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# The Bride's Secret

HELEN BROOKS

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### **Аннотация**

Should she confess to her husband? Marianne had been thrilled when Hudson de Sance proposed. But could she really go ahead with the wedding? She was being blackmailed, and the only solution seemed to be disappearing from Hudson's life... Only, Hudson had found her, and he was still determined to make Marianne his wife. But now he was driven by revenge, not love! Marianne longed to marry him - but what would happen when Hudson discovered his bride's secret?

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“When you agreed to marry me, you were happy.”

Hudson continued, “There was nothing, not a hint of anything being wrong. And then, within hours, it had all changed. What happened when you left me, Annie?” he asked softly. “Something did. Something...catastrophic.” His eyes were boring into her soul.

This was too close—he was getting too close.

“Annie?” He touched her face tenderly.

“After all we meant to each other, you really think I would be content to let you go without any explanation?”

What could she say? She stared at him wide-eyed until she couldn’t bear to look at him any longer and dropped her gaze. “You have no choice,” she stated as firmly as she could, considering her heart was thundering in her ears....

HELEN BROOKS lives in Northamptonshire, England, and is married with three children. As she is a committed Christian, busy housewife and mother, her spare time is at a premium, but her hobbies include reading and walking her two energetic and very endearing young dogs. Her long-cherished aspiration to write became a reality when she put pen to paper on reaching the age of forty, and sent the result off to Harlequin.

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Helen Brooks



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## CHAPTER ONE

‘MARIANNE? What’s the matter? You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.’

Marianne heard Keith speak but she could no more have dredged up a reply at that moment than flown to the moon. That big, lean body—the way he was holding his head—there was only one person in the world who stood with such arrogance and disregard for the rest of the human throng. It had to be Hudson de Sance.

‘Marianne?’ Now Keith reached out and turned her face to his, after staring perplexedly in the direction of her fixed gaze for a moment or two. He couldn’t see anything unusual in the well-dressed, cosmopolitan collection of businessmen and holiday-makers enjoying an alfresco lunch in the open-air dining room of the hotel where they were staying—it was exactly the sort of clientele he would expect to see in a first-class hotel such as this

one in the middle of Tangier. ‘What is it?’

‘What? Oh, nothing... I’m just daydreaming,’ she said quietly.

It didn’t work, but Marianne hadn’t expected it to. She and Keith had worked together long enough for him to know when she was evading the truth.

‘Don’t give me that; you resemble someone who’s just had a hard punch where it hurts,’ Keith said worriedly, his eyes returning to the well-populated tables in front of them. ‘Have you seen someone you know? Someone you’d rather not see?’

‘Just leave it, Keith, please.’ Her gaze had briefly swept the area along with his, and she felt weak with relief to find the spectre from the past had vanished.

It couldn’t have been Hudson, she told herself reassuringly. There were probably dozens—hundreds—of tall, dark, brooding men who inclined their heads in that particular way, and she had only seen the back of the man anyway as he had stood looking down over the roaming city spread out beneath them from the hilltop hotel.

Nevertheless, her heart continued to thud as the waiter presented them with lunch menus and took their order for drinks, and her stomach churned relentlessly. Hudson de Sance. He still invaded her dreams and encroached on her days as remorselessly as when she had first left him, despite the fact that she had not seen him in the flesh since that night two years ago. Would she ever get over him? She savaged the thought the second it took form. Of course she would—she had. She was autonomous now;

she had had to be.

‘I thought the shoot went really well—how about you?’ Keith was making an effort at conversation and she blessed him for it, although his face revealed she wasn’t hiding her shock as well as she would have hoped. ‘Of course, the location is second to none.’

‘I thought it was good, and you were brilliant as usual.’ She smiled, but it wasn’t flattery—Keith was one of the best photographers in London and she was lucky to be his assistant. All the top models wanted him, knowing he could make them look good even on their worst days, and he could pick and choose his assignments at leisure. She was a good photographer, but that was all, whereas Keith could make his camera talk for him. ‘Those shots you did of Marjorie against the background of the harbour were inspired; I didn’t think we’d get anything out of her today.’

‘Too much drinking in the hotel bar last night,’ Keith agreed softly. ‘She phoned that guy she’s been seeing earlier and it was all hassle, apparently.’ Keith was an easygoing individual—except where his work was concerned, and the beautiful model’s dishevelled state that morning had produced a certain amount of artistic despair followed by a rare temper tantrum, only mollified by indulgent obedience of his every suggestion by the lady in question. ‘She’s a fool to herself,’ he continued quietly. ‘Why she doesn’t dump that no-good boyfriend of hers I’ll never know.’

‘Love?’ Marianne suggested lightly.

‘That sort of slavish obsession isn’t love,’ Keith said flatly.

‘Love isn’t like that. It’s like he’s some sort of drug to her.’

The waiter returned at that moment with their drinks and Marianne was glad of it. There had been that look in her boss’s eyes again—a mixture of desire and devoted-puppy-dog appeal—that was appearing more and more often of late, despite her tactful intimations that she wasn’t interested.

‘Marianne—’ Keith’s voice was urgent as the waiter left them, but whatever he had been about to say was cut short by a deep, cold voice just behind her.

‘Marianne Harding, isn’t it? It’s been a long, long time.’

She froze—all her senses screaming to a halt—and then forced herself to turn and look up at the man who had moved to the side of their table, his grey eyes of glittering stone hard and uncompromising and his mouth unsmiling.

‘Hello, Hudson.’ It was all she could manage.

‘On holiday?’ She remembered this about him—the refusal to waste words on polite chit-chat—but apart from that the man standing in front of her could have been a stranger. Certainly in the past he had never looked at her the way he was looking at her now—his eyes narrowed and as cold as ice and his handsome face devoid of expression.

‘No, I’m...I’m working.’ Her voice was shaking but there wasn’t a thing she could do about it. ‘This—This is my boss, Keith Gallaway,’ she added quickly as Keith stood up slowly, his hand outstretched but his face straight. ‘Keith—Hudson de Sance.’

‘I’ve heard of you; you’re one of the best photographers money can buy.’ On the face of it the words shouldn’t have been insulting, but somehow Hudson made them so.

“Thank you.” Neither man smiled as they shook hands. ‘I’ve heard of you too,’ Keith said levelly. ‘If ever I need a tough lawyer to get me out of a spot I’ll call you.’ Again it wasn’t complimentary, and Marianne’s heart rose up into her mouth.

‘You couldn’t afford me.’ Hudson’s voice was pure steel.

‘I might surprise you.’

‘Very little surprises me, Mr Gallaway.’ This time the icy voice was wrapped in silk. ‘Isn’t that so, Annie?’

Annie. His pet name for her. She stared at him for a moment without speaking, her huge green eyes with their soft flecks of gold dark with bewilderment. She didn’t want to feel like this—vulnerable, exposed, frightened. He was out of her life now—he had no hold over her any more. The past was behind her.

‘Although this little lady is the exception that proves the rule.’ Hudson turned from her pale face to Keith, and now he smiled, but it was shark-like—threatening. ‘I’m sure you’ve found Marianne to be full of surprises?’ he asked smoothly.

Keith was out of his depth now and it showed. ‘Look, I don’t know what you’re getting at—’

‘No, I’m sure you don’t.’ Again the hard grey gaze moved back to Marianne, lingering for a moment on the pale gold of her hair—its riot of silky curls restrained into a high ponytail secured with black velvet ribbon—before it moved to capture her gaze.



‘But Annie does,’ he added mockingly, his voice dry and with a dark undertone that made her flush hotly before she dropped her eyes.

And then he moved on, walking swiftly past them after a terse nod at Keith and through into the hotel’s more formal dining room, where Marianne saw a tall, elegant redhead detach herself from a group of people waiting at the plate-glass doors. They exchanged a few brief words before Hudson took her arm, the party continuing out of sight through the doors and into the lush reception area.

For a moment she felt as though she was going to faint, the nausea and darkness sweeping over her in a giant wave before she forced it back by sheer will-power. Control. She had to have control.

‘What on earth was all that about?’ Keith sounded as stunned as she felt, and as her eyes turned to him she saw he was looking at her as though he had never seen her before. ‘You’ve never mentioned you know Hudson de Sance, Marianne. The man’s a walking legend in the States—more so since he took on the syndicate and won in that mega trial a couple of years back,’ he said bemusedly.

‘I used to know him.’ Keith was waiting for an answer and she heard her voice replying out of the dark vacuum her mind seemed to have fallen into. ‘But it was a long time ago.’ Two years, three months and four days, to be precise. She could even tell him the exact hours and minutes if she glanced at her watch.

‘I didn’t know you’d lived in the States.’ Keith sounded hurt, even petulant now. ‘I didn’t know you’d even visited America.’

‘I haven’t.’ She took a deep breath and prayed for the buzzing in her ears to fade. ‘Although he’s American his father’s family are still mostly in France, and my mother was French. He was visiting his grandparents some years ago when I was visiting relations in France, and we met at a party. That’s all.’ She tried for a smile but couldn’t get her tremulous mouth to obey. ‘We dated for a while,’ she finished with an effort at casualness.

‘You dated for a while?’ Keith asked shrilly. ‘You and de Sance dated?’

If she had said she’d dated Napoleon he couldn’t have sounded more amazed. ‘Yes, we dated for a while, and then it finished. End of story,’ she said tightly, meeting his eyes defiantly.

‘Marianne...’ He paused, and then said, speaking to himself more than her, ‘It clearly wasn’t Hudson who finished it.’

‘What makes you say that?’ she asked noncommittally, wanting the conversation to end but not knowing how to bring it to a conclusion.

‘His face when he saw you.’ Keith looked straight at her now, shaking his head slowly. ‘It looked much the same as when you saw him earlier. It was him you saw, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes.’ Her voice was cool and dismissive, and she shrugged as she said, ‘Can we leave it now, Keith? It’s...it’s history, as they say, and I really don’t want to discuss it further.’

‘Perhaps Hudson de Sance isn’t saying that,’ Keith said wryly.

‘And I’d say there’s plenty that man wants to discuss.’

‘I haven’t seen him in two years.’ Her voice was too sharp and she moderated it as she continued, ‘So I would say that speaks for itself. Whatever... whatever we shared is over.’

‘Hmm.’ The waiter arriving with their first course finished the conversation, but as Marianne forced each mouthful past the tight constriction in her throat the screen of her mind was replaying every frame of the last few minutes with Hudson.

He had looked wonderful. Terrifying but wonderful, she thought, trembling. At six feet four he had always towered over other men, his clothes unable to disguise the muscled strength of his big shoulders and chest, and with his jet-black hair and dark grey eyes his hardplaned, handsome face was devastatingly attractive. But she had never thought of it as cruel and cold—until to-day. Today it had been harsh and ruthless—menacing—and for the first time she could fully appreciate the fierce, merciless streak which proved so formidable in the courtroom.

He had a reputation for going straight for the jugular when he felt he was right, and he couldn’t be bought—two qualities which caused even the nastiest of criminals to tremble when they heard he was after their blood. But with her he had been tender, gentle and wonderfully sexy...

‘Marianne?’ She came out of the raw, pain-filled reverie to the realisation that Keith had been speaking and she hadn’t heard a word he’d said. ‘Where on earth are you?’ he asked, his voice testy.

‘Oh, sorry,’ she said quickly, hoping he would be mollified.

‘No, I am sorry,’ he said tightly, his brown eyes narrowed. ‘You aren’t over him, are you? A blind man could see that.’

It wasn’t really a question, but she responded as though it had been. ‘Over him? Hudson de Sance? Don’t be so silly; I told you, I haven’t seen him in two years. Anyway, there’s nothing to be over—’ She stopped abruptly. She was protesting too much and they both knew it. She stared at Keith, her face flushing.

‘I’m not going to pry, Marianne.’ The waiter reappeared with their seafood platters, and Keith waited until they were alone again before he repeated, ‘I’m not going to pry, but I just want to say one thing. You are good at your job—very good—and I’d be upset if you allowed anything, or anyone, to interfere with that. You could go right to the top, you understand me?’

She nodded mutely, swallowing hard against the lump in her throat which was the result of the shock of seeing Hudson again.

‘I’m only saying this because I care about you,’ he added quietly, ‘and because we work well together—very well.’

‘Thank you.’ She took a deep breath and managed a wobbly smile. ‘I do love my job, Keith, you know that. It’s given me more opportunities to travel than I’d ever dreamed possible.’

‘And of course the added bonus of working with a handsome and dynamic young boss who has the world at his fingertips—don’t forget that.’ It was said jokingly in an effort to defuse the almost painful tension. ‘Now eat up; we’ve got a busy afternoon ahead of us, and all our skills are going to be required to make

Marjorie and June perform on that fishing boat. They both get seasick,' he added wryly.

The afternoon went well, as Marianne had known it would. The sun was blazing down out of a crystal sky, the dancing waves were lit with sunshine and the gaily painted fishing boat was a perfect backdrop for the tall, graceful models in their wildly expensive leisure wear. A photographer's dream. And normally Marianne would have enjoyed the hectic pace, the laughter, the razzmatazz that went hand in hand with such a showy display. But not today.

Today she caught herself glancing back at the harbour all the time they worked, her eyes searching the quay for a tall, dark figure, even as her mind berated the stupidity of it. She had seen the stunning redhead, hadn't she? Why on earth did she think Hudson would be remotely interested in following up on their lunchtime encounter? She was nothing to him now. Her life had moved on—and his had always moved at a rate which had left her breathless.

Was his presence in Tangier down to business or pleasure? she asked herself as she stepped off the boat in the heat of late afternoon. And was that woman his girlfriend, his mistress—perhaps even his wife? The thought hit her in the solar plexus and she paused on the quay as Keith and the others stood admiring a huge ocean liner coming in to dock. He could be married or engaged. He was thirty-seven years old now—twelve years older than her—and had to be the catch of the century in the circles

he moved in.

‘Taxi or gig?’ Keith asked as he joined her, indicating the row of light, two-wheeled, horse-drawn carriages lined up and waiting for customers.

‘I don’t mind; what are the others doing?’ she asked quietly, her thoughts still a million miles away. ‘There was talk of a market?’

‘Marjorie and June are going shopping with Guy, but beyond that I don’t know. We could perhaps—’ He stopped abruptly, looking at something over Marianne’s left shoulder, his face slowly darkening in uncharacteristic anger. ‘What the hell is he doing here?’ he asked grimly. ‘The cheek of the man.’

She knew, even before she turned to follow the direction of his gaze, who it was. Only Hudson de Sance could put that look on someone’s face. It was an ability of his she had noticed before.

Hudson was at their side within seconds, his loose-limbed, easy walk covering the space before she had time to think or feel. ‘Hello again.’ He spoke to them both, his iron-hard gaze sweeping across their faces with such condemning coldness that Marianne found herself blushing as though she had been caught doing something immoral, rather than standing on a busy quayside in the bright Moroccan sunshine of a May evening. ‘Finished for the day?’ he asked coolly, with a flick of his head at the others who were departing in various directions, before his eyes fastened on Marianne’s hot face.

‘Yes.’ Her tone of voice was as cryptic as his had been, but more to disguise the effect his sudden appearance had had on

her equilibrium than anything else. He had changed from the smart business suit he'd been wearing that lunchtime, and now the big, powerful frame was clothed in an open-necked pale blue shirt that showed a tantalising glimpse of tightly curled dark body hair, and well-worn black jeans, tight across the hips. His flagrant masculinity was even more intimidating than she remembered, and it stopped her breath.

'Then I would like to speak with you.' It was as formal, and as constrained, as if he'd been in court. 'Privately,' he added, with a cold glance at Keith, who was bristling like a giant porcupine. 'I'm sure Mr Gallaway can spare you for a while.'

'I really don't think we've anything to say to each other.' How she managed it she didn't know, but her voice sounded quite calm, composed even, which was at odds with her galloping heartbeat and churning stomach.

'I disagree,' he said with a smooth self-assurance that grated like metal on fine porcelain. 'So, if you don't mind...?'

'Now look, de Sance, if Marianne doesn't want to speak to you...' Keith's voice died away as the full force of a pair of menacingly ruthless grey eyes homed in on his before narrowing to laser-like slits. Hudson could express more with one glance than any man she knew.

'This is nothing to do with you,' Hudson said softly. 'So let's keep it that way, okay?' It was more intimidating than any brazen threat, and Marianne saw Keith gulp slightly before his eyes wavered and fell, and she felt a dart of anger break through the

fright.

‘Well?’ Hudson turned to Marianne again, his voice icy. ‘We are staying at the same hotel, so I can give you a lift back there and we can talk on the way. Is that civilised enough for you?’

‘I’ve said no, and please don’t threaten my friends—’

‘Marianne is with me.’

Keith spoke at the same time as Marianne, but this time Hudson’s glare was accompanied by a quick turning movement of his body that had Marianne clutching his arm before she realised what she was doing. ‘Don’t! Leave him alone,’ she said breathlessly as Keith stumbled backwards so quickly, he almost fell. ‘Don’t bully him.’

Hudson was very still for a long moment as he looked down at her small hand on his arm, and then he raised his eyes to her face and stared at her for several heart-stopping seconds before saying, ‘There’s the easy way, and then there’s the hard way, Annie. Which is it to be?’

‘I’ll ride back to the hotel with you,’ she said weakly, her heart thudding anew at the relentless hardness on his face. He frightened her, this new Hudson de Sance. In fact he scared her to death. There was nothing left of the man she had known.

‘Good.’ Just one word, but it was chilling, and increased her nervous tension.

‘I’ll see you later, Keith. Don’t...don’t worry,’ she added quickly, seeing the agonised indecision in his worried little face. He was only a few years younger than Hudson in actual fact, but



his slight stature, coupled with naturally boyish good looks, made it difficult to believe he was a day over twenty-one—something he capitalised on in his day-to-day work.

The models found him comfortably non-threatening, especially when he turned on the little-boy charm, and this attribute, added to the brilliance of his work, had made him the toast of his profession, and enabled him to achieve the sort of results others only dreamed of. She didn't have a chance to say any more; Hudson had taken her by the elbow, his grip bruising, and she found herself being whisked along the quayside at a speed that left her breathless.

'Here.' He stopped beside an elegant sports car that was all sleek lines and gleaming red metal and opened the passenger door for her, watching her with a cool, all-encompassing gaze as she slid carefully inside the beautiful vehicle without saying a word.

He joined her immediately and at once her senses registered the elusive smell of the aftershave he had specially made for him, its perfume evoking memories she could well have done without in the circumstances, and doing nothing to alleviate her panic.

'How long are you staying in Tangier?' he asked quietly, his voice seeming to be without real interest.

'Just a few days more.' It wasn't quite true, but she had no intention of revealing that she had arranged to combine the business trip with a holiday, and that she was staying on when the rest of the troupe left. She planned to join a tour which took in

the five major cities of Morocco on the day Keith and the others flew home. 'It's...it's quite a coincidence meeting you like this, after all this time...' She came to a stumbling halt as her voice failed her.

'Isn't it?' he agreed flatly, before pulling off in a great growl of powerfully honed engine.

It was only a few minutes later that Marianne realised they weren't travelling on the road which led up into the hills to their hotel. She would have noticed it even sooner but for the fact her senses were battling with the close proximity of the big masculine body at the side of her.

She hadn't dared look at him, but now, as they travelled along a broad avenue lined with modern stores and houses, her eyes flashed to his grim profile. 'This isn't the way back to the hotel,' she challenged hotly. 'It isn't, is it?'

'No?' His voice was too innocent to be taken seriously.

'You know it isn't. Where...where are we going?' she asked nervously, real fear in her voice as she realised her vulnerability.

'Relax, Annie.' The stone-grey eyes flashed over her face for one piercing moment as he caught the panic she couldn't hide. 'I'm not into abduction, or rape, or any one of a number of variations on those themes. I see the misery caused by those sorts of abuses of strength too often in my work to indulge personally,' he said drily. 'You're quite safe.'

Safe? With Hudson de Sance? Never, she thought wildly.

'You said we were going back to the hotel,' she accused, once

she could trust her voice not to shake. He would just love to think she was quivering in her shoes! ‘Didn’t you?’

‘And so we are.’ He paused for a moment, and then added, ‘Eventually,’ his voice full of dark mockery.

‘Eventually?’ She glared at him, her eyes flashing.

‘It means finally, in the end, ultimately,’ he said helpfully.

‘I know what the word means.’

Her voice was too shrill, and she was furiously angry with herself for not matching his cool control, especially when the grey eyes moved over her face in another lightning glance and the black eyebrows lifted in indulgent disapproval. ‘Don’t screech, Annie; it’s most unbecoming,’ he drawled easily.

She mentally counted to ten—slowly—and then said, in as even a tone as she could manage, ‘I just want to know where we are going. I think that is reasonable enough—to any normal person.’

‘Reasonable doesn’t enter into it.’ Now his voice was clipped, and for the first time she saw his knuckles were white as he gripped the steering wheel. His control wasn’t as real as he’d like her to believe, she thought nervously as fear engulfed her again. ‘You, of all people, should know that.’

‘Hudson—’

‘You walked out on me two years ago without so much as a by-your-leave,’ he bit out tightly. ‘You call that reasonable?’

‘I left a letter to explain why,’ she protested quickly.

‘The original “dear John”’. Yes, I read it,’ he said icily. ‘And

yet the evening before that you had agreed to become my wife.'

'I explained—' She stopped abruptly as they turned a corner and almost collided with an aged donkey bearing bales of merchandise on its back, his owner having stopped to carry on a conversation with a vendor selling pomegranates from an old pushcart at the side of the road. It was charming and picturesque, but quite how the accident claim form would have read was another matter.

Hudson swore angrily under his breath, sounded his horn and continued down the dusty road leading away from the modern European section of the city they had been in earlier.

'I explained about that,' Marianne said weakly after a moment or two. 'Our lifestyles were too different—I had only recently finished university and I'd never even been to the States. Everything had happened too quickly. We...we didn't really know each other.'

'Rubbish,' he said with ruthless honesty. 'That's rubbish and you know it. If it had just been that, you wouldn't have dropped off the face of the earth. I came looking for you, but of course you know that. Your aunt and uncle were very shocked by it all, but your stepfather not so much. It was he who told me the truth.'

'The truth?' She was losing it, she thought frantically as her mind raced and spun. He had seen Michael? That had been the one thing she'd been trying to prevent by leaving France in the middle of the night without a word to anyone. What had Michael told him? She wouldn't put anything past her stepfather.

‘What was his name, Annie, this guy from university?’ Hudson asked coldly. ‘And why the hell didn’t you tell me about him yourself instead of getting your stepfather to do your dirty work and tell me you were engaged? You didn’t go back to Scotland, did you? The pair of you simply vanished off the face of the earth.’

‘I...I went to London,’ she admitted through stiff lips.

‘And Harding? Is that your married name?’ he bit out tightly.

‘No, I...I didn’t get married,’ she said flatly. ‘I changed my name from McBride, that’s all. Harding...Harding was more suitable in London.’

‘You didn’t get married?’ She felt the penetrating gaze sweep her face again but forced herself to stare straight ahead, her eyes seeing the hot street outside the car, with its veiled women, energetic little children and robed men, as though she were in a dream. ‘But I thought—’ He paused. ‘Was that anything to do with the car crash?’ he asked softly. ‘Or a separate decision?’

‘You know about the crash?’ She did turn to look at him then, but the dark, tanned profile was giving nothing away. ‘How?’ Scotland was a long way from America.

‘Let’s just say I kept tabs for a while,’ he said smoothly. ‘You didn’t go to the funeral of your mother and stepfather. Why?’

‘Reasons.’ This was becoming too hot to handle. ‘Look, Hudson, the past is the past—can’t we just leave it at that? And where are we going anyway?’ she asked nervously as they joined a road that began to curve upwards. ‘I need to get back—’

‘A friend of mine has invited me to stop by this evening.’ He had known how she would react, and his voice was dry and cool as he said, ‘Don’t look so surprised, Annie. I do have friends, you know. Or is that too difficult for you to believe?’

‘I’m sure you do,’ she said tightly. ‘But won’t they be surprised to see you turn up at the door with a strange woman?’

‘The “strange woman” is your terminology, not mine,’ he mocked softly. ‘I would have said unusual, extraordinary perhaps, but strange is going a little too far.’

‘You know what I meant.’ She’d hit him in a minute—she would!

‘So ...’ The cool voice was thoughtful. ‘Where did you go when you ran away from me, if not to marry your lover?’

‘I’ve told you—London,’ she said shortly.

‘And you changed your name and cut off all contact with your family, even to the extent of not attending your parents’ funeral.’ He was talking as though to himself. ‘What made you contact your aunt in France after two years?’ he asked suddenly, his voice sharpening into cold steel.

‘How did you know—?’ She stopped abruptly, her face going white as reality dawned. ‘You knew I would be here, didn’t you?’ she said dazedly. ‘This is not a coincidence.’ He had known her name earlier at lunch. He had called her Marianne Harding.

‘You haven’t answered my question.’ The cool mockery was back.

‘You haven’t answered mine either,’ she shot back quickly, his

cold, faintly drawling voice incredibly irritating when she was as tense as a tightly coiled spring. ‘You knew I’d be here, in this hotel in Tangier, didn’t you? You planned all this.’

‘You really think I would chase across half the world because I’d discovered your whereabouts?’ he asked contemptuously, and at the same moment, with a flash of mortifying and hot humiliation, she remembered the stunning redhead. He was here with her. Of course.

‘I...I didn’t mean that.’ She didn’t really know what she had meant, she admitted to herself painfully. But that wasn’t surprising—Hudson had always had the power to send her senses into overdrive and her mind spinning. She hadn’t looked at another man—hadn’t had the slightest interest in one—since she had left France two years ago. Left him two years ago. How he’d laugh at that.

‘Here we are.’ As the car passed through a great archway covered in traceries so delicate and intricate that they looked like lace, Marianne saw they were in the courtyard of what was obviously a very wealthy family, the low, sprawling white house in front of them decorated in the Moorish style with fine carvings in stone and wood. The air was heavy with the perfume of banana trees, bougainvillea vines and other flowering tropical plants. Several sparkling fountains murmured in the vegetation beyond the courtyard. It was tranquil, serene and very beautiful.

‘My friend’s name is Idris,’ Hudson said quietly as he brought the car to a quiet standstill in the warm, scented air, the sound

of droning insects in the vegetation meeting their ears. 'He and his family are very westernised, but he is a Berber through and through and proud of it We will be expected to eat with them.'

'But...' It was as though she had been transported into another world, swept along in the dark aura of this man who had dominated her life since the first moment she had laid eyes on him—the intervening years since she'd last seen him accentuating, rather than diminishing, his fierce appeal. 'I can't... They don't know me. Hudson, you must see I can't stay; it's presumptuous—'

'They expected me to bring a friend.' The glittering grey gaze fastened on her alarmed green eyes with their deep gold flecks, and then he uncoiled himself from the car, walking with cat-like litheness round to the passenger door.

A friend? The redhead, no doubt, Marianne thought silently as a rapier-sharp stab of jealousy replaced the desperate panic. Why hadn't she come? Was she ill? Indisposed in some way? But that still didn't explain why he had appeared on the quayside like that.

'Come along.' His deep, smoky voice interrupted her frantic thoughts, and as she slid out of the car his hand on her arm seemed to burn like fire. She didn't want to obey, but there was nothing else she could do, after all.

This was crazy, surreal—it couldn't be happening, Marianne told herself as she stood dazedly in the shaded warm air. She should be back at the hotel, getting ready for dinner in an



environment that was familiar and safe and controlled. How had she got here anyway? She had only agreed to have a lift with him.

‘Hudson...please—’

“‘Hudson...please’.” ‘He mimicked her voice softly and cruelly, his face mocking and his eyes narrowed. ‘You used to say that in the old days—“Hudson, oh, Hudson, please...please”—remember? When you were in my arms, when I was kissing you—holding you. Did your young English lover take you into the world we inhabited, Annie? Did he make you feel like I made you feel? Did he?’

‘You’re hurting me.’ His hand on her arm was vicelike.

‘Am I?’ He released her immediately. ‘I want to hurt you, my inconsistent little siren,’ he said with such matter-of-fact coolness that it took a moment for his words to sink in. ‘I want to see you suffer, like I suffered two years ago. Not in any physical sense—that would be too easy, too simple. But I would like to get inside your head—like you got inside mine—and watch while I slowly drain the very essence of you into my control. Does that shock you?’ he added with a marked lack of expression.

She stared at him, quite unable to speak, her mind frozen.

‘But we are civilised people, are we not?’ He smiled, but it was a mere twisting of the firm, sensual mouth, and chilled her still further. ‘And civilised people play games, have fun, flit from one partner to another if they get bored—’

‘I’m not like that.’ Her words were a trembling whisper, but he heard them. ‘I’ve never played those sorts of games in my life.’

‘No?’ The grey eyes flickered briefly. ‘Forgive me, but I’m not convinced. My mother’s father, a tough old Texan with a hide as thick as a rhinoceros—from whom I got my Christian name, incidentally—always used to say that actions speak louder than words. It used to irritate me as a boy as he invariably hammered it home when I was guilty of some fall from grace. But he was dead right, Annie. And your actions to date are somewhat—forgive me—frivolous, to put it mildly,’ he added with deadly sarcasm.

‘Hudson—’

‘Or do you consider a breach of faith between lovers as par for the course?’ he asked with lethal softness. ‘Part of the fun?’

‘No, of course I don’t. I didn’t... It wasn’t like that.’ She didn’t want to cry—she couldn’t cry—it would be the final humiliation, she told herself desperately as tears burnt fiercely at the back of her eyes, and she lowered her gaze quickly in case he saw the betraying sheen that was splintering the sunlight into a thousand glittering fragments. But not quickly enough.

‘And that old feminine ploy of tears won’t work either,’ he drawled nastily. ‘I’m too long in the tooth for that. For someone to behave like you did takes something the average person hasn’t got, so don’t try the weak, trembling female approach now. There’s steel under that beautiful exterior—I know; I’ve felt it.’

‘You know nothing about me,’ she said shakily, keeping her face turned from him and her eyes downcast.

‘Oh, I’d agree with that, sweetheart.’ He laughed bitterly. ‘Now that is the truth.’

‘Then why not just leave me alone?’ she muttered painfully. ‘I didn’t ask to come here with you; I don’t want to be here with you. It was you who instigated this.’

‘I’ve no doubt at all you would rather be back at the hotel enjoying a cocktail or two before dinner with the reputable Keith,’ Hudson said sardonically. ‘But unfortunately here you are and here you will remain until I choose to take you back.’

‘And this satisfies some twisted idea of revenge? Is that it?’ She raised her head now, her face fiery. ‘What sort of person are you, Hudson?’

‘I rather think that should be my line in the circumstances,’ he said with a silky coldness that told her her shot had hit home. ‘But if you’d like me to show you what sort of man I am, Annie...’

He had taken her in his arms before she had any clear idea of his intentions, his embrace crushing her into him as his mouth took hers in a kiss that was meant to punish and subdue. For a moment the shock of being held by him was overwhelming, the touch and taste of him achingly familiar, and then, as the tempo changed and he began to cover her face in burningly hot kisses that made her limp and fluid beneath his mouth, she strained into him, hardly aware of what she was doing.

How long the embrace continued she didn’t know; the magic of his kisses, the sheer sensation that was flowing like fire between them, wiped all coherent thought clean away. She could hear herself moaning his name, and she thought she heard him groan against her throat but then, in the next moment, he had

thrust her away from him so violently, she almost fell.

‘How can you do that—kiss me back like that—when it doesn’t mean a thing?’ he snarled bitterly, his eyes blazing. ‘Who, what are you, Marianne McBride—or Harding—or whatever it is you call yourself?’

## CHAPTER TWO

MARIANNE had never been more relieved in the whole of her life than she was when a childish whoop of glee sounded from the house behind them, and a small body hurtled over to wind itself round Hudson’s legs, drawing away his attention and breaking his furious gaze.

‘Abdul, my little friend...’ Hudson immediately became the benevolent uncle figure, bending down to lift the small boy into his arms as he spoke. And almost in the same instant a man and a woman, the former in western dress and the latter in a long, flowing jellaba but without a veil, appeared in the open doorway.

The following minutes of greetings and introductions took them into the house—which was as beautiful inside as out. It was wonderfully cool with its marbled floors and shaded inner courtyard complete with tinkling fountain and huge, leafy palms. Admiring their surroundings and making small talk with their hosts, and their small son, Abdul, eased the tension between her and Hudson.

Idris and his wife, Fatima, didn’t appear to think it at all odd that Hudson had brought her along; in fact such was their open-handed hospitality and genuine delight that Marianne began to

feel like an old friend, rather than a stranger in their midst.

‘Have you known Hudson long?’ She was sitting with Fatima on a long, low sofa in a shady part of the courtyard, sipping freshly squeezed orange juice flavoured with limes and lemon. The men had departed to Idris’s study to see his new computer set-up, with Abdul still in Hudson’s arms.

‘Idris has known him since they were students together in the States,’ Fatima answered quietly. ‘But I first met Hudson on the day I married Idris, five years ago.’

‘They seem very good friends,’ Marianne observed, taking another sip of the deliciously cold drink. ‘They’re obviously very fond of each other.’

‘This is true.’ Fatima spoke perfect English with a quaint preciseness that was charming. ‘Hudson helped Idris on the death of his first wife—you know Idris was married before?’

Marianne shook her head quickly. ‘No, no, I didn’t.’

‘She was killed in an automobile accident,’ Fatima said quietly, ‘with their two children. The chauffeur also was killed. It was very hard for Idris, and Hudson—how do you say it?—dropped everything. Idris often says he does not know what he would have done if Hudson had not been there. He stayed with him many weeks. Hudson is a very compassionate man, yes?’

‘Yes...’ Compassionate? He might be; she really didn’t know, Marianne thought numbly. Their whirlwind romance had lasted almost two months, and from the day they’d met they had barely been apart for more than a few hours. But...she hadn’t got to

know him—not really—not properly. It had been crazy, unreal—they had been locked into their own little world where everything had been vibrant and vivid and magical, and where one glance, one lingering look, had had the power to send her into the heavens. They had barely talked about their respective pasts, and the future had been nothing more than a rosy dream. It was the present that had been real, and they had known their immediate time together was limited.

Hudson had taken a three-month sabbatical from his law firm and had already used a month of that time before he had met her, and Marianne had had a new job waiting for her in Scotland. But on the night he had asked her to marry him—and she had accepted—she had known she would follow him anywhere. It had made the next few hours all the harder.

‘Is it not...?’

‘I’m sorry?’ Marianne came to with a jolt to realise Fatima had been speaking and she hadn’t heard a word. She blushed hotly, forcing herself to give all her attention to the Moroccan woman.

‘I said your job must be very interesting, Marianne.’ Fatima was too sensitive and far too well-bred to show open curiosity, but it was clear she was wondering where Marianne fitted into Hudson’s life, and after a somewhat cagey conversation Marianne was relieved when the men returned and they all went through to the dining room to eat.

The meal was in traditional Moroccan style—everyone seated on sofas around a low table—and before they ate they were given

towels and rose-water in order to wash their right hands—the hand Moroccans used to eat from the communal dishes they favoured. Marianne had heard of the custom, but only having eaten at the hotel—which was distinctly European—had never seen it in action.

She found it fascinating to watch the others reaching into a big bowl of couscous, picking up olives and raisins with three fingers, twirling them round in the creamy mixture and then popping them into their mouths. Normally she would have thoroughly enjoyed the experience—the table was full of mouth-watering dishes that smelt divine—but her stomach was so knotted with nerves, she could barely force anything past the constriction, and each mouthful was an effort of will.

Why had Hudson brought her here? The question was drumming in her head all through the meal and the subsequent conversation over coffee. She hadn't seen him for two years. They both had separate lives now—and if the tall, elegant redhead was anything to go by he hadn't exactly pined away for her, she thought with a touch of bitterness. He must hate her—he did hate her; he'd made that plain—so why bring her to his friend's home and act as though she was with him? Why put them both through such torment?

She didn't understand it and she didn't understand him, but he made her nervous—very nervous. She had never imagined he was a man who would forgive easily, but this—there was no rhyme or reason to it.

It was after eleven when they left Idris and Fatima, and the soft indigo dusk had given way to a black velvet sky pierced through with hundreds upon hundreds of bright, twinkling stars, the darkness perfumed with the heavy, rich scent of magnolia flowers.

It was a beautiful night—romantic, gentle, the full moon silhouetting the eastern horizon of flamboyant mosques and towering minarets with ethereal charm—but Marianne had never felt so tense and nervous in her life. Just sitting beside Hudson made her as jumpy as a cat on a hot tin roof, and she knew he sensed her agitation. Sensed it and was satisfied by it.

‘You are frightened of me?’ The dark, deep voice was silky-soft, but caused her to straighten her backbone as she glanced at the ruthlessly cold profile.

‘Of course not,’ she lied tightly, her voice cold and even.

‘No?’ The query was soft, charged with dark emotion.

‘No.’ She forced her hands, which had been clasped in tight fists on her lap, to relax before she said, her voice as steady and unemotional as she could make it, ‘Why? Should I be?’

‘Most certainly.’ It wasn’t the reply she had expected, and as her eyes widened with the shock of it her heart went haywire.

‘You walked out on me, Annie, and no one had ever done that to me before. I didn’t like it.’ It was the understatement of the year, and delivered in such an expressionless voice that her blood flowed cold. ‘I didn’t like it at all.’

‘I... I explained—’



‘We had an agreement, Annie.’ He continued as though she hadn’t spoken. ‘An agreement you welshed on. How do you think I should deal with that?’ he asked coldly, his eyes on the road in front of them.

She stared at him warily, quite unable to gauge anything from the cool mask he could don at will and which proved so formidable in the courtroom. He was formidable, terrifyingly so.

‘Now look, Hudson—’

‘No, you look!’ It was an explosion, hot and acidic, and as she felt herself shrink in the seat it dawned on her that he was furiously angry—that he had been furiously angry from that first moment of meeting her again. The fact that he had been holding the rage in didn’t comfort her in the least, merely emphasising, as it did, the almost superhuman power and control he could exert over his emotions when he chose to do so. But the fury was still there, just waiting to escape the iron constraint and devour her, she thought shakily. And it had had two years to simmer and burn.

‘You didn’t seriously think I would just say hello and goodbye, did you?’ he asked coldly. ‘You owe me, Marianne McBride-Harding.’

‘I owe you?’ She was scared to death but she was blowed if he was going to bully her like this, and the sarcastic intonation of her name brought a welcome surge of angry adrenalin to melt the chill his intimidation had wrought on her psyche. ‘Think again, Hudson,’ she said tightly. ‘I owe you nothing and you know it.’

‘I’ve thought, Annie, I’ve thought long and hard,’ he grated slowly. ‘I’ve had two years to think, haven’t I? Does the current boy wonder know what a cheating little liar you really are? Or are you stringing him along the way you did me?’

‘Who...?’ And then she realised. ‘Keith? Keith is just my boss—’ Keith? He seriously thought she was interested in Keith?

‘And I’m Father Christmas,’ Hudson said cuttingly.

‘You don’t believe me?’ she asked hotly, aware that he was driving far too fast along the badly lit Moroccan roads but too angry to care. ‘You think I’d lie just for the sake of it?’

‘You find that surprising?’ he rasped scathingly, his lips compressing in one straight, angry line. ‘I believed you once, my faithless siren, but never again. This time the old adage once bitten, twice shy holds fast. Mind you—’ he glanced at her, the movement lightning-fast but savage ‘—I think even you will be hard pressed to explain where you have been all evening.’

She stared at him, too stunned to reply as a hundred and one thoughts chased themselves through the turmoil of her mind. This had been a calculated exercise on his part, she told herself weakly, a cold-blooded, determined effort to make Keith think—Think what? she asked herself painfully as a sickening flood of desolation and despair washed over her. That she had been with Hudson in the biblical sense of the word—slept with him? Surely even Hudson wouldn’t do that...? ‘I shall simply tell him the truth,’ she informed him through lips that were beginning to tremble.

‘A novel experience for you, I’m sure,’ he said mockingly. ‘But you don’t think he will find it a little...farfetched ? You accept a lift from a man you used to know—years ago,’ he emphasised with a bitter twist to his lips, ‘and then, instead of appearing bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as arranged, you are hours late. And the reason? You went to dinner with friends?’ He shook his head slowly. ‘Surely even this youthful-looking child will not accept such a story?’ he asked with dark satisfaction.

‘But it’s true,’ she protested angrily. ‘You know it is.’

‘I know it is. Idris and Fatima know it is.’ The hard voice was merciless. ‘But Keith will believe whatever I want him to believe. I met you by chance. I gave you a lift by chance. How could I have set up an evening such as you will describe?’

‘Because...because your friend couldn’t go with you to Idris’s house, and you saw me and asked...’ Her voice trailed away as he shook his black head slowly, his profile without mercy.

‘I came to Tangier alone,’ he said softly, ‘as the hotel will confirm. You have no proof that there is a friend.’

‘But I saw you with people this lunchtime.’ In spite of the dire situation she couldn’t bring herself to mention the redhead specifically. ‘You know you were with—with them.’

‘Pure chance.’ His smile was without humour. ‘Prove otherwise.’

‘But you told Idris and Fatima you were bringing someone,’ she insisted desperately. ‘You arranged it with them.’

‘Yes, I did.’ A brief pause and then, ‘But you do not know their

surname, where they live, their telephone number. You will not be able to substantiate your story to the anxious Keith'

'I shan't need to give proof.' She raised her head proudly. 'Keith will believe me,' she declared firmly.

'A man in love is a jealous man, Annie,' he said coolly. 'And jealous men are not reasonable at the best of times. And this...this will not be the best of times. Keith imagines he loves you.'

'You would lie?' she asked dazedly. 'You'd really do that?'

'Without hesitation.' It was immediate and cold.

'But I've told you, he isn't my boyfriend.' She glared at the imperturbable profile, her eyes fiery. 'It's all in your imagination.'

'Then you have no cause to worry that pretty little head, have you?' he said urbanely. 'All, as they say, is well.'

But it wasn't. A picture of Keith's face as it had been that lunchtime was suddenly there in front of her, and snippets of their conversation echoed in her mind. He had told her she wasn't over Hudson, at the same time as making it plain he cared about her. The way he had reacted to Hudson—his attitude towards her—it all confirmed her suspicions that Keith wanted more than just a working relationship.

'Don't ever try to play poker, Annie.' The voice was livid. 'And, as far as I'm concerned. I'm doing the guy a favour. At least he gets a warning, which is far more than I did.'

'It's not like that.' She had never wanted to hit someone so much in her life. 'I've told you, Keith and I are just friends.'

'Spare me.'

How could she hate someone, really hate them as she did Hudson at this minute, and yet love them so much it was a physical pain in her heart? Marianne asked herself bleakly as she settled back in her seat helplessly. And yet could she blame him for being like this? What would she have been like if the situation had been reversed and it had been Hudson who had walked out on her after that glorious two months they had shared? She would have wanted to kill him. It had been bad enough for her, knowing she had to go. But him...

She stared miserably through the dark windscreen as the car flashed swiftly through the black Moroccan night, her eyes blind.

She had been so happy when Hudson had asked her to marry him that night—ecstatic, wild with joy... She had known, from the first moment of meeting him, that there would never be anyone else for her, but that he'd felt the same had been too wonderful, too glorious to be true. He was an assured, astute man of the world, powerful, commanding, with a reputation that went before him to oil wheels and pave the way in a manner that had left her breathless. People held him in awe—not just for his wealth and formidable influence, but for the razor-sharp, ruthless intelligence that ravaged those foolish enough to try to deceive him.

He was incorruptible and totally honourable—and that in a profession known for its subtle, and at times doubtful, elucidation of the law. He had his own moral code and he stuck to it—whatever pressure was brought to bear by colleagues or criminals.

And he had loved her. It had seemed like a fairy tale, a dream, when he could have had any woman he wanted just by lifting his little finger. Beautiful, sophisticated, experienced women who would know all there was to know about pleasing a man.

She had mentioned Hudson in her letters home to her mother in Scotland, unable to hide her happiness, but had been less than pleased when her mother and stepfather had popped up in France the day before Hudson had asked her to marry him. Not that she hadn't been pleased to see her mother, but her stepfather...

Michael Caxton, an American living and working in Scotland for a big American company, had married her mother after a whirlwind courtship eighteen months before when Marianne had been at university, and from the first moment of meeting him after the marriage she had disliked him. He'd been too handsome, too charming—too much of everything. But her mother had loved him, and, having struggled on her own for five years after the death of Marianne's father, she had seized the chance of happiness with both hands.

So Marianne had kept her reservations to herself on her visits home, maintaining a surface civility whilst praying that her distrust and misgivings were unfounded. But they hadn't been, she reflected flatly.

Michael had still been up when she had got home on the night of Hudson's proposal—her mother, aunt and uncle having long since retired—and she had known somehow, as soon as she'd walked through the door, that his guise of being unable to sleep

because of toothache was a lie. His eyes had been too sharp, too cunning.

‘Nice evening?’ It was deliberately casual.

‘Yes, thank you.’ She forced a smile whilst hoping she could escape with the minimum of conversation. He scared her.

‘Getting on well with Hudson, are you?’ he asked smoothly.

‘Very well.’ She looked straight at Michael then to find the pale blue eyes tight on her face. ‘Do you know him?’ she asked quietly as some sixth sense sent cold trickles down her spine. This was all about Hudson somehow; she felt it in her bones.

‘I know of him.’ Michael smiled but it didn’t reach the unblinking orbs, and she realised then, as a warning bell began to clang stridently in her brain, that his smiles never did. His eyes were the eyes of a shark—empty, cold, dead... ‘Oh, yes, I certainly know of him. He’s a one-man vigilante for law and order in the States, an advocate for the all-American way.’

‘Well, that’s good, surely?’ she replied warily, the fierce joy and excitement that had carried her into the house on wings beginning to die. ‘We need order and laws, don’t we?’

‘Probably... for the masses,’ Michael drawled slowly. ‘Those content to be led all their lives, who want nothing more than a paltry monthly pay cheque that enables them to scrape through to the next month.’ It was clear he didn’t put himself in that category.

‘And you’re not like that?’ She suddenly would have given the world to step back in time an hour and not be there. She was

going to hear something she didn't want to hear; the hairs that were standing up on the back of her neck told her so. 'You're different?'

'How do you think I bought the place in Scotland, Marianne?'

Michael had been living in a hotel when he'd first met her mother, but a few weeks before the wedding he had bought what virtually amounted to a small castle, complete with acres of grounds housing a lake, deer—and had taken great delight in acting the feudal lord.

'I don't know,' she said quietly. 'I haven't thought about it.'

'Use your imagination.' And then as she still stared at him with great, accusing eyes, he snapped, 'And don't look at me like that, damn you. You either make it or you don't in this wodd—there are only two choices—and to make it you take all the help you can get. I've...done favours for people, bent the rules a little, oiled wheels,' he finished softly, his eyes narrowed and hard.

'But you're an accountant,' she murmured naively. 'How—?'

'Hudson is going to get offered a case in the next little while, and if he takes it it could prove...uncomfortable for people who have been very good to me. If the dirt starts to fly it'll come my way too, and a little bit of dirt contaminates everything it comes into contact with—your mother, you—and if you're with Hudson...'

'What... what case?' she asked through numb lips.

'Things have been hotting up for some time, but eighteen months ago certain people decided I'd better leave the States



and lie low—subpoenas have a nasty habit of rearing their heads when you least expect them,’ he continued almost matter-of-factly.

‘Does my mother know?’ She couldn’t believe the conversation was really taking place, not here, in her aunt’s pretty little sitting room. ‘Does she know why you left the States?’

‘Of course not. I never discuss my business with anyone,’ he drawled softly, his voice at odds with the intensity of the chillingly cold eyes. ‘It is...personal.’

‘Then why are you telling me?’ she asked bewilderedly.

‘Think, girl, think!’ The words were harsh before he collected himself and continued in the same soft tone as before, ‘It is clear from what you’ve told your mother that you have some influence with Hudson de Sance, and that is a bonus we could never have arranged if we had tried for years. If de Sance doesn’t take the case it will come to nothing, end of story.’ He smiled meaningfully.

‘You’re asking me to persuade him not to take it?’ she asked numbly. ‘Is that what this is all about? You expect me to do that?’

‘Exactly.’ Now the soft voice was persuasive. ‘It will be best for everyone concerned—you see that, surely? Me, your mother, you—even Hudson. It will not do his sterling reputation any good when it comes to light he’s having an affair with the daughter of one of the men he’s prosecuting. And it would come to light...’

‘I am not your daughter,’ she shot back bitterly.

‘The media won’t see it like that,’ he countered darkly.

‘And it’s not an affair, not like you mean. He...he wants me to marry him,’ she said desperately. ‘He loves me.’

‘Does he? Does he indeed...?’ Michael nodded reflectively. ‘Better and better.’

‘I hate you.’ She glared at him, her eyes blazing. ‘You married my mother purely as a cover, didn’t you? And you’ll dump her as soon as it suits you. You don’t love her, you’re incapable of love. I bet you couldn’t believe your luck when I began to date Hudson—’

‘A gift from the lap of the gods,’ he confirmed sardonically. ‘And definitely not to be ignored. Now, if you’re clever, Marianne, you’ll use this for your own advantage. I can make you a very wealthy woman in your own right, and as Hudson’s wife...’

‘Even if I agreed to this, it wouldn’t be just this one time, would it?’ she said bitterly. ‘You’d put Hudson in a terrible position, use emotional blackmail about me and my mother, threaten to blacken his name through me if he didn’t agree to what you and your friends want. He would never be free of you.’

‘It would be just this once; you have my word,’ he said smoothly, but she saw the look in his eyes and knew she was right.

‘Your word?’ she repeated scathingly. ‘You’re despicable, filthy. I can’t bear that my mother has allowed you to touch her.’

‘Careful, Marianne, be very careful,’ he warned silkily. ‘I can break her and I can break you, and my friends have extensive influence. Just be sensible and all this can be worked out very nicely.’

But she didn't behave according to Michael's definition of sensible. She escaped to her room and sat there for hours, her mind desperately seeking a release from the horror, only to come to the conclusion that there wasn't one. She couldn't put Hudson through the torment that her revelation would involve—whichever course of action he took. Either he compromised everything he had built his life, character and reputation around—and Michael would make sure he kept on compromising, too—or he would have to fight her stepfather and his criminal friends, and in the process, through his relationship with her, mud would stick to him, too. It was a no-win situation whichever way she looked at it.

Unless she left Hudson now. Disappeared out of his life. Disappeared out of everyone's life. Her heart pounded furiously, but it was the only way.

She wrote three letters. One to her mother, explaining everything. One to Michael, informing him she was going where no one would find her and that she was telling Hudson nothing except that their relationship was over. And one—the most difficult—to Hudson. And then she packed, left the house before dawn, and once in England made for London, her mind and emotions shattered.

She couldn't remember much now about the first few months, although she had survived somehow—living in a tiny bedsit and working as a waitress, her mind on automatic most of the time. Later she'd realised she had had some sort of mini-breakdown,

but at the time she had just got through each day as it came, the blackness in her soul absolute.

The thing that had shocked her out of the stupor was seeing an old friend from her home village purely by chance, and learning in the middle of a crowded café that her mother and Michael were dead, killed in a car crash the day after they had returned to Scotland. It had been like a blow straight between the eyes.

She had grieved desperately for her mother, hated Michael with a vengeance that had shocked her, longed for Hudson with renewed intensity. But gradually, over the following weeks, she had come to the realisation that she was thinking and feeling and living again—even if the main element to it all was suffering. Agonising suffering.

‘Would you like me to hold your hand while you face the music?’

‘What?’ The dark, silky voice had intruded into the nightmare world with all the softness of cold steel, but as she came out of her reverie she saw her hotel looming up in the distance and a new sort of panic rose. ‘Oh, no, I don’t; of course I don’t,’ she snapped testily—hating him, loving him, feeling as though she couldn’t take much more without howling like a baby.

‘He might wonder why you didn’t phone him to tell him where you were,’ Hudson suggested quietly. ‘I wondered that myself. Why didn’t you?’ The grey eyes flashed her way for one vital second.

Because it simply hadn’t occurred to her, she thought

helplessly. She hadn't thought of Keith once, not once, through the evening; all her thoughts and emotions had been tied up with the tall, ruthless man at her side. 'It wasn't necessary,' she said stiffly. 'I don't answer to Keith or anyone else.'

'Hmm. independent, eh?' he drawled easily. 'Funny, I don't remember you as quite so militant when you were with me.'

She wasn't militant, she was melted jelly inside, Marianne thought with painful self-awareness; but the time had long since passed when she could have explained her actions to him. Perhaps if she had known about Michael's death when it had happened—had gone to Hudson then and told him everything—things might have been different now. But then again Michael's untimely death hadn't negated any of her reasons for leaving Hudson. The contact with her would still have been there; the people Michael had been involved with could still have tried to discredit Hudson through her. Whichever way she had looked there had still been no solution.

When she had found out about the car crash she had contacted the family solicitor, and had been amazed to find Michael and her mother had left everything to her in a will they'd made when they had married. Michael's wealth had been considerable, and she would never forget the absolute shock and amazement on the solicitor's face when she had insisted on giving everything she had inherited to charity. But to her it had been blood money—tainted, unclean—and she had only been able to breathe freely again when every last penny had gone, even though part of it had

been from her mother's estate.

'Here we are. And look who's waiting like an anxious mother hen,' Hudson said softly, and nastily, as the sports car growled to a stop outside the hotel and Hudson cut the powerful engine.

Marianne looked, and then felt a pang of deep and mortifying guilt as she saw Keith's worried face—which was made all the worse by the knowledge that Hudson's cruel analogy wasn't far off beam.

'I suppose a goodnight kiss is out of the question?' Hudson drawled with mocking amusement, his good humour apparently restored at the sight of Keith practically dancing in agitation as he raced down the steps towards them.

'You're a rotten swine,' she hissed furiously.

'I know...' His voice carried a wealth of satisfaction.

As Keith reached them and opened the passenger door Hudson left the driver's seat to stand just outside the car, his brawny arms leaning on the top of the vehicle as he watched Marianne alight.

'Where have you been?' Keith's voice was several octaves higher than normal, his round, boyish face flushed and perspiring. 'I expected you to be here when I got back this afternoon, and then I thought you'd at least be back for dinner.'

'I'm sorry—' Marianne began quickly, but the tirade continued.

'I've been worried to death, and none of the others knew where you were.' He was ignoring Hudson as though the big

figure watching them with such obvious satisfaction didn't exist. 'Couldn't you have phoned or something? Just a few words to say where you were?'

'It was my fault, I'm afraid.' Hudson's voice was like smooth cream, and even a babe in arms would have been able to tell he was enjoying every minute. 'We... had dinner with some friends.'

How could he make the truth sound so much like a lie? Marianne thought savagely. He'd done that on purpose—that brief pause which had made what followed sound even more unlikely. Oh, she hated him!

'Isn't that so, Annie?' He made the pet name take on soft and unbelievable connotations as he shifted his big body lazily, his eyes glittering in the muted light from the hotel.

'Yes, yes, it is.' Well, it was. "They...these friends of Hudson's had prepared us a meal," she continued helplessly as Keith drew back slightly, disbelief written all over his face. 'It—it would have been rude...I—I couldn't really leave,' she stammered.

'And they didn't have a phone?' Keith asked tightly.

Oh, she wished he'd leave this until they were alone and she could explain properly, Marianne thought desperately, vitally aware of the entertainment value the little tableau was affording Hudson. Couldn't Keith see he was playing right into the other man's hands? Apparently he couldn't

'Well? Did they have a phone?' Keith repeated snappily.

'I...I don't know.' She stared at him unhappily. 'Can't we discuss this inside?' she suggested quietly. 'Please. Keith?'

‘Yes, they have a phone.’ The deep voice spoke again from the other side of the car. ‘We just didn’t think of it, I’m afraid. Enjoying ourselves too much, I guess,’ Hudson added smoothly.

She’d hit him. She would—she’d hit him. Marianne took a deep breath and prayed for calm. ‘Keith, I really can explain—’

‘We are shooting at five tomorrow morning, Marianne, and I would appreciate you being in the lobby at half past four.’ Keith had drawn himself up to his full five feet nine inches, quivering hot outrage in every line of his pink face. ‘It is important we catch the dawn light, so don’t be late,’ he added sharply.

‘No, of course I won’t, but if I could just explain—’

‘Goodnight, Marianne.’ He strode back into the hotel without looking back, his back stiff and his head upright.

‘Now look what you’ve done!’ She rounded on Hudson like a small virago. ‘I’ve never seen him like that. How could you?’

‘Easily; the man’s a fool,’ Hudson said drily. ‘Hasn’t he heard of the concept of fighting for what he wants? Or has everything dropped into his lap so readily he’s nothing more than spoonfed? Faint heart never won fair lady, and all that.’

‘You know nothing about Keith.’ She was angry, furiously angry, at his arrogance. ‘He’s a lovely man—gentle, good-natured —’

‘So is the average cocker spaniel,’ he returned coolly, and in her rage she didn’t notice how his mouth had thinned with her championship of the other man. ‘But the attributes that make a pet dog so worthy would soon pall in a lover, believe me.’



‘He is not my lover!’ she spat heatedly. ‘He never has been.’

‘He’d like to be.’ It was straight for the jugular, and so true she was lost for an answer. ‘And you know it,’ he added grimly as her fiery face spoke for itself. ‘So cut the twaddle.’

‘Is that why you behaved like this tonight?’ she asked hotly. ‘Because you know—?’ She could have kicked herself for the slip, and continued quickly, ‘Because you think he loves me?’

‘I think he imagines he’s in love with you,’ Hudson answered cynically. ‘Which is quite a different thing, as we both know. He doesn’t know you any more than I knew you—he loves the fantasy you project, like I did. With me, I guess it provided a kick to the holiday for you to have a little fling before you returned home to your fiancé, yes? With him, no doubt, it’s good to have the boss panting for you—gives you the edge over the rest of the girls.’

‘You’re disgusting,’ she bit out tightly, masking the pain and crucifying hurt his words had caused with superhuman effort.

‘Realistic is the word.’ He surveyed her coldly with dark, narrowed eyes, his black hair and the shadowed planes and angles of his face bleak in the moonlight. ‘Yes, I’m realistic about you now, Annie. I only get taken for a ride once; you’d better understand that.’

‘I didn’t take you for a ride,’ she protested shakily. ‘It wasn’t like that.’ She stared at him helplessly, her mouth tremulous.

‘No? Then what do you call it when you agree to marry one man, knowing there’s already another tucked away back home

you're promised to?' he spat out menacingly. 'Tell me; I'd really like to know.'

'It wasn't true, what Michael told you.' She stared at him, her green-gold eyes reflecting a shaft of moonlight that turned her hair silver. 'He had no right to say what he did.'

'Wasn't true?' He laughed harshly. 'Oh, come on, Annie, don't disappoint me now; you can do better than that.'

'It wasn't,' she insisted quietly. 'I'm telling you the truth.'

Then what was true? That "goodbye, Hudson, thanks for the memories but I've decided the life of a lawyer's wife is not for me" letter you left for me?" he asked grimly. 'You're telling me that you just got cold feet, that that was the reason you disappeared off the face of the earth for I don't know how long? Do I look stupid, Annie? Do I?' he added savagely, his face dark and cold.

How could she tell him? She stared at him as her mind raced. If she told him the truth, the whole truth, he could react one of three ways. It was clear he didn't love her any more, so he might just acknowledge what she said and walk away.

Or—and here her heart thudded—he might pity her, feel some responsibility towards her, especially if he guessed she still loved him, and ask her to take up where they left off in spite of the fact his feelings had died. If he did that, would the threat to him through her still remain? Probably, she thought grimly. From what she had heard, the sort of people Michael had been involved with had very long memories. And then the last two

years would have been for nothing.

Or, thirdly—and she had to admit most likely—he simply wouldn't believe her anyway; he would think she was making up some fantastic story to cover her deceit. And with Michael's death all chance of proving what she had to say was gone. Hudson was far more likely to believe her stepfather's lies—he had had two years to let Michael's lie work its poison.

There was every reason for saying nothing and none for telling him the truth, except... Except she couldn't bear him to look at her with such contempt and scorn. She swallowed the lump in her throat. She had missed him so much, so much, and she didn't know what to do about it...

'Don't bother trying to work out what to say.' He slid back into the car as he spoke, his voice hard. 'I wouldn't believe it anyway.' The driver's door shut with a savageness that was very final.

Well, that settled her answer. She watched him for a moment with misty eyes as he drove the car over to the small car park surrounded by bushes and flowering vegetation. He despised her, and she really couldn't blame him. Perhaps if she told him the truth he wouldn't believe she and her mother had had no knowledge of Michael's involvement in such heavy crime anyway. He had fought such people all his working life and loathed them and the corruption they represented. Maybe him thinking she had been hiding a fiancé in the background was light in comparison.

She turned quickly as the lights on the car died, walking

swiftly into the hotel and picking up the key to her room before Hudson reappeared; knowing she couldn't face him again that night. But perhaps he was finished with her anyway? He'd made his point, told her exactly what he thought of her and in what contempt he held her; perhaps he would be satisfied with that? She had hurt him, she knew that—the knowledge had sent her half mad at times—but the alternative would have been far worse; it could have destroyed him and his career, she told herself frantically.

She reached her room, entering it quickly and then leaning weakly back against the door in the darkness as the tears began to seep from her closed eyelids. She had done the only thing she could two years ago, and it had been because she loved him, pure and simple. So why couldn't she gain just the smallest crumb of comfort from the knowledge to help combat the pain that was tearing her apart inside? It wasn't fair, none of this was fair.

She sank to the floor, her legs finally giving way as the storm of weeping overtook her, her moans like the cries of a wounded animal that had no hope.

She had just been learning to live without him, to accept that her life would never be one of fulfilment in the family sense—as a wife and mother—and now the pain was as raw and lacerating as it ever had been in the early days.

How long she lay there she didn't know, but when at last she rose, her face sticky and damp, there were no more tears left—only a cold, chilling emptiness in the pit of her stomach as she

recalled his last words to her and the look on his face as he had uttered them.

### CHAPTER THREE

‘WHAT’S the matter with Keith today?’ Marjorie pulled a face as she bent over Marianne and whispered in her ear, ‘He’s like a bear with a sore head; I’ve never seen him like this. Is it because you were late back last night?’

‘I don’t think that helped,’ Marianne said quietly as the wafer-thin model straightened again, and they both looked to where Keith was bawling at June and Guy, his face turkey-red.

‘He makes my Tony seem like a positive angel,’ Marjorie drawled softly. ‘And that’s hard to do, believe me. Well, we live and learn. I had no idea Keith had it in him.’ She glanced down at Marianne again, who was setting up the equipment, her face pale and sombre. ‘He’s crazy about you, you know,’ she added quietly.

‘Marjorie, please...’ Marianne raised anguished eyes. ‘That doesn’t help. I could never think of Keith in that way.’

‘Sorry.’ There was a pause, and then, ‘Mind you, if I had the choice of Keith or that hunk you went off with yesterday there’d be no contest. He was absolutely gorgeous . Old flame?’

‘Sort of.’ Marianne’s voice was dismissive but it didn’t work.

‘You were careless to let that one escape,’ Marjorie said softly, her beautiful almond-shaped eyes bright with curiosity. ‘Is he married? The best ones usually are,’ she added resignedly.

‘Marjorie, I’ve got to do this.’ Marianne kept her head bent to the task in hand. ‘Okay?’

‘I get the message: mind your own business, Marjorie,’ the other girl said good-naturedly. ‘But if he’s not married and you want to introduce us...?’ she wheedled hopefully.

‘It was a one-off, Marjorie; I probably shan’t be seeing him again,’ Marianne said as calmly as she could through her screaming nerves. Much more of this and she would say something she’d regret.

‘Pity.’ The model sighed deeply. ‘Great, great pity.’

The morning had started badly and got progressively worse, and by lunchtime Keith’s bad temper had affected everyone, making the very air tense and volatile, which made it all the more awkward when, just as they were packing up, Marjorie called across, ‘Marianne, you know that one-off? He’s going for double.’

‘What?’ She straightened and turned as she spoke, and then froze, her heartbeat going haywire, as she saw the tall, dark figure watching them from the road as he leant indolently against the side of his car, his hands thrust into the pockets of his jeans and sunglasses hiding his eyes. How could one man look so—so gorgeous?

They had been filming on Tangier’s three-mile-long white sandy beach, the atmosphere enhanced by several grazing camels and the two barefoot, curly-haired Moroccan children tending the animals; they had been delighted to pose for the cameras for a few dirhams. Although the May sun had been pleasantly warm at first, for the last two hours it had been blazing down out of a cloudless blue sky with the temperature steadily soaring.

Marianne felt hot and dirty and sticky, and the last person—the very last person in all the world—she wanted to see at that moment was Hudson de Sance.

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