

The Billionaire
Boss's
Secretary Bride

*Helen
Brooks*

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HELEN BROOKS
The Billionaire Boss's
Secretary Bride

Аннотация

As far as secretary Gina Leighton is concerned, billionaire businessman Harry Breedon has never shown more than a professional interest in her. Why should he? Plain and plump, Gina knows she's hardly trophy-wife material! But Harry has noticed her—sexy curves and all—and now that Gina has another job offer, he'll have to act fast. This handsome tycoon is determined to seduce her into staying—even if that means making her his wife!

Содержание

Helen Brooks	7
All about the author...	8
CONTENTS	10
CHAPTER ONE	11
CHAPTER TWO	33
CHAPTER THREE	47
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	56



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Dinner^{at} 8

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Beneath the tux, there's a primal, passionate lover who's determined to make her his!



Wined, dined and swept away by a British billionaire!

Helen Brooks
THE BILLIONAIRE BOSS'S
SECRETARY BRIDE



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All about the author...

Helen Brooks

HELEN BROOKS was born and educated in Northampton, England. She met her husband at the age of sixteen, and thirty-five years later the magic is still there. They have three lovely children and a menagerie of animals in the house! The children, friends and pets all keep the house buzzing and the food cupboards empty, but Helen wouldn't have it any other way.

Helen began writing in 1990 as she approached that milestone of a birthday—forty! She realized her two teenage ambitions (writing a novel and learning to drive) had been lost amid babies and family life, so she set about resurrecting them. Her first novel was accepted after one rewrite, and she passed her driving test (the former was a joy and the latter an unmitigated nightmare).

Helen is a committed Christian and fervent animal lover. Though she finds time is always at a premium, she somehow fits in walks in the countryside with her husband and dogs, meals out followed by the cinema or theater, reading, swimming and visiting with friends. She also enjoys sitting in her wonderfully therapeutic, rambling old garden in the sun with a glass of red wine (under the guise of resting while thinking, of course!).

Since becoming a full-time writer, Helen has found her occupation one of pure joy. She loves exploring what makes

people tick and finds the old adage “truth is stranger than fiction” to be absolutely true. She would love to hear from any readers, care of Harlequin Presents.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER ONE

'I STILL can't believe you're really going, that this is your last day. All along I thought you'd change your mind. I mean, you've been here for ever, Gina.'

Gina Leighton couldn't help but smile at her office junior's plaintive voice. 'Perhaps that's why I'm leaving, Natalie,' she said quietly. 'Because I've been here for ever, as you put it.'

OK, so 'for ever' was actually the last eleven years, since she had left university at the age of twenty-one, but clearly as far as Natalie was concerned Gina was as much a part of Breedon & Son as the bricks and mortar. As far as everyone was concerned, most likely. Especially him.

'I know I shan't be able to get on with Susan.' Natalie stared at her mournfully. 'She's not like you.'

'You'll be fine,' Gina said bracingly. She didn't mean it. In the last four weeks since she had been showing Susan Richards—her replacement—the ropes, she had come to realise Susan didn't suffer fools gladly. Not that Natalie was a fool, not at all—but she was something of a feather-brain at times, who had to have everything explained at least twice for it to click. Susan had already expressed her impatience with the girl in no uncertain terms, ignoring the fact that Natalie was a hard worker and always willing to go the extra mile.

But this wasn't her problem. In a few hours from now, she

would walk out of Breedon & Son for the last time. Not only that but she was leaving the Yorkshire market-town where she had been born and raised along with all her friends and family and moving to London at the weekend. New job, new flat, new lifestyle—new everything.

Her stomach doing a fairly good imitation of a pancake on Shrove Tuesday, Gina waved her hand at the papers on her desk. ‘I need to finish some things, Natalie, before the drinks and nibbles.’ Her boss was putting on a little farewell party for her for the last couple of hours of the afternoon, and she wanted to tie up any loose ends before she left.

Once Natalie had returned to the outer office, however, Gina sat staring round the large and comfortable room that had been her working domain for the last four years, since she had worked her way up to personal secretary to the founder of the agricultural-machinery firm. She’d been thrilled at first, the prestige and extremely generous salary adding to her sense of self-worth. And Dave Breedon was a good boss, a nice family-man with a sense of humour which matched hers. But then Dave Breedon wasn’t the reason she was leaving...

‘No eleventh-hour change of heart?’

The deep male voice brought Gina’s gaze to the doorway. ‘Of course not,’ she said with a composure that belied her racing heartbeat. But then she had had plenty of practice in disguising how she felt about Harry Breedon, her boss’s only son and right-hand man. She stared into the tanned and ruggedly

handsome face, her deep blue eyes revealing nothing beyond cool amusement. ‘You didn’t seriously think there was any chance of that, surely?’

He shrugged. “‘Hoped” is perhaps a better word.’

Ridiculous, because she had long since accepted Harry’s flirting meant absolutely nothing, but her breathing quickened in spite of herself. ‘Sorry,’ she said evenly. ‘But my bags are already packed.’

‘Dad’s devastated, you know.’ Harry strolled into her office, perching on the edge of her desk and fixing her with smoky grey eyes. Gina tried very hard not to focus on the way his trousers had pulled tight over lean male thighs. And failed.

‘Devastated?’ she said briskly. ‘Hardly. It’s nice he’ll be sorry to see me go, but I think that’s about it, Harry. And Susan is proving to be very capable, as you know.’

Susan Richards. Blonde, attractive and possessed of the sort of figure any model would be grateful for. Just Harry’s type, in fact. Over the last twelve months—since Harry had returned to the United Kingdom following his father’s heart attack, and taken on more and more of Dave Breedon’s work load—Gina had heard the company gossip about his succession of girlfriends, all allegedly blonde and slender. Whereas she was a redhead—at school she’d been called ‘carrot top’, but she preferred to label her bright auburn locks Titian. And, although her generous hour-glass shape might have been in fashion in Marilyn Monroe’s day, it wasn’t now.

So why, knowing all that, had she fallen for him? Gina asked herself silently. Especially as he was the original 'love 'em and leave 'em' male. It was the same question she had mulled over umpteen times in the last year, but she was no nearer to a logical answer. But then love didn't pretend to work on logic. All she knew was that this feeling—which had begun with an earthy lust that had knocked her sideways, and had rapidly grown into a love that was all consuming the more she'd got to know him—was here to stay. Whereas to Harry she was merely the secretary he shared with his father—admittedly someone he liked to chat and laugh and flirt with, but then he'd be the same with any female. End of story.

'I didn't think you liked London when you were at uni there. I remember you saying you couldn't wait to get home.'

Gina frowned. 'I said I was glad to come home.' She corrected quietly. 'That didn't mean I didn't like the city.'

He stared at her for a moment before hitching himself off her desk and standing to his feet. 'Well, it's your life,' he said so reasonably Gina wanted to hit him. 'I just hope you don't regret it, that's all. All big cities can be lonely places.'

'The old thing about being surrounded by people but knowing no one?' Gina nodded. 'I've lots of old university friends living in London, so that's not a problem. And I'm sharing a flat with another girl, anyway. I'm not living alone.'

She didn't add she was feeling more than a little trepidation about that. For the last six years she'd had her own place, a

small but beautifully positioned top-floor flat in a big house on the edge of town, with views of the river. After living with her parents, she had revelled in having a home of her own, where she was answerable to no one and could please herself at weekends, getting up when she wanted and eating when she felt like it. But renting in London was vastly different from renting in Yorkshire, and although her new job paid very well she couldn't run to her own place.

'Don't forget to leave your new address.' He was already walking to the door. 'I might look you up next time I spend a few days in the capital. Doss down on your sofa for a night.'

Over her dead body. She took a deep breath and let it out evenly. 'Fine,' she said nonchalantly, wishing she could hate him. It would make everything so much easier—she wouldn't be uprooting herself for one thing. Although, no, that wasn't quite fair. Even before she'd fallen for Harry she'd acknowledged she was in a rut and needed to do something with her life. Both her sisters and most of her friends were married with children; going out with them wasn't what it had once been. In the twelve months before Harry had come on the scene, she'd only had the odd date or two, as the only men around had either been boring or convinced they were God's gift to women, or, worse, married and looking for a bit of fun on the side. She'd begun to see herself as a spinster: devoted to her job, her home, and godmother to other people's children.

Her friends thought she was too choosy. She stared at the door

Harry had just closed behind him. And maybe she was. Certainly she'd had offers, but she balked at the idea of trying to like someone. Either the spark was there or it wasn't. Besides which, she wasn't desperate to settle down. What she was desperate for was a life outside work that was interesting and exciting and carried a buzz—nightclubs, the theatre, good restaurants and good company. She was only thirty two, for goodness' sake! So London had beckoned, and she'd embraced the notion.

It was the right decision. She nodded at the thought. Definitely. Without a doubt. Of course, if Harry had shown any interest...But he hadn't. And so roses round the door, cosy log-fires and breakfast in bed for two with the Sunday papers wasn't an option.

Gina swallowed the lump in her throat, telling herself she'd cried enough tears over him. However hard it was going to be to say goodbye, it would have been emotional suicide to stay. That one brief kiss at Christmas had told her that. Merely a friendly peck on her cheek as far as he was concerned, when he'd wished her merry Christmas. But the feel of his lips, the closeness of him, the delicious smell of his aftershave, had sent her into a spin for hours.

Christmas had been a bitter-sweet affair, and it was then she'd decided enough was enough. Self-torture wasn't her style. And it had been added confirmation when on the afternoon of Boxing Day, whilst she'd been walking her parents' dogs in the snowy fields surrounding the town, she'd seen him in the distance with

the blonde of the moment. She had hidden behind a tree and prayed they wouldn't see her, but once the danger was over and she'd continued her walk she'd realised merely leaving Breedon & Son wasn't enough. She had to get right away, where there was no chance of running into him.

And now it was the beginning of April. D-Day. Outside spring had come with a vengeance the last few days, croci and daffodils bursting forth, and birds busy nesting—new life sprouting seemingly everywhere. And that was the way she had to look at this, as an opportunity for new life. No point feeling her world had come to an end, no point at all.

Nevertheless, it was with gritted teeth that she joined everyone in the work canteen later that afternoon. She was touched to see most of Breedon & Son's employees—over a hundred in all, counting the folk on the factory floor—had gathered to say goodbye, and even more overcome when she was given a satellite-navigation system for her car to which everyone had contributed.

'So you can find your way back to us now and again,' Bill Dent, the chief accountant, joked as he presented her with the gift. She had a reputation—richly deserved—of having no sense of direction or navigation skills, and over the last weeks had endured a host of teasing about negotiating city streets.

'Thank you all so much.' As she gave a tearful little speech she kept her gaze from focusing on one tall, dark figure standing a little apart from the rest of the throng, but she was still vitally

aware of every movement Harry made. She knew exactly when Susan Richards made her way over to him, for instance, and the way the other woman reached up on tiptoe to whisper something in his ear.

All in all, Gina was glad when after an hour or so people began to drift home. Loving someone who didn't love you was bad enough at the best of times, but when you were trying to be bright and cheerful, and keep a lid on a mounting volcano of tears, it didn't help to see the object of your desire receiving the full batting-eyelash treatment from an undeniably attractive blonde.

When there was just a handful of people left, Gina made her way back to her office to pick up the last of her things. She felt like a wet rag. Dropping into her chair, she glanced round the room, feeling unbearably sentimental.

Dave entered a moment later, Harry on his heels. Shaking his head, Dave said, 'Don't look like that. I told you, you shouldn't leave us. Everyone thinks the world of you.'

Not everyone. Forcing a smile, Gina managed to keep her voice light and even as she said, 'The big wide world beckons, and it's now or never. It was always going to be hard to say goodbye.'

'While we're on that subject...' Dave reached into his pocket and brought out a small, oblong gift-wrapped box. 'This is a personal thank-you, lass. I'm not buttering you up when I say you've been the best secretary I've ever had. It's the truth. If London isn't all it's cracked up to be, there'll always be a job

somewhere in Breedon & Son for you.'

'Oh, it's beautiful.' After unwrapping the gift, Gina gazed, entranced, at the delicate little gold watch the box held. 'Thank you so much. I didn't expect...' The lump in her throat prevented further speech.

'Harry chose it,' said Dave, looking uncomfortable at the show of emotion. He was all down to earth, blunt Yorkshireman, and prided himself on it. 'I was going to give you a cheque, more practical in my opinion, but he thought you'd like something to remind you of your time here, and he noticed you hadn't been wearing your watch the last few weeks.'

'It broke,' she whispered. He had noticed.

'Aye, well, there we are, then.' Dave clearly wanted to end what was to him an embarrassing few moments. 'Don't forget to look us up when you're back visiting your parents. All right, lass? I'll be off now, the missus and I are out for dinner tonight. Lock up the offices, would you, Harry?' he added, turning to his son. 'The factory's already been taken care of.'

'Goodbye, Mr Breedon.' Gina stood up to shake her boss's hand—he was of the old school, and didn't hold with social pleasantries such as kissing or hugging—but then on impulse quickly pressed her lips to the leathery old cheek before she sat down again.

Dave cleared his throat. 'Bye, lass. You look after yourself,' he said gruffly before disappearing out of the door.

Silence reigned for some moments while Gina tidied the last

few papers on her desk. Every nerve and muscle was screaming, and the blood was racing through her veins. Act cool. Keep calm and businesslike. Don't give yourself away. You knew this moment was going to come.

Yes, she answered the voice in her head. But she hadn't expected they would be alone when she had to say the final goodbye.

'Your car wasn't in its normal spot in the car park this morning.'

Surprised, Gina raised her head, and looked fully at him for the first time since he'd entered the room. He gazed back at her from where he was leaning against the wall, hands in the pockets of his trousers and grey eyes half-closed, their expression inscrutable. She'd noticed this ability to betray nothing of what he was thinking early on. It was probably part and parcel of what had made him so successful in his own right since leaving university and working abroad, first in Germany and Austria, and then in the States. By all accounts he had left an extremely well paid and powerful position in a massive chain of pharmaceutical companies in America when he had returned to help his father, although she had learned this from Dave Breedon. Harry never talked about his past, and when she had asked the odd question his replies had been monosyllabic.

'My car?' She tried to collect her thoughts. It was difficult with him looking so broodingly drop-dead gorgeous. 'I knew I'd be having a drink, so I decided to travel by taxi today.' It was only

partly the truth. She hadn't known how she would feel when the knowledge that she would never see him again became reality.

'No need.' He straightened, and her stomach muscles clenched. 'I'll run you home.'

No, no, no. She had seen his car, a sexy sports job that moved like greased lightning, and it was seduction on wheels. 'Thanks, but that's not necessary. It's the wrong direction for you.'

He smiled. She wondered if he knew what a devastating effect it had on the opposite sex. Probably, she thought a trifle maliciously.

'It's a beautiful spring evening, and I'm not doing anything. I've all the time in the world,' he drawled lazily.

'No, really, I'd feel awful putting you to so much trouble.'

'I insist.' He brushed aside the desperate refusal.

'And I insist on travelling by taxi.' She could be just as determined as him. The thought that she might suffer the unthinkable humiliation of giving herself away necessitated it.

'Don't be silly.' He walked over and perched on her desk—a habit of his—lifting her chin and looking into her eyes as he said softly, 'You're all upset at leaving, and no wonder. You've been here since the beginning of time. I can't possibly abandon you to the anonymity of a taxi.'

She didn't like the 'beginning of time' bit. Who did he think she was—Methuselah? And she despised herself for the way her whole insides had tightened at his touch. But they always did, however casual the action. 'You're not abandoning me,' she said

stiffly. 'It's my choice.'

'A bad one.' He slid off the desk and walked to the door, opening it before he turned and said, 'And therefore I'm fully justified in overruling it. I'll get my coat.'

'Harry!' she shouted as he went to disappear.

'Yes, Gina?' He popped his head back round the door, grinning.

She gave up. 'This is ridiculous,' she muttered ungraciously. And dangerous. For her.

'Put your coat on and stop grumbling.'

He was back within a minute or so, taking the satellite-navigation system from her as she met him in the outer office. 'You'd better have my keys.' She handed him her office keys, which included those to all the confidential files. 'I meant to give them to Susan earlier.' But she was so busy making googoo eyes at you I never got the chance.

He pocketed them without comment.

She had slipped the case holding the watch into her handbag, and as they walked towards the lift she said quietly, 'Thank you for thinking of the watch, Harry. It's really beautiful.'

'My pleasure.' Once inside the carpet-lined box, he added, 'Dad really meant what he said, you know, and the watch is from both of us. You were great when he had his heart attack, holding the fort here, and then putting in endless hours once I was having to pick up all the threads. I couldn't have done it without you, Gina.'

This was torture. Exquisite torture, perhaps, but torture nonetheless. ‘Anyone would have done the same.’

‘No, they wouldn’t.’ His voice deepened, taking on the smoky quality that was dynamite as he murmured, ‘I just wanted to say thank you.’

The lift easily carried twelve people, but suddenly it was much too small. She caught the faintest whiff of his aftershave and breathed it in greedily. Drawing on all her considerable willpower, she said evenly, ‘There’s no need, I was just doing my job, but it’s nice to know I’m appreciated.’ She forced a smile as the lift doors opened, stepping into the small reception with a silent sigh of relief. Too cosy. Too intimate. And the car was going to be as bad.

It was worse. Every single nerve in her body registered the impact as, after settling her in the passenger seat and shutting the door, Harry joined her in the car. The interior was all black leather with a state-of-the-art dashboard, but it was the close confines of the car that had Gina swallowing hard. Her voice something of a squeak, she said, ‘This is a lovely car.’ Understatement of the year. ‘Toys for boys?’ she added, attempting a wry smile.

He turned his head, smiling. He was so close she could see every little, black hair of his five o’clock stubble in spite of the gathering twilight. ‘I had one of these in the States, and I guess I got used to fast cars.’

And fast women, no doubt. Not that any of his girlfriends

lasted for more than five minutes. Gina nodded. 'It must have been a wrench to leave America.'

'Yes, it was.' He started the engine before turning to her again. 'How about dinner?'

'What?' She stared at him, utterly taken aback.

'Dinner?' he repeated patiently. 'Unless you've other plans? I thought it might be a nice way to round off your time at Breedon & Son. A small thank-you.'

'You've already thanked me with the watch,' she said, flustered beyond measure, and hoping he wouldn't notice.

'That was a combined thank-you. This is just me.'

Whatever he was, he wasn't 'just' anything. And it would be crazy to say yes. The whole evening would be spent trying to hide her feelings and play at being friendly, when just looking at him made her weak at the knees. But she would never have the chance of another evening of his company, that was for sure. Two more days of tying up all the loose ends, and she was off to London for good. Could she cope with the agony of being with him? It would mess her head up for days.

'My other plans were clearing out cupboards and beginning to spring-clean the flat,' she admitted weakly. 'It can wait.'

'Good. Dinner it is, then. There's a great little Italian place not far from where I live. Do you like Italian food?'

She didn't think she would taste a thing tonight anyway. 'I love it.'

'I'll make sure they've got a table.' He extracted his mobile

phone, punching in a number before saying, ‘Roberto?’ and then speaking in rapid Italian. She hadn’t known he could speak the language, but it didn’t particularly surprise her. That was Harry all over. ‘That’s settled.’ He smiled at her. ‘Eight o’clock. OK with you if we call at my place first? I’d like to put on a fresh shirt before we go.’

His place. She’d see where he lived. She’d be able to picture him there in the weeks and months to follow. Not a good idea, probably, but irresistibly tempting. ‘Fine,’ she nodded, drawing on the cool aplomb she’d developed over the last twelve months, as the powerful car leapt into life and left the car park far too fast.

She glanced at Harry’s hands on the steering wheel. Large, capable, masculine hands. What would it feel like to have them move over every inch of her body, explore her intimate places, along with his mouth and tongue? To savour and taste...

‘...parents now and again.’

‘Sorry?’ Too late she realised he’d spoken, but she had been deep in a shockingly erotic fantasy. Blushing scarlet—an unfortunate attribute which went with the hair and her pale, freckled skin—she lied, ‘I was thinking how nice everyone’s been today.’

‘Of course they’ve been nice. You’re very popular.’

She didn’t want to be popular. She wanted to be a slender, elegant siren with long blonde hair and come-to-bed eyes, the sort of woman who might capture his heart, given half a chance.

‘I was just saying we must keep in touch, and perhaps meet

up for lunch now and again when you visit your parents,' he continued easily. 'I count you as a friend, Gina. I hope you know that.'

Great. 'As I do you.' She smiled brightly. Once she was in London, he'd forget she'd ever existed within days. Probably by the time he got up tomorrow morning, in fact. Harry wasn't the sort of man who had women friends. Just women.

The cool spring twilight had almost completely given way to the shadows of night by the time Harry turned the car off the country lane they had been following for some time, and through open wrought-iron gates on to a scrunchy pebble drive. Gina was surprised how far they'd travelled; she hadn't realised his home was so far away from Breedon & Son. She had supposed he'd settled somewhere near his parents' home.

The drive wound briefly between mature evergreens and bushes, which effectively hid all sight of the building from the road, and then suddenly became bordered by a wide expanse of green lawn with the house in front of them. Gina hadn't known what to expect. Probably a no-nonsense modern place or elegant turn-of-the-century manor-type house. In the event the picturesque thatched cottage in front of her was neither of these.

'This is your home?'

She had asked the obvious, but he didn't appear to notice. 'Like it?' he asked casually as the car drew up on the horseshoe-shaped area in front of the cottage.

Did she like it? How could anyone fail to? The two-storey

cottage's white walls and traditional mullioned windows were topped by a high thatched roof out of which peeped gothick dormers. The roof overhung to form an encircling veranda, supported on ancient, gnarled tree-trunks on which a table and chairs sat ready for summer evenings. There was even evidence of roses round the door on the trellis bordering the quaint arched door, and red and green ivy covered the walls of the veranda. It was so quintessentially the perfect English country-cottage that Gina was speechless. It was the last place, the very last place, she would have expected Harry to buy, and definitely no bachelor pad.

Whether he guessed what she was thinking or her face had given her away Gina wasn't sure, but the next moment he drawled, 'I had a modern stainless-steel and space-age place in the States, overlooking the ocean; I fancied a change.'

'It's wonderful.' He opened the car door as he spoke, and now as he appeared at her side and helped her out of the passenger seat she repeated, 'It's wonderful. A real fairy-tale cottage. I half expect Goldilocks and the three bears to appear any moment.' She liked that. It was light, teasing. She'd got the fleeting impression he hadn't appreciated her amazement at his choice of home, despite his lazy air.

He shrugged. 'It's somewhere to lay my hat for the moment. I'm not into putting down roots.'

She'd been right. He hadn't wanted her to assume there was any danger of him becoming a family man in the future. Not that

she would. 'Hence your travelling in the past?' she said carefully as they walked to the front door.

'I guess.'

She stared at him. 'Your father's hoping you'll take over the family business at some point, isn't he?'

'That was never on the cards.' He opened the door, standing aside so she preceded him into the wide square hall. The old floorboards had been lovingly restored and varnished, their mellow tones reflected in the honey-coloured walls adorned with the odd print or two. 'I agreed to come and help my father over the next couple of years, partly to ease him into letting go of the strings and making it easier to sell when the time comes, but that's all.'

'I see.' She didn't, but it was none of her business. 'So, you'll go back to the States at some point?'

Again he shrugged. 'The States, Germany, perhaps even Australia. I'm not sure. I invested a good deal of the money I've earned over the last years, played the stock exchange and so on. I don't actually need to work, but I will. I like a challenge.'

It was the most he had ever said about himself, and Gina longed to ask more, but a closed look had come over his face. Changing the subject, she said, 'Everything looks extremely clean and dust free. Do you have a cleaner come in?'

'Are you saying men can't clean for themselves? That's a trifle sexist, isn't it?' He grinned at her, leading the way to what proved to be the sitting room, and he opened the door into a large room

dominated by a magnificent open fireplace, the wooden floors scattered with fine rugs, and the sofas and chairs soft and plumpy. ‘You’re right, though,’ he admitted unrepentantly. ‘Mrs Rothman comes in three days a week, and does everything from changing the lightbulbs to washing and ironing. She’s a treasure.’

‘And preparing your meals?’ she asked as he waved her to a seat.

‘Not at all. I’m a great cook, if I do say so myself, and I prefer to eat what I want when I want to eat it. Glass of wine while you wait?’ he added. ‘Red or white?’

‘Red, please.’ She glanced at the fireplace as he disappeared, presumably to the kitchen. There were the remains of a fire in the fireplace, and plenty of logs were stacked in the ample confines of the hearth. She pictured him sitting here in the evenings, sipping a glass of wine maybe, while he stared into the flickering flames. The wrench her heart gave warned her to keep her thoughts in check. And she wasn’t going to dwell on the likelihood of the blonde of the moment stretched out on a rug in front of the fire, either, with Harry pampering and pleasing her.

‘One glass of wine.’

Gina was brought out of her mental agony as Harry reappeared, an enormous half-full glass of deep-red wine in one hand. She took it with a doubtful smile. There must have been half a bottle in there, and she’d been too het up to eat any of the extensive nibbles earlier, or much lunch, for that matter.

‘I won’t be long. There’s some magazines there—’ he gestured

towards one of the occasional tables dotted about the room ‘—and some nuts and olives alongside them. Help yourself.’

‘Thank you.’ As soon as he’d left again, she scuttled across and made short work of half the bowl of nuts, deciding she’d worry about the calories tomorrow. Tonight she needed to be sober and in full charge of her senses. One slip, one look, and he might guess how she felt about him, and then she’d die. She would, she’d die. Or have to go on living with the knowledge she’d betrayed herself, and that would be worse.

She retrieved her glass of wine and sipped at it as she wandered about the room. Rich, dark and fruity, it was gorgeous. Like Harry. Although he had never been fruity with her, more was the pity.

She glanced at herself in the huge antique mirror over the fireplace. The mellow lighting in the room made her hair appear more golden than anything else, and blended the pale ginger freckles that covered her creamy skin from head to foot into an overall honey glow. It couldn’t do anything for her small snub nose and nondescript features, however. She frowned at her reflection, her blue eyes dark with irritation. This was the reason Harry had never come on to her. She was the epitome of the girl next door, when she longed to be a femme fatale: tall, slim, elegant—not busty and hippy. Even her mother had to admit she was ‘nicely rounded’, which meant—in the terms the rest of the world would use—she was on the plump side.

After staring at herself for a full minute, she walked over

to the window and looked out over the grounds at the back of the cottage while she finished her glass of wine. She needed something to give her dutch courage for the evening, considering Harry was accompanying a creature not far removed from the Hunchback of Nôtre Dame.

‘You can’t see much tonight.’

He must have crept into the room, because she hadn’t heard him coming. Gina was glad there was no wine in the glass, because with the jump she gave as he came up behind her it would have been all down her dress. He continued to stand behind her, his hands loosely on her waist, as he said, ‘To the left beyond that big chestnut tree there’s a swimming pool, but it’s too dark to see it, and a tennis court. Are you sporty?’

Sporty? She didn’t know what she was with him holding her like this. Dredging up what was left of her thought process, she managed to mumble, ‘I swim a bit.’ She didn’t add that she hadn’t played tennis for years, because whatever sports bra she bought it still didn’t seem to stop her breasts bobbing about like crazy. Too much information, for sure.

‘You’ll have to come and have a swim in the summer, if you’re up this neck of the woods.’

That so wasn’t an option. ‘That’d be great.’

‘If you’re ready, we’ll make a move.’

When he let go of her, she felt wildly relieved and hopelessly bereft. When she turned to face him it didn’t help her shaky equilibrium one bit. He’d obviously had a quick shower

along with changing, and his ebony hair was still damp and slightly tousled. Suddenly he appeared vastly different from the immaculately finished product during working hours, and the open-necked black shirt and casual black trousers he was wearing added to the transformation. In the designer suits, shirts and ties he favoured in the office, he was breathtakingly gorgeous. Now he was a walking sex-machine, with enough magnetism to cause a disturbance in the earth's orbit.

Controlling a rush of love so powerful she was amazed it didn't show, Gina handed him her empty glass and walked over to the sofa, where her handbag and jacket were, saying over her shoulder, 'This is very good of you, Harry. There was nothing more exciting than beans on toast waiting for me at the flat.'

'My pleasure.'

No, hers, given the merest encouragement, Gina thought wryly. She had never been tempted to go all the way with any of her boyfriends in the past, and had even begun to wonder if there was something wrong with her. Harry's entrance into her life had put paid to that. She only had to think about him to get embarrassingly aroused. If he ever actually made love to her...

He took her jacket from her, helping her into it with a warm smile. She was everlastingly thankful he couldn't read her mind. Taking a deep breath, she walked briskly out of the room.

CHAPTER TWO

WHY had he done this? Why had he invited her out to dinner tonight? He hadn't intended to. He'd meant their goodbye to be friendly, swift and final, and definitely with a third party present.

As Harry slid into the car, he glanced at Gina for a second. He was, by virtue of his genetic background and upbringing, a very rational man. 'Cold' had even been the word used by former girlfriends on occasion, but that had been after he had firmly disabused them of the idea that their relationship had any chance of becoming permanent.

He knew exactly what he wanted out of life. Since Anna. And, because the knowledge had been forged in the furnace, it was not negotiable—Independence. Following his own star, with no tentacles of responsibility to prevent him doing so. Companionship and sex along the way, of course, good times with women who knew the score. But nothing that came with strings and ties and required sacrifices he wasn't willing to make.

He'd left university with a first in business studies, gaining experience in a couple of jobs, before landing the big one in the States where he'd moved to the top of the ladder after acquiring a postgraduate degree, Master of Business Administration. He had enjoyed working for that, although with his job it had meant regular twenty-hour days. But that had been fine. It had happened after Anna, and anything which had enabled him to go

to bed too dog-tired to think had been OK by him.

‘Is it far?’

The soft voice at the side of him brought his head turning. ‘Just a couple of miles,’ he said evenly, swinging the car out of the drive onto the quiet tree-lined lane beyond. ‘It’s only a very small place, by the way, nothing grand, but the food is excellent. Roberto has the knack of turning the most simple dish into something special. The first time I saw a warm-bread salad with roasted red peppers on the menu, I thought it a fairly basic starter. Big mistake. It came with capers and anchovies and fresh basil, and a whole host of other ingredients, that made it out of this world.’

‘You’re making my mouth water.’

Harry smiled. ‘Do I take it you’re someone who lives to eat, rather than eats to live?’

His swift glance saw her wrinkle her little nose. ‘Can’t you tell?’ she said a trifle flatly.

His smile vanished. He didn’t know what it was about this gentle, ginger-haired woman that had attracted him from day one, but her softly rounded, somewhat voluptuous curves were part of it. ‘Your figure’s fine,’ he said firmly.

‘Thank you.’

‘I mean it. There are far too many women these days who don’t actually look like women. Lettuce leaves are great for rabbits, but there’s where they should stop. I hate to see a woman nibbling on a stick of celery all evening, and drinking mineral water, while

insisting she's full to bursting.'

He'd just pulled up before turning on to the main road, and in the shadowed confines of the car he caught her glance of disbelief. 'What?' he said, turning to face her.

'You might say that, but I bet the women you date are all stick insects.'

He opened his mouth to deny it before the uncomfortable truth hit. To anyone on the outside looking in, it would appear Gina was spot on-target. He did tend to date trim, svelte types. Why? He pulled on to the main road, his very able and intelligent mind dissecting the matter.

Because he'd found by experience that women who were obsessed with their figures, and appearance, and street cred, tended to be on the insular side—especially when they were also career minded, as he made sure all his girlfriends were. Less inclined towards cosy twosomes at home, and more likely to favour a date involving dinner and dancing, or the theatre, where they could see and be seen. Women with their own, forged-in-steel goals who weren't looking for happy-ever-after but good conversation, good company and entertainment, and good sex. He'd made the odd mistake, of course, but mostly he tended to get it right.

In fact, if he thought about it, one criterion for dating a woman more than a couple of times was her level of self-interest. He grimaced mentally. Which made him...what? He decided not to follow that train of thought, but it confirmed he'd been crazy to

take Gina out tonight, even on the basis of friendship.

Realising he hadn't given her any reply, he ducked the issue by saying self-righteously, 'Anorexia is becoming an ever-increasing problem these days, and no one in their right mind can say those women, young girls some of them, look attractive.'

'I suppose not.'

They drove in silence for the rest of the short journey. When he finally pulled into Roberto's tiny car-park, he saw Gina looking about her. The restaurant was situated on the edge of a typical Yorkshire market-town, but in the darkness it appeared more secluded than it was. In the muted lighting from the couple of lamps in the car park, her hair gleamed like strands of copper. He wondered what she would say if he asked her to loosen it from the upswept bun she usually favoured for work. He'd seen it down a couple of times, and it was beautiful.

Stupid. He brushed the notion away ruthlessly. This was dinner. Nothing else.

He slid out of the car, walking round the bonnet and then opening Gina's door and helping her out. The air smelt of the burgeoning vegetation, and somewhere close by a blackbird sang two or three flute-like notes—probably disturbed by the car and lights—before falling silent again. He watched as she drew in a lungful of air, her eyes closed. Opening them, she said softly. 'I shall miss this in London.'

'Don't go, then.' He hadn't meant to say it.

'I have to.' Her lashes flickered.

‘Why?’

‘I start my new job on Monday—I’ve got a flat, everything. I couldn’t let people down.’

He suddenly knew why he had asked her out to dinner. He hadn’t believed she would actually leave Breedon & Son when it came to the crunch. He hadn’t prepared himself for her disappearing out of his life. There had been so much talk among Natalie and the other employees of Gina changing her mind at the last minute, and he’d found it expedient to believe it. He should have known that once she had committed to something she wouldn’t turn back.

‘No, I guess you couldn’t.’ At six feet, he topped her by five or six inches, and as he gazed down at her he caught the scent of her perfume, something warm and silky that reminded him of magnolia flowers. The jump his senses gave provided a warning shot across the bows. ‘Let’s go in,’ he said coolly. ‘I’m starving.’

Once Roberto had finished fussing over them, and they were seated at a table for two with menus in front of them and a bottle of wine on order, Harry took himself in hand. This was her last day at Breedon & Son, and it was true that she had been a lifesaver when he’d returned so suddenly to the UK—that was why he’d offered to take her out tonight. Nothing else. And of course he’d miss her. You couldn’t work closely with someone umpteen hours a day, share the odd coffee break and lunch and learn about her life and so on, without missing her when she was gone. It was as simple as that.

‘I think I’m going to try that warm-bread salad you mentioned for starters.’ She stared at him, her blue eyes dark in the paleness of her skin. ‘And maybe the tagliatelle to follow?’

‘Good choice.’ He nodded. ‘I’ll join you.’

Once Roberto had returned with the wine and taken their order, he settled back in his seat and raised his glass in a toast. ‘To you and your new life in the great, big city,’ he said, purposely injecting a teasing note into his voice. ‘May you be protected from all the prowling wolves who might try to gobble you up.’

She laughed. ‘I don’t somehow think they’ll be queueing for the privilege.’

He’d noticed this before, her tendency towards self-deprecation. ‘From where I’m sitting, it’s a very real possibility,’ he said quietly.

Her voice a little uncertain, she said, ‘Thank you. You’re very gallant.’

‘I like to think so, but in this case I am speaking the truth.’ He leant forward slightly, not hiding his curiosity as he said, ‘You don’t rate yourself much, do you, Gina? Why is that—or is that too personal a question?’

He liked it that she could blush. He’d thought it a lost art before he had met her.

She shrugged. ‘Legacy of being the ugly duckling of the family, I suppose,’ she said quietly. ‘My two older sisters inherited the red hair, but theirs is true chestnut, and they don’t have freckles. Added to which it was me who had to have the brace

on my teeth and see a doctor about acne.'

His eyes wandered over the flawlessly creamy skin, flawless except for the freckles, but he liked those. And her teeth were small, white and even. 'Your dentist and doctor are to be congratulated on their part in assisting the swan to emerge. You're a very lovely woman, even if you don't realise it.'

The blush grew deeper. He watched it with fascination. When she looked ready to explode, he said, 'I seem to remember both your sisters are married, aren't they?' It was more to change the subject and alleviate her distress than because he cared two hoots about them.

She nodded, and her hair reflected a hundred different shades of gold and copper as she moved. 'Bryony has a little boy of three, and Margaret two girls of five and eight, so I'm an aunt three times over. They're all great kids.'

Something in her voice prompted him to say, 'You obviously are very fond of them.'

'Of course.'

There was no 'of course' about it. He knew several women who couldn't seem to stand their own children, let alone anyone else's. 'Do you see yourself settling down and having a family one day?'

A shadow passed over her face. 'Maybe.'

'Maybe?'

She smiled, but he could see it was a little shaky. Her mouth was soft, vulnerable. Muscles knotted in his stomach.

‘Settling down and having a family does carry the prerequisite of meeting the right man,’ she said, taking a sip of her wine.

‘You’re bound to meet someone in London.’

‘Why “bound to”?’

Her voice was sharper than he’d heard it before, and his eyes widened momentarily. He’d clearly said the wrong thing, although he couldn’t think how.

And then she said quickly, ‘Not everyone meets the right one, as I’m sure you’d agree, and personally I’d rather remain single than marry just to be with someone. I’m going to London with a view to furthering my career, and perhaps travelling a little, things like that.’

He stared at her. That wasn’t all of it. Had she had a love affair go wrong? Was she moving away because someone had hurt her, broken her heart? But she hadn’t said anything to him about a man in her life.

He caught at the feeling of anger, the sense that she had let him down in some way. Drawing on his considerable self-control, he said coolly, ‘I hadn’t got you down as a career woman, Gina?’

‘No?’ She glanced up from her wine glass and looked him full in the face, but he could read nothing from her expression when she said, ‘But then you don’t really know me, do you?’

He felt as though she had just slapped him round the face, even though her voice had been pleasant and calm. He thought he knew her. She had always been quite free in talking about herself, her family, her friends, although...His eyes narrowed. Come to

think of it, she had never discussed her love life at all. He'd just assumed she didn't have one, he supposed.

He felt a dart of self-disgust, and realised how much he had assumed. Trying to justify himself, he argued silently, no, it wasn't altogether that. Because he didn't like to talk about that side of his life, he hadn't pressed her in that direction, that was all.

And the long hours she had put in ever since he had arrived? The devotion to the job, and to him and his father? Her readiness to be prepared to work overtime at the drop of a hat? The way—even when her workload had been huge and she'd been working flat out—she'd spare time to talk him through a procedure he wasn't familiar with? He had taken it all for granted, looking back, in his arrogance having imagined Breedon & Son was all of her life. But why would it be? Looking like Gina did, why wouldn't there have been a man in the background somewhere?

Collecting his racing thoughts, he said, 'So, what's your ultimate goal? Do you intend to stay in the capital for good, now you've made the break?'

She paused to think. He saw her tongue stroke her bottom lip for a moment, and his body responded, stirring to life. 'I'm not sure.' She raised her eyes. 'Possibly. Like I said, I'd like to travel, and perhaps that could be incorporated into a job. That would be perfect.'

This was a new side to her. Disturbing. He'd been more than a little taken aback when she had announced her intention to leave

shortly after the New Year; it hadn't fitted into his overall picture of her. She was level-headed, reliable, a calm, balanced woman with both feet firmly on the ground. The very last person to suddenly announce they were leaving their home, job and friends to hightail it to the big city, in fact.

'I see.' He tried for nonchalance when he said, 'You're full of surprises, Gina Leighton. I had you down as more of a homebody, I guess. Someone who wouldn't be happy if they were far away from where they were born.'

'London isn't exactly the ends of the earth.'

She lifted her chin as she spoke, and he said quickly, 'Oh, don't get me wrong. That wasn't a criticism.'

'Good.' She sipped at her wine.

'If anyone can understand the urge to travel, I can. It's just that I saw you differently, more...'

'Boring?'

'Boring?' He stared at her in genuine amazement. 'Of course I never thought you were boring. How can you say that? I was going to say contented with what you had, where you were in life.'

'You can be all that and still fancy a change,' she said flatly, just as the waitress came with their warm-bread salads.

Once she'd gone, he reached across the table and touched Gina's hand for one brief moment. 'I didn't mean to offend you,' he said softly. 'And I swear I've never thought of you as boring.' Disconcerting, maybe. Definitely unsettling on occasion, like when he'd stolen a swift kiss at the Christmas party and the scent

of her had stayed with him all evening. And, on the couple of instances she'd worn her hair down for work, he'd had to stuff his hands in his pockets all day to avoid the temptation to take a handful of the shining, silky mass and nuzzle his face into it. But boring? Never.

Gina shrugged. 'It doesn't matter one way or the other.'

She had moved her fingers out from under his almost as soon as they had rested on her hand, and it suggested she was still annoyed.

'It does.' Irritated, his voice hardened. 'We're friends, aren't we?'

'We are—we were—work colleagues, first and foremost,' came the dampening answer. 'We were friendly, but that's not the same as being friends.'

He stared at her. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright, and he couldn't read a thing in her closed expression. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt out of his depth when speaking to a woman, but it was happening now. Raking back a lock of hair from his forehead, he leant back in his seat, surveying her broodingly. 'So, what's your definition of friends?'

She ate a morsel of bread and pronounced it delicious, before she said, 'Friends are there for you, right or wrong. You can have fun with them or cry with them. They know plenty about you, but stick in there with you nonetheless. They're part of your life.'

He became aware he was frowning, and straightened his face. He felt monumentally insulted. 'And none of that applies to us,

apparently? Is that what you're saying?" he said evenly.

'Well, does it?' she asked matter-of-factly.

'I think so.'

'Harry, we've never met out of work, and know very little about each other.'

He shook his head stubbornly. 'Don't be silly, we know plenty about each other,' he said firmly, his annoyance rising when she narrowed her eyes cynically. He was possessed by the very irrational desire to do or say something remarkable to shock her out of her complacency, something that hadn't happened since he had been a thirteen-year-old schoolboy trying to impress the school beauty. But Delia Sherwood had been a walkover compared to the self-contained, quiet young woman watching him with disbelieving eyes. And this was a crazy conversation. He wasn't even sure how it had come about. Why did Gina's opinion about their relationship matter so much, anyway? 'I know you have two sisters, a best friend called Erica, and that you walk your parents' dog to keep fit, for instance. OK?' Even to himself he sounded petulant.

'Those are head facts. Not heart facts.'

'I'm sorry?' he said, his temper rising.

She gave what sounded like a weary sigh and ate another mouthful of food. 'Think about it,' was all she said.

He ate his warm-bread salad without tasting it. There had been undercurrents in their friendship from day one—and it was a friendship, whatever she said—but there she was, as cool as a

cucumber, stating they were merely work colleagues. Damn it, he knew there was a spark there, even if neither of them had done anything about it. And the reason he'd held his hand had been for her sake. An act of consideration on his part.

He speared a piece of pepper with unnecessary violence, feeling extremely hard done by. He had known she wasn't the type of woman to have a meaningless affair, and because he couldn't offer anything permanent he'd kept things light and casual. But that didn't mean there wasn't something real between them.

The waitress appeared as soon as they had finished and whisked their plates away, whereupon Gina immediately stood up, reaching for her handbag as she did so. 'I'm just going to powder my nose,' she said brightly.

He had risen to his feet and now he nodded, sitting down again, watching her make her way to the back of the small restaurant and open the door marked Ladies.

He had thought he knew her, but she had proved him wrong. His frown deepened. The woman who had sat there and blatantly told him he could stick their friendship—or as good as—was not the Gina of nine-to-five. In fact, she was a stranger. A beautiful, soft, honey-skinned stranger, admittedly, with eyes that could be uncertain and vulnerable one moment and fiery, to match the hair—the next. But a stranger nonetheless. And he didn't understand it.

Harry finished his glass of wine but resisted pouring himself

another as he was driving, instead reaching for the bottle of sparkling mineral-water he'd ordered along with the wine.

He had imagined there was a...buzz between them, and all the time she'd probably been carrying on with someone else. Of course she'd been entitled to; he'd had one or two, maybe three—but very short-lived—relationships in the last twelve months. But it was different for her. And then he grimaced at the hypocrisy, scowling in self-contempt. Damn it, she'd caught him on the raw, and he didn't know which end of him was up. Which only confirmed a million times over he had been absolutely right not to get involved with Gina. She was trouble. In spite of the air of gentle, warm voluptuousness that had a man dreaming he could drown in the depths of her—or perhaps because of it—she was trouble.

Swilling back the water, he made himself relax his limbs. It was ridiculous to get het up like this. She was leaving Yorkshire at the weekend, and that would be that. His mouth tightened. And Susan Richards had made it very plain she was up for a bit of fun with no strings attached. His perfect kind of woman, in fact.

His scowl deepened. When he replaced the empty glass on the table, it was with such force he was fortunate it didn't shatter.

CHAPTER THREE

WHATEVER had possessed her? Why had she challenged him like that? Gina stood, staring at her flushed reflection in the spotted little mirror in the ladies' cloakroom, mentally groaning. He had looked absolutely amazed, and no wonder.

Grabbing her bag, she hunted for her lip gloss and then stood with it in her hand, still staring vacantly. It had been his attitude that had done it. It had brought out the devil in her, and the temper that went with the hair. When she and her two sisters had been growing up, her father had repeatedly warned them about the folly of speaking first and thinking later—often lamenting the fact that he was the only male in a household of four red-haired women, while he'd been about it.

'A homebody.' And, 'you're bound to meet someone in London.' How patronising could you get? And why shouldn't she be a career woman, anyway? It wasn't only scrawny blondes like Susan Richards who had the monopoly on such things.

Suddenly she slumped, her eyes misty. She had behaved badly out there, and if she was being honest with herself it was because the sight of Harry and Susan had acted like salt on a raw wound.

Dabbing her eyes with a tissue, she sniffed loudly and then repaired her make-up. This was all her own fault—she should never have come out to dinner with him. She had known it was foolish, worse than foolish, but she had done it anyway. Harry

couldn't help being Harry. Being so drop-dead gorgeous, he was always going to have women panting after him, but at least after tonight she wouldn't have to watch it any longer.

The lurch her heart gave made her smudge the lip gloss down her chin. She stopped what she was doing and held herself round the middle, swaying back and forth a number of times, until the door opening brought her up straight.

A tall matronly looking woman entered, nodding and smiling at her before entering the one cubicle the tiny room held.

Gina wished she was old, or at least old enough for this to be past history. She wished she didn't love him so much. And more than anything she wished she wasn't so sure that she would never meet anyone who could stir her heart like Harry, which meant she wasn't likely to get the husband and children she'd always imagined herself having. She bit hard on her lip, her eyes cloudy. Harry was right. She was a homebody. And because of him she was being forced down a road she had never seen herself walking.

It was all his fault. She glared at her reflection, wiping her streaked chin, and then packing her make-up away. He was so content with his lot, so happy, so completely self-satisfied. The rat.

Taking a deep breath, she told herself to get a grip. He was buying her dinner, hardly a crime. And the watch was beautiful, made even more so by the fact he had noticed she wasn't wearing her old one. It had been kind of him to round off her time at Breedon & Son by taking her out, when all was said and done.

So...no more griping. Get yourself in there and be bright and sparkling, and leave him with a smile when the time comes.

When Gina walked back into the dining area the sight of him caused her breath to catch in her throat, but then it always did. Which was at best annoying and worst embarrassing—like the time she had been eating a hot sausage-roll in the work canteen and had choked, until Natalie had slapped her on the back so hard she'd thought her spine had snapped in two.

She arrived at the table just as the waitress brought their main course, which was good timing. She could bury herself in the food to some extent, she thought, sliding into her seat and returning his smile. At least he was smiling now. He'd looked thoroughly irritated with her when she had left, and she couldn't altogether blame him.

'More wine?' He was refilling her glass as he spoke, and Gina didn't protest. She needed something to help her get through the evening without making a complete fool of herself, and in the absence of anything else alcohol would do. Although, that was flawed thinking, she told herself in the next moment. The wine was more likely to prompt her to do or say something silly.

Warning herself to go steady, she took a small sip and then tried the tagliatelle. It was delicious. The best she had ever tasted. Deciding that she was definitely a girl who would eat for comfort rather than pine away, she tucked in.

By the time the main course was finished, Gina had discovered that you could laugh and really mean it, even if your

heart was on the verge of being broken. Harry seemed to put himself out to be the perfect dinner companion after their earlier blip, producing one amusing story after another, and displaying the wicked wit which had bowled her over in the first days of their acquaintance. Back then she had desperately been seeking a way to make him notice her as a woman; now that strain was taken off her shoulders at least. He saw her as a friend, and only as a friend, and she'd long since accepted it.

She chose pistachio meringue with fresh berries for dessert, and it didn't fail to live up to expectations. She didn't think she'd eat for a week after this evening, and she said so as she licked the last morsel of meringue off her spoon.

Harry grinned, his eyes following her pink tongue. 'I'm glad you enjoyed it. If I'd thought I could have introduced you to this place months ago.'

If he had thought. Quite. 'I'm glad you didn't. I'd be two stone heavier by now.'

'You could have taken your parents' dogs for a few extra walks and worked off the pounds,' he said easily.

'There speaks someone who's never had to diet.' Why would he? The man was perfect.

'Do you—have to diet, I mean?'

A bit personal, but she'd brought it on herself. Gina nodded. 'My sisters—wouldn't you just know?—follow after my dad, and he's a tall streak of nothing. My mother on the other hand is like me. We go on a diet every other week, but just as regularly fall

by the wayside. My mum blames my dad for her lapses. She says he gives her no incentive because he likes her to be what he calls “cuddly”.’ She grimaced.

‘I’m with your father.’

Gina smiled wryly.

‘I mean it.’

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Purposely changing the subject, she said, ‘Thank you for a lovely meal, Harry. I’ve really enjoyed it. It was a nice way to end my time at Breedon & Son.’

He seemed to digest that for a few seconds. ‘It’ll be odd, coming into work each day and you not being there.’

Be still, my foolish heart. She forced a smile. ‘I think you’ll find Susan a more than adequate replacement. She’s very keen.’ In more ways than one.

‘I guess so.’

He didn’t sound overly impressed, and Gina’s heart jumped for joy before she reminded herself it meant nothing. If it wasn’t Susan it would be someone else. Her voice even, she said, ‘It’ll all work out fine. Things always do, given time.’ Except me and you.

‘I think we’re both long enough in the tooth to know that’s not true,’ he said drily. ‘It goes hand in hand with accepting there’s no Santa Clause.’ He cleared his throat, his heavily lashed eyes intent on her face. ‘Look, this is none of my business, and tell me to go to blazes if you want, but is this decision to leave Yorkshire anything to do with your personal life?’

She stared at him.

‘You know what I mean,’ he said after a moment. ‘A man. Has a relationship ended unhappily, something like that? Because, if that’s the reason, running away won’t necessarily improve your state of mind.’

Panic stricken, she opened her mouth to deny it before logic stepped in. He had no idea the man in question was him, and if nothing else confirming his suspicions would work to her advantage. One, he’d have to accept she had a concrete reason for moving away, and two, it would explain her reluctance to visit in the future.

‘I’m right, aren’t I? Someone has let you down.’

After their earlier conversation, she couldn’t bear the idea of Harry thinking she’d been discarded like an old sock. Stiffly, she said, ‘It’s not like that. I made the decision to end the relationship and move away.’

His eyes narrowed. She recognised the look on his face. It was one he adopted when he wouldn’t take no for an answer on some business deal or other. It was this formidably tenacious streak in his nature that had seen Breedon & Son go from strength to strength in the last year since he’d come home. And that was great on a business level. Just dandy. It was vastly different when that acutely discerning mind was homed in on her, though. Recognising the wisdom of the old adage that pride went before a fall, she said quickly, ‘It wasn’t going anywhere, that’s all. End of story.’

‘What do you mean, not going anywhere? You’re obviously

upset enough about the finish of it to move away from your family and friends, your whole life,' he finished, somewhat dramatically for him. Then he added suddenly, 'He's not married, is he?'

'Excuse me?' It was a relief to hide behind outrage. 'I have never, and would never, get involved with someone else's husband.'

'No, of course you wouldn't.' He had the grace to look embarrassed. 'I know that, really I do. But what went wrong, then?'

Gina wondered if she could end this conversation with a few well-chosen words along the lines that he should mind his own business. But this was Harry she was dealing with. He was like one of those predatory fish of the Caribbean she'd read about recently: once it seized hold on something, it couldn't let go even if it wanted to. 'A common scenario,' she said as lightly as she could manage. 'He was content to jog along as we were indefinitely. I wanted more.'

He looked shocked. 'Did he know how much you cared for him?'

That was rich, coming from the man who—if office gossip was to be believed—discarded girlfriends like cherry stones once he'd enjoyed their fruit. Talk about a case of the pot calling the kettle black! Gina shrugged, keeping her voice steady and unemotional when she said, 'That's not really the point. We wanted different things for the future, that's all. I was ready to settle down, and he wasn't. Actually, I don't think he will ever

settle down.'

He stared at her, a frown darkening his countenance. 'In other words, he strung you along?'

'No, he didn't string me along,' Gina said severely. 'He was always absolutely straight and above board, if you must know. I suppose I just...hoped for more.' And always had, from the first moment she had laid eyes on him. Always would, for that matter, if she didn't put a good few miles between them.

'You are being too kind. He must have known the sort of girl you are from the start.'

She couldn't do this any more. Her voice low, she said, 'Could we change the subject, please, Harry?'

He opened his mouth to object, but the waitress was at their side with the coffee. He waited until she had bustled off, and then spoke in a very patient tone, which had the effect of making her want to kick him. 'Believe me, Gina,' he said gently, 'I know the type of man he is, and he's not worthy of you.'

That was true at least. 'Really?' she said drily. 'You know this without even having met him?'

'Like I said, I know the type. Now, I'm not saying he's wrong not to want to settle down, I'm the same way myself. But I wouldn't get involved with someone who had for ever on their mind, and there's the difference. And a man can tell. Always.'

He really was the most arrogant male on the planet. 'How?'
'How?'

'How can you tell if a woman is looking for something

permanent or just a roll in the hay?’ she asked baldly.

He looked askance at her. ‘I hope it’s never anything as crude as “just a roll in the hay”,’ he said stiffly. ‘I’m a man, not an animal. I’ve never yet taken a woman just because she’s indicated she’s available.’

This self-righteous side of him was new. Gina fixed him with purposely innocent eyes. ‘So you have to get to know someone first? Find out if they can provide mental as well as physical stimulation, perhaps? Make sure their slant on life and love is the same as yours?’

He stared at her as though he wasn’t sure whether she was mocking him or not. After a moment, his eyes glinting, he said, ‘You make it sound very cold-blooded.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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