



MODERN™



CAROLE MORTIMER

Surrender to the Past



Carole Mortimer

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Аннотация

The return of Ethan Black – the most magnificent man she’s ever met... Mia Burton thinks she’s seen the last of Ethan Black – the man who haunts her heart. She’s wanted to forget him – but can you really dismiss from your mind the most magnificent man you’ve ever met? He’s a painful reminder of her troubled past and she needs him to stay just a memory...But Ethan’s returned in all his very real glory – unyielding in his bid to resolve the history between them. Mia wonders what his real motive can be – because it’s clear he’ll do whatever it takes to win her back!

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‘How did you find me, Ethan?’

He looked at her from between narrowed lids. ‘When your father failed to do so in five years of searching?’ he taunted. ‘If that’s how long he looked, yes.’

Ethan grimaced. ‘We really should go somewhere more private to discuss this, Mia.’

Her mouth thinned. ‘I said no.’

Irritation darkened his brow. ‘We *are* going to talk, Mia.’

‘Whether I like it or not?’

‘Yes.’

About the Author

CAROLE MORTIMER was born in England, the youngest of three children. She began writing in 1978, and has now written over one hundred and fifty books for Harlequin Mills & Boon[®]. Carole has six sons: Matthew, Joshua, Timothy, Michael, David and Peter. She says, 'I'm happily married to Peter senior; we're best friends as well as lovers, which is probably the best recipe for a successful relationship. We live in a lovely part of England.'

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To Peter

CHAPTER ONE

‘MIND if I join you?’

‘Please do. I’m finished here, anyway.’ The warmly polite words had already been spoken before Mia looked up, but the friendly smile curving her lips froze in place as she instantly recognised the man standing beside her booth in the crowded coffee shop.

How could she not recognise Ethan Black?

Big. Dark. Forceful. Arrogant. Magnetically attractive. Still ...

Mia drew in a deep breath, chin tilting in challenge as she took in everything about him. It had been five years since she last saw Ethan, and his hair was still as dark as night, although it was styled much shorter than it used to be. Expertly so. His face was just as male-model handsome: wide, intelligent brow, penetrating grey eyes, sculptured cheekbones either side of a long straight nose, and a wickedly sinful mouth above a square and determined jaw. Although his mouth was unsmiling at the moment ...

The same, and yet not the same.

Ethan would be thirty-one now, to Mia’s twenty-five, and that maturity showed in the cynical depths of his eyes that at the moment had all the colour and warmth of a bleak winter sky. His cheeks were thinner too, more hollow, and there were lines beside his eyes and mouth that hadn’t been there before either.

He was dressed in a black—obviously expensively tailored

designer-label suit, with a black cashmere overcoat that reached mid-calf and drew attention to the handmade Italian shoes in soft black leather.

And he was nearly a foot taller than Mia's own five feet four inches—she was getting a crick in her neck just from looking up at him!

'Ethan.' She nodded tersely, knowing her initial reaction would have been too obvious for her to even attempt to act as if she hadn't recognised him.

Or realised that his presence at this particular coffee shop—the coffee shop Mia both owned and ran—couldn't simply be a coincidence ...

There was, Mia realised warily, a hardness about Ethan as he looked down at her—an unsmiling, haughty demeanour totally in keeping with those other changes she had noted in his appearance. A powerful arrogance that so reminded Mia of the man Ethan worked for. Mia's father ...

She raised her brows. 'You're supposed to buy the coffee and a cookie from the counter before you sit down.'

He shrugged, unconcerned. 'And if I don't want coffee or a cookie?'

Mia smiled ruefully. 'Then you obviously made a mistake coming into an establishment called Coffee and Cookies!'

'There was no mistake, Mia.'

'Of course not,' she accepted smoothly. 'The omnipotent Ethan Black doesn't make mistakes.'

Ethan eyed her coldly as he ignored the jibe. ‘Do you think we could go somewhere more ... private and talk?’ He looked pointedly around the room, crowded with people laughing and chatting as they enjoyed their hot drinks and biscuits in the warmth of the cosy coffee shop.

‘Fraid not.’ Mia’s light answer was completely bereft of apology as she closed the magazine she had been flicking through before his arrival. ‘My afternoon break is over and, as you can see, we’re a little busy right now.’

He didn’t move, effectively blocking her in the booth. ‘And I’m sure that as the owner you can take a break whenever you want to.’

‘Then obviously I don’t want to.’ Mia wasn’t in the least surprised that Ethan knew she owned the coffee shop; if he knew where to find her at four-thirty on a Thursday afternoon, then he would also have made a point of knowing she owned the coffee shop in which she could be found!

Ethan shrugged. ‘Then I’ll just sit here and wait until you finish work for the day.’

‘Not without buying coffee and a cookie, you won’t.’

‘Then I’ll do that,’ he retorted. ‘Or alternatively we can meet up somewhere once you’ve closed up for the day?’

Once upon a time—in another life!—Mia would have been delighted at the idea of meeting up with Ethan. Any time. Any place.

Once upon a time ...

It sounded like the beginning of a fairytale. Probably because that was what her infatuation with Ethan had always been—nothing more than a complete flight of fantasy on Mia’s part!

She sighed. ‘How did you find me, Ethan?’

He looked at her from between narrowed lids. ‘When your father has failed to do so in five years of searching?’ he taunted.

Her mouth thinned. ‘If that’s how long he’s looked, yes.’

Ethan grimaced. ‘We really should go somewhere more private to discuss this, Mia.’

‘I said no.’

Irritation darkened his brow. ‘We *are* going to talk, Mia.’

‘Whether I like it or not?’

‘Yes.’

That was what Mia had thought! ‘Did my father send you?’

Ethan gave a hard smile. ‘No one “sends” me anywhere, Mia.’

‘Meaning you volunteered to come and talk to me, or that my father doesn’t even know you’re here?’ She eyed him sceptically.

‘Both.’ He was obviously not comfortable with the latter.

Mia eyed him warily. ‘If my father didn’t send you, then what possible reason could you have for being here, Ethan?’

‘I’ve already told you—because I want to talk to you,’ he muttered tersely.

‘And if I don’t want to talk to you?’

‘You appear to be doing so, whether you want to or not!’

Yes, she did. And Mia had no intention of continuing to do so. ‘I’m busy, Ethan.’ She stood up.

Ethan gave a glance around the café. It was designed to be as warm and cosy as someone's sitting room, with comfortable armchairs grouped around low tables, and prints on the walls interspersed with plants trailing down from hooks fixed in the ceiling. The people sitting at those tables ranged in age from a mother and her young child—the latter obviously enjoying a hot chocolate with her cookie—several students from the university close by, who appeared to be working while they drank their coffee, to half a dozen or so older ladies, obviously meeting up for a chat in the late afternoon. Business, he noted abstractedly, was obviously thriving.

He turned back to look at the unmoving, grim-faced woman standing in the booth beside him. Mia had been twenty when Ethan had last seen her, with a prettily glowing face dominated by laughing green eyes, a nicely rounded body, and long straight hair the colour of ripe corn.

That softness was gone now. Her face was all hollows and angles, her body slim and toned—a fact only emphasised by the close-fitting black blouse and skin-tight black jeans. Her hair—that long and gloriously golden mane that had reached almost to her waist, and which Ethan clearly remembered falling softly, tantalisingly, across his bare flesh—was gone too. Although, he allowed grudgingly, the shorter, wispily feathered style certainly complemented the stark beauty of her face and emphasised the deep emerald colour of her eyes.

He gave a disbelieving shake of his head at the changes he saw

in her. ‘What happened to you, Mia?’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘In what way?’

‘In every way!’ He scowled darkly. ‘You’re so changed in appearance that—’

‘My own father wouldn’t recognise me ...?’ she finished dryly.

Ethan stilled. ‘I gather that was the point of the exercise?’

‘Of course.’

Ethan’s gaze raked over her critically. ‘William might not recognise you, but I do. With or without your clothes!’ he added.

Mia’s breath left her in a loud hiss. ‘That was uncalled-for!’

He gave a hard smile. ‘I take it you didn’t like my reference to the fact that we’ve been naked together?’

‘I want you to leave, Ethan.’ Her hands were clenched, her eyes glittering in warning. *Now!*

He looked down at her speculatively. ‘I never would have imagined you even working in a coffee shop, let alone owning one ...’

‘And why is that?’ Mia bristled. ‘Did you imagine that the daughter of Kay Burton would be too frightened of breaking a nail if she actually worked?’

‘I never once confused you with your mother, Mia,’ he drawled softly.

Mia’s mother ...

A beautiful and accomplished hostess. A social butterfly. Until the accident nine years ago that had not only robbed Kay of her beauty but the use of her legs ...

Mia's gaze fixed on Ethan. 'If you don't leave voluntarily in the next thirty seconds I'm going to call the police and have you forcibly removed!'

He looked at her in mock horror. 'On what grounds?'

'How about making a public nuisance of yourself? And I'm sure if I were to call the newspapers at least one of them would just love to come along and take pictures of Ethan Black being ejected from a coffee shop,' she taunted.

His mouth tightened and his eyes drew into icy slits of grey. 'Are you threatening me?'

'Does it sound as if I am?'

'Yes!'

'Then I probably am,' Mia confirmed.

'You do realise that even if I agree to leave now I'll only come back later?'

Oh, yes. Mia realised that ... Having finally succeeded in finding her, she very much doubted that Ethan was now going to just walk away without saying exactly what he had come here to say ...

It had been five years, for goodness' sake. Five years during which—as Ethan had just pointed out so cuttingly—Mia had changed almost beyond recognition. And those changes weren't just physical ...

Five years ago she had been totally infatuated—in love with Ethan. An interest he had briefly—*very* briefly—seemed to reciprocate. That mutual interest had come to an abrupt end

when Mia's mother died suddenly and Mia became aware of the fragility upon which her world had been built. A world she had thought so bright with possibilities suddenly made bereft and uncertain ...

'Please yourself,' she dismissed dryly.

'I usually do.'

'Why am I not surprised?' Mia gave his own changed appearance another scathing glance. 'Working for my father all these years has not only resulted in you looking and dressing like him, but also talking like he does too—as if you're God Almighty!'

Ethan snorted his impatience. 'Insult me all you wish, Mia, but let's leave your father out of it.'

'Fine with me. You have ten seconds of the thirty left, Ethan.' Her expression remained unrelenting.

His mouth thinned, and he looked as if he would like to add more before nodding abruptly. 'As I said, I'll be back.' It was more of a warning than a promise.

A warning Mia had no intention of heeding. 'Obviously I'm not going to say it was good seeing you again.'

'I remember a time when you couldn't wait to see me.' His hard eyes swept over her with slow deliberation. 'All of me ...'

The colour rose in Mia's cheeks as she was reminded of just how well she had once known this man. 'Just leave, will you, Ethan?'

He gave a mocking inclination of his head. 'For the moment.'

Mia watched in frustration as Ethan turned on one leather-shod heel and walked confidently over to the door, turning briefly so his glittering silver gaze met Mia's across the room once more in challenge, before he stepped outside and closed the door quietly behind him.

At which point all of Mia's outward bravado left her like the air from a deflating balloon and she began to hyperventilate. She had to rest her hands supportively on the table-top as her knees began to shake ...

'Are you feeling all right, Mia?' Dee, the nineteen-year-old Mia employed to help out with the serving, gave her a concerned glance as she cleared the neighbouring booth.

Was Mia feeling all right? *No*, came back the definitive answer. The last thing Mia was feeling was *all right!*

It had been five long years, damn it! And Ethan had just walked back into her life as if he had never left it. Worse—that last threat confirmed that he had no intention of leaving it again until he had said what he wanted to say to her.

'I think I need to go outside for some air.' She gave Dee a wobbly smile. 'Can you and Matt manage here for a while longer?'

'No problem,' Dee assured her readily.

Mia stood up to move quickly through the coffee shop and out to the kitchen, grabbing up her short leather jacket and hurrying out through the back door to breathe in large gulps of the fresh September air before moving away from the coffee shop as if

rabid dogs were at her heels. Or Ethan Black ...

Ethan.

The man Mia had fantasised about for years until he had finally asked her out and every one of those fantasies had become reality.

The man she had once believed herself to be deeply in love with.

The same man Mia had just discovered was still capable of making her aware of every disturbing thing about him just by being in the same room with her!

CHAPTER TWO

‘I THOUGHT you were in a hurry to get back to work?’

Mia hadn’t even realised she was being followed as she hurried into the park at the end of the street, but she now came to an abrupt halt on the gravel pathway, eyes closing tightly, shoulders stiff, her jaw clenched, hands fisted at her sides, as Ethan spoke softly from just behind her.

All those years of silence. Of peace. And now she was being hounded by one of the very people she had so desperately needed to get away from. To the extent that Mia knew she would never be able to come to this park again without recalling Ethan’s presence here, too.

‘Mia ...?’

She drew in a deeply controlling breath, smoothing her expression into one of mild uninterest before slowly turning to face Ethan.

‘I could add harassment to that list of charges.’ She eyed him defiantly.

To Ethan she had looked so very different inside the coffee shop. Not only looked different but acted differently too—like a distant stranger. But he could see traces of the old Mia in her now—in the depths of her eyes, the soft curve of her mouth, and the vulnerable tilt of her chin.

‘I’m sure the police would have no interest in a stepbrother

visiting his long-lost stepsister.’ Ethan knew before he had finished speaking that it had been the wrong thing to say. Her eyes chilled over with obvious distaste at that connection between the two of them.

‘You aren’t my stepbrother, Ethan, because I disowned what was left of my family *before* your mother married my father four and a half years ago! And I wasn’t lost—I just didn’t want to be found. I still don’t,’ she added flatly.

‘Too late!’

‘Obviously.’ She continued to eye him coldly.

Ethan knew that it was going to be up to him to stop baiting her in this way if this wasn’t to develop into nothing more than a slanging match. Mia’s resentment about the past was still such that it wasn’t just going to evaporate during the course of one conversation. One conversation badly handled on his part, he acknowledged heavily.

He had been thrown slightly off-balance earlier, when he’d walked into the coffee shop and recognised Mia sitting in a booth at the back of the room reading a magazine. A Mia so changed, but at the same time so confident in the world she had created for herself, that for one heart-stopping moment Ethan had almost hesitated about disturbing her obvious contentment. Almost ...

He gave a grimace. ‘Could we start again, do you think ...?’

‘Where would you like to start from?’ Her eyes glittered like emeralds in the pallor of her face. ‘Perhaps when I first became a sixth-form pupil at the boarding school of which your widowed

mother was headmistress? Or after your mother's affair with my father, perhaps? Or when you conveniently got a job working for Burton Industries—my *father's* firm—once you'd left LSE with your first-class master's degree and a PhD? With hindsight you *have* to have realised the significance of that ...?'

'The possibility I was only employed at Burton Industries because of my mother's ... connection to your father?' Ethan drawled dryly. 'It crossed my mind, of course—'

'I'm sure it did!'

'And was as quickly dismissed,' he bit out harshly. 'I'm going to say this only once more, Mia—my mother *wasn't* involved with your father before you went to Southlands School. Nor did their later friendship have anything to do with my getting a job at Burton Industries.'

She smiled humourlessly. 'And "once more" I'm going to choose not to believe you!'

'Why am I not surprised?'

'Perhaps because to you at least I was always so predictable!'

He gave an impatient sigh. 'I was head-hunted by dozens of companies when I left university, Mia. Burton Industries were lucky to have me.'

They probably were, Mia conceded grudgingly; Ethan's qualifications had never been in question. Or his ambition. It was only the lengths he was willing to go to in order to achieve those ambitions that had become so glaringly questionable. Lengths which involved the once innocent and naively trusting Mia.

She had wondered five years ago—at the same time as she'd thanked her good fortune!—how she had ever been lucky enough to attract the attention of someone like Ethan Black. The epitome of tall, dark and handsome, he could—and usually did—have any woman that he wanted. Mia may have been the only daughter of multi-millionaire William Burton and beautiful socialite Kay, but beneath the fashionable designer-label clothes her mother had insisted on buying for her Mia had also been terribly shy, and merely pretty rather than beautiful, like the women Ethan was usually attracted to.

Once she'd learned of Ethan's mother's affair with her father, the reason for Ethan's attraction had become obvious: Grace had made a play for the father, Ethan the daughter. One of them was sure to succeed.

'And let's call our parents' past relationship the nasty little affair that it really was, shall we?' Mia's top lip turned back with distaste.

'I told you it wasn't like that—'

'I'm really not interested, Ethan.'

'No—because you prefer to twist events to suit your own warped take on what really happened five years ago.'

'Nothing of what I eventually learnt about that situation suited me, Ethan,' Mia assured him furiously. 'Certainly not the realization that the only reason my father had chosen that particular boarding school to send me to in the first place was so that he had an excuse to visit his mistress. That's quite a play

on words, don't you think? My headmistress was also my father's mistress—'

'Stop it, Mia!' Ethan reached out to grasp the tops of her arms and shake her. 'Just stop it!'

'Let go of me, Ethan,' Mia gasped. 'You're hurting me!'

His fingers tightened rather than relaxed, her leather jacket proving no barrier to the pain of his fingers biting into her arms.

'I'm hurting you?' He thrust her firmly away from him, his gaze raking over her mercilessly. 'Do you have any idea—any idea at all—of the heartache you caused your father—have continued to cause him—by just disappearing in that way five years ago?'

'But I'm sure my leaving didn't affect you in the same way—did it, Ethan?' she murmured scornfully.

'Would you believe me if I were to say yes?'

'No.'

His mouth tightened.

'God, I was such an innocent. Such a fool!' She gave a pained groan.

'Because you were attracted to me?'

'Because I was stupid enough to think that you were attracted to *me*!'

He frowned darkly. 'I *was* attracted to you—'

'Oh, please, Ethan.' Mia gave a fierce shake of her head. 'What you were attracted to was my father's bank account and Burton Industries. You and your mother, both!'

‘I should be careful what you say next, Mia ...’ Ethan’s tone was icy with warning.

A warning Mia had absolutely no interest in. ‘At least I had the good sense to get out. Whereas my father—’

‘I said *stop*, Mia.’

‘It’s really not important now anyway.’ She gave an uninterested

shrug. ‘Five years later you both appear to be exactly where you always wanted to be—your mother is married to my father and you’re running Burton Industries!’

Ethan’s face looked as if it had been carved out of stone. ‘You really do believe that’s all I wanted all along?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Mia assured him with feeling. ‘You’ve always done exactly what was in the best interests of Ethan Black! And—to set the record straight—I didn’t *disappear* five years ago. I left.’

‘You disappeared, damn it!’ Ethan grimaced. ‘Just dropped out part-way through your second year of university, dropped *me*, and left!’

‘I was twenty years old. And, unless I’m mistaken, in this country that’s classed as being an adult, capable of making your own decisions. Besides, I left my father a note—’

“Don’t bother looking for me because you won’t find me.” Ethan quoted disgustedly. ‘What the hell sort of letter is that to leave anyone—least of all the man who had loved and cared for you since the day you were born?’

Mia’s eyes narrowed. ‘Even that was more than he deserved!’

‘More than he deserved ...?’ he repeated softly.

‘Yes!’ She didn’t at all care for the revulsion she could read in Ethan’s expression. ‘And I only left him that much so he wouldn’t decide to report me as missing to the police!’

‘And what about me, Mia? What did I deserve? The two of us were dating, sleeping together, when you decided to pull that disappearing act!’

‘It was the boss’s daughter you were sleeping with, Ethan. Not me,’ she dismissed scathingly.

‘That isn’t true.’ Ethan frowned.

‘Whether it’s true or not is unimportant—now as well as then. Just knowing of your connection to the woman who helped to make a fool of my mother was—and still is—enough reason for me never to want to see or hear from you ever again,’ Mia stated flatly.

Ethan drew in a ragged breath. ‘Okay, let’s forget about our own relationship if it makes you happy—’

‘Oh, it does!’

‘But William is your father—’

‘Something—along with you and your mother—I’ve been trying to forget for the past five years!’ She turned her back on him to walk away, and sat down on a wooden bench looking out over the parkland. She was hoping that Ethan wouldn’t follow her, but was not altogether surprised when, after a few seconds’ hesitation, he walked that same short distance and sat on the other end of the bench.

The two of them sat in uneasy silence for several long minutes.

‘He didn’t report you missing but he—we certainly looked for you.’ Ethan finally broke that silence, his voice huskily soft.

‘Don’t bother with the “we”, Ethan,’ she cut in dryly. ‘My father may have been too lovestruck by your mother to have realised it, but I certainly know that it wasn’t in *your* best interests for me to be found.’

‘Another piece of your own unique logic?’

‘Not at all,’ she said. ‘Once I had been removed from the equation it allowed both you and your mother to move in on my father.’

‘Damn you—’

‘No doubt,’ Mia accepted ruefully.

‘Okay, I can see there’s no reasoning with you on the subject of my mother or me—but what about your father?’

‘What about him?’

‘How could you just turn your back on him in that way?’ Ethan gave an impatient shake of his head. ‘William searched for you for months. Years! No lead was too small for him to follow up. No possible sighting of you too ridiculous for him to investigate.’

Mia didn’t so much as glance at him. ‘And to think that I never left London.’

‘You—?’ Ethan gave a disbelieving shake of his head. ‘You were here in the city all the time?’

‘Yes.’ She gave a humourless smile. ‘Don’t look so shocked, Ethan; haven’t you heard that the best way to avoid detection

by the enemy is by staying right under his nose!’

‘None of us were ever your enemy.’

‘No?’

‘No!’ Ethan eyed her in frustration. ‘Damn it!’ He began to pace. ‘So where exactly *were* you in London?’

Mia’s cheeks warmed at his obvious disgust. ‘I stayed with friends for the first couple of months.’

‘We—William contacted all of your friends to see if any of them had seen or heard from you and they all said they hadn’t!’

She raised her brows. ‘They were *my* friends, Ethan, not his.’

‘With friends like that ...!’ His jaw tightened. ‘Where did you go after you left these so-called friends?’

‘I bought an apartment, took some classes, and then a couple of years ago I opened the coffee shop.’

‘What sort of classes? William checked every year with all the universities to see if you were attending any of them,’ he added with a frown.

‘I enrolled in a very reputable cookery school right here in London, Ethan,’ Mia announced with satisfaction.

‘Cookery school ...? You actually *bake* the cookies in Coffee and Cookies yourself?’

She almost laughed at the disbelief in Ethan’s expression. Almost. But even knowing she had managed to totally bemuse the arrogant Ethan Black wasn’t enough reason for Mia to feel like laughing today. Nor was it reason enough to tell him that she not only baked cookies for her coffee shop but also for a couple

of very upmarket specialist food stores in London ...

‘My maternal grandmother, as well as leaving me the hefty trust fund that my father so conveniently signed over to me on my eighteenth birthday, also taught me to bake. I’m good at it,’ she added defensively as Ethan just continued to stare at her.

‘I’m sure that you are.’ Ethan finally nodded slowly. ‘But it’s a drastic change from the economics you were studying before you dropped out.’

She grimaced. ‘That was always my father’s choice, not mine.’

‘Because he expected you to take over Burton Industries one day?’

‘Probably,’ Mia acknowledged. ‘How lucky for him that you came along so conveniently to fill the breach.’

Ethan drew in a hissing breath. ‘Bitter and twisted doesn’t suit you, Mia.’

Her eyes flashed a deep dark green. ‘This is me being a realist, Ethan, not bitter and twisted.’

‘You closed your bank account two days after you left. We all thought you must have gone abroad somewhere.’

Mia gave another shrug. ‘Because that’s what you were all supposed to believe.’

‘That was unbelievably cruel, Mia.’

Her eyes glittered. ‘You don’t know the meaning of the word!’

‘Oh, believe me, I’m learning fast,’ Ethan assured her grimly.

Mia fell silent, not looking at Ethan but at the people in the park—some walking their dogs, others taking their children

home from school. All such everyday occurrences, sights and people Mia saw every day whenever she came to the park to eat her lunch, and yet Ethan's presence here made this totally unlike a normal day for her ...

She turned to look at him where he sat on the other end of the bench, her heart tightening in her chest at the bleakness of his expression as he stared straight back at her.

He was more attractive than he had ever been, Mia grudgingly admitted. Those outward signs of maturity gave him a dangerous edge and that aura of arrogant self-confidence only added to the impression of danger.

Her chin rose. 'I forgot to congratulate you earlier. On your promotion,' she explained at Ethan's questioning glance. 'It was announced in the newspapers several months ago that you were made CEO of Burton Industries.'

He looked at her through narrowed lids. 'And did you also see in the newspapers the circumstances under which I became CEO of the company?'

Mia turned away from that piercing silver gaze. 'Because my father had a heart attack.'

'You knew William had been ill?' Ethan stared at her incredulously.

'Yes,' she confirmed flatly.

'And yet you still didn't go to see him?' Ethan made no effort to hide his disgust now. Mia had known—all the time she had known about William's heart attack—and she hadn't even

bothered to telephone her father, let alone go to see him ...

Her sighed heavily. 'Obviously not.'

'What if he had died, Mia, and you never saw him again?'

Mia tried not to shudder at the thought. As much as her father had hurt her badly, she still questioned whether she had done the right thing. But Ethan didn't need to know that, so she shrugged. 'I have no intention of ever seeing him again.'

'And what if I were to tell you that it was another erroneous sighting of you that caused his heart attack?'

'It's been five years, Ethan—don't try and lay that guilt trip on me!'

'Five years or fifty—your father will never stop loving you. Never stop looking for you!'

Her expression remained unrelenting. 'I'm not, nor have I ever been—obviously!—answerable for anything my father may or may not choose to do.'

Ethan looked at her for several long, tense seconds before standing up abruptly. 'I'm wasting my time even trying to talk to you, aren't I?' It was more a flat statement than a question.

'I'm glad you've finally realised that.' Mia looked up at him unemotionally.

He gave a shake of his head. 'Obviously the changes in you aren't just on the surface, but go all the way to your selfish and bitter little heart!'

'How dare you ...?' Mia gasped.

Ethan looked down at her as if he had never seen her before.

'You were so beautiful, so sweet and trusting—'

'Well, I certainly had *that* knocked out of me, didn't I?' She eyed him wearily.

'Are you referring to me or to your father now?'

'Both!'

'Forget about me—'

'Oh, let's!'

Ethan gave an impatient shake of his head. 'William did everything for you. Loved you. Damn it, he *adored* you—'

'And then he betrayed everything I believed about him by having an affair with your mother!' Mia finished heatedly as she stood up to face him. 'And just because the two of them finally married each other it doesn't make your mother any more my stepmother than it makes *you* my stepbrother! None of those things changes the fact that long before *my* mother died my father was involved in an affair with your own mother.'

'It wasn't like that. You make it sound so—'

'Sordid?' she suggested. 'Maybe that's because it *was* sordid. My mother was in a wheelchair for the last four years of her life, and all the time my father and your mother—'

'I've told you—it wasn't all the time.' His eyes glittered. 'They didn't even know each other until after you started attending Southlands School.'

Mia gave an inelegant snort. 'You really expect me to believe that?'

'I'm telling you how it was—'

‘And beware anyone who dares to disbelieve the arrogant and powerful Ethan Black?’ She eyed him mockingly.

‘This isn’t about me, Mia. And it isn’t about you, either,’ he added grimly, cutting her off as she was about to speak. ‘Yes, your father and my mother made the mistake of falling in love with each other while your father was still married, but they didn’t do anything about those feelings until after your mother died. I know you would rather believe otherwise, but—’

‘My God, I can’t believe you actually fell for any of that sanctimonious rubbish they spouted after my mother died.’ She looked at him with pity. ‘That whole story of how the two of them fell in love but fought against their feelings! I always gave you credit for having more intelligence than to believe something so lame, Ethan.’

He eyed her derisively. ‘From what I’ve observed of the emotion, intelligence has very little to do with falling in love.’

‘The two of them were together on the day my mother killed herself, Ethan,’ she continued fiercely. ‘They were together at your mother’s house while my mother sat at home and downed a bottle of sleeping pills with a bottle of wine!’

He winced. ‘Your mother didn’t even know about their friendship.’

‘How can you possibly know that?’ Mia scorned. ‘She didn’t so much as leave a note, so how can anyone know what my mother was thinking when she swallowed that bottle of pills?’

Ethan hesitated, thinking of the promise William had

extracted from both himself and his mother never to tell Mia of the real circumstances behind her mother's death, or the letter Kay had left for him. It was a promise they had both kept for the past five years. But at what price ...?

He bit back his frustration. 'I'm sorry your mother did what she did, but you have to believe that it had nothing to do with the friendship that existed between my mother and your father.'

'I don't have to believe anything, Ethan.' Her face had paled to a ghostly white.

Damn it, Ethan hadn't come here to hurt Mia. Just like William, Ethan had never wanted to do that. 'Mia, I know how you must have felt—still feel—'

'You don't know anything about me, Ethan!' Mia shook her head. 'Certainly not how I felt then. Or how I still and will always feel about the circumstances of my mother's death.'

'Maybe that's because you refused all my attempts to see you after she died?' Ethan reminded her harshly.

Of course Mia had refused to see Ethan again after her mother had died and her father's affair with Ethan's mother had made front-page headlines in every newspaper in the country. How could she have done anything else, behaved in any other way, when the knowledge of that affair had shown her all too clearly the unfolding of past events and the reasons for them? *All* of them. Including the reason for her own brief relationship with Ethan.

'We had nothing left to say to each other, Ethan. You were

just using me. Just—’ Mia broke off abruptly as she heard her the emotional break in her voice.

She would *not* do this! She didn’t care what Ethan thought of her now, what he accused her of—or how hurtful she found those accusations—she would not allow herself to be put through this emotional wringer a second time.

The worst part of it was that she had loved her father so much—worshipped him, almost. She had liked Grace Black too, for the two years she’d been a pupil at her school. Until she’d later found out about the affair.

As for her feelings for Ethan ...!

She had worshipped him from afar for years too—already been crazily in love with him when he’d asked her out for the first time. She would have done anything—been anything that he wanted her to be. And all the time—all the time his mother had been involved in a relationship with Mia’s father.

She dropped down abruptly onto the bench, her face averted. ‘You’re right, Ethan. We’re done here.’

Ethan looked at the sharpness of her profile: pale and hollow cheeks, haunted eyes, the slenderness of her body poised as if for a fight.

He knew how much the past had hurt Mia. How much his own connection with the woman her father loved had and still did hurt her. But she would not believe—how could she, when she refused to believe everything else he told her?—how hurt and upset he had been about that friendship too, until William and his mother

had explained the truth of the situation to him.

A truth that William had refused absolutely ever to confide in the grieving Mia, insisting that he had no intention of trying to win back his daughter's love at the cost of damaging Mia's memory of the mother she had loved.

Ethan thrust his clenched hands into the pockets of his overcoat. 'I take it you still know where the offices of Burton Industries are? If you should change your mind and decide you want to talk to me after all?'

'Yes.' She didn't even glance at him.

'But you aren't going to, are you ...?'

Her mouth tightened. 'No.'

Ethan clearly remembered the first time he had seen Mia. He had been twenty-two, about to start his PhD at LSE, and Mia had been sixteen years old—a new sixth-form pupil at the school where his mother was headmistress. Her father had decided that it would be better for Mia to attend a boarding school after her mother had been involved in a car accident the year before, resulting in Kay being in a wheelchair, with her face badly scarred, and quite unable to deal with the needs of her young daughter.

It had been Mia's first time away from home, and she had obviously been very nervous at having tea, along with all the other new girls, at the home of her new headmistress.

She had stood silent and alone at the back of his mother's private sitting room, nothing at all like those other self-confident

sixteen-year-old girls vying for the attention of the headmistress's son. Instead she had exuded all the vulnerability of a puppy taken too early from its mother: her eyes too big for her face, the corn-gold hair long and silky, a vulnerable curve to the delicacy of her chin.

Ethan had felt sorry for her—had realized that she couldn't know any of the other new girls yet. Her sweet shyness had revealed how traumatised she was at leaving her parents and her home for the first time, and it had seemed the most natural thing in the world for Ethan to go and talk to her, to ease some of her nervousness, and for a friendship of sorts to develop between the two of them after that initial meeting.

An intermittent friendship, admittedly, with Ethan away at university most of the time, but he had always made a point of seeing and speaking with Mia at least once when he came home for the weekend or holidays.

It had seemed entirely natural too that Ethan should take the job offered to him with her father's company when he finally left university, and it hadn't been that big a step when he'd seen Mia again, looking stunningly beautiful and completely grown up in a figure-hugging red gown as she acted as her father's hostess at the company Christmas party, for him to realise he was deeply attracted to this more mature Mia.

It had been an attraction she had seemed to more than reciprocate when she'd accepted his invitation to dinner, and the two of them had begun to see each other on a regular basis.

Ethan had dated often during his university years, and gone to bed with quite a few of those women, but his relationship with Mia hadn't been like anything he had known in the past: emotionally intense, and physically satisfying in a way Ethan had never experienced with anyone else. Then or since ...

The woman now sitting on the park bench wasn't the Mia he had known. This woman wasn't in the least shy, and as for that appealing sweetness that had once brought out such a protective instinct in him—this older, assertive Mia was more like a Rottweiler than a defenceless puppy! So much so that Ethan certainly wouldn't have attempted to even take her in his arms, let alone make love with her.

Her expression was scornful now as she looked at him. 'Goodbye, Ethan.'

He sighed heavily. 'No matter what you may choose to believe to the contrary, Mia, my liking for you never had anything to do with my mother or my job at Burton Industries.'

Mia only heard the first part of that statement—Ethan had *liked* her! When Mia's naive and trusting heart had hoped that he would fall in love with her, as she had fallen in with him ...

'How fortunate for you that you got over the emotion so quickly!'

Ethan gave a shake of his head. 'I don't know enough about who or what you are any more to know how I feel towards you now,' he acknowledged heavily. 'The Mia I once knew was sweet and warm, utterly enchanting, and I don't believe she would ever

have deliberately hurt anyone, either.'

Her cheeks became flushed at the rebuke she heard in his tone. 'I had to grow up some time, Ethan.'

'So you did,' he accepted huskily.

And he obviously didn't like the way in which she *had* grown up! Well, that was just too bad—because Mia much preferred herself this way. Tougher. Stronger.

Ethan took a large brown envelope out of his pocket. 'You might like to have this.'

'What is it?' Mia said stiffly, totally ignoring the envelope he held out to her.

'Why don't you take a look inside and see?' He laid the envelope down on the bench beside her before turning and walking away.

Which was when the tears began to fall hotly, scaldingly down Mia's cheeks.

Damn!

Crying was the last thing Mia wanted to do. Instead she wanted to scream and shout, to wail against whatever cruel fate had brought Ethan back into her life.

Most of all she wanted to stop the aching agony that washed over her in increasingly painful waves just from seeing him again.

Instead, she picked up the brown envelope Ethan had left for her, ripping it open to tip the contents out onto the bench beside her.

And instantly felt all the colour drain from her cheeks ...

CHAPTER THREE

‘HOW dare you?’ Mia stormed into Ethan’s office on the top floor of the Burton Industries building the following morning, and threw the brown envelope down on top of the impressive oak desk in front of him, spilling the contents all over the papers he had obviously been signing when she’d burst unannounced into the room.

‘I’m so sorry, Mr Black.’ Ethan’s flustered secretary had hurried into the room behind Mia. ‘She just pushed her way in here before I had a chance to stop her—’

‘It’s okay, Trish,’ Ethan assured her smoothly as he slowly placed his fountain pen down on the side of the desk. ‘As this used to be the office of Miss Burton’s father she obviously doesn’t feel that she needs an appointment to see his successor.’

Mia heard the censure in Ethan’s tone, and grudgingly admitted it was merited; after all, no matter what her personal opinion of her father might be, this was still his company.

‘I apologise.’ She turned to smile at Trish. ‘I was just in such a hurry to see Ethan that I—well, I was obviously less than polite.’

‘It was my fault entirely, Miss Burton.’ The other woman looked even more embarrassed. ‘I haven’t been here very long, and I had no idea who—I’ll make sure and show you straight in next time.’ She smiled back tentatively.

As far as Mia was concerned there wouldn’t be a next time;

once she had told Ethan exactly what she thought of him she hoped never to have to see him again!

‘Let’s not go that far, Trish.’ Ethan spoke dryly to his secretary, but that narrowed silver gaze was fixed steadily on Mia. ‘I would like at least a little prior warning of the invasion!’

‘I really am sorry, Mr Black. I honestly had no idea—’

‘It’s not a problem,’ he assured her again smoothly. ‘But thanks anyway. And could you call Jeff Bailey and tell him I may be a little late for the ten o’clock board meeting?’

‘Certainly, Mr Black.’ With a last apologetic smile in Mia’s direction the other woman turned to leave.

‘Just what do you think you were doing by—’ Mia broke off in surprise as Ethan raised a silencing finger. A surprise she recovered from as soon as she heard his secretary closing the door on her way out. ‘Don’t you dare shush me, you arrogant, overbearing, pompous—’

‘My, you’re in good fighting form this morning, aren’t you?’ Ethan sat back in his high-backed black leather chair to consider her fully. Once again he was wearing one of those designer-label suits—charcoal-grey today—with a pale grey shirt and meticulously knotted tie. ‘I had a feeling I might see you here some time this morning.’

‘Then you weren’t disappointed, were you?’ Mia snapped. ‘And you would have seen me last night if I had known where to find you.’

He nodded slowly. ‘I moved apartments a couple of months

ago.’

‘No doubt you could afford to on a CEO’s salary!’

His mouth tightened at the scorn in her voice. ‘No doubt.’

Mia gave an impatient shake of her head. ‘Explain exactly what you thought you were doing by having someone spying on me—taking photographs of me—’ she lifted up the dozen coloured photographs that had fallen out of the brown envelope ‘—like some sort of pervert hiding in the bushes.’

‘How else was I supposed to find you?’

‘You weren’t.’ She stated the obvious.

He gave an unconcerned shrug. ‘Too late.’

‘You had no right spying on me, prying into my private life—’

‘I don’t consider locating the daughter of my stepfather to be prying into anything,’ Ethan cut in coldly.

Mia became very still. His *stepfather*. Much as she might have tried to forget it the previous day, that did also made him her stepbrother. Oh, God ...!

Ethan took advantage of Mia’s momentary silence to take in her appearance. She was wearing a sweater in the same emerald-green as her eyes beneath a short black leather jacket, along with skin-tight low-rider denim jeans that left little to the imagination in regard to the taut roundness of her bottom and the slender length of her legs.

Not that Ethan needed to use his imagination where Mia was concerned; he knew exactly what she looked like naked. Or at least he had ...

Mia was so much more slender than she'd used to be, but her skin—always the colour of ivory touched with a light rose, soft as velvet and begging to be touched—was just as appealing as it had always been. The fullness of her breasts would no longer be a snug fit in his hands, but the rounded curve of her bottom would, and he could imagine that softness as he pulled her into him and—

What the hell was he doing, fantasising about making love to Mia? Present tense, not past ...

Damn it, wasn't this situation complicated enough already, due to the limited amount of information he felt able to share with Mia, without clouding the issue by resurrecting his desire for this woman that had once been so unrelenting? A desire Mia had made it more than obvious she would never feel for him again ...

Ethan stood up restlessly. And instantly realised his mistake as the pulsing of his erection told him that it wasn't only his thoughts that had become wayward in the last few minutes!

He turned away to look out of the window rather than allowing Mia to see the evidence of his arousal. Yesterday he had been certain that he didn't even *like* this new tough and forceful Mia. Now his traitorous body had decided something completely different!

Not just his body, Ethan acknowledged with a frown. He had caught a glimpse of a softer, more appealing Mia just now, when she'd apologised to Trish for her rudeness, and that glimpse, it seemed, had been enough to reawaken the desire Ethan had felt

for Mia since he had looked across the room where the company party was being held and seen her in that snug-fitting red dress, her hair a glorious gold tumble down the length of her spine ...

‘Who took those photographs, Ethan?’

Get a grip, Ethan, he instructed himself firmly. Stop thinking about taking Mia to bed and concentrate on the here and now. ‘I hired a private security firm six months ago,’ he revealed tautly.

‘Obviously a more efficient one than my father.’

‘Obviously,’ Ethan said.

Mia had felt physically sick yesterday as she’d looked through the photographs inside the envelope Ethan had given her.

Photographs of her opening Coffee and Cookies in the morning. Of her walking alone in the park during her lunch break. Of her loading boxes of cookies into her car for delivery. Another one of her getting into her car and driving off. The list just went sickeningly on and on!

Someone—some unknown, faceless person Ethan had hired—had been following her, taking photographs of her, and she hadn’t even realised it! ‘Did my father ask you to do this?’

‘No.’

‘Then I don’t understand ...’

‘Obviously not.’ Ethan turned back to face her, eyes a glittering silver-grey. ‘You already know your father had a heart attack six months ago, Mia,’ he reminded grimly.

‘Yes ...’

‘And the one thing he wanted before he died was to see you

again.’

‘How sweet!’

‘Don’t, Mia.’ Ethan’s warning was icily chill, his eyes becoming like silver shards of glittering glass.

‘Don’t what?’ she taunted.

‘Don’t mock what you so obviously can’t begin to understand.’

‘Are you daring to question the love I felt for my father?’

‘Obviously in the past tense,’ Ethan recognised harshly. ‘But, whether you like it or not, whether you accept it or not,’ he added firmly, ‘William will never stop loving you.’

‘He has your mother now.’

‘Considering what a cold-hearted little witch his daughter has turned into, that’s probably as well!’ He looked at her coldly.

Mia’s cheeks flushed. ‘You know nothing about me—’

‘I know that you have only a few close female friends, that there’s no current man in your life, and that you work twelve hours a day, six days a week in your coffee-shop.’

‘Exactly how long did you have me watched, Ethan?’ Mia’s hands shook as she clenched them at her sides.

‘It took almost the whole six months and a lot of man hours to find you.’ He shrugged. ‘The fact that you used only the name of a company to buy your coffee shop was what threw us off the scent for so long.’ He looked at her reprovably.

Mia’s mouth firmed. ‘And once you had found me?’

‘A few days.’

‘How many?’

‘Five,’ he stated flatly.

‘I want any written reports on me given to you by this “private security firm”.’ Mia was breathing unevenly, not sure if she was just furious at having her private life invaded in this way, or if it was the fact that Ethan had instigated the search that made it seem so much more of an intrusion.

Ethan shrugged broad shoulders. ‘I’ve already shredded them.’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘Why?’

‘Because they weren’t relevant now that I’ve seen you again,’ Ethan dismissed impatiently, before moving to sit back behind his desk; he didn’t need a written report on Mia to remember what was in it. To know there was no current male in Mia’s life ...

‘It’s relevant to *me*—’

‘It’s gone, Mia.’ Ethan sighed. ‘Destroyed. Unimportant.’

‘Why should I believe you?’

His mouth tightened at her obvious scepticism. ‘Perhaps because I have no reason to lie to you?’

‘Did you ever need a reason?’

‘Damn it, Mia—’

‘Have you told my father yet that you’ve found and spoken to me?’

‘Not yet, no,’ Ethan bit out tersely.

‘Why not ...?’ She eyed him guardedly.

He shrugged. ‘I didn’t feel able to do that without first speaking to you.’

‘And now that you *have* spoken to me?’

Ethan breathed deeply. ‘I see little point in telling him anything when you’re obviously still so hostile to the idea of seeing him again.’

‘That isn’t going to change any time soon.’ Inwardly, Mia told herself she had absolutely no intention of feeling in the least bit guilty over her refusal to see or hear from her father again.

‘It might.’

‘It won’t,’ she assured him evenly. ‘Seeing you again—twice!—has been quite bad enough, thank you very much!’

‘I can’t see why. Unless I actually meant something to you five years ago ...?’

‘You didn’t.’ Mia gave a decisive shake of her head. ‘You’re just a part of something that I would rather forget.’

And that had been, and always would be, the problem between the two of them, Ethan acknowledged heavily. Even if they could have overcome the hurdle of the mistrust Mia felt in regard to him, Ethan still knew that every time Mia so much as looked at him now she was reminded of her mother’s suicide five years ago. Along with the remorseless publicity that had followed because of her father’s relationship with Ethan’s mother.

What would Mia say or do if Ethan were to act on the desire that now raged through his body at the very thought of having all her restless aggression in his bed?

‘Ethan!’ Mia was obviously as irritated with his distraction as Ethan was.

He frowned his impatience. ‘You’ve become quite the little

spitfire, haven't you?

'And?'

'I like it.' He shrugged.

She seemed dumbstruck for a few seconds, and then she glared at him. 'I have absolutely no interest in hearing what your opinion is of me now, Ethan!'

'Are you sure about that?'

Could Ethan possibly be flirting with her? Mia questioned incredulously. After all that had happened, their chequered history, was he actually—? No, he couldn't be. Ethan had made it perfectly clear that—spitfire apart—he didn't even *like* the woman she was now. That he thought she was both cruel and selfish.

When Mia was neither of those things ...

Walking away from her father—from Ethan—from the only life and home she had ever known—had been the hardest thing Mia had ever had to do. But to have stayed when she'd felt as if everyone she had ever loved and cared for was either gone or had betrayed her—her mother by dying, her father and Ethan by deceiving her—would have been even harder.

And if Ethan thought it had been easy for her to stay away after she had read about her father's heart attack in the newspapers, then he was mistaken; if anything that had been more difficult to do than walking away initially.

Instead she had continued to follow her father's medical progress in those newspapers, to inwardly ache at the changes

she saw in him when he was photographed leaving hospital two weeks after his heart attack. Her father's hair was iron-grey now, and there were lines on his face that certainly hadn't been there four and a half years ago. She had been pleased to see he looked slightly less strained and ill when he'd been photographed again four weeks later, boarding a plane on his way to recuperate at his home in the South of France. Although that pleasure had been somewhat diluted by seeing a smiling Grace Burton at his side ...

'Could we get back to the reason I came here?' she prompted testily.

'Which was?'

'To tell you to call off your private security company, for one!' She began to pace restlessly.

'Already done. Anything else?'

'I want you out of my life. And I want you to stay out!' Her eyes flashed in warning.

'You seriously think, after all these months of searching, I'm now going to just give up on you because you tell me to?' Ethan raised his brows in derision.

'Why not? I gave up on all of you years ago!'

Ethan was well aware of that fact. But there were still so many things that Mia didn't know about the past. Things that William had made Grace and Ethan promise never to tell her ...

Such as the fact that Kay Burton had been about to leave both her daughter and her husband for a younger man—her tennis coach; how clichéd was that?—on the day of the car

accident that had left her so badly injured and then in hospital for months afterwards. Such as the fact that the man Kay had been leaving her family for had decided he was no longer interested in being with a woman—even one as wealthy as Kay Burton would be after her divorce—who was badly scarred and would be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life. That had resulted in William feeling duty-bound to stand by the mother of his heartbroken daughter, even though she had been leaving him for another man and there had no longer been any love between himself and Kay.

The tennis coach hadn't completely disappeared from their lives, either ...

The wealthy divorcee Kay no longer being an option, as far as the other man was concerned, he had instead decided to blackmail William in order to keep the truth of her mother's affair, of Kay's intention to leave her husband and daughter, from the already traumatised sixteen-year-old Mia. Blackmail that had only come to an end when Kay had killed herself and Mia had disappeared only days after her mother's funeral.

Not a pretty story, by any means—and certainly not one that William would have confided in his young daughter while her mother was still alive. And he had adamantly refused to tell Mia after Kay Burton took her own life.

Putting Ethan in a very precarious position now he had found Mia again. His respect for William dictated that he couldn't break his promise to the other man and tell Mia the truth—but, having

now found her again, spoken with her, Ethan couldn't just walk away again either.

Even if he wanted to. Which he didn't. And not just because of his love for William; this older, self-reliant and more self-confident Mia was even more intriguing than the younger, vulnerable Mia had been ...

He straightened determinedly. 'I'm not going anywhere, Mia.' 'Pity!'

'Isn't it?' he came back insincerely. 'So, why isn't there currently a man in your life, Mia?'

Mia was thrown slightly off-balance by this sudden change of subject. 'Is there currently a woman in your own life?' she counter-challenged.

'No,' he answered.

Her brows rose. 'Why not?'

Ethan gave a rueful shrug. 'Perhaps I'm a little more ... discerning about the women who share my bed than I used to be?'

'You—'

'Arrogant? Overbearing? Pompous?'

'Absolute pig!' Mia completed forcefully.

'Sticks and stones, Mia,' Ethan dismissed derisively.

Mia stared across at him for several long seconds. Ethan was so different from the man she remembered from that first meeting nine years ago, and from when they had dated each other—slept together!—four years later. Both in looks and temperament.

She would never verbally admit to it, but she found this more mature Ethan slightly intimidating. Ruggedly handsome enough to set any woman's pulse racing, with a cool arrogance that attracted as much as it challenged. Quite a heady combination, in fact ...

And Mia would be insane to ever allow herself to become attracted to Ethan all over again!

Her chin rose defiantly. 'I'm not joking here, Ethan; I want you out of my life.'

The previous teasing left his face. 'Disappear like you did, you mean?'

'As long as you stay out of my life I don't care what you choose to call it.'

He gave a slow shake of his head. 'We both know I can't do that.'

'Of course you can,' she reasoned impatiently. 'You just shred those photographs, like you did the written file, and forget you ever saw me.'

Ethan eyed her impatiently. 'You really think I can do that?'
'It's exactly what I intend doing where you're concerned.'

His mouth thinned. 'And what happens if William should have another heart attack? Do I still "forget" that I know exactly where you are? That I ever saw you again?'

Mia gave a pained frown. 'There's no reason to think my father will have another heart attack. Is there ...?' she added uncertainly.

‘There’s no reason to think he won’t, either,’ Ethan rasped impatiently.

She gave an exasperated shake of her head. ‘I’m leaving now, Ethan, and I don’t ever want to see you again.’

‘Want all you like, Mia; it isn’t going to happen,’ he came back mildly.

She gave him one last frustrated glare before turning on her heel and leaving, knowing Ethan well enough to realise he meant exactly what he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘I THOUGHT I had made my feelings more than clear earlier today about seeing you again, Ethan?’ Mia eyed him impatiently as he stood by the counter, arms crossed in front of his powerful chest, having arrived at Coffee and Cookies a few minutes before closing time, but making no effort to leave when the other customers did so.

‘You did, yes,’ he confirmed.

‘But you, being you, decided to ignore me?’

‘As I told you I would, yes.’ He nodded unapologetically.

Mia wished that Ethan didn’t look so heart-stoppingly handsome this evening, having taken off his jacket and draped it over one of the chairs to reveal a tight-fitting black polo shirt beneath that defined his muscled chest and arms, and a pair of well-worn denims that fitted snugly in all the right—wrong?—places. He was looking much more like the devastatingly handsome Ethan she had once known so intimately—and loved so completely!

Mia delayed answering by turning away to pull down the blind on the front window, at the same time willing her pulse to stop racing and her cheeks to cease burning.

She might have been completely thrown when Ethan turned up at Coffee and Cookies but the impressionable Dee had been delighted; obviously Ethan was just as devastating to the female

population as he had always been!

But not to her, Mia told herself firmly. She was well and truly over Ethan Black. Had been over him for years.

And wasn't she protesting just a little too much ...?

Not when it came to Ethan, no! He had always been a force to be reckoned with, but the last five years had added a hard edge only a fool would deliberately choose to ignore. And Mia was no longer a fool.

'I thought the two of us could go out to dinner.'

Mia turned sharply. 'What?'

'Dinner. You and me. Together.'

Her cheeks felt warm. 'I'm just not getting through to you at all, am I? Let me repeat—I didn't want to see you again, let alone go out to dinner or anything else with you.'

'Perhaps you should wait until you're asked for anything else before turning it down?' he came back tauntingly.

Her eyed narrowed. 'You're really starting to irritate me now, Ethan.'

'Only starting?' He raised dark brows as he stood, effectively blocking her way, as she tried to move around him to the counter.

Mia breathed her impatience as Ethan stood tall and impenetrable in front of her. 'Isn't there someone else you could go and annoy this evening?'

'No doubt many, many people.' He nodded slowly, grey eyes looking down at her.

Mia wasn't sure she could cope with Ethan in this lighter

mood. It reminded her far too forcibly and uncomfortably of how it had once been between them. In another lifetime. Between two other people ...

‘But I’m having far too much fun irritating *you* at the moment to want to be anywhere else,’ he assured her dryly.

She looked up at him. ‘Were you always this annoying, or is it something new?’

He gave an unconcerned shrug. ‘Considering we virtually lived together for three months, you would no doubt be a better judge of that than me.’

No doubt ...

Just thinking of that three months when she and Ethan had been together constantly, night as well as day, was enough to cause an ache in Mia’s chest.

God, how she had loved him! She hadn’t been able to get enough of his company. Or their lovemaking ...

Long, pleasurable hours of just touching, caressing, kissing each other, before coming together in slow and pleasurable strokes until they both reached a climax that left them trembling in each other’s arms. Or those other times, when they had been so hungry for each other they had barely been able to rid themselves of their clothes before falling on each other ravenously, their coupling wild, their orgasms earth-shattering.

Yes, she had loved Ethan—been in love with him, Mia acknowledged inwardly, but Ethan’s emotions had been nowhere near as engaged. He had been twenty-six years old, very

ambitious, and Mia had been a sweet and tasty morsel for him to seduce and devour on his single-minded way to the top. He certainly hadn't been in love with Mia as she had with him.

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