The Billionaire's Blackmailed Bride

Jacqueline Baird

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JACQUELINE BAIRD
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Аннотация

Step into a world of sophistication and glamour, where sinfully seductive heroes await you in luxurious international locations.Wedded for vengeance, bedded for pleasure!Anton Diaz is hell-bent on revenge; all he needs to do is seduce and marry the innocent daughter of the man he despises. To carry out his plan will be no hardship, as Emily Fairfax is as beautiful as she is virginal… It’s only after Emily has exchanged her wedding vows with her darkly handsome new husband that she realises her mistake. But by then it is too late!Anton is ruthlessly blackmailing her, yet she can’t stop her treacherous body betraying her, as they spend their days parted in anger and their nights locked in passion…

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‘What the hell do you think you are playing at, woman?’ a deep voice roared. And Emily spun round to see Anton striding towards her.

‘I am not playing. I am leaving… The game is over,’ she said, standing tall and proud.

‘Over my dead body.’

‘That would be my preference,’ Emily tossed back.

‘It appears I must watch my back where you are concerned, my sweet, loving wife, because I have no intention of letting you leave. Not now. Not ever.’

‘You have no choice.’ She tilted up her chin and drew on every ounce of her pride to face him. ‘As far as I am concerned the marriage is finished.’

Anton’s dark eyes studied her. He was furious at her defiance, but he did not let it show. Hell, he could still hear her cries of love ringing in his ears as he took possession of her exquisite body. And he would again, he thought confidently. She just needed time to adjust to the reality of life as his wife.

‘We always have a choice, Emily,’ he murmured silkily, and, snaking an arm around her waist, he pulled her into the strength of his powerful body. ‘Your choice is quite simple. You stay with me, *your husband*.’

Jacqueline Baird began writing as a hobby, when her family objected to the smell of her oil painting, and immediately became hooked on the romantic genre. She loves travelling, and worked her way around the world from Europe to the Americas and

Australia, returning to marry her teenage sweetheart. She lives in Ponteland, Northumbria, the county of her birth, and has two sons.

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THE BILLIONAIRE'S BLACKMAILED BRIDE

BY
JACQUELINE BAIRD

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CHAPTER ONE

'I STILL can't believe you chose this for me,' Emily Fairfax said with a shake of her head as she sat down opposite her older brother Tom and his wife Helen at their table in the vast ballroom of the deluxe London hotel. 'I feel terribly conspicuous.' Embarrassment coloured her face almost as red as the outfit she was wearing.

'Oh, lighten up, Emily. You look great.' Tom grinned at her. 'This is a costume ball for Dad's favourite charity, The Children of Africa's Guardian Angel Project; he would have appreciated the Devil and Angels theme. Dad had a great sense of humour. Remember Mum's fortieth when he insisted everyone dress as Knights and Squires? I think he would have seen the funny side…'

‘All too well. Most of the women ended up looking like young boys, dressed in doublet and hose. I wondered at the time if Dad had secret gay tendencies,’ she quipped and then turned her sparkling blue gaze on her sister-in-law, a petite gamine-faced brunette. ‘But this is different, Helen. There is nothing funny about being squeezed into a red latex suit that is a couple of sizes too small. What on earth were you thinking of when you ordered it?’ she demanded, and saw the mischief dancing in Helen’s brown eyes and her lips twisted in a wry smile.

Tom and Helen had met at university and had married two years ago at the age of twenty-three. They were now the proud parents of a one-year-old daughter, who had been born the week before Tom and Emily’s father had died suddenly of a massive heart attack. The child was named Sara after their mother, who had died three years earlier after a long battle with cancer.

‘I don’t know what you are complaining about. You look fine, and I went to a lot of trouble to get that costume in the right size. At four and a half months pregnant I am actually the same bust measurement as you and I tried it on to make sure it would fit,’ Helen said with a grin.

‘Did it never occur to you that you’re five feet nothing and I am five nine—that it would have to go a little further on me?’ Emily groaned. ‘You damn near broke my neck pulling the hood over my head. It is still aching.’ She slipped a hand beneath the heavy fall of her hair and rubbed the nape of her neck to emphasize the point.

‘Don’t blame me. If you had come back to London yesterday as you were supposed to, you would have had time to get your own costume. But instead you spent another day on site and only arrived a couple of hours before the event. Plus it is April Fool’s Day,’ she said with an impish grin. ‘And be fair—I did cut the hood off and twist it into a braid so you could wear the horns as a head band.’ She burst out laughing.

Emily bit her lip to fight down the answering grin that threatened. She had totally forgotten it was the first of April, and Helen was right—she should have returned from Santorini yesterday instead of flying into London this evening. She really had no one to blame but herself, but she wasn’t going to let her beloved sister-in-law off too easy.

‘Anyone with a grain of common sense would have ordered an angel costume for me. The same as yours, I might add. It is only logical that the women dress as angels and the men as devils. Like my idiot brother T—’

‘Excuse me.’ A deep, slightly accented voice cut into Emily’s good-natured tirade. ‘Hello, Tom, nice to see you again.’

‘Anton, glad you and your friends could make it.’

Emily looked over at her brother as he greeted the new arrivals he had invited to make up their table of eight.

She glanced up at the man who had so rudely interrupted her. His back was turned to her and he was pulling out a chair for his companion, a stunning brunette who naturally was dressed like an angel in a diaphanous gold and white fabric that seemed to

reveal a lot more flesh than Emily imagined any self-respecting angel would reveal.

At least her outfit covered her from neck to toe, she consoled herself, though she had been forced to undo the front zip a few inches to prevent the damn thing crushing her chest so tightly she could barely breathe. It wasn't her usual style, that was for sure, but it didn't really faze her. She knew she had a decent enough body, she just wasn't used to displaying it quite so dramatically.

'Allow me to introduce my friend Eloise,' the deep voice continued as the brunette sent a social smile around the table, 'and my right-hand man, Max.'

Emily glanced at the middle-aged burly man and smiled in welcome as he took his seat at the table next to Helen. Then the stranger turned to her.

'Emily, isn't it? Tom has told me a lot about you. It is a real pleasure to finally meet you. I am Anton Diaz.' A large strong hand was held out and she politely put her hand in his, while her mind busily wondered how Tom knew the man, and why her brother would have mentioned her to him.

Then suddenly her mind went blank as a bizarre sensation a bit like an electric eel snaking up her arm had her skin breaking out in goose-bumps under the latex. Hastily she pulled her hand free and slowly looked up.

Emily had a long way to go… He had to be at least six feet four, she reckoned, and then her curious blue gaze collided with deep brown eyes and she simply stared…

The man was like a sleek black panther: poised, powerful and predatory.

She grimaced inwardly at the fanciful notion, really not her usual style.

The introductions moved on and Emily supposed she had made the right response, though she could not be sure. Her mouth felt dry and she had trouble tearing her fascinated gaze away from the tall, striking man.

He was dressed all in black. A black silk-knit roll-necked sweater outlined the impressive musculature of his broad chest. A short black cloak covered his wide shoulders and flowed down like bats' wings to broad cuffs around strong wrists, set off by tailored black trousers. He should have looked ridiculous in costume like the majority of the people present. Instead, if ever a man looked like a devil it was this one…

Dark and dangerous, she thought, her heart inexplicably tightening in her chest, and for a moment she had difficulty breathing that had nothing to do with the latex suit she wore.

His straight black hair worn slightly longer than was fashionable was swept casually back off his broad forehead. Distinctive arched brows framed deep-set almost black eyes, high cheekbones, a large hawklike nose and a wide sensuous mouth completed the picture. As she stared his lips parted to reveal even white teeth. He was smiling down at her. She lifted her eyes to his and even in her stunned state she recognized the humour did not entirely mask the cool remoteness of his dark gaze.

The man was not conventionally handsome, his features too large and harshly chiselled for classic male beauty.

Brutally handsome…was a better description.

There was something insulting about the way his dark eyes slid casually down to her cleavage and lingered for a long moment. But even as she recognized his insolent masculine appraisal for what it was her skin prickled with shocking awareness. The breath caught in her throat and she gave a shaky inward sigh of relief when he casually pulled out the chair next to hers, and lowered his long length into it.

It could be worse, Emily told herself, at least with Anton Diaz seated at her side, she did not have to face him.

Instinctively she recognized he was a man who was supremely confident in his masculinity and totally aware of his effect on the opposite sex, and discreetly she crossed her arms over her suddenly hardening nipples. A sophisticated charmer with an aura of ruthless power about him that would intimidate anybody, man or woman, she concluded. Not her type at all…

Even so, there was no escaping the fact he was an incredibly sexy man, as her body's unexpected response confirmed.

'I could not help overhearing your comment, Emily. Shame on you, your chauvinism is showing.' The devil spoke in a deep, dark, mocking voice that made her hackles rise.

'What do you mean, Mr Diaz?' she asked him with cool politeness, flicking him a sidelong glance, and was once again captured by the intensity of his dark eyes.

‘In today’s world of equality between the sexes isn’t it rather politically incorrect to assume all the women should dress as angels and the men as devils? And, given the very striking outfit you are wearing, just a little hypocritical,’ he drawled mockingly.

‘He has got you there,’ Helen piped up and everyone laughed.

Everyone but Emily.

‘My costume was my sister-in-law’s choice, not mine. She has a warped sense of humour,’ she explained, forcing a smile to her lips. ‘And I see you are dressed as a devil, rather upholding my theory. Though you do seem to have forgotten the horns,’ she prompted smoothly.

‘No, I didn’t forget. I never forget anything,’ he asserted, his dark eyes holding hers with an intimacy that made her pulse race and she could do nothing about the pink that tinged her cheeks. ‘I am supposed to be an angel, admittedly a dark angel, but an angel nevertheless.’

Emily saw what he meant, her blue eyes sweeping over him. It was the perfect costume for him. Unrelenting black and somehow threatening… She glimpsed a darkening in his deep-set eyes and something more. Anger… Why? She had no idea, and in an attempt to control her overheated imagination and body she looked somewhere past his left shoulder. She took a deep steadying breath, but for a long moment was incapable of making a response. No man had ever had such a startling effect on her in her life, and she had met plenty, and been attracted to a few, but never quite like this.

She was a twenty-four-year-old freelance marine archaeologist and had spent the last two years since qualifying gaining experience in her field. She had been on a few seagoing explorations. Her colleagues were mostly men, explorers, divers and fellow archaeologists with the skills needed to search and map out underwater wrecks and artifacts. Yet never once had she felt the sudden heat, the stomach-churning excitement that this man aroused in her with one look.

Get a grip, girl, she told herself. He was with his very beautiful girlfriend and, while Emily considered herself passably attractive, she was no competition for the lovely Eloise.

What was she thinking of?

At twenty-one, after a disastrous engagement that had ended abruptly after three days when she had found her fiancé in bed with her flatmate at university, she had sworn off men.

Nigel had been an accountant in her father's firm. A man she had fallen in love with at sixteen, a man who had kissed her at her eighteenth birthday party and declared he felt the same, a man who had offered her comfort and support when her mother was ill and died, a man whose proposal she had accepted shortly after. A man who, when she had confronted him in bed with her flatmate, had actually admitted the affair had been going on for a year. Her flatmate, her supposed friend, twisted the knife by telling her she was a fool. Nigel's interest in Emily had only ever been for her money and connections.

Which was a laugh. Admittedly the family home was probably

worth millions in today's market, but they lived in it, had done for generations. The business earned the shareholders a decent dividend each year but not a fortune by any means, but at the time she had felt utterly betrayed. She would no more compete for a man than fly to the moon, and, to be honest, over the intervening years, she had never felt the need. Which was probably why she had never since had a long-term relationship? she thought wryly.

'Yes, of course, I see it now, a silly mistake on my part,' she finally responded.

'You're forgiven,' he said with a smile that took her breath away all over again.

But at that moment the last two guests making up the table arrived and Emily smiled with relief. It was her aunt Lisa, her father's older sister, and her husband, James Browning, who was also the Chairman of the Board of Fairfax Engineering since her dad's death. She felt the light brush of Anton's shoulder against hers as, like a perfect gentleman, he stood up until Lisa was seated, and she determinedly ignored it.

Her equilibrium thankfully restored…

James took the seat on the other side of Emily. 'Aunt Lisa, Uncle James, it's good to see you,' she offered, her wayward emotions firmly under control.

But it was the *sotto voce* comment that Anton Diaz made among the flurry of introduction as he sat back down that threw her off balance yet again. 'But if a devil is more to your liking I'm sure something can be arranged.'

Her mouth open, her face scarlet, she stared at Anton. One dark brow rose in sardonic query, before he turned to respond to Eloise's rather loud request for champagne.

Was she hearing things? Had he actually made such a blatantly flirtatious comment or had she imagined what he said?

She did not know…and she did not know whether to feel angry or flattered as dinner was served. Emily's emotions stayed in pretty much the same state of flux until it was over; she was intensely aware of the man at her side.

The conversation was sociable, and when the meal ended and the band began to play Emily could not help watching Anton and Eloise as they took to the dance floor. Both Latin in looks, they made a striking couple and the way Eloise curved into her partner's body, her arms firmly clasped around his neck, left no one in any doubt of the intimacy of their relationship.

Emily turned to James and asked what she had been dying to ask all evening. Who exactly was Anton Diaz?

According to her uncle, Anton Diaz was the founder of a private equity business that made massive profits out of buying, restructuring and then selling on great chunks of worldwide businesses. It made him a man of enormous influence and power. It had also made him extremely rich. He was revered worldwide as a financial genius, with a fortune to match. His nationality was hazy, his name was hispanic, yet some considered him Greek because he spoke the language like a native. Rumours about him abounded. Her aunt Lisa offered the most colourful speculation

that his grandmother had been the madam of a high-class brothel in Peru, and her daughter had been a wealthy Greek's mistress for years and Anton Diaz was the result of the affair.

Her aunt also informed her archly that he owned a magnificent villa on a Greek island, a vast estate in Peru, a luxurious apartment in New York and another in Sydney. Recently he had acquired a prestigious office block in London with a stunning penthouse at the top, and there were probably more. Plus the parties he held on his huge luxury yacht were legendary.

James attempted to steer the conversation back to less gossipy ground by continuing that he knew Anton was multilingual because he had heard him employ at least four languages when they had first met at a European conference a couple of months ago. Since then they had become business acquaintances and friends of a sort, hence Tom inviting Anton and his party to join them tonight. In fact, Anton Diaz's expert advice had been instrumental in them deciding to diversify and expand Fairfax Engineering, James informed her in an almost reverential tone.

It was news to Emily that the firm needed revising or expanding, but she had no time to dwell on that revelation as her aunt chimed in again. Apparently Anton was a confirmed bachelor and as famous for the women he had bedded as he was for his financial skills. His countless affairs were apparently well documented by the press, actresses and models featuring prominently.

Emily believed her uncle and aunt and in a sense felt relieved.

Her earlier reaction to Anton Diaz had been normal under the circumstances. The man exuded a raw animal magnetism that probably affected every woman he met the same way, and if his press was to be believed he took full advantage of the fact. He was not the type of man any self-respecting woman would want to get involved with.

After her one disastrous relationship Emily had very firm ideas on the type of man she eventually wanted to marry. She wanted a like-minded man she could trust. Certainly not a womanizing, globe-trotting billionaire, plus she was in no hurry to marry—she enjoyed her work far too much to think of curtailing her career for any man for years yet.

Draining her coffee-cup, she smiled at James and Lisa affectionately as they decided to dance. Then looking around the table, she saw only the burly Max was left.

Emily was naturally a happy, confident girl with a successful career and a growing name in her field of expertise. She was also a realist and never let anything she could not change bother her for long. She was a firm believer in making the best of any situation. Neither the blatantly sexy costume she wore nor her strange reaction to the indomitable Anton Diaz was going to prevent her enjoying the evening.

'So, Max, would you like to dance?' she asked with a broad smile. She watched him blink, then grin and leap to his feet with alacrity.

'It will be my pleasure,' he said as he pulled out her chair. His

brown eyes widened as she rose to her feet, sweeping over the length of her body with unconcealed admiration. 'You are a very lovely lady, señorita,' he said, taking her hand and leading her to the dance floor.

Max was about an inch taller than Emily, and quite a lot wider, but for a heavy man he was a very good dancer and surprisingly light on his feet. Emily relaxed in his hold and began to have fun.

* * *

Anton Diaz allowed a small satisfied smile to curve his hard mouth. True, the man he had really wanted to meet, Charles Fairfax, had died a year ago. But his family and firm still existed, and would do just as well for his purpose.

He glanced around the glittering throng. London's social élite letting their hair down in a costume ball in aid of African children, and apparently a favoured charity of the Fairfax family. The bitter irony of it did not escape him and for a moment his black eyes glinted with an unholy light.

Last December when his mother, as if sensing the end was near, had finally told him the truth about the death of his sister Suki twenty-six years ago it had given him one hell of a shock. Actually Suki had been his half-sister, but as a child he had never thought of her like that. To him she had been his older sister who took care of him.

He had believed Suki died in a car accident, tragic but unavoidable. But apparently she had deliberately driven her car off a cliff and left a note for his mother that she had immediately

destroyed.

Suki had committed suicide because she had been convinced it was due to her family name and her illegitimacy that her lover, Charles Fairfax, had left her and married someone else. Then his mother had made him promise never to be ashamed of his name or his heritage.

Bitterness and bile rose in his throat just thinking about it now. He had named his company in memory of Suki, but the name had an added poignancy now. The letter he had discovered among his mother's papers after her death had confirmed she had told him the truth and more, and he had vowed on his mother's grave to avenge the insult to his sister no matter how long it took.

He was not a fan of costume parties and usually avoided them like the plague, but on this occasion he had an ulterior motive for accepting the invitation to share a table with the Fairfax family.

A deep frown marred his broad brow. Never in his hugely successful career had he ever had any trouble taking over any company he wanted and Fairfax Engineering should have been an easy acquisition. His first idea had been a hostile takeover bid and then the destruction of the company, but on studying the firm's set-up he was reluctantly forced to the conclusion that plan would not work.

The problem was the company was privately owned by family members and a small portion was diverted into a share scheme for the workforce. Also unfortunately for him it was well run and profitable. It had originally been based on the ownership of a

coalmine, but a previous Fairfax had had the foresight to expand into engineering. Now that coalmining was virtually defunct in Britain the firm had found a niche market building a specific type of earth-moving equipment that was used in most countries in Europe.

With a few discreet enquiries it had become obvious none of the principal shareholders was prepared to sell even at a very generous price, and, while not giving up on a buyout, he had been obliged to adopt another strategy.

He had planned to persuade the company it would be in their best interest to expand into America and China, with his expert advice and generous financial backing, of course. Then when they had overextended themselves financially he could step in and pull the rug from under them and take the firm, in the process virtually bankrupting the Fairfax family. With that in mind he had deliberately made the acquaintance of the chairman of the board, and the MD, Tom, the son of Charles Fairfax.

The only downside to his strategy was it was taking him a hell of a lot longer than he had anticipated to grind the Fairfax name into the dust. Three months of manoeuvring and, while he was closer to attaining his goal, he wasn't there yet. The problem was the son and uncle that ran the business were both competent but very conservative businessmen and, again unfortunately for Anton, neither of them appeared to be particularly greedy or the type to take unnecessary risks.

But why would they be? he thought cynically. The company

was over a hundred and sixty years old and they had never had to fight to make a living or to be accepted by their peers.

'Anton, darling, what are you thinking?'

He disliked the question, though he had heard it often enough and experience had taught him where women were concerned it was best ignored or answered with a white lie. Exasperated, he looked down at the woman in his arms. 'The latest figure on the Dow Jones—nothing that would interest you.'

'My figure is the only one you should be thinking of,' she responded with a pout, plastering herself to him.

'Save the flirting for your husband. I'm immune,' he said bluntly. Eloise was very beautiful, but she did nothing for him except remind him of his sister. That was why he had helped her out of a bad situation twelve years ago in Lima when her manager at the time had signed her up for what was undeniably a porn movie. He got her out of the contract and found her a reputable manager and they had been friends ever since. She was married to a close friend of his and yet given the chance she wasn't above trying to seduce him.

He supposed it was his own fault in a way because once, a decade ago, he had succumbed to her charms one night, though he had very quickly realized he had made a big mistake. Their friendship had survived, and now it was a game she played whenever they met, and he could not entirely blame her. He should have got tough with her long since.

Eloise was her husband's responsibility now. He had to stop

pandering to her constant whims this time to hold her hand while she auditioned for a lead in a West End musical. Actually it had been no hardship because he was staying in London a lot more than he had at first anticipated. He had Fairfax Engineering firmly in his sights… He almost felt sorry for the son and daughter; they were young and no competition for him.

He thought of the report he had got from the investigator some months ago. The only photo of the daughter was of a woman standing on a deserted beach with the ocean behind her, wearing a baseball cap that masked her eyes, an oversized shirt and combat trousers. There had been no point of reference to say if she was tall or short, fat or thin.

He had been surprised when he saw her seated at the table. The photo had not done her justice. A ridiculous horned headband held back a shinning mane of blonde hair that fell smooth as silk down past her shoulder blades. Whether the colour was natural or dyed he didn't know, but it looked good. She had the peaches and cream complexion of a stereotypical English rose with magnificent big blue eyes, a full-lipped wide mouth and her breasts looked just about perfect. As for the rest he could not tell, average height maybe. But as a connoisseur of women he would reserve judgement until he saw her standing up. She could quite possibly have a big behind and short stumpy legs. Not that it concerned him; he wasn't going there. The fact she was a Fairfax was a huge turnoff; he wouldn't touch her if she were the last woman in the world.

Charles Fairfax had married the Honourable Sara Deveral in what had been the society wedding of the year twenty-six years ago. His wife had borne him a son nine months later, Tom, and a daughter, Emily, a year after that. The perfect family…

Emily Fairfax had led a charmed life. She had the best of everything. A loving family, a good education, a career of sorts as a freelance archaeologist, and she moved in London society with a confidence that was bred in the bone. The likes of Charles Fairfax were big on breeding, and the thought brought back the bitter resentment that had simmered within him since the death of his mother.

'I don't believe it.' Eloise tilted back her head and Anton glanced down at her. 'Max is actually dancing the tango…'

Anton was diverted from his sombre thoughts and followed his partner's gaze, his dark eyes widening in shock and something more as they settled on his Head of Security and erstwhile bodyguard, though Max, at fifty, was more of a friend than anything else. He hadn't registered the band was playing the tango.

When Anton had a woman in his arms he held her close and naturally moved to the rhythm of the music, the steps not important. But Max was old school and was dancing the tango with all the passion and arrogance of a real aficionado. Incredibly his partner was with him every step of the way.

His eyes narrowed, absorbing the picture she presented. Emily Fairfax was stunning, and the only reason Anton had thought she

was average height was instantly apparent. She had fantastically long legs in proportion to her height, a round tight behind, narrow waist and high firm breasts. The red suit was glued to her like a second skin leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination and as Max swung her around Anton doubted there was a man in the room who wasn't watching her. Her blonde hair swung around her shoulders in a shimmering cloud as she moved. And what a mover… An instant pleasurable though inconvenient sensation stirred in Anton's loins.

'Don't they look ridiculous?' Eloise tugged on his neck. 'No one dances like that these days.'

'What…? Yes…' he lied, for once less than his suave self, while silently conceding the pair looked superb, and the majority of people on the floor had stopped to watch. Max dipped Emily low over his arm, her hair touching the floor as the music drew to a close. Anton saw Emily grin as Max lifted her upright and then burst out laughing as the applause echoed around the ballroom.

The woman was not afraid of making an exhibition of herself, and, given the fire and passion in the way she danced, she was definitely no innocent. Such passion could not be confined solely to the dance floor; he recalled that she had been engaged once, according to the report he had read, and there had probably been quite a few men since.

Suddenly, having decided he would not touch her if she were the last woman on earth, Anton was imagining her long, lithesome naked body under his, and it took all his self-control

to rein in his rampant libido—something that hadn't happened to him in years.

Deep in thought, he frowned as he led Eloise back to the table. He had set out to destroy Fairfax Engineering, everything Charles Fairfax owned, but he had to concede it was going to take him some time. But now an alternative scenario, a way to hedge his bet on gaining control of the company, formed in his Machiavellian mind. The solution he reached had a perfect poetic justice to it that made his firm lips twist in a brief, decidedly sinister smile.

Marriage had never appealed to him before, but he was thirty-seven, an ideal time to take a wife and produce an heir to inherit his fortune. He bred horses in Peru, and at least physically Emily Fairfax was good breeding stock, he assessed sardonically. As for her morals, he wasn't bothered about the past men in her life, with what he had on her family, she would dance to his tune and disruption to his life would be minimal. He frowned again; maybe Emily Fairfax had a man in her life now. Not that he was afraid of competition—he never had any trouble getting any woman he wanted. With his incredible wealth his problem was the reverse: fighting them off. And Emily had no partner with her tonight, which left him a clear field.

'Thank you, Max.' Emily was still smiling as her dancing partner held out her chair for her. 'I really enjoyed that,' she said as she sat down.

'It is good to see the fortune the parents spent on sending

us both to dancing classes wasn't completely wasted,' Tom said, grinning as he and Helen sat down.

'The lessons were certainly wasted on you,' Helen quipped. 'I don't think my feet will ever recover.'

Lisa piped up with, 'Join the club—after forty years of marriage and countless attempts at dancing James still has two left feet.'

Emily laughed at the friendly banter between her family and friends, unaware that the other couple had returned to the table.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS a shock when into the cheerful atmosphere Anton Diaz laid a hand on Emily's arm and asked her for the next dance.

She wanted to refuse, but, glancing at Max, she saw he had taken Eloise's hand and was obviously going to dance with her. The hostile look the other woman gave Anton said louder than words she wasn't delighted at the change of partner.

'Go on, Emily,' Tom encouraged. 'You know you love dancing.' He grinned. 'And if our wives are to be believed James and I are useless. Anton is your only chance.'

'Thanks, brother.' Emily snorted and reluctantly accepted and rose to her feet.

Anton gave her a wry smile. 'Your brother lacks a little subtlety,' he drawled as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. 'But I am not complaining if it gets you in my arms.'

Then, rather than taking her arm, he placed his own very firmly around her waist, his strong hand curving over her hipbone

as he urged her towards the dance floor. His touch was much too personal and his great body much too close for Emily's comfort and it only got worse…

As soon as they reached the dance floor he turned her to face him, his arm tightening around her waist as he drew her closer, and at that moment the band began playing a dreamy ballad. She stiffened in his hold, determined to resist a sudden inexplicable desire to collapse against him as he took her hand and linked his fingers with hers and cradled it against his broad chest.

'You surprised me, Emily,' he said, his dark eyes seeking hers. 'You dance the tango superbly—I was quite envious of Max,' he admitted. 'Though to be honest, dancing is not one of my talents. I could not tango to save my life. I am more a shuffle-to-the-music man,' he said with a self-effacing grin that lightened his saturnine features, making him look somewhat approachable. 'So I hope you won't be disappointed,' he concluded with a querying arch of one black brow.

Disappointed… It was a rare occurrence for Emily to dance with a man she had literally to look up to and it turned out to be frighteningly seductive. He fitted her perfectly and, enveloped in his arms, the black cloak enfolding her created an added intimacy. Disappointment was not an emotion troubling Emily, though a host of others were. With his long leg subtly easing between hers as he turned her slowly to the romantic music, her pulse raced, her heart pounded and every nerve end in her body was screaming with tension as she battled to retain control of

her wayward body. The damn latex suit was no help; it simply emphasized every brush of his muscular body against hers. And she seriously doubted Anton Diaz had ever disappointed a woman in his life. Certainly not the lovely Eloise, and the thought cooled her helpless reaction to him enough for her to respond.

'Oh, I think not,' she said with blunt honesty. She knew she was reasonably attractive and she had been hit on by many men over the years, but since her failed engagement she had learnt to put men off with no trouble. 'I also think, Mr Diaz, a man of your wealth and power is perfectly well aware of his talents and exploits them quite ruthlessly for his own ends.' Anton might make her heart beat faster—her and the rest of the female population—but she had no intention of falling for his charm. 'As I'm sure the tabloids and your friend Eloise could confirm,' she ended dryly.

'Ah, Emily, you have been listening to gossip. What was it? I was brought up in a brothel surrounded by willing women,' he mocked. 'Sorry to disappoint, but it is not true, though my grandmother did own one,' he admitted, 'and it is a poor reflection on the male of the species that she made rather a lot of money. Enough to send her daughter to the best school in the country and on to a finishing school in Switzerland.'

Emily's blue eyes widened in surprise at his blunt revelations, her tension forgotten as she listened intrigued as he continued.

'When she was in Europe she met and fell in love with a Greek man who was unfortunately married with children. But he was

decent enough to set her up in a house in Corinth where I was born. Their affair lasted for years, he died when I was twelve and my mother decided to return to Peru.'

'That is so sad. Your poor mother, you poor boy,' she murmured. Totally absorbed in his story, she compassionately squeezed his hand.

'I might have guessed you would feel sorry for me.' His dark head bent and his lips brushed her brow. 'Ah, Emily, you are so naive and so misguided. As a wealthy man's mistress my mother was never poor in the monetary sense and neither was I.' He looked into her big blue eyes, his own gleaming with cynical amusement. 'I hate to disillusion you, but your sympathy is wasted on me.'

'So why did you tell me all that?' she asked, puzzled. He did not strike her as the sort of man who would bare his soul to a relative stranger.

'May be because it got you to relax in my arms.' He smiled.

'Was it all lies?' she shot back, her body stiffening again, this time in anger.

'Not all…I actually am a bastard.' He grinned, the hand at her waist stroking slowly up her back, drawing her closer still. And she involuntarily trembled in his hold. 'And as you so rightly said,' he drawled softly, 'I use all the talents I have to get what I want. And I want you, Emily Fairfax.'

Stunned by his outrageous comment, she stared up into his night-black eyes, and saw the desire he made no attempt to hide.

‘You devious devil,’ she exclaimed.

‘Angel,’ he amended, his dark head dipping, his warm breath tickling her ear as he urged her hard against him, making her intimately aware of his aroused state. ‘And the way you tremble in my arms I know you want me. The attraction between us was instant and electric so don’t pretend otherwise, Emily,’ he commanded, and straightened up.

‘You’re unbelievable,’ she gasped. Though she could not deny the trembling, or the attraction, she had no intention of succumbing to such blatant seduction. ‘Coming on to me when you have the beautiful Eloise with—’

He cut her off. ‘Eloise is a very old friend, nothing more I can assure you, and so could her husband,’ he said, his dark eyes holding hers, a wicked gleam in their ebony depths. ‘She is quite a famous television star in Latin America, but she has ambitions to be famous worldwide. Which is why she is over here to discuss the possibility of starring in a musical production in the West End next year. She is going back to her husband tomorrow so you have nothing to be jealous about.’

‘Jealous. Are you crazy? I don’t even know you,’ Emily spluttered.

‘That is soon remedied. I will call you tomorrow and arrange a time for our dinner date,’ he declared, and stopped dancing, his hands sliding to span her waist, and hold her still. ‘But now I think we’d better get back to the table, before people start to gossip. The music has ended.’

Emily had not noticed, and, embarrassed, she followed him like a lamb to slaughter, she realized later…much later…

'For heaven's sake, Emily, will you stop devouring that disgusting fry-up—it is turning my stomach—and listen to me,' Helen declared. 'You have to put the poor man out of his misery and have dinner with him. He has sent you roses every single day and the housekeeper is fed up with taking his phone calls. The house is overflowing with blooms and in my pregnant state I might very well get hay fever.'

Emily popped the last bit of fried egg into her mouth, chewed, then grinned at her sister-in-law. 'You know the solution—I told you to throw the flowers away. I'm not interested.'

'Liar—the woman is not born who would not fancy Anton Diaz. Your trouble is you're afraid to get involved after the hateful Nigel. You haven't dated any man for more than a couple of weeks in years.'

'Moi?' Emily quipped, placing a hand on her heart. 'I am not afraid of anyone, but I know a devil when I see one, and Anton Diaz is not the kind of man any sensible woman would ever get involved with.'

'Forget the sensible, and live a little. You're at home for the next few months and your research at the museum does not take more than a couple of days a week. It is spring, when a young woman's fancy turns to love.'

'A young man's fancy, you mean, and Anton Diaz is no young man,' Emily responded dryly.

‘So what if he is a dozen or more years older than you? You have plenty of spare time and a wild passionate affair with an experienced man would do you the world of good.’

‘I don’t think so, and I have no time right now. I am going to view another apartment today,’ Emily said, hoping to change the subject, because the subject of Anton Diaz had taken up a great deal of her waking thoughts since the night she had met him. His phone calls she had refused after the first day as just the sound of his deep accented voice made her temperature rise and her whole body blush; the daily roses she could do nothing about.

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, Emily, forget about buying an apartment. It’s a stupid idea. This is your family home, has been for generations since the first Fairfax made his fortune as a coal baron in the nineteenth century, and it is big enough for all of us and half a dozen more.’

Helen rolled her eyes around the spacious breakfast room of the ten-bedroomed double-fronted Georgian house in the heart of Kensington. ‘I would hate it if you left and you would hate living on your own. Admit it. And you might as well admit you fancy Anton Diaz something rotten. I have seen the way you try not to blush every time his name is mentioned. You can’t fool me.’

Emily groaned. ‘Your trouble is, Helen, you know me far too well.’ She rose to her feet and smiled wryly down at her sister-in-law. ‘I am still going to look at the apartment, though. After all, if I am going to have a wild, passionate affair I will need a

place of my own. I'm sure you wouldn't appreciate my bringing a lover back here where your gorgeous child might see and hear more than she should.' She grinned.

'You're going to do it—you're going out with the man?'

'Maybe if Anton calls again and asks me out I will accept. Satisfied?'

'You will accept what?' Tom demanded as he walked into the room, with his daughter in his arms.

'Emily is going out with Anton Diaz,' Helen declared.

'Is that wise, sis?' he asked Emily, his blue eyes serious as they rested on her. 'He is a hell of a lot older than you. Are you sure you know what you are doing? Don't get me wrong, he is a great guy and his business knowledge is second to none—his input and advice to Fairfax Engineering has been exceptional. But he is the type of man that makes other men want to lock up their wives and daughters. The man definitely lives in the fast lane and has a poor track record with women.'

'I don't believe it!' Emily exclaimed. 'Much as I love you two, you should work at coordinating your opinions and advice.' And, grinning, she walked out.

Fate, kismet, whatever it was, but as she entered the hall the telephone rang and she answered. Anton…

'You're a very hard lady to get hold of, Emily. But I like a challenge. Have dinner with me tonight?'

So, she did what she had wanted to do for days and said yes…

Emily viewed the apartment and decided against it. Then

spent the rest of the morning at the museum, and the afternoon shopping for a new dress.

Emily smiled, happy with her reflection in the mirror, and, straightening her shoulders, she picked up her dark blue wrap and matching purse from the bed and left the room. She was nervous, butterflies were fluttering in her stomach, but none of her inner emotions showed as she opened the drawing-room door and walked in. Anton Diaz was picking her up at seven and it was ten to.

'Well, Helen, will I do?' She smiled at her sister-in-law reclining on a sofa, a glass of juice in her hand, and saw the embarrassed expression on her face just as a deep dark voice responded.

'You look beautiful, Emily.'

Emily turned her head, her eyes widening as Anton walked towards her from the far side of the room, Tom trailing in his wake.

'Thank you.' She accepted the compliment politely, but it was an effort. She had thought he looked dangerous dressed as a dark angel, but in a perfectly tailored light grey suit with a white shirt and silk tie he looked gorgeous. 'You're early,' she added, raising her eyes to his face. He had stopped barely a foot from her, and his dark gaze slid slowly over her from head to toe, then he lifted his eyes to hers and what she saw in the smouldering black depths made the breath catch in her throat.

For the second time in a week Anton Diaz could not control

his instant arousal at the sight of a woman. He had seen a photo of Emily in baggy clothes, and seen her in a very sexy latex suit with her hair down. But the Emily who stood before him now was something else again. She was the personification of sophisticated elegance.

Her blonde hair was swept up into a knot on top of her head, her make-up understated, but perfect. Her big blue eyes were accentuated even more by the clever use of cosmetics, her full lips a soft glossy rose. As for her gown, it was designer; he had bought enough over the years to know. Ice-blue to match her eyes, it was cut on the bias, the bodice, supported by slight straps, clung faithfully to her high firm breasts and subtly shaped her narrow waist and hips to flare ever so slightly a few inches from the hem that ended on her knees. Not too short to appear tacky, but short enough for a man to fantasize about slipping his hand beneath it.

'Beautiful does not do you justice—you look exquisite, Emily. I will be the envy of every man in the restaurant.' Reaching for a cashmere wrap that she held in her hand, he gently took it and slipped it over her shoulders. 'Shall we go?'

It was definitely going to be no hardship to bed the lovely Emily, the finer details of when and where were all he had to decide on, he thought as he battled to control his libido.

Amazingly, Tom Fairfax, despite his usual easygoing nature, had taken him to one side when he had arrived and told him quite seriously he expected Anton to behave himself with Emily and

return her home at a reasonable hour. No one had attempted to tell him what to do in years, if ever, and he had been too stunned to reply when Emily had walked into the room.

He could understand the man's concern, but it simply reminded him that he had been unable to take care of his own sister, and the memory cooled his wayward body in an instant.

Emily was too flustered to do more than take the hand Anton offered her. She felt his hand tighten on hers, and caught a flicker of some strange emotion in his dark eyes, gone as he turned and said goodnight to Tom and Helen.

He opened the passenger door of a silver Bentley and ushered her inside. She watched as he walked around the bonnet and slid behind the wheel. He glanced at her, one brow arched enquiringly, and she realized she was staring like a besotted fool.

'Where are you taking me?' She blurted the first thing that came into her head.

He chuckled a deep dark sound. 'To dinner, Emily.' Slipping a hand around her neck, he tilted her face to his dark eyes dancing with amusement. 'But ultimately to my bed.'

His provocative statement had her lips parting in a shocked gasp, and Anton's mouth covered them, firm, warm and tender. Her lips tingled and trembled as his hand trailed around her throat, his fingers curving around her small chin to hold her firm as the tip of his tongue sought hers with an eroticism that ignited a sudden warmth deep inside her. Her eyes closed and her hands slid up to clasp his nape, her fingers trailing involuntarily into the

silken blackness of his hair as he deepened the kiss, his tongue probing the moist interior of her mouth, and the slow-burning heat ignited into flame.

'Emily.' He raised his head, and lifted her hands from their death-like grip around his neck. 'Emily, we have to go.'

She looked dazedly up at him, then down at his hands holding hers. Had she really flung her arms around him and clung like a limpet? And suddenly the heat of arousal became the heat of embarrassment.

'What did you do that for?' she asked.

'I believe in getting the first kiss over with quickly, instead of wondering all evening, and to be blunt you have kept me waiting a week already.' He grinned.

'I'm surprised you persisted.' She grinned back, suddenly feeling wonderful, all her doubts and fears about Anton wiped out by his kiss.

'I surprised myself. I am of the W.C. Fields train of thought. If at first you don't succeed, try, try, and then give up—there is no point in being a damn fool about it. Usually two approaches with no response and I move on. But in your case I made an exception. You should be flattered.'

Emily chuckled. 'You are impossibly arrogant, Anton.'

'Yes, but you like me.' He grinned and started the car.

The restaurant was exclusive, the food superb and Anton the perfect dinner companion. His conversation was witty and gradually she relaxed. He told her he spent a lot of time travelling

between his head office in New York, and the subsidiaries in Sydney, London and Athens, where he had an island villa within commuting distance by helicopter. But he tried to spend the winter months on his estate in Peru.

Without being aware of it, Emily was already half in love with him by the time he took her home.

'Admit it, Emily, you enjoyed yourself tonight,' Anton prompted as he stopped the car outside her home and turned to look at her. 'I am not quite the ogre you thought, hmm?' And he slid an arm around her shoulders. howAnton

'I concede you really are very civilized and, yes, I did enjoy myself.' The champagne she had consumed making her ever so slightly tipsy, she smiled up at him and added, 'But you are still arrogant.'

'Maybe, but will you allow me to take you out again tomorrow night?' he asked formally, but there was nothing formal about the sensual gleam in the black depths of the eyes that held hers as he drew her close.

'Yes,' she murmured, and watched in helpless anticipation as his dark head bent and his wide mouth covered hers.

The second kiss was even better than the first and she leant into him with bone-melting enthusiasm, her arms eagerly wrapping around his neck. She felt his great body tense, felt the brush of one hand against the fabric covering her breast as he deepened the kiss, his tongue searching her mouth with a skilful eroticism that sent shuddering sensations of pure pleasure

coursing hotly through her slender body.

She inhaled the unique masculine scent of him, trembled with wild excitement at the pleasure of his kiss, a kiss so deep, so passionate, she never wanted to come up for air. When his fingers closed around the strap of her dress she quivered, but made no objection as he peeled the fabric down over her braless breasts.

He raised his head and she didn't understand his husky words as he palmed her breast, his long fingers grazing over the rosy tip. Her whole body jerked and her head fell back as he lowered his head and his mouth closed over an exposed nipple. Fierce sensations lanced from her breasts to her loins, moisture pooling between her thighs. She groaned out loud as with tongue and teeth he teased her rigid nipples, until she was a quivering mass of heated sensations she had never experienced before, never believed existed until now.

She threaded her hands through his dark hair, and held him to her aching body, wanting more. She felt the gentle trail of his strong hand sliding beneath her skirt, stroking up the silken smoothness of her thigh, felt his long fingers trace the thin strip of lace between her legs. Involuntarily her legs parted and one long finger edged beneath her panties.

'My God!' Anton exclaimed, rearing back. 'What the hell am I doing?'

She stared up at him, her body sprawled back against the seat in total abandonment, her blue eyes glittering wildly and her pale skin flushed with the heat of arousal at the hands of a man for the

first time in her twenty-four years. Quickly he smoothed her skirt down over her thighs and hauled her up in the seat, slipping the straps of her dress back over her shoulder, and placing her wrap carefully around her, folding it over her still-tingling breasts.

'That's better,' he said, his dark eyes suddenly shadowed.

Emily's body still pulsed with sensation, but slowly it dawned on her Anton was no way near as affected.

'Sorry, Emily, I never meant to take things so far in the car of all places.' He smoothed a few tendrils of hair from her brow. 'Damn it to hell, I promised your brother I would look after you.' He swore.

That did get through to Emily. 'You promised my brother…' she exclaimed. 'You mean Tom had the nerve… I'll kill him.' She could not believe her own brother, and her embarrassment at her helpless capitulation to Anton was overtaken by her anger at Tom. 'He seems to forget I am a grown woman and perfectly able to look after myself.'

'I'm sure you are,' Anton agreed. 'But right now you better get indoors, before I lose control completely,' he added with a self-derisory grimace as he got out of the car and walked around to open the passenger door. He slipped an arm around her waist and led her to the imposing front door of her home. 'I won't come in, I don't dare.' Dropping a swift kiss on the top of her head, he added, 'I'll call you in the morning.' He waited as Emily, her head in a whirl of chaotic emotions—embarrassment, anger and, most telling of all, frustration—found her key, opened the door

and walked in.

CHAPTER THREE

THE weeks that followed were like a fairy tale to Emily. She was head over heels in love with Anton Diaz. The love she had thought she had felt for Nigel was nothing compared to how Anton made her feel. There was no point in denying it. She only had to hear his deep, melodious accented voice to go weak at the knees, and when he touched her excitement buzzed through every nerve in her body. She wanted him in ways she had never dreamed of before, but now kept her hot and restless in bed at night.

Thinking about that first night now, four weeks later, as she sat in front of the dressing mirror applying her make-up, ignited a slow-burning heat in the pit of Emily's stomach. But then that was something that pretty much happened every time she thought of Anton these days. A secretive smile curved her full lips as she ran a brush through her hair and rose to her feet.

Anton had been in New York for almost a week, and she ached to see him again. In fact she ached for him, because for some reason there had been no repeat of that first steamy episode except in her head.

They had enjoyed themselves over a few dinners and a trip to the theatre. She had accompanied him on several high-profile social occasions that included his business acquaintances, and the one time they had attended a film première he had quite proudly confirmed to the waiting photographers that they were an item.

But it was their relationship on the sexual front that puzzled Emily. Innocent though she was, she knew deep in her heart she wanted him with every fibre of her being. Given his reputation, she knew the best she could hope for was an affair, and she had confidently expected to be invited to his London penthouse. Within a week of meeting him, she had prepared for their relationship to progress to the physical, but it had not advanced at all. On the contrary, Anton had never even suggested taking her to his apartment, and made a point of drawing back after a kiss or two, while she was left aching for more…

Still, perhaps after a six-day separation tomorrow night would be the night, she thought as she clipped the diamond studs in her ears and stood back to view her reflection. But first she had to get through tonight. A family party for her uncle Sir Clive Deveral's birthday.

Her mother's brother was a bachelor and it was a bit of a tradition that he dined with them all on his birthday before heading off later to his club and his old navy mates to reminisce and get drunk. She had made a determined effort to dress up for her uncle because she knew he really appreciated glamorous women.

He had told her so when, in his own bumbling way, he had tried to comfort her after her disastrous engagement. He had confided that years ago he had lost his fiancée to another man, but he had soon got over it; with so many glamorous women to choose from he preferred to play the field. Then realizing what

he had said, he had exclaimed, 'Not that I mean you should play the field. Heaven forbid. I simply meant there are plenty more fish in the sea,' and made her laugh.

He was a real sweetie and Emily adored him. She had spent many a school holiday at his home, Deveral Hall in Lincolnshire, or at his rather dilapidated villa in Corfu. When her childhood dreams of being a ballerina were dashed by her increasing height it was her uncle who had taught her never to waste time hankering after things that she could not change and move on. Then he had got her interested in archaeology and sailing and swimming in the warm waters off the Greek island and had been instrumental in her decision to be a marine archaeologist.

She smiled at her image in the mirror. The dress she wore was a strapless silver lamé that clung to every inch of her body like a second skin to end six inches above her knees. She had left her long hair loose and she was wearing ridiculously high-heeled diamanté sandals that showed off her legs to the max.

Emily was still smiling to herself as she walked down the stairs to join the family for pre-dinner drinks. Her uncle would love her outfit—he was always telling her that the latest generation of men on the Fairfax side of the family needed shocking out of their staid conservatism once in a while. For that reason he always turned up at any family dinner in a velvet dinner jacket and outrageous waistcoats. The rest of the family would probably have a fit.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and headed towards the

sound of talk and laughter coming from the drawing room, and then turned again as the doorbell rang.

'I'll get it, Mindy,' she said as the flustered housekeeper popped out of the kitchen.

She opened the door and her mouth fell open with shock. 'Anton, what are you doing here? I thought you weren't due back until tomorrow.'

'Obviously I got back not a minute too soon.' His dark eyes glittered with some fierce emotion as they swept over her. 'You look unbelievable, though I find it hard to believe you dressed like that for an evening at home. Who is my competition?' he demanded, his dark eyes narrowing with anger on her face. Then without a word he hauled her into his arms and covered her mouth with his own in a hard possessive kiss that knocked the breath from her body.

When he finally allowed her to breathe again she looked up into his burning black eyes. 'What was that for?' she gasped.

'To remind you, you are mine. Now who is he?'

'You're jealous—you think I am going out with another man,' Emily prompted, ridiculously delighted, and, lifting a finger, she stroked the firm line of his jaw. 'You have no need to be, Anton. There is no other man, and we are having a birthday party for my uncle,' she explained, a broad smile curving her slightly swollen lips. 'Come and join us. You will make the dinner table up to an even number.' And she watched as what looked surprisingly like a blush stained his high cheekbones.

‘What can I say?’ He groaned, holding her away from him. ‘Except I’ve missed you.’ His eyes roamed hungrily over her and then, grabbing her arm, he urged her inside. ‘I have to speak to Tom.’

‘Why?’

‘I want to marry you, and I need to ask his permission.’

‘What?’

‘You heard.’ He folded her against his long body. ‘Marry me, Emily. I can’t wait any longer.’

Not the most romantic proposal in the world, but Emily’s blue eyes filled with tears of happiness. Suddenly everything made sense. Anton, wonderful Anton, the man she loved with all her heart, the man she had been worrying would never take her to bed, actually wanted to marry her. Now his behaviour made magnificent sense. She had heard the rumours of his many mistresses, but with her he had behaved with admirable restraint because he wanted more, he wanted her to be his wife, he loved her.

‘Yes, oh, yes,’ she cried, and flung her arms around his neck.

‘What is going on out here?’

Anton raised his eyes and looked at Tom over the top of Emily’s head. He had shocked himself by proposing marriage so precipitously. He had had it all planned, the ring in his pocket, a romantic dinner, a skilful seduction; instead he had blurted it out in the doorway like an idiot. But hell! If ever a woman looked like sex on legs and ready to bed it was Emily tonight, he reasoned,

so naturally he had to get in quick. And Emily had said yes, mission accomplished. Not that he had doubted for a moment she would say yes, and he refused to admit it was the thought of Emily seeing another man that was responsible for his hasty proposal. He straightened his broad shoulders and tightened his arm around Emily's waist.

'I have just asked Emily to marry me, Tom, and she has agreed. But we would like your blessing,' he said, once more in complete control.

'Is this true, Emily? Is Anton the man for you?' Tom asked quietly, his eyes on his sister.

'Oh, yes.'

'In that case you have my blessing.' Anton met his soon-to-be brother-in-law's eyes and saw the slight reservation in the blue depths. 'But you are a lot older than Emily.' For that, read *You have a reputation with women,* Anton understood instantly. 'And if you hurt her in any way you will have me to answer to.'

'I'll guard her with my life,' Anton declared, and he meant it, though not necessarily for the reason Tom Fairfax thought…

'Knowing Emily and given her career choice, I don't envy you,' Tom teased.

'Tom—please…' Emily groaned. 'You are going to put Anton off before I get the ring on my finger.'

'Never.' Anton glanced down at the woman by his side. 'As your husband I will support you every which way you want, Emily.'

‘So stop making cow’s eyes at her, and come and meet the rest of the family.’ Tom grinned. ‘We can make it a double celebration and you will have some idea of what you are getting into, my friend.’

Anton knew exactly what he was getting into, he had engineered the whole thing, so he was surprised that he actually felt something suspiciously like guilt as the introductions were made. Tom and Helen, he knew of course, and James and Lisa Browning. The Brownings’ two adult sons and their wives seemed pleasant enough. Another aunt, Jane, was the younger sister of Sara Fairfax, a widow with twin sons about twenty. Then there was the birthday boy, Sir Clive Deveral, wearing a deep blue velvet dinner jacket, a ruffled yellow shirt and a brilliant scarlet waistcoat with a face to match.

Although he had seen all their names on the report his investigator had presented, meeting them in the flesh was a little disconcerting. As the dinner progressed he found it impossible to dislike them. Everyone without exception made him welcome and congratulated him on having won Emily’s hand in marriage. The conversation was lively and funny and inevitably reminiscences of other family parties were laughed over. For the first time in years he wondered if there was something to be said for a large close-knit family.

‘So what did you think of them?’ Emily asked Anton, her arm linked in his as she walked him to the door at one in the morning.

‘I think your uncle Clive is deliberately outrageous but a great

character and the rest are all lovely just like you,' he murmured as he slipped his hand in his pocket and withdrew a small velvet box.

Emily stared in wonder and a happiness so profound she could not speak.

'I meant to do this over a romantic dinner for two.' His lips quirked at the corners in a wry smile as he opened the box. 'But events rather overtook us.' And grasping her hand, he raised it to his lips and pressed a soft kiss on the backs of her fingers, before sliding a magnificent sapphire and diamond ring onto her finger.

Tears of joy sparkled in Emily's eyes as she looked up into his darkly handsome face. 'It is beautiful. I love it and I love you,' she declared. Anton was everything she wanted, and the fact he had said in front of Tom he would support her in her career banished the faintest doubt, and she kissed him.

They were married quietly on a Wednesday a month later in the church adjacent to her uncle Clive's home, Deveral Hall. Uncle Clive considered Tom and Emily as close to his own children as he would ever get and was delighted to throw open his once elegant but now slightly shabby home for the occasion.

On a brilliant day in late May the old stone house glowed mellowly in the sun. Emily was a vision in white and Anton every inch the perfect groom, tall, dark and strikingly attractive. The fifty-odd guests, mostly family and friends of Emily, were all agreed it was a wonderful intimate wedding.

Anton stared down at his sleeping bride, a slow satisfied smile

curving his firm lips, his dark eyes gleaming with triumph.

Emily Fairfax was his… His wife…Señora Diaz…or Mrs… whatever. He considered himself a citizen of the world, and it was only the Diaz that was important. He had applied for a passport weeks ago in her married name, and on production of the wedding certificate Max pulled a few strings and obtained the new passport and delivered it as they boarded the plane for Monte Carlo. Anton had accomplished what he had set out to do from the first time he had set eyes on her. He had married Charles Fairfax's daughter, the niece of a knight of the realm. Not that he cared about titles, but Charles Fairfax certainly had.

Anton's expression darkened. According to his mother, over twenty-six years ago Charles Fairfax had been on holiday in Greece and had seduced Anton's eighteen-year-old sister, Suki. Anton had been eleven at the time and attending boarding school so had known nothing about it. When his sister had died a few months later in a car accident he had been devastated, but it was only after his mother had died he had pieced together the full extent of Charles Fairfax's betrayal, from the letter addressed to Suki he had found among his mother's things.

Charles Fairfax had left Suki pregnant and returned to London. When she had contacted him about the child he had written back saying he did not believe the child was his. Then added he was well aware that Suki was the illegitimate daughter of a Frenchman, and that her mother was the daughter of a Peruvian brothel-keeper, and was now the mistress of a wealthy

Greek and had yet another illegitimate child. With such a pedigree there was no way, even if he were free, which he was not, that the proud old name of Fairfax would ever be associated with the name Diaz.

Five months after Fairfax had left her, Suki had picked up a copy of *The Times* newspaper and read the announcement of the wedding of Charles Fairfax to Sir Clive Thomas Deveral's sister, Sara Deveral, and she had given up all hope and committed suicide. Killing herself and her unborn child.

Anton shook his head to dispel the dark memories. Today he had righted the wrong done to his family in a way he knew his mother would have appreciated. Emily Fairfax was now a Diaz, a very fitting revenge.

As for Emily, he glanced back at her sleeping form in the seat beside him. She really was exquisite; in fact, if he had met her without the past to consider, while he would not have married her, he would certainly have bedded her and kept her as his mistress until he tired of her. But looking at her now with her silken blonde hair falling loosely over one side of her face, her soft lips slightly pouted in sleep, he was glad he had.

Emily was intelligent, well educated with a career of sorts and she was not likely to interfere in how he ran his life. Certainly not after he told her why he had married her, and the thought made him pause. Somehow the revenge he had achieved did not give him quite as much pleasure as he had expected. The soul-corroding bitterness that had consumed him since his mother's

death had faded slightly. Probably because of Emily—she really was delightful.

Her constant avowals of love, rather than irritating him, he was beginning to find quite addictive. He had known a few women, and he was realistic enough to recognize that, great sex aside, the biggest part of his attraction was his wealth. Personally he thought love was an excuse the female of the species, Emily included, used to justify having sex with a man. Wryly he amended that thought, with the exception of the three generations of females in his family who had imagined themselves in love and suffered for it.

His grandmother had been the daughter of a wealthy Spanish Peruvian rancher, a Señor Sebastian Emanuel Diaz. Her father had disowned her after she had disgraced the family by getting pregnant and running away to Lima with a ranch hand. They never married and he left her when their daughter was barely a year old. His own mother had repeated the same mistake twice over, first by falling in love with a Frenchman who had left her with a baby girl, and then with Anton's father, a Greek who was married, and she became his mistress. While not a complete tragedy, his mother had not made the wisest of choices. As for his sister—to kill herself for love didn't bear thinking about.

No, if love existed then it was a destructive emotion and not one Anton was prepared to embrace. He lusted after Emily, but he had no illusions about the female of the species. He knew his wealth and power were probably just as much an aphrodisiac to

Emily as they had been to the countless other women he had known.

The wedding had gone perfectly and they were now on his private jet heading for the South of France to board his yacht anchored off Monaco.

His dark eyes narrowed as they roamed over her lovely face, serene in sleep. He noted the fantastic sweep of her lashes over her eyes, the sensuously curved passionate mouth, the slight curve of her breasts revealed between the lapels of the wild blue silk suit she wore, and his body tightened.

Pity he had not been able to remove the exquisite white wedding gown. The image of her as he had turned to watch her walk down the aisle would live in his mind for ever. Beautiful was an understatement; her sparkling blue eyes had met his and for a long moment he had not been able to breathe, such was her effect on him. Even now remembering made his heart beat faster and he fought the temptation to kiss her awake. He had waited this long, he could wait a little longer until they reached the comfort of his yacht. He did not want to rush what he had promised himself would be a long night of passion.

A light flashed in the gathering darkness, and he heard the sudden change in the engine noise; they would be landing soon. Good, he was getting impatient. He could not remember the last time he had waited so long for a woman, if ever…though it had all been part of his plan.

Emily was a passionate woman, and as an experienced man

of the world and a skilful lover Anton had recognized that immediately. He had quickly decided his best policy was to give her just a taste of what she wanted and no more. To build up her frustration until she was so desperate to have him she would accept his proposal of marriage without a second thought. Which of course she had.

Anton shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The trouble was he had suffered just as much if not more from the enforced celibacy, as the stirring in his groin could testify. He had ended his last affair a month after his mother's death when the woman he was involved with at the time had started hinting at marriage now he was alone in the world. He grimaced painfully. He had never gone so long without sex since he was a teenager, but thankfully the wait would soon be over.

A slight frown creased his brow as, thinking back over the past few weeks, he suddenly realized every time he had stopped after a kiss or two Emily had looked at him with desire-dazed eyes, and yet she had made no attempt to seduce him, no attempt to touch him intimately. Not the usual reaction of a sexually sophisticated woman. In his experience they normally made their desire very clear. Odd…or maybe not so odd, he corrected cynically. She had probably been playing the same waiting game as he had to make sure of getting a ring on her finger…

'Anton.' A throaty murmur had his eyes flying back to her face.

'You're awake. Good.' He lowered his head to taste the soft

sweetness of her luscious mouth. ‘We are landing soon,’ he murmured, lifting his head, and, taking her hands in his, he folded them on her lap. ‘Another half-hour and we will be on board the yacht.’

‘It can’t be too soon.’ Emily smiled up at him, her brilliant blue eyes dazzling him. ‘My love. My husband.’

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