The Sheikh's Convenient Virgin

Trish Morey

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Аннотация

Sheikh Tajik al Zayed bin Aman needs a convenient bride, and custom demands that she must be pure.So when he first sees Morgan Fielding and is intrigued by her straitlaced style, an idea begins to form. . . . Morgan doesn't understand why Tajik is pursuing her–such a virile man could have any woman he desires!But once she arrives in Tajik's desert kingdom, he announces he will take her as his wife–and bedding her is only the beginning!

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Trish Morey
THE SHEIKH'S CONVENIENT VIRGIN

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To Jacqui, Steph, Ellen and Claire
Thanks for all the times you've had to wait

for me to finish a sentence, a paragraph or a chapter before you could get my attention.
And thanks for all the times you had to do lots of extra stuff because I was on deadline and the house would have collapsed in a heap otherwise.
Not to mention all the times you forgave me for forgetting to pick you up from wherever. (Really sorry about those!)
But, most of all, thank you all for being your totally gorgeous selves.
I am truly blessed.
All my love,
Mum xxxx

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CHAPTER ONE

'WHO'S the woman?' With just three sharp words Sheikh Tajik al Zayed bin Aman cut off the tedious update being delivered by his secretary as he wandered closer to the window. It had been a long flight, and the stranger he'd just spied sitting near the pool was far more interesting than the latest exchange rate fluctuations of his Emirate's currency. 'What is she doing here?'

Kamil temporarily abandoned his recitation of numbers and followed his ruler's gaze through the wall of windows and past the palm-lined lawns to the pool area beyond.

'This is the one we employed as your mother's companion after Fatima was taken ill. I sent word to you while you were in Paris for the oil summit…' His secretary trailed off, suddenly hesitant, as if concerned he'd overstepped the mark in retaining a local woman to be Nobilah's companion during their Gold Coast sojourn.

'Ah, yes,' Tajik said, recalling the case of appendicitis that had seen Fatima packed off to hospital for emergency surgery. 'I just did not expect Nobilah's new companion to be quite so young.' Or quite so attractive. Even from this distance he could see her features were far from plain, her figure, even though demurely dressed from neck to ankle in light trousers and shirt, no chore to behold. 'So why is she alone and not looking after my mother?'

As if on cue, Nobilah emerged from the poolhouse behind, the dark abaya she'd favoured since her husband had died swirling about her like a cloud as she walked. He watched the younger woman rise and then adjust the umbrella shading his mother from the Queensland sun as she settled herself into the chair alongside. Then the young woman sat back down, picking up a newspaper from a wrought-iron table sitting between them, her lips moving as she read aloud.

His mother laughed at something, and he could almost hear her musical chuckle. He couldn't help but smile. It had been a tough year—for all of them—and it was good to see her laugh. Very soon he would hear it for himself. After the tense and at times heated negotiations of the past week he deserved it. And now they would have the last weeks of their summer break together.

'I must go and let Nobilah know I have returned from Paris,' he said over his shoulder. 'Was there anything more, Kamil?'

His secretary cleared his throat. 'As a matter of fact, Excellency, there is one more item I must bring to your attention…'

'Can it wait? I am anxious to catch up with my mother.'

'I think you will want to hear this, Excellency.'

Tajik looked around in surprise. His secretary knew him too well to keep him over some trifling matter when he was already taking his leave. He moved away from the window, his attention now fully on his secretary, the stranger all but dismissed from

his mind. 'Well, what is it?'

'There have been murmurings from home…It appears Qasim has raised with the council of tribal leaders some concerns about the ascendancy…'

Tajik's blood chilled at the news, but it was to Kamil that his ire was directed right now. 'And you thought it more important to relate Jamalbad's exchange rates than my cousin's machinations behind the scenes?'

His secretary had the good sense to look nervous. 'Reports have just come in,' he said, bowing deferentially. 'They have yet to been confirmed—'

'Then have them confirmed!' he snapped as he began pacing the spacious living area in long purposeful strides. 'And tell me why should my cousin bring such concerns to the council? If anything happens to me, he knows he is next in line to the throne. His place is assured.'

'He has apparently told the council members he believes Jamalbad's future cannot be assured unless there is solid provision for the future. Unless there is an heir.'

Tajik's feet came to a sudden halt. 'My father has been dead but one short year, and Joharah with him! Would Qasim have me casting my seed at the first woman to cross my path? Besides, everyone knows that my cousin is more an agent of instability than of peace—otherwise why would he be stirring up trouble while my back is turned?'

'Qasim cloaks his desire for the throne in concerns for

Jamalbad. Some of the council will take his words at face value.'

'And some members of the council would be swayed by the dance of the cobra.' Tajik thumped his closed fist against the nearest piece of furniture with so much force it made his secretary jump. 'He must be stopped! If these reports are true, we must return to Jamalbad immediately. Prepare to make the necessary arrangements.'

Kamil hesitated. 'Before I do—there's one more thing you should know. There is a suggestion that he has told the council he has found you the perfect bride.'

'He has what? Who is the delightful creature this snake of a cousin of mine would see me saddled with?'

'His daughter, Abir.'

Tajik laughed out loud. 'In the name of Allah, the girl is but a child! She must be no more than ten years old. He wants the throne so badly he would sacrifice his own child to his cause?'

'Abir is fourteen at her next birthday. More than old enough to become betrothed if the council so approves.'

'Not to me, she's not! I will not be manipulated by a madman into marrying a child less than half my age, especially not his own spawn, merely to give him greater access to the throne.'

Kamil frowned. 'Beware, Excellency. From what's been said, some of the council are in favour of the match. They believe you have mourned long enough, that it is time you give away your playboy ways and find a bride to provide Jamalbad with an heir. Qasim has intimated that he is acting in your best interests, and

that the best way forward for both you and Jamalbad is a betrothal announcement that is just days away.'

'So now a single life is to be interpreted as "playboy ways"?' He sighed. Given his age and his position he'd had his pick of women if and when he'd wanted—but losing Joharah had taken the edge off his needs, and the nameless and faceless women since then had been few and far between, his wants nowhere near approximating what those words implied.

He stared blindly out of the window, the blood hammering with fury in his veins. So Qasim meant to tie him into a betrothal in his absence—a betrothal he would be neatly boxed into on his return? No wonder his belligerent cousin had been so accommodating when Tajik had informed him of his plans to take his mother away from Jamalbad's month of horror heat to the relative cool of tropical Australia.

But there was no way he would allow himself to be manipulated like that. And there was no way he would marry his cousin's teenaged daughter. No way in the world.

He raked his fingers through his hair as he set about pacing the room once more, his mind working out the best strategy to outplay his cousin's hand. On the one hand he could just say no. He was absolute ruler of Jamalbad after all. The council was a powerful body in its own right, but it could only advise, not decree, and while it might not be happy with his refusal to marry Abir, it could not force him to do otherwise.

And yet there was another course of action that formed like

crystals in his mind, clear and sharp. Another way he could stop Qasim's machinations in their tracks and keep the council happy into the deal.

'No, Kamil,' he asserted, swinging around. 'I will not marry Abir. Or anyone else my cousin lines up for me.'

'Very well, Excellency. Once I receive confirmation that our information is correct, I will prepare a message to the council to that effect.'

'No, there is no need. If the council are expecting a bride, then the council will be satisfied. They will have their sheikha.'

'And how do you intend to achieve that if you will not marry Abir?'

'Simple, Kamil. I will find my own bride.'

'Your Excellency, are you serious?'

The look he shot his secretary was enough to make his servant stammer in apology, but he cut off his backtracking with the simple act of raising one hand. 'I am serious about not being controlled like a puppet by my cousin. I will do whatever it takes to foil his plans to take over the throne of Jamalbad by marrying me to his daughter.'

'But a bride…You cannot marry just anyone. The bride of a ruler of Jamalbad must be pure of mind and body.' The secretary wildly threw out his arms in a gesture of hopelessness. 'How do you expect to find such a gem here?'

It took no more than a raised eyebrow for Kamil's coffee-coloured skin to flush darker. 'Have you not seen the women on

the beach?' he blustered in defence. 'I am not sure that the council would approve of such a queen.'

Tajik nodded in understanding as his thoughts drew him in the direction of the windows again. Tradition was important in Jamalbad, and while he had been educated long enough in the west to believe that the idea a woman must remain untouched until marriage while the man was free to sow his wild oats wherever he chose was a classic double standard, the council would expect his bride to be innocent. Still, he was sure he could find someone who would pass for a convenient virgin somewhere. So long as he was happy with the choice, he would have no trouble convincing the council of her virtue.

He turned his gaze out of the windows once more, movement poolside bringing his gaze back into focus—and his thoughts into razor-sharp precision behind it.

She was quite attractive, in a western kind of way, her figure indeed watchable, despite the conservative clothes and the honey-blonde hair restrained too tightly behind her head. She would look so much better in more feminine clothes that showed off her curves. But then, given the truth of what Kamil had said, her conservatism was a definite plus right now…

He stroked his chin while he considered the possibilities. Fair-skinned, with honey-blonde hair and a generous mouth, she looked nothing at all like Joharah. That could only be a plus.

He clamped down on a twinge of guilt that he should be contemplating marrying anyone. But this would not be a

marriage as theirs would have been. This marriage would be one of simple expediency that would put paid to Qasim's plans for the throne and bring stability to Jamalbad as a result.

Reason enough for him to contemplate the enjoyment he'd get presenting this woman as his bride. Her looks were merely a bonus. And bedding her would be no chore. He was a man, after all. He could certainly think of less enjoyable ways to foil his cousin's plans.

'Perhaps, Kamil,' he mused, 'we need not extend our search as far as the beach. Tell me,' he said, pointing to the young woman who had abandoned her reading of the newspaper and was currently engaged in painting his mother's nails, 'have you done all the necessary security checks on this woman?'

It wasn't really a question. He knew the answer would be in the affirmative—she wouldn't have been employed otherwise—and the older man looked confused at the sudden change of topic.

'Of course. She has a clean record, impeccable references, and no unsavoury connections that we could find.'

'And personally?'

'No attachments. As far as family she has just the one sister, a twin, recently married and with her first child.'

'Perfect,' Tajik announced coldly. 'Then she will not be missed.'

'What do you mean?' Kamil asked, with the tone of someone who really didn't want to hear the answer.

Tajik placed a hand on his secretary's shoulder. 'It's quite

simple, my good friend. In finding my mother the perfect companion you have also done your country a great service. You may also have found Jamalbad the perfect queen.'

CHAPTER TWO

'EXCELLENCY, this is madness. Taking a wife, taking a sheikha for your country, this is a serious matter.'

'You're right, Kamil,' he said with a brotherly slap on the back, 'and much too serious to be decided for me by the likes of my cousin.'

'But to decide on this woman on a whim, when the council cannot force you to marry Abir?'

'Listen, my good friend, do you think that if I refuse to marry Abir, Qasim will desist in his efforts to gain power? Of course he won't. He will keep working away, using whatever influence he has on the council for his own purposes.' He shrugged before continuing, 'And on one level Qasim and the council are right. Jamalbad needs an heir. And, sadly, I am in no position to provide them with an heir without a wife—a wife I simply have no interest in searching for.' He waved his hand in the direction of the window. 'Especially not when such an apparently suitable specimen sits just a few yards away. And she looks nothing like your "women on the beach". I am sure I can convince the council that she has all the necessary virtue she needs. Now, does this woman, this companion for my mother, have a name?'

His secretary was still shaking his head, but he could no more refuse his ruler than stop breathing. 'Her name is Morgan Fielding, Excellency. But what makes you think, even if she were

suitable for the role, that she would agree to marry you?'

Tajik laughed. The idea was preposterous. 'Come now, Kamil, she is a woman, and if you believe everything my cousin says I am a playboy through and through. With such a reputation, how could any woman resist me?'

Today was Gold Coast weather at its best: the sky an endless stretch of azure blue, bisected only by the occasional spear of jet stream, and with a slight breeze taking the edge off the sun's heat. Palm fronds swayed lazily in the gardens surrounding the pool, and diamonds of light played on the surface of the aqua water.

If a job could be perfect, then this one had to come close—relaxing days, beautiful surroundings, and nothing more taxing to do than keep a fascinating woman from an equally fascinating country company. She loved the stories Nobilah had told her about Jamalbad. She seemed to make the rich desert sunsets and the colours, scents and noise of the local soukhs come alive with her words.

Oh, yes, it was a dream job. Just a pity that it ended in less than two weeks. The gentle-faced Nobilah would return to Jamalbad and she would return to the temp agency. She sighed a wistful sigh. There was no way she could expect to be this lucky again. More likely she'd end up working ten hours a day for a madman in some office where the milk in the fridge lasted longer than the PAs.

Less than two weeks to go—so she'd just have to enjoy this experience while it lasted.

Morgan closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, the scent of frangipani adding a heady sweetness to the air. If she tried hard she could almost imagine she was there, in Nobilah's home in Jamalbad, the desert-warmed air kissing her skin, the sweet scent of the palace orange grove tugging at her senses.

A shadow moved over her as the sun disappeared behind a cloud—until she remembered there were no clouds today, and there should be no shadow.

She snapped open her eyes with a start to see a man standing over her, a dark statue looming tall and powerful, his features indistinguishable with the wash of light behind. Without seeing his eyes she knew this man was a stranger. Without seeing his eyes she could still feel their impact like an acid burn. He was looking down at her. Staring. Assessing.

Her senses on trembling alert, she swung her legs over the edge of the chair, pushing herself to stand so as to remove at least some of the advantage he had by virtue of his height. But just standing was nowhere near enough. He still stood a full head above her, although at least from this angle she could finally see his eyes.

And immediately regretted the fact.

They burned gold, with scattered flecks like flaming coals, burning all the brighter with the contrast of his dark lashes and arched brows and the darkly shadowed angles of his cheeks and jaw.

Never before had she been confronted with someone so totally, unashamedly masculine. And never before had she felt

more like an insect under a microscope. It was impossible not to resent his inspection. At the same time there was something compelling about those golden eyes that wouldn't let her turn away.

She swallowed, trying to quell the insane rush of sensation that coursed through her.

Attraction.

Desire.

Fear.

All those things rolled into one prickly surge of awareness as he silently continued to watch her.

'Can I help you?' she asked at last, when the silence had stretched out much longer than was polite, and it was clear he was not about to break it.

The corners of his mouth turned up, drawing her eyes to his full lips. And to a wide mouth she could tell immediately would be equally at home delivering either pleasure or pain. 'That is my intention,' he answered cryptically. But before she could think about a response, Nobilah stirred on the lounger alongside.

'Tajik! You're back already. Why didn't you tell me?'

He turned his attention to the much older woman, releasing the hold on Morgan's eyes as abruptly as the snapping of chains.

'The negotiations finished early,' he said, moving to the older woman's side and enclosing her in a bear-like hug that swept her off her feet and around in a circle of dark silk. 'I wanted to surprise you.'

‘You did!’ she said, her age-plumped features creasing in delight. ‘I’m so pleased.’

Morgan watched the reunion, waiting for the perfect time to withdraw. So this was Nobilah’s son, the Sheikh? She’d expected someone older, maybe forty or so, given that Nobilah was in her mid-sixties, but this man looked in his prime. He couldn’t be more than early thirties. But then Nobilah had talked often of him as a child, of her dark haired boy who had grown up wild and untamed in the deserts of Jamalbad only to become a prince when her husband had unexpectedly came to the sheikhdom. Of the boy who had been torn from one life and thrown into another much more demanding and exacting.

As she looked at him now she could see no trace of that wild boy-child. Royalty was everything about him. His composure. His bearing. His sheer presence.

He could have been born to rule.

As if sensing her thoughts, he turned and captured her gaze. ‘So this is your new companion?’ he said, still holding his mother’s hands in his own. ‘So, tell me, is she any good?’

‘Come and meet her,’ his mother scolded, tugging him around. ‘See for yourself.’

Morgan stiffened as he allowed his mother to lead him to the hired help. As if it was necessary. Surely he’d seen enough while he’d been standing over her? And if talking about her in the third person had been intended to make her feel uncomfortable, he’d sure hit the spot. She gave him a glare that should strip paint.

If he noticed her glare of disapproval he gave no hint of it. ‘Morgan Fielding,’ he uttered slowly—so slowly and deliberately, that the sound of her own name rolled through her, a strange, unfamiliar thing.

With an accent that was like a blend of the richest coffee and the darkest chocolate, he made her name sound good enough to eat. No, she corrected herself, catching sight of white teeth flashing between lips that looked too confident, too predatory, he made her name sound good enough to devour. She shivered. Because his eyes echoed the certainty. They looked down at her, their golden depths too knowing, too intent, as if he was reaching to some place deep inside her she hadn’t known existed until now. And instinct warned her this man would do nothing by half measures.

And then he held out one hand, and she had no choice, no matter what her senses screamed to her in warning, but to do likewise.

She felt long fingers enclose her hand, circling around her wrist in a sensual dance of flesh against flesh as he drew her arm weightlessly towards him. With his eyes firmly fixed on hers she felt powerless to resist. Just when she thought he was intending to take her all the way to his lips, he stopped, and with the merest smile nodded slightly. ‘It is indeed…a pleasure.’

Her heart thumping in her chest, it was all she could do to form, let alone hear, her own words. ‘Sheikh Tajik, I’ve heard a lot about you.’

His smile widened, although his eyes remained steady, calculating.

'You have me at a distinct disadvantage,' he said. 'I know next to nothing of you—a failing I intend to rectify at the first opportunity, I assure you.'

Golden eyes told her he meant every word he said, while the gentle stroke of one long finger over her wrist sent tremors of heat reverberating up her arm.

'Taj,' Nobilah rebuked with a laugh, breaking the spell. 'Stop flirting with my companion. Come and tell me all about Paris. I'll send for tea.'

'I…I'll get it,' Morgan offered, smiling her thanks at Nobilah as she sensed a means of escape. She tugged her hand free and set off for the house, unable to ignore the prickle of heat on her skin, almost as if a pair of golden eyes were burning tracks into her back the whole way.

Nobilah had thought he'd been flirting with her? Why, then, had every word felt like some kind of threat? And why had the touch of his fingers on her flesh felt like some kind of promise?

She shivered again, wanting to shake off the unfamiliar sensations, and let herself into the house via the wide glass doors that led into the casual living areas and through to the kitchen beyond. She had almost crossed the cool tiled floor when she heard the voices—the even, low tones of Kamil and the raised voice of Anton, the chef they'd lured from one of Brisbane's top hotels for the duration of their stay.

‘I have a contract,’ the chef protested. ‘I will not be sacked!’

Morgan pulled herself up short of the door. Obviously this was not a good time. But why were they sacking Anton? It made no sense. His cooking was three star Michelin standard, his menus superb. And Nobilah had made no secret of the fact that if she could she would like to take him back to Jamalbad with them.

‘Not sacked,’ she heard Kamil reply, his tone soothing yet insistent. ‘The remaining balance owing on your contract will be paid in a lump sum, together with a generous bonus for any inconvenience.’

Anton grunted his displeasure and Morgan tuned out. She was turning to leave—right now was probably not the best time to ask for tea—when she heard the words, ‘We leave for Jamalbad at first light tomorrow. All you need do is prepare a light breakfast and then you are free to go. You will have the day to clear your things before the house is closed up.’

They were leaving? Tomorrow? So that was why they wouldn’t need a chef any longer. And if they didn’t need a chef…

She stood there, drinking in the knowledge that her services were about to be terminated prematurely, and the clatter of pans coming from the kitchen as Anton grudgingly came to terms with the news echoed her mood.

She’d thought she still had two weeks of being Nobilah’s companion. Now she had less than twenty-four hours. Damn. Working nine to five in some office hellhole was going to seem very ordinary after this assignment.

‘Miss Fielding?’

Morgan blinked and swung around to see Kamil watching her from the kitchen door, a frown creasing his brow. Mentally she prepared herself, waiting for the axe to fall. Kamil had been the one to hire her. If her services were about to be terminated, he might as well get it over with right now. But he just stared right back at her.

‘Was there something you wanted?’

She hesitated, still expecting him to take advantage of finding her outside the kitchen to deliver the news of her own dismissal. But when he failed to speak again, Morgan could put it off no longer. She nodded, feeling awkward. ‘Nobilah requested tea.’

He looked at her oddly, his expression a mix of concern and something that looked like pity. Then he simply glanced over his shoulder. ‘Anton, tea for Nobilah, if you please.’ He turned back to Morgan. ‘Was there anything else?’

You tell me, she was tempted to say. ‘No,’ she whispered instead. ‘Just the tea.’

‘In that case, please excuse me. I have much to arrange. Anton will have the tea ready for you in just a moment.’ He nodded and turned to leave, but all of a sudden she couldn’t let him go—not without knowing for sure.

‘Kamil…’

He halted and swivelled back round. ‘Yes?’

‘I…I’m sorry, but I couldn’t help but overhear. You’re leaving for Jamalbad? Tomorrow?’

He inclined his head. ‘That is true.’

‘The entire household, including Nobilah?’

‘Again, this is true.’

‘Oh,’ she whispered. ‘I see.’

Kamil hesitated a moment, and once more she caught almost a look of pity in his features—but in a blink it was gone, his usual mask of efficiency returned.

‘If that is all…?’

‘Of course,’ she said, letting him withdraw. He would have plenty to do to organise the family’s early departure without her getting in his way.

Why had he looked at her that way? she wondered as she carried the tray from the kitchen. Unless Kamil had assumed she might be expecting a generous bonus for the early termination of her contract too?

He needn’t be worried on that score. Anton had been with them for the best part of two months, and was a top-flight chef, while she’d been Nobilah’s companion for little more than a week. Under the circumstances she’d be more than happy to have her contract paid out.

She slowed as she crossed the terrace, her pulse starting to beat irregularly as she took in the sight of Nobilah with her son. They were walking side by side along the stone flagging that lined the large, Italian-inspired pool. Tajik dwarfed his mother, a petite woman for all her curves, rendered all the more petite by the man walking alongside her and whose elegance could not be disguised

by the abaya she wore, its fabric swirling about her like poetry as she walked.

And then there was Tajik. Tall and broad-shouldered and hard, as if he'd been carved from stone and breathed into life by the kiss of the gods. His pale blue sweater could not mask a firm chest and flat abdomen; his dark trousers could not disguise lean hips and long legs.

As she watched, he angled his face towards his mother, and Morgan found herself reacquainted with the determined angles of his jaw, the strong line of his nose. Everything about the man said power, even the fire-flecked golden eyes and the passionate slash of his mouth.

What did his return today have to do with the family's sudden departure? It couldn't be coincidental. There'd been no hint of a possible early return to Jamalbad before now.

Not that there was anything she could do about it. With a sigh she pushed herself off the deck, heading for the pool area while the pair were still strolling around the far end of the pool. Screened by trees, she'd take the opportunity of leaving the tea on the table and make herself scarce while mother and son enjoyed their reunion. She had no desire to lock horns—or gazes, for that matter—with Sheikh Tajik again, not when he had such a disconcerting ability to get under her skin.

Morgan gave a wry smile as she reached the table. If she had to find a bright side to the early end to this assignment, she guessed being saved any further contact with Sheik Tajik would probably

fit the bill. That would be some consolation at least.

He'd known the second she'd emerged from the house. He'd felt her presence like a sigh of satisfaction. She'd taken a long time, much longer than it took to collect a mere pot of tea, and he'd wondered if he'd actually scared her off completely. After all, she'd almost bolted for the sanctuary of the house the second Nobilah had mentioned the word "tea".

He'd waited with unexpected enthusiasm for her to rejoin them while he'd gone over the plans to leave with his mother, until finally Morgan had reappeared, but even then she'd hesitated, like some quaking virgin on her way to her wedding feast—knowing but not really comprehending what was in store for her.

He allowed himself a smile at the parallel as his mother headed back to the house to check with Kamil on progress.

Morgan was perfect. Up close he could see she was both good-looking enough for everyone to believe he'd chosen her as his bride for just that reason alone, and meek enough not to complicate his plans. She was exactly what he needed to quash Qasim's lust for the throne.

He watched her place the tray on the table, her cream linen trousers moulding to her neat backside as she bent down, emphasising the flare of her hips and firing off a primitive spike of need in his loins that took him both by surprise and delight. Oh, no, he thought as he circled the pool towards her, appreciating the neat waist between those feminine curves, it

would be no hardship playing Qasim at his own game. Not with such an appetizing partner in crime.

The object of his attention straightened and set off without a backward glance. He smiled to himself. She was kidding herself if she thought she could escape that easily.

'Miss Fielding,' he called. 'You will be joining me for tea.' It wasn't a question.

She stopped with a jolt, before her back straightened and she swung around.

The polite smile on her face did nothing to hide her obvious discomfiture at being caught.

'I'm afraid I only brought two cups.'

He swung his hand around in a sweeping arc that could only emphasise the leanness in his body, the sheer latent strength. 'As you can see, there are only two of us.'

'But Nobilah?' Frantically her eyes scanned the pool area.

'Has gone to organise the staff,' he finished.

She took a step towards the house. 'Then I should help her.'

'No.' His hand whipped out and caught her forearm, arresting her mid-turn. 'Not just yet. I wanted the opportunity to talk to you.'

She looked up at him, her hazel eyes wide with what looked almost like panic, her lips still parted with surprise. Underneath his hand her skin felt smooth and warm, and his thumb picked up the race of her pulse through her slender limb.

Then her chin kicked up on a swallow. 'If it's about leaving

tomorrow, I already know.' She looked down at his hand. 'So, if you'll kindly take your hand away…'

He didn't. Not right away. He let it linger long enough to drink in more of the touch of her skin, long enough to tell her that he was the one who would decide what and where. As she would soon come to know.

Finally he let her go, and she clutched her arms around her as if she was cold. But he knew from her touch that she wasn't cold. Far from it.

'Walk with me,' he said, 'and tell me what you think you know.'

Her eyes sparked at the implication, but she said nothing, merely falling into step alongside him as he set off along the path that threaded through the palms around the perimeter. She walked with a slight limp, he noticed, a limp she was working hard at disguising.

For a moment he wondered if he was acting too rashly and there might be some pressing medical reason why he would be foolish to take this woman as his wife, but if Kamil had not listed it amongst his concerns, as surely he would have, then it must be a detail of no consequence. Beside him the woman gave a small sigh of resignation.

'Just that the household is returning to Jamalbad tomorrow and that everyone will be leaving.'

'You're not sorry? I believe from Kamil that your contract has two weeks to run?'

'I will miss Nobilah.'

He nodded, liking the way this conversation was developing. ‘As my mother seems to like you.’

She smiled in return, transforming her features to dazzling. ‘I love hearing Nobilah’s stories of life in Jamalbad. I don’t know.’ She shrugged. ‘It just all sounds so exotic.’

She looked up at him, her eyes bright and her smile wide, until, as suddenly as if she’d flicked a switch, her eyes clouded over and she let her smile slide away.

‘Anyway,’ she continued, looking ahead once more, the prim miss back in control, ‘I will miss her.’

He waited a stride or two before answering, taking his time to appreciate the slightly irregular sway of her hips as they walked together. It was good. Even the way she moved pleased him. ‘That will not be necessary,’ he told her.

He heard the rapid intake of air that preceded her words. ‘Look, it may not be necessary, as you put it, but I do like your mother. I’ve enjoyed her company immensely, whether you believe me or not.’

Her sudden outburst took him by surprise. So the meek-looking girl had some spirit after all? That might be a drawback if it meant she would not fall in with his plans, but then again it might make this a more interesting exercise than he’d imagined. Right now, though, he could do without getting her off-side.

‘You misunderstand me,’ he soothed. ‘I do not doubt your affection for my mother. I am saying merely that you will have no reason to miss her.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘That you are traveling to Jamalbad with us.’

‘Me?’

‘You are needed in Jamalbad.’

‘As Nobilah’s companion?’

He looked down at her. He would have to remember to thank his mother—she had made his job so much easier. ‘Fatima will be at least six weeks regaining her strength following her surgery.’

‘So you’ll be extending my contract?’

‘In a matter of speaking. I promise you it will be worth your while.’

Something about the way he said that managed to pierce the bubble of enthusiasm she’d been feeling at the news.

Jamalbad—she’d loved the very thought of the place since Nobilah had first mentioned it. The earth buildings looking as if they’d emerged fully formed from the surrounding sands, the white shell-encrusted palace walls glistening in the midday sun, the jewel colours of the women’s robes. The thought of seeing it for herself had been nothing short of a dream, and now she was being offered a chance to make that dream come true. And yet something about the offer seemed almost too good to be true.

Something didn’t feel right.

‘Surely there are plenty of women in Jamalbad who could perform the role of Nobilah’s companion?’

‘I have no doubt of that. Would that stop you from going?’

‘Well, no, but—’

‘Then perhaps you have had a better offer?’

‘No, it’s not that.’

‘Then it is settled.’ He smiled. ‘Come,’ he said, directing her back to the table, where the tea sat waiting, ‘have tea with me.’

Morgan wavered. She wasn’t sure she wanted to have tea with him. Especially now she felt she was being railroaded into going to Jamalbad—which was crazy when visiting Jamalbad was something she wanted to do. But tomorrow?

She almost never acted on impulse. That was her twin sister Tegan’s department. Gutsy Tegan, who’d come home from her aid work in Somalia and agreed to swap places with Morgan for a week while she attended a wedding in Fiji. Gutsy Tegan, who’d had no choice but to stay on for two months after Morgan’s broken leg and surgery. Gutsy Tegan, who’d fallen in love with Morgan’s boss from hell and turned him into the perfect husband.

Tegan would jump at such an opportunity, she knew. But Morgan had always been the quiet one. The sensible one. She hauled in a breath, only to find it tinged with the rich scent of the man beside her—sandalwood, exotic spices, musk—an alluring mix that seemed to latch into her senses and beckon to her.

But tomorrow?

‘It’s just not as simple as that,’ she said at last.

‘It’s not?’ he asked ingenuously, with a shrug. ‘It is only tea.’

Exasperated, she slipped into a chair when it was clear he was not going to take no for an answer. Without asking he picked up the delicate teapot and, with an unexpected sensuality of

movement, tilted the pot to pour tea into her cup. It was there in the curve of his fingers around the teapot. It was there in the steady pour of tea into her cup, in the heady scent of spices in the heated steam. It was there in the unwavering way he met her gaze with those golden eyes that seemed to see right inside her.

She cleared her throat, hoping it might go some way to clearing her mind. 'I didn't actually mean the tea. I'm talking about going to Jamalbad with you…I mean with Nobilah.'

'I know what you meant. But you've already said that you don't have a better offer. You yourself said you love what Nobilah has already told you about Jamalbad. I am offering you the chance to go there and see it for yourself. Why should you have any reason to turn down this opportunity?' He paused, his cup almost to that sensuous slash of mouth. 'Unless there is a man?' He shrugged. 'A boyfriend, perhaps?'

Maybe it was the earnest way he said it, but Morgan wanted to laugh out loud. Except one look at his eyes warned her not to. He was serious.

'Does Jamalbad have a problem with women who have boyfriends?'

'Would it be an issue for you if it did?'

She tried to hold his gaze, but she knew the rising heat she could feel colouring her skin would give her away anyway. 'No,' she acknowledged with a shake of her head.

He nodded. 'That is for the best.'

She blinked. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

‘Jamalbad is in a lot of ways a modern Arab emirate. However, we come from a very traditional society where women are still prized for their…shall we say, “purity”? While you are in our country, we would expect you to behave with a certain modesty.’

‘You mean as opposed to jumping into bed with every man I meet?’

His cool golden gaze collided dispassionately with her own. ‘I wouldn’t have put it quite so coarsely myself.’

‘Yet you have no problem thinking it.’ She replaced her cup on her saucer. ‘Well, it may just surprise you to know that there are some women in Australia who don’t jump into bed with every guy they meet.’

‘That is encouraging news. And would you count yourself in their number?’

She stood up quickly, the metal legs of her chair scraping across the sandstone tiles of the pool surrounds.

‘What is this? Next you’ll asking for some kind of medical certificate or something.’

‘That won’t be necessary,’ he said, rising alongside her. ‘I think you’ve made your point. You see, the women of the palace are easily influenced by the lure of the western life, and, while I encourage their education in most respects, there are some practices I would prefer them not to adopt.’

‘Well, you have no fear on that count. They’re hardly likely to learn anything from me.’

His golden eyes glimmered in a way that sent vibrations

dancing along her nerve-endings. Why did he look that way at her? Like a jungle cat sizing her up for the kill rather than someone who had to decide if she was morally upright enough to be invited to his country?

'I expected you to be totally docile, but you surprise me with your anger. Do you have any idea how beautiful you are when you are angry?'

His words blindsided her. Nobody had called her beautiful—not since Evan—and she couldn't believe what he'd said anyway. But the man opposite her was right about one thing—she was certainly angry. Morgan Fielding—who prided herself on staying cool under pressure—was cracking up. Something she'd never done even with Maverick, the boss with the worst reputation in the Gold Coast.

'Well, then,' she said, uncomfortable in the loud silence that followed, 'given that I have such a fiery temper, I wonder if I have given you yet another reason not to be considered morally upright enough to accompany Nobilah to Jamalbad?'

She tried to toss the question off lightly, to head off the mounting tension filling the air between them, but his eyes just crinkled at the edges, their golden depths deepening like warm caramel.

'On the contrary,' he murmured, his voice deep and resonant. 'You will be perfect.'

CHAPTER THREE

TEGAN eased the sleeping baby from her breast and offered her to her twin. 'Would you like to burp her, seeing as you won't have the chance again for a while? Maverick will be home in a couple of minutes, and I just want to finish the salad.'

'Please,' Morgan said, taking the infant and propping her gently over her shoulder as she swayed from side to side, rubbing the infant's back.

After a frantic few hours helping Nobilah pack and arranging her own affairs, it was so restful to hold her new niece while standing looking out through the palms to the placid waters of the Gold Coast canal beyond. There was still plenty to organise, but Nobilah had insisted Morgan take some time to visit her sister and her family before she left. Very soon her sister's husband, Maverick, would be home, and their conversation would not be so open. Right now it was worthwhile to be able to talk sister to sister.

Baby Ellie rewarded her ministrations with a very unladylike burp. She laughed as the infant briefly nuzzled her neck before settling back into a doze. 'Oh, I'm going to miss you, little one,' she said, pressing her lips to the baby's head.

'When will you be back?' her sister asked from the spacious kitchen.

'I'm not exactly sure. A few weeks, I guess.'

Tegan looked up sharply. 'You mean you don't know when you're coming back? That you're being whisked away to some tiny Arab emirate and you have no idea when you're coming home?'

Morgan shrugged. 'Sheikh Tajik didn't say, but I guess it's just until Fatima recovers enough to take over her duties again. I don't expect it to be for more than a few weeks.'

Tegan opened the refrigerator, pulling out the salad dressing she'd prepared earlier.

'So what's he like, this Sheikh?'

Morgan took a deep breath, her lungs filled with the fresh scent of newborn baby, while her mind battled to get a grip on the confusing images and impressions of Sheikh Tajik. It was hard to mesh the images—the dutiful son who had taken over the leadership of his country after his father's tragic death. The man who had bossed her mercilessly by the pool and told her everything was settled before she'd even had a chance to assimilate the news of her invitation to Jamalbad. The man who'd gazed into her soul with those golden eyes and left her strangely shaken…

'I don't know,' she said at last. 'I only met him today.'

'So he's not tall, dark and handsome, then?'

This time Morgan shook her head with no hesitation at all. 'No,' she said, 'not exactly. He's tall and broad-shouldered, and his hair is dark…'

'But he's not handsome?'

Morgan wavered. “Handsome” seemed too soft a word. He was strong-featured. With eyes that saw too much and revealed nothing that didn’t scare her. No, he wasn’t just handsome. He was beyond handsome.

He was disturbing.

A tremor moved through her and she clutched tiny Eleanor to her chest to disguise it. ‘Not exactly,’ she replied, wishing for a change of subject.

‘And is he married?’

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’

‘You tell me,’ responded Tegan with renewed interest as she arranged a couple of things on the table. ‘You’re the one who seems a bit affected by him.’

‘Forget it,’ Morgan lied. ‘It’s just that this is all a bit sudden. Besides, you know I’m not looking for a relationship.’

Tegan regarded her solemnly. ‘But you’re obviously desperate to have your own family.’

Morgan opened her mouth to defend herself, but Tegan was right there.

‘Just look at the way you are with Ellie! Don’t try telling me you’re not getting clucky.’

‘I love my niece. Isn’t that normal?’

‘It’s not normal to be pining over a failed relationship years after the event.’

‘I am not!’

Tegan gave her a searching look that left her sister in no doubt

she disagreed. 'Look at yourself, Morgan. You've buried yourself in your work for years, covering yourself up like a nun—just because that idiot Evan didn't appreciate what he had.'

Morgan grunted. 'Oh, he appreciated what he had, all right. Getting engaged to me meant he could protect his precious family from the truth about him. He used me, and I was so stupid I fell for it.'

Tegan placed the salad on the table and came over to wrap an arm around her sister's shoulders, giving them a squeeze. 'Hey, you were in love with him.'

'No,' Morgan said, shaking her head. 'I thought I was. But I was just in love with the idea of being in love—and with the idea that someone wanted to marry me. He didn't want me at all, except to use me. I'm never letting anyone do that to me again.'

'Which doesn't mean you have to shut yourself off from the entire world! You'll hardly find a man if you lock yourself away. In fact, I'm glad you're going on this trip. Who knows where it might lead?'

Morgan didn't answer straight away, instead thinking that since marrying Maverick her sister had become a hopeless romantic. She kissed the sleeping infant's hair and laid her down in her bassinet, tucking the light blankets in around her. Her task complete, she turned to her sister.

'I know you only want me to be as happy as you are now, but I really think you've got the wrong idea. I'm going to the desert for a few weeks to keep a middle-aged woman company, nothing

more. So if you think I'm going to be coming home with any more than a toy camel, then you're in for a big disappointment.'

After dinner Maverick offered to drive Morgan back to the sprawling mansion that served as a holiday home for Nobilah, stopping off along the way to let her pick up her passport and a few odd things she wanted to collect from her apartment, and to let her neighbours know she'd be away for a few weeks.

It was late by the time Maverick steered the car through the gates and pulled up outside the mansion that stood silent and imposing under the bright moonlight.

'Thanks for the lift,' she said, keeping her voice low as he hauled her bag from the boot and swung it down onto the paving alongside her. 'You take care of my little sister and Ellie.'

'You know I will,' he replied, placing one hand on her shoulder. 'But who's going to take care of you? Tegan's worried about you going off with no idea of when you'll be back.'

'Don't you start,' she said, wishing everyone would stop mirroring the very misgivings she was having. It was one thing to head off to Jamalbad to accompany Nobilah. It was another thing entirely to know that Sheikh Tajik, with his golden eyes and unsettling presence, was going to be part of the package. 'I'll be fine,' she said, as much to convince herself as anything, and she stretched up to give her brother-in-law a hug and a heartfelt kiss on the cheek.

His long arms enclosed her and he gave her a mighty squeeze that lifted her feet from the ground before, with a final kiss and

saying, 'Take care,' he was back behind the wheel.

Morgan waited while he drove away, one hand lifted in a silent farewell. She didn't know how long she would be away, but she knew she would miss her Gold Coast family and her new niece. Then the car turned onto the road and disappeared from view, and the fingers of her open hand curled as a prickling sensation needled its way down her spine. This was it, the point of no return, and that realisation sent excitement vying with a menacing anxiety inside her. But she'd told Maverick she'd be fine. She'd better start believing it, given she'd be on the plane in less than eight hours.

With a sigh, she bent down to pick up her bag. It was whipped out of her reach from behind. She gasped and reeled around, only to find a mountain standing between her and the door.

'Where have you been all this time?'

'You startled me,' she managed to say, her hand covering a thumping heart she knew would never completely settle back to normal—not while she was in this man's presence. 'I can carry my own luggage, thank you.' She held out her hand to take the bag, but he ignored it.

'Why are you so late?'

Shock turned to indignation. 'I didn't realise you were going to wait up for me. What an honour.'

She regretted the jibe the moment it had left her mouth—what was it about this man that brought out the worst in her?—but he merely brushed it aside by slashing his free hand in the

direction of the departed vehicle. 'Who was the man you were whispering to? That you were kissing?'

'Why, Sheikh Tajik,' she purred, with more bravado than she had ever known, 'I didn't realise you cared.' Then she attempted to coolly brush past the looming mountain in her path, knowing that if he could hear the blood thumping in her veins he would know she was anything but cool.

But his hand shot out and circled her wrist before she could pass, trapping her alongside the long, hard length of him. 'You told me you had no boyfriends.'

'And you think I lied? Shame on you for your lack of trust.'

'Then who was he?'

'What possible business can it be of yours?'

'Tell me!'

Her chest heaving, she glared up at him, not missing the way fury had tightened the skin covering his features and turned the tendons in his throat to steel pillars. 'It was my brother-in-law! My very happily married brother-in-law, I might add. There,' she said, as her news sank in, sweet satisfaction dripping from her voice, 'are you satisfied now?'

The ragged sound of his breathing was his only response—that and the turmoil in his golden eyes, filling the silence with an atmosphere more threatening than any words.

She gasped and tried to pull away, but his grip was made of iron, his hold relentless.

'Why did you not tell me you were going out?'

She twisted her arm, still fruitlessly trying to free herself. 'Your mother knew. Why didn't you ask her?'

'Nobilah is in bed.'

'Which is exactly where I intend to be, once you deign to let me go!'

Silence followed her outburst. Silence heavy with a new kind of tension. Heavy with desire. She could sense it thickening the air between them. She could see it in the set of his jaw and the glimmer of his eyes. Once more she cursed herself for her ill-chosen words.

'Now, there's an idea,' he said, in little more than a growl, sending tremors skittering up her spine anew.

In the instant before it happened she saw it coming. Which meant she had less than an instant to act to prevent it.

And yet she did nothing, mesmerised by the alluring touch of his fingers angling her chin higher, by the deeply seductive lure of his mouth as it dipped to meet hers.

And then his lips touched hers and she knew she'd waited too long to stop him. She tried to tell herself she cared. And she would care later, she knew. But for now she was content to drink in the power in the coaxing caress of his lips, to feel his desire like the gentle hiss of the ocean pulling back before the next inevitable wave crashed in.

His mouth moved over hers. Intoxicating. Seductive. And if he picked up on her inexperience, he didn't let on. But then, he made it easy to follow his lead—just as he made it impossible

not to want to. Not when he tasted of power and strength and all things exotic, an intoxicating mix that had her melting against him.

There was a sound—her bag hitting the tiled floor—before she felt herself enclosed in his embrace, his strong arms moulding her to him length to length, his hands holding her tight, and suddenly it wasn't just her mouth and lips involved in this kiss, it was every part of her. She could barely think. She could hardly breathe. And what oxygen there was seemed only to fuel the blast furnace of their kiss.

And then, before she could assimilate all the sensations, before she could make sense of what was happening, it was over.

His head pulled back, his arms slid away, leaving her trembling like an adolescent who'd just had her first kiss.

And realisation dawned on her like a cloud-filled morning. If Tajik had been looking for an excuse to leave her behind, a reason to doubt her lack of sexual experience, she'd just handed it to him on a platter.

Desperately she searched for some of her earlier bravado. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, wishing she could wipe the entire experience away as easily. 'What the hell was that for?' she said, trying to quell the shaking in her voice.

He looked down at her, all golden power and dark desire, his breathing heavy. 'I told you that you were beautiful when you were angry,' he said, his voice little more than a coarse rumble that tugged at her raw nerve-endings and refused to let them

settle. ‘But it is nothing to how beautiful you are when you are aroused.’

‘Oh, n…no,’ she stammered, shaking her head as she took a wobbly step back. ‘I was hardly—’ But she couldn’t bring herself to say the word. By saying it she would be admitting it, and by admitting it when she was about to board a plane with him for Jamalbad, for goodness knew how long, she would be in real trouble.

‘So you always kiss men like that when you are not aroused?’

‘I don’t kiss men like that—period! You just took me by surprise.’

His eyes proclaimed a victory that made no sense to her. How could it be victory when he hadn’t won that kiss? She’d damn near volunteered it. And why that didn’t have him terminating her contract on the spot, when he’d been so insistent on her virtue before, made even less sense.

‘By surprise, you say? And I say you are proving to be a more delightful surprise by the minute.’

‘And you are proving to be more irritating by the minute!’

For a moment he looked too shocked to respond. She was wondering if she’d well and truly overstepped the mark—here was a man used to people kow-towing to him, a man who could put paid to any idea of her entering his country—when he suddenly threw back his head and laughed.

It was too much. Indignation lent strength to her backbone. She reached down and grabbed her bag. She needed to be in her

room.

No, it was much simpler than that. She needed to be anywhere he wasn't. She reached for the door handle and turned it.

The laughter stopped behind her just as suddenly as it had started. 'Miss Fielding.'

His voice rang out like an order. Her hand paused and reluctantly she looked over her shoulder, half wishing she was more like her sister. Giving anyone lip had never been Morgan's forte. Why had she ever expected to go head to head with a man like this and get away with it?

She took one look into his eyes, shocked at what she saw. Under the night sky he could have been some kind of jungle cat, golden eyes glistening with hunger and the guarantee of a certain kill. She shivered, her heart thumping afresh, certain that he was about to terminate her services, if not her.

'What is it?' she whispered, her voice little more than a shudder.

'We leave at six,' he said. 'Be ready.'

The sleek jet crouched low on the tarmac, its El Jamal insignia curling artistically up the tail, whilst heated air from the warming engines turned the landscape behind into a shimmer. Inside the limousine speeding out over the tarmac towards it, Morgan knew her thoughts had just as little clarity.

Her fuzzy head was only partly to blame—it had taken her hours to get to sleep, and when she had her tortured dreams of a dark and dangerous pursuer had left her tangled in the sheets.

She should never have let Tajik kiss her. She should have pushed him away.

And then the car slowed, and the real reason for both her sleepless night and her muddled thoughts caught her eye and held on tight. Oh, no, she thought, as she felt herself drowning in those liquid eyes. It wasn't just the kiss and what she should have done. The real reason for her addled brain was the man who sprawled so nonchalantly opposite her, his long legs eating up the space between them, his hands steepled over his stomach as his eyes lazily contemplated her.

And as he watched her lips tingled with the memories of that kiss, with the warm press of his lips and the welcoming sensuality of his mouth. She bit down on her own betraying lips and turned away as the car came to a halt.

Beside her Nobilah squeezed her hand, misinterpreting Morgan's lack of enthusiasm. 'Don't be nervous. Our pilots are the best in the world,' she said with a smile in her son's direction. 'And by tonight we'll be there. You're going to love Jamalbad.'

Morgan didn't doubt it. But she knew she'd like it one heck of a lot better if Tajik wasn't part of the deal. She smiled back, fully aware of the Sheikh's continued scrutiny. 'I know I will.'

Then the door was pulled open, and it was time to alight and board the streamlined jet.

'Goodbye, Gold Coast,' Morgan muttered as she followed Nobilah up the stairs into the plane, taking her last look back at the familiar shape of Tamborine Mountain and the range

that bordered the Gold Coast strip and marked the start of the hinterland.

Her words were whipped away by the wind that tugged at her fitted skirt and tightly knotted hair, but still she paused at the top of the stairs, hesitant to take that final step into the plane.

'What's wrong?' asked the Sheikh, bounding up the stairs two at a time behind her. 'Fear of flying?'

She looked back at him, his linen pants and white shirt emphasising his dark hair and framing his golden good looks, and she felt her world of security and planning start to crumble.

How could a man look both cool and hot at the same time? How could he have eyes that looked coldly assessing one minute, yet rich with molten desire the next?

And how could she feel both fear and yet such a bewildering attraction? What was it about this man that unsettled her on so many levels?

She shook her head, more to clear her thoughts than to answer his question, but it served the purpose. 'I'm just not too good with turbulence,' she answered honestly. Not since the accident.

'In that case,' he said, climbing a step higher so that his eyes were on the same level and just inches from her own, 'let's hope this is all plain sailing.'

Was he talking about the flight? As she searched his eyes all she could think about was another time when his face had been so close, his lips just a heartbeat from hers. Her gaze dropped to those lips, her pulse kicking up as she remembered the sensual

press of them against her own, the masterful way he'd overcome her initial resistance, the easy way he'd melted her from the inside out.

Then those lips turned into a smile that broke into her thoughts, forcing her eyes back to his.

'I know,' he said, his voice a clear and steady thread amid the noise of screaming engines. 'I keep thinking about it too.'

Did he mean what she thought he meant? Were her thoughts so obvious?

It took a few moments to find her voice, given the tremors that coursed through her body. 'I don't know what you mean.' Then she turned and headed into the plane, knowing full well that it hadn't been fear of flying that had held up her progress boarding. It was knowing that once inside she would no longer be in her world.

She would be in his.

Tajik watched her enter the plane, enjoying her discomfiture almost as much as he'd enjoyed last night's kiss. That had been a surprise—the urgency of his passion like a beast demanding to be fed. But it was little wonder, he mused as he moved towards the cockpit. It had been a long time since he'd had a woman, after all, and this one promised to deliver everything he would need from her in that department. She'd shocked herself too with the force of her response, if her eyes had been any indication.

Visions of another pair of eyes, deeply expressive and framed with kohl, intruded on his thoughts, and once again he felt a stab

of guilt that he might feel an attraction to another woman—and one so different from his fiancée. But what choice did he have? Joharah was gone, and reports overnight had only confirmed what Kamil had discovered. Taj needed to take a wife, and soon, if he was to put paid to his cousin's moves to angle the sheikhdom under his control.

He greeted the other pilot and strapped himself into his seat, his mind exploring every memory and nuance of that kiss.

Besides, he told himself as he picked up the flight charts to look them over, if he had to marry anyone, and convince Qasim that it was a real marriage, then it was far better for there to be some kind of attraction between them.

And there was definitely that.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE interior of the plane was nothing like she'd ever seen before. Morgan was used to commercial airlines, with their row upon row of close-fitting seats and vinyl everything, but after being guided to the right through a short passage, she saw the cabin opened into what looked more like a lounge room, with a scattering of armchairs and tables sprinkled around the sides of the jet. Richly patterned carpet adorned the floor, and artworks lined the polished walnut walls. And from the glimpse she'd had, the rest of the plane's interior was divided into more rooms beyond.

The dark-eyed flight attendant showed her to a plush leather chair, alongside which Nobilah was already enjoying a pre-flight glass of juice. Tajik, she noticed, had vanished.

She buckled her seatbelt and accepted the glass of juice that had arrived unbidden. 'You mentioned that we'd be there tonight,' she said to the older woman. 'How long is the flight?'

'Around fourteen to fifteen hours. I'm afraid there's not much to do but read or watch movies until then.'

'Sounds terrible,' joked Morgan, finally starting to recover now that Tajik wasn't around to throw her into a spin.

'Where are the others?' she asked a little while later, curiosity getting the better of her as Tajik failed to appear. 'Kamil and Sheikh Tajik.'

‘Kamil will no doubt be in his office, sorting out the paperwork.’ Nobilah pointed to a narrow cabin they’d passed on the way in. ‘And Taj will be in the cockpit.’

‘He’s flying the plane?’

Nobilah laughed and patted Morgan’s hand. ‘Don’t look so alarmed. Taj is an excellent pilot. Now, what film do you think we should watch first?’

Morgan offered her opinion, and then settled back into her comfortable chair for the takeoff. If Tajik was busy in the cockpit, rather than here in the lounge, then maybe this flight wouldn’t be the ordeal she’d imagined. And, given he’d left her with not a word, maybe she’d read too much into that moment on the stairs.

As maybe she’d read far too much into that kiss.

Yes, he was attractive and charismatic, and he had a way of looking at her that made her heart lurch to a standstill, but he was the ruler of an independent Arab country. Way beyond anything in her experience. Way out of her league.

He’d be well used to escorting the world’s most beautiful women to the world’s most beautiful places. And no doubt he was equally at home making love to them. In which case that stolen kiss last night in a dimly lit gateway probably didn’t even register with him. Beyond making a point of how morally suspect she was, of course.

But then why had he told her that he kept thinking about it too? Unless he was reminding her of how easy she’d seemed?

Morgan squeezed her eyes shut and pinched the bridge of her nose. It was only yesterday she'd first met Sheikh Tajik. And it was only yesterday she'd learned of her sudden trip to Jamalbad. No wonder her nerves were frayed. She needed to unwind and get things back into perspective. She might as well enjoy the flight, and then, once back in Jamalbad, he'd be busy ruling his sheikhdom, or whatever it was that sheikhs did, while she'd no doubt be ensconced in the women's quarters with Nobilah. She'd probably hardly ever see him.

Which suited her just fine.

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