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MICHELLE REID

Marriage on the Rebound

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Jilted at the altar!Shaan Saketa has heard the words before but never thought they would apply to her. Humiliated and alone, she stands facing a thousand guests when her boss, ruthless tycoon Rafe Danvers, makes a shocking proposal. Suddenly she finds herself married to the wrong man and whisked away on honeymoon!Rafe has always suspected that there was more to his mousy secretary than meets the eye, and he's right. But as he indulges in exquisite nights little does he know that Shaan is wondering just how ruthless he really is…and just how far he went to have her in his bed!

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About the Author

MICHELLE REID grew up on the southern edges of Manchester, the youngest in a family of five lively children. Now she lives in the beautiful county of Cheshire, with her busy executive husband and two grown-up daughters. She loves reading, the ballet, and playing tennis when she gets the chance. She hates cooking, cleaning, and despises ironing! Sleep she can do without, and produces some of her best written work during the early hours of the morning.

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Marriage on the Rebound
Michelle Reid

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CHAPTER ONE

THE room had fallen into a terrible silence. No one moved, no one spoke, the horror that was every young woman's worst nightmare jamming the very air that surrounded them.

Shaan had dropped into the nearest chair, her face turned chalk-white with shock. Pressed between her knees and half-buried in the soft folds of pure white silk and delicate lace were her hands. Ice-cold and numb, they were crushing the single sheet of notepaper Rafe had just grimly handed to her.

'Dear Shaan,' it said. *Dear Shaan…*

'How could he do it?' Her uncle's harsh cry broke into the terrible silence, sounding hoarse and stricken and grievously bewildered.

Nobody answered him. Shaan couldn't, and Rafe obviously wasn't prepared to.

He stood by the window, effectively disconnected from it all now his part in the dirty deed was done, while out there, only a few short miles away, was a church packed full of guests, all dressed in their best wedding finery, waiting for a bride and groom who would not be turning up.

By now they would have begun to suspect that something terrible had gone wrong, the fact that Piers and Rafe were not in their places by the altar enough to arouse suspicion alone. Her aunt would be jumping all over the place with worry and Jemma, her only bridesmaid, looking foolish in her pretty pink dress, would be waiting just outside the church for a bride who was no longer wanted.

'My God! He couldn't have cut it any finer, could he?' her uncle raked out angrily.

'No,' Rafe decided to answer that one, though his voice sounded deeply constricted, as though he'd only just got the single syllable past his tensely locked throat.

Shaan didn't so much as move, her eyes—dark, dark brown under normal circumstances—looking so black in her pale face that they seemed utterly bottomless. They were not seeing much. They looked inwards, staring into the cold, dark recesses of her mind where horror, hurt and humiliation were waiting to grab hold of her once the all-encompassing numbness of shock had worn off.

Was Rafe in shock too? she found herself wondering. She supposed he must be. He certainly looked pale beneath that warm, golden tan his skin always wore. And he was dressed for a wedding in a formal grey morning suit. He could not have suspected Piers was going to do anything quite so crass as this.

Piers…

Her gaze dropped to her hands, where her fingers curled tightly around the single sheet of notepaper.

'I'm so sorry to have to do this…'

Her lips quivered, but not the rest of her—that was held in a kind of frozen stillness that barely allowed her enough room to breathe. Her mouth felt dry, so dry that everything had cleaved to everything else. And her heart was pumping oddly—not in her breast but in her stomach, huge, great, throbbing pulses which were making her feel dizzy and sick and—

'God—' Her uncle broke into sudden movement. 'I have to go and warn all those poor people waiting at the—'

'There's no need,' Rafe put in grimly. 'I've already seen to it. I thought it—best,' he finished inadequately, hating the situation Piers had thrust upon him so much that the words came out terse and clipped.

Sure enough, and as if on cue, the sound of a car pulling up outside the smart London town house alerted them to the first horrified arrivals back from the church.

Too soon, Shaan thought numbly. I'm not ready for them. I can't face—

'Shaan!'

It was Rafe's voice, sounding raw with concern, and a moment later she felt herself being caught just before she toppled sickeningly forward.

'I don't want to see anyone,' she whispered threadily—not actually unconscious, but dizzyingly close to it.

'Of course not.' Rafe was squatting in front of her, holding her slumped upper torso against him, the fine tulle veil covering her thick mane of jet-black hair rustling against his face. He was trembling, she noted vaguely, his heart thundering beneath her resting brow.

'It's Sheila…' Her uncle Thomas had moved to peer out of the window. 'It's your aunt, Shaan,' he murmured soothingly. 'She—'

At that moment the front door burst open, and Shaan began to shake—shake violently. Rafe uttered a soft curse and shifted his big frame so he could gather her deeper into the protective cocoon of his arms as the sitting room door flew open.

'Shaan!' a high-pitched, near hysterical voice cried out. 'Oh, you poor baby!'

'No,' she whimpered against Rafe's shoulder. 'No…' She didn't want this, couldn't cope with it. Not her aunt's grief, not her uncle's—not even her own!

Rafe must have sensed it, because he stood up suddenly, pulling her upright with him, and in the next second she was being lifted into his arms, her ice-cold face pressed into his warm, tense throat.

'She's fainted,' he lied. God alone knew why, but Shaan was grateful to him. 'Her room, Mrs Lester—show me where her room is.'

'Oh, Shaan!' Aunt Sheila—her quiet, soft, super, gentle aunt Sheila who rarely let anything ripple the calm waters surrounding her life—went completely to pieces, dropping down into one of the chairs to sob uncontrollably. Uncle Thomas went to her while Rafe muttered something beneath his breath and strode out of the room without waiting for direction.

The hall was packed with people. Shaan could sense their horrified presence even while Rafe kept her face hidden in his throat. Ignoring them all, he took the stairs like a mountain climber, the angry adrenaline pumping in his blood powerful enough to send him up there without him so much as taking a breath.

She heard several horrified gasps, and Jemma's voice, questioning and sharp with concern. Rafe answered tightly, but she didn't know what he said. She was hovering somewhere between this world and another, riding on a fluffy grey cloud just above pained reality.

'Which room?' His voice was terse, rasping enough to score through the cloud.

But although she tried to concentrate on the question she couldn't. She was barely aware of where she was. On another muttered curse Rafe began opening doors, throwing them wide and glancing inside before moving on to the next one, until he came to the one which could only be the bride's room, because of the mad scatter of wedding paraphernalia all over the place. Once inside, he sat her down on the end of the bed and then turned to slam the bedroom door shut.

Then silence hit, the same hard, drumming silence which had closed them all in downstairs, after Rafe had delivered his letter.

Rafe just stood there, glaring at her downbent head for a few moments, then suddenly strode over to grasp the short tulle veil she still wore. Careless of the amount of pins holding it in place, he ripped it from her head and threw it aside.

'Sorry,' he muttered tensely. 'But I couldn't…' Swallowing, he spun away, thrusting clenched fists into his pockets.

Her scalp began to tingle from his rough handling, but Shaan didn't mind. If anything she was glad of the feeling because it told her that she was at least partly still alive. And she even understood why he'd done it. She must look pathetic, really pathetic, sitting here in all her bridal finery while her groom made off in the opposite direction.

Then it really hit—self-revulsion surging up from nowhere to bring her staggering to her feet, the letter, still crumpled in one hand, falling forgotten to the floor as she began a mad clawing at the tiny pearl buttons holding the front of her lacy bodice together.

'Help me!' she pleaded in choking desperation, fingers trembling, body shaking, her expression until now uncannily still breaking into a war of tortured loathing.

The silk ripped as she tugged, but she didn't care—suddenly it was the most essential thing in her life to get out of this dress, remove everything even remotely connected with Piers or her ruined wedding day from her body! 'Help me, for God's sake!'

'Shaan, I can't!' Rafe sounded actually shocked, which brought her eyes jerking up to his face.

'Why not?' she demanded in tight, thick condemnation. 'You've done everything else you could possibly do to ruin today for me. Why can't you help me ruin this dress, too!'

Her sudden attack sent him back a step, set a nerve ticking at the side of his rigidly held jaw. His usually implacable grey eyes going dark with emotion as he opened his mouth to say something—and Shaan's chin came up, dark eyes daring him to deny what she'd said. He couldn't, and his mouth closed again into a hard, tight line of self-contempt.

On a fresh wave of inner violence, Shaan gave a vicious yank at the bodice so that the two pieces of fine fabric sheared apart to send tiny buttons flying everywhere, dropping on the bed, on the floor, one flying across the room to land on the soft mauve carpet at Rafe's feet.

Rafe stared down at it, his dark head lowered so she couldn't see the expression on his grim face. She turned away on a rustle of silk to finish the complete destruction of the dress as, without a single care for its cost, she took malicious pleasure in ripping it from her body until she stood, trembling and cold, in the lovely white lace basque and silk stockings, which was all she wore beneath.

'This feels worse than rape,' she whispered, her arms wrapping tightly around herself.

'God, Shaan. Don't…' he muttered, taking a half-step towards her with his hand outstretched in a kind of distressed appeal.

Then it fell heavily to his side because he knew there was nothing he could say—nothing that could ease the pain and degradation she was suffering right now.

Instead, he turned for the door, his broad shoulders stiff beneath the smooth grey cloth of his formal morning jacket. 'I'll—go and get someone to—'

'No!' The protest rasped from somewhere deep down inside her. And she turned to look at him as he stopped dead one step from the door. 'No,' she repeated huskily. 'You can go if you want,' she allowed. 'But I don't want anyone else coming anywhere near this room.'

It was one thing having Rafe witness her complete downfall, since it was he who had effectively brought it about, but it was quite another having all those others witness it too. She wanted nobody here. Nobody. Not her best friend, Jemma, nor even her aunt.

She didn't care about Rafe, or the fact that she was wearing next to nothing in his presence. Rafe had openly held her in contempt from the very first moment Piers had introduced her as his—

'No.' Thoughts of Piers brought the sickness back, churning around in her stomach, so that she had to heave in some deep, controlling breaths to stop it overwhelming her altogether. Her nails bit into the soft flesh of her upper arms with enough cruelty to draw blood.

Then she felt something cold press against her skin, and remembered. Her long lashes flickered upwards as she unclipped her left hand from her arm and spread the cold and trembling fingers out in front of her.

A huge diamond winked tauntingly back at her, and with an angry tug she wrenched it from her finger and spun to face Rafe again, her black eyes spearing bitterness into his tensely guarded grey ones.

'Here,' she said, and threw the ring at his feet. 'You can give that back to him when you see him next. I don't want it; I don't ever want to see it again.'

Turning away from the image of Rafe slowly bending to pick up the ring, she walked quickly into her small bathroom, where she wilted shakily against the closed door. Her insides felt thick and heavy, as though every functioning organ had collapsed in a throbbing heap deep in the pit of her stomach.

Nausea enveloped her, followed by a black dizziness, followed by a raking sense of self-disgust which had her body folding right in on itself. Then, with the sudden jerky movements of one whose mind was not functioning with any intelligence at all, she was stiffening upright and lurching drunkenly away from the door.

She needed a shower! Her cold and trembling skin was crawling with revulsion and she desperately needed to wash it away.

It was only as she wrenched the fragile white silk basque from her body that she saw the pale blue satin-and lace-trimmed garter still clinging lovingly to her thigh, just above one white silk stocking, and a smile twisted her bloodless mouth when she realised just how ridiculous she must have looked to Rafe, making her grand exit with this piece of frivolity on show.

Tears blinded her eyes, the first of many, she supposed, and she wretchedly wiped them away with the back of an icy hand and stepped into the shower cubicle. Trembling fingers found the tap and turned it until the burning-hot hiss of water gushed down on her. Then she stood, not moving, just letting the stinging heat wash all over her, eyes closed, face lifted up to it, not caring if she scalded herself so long as she scoured every last hint of the bride from her body.

How long she stood there like that, she had no idea, because she refused to allow herself to think, or even to feel much. But through the tunnel-dark recesses of her consciousness she was vaguely aware of intermittent knocks sounding on her bedroom door, of voices—one her aunt's, sounding high-pitched and shrill, another one, crisp and clear was Jemma, sounding demanding.

Rafe's darkly resonant murmurs intermingled with them, saying God knew what. She didn't know nor care, so long as he kept them all away from her. Then, eventually, the silence fell again, a solid kind of silence which soothed her flurried heart and helped keep her face turned up to the hot, hissing spray.

There would be time enough to endure all those pitying glances and murmured platitudes which were bound to come her way. These few minutes were for herself, herself alone, to try to come to terms with what she now was.

A jilted bride.

A nerve jerked at the corner of her mouth. Humiliation sat in the empty hollow where her heart used to be. A fool, more like, she corrected herself ruthlessly, a fool for ever believing that Rafe Danvers would let her marry his brother.

She had known from the first time she stood there in front of him, with her hand caught possessively in Piers' hand, that Rafe was going to do anything in his power to break them up.

Piers…

Oh, God, she thought wretchedly as his handsome, smiling face loomed up to torment her. How could he? How could he do this?

'Shaan…' The loud knock sounding on the bathroom door made her jump, her feet almost slipping on the wet tiles at the deep, husky sound of that voice.

So, Rafe hadn't given in to all those other concerned voices and made good his escape like his brother had, she noted grimly. He was still here, standing just on the other side of her bathroom door, as always ready to see his responsibilities through to the bitter end. She had told him she didn't want anyone else near her and he had taken her at her word—which therefore meant he could not desert her himself until he was satisfied he had seen *this* responsibility through to its conclusion.

Which was—what? she asked herself.

Rafe. The older brother. The more successful one. The head of the great Danvers empire. A man with shoulders more than broad enough to take whatever was thrust upon them.

And Piers had certainly thrust her upon Rafe today, she thought with a bitter little smile.

'Shaan…'

The voice came from much closer and she opened her eyes, turning her head to stare blankly through the thick bank of steam permeating all around her—to find Rafe's grim figure standing with a towel at the ready just outside the open shower cubicle door.

'Who said you could come in here?' she said, too numb to care about her own nakedness—both inside and out. The water was still gushing over her.

He didn't move his gaze from her face—not even to make a sweeping inspection of her naked body.

'Come on,' he said quietly, the towel held outstretched between his hands. 'You've been in there long enough.'

She laughed—why, she didn't know—but it was a sound that fell a long way short of humour and probably sounded more bleak and helpless than anything else. Long enough for what? she wondered. After all, I'm not going anywhere, am I?

Closing her eyes, she lifted her face back to the spray, effectively dismissing him.

'Hiding in here isn't going to make it all go away, you know,' he said quietly.

'Leave me alone, Rafe,' she threw back flatly. 'You've achieved what you set out to do; just leave me alone now.'

'I'm afraid I can't do that.' One hand dropped a corner of the towel so he could reach into the cubicle and turn off the water.

The new silence was engulfed in steam, emanating up from the wet tiles at her feet, and she glanced down to watch it swirl around her body, coiling up her long, slender legs and over the rounded contours of her hips, caressing as it wound around the firm swell of her breasts.

'He didn't want me,' she murmured dully. 'After all he said. He didn't really want me.'

The towel came softly about her shoulders, Rafe's hands holding it there as he gently urged her out of the cubicle and turned her into his arms. 'He wanted you, Shaan,' he told her huskily. 'But he loved Madeleine. In all fairness, he had no right to promise any other woman anything while he still loved her.'

Yes, Madeleine, she thought emptily. Piers' first and only love…'And you had to bring her back into his life,' she whispered accusingly.

'Yes,' he sighed, his hand moving gently on her back. 'You won't believe this, Shaan, but I'm sorry. I really am sorry…'

For some reason his apology cut so deeply into her that she reared back from him and, with all the bright, burning, bitter condemnation bubbling hotly inside, she threw her hand hard against the side of his face.

He took it, took it all, without even flinching. He didn't even release the hold he had on her, but just stood looking back at her with those cool grey eyes opalescent in his graven face, his mouth a thin, grim line.

She wanted to cry, but she couldn't. She wanted to kick and scream and hit out at him again and again and *again*, in an effort to release all the hurt and anger culminating inside her, but she couldn't. That one brief flash of violence seemed to have taken what bit of energy she had left from her. All she could do now was stand there in the circle of Rafe's arms and stare up at him through huge black haunted eyes, wondering if that grim look he was wearing hid satisfaction or any guilt at all for what he had done.

Rafe had warned her—as long as six weeks ago, he had warned her he wouldn't just stand aside and let her marry his brother. From the first moment their eyes had met across the elegant width of Rafe's luxurious home, his contempt for her had been there, vibrating on defences she hadn't even known she possessed, until she clashed with that look.

Until that moment she had just been Shaan Saketa, loving daughter of the late and much missed Tariq and Mary Saketa, proud of her mixed blood because she had never been made to feel otherwise —until those silver ice eyes had gone sliding over her.

Then, for the first time in her life, she'd experienced what real prejudice felt like, and the rare combination of thick, straight jet-black hair, dark brown eyes and skin as smooth and pale as milk, which had been turning people's heads in admiration all her life, suddenly became something to be sensitive about. She'd had to steel herself to actually take the hand Rafe had held out to her in formal greeting, knowing by sheer instinct that he had no wish to touch her or even be in the same room as her.

Yet, oddly, not only had he taken the hand but he had held onto it—and clung to the new, very defensive look in her liquid brown eyes—the dark, dire expression in his had managed to chill the blood in her veins in appalled acknowledgement of what his grim expression was telling her.

It had been the moment when Rafe Danvers had made sure she was rawly aware of her complete unsuitability to become one of the great Danvers family.

Well, today he had won his battle. And now he could afford to be a little charitable, she supposed. Lend comfort to the defeated.

She moved out of his arms, clutching the huge bath sheet around her trembling figure as she went back into her bedroom.

Miraculously, there wasn't a single sign of bridal attire about the place. The whole room had been completely swept clean of everything while she'd been hiding in the bathroom. The dress, the mad scatter of bits and pieces were all gone, leaving only her rose-pink bathrobe folded on the end of the bed, and her suitcases—so carefully packed the night before—still stacked neatly beside the bedroom door.

She dropped the towel and picked up the robe, uncaring that Rafe had followed her back into the room and that she was once again exposing her nakedness to him. It didn't seem to matter, not when the sight of her body held no interest for the man in question.

She turned to glance at him, though, as she cinched the robe belt around her narrow waist. He was standing in the bathroom doorway, not leaning, but tense, his hard eyes hooded.

'Your suit is wet,' she told him, sending a flickering glance along his big, hard frame where the pale grey showed dark patches where she had leant against him.

He shrugged with indifference and moved at last, walking across the now neat bedroom to her dressing table. 'Here,' he said, turning back to her and holding out a glass half-full of what could only be brandy.

She smiled wryly at it. 'Medicinal?' she mocked, taking it from him and lowering herself carefully onto the end of the bed. From being rubber-limbed with shock, she was now stiff with it—so stiff, in fact, that even the simple act of sitting down was a painful effort.

'Whatever you want to call it,' he replied. 'As it is…' He turned again, lifting another glass in rueful acknowledgement to her. 'I'm in need of the same.' And he came to sit down beside her. 'Drink it,' he advised. 'I can assure you, it will help.'

She swirled the dark amber liquid around the glass for a moment before lifting it to her bloodless lips. He did the same, sitting close to her, his arm brushing against hers as he moved it up and down.

It was strange, really, but, having spent the last six weeks avoiding touching her at all costs—except for that one brief contamination when they had been formally introduced—Rafe now seemed quite happy to be as close to her as he could get.

She glanced at him from beneath her thick black lashes, seeing the rigid tension in his square jaw, in the harsh line of his strong profile. He was nothing like Piers to look at. The two brothers were as different in every way as two men could possibly be. Where Rafe was dark, Piers was fair—so fair, it hadn't come as a complete surprise to her to find out later that they were only half-brothers.

Which also answered the question as to the ten-year gap in their ages. Piers was the handsome one of the brothers, the one with the uncomplicated smile which went with his uncomplicated character.

Or so she had believed, she amended grimly as she took another sip at the brandy. It burned as it went down, and the taste was gross, but it did at least put some warmth back inside her.

'What happened to everything in here?'

Rafe glanced around the pristine, tidy room. 'Your aunt and your friend cleared it all out while you were busy in the bathroom,' he explained. 'They—needed to feel useful.'

'I'm surprised Jemma didn't throw you out,' she murmured.

'Not your aunt?' he queried curiously.

'No.' Shaan shook the thick, wet pelt of black hair. 'My aunt has never been rude to anyone in her home in her life.'

'Unlike me.'

'Unlike you,' she agreed, not even trying to work out why they were sitting here having this stupid conversation in her bedroom of all places—he being who he was and she…

'Jemma tried throwing me out,' he admitted, taking a quick sip at his drink. 'But I— convinced her that you would handle all this better with me here rather than anyone else.'

'Because you don't care.' She nodded understandingly. She knew exactly why she had clung to Rafe rather than anyone else.

'That isn't entirely true, Shaan.' He sounded gruff all of a sudden. 'I know you won't believe this, but I knew from the beginning that Piers was not the man for you. All right,' he conceded at her deriding glance, 'I'm relieved he came to his senses before it was too late. But I am not proud of the time he took to do it. Nor will I forgive him easily for the way he's hurt you today. No one,' he finished roughly, 'has the right to wound another human being like he has done…If it gives you any satisfaction at all to know it, I can tell you that he and Madeleine are not proud of themselves for—'

'It doesn't,' she cut in, rising abruptly to her feet. 'And I really don't want to hear it.'

Lifting the glass to her mouth, she tossed the full contents to the back of her throat, then stood, back arched, eyes closed, breath held, while she absorbed the lick of liquid heat and waited for it to begin numbing her again.

She didn't want to feel anything yet. She wasn't ready. She didn't even want to think—not about herself, not about Rafe, and especially not about Piers and Madeleine.

'All right, Rafe.' Putting down the glass, she turned suddenly on him. Her eyes were still too big in her pale face, but her mouth was steadier, the colour beginning to ease back into her shock-whitened lips. 'I know this has all been an ordeal for you, and I thank you for the bother you've taken with me, but I'm going to be all right, and I would like you to leave now.' Now, before it all came hurtling on top of her, before the real hurting began, before…

But he gave a grim shake of his dark head, not even attempting to get up, and Shaan jumped in alarm when his hand snaked out to close around her wrist, the sudden tingle of her defences warning her that she wasn't completely numb as he pulled her back down to sit beside him.

'I'm not going yet,' he informed her bluntly. 'I have a proposition to put to you first. And I want you to hear me out before you say anything. I know you're in shock, and I know you can't possibly be capable of making decisions of any kind. But I'm going to force this one on you for the simple reason that I think, if you agree, we can at least save your pride if nothing else from this mess.'

He paused, then turned to look directly at her, those grey eyes of his very guarded but unwavering as they caught and held onto her own gaze.

'Will you marry me instead of my brother, Shaan?' he requested gravely.

CHAPTER TWO

FOR a single, short, breath-locking moment Shaan experienced a complete mind black-out. Then, '—Have you gone mad—?' she choked. 'Why, you despise the very sight of me!'

'That isn't true, Shaan,' Rafe denied.

Not listening, she tried to get up, but found her legs wouldn't let her. Her whole body had turned to crumbling stone, the shock waves of the past couple of devastating hours beginning to crack her wide open inside.

His hands came out to capture her own, closing all four of them tightly together on her lap and compelling her to turn around and face him. He looked tense, as white as she felt, but determined. She was trembling so badly now that even her head shook, quivering on the slender curve of her neck, her breathing gone haywire because of the tight contraction of her lungs.

'I know I'm not Piers,' he grimly conceded. 'Nor ever will be for that matter. He's my half-brother, and as different from me as—as Madeleine is from you. But—'

Madeleine! The name was beginning to haunt her, like the face—that sweet, gentle face, with its big blue vulnerable eyes surrounded by a cloud of soft golden hair. Madeleine was the archetypal pocket Venus, the fine porcelain doll. While Shaan—she was the—

'She's right for Piers, Shaan!' Rafe said fiercely, as though her thoughts were so open to him that he could easily make them his own. 'She always was! They were childhood sweethearts, young lovers before a stupid misunderstanding had Madeleine flying off to live with her mother in America last year…'

'I told you I didn't want to hear any of this!' she cried, trying desperately to struggle against the black cloud threatening to completely overtake her.

'All right!' he rasped, sucking in a tense breath, then letting it out again. 'Listen to this instead,' he insisted. 'In three days' time, your aunt and uncle should be leaving on a three-month long world cruise. Do you think they'll even consider going now, after what's happened to you today?'

She stared at him, having forgotten all about her aunt and uncle's delighted plans to take their dream cruise now the niece they had taken care of so lovingly for the past nine years was leaving the fold, so to speak.

'They don't have to worry about me,' she said shakily. 'I'll tell them—'

'Tell them what?' he challenged when she fell silent, her mouth moving soundlessly. 'That you'll be fine sitting here all on your own for the next three months grieving?'

'I don't intend to grieve,' she denied, stiffening in affront.

'Good.' He nodded his dark head in approval. 'I'm glad to hear you've got more spirit than to do that. But would you leave *them* on their own if something as devastating as this had happened to them? Of course you wouldn't.' He answered for her. 'And if you did manage to convince them to go, do you think they'd enjoy themselves, knowing how they'd left you behind?'

'I'll go and stay with Jemma…'

'Jemma is getting married herself in a few months,' he reminded her.

'How did you know that?' she gasped in shaken amazement.

He shook his head, dismissing that question as insignificant. 'Let's just leave it that I do know. To inflict yourself on Jemma now would spoil the excitement for her, because your own ruined wedding day will sit over you all like a thick black cloud.'

'Which doesn't mean I need to *inflict* myself on you instead!' she cried, hurt by the cruelly blunt way he had made her face that fact.

'Why not?' he demanded, grimly determined grey eyes boring straight into her wounded brown ones. 'If anyone deserves it, then I do. You said yourself that this was all my fault, and I damned well know it!' he admitted roughly. 'It was me who called Madeleine to warn her about you and Piers. It

was me who advised her to get back here if she still felt anything for my brother. And it was me who encouraged them to see each other at every possible moment I could arrange, to make Piers see what a dreadful mistake he was making by marrying you!'

'God, I hate you so!' she choked, turning to fling herself face-down on the bed, her poor body hurting in so many different places that she actually shook with it.

'Listen to me!' To her surprise he lay back too, stretching out beside her as though he had every given right to be this close to her, when only yesterday he had shied away from even looking at her! 'Shaan…' His hand came out to stroke down the silky wet pelt of her hair, his fingers trembling slightly. 'I admit it. I feel lousy about it all. Guilty, if you want to call it that. I owe you. Let me help you get through this with at least some dignity.'

'By offering yourself in your brother's place?' She laughed, the sound shrill with near hysteria. 'How old are you?' she demanded, turning onto her back to glare bitterly up at him.

He grimaced. 'Thirty-four.'

'I am twenty-two years old,' she informed him. 'Piers is twenty-four.'

'All right,' he bit out, jerking up and away from her. 'So I'm no bargain when compared to my brother! I'm not asking you to love me instead, just—give me a chance to help you through these next few months while you get over this.'

She didn't think she would ever get over this.

'And what will you get out of it?' She hadn't spent the last three years of her life working for the Danvers company without learning very early on that their revered chairman didn't do anything without a damned good reason for doing it!

'Like you,' he said, 'I save the family face.'

'You're that concerned with family honour?' Her sceptical look made his mouth grow tighter.

'My brother should be whipped out of town for the way he used you, Shaan. It makes the Danvers name dirty.'

Used…She sank back against the pillows, her eyes clouding over darkly. Yes, Piers had used her; all along the line he had used her, with his declarations of undying love and passionate promises.

He hadn't just used her, he had grossly defiled her. And the only saving grace she could glean for herself out of it all was the knowledge that he hadn't given in to her pathetic little pleas to make love to her before they married!

'God, I feel sick!'

Rolling dizzily off the bed, she ran, stumbling, into the bathroom, where she was horribly and humiliatingly sick while Rafe stood there beside her, holding her hair away from her face, grimly taking her weight while she leaned weakly over the bowl.

Here she stood, she flayed herself bitterly, a virgin on her wedding day—with no groom to care one way or another that she had saved herself for him!

The bitterness welled up and sliced through her eyes as she ran the cold tap so she could splash her clammy face with water.

Rafe was wrong about one thing if he thought himself no bargain compared to his brother. He was worth ten of Piers—and that had nothing to do with looks or charm, or even the love still throbbing in her breast for his brother, despite all the hurt he had inflicted on it.

It had to do with this—this deeply inbred sense of responsibility he possessed. The kind which had made him warn his brother's ex-lover about what Piers intended to do. It had to do with this—this need to put right what one of his own had messed up.

Her life—the family name. Their mutual honour!

'I won't marry you, Rafe,' she said, leaning heavily against the wash basin. 'Not to save your face or my own face. I won't degrade myself any further by pandering to just another Danvers method of exploitation.'

'I'm not trying to exploit you,' he denied gruffly.

‘Yes you are.’ She lifted her head to stare bleakly at his grim, hard face in the bathroom mirror, then just stood there, staring instead at the empty void which was her own unrecognisable face.

The tears began to burn at the backs of her eyes, and she covered them with her hands, her body beginning to shudder in another bout of weak self-pity.

Rafe’s hands were firm on her shoulders as he turned her into his arms. And she felt his heavy sigh as she struggled against the onset of tears once again.

‘I have nothing left…’ she whispered bleakly. ‘Nothing…’

‘But you will again soon,’ he murmured reassuringly, and suddenly his arms were tightly crushing bands around her. ‘Come away with me now, Shaan,’ he urged her huskily. ‘At the moment, only you, me and Piers know what he actually said in his letter. Only we three know the real reason why there was no wedding today. Even your uncle didn’t really understand—only that Piers had decided not to marry you.

‘We can tell them he found out about us, that you and I had fallen in love. Piers won’t try to deny it. He’ll just be relieved that we’ve found some way of making him come through it smelling cleaner. They’re already speculating down there as to why you wanted me with you rather than anyone else. Let’s go and tell them that you and I are going away together to marry quietly somewhere. Let’s give them something to cling onto, Shaan—a bit of hope!’

‘Everything has been packed,’ she whispered into his shoulder. ‘I h-haven’t got anything to wear.’

‘We can soon remedy that,’ he said, the tension seeping out of him when he recognised her words as a statement of defeat.

His arms tightened on her in a short moment of encouragement, then he was taking her back into the bedroom and over to the stack of suitcases waiting by the door. ‘Which one shall I open?’ he prompted huskily.

Shaan stared down at them. Her trousseau, she thought emptily. The clothes she’d spent weeks gathering together for the express purpose of pleasing Piers.

Pointing to one of the cases, she turned abruptly away, shuddering, because the very idea of wearing anything she had packed in those cases filled her with horror now.

Rafe glanced sharply at her, but didn’t say anything, his face tightening with a new aggression as he picked up the small weekend case and laid it on the bed so he could flick open the catches.

Shaan came to stand beside him, looking into the case with him. Inside lay a variety of female fripperies, from the expected toiletries to a neat pile of brand-new silky underwear, and the tension lying between them began to pulse with a new knowledge.

This was the case she would have used for her wedding night. It contained only the kinds of things a new bride would want to have around her on such an important occasion. Soft, delicate, sexy things, to tantalise her new husband with.

Without a word, her lips sucked back hard against her tightly clenched teeth, she reached down and selected a pair of white silky briefs and matching bra. Then she took out the uncrushable silk Jacquard suit in a bold apple-green colour that she had packed to wear after their stop-over in Paris. After that they had been supposed to go on to the Seychelles for a month-long honeymoon. Then she turned, walking away towards the bathroom, her dark head held high.

The door closed behind her and Rafe stood, staring at the closed door for a long time, before turning slowly back to the case. Then, on an act of violence which would have startled Shaan if she’d been there to witness it, he sent the small case flying to the floor with a single, vicious swipe of his hand, glaring down at the tumbled array of feminine items scattered at his feet.

When she came back, though, dressed, her hair contained in a simple knot at her nape, she found the room neat and tidy.

Rafe was standing by the window, looking big and dark and forbidding, with that black scowl on his face. But the moment he saw her he smiled, albeit grimly, and came over to her side.

‘OK?’ he asked.

She nodded, knowing she shouldn't be allowing this to happen, but somehow unable to find the strength to put up any more opposition.

Rafe was right about one thing—he was the only person she felt she could share the torment with because he had been the one to instigate it in the first place.

'Leave the talking to me,' he advised as he turned her towards the bedroom door.

She didn't answer—couldn't have if she'd tried—but she nodded. She had to trust in him to be the sane one. It was the only way she could cope right now.

They went to the sitting room.

Her aunt, her face red and swollen with crying, looked nothing like the bright, happy, if over-excited woman Shaan had watched leave for the church earlier today. Gone was the hyacinth-blue dress she had been wearing, and the huge, frivolous hat Shaan and her uncle had teased her about the day she had brought it home and showed them.

She came to her feet as they entered, still so shaken that she needed her husband's help to do so. And suddenly they looked old and frail, so utterly unable to cope with the horror and emotion of it all.

For nine years of her life these two people had loved and cared for her, taken up the responsibility of Tariq and Mary Saketa's child after she'd been left orphaned by a dreadful accident. Even though they had been well into their fifties then, and unused to having children around them, they had been good and loving towards her, had given her everything it was in their power to give her, put their own lives on hold for her sake, and been happy to do it.

Seeing Shaan safely married to Piers had meant the end of their commitment to her. And while she had been busy planning her wedding day, these two wonderful people had been just as excitedly planning their dream world cruise like two teenagers set free from parental control at last.

And Rafe was right, she couldn't spoil that for them as well.

'Shaan…' Her aunt's hoarse and trembling voice brought fresh tears to Shaan's eyes as she hurried forward to gather her into her arms.

'I'm all right,' she assured her, closing her eyes because she couldn't bear all this. Couldn't bear their pain along with her own pain. 'Really I am.' Over the top over her aunt's soft grey head, Shaan looked at her uncle. 'I'm so sorry,' she whispered, unable to stop herself from saying it.

Rafe moved up beside her, his hand slipping around her waist in an act of grim support. 'Mr Lester…'

'I hope your brother has it in him to feel shame for what he's done today,' Shaan's uncle said tightly.

'With all respect, sir,' Rafe came back politely, 'my brother was at liberty to change his mind right until the last moment—just as Shaan was at liberty to change hers also,' he added succinctly.

'Oh, my poor child!' her aunt sobbed, and, using what was left of her depleted banks of energy, Shaan helped her back to the sofa, aware that she was unable to support herself for very much longer.

Rafe let her go, his hand dropping to his side as he stood watching the gentle way Shaan seated both herself and her aunt before gathering the older woman close while she cried softly.

'Nevertheless, he should be made to face up to his obligations,' Shaan's uncle continued, aiming the blunt criticism directly at Rafe. 'If only in his duty to let my niece down less cruelly than waiting until she was ready to leave for the church before pulling this treachery!'

'In this case, I'm afraid that kind of duty doesn't count,' Rafe replied, his grim gaze not reacting to the outright attack. 'You see,' he went on coolly, 'my brother refused to marry Shaan because he had discovered that she is in love with me.'

Shaan leaned her head back against the soft leather headrest and closed her weary eyes. She had never felt so drained and empty in her whole life.

Rafe drove the car in silence, grim faced and withdrawn now the worst of it was over. Oh, he had been very clever, very alert all the way through the ordeal. He had not allowed her to be spoken to alone, he had not even allowed her uncle to question her on any of Rafe's tersely delivered statements.

And, oddly, her uncle had seemed to respect the way Rafe had been determined to protect what he was now claiming as his own.

Rafe had just told them in crisp, simple English that he and Shaan had fallen in love on their first meeting, that the two of them had been trying to fight their feelings ever since, and that—as her uncle would expect of her—Shaan had refused to turn back from a marriage she felt already committed to. In the end, out of desperation, Rafe had said, he himself had approached his own brother to plead with him on their behalf only that morning.

That Piers had, of course, backed out of marrying a woman who was in love with his own brother was perhaps only natural under the circumstances, they'd been told. He was sorry for all the heartache and embarrassment they had caused everyone, he'd gone on. But he was not sorry for stopping the wedding from taking place.

Rafe had then calmly told them that he was now going to take Shaan away and marry her himself, quietly, and that, like themselves, they intended leaving the country on a long honeymoon until the fuss died down.

And now they were driving to—she had no idea, nor did she care. She took with her the small consolation of knowing that somehow Rafe had managed to convince her uncle and aunt that everything had been done for the best. That, far from being broken in two by Piers' desertion, Shaan was actually relieved that she had not gone ahead and married him.

She had left their house knowing that they would be taking their world cruise as planned, in the knowledge that their niece, whom she suspected they were disappointed in, was in safe and loving hands.

But, although Rafe might have saved her from being labelled a jilted bride, he was mistaken if he believed his solution had done anything to assuage her pride, because it hadn't. For now she knew she looked like the jilter rather than the jilted, and really that was just as bad, just as unacceptable to those people who mattered.

On top of that she still felt used, defiled and rejected. And no lies, no matter how convincingly presented, could ease the terrible sense of loss and inadequacy she was suffering right now.

The car drew to a halt, and she opened her eyes to find herself staring at the Danvers family's elegant home, set in its own grounds in this prestigious part of London. Without a word to her, he climbed out of the car, looking faintly ridiculous in his formal clothes as he came around to open her door and help her out, leading her in equal silence into a house she had never felt even the slightest bit welcome in.

As they stepped into the hall, a short, dumpy woman with frizzled hair and a harassed face came bustling towards them. 'Oh, Mr Danvers,' she gasped out in agitated breathlessness. 'I'm so glad you're home. The telephone refuses to stop ringing—' Sure enough, as if on cue, the phone began pealing out even as the woman spoke. 'Everyone wants to speak to you, and I just didn't know what to say to them. They say Mr Piers has jilted his…'

She noticed Shaan then, half-hidden behind Rafe's frame, and went as red as a beetroot, then as white as a sheet. 'Oh, dear, I'm so sorry. I…'

Rafe made a gesture of impatience. 'Pull the bloody plug on that phone, Mrs Clough!' he commanded gruffly, and turned to stretch an arm around Shaan's shoulders. He began guiding her up the stairs and along the upper landing into a room which could only be his own private suite judging by the sheer masculine power of the place.

'Sit down,' he told her, moving away from her and indicating a brown leather armchair placed beside a huge old oak fireplace. 'I won't be long. I just want to change out of these clothes.'

He went, disappearing through another door, leaving her staring numbly at the chair. Her mind had gone blank, reaction setting in to take her off somewhere deep inside herself where no one else could go.

She tried to move and found she couldn't—couldn't remember how to make her limbs work. Her face felt stiff and drawn downwards, her shoulders aching from the rod of tension braced across them. Her head was throbbing, her stomach was queasy, and her eyes were burning in their sockets—not tearful, but hot and dry.

She heard the faint sound of gushing water, recognised it as a shower, but that was about all. Time ticked by, the quietness of the room having no effect on her whatsoever. Her hands hung limply at her sides, the fingers feeling oddly heavy. Her mouth drooped downwards too, as though a weight was tugging on each corner.

She continued to stare blankly at the chair.

Rafe came back, coming to an abrupt halt when he saw her. The smell of clean, male soap permeated the air around them while he studied her through narrowed, faintly worried eyes.

'Shaan.' he said her name carefully.

She didn't turn—couldn't. She heard him, but couldn't seem to respond. The heaviness had transported itself to her limbs now, dragging down on them, holding her like a huge block of wood pinned securely to the ground. And her head felt heavy, the very top of it feeling as though someone was pressing forever harder down on it, trying to push her into the carpet beneath her feet.

Rafe came over to her, the clean smell of soap strengthening as it came with him. It was a very strange feeling, this paralysing weightiness which was disabling everything but her senses. They still seemed to be working fine: her sense of smell, of hearing, even her sense of touch seemed intact, as he reached out to grasp her chin, lifting her face so he could study it.

She saw him frown, saw the grey eyes darken in concern. She saw that he had showered, his dark hair was lying slick against his head now. She saw he had changed into a pale blue shirt and casual linen trousers that fitted cleanly on his trim waist.

'Are you going to faint, by any chance?' he murmured enquiringly.

Yes, she thought, I think perhaps I am. And she closed her eyes at the exact same moment that she swayed towards him. He caught her, muttering and cursing as he lifted her into his arms, and once again she found herself being carried by this man who had ruined her life, through to the next room and over to a huge emperor-sized bed, where he laid her before disappearing into what could only be the bathroom, judging by the sound of water running again.

He came back with a glass of water and a facecloth. He put the glass down on the bedside table, then sat down on the bed beside her to apply the cloth to her clammy brow.

His touch was gentle, the cloth deliciously cool and refreshing; his thigh where it rested lightly against her own was strangely comforting.

'You remind me of a doll,' he informed her drily. 'A rather fragile, very temperamental clockwork doll who's had her key removed.'

Dragging open her eyes, she managed a weak smile for him.

He smiled too. It was a rare sight, something she had never seen him do before, and it changed the whole structure of his face, softening its aggressively male lines and adding an extra dimension to his persona that she found rather perturbing.

Why, she didn't know, and she frowned as she closed her eyes again.

'Here, I want you to take these…'

Her lashes flickered upwards to find that Rafe was now holding the glass of water in one hand and two small white pills in the palm of the other.

Shaan stared at them for a moment, then shook her head. 'No,' she refused. 'I don't want sleeping tablets.'

'These are not sleeping tablets as such,' he assured her. 'They're simply some very mild relaxants you can buy over the chemist's counter without a prescription. I use them to get me through long plane journeys,' he explained at her dubious expression. 'You won't sleep unless you want to, but they

will help you to relax. You're as strung up as piano wire, Shaan,' he added gently, and touched the back of her hand.

It was shock. Not so much his touch, but the sudden realisation that both her hands were clenched into white-knuckled fists at her sides. Her arms were tense, her shoulders, her neck, her legs—all locked in a tension so strong that she was literally trembling under the pressure.

'And anyway,' he added softly, 'you aren't being given a choice…'

And before she could do anything about it he had pressed her chin downwards and popped the two pills into her mouth.

She almost choked on the water which quickly followed the pills. 'Sorry,' he apologised at her accusing look. 'But you need to be bullied a bit right now. It will save you from having to think for yourself.'

Yes…she had to agree with that. Thinking meant hurting, and at the moment she was hurting enough—more than enough.

On a sigh that seemed to come from some deep, dark place in her, she let her eyes close again, shutting him out—wanting to shut it all out and just let the pills do whatever they were supposed to do.

It was shock—the delayed kind of shock you hear of people experiencing where they get hit by a car then get up and walk away, only to discover they should not have been walking anywhere because they were so badly injured.

That was what she had been doing since Rafe had arrived this morning to smash her whole world apart. She was one of the walking wounded, not quite ready yet to face what had really happened to her.

Which meant when she did find the courage to face it she was going to fall apart. And when that happened she could well find herself involved in a second accident. One which trapped her so completely that she would not be able to walk away even if she wanted to.

'We shouldn't be doing this, Rafe,' she murmured worriedly. 'It isn't right. It isn't—'

'I thought we'd just decided that I was going to do all the thinking,' his quiet voice interrupted. The hand still covering one of her clenched ones, squeezed gently. 'Trust me, Shaan,' he murmured. 'And I promise you I won't let you down.'

On a sigh that signalled the end of her small burst of spirit, she retreated into malleable silence again.

Rafe remained where he was for a few moments longer, watching her. She could feel his eyes on her and wondered dully what it was he thought he was seeing. A pitiable creature called his brother's jilted bride? Or that other Shaan, the one who had been so completely overwhelmed at their first meeting by his clear dislike of her that the person she really was had literally shrivelled up in his presence?

'Do you dislike me so much because of Madeleine? Or because of my mixed blood?' she heard herself ask, without really knowing she was going to say it.

Still, his response brought her eyes flicking open. *'What—?'* he rasped. 'Did I hear you correctly? Were you just accusing me of racial prejudice then?'

She hadn't meant to offend him, yet seemingly that was exactly what she had done. 'You hated to touch me,' she reminded him. 'Or even to look at me if you could avoid it. What else was I supposed to think?'

'Well, not what you did think, that's for damned well sure!' He got up, and she felt oddly lost without him close to her. 'You actually believed me crass enough to dislike your relationship with my brother because of your mixed race?'

He was obviously having difficulty taking that in.

She closed her eyes again, too trapped in this feeling of muscle-locked apathy to do much more than smile ruefully at his resentment.

Because the real point was, if it wasn't her mixed race, then what *was* it he didn't like about her? Because there was definitely something.

'Get some rest,' he said gruffly. 'We'll talk about it later.'

Yes, later, she agreed silently as her muscles began to slacken out of the tension-lock that shock had held them in. They could discuss all of that later…

CHAPTER THREE

'IT'S all arranged.'

Rafe came into the drawing room with his now very familiar aggressive stride, making Shaan jump because it felt as if he had only just walked out before he was back again.

But then, he had not left her alone for more than a few minutes at a time during the last forty-eight hours. And every time she had found herself with a few moments' respite from his aggressively dictatorial presence, it had always been with a terse assurance from him that he would be back in seconds, making sure she knew that she would not have time to sink into the brooding misery they both knew lurked beneath the fragile surface of her hazy existence.

'We get married in the morning just before your aunt and uncle leave for their cruise.'

'Oh.' She went pale, the sudden sinking of her heart telling her that she should not be allowing this to happen.

Rafe glanced at her, grey eyes hardening when he saw the way her small white teeth began to press into the soft cushion of her full bottom lip. 'Jemma has agreed to stand witness for you,' he went on firmly. 'She wants you to ring her; I said you would.' A wryish twist touched his mouth. 'She's worrying in case I'm holding you here against your will, so you'll have to assure her that I'm not—won't you?'

A challenge; she was receptive enough to note the challenge in his voice on that last question. 'I…'

'Have you got anything suitably white to wear inside those suitcases we brought with us?' he asked as she opened her mouth to answer the first real question he had asked her in forty-eight hours—only to find herself utterly thrown by the second one.

'I…yes…n-no…I d-don't know…' She blinked, her still shocked mind having difficulty keeping up with him for half of the time—and as for the other half, he just didn't allow her to keep up. 'W-why…?' she managed to ask.

'To marry me in,' he sighed, shoving his hands into his trouser pockets as he glared into her blank black eyes. 'You ripped your wedding dress to shreds, if you remember?'

Yes, she remembered, and shuddered. She'd ripped her lovely dress to shreds in front of Rafe, had stood totally naked in front of Rafe. She had been physically sick in front of Rafe, had let him talk her into letting him take the place of his brother…

She'd let him construct a pack of lies for her family, let him bring her here to his house, which had been turned into a positive fortress within minutes of them arriving. The big iron gates had been locked to any visitors, and the small cluster of reporters who had collected outside them had been completely ignored.

He was, she was coming to learn, the most amazingly determined man when he set his mind on something. From the moment she'd conceded to his crazy suggestion in her bedroom two days ago, he had not given her a single opportunity to withdraw her agreement.

If she opened her eyes, he was there. It didn't matter what time of the day or night it was, Rafe was always there. Sitting, standing, pacing about the room like a caged animal until she opened her eyes. Then the orders would begin. Get up, sit down. Drink this, eat that. Take a shower, get into bed, go to sleep.

Quite simply he had taken her over, and in doing so demanded her full compliance to his every wish and command. And if he caught her brooding at any time he snapped her out of it with the guttural bark of his voice, almost cruel in his methods of keeping her mind off his brother.

Piers. A kind of anguished desolation washed over her, taking what little colour she had in her face along with it.

'Shaan!'

The bark hit her eardrums, making her wince, grating along her nerve-ends as she forced her eyes back into focus to find him glaring at her, eyes like silver lasers boring into her, burning out everything else but the power of his presence.

'White,' he prompted. 'I want you to marry me in white. Think. Have you got anything white in your suitcases?'

White. Her mind went white, a complete white-out, as she tried hard to remember what her lovely trousseau consisted of. Then she laughed, a high-pitched, slightly hysterical sound that hardened his face as he stood there glaring down at her.

'A white silk nightdress and matching negligé,' she said, and nodded, seeing herself as she had the day she'd tried it on in the exclusive West End lingerie shop. Soft and slinky, it had clung to the slender contours of her body, from the narrow bootlace straps which had seemed too fragile to hold up the two triangles of fine silk that had covered her breasts to her ankles.

She remembered the delicious tremor of anticipation she had experienced as she'd stood there looking at herself in the full-length mirror in the shop, seeing herself as Piers would see her—the white for purity, the silk for sensuality, its sheerness offering an enticing glimpse of her woman's naked body waiting for him beneath. Breasts full and rounded, nipples duskily inviting. The flatness of her stomach and the narrowness of her waist. The seductive cling of the fabric around the swell of her hips and the hollow of her navel. And the velvety dark shadow at the juncture with her thighs which marked the embodiment of her womanhood.

'I don't suppose you'll want me to wear that,' she concluded, letting out another of those strained little laughs.

His frown blackened. 'No, I don't suppose I would,' he agreed, and abruptly turned his back on her. 'Ring Jemma,' he commanded. 'Get her to pick something suitable out for you to marry me in and bring it with her in the morning. God knows,' he sighed, 'neither you nor I dare step outside my blasted gates until this damned thing is over.'

Running a weary hand through his hair, he walked out of the room, leaving her to chew pensively on her bottom lip, because she had suddenly realised that this must be just as big an ordeal for him as it was for her.

Well, almost. He hadn't lost someone he loved—he was just marrying someone he didn't.

She rang Jemma as instructed, but reluctantly, because she still wasn't ready to speak to anyone—Jemma perhaps least of all. Her friend was no fool. She'd been well aware of how blissfully and blindly in love Shaan had been with Piers.

'What's going on, Shaan?' Jemma demanded the moment she knew who it was. 'For God's sake, love, what are you trying to do? You can't replace one brother with the other! It's a recipe for disaster!'

My life is a disaster, she thought tragically, and closed her eyes against the never far away threat of tears. 'It's what I want,' she stated quietly. 'It's what we both want.'

'But you don't even like Rafe!' Jemma cried, sounding angry and bewildered. 'You even admitted to being a little afraid of him!'

'I was afraid of the way he made me feel,' she argued, thinking but it was close to the truth; she had always felt Rafe was a threat to her happiness.

'Because you were falling in love with him?'

Love—what's love? she wondered blankly. She was sure she didn't know any more. 'Yes,' she replied.

'And now you're going to marry him instead of Piers,' Jemma concluded.

'Yes,' she said again. 'You should be relieved, not angry,' she said, then added drily, 'You always did hold Piers in contempt.'

'He was devious.' Jemma defended her opinion. 'Someone who smiled as much as he did just had to be hiding something. But I never thought for one moment it would be another woman.'

That hurt, and Shaan flinched. 'Which just goes to show what a lucky escape we all had, then, doesn't it?' she mocked rather bitterly, recalling—as no doubt Jemma was recalling—the headline on Mrs Clough's daily newspaper which had said, DANVERS BROTHERS SWAP BRIDES IN SENSATIONAL LOVE TUSSLE!

What a joke, Shaan thought bitterly. And what a pack of lies for the sake of a catchy headline. Rafe didn't love her, and Madeleine had never been his bride!

She was now Piers' bride, though, Shann recalled dully. The article had said so: 'Piers Danvers married Madeleine Steiner only an hour after he should have been marrying Shaan Saketa'.

Which meant that Piers must have been planning to let her down long before he bothered to tell her he no longer wanted her.

There had been more in the article, but Rafe had happened to walk into the kitchen then, and snatched the newspaper away from her. His black fury at Mrs Clough for bringing it into his house had been enough to turn the other woman white, while Shaan had just sat there shuddering in sick disgust at the depths of Piers' deceit.

'Do you think you'll have time to pick something suitable out for me to wear tomorrow?' she asked Jemma now, dragging her mind away from the only moment since this had all begun when she had been in real danger of breaking free from this numbing shock she was hiding behind.

Rafe had stopped her; he had bodily lifted her off the kitchen chair and marched her into his study, then dumped her down in front of a PC, switched it on and shoved a handwritten twenty-page document in front of her. 'You can type, can't you?' He'd mocked her look of bewilderment. 'So—type. I need it by lunchtime.'

'Yes, of course I will.' Jemma's voice seemed to reach her from some totally alien place outside her muddled thought patterns. 'But I wish you'd take a little time out to think about this before doing it,' she added worriedly. 'You could be jumping straight out of the frying pan into the fire—have you thought of that?'

Of course she had. When Rafe gave her the chance to think for herself, that was. And that had definitely not been yesterday, when he'd heaped piles of work on her, she recalled ruefully.

But thinking didn't help. Nothing helped. She simply did not care what happened to her. So, 'I love him,' she claimed, the reality of the words meaning nothing to her any more. 'He's what I want. Don't spoil it for me, Jemma.'

'All right.' Jemma's sigh was long-suffering but her manner softened a little when she added, 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

Jemma's choice was a Mondi suit in the severely tailored style that particular design house had made its own in recent years. The skirt was daringly short and needleslim, and the matching jacket moulded Shaan's slender figure to low on her hips and was fastened with gold military buttons to match the military braiding around the sleeve-cuffs and the collar. There was no blouse. The fitted style of the jacket left no room for a blouse, and the shortness of the skirt seemed to add an alarming length to her slender legs, which were encased in the sheerest white silk.

'Too short?' she asked Jemma pensively, giving a self-conscious tug at the skirt-hem.

'Are you joking?' Jemma scoffed, standing beside Shaan to view the finished product in the full-length mirror. 'Rafe'll need holding back when he sees you in this. You look fabulous, Shaan,' she added softly. 'Utterly stunning.'

But Shaan didn't feel stunning. She felt as if she was looking at a total stranger. As if that girl, with the big brown empty eyes and jet-black hair swept sleekly away from her face into a silken knot on the crown of her head, was someone else entirely.

In fact the only thing she did recognise, which said it really was herself standing there, was the fine gold chain around her throat, with its heart-shaped locket suspended from it, which held photographs of her parents' beloved faces.

Cold fingers tremored up to gently touch the familiar locket, and suddenly tears were flooding to blur out the reflection.

'Why the tears?'

With a small start she blinked the moisture away, long lashes flickering down and upwards as she brought her gaze into focus on Jemma's grave face in the mirror.

'I thought brides were allowed to be weepy,' she parried.

'Sure,' Jemma agreed. 'They're even allowed to look all pale and tantalisingly ethereal.' Her voice was loaded with mockery. 'All you have to do now is smile and I might even begin to believe that you really want this.'

'Don't,' Shaan pleaded hoarsely, hooding her too revealing eyes. 'Don't probe, Jemma. I don't think I'm up to it right now.'

'Why?' her best friend demanded. 'Because you know deep down inside that this—marriage, for want of a better word for it,' she tossed off tartly, 'won't stand up to scrutiny?'

Shaan's heart fluttered in her breast—the first sign she'd had for days that life actually still existed inside her—as a moment's desperation welled up.

Her lashes flickered again, and a brief glimpse of that desperation revealed itself to Jemma. On a gasp, she spun Shaan around to give her a small shake. 'For goodness' sake!' she said fiercely. 'What the hell is really going on here?'

The bedroom door opened, and as if Rafe could actually sense that Shaan's courage was beginning to fail her he walked arrogantly into the room, his silver-hard gaze flashing from one tense female face to the other.

Shaan went hot, then cold, staring at him through a hazy mist which wasn't entirely due to her lingering tears. Rafe was wearing a simple dark business suit over a plain white shirt and dark silk tie. Nothing special. Yet there was something about him—the red rose he wore in his lapel maybe—which seemed to make a statement of possession in itself, that trapped the air in her lungs and sent a prickling sense of awareness tripping though her.

'Shaan, you look beautiful,' he murmured brusquely. 'Shall we go?'

Like a woman in a trance, she nodded mutely and walked obediently towards him, feeling Jemma's silent, pleading, helpless protest following behind her in urgent waves but unable to stop herself.

In a few mad days, Rafe had made himself so indispensable to her that she could deny him nothing. He was the rock she clung to in the storm-wrecked destruction that had taken place inside her.

As if he knew it, he took her hand as soon as she was in reach, drawing it firmly into the crook of his arm and holding it there with his own hand.

There, you're safe now, the gesture seemed to say, and she lifted her bruised eyes to his and smiled—albeit weakly, but it was a smile.

She didn't hear the soft gasp her friend uttered when she saw that smile, nor did she see the hard look of triumph Rafe sent Jemma, because she had already lowered her head and was lost in that hazy world of nothing, relying totally on this man beside her for her very survival.

It was a brief civil ceremony—a relief to Shaan, who didn't think she could have coped with anything more. Her aunt and uncle were there. They hugged and kissed her and told her to be happy, but she saw the look in their eyes and knew they were still suffering a similar shock to herself over what had happened.

Jemma was more direct. She took hold of her friend's shoulders and made her look directly at her, taking her chance while Rafe stood across the room talking grimly to a man he had briefly introduced as, 'Saul, my second in command.'

'Anything,' Jemma said urgently. 'If for any reason you need me for anything—you just call and I'll come. Understand?'

Shaan nodded, her eyes huge and dark and empty in her pale face. ‘Thank you.’ She leaned forward to brush a kiss across Jemma’s warm cheek. ‘Please don’t worry about me, Jem,’ she pleaded as she drew away again. ‘Rafe will look after me.’

‘Will he?’ Jemma’s sceptical gaze lifted to take in the man in question. ‘He better had, or the Danvers family will have me to contend with.’

Shaan managed to smile at that, recognising the threat for what it was—a weak one, since Jemma was in no position to do the Danvers family any harm. But the meaning was clear—Jemma was not fooled. She was puzzled, but not fooled, and she considered the Danvers family had done enough to her friend without hurting her any more.

There was no wedding breakfast. Rafe rushed her straight into a waiting limousine the moment they left the register office. He said it was because they had a plane to catch, but Shaan had to wonder if he was rushing her away because he knew their deception would not hold up to any real scrutiny.

And the irritating press didn’t help. Their flashbulbs had been exploding in their faces from the moment they had stepped out of Rafe’s house, and hadn’t stopped since. By the time the chauffeur-driven limousine sped away from the kerb, Shaan was wilting with fatigue, the act of playing the blissful bride having drained her to the very dregs.

‘All right?’ Rafe enquired, his hand covering her cold ones where they lay together on her lap.

She nodded, sighing as she leaned back into the soft, squashy leather seat. ‘Will our picture be splashed all over the papers again tomorrow?’ Her tone alone said she didn’t relish the idea.

‘That depends,’ he replied, ‘on whether there’s a disaster between now and then. We are classed as expendable news.’ He answered the puzzled look she sent him. ‘The juicy fill-in to help sell their rags if nothing better comes along—vulgar, isn’t it?’

‘How do you live under such constant notoriety?’ she asked with a small shudder.

‘I don’t—usually,’ he replied, and she shuddered again, in bleak recognition this time that it was her fault that he was having to endure it now.

‘I’m—sorry,’ she whispered.

‘Why should you be sorry?’ he clipped. ‘It wasn’t you who caused this particular sensation, Shaan. It was me.’

‘And Piers,’ she added hollowly.

‘The Danvers brothers, then.’ He nodded, and leaned forward to press a button on the console in front of him which sent the sheet of glass that partitioned them off from their driver sliding downwards. ‘Make sure you lose them before we head for the airport,’ he commanded. ‘They’ve had their floorshow; now they can take a running jump.’

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