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King of Swords

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Mills & Boon proudly presents THE SARA CRAVEN COLLECTION. Sara’s powerful and passionate romances have captivated and thrilled readers all over the world for five decades making her an international bestseller.A vulgar Greek peasant, Julia had called himinWhen she learned that Alexandros Constantis was buying Ambermere, her beloved ancestral home, Julia was filled with shame and anger. Not only would he take away her home, he would strip away every shred of her female dignity."My instinct tells me, Julia," Alex had drawled, "that to war with you might be far more interesting than to make peace."And when she saw to what lengths he would go, Julia's life became a nightmare….

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King of Swords
Sara Craven

www.millsandboon.co.uk

Former journalist **SARA CRAVEN** published her first novel 'Garden of Dreams' for Mills & Boon in 1975. Apart from her writing (naturally!) her passions include reading, bridge, Italian cities, Greek islands, the French language and countryside, and her rescue Jack Russell/cross Button. She has appeared on several TV quiz shows and in 1997 became UK TV Mastermind champion. She lives near her family in Warwickshire – Shakespeare country.

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CHAPTER ONE

IN THE glowing light of a June afternoon, Ambermere had never looked more beautiful.

Julia brought her car to a halt at the side of the road and slid out from behind the wheel. The faint breeze lifted a few tendrils of waving copper hair and she pushed them back impatiently as she leaned on the wall and stared across the lush green of the lower paddock to the house.

It all looked amazingly peaceful, even deserted, but she knew that apparent tranquillity was only a façade. Inside, there would be a frantic buzz of activity as her mother and the staff applied the finishing touches to the décor for tonight's Midsummer party.

And I should be there, helping, Julia thought, half guiltily, half in amusement. The Ambermere party was one of the most anticipated local events in the year—a pleasant tradition established over generations.

She felt a small sigh of satisfaction rise within her at the thought. That was what houses like Ambermere were all about—custom and continuity. And that was what she would continue to provide, even if she was the only daughter, instead of the once longed-for son.

A month, she decided with sudden restlessness, was far too long to be away, even though she had enjoyed herself. Aunt Miriam was a wonderful diplomat's wife and there had been parties and dinners nearly every night. In addition there had been tennis, and swimming and polo matches, as well as visits to concerts and theatres with a succession of attractive and attentive young men.

'But no one worthy of Ambermere,' Julia would tell her father presently, with mock regret. It was a joke which had begun in the days of a much younger Julia who had been very much affronted to learn that the family name would die out when she married.

'Then I won't get married,' she had declared to her amused parents. 'Unless I can find a man with the same name as ours.'

'But you might fall in love with someone called Smith,' Lydia Kendrick had pointed out, stroking the small, determined face.

'Then he'll have to change his name to Kendrick,' Julia had retorted. 'If he won't do that, then he's not worthy of Ambermere.'

They had all three laughed about it since, but Julia had come to recognise that she'd been more than half in earnest. She wanted to go on living at Ambermere, and see her children brought up there, bearing her own loved family name. But the man who would fit docilely in with these plans, and father those children, remained a shadowy and amorphous figure. None of the boyfriends who wined and dined her so assiduously, and tried, without any luck, to get her into bed, seemed even remotely to be suitable candidates.

Perhaps I won't get married at all, she thought. Maybe I'll just run the estate and become known as an eccentric spinster. She grimaced slightly, straightening as she prepared to get back in the car, and it was then she saw him.

A man, a perfect stranger, walking across the lower paddock, where he had no right to be.

Julia's lips tightened as she watched him. He was tall, with glossy black hair, and a swarthy skin, and she didn't have to guess where he'd come from. Her easy-going father had always permitted gipsies to camp beyond the copse, on the understanding that they kept the site tidy, and didn't encroach in any way on the rest of the estate.

And now here was one of them strolling about as if he owned the place. Well, he would soon know differently! Julia decided grimly.

She swung herself up on to the wall, put two fingers to her lips and whistled.

The man's head came round sharply, and he looked at her, but he made no effort to approach. Usually the same travelling people came back year after year, but Julia had never set eyes on this one before. He was darker even then Loy Pascoe, who was the head of the family, and had conducted the

negotiations with her father. Julia was aware of unsmiling dark eyes beneath level brows, a beak of a nose, and a firmly emphasised mouth and chin. Not good-looking exactly, she found herself thinking to her own surprise, but with a definite air—seignorial and irritatingly arrogant—about him. Maybe he was some distant relation of the Pascoe clan and just passing through, but that was no reason why he shouldn't obey the same rules as everyone else.

She said clearly and coldly, 'Do you know you're trespassing?'

He stood surveying her silently, hands resting on his hips, but he made no reply. He was wearing well-cut cream denim pants and an elegant knitted shirt, open at the neck to reveal the strong column of his throat, and a shadowing of body hair on his chest. His clothes had obviously cost a great deal of money.

The scrap metal business must be booming, Julia thought cynically. No poor relation, this one.

Her tone glacial, she said, 'I suppose you do speak English?'

There was a slight pause, then he nodded, his face expressionless.

'Well that's something.' Julia's eyes narrowed. 'Then you understand what I mean by trespass?'

Another nod. They were actually making progress.

'My father permits your people to camp on his land on certain conditions. I suggest you go back where you came from and find out what they are. And don't let me find you wandering about here again.'

She climbed lithely down from the wall and got into her car, angrily aware that he hadn't budged an inch. The nerve of him! she thought. She risked a glance in her mirror as she drove off, and realised furiously that he was smiling—laughing at her.

I'll call at the camp and give Loy a piece of my mind, she raged inwardly. Give these tinkers an inch, and they take a mile!

She took a careful grip on her temper, realising she was over-revving her engine. After all, it was only a minor incident, and it was utterly ridiculous to feel, as she did, that it had spoiled her homecoming. Because nothing could do that. Not now, not ever.

Ambermere was going to be hers one day, and she was going to care for it, and cherish it in a way her charming, happy-go-lucky father had never done. He called it openly the Albatross, and laughed at Julia's fury. Her month with Aunt Miriam had been a brief interval of rest and relaxation before she began the serious business of going into the Ambermere office with Mr Greenwood and learning how to run the estate. It was what she had always wanted, although Philip Kendrick had always insisted she would have changed her mind by the time she was old enough for such responsibility.

'We'll see how you feel when you're twenty-one,' he had told her briskly. And he'd been frankly astonished when her birthday had come and gone, and she was still of the same mind about what she wanted to do with her life.

And she would begin as she meant to go on by dealing with this tinker problem, swiftly and personally. If Loy thought she was going to be a pushover to deal with because she was a girl, he would soon discover his mistake!

She parked her car and walked through the copse. The shining trailers were parked neatly enough, but there seemed to be no one around except, for a tethered dog who barked aggressively at her as she passed.

She said, 'Shut up, Ben you idiot,' and knocked on the door of the largest and glossiest trailer.

It opened immediately, revealing a small, white-haired woman in a stridently floral overall. Blackberry-dark eyes surveyed the visitor gravely.

'Well, Miss Julia,' she said. 'It came to me that you'd be here today.'

Julia gave her a level look. Grandma Pascoe was reputed to have the second sight, and made a good income from telling fortunes at local fêtes and fairgrounds, but Julia had never believed the old woman had any special powers, just a good nose for gossip, and a phenomenal memory. And

everyone in the county would know that no matter how long she'd been away, she would be back for tonight's party. No ESP required for that! she thought with a trace of cynicism.

She said, 'Hello, Grandma. Is Loy about?'

The white head moved in negation. 'He's seeing a man on business. Come in, Miss Julia. The kettle's boiled, and I've been spreading the cards for you.'

Julia hesitated. The tea would be welcome, but the last thing she wanted was Grandma brooding over the tarot cards on her behalf.

She began, 'I really don't think …' but Grandma stopped her with an imperative gesture.

'You may not believe, missy, but there's a message for you just the same. I've been sitting waiting for you to come and hear it.'

And no doubt cross her palm with silver, the old crook, Julia thought, torn between amusement and annoyance, as she followed Grandma into the trailer and sat down opposite her at the table. The tea was scalding and almost black, and she sipped carefully, as Grandma began to turn over the cards in front of her.

"Tes all change for you, maiden, and a journey across water.'

'I've just done that,' Julia said wearily, Usually Grandma made at least a pretence of seeing the future.

'This is 'nother one.' Grandma gave her a gimlet look.

'I don't think so.' Julia shook her head. 'This time I'm here to stay.'

'See what covers you?' Grandma turned over another card, and gasped. 'The King of Swords! He's come to cut you off from all you know. He's terrible powerful, the King of Swords. You can't fight him, though you may try.'

'You can count on that,' Julia said drily. 'Can you tell me what he looks like, so I can be sure to avoid him?'

'He's close enough to touch.' Grandma's voice lowered to a whisper, and in spite of herself Julia felt a faint frisson of uneasiness chill her spine. 'And you can't avoid your fate, maiden.' She turned over the final card, and gasped again. 'See—the Tower struck by lightning. Your world turned upside down, and no mistake.'

Julia stared down at the card, her brows drawing together. She found herself wishing, ridiculously, that she'd bypassed the camp and let her father deal with the interloper. Then she pulled herself together. She had never been taken in by Grandma's nonsense before, and she certainly wasn't going to start now.

She drank the rest of her tea in one wincing gulp, and stood up. 'Well, the weather forecast says nothing about storms,' she remarked briskly. 'I'll take my chance.' She reached for her bag, but Grandma Pascoe shook her head.

'There's no need for money beween us, Miss Julia. I've given you the warning. I can do no more.' She paused. 'You're a proud girl, and no mistake, with a mind of your own. But that pride of yours will be brought low. It's all here.' She tapped the cards with a bony forefinger. 'Now run away home, and dance at your party while you can.'

Julia almost stumbled down the steps of the trailer, and paused, her heart thumping. There should be a law, she thought angrily, against Grandma Pascoe and her kind spreading forecasts of doom. It was all very different from the handsome husbands and football pools wins that the old lady generally predicted.

She sat in the car, letting her pulses slow to a more normal rate, castigating herself for being an idiot. And she hadn't even left a message for Loy about the trespasser, she realised vexedly, as she started her engine. Well, that would have to wait, because she certainly wasn't going back.

The yard at the back of the house which housed the former stables and the garages was crowded with vehicles, florists' and caterers' vans among them. There was the usual atmosphere of bustle and subdued panic that Julia always associated with the Midsummer party. Although heaven knows why,

she told herself wryly, as she slid her car into its usual corner. Everything's always perfect, and this year even the weather's going to oblige us.

She found her mother in the large drawing-room, surrounded by lists. Lady Kendrick looked up as Julia walked towards her, her face breaking into a strained smile. 'Darling—at last!' She embraced her warmly. 'But you're very late. I was beginning to get anxious.'

'I took a slight detour,' Julia said with deliberate lightness. 'And I really wish I hadn't. She gave her mother a searching look. Had those worry lines round her mouth and eyes, the tension along her cheekbones, been there unnoticed before Julia went away? If so, perhaps these few weeks of separation had been a good thing if they'd taught her to be more perceptive. Lydia Kendrick had always been a highly strung, nervous woman, and the vagaries of life with her charming, feckless but much-loved husband had done little to ease the wear and tear on her nervous system.

'Is everything all right?' asked Julia anxiously.

'Everything's fine—and wonderful now that you're here. I can't wait to hear all the news about Miriam—and everyone. But there's so much to do.' Lydria Kendrick gestured helplessly about her, and Julia kissed her cheek.

'I'll go and unpack, then I'll pitch in and lend a hand with it all,' she promised reassuringly. 'Where's Daddy?'

'He's rather busy. Mr Poulton came down first thing this morning. They've been shut up in the study for most of the day.'

Julia's brows lifted. 'Rather inconsiderate of Polly,' she remarked, using her father's joking name for their staid family solicitor. 'He doesn't usually bother Daddy with business meetings on Midsummer Day.' She paused. 'Are you sure there's nothing wrong?'

'Of course not.' Her mother was smiling, but her glance slid away evasively. 'It's just—routine. Probably Polly underestimated the time it would take.'

There *is* something the matter, Julia thought as she unlocked her cases in her sunny bedroom and began to restore the contents to drawers and wardrobe. It wasn't just the uproar of preparing for the party either. It was like some dark and disturbing undercurrent beneath Ambermere's familiar and tranquil surface. From the moment she'd seen that man—that intruder in the lower paddock, her day had seemed disjointed, her homecoming oddly clouded.

'Jools, you're going crazy,' she adjured herself, as she unwrapped the dress she planned to wear that evening from its protective folds of tissue. Aunt Miriam had helped her choose it, and it relied for its chic on its stark and simple cut. She rarely wore that shade of midnight blue, but she had to admit Aunt Miriam was right when she said it darkened her eyes to sapphire. In the past, she'd chosen floating fabrics and pastels—débutante dresses, she thought with a slight grimace. This elegant, sophisticated model was going to open a few eyes—make it clear that Julia Kendrick was no longer a girl, but a woman ready and prepared to embark on her chosen course in life.

She sat down on her dressing stool and lifted her hair on top of her head in a casual swirl, studying herself, experimenting. The brief knock on her door made her start, and she looked up guiltily to see her mother had joined her.

'Are you waiting for me?' Julia jumped up. 'I'll only be a few minutes.'

'No—no. Everything's running like clockwork really—as it should after all these years.' Lydia Kendrick's voice was pitched higher than usual, and she dabbed at her mouth with a lace-edged handkerchief. 'Jools darling, I shouldn't be here talking to you like this. Your father told me to wait until after the party—not to spoil things for you on your first night—but I can't …'

Julia put a protective arm round the slender shoulders, helping her to the window seat and sitting beside her.

'What is it, love? Has Daddy been backing losers again? Is that why Polly's here, to give him the usual rap over the knuckles?'

Lydia gave a strangled sob. 'It's worse than that,' she said hoarsely. 'So much worse. I don't know how to tell you…' There was a pause while she obviously fought for control. Then she said brokenly, 'Jools—your father is having to sell this house.'

Julia had the oddest sensation that everything in the room had receded to a great distance. Her voice sounded very clear, however, and very cold.

'Is this some awful joke? Because I'm afraid I don't find it very funny …'

'Would I—could I joke about something like this?' Her mother's tone was piteous. 'Ambermere has to go. That's why Mr Poulton's here. He's been here every day almost for the past two weeks. Your—your father's had a lot of financial setbacks. The Mullion Corporation takeover—there was talk of insider trading—he had to resign from the board, although he swears he had nothing to do with it. And that's not all. Some time ago, Daddy changed a lot of our investments, because he felt we needed more return from our money. Some of the new investments were—high-risk, but he thought it was worth the gamble.' She swallowed nervously. 'We lost a great deal—too much. It's been a disaster. We have to sell Ambermere, Jools, because we can't afford to go on living here. The party tonight will be the last we'll ever give.' She began to cry, her throat wrenched by small gusty sobs.

Julia sat holding her, feeling frozen.

Worth the gamble, she thought. Those words had a hollow ring. All her life, her father had been a gambler, preferring to live his life on a knife-edge of insecurity. There were years when his betting and baccarat losses had been phenomenal. Julia could remember tearful scenes, and an atmosphere of gloomy repentance which she had only partly understood at the time.

Later, it had been explained to her that their income was adequate as long as they lived quietly and without undue extravagance. But that wasn't Philip Kendrick's way. Country life bored him, except in small doses. He was always looking out for some scheme which would restore the family fortunes to some fabled pre-war level. He'd been like some small boy, looking for adventure, she thought. But now the adventure had gone hideously wrong.

She said, 'Why—did Polly let him?'

'He didn't tell him anything about it until it was too late. You see, Daddy had been taking advice from some American he'd met in Monte Carlo—some financial wizard.' Lydia's lips tightened. 'Apparently this man's just been indicted for fraud in New York.'

Julia felt sick, 'Oh, God—Daddy's not involved in that?'

'Oh, no.' Lydia's fingers tore nervously at her handkerchief, but her voice was decisively reassuring. 'Darling, I know how you must feel—but Daddy did this for the best. The costs of running a house like this, an estate like Ambermere, are punitively high. He wanted you to have—a proper inheritance, not to have to scrimp and save all your life.'

Julia felt immensely weary. 'Why didn't you tell me—call me back from Aunt Miriam's?'

'We wanted you to have a good time. And there was nothing you could have done.'

'There must be something. I'm not going to let Ambermere go like this.' Julia tried to smile. 'Perhaps no one will want to buy the Albatross. No one we know has that kind of money.'

There was a long silence, then Lydia said quietly, 'These days, darling, estates like this tend to look for buyers from abroad. And Mr Poulton has found one for us.'

'Abroad?' Julia echoed dazedly. She shook her head. 'Not some Arab prince? I don't believe it…'

'Not quite. In fact—' there were bright spots of colour burning in her mother's cheeks '—I would almost prefer it. This man is Greek—a so-called tycoon. His name is Alexandros Constantis.'

'Constantis?' Julia's brows snapped together. 'That's familiar. Does he have a relative called Paul?'

'I wouldn't know,' Lady Kendrick said with distaste. 'What I've heard of his antecedents is bad enough. I have no wish to enquire into his immediate family. Not that they have very much to do with him,' she added with unaccustomed waspishness.

'Then it must be the same man,' Julia said slowly, thinking, remembering. 'I had dinner with Paul Constantis a few times—he was charming. He had a post at the Greek Embassy—something fairly junior, I gathered, but he used to joke about nature having intended him to be a millionaire until fate, in the shape of his cousin Alex, had prevented it.'

'Poor boy,' Lydia Kendrick said, almost fiercely. 'I imagine that's only too true. You're too young to remember the scandal, of course, but George Constantis was an immensely wealthy man, with a fortune in banking and property all over the Mediterranean. He was a widower, and childless, and his estate was expected to go to his sister and her children. Then lo and behold, on his deathbed, he suddenly revealed that he had an illegitimate son and had left his entire business empire to this child.' She shook her head. 'The family wouldn't have objected to some kind of provision, naturally, but to have this person no one had ever known existed foisted on to them—over them—was appalling. He wasn't a child, of course. He was already a grown man—but it was said he'd been dragged up in total poverty in some slum, and could barely read or write. There was some mystery about the mother, apparently. It seems she was some little peasant girl Constantis had seduced.

'They fought, of course. They tried to prove he wasn't Constantis's son at all, insisted on blood tests, but they were inconclusive, so then they tried to overturn the will in the courts, saying this Alex had exerted undue influence on the old man while he was ill. It was quite a *cause célèbre*. But they lost—and he took everything.'

And now, Julia thought, rage rising inside her, now he's trying to take Ambermere from me. But he won't. Not someone like that.

'An uncouth barbarian,' Paul Constantis had called him, she remembered. Well he wasn't going to lay his vandal's hands on her home, if she could prevent it!

She got to her feet, 'I'm going down to talk to Daddy,' she said, trying to keep her voice level. 'There must be something we can do. And surely this Constantis creature can't be the only prospective buyer we can find?'

'Apparently he's made an excellent offer,' her mother returned. 'He does a great deal of business over here, and wants a permanent residence where he can entertain.'

'Bouzouki nights with plate smashing, no doubt,' Julia said grimly, moving to the door. 'We'll see about that!' She ran along the gallery and down the wide curve of the big staircase, letting her hand slide down the highly polished balustrade as she had always done. As she always would do, she told herself. Ambermere had to be saved somehow.

As she reached the foot of the stairs, the study door opened and her father emerged with Gordon Poulton at his side. He looked tired and haggard, and in spite of her bitterness Julia felt a wrench of her heart at his obvious distress.

He looked up and saw her, and tried to smile. 'Jools, sweetheart, no one told me you were home. 'How marvellous!'

She ran to him. 'Daddy, tell me it's not true. Promise me you haven't sold Ambermere to this appalling Greek peasant!'

She heard Gordon Poulton make a shocked noise, and saw her father's brows snap together in sudden quelling anger. From the shadowy doorway behind them, a third figure detached itself and stepped forward.

Julia felt as if a hand had closed round her throat. She knew him at once, of course. It was the man she'd seen in the lower paddock and taken for a tinker.

No wonder he'd laughed at her! she thought dazedly.

Only this time he wasn't laughing at all. As the hooded dark gaze swept her from head to foot, she felt as if the flesh had been scorched from her bones by some swift and terrifying flame.

It was all she could do not to fling up her hands to defend herself.

The Tower struck by lightning, she thought, from some whirling corner of her mind, and the King of Swords, coming to cut down her pride and separate her from everything she loved.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SAPPHIRE dress looked superb. Julia regarded herself critically in the full-length mirror, making a minute adjustment to the seams of her stockings, and tucking an errant strand of hair into place in her carefully casual topknot.

She looked elegant, poised and sophisticated—just as the daughter of the house should, she thought bitterly. But she was only attending the party under protest, and after the most thunderous row she'd ever had with her father. Even the thought of it now could still make her shudder.

'How dare you, Julia!' Sir Philip's voice had been glacial, when they were finally alone together. 'I'd hoped your time with Miriam might have cured you of your tendency to impulsive and inopportune reactions. You realise nothing is signed yet between Constantis and myself, and you could have jeopardised the negotiations by your insolence?'

'Then I'm glad,' she had answered defiantly. 'Daddy, you can't sell Ambermere to a man like that! There must be some other way.'

'If there was, then I'd have found it.' His tone sharpened. 'You're a child, Julia—a spoiled child. I've done you no favours by sheltering you from life's realities.'

'Is that how you categorise Alex Constantis?' Julia's laugh broke in the middle. 'Then I'm glad you did—shelter me. He can't have Ambermere—he can't!'

'He can—and I desperately hope he will.' She had never seen her father look so stern. 'And you, madam, will do and say nothing else to put the sale at risk.'

'Well, you have no need to worry about that.' Julia glared back at him. 'I'll make very sure our paths don't cross again!'

'In fact you'll meet him again this evening,' Sir Philip told her grimly. 'He's dining with us, and staying on for the party.'

Julia's lips parted in a despairing gasp. 'You can't have invited him!' she wailed. 'Not someone like that. Our friends will think we approve of him—that we're endorsing him in some way.'

'And why shouldn't we?' Sir Philip slammed his desk with a clenched fist. 'My God, Julia. Where did you learn to be such an appalling little snob? Alex Constantis may have inherited money initially, but he's made another fortune on his own account since he became head of the Constantis empire. And in today's world, it's money that counts, my dear, as I'm afraid you're going to find out. So far, he's been reasonably accommodating. I just pray you haven't ruined everything with your muddle-headed stupidity. He has a reputation for being a tough operator.'

'For being a bastard!' Julia flung back at him. 'Which is, of course, exactly what he is.'

'And what have we, precisely, to be so stately and moral about?' Sir Philip demanded. 'If the first Julia Kendrick hadn't caught the Prince Regent's eye, then we would never have owned Ambermere in the first place. Perhaps you should remember that.' He paused, surveying her defiant, tight-lipped face. 'And remember this too, Jools. Tonight I expect you to be civil to Alex Constantis—beginning, perhaps, with an apology.'

'Will a plain "sorry I spoke" do, or would you like me to grovel—lick his shoes even?'

And so it had gone on, covering the same wretched ground, the same recriminations, until finally they had reached a kind of armed truce. Julia did not have to apologise in so many words, but she wouldn't be allowed to feign a headache and miss the party either. And she would be polite to Alex Constantis.

'I know it's a terrible situation for you, darling,' her father had said more gently, just before she went up, reluctantly, to change. 'But we're still a family, and that's what matters in the end. Bricks and mortar, however historic, aren't that important.'

The trouble was, Julia thought dispiritedly, her father had right on his side. She had been abysmally rude about Alex Constantis. But how could she have known he was lurking about in the

study doorway like the Demon King, ready to pop up at just the wrong moment? And if she had known would she honestly have behaved differently? Somehow, she doubted it.

And where rudeness was concerned, honours were about even, she thought. He had snubbed her totally and succinctly, after her father had awkwardly attempted to introduce them, reminding Sir Philip coolly that they were due to visit the Home Farm, and walking off with him without deigning Julia a second look.

But that was all to the good, Julia thought, her mouth suddenly dry. Because if the second look lived up to the first, she might end up permanently singed.

There was little doubt that the evening ahead was going to be an ordeal. Her father had made it clear that he intended to introduce Alex Constantis to their neighbours and friends as the future owner of Ambermere, and Julia wasn't at all sure she could bear it.

She had almost decided against wearing the new dress, telling herself that it didn't matter what she looked like—that the oldest rag in the wardrobe would do for a—awake like this evening promised to be.

But her pride had reasserted itself. Her ship might be sinking, but she would nail her full colours to the mast—and she would let no one, but no one know how much she despised and resented Alex Constantis. Her innate realism told her that too many avid eyes would be watching for any sign of grief or distress. Their friends would understand and sympathise, she thought with a sigh, but there were others in the neighbourhood, less well disposed towards the Kendricks, who had been prophesying doom and disaster for years.

And now the doom had come upon them in the unwelcome shape of this—Greek upstart, she thought wretchedly.

Paul Constantis had been philosophical about the enforced change in his circumstances, but Julia had sensed an underlying bitterness. She'd sympathised with him, without feeling too involved, but she was concerned now all right. Because by some incredible, nauseating coincidence, Alex Constantis was going to take Ambermere from her, just as he'd preyed on the Constantis family fortune. He was going to steal her home.

'Bricks and mortar aren't important,' Sir Philip had said.

Not to you, Daddy, Julia thought in aching silence. Never to you—but to me.

She was aware that her love for Ambermere was a local byword, could imagine the shock waves when people realised this would be the last Midsummer party. But no one would pity her tonight—or laugh at her either, she told herself almost savagely, as she lifted her scent spray and misted herself with fragrance before turning resolutely to the door and making her way downstairs.

It was still quite early, and the special guests who had been invited to dinner before the party proper began had not begun to arrive yet, so Julia expected to have the drawing-room to herself for a while.

But to her horror, Alex Constantis was there before her, standing on the hearthrug, staring up at the enormous portrait of the Regency Julia Kendrick which hung above the fireplace. Twentieth-century Julia had never cared for this constant reminder of how her family had acquired Ambermere. She had always been vaguely embarrassed by the pride of place given to a woman who had shamelessly betrayed her husband, and behaved like a tart with Prinny. And she loathed the lighthearted family tradition of drinking a toast to the first Julia as a climax to the Midsummer party. But perhaps, in the circumstances, that particular ritual could be forgone this year.

She hesitated in the doorway, wondering whether she could steal away before he saw her, but the wretched man must have had eyes in the back of his head, because without turning, he said, 'Come in, *thespinis*, and tell me about your ancestress.'

Julia came forward with deep unwillingness, strongly tempted to repudiate all knowledge of the flame-haired beauty in her shockingly fashionable transparent draperies.

But before she could speak, he added drily, 'And do not try to deny the relationship. The family resemblance is there—and the colour of the hair.' He turned and looked at her fully, the glittering dark gaze sliding with unabashed interest over the untrammelled cling of the midnight dress. 'And the fact that you both wear so little,' he ended silkily.

In spite of herself, Julia felt dull colour rise in her face. The cut of the dress demanded a minimum of underwear, but it infuriated her that this stranger—this interloper, should be so immediately aware of the fact—and be graceless enough to refer to it.

At the same time she was forced to acknowledge that his voice was attractive—low-pitched and resonant, with barely a trace of an accent. Not, she thought, what she would have expected from someone of his background.

She said coolly, 'As you're a stranger to Britain, Mr Constantis, perhaps I should warn you that sexist remarks are no longer welcomed here.'

'Sexist?' Alex Constantis repeated the word as if it were utterly new to him, then shrugged. 'Yet we are still born male and female, *thespinis*. The human race does not yet allow for neuters. Nor will it continue for much longer unless a man is able to tell a woman that he finds her desirable.'

To her fury, Julia felt her flush deepen. Did this person actually mean … No, of course he didn't. He was simply getting his own back by deliberately setting out to embarrass her.

She said crisply, 'You were asking about the portrait, I believe. She was the wife of the first baronet, and her name was Julia.'

'You were named for her?'

'Yes.' Julia forbore to add 'unfortunately', knowing it would involve her in explanations which she didn't wish to give. Alex Constantis's grin was far too insolent already.

He glanced back at the portrait. 'She is very beautiful. To possess such loveliness would be a rare acquisition.'

Again Julia had the uneasy feeling that his remark was a loaded one, intended to needle her. At this rate, she thought crossly, I'll be spending the entire evening blushing like a schoolgirl!

She forced her voice to remain level. 'I'm afraid the portrait isn't for sale, Mr Constantis. You're buying a house, not a family history.'

He said softly, 'The past does not concern me, *thespinis*—only the present—and the future. And it is not altogether certain that I shall buy Ambermere.'

Julia groaned inwardly. Aloud, she said stiffly, 'If you're having second thoughts because of anything I've said or done, then I'm sorry.'

'Are you?' He spoke in the same reflective tone, but Julia felt an inexplicable shiver run down her spine—as if he'd threatened her in some way.

Oh, I'm being ridiculous, she thought with exasperation.

She tried to speak lightly. 'Perhaps we'd better declare a truce. May I offer you a drink?'

'Thank you. Do you have Bourbon?'

'Of course. It's what my father drinks.' Julia moved to the side table where the decanters stood, and poured a measure into a glass, angrily aware that her hands were shaking.

'Come on, Jools,' she whispered to herself. 'Get it together.'

To add to her self-consciousness, she felt certain Alex Constantis had spotted her nervousness, and was amused by it, although his expression when she handed him the glass was enigmatic.

'You are not joining me?' he asked, and Julia shook her head.

'It's going to be a long evening,' she excused herself, with a bright smile which only touched her lips.

'Then—*yiassou*.' He raised his glass to her, then drank.

Julia began to wish she had in fact poured herself a drink as well. It would have given her something to fidget with—to concentrate on—anything rather than just having to stand here, the object of his undivided attention.

‘So, tell me more about your namesake,’ he said, after a pause. ‘She was the mistress of the Prince of Wales—isn’t that right?’

Julia’s lips tightened. ‘You seem perfectly well informed already.’

‘There is a small bookshop opposite my hotel in the village. I bought a local guide book, and such a story was mentioned.’

She shrugged. ‘Then what more is there to tell?’

‘Her husband—this first baronet. What kind of a man was he?’

‘He was one of the Prince’s circle,’ Julia said reluctantly. ‘Though not a close friend. He was a gambler.’

‘So that is where the tendency comes from,’ Alex Constantis said meditatively. ‘Was he also as unlucky as your father?’

Julia shot him a look of indignant surprise, annoyed at the implied criticism in his words. ‘I don’t think I want to discuss that with you.’

‘Yet it has a certain relevance.’ The dark eyes were hooded. ‘If your father had been luckier in his wagers—in his speculation, then your family home would not be for sale to the highest bidder—and we would not be here together now.’

She said tautly, ‘Please don’t remind me.’

He laughed. ‘The truce did not last long, *thespinis*. But no matter. My instinct tells me that to war with you might be more interesting than to make peace.’

‘And your instinct, of course, is never wrong.’ Julia was heavily sarcastic.

‘Where women are concerned—rarely.’ He was still smiling. ‘Another sexist remark!’

Julia bit her lip. ‘Could we change the subject, please?’

‘Certainly.’ He drank some more Bourbon. ‘Shall we talk about the weather, or shall I tell you how beautiful you look in that dress, and how much I would give to see you without it?’

Shame and anger welled up inside her, as if she had indeed been stripped naked in front of him. If she had had a drink in her hand, she would have thrown it straight into his mocking, arrogant face, she thought savagely. She wanted to hit out, to beat at him with her fists, but she knew, somehow, that such a gesture would only amuse him.

My God, she thought. He’s demanding a full pound of flesh in return for my having called him a peasant!

From somewhere she managed to conjure up a light laugh. ‘Would you give me Ambermere, Mr Constantis?’

His brows lifted slightly, as if her reaction had surprised him, and he said, ‘No.’

Julia shrugged again. ‘Then the deal’s off.’ She made herself meet his gaze. ‘You’ll just have to—eat your heart out.’

His smile widened, and he shook his head slowly. ‘Don’t count on it—Miss Kendrick.’

For an endless moment his eyes held hers. Julia was suddenly, terrifyingly conscious that she could neither move nor speak—and that every pulse point in her body seemed to be beating with an alarming independence.

She wanted to say ‘No.’ To assert her separateness from him, her rejection of him, and his degrading jibes, but the muscles of her throat refused to obey her.

It was the external sound of other voices, and footsteps approaching down the hall, which broke the spell at last. And if she’d burned before, Julia now realised she felt icily, deathly cold.

As Alex Constantis turned to greet her parents, she crossed to the empty fireplace and stood staring down at it, as if there were flames there which could warm her, and stop the wild, inner shivering which threatened to tear her apart.

Lydia Kendrick was polite to her unwanted guest, but there was none of her usual warmth in her manner, and Julia surmised that she too was under orders.

Her father seemed his usual ebullient self, laughing and talking as if Alex Constantis was an old and valued friend, but Julia could see the lines of strain round his mouth, and thought how they would deepen if the offer for the house was withdrawn.

She felt as if she was living through some kind of nightmare.

She had hoped the situation would be eased when the other dinner guests arrived, but among the first-comers were the Bosworths, and Vivvy Bosworth lost no time in drawing Julia into the morning-room.

'Jools, there are the most amazing rumours all over the place. People are saying your father's sold the estate to some Greek millionaire. Surely it can't be true?'

Julia pinned on a smile. 'We're certainly hoping the deal goes through.'

'Oh, don't con me, Julia Kendrick!' Vivvy gave her a minatory look. 'I've known you far too long—we swapped rattles in our prams, remember? You'd rather lose your right arm than this house.'

Julia's smile wavered and collapsed. She said wretchedly, 'Oh Vivvy, the house is going to be sold whatever happens, but I honestly don't know whether Alex Constantis is going to buy Ambermere or not.' She swallowed. 'What I do know is I'd sooner see it burn to the ground than belong to him. He's the most hateful man I've ever met!'

Vivvy gave her a limpid look. 'Darling Jools, no man with all that money could possibly be hateful!' She sobered, giving Julia a quick hug. 'There's nothing I can say to make you feel better about this, but I felt I had to warn you. Stepmother's on the warpath. She was smirking to herself all the way here, and that's always bad news for someone.'

Julia received the news with a grimace of dismay. Gerald Bosworth's first wife had been a warm and smiling woman, popular with everyone, and genuinely mourned when she died after a long illness. It was generally agreed locally that Gerald, who had nursed her with total devotion, should marry again in due time, but no one, least of all Vivvy and her brother Alastair, had expected it to happen so soon, or to find themselves with a young and glamorous former actress as a stepmother. Tricia Bosworth at first bewildered her new neighbours, who tried to make her welcome for Gerald's sake, and later aroused their resentment with the deliberately poisonous sweetness of some of her remarks. Because she was Gerald's wife, and everyone liked Gerald, it was impossible to exclude her from social gatherings, but there was always an edge when she was around.

'An actress!' Julia had once said bitterly, smarting from Tricia's smiling comments about adolescent gaucherie. 'What's she ever been in, for heaven's sake?'

'She claims to have been in an RSC production of *Antony and Cleopatra*,' Vivvy had returned dejectedly. 'Probably playing the asp.'

Tricia had always gushed about Ambermere, its beauty and its history, but she wouldn't be shedding any tears over the Kendricks' loss, and the thought of her openly probing their wounds over dinner was unbearable.

What else can go wrong? Julia asked herself unhappily. How could the passage of a few hours change one's entire life so fundamentally?

'Cheer up.' Vivvy linked an arm through hers. 'She may choke on a fishbone and die before she can start.'

Julia smiled reluctantly. 'Can't we arrange for two fishbones?'

'Never kill off a millionaire unless you're mentioned in his will,' Vivvy warned solemnly. 'What's he like—old, fat and repulsive?'

'No,' Julia said colourlessly. 'I suppose he's attractive—if you like that sort of thing.'

'I'm sure I could learn to,' giggled Vivvy. 'Lead me to him!'

As Julia took her into the drawing-room, she gave vent to a soundless whistle. 'Attractive? My God, Jools, are you crazy? He's gorgeous!'

Unwillingly, Julia had to concede that Vivvy spoke with a certain justice. In the casual clothes he had been wearing when she first encountered him, he'd looked a force to be reckoned with. Now, in

the dark formality of dinner jacket and black tie, Alex Constantis possessed a disturbing, charismatic presence which was drawing every female eye in the room.

Well, they said wealth and power were aphrodisiacs, Julia thought savagely, then bit her lip. She was being unfair, and she knew it. Even if he were penniless, any woman with blood in her veins would look at him, and look again. Except me, she reminded herself grimly.

But that was not as easy as it seemed. To her chagrin, Julia found she was placed opposite him at the long oak table in the dining-room, and no matter how rigorously she limited her attention to the companions on either side of her, she was still uneasily aware that he was watching her across the heaped bowls of early roses, and the flickering candle flames.

Tricia Bosworth leaned forward. 'So you're going to be the new master of Ambermere,' she said in her husky drawl. 'Do tell us—has Julia persuaded you to change your name to Kendrick yet?'

Julia put her knife and fork down, her mouth suddenly dry.

Alex Constantis's brows lifted. 'I do not quite understand.'

Mrs Bosworth laughed. 'Oh, it's been a standing joke locally for years. Julia has always sworn that the family name should continue here—either by finding another Kendrick from somewhere to marry her, or forcing some other unsuspecting soul to change his name. I wondered if she'd started her campaign with you yet. She's always claimed to be prepared to go to any lengths to keep Ambermere hers.'

'So I have already gathered.' The faint irony in his voice, and the flickering glance he sent the deeply slashed bodice of the midnight blue satin dress, were not lost on Julia.

'I'm sure you have,' purred Tricia then she paused, smiling. 'Are you married, Mr Constantis?'

The dark face was shuttered. 'No.'

In the hideously embarrassed silence which followed, Julia prayed for the floor beneath her chair to open, and swallow her for ever. She heard Gerald Bosworth mutter, 'Tricia, for God's sake!' and saw Vivvy's appalled and sympathetic grimace.

Into the silence, Sir Philip said pleasantly, 'As you say, Mrs Bosworth—a standing joke. But I don't think Julia, as a woman, should have a silly childhood boast held against her. Now, may I offer you some more duck?'

Conversation around the table resumed again in an atmosphere of relief, which Julia could not share. If Tricia Bosworth had openly gloated that Ambermere had to be sold, it would have been bad enough, but the other woman had deliberately set out to humiliate her in front of Alex Constantis. If she'd received a blow-by-blow account of the day's events she couldn't have planted her barbs more effectively, Julia thought, wincing.

And only he would not be aware that Tricia Bosworth made a speciality of such malice.

And somehow she had to smile and go on, pretending it didn't matter. She took a surreptitious glance at her small gold watch, wondering how long it would be before she could make some excuse and seek the refuge of her room.

Tonight, as never before, she found herself welcoming the duties as hostess with her mother which kept her perpetually on the move from group to group as the house filled with guests.

She had half expected, half dreaded that Alex Constantis would seek her out with some taunting reference to Tricia's words. But perhaps he too had been embarrassed by the exchange, for he never came near her.

Her father was almost always at his side, guiding him through the crowded rooms explaining, making introductions, while their friends loyally strove to mask their surprise and dismay at the news.

And even now it could all be for nothing, Julia thought with misgivings. Wouldn't it be hysterical if Tricia proves to be the final straw, and the whole deal falls through? But she didn't feel much like laughing. Even if Alex Constantis withdrew from contention, another buyer would come along. Ambermere could not be saved, and she had to come to terms with that.

As midnight approached Julia realised that the toast to the first Lady Kendrick was going to be drunk as usual.

'Oh, God, I can't face that,' she muttered to herself, slipping through the partially open french windows on to the terrace.

There was no breeze, but the night air felt refreshingly cool against her uncovered shoulders and arms. A scent of flowers hung in the air, making her starkly, poignantly aware that this was the last Midsummer night she would ever spend in this house.

She leaned on the balustrade, gazing sightlessly over the starlit gardens, wondering painfully what changes Alex Constantis would make if he bought the house. He would probably plough up the south lawn and replace it with a swimming pool, and a helicopter pad, she thought scornfully, and she should be glad she wasn't going to be around to see such desecration.

She could hear the laughter and the cheering from the drawing room, and the cries of 'To Julia', which followed her father's traditional, humorous speech, and wondered how many of the particpants realised they were drinking the toast for the last time. Julia Kendrick—scandalous wife, daring mistress, Toast of the Town—had reached the end of her reign.

She felt sudden absurd tears sting at her eyelids, and thought, 'To Julia'. And heard, with sudden shock, the same words echoed aloud from only a feet away.

She whirled round, her hands flying to her mouth to cover the little startled cry forced from her. 'You!'

'Yes,'

Somehow, in the shadows of the night, he looked taller—more powerful than ever, the dark face an unreadable mask as he stood between her and the sanctuary of the lighted window.

He said, 'I came to wish you goodnight, *thespinis*.'

'You're—leaving?' The words seemed to twist out of her suddenly dry throat.

He smiled. 'That is what you're hoping for, *ne?*' He shook his head. 'I am sorry to disappoint you. I shall be back—later today.'

'You're going to buy the house?'

'I think so. You have rekindled my interest in it.'

'I—have?'

'Certainly. Ambermere must be a unique property, if it can rouse such passionate commitment in you.' He paused. 'I wonder, in different circumstances, if you would ever have found the husband you are looking for, Julia Kendrick—a man so little a man he would deny his name and his birthright in subjection to your whim.'

'It wasn't a whim,' she denied huskily. 'How could you possibly understand?'

'You think perhaps that I have no right to the name I bear?' The dark eyes glittered at her. 'Well, you are not the first to say so—even though there have been few who would dare utter the words to my face.'

'Because they're all so terrified of you?' Her voice sounded high and rather breathless. 'When you take Ambermere, you'll have done the worst you can. You have no power over me after that.'

'You don't think so?' Slowly he advanced on her, making her retreat until her back was pressed against the balustrade with no further physical withdrawal possible. 'But you are wrong, Julia Kendrick. Because if I take Ambermere, I shall also take you.'

His hands descended on her shoulders. He used no particular force, but with the first shock of his touch on her bare skin, Julia knew her flesh would bear the imprint of his fingers as if he had bruised her.

She tried to say 'No!' but he was bending towards her, shutting out safety, blocking the starlight, and the word was stifled on her lips by the stark, demanding pressure of his mouth. She tried to resist, to keep her own mouth closed against his insistence, but it was a battle she could not win. A battle he was determined, with total sensuality, that she should lose.

In some distant corner of her mind, she admitted this. Recognised that this confrontation had been inevitable since she had entered the drawing-room that night.

A sigh trembled through her, and she capitulated, allowing him to invade her mouth and deepen the kiss in any way he wanted. But even that was not enough. His lips, his tongue demanded a response she had never before been required to give—a response she wasn't even sure she capable of. She couldn't breathe, and her legs seemed to be turning to water, as his hands pushed the straps of her dress from her shoulders, then drew her against him so that her bared breasts were brought into aching, erotic contract with the hard wall of his chest.

And from somewhere in her innermost being, she felt the first slow uncurling of heated, treacherous, unbearable excitement.

Her hands went up to clasp the lapels of his jacket as an insidious weakness began to spread through her. When he took his mouth from hers, she gasped, her head falling back helplessly as his mouth traced a path down the column of her throat.

But as his hand lifted to close intimately on one small naked breast, she cried out in outraged modesty, summoning all the strength of will which still remained to her in order to drag herself out of his arms. She was shaking so much she thought she might fall, her hands fumbling as she tried to drag her dress back into place, to hide her body from that dark, devouring gaze.

For one shuddering moment she thought he might reach for her again, and shrank back against the support of the balustrade.

She heard him catch his breath, and saw the savage, single-minded hunger die from his face, to be replaced by an odd wryness.

He said, to himself, 'A virgin. And that, of course, changes everything.'

Then, before Julia could move or speak, he turned, and walked away from her into the darkness.

CHAPTER THREE

JULIA stayed in her room until late the following morning. Downstairs she could hear the whine of vacuum cleaners, and a subdued hum of voices and movement, as the small army of cleaners from the village restored order after the party. Normally, she would have got up and pitched in with them.

But this time she didn't seem capable of doing anything but lying staring at the ceiling, letting the events of the previous day, and more particularly, the previous night, re-run in her mind like some slow-moving action replay.

It was still impossible for her to believe that she had behaved like that—responded like that, especially with a man she resented and despised. She even wondered whether she had dreamed the whole thing.

It had been, after all, Midsummer Night. But Alex Constantis's kisses were far from being 'the stuff that dreams are made on', Julia thought wryly.

And she couldn't blame alcohol either, for she'd hardly drunk anything all night.

Oh, damn him, she thought savagely, burying her face in the pillow. Damn him to hell!

Her behaviour had been totally out of context with the rest of her life. She had never been the type to walk willingly into any man's arms. 'Passionately aloof' had been the rueful description from one of her admirers, and she had liked that. She'd had a life planned out for herself in security and harmony at Ambermere, and nothing was going to interfere with that, especially the kind of casual sexual diversion so many of her friends seemed to take for granted. True, the threat of serious disease had changed their thinking in recent months, but Julia had had to make no such adaptation.

I was fashionable without even knowing it, she told herself half derisively.

Now she was being forced to consider whether the strong-mindedness she had always prided herself on might not simply have been lack of serious temptation.

No, she thought, thumping the mattress with her fist. I won't believe that. Yesterday I was knocked sideways by the news about Ambermere, that's all, and I went a little mad. But today I'm sane again.

Sane enough, certainly, to think about plans for her drastically altered future.

Soberly, she considered her strengths in bookkeeping and word-processing which she had intended to use in the administration of the estate, working alongside her father. Surely they were sufficient to find her some kind of secretarial work. And a number of her former school friends were now living and working in London, and always looking for an extra flatmate to help out with the rent.

I'll survive, she told herself. I'll have to.

She got up, took a quick bath, then dressed in jeans and a shirt before going downstairs.

Mrs Parsons the housekeeper was coming along the hall with a tray of coffee for Sir Philip's study, and Julia followed her.

'Morning, Jools.' Her father's greeting was a shade over-hearty. 'You slipped away rather early last night, didn't you?'

'I wasn't really in a party mood,' Julia returned levelly, and Sir Philip nodded, shuffling the papers on his desk.

'It's a hell of a thing,' he said sombrely. 'Jools, if there was any other way, you know—don't you …'

'Yes,' Julia acknowledged with a sigh, 'I know.' She poured out the coffee and handed her father his cup. 'Although I suppose nothing's settled yet.'

'As a matter of fact it is.' Her father gave her an awkward glance. 'Alex Constantis telephoned after breakfast to confirm his offer. Polly and I are meeting his lawyers this afternoon to work out the final details. It's all going to happen rather fast, I suspect.'

'I'm sure it will,' Julia agreed drily. Even when he was standing still, Alex Constantis gave an impression of being consumed by restless dynamic energy. Once he had made up his mind he wanted something, he would allow no grass to grow under his feet until he possessed it, she thought, a frisson of unease prickling between her shoulderblades.

'He's coming over later,' her father went on. 'We spent rather a long time at the Home Farm yesterday, and he wants to see the rest of the estate.' He paused. 'I told him you'd be happy to be his guide.'

'You said what?' Julia sent him a horrified glance. 'Oh, Daddy, you couldn't have done! I never want to set eyes on that man again as long as I live!'

'Then that's unfortunate.' Sir Philip frowned. 'What I said yesterday, Jools, still applies. I expect you to be civil, and keep any personal antipathy you may feel under control. Nothing's actually signed yet, after all. And you're the best person anyway for a job like that. Constantis was asking me last night about the damnfool remarks that silly woman poor Gerald lumbered himself with was making at dinner, and I explained to him how much the estate meant to you. He was very understanding.'

'I'm sure he was,' Julia said bitterly. She sighed. 'All right then, Daddy, I'll do what you want, on condition it's the last time I have to meet Mr Constantis. Tomorrow I'm going to London to start job-hunting.'

Sir Philip stared at her. 'But there's no need for that. Once the estate is sold, we won't be penniless. I thought we might move to the Riviera, or somewhere in the sun. These English winters are no good for Mummy's chest, you know, and …'

'No darling,' Julia said gently. 'You two go ahead and make whatever plans you want. I have to start organising a life for myself.' She lifted her chin. 'I'm not a child any more.'

'No,' Sir Philip said rather sadly, 'I suppose not.'

An hour later Julia waved her parents a smiling goodbye. Lydia Kendrick had decided to accompany her husband to London to do some shopping, a decision which Julia suspected sprang from the news that Alex Constantis was due at Ambermere shortly.

Lucky Mother, she thought with a sigh. I wish I could cut and run!

As she went back into the house, the telephone rang, and she reached for it with a feeling of fore-boding. But it was only Vivvy.

'Where did you disappear to last night?' her friend asked plaintively.

'I began to feel like the skeleton at the feast and went to bed,' Julia excused herself.

'Not swept off your feet by the dishy Mr Constantis, I hope,' giggled Vivvy, then she lowered her voice conspiratorially. 'By the way, Jools, Dad and Stepmother had a mega-row last night over her remarks at dinner. Alastair and I could hear them in their bedroom shouting at each other. I think Dad's rose-coloured glasses have cracked at last.'

'I'm sorry,' said Julia, and meant it.

'I'm not,' Vivvy returned with equal sincerity. 'She's an utter bitch, and everyone could see it but him. But she'll have to be more careful in future, which can only be a step in the right direction.' She paused. 'Actually, I thought Alex Constantis handled the situation pretty well. He's incredibly glamorous and sexy, Jools. Pity he's not looking for a wife, really.'

'Well, he'll be here at any minute for a tour of the estate,' Julia said coolly. 'I'll put in a good word for you.'

'For me?' Vivvy shrieked. 'Don't be an idiot! I was thinking of you. Tricia may have been out to make trouble, but she had a point, actually. If you married Alex Constantis, you'd still have Ambermere.'

'Thank you,' Julia said drily. 'But there's a limit to the sacrifices I'm prepared to make, even for Ambermere.'

Vivvy giggled again. 'Some sacrifice,' she said caustically. 'Quite apart from his money, I bet he's fantastic in bed.'

For one frightened moment Julia found herself reliving the reality of being in Alex Constantis's arms. The remembered scent of his skin, the warmth of his body seemed to fill her senses, as if he had been standing there beside her. A shiver ran through her. She gave a shaky laugh.

'You're the limit. Viv! What would Reverend Mother say if she could hear you?'

'She'd sigh, and offer to pray for me again,' Vivvy said ebulliently. 'Poor soul, I bet she's never off her knees.'

Julia's hand was trembling as she replaced the receiver on the rest after Vivvy had rung off. Her friend had only been joking, she knew, but her starlit encounter with Alex Constantis had taught her swiftly that any involvement with him was no laughing matter.

'If I take Ambermere, I shall also take you.' The words seemed to sting in her brain.

The only reassurance she could draw from the incident was the change of heart he'd undergone once he'd concluded she was a virgin. Although heaven alone knew how he'd guessed that, she thought with embarrassment. But clearly her total lack of sexual experience was a drawback as far as he was concerned.

And a lifesaver to me, she thought, squaring her shoulders, as she heard the sound of a car on the drive outside. She wiped suddenly damp hands on her denim-clad thighs. And now it was daylight, and the sexy party gear was shut away, along with the madness which had afflicted her last night. She was her practical workaday self once again.

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