THE Sicilian's WIFE

KATE WALKER

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Kate Walker

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“If that was all I ever wanted I could have asked a dozen women—more—to marry me over the years, but I did not.”

“Why didn’t you ask them?” she managed, knowing that it was what he wanted her to say. Cesare’s smile was slow, almost benign, but there was something in his eyes that stopped it from being the tender response it appeared.

“They didn’t offer me what I wanted,” he said with a deliberate softness.

“And that was…?” she whispered, and watched his smile grow into a wicked grin.

“This…”

She barely had time to catch her breath before his mouth came down on hers, but it was with an unexpected gentleness that seemed to draw out her soul, take it away from her and hold it captive. And in that moment she knew that she was lost. Knew that no matter how hard she tried to convince herself, there was no way in the world that she was over Cesare Santorino.

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CHAPTER ONE

TONIGHT he was going to ask her.

The words were clear and definite inside Cesare's head, voicing the resolve he had held to for years now.

He had been waiting for this day for ever it seemed. Six long years. Too long. It had been a wait that had tried all his patience, straining it to breaking point at times. But tonight the waiting had come to an end. Tonight Megan was going to be his.

The sound of the doorbell ringing through the house jolted him slightly, making him grimace wryly as he snatched his finger off hastily. He was risking sounding more like the police arriving with a warrant for someone's arrest rather than a would-be lover who had waited longer then he could bear for the woman he wanted more than any other.

'Mr Santorino!'

The housekeeper sounded flustered and confused as well she might, Cesare reflected ruefully. Normally his visits were well prepared for, notice given of his arrival long in advance. He was an honoured guest in this house, welcomed as a friend as well as a business colleague, so his arrival like this was not only out of the blue, it was also totally out of character.

'We weren't expecting you. Mr Ellis didn't say…'

'No…'

One lean brown hand came up to cut off her words, brushing

aside her nervously apologetic explanation.

'He would not have said, because he didn't know. I didn't tell him I was coming to England, or that I was likely to call.'

'But…'

Mrs Moore took a small step backwards, obviously feeling that she should invite him in, then hesitated again.

'I'm afraid Mr Ellis isn't here. He's visiting relatives in Scotland. There's only Miss Megan…'

'Ah, so Megan is home, is she?'

He was pleased with the tone he managed to use; glad to hear that he sounded both disinterested and faintly surprised. Hearing him, no one would have thought that his visit here tonight had been calculated for just this effect. That he had come to England knowing that Tom was away, and that his only daughter was in the house on her own.

'I take it she's back from university now then is she?'

'That's right. Finished her degree and everything. She got back at the weekend—on her own, surprisingly.'

'On her own?'

No. That question had been too sharp, betraying too much of an interest and a degree of shock than was wise.

'Yes, I thought she'd bring the boyfriend with her.'

Belatedly, the housekeeper realised that keeping her employer's friend standing on the doorstep was not the most polite approach. Mrs Moore moved further back into the wide, tiled hallway.

‘Won’t you come inside, sir? I’m sure Miss Megan would be delighted to see you.’

Privately, Cesare took the liberty of doubting that she would be any such thing. The way he and Megan had parted the last time he had seen her, at a New Year party given by her father, he had little hope that ‘delighted’ would describe her reaction to him now. When he had resolved on this visit, he had had every confidence that he could soon overcome any initial resistance, but the mention of a boyfriend was an unexpected complication, one he should have forseen but, foolishly, had not.

‘I’ll tell her you’re here…’

‘No!’

Idiota! He reproved himself inwardly at the realisation that once again he had almost given himself away. That ‘No’ had been too quick, the lapse into his native Italian giving too much away.

Hastily he switched on a covering smile, fixing his deep brown eyes on the housekeeper’s face. It was a calculated move, one that had melted far harder hearts than hers in the past, and it had exactly the effect he wanted now.

‘Don’t announce me. I’d like to do it myself—give her a surprise.’

‘Of course. She’s in the library.’

Mrs Moore waved a hand in the direction of a door at the far end of the hall.

‘I’m sure she’ll be glad to see you. If you want my opinion she’s a little run down at the moment—far too pale and thin for my

liking. She's probably been burning the candle at both ends and not eating properly.'

'Probably.'

It was a struggle to contain his impatience. Would the woman never go?

At last she seemed to realise that he was anxious to move and turned in the direction of the kitchen. But then just as Cesare felt some of the tension that held his muscles taut start to ease she hesitated and turned back again.

'Should I bring in some coffee? A cold drink?'

'I'll ring if we need anything.'

It was the tone he adopted with difficult employees. One that demanded instant, unquestioning obedience—and always got it. It worked this time too. The housekeeper nodded, made a small, awkward movement, almost as if she was coming close to bobbing a respectful curtsey, then turned and trotted away, her heels clicking in the silent hall.

At last!

Cesare gave a deep sigh of relief as he pushed both his hands through his jet-black hair. It was almost as if the housekeeper had sensed his intent, the reason why he was here tonight, and had set herself up as the moral guardian of the daughter of the house, the defender of Megan's honour, against the dark intrusive force of a sexually mature male.

His beautifully curved mouth twisted slightly cynically as he shut the door quietly. He didn't want to alert Megan to his

presence. Wanted to come up on her unawares. And it wasn't her honour he wanted to steal. It was her heart.

Megan had heard the doorbell some time earlier but had decided to ignore it. If it was important then Mrs Moore would come and fetch her. If it wasn't, then the housekeeper could deal with it. The older woman knew much more about her father's daily life than she did since she had been away at university. And besides, she wasn't in the mood for company.

'What am I going to do?'

Sighing, she pushed aside the sleek fall of her auburn hair and propped her chin on her hands, elbows resting on the table at which she sat. A book lay open in front of her, one she had been making a pretence at reading. But it had been simply for something to do, and her mossy-green eyes had been left so unfocused by tears that the words on the pages danced in front of her vision in a totally incomprehensible blur.

'What am I going to do?'

She had asked the question of herself again and again more times than she cared to remember, but there had never been a hope of an answer in her mind. She didn't know what to do, or where to turn next.

'Megan?'

The sound of the door opening jolted her head up, but it was the figure who appeared in the doorway, tall, dark and devastating that had her blinking in stunned disbelief, unable to believe that she was seeing correctly.

‘Cesare?’

Her heart gave one violent, breath-snatching thud against her ribcage, leaving her gasping in shock. Cesare Santorino was the last person she had expected to see here tonight. The last person she wanted to see as well.

But that didn’t stop her foolish emotions going into overdrive simply to see him.

She had once adored every inch of this man’s tall, rangy body, dreamed of losing herself in his arms, of drowning in the deep, molten bronze of his eyes. The image of his forcefully carved features had etched itself into her memory, so that for many nights the last thought in her mind as she drifted asleep had been of the slash of high, slanting cheekbones, the shockingly sensual curve of his wide mouth, the hard strength of his jaw and chin.

‘What are you doing here?’

To her annoyance, her voice came and went like a badly tuned radio and she had to fight to get it under control. It was just the way she was feeling, she told herself angrily. Just the low mood that had already affected her so badly. Nothing more.

She was over Cesare, had been over him for months; ever since that disastrous party at New Year when he had humiliated her so badly. Before then she had worshipped the ground he walked on, but that night he had taken her devotion, her pride, and trampled it underneath his beautifully polished, handmade leather shoes.

‘If you want to see my dad, then he’s not here…’

‘I know,’ Cesare cut in sharply, a faint frown drawing his dark

straight brows together. ‘It was you I came to see.’

‘Me?’

That frown, and something in the intonation of his lyrically accented voice set her nerves on edge, raising the tiny hairs on the back of her neck in wary apprehension. She was suddenly painfully aware of the blurred marks of tears on her cheeks, only roughly scrubbed away with the back of her hand.

‘What did you want me for?’

She got to her feet as she spoke, moving away from the direct light of the window, into a more shadowy part of the room.

‘I didn’t think you ever wanted to speak to me again.’

‘Why ever not?’ Infuriatingly it was touched with a thread of amusement that scraped over her skin.

‘You made it plain that you didn’t want to waste your time with me.’

His slow, sexy smile did terrible things to what little composure she had left, making her feel as if a powerful cord was tightening around her heart and tugging hard.

‘Oh, Megan, cara, you weren’t in any fit state to spend time with anyone—waste or not.’

‘I’d had a glass or two of champagne!’

But what she was never going to admit was that it had not been the sparkling wine that had intoxicated her, but the sheer impact of his presence, lethally elegant and stunning in the stark black and white of traditional evening wear.

‘Or three, or four…’ Cesare returned drily. ‘And the problem

was that you were hellishly enticing in your tiddly state. Do you have any idea just how sweetly seductive you looked in that slip of a dress?'

'Sweetly…' Megan echoed, totally bemused.

Had he really said what she thought he had said? Had he really used the words enticing and seductive to describe her? Even through the haze of misery that clouded her thoughts, the words touched something in her. Something that she had believed was long since dead. Something that still lingered in the heart she was sure she had armoured against him after that last, humiliating, public rejection of her.

'You're kidding!'

'Not at all.'

Cesare shook his dark head, moving at last, strolling into the room with the lithe ease of a hunting cat, letting the door swing to silently behind him.

'It was all that I could do to keep my hands off you.'

The only response that Megan could manage was a loud, unladylike snort, vividly expressing her cynical opinion of that comment.

'Oh sure! You had such a struggle that you put me aside as if just touching me might contaminate you. And then you…then you ignored me for the rest of the night. No?'

She blinked in confusion as Cesare shook his dark head.

'No,' he stated flatly. 'There was no way I could ignore you, no matter how I tried. I've never been able to ignore you. Not

from the moment you bounced into my life as a pretty thirteen-year-old, the first time I ever visited this house. I couldn't take my eyes off you then, and I've never been able to since.'

He still couldn't. If she was in a room, there was only one direction in which his eyes would be drawn. She was like some vivid, bright spark, burning so brilliantly that it almost blinded him. And the hardest thing had been that he could never admit to it; never reveal the way he felt.

Until now.

And she was so much more lovely now; the beauty that had promised as an adolescent becoming reality in the young woman who stood before him. She had hair like the burnished leaves of a copper beech tree, eyes like the deepest, mossy pools above the finest cheekbones he had ever seen. Tall and slender, she was curved in all the right places that declared her femininity, and her skin had the smooth softness of a peach so that his fingers itched to touch it.

But he had given his promise to her father, and had sworn to abide by it until the date of her twenty-second birthday set him free.

'You're kidding!'

'I would never joke about something like this.'

'Cesare…'

Megan shook her head in bemusement. This couldn't be happening! Nothing he was saying seemed as if it could possibly be true. And the worst, the bitterest irony, was that these words

were the ones she had always dreamed of hearing him say. Dreamed, but known that those dreams would never become reality.

She had had the world's greatest crush on this man since she had been in her teens. But he was eight years older than her, a sophisticated, cosmopolitan businessman, the owner of the huge corporation of which her father's firm was just one microscopic, unimportant component. Men like Cesare Santorino didn't take any notice of girls like her.

'Stop messing—don't tease me like this.'

'What makes you think that I'm teasing?'

Looking into his dark, inscrutable face, she could almost believe that he meant it. There was no trace of amusement in those burning eyes, no hint of a smile on the sensual mouth.

'But you have to be…'

Again his proud head moved in denial of her protest.

'No, cara. There is no "have to be" about this. I am telling the absolute truth.'

'You can't be…'

All the strength went from her legs and she dropped down into the nearest chair, unable to keep upright any longer. And at least this way she could put some distance between them.

'I don't believe you!'

'Believe it!'

Oh, this was worse than ever! Bending down, he had placed both strong-fingered hands on the arms of the chair, one on

either side of her. Imprisoned in the cage made by them and his powerful body, the wall of his chest in the immaculate white shirt a solid barrier between her and escape, she could look nowhere but into the smouldering bronze of his eyes.

And suddenly she was reminded of the volcano Etna on his native island of Sicily. The burn of his eyes made her think of the molten lava that had poured down the mountain's sides, scorching everything in its path. She felt as if his gaze had just the same heated power, searing over the delicacy of the exposed skin of her face and neck.

He was so close that she could smell the clean scent of his body, mixed with the tang of some citrus cologne, light and invigorating—and painfully stimulating to her already overwrought nerves. Her heart was thudding in double-quick time, her breath coming raw and uneven.

'Don't do this to me! Not now! What is this, Cesare—some sort of twisted little game? Do you get some fun out of tormenting me, lying to me? Because—'

'Would it help if I swore I am not lying now—but that I had lied in the past?'

'Lied?'

It seemed that with every word he spoke the situation got stranger and stranger, more complicated and tangled, impossible to sort out. It was as if the Cesare Santorino that she had thought she knew had been taken away and someone new and totally alien had been put in his place.

‘When did you lie to me?’

Her mouth had dried painfully and the words came out on an embarrassing croak.

‘When I said I wasn’t interested in you. When I acted as if you bored me. When I—’

‘No—stop it—no, no, no!’

Megan flung her hands up to cover her ears and then rapidly moved them so that they covered her face.

‘Stop it!’ she muttered into the protection of her concealing fingers. ‘This isn’t fair!’

This time last year—on her twenty-first birthday—she would have been overjoyed to hear those words. At Christmas, and even more at that dreadful New Year party, they would have set her heart dancing for joy, made her spirits sing. But now it was too late.

Then she couldn’t think of anything that could have been better. Now she couldn’t think of anything worse. Because if anything Cesare claimed was the truth in any way, then it very soon wouldn’t be when he found out…

‘Stop it!’ she repeated more fiercely this time.

‘Mi dispiace—I am sorry.’

He’d moved too fast, Cesare told himself reproachfully. Impatience had always been a fault of his and this time he’d rushed right in when he would have done so much better to take things slowly.

He had promised himself he would take things slowly. But in

the moment that he'd walked into the library and seen Megan in the flesh for the first time in over six months all his control had deserted him. He had struggled to hold on to that control for over six years now, and he hadn't been able to do so any longer.

'Forgive me Megan…'

His tone was so rough, so unbelievably raw with some emotion that it forced Megan to lower her protective hands, gazing up at him in shock and bewilderment.

And that bewilderment struck at Cesare like a reproach.

'Forgive me…' he said again, lifting his hands swiftly from the chair arms and flinging them up and out in a supremely Italian gesture of surrender.

'You are right. I was in the wrong to tease you—wrong and cruel. I should never have done it.'

It was only what she had expected, Megan told herself dully as she watched him swing away from her and prowl moodily across the wide, polished wooden floor, his shoulders hunched, hands pushed deep into the pockets of his trousers. She had known all along that he wasn't telling the truth. That he was just tormenting her as he had done when she was little more than a child, and he had been a sophisticated twenty-two year old.

Then he had mocked her starry-eyed hero-worship of him playing on it mercilessly to have her fetching and carrying for him, taking advantage of her keenness to perform any tiny task she could for the object of her devotion. And now it seemed that he was doing it again.

It was only what she had expected but, right now, with the worry that was always there, just below the surface of her mind, nagging at her and throwing her into total confusion about what she should do, his teasing seemed so much worse.

It hurt. It hurt terribly, adding another layer to the pain of the way Gary had behaved, and the consequences of that behaviour until her head swum sickeningly, and she was unable to think straight.

'It's all right,' she managed stiffly. 'After all, it's only what I'd expect from you. But now that you've had your fun, would you mind leaving?'

With an effort she brought her chin up, forced her green eyes to meet his dark gaze defiantly.

'I'd prefer to be alone.'

'Fun?'

He didn't seem to have heard the last comment or, if he had, he was deliberately ignoring it.

'Fun!'

Shock roughed his voice, stopped his restless prowling.

'You think that this is just un divertimento? That I am playing with you?'

'Well, isn't it?' Her chin lifted a little higher. 'What else could it be?' she challenged.

'La verita!' Cesare shot back, his tone like the crack of a gun. 'The truth!'

'The truth! Oh come on! Don't…don't…'

To her horror, her voice began to tremble, so that she stumbled over the words she wanted. It was too much. Too cruel. He'd taken his joke too far. And she was in no fit state to be able to cope with this new, sophisticated form of emotional torture.

'Don't do this to me!' she wailed, her voice high and tight.

The pain in her words was like a blow to his face, making him freeze into stillness, eyes narrowing sharply. Something was very wrong here. Something much more than any distress at his heavy-handed teasing.

'What is it?' he asked. 'What's wrong?'

And then, when she could only shake her head in mute, numb misery, he came close—closer—one warm strong hand sliding under her chin and lifting her face to meet his brown-eyed scrutiny.

Her cheeks were wet with tears. Tears that had trickled down her face, dripping off her chin. And more were welling up inside her eyes, making the deep green glisten like polished gemstones.

'Carina, why are you crying? Meggie…'

Unthinkingly, the word slid past his lips, using the long ago nickname she had had as a child.

'Tell me what's wrong.'

It was the name that did it. If he hadn't said 'Meggie…' in quite that way. If he hadn't used that once familiar, now rarely spoken, nickname, the name only those closest and dearest to her had used in the past, then she might have been able to resist it.

But he had said 'Meggie,' and both his voice and his expression

had softened on the word. Just for a moment he had pushed aside time and had taken her back to the days when life had been sweet, idyllic, uncomplicated. The perfect bliss of a summer when the sun had always seemed to be shining, and nothing could possibly go wrong.

Days when she had still held on to a dream that one day this man would love her. That somewhere, stretching ahead of her, lay a bright and wonderful future, filled with happy ever after. A future that now was totally beyond her reach.

And suddenly she knew, totally and irredeemably, without a hope of any other possibility, that she was going to tell him the whole sorry story.

CHAPTER TWO

'MEGGIE—tell me!'

This time, Cesare's use of the childish nickname was far from gentle. Her hesitation, the seconds she had spent hunting for the right words to tell him what was on her mind, had pushed him to the limits of his patience in a very short space of time. He was barely keeping hold of his tenuous grip on his temper, and the way the words hissed through his teeth made that plain.

'Just what is the problem? I need to know.'

It was the impatience in his tone that caught on Megan's tongue and held it immobile, unable to speak a word. That and the way that, towering over her, big, dark and dangerously imposing, a severe frown drawing together the black arcs of his brows, Cesare had reverted to the man she had known—and feared—as an adolescent. Then he had been able to strike her dumb simply by walking into a room, and any attempt to answer one of the occasional questions he arrogantly tossed her way had reduced her to a mumbling, stammering, red-faced heap of embarrassment totally unlike her normally reasonable, sensibly functioning self.

And that was just what he did to her now.

'Megan…'

This time her name had a note of warning in it. One that only made matters so much worse. She could only shake her head

despairingly, unable to find any words with which to answer him.

'Is it your father? Are you worried about the problems he's having with the company?'

'He told you about that?' Shock released her tongue, pushed the words from her mouth.

'Of course he told me—I am a friend after all.'

'Did he ask you to help him—to bail him out? And you agreed?'

Some degree of strength was returning to her limbs now, and her brain seemed to be functioning with just a degree or two of clarity. If he was prepared to help her father, save Tom Ellis from the almost inevitable bankruptcy that was now staring him in the face, then at least one of her worries would be eased.

'You said you'll lend him what he needs?'

The change in Cesare's face gave her the answer without a word having been spoken. The dark, carved features seemed to close up; the burnt-coffee-coloured eyes clouding as they met the urgent entreaty in hers. He had moved away from her mentally before he stepped back physically, withdrawing into himself in the space of a couple of heartbeats.

'No,' he said softly. 'I did not.'

'You did not!' Megan repeated, unable to believe what she had heard. 'You said no! I don't believe—'

'Believe it!' Cesare cut in sharply, not liking this direction the conversation had taken. 'Your father told me of his problems. Regrettably…'

‘Regrettably… Oh, yes, I just bet you regretted it.’

The cynicism in Megan’s voice, the way it twisted at her mouth, dulled her eyes, made him wince. He wouldn’t have hurt her this way if he could have helped it.

‘You could have afforded it! The amount he needed would have been just a drop in the ocean compared with the fortune you possess! Why, you must make that much or more in just a year or so!’

Megan had got to her feet now and was coming towards him furiously. The anger that sparked in the depths of her eyes actually made him take a step or two backwards, away from her.

‘Yes, I could have afforded it.’

‘And you weren’t prepared to do so! I thought you were his friend!’

‘I am. Dannazione, Megan, you know I am!’

The haughty toss of her head dismissed his words with supreme contempt, green flames flaring in the angry eyes that blazed into his.

‘Some sort of friend that wouldn’t help him when he most needed you!’

Cesare could not hold back an impatient sigh as he raked both hands through the midnight-dark strands of his hair. He had hoped to have this conversation later—much, much later when things would have had a very different sort of perspective.

‘Meggie,’ he remonstrated as calmly as possible, ‘it wouldn’t have done any good. Your father understands that.’

‘Well, I don’t! I think you’re going to have to explain it for those of us who aren’t blessed with your near-genius financial ability. And don’t “Meggie” me! I might have let you call me that when I was growing up, but I’m no longer a child. I’m a woman of twenty-two, with three years at university and a degree behind me. I’ve done a lot of maturing lately!’

‘You certainly have.’

Dark-chocolate eyes skimmed over her slender figure in the close-fitting jeans and T-shirt, lingering appreciatively on the high curves of her breasts in a way that made Megan think unwillingly of the changes she had sensed in her body over the last week or so.

‘My name is Megan and I’ll thank you to remember that!’

‘Of course.’

His smile at her outrage was wry, and the small, sideways inclination of his head in acknowledgement of her outburst seemed to make a mockery of the apparent gesture of submission.

‘Are you laughing at me?’ Megan demanded suspiciously.

‘Would I dare?’ he returned drily, the lift of humour in his voice, the hint of a gleam in his eyes, tugging at something in her heart.

The man was too damned attractive for his own good, she told herself furiously—furiously because she didn’t want to find anything in him appealing right now. Once she had thought him the most delicious, the most devastating man in the world, but

not any more. Especially not now! Though when he smiled like that…

Hastily she caught herself up, cursing her wandering mind. Such thoughts were dangerous, weakening her when she most needed to be strong.

'My father might understand, but I certainly don't! Would you care to explain?'

No, Cesare answered in the privacy of his thoughts. No, I would definitely not care to explain. Once more he was caught by the way he had given his word to Tom Ellis. The older man was proud to the point of stupidity. Even to rescue his company he couldn't take a hand-out from his friend—but his son-in-law was a different matter.

'If Meggie marries you,' he'd said, 'then I'll take your money. It will be a family matter then. But not otherwise.'

Tom had demanded that this deal was to be a secret between the two of them and, knowing it was the only way his stubborn friend would take his help, he had been forced to agree. But his loyalty to Tom was being worn away by his feelings for the woman in front of him.

Did she know how it twisted a knife in his heart when she had looked at him, first with that entreaty in her eyes, and then with the scorn that had replaced it? And what made it so much worse was the instinctive, very basic way that his body reacted simply to being in the same room as her. Every sense was on heated red-alert, his pulse throbbing heavily in his veins. Since

the moment he had walked into the room to find her sitting in the shadows, he had been fighting the impulse to grab her and kiss her, plundering her mouth with the force of the hunger that had him in its grip.

But to act on that impulse would be the most stupid behaviour he could come up with. At best, it would annoy and alienate her. At worst, it would drive her right away from him, send her screaming from the room. With a violent struggle he pushed the uncomfortable feelings back down inside himself, stamping on them hard.

'Cesare…' Megan's tone was a warning. 'Explain!'

'Your father's in a very tricky situation,' he began carefully. 'The state of the markets has just about destroyed the value of his investments—and the company's been having problems too.'

'So why wouldn't you help him?'

'I'm not in the business of buying up failing concerns! If word got about that I'd done it for one, then next moment I'd have thousands of lame dogs at my door, looking for a rescue deal—a hand-out!'

Pushed to the limit by the reproach in her voice, Cesare flung the words at her then almost immediately wished them back as he saw her recoil in distaste at his outburst. For perhaps the millionth time he cursed the promises to Tom Ellis that tied him down, making him feel like an angry, frustrated fly caught in the imprisoning, sticky threads of a huge spider's web.

'It isn't sound business sense, Megan.' But for Tom he would

do it. If he got the chance.

'Oh, and we must always put "business sense" first!' Megan flung back bitterly.

'I wouldn't have got where I am unless I had.'

'No—you wouldn't. But now that you are where you are, you seem to have lost all sense of caring about the smaller man. You used to have more charity than this, Cesare!'

'It wouldn't help!'

Stung beyond endurance, Cesare couldn't hold back any longer. His conscience only added to the feeling of mental discomfort, giving him another reproachful twist as he saw her flinch as if he had slapped her in the face.

'Your father's in too deep—and he knows it! He couldn't manage another loan—he owes too much already to too many people.'

Her silence betrayed the depth of her shock, and his spirits, already low, sank right to rock-bottom. This wasn't how this had been supposed to go. But from the moment he had walked into the library nothing had followed the path he had expected.

'It—it's that bad?'

Megan felt as if there were a thousand angrily buzzing bees swarming inside her head, making it swim unpleasantly so that rational thought was impossible.

'Cesare—are you telling me that—he's ruined?'

He didn't have to spell it out. It was there in his face, etching lines around the stunning eyes, the beautiful mouth.

‘Oh, no!’

Her legs went from under her, threatening to send her crashing to the floor but, even as she sagged weakly, Cesare had moved, coming to her side with the swift, instinctive reflex action of a hunting tiger. Powerful arms folded round her, enclosing and supporting her, holding her close as one hand fluttered in a weak gesture of supplication.

‘It’s all right, carina.’ His voice was rough, sounding husky in her ear. ‘I have you safe. I won’t let you fall.’

Safe, Megan thought hazily, the single word, the only one that would register in her clouded thoughts. Yes, here, at last, she felt safe. For the first time in six long, unhappy weeks, she felt something other than lost and afraid and alone. It seemed as if Cesare’s strength flowed along his arms and into her through the strong-fingered hands that clasped her around her waist.

The heat of his body surrounded her, the clean, musky scent of his skin reaching her nostrils, making her want to inhale deeply, as if to draw in more of him that way. The urge to lean on him even more was irresistible, her head feeling too heavy for her neck to support. Giving in to the impulse, she let her head drop down onto his shoulder, feeling the hard bone, the taut muscle provide the perfect, much needed rest.

‘Oh, Cesare…’ she sighed, abandoning herself to the luxury of giving in to a moment of weakness.

‘Megan…’

His voice was unexpectedly gruff and tight. Her heart thudded

in time with his breathing, the sound of his own pulse under her cheek providing an echo, beat for beat. Again Megan sighed, nestling closer, turning her head so that her mouth was close to the smooth, bronzed skin of his neck.

'Megan…'

This time there was a note of what seemed like warning in his use of her name, but she was too comfortable, too relaxed to heed it. For the first time since she had left Lancaster and travelled back to London at the end of her university life, she felt as if she had truly come home. As if she was where she wanted to be. Where she had always been meant to be.

The heavy throb of Cesare's heart gave a sudden jolt then lurched into a new and faster beat and she felt her own pulse quicken in response. Her breathing became faster too, shallower, uneven, until it was rasping in and out of her lungs like liquid fire.

'Cesare…'

She tried for his name but the heat inside her had dried her throat so that the single word came out on a raw, uneven croak. Her lips were parched and as she licked them nervously to ease the uncomfortable sensation she felt the faint adjustment of his head, knew even before she opened her eyes that he was looking down at her and that he had caught the small, betraying movement.

Her eyelids felt unnaturally heavy and swollen so that it was an effort to lift them and meet his gaze. But in the second that she managed it and looked straight into the dark unblinking force of

his stare, she was caught and held transfixed, like a rabbit in the oncoming glare of a car's headlights.

And she didn't want to move. Instead she waited, outwardly patient, but inwardly fizzing with anticipation and excitement. Waited, knowing that this was a moment she had been moving towards all her life. One that she had dreamed would come, then feared she had missed out on altogether, but which now she knew was as inevitable as her next breath, the beat of her heart.

'Megan…' Cesare began again in a voice that was thick and raw and sounded quite unlike the controlled, sophisticated man she had always known. 'I think I'm going to have to kiss you.'

'I know…'

'I am sorry if you—you know?'

'Mmm.'

Megan nodded slightly, feeling the brush of the soft cotton of his shirt against her cheek, the warmth of his skin burning through it.

'I know. And do you know something?'

Her mouth quirked up at the corners into a mischievous pixie-like smile.

'I'm going to have to let you—'

The words were smothered, crushed back down her throat, as his mouth covered hers. With a rough, jerky movement, he swung her round in front of him, his hands coming up to the back of her head, shaping themselves round the fine bones of her skull, holding her close, crushing her face up against his. It was

the wildest, most passionate kiss of her life, one that drove her breath away, made her head spin, set her heart pounding.

Her own arms went up around his neck, fingers twisting and tangling in the black silk of his hair, keeping him still when he would have moved away. Her whole body was suffused with a heat that was more primitive, more basic, more pagan, than the simple effect of feeling the hard, hot length of him against her. She was on fire with delight, with hunger, with need, her hands moving lower, clutching, clinging, stroking. She was unable to get enough of him, unable to touch enough of him all at once.

'Madre di Dio!' Cesare muttered against her lips, snatching in a quick, raw breath as best he could without actually moving away. 'Oh, Megan, Megan…'

'Did you know, I love the way you say my name?'

Megan's response was breathless too, shaking on an edge of near-laughter.

'Maygan…Maygan,' she echoed his pronunciation deliberately. 'It sounds something special, something much more exotic and sensual than plain, ordinary Megan Ellis could ever be.'

'No! Never say that.'

Cesare shook his dark head in reproof, laying one long finger across her lips to silence her.

'Never say the words plain and ordinary in the same sentence as your name. The two things should never be linked together. You are not plain—and you are most definitely not ordinary!'

‘No?’

Megan looked up at him in stunned bewilderment, hunting for the teasing, the amusement she felt sure must be gleaming in his eyes. She didn’t find it. Instead she saw a very different sort of light burning in the brown depths. The sort of glow that made her think of fires and heat and the scorching, searing heat of the sun. Her heart gave a sudden, jolting shudder of excitement inside her chest, so that she gasped aloud in shock.

‘You’re beautiful—squisita—a stunning, wonderful woman.’

‘Squi—squisita—exquisite!’

Megan couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She felt like a child who had been caught with her nose pressed up against the window of a sweetshop, only to have the owner come to the door and invite her in to help herself to anything and everything she wanted.

‘You’re—you have to be joking! No?’ she questioned, silenced once more by the rough, shake of his head.

‘No joke,’ he insisted in a tone that made it plain she shouldn’t allow herself even to begin to doubt that he was deadly serious. ‘Would I joke about something like this?’

One hand trailed softly down her hair, smoothing and caressing the bright auburn strands, lifting them and letting them coil softly around his fingers.

‘About hair that burns like the glow of lava from a volcano in the dead of night…’

To her astonishment he bent his head and pressed his lips to

the strand of hair in his hand, kissing it softly.

'Eyes that have the cool, shadowy appeal of the olive groves…'

He repeated the caress, this time on her eyes, pressing her lids shut with the soft pressure of his mouth and lingering there for a moment that held her entranced, her heart seeming to stop, her breathing become so shallow it was almost non-existent.

'Skin so soft and so delicate I'm almost afraid to touch it for fear it would bruise like a ripe peach…'

For a second the blunt tips of his fingers hovered over her face before gliding softly downwards, tracing the line of her cheek, her jaw, with a delicacy that made her shiver in uncontrolled response. But when his lips followed the same path then she froze in sensual delight, keeping her eyes tight shut in order to better enjoy the exquisite sensations he was creating.

Cesare's mouth moved over her skin, kissing, caressing, occasionally nipping very softly, until it reached her lips and covered them again.

'And a mouth,' he murmured against them, 'that is just made for kissing.'

This time his kiss was pure sensual enticement, the sort of kiss that seemed to draw her soul out of her body, making her head swim and her blood heat in her veins.

She melted against him, her body arcing as it pressed up against his, her breath catching in her throat as she felt the heated, swollen evidence of the reality of his desire for her. He might be able to choose his words, disguise his tone in order to be able to

carry out whatever tormenting plan had been in his mind, if he had meant to tease her as he had done in the past. But this was no tease. This was hard, solid, physical reality. The uncontrollable response of a man to a woman for whom he felt a desire that he was incapable of concealing.

And the same response was flooding through her own body, melting her already vulnerable heart, twisting along her nerves. Every sense throbbed in hungry reaction, sending a stinging sensation straight to the most intimate, most feminine point between her legs. Sighing her need into his mouth, Megan moved restlessly, her hands clutching at the broad strength of his shoulders as the unwary movement brought her once more up against the heat and force of his erection.

'I think we would be a little more comfortable if we…'

The rest of Cesare's words were lost in another long, burning kiss, but Megan didn't need words. Half-blind, totally absorbed, she would have followed him anywhere, and so she went with him, step by sightless step as he led her towards the big, squashy settee that stood before the huge open fireplace in the centre of the library.

'Sit down…' he dragged his mouth from hers long enough to say.

Obediently she sank down onto the soft cushions, her clinging hands pulling him down with her. As soon as he was beside her she moved closer, taking his mouth for herself, letting her tongue play intimately with his and slide along his lips.

‘Meggie…’

This time she found nothing to object to in his use of her childhood name. It was soft and tender, a seductive and a verbal caress in one. But what excited her most was the thread of total surrender in the sound, the wordless declaration of the way that he had abandoned himself totally to her lead.

The thought gave her a thrilling sense of power, one that had her reaching for his tie and tugging it loose at his throat. No sooner had she exposed the tanned skin, the strong, corded lines of his neck than the overwhelming need for more gripped her, driving her to impulsive action. Leaning forward, she pressed her lips against the point where his pulse raced, hard and strong, savouring the slightly salty taste of his flesh, the heated velvet against her mouth.

‘Meggie!’

It was a groan of resignation, a sound of total abandonment. In one twisting movement he came to lie on his back on the wide settee, with Megan half at his side, half lying across the supporting strength of his body.

His hands were impatient now, tugging the white T-shirt free of her jeans at her waist, pushing it upwards over her slender ribcage, his fingers caressing the exposed skin left in its path. Megan caught her breath sharply, writhing in pure delight, her breasts hardening, pouting, pushing against the confinement of her bra in a physical mirroring of the burning arousal she had seen in Cesare himself already.

‘Bellissima, magnifica, squisita…’ Cesare had lapsed into his own language, crooning the words deep in his throat, his lyrical accent growing deeper, more musical on every word. ‘Megan, you always were enchanting as a child, but as a woman…’

Words failed him as he lifted passion-glazed eyes to hers and for a moment it seemed as if time had frozen. For long, silent seconds, their gazes locked and it seemed to Megan that in that time there was some wordless question asked, and equally soundlessly answered.

She thought she could guess what was in Cesare’s mind. He still thought of her as a child, the infuriating youngster who had hung around him, dogging his every step until she must have driven him to distraction. And those thoughts must make him hesitate, wonder if she was ready to go further, if she was woman enough for him.

Surely the fearless, unwavering way she met that burning, questioning stare was enough of an answer for him? But just in case it wasn’t, she lowered her head and took his mouth again, deliberately putting every ounce of sensuality and enticement she possessed into the kiss, using it to communicate the heated need that throbbed between her legs.

‘The answer’s yes, Cesare,’ she whispered unevenly, her mouth very close to his ear. ‘If you want me then yes, yes, yes! I’m yours right here and now—anywhere and anyway you want me!’

His only answer was a thickly muttered and near-incoherent curse in raw Italian and a moment later Megan too was beyond

thought as hot fingers slid underneath the elastic sides of her bra, not even pausing to unfasten the slip of lace at the back. Her involuntary cry as the hard warmth of his palms cupped and held the soft weight of her breasts was a primitive sound of ecstasy, her head going back, her eyes staring sightlessly ahead. And when his thumbs moved, softly, slowly encircling her nipples in a tormenting, tantalising dance of provocation she writhed in delight under his touch, sighing her pleasure.

'Madre de Dios!'

Cesare muttered in Italian again, tugging off her clinging T-shirt and tossing it impatiently aside before coming back to take her breasts into his hands once more, holding them up and out so that all he had to do was lift his head ever so slightly from the worn velvet cushions and he could take one swollen tip into his mouth, suckling on it hard.

'Megan, mia amante, you weren't lying when you said you'd done a lot of growing up lately. When I last saw you, you were still a little girl…'

A wickedly hot tongue snaked out, slid over the sensitised nipple, making her shudder violently in uncontrolled response.

'Here, as everywhere else. But you've changed, developed… become all woman.'

Changed. Developed. Become all woman. The words echoed bleakly inside Megan's head, becoming more frighteningly ominous with every repetition. And just the sound of them was a dreadful, hateful reminder, a violent death knell to all her hopes,

dousing her passion in one brutal, bitterly cold rush.

'No!'

It was a cry of pain, of bewilderment, of confusion, sounding high and wild in the echoing room. And it froze Cesare into immediate stillness.

'No?'

It was like being slapped hard in the face. One moment she had been wild and willing, totally uninhibited in his arms. The next…

'You don't—you can't mean it!'

'I can! I don't want this!'

'Little liar.'

It was softly vicious, deadly. The nagging ache of frustrated passion was doing nothing at all to help his ability to think straight or reasonably.

'You're just teasing, you—'

'No! That's not it at all!'

With unexpected strength she tore herself from his restraining arms, flinging herself halfway across the polished floor towards the marble fireplace. Wrapping her arms around herself, concealing the creamy breasts his ardent passion had newly exposed, she shook her head so violently that her russet hair flew in a wild arc around her.

'You have to believe me! I'm not teasing—honestly I'm not! I don't want this!'

But that was too much.

‘You “don’t want”,’ Cesare echoed with gentle menace. ‘You “don’t want”! Oh, come now, cara, stop playing games! You were up for it every bit as much as I was—and don’t try to deny it!’ he snapped, seeing that she was about to refute the accusation once again. ‘I’m not blind—or deaf! I could see the passion in your eyes—hear it in your voice. “If you want me then, yes!”’

Megan flinched as he quoted her own thoughtless words of only moments before, echoing her passionate tone with cruel accuracy.

‘“I’m yours…anywhere and anyway you want me!” That was what you said, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes…’

Megan could only whisper words into the hands that concealed her ashen face.

‘I know I said that but…’

But what? The question rang inside her head, self-reproach in every syllable.

‘But I—I wasn’t thinking straight.’

She couldn’t have been thinking at all to let herself fall into Cesare’s arms like that, to invite his kisses, caresses…more!

For a few crazy, deluded moments, she had let herself pretend that she was still the young, innocent Megan, the adolescent with the world’s biggest ever crush on Cesare Santorino. And as that Megan she had seen his sudden new interest in her as the fulfilment of her long-held dream, the reward for half a lifetime of waiting.

But she was no longer that Megan. She no longer had the freedom to indulge in such wild and wanton behaviour. She couldn't think only of herself…as Cesare's words had reminded her. And the thought of what might have been had brought with it such a bitter sense of loss that she felt as if someone had reached into her chest and ripped out her heart without hesitation.

'And it doesn't matter what I said because I can't—I can't…'

'Can't what?'

Cesare was sitting up now, dark eyes fixed on her, his breathing, and apparently his temper, at last under control. Only the way his skin was drawn tight over the forceful cheekbones betrayed the way he was feeling below the surface of apparent calm.

'Megan,' he began again when she could only shake her head weakly in mute despair. 'What can't you do?'

'I can't sleep with you—or anyone. I mean, I can't have an affair with just anyone—no matter who.'

'And why not?'

But that was too much. She couldn't answer that question because she knew what his reaction would be. And right now she was feeling far too lost, too vulnerable to cope with the rejection that she knew he must inevitably toss in her direction when he knew the truth.

So she simply shook her head again, silent as before, fixing her unfocused eyes on the distant view from the window so as not to have to look into his dark, angry face.

‘Megan—why not?’

Cesare’s tone warned that he would not stop until he got an answer. She knew that he was totally ruthless when he was determined to get what he wanted. And he wanted to know the truth.

‘Why can’t you have an affair with me—or anyone? Why? Megan—are you going to tell me, or do I have to come over there and…’

The step he took towards her was positively the last straw.

‘All right!’

Megan cried out in despair and resignation.

‘All right! I’ll tell you! You want the truth—you can have the truth!’

‘And that is?’ Cesare persisted mercilessly when she still couldn’t make herself form the words. ‘Just what is the truth that you…’

‘That I’m pregnant!’ Megan cut in when, having drawn a deep, determined breath, she knew there was no going back. ‘That’s what’s happened. I had an affair at college—I made a mistake and—and I’m pregnant as a result,’ she finished starkly. ‘I’m having a baby in seven months’ time.’

CHAPTER THREE

'YOU'RE what?'

If he had felt as if he had been slapped in the face earlier, then this sensation was painfully like being kicked somewhere much more delicate—and intimate. It worked like magic on the ache of his libido however, making it vanish in a trice, leaving him numbed and bewildered, his head spinning wildly.

'What did you say?'

He didn't need her to repeat the words; they were already disturbingly clear, etched into his thoughts in letters of fire. But he had to say something—anything at all. He had to keep talking—the most inane nonsense if necessary—just so he didn't say the things that were buzzing in his mind.

So he didn't say—what the hell did you go and do that for?

And he didn't shout. Though he wanted to. Didn't turn and kick something—anything. Though he wanted to. Didn't demand to know why she had given herself to someone else when she was his! Didn't she know that? Didn't she see that she had no right to be with anyone else—let alone sleep with anyone else? But he had spent so long—a lifetime it seemed, pretending with Megan. So somehow he just slipped back into how it had been.

And most of all, worst of all, he had to make sure that he never, ever, admitted to the raging inferno of jealousy that was surging through him. To the pain that was clawing at him, the

blinding, black fury at the thought that she had cared for someone else enough to go to bed with him—to make love with him—to conceive a child with him.

'What did you say?' he repeated when Megan didn't speak, but simply stood, white-faced and huge-eyed, her bottom lip trembling slightly as she faced him.

'You know what I said! You heard me! I said that I'm pregnant.'

'And how, in the name of God, did that happen?'

Her smile, shaky though it was, was the last thing he had expected. Slightly wobbly and distinctly fraying at the edges, it was touched with a hint of wryness and just the tiniest bit of scepticism.

'Oh, Cesare, surely you of all people don't need to ask that! Don't you know about the birds and bees?'

'Yes, obviously I do,' he growled, uncomfortably. 'But you know what I mean. What happened?'

'I… Do you think you could pass me my T-shirt?' she said, changing the subject abruptly. 'I'm—I'd prefer to cover up, if you don't mind.'

If anything revealed the way that things had changed, the dramatic alteration in the atmosphere in the room, the way that the tension seemed to have drained away all the air so that it was impossible to breathe, then it was that simple phrase—'I'd prefer to cover up.' That and the way that she barely lifted a finger as she gestured in the direction of the white T-shirt still lying on

the floor some feet away, where he had tossed it in the heat of passion.

There couldn't have been a greater contrast with the uninhibited, wildly sexual siren who had delighted him on the settee just minutes before, and this uptight, heavily embarrassed woman who kept her arms firmly crossed over the lush curves of her breasts so as to keep herself hidden from him. She even managed to hook the T-shirt he tossed her on her thumb before determinedly turning her back in order to pull it on, concealing every sexy inch of herself from his watchful eyes.

But perhaps it was just as well, Cesare told himself, automatically smoothing down his ruffled hair and fastening the loosened buttons on his shirt with fingers that were not exactly steady. He needed to get himself back under control and think straight. And that was something he would never be fully capable of doing with a half-naked Megan standing in front of him.

So he waited, forcing himself to breathe slow and deep, until she was clothed again before deciding to speak once more.

'So,' he said when at last, dressed and apparently more composed, she slowly turned to face him. 'Are you going to tell me what happened?'

It was like being summoned to the headmaster's office to try and explain some kind of misdemeanour, Megan reflected, feeling reduced once more to the status of naughty schoolgirl, awaiting her punishment. No, it was worse than that. Cesare was counsel for the prosecution and judge and jury all rolled into one,

the sombre, frowning disapproval on his face sending a sensation like the trickle of icy water running down her spine.

'You know what happened! You don't need me to tell you! I met this guy at a party—Gary. I—found him attractive and he made it plain he liked me. We started dating. One night our kisses led to more and more—as these things do…'

'As they do,' Cesare echoed in a voice that made her blood run cold. 'And so you ended up in bed together.'

'Do you have to make it sound so sordid!'

'It wasn't like that?'

The cynical lift of one jet-black brow almost destroyed her but she forced herself to ignore it and rushed on.

'No, it wasn't! It was nothing like that!'

'Ah, I see…'

Pushing his hands deep into his trouser pockets, Cesare leaned back against the velvet cushions and looked up at her through narrowed eyes. His coldly assessing stare was cruel as a laser, seeming to cut right through to her soul and lay it bare.

'You were madly in love with him?' His scepticism scraped over her skin, stripping away one protective layer.

'Yes! Yes I was!'

It was too vehement, too revealing. Especially to someone who knew her as well as Cesare did. Surely he would be able to guess that she was protesting too much. That she was hiding behind a smokescreen of emotion?

She had thought she was in love with Gary. For a time she

had truly believed it to be the case. But then circumstances had changed, forcing her to reconsider. And if she hadn't already been doubting her own conviction, then her reaction to Cesare just now would have rubbed her nose forcibly in the uncomfortable truth.

'But he wasn't in love with you?'

Megan's bright head came up sharply, big green eyes becoming even bigger and darker.

'Why do you say that? How do you know?'

His indifferent shrug dismissed her question as the irrelevant inanity it was.

'If he cared anything about you, he would be here now—with you. He wouldn't leave you to come home—face the music by yourself. I take it that was the reason for your tears?—Megan!' he warned when she looked away, out of the window, down at the floor. Anything other than look him straight in the eye. 'He didn't come with you, did he?'

'No.'

It was just a whisper, the barest thread of sound, and she drew invisible patterns on the floor with the toe of one bare foot, watching the process with an intensity that was totally unconvincing.

'No, he's not here. In fact he won't be coming at all. Not ever.'

'Not even when the baby…?'

'No.'

She shook her head again, her expression that of a forlorn

child.

'He won't come for me, or for the baby. He doesn't want either of us. He never did. Not really. He was just having a bit of fun—playing around. As a matter of fact…'

She drew in another of those deep breaths that he had come to realise always preceded another of the announcements that were so shockingly disturbing to his emotional equilibrium.

'He's married.'

'Married? Oh, Meggie, Meggie, you little fool!'

'I didn't know!'

Indignation rang sharp in her voice.

'Do you think I'd even have gone out with—for one night alone if I'd known! If I'd so much as suspected? I'm not that much of an idiot!'

'No?' Once more those black eyebrows rose, cynically questioning her assertion. 'It seems to me…'

'Oh, I know how it seems to you—to the great, the all-knowing—the supremely infallible Cesare Santorino!'

Bitterness darkened Megan's tone as she swung away to stare moodily into the empty fireplace.

'We all know that you would never, ever make a mistake like that!'

'Oh, wouldn't I?' Cesare muttered bleakly, half to himself.

He made a mistake all right, coming here tonight, like this! Made a complete and total fool of himself! He'd thought of nothing else but this moment. Of the time when, freed from

his promise to Megan's father, he could declare the way he felt about her, the torch he'd been carrying for her for years as he'd watched her develop from a child into an adolescent and then into a beautiful young woman.

But he'd deceived himself totally into thinking that she felt something of the same. That she would wait for him, as he had determined to wait for her. She hadn't waited! Hadn't even thought about him! Instead she'd jumped straight into bed with someone else—a married man at that!

And how was he to know that this Gary had been the first?

The blazing rage that had been burning inside him stilled suddenly, the red-hot flames turning blue and icy. And cold fury was even harder to deal with than heated anger. Bitterness was cold—and jealousy—and hatred. And he hated even to think of Megan—his lovely, sweet innocent Megan in bed with someone else—giving herself to someone else!

He had never felt such an icy burn in his heart before. It stung like acid, seeming to eat away at his soul, leaving it broken and ruined, with great dark holes where his emotions should be.

'And when was that?' Megan's voice broke into the blackness of his thoughts, jarring him out of the brooding darkness and into the present again, making him unwillingly aware of the way that she had turned back from the fire and was now staring at him in puzzled confusion.

'What?' he responded, struggling to get himself back under control. 'What did you say?'

‘I wanted to know just when you made this great mistake you’re talking about,’ Megan told him. ‘What was this terrible thing you did and when?’

Idiota! Cesare cursed himself inwardly. You fool! You damn, damn fool! Now he’d alerted her attention, piquing her curiosity and centring it on him. And just when he was least capable of handling her questions. When he had only just realised how badly he’d misjudged everything and was incapable of explaining anything to her—if in fact he’d wanted to do any explaining!

On the contrary, he was determined that she should never find out how he had felt. He had come here tonight with the determination to tell Megan just that. To declare the instant attraction to her that had never faded over the years. To say that deep inside he actually believed he loved her and that he wanted her to spend the rest of her life with him.

But her rash words, her blunt declaration, had damaged those dreams beyond repair. He doubted if he would ever admit to them. He would never tell her how he felt—how he had felt, because he didn’t feel that way any more.

If the truth was told, he had no idea how he felt at all.

‘Cesare…’ Megan persisted, soft, but insistent.

‘Oh, it was nothing!’ he bluffed, veiling his eyes behind long black lashes in order to hide the truth from her. ‘Like you, I fell in love with the wrong person.’

‘And when was that?’

‘Years ago. I was little more than a child. Same age as you if

you must know.'

It was like a slap in the face, Megan reflected miserably. A cool-voiced reminder that he thought of her as little more than an awkward, troublesome adolescent. Nothing had changed then since his brutal dismissal of her just over six months before.

'Except that, unlike me, you didn't end up with—unfortunate consequences!' she tossed back, hiding pain behind sarcasm.

Don't you believe it! Hastily Cesare bit the words back. Unfortunate consequences! He had given his heart into the keeping of a child. Put his life on hold until she was old enough to be his—and now she had turned out to be someone else entirely.

'I got over it,' he returned, lacing the words with acid. 'You do. What is it you say—time heals all wounds.'

'Except that in my case, time can only make things worse.' Unthinkingly Megan touched a hand to her lower body, bringing Cesare's dark-eyed gaze to the spot.

'Are you sure?'

'As sure as I can be.'

'Have you seen a doctor?'

'Cesare, I don't need to see a doctor. I know what's happening to me! I haven't had a period for the past two months and I was always regular as clockwork—same time same day. I've been feeling sick in the mornings—and I did one of those horrible tests from the chemists. It came up positive.'

'I understand that those things aren't always accurate.'

'Stop clutching at straws, Cesare! I'm pregnant. There's no two

ways about it!'

'So what are you going to do about it?'

'I don't know,' Megan admitted honestly.

'You're not thinking of an abortion?'

If he hadn't been such a great businessman, then Cesare could have had a great career as an interrogator, Megan found herself thinking. He fired the questions at her, cold and hard and fierce, like rounds of bullets from a machinegun, hardly giving her time to think. She had had enough of his stony-faced disapproval, that cold-eyed, critical glare.

'No, I'm not thinking of an abortion! I couldn't and I wouldn't! Not that it's any business of yours!'

'I was only trying to help!'

'By suggesting that I got rid of my baby? I can do without that sort of help!'

'Megan, that isn't what I meant!'

'Isn't it? Sounded like it to me! Well, can I remind you, Signor Santorino, that this is my baby! And as such it has nothing whatsoever to do with you!'

'Which, Signorina Ellis,' Cesare returned viciously. 'Is exactly the way I want it.'

'Fine!' Megan tossed her head as she spoke, her russet hair flying, her chin coming up in defiance. 'I'm glad we understand each other!'

'Oh, we do!' Cesare returned darkly. 'Believe me, I understand perfectly! And as I prefer not to stay around when it is made

so patently clear that my company is not welcome, I'll say goodnight.'

'At last! I thought you'd never leave!'

She saw his dark head go back sharply at the spite in her tone and knew with a deep, tearing sense of regret that she had succeeded far better than she had ever anticipated in making him think she couldn't stand the sight of him. The real fact was that nothing could be further from the truth.

Or did she mean that nothing could be closer to the truth?

She didn't know. Couldn't decide whether she couldn't wait to see the back of him, and would frankly be delighted if she never saw or heard from Cesare Santorino again in all her life. Or if the terrible suspicion that her heart would break if he left now and never came back was in fact the true one and the determined anger only a camouflage shield, thrown up to protect herself from the truth.

'I'll see you around.'

She was so choked up that she could only nod in response to his curt goodbye. She knew that her silence made her look even colder and more distant than ever but it was all that she could manage. A cold, cruel hand was clutching at her throat, cutting off all her ability to speak and she knew that if she so much as opened her mouth she would burst into tears or find some other way of making a total fool of herself.

So she watched in silence as he spun on his heel and walked away from her. She had always known that the library was a big

room, a long room, but never before had the walk from the bay window where she stood to the door seemed so protracted, so endless.

And Cesare seemed to be deliberately taking his time about it. Or was that her deceiving herself? Because he never paused; never hesitated or looked back. He just kept putting one foot in front of another in his determined march away from her.

Still silent, she watched him cross the polished wooden floor, then the thick dark red and cream rug, then the floor again. She almost spoke then but caught back the words, clamping her lips tight on them. She let him get to the door, watched those strong fingers close around the handle, turn it…

'Cesare!'

His name burst from her, impossible to hold back.

'Cesare, please!'

He had thought she was going to let him go. He told himself it was what he wanted. That he was leaving, right now, for good! He was never, ever coming back. The crazy dreams of love and marriage and forever that had been in his thoughts when he had arrived at the house had crumbled into dust. He could almost imagine he was trampling them into the ground as he walked.

He was leaving. He didn't know where he was going, but he knew it would be via the nearest bar. Dio, but he could do with a drink!

And then she spoke. Just his name, on a whisper so quiet and soft that at first he wasn't at all sure he had heard anything. And

his march towards the door was so determined, so unstoppable that he barely hesitated. He even grasped the handle of the door and turned it.

'Cesare, please!'

It stopped him dead in his tracks, still with his hand on the door.

'Please don't go!'

How could he resist the appealing in that voice; the slight, shaken tremble on the first word that had clearly escaped her in spite of her determination not to let it. For a couple of seconds, feeling fought a nasty little battle with rational thought—thought reminding him of how he had felt a moment earlier, the kicked-in-the-teeth sensation that had followed her announcement. He tried hard to revive some of the fury, the disgust, the burning jealousy. And failed.

And then, as he had known it must inevitably do, emotion won. There was no way he could resist that appeal to his sympathy. And so, letting his hand drop again, he turned back to face her.

'What do you want, Megan?'

She was still standing exactly where he had left her, her slender body stiffly upright, fine-boned arms hanging loose at her sides. She was so pale—ashen—that her eyes seemed unnaturally dark above her bloodless cheeks, and the skin looked as if it was stretched taut over the high, slanting cheekbones.

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