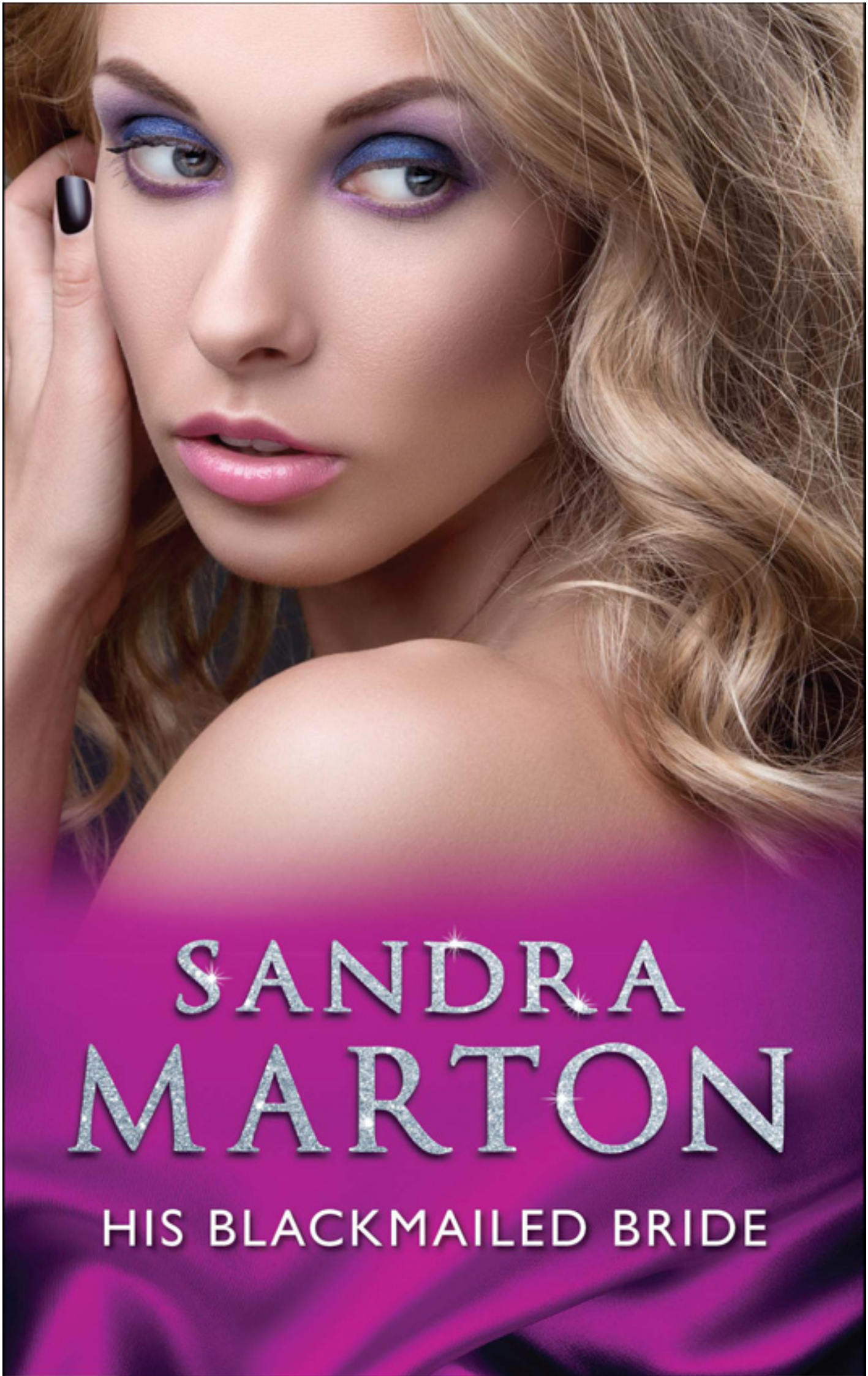
SANDRA
MARTON
HIS BLACKMAILED BRIDE

Sandra Marton

His Blackmailed Bride

«HarperCollins»

Marton S.

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Содержание

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Rediscover this reader favorite by Sandra Marton, originally published as Cherish the Flame.

Paige's first encounter with brooding millionaire Quinn Fowler ignited a searing flame between them—and ended any possibility of a quiet marriage to Quinn's brother Alan.

Quinn is suspicious of Paige's motives, but he can't help but be drawn to her. The best way to get her away from his brother becomes obvious: he must claim her as his own bride!

Married to a man who loathes her, but whose touch she craves, Paige has never felt more alone. But Quinn has been hiding the truth—that their first meeting indelibly marked him as hers…

His Blackmailed Bride
Sandra Marton

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ALL HALLOWS' EVE MASQUERADE BALL was in full swing the first time Paige Gardiner saw him. He was leaning against the far wall of the Hunt Club ballroom, watching the gyrating devils and black cats on the crowded dance floor. There was a dangerous look about him, a leanly muscled power that was disturbing, and Paige thought suddenly of a lion in the tall grass, waiting for a herd of wildebeest to move just a bit closer.

'Paige, for heaven's sake, haven't you spotted Alan yet? We can't just stand here, blocking the doorway all evening.'

Paige blinked and looked at her mother. 'Sorry,' she said, giving her a quick smile. 'I'm trying to find him, Mother. I just can't seem to…'

'Of course you can't. There must be a dozen Romeos here tonight.' Her mother sighed and brushed a lock of Paige's pale blonde hair back from her face. 'And a dozen Juliets, of course. But none as beautiful as you, dear.'

Paige smiled. 'And no Romeos as handsome as my fiancé,' she said. 'That's why he'll be easy to find.'

But he wasn't. She frowned behind the anonymity of her delicate silver mask as her violet eyes searched the crowded room. There was, indeed, an over-abundance of Romeos, and from this distance they all looked very much alike. Still, Alan was special. He was the man she was engaged to marry. She'd be able to pick him out from all the rest.

There he was again, the man she'd seen when she entered the ballroom. He was looking through the glass doors at the club's formal gardens. His back was to her now, but Paige knew it was he.

She recognised the defiant set of his shoulders beneath his dinner jacket, and the too-proud angle of his head.

He turned suddenly, and his eyes, behind his narrow black mask, locked with hers. The ballroom, the dancers, the music—all of it spun away.

'Paige?' Her father's hand closed around her arm. 'Paige, isn't that Alan?'

An eternity seemed to pass before she could look away from the man and turn towards her father.

'Where?' she asked, and he nodded towards a nearby Romeo. 'I… I'm not certain,' she said, and colour rushed into her cheeks. Ridiculous, she thought. She'd been dating Alan Fowler for almost a year and she'd been engaged to him for three weeks. Surely she could recognise him, even in costume. 'Alan?' she said tentatively. 'Is that you?' To Paige's great relief, the Romeo turned and smiled.

'There you are, sweetheart.' She smiled in return as he took her hands in his and kissed her cheek. 'You look positively beautiful, Juliet.'

'You look pretty good yourself, Romeo,' she said, and she smiled again. 'Is it my imagination, or is every pair of eyes in the room on us?'

Alan grinned as he tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. 'It's a possibility,' he said. 'Mother's out-of-town guests have been arriving by the carload all day long. In fact, Aunt Dorothy was asking about you only a few minutes ago. Want to meet her?'

'Not yet,' Paige said so quickly that everyone laughed.

'Paige is nervous about meeting all your relatives,' Paige's mother said as she brushed an imaginary speck of lint from her daughter's gown.

'It just doesn't seem like the best way to do it, that's all,' Paige murmured. 'You know, at a costume ball, with so much going on all at once.'

Janet Gardiner sighed. 'There's not much choice, with the wedding only three days off.'

Alan laughed. 'Mother thinks it's terrific. She must have rented a dozen costumes and…' He looked down at Paige as she shuddered lightly. 'Are you cold, sweetheart? Here,' he said, slipping his arm around her shoulders, 'is that better?'

Paige nodded. 'Much,' she said brightly. 'I just felt a chill, that's all.'

Three days, she thought, as Alan turned towards her father and began to discuss a business matter. Three days, and she would be Mrs Alan Fowler. It seemed impossible. A month ago she'd been content, dating Alan as she had been for months, turning aside his proposals which had become so frequent she hardly noticed them. But then, there had been that one evening when he put his finger to her lips before she could refuse him.

'Don't say no this time, Paige,' he'd pleaded. 'How about something different? Tell me you'll think it over until tomorrow.'

'I won't be here tomorrow,' she'd said. 'Remember? Maywalk's is sending me on my first buying trip this week. I won't be back until Friday.'

Alan had grinned. 'Even better. I'll have a whole week to hope—and you'll have a whole week to think of a reason not to say "yes".'

And Paige had smiled and agreed. After all, she owed him that much. Alan was sweet and charming, and she knew that the women he'd dated before would give anything to change places with her. Their dates always ended with chaste goodnight kisses, but that didn't seem to deter him. If anything, her refusals to make their relationship more intimate seemed only to spur him into a more determined pursuit. What harm could there be in letting five days go by before telling him 'no' one more time?

But, when she'd returned that Friday, her mother had embraced her and said tearfully, 'I'm so happy for you, dear. But you should have told us yourself.' And while Paige was still trying to make sense out of that, her father had kissed her and told her he was glad she'd finally decided to take his advice and marry Alan.

'I've been telling you he's the right man for months,' he'd said. 'I'm glad you finally came to your senses, girl.'

And Alan—Alan had flashed his sheepish, charming grin and admitted he'd got carried away, that he'd mentioned what she'd said, but only to her parents and his, and…

'What do you mean, you mentioned what I'd said?' Paige had demanded angrily. 'I didn't say anything, Alan. You asked me to wait, to think things over…'

Alan had said yes, he knew that, but what was there to think about, really? They liked each other, they had fun together, and he would give her a secure, happy life.

'Don't be angry with me, sweetheart,' he'd murmured.

His expression had been so apologetic that Paige's anger had fallen away. 'I'm not angry. It's just that…' She'd touched her hand gently to his cheek. 'You must know that I don't love you, Alan. Well, I mean, I love you, but I'm not in love with you. Do you understand? You deserve more from a wife than I can give you.'

Alan knew what she meant. He'd taken her in his arms a dozen times, waiting patiently for her to respond to his caresses, assuring her it was all right when she didn't.

'I want you,' he'd said simply, smiling into her eyes. 'As for the rest—it will come in time. You'll see.'

Embarrassment coloured her cheeks, but her gaze had never wavered. 'Alan, what if I don't? What if…'

The look on his face had told her he couldn't imagine such a thing happening.

'I'd still love you, of course,' he'd said, and then he'd grinned boyishly. 'But there's no danger of that. I won't fail you, Paige. You'll see.'

'Alan,' Paige had said, wanting to tell him it wasn't his failure she was concerned about, but he'd taken her in his arms and kissed her again, and when finally she'd pushed him gently from her the door had swung open and his mother had entered the room.

'Paige, we're so pleased,' she'd said. 'I hope you don't mind—I've spoken to the caterer—I thought perhaps we'd have a champagne breakfast, with quail and lobster.'

And after that, Paige thought as Alan led her to the dance floor, after that, everything had moved far too quickly. Alan's father wanted him to head up the South American branch of the firm, which meant that the wedding that had been planned for next June was moved back to November, and the long engagement Paige had anticipated had become one of the shortest on record. *Three days,* she thought again, as his arms slipped around her, *three days…*

'Hey,' Alan said gently, 'come back, Paige.'

Paige looked up at him and shook her head. 'Sorry. I was just thinking—I can't believe the wedding day's so soon.'

He drew back and grinned down at her. 'It's too late to get out of it. What would Aunt Dorothy think?'

Paige gave him a quick smile. 'That I was silly to give you up.'

Alan laughed as he spun her across the dance floor. 'That she'd been done out of the chance to attend the party of the year. Aunt Dorothy and Mother spent half the morning talking about Mother's plans for the wedding.'

'Only half the morning? I'd think our wedding deserved more than that.'

'It did. Aunt Dorothy spent the rest of the time giving me the benefit of her experience.'

Paige laughed. 'Is she an expert?'

'In a way.' He grinned and drew her closer. 'The old girl's been married three times. I'll probably have to listen to more advice from my big brother, too.'

She laughed again. 'Don't tell me he's been married three times.'

Alan chuckled. 'Quinn? Not likely. No woman's ever going to catch him.'

'Terrific,' Paige said teasingly. 'What kind of advice can you get from someone like that?'

'A speech that starts, "You've got to be crazy to do this, old man". You know, the usual "I'm older and wiser" nonsense big brothers always give.'

'And when do I get to meet this paragon?' Paige asked, tilting her head to the side and smiling at her fiancé.

'As soon as he gets here. He's due tomorrow, but with Quinn you never know. He…'

'Alan, you don't mind if I dance with my daughter, do you?'

Paige looked up as Alan let go of her and her father took her into his arms.

'Of course not, sir. Paige, sweetheart, I'll get us some champagne, OK? I'll be back in a minute.'

Her father cleared his throat as Paige settled into his arms. 'Your mother's worried about you,' he said without any preliminaries. 'She sent me to ask if everything was all right.'

Paige looked at Andrew Gardiner in surprise. 'What do you mean, Father?'

'She says you've been acting as if you were a million miles away.' The music changed to an old-fashioned waltz and her father guided her across the floor. 'I told her it was just last-minute jitters.'

Paige nodded. 'I guess.'

Her father peered into her face. 'Alan is right for you, Paige. He's a fine young man. I've got to know him during the years I've worked for his father, and…'

It was the same speech her father had been making for months, ever since she had let slip the fact that Alan had proposed.

'Father,' she said gently, 'you can relax. I'm marrying him, remember? I finally took your advice.'

Her father looked at her. 'I only want what's best for all of us.'

Paige laughed. 'All of us? I'm the one who's getting married, not you.'

'It's just a figure of speech, child. You know what I mean—if you're happy, your mother and I are happy.' Her father smiled at her. 'You are happy, aren't you?'

Paige nodded. Of course she was. Alan was, as her father had insisted, a fine man, and she did love him—in a way. And, if that was enough for him, it was enough for her. It was more than enough for her, she told herself as her father waltzed her around the dance floor. She'd had her taste of what everyone called the great passion, and she knew it for the fiction it was. She'd tried to tell that to Alan the day they'd become engaged, but he hadn't given her the chance. And it was just as well. Perhaps he could teach her heart to soar and her pulse to sing. And if he couldn't, then his pleasure would give her pleasure. That would be enough. It might even be best. It would…

A chill danced across her shoulders. Someone was watching her; she knew it without question, just as she knew who it was. The strange man she'd noticed an eternity ago—it had to be him. She could sense his presence, feel his power.

Paige drew closer into her father's arms. He smiled at her and she smiled back, but her eyes swept the room. Her breath caught in her throat. Yes, yes, there he was, standing on the perimeter of the dance floor, his jacket open, revealing a taut expanse of white silk shirt that clung to his chest as if it were a second skin. His hands were tucked into his trouser pockets and the material strained across his thighs. He was balanced on legs slightly apart, and his head was cocked to the side—and he was watching her. Behind the black mask, his eyes were fixed on her, burning into her, stripping her of the long, silk gown, moving now to the full curve of her breasts, watching their all too rapid rise and fall above the low-cut neckline.

Paige stumbled and her father's arms tightened around her.

'Paige? What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' she said quickly. 'Nothing,' she repeated, tearing her eyes from the man and looking at her father. 'I just—I must be tired.'

Her father nodded. 'It's been a busy week for you.' He looked into her eyes and frowned. 'Would you like to sit down?'

He'll come to you if you do. You know he will…

A tremor went through her. 'No,' she said quickly. 'I… I want to dance with you, Father. Really. I…' She swallowed and then ran her tongue across her dry lips. 'That man,' she said, her voice a breathy whisper, 'I wondered—do you know who he is?'

'Which man?'

'That one, over there,' she said urgently, taking a few steps so that her father had to turn around and look in the direction she'd been facing. 'The tall one, beside the dance floor.'

'Which man?' her father repeated. 'What kind of costume is he wearing?'

'He's not in costume,' Paige said, looking over her shoulder. 'He…'

He was gone. Her eyes scanned the crowd, searching for him, but he had disappeared. Her heart was racing as if she'd been running instead of dancing, and it seemed suddenly hard to breathe.

Andrew Gardiner grasped his daughter by the shoulders and held her steady.

'What is it? Do you feel ill?'

I don't know how I feel. Excited. Exhilarated. Terrified…

Paige drew a deep breath. 'I… I think it's time I went to the ladies' room and checked my make-up,' she said. She smiled, and the wary expression on her father's face told her the smile looked as artificial as it felt. 'After all, I want to look my best for all Alan's relatives.'

'Let me get your mother. She'll go with you.'

'No,' she said again, more sharply this time. 'There's no reason to bother Mother.' Paige patted her father's arm. 'I'll just be a few minutes, Father. Really. If Alan comes looking for me, tell him I'll be right back.'

'Paige…'

Her father's voice drifted after her as she hurried across the dance floor. This was the price you paid for too little sleep and too much to do, she thought as she wound her way through the crowded ballroom. She was lightheaded, and who wouldn't be after the day she'd had? Up at dawn, so that her mother could make some last-minute adjustments to her dress and veil. And then there'd been lunch with the girls she'd worked with, and tea with her bridesmaids…

'Excuse me,' Paige said as she moved between a laughing Marie Antoinette and a smiling Satan. Alan would understand if she begged off and asked him to take her home. She'd meet his relatives first, his Aunt Dorothy and all the rest, and then go home and get out of her costume and into a warm bath. The ballroom was just too crowded, the music too loud, the air too thick and warm. She'd comb her hair, touch up her make-up, go off and say all the right things to Alan's family and that would be that. In three days, she could relax. In three days, all this would be over. Three days. Oh, God, three days…

There was a long queue in the ladies' room. 'I only want to get to the sink,' Paige said, but it was impossible to move past anyone in the narrow space. She took a deep breath and settled in to wait her turn behind a harem girl and a lady pirate.

'… just popped the question,' the harem girl bubbled, holding out her left hand. 'Look, isn't it lovely?'

The lady pirate and everyone else looked at the girl's ring finger and smiled. A diamond gleamed on it, a diamond considerably smaller than the one on Paige's hand. But Paige knew, without question, that her eyes had never gleamed with the radiance she saw reflected in the harem girl's eyes. Suddenly, she wondered if the girl's heart raced when her fiancé looked at her, whether she ever found it difficult to breathe after his eyes had met hers and discovered secrets she'd never acknowledged. Paige had never felt that way under Alan's gaze. She'd never felt that way in her life, not even during that one, long-ago love affair, never felt that way until moments ago when a man whose name she didn't know had looked at her from behind a black mask.

The harem girl fell silent as a strangled gasp came from Paige's throat.

'Excuse me,' she said, and she tried to smile. But she couldn't; she could feel her lips draw back from her teeth in a terrible parody of a smile as she turned and shouldered her way past the waiting

women. ‘Excuse me,’ she said again, ignoring the raised eyebrows and curious faces that turned in her direction.

Finally, back in the ballroom, Paige leaned back against the door to the ladies’ room and looked around her. *Alan,* she thought, willing him to appear before her. But, if Alan Fowler was one of the Romeos nearby, it was impossible for her to pick him out.

The music seemed louder than ever, the crowd denser. A heavyset man in a pirate costume was smoking a cigar. The smell of it seemed to engulf her. Paige thought of pushing her way out of the ballroom to the street. She could flag a taxi and go home…

But there was no street outside the Hunt Club, there was only a car park high on a Connecticut bluff overlooking the Atlantic. And she couldn’t just disappear into the night. Alan and her parents would worry, they’d come looking for her. And what would she tell them when they found her? Could she say, I saw a girl in the ladies’ room, and she was so happy about her engagement that it made me want to cry? Could she say, I saw a man I’ve never seen before, a man whose name I don’t know, and he made me feel something Alan never made me feel, and it frightened me so much that I ran away?

The room seemed to quiver around her. ‘Dear God,’ she whispered aloud, and suddenly an arm slid around her waist. She smelled a faint tang of leathery cologne, felt the brush of fabric against her cheek, felt the hard length of a male body against hers.

‘You’ll be all right,’ a deep voice said. ‘Just lean on me.’

‘I… I’m fine,’ she said. ‘Really…’

But she allowed herself to lean into the man’s embrace. His arm tightened around her, his hand pressing against the curve of her hip.

‘You’re going to pass out if you don’t get some fresh air,’ he said. ‘Take a deep breath. That’s it.’

Paige did as she was told. She’d never fainted in her life, but she thought he was probably right. The room was a spinning vortex of bright colours, the music a drumming shriek. She fitted her body to his, almost burrowing against him as he led her through the crowd. The doors that led to the gardens loomed ahead, and she knew that was where he was taking her.

He reached for the door and pushed it open. A gust of cold air blew into her face, clearing the cobwebs from her mind. It was time for her to stop him. She could thank him for his help and asked him to locate her fiancé for her.

But she would do none of that. Paige knew it, even before he led her into the chill October garden, just as she knew that the man beside her was the stranger who’d been watching her all evening, and the race of her heart only confirmed what she could no longer deny.

She had wanted this moment to come. She had been hoping it would. And now that it was here, she knew her life would never be the same again.

CHAPTER TWO

PAIGE shivered as the glass doors swung shut behind her. The last time she’d been here was with Alan. Roses and honeysuckle had perfumed the air then. Now it smelled of the sea that beat relentlessly at the sand below the bluff. Music spilled faintly from the closed ballroom, a soft accompaniment to the distant pound of the surf. A full moon lit the terrace, but as Paige lifted her eyes to the stranger’s face a bank of clouds scudded across the sky, plunging everything into darkness.

Every instinct told her to pull free of the arm encircling her waist and hurry back into the lighted warmth of the clubhouse, but her feet seemed rooted to the ground. This is insanity, she thought, and she turned to say she was leaving. But the man beside her spoke first.

‘Take a deep breath.’

Paige shook her head. ‘I’m all right now. I…’

She felt the pressure of his hand. ‘Do it,’ he said curtly. ‘Go on. Inhale.’

It was a command, not a suggestion. She nodded and did as he’d said, drawing the cool air deep into her lungs.

‘Better?’

She nodded again. 'Yes. Much better. Thank you for your…'

'Don't talk,' he said. 'Just take another breath.'

She inhaled again and told herself there was nothing to be concerned about. She was sure she'd turned as pale as a sheet in that stuffy ballroom. He'd noticed, and he'd come to her assistance. He was just being a Good Samaritan. Anything else was the result of an over-active imagination.

'I… I'm fine now,' she said. 'And I'm terribly sorry for all the trouble I've caused you.'

'It was no trouble at all.' The pressure of his hand urged her to turn towards him. 'In fact, you might say you did me a favour.'

'I did?' Was there a smile in his voice? If only she could see his face…

He laughed softly. 'I've always wanted to rescue a damsel in distress, Juliet.' His hand touched her cheek. 'That is your name tonight, isn't it?'

'I… yes, yes, that's right,' Paige said quickly. 'And I really have to go inside now. My fiancé…'

His fingers closed on her hand. 'I thought I saw something sparkling on your finger. Tell me, Juliet—where is he? Your fiancé, I mean.'

'He… he's in the ballroom, waiting for me. He… What are you doing?' she asked, even though the answer was obvious. He had shrugged free of his dinner jacket and was draping it over her shoulders.

'You're cold,' he said, lifting the curtain of pale hair from her shoulders and settling it over the jacket. 'Your hand's like ice.'

'I'm not,' she said quickly. 'I'm fine. I…'

'Don't argue with me,' he said as he drew the lapels together.

No one argued with this man, Paige thought suddenly. No one would dare. His fingers brushed against her skin, his thumbs skimming her throat, lingering against the hollows above her collarbone. She wondered if he could feel the quick leap of blood that pulsed beneath his touch, and a tremor went through her.

'Maybe I am a little chilly,' she said, and she gave a forced laugh. 'It's cold out here, isn't it? It's the ocean, I guess. Although, of course, it's autumn…'

Damn! She was babbling like a fool. She sounded, she thought, like a nervous schoolgirl. And that was exactly how she felt—like a teenager at her first dance, alone with a boy she had a crush on. But it was a man beside her in the darkness, not a boy, a man whose name she didn't know. *What are you doing here, Paige?*

'Walk with me,' he said, clasping her hand in his.

'I can't,' she said, but he was already leading her along the path that bordered the garden. 'Please…'

'Just for a few minutes.'

She felt as if she were caught in a dream, her only link to reality the faint music drifting from the lighted ballroom. The man beside her was tall, taller than she'd thought. Even in high-heeled sandals, Paige reached only to his shoulder. His jacket hung about her like a cloak, the shoulders and sleeves trailing as if she were a child playing at dressing up. He'd raised the collar when he slipped it around her, and the soft wool brushed against her cheek. It felt warm to the touch, as if it still carried the heat of his body. And she could smell his scent on the fabric, that same cologne she'd noticed earlier, mixed with something much more basic and sensual. It was a clean, masculine odour that was his alone.

For one swift beat of her heart, Paige closed her eyes and breathed it in, letting the smell and the heat of him surround her. Then, with a rush, her lashes flew open. What was she doing? Here she was, traipsing along in the dark beside a man she didn't know, heart racing, throat dry, never once thinking of Alan or the engagement ring on her finger or the wedding vows she'd take in three days' time…

His hand clasped hers more tightly. 'Don't be afraid,' he said softly.

She managed another forced laugh. 'I'm not,' she said. 'I…'

'You are. I can feel your pulse racing.' He stopped and turned towards her, his fingers skimming the tender skin on the inside of her wrist. 'Your heart's beating like a frightened rabbit's.'

Paige took a hurried step back. 'I… I have to go back now,' she said in a whisper. 'Thanks for your jacket. Let me…'

His hand tightened on her wrist. 'Don't go,' he said. His voice was low and husky.

Her tongue felt thick in her mouth. 'I must,' she said quickly. 'My fiancé…'

The man shook his head in a gesture of impatience. 'The hell with your fiancé,' he said roughly. 'Stay here, with me.'

His hands cupped her face, tilting it up to him. There was a ring on his finger, an old one, set with a ruby. The blood-red stone captured the pale moonlight and warmed it with a sparkling fire.

She felt the warmth of his breath against her skin. His features were in shadow but Paige knew them, just as she knew that she had known this man since the beginning of for ever, that she had belonged to him in another time, in another eternity. His head bent to hers, and she closed her eyes, waiting, waiting…

There was a sound in the silent darkness. The wind sighing through the trees or a wave building against the shore below—she wasn't sure—but it was enough to bring her to her senses.

'I must go back,' she said, and she pulled away from him. 'I'm grateful for your help. I… I don't know what happened to me in there…'

The brave words died as he moved towards her. 'You know what happened,' he said.

There was something in his voice, a sense of certainty, that both thrilled and terrified her. She knew that he wasn't referring to her sudden dizziness. He meant that hushed moment of eternity they had shared—and she wasn't going to talk about that. Not now, not ever—and certainly not with him.

'You're right,' she said quickly, 'I do know. I felt sick, that's all. It was warm in the ballroom. And crowded. And…'

She gasped as his hands slid to her shoulders and bit into her flesh. 'Don't lie to me, Juliet.'

'I'm not lying. I…'

'I've been watching you all evening.'

Her skin tingled beneath the heat of his fingers. 'What are you talking about?'

He laughed softly. 'Are we going to play games? You know I've been watching you.'

She felt a sudden rush of heat flood her cheeks. Thank God for the darkness, she thought.

'You're wrong,' she said. 'I…'

His hands clasped her more tightly. 'You were watching me, too,' he said, slowly drawing her towards him.

Paige's denial was swift. 'I wasn't. I never noticed you at all until you offered to help me.'

'Who were you looking for when you came into the ballroom, Juliet?' She saw the white flash of his teeth. 'Your fiancé?'

'Yes, my fiancé,' she said quickly, grasping the word as if it would save her from whatever might come next, 'that's right. And he's probably looking for me right now. He…'

'Hell, he should have been with you all evening.' His hands moved over her shoulders. 'I'd have been, if you belonged to me.'

'I don't belong to anyone. And he *was* waiting. I mean, I just didn't see him right away. I…'

He laughed softly. 'But you saw me.' His hands slid from her shoulders, down her arms, and encircled her wrists. 'And then the crowd closed in and I lost sight of you. Is that when your Romeo found you?'

Paige's lips felt parched. Carefully, she ran the tip of her tongue over them.

'Yes. And now I really have to go back to him. I…'

'The next time I saw you, you were dancing with an older man.' He lifted her hands between them and held them against his chest. 'It wasn't Romeo.'

It was a statement, not a question. Despite herself, Paige smiled. 'No.'

He nodded. ‘Your father, I thought. Or a favourite uncle.’

‘My father,’ she said. ‘I saw you watching us. I…’

The admission was out before she had time to stop it. Any hope Paige had that it might slip by vanished when she heard the stranger’s softly triumphant laugh.

‘But you said you hadn’t noticed me at all, Juliet.’

‘That’s not my name,’ she said desperately. ‘That’s fantasy…’

His arms slid around her. ‘This is a night of fantasy,’ he whispered. ‘Anything can happen on a night like this.’ Slowly, he drew her closer to him. ‘You can even stay here and dance with me.’

The music drifting from the ballroom had turned slow and dreamlike. Paige put her hands on his chest as he began to move to its faint rhythm.

‘Don’t, please…’ She stood stiffly within his arms, fighting against the desire to melt against him, and then she drew in her breath. A night of fantasy, he’d said, and that was what this was, wasn’t it? Harmless fantasy. The stuff of dreams. Her heart turned over. ‘All right,’ she whispered. ‘Just one dance…’

‘One dance,’ he said easily. ‘And then we’ll do whatever you want.’

We’ll do whatever you want… Was there a threat in the simple words? No, not a threat, Paige told herself as they began to move across the flagstones. His words held something more. An assurance, a conviction that he knew what she wanted, even if she hadn’t admitted it to herself yet.

The stranger could think what he liked. One dance with him—that was all—and then she’d return to Alan’s side. And she’d tell Alan about all this in a week or two, tell him about the bit of foolishness that had taken hold of her on this night three days before their wedding. They would laugh about it, just as they’d laughed about the bachelor party Alan’s groomsmen had planned for tomorrow evening at a club known for its scantily clad barmaids.

‘A rite of passage,’ Alan called it, and that was what tonight was, wasn’t it? This dance with a stranger was just one last taste of freedom, and Alan would smile when she told him about it and…

Who was she kidding? She could never tell Alan. She could never tell anyone. This was insanity. Dangerous insanity. It wasn’t a last fling or an innocent rite of passage…

The man drew her closer. ‘Are your eyes really the colour of spring violets?’

His voice, soft and husky, moved over her like a velvet caress. In the heavy silence of the night, Paige could hear the quick tumble of her heart.

‘Who are you?’ she asked breathlessly.

He laughed softly. ‘You know who I am, Juliet. I’m the man who’s wanted to make love to you all night.’

The admission stole her breath away. She stumbled and he caught her to him, holding her tightly against the hardness of his body.

‘Don’t,’ she whispered, but, even as she said the word, she felt herself melting against him. Her hands spread against his chest; she felt the thudding beat of his heart beneath her palms.

‘Juliet…’

A door slammed behind them. There was a sudden shriek of laughter, and the sound of feet on the gravel path. Paige’s return to reality was swift. Her hands balled into fists and pressed against him.

‘Let me go,’ she said in a desperate whisper. ‘Please…’

His hand caught hers. ‘Come with me,’ he said in a low voice.

‘Are you crazy? My fiancé…’

‘I don’t give a damn about your fiancé. And neither do you. Hell, if he mattered, you wouldn’t be here with me.’

His words sent a chill through her. ‘You don’t know what you’re saying. He means everything to me. He…’

‘Then you have nothing to fear by coming with me, do you?’ His fingers wove through hers. ‘Besides, if someone were to find us here, they might come to the wrong conclusion.’

She wanted to tell him that Alan would understand, but it was a hope, not a certainty. The footsteps and the laughter were growing closer. The man sensed her hesitancy and clasped her hand more tightly in his.

'We'll finish our dance,' he said as he drew her after him. 'Down there, on the beach. And then, if that's what you want, I'll return you to your Romeo.'

It was lunacy to follow him along the narrow gravel path that led down the bluff. Paige told herself that, even as she walked alongside him. It was lunacy to kick off her sandals and step into his waiting arms when her feet touched the sand. But it felt wonderful to let herself lean into his embrace and move in rhythm with the music. Moments passed, and she closed her eyes and put her head against his shoulder. When his lips brushed her hair, it seemed so right that she made no objection.

'Juliet,' he whispered.

Paige lifted her head slowly. The stranger's hand moved up her back, to the nape of her neck, and his fingers twined in her hair.

'Juliet,' he said again, and, as the moon escaped the pursuing clouds and lit his face, her eyes filled with him, drinking in the features she had only glimpsed until now. His nose was narrow, his mouth hard, the bottom lip full and sensual. His eyes glittered behind the mask. Blue, she thought, while her heart drummed in her chest. Blue, or perhaps green…

As if he were reading her mind, he reached up and slowly pulled the black domino from his face. Her breathing quickened as he cast it aside and gazed at her. His eyes were a piercing aquamarine, the colour of the summer sea, deep-set and thickly lashed.

'Now it's your turn,' he murmured.

Paige trembled as he reached towards her. His fingers closed on the silver mask, and she held her breath as he untied it. Slowly, patiently, he eased it from her, and she knew she had never felt as naked in a man's arms as she felt at this moment. His eyes moving over her unmasked face were more intimate a caress than any she had ever experienced. God, what was happening to her?

'I knew your eyes were the colour of violets,' he said, smiling down at her. His voice thickened. 'You're beautiful, Juliet.'

His hand cupped her face. He was going to kiss her, she thought. She had to stop him…

Paige swayed as her lashes fell to her cheeks. What was the sense of pretending? She wanted him to kiss her. She knew it—and the stranger knew it. He'd been making love to her all night, first in the ballroom, then on the terrace, and now—now he was going to kiss her. The kiss would end the fantasy and bring back reality. It would put a stop to all this foolishness. She'd step back and apologise for letting things get out of hand and…

His mouth brushed against hers, the kiss as light as blown spray from the ocean.

'A flower,' he whispered as his arms curved around her. 'Your mouth is a flower that tastes of nectar as sweet as honey.' His head bent to hers and he kissed her again, the press of his mouth firmer, the kiss longer. When at last he lifted his head, Paige was breathless. 'So sweet,' he said, 'so wonderful…'

'Kiss me again,' she sighed.

His eyes changed, darkened to the colour of the ocean depths, and he gathered her to him. When his mouth dropped to hers, his lips were hungry and demanded surrender, and she gave it willingly. Her mouth softened beneath his, parted, and with a sound that was half-growl, half-triumph, he pulled her against him, moulding her body to his. Her fingers curled into the silky hair at the back of his head as his tongue touched her mouth with flame.

'I want to make love to you,' he whispered, drawing away only enough so he could look into her flushed face.

Some last link of reality made her shake her head.

'No,' she said, 'I can't…'

His hand slid to her breast, and she gasped as she felt the heat of his caress through the thin silk bodice.

'You want me. I know you do.'

'I can't,' she said again. 'You must let me go. I…'

'Go where?' he demanded. 'Back to your Romeo?'

'Yes,' she said, shuddering as his hand moved over her, 'yes, my fiancé… Please, don't…'

'Does he make you feel the way I do?' His mouth dipped to hers again, searing her with his passion, branding her with desire. He lifted his head and stared into her eyes. 'Does he?' he demanded.

Forgive me, Alan, she thought. 'No,' she said in a whisper so low that she hoped only the ocean would hear it. His smile was a trophy of her submission, but before he could kiss her again Paige put her hands against his chest and struggled in his embrace. 'But I'm not going to do this,' she said. 'I…'

'You don't want him, Juliet. You want me. You want me to make love to you, here, on the beach.'

'No,' she whispered, but even she could hear the lie trapped in the word. 'No,' she said again, but his arms were holding her tightly, and the stars were beginning to swirl all around her. The moon had climbed higher, casting a silver highway across the black water and a billion stars glittered in the sky. They were the last people on Earth, and love was an imperative. A tremor raced through her. 'Please,' she whispered, 'please…'

'Please, what?' he said, and his lips brushed hers. 'Tell me what you want me to do, Juliet. Show me.'

Her head fell back as his lips found her throat, and she moaned softly as she felt the silky glide of his tongue caress her skin. He was bending her back over his arm, lowering her to the sand, and it was what she wanted. He was what she wanted, he was all she wanted, he was everything…

'… are you out here?'

No! The voice was recognisable, even if the words were muffled by the surf. Paige stiffened in the stranger's arms.

'It's my mother!'

Her whisper was frantic. He said nothing, and she thought he hadn't understood her. Then she heard his stifled oath and felt the sudden tension in his muscles.

'Keep quiet and she'll go away,' he murmured against her cheek.

'She won't do that,' Paige whispered. 'Let me go—please.'

His eyes burned into hers. 'Only if you swear you'll come back to me.'

Paige shook her head. 'No, no, I can't. I…'

'… are you?' came her mother's voice.

'She's going to come down here,' Paige said in a desperate whisper. 'Let go of me, I beg you.'

His hands bound her to him. 'Tell me you'll come back,' he said fiercely.

'I can't. I…' Paige looked up. Her mother stood silhouetted at the head of the path that led down to the beach. 'All right,' she said breathlessly. 'All right, I'll come back.'

His hands clasped her shoulders, biting into her flesh until she winced. 'Swear it,' he said in an urgent whisper. 'Swear it, or I'll come with you now. I'll tell your mother and your Romeo that you're mine tonight.'

'I'm not. I…'

His mouth took hers in a hard, swift kiss that stole her breath away. 'Don't lie to yourself, Juliet. I don't understand it, either, but I know sure as hell that something's happened. And I'm damned if I'm going to let you walk out of my life until I figure it out. Do you understand?'

Paige's heart tumbled crazily. 'Yes,' she whispered, and an overwhelming sense of joy filled her. 'Yes,' she said again, and then she heard her mother's footsteps on the gravel. She touched the man's cheek and then stepped swiftly on to the path. 'I'm here, Mother,' she called.

'For heaven's sake, dear,' her mother said, taking a step towards her. 'We were worried half to death. Where have you been?'

Paige hurried up the last few yards and looped her arm through her mother's, drawing her back towards the gardens and the brightly lit clubhouse.

'I was… I was walking on the beach, Mother. I'm sorry if I worried you.'

'Well, not just me, Paige,' Janet Gardiner said as they moved across the flagstones. 'We were all upset. Your father, Alan—whatever got into you? Were you out here all by yourself?'

Paige glanced over her shoulder. There was only darkness behind her. 'Yes, of course. I'm really sorry. I just… I just needed some time to myself, I guess.'

Her mother's footsteps slowed. 'Are you sure you're all right, dear? There's something about you this evening…'

'Mother, where's Alan?'

'Looking for you, of course. He…'

'I have to talk to him,' Paige said in a rush. 'I have to tell him that this…'

Her mother put her arm around Paige's waist. 'Alan understands,' she said soothingly. 'He knows it's just last-minute nerves.'

'Mother, please…'

'All brides feel that way. You'll be fine the day of the wedding. Once you see your bridesmaids and the ushers, the flowers, the guests smiling at you, and Alan waiting at the altar—you'll see. All the jitters will vanish.'

It was a litany designed to comfort, but it was also a reminder of reality and responsibility. Paige came to an abrupt halt.

'Will they?' she asked in a whisper.

Janet Gardiner smiled. 'Of course,' she said, and then, looking into Paige's eyes, her smile turned to a worried frown. 'Unless you have real reservations, Paige. Do you? If you're not sure…'

Paige caught her lower lip between her teeth. 'Yes. No. God, Mother, I… I don't feel… I don't feel the way I should about Alan, do you know what I mean? I… I just don't feel that way…'

Her mother's eyebrows rose. 'The way you felt about that man in New York, you mean.' Her voice was stiff with distaste. 'Is that what you're saying?'

Paige took a breath. 'I'm not comparing the two situations, Mother. I…'

'I should hope not. Alan will never hurt you, Paige. You should be happy.'

'I am happy. I mean, I thought I was. But…'

The door ahead of them swung open suddenly, and the noise and smoky warmth of the ballroom spilled over them. Alan gave a sigh of relief as he stepped on to the terrace.

'There you are,' he said. 'What happened to you, sweetheart?'

'I was… I was walking, Alan. I…'

He put his arm around her shoulders. 'Are you OK?'

Paige nodded. 'Fine.'

'I looked everywhere for you. In the cloakroom, in the car…'

'You didn't look on the beach,' Janet Gardiner said. 'That's where she was, Alan. Walking off a bad set of nerves.'

Paige flushed. 'Mother, for heaven's sake…'

Alan grinned. 'Terrific. I'm the one who's supposed to be jittery, remember? That's the bridegroom's prerogative.'

Paige drew in her breath. 'Are you?' she whispered.

Alan put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. 'We're going to be happy,' he said softly. 'I promise.'

Paige stared at her fiancé. They *would* be happy, she thought. Of course they would. What she'd felt a few moments ago, in the arms of a stranger, wasn't happiness. She knew that as well as anyone. Better, perhaps…

'Mr and Mrs Fowler have asked us to their house for coffee, dear,' her mother said. 'I'll just get your father and we'll meet you out front.'

Alan smiled as Paige's mother bustled away. 'You're going to get coffee and cake and the whole Fowler clan,' he said teasingly. 'Aunt Dorothy wants to meet you. And Uncle Sam. And what looks like an endless line of cousins.' He bent and kissed her. 'I'm glad your mother found you, sweetheart. We don't want to disappoint them, do we?'

'No, of course not.'

She gave him a quick smile as he clasped her hand in his and led her through the clubhouse to the front portico. How long would the man on the beach wait for her? she wondered. Five minutes? Ten? Would he be disappointed or angry or…

'Here we are, children. Alan, why don't you ask the attendant to get the car?' Her mother took her aside as Alan and her father stepped towards the kerb. 'Stop worrying,' she whispered. 'It's just last-minute nerves, that's all. Three days from now, when you're Mrs Alan Fowler, you'll remember how you felt tonight and you'll laugh.'

Paige nodded and murmured something appropriate. But as she stepped into her fiancé's car and let the commitments and obligations of her new life swallow her, she knew that her mother was wrong.

She would remember this night, but she would never laugh. The memories of it would be too bittersweet.

But then, fantasy often was.

CHAPTER THREE

'PAIGE? Paige, have you seen that spray of silk baby's breath I was going to sew on to your headdress?'

Paige, who had been rummaging in her wardrobe for the mate to the silver pump she held in her hand, sat back on her heels and sighed.

'No, Mother,' she called. 'But I wouldn't worry about it. The headdress looks lovely just as it is.'

Janet Gardiner stepped into her daughter's room and poked through the lacy garments strewn across the dresser.

'Did I mix it into this lingerie by mistake?' she muttered, and then she sighed and answered her own question. 'No, there's nothing here but lingerie for your trousseau.' The older woman looked at her daughter. 'Haven't you finished packing, dear? The wedding's tomorrow, and you and Alan will have to leave for the airport by five, the latest.'

Paige rose to her feet. 'There's plenty of time, Mother. I'll do the rest tonight, after we get back from the rehearsal dinner.' A frown creased her forehead. 'If we get to it in the first place,' she said, tossing the silver shoe on the bed. 'I can't find the mate to this anywhere.'

'Isn't that… yes, there it is,' her mother said, plucking the missing pump from the floor. She looked around the room, smiling at the open suitcases and wardrobes. 'I'm going to miss all this,' she said softly.

Paige laughed as she slipped the shoes on her feet. 'Miss this mess? Come on, Mother. I know you—you can hardly wait to get at this room and clean it.'

Janet Gardiner smiled. 'You know what I mean, dear. I'm going to miss opening the door and finding you here.' She watched as her daughter smoothed down the skirt of her long blue dress and peered critically at her reflection in the mirror. 'It's hard to believe you'll be Mrs Alan Fowler by this time tomorrow.'

For a fragile moment, Paige's features clouded, and then she returned her mother's smile.

'Look on the bright side, Mother. You'll be able to turn my bedroom back into a guest room again.'

The older woman laughed. 'It was never anything but your bedroom, Paige, even when you lived in New York City.' She started from the room, then turned and popped her head into the doorway. 'Are you all right?' she asked softly.

Paige nodded. There was a sudden lump in her throat, and she didn't trust herself to try and say anything in return. Instead, she smiled and blew a kiss to her mother, and then she turned away, snatched up the stack of lingerie from the dresser, and put it into one of the open suitcases. When she glanced up again, her mother was gone.

The tremulous smile faded and she sank to the edge of the bed that had been hers since childhood. Tears hung on her lashes and she blinked them back angrily. No more tears, she told herself. She had done enough weeping the past two days to last a lifetime. All brides were edgy—everyone said so—and some were tearful, but God only knew what Alan's family thought of her after the other night. She'd shaken a lot of hands at the Fowler home after they'd left the Hunt Club, and kissed a lot of cheeks, and she'd kept wondering if her smile felt as forced as it looked, until finally Alan had put his arm around her, announced that his bride-to-be was exhausted, and taken her home.

'Are you sure you're OK?' he'd asked when they reached her house.

And Paige had nodded and smiled and assured him that she was fine. 'I'm just tired,' she'd said briskly. 'That's all.'

What else could she have said? she thought now as she sat in her bedroom and stared blindly at the pink and white papered wall ahead. Could she have told him she'd almost given herself to a nameless stranger on a windswept beach? All the time she'd been smiling at Alan's relatives, she'd been thinking about the man, wondering if his heart was as filled with anguish as hers. Was he cursing the cruelty of a Fate that had brought them together and then torn them apart? Or had he just gone back to the clubhouse and found another woman who'd gone willingly into the night with him, a woman he'd whispered to and caressed, a woman he'd made love to as he'd almost made love to her.

That was the most likely script of all. He'd been looking for an adventure, and he'd found her. She'd made a fool of herself with a stranger, and she should have been grateful it had gone no further than a few moonlight kisses.

Then why was her heart so filled with longing, her dreams so filled with a man whose eyes were the colour of the sea?

'Paige!' Startled, she looked up. 'Alan will be here soon,' her mother said from the doorway. 'And you're not half ready.'

She smiled brightly. 'I will be, Mother. You'll see.'

Her mother laughed. 'That's what you used to say when you were just a little girl.' She hurried across the room and gave her daughter a quick hug, and then she dabbed briskly at her eyes. 'I'm going to ruin my make-up if I keep this up. And then I'll have to redo it, and your father will be furious.' She paused in the doorway and smiled. 'We're going to miss you, dear. It's been lovely, having you live with us this past year.'

Paige met her mother's eyes in the mirror. 'I've been happy here, too.'

Her smile faded as her mother left the room and closed the door behind her. Her mother always made it sound as if she'd simply decided, on impulse, to move back to Connecticut from New York a year ago, but it hadn't been that simple. She'd come home unannounced, the taste of freedom bitter in her mouth. A taxi had taken her from the railway station in Greenwich to the grey-shingled house she'd grown up in. She could still remember taking out her key to open the door, then hesitating, remembering suddenly that she'd not lived here for the past four years, not since she'd turned twenty and finished business school. Slowly, she'd dropped the key back into her shoulder bag, and then she'd rung the doorbell.

Janet Gardiner had answered the door, her face showing first delighted surprise and then worried concern as she became aware of her daughter's drawn features. But she'd acted as if Paige's presence were nothing but an unexpected pleasure, bustling her out of her coat and into the kitchen,

setting another place at the old oak table before the fireplace, keeping up a line of chatter designed to put her daughter at ease. Her father had arrived home late from the office. To Paige's surprise, he'd hardly seemed to notice her.

'Paige has come for a visit,' her mother said, her eyebrows raised in warning that he ask no questions of their only child.

But her father seemed too absorbed in his own thoughts to do anything more than mumble a few words.

'That's nice,' he said, and then he went off to his study and left the two women to themselves.

'Is something wrong with Father?' Paige asked.

'Nothing more than the usual,' her mother said patiently. 'You know how he is—there's always some pie-in-the-sky scheme hatching in his head that's going to make him an instant millionaire.'

Paige shook her head. 'Poor Daddy. What was it last time? Gold mines or something?'

Mrs Gardiner smiled wearily. 'Or something. I'll never understand how a man who handles money for a firm like Fowlers' can have such bad judgement with his own.' She sighed. 'After the last disaster, I made him promise he wouldn't touch our savings again.'

Paige smiled. 'Does he still say, "no risk, no gain"?'

'Yes. And I told him that was all right as long as you could afford to lose the money you risked.' Her mother laughed. 'Let him squander his cigar money, if it makes him happy. He's a good man, darling, he just thinks we need more—that he's less a man, somehow, because he hasn't been able to give us the moon. I mean, it's not as if he drank or didn't love me…' Her eyebrows rose as Paige's face suddenly crumpled. 'Sweetheart, what is it?'

And Paige told her. Not everything; it had all been too recent and too painful. But she told her mother enough. How she'd met someone, thought she was in love, succumbed to her own burgeoning sexuality and found disappointment instead of fulfilment. In one brief encounter, she'd lost both her innocence and her desire.

'And the man?' Her mother touched her hand.

'He said I wasn't a woman. He said…'

Her mother put her arms around her. 'Forget about him,' she said fiercely. 'A man like that…' Janet Gardiner had looked at her for a long moment, and then she'd smiled. 'I have a wonderful idea,' she'd said, and then she'd made the suggestion that had been destined to change Paige's life. 'Why don't you move back here for a while? You could commute into the city, if you really want to keep that job of yours.'

'Or I could look for one right here in Greenwich,' Paige had said, too quickly, and both women had laughed, Paige with tears glistening in her eyes. 'I was hoping you'd ask me to stay.'

Her mother had patted her hand. 'This is your home, Paige. Of course we want you to stay. And you'll put all this behind you, believe me.'

And she had, Paige thought, staring blindly at the mirror that hung on the wall opposite her bed. First had come the job at Maywalk's department store. And then her father had begun playing Cupid, inviting his boss's son home to dinner, urging her to accept Alan's invitations, mixing together business and social occasions so that she was in Alan's company even when she wasn't dating him.

Not that she hadn't liked him—no one would ever dislike Alan Fowler, with his looks and his charm. And if there were no sparks when he kissed her—well, that was all the better, wasn't it? Compatibility and respect were the soils in which love grew. Passion? Passion was for the movies and for books. It was overrated and oversold, and what she'd experienced of it was enough to last her a lifetime.

Until two nights ago. Until she'd behaved like a… a wanton with a man who'd probably disappeared into the night.

And thank goodness he had, she thought as she brushed furiously at her pale blonde hair. At least she wouldn't have to worry about seeing him again. As for the emotions he'd unleashed—she'd

learn to feel all that, and more, with Alan. He would be her husband and she'd learn to want his kisses and caresses.

There was a soft tap at the door. 'Alan's here,' her mother said brightly. 'Ready, dear?'

Paige took a deep breath. 'Yes, I'm ready,' she said, and she told herself that she finally was.

The rehearsal dinner as well as the wedding were to be held at the Fowler home. Paige's mother had protested at first, saying that it was the bride's family who should make the wedding, but Alan's mother had been pleasantly but firmly insistent. Alan had urged Paige to go along with his mother's plans. 'It's easier to go along with Mother once she has a bee in her bonnet,' he'd said with a wry smile.

But, in the end, it was Paige's father who'd forced the decision.

'Let the Fowlers do it all,' he'd said. 'They're the ones with the money.' Paige had looked at him in surprise, and he'd given her a quick smile that had barely softened the harshness of his words. 'I only meant that it's foolish to argue.' In the end, Paige and her mother had agreed.

Now, standing in the Fowlers' impressive sitting room, gazing around her at the milling crowd, Paige was glad they had. It looked as if half the world was present—or half Connecticut and New York, anyway.

'If the Fowlers invited so many people to the rehearsal dinner, just imagine how many there'll be at the wedding tomorrow,' she whispered to her mother. 'I don't think I recognise a dozen faces!'

'Don't worry about a thing, dear. Just smile and say "thank you" and "no, thank you" in all the right places.'

Paige laughed. 'I won't let Alan out of my sight, once he shows up.'

'Shows up, indeed. Where's he gone to?'

'The airport. I only half heard the story. Some last-minute arrival's just come in, and apparently Alan was so delighted to hear about it that he decided to fetch him himself.'

'The mysterious brother, perhaps?'

Paige shrugged. 'Maybe. All I know is I've been left here to hold down the fort. Believe me,' she laughed, 'Alan's going to pay for… oh, God!'

The words were a choked whisper. Her mother turned to her in surprise.

'Paige? What is it? You're white as a sheet.'

'I… nothing. Nothing. I just…'

Paige could hear herself stammering, saying words that made no sense. But it was a miracle she could speak at all, she thought, staring across the crowded room. He was here. The stranger, the man she'd let make love to her two nights before—he was here, a guest in the Fowler home, a guest at her rehearsal dinner. He hadn't seen her yet; he was standing at the far end of the room, alone, holding a glass in his hand. She watched as someone stopped beside him—a woman, young, lovely, her face tilted smilingly up to his. He nodded, said something, but there was no answering smile. The woman spoke again, saying something else, but he seemed to be barely listening.

'Paige, will you please answer me? What's wrong?'

She drew her gaze from him and looked at her mother. 'I… nothing,' she said carefully. 'I just thought I saw… I saw someone I went to school with, that's all. Someone I… I never dreamed I'd see again.' *Smile,* she told herself fiercely. But, when she did, her lips felt glued to her teeth.

Her mother put her hand to her heart and laughed. 'You gave me quite a start, dear. I thought you'd seen a ghost. Well, why don't you go over and say hello? I'll just go find Mrs Fowler.' She laughed again. 'Maybe our handful of guests has shown up and we won't feel so outnumbered.'

'Yes, fine. I'll just… I'll find you in a few minutes, Mother.'

By then, I'll have thought up some excuse for leaving… But that would only postpose the inevitable. If he was here tonight, it was likely he'd be at the wedding tomorrow. What to do, what to do? What if she simply walked up to him, offered her apologies for her disreputable behaviour? What if she begged for his silence, for his understanding…

He'd seen her! Paige's heart stood still. Everything around her faded as the man's eyes met hers. His face grew dark, his lips narrow. The woman beside him was still talking, still smiling, and suddenly he shoved his glass into her hand and brushed past her. Paige knew, as surely as she knew he was coming straight for her, that he would never accept either her apologies or her pleas for understanding.

But he wouldn't make a scene, not in front of all these people. No, she told herself, no, he wouldn't… She watched as he moved rapidly through the crowd, rudely shouldering people out of his way if they didn't step aside quickly enough. His eyes were locked on her face, unwavering pools of icy fire. The first image she'd had of him returned to her, and her pulse began to race. Tonight, the lion had no intention of waiting for the wildebeest to come near. He was the killer—and she was his prey.

How could she have let herself think he wouldn't make a scene? He was capable of anything—her heart thudded into her throat and she turned wildly and began to run. She heard a peal of nervous laughter as she spun past surprised faces. She thought fleetingly of how impossible it was going to be to try and explain this to Alan. But she had seen the savagery in the stranger's eyes, and all that mattered at this moment was getting away from him. She fled from the sitting room, into the darkness of the rest of the house, trying to remember where the rear door led.

He caught her just as she was halfway through it. She tried to slam the door in his face, but he was far too strong for her. The door glanced off his shoulder, and then he was past it, reaching for her, grasping her by the shoulders with hands that bit into her flesh like talons.

'Let go of me!' she gasped, trying to twist free of him. 'Damn you…'

He kicked the door closed. 'Did you really think you could get away from me?' His voice was low and filled with rage.

'I told you to let go of me. How dare you treat me like this? I…'

'Shut up,' he said, slipping his arm around her shoulders.

She struggled against him as he began to draw her away from the house. 'Where are you taking me?' she demanded. 'I…'

'I'm taking you to the summer house,' he said grimly, half lifting her dragging feet from the ground. 'I don't need a whole damned houseful of people out here staring at me.'

'It's a little late to worry about that, don't you think? A few minutes ago…'

'You're the one who ran,' he said, pulling her up the wooden steps that led into the trellised gazebo that stood far

to the rear of the Fowler lawn.

'Of course I ran. You looked as if you… as if you…'

He grasped her shoulders with a roughness that made her gasp. 'As if what?' he growled, staring down at her.

Paige swallowed drily. The trees scattered about the lawn had been strung with coloured lights for the party, mottling his face with reds, blues, and yellows.

'As if… as if you wanted to kill me,' she whispered finally.

His mouth twisted. 'I thought about it, believe me. The other night, when I finally let myself believe you'd left…'

'Look, about that—about the other night…'

His eyes darkened. 'Did you have a good time playing with me, Juliet?'

Colour flooded her cheeks. 'You're a fine one to talk about games,' she hissed. 'I wasn't the one who started things. It was you…'

The words caught in her throat as he shook her. 'I waited on that godforsaken beach for an hour, damn you! And then I went back to the clubhouse—and you weren't there.' His hands slid from her shoulders and a weariness crept into his voice. 'I couldn't even ask anybody where you'd gone—hell, I didn't even know your name.'

Paige ran her tongue over her lips. 'I… I'm sorry,' she whispered. 'I didn't mean…'

She flinched as he spun towards her. ‘Didn’t you? Then what the hell was all that about, Juliet?’ He caught her by the arms and stared into her eyes. ‘Or is that just something you do when you go to parties, hmm? Have a drink, have a canapé, have a dance—and then go off with some man and drive him half out of his mind with wanting you and…’

‘Don’t you dare talk that way to me! You have no right.’

‘Don’t I? You made a fool out of me. You…’

‘I tried to tell you it was no good, but you wouldn’t listen. I kept saying I had to go back to my fiancé, but you… you…’

To her horror, Paige felt tears fill her eyes and begin to slide down her cheeks. It was bad enough that he’d made a fool of her the other night; she didn’t have to let this man reduce her to tears. Quickly, she brushed the back of her hand across her lashes and turned away.

‘Just let go of me,’ she whispered.

‘And where the hell do you think you’re going now?’

‘Let go of me. Please.’

His hands moved gently to her shoulders, and he turned her stiff, unyielding body towards his.

‘Don’t cry,’ he said fiercely. ‘Dammit, Juliet…’

Paige lifted her face to him, the tears glistening damply on her lashes, and with a whispered oath, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. It was a kiss that told her, more clearly than words, that his torment these past days had been as great as hers. There was passion in it and desire, there was anger and tenderness—but underlying all there was an awareness that this one kiss would not, could not, be enough.

‘Juliet, Juliet,’ he murmured against her lips, ‘why didn’t you come back to me?’

Her arms slid around his neck. ‘I couldn’t,’ she whispered. ‘I couldn’t… and I can’t stay with you now.’

His arms tightened around her. ‘Don’t say that,’ he growled. She moaned as his hand moved over her, cupping the fullness of her breast, sliding across her hip, curving across her buttocks. ‘I’m not letting you go,’ he said against her throat. ‘Not this time.’

He moved her against him, bringing her body tightly against his, and she felt the heated strength of him press into her.

‘You must,’ she whispered. ‘Please. My fiancé…’

He laughed throatily. ‘Are we going to talk about him again? What kind of man is he, this fiancé of yours?’ His hand moved over her, possessively, claiming each curve. ‘You don’t want him, Juliet. You know you don’t.’

Paige closed her eyes. ‘No,’ she murmured. ‘Not… not this way. But…’

‘He’s never made you feel like this, Juliet.’ His lips moved along her cheek, to her throat. ‘Spend the night with me,’ he whispered. ‘Let me show you how it can be with us.’

‘I can’t, don’t you understand? It’s too late. My fiancé…’

He drew back and looked down at her. ‘What is it like when you’re with him?’

Paige’s cheeks flamed. ‘I… I…’

He lifted her left hand and brought it to his lips. ‘Is it like that diamond you wear? Is the fire locked away inside the cold stone?’

‘You mustn’t say things like that. He…’

‘I’m only telling you what we both know,’ he said. His hands slipped from her shoulders. The party lights danced on the ruby ring he wore, and she watched as he slipped it from his fingers. ‘Give me your hand.’ Her eyes scanned his face and then, slowly, she did as he’d asked. He took her hand in his and placed the ring on her palm. ‘A man who would give you a diamond doesn’t really want you, Juliet,’ he said softly.

Paige stared at the ring he’d given her. The ruby glowed against her skin like a burning coal, its antique setting intricate and exquisite. She looked from it to him and shook her head.

'I… I don't understand.'

'You're like the blood ruby in that ring,' he said softly, cupping her face in his hands and raising it to his. 'Rare, precious, burning with passionate life.' Her eyes closed as his mouth took hers. When he raised his head again, his eyes were dark. 'Keep the ring. Look into it tonight, into the flame that blazes in its heart, and think of me and of how it will be when we're together.' His hand closed over hers, and she felt the heat of the ruby sear her palm. 'Cherish the flame in your dreams, Juliet, and tomorrow, when I see you again…'

'Tomorrow,' she repeated, as if he were speaking an unknown language.

'The wedding. You'll be there, won't you?'

'I… yes, yes, I'll be there.'

'We'll spend the day together,' he said, and he smiled at her. 'We'll do all the things people do when they first meet. We'll talk and we'll joke…' The smile faded, and he put his arms around her. 'And then I'll take you in my arms and I'll kiss you, like this.' His lips moved slowly, teasingly, over hers. 'And then I'll ask you to come with me. And…'

Tomorrow!

'Please,' Paige said desperately, 'you've got to listen. I…'

'If you tell me "no", I'll go away and you'll never see me again.' His arms tightened as he gathered her closer. 'But you won't,' he said, his voice a whisper that slid along her skin. 'You won't, Juliet. You'll look into my eyes and say you want me to make love to you.'

'You don't understand. Tomorrow…'

There was the sound of a door slamming closed, and then a whistle pierced the night.

'Hey, are you guys out here?'

Dear God! It was Alan. Paige's heart began to race. 'You've got to get out of here,' she hissed. 'Please!'

'Paige? Where are you, sweetheart?'

'Don't you hear me? Dammit—that's Alan. That's my fiancé…'

The man's eyes darkened, narrowed, until they were pinpoints of cobalt fire. His hands grasped her shoulders, his fingers biting into her until she gasped with pain.

'I tried to tell you,' she whispered. 'I…'

The look on his face silenced her. 'I ought to kill you,' he said softly. 'Jesus, I'd like to put my hands around your throat and…'

There was a clatter of footsteps on the gazebo stairs, and an arm slid around her waist.

'There you are, sweetheart,' Alan said, smiling at her. Paige's eyes widened as he threw his other arm loosely around the stranger's neck. 'Terrific!' he said happily. 'I see you two have already met. Well, Quinn, what do you think of her? What does my big brother have to say about my blushing bride?'

CHAPTER FOUR

WEDDING days were supposed to be storybook perfect. Blue skies, bright sun, not a cloud in the sky. And that was the way this one had dawned, Paige thought as she stood looking out her bedroom window. The few remaining leaves on the old maple tree gleamed gold and scarlet. When she was little, she'd loved to scramble into the tree's low, curving branches and sit safely hidden from the world in its leafy embrace.

If only she could do that now—climb into the maple and put her arms around the rough, scarred wood, hide there until this terrible day was over. But she wasn't a child any more, and there was no escaping reality. Paige sighed and took the last, bitter sip from a cup of cold coffee. The only thing she could hope for now was a modicum of kindness from Alan. He hadn't called yet, but he would —after Quinn had told him everything.

Somehow, she'd lived through last night, through the awful moment at the gazebo, murmuring some nonsense about the surprise of meeting Quinn at last, all the while waiting for him to denounce

her. But he'd been silent, watching her with a terrifying intensity, then muttering some polite phrases similar to hers. Alan had smiled and then they'd all returned to the house together, Alan walking happily between them.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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