



THE
Sicilian's
STOLEN SON

MODERN™



LYNNE GRAHAM

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The Sicilian's Stolen Son

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At the Sicilian's bidding...and bedding!The only link Jemima Barber has to her troubled late twin sister is her nephew. So when the boy's father storms into their lives, to reclaim the child who was stolen from him, Jemima lets the forbidding Sicilian believe she is her smooth seductress of a sister. Though his son's mother might be gentler than Luciano Vitale remembers, he's resolved to make her pay in the most pleasurable way imaginable. But when he discovers she's a virgin – her secret is out! Now Luciano has a new proposal: Jemima can atone for her sister's sins...by becoming his wife!

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‘I’m only here for Nicky,’ she reminded him shakily.

‘Liar... My son was not your primary motivation,’ Luciano derided in a raw undertone, thoroughly fed up with her foolish pretences. ‘You came here to be with me. Of course you did.’

Jemima looked up at him, scanning the dark golden eyes that inexplicably turned her insides to mush and made her knees boneless. As he lowered his head her breath caught in her throat and her pupils dilated. Without warning his mouth crashed down on hers with hungry force. That kiss was what she really wanted ... what her body mysteriously craved.

He kissed her, and it was simultaneously everything she most wanted and everything she most feared. She wanted him. He was right about that. She had never wanted anything or anybody as much as she wanted Luciano at that moment.

Ducking out of reach, and barefoot, Jemima darted round him and pelted out through the door as though baying hounds were chasing her.

Luciano didn’t understand why she was running away. What possible benefit could she hope to attain by infuriating him? And then the penny dropped and he wondered why he had not immediately grasped her strategy. After all, it was an exceedingly basic strategy: she wanted *more*. And she knew he was rich enough to deliver a *lot* more.

LYNNE GRAHAM was born in Northern Ireland and has been a keen romance reader since her teens. She is very happily married to an understanding husband who has learned to cook since she started to write! Her five children keep her on her toes. She has a very large dog who knocks everything over, a very small terrier who barks a lot, and two cats. When time allows, Lynne is a keen gardener.

The Sicilian’s
Stolen Son
Lynne Graham



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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

LUCIANO VITALE'S LONDON LAWYER, Charles Bennett, greeted him the moment he stepped off his private jet. The Sicilian billionaire and the professional exchanged polite small talk. Luciano stalked like a lion that had already picked up the scent of prey in the air, impatience and innate aggression girding every step.

He had tracked her down...at last. The thieving child stealer, Jemima Barber. There were no adequate words to convey his loathing for the woman who had stolen his son and then tried to sell the baby back to him like a product. It galled him even more that he would not be able to bring the full force of the law down on Jemima. Not only did he not want his private life laid open to the world's media again, but he was also all too aware of the likely long-term repercussions of such a vengeful act. Hadn't he suffered enough at the hands of the press while his wife was alive? These days Luciano very much preferred the shadows to the full glare of daylight and the endless libellous headlines that had followed his every move throughout his marriage.

Even so, Luciano still walked tall and every female head in his vicinity turned to appreciate his passing. He stood six feet four inches tall, with the build of a natural athlete, not to mention the stunning good looks he had been born with. Not a single flaw marred his golden skin, straight nose or the high cheekbones and hollows that combined to lend him the haunting beauty of a fallen angel. He cared not at all for his beautiful face, though, indeed had learned to see it as a flaw that attracted unwelcome attention.

As it was, it was intolerable to him that in spite of taking every precaution he had almost lost a second child. Instantly he reprimanded himself for making that assumption. He could not know for certain that the boy was his until the DNA testing had been done. It was perfectly possible that the surrogate mother he had chosen for the role had slept with other men at the time of the artificial insemination. She had broken every other clause of the agreement they had signed, so why not that one as well?

But, if the baby was his as he hoped, would it take after its lying, cheating mother? Was there such a thing as bad genes? He refused to accept that. His own life stood testament to that belief because he was the last in a long ruthless line of men, famed for their contempt for the law and their cruelty. There could be no taint in an innocent child, merely inclinations that could be encouraged or discouraged. He reminded himself that on paper his son's mother had appeared eminently respectable. The only child of elderly, financially indebted parents, she had presented herself as a trained infant teacher with a love of growing vegetables and cookery. Unfortunately her true interests, which he had only discovered after she had run from the hospital with the child, had proved to be a good deal less respectable. She was a sociopathic promiscuous thrill-seeker who overspent, gambled and stole without conscience when she ran out of money.

Time and time again he had blamed himself for his decision not to physically meet with the mother of his child, not to personalise in any way what was essentially a business arrangement. Would he have recognised her true nature if he had? He had not expected her to want to see him either, when he came to collect the child from the hospital after the birth, but in the event he had arrived there to learn that she had already vanished, leaving behind only a note that spelt out her financial demands. By then she had found out how rich he was and only greed had motivated her.

'I must ask,' Charles murmured in the tense silence within the limousine. 'Do you intend to tip off the police about the lady's whereabouts?'

Luciano tensed, his wide sensual mouth compressing. 'No, I do not.'

'May I ask...' Choosing tact over frank frustration, Charles left the question hanging, wishing that his wealthiest client would be a little more forthcoming. But Luciano Vitale, the only child of Sicily's once most petrifying Mafia don, had always been a male of forbidding reserve. A billionaire at the age of thirty, he was a hugely successful businessman and, to the best of Charles's knowledge, resolutely legitimate in all his dealings. And yet his very name still struck fear into those who surrounded him and they paled and trembled in the face of his displeasure. His loathing for the paparazzi, and the ever lingering danger of his criminal ancestry making him the target of a hit, ensured that he was encircled by bodyguards, who kept the rest of the world at bay. In so many ways, Luciano Vitale remained a complete mystery. Charles would have given much to know why a man with so many more appealing options had chosen to pick a surrogate mother to bring a child into the world.

'I will not be responsible for sending the apparent mother of my son to prison,' Luciano said without any expression at all. 'There is no doubt in my mind that Jemima deserves to go to prison but I do not wish to be the instrument that puts her there.'

'Quite understandable,' Charles chimed in, although it was a polite lie because he did not understand at all. 'However, the police are already looking for her and notifying them of her location could be done most discreetly.'

'And then what?' Luciano prompted. 'The elderly grandparents receive custody of my son? And the authorities are forced to enter the picture to consider his welfare? You have already warned me that surrogacy arrangements receive a divergent and uncertain reception within the UK court system. I will not take any risk that could entail losing all rights to my son.'

'But the Barber woman has already made it clear that she will only surrender the boy for a substantial sum of money...and you must not, you cannot offer her cash because that would put you on the wrong side of British law.'

'I will find some acceptable and legal way to bring this matter to a satisfactory conclusion,' Luciano breathed softly, lean brown fingers flexing impatiently on his thighs. 'Without damaging publicity or a court case or sending her to prison.'

Warily encountering his client's cold dark eyes, Charles suppressed a shiver and tried not to think about how Luciano's forebears had preferred to clear their paths of human obstacles: with cold-blooded murder and mayhem. He told himself off for that imaginative flight of fancy but he could not forget that chilling look in Luciano's gaze or his notorious ruthlessness in business. He might not kill his competitors but he had never been a man to cross and was known to exact harsh retribution from those who offended him. He doubted very much that Jemima Barber had the slightest comprehension of the very dangerous consequences she had invited when she had reneged on her legal agreement with Luciano Vitale.

Sì, Luciano brooded, he would achieve his goal because he always got what he wanted and anything less was unthinkable, particularly when it came to his son's well-being. If the little boy proved to be his, he would take him whatever the cost because he could not possibly leave an innocent child in the care of such a mother.

* * *

Jemima tidied the flowers on her sister's grave. Her crystalline blue eyes were stinging like mad, her heart squeezing tight with misery inside her.

She had loved Julie and hated the reality that she had never got the chance to get closer to her natural sibling and help her. Born to an unknown father and a drug-addicted mother, the twin girls had ended up in separate adoptive homes. Julie had briefly been deprived of oxygen at birth and had required major surgery soon afterwards. Her sister had not been available for adoption until her treatment was complete a full two years later. Jemima, however, had been much more fortunate in every way, she thought guiltily. Her middle-aged adoptive parents had adored her on sight, adopted her at birth and given her a wonderfully happy and secure childhood. Julie had been adopted by a

much wealthier couple but her developmental delays and problems had disappointed and embarrassed her parents. Ultimately the adoption had broken down when her sister was a wayward teenager and Julie had ended up back in care, rejected by the parents she'd loved. It was no surprise to Jemima that from that point everything in her twin's life had gone even more badly wrong.

The twins had not met again until they were adults and Julie had tracked Jemima down. Right from the outset Jemima and her parents had been captivated by her lively charming twin. Of course that had gone wrong as well for all of them, Jemima acknowledged reluctantly. But perhaps it had gone worst of all for little Nicky, who would now never know his birth mother. Her misty eyes rested on the eight-month-old baby in the buggy on the path and predictably brightened because Nicky was the sun, the moon and the stars in Jemima's world. He studied her with his big liquid dark eyes and smiled from below the mop of his black curly hair. He was the most utterly adorable baby and he owned his auntie's heart and soul and had done so since the moment she'd first met him when he was only a week old.

'I saw you from the street. Why are you here again?' a worried female voice pressed. 'I don't understand why you're torturing yourself this way, Jem. She's gone and I say good riddance!'

'Please don't say that,' Jemima urged her best friend, Ellie, whom she had first met in nursery school. She turned to face the taller, thinner redhead with determination.

'But it's the truth and you have to face it. Julie almost destroyed your family,' Ellie said bluntly. 'I know it hurts you to hear me say it but your twin was rotten to the core.'

Jemima compressed her lips, determined not to get into another argument with her outspoken friend. After all, when times had been tough during the Julie debacle Ellie had regularly offered Jemima and her parents a sympathetic shoulder as well as advice and support. Ellie had proved her loyalty and the depth of her friendship many times over. In any case, it would be pointless to argue now that Jemima's twin was dead. Even so, the pain of that loss still made such judgements wounding. Only a few months had passed since Julie had carelessly stepped out in front of a car and died instantly. Julie's adoptive family had refused even to attend the funeral and the cost had been borne by Jemima's parents, although they could ill afford the expense.

'If we'd had more time together, things would have turned out very differently,' Jemima declared with a bitterness that she struggled to hide.

'She ripped off your parents, stole your identity and your boyfriend and landed you with a baby,' Ellie reminded her drily. 'What could she have done as an encore? Murdered you all in your beds?'

'Julie never showed any tendency towards violence,' Jemima argued back through gritted teeth. 'Let's not talk about this any more.'

'Let's not,' Ellie agreed wryly. 'It would make more sense to discuss what you're planning to do with Nicky now. You've got quite enough on your plate with a full-time job and helping out your parents.'

'But I'm more than happy to look after Nicky as well. I love him. He is my only living relative,' Jemima pointed out with quiet fortitude as the two women walked out of the graveyard and down the road. 'Obviously I'm not planning to give him up. We'll manage somehow.'

'But what about his father? Surely you have to consider his rights?' Ellie countered impatiently and, seeing her companion stiffen and pale, she groaned. 'My shift starts in an hour—I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Parting from her friend, who lived in an apartment on the same street, Jemima walked away at the slow pace of someone exhausted—Nicky still only slept a few hours at a time. She had expended a great deal of thought on the worrying topic of Nicky's paternal ancestry. Other than the fact that Nicky's father was supposedly a very wealthy man, she knew nothing about him or, more importantly, why he had chosen to father a child through a surrogacy agreement. Was he a gay man in a relationship? Or were he or his partner unable to have a child? Julie had not cared about such details but Jemima cared about them very much indeed.

There was no way she could ignore the reality that Nicky had a living father somewhere in the world, a parent who had paid for and planned his very conception. But she didn't know his identity because Julie had flatly refused to divulge it and there was therefore nothing that anyone could expect Jemima to do about tracing the man, she reflected with guilty relief. Her sole concern was, and always had been, Nicky's well-being. She wasn't prepared to hand the little boy over to anyone without first seeing the proof that that person would love and nurture her nephew. That was her true role now, she conceded unhappily: to step into the untenable situation Julie had created and try to ensure that Julie's son was not damaged by his mother's rash choices.

Jemima still marvelled that her twin had not even recognised that she was literally agreeing to bring a child into the world for a price. Incredibly at the time she had signed up, Julie had only viewed the surrogacy agreement as a job that paid living expenses at a time when she was short of cash and needed somewhere to live. She had admitted to loathing what pregnancy did to her body and she had not changed her mind about handing Nicky over after the birth. No, Julie had simply decided that she had not been well enough rewarded for suffering the tribulations of nine months of pregnancy followed by a birth, particularly once she had learned that Nicky's father was rich.

And what were the chances that the man would prove to be a caring, compassionate father? The sort of man who would love and cherish Nicky to the very best of his ability? Jemima believed that there was little chance of that being the case when the man concerned had not even wanted to meet the mother of his future child. From what little she had read most surrogacy agreements encouraged some kind of contact between the various parties involved, at least initially. After all, Nicky was half Julie's flesh and blood as well. He had not been conceived from a donated egg but from her sister's body, which meant he was very much Jemima's nephew and a part of Jemima's small family, a little connected person whom Jemima felt it was her duty to love and protect.

Jemima let herself into the small retirement bungalow that was her parents' current home. It had two bedrooms and a small garden and she was very grateful that there was enough space for her and Nicky to stay there. Her father was a retired clergyman and her mother had only ever been a clergyman's wife. Sadly, the careful savings her parents had made over the years had gone into Julie's pocket when she had pretended that she'd wanted to rent a local shop and start up her own business. Or maybe that hadn't been a pretence, Jemima conceded, striving not to be judgemental.

Quite possibly, Julie had genuinely intended to set up a business when she'd first floated the idea to Jemima's parents but Julie had been tremendously impulsive and her plans had often leapt enthusiastically from one money-making scheme to the next within days. Her sister might have seemed to have good intentions and might have uttered very convincing sentiments but she had told lies. There was no denying that, Jemima reflected unhappily.

Regardless, the Barbers' financial safety net was now gone and her parents' lifelong dream of buying their own home was no longer possible. In fact the only reason her parents still had a roof over their heads was Jemima's decision to come back home to live and help to pay the rent and the household expenses, which were exceeding her father's small pension. Faced with bills they couldn't afford to pay, the older couple had begun to fret and their health had suffered.

With quiet efficiency, Jemima changed Nicky and settled him down for a morning nap. Screening a yawn of her own, she decided to lie down too, having learned that napping when Nicky did was the only sure way to get her own rest. She peeled off her tunic top and winced when she caught an accidental glimpse of her liberally curved bottom in the wardrobe mirror.

'Your backside's far too big for leggings! Always wear a long top to cover your behind,' Julie had urged her.

But then Julie had been thin as a willow wand and tormented by bulimia, Jemima reminded herself ruefully. Her twin had had serious issues with food and self-image. On that unhappy reflection, Jemima fell straight to sleep, still clad in her leggings and vest top.

When the shrilling doorbell wakened her, Jemima scrambled up in surprise because most visitors were family friends and aware that her mum and dad were currently staying in Devon with a former parishioner. That was the closest her parents could get to a holiday on their restricted income. She peered into the cot, relieved to see that her nephew was still peacefully asleep, his little face flushed, his rosebud mouth relaxed.

From the hall she could see two male figures through the glass.

‘Yes?’ she asked enquiringly, opening the door only a fraction.

An older man with greying hair dealt her a serious appraisal. ‘May we come in and speak to you, Miss Barber? My card...’ A business card was extended through the narrow gap and she glanced down at it.

Charles Bennett, it read. Bennett & Bennett, Solicitors.

Instantly fearing yet another problem linked to her twin’s premature death, Jemima lost colour and opened the door. Julie had left a lot of debts in her wake and Jemima just didn’t know how to deal with them. She shrank from the prospect of telling the police that her sister had stolen her identity to the extent of contracting debts in her name, travelling on her passport and even giving birth in Sicily as Jemima Barber. She was very much afraid that revealing that information would make her current custody of Nicky illegal and she was frightened that the minute she admitted that he was not her child he would be taken from her and placed in a foster home with strangers.

‘Luciano Vitale...’ the older man introduced as his companion stepped forward and Jemima took yet another step back from her visitors, all her senses now on full apprehensive alert.

And when she focused on the taller, younger man by his side she froze, for he was a man like no other. His movements were fast, smooth and incredibly quiet as if he were a combat soldier slinking through the jungle. He was poetry in motion and pure fantasy in the flesh. Indeed he was very probably the most breathtakingly beautiful man Jemima had ever seen in her life. The shock of his sudden magnetic appearance was hard to withstand. Her chest tightened as she struggled to catch her breath and not stare as the compellingly handsome lineaments of his lean bronzed features urged her to do. It made her feel frighteningly schoolgirlish and she hurriedly turned her head away to invite them into the living room.

Luciano couldn’t take his eyes off Jemima Barber because she was so very different from what he had expected. His very first sight of her had been her passport photo application in which she had looked blonde, blue-eyed and a little plump, indeed so ordinary he had rolled his eyes at the idea that such a commonplace woman could give him a child. His second view of her two months earlier on security-camera footage from a London hotel had been far more indicative of her true nature. Blonde hair cut short and choppy, she had sported a very low-necked top, a tiny silver skirt and sky-high hooker heels that had showed off her slim figure and the rounded curve of her breast implants. She had been acting like the slut she was, giggling and fondling the two men she was taking back to her hotel room that night.

Now that image was being replaced by another, even more challenging one for evidently Jemima Barber had reinvented herself yet again. Possibly that big change in appearance was a deliberate element of her con tricks, he conceded. The short hair was gone, exchanged for hip-length extensions, which provided her with a glorious mane the colour of ripe wheat in sunlight. Her heart-shaped face seemed bare of make-up, his keen gaze resting suspiciously on the succulent pout of her pink mouth, the faint colour blossoming in her cheeks and the pale ice-blue eyes, an unusual shade that he had initially assumed was a mere accident of the photographic lighting. She wore a drab pair of black leggings and a tight vest top, which accentuated the sumptuous swell of her breasts.

With difficulty he dragged his attention from that surprisingly luscious display, acknowledging that the camera shots of her chest must have been unflattering, because in the flesh she looked much more natural. Even so, she was distinctly curvier. Had she simply put on weight? The plain clothing was a surprise as well but, of course, she hadn’t been expecting visitors and it was possible that

she dressed more circumspectly in her elderly parents' radius. In fact at this moment she looked ridiculously wholesome and young. It made him wonder who Jemima Barber really was below the surface. And then he questioned why he was wondering about her at all when he already knew all that he needed to know. She was a liar, a cheat, a thief and a whore without boundaries. She sold her own body as easily as she planned to sell her son.

Hugely self-conscious below the intensity of Luciano's appraisal, Jemima could feel her face getting hotter and hotter but, because he unnerved her, she kept her attention on the older man and said, 'How can I help you?'

'We're here to discuss the child's future,' Charles Bennett informed her.

At that news her heart dropped to the soles of her canvas-clad feet and her head swivelled, eyes flying wide as she involuntarily looked back at Luciano. Looked and instantly saw what she had refused to recognise seconds earlier, finally making the terrifying connection that set a large question mark over her hopes and dreams for Nicky. Nicky was like a miniature carbon copy of Luciano Vitale. Luciano wore his hair a little longer than was conventional. It fell below his collar in glossy blue-black curls that flared luxuriantly across his skull. He had a straight nose, spectacular high cheekbones, winged brows and deep-set eyes the colour of tawny tiger's eye stones—eyes as hard and unyielding as any crystal.

Stray recollections of her late sister's remarks on the topic of Nicky's father echoed in the back of her head.

'If he met me, he would want me... Men always do,' Julie had trilled excitedly. 'He's exactly the sort of man I want to marry—rich and good-looking and madly successful. I'd make the perfect wife for a man like him.'

And, of course, Luciano Vitale wouldn't be too impressed right now when, instead of the slim, fashionable Julie, he got the fatter, plainer twin, a little voice whispered in Jemima's shaken head. Was that why he was staring? But he didn't know that she was Julie's sister and he had never even met her sister. As far as she was aware he did not even know that Julie had an identical twin nor was he likely to know that Julie had stolen Jemima's identity. Did he even know that her sister was dead?

Jemima assumed not. Had he known, surely that would have fuelled the lawyer's first words because Julie's death now changed everything. A cold little shiver shimmied down Jemima's spine at that awareness. As Nicky's mother, Julie had had rights to her son even if those rights could be disputed in court. As Nicky's aunt, Jemima had virtually no rights at all. The only thing that blurred those boundaries was the fact that Julie had given birth in her twin's name and it was Jemima's name on Nicky's birth certificate and not his real birth mother's. It was a legal tangle that would have to be sorted out some day.

But not on this particular day, Jemima decided abruptly as she collided with Luciano's chilling dark eyes, which were regarding her with as much emotion and empathy as a lab specimen might have inspired. Nicky's father was angry, distrustful and ready to make snap judgements and decisions, she reckoned fearfully. He was not visiting in a spirit of goodwill and why indeed would he? Julie had given birth to his child and had then run away with that child, leaving behind an unabashed demand for more money.

Jemima tilted her chin up as if she were neither aware of nor bothered by Luciano's scrutiny and concentrated on the lawyer instead. The tension in the atmosphere was making her tummy perform nauseous somersaults and suffocating her vocal cords. She knew that she needed to get a grip on herself and do it fast because she had no idea of what was about to happen and for Nicky's sake she had to be able to react fast and appropriately. It disturbed her, though, that one major decision had somehow already been made and that was her willingness to pretend to be Julie for as long as she could pretend while she assessed Nicky's father as a potential parent. If she admitted who she really was, her nephew could be immediately removed from her care and her heart almost stopped at the

mere thought of that happening. For that reason alone she would lie...she would pretend...even if it went against all her principles.

Luciano was very still, his entire attention engaged by the strange behaviour of the woman in front of him. Women did not stick out their chins and ignore Luciano when they were lucky enough to gain his attention. They smiled at him, flirted, treated him to little upward glances calculated to appeal. They never ever blanked him. Yet Jemima Barber was blanking him.

'I want DNA testing carried out on the child so that I know whether or not he is mine.' Luciano spoke up for the first time, startling her. His dark, deep accented drawl trailed along her skin like a fur caress and awakened goosebumps.

As the ramifications of what he had said sank in Jemima went rigid at the insult to her sister's memory. 'How dare you?' she shot back at him angrily, her temper rising and spilling out without warning and shaking her with its intensity.

His perfectly modelled mouth took on a derisive slant. 'I dare,' he said levelly. 'There must be no doubt that he is mine—'

'In any case, mandatory DNA testing after the birth was a clause in the contract you signed,' the lawyer chipped in. 'Unfortunately you left the hospital before the test could be completed.'

The reminder of the contract that Julie had signed in Jemima's name doused Jemima's anger and covered her with a sudden surge of shame instead. She was about to lie. She was about to pretend that she was her sister when she was not and the knowledge cut her deep because, in the normal way of things, Jemima was an honest and straightforward person who detested lies and deception. Her desire to look out for Nicky's needs, she registered unhappily, had put her on a slippery slope at odds with her conscience. She should be telling the truth, no matter how unpleasant or dangerous it was, she thought wretchedly. Two wrongs did not make a right. This man was Nicky's father. But could she simply stand back and watch Luciano Vitale take her baby nephew away from her?

She knew she could not. There had to be safeguards. Nicky was defenceless. It was Jemima's job to carefully consider his future and ensure that his needs were met. But she had to be unselfish about that process too, she reminded herself doggedly, even if the final result hurt, even if it meant standing back and losing the child she loved.

'DNA testing,' Luciano repeated, wondering if his worst fears were being borne out by her pallor and clear apprehension. Maybe the child wasn't his. If that were the case, it was better that he found that out sooner rather than later. 'The technician can visit the child here. It is a simple procedure done with a mouth swab and the results will be known within forty-eight hours.'

'Yes,' Jemima muttered, dry-mouthed, nerves rattling through her like express trains as yet another fear presented itself to her.

All bets were off if he intended to have her tested for DNA. Did twins have the same DNA? She had no idea and worried that she would be exposed as an imposter. She lowered her feathery lashes. Well, she would just have to wait and see what happened. She was not in a position to do anything else. Arguing against the need for such testing would only muddy the waters. It wouldn't achieve anything. It would only increase the animosity and uncertainty about her nephew's future.

'So, you will agree to this?' Luciano said softly.

Involuntarily, Jemima glanced at him and connected with liquid dark eyes surrounded by black velvet lashes as lush as his son's. Her heart went bang-bang-bang inside her and she felt incredibly dizzy, as if she stood on the edge of an abyss gazing down at a perilous drop. Something tugged and tightened low in her pelvis and she was unexpectedly alarmingly aware of her body as if her prickling skin had suddenly become too tender to bear the weight of her clothes. 'Yes...'

'In fact you will agree to all my demands,' Luciano told her without skipping a beat while he silently marvelled at the translucent perfection of her pale blue eyes. 'Because you are not stupid and it would be very stupid to refuse me anything that I want.'

Brows pleating, Charles Bennett turned to study his client in astonishment and then his attention skimmed back to the young blonde woman staring back at Luciano as if he had cast a magic spell over her.

CHAPTER TWO

‘AND WHY WOULD you think that?’ Jemima fired back in sudden bewilderment, shaking her head as though to clear it.

‘Because I hold pole position,’ Luciano informed her with chilling assurance. ‘I have security-camera footage of you stealing credit cards and using one of them in an act of fraud. If I should choose to pass that evidence to the police, I—’

‘You’re threatening me!’ Jemima interrupted in shock.

Stolen credit cards? Was he serious? Was it possible that Julie had sunk that low while she was working in London? Jemima did recall wondering how her sister was contriving to stay at a fancy hotel. She had asked and Julie had winced as though such a financial enquiry were incredibly rude and had sulkily refused to explain.

‘My client is not threatening you,’ Charles Bennett interposed flatly. ‘He is simply telling you that he has footage of the theft.’

But Jemima had turned pale as death and did not dare look in Luciano’s direction again. Proof of theft? My goodness, he could have her arrested right here and now! Forcibly parted from Nicky! Her lashes fluttered rapidly as she struggled to think.

‘So you will agree to the DNA testing?’ Luciano queried once more.

‘Yes,’ she agreed shakily.

‘We will endeavour to be civilised about this matter.’

In receipt of that unpersuasive statement, Jemima’s palm tingled. Never in her life had she wanted so badly to slap someone for lying. But that richly confident, patronising assurance from Luciano Vitale sent violent vibes of antagonism coursing through her and, daringly, she turned her head to look at him again. It was a grave mistake. As she fell into the hypnotic darkness of his gaze shock gripped her, tensing every muscle with sudden bone-deep fear for in Luciano she sensed a propensity for violence that made a mockery of her own softer nature. He was a man of extremes, of dangerous emotions and dangerous drives, and for a split second it was all there in his extraordinarily compelling eyes like a high-voltage electrical pulse zapping her with a stinging warning to back off or take the consequences. Seemingly he hid the disturbing reality of his true nature behind a chillingly polite mask.

‘Yes, we must try to be civilised,’ she heard herself say obediently while she shrank from the terrifying surge of ESP that had enveloped her in an adrenaline-charged panic mere seconds earlier.

‘I can be reasonable,’ Luciano declared, smooth as polished glass. ‘But I will do nothing that could put me on the wrong side of British law. Be clear on that score.’

‘Of course,’ she conceded, wondering why she didn’t feel reassured by that moral statement.

He wanted to stay on the right side of the law. She quite understood that. Only, where did that leave her? Julie had committed her crimes in Jemima’s name and the only way for Jemima to clear her name was to own up to her sister’s identity theft. Unfortunately doing that would also mean that she lost the right to care for Nicky. How could she bear that loss? How could she risk it? All she could do in the short-term, she thought in a panic, was fake being Julie until she was confronted by the police. At that point she would have to come clean because she would have no other choice.

Luciano studied his quarry, his gaze instinctively lingering on her ripe mouth and the porcelain smoothness of the upper slopes of her full breasts. He was a man and he supposed it was natural for him to notice her body, but the pulse of response at his groin and the sudden tightening there infuriated him. He turned away dismissively, broad shoulders rigid below his exquisitely tailored charcoal-grey suit jacket.

‘The technician will call to take the sample this afternoon,’ he delivered.

‘You’re not wasting any time,’ Jemima remarked gingerly.

Luciano swung back, eyes narrowed and cutting as black razors. ‘You have already wasted a great deal of my time,’ he told her with brutal bluntness.

Jemima clenched her teeth together and glanced at his companion, whose discomfiture was unhidden. There was civilised and civilised, she guessed, and Luciano Vitale had no intention of treating someone like her with kid gloves. It was clear that he saw her as inferior in every way. She would have to toughen up, she told herself urgently, toughen up to handle someone who disliked and distrusted her without showing weakness. Weakness, she sensed, he would use against her.

Shell-shocked as Jemima was by Luciano’s visit, once he had left she followed her usual routine with Nicky. She had looked forward to spending the long summer holidays with the little boy before she had to make childcare arrangements to enable her to return to work at the start of the new term. Now she was wondering if she would lose custody of him before then. She was down on the floor playing with Nicky when the doorbell went again.

It was the technician from the DNA-testing facility. The woman extended a consent form on a board for her to sign and then asked her to hold Nicky. The swab was done in seconds and Jemima waited for the technician to use the same procedure on her but instead she packaged the swab and departed, her job evidently complete. Heaving a sigh of relief that she herself had not been asked to give a sample, Jemima was in no mood for further company and she suppressed a weary groan when yet another caller turned up at the door.

Her face stiffened when she recognised her ex-boyfriend. Yes, she was still friends with Steven because her parents liked him and she had had to deal with the awkwardness of continuing meetings whether she liked it or not. Steven was a big mover and shaker in the church she attended and ran a young evangelical group to great acclaim.

‘May I come in?’ Steven pressed when the polite small talk about her parents’ little holiday had dried up and she was rather hoping he would take the hint and leave.

‘Nicky’s still up,’ Jemima warned him.

‘How’s the little chap doing?’ Steven enquired with his widest, fakest smile.

‘Well, his father may have turned up,’ Jemima heard herself say without meaning to. That she had admitted that much to Steven was evidence of how much emotional turmoil she was in because once she had realised how much he disapproved of her taking responsibility for Julie’s son she had stopped confiding in the tall blond man.

Steven took a seat with the casual informality of a regular visitor. A handsome dentist with a lucrative line in private patients, her ex was well liked by all. Jemima, however, was rather less keen. She had believed she loved Steven for years and had fully expected to marry him before Julie came into their lives.

‘Yes, he’s good-looking and he could give me some fun but he’s your boyfriend. I’m not poaching him,’ Julie had told her squarely.

But Jemima hadn’t wanted to keep Steven by default and once she’d realised how infatuated he was with her twin she had set him free. Of course, as a couple, Steven and Julie hadn’t suited, as Jemima had suspected at the outset. Her sister and her ex had enjoyed a short-lived fling, nothing more, and Jemima genuinely did not hold Steven’s defection against him. How could she possibly blame him for having found her colourful, lively sister more attractive? No, what annoyed Jemima about Steven was that he was smugly convinced that he could talk his way back into Jemima’s affections now that Julie was gone. Steven had no sensitivity whatsoever.

‘His father?’ Steven echoed on a rising note of interest. ‘Tell me more.’

Jemima told him about her visitors but withheld the information about the stolen credit cards and the underlying threat, reluctant to give Steven another opportunity to trash her sister’s memory.

'That's the best news I've heard in weeks!' Steven exclaimed, his bright blue eyes lingering intently on her flushed face. 'I admire your affection for Nicky but keeping him isn't practical in your circumstances.'

'Sometimes feelings aren't practical,' Jemima countered quietly.

Steven gave her an earnest appraisal. 'You know how I feel about you, Jem. How long is it going to take for you to forgive me? I was foolish. I made a mistake. But I learned from it.'

'If you had really loved me, you wouldn't have wanted Julie—'

'It's different for men. We are more base creatures,' Steven told her sanctimoniously.

Jemima gritted her teeth and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. It amazed her that she had failed to appreciate how sexist and judgemental Steven could be. 'I've moved on now. I'm fond of you but I'm afraid that's all.'

'Tell me about Nicky's father,' Steven urged irritably.

'I only know his name, nothing else...'

Steven started looking up Luciano Vitale on his tablet and fired a welter of facts at her.

Luciano was an only child, the son of an infamous Mafia don. Jemima did roll her eyes at that information. He was filthy rich, which wasn't a surprise, but much that followed did take her aback. In his early twenties Luciano had married a famous Italian movie star and had a daughter with her before tragically losing both wife and child in a helicopter crash three years earlier. Jemima was shocked, very shocked by that particular piece of news.

'So there you have it...that's why he wants a kid...his daughter died!' Steven pointed out with satisfaction. 'How can you doubt that the man will make a good parent?'

'He's still single. How much actual parenting is he planning to do?' Jemima traded stubbornly. 'And maybe Nicky's supposed to be a replacement but he's not a girl, he's a boy and a child in his own right—'

Steven pontificated at length about the immorality of the surrogacy agreement and how it went against all natural laws. Jemima said nothing because she was too busy looking at photographic images of the exquisite blonde, Gigi Nocella, Luciano's late wife and the mother of his firstborn. Luciano had matched Gigi, she reflected abstractedly, two beautiful people combined to make a perfect couple. He had already lost a child, she thought helplessly, and she was filled with guilt at her own reluctance to hand over Nicky. Who was she to interfere? Who was she to think she knew everything when she was already painfully aware that her sister had made so many bad choices in life?

'Vitale needs to know what Julie did to you and your family,' Steven said harshly. 'After all, if he'd kept better tabs on her, Julie would never have come here and caused so much grief.'

'That's very much a matter of opinion, Steven,' Jemima said stiffly and, deciding that she had been sufficiently hospitable, she stood up in the hope of hastening his departure.

'You're not thinking this through, Jem,' he told her in exasperation. 'Nicky's not your child and you shouldn't be behaving as if he is. If you pass him on to his father...'

'Like a parcel?'

'He belongs with his father,' Steven argued vehemently. 'Don't think that I don't appreciate that that child is preventing us from getting back together again!'

'Only in your imagination—'

'You know how I feel about you keeping Nicky. Why are you trying to do more for the kid than his own mother was prepared to do? Let's be honest, Julie was a lousy mother and not the nicest—'

'Stop right there!' Hot-cheeked, Jemima wrenched open the front door with vigour. 'I'll tell Mum and Dad that you called in when I phone them later.'

She closed the door again with the suggestion of a slam and groaned out loud in frustration. But grateful as she was to see Steven leave, he had left her with food for thought. She played with Nicky in the bath and stared down at his damp curly head with tears swimming in her eyes. He wasn't her child and all the wishing in the world couldn't change that...or bring Julie back. Luciano Vitale had

lost a much-loved daughter. She must have been loved, for that could be the only reason her father had gone to such lengths to have another child. Jemima wrapped Nicky's wet, squirming figure into a towel and hugged him close.

Luciano had searched for eight months to find his child. He wanted Nicky. She had to stop being so selfish. She had to take a step back. Was she prejudiced against Luciano because he had chosen a surrogacy arrangement to father a second child? She was conservative and conventional and she supposed she was a little bit disposed to prejudice in that line. The admission shamed her. How could she have accepted Julie and Nicky but retained her bias against Nicky's father? Of course, what if Luciano Vitale wasn't Nicky's father?

Two days later, however, she received the results of the DNA testing, which declared that her nephew was Luciano's flesh and blood, and she had barely settled the document down when the landline rang.

'Luciano Vitale...' Her caller imparted his identity with a warning edge of harshness. 'I would like to meet my son this evening.'

Jemima reminded herself that there was no room for her personal feelings in her dealings with Luciano and she breathed in deep. 'Yes, Mr Vitale. What time suits you?'

They negotiated politely for an earlier time than he first suggested because Jemima knew that the later he arrived, the more tired and cross Nicky would be. And she wanted the first meeting between father and son to go well because it would be downright mean and malicious to hope otherwise. The small living room was spick and span by the time she had finished cleaning, but Nicky was teething again and cried pathetically when she tried to put him down for his afternoon nap. Ellie had been texting her constantly with queries since she had told her friend about Luciano and was reacting to his proposed visit with as much excitement as a famous rock star might have invoked.

'Are you sure I can't come round and sort of hover on the doorstep?' Ellie pleaded on the phone. 'I'm gasping to see the guy in the flesh. He looks hotter than the fires of hell!'

'It's not the right moment, Ellie. He has a right to his privacy.'

'Not looking like a walking, talking female temptation, he hasn't!'

'He may look good in photos but he's not the warm, approachable type,' Jemima reminded her friend.

'Well, why would he be? He thinks you're Julie and Julie ripped him off! When are you planning to tell him the truth?'

'When I find the right moment. Not tonight because in the mood he's probably going to be in he's likely to just scoop up Nicky and walk straight out of here with him,' Jemima admitted with a grimace.

'Whether Luciano Vitale knows it or not, he owes you,' Ellie said loyally. 'Julie couldn't cope with Nicky and you've been caring for him since he was only a week old. Your parents will miss him terribly, though, when he goes.'

When he goes, Jemima repeated inwardly, her heart sinking as she was finally forced to face that certainty. Nicky was about to be taken away from her and there was not one blasted thing she could do about it. She was not Nicky's closest relative, Luciano was.

Jemima was very tense while she waited for her visitor. Nicky looked adorable in a little blue playsuit but he was teething and in a touchy temperamental mood in which he could travel from smiles to tears in the space of seconds.

Jemima heard the cars arrive and rushed to the window. The equivalent of a cavalcade had drawn up outside on the street, a collection of vehicles composed of a black limousine and several Mercedes cars, all with tinted windows. As she watched several men emerged from the accompanying cars and fanned out across the street while clearly taking direction from ear devices. All the men wore formal suits and sunglasses and emanated an aggressive take-charge vibe. Finally the rear door of the

limo was opened and Luciano slid out, instantly casting everyone around him in the shade. He wore well-washed jeans and a long-sleeved black sweater...and still, he took her breath away.

The well-cut denim outlined long, powerful thighs and lean hips, while the dark sweater somehow enhanced his blue-black hair and olive skin. Her mouth ran dry while she stared and smoothed damp palms down over her own, more ordinary jeans, wishing she had the same sleek, fashionable edge he exuded with infuriating ease. As she began to back away from the window a movement behind him attracted her attention and she stared as a slim blonde woman climbed out of the car. Instantly, Luciano turned to speak to the woman and a moment later she got back into the car, evidently having thought better of accompanying him. Who was she? His girlfriend?

It's none of your business who she is, a voice reproved in Jemima's mind and she moved through to the doorway and breathed in deep, struggling to bolster herself for what was to come. She opened the door briskly. 'Mr Vitale...'

'Jemima,' he said drily, stepping inside, his sculpted lips unsmiling, an aloof coolness stamped across his lean bronzed face like a wall.

'Nicky's in here...' Jemima pressed the living-room door wider to show off Nicky where he sat on the floor surrounded by his favourite toys.

'His name is Niccolò,' Luciano corrected without hesitation. 'I don't like diminutives. I would also like to meet my son alone...'

Jemima glanced up at him in surprise and dismay but he wasn't looking at her. His attention was all for Nicky, no, Niccolò, and Luciano's lustrous tiger eyes were gleaming as he literally savoured his first view of his son with an intensity she could feel. Jemima stared, couldn't help doing it, noting with relief that the forbidding lines of Luciano's lean dark face were softening, the hard compression of his beautifully sculpted hard mouth easing.

'Thank you, Miss Barber,' Luciano Vitale murmured, deftly planting himself inside the room and leaving her outside as he firmly closed the door in her face.

With a sigh, Jemima sat down on the phone bench just inside the front door. Of course he didn't want an audience, she reasoned, striving to be fair and reasonable. Who was the woman waiting outside for Luciano? If she was his girlfriend, did he live with her? Was it possible that the girlfriend was unable to have children and that she and Luciano had entered the surrogacy agreement as a couple? And what did any of those facts matter to her? Well, they mattered, she conceded ruefully, because she cared a great deal about Nicky's future but ultimately she had no say whatsoever in what came next.

As a whimper sounded from the living room Jemima tensed. Nicky was going through a stranger-danger phase. She could hear the quiet murmur of Luciano's voice as he endeavoured to soothe the little boy. Sadly, a sudden outburst of inconsolable crying was his reward. Jemima made no move but her hands were clenched into fists and her knuckles showed white beneath her pale skin as she resisted the urge to intervene. The sound of Nicky becoming increasingly upset distressed her but she knew she had to learn to step back and accept that Luciano Vitale was Nicky's father and his closest relative.

When Nicky's sobs erupted into screams, the living-room door opened abruptly. 'You'd better come in... He's frightened,' Luciano bit out in a harsh undertone.

Jemima required no second invitation. She scrambled up and surged past him. Nicky's anxious eyes locked straight on to her and he held up his arms to be lifted. Jemima crouched down to scoop him up and he clung like a monkey, shaking and sobbing, burying his little head in her neck.

Luciano watched that revealing display in angry disbelief. Niccolò had two little hands fisted in his mother's shirt, his fearful desperation patently obvious as he hid his face from the stranger who had tried to make friends with him. As Jemima quieted the trembling child Luciano registered two unwelcome facts. His son was much more attached to his mother than his father had expected and Jemima was very definitely the centre of his son's sense of security. It was a complication he neither

wanted nor needed. His attention dropped to the generous curve of Jemima's derriere in jeans and he tensed, averting his gaze to the back of his son's curly head as he felt himself harden. So, he liked women to look more like women than slender boys and she had splendid curves, but he abhorred that hormonal response that was so very inappropriate in Jemima Barber's radius.

'He's teething, which always makes him a bit clingy,' Jemima proffered in Nicky's defence. 'And this is the wrong end of the day for him because he's tired and fractious—'

'He's terrified. Isn't he used to meeting people?' Luciano pressed critically.

'He's more used to women.'

'But your parents must've been looking after him for you while you were in London,' he pointed out, momentarily depriving her of breath as he reminded her of the lie she was living for his benefit. After all, nobody could be in two places at once and while Jemima had been teaching and covering Nicky's childcare costs at a local nursery facility, Julie had been in London.

'Dad's retired but he's still out and about a lot, so Nicky would've seen less of him,' Jemima muttered in a brittle voice, crossing her fingers at a lie that made her feel guiltier than ever because Nicky adored his grandfather.

Nicky stuck his thumb in his mouth and sagged against Jemima with a final hoarse whimper. 'Sorry about this...' she added uncomfortably. 'But in time he'll get used to you.'

Luciano compressed his lips. He didn't have time to waste.

'Is that your girlfriend outside waiting in the car?' Jemima asked abruptly, keen to know and to change the subject about Nicky's lifestyle in recent months.

Luciano frowned, winged ebony brows pleating above hard dark eyes fringed by lashes as dense and noticeable as black lace. 'No, the nanny I'm hiring.'

Jemima stopped breathing. 'A nanny?' she gasped in dismay.

'I will need some support in caring for my son,' Luciano countered drily, wondering what he was going to do about the problem his son's mother had become.

Well, he certainly wouldn't be marrying her as Charles Bennett had ludicrously suggested after the results of the DNA test had been revealed.

'A paper marriage,' Charles had outlined. 'In one move you would legitimise your son's birth, tidy up any future inheritance issues and gain a legal right to have custody of your son. As an ex-wife you could also give her a settlement without breaking the law. It would be perfect.'

Perfect only in a nightmare, Luciano reflected grimly. No way was he linking his name to a woman who was no better than a thieving hooker, not in a paper marriage of any kind.

He was employing a nanny, Jemima thought wretchedly as panic snaked through her in a cold little shiver of foreboding. Clearly Luciano was planning to remove Nicky from her care as soon as he could.

Luciano surveyed his infant son, who was engaged in contentedly falling asleep against his mother's shoulder. He could rip him away from Jemima as he himself had once been ripped away from his own mother. All right, he had been almost three years old but he had never forgotten the day he was torn from his mother's loving arms. Of course there had been a lot of blood and violence involved and naturally he had been traumatised by the episode. He would not be doing anything of that nature. He despised Jemima Barber but he did not wish her dead for having crossed him. At the same time, however, he deeply resented her hold on his son.

'Nicky's very emotional,' Jemima remarked cautiously. 'He does get upset quite easily.'

'I'm surprised he's so fond of you. You've spent most of your time in London and left other people looking after him,' Luciano condemned.

'I've spent much more time with him than you appreciate,' Jemima protested, tilting her chin. 'Of course he's fond of me...'

'But you always planned to give him away,' he reminded her coolly. 'As long as the pay-off was sufficient. Shouldn't you have prepared him better for the separation?'

An angry flush illuminated her pale porcelain skin. 'I didn't know if there was going to be a separation!' she fired back awkwardly.

'I would let nothing prevent me from claiming my son. Since you disappeared there has not been a single day that I haven't thought of him,' Luciano proclaimed, dark honey-rich eyes glittering with challenge. 'He is mine—'

'Yes...' she conceded raggedly, her breath catching in her throat below the onslaught of his extraordinarily compelling gaze. 'But handing him over isn't going to be as simple...er...as I once thought it would be.'

Luciano shrugged a broad shoulder without interest. 'You convinced a psychiatrist that you knew what you were signing up to do and could cope with it.'

Desperation slivered through Jemima's taut frame. 'Things change...' she whispered.

'I want my son,' Luciano told her bluntly.

The germ of a wild idea burst into being inside Jemima and flew straight from brain to tongue without the benefit of any filter or forethought. 'Couldn't I be your nanny? Even for a little while?'

Luciano studied her in disbelief. 'My nanny? You? Are you crazy?'

'Only until he settles into his new life. You'd be getting a trained infant teacher to look after him. I'm well qualified with young children.'

'But you've never worked with them?'

'Of course I have work experience.'

'Before you decided that you much preferred earning easy money as an escort?'

Jemima froze. 'An...es-escort?' Her voice stumbled over the mortifying word. 'That's a dreadful —'

Luciano sighed. 'I know everything about you. You can't lie to me. You were working as an escort in London and you were very popular with older men until you began to steal their wallets. I spoke to the agency that made your bookings for you before deciding to dispense with your services.'

Her lips parted and then closed again. She had turned white as snow, shock thudding through her, her heart thumping loudly in her eardrums. She didn't want to believe him but she did because Julie's love of money had been much stronger than her self-respect. An escort? An escort offering extras? Jemima squirmed, raw humiliation bowing her head. Working as an escort had given her twin the chance to steal. And sadly, the stolen credit cards had only been the tip of the iceberg, she acknowledged wretchedly. Seemingly Julie had been as willing to sell herself as she had been to sell her son.

'It was an exclusive escort service,' Luciano conceded, recognising her mortification and less gratified by it than he had expected to be.

'So I wouldn't be quite what you want in a nanny,' Jemima breathed, stricken, receiving that message loud and clear from his attitude.

'I'm afraid not. My security team will pick Niccolò up tomorrow and bring him up to London for the day. I'll send the nanny with them.' Luciano read her consternation with ease. 'Naturally I want to spend time with my son.'

'Before you do...what?' Jemima pressed helplessly.

'Before I take him home to Sicily with me,' Luciano fielded. 'You know how this must end, Jemima. Why make it more difficult for all of us?'

Jemima subsided like a pricked balloon. Julie had accepted payment and signed the agreement. There was no escape clause unless she was willing to run screaming to the media with her sad story. And where would that get her? More importantly, what would it gain Nicky? Notified of the circumstances of Nicky's birth, the social services would probably step in to take charge of Nicky and decide his future and there was no guarantee that Luciano would get him either. In fact there was every chance that Nicky would be placed in an adoptive home and neither Jemima nor Luciano would ever see him again. Seeking outside help would be the wrong thing to do, she decided in despair. The

very fact she had lied and faked being Julie to hold on to her nephew would be held against her by the authorities...and by Luciano if he ever found out the truth.

CHAPTER THREE

‘SO COULD I have a lift with you up to London?’ Jemima asked the nanny cheerfully. ‘I assure you that a lift is all I want, but my being in the car will make it easier for you to get to know Nicky and I can run through his routine with you as well.’

‘Er... I...’ Nonplussed, the nanny, who had introduced herself as Lisa, hovered on the doorstep and looked at the tall, broadly built bodyguard standing behind her for direction.

The bodyguard dug out a cell phone and punched in a number and Jemima got the obvious message: nothing could be done because no plan could deviate in the smallest way without Luciano Vitale’s permission and approval. She scolded herself for thinking that she was being clever when she had come up with the idea the night before. Yet she truly wasn’t trying to interfere with Luciano’s day with Nicky. She simply wanted to be more accessible if anything went wrong.

‘I just thought I could take the opportunity to do some shopping,’ she fibbed nervously as the bodyguard’s conversation in staccato Italian continued at length.

‘Mr Vitale makes all the arrangements,’ Lisa told her with an apologetic smile. ‘I don’t want to screw up my first day on the job. It would be handy, though, to know a little more about your son.’

‘Miss Maurice?’ The bodyguard handed the phone to the nanny.

Jemima watched the woman stiffen, straighten her shoulders and pale as she evidently received her instructions while answering yes and no several times. She then extended the phone to Jemima.

Realising that it was now her turn to receive her orders, Jemima laughed out loud, stunning her companions.

‘So glad you’ve found something to laugh about today,’ Luciano drawled, sharp and swift as a stiletto stabbing at her down the line.

‘Oh, please don’t take it like that,’ Jemima babbled in dismay. ‘I promise you that you won’t see or hear from me today. I just want to be in London...to...er...shop—’

‘I can hear the lie in your voice—’

Her blood ran cold in her veins.

‘You got a sixth sense or something?’

‘Or something. Tell me the truth or I will not consider the idea,’ he told her coldly.

‘I wanted to be within reach...you know, in case you needed me. That’s all.’

At his end of the line, Luciano gritted his perfect white teeth. Where the hell did she get the nerve to bug him like this? He expelled his breath in a hiss of impatience. ‘Why would I need you?’

‘Not you, him,’ Jemima stressed. ‘And dial back the tension, Luciano. Nicky can be very temperamental. He works best with calm, quiet and soothing—’

Luciano was incredulous. ‘Let me get this straight—you are telling me how to behave?’

‘But not in a rude way, in a helpful way,’ Jemima emphasised.

‘You are irritating me,’ Luciano growled soft and low.

‘Ditto.’ Jemima groaned out loud, having forgotten her audience. ‘Less of the growly stuff would be nice but not if you replace it with the rave-from-the-grave voice.’

The rave from the grave, Luciano mouthed in silent disbelief. She was actually telling him that he irritated her. How dared she? A thieving whore...but the mother of his son...

‘You can travel to London with them and accompany Niccolò back again at five today. Pass the phone back to Rico...’

Jemima did as she was bid, handing Nicky’s baby bag to the second bodyguard who had appeared before tucking her nephew under her arm to lock up the house.

‘What a fuss about nothing,’ she wanted to remark to the nanny as she climbed into the limousine and the two women together secured the baby into the very fancy car seat awaiting him, but caution silenced her. Luciano was an intractable tyrant supported in his moods and habits by

his intimidated employees. Presumably standing up to Luciano meant instant dismissal. Jemima suspected she wouldn't last five minutes working for him because she had too much of her own mind, so it was probably fortunate that he hadn't jumped on her nanny offer. At the same time, however, she was relieved he had agreed to let her catch a lift to London and travel back with Nicky at the end of the day. She had been a tiny bit afraid that Luciano wasn't planning on letting Nicky return to her again and now that looming fear could be set aside for at least one more day. Having passed her cell-phone number to Lisa, she asked to be dropped at the entrance to a Tube station.

The attraction of browsing round shops where she could not afford to buy anything held little appeal for Jemima. In recent months she had grown accustomed to being stony broke, to questioning every single purchase and asking herself if she really needed the item. And although she would have adored some new clothes and the chance to replace cosmetics that had run out, she was happy to make those sacrifices to keep Nicky and give her parents peace of mind in their retirement. A desire to make the best of whatever life threw at her had always driven Jemima and she took the same approach to her day out, heading to the first of her free attractions—the British Museum—before enjoying a picnic lunch in Kensington Gardens and a walk round the Tate Modern. She was on the banks of the Thames when her phone rang and she snatched it out.

'Nicky's ill... Where are you?' Luciano demanded thinly. 'I'll have you picked up.'

Her frantic questions elicited no adequate response beyond the assurance that the baby was not in danger. Luciano was much more intent on retrieving her as soon as possible so that she could comfort the little boy. Jemima was perspiring with stress and anxiety by the time a limousine lifted her at the agreed pick-up point and drove her across London to an exclusive block of apartments. There, flanked by two enormous bodyguards, she got into a glass lift to be swept up to the penthouse.

'I thought you were going to stay within reach!' Luciano roared at her as she came through the front door.

Jemima was accustomed to dealing with distraught and often angry parents whose child had become upset at school or had suffered injury and at one glance she recognised that Luciano fell into that category. He was a powerful man who controlled everything around him but Nicky's illness had made him feel powerless and that anger was the fallout. She could hear Nicky's distressed choking wails echoing through the apartment and was not in the mood to waste time sparring with his anxious father. 'Where is he?'

'The doctor's with him,' Luciano gritted, closing a managing hand to her spine to herd her in the right direction. He was the most alarmingly dominant man and, even worse, she thought ruefully, it seemed to come entirely naturally to him, as if an autocratic need to trample over the little people had been programmed into him at birth. 'Not that he's been much use!'

Lisa was pacing the floor with a wailing Nicky and looked as though she had been through the wars. Earlier that day she had looked immaculate. Now her long hair was falling down untidily and her shirt was spattered with food stains. An older bespectacled man, who could only be the doctor, overlooked the scene with an air of discomfiture.

'What's wrong with Nicky?' Jemima asked worriedly.

The doctor studied her anxiously. 'A touch of tonsillitis...nothing more—'

'My son would not be making such a fuss over so little,' Luciano began wrathfully.

'Oh, yes, he would.' Jemima threw Luciano a wryly apologetic glance. 'He makes a real fuss when he's sick. He's had tonsillitis a couple of times already and I was up all night with him.'

With a yell, Nicky unglued his reddened eyes and, focusing joyously on Jemima, he gave a frantic lurch in Lisa's hold. The other woman crossed the room in haste to settle him into Jemima's arms. 'It's obvious he wants his mum.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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