Sharon
KENDRICK

SHAMEFUL SECRET,
SHOTGUN WEDDING

Шэрон Кендрик

Shameful Secret, Shotgun Wedding

«HarperCollins»

Кендрик Ш.

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His pregnant mistress When renowned international playboy Giancarlo Vellutini invites shop assistant Cassie Summers to join him for dinner, how can she refuse? After all, she is an ordinary girl from Cornwall, and chances like this don't come round very often!Throwing caution to the wind, before she knows it unworldly Cassie is completely at Giancarlo's mercy. She finds herself agreeing to be his mistress for Christmas… But will an unexpected gift make this temporary festive arrangement last a lifetime?

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‘Giancarlo. I need to speak to you.’

At the other end of the phone Giancarlo frowned—wondering what had made her abandon the pride he had so admired in order to ring him. Was this a ploy to get back into his bed—and, if so, wasn’t there a small part of him which was tempted to indulge her?

‘Giancarlo, are you still there?’

‘You *are* speaking to me,’ he pointed out coolly.

‘I meant…in person.’

‘In person might be difficult.’ He thought of her firm young body. Her violet eyes and rose petal lips. ‘I have a business trip coming up. Time is tight, Cassandra—you know how it is.’

In her little Cornish sitting room Cassie flinched—wishing that she’d just come right out and told him. And hadn’t there been a part of her which had hoped that maybe he was regretting letting her go? Well, she had just received her wake-up call, because he very definitely wasn’t.

‘I’d prefer not to have to tell you this on the phone.’

‘Tell me *what?’*

She swallowed. What else could she do but come right out with it? ‘I’m pregnant, Giancarlo.’

Dear Reader,

One hundred. Doesn’t matter how many times I say it, I still can’t believe that’s how many books I’ve written. It’s a fabulous feeling but more fabulous still is the news that Mills & Boon are issuing *every single one* of my backlist as digital titles. Wow. I can’t wait to share all my stories with you - which are as vivid to me now as when I wrote them.

There’s BOUGHT FOR HER HUSBAND, with its outrageously macho Greek hero and A SCANDAL, A SECRET AND A BABY featuring a very sexy Tuscan. THE SHEIKH’S HEIR proved so popular with readers that it spent two weeks on the *USA Today* charts and…well, I could go on, but I’ll leave you to discover them for yourselves.

I remember the first line of my very first book: “So you’ve come to Australia looking for a husband?” Actually, the heroine had gone to Australia to escape men, but guess what? She found a husband all the same! The man who inspired that book rang me up recently and when I told him I was beginning my 100th story and couldn’t decide what to write, he said, “Why don’t you go back to where it all started?”

So I did. And that’s how A ROYAL VOW OF CONVENIENCE was born. It opens in beautiful Queensland and moves to England and New York. It’s about a runaway princess and the enigmatic billionaire who is infuriated by her, yet who winds up rescuing her. But then, she goes and rescues him… Wouldn’t you know it?

I’ll end by saying how very grateful I am to have a career I love, and to thank each and every one of you who has supported me along the way. You really are very dear readers.

Love,

Sharon xxx

Shameful Secret, Shotgun Wedding
Sharon Kendrick

www.millsandboon.co.uk

Mills & Boon are proud to present a thrilling digital collection of all Sharon Kendrick's novels and novellas for us to celebrate the publication of her amazing and awesome 100th book! Sharon is known worldwide for her likeable, spirited heroines and her gorgeous, utterly masculine heroes.

SHARON KENDRICK once won a national writing competition, describing her ideal date: being flown to an exotic island by a gorgeous and powerful man. Little did she realise that she'd just wandered into her dream job! Today she writes for Mills & Boon, featuring her often stubborn but always to-die-for heroes and the women who bring them to their knees. She believes that the best books are those you never want to end. Just like life…

This book is dedicated to the Hempstock family—with whom I used to spend many happy times in Dronfield as a child.

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Chapter One

THERE was something about him which made her think of danger. Something dark and tantalising which drew her gaze like a magnet. Cassie felt the rush of blood to her cheeks and the sudden pounding of her heart as she stared at the man across the busy holiday rush of the department store.

He was *gorgeous.* Too gorgeous to be real, surely? Why, if she hadn't been surrounded by tinsel, fairy lights and a packed working schedule until the big day itself she might have thought that Christmas had come early.

Not that she had a lot to compare him with. It was only the second time she'd been away from rural Cornwall—where most of the men she met wore cheap aftershave and trod on your toes while you were dancing. And when you got up close for the slow numbers you could see little pieces of blood-stained tissue paper on their chins, where they'd cut themselves shaving.

Which was why landing this temporary job in London's most glitzy department store over the festive season was Cassie's chance to get away from the predictable world she'd grown up in and to live the dream. And London at this time of the year *was* a dream—an enchanted world of fairy lights and fake snow and an air of expectation. She *loved* Christmas.

Even working on the 'Seasonal Candle' section—a fir-festooned grotto selling a variety of upmarket candles—was a dream. One which remained intact despite the best efforts of mealy-mouthed Lindy in nearby Cosmetics and the fact ten hours of standing made your feet scream with protest. Daily, Cassie dealt with stick-thin society matrons and laughing students and over-excited small children filing past her on their way to see Santa.

Only today, she could see someone rather different from her usual customer—a tall, brooding man with skin the colour of burnished olive. Clad in a dark cashmere overcoat, his face proud and aristocratic, his lips mockingly sensual—and yet there was a cold, hard glint to his eyes of pure ebony.

Cassie's heart started racing. Racing hard enough to burst. She was certain he wasn't interested in buying a candle—in fact, she was surprised to see him shopping at all. He looked like the sort of man who would have minions to do the more mundane chores in life and one who would *never* cut himself shaving. She didn't imagine he'd be tempted by her sales pitch, either—but something made her walk up to him, her bright professional smile fixed firmly in place.

Never in her life had Cassie been so conscious of anyone's presence. He seemed to own the space around him simply by existing in it and exuded a rare kind of charisma which made people stop and take a second look.

Suddenly dizzy and wondering what insane instinct had propelled her into his vicinity, she drew a deep breath. 'Good afternoon, sir—I wonder can I interest you in one of these beautiful candles?'

Giancarlo's brows knitted together as a banal little sentence interrupted his reverie and he found himself staring into a pair of violet eyes of extraordinary beauty. He was used to the adulation of women in general and salesgirls were no exception—and he really wasn't in the mood to be engaging. But he *was* supposed to be buying Christmas gifts for all his admin staff and the girl who was trying to sell him something *was* very pretty—so he gave her his attention. 'A candle?' he drawled.

Cassie nodded. His sexy Italian accent matched his Mediterranean looks, adding yet another layer to his allure—and silently she despaired at her own stupidity.

She might not have a wealth of experience about the opposite sex but she was intuitive enough to recognise when a man was completely out of her league. And this one most definitely was. Why, his clothes just screamed class and quality and his demeanour was more than impressive—it was daunting. So don't just stand there gawping at him like a stranded fish—*say something*!

'That's right, sir. But not just *any* candle—this is the biggest selection you'll find in London. Irresistible specialities for the festive season.' Cassie widened her smile and wondered whether his face was always so dark and so forbidding. 'It *is* Christmas. Or hadn't you noticed?'

Giancarlo gave a shrug. It wasn't his favourite time of year, no—but on closer inspection his attention was captured by more than the seasonal mayhem going on around him. Because she was exquisite. Absolutely *exquisite.* With skin like quietly gleaming satin and hair like silk. And a body which should have carried a health warning—even though she was wearing the rather plain store uniform. Through the faint miasma produced by jet lag and overwork, he felt the sudden prickling of his senses.

'Christmas?' he murmured. 'Would that have anything to do with the choir of angels I'm hearing—or is that the effect you have on all your customers?' He saw the colour rise in her cheeks and gave a lazy smile. 'Look, why don't you tell me what it is you're selling and we shall see if you can persuade me to buy?'

Cassie nodded. Trying to ignore the now frantic crashing of her heart, she drew an arc with her hand in front of the glittering display as she slipped smoothly into the script of her sales patter. 'Well, these candles all come in a wide range of scents. The Christmas Chocolate has proved to be one of our most popular varieties this year. It's dark and spicy—with subtle undertones of mulled wine.'

'And is that your favourite?'

'My…my *favourite*?'

'Mmm. Surely you must have a favourite?'

For a second, her sales pitch deserted her. She hadn't been asked that before. And when *he* asked it, he made her feel special. Different. Oh, but she was an idiot! But she still looked into the gleam of his black eyes and answered as honestly as she could. 'To be honest, I like this one best. It smells of sweet oranges. And cloves. Sort of…traditional. And nostalgic. Everybody loves them. All ages. They have universal appeal. Especially at this time of year.'

There was a pause and Giancarlo felt another quick beat of desire as he heard the wistful little note in her voice. 'You've got a deal,' he said softly. 'I'll take half a dozen.'

Cassie opened her eyes wide. 'You mean *six*?' she squeaked.

'Unless the definition of half a dozen has changed since the last time I heard it?' he questioned gravely.

'N-no. Certainly, sir. Six it is.'

While she was wrapping them—with fumbling fingers which seemed much less dextrous than usual—he asked her a series of questions, and in view of the commission she was going to make on the sale, it seemed rude not to answer them. No, she didn't live in London, she was only here for the holiday season, and no, she wasn't wearing coloured contact lenses—her eyes really *were* that colour. But in truth, his presence was so distracting that she could barely think straight.

Giancarlo watched as she snipped the end of a claret-coloured ribbon and tugged at the finished bow with a flourish. She was just too good to walk away from, he decided—with that pale blonde hair and violet eyes and a body shaped like a bottle of Verdicchio.

He'd spent most of the past month in New York—labouring away on a tough deal he'd only just pulled off by the skin of his teeth. One of those deals which had seen him still at his desk at midnight and beyond. His name had been splashed all over the financial papers, he'd stacked up a few million dollars—and then quietly siphoned off a substantial portion to a cause far more worthy than his already bloated bank account. All in all, it had been a successful trip—just like the one before, and the one before that. But success could be draining—sometimes it took you away from the fundamentals in life. And he was sick of the relentless march of Christmas with its in-your-face commercialism and over-the-top celebration.

What he needed was a little light relaxation with a female of the species. And not some ball-breaking woman who liked to work and play as hard as a man and gave you a lecture on equality

if you so much as opened a door for her. Until you made the mistake of taking her away for a long weekend—when suddenly she was talking three-carat diamond rings and church weddings.

No. He wanted someone soft and unchallenging. Someone easy on the eye and easy on the mind. Someone who would massage his ego and a lot more besides. Like this sassy little thing with her soft, curving breasts and her peachy little bottom. He couldn't imagine *her* wanting to talk stocks and shares with him—or angling for a winter break in Hawaii!

'What time do you finish work?' he questioned as she took his credit card from him.

Cassie hesitated. 'Six-thirty,' she said, feeling on rather shaky territory here—but surely it would be rude not to answer a customer when he asked you a direct question?

'And you'll be going out for dinner afterwards?'

Cassie thought of the pan full of pasta and pesto which was sitting on the fat-spattered cooker back at the shared apartment which was currently her temporary home. As accommodation went it was pretty basic, but she was grateful to her old school-friend, Gavin, for letting her stay—even if it meant sleeping in a room which was little more than a cupboard.

'Well, sort of,' she prevaricated.

'Sort of?'

'I told my flatmates I'd have dinner with them.'

'And what if I asked you to have dinner with me instead?'

'I can't,' she breathed.

'Why not?'

She stared into his narrowed black eyes and her stomach gave a funny little lurch. 'Because I don't…I don't even *know* you.'

'So why don't I introduce myself and we'll get that problem out of the way?'

A hand was extended, and with proprietary ease, it captured hers. Cassie's hand had been shaken many times in her life—often by departing guests at the little B&B run by her mother. Or when she'd won a prize for ice-dancing, which was something she was particularly good at.

But never had it felt quite like this before…

His big hand made hers seem so tiny—and the warm touch of his bare skin against hers seemed, well…*intimate,* really. Or was that because his thumb brushed almost negligently against her palm—a movement so brief that she might almost have imagined it? Except the responding shiver of her skin told her she hadn't imagined anything.

'My name is Giancarlo Andrea Vellutini,' he said softly. 'I am Tuscan by birth and global by nature. What else would you like to know? That I have a house in London and my diary is empty tonight? I was planning to catch up on a stack of paperwork, but you…' he leaned forward and read her name badge '…Cassandra Summers…have tempted me into changing my plans.'

Cassie couldn't deny being tempted, too—and not just because the way he said her name made it sound like pure poetry. Invitations to dinner were pretty thin on the ground—and nobody remotely like this man Giancarlo had ever asked her out before. In fact, the most recent date she'd been on had consisted of someone from the computer department who'd taken her for a disgusting burger in a fast-food chain—and then claimed to have forgotten his wallet!

Yet instinct warned her against accepting this far more tantalising offer. That same deep instinct which had alerted her senses when she'd first set eyes on him. The one which told her that this man was dangerous—and not for the likes of her. He was too good-looking. Too urbane. Too rich. Too *everything.* And wasn't it more than a little arrogant of him to assume that she would drop everything and fit in with him just because he had decided he would change his plans?

'It's very sweet of you, but I'm afraid I can't let my flatmates down,' she said apologetically.

Giancarlo's eyes narrowed. The little shop-girl was turning him down? Inconceivable! 'You have a boyfriend?' he questioned curiously. 'Someone waiting at home for you?'

'No,' she said. 'There's no one. But my flatmates are relying on me to bring half their supper home from the delicatessen here.'

He wondered if she was playing games with him. Perhaps imagining that she would make herself more desirable by playing hard to get. Or was it possible that here was a woman who wasn't his for the taking—a woman with enough self-respect to say no? His lips curved into a thoughtful smile. Doubtful.

Pulling a thick cream business card from his wallet, he slid it between her unresisting fingers. 'Well, why don't you call me if you change your mind?'

She met his eyes, again feeling the unmistakable tingle of her skin where he'd touched her and wondering if he could feel it, too. She swallowed, plucking up every bit of courage she had. 'Or perhaps you could always come in another day?'

Dark eyebrows were elevated. 'And ask you again?'

'Well, yes.'

She thought he was about to start haunting the department store like some lovelorn young suitor? 'I don't think so,' he said silkily. *'Ciao, bella.'*

And to Cassie's consternation, he turned on his heel and walked away—just like that. For a moment she stood there watching the tall, striking figure in the cashmere coat until he had disappeared—and began to wonder if she had imagined the entire interlude. And then she looked down at the neatly wrapped package which was still sitting next to the till and realised that he had forgotten to take his candles and that it was too late to run after him.

All the way home on the bus, with the brightly wrapped candles lying on her lap, Cassie could have kicked herself. How *stupid* could she have been? Batting his invitation away as if men like him were queuing round the block to date her. How many times in life did an opportunity like that present itself—a gorgeous man offering to sweep you off your feet?

Her father's prolonged illness had been heartbreaking and she had been longing to get away from Cornwall. But hadn't she also come to London partly because she felt her life was passing her by and she wanted a little adventure? And surely it would be difficult to imagine a greater adventure than some tantalising Tuscan asking her to have dinner with him.

Still, at least she could comfort herself with the thought that she was a loyal friend and flatmate—and that she hadn't let the others down. Until she let herself into the apartment to find that the flat was empty and all the pasta had been eaten. Gavin had left her a note saying they'd all got too hungry to wait and had gone to the pub—and would she care to join them?

Well, what else was she going to do—scrub around in an empty fridge, trying to find something on the TV which wasn't a game show and trying not to think about what she *could* have been doing? An image of Giancarlo's mocking eyes swam into her memory as, with a frustrated little yelp, she slung the salad and the garlic bread into the empty fridge and went to change.

Wearing a pair of jeans and a warm coat over her sweater, Cassie walked through the cold night air to the pub. Her footsteps rang out on the icy pavement and bright stars spangled the clear skies. Even from the end of the road she could hear the noise and the bustle and when she opened the door of the pub, she was hit by a solid wall of sound.

Every inch of the place was packed. Beneath a swirl of paper streamers, people were swaying and singing along to a song about wishing it could be Christmas every day—which had been played every year since Cassie could remember. And, given the current decibel level and crush of bodies, it was not a sentiment she currently agreed with.

The queue to get to the bar was five-deep and heaven only knew where Gavin and the others were. Could she face battling her way through the crowds to sit nursing a mediocre glass of warm white wine for the rest of the evening and shouting to make herself heard above the noise?

No, she could not. With a decisiveness which surprised her, she turned and walked out of the pub again—her feet taking her straight back to the flat while a preposterous idea grew in her mind.

Only, maybe it was not *so* preposterous at all. He had given her his phone number, hadn't he? Told her to call him—and she had a good reason to call him, even if you discounted the fact that he was the most exciting thing to ever happen to her.

Letting herself into the apartment with a fast-beating heart and grateful for the quietness, Cassie punched out his number with a trembling finger before she could change her mind. She could hear the phone ringing and ringing. Maybe he was one of those people who screened their calls and, since he didn't recognise the number, wasn't going to bother answering. She was just about to hang up when she heard a click—and then that distinctive velvety, accented voice sounded in her ear.

'*Pronto.* Giancarlo Vellutini.'

'Giancarlo?' She swallowed down her nerves. 'It's me…Cassie.'

'Chi?' There was a pause. 'Who?'

This was humiliating. He didn't remember. Of *course* he didn't remember. He'd spoken to her for about five minutes and given her his business card on a whim. Cassie would have hung up there and then if it hadn't been for the candles which were still sitting on the side, wrapped in glittery gold and claret paper. 'Cassandra Summers. I work at Hudson's department store. We met today—do you remember? You bought some—'

'Sì, sì, senz'altro—scusi, scusi.' His voice dipped effortlessly into English. 'Cassandra Summers with the amazing eyes. How could I possibly forget?'

Cassie swallowed as nerves began to assail her. Don't back him into a corner. Show that you have a legitimate reason to ring him in case he's looking for an out. 'Actually, I'm ringing up because you forgot your candles?'

'Excuse me?'

'You bought six very expensive c-candles and you didn't take them with you.'

His long legs sprawling in front of him as he reclined in a squashy leather sofa, Giancarlo looked up at the huge canvas which dominated the wall above the blazing log fire, and gave a slow smile. 'So I did. And that's the only reason you're ringing me, is it?'

'Well, I…' Flustered now, Cassie didn't know how to respond. Did she tell him that maybe she'd been a bit too hasty in turning him down—and that dinner sounded wonderful—or would that make her sound like some sort of desperado?

'Or maybe you've changed your mind about having dinner with me?' he prompted silkily.

Just say yes…he isn't planning to kidnap you and send you to the ends of the earth. *Just say yes!* 'That would be very…nice,' said Cassie blandly.

Giancarlo gave a soft laugh. Nice wasn't what he had in mind. Nothing near 'nice', in fact. Something dark, erotic and horizontal was closer to the mark—he knew that and he suspected that deep down she knew that, too. Because nobody could deny the sparks which had flown between them today—sparks hot enough to make him act on impulse, to chat up the kind of woman he would never have met at a dinner party.

And yet, in a way, he had preferred her a little more when she'd lifted her chin and fixed him with those violet eyes and proudly said she was doing something else tonight. Wasn't it slightly disappointing that she'd rung and become just like all the others—joining the endless line of women who wanted him and didn't mind showing him how much? In a few short moments she'd gone from goddess to doormat and he'd known enough of those in his time. His mouth flattened. Wouldn't it have excited him if *he'd* had to do the chasing for once—instead of the inevitability of yet another luscious creature falling into his bed because he had snapped his fingers?

Still, he shouldn't knock it. At least, not until he'd tried it.

'So what time shall I expect you?' he murmured.

'*Expect* me?' Cassie squeaked. 'You mean have dinner with you *tonight*?'

'Of course. What did *you* mean? Unless you have eaten already?'

'Well, no—but it's…' Cassie glanced down at the bright pink waterproof watch which encircled her slender wrist. 'It's getting on for nine o'clock!"

'So?'

'Well, isn't that…?' Something stopped her from expounding her mother's theory that food lay heavy on your stomach if it was consumed too late in the evening. He didn't seem the kind of man who would be interested in that kind of information. 'A bit late to eat?'

'Not at all. In Spain, they eat at eleven.'

'I wouldn't know about that.'

'You've never been to Spain?'

'Never.'

'Then maybe I shall take you there one day,' he murmured. 'We could drink Rioja under some of the starriest skies in the world and eat tapas with our fingers. But in the meantime—why don't you get in a cab and come over here and we'll see what we can find in my cupboard? Where do you live?'

'Greenford.'

'Near Park Lane?'

'No, no—that's Green Park,' she corrected, because it was a common mistake. As if she could ever afford to live anywhere near Park Lane! 'I'm miles out,' she forged on. 'Even with a fast car I couldn't possibly get there much before ten and—no matter what they do in Spain—that really is too late for dinner. Especially when I have to get up early for work tomorrow.'

It wasn't too late for what he had in mind but even Giancarlo wouldn't dream of issuing such a blatant invitation unless he had a woman in his arms and was kissing her into dreamy submission. He stifled a sigh—because this now seemed to be escalating into something other than an impromptu dinner with the inevitable conclusion he'd had in mind. The last thing he wanted was hassle. He didn't do hassle—and certainly not from women. Maybe it wasn't meant to happen after all.

'That's a pity,' he murmured.

Cassie could hear the dismissive note in his voice bringing the conversation to an end—and all she could think of was that her chance to see him was slipping away. And that she would never meet a man like Giancarlo Vellutini again.

'But I'm free tomorrow night,' she blurted out.

Giancarlo stared up at the ceiling, wondering why nothing was ever perfect, for now she sounded a little *too* keen. Should he tell her he was busy? It wasn't really a fabrication since he was *always* busy —and there was enough paperwork left over from the American deal to keep him occupied for days.

And then he thought of her face. Of her rose-petal lips and those eyes—the most vivid, violet colour he'd ever seen. In fact, come to think of it, he'd *never* seen a pair of eyes like that. He found himself thinking beyond her face. Wondering what kind of panties she favoured. And what she liked best to do in bed. And he swallowed down the sharp tang of lust which had dried in his throat.

'Then we must have dinner tomorrow,' he said unevenly. 'I'll send a car to collect you. What time do you finish at the store?'

'I…' Cassie's thoughts began rattling through her head as she tried to work out the logistics. She could take an outfit into work and get changed afterwards. 'That would be great. Tomorrow I finish at seven-thirty.'

'The car will be waiting for you. *A domani,*' he said softly, and hung up.

Cassie was left listening to the click as he cut the connection, her heart racing as she replaced the phone in its cradle. She thought of the sensual curve of his lips and way his hard black eyes had glittered when he looked at her. She remembered the way her body had trembled when his hand had brushed over hers and she had the strangest sensation of standing beside a deep, dark lake and getting ready to dive in without really knowing anything about what might lay beneath the surface.

The only thing she knew was that she was going to be way out of her depth.

Chapter Two

THERE must have been some kind of mistake.

For a moment Cassie froze as she stared up at the imposing white mansion. Yes, she'd guessed that Giancarlo was rich—very, very rich—but surely he couldn't live somewhere like *this*? Not looking out over the lush gardens of Kensington Palace and slap bang next door to an embassy where a flag was fluttering in the cold December breeze.

Already the evening felt as if it were happening to someone else—and yet it had barely begun. She kept thinking that if she pinched herself hard enough she might wake up and find herself on the bus going home to Greenford instead of in the back of a chauffeur-driven car which had just stopped in front of one of the most prestigious crescents in London.

After finishing work, she had changed into a simple black dress and a pair of cheap, high-heeled shoes that she'd hastily run out and bought during her lunch hour. Adding a touch of lipstick, she had untied her hair and tried to quell her steadily rising nerves as she dragged a brush through it. It was only when it was hanging loose in a pale waterfall down her back that Lindy from the cosmetics department had walked in, to see Cassie looking at herself in the mirror.

'Going somewhere?'

'Um, out for dinner.'

'Got a date?'

'Yes. Yes, I have.' She was dying to tell someone but she'd been asleep by the time her flatmates had arrived home last night—and Lindy had never been friendly towards her. Plus Lindy was a full-time member of staff—not someone who'd been drafted in for the Christmas period—and perhaps it wasn't really appropriate to tell her that she was dating a customer. Not when the expression on her face as she looked Cassie up and down was as sour as a bowlful of lemons.

Instead, Cassie glanced at her watch. 'Gosh, is that the time? I'd better go or I'll be late. See you tomorrow, Lindy.' Carefully, she picked up the distinctive claret-and-gold-wrapped package and smiled.

Lindy's sharp eyes narrowed. 'What's that?'

'Oh, just—just some candles. They belong to a…friend.' Did she know Giancarlo well enough to call him a friend—and why was she blushing? Why hadn't she just come out and said that a customer had left them behind? 'He asked me to bring them over.'

Lindy's eyebrows shot up. 'Did he?'

'Yes. Well, I'd better…I'd better go. Night, Lindy.'

Feeling ridiculously guilty—and not quite sure why—Cassie had left the building, relieved to find the promised car waiting for her at the Brompton Road entrance to the store. But the only person in the vast vehicle was the chauffeur and she found herself wishing that Giancarlo had come to collect her personally. Maybe he wasn't the kind of man who sat waiting patiently for a woman—but it didn't exactly do her ego much good.

And now she felt a bit like a door-to-door salesperson as she made her way up the flight of white stairs leading to the enormous front door, the candles in one hand, her fingers clutching tightly at her handbag with the other. What on earth was she going to talk to him about? But before she'd had the chance to ring the bell, the door opened and there was Giancarlo himself—a gleam flickering in the depths of his ebony eyes.

His black hair was gleaming and tousled—as if he'd run his fingers through it when he'd been fresh out of the shower—and he wore a fine white silk shirt which was unbuttoned at the neck. Dark trousers hugged his narrow hips and emphasised the muscular legs and he seemed much taller than she remembered. Despite the simplicity of his clothes, he looked rich and powerful and intimidatingly masculine and Cassie felt the sudden spiralling of nerves.

'So here you are,' he said softly.

'Here I am.' Glad to have something to distract her, she thrust the package into his hand. 'Look, I've brought your candles.'

His lips curved into a smile as he took them from her. Candles were the very last thing on his mind. '*Grazie.* Now come inside and let me look at *you.*' Giancarlo's throat thickened as she stepped past him into the hallway on those killer heels, with a sway of her silken hair.

He let his gaze drift over her. Even when she'd been working behind the counter in her starchy uniform with her hair scraped back there had been some quality about her which had intrigued him. But in the short dress and high heels with that pale cascade of blonde hair running down her back, she looked utterly irresistible. Fresh, and young and firm. Suddenly, he wished he knew her well enough to skip dinner and take her straight to bed. Or at least to start kissing her. 'You look amazing,' he said softly as he put the package down on a table.

'Do I?'

'You know you do.'

But Cassie shrugged a little awkwardly. Like most women, she had little real confidence in the way she looked—even though she'd tried her best to fit in since arriving in London and discovering that her Cornish clothes weren't really suitable for a city lifestyle. Sometimes it felt as if she'd taken on a different persona to match the new outfits she'd acquired—a glossy patina which concealed the real her. She'd certainly never have worn heels this high or a dress this short back home. But then, she'd never have been standing looking into the face of a man like this back home, would she?

Suddenly shy and wanting to divert herself from the gleam of appraisal in his black eyes, she glanced around the entrance hall, which was as big as a room itself with its high ceilings and pale grey walls hung with a series of muted charcoal drawings of a beautiful Japanese woman. Stained glass from the window light of the front door splashed reds and blues on the tiled black and white floor, and on a gleaming rosewood table stood a glass bowl of white roses and freesia which perfumed the air with their delicate scent. The airy dimensions and sense of space were awesome—it was like somewhere you might see in one of those glossy interior magazines you found at the dentist's—and Cassie couldn't imagine just one person living in a place this big.

She looked at Giancarlo expectantly, waiting for him to fetch his jacket. 'Where are we going for dinner?' she asked.

'Well, actually, we're not going anywhere.' His voice was soft. 'We're eating right here.'

'Here?' Her heart began to thud and she wasn't sure why. She had imagined a rooftop and a twinkling city view. Someone playing a white piano—and cocktail waitresses with flowers in their hair. The soft murmur of conversation and watching all the rich people out at play.

'You have some sort of objection to that, *mia bella*?' His eyes gleamed. 'You don't think the standard of food will be what you're used to?'

Her cheeks grew pink at the mockery in his voice. 'Well, I…'

'Well, what, Cassandra?' he questioned teasingly.

Nobody—*nobody*—ever called her Cassandra. And nobody had ever told her that an Italian voice could make a single word sound like a soft seduction. Surely it wasn't decent behaviour for her to have dinner alone in a man's house on their first date—and yet if she came out and told him so, then wouldn't it make her sound awfully naïve? As if she'd just come up from the country and were some sort of *hick.* Maybe this was normal behaviour for London. And just because they were eating in didn't mean he was going to leap on her, did it? Cassie cleared her throat. 'I just thought—well, there are lots of lovely restaurants locally.'

'So there are—but most of them are full of tourists and office parties at this time of the year.' He held out his hand towards her. 'Come with me and let me see if I can change your mind.'

She let him take her hand and allowed him to lead her along an endless corridor hung with yet more pictures, past the faint sound of a radio and the clanking sound of something being whisked.

The corridor led into an enormous, wooden-floored room dotted with several dramatic sculptures and large French windows which opened onto a beautiful conservatory, where a table had been set for dinner.

Stars gleamed through the clear ceiling, a bottle of champagne sat waiting in an ice-bucket and pots of jasmine scented the air. Aware that he was still holding her hand and that it now seemed a little too intimate, Cassie shook hers free and walked over to the glass doors, which overlooked an enormous garden.

Though the night was cold and dark, strategic lights had been placed around the huge grounds, illuminating bare trees and elegant shrubs so that the whole scene resembled a winter stage-set. It was the prettiest and most unexpected thing she had ever seen—as if the countryside had been transplanted into the centre of the busy city and given a theatrical twist.

'Oh, my,' she breathed. 'All that garden—and right in the middle of London. Lucky you.'

Luck? Giancarlo walked over to stand beside her, looking at the tight high curve of her young bottom as he did so and the way the pale blonde hair fell almost to her waist. How people always looked at his life and thought he'd had it easy. He thought that luck didn't feature as strongly as the capricious hand of fate and a corresponding determination to make something of himself. The senseless shock of a double betrayal. And the long, grim struggle to work his way up from the bottom. To prove to his brother and himself that he didn't need an inheritance to elevate himself to the level of a wealthy man.

And he had done it. Exceeded even his own exacting standards and lofty expectations. Been single-minded enough to focus on his goal and to achieve the success he had set out to achieve. Which was why he could bring this beautiful young woman into his home—for a meal which would rival most award-winning restaurants in the capital.

'So have you changed your mind about going out? Can you think of anywhere prettier to eat?' he questioned, glancing at the waterfall of blonde hair which was rippling down her narrow back.

'I guess I can't. Not really. But who's doing the cooking?'

'Well, not me, that's for sure!' Walking back over to the table, he pulled the bottle of champagne from the bucket and removed the thick foil with his thumb. 'Drink?'

'Lovely,' she said lightly, taking the flute of pale fizz from him and giving a little squeak as she sipped it.

'Bubbles up your nose?' he murmured.

'Every time,' she agreed sanguinely, as if she drank champagne every day of her life. 'So who *does* do your cooking?'

'I have staff.' His tone was casual. 'A cook. A housekeeper. A gardener.'

'Gosh. How very indulgent.'

He flicked her a glance. Wealth did strange things. It opened up the world like an oyster—and closed off other parts of it for ever. It isolated and enclosed you in a rarefied and gilded existence. It meant that people sometimes looked at you with envy—or avarice. But that was the price you paid. And what would this little shop-girl know of his life unless he told her? 'More a necessity than an indulgence. I travel a lot for work and my hours are long. So I don't have time for all the maintenance stuff.'

'And even if you did—maybe you still wouldn't do it? I can't really imagine you peeling potatoes or hammering a nail in a wall.'

'The former is what I'd expect a woman to do,' he said, with a faint glimmer of a smile. 'The hammering part of the equation wouldn't be a problem.'

Cassie nearly choked on the mouthful of champagne she was drinking. 'You're not serious?'

'About the nail? Sure I am. I'm pretty good with a hammer.'

She blushed—because the soft mockery in his voice made it sound as though he was referring to something other than DIY skills. 'I meant your remark about peeling potatoes being women's work.'

‘Are you going to subject me to a lecture about sexual stereotypes, *bella*?’ he mocked. ‘Because let me save you the time. I know it off by heart.’

Cassie stared at him, her heart beating very fast. ‘Some people might describe that as arrogance, Giancarlo.’

‘Guilty as charged,’ he said silkily.

Cassie stared at him and their eyes clashed—fighting a sudden silent battle which had nothing to do with potatoes or sexual stereotypes. A battle which was completely alien to her—and yet one for which she was suddenly discovering an instinctive knowledge.

Yet another type of intuition was telling her that she was in danger—a subtle and insidious kind. The kind of danger which was making her want to behave with an abandon she wasn’t even aware she possessed. She knew exactly what she *should* do. Turn around and walk right out of there. Away from the temptation of an arrogant and heartbreakingly handsome man with his servants and his wealth and his crushing contempt for women.

But something stopped her. The same thing which had first made her heart leap with some kind of primitive recognition the first time she’d set eyes on him. An attraction which wasn’t based on intellect or reason or understanding—but on something much more fundamental.

Desire.

Shakily, she put her glass down on the table. ‘I don’t think I’d better have any more to drink on any empty stomach,’ she said.

Giancarlo had seen the darkening of her eyes, felt the unmistakable crackle of tension between them and known that there had been a moment when she had longed for him to take her in his arms and kiss her. The moment was lost—but almost certainly there would be another. ‘Then let’s eat. Are you hungry?’

‘Starving,’ she said, without much enthusiasm.

Cassie watched as he walked back over to the French windows and, reaching inside, rang some sort of bell. He’s ringing a bell to summon his servants! she thought. Once again, she could feel a slightly hysterical sense of being divorced from reality—as a dark-haired woman he introduced as Gina carried out a dish and laid it in the centre of the table, soon followed by a bowl of potatoes and platter of green beans.

‘Just something simple,’ he said softly as he pulled out a chair for Cassie. ‘Which will leave you plenty of room for dessert.’

Cassie didn’t know whether she was imagining sensual imagery at every corner and whether he was intending for that to happen. All she did know was that the woman called Gina was making her feel uncomfortable. Tall and slim, with a pair of trendy black-rimmed spectacles perched on her nose, she was aged about forty and spoke briefly to Giancarlo in Italian.

So was it the language exclusion which made Cassie feel so out of place—or the fear that Gina might be judging her? Maybe it was her own guilty conscience making her feel awkward as she wondered just how many women had sat where she was sitting, dining with a wealthy Italian they’d only just met. Did any of them stay the night, she wondered—and did Gina serve coffee and breakfast in the morning as if nothing had happened?

‘Cassie?’ Giancarlo’s voice broke into the swirl of her thoughts.

‘Sorry?’ Biting her lip, she looked up at him to find his ebony gaze washing over her. What on earth was she *doing*—thinking about women staying the night here?

‘You were miles away.’

‘Was I?’ She helped herself to a portion of chicken from the dish he was holding towards her. ‘Sorry, I was just thinking…’

‘What were you thinking?’

Hastily, Cassie reassembled her thoughts, glad that the candlelight hid her sudden rise in colour. ‘That I’ve never met anyone who has staff before. Gina’s Italian, isn’t she?’

'Yes, she is.'

'And what about the others that you mentioned—the cook and the gardener—are they all Italian?'

'Do you want me to go through the CVs of my entire staff?' he questioned softly, taking the bowl from her and placing it in the middle of the table. 'Yes, they are all Italian. They've been with me a long time and know my tastes. Now relax, *bella*—and eat your dinner. I'm much more interested to hear about you and how you came to be working at the store.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really.'

'Well, I live in Cornwall—I may have mentioned that.'

'And what is it like, living in Cornwall?' he murmured.

She shot him a shy look. 'Oh, it's *gorgeous*—with the most beautiful beaches and the biggest waves you've ever seen. It's a surfers' paradise and does the best cream teas in the world—have you never been there?'

'No, I haven't.' His lips curved, because her enthusiasm was really very sweet. 'Tell me more.'

'I live close to the sea—in Trevone,' she said.

'On your own?'

'No, with my mother. She runs a B&B—that's bed and breakfast—though there are hardly any guests during the winter. My father…' She swallowed. 'Well, my father died a couple of years ago.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Thank you.' Cassie put her fork down. People always said that. *I'm sorry.* As if somehow they were responsible for the death of a stranger. She guessed it was just what people said when they didn't really know what to say—though she couldn't imagine that Giancarlo Vellutini was often stuck for words. She shot him a quick glance as he ate a mouthful of chicken and pushed a bit more food around on her own plate. 'I suppose you're shocked that a woman my age is still living at home?'

He shook his head and shrugged. It meant that there would be no liaisons in her home town—but so what? He wasn't planning long-term.

'I am from Italy,' he said softly. 'Where such a scenario is common. Living with your parents has many advantages—for both parties—although, naturally, it can curtail individual freedom.'

She couldn't have put it better herself. 'Exactly!'

'Is that why you came to London, Cassandra? Because you wanted to be free?'

'Yes, well—sort of,' she said slowly—because only now had her mother come out of her frozen grief, and allowed Cassie to think that it was okay to leave her on her own. But it was more than that. Hadn't her father's death made her rethink everything? Hadn't it brought home how frighteningly fragile life was and made her examine her own and find it wanting? Making her realise that it was whizzing by and she had done very little with it. 'I wanted a break. Felt I was in a bit of a rut. You know.'

She paused to allow him to agree, but he didn't—and when she thought about it, a jet-setting man like him was unlikely to get bored with the daily grind, was he?

'You see, I've only ever lived in one place and felt it was time for a change,' she continued. 'I work in a shop in Padstow—a really pretty little gift shop which sells trinkets and craft kits and fancy food. Cornish clottedcream biscuits and crystals—that sort of thing. I'd like to get promoted to manageress—and the owner said that it might be a good idea if I got a bit of experience in London first. She knows one of the buyers at Hudson's—and she arranged for me to get a temporary job there during the Christmas rush. And so, here I am.'

'Here you are,' he agreed, sitting back in his chair and looking at her. 'With your eyes the colour of those little bunches of violets you sometimes see on city market stalls—all dewy fresh amid the dust and grime.'

She blushed and glanced down at her plate, feeling the sudden skitter of her heart. 'I wish you wouldn't say things like that.'

'But surely men say that kind of thing to you all the time, especially if you blush so enchantingly in response.'

'Not really.'

'No? Oh, come on, Cassandra—I can't believe there isn't a long line of men beating a path to your door.'

Cassie supposed it would sound shaming to admit that few men of her acquaintance had offered little more in the way of flattery than a terse 'not bad' when she'd dressed up for a date. But then most of the men she met were those she'd grown up with who felt more like brothers—or married men who came into the shop accompanied by their wife and two toddlers. Tentatively, she raised her eyes to meet the mocking question in his. 'I don't think Englishmen are quite as…well, as…*verbal* as Italians.'

He smiled. 'Ah, so now we're talking *national* stereotypes, are we? You prefer the Italian male with his innate ability to charm women?'

'That sounds more like boasting than charming to me!'

His eyes glittered. 'And that sounds as if you're laying down a challenge, my beauty.'

Cassie swallowed as he made that silky declaration—aware that the strangest sensations were washing over her and there didn't seem to be a thing she could do to stop them. She wanted him to kiss her—and they hadn't even finished their main courses. And wasn't there also *another* characteristic attributed to Italian men—that they didn't respect women who gave into them too easily?

'I think…I think that champagne is going to my head. May I have a glass of water, please?' she questioned weakly, because why on earth was she leaping ahead of herself like this and thinking about 'giving in' to him? As if it would take any persuasion at all! Again, she could feel the heated prickling of her skin—and if Giancarlo Vellutini had the slightest inkling what was going on inside her head he would think her insane!

'Of course.' Reading the darkening of desire in her eyes, Giancarlo poured her a glass, approving of the fact that she wasn't much of a drinker. He didn't want alcohol blurring her reactions or influencing her judgement tonight—or any sense of false outrage in the morning. He wanted her and she wanted him—the only question was whether she was honest enough to admit it. 'You haven't eaten very much.'

'No. I'm not really hungry. What a terrible dinner guest I am.'

'I'm certainly not complaining,' he murmured. 'Do I take it you're not in the market for dessert?'

Cassie shook her head. Normally, she loved puddings—the sweeter and creamier, the better—but right now she felt as if anything else to eat might choke her. 'Not really. Well, not just yet. I hope it won't offend Gina.'

He shook his head. 'I don't employ Gina to get offended. Maybe a walk might give you an appetite?'

'A walk? Where would we walk?'

He pointed to the shadows falling over the lawn, which was now growing white with frost. 'If you look outside there's a great big garden at our feet.' His eyes glanced down at the vertiginous heels which made her fragile ankles look almost impossibly slender. 'Though speaking of feet—I don't think those shoes were made for walking.'

She followed the direction of his gaze. 'No. I think you could be right.'

'Pity. You should have worn trainers.'

'Trainers would have looked terrible with this dress.'

He laughed. 'True. Never mind, *bella*—perhaps I will take you for a walk another time.'

But Cassie felt as if a wonderful opportunity was slipping away from her. Suddenly, she became aware that this evening would never happen again—hadn't the way he'd said 'perhaps' driven that

simple fact home? That it didn't matter where she went in life or what she did—there would never be another frosty December evening in Kensington with this particular man.

He was the most captivating person she'd ever met and he had liked *her* enough to ask her to dinner. And nothing was certain. After tonight, she might never see him again. And if that were to be the case, then wouldn't she have wasted the most wonderful opportunity to see how the other half lived? Too choked up with nerves to be able to enjoy herself properly—and too constrained by her impulsive shoe purchase to be able to appreciate the beautiful gardens of his home.

'Oh, I'm not going to be put off by a stupid pair of high heels!' she declared. 'Haven't you got an old pair of wellington boots that I could borrow?'

Impulsively, she bent and untied the ankle strap, slipping off one of the shoes in a move which left her curiously lopsided. Smiling up at him, she reached for the other strap but something stopped her. Or rather—someone.

For Giancarlo had bent before her—almost, she thought dazedly, like a man about to propose marriage. And he was undoing the other strap—only he was taking much longer than she had done. His thumb was circling at her insole as he slid the shoe off in a movement which felt unbelievably erotic…like a slow shoe-striptease. And now his hand was sliding up her ankle, and her calf.

'Bare legs,' he murmured approvingly. 'That's what I like about English and American girls—they have bare legs in winter. Even better than stockings.'

His fingertips had now reached the back of her knee—just one light touch and she had begun to tremble uncontrollably. 'Giancarlo—'

'What?' If it weren't the first time then he would have continued with his erotic journey. Brought her to orgasm with his fingers and then perhaps have followed it with the slow lick of his tongue—before carrying her off to his bedroom for a long night of pleasure. But it was the first time, and so he straightened up—finding that she looked so much smaller without her heels. And so delicate.

With the stars beginning to sprinkle the dark sky above them and the rise of the moon making a pale halo of her hair, she looked as if some flower fairy had tumbled down and taken up residence within the airy confines of his conservatory. Lightly, he placed his hands at her waist as if to anchor her down—thinking that if he let her go she might simply drift away.

'Wh-what about the boots?' she questioned.

'What about them?' he repeated unevenly as he let his fingers drift up towards the luscious swell of her breasts.

'Aren't we…supposed to be going outside for a walk before pudding?'

'I've changed my mind.'

Aware that things were proceeding with a rapidity she hadn't anticipated, Cassie felt a sudden flurry of nerves. 'You…you've let me chatter about myself all evening and yet you haven't told me anything about yourself.'

'Like what?' he murmured.

'Oh, I don't know.' Cassie swallowed as he pulled her closer—so that she could feel the heat of his body and the warmth of his breath. 'Your…your life. Your work. Your dreams.'

Her words shattered his fantasy. Giancarlo's mouth hardened with a grim kind of reality check—and not just because talking was the last thing on his mind right now. Start telling a woman about your dreams and she started seeing happy-ever-after. And what if he told her that he had no dreams left? Wouldn't that only make her determined to prove him wrong in that way that women had—wanting to show that they and only they could change you? And they couldn't—even if you wanted them to. 'There's only one thing you need to know about me, Cassandra,' he said softly.

She turned her face upwards, part of her knowing what he was about to say. And although there were a million questions bubbling beneath the surface, it was as if she were programmed to ask the only one which mattered. 'What's that?' she whispered hesitantly.

'This.' And his lips came down to meet hers in a crushing kiss.

Chapter Three

GIANCARLO's bedroom was vast. Big and intimidating as an ocean—so that for a moment Cassie felt like a tiny little raft bobbing around in unknown territory, unsure which direction to take. Down on his terrace where he had been kissing her and kissing her until their breath had mingled and they had been wrapped tightly in each other's arms, she had felt no qualms. As he had tangled his fingers in the spill of her hair beneath the rising moon she had felt as though she had found her place in the world. A magical place which was governed by feeling and by the irresistible lure of the senses.

But then the kissing had become more frantic. She had felt the urgent clamour of her body and dimly recognised the growing need in his. And that had been the moment when he had stopped kissing her, his lips moving instead to her ear.

'If we don't stop this right now, *mia bella,* then I will take you right here—and I think we should be more comfortable for our first time together, don't you?'

The sexual declaration had been stark, and it should have been scary—especially for someone of Cassie's experience. But her heart had been pounding so wildly and her body so tense and trembling with desire for him that she hadn't been able to do anything other than nod and let him take her by the hand as he had done at the very start of the evening. Only this time he led her through the huge and echoing house—up the majestic sweep of a mighty staircase to his bedroom.

And now that she was here, Cassie was suddenly filled with nerves at the thought of what was about to happen. That maybe she would disappoint him. Or that he would think she had capitulated much too easily. And she had, hadn't she?

'Cassandra, *bella.*' Sensing her restraint, he pulled her back into his arms and tilted her face upwards, stroking away a bright strand of hair which had fallen over her cheek as he looked down at her. 'You have changed your mind? You don't want me?'

What could she say? Cross her fingers and tell a lie? Could she really bear to do that—shrug her shoulders with embarrassment and say she'd got a little carried away and had changed her mind?

Because he would let her. He might not have told her anything about his life or his work or his dreams, but something told Cassie that he was not only honourable enough to let her go—but proud enough never to ask her back again. And she would spend the rest of her life asking herself the most painful question of all. *What if?*

'Yes, I want you,' she whispered.

Giancarlo smiled as he felt the rush of uncomplicated pleasure. 'Then isn't it convenient that I happen to want you, too?' he questioned unsteadily. 'Do you want to know how much?'

'Giancarlo…' Her eyes closed as his mouth drifted down to the hollow above her shoulder blade.

'This much.'

She moaned as his hand cupped her breast over the soft material of her dress and then found the side-zip of her dress and slid it down—his lips grazing over hers in erotic dance all the while. And she moaned again as he peeled the garment over her head and she felt the rush of air to her partially bare skin. Because suddenly she was standing there in her underwear—her nipples peaking and her thighs tingling. Her body was on fire and she was clinging to him as his lips and his hands trailed pure delight over her skin. Should she warn him? she wondered dazedly.

She swallowed as his palms cupped her bottom and he pulled her closer. 'Giancarlo—'

'I want to study you,' he murmured. 'I want to examine every inch of you—to know you so well that if I were to take an exam about your body then I would get full marks. But the trouble is that my desire for you is so great that I think we might have to postpone that pleasure until later,' he declared, his voice thick with desire as he guided her trembling fingers to his shirt buttons. Because it had been a long time, he realised. A long time since he had wanted a woman as much as this. 'Undo my shirt.'

Her hands were trembling so much that it felt like an almost impossible task—until her first encounter with the silky texture of his flesh. And suddenly her doubts melted away and she became greedy. Like a prospector who had suddenly found an abundance of gold, Cassie found herself wanting to run her fingers all over his hair-roughened torso. She felt him twist slightly as she ran her fingertips over his flesh, heard him give a little laugh as she touched each of his diamond-hard nipples.

'You are making me forget the reason I brought you up here,' he growled. 'Which was to take you to bed.' And, picking her up, he carried her across the room to the biggest bed Cassie had ever seen.

He laid her down upon it, his dark eyes not leaving hers as he pulled off his clothes—until he was wearing nothing but a pair of dark silk boxer shorts. Cassie could see the flagrant ridge at the front of them and suddenly she began to shiver. This was really happening—and she was letting it happen. *Should* she tell him? Wasn't it wrong *not* to tell him?

'You tremble. You are cold?' he murmured. This was asked as he joined her, dragging a huge coverlet over them and pulling her close against his warm body.

'N-no, I'm not cold.'

'Me, neither. In fact, I think we are both wearing too much, don't you? Shall we do something about that?' Unclipping her bra, he tossed it aside and then began to slide her panties down over her thighs, his fingertips whispering enticing little paths along the way, which made her gasp. And then he removed his boxers—edged them off with his feet and gave a shuddering sigh as he felt her nakedness next to his. How long had it been since he had lain with a woman? Long enough for his breath to catch strangely in his throat with an odd sense of *discovery* as he stroked her delicate skin.

He looked down at her—at the way her long, blonde hair lay spread out over his pillow like a silken cloud. At the curved, feminine body—with its luscious breasts and rounded hips. She was like a goddess, he thought. Yet a goddess who was giving herself to him with sweet abandon. 'You are beautiful, Cassandra,' he murmured. 'And I am a lucky man.'

'Kiss me,' she whispered.

Softly, his mouth came down and covered hers. He could feel her body melting into his, her fingers tangling in his hair and the increasingly restless movement of her hips as the kiss deepened. At last he lifted his head and traced the outline of her lips with the tip of his finger. 'Don't go away.'

Her eyes opened wide in alarm as he pulled away from her. 'Where…where are you going?'

'Not far.'

He had leaned across the bed to pull something from the drawer of a gleaming antique table—and it was only when he had ripped the packet open and begun to slide on a condom that Cassie realised what he was doing.

Tell him.

Tell him.

But now he was moving over her and kissing her again and it all seemed so perfect—and wouldn't it break the mood if she came right out and told him? With a groan and a whispering of her name, he parted her legs and she could feel the rocky tip of him pushing against her molten heat.

'Giancarlo—'

'Sì?' he breathed raggedly.

'It's…it's my first time,' she gasped, just as he thrust inside her.

Giancarlo shuddered—but he was in too deep to stop, even as he felt her tense and her nails dig into his shoulders. And even if he'd wanted to, he couldn't have stopped. Not if the world had been about to end. Or maybe that was what was happening. Because now she was clutching him tightly, bringing him into her deeper still—her breath hot on his neck as she bit out his name.

Her molten tightness sent heated flares of desire rippling through him—devouring him with their intensity as he moved inside her. Never before had he wanted to come quite so much—but he made himself hold back. Using every skill he'd learnt since he lost his own virginity at sixteen, he

drove Cassandra closer and closer towards her own sweet oblivion. Didn't they say it was difficult for a virgin to achieve orgasm the first time? Well, he would make sure that he proved the statistics wrong, he thought grimly—watching her eyes close as she began to abandon herself to the siren call of fulfilment.

Over and over again, he drew back from the brink—until finally he heard her little cry of disbelief and felt her arch beneath him. Never before could he remember feeling such an intense sense of satisfaction as when she gasped and began to spasm around him—and only when at last she had begun to still beneath him did he allow himself his own release. A release which went on and on—his pleasure only heightened by the anger and disbelief which began to ripple through him as he thought of what he had done.

Afterwards, he rolled off her and turned over onto his side, propping himself up on his elbow and taking a moment or two before he could control his breathing enough to speak. And to block out the appeal of her sated beauty—her tousled hair and flushed cheeks and the parted invitation of her breathless lips. 'That was some surprise you sprang on me, *cara.*'

Cassie's fingers fluttered to her breastbone as she registered the dark note of disapproval in his voice. 'You mean—about me being a virgin?'

'No, I mean about you being a natural blonde,' he drawled sarcastically.

Her warm glow and slightly dreamy sensation rapidly began to evaporate and she bit her lip. 'I should have told you.'

Hardening his heart to the anxiety in her violet eyes, he nodded his head in violent agreement. 'Well, actually you *did* tell me—only you left it too late for me to do anything about it,' he growled. Too late for him to do anything but thrust deep inside her with a sense of powerlessness which had overwhelmed him. Because he didn't do powerlessness. Not any more.

She looked up into the hard glitter of his black eyes. 'Would you…would you have stopped then?'

For a moment he didn't answer. He wanted to say that yes, he would have stopped—but would he? Could he? If she had mentioned it on the terrace before she had come so eagerly with him to bed—he could have resisted her then, that was for sure. But she hadn't. She had waited until they were at a point of no return before she had blurted out her unbelievable statement.

'What the hell are you doing letting a man take your virginity from you on a first date?' he demanded.

He was acting as if she had done something *wrong*—shameful even. 'Somebody has to take it,' she said flatly.

'But not like *that.* Not with a man you barely know.' A man who has no intention of forming any kind of deep or lasting relationship with you. Exasperatedly, he shook his head. 'How old are you?'

'Twenty-one.'

So young, he thought bitterly—and yet surely old enough to have had some sexual experience before. 'And there's been no one else?' He gave a hollow kind of laugh. 'Stupid question. I've just proved the answer to that one.' He could ask her *why him,*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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