Sara
CRAVEN

The Marchese's Love-Child

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Mills & Boon proudly presents THE SARA CRAVEN COLLECTION. Sara’s powerful and passionate romances have captivated and thrilled readers all over the world for five decades making her an international bestseller.THE MARCHESE’S LOVE-CHILDValessi’s son and heirWhen Alessandro Valessi discovers the existence of his love-child, he has every intention of thrusting himself back into Polly Fairfax's life. But Polly is determinedly going it alone – the one thing she doesn't want or need in her life is her son's father, especially after the arrogant, aristocratic Italian hurt her so badly. But Alessandro leaves Polly no choice, for he intends to fight her for custody of their little boy.

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The Marchese's Love-Child
Sara Craven

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Former journalist **SARA CRAVEN** published her first novel 'Garden of Dreams' for Mills & Boon in 1975. Apart from her writing (naturally!) her passions include reading, bridge, Italian cities, Greek islands, the French language and countryside, and her rescue Jack Russell/cross Button. She has appeared on several TV quiz shows and in 1997 became UK TV Mastermind champion. She lives near her family in Warwickshire – Shakespeare country.

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CHAPTER ONE

'YOU'RE going back to Italy?' There was outrage in Lily Fairfax's voice as she turned on her daughter. Anger too. 'Oh, I don't believe it. You can't—you mustn't.'

Polly Fairfax sighed soundlessly. 'Mother, I'm escorting an elderly lady to Naples, where she'll be met by her family, upon which—I catch the next flight home. I'll be gone for a few hours at most. Hardly *Mission Impossible*.'

'You said you'd never return there,' her mother said. 'You swore it.'

'Yes, I know,' Polly acknowledged wearily. 'But that was three years ago. And circumstances change. This is a work assignment, and there's no one else to do it. Since Safe Hands was featured on that holiday programme, we've been snowed under with requests.' She adopted a persuasive tone. 'And you enjoyed seeing me on television—you know you did.' She added a smile. 'So you can't complain if I'm in demand as a consequence.'

Mrs Fairfax wasn't pacified. 'Is this why this woman—this Contessa Whatsit wants you? Because you've been on television?'

Polly laughed. 'I shouldn't think so for a moment. She's far too grand to bother with anything so vulgar. And her name's the Contessa Barsoli.'

Her mother dismissed that impatiently. 'I didn't think you liked her very much.'

Polly shrugged. 'I don't particularly. She's been a total pain the whole week I've been with her. And I'm damned sure she doesn't care for me either,' she added musingly. 'She always looks at me as if I'm a slug in her salad. Believe me, I shan't be tempted to linger.'

'Then why did she choose you?'

'The devil she knows, perhaps.' Polly shrugged again. 'As opposed to some stranger. Anyway, she needs someone to see to her luggage, and make sure she's got all her documentation. Which is where Safe Hands comes in, of course.'

She leaned forward. 'To be honest, Mum, I don't know how much longer I can go on turning down jobs in Italy, just because of something that happened three years ago. I like my job, and I want to hang on to it. But Mrs Terence is running a business here, not an agency for people who've been crossed in love.'

'It was,' her mother reminded her tightly, 'rather more than that.'

'Whatever.' Polly bit her lip. 'But I can't pick and choose my clients, and I think Mrs T has made all the allowances over Italy that she's going to. So I have to treat it as just another destination from now on.'

'And what about Charlie?' Mrs Fairfax demanded fiercely. 'What's going to happen to him while you're gadding off?'

It hardly seemed to Polly that enduring another twenty-four hours in the company of a disdainful Italian autocrat counted as 'gadding'.

And her mother had never objected to her role as child-minder before, even when Polly was absent on other, much longer trips. In fact she'd declared that Charlie's presence had given her a new lease of life.

She looked out of the window to where her cheerful two-year-old was trotting about after his grandfather, picking up hedge clippings.

She said slowly, 'I thought he would stay with you, as usual.'

There were bright spots of colour in her mother's face. 'But it's not usual—is it? You're deliberately defying my wishes—yet again. I was totally against your taking that job in Sorrento three years ago, and how right I was. You came slinking home pregnant by some local Casanova, who didn't want to know about you any more. Can you deny it?'

‘To be fair, Sandro had no more idea that I was expecting a baby than I did myself,’ Polly said levelly. ‘Although I agree it would have made no difference if he had known. But that’s all in the past. I’ve—rebuilt my life, and he’ll have moved on too.’ She paused. ‘All the same, I promise not to go within ten miles of Sorrento, if that will make you feel better.’

‘I’d feel better if you didn’t go at all,’ her mother returned sharply. ‘But if it really is just a day trip, I suppose I can’t stop you.’

‘You’ll hardly know I’ve gone,’ Polly assured her. ‘Thanks, Mum.’ She gave her a swift hug. ‘You’re a star.’

‘I’m an idiot,’ Lily Fairfax retorted, but she sounded slightly mollified. ‘Are you going to stay for supper? I’ve made one of my steak pies.’

‘It’s good of you, darling,’ said Polly, mentally bracing herself for another battle. ‘But we must get back. I have this trip to prepare for.’

Mrs Fairfax gave her a tragic look. ‘But I’ve got Charlie’s favourite ice-cream for dessert. He’ll be so disappointed.’

Only because you’ve already told him, Polly thought without pleasure.

Aloud, she said, ‘You really mustn’t spoil him like that.’

Her mother pouted. ‘It’s a sad thing if I can’t give my only grandchild the occasional treat.’ She paused. ‘Why not leave him here—if you’re going to be busy this evening?’ she coaxed. ‘It’ll save you time in the morning if you have a plane to catch.’

‘It’s a kind thought.’ Polly tried to sound positive. ‘But I really look forward to my evenings with Charlie, Mum. I—I see so little of him.’

‘Well, that’s something your father and I wanted to discuss with you,’ her mother said with sudden briskness. ‘There’s a lot of unused space in this house, and if we were to extend over the garage, it would make a really nice flat for you both. And it would mean so much less disruption for Charlie.’

She emptied the carrots she’d been scraping into a pan. ‘We’ve had some preliminary plans drawn up, and, if you stayed, we could look at them over supper perhaps.’

Polly supposed, heart sinking, that she should have seen it coming—but she hadn’t. Oh, God, she thought, is this the day from hell, or what?

She said quietly, ‘Mum, I do have a flat already.’

‘An attic,’ her mother dismissed with a sniff, ‘with a room hardly bigger than a cupboard for Charlie. Here, he’d have room to run about, plus a routine he’s accustomed to. And we’re in the catchment area for a good primary school, when the time comes,’ she added. ‘I think it’s the perfect solution to all sorts of problems.’

My main problem, Polly thought wearily, is prising Charlie out of this house at the end of the working day. Of staking a claim in my own child. She’d seen trouble looming when her own former bedroom was extensively redecorated and refitted for Charlie, despite her protest that he wouldn’t use it sufficiently to justify the expense.

Her mother must have had this in mind from the first.

She rallied herself, trying to speak reasonably. ‘But I need my independence. I’m used to it.’

‘Is that what you call the way you live? You’re a single mother, my girl. A statistic. And this glamorous job of yours is little better than slavery—running around all over the place at the beck and call of people with more money than sense. And where did it lead? To you making a fool of yourself with some foreigner, and ruining your life.’ She snorted. ‘Well, don’t come to me for help if you mess up your life a second time.’

Polly’s head went back in shock. She said unsteadily, ‘That is *so* unfair. I made a mistake, and I’ve paid for it. But I still intend to live my life on my own terms, and I hope you can accept that.’

Mrs Fairfax's face was flushed. 'I can certainly see you're determined to have your own way, regardless of Charlie's well-being.' She sent her daughter a fulminating glance. 'And now I suppose you'll take him with you, just to make your point.'

'No,' Polly said reluctantly. 'I won't do that—this time. But I think you have to accept that I do have a point.'

'Perhaps you'd send Charlie indoors as you leave.' Her mother opened a carton of new potatoes and began to wash them. 'He's getting absolutely filthy out there, and I'd like him to calm down before he eats.'

'Fine.' Polly allowed herself a small, taut smile. 'I'll pass the message on.'

As she went into the garden, Charlie headed for her gleefully, strewing twigs and leaves behind him. Polly bent to enfold him, the breath catching in her throat as she inhaled his unique baby scent. Thinking again, with a pang, how beautiful he was. And how painfully, searingly like his father …

Her mother had never wanted to know any details about his paternity, referring to Sandro solely as 'that foreigner'. The fact that Charlie, with his curly black hair, olive skin and long-lashed eyes the colour of deep topaz, was also clearly a Mediterranean to his fingertips seemed to have eluded her notice.

But it was the details that only Polly could recognise that brought her heart into her mouth, like the first time her son had looked at her with that wrenchingly familiar slow, slanting smile. His baby features were starting to change too, and she could see that he was going to have Sandro's high-bridged nose one day, and the same straight brows.

It would be like living with a mirror image before too long, Polly told herself, thinking forlornly that nature played cruel tricks at times. Why couldn't Charlie have inherited her own pale blonde hair and green eyes?

She smoothed the hair back from his damp forehead. 'Gran wants you to go inside, darling,' she whispered. 'You're sleeping here tonight. Won't that be fun?'

Her father came to join them, his brows lifting at her words. 'Will it, my love?' His voice was neutral, but the glance he sent her was searching.

'Yes.' Polly cleared her throat, watching Charlie scamper towards the house. 'It—it seems a shame to uproot him, when I have to start work early tomorrow.'

'Yes.' He paused. 'She means it all for the best, you know, Poll,' he told her quietly.

'He's my child, Dad.' Polly shook her head. 'I have to have an opinion on what's best for him, too. And that doesn't include moving back here.'

'I know that,' her father said gently. 'But I'm also aware how hard it must be raising a child without any kind of support from his father—and I'm not simply talking about the economics of it.'

He sighed. 'You were so precious to me, I can't imagine a man not wanting to involve himself with his own flesh and blood.'

Polly's lips moved in a wintry little smile. 'He didn't want to know, Dad—about either of us. It was best to leave it that way.'

'Yes, love,' he said. 'So you told me. But that hasn't stopped me from worrying—or your mother either.' He gave her a swift hug. 'Take care.'

Polly's thoughts were troubled as she rode home on the bus alone. Her mother's attempts to totally monopolise her grandson was becoming a seriously tricky situation, and she wasn't sure she had sufficient wisdom to resolve it.

The last thing she wanted was for Charlie to become a battleground, but even a mild suggestion that she should enrol him at a local nursery for a few hours a week so that he could mix with other children had provoked such an injured reception from Mrs Fairfax that she hadn't dared raise the subject again.

Her mother's hostile attitude to her work was a different thing.

Safe Hands had proved the job of her dreams, and she knew, without conceit, that she was good at it.

The people who made use of the company were mainly female and usually elderly, people who needed someone young, relatively strong and capable to deal with their luggage, guide them through airports and escort them safely round unfamiliar foreign cities.

Polly was the youngest of Mrs Terence's employees, but she had a gift for languages, and her brief career as a holiday rep had taught her patience and tolerance to add to her natural sense of humour—qualities she soon found she needed in abundance.

She knew how to diffuse potentially explosive situations with overseas Customs, find restaurants that were sympathetic to delicate digestions, hotels in peaceful locations that were also picturesque, and shops prepared to deliver purchases to hotels, or post them on to addresses abroad. She could also discover which art galleries and museums were prepared to arrange quiet private tours for small groups.

And she never showed even a trace of irritation with even the most high-handed behaviour from her charges.

After all, she was being paid for acceding to their whims and fancies, and part of her skill was in making them forget that was how she earned her living, and persuading them that she was there for the sheer pleasure of their company.

But with the Contessa Barsoli, it had been a struggle from day one.

Polly had long accepted that not all her clients would like her, but she did need them to trust her, and, from the start, her senses had detected an inflexible wariness, bordering on hostility at times, in the *contessa*'s attitude which she was at a loss to account for.

Whatever the reason, there had never been any real warmth between them, so Polly had been genuinely astonished to hear that the *contessa* had specifically requested her services again for the homeward leg of her journey to southern Italy, and was prepared to pay her a generous cash bonus too.

Surprised—but also alarmed enough to ask herself if the money was really worth the damage to her nervous system.

Her previous visit—the first and last—had left her scarred—and scared. And there was no way she'd have dared risk a return, if there'd been the slightest chance she might encounter Sandro again. But the odds against such a meeting must run into millions to one. But irrational as it might seem, even the remotest possibility still had the power to make her tremble.

They said time was a great healer, but the wound Sandro had dealt her was still agonisingly raw.

She'd tried so hard to block out the memories of that summer in Sorrento three years ago. The summer she thought she'd fallen in love, and believed she was loved in return. But the images she'd hoped were safely locked away forever had broken free, and were running wild in her brain again.

Her room, she thought, wincing, during the hours of siesta, the shutters closed against the beat of the sun, and only the languid whirr of the ceiling fan and their own ragged breathing to break the silence.

And Sandro's voice murmuring soft, husky words of passion, his hands and mouth exploring her naked body with sensuous delight. The heated surge of his body into hers at the moment of possession.

She had lived for those shadowed, rapturous afternoons, and warm, moonlit nights, which made the pain of his ultimate betrayal even more intense.

What a gullible little fool I was, Polly thought with self-derision. And I can't say I wasn't warned. The other reps said that he was just looking for some easy summer sex, and cautioned me to be careful, but I wouldn't listen because I knew better.

I knew that he loved me, and that when the summer was over we were going to be married. I was convinced of it—because he'd said so.

I thought it was that innocent—that simple. I should have realised that he wasn't what he seemed. He told me he worked at one of the big hotels, but he always had too much money to be just a waiter or a barman. And these jobs were usually taken by younger men, anyway, while Sandro was thirty at least.

I knew from the first that there were depths to him that belied the seaside Romeo tag—and that the latent power I always sensed in him was part of his attraction for me.

But I liked the fact that he was something of an enigma. That there were questions about him still to be answered. I thought I would have the rest of my life to find out the truth.

Yes, I was a fool, but it never once occurred to me that I could be in any real danger. That there was another darker side to his life, far away from the sunlight and whispered promises.

Not until he got bored with me. Not until his friend arrived—the man in the designer suit with the smile that never reached his eyes. The man who came to tell me that it was all over, and to suggest, smiling suavely and icily, that it would be better for my health to get out of Sorrento, and away from Italy altogether.

The man who told me that I'd become an inconvenience, and that it would be much safer for me to quit my job and go back to England.

And that I should never try to contact Sandro, or come back to Italy again—ever.

In return for which I was to receive the equivalent of fifty thousand pounds.

Polly shuddered. Even now the memory made her shake inside. But what had crucified her then, and still hurt today, was that Sandro hadn't had the guts to come to her himself—to tell her in person that it was finished between them. And why …

She'd rejected his money with anger and contempt, unable to believe that he could insult her like that. Ordered his confederate out of her room.

But, all the same, she'd obeyed and left, because she was too heartbroken—and also too frightened to stay. She didn't know what Sandro could be involved with to afford a bribe of that size—and she didn't want to know. But something had reached out from the shadows around him, which had touched her life, and destroyed her hope of happiness.

She had been at home for several weeks before it dawned on her that she was pregnant—a knowledge born slowly from grief, bewilderment and unbelievable loneliness. At first she'd told herself that it could not be true—that they'd always been so careful—except for one night when their frantic, heated need for each other had outweighed caution.

And that, she had realised, stunned, must have been when it happened. Another blow to deepen the agony of pain and betrayal. Yet, although the prospect of single-motherhood had filled her with dread, she'd never once considered the obvious alternative and sought an abortion.

Her mother had thought of it, of course. Had urged her to do it, too, cajoling one minute, threatening the next. Railing at Polly for her stupidity, and for bringing shame on the family. Swearing that she would have nothing further to do with her daughter or the baby if the pregnancy went ahead. A resolution that had lasted no longer than an indrawn breath from the moment she had seen her newborn grandson.

Charlie had instantly taken the place of the son she'd always longed for. And there'd never been any question about who was going to look after him when Polly recovered and went back to work.

But, as Polly ruefully acknowledged, the arrangement had become a two-edged sword. Over the months, she seemed to have been sidelined into playing an elder sister's role to Charlie. Any slight wail, bump or graze brought her mother running, leaving Polly to watch helplessly while Mrs Fairfax hugged and comforted him. And that was not good.

She had to admit that her mother had not been too wide of the mark when she'd described Polly's flat as an attic. It had a reasonable-sized main room, a basic bathroom and a minuscule kitchen opening out of it, plus Charlie's cubby-hole. Polly herself slept on the sofa bed in the living room.

But she couldn't deny it was a weary climb up steep and badly lit stairs to reach her front door, especially when she was encumbered with Charlie, his bag of necessities and his buggy, which she didn't dare leave in the entrance hall in case it was stolen.

Once inside, she kept her home space clean and uncluttered, the walls painted in cool aqua. Most of the furniture had been acquired at auction sales, including the sofa bed, for which she'd bought a new cover in an Aztec print of deep blue, crimson and gold.

It wasn't flash, but the rent was reasonable, and she always felt the place offered comfort and a welcome as she went in.

And tonight she was in sore need of both.

It was a warm evening, so she unlocked the living-room window and pushed up the lower sash, sinking down onto the wooden seat beneath. There was some cold chicken and salad in the fridge, and it would be a moment's work to put a potato to bake in her second-hand microwave.

But she was in no hurry to complete her supper preparations. She felt tired and anxious—and more than a little disheartened. It seemed strange not to hear the clatter of Charlie's feet on the stripped boards as he trotted about, or his incessant and often unintelligible chatter.

She missed, too, his sudden, unsteady gallop to her arms. That most of all, she thought, her throat tightening.

I should have brought him home, she told herself restlessly, and not let myself be out-manoeuvred like that.

She felt, she realised, totally unsettled, for all kinds of reasons, so maybe this would be a good time to review her life, and see if she needed to make some changes.

And, first and foremost, she needed to be able to spend more time with Charlie.

When she began working again, after he was born, Safe Hands had seemed ideal, more of a career choice than an ordinary job. Having her cake, and eating it—or so she'd thought then.

She had been able to go on with the travelling she loved, and, as well as her salary, the majority of the clients paid her a cash bonus as well. Even at London prices, she could afford to live, and provide Charlie with what he needed, although there was never much left over for extras.

But his needs were changing, and so, she realised, were hers.

For one thing, it wasn't essential to work, or even live, in London. In fact, it would be sheer relief to be able to say goodbye to those stifling journeys on the underground and buses.

She could move to a totally different area altogether, away from the south-east of England. Deliberately select a place where it would be cheaper to live, and find a job in local tourism. Something strictly nine-to-five, with no time away from home, so that she could spend her leisure hours with her son.

During the day she'd need a minder for him, of course. There was no way out of that. But she'd look for someone young and lively, caring for other children too, so that Charlie would have playmates. Maybe, in time, she could even get a foot on the housing ladder—find somewhere small and manageable, hopefully with a garden. Something she would never be able to afford in London.

She would miss this flat, she thought, sighing, and it would be a wrench leaving Safe Hands but reason was telling her it would be for the best.

I have, she thought, to make a life for us both. For Charlie and myself. I need to build a proper relationship with him. And I can't do that if we stay here. Because I won't be allowed to.

But she wasn't delusional enough to think she could strike out on her own without a struggle, she told herself, wrinkling her nose. Her mother would fight her every step of the way, coming up with every possible reason why she should not do this thing—and a few impossible ones, too.

And when she saw Polly could not be moved, she would be very bitter. There might even be an open breach between them.

But that won't last forever, she thought. Whatever Mum thinks of me, she'll still want to maintain contact with Charlie.

She got to her feet. She would eat now, and when supper was over she'd use her laptop to go internet-exploring, looking at house prices in different parts of the country. Now that she'd made up her mind, there was no time to be lost.

Strange, she thought, how I can suddenly be so sure of that.

Yet the pressure on her to accept the Italian assignment must have contributed to her decision. It had left her feeling uneasy—and awoken too many bad memories.

A clean break with the past was what she needed. New job—new home—new friends.

She would never be able to forget, of course, that Sandro was Charlie's father. But in time, it might begin to hurt less. And she might even be able to stop being afraid. One day.

'See Naples and die, eh?' The man in the adjoining seat emphasised the originality of his remark with a slight dig in Polly's ribs, as their plane descended towards Capodichino Airport. 'That's what they say, isn't it?'

Polly gritted her teeth as she gave a wintry smile in acknowledgement.

But I don't care what 'they' say, she told herself fiercely. Naples is going to be my jumping-off point for a whole new life. And I plan to live every moment of it.

She couldn't say she'd enjoyed the flight. The *contessa* might need her physical assistance, but she certainly hadn't wanted her company. Which was why she was seated in first class, while Polly herself was in economy, with a neighbour who considered her presence his personal bonus.

Never mind, she thought. In a few moments I'll never have to see him again, or the *contessa* either.

She'd sipped mineral water throughout the flight, in spite of her fellow traveller's unceasing efforts to buy her what he called a proper drink. And the irony was that she'd have welcomed some alcohol, to dispel the shaky chill which had settled in the pit of her stomach. The closer they had got to their destination, their progress cheerfully marked by the captain, the more nervous she'd become.

I shan't relax until I'm safely back in Britain, she thought.

On the surface, she was calmness itself. She was wearing the company uniform of a slim-fitting, button-through dress in navy linen, with the distinctive silver brooch showing a pair of clasped hands pinned to her left shoulder. Her pale hair was in a loose knot on top of her head, and she wore her usual dusting of powder, and soft pink lipstick.

As they touched down, and the plane began to taxi to its stand, Polly reached under the seat, and extracted the navy leather satchel which held the travel documents and a few basic necessities in case of delay. Her client, she was sure, would have an eagle eye for the slightest lapse in efficiency.

Her companion nudged her again. 'Dangerous city, they say,' he whispered. 'If you're on your own tonight, I'd be happy to show you around.'

'Tonight,' she told him, 'I intend to be back in London.' And left him gaping.

Contessa Barsoli was a tall woman, rake-thin, with immaculately coiffed white hair and still handsome in a chilly way. A member of the cabin staff was permitted to help her descend the aircraft steps while Polly followed, instinctively lifting her face to the brilliant warmth of the southern sun.

Once inside the terminal, she found her charge a chair, retrieved her luggage and guided her through the formalities.

'There has been a small change of plan,' the older woman informed her abruptly. 'I am too tired to undertake a long car journey down to the Campania, so my cousin has arranged a suite for me at the Grand Hotel Neapolitana. You will accompany me there.'

Polly knew resignedly that she shouldn't be surprised. Most of the arrangements she'd made for the *contessa* during her stay in Britain had been subject to alteration, usually at the last moment. Why should this time be any different?

But this wasn't just irritating, she reminded herself, schooling her expression. It was seriously inconvenient. She had a return flight to catch, and the *contessa* knew it.

‘Do you wish me to get us a taxi?’ she asked quietly. If she could find a driver who knew a few short cuts through Naples’ crowded streets, she might still be in with a chance.

‘A taxi?’ The *contessa* made it sound like a tumbrel. ‘My cousin has sent a car and chauffeur for us. Oblige me by finding him.’

That was easily achieved. Transferring the *contessa* and her luggage to the roomy depths of the limousine was a completely different matter. The lady liked to take her time, oblivious to Polly’s simmering frustration as the minutes ticked past.

The traffic was a nightmare, and when they did reach the hotel at last, Polly accepted that she probably wouldn’t make it back to the airport in time for her flight.

I haven’t a prayer, she told herself resignedly. It’ll take me half an hour to get her to the lift.

But to her astonishment, the *contessa* suddenly became quite sprightly. She conducted her own registration at the desk, waving Polly regally away, and made no fuss about the prompt unloading of her luggage.

An under-manager escorted her, bowing, to the lift, where Polly caught up with her.

She said awkwardly, ‘I need to say goodbye now, *contessa,* if I’m to get my flight.’

She got a severe look. ‘But I wish you to accompany me to the suite, *signorina.* I have ordered coffee and *biscotti* to be served there. Besides,’ she added, seeing that Polly was on the verge of protest, ‘there is still the question of the money I offered you. I do not conduct such transactions in the foyers of hotels. If you want to be paid, you will come with me now.’

Groaning silently, Polly stood beside her as the lift made its way upward. They emerged onto a crimson-carpeted corridor, opposite a heavily carved door.

The under-manager produced a key with a flourish, and unlocked the door, and, still bowing, showed them ceremoniously into the suite.

Polly found herself in a large drawing room, shaded by the shutters which had been drawn over the long windows to combat the force of the mid-June sunlight. She had a confused impression of brocaded sofas and fresh flowers in elaborate arrangements, their scent hanging languidly in the air.

And realised suddenly that the room wasn’t empty as she’d first thought. Because someone was there—someone standing by the windows, his figure silhouetted against the slatted light. Someone tall, lean and unforgettably—terrifyingly—familiar.

Even before he spoke, Polly knew who he was. Then his voice, low-pitched and faintly husky, reached her, and there was no longer room for any doubt. Or any hope, either.

He said, ‘Paola *mia.* So, you have come to me at last.’

He moved—came away from the window, and walked towards her with that long, lithe stride she would have known anywhere, his shadow falling across the floor as he approached.

She tried to speak—to say his name, but her trembling mouth could not obey her and shape the word.

Because this could not be happening. Sandro could not be here, in this room, waiting for her.

As he reached her, she cried out and flung up her bare and unavailing hands in a desperate effort to keep him at bay. Only to find the shadows crowding round her, welcoming her, as she slid helplessly downwards into the dark whirl of oblivion.

CHAPTER TWO

AWARENESS returned slowly, accompanied by an acrid smell that filled her nose and mouth with its bitterness, making her cough and mutter a feeble protest.

She lay very still, fighting against a feeling of nausea, hardly daring to open her eyes. Her senses told her that she was cushioned on satiny softness, and that she was not alone. That in the real world behind her closed eyelids, there was movement—people talking. And the heavy noise of traffic.

She propped herself dizzily on one elbow, and looked around her. She was lying in the middle of a vast bed, covered in deep gold embroidered silk. She was shoeless, she realised, and the top buttons of her dress had been unfastened.

The first person she saw was the *contessa,* as she stepped back, replacing the stopper in a small bottle. Smelling salts, Polly thought, dazedly. The older woman always insisted on having some handy in case travel motion upset her.

And, standing in silence a few yards away, was Sandro, head bent, his face in profile.

Not a figment of her imagination, as she'd hoped, but a nightmare that lived and breathed, and would not go away.

And not the laughing, dishevelled lover, wearing frayed shorts and an old T-shirt, and badly in need of a haircut, that she'd once known and desired so passionately, but that other, hidden man whose identity she'd never even suspected as she lay in his arms.

This other Sandro wore a dark suit that had clearly emanated from a great Italian fashion house. The dark curling hair had been tamed, to some extent at least, and there wasn't a trace of stubble, designer or otherwise, on what she could see of the hard, tanned face, only a faint breath of some expensive cologne hanging in the air.

His immaculate white shirt set off a sombre silk tie, and a thin platinum watch encircled his wrist.

Whatever path he'd chosen to follow, it had clearly brought him serious money, Polly thought, anger and pain tightening her throat. And she didn't want to contemplate how it might have been obtained. Who said crime didn't pay?

Nor was he staying silent out of weakness, or any sense of guilt. Instinct told her that. He was simply exercising restraint. Under the stillness, Polly could sense his power—and the furious burn of his anger, rigorously reined in. Could feel the violence of his emotions in the pulse of her blood and deep within her bones, just as she'd once known the naked imprint of his skin on hers, and the intimate heat of his possession.

As if, she thought with a sudden sick helplessness, she lived within his flesh. Part of him. As she had once been.

Now that the impossible had happened, and she was face to face with him again, she was shocked by the intensity of her physical reaction to him. Ashamed too.

She had to make herself remember the cruel brutality of his rejection. The cynical attempt to buy her off, and the explicit threat that had accompanied it.

She needed to remind herself of the abyss of pain and loneliness that had consumed her after she'd fled from Italy. And, most important of all, she had to get out of here, and fast.

She sat upright, lifting a hand to her head as the room swayed about her.

The movement riveted everyone's attention, and Sandro took a hasty step forward, pausing when Polly flinched away from him involuntarily, his mouth hardening in an icy sneer.

'No,' he said. 'It is not pretty. You should have been prepared in advance, perhaps. Warned what to expect.'

As he came closer, Polly saw his face clearly for the first time. Saw the jagged scar that had torn its way from the corner of his eye, across the high cheekbone and halfway to his jaw.

For a brief moment she was stunned, as shocked as if she had seen some great work of art deliberately defaced.

He looked older too, and there was a weariness in the topaz eyes that had once glowed into hers.

Oh, God, she thought, swallowing. He thinks that I find him repulsive, and that's why I turned away just now.

A pang of something like anguish twisted inside her, then she took a deep breath, hardening herself against a compassion he did not need or deserve.

Let him think what he wanted, she thought. He'd chosen his life, and however rich and powerful he'd become he'd clearly paid violently for his wealth. And she'd been fortunate to escape when she did, and keep her own wounds hidden. That was all there was to be said.

She looked away from him. 'I don't understand.' Her voice was small and strained. 'What am I doing here? What—happened?'

'You fainted, *signorina.*' It was the *contessa* who answered her. 'At my cousin's feet.'

'Your cousin?' Polly repeated the words dazedly, her mind wincing away from the image the older woman's words conjured up of herself, unconscious, helpless. She shook her head, immediately wishing that she hadn't. 'Is that supposed to be some kind of joke?'

The *contessa* drew herself up, her brows lifting in hauteur. 'I do not understand you, *signorina.* There is no joke, I assure you. Alessandro is the son of my husband's late cousin. Indeed, his only child.'

'No,' Polly whispered. 'He can't be. It's not possible.'

'I am not accustomed to having my word doubted, Signorina Fairfax.' The *contessa*'s tone was frigid. She paused. 'But you are not yourself, so allowances must be made.' She handed Polly a glass of water. 'Drink this, if you please. And I will ask for some food to be brought. You will feel better when you have eaten something.'

'Thank you, but no.' Polly put down the empty glass and moved to the edge of the bed, putting her feet to the floor. She was still feeling shaky, but self-preservation was more important than any temporary weakness.

She'd fainted—something she'd never done in her life before, and a betraying sign of vulnerability that she could ill afford.

She spoke more strongly, lifting her chin. 'I would much prefer to leave. Right now. I have a flight to catch.'

'You are not very gracious, Paola *mia.*' Sandro's voice was soft, but there was a note in it that made her quiver. 'Especially when I have had you brought all the way from England just to see you again.'

Had you brought … The words echoed in her head, menacing her.

'Then you've wasted your time, *signore.*' Was that how you addressed the supposed cousin of an Italian countess? Polly had no idea, and didn't much care. 'Because I have no wish to see you.'

There was a bitter irony in this, she thought. This was supposed to be the first day of her new life, and instead she seemed to have walked into a trap.

Ironic, inexplicable—and dangerous too, she realised, a shiver chilling her spine.

The *contessa* had deliberately set her up, it seemed. So she must be in Sandro's power in some way. But however scaring that was, it couldn't be allowed to matter, Polly reminded herself swiftly. She didn't know what was going on here, nor did she want to know. The most important thing, now, was to distance herself, and quickly.

'"*Signore*"?' Sandro questioned, his mouth twisting. 'Isn't that a little formal—for us, *bella mia*?'

Her pulses quickened at the endearment, putting her instantly on the defensive.

'To me this is a formal occasion,' she said tautly. 'I'm working—escorting the *contessa.* And there is no "us",' she added. 'There never was.'

'You don't think so?' The topaz eyes were watchful. 'Then I shall have to jog your memory, cara.'

'I can remember everything I need to, thanks.' Polly spoke fiercely. 'And it doesn't change a thing. You and I have nothing to say to each other. Not now. Not ever again.' She took a deep breath. 'And now I wish to leave.'

Sandro shook his head slowly. 'You are mistaken, *carissima*.' His voice was soft. 'There is a great deal to be said. Or else I would not be here. But perhaps it would be better if we spoke alone.'

He turned to the *contessa.* 'Would you excuse us, Zia Antonia?' His tone was coolly courteous. 'I think Signorina Fairfax and I should continue our conversation in private.'

'No.' Polly flung the word at him, aware that her voice was shaking. That her body was trembling too. 'I won't stay here—and you can't make me.'

He looked at her, his mouth relaxing into a faint smile. 'You don't think so, Paola *mia*? But you're so wrong.'

'Contessa!' Polly appealed as the older woman moved towards the door. 'You had no right to do this. Don't leave me alone—please.'

The *contessa* gave her a thin smile. 'You require a chaperone?' she queried. 'But surely it is a little late for that?' She paused, allowing her words to sting, then turned to Sandro. 'However, Alessandro, Signorina Fairfax might feel more at ease if you conducted this interview in the *salotto.* A suggestion, merely.'

'I bow to your superior wisdom.' Sandro spoke briskly.

Before Polly could register what he intended, and take evasive action, he had stepped forward, scooping her up into his arms as if she were a child. She tried to hit him, but he controlled her flailing hands, tucking her arms against her body with insulting ease.

'Be still,' he told her. 'Unless, of course, you would prefer to remain here.' He glanced significantly back at the bed.

'No, I would not.' She glared up into the dark, ruined face. 'But I can walk.'

'When you are shaking like a leaf? I think not.'

In spite of her continuing struggles, Sandro carried her back into the now deserted drawing room. The *contessa* had disappeared, Polly realised with a stab of panic, and, although neither of them were her company of choice, it meant that she and Sandro were now alone. Which was far worse …

'This was easier when you were unconscious,' he commented as he walked across the room with her. 'Although I think you have lost a little weight since our last meeting, Paola *mia.*'

'Put me down.' Polly was almost choking with rage, mingled with the shock of finding herself in such intimately close proximity to him. 'Put me down, damn you.'

'As you wish.' He lifted a shoulder nonchalantly, and dropped her onto one of the sofas flanking the fireplace. She lay, winded and gasping, staring up at him.

'You bastard,' she said unevenly, and he clicked his tongue in reproach as he seated himself on the sofa opposite.

'What a name to call the man you are going to marry.'

'Marry?' The word strangled in her throat. Polly struggled to sit up, pulling down the navy dress which had ridden up round her thighs. 'You must be insane.'

He shrugged. 'I once asked you to be my wife. You agreed.' He watched as she fumbled to re-fasten the buttons he'd undone, his lips slanting into faint amusement. Looking so like Charlie that she almost cried out. 'That makes us *fidanzato.* Or am I wrong?'

'You're wrong,' she bit back at him, infuriated at her own awkwardness, and at the pain he still had the power to cause her. 'Totally and completely mistaken. And you know it, as well as I do, so let's stop playing games.'

'Is that what we're doing?' Sandro shrugged again. 'I had not realised. Perhaps you would explain the rules to me.'

'Not rules,' she said. 'But laws. Laws that exist to deal with someone like you.'

'Dio,' he said. 'So you think our government interests itself in a man's reunion with his woman? How enlightened of them.'

'Enlightened enough to lock you up for harassment,' Polly said angrily. 'And I am not your woman.'

He grinned at her, making her realise that the scar had done little to diminish the powerful sexual charisma he'd always been able to exert, which was as basic a part of him as the breath he drew. He was lounging on the sofa opposite, jacket discarded and tie loosened, his long legs thrust out in front of him, totally at his ease. Enjoying, she thought bitterly, his control of the situation. While she remained shaken and on edge, unable to comprehend what was happening. Or why. Especially why …

'No? Perhaps we should have stayed in the bedroom after all, *cara mia,* and continued the argument there.' The topaz eyes held a familiar glint.

'You dare to lay a hand on me again,' Polly said, through gritted teeth, 'and I'll go straight to the police—have you charged.'

'With what offence? The attempted seduction of my future bride?' He shook his head regretfully. 'A girl who once spent a summer as my lover. I don't think they would take you seriously, *carissima.*'

'No,' she said. 'I expect they have to do what you want—like the *contessa.* And where is she, by the way?'

'On her way back to Comadora, where she lives.'

'But she was supposed to be staying here.'

He shook his head. 'No, Paola *mia*. I reserved the suite for myself.' He smiled at her. 'And for you to share with me.'

'If this is a joke,' Polly said, recovering herself from a stunned silence, 'I don't find it remotely funny.'

'And nor do I,' Sandro said with sudden curtness. 'This is no game, believe me. I am entirely serious.' He paused. 'Do you wish to test my determination?'

He hadn't moved, but suddenly Polly found herself remembering the strength of the arms that had held her. Recognised the implacable will that challenged her from his gaze and the sudden hardening of the mobile, sensuous mouth which had once stopped her heart with its caresses.

She bit her lip, painfully. 'No.'

'You begin to show sense at last,' he approved softly.

'Not,' she said, 'when I agreed to come to Italy today. That was really stupid of me.'

'You must not blame Zia Antonia,' he said. 'She shares your disapproval of my methods.' He shrugged. 'But if you and I had not met again tonight, then it would have been at some other time, in some other place. Or did you think I would simply allow you to vanish?'

She said coldly, 'Yes, of course. In fact, I counted on it.'

His head came up sharply, and she saw the sudden tensing of his lean body. 'You were so glad to be rid of me?'

You dare to say that—to me? After what you did?

The words trembled on the tip of her tongue, but she fought them back. He must never know how she'd felt in those dazed, agonised weeks following his rejection. How she'd ached for him, drowning in bewilderment and pain. Pride had to keep her silent now. Except in defiance.

She shrugged in her turn. 'Do you doubt it?' she retorted. 'After all, when it's over, it's over,' she added with deliberate *sang-froid.*

'You may think that, *mia cara.*' His voice slowed to a drawl. 'I do not have to agree.'

She looked down at her hands, clamped together in her lap. 'Tell me something,' she said in a low voice. 'How did you find me?'

'I was at a conference on tourism. A video was shown of a British company which looks after single travellers. You were its star, *cara mia.* I was—most impressed.'

Polly groaned inwardly. Her one and only television appearance, she thought, that her mother had been so proud of. It had never occurred to her that it might be shown outside the UK.

She said coldly, 'And you were suddenly overwhelmed by nostalgia, I suppose.'

'If so,' Sandro said with equal chill, 'I would have sighed sentimentally and got on with my life. But it reminded me that there are issues still unresolved between us.' He paused. 'As you must know, also.'

She moistened her dry lips with the tip of her tongue. 'I need to say something. To tell you that—I've never talked about you. Never discussed anything that happened between us. And I wouldn't—I give you my word …'

He stared at her, frowning. 'You wished to wipe me from your memory? Pretend I had never existed? But why?'

She swallowed, her throat tightening. *Because it hurt too much to remember,* she thought.

'Once I discovered your—your background,' she said, 'I realised it was—necessary. The only way …'

His gaze became incredulous. 'It disturbed you to find that I was rich. You'd have preferred me to be a waiter, existing on tips?' He gave a short laugh. *'Dio mio.'*

Polly sat up very straight. She said coldly, 'It was the way you'd acquired your money that I found—unacceptable. And your—connections,' she added bravely, controlling a shiver as she remembered the man who had confronted her. The scorn and menace he'd exuded.

'Unbelievable,' he said slowly. 'But if you expect me to apologise for my family, Paola, you will wait a long time.' The look he sent her was hard—unrelenting. 'I am what I am, and nothing can change that. Nor would I wish it to.'

He was silent for a moment. '*Certamente,* I hoped—at one time—that you would find it possible to live in my world. Understand how it works, and accept its limitations.'

But you soon changed your mind about that, Polly thought painfully. In fact, once you realised that I'd never be suitable, you were willing to pay a small fortune to get me out of your life altogether—and I should be grateful for that. Relieved that you sent me away, and saved me from an impossible moral dilemma. Prevented me from making a choice I might have hated myself for later, when I was sane again …

And knowing that has to be my salvation now. Has to …

She said stiltedly, 'That could—never have happened. It was better—safer for us to part.'

'You think so?' He drew a harsh breath. 'Then how is it I have been unable to forget you, Paola *mia,* no matter how hard I have tried? Or how many other women there have been in my life since you?'

She lifted her chin, resisting the sudden anguish that stabbed her. 'Am I supposed to feel flattered?'

'You ask me about your emotions?' Sandro asked derisively. 'What did I ever know about your thoughts—your feelings? I saw what I wished to see—believed what I needed to believe.'

He shook his head. '*Madonna,* how many times in these long months I have wished I could simply—dismiss you from my mind.' He paused. 'Forget you as easily as you have rejected the memory of me.'

Oh, God, Polly thought numbly, how little you know …

She tried to speak evenly. 'Life doesn't remain static. It moves on—and we have to go with it.'

'Do you go alone?' Sandro enquired, almost negligently studying his fingernails. 'Or do you have company on your journey?'

Polly tensed. 'That,' she said, 'is no concern of yours.'

'Then let us make it my concern,' he said softly. 'Because I wish to know the truth. Do you live alone?'

The question seemed to hang in the air between them while her mind ran in frantic circles, looking for a way out.

Useless to go on telling him it was none of his business. That would not deter him. On the other hand, it would be a humiliation to admit that since him, there had been no one in her life. That she existed in self-imposed celibacy.

She could invent a lover, but she'd always been a terrible liar, and the risk of him seeing through her story was too great.

And then, as if a light had dawned, she realised there was no need for invention after all.

Polly lifted her chin, and faced him. 'No,' she said, very clearly. 'I don't live alone.'

It was no more than the truth, she thought. And it might just set her free …

Sandro was very still suddenly, little golden fires leaping in his eyes as his gaze met hers. He said, 'And, naturally, your companion is male?' He watched her swift, jerky nod.

There was another silence, then he said harshly, 'Do you love him?'

Unbidden, an image of Charlie's small sleeping face invaded her mind, and her mouth curved involuntarily, instinctively into tenderness.

'Yes,' she said. 'And I always will.'

As soon as she spoke the words, she knew they were a mistake. That she'd snatched at a means of escape from him, without fully considering the consequences. And that she could have gone too far.

'You dare to tell me that?' His voice crackled with suppressed anger.

Her heart jolted nervously, but she knew that she had to finish what she'd started. That she had no other choice.

She tilted her chin defiantly. 'What did you expect? That I'd stay single in memory of you? Like you remained celibate for me?' she added scornfully. 'Dream on—please.'

Sandro's eyes were fixed on her, a slow flame burning in their depths. 'And how long has he been part of your life? The truth.'

She touched the tip of her tongue to her dry lips. 'Two years—or so.'

'So,' he said slowly. 'You went from my arms to his.' His gaze went over her, measuring and contemptuous. 'I see you wear no ring.'

She swallowed. 'That's my own choice.'

'And have you whispered the same promises to him that you once made to me?' His voice was quiet. Compelling.

She hesitated, choosing her words with care. 'He knows that I'll—always be there for him.'

'How touching,' Sandro said softly. 'Yet you left him to come to Italy.' His sudden smile was cool. Dangerous. 'And to me.'

'I believed I was working for the *contessa,*' Polly returned fiercely, trying to conceal the fact that she was shaking inside, nearing the edge of panic. 'I had no idea that she could be a relation of yours—or that you were even in the region. If I'd known, I wouldn't be here.'

She flung back her head. 'So, how did you persuade her to do your dirty work? Bribery—or blackmail?'

His mouth thinned. 'You are not amusing, *carissima.* Be very careful.'

'Why?' she challenged recklessly. 'I already know the lengths you're prepared to go to—when there's something you want.'

Or when you've stopped wanting …

You sent me away, she thought. *So why are you here now, tormenting me like this—reviving all these unwanted memories?*

Her throat ached suddenly at the thought of them. But that was a weakness she couldn't afford, because the room seemed to be shrinking, the walls closing in, diminishing the space between them. A space she needed to maintain at all costs.

‘I wonder if that’s true.’ Sandro’s voice was quiet—reflective. ‘Perhaps you don’t know me as well as you think.’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘that hardly matters any more.’ She paused. ‘And I don’t think there’s much point in continuing this discussion either.’

His smile twisted. ‘Then we agree on something at last.’

‘So, if you can tell me where to find my shoes and jacket, I’ll go.’

‘Back to him? Your *innamorato*?’

‘Back to my life,’ Polly said, lifting her chin. ‘In which you have no part, *signore*.’

‘I can hardly argue with that,’ Sandro shrugged. ‘You will find your belongings in the bedroom, Paola *mia*.’

He did not, she noticed, offer to fetch them for her, as the Sandro she’d once known would have done.

Don’t fool yourself, she thought as she trod, barefoot, into the bedroom and paused, looking around her. As he said—you never really knew him at all.

Her jacket and bag were on a small sofa by the window, her shoes arranged neatly beneath it. As she reached them she was aware of a sound behind her, and turned.

Sandro had followed her, she realised, her heart missing a beat. She hadn’t been aware of his approach, because he too had discarded his shoes. But the noise she’d heard was the sound of the door closing behind him, shutting them in together.

And now he was leaning back against its panels, watching her with hooded eyes, his expression cool and purposeful as, with one hand, he began to unfasten the buttons on his shirt.

Polly felt the breath catch in her throat. With a supreme effort, she controlled her voice, keeping it steady. ‘Another game, *signore*?’

‘No game at all, *signorina*.’ Cynically, he echoed her formality. ‘As I am sure you know perfectly well.’

She had picked up her bag, and was holding it so tightly that the strap cut into her fingers. ‘I—I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

Sandro tutted. ‘Now you’re being dishonest, *bella mia,* but I expected that.’ He allowed his discarded shirt to drop to the floor, and began to walk towards her.

She swallowed. ‘I think you must be going crazy.’

‘Possibly,’ he said with sudden harshness. ‘And I want to be sane again.’ He halted, the topaz eyes blazing at her. ‘You are under my skin, Paola. In my blood, like a fever that refuses to be healed. And that is no longer acceptable to me. So, I plan to cure myself of you once and for all—and in the only possible way.’

‘No.’ She stared back at him, her appalled heart thudding frantically. ‘No, Sandro. You can’t do this. I—I won’t let you.’

‘You really believe you have a choice?’ He gave a short laugh. ‘I know better.’

She backed away until her retreat was cut off by the wall behind her. Until he reached her.

‘Please, Sandro,’ she whispered. ‘Please let me go.’

He laughed again, touching a finger to her trembling lips, before outlining the curve of her jaw, and stroking down the delicate line of her throat to the neckline of her dress.

‘Once I have finished with you, *carissima*,’ he drawled insolently, ‘you are free to go anywhere you wish.’

‘Do you want me to hate you?’ Her voice pleaded with him.

‘I thought you already did.’ Almost casually, he detached her bag from her grasp and tossed it to one side, his brows snapping together as he saw the marks on her skin.

He lifted both her hands to his lips, letting them move caressingly on the redness the leather strap had left.

‘I had almost forgotten how easily you bruise.’ His voice was low and husky. ‘I shall have to be careful.’

Her whole body shivered at the touch of his mouth on her flesh, the aching, delirious memories it evoked. And the promise of further, dangerous delights in his whispered words.

A promise she could not allow him to keep.

She snatched her hands from his grip, and pushed violently at the bare, tanned wall of his chest, catching him off balance. As Sandro was forced into a step backwards, she dodged past, running for the door.

With no shoes and no money, she was going nowhere, but if she could just get out of this bedroom it might be possible to reason with him—deflect him from his apparent purpose.

She flung herself at the door handle, twisted it one way, then the other, trying to drag the door open, but it wouldn’t budge an inch, and she realised with horror that he must have locked it too—and taken the key.

‘Trying to escape again.’ His voice was sardonic, his hands hard on her shoulders as he swung her relentlessly to face him. ‘Not this time, *bella mia*.’ His smile mocked her. ‘Not, at least, until you have said a proper goodbye to me.’

‘Sandro.’ Her voice cracked. ‘You can’t do this. You must let me go …’

‘Back to your lover? Surely he can spare me a little of your time and attention first. After all, he has reaped the benefit of our previous association, wouldn’t you say?’ He paused. ‘And, naturally, I am intrigued to know if your repertoire has increased since then.’

Her face was white, her eyes like emerald hollows, as she stared up at him, her skin seared by his words.

She said chokingly, ‘You bastard.’

‘If you insist on calling me bad names,’ Sandro said softly, ‘I have no option but to stop you speaking at all.’ And his mouth came down hard on hers.

She tried to struggle—to pull away from him, so that she could talk to him—appeal, even on the edge, to his better nature. Tell him that his actions were an outrage—a crime. But what did that matter to someone who lived his life outside the law anyway? her reeling mind demanded.

Her efforts were in vain. The arm that held her had muscles of steel. At the same time, his free hand was loosening the dishevelled knot of her hair, his fingers twisting in its silky strands to hold her still for the ravishment of his kiss.

Her breasts were crushed against his naked chest. She could feel the warmth of his skin penetrating her thin dress. Felt the heat surge in her own body to meet it.

She heard herself moan faintly in anguished protest—pleading that this man, to whom she’d once given her innocence, would not now take her by force.

But Sandro used the slight parting of her lips for his own advantage, deepening the intimacy of his kiss with sensual intensity as his tongue invaded the moist sweetness of her mouth.

No sign now of the tenderness with which he’d caressed her fingers only moments ago. Just the urgency of a need too powerful to be denied any longer.

A fever in the blood, he’d called it, she thought in a kind of despair, her starved body craving him in turn. And how was it possible that she could feel like this? That she could want him so desperately in return?

When at last he raised his head, the scar on his face was livid against the fierce burn of colour along his taut cheekbones.

He said, ‘Take off your dress,’ his voice hoarse, shaken. And when he saw her hesitate, ‘Or do you wish me to tear it off you?’

‘No.’ She sounded small and breathless. ‘I—I’ll do it.’ She turned away from him, as her shaking fingers fought with the buttons. When half of them were loose, she pushed the navy linen from her shoulders, freeing her arms from the sleeves as she did so, and letting the dress fall to the floor.

She faced him slowly, her arms crossed defensively across her body, trying to conceal the scraps of white broderie anglaise that were now her only covering.

'But how delicious,' he said, softly. 'Bought for your lover?'

Polly shook her hair back from her face. 'I dress to please myself.'

'Ah,' he said. 'And now you will undress to please me. *Per favore*,' he added silkily.

She could hear nothing but the wild drumming of her own pulses, and the tear of her ragged breathing. See nothing but the heated flare of hunger in his eyes. A hunger without gentleness, demanding to be appeased.

And his hands reaching for her—like some ruthless hawk about to seize his prey.

Not like this, she thought in anguish. Oh, dear God, not like this. Not to lie naked in his arms and be taken—enjoyed for one night alone. To be used, however skilfully, just so that he could get her out of his system, only to find herself discarded all over again when his need for her was finally assuaged. And to be forced to go through all that suffering a second time—unappeased.

It was unthinkable—unbearable.

Her voice shook. 'Sandro—please—don't hurt me …'

She paused, knowing she was on the edge of complete self-betrayal here. Realising too that she must not let him see that he still had the power to inflict more misery on her.

The sudden silence was total. He was completely still, apart from a muscle which moved swiftly, convulsively in his throat.

When at last he spoke, his voice was hoarse. '*Dio mio,* you think that I'm going to rape you? That I might be capable of such a thing?' He shook his head. 'How could you believe that? It is an insult to everything we have ever been to each other.'

He lifted his hand, and touched the scar. 'This has only altered my face, Paola. It has not turned me into a monster.'

'I—I didn't mean …' Polly began, then bit her lip. This was a misunderstanding that she could not put right—not without the kind of explanation she was desperate to avoid, she told herself wretchedly.

'Basta,' Sandro said sharply. 'Enough.' He bent and retrieved his shirt from the floor, dragging it on with swift, jerky movements.

'Now dress yourself and go,' he instructed icily. 'And be quick. Otherwise I might lose all self-respect, and justify your low opinion of me. Punish you in the way you deserve,' he added grimly.

He went to the door, unlocked it, then turned.

'Remember this, *mia bella.*' His voice grated across her taut nerve-endings, just as his contemptuous gaze flayed her skin. 'Even if I had taken you there on the floor like the *sciattona* you are, it would still not have been rape.' He smiled at her with insolent certainty. 'You know it as well as I do, so do not fool yourself.

'Now, get out of my sight,' he added curtly, and left, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER THREE

SHE had missed her plane, but eventually managed to catch the last flight of the evening, thanks to a no-show.

Her escape from the hotel had been easier than she could have hoped. She had dressed quickly, her shaking hands fumbling so badly with the buttons on her dress that she had to begin again.

Then she'd wasted precious moments listening tautly at the door for some sound from the room beyond. Dreading that Sandro might be waiting there for her, still angry and possibly vengeful.

But when she had finally risked taking a look, the room was completely deserted, and she left on the run. The hotel commissionaire had summoned a cab for her, allotting her dishevelled state a discreetly impassive glance.

She had prowled around the airport, her eyes everywhere. Terrified that he might change his mind, and come to find her. To prevent her from leaving. Even when she presented her boarding card, she was half expecting his hand to reach over her shoulder and take it from her.

When the plane finally took off, she was almost sick with relief. She ordered a double brandy from the stewardess, and fell asleep before she'd drunk half of it.

She took a cab from the airport to her flat, unlocking the door and falling inside in the same movement. There was a strange empty chill about the place that she had never experienced before, that seemed to match the cold hollow inside her.

A voice in her head whispered, 'You're safe—you're safe …' But somehow she couldn't believe it. She even found herself picking her way in the darkness to her living-room window, and drawing the curtains before she switched on the lights.

Then she sank down on the sofa, and tried to stop trembling.

I didn't suspect a thing, she thought. To me, the *contessa* was simply another very demanding client, nothing more—but it was all a trick.

She had to be deeply in Sandro's power to agree to something like that, Polly told herself, and shivered as she remembered how nearly she'd surrendered to that power herself.

Oh, God, she thought. He only had to touch me …

But it had always been like that. From the first time his hand had taken hers as they walked together, her body had responded with wild yearning to his touch. She had hungered and thirsted for his mouth on hers—for the brush of his fingers over her ardent flesh. For the ultimate mystery of his body joined to hers.

Sandro had enraptured her every sense, and she had mistaken that for love. And he had cynically allowed that—had said the words she wanted to hear—whispered the promises that would keep her enthralled until he chose to leave her.

She'd been just one more girl in his bed, easily discarded, instantly replaced. Except that he'd caught a fleeting glimpse of her on television and discovered, for some inexplicable reason, that he still wanted her.

Sandro Domenico, she thought painfully. A man rich enough to pay for his whims, and powerful enough to pull the strings that would satisfy them.

And yet he'd let her go, outraged at the idea that he could rape her physically, but too arrogant to realise he'd already done far worse damage to her emotionally.

Still, it was over now, and she had nothing more to fear. She'd insulted his sense of honour, such as it was, and he would never come near her again.

In fact, she'd got off comparatively lightly, she told herself. Yes, she was bruised by his anger and disgust, but she'd recover from that—given time. And her future held plenty of that.

In some ways, it all seemed like a bad dream—some torment dredged up from the depths of her unconscious. But the faint lingering tenderness of her lips forced her to face reality.

Wincing, she touched her mouth with her fingertips, telling herself that it could all have been so much worse. That at this moment, she might have been in his bed, and in his arms, with a whole new cycle of heartbreak and regret to endure.

For all she knew he could be married to someone 'suitable'. A dynastic union from the criminal network he belonged to, she thought with a pang.

But she—she was all right, she rallied herself. She'd had a narrow escape, that was all.

Just the same, her vague plans for a change of location had become a firm resolve as a result of the past twenty-four hours.

She and Charlie would move, somewhere anonymous and preferably far away. And, to ensure she could never be so easily traced again, she'd find out the legal implications of changing her name.

Drastic measures, she thought, but, in view of her recent scare, perfectly justified.

She stripped in her tiny bathroom, putting her clothing in the laundry basket, then took a shower, scrubbing herself from top to toe, and even shampooing her hair to make sure she erased every trace of him.

She only wished she could wash away the memories of the heated pressure of his mouth, and the familiar, arousing scent of his skin just as easily.

Dear God, she thought, towelling her hair with more than necessary vigour, that is—frighteningly pathetic.

She put on her cotton housecoat, belting it securely round her slim waist, and trailed into the kitchen.

She needed a hot drink, but not with the additional stimulus of caffeine. She'd have enough trouble sleeping as it was through what little was left of the night.

No, she'd have a herbal tea instead, she decided. A *tisana* at bedtime was a habit she'd acquired in Italy. One of the good ones, she amended wryly.

While the kettle was boiling, she wandered back into the living room, and, for reasons she couldn't properly explain, crossed to the window, and pulled back the edge of the curtain slightly.

The road below seemed empty, or was there an added density among the shadows opposite, in a gateway just out of the range of the street light?

No, she thought, hurriedly letting the curtain fall back into place. It was simply her imagination. Sandro had traced her through her work, simply and easily, so there was no need for him to compile a complete dossier on her.

Because if he'd done so, he'd have realised at once that her 'live-in lover' was pure invention, and told her so. And he'd have known, too, about Charlie …

She turned her head, staring at the chest of drawers, and the framed photograph that occupied pride of place. Charlie, on his second birthday. His father's image smiling at her.

Sandro's out of your life, she told herself feverishly. He's gone.

Nevertheless, on the way back to the kitchen, Polly found herself taking Charlie's portrait off the chest, and stowing it in the top drawer instead.

Better, she thought, safe than sorry, and shivered again.

Polly slept badly, in spite of her *tisana.* When morning came, she telephoned Safe Hands, said quite truthfully that she felt like death, then crawled back into bed and slept until lunchtime.

She woke with a start, thinking of Charlie. Why was she wasting time, when she could have the bonus of a whole afternoon in his company without the distractions of shopping and housework?

She rang her mother's house but there was no reply, so she left a message on the answering machine to say she would be over to collect him in an hour.

She took a quick shower, then dressed in a casual blue denim skirt, topping it with a crisp white cotton shirt, and sliding her feet into flat brown leather sandals. She brushed her hair back from her face and secured it at the nape of her neck with a silver barette, and hung small blue enamel cornflowers on delicate silver chains from her earlobes.

She had some work to do with the blusher and concealer she kept for emergencies, or her mother would guess something was wrong. And Polly had enough bad news to give her without mentioning Sandro's shock reappearance in her life.

But that was all over, so there was no need to cause her further distress, she told herself firmly, applying her lipstick and attempting an experimental smile which, somehow, turned into a wry grimace.

Positive thinking, she adjured herself, and, grabbing her bag, she left.

The house seemed unusually quiet when she let herself in, and Polly paused, frowning a little. Surely her mother hadn't taken Charlie out somewhere, she thought, groaning inwardly. Was this the latest move in the battle of wits between them? She hoped not.

She kept her voice deliberately cheerful. 'Mum—Dad—are you there?'

'We're in the living room.' It was her mother's voice, high-pitched and strained.

Her frown deepening, Polly pushed open the door and walked in.

It wasn't a particularly large room, and her instant impression was that it had shrunk still further in some strange way.

The first person she saw was her mother, sitting in the chair beside the empty fireplace, her face a mask of tension, and Charlie clasped tightly on her lap.

The second was a complete stranger, stockily built with black hair and olive skin, who rose politely from the sofa at her entrance.

And the third, unbelievably, was Sandro, standing silently in the window alcove, as if he had been carved out of granite.

For a moment the room seemed to reel around her, then she steadied herself, her hands clenching into fists, her nails scoring her palms. She was *not,* under any circumstances, going to faint again.

She said hoarsely, 'What the *hell* are you doing here?'

'Is it not obvious?' The topaz eyes were as fierce as a leopard's, and as dangerous. His voice was ice. 'I have come for my son. And please do not try to deny his parentage,' he added bitingly. 'Because no court in the world would believe you. He is my image.' He paused. 'But I warn you that I am prepared to undergo DNA testing to prove paternity, if it becomes necessary.'

Polly stared at him, her stomach churning, her heart pounding against her ribs. 'You must be mad.'

'I was.' His smile was grim. 'Before I discovered quite what a treacherous little bitch you are, Paola *mia.* But now I am sane again, and I want my child.'

Her low voice shook. 'Over my dead body.'

He said softly, 'The way I feel at this moment, that could easily be arranged. Do not provoke me any further.'

'He's going to take him away from us,' her mother wailed suddenly. 'Take him to Italy. I'll never see him again.'

Horror caught Polly by the throat. She turned on Sandro. 'You can't do that.'

'And what is there to stop me?' His glance challenged her.

'It—it's kidnapping,' Polly flung at him. She took a breath. 'Although I suppose that's an everyday occurrence in your world.'

And it was more common than she wanted to admit in her own, she thought numbly. There'd been numerous headlines in the papers over the past few years where children had been snatched and taken abroad by a parent. They called them 'tug of love' babies …

She looked with scorn at the other man, who had got quietly to his feet. 'And what are you—another of his tame thugs?'

His brows rose. 'My name is Alberto Molena, *signorina,* and I am a lawyer. I act for the *marchese* in this matter.'

Polly gave him a scornful glance. ‘Don’t you mean you’re his *consigliere*?’ she queried with distaste.

He paused, sending Sandro a surprised look. ‘May I suggest that you sit down, Signorina Fairfax, and remain calm? It would be better too if the little boy was taken to another room. I think he’s becoming frightened.’

‘I have a better suggestion,’ Polly flared. ‘Why don’t you and your dubious client get out of here, and leave us alone?’

His tone was still quiet, still courteous. ‘I’m afraid that isn’t possible. You must understand that your child is the first-born son, and thus the heir of the Marchese Valessi, and that he intends to apply through the courts for sole custody of the boy. Although you will be permitted proper access, naturally.’

He looked at Charlie, who was round-eyed, his knuckles pushed into his mouth. ‘But, believe me, it would be better if the little boy was spared any more upset from this discussion. We have a trained nanny waiting to look after him.’

He walked to the door and called. A pleasant-faced girl in a smart maroon uniform came in and removed Charlie gently but firmly from his grandmother’s almost frenzied grasp, talking to him softly as she carried him out of the room.

‘Where’s she taking him?’ Polly demanded shakily.

‘Into the garden,’ the lawyer told her, adding less reassuringly, ‘For the time being.’

She swallowed convulsively, turning to the silent man by the window. ‘Sandro.’ Her voice was pleading, all pride forgotten. ‘Please don’t do this. Don’t try to take him away from me.’

‘I have already been deprived of the first two years of his life,’ he returned implacably. ‘There will be no more separation.’ His lip curled. ‘How remiss of you, *cara mia,* not to inform me of his existence. Even last night, when we talked so intimately about your living arrangements, you said nothing—gave no hint that you had borne me a child. Did you really think you could keep him hidden forever?’

She moistened her dry lips. ‘How—how did you find out?’

He shrugged. ‘I employed an agency to trace you. They suggested broadening the scope of their enquiries.’ His voice was expressionless. ‘I received their full report last night after you left. It made fascinating reading.’

She stared down at the carpet. ‘So there was someone watching me when I got back,’ she said almost inaudibly.

‘Can you wonder?’ Sandro returned contemptuously. ‘I have a beautiful son, Paola, and you deliberately barred me from his life. You preferred to struggle alone than ask me for help—or give me the joy of knowing I was a father.’ His gaze was cold, level. ‘How can such a thing be forgiven?’

‘It was over between us.’ Polly lifted her chin. ‘What did you expect me to do—beg?’

‘I think,’ he said softly, ‘that is something you may have to learn for the future.’

There was a silence. Polly could hear her mother weeping softly.

‘No court in the world,’ she said huskily, ‘would take a baby away from his mother.’

‘Yet it is his grandmother who has the care of him each day.’ His tone was harsh. ‘I was watching when you came into the room, and he did not try to go to you. Is he even aware that you are his mother?’

Polly gasped, and her head went back as if he had slapped her.

She said unsteadily, ‘I go out to work to support us both. As the *contessa* has probably told you, the hours can be long and difficult. But I needed the money, so I had no choice.’

‘Yes,’ he said, his voice quiet and cold. ‘You did. You could have chosen me. All that was needed was one word—one sign.’

There was an odd intensity in his voice, which startled and bewildered her. And also rekindled her anger.

He talks, she thought, as if I deserted him.

A sudden noise from her mother—something between a sigh and a groan—distracted her, and she went over and sat on the arm of her chair, putting an arm round her shoulders.

Oh, God, she thought. To think I was going to tell her that I was taking Charlie away. But how could I have guessed this was going to happen?

'It's going to be all right, Mum,' she said softly. 'I promise.'

'How can it be?' Mrs Fairfax demanded, almost hysterically. 'He's going to take my little treasure to Italy, and I can't bear it.' She reared up from Polly's sheltering arm, glaring venomously at Sandro, who was regarding her with narrowed eyes, his mouth hard and set. 'How dare you come here, ruining our lives like this?' she stormed. 'Get out of my house. And never come back.'

'You are not the only one to suffer, *signora.*' His tone was almost dismissive. He looked at Polly. 'But it would be better for my son to be looked after by someone else until the custody hearing. The nanny I have engaged will move in with you.'

'She can't,' Polly told him curtly. 'My flat is far too small for that.'

He shrugged. 'Then you will be found somewhere else to live.'

'I don't want that,' she said raggedly. 'I don't want anything from you. I just need you to go, and leave us in peace.'

'The *marchese* is being generous, Signorina Fairfax,' Alberto Molena intervened unexpectedly. 'He could ask for the child to be transferred to the care of a temporary guardian while the custody issue is decided.'

'And, of course, he's so sure he'll get custody.' Polly got to her feet, her eyes blazing. 'So bloody arrogant and all-conquering. But what court's going to hand over a baby to someone with his criminal connections? And I'll make sure they know all about his underworld background,' she added defiantly. 'Whatever the cost.'

There was a stunned silence. Then Sandro muttered, *'Dio mio,'* and turned sharply, walking back to the window, his fists clenched at his sides.

Signor Molena's voice was hushed. 'I think you're making a grave mistake, *signorina.* Since the death of his father, the *marchese* has become head of an old and much respected family in southern Italy, and chairman of a business empire with strong interests in the tourist industry among other things.'

He spread his hands almost helplessly. 'You must surely have heard of the Comadora chain of hotels? They are internationally famous.'

'Yes.' Polly had to force suddenly numbed lips to form the words. Her shocked gaze went from his embarrassed face to Sandro's rigid back. 'Yes, I know about them.'

Signor Molena paused, awkwardly. 'And *marchese* means "marquis" in your language. It is an aristocratic title, not what you seem to think.' He shook his head. 'To suggest that any member of the Valessi family has ever been linked with criminal elements would be a serious slander if it were not so laughable.'

Polly had never felt less like laughing in her entire life. If she'd been cold before, she was now consumed in an agony of burning humiliation, blushing from her feet to the top of her head.

She wrapped her arms defensively round her body. 'I—I'm sorry,' she mumbled.

Behind her, her mother moaned faintly, and sank back in her chair.

Sandro turned slowly and studied them both reflectively. When he spoke his voice was calm but there was no sign of softening in his attitude.

'That is what you thought?' he asked. 'What you really believed, in spite of everything? It almost defies belief. Almost,' he added quietly, 'but not quite. And it explains a great deal.'

He paused. 'I understand from the *signora,* your mother, that your father is at his office. Perhaps he could be fetched. I do not think that she should be alone.'

Polly shook herself into action. 'Yes—yes, I'll telephone him. And her doctor …' She went out into the hall, standing helplessly for a moment as she tried to remember the number. Realising her mind was a blank.

Sandro followed, closing the door of the living room behind him.

She didn't look at him, doggedly turning the leaves of the directory. 'What—what will happen now?'

'The legal process will begin. But for tonight you may take Carlino to sleep at your *appartamento.*'

'Thank you,' she said with irony.

'The *bambinaia,* whose name is Julie Cole, will accompany you to put him to bed,' he went on, as if she hadn't spoken. 'Then she will return in the morning at seven o'clock to take care of him.'

He spoke as if he was conducting a board meeting, Polly thought incredulously, rather than trying to destroy her life.

She said, 'We could all stay here, perhaps. There's—plenty of room.'

'No,' he said. 'This is not an environment I want for my son.'

Why? she wanted to cry. Because it's an ordinary suburban house rather than a *palazzo*? Just as I was an ordinary girl, and therefore not deemed as a suitable candidate to become your *marchesa*?

She could see now why it had been so important to pay her off, in order to get rid of her. There was too much at stake dynastically to allow a mistake like herself to enter the equation.

The old pain was back like a knife twisting inside her. A pain that her pride forbade her to let him see. So she would never ask the question 'Why did you leave me?' because she now knew the answer to that, beyond all doubt.

Besides, it would expose the fact that she cared, and that he still had the power to hurt her. And she needed that to remain her secret, and her solitary torment.

Besides, at the moment she was faced with all the suffering she could handle.

Unless she could divert him from his purpose somehow, she thought. Unless …

She picked up the phone irresolutely, then put it down again. She said quickly, before her courage ran out, 'Sandro, it doesn't have to be like this. Surely we could work something out. Share custody in some way.'

His mouth thinned. 'I am expected to trust you? When you have deliberately kept our child from me and even claimed to have a lover to sustain the deception? How much do you think your word is worth?'

Polly swallowed. 'I don't blame you for being angry.'

'Mille grazie.' His tone was sardonic.

'And maybe doing my best to be Charlie's mother hasn't been good enough,' she went on, bravely. 'But he doesn't know you at all, and if he was just whisked off to another country among strangers, however well-meaning, he'd be disorientated—scared. He—he's shy with people at first.'

'A trait he shares with you, *mia bella,* if memory serves,' Sandro drawled with cool mockery.

She remembered too. Recalled how gentle and considerate he had been that first time in bed together. How he'd coaxed her out of her clothes and her initial inhibitions.

She flushed hotly and angrily. 'May we cut out the personal reminiscences?' she requested curtly.

He shrugged. 'It is difficult to see how. Making a child together is an intensely personal matter.' He paused. 'And by the time I take Carlino to Italy, we will be well acquainted with each other. I guarantee that. And my own old nurse, Dorotea, will be waiting to look after him. The transition will not be too hard.'

But it will be agony for me, she thought, her throat tightening convulsively. First I lost you, and now you're trying to take Charlie away. And already I feel as if I'm dying inside.

She said tonelessly, 'I'd better make those calls.'

He inclined his head courteously, and went past her, and out into the garden.

Presently, distant but gleeful, Charlie's laughter came to her on the light summer wind, and she stood, staring in front of her unseeingly, her teeth sunk so deeply into her lower lip that she could taste blood.

She wanted to hate Julie Cole, but it was impossible. She was too kind, too tactful, and she thought that Charlie was heaven on legs.

And if she knew that her job was more for security than enjoyment, she kept that to herself.

The creamy scrambled eggs she made for supper were good too, and Charlie loved the triangles of buttered toast that went with them, although Polly could barely force her portion past the sick, scared lump in her throat.

She had wanted to wait at the house to talk to her father, or perhaps just put her head down on his shoulder and cry out her fear, but suddenly there was a car and driver at the gate, and Sandro was insisting quietly but implacably that she should take Charlie home.

She'd begun a protest, but Sandro had simply looked at her, his brows lifted haughtily, questioningly, and the words seemed to stutter and die on her lips.

'You begin to learn,' he had approved coldly.

She had been shaken to find him carrying Charlie down to the car in his arms, and found herself hoping that the little boy would have one of his infrequent tantrums, kicking, screaming and reaching for her as proof that no one else would do.

He didn't; nor did he burst into tears when Sandro had gently but firmly removed his thumb from his mouth.

She had said defensively, 'He doesn't really do that any more. Only when he's tired—or frightened.'

'All the more reason, then, to take him home,' Sandro had retorted unarguably.

She could only imagine the kind of scene that would erupt once her father returned, and her mother had some solid support.

'I'll make your father sell the house,' she'd hissed at Polly as she was leaving. 'Marquis or not, I'm going to fight this man through every court in the land.'

Polly sighed silently. She really doesn't know what she's up against, she thought unhappily. And I'm only just beginning to find out, too.

Only twenty-four hours ago or less, she'd been planning for her life to change, but not to this extreme, catastrophic extent. She'd seen a period of struggle ahead, but never the bleak desert of loneliness that now threatened her.

'He may not win,' she thought. And only realised she'd spoken aloud when Julie said, 'Are you all right, Miss Fairfax?'

Polly jumped, then mustered an attempt at a smile. 'Yes, fine,' she lied.

Julie studied her dubiously. 'I saw some white wine in the fridge while I was getting the eggs. Why don't you sit down and put your feet up, while I do the dishes, and then I'll bring you a glass?'

I don't want a glass, thought Polly. I want a bottle, a cellar, a whole vineyard. I want the edges of my pain blurred, and to be able to stop thinking.

She cleared her throat. 'I know Sandro—the *marchese*

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