The Tuscan Tycoon's Pregnant Housekeeper

Christina Hollis

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She was caught in his piercing gaze. 'Trust me. There's nothing more intimate on offer than that.'

Everything went very still. In the silence, Michelle became painfully aware of a sound inside her head. It was all her dreams, crumbling into dust.

'Unless,' he said slowly, 'you have something more intimate in mind…?'

His voice lilted with danger. Michelle sensed it. Her mother might have seen off all her boyfriends in the past, but when it came to Alessandro Castiglione no previous experience was necessary.

Their swing seat rocked gently in the warm breeze, scented by low-growing thyme. Michelle hoped it would cool her flaming cheeks. Instead she felt hotter than ever. She began moving uneasily. Strange feelings flowed through her body every time she looked at him.

His arm dropped lazily along the back of the bench. 'What's the matter, *cara*?'

She stood up quickly. 'I don't like this.'

He laughed. It was a low, provocative sound.

'No? I think you like it very much.'

Christina Hollis was born in Somerset, and now lives in the idyllic Wye Valley. She was born reading, and her childhood dream was to become a writer. This was realised when she became a successful journalist and lecturer in organic horticulture. Then she gave it all up to become a full-time

mother of two, and to run half an acre of productive country garden. Writing Mills & Boon® romances is another ambition realised. It fills most of her time, between complicated rural school runs. The rest of her life is divided between garden and kitchen, either growing fruit and vegetables or cooking with them. Her daughter's cat always closely supervises everything she does around the home, from typing to picking strawberries!

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THE TUSCAN TYCOON'S PREGNANT HOUSEKEEPER

BY
CHRISTINA HOLLIS

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To all carers, everywhere

CHAPTER ONE

ANY MINUTE now! Michelle thought as the prow of the *Arcadia* nosed around the headland of St Valere. She had been waiting for this. Even so, she took a moment to admire her employer's vast yacht as it cut a white slit through the bright blue Mediterranean.

It would be a terrible wrench when this temporary job came to an end—if anyone could call being housekeeper at the villa Jolie Fleur 'work'. This position was a godsend, although the thought of her contract coming to an end lurked on her horizon like a big black cloud. And right now she was watching a thunderhead arrive to join it.

The previous day, her employer's domestic manager had rung Michelle from the yacht. Sounding tense and exasperated, the woman had warned her that an unexpected guest was going to be staying at the villa. Michelle had soon found out why. One of her employer's grandest guests was not fitting in to life on board ship. Michelle had laughed at this, thinking it was because of seasickness. But the truth was more than that.

Billionaire art dealer Alessandro Castiglione couldn't be confined to the ocean. He was *supposed* to be taking a few weeks' complete break from work, the housekeeper had said, but her tone had told Michelle more than her words. She had known then what was in store for her, because she had seen plenty of men like him. Alessandro Castiglione would be a driven man, who drove his staff mad at the same time. He might be, as the woman had told her, 'The best-looking thing in every magazine!', but Michelle knew it took more than good looks to keep a tycoon at the top of his game.

Cleaning offices in central London had given her a glimpse of the brutal side of business life. So when the domestic manager had added a bit of gossip, Michelle had taken it with a pinch of salt. This man, she'd said, had recently taken over his father's firm and sacked nearly all its employees. If that wasn't bad enough, the woman had added in a low voice, they were all his aunts, uncles and cousins!

What sort of man would sack his relatives? Even Michelle's mother had never done that! She thought back to the life she had

been so glad to abandon a few months earlier. Working for her mother had been hell. Mrs Spicer was an absolute perfectionist. The two of them, as Spicer and Co, had built up a reputation for fast, discreet domestic service anywhere in central London. Mrs Spicer had given the orders. Michelle had been the 'and Co' part of their business. She did all the dirty work.

But I'm in sole charge now! Michelle thought. Despite her nervousness, she allowed herself a small smile as she waited to greet her famous house guest. However bad he was, Alessandro Castiglione couldn't possibly be a worse task-master than her mother.

Michelle always kept Jolie Fleur spotless, so this unexpected arrival hadn't made too much extra work for her. And what was the worst this man could do? Sack her? She only had a few weeks left in this position anyway. He might be an unexploded bomb, but Michelle had total confidence in her skills. She knew that if she worked hard and kept out of his way there would be no reason for him to lose his temper—at least not with her.

A man who dumps his own relatives will think nothing of throwing me out on my ear, and I'm not ready to leave! She thought. A keen sense of self-preservation had got her this far in life. Now she had escaped from England, she was curious to see how much further she might go.

As she watched from the clifftop overlooking the bay, a shape detached itself from the yacht's flight deck. It was a helicopter. Michelle shaded her eyes with her hand. It was always exciting to

watch it swing into the hard blue sky with the grace of a wheeling seagull. She spent so long gazing up, the helicopter was almost overhead before she remembered she ought to be in position to welcome her unwelcome guest. She walked around to the front doors of the villa, making one last check of the exterior as she did so. The windows and white paintwork gleamed in the blinding sunlight. Inside the house, everything was ready. The caretaker and the gardener were the only permanent members of staff during the holiday season, but they weren't anywhere to be seen.

Nervously, she checked her fingernails and her uniform. Everything was clean and neat, as usual. Keeping busy was Michelle's way of coping with the world. With nothing left to panic about, she ran through what she would do when the unexpected house guest landed.

I'll give him a smile and a slight bow of my head, she *thought. Then I'll extend my hand for a handshake, tell him to ring me if he needs anything, and vanish.*

That didn't sound too difficult. The tricky part was actually managing it. Michelle loved this job because it gave her the chance to spend a lot of time on her own. People always made her nervous. The prospect of meeting a man who was apparently never photographed with the same model twice—woman or car—terrified her.

The incoming helicopter's rumble increased, until it vibrated right through her body. She looked down at the palms of her hands. Tiny beads of perspiration sparkled in their shallow

creases. Absent-mindedly she ran them over the severe black skirt of her uniform and then stopped. A proper French chatelaine would never do such a thing!

I might be lucky and find he spends all his time out on the town, she thought, desperately trying to buoy up her spirits. *In that case he'll be nocturnal, so I'll hardly see him. Making his stay run smoothly will be enough for me*.

She walked quickly round to the front of the villa, the stiff sea breeze at her back. All the windows and doors were wide open, letting a cooling draught rush right through the house. Michelle thought the rich smell of the maquis was much nicer than the soulless scents pumped out by the air-conditioning system. Once she was in place, she could watch the helicopter land with a clear conscience. As it drew closer to the helipad, the racket of its rotors was almost too much to bear. Michelle turned away from the sound and moved closer to the door for protection.

Turning around again, she expected to see the helicopter on the lawn. She got a surprise. It was still hanging in the air. Something must be wrong. Gaston, the pilot, was usually in such a tearing hurry to get back to his poker game on the yacht that he plonked the machine down anywhere. Smashed shrubs and crushed flowers were painful reminders of Gaston's previous overshoots and under-steering. Jolie Fleur's carefully tended mixed borders weren't so much a reminder of their English owner's homeland, they were more of a war zone.

This time was clearly going to be different. Michelle assumed

there was a new pilot at the controls. Gaston would never take so long lining up his approach. But when the helicopter suddenly swung away and made a circuit of the house to try another approach, she caught sight of the pilot's face. It was the same old Gaston—but, from the furious look on his face, a perfectionist was schooling him in the art of landing.

By the time the helicopter finally came to rest, its skids were lined up exactly with the white letter 'H' stencilled in the centre of Jolie Fleur's main lawn. The racket had been deafening. Michelle's carefully brushed hair was blown to a thatch. As she tried to tame her mousy brown tangle, disaster struck. The helicopter's rotors slowed and its downdraught eased. The drop in pressure meant a gust of wind off the sea got behind the villa's door and slammed it shut behind her with a thunderous bang. Michelle jumped—or would have done, if her uniform hadn't held her back. Its skirt had been sucked in between the heavy door and its jamb. She was trapped and could hardly move.

Tugging at it with growing horror, she realised this was the first and only low point since she'd left England—but it was bottomless. She knew the door would have locked.

Desperately hoping for a miracle, she tried the handle anyway. The door didn't move. Her guardian angel must be on holiday.

Michelle's pulse had been galloping with nerves all morning. Now it went into overdrive. What could she do? Wave hopefully at the tall, rangy figure unfolding itself from the helicopter? Appealing for help to a guest when she was supposed to be so

efficient wouldn't be the best start to their working relationship. Someone who could teach precision to a slap-dash pilot in one lesson was unlikely to have any time for accidents or mishaps.

Desperately, she tried working her skirt out through the crack, pulling it up and down, backwards and forwards. Nothing worked. The alternative was to tear herself free, leaving her skirt behind. That wasn't an option. A careless housekeeper was one thing. A half-dressed one was unforgivable—and totally unforgettable. Trussed up like a chicken, she resigned herself to a roasting.

Signor Alessandro Castiglione stood on the parched lawn, his back to her, as he waited for his designer luggage to be unloaded. Michelle watched, getting hotter and hotter. Long, agonising seconds dripped away. She tensed, ready with a million explanations. Taking possession of a briefcase and laptop, her guest left Gaston to deal with everything else. Marching towards the house, he covered the distance in a terrifyingly short time.

He was nothing like as old as she'd expected, but to think such a young man was already notorious in the newspapers somehow made her situation much worse. Michelle's spirits skidded along rock-bottom. Despite his hunched shoulders and considered pace, he was moving quickly. Instead of taking the track of scuffed, dead grass leading directly from the helipad to the house, he took a much longer route. This went by way of paved paths through banks of thyme and sage, and stretched out her agony still further. Watching bees working among the herb

flowers always persuaded Michelle to relax and linger. They had absolutely no effect on this man. He was totally single-minded. Looking neither to left nor right, he homed straight in on the front door of the villa.

If Michelle hadn't been so frantic she would have appreciated his fine features. The natural curl in his thick, dark hair, his quick brown eyes, frowning brow and heavy tread would normally have made such an impression on her she would have been struck dumb. Instead she was speechless with embarrassment. Hands behind her back, she went on easing, tugging and wheedling at her skirt to try and free it. It was no use.

The closer the newcomer got, the more frantic she felt. Her fingers throbbed from trying to break free. So did her pulse. It was so hot. She might as well have been a butterfly beating its wings against a closed window. She was well and truly stuck. If that wasn't bad enough, she was beginning to see why this guest hadn't fitted in on Mr Bartlett's yacht. It was designed for holidays and having a good time. Alessandro Castiglione looked as though he didn't know the meaning of the words. Despite the heat, he was wearing a top-quality suit and a hand-finished shirt. His only concessions to the Mediterranean were the ivory colour of his linen trousers and jacket, the open buttons at his neck, and the mulberry-coloured tie peeking from his pocket.

Michelle swallowed hard. The time for practising her welcome was over. Now for it…

'*Buongiorno*, Signor Castiglione. My name is Michelle Spicer,

and I'll be looking after you during your stay here at Jolie Fleur.'

His pale, aristocratic face was compressed. 'I don't need looking after. That's why I jumped ship. There were too many people running round after me. All they do is get in my way,' he growled in faultless English, speaking with the accent of a Caesar. It drove everything from Michelle's mind except her fear of explaining exactly how much of a fool she was.

And then, ten feet away from her, his expression changed from distracted to thoughtful. He stopped. Michelle tried to take a step backwards away from him, but her heels rattled against the firmly closed door. There was no escape. She stood and quailed, while he stood and watched her. He pressed his lips together in a tight line, matching the deep furrows on his brow. Michelle couldn't think of a single thing to say. This was worse than she had ever imagined it would be. She was pinned to the door by his unblinking stare. Michelle tried to tell herself this was just another job and she really shouldn't care what impression he was getting of her. The truth was, she cared very much. Staff should be invisible and silent. Here she was, pegged out with no hope of release. You couldn't get much more visible than that.

Why does he have to be so good-looking? she thought. *It wouldn't be half so bad if he was old, or ugly, or ranted and raved at me—anything would be easier to bear than this slow, silent interrogation…*

'Well! What have we got here?' he drawled eventually. 'You're trapped.'

So tell me something I don't know! she thought, but the relish in his eyes was too obvious. Instead, she nodded and tried to smile.

'I—I'm the housekeeper here at Jolie Fleur and I shall be doing everything I can to make your stay as pleasant as possible…' *Though how I'm going to manage it from here…* she added silently.

It didn't seem much of an obstacle to Alessandro Castiglione. He pinned her to the door with a knowing look.

'*Everything?*' he questioned with a mischevious twinkle. 'You mean my wish is your command? That's dangerous talk, *signorina*, when you look to be stuck fast!'

Michelle burbled something wordless, her mind melted by flames of embarrassment. She needn't have bothered. He was far too interested in her problem.

'I was trapped too—on that damned boat,' he added, almost sympathetically.

After a moment's hesitation, Michelle screwed up all her courage and tried an explanation.

'The door slammed shut in the helicopter's downdraught. The key is in my pocket, but I can't reach it,' she said, in a voice so small she hardly recognised it.

To her surprise he gave a quick nod of understanding. 'You must be more careful. This is a very heavy door, Michelle. You're lucky it's only your dress. You might have lost your fingers.'

Her heart slowed to about five hundred beats a minute. Looking into those *nocciola*-brown eyes was having a very

strange effect on her. None of the bad things she had been told about him mattered any more. This was a man who had been through a lot. She could see that from his face. He must be in his late thirties, and creases etched between his brows added to the character of his otherwise fine features, but to Michelle he was at his loveliest when he smiled.

'My keys—' she tried to say, but no sound came out. Clearing her throat as delicately as she could, she tried again. 'My keys are in my pocket, but I can't reach them.'

'Then it's easily fixed,' he said as he moved towards her.

The villa's overhanging eaves meant she was imprisoned in the shade, but her temperature began to rise. The closer Alessandro got, the better-looking he became. Any lines on his face now were drawn by concentration. His aura of confidence should have put her at her ease, but it had exactly the opposite effect. There was nowhere for Michelle to look except straight at him. She was swept into the steady depths of his eyes and could study them all she liked. Alessandro Castiglione was far too busy to notice. He was concentrating on her waist.

'Surely if you were to turn around—?'

'How? I'm stuck!'

'I'll show you.'

He closed in on her until they were almost touching. She gazed up at him, her hazel eyes wide with anxiety. He placed his hands on her shoulders, and she flinched.

'Michelle! Anyone would think I was a monster.' He laughed.

‘I’m sorry,’ she muttered.

‘Don’t worry. I’ve had my quota of virgins for the day.’ With that, he turned her—not to the left, as she’d imagined, but to the right. Now she was facing the door. She couldn’t see him any more, but hardly needed to. The mere presence of him was sending out enough vibrations to tell her he meant business.

‘That’s given you more room to play with, hasn’t it?’ he asked in his deep brown voice.

Michelle tried, struggled and failed.

‘Yes, but it’s not enough. I still can’t get my hand around into my pocket.’

The fragrance of his new clothes and expensive cologne retreated a little, but then returned with full force.

‘How about if I try?’

Michelle nodded. His hand slid over her, and she was spellbound. His touch was slow and measured. Michelle felt it like a caress. She tried to steady her breathing. It was impossible. The air filling her lungs was superheated with his clean, understated fragrance.

‘No—please—don’t do that…’ Michelle’s protest sounded feeble and fake, even to her.

Alessandro’s hand stopped moving, but he didn’t take it away. She felt the warmth of it burning through the thin fabric of her uniform like a brand.

‘What is it, Michelle?’

His rich accent made even those few simple words sound

beautiful.

Michelle pressed her cheek hard against the impassive face of the front door and tried to keep cool. It wasn't easy when she could feel every one of his fingers.

'Nothing.' She shook her head.

Only, it's the first real time I've been touched by a man, she thought to herself.

The tips of his fingers slid lazily over her, searching. When he found what he was looking for, she gasped. His hand slid into her pocket and closed over her key fold.

'Now…I'm afraid I shall have to move in a lot closer to reach the keyhole…'

Michelle couldn't speak. He was leaning against her as he searched for the lock. The feel of his breath on her hair was intoxicating enough. When his right hand slid around her waist the breath caught in her throat. There was a click, and the door swung open. His supporting hand fell away from her and he stood back.

'You're free,' he said, nodding towards the entrance hall, smiling. It lit up his face, and she couldn't help pausing in wonder. Then a breeze rippled around them, bringing her situation right back to life again. She flung out her hand to stop the door slamming a second time. Alessandro's hand was already there. Electricity crackled right through her body. She felt his firm, warm fingers again—then snatched hers away.

'Thank you, Signor Castiglione. I'll show you to your suite.

Then I'll take you on a tour of Jolie Fleur—' she gabbled, desperate to prove how capable she was.

'No—I'll be fine.' Alessandro cut her off. 'There's no reason why you should worry about me. Go and do whatever you have to. I'm more than capable of finding my way around a house alone.'

'Of course, Signor Castiglione.'

Michelle dipped her head politely and reversed away from him.

'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to change—this dress is all creased now. I live in the studio house. It's in the grounds, just over there.'

He frowned. 'Why don't you live in the main house?'

'I'm only temporary staff, *signor*. Given my position, I don't really fit in anywhere up at the house.'

'But Terence Bartlett told me his house was deserted—there must be plenty of spare rooms. All his staff are with him on the yacht. That's the only reason I got him to drop me off here, rather than heading for home. I employ even more people than he does,' he said, with a voice full of feeling.

Michelle wondered if this was before or after the redundancies, and shivered.

'To be honest, I prefer living away from the main house, *signor*. I like my own company, so the studio is ideal for me.'

'Do you mean the artist's studio?' he said slowly.

She nodded. 'There's a lot of equipment and things stored in there, *signor*, but none of it has been used or even opened.'

‘Terence had it built so he could dabble, but he’s never had the time to use it. Or the talent,’ he added regretfully. ‘Is it a good building?’

‘It’s wonderful, *signor*.’ Michelle smiled.

Living in a place where works of art might one day be made was another reason why she loved Jolie Fleur. The place was so beautiful it cried out to be drawn or painted. She wished she had one percent of the equipment that was lying abandoned in the apartment she was using. Then she reminded herself none of it was any use to her, as she lacked the nerve to try.

‘May I take a look inside this studio of yours?’

How could she refuse? Alessandro was the boss, after all. She nodded. The idea of a man intruding into her personal space would normally set her teeth on edge. And yet something about *this* man made agreeing to his request the most natural thing in the world. She didn’t want to cross him, but that wasn’t the only reason. In the few minutes since he’d landed Michelle had realised something. He might be used to the company of stars and billionaires, but Alessandro Castiglione was the most natural, unaffected person she had ever met. He didn’t waste words, either. That was something else in his favour. She much preferred an employer who kept quiet and let her get on with things, although the magnetic Signor Castiglione was bound to be quite a challenge. But Michelle knew her place. It was his holiday: her job was to keep him happy while keeping out of his way.

She found herself wondering whether he would be spending much time at the villa, or whether he would be travelling farther afield. And, whatever he did, would he have company? She began to think that keeping an invisible watch on this gorgeous man might be a lot more fun than hiding away from him completely…

CHAPTER TWO

MICHELLE'S heart leapt each time she saw her temporary home. It nestled in a sheltered part of the garden, and was designed so that the banks of flowers billowing on every side could be enjoyed whatever the weather. Glass made up most of the front of the building, while deep eaves shaded a swing-seat. Michelle unlocked the sliding French doors and stood aside for him to go in.

'This is impressive.' Alessandro Castiglione looked around the living room, with its stacks of art boxes and storage bins. Wandering into the kitchen, he nodded appreciatively at the big stainless steel sink and double drainers that took up most of the room. 'It wouldn't take long to remove this partition wall to make better use of the space,' he murmured to himself.

Michelle stood silently in a corner while he roamed around, occasionally taking something from the huge collection of equipment and supplies she had to squeeze around. Once he had studied a packet of paper, a box of pencils, an easel or some brushes, he put them back carefully in their place. Michelle was glad to see that. Most employers would have put them anywhere. *They pay you to be tidy for them*, her mother had always said.

She found it fascinating to watch him when she could. Each time he caught her doing it, he smiled. Michelle found herself blushing madly, and had to look away. Her guest knew exactly the effect he was having.

'I never knew Terence had so many art books!' He ran his finger along the spines lining the shelves, but it was a volume open on the coffee table that really caught his eye. 'Raphael. He's one of my favourites. Do you mind if I borrow this one and take it back to the villa with me?'

He picked it up and began flicking through the pages, from the back to front of the book. Of all the ones to choose… Michelle felt as though he had reached inside her ribcage and pulled out her heart. She knew exactly what he was thinking, because she had experienced it so often herself. As he revelled in the beautiful pictures and glowing colours, it showed clearly in his face. It was only when he reached the flyleaf that he stopped smiling.

'"Presented to Michelle Spicer as part of the Lawrence Prize for the year's outstanding portfolio,"' he read aloud, and then looked at her directly. His eyes were smiling, 'So this is yours?'

Michelle nodded, too struck by the sparkle in his eyes to speak.

'A little light bedtime reading?'

'It's a bit too heavy for that, *signor*.'

'For one person, maybe…although two might manage, I suppose. One could read while the other looks on?'

A vision of Alessandro Castiglione in bed came to Michelle,

and it didn't involve any art books. She managed not to gasp aloud, but couldn't help taking a step backwards, away from him.

When he put her presentation book down on the table again Michelle was puzzled.

'Aren't you going to take it after all, *signor*?'

He shook his head. 'I couldn't possibly. It's yours and must mean so much to you.'

'It does—but if you want it…'

'Thank you. I'll let you have it back as soon as possible.' Taking possession of it again with relish, he patted the cover. 'This must be an inspiring place to work for you, as an artist. How many pictures have you done while you've been here?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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