

Innocent Mistress, Royal Wife
Robyn Donald



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Содержание

INNOCENT MISTRESS, ROYAL WIFE

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Did he know she was a virgin? ‘I don’t think I’m sweet. Practical, perhaps...’

But a practical woman wouldn’t be locked in his arms, her body rejoicing at the hardness of his, her heart pounding so heavily he must feel it.

‘Do you feel practical now?’ His voice was low and tender.

She closed her eyes, afraid that he’d see just what she was feeling—total surrender, a desperate, wanton abandonment of all the rules she’d lived by until she’d met him.

‘No,’ she admitted.

‘So—how do you feel?’ And when she didn’t answer he laughed softly. ‘A little wild?’

He punctuated each word with teasing kisses, but she sensed the inner demands driving him, and something fierce flared up to match his hunger.

‘Reckless?’ he murmured, his mouth poised so close to hers that their breath mingled.

‘Yes,’ she said, knowing that now there would be no going back—knowing and not caring, because there was nothing in the world she wanted as much as learning about Rafiq in the most intimate way of all.

Robyn Donald can’t remember not being able to read, and will be eternally grateful to the local farmers who carefully avoided her on a dusty country road as she read her way to and from school, transported to places and times far away from her small village in Northland, New Zealand. Growing up fed her

habit; as well as training as a teacher, marrying and raising two children, she discovered the delights of romances and read them voraciously, especially enjoying the ones written by New Zealand writers. So much so that one day she decided to write one herself. Writing soon grew to be as much of a delight as reading—although infinitely more challenging—and when eventually her first book was accepted by Mills & Boon® she felt she'd arrived home. She still lives in a small town in Northland, with her family close by, using the landscape as a setting for much of her work. Her life is enriched by the friends she's made among writers and readers, and complicated by a determined Corgi called Buster, who is convinced that blackbirds are evil entities. Her greatest hobby is still reading, with travelling a very close second.

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THE MEDITERRANEAN PRINCE'S CAPTIVE VIRGIN
HIS MAJESTY'S MISTRESS
VIRGIN BOUGHT AND PAID FOR

INNOCENT MISTRESS, ROYAL WIFE

BY
ROBYN DONALD



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CHAPTER ONE

RAFIQ DE COUTEVEILLE looked directly at Therese Fanchette, the motherly, middle-aged woman whose razor-sharp mind oversaw the security of his island country in the Indian Ocean. In a level voice he asked, 'Exactly what sort of relationship does this Alexa Considine have with Felipe Gastano? Are they lovers?'

Therese said neutrally, 'They are sharing a room at the hotel.'

So they were lovers. Rafiq glanced down at the photograph on his desk. Fine featured, medium height and slim, the woman was laughing up at the man he'd had in his sights for the past two years. She didn't look like Felipe Gastano's sort, but then, he thought with ice-cold anger, neither had Hani. His sister, now dead. 'What have you discovered about her?'

‘Not much, but I’ve just been talking to a source in New Zealand. I taped the conversation, of course, and I’ll make a written report after I’ve had the information verified.’ She straightened her spectacles and checked her notes. ‘Alexa Considine is twenty-six years old, and in New Zealand she is known as Lexie Sinclair. Until a year ago she was a veterinarian in a rural practice in the north of the country. When her half-sister—Jacoba Sinclair, the model—and Prince Marco of Illyria became engaged, it emerged that Ms Considine is actually the daughter of the dead dictator of Illyria.’

‘Paulo Considine?’ At her nod, Rafiq’s brows lifted. ‘How did the daughter of one of the most hated and feared men of the twentieth century grow up in New Zealand?’

‘Her mother fled there when the children were very young. She must have had good reason to be terrified of her husband. According to the news media, neither girl had any idea of their real identity until they were adults.’

‘Anyone who knew Considine had reason to be afraid. Go on,’ Rafiq said, his eyes once more on the photograph.

‘She has spent the past year working with the peasants in Illyria, healing their animals and teaching classes at the veterinary college she’s helped set up under Prince Alex of Illyria’s patronage.’ Therese looked up. ‘It appears he used her obvious innocence of her father’s sins to break the ancient system of blood feuds in his country.’

Yes, Alex of Illyria was clever enough to stage-manage the

situation to his advantage, Rafiq thought, his mind racing.

So Felipe Gastano had brought Alexa Considine to Moraze. What the *hell* was her family thinking to allow it? Her cousins were sophisticated men of the world; they must know that Gastano lived on the edge of society, using his wits, his handsome face and the faded glamour of an empty title to dazzle people. The tabloids called Count Felipe Gastano a great lover. Rafiq knew of a woman who'd killed herself after he'd stripped her of her self-respect by seducing her and then introducing her to drugs.

But perhaps Alexa Considine had something of her father in her. In spite of her work for the peasants, she could be an embarrassment to the Illyrian royal family.

Possibly she didn't need protection because she knew very well how to look after herself...

He had to know more before he worked out how best to exploit the situation. 'She and Gastano have been lovers for how long?'

'About two months.'

Rafiq's dark gaze travelled to the handsome face of his enemy. Although he doubted that Gastano felt anything much beyond a cynical, predatory lust for any woman, he had a reputation for pride. He had always demanded beauty in his amours.

But Alexa Considine—Lexie Sinclair—was not beautiful. Attractive, yes, even striking, but without the overt sexuality the man had always favoured. So why had he chosen her to warm his bed?

Brows drawing together, Rafiq studied the photograph of the woman on Gastano's arm. It had been taken at a party in London, and she was laughing up at Gastano's good-looking face.

The illegitimate son of an aristocrat, the man had assumed the title 'Count' after the real count, his half-brother, had died from a drug overdose. Gastano might well consider that the Sinclair woman's connections to the rich and powerful Considine family—tainted though they were—would give him the social standing he'd spent his life seeking.

That certainly made sense. And now Gastano's arrogance and his conviction that he was above suspicion had delivered him into Rafiq's hands.

Transferring his gaze to the crest on the wall of his office, Rafiq reined in a cold anticipation as he surveyed the emblem of his family—a rampant horse wearing a crown that held a glitter of crimson, signifying the precious fire-diamonds found only on Moraze.

Rafiq would not be his father's son—or Hani's brother—if he failed to use the situation to his advantage.

Revenge was an ugly ambition, but Hani's death should not be in vain.

As for Alexa Considine—she might have been innocent before she met Gastano, though it seemed unlikely. Her half-sister had worked in the notoriously amoral world of high fashion, so maybe Alexa Considine had a modern attitude to sex, taking partners as she wanted them.

But if not, he'd be doing her a favour. Felipe Gastano was no considerate lover, and once his world started crumbling around him he'd fight viciously to save himself. She'd be far safer out of the way.

Besides, he thought with cold satisfaction, it would give him great pleasure to take her from Gastano, to show the creep the limits of his power and influence before the trap closed around him.

Mind made up, he said evenly, 'This is what I want you to do.'

Mme Fanchette leaned forward, frowning slightly as he outlined his instructions. When he'd finished she said quietly, 'Very well, then. And the count?'

Rafiq's voice hardened. 'Watch him closely—put your best people onto it, because he's as wary as a cat.' He got up and walked across to the window, looking down at the city spread below. 'Fortunately he is also a man with a huge sense of self-esteem, and a sophisticate's disdain for people who live in small, isolated countries far from the fleshpots of the world he preys on.'

From beneath lowered lashes, Rafiq watched the woman in the flame-coloured dress. Cleverly cut to reveal long legs, narrow waist and high, small breasts, the silk dress angled for male attention. But Alexa Considine's face didn't quite fit its skilful, not entirely discreet sensuality.

The photographs hadn't lied; she wasn't a top-class beauty, Rafiq decided dispassionately—although, like every other

woman attending the official opening of Moraze's newest, most luxurious, highly exclusive hotel, she was superbly groomed. Her cosmetics had been applied expertly and her golden-brown hair cut by a master to make the most of her features. However, apart from that eye-catcher of a dress, she stood out, and not just because she was alone.

Gastano, Rafiq noted, was across the other side of the room flirting with a film star of somewhat notorious reputation.

Interesting...

Unlike every other woman in the place, Alexa Considine wore no jewellery. And she looked unawakened, as though no one had ever kissed that tempting, lushly opulent mouth—sensuous enough to make any red-blooded man fantasise about the touch of it on his skin.

Rafiq's gut tightened. Swiftly controlling the hot surge of desire through his blood, he scanned her fine-boned face with an impassive expression. It seemed highly unlikely that her features told anything like the truth. Mme Fanchette's source in New Zealand had come up with a blank about any possible affairs, but that didn't mean Alexa was an innocent. At university no one would have taken much notice of her love life.

And she was certainly Felipe Gastano's mistress, so that grave, unworldly air had to be spurious, a mere trick of genetics from somewhere in her bloodline.

Yet her cool self-possession challenged Rafiq in some primal, instinctive way. What would it be like to banish the composure

from those regular features, set those large, slightly tilted eyes aflame with desire, feel those lips shape themselves to his...?

It took an effort of will to look away and pretend to scan the crowd, carefully chosen for their ability to create a buzz—a gathering wave of gossip and comment that would reach the ears of those who wanted privacy and opulence when they holidayed.

Rafiq had himself vetted the guest list, and apart from the woman in the sunset-coloured dress everybody in this Indian Ocean fantasy of a salon wore their sophistication like a badge of belonging.

Standing alone in the elegant, crowded room, she was attracting interested glances. Rafiq had to rein in a disturbing urge to forge his way through the chattering mob and cut her out, like a stallion with its favourite mare.

As he watched she turned and walked out through the wide doors into the warm, tropical night, the light from the chandeliers gleaming over satiny, golden-amber hair.

Across the room Gastano looked up, said something to the film star, and set off after his mistress. Rafiq fought back a raw anger that drove him to follow Gastano, and moved with the lithe gait of a man in complete control of his body.

He should leave it to the security men, of course, but he wanted to see them together, Gastano and Alexa Considine. That way he'd know for certain the truth about their relationship.

It was, he thought cynically as he stepped out onto the wide stone terrace, a perfect night for dalliance—the stars were as big

as lamps, the sea gleamed like black silk shot with silver, and erotic perfumes from the flower farms of Moraze drifted lazily through the palms.

Stopping in the shadow of a vine heavy with flamboyant scarlet blossom, Rafiq watched the count walk up to Alexa Considine, and fought a primitive impulse to follow the man and best him in a territorial contest of overt masculine power.

The impulse startled him. Even in his amours he never allowed himself to be anything other than self-possessed, and this proprietary attitude towards a woman he didn't even know—and planned to use—was an unwelcome development.

Of course, it couldn't be personal—well, it was, he thought with a slow burn of anger, but it was between him and Gastano. Attractive though she was, the woman was merely a bystander.

Frowning, he noted her reaction to the count's opening remark, scanning her face for emotions as she turned from her contemplation of the lagoon.

Although Rafiq had a hunter's patience, he must have made some slight movement, because the woman looked over the count's shoulder. Her eyes widened momentarily, only to be hastily covered by long lashes.

Not in fear or surprise, he thought, but in warning. A very cool customer, this one. No, he didn't have to concern himself about her feelings; she was fully in command of them.

Narrowly he inspected the regular features highlighted by the silver witchery of starlight. Her sensuous mouth was compressed,

her detached expression not altering as Gastano bent his head down to her.

The count's voice was pitched too low for Rafiq to hear what he said, but the tone was unmistakeable—intimate and smoothly caressing.

The woman's brows lifted. 'No, I haven't changed my mind.' Again the count spoke, and this time Rafiq caught a few words. He stiffened.

Speaking in English, the count had said, 'Come, don't be so angry, my dearest girl,' accompanied by a lingering, significant gaze.

She tossed back a crisp comment and walked past him, her spine straight as she headed for Rafiq.

'Hello,' she said in English, her voice clear and steady. 'I'm Lexie Sinclair. Isn't it a gorgeous evening?' Not giving him time to answer, she turned to include the count and asked in a pleasant tone, 'Do you two know each other?'

Full marks for social skills, Rafiq thought sardonically. Aloud he said, 'Of course.' Without offering a hand, he favoured the other man with a slight unsmiling inclination of his head. 'Gastano.'

'Ah, sir, how delightful to meet you again.' The count's voice was a mixture of impudence and false man-to-man heartiness. 'I must congratulate you on yet another superb investment—I can tell you now that this hotel will be a huge success. I've already had two film stars singing its praises, and at least one minor European

royal is planning to bring his latest mistress here for a week's tryst.'

He switched his attention to the woman, letting his eyes linger on her face, and went on in a voice where the impertinence had transmuted into charming ruefulness. 'Alexa, I must introduce you to Rafiq de Courteveille. He is the ruler of this lovely island, and all who live here, you know. But I must warn you to beware of him—he is well known to be a breaker of hearts. Sir, this is Alexa Considine, who prefers to be known as Lexie Sinclair. Perhaps she will tell you why.'

With an ironic smile, he bowed to them both then walked back into the hotel.

Aware of the anger that tightened her neat features, Rafiq took Alexa's arm. Ignoring her startled resistance, he walked her towards the edge of the wide, stone-flagged terrace.

A volatile mixture of irritation laced with apprehension had prompted Lexie's decision to make use of this stranger. If she'd known that he was the hereditary ruler of Moraze she'd never have dared; she'd probably shattered protocol. It had been kind of him to ignore her lack of manners.

So why did she feel that her impulsive approach to him had set something dangerous in motion? Resisting a faint, foolish urge to turn and run, she stole a rapid sideways glance at his face and dragged in a silent breath. A silver wash of starlight emphasised boldly angular features, strong and thrusting and uncompromising.

Dead gorgeous, she thought with involuntary appreciation, her heart picking up speed. In superbly tailored evening clothes he carried himself like an autocrat, his six-foot-several-inches of lean manhood almost intimidating.

Against such steel-hard authority, Felipe's glamorous sophistication suddenly seemed flashy and superficial.

Sedately, she said, 'It's an honour to meet you, sir.'

'My name is Rafiq.' He smiled at her, his dark eyes intent.

Lexie's pulse rate accelerated further, and an odd twist of sensation tightened her stomach. Trying to curb her runaway response, she struggled to remember what she'd read about the man who ruled this small, independent island state.

Not a lot. He didn't make the headlines, or figure largely in the tabloids. Felipe had referred to him contemptuously as 'the tinpot fake prince of a speck of land thousands of miles from civilisation.'

But Felipe's jeering dismissal of the man beside her had been foolish as well as wrong. Rafiq de Couteville walked in an aura of effortless power based on formidable male assurance.

Her mind jerked away from the memory of the moment that morning when, tired after the long flight from Europe, she'd discovered that Felipe had organised for her to spend the week in a room with him.

It had been a shock. She'd already decided she wasn't in love with Felipe, and by going back to New Zealand she'd be ending their relationship.

The week in Moraze on her own was to have been a holiday, seven days to reorient herself to her real life as a country vet in Northland. Being met by Felipe at the airport had been unexpected. But when he'd swept her off to the hotel he was staying in, and they'd been shown into a suite with flowers everywhere and a bottle of champagne in a silver bucket prominently displayed, she'd realised with dismay and a certain unease that he'd set the scene for seduction.

Still, she'd been civilised about it, and so had Felipe, when she'd told him that no, she wasn't going to join him in any sensual fantasy.

He hadn't argued. Felipe never did. He'd taken her rejection with a smiling shrug, observing that it didn't matter, that he'd sleep on one of the very comfortable sofas. That was when she'd found out that he'd cancelled her booking at her own, much more modest hotel some miles away. It had been impossible to get a room to herself—it was the holiday season and all the hotels were fully booked, an apologetic clerk told her.

It hadn't been the first time Felipe had suggested they make love, but before it had always been with a light touch so she'd never felt pressured.

This time there had been something about his humorously regretful acceptance that didn't ring true; he'd sounded satisfied, almost smug. Oh, she wasn't afraid, but right now she felt a long way from home, and rather vulnerable and wary, whereas before she'd always been at ease with him.

Well, almost always.

He'd talked her into accompanying him to the party, only to abandon her after the first half-hour. It seemed very like punishment.

Yes, she thought—deliberate and rather vindictive. That sense of unease grew. Because she was out of place in this assembly of famous faces she'd seen in newspapers and gossip columns. Others were complete strangers, but they too wore fabulous clothes and even more fabulous jewels, and they all seemed to know each other.

'You are all right?' the man beside her asked in a deep, cool voice that ruffled across her skin like dark velvet.

'Yes, of course.' Goodness, was that her voice? Pitched slightly too high, the words had emerged almost breathlessly.

'Should I apologise for disturbing you and your friend?' Rafiq de Couteville asked.

'No, not at all,' she said, again too quickly. She fixed her gaze on the lagoon, placid and shimmering beneath the tropical night.

She stole a glance at Rafiq de Couteville, and a hot shiver worked its way down her spine, igniting her nerves so that she was acutely, almost painfully aware of him. Like her he was looking out across the lagoon, and in the darkness his arrogantly autocratic profile was an uncompromising slash across the star-gemmed sky.

Both he and Felipe were exceedingly good-looking, but the difference between them couldn't have been greater.

Felipe had dazzled her; after the hard work of proving herself to the Illyrians, he'd accepted her without comment, made her laugh, introduced her to interesting people and generally entertained her with a light touch.

And, until she'd been presented with the *fait accompli* of that huge double bed, she'd taken him at face value.

Perhaps she should have seen the signs sooner—like the moment, after they'd been seeing each other for a month or so, when he'd noticed she was tired and told her he could get something that would take away her tiredness...if she wanted him to.

After one glance at her stunned expression he'd laughed softly and with affection, before apologising charmingly, saying that he'd only been testing her.

Then she'd believed him. Now she wondered whether he'd been lying. In spite of seeing so much of him, she really didn't know Felipe at all. Her hands tightened on the balustrade.

'There is something wrong. Can I help?'

Could Rafiq de Couteville read minds? 'I'm fine,' she said briskly. After all, she didn't know this man either.

'Do you know Gastano well?'

'I've known him for a couple of months,' she said with restraint.

'It appears you are close to becoming engaged to him.'

'What?' He was watching her keenly, those dark eyes uncomfortably piercing. 'I don't know where you got that idea

from,' she said more forcefully than she'd intended, startled by her instinctive rejection of the possibility.

His straight brows rose, but his voice was smooth when he said, 'You don't find the idea of taming a man like that intriguing?'

Turning her gaze to the pool and the gracefully curved trunks of the palms beyond, she said abruptly, 'I don't find the idea of taming *any* man intriguing.'

And she stopped, because this was an odd conversation to have with a man she didn't know.

'It's supposed to be a universal female desire,' he observed.

A note in his words told her he was amused—and strangely, she found that a relief. 'Not mine,' she told him brightly. 'What made you think that we were about to become engaged?'

'I heard it somewhere,' he said. 'Perhaps whoever was discussing it misunderstood—or possibly I did. So what *is* your desire?'

The flicker of excitement deep inside her leapt into a flame. He was flirting with her.

She should go back inside. Actually, she should leave this party. But that suite upstairs, with its one huge bed, loomed like a threat. Shrugging off that worry, she smiled up at her companion. Although his lips curved in response, she couldn't see any humour there. He was watching her, his chiselled face enigmatic in the starlight, his expression speculative.

Did he know what was happening to her? Could he feel it too

—that keen awareness, the anticipation, hidden yet potent, the whispered instructions she didn't dare obey?

Hastily, before she could react to a treacherous impulse to lift herself onto her toes and kiss his excitingly sensuous mouth, she said demurely, 'Only a foolish woman tells a man her innermost desire.'

'My innermost desire at this moment,' he said, his deep voice investing the conventional words with an edge that sent Lexie's pulse racing into overdrive, 'is to discover if your mouth tastes as good as it looks.'

Lexie froze, her widening eyes taking in his honed features.

His smile twisted into something close to cynicism. 'But not if it goes against your principles.'

'No—well—no,' she stammered, barely able to articulate.

'Then shall we try it?' He took her startled silence for assent, and bent his head to claim her lips in a kiss that was surprisingly gentle.

At first.

But when her bones melted his arms came around her and he pulled her against his lean, powerful body—and all hell broke loose.

That cool, exploring kiss hardened into fierce demand and Lexie burned up in his arms, meeting and matching his frankly sexual hunger. Stunned by an urgent, voluptuous craving, she almost surrendered to the adrenalin raging like a bushfire through her.

She felt the subtle flexion of his body, and knew that he too wanted this—this headstrong need, mindless and sensuous. Desperately, she fought to retain a tiny spark of sanity as a bulwark against the white-hot sensations his experienced kiss summoned inside her.

Yet when he lifted his head and drawled, ‘Shall we go further down into the garden?’ it took every ounce of her will power to refuse.

In a ragged voice she muttered, ‘No.’

He let her go and stepped back. Embarrassed, shocked and angry with herself, she whirled and set off for the bright rectangles of light that indicated the doors onto the terrace.

‘One moment.’

Startled into stillness by the decisive command, she stopped and half turned.

He was right behind her. A long-fingered hand lifted to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, and somehow he managed to turn the simple gesture into a caress that sent more forbidden excitement drumming through her.

‘You don’t look quite so storm tossed now,’ he said, that sardonic smile tilting his lips again as he surveyed her face. ‘But a trip to the powder room is advisable, I think.’

‘I—yes,’ she said, forcing her voice into its usual practical tone. ‘Are you coming inside too?’

‘Not for a few minutes,’ he said gravely. ‘My body, alas, is not so easily mastered as yours.’

‘Oh.’ Hot faced, she took off to the sound of his quiet laughter behind her.

Rafiq watched her go, frowning as his *aide-de-camp* passed her in the doorway, the man’s presence breaking in on thoughts that weren’t as ordered as he’d have liked.

Dragging his mind away from Lexie’s sleek back and the gentle sway of her hips, he said abruptly, ‘Yes?’

‘Your instructions have been followed.’

‘Thank you,’ Rafiq said crisply, and turned to go inside. Then he stopped. ‘You noticed the woman who passed you on the way in?’

‘Yes, sir.’ When Rafiq’s brows lifted, the younger man expanded, ‘She is also under s—’ He stopped as Rafiq’s brows met over his arrogant nose. Hastily he went on, ‘She is staying at the hotel with Count Felipe Gastano.’

He stepped back as another man approached them, saying to Rafiq, ‘You’re leaving already, sir?’

Rafiq returned the newcomer’s smile. He respected any man who’d hauled himself up from poverty and refugee status, and this man—the CEO of the construction firm that had built the new resort—was noted for his honesty and philanthropy. ‘I’m afraid I must,’ he said. ‘I have an early call tomorrow.’

They exchanged pleasantries, but as Rafiq turned to go the older man said, ‘And you will consider the matter we discussed previously?’

‘I will,’ Rafiq told him with remote courtesy. ‘But I am unable

to make the decision; there must be consultations with the council first.'

The older man said shrewdly, 'I wonder if you will ever regret giving up the power your forebears took for granted?'

Rafiq's broad shoulders lifted in a negligent shrug. 'In the eyes of the world Moraze might be only a smallish island in the Indian Ocean. But its few-million citizens are as entitled to the privileges and responsibilities of democracy as any other free people, and if they don't want them now they will soon enough. I am a practical man. If I hadn't introduced self-government, power would eventually have been taken away—either from me or from one of my descendants.'

'I wish all rulers were as enlightened,' the other man said. He paused before adding, 'I know my daughter has already thanked you for your magnificent birthday gift, but I must thank you also. I know how rare fire-diamonds are, and that one is superb.'

'It is nothing.' Rafiq dismissed his gift with a smile. 'Freda and I are old friends—and the diamond suits her.'

They shook hands and Rafiq frowned, his mind not on the woman who'd been his lover until six months previously but on Alexa Sinclair Considine, with the gold-burnished hair and the steady gaze, and a mouth that summoned erotic fantasies.

And her relationship with a man he loathed and despised.

She was no longer in the room, Rafiq realised after one comprehensive glance around the large salon. And neither was Felipe Gastano.

CHAPTER TWO

UP IN the palatial bedroom, Lexie could still hear the faint sound of music. Moraze was as glorious as its discreet publicity promised—a large island, dominated by a long-extinct chain of volcanoes ground down by aeons of wind and weather to become a jagged range of mountains bordering a vast plateau area.

Just before landing the previous day Lexie had leaned forward to peer at the green-gold grasslands. She'd hoped for a glimpse of the famed wild horses of Moraze, only to sink back disappointed when lush coastal lands came into view, vividly patched with green sugar cane and the bright colours of flower farms.

Now, standing at the glass doors onto the balcony, she remembered that the island's heraldic animal was a rearing horse wearing a crown. Her mind skipped from the horse to the man it signified, and she lifted her hands to suddenly burning cheeks.

That kiss had been scandalously disturbing, so different from any other she'd ever experienced that it had overwhelmed her.

Why? Yes, Rafiq de Couteville was enormously attractive, with that compelling air of dangerous assurance, but she was accustomed to attractive men. Her sister Jacoba was married to one, and Marco's older brother was just as stunning in a slightly sterner way. Yet neither of them had summoned so much as an extra heartbeat from her.

It wasn't just his leanly aquiline features, boldly sculpted into a tough impression of force and power, that had made such an impression. Although Felipe Gastano was actually better-

looking, he didn't have an ounce of Rafiq's dangerous charisma. She couldn't imagine Felipe on a warhorse, leading his warriors into battle, but it was very easy to picture Rafiq de Couteville doing exactly that.

Or she could see him as a corsair, she thought, heart quickening when her too-active imagination visualised him with a cutlass between his teeth as he swung over the side of a vessel...

According to the hotel publicity, in the eighteenth century the Indian Ocean had been the haunt of buccaneers. Moraze had been threatened by them, and had also used them in the struggle to keep its independence. Eventually the corsairs had been brought to heel, and Moraze's rulers were at last able to give up the dangerous double game they'd been forced to play.

But no doubt the corsairs had left their genes in the bloodlines of the people of Moraze. Certainly Rafiq looked like a warrior—stern, hard and ruthless if the occasion demanded it.

However, fantasising about him wasn't any help in dealing with her most pressing problem. Frowning, she stepped back inside. What the hell was she to do?

She wished she could trust Felipe to sleep on the sofa, but she didn't. If she chose the bed, she suspected he might see it as an invitation for him to join her, and she did *not* want an undignified struggle when he finally decided to come up for the night.

Making up her mind, she pulled the light coverlet from the foot of the bed, grabbed a pillow, changed into cotton trousers and a shirt and curled up on the sofa.

She woke to music—from outside, she realised as she disentangled herself from the coverlet. Vaguely apprehensive, she glanced towards the closed bedroom door and grimaced. Once she'd finally fallen asleep, Rafiq de Couteville had taken over her dreams to such an extent that she was possessed by an odd, aching restlessness.

The light she'd left on glowed softly, barely bright enough to show her a note someone had slipped under the door. Heart thudding, she untangled herself and ran across to retrieve it.

My dear girl, she read, I am sorry to have inconvenienced you. As it upset you so much to think of sharing a room with me, I have thrown myself on the sympathy of good friends who have a suite here. Because I do not trust myself with you.

Felipe had signed it with an elaborate *F*.

Lexie let out a long breath. She could have slept in the bed without fear, it seemed. It was thoughtful of Felipe.

Or perhaps, she thought, remembering the way he'd more or less ignored her at the party last night, this too was a little punishment?

Surely he wouldn't be so petty?

It didn't matter; the clerk had promised her a room of her own tomorrow—today, she amended after a glance at the clock. Felipe's consideration should have appeased her, but his assumption that he could manipulate her into bed had crossed a boundary, and she knew it was time to tell him that their friendship would never develop any further.

Surprised at the relief that flooded her, she realised she'd been resisting a creeping sense of wrongness ever since he'd offered to buy drugs for her.

So her decision had nothing to do with the fact that he seemed far less vital—almost faded—next to the vital, hard-edged charisma of the man who'd kissed her on the terrace.

Felipe's kisses had been warm and pleasant, but conveyed nothing like the raw charge of Rafiq's...

'Oh, *stop* it!' she commanded her inconvenient memory.

Irritated, she poured herself some water to drink, and carried it across to the glass door leading onto the balcony.

The music that had somehow tangled her dreams in its sensuous beat had fallen silent now, the only sounds the sibilant whisper of a breeze in the casuarinas, the sleepy hush of small waves on the beach, and the muted thunder of breakers against the reef. As far as she could see the lagoon spread before her like a shadowy masquerade cloak spangled with silver.

She drank deeply, willing herself to relax, to enjoy the breeze that flirted with her hair, its hint of salt and flower perfumes mingling with a faint, evocative scent of spices, of ancient mysteries and secrets hidden from the smiling beauty of daylight.

It was almost dawn, although as yet no light glowed in the eastern sky. Feeling like the only person in the world, she took a deep breath and moved farther out onto the balcony.

The hair on the nape of her neck lifted, and unthinkingly she stepped back into the darkness of the overhang, senses straining

as her eyes darted back and forth to search out what had triggered that primitive instinct.

Don't be an idiot, she told herself uneasily, there's no one out there—and even if there were it would be some sort of night watchman.

Moving slowly and quietly, she eased into her room and pulled the glass door shut, locking it and making sure there was no gap in the curtains.

But even then it was difficult to dispel that eerie sense of being watched. She marched across to the bathroom and set the glass down, washed her face, and then wondered how she was going to get back to sleep.

Half an hour later she gave up the attempt and decided to email her sister Jacoba.

Only to discover that for some reason the internet link wouldn't work. Thoroughly disgruntled, she closed down her laptop and drank another glass of water.

It seemed that Felipe had decided to continue his charade of rejection. After breakfast in her room the butler hand-delivered a note that told her Gastano had business to attend to in Moraze's capital, and would see her that evening.

Suddenly light-hearted, Lexie arranged the transfer of her luggage to a new room, then organised a trip up to the mountains, eager to see the results of the world-famous bird-protection programme.

It was a surprise to find herself alone in the small tourist van

with a woman who informed her she was both driver and guide.

‘Just you today, *m’selle*,’ she confirmed cheerfully. ‘I know all about this place, so, if you got any questions, you ask.’

And know about Moraze she did, dispensing snippets of information all the more intriguing for having a strong personal bias. Lexie plied her with questions, and once they reached the high grasslands she looked eagerly for signs of the horses.

‘You like horses?’ the driver asked.

‘Very much. I’m a vet,’ Lexie told her.

‘OK, I tell you about the horses.’

Lexie soaked up her information, much of which concerned the legendary relationship between the horses and the ruler.

‘As long as the horses flourish,’ the guide finished on the approach to a sweeping corner, ‘Our Emir will also, and so will Moraze.’

She spoke as though it were written law. Lexie asked curiously, ‘Why do you call him the Emir?’

‘It’s kind of a joke, because the first de Couteville was a duke in France. He got into trouble there, and after a couple of years of roaming in exile he found Moraze. He brought an Arabian princess with him.’ She gave a thousand-watt smile. ‘Their descendants have kept Moraze safe for hundreds of years, so you better believe we look after those horses! We don’t want anyone else taking over our island, thank you very much.’

Lexie gasped with alarm as the guide suddenly jerked the wheel. The van skidded, the world turned upside down, and

amidst a harsh cacophony of sounds Lexie was flung forward against the seatbelt. It locked across her, the force driving the breath from her lungs, so that she dragged air into them with a painful grunt.

The laboured sound of the engine and a strong smell of petrol forced her to ignore her maltreated ribs. A cool little wind played with her hair, blowing it around her face. She forced her eyes open and saw grass, long and golden, rustling in the breeze.

The car had buried its nose in the low bank on one side of the road, and when she tried her door it refused to open. She turned her head, wincing at a sharp pain in her neck, to see the driver slumped behind the wheel. The woman's harsh breathing filled the vehicle.

'I have to turn off the engine,' Lexie said aloud. If she didn't it might catch fire.

Easing herself around, she freed the seatbelt and groped for the key. She could just reach it. With shaking fingers, she twisted rapidly, hugely relieved when the engine sputtered into silence.

Now she had to see if the driver was all right. If it was a heart attack she could at least give CPR. But first she had to get out, which meant crawling over the poor woman, possibly making any injuries worse...

She reached for the driver's wrist, hugely relieved when the pulse beat strongly beneath her shaking fingers. And then she heard the distant throb of a powerful engine, a sound she identified as a helicopter.

The pilot must have seen the wrecked car because the chopper altered course. The clack-clack-clack of the engine filled the air, and seconds later the craft landed in a haze of dust and wind. Immediately a man leapt down, ducking to avoid the rotors as he ran towards her. Lexie put her hand up to her eyes and closed them, then looked again, blinking hard.

Even at this distance she knew him. Rafiq de Couteville—the man who had kissed her only last night...

Stunned, her stomach hollow, Lexie watched him yank open the driver's door and crouch beside her. After one quick glance at the unconscious woman, he transferred his gaze to Lexie's face.

'You are all right?' he demanded, pitching his voice so she could hear him above the noise of the helicopter.

Lexie nodded, ignoring the sharp stab of maltreated muscles in her neck. 'I think she might have had a heart attack.'

He bent his attention to the crumpled woman beside her. Was he a doctor? No, he didn't look like a doctor.

The driver stirred and muttered something in the local Creole French, then opened her eyes.

'Don't worry,' Rafiq de Couteville said. 'We'll have you both out soon.'

No sooner said than done; within a few minutes the driver was free and being carried across to the chopper by two men, and Rafiq was saying, 'Let me help you.'

'I can manage, thank you.'

But he eased her past the wheel, his strong arms gentle and

controlled. In spite of the shivers racking her when he set her carefully on her feet, her breath was shallow and her colour high.

And all she could think of was that she must look a real guy. ‘Thank you,’ she said as crisply as she could.

Something flickered in the dark eyes—green, she realised in the clear light of the Moraze day. Not just ordinary green, either—the pure, dense green of the very best pounamu, New Zealand’s prized native jade.

‘So we meet again,’ he said with an ironic twist to his beautifully chiselled mouth.

He was too close. Taking an automatic step backwards, she turned slightly away, her brows meeting for a second as another twinge of pain tightened the muscles in her neck.

Sharply he asked, ‘Where are you hurt?’

‘I’m not—the seatbelt was just a bit *too* efficient.’ Her smile faded as she asked anxiously, ‘Is the driver all right?’

‘I think so.’

Lexie swallowed to ease a suddenly dry throat. ‘I’m so glad you happened to be passing.’

He responded courteously, ‘And so, Alexa Considine, am I.’

‘Lexie. My name is Lexie,’ she told him. ‘From New Zealand,’ she added idiotically.

She shivered, then stiffened as he picked her up and strode towards the chopper.

‘I can walk,’ she muttered.

‘I doubt it. You’re in shock. Keep your head down.’

Her face turned into his shoulder; she inhaled his dark, male scent. He ducked, and it was with faces almost pressed together that they headed for the chopper door. Lexie shut her eyes.

She felt safe, she thought raggedly—safer than she had ever felt in her life.

Which was odd, because every instinct she possessed was shouting a warning. Somehow she'd managed to forget that he had his own particular scent—faint, yet hugely evocative. And although her ribs were still complaining, memories flooded back in sensory overload as the remembered impact of that kiss burned through every cell in her body.

The noise of the helicopter's engines thundered through her, turning her shivers into shudders; by the time the chopper lifted off, she was white to the lips.

At least she'd managed not to throw up, she thought distantly after they landed in the grounds of a large building in the capital city.

The following hours passed in a blur of movement and noise, at last relieved by blessed peace when she was delivered to a solitary bed in a small, cool room overlooking the sea. She looked up from the pillows as Rafiq de Couteville came in with a slender woman at his side—the doctor who'd supervised her tests.

'How are you now?' he asked.

'Better, thank you.' Except that her throat had turned to sand. Huskily she asked, 'How is the driver?'

‘Like you, she doesn’t seem hurt apart from mild shock,’ Rafiq told her.

‘Does she know what happened?’

He scanned her face with hard green eyes. ‘An animal apparently ran out in front of the coach.’

‘I hope it wasn’t hurt,’ she said quietly.

The woman beside him smiled. ‘Probably not as much as you are. Our animals run fast. Although you have bruises, you do not have anything cracked or broken. However, you’re still suffering a mild case of shock, so it seems a good idea to keep you in here for tonight.’

Rafiq de Couteville asked, ‘Is there anyone I should contact?’

If her sister Jacoba heard about this she’d be on a jet to Moraze immediately. Crisply, Lexie said, ‘No. I’ll be fine, and I presume there’s no reason why I shouldn’t see out the rest of my holiday?’

He looked at the doctor, who said, ‘None at all, with a few precautions. I’ll tell you about those tomorrow before you leave hospital.’

‘I do need to notify someone about where I am,’ she objected, feeling rather as though someone had run over her with a steamroller.

‘I will contact the count,’ Rafiq de Couteville said calmly. ‘The doctor feels that you need to be left alone tonight, so don’t expect visitors.’ When Lexie frowned he told her, ‘The hotel is sending along toiletries and clothes. I will leave you now. Do everything you are told to do, and don’t worry about anything.’

Silenced by the authority in his tone and bearing, Lexie watched him stride out of the room beside the doctor, tall and utterly sure of himself, the superbly tailored light suit revealing a body that made her foolish heart increase speed dramatically. How could one man pack so much punch?

And how had he appeared up on those grassy plains—literally from out of the blue?

Like a genie from a bottle, she thought, and gave an involuntary smile, because the image was so incongruous. Rafiq de Couteville bore all the hallmarks of an alpha male—it would be a very clever magician who managed to confine him.

And it would take a special sort of woman to match that impressive male charisma—someone elegant, sophisticated, worldly.

Someone completely unlike Lexie Sinclair, a vet from New Zealand who'd never even had a lover!

Which inevitably brought more memories of that kiss—explosive, exciting and still capable of causing a delicious agitation that temporarily made her forget her tender ribs and stiff neck.

It almost seemed like fate, she thought dreamily, that they should meet again...

Oh, how ridiculous! Coincidences happened all the time—everyone had stories of the most amazing ones that meant nothing at all.

Forget about him, she told herself sternly.

When she eased out of bed the following morning an inspection of her body revealed some mild bruising over her ribs. She was also stiff, although movement would ease that. However the shakiness that had startled her after the accident was gone.

And although the doctor was cautious she said there was no reason why she shouldn't leave, cautioning her to take things easy until the bruises had faded and she felt completely well.

So she dressed in the outfit that had arrived from the hotel the previous evening with her toiletries, and sat down rather limply on the chair. Presumably Felipe would come and get her, and she just didn't feel like dealing with him at the moment.

A knock at the door made her brace herself. 'Come in,' she called, getting to her feet and squaring her shoulders.

But it wasn't Felipe. When Rafiq de Couteville walked in, his lithe form immaculate in superbly tailored casual clothes, her heart performed an odd gyration in her chest, quivering as it finally came to rest.

'Ready to leave?' he asked, dark eyes cool and measuring.

Later she'd wonder why on earth she hadn't asked him what he was doing there.

'Yes, of course.' Oddly breathless, she picked up the small bag with her clothes from yesterday.

'You will be more comfortable once you get home,' he said calmly. At her hesitation, his brows met for a second across his nose. 'Come—they'll be wanting this room soon.'

'I can't ask you to drive me back to the hotel,' she said inanely.

‘Felipe—?’

‘But you aren’t asking me,’ he pointed out with a smile that pierced her fragile shell of independence.

When she still didn’t move he held out an imperative hand.

With a meekness entirely foreign to her, Lexie handed over her bag.

CHAPTER THREE

COOL, firm fingers gripped Lexie’s elbow. Rafiq said, ‘Shall I ring for a wheelchair?’

‘Of course not,’ she spluttered, and started walking.

But once out beneath Moraze’s brilliant sun she was glad to sink into the air-conditioned comfort of the waiting vehicle.

He took the wheel, which surprised her; she’d have presumed the ruler of a place with several million inhabitants would have a limousine with a chauffeur. Instead he drove a late-model car, sleek, and with all the accoutrements of luxury.

Hanging on to the remnants of her composure, she said steadily, ‘This is very kind of you.’

‘It is the least I can do,’ he said, adding with a smile that barely tucked in the corners of his sculpted mouth, ‘We value our tourists. It is a pity your trip to the jungle was cut short. When you are fully recovered I will take you there.’

Lexie stared straight ahead, refusing to allow herself to feel any excitement at the prospect. They were passing beneath an avenue of tall palms, and the shadows of their long, slender trunks flashing across her eyes set up such an unpleasant rhythm

that she turned her head away.

Unfortunately this gave her an extremely good view of Rafiq de Couteville's profile in all its autocratic purity. Whatever interesting meld of races and cultures had given him that face, it was disturbingly beautiful in a very masculine way—a compelling amalgam of angles and curves and hard-honed lines that spoke of formidable power.

And perhaps just a hint of cruelty? She would not, she thought with an inner shiver, closing her eyes, want to make an enemy of him.

His voice broke into her thoughts. 'Here, take these.'

Eyes flying open, she realised he was holding out his sunglasses. 'I can't—you'll need them,' she said, unwilling to wear something so intimately connected to him.

He shrugged. 'You are not accustomed to this sun. I am.'

And very much accustomed to getting your own way, she thought dryly.

But then rulers were notorious for that. Reluctantly she accepted the spectacles and perched them on the end of her nose.

They made an immense difference. She said quietly, 'Thank you. I'm not usually so wimpish.'

'You are too harsh on yourself. There is a difference between being fragile and being a wimp, and an accident always leaves one shaken. Why don't you put your head back and rest quietly?'

It was couched as a question, but clearly he expected her to obey. And because it was simpler she did, waiting for the hum

of the engine to calm her.

Only to find the impact of the man next to her negated any soothing effect. Rafiq de Couteville got to her in a way no other man ever had, his presence alerting unsuspected sensory receptors in her mind and body, so that everything seemed suddenly more vivid, more exhilarating, more *more*, she thought with a surge of apprehension.

She didn't need this. Because she'd spent so much of her time studying, she'd missed out on the social aspect of university life. But she'd watched with considerable bewilderment when heartbroken friends suffered agonies over young men she'd considered shallow and inconsiderate.

Eventually she'd decided there had to be something missing in her. Possibly growing up without a father had somehow stunted her response to men.

In a way, that was why she'd let herself be beguiled by Felipe. It had been such a relief to discover that she *could* enjoy flirting with a man!

But this—this was entirely different—a driving, uncontrollable reaction that was dangerous and altogether too tantalising.

If this was how lust started, she thought wryly, she could at last understand why it was so difficult to resist. She catalogued her symptoms: racing heartbeat, a kind of softening of the muscles, a fluttering in her stomach that hovered between apprehension and excitement, a keen attentiveness and heightened physical

responses.

And an involuntary reaction to the memory of his mouth on hers that still embarrassed and shocked her.

Yes, it sounded like the first stages of attraction, all right. And of course it was doomed, because Rafiq de Couteville was a kind of king, even though he didn't have any title.

No, not a king—a sheikh, she decided, watching him through her lashes. His profile was strongly marked and arrogant, and when he walked she could almost hear the swish of robes about that lean, powerfully muscled body. In spite of the superb tailoring of his clothes and his luxurious car, there was something untamed about him, as though he lived by a more elemental code.

Beneath the sophisticated exterior he was a warrior, and she sensed a warrior's uncompromising determination. Clearly he was of French descent, but Rafiq was an Arabic name, and she'd bet that Moraze's ruler had familial links to both cultures.

‘Are you feeling all right?’

Lexie's eyes flew open. ‘Yes, fine, thank you,’ she said a little disjointedly.

Rafiq snatched a sideways glance at his passenger, then fixed his gaze on the road ahead. Her exquisite skin was still pale, and her ribs would probably be painful beneath the seatbelt. ‘It's not very far now.’

Smoky eyes hidden by his sunglasses, she leaned forward, a frown showing in her tone. ‘I don't remember this part of the road.’

Rafiq shrugged. ‘Possibly because you have not seen it before. When the doctor and I discussed your condition, we agreed it would be better for you to spend the next few days in a place with more peace than the hotel could provide. So you will be staying with me.’

And he waited with interest and a certain amount of anticipation for her response.

Her head swung around. She snapped off the sunglasses to glare at him, eyes gleaming the blue of a Spanish sword blade, her lush mouth compressed in outrage. ‘Why wasn’t I included in this discussion?’ she demanded tautly.

‘It wasn’t necessary,’ Rafiq replied, intrigued in spite of himself.

She could be a consummate actress. And she could be truly in love with Gastano. In which case, she’d thank him one day for this abduction.

After scrutinising him as though she couldn’t believe what she’d heard, her delectable mouth opened, then closed again, to bite back what were clearly intemperate words.

Fully aware of her seething resentment, Rafiq kept his eyes on the road ahead and waited.

In the end she said through gritted teeth, ‘There is no need to treat me like a halfwit just because I’ve been in a minor—a *very* minor—accident.’

‘I’m sure your family would agree with me that you need a few days’ respite after a nasty experience,’ he said blandly. ‘Should I

contact them to check?’

‘No!’

‘Why not?’

After a second’s hesitation, she said reluctantly, ‘My sister is six months’ pregnant. She’d insist on flying out here, and the trip would exhaust her. I’m sure you and the doctor are only thinking of my wellbeing, but I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself. You don’t have to feel any sort of responsibility for me.’

‘Possibly not, but the hotel management said they were not equipped to deal with someone convalescing, and it was agreed that this was the best solution.’ He allowed that to sink in, ignoring her mutinous expression to finish, ‘You will spend several days at my home—which is big enough to give you all the privacy you desire—and once the doctor has given you the all-clear you can go back to the hotel.’

After considering this she said briefly, ‘In that case, I should let Count Gastano know where I’ll be.’

Rafiq controlled the curl of his lip, despising himself for wanting to believe she was just a naive New Zealand girl entangled by the count’s deceptive charm. His brows drew together. This wildfire, highly inconvenient attraction couldn’t—*wouldn’t*—be allowed to distract him from his reason for keeping her tucked safely away where she couldn’t contact the self-titled count.

‘Gastano has already been told about your accident.’ Rafiq let

that sink in, then said, 'I believe he has business here that will keep him occupied for some days. Then you can join him again.'

Steadily she said, 'It doesn't sound as though I have any choice in the matter.'

'I'm sorry if my decision conflicts with your independence.'

'Well, it does.' Her voice was crisp and cool. 'However, I've never thought banging my head against a wall was a sensible way of working through a situation. Thank you for the hospitality. I'm sure you won't mind if I avail myself of it for as short a time as possible.'

Lexie hoped the final snide comment might pierce his armour-plated inflexibility, but when he gave her a smile that almost banished her justifiable resentment she realised he was still fully in control.

And that smile was an epiphany—filled with charm and sexual magnetism, it was the sort of smile that led to broken hearts and despair.

Grimly, Lexie concentrated on the scenery until her body stopped singing.

Fortunately the scenery was worth looking at, with everything that was exotic about the tropics—brilliant sky, deep aquamarine lagoon, vivid flowers and the intense green of the countryside, coconut palms bending gracefully over white sand, and mountains purple with heat haze...

Determined not to be impressed, she decided it was just like a picture in a travel magazine.

Besides, if it came to a competition, New Zealand had some of the best beaches in the world. And pretty good mountains too, jutting into as blue a sky, and displaying every bit as much boldness and drama as these peaks did.

The man beside her said, 'I have never been to New Zealand, but I believe it's very beautiful.'

Was he a mind reader? 'It is,' she said woodenly, and let the conversation lie there, dead on the floor.

His smile was wry. 'So what particular part of the country do you come from?'

'I grew up in Northland.'

'It's a long way from there to Moraze.'

Dampening down her impulse to use the manners her mother had drilled into her, she confined her answer to a few noncommittal words. 'Indeed it is.'

If he had the nerve to mention that kiss, she'd—she'd tell him straight it was a one-off, an indiscretion she had no intention of repeating.

He didn't. Instead he asked, 'Do you specialise in a certain sort of animal in your veterinary practice?'

'Domestic animals,' she said, adding reluctantly, 'But it's a country practice, so I also deal with a lot of farm animals.'

'Horses?'

'Sometimes,' she admitted.

How did he know she was a vet?

She tried to remember where her profession was given in her

passport, then recalled writing it in the arrival form she'd filled in as they came towards Moraze.

So he'd checked her travel documents—or more likely had ordered someone else to check them.

All right; security was a concern to those who were rich and famous enough to attract obsessive or downright dangerous people. Nevertheless, the thought of anyone poking around in her life gave Lexie an uneasy feeling.

Keeping her gaze defiantly on the view outside, she was about to observe tartly that as he knew all about her there was no need for further conversation, when she realised she couldn't be rude to a man who'd gone out of his way to be kind to her after the accident. Also, he was going to be her host for a few days.

She searched for something innocuous to say and finally came up with a subject. 'I went diving the day I arrived. The reef fishes are absolutely gorgeous—like living jewels.'

'You are interested in jewels?' he commented dispassionately.

Perhaps that was the way everyone referred to the fish here and he found it trite. Well, she didn't care.

Of course, Moraze was famous for the rare and exquisite—and extremely valuable—fire-diamonds found in gravel beds washed down from the mountains. Perhaps he thought she was hinting; no, how could he?

'Most people are. Off Northland's east coast we have a very interesting mix of sea life. A warm current sweeps south from the tropics, and we get a mixture of tropical and temperate fauna.'

OK, so she sounded like something out of a textbook, and was probably boring him to bits. It served him right. If he'd taken her to the hotel, instead of conspiring with the doctor behind her back, he'd have been rid of her by now.

'It sounds most intriguing,' he said smoothly, returning the waves of a small group of children walking down the road.

A few metres further on he turned into a drive and the big car passed between gates that had slid back silently at the press of an unknown button. Lexie looked around for a sentry box, but clearly security nowadays was much more technical and far less conspicuous. Ahead, the drive began to climb steeply through a tangle of greenery.

'We're almost there,' Rafiq told her.

He lived in a castle. Perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking the lagoon, it frowned down over a scene as beautiful as it was deserted.

Lexie drew a sharp breath. 'I don't know much about the architecture of castles, but that looks like something out of the Middle East.'

'It's a mixture of Oriental and European styles.'

The car eased to a halt outside a huge set of what appeared to be bronze doors, sculpted and ornate, with a grid of iron spikes poised above to grind down in case of an attack. Rafiq switched off the engine.

In the silence the sound of the waves on the reef echoed in Lexie's ears. A manservant came swiftly out through a side door

and went to the boot of the car, and one of the big bronze doors swung slowly open.

Rafiq looked at her, heavy-lidded eyes narrowing as he scanned her face. ‘Moraze was known to Arab sailors, but because it wasn’t on their trade routes and had nothing they wanted they rarely came this way. The first settlers were led by a distant ancestor of mine, a French nobleman who had the temerity to conduct an affair with his monarch’s much-prized mistress. Nowhere in Europe was safe, so he travelled farther afield, and eventually found refuge here with a somewhat motley crew of adventurers and sailors and their women.’

Fascinated, Lexie said, ‘I wouldn’t have thought the King of France’s mandate stretched this far.’

He smiled, and the skin at the back of her neck tightened, lifting the tiny hairs there. For a second she thought she saw his ancestor, proud and gallant and tough as he shepherded that motley crew to Moraze.

Rafiq told her, ‘By then it wasn’t the French king he was concerned about. On his travels my forebear stole an Arabian sheikh’s most precious jewel—his daughter—and as she was more than happy to be stolen they needed a refuge they could defend.’

‘When did all this happen?’

‘Several hundred years ago.’

Fascinated, she asked, ‘What happened to the French king’s mistress?’

He looked surprised. 'I believe she was married off to some elderly duke. Why?'

'I just wondered,' she said. 'I hope she liked that elderly duke.'

'I don't think anyone ever enquired,' he told her dryly.

As though bored by the discussion, he got out and came around to open her door. With the same automatic courtesy he took her arm as they went up the steps and through the door into a vast, tiled hall. She'd expected grim stone inside, but the far end of the hall was high glass doors that opened out onto a terrace bordered by shrubs and trees.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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