



The Wedding Night Debt: Christmas at the Castello (bonus novella) (Harlequin Presents)

By Cathy Williams, Amanda Cinelli



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Hurt and humiliated to learn their vows were just a business transaction to Dio, Lucy has played the perfect wife in public, while their cold war waged in private. She wants to walk away—not bow to his command! Can she pay Dio's price and survive ten days as true husband and wife?



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- Sales Rank: #371182 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-10-01
- Released on: 2015-10-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Cathy Williams is a great believer in the power of perseverance as she had never written anything before her writing career, and from the starting point of zero has now fulfilled her ambition to pursue this most enjoyable of careers. She would encourage any would-be writer to have faith and go for it! She derives inspiration from the tropical island of Trinidad and from the peaceful countryside of middle England. Cathy lives in Warwickshire her family.

Amanda was born and raised in an Irish- Italian family in the suburbs of County Dublin, Ireland. Her passion for writing developed at a young age as a necessary outlet for an overactive imagination. She now splits her time between being a stay at home mom and writing love stories.

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Divorce. It was something that happened to other people: people who didn't take care of their marriages; who didn't understand that they were to be nurtured, looked after, handled as delicately as you would handle a piece of priceless porcelain.

At any rate, that had always been Lucy's way of thinking, and she wondered how it was that she was standing here now, in one of the grandest houses in London, waiting for her husband to return home so that she could broach the subject of divorcing him.

She looked at her diamondencrusted watch and her stomach knotted in anxiety. Dio was due back in half an hour. She couldn't remember where he had spent the past week and a half. New York? Paris? They had places in both. Or maybe he had been in their Mustique villa. Maybe he had gone there with another woman. Who knew? She certainly didn't.

Self-pity threatened to engulf her and she stemmed the tide with ease of practice born of habit.

She'd been married for nearly a year and a half, plenty of time to get accustomed to the way her youthful dreams had crumbled to ashes.

When she glanced up, she could see herself reflected in the huge, hand-made contemporary mirror which dominated the ultra-modern drawing room. Five foot ten, slender as a reed, long blonde hair that dropped to her shoulders, vanilla-blonde and poker-straight. When she was sixteen, she had been spotted by an agency and her father had tried to shove her into a career in modelling, because why waste a pretty face? After all, women weren't cut out for anything more challenging, not really... But she had resisted—not that it had done her any good at all, in the end, because what good had been her degree when she had ended up...here? In this vast house, wandering in and out of rooms like a wraith, playing the perfect hostess? As if perfect hostessing was any kind of career for someone who had a degree in maths.

She barely recognised the woman she had turned out to be. On a warm evening in the middle of July, she was languishing in silk culottes with a matching silk vest top, just a few discreet bits of fairly priceless jewellery and high heels. She had turned into a Stepford Wife, except without the adoring husband rolling in at five-thirty every evening and asking what was for dinner. That might have been a distinct improvement on what she actually had, which was...nothing.

Or, *had* been nothing. She allowed herself a little smile because things weren't quite as sterile as they had been. Her situation had changed in the past two months and she hugged that secret pleasure to herself.

It made up for all the time she had spent dressed up like an expensive doll, administering their various properties, smiling politely when she needed to smile politely and hosting dinner parties for the great and the good. Or, at any rate, the very, very rich.

And now...a divorce would set her free.

Provided Dio didn't kick up a fuss. Although she told herself that there was no reason for him to, she could still feel a prickle of nervous perspiration break out over her body.

When it came to the concrete jungle, Dio Ruiz was the pack leader. He was an alpha male who played by his own rules. He was the sexiest man on earth and also the most intimidating.

But he wasn't going to intimidate *her*. She had spent the past few days telling herself that, ever since she had decided which turning she would take at the crossroads—the turning that would put as much distance between herself and her husband as possible.

The only slight fly in the ointment was the fact that this would be the last thing he would be expecting and Dio didn't do well when it came to flies in the ointment, not to mention the unexpected.

She heard the slam of the front door and her stomach lurched sickeningly but she only turned around when she sensed him at the door, his powerful, restless personality permeating the room even before she looked at him.

Even now, after everything, hating him as much as she hated him, his physical beauty still managed to take her breath away.

At twenty-two, when she had first laid eyes on him, he had been the most sinfully stunning guy she had ever seen and nothing had changed on that front. He was still the most sinfully stunning guy she had ever seen. Raven-black hair framed arrogantly perfect features. His pale, silver-grey eyes, so unusual against his bronzed skin, were dramatically fringed with thick, dark lashes. His mouth was firm and sensuous. Every little bit of him relayed the message that he was not a guy to be messed with.

'What are you doing here? I thought you were in Paris...' Lounging in the doorway, Dio began tugging at his tie, strolling into the room at the same time.

Surprise, surprise. It wasn't often he found himself anywhere with his wife that hadn't been meticulously planned in advance. Their meetings were formal, staged, never, ever spontaneous. When they were both in London, their lives were hectic, a whirlwind of social events. They each had their separate quarters, readied themselves in their own private cocoons and met in the vast hall, both dressed to the nines and ready to present the united image that couldn't have been further from the truth.

Occasionally, she might accompany him to Paris, New York or Hong Kong, always the perfect accessory.

Smart, well-bred...and most of all stunningly beautiful.

Tie off, he tossed it onto the white leather sofa and circled her, frowning, before coming to rest directly in

front of her, where he began undoing the top two buttons of his shirt.

'So...' he drawled. 'To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?'

Her nostrils flared as she breathed him in. He had a scent that was peculiarly unique to him. Clean, woody and intensely masculine.

'Am I interrupting your plans for the evening?' She averted her eyes from the sliver of tanned chest just visible where he had unbuttoned the shirt.

'My plans involved reading through some fairly dull legal due diligence on a company I'm taking over. What plans did you think you might be interrupting?'

'No idea.' She shrugged her narrow shoulders. 'I don't know what you get up to in my absence, do I?'

'Would you like me to fill you in?'

'I don't care one way or another, although it might have been a little embarrassing if you'd come home with a woman on your arm.' She gave a brittle laugh, hating herself for how she sounded—hard, cold, dismissive.

It hadn't started out like this. In fact, she had actually been stupid enough, at the very beginning, to think that he was actually interested in her, actually attracted to her.

They had gone out on a few dates. She had made him laugh, telling him about some of her university friends and their escapades. She had listened, enthralled, about the places he had seen. The fact that her father had actually approved of the relationship had been a green light because her father had made a career out of disapproving of every single boy she had ever brought home, all three of them. In fact, he had made a career out of being critical and disapproving of everything she had ever done, and every choice she had ever made, so the fact that he had been accepting, *encouraging*, even, of Dio had been a refreshing change.

If she hadn't been so wet behind the ears, she might have asked herself why that was, but instead, heady with the joy of falling in love, she had chosen to overlook his sudden benevolence.

When Dio had proposed after a whirlwind romance she had been over the moon. The intense but chaste courtship had thrilled her, as had the fact that he hadn't wanted to wait. No long engagement for him! He had been eager to slip the ring on her finger and his eagerness had made her feel loved, wanted, desired.

Sometimes, she wondered whether she would have stupidly continued feeling loved, wanted and desired if she hadn't overheard that conversation on their wedding night. She'd been floating on a cloud, barely able to contain her excitement at the thought of their honeymoon in the Maldives and their wedding night, the big night when she would lose her virginity, because until then he had been the perfect gentleman.

He'd been nowhere to be seen and she had eventually floated away from the marquee in her father's garden, from the music and the people dancing and getting drunk, and had drifted off towards the kitchen and past her father's office, where she had immediately recognised the deep timbre of his voice.

A marriage of convenience...a company takeover... He had got her father's company, which had been losing money by the bucket load, and she had been an accessory thrown in for good measure. Or maybe, when she had bitterly thought about it later, her father had insisted on the marriage because if she was married to Dio

he would remain duty-bound to the family company. No doing the dirty once the signatures had been written on the dotted line! No dumping her father in the proverbial because he was no longer an asset!

She would be her father's safety net and Dio—as her father had spitefully told her when she had later confronted him with what she had overheard—would get the sort of class that his vast sums of money would never have been able to afford him.

Lucy, in the space of a couple of hours, had grown up. She was a married woman and her marriage was over before she had even embarked on it.

Except, she couldn't get out of it, her father had told her, not that easily. Did she want to see the family company go under? There'd been some uncomfortable stuff with some of the company profits...a little borrowed here and there...he might go to prison if it all came out. Did she want that, to see her father behind bars? It would hit the news. Did she want that? Fingers pointed? People smirking?

She had acquiesced to her sham of a marriage although, frankly, her father might have escaped a prison sentence but only by handing the prison sentence over to her.

The one thing she had resolved, however, was to be married in name only. No sex. No cosy time together. If Dio thought that he had bought her body and soul, she had been determined to prove him wrong. When she thought of the way she had fallen for his charm, had thought he'd actually been interested in inexperienced little *her*, she had burned with shame.

So she had quietly put her dreams into a box, shut the lid and thrown away the key...and here she was now.

'Is there a problem with the Paris apartment?' Dio asked politely. 'Can I get you a drink? Something to celebrate the one-off occasion of us being in the same room alone without prior arrangement? I can't think of the last time that happened, can you?' But, at a push, he would have said before they'd got married, when she had been studiously courting him, even though at the time he had thought it to be the other way around.

He had set his sights on Robert Bishop and his company a long, long time ago. He had covertly kept tabs on it, had seen the way it had slid further and further into a morass of debt and, like any predator worth his salt, he had bided his time.

Revenge was always a dish best eaten cold.

He just hadn't banked on the daughter. One glimpse of Lucy and her innocent, ethereal beauty and he had altered his plans on the spot. He had wanted her. She had touched something in him with her innocence and, cynic that he was, he had fallen hook, line and sinker.

He hadn't banked on that complication, had thought that she would hop into bed with him, allowing him to get her out of his system before he concluded business with her father. But, after a few weeks of playing a courting game that wasn't his thing at all, he had concluded that he wanted more than just a slice of her.

Only thing was...nearly a year and a half later and their marriage was as dry as dust. He still hadn't touched that glorious body, leaving him with the certainty that, whilst he had thought he had the upper hand, she and her conniving father had actually played him for a fool. Instead of swinging the wrecking ball to the company and setting the police on Robert Bishop—who had been embezzling for years—he had ended up saving the company because he had wanted Lucy. He had wanted her at his side and in his bed and, if saving

the company came as part of the deal, then so be it. Course, he had saved it and made money from it, ensuring that Robert Bishop was firmly locked out with just enough pocket money to teach him the joys of frugality, but still...

He had been unwittingly charmed by her open, shy, disingenuous personality. When she had looked at him with those big, grave brown eyes, her face propped in the palm of her hand, her expression enraptured, he had felt as though he had found the secret of eternal life and it had gone to his head like a drug.

She'd led him on. God knew if her slime of a father had kick-started the idea but that didn't matter.

What mattered was that they had got what they wanted while he had certainly missed out on what *he* had banked on getting.

She was shaking her head at the offer of a drink and he ignored her, fetching himself a glass of whisky and a glass of wine for her.

'Relax,' he said, pressing the glass on her and then retreating to the bay window where he sipped his drink and watched her in absolute silence. She had made it crystal clear on their wedding night that theirs was not a real marriage. No sex, no chit-chat, no getting to know one another. So he'd taken over her father's company but that didn't mean that she came as part of the package deal and, if he thought he'd been short-changed, then that was too bad.

He hadn't asked how she knew, what her father had said or what she had been told. He'd been duped and that was the end of the story.

The thought of having any kind of soul-searching conversation about the quality of their marriage had never crossed Dio's mind. He had made no effort to talk things through. And no one could ever accuse her of not being the 'perfect wife'. She certainly looked the part. Willowy, blonde, with a devastating *prettiness* that conveyed an air of peculiar innocence underneath the polished exterior. It was a quality that no model or socialite could replicate. She looked like someone waiting for life to *happen* and people fell for it. She was the greatest business asset a man could have. The woman, Dio had often thought, had missed her career as an Oscar-winning actress.

'So, if you're not in Paris, it's because something's wrong with the apartment. You should know by now that I don't get involved with the nitty-gritty details of my houses. That's *your* job.'

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