

MILLS & BOON



Vintage INTRIGUE

**Her Secret
Weapon**

BEVERLY BARTON

BEVERLY BARTON

Her Secret Weapon

«HarperCollins»

BARTON B.

Her Secret Weapon / B. BARTON — «HarperCollins»,

THE AGENT: Burke Lonigan, weapons expert and world-class charmer
THE MISSION: To destroy a dangerous traitor, while defending his woman and child!
Facing off with a deadly menace was easy for Burke Lonigan—until a beguiling beauty stepped in danger's path. The only way Burke could protect Callie Severin was to make her his wife. Then Burke discovered his new bride was the beautiful stranger he had taken to his bed one passionate night long ago—and the mother of the child he'd never known! Now Burke was determined to defend his family—and damn the consequences to his heart! a year of loving dangerously
Where passion rules and nothing is what it seems....

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When a deadly traitor threatens to dishonor a top-secret agency, A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY begins....

Burke Lonigan

Penetrating blue eyes, a powerful build—and a way with women...

His wealth had brought him privilege and his work for SPEAR had brought him honor. But when Burke married enigmatic Callie Severin, he was about to learn something about love—and fatherhood....

Callie Severin

A rare beauty with russet hair and a secret lurking in her pretty gray eyes...

She had agreed to be Burke's bride because she desperately needed his protection. But what would her sexy husband do when he discovered she was the mother of his child?

"Simon"

With his burns and battle scars, this reputed traitor looked as deadly as rumors made him out to be....

Simon is steps away from securing the weaponry he needs to wreak more havoc on SPEAR, but first he needs to get past powerful Burke Lonigan....

Dear Reader,

The 20th anniversary excitement continues as we bring you a 2-in-1 collection containing brand-new novellas by two of your favorite authors: Maggie Shayne and Marilyn Pappano. Who Do You Love? It's an interesting question—made more complicated for these heroes and heroines because they're not quite what they seem, making the path to happily-ever-after an especially twisty one. Enjoy!

A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY continues with Her Secret Weapon by bestselling writer Beverly Barton. This is a great secret-baby story—with a forgotten night of passion thrown in to make things even more exciting. Our in-line 36 HOURS spin-off continues with A Thanksgiving To Remember, by Margaret Watson. Suspenseful and sensual, this story shows off her talents to their fullest. Applaud the return of Justine Davis with The Return of Luke McGuire. There's something irresistible about a bad boy turned hero, and Justine's compelling and emotional handling of the theme will win your heart. In The Lawman Meets His Bride, Meagan McKinney brings her MATCHED IN MONTANA miniseries over from Desire with an exciting romance featuring a to-die-for hero. Finally, pick up The Virgin Beauty by Claire King and discover why this relative newcomer already has people talking about her talent.

Share the excitement—and come back next month for more!



Leslie J. Wainger
Executive Senior Editor

Her Secret Weapon

Beverly Barton

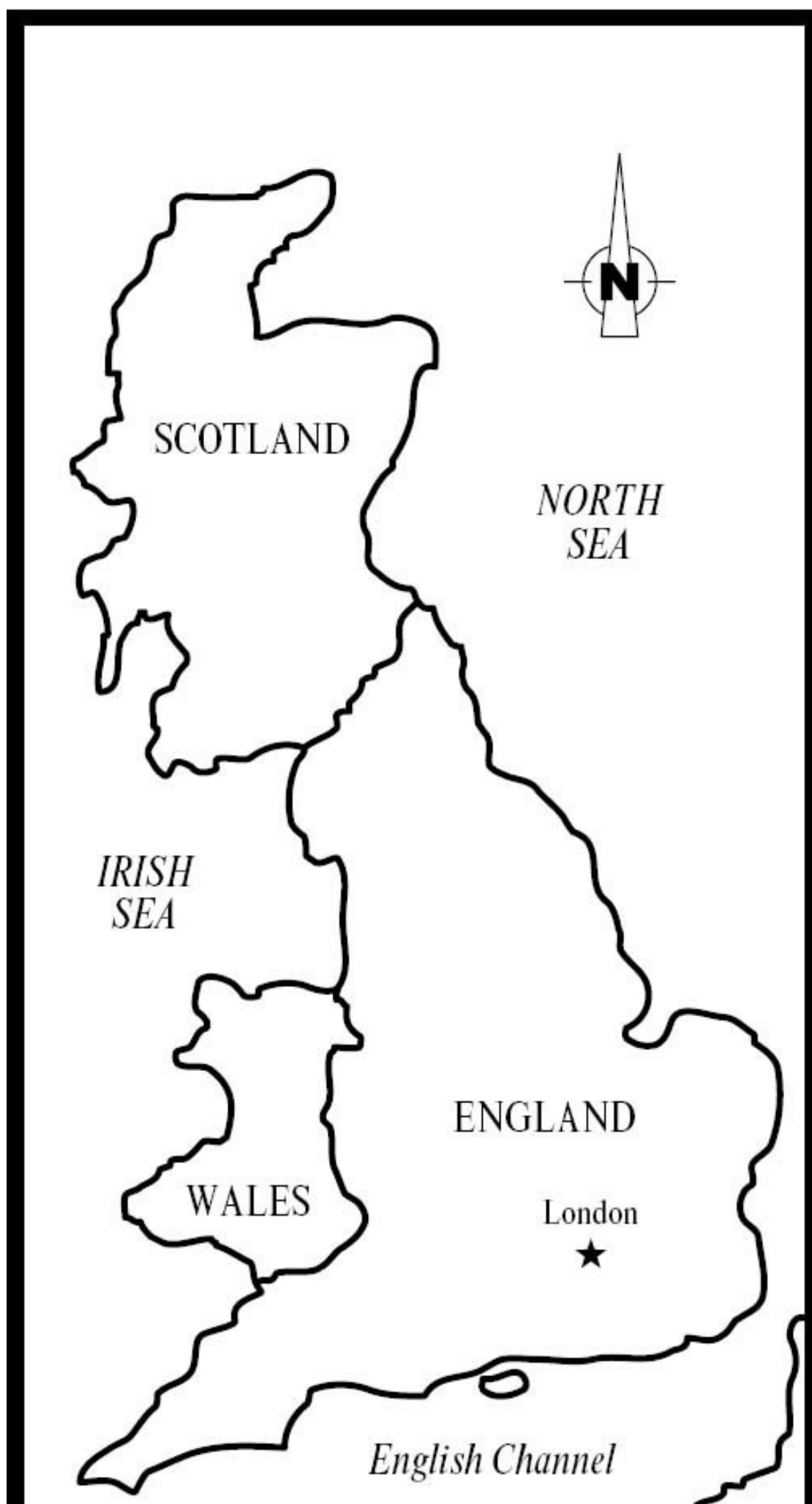


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To my girls,

Badiema Beaver Waldrep and Jana Parris Beaver

A special thanks to Brian Usher, who helped me with my London research, and to his aunt, Carol Benjamin, for putting me in touch with a resident of the U.K.



A note from award-winning author Beverly Barton, author of over thirty books, including the bestselling Intimate Moment series THE PROTECTORS.

Dear Reader,

Writing Burke Lonigan and Callie Severin's romance began with a certain process to make the story uniquely my own—a process I undertake whenever I write a book that is part of a continuity series, as Her Secret Weapon is. The exciting premise of A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY, revolving around characters associated with a highly secret organization formed to protect the world from evil, intrigued me immediately. At first glance Her Secret Weapon is simply a secret-baby book, but as we all know, a tried-and-true plot can be the basis of a highly emotional love story—especially if the heroine suspects that the playboy tycoon father of her child is really an illegal arms dealer. As I do with most of my books, I added to the mix a little cloak-and-dagger danger, several unique secondary characters and some hot sex. And in the end I achieved my goal. This story, the fourth in a twelve-book series, took on a life of its own as a Beverly Barton book. I hope you'll enjoy getting to know Callie and Burke and sharing all the emotional highs and lows they experience on the rocky road to happily-ever-after.

During the process of researching London, the British “English language” and numerous other details I needed to know in order to write this book, I became thoroughly absorbed in the setting as well as the plot and characters. Luckily, I had the assistance of a U.K. resident, the nephew of a longtime Heart of Dixie RWA friend who, via e-mail, answered numerous questions for me. The research quickly became almost as much fun as writing the book.

Warmest regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Beverly Barton". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid, with a large, stylized 'B' at the beginning.

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Prologue

The crisp autumn breeze swirled around Callie Severin as she stood outside the Princess Inn, located in the heart of London's elegant Belgravia. An October rain earlier in the day had lowered the temperature, so that it was rather chilly. Shivering slightly, she wished she'd taken a heavy coat to the office with her today. Hindsight was twenty-twenty, she reminded herself. One of her American father's favorite sayings. And that old saying definitely applied to her love life as well as to her coat!

After Laurence had so cruelly broken their engagement and ripped out her heart only a few hours ago, Callie had resigned her position as a Personal Assistant at McNeill, Inc., where Laurence had been her superior. He'd assured her that her resignation was unnecessary and she had assured him that it most certainly was. And she'd told him that she had no intention of working out a notice. He was a heartless, uncaring cad and she was well rid of him! She had repeated those words to herself so often they were now a litany.

After clearing out her desk and saying a somber goodbye to her associates, Callie had taken the tube home and then rushed down the street to her flat, hoping that Enid would be there. She'd needed a friend. A shoulder to cry on. And who better than Enid, her dearest friend and cousin, with whom she shared the flat in Kensington. But Enid hadn't been there. So Callie had waited and waited, crying for a while and fantasizing about smashing her fist into Laurence's aquiline nose.

After pulling herself together as best as she could, Callie had searched for Enid in all the places she usually frequented, but hadn't found her. Enid delighted in being an artist's model and lived a rather free and easy life, thanks to an inheritance from her paternal grandmother. Men were a disposable commodity to Enid, and she changed lovers frequently. Despite the fact that she and Enid were cousins, their mothers having been sisters, they were as different as day and night. Callie had remained a virgin until she'd become engaged to Laurence.

God! She had to stop thinking about him! Heartless cad. Better off without him.

Callie decided that the Princess Inn would be her last stop. If Enid and her new boyfriend, Niles, weren't there, she wouldn't continue searching. She'd go home, have herself another good cry and wait until morning to tell Enid that not only had she lost her fiancé because he was in love with another woman, she would have to temporarily rely on Enid's generosity until she found a new position.

The pub featured a perfect Georgian era facade with Victorian decor. Elegant and probably very expensive, Callie thought, as she scanned the bar area. If Enid were here, her new boyfriend must have plenty of money. Either that or Enid was picking up the tab. Callie searched the place thoroughly, garnering several odds stares and a couple of propositions. But she didn't catch a glimpse of Enid anywhere. Enough of this! Time to go home, she told herself. She would simply have to live through this night alone, no matter how much she needed sympathy and comfort.

Just as Callie turned to leave, she noticed a man sitting alone in a back booth. She wasn't quite sure why her gaze fixed on him—and lingered—or why she couldn't make herself stop staring at him. Oh, he was quite good-looking. Actually more than good-looking. He was devastatingly handsome. In a terribly masculine way. Not young. Not a boy. Probably late thirties. A good ten or fifteen years older than she.

He glanced at Callie and for a split second she stopped breathing. His eyes focused directly on her, freezing her in place. Some inner instinct warned her to run. Now! But his gaze held her hypnotized.

The man's face possessed a world-weary expression and his beautiful blue eyes spoke silently of some deep sadness within him. She had never seen eyes such a brilliant blue or a man's lashes so long and thick. He'd been blessed with black Irish looks—black hair, blue eyes and a fair, ruddy complexion. He was, without a doubt, the best-looking man she'd ever seen.

A heavy stubble darkened his cheeks and chin, as if he hadn't shaved in a couple of days. From the tousled appearance of his stylishly cut hair, she assumed he'd been raking his fingers through it. And his rather expensive-looking navy blue suit was slightly rumpled. She couldn't help wondering if perhaps he'd slept in it last night.

Without taking his eyes off her, he lifted his glass, saluted her with it and downed the last drops of what she thought was probably Scotch whiskey. His lips lifted ever so lightly in an almost smile that never reached his eyes. As if it were a palpable thing, the stranger's misery reached out to her, drawing her to him.

Callie took a hesitant step in the man's direction, her gaze still riveted to his. Somehow she knew he was as unhappy and as alone as she. Could he sense her pain, the way she had sensed his?

He tilted his head, motioning to her, and the almost smile grew wider but remained only a parody of a real smile. As if of their own volition, her legs moved, taking her closer and closer to the stranger. When she stopped at the edge of the booth, the man stood. Unsteady on his feet, he chuckled and grabbed the edge of the table.

With a magnanimous sweep of his hand, he bowed to Callie. "Won't you join me, lovely lady?"

She hesitated only a second before she nodded and slid into the booth. With staggering unease, he slumped onto the seat. "May I get you something to drink?" he asked, but didn't wait for her reply before he tried again to stand. A bit wobbly, he braced his hand on the tabletop.

"Thank you," Callie said. That would be nice, Mr., er, Mr....?

"Lonigan. Burke Lonigan."

His devastating smile did evil things to her stomach, making it tighten and then turn somersaults. Oh, dear me, she thought. Mr. Burke Lonigan was undeniably lethal.

"I'll get myself another," he said, his speech slightly slurred. "And you will have a—"

"Chardonnay," she said, her voice creaky. She cleared her throat, feeling uneasy and uncertain. And breathlessly attracted to a perfect stranger.

Mr. Lonigan made his way across the crowded room to the bar area, leaving her with her confused thoughts. What was she doing? Had she lost her mind? She'd never been the type to pick up men in pubs. Not until now, a pesky inner voice chided.

He returned from the bar, their drinks in hand, set hers before her and slid into the booth.

"What's a pretty lady like you doing all alone?" he asked.

"I was looking for someone."

"A man?"

"No, actually, I was looking for a friend—a girlfriend."

"Girlfriend, huh? Looking for her to chat her up, I suppose."

"Yes, something like that."

"Good friend, is she?" he asked. "Someone you can trust with your problems?"

"Yes."

"I don't have a friend like that," he said, his eyes piercing her with their intense stare. "Would you like to be my friend? Just for tonight?"

A hint of tears glistened in his eyes. Unshed tears. Agonized tears. She saw the pain and understood—this man was hurting in the worst way. Hurting as she was hurting. Had someone broken his heart? she wondered.

Without thinking about what she was doing, Callie reached over and placed her hand atop his and squeezed gently. "Yes, I'll be your friend, just for tonight, if you'll be my friend."

It was apparent she wasn't going to find Enid tonight, and she desperately needed someone with whom she could share her misery. Why not this handsome man, this stranger she would never see again? She'd often heard that it was easier to talk to a stranger. Perhaps it was.

Suddenly Callie felt him tense as he looked at the whiskey. His hand beneath hers balled into a fist. As he removed his hand from hers, she noted a slight tremble.

“Do you really need more to drink?” she asked.

“If I’m going to drown my sorrows, I do,” he told her.

“Can a person really drown their sorrows? If they can, then I’d be willing to give it a try.”

“What sorrows could a pretty young thing like you have?” He lifted the whiskey to his mouth and downed half of it in one swallow. The shiver that went through his body was barely discernible.

“The sorrow of having been betrayed by my fiancé,” she explained, not really understanding why she was pouring out her heart to this man. “He dumped me this afternoon. Seems he’s been having an affair for the past two months with someone he loves madly.”

“Obviously, the man’s a fool.”

“Actually, I’m the fool.” Callie lifted the flute of Chardonnay to her lips. The taste was pleasing on her tongue. She sipped the sharp, dry white wine and decided it was the best she’d ever drunk.

Mr. Lonigan downed the rest of his whiskey. His already flushed cheeks darkened. “Why are you the fool?”

“Because I should have known something was wrong. He’s been acting odd for quite some time now and I chose to accept his rather weak excuses.”

“You were very much in love, I assume. Young girls like you always are, aren’t they?”

“I thought I was. You know how it is. He was charming and attentive and he was the first man I’d...” Callie realized she was about to tell this stranger that Laurence had been her first lover. “Well, I’d never been in love before.”

Mr. Lonigan’s mesmerizing blue eyes opened wide in an expression that told Callie he had understood only too well the meaning of “he was the first man.”

“Love, my girl, is a wasted emotion. Smart people don’t need love. They don’t give it and they don’t expect to receive it. Not from anyone. Not from friends or lovers or—” he paused, sighing loudly “—and not even from parents.”

Callie stared at Mr. Lonigan. He looked directly at her, but she knew he was looking through her. It was so obvious that his mind had drifted away to another time and another place. From the expression on his handsome face, she surmised that his memories were painful.

“Mr. Lonigan?”

“Call me Burke.” He chuckled. “What shall I call you?” When she opened her mouth to tell him her name, he shushed her. “No, no, don’t tell me. I’ll just forget it anyway. I could call you love, I suppose. But that doesn’t suit, does it? Why don’t I call you my darling? Something just as easy to remember.” He inspected her thoroughly. “Besides, you look like a darling to me. So tell me, my darling, what did you do when your fiancé dumped you? Did you scream and cry and call him names?”

“I slapped his silly face and then I resigned my position in the firm where we both worked.”

“Ah, so you’re without a man and without a job.”

“It appears so.”

“Mm... If you’re as smart as you are pretty, you won’t be without either for long.”

Burke excused himself for a trip to the bar, but when he asked if she’d like another, she declined. She watched him staggering as he disappeared into the crowded bar area. He returned within minutes, smiling, another whiskey in his hand.

The moment he sat down, he reached for the Scotch. Callie grasped his hand before he could pick up the glass. “I’ve told you my sad story,” she said. “Why don’t you tell me yours?”

“My sad story?” He lifted his eyebrows as if surprised by her request. “What makes you think I have a sad story to tell?”

She tightened her hold on his big hand. “Because you’re drinking to drown your sorrows and —” she hesitated momentarily “—you look like an unmade bed.”

He tossed back his head and laughed. Genuine, gut-deep laughter.

When he looked at her again, a rather cocky, crooked smile remained in place. “I like honesty in a woman. Unusual quality in most. So, I look like an unmade bed, do I?”

“Yes, you do. And the moment I saw you, I noticed the sadness in your eyes.”

His smile vanished. He knocked her hand aside and lifted the whiskey. This time he downed the entire drink in one long swallow. Afterward he coughed several times.

“Observant little thing, aren’t you?”

“Please, don’t drink any more. You’ve had more than enough.”

He deliberately pinched his cheek. “I’m afraid I can still feel, so that means I haven’t had enough.”

“Want to tell me what’s wrong?”

“Why is it that women always want to poke and probe into a man’s business? If you really want to help me, then why don’t you come closer and I’ll tell you what will really make me feel better.”

She noted that he’d begun to slur his words more and more. Another drink and he might not be able to walk. So, why do you care? an inner voice asked. This man doesn’t mean anything to you. He’s a stranger. But he is a stranger in pain. He needs someone tonight. Someone to ease his pain. And you need someone, too, that inner voice reminded her. Someone to ease your pain.

Callie slid closer to him so that they were shoulder to shoulder. Then she draped her arm around his waist and cuddled to his side. “Don’t drink any more and we’ll discuss what we can do for each other...how I can ease your pain and you can ease mine.”

She had no intention of giving this man anything more than sympathy and caring. The two things they both needed. But first she had to find a way to stop him from drinking, didn’t she?

He grinned at her. The bottom dropped out of her stomach. She’d never had such a strong physical reaction to a man—not even Laurence, and they had been lovers. It was as if she and this stranger, this Mr. Lonigan, were somehow connected. She couldn’t explain the odd attraction she felt for him. Did he feel it, too? she wondered. She thought that perhaps he did. Right now he was looking at her as if he could see straight through her clothes. His intense scrutiny made her feel completely naked.

“Would you come home with me, my darling?” he asked, his voice a deep, sensuous invitation.

“I’ll make sure you get home safely.” She made a counteroffer.

“Will you now?”

Callie’s heartbeat quickened when he stared at her, his eyes twinkling with devilment. “I’m not really into casual sex,” she admitted. “I’ve just lived through one of the worst days of my life and obviously you have, too, so perhaps—”

“No sex, huh?”

“I’ll get us a taxi,” Callie said. “And I’ll see you home.”

Burke glowered at her. “Take-charge kind of girl, are you? Well, I don’t need anyone to take charge of me, thank you kindly.” With that said, he tried to stand. After swaying right and left, he quickly sat. “I seem to be quite blotto.”

Callie couldn’t suppress the giggle that escaped from her throat.

“You won’t get an argument from me. You, Mr. Lonigan, are most definitely blotto.”

Within ten minutes Callie, aided by a pub employee, eased Burke Lonigan into a black cab, then slid in beside him. While she rummaged in her purse for money to tip the young man who had helped her, Burke handed the man an overly generous twenty quid.

“Where to, governor?” the driver asked.

When Burke gave the driver his address, Callie gasped. His home was in Belgravia? Only the extremely wealthy lived here. Multimillionaires. Was her Mr. Lonigan that rich? she wondered. Not your Mr. Lonigan, an inner voice scolded.

Burke slipped his arm around Callie’s shoulders and pulled her against him. His whiskey breath was warm and soft against the side of her face. A tingling shudder rippled up her spine, and her stomach fluttered with sexual awareness.

Burke nuzzled her ear and laughed when she trembled. “You’re as jumpy as a virgin, my darling.”

“I’m not a—”

“Of course you’re not. You had a fiancé, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Engaged long?” Burke asked.

“Nearly a year,” she said. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you married or engaged or anything?”

“Never married. Never engaged. But a great deal of anything.”

His teasing manner helped her relax just a bit. “Have you ever been in love?”

“Depends on your definition of love.”

“I suppose what I’m trying to ask is why you’re so sad tonight. I thought perhaps you had a broken heart, too.” She cuddled against Burke Lonigan’s large, strong body. Oddly enough, being encompassed in this stranger’s arms made her feel safe and comforted.

“Ah, I see.” He released her, scooted her toward the opposite side of the taxi and then laid his head on her lap as he stretched his long legs across the seat. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“No.” And she really didn’t. Unable to stop herself, she threaded her fingers through his wavy black hair, which felt incredibly soft and silky to the touch.

Burke lifted his right arm. Reaching up, he caressed the back of her neck with his fingertips. He lowered his left hand to begin a similar maneuver with her knees.

She could stop him. She should stop him! But she didn’t. His touch somehow soothed her as, at the same time, it excited her. An odd combination, but she knew no other way to describe the sensations fluttering inside her body.

“My father died.” Burke’s voice was low and quiet, as if he were talking to himself.

“Oh, I’m so very sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. The old bastard lived to be nearly eighty!”

Callie didn’t understand the bitterness in Burke’s voice or the sudden tenseness in his body. Why would anyone refer to their father as an old bastard? Although she and her father didn’t always agree on everything, they got along rather well. Arthur Severin had been a strict but loving parent who had done his best to bring up his only child after his wife’s untimely death when Callie was twelve.

Burke chuckled. “Actually, I’m the bastard. My parents were never married. He was an older married man and she a young Irish maid. My mother married a Yank soldier when I was ten and we moved to America. I only became acquainted with my real father when I returned to England as a grown man.”

“Did the two of you never reconcile?” Callie asked.

“In a way, I suppose we did.” Burke halted his caress of Callie’s knees, allowing his hand to cup her kneecap. He lowered the hand at her neck until it rested at his side. “I’m afraid Seamus Malcolm didn’t have room in his life for an illegitimate son, so in all the years I knew him, he never actually acknowledged me. Just kept me on the fringes of his life. Tossed me a crumb from time to time.”

“He sounds like a beastly man.” Callie’s heart ached for Burke Lonigan, for the little boy inside him who still longed for a father’s love and attention.

“Not really. He was just a man of his time.” Burke harrumphed. “Old Seamus died last week. I was out of the country. On business. His family—his legitimate children—didn’t even bother to try to contact me. I wasn’t here for my own father’s funeral. I returned to London this morning and when I telephoned him, as I often did after I’d been out of the country, I was told that he had died.”

Burke lifted his head from her lap, then slowly pulled himself into a sitting position. “When I stopped by the house this afternoon to pay my condolences, I was told I wasn’t welcome.”

“Oh, how dreadful for you.” Callie wrapped her arms around him and hugged him to her.

Engulfing her in his embrace, Burke melted against her. “The maid who turned me away followed me out into the street and told me that Mr. Seamus had asked for me on his deathbed and they had told him I wouldn’t come.”

“Oh, God!” Callie held Burke, offering him sympathy and comfort and tender care.

He buried his face against her neck. She caressed the back of his head, then turned and kissed him sweetly on his temple. He lifted his face to her, and his breathtaking blue eyes glistened with moisture.

“It’s all right,” she said. “It really is quite all right to cry for your father.”

“I don’t cry,” he told her, the tone of his voice hard, even if his words were slightly slurred. “I’ve cried only once since I was a lad of six, when someone called me an ugly name and I knew what it meant. The other time—the last time—was when my dog Skippy died. I was eleven and knew better than to act like a crybaby.”

She couldn’t bear it, Callie thought. This beautiful, brokenhearted man, who so desperately needed the relief of tears, refused to give in to his emotions. Horrid masculine trait! She wanted nothing more at that moment than to ease his suffering, to erase the pain she saw in his eyes and somehow give him the emotional release he needed.

As if he could read her mind, Burke studied her intently and then without a word he covered her mouth with his. The kiss was wildly passionate, and yet an odd blend of tenderness and savagery. He devoured. Taking, demanding, needing. At first, she simply allowed his plundering, but within moments she responded. Hesitantly she opened her mouth, inviting his invasion. But the second he cupped the back of her head, pressing her deeper into the kiss, she ignited, like dry timber to a lit match. Rational thought ceased. Sensation ruled her completely.

All her bruised and battered emotions clashed with sexual heat and the two melded into raw, primitive need.

“Here we are, governor,” the driver said, then hopped out of the cab and opened the door.

Burke ended the kiss, slowly. As if he had all the time in the world. As if some heavysset, gray-haired cabdriver wasn’t watching them. As if passersby couldn’t see them.

Still lost in a sensual fog, Callie’s mind swirled. She eased out of Burke’s arms, her body decidedly weak.

“Want me to help you with him, miss?” the driver asked.

“Sir, are you implying that I can’t walk without assistance?” Burke demanded, but his tone implied a teasing attitude.

As if to make a point, Burke climbed out of the taxi and stood on his own two feet. Callie slid out directly behind him, then searched in her purse for money to pay the driver.

Burke grabbed her hand. “I’ll take care of this.” He removed his wallet, pulled out several large bills—twice the cost of the taxi ride—and handed the generous sum to the driver.

“Thank you, sir. Thank you, indeed.” The middle-aged man smiled broadly. “I’ll be glad to help you inside, governor. No extra charge.” When he chuckled, his potbelly jiggled like jelly.

“My darling, do you need any assistance putting me to bed?” Burke draped his arm around Callie’s shoulders.

Under the streetlights, Burke’s hair shone a rich blue black and his eyes glimmered with temptation and promise.

“Thank you,” she said to the driver, “but I think I can handle things.”

Callie tried not to let Burke’s beautiful period house in prestigious Belgravia intimidate her, but she couldn’t help it. The house must have cost him no less than two million pounds! She was far from poor and had been raised quite comfortably by an American diplomat father and a disowned-by-her-family English aristocrat mother. She had friends from every walk of life, including her independently wealthy cousin Enid. But the kind of money it took to live in Belgravia was the kind possessed by

oil sheiks and business tycoons. Just who was Burke Lonigan? she wondered. And what am I doing with him?

When Callie remained unmoving on the pavement in front of his home, Burke nudged her into action. “You haven’t changed your mind, have you?”

Although his steps were unsteady because of the large amount of liquor he had consumed, Callie’s movements were shaky for a different reason. Suddenly, she felt very uncertain about going inside this mansion with a man she really didn’t know.

When they reached the front door, Burke dove his hand into his pocket and brought out a key, but before inserting it into the lock, he turned and wrapped his arms around Callie. She felt small and vulnerable. With her flats not adding any height to her five-foot-three-inch frame, Burke towered over her a good nine inches.

He pressed his face against her neck, then nuzzled softly and whispered into her ear. “You need me tonight, my darling, just as much as I need you.”

He kissed her. A preview of things to come. A hint of the passion they had shared in the taxi sparked, and she knew it wouldn’t take much to set them aflame.

When he unlocked and opened the massive front doors, she went with him into the dark belly of his home. He didn’t give her time to assess the situation or to get her bearings before he led her deeper into the cavern of the large foyer. The downstairs area was pitch black, but at the top of the impressive staircase a dim light shone from an open doorway.

On their ascent up the marble staircase, Burke continued kissing her, his lips brushing her cheek, her temple and her jaw. All the while he kept his left arm securely wrapped around her shoulders, he maneuvered his right hand alongside her waist and up to gently cradle the underside of her breast. She sucked in a deep breath when his fingertips brushed her nipple.

The light in the hallway came from a bedroom. Burke’s bedroom, she surmised. While her mind instructed her to look at the room, to appreciate the decor and take time out to catch her breath, her senses felt no compulsion to do more than enjoy the ardent attention of the man who kissed and caressed her.

You need this, an inner voice prompted. You need to be loved tonight. Mindlessly, passionately loved. No commitment. No concerns beyond this one night. Don’t think. Feel. Feel what it’s like to be with a man like Burke Lonigan.

Burke shed his coat and let it fall haphazardly to the floor. Then he loosened the buttons on his shirt and tossed the fine linen garment aside. With trembling fingers, he caught the hem of Callie’s cashmere jumper and lifted it up and off, then added it to the pile of clothing accumulating on the floor. Before she could catch her breath, he tumbled them onto the massive mahogany bed. His laughter rumbled from his chest as he rolled Callie on top of his long, hard body. She gazed at him, into his sexy blue eyes, and felt her bones beginning to liquefy. Her feminine core clenched and unclenched. Her nipples peaked.

She didn’t think she’d ever wanted anything so much in her entire life. Sanity warned her that she was making a mistake. But lust promised her ecstasy beyond her wildest dreams.

She straddled him, the action hiking her skirt to mid-thigh. At the apex between her spread legs, she felt the large, throbbing bulge of Burke’s arousal. Every nerve in her body quivered.

He ran one hand underneath her skirt to cup her hip. “You’re wearing tights,” he complained. “Take them off.”

She kicked off her shoes, then lifted her legs and hastily removed her skirt and her tights, leaving her in only a pair of coral silk panties and matching bra.

“That’s better,” he said, as he tried to unbuckle his belt. When his fumbling attempt failed, he cursed under his breath.

“Here, let me.”

Callie had never undressed a man, not even Laurence, who had preferred to remove his own clothes and be waiting in bed for her. She went at removing Burke's clothes like a madwoman intent upon stripping him bare at record speed. Within two minutes, his shoes, socks, belt, trousers and underpants lay askew across the foot of the bed.

"Eager little thing, aren't you?" Burke teased her.

"Very eager," she admitted.

"Been awhile, has it, since a man pleased you?"

She covered his body with hers and quickly spread hot, damp kisses over his broad, muscular chest. A soft sprinkling of black hair ran from one tiny male nipple to the other. When she licked each nipple in turn, Burke groaned deeply.

"I've never been with a real man," Callie said. "Only with one very self-centered boy who didn't know the first thing about pleasuring me."

Her confession poured gasoline on an already blazing fire. Burke captured her mouth, thrust his tongue into her waiting warmth and began a sensual assault that soon had her breathless and desperate for satisfaction. His mouth tasted of the Scotch he'd drunk earlier and his skin still retained the faded scent of some expensive men's cologne.

She felt his mouth on her breast and vaguely wondered when he had removed her bra. Did it matter? an inner voice asked. No. No! Nothing mattered except that he continue touching her.

His hand crept up inside her scanty bloomers, cupping and caressing her bare buttocks. She writhed against him, loving the feel of his body so intimately entwined with hers. They turned and tossed on the bed, exchanging the dominant position again and again as they caressed, licked, kissed and nibbled each other's bodies. Sometime during their sexual tumble, Burke removed the last barrier between them—her silk bikini panties.

The moment Burke's lips touched her intimately between her thighs, Callie realized she was completely naked. She had no time to protest, no time to think about what he was doing to her. The masterful strokes of his talented tongue treated her to a lush, hot treat that left her panting when release shot through her body like fireworks in the nighttime sky. As the aftershocks of her climax rippled through her, Burke mounted her and lifted her hips. She stared into his face and saw the savage arousal of a primitive man. She cried out when he entered her with a forceful lunge. She clung to him, loving the fullness he created inside her as he filled her completely.

She met him thrust for thrust as the pressure increased. Throbbing, blinding, all-consuming hunger like none she'd ever known. She tensed, her body rioting with sensation, and like a thunderbolt, Callie experienced the most incredible pleasure of her entire life.

As her nails raked his back, her moans of completion sent him over the edge. Burke hammered into her, intensifying her fulfillment. And then he groaned like a wild animal—a roar of masculine triumph—as he shuddered violently inside her damp, receptive body.

He eased to her side but kept his arm possessively draped around her. Callie felt weightless and sated beyond belief. Drained. Sleepy. Deliriously content. Without another thought, she curled up against Burke and fell asleep.

In the wee hours of the morning, with dawn at least an hour away, Callie gathered her clothes and crept into the loo adjoining Burke's bedroom. She washed quickly, refusing to turn on a light or to glance at herself in the mirror. Once she had put on her clothes, she tiptoed across the room, but stopped briefly at the foot of the bed to take one last look at Burke Lonigan.

She couldn't believe that she'd had sex with a man she barely knew. Twice! Unprotected sex, she reminded herself, and groaned silently. Maybe he was the most gorgeous man alive. Maybe they had truly needed each other. And maybe the sex had been the absolutely greatest she'd ever experienced. Scratch that. No maybe about it. It had been the greatest sex!

But Burke had been plastered and couldn't be held totally responsible for his actions, where she on the other hand had been perfectly sober and could be held responsible.

She left the bedroom, made her way down the marble staircase and rushed hurriedly through the huge foyer and out the front door. She glanced at the house and said goodbye to her lover. She'd never see Burke Lonigan again. In a few weeks, he would be nothing more than a sweet memory.

Chapter 1

Callie dashed out of the elevator, thankful she'd had several minutes in the lift to catch her breath. The morning had been unusually hectic. Enid had stayed over at a friend's last night and hadn't come home by the time the minder had arrived. Thankfully Seamus adored the plump, motherly Mrs. Goodhope, who had raised four children of her own and had ten grandchildren.

Seamus had been fussy during the night, which was so unlike him. He'd woken Callie before dawn. She'd taken his temperature, which was normal, and had tried everything to soothe his whining. And when he'd said mama, and looked pleadingly at her with those big blue eyes of his, she'd almost stayed at home. But she couldn't allow a fourteen-month-old child to dictate her actions. Especially not when she and that spoiled little boy depended upon her job for their livelihood.

Callie's quick steps clicked her sensible two-inch heels along the corridor in the office suite of Lonigan's Imports and Exports, which comprised the entire twentieth floor of an impressive skyscraper in the heart of the Square Mile. The relatively new building, constructed in the mid eighties, blended into the landscape in and around the Barbican Center and the nearby Tower Bridge over the Pool of London. As she hurried toward her office, she nodded and spoke to various employees. She'd been employed here only two and a half months, but she already knew everyone by first and last names and could recite each person's individual title and duties. Of course, acquiring that knowledge had been part of her job as Burke Lonigan's personal assistant.

"Good morning, Ms. Severin," her secretary, Juliette Davenport, said in greeting. "Would you care for some tea and scones?"

"Yes, please, thank you. I didn't have time for breakfast." Callie pushed open the door to her office, then paused and asked, "By the way, has Mr. Lonigan arrived?"

"No, but he did telephone and leave you a message. He said to proceed with the McMaster's shipment and that he'd be in by noon."

"Oh. Yes, I'll take care of it."

She couldn't help wondering if Burke had spent the night with a friend last night, as Enid had, and that was the reason he would be late coming into the office this morning.

Callie dropped her briefcase on top of her desk, plopped down in her leather swivel chair and punched several keys on her computer to bring up the McMaster's file. The facts and figures blurred before her eyes as her mind filled with thoughts of Burke and another woman. Some tall, leggy brunette or some luscious blonde.

She had found out a great deal about Burke Lonigan in the past few months, and one of the few things she didn't like about him was his penchant for womanizing. As part of the London social set, he was seen frequently in public, each time with a different attractive lady on his arm. She didn't blame the ladies. After all, Burke was a very handsome, quite charming and excessively wealthy man, not to mention a fantastic lover.

Just the thought of the night she'd spent with him suffused Callie's body with heat and flushed her cheeks. That night almost two years ago had changed her life forever. For Burke Lonigan had given her more than a sweet memory. He had given her a child.

When she had told Enid she was pregnant, her cousin had assumed the baby belonged to Laurence, but Callie had quickly corrected that misconception. Enid had been the one who'd found out who Burke Lonigan was and how he could be contacted, but Callie had refused to go to the man and tell him he was going to become a father. She didn't blame Burke for what had happened that night. She blamed only herself. She'd been sober and in her right mind. He hadn't. Truth be told, she had felt certain that Burke wouldn't even remember her. And she had been right, of course, much to her own dismay.

After endless needling by Enid, Callie had gone to Burke's house a few months after Seamus was born. While she'd been hesitating on the pavement, trying to garner enough courage to ring the bell, a chauffeured Rolls had pulled up and Burke had emerged. He'd looked right at her, smiled, nodded and walked past her—without recognizing her. After that, she hadn't attempted to approach him again. Not until a few months ago, when she had applied for the job as Burke's PA. Even after working with her for over two months, the man still didn't have a clue that they had shared a night of passion.

Although she'd put on a few pounds, had cut her waist-length hair to shoulder length and wore the curly mass in a neat bun while at work, she really hadn't changed all that much, had she? An eye infection had temporarily ended her use of contact lenses about six months ago, but a pair of small, gold-rimmed specs couldn't possibly make her look that different. After all, she wore them only for reading and working at the computer.

Callie had come to the conclusion that Burke simply didn't remember that night. For whatever reason, he had blocked the memory from his mind. Perhaps because he'd been plastered after downing so much Scotch and had acted rather emotional for a man who, she had learned, was never emotional. Perhaps he associated that night with the agony he'd suffered not only from losing his father, but from having been denied the right to say a proper goodbye. Whatever the reason, he seemed to have no recollection of her whatsoever.

She had learned that Burke was a tough, shrewd, in-control businessman who managed an import-export business that was worth over five hundred million pounds. Although, as Burke's PA, she was privy to Lonigan's records, she suspected that all of his assets hadn't been acquired through legitimate means. Rumors abounded about Burke being an illegal arms dealer. She tried to tell herself that the rumors weren't true, but her intuition told her that they were.

"Here's your tea and scones." Juliette set the pastry, cup and saucer on the desk. "Are you all right? You look knackered."

Despite the fact that she had lived in London for several years and her mother had been a U.K. citizen, some British words still seemed strange to Callie, whereas she had adapted others into her everyday speech. Although having grown up all over Europe as the daughter of a diplomat, from the age of twelve her education had been acquired in the States, so she often found her vocabulary to be a mixture of American and British English. Oddly enough, the same held true for Burke. He had been born in London and had lived here for the past fifteen years, but he had been brought up and educated in the States, as she had.

"I'm fine," Callie said. "Please, don't worry about me."

Callie smiled pleasantly at the freckled-faced young woman, who was a whiz at her secretarial duties. A talkative, carrot-topped redhead, Juliette often chatted endlessly. Deliberately, Callie didn't instigate further conversation this morning, as she often did. She was too out of sorts after her early morning with Seamus and was worrying about where Burke might have spent his night.

She hadn't come to work for Burke to renew their romance, an inner voice reminded her. Ha! Referring to their former relationship as a romance was indeed a laugh. There had never been a romance. Only one sexual encounter. A night Burke couldn't even remember! She hadn't sought the job as Burke's PA because she harbored any silly romantic notions about the man. Instead, she'd taken the job in order to get to know the father of her child, so that she could make a well-thought-out, rational decision about whether or not she should tell Burke about his son. Someday Seamus was bound to ask about the man who had fathered him.

Although she found herself liking Burke more and more with each passing day, she also could not ignore the rumors about the mysteries surrounding his wealth and fabulous lifestyle. If her child's father really was an illegal arms dealer and his import-export business was a convenient—albeit highly profitable—front, she could never risk letting Burke know he was Seamus's father.

Perhaps taking this job had been a mistake, but she had thought it the best possible way to get to know Burke. And she'd been right.

In ten weeks, she had been at his side five days a week as well as several nights and even an occasional Saturday. Although their relationship remained a professional one, she knew that he was aware of her as a woman. This past week, when she had worked a couple of hours overtime, Burke had ordered dinner delivered to his office and they had enjoyed a lively chat and a delicious meal. But when he'd helped her on with her coat, just as she was leaving, an electrifying current passed between them. Burke had almost kissed her. He would have kissed her if she hadn't turned her head and stepped out of his reach. She had wanted that kiss—wanted it very much. But she didn't dare allow herself to become involved with Burke. She had to know everything there was to know about him before she risked bringing him into her private life and introducing him to her son.

His son, too, an aggravating inner voice reminded her.

Callie sipped her tea and returned her attention to the McMaster's file. Time passed quickly when she focused on business and forgot about personal matters.

With her teacup empty, scones polished off and three hours of solid work behind her, Callie leaned back in her chair and stretched. Barely stifling a yawn, she covered her mouth with her hand and closed her eyes. She found that five-minute rest breaks often refreshed her.

A knock sounded at her closed office door. Juliette opened the door just a crack and peeped at Callie. "Mr. Lonigan is in his office now, Callie. He looks knackered, as if he's been up all night."

So, Burke looked exhausted, did he? Worn out by another paramour, no doubt!

"He wants to see you immediately," Juliette said. "His exact words were, 'Tell her to come in here and be quick about it.' He asked me to order lunch and have it delivered. Seems you're in for a long afternoon."

"Tell Mr. Lonigan that I'll be in shortly."

As soon as Juliette closed the door, Callie lifted the telephone receiver and rang Seamus's minder. Before Burke demanded her undivided attention, she thought it best to make sure her son was all right.

Mrs. Goodhope answered quickly, her voice ever so pleasant. Callie asked about Seamus and was told that the lad was asleep.

"I might have to work late this evening, but if I do, I'll ask Enid to look after Seamus," Callie said.

"Enid isn't here," Mrs. Goodhope said. "But don't you worry none, dearie. I can stay over a couple of hours. Our Seamus is a good little nipper. And he's talked my ears off this morning."

"Has he?"

"Oh, yes. Can't understand anything he says, except wa-wa for water, bla for banana and of course, mama and dada."

"He's been saying dada?" Callie's heart sank. Seamus had been saying dada for quite some time now and he was smart enough, even at fourteen months, to associate the word with all males. He often heard other children in the park calling their fathers daddy. And on the children's programs she allowed him to watch, the little ones always had mamas and daddies. How long would it be before Seamus wanted to know where his dada was? A year? Two years?

"Give Seamus a kiss from his mother and tell him I'll be home to read him a bedtime story and tuck him in tonight."

One of the stipulations she'd made perfectly clear concerning her position as Burke's PA was that unless she had to travel with him, she would be home each night in time to put her son to bed. Burke had agreed, had even commended her on being a good parent, but he'd never questioned her about her child or the fact that she was an unmarried woman. She hadn't lied on her job application. She would never lie about Seamus.

And what will you do if Burke ever asks you about your son's father? her inner voice taunted.

If and when that time came, she would know what to do, what to say. Wouldn't she?

Burke drank coffee from a Royal Doulton cup. He had picked up the habit of drinking coffee from his military stepfather, Gene Harmon, who had been a colonel in the United States Army. Gene had introduced him to some high-ranking government officials when, as a young college freshman, Burke had shown an interest in the FBI and the CIA. Little had Gene known that those entrees would bring Burke to the attention of an organization that would mold and shape him into the man he was today. As an operative for the top-secret SPEAR agency, his life was only partially his own. Lonigan's Imports and Exports had been funded by SPEAR, and even though Burke's expertise helped maintain the company's extraordinary success, his job required far more from him than simply acting the part of a rich London businessman.

When SPEAR had sent him to London fifteen years ago, he'd understood why, of all the top young agents, he had been the one chosen for this position. He was, after all, London born, with a father who still resided there. No one would question why he'd returned to the U.K. to live.

SPEAR's head honcho, a man known only as Jonah, had telephoned Burke late last night, both using cellular phones that possessed special scrambling security frequencies. Burke had been up until dawn putting into action a preliminary plan for his latest assignment. Making use of all his contacts, he had sent out word that a certain arms shipment, very much wanted by a man named Simon, had by circuitous route made its way into Burke Lonigan's control. Being known the world over by certain people as an illegal arms dealer placed Burke in the perfect position to carry out his latest job for the agency.

Now, all he had to do was wait. Wait for the notorious Simon to make the next move. Every top SPEAR agent had been called into the war against this man—a traitor determined to bring down the entire agency. Burke and his comrades were united in an effort to eliminate the lethal threat Simon posed to the agency. But until it was time for Burke's next move in this strategic game with the enemy, it would be business as usual for Lonigan's Imports and Exports.

A soft knock sounded on the outer door. Burke lifted his head just in time to lock gazes with his personal assistant. The lovely, elusive and very-disturbing-to-a-man's-libido Callie Severin breezed into his office, a tentative smile on her face.

"Good morning, Mr. Lonigan. Or should I say good afternoon?" Callie sat in the chair across from Burke's desk, crossed her ankles and folded her hands in her lap.

Had he heard just a hint of censure in her voice? Burke wondered. What had her in a snit? "It is noon, isn't it?" He chuckled pleasantly. "Are you upset with me for some reason?"

"No, of course not. Why should I be? What you do in your personal life is none of my concern."

"My personal life?" He grinned broadly. "Ah, I see. You assume my tardiness is due to my having spent the night in some fair damsel's boudoir, making mad passionate love until dawn."

He liked the way Callie blushed. Few women blushed these days. But then she had the complexion for it. Pale and creamy, without a hint of a freckle despite her dark auburn hair and smoky gray eyes.

"As I said, it's none of my—"

"None of your concern." He finished her sentence.

She nodded.

"I've ordered in a meal for us," he told her. "I'm afraid I must impose on you to help me get an important dinner party planned and then I must ask an enormous favor of you."

"Doing my job is not imposing on me," she said. "And please, ask your favor."

"I'll need a hostess for this affair. Naturally I'll pay for your dress and provide the right jewelry and—"

"Isn't there someone else more suited than I am to serve as your hostess?" she asked, nervously rubbing her hands together. "I'm sure Lady Ashley or Mrs. Odum-Hyde would—"

“Lady Ashley is in Paris visiting her sister, and Mrs. Odum-Hyde has landed herself a Brussels diamond broker and is now wearing a ring the size of an apple.”

Callie giggled. Burke liked her giggle, too. Girlish, yet throaty and seductive. If he were totally honest with himself, he’d have to admit that he liked everything about Callie. She was more than competent at her job. Actually she was the best PA he’d ever had.

But something about her bothered him. Not that he didn’t trust her. He did. Implicitly. Her background check had given him every reason to think highly of her—as a PA and as a person. A master’s degree from the Owen Graduate School of Management at Vanderbilt University and glowing recommendations from her previous employers had been the reasons he’d hired her. That and the fact he had immediately liked her when he’d interviewed her. She’d been nervous, but charming.

She was a bright, hardworking young lady with an impeccable work record. He knew she was unmarried and yet was the mother of a small child. If he remembered correctly, the child was almost two. Although he had never questioned her about anything remotely personal, he couldn’t help wondering about her child’s father. What sort of man could have walked away from a woman such as Callie and deserted his own child?

Not much of a man, Burke thought.

I’ve never been with a real man, only a self-centered boy. The words echoed inside Burke’s mind, but he had no idea who had said them or when. Had some woman he had bedded spoken those words? If so, why couldn’t he remember the woman or the incident? Could it have been that night two years ago? He vaguely remembered drowning his sorrows at the Princess Inn after he’d been told his father had died and the family had turned him away. And occasionally, through the fog of his subconscious, he could almost make out the face of the woman who had gone home with him that night.

“Is something wrong?” Callie asked.

“What? No, nothing’s wrong. Why do you ask?”

“You had a most peculiar look on your face, as if you were in pain.”

“You can alleviate any pain I might be experiencing if you agree to act as my hostess next week.”

“Of course, I’d be delighted to act as your hostess.”

“Good, then that’s settled.”

When he rose from his desk chair, Callie stood. She was only a wisp of a girl—no, not a girl, he thought. A woman. She was twenty-seven and a mother. Hardly a girl. Size wise, she was just shy of being petite. Short, small-boned, fragile. Round in all the right places, with a slender waist. Not skinny like so many of the young women were today.

His stepfather had often told his mother, “I like a woman with some flesh on her bones.” Mary Kate Lonigan Harmon had been a plump, black-haired beauty, who had passed her striking black Irish looks on to her only son and to her two daughters, Kathleen and Fiona, who had been fathered by Gene Harmon.

And like his stepfather, Burke preferred a woman with some flesh on her bones. Callie fit the description quite nicely. Although he had more sophisticated, more elegant ladies at his disposal, Burke fancied Callie and had since the first day she walked into his office. He couldn’t understand why he was so attracted to her, more so than to any woman he’d ever met.

Knowing better than to mix business with pleasure, he had never become personally involved with any of his employees and usually listened to his common sense. Besides being too old for Callie—a good fifteen years too old—he was a man living a secret life as an agent for SPEAR, which existed in a shadow world of espionage and danger. He had spent most of his adult life in cloak-and-dagger activities, using his cover as an illegal arms dealer to the benefit of whatever the agency required at any given moment.

He couldn’t deny that in many ways he lived the good life. A magnificent home in London. A flat in Paris. A villa in Italy. An apartment in New York. Lonigan’s Imports and Exports afforded

him the lifestyle most men only dreamed of having. Expensive clothes purchased on Savile Row. A chauffeured Rolls and a Porsche. And beautiful ladies vying for his attention.

But something was missing in his life. He felt that deep aloneness more and more with each passing year. Was that the reason he couldn't get Callie Severin out of his mind? Why he found himself fantasizing about her frequently? Did he think one specific woman could fill that void and give meaning to his life on a personal level?

"Mr. Lonigan, you aren't listening to me," Callie said. "Your mind seems to be a million miles away today. Are you sure there isn't something bothering you?"

Dragging his mind away from errant thoughts to concentrate on the present moment, Burke said, "No, no. Nothing's wrong. Just mentally going over the guest list I have in mind. I'll want you to handle the invitations. We'll keep this rather intimate. No more than fifty guests. All business associates."

Smiling warmly, Callie nodded. "Would you like for us to make the list now?" But what she actually wanted to ask was, Which business associates? The import-export business or the illegal arms business?

Really now, Callie, she cautioned herself. You have no proof that Burke is involved in the illegal arms trade. But you also have no proof that he isn't, her nagging inner voice warned. Remember the old American adage, "Where there's smoke, there's fire." Why would so many persistent rumors abound about Burke's notorious secret life if there was no truth to the rumors?

"Why don't you leave the list to me," he said. "You attend to the caterer, the florists, the musicians and the printer and whatever else needs attending to. I'll be sure you have the list ready later today, since this affair is to take place Saturday night."

"Saturday night!" He certainly wasn't allowing them much time to coordinate an elegant party, even one for fifty. "Oh, all right. Now, I'll need a few details, so we should get started on the plans immediately."

"That's one of the things I like about you, Callie. You're highly efficient."

"One of the things you like about me? Are there more?" Any fool could see that she was flirting with her boss. She'd been saying and doing things like that since the first day of her employment. And she couldn't seem to stop herself. As much as she tried to deny her feelings, she was as drawn to Burke now as she'd been that night Seamus had been conceived.

Burke scraped the underside of her chin with his curled index finger, tilting her head upward and aligning her gaze with his. "There are many, many more things I like about you, Callie. Too many to name. Everything from your sweet smile to your sharp mind."

When Burke grinned at her, she went weak in the knees. This must stop, she told herself. She couldn't continue letting his sexy smiles and dreamy gazes make her heart flutter. And she couldn't allow her feelings for this man to get out of control. She had to remember that she couldn't do anything foolish because she had a child to think about. An affair with Burke, no matter how appealing, would affect not only her life, but Seamus's life, too.

She couldn't allow Burke Lonigan to know that he had a son—not until she was certain that he was the type of man she wanted to introduce into Seamus's life as his father.

"Now who's woolgathering, Ms. Severin?"

Callie stepped backward, putting some distance between them. "We really should get to work, Mr. Lonigan."

"Why won't you call me Burke?" he asked, walking toward her. "I've asked you several times to stop calling me Mr. Lonigan."

As he drew near, Callie eased back farther and farther until her hips encountered the paneled wall behind her. When Burke reached her, he spread his big hands, palms open, on either side of her. She sucked in her breath as he lowered his head. His warm breath mingled with hers. His lips hovered ever so close.

“I want to hear you say my name,” he told her.

She had refused to use his given name because when they’d made love that night, she had sighed his name, whispered his name and cried out his name. Referring to him aloud by his name seemed far too intimate. The name on her lips would conjure up anew the heated passion they had shared.

“Come on,” he coaxed, his lips almost touching hers. “Say my name.”

“I—I prefer to call you Mr. Lonigan.” She couldn’t allow him to kiss her. A kiss would take their relationship out of the strictly business area and into something far more personal. She wasn’t ready for that—not yet. Maybe not ever. She laughed nervously. “After all, as my employer, I owe you a certain amount of respect, don’t you think?”

“I respect you, Callie.” His lips brushed hers ever so lightly. “And I’m beginning to think of you as much more than just my assistant.” Although only mere inches separated their bodies and he kept his hands in place on the wall, he lifted his head. “If I’m making unwanted advances, please, tell me now and I’ll back off.”

Tell him! her mind screamed. Tell him that you aren’t interested. “I—I...well, you see...I am interested. Oh, dear. What I mean is that I think you’re terribly attractive and I find you.... But we shouldn’t. We really shouldn’t.”

“Shouldn’t what?” Burke’s heated gaze forced her to confront him directly.

“Shouldn’t become more than employer and employee,” she said.

“Something tells me that we’ve already moved beyond that point, my darling.”

She gasped. “Why did you call me that?”

“Call you what?”

“My darling. Why did you—”

“Because you look like a darling to me.”

“Is that your standard endearment for your lady friends, Mr. Lonigan?”

“As a matter of fact, it isn’t.” Lifting one hand from the wall, he eased it behind her head and pulled her to him. “My favorite pet name for the ladies is love.”

“You’ve never called anyone else my darling?” Callie held her breath, waiting for his reply.

“Not that I recall.”

“Oh, Burke...”

Then he kissed her.

Chapter 2

Burke's lips covered hers with a tender urgency. Soft, yet demanding. She closed her eyes and savored the feel of his mouth on hers. How many long, lonely nights had she dreamed of this moment? How often had she shuddered with desire at the memory of the hours she had spent in this man's bed? The rational part of her mind warned her of danger. Burke Lonigan was a man of mystery, perhaps a man with a deadly secret life. She shouldn't become involved in an affair with a man who might well be an international criminal.

As Burke deepened the kiss, his tongue seeking entrance, he leaned forward until his body pressed hers against the wall. A shiver of recognition rippled along her nerve endings. This is the way she had felt the night she had given herself to a stranger and he had given her his child.

Resist him, her mind screamed. Don't do this! But her body refused to listen. She melted against him, loving the feel of his hard chest pressed into her breasts and his lips devouring her. Of their own volition, her arms lifted up and around his neck, drawing him even closer. When her mouth opened invitingly, Burke delved within to explore and pillage. A gentle humming rose in her throat and turned into a soft moan when it reached her lips. He captured that moan with his mouth, diffusing it into fragments of minuscule sounds.

Callie's nipples peaked. Her femininity clenched and unclenched. Heaven help her, she wanted Burke. Now. This very moment. Here. Up against the wall.

Don't do this! You'll be sorry if you do! her conscience warned. Don't forget you have more to consider than yourself—you have Seamus. Whatever happens between you and Burke will ultimately affect your child.

Callie forced herself to end the kiss. When she did, Burke groaned and rubbed himself against her in a doesn't-this-feel-good way that elicited a whimper from her. In order to avoid him instigating another kiss, she turned her head, eased her arms from around his neck and gave him an insistent shove.

Burke lifted his head and stared into her beguiling gray eyes. He couldn't remember the last time he had ached so to make love to a woman. Since the first moment he'd seen Callie Severin, he'd been attracted to her, but he never mixed business with pleasure. A cardinal rule that he had just broken.

Undoubtedly she had the same reservations as he and that's why she'd ended their kiss. He knew damn well that she wanted him every bit as much as he wanted her. His instincts had been telling him for weeks now that Callie felt the same sexual tension that he did. But she was his employee, the best PA he'd ever had. An affair that might end on a sour note could wreck their perfect working relationship.

Burke lifted his hands from the wall and stepped backward, placing a couple of feet between them, but he kept his gaze riveted to hers. She smiled weakly. Burke swallowed hard. Just the sight of her did crazy things to his libido. Callie possessed a fragile beauty, an old-fashioned loveliness that drew him to her. Her curly auburn hair couldn't be confined within the neat bun at the base of her neck. Flyaway tendrils curled about her ears and forehead. Her flawless peaches-and-cream complexion complemented her dark fiery hair and her cool, storm-cloud gray eyes.

His gaze traveled to her lips and lingered. Her mouth, devoid of lipstick, was full and slightly swollen from his kiss. He wanted to kiss her again. Wanted to pull her into his arms. Wanted to strip her naked and make mad, passionate love to her.

Burke shut his eyes, hoping that by blotting out Callie's pretty face and luscious body, he could control his desire for her. She's just a lovely lady, like so many others, he told himself. There's nothing special about her.

Ah, but that wasn't true. There was something special about Callie. He couldn't explain what it was about her that made her unique, different from the other women he'd known.

But there had been one other woman—a woman he could barely remember—who haunted his dreams. A faceless memory. A soft voice. A sweet body. And a scent of flowers. His mind alternated between wanting to remember and trying to forget.

"Mr. Lonigan...Burke?"

His eyelids opened to reveal his brilliant blue eyes. Callie sucked in a deep breath. How was it possible that one night with this man had spoiled her for any other man? She compared every male that entered her life with the indomitable Burke Lonigan, a man of strength and courage and an unconquerable spirit. An expert lover. Passionate. Considerate. Powerful.

"If you keep looking at me that way, I'll have no choice but to kiss you again," he said.

"Oh, I—I didn't realize...I'm sorry that—" She averted her gaze.

Tucking his fist under her chin, he lifted her face so that her gaze met his. "We have a problem, don't we, Callie?"

"Yes, sir, we do."

He caressed her cheek with his fingertips, then withdrew his hand. "I've never become involved with an employee. Keeping my business life and my personal life separate has been a cardinal rule. One that I've never broken. Until you."

Callie's mouth rounded on a silent sigh. "I was engaged to my boss and the relationship turned out badly. I swore I wouldn't become involved with my employer ever again. And I haven't. Not until... What are we going to do about this?"

Burke wondered if her former employer was the father of her child. Had her boss been a married man as his own father had been? Had he refused to acknowledge his son as Burke's father had done?

"I'm not sure how we proceed," Burke admitted. "I've never been in this position before, so I have no frame of reference. But I do know one thing—I want us to become lovers."

Callie gasped audibly. "You do?"

"Yes, I do. And unless I miss my guess, you want the same thing, don't you?"

Tell him that he's wrong, that you do not want to have an affair, her inner voice cautioned. "I know your reputation with women, Mr.—er, Burke. You've had countless affairs. The women in your life are all very beautiful and rich and sophisticated. You've dated countesses and models and movie stars and—"

"And not one of them was as tempting as you are."

The heat of his stare warmed Callie to her bones. His desire was so strong that it vibrated with energy and curled about her like an invisible band.

"If—and I'm saying if—we become lovers and the affair ends, what then?" she asked. "There's no way I could continue working for you, seeing you every day and knowing you were dating other women."

"I realize an affair would be a complication in your life and in mine," Burke shrugged. "I suppose we have to decide which is more important to us—continuing our working relationship or becoming lovers. I risk losing the best PA I've ever had."

"I need this job," she told him. "I have a child to support, and positions like the one I have here at Lonigan's Imports and Exports aren't easy to come by, you know."

"If, when our affair ends, you choose not to remain with Lonigan's, then I'll make sure you find a job with equal pay and benefits."

"Mm."

"Callie, I never make promises that I can't keep," he said. "And who knows, by the time we grow tired of each other, we might find that we're perfectly capable of being only friends."

"Is that how all your affairs end?" she asked. "You and the lady become only friends?"

"Are you saying that you haven't remained friends with your ex-lovers?" Burke grinned broadly.

"I'm afraid my experience doesn't equal yours. I've had two lovers. My former fiancé, who is definitely not a friend, and my son's father."

"I don't mean to pry into your personal life, but I've wondered about your child's father. Does he take any responsibility for his son? Does he give you any type of financial support?"

Okay, you asked for this, Callie thought. You deliberately put yourself in this position. So what are you going to do now? Lie?

"No. He—he doesn't. But I've never asked anything of him. I'm afraid it's an awkward situation and I don't know how to—"

"Is he married?"

"Mercy, no! I'd never become involved with a married man."

"Then if he isn't married, why haven't you demanded that he take responsibility for his son? No man should father a child and then abandon him."

Callie understood Burke's vehement reaction because she knew his history with his biological father. Burke Lonigan was the type of man who would take responsibility. But she had never given him the opportunity. Dear God, how would he feel and what would he think of her when she told him. No, not when, if. If she told him.

"I'm not sure that my son's father is someone I want to be a part of his life. I'm uncertain about his ability to be a suitable father."

"You didn't tell this man about his child?" Burke's eyes narrowed into slits, his expression accusatory.

"As I said before, it's an awkward situation and rather complicated. I'd prefer not to discuss it anymore."

Burke grasped her shoulder. "Is this man the reason you're reluctant to have an affair with me? Did you love him? Did he hurt you terribly?"

How could she answer his questions? she wondered. Not with the complete truth. With lies, perhaps. Or maybe with half-truths. She wasn't ready to be totally honest with Burke Lonigan. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

"I can't talk about this with you."

Burke glared at her speculatively. "Are you still in love with your child's father? Is that the problem? You're sexually attracted to me, but you love another man?"

Callie couldn't restrain the bubble of laughter that formed in her throat and escaped from her lips. "I'm sorry."

"What's so funny?" he asked. "I fail to find any humor in what I asked you."

"Do you always find it so difficult to accept a refusal from a woman? Do you always cross-examine her and try to find hidden motives for her rejection?"

"A refusal?" His eyebrows lifted in mock surprise. "I don't think I heard you refuse."

"Burke, I like you. I like working with you. And yes, I'm very attracted to you. But I can't just have an affair with you. I'm not, as my father would say, footloose and fancy-free. I'm a mother and my first responsibility is to my child."

"Then you're saying that you don't want us to become lovers?"

We've already been lovers, she wanted to shout. For one glorious, wildly passionate night, we were lovers. "I'm saying that I do not want to rush into a relationship that might end up hurting me and creating problems in my life."

"Fair enough," he said. "You take all the time you need, but you won't fault me if I do everything in my power to persuade you."

"You really don't know how to take no for an answer, do you? What have you done in the past when a lady refused you?"

With a cocky grin, Burke shrugged. "It's never happened. Would you believe me if I told you that you're the first?"

Callie's giggle turned into amused laughter. She nodded. "Yes, I'd believe you. You're quite an irresistible man."

He tugged her against him. With his lips only a hairbreadth away from hers, he said, "But you're resisting me and you know that I find that resistance challenging. You want me to work for my reward, don't you? That's what this is all about."

Callie pulled away from him, walked past him and halted at the door. "Maybe you're right. The worthwhile things in life are usually more difficult to acquire."

When Callie opened the door, Burke called after her, "Wait!"

She glanced over her shoulder. "Yes?"

"This isn't over. Not by a long shot."

After a short walk from the High Street Kensington subway station, Callie rummaged in the side pocket of her shoulder bag to find her key. Her home was located on a quiet street with little traffic. After Seamus was born, Enid had insisted that they needed a larger place to live and had promptly acquired a three-bedroom town house in central London. Callie wasn't sure what she would have done without her cousin, who was not only her dearest friend, but also Seamus's godmother. During the months she hadn't worked after Seamus's birth, Enid had generously supported them.

"What's the good of having a sizable trust fund if I can't spend it on something as worthwhile as a new mother and her baby?" Enid had asked.

Just as Callie started to unlock the latch, the door swung open. Enid stood there with a screaming Seamus on her hip.

"Thank God, you didn't work late tonight." Enid thrust Seamus into Callie's arms. "He must be teething or something. He's been wailing like that for half an hour. I rubbed that nasty-tasting gel on his gums, but that didn't seem to help."

"What's the matter, sweetheart?" Callie dropped her bag onto the floor in the living room, which, along with the dining room and kitchen, comprised the ground floor of the three-story house. "Have you been a bad boy for Aunt Enid?"

"Oh, he's never a bad boy," Enid said. "He's just very loud when he's in a bad mood."

Holding Seamus on her hip, Callie eased one arm through the sleeve of her coat, switched her baby to the other hip and finished removing it. After draping the tan wool coat on the back of the sofa, she sat in the rocking chair by the door that opened onto the courtyard their home shared with four other houses. A fish pond and fountain decorated the terrace.

As Callie rocked, talking nonsensical words to Seamus, he quieted and cuddled against her. She smoothed the damp strands of his curly black hair, as silky and dark as his father's. When he gazed at her with Burke's brilliant blue eyes and said, "Hi, Mama," she kissed both of his cheeks and hugged him to her.

"I fed Seamus about an hour ago," Enid said. "He seemed hungry and ate quite well."

"Thank you." Callie glanced at her cousin and realized she was dressed for the evening. "Are you going out?"

"Some of us are going on a pub crawl," Enid said. "We're meeting at Riki Tik in about an hour. If the night turns out as I hope, I won't be home till morning." Enid's little-girl giggle was in direct contrast to her very adult body. "Some night you should ask Mrs. Goodhope to stay so you can go with us. It's time you—"

"Burke asked me to have an affair with him."

"What!"

"Today. He kissed me, told me that he wanted us to become lovers and—"

"Did he say that he remembers you?" With her eyes wide and her hands waving excitedly, Enid rushed toward Callie. "Does he or does he not admit that he remembers the night you two first met?"

Callie shook her head. "He doesn't remember. And I've told you that I truly believe he has no recollection of it. For some reason he has blotted out that night. Maybe because of the association with his father's death. Or maybe because he allowed a woman to see him weak and vulnerable."

"I have my doubts about his convenient loss of memory," Enid said. "If he was so plastered that he has no memory of that night, I don't see how he was able to perform. Heavy drinking usually leaves a man not fully charged."

"Maybe other men."

"Oh, please! You act as if no man on earth could compare to Burke Lonigan as a lover." Enid huffed. "And what did you have to compare him to anyway? Laurence Wyntrope! That nancy boy!"

"Laurence might not have been the most masculine man in the world, but he wasn't—"

"Admit it—he was a lousy lover and a real bastard. But at least he didn't leave you pregnant. Which is exactly what Burke Lonigan did."

Seamus let out a loud yelp. Callie soothed him with a few silly words that soon had him laughing. She cast a sharp glance at her cousin.

"We've discussed this a hundred times and I've told you repeatedly that what happened wasn't Burke's fault. It was mine. I was sober and—"

"So tell the man what he doesn't remember and introduce him to his son."

"I can't do that. Not yet."

"Oh, dear. Do you really think those rumors about him being an illegal arms dealer are true?" Enid asked.

"I have no proof one way or the other, but if Burke is a criminal, then how can I allow him to become a part of Seamus's life?"

"So, what did you say to him when he told you that he wanted to be your lover?"

"I said that I wasn't ready for an affair."

"And he accepted your refusal?"

"He accepted the fact that getting me into bed won't be as easy as he'd hoped it would be."

"At least not this time," Enid said smugly.

Burke poured himself a snifter of brandy, then sat in the leather wing chair in front of the roaring fire in the living room. He had lived the good life for many years now, enjoying the trappings of wealth, privilege and power afforded him by his disguise as a legitimate businessman.

Recently Burke had begun to wonder if this was all there would ever be to his life. He was forty-two, no longer a young buck eager for danger and excitement. Occasionally the thought of retiring crossed his mind, but then he'd ask himself a critical question. Retire and do what? He had become a SPEAR agent shortly after college graduation and had never once regretted that decision. So why was he suddenly so disillusioned by it all?

Because he was getting old? Because he didn't want to wake up at fifty and still be alone? There were at least a dozen suitable women who would gladly become Mrs. Lonigan. But not a one of those lovely ladies was the woman with whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

What about Callie Severin? an inner voice asked.

"Yes, what about Callie Severin?" he repeated.

The chemistry between them was undeniable. Every time they were together, sparks ignited. And the fact that she was being coy with him, making him wait for her favors, made him want her all the more. But was her reluctance genuine or just a game she played to whet his appetite? If he made love to her, would that satisfy him?

Burke swirled the brandy in the glass, then lifted it to his lips and sipped the aged liquor. He closed his eyes and relaxed. Unbidden memories floated through his mind. A faceless woman. The musty scent of two bodies mating mingled with the heady scent of flowers. A lush, loving body lying beneath him. A sweet, soft voice whispering his name.

He became aroused. For nearly two years she had haunted him. He had tried—unsuccessfully—to forget her and their time together. He'd been a complete mess that night. Plastered. Self-pitying. Pathetic. And desperately in need of comfort.

She had comforted him. Loved him selflessly. Given herself to him with abandon. He could remember the feel of her, the scent of her and even the taste of her. But his mind refused to remember her face. Or her name, if he'd ever known her name.

He had never been as weak and vulnerable, as completely at the mercy of another human being as he had with her. He hated the thought that he'd opened himself up and put himself at risk with a stranger, a woman who could have easily ripped his tattered emotions to shreds. He had allowed her to see his weakness, to view the hurt and angry little boy inside him.

Somewhere out there was a woman who knew him inside and out. Every inch of his body. Every beat of his heart. Down to the very depths of his soul.

She had touched something within him and he within her. Two strangers giving solace. A man and a woman who had sought only physical union and had somehow connected on a deeper level.

Did he love this woman whose face he couldn't remember? Whose memory was a beautiful, faded blur? He didn't know. Wasn't sure. He doubted he could even begin to put into words the way he felt about her. But what did it matter? She had vanished from his life as quickly as she had entered it. And since that night, loneliness akin to none he'd ever known had been an integral part of his life.

His loneliness had nothing to do with being alone. He could easily surround himself with people and fill his empty bed with his pick of eager women. And he had, on occasion. But the loneliness remained. He wanted that gut-wrenching desolation to come to an end. And he thought Callie Severin might well be the woman to accomplish that deed. He knew one thing for certain—she was the only other woman who had ever tempted him beyond reason.

Chapter 3

Callie stood at Burke's side smiling warmly as they greeted his guests. Acting as his hostess for this affair reminded her of the occasions when she had served as her father's hostess at embassies around the world. Everyone had thought it adorable for Arthur Severin to allow his teenage daughter to play at being a grown-up. However, on none of those occasions had she worn a designer gown or diamonds worth a small fortune. Burke had insisted on the dress, a pale pink silk that clung to her curves yet somehow managed to achieve a demure appearance. She wore diamond and pearl studs in her ears and a diamond bracelet. A large diamond-and-pearl heart-shaped pendant rested just above the crevice between her breasts.

When a pause came in welcoming guests, Burke leaned down and whispered, "You look ravishing tonight. I like your hair worn down about your shoulders. I wish you'd wear it that way at the office." He chuckled. "On second thought, you'd better not."

"Thank you. I think."

Before their conversation could progress further, another couple arrived. While she smiled and made idle chit-chat, Callie's mind began to wander. During the past week, since Burke had suggested they become lovers and she had declined, he hadn't actively pursued her. And yet she had been aware of his subtle looks, his innuendos and the way he often allowed their hands to accidentally touch. And at least once a day he somehow managed to maneuver her into a position where their bodies brushed against each other.

It had become quite obvious that Burke Lonigan wasn't going to take no for an answer. Callie glanced at him and her stomach tightened. Look at him, an inner voice said. No woman in her right mind would reject that man.

He was handsome, glamorous, ultra masculine and extremely wealthy. Wearing a stylish Armani tuxedo and an air of supreme confidence, he epitomized the sophisticated millionaire. Unless they knew his background, no one would ever think he'd been born the illegitimate son of an Irish housemaid. He wore the mantle of a gentleman easily, with only a hint of the wild Irishman lurking in his persona.

Every time she looked at Burke, she was reminded of how very much Seamus resembled him. No doubt, when her son was a grown man, he would be his father's double. The only feature he had inherited from her was his mouth—his smile was identical to hers.

Burke leaned close and whispered, "Woolgathering, my darling?"

"What?" She realized that she hadn't responded to a question Sir Thomas Warfield had asked. "I'm so sorry, Sir Thomas, I'm afraid I was thinking about my son."

"Didn't know you had a child, Ms. Severin." The portly, middle-aged banker raised an eyebrow when he spoke.

Although having children out of wedlock was generally more accepted these days, there were still those who frowned on the practice. Sir Thomas and most of Burke's guests would be appalled that his PA was an unwed mother. She glanced at Burke, silently asking him how she should respond.

"The little nipper is almost two, isn't he?" Burke slipped his arm around her waist. "Callie's quite a devoted mother. I greatly admire women who are good mothers and put their children's needs first, don't you, Sir Thomas?"

Pasting a weak smile on his pale face, Sir Thomas nodded. "Indeed. Indeed."

Within five minutes all the guests had arrived and Burke took Callie's hand in his and led her into the living room. Before he released her, he brought her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"The circumstances of your son's birth are no one's business but yours," Burke told her. "You don't owe anyone an explanation, especially not a pompous jerk like Thomas Warfield."

"If he's such a pompous jerk, why did you invite him to your party?"

“This isn’t a gathering of friends. You should know that. These people are business acquaintances. Nothing more.”

“Yes, of course.” In the two and a half months she had been working for Burke, she had come to realize that the man had hundreds of friendly acquaintances, but few friends. Actually, she wasn’t sure he had any friends. And she found that odd. Burke’s personality most certainly leaned more toward his being an extrovert than an introvert, yet he seemed adept at keeping others at arm’s length.

“We should mix and mingle a bit,” Burke suggested. “Just be your beautiful, charming self and you’ll have them all eating out of the palm of your hand.”

“I’m afraid you overestimate my charm.”

Burke gazed into her eyes. Butterflies danced in her stomach.

“You underestimate your charm,” he said.

Blushing profusely, Callie smiled. “You’re such a flatterer, Mr. Lonigan.”

Suddenly a tall, willowy blonde draped her arm through Burke’s as she rubbed herself against him. Callie recognized the woman instantly. And why shouldn’t she? Hayley Martin’s picture graced the covers of countless magazines. She was this year’s most popular supermodel. At six feet tall in her three-inch heels, the waif-thin beauty stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Burke.

“I’m a tad upset with you, love. You’ve been neglecting me terribly.” Hayley pursed her collagen-fat lips into a sultry pout.

“I’ve been back from Paris for weeks now and you haven’t rung me even once.”

When Burke kissed Hayley’s cheek, Callie felt an unpleasant stirring of jealousy in her heart. Don’t show him that you care, her inner voice cautioned. Don’t let him see that you’re upset. After all, she was well aware of Burke’s womanizing reputation. And she’d known about his affair with Hayley Martin. The affair had been the hot topic at Lonigan’s Imports and Exports when Callie had first gone to work there.

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