of herself. She'd become used to it, telling herself that safe was far better than sorry. Not, of course, that she'd ever gone in for fashion's extremes or painted her face in stripes.

And Gerard seemed to like her the way she was, although she could, maybe, move up a gear without too much shock to his system.

Depending, she thought, on how things went at his grandmother's party.

The invitation had surprised her. Gerard was undeniably charming and attentive, but their relationship so far could quite definitely be characterised as restrained. Not that she had any objections to this. Quite the contrary, in fact.

She'd only agreed to have dinner with him on that first occasion because he'd put himself at risk to save her from serious injury at the very least, and it would have seemed churlish to refuse.

And, almost tentatively, she'd found herself relaxing and starting to enjoy a pleasant and undemanding evening in his company. It had been their third date before he'd kissed her goodnight—a light, unthreatening brush of his lips on hers.

Not, as Susie put it, a martini kiss. She'd been, to her relief, neither shaken nor stirred. At the same time, it was reassuring to reflect that she'd have no real objection to him kissing her again. And, when he did, to realise that she was beginning, warily, to find it enjoyable.

'We're going steady,' she'd told herself, faintly amused at the idea of an old-fashioned courtship, but thankful at the same time. 'And this time,' she'd added fervently, 'I'll get it right.'

All the same, she was aware that the coming weekend at Whitestone Abbey could prove a turning point in their relationship which she might not be ready for.

On the other hand, refusing the invitation might be an even bigger mistake.

On the strength of that, she'd spent a chunk of her savings on a dress, the lovely colour of a misty sea, slim-fitting and ankle length in alternating bands of silk and lace, demure enough, she thought, to please the most exacting grandmother, yet also subtly enhancing her slender curves in a way that Gerard might appreciate.

And which would take her through Saturday's cocktail party for friends and neighbours to the formal family dinner later in the evening.

'I hope you won't find it too dull,' Gerard said, adding ruefully, 'There was a time when Grandam would have danced the night away, but I think she's started to feel her age.'

'Grandam?' Alanna was intrigued. 'That has a wonderfully old-fashioned ring about it.'

He pulled a face. 'Actually, it was an accident. When I was away at school for the first time, she sent me a food parcel and when I wrote to thank her, I mixed up the last two letters of Grandma and it stuck.'

'Whatever,' she said. 'I think it's charming.'

'Well, don't think in terms of lavender and lace,' he said. 'She still goes out on her horse each day before breakfast, summer and winter.' He paused. 'Do you ride?'

'I did,' she said. 'Up to the time I left home to go to university and my parents decided to downsize to a cottage with a manageable garden, instead of a paddock with stabling.'

‘Bring some boots,’ he said, his surprised smile widening into a grin. ‘We can fix you up with a hat and I’ll give you a proper tour of the area.’

Alanna smiled back. ‘That will be marvellous,’ she said, and meant it in spite of a growing conviction that the soon-to-be eighty-year-old Niamh Harrington was one formidable lady.

And then, of course, there was the rest of the family.

‘Gerard’s mother is a widow and his late father was Mrs Harrington’s eldest child and only son,’ she told Susie over a Thai takeaway at the flat that evening.

She counted on her fingers. ‘Then there’s his Aunt Caroline and Uncle Richard with their son and his wife, plus his Aunt Diana, her husband Maurice and their two daughters, one married, one single.’

‘My God,’ Susie said limply. ‘I hope for your sake they wear name tags. Children?’

Alanna speared a prawn. ‘Yes, but strictly with attendant nannies. I get the impression that Mrs Harrington doesn’t approve of modern child-rearing methods.’

She added, ‘She also had a third daughter, her youngest, called Marianne, but she and her husband are both dead, and their son apparently is not expected to attend the festivities.’

‘Just as well,’ said Susie. ‘Sounds as if it will be standing room only as it is.’ She paused. ‘Is it this Marianne’s son who owns Bazaar Vert?’

Alanna shrugged. ‘I guess so. Gerard hasn’t said much about him.’ She picked up a foil dish. ‘Share the rest of the sticky rice?’

‘Willingly,’ said Susie. ‘But I’m glad to be missing out on the sticky weekend,’ she added thoughtfully.

The stickiness, in fact, began early at the Friday morning acquisitions meeting.

Alanna walked from it into her cubbyhole of an office, kicked the door shut behind her and swore.

‘Oh, Hetty,’ she said quietly. ‘Where are you when I need you?’

Well, on maternity leave was the answer to that, which was why Alanna had been temporarily promoted to head up romantic fiction at Hawkseye Publishing during her boss’s absence.

Initially, she’d been thrilled at the opportunity, but now the rose-tinted spectacles were off and she realised she was in a war zone, the opposing foe being Louis Foster who produced the men’s fiction list, mainly slanted towards the ‘blood and guts’ school of thought, but also including some literary names. And others, as Alanna had just found out.

She had gone to the meeting to sell a new author with a fresh voice and innovative approach, who was her own discovery.

She had spoken enthusiastically and persuasively about acquiring this burgeoning talent for the Hawkseye stable, only to find herself blocked by Louis’s suave determination.

He could not, he said, having studied the figures, recommend such a high-risk investment in a total unknown.

‘Especially,’ he added, ‘as Jeffrey Winton told me over lunch the other day that he was very keen to extend his range, and what he was suggesting sounds very similar to what this young lady of Alanna’s is offering. And, of course, we’d have the Maisie McIntyre name which sells itself.’

Jeffrey Winton, thought Alanna, her toes curling inside her shoes, the bestselling creator, under a female pseudonym, of village sagas so sweet they made her teeth ache.

Also Hetty’s author, so what the hell was he doing being wined and dined by Louis, let alone discussing future projects?

Not that she wanted to go within a mile of him, she thought, recoiling from the memory of her one and only encounter with the rotund, twinkling author of *Love at the Forge* and *Inn of Contentment*. And, even worse, what had followed...

Everything she had done her best to erase from her consciousness was now suddenly confronting her again in every detail, rendering her momentarily numb.

And while she was still faltering, Louis's powers of persuasion convinced the others round the table and she was faced with telling an author she believed in that there was no contract in the offing after all. Adding to her bitter disappointment twin blows to her negotiating skills and her pride.

And possibly moving Louis a definite step towards his ultimate goal of uniting men's and women's commercial fiction under his leadership.

All this, she thought wearily, and, in a few hours, her first encounter with the extended Harrington family, for which she probably needed all the confidence she could get.

She looked at her weekend case waiting in the corner, holding jeans and boots, together with the expensive tissue-wrapped dress and the hand-crafted silver photograph frame she'd chosen as her hostess's birthday present.

For a moment she considered assuming the role of victim of a forty-eight-hour mystery virus, then dismissed it.

Having let her author down, she would not do the same to Gerard, mainly because she sensed he was anxious about the weekend too.

I must make sure it all goes well for his sake, she thought. And for the possibility of a future together—if and when liking grows into love.

A cautious beginning to a happy ending. The way it ought to be.

That was what she needed. Not a passionate tumultuous descent to guilt and the risk of disaster. That, like all other bad memories, must be locked—sealed away to await well-deserved oblivion.

Which would come, in spite of the recent unwanted reminder, she assured herself. It had to...

* * *

It was an uneventful journey, Gerard handling his supremely comfortable Mercedes with finesse while he chatted about the abbey and its turbulent history.

'It's said that the family who acquired it in Tudor times bribed the King's officials to turn the monks out and the abbot cursed them,' he said ruefully.

'Whether that's true or not, they certainly fell on hard times in later years, largely due to the drink and gambling problems of a succession of eldest sons, so my great-great-grandfather Augustus Harrington got it quite cheaply.

'Also being eminently respectable and hard-working, the restoration of Whitestone was his idea of recreation.'

'Is much of the original building left?' Alanna asked.

'Very little, apart from the cloisters. The Tudor lot simply pulled the whole thing down and started again.'

'Vandals.' She smiled at him. 'I suppose upkeep is an ongoing process.'

He was silent for a moment. 'Yes,' he said. 'Very much so. Maybe that's the real meaning of the abbot's curse. He said it would be a millstone round the owners' necks for evermore.'

'I don't think I believe in curses,' said Alanna. 'Anyway, even a millstone must be worth it—when it's such a piece of history.'

'I certainly believe that.' He spoke with a touch of bleakness. 'But that isn't a universal view. However you must judge for yourself.' He accelerated a little. 'We're nearly there.'

And he was right. As they crested the next hill, Alanna saw the solid mass of pale stone which was the abbey cradled in the valley below, its tall chimneys rearing towards the sky and the mullioned windows glinting in the early evening sunlight.

From either side of the main structure, two narrow wings jutted out, enclosing a large forecourt where a number of cars were already parked.

Like arms opening in welcome? Alanna wondered. Well, she would soon find out.

Gerard slotted the Merc between a Jaguar and an Audi, just to the right of the shallow stone steps leading up to the front entrance. As she waited for him to retrieve their luggage from the boot,

Alanna saw that the heavily timbered door was opening, and that a grey-haired woman in a smart red dress had appeared, shading her eyes as she watched their approach.

‘So there you are,’ she said with something of a snap. She turned to the tall man who had followed her out. ‘Richard, go and tell Mother that Gerard has arrived at last.’

‘And good evening to you too, Aunt Caroline.’ Gerard’s smile was courteous. ‘Don’t worry, Uncle Rich. I can announce us.’

‘But you were expected over an hour ago.’ His aunt pursed her lips as she led the way into an impressive wainscoted hall. ‘I’ve no idea how this will affect the timing of dinner.’

‘I imagine it will be served exactly when Grandam ordered, just as usual,’ Gerard returned, unruffled. ‘Now, let me introduce Alanna Beckett to you. Darling—my aunt and uncle, Mr and Mrs Healey.’

Slightly thrown by the unexpected endearment, Alanna shook hands and murmured politely.

‘Everyone is waiting in the drawing room,’ said Mrs Healey. ‘Leave your case there, Miss—er—Beckett. The housekeeper will take it up to your room.’ She turned to Gerard. ‘We’ve had to make a last change to the arrangements, so your guest is now in the east wing, just along from Joanne.’ She gave Alanna a dubious look. ‘I’m afraid you’ll have to share a bathroom.’

‘I’m used to it.’ Alanna tried a pleasant smile. ‘I share a flat in London.’

Mrs Healey absorbed the information without comment and returned to Gerard. ‘Now do come along. You know how your grandmother hates to be kept waiting.’

It occurred to Alanna as she followed in Mrs Healey’s wake that she wasn’t really ready for this. That she would have preferred to accompany her case upstairs and freshen up before entering the presence of the Harrington matriarch.

Or—preferably—return to London, on foot if necessary.

Gerard bent towards her. ‘Don’t worry about Aunt Caroline,’ he whispered. ‘Since my mother went off to live in Suffolk, she’s been taking her role as daughter of the house rather too seriously.’

She forced a smile. ‘She made me wonder if I should curtsy.’

He took her hand. ‘You’ll be fine, I promise you.’

She found herself in a long, low-ceilinged room with a vast stone fireplace at one end, big enough, she supposed, to roast an ox, if anyone had an urge to do so.

The furnishings, mainly large squashy sofas and deep armchairs, all upholstered in faded chintz, made no claim to be shabby chic. Like the elderly rugs on the dark oak floorboards and the green damask curtains that framed the wide French windows, they were just—shabby.

A real home, she acknowledged with relief, and full of people, all of whom had, rather disturbingly, fallen silent as soon as she and Gerard walked in.

Feeling desperately self-conscious, she wished they’d start chatting again, if only to muffle the sound of her heels on the wooden floor, and disguise the fact that they were staring at her as Gerard steered her across the room towards his grandmother.

She’d anticipated an older version of Mrs Healey, a forbidding presence enthroned at a slight distance from her obedient family, and was bracing herself accordingly.

But Niamh Harrington was small and plump with bright blue eyes, pink cheeks and a quantity of snowy hair arranged on top of her head like a cottage loaf in danger of collapse.

She was seated in the middle of the largest sofa, facing the open windows, still talking animatedly to the blonde girl beside her, but she broke off at Gerard’s approach.

‘Dearest boy.’ She lifted a smiling face for his kiss. ‘So, this is your lovely girl.’

The twinkling gaze swept over Alanna in an assessment as shrewd as it was comprehensive, and, for a moment, she had an absurd impulse to step back, as if getting out of range.

Then Mrs Harrington’s smile widened. ‘Well, isn’t this just grand. Welcome to Whitestone, my dear.’

The distinct Irish accent was something else Alanna hadn't expected although she supposed 'Niamh' should have supplied a clue.

She pulled herself together. 'Thank you for inviting me, Mrs Harrington. You—you have a very beautiful home.'

Oh, God, she thought. Did that sound as if she was sizing the place up for future occupancy? And had Gerard warned his grandmother that they'd only been dating for a few weeks rather than months.

Mrs Harrington made a deprecating gesture with a heavily be-ringed hand. 'Ah, well, it's seen better days.' She turned to the girl beside her. 'Move up, Joanne darling and let—Alanna, is it?—sit beside me while she tells me all about herself.'

Gerard was looking round. 'I don't see my mother.'

'Poor Meg's upstairs having a bit of a lie down. I expect she found the journey from Suffolk a great burden to her as I always feared she would.' Mrs Harrington sighed deeply. 'Leave her be for now, dearest boy, and I'm sure she'll be fine, just fine by dinner.'

Alanna saw Gerard's mouth tighten, but he said nothing as he turned away.

'So,' said Mrs Harrington. 'My grandson tells me you're a publisher.'

'An editor in women's commercial fiction.' Alanna knew how stilted that must sound.

'Now that's a job I envy you for. There's nothing I love more than a book. A good story with plenty of meat in it and not too sentimental. Maybe, now, you could suggest a few titles that I'd enjoy.'

'Can you recommend a book for an elderly lady who loves reading?'

Almost the same request she'd heard in a London bookshop nearly a year ago, but spoken then in a man's deep drawl. And the start of the nightmare she needed so badly to forget, she thought, trying to repress an instinctive shiver.

Which was noticed. 'You're feeling cold and no wonder, now the evening breeze has got up.' Niamh Harrington raised her voice. 'Will you come in now, Zandor? And close those windows behind you, for the Lord's sake. There's a terrible draught, and we can't have Gerard's guest catching her death because you're wandering about on the terrace.'

Alanna found she was freezing in reality. She stared down at her hands, clasped so tightly in her lap that the knuckles were turning white.

'Zandor,' she repeated under her breath in total incredulity. *Zandor?*

No, it couldn't be. Not possibly. She was nervous so she'd misheard. That's all it was.

'I apologise, Grandmother. To you and my cousin's beautiful friend. We must all take care that no harm comes to her.'

Not just the name, she thought dazedly. But the voice—low-pitched and tinged with that same note of faint amusement. Instantly and hideously recognisable. Shockingly, horribly unmistakable.

As, God help her, she must be to him.

She forced herself to look up and meet the gaze of the tall figure, dark against the setting sun, framed in the French windows.

The man from whose bedroom she'd fled all those months ago, leaving her with memories that had haunted her ever since.

And for the worst of all possible reasons.

CHAPTER TWO

HE CLOSED THE French windows behind him with elaborate care and strolled forward, broad-shouldered, lean-hipped, long-legged in close-fitting black pants, his matching shirt casually unbuttoned halfway to the waist, affording Alanna an unwanted view of his bronze chest, and an even more disturbing reminder that, when she'd left his bed at their previous encounter, he'd been wearing no clothes at all.

He said softly, 'Perhaps we should properly introduce ourselves. I am Zandor.' He paused. 'Zandor Varga, and you are...?'

She produced a voice from somewhere. A husky travesty of her usual clear tones. 'Alanna,' she said, and swallowed. 'Alanna Beckett.'

He nodded, those astonishing, never forgotten pale grey eyes studying her, hard as burnished steel.

'It is a delight to meet you, Miss Beckett...' He paused, and she swallowed, waiting for him to say 'again' and for the questions to begin.

His faint smile told her he had read her thoughts. He said silkily, 'But then my cousin Gerard has always had exquisite taste.' And turned away.

She felt limp with relief, but knew that was only transitory. That she was by no means off the hook.

And that the day which had started badly had just got a hundred—a thousand times worse.

She realised now that it hadn't been her imagination playing tricks that day in Chelsea. That as the owner of the Bazaar Vert chain, he'd been visiting the King's Road branch and must have just left when she caught that brief but dangerous glimpse of him. And that Gerard had been seeing him off the premises when he came to her rescue.

It was also apparent, from Gerard's passing remarks and his aunt's irritable comment about last minute changes, that Zandor had indeed not been expected at the birthday celebrations.

Oh, God, she thought, panic clawing at her. If only he'd stayed away...

And wondered why he'd changed his mind.

But even so, they'd have been bound to meet eventually, that is if she went on seeing Gerard. And how could she—under the circumstances? When that night with Zandor would always be there, a time bomb lethally ticking its way down to disaster.

Because the way he'd looked at her had told her quite plainly that he was not simply going to let bygones be bygones.

Presumably her hasty and unheralded departure had offended his masculine pride. That he was usually the one to walk away. Well, tough. She owed him nothing, as she would make clear when the time inevitably came.

However, Mrs Harrington could not have detected anything amiss in the recent exchange as her lilting tones had reverted to the subject of books.

'*Middlemarch*, now,' she was saying. 'Did you ever read that? A wonderful book, but what a fool young Dorothea to be marrying that dried-up stick of a man. And then leaping out of the frying pan into the fire with the other fellow.' She snorted. 'A ne'er do well, if ever there was one. And what in the world is it that draws a decent girl to the likes of them?'

Somehow, Alanna managed a smile. 'I've no idea. But it's still a great novel.'

As I told your grandson who bought it for you around this time last year...

She was grateful when they were interrupted by Mrs Healey.

'Isn't it time we all got ready for dinner, Mama? I know we're not actually *dressing* tonight, but I'm sure Miss Becket, for one, would like to tidy herself,' she added with a look suggesting that Alanna had recently been dragged through a hedge backwards. 'Joanne can show her to her room.'

Alanna found her hand being patted. 'I have to let you go, dear girl,' said Niamh Harrington. 'But there'll be plenty of time for another grand chat.'

Joanne turned out to be the blonde who'd been sitting beside her grandmother, not just pretty but clearly disposed to be friendly.

'Rather you than me for the cosy chats,' she confided as they went upstairs. 'Grandam has a way of asking questions when she already knows the answers. But that won't happen with you.'

Oh, God, I hope not, thought Alanna, her heart sinking.

'And you know about literature,' Joanne went on. 'It's as much as I can do to get through *Hello!* in the hairdresser's, and Kate's as bad, although she can use Mark and the baby as an excuse for being too busy to read.'

At the top of the impressive stone staircase, she turned left. 'We're down here—spinsters' alley, I suppose, although you don't really qualify as you and Gerard are an item.'

'It's a bit early to call it that,' Alanna said carefully. 'We've only been going out together for a few weeks.'

'But he's brought you here. Exposed you to the entire Harrington onslaught.' Joanne giggled, naughtily. 'I bet Grandam gave you the full once-over, checking for childbearing hips. Her father owned a stud farm in Tipperary, and she practically claims to be descended from Brian Boru, so she'll want to know all about your family—suitable blood lines and all that. No dodgy branches on the family tree.'

Alanna gasped. 'You are joking.'

'Not altogether.' Joanne pulled a face. 'She does take the whole thing horribly seriously, and I've never had a boyfriend I've dared bring here in case he turns out to be spavined or sway-backed or something equally ghastly.'

She opened a door. 'Well, this is you. I hope you'll be comfortable,' she added dubiously. 'The bathroom's between us. It's only small, because it used to be a powdering room for people's wigs, but the water's always boiling, and there's a door into the bedrooms on each side which we can bolt, so no need to sing loudly during occupancy.'

She looked at her watch. 'I'll be back to collect you in forty minutes. Will that do?'

Alanna could only nod.

Left alone, she sank down on to the edge of a rather hard mattress on a three-quarter-size bed, and looked around her. It was an old-fashioned room with a narrow window, and made even darker by cumbersome furniture dating from the beginning of the previous century, and wallpaper covered in flamboyant cabbage roses in a shade of pink Nature had overlooked.

Her bag had been placed on the foot of the bed, so she unfastened it and extracted tomorrow evening's dress, removing its tissue paper wrapping before hanging it in the cavernous wardrobe.

Joanne, she decided, was undoubtedly indiscreet as well as cheerful, and she would probably need to be on her guard. But the other girl could be a valuable source of information and a few casual questions could do no harm.

Because it was clear that Niamh Harrington's other grandson, whose arrival for her birthday party had caused such a disturbance to the arrangements as well as destroying her own peace of mind, was also something of an outsider.

Her first instinct was, once again, to run. To invent some work-related emergency involving an imperative summons back to London. But that would, quite correctly, lead Zandor Varga to suppose she was scared of him, and what was left of her pride forbade it.

Besides, the Harrington family *en masse* now seemed more of an advantage than a problem. By the time she'd done the rounds and met them all, it should be perfectly possible to lose herself among them, thus avoiding any further contact with Zandor.

And, of course, Gerard would be her shield too, she told herself, wondering why that was an afterthought.

Her immediate dilemma was what to wear that evening. She'd brought a dress, of course, a black, knee-length linen shift. It wasn't the one she'd been wearing when she first met Zandor—that had been consigned to the dustbin the following day—but it bore far too distinct a resemblance to the other for her comfort. On the other hand, she felt hot and sticky in the clothes she'd travelled in, and her skirt was badly creased.

I'll just have to bite on the bullet, she thought. Brazen the situation out. Let him think what he likes.

Her decision made, she took a quick refreshing bath in the deep, old-fashioned tub, then dressed swiftly and brushed her hair till it shone. She clasped a necklace composed of flat silver discs round her throat adding a matching bracelet to her wrist.

She disguised her unwelcome pallor with a discreet use of blusher and masked the strained lines of her mouth with a brownish-pink lipstick.

She reached for her scent spray, then hesitated. She only ever wore one perfume—Azalea, from the distinctive Earth Scents range by Lizbeth Lane, a new young designer whose workshop she'd visited with Susie when she first arrived in London.

And that was something he would definitely recognise—if he got close enough, she thought, sudden heat pervading her body as she returned the atomiser to her makeup purse.

She was trying to calm herself with some Yoga-style breathing when Joanne tapped on her door.

'Ready for the lions' den?' she asked cheerfully.

'You certainly look great. Your hair is the most amazing colour—rather like Gran's antique mahogany dining table. Granny Dennison, I mean, not Grandam.'

'You call her that too?'

'We all do,' Joanne said as they walked to the stairs. 'Except Zan, of course. He sticks to the formal Grandmother when he visits—which isn't that often.'

She sighed. 'None of us knew he was coming this time either. I suppose it's about money again, which means the usual row. And unfair, I think, to put her in a bade on her birthday weekend. On the other hand, I guess we must be thankful he didn't bring Lili.'

She encountered Alanna's questioning look and flushed scarlet. 'Oh, hell, me and my big mouth. Look, just forget I mentioned her—please.'

'Forgotten,' Alanna assured her over-brightly, reflecting she'd been entirely accurate about Joanne's talent for indiscretion.

But it was interesting that the dynamic, all-conquering Mr Varga needed money, suggesting that Bazaar Vert might be feeling the economic crunch along with other high-profile businesses.

Gerard had mentioned nothing about any downward turn, but she could hardly expect that he would, any more than she'd confessed to him her fears about the takeover at Hawkseye, now said to be looming. They weren't on those sorts of terms.

And now they never would be, which might be disappointing, but hardly the end of the world.

It would have been far worse if she and Gerard had become seriously involved before she discovered his cousin's identity.

It occurred to her that earlier there'd been a tension between the pair of them that was almost palpable, so perhaps the financial difficulties were all too real.

However, that was none of her business, and in forty-eight hours it would all be over anyway. And she'd be free to get on with the rest of her life.

And there was no need to wonder about Lili. She would simply be Zandor's latest choice to share his bed. And welcome to him.

Even if his trading figures were down, his rapid turnover in willing women would undoubtedly be continuing unabated. It was probably only his grandmother's strict embargo on extra-marital sex that had prevented him from bringing her as his guest.

And why the hell am I sparing the situation even a moment's thought anyway? Alanna asked herself savagely as they reached the drawing room.

Although she knew the answer to that. Zandor's re-emergence into her life had thrown her completely. She felt as if she'd gone sailing on a calm lake, under a blue sky, only to find herself helpless and at the mercy of a squall that had come out of nowhere.

Oh, get a grip, she thought with sudden impatience.

Certainly Zandor had not been pleased when they met earlier, but maybe her own sense of shock had made her read too much into his reaction. By now, he'd surely have had time to think. To realise their previous encounter had been a long time ago, and that they had both moved on.

At least that was how she planned to handle things from now on, until the weekend was safely over. And, hopefully, for ever after.

‘So there you are, sweetheart.’ Gerard came to meet her and, drawing her towards him, gave her a long, lingering kiss on her astonished mouth.

As he raised his head Alanna stepped back, aware that she was blushing, not with pleasure but with embarrassment and more than a touch of anger at this second demonstration of totally uncharacteristic behaviour.

The words ‘What on earth...?’ were already forming when she looked past him and saw, a few yards away, Zandor watching them, silver eyes glittering in a face that looked as if it had been hacked from dark stone.

And instantly she swallowed the tart query, tossing back her hair and forcing her lips into the semblance of a flirtatious smile instead, aware as she did so that Zandor was turning abruptly and walking away.

Now do your worst, she sent after him in silent defiance.

Gerard took her hand. ‘Come and say hello to my mother,’ he invited.

‘Is she feeling better?’ Alanna’s tone was stilted, conscious as they crossed the room that covert glances and shrugs were being exchanged as if Gerard’s family were as surprised by the kiss as herself.

‘There was never anything the matter with her.’ Gerard’s smile was rueful. ‘She and Grandam have always had something of an edgy relationship, so she finds headaches useful.’

‘Oh,’ was the only reply Alanna could conjure up. It occurred to her that Whitestone Abbey seemed to harbour all kinds of other tensions at various levels.

A pleasant weekend in the country? she thought drily. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

Meg Harrington was ensconced in an armchair, slim and elegant in white silk trousers and a loose shirt in shades of blue, rust and gold. Her fair hair, skilfully highlighted, was cut in a smooth, expensive bob, and her makeup was flawless.

She gave Alanna a polite, faintly puzzled smile as Gerard performed the introduction, then picked up an empty highball glass from the table beside her chair and held it out to him. ‘Get me a refill, would you, honey?’

‘I didn’t know my son was bringing a friend,’ Mrs Harrington said as he departed on his errand. ‘Have you known each other long, Miss—er—Beckett?’

Saying, ‘Oh, call me Alanna, please,’ seemed strangely inappropriate, so she contented herself with, ‘Just a few weeks, actually.’

The other woman’s brows lifted. ‘And you agreed to accompany him here? How incredibly brave of you.’

Alanna shrugged. ‘I’m an only child, so I find a large family gathering like this tremendously appealing.’ She paused, hoping the lie didn’t sound as ridiculous as it felt, then aimed for something approaching the truth. ‘Gerard’s grandmother has been very welcoming.’

Meg Harrington said drily, ‘I don’t doubt it.’

‘And the house is amazing,’ Alanna added with spurious brightness. ‘Such an interesting history.’

‘A white elephant,’ said Gerard’s mother. ‘In the last stages of decay. I couldn’t wait to leave. And here comes my drink.’

But not brought by Gerard.

‘Drowning your sorrows, Aunt Meg?’ Zandor enquired pleasantly as he handed her the glass.

‘Anaesthetising them, certainly. And wondering what other surprises are in store.’ She paused. ‘I presume you’re here alone?’

His mouth tightened. ‘Of course. And for business rather than pleasure.’

‘Nothing new there then. I wish you luck.’ She raised her glass. ‘Cheers. Now why don’t you get a drink for Gerard’s new friend, here.’ She sounded amused. ‘The poor child looks as if she needs one.’

‘No,’ Alanna said quickly. ‘Thank you. I’m fine—really.’

She turned and walked away, only to find Zandor at her side and keeping pace with her.

He said softly, 'Running away again, Alanna?'

She stared rigidly ahead of her, angrily aware that her heartbeat had quickened and she was blushing. 'Just looking for Gerard, as it happens.'

'And hoping for another loving reunion, no doubt.' He sounded faintly amused. 'However, he's been summoned to the book room to have a private word with Grandmother Niamh. They won't wish to be interrupted.' He paused. 'So why don't I get us both a drink and take them on to the terrace for our own quiet chat? I think we should have one, don't you?'

She took a deep breath. 'On the contrary, we have nothing to discuss,' she said icily. 'And I don't drink any more—at least not alcohol. I'm sure I don't have to explain my reasons.'

He said slowly, 'Actually, yes, I think you do. That is if it relates in some way to our previous encounter. If you're implying you ended up in bed with me because you were drunk.'

'Good guess.' She clenched her shaking hands into fists at her sides. 'And my first mistake. Fortunately not fatal.'

'Hardly,' he said. 'After a couple of glasses of champagne. I'd have called it—pleasantly relaxing.'

'I'm sure you would.' She added tautly, 'And that's all I have to say, so now, please, leave me alone.'

'Just as you left me?' His tone bit. 'But I have done so, my sweet, for almost a year, and—do you know?—I have discovered that it no longer pleases me. Especially now that I have seen you again—and under such interesting circumstances.'

His smile did not reach his eyes. 'And before you think of another stinging retort, remember that this room is filled with people who believe we met for the first time today and might wonder why we are so soon on bad terms.'

'On the other hand,' she said. 'From what I gather, you seem to make a habit of upsetting people.'

He said quietly, 'Then, by all means, go on gathering. You may collect a few surprises on the way. But, understand this. One day—or night—we will have that chat. So be ready.'

And he walked away, leaving her standing there, those words 'be ready' beating in her brain, and drying her mouth.

She turned precipitately towards the door, impelled by a frantic need to be alone. To think...

Only to find herself being intercepted by Joanne.

'Has Zan been coming on to you?' Her tone was anxious. 'My God, he's the screaming limit. He must have women dotted all over the known world, and then some, so he has no right—no right at all.' She added earnestly, 'Honestly, Alanna, you don't want to believe a word he says.'

'Don't worry.' Joanne had just confirmed that she'd allowed herself to be used for a night's amusement by a serial womaniser, yet Alanna managed to summon a smile from somewhere. 'I won't.'

'Anyway,' Joanne added more buoyantly. 'You're Gerard's girl—right?'

Wrong, thought Alanna. The truth is I don't really know at this moment who I am or what I'm doing here, but the weight of opinion seems to tend towards past fool and present fraud. But for now...

She lifted her chin. 'Absolutely right,' she said clearly.

'And my parents are dying to meet you.' Joanne guided her across the room. 'But don't worry,' she added cheerfully. 'Mother and Aunt Caroline are chalk and cheese. You'd never think they were sisters.'

Mrs Dennison was a comfortably built lady whose greeting was as warm as her smile.

'Well, you've been thrown in at the deep end,' she said cheerfully, motioning Alanna to sit beside her. 'You're not seeing us at our best, I fear, but please don't blame Gerard. He wasn't to know how things would turn out.' She turned to her husband. 'And now it seems my mother's invited Tom Bradham tomorrow evening. Just asking for more trouble.'

Maurice Dennison shrugged. 'Something she thrives on, darling. So relax, and let Caroline fret about the seating arrangements.' He glanced at his watch. 'It's almost time for dinner, so I'd better detach Kate and Mark from the nursery and frogmarch them downstairs.'

'My mother,' said Diana Dennison, as he walked away, 'must be the only great-grandmother in the world who still believes that little children should be seen—briefly—but not heard. So they get to come down from the nursery once a day at teatime. Accordingly that's why their parents choose to spend the greater part of their time upstairs with them.'

She sighed. 'Mark's parents would have the boys like a shot, and they'd have a wonderful time on the farm, yet Mother always insists on them being brought here when she issues a family summons.' She shook her head. 'I can never understand why. She's never been fond of children—not even her own if memory serves,' she added drily.

She gave Alanna another smile. 'I've shocked you, haven't I? But Gerard won't mind you knowing how things are.'

More information, Alanna thought, that I could well do without.

She said carefully, 'I think I should make it clear that I haven't actually known Gerard for very long.'

Mrs Dennison shrugged. 'He can't be too concerned about that, or he wouldn't have invited you,' she returned calmly. 'And I'm delighted he did. I intend to tell my nephew that he's a fool if he lets you slip away.'

Alanna was agonised. 'Mrs Dennison—please...'

The older woman sighed again. 'I'm sorry, but I'm fond of Gerard and I want to see him happy again. However, if it means so much to you, I won't say a word.' Her smile was suddenly mischievous. 'Let nature take its course.'

Not, thought Alanna, a course of action with any appeal for me.

Mrs Dennison paused. 'And here comes my sister, looking rattled. I suppose that means that Mother is now waiting for us all in the dining room, tapping her foot impatiently. Let's not keep her waiting any longer.'

It was a long and leisurely meal which turned out to be less of a nightmare than Alanna expected. For one thing, the food was excellent and, for another, she found herself sitting at the far end of the table, a long way from Gerard and, thankfully, even further from Zandor.

Her immediate neighbours were Desmond Healey, a quiet, humorous replica of his father, and his pretty wife, both of them drama buffs. And, for a while, she managed to lose herself in a light-hearted argument about TV *noir* and if the Scandinavians still led the field or had been overtaken by the French and Italians.

When the meal was over, it was late enough for her to be able to excuse herself politely from the return to the drawing room, a swift glance having assured her that Zandor was nowhere to be seen, claiming mendaciously that coffee kept her awake but adding truthfully it had been a very long day.

She'd noticed that Niamh Harrington was also missing and that Gerard had disappeared again too, presumably to continue their earlier conference, so she was able to escape up to her room without any further unwonted and public demonstrations of affection from him.

No wonder people were thinking their relationship was a done deal, she thought, closing her door and, for reasons she was unable to explain, turning its heavy key in the old-fashioned lock.

She found Mrs Dennison's comment about wishing to see Gerard 'happy again' buzzing in her brain as she got ready for bed.

I've never seen any sign that he's been miserable, she mused, with an inward shrug. Although perhaps having to work for his cousin might be getting him down, which raised the question why he'd accepted a job in the first place from someone who was clearly *persona non grata* with the rest of the family.

It's beyond me, she decided as she switched off the lamp. And also not my problem. Not that it ever was or ever would be.

She drew back the curtains to admit the moonlight, and tried to get comfortable on a mattress that she discovered was lumpy as well as hard.

She was almost asleep when she heard the soft knock at the door. She propped herself on an elbow staring across the room and saw in the half-light the handle slowly turn.

She stayed silent, motionless, until it returned to its original position followed by quiet footsteps receding down the passage.

He'd gone—and she didn't even have to question the identity of her late-night visitor.

As she lay down, she realised she'd also been holding her breath.

That key, she told herself, will go everywhere with me until I finally walk out of here on Sunday morning. And say goodbye to the Harrington family for ever.

CHAPTER THREE

ALANNA WOKE VERY early the next morning, aware that she'd spent a restless night in the grip of dreams she was glad not to remember too clearly.

She slid out of bed and crossed to the window, only to find any view of the gardens was obscured by a thick cloud of mist hanging like a pall at tree level.

Towards the east, however, the sky was vermilion shot with flame, promising another hot day. And perhaps more, she thought, remembering an old saying from childhood, 'Red sky in the morning, sailors' warning' which suggested storms in the offing.

As if there hadn't been enough already, she thought, shivering a little as she pulled on the lawn wrap which matched her white nightdress, before curling up on the thinly cushioned seat under the window.

She should never have agreed to come here, she told herself. Quite apart from the nightmare of finding herself face to face with Zandor again, her visit had obviously raised expectations in Gerard's family about their relationship which were as premature as they were embarrassing. And which were now, in any case, due to be totally disappointed.

And was that her own reaction too?

In all honesty, she didn't know. Couldn't even begin to consider all the might-have-beens that were now denied her.

Not when she had to deal with the reality of Zandor and his ongoing disruption of her life and her peace of mind.

Which had all begun, she recalled wretchedly, with a 'Meet the Reader' event, starring the loathsome Jeffrey Winton. And her feet hurting...

Alanna discreetly eased off one high-heeled pump and flexed her toes. These were not standing-about-in shoes, she reflected ruefully, but having her stand beside him instead of sit at the table was Jeffrey's idea, and certainly not hers.

Nor had it been her plan to spend this Friday evening in a bookshop, listening to him talk about his life, his writing career, primarily his incarnation as Maisie McIntyre, and his future plans to a crowd of adoring women fans.

Clearly no one had ever told him that self-praise was no recommendation.

Izzy, the Hawkseye Publishing publicist scheduled to accompany him, had gone home during the afternoon with a migraine, and Alanna had been the only one around when Hetty came looking for a replacement.

Her protests had been ignored. 'Sometimes, it's all hands to the pump,' Hetty had decreed. 'It's simple enough. He just needs someone to pass him the books to be signed and keep the queue moving. Oh, and he prefers smart dress for his back-up,' she added flicking a glance at Alanna's jeans, T-shirt and trainers. 'Including shoes.'

‘Also he tends to sign all the books we send so that the shop can’t return them, so fend him off because the owner of SolBooks doesn’t like it.’

Now, nearly an hour into Mr Winton’s description of how he’d learned to get in touch with his feminine side in order to write about the whimsical and endearing events in his rural sagas, Alanna had murder in her heart.

Back at her bedsit, she had scripts to read and report on, music to listen to, a bowl of soup followed by a jacket potato smothered in cheese to enjoy and an elderly but comfortable robe to wear.

Instead, she was stranded here in her one and only little black dress and some toe-crushing footwear.

She wished that someone would stand up and ask, ‘What do you say to the rumours that your wife writes over fifty per cent of your books?’ but of course it didn’t happen.

His audience, whose tickets included a glass of wine, had completely bought into the Maisie McIntyre dream world, and they were hooked—mesmerised, and almost panting to get their hands on the piles of *Summer at the Shepherd’s Crook* that shop-owner Clive Solomon was bringing from the stockroom.

‘This will be my last Meet the Author session,’ he’d confided when she arrived. ‘I’m retiring, and handing the business over to my nephew as both my daughters are married and sublimely uninterested in bookselling. I shall keep my hand in with a spot of antiquarian dealing on the internet,’ he added with satisfaction.

And Alanna, wishing that he’d had a more congenial writer at his swansong, smiled and wished him every success.

She was just squeezing her protesting foot back into her shoe when she realised that there was a new arrival in the shop, who’d apparently just pushed open the door and walked in off the street. And that unlike the rest of the rapt crowd, he was male.

He was also tall, very dark, his thin face striking rather than conventionally handsome, and elegantly clad in a charcoal grey suit, his immaculate white shirt set off by a crimson silk tie.

So hardly, she thought, a journalist who’d also been sent there on an unwilling mission.

Just someone in the wrong place at the wrong time.

As she walked down the shop towards him, she was aware too that he was looking back at her. That his grey eyes, so pale they were almost silver, with their colour enhanced by long black eyelashes, were conducting a leisurely and comprehensive survey of her that she should have resented.

Also that his firm-lipped mouth was beginning to quirk into a smile. To which, she discovered to her own astonishment, she was sorely tempted to respond.

She said quietly but firmly, ‘I’m afraid this is a private book launch. Or do you have a ticket?’

‘No.’ He glanced round him. ‘I thought the shop was having a late-night opening. As I’m here, can you recommend a book for an elderly lady who loves to read?’

She hesitated. Mr Solomon was still busy, and Jeffrey Winton was looking daggers in her direction, so the obvious answer was to advise this potential customer to return another time. Except he wouldn’t. He’d buy elsewhere and she liked Mr Solomon and didn’t want him to miss out on a sale.

‘What sort of thing does she like?’

‘Good stories with plenty of characters, I understand.’ He looked past her, frowning faintly. ‘Is he an author?’ he asked quietly.

‘Yes,’ Alanna whispered. ‘But I don’t think he’d be her choice.’ She paused. ‘Has she read *Middlemarch* by George Eliot?’

‘I haven’t the faintest idea. Did you enjoy it?’

‘It’s one of my all-time favourites.’

‘Then you have a sale.’ His smile was glinting in those astonishing eyes, and prompting a strange and unfamiliar tremor deep within her.

'I'll leave that to Mr Solomon,' she said hurriedly, seeing that he was heading enquiringly in their direction. 'I need to get back to my author.'

He said softly, 'To my infinite regret,' and she felt her face warm as she hurried back to the table.

During the applause at the end of the talk, she permitted herself a quick glance towards the door, but the stranger had gone, and she found herself suppressing a pang of disappointment.

The signing session went well, although Alanna did not appreciate Mr Winton's unctuous reference to herself as 'my lovely helper' or his insistence on her moving nearer to his chair, when her preference was for keeping her distance.

She'd already noticed with faint unease his sideways glances at the length of her skirt, the depth of her neckline and the way the fabric clung to the gentle curves in between.

She was thankful when the queue began to dwindle and people started to take their reluctant departures. Clive Solomon was already collecting the used glasses and she, remembering Hetty's warning, decided to add some extra tape to the unopened cartons in the stockroom, in case Mr Winton decided to pull a fast one.

And next time Maisie McIntyre has a book launch, I'll be the one claiming a migraine, she thought grimly, if not a brain tumour.

She picked up the tape and started work, glad it was a mindless occupation because her brain seemed for some reason to be working on images of a man with a slanting smile and silver eyes.

So much so that she didn't even realise she had company until Jeffrey Winton spoke.

'That's rather naughty of you, my dear. You should be promoting my sales, not obstructing them.'

She straightened. 'I think all the customers have gone, Mr Winton,' she returned, wishing he was not standing between her and the door, and that Clive Solomon wasn't packing up the unused wine in his tiny staffroom.

'But a whole lot of new ones will be in the shop tomorrow.' His tone was jovially reproofing as he took a step closer. 'However, you're young and I might be persuaded not to report you to Hetty.'

'And a fat lot of good that would do you,' Alanna said under her breath as she stepped backwards, only to find herself trapped between his bulky body and the steel shelving.

Oh, God, she thought in horror, please don't let this be happening. Please...

'That is,' he added, 'if you're prepared to be nice to me.'

He licked already moist pink lips expectantly, leering at her as he moved closer, his hand snaking towards the hem of her dress.

What, Alanna wondered wildly, would be the penalty for kneeling a bestselling author in the groin?

But before she could take the risk, another voice intervened.

'Haven't you finished yet, darling?' He was back, the customer, the silver-eyed focus of her recent imaginings, leaning casually in the doorway, smiling at her and ignoring Jeffrey Winton who had spun round, red-faced and furious at the interruption. 'You promised me the rest of the evening—remember?'

She said huskily, 'I'm quite ready. I—I just need my jacket and bag.'

She eased past Mr Winton and collected her things from the staffroom, uttering a few words of breathless congratulation on a successful evening to Mr Solomon before joining her unexpected rescuer at the shop door.

'It seems I arrived at the right moment,' he commented helping her into her jacket.

'Yes,' she said with a shudder. 'I still can't really believe it.' She took a deep breath. 'I—I don't know how to thank you.' She paused. 'But what made you come back? Did you change your mind about the book?'

'No,' he said. 'I wanted to ask you to have dinner with me.'

She hesitated, feeling her pulses quicken outrageously. 'That's very kind of you,' she managed. 'But truly, there's no need.'

'I disagree,' he said. 'For one thing, I'm keen to continue our discussion of English literature. Also I dislike eating alone.'

'But I don't even know your name...'

'It's Zandor,' he said. 'Or Zan, if you prefer. And you are...?'

She swallowed. 'Alanna.'

'So now we are at least fifty per cent respectable,' he said. 'The rest can wait.'

As he signalled to the cab that had suddenly appeared from nowhere, it occurred to her that by no stretch of the imagination could she accept that solitary dining would ever play a major role in his life.

From the moment she'd seen him, she'd recognised that he was a seriously attractive man on a scale marking as dangerous, at the same time registering an exhilarating awareness that her blood seemed to be flowing more quickly. That her senses had somehow become more finely tuned.

Knowing at the same time that by accepting his invitation, she could be making a disastrous leap from a hot frying pan into a raging inferno.

A view reinforced by the sight of Jeffrey Winton emerging from SolBooks and glaring venomously in her direction. Proof, if proof were needed, that he was unlikely to be a good loser, she thought, her stomach churning with renewed alarm, as she shrank into her corner of the cab.

Which Zan noticed as he took his seat beside her.

'What's the matter?'

She said shakily, 'I'm sorry, but I'm not very hungry. I—I'd like to go home, please.'

'Do you live with your family?'

'No, I have a flat.' An absurdly upbeat way, she thought, to describe one room with a kitchen alcove, and a shared bathroom.

'Which you share?'

'Well—no.'

He nodded. 'Then I think our original plan is best.' His tone was matter-of-fact. 'You've had an unpleasant experience but some food and company will help put it behind you. Solitary brooding will not.'

'That's easy for you to say,' she flashed back. 'You don't stand to lose your job over this evening's fiasco. Jeffrey Winton is a huge bestseller. If he spins some yarn about me, guess who will be believed?'

He frowned. 'I could speak to your boss. Tell him what I saw. He seems a guy who would listen to reason.'

But my boss is a woman. She has to consider the bottom line... The words were trembling on her lips, but she swallowed them unspoken.

Zan, she realised, must think she worked at SolBooks, and, on the whole, that seemed preferable to launching into complicated explanations about her junior role at Hawkseye. Or any other personal detail, for that matter.

And she felt too weary to go on arguing about dinner. For one thing, the planned soup and jacket potato no longer held the slightest appeal for her. And he was trying to be kind, so she could at least be civil in return for an hour or so.

Besides, she owed him—didn't she?

After that—well, they would be ships that passed in the night. Nothing more, she decided, staring out of the window at the brightly lit shops—which suddenly seemed oddly blurred.

And realised to her horror that she was crying, quietly and unstoppably.

She heard Zandor say something under his breath, and found herself drawn towards him. She gave herself up the astonishing comfort of being cradled in his arms, her head against his shoulder.

Of breathing the warm scent of his skin and the faint but heady fragrance of his cologne. And, not least, the sheer practicality of having an immaculate linen handkerchief pushed into her hand.

‘He was so vile.’ She sobbed the words into his expensive tailoring. ‘If you hadn’t been there—if you hadn’t come back...’

‘Hush,’ he whispered, his hand gently and rhythmically stroking her hair. ‘It’s over. You’re safe now.’

And she’d believed him, she thought. Had cried herself out while he held her, then sat up awkwardly, reducing his handkerchief to a sodden lump as she blotted her eyes and blew her nose.

‘I feel so stupid,’ she said huskily.

‘There’s no need.’ He pushed a strand of damp hair back from her forehead and she felt the brush of his fingers resonate through every inch of her skin.

At the same time she realised the cab was coming to a halt and, as Zandor paid the driver, found herself standing outside an imposing facade announcing itself as the Metro-Imperial Hotel, with a uniformed commissionaire holding open a pair of elegant glass doors.

As they crossed the expanse of marble-tiled foyer towards a bank of lifts, Alanna hung back.

‘Why are we here?’

‘To have dinner.’ He urged her forward gently, his hand under her elbow. ‘I didn’t have time to book a table anywhere else. But the food is good.’

And then she was in the lift, which was rising smoothly and swiftly past floor after floor until it reached the very top.

‘Is this the restaurant?’

‘No, the penthouse. I stay here when I’m in London.’ He unlocked the door straight ahead of them with his key card and ushered her into a sitting room, all pale golden wood and ivory leather sofas with enough space to accommodate her bedsit twice over and then some.

He pointed to a door on the far wall. ‘You might want to freshen up. Go through there and you’ll find the bathroom’s directly opposite.’ He paused. ‘Do you like pasta?’

‘Well—yes,’ she admitted uncertainly.

‘Good.’ He smiled at her. ‘Then that’s what we’ll have.’

‘Through there’ was, of course, the bedroom, also huge and with a bed vast enough for several kings plus an emperor, Alanna thought as she headed for the bathroom, the imperial note being continued in the deep purple quilted bedspread.

Apart from a two-tier wooden stand bearing an opulent leather suitcase, open and neatly packed, the bed was the only visible piece of furniture, so presumably the wardrobes and chests of drawers were concealed behind the room’s elegant cream panelling.

The bathroom with its walk-in shower and sunken tub was lavishly supplied with soft towels and toiletries, and one glance in the mirror above the twin marble washbasins at her red-eyed, tear-stained reflection revealed to Alanna how essential the freshening up process was and why a public restaurant might not have been her companion’s immediate choice.

Or his second, she discovered, when, all signs of her recent distress removed and her makeup discreetly renewed, she returned to the sitting room and found a waiter laying places for two at a table beside the long windows while another was busy with a gold-foiled bottle and an ice bucket.

Zandor was lounging on a sofa, jacket removed, tie loosened, and the top buttons of his shirt unfastened. His attention was fixed frowningly on the laptop on the low table in front of him, but he closed it at her approach and smiled up at her.

‘Did that help?’

‘Amazingly so.’ She sat down beside him, but at a discreet distance, and took another longer look around her. ‘This is—palatial.’

He shrugged. ‘It does the job while I’m in London. Right now, I seem to spend most of my time on aircraft. Tomorrow I’m heading off to the States.’

Which explained the waiting suitcase.

‘You enjoy travelling?’

‘It doesn’t worry me.’ His mouth twisted. ‘But then I’ve always been regarded as having gipsy blood.’

‘How—exciting.’ She’d almost said ‘romantic’ but stopped herself just in time.

He said drily, ‘Except it’s never been intended as a compliment.’

She was wondering how to respond to this when she was diverted by the waiter’s arrival with two flutes of pale wine, fizzing with bubbles.

‘Champagne?’ She drew a breath. ‘But why?’

He shrugged. ‘You think it’s just for celebrations? It isn’t. Tonight, treat it simply as the world’s best tonic.’

She accepted the flute uncertainly. ‘Well—thank you.’

‘We should have a toast.’ He touched his glass lightly to hers. ‘Health and happiness.’

She repeated the words softly and drank.

The cool, dry wine seemed to burst, fizzing, in her mouth, caressing her throat as she swallowed.

She said with a little gasp. ‘You’re right. It’s wonderful.’

And the food which arrived shortly afterwards was just as good—fillets of salmon wrapped in prosciutto, served on a bed of creamy tarragon pasta with asparagus, peas and tiny broad beans.

The dessert was a platter of little filo pastry tartlets filled with an assortment of fruits in brandied syrup.

All of it enhanced accompanied by the chilled sparkle of the champagne.

And by conversation, starting with books and moving on to music, quiet, entertaining, and always involving, so that, in spite of her initial forebodings, Alanna found she was relaxing into enjoyment. Savouring his company almost more than the delicious supper.

Yet, at the same time, becoming increasingly aware of the potency of his attraction. How his slow smile and the quiet intensity of his silver gaze made her nerve-endings quiver and set her pulses racing—reactions which bewildered as much as they disturbed her.

She wasn’t a child for heaven’s sake. She’d enjoyed a satisfactory social life at university and since her arrival in London. But liking had not so far ripened into passion and none of the young men she’d dated had ever come close to persuading her into a more intimate relationship.

That, she’d told herself, was because casual relationships had little appeal for her, and, anyway, she was far more interested in concentrating her emotional energy on the development of her career.

Or was it just because she’d never been seriously tempted to abandon her self-imposed celibacy.

Not that she was now, of course, she added hastily.

And, thankfully, the evening would soon be over, and no harm done.

After all, the conversation, however enjoyable, had remained strictly impersonal. They hadn’t even exchanged surnames, she reminded herself, which made it very much a ‘ships that pass in the night’ occasion.

And she should put out of her mind the sense of comfort and security she’d experienced in the taxi when he’d held her in his arms as she wept. Once again, he was just being kind. Nothing more. And far better—safer—to believe that.

The arrival of the coffee, however, prompted a move back to the sofa. And it had also, she realised, signalled the departure of the serving staff, leaving them alone together.

She made a thing of looking at her watch. ‘Heavens, I didn’t realise how late it was. I should be leaving. I—I’ve already taken up too much of your time.’

‘I think we both know that isn’t true.’ He paused, then added, ‘Have some coffee,’ filling one of the small cups from the tall silver pot. ‘Then I’ll call the desk and order a cab for you.’

As he passed her the cup, their fingers brushed and she felt the brief contact shiver through her senses.

It was so quiet in the room that it seemed the swift uneven pounding of her heart must be audible to them both.

She pushed back a strand of hair from her forehead and saw him watching the swift, nervous movement of her hand and stared down, trying to calm herself, concentrating her attention on the dark swirl of coffee in her cup.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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