

The Mediterranean Billionaire's Blackmail Bargain
Abby Green



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ABBY GREEN

**The Mediterranean
Billionaire's Blackmail Bargain**

Аннотация

Step into a world of sophistication and glamour, where sinfully seductive heroes await you in luxurious international locations. His dark desire... Cynical, ruthless Dante D'Aquanni is a powerful man with a reputation to uphold. When Alicia Parker turns up at his Lake Como villa with the press in tow, claiming he's responsible for her sister's pregnancy, he's furious. He knows her kind – and he'll make her pay! When it turns out her sick sister's lover was actually Dante's brother – not Dante – Alicia has to make amends. But Dante demands more than just a mere apology. He'll see her sister is looked after, but he wants Alicia by his side on his next business trip. Soon she's whisked into a world of glamour, luxury and passion. But, despite the sizzling chemistry between them, Alicia knows she must leave – because she's falling for a man who despises her...

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Alicia looked up to Dante's face and willed herself to stand tall, strong, when everything in her wanted to hurl herself back into his arms and beg him to kiss her again.

'I don't know what just happened there—'

He advanced with a dangerous look on his face. 'I can show you if you like.' He clearly didn't like the direction things were going. Alicia retreated around the back of the seat and gripped it. Her top slid off her shoulder again.

'That won't be happening again. Just because you have me here as a result of extenuating circumstances, just because you've dressed me, does not mean that I am available sexually. I am not interested—do you hear me? I will not be used like this just because it's... it's easy or convenient.'

Dante regarded the woman in front of him. Two spots of high colour marked her cheeks; her mouth looked like a ripe moist fruit...her hair was coming undone, tendrils of curls falling in sexy disarray. He had no doubt in his mind that he would indeed be taking Alicia Parker to bed. She was here now, his for a month. Plenty of time. She wouldn't last more than a week with this heat burning up the air around them.

Abby Green worked for twelve years in the film industry. The glamour of four a.m. starts, dealing with precious egos, mucky fields, driving rain...all became too much. After stumbling across a guide to writing romance, she took it as a sign and saw her way out, capitalising on her long-time love for romance books. Now she is very happy to sit in her nice warm house

while others are out in the rain and muck! She lives and works in Dublin.

THE MEDITERRANEAN BILLIONAIRE'S BLACKMAIL BARGAIN

BY
ABBY GREEN



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CHAPTER ONE

'I AM quite certain that if I had fathered a child I would be well aware of the fact, which, needless to say, would be none of your business, as you are a complete stranger. Now take your hand off me immediately.'

Alicia Parker was still stunned into immobility by the sheer audacity of her actions, which had stopped this man in his tracks. She looked up into a face so savagely handsome that the breath left her body. All her poor muddled, overtired and overwrought brain could formulate were impressions. Tall. Broad. Dark. Gorgeous. Sexy. Powerful. Sexy. Powerful.

Eyes as cold and dark as the night stared down with uncompromising arrogance and supreme assurance that she—

and her preposterous accusation—were so far removed from his gilded life that she must be certifiably mad to accost him like this. His look could have turned her to ice...and yet, awfully, Alicia didn't feel cold. She felt hot. All over.

And as she watched, struck dumb by any number of things, the very least of which was his overwhelming presence, Dante D'Aquanni calmly and disdainfully extricated the expensive cloth of his suit from her white knuckle grip, flicked a glance to his minions nearby and strode off and out of the mammoth building which housed his offices in London.

He was gone, as if spirited away, without a backward glance at the petite, dishevelled woman who stood gaping at his departing back. Who'd had only the briefest of chances to get out a few words, her attempt to make him listen having failed abysmally.

Within seconds Alicia was surrounded by great hulking security guards and, without knowing exactly how, she found herself outside in the teeming rain and what had just happened seemed like a blur...or a bad dream...

Alicia's soft mouth tightened into a grim line. Unfortunately, that day a week ago hadn't been a bad dream. It was a stark reality and the reason why she was now seated in a tiny rental car across the road from an exclusively opulent hotel near the shores of Lake Como in Italy. She even had the remnants of a cold as a result of getting soaked to the skin that day. Dante D'Aquanni had refused to hear her out then, but he wouldn't—couldn't—refuse to listen to her here...

The sun had set some hours ago, but the sky was still a dark, bruised violet colour. That magical moment when day teetered into night had come and gone, its beauty unnoticed. And, across the road, the hotel quite literally *glittered* with luxuriousness, adding to this heightened sense of beauty.

Alicia was terrified. She was trying not to be bowled over by it. Trying not to let the pristine streets intimidate her, the unmistakable handsome foreignness of the smartly dressed people coming in and out of the hotel. But still *not him...yet*. This was a million miles away from anywhere she'd ever been, or anywhere she was ever likely to be. She closed her eyes for a second; they were gritty with tiredness, every limb ached with exhaustion. She knew she wasn't far from collapse, but didn't have the luxury of time to sleep, to catch her breath. She was existing in a haze, anger at his recent curt dismissal and sheer nerves keeping her going.

This was the only solution, and the only way she was going to get to see him, *to force* him to admit his responsibility. To admit to fathering her sister's unborn child. A sudden image of Melanie's small, pale face against the hospital bed linen made Alicia's breath stop painfully. She closed her eyes but the image got stronger and she could see with alarming vividness, the scary profusion of tubes and wires that had snaked around her too thin body with its small bump. Alicia felt tears threaten; if *anything* happened to her... She couldn't let it. Her eyes snapped open. She needed money now for Melanie's treatment and Dante

D'Aquanni *would* be made to accept the part he'd played in this chain of events. Would be made to pay. He was their only option. Alicia was desperate.

Her sister had been involved in a horrific car crash while on her way to see this very man and somehow, miraculously, she and her baby had survived. But she had suffered a fractured pelvis, among other more minor internal injuries. With the complication of being pregnant, the result was that they desperately needed to get Melanie into the care of a consultant who had expert experience with pregnancies which had suffered trauma. He was based in central London and Alicia knew well that this kind of care came privately and with a hefty price tag.

With no other close family and no friends who had anything approaching that kind of money to call upon, it had left her no choice but to take this course of action. The ward sister, an old friend of Alicia's from her nursing training days, had assured her that Melanie was stable and could be left for a short time. That assurance had led her to feel confident enough to make this drastic, desperate step, along with the promise that she would be notified the minute that any change occurred in Mel's condition.

She looked quickly at the hotel's intricately carved doors again, afraid that she might have missed him. Nothing. She'd followed him earlier from his villa on the shores of the lake to the hotel, where he had met a stunning brunette on the steps. She could only imagine what they would be doing now and wondered if Dante D'Aquanni would be taking her back to his villa or

entertaining her in an opulent suite inside. Alicia worried her lower lip. She prayed that he wouldn't bring her back—Alicia needed him on his own.

Something caught the corner of her eye and she looked across the road again. A valet was bringing a low-slung, gleaming silver car to a halt outside the door, which was opening. Her eyes widened in apprehension—*his* car. And then he appeared. Mere feet away. Coming out of the hotel in a black tuxedo, the bow-tie undone at his neck. Certainly looking more dishevelled than when he'd gone in. The beautiful brunette accompanied him down the steps in a glittering silver sheath of a dress, also looking sexily tousled, long, dark lustrous hair around her shoulders. She looked thoroughly bedded.

Alicia wanted to feel revolted, but as she watched the woman twine sinuous arms around his neck and press close, all she did feel was a tingling awareness and something much more disturbing. She felt bewildered for a moment by the confusing emotion. The man's overpoweringly good looks and charisma, which she could remember like a brand from the previous week reached out to her from across the road.

Like any protective, loving older sister, she believed Melanie was beautiful and that everyone else loved her too...but Alicia knew well that she and her sister were not the type of women to turn this man's head. He was out of their league, on a level that hadn't even been invented yet. A grim hardness settled in her chest...*That was exactly why he had discarded Melanie with*

such callous ruthlessness.

The valet had opened the driver's door of the open-top sports car. Dante D'Aquanni extricated himself from the woman and, with a brief kiss on her cheek, strode down the steps and to his car. After discreetly giving a tip to the valet, he slid into the driver's seat and, with a muted roar of the throttle, sped off.

The woman stood on the steps looking after the car, a look of comic chagrin on her beautiful face before she flounced back up the steps and disappeared, no doubt back to the suite from where they'd just emerged. It was only then that Alicia came to, shaken out of the crazy reverie that seemed to have taken hold. Hands shaking, she turned the key in the ignition and pulled out of her parking space. What was wrong with her? She needed all her concentration just to navigate in the unfamiliar car.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw red traffic lights ahead and the familiar lines of the powerful sports car. The light went green and he pulled off again.

She pictured all too easily the supreme nonchalance of his movements as he had come down the steps of the hotel just moments before. The way he'd coolly discarded the woman. It seemed to mock her now. This man didn't have a care in the world. So utterly confident that he could wreak havoc, walk away and believe himself to be protected.

Her phone rang shrilly on the seat beside her and she picked it up, listening for a second before saying briefly, 'Just follow me, I'll show you where we can get in.' She looked back and,

sure enough, another car was not far behind. She cursed herself; she'd almost forgotten about the others. She couldn't let this man scramble her thoughts.

Fear gripped her at what she was about to do but she willed it down. She couldn't lose her bottle now. Not when she'd come so far. Not when she'd gone to so much trouble to find out where he was going on holiday, any one of his palatial homes being a possibility.

The road beside Lake Como at any other time might have been a magical route, but she couldn't enjoy the scenery, the way the rising moon was bathing everything in a dark, inky-blue light. All she could focus on were the car lights ahead of her.

She knew that the back of his villa faced on to the shores of the Lake, of which he had an unimpeded view. And that *apparently* one of his favourite times was dusk: he would watch the lights twinkle and come on across the still waters from his terrace, which was covered with antique drapes. Or at least that was the picture of the man that the gushing article had painted. Idyllic. A man who could have anything he desired at the click of his fingers. Alicia knew all about the exclusivity of the Lake Como villas. They were never advertised for sale, it was all word of mouth, buyers carefully vetted. And prices invariably soared into the high millions.

But then, for a multi-billionaire who controlled the largest, most successful construction company in the world, who would expect anything less? Her hands tightened on the steering wheel.

She didn't imagine that he would have the callused hands of his workers.

His lights disappeared and Alicia had to concentrate. They were here, at the high wall of his villa. She cursed herself. She had to get it together. For Melanie. The effort it had taken her sister to say just a few words a week ago had been enough to tip her into unconsciousness. But they'd been enough.

They'd given Alicia all the information she'd needed.

She drove the car neatly into the space she had found earlier, partially hidden by an overhanging tree, and sat there for some moments waiting for the other car to draw up behind her. Alicia hadn't even known about Melanie's pregnancy until she'd come home from Africa and gone straight to the hospital after a series of panicky messages on her mobile and in their apartment had alerted her to her sister's whereabouts.

Since Melanie's best friend, the only other person likely to know her movements, was away on holiday, it had taken the hospital a day to properly identify Melanie and get in contact. And since that moment everything had been a scary blur. Alicia's thoughts revolved sickeningly on her sister's fevered words, which had led her to this place and this moment.

Melanie had gripped her hand, struggling to speak. It had made Alicia's heart break. 'Melanie, love, don't try to speak; you need to keep your strength.'

Melanie had shaken her head. 'I have to tell you. I have to see...have to talk to Dante D'Aquanni... He's the one...'

‘Melanie—’ Alicia’s voice had been urgent ‘—what do you mean? Is he the one who did this to you? Is he the one you talked about?’

The communications between the remote area where she’d been working in Africa and the UK had been sporadic to say the least.

Melanie had sagged back against the pillows, her words were broken and her breath jagged. ‘I was on my way to see him to tell him that I’d leave the company, do anything he wanted, if only to...I was so upset and then that lorry just came out of nowhere—’ She closed her eyes at the memory, went paler and gripped Alicia’s hand even tighter as her eyes opened again. ‘You have to find him, Lissy...I need him to...’ Alicia had been horrified to see weak tears rolling down her sister’s face. ‘Oh, Lissy, I love him so much and he sent him away...and I need him.’

Alicia’s focus came back to the lake, lapping softly nearby. Her sister had been so feverish by then that she’d been incoherent, her words becoming jumbled. She’d obviously meant that he’d sent *her* away. The facts were stark and Alicia had pieced them together with little effort.

Her sister had had an affair with Dante D’Aquanni, the owner of the corporation she worked for. He had cast her aside. Melanie had been on her way to see him when the accident happened. She’d been made careless by her distraught state. Alicia’s insides roiled again; she felt so guilty that she hadn’t been there. She could have prevented the accident. If only she’d been able to

phone more frequently. All she knew was that Melanie had been seeing someone at work. Her e-mails had been like Morse code, in an obvious effort to protect the man who had stolen her heart... her innocence.

After trying and failing to get in touch with Melanie's friend, who might possibly know more, Alicia had turned to the Internet to find out what she could about this man. She'd seen that office affairs within the D'Aquanni corporation were sackable offences—hence Melanie's ridiculously secretive e-mails—and yet the man himself had seen fit to be a hypocrite of the highest order...

A car door slammed behind her. She pulled back her mass of unruly hair and twisted it up, tying it with a band, putting on a battered baseball hat. Then she got out of the car, easing cramped muscles. The late summer air held the slightest of chills and she pulled on her voluminous dark sweatshirt. Then, taking her small backpack, making sure she had her phone and that it was on silent, she made her way to the two men who had just emerged from the other car.

Dante D'Aquanni drove his car to an abrupt stop on the gravel outside his villa. The feeling of relief was enormous. He vaulted out and ran up the few stone steps, his housekeeper coming out to meet him. They exchanged a few words and he strode through the open door and into the immense, palatial villa. Home. His favourite place in the world.

He recalled Alessandra's pleas to bring her back with him for the night. How she'd whispered what she'd thought were erotic

promises into his ear on the steps of the hotel, but which had made any possible lingering desire disappear completely.

He poured himself a drink and took it to the back terrace where the view of the still, dark lake acted like a balm. Alessandra Macchi was indisputably one of the most beautiful women in Italy. And she had made no secret of the fact that she desired Dante. His mouth tightened. Desired his wealth. That much was clear. When he'd arrived at Lake Como a few days ago, he'd gone for a quiet drink, a catch up with some locals, and Alessandra had appeared with some flimsy story of taking a break too... She'd proved a force to be reckoned with. His defences must have been down, or something, as he'd found himself going to her hotel this evening to take her for dinner and then had allowed her to seduce him. He rubbed a weary hand across his brow.

What was wrong with him? He didn't normally regret anything he did, as each and every decision was made with full weighing up of pros and cons. Alessandra was exactly the type of woman he normally went for. Beautiful. Polished. Experienced. Not into commitment or, at least, he thought cynically, she *professed* not to be. So why had this whole evening been so wholly unspectacular? So...mechanical, unsatisfactory...

And when she'd wanted to come back *here*... He had to repress a shudder again at the thought. She hadn't been happy to be left on the steps of the hotel but he could be ruthless when necessary and knew women like her... She'd survive.

Congratulating himself on his escape, he downed the rest of the liquid and strode back through the villa. He could hear raised voices and see his housekeeper at the door. She looked as if she was struggling with something—*someone*—trying to get in.

Every instinct jumped to high alert. His whole body tensed—something that hadn't happened in a long time. It immediately brought back the memory of the constant dangers of living on the streets in Naples. Which was crazy. That was another world, a distant memory, *another life*. He was protected from that life now.

Alicia was trying to calm things down but the reporter and photographer that she'd brought with her were being aggressive. She was out of her depth, she was no con artist. The poor housekeeper was looking terrified as she tried to shut the door in their faces. Alicia had no Italian vocabulary to reassure her, to explain that all they wanted was to see Dante D'Aquanni. And she knew it would only be a matter of time before the guard at the gate found them.

Even though they had been able to get through the hole in the wall that she had found earlier and clamber through prickly bushes and trees, Alicia didn't doubt for a second that security here was state of the art. The photographer made a lunge for the door again and knocked Alicia's head, her hat sailed off and at that moment the door swung back and everyone stopped moving.

Dante D'Aquanni stood there, resplendent and devastating. Dark, dark eyes expertly assessing and taking in the small,

bedraggled group. He issued a few curt words and the housekeeper disappeared behind him. He came out and shut the door.

Words were locked in Alicia's throat. Like last week, she felt overwhelmed, ineffectual. Impotent. Would he recognize her?

He looked calm, yet Alicia could feel the barely leashed energy emanating from him in hypnotic waves. He folded his arms with an insouciance that said he'd summed them all up and found no threat. His gaze came to rest on her. And her heart stopped. She gulped.

The reporter's voice came from behind her. 'Signore D'Aquanni, do you know this woman?'

The first initial beat of danger that had surged through Dante was gone. He knew the local paparazzi. They were rabble. What he did feel now was anger that they were contaminating his property, and the reason they were here had to be this woman. His gaze slid up and down and a prickling sensation caught the back of his neck. An image crashed into his head.

Last week. At his offices in London. *This* woman had been there. She had emerged from behind a column, right in his path. He'd almost knocked her over, she was so tiny. The impression he'd formulated last week was the same as now and surprised him with its strength; he hadn't realized that he'd even taken that much notice. His eyes ran up and down her form. Not an ounce of femininity. Her scraped back hair was like the rest of her—of indeterminate colour, texture and shape.

Yet, to his surprise, even as he formulated that thought, he noticed big, wide-spaced brown eyes, ringed with long lashes that looked at him like a startled fawn. No threat.

‘Yes,’ he drawled with a measure of surprise, ‘I believe I do.’
So he did recognize her.

Did he remember what she’d said? Alicia shook herself free of the overpowering intimidation that threatened to keep her silent. This was her moment, her chance. Even if he threw them all out and they didn’t get pictures, the reporter would have a story and Dante would be forced into the limelight to at least acknowledge it on some level. He would be forced to think of Melanie then. She thought of her sister. She thought of the way he’d dismissed her last week and his *lover* so recently. She opened her mouth but before she could say a word, the reporter jostled forward roughly. ‘Your little friend here tells us that she has a juicy story about you.’

Dante stiffened inside. He could see the woman’s mouth open to speak, the spark of rage in her eyes and in a flash he also remembered the words she’d hurled at him last week. His head had been full of the upcoming negotiations, which was how she’d caught him slightly off guard.

‘You’re the father of my sister’s baby and if you think you can walk away without accepting responsibility then you’ve another think coming.’

It had been such a preposterous accusation that he’d barely acknowledged her or her words. He didn’t even have to think

about it; he hadn't been seeing anyone in England and knew exactly who his recent lovers had been and not one of them would be remotely related to *her*. He was a billionaire; his lovers were carefully chosen and he was always, without fail, supremely careful to avoid such a scenario. Many women had attempted to trap him, lure him, and this woman was no different. He didn't have the time to try and figure out where she'd come from, if she was an employee...

Assimilating all this information in a split second, he also realized quickly that she evidently meant business as she'd followed him all the way to Lake Como. And, more importantly, he instantly assessed the damage she could do with her foolish audacity.

He had to stop her.

Alicia seized the opportunity she'd come so far for with both hands. 'This man,' she started bravely, but her voice sounded husky with the remnants of her cold. A dog suddenly barked halting her words. Her head whipped around. A security man held the dog back with a straining leash. She couldn't let this stop her. She faced back to Dante D'Aquanni. Desperation fuelling her movements, she squared her small defiant chin.

'*This man...*' It came out stronger this time and the dog mercifully stopped barking. The two men who'd followed her here looked at her eagerly, sensing a huge story in the offing. In that instant she regretted not having told them her story before now, she'd judged that the shock value would be greater, have

more impact this way. She only hoped and prayed she could get it out.

‘This man is responsible for—’

Before her lips could utter another word, they were smothered and stopped under a cruel, hard mouth. The world went dark and disorientation took over. Shock rendered Alicia stiff under the onslaught. It was comprehensive. Dante D’Aquanni crowded her, wrapped those strong arms around her, pulling her off her feet and into his chest. Her senses were so overloaded that she had trouble disentangling the strands of sensation.

There was his smell...musky and hot. There was the feel of his chest...hard, taut, unyielding. There was his firm mouth...touching, exploring. Suddenly she didn’t feel stiff any more; she was melting, unable to stop the flood of heat to every part of her. His tongue was a silky, heated invasion that he pushed past shocked opening lips that belonged to someone else, not to her. Because, right now, she didn’t inhabit her own body any more; it was someone else. Someone who had gone temporarily mad.

Dante lifted his head and it felt heavy. The clear, concise reasons for doing what he’d just done were unavailable to him now as he looked down into a grimy face, streaked with blood where she’d been struck by branches from the trees surrounding his property. Huge, liquid brown eyes stared up at him, lashes tangled and even more luxuriant up close. Lush lips were plump and pink. Quivering. Her whole body trembled in his arms; her hands were curled into his chest. *Where* had this nymph come

from? Had the whole world gone mad in just an hour?

The security guard shouted something and Dante felt the return of sanity. He realized that he was holding this woman off the ground, into his chest and, as he lowered her back down with an abruptness that bordered on dropping her, he had to acknowledge the fact that he was aroused to a point that had most definitely eluded him earlier.

He knew that as much as he wanted to fling this stranger down his steps to join the paparazzi, something more compelling was stopping him. He also couldn't figure out his instinctive reaction to shut her up in any way possible, or why kissing her had been the only option.

The security guard surged forward and caught the two men by the scruffs of their necks, holding them easily. The reporter shouted out, 'Mr D'Aquanni, you were spotted with Alessandra Macchi earlier. What does this mean? Aren't you going to tell me who your new girlfriend is? It won't take long to find out...'

A curt, No Comment hovered on his lips but for some reason Dante didn't say it. He was certain of one thing. He couldn't let this woman go now because she was a loose cannon. Her determination to confront him told him he would be foolish to dismiss her so quickly this time. He had to get to the bottom of the preposterous allegations she had made—*was* making—and he welcomed the clarity that reminded him that at all costs he had to avoid any unwelcome press attention in the run up to the vital business negotiations next week. What the hell was wrong

with him? Acting so out of character made him very nervous. He focused his mind again with effort.

He knew that his security guard would confiscate the camera, delete the digital images which had surely been taken, but, with technology being what it was, he knew he couldn't be certain they wouldn't have obtained an image of that kiss another way.

He had just kissed her in front of these men, they didn't need an image... This all flashed through his head in a nanosecond.

'Wait.' Dante's voice cracked out. The security man halted.

Alicia was taking all this in but she felt disembodied. His kiss—if you could even call it that—had seared its way into her blood, into her brain, and had lobotomized her ability to speak or function. All she could do was watch helplessly as Dante pulled her tight into his side.

He smiled urbanely, dangerously. 'I'm afraid that it's really quite banal. You've been used as a pawn in a lovers' spat. It's true I was out with Alessandra earlier. She, I'm afraid, was my attempt to make this woman jealous.' He looked down at Alicia and lifted her hand. It was held in a death grip; she could feel the blood stopping. But to their small audience it must have looked like a tender gesture when he brushed his mouth across her scratched knuckles.

'And it worked.'

The reporter's mouth was a round O of shock—presumably, Alicia thought for one clear second, that someone like her had the power to turn his head at all. She would have reacted the

same way.

Dante D'Aquanni could have been Oscar nominated, the way he looked away from Alicia with extreme reluctance, but with what *she* could see very clearly was extreme loathing. His eyes were dark and hard.

The reporter shouted out, 'Where has she come from?'

'Come now, a man has to keep some things secret. Do you not think after all these years that I'd have a few evasive tricks up my sleeve? And do you really think that we could have made anything of this relationship if you'd known that I was seeing someone new, someone *serious*?'

Alicia was so stunned that she couldn't even begin to see how she could possibly get out of this mess.

Dante *hated* the woman at his side with a vengeance for bringing this intrusion into his life. How dare she? He was caught between a rock and a hard place. The reporter had his story anyway and if Dante called the police in it would fan the flames of a news item that didn't even exist!

He smiled again and it was cold. 'Needless to say, this will be the last time you invade my privacy and if I catch you even attempting to trespass again, you will pay the price.' Dante tightened his hold on Alicia, making her gasp painfully. 'You're lucky that love is making me magnanimous.'

And with that the reporter and his companion were summarily marched down the driveway. Alicia's legs were very wobbly and she had a taste of just how stupid she'd been in thinking for a

second that it had been easy to get in. She'd just been very, very lucky.

CHAPTER TWO

ALICIA FELT ANYTHING but lucky now, though, as her head swirled with everything that had just happened and Dante D'Aquanni dropped his hands as though she were infectious.

'Get inside. Now.'

Alicia opened her mouth. He made a move and she flinched. She didn't know this man, didn't know his capacity or otherwise for violence and, right now, he looked murderous.

'Not a word, lady. Inside. Now.'

Alicia walked into the villa on cotton wool legs. She saw a chair and went and sat down, seriously afraid that she might fall.

'Get up. Did I say you could sit down?'

Alicia looked up, her face leached of all colour. 'Please... I—'

Dante strode forward and pulled her out of the chair. Two hands on her arms, holding her like a rag doll. And she felt like a rag doll.

'How dare you? How *dare* you invade my private space, bring those miscreants onto my property, a *photographer* for heaven's sake—'

Alicia looked up into the harsh features—no less handsome now because of his anger. Even more mesmerizing because of it. From some reserve she called up her own anger, which had been in woefully short supply for the past few minutes. He might have turned the tables but she was still here. He hadn't turfed her

out on the road.

‘I dare, Mr D’Aquanni, because someone I love very much is lying in a hospital bed and she needs help. Help that I can’t give her. As much as it kills me to come here and have to deal with someone as amoral as you, I have no choice.’ Bitterness laced her words. ‘Believe me, it’s not my idea of fun scrabbling around thorn bushes in the dark. I *did* try to talk to you last week, if you recall, but you wouldn’t listen.’

He delivered a scathing glance up and down. ‘I don’t have time to waste, listening to someone shrieking such unfounded accusations.’

Alicia remembered the panic that had galvanized her actions, the fear that had been barely in check when she’d seen him. She’d had to stop him somehow and, as much as she might have wanted to be civil, she hadn’t been allowed. She strove for calm now.

‘I *tried* to make an appointment to see you in your office but it would have been easier to get an audience with the Pope.’

He snorted inelegantly and in the next second moved so fast that Alicia was caught totally by surprise.

He had slipped her bag from her shoulders and upended it on to the floor in seconds. After a moment of shock she stepped forward. ‘How dare you—’

But he held her back easily with one hand and the feel of that hand against her belly made her jump back like a scalded cat.

She watched as he flicked through the contents of her bag. Her wallet had a shockingly small amount of money. The printout of

her one way ticket to Milan—she hadn't been able to get a return as the world and its wife were there that weekend for a football game. Her phone. A credit card.

Dante threw the paltry things back into her holdall and stood easily, towering over her as he inspected her driver's licence. He quirked a brow and looked at her.

‘Alicia Parker...’

She nodded jerkily. Surely the name would register with him? It didn't seem to. He advanced dangerously and she moved back, feeling more and more light-headed.

‘So, what exactly are you up to, coming here with a one-way ticket? Were you hoping your little trip would be so successful that you'd score a lift back on my private jet...or score *me*? Is that your plan? To seduce me and really get pregnant so your bizarre claims are founded on truth?’

Alicia's mouth opened but, before she could say a word, he was continuing, his words falling and stinging her flesh.

‘If that was what you'd planned, then you're doing a woeful job. I don't go for dramatics and unkempt shrieking fishwives are not my type.’

Alicia stopped moving. She glared up at him, adrenaline surging through her quivering five foot two frame. Her voice shook with emotion.

‘Melanie. Melanie Parker is her name. Does that even ring a bell with you? Or do you categorize your lovers by their social standing, in which case I'd imagine Melanie came somewhere

near the bottom of the heap—’

‘What did you say?’ he asked sharply, stopping in his tracks.

Alicia was stymied for a second. He looked genuinely confused. And then she did see a flicker of something cross his face. Recognition. Anger surged all over again; apparently Melanie hadn’t made that much of an impression.

‘You are unbelievable. You can sleep with someone and not even recall their name unless pushed?’

He closed the distance between them and took her shoulders roughly. She bit back a gasp. As if he realized how delicate she was, he dropped his hands abruptly and she stumbled back, but kept standing even though everything swayed ominously for a second. She could not be weak. Not here, not now. She had to be strong for Melanie.

Dante’s face felt rigid with rage and anger. He didn’t believe what she said for a second...but that name...it did ring a bell—a loud one. Not that he was going to admit that now, not until he had more independently trustworthy information. This woman was up to something and he felt very sure it had to do with money.

He enunciated his words very slowly. ‘Be clear. I have very little patience left. What is it you want?’

Alicia tilted her chin up and she unconsciously confirmed his prediction. ‘What I want, Mr D’Aquanni, is money. I need money for my sister’s care. If you don’t give it to me—to us—then her unborn child is in serious danger of not coming to term.’ Her voice shook ominously. ‘*Your baby*. Or don’t you even care about

that?’

Dante frowned. ‘What on earth are you talking about, woman?’ She was talking in riddles. Perhaps she was a little crazy? She also looked as if a gust of wind would knock her down and he steeled himself not to give in to the delicate image she was trying to project.

‘*Care*—what are you talking about?’

The harsh quality of his voice shocked Alicia out of the stupor that had rendered her momentarily speechless. Of course. How would he know that Melanie had been in the accident?

She spoke, but increasingly she was feeling more and more detached from her body. ‘Melanie...Melanie was in an accident. She was on her way to see you, and a lorry skidded on the motorway in front of her; it jackknifed right back—’

At that moment everything seemed to hit Alicia at once. The magnitude of what she’d just done. What she’d been through in the past week since she’d arrived home from Africa. The fact that she was here. What had just happened out on the front steps.

Had he really kissed her? And had she clung to him so helplessly?

The hall around her swayed, went into double vision, and this time she couldn’t stop it.

When she came round, she was sitting on the chair with her head between her legs, a large hand clamped to the back of her neck. She was mortified and felt like protesting vociferously—she didn’t faint! She’d been through unspeakable horrors in

the last year and had developed nerves of steel. And yet here, surrounded by luxury, she'd fainted within minutes.

Alicia saw the black clothed legs and shoes of Dante D'Aquanni beside her. She saw another pair of feet. She muttered something unintelligible and tried to move. The pressure of the hand eased. *His* hand. She looked up; the kindly, matronly face of the housekeeper looked at her. She felt like crying. They spoke in Italian above her head.

With little ceremony she was pulled up again, her head swam and, before she knew which way was up, she was over Dante D'Aquanni's shoulder, dangling inelegantly against his back. He strode across the hall and started climbing stairs.

'What the hell do you think you're—?'

'Be quiet. This will help the blood get to your head and restrain me from doing something I've never been tempted into before. When was the last time you ate or were you so consumed with gold-digging that you forgot?'

Alicia's hands were balled into fists as she couldn't look anywhere but at the man's perfectly shaped behind, his back against which her breasts were crushed.

'Gold-digging? *Gold-digging*? How dare you? Have you even considered the havoc that you've caused in my sister's—'

And, just as suddenly as she had been picked up, she was back on her feet, the rush of blood to her brain making her dizzy all over again. She put a hand to her head. She was barely aware of standing in a huge bedroom, discreetly designed with understated

elegance and extreme luxury.

Dante was walking away from her. She ran after him. ‘Wait a minute. I’m not finished. What are you going to do about my sister? You can’t ignore me.’

He turned, with his hand on the doorknob. His mouth was tight. ‘No, you’ve made that impossible. But what I can do for now, and what I am going to do, is lock you in here.’

Alicia’s mouth opened and closed. ‘You...what...you’re not going to...’

‘Oh, yes, I am.’

And then he walked out, the door shutting ominously behind him. Stupefied, Alicia heard a key turn. She ran to the door, jiggled the knob. He had done it. He had locked her in.

She beat on the huge, heavy door with tiny fists. ‘Come back here! You can’t just lock me away. This is outrageous.’

Nothing. Not a sound. He was gone. Alicia sank back against the door and slid to the ground in a heap. She didn’t have a thing. Not even her phone to try and get help. And who would she call? Her only relative lay unconscious in a hospital bed in England. She didn’t need a friend to tell her what she already knew. She’d trespassed on the property of one of the most powerful men in the world. He had every right to go and call the police, which was probably exactly where he had gone. Any accusation she could level at him regarding her sister would be her word against his right now. Her brave, stupid mission had just gone up in flames. She should never have left England, never left her sister’s side.

The article she'd read on the Internet mocked her. In her frantic research after he'd refused to see her, listen to her, she'd come across a particularly bitter piece by a jilted lover, or *alleged lover* as the article had been careful to state, ever mindful of litigation, especially where a billionaire was concerned. However, the woman was one of many, it seemed. It was what she had said that had galvanized Alicia to take these drastic actions. The woman had said that the only way to deal with a man like Dante D'Aquanni was by taking him by surprise, hitting him where it hurt. Publicly. Even super successful businessmen weren't immune to public opinion. Public censure. And if people knew that he'd callously turned his back on a pregnant ex-lover—

A brief knock came on the door at that moment and Alicia scrambled up. Maybe she'd been too harsh, maybe he'd listen if she tried to be reasonable. The key turned and the door opened. Alicia's hands were clasped in front of her. 'Look, I'm sorry for —',

But it wasn't Dante D'Aquanni. It was the kindly housekeeper. She came in with a tray that held a steaming bowl of pasta and a glass of water. Alicia was so shocked that all she could do was stare, it didn't even occur to her to try and escape. Her hollow stomach rumbled.

The woman smiled, her eyes crinkling in her brown face, seemingly oblivious that Alicia was no *guest* of the master. She put down the tray and gestured to Alicia's clothes. She obviously meant for her to take them off. Alicia backed away and put her

hands up.

‘No, no...they’re fine, really...’ She wished she knew some Italian. But the woman was clearly not taking no for an answer. She took Alicia by the hand and led her to the bed, pulling her sweatshirt up and, before Alicia could protest, too weak in all honesty, the woman had whipped it off.

Her trousers were next and soon she stood in just her underwear. The woman pointed at the tray, which also held some cotton wool and antiseptic. She gestured to the cut on Alicia’s face and tutted. Alicia touched it, feeling the raised and congealed welt. She hadn’t even noticed. The housekeeper disappeared into an *en suite* bathroom and returned with a luxurious white robe, which she left on the bed.

Then she gathered up Alicia’s clothes and left the room, the ominous turning of the key making her come to her senses again. Nothing had changed; she was still a prisoner. She sat on the bed, arms wrapped around herself. She wanted to ignore the plate piled high with fragrant, steaming pasta. Wanted to conduct a hunger strike. But she knew how weakened she was. She needed her strength to be able to deal with Dante D’Aquanni again.

And when she saw her reflection in the mirror of the bathroom a short time later, she was glad she had eaten because she nearly fainted all over again at the sight of the scarecrow that greeted her.

Dante turned the key quietly and opened the door. It was much later that night. The light in the room was dim. He walked in

and stood by the bed, hands deep in the pockets of his trousers. He had convinced himself that what had happened to him when he'd kissed the woman earlier had been as a result of the surreal circumstances. But now, as he looked down at her, he felt a disconcerting pulse throb to life in his blood. For a screaming virago, there was something curiously innocent about her.

In a bathrobe which swamped her petite frame, her hair was no longer an indistinct bundled up mess. It was a mass of dark blonde ringlets spread on the pillow behind her. With the grime and dust washed away he could see her face properly for the first time; she was actually extremely pretty.

She looked as if she'd gone to sleep despite herself, as if she'd fought it. Her hands were balled up, making her look as if she was ready, even now, to take on some attacker. The raised red welt on her cheek made him feel curiously concerned. He cursed himself.

His gaze travelled down; one slim leg, with a perfectly shaped calf and silky-smooth skin peeped out from the folds of the robe. Her foot was *tiny*, no bigger than a child's. Her breaths were deep and even. She was in a heavy sleep and had been for hours. He knew, as his housekeeper had informed him. This perplexed him. It didn't fit with the image of someone who'd just trespassed and hurled accusations at him concerning paternity. If anything, it damned her more because she was obviously complacent enough to sleep.

He tensed almost violently when she muttered something in

her sleep and moved restlessly. When she settled again, the robe had gaped open and one small, yet surprisingly lush breast was bared. Crowned with a dusky pink crest, the slope was pert and curved so enticingly that Dante stared, transfixed and shocked, as *that* desire rocked through his body again and he had a sudden urgent hunger to rouse that tip to hard life, to see the rest of her naked body. It was a totally inappropriate and unwelcome desire.

Again the insidious thought mocked him—*this* was the kind of desire that had proved so elusive that evening. The kind of desire he hadn't felt for so long that he almost didn't recognize it. It was primitive, guttural, base. Far from his initial conviction that she wasn't feminine, the sleeping form of the woman screamed with a delicately curved femininity that he'd never encountered. And he could remember all too well how easy it had been to lift her slight form against his body, how she'd felt, how those soft, warm lips had opened up beneath his own...

That thought, and his fast growing arousal, propelled Dante back from the bed and out of the room, closing the door, his hand turning the key in the lock quickly, almost as if the woman on the other side was a witch who would materialize in front of him.

When he got to the bottom of the staircase his security guard was waiting, still looking shamefaced after having had to search and find the breach in security. He handed Dante a folder. 'The information you were looking for. She's related to a Melanie Parker who works in your London offices. Alicia Parker is a qualified nurse, and in the last twelve months there were at least

six nurses called A Parker registered in various places, from a private nursing home in Devon to a relief organization in Africa. Within twenty four hours we should know which one she is.'

Dante took the folder and flipped it open, not one shred of the surprise he felt at learning this information showing on his impassive face. He'd know a lot more than that in twenty four hours. 'That'll be all for now.'

He went into his study and poured himself a measure of cognac. Sitting down at his desk, he flicked through the papers. After a while he sat back and looked out of the huge window which had a view over the darkened lake, the glass in his hand. He was glad he'd followed his instincts in not calling the police straight away.

Much to his chagrin, he had to concede that she hadn't been talking complete gibberish. He ran a hand around the back of his neck. Unfortunately, he knew exactly who Melanie Parker was. And, if what this woman said was true—if her sister was in hospital, claiming to be *pregnant*—then things could get very sticky. Obviously the Parker sisters were going for the jugular. Who else knew about this? There was only one thing to do. He would have to keep Alicia Parker close, until he got to the bottom of this mess and discovered the real truth. Until he found out exactly what it would take to nip this in the bud.

His mouth twisted after he downed the last of the dark liquid. With the news of his new *love affair* no doubt hitting the news-stands within the next twelve hours, it wouldn't be hard to keep

her close. A sudden image of her naked breast made his hand tighten on the glass. The last thing he needed right now was a libido brought to life by this...*stranger* who was threatening the equilibrium he so favoured in his life. But already his blood felt hot running through his veins, his heart picked up a rhythm and, as if possessed, when he closed his eyes all he could imagine was going back upstairs, wrapping a long skein of rippling hair around his hand, bending down and taking that lush, soft mouth with his. He wanted to taste her again, wondered if she would feel tight around him...

Not used to such carnal images invading his thoughts, he stood, agitated, and strode across the room, poured himself another shot, swallowing it back in one gulp. There was no doubt about it, they must be working as a team, the two sisters, or friends, whatever they were. It wasn't even a particularly sophisticated scam, but it was a scam nonetheless and one he would reveal quite effortlessly. His insides lurched at the thought that someone believed he could be stung—*again*.

He'd learnt his lesson the first time round.

This was not the time to become embroiled in some tabloid hell, fielding false accusations of fatherhood. These women—Alicia Parker and Melanie Parker—were obviously determined to see him publicly humiliated in order to extract money and, with the negotiations so close, no doubt the story of the accident was a ruse to inspire urgency.

If there was ever a time in his life when he needed calm waters,

this was it. Too many people depended on him to let a stupid news story created by gold-diggers mess things up. He walked back to the desk and picked up the phone, making the first of a few calls.

CHAPTER THREE

ALICIA stood by the window, the spectacular view outside going unnoticed. It was early the following morning. She was back in her own freshly laundered clothes. She'd tied her hair back in a plait and it hung down her back, between her shoulder blades. She felt tense and worried, wanted to call the hospital to see how Melanie was, see if she'd woken up.

In the cold light of day she couldn't believe everything that had happened. And couldn't believe that she'd slept for almost eight hours straight. Dead to the world. In *his* house. She'd fought the tiredness for the longest time, sitting on the floor with her back against the wall, watching the door, but her eyes had kept closing, her head jerking.

She'd tried not to give in, had told herself that she'd only close her eyes for a few minutes...but, unable to resist the lure of hot water, even just washing her face and rinsing out her underwear, the soft robe, the even softer bed...she'd fallen into the abyss that had been calling her for weeks now. Here of all places—some protective older sister that made her. Maybe it was the effects of her lingering cold as well. She was useless. She should never have come, never have left—

The key turned in the lock and she jumped around, her heart

lurching crazily. Dante D'Aquanni stood in the doorway. He took her breath away. He was even more shockingly handsome in the stark daylight. Dressed in black trousers, a dark grey shirt, he looked effortlessly cool, stylish and very much the successful businessman. And he also looked extremely annoyed. Any wish to try and make him see reason flew out of the window and Alicia felt her spine straighten; the familiar pain in her lower back made itself felt again, like a dull ache. She knew she shouldn't have been doing so much, not to mention scrambling through bushes, only to be thrown over this man's shoulder. Her insides went hot at the thought of that, cancelling out the pain.

'Mr D'Aquanni—'

He lifted a terse hand, halting her in her tracks when she took a tentative step forward. He came into the room with her bag and held out her phone. She reached for them eagerly. Her phone was still on silent and on the screen there were numerous missed calls listed, all from the hospital. Her bag fell out of nerveless fingers. Her face went white as she forgot everything and dialled the number.

Turning her back on Dante, she asked for the ward sister when a voice answered. What she heard when the woman came on the line made her eyes close and she said a few shaken words.

After cutting the connection she turned to face Dante D'Aquanni and he was surprised to see moisture in her eyes. He hadn't been expecting that. He still felt slightly winded at seeing her just now, in the clear light of day. That mass of curly hair

was pulled back, yet some tendrils of silky spirals were coming loose. Her eyes were huge—almost too big for her small, heart-shaped face—and dark brown. Like velvet. It was hard to focus for a second.

But, as if he'd imagined it, the sheen of moisture in her eyes was gone, blinked away. She reminded him of a hissing kitten and he felt, above anything else, a curious need to reassure, protect. He had to smile inwardly to himself. She was certainly putting on a show worthy of an award—some operator.

Panic mixed with relief made Alicia's voice feel constricted. The connection had been bad but she'd heard enough. 'That was the hospital; they've been trying to reach me. My sister has woken up and she's asking for me, I have to go to her now.' *She'd worry about how later...* This whole plan had been an unmitigated disaster and Alicia could only hope that Dante would let her go.

'I know,' he said curtly. The deep timbre of his voice resonated within her like some kind of sensual pull on her senses. It took a second for his words to sink in. *He knew?*

Dante's mouth tightened to a harsh line. Now that he'd had a glimpse of what was underneath the baggy clothes, he couldn't be unaware of the effects, which gripped him with surprising and unwelcome force.

Alicia looked up into dark eyes. When had he moved so close that she could touch him? She frowned slightly, annoyed that he could be so cool, calm, unflappable.

'How do you know?'

A muscle flickered in his jaw. 'There's plenty I know, Miss Parker. And there's plenty more I'm going to know when we get to England.'

Relief flooded her, even as something very contradictory and ugly raised its head in the pit of her belly. 'You mean, you agree? That is, you're not going to deny that you're the father any more?'

He shook his head abruptly, irritation flashing across his face. He could practically see the pound signs in her devious eyes. 'No. That's where you're still wrong. There is no doubt in my mind that I am not the father of your sister's baby. That is if she is even pregnant.'

Alicia bristled, incensed that he could still be denying it. 'Of course she's pregnant; she has a bump for crying out loud. She is not a liar. You *are* the father. She specifically told me—'

He swiped his hand again. 'If she did then she's lying. This conversation is boring me. Let's go.'

He turned and walked from the room. Alicia grabbed her bag before rushing after him. 'I told you, she is not a liar, Mr D'Aquanni—'

He stopped at the top of the stairs and Alicia cannoned into his back. He turned and gripped her arms, holding her steady when she reeled slightly from coming into contact with his hard, muscle-packed form.

'Enough! I don't want to hear another word about this ridiculous claim. A helicopter will take us to the landing strip in Milan.' He let her go abruptly, as if fearful of catching something

from her, and perversely Alicia was stung and at the same time bemused. She'd come for this, had wanted to force him to return and face the music, but now she couldn't quite believe it was happening.

'You...you're going to take me?'

An arctic glance slid up and down her body. 'With a one-way ticket here and barely enough money for a meal, not to mention a credit card I can only imagine is already maxed out, I don't imagine you'd get very far in a hurry.' *And this has to be cleared up.*

He walked away from her down the wide stairs, a harsh inflection in his voice as it floated back up. 'You and your sister picked the wrong man to play games with, Miss Parker. I am not going to entertain any further discussion about this *baby*. I will not be held to ransom by some half-baked accusation of parenthood.' He turned and looked up darkly from the bottom of the stairs. 'And you are not going to leave my sight until this is concluded to my satisfaction. You will pay for having so sorely tested my patience.'

Alicia stood still for a moment when he turned and walked away and then thought a little hysterically that at least she wouldn't have to worry about how she was going to get home. He was right. With only a questionable amount of credit left on her card, she really hadn't even thought that far ahead, to her return. Her driving concern had been to see Dante D'Aquanni.

And now she had. As she followed him down the stairs she felt

very queasily as if she were on a train and they had just changed track for some unknown and very scary destination. And she knew, with that sick feeling, that there was no way she could call a halt and get off.

Dante glanced across the aisle of his plane. The woman's face was averted, her body tense and huddled into the seat, which seemed to dwarf her petite form. She was staring out of the window at the white expanse of cloud as if it contained some fascinating image that he couldn't see. He wanted to go over, haul her out of the seat and demand payment for disrupting his life, making him trek all the way back to England, which had laid claim to him for almost a year previously. Make her pay—*how?* asked a snide voice as an unwelcome image of her crushed into his arms, her head falling back, throat and mouth bared for his kisses, inserted itself like a lurid B movie image into his imagination.

His face hardened. She'd been silent since leaving the house. She'd shown no awe or surprise at the experience of being taken by helicopter to the private landing strip of a tiny airport reserved only for VIPs and dignitaries. When they had been in the helicopter she had not even needed to be told what to do, what safety procedures to follow. She'd done them automatically.

So she was accustomed to the luxury that private helicopter travel afforded. While it didn't gel immediately with the downbeat image she portrayed—he could vaguely remember jeans and another shapeless dark top in London, her hair tied

back—he had to concede that she'd quickly smashed his first impressions. She'd proven that, with just soap and water; a lily had lain underneath all the grime and dust, under the voluminous garments. His chest tightened at the thought of how much a little more gilding might make her even more alluring. How the silk of a custom-made dress would skim and cling enticingly to those slight curves...

Alicia turned her head as though compelled and found Dante looking at her with an intense expression on his face. It made more than a quiver of awareness run through her. It made her heart flip and thump unevenly.

He settled back into his seat and regarded her coolly. She couldn't look away and she felt a flush come up under her skin.

Contradicting his own avowal not to mention it, he asked, 'Tell me why you are so certain that I am the father of your sister's baby.'

Alicia fought to stay calm. She couldn't believe he was being so obtuse, and then she felt slightly sick. Perhaps the man did have so many lovers that he literally didn't know one from the other. And yet...he seemed far too discriminating for that kind of behaviour which led her again to wonder what he had seen in Melanie.

'Because,' she bit out, 'she told me and I trust her. She's my sister.' Something made her defiant then. 'You're not making this trip for the good of your health so you obviously believe me, even if you say you don't.'

His jaw clenched and he leant forward slightly, even though a few feet separated them. Alicia leant back into her seat. ‘What did she say exactly?’

Alicia took a calming breath. ‘I asked her who had done this to her. She said you, how she’d been on her way to try and see you when the accident happened...how you’d sent her away. I knew she was seeing someone from work, I just had no idea it was you.’

He frowned slightly. ‘To the best of my knowledge, she was still working for me.’

‘Yes...but she obviously meant you sent her away from her association with you. She was still feverish, in shock. She’d just suffered a major accident.’ Alicia could feel the shock setting in again.

Dante shook his head incredulously as something became very clear to him. He cursed himself for not having seen it before. ‘Your sister would know that the merger is coming up. She knows how vulnerable I am to public scandal at this moment...’ He shook his head. ‘I know *exactly* what you and she are up to now.’

Alicia leant forward again, her hands clenched, her eyes bright. ‘Signora D’Aquanni, right now she is fighting for her life, she’s not up to anything beyond that. And as for me, do you really think I’ve nothing better to do than chase around Europe trying to get some holier-than-thou autocratic billionaire playboy to speak to me?’

He looked at her coolly and then said, ‘You can drop the act now, it’s unnecessary.’ He turned away from her, making her

insides boil over with fury.

She undid her belt and stood up from the seat, her face pink with rage. His calculating dismissive look had driven her blood pressure even higher. As if he knew something she didn't. He looked back up at her as she planted herself in front of him, hands on hips.

'You really are unbelievable. Do you think you're so untouchable that you can treat people like things? Like...' she flung her hand out '...toys to be played with and then discarded when you're bored? You might have grown up getting your own way, but that's not how—'

In that instant the plane suddenly hit some turbulence and Alicia was thrown forward and off balance. With deadly inevitability and in sickening slow motion, she fell straight into Dante D'Aquanni's lap.

The wind was knocked out of her and she was plastered against his front. And when she tried to move, hard arms held her captive. In a second she became aware of hard, taut thigh muscles under her bottom, a very hard chest and his breath, feathering across her face. He smelt fresh, masculine, musky.

She struggled in earnest, in panic at the way her own body was responding eagerly. 'Let me go.'

'No way. I'm far too interested in hearing the end of your tirade. Please, do go on. I believe you were about to tell me how things work.' His voice was innocuous enough, not a hint of the extreme torture of her squirming position on his lap.

She looked up and wished she hadn't. His face, that mouth, was inches away and his eyes told the real story of the emotion behind his words. They were dark and utterly cold. Remote.

'I...I...' Her voice sounded squeaky, ineffectual. Why, oh, why, did she have to be so aware of him physically? He was the enemy, the man who had rejected her sister, who even now was denying paternity. This man was the lowest of the low...

'Actually, I'm not interested in what you have to say, as you're so far from the truth it's not even funny. What I am interested in, however, is this...'

And, before Alicia could ask what he meant, his mouth had landed on hers and she was transported back in time to the previous evening. Every nerve ending exploded into a tiny ball of fire. It was madness, insanity, this instantaneous effect he had.

One of his hands had found its way underneath her sweater and was climbing up over her skin, skimming her waist. Her breasts throbbed as if on cue and swelled to tight points. She wriggled as a shaft of pure arousal pulsed between her legs and Dante groaned softly against her mouth. Her heart thumped even faster, reality slipping away with an inexorability that Alicia couldn't fight.

His hand cupped one of her breasts and, with aching slowness, his thumb found and rubbed against the tight bud under its covering of lace. *Hard, not soft*, went through her overheated brain as the callused feel of his hands were an exquisite torture against her sensitive skin. Alicia's head fell back, her eyes closed.

She'd never, ever felt like this before—this immediate fire that erupted and washed away any resistance. The only time she'd come close to anything like this—

Her thoughts seized to an icy halt as a memory surfaced and she stiffened. Dante's hand was seeking her other breast and Alicia was aghast to see that she'd shifted in order to offer him easier access. She seized on that painful memory and pushed with all her might against him. His arms loosened and she tumbled back and out of the seat, landing on her rear on the soft carpet.

What the hell had just happened?

She stood awkwardly, breathing heavily. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth, her eyes huge. She dropped her hand and her mouth was pink, her cheeks glowing red. Dante said nothing, his face implacable, barely a hair out of place. Unmoved.

'Don't touch me ever again. You make me sick.'

And, before he could see how much turmoil she was in, she turned and fled to the toilet at the front of the cabin, narrowly avoiding the stewardess, who appeared just then with a tray piled high with food and drinks.

After spending an inordinately long time in the bathroom splashing cold water on her face and wrists, Alicia emerged. She wondered what kind of spell this man held over her and felt sick to the stomach at the thought of facing Melanie when she'd proven herself to be no less immune to his *charms*. For a brief cataclysmic moment in there, faced with her own bewildered

image, she'd actually wished that somehow he wasn't the father of Melanie's baby. She was going to be the aunt of this man's child, for goodness' sake. Her stomach had lurched ominously and she thought for a second that she'd be sick.

But when she emerged, steeled to see him again, the cabin was empty. The stewardess turned around from where she'd been laying out cutlery and plates. Alicia thought hysterically that Dante must have parachuted out in order to get away from her. The cool blonde woman cut through her thoughts. 'Mr D'Aquanni has taken a call in the office at the back of the plane. He said to call me if you need anything. We'll be landing in a little under an hour, Ms Parker.'

Alicia nodded. She couldn't trust herself to speak. Of course the plane had an office. Silly her, she chided herself. And no doubt he was as disgusted by what had just happened as she was. Her cheeks burned as she recalled what it must have looked like. She had practically thrown herself into his arms, had all but begged him to keep going...

Dante sat at the back of the plane, his call having lasted only a couple of minutes. His body still hummed, his trousers still felt tight. He'd watched, uncharacteristically speechless as Alicia had walked into the bathroom. When she'd landed on his lap, in his mind's eye he'd seen very clearly what he should do—put her away from him and back to her own seat. But his arms had come around her instinctively. His lap had cupped her bottom as if it had known it from a previous existence. And the feel of her

tiny, curved form had been so seductive that he'd found it nigh on impossible to remember the rage that her words had sparked within him.

But without her bewitching presence he could remember. How dared she presume to know what kind of upbringing he'd had? It had been more like an up-dragging. He'd fought and kicked every step of the way, staying on the right side of the law only by the mercy of some divine force. And if it hadn't been for Stefano Arrigi plucking him and his brother from the streets when he had, who knew where he—*they*—might have ended up...?

He cursed the woman for making him think of these things. He knew rationally that he couldn't entirely blame her as he'd never publicized his background—oh, the information was there, he couldn't move without someone commenting on it—but he'd learnt the hard way that once you had money people didn't much care how you'd got it, and yet Alicia's condemnation had cut him in a tender place. And he had no idea why. She was a complete stranger to him.

He didn't seek pity from anyone. Especially when he had such a bitter memory of the one and only time he *had* told someone the truth—a woman. And yet he felt instinctively that *this* woman would somehow empathise. Or, more accurately, *pretend* to.

He stood abruptly, making some papers fall from the desk. The sooner they got to England and sorted this farce out the better. And the sooner he made sure this woman had no recourse

or claim, however bogus, on his life, the better. He vowed that within the day he would be back in his villa on Lake Como, any threat from these women nullified and eradicated.

Dante returned to the main cabin just as the plane was landing and Alicia studiously avoided looking anywhere near him. She trembled inside. Watching the ground below become clearer and clearer, she could make out fields, buildings, tiny cars...she realized then that she hadn't told him where to go but they were in fact circling over the Oxford area.

She turned around. 'How did you know where to come? I never told you.'

She was relieved to see him buttoned up, suit jacket on.

'I know because it didn't take much to find out.'

Alicia had to consciously stop her gaze from dropping to his mouth, the strong brown column of his throat. 'Oh...'

'You never did tell me what you want the money for exactly, or how much... You pulled your fainting stunt just before you did. Which was, no doubt, designed somewhat crudely to arouse sympathy.' His tone was conversational, bored even.

Alicia's heart hardened. The man was a bastard. She hated him. He had hurt Melanie unforgivably.

She tried to keep her voice steady but it was a struggle. Briefly, she told him of Melanie's injuries. 'She's going to need the expert ongoing care of one of the best gynaecologists in the UK who specializes in post trauma cases, and he is only available privately. Even if we had the money, he's based in central London, so we

would have to move closer in order to see him once a week. Melanie won't be able to withstand a lengthy public transport journey. He works in Harley Street. You do the maths.' She flung the last words at him in a fit of pique at his lack of expression. Tears stung her eyes again. Damn it, if Melanie or the baby suffered because of this man... She turned away in despair. She wouldn't be surprised if when they landed he threw her from the plane and closed the door only to take off, back to Italy.

Dante watched the slim column of her throat work in profile. Was she really upset or was this part of the game? *As if he had to ask.* He had thought for a brief moment of seeing her out of the plane door, closing it behind her and taking off immediately. But he knew he couldn't. Melanie Parker was a reality. She *was* associated with him. It would be an easy story to sell and he was damned if he'd let her.

He focused on his recent conversation with his assistant in Italy. They were still unable to track down his younger brother. His mouth tightened. If this pregnancy was genuine, Paolo D'Aquanni had a lot to answer for.

CHAPTER FOUR

'YOUR sister has been conscious for a few hours now. We're cautiously optimistic that she's not going to lapse again.'

Alicia felt weak with relief. 'And the baby?'

The ward sister nodded. 'The baby is doing fine.' She shook her head incredulously. 'It's a miracle really how it survived the impact of the crash but, as you know, this is only the first

step. She's going to need constant care to ensure its healthy progress. It's such a relief that Paolo has managed to make the first appointment for Mel to see Dr Hardy in London in a couple of weeks. I was afraid it'd be too short notice.'

Alicia's back tensed; she felt Dante straighten beside her. She struggled to interpret the words she'd just heard. 'What are you talking about? Who is Paolo?'

Her friend gave her a funny look. 'Why, Mel's boyfriend, of course, silly. He arrived last night. He stayed in the chair beside her bed, absolutely besotted.' She bustled towards the ward, guiding them in. 'She's still very weak, so maybe don't make it a long visit today, OK?'

Alicia felt herself nod dumbly. She still couldn't process the words. She was vaguely aware of Dante behind her, his hand moving to her back, propelling her forward. She moved, but didn't know how. They were in a ward of four beds, the curtains pulled around her sister's. Somehow instinctively Alicia just *knew* that everything was about to fall apart.

And when she pulled back the curtain she nearly fainted for the second time in two days.

'Lissy...' Melanie's weakened voice was a thread of its normal chatty vitality but Alicia couldn't even look at her yet. She couldn't move. She stared in abject mounting horror at a younger, slightly less good looking, slightly smaller version of Dante D'Aquanni. She had to be so exhausted that she was hallucinating. That was it—extreme tiredness and stress... She

raised a hand to her head.

‘Lissy? Are you OK?’

Finally she turned to look at her sister and blanched when she saw her still too pale face, one livid scar still across her forehead. But a hint of colour warmed her cheeks under the sickly pallor and the sight of her bump under the bedclothes was reassuring. Alicia nodded her head jerkily.

An autocratic hand propelled her towards a chair beside the bed. Melanie reached out a hand and took Alicia’s in hers. ‘What is it? The nurses said you’d been gone since yesterday... Where did you—’

Melanie broke off and looked from Alicia to Dante D’Aquanni, who she’d just noticed. Out of the corner of her eye, Alicia saw the younger man stand, bristling.

Melanie’s voice sounded strained and Alicia could see this man take her hand in support. ‘Mr D’Aquanni... What are you doing here?’

Dante stepped forward into the light and seemed to Alicia to energise the small space. ‘Your sister here seems to be under the misapprehension that I am the father of your unborn child.’ Alicia couldn’t be unaware of the way his glance flicked down to the bump of her sister’s belly, as if to confirm for himself that she had been telling the truth.

Melanie looked at Alicia. ‘How...what...however did you get that idea?’

Alicia fought valiantly against sinking into the ground into the

comfort of another dead faint. She couldn't look at Dante.

‘When I came here last week, you were feverish...I asked you who had done this to you and all you said was, “Dante D’Aquanni,” his was the only name you mentioned... You said you’d been on your way to see him. You asked me to find him for you...’

‘I did?’

Alicia smiled sadly. This wasn't Melanie's fault. ‘You probably don't remember.’

Melanie groaned and glanced at the young man beside her shyly. ‘I *had* been on my way to see Mr D’Aquanni.’ She glanced at him then with a little trepidation. ‘But it was only to ask him to bring back Paolo...’

‘Paolo...’ Alicia repeated dumbly.

Dante spoke then, and Alicia flinched slightly at the harshness of his tone. ‘Paolo D’Aquanni—the man your sister was having an affair with at the office. My *brother*.’

His words seemed to come from far away. Alicia looked across at Paolo. ‘So you’re...’

Melanie squeezed her hand. ‘Yes, Lissy, he’s the one, the father of my baby.’

Distaste flavoured Dante's mouth. His eyes raked over Melanie, taking in her undoubtedly weakened state. He had to admit that she couldn't have faked the crash. She looked to be taller than Alicia; they shared the same colouring, but her eyes were blue, not a deep, dark chocolate brown. He ruthlessly drove

down his awareness of the small woman beside the bed.

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