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Nina Milne

 Cherish

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Аннотация

One evening that changes everything! After Lady Kaitlin Derwent was kidnapped as a child, she shut down her emotions and focused on becoming the perfect daughter her aristocratic family wanted. But, one evening in Barcelona, she meets a handsome stranger who makes her crave freedom... Wealthy lawyer Daniel Harrington has never believed in love, but spending the evening with Kaitlin opens up new possibilities. Daniel is determined to show her that only by being true to herself can she be truly happy... If only she'll let him show her the way!

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“How about dinner? No strings. We’re two people alone in a vibrant city and I could do with some company.”

The words held a ring of truth and for a moment Kaitlin wondered what demons he wanted to hold at bay.

Temptation, warring with the final grains of common sense, pointed out that after all she had to eat.

Daniel’s shoulders lifted in a shrug. “I had a reservation at one of Barcelona’s best restaurants—I could try and resurrect it.”

Kaitlin frowned. “So you did have plans.”

“Let’s say my plans didn’t materialize.” Harshness underlaid the words and pain flashed across those blue eyes. Kaitlin hesitated, sensed that the man seated opposite her was hurting. Clearly he’d been stood up. Doubt unfurled—somehow that didn’t seem feasible. It wasn’t a scenario that played out. *Ridiculous*—yes he was good-looking and magnetic and... and...

and... but she hardly knew him or his relationship background.

Yet more reasons to make her exit now.

But she didn't want to. Never again would she have a chance like this. To be free, to shed the Lady Kaitlin persona. Because soon there would be the meeting with Prince Frederick of Lycander, a meeting where she needed to demonstrate her suitability to be a Lycander bride and then... Enough. She wouldn't, couldn't think of that now.

“Dinner sounds wonderful. A night of freedom before I step into a gilded cage.”

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NINA MILNE has always dreamed of writing for Mills & Boon Cherish—ever since as a child she played libraries with her mother's stacks of Mills & Boon romances. On her way to this dream Nina acquired an English degree, a hero of her own, three gorgeous children and—somehow!—an accountancy qualification. She lives in Brighton and has filled her house with stacks of books—her very own real library.

To all things Venice!

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CHAPTER ONE

LADY KAITLIN DERWENT, poster girl for the aristocracy, daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Fairfax, stared at her night

on unrecognisable reflection and wondered if she'd run mad... No, she knew she must have run mad.

There could be no other explanation for the fact that she was standing in this glitzy Barcelona hotel room, her Titian-red hair obscured under a bottleful of cheap blonde dye, her green eyes masked by baby-blue contact lenses, on a 'Blonde Hair and Blue Eyes in Barcelona' themed hen weekend for a woman she hadn't seen for years.

'You OK?' Lynette Cooper, her childhood playmate and the bride-to-be, leant forward to peer more closely into the dressing table mirror and layered on another sheen of letterbox-red lipstick. 'Are you sure you won't come out tonight? We're making cocktails and then we're drinking cocktails.'

Kaitlin summoned a smile. 'No, thank you. I appreciate it, but I'd be gatecrashing.'

She didn't know any of the other guests; it had been a crazy impulse of the type she never, ever demonstrated to ask Lynette if she could join the hen group so that she could escape for a weekend. Travel as part of a group with a degree of anonymity and gain some time out, some space to think.

'I will truly be happy chilling out here. I'll order room service, watch a film and go to sleep.'

Lynette tipped her blonde head to one side. 'You sure?'

'I'm sure.'

'OK.' Lynette's smile was genuine, and so reminiscent of her ten-year-old self that Kaitlin couldn't help but smile back.

‘And, Lynette... Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome, Kaitlin. I know we’ve lost touch, but I’m glad I could help. Really.’

Lynette looked as though she wanted to say more, and Kaitlin knew she needed to forestall her. She wouldn’t explain the reasons for the breakdown of their friendship all those years ago—couldn’t revisit the memories of a trauma she had relegated to the surreal.

‘And I am really grateful, Lynette. Now, go and have fun. Don’t worry about me.’

Lynette stood, undecided, and then nodded. ‘OK. Be good. Call me if you change your mind and want to meet up with us.’

With that she swirled from the room in a gust of perfume.

Be good. No problem there. Lady Kaitlin Derwent was always good—never a breath of scandal to her name and that was the way it would stay. This was as mad as she was ever likely to be—disguised as a blonde, holed up in a hotel room in Barcelona, so that she could contemplate her future.

The recent conversation with her parents pounded her temples.

Her mother’s voice, warm with honey. Yet it was a warmth all the Derwent children knew to be false. ‘Kaitlin. We have good news. Prince Frederick of Lycander is looking for a bride. We think you fit the bill.’

The Duke of Fairfax had snorted. ‘We know you do, and we expect you to do everything in your power to ensure it is you who

joins him at the altar. Royal blood and Derwent blood joined in alliance.’

The Duchess had looked at her with something as near to approval as she ever showed, eyed her up and down and nodded her ash-blonde head. ‘So it shall be.’

Her parents had spoken and Kaitlin had smiled her cool, poised, serene smile—one of many practised in front of the mirror until her cheek muscles ached. ‘I’ll do my best.’

Now, sitting on the single bed of the Barcelona hotel room, Kaitlin closed her eyes and wondered what on earth she was doing here. What was the point of contemplation? There was nothing to muse over. After all, her future had been mapped out, her destiny already determined. Granted, it was a future most women would kill for—a guarantee of wealth and a young handsome sovereign prince to go with it.

A glance out of the window showed the dusky Barcelona evening. The breeze carried in staccato bursts of chatter, the smell of heat-hazed streets and a hint of sangria. Another glance at the mirror reassured her that her own siblings wouldn’t recognise her.

Well, Cora might, with her twin’s intuition, but Gabriel certainly wouldn’t. A familiar pang of guilt touched her at the thought of Cora—at the knowledge that her relationship with her sister had lost any semblance of closeness. As for Gabriel—right now she didn’t even know where her brother was. The future Duke of Fairfax had disappeared on a prolonged sojourn abroad,

leaving behind a supposedly jilted girlfriend and no indication of when he would return.

The Derwent siblings—on the surface they had it all, but in reality...

The impetus of emotion made her decision for her—pent-up energy roiled inside her, making the room's confines too restrictive, and instinct propelled her to the door, out of the room and down the carpeted stairs towards the lobby.

But as she looked around at the bustle in the marble foyer, the people all strangers, a tsunami of panic welled inside her without warning. Alarm and anxiety crashed in as they hadn't for—oh, so many years.

Fool that she was.

This had been a mistake. She should never have come here—never have set foot out of her carefully planned life trajectory. At best she should at least have remained in the safety of her room. She needed to retrace her steps. If only her legs would cooperate. Dots danced in front of her eyes and her lungs refused to work.

A last vestige of common sense had her leaning against a marble pillar in the hope of obscurity...

* * *

Daniel Harrington stepped out of the elevator into the hotel lobby. Feelings of futile anger mixed with equally pointless hurt banded his chest.

Stupidity incarnate.

Who knew what had possessed him to attempt a reunion with his family? Ten years ago they had turned their backs on him, refused to countenance his decision to go legitimate, to no longer turn a blind eye.

‘If you walk out of that door, Danny, you don’t get to come back. Ever. You will be dead to us.’

That walk had been the hardest choice he’d ever made. But he’d done it, and he’d been a fool to think there would be any softening now. So he had only himself to blame for this wasted journey. But he had hoped that his mother, at least, would relent, would want to see her eldest son.

Instead his stepfather had sent his deputy in her stead—a man who had delivered his message with a cruelty that had exercised Daniel’s self-restraint to the utmost.

As he strode towards the revolving doors, the message echoed in his ears.

‘Ghosts get no visitors. Dead is dead, Danny boy. Dead is for ever, and you are dead to the Rosso family.’

He nearly missed the movement that had caught at the edge of his vision.

Dyed blonde hair caught back in a messy ponytail, blue eyes filled with anguish... The woman leant against a marble pillar that mostly concealed her from the guests that dotted the foyer. Her breath rasped in heaving gasps that indicated a full-scale panic attack.

With an abrupt turn Daniel veered off and halted in front of

her. 'Are you OK?'

Stupid question, but the words seemed at least to steady her slightly, and she blinked her eyes in rapid succession.

'I'm fi...' she began, then gasped out a half-laugh. 'No, I'm not.'

Daniel gestured to a concierge. 'Water, please.' Turning, he held an arm out to the woman. 'Let me help you. You need to sit down.'

'Thank you.'

He watched as she visibly pulled herself together, almost as if through sheer will power. Her breathing was still ragged, but no longer desperate as she pushed away from the fluted column and stood with one hand resting on it.

'I'll be fine.' She nodded her thanks to the hotel staff member who came over with a bottle of water. 'Really.'

'Is there someone I can call or get for you? Or...?'

'No!' The syllable was a touch too sharp. 'Really, I'm fine now. Thank you for your help.'

'I've hardly helped.'

He studied her for a long moment, saw the vulnerability still in her eyes, along with an anxiety she was clearly doing her best to mask.

'But I'd like to. How about I buy you a drink? Stay with you until I'm sure you're OK?'

Surprise touched with an understandable wariness etched a frown on her face.

'No, thank you.' The words were polite but final. 'I don't drink

with strangers.’

‘And I don’t leave damsels in distress on their own in hotel lobbies. We can have a drink here. In the public bar, full of plenty of people. If you’re in trouble maybe I can help you.’

‘What makes you think I’m in trouble?’

Daniel shrugged. ‘Instinct. I’m a lawyer. Lots of my clients are in trouble. You get to know the signs.’

‘Well, in this case you’ve misread the signals. I appreciate your concern, but I’m not in trouble and I don’t need any more help than you’ve already given me.’

The words, though softly spoken, were uttered with determination, and Daniel knew he should go on his currently less than merry way. But his instincts were usually bang on the button, and the idea that this woman was in dire straits of some sort persisted.

Not his business. Though there was more to it than that. Dammit, she was beautiful. Wide blue eyes were fringed with thick dark lashes and unenhanced by make-up. A few tendrils of blonde hair had escaped the ponytail and framed a classically oval face. Slender and long-legged, she held herself with a poise and grace that added distinction to her beauty.

As if made uncomfortable by his scrutiny, she shifted from foot to foot and turned her head slightly to one side.

‘If you don’t need my help then perhaps we could just enjoy each other’s company? You wouldn’t think it to look at me, but I am a scintillating conversationalist.’

He accompanied the words with a wriggle of his eyebrows and to his surprise, and perhaps hers, her lips curved up into a smile. Though she still shook her head.

‘Humour me. One drink. So I can be sure you are OK. You can ask the staff to keep an eye on us, if you’re worried. In fact I think they already are.’

The smile vanished and her eyes shaded with a hint of anxiety as she glanced round to where the concierge still watched them.

‘OK. One drink.’

He held out a hand. ‘I’m Daniel.’

The woman hesitated a moment before reaching her hand out to his. ‘Lynette.’

* * *

Half an hour later, seated across from Daniel in the cool anonymity of the elegant yet highly functional hotel bar, Kaitlin sipped the last of her pomegranate cooler. The non-alcoholic blend of sweet and sour was exactly what she’d needed to revive her.

Come on, Kaitlin.

It wasn’t the beverage, nor the comfort of the cream-cushioned round-backed seats, nor even the vivid splash of bright yellow flower arrangements—it was the man.

Daniel lacked her brother’s classic handsomeness—the slight crook to his nose indicated that it might well have been broken once, and his features were craggy rather than aquiline—but in sheer presence he could rival Gabriel, even if the latter was the

Earl of Wycliffe.

He projected a raw energy—a force that showed in the intense blue of his eyes, the jut of his jaw, the sheer focus he bestowed on her. It was a focus underlain with a pull of attraction that caused a warning bell to toll in the dim recesses of her brain that knew the sheer scale of the stupidity of all this.

Attraction was a tug she couldn't afford to feel—an emotion that in truth she had never felt. The blight, she assumed, was a result of her childhood trauma.

Stop, Kaitlin. Don't go there.

The kidnap was an experience she had done her best to suppress, and she had every intention of keeping it buried in the deepest, darkest depths of her psyche, never to surface. After all she had created her safe, controlled Lady Kaitlin persona to achieve that exact obliteration of her memory banks.

'Another drink?' he asked, and his deep voice caressed her skin like velvet and decadent chocolate. 'Or how about dinner?'

'Thank you.'

But no—they were the words she knew she should say. Each minute she spent with Daniel increased the risk of recognition, the possibility that she would slip up and reveal her true identity. That would be a disaster—her parents would be incoherent with anger if Lady Kaitlin Derwent was revealed to have been picked up by a stranger in a Barcelona bar. Because—and she might as well face it—if she agreed to dinner this would no longer be a 'medical' interlude. It would move into different territory

altogether. An unfamiliar minefield of a terrain. So...

‘But I don’t want to disrupt your plans. I’m fine now. Thank you for coming to my rescue.’

‘I have no plans.’ There was a bleak note in his voice under the casual disclaimer.

‘You must have had some plans,’ she countered. ‘You were on your way somewhere when you ran into me.’

‘Nowhere specific. Wherever the night took me.’

His shoulders lifted and her gaze snagged on their breadth. Once again awareness struck—an undercurrent that swirled between them across the square glass-topped table.

‘So what do you say?’

‘I...I shouldn’t.’

‘Why not?’ Ice-blue eyes met hers. ‘Is anyone else expecting you?’

‘No.’

‘So you’re here alone?’

Kaitlin hesitated...couldn’t face the complications involved in a full explanation. And, anyway, to all intents and purposes she was alone. ‘Yes.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then how about dinner? No strings. We’re two people alone in a vibrant city and I could do with some company.’

The words held a ring of truth, and for a moment she wondered what demons he wanted to hold at bay.

Temptation warred with the final grains of common sense, which pointed out that after all she had to eat.

His shoulders lifted in a shrug. 'I had a reservation at one of Barcelona's best restaurants—I could try and resurrect it.'

Kaitlin frowned. 'So you did have plans?'

'Let's say my plans didn't materialise.'

An underlying harshness coated the words and pain flashed across those blue eyes.

Kaitlin hesitated, sensing that the man opposite her was hurting. Clearly he'd been stood up. Doubt unfurled—somehow that didn't seem a possibility. It wasn't a scenario that played true.

Ridiculous. Yes, he was good-looking and magnetic and...and... But she hardly knew him or his relationship background.

Yet more reasons to make her exit now.

But she didn't want to. Never again would she have a chance like this. To be free, to shed the 'Lady Kaitlin' persona. Because soon there would be the meeting with Prince Frederick of Lycander—a meeting at which she needed to demonstrate her suitability to be a Lycander bride and then...

Enough. She wouldn't—couldn't think of that now.

'Dinner sounds wonderful. A night of freedom before I step into a gilded cage.'

Oh, hell. She'd said the words out loud. and now this stranger looked at her with a sharpness, an intensity she couldn't fathom. Almost as if it were someone else he saw, not her.

‘Never voluntarily step into a cage you don’t have a key to unlock.’

The words had an edge—a meaning she needed to deflect. Tonight she didn’t want to think about the marriage that awaited her—a marriage that she had believed she wanted. An alliance...a safe future and a role she would excel in.

‘I’ll bear it in mind.’ She turned her lips up into her Lady Kaitlin smile—friendly yet deflecting. ‘Now, I’d prefer to think about dinner. But there’s no need for Barcelona’s best restaurant.’ That was Lady Kaitlin’s milieu. ‘Let’s just walk and see where the night takes us.’

Innate caution pointed out that this man was a stranger—instinct told her she could trust him, but she knew all too well the follies of trust and a tendril of panic unfurled.

Think.

‘In the meantime, before we go, I’m going to call a friend and tell her I’ll be checking in every hour.’

No need to tell Lynette that she was having dinner with a stranger; instead she’d say she was walking alone and would feel better if she could check in.

‘Works for me.’

‘I’ll be back in a minute.’

To Kaitlin’s relief Lynette didn’t make a big deal of the situation—she seemed to accept that Kaitlin never travelled alone and that the aristocracy were ultra-security-conscious.

And so ten minutes later she and Daniel stepped out of the

hotel's revolving doors into the hustle and bustle of the Barcelona street.

Instinctively Kaitlin halted, almost overwhelmed by the sheer buzz that emanated from the throngs of chattering people. Her gaze darted to the street performers who plied their expertise for the amusement of passers-by. The scents of garlic and chilli and spices wafted from the numerous tapas bars that dotted the early medieval streets and overflowed with evening revellers.

‘You OK?’

Kaitlin pushed her shoulders back and nodded. Panic would not ruin this evening. The old dormant fear that coloured her every move, that made her live her life bound by rules and regulations and routine, would be suspended tonight. No one knew her identity; no one had any interest in snatching her now.

‘I’m fine. It’s just so vibrant it stopped me in my tracks.’

Yet instinct had her walking close to his reassuring warmth—logical or not, she sensed that Daniel would keep her safe. Perhaps it was the confident, swagger-free, don’t-mess-with-me aura he projected, or the sheer lithe muscular strength in each step. Whatever it was, it worked, and as they walked Kaitlin relaxed, absorbed the sights, the awe-inspiring grand patchwork of architectural styles that graced the skyline, where dark Gothic façades neighboured the harlequin buildings of the Modernistas.

But it wasn’t only the Barcelona experience that she absorbed—as they walked her whole body hummed with an awareness of Daniel... Something shimmered and sizzled in the air between

them, exacerbated by the occasional brush of their hands or the press of their bodies against each other in the crowds. Each touch sent heat through her, caused her tummy to loop the loop.

Even more head-spinning was the knowledge that he felt the same way; she could sense it—see it in the hunger of his blue gaze when it rested on her.

Some space, time out, seemed a good idea, so she could make an attempt to process the enormity of her reactions. ‘Shall we eat?’ she suggested pointing to a tapas bar. ‘That one looks as good as any.’

‘Sure.’

She followed him into the dimly lit packed interior and watched as he managed to snag one of the few small square tables covered in plastic red and white checked tablecloths.

As they looked around she realised where they were. ‘It’s a pintxo bar. I’ve never been in one—but I think they originate from the Basque region of Spain.’

He nodded. ‘Basically pintxos are mouth-sized tapas—always skewered with toothpicks. We just go up to the bar, help ourselves and tuck in. We keep the toothpicks and at the end we pay by the number of toothpicks.’

Kaitlin eyed the throng of people at the bar, most of them standing and eating, chatting and drinking with abandon. She knew that even with the new-found freedom of being ‘Lynette’ she couldn’t risk it. Not the possibility of another panic attack brought on by the crowd or that of being recognised.

Daniel looked at her with a glint of amusement. ‘I can go and get a selection for us both.’

‘Thank you. That would be kind.’ Perhaps a touch too much aristocratic hauteur in her voice there, and she eased it with a smile. ‘I’ll order the drinks.’

Ten minutes later he returned to the table. ‘Here we go.’

‘Delicious. Ham empanadillas, sobrassada sausage with honey, apple and crispy Idiazabal cheese pintxos made of chicken, tempura with saffron mayonnaise, melted provolone with mango and ham, and a mini-brochette of pork.’

‘That’s an impressive Spanish accent. I take it you speak the language?’

‘A little.’ The Duchess had ensured Kaitlin was fluent in a number of languages.

‘You must be prepared, Kaitlin, should you marry into European aristocracy.’

‘As part of your job?’

‘No. I work in an art gallery.’ No harm in sharing that fact; lots of people worked in art galleries, after all.

He speared a pinxto and surveyed her thoughtfully. ‘So, are you here on business? Barcelona has plenty of art.’

Kaitlin shook her head. ‘This trip is personal.’

‘Are you in trouble?’

The unexpectedness of the question caused her to tense, and a drop of sangria slopped over the edge of her glass and hit the wooden table. Placing her glass down carefully, Kaitlin mopped

up the red liquid with a napkin, watching the cloth absorb the ruby stain.

‘We had this conversation earlier and I said no.’

‘I know you did. I’m not sure I believe you.’

‘I’m not in trouble. I came to Barcelona because I needed some space. Tonight I want to forget the past and the future and live in the present.’

An arrested expression flickered across his face in the candlelit alcove. ‘A night of freedom?’ he said, quoting her words from earlier.

‘Yes.’

Daniel raised his glass. ‘To your night of freedom.’

His blue eyes met hers and what she saw shot a funny little thrill through her and she stilled. The sheer unfamiliarity of the sensation made her light-headed, made her dizzy with its intensity, and her body felt energised as every nerve-end tingled in anticipation.

The hours danced by, and the air was tinged with motes of awareness as they talked of everything and nothing. By mutual unspoken consent the conversation veered away from the personal, so they discussed music, films and philosophy. But every word was punctuated by a growing expectancy—a heady underlying responsiveness and a growing realisation of where the evening might end up.

Eventually they shared a dessert, a decadent dark chocolate concoction, and as she spooned up the last sumptuous bite she

met his gaze, saw desire ignite in his eyes. Then gently he took the spoon from her suddenly nerveless fingers and placed it on the plate. The chink of metal on china rang loud in her ear.

Oh, so gently he reached out and ran his thumb across her lower lip. She gasped—a small, involuntary sound—at the potency of her own reaction. Sensation uncoiled in her tummy...a need she'd never felt before. Without thought she cupped his jaw, wondered at the feel of his six o'clock shadow. Then his lips descended to hers and the world seemed to stop.

There was the taste of coffee and chocolate, the whirling rush of need, and the intense, sweet pleasure that streamed through her veins and sent a tingling rush to every bit of her body. Never before had she felt like this.

He pulled back, his breathing ragged, and he looked at her with such intensity as he said her name. 'Lynette...'

It was a reminder that she had this night and this night only. Ideas swirled round her head. A touch of fear as to whether she could do this, however much she wanted to—and, dammit, she wanted to.

For one grim instant the image of her dark, bearded kidnapper splayed through her vision, and then she looked at Daniel and the picture faded, dissipated by the white-hot burn of desire.

'I think we should move this somewhere else.'

'Are you sure?'

She was so sure—because she knew that these feelings could never happen to Lady Kaitlin. Perhaps because of the horror of

what had happened during the kidnap... Whatever the reason, it didn't matter. The fact remained that the odds were she would never feel like this again, and right now, caught in the sheer, dizzying sensual mesh of desire, Kaitlin knew she wanted this man. Against all reason it felt right. It could only be for one night, but so be it.

'Yes. I'm sure.'

CHAPTER TWO

Nine months later...

DANIEL HARRINGTON PAUSED on the threshold of the immense marquee, his ice-blue eyes scanning the wedding guests with ruthless disregard. One part of his brain registered the glorious elegance that graced the wedding reception of Gabriel Derwent, Earl of Wycliffe, heir to the Duke of Fairfax. The sumptuous drapes of organza, the glittering twinkle of the fairy lights and the splash of colour provided by the overhanging Chinese lanterns. The delicate scent of flowers pervaded the air—gloriosa and hyacinth, decked the canvas in lavish arrangements.

But in truth Daniel had no interest in the décor, and limited interest in the bride and groom. He was here for one reason and one reason only, and his eyes continued their systematic search, skipping over the rich, the famous and the ordinary on a quest to find Lady Kaitlin Derwent—sister to the groom, and the bride's maid of honour.

Earlier in the proceedings he'd watched her walk down the

aisle amidst a bevy of bridesmaids, all dressed in different jewel shades, a medley of beauty. But the only woman he'd been interested in was her, Lady Kaitlin, and as he'd studied her poised, graceful movements suspicion had begun the conversion process to confirmation.

Yet it was still nigh on impossible to believe that the poised Titian-haired beauty, clad in expensive designer teal-green, was the same woman he'd met nine months before in a Barcelona hotel. But as the hymns and the vows had resonated from the rafters of the picturesque medieval church his gaze had never once ceased its lingering on her beautiful features, and certainty had dawned.

Daniel had no doubt whatsoever that 'Lynette' and Katlin Derwent were one and the same.

Now, in the vast marquee that housed the reception party, he located her. Stood in a corner, deep in conversation with a tall blond man he knew to be Prince Frederick, ruler of the Principality of Lycander. Raw emotion slammed into his gut. Anger alongside the unwanted sting of desire and a primal instinct that yelled mine.

Instinctively he bunched his hands into fists.

Cool it, Dan. Violence no longer featured in his life as a solution, and initiating a brawl was not an option. After all, Prince Frederick was blameless in this whole sorry mess, and it shouldn't matter to Daniel that Kaitlin's hand rested on the Prince's forearm as she looked up at him.

Yet anger at her deception still pulsed in his veins. Along with the memory of his sense of loss and chagrin when he'd woken up in the swish Barcelona hotel to find no sign of the woman he'd shared such an amazing night with. Not so much as a blonde hair curled on the pillow had spoken of her presence. No strand or fibre of clothing. Just an elusive trace of her rose scent, and the ache in his body that had awoken him in the expectation of her still being beside him.

Then had come worry—heightened by the fact that it had been her first time...a fact she had refused to elaborate on or discuss. Had he mistaken the wonder of the night? Did she have regrets that her first experience had been with a stranger?

Then had come the conviction that she was in trouble. Hell, he'd even wondered if she'd been forced to leave. More fool him. Anger burned cold under his control.

He allowed only the civilised approach—Daniel got what he wanted through law, order and fair negotiation. That had been his vow a decade ago, and he'd lived by those rules ever since.

Frustration tautened his sinews with the desire to lash out. He would not revert to type—would not embrace the ethos of his family. That was why he'd walked away ten years before, though the cost had been high.

A memory snaked into his brain: his mother's beautiful face, twisted in entreaty as she'd stretched out a pleading hand. 'Don't go, Danny. Please don't walk out through that door.'
'Daniel.'

He swivelled in recognition of the well-modulated tones of Gabriel Derwent, groom and brother of the Lady Kaitlin.

‘Glad you could make it.’

Gabriel smiled and Daniel blinked—the Earl radiated palpable happiness.

‘Etta. This is Daniel Harrington—CEO of Harrington Legal, a new associate of my father’s, and also a new patron of the Caversham Foundation.’

Daniel recognised the slight edge to Gabriel’s voice and couldn’t blame him. He’d negotiated an invitation to this wedding with the Duke of Fairfax, Gabriel’s father, by dint of making a sizeable donation to the Derwent Manor restoration fund. When Gabriel had found out he’d called Daniel and explained that he wanted an additional price—a ‘donation with a difference’ to the Caversham Foundation, a charitable trust that helped troubled teenagers.

‘Daniel, this is my wife—Etta.’

Pride and awe touched the syllables, and Etta positively beamed, her tawny eyes sparkling with joy.

Daniel searched his repertoire of happy wedding talk. ‘Congratulations,’ he mustered.

Though who knew for what? Marriage shackled you, created ties that would bind and link and imprison you. His own mother’s marriage was proof of that.

‘Thank you.’ Gabriel studied his expression and his smile widened. ‘Though I get the feeling you aren’t a fan of marriage.’

‘It’s just not for me.’

Etta shook her head. ‘Perhaps you haven’t met the right woman.’

His gaze must have flicked across to Kaitlin for a fraction of a second, because Gabriel followed his line of sight and his forehead creased in a small frown.

Daniel thought rapidly. ‘Though from what I’ve read it sounds as though your sister will follow in your footsteps shortly?’

Keep it casual.

‘Perhaps,’ Gabriel said, his frown deepening, almost as if he didn’t like the idea.

‘Why don’t we introduce you?’ Etta suggested.

Bingo. Not exactly the way he’d planned it—but Daniel was nothing if not versatile. ‘Great.’

Gabriel strode towards where Kaitlin and the Prince were engrossed in conversation. Satisfaction brought a small, cold smile to Daniel’s lips as he followed.

* * *

Kaitlin looked up at Prince Frederick and tried to suppress the all too familiar feelings of panic. Chill out. Or chillax. Or whatever the current phrase was. But she couldn’t—despite the size of the marquee she felt hemmed in, and fear knotted her tummy into a tangle of panic. Which was nuts. She was standing next to royalty—how much safer could she be? The Prince would have strategically placed bodyguards everywhere.

Though you could argue that those bodyguards were only

interested in the protection of the Prince—she'd no doubt be seen as collateral damage.

No, that wasn't fair. Frederick would care. Not because he loved her—he'd been upfront about that—but because he was a dutiful man. Or at least she thought he was—the Prince was even better than she was at keeping his true self under wraps.

Yet over the past months she'd learnt he had a moral code that meant he would protect her out of duty.

So she was safe. But, however many times her brain told her that, her nerves still fluttered with an anxiety that increased daily—a throwback to all those years ago when it had been her constant companion. If she was honest, the panic had been on the up ever since her disastrous trip to Barcelona nine months before.

Barcelona. Don't go there.

As for the panic—she'd tamed it once, and she'd tame it again. All she had to do was be Lady Kaitlin—be the calm, in control woman she'd taught herself to be. The woman who could produce suitable emotion on tap without feeling a thing.

'We need to talk, Kaitlin. In private.'

Oh, hell. She knew exactly what Prince Frederick wanted to talk about—he wanted to propose and she just didn't want him to. Not yet. Not ever, said a small, defiant voice that she tuned out without compunction. This was what she wanted—what most women would rip their own arm off for. Marriage to a wealthy, handsome prince who also possessed the bonus of a moral code. So of course she wanted him to propose—but just not now.

‘Yes, we do. But not here. This is Gabe and Etta’s day. I don’t want us to overshadow it in any way.’

She’d been there and done that at her sister’s wedding, and the guilt still pinged within her.

He raised an eyebrow. ‘I don’t think us having a conversation will overshadow Gabe’s wedding. In truth, I don’t think anything could overshadow this day for him. Gabe is a man in love.’

Frederick was right—though who would have thought it? Her big brother, nearly as big an emotional disaster zone as Kaitlin herself, had succumbed to the biggest emotion of all and fallen hook, line and sinker for Etta Mason.

‘Even so...it is still their day. If we disappear to have a “private” conversation every reporter in the room will clock it.’

To say nothing of her parents. The Duke and Duchess of Fairfax were watching their eldest daughter like a pair of hawk-eagle hybrids.

The Prince frowned, and it was a relief to hear the deep sound of her brother’s voice from behind her.

‘Kait.’

She turned gracefully, smile in place to greet the euphoric bridegroom, and then she froze. Her brain scrambled for purchase and her stomach nosedived as her eyes absorbed the identity of the man standing next to her brother. Surely she was in the throes of a hallucination? Please let that be the case. She’d take the prospect of insanity over reality in a heartbeat.

Pulling up every ounce of learned poise and ability to rise to

any social occasion, she forced her jaw to remain clenched and prayed that no one could hear the accelerated pounding of her heart as she let her gaze rest on the man next to Gabe.

No doubt about it—it was Daniel.

Same dark brown hair, same raw energy that couldn't be concealed by the expensively tailored suit. Those oh-so-familiar ice-blue eyes met hers full-on and she could read the anger in their depths. An anger she didn't—couldn't—blame him for. After the most magical night imaginable she'd sneaked away into the chilly Barcelona dawn without so much as a by your leave. Worse, she had lied shamelessly about her identity.

What to do? What to do now?

There was zilch she could do—except hope that he wouldn't expose her. Yet even as her head reeled with the sheer horror of the situation, and its potential for disaster, her body betrayed her with a frisson of memory that prickled her skin.

'Sorry to interrupt,' Gabe said, though Kaitlin noted there was not so much as a hint of apology in his tone. 'But I wanted to introduce you to someone. Kaitlin, this is Daniel Harrington. He has made a generous contribution to the manor and is also linked with the Caversham Foundation.'

Mind racing, Kaitlin forced her lips to turn up in a polite smile with a touch of appreciation. Her years of careful practice in front of a mirror to perfect a smile for any occasion was coming in handy. Even as her brain seethed with tumult it tried to come to terms with the scale of the disaster.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ she said, her voice even as she held out one perfectly manicured hand, impressed to see that her fingers didn’t so much as tremble. It was a shame the same couldn’t be said of her insides. Then he clasped her hand in his, in the briefest of handshakes, and a funny little thrill raced through her bloodstream.

No! No! No! There could be no thrills of any sort—that was a complete non-starter. It was imperative to focus, to work out a way to end this whole scenario before her life imploded. In public.

‘Likewise,’ Daniel said, his voice silk-smooth and deadly as nightshade. ‘I must admit I hoped to meet you today.’ A smile utterly devoid of mirth turned up his lips. ‘I’d like to discuss a project with you—I realise this is a big day for you, and you have lots of duties as maid of honour, but it will only take a few minutes.’

Kaitlin quelled the urge to cover her ears, close her eyes and hope that would equate to sudden invisibility. But that wasn’t an option. Somehow Daniel had worked out her identity and he now had the ammunition to embroil her in a scandal. Worse it would impact not just herself, but Frederick as well—and that wasn’t fair. True enough, technically Kaitlin had done nothing wrong—but her association with Frederick had begun near enough to that disastrous Barcelona night as would make no difference. To the press, at least.

This scenario was a nightmare. She had hoped—believed

—that she would never see Daniel again, and here he was, requesting a few minutes of her time.

Who was she kidding? His words had been posed as a request, but his eyes were glacial, his jaw was set, and she knew if she didn't acquiesce he'd have no hesitation in forcing the issue.

'Of course,' she murmured. 'I'd be interested to hear what you have to say.'

The words fell from her lips automatically—she didn't want anyone to suspect how rattled she was. Lady Kaitlin Derwent didn't do rattled, and now was not the time to start.

'Well, there's no time like the present. Would anyone mind if I whisk Kaitlin off?'

Kaitlin blinked. That was not what she had in mind—she'd wanted time to think, regroup.

Prince Frederick glanced at her. 'It is entirely up to Kaitlin whether it is convenient for her to speak with you now.'

Etta glanced from Daniel to Kaitlin and back again. 'I don't need you to do anything but enjoy yourself. That's what I'm hoping everyone will do.'

Daniel smiled. 'I promise I'll keep the business talk to a minimum.'

'Make sure you do,' Etta said with a light laugh. 'Now, we had better mingle.'

Gabe twined an arm round his bride's waist and they smiled at each other—smiles that could only be described as goofy—and Kaitlin experienced a small pang of envy, felt the sudden

ache of emptiness. Exacerbated as she glanced from Frederick's closed expression to Daniel's glacial one. Not so much as a hint of goofiness in the vicinity.

Frederick nodded. 'Make sure you're back in time for the waltz.'

With that he moved away, through the throng of guests, and within moments had been absorbed into a group.

For a second Kaitlin stood, her high-heeled sandals rooted to the marquee floor, frozen by the surreal impossibility of Daniel's presence. Fear dried her mouth. How had he found her? What was he going to do? Questions crowded and jostled in her brain, even as she kept her expression neutral. Yet alongside the anxiety that stretched her nerves there was...awareness.

Try as she might, she couldn't stop the memories from tumbling back. Sensations, taste, passion, laughter...the feel of his touch skimming her skin... The very thought made her shiver across the nine-month gap.

Rein it in, Kaitlin.

Because clearly Daniel was not walking that path of memory—his expression displayed a cold anger that was not a happy omen for the forthcoming discussion.

Come on, Kaitlin.

It might still be all right—if he'd wanted to create a scene he surely would have done so by now.

'How about we take this outside?' he suggested, his voice hard.

Kaitlin shook her head. 'No. I don't want anyone to get the

wrong idea about us.’

Lord knew she didn’t want anyone to get any idea about them at all—even a glimmer of the truth had the potential to destroy her future.

He raised an eyebrow. ‘Bit late to worry about that now, isn’t it?’

‘Shh! For goodness’ sake, could you please keep your voice down? We need to be discreet.’

Her head spun, though she took pride in the knowledge that not a single observer would notice her inner turmoil. All that was on show was the poised, collected Lady Kaitlin Derwent, chatting politely to a wedding guest. Unless, of course, anyone actually overheard the content of the conversation...

He shook his head. ‘Wrong. You need to be discreet. I couldn’t care less. So, if you want discretion I suggest we take this outside. There’s less chance we’ll be overheard or interrupted out there.’

Daniel had a point, and surely there would be some guests outside. The afternoon sun shone down, and what could be more natural than she should show a guest the famed Derwent Manor gardens?

‘OK. Fine.’

They walked towards the entrance of the marquee and somehow, from somewhere, Kaitlin summoned up conversation. ‘So you’re linked with the Caversham Foundation? That’s interesting.’

Daniel’s stride slowed as he stared at her, genuine incredulity

etched on the craggy contours of his face. ‘Are you for real? You want to make chit-chat?’

‘For the benefit of the people watching us—yes, I do.’

‘So your image matters that much to you?’

‘Yes.’ Her voice was flat. ‘Haven’t you heard? Image is everything.’

To her it truly was. The creation of Lady Kaitlin Derwent’s image had been her own personal version of therapy—the way she’d coped after the kidnap fourteen years before. It had been her way to block out the memories, the fear that lived with her day and night, the coil of panic that lashed round her without warning. Being Lady Kaitlin allowed her to live her life.

‘So, yes, seeing as we are supposed to be engaging in polite conversation, let’s do that.’

He gave one last head-shake of disbelief. ‘Sure. My association with the Caversham Foundation is actually the price your brother requested in return for a wedding invitation. On top of my donation to Derwent Manor—which was your father’s stipulation.’

Keep walking.

‘And you agreed to this just so you could talk to me?’

‘Yes. It’s a good cause, and an association with the Duke and Duchess of Fairfax and their son will be good publicity for my firm. Clients like things like that.’

‘Which firm do you work for?’

‘I’m CEO of Harrington Legal Services.’

Now her footsteps did falter. HLS was huge—a global law firm with offices in every major city in the world.

‘In Barcelona you told me you were a lawyer.’

‘I am a lawyer. And you aren’t in any position to accuse me of messing with the truth.’

Touché.

Kaitlin quickened her pace slightly as they exited the marquee and stepped into the late-afternoon sunshine that bathed the lush green landscaped lawns with dappled light. Other guests stood in small groups as Kaitlin led the way along the gravelled path, lined with lush green manicured hedges, towards a bench she judged to be secluded, but not so isolated as to give anyone reason to gossip.

Once seated, she turned towards him, keeping her smile in place for the benefit of onlookers. ‘So, why are you here, Daniel?’

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS A good question. Why was he here? Sitting in the splendour of Derwent Manor’s famed landscaped gardens. Nearby camellias provided vivid splashes of pink, and their bench overlooked the breathtaking glory of the rhododendron garden for which the Manor was famed.

But in truth the surroundings didn’t matter; right now all that mattered was the woman next to him on the wooden bench in the sunshine. The woman he’d known as ‘Lynette’. The woman whose true identity had turned out to be Lady Kaitlin Derwent.

Anger battled an unwanted stab of desire as he absorbed her

sheer beauty.

Titian hair of a near-indescribable shade—tints of auburn interwoven with shades of reddish-gold—cascaded in loose waves to meet creamy bare shoulders that had his fingers tingling. Her dark green eyes met his gaze in a mixture of defiance, vulnerability and hope.

‘Well?’ she repeated. ‘Why are you here?’

‘Because I wanted to check for myself whether Lady Kaitlin Derwent and “Lynette” were one and the same.’

‘How did you find out?’

‘I saw a recent picture of you and Prince Frederick.’

Glaring up at him from the glossy cover of a celebrity magazine, the image had caught his eye at an airport lounge just weeks ago. About to look away something elusive had nagged at him: the set of Lady Kaitlin’s head, the angle of her cheekbones...a willow-the-wisp of recognition.

‘And you recognised me from that?’

‘Not at first.’

At first he’d thought nothing of it. But some instinct had made him purchase his very first gossip rag and study the photograph further. One business flight later he’d known he must be losing the plot—big-time—but the conviction that Lady Kaitlin Derwent and his ‘Lynette’ were one and the same wouldn’t quit. The more he’d researched Lady Kaitlin the more sure he’d become, preposterous though the idea was, that he’d found ‘Lynette’.

‘Until today I wasn’t a hundred per cent sure.’

Her hands twisted together on her lap. Then, as if aware of the gesture, she loosed the grip. ‘You could just have called me. This is a disaster—now you’ve made contact with my family...we have an association.’ Horror etched her classical features. ‘What if we end up meeting again?’

‘Then so be it. I wanted to see you face to face—make sure beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are “Lynette”. Without calling first and giving you a chance to lie. Again.’

Forcing himself to lean back, Daniel kept his anger in check.

‘Plus, it’s hard to call someone who didn’t leave a number, didn’t even give their real name, and who vanished without so much as a goodbye.’

‘You knew it was one night only.’

A night of freedom.

‘Yes, but I didn’t know your “one night of freedom” was an aristocrat slumming it with the hoi-polloi.’ Anger at her deception, wrath at his own stupidity in falling for her show, fuelled his words. ‘Is that the new trend—to lose your vir—?’

Her poise broke and a laser of ire flashed in her eyes. ‘Stop right there. How dare you? That is not what it was. That night was—’

Breaking off, she pressed her lips together and for a moment vulnerability lit those emerald-green eyes and momentarily sideswiped his anger.

‘Was what?’

‘It doesn’t matter. I know it was shabby to leave like that, but I had no choice. In case you woke up and realised who I really was. Or someone might have recognised me...seen us together.’

Sheesh.

‘Would that have been so bad?’ Good thing his ego was in good shape.

‘Yes.’ The word was delivered with simplicity. ‘The scandal would have been too much. Especially...’

‘Especially because you were planning to marry a prince.’

‘No! I mean... I hadn’t decided what to do.’ She twisted her hands into the teal-green folds of her skirt and then, as if realising what she was doing, she smoothed the material and pulled her shoulders back. ‘I wasn’t dating Frederick at the time, but I knew there was a possibility that I would in the future. I was a free agent that night, Daniel, and I didn’t offer more than I could give. One night.’

‘But you lied. And you took what I gave under false pretences. I wouldn’t have spent the night with you in Barcelona if I’d known who you were and exactly what your gilded cage was.’

‘Why not?’ The question tumbled out and she pressed her lips together as if in regret.

‘Because you were as good as promised to another man and I don’t poach.’ The idea was anathema—he’d watched his mother’s repeated humiliation at his stepfather’s numerous infidelities.

Kaitlin leant forward, shook her head, her red-gold hair swinging as if in emphasis. ‘I was not promised to anyone.’

Frederick and I had no understanding at that point. It was simply an idea that my parents had put to me. He hadn't approached me—there had been no discussions.'

'But you knew.' His voice was implacable. 'All the time you were with me you knew that you would soon be dating someone else. You as good as said it.'

'One night of freedom before I step into a gilded cage.'

Her words in Barcelona had been poignant. Because he knew all too well the iron bars of a gilded cage.

He'd grown up in one—benefited from the gilding, the luxuries, the power, the money, the lifestyle. At what point had he suspected that all those advantages had been bought with money raised from illegal sources? When had he realised what his mother had done?

Guilt coated his insides. She'd done it for him—to give him all those advantages. His father had been dead, she had been destitute, and so his mother had stepped into a gilded cage, married into the mob, and taken two-year-old Daniel in with her.

Enough. That part of his life was over. Here and now he focused on Kaitlin, studied her cool, aloof expression, and felt curiosity as to her motivations surface. 'I don't get why you took such an enormous risk.'

Because every scrap of research he had done on Kaitlin Derwent had shown that risk wasn't in her personality. Never a hair out of place...always ready with a witty quip or the correct comment. Always serene, poised, calm and in control—not the

type of person to risk a scandal for a one-night stand. Yet that was exactly what she had done.

‘It doesn’t matter.’ Her tone had lost all colour, and a sudden image of ‘Lynette’ filled his mind—her vivacity, the way she’d laughed, spoken, enthused. It seemed almost impossible that Lynette and Kaitlin were one and the same.

Not his business. Kaitlin was right. It didn’t matter—he’d come here to satisfy his curiosity, confirm his near conviction. No more.

Kaitlin glanced around. ‘We’ve been out here too long; people will start to talk soon. I need to go. This is Gabe’s wedding—I don’t want to ruin it in any way.’ She closed her eyes for a second. ‘But we need to finish this conversation.’

They did? As far as he was concerned it was over bar the farewell. But Kaitlin clearly disagreed.

‘I’d appreciate a few more minutes of your time. Maybe tomorrow?’

‘Sure.’ Curiosity prompted his acquiescence. Along with the knowledge that it was never wise to refuse information. All good lawyers knew that information was power. The last thing he wanted was for this farce to come back and bite him in the future. If Lady Kaitlin Derwent believed there was an issue to discuss then he’d go along for the ride.

‘Breakfast. Tomorrow. Faircliffe Hotel. I’ll book a private room.’

‘Thank you.’ She gave a fatalistic lift of her shoulders. ‘I’ll be

there.’

* * *

The morning spring sunshine slanted through the windows of the hotel bedroom, reflecting off the mirror where Kaitlin surveyed her reflection. She put the final touches to her discreet layer of make-up—the mask that ensured Lady Kaitlin retained her image of cool perfection.

‘I wish you’d tell me what is going on,’ her sister said from where she sat on the bed.

Not surprisingly, given it was the closest hotel in the neighbourhood, Cora and her husband, Rafael, had stayed in the same hotel as Daniel the previous night. Kaitlin had figured it was better to tell Cora about the meeting rather than have her twin waylay her en route to breakfast. Now she was beginning to think she should just have kept quiet. Cora had insisted on seeing Kaitlin before the meeting, and her dark blue eyes reflected her usual intuitive discern.

Kaitlin met her sister’s gaze in the mirror. ‘Nothing is going on.’

‘Rubbish. I’m your twin, Kait. There are times when I just know, and this is one of them.’

It was true—there was a bond, despite how different she and Cora were. Years before, when the kidnap had occurred, her twin had been distraught, refusing to believe her parents’ assertion that Kaitlin was staying with friends.

There were times when Kaitlin wished she had rebelled

against her parents' dictate and confided in Cora. But she hadn't—she'd convinced herself that if she suppressed the memories, locked them away, they would become a dream, lose the sharp edges of reality. So she'd done what her parents had instructed her to do—and never told a soul what had happened.

'What's done is done, Kaitlin. The important thing now is to forget it ever happened. And never, ever disobey us again.' The Duchess's stern voice had hardened further. 'You understand that no one must ever know. It shows us as weak and, worse, those kidnappers have photos of you that cannot be made public. You will not disgrace the Derwent name.'

'Kait?' Cora's voice was edged with concern, and Kaitlin focused on her twin. 'Is it something to do with the Prince? Because I've wanted to talk to you about Frederick for a long time and...'

Kaitlin had used guile and every conversational trick in the library to avoid the subject. 'I don't need to discuss Fredrick.'

'Well, I do. All I want to say is that before I met Rafael I would have done anything to win Mum and Dad's approval. Because I thought that was the way to win their love.'

'I—'

Cora raised a hand. 'Let me finish. I need to say this. Don't marry him if you don't love him. Love has transformed my life and I'd like you to have an opportunity to feel the way I feel.'

And there was the crux of the matter. Lady Kaitlin didn't do feelings—couldn't feel, didn't want to experience the tsunami of

emotions that might be unleashed if she allowed feelings in.

‘Cora, I am truly happy for you, and your happiness, but everyone experiences happiness in a different way. My road is different from yours.’ Ignoring the small sigh from her sister, she glanced at her watch. ‘Now, I’ve got to go.’

Suspicion narrowed Cora’s blue eyes. ‘That’s another thing. I’m getting a vibe about Daniel Harrington as well. Remind me why you’re meeting him.’

‘I told you. He wants to discuss a project—and, given the amount he donated to the Derwent Manor restoration fund, I think it’s polite to at least see what he has to say. And he’s linked to the Caversham Foundation.’

That should reassure Cora, bearing in mind her friendship with Ethan and Ruby Caversham.

Kaitlin rose from the dressing table in one graceful move and cast a last look in the mirror, taking comfort in the fact that outwardly no one except her pesky twin would be able to tell her inner self was in turmoil. The dove-grey light wool coat dress was perfect for the occasion. It spoke of an aloof elegance with businesslike overtones that would assure any nosey reporter that this breakfast had no innuendo attached. The intricate hand-stitched ribbon embroidered around the neck and falling across the front gave it the Kaitlin Derwent ‘edge’, and she gave a small satisfied nod.

‘I’ll see you later, Cora. And quit worrying.’

As Kaitlin exited the room and made her way down the

carpeted grand staircase of the country hotel her heart pounded her ribcage. It was only the years of practice that kept her upright. Her gaze darted around the lobby in an automatic check for danger even as she focused on keeping her gait unhurried.

She managed a smile for Sophia, the member of staff who manned the small desk that led to the breakfast room. ‘I have a meeting with Daniel Harrington.’

The girl nodded with enthusiasm. ‘Mr Harrington has booked for a private room. Come through here.’

‘Thank you.’ She followed the girl into a small room and braced herself as Daniel rose from the table to greet her.

‘Lady Kaitlin.’

To her relief his voice was formal, but as she met his gaze she saw something flash in his eyes and her own body instinctively responded. Knowing her voice would suffer from lack of breath, she nodded in acknowledgement.

‘Can I get you anything?’ Sophia asked,

‘We’re good, thanks.’

There was silence when the young woman had left.

Get it together, Kaitlin.

If only this man didn’t affect her so much. Her expert eye recognised the quality of the understated light blue silk cotton shirt and suit trousers. But it wasn’t the expensive clothes—it was the raw energy they contained, the solid, muscular bulk of his body, the strength of his craggy features, the square determination of his jaw and the set of his lips.

Lips that had given her such aching pleasure she nearly shivered with the memory.

Get it together now, Kaitlin.

He gestured to the side table pushed against the wall of the room. ‘Help yourself to food.’

Kaitlin contemplated refusing, unsure whether she could physically eat, given the fact her tummy was busy tying itself up in a lanyard of knots. But this was supposedly a business breakfast, and therefore she’d do better to play along. The last thing she wanted was for the hotel staff to notice anything amiss.

Two minutes later she seated herself at the circular table, with a plate holding a croissant, a dab of butter and a small pot of strawberry jam in front of her. Somehow she had to focus—she was here to negotiate herself out of this mess. Channelling every single iota of her inner poise, she managed a cool smile. Whatever it cost her she would not show Daniel even a particle of her discomfort.

‘So, Kaitlin. You requested this meeting. Why?’

‘I need to know what you plan to do.’

For a fleeting second confusion flashed across his face, and then a small mirthless smile tipped his lips up. ‘You’re worried I’ll go public with the whole Barcelona story?’

‘Yes.’

In truth, the idea of the press getting hold of this made her quake. Her parents would... Her imagination couldn’t even begin to conjure up the Duke’s and Duchess’s reactions. But it was more

than that...

‘I realise you have no obligation not to,’ she continued quietly, ‘but it wouldn’t just impact me. The scandal would affect Prince Frederick as well.’

The House of Lycander had been besmirched by more than its fair share of disgrace and rocked by tragedy, and the idea that she might add to Frederick’s troubles filled her with horror.

‘I don’t want my stupidity to discredit Frederick or make him look a fool in the eyes of the media.’

‘Because you love him?’

The question was posed as though the answer mattered and it caused her vocal chords to tighten.

‘Or because it would make your relationship and marriage to him problematical?’

Perhaps she should lie—claim that she did love Frederick, throw herself on Daniel’s mercy. Ha! Instinct informed her that that wouldn’t work, because she sensed he didn’t have any. But, more than that, she didn’t want to lie—she’d lied enough.

‘That’s none of your business. I will not discuss Prince Frederick with you. That’s not fair to him.’

‘You didn’t worry about fairness in Barcelona.’

‘I told you—I hadn’t met him then. Or at least I hadn’t started to date him.’

‘But you knew you were going to.’

Daniel’s voice was soft, but the edge could have cut a diamond. Easy to imagine him in a courtroom now.

‘All the time you were with me you knew that you would soon be dating someone else.’

The contempt in his voice made her feel exposed and she leant forward, needing him to understand even as she knew she shouldn’t care about his opinion.

‘Yes.’ There could be no denial there, but she’d be damned if she apologised either. ‘But I didn’t plan that night. I didn’t go to Barcelona to have a one-night stand.’

‘Why did you go?’

‘I had a moment of panic.’

‘No. A moment of panic is when you have a few drinks, breathe into a paper bag or eat your bodyweight in chocolate. It’s not when you assume a fake identity and sleep with a stranger.’

‘OK. So I had a spectacular moment of panic.’

‘Because of Prince Frederick? That seems extreme. No one was going to march you to the altar on the spot.’

‘I know that.’

How to explain panic to this man? A man who clearly knew who he was and what he wanted from life. To Kaitlin, panic was a mortal enemy—kept on a leash, tamed by her determination not to let it conquer her. Time had taught her the best way to achieve dominance was control—if she micromanaged every second of her life, created a secure zone, a persona that was in command, that way she won.

‘I just wanted some space to process the future...some time out. The plan was to stay in my hotel room and order room

service. Instead...’ She tipped a palm up and let out a sigh.

Instead she’d deviated from the script for the first time in a decade, stepped out of her comfort zone and into disaster.

‘Instead you ended up with me. It doesn’t make sense. As far as I can tell, from the publicity that surrounds you, you are the personification of discretion. You’ve never so much as been caught tipsy, and any relationships you have had haven’t caused even a breath of scandal. As for you and Prince Frederick—you haven’t even been seen holding hands in public...’

Impossible to explain that there was no spark between her and Prince Frederick—had never been a spark with any man until Daniel. Dating Frederick was calm, correct and dutiful. In truth that had surprised her as much as it had relieved her. Prince Frederick of Lycander had once been a noted playboy—had ‘dated’, for want of a better euphemism, plenty of women, and been photographed on yachts and in night clubs. But clearly that wasn’t the way he treated a possible wife. Formal duty characterised their relationship, and that suited her fine.

‘I agree it didn’t make sense. I acted out of character and it was a mistake.’ Of enormous proportions.

The sparks between her and Daniel had set off an inferno that could affect the rest of her life.

‘So now you’ve decided to enter the gilded cage? That’s the gilded cage you were talking about in Barcelona, isn’t it?’

The words slammed into her—seemed to echo across the months.

‘The Lycander marriage.’

Kaitlin summoned as much aristocratic hauteur as was possible. ‘My marriage is my business and I know what I’m doing.’

Amazing she could say that with a straight face. No! She did know what she was doing; it was just this man, this horrible scenario, that was messing with her head.

‘There is nothing wrong with a gilded cage.’

‘Dammit. There is everything wrong with a gilded cage.’

The force in his voice made her jump, caused her heart to pound.

‘It’s a prison of the worst kind.’

Bleakness flashed across his blue eyes and for a mad second she wanted to reach out and offer comfort. Ridiculous. She had to focus on what was important here.

‘You are entitled to your opinion, but I disagree.’

His fingers drummed the snowy white linen of the tablecloth and his gaze seemed to bore into her soul. ‘That’s not what you thought nine months ago.’

‘Yes, it is. I had a moment of insanity that night, but however mad I was I always knew what my future held.’

Daniel shook his head and she wondered why this mattered so much to him. She felt an urge to ask—a wish that this conversation didn’t have to be so antagonistic. A sudden memory of the conversations they’d shared that Barcelona night clouded her mind: the ease, the banter, the sharing of opinions. Compared

with the sophisticated, carefully constructed exchange of her talk with Frederick. Enough. Bad enough that her body was on alert—heaven help her if her mind joined the party.

‘And I should never have jeopardised it with a meaningless one-night stand.’

His eyebrows rose. ‘Meaningless?’ he repeated softly.

‘Meaningless on any real level.’ It was impossible to infuse her words with more than a mocking semblance of truth—not when she knew that their night together had been little short of a miracle for her.

‘You sure about that?’

His voice deepened and Kaitlin caught her breath on the smallest of gasps. She dropped her gaze from the look in his eye. The ice-blue had darkened to cobalt and she knew what she would see in their depths—the memory of the levels, the sheer heights of the passion they had scaled. Heat crept up her cheekbones and her gaze lingered on his hands, on their strength, their capability, and an image flashed into her brain. The touch of his fingers as they’d caressed her skin...her own fingers trailing down the skin of his bare back...the ripple of muscle, the taste of...

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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