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The Princess and the Playboy

VALERIE PARV

Valerie Parv

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Аннотация

Princess in Secret Love Tryst Princess Talay Rasada's reputation was compromised the minute the newspapers carried the photograph of her kissing the rugged Australian, Jase Clendon. Outraged, he wondered if it had been a desperate ploy to get him to leave her island. He wasn't about to let her intended husband's challenge drive him away—no matter what danger was involved. Talay feared what would happen if Jase won her heart. He couldn't want to marry such an inexperienced woman, and she shouldn't want to marry such a seductive playboy....

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Of all the reckless, foolhardy . . .

Jase's condemnation of himself was total as he paced the length of the living room at the Martine villa.

From the start he had sensed that the woman wasn't being honest with him. Letting himself kiss her before he had solved the mystery was the height of stupidity. Now "The Princess and the Playboy in Secret Love Tryst" was the national breakfast-time reading.

"Secret Plot Against Playboy" was more like it, he fumed inwardly. He had fought some tangled corporate battles in his time, but they paled alongside this for deviousness. Talay's denials had sounded convincing enough, but it was too neat a scheme for him to believe she hadn't foreseen this outcome.

Valerie Parv has been a successful journalist and nonfiction writer. She began writing for Harlequin Mills & Boon in 1982. Born in Shropshire, England, she grew up in Australia and now lives with her cartoonist husband and their cat—the office manager—in Sydney, New South Wales. She is a keen futurist, a Star Trek enthusiast, and her interests include traveling, restoring dollhouses and entertaining friends. Writing romance novels

affirms her belief in love and happy endings.

In *The Princess and the Playboy*, Valerie Parv has returned to the fictitious realm of Sapphan, which she created in one of her previous titles, *A Royal Romance*.

The Princess and the Playboy

Valerie Parv



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CHAPTER ONE

IT WASN'T always easy being a princess, Talay Rasada thought with a sigh. There were so many rules, things you could and couldn't do, and endless protocol to be followed. 'If I were an ordinary Sapphan woman I could arrange a meeting with this Jase Clendon and tell him all the reasons his plans are totally unacceptable.'

Her friend, Allie Martine, smiled understandingly. 'But you are a princess, Talay. Your uncle is probably right. It isn't good for your public image to be seen around a man with Jase's reputation with women. What would Luc Armand think, for a start?'

Talay let her flashing eyes betray her opinion. 'Luc Armand isn't my keeper, no matter how attractive and highly suitable my uncle thinks he is.'

Allie grew serious. 'It must be rough, having so many expectations heaped on you.'

'It goes with being royal,' Talay accepted, 'although I'm so far away from the throne that I could be an old maid and nobody would notice.'

'I'd notice,' Allie said firmly. 'This isn't about being royal. It's about you and marriage, isn't it?' When Talay nodded she went on, 'When you lost your parents you lost more than anyone should have to bear, but denying yourself love for the rest of your life won't change what happened.'

'I know.'

'So why not give Luc Armand a chance, instead of exhausting yourself fighting battles you can't hope to win? From what Michael tells me, Jase Clendon does things his way so you're unlikely to sway him with emotional arguments even if you do get to meet him, which you won't.'

'You get to meet him,' Talay mocked.

Allie sighed. 'In the first place I don't belong to the royal family and, in the second, Michael has known Jase for years as they went to the same university in Australia.'

Talay was intrigued. 'But you've not actually met him yet?'

'No, and I wish I didn't have to this time. Why must he come to Sapphan now, just when Michael has arranged a second

honeymoon for us?’ She gave a dreamy sigh. ‘Paris, imagine. I’ve never been there and, with Jase coming next week, it looks as if it will be a long time before I do.’ She patted the soft curve of her stomach. ‘Once Michael junior arrives there won’t be much time for second honeymoons.’

‘Paris is glorious,’ Talay agreed. ‘I studied jewellery design there for a year and I never tired of the museums, the galleries, the open-air cafés. We have so much French heritage in Sapphan that I felt completely at home.’

‘I envy you. Instead of drinking café au lait at some open-air bistro next week, I’ll be playing hostess here while Michael and Jase discuss business endlessly. With them both involved in the tourism industry, I probably shan’t get a word in edgewise.’

‘There must be a solution,’ Talay said slowly, but her mind was racing a mile a minute. ‘It’s crazy that you’re being forced to meet Jase Clendon and I can’t when I’m the one who wants to. He can’t possibly be allowed to open one of his three-ring-circus resorts along the Pearl Coast. I’m all for progress, but his plan is inappropriate for one of the most beautiful and unspoiled regions in our country.’

‘They aren’t exactly three-ring-circuses,’ Allie pointed out. ‘All right, they are attractive to the mega-rich, but only because they’re designed with exquisite taste. From what Michael tells me, Jase insists on the best of everything. He prefers locations like the Pearl Coast because they’re remote and exotic.’

‘And they appeal to the jaded tastes of people who’ve seen

it all and done it all, like Jase Clendon himself, from what I read,' Talay stated scornfully. 'Since he announced his plans for Crystal Bay I keep seeing his picture everywhere.' Usually on the arm of some stunningly beautiful woman, she recalled. She had even read something about an ex-wife in Australia. Jase's playboy image was the main reason her ever-protective uncle, King Philippe, had thought it unwise for her to be seen in the man's company. But maybe she didn't have to be seen...

'How much do you want to go to Paris with Michael?' she asked.

Allie looked puzzled. 'I'd give anything to go, but it isn't possible.'

'Perhaps it is. You say you haven't actually met Jase Clendon face to face?'

Allie shook her head. 'He and Michael went to college together then afterwards Michael came here for a holiday, married me and never went home to Australia. Jase has been here before but, for one reason or another, our paths haven't crossed. He was supposed to attend our wedding, but became shipwrecked in mid-Pacific during an around-the-world yacht race and never made it to the ceremony. Although Michael is as disappointed as me about our second honeymoon, he likes the idea that I'll finally meet his friend.'

She wandered to a cabinet on which was displayed an assortment of framed photographs. Talay's graduation photo was among them. Allie picked up the one beside it and handed it to

Talay. 'This was taken last year when Michael and Jase competed in the Sydney to Hobart yacht race.'

The photo showed the two men hauling on ropes on the deck of an ocean-going yacht and Talay felt a jolt of reaction as she looked at the man beside Michael. Allie's husband was almost six feet tall but Jase was half a head taller with a head of thick wavy hair the colour of burnt toast. Some of it fell across his forehead in a boyishly appealing look. Talay could imagine him constantly brushing it off his face but it would, no doubt, fall back again just as quickly.

Jase's hair was the only remotely boyish thing about him. In the photo he was soaked to the skin and his crew shirt was plastered over shoulders that looked as if they could carry the weight of the world without flinching. The effect was enhanced by a deeply sculpted chest and muscular arms.

He had eyes the colour of a storm-tossed sea, she also noticed. They gazed out of the photograph right into her own with a familiarity that tugged at her. Had she met him somewhere before? Or was she reacting to the sensual appeal of the man which practically leapt out of the photograph at her?

- She blinked furiously to dispel the sensation. He was the enemy, the man who wanted to plunder her beloved Pearl Coast for commercial gain. How could she think of him in anything but disparaging terms? Still, it was hard to tear her eyes away from his mesmerising sea-green ones. Her throat dried as she imagined meeting him in the flesh. The thought was so overpowering that

she put the photo down hastily.

‘Would Michael be put out if Jase Clendon were to change his plans, arriving maybe two weeks later, so you’d have time to go to Paris and return?’

Allie’s eyes narrowed. ‘What are you scheming, Talay Rasada, and why do I get the feeling that what you’re about to suggest is conduct unbecoming a princess?’

‘Then I shan’t suggest it. Let’s say I have a strong feeling Jase is about to receive a message about the two-week delay.’

Allie laughed. ‘I get it, you’re going to pull some royal strings to delay him so he can’t get here until after we’ve been to Paris.’

Talay hadn’t thought of that but it was a good idea, and far less daring than what she actually had in mind. She smiled regally. ‘What’s the use of being royal if you can’t occasionally use it to your advantage?’ It was close enough to the truth that it didn’t alert Allie’s suspicions.

Her friend looked relieved. ‘Sometimes it’s great, having royal connections. Do you know, before I met you and we shared a room at boarding school I thought you would be stuck-up and horrible?’

‘And now?’

Allie enveloped her in a hug. ‘You’re one of the sweetest, most caring people I know. Doesn’t the king realise you’re only upset about the resort plans because you care so much about this country?’

‘He cares, too,’ Talay said soberly, ‘but he lives in the capital

most of the time. And Andaman is a long way from the Pearl Coast. He's so used to going everywhere with a great entourage that he doesn't see what I see—a simple, traditional way of life which may not survive a huge influx of tourism.'

'I suppose you've pointed this out to the king?'

Talay nodded. 'Who listens to a twenty-six-year-old jewellery designer? I'm not a politician or a member of the cabinet.'

'But the king did entrust you with chairing the cultural advisory board for this province.'

Talay gave a disdainful sniff. 'A paper tiger, if you ask me. They put advisory in the title for a good reason, so we don't get to actually do anything but advise, and the advice isn't always listened to, as in this instance.'

'So what are you going to do?'

Talay gave a slow smile. 'You and Michael go ahead and finalise your second honeymoon plans. I'll find a way to let Mr Clendon know how I feel.' As casually as she could, she added as an apparent afterthought, 'I need somewhere quiet and private to work on some new designs. Can I use your villa while you're away?'

CHAPTER TWO

JASE CLENDON filled his lungs with the glorious, ginger-scented air that was unique to the island kingdom of Sapphan and tried to relax. It was inconvenient of Michael Martine to be called away on business at the last minute but there wasn't much either of them could do about it. The same thing had happened

to Jase himself often enough.

It was strange of Michael to send a message, rather than calling direct. But it was decent of him to give Jase the run of the villa. As soon as he caught sight of the inviting pool, Jase changed into his swimming gear, intending to make the most of it. A swim was just what he needed to help him adjust to Sapphan time.

He was accustomed to luxury but this was on a scale unknown in Australia. The villa reminded Jase of a small palace, with ancient stone walls, a tropical garden studded with statuary and large, airy rooms with cool slate floors and walls panelled with aromatic eaglewood. The rattan furniture with its hand-printed silk coverings was as comfortable as it was beautiful. Michael had done well for himself, he thought, wandering around the casual living room which opened onto the pool area.

On a dresser stood a collection of family photographs, most of them meaning nothing to Jase. He considered Michael a friend but they gave each other a loose rein. Sometimes they were out of touch for a couple of years but when they got back together it was as if they'd never been apart.

His mouth twisted wryly. Male friendship was something women had trouble understanding. They wanted you there every minute, preferably talking or—more accurately—listening to them, or at least his former wife had. She'd never understood his need for solitude and quiet, a direct legacy of growing up in a boys' home with dozens of other children who were never quiet.

Jase shrugged off the memory and started to turn away but his attention was caught by one photo in particular. It must be Michael's wife, whom Jase had yet to meet, and it had been taken at some kind of graduation ceremony. It definitely wasn't one of Michael's photographs. For a start, unlike most of Michael's photographs, you could actually make out the subject, which meant it was Jase's first really good look at Michael's wife, Allie.

Studying her, he felt his swimming trunks growing uncomfortably tight. Not only was she gorgeous, she looked out of the picture as if she owned the world. There was something—he searched for a word—regal about her.

Her dark hair fell in a satin curtain halfway down her back. She was tall for a Sapphan woman, judging by the doorframe behind her, and she had a figure like a model, tiny of waist and full...well, full everywhere else. There was also something familiar about her that he couldn't pin down. It was probably because he'd half seen her a few times in Michael's blurred attempts at family photography.

Jase's grin was self-deprecating. Just as well she was married. Michael would laugh himself silly if he could see his friend, poring over a woman's photograph like a lovesick puppy. If he wasn't careful his reputation as a playboy would be in jeopardy and he had worked hard to create it. It served him too well to drop now.

When you were as successful and wealthy as he had made himself you were fair game for every female for miles, not

to mention their fathers, mothers and ugly sisters. His one experience of marriage had convinced him he was a lone wolf, better left to hunt solo. He'd need to watch himself in Sapphan if there were many women as bewitching as Allie Martine.

If she came back early from her week-long expedition to the capital, as Michael's message had warned him she might, Jase would have to watch himself. Michael had assured him her presence wouldn't interfere with Jase's use of the villa, but it didn't solve the problem of her extraordinary effect on him.

There was another problem, too. The key Michael had sent him didn't fit the door to the guest pavilion, which he had assumed he was to use. It did fit the main house entrance so Jase had decided to move in there for the time being. If Allie came back while he was still here he would have her unlock the guest pavilion and he'd gladly move out there. Another glance at the photo in his hand warned him it might be wise to keep some distance between himself and Michael's wife.

He took another leisurely swallow of the strongly flavoured local beer Michael favoured. Jase didn't mind serving himself, but it was odd to be in such lavish surroundings without any servants. He shrugged inwardly. Maybe it was a Sapphanese custom to give the servants time off when the boss was away.

Outside his air-conditioned cocoon the air steamed. It was the end of the dry season and the humidity levels were starting to build. He finished the beer, returned the glass to the kitchen and threw open the wide doors leading to the pool and waterfall.

After his reaction to Allie's photo he needed to cool off more than ever. He took a running dive into the pool.

His dive cut the water cleanly, his body knifing through the deep water like a torpedo until he surfaced on the far side of the pool, slicking his hair back and gasping for breath. This beat the heck out of cold showers.

Talay heard the sounds of someone in the pool and froze. Now the moment had arrived she was tempted to turn around and flee the house before Jase Clendon discovered her presence. He had accepted without question her message, saying that Michael would be overseas when he arrived. It wasn't exactly a lie. Allie and Michael were in Paris by now, enjoying their second honeymoon before their baby was due, Michael having also received a message saying Jase's arrival would be delayed for a couple of weeks.

She hadn't forged anyone's signature. She had simply 'forgotten' to append any name or signature at all. In these days of faxes and e-mail messages lots of people did. It was a sin of omission, she recognised, but she was desperate enough to try anything.

There was still time to change her mind, she assured herself as she moved cautiously towards the open French doors leading to the pool area. First she would take a look at her adversary.

He wouldn't hear her over the splashing of the waterfall, but she moved softly until she could see him without being seen. The effect was instant and electrifying. He had levered himself onto

the stone rim of the pool and water streamed from muscles she had rarely seen on a male body outside the statues in her uncle's palace.

Apart from a thin band of salmon-coloured Lycra, clinging to his narrow hips, he was naked, and his Australian tan gleamed in the Sapphanese sun. Straight arms braced wide shoulders and his posture was erect, probably from his experience as a yachtsman, she guessed. His dark hair was slicked back but looked collar-length, an unusual choice for a businessman, she considered, but somehow looked right on him. Like a buccaneer from Sapphan's far past, or a modern-day pirate.

She sucked in a breath, feeling her heart race. As far as she was concerned, he was a pirate, as dangerous to her beloved coastline and its gentle people as any buccaneer in history. Still, with Jase filling her field of vision, it wasn't hard to understand how, in times past, women sometimes fell in love with pirates and ran away to sea to spend their lives with them.

Then he lifted his head and shock slammed through her so hard she had to cling to the doorframe for support. Those eyes! She had never met Jase Clendon before, yet the eyes inspecting the surface of the pool looked as familiar as her own in a mirror.

It was crazy, she told herself. Beyond the photograph Allie had shown her, she knew very little about him as a person. As far as she knew, their paths had never crossed. So why was she gripped by an unshakeable sense of familiarity, as if she had chanced across a former lover instead of a complete stranger?

She gave herself a mental shake. He was the enemy, and she had no business allowing foolish fantasies to interfere with her mission.

‘It’s OK, you can come and join me. I don’t bite.’

Lost in a daydream of pirates and plunder, she was startled to hear his voice. It was deeply resonant with a hint of Australian accent, as tauntingly familiar as his eyes, although the source of the feeling remained equally elusive. Shock must have made her betray her presence, and panic whirled through her. She should leave now before she got herself in any deeper. She hadn’t actually spoken to Jase Clendon so maybe Uncle Philippe would excuse her behaviour as female curiosity.

Of course the king hadn’t specifically forbidden her to meet Jase, otherwise she would have felt duty bound to obey. He had advised against it because he considered her committed to Luc Armand. But unless she met Jase Clendon she had no hope of convincing him to change his plans. In any case, she told herself, it wasn’t Her Royal Highness Princess Talay Rasada, meeting Jase Clendon, but Allie Martine, the wife of his old friend. The thought bolstered her failing courage. Gathering her flowered sarong around her, she stepped out of the shadows. ‘Good afternoon. You must be Mr Clendon.’

He got to his feet and moved smoothly around the edge of the pool, coming to stand close beside her and offer his hand. ‘Hello. I take it you’re Michael’s wife, Allie. I recognise you from your photograph.’

The touch of his fingers against her own started a chain reaction of tremors which travelled along her arm and somehow found the vein leading to her heart. Or so it felt 'My photograph?' Even though she had put all the pictures of Allie and Michael out of sight Talay was anxious enough to try to tug her hand free, but Jase's fingers closed around hers.

He nodded. 'On the dresser inside. Some kind of graduation thing.'

To add to her pretence of being Allie, Talay had left out the picture Allie kept of her. Jase must have seen it and drawn his own interpretation. Instead of making her feel relieved, Talay was disturbed by the success of her deception. 'It was taken when I got my masters in business administration at the University of Andaman,' she said, thankful she could be honest about this at least.

'Brains as well as beauty. I'm impressed.' Very slowly he drew her hand up to his mouth, his eyes never leaving hers. When his lips brushed the backs of her fingers she felt a coil of something hot and sensual so deep inside her that it almost eluded conscious awareness. It was the most gentlemanly of greetings, perhaps even old-fashioned, but there was nothing old-fashioned about her response.

He saw the startled reaction she was unable to conceal but misinterpreted it and released her hand. 'I mustn't give you the wrong idea about me, Mrs Martine.'

'Call me Allie, please,' she invited, horrified by how shaky her

voice sounded.

‘And I’m Jase, Allie. No need to look so anxious. I’m sure Michael has filled you in on my...er...reputation with women, and some of it may even be deserved, but married women are strictly off limits, as Michael well knows or he wouldn’t have invited me to stay here while he was away.’

‘Of course.’ But Jase’s honeyed assurance only increased Talay’s alarm. What on earth had she got herself into? She had encouraged Allie to give the servants their holidays, thinking the fewer people around who could give her away the better, but it meant she was entirely alone with Jase.

Even Sam, her devoted bodyguard, had returned home at Talay’s insistence. She had told him she intended to spend the night at the Martine villa, which was true. Luckily, it hadn’t occurred to Sam to check that the Martines were actually in residence. He assumed Talay was safe with their staff, as well as the villa’s extensive security system, until he came to collect her the following afternoon.

She had thought that arranging the meeting would be the hardest part, but actually facing Jase himself was much more challenging than she had anticipated. Her own reaction was the problem, she acknowledged. She simply hadn’t expected the magnetic power of his personality to affect her so strongly. Why hadn’t anyone told her that a man could make her feel over-heated and chilled, confused and empowered, all at the same time?

‘Michael’s message said you were spending a few days in the capital,’ Jase went on. ‘You must be tired after your return journey. Why don’t you join me for a swim? According to your husband, you’re a real water baby who gets into the water at every opportunity.’

Allie was the true water baby. Talay also enjoyed swimming, but the thought of appearing in a swimsuit in front of Jase made her knees weaken. ‘I don’t think so, not today,’ she dissembled.

‘Then I must get dressed and join you inside. Anything else would be impolite,’ he insisted.

Alarm rippled through her. With him in it, the spacious room would seem confining, the walls closer together, the ceiling lower. It was his impressive breadth and height, she accepted, as well as the sheer presence he managed to exude. It was easy to see why he was so successful in business. He radiated the same kind of easy authority as her uncle, the king.

Philippe Rasada, nicknamed the Hawk by his supporters and political adversaries alike, had the same knack of dominating a room simply by entering it. Talay forced a smile. ‘In that case, I will have a swim after all,’ she said around a throat gone suddenly dry. ‘I don’t wish to spoil your pleasure.’

His gaze lingered on her for the longest time. ‘Sapphan has many pleasures. Her crystalline waters hardly compare with the attractions much closer to hand.’

He gave her no time to absorb the poetic compliment, far less frame a coherent response, before he led the way back to the

pool and cut a sleek arc through the air as he dived in. She held her breath as he stayed under for a long time and only released it when he finally surfaced on the far side, treading water with powerful thrusts which he managed to make appear effortless.

Hastily she turned towards the dressing rooms, where Allie kept swimwear for her as she spent much of her free time here. She emerged, wearing a modest one-piece costume which usually felt comfortable. In indigo and white, it was a traditional Sapphan design known as ‘flowing water’ which showed stepped patterns representing streams, rivers and waterfalls.

With Jase’s eyes on her as she walked towards the water, she was more aware of the parts the suit didn’t cover, such as the curve of her hips, her legs—which were long for a Sapphan woman—and the way the traditional material outlined the swell of her breasts.

As a member of the royal family she should be accustomed to public scrutiny, but Jase’s inspection managed to convey a far more personal interest. His appraisal was leisurely and frankly appreciative as she stepped to the water’s edge. His expression seemed to say, ‘If you were not a married woman...’

She dived into the water and welcomed the cool, silken feel as it closed over her. Unfortunately Jase moved while she was under water, or else she misjudged the distance, because she surfaced uncomfortably close to him. ‘Michael was right—you are a real water baby,’ he commented.

She smiled to hide her discomfiture. ‘In Sapphan we have

a natural affinity with the water. Two centuries ago many of our people earned their living as pearl divers or shell hunters.' Many were also sea-nomads and pirates but she didn't point this out. 'During the early eighteen hundreds many pearl divers from Sapphan worked along the north-west coast of Australia.'

'With the pearling luggers, based in Broome,' he confirmed. 'At first the divers were aboriginal, then they came from Sapphan and later the Japanese took over.'

'You know your history, Jase.'

He smiled wryly. 'I should. I was born in Broome. I built my first resort there.'

It was the opening she'd hoped for but she hesitated, before taking advantage of it. Something about Jase Clendon warned her he would make a formidable enemy. He would also make a formidable friend, she suspected, which was probably why Michael Martine was so loyal to him.

Everything about Jase suggested he would also make a formidable lover, but Talay pushed the thought away. She wasn't likely to find out. Nor did she want to, she added hastily to herself. They had other business and delaying it would only make it more difficult. As it was, she had only these two days in which to try to change his plans.

She side-stroked to the edge of the pool and clung to it, her feet just touching the bottom. 'How many resorts do you own?'

'Crystal Bay will be the fifth.'

'Provided something—or someone—doesn't change your

mind about going ahead with it,' she said, unable to stop her tone from sharpening.

He levelled a long look at her until she wondered if he sensed her disapproval of his plans. Before she could answer he shook his head, shedding water like a tiger having drunk at a watering hole. 'Why would they want to try, Allie? My resort is needed to give the Pearl Coast an injection of new commercial life. The place is in danger of stagnating, otherwise.'

Despite the coolness of the water, her blood felt heated. How dared he call her beloved Pearl Coast stagnant? 'Surely there's a difference between tradition and stagnation?' she demanded.

He looked startled by her vehemence. 'You sound as if the area is important to you, Allie.'

'It is. My mother was born there,' she snapped.

She realised her mistake as soon as the words escaped her mouth. He frowned. 'Michael told me your people come from the Jarim islands in the Andaman Sea.'

'Oh, what a tangled web,' she thought furiously. Her mother had come from the Pearl Coast. According to Sapphan law, royalty could not marry another member of the royal family so her father, the king's brother, had taken as his bride a woman from a pearl-farming community. A blue-blooded woman, true enough, with vast land holdings and pearl farming interests of her own, but still a commoner under the law.

Bitterness rose in Talay as she thought of her parents' lives cut cruelly short by a terrorist bomb attack ten years ago as

they had boarded a plane for a visit to a neighbouring island. Talay, sixteen at the time, had been about to board the plane and had survived with horrific scarring to her face. Only the devotion of her grandfather, Leon, and the skills of Australian cosmetic surgeons had repaired the damage. But, however deep her gratitude towards his people, she wasn't about to let this arrogant Australian dismiss her mother's way of life as stagnant.

'My family is scattered,' she supplied diffidently. 'Many of them come from the Pearl Coast. They're a hard-working, fiercely proud people with strong ties to the province. The historical name for Crystal Bay even translates as "mother place". It is said to whisper to anyone who leaves it, the voices only ceasing when they return to stay.'

The pool was barely large enough to contain her growing anger. He didn't understand anything. Tremors shook her as she levered herself onto the stone coping and stood up. She had hoped they could discuss rationally the unspoilt beauty of Crystal Province, its historic and cultural uniqueness. Instead, she had allowed emotion to get in the way. She was as annoyed with herself as with him for letting him provoke her.

She was unaware of footsteps on the stone behind her until he took her arm and spun her around. The contact triggered a maelstrom of sensations inside her. She tried to tell herself it was because, as a member of the royal house, she was seldom touched other than by her maid and closest friends. It couldn't have anything to do with finding Jase a hair's breadth away, his

arm extended towards her so every detail of his long-fingered hand burned itself into her awareness.

He had followed her out of the pool in such a hurry that water streamed from him, steaming gently in the hot air to create a misty halo around his body.

Her attention was captured by the contrasting tenderness in his gaze, and a totally unexpected warmth surged through her. Physically, he had no equal in her experience, but she sensed something more, a connecting of souls she hadn't anticipated and couldn't possibly allow with this man. Her every instinct warned her against such foolish indulgence.

The heart-stopping moment ended when he said, 'I apologise for whatever I said to offend you.'

She shook her head. 'You don't understand why I'm angry, do you?'

His mouth twisted wryly. 'No doubt you're going to tell me.'

'Pearl Coast Province is the last remnant of a way of life which has existed unchanged for thousands of years. The people are pearl farmers, shell hunters and sea-nomads, not innkeepers.'

He folded his arms across his broad chest. 'What was the population of the province ten years ago, Allie?'

'About five thousand. Why?'

'And two years ago?'

She had to think. 'Maybe three thousand.'

'And today?'

She saw what he was getting at. 'All right, I'm well aware the

people are growing older and the younger ones are moving away to the cities to work.’ The whispering voices of the mother place couldn’t alter the fact that there was little work for young people in the province.

He nodded. ‘If they had a future at home they might not be forced to leave. A Clendon Resort is not only a playground for the rich. It’s also a training ground for the young, a nursery for endangered plants and animals and a monument to the past as well as the future. I’m proud of the concept, which is rare in the tourism business.’

It was hard to think rationally around the thunder of her own heartbeat. She wished they could have had this discussion in the air-conditioned living room, preferably fully dressed. While he talked her swimsuit had dried, and she was disturbingly conscious of the way it was moulded to her figure. She took refuge in annoyance. ‘I hardly think token eco-tourism can compensate for what will be lost.’

Fire snapped in his eyes. ‘You obviously know little about how I do things. Why don’t I take you with me to the site tomorrow and show you why you’re wrong?’

Given the way he made her feel, going anywhere with him was reckless. It was also impossible, without giving away her true identity. ‘I can’t.’

‘Afraid, Allie?’

His lowered tone stole over her like a caress. Musical voices were a characteristic of her people but his defied such a mundane

description. It was as deep and rich as volcanic soil. The sound vibrated through her. She was afraid, but not in the way he apparently thought. Visiting Crystal Bay with him could only strengthen her conviction so it must be her reaction to his company she feared.

The surreal nature of today's experience crashed over her. Today she wasn't Princess Talay Rasada, she was Allie Martine, commoner and married woman. It was alarming how readily her Allie entertained fantasies which were forbidden to a princess or even to a married woman. It would have to stop. 'I have other plans tomorrow—sorry.'

'A lover, perhaps?'

She stared at him in shocked surprise. 'What an extraordinary thing to say.'

He met her look levelly. 'You're an extraordinary woman, not at all the way Michael describes you. This thing between us, for instance...'

Tension gripped her. 'There's nothing between us.'

'Oh, yes, there is. We both felt it from the moment we set eyes on each other. It suggests to me that you're not as faithful to Michael as he thinks you are. Which is why I asked if you're seeing someone else.'

She drew herself up, regal hauteur in every line of her bearing. At some level she was intrigued by his willingness to confront her on his friend's account. It suggested a capacity for loyalty on an enviable scale—provided he considered you his friend. For her

own sake she was furious at being so unfairly suspected. 'I can only assume you speak from your own experience. It's said we suspect others of our own misdeeds.'

'Quite possibly.' His tone was mild but his eyes burned into her. 'I don't deny my marriage was a spectacular failure, as Michael would have told you. Nor do I deny having seduced many women but they were all willing, not to mention enthusiastic, at least at the time. And they were all available.'

She recalled his vow that he considered married women off limits, and felt the merest flaring of regret She resisted it but couldn't stop herself from asking, 'Why did your marriage fail, Jase?'

'The question should be: why did we get together in the first place? The answer is that she got pregnant—on purpose.' His expression hardened. 'Don't look so shocked. I'm sure women in Sapphan do it to snare men, too. She talked me out of using precautions, swearing she was protected, then used her pregnancy to put a noose around my neck.'

None of Allie's talk about Jase had mentioned the existence of a child, and something clenched inside Talay as she pictured him with a tiny baby cradled against the hard wall of his chest. 'Where is your child now—with the mother?'

'There's no child any more,' he said in a voice laced with bitterness. The pregnancy didn't last beyond the fifth month. By then we were stuck with each other.'

It was as cynical an opinion of marriage as she had ever heard.

‘With such a sad experience of marriage, no wonder you’re quick to jump to conclusions about me,’ she said. ‘I don’t know what you think you sense between us, Mr Clendon, but you’re wrong. I would never cheat on the man I love.’

‘Then there’s no reason why you can’t come with me to Crystal Bay tomorrow.’

Hooked as neatly as a fish on a line, she thought furiously. She would have to watch herself around him if she was to have any hope of winning her battle. That it might be lost already, she couldn’t afford to consider. ‘Very well, I’ll go,’ she conceded. Keeping up the fiction of being Allie Martine wouldn’t be easy, but she would find a way.

Keeping up the fiction that Jase had no effect on her—now there was the real challenge.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS easier than she had anticipated for the simple reason that Jase declined her offer to prepare a meal for them and went out for the evening. Royal or not Talay was perfectly able to cook, having been taught at boarding school. The king himself was an enthusiastic cook and had taught Talay some of his favourite recipes.

So she felt more than a little piqued when Jase announced he was attending a business dinner that evening. He seemed almost eager to escape the villa, and she couldn’t shake off the feeling that she was part of the reason.

Had he somehow guessed her identity? She didn’t think so

and she had looked forward to the evening to provide her best chance to impress upon him the uniqueness of Crystal Bay. Now she would have to wait until he took her to visit the site to spend more time with him.

Frustration gnawed at her. As a princess, she could have requested his company at dinner and he would have felt bound by protocol to accept, no matter what other engagements pressed him. However, as Allie Martine she had no such influence.

‘I’d invite you to join me but it’s mainly business,’ he explained.

She pretended indifference. ‘Please don’t concern yourself. I’m looking forward to a restful evening at home.’

‘After your long journey,’ he said.

Her blank look almost betrayed her until she remembered the trip she was supposed to have taken. ‘It’s a three-hour drive from the capital. No wonder I’m all in.’

His eyes narrowed speculatively. ‘Which reminds me. I’m surprised Michael let you drive back alone. Didn’t he insist you have a driver?’ He looked around as if seeking evidence of one. But the longest ‘journey’ Talay had taken was to the Martine villa from her residence, a mere twenty minutes’ drive away, where her bodyguard had returned with the car after dropping her here.

‘Michael is a husband, not a keeper,’ she said tartly, aware that her ill humour had a lot to do with Jase deserting her for the evening. She pushed the feeling away. ‘He doesn’t let his wife do anything. She makes up her own mind. I’m well able to

drive myself wherever I wish to go.’ She winced inwardly as a betrayingly regal note crept into her tone.

He didn’t appear to notice because his attention was fixed on something else. ‘Is it a peculiarly Sapphan custom to talk about yourself in the third person?’

‘Sometimes,’ she said warily. It wasn’t, but it enabled her to stick to the truth as much as possible.

‘I see.’ He straightened his tie and the simple act drew her gaze upwards, back to the hawk-like planes of his face. Stripped off to swim, he had looked awesome. It was hard to believe he could look even more prepossessing in a maroon tuxedo with a blindingly white dress shirt which showed off his Australian tan to perfection. ‘I’d better get going. It’s a shame the guest villa isn’t available. I don’t want to wake you if I return late.’

The message was clear—don’t wait up. She felt a quick flaring of anger but controlled it. What he did was no concern of hers, except as it affected her beloved province. ‘I’m not your keeper, either, Jase. Return as late as you wish. My bedroom suite is sufficiently far from the front door that you’re unlikely to wake me.’ Unlikely because he had disturbed her so much she was sure she would have trouble sleeping at all tonight.

‘Then I’ll wish you a good evening. If Michael rings give him my thanks and best regards.’

She inclined her head. ‘Of course.’

Then he was gone and the villa echoed with emptiness. Having spent many nights at her uncle’s vast Pearl Palace at Andaman,

she wasn't troubled by the emptiness. But she had never been so conscious of it before, as if some vital force had been drained from the rooms.

She started to pace then checked the action. She wasn't bothered by Jase's unexpected departure, only that it had robbed her of the chance to discuss his plans with him, she told herself. Nothing else explained the sensation that she would explode if she didn't move.

The feeling almost drove her back to the swimming pool, but Jase had stamped his presence on it too indelibly. It wouldn't help to be reminded of what a narrow band of Lycra could do for the male physique, in his case at least.

She resisted the vision, knowing the link between them was more than physical. Some of her more spiritual friends would say they had known each other in a previous life. She had certainly known him somewhere but more probably in this life. But where and when? Men like Jase Clendon were not easily forgotten. It would come to her in time.

In the meantime, she had told Allie that she wanted to use the villa to work on some new jewellery designs for her collection so that was precisely what she would do. Beyond his involvement with Crystal Bay, Jase meant nothing to her. She wouldn't even miss him this evening.

As she rounded up her drawing materials she wondered why she found herself remembering Allie's favourite English phrase about pigs flying.

Jase's fingers drummed impatiently on the armrest as his driver negotiated the busy streets of Alohan, capital of Pearl Province. Traffic here was nowhere near as bad as in Andaman but it was bad enough.

He wished fervently that he had elected to drive himself, instead of letting his associates send a limousine for him. The traffic would have served as a distraction from thoughts he had no business thinking, such as how exotically beautiful Allie Martine was. No wonder Michael had fallen headlong for her, giving up his Australian citizenship to live permanently in Sapphan. For a woman like Allie, it wouldn't be a sacrifice, Jase thought.

His stomach muscles tightened as he remembered how she had looked in a swimsuit. It was modest enough, covering far more of her body than the garments Australian women wore back home on Bondi Beach. But, in Allie's case, the sensuous fabric hinted at secrets which practically invited exploration.

Lord, it was hot in here, he thought, reaching to turn up the air conditioning in the passenger compartment. The collar of his dress shirt felt tight suddenly and he hooked a finger into it, knowing the collar had fitted perfectly well when he had left the villa.

It came to him that Allie hadn't been pleased to hear he was going out for the evening. The thought of spending the evening alone with her in the villa as the sun set and darkness gathered around them had him tugging at the collar once more. He hadn't actually planned this business dinner until he had met her but it

was the only sensible option. If he had stayed with her tonight...

He slammed one fist into the other palm so hard that pain vibrated all the way to his shoulders, shattering the image before it could take form. Allie was married, for goodness' sake. She knew what could happen when a man and a woman struck sparks off each other the way they did. She should be grateful he had taken the initiative and removed himself from temptation.

Another thought occurred to him. She was married, but she wasn't wearing a ring. Odd. He tried to remember if couples exchanged rings in Sapphan. They had some unusual customs, such as declaring two people legally married as soon as they formally agreed to the union. There was no concept of an engagement, simply, 'Do you? I do.' Any ceremony came later but it was purely a formality. The marriage existed from the time they agreed to be married. So rings were probably optional. All the same, Michael was Australian-born. Surely he would have wanted to give Allie a wedding ring, even if local custom didn't demand it?

Jase frowned at his own thoughts. What business was it of his whether the Martines had exchanged rings or not? Ring or no ring, he was well aware of her status and it screamed 'hands off' at him. No trappings were needed, only a good deal of self-restraint, enough to leave him feeling shaken.

'Did you sleep well last night, Allie?' Jase enquired politely when he joined her for breakfast next morning. She had set out a traditional local repast of fresh papaya, pineapple and mango

slices, croissants and an assortment of sliced cold meats. He was glad to see there was coffee. Tea was more common in Sapphan but it wouldn't help his head this morning.

She smiled but he saw a hint of censure in her eyes. 'Better than you, from the look of you.'

He massaged his forehead. 'It was a heavy night. Lots of business to discuss.'

'Naturally.'

He didn't add that his business could have been concluded at the restaurant. He had had no need to continue to a nightclub where the music had pounded at him and the drinks had been at stellar prices. He didn't normally drink to excess but last night he had needed the distraction for some reason. Unfortunately he was paying for it now.

The drink she offered him was a vile orange colour, and she persisted even after he shook his head, a shudder taking him. 'It's a local remedy for late nights and heavy business discussions,' she said, with the merest trace of sarcasm.

He took a cautious swallow then another. After the first bitter taste it was curiously refreshing. 'What is this stuff?'

'Mostly tropical juices with herbs and a dash of pepper,' she explained. 'What you would call "hair of the pup".'

'Dog,' he corrected. At her puzzled look, he added, 'It's called "hair of the dog" but this doesn't qualify. The complete phrase is "hair of the dog that bit you" so, strictly speaking, it should be alcoholic.'

She started to rise but he stayed her with a hand on her arm. ‘This is fine, thanks.’

The effect of the contact was instant and electrifying. He felt it all the way to the soles of his shoes. She felt it too, from the way her pupils enlarged and she trembled ever so slightly under his hand. He hastily withdrew it and finished the juice.

‘Are you still coming with me to Crystal Bay?’ Even as he said it he knew he should have withdrawn the invitation, giving some excuse to go alone. Instead, he held his breath as he waited for her answer.

‘I wouldn’t miss it for the world,’ she assured him. ‘After you’ve shown me the site of your resort, I want to show you a Crystal Bay which outsiders seldom see.’

He felt a frown etch his brow. ‘Carting me around some picturesque village won’t make me change my plans, if that’s what you’re hoping.’ It didn’t take a genius to work out that she didn’t favour the resort, which was strange, given her husband’s involvement with tourism.

Her look was mild but her hands wove together in her lap, he noted. ‘Somehow I doubt if anyone makes you do anything, Jase.’

She didn’t exactly say, ‘So who am I to try?’ And she didn’t bat her eyelids. But both were implied. He got a sense of performance in her behaviour today, as if she were acting a part. Probably the submissive Sapphan woman, he decided. Feminism wasn’t exactly rampant here but neither were the women especially submissive. They owned property, ran businesses, held

government office, exactly as they did in his own country. Maybe she had some notion of using feminine wiles to influence his plans. 'Why didn't you go with Michael to Europe?' he asked, suddenly suspicious.

She shrugged. 'He didn't ask me to.' It was the absolute truth. 'You didn't remain behind precisely so we could have the discussion we're having now?'

She drew herself up. Regal was the only word which fitted her bearing, as if she wasn't accustomed to having her word doubted. 'What are you implying, Jase?'

He folded his arms across his chest. 'You don't like the idea of a resort at Crystal Bay.' It wasn't a question. Her behaviour had already given him the answer.

'I make no secret of it,' she confirmed. 'Today I mean to show you my reasons.'

Honesty at last. He nodded slowly. 'This should prove fascinating.'

The road to the resort site at Crystal Bay was a winding dirt track, littered with fist-sized stones. Jase kept the car windows wound up against the gritty dust blowing against the glass. 'This road is the first thing I plan to upgrade,' he said through clenched teeth.

The daunting road also deterred outsiders from intruding on the villagers' way of life, but Talay kept the thought to herself, reluctant to invite another lecture about the dangers of stagnation.

Another jolt threw her sideways against Jase and she was forced to cling to him until she could lever herself upright. About the only benefit she could see in a smooth road was to save her the indignity of constantly being thrown into contact with him, she thought, feeling her face flame. In the driving mirror she glimpsed amusement dancing in his eyes. The wretched man was enjoying this.

Fortunately, he blamed the jolting ride rather than the intimacy of the contact for her discomfiture. She would die before admitting that every move, every touch between them, sent her senses haywire. She had never experienced anything remotely like his effect on her, and it took her breath away. Keeping her mind on her mission was becoming more and more of a challenge.

‘I gather you’re a jewellery designer,’ he surprised her by saying.

Her startled look flitted to him. ‘How did you know?’

‘This morning I saw some sketches you left lying on the coffee-table. From the look of them, you have a lot of talent. I’m surprised Michael never mentioned it.’

Her thoughts raced. ‘It’s something I studied as a single woman.’

Jase nodded, his lean hands flexed around the steering-wheel as he controlled the powerful car over the tortuous road. ‘And now you’ve decided to go back to it.’ He shot her a sidelong look. ‘Are you and Michael having some trouble?’

Her eyebrows lifted involuntarily. 'Why do you ask?'

'I can add up. He didn't ask you to go with him to Europe. You're reviving an interest in a former career. And you obviously don't see eye to eye on the resort plans.' Without warning he stopped the car and turned to her. 'What are you playing at?'

Confusion ripped through her. His instincts had warned him she wasn't being honest with him but he had reached a totally unexpected—and wrong—conclusion. 'What do you mean?' she hedged.

'Michael didn't sign the message inviting me to use the villa in his absence. Did you send it, Allie?'

'What makes you think—?'

He seized her wrist and turned her to face him. 'First things first. Did you send the message?'

White-hot anger seared her veins. 'You forget with whom you're dealing.' In dismay she realised her imperious tone belonged more to Princess Talay than Allie Martine.

His hold didn't slacken but thankfully he misunderstood the source of her rage. 'It's a bit late to remind me of your married status now, isn't it? You should have remembered it before arranging for us to be alone.'

'I have no idea what you mean.' In truth, she didn't.

His hard gaze bored into her. 'Don't you? You may think you know what kind of man I am—but think again. In spite of my reputation, I have no interest in providing a fling for a woman whose marriage has gone stale.'

Horror gripped Talay. She had never dreamed he would misinterpret her actions so completely. She couldn't let him believe Allie would do such a thing. 'You're wrong,' she stated emphatically. 'There's nothing amiss with the marriage.'

His eyebrows climbed. 'The marriage, Allie? It's a peculiar way to describe a love match, surely? What about, "I still love Michael"? Say it and I'll admit I'm out of line.'

The silence in the car became deafening. Lies argued against Talay's nature. Already she wished with all her heart that she had never pretended to be Allie. She couldn't bring herself to compound her crimes by telling Jase she loved Michael.

An impatient breath whistled past Jase's lips. 'I rest my case. So there's only one thing left to prove.'

Something in his tone set her senses on full alert. 'What do you—?'

Before she could finish the question he slid an arm around her neck and pulled her towards him, the suddenness of the movement driving the air out of her lungs. His mouth crashed down on hers and she was enveloped in a sensation like drowning.

It was drowning of the most sensuous sort and the protest she tried to make forced her lips apart, exactly the way he wanted them she found out when his tongue sought hers in a sinuous dance. She had been kissed before, but never so compellingly that she could hardly think.

Then, somewhere between her attempted cry of protest and his invasion of her mouth, something changed. All the pent-up

emotion of the last few hours forced its way into her response until she found herself returning his kiss with all the passion in her soul.

Her arms came up and wound around his neck, her fingers threading through his wonderful long hair which felt like silk. The firmness of his scalp was another source of sensory wonder and she explored it with fingertips as sensitised as a surgeon's. She felt hungry for something beyond food, thirsty for something beyond water. Blackness fringed the edges of her vision and she wondered fleetingly if you could pass out from an overload of sensual pleasure.

She never found out. As abruptly as he had begun the kiss, he ended it by drawing away from her, imposing a yawning chasm of space between them as he folded his arms and stared grimly out of the window.

As the sensual heat subsided Talay's muscles ached, as if from a mile-long run. 'What is it?' she asked. Why had he stopped before they had barely begun?

He heard the question, without her having to say it aloud. 'There's no need to go on. I've proved my point. If you want more you'll have to find some other man to provide it. Michael is my friend.'

Fighting a crushing sense of disappointment, she decided to tell him the truth. She couldn't let him go on thinking Allie would ever seek an affair outside her marriage. Not only were she and Michael blissfully happy, they were planning for the arrival of

their first child at this very moment.

‘This isn’t what you think,’ she began. ‘I’m not—’

‘Save it, I’m not interested in a litany of Michael’s shortcomings as a husband,’ he cut across her savagely. In spite of her turmoil, Talay was mesmerised by the way his breathing came and went, came and went, as if he, too, had been affected by the kiss. But his voice was steady as he said, ‘If I had a choice I’d turn this car around and take you home right now, but my foreman expects me at Crystal Bay in a few minutes so I have to show up. Once we get there I’ll have someone else drive you back. Until then I don’t want to hear another word out of you.’

As a princess she should have found the injunction shocking. No one spoke to her in such a demeaning way. But in her present guise she understood and even admired his loyalty to his friend. But he had to let her tell him the truth. ‘Please let me—’

With the swiftness of a king cobra, he moved to clamp a hand over her mouth, silencing her. ‘Not a word, understand?’

Over the warm pressure of his fingers she saw the determined glint firing his eyes, and she had no choice but to nod. His palm tasted salty against her lips which felt swollen from his kiss. It came to her that he would be stunned when he found out how he’d treated a member of the royal family. It was a pity Sapphan no longer imposed the death penalty for lese-majesty, she raged inwardly. She would take great pleasure in making Jase pay for his callous treatment. At her nod he slowly removed his hand.

Trying to explain would only invite more punishment so she

sat in mutinous silence while he restarted the car and drove the remaining distance to Crystal Bay. When they arrived she was too stunned by the scene which met her eyes to say anything.

He noticed her stillness. 'It looks worse than it is,' he assured her calmly. 'We have a complete reforestation plan in place to ensure that every tree removed and more are put back before we're done. I have thousands of baobabs, coconut palms, tamarinds, frangipani and flame trees on standby for this area alone.'

'Big of you,' she muttered. She was still smarting from the physical way he had ensured her silence.

He gave her a searching look. 'Sulking, Allie? Or simply annoyed because I wasn't taken in by your devious scheme?'

She forced herself to meet his eyes unflinchingly, wishing fervently that looks could kill. 'It must be a terrible burden, always having to be right.'

'Then you admit I am right about you?'

'I admit nothing of the sort.' During her enforced silence she had decided he would find out soon enough whom he had mistreated. The longer it took the sweeter would be her revenge when it came. In the meantime, since he wasn't prepared to listen to her explanation, she would maintain a dignified aloofness.

'I'll say this for you, you don't lack courage.' His tone was grudgingly admiring. 'And you're sufficiently beautiful and sexy to make me wish you weren't married. But you are, and to a man I like and respect too much to indulge you. I'll arrange for someone

to drive you home before I deal with my business here.'

'Afraid, Jase?' She deliberately used his own words against him.

'Afraid of what? You? I thought I demonstrated my resistance to your charms rather effectively on the way here.'

At the reminder of his forceful kiss her insides clenched but she managed to remain outwardly calm, blessing years of royal training which enabled her to disguise her inner turmoil. 'I was referring to your obvious fear of learning anything that might not fit your preconceptions about this place,' she said, pleased that her voice hardly shook at all.

He gave a grunt of annoyance. 'You're still determined to show me the error of my ways.'

'You did a good job of pointing out mine. I only wish to return the favour.'

His eyes glinted ferally. 'Touché. Very well, I'll deal with my business here then you can show me around. But if your behaviour is less than exemplary I'll return you home so quickly your head will spin.'

It was already spinning but she bit her tongue. She was determined not to give him the satisfaction of revealing how strongly he affected her. Even if he knew he would probably assume it was a new ploy on Allie's part to seduce her husband's friend.

Silently Talay asked for Allie's forgiveness. Now she had come this far she had to continue playing the part long enough to

convince Jase to change his plans. Afterwards she would take great pleasure in setting the record straight for Allie and herself while she watched Jase choke on his ugly suspicions.

CHAPTER FOUR

JASE had chosen his location well, Talay admitted reluctantly to herself. The resort rested on nearly eighteen hectares of swaying palms and tropical foliage against a backdrop of lush green rainforest.

A white sandy beach stretched around two sides of the area and curved into deep, secluded bays. A small coral reef at one end of the crescent would provide snorkelling in Sapphan's crystal-clear waters, Jase explained. From the shore it was possible to watch shoals of brilliantly coloured fish, playing among the coral gardens almost at her feet.

The buildings would blend with the lush jungle, waterfalls and mist-covered mountain peaks, Jase assured her. He borrowed plans from the foreman overseeing the site preparation to show Talay sketches of how the finished resort would look. Built from traditional materials, using timeless Sapphan carpentry techniques, it could easily be mistaken for the abode of an island chieftain from her country's history, she concluded, impressed almost against her will.

The resort would comprise several low-lying main buildings and a dozen thatched cottages, known as bures, facing the tropical sunsets. She noticed Jase took special care to describe the honeymoon bure to her. 'It will have a hand-carved four-

poster bed curtained with mosquito netting, an outdoor shower for two,' he emphasised, 'and a private spa and sundeck where the newlyweds can entertain themselves, without having to set foot in the main complex. Tropical fruit and champagne will be provided and even a yacht to take them to the resort's private island, complete with gourmet provisions, if they wish to spend a night entirely alone.'

A wave of sensual heat swept through her as his words painted a vivid picture in her mind. No need for clothing on an uninhabited island. No need for anything except the company of the man you loved and endless hours to enjoy each other, free of all commitment and restriction. Her throat felt dry but she refused to swallow.

'I see the notion appeals to you,' Jase drawled, shattering the fantasy. 'Maybe you can convince Michael to reserve it for the two of you so you can direct those passions of yours where they belong.'

'If you've finished lecturing me it's my turn to show you around,' she snapped, uncomfortably aware of how easily she could imagine sharing the private island paradise with Jase himself. Having tasted the heady pleasure of his kiss, she trembled at the thought of what other sensual treats might await his partner in such a place. It would, indeed, be paradise on earth.

She froze in horror at her own thoughts. He was the last man with whom she should dream of spending nights in paradise, or anywhere else for that matter. He had as good as admitted

that his playboy reputation was deserved. His refusal to seduce his friend's wife, as he believed she wanted, was honourable but hardly radeeming, given the number of other fish in the sea. And he was still the enemy. Nothing he had shown her today had altered her opinion of him as an interloper here.

She was so lost in thought that she didn't notice the foreman approaching them to consult the plans spread out on the car bonnet in front of Jase. The man froze as he caught sight of Talay, and immediately brought his palms together at chest height in a gesture of respect. 'Your Royal Highness, forgive the intrusion. I didn't recognise you from a distance.'

Fortunately he addressed her in Sapphanese and she answered in kind, assuring him she was not seeking special treatment but was here as Jase's guest to inspect the site. 'Go about your work and take no notice of me,' she urged with a smile. She had deliberately dressed in a western-style white shirt and slim-fitting cream linen trousers to avoid being recognised too easily. So far it had worked, but the foreman was spreading the word, she saw, as the distant workers began to look their way.

A deep V of interest furrowed Jase's brow. 'Your presence seems to be causing a stir.'

'I'm patron of some local charities so I'm well known around here,' she answered truthfully.

She wasn't sure if he accepted the explanation or not but he said no more about it as he concluded his business at the site. Unfortunately, the problem was even worse at their next port of

call mere minutes away, the village she wanted very much to show him. There was nothing she could do about it except be glad few of the villagers spoke English and when they used her title it was in Sapphanese.

The village comprised a collection of bamboo and thatch buildings clustered around an arc of white sand where turtles came to lay their eggs between November and February. Behind the village was a forest of casuarina trees. Overhead the palm fronds waved and the rest of the world could have been on the moon.

Sea-nomads, shell hunters and pearl divers had lived here for centuries. At night they strapped batteryoperated lamps to their foreheads and walked in the tidal shallows to where jutting rocks hissed and popped as they dried. Wielding hooks of bent iron, they pried up the rocks and tipped them over to expose slimy shells which, when cleaned, were breathtakingly beautiful.

A thatch-roofed cottage served as a trading post for the shells. In their raw state they wore thick rubbery coats which washed away to reveal key scallops, nautilus shells, cowries, olives, cones and the delicate, spinetipped Venus's combs.

There were pearls, too, not the perfect farmed variety but the bizarre baroque shapes created by wild oysters in the open sea. Jase picked up a specimen which was amazingly heart-shaped. Its rainbow colours glistened in the sunlight spilling through the cottage door. 'Ask the trader how much she wants for this pearl,' he told Talay.

The woman, having recognised Talay, wanted to press the gem on her as a gift, and it took a lot of gentle persuasion to convince her to name a price, which was still ridiculously low. Jase paid for the pearl with a large note and walked away before he could be given change. Too late Talay remembered that Jase came from Broome and was bound to know the pearl was a bargain.

‘Either these people are dangerously naïve or unusually generous,’ he commented outside the trader’s hut.

‘Is generosity a crime in Australia?’ She evaded the issue.

He ignored it and his searching gaze swept the area. ‘No building rises higher than the palm trees.’

She welcomed the change of subject. ‘It’s their idea of a planning code.’

He glanced at the palm-leaf-wrapped package in his hand. ‘How do they live? Educate their children?’

‘There’s a snake farm nearby where they milk poisonous snakes of their venom to make snake-bite serum,’ she explained. ‘The women also make silk on traditional hand looms. In spite of the rustic appearance, this village is prosperous and its members happy and healthy in their isolation.’

His eyes narrowed. ‘In other words, hands off. Point taken. Where can we get lunch around here?’

Her tension escalated rapidly. There were several thatch-roofed cafés where they could eat and her presence would be considered an honour. Which was the problem. She had managed to explain away the reaction to her so far, but over a meal it would

become obvious that she was more than a respected charity-worker.

‘I thought you couldn’t wait to dump me back at home,’ she reminded him sharply, not liking to bring up his earlier suspicions of ‘Allie’, but seeing no other option.

‘Since I made my position clear you’ve been on your best behaviour. There’s no need to let you starve.’ His searching appraisal took in her slender waist and hips, their narrowness emphasised by the cut of the pants. ‘There’s nothing of you as it is. I’d hate to have you fainting from hunger on me.’

‘Sapphan women are naturally slender. We eat like horses,’ she snapped back, as his disturbingly slow appraisal sent waves of warmth flooding through her, try as she might to prevent it.

‘All the more reason to take you to lunch now. This one looks good.’ He indicated an unpretentious little restaurant on a bluff with a superb view of Crystal Bay.

Talay’s heart sank. She had hoped he would ask for her recommendation. She would never have chosen this café, where she was well known. The restaurant was famous for its local lobsters, marinated duckling and seafood steamed in a crab shell, and was also a favourite of her uncle, the king, when he visited the province on his way to the royal retreat at Chalong.

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