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CATHY WILLIAMS

The Secret Casella Baby

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Аннотация

How does it feel to be one of the beautiful people? That is a question ordinary girl Holly George never thought she'd be able to answer! Until one sizzling night with brooding Brazilian Luiz changes her life. Not only is Luiz Casella a billionaire – but now Holly is expecting his baby!Holly might don all the silk and diamonds Luiz can shower her with – but she'll always feel most comfortable working at her animal sanctuary. Yet it seems she might have to get used to living in world of the rich and famous… As a Casella heir cannot be born out of wedlock!'Beautifully written, stunning descriptions and such depth to her characters.' – Uzma, Customer Services, Southport

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Luiz tilted his head to one side, looking for all the world as though he was paying keen attention and actually listening to what she was suggesting.

'No.'

‘No? *No?* What do you mean, *no*?’ Holly looked at him in sudden confusion. She had exhausted all the options she could think of, so what exactly was he turning down? All of them? Didn’t he know that there was nothing else on the table?

‘I find that none of those options appeal. Let me put it this way… As far as I am concerned, the only choice I have is to marry you. My child will be born legitimate. There’s no other alternative. Rest assured that as far as money goes you will be well taken care of. In fact you could say that you will be rich beyond your wildest dreams.’

Holly was staring at him as though he had just grown wings and was now informing her that he would be flying to the moon. She wasn’t sure that she had quite heard correctly.

Marriage?

About the Author

CATHY WILLIAMS is originally from Trinidad, but has lived in England for a number of years. She currently has a house in Warwickshire, which she shares with her husband Richard, her three daughters, Charlotte, Olivia and Emma, and their pet cat, Salem. She adores writing romantic fiction, and would love one of her girls to become a writer—although at the moment she is happy enough if they do their homework and agree not to bicker with one another!

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The Secret Casella Baby

Cathy Williams

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CHAPTER ONE

BEHIND THE WHEEL of his top-of-the-range silver sports car, Luiz Casella edged his foot down on the accelerator and felt the low, responsive growl of the vehicle as it leapt faster along the narrow country road. This was madness; he shouldn't be here, in the depths of a wintry, deserted Yorkshire countryside, pitting his ability to drive against nature's ability to stop him. On one side, endless fields, snow-covered, meandered out towards a horizon fast being consumed by darkness. On the other the bank rose steadily upwards, an icy mass of unforgiving rock that would shatter his car if he made the mistake of getting too close.

Luiz knew that. He also knew that he had to do this, he had to work this crazy, maddening grief out of his system somehow, and he couldn't think of a better way of doing it than by dicing with death a million miles away from the well-ordered, clinical sanity of his London penthouse.

It had been nearly a year since his father had died. A strapping, adventurous man in his early sixties, Mario Casella had been alive, strong and vibrant one day, nagging his son that it was time to settle down, threatening to leave Brazil and fly to London to persuade him. The next, he had been a crumpled, lifeless body barely identifiable in the ruins of the small light aeroplane which he had been determined to master.

Luiz had taken the call from his sobbing mother and had

returned immediately to Brazil where he had risen to the challenges awaiting him. As the only son, he had become immediate head of the family. He handled everything, from the funeral arrangements to the sudden crisis within his father's company caused by his death. He juggled the managing of his own companies from a distance.

He was the reassuring rock to which his mother, his three sisters, various assorted relatives and a number of business associates had turned. He had not allowed any poisonous thread of weakness to corrupt his remorseless, single-minded determination to do what he knew he had to do. He had appointed the necessary people to run his father's company and made sure they knew that one slip up, and they would be answerable to him. He had arranged for the family mansion to be sold because his mother couldn't face the prospect of living there without her husband. He had found somewhere equally luxurious but much smaller in the same cul de sac as one of his sisters. He had quietly put some of the more sentimental mementoes into storage where they would rest until the time came when his mother would be strong enough to face looking at them. He had done all this without shedding a tear.

When he had returned to London, months later, it was to resume the running of his own personal empire. He threw himself into a work routine that would have crippled any normal human being. He began a ferocious programme of buy-outs that saw his personal wealth increase ten fold.

The latest buy-out of a failing electronics company in Durham had given him the first opportunity he had had to release some of the savage energy that had been burning a hole inside him since his father's death. He had taken advantage of it, arranging for his car to be at the airport and allowing himself a few hours' respite from his gruelling work agenda to drive back down to London.

He hadn't intended to be distracted by country lanes but the challenge of those small, deserted icy roads had been irresistible. He had switched off his GPS navigation and now here he was.

In the failing light, he could see the first light glimmers of snow beginning to fall like translucent powder, necessitating the windscreen wipers. He had switched off his phone, switched off the radio, and all he could hear was the deep, sepulchral silence of winter battling against the low roar of his powerful car.

Had his father felt any pain before he'd died? He would have known that death was imminent as his plane had plummeted out of the sky, like a bird with its wings catastrophically snapped. What had been his thoughts?

Surely no regrets? His father had been the finest example of what a clever man possessed of boundless energy and imagination could achieve. He had taken himself away from his impoverished background and worked his way steadily upwards until he had finally been able to reside in that rarefied place where money was no object. He had married his childhood sweetheart, who had stood by him every inch of the way, and together they had had four children. No; there would surely have

been no regrets there.

Luiz liked to think that there was comfort to be derived from that but no amount of mental acrobatics could stifle the pain of the unanswered questions, or knowing that the single one man he had truly admired was gone for ever from his life.

His hands tightened on the wheel. A searing ache began uncoiling in the very pit of his stomach. He clenched his jaw, pressed harder on the accelerator, and in the blink of an eye that unforgiving face of rock was bearing down towards him.

Luiz reacted in a split second, veering away from it, feeling it brush against the side of his car, hearing the shriek of protesting metal against immovable stone, then his car was spinning out of control and hurtling across the country lane, now shrouded in darkness, out towards the expanse of fields.

The impact left him momentarily dazed but his airbag had done its thing and the strength of the vehicle had weathered the crash better than he could have hoped for. But he was still winded and in a bad way as he manoeuvred himself out of the car and dragged himself as far away from it as possible. He was running on a full tank and there was every chance that the thing would go up in flames. Remain too close, and it would take him along for the ride.

But walking was going to be a problem. He gingerly felt his leg and the gash running along it. He was without a coat, in the middle of nowhere and there was not a single light in sight. To make matters worse, the snow had decided to gather momentum.

The powdery dust was fast turning into fat snowflakes that began settling on his hair, his useless work trousers—lovingly hand-tailored but totally inappropriate in falling snow—the designer jumper which would be soaked through in under half an hour and on the fields stretching as far as the eye could see.

Gritting his teeth, he began making his way slowly back towards the road. He would just have to take things from there. He had his mobile phone and, whilst he was fully aware that the network in these parts would probably be severely challenged, sooner or later he would be able to pick up a signal.

And, hey; a grim smile flitted across his dark, aristocratic face. This physical pain, after months of putting a cap on the far uglier pain of his emotions, almost felt good…

Had he but known it, less than two miles away, Holly George, in the act of doing her routine check of her cherished animal sanctuary, heard the distant scream of the car crash and instantly stilled, cocking her head to listen a little harder.

She had grown up in this wild, spectacular terrain and she knew it intimately. She knew its changing moods, its unexpectedly graceful nooks and crannies and she knew its sounds. Especially in the depths of February when the silence could be bottomless.

She snapped shut the gate on Buster the donkey, a new addition, and hurried inside the stone cottage, taking off her woolly hat in the process so that long, curly fair hair the colour of vanilla spilled over her shoulders and rippled down her back.

Someone's come off the road. There was no question of it. For a few seconds she debated whether to call Andy, her partner at the sanctuary, but then dismissed the idea before it had chance to form. Andy had left early for a cookery course in town, hosted by his favourite chef. He had been looking forward to it for the past three weeks and she wasn't about to ruin his good time by dragging him out on a search and rescue mission.

Ben Firth would gladly have got his boys together and headed out with their fire trucks, and Abe, the local doctor, would have rustled up the ambulance, but where would they head? The funny thing with sound around here was that the echoes of it could literally have originated anywhere. But she knew this place like the back of her hand. She would be able to pin point where the crash had happened and get there much faster than Ben and his crew, who were based over fifteen miles away, or Abe for that matter, who was closer but not by much.

Holly George was only twenty-six years old but she was sensible, practical and used to the harsh winters delivered every year in remote Yorkshire. Sometimes it occurred to her that sensible and practical were not very feminine traits, which might have accounted for the lack of men pounding on her front door begging for a date. But whenever she thought of leaving her beloved animal sanctuary and moving to one of the big cities with bright lights, clubs, bars and all those other things her friends kept telling her she needed, she literally felt ill.

Her father had been a farmer and she had always lived around

animals. Her body clock was primed for early mornings and the onset of spring was always a reminder of the wonders of lambing. Her father had died years ago, shortly after she had turned eighteen, and she had reluctantly sold the farm, knowing that managing the extensive acres of arable would be out of the question, even with a great deal of help. In its place, she had sunk what she had made on the farm into the animal sanctuary which now occupied her time. Once she had paid the bills there was precious little money left, but she had her cottage, with its grumbling heating system and eccentric plumbing, and she didn't owe a thing on it. She had bought it outright.

But the question of time passing her by while her friends lived it up and tried to drag her out was still the occasional wrinkle in an otherwise uncomplicated existence. She had only ever had one serious boyfriend. James had been training to be a vet and they had met at one of the many courses she enjoyed attending to better her understanding of how to look after the animals she rescued. He had been giving the lecture as part of his coursework and she had immediately warmed to his evident nervousness. They had got chatting and, when their relationship had ended after a year and a half, they had remained firm friends.

Personally, Holly thought that she might very well have missed her chance because she couldn't imagine that there was anyone more on her wavelength than James had been. But he had been transferred south and had just not been able to tolerate the physical distance. She often wondered whether she should have

tried harder because time moved on and…

She paused by the front door to reach for the keys to her ancient four-wheel drive and glanced at the reflection in the little brass mirror attached to the hooks for the keys.

This face would never suit the bright lights, she decided, and neither would this body. She lacked the fashionable angular lines that looked good in tight clothes and she had never quite cracked the art of make-up. The bright blue eyes staring back at her were rarely adorned with mascara or eye-liner. Her face was soft, gentle, too feminine to be sexy.

She turned away without dwelling further on her physical drawbacks.

Outside the snow was getting heavier, and she knew that there was no time for second thoughts, but her car was extremely sturdy and as she switched on the engine it let out its usual reassuring rumble.

There were several roads and lanes she could have taken but she unerringly went for the right one. It was the most hazardous. In the past four years, three accidents had taken place on one of the bends that forked left without warning. If that wasn't the site of the car crash, then she would have no difficulty in picking up another lane.

Making her way through the snow, she spotted the car as soon as the narrow road allowed her an unimpeded view straight ahead. It was skewed into the field at an angle that made her urge her old car on faster. Snow was already gathering on it and even

from a distance she could see that it was a complete write off.

She was squinting to make out the detail in the beam of her headlights and very nearly missed the figure at the side of the road, barely standing and signalling to her to stop.

A man, on his own, and not kitted out for the weather; she could make that much out as she carefully pulled to the side of the road.

'Is there anyone else with you?' Holly asked anxiously, hurrying over and wrapping her arm around his waist. Half-slumped, she was conscious of the firmness of muscle and the weight of someone much taller than her.

'Just me.' Luiz ground his teeth to bite back the agony of his leg as they hobbled, clutching each other, to a car that looked like the left-over relic from another century.

'Your car…'

'Completely destroyed.'

'I'll arrange for someone to come out and fetch it.'

'Forget it. I couldn't give a damn about it.'

Holly wondered who couldn't give a damn about something as expensive as a car. Letting him go for the second it took to open the passenger door, she felt the brush of his body as he settled into the seat with a grimace of pain.

A thousand questions were running through her head. Which would be the quickest route to the hospital? He was standing and he was talking, but was he seriously injured? Should she be asking him about any family members she could contact? Should

she do some sort of routine check to make sure that he wasn't concussed?

She raised her eyes, one of those questions already forming on her lips, and was skewered to the spot by the sort of spectacular good looks that just made her want to stare and keep on staring. His eyes were deep and dark and the snow glistened on short black hair and on a lean-boned face that was breathtakingly, uncompromisingly masculine. He was exotically foreign, his skin the colour of burnished gold. Her heart set up a tempo that was so alien to her that she could feel bright, flustered colour invade her cheeks.

'Are you comfortable?' she managed to ask in a staccato voice that was very different from her usually calm, unruffled tone.

'As comfortable as I can be with a leg that's been ripped open.'

At which Holly roused herself out of her stupor sufficiently to look at the bloodied trousers and she gave a little gasp of horror.

'You need the hospital.' She switched on the engine. The snow was falling more heavily and it took her a little while before her tyres could grip the tarmac.

'How far is it?'

'Quite far.' She had to fight the temptation to sneak one more look at that face. 'You're not from around here, are you?'

'Is it so easy to tell?' Luiz rested his head against the window and stared at her profile. He had the strangest feeling that he had crashed, died and gone to heaven, because she was the most angelic thing he had ever seen in his life. Her skin was as smooth

as satin, her enormous eyes were the pure blue of cornflowers; her hair, flyaway blonde, cascaded down her back and over her shoulders in natural, wild disarray, so different from the poker-straight hairstyles that were everywhere in London. The pain in his leg was now a steady throb, pulsing underneath the trousers.

'You're wearing the wrong clothes. No one would venture out in weather like this without a few more layers. Look, it's going to be impossible to get you to the hospital, but I can call and find out whether they can send a rescue helicopter for you.'

Luiz thought of the carelessness that had landed him in this mess and flushed darkly. 'I can handle it myself. There's no need for a rescue helicopter.'

'You're kidding.'

When she smiled, her cheeks dimpled. He had never seen anything like it.

'I haven't even introduced myself,' Holly said shyly. 'I'm Holly George.'

'Well, Holly George,' Luiz murmured, 'What were you doing out on the roads in this weather? Won't your parents be wondering where you've gone?'

'I live on my own. Not very far away, as a matter of fact. I heard you crash so I jumped in my car and drove here. I was going to alert Ben and Abe but it would have taken them ages. That's the problem with living in such a remote place; if you run into trouble in the depths of winter, you just have to keep your fingers crossed that you can hold out for a few hours.'

‘Who are Ben and Abe?’

‘Oh, Ben’s in charge of the fire station and old Abe is the local doctor.’

‘It all sounds very cosy.’

‘What were you doing on those roads?’

‘Getting rid of some of my demons.’

Holly glanced across at him at that intriguing statement but his eyes were veiled and she instinctively knew that he was not a man who would expand on anything if she chose to ask him a direct question. How did she know that? Where had that gut feeling come from?

‘Those lights up ahead…’ She turned off the main road and felt the familiarity of the grounds surrounding her cottage. ‘My cottage is there. I… I run an animal sanctuary.’

‘You do what?’

‘I run an animal sanctuary. You can just make out the buildings over there; they’re heated and covered. We have about fifty animals. Dogs, cats, two horses, a donkey… Last year we even had a pair of llamas, but fortunately they were taken in by a children’s farm.’

‘Cats… horses… a donkey…’ He had stepped into another world. This was so far beyond his realm of understanding that he could have been conversing with someone from another planet.

‘What do you do?’ Holly asked. ‘I mean, what’s your job?’

‘My job…’ They were pulling up in front of a small stone cottage, brightly lit. She turned to him and for a second his breath

caught at the sight of her open, smiling heart-shaped face. He noticed details that had escaped his attention. For instance, not only were her eyes the bluest he had ever seen, but her eyelashes were incongruously dark and her mouth was full and beautifully defined. The fingers lightly gripping the steering wheel were slender, smooth and free of any rings. In fact, she wore no jewellery. Her clothes were basic, practical, unfashionable—jeans, a jumper over which she had flung a very worn, olive-green oilskin, wellies and a woollen hat with a Christmas motif. She was the least artificial person he could remember seeing in a long time.

'And your name; what's your name? Hang on, I'll come round your side and help you out and we can have a look at your injury and decide what to do. I have a lot of first-aid stuff and if it's superficial I can probably deal with it.'

Holly found that she was as tense as violin wire as once again that very masculine body was leaning against her, weighing her down even though she knew that he was doing his best to put as little pressure on her as he could. As always when she was nervous, she chattered as they walked very slowly through the snow towards the front door, and once in to the kitchen where he sat heavily on one of the pine chairs at her kitchen table.

This was just the sort of decor that Luiz loathed: lots of rustic touches and one of those enormous ranges that did very little, as far as he was concerned, aside from take up useful space. The tiles on the floor were old, as old as the weathered rug underneath

the pine table. Against one wall, a dresser was home to a variety of mismatched plates which fought for space alongside little framed pictures and various bric-a-brac of the sort guaranteed to have any interior designer worth her salt gnashing her teeth in frustration.

And yet…

He watched as she bustled, fetching a first-aid kit from one of the cupboards, not even looking at him directly as she concentrated on the gash on his leg.

'You'll have to help me get the trousers off,' he murmured and she hurriedly waved aside the suggestion.

Get his trousers off? Holly didn't think that her blood pressure could take it. His presence filled her small kitchen like no one else's ever had. However hard she tried to divert her eyes, they just kept coming back to him, big, muscular and indecently good-looking.

'I'll cut them. It's better that way.'

She knelt in front of him and Luiz felt the thrust of an erection that was so strong and so unexpected that he had to draw his breath in sharply. What was it about her? She had no sharp edges, no bony elbows, thin arms or stick legs. She was soft and rounded and he could see the shape of her full breasts even in the faded jeans and even more faded jumper, as seductive as ripe fruit.

As she gently began cutting away the trouser leg, apologising about ruining the lovely cloth, his head was suddenly filled with images of her naked in front of him, offering herself to him. He

fidgeted and Holly looked up immediately.

'Have I hurt you?'

He wondered how she would react if he told her exactly what was hurting him at this moment in time.

'You're very brave. You must tell me if I hurt you. It's bound to but…'

She hurried off, to return seconds later with a glass of water and some tablets.

'Painkillers. Very strong. They'll help.' She could feel her skin tingling as he rested his dark eyes on her flushed face. It was strange, but when he looked at her she got the funniest feeling that she was being caressed.

'So you haven't told me your name…' Once again at the task of slitting the trousers, trying to ignore the strong legs slowly being revealed with their dark hair which was somehow so aggressively masculine, she launched into jumpy chatter.

'Ah, yes. Luiz. Luiz… Gomez.' He hoped that the head gardener who had been in charge of the grounds of the family house in Brazil would forgive him appropriating his surname, but suddenly it seemed a good idea. Here, with this woman kneeling at his feet, in surroundings so far removed from those to which he was accustomed, he would be a different person. Just for a few hours. He would no longer be a workaholic, driven by demons, in charge of an empire in which there was no time-out clause built in. There was no sin in seeking a little respite from the brutal reality of his life, was there?

‘Luiz… Where are you from?’

‘I live in London, as a matter of fact, but I come from Brazil.’ He smiled at her delighted expression and relaxed as she chattered away about the places she would love to see one day. Her fingers were nimble and she worked quickly, explaining that he would need to see a doctor, would probably need antibiotics but it wasn’t too bad, she would make sure she cleaned it thoroughly…

She laughed when he asked her whether she had been a girl guide and he enjoyed the sound of her laughter. He felt he might like to hear it more often.

‘I could stitch you up,’ she told him. ‘But I’m not sure whether you would be willing to trust me to do that. If not, I can bandage you up until we can get you to a doctor.’

Luiz half-murmured that when it came to being stitched up there had been a fair few women who had attempted the exercise.

‘Is there somewhere I could stay out here?’ he asked, looking around him as if he might just spy a cosy tavern at the bottom of the garden. Already his mind was moving ahead. Time out; this was the tonic he needed. A place where no one could find him, with a woman who had no agenda and to whom he would be no more than an injured stranger. The wealthy and powerful Luiz Casella could have a bit of peace and quiet. The man over whom women fawned could step back and luxuriate in the novelty of knowing that the health of his bank account was not a contributing factor.

And, of course, out here…

He feasted his eyes on her luscious curves, her achingly pretty face, which went pink every time he looked at her.

Holly blushed and laughed again as she straightened up, pleased with the job she had done. She was used to dealing with injuries. He was probably bruised on other parts of his body as well. She couldn't help admiring his stoicism. Not only was he fantastically good-looking, but he wasn't a complainer.

'The nearest bed and breakfast is at least twenty miles away. You couldn't have picked a worse spot to come off the road,' she said ruefully. 'I'll fix you something to eat and make up the spare room. You can stay here, if you like. At least overnight, until we can get you to a hospital.'

'I won't be needing a hospital.' Luiz thought that he couldn't have picked a better place to come off the road. He didn't know what it was about her, but already he felt calmer than he had in a long time.

'And you still haven't told me what you do. Or if I should get in touch with someone to tell them about your accident. A wife, perhaps…?'

Luiz could recognise a leading question when he heard one and he smiled slowly. 'No wife,' he murmured. 'No girlfriend. No one to contact.' He watched as she busied herself fixing them something to eat. The cupboards were hand-painted, cream and dark green. The tiles above the range cooker depicted children's drawings of various animals. It was warm in the kitchen and she

pulled off the sweater so that she was down to a long-sleeved tee-shirt which clung faithfully to all her curves and to breasts which were as abundant as he had suspected. She was chattering, although he wasn't one hundred percent paying attention to what she was saying.

He knew that he was making all the right noises, and when finally she sat at the kitchen table with food in front of them—eggs and bacon and some of the best bread he had ever eaten—he knew that he was asking all the right questions.

He asked about the sanctuary, about how it was funded, about the details of how it was run, where the animals came from, the success rate at rehousing them.

She had an open, expressive face. She gesticulated excitedly when she talked about her animals. They all had names. They tried to raise money locally to keep going. Personally, he thought that it all sounded like a lot of hard work for no profit, but he enjoyed looking at her enthusiasm. He couldn't remember being as enthusiastic as she was when he was closing his deals, which were usually worth millions. He was tempted to offer her a substantial amount of money, a thank you for saving his life, but, having told her that he was little more than a travelling salesman, that possibility was ruled out.

'I might have to stay here slightly longer than a night,' he finally said as she rose to clear their dishes and Holly threw him an anxious glance over her shoulder.

'Won't your boss mind?' she asked, concerned. 'Things are

so tough in the economy nowadays… I hope your job won't be under threat because you have to take time off.' When he said *stay here*, did he mean stay *here?* In her *house?* Or stay somewhere locally until he was fully recovered? She thought of him in her house and a guilty thrill of pleasure rippled through her. He was just the most interesting guy she had ever met, willing to listen to what she had to say and informative on all his responses.

'I think I'll be able to wing it on that score,' Luiz murmured. For a second, he felt a twinge of guilt at his creative manipulation of the truth but it didn't last long. He reasoned that she would be intimidated had she known the extent of his influence, power and wealth. She would respond far more quickly and openly to a travelling salesman type, someone safe and unthreatening.

'So getting back to you staying here…' Holly said uncertainly. 'I'm not sure what you mean, exactly…'

'Of course, I would insist on paying you. You could consider yourself the most convenient bed and breakfast, and I assure you, you would be generously compensated. In fact, you can name your price. I… I'm quite sure my boss would not hesitate to make whatever generous donation you might want towards your animal sanctuary.'

'I wouldn't dream of taking money from you!' Holly was horrified that he might think her so mercenary that she would try and charge him for what anyone else would have done in her situation.

‘Even though, from all accounts, your animals don’t exactly pay the bills?’ Luiz was enjoying the unexpected novelty of this situation more and more. He couldn’t think of a single woman who wouldn’t have taken money from him. In fact, he was quite accustomed to lavishing presents on his women: diamonds, pearls, cars, holidays… Naturally, had she known the extent of his personal fortune, she would not have hesitated to take advantage of his generosity. He knew enough about women to be sure on that count. Her scruples would only have kicked in at the thought of depriving a struggling salesman who might or might not be in danger of losing his job.

‘I know a bit about computers…’ He had to conceal a smile when he said that, for he owned several IT companies and probably knew more about the workings of computers than most of the people he employed. ‘Do you have a website? Because I could set one up for you…’

Not only did he not complain, not only was he interested in what she did, not only was he the perfect gentleman in offering to compensate her for her simple act of kindness, but here he was, doing his best to make himself useful! He just seemed to know everything. Perhaps computers were his thing.

‘The main thing is that you get better,’ she told him firmly. ‘Would you like some tea? Coffee? And then I’ll show you up to your bedroom. In the morning, I’ll get in touch with Abe. The snow doesn’t seem to be getting any heavier. He has a Jeep. He should be able to make it out here.’

‘Are you always this upbeat?’ Luiz wondered aloud and she favoured him with one of those smiles that he found strangely transfixing.

‘I have a lot to be thankful for. This place, a job I love, lots of friends…’ She placed the cafetière on the table along with two mugs and some milk and sugar. ‘I no longer have my parents. My mother died when I was a kid, and my dad died a few years ago, but I like to think that they were very happy…’

‘And that works for you?’ Luiz’s mouth twisted cynically at her innocent, sunny acceptance of what he, personally, had found unacceptable—of the event which, in a strange way, accounted for him sitting right here in this kitchen with a woman the likes of whom he had never known existed.

‘Of course it does. What did you mean when you said that you were getting rid of some of your demons?’

Had anyone else asked him that question, Luiz would have shot them down with a glance, but as he stared into those sympathetic blue eyes, he felt that ache in his gut uncoil again.

He told her: he was just Luiz Gomez, a travelling salesman, allowed, for a brief window in time, to reveal his feelings. It wasn’t easy. He was not a man given to sharing or confiding. When you were the power house, the person shouldering the responsibility and running the show, confiding about anything to anyone was not a desirable thing to do. It was a sign of weakness and, as one of those kings of the concrete jungle, weakness was not allowed.

But she made a damned good listener. He forgot about his leg, the incipient aches all over his body, his wrecked car, and at the end of an hour he had made his mind up.

Holly George was going to be his lover.

CHAPTER TWO

HOLLY LOOKED AT the little wrought-iron table with matching chairs on the stone flagged patio which overlooked the open fields at the back of her cottage and felt a little knot of nervousness and excitement. She had laid everything out neatly. The bottle of wine—from the supply which was permanently re-stocked by Luiz, who was fussy with his alcohol—was chilling in the wine cooler. A dish of crudités was covered over, as were the little homemade savoury cheese biscuits. Midges; flies; they always came out in summer and it was still very warm, even though it was nearly six-thirty in the evening.

Any minute now, Luiz would be arriving in his taxi, and after nearly a year and a half she would still feel that giddy craving that always overwhelmed her the second she laid eyes on him.

This weekend, though, was going to be different. Holly smoothed her hands over her summer dress and hurried inside to hover by the window in the front room.

A wave of dizziness washed over her and she suspected that it was the heat. Recently, she had been prone to such waves of dizziness. It was an extremely and unusually hot summer. All her animals were lethargic. Her chickens, which usually pestered her by the kitchen door in search of scraps, took themselves off to shadier spots. Even her assortment of dogs was less interested in running around than finding a cosy niche underneath the

nearest tree where they could lie, tongues lolling, dreaming about running around.

She was lethargic. For the past three weeks, getting out of bed in the mornings had been a struggle. Normally up with the larks, she had found herself yearning to lie in a couple of times and she had had to make a mammoth effort to get going.

Yorkshire, she had told Luiz, wasn't designed for searing temperatures. It was designed for the cool, bright colours of spring, the chill of autumn russets or the breathtaking cold of a winter wonderland. Luiz had laughed and told her that she should get some air-conditioning installed in her cottage and she wouldn't feel so uncomfortable in the heat.

She teased him about his practicality. She told him that he needed to cultivate some romance, but in truth their personalities blended beautifully together. She would never have believed that after that initial meeting, when she had first looked at him and concluded that he was just the most spectacular guy she had ever seen, he would come to fill her world, all the corners of it.

They only ever met at weekends. She couldn't leave her animals and he couldn't get time away from his job, which she assumed took him travelling all over the country, selling all that computer stuff which made her glaze over whenever she thought too hard about it. But the time they spent together was so intense, so vibrantly, wildly alive, that she couldn't confess to having a second's doubt that he was just the best thing that had ever happened to her.

He was her lover, her soul mate. He was the guy she knew she could share everything with, from the small things, bits and pieces of local gossip, to the really big things like when some of the shelters had lost their roofs the year before in a snow storm and the bank had been digging its heels in about lending her the amount she needed to repair them to the standard she wanted. Well, Luiz had sorted it all out for her, and in fact had managed to talk the bank manager into lending her enough to really bring the whole sanctuary up to an incredibly high standard, far better than she could ever have imagined.

Plus, he had looked through all her deeds and papers and found a stash of cash sitting in an unused account dating back to the original sale of the farm. With the accumulated interest over the years, she hadn't even had to pay for any of the refurbishments. He was her rock.

As they did every time she thought of him, her fingers rested lovingly on the tiny red pendant he had given her the previous Christmas as a present before he had returned to Brazil—for, as he had told her, ten days of agony without the bliss of seeing her for the weekend. Her eyes had welled up at the present, because he had remembered her once telling him that rubies were her favourite stones, but he had waved aside her thanks and vaguely assured her that it was just a great copy, nothing to get all worked up about.

Over time, he had lavished her with a number of such great copies of precious jewellery. He knew a guy who knew a guy

who could work magic when it came to terrific reproductions, he had told her. In return, she had given him little things she picked up at the craft fairs she occasionally went to. She had knitted him a sweater because his sweaters were far too thin—London sweaters, she had laughed, only useful for London winters. She had bought him a first edition of a book he had mentioned liking which she had found in an antique-book shop in an out-of-the-way village near Middlesbrough.

She smiled at the memory of how concerned he had been at the extravagance, but in truth, ever since he had set up that website, the finances of the place had never been so good. Donations more than kept them going and there were now a couple of really generous anonymous online donors who almost single-handedly ensured that the sanctuary was in tip-top condition with money to spare.

Lost in her daydreams, she started at the sound of the door knocker and she was already succumbing to the thrill of anticipation as she pulled open the door.

'I couldn't get here fast enough…' Luiz kicked the door shut behind him and pulled her into his arms. En route, he had rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and his tie was stuffed into his trouser pocket. In weather like this, it would have made sense to have changed into something cooler before boarding his helicopter, but as always the need to see her was so urgent that he just couldn't bring himself to take time out to return to his apartment and change.

In fact, it was a source of continual gratification that he had use of a helicopter. Had he been obliged to take the train and a taxi, which he knew she assumed he did, he would have gone mad during the journey. Hell, no woman had ever been able to hold his attention for the length of time that she had and now he buried his head in her hair, breathing in her unique, gloriously womanly scent.

'There's wine outside.' Holly's laughter caught on a breath of intoxicating desire as he pushed her back to the wall and teased open the small buttons at the front of her dress.

'The wine will have to wait.' Luiz half-groaned. 'I've been thinking of nothing but this since I got into that taxi. Why the hell have you worn something with a thousand buttons, Holly? Are you trying to drive me crazy?'

'I'm not wearing a bra, though…'

'Then it's a good thing you answered the door to me,' Luiz growled possessively. 'Because that's something for my eyes only…' He couldn't get the buttons undone fast enough. His impulse was just to rip the dress open, but he knew that she would fret about the cost and he would be impotent to replace it. Eventually, the buttons were undone to the waist and he peeled the dress aside so that he could feast his eyes on her wondrous breasts.

Breathing unevenly, he flung his head back, nostrils flared, eyes half-closed before cupping those breasts in his big hands and rubbing the pads of his thumbs over the distended, swollen

peaks of her large, circular nipples. He could have taken her right here, standing in the hallway, with her pressed up against the wall. Instead, he swept her off her feet and carried her into the front room where at his instigation, and with a great deal of persuasion, she had accepted the gift of an enormous sofa from him, big enough to take them both and essential, he had said, to cater for the times when they just couldn't make it to the bedroom. Which was often. He deposited her on the sofa now and stood up to remove his shirt.

Holly adored the hunger in his eyes. From the very beginning, unused to such naked desire, she had revelled in the way he made her feel: sexy, beautiful and very, very necessary. He went up in flames the second he touched her, he had told her, and she believed him because she could see the proof of it in his eyes. She pushed herself up and tugged down the zip of his trousers. His erection was big, bold and barely restrained by the boxers. She wriggled her hand to touch his arousal and he covered her hand with his and held it still.

'Don't,' he commanded in a strangled voice. 'Not unless you want to see me react like a horny teenager who has never had sex!'

Holly laughed and ignored him. The very first time they had made love, she had nervously wondered whether she had done all right. He was a man of infinite experience. She had known that the second he had trailed his finger along her cheek and down to her collarbone, watching her with a half-smile as she had

shivered and shuddered and wondered whether she was doing the right thing.

That had been on his third day of sharing the cottage with her. His curiosity about her had been thrilling and insistent. And she had been bowled over by his confidence, his easiness, his wit, his intelligence. She had been ripe for the taking and she had loved every second of it.

'Tell me,' he had murmured softly, washing away the dregs of her hesitation all that time back, 'What could be wrong about this?' And he had teased her body with a sexy, feathery touch until it had felt as though it would go up in flames. He had taken his time and she had been swept away on a tide of passion. There had been no chance of her finding anything to cling to, no chance of common sense pulling her back to safety. Every expectation she had ever had of a normal life with a normal guy doing normal things and progressing down a normal route had been turned on its head and she hadn't regretted any of it for a minute.

She was no longer insecure about touching him, not like that very first time. He made her feel wonderfully, deliciously needed. She touched his pulsating erection with the delicate tip of her tongue and he groaned and shuddered.

'I can't wait… Get your clothes off.' He watched feverishly as she wriggled out of the annoying dress and the lacy underwear. He had introduced her to that concept the very first time he had returned to see her, only days after he had left: lacy underwear to replace the sensible cotton briefs. She had made a token protest

but it hadn't lasted long. Even she could see how outrageously sexy the tiny bits of lace made her look. Sometimes, he would strip her down to that lacy underwear and tease her through the lace with his tongue until she was on fire for him.

That wouldn't be happening tonight. Not when he could barely keep a lid on his own uncontrolled libido.

She was divinely sexy lying on the bed with her hair rippling around her in waves of vanilla, caramel and gold. She let her legs drop open so that he could see the seductive details of her womanhood and he stilled in the process of pulling off his shirt when her fingers lightly touched herself. Her amazing eyes were half-closed but he knew that she was watching him, enjoying his reaction to what she was doing. He ripped the last two buttons of his shirt and subsided on the bed next to her.

'If you want to touch something…' He firmly guided her hand away from herself and back towards his erection. 'Then you can touch me!' He slid his fingers along her wetness and loved the feel of her moisture that made them slippery.

'We should be talking,' Holly whispered unevenly as insistent waves of pleasure began swelling inside her as he continued to stroke and rub between her legs.

'You'd be shocked if I didn't walk through that front door and grab you,' Luiz said with masculine satisfaction. 'You can't resist me.'

'You are *so* egotistic, Luiz Gomez!'

'Just reporting on what your body's telling me. Right now,

you're hot and wet and those are definitely not the signs of a woman who wants to talk…' To emphasise his point, he straddled her in one easy movement and, on cue, she arched back, offering her breasts to him and closing her eyes as he began the languorous process of exploring every inch of them.

He could spend hours teasing and playing with her breasts. He loved everything about them. He had long given up asking himself how he could ever have gone out with women who weren't as generously built as the woman who was now writhing underneath him.

Holly's breathing was fast and interspersed with small little moans of satisfaction as he licked and nibbled. She half-opened her eyes to gaze lovingly at his dark head. When he nudged at her with his erection, she slipped into a bubble of pure ecstasy, and as he thrust forcefully in she was swept away. Their bodies moved in perfect harmony. She was already so excited that she could feel her orgasm building as he continued to push into her but she had learned to hold off until she could feel them both at the same point.

It came quickly, then she let herself go. Her moans became cries until her mind and body parted company and she was no longer capable of thinking. She shuddered, raking her fingers along the length of his back and feeling the hardness of muscle and sinew under them. More than anything, she wanted to shout out how much she loved him but she held it in.

Ages ago he had told her about a woman he had been seeing, a

woman he had almost married whom he had believed was madly in love with him, only to find out that she had been stringing him along. He hadn't given any details and Holly had known not to press. She had kept a steady smile on her face while he had told her this story in passing. Who was she to demand explanations when she, too, had once fancied herself in love, only to realise that once the first flush had faded there was just not enough there to pull them through.

Now, of course, she could see that what she had felt at the time had been nothing. That said, instinct had told her that telling him how much she loved him might not be something he wanted to hear, even though they had now been seeing each other for so long that he must surely guess, just as she did.

He fell back next to her on the sofa and flung his hand over his face before turning on his side and pulling her against him.

'How do you do that?' Luiz murmured. 'How do you always manage to get me so worked up that I can't control myself?' He gave her a crooked smile and outlined her full mouth with his finger. Not only could she get him so worked up that he couldn't control himself, she also managed the impossible feat of making him want to take her all over again within moments of being sated. No woman had ever been able to do that, but then again no woman had ever been so utterly lacking in any kind of agenda. It was just perfect.

'Don't tell me I'm the first to do that.' Holly smiled back at him. She thought of that woman he had once been in love with,

the woman she had had no trouble tossing away in a cupboard at the back of her mind. Except now, with a bottle of wine growing steadily warmer outside, and talk of a future between them on the cards, that mysterious woman was demanding some attention. 'What about… you know, Clarissa… the woman you nearly married seven years ago.'

Luiz frowned and drew back to gaze down at her flushed face with a quizzical expression. He had no idea how he had been persuaded into telling her about Clarissa, his biggest mistake and valuable learning curve. But, then again, hadn't he told her a lot of things over time, from that very first moment when he had found himself confiding in her about his father and his feelings of grief that had blinded him to the dangers of the icy country lanes? The grief that had sent his car spinning out of control and landed him in her cottage and, not long after, in her bed. She occupied a special position, one which was far removed from his daily life and, as such, he had ended up telling her a hell of a lot more than he had ever told anyone else in his life.

But now she was smiling and asking about Clarissa and his antenna was picking up signals that were sending little threads of alarm through him. Although he was sure that he was just imagining that. He relaxed and held her close to him.

'Let's not go there.' He nuzzled the column of her neck and felt her shiver responsively. 'The past should never be raked up. What's the point?' He moved to kiss her lips, a long, gentle lingering kiss that did all those wonderfully familiar things to his

manhood. 'I don't ask you about your ex,' he pointed out.

'You don't have to.' For once, the feel of him against her and the rub of his arousal pushing to insert itself between her thighs was not enough to bring all her brain functions to a grinding halt. 'You know everything there is to know about him.'

'I don't understand where this is coming from.'

'I'm just curious. What was it about her that you fell in love with?'

Luiz pulled away and lay on his back in silence for a few seconds, hands clasped behind his head. 'It was just one of those relationships that didn't work out,' he said abruptly. 'I should go and have a shower.' He levered himself off the sofa with a twinge of regret. He would have liked to stay put, lost himself in her again, but he really wasn't interested in prolonging a conversation about Clarissa James.

When he had told her about Clarissa, it had been to assuage her curiosity about his unmarried status. Once bitten, twice shy, he had wryly concluded, having omitted most of the details of the relationship—notably the fact that Clarissa James had played him for a fool. He and Clarissa had gone out and she had been a breath of fresh air after his diet of elegant, eligible women. She had been wild, willing and, to start with at least, satisfyingly hard to get. By the time doubts had set in and Luiz had found himself ready to move on, she had declared herself pregnant.

The wild child with the tangle of gypsy-black hair and eccentric clothes that had always looked just right had somehow

morphed into a calculating woman who was in a position to call all the shots. It had just been a fortunate accident that he had discovered the stash of contraceptive pills buried in a compartment in her handbag. The packet that was one pill lighter every day for the seven days he had routinely checked.

She had played him for a fool and in the aftermath he had had to endure his family cautioning him about gold-diggers and his sisters gleefully thinking that they could arrange his private life to save him the bother of another mistake—not to mention friends and colleagues to whom he had given no explanation for the break-up, only to say what he had said to Holly, that it hadn't worked out. Doubtless they had drawn other, more elaborate conclusions for the sudden demise of the relationship.

'Why won't you talk about her?' Holly demanded. She sat up and reached down for her discarded underwear. For a few seconds she had the strangest sensation of being suddenly cast adrift on unknown waters. There was an edginess to the atmosphere that made her want just to keep quiet and go with the flow as she had done in the past, but something else was pushing her on to ask him the question that had been playing on her mind for the past couple of months: where were they going? What was the next step for them?

'Because there's nothing to talk about!' Back in his clothes, Luiz turned to see that she had also got into hers although she still had that tousled, thoroughly kissed look that could do things to his body.

‘Were you in love with her?’

Luiz paused. He felt as though he had taken a direct hit. The comfortable situation in which she was pleasantly deluded about his wealth, his power and the horror of how it could corrupt no longer felt quite so comfortable. Nor was it so easy to sidestep the reality that the piece of fiction which now lay between them like a gaping chasm wasn’t quite as harmless as he conveniently liked to pretend to himself.

‘It felt that way at the time,’ he grudgingly offered. ‘I was wrong.’

‘But it left a mark on you.’

‘Naturally. That’s the thing about bad experiences, they usually do. Now, are we going to spend the rest of the evening sitting here discussing something that’s not relevant or are we going to have some of that wine you tell me is waiting outside?’

‘It’ll be warm.’ Suddenly the wine and the crudités seemed a gauche introduction to the serious conversation she had planned. Plus, he just didn’t want to talk about Clarissa. He was very forthcoming about his family, about Brazil. He knew so much about so many things that he could debate pretty much anything —he could discuss theatre, opera and art, and he could make her laugh in a thousand ways. If there was ever anything on her mind, anything troubling her, he always knew how to sort it out.

He was physical in ways she could never have imagined and saw nothing wrong in getting his hands dirty helping out at the sanctuary. He listened to everything she said, and she knew that

she talked a lot. He probably knew more about her childhood and her background than the friends she had grown up with!

But there were dark areas to him that were practically impenetrable and she had hit one. She knew that even as he turned away and headed out towards the garden where the warm bottle of wine and the crudités, dried at the edges, were waiting for them.

'You're right. It's warm.' He grinned at her and decided that he would put that brief, awkward conversation somewhere safely out of mind. 'Let's scrap the wine and the… eh… sticks of celery and carrot.'

'Crudités,' Holly reluctantly grinned back at him and he gave her a swift hug and dropped a kiss on the corner of her mouth.

'Hmm. If you say so. I've bought you something; you can wear it to go out…' He dipped into his trouser pocket and extracted a small box. The bracelet had cost him thousands. He had chosen it himself. Naturally, he would assure her that it was just a trinket. It was the only way he could give her things and he liked giving her things. Maybe because she never asked for anything. She was neither materialistic, nor was she grasping, but then why would she be when she was clueless as to his financial worth?

'Wow.' The bracelet was studded with what could easily have passed for real diamonds. 'This is amazing, Luiz.' She held it up to the light and watched the way the gemstones caught the rays of the sun. 'You shouldn't have.'

'You say that every time I give you something.'

‘Yes, I know. And I keep telling you that there’s no need for you to bring me presents all the time. There must be loads of other stuff you need the money for. Living in London isn’t cheap…’ He had told her that he had a little place in a good enough location. She wasn’t entirely sure what ‘a good enough location’ was and how little his little place might be but, whatever it was and wherever it was located, it would still have cost a lot. Heaven only knew what his mortgage repayments were!

‘Let me worry about my finances,’ Luiz murmured, urging her back into the house. ‘And tell me where you would like to eat.’

‘There’s something in the oven,’ Holly told him breathlessly. Crudités were going to be followed by a casserole. She had followed a recipe. There would be candlelight and she would edge towards the questions she wanted to ask him in stages. She didn’t really know why she felt so timid about discussing their relationship. She just did. It was something he never discussed and his reticence on the subject was strangely infectious.

‘I thought we could eat here… talk a bit.’

‘Talk a bit?’ Luiz felt a stirring of unease. He had already diverted an awkward conversation about Clarissa. He hoped that there were no plans to return to the subject. Walking into the kitchen a step behind her, he noted that the table had been elaborately set. Usually, eating in was a casual exercise. Something quick was rustled up. There always seemed to be a lot of catching up to do even though he was accustomed to speaking to her during the week. Food was usually just a

necessary interruption.

'Talk about what?' he demanded.

Holly turned around and gazed at him equably. Underneath the calm exterior, however, she felt unaccountably nervous, and then for the first time ever a certain amount of resentment that she should be made to feel nervous about the prospect of having a perfectly natural conversation with the man she was in love with.

'Oh, about us.' She gave an unnaturally high laugh and turned away to pour them both a glass of cold wine from the fridge.

'We talk about us all the time.'

'No, we don't. I mean, we talk about the things we've been doing during the week, but we don't talk about us.' She fought past the sinking feeling she was getting at the closed expression on his face. Her legs felt a little wobbly and she sat down on the kitchen chair, clutching the wine glass.

'What is there to talk about?' Luiz was deliberately obtuse. The width of the table between them felt like a chasm. He had become accustomed to her soft, yielding personality. Everything about her was sweetly, generously feminine. She thought of him in a million little ways and he liked that. It was why similarly, he put himself out for her like he had never done for any other woman before. Right now, though, he had the disconcerting sensation that she was pulling away from him.

'I've never even seen your place,' Holly told him wistfully.

'You've never asked.' And he had never encouraged. How could he?

‘You know everything about me and I know so little about you.’

‘You know everything that’s of any importance.’

‘But you never talk to me about your job—your hopes and dreams for the future.’

‘The second I mention the word “computer” you glaze over, Holly. You’ve been known to state that they’re more trouble than they’re worth. Why would we waste time discussing them?’

‘I’m not saying that we talk about *computers*. I’m saying that you never mention the people you work with. What are they like? Are they fun? I bet the girls in your department are all in love with you…’ She laughed but a part of her wondered whether that was really the case. He was so stunning, so charismatic; how could anyone *not* fall in love with him?

‘Are you fishing for compliments?’ The table between them wasn’t a good idea. He needed to be able to touch her. He stood up and pulled a chair towards her so that he could sift his fingers through her long hair. ‘You are the only woman on my mind. I wouldn’t be able to describe any of the women I see at work, in the street or anywhere else, for that matter.’ Nor had he been tempted, once, to stray. Fidelity had never had such a hold over him.

‘I think of you all the time.’ He gently removed the glass from her hand so that he could tug her towards him and kiss her very gently on her mouth, taking his time. She didn’t protest when he undid those wretched buttons, this time not caring whether they

ripped or not. This, he thought, was more like it.

Think of me in terms of what? Holly wondered. As the woman he enjoyed having sex with? Or as the woman he saw sharing his life with for ever? And, if he thought of sharing his life with her for ever, then how was it that the future had never been a subject for discussion?

'There's no need to feel insecure on that front,' Luiz said huskily. He was getting more aroused by the second. How could she think, even for a minute, that he might look at other women when his responses to her were always so shamefully, glaringly obvious? He pushed her back into the chair and pulled down the top of the dress to look with unashamed, possessive satisfaction at breasts that were flushed from his caresses.

'I don't,' Holly said abruptly. Where was this edgy dissatisfaction coming from? She stood up, roughly buttoned the dress back up and ignored the throbbing between her legs that begged for his fingers, his mouth, the steel-hard length of his erection. 'I know you find me attractive…'

'More than attractive!' He narrowed his eyes on her back. She had turned away from him to begin the process of setting the food out. He wanted to know what she was thinking, although there was a part of him that was getting powerful vibes of discontent. That said, he was certain that he could smooth away all that discontent if only she would allow him. 'You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble.' He stood up, walked towards her and noted her infinitesimal shift away from him. 'Let me help.'

‘You can light the candles on the table.’ She thought of the crudités shrivelling on the patio outside and the conversation which had yet to get going. At least, get going in the way she had hopefully predicted.

Food on the table, she sat down with lowered eyes. ‘I guess what I’m saying is that we’ve been an item for well over a year now and I… I think I should be as involved in your life as you are in mine…’

‘Are you dissatisfied with the way I treat you?’

‘No, of course I’m not, and that’s not what I’m saying. You’ve met all the people who work with me and most of my friends as well. A few weeks ago, I had a party here and invited them all. I haven’t met any of yours.’ Her hand trembled as she helped herself to some of the casserole which she had spent hours getting just right but which now tasted of cardboard. The candles should have infused the room with a soft, romantic glow. Unfortunately, she felt anything but romantic.

‘Everything you’re saying points to the fact that you don’t think I’m treating you right, whatever you say to the contrary!’ Luiz glowered at her down-bent head. Was she determined to wreck the evening? he wondered. ‘And yet,’ he carried on with remorseless logic, ‘Can I remind you that when you developed a food bug after that party I took three days off so that I could stay here and look after you?’

‘And I’m really grateful that you did.’ The bug had cleared itself out of her system after twenty-four hours and the rest of

the time, she wanted to remind him, they had pretty much spent in bed, making love and leaving the running of the sanctuary to Andy and the other helpers. Luiz had had no qualms in announcing her bout of ill health to them and declaring that she would be off work for at least three days.

'And I would do it again!' he stated with an elaborately dismissive gesture designed to imply that he was the sort of big-hearted fellow capable of rising to any occasion. 'Proof enough of your importance in my life. Believe me when I tell you that mopping a woman's brow isn't something I've ever made a habit of!'

Holly allowed herself to relax a little because hearing that was reassuring. 'It's nice to hear that I'm important to you,' she said softly. 'I know you don't like talking about feelings… I guess a lot of men don't… so it really means a lot for you to say that. Because you're really important to me, Luiz.' She looked across at him with joyous, gleaming eyes. 'The past year and a half has been amazing. I suppose I'm beginning to wonder what the next step is.'

'The next step…?' Luiz felt that his brain was suddenly no longer functioning at its optimum level. His keen mental abilities seemed to have all the agility of a tortoise trudging through treacle.

'The sanctuary runs so well now that, for the first time in ages, I feel I can actually take time off without worrying that something awful might happen in my absence. The accounts are

overflowing; there are always animals being rescued, but there's also a long list of people waiting to adopt. I'd really like to see where you live, Luiz, see where you work, meet your friends and maybe… maybe even meet your family. You've told me so much about them, your sisters, your mum… I'd love to see where they live, and for the first time I really think I could take the time off.'

Her smile was beginning to fade at his lack of response. He looked, frankly, shell-shocked. Was she coming on too strong? She knew about his family, their personalities, but she didn't know the details of their lives. Were they poor? He had once told her that there was a great deal of poverty in Brazil. Did he think that she would mind?

'I mean,' she said hurriedly, back-tracking, 'We don't have to just yet. Brazil is an awfully long way away. But I could come down to London… meet some of your friends. I promise not to glaze over if they only want to talk about computers.'

Her voice faltered. Why wasn't he saying anything? Why did he look as though he had been bludgeoned with a sledgehammer? Didn't he realise that this was the normal progression of a relationship? Of course she knew that, after Clarissa, he had not had any meaningful relationships—in fact, from the sounds of it, he had been something of a womanizer—but they had been going out now for well over a year. Surely he must realise that they just couldn't keep drifting? She wasn't getting any younger. Many of her friends were now married; several had started families. Recently, one of the last of her unmarried pals had announced

her engagement.

‘I just need to know where we’re heading,’ she said, clearing her throat. ‘I just need a sign of commitment.’

CHAPTER THREE

OF COURSE IT was eventually going to come to this. Luiz could scarcely believe that they had arrived at this crossroads without him having foreseen the eventuality and taken the necessary precautions. He had never had any intention of indulging in a long-term relationship. He didn't do long-term relationships. But it was all too easy to see now how he had grown lazy after that first, momentous fabrication when he had played fast and loose with the truth of his identity. Without the need to defend himself against a possible gold-digger, he had drifted along and taken what was there for his own enjoyment.

Now her clear blue eyes were anxiously scrutinising his face, waiting for him to say something.

'Why?' Restless energy was pouring through him in disturbing waves and he raked his fingers through his dark hair, his mind travelling down all the angles the conversation could take and crashing into dead ends at each one of them.

'What do you mean *why?*' Holly asked, bewildered because as far as she was concerned she had raised a perfectly reasonable point. 'We've been going out for quite a while. I think I deserve to know where this is heading.' She wished he would stop pacing the room. The giddiness was back, accompanied now by slight feelings of nausea.

'Why does it have to head anywhere?' He paused to stand

in front of her. 'What we have is good. No, it's better than good—it's damn near perfect. Why ruin it with questions about commitment? Why try and box it in and give it a time limit? Who knows what's around the corner?'

'I *know* that,' Holly persevered. 'I *know* there are no guarantees, I *know* that no one knows what's round the corner. But that doesn't mean that I want to continue living in the moment with no thought of the future! I want to know how this is going to *progress* and I don't think I'm being unfair, you know, having this conversation with you. Have I told you that Claire is engaged? Remember Claire—the one with the red hair and the gap between her teeth? You met her at the party…'

'Yes, I remember her.' Loud, extrovert, with a boyfriend who had trailed timidly behind her, fetching drinks and nibbles and making no effort to restrain his girlfriend. Thinking about it, she now struck Luiz as just the sort of subversive woman who would goad Holly into any manner of rebellious thoughts. 'Has she been telling you things? Implying that you can't be happy because there's no diamond ring on your finger? I'm surprised and disappointed that you would allow someone to dictate to you how you should or shouldn't feel!'

'Claire hasn't said anything of the sort to me!' Two bright patches of colour had appeared on her cheeks. One simple question; she had just asked him to clarify where they were going as a couple and he couldn't even bring himself to answer the question directly. Instead, he was happy to imply that she was

so stupid and so impressionable that someone else could tell her how she should be feeling!

'Because your friend is engaged doesn't mean that you should be, too.'

'I'm not talking about getting *engaged*…' Although, wasn't it true that ever since their relationship had started she had only seen a future with Luiz in it? She had never daydreamed about a great diamond rock on her finger. But when she thought about the winter coming, and the one after that and the one after that, she had a vision of Luiz right there by her side, helping out as he always did. In her mind, her future was inexorably wrapped up with his and she knew that she had been guilty of assuming that he felt the same way, even if he didn't exactly vocalise it.

'Are you happy with me?' Luiz demanded.

'Of course I am!'

'Then what's the problem?' He felt like someone swimming upstream against a very strong current and he didn't care for the sensation. He liked to be in control. It occurred to him that he had distinctly lacked control when he had allowed this relationship to meander through the weeks and months. He had been instantly attracted to her when she had rescued him after his car crash. He had certainly planned on getting her into bed. He had never played with the possibility that a little time out—a few days of harmless pretence, of letting go of the persona he was compelled to be on a daily basis and all the stresses that came with it—would end up lasting over a year.

The thing to do would be to start thinking clearly and regaining some of that lost control. The obvious solution would be to walk away. He certainly had no intention of encouraging anyone to start thinking in terms of diamond rings, churches and flower girls, however good the sex as between them. No way.

He especially would not be going down that route with a woman who was, frankly, as poor as a church mouse. She might be disingenuous charm itself as long as she believed him to be little more than another one of life's hard workers who saved up to pay the mortgage and grab an annual holiday somewhere cheap and cheerful. But how different would she have been had she known the extent of his wealth? He had been conned once and he had vowed never to allow that situation to happen again.

Step one in the preventative stakes was to ensure that any lifetime partner—and there certainly wouldn't be one on the horizon in the foreseeable future—would be able to match his wealth. He would only ever marry a woman who didn't have anything to gain in the financial stakes by marrying him.

Holly George was just not suitable. She had raised an issue and the only way to deal with it would be to dispose of her. It sounded heartless, but in the end he would be doing her a favour. If the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow was marriage, then she wasn't going to get the pot of gold from him, and it was kinder to let her go now. When it came to handling the reins of a relationship, *any* relationship, he was the one in control.

Holly turned away and began walking towards the sitting

room. Her heart was beating very fast. She just couldn't believe that this conversation was taking place. She had been so secure in their relationship. Had love blinded her to the very real possibility that what he felt for her was nothing more than lust? She couldn't credit that! Lust became eroded over time, lost its urgency… What they had had just got better and better, deeper and deeper, at least as far as she was concerned…

Luiz watched her leave the kitchen and he wanted to throw things, or at the very least haul her back into his arms and make love to her until her questions had been put to rest. He had become accustomed to her smiling, upbeat, eternally optimistic nature. He was used to her glorious, uninhibited chatter. He luxuriated in the company of someone who didn't feel as though she ought to be impressing him. Now, he felt like a monster responsible for draining all the sunshine and light out of her. He had to remind himself that there was nothing he could do to alter the situation and to offer her anything beyond his remit would be to make matters worse in the long run.

'So what are you telling me?' Holly was standing by the bay window, arms folded, every inch of her body radiating tension. 'Are you telling me that what we have isn't going anywhere? Is *never* going to go anywhere? Because if that's the case then I don't see any point to us carrying on. I don't want to be in a relationship where we just drift along until one of us gets bored and decides to call it a day.'

She could hardly breathe. Her chest felt tight. How could he

just stand there, looking at her with an inscrutable expression, not saying anything? A treacherous little voice whispered that perhaps she should have left well alone and not said anything, but as soon as the thought flitted through her head Holly knew that she had had to say what was on her mind. She had been feeling strangely emotional over the past few weeks. Holding things in would only exacerbate those heightened emotions.

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