



Sharon
KENDRICK

THE ROYAL
BABY REVELATION

Sharon Kendrik

The Royal Baby Revelation

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Kendrik S.

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Step into a world of sophistication and glamour, where sinfully seductive heroes await you in luxurious international locations. The King's baby of shame! King Casimiro harbours a secret. No one in the kingdom of Zaffirinthos knows that a devastating accident has left his memory clouded in darkness. And Casimiro himself cannot answer why Melissa Maguire, the enigmatic English rose before him, stirs such feelings in him... Questioning his ability to rule, Casimiro decides he will renounce the throne. But Melissa has news she knows will rock the palace to its core: Casimiro has an heir! Law dictates Casimiro cannot abdicate, so he must find a way to reacquaint himself with Melissa – his new queen!

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‘If you don’t mind, I’d rather go somewhere...a little more private.’

‘I don’t think so,’ he said softly. ‘You’ve already had more than enough concessions. You’ve got your opportunity—which is precisely two minutes—to tell me what all this damned mystery is about.’ His mouth hardened. ‘And it had better be good.’

Her voice was trembling, but somehow she got the words out. ‘Our meeting was very different from most you must encounter, Your Majesty—or at least I’m assuming it was. It was back in the summer, nearly two years ago—in England, at a party during a tour of the Zaffirinthos marbles. In fact we did more than meet. Much more. As it happens we had a short affair, and as a consequence...’ She saw the disbelief and the anger which was beginning to blaze from his amber eyes. ‘As a consequence I...I have a little son. Or rather *we* have a son. What I should say is...you have a son, Your Majesty.’

Dear Reader,

One hundred. Doesn’t matter how many times I say it, I still can’t believe that’s how many books I’ve written. It’s a fabulous feeling but more fabulous still is the news that Mills & Boon are issuing *every single one* of my backlist as digital titles. Wow. I can’t wait to share all my stories with you - which are as vivid to me now as when I wrote them.

There’s BOUGHT FOR HER HUSBAND, with its outrageously macho Greek hero and A SCANDAL, A SECRET AND A BABY featuring a very sexy Tuscan. THE SHEIKH’S HEIR proved so popular with readers that it spent two weeks on the *USA Today* charts and...well, I could go on, but I’ll leave you to discover them for yourselves.

I remember the first line of my very first book: “So you’ve come to Australia looking for a husband?” Actually, the heroine had gone to Australia to escape men, but guess what? She found a husband all the same! The man who inspired that book rang me up recently and when I told him I was beginning my 100th story and couldn’t decide what to write, he said, “Why don’t you go back to where it all started?”

So I did. And that’s how A ROYAL VOW OF CONVENIENCE was born. It opens in beautiful Queensland and moves to England and New York. It’s about a runaway princess and the enigmatic billionaire who is infuriated by her, yet who winds up rescuing her. But then, she goes and rescues him... Wouldn’t you know it?

I’ll end by saying how very grateful I am to have a career I love, and to thank each and every one of you who has supported me along the way. You really are very dear readers.

Love,

Sharon xxx

The Royal Baby Revelation

Sharon Kendrick



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Mills & Boon are proud to present a thrilling digital collection of all Sharon Kendrick's novels and novellas for us to celebrate the publication of her amazing and awesome 100th book! Sharon is known worldwide for her likeable, spirited heroines and her gorgeous, utterly masculine heroes.

SHARON KENDRICK once won a national writing competition, describing her ideal date: being flown to an exotic island by a gorgeous and powerful man. Little did she realise that she'd just wandered into her dream job! Today she writes for Mills & Boon, featuring her often stubborn but always to-die-for heroes and the women who bring them to their knees. She believes that the best books are those you never want to end. Just like life...

This book is dedicated with love to the mischievous and inspirational Monica Black—whose talents as wife, mother and raconteur are legendary.

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CHAPTER ONE

GOLDEN light streamed down from the vaulted ceiling but Melissa didn't pay it any attention. Even palaces paled into insignificance when measured against the realisation that her moment had come.

At last.

Sometimes it seemed as if her life had been defined by this moment—and that her future would be determined by its outcome. A moment she could trace right back to that terrifying second when she'd held the strip of plastic in her shaking fingers and seen the unmistakable blue line which had confirmed her pregnancy.

And the world as she'd known it had changed for ever.

'Did you hear me, Melissa?' Stephen's voice punctured her ballooning thoughts. 'I said that the King will see you shortly.'

'Yes. Yes, I heard you,' said Melissa, her heart beginning to pound as she allowed herself a brief glance in one of the ornate mirrors which lined the ante-room of the Zaffirinthos palace. She was not a vain woman—there would have been no time for vanity in her life even if her looks had warranted it. She had the kind of face which wouldn't have launched even a single ship—let alone a thousand. But an audience with the King...

The King who had fathered her son!

As she tidied her long, thick hair for what felt the hundredth time she hoped she looked better from the outside than she felt on the inside. Because she had to look her best. Her very best. She had to make Casimiro believe that she was worth something. That she was fit to be the mother of his child. Smoothing damp palms down over the linen of her new dress, she looked anxiously to Stephen for some kind of confirmation. 'Do I...do I look okay?'

He flicked her a brief glance before returning his attention to the clipboard in his hand. 'You look fine—but you do realise he isn't going to notice what you're wearing? Royals never do. We're staff so we're deemed servants—and they never look properly at servants. We're just there—like part of the wallpaper.'

'Wallpaper,' she repeated blankly.

'That's right. Part of the background. All he wants from you is a brief outline of the itinerary for tonight's ball. Basically, I've told him everything he needs to know—but since you've organised the flowers and the band he wants to speak to you himself, to thank you. It's a courtesy thing. Keep it short and keep it sweet, and don't forget—only speak when you're spoken to.'

'Of course I won't forget.' There was a pause. What Melissa might have called a pregnant pause if the expression hadn't mocked her quite so much. 'You know I've...I've met the King once before,' she ventured.

Stephen frowned as he looked up from his clipboard. 'When?'

What *had* made her say that? Was it perhaps to pave the way for the number one dream scenario she'd nurtured for so long—that Casimiro would immediately acknowledge Ben as his son and heir? That she would be able to tell people about Ben's dad with a certain amount of pride, instead of biting her lip and saying that she'd rather not talk about it?

The only trouble with dream scenarios was that once you started coming up with them, it wasn't easy to stop.

Because wasn't it possible that the King might even be grateful to her for the bombshell she was about to drop—especially as his younger brother's wife had recently given birth to a son. The world's press had fanfared the birth of an heir to the fabulous Mediterranean kingdom, but Melissa knew that wasn't true. Because Ben was the heir. *The true heir.*

She cleared her throat. ‘When...when we did that museum party in London, for the touring exhibition of the Zaffirinthos marbles. Casimiro was there—and at the after-show party. Surely you remember?’

‘Sure I do.’ Stephen screwed up his eyes. ‘You helped me hand out the canapés that night, Mel—I doubt whether you actually engaged him in any conversation other than, “Would you like another hors d’oeuvre, Your Majesty?” And if you’re expecting him to remember you from back then, you’d better think again.’

Melissa gave a brief, nervous smile. Of course her boss wouldn’t have noticed—for there had been no chemistry or eye contact between the party planner’s assistant and the eligible King during what had been just another glittering socialite gathering. You would hardly expect the guest of honour to engage in light-hearted banter with a woman who was there simply to serve the privileged throng.

And yet what would Stephen say if he knew just what the King *had* said to her the very next night when she had been cold and empty and aching for some human comfort? Something along the lines of how criminal it was for her to wear panties at all...and then he had proceeded to remove them with a dexterity which, when coupled with a passionate kiss, had made any argument against his love-making completely futile.

But Stephen was clearly oblivious to the fact that she had become intimate with the man who ruled the prosperous Mediterranean island of Zaffirinthos. He had no idea that Casimiro was Ben’s father. In fact, neither did her aunt, who was looking after Ben back in England at this very moment. No one did—not even Casimiro himself. It was a terrible, aching secret she had been forced to keep to herself—but soon she would be free of the intolerable burden.

‘And people are still concerned about the King’s health, of course,’ continued Stephen thoughtfully.

At this, Melissa stilled. ‘He’s...he’s not ill?’

‘Ill? He’s the fittest man I’ve ever seen—which is a miracle when you stop to think about it,’ said Stephen reflectively. ‘You know he nearly died the year before last, don’t you?’

Despite the warmth of the late-May evening, Melissa couldn’t suppress the shiver which Stephen’s words produced as they took her back to that terrible time. A time which had been like a living hell. Of course she knew that Casimiro had nearly died—hadn’t she sat awake for hours watching the twenty-four hour news channel, wide-eyed and weary from lack of sleep as she’d waited for bulletins which had told her very little?

The King is fighting for his life had been the one grim and enduring announcement which had made her recognise that she couldn’t keep burying her head in the sand.

And hadn’t Casimiro’s eventual recovery spurred her into action—slamming home the realisation that she must tell him about his baby? Even if she’d failed in her attempts to contact him before—because Kings were pretty much unreachable to people like her—this time she must. She *must*. For Ben was more than just a beautiful little boy she adored with all her heart—he was the progeny of a king; heir to a royal kingdom—and didn’t they both have a right to know that?

‘He...he fell off his horse, didn’t he?’ she questioned—a fact she already knew. Actually, about the *only* fact she knew about the accident—though perhaps Stephen could tell her more.

‘Landed on his head—reckless fool. Was in a coma for weeks.’

‘But he’s all right now?’

‘Apparently. Though one of his staff was indiscreet enough to tell me that the King’s initial relief at his full recovery has given way to a cold demeanour which makes most of them quake.’

This was not what Melissa wanted to hear. She wanted to hear that Casimiro was the sunniest person on the planet. That he would smile on her with delight when she grabbed an opportune moment to tell him her earth-shattering news, and tell her that she wasn’t to worry. That he would sort it all out.

‘Cold?’ she echoed.

‘Positively icy.’ Stephen laughed. ‘So, like I say, Melissa—keep it short and keep it sweet.’

‘I’ll try to remember. See you in a while,’ she said, and with strangely reluctant footsteps, she began to follow the footman who was waiting to lead her to the King’s offices.

She’d only arrived at the palace yesterday—stepping off a private jet which had been light years away from her usual mode of public transport on crowded buses and trains. Ready to help Stephen with the final preparations for the ball that King Casimiro was throwing. It was to be a belated wedding party for his younger brother Xaviero and wife Catherine—as well as a celebration of the birth of their baby son. And Stephen was organising the gathering—these days he seemed to have a monopoly on high-profile events, and royal gatherings were his speciality.

Stephen Woods was her boss—she helped him plan his society parties, a job she’d stumbled on more by chance than by judgement. They’d met when Melissa had been temping in one of his offices—after she’d been forced to drop out of college due to a lack of funds when her mother had died. In the midst of her grief, Stephen had recognised her talent and made her feel as if she was worth something. Time and time again, the flamboyant caterer had told Melissa that her artistic eye was invaluable to him. That her talent for transforming the mundane into something extraordinary was what helped get his business talked about and her behind-the-scenes work was second to none. Which was why he valued her enough to let her choose her own hours and to work them around Ben—and she was so grateful to him for that.

Lost in thought, Melissa barely noticed the splendour and dimensions of the magnificent palace as she followed the footman along the wide marble corridors. The paintings on the walls seemed to all blur into one and the statues of ancient gods and goddesses bathed in sunlight were completely lost on her. She just kept thinking about Ben—and how his life was about to take on an entirely new direction. Very soon he would have a father at long last—a father he could grow to know and to love. Someone who would be able to enrich his young life with all kinds of benefits.

Eventually coming to a halt, the footman knocked loudly on an ornate pair of doors and she heard a single terse word emanating from within.

‘Si?’

There wasn’t really time to register the throaty and sexy accent—which she knew spoke Greek as fluently as Italian—or the fact that she was seconds away from seeing him, because the doors were pushed open. Melissa’s hands were trembling as she was summoned inside—indeed it seemed as if her whole body was trembling. The thought that her most longed-for wish was about to come true was making her wonder whether her shaky legs would bear her weight—but she knew that she had to stay calm and focused. She *had* to.

And then she saw him.

Seated at his desk with an air of intense concentration as he scrutinised a sheaf of papers which were spread out in front of him, he seemed to have been carved from a piece of dark and glittering stone and was completely oblivious to her presence. For a moment, she just stood there—drinking him in. The ebony sheen of his hair and the powerful broad shoulders set her pulse racing. He might have been born to rule with untold riches at his clever fingertips, but to Melissa he had always been the most perfect man she’d ever seen, and, from this angle, that much hadn’t changed.

Suddenly, he looked up and her heart lurched with excited recognition as their eyes met—for, despite everything, she felt her heart turn over with longing. Because what woman wouldn’t feel moved by the sight of her ex-lover whose seed had grown inside her belly for nine long months? Time after time he’d preoccupied her thoughts—even if he’d never shown the slightest inclination to stay in touch with her. How long had it been since she’d seen him? she wondered dazedly. Getting on for two years. *Nearly two whole years!*

She stared into deep amber eyes fringed with jet-dark lashes, which made his gaze seem to pierce right through her. At hair the colour of a raven’s wing. At autocratic and proud features and a lean, muscular body, which was wearing some kind of uniform. Casimiro. It was Casimiro—but he seemed so different. His face seemed darker, harder—more forbidding than she remembered it. She

swallowed. Cloaked in the unmistakable aura of royalty, he looked regal and imposing—and utterly, utterly inaccessible.

Yet once he had been accessible, hadn't he? she reminded herself. Accessible enough to take you to his bed and to thrust his golden-dark body into yours over and over again. It was just seeing him now—sitting in his very own palace—that Melissa felt insecurity wash over her. Because even though you knew something intellectually, you couldn't always accept it—not emotionally. But now, for the first time, she did. He really *was* a king. A king who ruled an exquisite island kingdom. Who was lord and master of all he surveyed. And the enormity of what lay before her seemed positively daunting.

But it was too late to back out now—the access she had longed for had finally been granted—and with a fast-thudding heart, Melissa smiled. Because he was the father of her child and—no matter what had happened in the past—surely they could be adult about the future?

She hadn't exactly expected him to leap to his feet with pleasure and to pull her into his arms, but she had been expecting him to say *something*. To have registered *some* kind of emotion on his face—like shock or surprise, maybe even dismay, because she wasn't naïve enough not to realise that his life would have moved on in all kinds of ways. But his countenance remained cold—as cold as ice—and maybe it was up to her to break it.

Fixing a hopeful look to her face, she attempted a smile. 'H-hello,' she said, even though the word felt like a pebble which had stuck in her throat.

For a moment, Casimiro did not respond to her greeting or to her soft English accent. He had been so deep in troubled thought that he could barely remember summoning anyone to his offices, and now he narrowed his eyes as he studied the woman who stood before him.

Her long, glossy hair was the colour of strong tea—the brown hair which was so widespread among Englishwomen—and her eyes were green. Skin so pale it was almost translucent showed a fine tracery of blue veins at her temples and she wore a dress whose only eye-catching feature was the fact that it drew his attention to a pair of long and very attractive legs.

He frowned. All his life had been steeped in protocol—it was as much a part of his existence as breathing itself. Often he professed himself bored with such etiquette and railed against its restrictions—but its absence was enough to ensure his frosty disapproval. Placing his gold fountain pen down on the desk, he fixed her with a look of chilly censure.

'And you are...?' he questioned coldly.

Melissa's smile slipped by a fraction and she was taken aback by his unfriendliness. Was this some kind of joke? She met amber eyes—but amber was supposed to be warm and glowing, wasn't it? Not like the glance which was searing its way through her. This was cold, impenetrable—hard and unwelcoming. Heart thundering, she searched his aristocratic features for some kind of recognition. Some vague stirring of memory. Some acknowledgement that this was a woman he had made love to over and over again.

But there was nothing on his face other than a faintly dismissive stare and, slowly, the unbelievable began to dawn on her protesting mind.

He doesn't know who you are!

For a moment she didn't believe it. Thought that he might be playing some kind of cruel game with her—but his demeanour remained hard and obdurate, and surely nobody could be *that* good an actor?

Yes, their affair had lasted only a few short days—but surely she wasn't completely forgettable? In fact, hadn't he told her that he would always remember their passionate encounter? Had he been lying when he'd said that—or was it just a line he'd spun to countless women, despite having had the ability to make her feel so intensely special at the time?

Eyes blinking rapidly, Melissa tried to put her jumbled thoughts into some semblance of order. Forcing herself not to do something crazy, that afterwards she might regret. Like blurting something

out. Something along the lines of: *Your Royal Highness, I can see my son's face in your features. Or I have a miniature version of you back home, Casimiro—an heir you aren't even aware of.*

But she couldn't possibly do that. Not right out of the blue. Not when she'd already decided that she was going to have to choose her moment to tell him very carefully. And standing beneath the nearcontemptuous gaze of a man who was regarding her as if she'd tumbled down from space and were burning an unwelcome hole in his priceless silk rug would never be described as ideal, not in anyone's eyes.

'I'm Melissa,' she said, hoping against hope that the sound of her Christian name might stir something in his memory. Didn't he once say that it made him think of honey?

'Melissa?'

'Melissa Maguire.'

He flicked her a look of barely restrained boredom. 'I'm none the wiser.'

What could she say which might jog his memory? Some half-forgotten fragment of conversation which might have stayed alive in his mind even if the memory of her eager love-making didn't. Hadn't he told her that the afternoon when they'd sneaked out on the little river boat had been one of the best of his life? Swallowing down her hurt, she wobbled him a smile. 'I live...I live just outside London in a place called Walton-on-Thames. Not far from the river, where you can hire rowing boats. You might—'

'I might be in danger of falling asleep any minute now if you continue with your dull little monologue.' Amber eyes iced through her as he cut into her faltering words. 'I didn't ask for your life story. I asked what you're doing here, waltzing into my private rooms with a complete and utter lack of regard.' He paused as all the frustration and uncertainty of the past months now found a legitimate outlet for his intense irritation. 'Because I'm assuming that you know who *I* am—even though you have made no suitable acknowledgment of the fact.'

'Of course I know who you are,' she said quickly. 'You are the King of Zaffirinthos.'

'And yet you greet me as you would a casual friend. You do not lower your eyes in deference? Nor attempt the curtsy which my title merits?'

Melissa heard the silky barbs which spiked his icy request and shakily she attempted to comply—but it felt like a form of humiliation as she crossed one ankle behind the other and awkwardly dipped her knees, like some sort of adolescent frog. Inside she felt upset and angry—his sardonic comments coming hot on the heels of the realisation that he didn't recognise her. Why *should* she have to bow and scrape to him—when she was the mother of his child?

Yet now was probably not the best time to exhibit rebellion and so she executed the most graceful curtsy she could manage—which wasn't easy given that she was now feeling hot and flustered and her linen dress didn't allow for much movement. 'Forgive me, Your Highness,' she said.

'Majesty,' he corrected silkily—although the irony of his statement did not escape him. Not His Majesty for very much longer, he thought—with a heart which grew heavy at the thought of what lay ahead. Soon he would be free of all the accoutrements which had turned his life into a gilded cage. When he made his dramatic announcement at the ball that night, it would put an end at last to all the speculation about his future.

But as he studied the top of the Englishwoman's bent head Casimiro's intuition was alerted—something that had not been lost as a result of his accident, although he had been robbed of much else. There was something about her behaviour which didn't add up—something about her attitude which didn't make sense—though he couldn't for the life of him put his finger on what it could be.

'Get up,' he ordered impatiently.

Feeling the hot prickle of sweat between her breasts, Melissa rose and lifted her eyes to his. 'Yes, Your Majesty.'

'Why are you here?' he demanded softly.

'You sent for me.'

Had he? In truth, his mind had been so caught up with the enormous step he was about to take. The new journey he was about to embark on had preoccupied so much of his thinking that he had barely given a thought to the running of the palace. He glanced down quickly at the papers on his desk, straightening them into a neat pile before fixing her with a cool stare. ‘Very well—then justify my command. Remind me who you are and what you do.’

It was possibly the most insulting way he could have reinforced her lack of status, but Melissa was determined that he would not see how much it had hurt. What good would *that* do? Make him see you as a person, rather than a hindrance. Give him the facts. The facts behind your *real* motive for being here. From somewhere, she found the glimmer of a professional smile.

‘I work for Stephen Woods, the party planner, Your Majesty. I’ve been helping to arrange the ball from back in England. I arrived yesterday to help with the finishing touches and he told me... Stephen, that is...that I was to give you a brief itinerary of tonight’s events.’ She hesitated. He had also said that the King wanted to thank her—but somehow she didn’t think that was going to happen.

‘Did he?’ Casimiro’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. ‘Well, in that case—you’d better go ahead. Sit down,’ he ordered carelessly.

‘Thank you.’ Praying for her breathing to return to something approaching normality, Melissa slid into the delicate-looking gilt chair he had indicated on the other side of his desk.

‘So,’ he drawled. ‘Talk me through it.’

With the tip of her tongue, Melissa moistened her dry lips, trying not to feel self-conscious—though she was acutely aware of his moody and handsome face as the dark golden gaze arrowed into her. How the hell was he going to react when she told him? And just when *was* she going to tell him?

She gave herself a moment’s grace. Everyone’s life was measured by moments, she realised—but maybe this was an important one, too. Maybe this was the time to impress him with her efficiency and work-ethic rather than come right out and tell him he was a daddy.

‘The ball will start at eight—with your entrance, Your Majesty. That will be followed by the arrival of your brother—the Prince Xaviero, his wife, Princess Catherine—and their baby son, the Prince Cosimo.’

‘Is it not too late for the infant Prince to be awake?’ he bit out.

‘Well, maybe just a little.’ She cleared her throat. ‘It’s just...well, we thought that this might be a good opportunity to allow for a photo opportunity, Your Majesty. Since this is a belated wedding party and christening celebration all rolled into one, we’ve been inundated with requests for shots of the new Prince with his mother and father.’ She paused. ‘And if you give the press their shots, afterwards they’ll hopefully leave you alone.’

He narrowed his eyes as he listened to her, knowing that she was only expressing the fundamental truth of the situation. Along with his own people, the world was already half in love with his little nephew—for a royal baby captured the collective imagination as little else did. In truth, he couldn’t blame them—not just because the child was cute, but because his lusty new life promised so much.

Didn’t the infant Cosimo symbolise hope for the future—and the continuity of one of the oldest royal bloodlines in Europe? And hadn’t his birth increased the pressure on Casimiro to find himself a bride and to produce a child of his own?

His mouth hardened. Well, he would not play ball. Not any more. He had followed orders all his life and he would certainly not procreate to order. If the past months had taught him anything, it was that he could no longer continue with this way of living. He had all the trappings that most men lusted after, but they were called *trappings* for a reason—they tied you down and constrained you with their golden snare, and he wanted to break free from them once and for all.

Deep in his veins ran a restlessness which had been even more pronounced since the accident and a restless king could not be a good king. Casimiro’s mouth tightened. And there was another

reason behind his proposed plan. Something else which had haunted him ever since he had awoken from his coma...

‘Would you have any objections to that, Your Majesty?’

Her soft accent cut into his thoughts and he looked at her with his eyebrows raised. ‘What?’

‘A supervised photo-call with your brother and his family?’ she continued smoothly.

‘Objections?’ He gave a short and bitter laugh as her question broke into his troubled thoughts. ‘At least a hundred—and then a hundred more—but I can see the sense behind your words. Speak to my people about security,’ he ordered. ‘And ensure they don’t run over time—because they’ll try their damndest. Too much flash photography is not good for a small child. Not particularly good for adults either,’ he added on a sardonic aside as he met her eyes with a look which was resigned, rather than interested. ‘What next?’

‘Dinner for two hundred. And your brother is making a short speech afterwards to thank you for throwing the party. Then the fireworks. After that—’

‘Wait.’ His peremptory request silenced her and he was surprised by the stone-like feeling deep in his heart. ‘I wish to make a speech myself,’ he said heavily. ‘Before my brother.’

Melissa sat up in alarm. ‘But, Your Majesty—’

His eyes glittered dangerously. ‘What?’

She thought about the foreign royal families, the dignitaries and the glitterati who were arriving from mainland Europe and from the United States, the security services who were already working to the tightest of schedules, and she drew a deep breath. Surely he couldn’t spring something like this on her at the last minute which would throw all her plans out? ‘The timetable has been worked out down to the last second.’

‘Then damned well *unwork* it,’ he drawled unhelpfully. ‘Isn’t that what you’re being paid for?’

Again, his cutting words drummed in her lack of status—but somehow Melissa kept the hurt from registering on her face.

‘Very well, Your Majesty—if...if you can let me know how long you need to say your piece, then I’ll work it into the schedule and inform everybody of the change. It can...it can all be sorted out, I’m sure.’

Aware that her words were stumbling out of her lips like some sort of plea, she searched his face in a lastditch attempt to strike a chord of recognition. *Remember me*, she urged him silently as she leaned forward by a fraction. *Remember who I am. Remember you said I was sweeter than honey. That my skin was softer than a cloud. Don’t you remember the way that you buried your mouth against my neck and moaned out your pleasure while you were deep inside me?*

Casimiro frowned at her reaction as something intangible seemed to shimmer through the air towards him. Her green eyes had suddenly grown as dark as the lunar eclipse and her lips had parted in a way which made them look almost kissable. *Very* kissable, in fact. And suddenly he caught a drift of her perfume as she moved. Some subtle scent of lilac which seemed to pervade the very air with its delicacy—and for a moment he stilled, as if somebody had turned him to stone.

He felt something nudging insistently at the corners of his mind—what the hell had that smell reminded him of? But then, like a delicious dream disturbed by a loud noise, it was gone, and no amount of concentration could get it back again.

Silently, he cursed as he stared at her and glimpsed the faint gleam of her tongue through her half-opened mouth. And inexplicably, he felt a swift, sharp hardening at his groin—a tumescent ridge which was heating his blood and making his senses start fizzing with desire. So that for one insane moment he thought about pulling her into his arms—of raking his fingers through that thick brown hair and tilting up her face before ravishing those quivering lips of hers.

Angrily, he gave a little click of irritation. What the hell was he thinking of? This was some itinerant little worker from England—not a woman worthy of his desire. And, yes, it was an age since he had lost himself in the incomparable pleasures of sex—not since before his accident, that was for

sure. Was he so frustrated that he was allowing desperation to cloud his judgement—he who could have any woman he wanted? And *would* have, he vowed silently.

At tonight's ball, there would be a surplus of women just longing for him to notice them—among them would-be brides from all the most aristocratic families in the world. But he was not looking for a bride. He was looking for a lover—a lover who would take whatever he was prepared to offer.

There would be plenty of those kinds of women there too, he thought—with a grim kind of satisfaction. The most beautiful women which nature had to offer would be eying him with predatory eyes and eager bodies. Casimiro's mouth hardened as he willed his unwanted erection to subside.

It was time to break his self-imposed sexual drought—and to lose himself in the mindless pleasures of the body before he embarked on his self-imposed exile. And when he *did*—when he surrendered to sex again—it would be with someone far more worthy of his affections than this tall Englishwoman with her strangely intense attitude. The sooner he could start choosing his own company—instead of having it forced upon him by his position—the better.

He realised that she was still sitting there, staring at him as if she had every right to linger in the King's private offices. 'I think we've covered everything, don't you?' he said.

His curt words were clearly a dismissal—but just in case she hadn't got the message the double-doors opened at precisely that moment. He must have rung some kind of secret bell—or maybe she had just used up her allotted time with him. And this time it wasn't a footman who stood there, but one of his aides—a hard-faced man who flicked her a hostile glance which left her in no doubt that she had overstayed her welcome. '*Majesty?*' the man said.

'Ah, Orso,' said Casimiro. 'Signorina Maguire is just going. See her out, will you?'

'*Certo, Majesty.*' Orso gestured towards the door, giving Melissa no choice but to leave—her cheeks burning as she scrambled to her feet.

She glanced at the King but he was studying something on his desk—as though he'd forgotten she was there. *As though she'd never been there at all.* Self-consciously, she walked past the aide—realising that she'd thrown away the perfect opportunity to tell the King about his son.

And wondering when on earth she was going to get another one.

CHAPTER TWO

AFTER the Englishwoman had gone, Casimiro sat perfectly still for a moment before picking up the document which lay on the desk before him, detailing possibly the most important speech of his life. A speech which even Orso—his closest aide for many years—remained in complete ignorance of.

The speech which spelt out his abdication announcement.

Swallowing down the sudden wave of emotion which rose in his throat, he got to his feet and walked over to the huge windows, looking out at the palace gardens. What a view! Roses and oranges and cool, flowing fountains and, beyond that, the sea. He had known this view since boyhood—had been brought into this suite of offices from infancy—for his father had believed in his son and heir being schooled for the monarchy from the very outset. There were even photographs of him in the palace archives—as a little toddler crawling around beneath the enormous desk while his father had signed the Treaty Of Rhodes.

Then, when his beloved mother had succumbed to the brain haemorrhage which had eventually killed her, his father had devoted most of his time and energy to teaching his son about the responsibilities and the privileges of being King. Often Casimiro suspected that his brother Xaviero had felt left out—the neglected younger son badly missing the mother he had been so close to. Grief hadn't really been discussed in those days—especially not among high-born royals—so that both boys had suffered essentially lonely childhoods.

But Casimiro had never questioned his destiny—indeed, he had seized it with enthusiastic and modernising hands. He had embraced all that he could do for his beloved Zaffirinthos—and joyfully set into motion a whole raft of reforms which had made the people of his Mediterranean island more prosperous and contented than ever before. Yet along with his success as ruler had come the bitter realisation of how much this job demanded. How it ate into the rest of your life and devoured it like an ever-hungry predator. Disillusion had begun to gnaw away at him and made him long to be free.

But there was another reason why he knew he must step down from the throne—for the accident which had almost felled him had left behind a dark legacy. Unknown to anyone, there was a small but terrifying gap in his memory as a result of his near-fatal fall. Fierce pride and a determination that a king should never show weakness in front of his court or his people had meant that Casimiro had successfully concealed the fact from the world. Not even his doctors had guessed—even though at times he felt as if he were walking on a knife-edge. At times he felt guilty at the subterfuge and at others he was overwhelmed with frustration by his lack of recall.

But there *was* a solution—and a heartbreakingly simple one. It was time to pass on the royal reins to the brother who had always secretly lusted after his role as King—the brother who came with his own ready-made heir. Xaviero would become King; it was time for Casimiro to go.

And tonight he would make that announcement to the world.

Glancing at his watch, Casimiro locked away his papers and then walked briskly to the thankful solitude of his state apartments where he stripped and stood beneath the powerful jets of the shower. But while soaping the hard contours of his body, he felt a sudden fierce wave of desire spring to his manhood.

Closing his eyes, he willed the image to subside. For what good was desire unless you had a woman with you? Surely that was like looking at the sea from behind a window—instead of getting out there and enjoying the toss and spin of the waves for yourself?

For one brief moment he thought of the Englishwoman who had been in his office earlier—recalling the strangely evocative scent of lilac and the provocative gleam of her lips—and he felt his hand begin to stray towards his groin...but only for a second. Instead, he turned the tap as icy shower jets killed his desire and focused his mind on the enormity of what lay ahead.

Refreshed and glowing, he dressed in a dark and formal suit and slipped the speech into the pocket of his jacket. And at eight o' clock on the dot Casimiro walked into the ballroom to a fanfare of trumpets, with Orso and his other aides surrounding him like a satellite of small suns around a giant planet. A smattering of applause greeted his entrance and he was aware of the intense scent of flowers and the frantic guttering of hundreds of tall, white candles.

All eyes were upon him—every woman decked in precious gems worn with designer gowns which held their gym-perfect bodies to their best advantage, because even if they were married there was no greater accolade than to be looked on with approval by the King of Zaffirinthos. And most of them would have begged to be his lover if he'd only deigned to click his careless fingers in their direction.

But Casimiro was aware of a pair of eyes burning into him. A pair of eyes which were startlingly green—their expression fierce and intent as the Englishwoman who had come to his study earlier now stared at him from across the ballroom. On her face was a look he could never remember seeing before—and novelty was rare enough to command his attention, even though the import of what he was about to do tonight hung like the sword of Damocles above his head.

More trumpets sounded and announced the entrance of the infant Prince and huge cheers went up round the ballroom. Yet Casimiro saw that the Englishwoman's attention was still fixed firmly to him when everyone else was vying for a glimpse of the baby. He should have been irritated at yet another shocking lack of protocol and yet, intriguingly, she had captured his attention. Maybe it was a kind of distraction technique to take his mind off what lay ahead, but he found himself studying her back with an intensity which her appearance did not merit—certainly not when you compared her to the other women in the room.

The dress she wore tonight covered the long legs which had briefly captured his attention earlier. Plain black and silky, the long gown rippled to the ground from a fairly modest scooped neckline and yet, curiously, she drew the eye *because* she was so understated.

Well, of course she is understated, he told himself as he saw the banks of cameras lining up like hunters in front of the baby Prince—*she's a member of staff*. It was like seeing a lump of bread and cheese set down at a lavish banquet—sometimes the commonplace had its own inexplicable power to capture the attention.

But as her gaze burned into him Casimiro felt the vaguest stirring of disquiet. As if someone had tugged at the invisible cord in his mind.

Despite a complete lack of appetite, he endured the overlong banquet with equanimity—though course after exquisite course of the finest produce failed to interest him, and neither did the princess seated next to him who was attempting to flirt with him. Increasingly, Casimiro could feel the darkness creeping over his heart and the only distraction to his troubled thoughts was the sight of the Englishwoman who stood in a discreet alcove at the other end of the banqueting hall—her eyes fixed intently on him every time he looked up.

He was used to being looked at by women—though rarely with such outrageous blatancy—but even he was surprised by her tenacious adoration. How on earth had she survived in her job so long? he wondered idly. Did she not realise that it was discourteous in the extreme to stare so openly at the monarch?

He found himself speculating on how much he might miss some areas of protocol when, to his astonishment, he saw her begin to weave her way through the glittering tables towards him—the almost shy look of resolve on her face making it abundantly clear that he, the King, was her target.

He frowned. Did she think that their brief interview had given her the right of access? Did she imagine that she was free to speak to him any time she liked?

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Orso stir—his muscle-packed frame as imposing as the bear after which he'd been named. Yet he moved with surprising agility to speak softly into Casimiro's ear.

‘Shall I get rid of her, Majesty?’ he questioned, in the Greek in which both men were fluent and which was less widely understood than their first language of Italian.

Casimiro’s instinctive response was to say yes as etiquette demanded—but as the woman called Melissa drew nearer her unquestionable breach of protocol was enough to again capture his interest. And something written on her face struck at a chord within him—an echo of the expression he had seen there earlier. Something which set off some far-distant warning bell ringing deep inside him.

Instinct told him to speak to her—and now that he was about to cast off the strictures of royal life, then surely he could listen to his instincts at long last. Surely he could satisfy his curiosity about what she wanted—if only as a distraction until this interminable meal ended, when the speech was burning a hole in his pocket and, unexpectedly, his heart was aching at the thought of delivering it.

‘No. Let her speak. She intrigues me. Perhaps there is some problem to which she wishes to alert me. This ball *is* part of my gift to my brother and therefore my responsibility, after all.’

‘But, Majesty—’

‘Let her approach, Orso—but guide her more discreetly. All eyes are upon her and she has neither the poise nor the beauty to withstand such scrutiny.’

‘*Ochi*, Majesty.’

Melissa walked towards the King, her heart crashing madly against her chest, feeling a rivulet of sweat beginning to trickle its way down between her breasts. She was scarcely able to believe that she was actually going through with this, but as she had been getting ready for tonight she’d realised that she couldn’t delay telling him. Not for a moment longer. She had blown her opportunity when they’d been alone together earlier—sheer nerves had defeated her, along with her stupid and over-optimistic plan of waiting for the ‘right’ time. And there never was going to be a ‘right’ time—not when the situation was as wrong as could be. Even she, guided by fierce maternal love, could see that.

She had thought about delaying it until after the King’s speech—but surely she wouldn’t stand a chance of getting near him *then*? Not with people clamouring around to tell him how wonderful he was as they inevitably would.

She saw the towering form of his aide beginning to advance towards her with grim intent in his black eyes and she wondered if he had been told to act as a buffer between them. So that for one crazy moment, she actually thought of making a run for it. Of flying straight over to the King and blurting out her secret before anyone could stop her. But the man he had called Orso was lighter on his feet than his huge frame suggested—and suddenly he was by her side, with a light but iron-firm grip to her elbow which meant she was going nowhere without his say-so, and she felt her nerve begin to desert her.

‘You wish to speak to the King?’

‘Y-yes.’

‘About *what*?’ snapped Orso.

Meeting the glare from his eyes, Melissa knew it was imperative that she held her nerve. She had come this far and she would not be fobbed off with a member of his entourage. ‘That’s between me and the King. I wish to speak privately with him.’

‘Then you will approach His Majesty with more caution.’ Orso’s heavily accented voice was harsh with disapproval. ‘Unless you wish for a posse of his armed guards to spring on you and to throw you in the jail-house at Ghalazamba?’

‘Of c-course I don’t,’ she stumbled, some of her nerve deserting her.

‘Then walk with me,’ instructed Orso tersely.

He led her by a circuitous route to the long dais where Casimiro sat along with the other exulted guests. Melissa stood looking at the backs of them all—at the women’s jewel-encrusted necklaces and priceless earrings which dangled down to their naked shoulders—and there was a moment when she wondered if he’d forgotten she was there. Until suddenly he turned, fastening her in the amber snare

of his eyes—the faintest inclination of his dark head the only outward sign that he was summoning her towards him.

Heart crashing, she approached him. Had anyone noticed that she wasn't busying herself on the sidelines with Stephen—helping deal with every little crisis as it arose? Which was what she *should* have been doing. But Melissa didn't care. It didn't even matter if her job was on the line. She could always find another job—but never find another father for her son.

'You are very impertinent,' Casimiro mused as she grew close enough to hear the whispered disapproval in his voice. 'To stare at me as the hyena regards the glistening flesh.'

Had she come over as *predatory*? 'I don't mean to be, Your Majesty.'

Again, he detected the faint drift of lilac as she leaned towards him. The sense of something tantalisingly close—like a wave which washed against the shoreline before retreating again. He frowned, his interest unexpectedly awakened. 'Do you always behave this way at functions?'

She wanted to say no—but hadn't she been pretty unprofessional the *last* time she'd met him? Yet *he* had been the one who had driven it, she reminded herself. Who had started this whole thing between them. And was she really so invisible—so inconsequential—that he couldn't remember a single thing about her or anything they'd done together?

'This is not the way I normally behave, no. Perhaps...perhaps it's the effect you have on me, Your Majesty.'

'I *beg* your pardon?'

'You don't remember, do you?' she whispered.

Sabre-sharp, her words sliced through him as she found his Achilles heel and Casimiro stilled. 'Remember *what*?' he bit out.

Was she going to have to spell it out for him? Was she really so unforgettable that he *still* didn't remember their affair? Staring at the august presence in front of her, Melissa allowed herself the bittersweet luxury of recall, remembering the night she'd first laid eyes on him.

It had been when London's biggest museum had exhibited the fabulous statues excavated during an archaeological dig on the island of Zaffirinthos. The after-show party had been held at the house of a minor British royal—a magnificent mansion which had overlooked Green Park itself.

What had made the evening stand out had been the presence of the King of Zaffirinthos, who had flown in especially to witness the first stage of the international tour of the statues. And he had turned out to be an attraction who had proved even more newsworthy than the precious artefacts. An outrageously gorgeous man in his early thirties, he was quickly dubbed by the press: "The Most Eligible Man In Europe."

Melissa's first glimpse of the royal had certainly borne out all the hype. As he'd been shown around the museum for a private view of the show she could see why his face had been raved about in all the gossip columns and why every hostess in the capital was clamouring to get him onto her guest list.

It was an amazing face—all carved aristocratic features and skin which gleamed like gold. His eyes were golden too, a deeper, darker shade which was closer to amber—and the jet-dark waves of his hair looked as if they had been swirled onto his head with the bold brush-strokes of some master artist's charcoal pencil. Why, with his powerful presence she had found herself thinking that he looked almost like a statue himself.

But the stillness of his muscular body did nothing to deflect the fact that he had about him some nebulous quality which transcended his royal status. Melissa felt there was something rather wild and *untamed* about him.

And, of course, she hadn't spoken to him. She had been too busy supervising the mass of summer flowers which had garlanded the entrance to the grand house in an attempt to detract from the unseasonably heavy rain outside—and reporting back to her hostess, who was a particularly exacting woman.

The evening had been memorable for another reason, too—the one which could always activate the dark aching hole inside her: the anniversary of her mother’s death in that terrible car crash. Melissa knew it was slightly pathetic for a young adult like herself to describe herself as an orphan, but on this one night of the year—when she relived the terror of the midnight phone-call and the subsequent horror which had unfolded in the intensive care ward—that was exactly what she felt like.

She had put her emotions on hold until the end of the evening when she had been unable to stem the tide of tears any longer and in a cloakroom in a deserted part of the basement she had lost the battle, and given into quiet sobs of sorrow.

Eventually, emerging red-eyed into the corridor which led back up to the main part of the house, she had almost cannoned into a tall man—quickly turning her face to one side, too embarrassed to be seen by anyone in such a fragile state as she had tried to avoid him.

‘Hey,’ came a silken voice whose marked accent should have alerted her but she was so busy dabbing at her eyes with a crumpled-up tissue that she failed to make the connection. ‘What’s the rush?’

‘Go away.’ Melissa gulped and the moment she’d said it she realised just who he was and stared up at him in horror.

He looked as if he hadn’t quite decided to be irritated or bemused—as if he wasn’t used to people saying that to him. And then his eyes drifted over her and Melissa wondered how vile she must look with her shiny red nose and blotchy skin.

‘You’ve been crying,’ he observed, with the air of a man who was never cried in front of.

Ten out of ten for observation, she thought miserably—hating feeling so vulnerable and so awful in front of someone like him. ‘Yes, I have,’ she said, in a small voice, wondering why he wasn’t upstairs drinking his champagne with the rest of the privileged gathering.

‘Why?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Oh, but it does—because I want to know. Don’t you realise that I am a king?’ His amber eyes glittered, his lips curving into a mocking smile. ‘And that everything I command is always granted?’

For a moment she thought he was joking—and maybe he was, just a little. But she could also see that he expected an answer from her and so, with a sudden mulishness, Melissa decided to tell him. *Then* let him be sorry he had asked.

‘It’s the anniversary of my mother’s death.’

There was a pause. ‘Oh.’

She could see the sudden tightening of his face. Could hear the sudden chatter of conversation as a distant door was opened and the dull background patter of rain as it lashed against one of the basement doors. Perhaps he heard it too for she caught him looking down at her cheap shoes, and frowning—as if it had suddenly occurred to him that they might let in water.

‘You want a ride home?’ he questioned.

‘From *you*?’

‘Who else? You have a car waiting? A boyfriend perhaps?’

Suspiciously, she screwed up her eyes as if to check that he wasn’t being sarcastic. ‘No. I don’t.’

‘Then how were you planning on getting home?’

‘On the underground.’

‘Well, don’t. I’ll be outside. Don’t keep me waiting.’

He walked off, leaving Melissa staring at him as if she’d seen a ghost. A ghost that looked and sounded like a king and had offered her a ride home. As she gave the kitchen a last minute check and changed from her black working dress into a pair of jeans and a raincoat she kept wondering whether she’d imagined the whole thing.

But she hadn’t. A dark-tinted limousine was sitting a little way down the road and as her steps slowed uncertainly a chauffeur suddenly got out and opened the door for her.

Briefly, it occurred to her that this was the kind of action those real-life crime programmes you saw on TV always advised you against taking. She could see Casimiro sitting in the back seat and when Melissa hesitated, this seemed to amuse him.

‘So, are you getting in—or staying there and getting wet?’

Still she hesitated.

‘Or perhaps you think I will leap on you? That you are completely irresistible to me?’

Melissa swallowed. Now he *was* being sarcastic. And suddenly she didn’t care—not about whether it was right or wrong or the fact that he was a king. When compared to the bigger picture of mortality and the fact that she would never see her mother again—this was about as important as chicken-feed.

‘Why are you doing this?’ she questioned as she climbed into the back of the car and into his world of luxury and soft leather. ‘Because you feel sorry for me?’

There was a pause, and then a fierce look came over his face—a look so dark and so bleak that Melissa felt as if she was intruding just by witnessing it. As if she had glimpsed into some dark corner of his soul.

‘Because I know how hard it can be,’ he said unexpectedly. ‘To lose a mother.’

And that had been it, really. Two people brought together by a rainy night and a moment of empathy. Something had fused between them—bringing together a pair of lives which couldn’t have been more disparate. Against all the odds, they had become lovers.

With lazy amusement, Casimiro told her that his usual aide was not accompanying him—and it seemed to amuse him to give the others the slip as often as possible. For five days he played hide-and-seek with them—ensuring just enough freedom to snatch at a life which could never be his, while reassuring the people who guarded him that he was safe. It seemed that everything the King did, he did well—if recklessly—and he embraced his new-found anonymity with a skill which would have made the finest actor turn green with envy.

In Melissa’s tiny bedsit he—a man who had been fed every delicacy since birth—sampled beans on toast for the first time in his life. He drank cheap wine and made tea in a mug. The two of them hired a little boat on the river and he rode on the top deck of a red London bus without anyone knowing it was him. And they spent afternoons in bed, listening to the distant hum of traffic and the sound of their own heartbeats. He told her that she smelt of summer flowers and that her eyes were like emerald stars—and hadn’t she just revelled in those lazy compliments?

Of course, it was over almost as soon as it began. Melissa had known that was going to happen—and Casimiro had never pretended that it was ever going to be otherwise. Five days could simultaneously feel like a moment or a lifetime, she discovered.

‘You knew that this was never destined to last, didn’t you?’ he’d murmured on that last time in bed, his clever, seeking fingers trickling down over her belly to bury themselves in the soft fuzz of hair which lay at the fork of her thighs.

‘Of course I did!’ she’d whispered, praying that her voice wouldn’t break down.

That didn’t stop it hurting, of course, and the pain she felt was in direct proportion to her earlier joy—fierce and strong and almost unbearable. But somehow she managed to keep the tears at bay until they’d said their goodbyes—and once he’d gone she experienced an empty void, a kind of aching no-man’s-land, before her world was completely shattered...

‘Remember *what?*’

Casimiro’s harsh question broke into her painful thoughts and Melissa felt her body jerk as the memories cleared and she found herself back in the present, standing beneath the imperious gaze of the man with the amber eyes in a banqueting hall full of the world’s movers and shakers. But this was no longer the anonymous lover who had kissed her so passionately in her little bedsit—but a distant and remote stranger sitting on his kingly dais.

She met the icy question in his eyes. ‘We’ve...we’ve met before, Your Majesty.’

‘And?’

Melissa blinked, confused now. ‘So you... you *do* remember?’

Casimiro gave a little click of disapproval as he pulled his speech from his jacket pocket and prepared to wave her away.

‘Do you realise how many people I “meet” in the course of my working life?’ he demanded impatiently. ‘And while they will each remember every detail of our encounter, most of their faces are, to me, simply a blur. What was it? Some official line-up you were on? Some catering college I was visiting?’

‘No. You don’t understand.’ Shaking her head, Melissa could see the look of surprise in his eyes as she contradicted him, but she was fearless now. This was her last chance, she realised. Her very last chance.

‘What don’t I understand?’ he asked, dangerously.

‘This was different.’

Casimiro tensed, half wondering if she was one of that thankfully rare breed of women who stalked famous men—and whether he had been foolish in granting her access. But something in the way she was looking at him made his eyes narrow and his heart began to pound. He glanced over to where Orso was clearly poised to terminate the conversation at his behest. At the guards who stood in the shadows and could be summoned at a moment’s notice. ‘Go on.’

Melissa was aware that he was in full view of everyone in the banquet hall. And that there seemed something terribly wrong about disclosing something as big as this before the curious gaze of an international audience. ‘If you don’t mind, I’d rather go somewhere... a little more private.’

‘I don’t think so,’ he said softly. ‘You’ve already had more than enough concessions. You’ve got your opportunity—which is precisely two minutes—to tell me what all this damned mystery is about.’ His mouth hardened. ‘And it had better be good.’

Her voice was trembling but somehow she got the words out. ‘Our meeting was very different from most you must encounter, Your Majesty—or, at least, I’m assuming it was. It was back in the summer nearly two years ago—in England—at a party during a tour of the Zaffirinthos marbles. In fact, we did more than meet. Much more. As it happens, we had a short affair and, as a consequence...’ She saw the disbelief and the anger which was beginning to blaze from his amber eyes ‘...as a consequence, I... I have a little son. Or, rather, *we* have a son. What I should say is... you have a son, Your Majesty.’

CHAPTER THREE

CASIMIRO stared into Melissa's white face, his heart beginning to pound with fury at her outrageous claim. *He*, a father of *her* child? He would have liked to have taken her by her shoulders and to have shaken the admission from her that her words were nothing but a sham and a lie.

But he knew that all eyes were upon him, just as they always were, for hadn't he spent a lifetime being watched—like the human equivalent of a goldfish? Wasn't he always seated at the top table or the raised dais for precisely that purpose? Kings were not permitted the freedom to express their feelings and therefore he could not indulge in the luxury of venting his anger towards this insolent Englishwoman. The only outward sign of his ire was the clenching of his fists beneath the table—and so great was his wrath that he barely noticed that he had crushed the heavy cream parchment of his abdication speech in the process.

He leaned towards her by a fraction—as if he were about to engage in some pleasantries about the food. 'Are you crazy?' he said, his accusation so soft that nobody but Melissa could hear it. 'One of those crazy women who go around pretending to have been impregnated by powerful men?'

Melissa flinched—recoiling from the naked anger in his eyes. 'No! No! Of course not. I'm telling the truth.'

'And I don't believe you.'

'Why not?' she whispered, shocked by his venom.

'You want me to spell it out for you?' He wanted to hurt her now—to lash back at her for daring to concoct such a wild fantasy. To show his extreme displeasure for daring to disrupt his plans. With the hand which wasn't holding his crushed speech, he indicated the array of glitteringly beautiful women who sat at each sparkling and flower-festooned table gazing up at him with the adoration of teenagers at a boy-band concert.

'You think that I can't have any woman I want in my bed? You don't think I'm spoiled for choice by all the females who daily throw themselves at me?' His eyes became cold. 'Do the maths, *cara*,' he added icily. 'If I could have my pick of the most beautiful women in the world, then why the hell would I choose someone like you?'

Melissa swallowed, knowing there was no answer to this—because, deep down, wasn't he simply echoing her own sentiments? Hadn't she found it unbelievable at the time that such a man should have chosen to take someone like her as his lover? So she couldn't really blame him for coming out and saying it now. She had no right to feel hurt by what was essentially the truth—but one thing still didn't add up. One thing that was pretty painful to accept. 'So you don't even remember me?' she said woodenly.

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