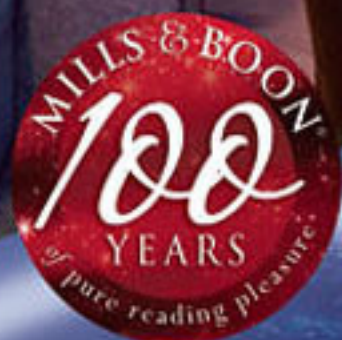


Mistress Against Her Will

Lee Wilkinson



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Lee Wilkinson

Mistress Against Her Will

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He laughed mirthlessly. ‘I would say we’re already about as up close and personal as it’s possible for two people to get.

‘But before I make love to you I would like to know *why* you’re still wearing another man’s ring.’

‘I don’t want you to make love to me. It’s all been a terrible mistake. I should never have let things go this far.’

‘Why did you?’ he asked interestedly.

‘Because I... I...’

As she floundered, he drawled, ‘Don’t bother to think up any lies. You let things go this far because you couldn’t help yourself. You want to go to bed with me.’

Lee Wilkinson lives with her husband in a three-hundred-year-old stone cottage in a Derbyshire village, which most winters gets cut off by snow. They both enjoy travelling, and recently, joining forces with their daughter and son-in-law, spent a year going round the world ‘on a shoestring’ while their son looked after Kelly, their much loved German shepherd dog. Her hobbies are reading and gardening, and holding impromptu barbecues for her long-suffering family and friends.

Recent titles by the same author:

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Dear Reader

As Mills & Boon celebrate their centenary in 2008, this is a great time to acknowledge how much pleasure and romance they have brought to their readers worldwide, and to say a big ‘thank you’ for the small part they have allowed me to play in their success.

It’s over fifteen years since they accepted my first story, and I was warmly welcomed into the fold. Since then, backed by a wonderful team of dedicated people, I’ve written thirty-five books for Mills & Boon, and had a great deal of fun and excitement doing it.

I always choose locations that I know, and that mean a lot to me, and I have to confess that, although I’m very happily married, I always fall a little in love with my current hero. I particularly enjoyed writing my latest book, *MISTRESS AGAINST HER WILL*, and I hope that you will enjoy reading it just as much.

Love

Lee Wilkinson

MISTRESS AGAINST HER WILL

BY

LEE WILKINSON



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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS early, barely seven twenty-five, and London's morning traffic was still flowing fairly freely as Paul's pale blue Jaguar purred towards the city centre.

Normally, Gail knew, he would have been enjoying a leisurely breakfast before embarking on the day's business meetings. Judging by the look on his fair, handsome face, having his routine disrupted did nothing to improve his temper.

Sitting in the front passenger seat beside him, she sighed. She had told him more than once that she could make her own way to Jenson Lorenson's prestigious London offices. But, in spite of earliness of the hour and the personal inconvenience, he had insisted on picking her up and driving her there himself.

He had arrived early and, stressed and harassed when she'd changed handbags at the last minute, she had omitted to pick up her notecase. All she had with her was her purse, which contained her credit card and some small change.

When she mentioned the oversight to Paul, he said irritably, 'I don't see what you're worrying about. You won't need it.'

Perhaps he was right. With a bit of luck there would be just about enough to get a bus back home.

'Now don't look flustered, whatever you do,' he instructed her as they stopped for a red light. 'Lorenson expects his personal staff to be cool and efficient. You've let this thing get to you and, now the crunch has come, you'll need to keep your composure.'

After a sleepless night, she felt washed out and on edge and in no mood to be preached to. 'I just wish there was some other way to achieve what you want,' she blurted out desperately. 'I hate all this lying and scheming.'

'There's no need to tell a lot of lies; in fact it's much safer to stick to the truth whenever possible. Your working background is solid and reliable, and you've got all the qualifications and experience Lorenson's looking for.'

'Added to that, you've been recommended by a woman he trusts, so there's no reason for him to suspect anything. All you have to do is forget that we two have ever met and you can't go wrong.'

Glancing at her, he added, 'By the way, you did remember to take off your ring?'

'Yes.' The three stone diamond engagement ring that Paul had bought her was on a thin gold chain around her neck.

'Don't forget to emphasize that you have no ties and there's no current boyfriend. Lorenson has a massive office complex in Manhattan and he likes his Personal Assistant to be free and unencumbered, to be able to travel to his New York offices with him at the drop of a hat.'

'Oh, but I—'

'He's not an easy man to work for like Randall was. You'll have to be prepared for someone cold and arrogant and uncaring. Someone who expects his staff to jump when he says jump.'

'How do you know all this?'

‘My sister, Julie, made a point of getting to know the woman who used to be Lorensen’s PA. Apparently she’d been with him for over five years, and would still be working for him now if she wasn’t planning to get married...’

As the lights changed to green, he went on, ‘She told Julie that though he expects a twenty-four hour commitment, she rates him as a good boss...’

‘When you say a twenty-four hour commitment,’ Gail began uneasily, ‘you don’t think he’ll...?’

‘No, there’ll be no funny business. Lorensen isn’t known for mixing work and pleasure. Quite the opposite, in fact.’

‘Then he’s married?’

‘No, and never has been. His ex-PA, who admitted she’d once been madly in love with him, told Julie she’s convinced that there’s no real place in his life for a woman.

‘However, he’s a good-looking devil,’ Paul admitted grudgingly, ‘and it appears that when he wants a woman to warm his bed there are always plenty only too willing to jump in with him. So you’ve nothing to fear on that score.

‘Once you’ve got the job, all you have to do is be your normal efficient self and everything should be plain sailing.’

Gail wasn’t convinced by his blasé attitude. ‘But even if I *do* get it I’ll be new, an unknown quantity. He may not trust me with—’

‘The word is,’ Paul broke in, his blue eyes impatient, ‘that once he’s chosen his personal staff he trusts them. He won’t hire someone he doesn’t trust. So you shouldn’t have any trouble on that score...’

Somehow, knowing that only made her feel worse.

Oblivious to her mental discomfort, Paul was going on, ‘I’ve had a report from someone I’d already planted—the plans for the Rainmaker project should be finalized in the next few weeks, which means we’re just in the nick of time.

‘As soon as you’ve managed to see those plans and get the latest gen, just let me know.’

He made the whole thing sound so casual, so innocuous, Gail thought helplessly, but to her it was spying, pure and simple, and she hated the thought of being involved.

But after days of unrelenting pressure Paul had made it a test of her love....

‘There’ll never be another opportunity like this. With his present PA leaving just as the Rainmaker project is going through, and you being out of a job, this is exactly the chance I’ve been waiting for.

‘Lorensen has a reputation for being daring, for sticking his neck out when it comes to these really big deals. That’s how he comes to be a billionaire at just turned thirty. If he intends to play it the same way this time *and I know about it in advance* I can be waiting with a hatchet.

‘This is important to me.’ He took her hand and squeezed it by way of emphasis. ‘I have to know what’s in those plans. I need to be at least one jump ahead.’ Taking her hand to his lips and pressing a kiss to her palm he continued, ‘That way, if I can’t bring him down altogether, and he may be too powerful for that,’ Paul admitted regretfully, ‘at the very least, I can bring him to his knees.

‘All I need is some reliable inside information, and when you’re his PA it’ll be a doddle...’

When Paul had first mentioned Jenson Lorensen, Gail had felt her heart stop, then start to race again uncomfortably fast.

‘Jenson Lorensen?’ she echoed warily.

‘Don’t tell me you’ve never heard the name. It’s a big Anglo-American concern. It was started in the States by Richard Jenson just as the boom in electronics really got under way.

‘When Jenson retired five years ago, he made the company over to Zane Lorensen, his nephew, who’d been his right-hand man for a number of years...’

So it was him.

Unbidden, a mental picture of Zane Lorensen filled her mind. Tall, black-haired, broad-shouldered and narrow-hipped... A lean, tanned face with strong features... A mouth like a fallen

angel, and long, heavy-lidded dark green eyes. Handsome eyes. Eyes that seemed able to look into her very soul.

A shiver ran through her.

Paul went on, oblivious to her reaction. 'Lorenson, who had an American mother and an English father, is a clever swine and brilliant when it comes to business. He added the Anglo part, moved into Information Technology and Research and Development and trebled the company's profits inside two years...'

'But I don't see what—'

Paul cut in, speaking over her. 'He's an old adversary. That swine was responsible for my first company going down, and I've hated his guts ever since. Now, with your help, I've a chance to derail the Rainmaker project and get some of my own back.'

Gail turned to him, wide-eyed. 'With *my* help? Oh, but I—'

'Just listen. It should work like a dream...'

While he outlined the scheme her agitation grew. As soon as she could get a word in edgeways she said in a rush, 'No, Paul. I don't want anything to do with it.'

Once again, he dismissed her protest. 'It won't be difficult. Think about it. I'm sure you'll change your mind.'

'I won't change my mind.'

With a smile that would normally have melted her heart, he coaxed, 'Come on, sweetie, do it for me.'

Even if it hadn't involved Zane Lorenson she wouldn't have wanted to do it. But as it *did*, there was no way...

'I'd never be able to bring it off.'

Well aware that she was besotted with him, and wondering at her unusual reluctance to toe the line he had marked out for her, Paul demanded, 'Surely you could at least try?'

Her lovely mouth set in a determined line, she shook her head. 'I don't want to get involved.'

Paul turned to meet her gaze and said somewhat sharply, 'You once said you'd do anything for me.'

'I said anything I *could* do. But this is something I *can't* do,' Gail pleaded.

'Why can't you?'

She shook her head, helplessly. 'I just *can't*.'

'There must be a reason,' he pressed.

Cornered, she blurted out, 'I once knew him.'

'How do you mean, you once knew him?'

'I met him when I was living in the States. He was...friends with Rona.'

'Your stepsister?'

Gail nodded. 'Yes.'

'I thought you'd been back in England for quite a few years?'

'I have—'

Paul brushed off her concerns. 'So it must have been some time ago?'

'Seven years.' She didn't add that for seven long years Zane Lorenson's image had haunted her. 'I was just seventeen.'

'Did you know him well?'

'No...' In spite of what had happened, she hadn't really *known* him at all.

Awkwardly, she added, 'But we met two or three times and I—'

His face impatient, Paul butted in, 'When your mother remarried after your own father's death, did your new stepfather adopt you?'

'No.'

'In that case you and your stepsister must have different surnames.'

‘Yes, but—’

‘Then what are you worrying about? Your name won’t ring a bell, and if you only met each other two or three times he’s hardly likely to remember you after seven years.’

‘But suppose he did?’

‘If by any faint chance he did, would it matter?’

‘Yes, it would... You see I—’

‘My dear girl,’ Paul interrupted peevishly, ‘do you seriously believe there’s a cat in hell’s chance of him recognising you after all this time...?’

The honest answer was no. She had been less than nothing to the young Zane Lorenson. Until Rona had turned that cruel spotlight on her, he hadn’t even been aware of her existence.

‘If you really think there might be a problem, for goodness’ sake find some way of altering your appearance; get some glasses or something.

‘But I’m quite certain you’re worrying over nothing. In the last seven years you must have altered a great deal.’

She had.

In those days she had been just a gawky adolescent, a late developer, painfully shy and gauche, and still with the remains of a northern accent.

Then, goaded by Rona, and hopelessly in love with a man she had only seen from afar, she had set about changing her image.

Only to be laughed at and ridiculed by her stepsister who, at twenty-three, had been beautiful and glamorous and worldly.

But that hadn’t been the worst...

She pushed the memory—still unbearably shameful and humiliating even after all these years—away and tried to concentrate on what she had become.

To all intents and purposes she was now a cool, self-possessed young woman with dark glossy hair, a clear skin, a good figure, a polished manner and no trace of an accent.

No, in all truth, Zane Lorenson was hardly likely to recognize her.

But remembering how he had looked at her the last time they’d met—his set lips, the cold fury in those green eyes—she still didn’t want to take the risk.

‘I don’t want to have to see him again. I’m afraid...’ About to say, *I’m afraid of him*, unwilling to have Paul laugh at her, she changed it to, ‘I’m afraid I don’t like him. I’d simply *hate* to have to work for him.’

Paul’s fair face darkened. ‘I think in the circumstances that’s a very selfish attitude. After all, it wouldn’t be for long. As soon as you’ve got the information I want, you can make some excuse and leave.’

Her grey eyes beseeching, she begged, ‘Please, Paul, don’t ask me to do this.’

Such a heartfelt plea ought to have melted stone. But his expression hard, unrelenting, he said, ‘It’s not as if it’s *that* much to ask, and you’d do it for my sake if you really loved me.’

As, hating that look of censure, the feeling that she was letting him down, she wavered, he pressed, ‘Of course if you *don’t* there’s not much point in our getting engaged.’

‘I *do* love you.’

‘Then prove it.’

Finally giving in to the pressure, she agreed unhappily. ‘Very well, I’ll try.’

Triumphantly, he drawled smugly, ‘That’s my girl. I always knew you wouldn’t let me down.

‘Now just one thing, no one else must know, so don’t say anything to that flatmate of yours. Simply tell her you’ve got another job.’

She looked across at him, still worried about the plan. ‘I might not get it.’

‘Of course you will. It’s practically a cert.’

As a reward for toeing the line, he had taken her out and bought her an engagement ring.

With his red-gold hair and Greek god looks, his bright blue eyes and long curly lashes, the boyish smile that added to his charm, most women he came into contact with were bowled over.

Gail had been no exception.

He had called one morning to see David Randall, her ex-boss, and after years of thinking she would never fall in love again, she had done just that.

A small, privately owned company, Randalls had been highly successful, coming up with some brilliant ideas that seemed set to revolutionize their particular branch of electronics.

They had been on the point of putting the new ideas into practice when David Randall had had a heart attack which had made him decide to sell out and retire at the early age of fifty-five.

The Manton Group, which Paul owned, had made an offer for the company, but it had been a derisory offer in David Randall's opinion.

As the negotiations dragged on, Paul had become a frequent visitor, often stopping by Gail's desk to have a chat. When one day he asked her to have dinner with him, she had been both flattered and flustered.

From then on he had taken her out a good deal and, though he had been both romantic and ardent, unlike her previous boyfriend, he had made no attempt to take her back to his place or get her into bed.

This restraint, as well as his good looks and his undeniable charm, had set him apart and deepened her feelings for him.

Finally the business deal had gone through and David Randall had left the company he had built up single-handed, satisfied that he had negotiated a fair deal for his employees.

But, as soon as Randalls was his, Paul had paid off staff and workers alike and closed the company down.

When, badly shaken, her liking and respect for Paul diminished, Gail had ventured to protest, he had answered that all the employees had received a generous cash settlement and most of them had been quite content.

'But it isn't what David intended,' she insisted. 'He spent a lifetime building up that company. He regarded his workers almost as family, and he wanted them all to keep their jobs—'

'My dear girl, you ought to know by now that there's no sentiment in business. Randalls was opposition we could well do without. A thorn in our side that had to be removed,' he answered dismissively.

'That wasn't what you told David Randall,' she said accusingly. 'You gave him to understand that nothing much would change.'

Paul shrugged. 'It was business, darling. He may have chosen to believe otherwise, but this was the best decision all round, I promise.'

Seeing she was still far from happy, and needing to keep her on his side for what he had in mind, he pulled her close and kissed her. 'Now let's forget all about work. If you really want another job, I'll give you one. But I thought you might prefer to be Mrs Paul Manton...'

Paul wanted to marry her. Still besotted by him, in spite of all that had happened, she floated up to cloud nine.

'But before we start planning the wedding, there's something I want you to do for me...'

She had come down to earth again with a bump when he'd explained what it was he wanted her to do and, even with his engagement ring on her finger, her joy had been marred by the thought of what was in store.

'This job you want me to apply for—' she broached the subject with reluctance '—how shall I go about it?'

'Don't worry about that. I know Mrs Rogers, the woman who runs the employment agency that Lorenson uses. I'll ask her to see you and recommend you for the position.'

Gail had found herself hoping that for once in his life Paul wouldn't succeed in pulling strings and manipulating people.

But, with the kind of looks and charm that made slaves of the female sex, he had, and she had been asked to call and see Mrs Rogers.

The following day the agency had rung to say that an interview had been arranged.

Though pleased that everything had so far gone according to plan, Paul had complained bitterly about the earliness of the hour.

'Lorenson wants you to be at his office at eight o'clock! Why the hell can't he work nine to five like most people?

'Well, you'll just have to take care not to be late. The swine is a stickler for punctuality and you'll need to look cool.'

Then, with a thoughtful glance at her face, 'Perhaps I'd better pick you up.'

'There's no need to do that. I can make my own way there. I'll get a taxi if necessary.'

After a moment or two's consideration, he said decidedly, 'No, it'll be best if I come round and collect you.'

She had strongly suspected that it was in case she chickened out at the last minute.

Whatever his reason, he had picked her up on the dot of seven fifteen, so now here she was, on her way to be interviewed for the position of PA to a man she had hoped never to have to see again.

Talk about being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, she thought miserably. If she didn't get it, Paul would be furious with her. If she *did*, she would be in an invidious position...

'We're almost there.' His voice broke into her unhappy thoughts. 'Lorenson's offices, as well as his own private apartment, are in the Clairmont Building on Lower Arlington Street. But, just to make certain no one spots you getting out of my car, I'll drop you at the corner.'

When they reached their destination, he drew in to the kerb and issued his last instructions. 'Now don't forget, try not to look flustered whatever you do, or all this planning and preparation will be wasted.

'And don't breathe a word about me. Lorenson would soon be on his guard if he picked up any suggestion that we know each other.' His gaze held a warning and Gail looked away as he continued, 'When the interview's over and you're well away from Lorenson's offices, you can give me a quick call and let me know for sure if you've got the job.'

Gail hesitated, still uncertain and unsure. 'But suppose one of his staff is doing the interviewing and is just compiling a short-list?'

'According to Mrs Rogers, Lorenson doesn't work that way. The people he wants on his own staff he always interviews personally, and usually he makes an on-the-spot decision.'

Gail's heart sank. She had held on to the faint hope that it might be one of his minions she would have to see, and that said minion would prefer some other candidate, thus giving her a let-out. But it seemed it wasn't to be.

Urgently in need of reassurance, she asked, 'When shall I see you? Lynne will be out tonight if you want to come round for a meal.'

'Once Lorenson knows where you live, it might not be safe.'

Trying to keep the tell-tale tremor out of her voice, she suggested, 'Well, couldn't we meet in the park, or at a restaurant, or something?'

But, instead of softening, those eyes, blue as summer skies, looked at her dismissively. 'It's too big a risk. We can't afford to jeopardise our chances by possibly being seen together.

'After you've let me know the score it would be better if we don't have any contact until you've something to report.'

'Oh,' she said blankly.

'When you have, you'd better give me a ring at the office and we'll meet up somewhere.'

He leaned over and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. 'Now don't forget how much this means to me. Good luck.'

Feeling slightly sick, her stomach full of butterflies, Gail unfastened her seat belt, opened the door and got out.

Already the air was warm and the summer sunshine bright, glancing off the bodywork of passing cars and gleaming on pavements still damp from the early morning shower.

As the Jaguar drew away, she lifted her hand but, a slight frown on his good-looking face, Paul was staring straight ahead.

Opening her bag, she took out the pair of cheap low-strength reading glasses she'd bought in the local chemist and put them on.

Then bracing herself, she walked the short distance to the Clairmont Building, with its handsome Georgian façade, and through the imposing main entrance.

The clock above the reception desk showed it was ten minutes to eight, so she was in good time.

As, her heart beating fast and her legs feeling oddly shaky, she started to cross the marble-floored lobby, she caught sight of herself reflected in one of the long gilt-framed mirrors.

Wearing a smart charcoal-grey suit and an off-white blouse, her small heart-shaped face outwardly calm, her dark hair in a smooth coil, she looked every inch the cool, efficient businesswoman.

No one would have guessed at her inner turmoil as she approached the desk and gave her name to the pretty blonde receptionist.

'You'll find the office complex on the second floor, Miss North. If you would like to go straight up, Mrs Bancroft, Mr Lorensen's secretary, will be waiting for you.'

When Gail stepped out of the lift on the second floor she was greeted by an attractive middle-aged woman with bobbed iron-grey hair.

'I'm Claire Bancroft. If you'd like to follow me, Miss North...'

As Mrs Bancroft led the way along the carpeted corridor to another lift, she remarked, 'Mr Lorensen is in his apartment this morning. He likes to keep the interviews he conducts informal.'

Entering a four digit code into a small panel, she added, 'This is his private lift.'

The lift took them up to the top floor, where they emerged into a quietly luxurious hallway. Opening the nearest door, Mrs Bancroft said, 'Please come in, Miss North...'

Gail found herself ushered into a large sunny room with an off-white and mint-green decor and an ornate plaster ceiling. To the left, a door into a neighbouring room stood slightly ajar.

Between two sets of windows was a desk with an impressive array of the latest electronic equipment and a black leather chair.

Apart from the businesslike desk, the room was furnished as a lounge.

'Perhaps you'd like to take a seat?' Mrs Bancroft suggested with a friendly smile. 'Mr Lorensen knows you're here. He'll be with you in a minute or so.'

When the other woman had gone, too nervous to sit and cravenly grateful for even this short breathing space, Gail looked around curiously.

Along with some lovely antique furniture, there were a couple of comfortable-looking couches, several soft off-white leather armchairs and a large round coffee table.

A thick-pile smoke-grey carpet covered the floor and on either side of a beautiful Adam fireplace, which was filled with fresh flowers, there were recessed bookcases, their shelves overflowing.

Considering how very strongly she had felt about Zane Lorensen, aside from his appearance, she had known hardly anything about the man himself, what he was really like, what his tastes were.

This appeared to be the room of a man with eclectic tastes, a man who preferred his surroundings to be both simple and elegant.

On the walls several stark and dramatic snow scenes by Jonathan Cass rubbed shoulders with the vibrant colour and slumberous warmth of Tuscan landscapes by Marco Abruzzi.

Frowning a little, she studied them. With such diverse techniques and subject matter, they shouldn't have been hung together. But somehow the contrast worked, highlighting them both.

It seemed that Zane Lorensen was a man who knew precisely what he wanted and wasn't afraid to try the less obvious.

Her mother had always said that one could get a good idea of a person's character from what kind of books they read so, taking a deep breath, Gail moved closer to the bookcases and looked at their contents.

Classics and poetry, travel and adventure, mysteries, biographies, autobiographies, the best popular paperback fiction and Booker Prize winners jostled for space.

She had picked up a copy of a recent Booker Prize winner when, glancing up, she met a pair of brilliant dark eyes.

He was leaning negligently against the door jamb, his tough, good-looking face shrewd, calculating, an arrogant tilt to his dark head.

Wearing a smart light-weight suit, a crisp shirt and tie and handmade shoes, he looked every inch the billionaire businessman. He also looked fit and virile and dangerous.

Though she had braced herself to see him again, the shock hit her like a blow over the heart and in that instant her heartbeat and her breathing, the very blood flowing through her veins, seemed to stop.

She had remembered how he looked—of course she had, his face had haunted her for years—and, apart from an added maturity, he looked much the same now as he had then.

But in the intervening years she had almost forgotten just what a powerful impact his physical presence had on her.

While she stood rooted to the spot, endeavouring to pull herself together, he continued to stand and study her in unnerving silence.

It seemed an age, but could only have been seconds, before she released the breath she was holding and her heart began to beat again in slow, heavy thuds.

How long had he been standing there quietly watching her while she'd nosed amongst his personal belongings?

She felt herself shrivel inwardly. Her one consolation was that the cool green gaze fixed on her face held no sign of recognition. But she had known it wouldn't.

As soon as she had managed to regain some semblance of composure, she thrust the book she was holding back on to the shelf and said unevenly, 'I'm sorry; I was just...'

'Taking a look at what I read? What conclusion did you come to?'

His voice was low-pitched and attractive. It was a voice she had never forgotten. A voice she would have known amongst a million. A voice that could have called her back from the grave.

Shaken afresh, she said the first thing that came into her head. 'That you have interesting tastes.'

'Really? Do you?' he drawled nonchalantly.

'Yes, I believe so.'

'What about the pictures?' He nodded towards the impressive artwork.

So he had watched her studying those as well. 'I like them.'

His gaze narrowed. 'Do you know who painted them?'

'Yes.'

'How do you know?'

She raised her chin, trying to give an air of authority and calm. 'Though these are clearly originals, and I can only afford prints, Jonathan Cass and Marco Abruzzi are two of my favourite artists.'

He raised a dark, level brow. 'My, my, we *do* seem to have a lot in common. Wouldn't you say so?'

Clenching her teeth at the blatant mockery, she said nothing.

'So I take it you have the same pictures hanging in your living room?'

Aware that he thought she was making the whole thing up to curry favour, she answered briefly, 'No.'

'Ah, now you disappoint me. Do you actually have any by either of those artists?'

'I have two of Cass's and—'

'Which two?'

'*Snowfall* and *Winter Journey*.'

'Any of Abruzzi's?'

'Three,' she replied quickly.

'And they are?'

'*Olive Groves*, *Sunset* and *Fields of Sunflowers*,' she said, listing her three favorites.

'Do they all hang in the same room?'

'No...I would never have had the nerve to hang them together.'

'What do you think of the result?'

She wanted to say she hated it but, unable to frame the lie, she admitted, 'It shouldn't work, but somehow it does.'

'I'm pleased you think so,' he told her sardonically. 'Well, now we've established that when it comes to books and paintings we're practically soulmates, suppose you sit down and we'll see how you measure up on the business side.'

But she had had enough. If Zane Lorensen had realized who she was, he couldn't have been more unkind and derisive.

'Thank you,' she said stiffly, 'but I've decided I don't want the position after all, so there's no point in staying for the interview.'

Appearing totally unruffled, he asked, 'Why have you changed your mind?'

She had nothing to lose by speaking the truth. Lifting her chin and bravely meeting those green eyes, she told him, 'I don't like the way you're making fun of me. It's not businesslike and—'

'You can't bear to be teased?'

'I can't see the necessity for it.'

'As a matter of fact, how a person reacts to being teased tells me quite a lot about his or her character. Now sit down.'

Though he spoke quietly, his voice cracked like a whip and, against all her inclinations, she found herself obeying a will stronger than her own.

CHAPTER TWO

AS GAIL sank into the nearest armchair, her heart hammering against her ribs so loudly she felt sure it must be audible, he commented, 'That's better.'

Then, with exaggerated politeness, 'How do you like your coffee, Miss North?'

Her empty stomach was churning and, about to say she didn't want any coffee, she thought better of it and answered, 'A little cream, no sugar, thank you.'

'Exactly how I like mine,' he observed. Adding provokingly, 'Now, isn't that strange?'

Refusing to rise to the bait, she put her bag on the floor and sat in silence while he filled two cups with the dark fragrant liquid and added a dash of cream to each of them.

Passing her a cup, he sat down opposite and looked at her with a gleam in his eye that showed he enjoyed being master of the situation.

Watching her bite her lip, he queried, 'Do I take it you're vexed because of a little gentle teasing?'

Without answering, she looked at him stonily.

‘OK.’ He sat back with a hint of a smile on his lips. ‘Let’s keep this strictly business—where are you from?’

Still riled, she answered quickly. ‘I was born in the northeast—’

The moment the words were out, she could have bitten her tongue. She shouldn’t have told him that. Rona had always teased her unmercilessly about her Geordie accent and it was the one thing that he might possibly remember.

She risked a quick glance at him and the little flare of satisfaction in those handsome eyes made her heart sink.

Had he guessed her identity?

No, surely not. It must be because he had managed to provoke her into speech.

His expression bland now, he asked, ‘Whereabouts in the north-east?’

‘Tyneside,’ she answered reluctantly, certain he was still mocking her.

When he nodded, clearly absorbing the information, Gail looked up at him and cautiously studied his handsome profile. She had forgotten just how devastatingly attractive his white smile was, and her heart lurched crazily.

Not that she was still attracted to him, she told herself hastily. It was just remembering the past that had affected her so strongly.

While she tried to steady herself, she made a pretence of sipping her coffee.

She was hoping that he had let the subject drop when he asked casually, ‘How long did you live in the north?’

‘We left when I was twelve.’

‘Why?’

She paused, worried about how much information to reveal but replied honestly. ‘My father died when I was ten, and two years later my mother remarried.’

Everything she had told him so far was the exact truth, but if he wanted to delve any further into her family background, rather than admit that her stepfather had been American and they had moved to the States, she would have to resort to lies.

However, to her relief, he changed tack by saying, ‘So fill me in on your personal details—full name, age, where you live, previous work experience...’

‘It’s all in my CV.’

He leaned back and crossed his ankles, perfectly at ease. ‘I dare say it is, Miss North. But I’d prefer to hear it from your own lips...’

It was so in keeping with his attitude that she should have expected it.

‘You can start by telling me your Christian name.’

‘Gail.’

‘Short for Abigail?’

‘Yes.’ She had been praying that he would take the name at face value and not make the connection.

Her parents had always called her Abbey, but after pointing out that in books Abigail was usually a servant’s name, her stepsister Rona had used her full name, apparently in an unkind attempt to belittle her.

It was one of the reasons that, when she and her mother had returned to England, she had started to call herself Gail.

‘A nice old-fashioned name,’ Zane Lorensen commented after a moment. ‘So how do you come to be called Abigail?’

‘It was my maternal grandmother’s name.’

‘Would you believe me if I told you *my* maternal grandmother was named Abigail?’

‘No, I wouldn’t,’ she said shortly.

He threw back his head and laughed. 'Well, at least you're honest. But, in this case, mistaken. It happens to be the truth.'

Her mouth went dry as he added, his tone reflective, 'It's quite an unusual name these days. You don't meet many Abigails.' His gaze held hers as if suggesting there was more meaning to his words.

So he had known who she was all along, and that was why he'd treated her the way he had.

If it had been at all possible she would have made a run for it, but her old fear of him was back in force and she was frozen into immobility, unable to either move or speak.

Quite a few seconds had passed before she appreciated that his lean, tanned face showed no sign of the anger or hostility she would have expected had he known who she was. She was being ridiculous, and she knew it. She had to keep calm.

His expression held a kind of studied patience as he waited for an answer to a question she hadn't even heard.

'I—I'm sorry,' she stammered.

'I asked how old you were.'

'Twenty...' she paused '...six.' It was her first white lie and the words almost stuck in her throat as she pretended to be older than she was. She had to make sure he hadn't made the connection.

'Which school did you go to?'

'Langton Chase.' She had gone to the well-known all girls school for just a year after she and her mother had returned to England.

He placed it immediately. 'So you lived in Sussex?'

'Yes.'

'With your parents?'

Though after the separation there had only been her mother, she answered, 'Yes.'

'Do your parents still live there?'

She shook her head. 'They're both dead now.'

'Were you very close?'

'I was to my mother.'

'Any brothers or sisters?'

Family relationships were a minefield, and she answered briefly, 'No.'

He ran long, lean fingers over his smooth jaw before moving on to ask, 'How old were you when you left school?'

With a sigh of relief at the change of subject, she told him, 'Eighteen.'

'Then what?'

'I spent a year at St Helen's Business College before getting a job at Randalls.'

'And there you were...' he picked up her CV '...PA to David Randall.'

She nodded, then, all at once foreseeing a problem that Paul hadn't taken into account, she added hastily, 'After Mr Randall had a heart attack and retired, the company was closed down.'

Zane Lorensen's clear, long-lashed eyes pinned her. 'The financial news indicated that it had been bought by The Manton Group.'

Her heart sank but somehow she managed steadily, 'Yes, it was. They paid off the workers and closed it down as soon as it was legally theirs.'

'What do you think of Paul Manton?'

'W-what?' she stammered.

'I asked what you thought of Paul Manton. Presumably he did the negotiating and wielded the axe. Or was it someone else?'

'A Mr Desmond,' she said, seizing on the suggestion.

Mark Desmond, Paul's second in command, a bluff, hearty man she had disliked on sight, had come in with Paul a couple of times.

‘I’m surprised. Manton usually enjoys doing his own dirty work... Tell me, what did you think of the decision to close Randalls down?’

‘I thought it was totally wrong.’ For perhaps the first time her tone held real conviction. ‘It wasn’t what Mr Randall had wanted or expected.’

He raised a brow, questioning her frankness. ‘He couldn’t have known what kind of men he was dealing with, otherwise he *would* have expected it.’

Then, with another swift change of subject, ‘Where do you live?’

‘In Kensington.’

‘Which part of Kensington?’ he pressed.

‘Just off the West Brackensfield Road,’ she answered reluctantly.

She had hoped he would leave it at that, but he asked, ‘Whereabouts exactly?’

‘Delafield House, Rolchester Square. I share a flat,’ she went on, rambling a bit because she was nervous.

‘Does that mean you have a live-in lover?’

She shook her head. ‘No. It means I share with another girl.’

‘Have you any ties or commitments at home?’

She shook her head.

‘No steady boyfriend?’

She stuck as close to the truth as she could. ‘I’m not seeing anyone just at the moment.’

Studying her heart-shaped face, with its small straight nose, beautiful almond eyes and dark winged brows, its flawless skin and pure bone-structure, he commented, ‘That surprises me.’ Then, drily, ‘Or have you heard that I prefer my PA to be a free agent?’

Determined to avoid direct lies wherever possible, she said, ‘I split up with Jason, my previous boyfriend, some six months ago.’

‘And there’s been no one since then?’

Forced into a direct lie, she surreptitiously crossed her fingers and said, ‘No.’

‘So you’re still broken-hearted?’ her tormentor asked, the old hateful mockery back.

‘Are such personal questions really necessary?’ she demanded, losing her cool.

‘Oh, absolutely,’ he assured her, his voice flippant. Then, smiling a little at her indignation, ‘You see I don’t want to take on a lovelorn PA whose mind isn’t on her work.’

‘I am *not* lovelorn,’ she informed him raggedly.

‘Does that mean you’ve got over it? Or you didn’t love him in the first place?’

The unholy gleam in his eyes telling her that this was just another attempt to bait her, she bit back the angry words, took a deep breath and repeated more calmly, ‘I am *not* lovelorn.’

With an ironic smile, he saluted that show of anger management before asking, ‘Do you have any objections to travelling?’

On firmer ground now, she replied, ‘None at all.’

‘Done much?’

‘Not as much as I would have liked. Europe mainly...’ After her mother’s untimely death she had taken holidays with Joanne, one of the secretaries from Randalls.

‘Ever been to the States?’

She should have seen that coming. Once again she crossed her fingers and lied. ‘No.’

His cool green eyes studied her face and lingered there, and she had the strangest feeling that he knew perfectly well that she hadn’t spoken the truth.

Unable to meet that probing gaze, she was forced to look away.

There was a long thoughtful pause, then he said, ‘Tell me, do you usually wear glasses?’

Ambushed by the unexpected question, she hesitated fractionally before saying as steadily as possible, ‘Why, yes.’

‘Strange. When I asked Mrs Rogers to describe you, she failed to mention them.’

Leaning over, he lifted the glasses from Gail's nose and squinted through them, before asking, 'Why do you wear them?'

'Why?'

'Yes, why? As far as I can see, these are merely low-strength reading glasses.'

Feeling her colour rise, she said nothing.

He handed them back to her. 'So you don't wear glasses as a rule. You put them on especially for this interview.'

Both were statements rather than questions, but her failure to dispute either was answer enough.

'Why did you feel that was necessary?'

Cursing the impulse that had made her put them on, she stammered, 'Well I—I thought they would make me look more...efficient, more competent...'

His green eyes glinted. 'That reason hardly inspires confidence. It strongly suggests that you aren't at all sure of yourself or your capabilities.'

'I'm quite sure I'm capable of doing the job.'

'Possibly you are, but lying to me is hardly the way to get it.'

So she had failed.

All she could feel for a moment or two was a sense of relief that she wouldn't have to go through with something she had dreaded.

Hard on the heels of that relief came a leaden feeling of failure as she realized just how angry and disappointed Paul would be.

Then both those feelings were swamped by the urgent necessity to leave, to get away from Zane Lorensen's clear-eyed scrutiny, his condemnation.

Gathering up her bag, she thrust the glasses clumsily into it and jumped to her feet, babbling, 'I'm sorry to have wasted your time...'

He rose too and took a step towards her. At five feet six inches she was fairly tall for a woman, but at well over six feet he seemed to tower over her. 'Don't rush off.'

Ignoring the quietly spoken order, she was about to head for the door when his lean fingers closed lightly round her wrist and kept her where she was. 'I said don't rush off.'

He had said that same thing to her once before and she shuddered as, his touch burning into her like a brand, she made an effort to pull free.

It was to no avail and, panic-stricken, recalling that past encounter and desperate to escape, she tried harder. 'Please let me go.'

Ignoring her plea, he put his free hand on her shoulder and pressed her back into the chair. Then, releasing her wrist, he stood over her.

Her voice sounding high and frightened even to her own ears, she objected, 'You've no right to keep me here against my will.'

Clicking his tongue, he told her severely, 'Now you're being melodramatic.'

His words were like a dash of cold water and, realizing the justice of his remark, she took a deep steadying breath and apologized shamefacedly. 'I'm sorry. I really don't know what's got into me.'

'I dare say the prospect of being interviewed made you nervous,' he suggested with smooth mockery. Now, if you're still interested in the job, there are one or two things you ought to know...

'I expect my PA to be available for twenty-four hours a day if I think it's necessary. That's why I asked if you have any ties at home.'

'More importantly, I always give my PA my complete trust and in return I expect discretion and one hundred per cent loyalty...'

His words made Gail feel hollow inside.

'Because of the occasional long hours, I'm flexible with regard to the length and the number of holidays my PA takes, and the salary is generous...'

He quoted a figure that made Gail blink and she found herself thinking, no wonder his previous PA had been reluctant to leave.

‘Oh, just one more thing. When we’re away from the office I like a friendly, informal working atmosphere with the use of first names.

‘Now, if you want it, the job is yours.’

She didn’t. But the thought of Paul’s anger prevented her from saying so. If there was still a chance, he would want her to grab it with both hands.

And, after the way Zane Lorensen had treated her, did she really care if he came a cropper? Wouldn’t she be justified in cheering if he *could* be brought to his knees?

Yes, she would.

But the truth was that she didn’t want to play any part in it. Didn’t want to have to work closely with a man who had turned her whole life upside down once before, and who, she was forced to admit, might well have the power to do so again.

She had never met anyone else who had such an overwhelming effect on her. Just being with him was traumatic, turning the cool, competent woman she had become into a mass of nerves and making her feel like a gauche, insecure seventeen-year-old again.

If she didn’t take the job, she knew Paul might never forgive her. But it was more than that—when it came to Zane Lorensen, Gail couldn’t say no.

‘Well?’ There was the merest hint of impatience in Zane’s voice.

Still she hesitated. If she said no, she would be free and Paul need never know that she had had the chance and turned it down.

Sorely tempted, she battled with her conscience. Her conscience won.

There was no way she could deceive the man she loved and was going to marry. It would be like living a lie...

Looking up and meeting Zane Lorensen’s green eyes was like walking into a plate glass window.

She was still mentally reeling when he said silkily, ‘You seem to be having a great deal of difficulty deciding.’

‘Yes,’ she stammered. ‘Yes, I want it.’

She saw what appeared to be a look of almost savage relief and satisfaction cross his face.

It was gone instantly and she knew she must have been mistaken. He wouldn’t care one way or the other whether or not she took the job. If she didn’t take it, no doubt the next girl he interviewed would.

‘Very well,’ he said, his tone businesslike, ‘it’s yours for a three month trial period. I’ll let my secretary know what’s happening and get her to deal with all the details.

‘I understand from Mrs Rogers that you’re free to start at once?’

She nodded, though in truth she didn’t want to start at all. The second the words, ‘*Yes, I want it,*’ had been spoken she had regretted them.

‘How did you get here?’

Momentarily thrown, she echoed, ‘Get here?’

‘Did you come by bus? Tube?’

After a brief hesitation, she answered, ‘Taxi.’

‘You have a current passport?’

She frowned, unsure where this conversation was heading. ‘Yes.’

‘Good. How long will it take you to pack a bag?’

‘P-pack a bag? You mean to travel?’

‘My, but you’re quick,’ he said with a hint of sarcasm.

She flushed. ‘I’m sorry. It’s just a bit sudden.’

Though Paul had warned her, *‘Lorenson has a massive office complex in Manhattan and he likes his Personal Assistant to be free and unencumbered, to be available to travel to his New York offices with him at the drop of a hat,’* she hadn’t expected to be going quite this soon.

‘So how long?’

‘Fifteen minutes.’

‘Right. Let’s get on our way. My private jet’s waiting at the airport.’ A hand beneath her elbow, he hurried her to the door.

Wits scattered by his touch, and feeling as though she had been caught up and swept along by a tidal wave, Gail found herself escorted to the lift.

As it carried them swiftly downwards, he said, ‘I need to discuss something with my secretary, so perhaps you can get a taxi home to pick up your passport and luggage, then go on to meet me at the airport?’

‘Of course.’ She could always ask the driver to wait while she slipped inside for some money.

And this way, she thought with relief, she would have a breathing space, time to talk to Paul and let him know the score.

If she told him how Zane Lorenson had treated her, he might be concerned enough to forbid her to take the job...

She was warming herself with that small flicker of hope when—as though her companion knew exactly what was in her mind and was determined to thwart her—he said, ‘On second thoughts, I’ll only be with Claire for a short time so I might as well take you.’

Apart from needing to speak to Paul, she didn’t like the idea of Zane Lorenson going anywhere near her flat. His knowing her address was one thing, his actually ending up on her doorstep another.

Just the thought made her feel vulnerable, exposed.

Biting back the panic, she said as levelly as possible, ‘There’s really no need for you to go to all that trouble. I can easily—’

‘It isn’t any trouble,’ he told her crisply as the lift doors slid to behind them and they made their way down the corridor, ‘and it makes more sense for us to go together.’

‘Oh, but—’

‘If you took a taxi to the airport you might have some difficulty finding me, so it’ll save time in the long run.’

Knowing she couldn’t keep arguing, she relapsed into silence, her teeth biting into her lower lip.

‘Something wrong?’ he queried, giving her a sidelong glance.

Damn the man, he never missed a thing. ‘No, nothing,’ she assured him.

‘Quite sure? We don’t want to start our relationship with any undisclosed issues or problems. I know it’s the friction in the oyster that makes the pearl, but now you’re my PA I’d like there to be harmony, complete trust and confidence between us.’

She was saved from having to answer by the office door opening and Mrs Bancroft appearing, a sheaf of papers in her hand.

‘Ah, Claire, before we start for the airport, I need a minute or two of your time.’

‘Of course, Mr Lorenson.’ Turning on her heel, she led the way back inside.

Gail found herself shepherded into the office and given a seat.

Her thoughts busy, she paid scant attention while, quickly and precisely, Zane Lorenson issued his orders, ending, ‘I may be gone for a couple of weeks, but I intend to remain incommunicado.’

‘If anything really urgent crops up that Dave can’t handle, you know how to get hold of me. Otherwise, I don’t want to be disturbed while I’m away.’

‘I understand, Mr Lorenson.’

‘Good. Then we’ll be off. Perhaps you’ll ask John to bring the car round?’

‘Certainly, Mr Lorenson.’ She lifted the phone. ‘Shall I ask him to pick up your luggage?’

‘It’s already in the boot, thanks.’ Turning to Gail, he queried, ‘Ready to go, Miss North?’

The brisk question scattering Gail's thoughts like a gunshot scattered starlings, she got to her feet.

They went down in the lift without a word being spoken, but she was uncomfortably aware that he never took his eyes off her face.

As, his hand at her waist, they made their way across the foyer, the pretty blonde behind the reception desk smiled brightly and called an eager, 'Good morning, Mr Lorensen.'

'Morning, Miss Johnson,' he responded pleasantly. 'Settling in all right?'

'Very well, thank you, Mr Lorensen.' She gave him another sparkling smile and shot Gail a glance that was frankly envious.

Judging by the way this attractive girl was practically drooling over him, Gail could quite believe he had no trouble getting a woman to warm his bed whenever he wanted one.

Outside the impressive entrance a stylish black limousine was just drawing up. A moment later the uniformed chauffeur had jumped out and was standing by to open the door.

As they approached, he said, 'Good morning, Mr Lorensen,' with a respectful salute.

'Morning, John... On the way to the airport, will you stop at Delafield House, Rolchester Square? It's just off the West Brackensfield Road.'

'Certainly, sir.'

'How's the wife keeping?'

'Very well, considering, thank you, sir. The twins are due any day now.'

'Know what they're going to be?'

As Gail got into the luxurious car, she heard the middle-aged chauffeur answer proudly, 'A boy and a girl, sir.'

'Lucky man. When they arrive, I dare say your wife will be only too glad of some help, so take a couple of weeks paid leave. I'll be away, so you won't be needed here.'

'Why, thank you, sir,' the chauffeur exclaimed gladly. 'Jenny will be grateful. She's been wondering how she'd cope. But I told her, there's no need to worry, Mr Lorensen won't see us in a mess...'

Gail frowned. Though as far as *she* was concerned he'd been anything but easy to deal with, his consideration for his chauffeur didn't match the cold, uncaring image Paul had painted.

The thought of Paul made her wonder how she was going to manage to phone him. If Zane Lorensen stayed in the car while she went in to pack, it wouldn't be a problem. But if he decided to come in...

'You're looking worried,' he observed gravely, sliding in beside her and reaching over to fasten her seat belt. 'Something wrong?'

Feeling flustered by his nearness, the firm thigh pressing against hers, she moved away as inconspicuously as possible and said jerkily, 'No. No, nothing at all.'

The ironic glance he gave her confirmed that he had noticed her instinctive reaction to his closeness, but he merely observed, 'I thought you might have changed your mind about working for me.'

She longed to say that she had, but dared not until she had talked to Paul and got his blessing.

Instead she answered with what conviction she could muster, 'No, of course not, Mr Lorensen.'

'As I said, when we're away from the office I like a friendly, informal atmosphere, so make it Zane, and I'll call you Abigail.'

'I prefer Gail,' she said quickly.

'Then Gail it is.'

Very conscious of the fact that he was studying her profile, and struggling to keep her composure, she turned to look at him, remarking steadily, 'Yours is an unusual name.'

His white teeth gleamed in a smile before he told her wryly, 'I used to curse my father—who had a regrettable taste for Westerns and read a lot of stories by Zane Grey—until I discovered that my mother would have called me Tarquin.'

In spite of herself, Gail smiled. 'Yes, I see what you mean.'

His eyes on her face, he said softly, 'You're quite beautiful when you smile.'

If it had been his intention to destroy her hard won composure, he succeeded. Completely thrown by both by his words and his close scrutiny, she found herself blushing hotly.

A moment later she heard his quiet, satisfied chuckle, before he said with mock repentance, 'Dear me, now I've embarrassed you. I'm afraid I hadn't realized that some women are still capable of being embarrassed by a compliment.'

Gail sat as if turned to stone as he added caustically, 'Or anything else for that matter. Most of the females I've met, even as young as sixteen or seventeen, are able to throw themselves at a man without so much as a blush...'

Even as young as sixteen or seventeen... Oh, dear God, why had he said that unless he *knew*?

As she waited in an agony of fear and humiliation for the axe to fall, he went on, 'It's quite refreshing to meet a woman in her twenties who obviously doesn't belong in that category.' So he *didn't* know. She released the breath she had been unconsciously holding. It was her own sense of guilt and shame that had turned a general reference into a specific incident.

Too wrung out to make any further attempt at conversation and wishing herself anywhere but where she was, she stared blindly ahead and made an effort to at least *appear* relaxed.

But while she remained taut as a drawn bow string she was well aware that her companion—who was leaning back, his long legs stretched negligently, his feet crossed neatly at the ankles—was completely at ease.

Nothing more was said until they turned into Rolchester Square and drew up outside the modern block of flats.

When the chauffeur opened the car door, as nonchalantly as possible, Gail told the man beside her, 'I'll be as quick as I can,' and hastily scrambled out.

She thought for a split second that she had succeeded in leaving him behind, but Zane followed on her heels, saying coolly, 'If you can rustle up a cup of coffee, I could certainly use one.'

'Of course,' she agreed hollowly.

It would be no use attempting to phone Paul now. The internal walls of the flat were paper-thin. Even if she spoke quietly, Zane was bound to realize she was talking to someone.

She could use her mobile to send a text, of course. But if Paul was busy he might not bother to pick up a text message until lunch time, and that would be far too late.

A second or two's thought convinced her that it would be better to wait until she reached the airport. Then she could slip into the Ladies' and phone him from there.

If he was willing to let her back out, she could tell Zane that she had had second thoughts and get a taxi home.

Feeling a shade happier, she fished in her bag for the key and let them both into her ground floor flat which, though small, was as pleasant as the two girls could make it.

Dropping her bag on the coffee table and indicating one of the linen-covered armchairs, she asked, 'Won't you sit down?'

But, ignoring the polite invitation, Zane followed her through to the tiny kitchen and leaned idly against one of the work surfaces while she put the kettle on and spooned coffee into the cafetière.

Feeling all thumbs because he was watching her, she said, 'I'm afraid we've only got milk. My flatmate's trying to lose weight and she refused to put cream on the shopping list.'

'Don't worry, I'm quite happy with it black.'

Seeing her get out, and fill, a single cup, he queried, 'Aren't you going to join me?'

Anxious to bring an end to this nerve-racking situation, she shook her head. 'I need to write a note for my flatmate before I start packing.'

If her appeal to Paul was successful, she could always tear the note up when she got back. If it wasn't—and that didn't bear thinking about—Lynne would need to know what was happening.

CHAPTER THREE

FINDING a pen and a piece of paper, Gail briefly explained the situation, adding that there was a possibility that she might be in the States for a week or two.

Then having propped the note against the kettle where her flatmate was sure to find it, she turned to go through to her bedroom.

'Don't bother to pack a flight bag,' Zane told her. 'There'll be everything you may need on the plane. But do remember to bring your passport,' he added as he took his coffee and returned to the living room.

She lifted her case from the top of the wardrobe and, hardly caring what she put in—as, hopefully, she wouldn't be needing any of it—packed it. Then, having zipped it up, she searched in the chest of drawers for her passport.

When she returned to the living room, her case in one hand, her passport in the other, Zane rose to his feet with a wholly masculine grace and said approvingly, 'You've been quick... Here, let me take care of those.'

He relieved her of the case and, before she could think of arguing, he'd taken the passport and slipped it into his pocket.

'Have you packed a swimsuit?'

'A swimsuit?' she echoed blankly.

Though a number of hotels boasted a swimming pool these days, she wouldn't have given it a thought even if she *had* intended to go through with the trip.

He shrugged dismissively. 'I can see you haven't. Never mind. I'm sure we'll be able to sort out the problem when the time comes. Now, all set?'

Picking up her shoulder bag, she nodded.

'Then let's go.' He shepherd her to the door.

During the drive to the airport he seemed occupied with his thoughts. Gail, who couldn't wait to get there, sat staring into space, silently repeating, *Please let Paul understand...* like a mantra.

Though they had a good run through, it seemed an age before they reached the busy airport and made their way to a special VIP parking area.

It was only as they drew up that Gail realized she had still forgotten to pick up her notecase.

As the chauffeur jumped out to open the car door, a young, smartly dressed man who had obviously been awaiting their arrival hurried over.

'Good morning, Mr Lorensen.'

'Morning, Derek. How are things?'

'Fine, thank you, sir. If you'd like to come through, your luggage will all be taken care of.'

Rather than striding ahead and leaving her to follow at his heels, as Paul was apt to do, Zane picked up his briefcase and, putting a hand at her waist, kept her by his side as they made their way into the airport buildings.

While he quickly dealt with the checks and procedures, Gail remained sunk in thought, doing her best to plan ahead. When the formalities were over, instead of handing her back her passport, he put it in his briefcase with the rest of the documents.

Watching it disappear with a sinking heart, she realized that things had gone a lot further than she had intended and she might have to abandon both her passport and her luggage and make a run for it...

But first she had to speak to Paul.

'If you don't mind,' she said hurriedly, 'I just need to pay a visit to the Ladies.'

He put a restraining hand on her arm. 'We're running a little late—there's a perfectly good bathroom on the plane.'

'Oh, but I—'

'As we already have a take-off slot,' he added with a commanding edge to his voice, 'we shall be boarding immediately.'

Before she could catch her breath, she found herself escorted outside and across the tarmac to a sleek executive jet which was standing gleaming in the late morning sunshine.

The moment they had been welcomed aboard by a middle-aged, cheerful-faced steward, Zane remarked, 'Miss North is desperate to wash her hands, so will you show her where the bathroom is, please, Jarvis?'

'Certainly, sir. If you'll follow me, Miss North.'

Turning to Gail, Zane said, 'While you're gone I'll have a quick word with Captain Giardino and then we'll be about ready for take-off.'

Though his face was straight, she knew by the gleam in his eye that he not only knew how embarrassed she felt, but was amused by her discomfort.

Biting her lip and keeping a tight hold on both her temper and her bag, she followed the steward's white-coated figure to the rear of the plane, where she was shown into a small but luxurious bathroom.

She murmured her thanks and, the moment the door was shut and the bolt pushed firmly into place, unzipped her bag and felt for her mobile.

If she was quick enough there was still a chance she could talk to Paul and get off the plane before the luggage arrived and the main door was closed.

To start with, her fumbling fingers failed to locate it and, cursing the fact that everything was jumbled together in the bottom, she made a more thorough search.

The seconds were ticking away rapidly and when she still couldn't find it, frantic now, she tipped the entire contents of her bag into the sink and scrabbled through them.

It was a moment before she could really believe what her eyes were confirming. It wasn't there.

But she couldn't possibly have lost it. She had taken it off charge and put it in her bag that morning while Paul had stood and waited for her and she hadn't opened her bag since, apart from taking out and putting back the glasses.

Still, the hideous fact remained that *it wasn't there* and the only time the bag had been out of her sight was when she had left it in the living room while she'd gone to pack.

Suppose Zane had taken it?

Oh, don't be a fool, she told herself crossly. Why on earth should he take my phone?

Unless he had known precisely what she had in mind.

The thought momentarily sent her brain reeling.

But he couldn't possibly have known. She was being utterly ridiculous. If he'd had any idea of her link with Paul he would never have offered her the job in the first place.

Common sense having restored the balance, her mind went back to the more pressing problem of what she was to do now.

There were two options. She could throw everything away by telling Zane she didn't want the job after all and insist on leaving the plane. Or she could go through with this trip to the States and see how things worked out.

If she chose the former without consulting him, there was a good chance that Paul, whom she knew bore grudges, might never forgive her. If she chose the latter, she would have to find some way of armouring herself against Zane Lorensen...

A tap at the door made her practically jump out of her skin.

'I'm sorry to disturb you, Miss North,' the steward's voice murmured discreetly, 'but Mr Lorensen asked me to let you know that any minute now we'll be starting to taxi in preparation for take-off.'

With a jolt, Gail faced the fact that she had left it too late. She no longer had a choice.

Somehow she found her voice and answered, 'Please tell him I'll be there in just a moment.'

Having transferred her belongings from the sink back into her bag, Gail hurried after the steward, much too harassed to be more than vaguely aware of her sumptuous surroundings.

They were already taxiing towards the runway, any minute now they would be airborne, and Paul didn't even know she'd got the job, let alone that she would soon be on her way to the States.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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