



Sara
CRAVEN

MILLS & BOON



Wife in
the Shadows

Sara Craven

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Аннотация

Step into a world of sophistication and glamour, where sinfully seductive heroes await you in luxurious international locations. The private face of a public marriage. The manipulative machinations of the great Manzini family have locked Elena Blake into marriage. The reluctant groom is Italy's most infamous womaniser, Count Angelo Manzini. In society's spotlight Angelo bestows dutiful kisses on his shy new countess. But then, behind closed doors, his apparently biddable bride refuses to stand in the shadows... Challenged by Elena's defiance, Angelo finds himself captivated by the challenge of possessing her!

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Ellie lifted her head and looked at him, her eyes enormous in her pale face. ‘If there is no other way, then I suppose—yes.’

Angelo’s brows lifted mockingly. ‘You are graciousness itself.’ ‘If you wanted a more generous reply,’ she said, ‘you should have asked a more willing lady.’

‘On the contrary, Elena,’ he said softly. ‘I think you will suit my purpose very well.’

He reached for her hand and made to raise it to his lips, but Ellie snatched it back, flushing.

‘Perhaps you’d restrict your overtures to those times when we have an audience to convince, My Lord?’

About the Author

SARA CRAVEN was born in South Devon and grew up in a house full of books. She worked as a local journalist, covering everything from flower shows to murders, and started writing for Mills & Boon in 1975. When not writing, she enjoys films, music, theatre, cooking, and eating in good restaurants. She now lives near her family in Warwickshire. Sara has appeared as a contestant on the former Channel Four game show *Fifteen to One*, and in 1997 was the UK television *Mastermind* champion. In 2005 she was a member of the Romantic Novelists' team on *University Challenge*—*the Professionals*.

Recent titles by the same author:

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HIS UNTAMED INNOCENT
RUTHLESS AWAKENING

WIFE IN THE SHADOWS
SARA CRAVEN



CHAPTER ONE

April

THE EAR-RINGS WERE the most exquisite she had ever seen.

Nestling in their bed of black velvet, the single diamond drops glowed with a fierce inner fire that made her wonder if her fingertips would burn as she touched them.

But, in fact, they were cold, she thought with a small ironic smile as she fastened them into her earlobes.

Cold as the rest of the jewellery she had been given over the last endless months.

Cold as the chill in the pit of her stomach when she envisaged the evening ahead of her. And its possible aftermath.

She took the pendant, which had been the previous gift, from its case, and handed it to Donata, her maid, to fasten round her throat.

Then she rose from her dressing table, walked to the full-length mirror on an adjacent wall, and stood, straight and silent, subjecting her reflection to a critical, almost clinical examination.

The prescribed outfit for the evening was black, a simple full-length column of silk jersey, long-sleeved, and gathered in soft folds under the bust, its deep neckline revealing the first swell of her breasts, as well as setting off the pendant.

The dress was not in a colour or a style she particularly cared

for. It made her look older than her twenty three years, she thought objectively. Conveyed a sophistication she certainly did not possess. But, like so much else in life, it was not her choice.

And, anyway, she asked herself with irony, when had a puppet ever picked its own costume?

Her hair had been swept up into an artfully arranged topknot, with just a few careless strands allowed to brush her cheeks and the nape of her neck.

She had never really warmed to Donata—the girl was too closely involved in the hollow sham that was her life, and probably saw altogether too much, she thought bitterly—but she could not fault her talent for hairdressing. Or, it seemed, her discretion. Whatever she might think of her employer's marriage, she appeared to keep it to herself.

She had learned to apply her own cosmetics. Practised with shadow, liner and mascara to make the most of the grey-green eyes that were her one real claim to beauty, so that they gleamed almost mysteriously under their fringe of heavily darkened lashes.

Her mouth wore the warm flush of a wild rose, and the same shade was echoed in the polish that enhanced her manicured nails.

And in her ears and at her throat, the diamonds glittered like ice in winter sunlight.

She heard a warning cough from Donata, and saw her glance significantly at her watch.

Time, it seemed, for another performance to begin. Reaching for her evening purse, she walked to the door and out along the gallery to the head of the stairs, hearing from the opposite direction the sound of another door closing.

She paused, as always, watching him walk towards her, tall and lean in the elegance of his evening clothes, and moving as lithely as a panther, as if hinting that the formality of his appearance might only be a façade.

And he halted too, his dark gaze sweeping her in one unhurried, comprehensive assessment.

He gave a swift curt nod indicating that her appearance at least had won his approval, then they began to descend the stairs, side by side, but far enough apart to ensure that not so much as his sleeve would brush her arm.

Then, as they reached the marble floored hall below, she was aware of him turning towards her. She heard his voice say quietly, 'Tonight,' and felt the word shiver across her senses until it became dread.

June the previous year

He had, of course, been ambushed. He realised it as soon as he entered the *salotto* and saw that his grandmother was not as he'd hoped, waiting to receive him alone. Instead, her daughter, Signora Luccino, her plump face set in disapproving lines, was seated beside the Contessa Manzini.

'Dearest Nonna.' He went gracefully to his grandmother's chair, and kissed her slender fingers. 'And Zia Dorotea.' He

acknowledged his aunt's presence with a polite inclination of the head that was not quite a bow. 'What a pleasant surprise.'

Well, at least in one respect he was telling the truth, he thought drily. He had certainly not expected to come face to face with his late father's older and least favourite sister, the imposing matriarch who ruled her large family as an absolute despot. But he doubted very much if either of them would derive much pleasure from the encounter.

'*Caro Angelo.*' Cosima Manzini indicated that he should take the sofa opposite. 'You are looking well, dearest.'

He thought he heard his aunt give a quiet snort, but continued to smile pleasantly.

'Thank you, I am in the best of health. Probably more by good fortune than good judgement as I am sure Zia Dorotea wishes to remark.'

'I do not think that riding in a private horse race, when you were still recovering from the shoulder you dislocated in a polo match shows any kind of judgement, my dear Angelo,' said the Signora.

Angelo's smile widened. 'But I had been heavily backed to win—not least by yourself, zia, or so my cousin Mauro tells me,' he pointed out softly. 'It would have been most discourteous to let people down, so I did not do so.'

The expression on the Signora's face said plainly that Mauro would suffer for his indiscretion.

'You took a great risk, caro,' his grandmother added, her

arched brows drawing together.

‘A calculated one, Nonna.’

Tuttavia, Angelo mio, there is a matter you must now seriously consider.’

His mouth tightened. ‘You are again referring, I presume, to marriage.’

‘Dear one, I must do.’ Cosima leaned forward, her eyes pleading. ‘I have no wish to interfere, or to make you angry, but it is over two years since your beloved father died, and you became Count Manzini. You need a son and heir to inherit the title in his turn.’

He said bleakly, ‘I am aware of my obligations, Nonna. None better, I assure you. But I do not find them particularly appealing.’

‘No,’ said his aunt. ‘You prefer to trifle with other men’s wives rather than find one for yourself. Oh, do not defend him, Mamma,’ she added sharply as the Contessa tried to speak. ‘It is the truth and Angelo knows it. There are plenty of single girls for him to choose from, but until he stops behaving like a tomcat all over Rome, he will never find a bride.’

He said between his teeth, ‘How good of you to take such an interest in my private life, Zia Dorotea.’

‘If only it were private,’ she retorted. ‘But I fear that it is only a matter of time before one of your liaisons becomes a public scandal. And I tell you, Angelo, you will have no-one to blame but yourself if the Galantana brand suffers as a result.’

‘We make clothing for the fashion industry, zia,’ he returned coldly. ‘Not church vestments. I hardly think any stories about me as the chairman of the company will affect whether a girl buys a skirt with our label on it or another’s.’ He shrugged. ‘It might even boost sales. Who knows?’

‘Oh, you are impossible.’ She reached for her bag and rose. ‘I have not the patience to reason with you.’

‘As I am fast running out of patience to listen to you,’ Angelo said crisply. ‘Busy yourself with finding a wife for Mauro. That should occupy you for the next several years.’

She gave him a look of concentrated fury and swept to the door. When it had closed behind her, the Contessa said mildly, ‘That was neither kind nor polite, *mio caro*.’

‘Yet it had the ring of truth she allegedly admires so much. However, I will send her some flowers and make peace.’ He was silent for a moment, then sighed irritably. ‘She did not come here today, I am sure, just to lecture me on my sins. No doubt she has a suitable candidate in mind as a wife for me.’

Davvero, she mentioned—someone.’

Angelo’s face relaxed into faint amusement. ‘But of course,’ he said softly. ‘And are you going to tell me her name?’

‘She is called Elena—Helen in her own language.’

‘An English girl?’ He didn’t hide his surprise.

‘With Italian blood,’ the Contessa nodded. ‘Her grandmother Vittoria Silvestre was a dear friend of mine and Dorotea also had affection for her. She married an Englishman, and one of

her daughters did the same, a man called Blake. They eventually settled near Genoa, but sadly were killed one winter in an accident on the *autostrada*. Elena, their only child, now lives in Rome, and works as a translator for the Avortino publishing company.'

'She works?' His brows lifted. 'So she is "not just a pretty face" as the English say.'

'You would be a better judge of that than myself.' The Contessa played with her rings. 'It seems you have met her.'

'I have?' Angelo frowned. 'I do not recall.'

She said expressionlessly, 'She was at a dinner party you attended at the house of Silvia Alberoni.' She paused. 'A name that is familiar to you, I think. And certainly a pretty face.'

Under his breath, Angelo cursed his Aunt Dorotea, wondering at the same time how she came by her information.

I shall have to be more careful in future, he thought grimly.

Married to the wealthy but dull head of a firm of top accountants, Silvia was as bored as she was young and beautiful, and also ripe for mischief as he'd swiftly detected at their first meeting. Subsequent and more private encounters had proved her just as ardent and inventive as he'd conjectured, and their *affaire* had prospered.

Until then, he had also believed it to be a secret, which was why he'd risked accepting her invitation to dinner. Most of the other guests had been from the world of finance, so he had found the evening instructive as well as entertaining, but he

seemed to remember there had been a girl, quiet and essentially nondescript, seated at the other end of the table. The fact that he'd barely noticed her, he thought, said it all.

He said coolly, 'It is kind of my aunt to bring her to my attention, but I believe I require at least a modicum of personality in the woman I marry. Signora Alberoni's guest seemed—a complete nonentity—a girl without looks or significance.'

'I am sorry to hear it,' his grandmother said after a pause. 'I would not have thought Vittoria's grand-daughter could be so signally lacking in appeal. But any decision must naturally be yours—when you choose to make it.' She paused. 'Now ring the bell, *mio caro*, and Maria will bring coffee.'

And the conversation, to Angelo's relief, turned to other topics.

But that did not mean he was off the hook, he thought, as he drove home later. And in many ways his grandmother and interfering aunt were right. He should be married, and if this might be possible to achieve without having to abandon his bachelor pleasures, he would propose to the first suitable girl who took his eye.

But the experiences of some of his married friends whose submissive doe-eyed brides had turned into control freaks before the honeymoon was over had proved an active deterrent. True, they seemed more philosophical than crushed, but Angelo knew it would not do for him.

But, at the same time, he could not envisage what he might

find acceptable either.

He enjoyed women, and the pleasure of women, always making sure that he gave back the delight that he took, but he had never fallen in love with any of the girls who'd shared his bed, or considered that they might also share his future on a long-term basis.

He offered no promises and made it clear he expected none in return.

In addition, there was a kind of inner reserve in him which seemed to warn him when each liaison had run its natural course, and could be safely ended, with charm, generosity—and finality.

And he suspected with a trace of regret that his *affaire* with Silvia Alberoni might already be reaching those limits.

She was a passionate and insatiable mistress, but that reliable antenna of his had recently picked up that she might have begun to foresee a different role in his life for herself, if the worthy Ernesto could be conveniently sidelined.

The word 'annulment' had even been mentioned, lightly and amusingly, it was true, and solely in the context of her failure to become pregnant during the two and a half years of her marriage.

'I was told once that a woman's body can reject the seed of a man she does not truly love.' One crimson-tipped finger had drawn an enticing pattern in the curling dark hair on his chest. 'Do you think that is true, *mi amore*?'

He had curbed his instinct to dismiss the idea as ludicrous nonsense but in much pithier terms, and, instead, murmured

some meaningless platitude about a woman's sensitivity which appeared to satisfy her. But the exchange had raised a red flag in his consciousness just the same. As did her use of the word 'love' which he'd always deliberately avoided in his *affaires*.

But even more alarming was the possibility that rumours might be circulating about them. That if Zia Dorotea had learned of their relationship, then others might also have done so, and that the stories might eventually reach Ernesto Alberoni.

Angelo would deny them, of course, but he had to ask himself if Silvia could be trusted to do the same, or if she might see this as an opportunity to escape from a disappointing marriage, and find a husband more to her taste. And there was a real danger she might want it to be him. Could insist that having destroyed her marriage, he had an obligation towards her. Had even once expressed disappointment that she had not met him while she was still 'free'. Another word to set alarm bells ringing.

Because Silvia, though beautiful and entertaining, was hardly the material from which good wives were made. After all, she'd had no compunction about putting horns on the unfortunate Ernesto, and who was to say she would not do the same to another husband, given the opportunity?

Suddenly he could see the precipice yawning in front of him and knew that, for safety's sake, he needed to step back, and fast, while he still could.

For there was another reason why any kind of open scandal should be avoided, particularly at this moment. The quality of

the Galantana brand of clothing had saved the company from the worst effects of the global recession—indeed, they were planning expansion—but for that they needed extra finance for more new machinery at the Milan factory, as well as buying another site for workshops near Verona.

Which was principally why he had accepted Silvia's dinner invitation, because he'd learned that Prince Cesare Damiano, head of the Credito Europa bank would be present, and not because he liked to live dangerously.

He and Prince Damiano had spoken briefly but constructively, and negotiations were now proceeding. And while the banker was a charming, cultivated man with a passion for rose growing, he was also known to be a stickler for old-fashioned morality.

Any overt lapse on Angelo's part could well blow the deal out of the water, and delay would be costly in all kinds of ways.

So a period of celibacy was indicated. Irritating, he decided cynically, but a necessity. As, it now seemed, was his marriage, which would provide a safeguard as well as an expedient.

He drove into the security parking of his apartment block, and rode the lift up to the top floor. As he stepped through his front door, his manservant, Salvatore, was waiting to take his briefcase and discarded jacket.

'There have been two phone calls for Your Excellency,' he announced, lowering his eyes discreetly. 'Also a note has been delivered.' He paused. 'Will your *signoria* be dining out this evening?'

‘No,’ Angelo returned, looking moodily at the unmistakable pale mauve envelope on the hall table. ‘I shall eat here. Something light, Salvatore. I am not very hungry.’

The other’s eyes lit up. ‘I have some good veal—which I will cook in a little Marsala, perhaps?’

‘With a green salad,’ Angelo agreed. He ran a weary hand round the nape of his neck. ‘In the meantime, I think I’ll take a sauna. Get rid of some of the kinks of the day.’

In his bedroom, he stripped then walked into the bathroom, grabbing a towel on the way, to the wooden cabin that opened off it. He poured a dipper of water scented with aromatic herbs on to the coals and, spreading his towel on the slatted wooden bench, stretched out, closed his eyes and let his mind drift.

If he was going to marry, he mused, there were a number of practical matters to take into consideration, the most urgent being living accommodation, because, convenient as it was to the Via Veneto and the Rome headquarters of Galantana, this apartment was also his bachelor pad, and due to its past associations, not a suitable place to bring his bride, although he had no intention of getting rid of it.

No, he thought, she would be far happier living on his estate in the hills just outside the capital, and it would be a better environment for the son he hoped for. Or it would be once the air of melancholy following the loss of his mother, which had dulled his own memories of a happy childhood and caused him to avoid the place in recent years, had been banished forever.

His father, turned by grief into a virtual recluse, had suddenly and quite unexpectedly begun a refurbishment programme on the villa itself three years before. It had gone into abeyance on his death, but the time had come, Angelo decided, for it to be revived and completed.

It was odd, he admitted to himself, to be making plans for a woman he didn't even know as yet, but, as the Contessa Manzini, she would soon learn the duties and responsibilities of her new status and, he hoped, the pleasures of it too as he had every intention of being both generous and considerate.

She might not have his love, the sweet and passionate emotion that had held his parents steadfastly in thrall to each other, because he doubted whether he was capable of such feelings, but he could and would offer her, at the very least, respect along with every material comfort she could wish for. And a decent show of ardour should not be too difficult to feign. Besides, if she was pretty enough, he might not have to pretend, he told himself, grimacing inwardly.

He'd stayed with friends in Tuscany the previous weekend, and partnered a girl called Lucia in an impromptu tennis match. Good legs, he thought judiciously, a figure that curved in all the right places, and dark eyes that had gleamed in his direction more than once. He had not asked for her telephone number but that was an omission that could easily be rectified with an email to his host.

On the other hand, each time she'd played a bad shot, she'd

giggled and he'd begun to find this irritating. The thought of having to listen to it morning, noon and even night was not appealing.

He sat up abruptly, cursing under his breath. He was hardly perfect husband material, so why should he expect to find the perfect wife? And what made him think Lucia would even want him?

For once, and perhaps understandably, he was finding relaxation difficult, so he abandoned the sauna, showered briskly, pulled on jeans and a polo shirt and went to the *salotto*.

As he'd anticipated, both phone messages were from Silvia, requesting him to call her. And her letter proved to be in similar vein but rather more demanding, he noted, his lips tightening. Clearly his absence in Tuscany and his omission to contact her immediately on his return had not pleased her. She was becoming distinctly proprietorial, and although he would have his regrets at terminating their association, he realised he had no choice.

He did not belong to her, he thought coldly, pouring himself a whisky. To her, or any other woman, and he never would. He had seen what that could do. Had seen his father become a silent stranger, the heart and spirit torn out of him after his wife's death—little more than a sad ghost in a house which had once been filled with sunshine and laughter.

Had found himself, scarcely out of boyhood, excluded from his own grief in the face of his father's desolation.

And without the tenderness and support of Nonna Cosima,

who had taken him into her own home, he would have been left very much alone.

As he emerged from the darkness of that time, he'd sworn that he would never allow anyone to make him suffer like that. And nothing had happened since to persuade him to change his mind.

His marriage would be a practical arrangement without illusions, he vowed silently, and he would set himself to make it work.

Therefore, as a beginning, he would decline Silvia's suggestion that as Ernesto would be away the following weekend, they should take advantage of his absence at some discreet *albergo* in the wilds of Umbria or Reggio Calabria.

Instead, he thought, crumpling the note in his hand, I will be spending the time in close consultation with the builders at Vostranto, so I shall call her tomorrow and make my excuses.

And after that, I shall also ask Ottavio for Lucia's phone number.

'No,' said Ellie. 'It's very kind of Madrina to invite me, but I've already made my plans for that weekend. I'm sorry, Silvia.'

'You don't sound it.' Her cousin leaned back in her chair, pouting. 'I suppose you're off to bury yourself at Nonna Vittoria's shack as usual.'

It might only be a small house, but it was hardly a shack, Ellie thought drily. And Silvia clearly hadn't thought so when she discovered that their grandmother's will had left Ellie in sole possession of what could be an eminently desirable property in a

charming fishing village on a beautiful coastline. She had raged about the total unfairness of the bequest for weeks if not months, accusing Ellie of wheedling her way into Nonna Vittoria's good graces.

By which Ellie supposed she meant visiting her grandmother regularly and remembering her at birthdays and Christmases. Something Silvia's busy social life had overlooked most of the time.

'And how can you even think of it when you could be staying in the lap of luxury at the Villa Rosa?' Silvia went on.

'Perhaps I don't find the lap of luxury particularly comfortable,' Ellie said drily. 'Especially when I'm aware that I'm the only person present who's actually an employee instead of an employer.'

Silvia waved a languid hand. 'Oh, you're far too sensitive, *cara*. Besides Madrina adores you, and you owe her a visit. She has said so, and will be so upset if you refuse.' She paused. 'And you could do me the most enormous favour too.'

Ellie's hand stilled in its task of refilling their coffee cups. Ah, she thought, without surprise. Now we're coming to it.

She said, 'Oh God, Silvia, you haven't been losing money at bridge again, not after the things Ernesto said last time.'

'Oh, that.' Silvia looked down, playing with the emerald and diamond ring on her wedding finger. 'I've hardly touched a card for months. Truly. Anyone will tell you.'

'Except that I don't know anyone to ask,' Ellie returned,

scenting an evasion. 'And I have no money to bail you out, so don't even think about it.'

'That's not what I'm asking,' Silvia denied swiftly. 'It's just that—well—Ernesto is being a little silly at the moment about my going away without him, even to see my own godmother, and if he knew you'd be there too, I'm sure he'd change his mind.'

Ellie brought over the fresh coffee, placing the cup on the table beside her cousin's chair.

She said slowly, 'It's not like him to play the heavy husband. Silvia, you're sure that you're not the one who's being silly?'

Silvia flushed angrily. 'And what makes you an authority on married life? I wasn't aware that you even had a boyfriend.'

Ouch, thought Ellie, remembering at the same time that attack had always been Silvia's favourite form of defence. Also, that it had been several weeks since her cousin had sought her company—and then only at the last minute to make up the numbers at a dinner party, where, to add to her usual shyness, she'd felt badly dressed and totally out of her depth.

Especially when Silvia had been at her sparkling best, eyes gleaming like her jewellery, and her mouth curved on the edge of a smile all evening, and the centre of everyone's attention. As if, Ellie thought, a fire had been lit inside her.

In fact, on that occasion, Ellie had taken her godmother's place, as the Principessa Damiano had been suffering from a heavy cold. But at least she'd only had to give up a few hours—unlike this new request, where she'd be committed from Friday

evening until late afternoon on Sunday. Not a prospect she relished, however fond she was of her tiny, exquisite godmother fluttering like a butterfly in the pale draperies she affected.

Although that, Ellie had always suspected, was just a façade, concealing a will of reinforced steel. Which was why she'd probably used Silvia to back up her invitation.

But Ellie was always conscious that Madrina inhabited a world where Silvia belonged, but she herself did not. They might be first cousins, but chalk and cheese didn't even come near it.

Silvia, the elder by almost a year, was silvery fair, with green eyes that looked at the world from the shadow of extravagant lashes, a small straight nose and a frankly sexy full-lipped mouth. Her chief ambition from childhood had been to marry a rich man and she'd achieved it effortlessly, although Nonna Vittoria had frowned and tutted over her choice, murmuring that *cara* Silvia needed to be held in check, and that her *fidanzato*, though estimable, might not be the man to do it.

Ellie, on the other hand, had often thought, without rancour, that she resembled the negative of a dramatically coloured photograph. Her own hair was the shade generally known as dirty blonde, and she was pale-skinned and slender. Nonna Vittoria always told her she had unusual eyes, but the rest of her features were nothing to admire. Nose too long, she thought. Mouth too serious.

However, on the plus side, she enjoyed her work, liked most of her colleagues and had a small group of friends of both sexes

with whom she ate out and attended films and concerts.

She supposed it was a relatively sedate existence, but it suited her. Yet so did her own company, and the times when she could escape to the coast and the waiting Casa Bianca were among her happiest.

She couldn't let the opportunity to spend the weekend there pass. Could she?

Yet, as she drank her coffee, she sent a covert glance at her cousin. Something was wrong. She knew it. The shining brightness of a few weeks ago had become restive—even edgy.

She said quietly, 'Silvia, I don't want us to fall out but I need you to be honest with me. Why do you want me to accept Madrina's invitation?'

Her cousin looked sulky. 'It is nothing. An absurdity. A man Ernesto feels has paid me too much attention. He has even started to think that I am meeting this man and not going to

Largossa at all. But if he knows that you and I will be at the Villa Rosa together, his mind will be at rest.'

Ellie frowned. 'Wouldn't it be simpler if he accompanied you himself?'

Silvia spread her hands. 'He cannot. There is a client—an important man—with tax difficulties which must be settled *pronto*. So Ernesto must handle the case personally, even if he has to use the weekend.'

Ellie could sympathise with the client's needs. Italy's labyrinthine tax laws were not for the inexperienced or the

fainthearted.

And yet—and yet ...

She recalled suddenly that she'd thought she heard the name of Alberoni mentioned in a low-pitched conversation by the water cooler at work a few weeks ago, only to find when she joined the group that they were talking about something completely different.

Now she found herself wondering uneasily if the subject had been deliberately changed at her approach and just what they'd been discussing.

If the stolid Ernesto had been stirred to a seething mass of jealousy, might he have reason? Whatever, he seemed to be taking steps to keep Silvia in check at last, and maybe, as her cousin was all the family she had left, she should help, besides having no wish to hurt her godmother's feelings by a refusal to attend her house party.

'Who else will be there?' she asked cautiously.

Silvia shrugged. 'Oh, Fulvio Ciprianto and his wife.' She added casually. 'Plus one of Madrina's elderly cronies, the Contessa Manzini.'

Manzini, thought Ellie. The name was vaguely familiar, but in what context? Then her mind went back to that wretched dinner party, and she remembered. A man, she thought, tall, very dark, and lethally attractive even to her untutored gaze, who'd been pointed out to her as Count Angelo Manzini. Not, she'd reflected at the time, that he looked even remotely like an angel. The lean

saturnine face, amused dark eyes and mobile, sensuous mouth suggested far more sin than sanctity.

However, no playboy apparently, but the successful chairman of the Galantana fashion group, or so she'd been informed by her neighbour during a brief lull between courses.

Which, considering what she'd been wearing, was probably why the Count had totally ignored her.

'A few others, perhaps,' Silvia went on, twisting the emerald on her finger again. 'I am not sure. But if you get bored,' she added with renewed buoyancy, 'you can always ask Zio Cesare to show you his roses. You like such things.'

Ellie had never addressed her godmother's august husband as 'uncle' in her life, and Silvia knew it. Another reminder of the wide gap in their circumstances.

'Thank you,' she returned ironically.

'So I can tell Madrina that you will be coming with me, Ella-Bella?' Silvia was watching her almost eagerly.

But, thought Ellie, there was another element in her expression that was not so easy to fathom, and which sparked a faint *frisson* of concern.

'Only if you swear never to call me that stupid name again, Silly-Billy. We're no longer children,' she retorted crisply. 'And I'll telephone her myself.' She paused. 'Shall we go in my car?'

Silvia looked as horrified as if Ellie had suggested they trudge to Largossa, pushing their luggage in a wheelbarrow. 'You mean that little Fiat? No, I will arrange for Ernesto to lend us the

Maserati with Beppo to drive us.'

Ellie frowned. 'He won't want them himself?'

'He has the Lamborghini.' Silvia pursed her lips. 'Or he could walk. The exercise would do him good, I think.'

'Poor Ernesto,' said Ellie.

And poor me, she thought when her cousin had departed, leaving a delicate aroma of Patou's 'Joy' in the air. Although that, she admitted, was rank ingratitude when she would be staying in a superbly comfortable house, with magnificent food and wine, and being thoroughly indulged with her godmother's unfailing affection.

But it was simply not the kind of visit she was accustomed to. Usually she was invited to keep Lucrezia Damiano company while her husband was away attending meetings with other European bankers. Sometimes, but not always, Silvia came too.

But Ellie could not imagine why her cousin was so keen for them both to attend what seemed to be a distinctly middle-aged party.

Oh for heaven's sake, she adjured herself impatiently, as she carried the coffee pot and used cups into her tiny kitchen. Stop worrying about nothing. It's not a major conspiracy. It's simply a couple of days out of your life, that's all.

And when they're over, you'll be straight back to the old routine again, just as if you'd never been away.

Then she paused, as she began to run water into the sink, staring into space as she wondered exactly what it was that Silvia

wasn't telling her. And why she should suddenly feel so worried.

CHAPTER TWO

‘*CARISSIMA!*’ Lucrezia Damiano embraced Ellie fondly. ‘Such a joy.’

Ellie, partaker of a largely silent drive from Rome in the back of the Maserati, with Silvia, face set, staring moodily through the window, had yet to be convinced of the joyousness of the occasion, but her godmother’s welcome alleviated some of the chill inside her.

The Villa Rosa had begun its life at the time of the Renaissance, and, with additions over the centuries, including a small square tower at one end, now had the look of a house that had simply grown up organically from the rich earth that surrounded it. The Damianos possessed a much grander house in Rome, but Largossa was the country retreat they loved and regularly used at weekends.

The *salotto* where the Principessa received her guests was in the oldest part of the house, a low-ceilinged room, its walls hung with beautifully restored tapestries, furnished with groupings of superbly comfortable sofas and chairs, with a fireplace big enough to roast a fair-sized ox.

The long windows opened on to a broad terrace, and offered a beguiling view of the grounds beyond, including the walled garden where Cesare Damiano cultivated the roses that were his pride and joy.

But her host, Ellie learned, would not be joining the party until the following day.

‘My poor Cesare—a meeting in Geneva, and quite unavoidable,’ the Principessa lamented. ‘So tonight will be quite informal—just a reunion of dear friends.’

She turned to her other god-daughter, who was standing, her expression like stone. ‘*Ciao, Silvia mia. Come stai?*’

‘I am fine, thank you, Godmother.’ Silvia submitted rather sullenly to being kissed on both cheeks, causing Ellie to eye her narrowly.

She didn’t look fine, she thought. On the contrary, since she entered the house, Silvia appeared to be strung up on wires. Nor had it been lost on Ellie that, on their arrival, she had scanned almost fiercely the cars parked on the gravel sweep in front of the villa’s main entrance as if she was looking for one particular vehicle before sinking back in her seat, chewing at her lip.

‘And now there are people you must meet,’ the Principessa decreed, leading the way out on to the terrace.

An elderly lady, dressed in black, her white hair drawn into an elegant chignon, was seated at a table under a parasol, in conversation with a younger, plumper woman with a merry face, but they turned expectantly at the Principessa’s approach.

‘Contessa,’ she said. ‘And my dear Anna. May I present my god-daughters—the Signora Silvia Alberoni, and Signorina Elena Blake. Girls, allow me to make the Contessa Cosima Manzini and Signora Ciprianto known to you.’

The Contessa extended a be-ringed hand to both, murmuring that it was her pleasure. Her smile was gracious, but the eyes that studied Ellie were oddly shrewd, almost, she thought in bewilderment, as if she was being assessed in some way. If so, it was unlikely that her simple button-through dress in olive-green linen, and the plain silver studs in her ears would pass muster. And nor, she imagined, would her very ordinary looks.

The Contessa, by contrast, was not only dressed in great style, but her classic bone structure still suggested the beauty she must have been in her youth.

They took the seats they were offered, and accepted glasses of fresh lemonade, clinking with ice. Silvia seemed to have come out of sulky mode and was talking brightly about the journey, the warmth of the day, and the beauty of the gardens, her smile expansive, her hands moving gracefully to emphasise some point, while Contessa Manzini listened and nodded politely but without comment.

Under the cover of this vivacity, Ellie found herself being addressed quietly and kindly by Anna Ciprianto, and asked, with what seemed to be genuine interest, about her work at the Avortino company, so that she was able to overcome her usual shyness with strangers and chat back.

After a while, Lucrezia Damiano went off to greet more guests, a couple called Barzado, also middle-aged, the wife bright-eyed and talkative, whom she brought out to join the party. So what on earth am I doing here? Ellie asked herself in

renewed perplexity. And, even more to the point, what is Silvia?

On the surface, her cousin was brimming with effusive charm, the very picture of the lovely young wife of a successful man, but Ellie could see that her posture was betrayingly rigid, and the hands in her lap were clenched rather than folded.

I want to help, she thought, wondering why, when she and Silvia were together, she so often felt like the older one. But how can I—if she won't talk to me—won't tell me the problem?

And at that moment she saw the Contessa look down the terrace, a hand lifting to shade her eyes, as the faint austerity of her expression relaxed into warmth and pleasure.

'Mio caro,' she exclaimed. *'Alla fine.* At last.'

Ellie did not have to look round to see who was approaching, and whose tall shadow had fallen across the sunlit flagstones. Because one glance at Silvia, her eyes wide and intense, her natural colour fading to leave two spots of blusher visible on her cheekbones, suddenly told her everything she needed to know, making her realise at the same time that it was information she would far sooner have been without. And that all her concerns about this weekend were fully justified.

Nor did she need to wonder further about the whispers round the coffee machine, either in her workplace, or probably any other.

'Oh God,' she whispered under her breath, dry-mouthed with shock. 'I don't believe this. Silvia—you complete and utter fool.'

'My dearest one.' Count Angelo Manzini, contriving to look

elegant in chinos and an open-necked white shirt, bent to kiss his grandmother's hand, then her cheek. 'Ladies.' A brief, charming smile acknowledged everyone else at the table, but bestowed no special attention anywhere.

Ellie had the curious sensation that the air around them had begun to tingle, and hastily drank some more lemonade, keeping her eyes fixed firmly on the ground, as he pulled up a chair and joined the group.

In daylight and close up, he was even more formidable, she thought, taking a deep steadying breath, and wishing with all her heart that she was back in Rome. Or that Silvia was.

She wondered if she could invent some emergency to provide her with an excuse for leaving, only to remember, with a sinking heart, that she had inadvertently left her mobile phone on charge back at her apartment, and that any landline calls to the villa would be answered by Giovanni, the major domo, and relayed through the Principessa herself.

So it appeared she was stuck here for the duration.

Lucrezia was speaking. 'My dear Count, I know you are acquainted with Signora Alberoni, but I believe you have not been introduced to her cousin, my other god-daughter, the Signorina Elena Blake.'

'No, I have not had that pleasure. I am charmed, *signorina*.'

Ellie sat up with an alarmed jolt, forcing herself to look at him, and murmur something polite and meaningless in return. His mouth was unsmiling, but his dark gaze that met hers held

a faint glint that might have been amusement. Or—equally—anger.

Though what he had to be angry about defeated her, she thought, glancing away, her own expression stony. After all, she was the one who'd been manipulated into providing cover for his affair with Silvia. But if he imagined she'd have come within miles of the Villa Rosa if she'd known the truth, then the glamorous Count Manzini could think again. And, she told herself almost grinding her teeth, if he actually thought it was funny ...

As soon as she could do so, she excused herself on the grounds she needed to unpack and went indoors, feeling as if she'd escaped.

There was never any question about which room she'd be using. Since her first childhood visit, when she'd gazed entranced at the little tower, telling her amused godmother that it was like something out of a fairy tale, that had been where she'd slept.

But as she climbed the spiral staircase leading up to it from the little sitting room below, she reflected that, mercifully, the Principessa no longer teased her that she was waiting for some princely hero to leap up the other steep flight of exterior steps from the garden to the small balcony outside her window and carry her off.

On the contrary, in recent years, she'd come to regard the tower room in much the same light as the Casa Bianca—as something of a refuge, and probably it would never be more

so than this time, she thought with a troubled sigh as she contemplated the afternoon's developments.

Unlike Silvia, Ellie had only brought one small case, so her unpacking was soon completed, but she had no intention of returning to the terrace, even though it would probably be expected of her.

Instead, she used the tiny adjoining bathroom to shower away the stickiness of the journey, and, she vainly hoped, some of its subsequent tensions. Then, wrapped in her white cotton robe, she curled up in the small deeply cushioned armchair in front of the open window and resignedly gave full rein to her uneasy thoughts.

She would be having severe words with Silvia, once the opportunity presented itself, she promised herself grimly. Her cousin had no right—no right at all—to implicate her even marginally in whatever was going on between herself and that diabolically good-looking bastard who'd just swanned in.

Not that there were any real doubts in her mind about the situation—how could there be?—which suggested that, if Silvia wasn't careful, other people including Madrina, would be drawing the same conclusions.

And Silvia must be mad if she thought her godmother, or, more particularly, the austere Prince Damiano would tolerate any possibility of open scandal under their roof.

And while she could admit that maybe Ernesto was not the most exciting man in the world, she remembered how Silvia had insisted she wanted to marry him and no-one else. Or was it more

the status of being a rich man's wife she'd actually hankered for?

Whatever—there was a limit to Ernesto's placidity, and if he even suspected that Silvia had been unfaithful to him, there'd be trouble bordering on catastrophe.

How could her cousin take such a risk—especially when it did not seem to be making her happy? Ellie asked herself in bewilderment. But remembering her original assessment of Count Manzini, she doubted whether bestowing happiness would be a priority in his relationships anyway.

Here today, she thought, biting her lip, and gone tomorrow. Not that she was any real judge of such matters, of course, but instinct warned her he was the kind of man anyone with sense should cross a busy street to avoid.

But there were no busy streets at the Villa Rosa, as Ellie discovered several hours later when, to her horror, she found she'd been placed next to Count Manzini at dinner.

It was punishment, she thought, for fibbing to her godmother that she'd stayed in her room with a slight headache instead of rejoining the party.

Nor was it any consolation that the Count seemed no more pleased at having her as a neighbour than she was.

Because Madrina had emphasised an informal evening,

Ellie had kept back the long dress she'd brought in deference to the Prince's known wishes, choosing instead a pretty georgette skirt in white, patterned with sunflowers, which floated around her when she moved, and a scooped-neck silk top, also in white.

Neither of them were from the Galantana line, as she was sure one quick glance had told him.

She had no idea who'd made his expensive suit either, but decided it was probably Armani.

At the other end of the table, Silvia was resplendent in a royal blue cocktail dress, made high to the throat in front, but plunging deeply at the back. She seemed to have recovered her equilibrium—in fact she looked almost glowingly triumphant—and was chatting with animation to her neighbours as if she didn't have a care in the world.

Leaving me free to do the worrying for her, Ellie thought, serving herself from the dishes of *antipasti* which began the meal.

She'd not yet had the chance for a private word with her cousin who'd been missing from her room at the other end of the villa when she went in search of her, leaving Ellie to wonder where she was and decide that she'd probably prefer not to know.

'May I offer you some tomato salad?' Count Manzini enquired with cool politeness, and she looked up from her plate with a start.

'No,' she said, stiltedly. 'No, thank you.'

'I seem to alarm you, *signorina*,' he went on, after a pause. 'Or do you simply prefer to eat in silence?'

'I think—neither.'

'I am relieved to hear it.'

He smiled at her for the first time, and she felt her throat tighten nervously as she reluctantly experienced the full impact

of his attraction. The government, she thought shakily, should issue a warning, and felt something like a grudging sympathy for Silvia.

‘I believe we have encountered each other before, but were not formally presented to each other,’ he continued. ‘One evening at the home of Ernesto Alberoni, I think.’

‘Perhaps.’ Ellie stared rigidly down at her food. ‘I—I don’t remember.’

‘*Che peccato*,’ he said lightly. ‘Also, I was not aware that our hostess had more than one god child. Do you visit her a great deal?’

‘As often as I can, yes.’ Her tone was faintly defensive. ‘And this weekend—it is an engagement of long standing?’

She wanted to say ‘Hasn’t Silvia told you how she dragged me down here at the last minute as a cover story?’ but decided against it. On the other hand, she didn’t see why she should answer any more of his questions.

She shrugged. ‘I can’t really remember when it was arranged,’ she returned, deliberately casual. ‘Does it matter?’

‘Not at all,’ he said. ‘I am just a little curious about your presence at a party where the other guests are so much older.’

‘But I’m not the only one.’ She was careful not to glance in Silvia’s direction. ‘The same could be said of you, Count Manzini.’

‘I am here because I have business with Prince Damiano,’ he said softly. ‘And when it is concluded, I shall be gone.’

Let it be soon, thought Ellie, helping herself to more anchovies and wondering at the same time if her cousin was aware of his plans.

When he resumed the conversation, he turned to rather more neutral topics, asking if she played tennis—she didn't—and if she liked to swim, at which point she claimed mendaciously that she hadn't brought her bathing costume.

He was being perfectly civil, yet Ellie was thankful when his attention was claimed by Signora Barzado, seated on his other side, and she was therefore able to relax a little and enjoy the *gnocchi* in its rich sauce, and the exquisite veal dish that followed.

It occurred to her that even if she'd been unaware of his involvement with Silvia, she would still not have felt comfortable with him. There was arrogance beneath the charm, she thought, suggesting that he regarded women as just another facet of his success.

Besides, he was in orbit round some sun while she remained completely earthbound.

Not that it mattered, she told herself, as she ate her *panna cotta* with its accompanying wild strawberries. Tomorrow he would leave and, with luck, she would never have to set eyes on him again. All the same she wished that Prince Damiano had not been detained in Geneva.

It was a long meal with strega and grappa to accompany the coffee which ended it, but when it was over and they drifted back to the *salotto*, Ellie's need to talk to Silvia was thwarted again

by her cousin immediately opting to play bridge with Signora Barzado and the Cipriantos.

Count Manzini, to her relief, took himself off to the billiard room with Carlo Barzado, while his grandmother and the Principessa occupying a sofa by the fireplace had their heads together in low-voiced and plainly confidential conversation.

Ellie found a magazine in a rack beneath one of the side tables, and took it to a chair on the other side of the room. It was mainly concerned with the fashion industry, and, inevitably, had a feature on Galantana praising its success and detailing its anticipated expansion. This was naturally accompanied by a photograph of Angelo Manzini seated at his desk, his shirt sleeves rolled back over tanned forearms and his tie loose. He looked tough, business-like, and, as even Ellie could appreciate, sexy as hell.

The camera, she thought, drawing a breath, was no doubt being operated by a woman.

At the bridge table, one rubber followed another and Ellie was forced to accept that Silvia was avoiding any kind of *tête à tête* between them, and she might as well go to bed.

‘So soon, cara?’ The Principessa regarded her with concern. ‘It is not still the headache?’

‘Oh, no,’ Ellie assured her swiftly and guiltily. ‘That seems to have gone.’

In her room, the bed had been turned down and her white lawn nightgown prettily fanned across the coverlet, but the helpful

maid had also closed the windows for some abstruse reason, turning the room into a temporary oven.

Sighing a little, Ellie opened them again, drew the curtains, and switched on the ceiling fan. She took a quick cooling shower, cleaned her teeth, then folded back the coverlet to the bottom of the bed, deciding for once to dispense with her nightgown before sliding under the cover of the sheet.

She'd arranged to leave the Avortino office early that day, so she'd brought some remaining translation work with her to finish off. It was a simple enough task, and normally she'd have whizzed through it, but this time she found it well-nigh impossible to concentrate, and after struggling for almost an hour, she gave up.

If I go on, I'll have a genuine headache, she thought, putting the script back in its folder, then switching off her lamp and composing herself for sleep instead.

She lay for a while, staring into the darkness, listening to the soft swish of the fan above her, while the events of the day played through her mind like a depressing newsreel. And most disturbing of all was the number of unwanted images of Angelo Manzini that kept intruding upon her.

She tried to tell herself it was hardly surprising, considering that blinding moment of unwelcome revelation about Silvia and its possible repercussions. But it was troubling nevertheless.

On the other hand, there was no point in losing sleep over it, so she turned on to her side, closing her eyes with resolution.

He should not, Angelo told himself grimly as he glanced at his

watch, be contemplating this.

Having made the break, he should adhere to his decision and not be lured back, even if it was for ‘one last time’ as she’d breathed to him in that secluded corner of the garden before dinner. When she’d stood so close that the shape of her untrammelled breasts under the cling of her dress were clearly revealed, the nipples standing proud. So close that the familiar perfume she wore filled his senses, reviving memories that commonsense told him were best forgotten.

Although he knew of her relationship with the Principessa, he’d been frankly astonished and certainly not best pleased to find her here. In view of the serious purpose of his visit, she was a complication he did not need.

And yet when she’d looked up at him wistfully, touching her parted lips with her little pointed tongue, reminding him of its delicious artistry, and whispered, ‘Don’t you want me, *mio caro?*’, in spite of himself, he had found his body responding to her enticement with all its former urgency.

All the same, he would have drawn the line at traversing unfamiliar corridors to reach her, in the hope that the other members of the house party—his hostess in particular—would be safely asleep.

But as this would not be necessary, the promise of ‘one last time’ seemed worth the risk.

No-one, he told himself, would be likely to see him descending from the *loggia* outside his room, especially now he’d

changed his white shirt for a thin dark sweater.

But if the worst happened, he could always explain he'd been unable to sleep, and decided to get some air.

Or, he could take the infinitely wiser course of resisting temptation altogether, and staying where he was. However disappointed his former *innamorata* might be, she could hardly make a scene over his dereliction. Not in this company.

And afterwards, he would be careful to avoid any encounters with her until she had found the inevitable someone to take his place.

Counsels of perfection, he thought cynically. Which he had, *naturalmente*, no intention of following. Not while that gloriously rapacious body was waiting to welcome him on this hot, starlit night.

Earlier, he'd fetched the flashlight from his car, and sliding it into his pocket, he went noiselessly out to the *loggia* and down the steps to the grounds below.

Ellie was never sure what woke her. For one sleepy moment, she wondered why, on such a still night, the pale curtains at her window seemed to be billowing into the room? Only to discover, with blank terror, that she was no longer alone. That a tall shadow, darker than all the rest, was standing beside the bed and a man's voice was whispering teasingly, 'Were you asleep, *mia bella*? Then I hope you were dreaming of me.'

Then before she could move or force her paralysed throat muscles to scream, the mattress beside her dipped under a new

weight, and strong arms reached for her, drawing her against bare and aroused male flesh while a warm mouth took hers in the kind of deep and sensual kiss wholly outside her experience.

And for one brief, appalled instant, she felt her ungiven body arch against him in a response as instinctive as it was shocking.

Then, as sanity came racing back, she tore her lips from his and tried to push him away, raking her nails down the hair-roughened wall of his torso.

He swore and his grasp slackened fractionally, giving her the chance to fling herself across the bed away from him, her hand reaching desperately for the lamp switch.

And as light flooded the room, Ellie's horrified, incredulous gaze met that of her assailant.

Angelo was the first to speak. He said hoarsely, 'You? But I don't understand ...'

'Get out of here.' She was blushing from head to foot, burning with shame, as she delved for the sheet, dragging it up to cover her naked breasts. Trying at the same time not to look at him. 'Just—go. Now. For God's sake.'

But it was too late. There was a sharp knock at the door, followed by her godmother's voice saying, 'Is all well with you, Elena? An intruder has been seen in the garden.'

Angelo muttered something soft and violent under his breath, and dived for the sheet in his turn. And before Ellie could answer, think of some reassurance to send her latest visitor away, the door was flung wide, and the Principessa came in, swathed in an ivory

silk dressing gown. And behind her, dignified in grey satin, the Contessa Manzini, with Carlo Barzado beside her, and Giovanni bringing up the rear.

Lucrezia Damiano stopped, a hand flying to her throat, her eyes widening in shock and dismay. There was a long and deadly silence, which the Contessa was the first to break, turning to request Signor Barzado and the gaping major domo to leave before she too stepped into the room, closing the door behind her.

She said, '*Cosa succede*, Angelo. What is happening here? Have you lost your mind or simply all sense of honour?' She looked at Ellie, her face like stone. 'Is my grandson here at your invitation, *signorina*? The truth, if you please.'

Angelo answered for her. 'No,' he said. 'From first to last, Nonna, it was my own idea.' He glanced down at the scratches on his chest, his mouth twisting wryly. 'But clearly, I should have thought again—for several reasons.'

'You are saying you have disgraced our family name—forced yourself on this girl—on a whim?' The Contessa closed her eyes. '*Dio mio*, I cannot believe it.'

It occurred to Ellie that hoping to wake up and find she'd simply been having a nightmare wasn't working. Neither was praying for death.

Clutching the sheet so tightly that her knuckles turned white, she said huskily, 'Contessa—Godmother—I know how this must look but—really—nothing happened.'

‘I presume because he was interrupted.’ The Principessa’s voice was colder than her god-daughter had ever heard it, as she looked pointedly at Ellie’s nightgown lying on the floor beside the bed.

No, Ellie thought painfully. Because he discovered he was in the wrong room, with the wrong woman.

Thought it, but realised she couldn’t say it because it would only make matters a thousand times worse.

Angelo indicated his own clothing. He said coolly, ‘Perhaps, before anything more is said, I might be permitted to dress myself.’

Tra un momento. My god-daughter’s needs come first.’ The Principessa took Ellie’s robe from the chair and advanced to the bed. ‘Put this on, my child, then come with us to the *salotto*.’ She added, ‘You will have the goodness to join us there, Count Manzini, when you are ready.’

Back turned to him, and seated on the edge of the bed, Ellie huddled awkwardly into the robe and fastened its sash, her fingers all thumbs. She was suddenly aware that she was trembling, and on the verge of tears.

It’s all so ridiculous, she thought, like some dreadful bedroom farce. Except that on this occasion there can be no last act explanations to make everything right again. Because they would have to involve Silvia, and that can’t happen.

As she followed the two older women downstairs, her mind went into a kind of overdrive as she struggled to make sense of

what had happened.

It went without saying that Angelo Manzini had expected to find her cousin waiting for him, but Silvia's room was at the other end of the villa, so what could possibly have made him think she was sleeping in the tower?

And what was all this about an intruder in the grounds? Who had seen him?

Every question she asked herself seemed to throw up another, and she didn't like any of the answers that were suggesting themselves to her.

Giovanni was just leaving the *salotto* as they arrived. His face might be expressionless, but he radiated disapproval just the same and Ellie, who'd known him all her life, found herself avoiding his glance.

He'd lit the lamps and brought a tray of coffee to the room, and the Principessa poured a measure of brandy into a glass and brought it to Ellie.

'I have instructed Giovanni to have another room prepared for you,' she said. 'You will not wish to return to the tower.'

No, thought Ellie, with a swift pang. Never again for as long as I live.

Any stupid fairy tale dreams I still had finally crashed and burned tonight.

Aloud, she said, 'Thank you,' and swallowed some of the brandy, feeling its warmth pervade the chill inside her. 'But I swear to you—both of you—that nothing happened.'

‘You regard my grandson’s shameful conduct—this outrage to your godmother’s hospitality as nothing?’ The Contessa’s question was icy. ‘Are you saying, *signorina*, that you are accustomed to share your bed with strangers? That this unforgivable insult should be—laughed off in some way? Treated as one of the aberrations of modern life? If so, I doubt if Prince Damiano will agree with you.’

Ellie flushed again. ‘No,’ she said, her voice constricted. ‘No, of course not.’ She hesitated, ‘Does he—have to be told?’

‘I think so,’ said the Contessa. ‘Before the story reaches him from another source.’ She paused. ‘It is unfortunate that Carlo Barzardo witnessed what had happened, because he will tell his wife, and she will immediately tell the whole world.’

Ellie’s lips parted in a soundless gasp. ‘Oh—surely not.’

The Contessa shrugged. ‘It is inevitable.’

The Principessa sat down beside Ellie, and took her hand. She said more gently, ‘We must suppose that Count Manzini gave some indication—at dinner, perhaps—that he found you attractive, my child, and you were flattered by his attention. Gave him reason to think that you would welcome him later. Is that how it was?’

Ellie bit her lip. The truth was impossible, she told herself, so she would have to rely on prevarication.

She said quietly, ‘If I did, it was—unintentional.’

‘But I think we must accept that was the case and act accordingly.’ Her godmother’s tone was firm. She looked towards

the door. 'I am sure Count Manzini will agree.'

Coming into rooms silently must be one of his talents, Ellie thought bitterly because she'd been totally unaware of his arrival—yet again. But there he was, leaning against the doorframe, the lean body apparently relaxed, his dark face impassive as he listened to what was being said.

But Ellie wasn't fooled. The anger in him might be dammed back, but she could still sense it. Feel it reaching her across the room.

But why, she demanded silently, when I'm the innocent party in all this? And you know it.

Angelo walked slowly forward. 'I deeply regret, Signorina Blake, that I completely misunderstood the invitation I thought I had received.' His mouth twisted harshly. 'It was an unforgivable error, and *naturalmente*, I wish to make amends for my behaviour in any way that is suggested.'

'My dear Angelo,' said his grandmother. 'In view of Prince Damiano's known moral stance, you have only one course of action. Tomorrow, *mio caro*, to prevent further scandal, you will announce that you and Signorina Blake are engaged to be married.'

CHAPTER THREE

ELLIE'S HAND JERKED and the remains of her brandy splashed down the skirt of her robe.

She said in a voice she hardly recognised, 'No. I can't—I won't do it. It—it's crazy. I tell you—nothing happened.'

'I believe you.' Lucrezia Damiano took the glass from her hand. 'And if only you had been seen by no-one but the Contessa and myself, there would be no problem.' She sighed. 'But my dear Cesare, I fear, will adopt a very different attitude.'

'Promised lovers carried away by their feelings, he might accept, although he would certainly not approve. But a casual encounter based on a passing attraction, and conducted in his house?' She shuddered. 'That he would find intolerable.' And paused, adding, 'Unforgivable.'

Ellie could feel the tension in the room crackling around her like an electrical storm.

'I'll talk to him,' she said wildly. 'Somehow make him understand.'

'But, dear girl,' said the Principessa. 'What could you possibly say?'

And in one thunderstruck moment, Ellie realised that both her godmother and the Contessa knew perfectly well exactly where and with whom Angelo had really planned to spend the night.

That they'd probably been aware of the situation for some

time.

But that, even if it was not a secret, it would still not be spoken of openly, because discretion had to be observed at all costs.

Which, in the short term, she was being called upon to pay. And her silence was only the first instalment.

She bent her head. 'Nothing,' she said wearily. 'I suppose.'

'You show good sense,' the Contessa remarked. She looked calmly at her grandson. 'You have not spoken, Angelo *mio*.'

His tone was icy. 'Perhaps I am lost for words.'

Tuttavia, I am sure you appreciate the necessity. Your negotiations with Prince Damiano will go more smoothly if you undertake them as Signorina Blake's *fidanzato*, rather than her attempted seducer. I am certain you must agree.'

'Under the circumstances, it seems I have little choice,' he said with an undisguised bitterness that made Ellie send him a surprised glance from beneath the veil of her lashes. He added with chilling clarity, 'And an engagement is not a marriage.'

Excuse me, Ellie wanted to say indignantly, but just who is doing the big favour here and to whom? Because, Count Angelo Manzini, I wouldn't want you if you came gift-wrapped.

And tried to put out of her mind the sudden searing memory of the way his mouth had moved on hers with such devastating sensual purpose, and her own shocked, aching reaction.

'Then the matter is settled,' the Principessa said briskly, and rose. 'Now I suggest we try to get some rest for what is left of the night.' She paused, then added pointedly, 'Let us hope there will

be no further alarms to disturb us.'

Ellie did not find the remainder of the night particularly restful. Her belongings had already been transferred to her new room, thanks to the supremely efficient Giovanni, whom, she thought shuddering, she never wanted to look in the face again. She had to admit that the accommodation was more luxurious than the tower room and possessed a very much larger and very comfortable bed for its occupant to sink into.

But she could not relax. She had far too much to think about, little of it pleasant. For one thing, it was clear that she and Angelo Manzini had been deliberately set up, and almost certainly by Silvia, but what she couldn't figure was—why?

For another, as she'd turned at the door of the *salotto* to say 'Goodnight', she'd found him watching her go with an expression of such scornful resentment that she'd felt her skin burn under his regard.

Anyone would think, she'd thought angrily, as she went upstairs, that I was the one having the illicit *affaire*, instead of him. But whatever problems he's having, he's brought entirely on himself, and he has no-one else to blame.

Plus he must know the last thing I ever wanted was to become involved with him or any of his sordid little games, so a touch of gratitude wouldn't come amiss.

Nor could she escape the terrible irony that the first time she'd found herself in bed with a man was only as a result of mistaken identity. She supposed it was almost funny, yet she had never felt

less like laughing in her life.

The entire situation had been total humiliation, she thought as pain twisted inside her, turning rapidly into complete disaster.

She lay in the darkness, her mind revolving wearily over the same well-trodden ground, trying to make sense of it all and failing miserably.

Wondering too how she would get through the horrific difficulties of the day ahead, pretending to be engaged to a man who appeared to despise her.

She could find no answer to that and there were already pale streaks in the eastern sky when she eventually fell into an uneasy sleep.

It was mid-morning when she was woken by one of the maids bringing her a breakfast tray of tea with lemon, warm rolls, ham and cheese. At least she was being spared the gauntlet of the dining room, she thought, as the memory of Signor Barzado's face, goggle-eyed with shock, invaded her shuddering mind. But that had to be the least of her worries.

She ate what she could, then showered quickly and dressed.

She paused to look at herself in the full-length mirror before venturing downstairs, scrutinising her ordinary dark green linen skirt and very ordinary white tee shirt. That said it all, she thought, grimacing at her reflection. And no-one in their right mind would ever believe that a man like Angelo Manzini would ask her to marry him, or steal through the darkness for a secret night of passion in her arms.

However, that was the story, and she would somehow have to stick to it. But only for a strictly limited period, she told herself, lifting her chin. Which was probably the sole aspect of the situation that she and Count Manzini were likely to agree on.

Giovanni was waiting as she descended the stairs, inclining his head respectfully as he told her the Principessa wished her to be shown to her private sitting room.

No real surprise there, Ellie thought drily. It was a charming retreat, furnished in shell pink, a shade her godmother described as ‘most calming to the nerves’, and where no-one else would dare to go unless specifically invited, so their conversation would be undisturbed.

When they reached the door, Giovanni tapped deferentially, then ushered her in. Ellie walked in, a smile nailed firmly in place, only to stop dead as the room’s sole occupant turned from the window to face her.

He was wearing charcoal pants this morning, and a matching shirt open at the neck. Against the sunlit pastel background, he looked as dark as a moonless night, making Ellie feel, absurdly, that this pretty room was no longer a sanctuary but a panther’s den.

It was all she could do not to take a step backwards, but she recovered herself and said quietly and glacially, ‘I thought I was here to speak to my godmother, Count Manzini.’

‘She felt we should have an opportunity to meet alone.’ His tone was casual. ‘And as we have to convince the world we have

been doing so quite intimately over the past weeks, it might be better if you addressed me as Angelo. And I shall call you Elena.'

It was all said without smiling, but at least he wasn't looking at her as if she was a slug in his salad. Cool indifference seemed an appropriate description. And she would match it.

She lifted her chin. 'Then you really intend to go on with this—ridiculous pretence?'

'Unfortunately, yes.' He paused. 'It was mentioned last night, I think, that I am here to negotiate an important financial deal for Galantana with Prince Damiano. There is a great deal at stake, and I will not allow my plans for a major expansion of the company to be wrecked by the malice of an angry woman.'

She said quickly. 'Angry?'

'You were aware, I suppose, that your cousin had been my mistress?'

'No, I wasn't,' she snapped. 'Not until you arrived yesterday and I saw her reaction.'

'Ah,' he said. 'Then you also will not know that I ended the relationship two weeks ago.'

'Ended it?' She stared at him. 'That wasn't the impression you gave last night.'

'It was to be the last time,' he said, shrugging. 'And one doesn't wish to disappoint a lady.'

'Really?' Ellie's tone bit. 'Maybe you should have remembered the risk you were running a little earlier and stayed in your own room.'

‘Hindsight,’ he said, ‘is a miraculous gift. Besides, the invitation I received was—most pressing.’

Her face warmed as she recalled just how sure he’d been of his welcome. ‘I—I really don’t want to hear about it.’ She took a deep breath. ‘And I still can’t believe that Silvia’s done this. I—I had no intention of spending the weekend here. I only came because I was concerned about her.’ She spread her hands. ‘Even if she wanted revenge by setting you up, why did she have to involve me? It’s unbelievable.’

His voice was expressionless. ‘She may have had a reason.’

‘Well, I can’t imagine what it could be.’ Ellie paused. ‘Anyway, how did she know you’d be here?’

He frowned. ‘I probably mentioned it, when it seemed not to matter. I forget.’ ‘A costly lapse.’

‘As you say.’ His mouth hardened. ‘But, believe me, I would have remembered if she had said she was also to be a guest—and changed my plans accordingly.’

Ellie said slowly, ‘Once she’d talked me into it, of course, her scheme just—fell into place. I can see that now. After all, you’d have no means of knowing that the tower room was always given to me.’

‘No.’ He gave her a considering look. ‘*Infatti*, its isolation seemed to make it ideal for a place of assignation.’ He paused. ‘How did she persuade you to come with her?’

She bit her lip. ‘She said Ernesto was becoming foolishly jealous and she needed me to be a kind of chaperone.’

Dio mio. His mouth tightened. 'And instead she made you her *ingenuo*—her fall guy.'

'Yes.' She hesitated. 'I presume she was also the one who gave the alarm about the supposed intruder.'

'But of course,' he said. 'And with impeccable timing.'

She swallowed. 'If you say so.' Her flush deepened. 'But surely you—you must have known that you weren't—that I wasn't ...?'

'Not until you drew blood.' His smile was sudden and mocking. 'And maybe not even then, although it is usually my back that suffers.'

If she blushed any more, she would probably burst into flames, Ellie thought, setting her jaw. 'Then it's a pity you didn't realise your mistake at once,' she said icily. 'And spared us both some hideous embarrassment as well as this present ghastly mess.'

'How true,' he said. 'But a man with a warm, naked girl in his arms does not always think clearly, you understand.'

No, thought Ellie. She did not understand, but she did not intend to cause him further amusement by saying so.

She said stiffly, 'You seem to be taking this very lightly, Count Manzini.'

'Do I?' There was an edge to his voice. 'You would be entirely wrong to think so, Signorina Blake. I accept the situation we have been forced into because I must. But, believe me, I shall not forget the cause.'

He paused. 'Tell me something. Why, last night, didn't you tell the truth about my presence in your bed?'

She said in a low voice, 'Perhaps if Madrina had been alone, I'd have done so, and the whole thing could have been—hushed up. But there were other people there—your grandmother—Signor Barzado. I couldn't let them know that you thought I was really Silvia.'

His mouth curled cynically. 'Your loyalty is as touching as it is misplaced.'

She said stiltedly, 'What you don't realise is that she's been—good to me. Generous too with things like—clothes.'

'And the scent you wore last night,' he said softly. 'Was that also a gift from her?'

'Why, yes. It was almost a full bottle. She said she no longer cared for it.' She gave him an uncertain look. 'How did you know?'

'A fortunate guess,' he said. 'Pour the rest away, *signorina*. It does not suit you, as I am sure she knew.'

'But it wasn't just Silvia,' she added unhappily. 'There were her parents to consider as well. They've always been so kind to me.' She hesitated. 'And—Ernesto, too, in his way. He doesn't deserve to be hurt like this.'

He shrugged. '*Prima o poi*. Sooner or later, it will happen, but I, *grazie a Dio*, shall not be the cause.'

He moved away from the window, walking towards her, and this time she did step back, her eyes meeting his defensively. He halted, the dark brows lifting in hauteur.

He said, 'Perhaps I should remind you that we are supposed

to be passionately in love. So much so that we forgot everything in our need to be together.'

'Who on earth is going to believe that?' she muttered defensively.

'No-one—if you intend to flinch each time I come near you,' he returned tersely. 'Everyone—if you stand with your hand in mine and smile at me while our engagement is announced. And, most importantly, Prince Damiano will believe it.'

'But is that really so important? There must be other banks you could approach if Credito Europa turns you down,' she protested.

'In the financial world, a rejection by Cesare Damiano would be taken very seriously,' he said. 'It would be a black mark not just against me but Galantana too. I cannot permit that to happen.'

He added harshly, 'This trick that Silvia has played on us is like a stone dropped into a pool. The ripples are already beginning to spread. I discovered this at breakfast when I encountered Signora Barzado's prurient gaze. She cannot wait to leave, I think, and tell all Rome how we were caught *in flagrante*.'

Ellie looked down at the carpet. 'Your grandmother believes that too.'

'*Bene*. It follows that we must give the lady another less interesting story to spread.' He added sardonically, 'One with a happy ending.'

'It can hardly be called that.' She swallowed. 'More a tissue of lies.' She hesitated. 'And just how long will we have to maintain

this deception?’

‘For as long as it is necessary.’ He shrugged. ‘Believe me, *signorina*, you are not the only sufferer.’

He glanced past Ellie as the door opened to admit the Principessa, her smile a little fixed.

‘You must excuse me. I have been welcoming another guest. Silvia’s husband, *caro* Ernesto, has been able to join us. Such a pleasure.’ Ignoring Ellie’s gasp of disbelief, she paused, playing with the bracelet she was wearing, her glance flickering from one impassive face to the other, now flushed with anger as well as embarrassment.

‘And by now you have arranged everything between you, I am sure,’ she went on. ‘The Prince has telephoned to say he will be here for lunch, so I suggest the announcement is made then.’

But nothing happened ...

The same desperate words echoed and re-echoed in Ellie’s head, but remained unuttered. There was no point, she thought numbly. A course of action had been agreed, and would be adhered to. Ernesto’s sudden arrival had guaranteed that. But what had brought him? Had he come of his own accord, or had it already been arranged with Silvia? And had the important client who needed his advice ever existed?

She felt too weary to think any more, as she watched Angelo Manzini bow slightly, kiss her godmother’s hand then leave.

The Principessa came over to her, studying her with critical eyes. ‘You look a little worn, dearest girl. If you go to your room,

my maid will bring you this wonderful concealer that I have discovered and show you how to use it. You must look radiant for your *fidanzamento*.'

Ellie gave her an anguished look. 'Godmamma—I.'

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