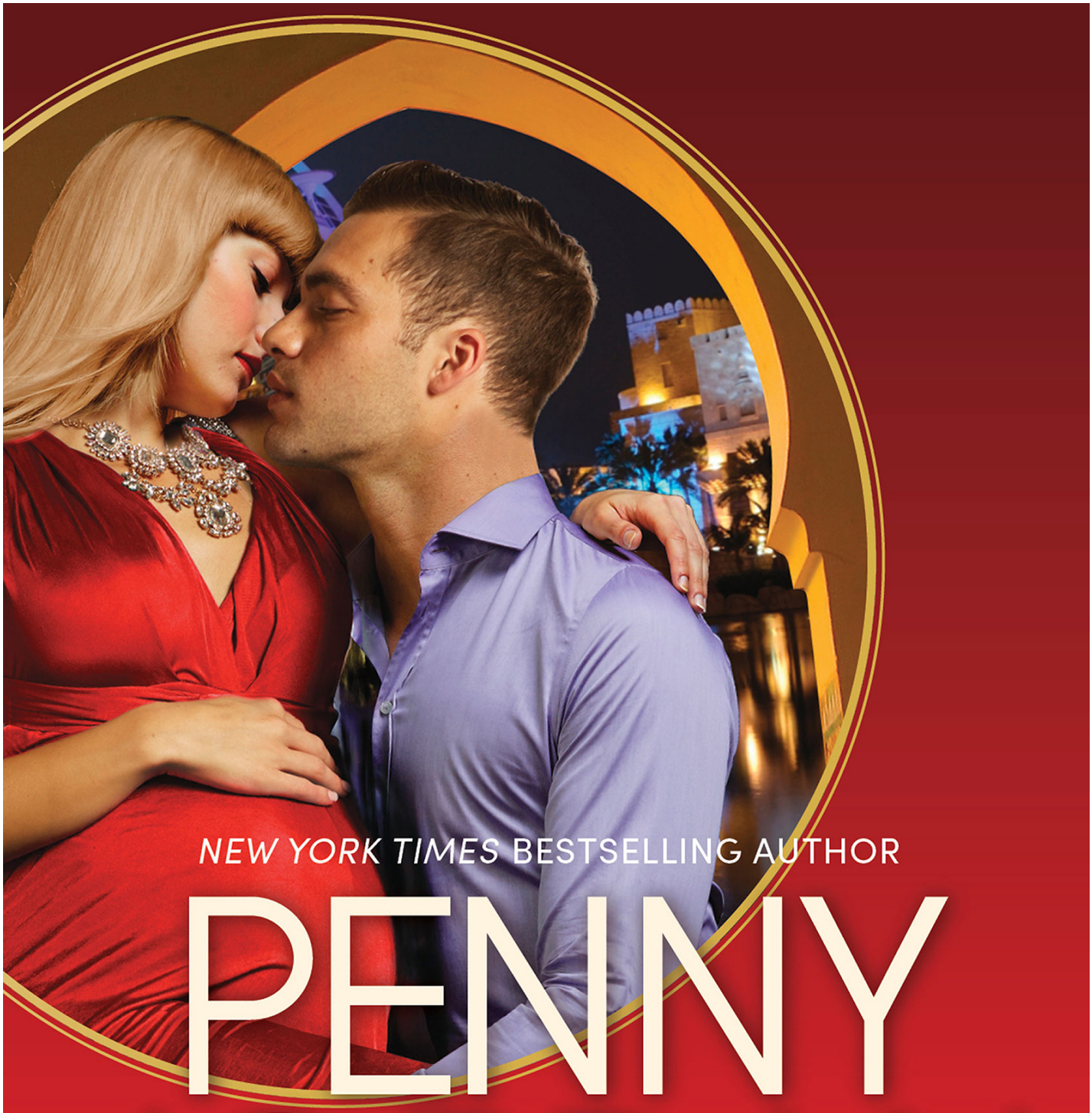

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THE SHEIKH'S BABY

TWO CLASSIC ROMANCE STORIES

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The Sheikh's Baby

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The lives of two sheikhs are changed forever…when they each meet the woman of their dreams ONE NIGHT WITH THE SHEIKH The searing attraction between Sheikh Xavier Al Agir and Mariella Sutton is instant and all consuming. When a storm leaves Mariella stranded at Xavier's desert home, desire soon takes over, leading to a night neither will soon forget–for more reasons than they can imagine!THE SHEIKH'S BLACKMAILED MISTRESS Life has taught Prince Vereham al a'Karim bin Hakar to control his emotions. But an unexpected encounter with the enchanting Samantha McLellan shakes Vere's steely reserve. Though love is not an option for the sheikh, he knows that somehow he must have Sam.

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Содержание

MILLS & BOON 6
One Night with the Sheikh 7
CONTENTS 8
PROLOGUE 9
CHAPTER ONE 12
CHAPTER TWO 18
CHAPTER THREE 24
CHAPTER FOUR 29
CHAPTER FIVE 33
CHAPTER SIX 38
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 45

From The Penny Jordan Collection, the lives of two sheikhs are changed forever…when they each meet the woman of their dreams

One Night with the Sheikh

The searing attraction between Sheikh Xavier Al Agir and Mariella Sutton is instant and all consuming. When a storm leaves Mariella stranded at Xavier's desert home, desire soon takes over, leading to a night neither will soon forget–for more reasons than they can imagine!

The Sheikh's Blackmailed Mistress

Life has taught Prince Vereham al a'Karim bin Hakar to control his emotions. But an unexpected encounter with the enchanting Samantha McLellan shakes Vere's steely reserve. Though love is not an option for the sheikh, he knows that somehow he must have Sam.

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The Sheikh's Baby

One Night with the Sheikh

The Sheikh's Blackmailed Mistress

Penny Jordan

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CONTENTS

ONE NIGHT WITH THE SHEIKH

THE SHEIKH'S BLACKMAILED MISTRESS

One Night with the Sheikh

Penny Jordan

CONTENTS

Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Epilogue

PROLOGUE

‘YOU WON’T FORGET your mummy whilst I’m away working, will you, my precious baby girl?’

Mariella watched sympathetically as her younger half-sister Tanya’s eyes filled with tears as she handed her precious four-month-old daughter over to her.

‘I know that Fleur couldn’t have anyone better to look after her than you, Ella,’ Tanya acknowledged emotionally. ‘After all, you became my mother as well as my sister when Mum and Dad died. I just wish I could have got a job that didn’t mean I have to be away, but this six-week contract on this cruise liner pays so well that I just can’t afford to give it up! Yes, I know you would support us both,’ she continued before Mariella could say anything, ‘but that isn’t what I want. I want to be as independent as I can be. Anyway,’ she told Mariella bitterly, ‘supporting Fleur financially should be her father’s job and not yours! What I ever saw in that weak, lying rat of a man, I’ll never know! My wonderful sexy dream fantasy of a sheikh! Some dream he turned out to be—more of a nightmare.’

Mariella let her vent her feelings, without comment, knowing just how devastated and hurt her half-sister had been when her lover had abandoned her.

‘You don’t have to do this, Tanya,’ she told her gently now. ‘I’m earning enough to support us all, and this house is big enough for the three of us.’

‘Oh, Mariella, I know that. I know you’d starve yourself to give to me and Fleur, but that isn’t what I want. You’ve done so much for me since Mum and Dad died. You were only eighteen, after all, three years younger than I am now, when we found out that there wasn’t going to be any money! I suppose Dad wanted to give us all so much that he simply didn’t think about what would happen if anything happened to him, and with him remortgaging the house because of the stock market crisis.’

Silently the sisters looked at one another.

Both of them had inherited their mother’s delicate bone structure and heart-shaped face, along with her strawberry-blonde hair and peach perfect complexion, but where Tanya had inherited her father’s height and hazel eyes, Mariella had inherited intensely turquoise eyes from her father, the man who had decided less than a year after her birth that the responsibilities of fatherhood and marriage simply weren’t for him and walked out on his wife and baby daughter.

‘It’s not fair,’ Tanya had mock complained to her when she had announced that she was not going to go to university as Mariella had hoped she would, but wanted to pursue a career singing and dancing. ‘If I had your eyes, I’d have a ready-made advantage over everyone else whenever I went for a part.’

Although she knew how headstrong and impulsive her half-sister could be, Mariella admired her for what she was doing, even whilst she worried about how she was going to cope with being away from her daughter for six long weeks.

Whatever small differences there might ever have been between them, in their passionate and protective love for baby Fleur they were totally united.

‘I’ll ring every day,’ Tanya promised chokily.

‘And I want to know everything she does, Ella…Every tiny little thing. Oh, Ella…I feel so guilty about all of this…I know how you suffered as a little girl because your father wasn’t there; because he’d abandoned you and Mum…and I know too how lucky I was to have both Mum and Dad and you there for me, and yet here is my poor little Fleur…’

Holding Fleur in one arm, Mariella hugged her sister tightly with the other.

‘The taxi’s here,’ she warned, before releasing Tanya and tenderly brushing the tears off her face.

* * *

‘ELLA! I’VE GOT the most fab commission for you.’

Recognising the voice of her agent, Mariella shifted Fleur's warm weight from one arm to the other, smiling lovingly at her as the baby guzzled happily on her bottle. 'It's racehorses, dozens of them. The client owns his own racing yard out in Zuran. He's a member of the Zuran royal family, and apparently he heard about you via that chap in Kentucky, whose Kentucky Derby winner you painted the other year. Anyway—he wants to fly you out there, all expenses paid, so that you can discuss the project with him, see the beasts *in situ* so to speak!'

Mariella laughed. Kate, with her immaculate designer clothes and equally immaculate all-white apartment, was not an animal lover. 'Ella, what is that noise?' she demanded plaintively.

Mariella laughed. 'It's Fleur. I'm just giving her her bottle. It does sound promising, but right now I'm pretty booked with commissions, and, to be honest, I don't really think that going to Zuran is on. For a start, I'm looking after Fleur for the next six weeks, and—'

'That's no problem—I am sure Prince Sayid wouldn't mind you taking her with you and February is the perfect time of year to go there; the weather will be wonderful—warm and mild. Ella, you can't turn this one down. Just what I'd earn in commission is making my mouth water,' she admitted frankly.

Ella laughed. 'Ah, I see…'

She had begun painting animal 'portraits' almost by accident. Her painting had been merely a small hobby and her 'pet portraits' done for friends, but her reputation had spread by word of mouth, and eventually she had decided to make it her full-time career.

Now she earned what to her was a very comfortable living from her work, and she knew she would normally have leapt at the chance she was being offered.

'I'd love to go, Kate,' she replied. 'But Fleur is my priority right now…'

'Well, don't turn it down out of hand,' Kate warned her. 'Like I said, there's no reason why Fleur shouldn't go with you. You won't be working on this trip, it's only a mutual look-see. You'd be gone just over a week, and forget any idiotic ideas you might have about potential health hazards to any young baby out there—Zuran is second to none when it comes to being a world-class cosmopolitan city!'

One of the reasons Mariella had originally bought her small three-storey house had been because of the excellent north-facing window on the top floor, which she had turned into her studio. With Fleur contently fed she looked out at the grey early February day. The rain that had been sheeting down all week had turned to a mere drizzle. A walk in the park and some fresh air would do them both good, Mariella decided, putting Fleur down whilst she went to prepare her pram.

It had been her decision to buy the baby a huge old-fashioned 'nanny' style pram.

'You can use the running stroller if you want,' she had informed Tanya firmly. 'But when I walk her it will be in a traditional vehicle and at a traditional pace!'

'Ella, you talk as though you were sixty-eight, not twenty-eight,' Tanya had protested. Perhaps she was a little bit old-fashioned, Mariella conceded as she started to remove the blankets from the running stroller to put in the pram. Her father's desertion and her mother's consequent vulnerability and helplessness had left her with a very strong determination to stand on her own two feet, and an extremely strong disinclination to allow herself to be emotionally vulnerable through loving a man too much as her mother had done.

After all, as Tanya had proved, it was possible to inherit a tendency!

She frowned as her fingers brushed against a balled-up piece of paper as she removed the bedding. It could easily have scratched Fleur's delicate skin. She was on the point of throwing it away, when a line of her sister's handwriting suddenly caught her eye.

The piece of paper was a letter, Mariella recognised, and she could see the name and address on it quite plainly.

'Sheikh Xavier Al Agir, No. 24 Quaffire Beach Road, Zuran City.'

Her heart thudded guiltily as she smoothed out the note and read the first line.

‘You have destroyed my life and Fleur’s and I shall hate you for ever for that,’ she read.

The letter was obviously one Tanya had written but not sent to Fleur’s father.

Tanya had always refused to discuss her relationship with him other than to say that he was a very wealthy Middle Eastern man whom she had met whilst working in a nightclub as a singer and dancer.

Privately Mariella had always thought that he had escaped far too lightly from his responsibility to her sister and to his baby…

And now she had discovered he lived in Zuran! Frowning slightly, she carefully folded the note. She had no right to interfere, she knew that, but…Would she be interfering or merely acknowledging the validity of fate? How many, many times over the years had she longed for the opportunity to confront her own father and tell him just what she thought of him, how he had broken her mother’s heart and almost destroyed her life?

Her father, like her mother, was now dead, and could never make reparation for what he had done; but Tanya’s lover was very much alive, and it would give her a great deal of satisfaction to tell him just what she thought of him!

Blowing Fleur a kiss, she hurried over to the telephone and quickly dialled her agent’s number.

‘Kate,’ she began. ‘I’ve been thinking…about that trip to Zuran…’

‘You’ve changed your mind! Wonderful…You won’t regret it, Ella, I promise you. I mean, this guy is mega, mega rich, and what he’s prepared to pay to have his four-legged friends immortalised in oils…’

Listening to her, Mariella reflected ruefully that on occasion Kate could show a depressing tendency to favour the material over the emotional, but she was an excellent agent!

CHAPTER ONE

ZURAN HAD TO have the cleanest airport in the world, Mariella decided as she retrieved her luggage and headed for the exit area, and Kate had been right about Prince Sayid's willingness to spare no expense to get her to Zuran. In the first-class cabin of their aircraft Fleur had been treated like a little princess!

Arrangements had been made for her to be chauffeur-driven to the Beach Club Resort where she would be staying along with Fleur in their own private bungalow, and, thanks to the prince's influence with the right diplomatic departments, all the necessary arrangements to get Fleur a passport, with Tanya's permission, had also been accomplished at top speed!

Craning her neck, Mariella looked round the busy arrivals area searching for someone carrying a placard bearing her name.

Behind her she was vaguely aware of something going on, not so much because of an increase in the noise level but rather because of the way it suddenly fell away. Alerted by some sixth sense, Mariella turned round, her eyes widening as she watched the way the crowds parted to make way for the small phalanx of white-robed men. Like traditional outriders, they carved a wide path through the crowd to allow the man striding behind them to cross the marble floor unhindered. Taller than the others, he looked neither to the right nor the left so that Mariella's artist's eye was able to observe the patrician arrogance of a profile that could only belong to a man used to being in command.

Instinctively, without being able to substantiate her reaction, Mariella didn't like him. He was too arrogant, too aware of his own importance. So physically and powerfully male, perfect in a way that sent a hundred unwanted sexual messages skittering over her suddenly very sensitive nerve endings. He had drawn level with her, and, whether because she sensed her antagonism or because Mariella had gripped her just a little bit more tightly, Fleur suddenly broke the silence with a small cry.

Instantly the dark head turned in their direction whilst the equally dark eyes burned into Mariella's. Mariella registered his gaze as her body gave a small, tight shudder.

The dark eyes stripped her, not of her clothes, but of her skin, her defences, Mariella recognised shakily, leaving them shredded down to her bones; her soul! But his gaze lingered longest of all on her face. Her eyes, she realised as she returned his remote and disdainful look of contempt with one of smouldering fury.

Fleur made another small sound and immediately his gaze switched from her to the baby and stayed there for a while, before it switched back to her own as though checking something.

Whatever it had been it brought a sneering look of contempt to his mouth that curved it into an even more dangerous line, Mariella noticed as her body responded to his reaction with a slow burn of colour along her cheekbones.

How dared he look at her with such contempt? She didn't care who or what he was! Once she imagined her father must have looked so at her mother before walking out on her, before leaving her to sink into the needy despair and dependence that Mariella remembered so starkly from her childhood, until her stepfather with his love and kindness had come to lift them both out of the dark, mean place her father had left them in.

As swiftly and as silently as they had arrived the small group of men swept through the hall and left. As a production it had been ridiculously overdone and theatrical, Mariella decided as she found the chauffeur patiently waiting for her and allowed herself to be carefully driven along with Fleur in the air-conditioned luxury of the limousine.

* * *

THE BEACH CLUB RESORT was everything a five-star resort should be and more, Mariella acknowledged a couple of hours later when she had finished her exploration of her new surroundings.

The bungalow she had been allocated had two large bedrooms, each with its own bathroom, a small kitchen area, a living room, a private patio complete with whirlpool, but it was the obvious forethought that had gone into equipping the place for a very young baby that most impressed Mariella. A good-sized cot had been provided and placed next to the bed, the bathroom was equipped with what was obviously a brand-new baby bath, baby toiletries had been added to the luxurious range provided for her own use, and in the fridge was a very full selection of top-of-the-range baby foods. However, it was the letter that had been left for her stating that the Beach Club's chef would prepare fresh organic baby food for Fleur on request that really made Mariella feel she could relax.

Having settled Fleur, who fell asleep as easily and comfortably as though she was in her own home, Mariella checked her watch and then put a call through to her sister. Tanya's cruise liner was on an extended tour of the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico.

'Ella, how's Fleur?' Tanya demanded immediately.

'Fast asleep,' Mariella told her. 'She was fine on the flight and got thoroughly spoiled. How are you?'

'Oh…fine…Very busy…we're doing two shows each evening, with no time off, but as I said the money is excellent. Ella, I must go…Give Fleur a big kiss for me.'

A little guiltily, Mariella looked at the now-silent mobile. She hadn't said anything to Tanya about her determination to confront her sister's faithless ex-lover and tell him just what she thought about him! Tanya might have gone willingly to his bed, but Mariella knew she hadn't been lying to her when she had told her that she had believed that he loved her, and that they had a future together.

* * *

MARIELLA STRUGGLED TO wake up from a confused and disjointed dream in which she was being dragged by her guards to lie trembling at the feet of the man who was now her master. How she hated him. Hated him for the way he stood there towering over her, looking down at her, looking over her so thoroughly that she felt as though his gaze burned her flesh.

He was looking deep into her eyes. His were the colour of the storm-tossed skies and seas of her homeland, a cold, pure grey that chilled her through and through.

'You dare to challenge me?' he was demanding softly as he moved closer to her. Behind her Mariella was conscious of the threatening presence of the guards.

She hated him with every sinew of her body, every pulse of blood from her heart. He left the divan where he had been sitting and came towards her, bending down, extending his hand to her face, but as his fingers gripped her chin Mariella turned her head and bit sharply into the soft pad of flesh below his thumb.

She felt the movement of the air as the guards leapt into action, heard them draw their swords, and her body waited for the welcome kiss of death, but instead the guards were dismissed whilst her tormentor stepped back from her. One bright spot of blood glistened on the intricately inlaid tiled floor.

'You are like a wildcat and as such need to be tamed,' she heard him telling her softly.

She could feel the cleanliness of her hair on her bare skin and froze as he slowly circled her, standing behind her and sliding his hand through her hair and then wrapping it tightly around his fingers, arching her back against his body so that her semi-naked breasts were thrown into taut profile. His free hand reached for the clasp securing her top and her whole body shook with outrage. And then abruptly he released her, turning to face her so that she could see the contempt in his eyes.

Swimming up through the layers of her dream Mariella recognised that his face was one she knew; that his cynical contempt was something she had experienced before…

In the half heartbeat of time between sleeping and waking she realised why. The man in her dream had been the arrogant, hawk-eyed man she had seen earlier at the airport!

Getting out of bed, she went into the bathroom, shaking her head to clear her thoughts, and then, when that tactic did nothing to subdue their dangerous, clinging tentacles of remembered sensuality, she turned on the shower, deliberately setting it at a punishing 'cool,' before stepping into it.

The minute the cool spray hit her overheated skin she shuddered, gritting her teeth as she washed the slick film from her body, and then stepping out of the shower, to wrap herself in a luxuriously thick, soft white towel. In the mirror in front of her she could see the pale, pearlescent gleam of her own skin, and dangerously she knew that if she were merely to close her eyes, behind her closed eyelids she would immediately see her tormentor, tall, cynically watchful, as he mocked her before reaching out to take the towel from her body and claim her.

Infuriated with herself, Mariella rubbed her damp skin roughly with the towel, and then reset the air-conditioning. In her cot Fleur slept peacefully. Going to the fridge, Mariella removed a bottle of water and opened it. Her hand was shaking so much some of it slopped from the bottle onto the worktop.

* * *

MARIELLA AND FLEUR had just finished eating a leisurely breakfast on their private patio when a message came chattering through the fax machine. Frowning, Mariella read it. The prince had been called away on some unexpected business and would not now be able to see her for several days. He apologised to Mariella for having to change their arrangements, but asked her to enjoy the facilities of the Beach Club at his expense until his return.

Carefully smoothing sun-protection lotion onto Fleur's happy, wriggling little body, Mariella bent her head to kiss her tummy, acknowledging that this would be an ideal time to seek out Fleur's father. She had his address, after all! So all she needed to do was summon a taxi to take her there!

Kate had been quite correct when she had described Zuran's February weather as perfect, Mariella admitted half an hour later as she carried Fleur out into the warm sunshine. Since she was here on business and not holiday she had packed accordingly, and was wearing a pair of soft white linen trousers and a protective long-sleeved top. When she showed the taxi driver the sheikh's address he smiled and nodded. 'It will take maybe three quarters of an hour,' he told her. 'You have business with the sheikh?' he asked her conversationally.

Having learned already just how friendly people were, Mariella didn't take offence, replying simply tongue in cheek, 'You could say that.'

'He is a famous man. Revered by his tribe. They admire him for the way he has supported their right to live their lives in the traditional way. Although he is an extremely successful businessman it is said that he still prefers to live simply in the desert the way his people always have. He is a very good man.'

Mariella reflected inwardly that the picture the driver had just drawn for her was considerably at odds with the one she had gained from her half-sister.

Tanya had met the man in a nightclub, after all. Mariella had never liked the fact that Tanya worked there—although she had been employed as a singer, it openly advertised the sexual charms of its dancers, and Tanya had freely admitted that the majority of the customers were male.

And, certainly, during the twelve months they had been together, Mariella had never heard Tanya mention any predilection on her sexy sheikh's part to spend quality time in the middle of the desert! In fact, if she was honest, she had gained the impression that he was something of a 'playboy,' to use a perhaps now outdated word.

It took just under forty minutes for them to reach the impressive white mansion, which the taxi driver assured her was the correct address.

A huge pair of locked wrought-iron gates prevented them from going any farther, but as if by magic an official stepped out of one of the pair of gatehouses that flanked the gates, and approached the car.

As firmly as she could Mariella explained that she wished to see the sheikh.

‘I am sorry but he is not available,’ the official informed her. ‘He is away at the oasis at the moment and not expected back for some time.’

This was a complication Mariella had not been expecting. Fleur had woken up and was starting to grizzle a little.

‘If you would care to leave a message?’ the official was offering courteously.

Ruefully Mariella acknowledged inwardly that the nature of the message she wanted to give to the sheikh was better delivered in person!

Thanking him, she asked the taxi driver to take her back to the hotel.

‘If you want, I can find someone to drive you to this oasis?’ he suggested.

‘You know where it is?’ she questioned him.

He gave a small shrug. ‘Sure! But you will need a four-wheel drive vehicle, as the track can be covered with sand.’

‘Could I drive there myself?’ Mariella asked him.

‘It is possible, yes. It would take you two, maybe three hours. You wish me to give you the directions?’

It made more sense to drive to the oasis under her own steam than to go to the expense of paying a driver for the day as well as hiring a vehicle, Mariella decided.

‘Please,’ she agreed.

* * *

METHODICALLY, MARIELLA CHECKED through everything she had put on one side to pack into the four-wheel drive for her trip into the desert. The Beach Club’s information desk staff had assured her that it would be perfectly safe for her to drive into the desert, and had attended to all the necessary formalities for her, including ensuring that a proper baby seat was provided for Fleur.

The trip should take her around three hours—four if she stopped off at the popular oasis resort for lunch as recommended by the Beach Club. But just in case she decided not to, they had provided her with a packed lunch in the form of a picnic hamper.

If it hadn’t been for the serious purpose of her trip, she could quite easily have felt she were embarking on an exciting adventure, Mariella thought. Like everything else connected with the Beach Club, the four-wheel drive was immaculately clean and was even provided with its own mobile telephone!

The road into the desert was clearly marked, and turned out to be a well-built, smooth road that was so easy to navigate that Mariella quickly felt confident.

The secluded oasis where apparently the sheikh was staying was located in the Agir mountain range.

The light breeze, which had been just stirring the air when she had left the Beach Club, had increased enough to whip a fine dust of sand over her vehicle and the road itself within an hour of her setting out on her journey. The sand particles were so fine that somehow they actually managed to find their way into the four-wheel drive, despite the fact that Mariella had the doors and windows firmly closed. She had left the main road, now branched out onto a well-marked track across the desert itself.

It was a relief when she reached the Bedouin village marked on her map. It was market day and she had to drive patiently behind a camel train through the village, but fortunately it turned off towards the oasis itself, allowing her to accelerate.

In another half an hour she would stop for some lunch—if she hadn’t reached the second oasis, marked on her map, she and Fleur would have their picnic instead.

The height of the sand dunes had left her feeling surprised and awed; they were almost a mountain range in themselves. Fleur was awake and Mariella turned off the radio to play her one of her favourite nursery rhyme tapes, singing along to it.

It was taking her longer than she'd estimated to reach the tourist base at the oasis where she had planned to have lunch—it was almost two o'clock now and she had expected to be there at one. A film of sand dust had turned the sky a brassy red-gold colour, and as she crested a huge sand dune and looked down into the emptiness on the other side of it Mariella began to panic slightly. Surely she should be able to at least see the tourist base oasis from here?

Ruefully she reached for the vehicle's mobile, realising that it might be sensible to ask for help, but to her dismay when she tried to make a call to the number programmed into the phone the only response was a fierce crackling sound. Stopping the vehicle she reached for her own mobile, but it was equally ineffective.

The sky was even more obscured by sand now, the wind hitting the vehicle with such force that it was physically rocking it. As though sensing her disquiet Fleur began to cry. She was hungry and needed changing, Mariella recognised, automatically attending to the baby's needs whilst she tried to decide what she should do.

It was impossible that she could be lost, of course. The vehicle was fitted with a compass and she had been given very detailed and careful instructions, which she had followed to the letter.

So why hadn't she reached the tourist oasis?

Fleur ate her own meal eagerly, but Mariella discovered that she herself had lost her appetite!

And then just as she was beginning to feel truly afraid she saw it! A line of camels swaying out of the dust towards her led by a robed camel driver.

Relieved, Mariella drove towards the camel train. Its leader was gravely polite. She had missed the turning to the oasis, he explained, something that was easily done with such a wind blowing sand across the track. To her alarm he further explained that, because of the sudden deterioration in the weather, all tourists had been urged to return to the city instead of remaining in the desert, but since Mariella had come so far her best course of action now was to press on to her ultimate destination, which he carefully showed her how to do using the vehicle's compass.

Thanking him, she did as he had instructed her, grimly checking and rechecking the compass as she drove up and down what felt like an interminable series of the sand dunes until eventually, in the distance through the sand blowing against her windscreen, she could just about see the looming mass of the mountain range.

It was already four o'clock and the light seemed to be fading, a fact that panicked Mariella into driving a little faster. She had never dreamed that her journey would prove so hazardous and she was very much regretting having set out on it, but now at last its end was in sight.

It took her almost another hour of zigzagging across the sand dunes to reach the rocky thrust of the beginnings of the mountain range. The oasis was situated in a deep ravine, its escarpment so high that Mariella shuddered a little as she drove into its shadows. This was the last kind of place she had expected to appeal to the man who had been her sister's faithless lover.

Would his villa here be as palatial as his home in Zuran? Mariella frowned and checked as the ravine opened out and she saw the oasis ahead of her. Remote and beautiful in its own way, it was very obviously a place of deep solitude, the oasis itself enclosed with a fringing of palms illuminated by the eerie glow of the final rays of the setting sun. Shielding her eyes, Mariella stopped the vehicle to look around. Where was the villa? All she could see was one solitary pavilion tent! A good-sized pavilion, to be sure, but most definitely not a villa! Had she somehow got lost—again?

Fleur had started to cry, a cross, tired, hungry noise that alerted Mariella to the fact that for Fleur's sake if nothing else she needed to stop.

Carefully she drove the vehicle forward over the treacherously boulder-rutted track, which seemed more like a dry riverbed than a roadway! Sand blowing in from the desert was covering the boulders and the thin sparse grass of the oasis.

There was a vehicle parked several yards from the pavilion and Mariella stopped next to it.

A man was emerging from the pavilion, alerted to her arrival by the sound of her vehicle.

As he strode towards her, his robe caught by the strong wind and flattened against his body revealing a torso muscle structure that caused her to suck in her own stomach in a sharply dangerous womanly response to its maleness.

And then he turned his head and looked at her, and the earth halted on its axis before swinging perilously in a sickening movement as Mariella recognised him.

It was the man from the airport. The man from her dream!

CHAPTER TWO

HIS HAND WAS on the door handle of the four-wheel drive. Wrenching it open, he demanded angrily, 'Who the devil are you?'

He was looking at her eyes again, with that same look of biting contempt glittering in his own as he raked her with a gritty gaze.

'I'm looking for Sheikh Xavier Al Agir,' Mariella responded, returning his look with one of her own—plus interest!

'What? What do you want with him?'

He was curt to the point of rudeness, but then, given what she had already seen—and dreamed—of him, she wouldn't have expected anything else.

'What I want with him is no business of yours!' she told him angrily.

In her seat Fleur's cries grew louder.

Peering into the vehicle, he demanded in disbelief, 'You've brought a baby out in this?'

The disgust and anger in his voice made her face sting even more than the pieces of sand blown against it by the wind.

'What the hell possessed you? Didn't you hear the weather warning earlier? This area was reported as being strictly out of bounds to tourists because of the threat of sandstorms.'

Hot-faced, Mariella remembered how she had switched off the radio to play Fleur's tapes.

'I'm sorry if I've arrived at an inconvenient time,' she responded sarcastically to cover her own discomfort, 'but if you could just give me directions for the Oasis Istafan, then—'

'This is the Oasis Istafan,' came back the immediate and cold response.

It was? Then?

'I want to see Sheikh Xavier Al Agir,' Mariella told him again, gathering her composure together. 'I presume he is here?'

'What do you want to see him for?'

Mariella had had enough. 'That is no business of yours,' she said angrily. Inwardly she was worrying how on earth she was going to get back to the city and the comfort of her Beach Club bungalow and what on earth a man as wealthy as the sheikh was reputed to be was doing out here with this…this…this arrogant predator of a man!

'Oh, I think you'll find that anything concerning Xavier is very much my business,' came the gritted reply.

Something—Mariella wasn't sure what—must have alerted her to the truth. But she was too shocked by it to voice it, looking from his eyes to his mouth and then back again as she swallowed—hard—against the tight ball of shock tightening like ice around her heart. 'You…you…can't be the sheikh,' she told him defiantly, but her voice was trembling lightly, betraying her lack of confidence in her own denial.

Was this man her sister's lover…and Fleur's father? What was that sharp, bitter, dangerous feeling settling over her like a black cloud?

'You are the sheikh, aren't you?' she acknowledged bleakly.

A brief, sardonic inclination of his head was his only response but it was enough.

Turning away from him, she reached into the baby carrier and tenderly removed Fleur. Her whole face softened and illuminated with love as she hugged her and then kissed her before looking him straight in the eyes and saying fiercely to him, 'This is Fleur, the baby you have refused to both acknowledge and support.'

She had shocked him, Mariella realised, even though he had concealed his reaction very quickly.

As he stepped back from the vehicle for a second Mariella thought he was going to tell her to leave—and cravenly she wanted to do so! The man, the location, the situation were so not what she

had been anticipating and prepared herself for. Each one of them in their different ways shattered not just her preconceptions but also her precious self-containment.

The man—try as she might she could just not envisage him in the club where Tanya had performed. The location made her ache for her painting equipment and brought her artistic senses to quick hunger. And her situation! Oh, no…Definitely no! This man had been her sister's lover, and was Fleur's father—

The shadowy fear that had stalked her adult years suddenly loomed terrifyingly sharply in front of her. She would not be like her mother; she would not ever allow herself to be vulnerable in any way to a man who could only damage her emotionally. The ability to fall in love with the wrong man might be learned, but it was not, to the best of Mariella's knowledge, inherited!

'Get out!'

Get out? With pleasure! Gripping the steering wheel, Mariella reached for the door, slamming it closed and then switching on the ignition at the same time, then she threw the vehicle into a furious spurt of reverse speed.

The tyres spun; sand filled the air. She could hear a thunderous banging on her driver's door as the car refused to budge. Looking out of the window, she saw Xavier looking at her in icy, furious disbelief.

Realising that she was bogged down in the swirling sand, Mariella switched off the engine. If he wanted her to leave he would have to move the vehicle for her, she recognised in angry humiliation.

As the engine died he was yanking the door open, demanding, 'What the hell do you think you are trying to do?'

'You told me to get out!' Mariella reminded him, equally angry.

'I meant get out of the car, not…' As he swore beneath his breath, to her shock he suddenly reached into the vehicle and snapped off her seat belt, grasping her so tightly around her waist that it actually hurt.

As he pulled her free of her seat and swung her to the ground she had a sudden shocking image of the two of them in her dream!

'Let go of me,' she demanded chokily, pushing him away. 'Don't touch me…'

'Don't touch you?'

Now that she was on the ground she realised just how far she had to look up to see the expression in his eyes.

'From what I've heard it isn't often those words leave your lips.'

Instinctively Mariella raised her hand, taking refuge in an act of female rebuttal and retaliation as ancient as the land around her, but immediately he seized her wrist in a punishing grip, his eyes glittering savagely as he curled his fingers tighter. 'Hellcat!' he taunted her mercilessly. 'One attempt to use your claws on me and, I promise you, you will regret it.

'You can't go anywhere tonight,' he told her bluntly. 'There's a sandstorm forecast that would bury you alive before you could get even halfway back to the city. In your case it would be no loss, but for the sake of the child…'

The child…Fleur!

An agonised sound of distress choked in Mariella's throat. She could not stay here in this wilderness with this…this…savagely dangerous man, but her own common sense was telling her that she had no other option. Already the four-wheel drive was buried almost axle-deep in sand. She could taste it in her mouth, feel it on her skin. Inside the vehicle, Fleur had begun to cry again. Instinctively Mariella turned to go to her, but Xavier was there before her, lifting Fleur out.

The baby looked so tiny held in his arms. Mariella held her breath watching him…He was Fleur's father, after all. Surely he must feel something? Some remorse, some guilt…something… True, he did pause to look at her, but the expression on his face was unreadable.

‘She has your hair,’ he told Mariella, before adding grimly, ‘The wind is picking up. We need to get inside the tent. Where are you going?’ he demanded as she turned back to the vehicle.

‘I want to get Fleur’s things,’ she told him, tensing as he gave a sharp exclamation of irritation and overruled her.

‘Leave them for now. I shall come back for them.’

Mariella couldn’t believe how strong the wind had become! The sand felt like a million tiny particles of glass shredding her skin.

By the time they reached the safety and protection of the pavilion, her leg muscles ached from the effort of fighting her way through the shifting sand.

Once inside the pavilion she realised that it was much larger than she had originally thought. A central area was furnished with rich carpets and low divans. Rugs were thrown over dark wood chests, and on the intricately carved tables stood oil lamps and candles. In their light Mariella could see two draped swags of cloth caught back in a dull gold rope as though they covered the entrance to two other inner rooms.

‘Fleur needs something to eat, and a change of clothes,’ she announced curtly, ‘and I want to ring the Beach Club to tell them what has happened.’

‘Use a telephone—in this intensity of sandstorm?’ He laughed openly at her. ‘You would be lucky to be able to use a landline, never mind a mobile. As for the child…’

‘The child!’ Mariella checked him bitterly. ‘Even knowing the truth you still try to distance yourself from her, don’t you? Well, let me tell you something—’

‘No, let me tell you something…Any man could have fathered this child! I feel for her that she should have a mother of such low morals, a mother so willing to give herself to any and every man her eye alights on, but let me make it plain to you that I do not intend to be blackmailed into paying for a pleasure that was of so little value, never mind paying for a child who may or may not be the result of it!’

Mariella went white with shock and disbelief, but before she could defend her sister, Fleur started to cry in earnest.

Ignoring Xavier, Mariella soothed her, whispering tenderly. ‘It’s all right, sweetheart, I know you’re hungry…’ Automatically as she talked to her Mariella stroked her and kissed the top of her head. She was so unbearably precious to her even though she was not her child. Being there at her birth had made Mariella feel as though they shared a very special bond, and awakened a maternal urge inside her she had not previously known she had.

‘I don’t know what she has to eat, but there is some fruit and milk in the fridge, and a blender,’ he informed her.

Fridge? Blender? Mariella’s eyes widened. ‘You have electricity out here?’

Immediately he gave her a very male sardonic look.

‘Not as such. There’s a small generator, which provides enough for my needs.’ He gave a brief shrug. ‘After all, I come out here to work in peace…not to wear a hair shirt! The generator can provide enough warm water for you to bathe the child, although you, I am afraid, will have to share my bathing water.’

He was waiting for her to object, Mariella could see that. He was enjoying tormenting her.

‘Since I shall only be here overnight, I dare say I can manage to forgo that particular pleasure,’ she told him grittily.

‘I shall go to your vehicle and bring the baby’s things. You will find the kitchen area through that exit and to your right.’

Mariella had brought some dried baby food with her as well as some tinned food, which she knew would probably suit Fleur’s baby digestion rather better than raw fruit, no matter how well blended! Even so, it would do no harm to explore their surroundings.

As she stepped through the opening she found that she was in a narrow corridor, on the right of which was an unexpectedly well equipped although very small kitchen, and, to the left, an immaculately clean chemical lavatory, along with a small shower unit.

The other opening off the main room must lead to a sleeping area, she decided as she walked back.

'What is all this stuff?' she heard Xavier demanding as he walked in with his arms full.

In other circumstances his obvious male lack of awareness of a small baby's needs might have been endearing, but right now…

Ignoring him and still holding Fleur, she opened the cool-bag in which she had placed her foods.

'Yummy, look at this, Fleur,' she murmured to her. 'Banana pudding…our favourite…Yum-yum.'

The look of serious consideration in Fleur's hazel eyes as she looked at her made her smile, and she forgot Xavier for a second as she concentrated on the baby.

'I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that she isn't receiving the nutrition of her mother's own milk,' she heard Xavier announcing critically.

Immediately Mariella swung round, her eyes dark with anger.

'Since her mother had to go back to work that wasn't possible!'

'How virtuous you make it sound, but isn't it the truth that the nature of that work—is anything but? But of course you will deny that, just as you will claim to know who the child's father is.'

'You are totally despicable,' Mariella stopped him. 'Fleur does not deserve to be treated like this. She is an innocent baby…'

'Indeed! At last we are in agreement about something. It is a pity, though, that you did not think of that before you came out here making accusations and claims.'

How could he be so cold? So unfeeling! According to the little Tanya had said about him, she had considered him to be a very emotional and passionate man.

No doubt in bed he was, Mariella found herself acknowledging. Her face suddenly burnt hotly as she recognised the unwanted significance of her private thoughts, and even worse the images they were mentally conjuring up for her; not with her sister as Xavier's partner—but herself!

What was happening to her? She was a cool-blooded woman who analysed, rationalised and resisted any kind of damaging behaviour to herself. And yet here she was…

'Just how long is this sandstorm going to last?' she asked abruptly.

The dark eyebrows rose. 'One day…two…three…'

'Three!' Mariella was aghast. Apart from the fact that Tanya would be beside herself if she could not get in touch with her, what was the prince going to think if he returned and she wasn't there?

'I have to feed and change Fleur.'

Luckily she had brought the baby bath with her as well as the changing mat, and Fleur's pram cum carry-cot, mainly because she had not been quite sure what facilities would be available at the oasis.

'Since it is obvious that you will have to stay the night, it is probably best that you and the child sleep in my…In the sleeping quarters,' Xavier corrected himself. Mariella's mouth went dry.

'And…where will you sleep?' she asked him apprehensively.

'In here, of course. When you have fed and bathed the child I suggest that we both have something to eat. And then—'

'Thank you, but I am perfectly capable of deciding for myself when I eat,' Mariella told him sharply.

* * *

SHE WAS FAR more independent, and a good deal more fiery, than he had anticipated, Xavier acknowledged broodingly when Mariella had disappeared with Fleur. And quite definitely not his younger cousin's normal type.

Thinking of Khalid made his mouth tighten a little. He had been both furious and disbelieving when Khalid had telephoned him to announce that he had fallen in love and was thinking of marrying a girl he had met in a dubious nightclub. Khalid had been in love before, but this was the first time he had considered marriage. At twenty-four Khalid was still very immature. When he married, in Xavier's opinion it needed to be someone strong enough to keep him grounded—and wealthy enough not to be marrying him for his money.

His frown deepened. It had been his cynical French grandmother who had warned him when he was very young that the great wealth he had inherited from his father would make him a target for greedy women. When he had been in his teens his grandmother had insisted that he spent time in France meeting the chic daughters of her own distant relatives, girls who in her opinion were deserving of inheriting the 'throne' his grandmother would have had to abdicate when Xavier eventually married.

Well born though they were, those girls had held very little appeal for him, and, practical though he knew it would be, he found himself even less enamoured of the idea of contracting an arranged marriage.

Because of this he had already decided that it would be Khalid who would ultimately provide the heir to his enormous fortune and, more importantly, take his place as leader of their historically unique tribe. But he hadn't been in any hurry to nudge Khalid in the direction of a suitable bride—until he had learned of his plans *vis-à-vis* the impossible young woman who had forced her way into his private retreat!

He didn't know which of them had angered him the most! Khalid for his weakness in disappearing without leaving any indication of where he had gone, or the woman herself who had boldly followed up her pathetic attempt at blackmailing him via the letter she had sent Xavier, with a visit to his territory, along with the baby she was so determined to claim his cousin had fathered!

Physically he had not been able to see any hint in the child's features that she might be Khalid's; she was as prettily blonde as her mother, and as delicately feminine. The only difference was that, whilst her mother chose to affect those ridiculous, obviously false turquoise-coloured contact lenses, the baby's eyes were a warm hazel.

Like Khalid's?

There was no proof that the child was Khalid's, he reminded himself. And there was no way he was going to allow his cousin to marry her mother, without knowing for sure that Khalid was the father, especially now that he had actually met her. It was a wonder that Khalid had ever fallen so desperately in love with her in the first place!

'She has the grace of a gazelle,' he had written to him. 'The voice of an angel! She is the sweetest and most gentle of women…'

Well, Xavier begged to differ! At least on the two eulogising counts! Had he known when he had seen her at the airport just who she was he would have tried to find some way of having her deported there and then!

Remembering that occasion made him stride over to the opening to the pavilion, pulling back the cover to look outside. As had been forecast the wind was now a howling dervish of destruction, whipping up the sand so that already it was impossible to see even as far as the oasis itself. Which was a pity, because right now he could do with the refreshing swim he took each evening in the cool water of the oasis, rather than using the small shower next to the lavatory.

It both astounded and infuriated him that he could possibly want such a woman—she represented everything he most detested in the female sex: avarice, sexual laxity, selfishness—so far as he was concerned these were faults that could never be outweighed by a beautiful face or a sensual body. And he had to admit that, in that regard, his cousin had shown better taste than he had ever done previously!

Xavier allowed the flap of the tent to drop back in place and secured it. It irked him that Mariella should have the gall to approach him here of all places, where he came to retreat from the

sometimes heavy burden of his responsibilities. A thin smile turned down the corners of his mouth. From what Khalid had described of the luxury-loving lifestyle they had shared, he doubted that she would enjoy being here. However little he cared about her discomfort, though there was the child to be considered.

The child! His mouth thinned a little more. Little Fleur was most definitely a complication he had not anticipated!

* * *

WITH FLEUR FED, clean and dry, Mariella suddenly discovered just how tired she felt herself.

She had not expected Xavier to be pleased to be confronted with her accusations regarding his treatment of Tanya and Fleur, but the sheer savagery and cruelty with which he had verbally savaged her sister's morals had truly shocked her. This was, after all, a man who had very eagerly shared Tanya's bed, and who, even worse, had sworn that he loved her and that he wanted her to share a future with him!

In her opinion Tanya and Fleur were better off without him, just as she had been better off without the father who had deserted her!

Now that she had confronted him, though—and witnessed that he was incapable of feeling even the smallest shred of remorse—she longed to be able to get away from him, instead of being forced to remain here with him in the dangerous intimacy of this desert camp where the two of them…

* * *

THOSE RIDICULOUS TURQUOISE eyes looked even more theatrical and unreal in the pale triangle of her small exhausted face, Xavier decided angrily as he watched Mariella walking patiently up and down the living area of the pavilion whilst she rocked Fleur to sleep in her arms.

No doubt Khalid must have seen her a hundred or more times with her delicate skin free of make-up and those haunting, smudged shadows beneath her eyes as he lay over her in the soft shadows of the early morning, waking her with his caresses.

The fierce burst of anger that exploded inside him infuriated him. What was the matter with him? When he broke it down what was she, after all? A petite, small-boned woman with a tousled head of strawberry-blonde hair that was probably dyed, coloured contact lenses to obscure the real colour of her eyes, skin the colour of milk and a body that had no doubt known more lovers than it was sensible for any sane-thinking adult to want to own to, especially one as fastidious in such matters as he was.

It would serve her right if he proved to Khalid just exactly what she was by bedding her himself! That would certainly ensure that his feckless cousin, who had abandoned his desk in their company headquarters without telling anyone where he was going or for how long, would, when he decided to return, realise just what a fate he had protected him from!

The child, though, was a different matter. If she should indeed prove to be his cousin's, then her place was here in Zuran where she could be brought up to respect herself as a woman should, and to despise the greedy, immoral woman who had given birth to her!

CHAPTER THREE

MARIELLA WOKE UP before Fleur had given her first distressed, hungry cry. She wriggled out from under the cool pure linen bedding to pad barefoot and naked to where she had placed the carry-cot.

Her khaki-coloured soft shape trousers could be re-worn without laundering, but the white cotton tee shirt she had worn beneath her jacket, and her underwear—no way.

Fastidiously wrinkling her nose at the very thought, Mariella had rinsed them out, deciding that even if they had not dried by morning wearing them slightly damp was preferable to putting them back on unwashed!

Picking Fleur up, she carried her back to the bed…Xavier's bed, a huge, low-lying monster of a bed, large enough to accommodate both a man and half his harem without any problem at all!

Sliding back beneath the linen sheets, Mariella stroked Fleur's soft cheek and watched her in the glow of the single lamp she had left on. She could tell from the way the baby sucked eagerly on her finger that she was hungry!

She had seen water in the fridge, and she had Fleur's formula. All she had to do was to brave the leopard's den in order to reach the kitchen!

And in order to do that she needed to find something to wear.

Whilst she was deciding between one of the pile of soft towels Xavier had presented her with or the sheet itself, Fleur started to cry.

'Hush,' she soothed her gently. 'I know you're hungry, sweetheart…'

Xavier sighed as he heard Fleur crying. It was just gone two in the morning. The divan wasn't exactly the most comfortable thing to sleep on. Outside the wind shrieked like a hyena, testing the strength of the pavilion, but its traditional design had withstood many centuries of desert winds and Xavier had no fears of it being plucked away.

Throwing back the cover from his makeshift bed, he pulled on the soft loose robe and strode towards the kitchen, briskly removing one of the empty bottles Mariella had left in the sterilizer and mixing the formula.

His grandmother—an eccentric woman so far as many people were concerned—had sent him to work in a refugee camp for six months after his final year at school and before he went on to university.

'You know what it is to be proud,' she had told him when he had expressed his disdain for her decision. 'Now you need to learn what it is to be humble.

'Without humility it is impossible to be a great leader of men, Xavier,' she had informed him. 'You owe it to your grandfather's people to have greatness, for without it they will be swamped by this modern world and scattered like seeds in the wind.'

One of his tasks there had been to work in the crèche. For the rest of his life Xavier knew he would remember the emotions he had experienced at the sight of the children's emaciated little bodies.

Snapping the teat on the filled bottle, he headed for the bedroom.

The baby's cries were noticeably louder. Her feckless mother was no doubt sleeping selfishly through them, Xavier decided grimly, ignoring the fact that he himself had already noticed just how devoted Fleur's mother was to her.

Fleur was crying too much and too long to be merely hungry, Mariella thought anxiously as she caught the increasing note of misery in the baby's piercing cry.

To her relief, Fleur seemed to find some comfort as Mariella sat up in the bed and cuddled her against her own body.

'What's wrong, sweetheart?' she whispered to her. 'Are you missing your…?'

She froze as the protective curtain closing off the room swung open, snatching at the sheet to cover herself, her face hot with embarrassment as she glared at Xavier.

'What do you want?' she demanded aggressively.

'So you are awake. I thought—'

Fleur's eyes widened as she saw that he was carrying her bottle.

'What have you put in there?' Mariella demanded suspiciously, holding Fleur even tighter as he held the bottle out to her.

'Formula,' he told her curtly. 'What did you think was in it…hemlock? You've been reading too many idiotic trashy books!'

As she took the bottle from him and squirted a few drops onto the back of her hand, tasting it, he watched her.

'Satisfied?'

Looking fully at him, Mariella compressed her lips.

'My word,' she heard him breathe in disbelief. 'You even go to bed in those ridiculous coloured contact lenses! Hasn't anyone ever told you that no one actually has eyes that colour? So if it's your lovers you are hoping to impress and deceive…'

As Fleur seized eagerly on her bottle Mariella froze in outraged fury.

Coloured contact lenses. How dared he?

'Oh, is that a fact?' she breathed. 'Well, for your information, whether you consider it to be ridiculous or not this just happens to be the real colour of my eyes. I am not wearing contact lenses, and as for wanting to impress or deceive a lover—'

Fleur gave a wail of protest as in her agitation Mariella unwittingly removed the teat from her mouth. Apologising to the baby, and comforting her, Mariella breathed in sharply with resentment.

Real? The only thing about her that was real was her outrageous lying! Xavier decided lowering his lashes over his eyes as he discreetly studied the smooth swell of her breasts as her agitated movements dislodged the sheet.

No wonder she had not wanted to feed her child herself. With breasts so perfectly and beautifully formed she would be reluctant to spoil their shape. He could almost see the faint pink shadowing of the areolae of her nipples.

Uncomfortably he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, all too conscious of the effect she was having on him. She was doing it deliberately, he knew that…She was that kind of woman!

When he came here it was to withdraw from the fast-paced city life and concentrate on more cerebral matters, Xavier reminded himself sharply.

The sheet slipped a little farther.

Her flesh was creamy pale, untouched by the sun. He frowned. Khalid had said specifically that he had taken her to the South of France. Surely there she must have exposed herself, as so many did, to the hot glare of its sun and the ever hotter lustful looks of the men who went there specifically to enjoy the sight of so much young, naked flesh?

Knowing his cousin as he did, he couldn't imagine that Khalid would be attracted to a woman too modest to remove her bikini top!

He, on the other hand, found something profoundly and intensely sensual about the thought of a woman only revealing her bare breasts to her lover, her only lover…

Worriedly Mariella studied Fleur's suddenly flushed face, reaching out to touch her cheek. It burned beneath the coolness of her own fingertips. Her heart jumped with anxiety.

Xavier's stomach muscles clenched as she removed her arm, revealing the full exposed curve of her breast. As he had known it would be, her nipple was rose-pink and so softly delicate that he ached to reach out and touch it, explore its soft tenderness, feel it hardening in eager demand beneath his caress.

In her anxiety for Fleur, Mariella had all but forgotten that he was there, only alerted to his sudden departure by the brief swirl of air eddying the door-hanging as he left.

The minute he had gone Fleur started to cry again and nothing Mariella could do would soothe her.

In the end, terrified that he would reappear at any minute and demand that she silence the baby or else, Mariella got out of the bed and, wrapping the sheet around herself, started to pace the floor, gently rocking Fleur as she did so.

To her relief after about ten minutes Fleur began to fall asleep. Gently carrying her back to her cot she started to lie her down, but the minute she did so the baby began to cry again.

Resolutely Mariella tried again…and again…and again…

Three hours later she finally admitted just how afraid she was. Fleur was crying pitifully now, her cheeks bright red and her whole body hot and sweaty. Mariella's own eyes ached and her arms were cramped with holding her as she walked up and down the bedroom.

Outside the wind still howled demoniacally.

'Oh, poor, poor baby,' Mariella whispered anxiously. Tanya had entrusted her precious child to her. How would she feel if she knew what Mariella had done? How she had brought her to the middle of the desert where there was no doctor and no way of getting to one? What if Fleur had something really seriously wrong with her? What if she had picked up some life-threatening infectious disease? What if…? Sick with anxiety and guilt, Mariella prayed that Fleur would be all right.

In the outer part of the pavilion Xavier could hear the fretful cry of the baby but he dared not go in to find out what was wrong. He could not trust himself to go in and find out what was wrong he admitted grimly.

* * *

AN HOUR LATER, still trying to soothe and comfort Fleur, Mariella felt desperately afraid. It was obvious that Fleur wasn't well. The fear tormenting her could not be ignored any longer. Her hands trembling, Mariella relit all the oil lamps and then carefully undressed Fleur, slowly checking her for any sign of the rash that would confirm her worst fears and indicate that the baby could somehow have contracted meningitis.

Not content with having checked her skin once without finding any sign of a rash, Mariella did so again. When once again she could not find any sign of a rash, she didn't know whether to feel relieved or simply more anxious!

Tenderly wiping the tears from Fleur's hot face, she kissed her. Fleur grabbed hold of her finger and was trying to suck on it. No, not suck, Mariella realised—she was trying to bite on it. Fleur was cutting her first tooth!

All at once relief and recognition filled her. Fleur was teething—that was why she had been so uncomfortable. Mariella could well remember Tanya at the same age, her mother walking up and down with her as she tried to soothe her, explaining to Mariella just how much those sharp, pretty little teeth cutting through tender flesh hurt and upset the baby.

Naturally Mariella had tucked a good supply of paediatric paracetamol suspension into her baby bag before leaving home and, still holding Fleur, she went to get it.

'This will make you feel better, sweetheart,' she crooned, adding lovingly, 'And what a clever girl you are, aren't you, with your lovely new tooth? A very clever girl.'

Within minutes or so of the baby having her medicine, or so it seemed to a now totally exhausted Mariella, she was fast asleep. Patting her flushed face, Mariella smothered a yawn. Tucking Fleur into her cot, she made for her own bed.

* * *

XAVIER FROWNED. IT was well past daylight. He had showered and eaten his breakfast and switched on the laptop he had brought with him to do some work, but his mind wasn't really on it. Every time he thought about his cousin's mistress he was filled with unwanted and dangerous

emotions. There hadn't been a sound from the bedroom in hours. No doubt working in a nightclub she was used to sleeping during the day…And very probably not on her own!

The very thought of the woman sleeping next door in his bed drove him to such an unfamiliar and furious level of hormone-fuelled rage that he could barely contain himself. And he was a man who was secretly proud of the fact that he was known for his fabled self-control!

Khalid should think himself very fortunate indeed that he had prevented him from marrying that turquoise-eyed seductress.

But Khalid did not think himself fortunate! Khalid thought himself very far from fortunate and had, in fact, left his cousin's presence swearing that he would not give up the woman he loved, no, not even if Xavier did try to carry out his threat and disinherit him!

His cousin was quite plainly besotted with the woman, and now that Xavier had met her for himself he was beginning to understand just how dangerous she was.

But not even Khalid's love would be strong enough to withstand the knowledge that she had been his cousin's lover. That she had given herself willingly to him! That the thought of ensnaring an even richer man than Khalid, in Xavier himself, had been enough to have her crawling into his bed.

That knowledge would hurt Khalid, but better that he was hurt quickly and cleanly now than that he spent a lifetime suffering a thousand humiliations at her hands! As he undoubtedly would do!

Surely the silence from the bedroom was unnatural. The woman should be awake by now, if only for the sake of her child!

Irritably Xavier strode towards the bedroom area, and pulled back the hanging.

Mariella was lying on the bed deeply asleep, one arm flung out, her pale skin gleaming in the soft light.

The thick strawberry-blonde hair was softly tousled, a few wisps sticking to her pink-cheeked face, lashes, which surely must be dyed to achieve that density of colour, surrounding the turquoise she insisted on claiming was natural.

In her sleep she sighed and frowned and made a little moue of distress before settling back into sleep.

Unable to drag his gaze from her, Xavier continued to watch her. There was nothing about what he knew of the type of person she was that could appeal to his aesthetic and cultured taste. But physically…

Physically, hormonally, she exerted such a pull over his senses that right now…

He had taken a step towards the bed without even realising it, the ache in his groin immediately a fierce, primal surge of white-hot need. If he took her in his arms and woke her now, would it be Khalid's name he heard on her lips?

That thought alone should have been enough to freeze his arousal to nothing, but instead he was filled with a savage explosion of angry emotion at the thought of any man's name on her lips that wasn't his own!

As he battled with the realisation of just what that meant, his attention was suddenly distracted by the happy gurgling coming from the cot.

Striding over to it, he stared down at Fleur. Her child. The child another man had given her! A surge of primitive aching pain filled him.

Fleur had kicked off her blankets and was playing with her bare toes, smiling coquettishly up at him.

Xavier sucked in his breath. She was so small, so delicate…so very much like her mother.

Instinctively he bent to pick her up.

Mariella didn't know what woke her from her deep sleep, some ancient female instinct perhaps, she decided shakily as she stared across the room and saw Xavier bending over Fleur.

Gripping the bedclothes, she burst out frantically, 'Don't you dare hurt her.'

‘Hurt her?’ Tight-lipped, Xavier swung round. ‘You dare to say that when she has already been hurt immeasurably simply by being brought into being as the child of a woman who…’

Unable to fully express his feelings, he compressed his mouth.

‘I suppose she is used to being left to amuse herself whilst her mother sleeps off the effects of her night’s work!’

Mariella could scarcely contain her fury.

‘How dare you say such things, after the way you have behaved? You are the most loathsome, the most vile man I have ever met. You are totally lacking in any kind of compassion, or…or responsibility!’

Her eyes really were that colour, Xavier recognised in disbelief as he watched them darken from turquoise to inky blue-green.

Did they turn that colour when she was lost in passion? Was she as passionate in her sexual desire as she was in her anger? Of course she was…he knew that instinctively, just as he knew equally instinctively that if she were his…

‘It is nearly eleven o’clock, the child must be hungry,’ he told her tersely, infuriated by his own weakness in allowing such thoughts to creep into his head.

Eleven o’clock—how could it be? Mariella wondered guiltily, but a quick glance at her watch showed her that it was.

She couldn’t wait to get back to the city and the sooner she and Fleur were on their way back there, the better, she decided as Xavier strode out of the room.

CHAPTER FOUR

MARIELLA FROWNED AS she walked into the empty living area of the pavilion. Where was Xavier?

A laptop hummed quietly on a folding campaign table to one side of the pavilion. Xavier had obviously been working on it.

As she looked round the pavilion with its precious carpets and elegant few pieces of furniture, which she recognised as being expensively antique as well as functional, Mariella tried to imagine her dizzy half-sister in such a setting. Tanya was totally open about the fact that she was a girl who loved the bustle of cities, holidays in expensive, fashionable locations, modern apartments as opposed to traditional houses. Although she adored Fleur, self-indulgence was her byword, and Mariella was finding it increasingly hard to visualise her sister ever being compatible with a man like Xavier, who she could not imagine truly sharing Tanya's tastes. He was too austere, surely. Too…

Tanya loved him, she reminded herself stubbornly, although she was finding that equally hard to imagine! He was just so totally not Tanya's type! Tanya liked happy-go-lucky, boyish, fun-loving men!

Fleur was sound asleep, and Mariella decided she would go outside to check on what was happening. She could no longer hear the sound of the wind battering against the walls of the pavilion, which hopefully meant that she would be able to make her way back to the city.

As she stepped outside she saw to her relief that the wind had indeed dropped. The air was now totally still and the sky had a dull ochre tinge to it. She could see her four-wheel drive, its sides covered in sand.

On the far side of the oasis, the rock face of the gorge rose steeply, its almost vertical face scarred here and there by the odd ledge.

There was a raw, elemental beauty about this hidden place, Mariella acknowledged, seeing it now with an artist's eye rather than the panicky apprehension of a lost traveller.

A scattering of palm trees fringed the water of the oasis, and beyond them lay a rough area of sparse, spiky grass. The rutted track she had driven down probably was a dried-out riverbed, she could see now.

The quality of the stillness and the corresponding silence were almost hypnotic.

A movement on the other side of the oasis caught her eye, her body tensing as she recognised Xavier. He was dressed not in traditional robes, but in jeans and a tee shirt. He seemed to be checking the palm trees, she realised as he paused to inspect one before walking to another. He had obviously not seen her, but instinctively she drew farther back into the shadow cast by the pavilion.

He had turned away from the trees now and was staring across the oasis, shading his eyes as he looked up into the sky.

* * *

THE STORM HADN'T weakened the roots of any of the palm trees, Xavier acknowledged. There was no reason why he shouldn't go back to the pavilion and continue with his work. And in fact pretty soon he would have to do so. Right now they were in the eye of the storm, but as soon as it moved on the wind would return with even greater force.

But he couldn't go back inside. Not whilst he was still visualising *her* lying on the bed…his bed…

Angrily he stripped off his tee shirt, quickly followed by the rest of his clothes. And began to wade out into the water.

Mariella couldn't move. Like someone deeply beneath the spell of an outside force she stood, muscles clenched, hardly daring to breathe as she fought to repel the sensation coiling through her,

and shivering to each and every single sensitive nerve ending as her gaze absorbed the raw male beauty of Xavier's nudity.

As an artist she was fully aware of the complexities and the beauty of the human form, she had visited Florence and wandered lost in rapt awe as she studied the work of the great masters, but now she recognised she was seeing the work of the greatest Master of all.

Xavier was wading out into the water, the dull glaring sunlight glinting on flesh so warmly and evenly hued that it was immediately obvious that such nudity was normal for him.

As he moved through the water she could see the powerful sinews in his thighs contracting against its pressure. Trying to distract herself she visualised what lay inside that heavy satin male flesh, the bones, the muscles, the tissues, but instead of calming her down, it made her awareness of him increase, her wanton thoughts fiercely pushing aside the pallid academic images she was trying to conjure, in favour of some of their own: like a close-up of that sun-warmed flesh, roped with muscle, hard, sleek, rough with the same fine dark hair she could see so clearly arrowing down the centre of his body.

Only his buttocks were a slightly paler shade than the rest of his skin, taut and man-shaped, packed with the muscles that would drive…

Mariella shuddered violently, feeling as though she herself were sinking into a pool of sensation so deep and dangerous that she had no means of freeing herself from it.

Helplessly she watched as Xavier moved farther into the oasis until all she could see above the water were his head and shoulders. He ducked his whole body beneath the water and she held her breath, expelling it when she saw him break the surface several yards away, cleaving through it with long, powerful over-arm strokes that propelled him at a fierce and silent speed away from her.

She felt sick, shocked, furiously angry, terrifyingly vulnerable, aching from head to toe and most of all, deep down inside the most female part of her body, tormented by a need, a knowledge that ripped apart all her previous beliefs about herself.

She could not possibly want Xavier! But that…that merciless message her body had just given her could not be denied.

It sickened her to think of wanting a man who had hurt her sister so much; a man Tanya still loved so much. Such a feeling was a betrayal of everything within herself she most prided herself on. It was inconceivable that such a thing could be happening, just as it was inconceivable too that she, a woman who took such pride in her ability to mentally control the sexual and emotional side of her nature, could allow herself to feel so…so…

Dragging her gaze away from the oasis, Mariella closed her eyes.

Go on, admit it, she taunted herself mentally. You are so hungry for him that if he came to you now, you would let him do whatever he wanted with you right here and right now. Let him? You would urge him, encourage him, entice him…

Frantically Mariella shook her head, trying to shake away her own tormenting thoughts, the tormenting inner voice that was mocking her so openly.

Blindly she headed back for the pavilion, not seeing the hot breaths of wind tugging warningly at the topmost fronds of the palm trees, and not noticing, either, the bronze ring of light dulling the sun so menacingly.

Once inside the pavilion she hurried to check on Fleur who was still sleeping. She had only been outside for around half an hour, but it felt somehow as though she had passed through a whole time zone and entered another world. A world in which she no longer knew exactly who or what she was.

Quickly she started to get together their things. She didn't want to be here when Xavier came back. She couldn't bear to be here when he came back; she couldn't bear to face him, to be in the same room with him, the same space with him; in fact she wasn't sure right now if she could even bear to be in the same life with him.

She had never imagined that there could be anyone who could make her feel so threatened, so appalled by her own feelings, and so afraid of them. Flushed and sticky, she surveyed her uncharacteristically chaotic packing.

She would put their things in the four-wheel drive first, and then pop Fleur in and then she would drive back to the hotel and not stop until she got there.

Mariella took a deep breath. Once she was there she would no doubt come to her senses and think of Xavier only as the man who had betrayed her sister, the man who was Fleur's father!

The wind was beginning to bend the palms as Mariella hurried out to the vehicle with their things, but she was oblivious to it as she wrestled with the heavy door and started to load the car.

Xavier saw her as he turned to swim another length. Treading water, he watched in furious disbelief as she struggled with the vehicle's door and then started to push the bulky container she had brought with her inside it.

* * *

THERE! NOW ALL she had to do was go back for Fleur and then they could leave, hopefully whilst Xavier was too busy swimming to notice! And anyway, if he had wanted a swim that badly why couldn't he have worn…well, something? Why had he had to—to flaunt his undeniably supremely male and very, very sexy body in the way he had?

Engrossed in her thoughts, she failed to see Xavier wade out of the water and pull on his tee shirt and jeans without wasting time on anything else, before starting to run towards the pavilion into which she had already disappeared.

'Come on, my beautiful baby,' Mariella crooned lovingly to Fleur as she wrapped her up. 'You and I are going—'

'Nowhere!'

Turning round, white-faced and clutching Fleur protectively to her, Mariella glared at him. The fine cotton tee shirt was plastered to his very obviously still damp body and her skittering gaze slid helplessly downward to rest indiscreetly on the groin of his jeans at the same time as her heart came to rest against her chest wall in a massive breathtaking thud.

He was standing in the exit blocking her way, but infuriatingly, instead of registering this vitally important fact first, her senses seemed to be far too preoccupied with taking a personal inventory of the way he looked clothed and the way he had looked…before!

Reminding herself that she was an adult, mature businesswoman, well used to running her own life and making her own decisions, and not the sad female with her hormones running riot that she was currently doing a good impression of, she drew herself up to her full height and told him determinedly, 'I am taking Fleur back to the city and there is no way you are going to stop me. And anyway, I can't imagine why you would want us to stay after the way you have behaved! The things you have said!'

'Want you to stay? No, I don't!' Xavier confirmed harshly. 'But unfortunately you are going to have to, unless, of course, you want to condemn yourself and the baby to almost certain death.'

Mariella stared at him. What did he mean? Was he trying to threaten her? 'We're leaving,' she repeated, making for the exit, and trying to ignore both the furious thud of her heart and the fact that he was standing in the way.

'Are you mad? You'd be lucky to get above half a dozen miles before being buried in a sand drift. If you thought the wind coming here was bad, well, let me tell you that was nothing compared with what's blowing up out there now!'

Mariella took a deep breath.

'I've just been outside. There is no wind,' she told him patiently, slowly spacing each word with immense care. 'The storm is over.'

'And you would know, of course, being an expert on desert weather conditions, no doubt. For your information, the reason that there was no wind, as you put it, is because we are, or rather we were in the eye of the storm. And anyone who knows anything about the desert would know that.

Couldn't you feel the stillness? Didn't you notice the sand haze in the sky?' The look he shot her could have lit tinder at fifty paces, Mariella recognised shakily.

'You're lying,' she told him stubbornly, determined not to let him get the better of her. 'You just want to keep us here because—'

When she stopped he looked derisively at her.

'Yes. I want to keep you here because what?'

Because you know how dangerously much I want you, a treacherous little voice whispered insidiously inside Mariella's head, *and you feel the same way.*

Shuddering, she pushed her thoughts back into the realms of reality—and safety.

'You're lying,' she repeated doggedly, eyeing the exit rebelliously.

'Am I?' Moving to one side, he swept back the tent flap so that she could see outside.

The palms were bending so much beneath the strength of the wind that their fronds were brushing the sand.

As she stared in disbelief Mariella could hear the strength of the wind increasing until it whistled eerily around the oasis, physically hurting her ears.

Out of nowhere it whipped up huge spirals of sand, making them dance in front of her. She could hardly see the sun or differentiate any longer between sand and sky.

Disbelievingly she took a step outside and cried out in shock as she was almost lifted off her feet when the wind punched into her. In her arms, Fleur screamed and was immediately removed to the protection of a much stronger and safer pair as Xavier snatched Fleur from her.

The thought of what would have happened to them if they had been caught in the open desert in such conditions drove the colour from Mariella's face.

'Now do you believe me?' Xavier demanded grimly when they were both back inside and he had secured the tent flap.

Reaching out to take Fleur from him, Mariella, whose fingers had inadvertently come into contact with the damp heat of his tee-shirt-clad chest, withdrew her hand so fast she almost lost her balance.

Immediately Xavier gripped her arm to steady her, supporting whilst he did so, so that it looked almost as though he were embracing them both, holding them both safe.

Against all rationality, given what she knew about him, Mariella discovered that her eyes were burning with emotional tears. She should be crying, she acknowledged grimly, for her own stupidity in allowing her emotions to be aroused so much for so little real reason! Pulling back from him, she demanded, 'Just how long is this storm going to last?'

'At least twenty-four hours, perhaps longer. Since the storm is making it impossible to receive any kind of communication signal, it is impossible to know. Such storms are rare at this time of year, but when they do occur they are both unpredictable and fierce.'

As was Xavier himself, Mariella decided as she took Fleur from him.

CHAPTER FIVE

GETTING UP FROM the bed where she had been lying reading one of the research books she had brought to Zuran with her, Mariella went to check on Fleur.

A brief glance at her watch showed her that it was nearly eight p.m. Fleur was awake but obviously quite content, and happy to oblige when Mariella checked her mouth to look at the small pearly white tooth just beginning to appear. Her face was still a little bit swollen and flushed, but the paracetamol seemed to have eased the pain she had suffered the previous night.

Mariella had retreated to 'her bedroom' late in the afternoon, desperate to escape from the highly charged atmosphere in the main living area.

It had become impossible for her to look at Xavier without imagining him as he had been earlier: naked…male.

He had retrieved the things she had carried out to the four-wheel drive and put them back in the bedroom, and when Mariella had come across a sketch-book and pencils she had forgotten she had brought, along with her book, she had fallen on the book with a surge of relief.

Apart from the fact that she genuinely found the subject interesting, it gave her a perfect excuse to distance herself from Xavier, who had been busily working on his laptop.

On the pretext of Fleur needing a nap she had come into the sleeping quarters and had remained there ever since.

A thorough understanding of anatomy was essential for any painter in her type of field, and she had quickly become totally engrossed in trying to trace the development of the modern-day racehorse from the original Arabian bloodstock.

As Kate had said, the potential commission from the prince was indeed a prestigious one.

Picking up her sketch-book, Mariella started to work. Those incredible muscles that powered every movement…Her pencil flew over the paper, her absorption in what she was doing only broken when Fleur started to demand her attention.

Smiling, she discarded the sketch-book and then frowned sharply as she looked at what she had done, her face burning mortifying and disbelieving scarlet.

How on earth had that happened? How on earth had she managed to sketch, not a horse, but a man…Xavier…Xavier, swimming, Xavier standing, Xavier: his body lean and naked, clean-muscled and powerful.

Guiltily, Mariella flipped over the page. Fleur was blowing kisses at her and becoming increasingly vociferous.

Tucking the sketch-pad safely out of sight, Mariella went to her and picked her up, fastening her into her car seat and then carrying her into the kitchen.

'Look at this yummy dinner you're going to have,' Mariella crooned to Fleur as she prepared her food.

It had been her intention to take Fleur back into the bedroom to feed her, but instead Mariella carried her into the living area.

Fleur was Xavier's daughter, after all, and perhaps they both needed reminding just what that meant, albeit for very different reasons! Perhaps too he ought to be made to see just what he was missing out on by not acknowledging her.

He was working on the laptop when Mariella walked in and put Fleur down in her seat so that she could feed her.

She was a strong, healthy baby with a good appetite, who thankfully no longer seemed to be too bothered by the tooth she had been cutting.

Absorbed in her own enjoyable task, Mariella didn't realise that Xavier had stopped work to turn and study them until some sixth sense warned her that they were being watched.

His abrupt, 'She has your nose,' made Mariella's hand tremble slightly. She and Tanya shared the same shaped nose, which they had both inherited from their mother. Fleur had their nose, but, according to Tanya, her father's deliciously long thick eyelashes.

Mariella could feel her face starting to burn. What was it about a certain type of man that enabled him to behave so uncaringly towards the child he had fathered?

The way Xavier was behaving towards Fleur was so reminiscent of the way her father had behaved towards her! She knew all too well what it was like to grow up feeling rejected and unloved by one's father and she couldn't bear to see that happen to Fleur!

Xavier ought to be made to see that she was at least in part his responsibility instead of being allowed to just walk away from her. The way she felt had nothing whatsoever to do with money, Mariella recognised, and everything to do with emotion.

Fleur had finished her meal and was beginning to drift off to sleep. Bending down to double-check that she was comfortably fastened into her seat, Mariella tenderly kissed her downy cheek, then straightened up and headed for the kitchen to wash out her feeding things.

Left on his own with Fleur, Xavier studied her frowningly. She was far fairer skinned than his cousin and, whilst Xavier could see an unmistakable physical resemblance to Mariella in her, he could see none to Khalid. Fast asleep now, Fleur gave a small quiver.

Immediately Xavier went over to her. Desert nights could be unbelievably cold—she felt warm enough, but perhaps she needed an extra cover?

He could hear Mariella in the kitchen and so he went through into the bedroom area, to get an extra blanket from the carry-cot.

Mariella had tucked her sketch-pad in between the carry-cot and the box of baby equipment, and as Xavier reached for a blanket he saw the sketch-pad, and its very recognisable sketches.

Frowning, he picked it up and studied it.

Having washed Fleur's feeding cup, Mariella walked into the bedroom intending to put it away, coming to an abrupt halt as she saw Xavier bending towards the carry-cot.

'Where is Fleur?' she demanded immediately. 'What—?'

'She's fast asleep where you left her,' Xavier answered her adding, 'From looking at her, it is plain to see her resemblance to you, but as to there being a similarity to her supposed father…'

Mariella had had enough.

'How can you deny your own flesh and blood?' she demanded bitterly. 'I can't imagine how *any* woman could ever desire you, never mind—'

Before she could say 'Tanya' he had cut her off as he asked with cutting brutality, 'Indeed? Then, what may I ask, are these?'

Mariella felt the breath wheeze from her lungs like air squeezed from a pair of bellows as he held up in front of her her own sketches.

Chagrin, embarrassment, guilt and anger fused into one burning, searing jolt of emotional intensity had her lunging frantically towards him, intent on snatching her betraying sketches from him. But Xavier was withholding them from her, holding them out of her reach with one hand whilst he fended her attempt to repossess them with the other.

Furiously Mariella redoubled her efforts, flinging herself at him, and trying to shake off his hard grip of her wrist as she did so.

'Give those back to me. They are mine,' she insisted breathlessly.

As she tried to reach up for them she overbalanced slightly, her fingers curling into his arm, her fingernails accidentally raising livid weals on his olive skin.

'Why, you little…'

Shocked as much by her own inadvertent action as his reaction to it, Mariella went stiff with disbelief as he suddenly dropped the sketches and grabbed hold of her waist with both hands.

‘Other men might have been willing to let you get away with such behaviour, but I most certainly do not intend to!’ She could hear Xavier grating at her as he gave her a small, angry shake.

Mariella could feel the edge of the bed behind her as she turned and twisted, frantically trying to break free, but Xavier was refusing to let her go and suddenly she was lying on the bed, with Xavier arching over her, pinning her down.

He was angry with her, Mariella recognised as she stared into the lava-grey heat of his eyes, but her senses were telling her something else as well and a savage little quiver then ran unmistakably through her own body as she realised that something else had nothing whatsoever to do with fear.

Xavier wanted her! Mariella could sense, feel it, breathe it in the sudden tension that filled the air, engulfing, locking them both in a place out of time.

This was fate, Xavier decided recklessly, a golden opportunity given to him to prove to his cousin beyond any shadow of a doubt that this woman was not worthy of his love, but, strangely, as he lowered his mouth to Mariella’s it wasn’t his duty towards his cousin that was filling his thoughts, driving him with an intense ferocity that a part of him recognised was more dangerous than anything he had previously experienced.

This was wrong, desperately wrong, the very worst kind of betrayal, Mariella acknowledged as her whole body was savaged by a mixture of anguish and hunger.

Xavier’s mouth burned hers, its possession every bit as harsh and demanding as she had expected, barely cloaking a hunger that scorched right through her body to her fingertips.

Helplessly her mouth responded to the savage demand of his, her body quivering as his tongue probed her closed lips demanding entry. Somehow, some time she had lifted her hands to his body so that she was gripping his shoulders. To push him away, or to draw him closer?

His teeth tugged ruthlessly at her bottom lip and her resistance ebbed away, like the inner tears of shame and guilt she was silently crying inside for her inability to resist giving in to flames of her own desire as they licked and darted inside her, burning down her pathetically weak defences. Without knowing how she knew, she knew that this man, this moment was something a part of her had been waiting for, for a very long time. Even the merciless intent of his sensual need was something that a part of her was fiercely responsive to.

Her eyes, magnificent in their emotional intensity, shimmered from turquoise to dark blue-green. Xavier was mesmerised by them, caught in their brilliance. How could such cool colours glow so hotly? But not nearly so hotly as his own body.

Without knowing what she was doing, Mariella raked the taut flesh of his arm—deliberately this time—her body galvanised by deep, urgent shudders as his kiss possessed her mouth, his tongue thrusting into its warm softness.

Mariella tried to deny what she was feeling, pulling frantically away from Xavier, in a desperate attempt to escape and to save them both from the very worst kind of betrayal, but having shared her surrender Xavier refused to let her go, pinning her to the bed with the weight of his body hot and heavy on hers, making her melt, making her ache, making her writhe in helpless supplication and moan into his mouth, a tiny keening sound lost beneath the greater sounds of their bodies moving on the bed. The rustle and rasp of fabric against flesh, of two people both revealing their hunger in the accelerated sound of their breathing, and the frantic thud of their heartbeats.

Xavier’s mouth grazed her skin, exploring the curve of her jaw, the soft vulnerability of her throat as she automatically arched her whole body. The hot, fevered feel of his mouth against her flesh made her arch even more, shuddering in agonised pleasure.

Just a few kisses, that was all it was…And yet she felt as possessed by him, as aching for him as though he had touched her far more intimately and for far, far longer. The desire she was feeling was so acute, so very nearly unbearable, that Mariella dared not allow herself to imagine how she was going to feel when he did touch her more intimately. And yet at the same time she knew that if he didn’t—

When his hand covered her breast she cried out, unable to stop herself, and felt his responding groan shudder through his body. She could hear herself making small, whimpering sounds of distress as she tugged at his clothes, her own body consumed by a need to be completely bare to his touch, to be open to him…

And yet when he had finally removed them and she was naked, a sense of panic that was wholly primitive and instinctive ripped through her, causing her to go to cover her naked breasts protectively with her own hands. But Xavier was too quick for her, his fingers snapping round her wrists, pinioning her hands to either side of her head as he knelt over her.

Mariella felt the heavy thread of her own hungry desire. She just had time to see the molten glitter of Xavier's answering hunger before he looked down at her exposed breasts. A sinful desire slid hotly through her veins, her face burning as she watched him absorbing the taut swell of her breasts as her nipples tightened and darkened, openly inciting the need she could hear and feel in his indrawn breath, even before he lowered his head to her body.

The feeling of him slowly circling first one and then the other nipple with the moist heat of his tongue, whilst she lay powerless beneath him, should surely have inflamed her angry independence instead of sending such a sheet of white-hot sensuality pouring through her that her belly automatically concaved under its pressure whilst her sex ached and swelled.

Mariella closed her eyes. Behind her closed eyelids she could see him as she had done in the oasis, just as she wanted to see him again now, she recognised as her body began to shudder. Slow, deep, galvanic surges of desire that ripped rhythmically through her, her body moving to the suckle of his mouth against her breast.

She could feel his knee parting her thighs her body already aching for the aroused feel of him, hot, heavy, masculine as he urgently moved against her.

* * *

HE WAS LOSING HIMSELF, drowning in the way she was making him feel, his self-control in danger of being burned away to nothing. Just the sight of her swollen breasts, their nipples tight and aroused from his laving of them, made him ache to possess her, to complete and fill her, to complete himself within her.

The moment Xavier released her wrists, Mariella tugged impatiently at his clothes, answering her demanding need for him. Immediately Xavier helped her, guiding her hands over buttons and zips and then flesh itself as she moaned her pleasure against the hot skin of his throat when her fingertips finally tangled with the soft, silky hair she had ached to touch earlier.

His body, packed hard with muscle, was excitingly alien and overpoweringly male. His impatience to be a part of her made her gasp and shudder as he kissed her throat, her shoulder and then her mouth, whilst he wrapped her tightly in his arms so that they were lying intimately, naked body to naked body.

The feel of him pressing against her. Hot and hard, aroused, his movement against her urgently explicit, was more than she could withstand.

Eagerly she coiled herself around him, opening herself to him, crying out as she felt him enter her, each movement powerful and sure, strong and urgent.

Already her own body was responding to his movement, her muscles clinging to him. Sensually stroking him and savouring each thrust, she could feel him strengthening inside her, filling her to completion, picking up the rhythm of her body and carrying…driving them both with it.

'Never mind the child he has given you, has my cousin given you this? Has he made you feel like this when he holds you? When he possesses you? When he loves you? Was *this* how it was between you when you made Fleur together?'

Mariella's whole body stiffened.

'Did you give yourself to him as easily as you did to me? And how many others have there been?'

With a fierce cry, she pulled away from him, her brain barely able to take in what he was saying, her body and emotions in such deep shock that removing herself from him made her feel as though she were physically dying.

The shock of her rejection tore at Xavier's guts. He wanted to drag her back into his arms, where surely she belonged, to roll her into the bed beneath him and to fill her with himself, to make her admit that no other man had ever or could ever give her or share with her what he could. But most of all he wanted to fill her with the life force that would ultimately be his child. A part of him recognised that there was no more elemental drive than this, to fill a woman's body with one's child in order to drive out her commitment to another man and the child he had already given her. The barbaric intensity of his own emotions shocked him. He had done what he had done for Khalid's sake, to protect him, he reminded himself, and to reinforce that fact he told her, 'It's a little too late for that now! You have already proved to me just what you are, and once Khalid learns how willing you were to give yourself to me he will quickly realise how right I was to counsel him against you.'

He had taken her to bed for that? Because of that? So that he could denounce her to another man?

In the outer room Fleur suddenly started to cry. Dragging on her clothes, Mariella hurried in to her, picking her up and holding her tightly as though just holding her could somehow staunch the huge wound inside her that was haemorrhaging her life force. She was shaking from head to foot with reaction, both from what had happened and from what she had just learned.

Fleur was not Xavier's child! Xavier's cousin was Fleur's father! But Xavier believed that she was Fleur's mother. And because of that he had taken her to bed, out of a cold-hearted, despicable, damnable desire to prove to his cousin that she was a…a wanton who would give herself to any man!

Fate had been doubly kind to her, she told herself staunchly: firstly in ensuring that she had not betrayed her sister, and secondly in giving her incontrovertible proof of just what manner of man Xavier was!

CHAPTER SIX

AS SHE STEPPED inside the welcome familiarity of her Beach Club bungalow, Mariella allowed herself to expel a shaky sigh of relief. Her first since she had left the oasis!

Now that she was safely here, perhaps she could allow herself to put the events of the last forty-eight hours firmly behind her. Lock them away in a very deep sealed drawer marked, 'Forget for ever.'

But how could she forget, how could any human being forget an act as deliberately and cold-bloodedly cruel and damaging as the one Xavier had perpetrated against her?

If she herself had been a different kind of woman she might have taken a grim sense of distorted pleasure in knowing that, for all he might try to deny it, Xavier had physically wanted her. In knowing it and in throwing that knowledge back at him! Instinctively she knew that he would be humiliated by it, and if any man deserved to be humiliated it was Xavier!

Just thinking about him was enough to have Mariella's hands curling into small, passionately angry fists. As her heart drove against her ribs in sledgehammer blows. How could he possibly not have recognised that she would never, ever, ever under any circumstances betray her love, and that if she had been another man's lover nothing he could have done would have tempted her to want him? Hadn't her body itself proclaimed to him the unlikeliness, the impossibility of her being Fleur's mother and any man's intimate lover?

But believing that he had been Tanya's lover hadn't stopped her, had it?

She would carry that shame and guilt with her to her deathbed, Mariella acknowledged.

The message light on the bungalow's communications system was flashing, indicating that she had received several telephone calls, all from the prince's personal assistant, she discovered when she went to check them. Before answering them, the first thing she intended to do now that she was safely back at the hotel was ring her sister and double-check that she had not misunderstood Xavier—he was not Tanya's lover or Fleur's father!

And once she had that confirmation safely in her possession, then Xavier would be history!

* * *

IT TOOK HER several attempts to get through to Tanya, who eventually answered the phone sounding breathless and flustered.

'I'm sorry, Ella,' she apologised quickly. 'But things are really hectic here and…Look, I can't really talk right now. Is Fleur okay?'

'Fleur is fine. She's cut her first tooth, but, Tanya, there's something I've got to know,' Mariella told her, firmly overriding her attempts to end the call.

'I must know Fleur's father's name, Tanya. It's desperately important!'

'Why? What's happened? Ella, I can't tell you…'

Hearing the panic in her sister's voice, Mariella took a deep breath. 'All right! But if you won't tell me who he is, Tanya, then please at least tell me that his first name isn't Xavier…'

'Who?' Tanya's outraged shriek almost hurt her eardrums. 'Xavier? You mean that horrid cousin of Khalid's? Of course he isn't Fleur's father. I hate him…He's the one responsible for parting me and Khalid! He sent Khalid away! He doesn't think that I'm good enough for him! Anyway…how do you know about Xavier, Ella? He's an arrogant, overbearing, old-fashioned, moralistic beast, who lives in the Dark Ages! Look, Ella, I've got to go…Love to Fleur and lots of kisses.'

She ended the call before Mariella could stop her, leaving her gripping the receiver tensely.

But at least she had confirmed that Xavier was not Fleur's father.

Determinedly Mariella made herself turn her attention to her messages.

The prince had now returned to Zuran and wanted her to get in touch with his personal assistant.

* * *

'DON'T WORRY,' THE prince's personal assistant reassured Mariella when he rang him a few minutes later to explain why she had not returned his calls.

'It is just that the prince is hosting a charity breakfast tomorrow morning at the stables and he wanted to invite you as his guest. His Highness is very enthusiastic about his project of having the horses painted, but of course this is something you will be having formal discussions with him about at a later date. The breakfast is a prestigious dressy event, although we do ask all our guests not to wear strong perfumes, as this can affect the horses.'

'It sounds wonderful,' Mariella responded. 'However, there is one small problem. I have brought my four-month-old niece to Zuran with me, as the prince knows. I am looking after her for my sister, and—'

'That is no problem at all,' the PA came back promptly. 'Crèche facilities are being provided with fully trained nannies in attendance. A car will be sent to collect both you and the baby, of course.'

Mariella had previously attended several glitzy society events at the invitation of her clients, including one particularly elegant trip to France for their main race of the season at Longchamp—a gift from a client, which she had repaid with a 'surprise' sketch of his four-year-old daughter on her pony, and, recalling the sophistication and glamour of the outfits worn by the Middle Eastern contingent on that occasion, she suspected that she was going to have to go shopping.

* * *

TWO HOURS LATER, sitting sipping coffee in the exclusive Zuran Designer Shopping Centre, Mariella smiled ruefully to herself as she contemplated her assorted collection of shiny shopping bags.

The largest one bore the name, not of some famous designer, but of an exclusive babywear store. Unable to choose between two equally delicious little outfits for Fleur, Mariella had ended up buying her niece both.

She had been rather less indulgent on her own account, opting only to buy a hat—an outrageously feminine and eye-catching model hat, mind you!—a pair of ridiculously spindly heeled but totally irresistible sandals, which just happened to be the exact shade of turquoise-blue of the silk dress she had decided to wear to the charity breakfast, and a handbag in the same colour, which quite incredibly had the design of a galloping horse picked out on it in sequins and beads.

And best of all she had managed not to think about Xavier at all…well, almost not at all! And when she had thought about him it had been to reiterate to herself just what a total pig he was, and how lucky she was that all she had done was give in to a now unthinkable and totally out of character, momentary madness, which would never, ever be repeated. After all, there was no danger of her ever allowing herself to become emotionally vulnerable to any man—not with her father's behaviour to remind her of the danger of falling in love—never mind a man who had condemned himself in the way that Xavier had!

Having drunk her coffee, she gathered up her bags and checked that Fleur was strapped securely in her buggy before heading for the taxi rank.

It had been a long day. She had hardly slept the night before, lying awake in Xavier's bed, her thoughts and her emotions churning. And then there had been the long drive back to Zuran this morning after her prayers had been answered and the storm had died away.

True, she had had a brief nap earlier, but now, even though it was barely eight in the evening, she was already yawning.

* * *

XAVIER PACED THE floor of the pavilion. He should, he knew, be rejoicing in his solitude and the fact that that woman had gone! And of course he would have no compunction whatsoever in telling Khalid just how easily and quickly she had betrayed the 'love' she had claimed to have for him!

That ache he could feel in his body right now meant nothing and would very quickly be banished!

But what if Khalid refused to listen to him? What if, despite everything he, Xavier, had said to him, he insisted on continuing his relationship with her?

If Fleur was Khalid's child, then it was only right that he should provide for her. Xavier tried to imagine how he would feel if Khalid were to set his mistress and their child up in a home in Zuran. How he would feel knowing that Khalid was living with her, sharing that home…sharing her bed?

Angrily he strode outside. Even the damned air inside the tent was poisoned by her perfume—that and the scent of baby powder! He would instruct his staff to dispose of the bedding and replace it with new, just in case her scent might somehow manage to linger and remind him of an incident he now wanted to totally forget!

But even outside he was still haunted by his mental images of her. Her ridiculous turquoise eyes, her creamy pale skin, her delicate bone structure, her extraordinarily passionate response to him that had driven him wild, driven him over the edge of his control to a place he had never been before. The sweet, hot, tight feel of her inside, as though she had never had another lover, never mind a child! No wonder poor, easygoing Khalid had become so ensnared by her!

* * *

FLEUR WAS CERTAINLY attracting a lot of attention, Mariella reflected tenderly as people turned to look at the baby she was carrying in her arms, oblivious to the fact that it was her own appearance that was attracting second looks from so many members of the fashionably dressed crowd already filling the stable yard.

Her slim silk dress had originally been bought for a friend's wedding, its soft, swirling pattern in colours that ranged from palest aqua right through to turquoise. Over it, to cover her bare arms, Mariella was wearing a toning, velvet-edged, silk-knit cardigan, several shades paler than her hat and shoes.

A member of the prince's staff had been on hand to greet her as she stepped out of the limousine that had been sent to collect her, and to pass her on to a charming young man, who was now taking her to introduce her to the prince.

The purpose-built stables were immaculate, the equine occupants of the stalls arching their long necks and doing a good deal of scene stealing, as though intent on making the point that they were the real stars of the event and not the humans who were invading their territory.

The breakfast was to be served in ornamental pavilioned areas, off which was the crèche, so Mariella had been informed.

Her stomach muscles tightened a little as she saw the group of people up ahead of her. People of consequence and standing, no matter how they were dressed, all possessed that same air of confidence, Mariella acknowledged as the crowd opened up and the man at the centre of it turned to look at her.

'Miss Sutton, this is His Royal Highness,' her young escort introduced her to the prince, her potential client.

'Miss Sutton!' His voice was warm, but Mariella was aware of the sharp, assessing look he gave her.

'Your Highness,' she responded, with a small inclination of her head.

'I have been very impressed with your work, Miss Sutton, although I have to say that, especially in the case of my friend and rival Sir John Feinnes, you have erred on the side of generosity in the stature and muscle you have given his "Oracle".'

A small smile dimpled Mariella's mouth.

'I simply reflect what I see as an artist, Highness,' she told him demurely.

'Indeed. Then wait until you have seen my animals. They are the result of a breeding programme that has taken many years' hard work, and I want them to be painted in a way that pays full tribute to their magnificence.'

And to his own, Mariella decided, but tactfully did not say so.

‘My friend Sir John also tells me that you have some very innovative ideas…The finishing touches are currently being put to an exclusive enclosure at our racecourse, which will bear my family name, and it occurs to me that there could be an opportunity there for…’ He paused.

Mariella suggested, tongue in cheek, ‘Something innovative?’

‘Indeed,’ he agreed. ‘But this is not a time to discuss business. I have invited you here as my guest, so that you can meet some of your subjects informally, so to speak…’

Fleur, who had been staring around in wide-eyed silence, suddenly turned her head and smiled at him.

‘You have a beautiful child,’ he complimented her.

‘She is my niece,’ Mariella informed him. ‘I am looking after her for my sister. I think my agent did explain.’

‘Yes. I am sure he did! I seem to remember that my personal assistant did mention the little one.’

Some new guests were waiting to be presented to him, and Mariella stepped discreetly to one side. In the distance on the racecourse she could see a string of horses being exercised, whilst here in the yard there were grooms and stable hands all wearing khaki shorts or trousers, and tee shirts in one of the prince’s three racing colours denoting their status within the hierarchy of the stables.

‘If you would care to take the baby to the crèche,’ the prince’s assistant was asking politely.

Firmly Mariella shook her head. Such was her sense of responsibility towards her niece that she preferred to keep her with her for as long as she could, and, besides, the yard was far too busy for her to be able to do even the briefest of preliminary sketches of the animals. The event was providing her with a wonderful opportunity to do some people watching, though.

* * *

SURVEYING THE CROWD filling the prince’s racing yard, Xavier wondered what on earth he was doing here. This kind of social event was normally something he avoided like the plague! It was much more Khalid’s style than his, and if Khalid had not taken a leave of absence without warning he would have been the one to attend the event! However, since Xavier was involved in shared business interests with the prince, he had felt that perhaps he should attend the breakfast—especially as it was in aid of a charity that he fully supported.

Several people had already stopped him to talk with him, including various members of the royal family, but he now felt that he had done his duty and was on the point of leaving when he suddenly frowned as he caught sight of a silky flash of turquoise-blue as the crowd in front of him momentarily parted.

Grimly he started to stride towards it.

People were starting to move towards the pavilioned area where the breakfast was about to be served, but Mariella hesitated a little uncertainly, suspecting that it would be a diplomatic move now to take Fleur over to the crèche area rather than into the pavilions. A little uncertainly she glanced round, unsure as to what to do, and hoping that she might see the prince’s helpful assistant.

Xavier saw Mariella before she saw him, his eyebrows snapping together in seething fury as he realised his suspicions had been confirmed. It was her! And he had no difficulty in guessing just what she was doing here! Some of the richest men in Zuran were here, and very few of them were unlikely to at least be tempted by the sight of her! From the top of the confection of straw and tulle she was wearing on top of her head to the tip of the dainty little pink-painted toenails revealed by shoes so fragile that he was surprised that she dared risk wearing them, especially when carrying her child, she looked a picture of innocent vulnerability. But of course she was no such thing! And dressing the baby in an outfit obviously chosen to match hers seemed to proclaim their mother and baby status to the world.

Unaware of the fact that Nemesis and all the Furies were about to bear down on her with grim zeal in the shape of a very angry and disapproving male, Mariella shifted Fleur’s weight in her arm.

‘Very fetching! Trust you to be here, and with the very latest European accessory—I have to tell you, though, that you’ve misjudged its effect in Zuran!’

‘Xavier!’ Mariella felt her legs wobble treacherously in her high heels as she stared at him in shock.

‘I don’t know how you managed to get past the security staff—although I suspect I can guess how!’ he told her cynically. ‘Kept women and those who sell their favours to the highest bidder are normally kept out of such events.’

Kept women! His condemnation stung not just her pride, but her sense of sisterly protection for Tanya. She knew that if this conversation were to continue, she would have to explain she was not Fleur’s mother, but right now she was due in the pavilion for breakfast. She was here on business and she would not jeopardise the commission by having an argument with Xavier in front of the prince! ‘I refuse to speak with you if you are going to be so rude,’ she said tersely. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must go and join the others.’ A flash of light to her left made her gasp as she realised a photographer had just caught the two of them on camera!

‘Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing here,’ Xavier told her challengingly. ‘You know that Khalid is going to come to his senses and realise just what you are, and you’re looking for someone to take his place, and finance you.’

‘Finance her!’ The feathers nestling in the swathes of chiffon on Mariella’s hat trembled as she shook with outrage.

‘For your information, I do not need anyone to finance me, as you put it. I am completely financially independent.’ As she saw his expression Mariella turned on her heel.

Hurrying away from him, she tensed as she suddenly felt a touch on her arm, but when she looked round it was only the prince’s assistant.

‘The prince would like you to join his table for breakfast, Miss Sutton,’ he told her. ‘If I may escort you first to the crèche,’ he added tactfully.

Angrily Xavier watched as the crowd swallowed her up. How dared she lie to him and claim to be financially independent, especially when she knew he knew the truth about her?

She was the most scheming and deceitful woman he had ever met, a woman he was a total fool to spare the smallest thought for!

* * *

THE CONVERSATION AROUND the breakfast table was certainly very cosmopolitan, Mariella decided as she listened to two other women discussing the world’s best spa resorts, whilst the men debated the various merits of differing bloodstock.

After the breakfast was over and people were beginning to drift away, the prince came over to Mariella.

‘My assistant will telephone you to make formal arrangements for us to discuss my commission,’ he told her.

‘I was wondering if it would be possible for me to visit your new enclosure?’ Mariella asked him. ‘Or, failing that, perhaps see some plans?’

She had the beginnings of a vague idea which, if the prince approved, would be innovative, but first she needed to see the enclosure to see if it would work.

‘Certainly. I shall see that it is arranged.’

As he escorted her outside Mariella saw Xavier standing several yards away, her face beginning to burn as he looked at the prince and then allowed his glance to drift with slow and deliberate insolence over her, assessing her as though…as though she were a piece of…of flesh he was contemplating buying, Mariella recognised.

‘Highness!’

‘Xavier.’ As the two men exchanged greetings Mariella turned to leave, but somehow Xavier had moved and was blocking her way.

‘I see that you do not have Fleur with you!’

‘No,’ Mariella agreed coldly. ‘She is in the crèche. I am just on my way to collect her.’

‘You know Miss Sutton, Xavier? I hadn’t realised. I am about to avail myself of her exceptional services, and she has promised me something extremely innovative.’

Mariella winced as she recognised from his expression just what interpretation Xavier had put on the prince’s remarks. Excusing herself, she managed to push her way past Xavier, but to her consternation he only allowed her to take a few steps into the shadows cast by one of the pavilions before catching up with her and taking hold of her arm.

‘My word, but you are a witch! The prince is renowned for his devotion to his wife and yet he speaks openly of entering a relationship with you!’

Mariella did not dignify that with an answer. Instead she bared her teeth at him in a savage little smile as she told him sweetly, ‘There, you see, you need not have gone to all that trouble to protect your cousin. There is no need for you to go running to him now to tell him all about your sordid and appalling behaviour towards me. After all, once he gets to hear about the fact that the prince is paying for my…expertise…’

‘You dare to boast openly about it?’ Xavier was gripping her with both hands now, his fingers digging into the vulnerable flesh of her upper arms.

To her own surprise Mariella discovered that winding Xavier up was great fun and she was actually enjoying herself.

‘Why shouldn’t I?’ she taunted him. ‘I am proud of the fact that my skills are so recognised and highly thought of, and that I am able to earn a very respectable living for myself by employing them!’

As his fingers bit even harder into her arms she viewed the ominous white line around his mouth with a dangerous sense of reckless euphoria.

‘In fact, in some circles I have already made quite a name for myself.’

She had gone too far, Mariella realised as her euphoria was suddenly replaced with apprehension.

‘You are proud of being known as a high-class whore? Personally I would have classed you merely as an expensive one!’

Mariella was just about to slap him when he said, ‘If you strike me here you could well end up in prison, whereas if I do this…’

She gasped as he bent his head and subjected her to a savagely demanding kiss, arching her whole body back as she fought not to come into contact with his, and lost that fight. In the shadows of the pavilion he used his physical strength to show her what she already knew—that despite his rage and contempt he was physically aroused by her! Just as she was by him?

He released her so abruptly that she almost stumbled. As he turned away from her he reached into his robe and removed a wallet, opening it to throw down some money.

White-faced, Mariella stared at him. Deep down inside herself she knew that she had deliberately incited and goaded him, but not for this.

‘Pick it up!’ he told her savagely.

Mariella took a deep breath and gathered what was left of her dignity around her. ‘Very well,’ she agreed calmly. ‘I am sure the charity will be grateful for it, Xavier. I understand it helps to support abandoned children.’

She prayed that he would think the glitter in her eyes was caused by her contempt and not by her tears.

Silently Xavier watched her go. His own behaviour had shocked him but he was too stubbornly proud to admit it—and even more stubbornly determined not to acknowledge what had actually caused it.

How could he admit to jealousy over the favours of such a woman? How could he acknowledge that his own desire to possess her went far, far beyond the physical desire for just her body? He could not and he did not intend to do so!

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