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A **Royal**
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SHARON KENDRICK

Sharon Kendrik

**A Royal Vow Of Convenience:
The steamy new romance from
a multi-million selling author**

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A Royal Vow Of Convenience: The steamy new romance from a multi-million selling author / S. Kendrik — «HarperCollins»,

‘Full of drama, passion and emotion’ – Sarah Morgan on Sharon Kendrick
His Princess under the covers...The whirr of helicopter blades announcing the return of her new boss sends Sophie scurrying back to the kitchen. Little does she know that fleeing from royal scrutiny will place her under the devastatingly searing gaze of notorious billionaire Rafe Carter...Having resisted his cook for days, Rafe finds his senses sent into overdrive by a secret midnight swim, and he can’t resist a taste of the forbidden. But the press descend when Sophie’s identity is shockingly revealed, and Rafe is duty-bound to rescue the beautiful Princess...with a convenient vow. Congratulations Sharon Kendrick on over 20 million copies sold worldwide with Mills & Boon!

His princess under the covers...

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'Oh, don't worry,' Rafe said, with a disdainful curl of his lips. 'I haven't come here for sex.'

'Oh? Then why *have* you come here?'

Sophie tilted her chin in a defiant gesture and suddenly Rafe wondered how he could have been so dense. Of course she was someone—hadn't that been apparent from the start? A diamond in the rough—that had been his initial reaction on seeing her, and he had been right. And when he stopped to think about it, her high-born status had been apparent in every gesture she made. It had been there in the way she moved and the way she walked. In her flawless skin and heart-shaped face and in the thick, lustrous bounce of her hair. She was a princess. Of course she was. A runaway virgin princess who had chosen *him* as her first lover.

'I'm still trying to get my head around what happened last night,' he said. 'And wondering if there's anything else you've omitted to tell me.'

'Like what?' she questioned nonchalantly.

'Oh, sweetheart,' he said softly. 'Why do women find it impossible to give a straight answer? I'm talking about the fact that you're a princess—and that the world's press know you're here.'

'No...' she whispered, her fingers moving from her neck to her lips.

'Yes. So you're going to have to come to England with me.'

[Dear Reader,](#)

Every book is special. The characters become totally real to me and by the time I write 'THE END' I hate to leave them. But this book is extra-special because it's my 100th, and although I wanted to mark that in some way I didn't know how until—a friend said, 'Why don't you go back to where it all started?'

Go back? What a tantalising thought. Go back to Australia, which was the setting for my very first book, about a nurse who fell in love with a doctor.

This story is very different. My heroine is a runaway princess, seeking to escape her gilded world—a world in which she has been humiliated. She's chasing anonymity and peace and she finds both on a cattle station in Queensland. Until sexy billionaire Rafe Carter arrives unexpectedly and suddenly everything is threatened.

The story moves to snowy England, to the high-octane glamour of a New York Christmas, and then to Sophie's sumptuous Mediterranean island home. There's glitz, grit and heartache, and I hope you like it as much as I do.

There are so many people I should thank for the help they've given me along the way. People who have carefully explained what their jobs entail. Others who've helped me come up with clever first lines or brilliant ideas. Who have patiently listened while I lose myself in the world of my imagination. You know who you are.

But most of all I need to thank you, the reader. Because without you I wouldn't be writing.

This one's for you.

Sharon x

A Royal Vow of Convenience

Sharon Kendrick



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‘Sharon Kendrick is such a talented author and a good friend. Her books are all-consuming, and I race through the pages from start to finish every time I pick one up.’

—LYNNE GRAHAM

SHARON KENDRICK once won a national writing competition by 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 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...

Books by Sharon Kendrick

Mills & Boon Modern Romance

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Christmas in Da Conti’s Bed

The Greek’s Marriage Bargain

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The Billionaire’s Legacy

Di Sione’s Virgin Mistress

The Bond of Billionaires

Claimed for Makarov’s Baby

The Sheikh’s Christmas Conquest

One Night With Consequences

Crowned for the Prince’s Heir

Carrying the Greek’s Heir

Wedlocked!

The Billionaire’s Defiant Acquisition

Visit the Author Profile page at millsandboon.co.uk for more titles.

This book is dedicated to my two greatest achievements—Celia Campbell & Patrick Kendrick, who are talented, hard-working and funny. I’m very proud to be your mum.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

THE CLATTER WAS deafening as the helicopter descended from a cloudless blue sky, and a nervous bead of sweat trickled down between Sophie's breasts.

'He's here,' said Andy abruptly as the blades stopped turning. 'Don't look so worried, Sophie. Rafe Carter might be the big boss but he doesn't bite. He just doesn't suffer fools gladly and as long as you remember that, you'll be okay. Okay?'

'Okay,' Sophie echoed dutifully. But her throat was still tight with tension as Andy left the veranda and ran towards the helicopter where a powerfully built man had just appeared at the open door, raking his fingers through dark and wind-ruffled hair. Pausing briefly to scan the horizon, he shook his head as a busty blonde in a tight blue uniform tried to get his attention, before jumping to the dusty ground, leaving the woman staring after him—her shoulders hunched with dejection.

Another feeling of panic prickled over Sophie's skin but now it was underpinned with something else. Something which made her pulse start racing as the man stood very still, just staring at the land—his frozen stance drawing attention to his proud profile and the shadowed jut of his jaw.

Even from this distance she could see the hard definition of his body. In an immaculate suit, which hugged his muscular physique, he looked sophisticated and urbane—as out of place in the dusty Outback setting as his expensive helicopter. Everything about him proclaimed the fact that this was the billionaire owner of one of the world's biggest telecommunications companies, whose enormous cattle station was simply one of his 'hobbies'. Rafe Carter. Even the name sounded sexy. She'd overheard the other staff talking about him—tantalising snatches of gossip which had made her ears prick up—though she'd been careful not to pry or show her curiosity.

Because Sophie had learnt very quickly that if she wanted to keep her identity secret, it was better to be seen and not heard. To dress demurely and fade into the background. To not ask questions about the man who owned this property and all the land as far as the eye could see. All she knew was that he was rich. Very rich. That he liked planes and art and beautiful women—in addition to a rural Australian life he dipped in and out of as he pleased. Her breasts prickled with an unfamiliar beat of anticipation. She just hadn't expected him to be quite so...mesmerising.

She watched as Andy moved forward and the two men exchanged a few words of greeting before walking towards the homestead as the helicopter rose back up into the sky. It was hot on the veranda. Even at this early hour the mercury was shooting up the scale. Summer had arrived and sometimes it felt as if she were living in a giant sauna. Her palms were covered in a fine layer of sweat and she rubbed them over her cotton shorts, willing her heart to stop pounding—because surely that would make her unease seem somehow obvious.

She wondered what it was about the arrival of Rafe Carter which made her feel as if her world were about to come tumbling down around her. Fear she would be found out? That he might succeed where everyone else on this cattle station had failed—and work out who she really was? That he would discover the crazy lengths she'd gone to in order to secure herself a place here in the wild peace of the Australian Outback, because she'd wanted to escape from her gilded life and forge a more worthwhile existence? She'd never met him, but it wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that he'd seen her photograph in a newspaper—because didn't their gilded worlds have distant connections? Her mind began to race even faster. And what if he did find out—then what?

A series of disturbing scenarios flashed before her and she clenched her fists as a wave of determination swept over her. Because that wasn't going to happen. She wouldn't let it. For the first time in her life she'd been enjoying the simple pleasures of anonymity and the rewards of honest hard work and was feeling cautiously optimistic about the future. Nobody knew who she was and nobody cared. There were no eyes following her every move. She was on her own—properly on her own—and it was both daunting and exciting. It couldn't last. She knew that. Her brother had given her an ultimatum and time was fast running out. He wanted her back in Isolaverde—preferably by Christmas, but certainly by the time of her little sister's nineteenth birthday at the end of February. In a couple of months it would all be over and she was going to miss the sense of peace and freedom she'd known in this out-of-the-way place. She was going to have to return to the world she'd run away from and face up to the future, but she wanted to do it on her own terms. To leave here in the same way she'd arrived—without fuss or fanfare.

Leaving the heat which hung over the veranda like a heavy blanket, Sophie hurried into the kitchen where the air-conditioning did little to cool her heated skin. She fanned her face with her hand as she heard the heavy tread of masculine footfall and tried not to let her nerves get the better of her.

'Sophie? Come and meet the boss.'

Andy's broad Australian accent shattered her thoughts and suddenly it was too late for any more reflection because the station manager was walking into the kitchen, a smile wreathing his face—in stark contrast to the expression of the man who followed him. And try as she might, Sophie still couldn't tear her eyes away from the newcomer, even though her upbringing had taught her it was rude to stare.

Close up, he was even more spectacular. His hard-boned face was shockingly beautiful and so was his body. But his physical perfection was underpinned by a dark quality which shimmered around him like an aura—an edge of danger which was making her feel self-conscious. Did he know the effect he had on women? she wondered. Did he realise that her mouth was as dry as the dust in the yard outside and that her breasts had started to swell, so that they were pushing against the suddenly constricting material of her cheap underwear? She wondered how he managed to look so cool in a suit and, as if reading her thoughts, he slid the jacket from his broad shoulders so she was confronted by the hint of hard, honed torso—shadowy beneath the pristine silk of his white shirt.

Another bead of sweat trickled down her cleavage and soaked into her T-shirt as she met the steely grey eyes which were trained in her direction. He narrowed them in contemplation as he looked her up and down and Sophie's apprehension gave way to indignation because she wasn't used to men looking at her that way. Nobody ever stared at her so openly. As if he had every right to do so. She swallowed. As if he knew exactly what she was thinking about him and his beautiful face and body...

'Rafe.' Andy's voice was relaxed as he gestured in her direction. 'This is Sophie—the woman I was telling you about. She's been cooking for us for nearly six months now.'

'Sophie...?'

It was the first word he'd spoken—a lash of dark silk which whipped through the air towards her. Rafe Carter raised his eyebrows in question and Sophie gave a nervous smile in response. She knew she shouldn't hesitate because hesitation was dangerous. Just as she knew she should have had this answer all pat and ready—and she would have done if she hadn't been so distracted by the lure of his deep, mellifluous voice and the effect that paralysing stare was having on her.

'It's Doukas. Sophie Doukas,' she said, using the surname of her Greek grandmother, knowing that nobody would be able to contradict her, because she hadn't shown anyone her papers. A wave of guilt washed over her. She'd managed to distract them for long enough to forget they'd never seen them.

The steely gaze became even more piercing. 'Unusual name,' he observed.

'Yes.' Desperate to change the subject, she cleared her throat, mustering up a smile from somewhere. 'You must be thirsty after your flight. Would you like some tea, Mr Carter?'

‘I thought you’d never ask,’ he drawled. ‘And it’s Rafe.’

‘Rafe,’ she repeated, aware that his cool tone contained the hint of a reprimand. So pull yourself together. Start remembering that he’s the boss and you’re supposed to be pleasant and obedient. ‘Right.’ She forced a smile. ‘I’ll make some right away. Andy, how about you?’

‘Not for me, thanks.’ The station manager shook his head. ‘I’ll wait for the morning smoko. See you outside when you’ve had a brew, Rafe. Take you on a quick tour.’

Sophie’s self-consciousness spiralled as Andy walked out, leaving her alone with Rafe Carter in a room whose walls seemed to be closing in on her. And even though making tea was a task she performed countless times every day, she felt like a coiled spring as she busied herself around the kitchen, aware of his eyes following her every movement. His grey gaze seemed to laser through her as she lifted a kettle which suddenly felt ridiculously heavy. Why was he even here? she thought as she poured boiling water into the teapot. Andy had said he wasn’t expected until springtime—by which time she would be gone and nothing but a distant memory. He certainly wasn’t expected this close to Christmas—which was now only weeks away.

She took a cup down from the dresser. It had been easy to forget Christmas in this exotic and tropical area of Australia, with its lush foliage and steamy heat, and the kind of birds and mammals which she’d only ever seen in nature documentaries. Yet because the men had demanded it, she’d made a stab at decorating the homestead with paper chains and plastic holly and a cheap tree made out of tinsel which she’d bought from the local store. The effect had been garish but it was so different that it had allowed her to forget all the things she was used to.

But now the familiar images of what she’d left behind came crowding into her mind, as she thought about Christmas on her island home of Isolaverde. She pictured mulled wine and golden platters piled high with sugary treats. She thought about the enormous tree which took pride of place in the palace throne room, which was decorated with real candles and diligently lit by the legions of faithful staff who served her. And beneath it the huge pile of presents, which she and her brother would hand out every year to the children of the city. She remembered the eager looks lighting up their little faces and, without warning, a wave of loneliness came washing over her. Suddenly she felt vulnerable. She knew how easy it would be to just throw the towel in and go home, but she didn’t want to do that. Not yet. Not until she’d worked out what she wanted her new future to be...

Giving the teapot a quick stir, she hoped Rafe would take his tea outside, or go to his own lavish quarters, which were in a separate part of this giant homestead. But her heart sank as he rested his narrow hips against the window sill with the look of a man who wasn’t going anywhere. And, unlike most people, he seemed content to let the silence grow. Didn’t he realise she was getting more flustered by the moment despite the fact that she’d spent her whole life being stared at? It just didn’t usually affect her like this. It didn’t make her breasts tingle, or a slug of disconcerting heat begin to gather low in her belly...

So say something. Pretend he’s one of those countless strangers you’ve spent your life meeting and exchanging polite words with.

‘Have you flown in from England today?’ she questioned, pouring milk into a china jug.

He didn’t smile back. ‘No. I’ve been on an extended trip to the Far East and I arrived in Brisbane yesterday. I was so close that it seemed crazy not to visit.’ His grey eyes gleamed. ‘And just for the record, I don’t live in England.’

She met the steely gaze. ‘But I thought—’

‘That my accent was English?’

She gave a weak smile. ‘Well, yes.’

‘They say you never really lose the accent you were born with, but I haven’t lived there in a long time. Years, in fact.’ He frowned. ‘And speaking of accents—I can’t quite work yours out. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything like it before. Are you Greek?’

Sophie distracted him by holding up the jug, her bright tone matching her smile. ‘Milk? Sugar?’

‘Neither, thanks. I’ll take it how it comes.’

She handed him the tea, wishing he wouldn’t stretch out his legs like that—a movement which was making the dark material of his trousers spread tautly over his powerful thighs. Was it his intention to get her gaze to linger there, like some reluctant voyeur? Yet ogling men was something she didn’t do. It wasn’t in her nature to be predatory. Any such behaviour would have been picked up and frowned on by the cameras which had followed her every move since birth. Even the man to whom she’d been betrothed—a man popularly known as one of the world’s sexiest men—had never aroused this kind of heart-pumping interest, which was making her fingers start to tremble.

In an attempt to hide her nerves, she brushed some imaginary crumbs from the table. ‘So where do you live?’ she questioned.

‘Mainly in New York, although I lived here full-time when I first bought the station. But I move around a lot between cities—constantly on the move. I’m what you might call an urban gypsy, Sophie.’ He took a sip of his tea, mocking eyes studying her over the rim of his cup. ‘And you still haven’t answered my question.’

‘I’m sorry?’ She batted him a confused look, hoping he might have forgotten. ‘What question was that?’

‘I asked if you were Greek.’

Sophie didn’t want to lie but if she told him the truth it would be like hurling a bomb into the room. Her anonymity would be over and her sanctuary would end. There would be questions. Lots of them. Because what could she say?

I’m a princess who doesn’t want to be a princess any more. I’m a woman who’s been brought up in a palace who has never had to cope with real life before. A woman who has been hurt and humiliated. Who has struck out to discover if she can cope with life without the protection she’s known all her life.

She met the cold gleam of his gaze. ‘My grandmother was Greek,’ she said. ‘And Greek is my mother tongue.’

He was even more watchful now. ‘Any other languages?’

‘English. Obviously.’

‘Obviously.’ His eyes glinted. ‘And that’s the lot?’

She licked her bottom lip. ‘I can get by in Italian. French, too.’

‘Well now, aren’t you the clever one?’ he questioned softly. ‘You certainly have a lot of qualifications for someone who’s spent the last few months frying steak and buttering bread for a bunch of station workers.’

‘I didn’t realise linguistic ability was a bar to being a cook on a cattle station, Mr Carter.’

Their gazes clashed and Rafe tried not to be affected by the sudden challenge sparking from her eyes, which was easily as distracting as the pert thrust of her breasts. On one level he was aware she was playing games with him by avoiding his questions and he wasn’t sure why. He frowned. But there was a lot he wasn’t sure about right now. Plenty of young women came from abroad to work in remote parts of this country—but he’d never come across anyone like Sophie Doukas before. He wondered just what she was doing here, when she looked as out of place as a diamond you might find in the rough. Andy had told him that when she’d first arrived she’d been green and naïve, but had been eager to learn. Rafe had wondered why his gruff Australian station manager had employed someone without even the most basic of skills, but now he’d seen her—he had a pretty good idea why.

His throat grew dry.

Because she was beautiful.

Really beautiful.

Not the kind of beauty which came from spending hours in front of the mirror or having a plastic surgeon on speed-dial. Something told him she looked that way without even trying. Her cheekbones were high, her eyes as blue as a Queensland sky and her dark hair was tied back in a

shiny ponytail. She wore no make-up—but with lashes that long, he guessed she didn't need to. And her lips. Oh, man. Those lips. His groin hardened. Just one glance at them and he could think of a million different X-rated ways he'd like her to use them—starting with that cute pink tongue working a very fundamental kind of magic.

But her appeal didn't stop at her face. She had one of those bodies which looked amazing in clothes but probably better out of them. Even her cheap white T-shirt and unremarkable cotton shorts failed to disguise her long legs and curvy bottom, and she moved with the natural grace of a dancer. She was one very desirable female, that was for sure—and Rafe imagined Andy's reaction when he had first seen her. What man could have resisted a woman who looked like this, turning up out of the blue as if in answer to every hot-blooded man's dreams?

But Andy had also told him that she'd kept her distance. She wasn't one of those foreign backpackers keen to enjoy anything new—including sex. Apparently she hadn't flirted with the men or indicated that she might be up for some late-night hook-up. His manager had told him she seemed wary and could turn the ice on without really trying, which was why nobody had dared to make a pass at her. Rafe frowned. Yes. Wary was right. She was regarding him now in a way which reminded him of a bowerbird which had once flown into the homestead by mistake—its beautiful wings battering uselessly against the window pane as it tried to escape from its domestic confinement.

He took another sip of his tea, his interest stirred in more ways than one because he could sense she was trying to distance herself from him, and that never usually happened. He was used to instant compliance from the opposite sex whenever he wanted it. A gushing desire to tell him everything he ever wanted to know—and then more.

But not from Sophie Doukas it seemed. He wondered why she was being so cagey. And whether her reluctance to talk was responsible for the powerful beat of desire which was pooling even harder in his groin.

'No,' he conceded dryly. 'Your linguistic ability is to be commended, even if you haven't had much chance to practise your language skills out here in the bush.' He shifted his weight a little. 'I understand you and I are going to be sharing accommodation.'

She looked uncomfortable. 'We don't have to. I've been living in the far end of the main house since I arrived. Andy said it seemed crazy for it to stay empty and that it was much cooler in here. But now you're back...'

She looked him straight in the eyes without any hint of the flirtation he would have expected from any other woman in the circumstances.

'I can easily move into one of the smaller properties,' she continued stiffly. 'I'd hate to feel I was in your way.'

Rafe almost smiled. No. She definitely wasn't flirting. Hell. When had been the last time that had happened? 'That won't be necessary,' he said. 'It's plenty big enough for two people. I'm sure we won't have any problem keeping out of each other's way. And I'm only passing through—one night max. Which reminds me.' He leaned back against the window and looked at her speculatively. 'I don't remember Andy mentioning how long you're planning on staying?'

He watched as her body language changed. And how. She picked up a teaspoon she'd left lying on the table and carried it over to the sink as if it would explode if she didn't quickly plunge it into a bowl of water.

'I...hadn't really decided,' she said, still with her tensed back to him. 'Soon. Just after Christmas, probably.'

'But won't your family miss you at Christmas?' he probed. 'Or maybe you don't celebrate Christmas?'

She turned to face him then and Rafe saw that her face had grown pale. Her blue eyes had darkened so that suddenly she looked almost fragile and he felt an unexpected kick of guilt—as if he'd

done something wrong. Until he reminded himself that all he'd done was ask her a straightforward question and, as the man who was paying her wages, he had every right to do that.

'Yes, I celebrate it,' she said quietly. 'But my parents are dead.'

'I'm sorry.'

She inclined her head. 'Thank you.'

'You don't have brothers, or sisters?'

Sophie thought how persistent he was—and how she wasn't used to being interrogated like this. Because nobody would usually dare. She wondered why he was so interested. Did he realise that his station manager had been less than meticulous when he'd interviewed her—or was there something else? She stared at the teapot and watched it blur in and out of focus. She was innocent, yes—but she wasn't completely stupid. She'd seen the look he'd given her when he walked into the kitchen—a look of surprise which had swiftly turned to one of appreciation. She had been subjected to a brief but very thorough evaluation of her face and her body—one she doubted he would have done if he'd known who she really was. But he didn't know, did he? And he wasn't going to find out.

Because her first instincts had been the right ones, as instincts so often were. She'd felt apprehension when she'd first seen him and she hadn't known why. But now she did. As he'd looked at her, she'd felt something alien. A feeling which had nothing to do with the fear of being found out, but which was just as disturbing. A sudden heaviness in her breasts and a melting sensation low in her belly. Her skin suddenly felt as if it were too tight for her body and her cheap underwear seemed to be digging into her flesh.

And just as she would have recognised sunburn if she'd never experienced it before, she knew that what she was feeling for Rafe Carter was desire. Hot and very real desire, which was making her heart pound so erratically. Making her wonder what it would be like to be held by Rafe Carter and have him touch her. For him to run those long olive fingers over her newly sensitised skin and take away some of this terrible aching. And she'd never felt that before, not with anyone.

Guilt rippled over her.

Not even with Luciano.

She realised he was still waiting for an answer and she struggled to extract some coherent answers from the unfamiliar erotic fog of her thoughts. 'I have a younger sister and a brother.'

'And won't they be expecting you home?'

Sophie shook her head. After she'd left Isolaverde, she had phoned to let her brother, Myron, know she was safe and well—and begged him not to send out any search parties. She'd told him she needed to escape the pressure of what had happened, and so far he had heeded her request. On the few occasions she'd managed to get online and search the news outlets, there had been no public acknowledgements regarding her sudden disappearance and her younger sister, Mary-Belle, had stepped in to take over all her official engagements. Maybe Myron understood that her pride had been hurt and she'd needed to get away to lick her wounds after her very public rejection by the man she'd been meant to marry. That she was more than happy to resume all the responsibilities of her role as princess, she just wanted a little time to get her head together. Or maybe he was just too busy ruling their island kingdom to pay her much attention. He took his position as King of Isolaverde very seriously and for too long now had been coming under pressure to find himself a suitable bride.

'You've got exactly six months to have your little stab at rebellion,' he had clipped out, over the crackly phone line. 'And if you're not back by February, then I will send out search parties to bring you home again. Make no mistake about that, Sophie.'

Remembering her brother's sense of control—and the way that people had always tried to control her all her life—Sophie turned round to meet Rafe Carter's inquisitive stare, knowing she had to stop him doing the same. So be strong. Ask him something, she thought. Put him on the spot.

'And how about your Christmas? You'll be sitting around the Christmas tree with your own family, will you?' she questioned. 'Pulling crackers and singing carols in the old traditional way?'

His face hardened and Sophie saw something in the depths of his eyes which looked almost like pain. She blinked. Surely not. She couldn't imagine a powerful man like this ever hurting.

'That kind of Christmas only exists in fairy tales,' he said and suddenly his voice grew harsh with cynicism. 'And I never did believe in fairy tales.'

Abruptly he stood up and moved away from the window and suddenly he was close enough for Sophie to touch. Close enough for her to notice that his jaw was dark with the hint of new growth, even though he could barely have been out of bed for more than a few hours. As a symbol of virility, he couldn't have sent out a more potent message and another rush of unfamiliar desire pulsed through her.

'Why look,' he observed, his steely eyes glittering before they were shaded by his ebony lashes as he glanced down at her fingers. 'Your hands are trembling. What's the matter, Sophie? Is something bothering you?'

She suspected he knew exactly what was bothering her but she concealed her embarrassment behind a shake of her head.

'Actually, there is,' she said. 'I get nervous if someone stands around watching while I work—especially if that someone happens to be the boss. I'm about to start making the men their mid-morning smoko and you know how hungry they get.' She gave a quick smile, hoping it hid the way she was feeling. Hoping he wouldn't notice the fact that her nipples were pushing like little hard stones against her T-shirt or that her cheeks were getting hotter by the second. 'So if you'll excuse me?'

'I get the distinct feeling I'm being dismissed,' he said silkily. 'Which is something of a first. Still, since dedication to work is a quality I've always admired, you won't find me objecting.'

But before he reached the door he paused, and suddenly he was no longer the mildly curious boss asking idle questions about her background or pointing out that her fingers were trembling. Suddenly he was the billionaire station owner with the shiny helicopter, who was regarding her with a certain sense of entitlement.

'I have no objection to sharing the homestead with you, just as long as you realise that I like my own company. So please don't feel you have to seek me out or engage me in conversation, especially if I'm working. If it happens to be a beautiful day, we'll take that as a given, shall we?' His voice hardened. 'I certainly don't need to hear your views on the sunshine levels or having you brightly enquire how I'm planning to spend my day. Understand?'

Sophie met his piercing grey gaze, thinking that was possibly the rudest thing anyone had ever said to her. Engage him in conversation? Why, she'd rather talk to one of the large bugs which regularly scuttled across the veranda each morning! But her face betrayed nothing as she nodded, even if her voice was stiff. 'Of course.'

She was glad when the door swung shut behind him. He was the most arrogant man she'd ever met—even more arrogant than her brother—but he was also the most attractive. By a mile. Briefly she closed her eyes as she reminded herself of the effect he'd had on her. She'd been stumbling and uptight in his company and that wasn't her. Just as trembling fingers and aching breasts weren't her either. She'd let him get to her just because he looked like some fallen Greek god who'd been given more than his fair share of sex appeal and she mustn't allow that to happen again. He was her boss—nothing more. A man who was just passing through.

But despite her best intentions, something made her go to the window as he crossed the yard and something kept her there, watching him.

The morning sun was touching his ebony hair with splashes of dark red and she could see the powerful thrust of his thighs as he walked. A pulse started beating deep in her groin and Sophie felt a yearning so powerful that she had to grip onto the window sill for support.

It was just unfortunate that Rafe Carter chose that very moment to turn around and catch her staring.

And she couldn't mistake the lazy arrogance of his smile.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS TORTURE having your boss hanging around for longer than he was supposed to. Sophie gave the bowl of cake mix a vicious stir as he began to walk across the yard towards her. Sheer torture. Why was he still here four days after telling her he was just ‘passing through’? Wasn’t he supposed to be some important international CEO with loads of calls on his time? Not someone who helped his men repair fences and muster cattle before standing in the evening sunlight with a bottle of cold beer held to his lips. Sophie swallowed. And why the hell did he have to walk around the place looking like...that?

Her heart pounded as she watched him approach the homestead, the expensive grey suit he’d worn on his arrival now just a memory. He was wearing faded denim jeans, which might as well have been sprayed onto his muscular legs, and a clinging black T-shirt, which emphasised his washboard abs and the powerful lines of his arms and shoulders.

It was getting uncomfortable. Embarrassing, even. Every time he came into her eye-line, a load of unsettling things started to happen to her body. Things which centred around her aching breasts and a newly sensitive spot between her thighs. Things which had never happened to her before. She’d tried telling herself that it was because she was in this very elemental place instead of the rarefied atmosphere of her palatial home which was making her so aware of her own physicality. She’d tried keeping out of his way as much as possible—scuttling out of sight whenever she spotted him in the distance—but nothing seemed to help. Whatever qualities Rafe Carter had, he had them in abundance and she just couldn’t stop thinking about him...

He pushed open the door and walked into the air-conditioned cool of the kitchen. His black hair was curling in damp tendrils around his hard-boned face and a single line of sweat arched down the front of his T-shirt before disappearing beneath the soft leather of his belt. She put down the bowl of cake mix as she forced her gaze upwards to his face, but that wasn’t much better. Why couldn’t she just look at those sensual lips without wondering what it would be like to be kissed by them?

‘Anything I can do for you, Rafe?’

‘You mean, apart from looking as though you’d rather I was anywhere else but here?’

‘I told you,’ she said stiffly. ‘I get uncomfortable if people watch me while I’m working.’

‘So you did,’ he said softly. ‘Well, you won’t have to endure my company for much longer because I’m leaving first thing tomorrow.’

‘Oh.’ Sophie tried to keep her stupid wash of disappointment at bay. ‘You are?’

‘I am. So I’ll be out of your hair once and for all.’ He paused. ‘I thought you could cook the men a special meal tonight. An early Christmas celebration, if you like. A kind of thank you from me to them for all their hard work over the year. We could open some decent wine—and afterwards go into Corksville for a drink.’ His eyes gleamed. ‘Think you could manage that, Sophie?’

When he looked at her that way she felt incapable of managing anything except dissolving in a puddle, but somehow Sophie produced an efficient nod of her head. ‘Of course!’

She spent the rest of the day rushing around, consulting online recipes as she attempted to make a traditional Christmas dinner for the men, but her thoughts were mostly occupied with what to wear. Because even though she was only there to cook and serve, her cheap dresses and shapeless shorts didn’t seem appropriate for a celebration dinner and besides—wasn’t there a stupid part of her which wanted to dress up? Who wanted Rafe Carter to see her as a real woman for a change, rather than just the fading-into-the-background person she had tried her best to be?

She looked longingly at the one dress which was hanging in her wardrobe and the only outfit she’d brought with her from Isolaverde. It was made to measure by her favourite designer and deceptively simple; she loved the soft blue cotton material, which brought out the colour of her eyes. Just as she loved the fitted bodice and short swinging skirt which brushed her bare thighs as she moved. She slipped it on, along with a pair of strappy sandals, then applied a little mascara and lip

gloss. She even left her hair loose for once, clipping it lightly back from her face in case bossy Rafe Carter started giving her a lecture on health and safety regulations while she was cooking.

With barely an hour to spare and the realisation that there were no after-dinner chocolates, she made a last-minute dash into the nearby town of Corksville where Eileen Donahue, the woman who ran the local store, gave her a very curious look.

‘I hear the boss man is back,’ she said as Sophie put a box of dark chocolate mints on the counter.

Sophie nodded. ‘That’s right. But he’s leaving tomorrow.’

‘Shame. The town could do with a little more eye candy.’ Eileen gave a sly smile. ‘Good-looking man, Rafe Carter.’

Sophie kept her voice neutral. ‘So they say.’

‘Got himself a permanent woman yet?’

‘I really have no idea, Mrs Donahue.’

‘Yeah. Heard he plays the field and all.’ The storekeeper’s eyes narrowed perceptively. ‘Still, nice to see you in a dress for a change. Makes you look kind of...different.’

It felt like reality slapping her hard across the face and Sophie’s fingers stiffened as she pulled a note from her purse.

What did she think she was playing at—risking months of careful anonymity just because she wanted to make some pathetic impression on the boss?

Quickly, she picked up the chocolates and left, but her throat felt dry with anxiety as she drove out of Corksville in a cloud of dust. Had Eileen been looking at her suspiciously as she’d picked up her change, or was she just getting paranoid?

She was putting the finishing touches to the dining-room table when she looked up to find Rafe standing framed in the doorway and she wondered how long he’d been standing there, watching her. He was dressed in a pair of dark trousers and a silk shirt, which was unbuttoned at the neck, all traces of the day’s dust and sweat gone. He had the slightly glowing appearance of a man who’d just stepped out of the shower and the sheer intimacy of that fact didn’t escape her. And he was looking at her in a way which was making her heart crash painfully against her ribcage.

‘Well, well, well.’ He blew a soft whistle from between his lips as she placed a folded napkin on one of the placemats. ‘It’s the Sophie Doukas transformation scene.’

She pretended not to know what he was talking about. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘The pretty dress. The loose hair. The make-up.’

‘You don’t like it?’

His lips curved into a smile, which suddenly looked wolfish. Dangerously and attractively so.

‘Don’t fish for compliments, Sophie. You look very beautiful as I’m sure you’re perfectly aware. And the dress is...’ he seemed to be having difficulty completing the sentence ‘...quite something.’

She grabbed another napkin and turned away. ‘Thank you.’

Rafe frowned, wondering why her abrupt reaction to a simple compliment was so perplexing—as if she wasn’t used to a man telling her she looked beautiful. But then, everything about her was perplexing and he couldn’t work out why. He glanced around, taking in the flowers and candles and a starched white tablecloth she must have got from heaven only knew where. Paper chains were looped from one side of the ceiling to the other and, on the plastic Christmas tree, fairy lights gleamed. The overall effect was tacky and yet it was also homely. It was unmistakably a woman’s touch—as if she’d been trying very hard to make the place look comfortable. Something inexplicable twisted at his heart, because Poonbarra was supposed to be about basics. About hard work and getting back to nature. It wasn’t supposed to be about comfort.

He’d ended up staying longer than planned because he was dreading going back to England for the christening of his half-brother’s son. Given his reputation for being the family’s habitual no-show—for reasons which were painfully private—nobody could believe he’d agreed to attend in the

first place. And in truth, neither could he. He swallowed down the acrid taste which had risen in his throat. He knew that dark and bitter memories were going to be unavoidable, but he told himself he couldn't keep avoiding them for ever. That maybe he needed to ride out the pain once and for all. That maybe you never properly healed unless you faced the reality of what you had done.

But one day had bled into two and then three and delaying his trip had become more...complex. He'd underestimated the effect of Poonbarra. Of the peace and calm which always descended on him there—a feeling which had been magnified by the decorative presence of Sophie Doukas...the woman who didn't flirt. The woman who spent her time avoiding him—something which was both novel but ultimately frustrating.

He tried to concentrate on the bottle of wine he was opening, but couldn't seem to stop his gaze from straying to her, no matter how hard he tried. Because she was...a challenge? Was that why he couldn't stop thinking about her? Why his hot and erotic dreams had featured plenty of X-rated images of his aloof cook? She must be as aware as he of the sizzling attraction which had sparked between them from the get-go, yet she hadn't acted on it as most women in her position would have done. There had been no unexpected sightings of her around the homestead wearing just a skimpy bath towel. No unexplained 'nightmares' intended to bring him running into her room late at night. She'd done what he'd asked her to do. She'd kept out of his way as much as possible—leaving him frustrating and restless, with a painful ache between his legs.

Yet human nature was a conundrum, that was for sure. When you were used to women flinging themselves at you, it was curiously exciting to discover one who was actively fighting that attraction. In fact, it was the biggest turn-on he knew and it had never happened to him before. He wondered if it was necessary for her to fuss around the bubbling pans quite so much and found himself almost resenting Andy and the other workers as they trooped in and sat round the table. All through dinner the overpowering scent of liberally applied aftershave hung cloyingly in the air. Suddenly, the room seemed overcrowded.

Were they in complete thrall to her? Rafe wondered—caught midway between amusement and irritation—as he watched the men lavish praise on her food. Was that why they were acting like tongue-tied adolescents whenever she spoke to them, or appeared with yet another steaming dish held enticingly in front of those magnificent breasts?

He ate and drank very little and when the meal was finished, the men all got up to leave and Andy turned to her.

'You coming to the pub with us, Soph? Let us buy you a beer as a thank you for all your delicious cooking?'

With a smile, she shook her head. 'Not for me, thanks. I'm going to clear up in here and get an early night.'

But Rafe could see her unmistakable look of...was that alarm?...as the men trooped out and he remained seated. He saw the uneasy flicker of her tongue as it edged rather nervously along her bottom lip.

'You're not going to the pub with the others?' she questioned, a touch too brightly.

He shook his head. 'Not me. I've got a long day ahead of me tomorrow.' He gave the ghost of a smile. 'And besides, I might cramp their style.'

'Oh. Right. Well, you'll excuse me if I get on.' She clattered a pile of plates together and carried them out to the kitchen.

Rafe stretched his arms above his head and knew he ought to move. To go to bed and sleep and figure out how the hell he was going to get through Oliver's christening, especially now that Sharla's presence had been confirmed. The trouble was he didn't want to go anywhere. Not when it was so comfortable sitting here, watching Sophie clear away the dishes. Watching as she busied herself around the table and studiously tried to avoid his gaze. The only trouble was that meant he could stare at her without censure. His eyes lingered on the gleam of her shapely calves and the way

the blue cotton dress swished about her bottom as she moved. He found himself thinking longingly about sex and how it might blot out the darkness of his thoughts—and the idea of having sex with Sophie was becoming something of an obsession.

Yet these days he avoided one-night stands—even if he hadn't always made it a rule never to get intimate with employees. Women were tricky enough as lovers without the added complication of them being on the payroll. He'd seen friends and peers get their fingers burned by over-familiarity with staff. Seen how a formerly cool colleague could morph into a bunny-boiling maniac once she'd slipped between the sheets and discovered there wasn't going to be a big rock on her finger as a result. Even if you were honest with a woman from the start and told her you just wanted a no-strings fling, they never believed you. They always thought they'd be the one to change your mind. And how could you escape a rejected lover's wrath if you had to stare at her vengeful face across the other side of the boardroom, or when her manicured fingers were flying across the keyboard?

Or when she was leaning across the table to grab an unused serving spoon and you could smell a trace of her perfume?

Nope. That was an area he had always steered clear of.

So stop looking at her breasts. Stop imagining what it would be like to part those delicious thighs and slip your fingers inside her panties and see how long it would take to make her wet.

'Would you like some coffee, Rafe?'

Her unfathomable accent punctured his thoughts and Rafe met the question in her eyes as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

'No,' he said, more curtly than he'd intended. 'I don't want any more to drink. Come and sit down. You've been working all evening. Have you eaten anything?'

'Honestly—I'm fine. I had something before I started serving.'

'Have some chocolate, then. Surely there isn't a woman alive who can resist chocolate?'

'I've still got some clearing up to do.'

'You've done most of it. Leave the rest for now. And that's an order. For heaven's sake, relax, Sophie—or is that such an outrageous suggestion?'

Sophie edged towards the chair he was indicating, her heart crashing against her ribcage. Relax? He had to be joking. She felt about as relaxed as a mouse which had just glanced up to see a metal trap hovering overhead. Which was slightly ironic for someone who'd spent her whole life being introduced to strangers and putting them at their ease. But for once she was the one feeling nervous in the company of a man who was currently pouring her some wine—though she noticed he'd barely touched his own glass all evening.

'Here,' he said, pushing it across the table towards her.

She took the drink and sipped it, grateful for the sudden warmth which flooded through her veins. 'Mmm. This is excellent.'

'Of course it is. Australia produces some of the best wine in the world.' His eyes glittered. 'As well as having the kind of wild beauty which takes the breath away.'

Sophie swirled the wine around and watched it stain the sides of the glass. 'You sound as if you love it. The country, I mean.'

'That's because I do.' He shrugged. 'I always have.'

She looked up from the glass to stare directly into his eyes. 'Was that why you bought a cattle station here, so far away from England?'

Rafe didn't answer her question straight away because it was a long time since he'd thought about it. What had started out as a bolt-hole from the unbearable had become one of his favourite places. He'd always revelled in the extreme conditions of the Outback and whenever he returned—less and less these days—he settled in right away. He'd come here first for sanctuary, far away from the brutal world he'd left behind. He'd needed the hard work and sweat and toil which had helped heal his shattered heart and broken soul. It had been his first stop in a series of places to lay his head

without ever really considering any of them home. But then, he'd never had a real home during his childhood, so why should adulthood be any different? His description of himself as a modern-day gypsy had been truthful, though he knew from experience it was an image which turned women on.

Had it turned Sophie on? he wondered. Was that why she was staring at him now, her blue eyes shadowed in the candlelight and those amazing lips slightly parted, as if she wanted him to kiss her? And wasn't the desire to do so almost overwhelming? 'Aren't I supposed to be interviewing you,' he said acidly, 'rather than the other way round?'

'Is this an interview, then?' She put her glass down. 'I thought I'd already got the job.'

'Yes, you've got the job. Yet it's interesting,' he mused as he leaned back in his chair, 'that when I asked Andy about your background, he knew nothing about you. And that after several days in your company, I find myself in exactly the same boat. You're a bit of a mystery, Sophie.'

'I thought my role here was to feed the men, not entertain them with my life story?'

'True.' Rafe frowned, thinking that her casual tone was failing to disguise her sudden air of defensiveness. 'Yet apparently, when you arrived, you didn't know one end of a frying pan from the other.'

'I soon learned.'

'Or have a clue how to load the dishwasher.'

She shrugged. 'It's an industrial-sized dishwasher.'

'And you looked at the tin-opener as if it had just landed from outer space.'

'Gosh,' she said sarcastically. 'Just how long did you and Andy spend discussing me?'

'Long enough.'

'And did you come to any conclusions?'

'I did.'

'Which were?'

He stretched out his legs. 'I came to the conclusion that you're someone who's never had to get her hands dirty before,' he observed softly. 'And that maybe you've led a very privileged life up until now.'

Sophie stiffened. How perceptive he was, she thought—her unwilling admiration swept away by a sudden whisper of fear. Because wasn't this what she had dreaded all along—that the cool and clever Englishman would guess she wasn't what she seemed? That he would blow her cover before she was ready to have it blown, and force her into making decisions she still wasn't sure about.

So brazen it out. Challenge him—just as he is challenging you.

She raised her eyebrows. 'But none of the men—or you—have any complaints about my work, do you?'

His eyes glittered. 'Are my questions bothering you, Sophie?'

'Not bothering me so much as boring me, if I may be frank.' She lifted her eyebrows. 'Didn't you tell me when you first arrived that you'd prefer it if I left you alone? That you didn't want me to engage you in conversation just for the sake of it.'

'Did I say that?'

'You know you did,' she said, in a low voice. 'Yet now you're doing exactly that to me!'

'Well, maybe I've changed my mind. Maybe I'm wondering why a young and beautiful woman is hiding herself in the middle of the Outback without making a single phone call or getting any emails.'

She froze. 'What are you talking about?'

'Andy says you don't use a cell-phone. That you haven't received a single letter or card since you've been here—and that you only ever use the Internet very occasionally.'

'I didn't realise I was being constantly monitored,' she said crossly. 'Surely my life is my business.'

'It is, of course. But I'm always intrigued by people who are reluctant to talk about themselves.'

And Sophie suddenly realised why that might be. Because a man like Rafe Carter would have people falling over themselves to tell him everything he wanted to know, wouldn't he? She wondered how he would react if she blurted out the truth. If she told him who she really was. Something told her he wouldn't fawn all over her, the way most people did when they came into close contact with a royal. Something told her he would stay exactly the same—and that was a very tantalising prospect.

Yet she couldn't risk it. No matter how normal he might be in those circumstances, things would inevitably change. He might be angry she hadn't mentioned it before. And what if he inadvertently mentioned it to one of his friends, who mentioned it to someone else—and the wretched press got hold of it? That would be a disaster.

But it was more than his reaction which made Sophie want to keep her secret. She just didn't want to pop this bubble of feeling so normal. Of feeling just like anyone else. Why shouldn't she talk about herself without mentioning her status? Unless being a princess was the only thing which defined her.

'What exactly do you want to know?' she questioned.

Pushing his wine glass away, Rafe sat back in his chair as he considered her question, but in his heart he knew the answer. He didn't want facts. He wanted her. He'd wanted her from the first moment she'd turned round and looked at him with those big blue eyes. He wanted to crush those amazing lips with his own. To peel that cotton dress from her body and see what delicious treasures lay beneath. To hear her gasping his name as he pushed deep inside her...

He shifted his weight to try to ease his discomfort, realising he was sitting there like some frustrated teenager with a hard-on—and suddenly common sense overrode the primitive needs of his body. What the hell was he thinking of? He forced himself to stand, reminding himself he was leaving tomorrow and that in a week he would scarcely remember her name. 'It's okay, Sophie. You're right. Your life is none of my business.' Suddenly, he smiled. 'But for what it's worth—you're doing a pretty good job.'

It was the praise as much as the smile which got to her and Sophie blinked at him, stupidly moved by his words. She was naturally suspicious of praise because usually it was delivered with some sort of agenda, usually because people were trying to ingratiate themselves with her. But Rafe's words were genuine. He didn't know she was a princess. He was saying those things because he meant them. His praise was real.

And suddenly she knew she had to get away from him—before another small act of kindness had her rolling over like a puppy wanting its stomach stroked. Her chair scraped loudly against the wooden floor as she also stood up. 'Thanks,' she said. 'I appreciate it. And in order not to blot my brilliant record, I guess I'd better finish clearing up.'

She went into the kitchen and started washing the glasses, feeling stupidly disappointed when he said goodnight and left her to it. The room felt empty without him. She felt empty without him. What had she wanted to happen? For him to remove her hands from the soapy water and take her into his arms and start to kiss her?

Yes. That was exactly what she wanted.

Frustrated, she went to her room and took a quick shower before climbing into bed. But despite all her hard work and the thought of the early-morning start, she spent countless minutes lying wide awake in the darkness. Every time she shut her eyes, she was haunted by Rafe's image. By his hard-boned face and powerful body. By the way those steely eyes swept over her, making her stomach turn somersaults. She pushed the cotton sheet from her hot body, going through all the relaxation techniques she knew but nothing seemed to work, until eventually she gave up and got out of bed.

Walking over to the window, she peered out at the beautiful night, where the moon had risen high in the clear and unpolluted sky. She could see its milky glimmer on the surface of the pool and suddenly the thought of a swim seemed irresistible. If she was very quiet she would disturb no one. She could cool herself down and wear herself out and, afterwards, crawl back into bed exhausted.

Pulling on her swimsuit, she slipped her feet into a pair of flip flops and padded quietly outside. Switching on the pool's floodlights, she scanned the surroundings for any of the ubiquitous cane toads who sometimes swam there until the chlorinated water poisoned them, but there were none. Everything was silent except for the ghost-like wailing of a curlew in a distant tree.

Slipping into the water, she swam with strong, regular strokes which were the result of hours spent practising in the palace pool. She swam until she was pleasantly tired. Floating on her back in the water, she was just thinking about getting out when she heard a splash and, glancing down to the other end of the pool, she froze as she saw a powerful male body swimming beneath the surface of the floodlit water towards her. She held her breath as the man emerged beside her, wet dark hair plastered to his head—his muscular torso painted silver by the moonlight.

'Rafe!' Her heart crashed violently against her ribcage. 'You scared the life out of me!'

'Who did you think it was?'

'A cane toad!' she declared furiously.

'Pretty big cane toad,' he said, a smile curving the edges of his lips.

He dived beneath the water again—swimming several lengths of the pool and back again. It was an impressive display, thought Sophie reluctantly. A deliberate and very macho display and she would have needed to be made of wood not to have responded to it. And Sophie was not made of wood. Far from it. Right then she felt like cream which had been whipped up into soft peaks. Suddenly he emerged beside her again, shaking his head so that little droplets of water showered over her skin.

Tilting his head back, he looked up at the bright canopy of stars. 'Amazing, isn't it?'

Sophie forced herself to follow his gaze. To try to concentrate on the glittering constellations overhead when all she wanted to do was to stare at the magnificence of his wet body. He was so near. So very near. The danger which whispered over her skin was followed by a potent sense of excitement. A sense that she was standing on the edge of the unknown. 'Very beautiful,' she said. The shiver she gave wasn't faked, but it had nothing to do with the temperature and suddenly Sophie felt out of her depth in more ways than one. 'It's...getting cold, isn't it? I'd better go in.'

'Please. Don't let me curtail your swim,' he said softly, his hooded eyes gleaming. 'I'd hate to think I was driving you away. Or that my presence was bothering you.'

Of course it was bothering her. He must have known that. Even if his voice hadn't suddenly dipped, the tension which had been growing between them for days now seemed to be reaching a climax. Her breathing had grown so shallow that she barely seemed capable of taking any air into her lungs and Sophie was aware of the blood beating hotly through her veins. He was coming onto her and she wasn't doing a thing to stop him and it was crazy. She knew that.

And yet...

She swallowed.

Why shouldn't she respond, when it had been nearly killing her to keep out of his way as much as she had been doing? She'd never done this before. Never had an intimate late-night swim—not even with the Prince to whom she'd been promised in marriage. In fact, she'd never been alone with a man like this—half dressed and totally unguarded—because her life on Isolaverde had been like living in the Dark Ages. She wondered what Rafe Carter would say if he knew she was a stranger to seduction and everything which went with it, but right now she didn't care.

Because for the first time in her life she felt unencumbered by protocol and acutely aware that this opportunity wouldn't come her way again. Her time here was limited and she was hurtling towards an unknown future—a bit like one of the cyclones which would soon dominate and threaten this very region. But none of that seemed to matter now. It was as if everything which had happened in her life up until that moment was about to be tossed aside by a powerful force of nature—in the very alpha shape of her half-naked boss.

With a splash she flipped over, bobbing underneath the water so he couldn't see the pointing of her nipples. But he wasn't looking at her breasts. He was looking at her face and suddenly she was

looking right back at his. In the moonlight his eyes gleamed with an intense brilliance which made her stomach flip.

‘Rafe?’ she said uncertainly, but he silenced her with a shake of his head.

‘Come here,’ he said, his voice a sudden growl.

She knew he was going to kiss her even before he pulled her against him, against the hard wet planes of his muscular body. She could feel her breasts being crushed against his bare chest and the warmth of his breath just before he crushed her lips beneath his. Her eyelids fluttered to a close as he deepened the kiss and his thumb flicked over the wet stud of her hardening nipple through her swimsuit, making her moan with disbelief that something could feel this good. Because nobody had ever touched her before. Not like this. He slid his hand further down, before letting his fingertips skim over her belly and she wriggled impatiently, wanting him to touch her where she was hot and molten. Made weightless by the water, her thighs parted as if her body was programmed to know exactly how to respond and she sucked in another disbelieving breath as he slipped aside the panel of her swimsuit and pushed his finger deep inside her.

‘Rafe,’ she gasped against his lips, writhing her hips against him. ‘Oh, Rafe.’

Her breathless use of his name seemed to break the erotic spell and when he pulled his hand away she immediately found herself wanting his finger right back where it had been. His eyes were unreadable in the moonlight and his features were harder than she’d ever seen them—his cheekbones two taut slashes against the obvious tension in his face.

‘I want to have sex with you,’ he said unsteadily. ‘And clearly you feel exactly the same way. But there are a few things you need to understand.’

Her heart was thundering so loudly she felt as if she might faint. ‘What kind of things?’

‘You’re staff,’ he said bluntly. ‘And I don’t usually sleep with employees.’

‘Oh.’ There was a pause as she licked some of the chorine off her lips. ‘Well, I guess that’s honest, at least.’

‘I’m nothing if not honest, Sophie,’ he said. ‘And if we’re going to do this, it has to be on my terms.’

She met his gaze. ‘What terms are they?’

‘One night. That’s all,’ he told her, his gaze raking over her. ‘No more. No dates. No promises. No happy ever after or follow-up emails. No Christmas present or surprise ticket to New York. And you certainly won’t be getting love because I don’t do love. I’m out of here tomorrow and it’s goodbye. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

Sophie bit her tingling lips as she considered his question. She was caught in the perfect storm of moonlight and desire and opportunity, even though the voice of common sense was urging her to get out while she still could.

But hadn’t she always played by the rules and done what was ‘right’? And look where it had got her. Deserted by the Prince her people adored and left a laughing stock. She had been placed on a pedestal from the moment of her birth. She was the Princess. People could look but they could never, ever touch. But Rafe had touched. She stared at him. Rafe didn’t have a clue who she really was and he didn’t care. All she could see was desire in his eyes and a hard, tense body which was calling out to her on the most primitive level of all. He wanted her. Not Princess Sophie. Just Sophie. More than that, she wanted him. Not the billionaire in his shiny helicopter but the elemental man who was making her feel like a real woman for the first time in her life. Him. Rafe Carter.

‘I understand,’ she said quietly.

His wet brow furrowed into a frown. ‘Just like that?’

‘Exactly like that.’ She shrugged. ‘Maybe I want exactly the same thing as you do, Rafe. One night. No strings.’

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