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The Groom's Revenge

KATE WALKER

Kate Walker

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The wedding revenge Everything had been perfect. India Marchant had planned her fairy-tale wedding and all that had remained was for the groom, Aidan Wolfe, to say "I do." But he hadn't! Instead, he accused India of being a gold digger and had walked away from the altar and out of her life.A year later Aidan was back and India was determined not to be such easy game this time around. But it seemed Aidan was still out for revenge. He'd only help her family with their difficulties for a price - India as his mistress… .

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“Did you ever want to marry me?”

India searched his face for the vital answer. “Or was it all just deceit from the start?”

Aidan gave a small, grim smile that made her heart clench. I always believed that marriage wasn’t for me, but you came close to making me change my mind. From the moment I met you, I couldn’t keep my hands off you, and it seemed you felt the same. And that magic is still there.”

“Magic!” India echoed cynically, fighting to suppress the way her mind replayed erotic images. “That’s something of an exaggeration.”

Aidan’s smile was positively beatific, in unnerving contrast to the devilishly wicked gleam in his eyes.

“I don’t have to exaggerate,” he drawled lazily. “My memory is perfectly clear, and, believe me, it needs no embellishment. Which will make our living together so much more interesting.”

KATE WALKER was born in Nottinghamshire, England, but as she grew up in Yorkshire she has always felt that her roots were there. She met her husband at university and she originally worked as a children’s librarian, but after the birth of her son she returned to her old childhood love of writing. When she’s not working, she divides her time between her family, their three cats, and her interests of embroidery, antiques, film and theater, and, of course, reading.

The Groom’s Revenge

Kate Walker

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CHAPTER ONE

‘NO.’

The single, emphatic syllable was the one word no one was expecting to hear. In the circumstances, it was the last thing any of the congregation in the tiny village church could have anticipated.

It was just one word, but it was enough to shatter the happy, festive atmosphere of what should have been India’s most wonderful day and turn it into the worst nightmare she had ever had.

Only seconds before, her uncle, the celebrant, had smiled encouragement at the couple standing before him, his eyes meeting India’s green ones through the fine lace of her veil.

‘And now we come to the most important point in the service—your vows. Aidan...’

The man at his niece’s side had straightened noticeably. His dark head had lifted, his shoulders going back as if in preparation for the responsibility he was about to undertake. The slight movement had drawn India’s eyes to him at once. She’d seen the tension stamped onto his face, the tightness of the muscles around his strong jaw. Immediately all her own nerves had vanished, her earlier tremulous smile growing, becoming stronger.

She would never have believed that her husband-to-be would share her own apprehension at this important moment, and the realisation that he did had warmed her heart, making her slide her hand into his at his side. She had been just a little disconcerted to find that Aidan made no response.

Instead he had simply let her hand rest where it was, not closing his own strong fingers around it as she had expected.

'Aidan, do you take India to be your wife...?'

The familiar words, heard so many times before at other, far less personally significant moments, had echoed round the small medieval church, seeming to hang in the air along with the delicate scent of the banks of cream and gold flowers that framed the altar.

India's heart had skipped a beat at the thought that the moment she had been waiting for was finally here. In just a few more seconds it would all be official and she would be Aidan's wife, no longer India Marchant but India Wolfe.

'Until death do you part?'

Until death do you part. She would be Aidan's, and he hers for the rest of her life.

The idea was so amazing that it had stopped her thought processes, leaving her unaware of the fact that her uncle was no longer speaking, his ritual question complete.

By the time she'd registered that fact, the silence that had followed had already become just a little too drawn out, too significant to be simply the result of the need to take a steadying breath or impose the necessary control to be able to answer with confidence. The seconds had dragged on and on, extending the wait into a nerve-stretching endurance test.

'Aidan?'

William Marchant's questioning prompt had been echoed by a spontaneous murmur of curious interest from the congregation, crammed into the dark wooden pews in the body of the church. Behind the ornate lace of her veil, India hadn't been able to help smiling to herself at the thought that her family and friends might have anticipated that the bride might find her courage had deserted her at this vital moment, but not the groom.

At least, not this particular groom. Aidan Wolfe, the notorious 'Lone Wolfe'; a man with a reputation for being a ruthless businessman with a mind like a steel trap, so unsure of himself that he was lost for words? Never!

'Aidan—do you take...?'

'No.'

It came out harshly, almost savagely. The single word slashed through the priest's reiteration of the question with a cold violence that stopped it dead, creating a silence so complete, so taut, that it was as if all the air in the church had suddenly frozen into a sheet of ice, obliterating all sound.

No?

The word rang inside India's head like the stunning aftermath of a violent blow to her skull, and she felt as if all the air had been driven from her lungs, leaving her gasping for breath. He couldn't have said...

No?

Her lips formed the word but no sound came out. With her green eyes wide and dark with shock, her face losing all colour, she could only stare at the man she had come here to marry.

Aidan's hard profile was etched against one of the small, paned windows. His proud, dark head was held high, revealing the strongly carved bone structure that gave his features a power that went far beyond the restrictions of such inadequate descriptions as 'handsome'.

A weak shaft of sunlight slanted through the stained glass, spotlighting his strong, tall frame before falling in a warm, soft pool on the stone flags at his feet. But there was nothing warm or soft about the man himself, the hard lines into which his face was set seeming to be mirrored by the elegant severity of the formal morning dress he wore. Seeing him like this, India suddenly felt as if cold, cruel fingers had gripped her heart and twisted it savagely.

He still hadn't touched her hand, ignoring it where it was linked with his own, and his eyes—eyes she knew to be dark as polished ebony—were obdurately turned away from her, staring deliberately

straight ahead. Not even a flicker of a sidelong glance gave any indication of the fact that he was aware of her presence in any way.

'Aidan...'

Clearly uneasy, her uncle tried again, the concern that made his voice rough and uneven scraping over India's already raw nerves so that she had to bite down hard on her lower lip to hold back a cry of distress.

'I said, do you—?'

'And I said no!'

At last he moved, swinging round to face India as he spoke. And, seeing his expression, she could only wish that he had kept his head turned away after all.

This wasn't the man she knew! This harsh-featured creature with the burning dark eyes, the blaze of contempt in them searing over her, wasn't the man she had fallen head over heels for.

The savage look that swept over her white face clearly noted the shocking contrast between her colourless cheeks and the fall of long jet-black hair, arranged into ornate curls and topped with a small silver coronet for this special occasion. But no flicker of emotion, no hint of reaction revealed that he was in any way affected by how devastated she looked. For the first time since she had met him, India found that she really understood just why he had been given that rather disturbing nickname.

'Aidan...'

Her use of his name was as shaky as she felt her grasp on reality had become. She didn't even know if the hand that clasped his arm was to draw his attention or to provide herself with some support against the worrying weakness that threatened to overwhelm her. She feared that she might actually collapse in a pile of white silk and antique lace right at his elegantly shod feet

'Please don't play games...'

It was all she could think of. It had to be some appalling joke, something in unbelievably bad taste, and she tried to force a smile that showed she understood.

It was met with an obdurately hostile glare of rejection, his face so hard and unyielding that she felt as if her gaze had physically slammed into something as solid as a brick wall, and he shook her hand from his arm with a rough movement.

'No game, darling.' His tone turned the endearment into the worst obscenity he could possibly have flung at her. 'I said no, and I meant no.'

In the ranged pews, the gathered guests could only stare in stunned silence. The sombre shock in their expressions seemed suddenly in almost comical contrast to the colourful gaiety of their clothes.

'Please—be serious.'

'Never more so, sweetheart,' he assured her with dark flippancy.

'But...'

The scent of the flowers seemed heavier now, rich and oppressive, making her stomach chum nauseously.

'You can't mean...'

'"Can't mean"?' Aidan echoed sardonically. 'What can't I mean, darling? God, do I have to spell it out for you? All right then—'

His hand coming out fast as a striking snake, he caught hold of her wrist, yanking her towards him so roughly that she spun round in a semi-circle, ending up facing the congregation, her back to the altar.

Through unfocused eyes she was aware of her father in the front pew, his round face patched the red of anger and the white of concern as he got to his feet, hastily restrained by her mother's warning hand.

He had never wanted this marriage, she recalled miserably. Initially he had warned her against linking her life with a man of Aidan's background and reputation, but, just lately, swayed by her

determination and conviction, he had seemed to come round to the idea. Now she was forced to wish that she had given more weight to his doubts.

'Let's make it absolutely clear. No, I will not marry you.'

Each word was delivered with icily brutal precision, the overly clear enunciation aimed at ensuring there could be no possible room for misunderstanding.

'I will not take you for better for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer for poorer—especially not that—or any other of those totally meaningless promises that you were expecting me to mouth so compliantly before all of these persons here present.'

India flinched away from his black parody of the wedding service and the vows they should by now have made if events hadn't taken this appalling, devastatingly unexpected turn, bringing her hopes and dreams falling in tiny pieces around her.

In an act of instinctive self-protection, she tried to lift her hands to cover her ears, only to have Aidan force them down again, ebony eyes blazing harshly into green.

'Listen, damn you! I want you to hear this. I want you to know that I will not marry you now or at any time in the future. I would rather die than surrender myself to such an imprisonment—accede to what I know is no more than the worst form of a lie.'

'But...'

'No!'

Abruptly he released her, dropping her hand as if he felt that to touch her might actually contaminate him in some way. Drawing in a deep, ragged breath, he raked strong fingers violently through the dark silk of his hair, ruffling its shining sleekness.

'I'm sorry, babe, but that's how it's going to be.'

The sunlight brought out the burnished gleam of the coppery strands in the darkness of his hair, the rough movement of his hand making a single lock fall forward over his broad forehead. With the memory of the many occasions on which, in the past, she had been able to smooth such a wayward strand back from his face clear in her mind, she found that her fingers itched to do just that. Perhaps if she could just touch him...

But the set of his face and the cold burn of his eyes shrivelled the idea even as it formed, and suddenly the bitter truth was more than she could bear.

'You're not sorry at all!' she cried sharply, the gnawing pain deep inside biting even harder when a tiny, almost imperceptible inclination of his head seemed to indicate a careless confirmation of her accusation.

'You're not sorry because—because...'

Her throat closed over the words. Because you don't even care. She couldn't bring her tongue to form them, and had to swallow convulsively in order to stop herself from choking on the knot of pain that had formed.

She had always known. Right from the very start of their whirlwind romance, she had known that Aidan's feelings didn't really match hers—not in the fullest sense. He wasn't the one who had been stunned to find that this amazing person, this man who had knocked her so completely off balance, both physically and emotionally, could actually want her. So, when he had asked her to marry him, she hadn't thought twice. She had said yes at once, and then had pushed for the wedding to be as soon as possible, terrified he might change his mind.

But how could he do this? How could he just stand there, so cool and calmly collected, when with each word that he spoke he was destroying her world completely?

'Don't do this.' Her voice was low, so fiercely controlled that it sounded almost as cold as his. 'Don't make me hate you.'

'Hate...'

The broad, straight shoulders lifted in a gesture of carelessly contemptuous dismissal.

‘I will hate you! I’ll hate you with all my heart! If you do this, Aidan, I’ll never forgive you —ever!’

He smiled; he actually smiled. But the curve of his lips held no warmth or trace of humour, making his response a bitter mockery of everything it should have meant.

‘Fine,’ he declared crisply. ‘That’s just fine with me. In fact, my lovely India, that’s exactly the way I want it.’

And with that hateful smile still lingering on his sensual mouth, he turned on his heel and strode away from her, going swiftly down the aisle, his footsteps echoing in the stunned silence.

‘No!’

With a wild gesture, India flung back the antique lace veil, revealing a pale oval face in which her bright green eyes blazed like burning emeralds above high cheekbones, her normally full, generous mouth drawn tight with tension.

‘You can’t do this! You can’t just walk out on me!’

Aidan spared her a swift, scathing glance over his shoulder.

‘Watch me!’ he flung at her.

Acting purely on instinct, totally beyond rational thought, India dashed forward, snatching the bouquet of cream roses from the grasp of her open-monthed chief bridesmaid.

‘I said no!’

As she spoke she flung the bouquet after him, watching the gorgeous flowers, chosen so carefully and so happily only a few weeks before, sail through the air, heading straight for Aidan’s broad back.

But some intuition of his own, or some movement glimpsed out of the corner of his eye, must have warned him. With reflexes as swift as a cat’s he turned, one long hand coming out to catch the bouquet just before it crashed to the ground.

For a long moment there was an intent, brittle silence. Aidan’s dark, unreadable eyes clashed with India’s over-brilliant green ones over the heads of the congregation, holding her transfixed like some small wild animal frozen in the headlights of an oncoming car. But then Aidan abruptly broke the taut contact. Glancing down at the bouquet he held, he twisted it round consideringly, a thoughtful look on his face. A moment later that reflective expression was replaced by another of those unexpected and far from humorous smiles.

‘Well, now,’ he drawled lazily, lifting the flowers in mocking salute. ‘I believe that, traditionally at least, this means that of everyone here I should be the next person to be married. Isn’t that what’s supposed to happen to whoever catches the bride’s bouquet? But you’ll have to forgive me if I prefer to pass on this particular opportunity, or any other that presents itself. You see, the idea of a life of slavery to one woman is not something I can face with any degree of equanimity.’

India couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Life of slavery. He was talking as if she had trapped him in some way—but he’d been the one who had proposed to her!

And that had definitely not been just a ploy to get her into his bed. There had been no need for that. Physically, there had been no holding back on either part. But then, with Aidan, holding back was something of which she had never been capable.

‘But perhaps if you try again you’ll have better luck with someone else.’

Disdainfully he tossed the flowers back towards her, deliberately throwing them short so that even if she had made the effort to try to catch them they would still have fallen on the floor at her feet. The impact crushed the delicate blooms against the stone floor, scattering satiny cream petals over the flags.

‘You said you wanted to marry a rich man, my darling. But I’m sorry, it isn’t going to be me —even if I was the first through that door.’

And then she knew. India gave a small, shaken moan of distress, realising exactly what he meant.

‘I’m sick and tired of genteel poverty!’ Her own foolish words came back to haunt her.

‘You just watch me! I’m going to find myself a wealthy husband, one who can keep me in a manner to which I have every intention of becoming accustomed...

‘And I don’t plan on waiting for him to come to me. In fact, the very next rich man who walks through that door will find himself on the receiving end of such a campaign of seduction and enticement that he won’t be able to resist me. I’ll bet you anything you like I’ll have his ring on my finger before he knows what’s hit him...!’

It had been only a joke.

She tried to say the words but they wouldn’t form in her mouth, the knowledge that they weren’t strictly true closing her throat against them. She had only been half joking when she had made her impetuous declaration at her friend’s party—she had been half-serious too.

But when Aidan had walked into the room a short time later anything that had gone before had been forgotten in an instant, driven from her mind by a rush of sensual awareness so overwhelming that she’d been incapable of thinking of anything else.

But how had Aidan heard her crazy bet? He hadn’t even been in the house then—had he?

‘Aidan...’ she tried, but her voice was too weak to carry to him and, looking into the stony, set lines of his face, she knew that even if it had he wouldn’t have listened. Her small hesitation had been taken as evidence against her, used as proof of her guilt.

‘So I’m sorry.’ The dark intonation made it plain that sorrow was the very last thing he was feeling. ‘You’ll have to make do with what you’ve got; I have nothing more to give you. But don’t give up, darling. There are plenty more fish in the sea.’

One strong, tanned hand swept through the air in a gesture that took in all the congregation—all watching wide-eyed, stunned into stillness and silence by the drama unfolding before them.

Her family, her friends, India realised miserably. She had known that Aidan had no family living, and he had claimed that the speed with which their marriage had been arranged meant that his friends couldn’t make it to the service. But now she was forced to wonder if in fact he had ever invited them at all. Just how long had he been planning the revenge of this very public rejection?

‘I’m sure someone else here would be only too willing to oblige. Just don’t expect me to stand around and watch.’

And as soon as he had finished speaking he turned on his heel and strode away from her, walking out of the church and out of her life without so much as a backward glance.

CHAPTER TWO

THE flowers were the first thing that India saw when she let herself into the house at the end of a long, emotionally draining day. Instinctively she knew that they meant trouble, and trouble was something she already had more than enough of on her plate.

The gold and cream beauty of the roses glowed in the late evening sun, their colour in powerful contrast to the deep oak of the dresser on which they lay. They were glorious—there was no other word for them. A sight that would normally lift anyone’s spirits.

But it wasn’t the present bouquet that registered in India’s thoughts. Instead, her mind was filled with the memory of another, identical set of flowers lying on the ground at her feet exactly one year before.

‘Just don’t expect me to stand around and watch’.

Aidan’s last words reverberated inside her head, making her shake it hard in a vain attempt to drive them away. It was as if the year since she had heard them had never happened.

Aidan wouldn’t come back. She’d known that to be the truth in the moment that she had looked into his face and seen the unyielding cold steel of rejection etched into every line, darkening his eyes to obsidian.

Aidan Wolfe was a proud, ruthless man. He was someone who lived life by his own rules and ignored the restrictions of a more conventional approach. He had pulled himself up by his own bootstraps, coming from nothing to become the head of a multi-faceted corporation that he was now.

He had a reputation for being as tough as they came, someone who didn't suffer fools gladly and who gave no quarter at all in his business dealings. But she would have sworn that with her he could have been so very different.

But, when it came down to it, how well had she known him? How well could you know anyone you had met barely six weeks before your wedding day? Even as Julia faced the truth of that question, Jane's words on the night of the fateful party came back to haunt her.

'Oh, God, Indy, no!' her friend had said, all the light and laughter dying from her face as she'd looked across the room in response to India's stunned declaration that the man of her dreams had just walked through the door. 'Not the Lone Wolfe himself! No one tangles with him and lives to tell the tale.'

'Why's that?' India had asked, her mind only half on the question, her eyes devouring the dark, saturnine features and tall, powerful body of the man who had caught her attention. 'Is he some sort of a heart-breaker?'

'Soul-breaker's more like it.' Her friend had shivered dramatically. 'Business negotiations or women, he treats them both the same. He takes what he wants and discards the rest without his heart even missing a beat. In fact, it's been rumoured that he actually doesn't even possess the organ in question, let alone the feelings supposed to go with it. So, you have been warned.'

But she hadn't cared, India admitted to herself. She hadn't cared who or what he was, or whether he was rich or poor, a success or failure. She had never believed in love at first sight before, but now she knew that she had been knocked completely off balance, her sense of reality rocked in a way that she had never experienced in her life.

And so she had made her way over to where Aidan stood, dark and devastating in black shirt and trousers topped by a loose black linen jacket, and, with uncharacteristic forwardness, had introduced herself to him.

'You may not know this,' she had said, her voice sliding up and down in a mixture of excitement and near-hysteria, 'but I'm the girl you've been waiting for all your life.'

'Are you, indeed?' Aidan had drawled, one dark eyebrow drifting upwards in intrigued speculation as he'd subjected her to a slow, deliberate scrutiny. Those deep brown eyes had scanned every inch of her from the top of her head, over the home-made dress and down to her slender feet, before he'd added, 'Do you know, you could be right?'

He had offered her a drink, and the rest was history. History that had turned so terribly sour in the end, leading as it had done to the farce of her wedding day. If only she had known...

But the truth was that she had never really known Aidan Wolfe—except perhaps in one way.

A tiny touch of colour crept into India's cheeks at the memory of the very physical, passionate nature of their relationship. Then faded again at the thought of the way that that very sensuality had been her undoing. It had rushed her into Aidan's bed and into that precipitous marriage, handing him the perfect weapon to turn against her. -

Almost in the same moment that she had realised the depth of her love for him, that same love had been transformed into an equally powerful, deeply burning hatred.

That hatred had sustained her through the dark days that had followed. It had forced her out of bed on the mornings when all she'd wanted to do was to pull the covers over her head and hide away. It had given her the strength to ignore the speculative looks and whispered comments that had greeted her appearance in the village. If she gave in to the hurt, then Aidan had won. He would have succeeded in his cruel plan to humiliate her, and she would rather die than let that happen.

And so she had forced herself to get on with her life, meeting those curious glances with what she'd hoped was a confident smile, and holding her head high. The act had worked, seeming to convince people that she didn't care, and in the end she had almost come to believe it Until today.

'When did these arrive?' she asked her brother, the catch in her voice revealing feelings that went deeper than the careless gesture towards the flowers indicated.

‘Coogan’s delivered them at two this afternoon.’

Gary was clearly unaware of her struggle to impose some control over her emotions. But then, like most fourteen-year-olds, he lived in his own private world. He probably didn’t even realise what day it was, the events of the previous year having faded from his mind at least.

‘Did they say who they were from?’

And why two o’clock so precisely, unless they were from someone who knew the significance of that time? If the choice of flowers had already set her teeth on edge, now an uncomfortable suspicion ran like pins and needles along every nerve.

‘Dunno. But there’s a card somewhere if you want to look.’

She didn’t; didn’t want confirmation of her fears. But she just had to.

‘Who’s “A”?’ Gary looked over her shoulder in curiosity. ‘Some secret admirer?’

‘Nothing like that.’

Did he really not know? Was it possible that he couldn’t even guess? Or was it only in her own thoughts that the single, forceful initial could only ever mean one name?

The urge to tear the card into tiny pieces and fling them from her, with the bouquet following them, was almost overwhelming. Only the thought that such an emotional reaction was precisely what Aidan would have wanted stayed her hand.

Of course, deep down, she had known that it had to be Aidan who had sent the flowers. The cynical choice of blooms, deliberately matching the ones that had made up her wedding bouquet, and the delivery planned for the exact time of the aborted wedding service a year ago had left no room for hope that they could have been from anyone else. But, after all this time, how could he be so cruel, so vindictive? How he must hate her—and all over one rather silly, thoughtless declaration!

‘I’ll take these to the hospital tonight,’ she said stiffly, knowing that to keep the bouquet in the house would be more than she could bear. ‘Someone there will appreciate them.’

‘But...’ Gary looked bewildered, his frown one of confusion. ‘They were meant for you—to wish you a happy...’

‘They weren’t meant to wish me a happy anything, Gary. And right now I’ve got too much on my plate to concern myself with the fact that today’s my birthday.’

Wearily she ran a hand through her hair, raking the blue-black strands back from a face that strain had made pale and drawn.

‘Mum’s staying at the hospital again, so it’ll just be you and me for supper tonight. But it’ll have to be something out of the freezer, I’m afraid. I haven’t got time to make anything from scratch before Jim comes to pick me up for another stint at Dad’s bedside.’

‘Is there any change?’ Her brother’s voice was sharp with anxiety. ‘Any sign of Dad coming out of the coma?’

‘None, I’m afraid, sweetie.’

The sight of Gary’s troubled face, his teeth digging hard into his lower lip and his eyes suspiciously bright, had India moving to his side. Gently she put one hand on his arm, knowing from past experience that the small gesture was all the sympathy his spiky young masculinity could accept at the moment.

All thought of the hateful bouquet was pushed from her mind. Instead, her thoughts were filled by the memory of the scene she had just left in the hospital—the hushed atmosphere of the intensive care unit, the machines and tubes attached to her father’s motionless body.

‘But he is breathing on his own, at least—that’s something. All we can do is wait.’

‘But they’ve said that for days now!’ Gary’s voice was rough with distress. His father’s stroke had devastated him, and he had found it difficult to come to terms with events.

‘I know, love.’

India's green eyes were dull and clouded. Like Gary, she found it almost impossible to accept that her father—who, at barely fifty, she had believed still in the prime of life—could have been felled so completely by the illness that had struck without warning just a week ago.

'But there's nothing else to do. He's in good hands, and all we can do is wait—and pray.'

Wait and pray. The words still echoed inside India's head some hours later when, feeling physically and mentally drained, she arrived back at the Grange after yet another trip to the hospital.

'Thanks for bringing me home, Jim.' She sighed, turning with a tired smile to the man at the wheel of the car. 'I don't think I'd have been up to driving myself, so I really appreciate it.'

'No trouble.' James Hawthorne smoothed a tidying hand over the light brown hair that the breeze from an open window had ruffled as he smiled back at her, blue eyes warm. 'You know I'm only too willing to help.'

India glanced towards the house, noting the darkened windows, the single light left burning in the hall.

'It looks like Gary's already gone to bed, so I hope you'll forgive me if I don't invite you in for coffee.'

'Nothing to forgive,' her companion returned easily as she pushed open her door. 'I wouldn't have accepted anyway. You look as if you need to get straight to bed.'

'Oh, I do!' India sighed. 'I feel as if I could sleep for a week. Some birthday, huh?'

'We'll make up for it when things get better,' James assured her. 'Now, you get off and get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow.'

India was halfway out of the car when an impulse had her turning back and pressing a spontaneous kiss on his left cheek.

'You've been so good to me. I don't know how to thank you.'

'No problem,' was the smiling response. 'You know I'd do anything for you. You only have to ask.'

From the look on his face it was plain that he wanted more than just the friendly kiss she had given him, and the realisation twisted her nerves sharply. Hastily she backed out of the car again, with rather more speed than grace.

'I'll see you tomorrow, then. Drive carefully, please.'

It wasn't Jim's fault that she couldn't feel anything for him, India reflected sadly as she watched his car move off down the drive and disappear into the darkness of the night. She doubted if she could feel anything for any man ever again. Aidan Wolfe had cured her of that foolishness.

'Oh, how sweet!'

'What...?'

A sharp cry of shock escaping her, India jumped like a startled cat as a voice sounded suddenly from the deep shadows cast by the house.

'"You've been so good to me".' The cynical tones echoed her words but gave them a dangerously different emphasis. '"I don't know how to thank you".'

After her initial panicked reaction, the sound of that terrifyingly familiar, husky intonation had India freezing in horror.

'I'm sure you'll find a way to thank him, won't you, Princess?'

And the use of that once familiar teasing nickname drove all hope of redemption from her head. One person had invented that name for her, playing on the fact that India had once been part of the British empire, and only one person had ever used it—affectionately at first. It was only later that she had been able to see the other, less complimentary undertones in it.

There was no hope now that she could be mistaken, she told herself, turning slowly with a sense of dreary resignation. At last she found that her tongue had loosened enough for her to croak, 'Hello, Aidan.'

He had been in her thoughts so much that if he had appeared as some unearthly apparition, conjured out of the air by her bleak memories earlier in the day, then she wouldn't have been surprised. But, of course, Aidan Wolfe was solid flesh and bone, six feet two of toned muscle over a powerful frame. There was nothing in the least ethereal about him.

His feet were planted firmly on the stone flags that lay before the heavy wooden main door, his hands resting loosely on lean hips, his head slightly to one side. His whole stance was one of mocking challenge as his dark eyes, eyes that were just pools of black in the shadowed planes of his face, met her stunned green ones in open provocation.

'What are you doing here?'

Aidan stepped forward into the light of the lamp that illuminated the courtyard. His smile was just a hateful, cruel curl of his lips that made her blood run cold.

'Would you believe I've come to wish you a happy birthday?'

'No.'

It was a clipped, curt rejection of his teasing question, and she made no attempt to respond to that mockery of a smile.

'And you know that I know that has to be the furthest thing from your thoughts.'

'Well, there you'd be wrong, you know,' Aidan put in with deceptive mildness, that smile growing wider. 'I do wish you a very happy—what? Twenty-fourth birthday? And a wonderful year to follow.'

He almost sounded as if he meant it, India told herself. But almost immediately she clamped down hard on that weak train of thought. Even to allow the possibility to slide into her mind was foolish in the extreme. Foolish and very dangerous.

'It can hardly be much worse than last year.'

She regretted the words as soon as they were out of her mouth, fearing that they gave away far too much. She didn't want this man to know of all the long, lonely nights she had spent lying awake in an agony of frustration, the dreary, empty days she had dragged herself through since he had abandoned her so brutally. Immediately she tried to cover her tracks.

'Though really I should thank you for what you did. You saved me from making what could quite possibly have been the worst mistake of my life.'

The way his head went back slightly, showing that her attack had hit home, made her give a small smile of satisfaction.

'But I'm sure you didn't come here to chat over old times.' Deliberately she laced the words with acid. 'So perhaps you'll tell me the real reason for your sudden materialisation.'

'Materialisation,' Aidan echoed in dark amusement. 'You make me sound like some alien being, or a ghost.'

Ghost indeed. The ghost of happier times, a reminder of the way she had once felt. India flinched away from the stab of anguish that pushed her into unconsidered speech.

'A werewolf or a vampire is more like it!' she flung at him.

'Now you're being fanciful.'

'Am I? Am I really?'

How she wished she could bring her voice down a note on two. It was too high, too shrill, too bitterly revealing. It infuriated her even more to remember that she had always promised herself that if she ever met this man again then she would be so cool, would freeze him out completely. She could never bear it if he knew just how badly he had hurt her.

'Well, let me tell you something, Mr Wolfe. In my mind, a vampire is just what you are! An emotional vampire, someone who preys on people's feelings, taking them and sucking them dry, then casting them aside without a second thought when you've tired of them.'

'Oh, come on.' The smooth voice mocked her outburst. 'You surely aren't claiming that I broke your heart? After all, it wasn't me you wanted but my money.'

His tone had sharpened noticeably on the last words, and now he took a couple of swift steps towards her, coming very close for the first time.

It took all India's self-control not to recoil in panic. She had forgotten just how tall he was, how broad his shoulders were under the immaculately white T-shirt and the loose linen jacket.

She had never seen Aidan quite so casually dressed before, she realised. In all the time that they had been dating he had stuck rigidly to the formal suits he wore for work as well as leisure. So now it was painfully disconcerting to feel her mouth dry in an instinctively sensual response to the way that the soft cotton clung to the honed lines of his chest, the denim jeans he wore with it emphasising the powerful length of his legs.

Oh, God, how could he still do this to her after all that had happened? She couldn't be so weak that he had only to appear and she fell straight back under his spell, could she?

'You broke my heart? Now who's being fanciful? We never had that sort of a relationship, and you know it You wanted me and I wanted you.'

'And what I brought with me,' Aidan inserted brutally. 'So, tell me, how is it with your new lover?'

'Lover?' For a few seconds she couldn't focus her mind enough to think. 'Oh, Jim!'

'Yes, Jim.'

The twist to Aidan's mouth, the roughness of his voice, turned the name into an obscenity.

'"You've been so good to me" Jim. "I don't know how to thank you" Jim. What does he do for you, my lovely India? Does he give you more than I ever could? Was he the next wealthy man to walk through the door after I walked out of it?'

'Precisely! You walked out!' India pounced on the opening he had given her. 'You walked out on me, remember. So don't come the jilted fiancé—'

'I wouldn't dream of it,' Aidan responded coolly, stopping her dead. 'Believe me, he's welcome to you.'

Those dark eyes noted the way India clamped her mouth shut against any weak protest at the callousness, and his smile surfaced once more. The curl of his lips was even more predatory than before.

'But I wonder if he knows just how much it's going to cost him.'

'If you must know,' India declared, unable to endure his taunts any longer, 'Jim is just a very junior cog in the firm of Jenkins and Curran, my father's—'

'Your father's solicitors,' Aidan inserted dismissively. 'I know who they are only too well.'

'But how?'

'We've had dealings,' was the enigmatic response. 'Which reminds me. Where is your dear papa?'

The edge in his voice was worrying, an undertone of threat seeming to lurk in his words like jagged rocks underneath the still surface of a calm sea. Hearing it, India felt an intuitive shiver run down her spine, setting her protective instincts on red alert.

'Why do you want to know?' she asked warily.

'It was your father I came to see. Let's just say I have some important business to discuss with him.'

If she had felt apprehensive before, that cryptic remark made matters ten times worse. Even before her wedding day Aidan and her father had been at daggers drawn, and she very much doubted that time had done anything to ease the situation.

'I don't think he'd want anything to do with you!' The memory of the state in which she had just left her father sharpened her voice, giving it extra emphasis.

'Oh, he'll see me, darling. I promise you, he'll want to talk to me very much, and if he's wise he'll arrange a meeting very soon. So when will he be back?'

‘And what is that supposed to mean?’ India ignored the question, concentrating instead on the implications behind that ‘if he’s wise’.

‘Just what it says,’ Aidan returned indifferently. ‘I want to see your father, and it would be better for him if I saw him soon. So when do you expect him home?’

‘I don’t know.’

Which at least was nothing more than the truth. No matter when her father came out of hospital, it would be a long time before he would be well enough to talk to anyone, let alone the predatory Lone Wolfe. But what possible business could connect two such disparate men?

‘I could give him a message if you like,’ she managed, her attempt at cool confidence sadly marred by the sudden realisation that Aidan was between her and the door.

If she wanted to get inside she would have to go past him, she told herself. The idea made her uneasy, uncomfortably aware of the heavy shadows cast by the trees, the silence of the night and the recollection of the fact that Gary’s room was at the back of the house, well out of earshot.

‘If you just tell me what you want to say.’

For a long moment Aidan considered. ‘No.’ He shook his dark head decisively. ‘It’s between the two of us. ‘I’ll find him later. Tell him I was looking for him.’

‘Is that it?’ India questioned, receiving another of those slanted, mocking glances that aggravated the already edgy way she was feeling.

‘Were you looking for something more?’

‘Not on your life!’

She was disconcerted to realise just how close he had come to her, suddenly only inches away from her.

‘A pity.’ It was a low, seductive murmur, one that drew her attention against her will. Drew it and held it as if she were hypnotised. ‘Because I was just thinking that I couldn’t let you go without a kiss for old times’ sake.’

‘For—!’ India spluttered, a sense of panic gripping her round the throat, choking off her words as his head came even nearer, lowering to blot out the light of the moon.

He was so near that she could hear the sound of his breathing, catch the tang of some exclusive cologne. Her heart lurched into a wild, uneven rhythm that made her blood pound in her ears, and she was sure he must hear the accelerated beat of her heart.

‘Don’t you dare!’

Her voice was high and sharp, and it stilled that ominous movement, his head coming to a sudden halt.

‘Don’t you dare...’

It was less successful this time. A betraying quiver that she couldn’t quite suppress deprived her words of the force she had aimed for.

A wicked smile curved his lips, revealing perfect white teeth.

‘Oh, I dare,’ he drawled softly. ‘The question is, do you? You see, I wouldn’t be content with just a peck on the cheek and a breathless thank-you such as you gave your so-kind Jim.’

‘But you...’

‘I what?’ Aidan murmured when she struggled to find words to fling at him.

The trouble was that with that dark head so very close, with his lips curved into that deceptive softness, all she could think of was how it had once been. She could recall so vividly how it had felt to run her hands through the dark silk of his hair, to have that beautiful mouth against her own...

To her horror she found that she had actually raised her head, tilting it slightly, her lips parting as if to receive his kiss.

‘I what, sweetheart?’ Aidan repeated on a very different note, one so smokily sensual that it seemed to have the power to draw her soul from her body and straight into his ruthless hands. ‘I rejected you, cast you off—is that it?’

She couldn't find any response. Her tongue seemed frozen and stiff inside her mouth.

'Ah, but you're forgetting one thing, my darling India. I may have walked away from the thought of tying myself down, but I could never refuse the invitation offered by that glorious body of yours. I was always unable to resist the temptation you offered, and, after twelve months, the hunger you arouse is stronger than ever.'

'Invitation!' India exploded, her head coming up sharply, green eyes blazing in rejection of his blunt declaration. 'Offer! I'm not inviting anything! And, believe me, I have nothing whatsoever to offer you ever again! If you think otherwise, then you have most definitely totally misread the signals.'

'Perhaps.' His tone implied that he very much doubted it. 'But, India, sweetheart—'

'And I am not your sweetheart, or anything else! How you can possibly even begin to imagine that after the way you treated me I would want anything at all to do with you, I just don't know. But...'

Drawing a deep breath, she snatched at the one thing she hoped would convince him once and for all.

'Get it through your thick skull that I am not available! As you saw, I'm with Jim now.'

Dear Jim. He wouldn't mind his name being taken in vain in this way. He would probably even enjoy the thought of being linked with her, in fantasy if not in reality. At least she could rely on him to back her up if her story was challenged.

'He's the only man in my life; the only one I want.'

If he argued, she thought, her breathing fast and uneven, if he so much as questioned her declaration or asked for proof she didn't know what she would do. That last outburst seemed to have used up all her remaining strength, and she didn't feel she had anything in reserve with which to fight him.

But Aidan's unexpected reaction seemed to blast apart the last scrap of solid ground beneath her feet, destroying the shreds of her composure as it did so.

'OK,' he said casually, shrugging those broad shoulders in a gesture of supreme indifference. 'If that's how you want it.'

It was how little he cared that really hurt. India found herself frozen to the spot, unable to do anything more than watch as he turned and strolled away, heading for the car that was parked at the side of the house, almost invisible in the shadows.

If he had ever felt anything for her, however little, then surely he would have shown some reaction? Surely his face would have betrayed a hint of disappointment, or anger, or at the very least jealousy? Or was she being all sorts of a fool even to hope?

But even the realisation that Aidan felt nothing at all couldn't stop her heart from jolting painfully in her chest, seeming to lurch almost into her throat, when he suddenly paused and turned back to her.

'Tell your father I was here,' he said, and his voice had returned to the ominously dark intonation that had so worried her earlier. 'And that we have important things to discuss.'

'What—?' India began, but her feeble attempt at speech was brushed aside, falling to the ground like splintered glass as it came up against the hard, unyielding mask of his face.

'Just tell him I'll be back. And if he's wise he'll be here to see me.'

In spite of the heat of the evening, the words sent a shiver like the trail of icy water down India's spine. There could be no mistaking the menace behind them—a threat made all the worse by the fact that she had no idea what was involved.

'But what...?'

But Aidan had gone. And as the dark, sleek car disappeared down the drive, turning the corner out of sight, she was suddenly swamped by a terrible sense of loneliness, a feeling of dread that was all the worse for having no rational explanation.

CHAPTER THREE

'I'LL be back.'

For two days now, Aidan's words had rung inside India's head, their disturbing undertones seeming to grow more and more ominous with each repetition. The fact that she could think of no reason at all for Aidan to want to speak to her father only added to her already deeply uneasy frame of mind.

There was no one she could share her anxiety with, either. Her mother was under enough strain as it was, spending each day and often all night at the hospital. She was usually too tense and anxious even to eat properly. And Gary was too young, already worried about his father.

I'll be back.

She didn't doubt that he meant it. Already she had found three messages from Aidan on her father's answering machine, the later ones distinctly less polite than the first. And only yesterday she had had a narrow escape when he had come to the door.

She had answered the summons of the bell automatically, but luckily had taken a second to glance out of an upstairs window before making her way down to the hall. The sight of the dark grey Jaguar parked in the driveway had had all the tiny hairs on the back of her neck lifting in instinctive alarm, freezing her to the spot.

A moment later Aidan's dark head and powerful shoulders had become visible below her as he'd moved restlessly, impatient for an answer. Instinct had had India shrinking back against the wall, hidden by a thick velvet curtain, just seconds before he'd looked up, dark eyes raking the upper windows with an intensity that had made her shiver.

It was as if he'd known she was there, had been able to sense her presence as the wolf scented its prey. Fearfully India had flattened herself against the wall, staying there until the roar of the car's engine told her he had gone. Even then, it had taken some minutes before she dared move at all.

But today at least the coast was clear, she acknowledged gratefully as she arrived back at the house with a load of groceries in the back of the car. There was no sign of anyone, no alien vehicle parked in the forecourt.

Relief made her heart lift. and she hummed softly to herself as she opened the boot and reached in for the two heavy shopping bags.

'Here, let me help you with those.'

'Oh, I...'

The bag she held almost slipped from her grasp, and she only avoided banging her head on the open end of the car by the narrowest of margins.

'Careful,' Aidan soothed, his voice and expression one of carefully assumed concern that she didn't believe in for a second. 'Let me take that'

'I can manage perfectly well!'

Her thoughts were reeling in shock, sharpening her tone. It seemed almost as if he had been conjured up by her own mind.

'Where the hell did you spring from?'

'From Westbury,' Aidan responded, knowing very well that that was not what she had meant at all. 'I've been staying there for a few days.'

'But your car...?'

'Oh, I left that at the bottom of the drive and walked up.'

'I never saw it.'

Too late, she realised that she had given herself away. Now Aidan would know that she had been looking for signs of his presence, worried that he might be around.

'I don't suppose you did.' His smile was slow and filled with a lazy mockery that told her he had caught her momentary lapse. The glint of dark amusement in his eyes brightened as he went on, 'But then, of course, I didn't exactly leave it in full view. You can't be too careful these days, with so many thieves and joy-riders around.'

And he knew very well that if she had seen his car she would have turned around at once and stayed well away until the coast was clear.

'And I didn't want you forewarned and so forearmed as you were when I called the other day.' Aidan confirmed her thoughts with such deadly accuracy that India's mouth actually fell open in shock.

'You knew?'

'Of course I knew. You forget, my dear India, that I know this house of old, and that I am very well aware of just which bedroom is yours.'

The sensual deepening of his tone, together with the smokiness of his eyes, had hot colour rising in her cheeks at the thought of just how he knew. The memory of those nights, just over a year ago, when—with her parents and Gary away on a visit to relatives—she had invited Aidan to stay at the Grange came back to haunt her. Of course he knew where her room—her bed—was. They had hardly moved out of it, except to fetch food, for the whole of that week.

'Now, let's get these inside.'

Taking advantage of the shock that had loosened her grip on the bag, Aidan eased it from her before she could protest. Then he hoisted the other one from the interior of the boot with a lack of effort that forced a reluctant and secret admission of envious admiration from her. She was well aware of just how heavy that bag was, but Aidan's one-handed ease made a nonsense of her own earlier struggle to get it into the car.

But then, of course, she was only too well aware of the strength of those sinewy, tightly muscled arms. She was also uncomfortably sensitive to the sensual impact of the way their impressive power was shown off to advantage by the short sleeves of the dark chocolate-coloured T-shirt he wore with oatmeal—coloured chinos.

The sun warmed the smoothly tanned skin, and her throat dried at the thought of the times she had felt those arms close around her in the throes of passion, holding her tight against the hard length of his body...

'India?'

A touch of amusement in the deep voice brought hot colour rushing into her face. She couldn't avoid the uncomfortable suspicion that Aidan had known just what thoughts had distracted her, the gleam in his eyes intensifying to a positively devilish light as his smile widened wickedly.

'If we don't get this food inside, some of the frozen stuff will start to defrost in this heat. And I want...'

'My father isn't at home!'

It was all she could think of to say. The idea of Aidan setting foot inside her home ever again sent such a shudder of revulsion down her spine that it was all she could do not to let him see it. As it was, she knew all the blood had drained from her face.

'Oh, I know,' Aidan returned easily. 'That's why I waited. But I have to admit to being surprised when you turned up. I expected you'd be at work all day.'

'I don't have a job.'

India's voice was tight. When she had first met him she had had a position as a secretary to a local businessman, a job she had been only too glad to give up as soon as she had become engaged.

In the year since her wedding day she had only been able to find temporary work. And lately, just when she needed it most, even that uncertain source of income had dried up. Irrationally, she felt deeply resentful—as if Aidan had been responsible for that misfortune too.

'Of course not.' Something in his tone stung sharply. 'So you're free all day.'

'Yes, but you—'

'I have all the time in the world,' Aidan put in, obviously anticipating India's next attempt at persuading him to leave. tom on holiday.'

‘I didn’t know you took them,’ India cut in sharply. ‘I mean, you always were a workaholic when we were...’

‘When we were together?’ he completed smoothly when the realisation of just what she had been about to say froze her tongue. ‘Well, I think you’ll find that quite a few things have changed since then. Now, are you going to open this door or not?’

India devoutly wished that she could do no such thing. But Aidan’s determined stance and the obdurate look in his eyes brought her up hard against the realisation that, unless she was prepared to indulge in an undignified and probably totally pointless struggle for her shopping, she would either have to do as he said or risk losing all their food for the coming week.

One look at those long, tanned fingers clamped firmly around the handles of the bags decided her on the side of discretion rather than valour. With a sigh of resignation she accepted defeat and opened the door.

‘And besides, I didn’t just come to see your father.’

‘Well, don’t try to claim that you wanted to renew our friendship,’ India muttered ungraciously.

‘Friendship?’

One dark eyebrow quirked up in frank scepticism, and his voice held an undertone that she was beyond interpreting.

‘Don’t you think that’s something of an understatement for what we had?’

‘What we had was a lie from start to finish, and it’s over now, gone for good. Dead and buried.’

‘Is that a fact?’

‘It’s the only fact that I know!’ The only one she would ever admit to him, anyway.

All trace of his mocking humour seemed to have evaporated, leaving his face cold and distant, set into harshly brutal lines.

‘You’re surely not claiming that I broke your heart? That I did anything more than cause you some social embarrassment, and perhaps lower your expectations of the future a little?’

‘Broke my heart?’ India repeated, the need for control, to ensure that not even the tiniest suggestion of the truth seeped past her defences, making her tone coldly brittle. ‘No, I’m not claiming that at all.’

If she was to convince him of that fact, she had to do it once and for all.

‘In fact, as I said the other night, I really should be grateful to you. If you hadn’t walked out on me like that, I’d have been trapped in a very unwise and totally unsuitable marriage. Before very long—possibly even by now—we would both have realised our mistake, but would have had to go through the unpleasantness of a divorce in order to get out of it.’

‘Instead of which you find yourself free and available, and perfectly positioned to marry your darling Jim.’

As on the previous occasion, the total lack of any feeling in Aidan’s response brought a flaring pain so violent that she had to bite down hard on her lower lip.

All she could think of was the need to make sure there was no possibility he could doubt her sincerity, and so she pounced on the opening he had offered her. If he wanted to believe she and Jim were a couple, then who was she to stop him?

‘That’s right. Jim has—kept me company...’

She had been about to say ‘comforted me’, but caught herself just in time.

‘Ever since last year. We’ve become very close, and I think our families are expecting an announcement soon.’

‘My congratulations,’ Aidan drawled. ‘I’m sure you’ll be well suited.’

He made the possibility sound like a life sentence rather than a prospect for happiness.

‘Obviously a trainee solicitor is considered a better bet by your father than someone with my background.’

‘Well, Jim’s uncle is an MP, and his grandmother was an earl’s daughter,’ India told him with a terrible sense of hammering nails into an already well-sealed coffin.

‘That’d just about do it,’ Aidan growled. ‘Shall I put this stuff away?’

‘There’s no need.’

It was almost impossible to match the carelessness of his tone with her own, to hide the stab of bitterness his indifference brought.

‘But thanks for carrying them in.’

Automatically she looked towards the door, anticipating that he would take the hint and leave. But Aidan simply shook his head with a calmness that set her teeth on edge.

‘Oh, no, my lovely. I’m not leaving until I’ve had words with your fool of a father.’

To India’s horror, he calmly deposited one of the bags on the table and began to unpack it systematically, putting the various tins and packages in their places with a familiarity that struck at her heart with its bitter memories.

‘You can’t. He’s...out.’

If she had had any hope that her father’s illness might make Aidan hold back, show a little consideration, she would have told him the truth. But this man and Bruce Marchant had always been at daggers drawn. She wouldn’t put it past Aidan to march straight round to the hospital to confront his opponent about whatever matter was on his mind. And, already uneasy about his motives, she quailed inside at the thought of what the result of such a meeting would be on her father’s already frail health.

‘Obviously. So when will he be back?’

‘I can’t say.’

‘Can’t or won’t, Princess?’

‘I don’t know when he’ll be back!’

‘Then I’ll wait until he returns. He can’t stay away all day.’

‘Yes, he can!’ Belated inspiration had struck. ‘He’s gone away for the weekend, and...’ India’s voice faded as Aidan shook his head reprovingly.

‘Nice try, sweetheart, but too late. If you wanted to convince me, you should have come up with that one much earlier. And besides, I saw his car in the garage. Wherever he’s gone it isn’t far.’

He didn’t miss a trick, India thought despairingly. Those keen dark eyes observed every little thing about his surroundings, and the shrewd brain that had made his fortune considered the information, assessing the situation and coming to a swift conclusion. She was beginning to feel like some particularly interesting scientific specimen under observation in a controlled laboratory experiment.

‘Think what you like.’ Her tone acknowledged defeat. ‘But don’t call me sweetheart! I am not your anything, and never will be again!’

‘Well, I have to admit that it isn’t exactly apposite,’ Aidan flung back, putting the last tin m a cupboard and folding the carrier bag with firm, precise movements. ‘You’ve been anything but sweet ever since I arrived.’

‘What did you expect?’ India exploded, unable to believe the gall of the man. ‘After the way you treated me, I’d hardly be likely to throw myself into your arms and kiss you senseless! ’

‘I recall many occasions on which you did just that.’ There was a predatory gleam in the depths of those eyes now. ‘And I remember them as being very enjoyable, for both of us. All the more so because they usually led to—’

‘Well, memories are all you’re going to have!’ India broke in sharply, knowing only too well just what those occasions had led to.

Neither did she need any reminder of how those passionate encounters had felt. Simply thinking of them had raised her pulse rate to racing point, making her breathing unnaturally rapid and rawly uneven.

In the past, a simple kiss of greeting from this man had had the effect of a lighted match laid to a tinder-dry bonfire, making desire flare between them, roaring out of control in seconds.

'That's all right by me—for now.'

Aidan's smile was one that might have been on the face of a hunting tiger as it lay in the sun, lazily watching its prey, knowing that when the time was right it would spring. But right now he couldn't be bothered, that smile said, and his voice was a sensually indolent purr, threaded through with a dark line of threat.

'But I have a very good memory. A cup of coffee would be nice,' he added pointedly, startling India with his abrupt change of mood.

'Don't you have anything better to do?'

'Frankly, no.'

The blunt declaration left no room for argument, and India could only shrug her shoulders resignedly as she moved to fill the kettle.

'Why do you want to see my father anyway?' She tried to make it sound casual, even if it was the furthest thing from the way she was feeling.

'He owes me money.'

You and a hundred others. India barely bit back the despondent comment in time, but Aidan had caught something of her change in expression.

'You don't seem surprised.'

'I'm not.'

If there was one thing that made her father's illness even more difficult to bear, it was the discovery of the mountain of debts he had run up, unknown to anyone else.

It seemed that no sooner had the ambulance taken him to hospital than all sorts of demanding creditors had crawled out of the woodwork. There had also been letters from the bank, demanding that Bruce Marchant paid off some of his excessively large overdraft, not to mention the instalments on a loan he had taken out and on which he was behind with payment.

'I'm just surprised that he borrowed anything from you.'

The last word was emphasised by the way that she slammed the mug of coffee down onto the table in front of him.

'Tainted money, hmm?' Aidan murmured cynically. 'Not quite the sort of thing that blue-bloods like you want to soil their hands with.'

'Oh, now you're being ridiculous! That wasn't the only thing that worried my father. He was concerned by the stories of your wild youth, run-ins with the police.'

'The reports in the papers were exaggerated. I admit I was no saint—but then, is anyone when they're an adolescent?'

'You haven't been a teenager for over fifteen years! Or are you claiming that the men and women—particularly the women—you've used and discarded on your way to the top are just a figment of the tabloids' imagination too?'

'And are you claiming that your parents—your father at least—never believed that their sort of inherited wealth was far superior to money earned by hard work?'

He hadn't answered the question, India realised. But then, did he really have to? Was she really fool enough to think he might actually care about the beauties with whom his name had been linked, usually so briefly, in the past?

'In our case, "wealth" is a far from accurate term! For as long as I can remember, and certainly since my grandfather's death embroiled us in the problems of death duties, we've existed in a form of genteel poverty where appearance barely papered over the cracks. If you'd looked underneath, you'd have seen there was nothing of any substance...'

'Which is where I came in.'

'You know I never shared my father's opinions on—'

‘No—you didn’t care where the money came from, so long as there was plenty of it and it took you out of that “genteel poverty” you so hated,’ Aidan inserted in a voice that seemed to freeze the air around them, making it difficult to breathe.

Suddenly it was as if she had slipped back in time, seeing herself little more than a year ago at that party that had started it all.

If it hadn’t been for Rob, she wouldn’t have felt that way in the first place. Rob—the man she had been seeing for the past few months, and with whom she had believed herself more than halfway in love. She had been so convinced of her feelings that only the week before the party she had finally given in to his persistent pressure and slept with him—her own first experience of physical lovemaking.

If the experience hadn’t been everything she had hoped for, and certainly not all that the books she had read had led her to expect, she had told herself that it was only the result of inexperience. Time and commitment could only make things better—or so she’d believed.

And so she had been devastated when only a day or so later Rob had brusquely, and with brutal indifference to her feelings, broken off the relationship.

In an attempt to drown her sorrows, India had downed a couple of glasses of wine with more haste than she was used to. Her feelings of hurt pride and loss had been made even worse by the appearance of Rob himself at the party, with another woman on his arm.

‘His boss’s daughter, no less!’ she complained to her friends, hiding her hurt behind a veil of contempt as she went on, ‘But I mean—just look at her! That hair isn’t natural for a start. And, well, to call her a bimbo would be an insult to all self-respecting airheads. What on earth can he see in her?’

‘Face it,’ Rose said, her tone one of knowing cynicism, ‘What he really sees when he looks at Miss Bannister is a private income of X thousand a year and an easy way into Daddy’s good books—not to mention, if he plays his cards right, the prospect of a very comfortable future. Your family may have a high society name, Indy, and the family tree to go with it—but you haven’t got the disposable income men like Rob look for.’

‘And what income the Marchants do have is taken up by that crumbling old pile my father insists on calling the ancestral home!’ India agreed. ‘It’s going to need a new roof soon, and there’s not enough in the bank to fund it.’

‘Not a problem dear Miss Bannister is likely to have to concern herself with,’ Jane put in with a nod towards the dance floor, where the blonde was draped all over Rob. ‘That little slip of nothing she’s wearing is fresh from the Paris catwalks, and I’ll bet that what Daddy paid for it would go a long way towards your new roof. Our high street couture just can’t compete.’

‘High street!’ India’s laugh was wry. ‘You must be joking. I made this myself, from one of Mum’s old evening dresses, cut down and restyled.’

Another glance towards Rob and his attentive companion twisted the knife deep inside her heart.

‘Oh, God, I’m sick and tired of genteel poverty! I think it’s high time I did something about it. You just watch me! I’m going to find myself a wealthy husband, one who can keep me in the manner to which I have every intention of becoming accustomed. Then I can just sit back and enjoy myself, not have to worry about anything.’

‘Well, you couldn’t do better than to start here, tonight,’ her friend had told her. ‘There must be the cream of the society, artistic and business worlds right here under one roof. You could take your pick.’

‘I intend to!’

Buoyed up by the wine, India hadn’t cared if her voice carried.

‘And I don’t plan on waiting for him to come to me. In fact, the very next rich man who walks through that door will find himself on the receiving end of such a campaign of seduction and

enticement that he won't be able to resist me. I'll bet you anything you like that I'll have his ring on my finger before he knows what's hit him—three months at most, start to finish!'

'That was how you saw it, wasn't it?' Aidan's cold voice broke into her memories now. 'Correct me if I'm wrong.'

'I don't suppose you'd believe me if I said it was all a joke?' she managed, not meeting his eyes.

'In that case, the joke was on you,' Aidan returned harshly, his steely eyes and the tightness of the muscles in his face driving home the message of his tone.

'I didn't know you were listening.'

'No?' Aidan laughed nastily. 'You really slipped up there, didn't you, darling? You must have thought you were home and dry. As ordered, one extremely wealthy man who seemed to fall straight into your carefully baited trap.'

That laugh was worse the second time around, a grim travesty of humour that made India wince away in distress.

'What a pity that you hadn't realised that the window behind you was open when you hatched your grasping little plot, and that it carried every word of your conversation out to where I had just arrived at the front door. As they say, forewarned is forearmed. You should have seen your face. You looked as if all your Christmases had come at once and you'd got exactly what you asked Santa for.'

'Well, you got what you wanted too!'

Unable to bear his goading any longer, India needed to lash out at him, verbally at least, make him feel a little of her inner distress. The fact that her own conscience wasn't exactly comfortable with the events he was making her remember only made matters worse.

'And what was that?'

His voice was freezing again, and India shivered in nervous response

'You got me! You wanted my body—you made that only too plain. You wanted me in your bed, nothing more, nothing less, so you went along with my "grasping little plot" because it suited you. Or are you going to try and deny that now?'

Aidan's emphatic, silent shake of his head, the dark eyes fixed disturbingly on her face, drove that jagged knife in a few inches deeper, twisting it viciously in the wound.

'So you wanted sex. You wanted to screw me...'

She didn't care how crude she sounded, how harsh and vicious her tone had become. Her emotions felt crude. She felt soiled, dirty, used and discarded.

'And, boy, did you do that! You took what you wanted for as long as you wanted, promising marriage and happy ever after just to keep me sweet! But then, when you'd had enough, when you grew tired...'

'Damn you!'

India's voice failed her suddenly, the words disintegrating in her throat as Aidan flung the savage imprecation at her, getting to his feet in a violent movement, his chair scraping back over the floor with a harsh, ugly sound.

'Damn you to hell, Princess! If it's truth time, then it's that for both of us,' he declared, coming round the table towards her, his face set in an expression that had her shrinking away fearfully, reading danger in his look.

But Aidan's hands came out swiftly, fastening onto her arms, hard fingers digging painfully into soft flesh as he easily controlled her impulse to escape. Unable to move, she could only turn her head away—anything to avoid looking into his eyes.

'And you'll listen,' he growled into her stubbornly averted face. 'You'll hear what I have to say if I have to shake every damned word into you.'

Suiting action to the words, he gave her a rough shake. Not violent, but controlled just enough to let her know what it would be like if his temper finally broke free from the constraint he was imposing on it.

‘Yes, I wanted you—’

‘For sex,’ India couldn’t stop herself from inserting, and out of the corner of her eye saw the hard nod of his head that confirmed her words.

‘I’ve never denied that. I’d be a fool to try. I’ve only got to look at you to want you—and even the knowledge that you’re nothing but a cheap, money-grabbing little bloodsucker isn’t enough to change the way I feel, unfortunately. I wish it was. But you got one thing wrong.’

‘No...’

The protest escaped involuntarily, India’s head going back in shock as her mind focused on and fully registered just what he had said. I’ve only got to look at you to want you. Present tense—not past.

‘No!’ She didn’t want him to say it, didn’t want to hear her fears confirmed.

‘Yes.’

His smile was hateful, curling his lips in acknowledgement of the way that the sudden darkening of her eyes told him she had guessed what was coming.

‘Oh, yes, my darling Princess. You got one thing totally and unequivocally wrong, and that one thing makes all the difference. You can say that I got what I wanted and, in a way, I did. But I didn’t get enough of it—nowhere near enough.’

Hopelessly, desperately, India shook her head, her hands coming up before her face as if she could actually ward off what he was saying. But Aidan ignored her and ploughed on ruthlessly.

‘I never grew tired of you—not in that way at least. I wanted you in my bed then, wanted you with a need so sharp it hurts just to think of it, and I want you now. In fact, I want you more than ever, and nothing that’s happened has done anything to change that.’

CHAPTER FOUR

‘I DIDN’T get enough—nowhere near enough.’

Aidan’s harsh-voiced declaration swung round and round in India’s head, gaining further devastating impact with each repetition. It almost seemed as if a grenade had just exploded right in her face, blasting her thought processes to bits.

The only thing she could see was Aidan’s eyes, ebony-dark, no light in them at all, holding her stunned gaze with a powerfully mesmeric force.

‘I never got enough of you,’ he conferred, dropping his voice even lower, so that it seemed to coil round her beleaguered senses like thick, warm smoke. ‘Not then, my lovely, and certainly not now.’

Inwardly, India shivered at the huskily sensual promise in his voice. Or did she mean threat? Right now, she neither knew nor cared. But then a new thought struck with stunning force, making her pull herself up sharply.

This was exactly what he wanted, she realised. He had set out deliberately to throw her off balance, and she had responded exactly as he had planned. If she showed fear or reacted nervously then he had won, or at least gained a very powerful advantage—and she was damned if she was going to let him get away with that!

Swallowing hard, she moistened dry lips with her tongue, and when she saw his dark-eyed gaze drop down to follow the tiny movement she deliberately made herself repeat it, more slowly this time. The change in pace turned the gesture into a lazily lascivious self-caress, like the sensuous reaction of a cat that had just cleared a saucer of cream, and she knew its impact wasn’t lost on the man before her.

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