Ruthless Boss, Hired Wife

Kate Hewitt

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Аннотация

Cormac Douglas doesn't let emotion get in the way of business.Now he needs a weekend wife to secure a prestigious contract, and biddable secretary Lizzie Chandler is the perfect candidate. Lizzie is outraged, but Cormac's ruthless persuasion leaves her wanting more.When he asks for her services again, she finds herself agreeing to be his hired wife. . . in the bedroom as well as the boardroom.

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THE BOSS'S MISTRESS
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KATE HEWITT discovered her first Harlequin romance on a trip to England when she was thirteen, and she's continued to read them ever since. She wrote her first story at the age of five, simply because her older brother had written one and she thought she could do it, too. That story was one sentence long—fortunately, they've become a bit more detailed as she's grown

older.

She studied drama in college, and shortly after graduation moved to New York City to pursue a career in theater. This was derailed by something far better: meeting the man of her dreams, who happened also to be her older brother's childhood friend. Ten days after their wedding, they moved to England, where Kate worked a variety of different jobs—drama teacher, editorial assistant, youth worker, secretary and, finally, mother.

When her oldest daughter was one year old, Kate sold her first short story to a British magazine. Since then she has sold many stories and serials, but writing romance remains her first love, of course!

Besides writing, she enjoys reading, traveling and learning to knit—it's an ongoing process, and she's made a lot of scarves. After living in England for six years, she now resides in Connecticut with her husband, her three young children and, possibly one day, a dog.

Kate loves to hear from readers. You can contact her through her Web site, www.kate-hewitt.com.

RUTHLESS BOSS, HIRED WIFE
KATE HEWITT

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RUTHLESS BOSS, HIRED WIFE

For Caroline and Ellen,
the two spunkiest heroines I know

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CHAPTER ONE

CORMAC DOUGLAS needed a wife. Tomorrow. Irritation and impatience thrummed through him in time with the drumming of his fingers on his desk. Outside, the crenellated turrets of Edinburgh Castle were shrouded in a thick and gloomy October fog.

He needed a wife. How? Who?

The women he knew were not wife material. Beauties to be seduced or aspiring socialites to be avoided. No one who would be suitable to act as his wife, weekend engagement only.

No one he could entice, bribe or blackmail. Bend to his will.

His narrowed hazel gaze scanned his office—a large, spare room on the top floor of a restored building on Cowgate. He'd gutted the place when he'd bought it five years ago, turned the old, poky rooms into a wide-open space filled with light and exposed brick.

Normally the sight of the office he owned and the memories it banished gave him a satisfaction that replaced his usual restless discontent.

Now it just seemed to mock him. He had the perfect commission, ripe for the taking, meant to be his, and he wouldn't get it unless he had a wife.

The conversation a few days ago with an architect colleague replayed in his mind.

‘The Hassells finally want to develop a resort in Sint Rimbert,’ Eric had said. ‘Something eco-friendly and luxurious, aimed particularly at families.’

‘Families,’ Cormac repeated without any intonation.

‘Yes, they claim it’s a needed niche in the market—luxury for the little ones.’ He chuckled. ‘It’s a plum commission.’

‘Indeed.’

‘I’d go for it myself, but they want to start work in the new year and I’m already booked.’ He paused, laughing ruefully. ‘I’m also out of the running for another reason—I’m not married.’

‘Married?’ Cormac’s voice turned sharp. ‘What the hell does that have to do with anything?’

‘Apparently the Hassells are a close-knit family. They want someone dependable to design this resort, with family values, seeing as it’s a family resort. Preferably a married man. Of course, that’s just the word on the street—they’d never say as much officially.’

‘Of course.’ Cormac injected a dry note into his voice. ‘Presumably that’s why I haven’t heard of it.’

‘Exactly,’ Eric agreed, laughing. ‘You’re not on the short-list, Cormac.’

‘Not yet.’

‘What are you thinking of? A trip to Gretna Green?’

Cormac knew Eric was joking so he chuckled along with him. ‘Not a bad idea.’

‘You know your own reputation,’ Eric said with a careless

laugh. ‘But I didn’t think you were quite that ruthless.’

After the telephone call Cormac had spent a long time staring out at the gloomy skies, the crawl of cars intent on avoiding the traffic of the Old Town.

He imagined the short-list Jan Hassell would have compiled: smug married architects with their happy home lives and uninspired designs.

It was absurd that the Hassells wanted a married man to design the resort. Family values had no effect—at least no positive effect—on one’s work. He should know. His work was his life, his breath. And as for family…

He stifled a curse, one hand balling into a frustrated fist. He wanted that commission. It was a fantastic opportunity, but it was more than that. It was a chance to prove who he was…and who he wasn’t.

He was the best man for the job, could be the best man if given the chance, if he grabbed it.

He wasn’t married.

A few hours after the call from Eric, Cormac had made some calls of his own and finally connected with Jan Hassell. After faxing his CV and some designs to Jan, he’d been invited to a weekend house party on Sint Rimbert, along with two other architects. It was a stone’s throw from complete success and now all he needed was a wife on his arm, an ornament to prove he had all those damn family values.

To get the commission.

To seize it.

He glanced at some letters on his desk which his secretary had left for him to sign and irritably pulled them towards him. He was just scrawling his name on the bottom of the first page when he stopped. Smiled.

Considered.

He had the perfect idea. The perfect wife.

She just didn't know it yet.

'I'm glad you're doing so well, Dani,' Lizzie said into the phone. She swallowed past the lump which had risen suddenly—stupidly—in her throat. It was ridiculous to feel sad. Dani was happy, enjoying life at university, doing all the things an eighteen-year-old should do.

This was what she'd always wanted for her sister. Always.

There was a low rumble of male laughter from the end of the line and Dani said, 'I ought to go, some friends are coming over…'

'It's only five o'clock,' Lizzie found herself protesting, aware of the prissy censure in her voice.

'It's Thursday, Lizzie!' Dani laughed. 'Weekends at university always start early.' Another male laugh sounded in the background and she asked a bit guiltily, 'Do you have plans for the weekend? Your first weekend alone!'

'Yes.' Lizzie tried to inject some enthusiasm into her voice and failed. 'Yes, I'm going to…' Her mind went blank. Read a book.

Take a bath. Go to bed.

'Paint the town red?' If there was any mockery in Dani's voice, it was gentle, but it still stung. 'You should go for it, Lizzie. You've spent too much of your life looking after me as it is. Seize life! Or at least a man.' She giggled. 'Anyway, someone's calling me, so I'd better go…' Giggling again, at someone other than Lizzie, she hung up the phone.

Seize life. Dani's reckless advice rang in Lizzie's ears as she replaced the receiver. It was easy for her sister to seize things; she was carefree, young, thoughtless. She didn't have responsibilities, concerns, bills weighing her down.

Lizzie sighed. She didn't want to think badly of Dani. Hadn't she worked so hard—sacrificed her own dreams—so Dani could have hers?

And now she had them. Lizzie knew she should be thrilled.

And she was. She was.

Determinedly, she rose from her desk. Perhaps she would paint the town, if not red, then a light pink. She could go to a wine bar on Rose Street, see if anyone from work was going…There was an associate architect she vaguely fancied—John something. Of course, he didn't even know her name.

No one did.

And even as these plans half-formed in her mind, Lizzie knew she would never carry them out. Didn't know how. Didn't dare.

Sighing, she reached for her handbag. She'd make sure her boss didn't need anything else from her tonight and then she'd go

home. Alone. Lonely.

As always.

She knocked lightly on Cormac Douglas's door.

'Come in.'

The barked-out command made Lizzie stiffen slightly. Cormac Douglas was in the Edinburgh office for only one week out of four, and she found she preferred the other three. His terse commands were taken better by e-mail or a short note left on her desk than face to face.

Lizzie pushed the door open. 'Mr Douglas? I was just going to head out unless you need me…?'

Cormac stood by the window, hands shoved deep into his trouser pockets, his gaze studying the grey cityscape stretched out before him. 'Need you?' he repeated as if considering the question. He turned to face her, his eyes sweeping her form in a strangely assessing way. 'As a matter of fact, I do.'

'All right.' Lizzie waited for instructions. She was used to staying late when Cormac was in town, although she'd finished all the work he'd given her. Something must have come up.

'Do you have a current passport?' he asked, and Lizzie blinked, nonplussed.

'Yes…'

'Good.' He paused and Lizzie had the feeling he was considering what to say. An odd thought, since Cormac Douglas was the kind of man who always knew what to say. 'I have a business engagement,' he finally explained tersely, 'and I need a

secretary to accompany me.'

'Very well.' Lizzie nodded, as if this was something she'd done before. In the two years she'd worked for Douglas Architectural Designs, she'd never accompanied Cormac anywhere, not even to a local work site. He preferred to do things on his own. Besides, he was more likely to take one of his assistants from the London office with him than Lizzie, a plain, parochial Edinburgh girl. 'Where are we going?'

'We leave for the Dutch Antilles tomorrow evening and return on Monday. It's a very important commission.' He paused, eyes narrowed, brow furrowed in concentration. 'Do you understand?'

'Yes.' Lizzie's mind was spinning, although she strove to look unruffled. The Dutch Antilles…If her geography wasn't too far off, that was in the Caribbean and at least eight hours by plane. If Cormac was travelling that far simply to court a commission, it had to be serious. And so did she.

She swallowed, heard the audible gulp, and forced herself to meet Cormac's harsh gaze.

'Is there anything I can do to arrange the travel?'

'Yes, book the tickets.' He pushed a piece of paper across the desk. 'The information's there. I'll be out of the office tomorrow, so I'll meet you at the airport, first-class lounge. Just text me the relevant information.'

Lizzie nodded, used to such terse commands. She picked up the paper and scanned the few scrawled details.

She could hardly pump Cormac for information, or ask him

what kind of clothes she should bring. Or why he had chosen to bring her.

She swallowed down her curiosity and smiled stiffly. 'Is that all?'

His gaze swept over her once more and a strange sardonic smile curved his mouth. Lizzie had the eerie feeling she'd somehow done something that Cormac had expected…and it was a disappointment.

'That's it,' he said and, sitting down at his desk, turned back to his work, dismissing her from both his presence and his mind.

Lizzie slipped silently from the room.

Back at her desk she sank into her chair, her knees weak.

She was going to the Caribbean. She pictured white sandy beaches, tropical forests, tropical drinks. People, laughter, sultry breezes. For a moment she allowed a thrill to trickle through her like quicksilver, awakening nerves, dreams, even desires she hadn't known she still had.

Who knew what could happen? Who she might meet?

She had plans for this weekend. Big ones.

After making the necessary travel arrangements, Lizzie got up and shrugged on her coat.

She was going to the Caribbean…with Cormac Douglas.

For a moment she paused, her coat halfway on, as she considered what a trip with her boss would be like. Together on a plane, in a hotel, on the beach.

Would Cormac soften in a new, more relaxed environment?

Or would he be just as tense and short with her as always?

She pictured him for a moment, tried to imagine his face in a smile rather than a scowl, eyes crinkled with laughter rather than narrowed in scorn. It was virtually impossible. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen Cormac Douglas smile—a kind smile rather than something born of contempt or cold-blooded business acumen.

She gave herself a mental shake; she had no place imagining what Cormac would be like. It didn't matter. All he wanted her for was to take notes, carry papers. And do it well.

And yet…the Caribbean. With Cormac. Another thrill racked her like a shiver—illicit, dangerous. Real.

A fine misting drizzle was falling when Lizzie left work, heading into the busy nightlife of the Old Town.

A few of the other secretaries from the office had invited her out when she'd first started working there, but she'd never been able to go because of Dani.

Now they no longer asked.

Lizzie shrugged this off; caring for Dani was enough, had always been enough.

Except now she was gone.

The last three days had been strange, still, silent. Lizzie accepted it with pragmatic determination, told herself she needed time to develop her own friends and pastimes, things she'd never had time to have before. Time to find a life.

And it would start by jet-setting off to the Caribbean.

A giggle escaped her, a breathless sound of pure feminine fun.

Three days in Sint Rimbert…Anything seemed possible. She was doing what Dani had told her to do. Seizing life.

Even if she had to go with Cormac Douglas, at least she would be getting out, meeting people, having a bit of an adventure.

It was a start…of something.

She left the lights, misty through the rain, of Princes Street and headed towards her house in Stockbridge, a short walk from Edinburgh's Old Town.

The Georgian town house was in an area that had become affluent and cosmopolitan, and as always Lizzie was aware how shabby and run-down her house looked among the others—a weed among roses. It needed new windows, a coat of paint and a dozen other things, as well. None of them were within her budget, but it was home, a house full of memories she wanted to keep.

She unlocked the door and pushed it open, entering the dim hallway. As she had been since Dani's departure, Lizzie was conscious of the silence, the emptiness, the blank spaces.

'Empty nest syndrome at twenty-eight,' she murmured, annoyed with herself. Defiantly she turned on the radio in the kitchen, glanced in the cupboards to see what she could make for a meal and then headed upstairs to change.

He had a wife. Cormac knew he would have to tread carefully. It was a delicate business, maintaining a deceit.

Still, he thought he knew how to play his secretary.

Intimidation was the key to someone like her. He shook his head in contemptuous dismissal.

Miss Chandler was one of those unfortunate people in life whose only purpose was to be used.

Use or be used.

Cormac chose the former. Always.

Despite the satisfaction he felt at obtaining his so-called wife, he also felt a restless surging, an uneasy energy pulsing through him. There were too many variables, possibilities. Not everything was under his control. Yet.

Would his secretary be convincing as his wife? He hadn't told her just what was required of her; he'd do it on the plane when there was no exit. No escape.

His mouth curved in a knowing smile. He didn't think she'd balk, but if necessary he could offer her money. No one turned down cold, hard cash.

God knew she could probably use a little extra, even though he considered the salaries he offered to his staff to be generous enough. She wore the same black suit to work every day, clearly something inexpensive off the high street. With her lack of make-up and pale, neat hair, she could certainly use a makeover, or at least some good advice.

Makeover…The word, the thought stilled him. He pictured her showing up tomorrow with a cheap suitcase full of plain, inexpensive little outfits. A secretary's clothes. Not a wife's.

Not his wife's.

A possibility he hadn't considered. It would be dealt with. Now.

With a muffled curse, he grabbed his coat and headed outside.

She'd turned the radio up loud so at first she didn't hear the knocking. Not until it become a fierce, methodical pounding.

Lizzie put down the chopping knife, turned down the radio and headed for the door with her heart leaping into her throat.

Who knocked like that? Police or drunks came to mind. She peered out of the hall's narrow windowpane and gasped in surprise when she saw who it was.

She had her answer. Cormac Douglas knocked like that.

What on earth was he doing here? She'd never seen him outside the office…or the tabloid newspapers.

Taking a deep breath, she ran a hand over her hair, which tumbled loosely over her shoulders, and opened the door.

'Mr Douglas?' She eyed him uncertainly, for he looked as grim as ever, his forehead drawn into a frown, his eyebrows an unyielding scowl. He was still a handsome man, she acknowledged, as she had since the first day he'd hired her. Tall, his chocolate-brown hair misted with rain, clear hazel eyes glinting with impatience, his cheekbones high and chiselled, slashed with colour.

'I need to speak with you. May I come in?'

She nodded, conscious suddenly of her own mussed hair, the jeans and white T-shirt she'd changed into. She touched her

cheek and realised a dab of tomato sauce had smeared there.

'Yes, of course.'

The hall of her parents' house was long, narrow and high, yet Cormac seemed to fill the gloomy space. He glanced around, and Lizzie knew he was taking in the old, shabby furnishings.

Just then she heard a sizzling sound from the kitchen and, with a murmured excuse, hurried to it.

The tomato sauce was bubbling ominously on the stove and she lowered the gas flame before turning around.

She gave a little gasp of surprise; Cormac stood in the doorway, taking in the pathetic little scene in one cursory sweep of his contemptuous gaze.

Lizzie found herself flushing. She could just imagine what Cormac was thinking. Thursday night and she was home alone, making a sad little meal for one, the radio her only company.

'I'm sorry. I was just making some dinner,' she explained stiltedly. Jazz music played tinnily from the radio and she snapped it off. 'Do you…do you want some?'

Cormac simply stared, raising one eyebrow in silent, scornful disbelief. Lizzie bit her lip, flushing again. Of course he must already have dinner arrangements at some chic restaurant, a far cry from here. From her.

According to the tabloids—as well as the voicemail messages that were occasionally left on the office machine—she knew he was with a different woman nearly every time he was seen, usually at a nightclub or high-class restaurant.

So why was he with her tonight? Here?

'Sorry,' she muttered, not really sure why she was apologising. 'Anyway…may I take your coat?'

Cormac was still looking at her, sizing her up in a way she wasn't used to. Lizzie tried not to fidget. He'd never really looked at her before, she realised. She was simply someone to bring papers, answer telephones. Now he was watching her, eyes narrowed, seeming as if he was deciding whether she passed or failed.

Passed or failed what?

His hands were thrust deep into his pockets and the shoulders of his overcoat were damp, his hair mussed from the rain.

'All right.' He shrugged his coat off and handed it to her. 'Put that away and then I need to talk to you.'

Lizzie nodded stiffly, feeling like a maid in her own home. She went to hang his coat in the hall. A faint tang of cedar and soap wafted from it and Lizzie felt a strange tingling in her chest, a tightening she didn't really like or understand.

She didn't know this man, she realised. At all. And she had no idea what he was doing here. What could he possibly want to talk about?

Back in the kitchen, Cormac stood in the same place. He was completely still yet he radiated energy, impatience.

His hard hazel gaze snapped back to her with a cold, precise determination as soon as she entered the kitchen.

'I forgot to mention some salient details regarding our trip.' He

paused, raking his fingers through his damp hair. 'I'm travelling to Sint Rimbert to court an important commission. Jan Hassell, who owns most of the island, has finally decided to build a luxury resort. It's important to him, of course, that the architect he chooses presents the right…appearance.' He paused, looking at her as if he expected a reply, but Lizzie was baffled.

'Yes, I see,' she said after a moment, although she didn't really.

Cormac let out an impatient breath. 'Do you? Then perhaps you realise that I can't have a secretary who gets her clothes from the rag basket.'

Colour surged into Lizzie's face. It was galling to realise that he didn't think she possessed the proper clothes for such a trip. Even worse was the realisation that undoubtedly she didn't. She swallowed. 'Perhaps you could tell me what I need to bring,' she said with as much dignity as she could muster.

Cormac shook his head. 'I can guarantee, sweetheart, that you don't have it.'

Lizzie lifted her chin. He'd never called her sweetheart before, and she didn't like the casual, callous endearment. 'If I'm not stylish enough for you,' she said shortly, 'there are other secretaries from the Edinburgh office who could oblige you.'

'I'm sure there are,' Cormac returned, 'but I want you.'

He spoke flatly, yet Lizzie felt a frisson of awareness, excitement, at his words. I want you.

Because of your typing speed, idiot, she told herself. And obviously not her style or appearance. Anyway, she reminded

herself, the last thing she wanted was a man like Cormac Douglas to turn his attention towards her. Working for him was difficult enough.

'Well, then,' she finally said, a brisk note entering her voice, 'I'll do my best to look smart. Was there anything else you needed to discuss with me, Mr Douglas?'

'You should call me Cormac,' he replied abruptly, and Lizzie simply stared.

'Why?' she asked after a moment, and he gave her a cool look which spoke volumes about what he thought of her audacity in questioning him.

'Because I said so.'

'Fine.' She swallowed any indignation she felt. It was pointless. Cormac Douglas was her boss and he could do what he liked. Even in her own house. 'Is that all?' she finally got out in a voice of strangled politeness.

'No.' Cormac continued to stare at her, his gaze narrowed and uncomfortably assessing. On the stove the pot of tomato sauce bubbled resentfully.

After a moment he sighed impatiently and, without another word, he turned on his heel and headed for the stairs.

Lizzie's mouth dropped open. 'Just where do you think you're going?'

'Upstairs.'

She followed him up the steep, narrow stairs, unable to believe that he was invading her home, her privacy, in such a blatant and

unapologetic way. Yet why should she be surprised? She knew well enough how Cormac Douglas operated. She'd just never been on the receiving end of it before.

She'd never been important enough to merit more than a single scornful glance and a few barked-out instructions. Now her clothes, her home, her whole self were up for scrutiny.

Why?

Cormac strode down the hallway, poking in a few bedrooms, mostly unused and shrouded in dust-sheets.

'This place is a mausoleum,' he remarked with casual disdain as he closed the door to her parents' old bedroom. 'Why do you live here?'

'This is my home,' Lizzie snapped. Her voice wavered and she stood in front of him, blocking his way down the hall towards her bedroom. 'What are you doing here, Cormac? Besides being unbelievably nosy and rude.' A disconnected part of her brain could hardly credit that she was speaking this way to her boss. Another part was surprisingly glad. She glared at him.

'Seeing if you have appropriate clothes,' Cormac replied. 'Now, move.'

He elbowed past her none too gently and Lizzie was forced to follow, grinding her teeth as Cormac strode into her bedroom and looked around.

Her bed was rumpled and unmade, her pyjamas still on the floor, along with a discarded bra and blouse. The stack of paperback romances by the bed suddenly seemed revealing,

although of what Lizzie couldn't even say.

She didn't want Cormac here, looking over the detritus, the dross of her life. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right.

It was incredibly uncomfortable.

He glanced around once, taking in every salient detail with narrowed eyes, a smile of complete contempt curling one lip, before he strode to her wardrobe and flung open the doors.

Lizzie watched with a growing sense of incredulity, irritation and shame as he thumbed through her paltry rack of clothes, mostly sensible skirts and dresses, a few different blouses to go with her black suit. There had never been any need for anything else.

'As I thought,' he said with an aggravating note of cruel satisfaction. 'Nothing remotely suitable.'

'I'm your secretary,' Lizzie snapped. 'I hardly think you'll lose this commission because I'm not dressed like—like one of your tarty girlfriends!'

Cormac swivelled slowly to face her, light beginning to gleam in his eyes. 'What would you know about my girlfriends, tarty or otherwise?'

Lizzie swallowed and shrugged defiantly. 'Only what I see in the tabloids.'

He laughed softly. 'You believe that tripe? You read it?'

'You do it,' Lizzie snapped back, goaded beyond all sense of caution.

'Do I?' He took a step forward, his voice dangerously soft. 'Is

that what you're after?'

'What I'm after,' Lizzie replied, her voice turning slightly shrill with desperation, 'is getting you out of my bedroom and my house. You may be my boss, but you don't have any rights in here.'

'I wouldn't want any,' he scoffed, and too late Lizzie realised how it had sounded. Bedroom rights. Sexual rights. With a small smile, he bent down and hooked the strap of her discarded bra on his little finger, dangling it in front of her. 'A bit too small for my taste.'

She flushed, thought of threatening a sexual harassment suit and knew she never would. 'Please leave,' she said in a voice that was entirely too weak and wavery, and realised with a stab of mortification that there were actually tears in her eyes. She was pathetic. Cormac certainly thought so.

'Gladly,' he informed her, 'but you're coming with me.'

Lizzie blinked. The threat of tears had thankfully receded, leaving only bafflement. 'Coming with you? Why?'

'You don't have the proper clothes,' Cormac said as if speaking to an idiot, 'so we'll have to get you some.'

'I don't want—'

'This isn't about what you want, Miss Chandler. It's about what I want. Get that straight right now.'

Lizzie bit hard on her lip. She couldn't afford to dig in her heels now, not over something like this. She needed her job, her salary, especially now Dani was at university, requiring fees,

living costs, books and a bit to enjoy herself with. Lizzie couldn't afford to antagonise Cormac Douglas, especially not over a few outfits.

'Fine,' she finally said, her voice clipped. 'I assume you're footing the bill?'

He smiled. It made her insides curl unpleasantly. 'Of course. You couldn't afford a pair of panties from the place we're going.'

'I wouldn't want any,' Lizzie snapped, but he'd already walked out of the bedroom, no doubt expecting her to follow, trotting at his heels.

CHAPTER TWO

LIZZIE sat stiffly on a cream leather sofa while Cormac spoke in a hushed voice to the sales assistant at the expensive boutique he'd brought her to on Princes Street.

What kind of man inspired the respect, awe and, most likely, fear that kept an exclusive boutique open for its only customer at eight o'clock at night?

The answer was right in front of her, in the arrogant, authoritative stance and the assessingly dismissive look Cormac shot her before turning back to the assistant.

'Don't let her choose her own clothes. She wouldn't know what to pick.'

Lizzie pressed her lips together and gazed blindly out of the rain-smeared window. He was right; she wouldn't know what to pick. But he didn't have to tell the assistant that, and certainly not in that tone.

On the taxi ride to the boutique, she'd made the decision not to get angry at Cormac's rude and arrogant ways. She just wouldn't care.

He was known as ruthless and cold, she reminded herself; he was indifferent to the point of rudeness. He was also respected because of his incredible talent and building designs.

Right now those designs didn't seem to matter very much.

'All right, miss.' The assistant, a sleek woman in a grey silk

suit, came forward, smiling briskly. 'Mr Douglas would like you to be outfitted for the weekend. Will you come this way?'

With a jerky nod, refusing to look at Cormac, Lizzie followed the assistant into the inner room of the boutique.

'I'm Claire,' the woman called over her shoulder as she began pulling clothes from the racks. 'You'll need at least two evening dresses, some casual wear, a swimming costume…' The list went on, washing over Lizzie in an incomprehensible tide of sound.

She'd never spent much time or money on clothes, never had the inclination or interest, not to mention the means. Now she reached out and stroked a cocktail dress of crimson silk, the material sliding through her fingers like water.

Why was Cormac doing this? Surely, surely as his secretary she didn't need clothes like this, no matter how promising or prominent this commission could be.

Did he feel sorry for her? Impossible. Embarrassed for her? By her? Lizzie considered it, but decided Cormac Douglas didn't have enough sensitivity towards anyone to feel such an emotion.

So why? Because she knew, more than anything, that Cormac didn't do anything unless there was something in it for him.

'Miss Chandler?' Claire indicated the sumptuous changing room and, with a little apologetic smile, Lizzie entered.

An hour later she was trying on the last outfit, a slinky silver evening dress with skinny straps that poured over her slight curves like liquid moonlight.

Lizzie smoothed the elegant material over her hips, amazed

at the transformation. Her pale blond hair fell to her shoulders in a soft cloud, and her eyes were wide and luminous. It looked, she thought ruefully, as if the dress were too big for her, even though it fitted perfectly. She looked overawed by the glamour, and she was.

Just what was Cormac trying to turn her into? Because it wasn't working.

What kind of woman did he want her to be this weekend… and why?

Perhaps she was paranoid to be so suspicious, yet she couldn't shake the unreality of the situation…the impossibility.

'Gorgeous,' Claire murmured, and gestured her to leave the dressing room. 'Mr Douglas will want to see this.'

'I don't think—' Lizzie began, but Claire was already pulling her hand, and from the corner of her eye she saw Cormac stand up, alert and ready, lips pressed together in a firm, hard line.

She stood in the middle of the room, conscious of the way the dress clung to her body and swirled about her feet, leaving very little to the imagination…to Cormac's imagination.

He surveyed her from top to toe, his hazel eyes darkening, his face expressionless.

'Good,' he said after a moment. 'Add it to the rest.'

With a nod, he dismissed her. Feeling like a show pony, Lizzie retreated to the dressing room and peeled off the evening gown, adding it to the heap of clothes that had to cost at least several thousand pounds piled next to her.

‘I’ll just take these to the front,’ Claire said, and Lizzie felt she had to protest.

‘I don’t really need…’ she began, and Claire shook her head.

‘Mr Douglas said you might protest, but he was very firm, Miss Chandler. He wants you to be properly outfitted.’

‘Does he?’ Lizzie muttered, yanking her jeans back on. ‘And what Mr Douglas wants, Mr Douglas gets.’

‘That’s right.’

With a little yelp Lizzie whirled around and saw Cormac standing in the doorway of the dressing room.

‘What are you doing here?’ she cried.

‘Telling you to hurry up.’ He braced one hand against the wall, his glinting eyes sweeping over her, his mouth curving in a knowing smile that brought colour rushing to Lizzie’s face.

And not just to her face…Lizzie felt her body react to that assessing gaze, felt her breasts, clad only in a greying, worn bra, tighten and swell. She’d never been looked at in this way by a man—any man—and certainly not by a man like Cormac.

She didn’t like it. Her body might react, treacherous and helpless, but her mind and heart rebelled against the assessing way his eyes raked over her, a mocking little smile playing about his mouth.

She put her hands on her hips and lifted her chin. ‘Had a good look?’

She thought she saw a flicker of surprise in Cormac’s eyes before he smiled coolly. ‘Not much to see.’ He turned away

before she could reply, and Lizzie put on her shirt with shaking fingers.

Outside the boutique, a pile of boxes and bags at their feet, Cormac hailed a taxi.

Rain still misted down, as soft as a caress, but cold on Lizzie's face. 'I'll see you tomorrow,' he said as the driver loaded her parcels into the car. 'Make sure you bring all of that. I want you dressed properly.'

'So you've said.' Lizzie realised she should probably say thank-you, as he'd spent a rather indecent amount of money on her, but somehow she couldn't get herself to form the words. She hadn't wanted the clothes, and he was too overbearing and obnoxious for her to feel any proper gratitude.

The boxes were loaded, the driver waiting, and still, Cormac paused. 'That silver evening dress,' he finally said, his voice gruff. 'Wear that the last night.'

Lizzie opened her mouth to reply, her mind blank. Nothing came out.

'See you at the airport.' Without waiting for a response, he turned away and began walking down the street.

Lizzie watched him go, saw the rain dampen his coat and his hair, and wondered yet again just what kind of man he was…and what she was letting herself in for this weekend.

Lizzie was breathless and flushed when she finally checked in and made her way to the first-class lounge at the airport.

Cormac, the lady at the register had informed her, had checked in half an hour earlier.

Lizzie gritted her teeth. If she hadn't had all those ridiculous bags, filled with clothes she couldn't possibly need, she might have made better time.

'You're late.' Cormac looked up from his sheaf of papers, frowning, as Lizzie made her way into the lounge.

'I'm sorry,' she said stiffly. 'I'm not used to travelling with so much luggage.'

Cormac turned back to his papers. 'I doubt you're used to travelling at all,' he replied, and Lizzie opened her mouth to retort something stinging, but closed it without even framing a response.

What could she say? It was true, and she could hardly argue with her boss anyway. Still, she wished he wasn't right. She wished he didn't know it.

She sank into the seat across from him, conscious of the outfit she wore—slim-fitting black trousers and a cranberry silk blouse, unbuttoned at the throat. She'd pulled her hair back with a clip and fine wisps fell about her flushed face. So much for looking smart.

Cormac lifted his eyes, let his gaze travel slowly over her, from her tousled hair to the pair of black leather pumps that pinched her feet. Lizzie tried not to squirm.

'You should have had your hair cut,' he remarked, and then turned back to his work.

Stung, Lizzie replied, 'If you wanted me to have a complete makeover, you should have given me a bit more warning. As it is, I have no idea why the Hassells will be analysing your secretary!'

He continued to scan the papers as he replied, 'I think I've already explained to you what kind of impression I—we—need to make.'

'And you're afraid a bad hair day is going to make or break the deal?' Lizzie jibed, only to fall silent at Cormac's icy look.

'Nothing will break this deal,' he said in a tone that was ominous in its finality. 'Nothing.'

'Perhaps you could tell me a little bit more about what to expect, then,' Lizzie said after a moment. The freezing look in Cormac's eyes thawed only slightly and she tried for a conversational tone. 'Will there be other guests?'

'Later,' he replied, and she knew she was dismissed.

Sinking back into her seat, she gazed around the lounge, the deep leather armchairs seating a variety of well-heeled travellers. Even in her shiny new outfit, Lizzie felt like an outsider. A misfit. She'd never even been on an aeroplane before.

She turned her attention back to Cormac, sneaked a peep at him from beneath her lashes. He was deeply absorbed in his work, his eyes downcast, his own lashes, thick and dark, sweeping and softening the harsh planes of his face.

He was a harsh man, Lizzie thought, and felt, for the first time, a rush of curiosity about what—or who—had made him the way he was.

Ruthless, ambitious, unfeeling. Cold. The tabloids had used every damning word, delighting in Cormac's reviled reputation. The women—starlets and socialites alike—flocked to him, to the bad boy they mistakenly thought they could tame.

Now Lizzie wondered why. Why are you the way you are?

Everyone had a past, a story. She thought of her own—her parents' death ten years ago, Dani's dependence. The life she'd made for herself, caring for Dani, providing her younger sister with every opportunity and affection.

She'd rung Dani to explain about the weekend, only to have her sister blithely assure her that Lizzie could do whatever she wanted, Dani was already busy with her own life.

Lizzie knew it was ridiculous to feel hurt. Rejected. Yet she did. She was glad Dani was so happy at university. She was thrilled.

She knew she was.

It just didn't feel that way right now.

Cormac looked up. 'They're boarding first class.'

He stood up, putting his papers back in his attaché case. Lizzie saw a glimpse of sketches, strong pencil lines that didn't look like the usual architectural blueprints, but they were slipped out of sight before she could guess what they were.

Clutching her handbag, she followed Cormac into the queue. They'd already been assigned seats and the airline attendants were cloyingly deferential as they led Cormac to two sumptuous reclining seats in soft grey leather.

Lizzie followed behind, feeling out of place and yet helplessly giddy at the blatant luxury. The feelings intensified when they sat down and an attendant offered them champagne and a crystal bowl full of strawberries.

Lizzie took the flute awkwardly, rotated the fragile crystal stem between her slick fingers. 'Some service.'

'First class,' Cormac dismissed, and pushed his glass away, untouched.

Lizzie took a cautious sip. She hadn't had champagne in years, not since before her parents had died, and then only a sip or two on Hogmanay or birthdays. Now the bubbles tickled her throat and her nose, made her feel a bit dizzy.

Or was it just the total unreality of the situation, sitting in first class, sipping champagne with Cormac Douglas?

Cormac was staring broodingly out of the window, the bare, brown fields and leafless trees stark against a slate-grey sky. Lizzie put her champagne flute down and glanced around at the other first-class passengers settling themselves.

A polished woman in designer denim shot her a look of pure envy and, startled, Lizzie realised the woman must think she and Cormac were a couple.

Lovers.

She glanced back at her boss, still lost in his own thoughts. His face was in profile and she could see the strong, clean line of his jaw. She was close enough even to see the glint of gold stubble on his chin, the way his close-cropped brown hair was

streaked by the sun.

She turned away abruptly.

Soon the rest of the passengers were settled and the plane began to taxi towards the runway. Lizzie leaned back in her seat, her nerves beginning a sudden, frantic flutter in her middle.

Cormac saw her fingers curl around the armrest and raised one eyebrow. 'Are you nervous?'

'A bit,' she admitted unwillingly. 'I've never flown before.'

'But you had a passport.'

'I went to Paris by train once.' As an escort for Dani's fifth form field trip, but she let Cormac think what he liked.

Apparently he didn't think much for he raised his eyebrows and murmured, 'I see.'

Soon the plane was lifting into a steely sky and Lizzie felt her stomach dip. Once the craft levelled out, she felt more relaxed and her fingers loosened on the armrest.

Above the clouds, the sky was a deep, clear purple, a cloak of twilight, smooth and soft. Lizzie let out a little sigh.

The attendant came to take drink orders and she asked for an orange juice. Cormac asked for the same.

Once the attendant had moved on, he turned to her, eyes suddenly flinty and cold. His mouth was set and a furrow was in the middle of his forehead. 'We need to talk.'

Lizzie set her orange juice down. 'Okay.'

'Your role in this weekend's meetings is…important.'

Lizzie raised her eyebrows, bemused. Shorthand and shuffling

papers was important? 'I understand,' she began carefully, feeling he required some response, 'that you want to put forth an impeccable—'

'Do you know anything about the Hassells?' he demanded, cutting her off, and Lizzie shrugged.

'Only what you've told me. They own an island in the Dutch Antilles, and they finally want to build a resort there.'

His mouth thinned and he reached down to extract a newspaper clipping from his attaché case. 'Read that.'

Lizzie took the clipping with cautious curiosity. The Hassells: A Family, A Dynasty the headline read. The article described the family, a Dutch dynasty that had lived on Sint Rimbert for over a hundred years. She read about Jan Hassell, his wife, Hilda, and their three sons, all entrepreneurs in various cities across the globe.

The family was focused on developing the local economy, keeping the island eco-friendly and retaining 'the family values the Hassells have cherished for a century'. The write-up was glowing indeed, and she looked up to see Cormac scowling at her.

'Now do you understand?'

She didn't. 'They seem like a nice family,' she said as she handed back the clipping. Not the type of people to care about whether a secretary wore designer clothes, either, although she bit her tongue to stop herself from voicing that thought aloud.

'Family values,' Cormac said, glancing down at the article. His

voice was a sneer.

His face was dark, as if a storm had gathered in his thoughts. Lizzie struggled for something to say to lighten the mood. 'They're clearly not in it just for the money,' she ventured. The article had described the Hassells' decision to build a resort—'a way of sharing the beauty of our island with the world.' A bit saccharine, perhaps, but a pretty sentiment nonetheless.

'Everyone's in it for the money,' Cormac said flatly. He glanced over at her, his expression now alarmingly neutral. 'The Hassells want an architect with family values, as well,' he continued. 'They've invited three architects to this weekend—the short-list—including me. As far as I can tell, they want everyone sitting round playing Happy Families and singing campfire songs.'

Lizzie stared at him, wondering what was coming next. Cormac Douglas was about as far from family values as a man could get.

'They invited you to Sint Rimbert,' she repeated hesitantly, trying to make sense of what he was telling her. 'So whatever they think about family values…'

'They invited me,' Cormac interjected, 'because I told them I was newly married and looking forward to having a family.'

Lizzie's mouth dropped open. 'But…that's not true…'

'It is,' he replied with a faint feral smile, 'for the purposes of this weekend.'

Lizzie blinked. Her stomach dipped, dropped. She wanted to

make sense of what Cormac was saying, yet she had the odd feeling that if she put two and two together she'd get about twenty. Cormac was gazing at her steadily, coldly, his expression like a vice on her mind. Her soul.

'So…how…?' She shook her head, licked her lips. Her mouth was dry and she took a sip of orange juice. It felt like acid coating her throat. 'What are you trying to tell me?' she finally asked, and her voice came out in little more than a scratchy whisper.

'I'm telling you,' Cormac replied with icy precision, 'that this weekend you're not my secretary. You're my wife.'

CHAPTER THREE

FOR one tantalising second the word conjured images in Lizzie's mind she had no business thinking of. Wife. Entwined fingers, tangled limbs. Marriage, love. Sex.

She blinked. 'Your wife?' she repeated. 'But…how?' She shook her head. 'You mean, pretend?'

His mouth curved into a smile she didn't like and his eyes remained cold. 'Did you think I was asking you for real?'

'You mean, lie?' Lizzie clarified. The realisation of what he was asking her to do rolled through her in sickening waves. 'Deceive the people you want to work for so you can get your blasted commission?'

Cormac looked unruffled. 'I suppose that's not putting too fine a point on it,' he agreed with deceptive mildness.

It was all making sense now—the reason he'd asked her to accompany him so suddenly, the importance of looking the part with cases of designer clothes. Even his request to call him by his first name. All part of a deception. A lie.

Lizzie looked away, closed her eyes.

It was impossible. It was wrong. She couldn't pretend to be Cormac's wife—she didn't like him, didn't even know him. Pulling off such a charade would be ludicrous; she wouldn't be able to keep it up for a minute, even if she wanted to…

For a moment Lizzie pictured what such an act would require.

Shared looks, jokes, bodies, beds.

A thrill darted through her, tempting, treacherous. She couldn't…wouldn't…want to…

She glanced back at him, saw him lounging comfortably in his seat, an expression of arrogant amusement in his eyes as if he'd witnessed her entire thought process.

Perhaps he had.

She licked her lips. 'Even if I agreed—which I'm not—how would it actually work? You're famous, Cormac.' Her mouth twisted. 'Notorious. If Jan Hassell is interested in hiring you, he will have researched your background. All it would take is one search on the Internet to come up with a dozen stories that refute these so-called family values of yours.' The photos in the tabloids waltzed before her eyes—Cormac with his arm around his latest glamorous conquest, usually replaced within twenty-four hours.

Cormac smiled. 'I'm a reformed man.'

She laughed shortly. 'You'd have to be a pretty good actor to pull that off.'

He leaned forward, eyes glittering, his voice a whisper, a promise. 'I am.'

Lizzie leaned back into her seat. He was too close, too dangerous, too much. In that moment, she had no doubt Cormac could pull such a feat off—and she couldn't.

Couldn't risk it.

Could she?

'I can't.' She spoke sharply, too sharply, and saw Cormac

smile. He knew too much, saw too much. She shook her head. 'It's wrong. It's immoral.'

'You think so?' He stretched his legs out, took a sip of orange juice. 'Actually, you'll find that what the Hassells are doing is wrong. If not immoral, then at least some shade of illegal.'

'What do you mean?'

He raised one eyebrow. 'Discrimination, Chandler. What if I were gay? Or a widower? They'd be discriminating against me by insisting I be married.'

'But you're not gay,' she snapped, and he inclined his head in acknowledgement.

'Of course not, but the principle remains the same, don't you think?'

She shook her head in mute, instinctive denial. She didn't want things twisted. She didn't want to think. 'It's still a deception.'

'Yes. But for a good reason.'

'It doesn't matter—'

'You're right.' Cormac cut her off smoothly. He was still relaxed, smiling even, while she was clutching her chair as if it would keep her grounded. Safe.

Which it wouldn't. The whole world was spinning, reeling.

'What matters,' he continued, 'is the resort. The design. And I'll build a spectacular resort—you know that.' It wasn't a question, and Lizzie didn't bother answering it.

Yes. She knew. Once upon a time, she'd had artistic ambitions of her own. She'd seen Cormac's designs and, while she was

no architect, she recognised good work. Brilliant work. 'The Hassells must have some reason for wanting a married architect,' Lizzie insisted. She heard the weakness, the doubt in her own voice. So did Cormac.

'Probably,' he agreed. 'I just don't care what it is.'

'How would you expect to pull it off? You don't even know me…'

'I know enough.'

'Do you even know my first name?' Lizzie asked, cutting him off. A bubble of laughter verging on hysteria rose in her throat; she swallowed it down. 'How on earth do you see yourself acting as my reformed, loving husband when you don't even know my name?' She shook her head, still too stunned to be scared. 'The whole idea is ludicrous!'

Cormac cocked his head, gazed at her for a moment with hard, thoughtful eyes. Then he smiled.

Normally when Cormac smiled, it was a cold, sardonic curving of his mobile mouth.

Now it was something tender, promising, sensual. His eyes flicked over her slim form with heavy-lidded intent, his mouth curved—curved knowingly, lovingly—and something unfurled in Lizzie's middle and spiralled upwards, taking over her heart, her mind.

Her will.

'No…' she whispered, and she didn't even know what she was protesting against except that look and what it meant. What it

promised.

And she didn't even understand what that was.

Cormac leaned forward, brushed his knuckles across her cheek. The simple touch sent that spiralling emotion hurtling through her body—every limb, every bone and muscle—until she sagged against her seat.

'Yes,' he murmured languorously.

Lizzie shook herself, watched as he moved closer, his lips hovering inches from hers. His lashes swept downward, hiding those cruel eyes, and his lips brushed her ear. 'Yes,' he whispered again, and she shivered. Shuddered.

She felt him shift back, realised she'd closed her eyes, let her head fall back.

She was so pathetic. And he knew.

'I think,' he said in a voice laced with cool amusement, 'you'll find I'm a good enough actor. We'll pull it off.'

'You might be good enough,' Lizzie choked, 'but I'm not.'

Cormac paused. Smiled. 'Perhaps,' he said softly, 'you don't need to act.'

Shame and fury scorched her soul, her face. She drew in a desperate breath.

Cormac leaned forward as a flight attendant approached them. 'Could we have some more champagne? We've just been married and we're celebrating.'

Lizzie jerked, saw the flight attendant coo at Cormac. 'Of course, sir.' She glanced briefly at Lizzie, seemed unimpressed

and turned away.

Cormac sat back in his seat and smiled. Smirked.

'You shouldn't have said that,' Lizzie said. Her heart was still thudding against her ribs, adrenalin pouring through her, turning her weak. She had been so weak. For a moment—a second—she'd been transfixed by Cormac. Cormac. The man who had not had a single kind word, glance or even thought for her.

She was disgusted with herself. 'I haven't agreed to anything yet and I don't plan to. Even if you're perfectly capable of convincing the Hassells that we're married,' she told him, grateful that her voice didn't shake, 'that you're in love with me, I won't agree. I won't.' She sounded petulant. A smile flickered over Cormac's face and was gone.

'Yes, you will.' He spoke calmly, conversationally. As if he had no doubt. Sickeningly, Lizzie realised that he probably didn't.

She gave a little laugh of disbelief; it trembled on the air. 'What are you going to do?' she asked. 'Threaten to fire me? Somehow I don't think that would hold up in a court of law.'

'Are you saying you'd sue me?' Cormac murmured, and Lizzie flushed. She didn't know if she had the stamina to suffer through a lawsuit, the time and money it would cost. The publicity, the shame.

'Are you saying,' she countered, her voice shaking enough now for both of them to notice, 'that you'd blackmail me?'

'Here you are, sir.' The flight attendant returned with two flutes of fizzy champagne, smiling sycophantically at Cormac,

who returned it with a quick, playful grin that blazed along Lizzie's nerve-endings even though it wasn't directed at her.

She'd never been affected by this man before. Hadn't remotely expected it. Didn't like it.

The attendant left and Cormac pushed his drink to the side. He eyed her thoughtfully, as if she were a puzzle to be completed, a problem to be sorted. 'Blackmail is a dirty word,' he said after a moment. 'Not one I prefer to use.'

'A rose by any other name…' Lizzie quoted, and he chuckled.

'Is it blackmail, Chandler, to buy you clothes? To take you to a luxurious villa in the Caribbean, all expenses paid?' He leaned forward. 'Or would people—the press—consider it a bribe? An accepted bribe.'

She stilled, her eyes widening in dawning realisation. 'You're saying no one would believe me if I told them you were blackmailing me?'

'I think they'd be more likely to believe that you were a spurned lover. Imagine the press, sweetheart. The tremendously bad press.'

'Don't call me sweetheart,' Lizzie snapped, and he shrugged.

She looked away, tried to quell the roiling nausea that his words had caused.

Suddenly she saw it all in a different, dreadful light. Against Cormac's calm confidence, she would be a hopeless, helpless wreck. Even if she managed to stammer a defence, no one would believe her. No one would even want to.

The press would be merciless, relishing the scandal. She would be judged, condemned as some sort of cheap gold-digger. Her career would be ruined.

So would Cormac's.

She turned back to him. 'Even if telling the truth ruined me, it would ruin you, too. Everyone would know you'd asked me to pretend—you've already told the Hassells you're married!' Her eyes narrowed and she gathered the courage to hiss, 'Somehow I think you have a lot more to lose than I do.'

He steepled his fingers under his chin, eyebrows raised. 'Do I?'

'You seem to want this commission rather a lot. Why is that?'

He shrugged, even as Lizzie saw a flicker of something—desolation? determination?—in his eyes before it was gone. 'It's important to me. A challenge.' He gazed at her calmly, his eyes now hard and bright, and yet something in that brief flicker had snagged Lizzie's curiosity. Her sympathy. She knew he wasn't telling the truth—the whole truth.

But what was the truth? She had no way of discovering it, no way of knowing.

'Still,' she pressed, 'you're taking a huge risk just for one commission. Your entire career could go up in flames! Even if I agree, someone else might discover the truth…' She shook her head slowly as she considered the implications. 'And even if this weekend was a success, there would be other times. You'd be working on the design for this resort for a year at least. How would you explain the fact that you're not married any more?'

He shrugged. ‘A divorce? A separation? Perhaps I’d simply say you were at home, waiting for me.’ He smiled, although there was an intense, icy light in his eyes that made Lizzie want to shiver.

‘The press would get wind of it…’

‘The Hassells are never in the British press,’ Cormac dismissed. ‘And I’m the only British architect on this weekend. Nobody from England even knows I’m going.’

‘But they’ll find out when you receive the commission,’ Lizzie argued, and Cormac leaned forward.

‘Does that mean you’re agreeing?’ he murmured with sleepy languor.

Lizzie stiffened. ‘Do I really have much choice?’ It hadn’t taken long to realise just how cornered she truly was. Cormac had coldly, calculatingly built the evidence against her. He’d waited until they were on the plane before telling her—there was no escape without shaming them both.

‘You could tell Hassell when we land,’ Cormac offered. ‘I expect he’d believe you. All those family values…’ He waved a hand in contemptuous dismissal. ‘They must count for something when it comes to a damsel in distress.’

‘Yes, and then what? He’ll send us both back on the very next plane, and no doubt tell the press what you’ve done. Your career would be ruined, and so would mine. And you know how rabid tabloid journalists can be. They’d be sniffing around me… around…’ She stopped abruptly and looked away.

‘Around your sister?’ Cormac finished, and Lizzie jerked back to face him.

‘What do you know about my sister?’

‘You’ve been taking care of her for ten years or so, since your parents died,’ Cormac replied calmly. ‘She’s what? Eighteen? Impressionable, probably. I imagine that so much publicity could go to her head quite quickly.’ He smiled.

Lizzie swallowed, tasted bile. She could just about face her own career—her own life—being ruined. But not Dani’s. Nothing could happen to Dani.

She hadn’t spent the last ten years saving and sacrificing to have Dani’s chances at a better life shot to hell…and all because of Cormac.

Cormac. This was all his fault…and there was nothing she could do about it.

‘How do you know so much?’ she demanded in a furious, frightened whisper, and he shrugged.

‘Most of it is on your CV.’

‘So is my name!’ She felt like scratching that arrogant, indulgent smile right off his mouth.

‘Yes,’ he agreed, ‘but that information isn’t important to me.’

‘It should be, if you want to pretend to be my husband!’ She’d raised her voice and in one quick, quiet movement Cormac grabbed her wrist, encased her hand in his like a vice. He pressed her fingers against her own mouth in a movement that was almost tender, except for the look in his eyes.

His eyes were cold. Freezing, dangerous. Dead.

'Careful, Chandler,' he whispered. 'You don't really want to give the game away now, do you?'

'Yes, I do,' she choked. She wrenched her hand out of his grasp. 'You're such a—'

'Now, now,' he murmured, smiling, although his eyes were still cold, still frighteningly flat. Lizzie choked back her words, her fear.

A flight attendant passed, glancing at them curiously.

She probably thought this was a lovers' spat, Lizzie thought. A little tiff. If it weren't quite so horrible, it would have been funny.

Except Lizzie did not feel like laughing.

'Why?' she asked, and it came out in a wretched whisper. 'Why are you doing this? It's only one commission. And it's such a risk—you could be ruining both of our lives.'

Her head drooped and she pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes, willed the tears and despair back.

Cormac was silent. 'If you make it through this weekend,' he finally told her, his voice soft, 'I'll pay you double your normal salary for the rest of the year. I'll make sure you never receive a word of bad press—even if it all comes out.'

Lizzie looked up bleakly. 'How can you make sure of that?'

'I can. Trust me, Chandler. I don't take foolish risks.'

'This seems pretty foolish to me,' she retorted, and he smiled.

'Yes, and foolhardy…and a little bit interesting, don't you think?' He leaned forward, his lids lowering, his lashes sweeping

the bronzed planes of his face. His breath feathered her hair, her cheek. 'A bit intriguing, perhaps…' he murmured, a provocative, questioning lilt to his voice.

Lizzie stared at him, amazed by his sudden transformation. Transfixed by it. 'No,' she denied—a matter of instinct. Protection. No.

'It could be an adventure,' Cormac continued, his voice turning silkily persuasive. 'For both of us.' His eyes glittered and again she saw that flicker, as if something had been stripped away or dropped into place. She didn't know which.

What was it? It was a shadow, a veil, and yet it also revealed. Revealed the man beneath the hard veneer of calculated charm—if there was one.

'An adventure? I don't…' Lizzie's breath hitched as she dragged it into her lungs '…see how.'

Cormac raised his eyebrows, a smile played about his mouth. His lips were both sculpted and soft…and close. Very close. To her.

'Don't you?' he murmured. He raised one hand to her cheek and twined her hair through his fingers. With each sleepy spiral of his hand he ticked off a point. 'You'll be in the Caribbean, in a beautiful villa. Wined and dined with a trunkful of designer clothes at your disposal—clothes which cost a small fortune. Petted, pampered. What woman wouldn't enjoy that?'

Lizzie swallowed. What woman, indeed? She wanted to say she wouldn't, insist that she couldn't be bought so easily, and

yet…

There was truth in his words.

Some bizarre, yearning part of her wanted this. Not the clothes, perhaps, or the food or any of the luxuries Cormac thought would entice her.

She wanted the thrill. The adventure, the intimacy. She'd had precious little in her life so far. The last ten years had been a desert of devotion to her sister.

She wanted excitement…and she wanted it with Cormac.

Cormac—the boss she barely knew, who had no interest in knowing her. Yet who was now looking at her, his eyes glittering, a smile of tempting, sensuous promise stealing over his features, softening them…

Stop. Stop.

This was Cormac. This was wrong.

'What about you?' she whispered, hating the need and weakness in her voice. 'How would it be an adventure for you?'

His smile deepened and he dipped closer so his lips touched her ear, sent delicious shivers straight to her soul.

'Why,' he whispered, 'because I'd be with you.' His lips hovered by her ear, making the little hairs on the nape of her neck quiver with awareness. Awareness of him, awareness of need. Need of him. She'd never needed anyone. Not like this. Never like this.

How had she not missed it? How had she managed without?

The adrenalin, the adventure, they were an addiction. She felt

alive, more alive than she'd ever felt before, every nerve and sense twanging with delicious awareness.

And yet it was wrong…

Wonderfully wrong.

'So?' Cormac breathed, his lips still close to her ear. 'What's your answer…Lizzie?'

He'd known her name. The whole time, she realised, he'd known her name. And somehow, stupidly, that made a difference. That made it almost safe.

She closed her eyes, took in a breath, felt it fill her lungs, felt herself go dizzy. Dizzy, scared and wonderfully excited.

Nothing like this had ever happened to her…and nothing ever would again.

Seize life.

Seize it.

'Yes,' she whispered. 'I'll do it.'

She felt Cormac's smile, his lips touched her neck in the barest of kisses. 'I can't wait,' he murmured, and sat back in his seat.

She couldn't even look at him. Cormac smiled to himself, shaking his head slightly at her ridiculous naïveté, her unbelievable innocence. She was embarrassed by the barest brush of a kiss…He wondered if she were a virgin.

She was twenty-eight years old. Surely not. That, he mused, would really be just too pathetic.

Yet it could also prove to be interesting…

Ever since seeing her in that silver gown—and then afterwards in her worn-out bra and jeans—he'd considered whether he would sleep with her. Seduce her. It would be easy, really, all too revoltingly simple, as his brief taste on the plane journey had already proved. A few whispered words, a little caress, and she'd fallen into his hands like softened clay, ready to be shaped to his own desire. His own purpose. He usually liked a bit more of a challenge.

Still…seduction had its uses. A Lizzie who believed herself in love might be more pliable than one who was simply going along because she'd been coerced.

On the other hand, a Lizzie who felt she'd been ruthlessly seduced could be dangerous. Unpredictable.

He'd have to be cautious. Lizzie Chandler needed careful handling.

He gazed out of the window, the stretch of inky sky merely a canvas for the resort he was going to design. The commission he would seize.

The people he would prove wrong.

Lizzie had asked him why this particular commission was so important to him; Cormac hadn't realised just how much it mattered until the question had been voiced aloud.

No one would tell him what he could or couldn't do. No one would tell him he wasn't good enough, worthy enough for anything.

Not any more.

He was in charge, in control of his own destiny—and of hers.

He had Lizzie Chandler in the palm of his hand and that was exactly where he wanted her.

CHAPTER FOUR

AS SOON as their dinners had been cleared—beef fillet and truffle-studded potatoes—Cormac turned brisk and businesslike.

After the few terrifying moments when he'd been so soft, so seductive, Lizzie was grateful for the change.

Brisk she could handle. Businesslike she could do.

'So…' Cormac turned to her. The flight attendant had left them with a pot of coffee, two delicate cups and a plate of petit fours. Cormac pushed the sweets aside and took a sip of strong black coffee. He hadn't touched any alcohol during dinner, Lizzie had noticed, and he'd eaten lightly, despite the many rich offerings.

He was, she realised, a man of incredible restraint. Control. Which made what had happened before—the teasing, tempting breath of a kiss—all the more worrisome. He was just flirting with her, teasing her as a form of amusement. Intimidation. He'd obviously seen how affected she was, just as she'd realised how affected he wasn't.

'We need to get our stories straight,' he said now. He took a sip of coffee before reaching for some papers from his attaché case. 'If you're telling Hassell we met at a wine bar and I say we met at work…' he glanced up briefly, eyes lighting with rare humour '…even the most trusting of saints would start to wonder.'

Lizzie nodded. She stirred a spoonful of sugar into her coffee and thought of the silly films she'd seen where just that scenario had occurred. Then had it been funny; now it was frightening.

No matter how exciting it might be, they both still had so much to lose.

'You've thought of a story?' she asked, nodding at the papers.

'Best to keep to the truth as much as possible. Then we're less likely to trip ourselves up. Now, the facts.' He gave her a glimmer of a smile before he began the recitation. 'We've been married six weeks. You've always worked for me, and one day…'

Suddenly Lizzie couldn't help herself. It was a game and she wanted to play. Flirt, even if just for pretend. She wanted to have fun. To seize life. 'One day,' she interrupted, smiling with coy promise, 'I walked into your office with some letters for you to sign and you just realised.' Cormac glanced at her, eyebrow raised in amused query. Lizzie gave a breathy, delighted sigh. 'You looked into my eyes…' she leaned forward and fluttered her lashes '…and realised that your life had been so cold, so empty, so meaningless without me. Didn't you?'

She dared to trail her fingers along his cheek, revelling in the rough stubble, the tick in his jaw. 'It was so sudden, of course. I never thought my boss would be interested in me for one second…But you insisted on taking me out to dinner, and the rest…' she shrugged, gave a little laugh '…is history. Isn't it, darling?' She sat back, smiling triumphantly even though her heart was beating a bit too hard.

She'd meant to take her hand away from his cheek, but he was too fast. He grabbed it, held it to his lips as his eyes roamed, caressed her face. 'That's just how it happened, sweetheart. I'll never forget the moment I realised how hopelessly I'd fallen in love with you.' He kissed the tip of her finger, nibbled on the sensitive pad. Lizzie gasped. Aloud. He smiled and continued nibbling. 'And you,' he murmured in a lower, more seductive voice like the slide of silk on skin, 'fell rather hopelessly in love with me.' He was sucking her fingers, his tongue flicking along her skin, her nerve-endings, his teeth tenderly biting into her flesh, filling her with craven need. Desire. His mouth curved into a smile that was all too knowing, and amusement lit his eyes.

She'd been playing a game and she had the feeling she'd just lost.

With one last brush against his lips, he dropped her hand into her lap. 'Don't lay it on too thick, Chandler, or they'll really start to wonder.' He turned back to his papers, completely unruffled, while Lizzie sagged against the seat.

Lord help her. What the hell had she got herself into?

Somehow she managed to get through the next half hour as Cormac droned on about the basics of what they needed to know. She felt frozen, numb. Afraid.

She wasn't sure she could do this after all. At that moment she was more afraid of Cormac than the press. More fearful for her body—her heart—than her career or reputation.

She'd had no idea she would react this way to Cormac, to his

touch, his look; she was leaning into it, craving it. Craving him. Adventure was one thing; abandon was quite another. Her mind danced with possibilities she had no business entertaining.

This was a charade, she told herself fiercely, not the real thing.

Never the real thing.

Help.

Cormac irritably tapped his pen against the sheaf of papers. 'You haven't been listening to a word, have you?'

'Sorry.' She flinched guiltily. 'It's just so much to take in.'

He capped the pen and gestured to the flight attendant to take their empty coffee cups. 'I don't suppose it really matters,' he said with a shrug. 'No one will be expecting a deceit, so no one will be looking for one.'

'No one will think it strange that you've only been married for six weeks?'

'Coincidence rather than convenience,' he replied with a shrug. 'People will expect a newly-wed couple, newly in love, and I don't think it will take much to convince them that's what they're seeing.' He paused, his gaze dipping down to her fingers —the fingers he'd touched. Tasted. 'I'm rather confident of your acting abilities.'

Lizzie tried for a laugh; it came out like a wheeze. 'At least it's only for a few days.'

'A few memorable days,' Cormac agreed. His smile turned languourous, his gaze heavy-lidded. All intentional, Lizzie knew, and yet she wasn't immune. She felt her stomach clench, prepare

for an assault of the senses, the flood of damning desire. Cormac's smile deepened. 'Who knows what might happen?'

The cabin lights flickered and dimmed. Cormac leaned over, his arm brushing her breasts—intentional again, Lizzie was sure—and he eased her chair into a reclining position.

Prone, supine before him, Lizzie clutched the armrests. Hated feeling vulnerable.

'Sweet dreams, Chandler,' he whispered. Lizzie lay there and watched as he adjusted his own seat, settled a pillow under his head and promptly fell asleep.

If only it were so easy for her. She lay in the dark, her eyes wide-open, her body thrumming with fear, excitement and unfulfilled desire.

It was a heady mix.

'We'll be arriving in Bonaire in just under forty minutes.'

Lizzie tilted her seat forward, her eyes gritty from lack of sleep, although she'd finally fallen into a restless doze only to be jerked awake by the bright Caribbean sunlight streaming through the window and the chirpy voice of the flight attendant as she pushed the breakfast cart down the aisle.

Her damp hands curled around the metal buckle of her seat belt. Next to her, Cormac sat relaxed, calm, smiling.

Her husband.

She smiled, a small stretching of her lips. In little over half an hour they would exit in Bonaire, take a small chartered plane to Sint Rimbert and the charade would begin.

She would be Cormac's wife. A thrill of terror rippled through her in an icy wave.

She couldn't eat any of the breakfast, although Cormac was calmly drinking a cup of strong black coffee. Once the dishes had been cleared away, they prepared for landing.

'Here.' Cormac pressed something cool and hard into her palm; Lizzie looked down and saw it was a wedding ring. Platinum. Expensive.

'I can't…' she began, shaking her head. Cormac curled her fingers around the ring.

'Yes,' he said, 'you can.'

Lizzie slipped the ring on with numb fingers. It was a little too big, although not enough for anyone to notice.

She was the only one who would notice, who would care. Who would realise how wrong it felt.

It was too late for regrets, she knew. Far too late for second thoughts. She'd agreed, she'd let Cormac seduce her with his words, his touch, his promise.

Who knows what might happen?

Nothing, Lizzie told herself fiercely now. Absolutely nothing.

It was too dangerous. Too tempting.

The plane landed with a bump.

Cormac stood up, slinging his attaché case over his shoulder. He handed Lizzie her handbag and she started in surprise.

'Here you are, sweetheart,' he said, and she stiffened. He smiled over her head at the flight attendant who'd been ogling

him for the entire journey. 'She's always forgetting her things on aeroplanes.'

The attendant tittered, and Lizzie's cheeks burned. 'Ridiculing me to the staff before we've even stepped off the plane?' she hissed. 'What a loving husband you are…darling.'

'Just teasing,' he murmured, but she saw a new flintiness in his eyes and realised she'd scored a direct hit. Pretending to be a loving husband—a loving anything—was going to be difficult for Cormac.

Perhaps as difficult as it was proving to be for her.

A young pilot, smiling and speaking with a Dutch accent, met them as they stepped off the plane. The next half hour was a blur of customs, the glare of the hot sun reflecting off the tin roofs of the airport and giving Lizzie a headache. She barely had time to take in their surroundings before they were on a tiny plane, Cormac relaxed next to her, Lizzie's hand clutching the rail.

It felt as if they were flying a kite.

The pilot grinned at her. 'It's small, but it's perfectly safe.'

Right. She thought of all the accidents she'd read about in the papers that had occurred with planes like these.

This wasn't part of the deal.

What deal? Lizzie asked herself. There was no deal. Cormac might have let her pretend there was a deal, asked her permission, but it was a joke. A farce.

There was simply Cormac's will and her submission to it.

Why had she not realised that before? Had she actually

believed she'd had some choice?

She closed her eyes. Cormac patted her hand, a caress that felt like a warning.

'She's just a bit nervous…and tired.' She opened her eyes to see him wink at the pilot, who grinned. Lizzie gritted her teeth.

'There's Sint Rimbert now.' The pilot pointed out of the window and Lizzie craned her neck to see.

Below them, the sea sparkled like a jewel and nestled in its aquamarine folds was a pristine island, magnificent and unspoiled.

For a moment Lizzie forgot the man next to her, and the role he was requiring her to play, and sucked in an awed breath.

A densely forested mountain rose majestically in the centre of the tiny island, framed by a curve of smooth, white sand, the clear azure sea stretching to an endless horizon.

A few buildings nestled against the mountain—cottages in pastel colours with shutters open to the tropical breeze.

'It's beautiful,' she murmured.

'Sint Rimbert is the jewel of the Caribbean,' the pilot stated. 'Untouched by crass tourism…and it will remain that way.' There was a warning in his voice and Cormac smiled easily.

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