

EMMA DARCY

The Secret Baby
Revenge



Mills & Boon Modern

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Darcy E.

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Joaquin Luis Sola is true to his Argentinean heritage – proud and passionate. He has rebuilt his family's fortunes from nothing. Although beautiful Nicole Ashton left him five years ago, Quin still yearns to possess her. Now there is an opportunity to settle this old score. Nicole is offering twenty-six nights of lovemaking, if he will pay her debts. Quin is already wealthy through smart investments, and this proposition promises a most satisfying return...

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The Secret Baby Revenge

Emma Darcy



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CHAPTER ONE

OPENING night at Sydney's new Havana Club and Joaquin Luis Sola stood at the extremely busy bar, waiting for the drinks he'd ordered and idly watching the talent on the dance floor swirl by. His friend, legal advisor, and highly eligible man about town, Tony Fisher, had promised all the beautiful people would be here, to see and be seen in the hotspot of the moment, and Quin could undoubtedly pick himself a partner for more than dancing.

Much waggling of eyebrows to underline the point, but for Quin, joining Tony's party was more an escape from a sense of restless boredom than a quest for casual sex. Having recently ended a less than satisfying relationship, Quin wasn't sure he wanted to complicate his life with another woman just yet. A one-night stand didn't appeal, either. He wasn't actually watching for targets of possible interest, just watching...

A colourful kaleidoscope of couples were swinging around the dance floor, doing the salsa. Latin American dancing was big on the social scene right now due to a number of popular television shows featuring competitions. The Havana Club was cleverly capitalising on this latest trend.

"Great way of meeting people," Tony had enthused. "Everyone putting themselves on display, strutting their stuff."

They were certainly doing that, Quin thought, somewhat bemused by the exuberant and very public plunge into fun and fantasy. Most of the people here had wildly embraced Latin dance fashion; the guys in fitted shirts with big cuffs, bootleg pants, much attention paid to their hairdos; the women very glamorous in slinky sheaths with side splits, skintight black pants with halter midriff tops, frilled skirts and strappy stilettos.

Being in this club was like being in an exotic and erotic foreign country. Quin could see its appeal—a quick fix escape from the pressures of today's fast and frantic society—a place where people could let their hair down, revel in uninhibited dress-ups, enjoy the primitive pleasure of moving to music, not to mention the sexual excitement...with the right partner.

A flashy couple caught his eye. The guy was all in white, his long black hair slicked back into a ponytail—very dramatic with his dark olive skin and hard featured handsome face. The woman partnering him was wearing a virtually backless black dress, its figure-hugging skirt ending in a ruffle edged in white. She also had long black hair, but it was a wild loose mass of curls falling to below her shoulder-blades, reminding Quin instantly of Nicole Ashton—not a memory he cared to dwell on.

"Your drinks, sir?"

Quin paid the bartender, cynically reflecting that the price of cocktails in this club belonged to the fantasy realm, too, aimed at a clientele who never counted the cost. Strange how it didn't matter how wealthy he had become, the concept of value for money still counted in his mind. Not that it stopped him from doing or buying whatever he wanted. It was simply impossible to forget the lessons of poverty.

With the drinks firmly clutched in his hands, Quin turned to weave his way around the crowded dance floor to the tables Tony had claimed for his party, and found the woman with Nicole's hair twirling right in front of him.

She had a great body; lush breasts straining against a halter-necked bodice edged in white. The skirt was split up to mid thigh, the ruffle following the opening up, diminishing to a white tie-belt around a hand-span waist. Her hips were female poetry and her long shapely legs flashed with sexy elegance.

The guy in white caught her and dipped her over his knee, her lovely lithe body arched, toes in their black stilettos pointed, head thrown back, hair sweeping the floor, stunning green eyes sparkling with pleasure, her whole beautiful face vividly lit by a laughing smile—a face that delivered such a jolt to Quin, the drinks he was carrying sloshed over the rims of the glasses.

It was Nicole!

The thump to his heart and the kick to his gut were instantaneous. Shock, he tried to reason, after he'd pulled himself back from shooting a blistering bolt of hatred at the guy in white and halted the rampant urge to tear Nicole away from him.

Quite simply hadn't expected to run into her like this, hadn't expected their paths ever to cross again. She'd gone overseas after breaking up with him, taking herself completely out of his reach, yet here she was in this Sussex Street club, right under his nose. And attached to another guy.

Which also stood to reason, Quin savagely told himself. Why wouldn't she move on to other men? He'd moved on to other women, though never feeling the same intensity Nicole had drawn from him. In fact, he hadn't wanted to feel any deep emotional connection with anyone after she had walked out of his life. It was easier to function on the fast-moving business level without that kind of distraction.

And it was totally absurd to get in a twist over Nicole now. What was gone was gone. He wrenched his gaze away from the dance floor and guarded the drinks in his hands as he made his way back to those in Tony's party who were sitting out this number. He sat down next to Amber Piramo who'd requested the liquid refreshment, expecting him to pay and deliver, expecting her every whim to be indulged because she was the beautiful socialite daughter of old-wealth parents.

"Oh, thank you, my darling Quin," she gushed. "I am totally, totally dehydrated."

He wasn't her darling, and despite her obvious physical attractions, the overly flirtatious manner grated on him. He had to force a smile as he responded, "Sorry I was so long at the bar."

"No problem." She patted his thigh as she added, "It's been fun just watching the other dancers."

His leg muscles tensed, instinctively repelling the touch. His jaw clenched, too. The only touch he wanted...but Nicole was with someone else now.

Amber withdrew the inviting hand and wrapped it around her glass. She drank too much, too fast, revealing a reckless disregard for the alcoholic content of the cocktail. Quin hoped she wasn't working up some courage to be more direct in coming onto him. While it might be an old-fashioned attitude these days, he still felt it was a man's prerogative to be the hunter.

His gaze instinctively targeted Nicole as the music stopped. Her ponytailed partner swept her to a table where another guy had just left a woman with wildly purple hair—definitely not a shrinking violet, wearing a black midriff top and skintight hot-pink pants. Intriguingly the three of them cosied up together, chatting and laughing—two women, one man between them, all very friendly.

Quin's view of them was blocked by Tony, comically miming wobbly legs and wiping his brow as he escorted his latest amour, Nina Salter-Smythe off the dance floor. "I need a fast and long injection of cold beer," he declared, leaving Nina at the table while he headed for the bar. She suggested a visit to the powder room to Amber and the two women went off together, leaving Quin free to watch Nicole without interruption.

He tried reminding himself this was a woman who had rejected him. He shouldn't be giving her a second thought, let alone a second look. It was an exercise in futility, in frustration.

Yet all his aggressive instincts were on fire. She'd been his woman and he wanted another chance with her. If she wasn't actually married to the Latin lover who was flashing his eyes at both women indiscriminately, he had room to move.

And move he would.

His whole body was screaming at him to do it, mount an attack, get Nicole back into his life.

The moment Tony returned to the table, ready to play jovial host to the rest of his party friends, Quin was on his feet to intercept him before he sat down. "Spotted someone I want to meet," he explained. "Excuse me, won't you?"

"Wait a sec," came the quick protest. "How goes it with Amber? She's been eyeing you over."

"Non-event," Quin almost snapped, raising his hand to ward off any further comment as he swung to make a beeline for the woman who was the only event in his mind tonight.

CHAPTER TWO

NICOLE was having fun. She was glad she'd let Jade and Jules talk her into accompanying them here tonight. They had argued she should be armed with a firsthand report of the new Havana Club to pass onto her pupils, unaware that the dance school she was managing for her mother was in such dire debt that Nicole couldn't see a way out of it. She had accepted their invitation in a desperate need to push her worries aside for a while, to simply enjoy the zany company of her friends and not think about facing tomorrow until it came.

"Handsome hunk zeroing in on you, Nic." Jade rolled her big brown eyes expressively. "To your left. Nine o'clock."

Nicole laughed. "Score out of ten?"

"Ten plus."

She shook her head disbelievingly. Ever since Jade had returned from her extensive work experience with designers in Europe to set up business in Sydney, she had been trying to fix Nicole up with some guy, preaching one should keep involved with everything life had to offer, seeing Nicole's single status as unhealthy, even stunting her growth as a woman.

Jules leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Got to say Jade's spot-on. Mega macho bearing down on you. A star player."

Nicole winced at that phrase. Jules wouldn't know it—not his field—but it was the phrase used in banking circles to describe the top guns on the trading floor, and she'd once been intimately attached to a star player. Attached and burnt.

"Nicole..."

That voice...a convulsive little shiver instantly ran down her spine. Her skin went cold. Her stomach contracted as her head jerked around, reacting to the need to deny the recognition blasting her mind and thumping into her heart. Except the recognition was not a mad mistake.

"Quin..." His name fell from her lips before she could catch it back, and the awful part was the lingering sound of it seemed to carry a longing that was intensely embarrassing. She should have been expressing surprise.

It was certainly that.

He smiled, hitting her with the same megawatt attraction that had been her downfall seven years ago, his bullet grey eyes cutting straight through all lines of defence. The only thing that had changed about him were the silver threads shining through his thick thatch of black hair, giving a more mature authority to his strikingly handsome face—a face which had never lacked authority with its sharply chiselled features adding male strength and character to it. His tall, powerful physique shouted strength, as well, not to mention compelling sex appeal.

"Good to see you again, Nicole," he rolled out, the smooth deep timbre of his voice raising goose-bumps.

"What are you doing here?" The words burst abruptly from a surge of resentment at the way he could still affect her. He had dominated her life for two years—two years that had ultimately taught her she was nothing more than a sexual convenience to him.

His smile wasn't even slightly shaken. "I enjoy dancing...remember?"

She didn't want to remember anything. Though he had been a great dancer the few times it actually suited him to partner her at parties.

"Hi! I'm Jade Zilic." Typical Jade, too fascinated to wait for an introduction, hand thrust out in ready friendship. "And you are?"

"Joaquin Sola. Mostly called Quin." He took her hand, nodding a polite acknowledgment, looking enquiringly at Jules.

"My partner, Jules," Jade obliged, leaving Nicole exposed as partnerless tonight.

Jules thrust out his hand and it was promptly taken and shaken with vigour. “Pleased to meet you both,” Quin said, warm pleasure positively emanating from him.

Field clear, Nicole bitterly interpreted, though second thoughts zipped into her mind. Quin could not be here womanless. A man like him didn’t have to go anywhere alone and he wouldn’t to a club. No doubt he had some banking clique with him, having a night on the town.

“I have one question for you,” Jade shot at him, her eyes dancing wicked mischief.

“Yes?” he invited.

“Are you wearing Nick’s Knickers?”

The charming smile definitely faltered at that point, his gaze swinging to Nicole, furrowed brow indicating fast reassessment of the situation. Did the somewhat bawdy question relate to knowledge of his being Nicole’s former lover? Was he being cast as a bunny here? Someone to make fun of?

Nicole quite enjoyed seeing the brilliant Joaquin Sola lost for a moment. It made her feel slightly less vulnerable. Though when his thick black eyelashes lowered and a steamy look smoked through them at her, suggesting his thoughts had fastened on her knickers, she rushed out an explanation of the question.

“It’s a new range of male underwear, designed and promoted by my friends here.”

A deeper frown as his gaze sliced back to her friends. “Business partners?”

“Uh-huh. With very hot merchandise,” Jules advised with a wide grin.

“Guaranteed to bring out the devil in a man,” Jade backed up, then heaved a dramatic sigh of woe. “The advertising campaign can’t be working as effectively as it should if Quin hasn’t even caught onto the brand name.”

“Don’t judge by his ignorance,” Nicole dryly commented. “Quin doesn’t have the time nor the inclination to watch commercial television.”

“Really?” Jade eyed him in arch disbelief, then trilled one of her coquettish laughs. “Well, can’t say you look like a couch potato. More like an action man. Which is why you should be buying Nick’s Knickers. A great turn-on, believe me. Jules tries them out on me to measure response.”

“He...models them...for your approval?” Quin asked, pouncing on the chance to draw more information.

“Hey! I don’t let him stop at modelling.” Jade smooched up to her totally committed partner in every sense. “Do I, honey-bun?” she purred.

“Stokes the fire every time,” Jules said with happy satisfaction.

It gave Quin satisfaction, too, having no doubt now that business was mixed with pleasure with this duo, confirming Nicole’s availability for his own interest. “Nothing like personal endorsement,” he said appreciatively. “Next time I’m shopping for underwear, I’ll look for your range.”

“No wife to choose it for you, Quin?” Nicole slid in coolly, trying to ward off the heat she knew he was going to turn on her.

“No. No wife,” he quickly asserted.

“Perhaps I should have said partner,” she drawled. “As I recall, you were commitment-shy.”

“On the contrary, I’d say I had a history of excessive commitment.” He effected an ironic grimace. “Unfortunately, not always choosing the right priority at the right time, much to my regret. I plan on correcting that error in judgment.”

“Lucky for the woman you’re with now,” Nicole rolled back at him, burning over the smooth reference to regrets. Quin was a master at pressing the right buttons to get what he wanted and from the amount of forceful energy being directed at her, she had no doubt he was hunting her head for a new round of pillow-talk in the very near future.

He shrugged. “I’m not with any particular woman.”

“You mean no one of any importance,” she mocked, knowing the only people of importance to Joaquin Sola were those who served his ambition.

“Every person has value,” he quickly slung at her, the clever grey eyes giving her a flatteringly high evaluation on the desirability scale.

“You’re right,” she agreed silkily, her own eyes sizzling with challenge as she added, “but to some people, money counts for a lot more than anyone’s value.”

Her eyes were locked onto his, watching his sharp intelligence go to work on the conflicts that had ruptured their relationship five years ago.

“Let’s not pretend money doesn’t count, Nicole. It adds a value to everyone. Like it or not, it’s the way the world works,” he asserted sardonically.

Too true. And the bottom was going to fall out of her world for the lack of it. A surge of hatred for all the moneymakers who cared for nothing else poured acid into her voice.

“How are you measuring your worth these days, Quin?” she mocked, goaded into striking directly at him. “Have you reached your target yet? How many million were you aiming for? Or was there no fixed number in your mind, just a cumulative amount that could never be enough?”

He cocked his head, weighing the load of bitterness he’d probably heard in her words. “What would you consider enough, Nicole?” he asked softly. “What would meet your needs?”

For a moment she was seduced by the thought that Quin might now have deep enough pockets to actually come to the rescue. But that would involve him in her life, and if she opened one door to him...no, she couldn’t go there. Far more would be at stake than the financial ruin she and her mother were facing. Some wreckages one could recover from. Others lasted a lifetime.

She looked at him with arch scepticism and said, “My needs were never part of your equation.”

“I’d like to make them so.”

“Since when? Two minutes ago? The moment you decided to break in on my night out?”

“If the intention is sincere, the timing shouldn’t be relevant.”

She shook her head at this arrogant belief that her past experience with him and the years between then and now could simply be dismissed. “It’s a bit late to be showing interest in me, Quin, and quite frankly, I have none in you,” she stated bluntly.

“It shouldn’t ever be too late to make some amends on past mistakes,” he argued.

“Raking over dead ashes is hardly profitable,” she mocked.

“Amazing how often a live ember is found.”

He was just as aware as she was that the chemistry between them was still active. It had led her down a destructive path once and Nicole was determined it would not take her there again. “A spark of fool’s gold, Quin,” she strongly asserted.

“Not if it can be fanned into a flame. It’s a cold life without fire, Nicole.”

“I’m sure there are many warm hearths that would welcome you.”

“One burnt more brightly than any other. I’d like to find my way back to it.”

“Unfortunately I can’t provide you with a magic door. You’ll have to look elsewhere.” She waved her hand in conclusive farewell. “Hasta la vista.”

He nodded an acknowledgment of her dismissal, but there was no acceptance of defeat in his eyes as he answered, “Until we meet again.” A whimsical little smile was directed at Jade and Jules. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“And fascinating to make yours,” Jade instantly replied, goggle-eyed over the encounter.

“Try Nick’s Knickers,” Jules advised. “Magic door every time.”

Quin laughed, saluting them both as he moved off, no doubt warming himself with the satisfaction of knowing he’d made a winning impression on her friends.

Nicole gritted her teeth. One favourable comment about him from either Jade or Jules and she’d explode. The duel of words with Quin had left her pumped up—typical of any exchange between them. He’d got to her. He always had, putting an electric charge under her skin. No other man had ever come close to affecting her as Quin did, but that didn’t mean he was good for her. No way! And something savage in her wanted him to taste defeat—taste it, know it, hate it as much as she had.

Both Jade and Jules were looking at her as though they were seeing an entirely different woman to the Nicole they were familiar with, eyes avid with curiosity but mouths firmly buttoned until she opened up. Which she was not about to do. The door was shut on Joaquin Luis Sola.

“There’s no going back,” she stated flatly. “I don’t live at that address anymore.”

“The one you shared with him?” Jade quickly speculated.

“It wasn’t a place of sharing. It was a place of possession. Always on his terms.”

“Bad place,” Jules muttered sympathetically.

Nicole nodded. “I live in a different space now.”

“Maybe you’ve made your current space too tight,” Jade posed seriously. “What if he no longer lives at that address, either? Time and timing—” she wriggled her fingers “—very tricky things. Shifting sands, different circumstances, revolving doors...how long ago was it when you and Quin were an item?”

Jade had not been in Australia then, but if Nicole pinpointed the time it would be like handing her friend a bone she would gnaw at with intolerable persistence. Jade was far too adept at putting two and two together.

“Doesn’t matter,” she said, shrugging as she stood up from the table. “Distance has not made the heart grow fonder so just let this one go. Okay? I’m off to the powder room.”

“Seems a terrible waste,” she heard Jade mutter in a disgruntled tone.

Nicole made good her escape, hoping the subject of Quin would not be revived when she returned. Even so, the fun had gone out of the evening. Just knowing he was here made her feel tense, her nerves prickling with the sense of a dangerous threat to the life she’d made without him.

She wished she could just walk away right now, but leaving the club would signal a vulnerability she didn’t want to reveal, not to Jade and Jules, and certainly not to Quin Sola. If he was watching, if he came after her...no, she had to act as though she was totally impervious to his presence.

The powder room provided a safe refuge though she could only take a brief respite there if she was not to give the impression of hiding. The place was crowded—a queue for toilet cubicles and a crush of women along the vanity bench; washing hands, repairing make-up, restoring hairstyles. Nicole joined the queue and tried to block memories of Quin from crawling through her mind by eavesdropping on others’ conversations. Ironically, not even here was she free of him.

“So how goes it with Quin Sola?”

The question came loud and clear through the babble of general chat, drawing Nicole’s startled gaze to a pretty brunette in red who was looking archly at a tall beautiful blonde, definitely out of the same mould as Paris Hilton, dressed in a second skin blue mini-dress and practising a sexy pout in the mirror.

“Oh, I don’t know that he’s worth having,” she drawled.

“Not worth having! The hottest trader in town? Everyone with any money is using his financial services company. The guy has made billions. And he’s an eye-candy hunk, as well.”

His company...billions...not the star player for an international bank anymore, Nicole realised. Somewhere along the past five years Quin must have moved to being his own man, no doubt accumulating far more personal wealth by working on his terms.

“Wow! Point me in his direction,” someone eagerly requested, triggering a cheerful chorus of “Me, too,” from other chance listeners.

The outburst was ignored.

“I really don’t need his money, Nina, and going to bed with a cold fish does not appeal,” the blonde said in a bored tone.

The brunette in red grinned. “You mean you made a move on him and he didn’t bite.”

Mistake, Nicole thought sardonically. Quin made the moves. He was programmed that way. The blonde shrugged as though she didn’t care, although her ego had to be suffering some damage.

She was wrong about Quin's coldness in bed but his decision-making was icily absolute, no melting around the edges when his mind was made up.

Until we meet again...

A convulsive shiver ran down Nicole's spine as the thought struck her that Quin might have been cold to the blonde because he'd already fixed his sights on herself. What if he didn't accept the rejection she'd just handed out? Five years ago she had fled to Europe to break all connection with him, but she couldn't do that now. She could only hope he would change his mind about pursuing another meeting, leave her alone.

The woman behind her nudged her towards the most recently vacated toilet cubicle. Nicole hadn't even realised she now headed the queue. Nor had she noticed the two women who'd been talking about Quin make their exit from the powder room but they were gone. She hurried forward and closed herself into the small private space, wishing she could close out all the worries whirling around her mind.

From what she'd heard, Quin could easily afford to lend her the money needed to keep the dance school afloat. He might even do it if he got what he wanted from her. If it was only sex...

Nicole shocked herself with the treacherous desire that had prompted that thought. It was so stupid to want Quin for anything. He'd stripped her of self-esteem once. To even dally with an idea that would give him the power to do it again, was just plain crazy.

But she would be using him this time...using him to meet her needs. A vengeful streak in her whispered this was a justifiable course. After all, Quin put a money value on everything. Why shouldn't she?

A controlled situation could be set up—no intrusion on her real life. She wouldn't be hurt by confusing sex with love again. Not with Quin. In fact, there was a lot of savage appeal in turning the tables on him, only giving what she was prepared to give...on her terms!

The big question was...how much did Quin want her?

CHAPTER THREE

QUIN'S mind and body were firing on all cylinders, energised by the excitement of a challenging chase. He wasn't about to let Nicole escape him this time. However many obstacles she put in his path, he was determined on getting past them, breaking down her resistance and making her his woman again.

What he needed now was some information—where she was working, how her daily schedule ran. It would be easy enough then to set up another chance meeting so he could reinforce the mutual attraction she was trying to deny, work on it, build the sparks into a flame that would burn up her opposition to any future together.

He caught sight of Tony watching him make his way back to the party. Quin had learnt in his four years of professional and personal association with him, very little escaped Tony Fisher's notice. Whether it was taking care of legal matters or his keen observation of people, the man was invariably on the ball. He was short and rather stocky, but big with personality, aided by an infectious smile, wickedly merry brown eyes and a wild mop of chestnut curls framing his good-humoured face.

Having sidled around his boisterous guests, he caught Quin just before he joined them. "Trust you to pick out the expert in this crowd," he remarked, nodding in Nicole's direction.

For once, Quin wasn't tuned to Tony's wavelength. "Expert?" he queried.

"The dancing teacher," Tony supplied, raising his eyebrows in arch surprise. "You're slipping if you didn't find that much out about her."

Quin frowned. Tony wasn't making sense. Nicole had been in banking before going overseas. Armed with a top level business degree, she'd worked her way up to the key division of sales, making the most of big investors' money. One of the great things about their relationship had been her understanding of his work on the trading floor.

Though she could certainly dance like a professional—a natural at Latin American. Even so, Tony must have mistaken her for someone else. A woman with Nicole's brain for clever commerce had to be earning big bucks somewhere in the workplace and that would not be in a school for dancing.

"I think you've got it wrong here, Tony," he mocked his friend who prided himself on getting everything right.

One eyebrow lowered. The other was cocked higher. "Were you or were you not chatting up Nicole Ashton?"

Her name sent a shock wave up Quin's spine. Alert signals shot along his nervous system. He eyed his friend very sharply, seeking urgent entry into his mind. "What do you know about her?"

Tony's mouth formed a curious little smile. "Did she give you the flick?"

Quin tensed as he realised there was definitely some personal previous acquaintance here and he didn't like it. Tony would be unaware of his own past relationship with Nicole. It was before his time, so the flick question couldn't relate to that. Which meant it had to come from Tony's own experience with her.

"You have a good reason for asking that?" he said coldly, hating the thought of his friend having intimate knowledge of Nicole.

"Oh, just that I failed to get anywhere with her beyond the dancing lessons I paid for," he answered with a shrug. "That doesn't happen very often. I might not have the pulling power of your physical assets, but when I set out to charm a woman, I usually win her."

Quin knew that was true, which was why his gut had suddenly been in knots. "But you had no luck with Nicole Ashton," he pressed.

"Not one flirtatious spark from her," came the reassuring reply. "Always pleasant but her focus was fixed on feeling the dance, not feeling anything else. Not with me, anyway."

Relief coursed through Quin. His mind lifted out of a storm of black possessiveness and honed in on getting information. “When was this, Tony?”

“Two years ago. You know me, Quin. I hate not being ahead of the game, and Latin American dancing was becoming popular. I took a month of lessons from her to get all the moves under my belt.”

“At a dancing school.”

“Yes.”

“Evening lessons?” He couldn’t believe it was Nicole’s day job.

Tony nodded. “Three times a week. Personal tuition, not a class. And all I ever found out about her was she helped run the school for her mother who owned it. Oh, and she’d won a lot of dancing competitions when she was a kid. Had photos and trophies on show to prove it. Like I said...an expert.”

She’d never told him this. But then, he’d never told her about his childhood, either. He’d wanted her to accept him as he was at the time—no probing into the past—and having cut off the subject of family several times, insisting that their backgrounds were totally irrelevant to how they felt together, Nicole had given up on trying to change his attitude.

“Where is this school?” he asked, wondering if Nicole had actually gone into business with her mother.

“Burwood.”

The suburb was reasonably close to the inner city where he lived and worked but far enough away for their paths to stay apart, given that Burwood was where she lived, as well as worked.

“So you didn’t even get that far with her,” Tony observed.

“I was just touching base, Tony, feeling for an opening.”

“Any crack of encouragement?”

“None. But that was only the initial foray.”

“From which you retreated in good order so you could take the fight to her again,” Tony dryly deduced.

Quin smiled at his shrewd reading of the situation. “I do not accept that all is lost.”

“Well, good luck, my friend. Nicole Ashton looks hot but she’s one cool lady.”

Not in bed, Quin thought.

“Ah, here’s Nina and Amber back from the powder room,” Tony announced, looking over Quin’s shoulder and holding out an inviting arm for Nina Salter-Smythe—his current love interest—to be gathered in to his side.

Quin swung around to greet the two women’s return, surreptitiously using the opportunity to glance back to where Nicole was seated, wanting to catch her looking at him, hoping for another chance to prove that her show of disinterest was not sustainable.

She wasn’t there.

His heart thumped with the shock of finding her place vacant.

Had she left the club, intent on doing another runner before he could catch her back?

His gaze jerked to her friends who still occupied the table. Jade Zilic and her partner, Jules, had their heads together as though plotting something. Surely they would have accompanied Nicole out, at least to see her into a taxi, if she had gone.

Quin told himself it didn’t matter, either way.

He had enough information to find her.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN Nicole emerged from the powder room, the dance floor was once again crowded, couples throwing themselves into the cha-cha with much energetic panache. This left an easy passage for her back to the table where Jade and Jules remained seated, watching the action.

“Got to say Quin Sola is a superb dancer,” Jade immediately commented, pointing to where he was partnering the brunette in red from the powder room. “Did you teach him, Nicole?”

She shook her head. “It’s natural to him. He once told me dancing is an expression of life in South America. He grew up with it.”

“Where in South America?” Jules asked, his curiosity piqued.

“I don’t know. He would never say.”

“Ah! A mysterious past,” Jade pounced, waggling her highly mobile eyebrows.

“Whatever...” Nicole waved dismissively. “He became an Australian citizen and left the past in the past. Now why don’t you two go and dance? I’m happy to sit this one out.”

She didn’t want to talk about Quin.

She needed more time alone to think about him.

Jade and Jules obligingly left her to it.

Sexual memories bombarded her mind as she watched him dance, his strong, muscular legs snapping out the cha-cha rhythm, his taut cheeky butt almost mesmerising in its matching action. Quin was a great dancer. Better than Jules. Best on the dance floor, in fact. Best at everything.

Except actually caring about someone, Nicole savagely reminded herself. The trick with Quin was to take what he offered of himself, enjoy it, and not care back. She simply hadn’t been capable of doing that when she’d been with him, caring too much about too many things and losing her own sense of self-worth because he hadn’t responded in kind.

She shouldn’t have measured herself by that.

The fault lay in Quin, not her.

Five years ago it had been a matter of survival to walk away from him and his lack of caring. Now she was facing a different issue of survival, based on the one commodity Quin apparently had in plenty. Since he put a money value on everything, she wondered how much he would give to warm himself at her hearth. Could she steel herself to shut out everything else and put the question to him?

If he said no...well, that was that, nothing lost, nothing gained.

If he said yes...since he’d more or less limited their previous relationship to the bedroom, it seemed logical he’d accept that same limitation again, so there should be no great risk in such an arrangement. In fact, satisfying the desire he was stirring up might do her a power of good. It was Quin who had caused the hole Jade perceived in Nicole’s love life. A short, sharp dose of him might cure the long hangover from having been his possession.

Control was the key.

She had to hold it, not let Quin take it over.

Could she do it?

Could she?

The dance ended.

She watched him escort the brunette in red off the dance floor. Jade and Jules were noisily approaching their table. Bold, enterprising Jade. She wouldn’t think twice about approaching Quin for help if she needed it from him. Striking deals were second nature to her. Seize the day, she’d say. Make it yours.

Nicole rose to her feet, standing firmly on her stiletto heels, moving forward with determined purpose. “I’m going to speak to Quin Sola,” she informed her friends in passing.

Either he caught sight of her approach in some mirrored surface, or his personal antennae picked up her churning chemistry and swung him around to face her, negating any need to break into his social group. She halted a metre away, her mouth tilting into a wry little smile as she tossed at him, “I have a proposition for you, Quin.”

He nodded towards the bar. “Let me buy you a drink.”

The move would ensure some privacy from his companions, which certainly suited Nicole. It would also prolong this encounter which undoubtedly suited him since she’d cut him off earlier tonight. “Thank you. I’d like that,” she replied, her ready agreement bringing a smile of satisfaction to his lips.

He led off without a backward glance at the people he’d been with, instantly making her the exclusive focus of his attention, shepherding her through the crowd without actually touching her—quite a masterful operation with people in front of them moving aside at the commanding wave of his hand or a look into the bullet grey eyes.

The force, Nicole thought. Quin had always had it—the power to draw or repel people at will. It was some form of energy he knew how to exert. Or maybe it was an innate thing in him, a kind of charisma he’d been born with. It made him special, out of the ordinary, and dangerous because it was all too easy to fall under his spell and then you belonged to him.

Even knowing this and being on guard against it, Nicole felt every nerve in her body quivering with excitement at being close to the source of this treacherous power. Locking horns with Quin on any ground was tantamount to playing with fire. But she had learnt lessons from being burnt. Nothing would induce her to let this man take over her life again. She’d go so far with him and no further.

They reached the bar and despite the crush of thirsty people, somehow space was made for them and a waiter was ready to take their order. “Two margaritas,” Quin told him, not offering Nicole any choice, assuming command of the situation as he always had. But it was not going to be all his way this time, Nicole fiercely determined.

She recalled only too sharply that he’d bought them both margaritas on the very first evening they’d spent together. If he thought he could stir some sentimentality with the memory, he could think again. The cocktails were made. Quin handed over some notes and told the waiter to keep the change. Nicole took her glass, not waiting for it to be handed to her.

Quin picked up his and raised it in a toast. “To second meetings. And second thoughts,” he said whimsically, his eyes warmly welcoming her apparent change of mind.

She baulked at entering into any flirtatious banter. Nothing had to be won from Quin. He either went for the deal or he didn’t. “You asked me what would meet my needs,” she reminded him with sharp directness.

“I did,” he agreed, adopting a more attentive expression. “Have you been concocting a list?”

She ignored that question. “You said you’d like to make them your business.”

“Within reason,” he quickly amended, his eyes more calculating now.

She sipped her margarita, needing to loosen up her taut nerves, hoping a good slug of alcohol would do it. Having worked up the courage to deliver the next line, she plunged on. “You said money adds a value to everyone.”

He sipped his drink, silently weighing the thrust of her statements before laying out his interpretation of them. “Are you telling me you have a primary need for money, and if I bring enough to the table, it will open the magic door?”

“An urgent need,” she corrected him. “So the question is, Quin, how much are you willing to give to get me back into your bed?”

“Give,” he repeated, eyes narrowing. “We’re not talking about a loan?”

“No.” Her chin lifted belligerently, silently defying whatever he was thinking of her. It didn’t matter. Only the chance of a positive outcome mattered. “We’re talking about an outright gift. And it has to be available to me tomorrow,” she spelled out unequivocally.

“And when will you be available to me, Nicole, assuming that I accept your proposition?”

Her heart was pounding at the possibility he would accept. She hadn't really believed it enough to work out how she would manage her side of the deal. What was possible for her, given her other commitments? She had to keep him away from her mother's home at Burwood.

“Where do you live now, Quin?”

“I have an apartment at Circular Quay.”

Getting public transport to Circular Quay was not a problem—a twenty-minute train trip from Burwood. With a heavy sense of irony, she said, “I could warm the hearth of your home on two nights a week for...” What would be a reasonable offer for the money involved? There had to be a time limit.

“For as long as I want you,” he pushed.

“No!” That would be handing control to him. “For three months,” she quickly decided, not caring what he thought of it, intuitively knowing she couldn't risk more. Three months was as fair a bargain as she was prepared to offer.

“Twenty-six nights...” he said musingly, his eyes smoking with memories of sexual highs with her.

Panic galloped through Nicole. She hadn't done the maths, just grabbed at a time limit. Could she sustain objectivity with Quin for that long, hold the line she had to hold?

It was impossible to recant now. Quin would instantly pick up on how vulnerable she felt about it. Besides, he himself might balk when it came to the cost of those twenty-six nights with her. No doubt he could get a high class callgirl to satisfy his every desire for much less.

“How much money do you need, Nicole?” he asked, coming straight to the point.

Her own eyes issued a mocking challenge as she replied with the total figure of the debts to be paid. “Seven hundred and thirty-six thousand dollars and fifty-five cents.” The numbers were deeply imprinted on her mind from having been so terribly plagued by them.

Quin digested them without so much as a flicker of an eyelid, maintaining a poker face as he checked on what she'd said before. “And you need it tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

“Or what will happen?”

She shook her head. “That's private. This is a take it or leave it proposition. You say yes or no.”

“Spend tonight with me while I consider it.”

“No! I'm not giving out freebies, Quin. I won't spend a night with you until you give me my value in money and it has to be given tomorrow.”

“Your value...” he drawled derisively.

“You used those words,” she fiercely reminded him, her stomach churning with the anticipation of imminent humiliation. “Yes or no,” she repeated.

His eyes glittered with plans of his own as he reached out and took her glass from her, a glass that was empty although she couldn't recall having drunk all its contents. She saw that his was empty, too, as he placed both glasses on the bar. So this mad encounter was at an end, she thought, steeling herself to turn her back on it.

“I'll give you my answer after you dance this tango with me,” he said with a relish that sent warning tingles down her spine.

Nicole was given no time to respond, no time to resist. Her hand was captured by his and strongly held as he pulled her after him, onto the dance floor. The band had only just started up again. No other couples had begun dancing. Quin swung her into the centre of the empty floor, then lifted her arms, arrogantly positioning the initial embrace for the traditional start of the tango.

Her body arched back in instinctive resistance as he assumed the dominant role, his strong legs forcing hers into the *salida*, the basic walking pattern, which Quin turned into a physical—sexual—stalking, igniting a volatile energy in Nicole that sizzled with the need to challenge him, fight him, beat him at his own game.

It was more than a matter of pride to match his perfectly executed figure-eights, his turns, twists and sweeps. Every chance she had she threw in some fancy embellishments to the hooks and kicks, challenging him to meet her creativity, beat it if he could. It goaded him to hurl her into a masterful drag, making her submit to a feet together slide, then swiftly engineering a sandwich, trapping her thigh against his, leaning into her, his arm circling her waist in possessive support as she arched back, his hand almost cupping the soft swell of her breast.

“Don’t think you can take, Quin,” she shot at him.

“Just checking the merchandise,” he retorted.

Nicole’s blood boiled at the crass term but there was no point in taking offence since it was in keeping with her proposition. Besides, it was best she knew Quin thought of her like that—a strong deterrent to any emotional attachment forming.

Merchandise...

She’d show him merchandise!

The intricate footwork and dark passion of their tango had drawn spectators who stood back, clapping them on, leaving them plenty of room to indulge themselves in the dramatic rhythm of the music. Nicole recklessly abandoned herself to the sexuality of the dance with a wild display of provocative wiggles and shakes until Quin claimed her again, sweeping her into a whirl of double-time steps, then re-establishing his dominance with a high lift and a body curl around him. Nicole hit back with a full contact downward slide which gave her undeniable evidence of his excitement.

“Nothing without the money, Quin,” she reminded him, exulting in the hard bulge of his erection.

His eyes blazed raw desire at her. “Don’t tell me you’re not on fire, Nicole.”

“You won’t break my resolve,” she taunted and maintained a haughty disdain throughout his heat-seeking manoeuvres for the rest of the dance.

They were breathing hard when the music ended, her breasts heaving against his chest, their bodies bent in the traditional aggressive/resistant pose, her head, shoulders and arms straining away from him, her long hair almost sweeping the floor, his face hovering over hers. Although loud applause broke out around them, neither of them acknowledged it. Quin wasn’t yet ready to break from the sizzling sexuality of this last embrace.

“Admit you want me!” he demanded.

“Prove that you value what I can give you,” she counter-demanded.

“Tomorrow morning, the money. Tomorrow night, you come to me.”

“Agreed.”

His eyes glittered with animal savagery. “I’ll have my pound of flesh, Nicole.”

But not my heart, she thought with the same depth of ferocity. Quin Sola couldn’t take it twice.

“Twenty-six nights,” he reaffirmed.

“Payment in full,” she promised.

“I’ll hold you to it.”

“I know.”

“As long as you understand there is no escape clause.”

“Understood.”

“Right! So let’s get down to necessary details.”

He scooped her upright again and released her from his embrace, retaining only her hand as he swung her out beside him to perform an acknowledging bow to the still applauding spectators. Their faces were a blur to Nicole. She was gripped by a weird sense of shock that the deal had actually been made. Quin was going to pay off the ruinous debt and she was about to become his sex slave for three months.

Being his sex slave was not something new, she sternly told herself, just a repetition of the past, but her legs started wobbling as they made their way back to the bar. Neither she nor Quin were

inclined to head for their respective tables since there was still private business to be done. She hoped he understood that their negotiated intimacy should remain private, too.

“Another drink?” Quin asked.

“Just iced water,” she replied.

He ordered two, probably feeling the same need to cool down. While they waited, a man came up and clapped Quin on the shoulder, claiming his attention and making Nicole’s nerves even more jumpy.

“Got to say you’ve met your match, Quin,” he rolled out with a grin, twinkling brown eyes spreading his good humour to both of them. “Great dancing! You should snag him for a partner if you’re still doing dance competitions, Nicole.”

Shock hit her hard, squeezing her heart and making her stomach contract in fear.

Tony Fisher!

She remembered giving him dancing lessons—something like two years ago—but she couldn’t remember how she’d been working her situation at the time. Did he know about Zoe? Would he mention her to Quin? How closely were the two men connected?

“Tony...” she greeted him belatedly.

“Glad you remember me.” He exuded happy warmth as he offered his hand.

She took it briefly. “Not many men have so much charm. I hope you’re enjoying your own dancing.”

“I am, indeed. As to charm...” He flicked a wry smile at Quin. “It seems my friend has considerably more.”

Friend!

“Not so I’ve noticed,” she said coolly. “But then, charm isn’t a necessary component when doing business. The primary aim is to understand each other. Quin and I are trying to settle the details of an agreement, so if you’d be so kind as to...”

“Leave you alone together? Got it!” He raised a hand in a salute to both of them and moved away.

Quin handed her a long glass of iced water. “Very deft,” he commented. “A pity you’re wasting your talent for handling people in a dance school.”

So he knew that much. “Believe me, it’s not wasted there,” she said dryly. When he made no other observation about her current life, Nicole’s tension eased a little. “Let’s tie this up quickly before we’re interrupted again,” she said briskly. “Are you carrying a business card with your e-mail address on it?”

“Yes.” He put his drink down to get the card out of his wallet and give it to her. “Do you have yours in your handbag?”

“You won’t need it. I’ll e-mail you when I get home tonight, spelling out where the money has to be transferred. You can reply to sender, giving me your home address and what time you want me to arrive.”

“That works,” he agreed.

Nicole wanted to get away from him now, escape the tension of being this close. She had to spend twenty-six nights in his company but tonight wasn’t one of them. “I want this deal kept private, Quin,” she quickly stated.

His eyes mocked her concern. “I’m hardly likely to spread the fact that I have to buy sex from you.”

A tide of scorching heat rushed up her neck and burnt her cheeks. “You didn’t value it when I gave it to you,” she fired back at him.

“I’ll count the worth of every second this time.”

“Do that!” Her chin lifted in defiant denial of any more seconds on the clock with him now. “In the meantime, please excuse me. My friends are probably wondering where I am.”

“Oh, I don’t think they’re wondering, Nicole. Not after our tango. But I’ll escort you back to their table to ensure they know you’ve been in good hands.”

“I don’t need to be escorted, thank you,” she flashed at him as she turned to go.

“I wouldn’t want your friends to think I’m not gentleman enough to give you that courtesy,” came the insidiously determined voice behind her.

Nicole gritted her teeth and said no more, knowing there’d be no shaking him off until he performed his self-appointed role. Waste of breath to argue. In actual fact, Quin had always played the gentleman with women; opening doors, seeing them seated, extending protection whenever it was appropriate. It had once given Nicole the sense of being cherished, but his courtesies had nothing to do with cherishing. Quin simply followed standards he’d set for himself.

She sailed ahead, acutely aware of him trailing closely in her wake and inwardly stewing over how she was going to explain what she’d been doing with Quin to Jade and Jules. No doubt they had seen the tango performance, which certainly didn’t gel with banishing the man from her life. There had been nothing cold about it, either.

Quin had caught up and was shoulder to shoulder with her when they arrived at the table. Both Jade and Jules had wide grins on their faces, probably thinking they’d been witnessing the rebirth of a passionate affair. Before Nicole could issue a polite dismissal to Quin, Jade surprised her by holding out a brilliant yellow butterfly, exquisitely fashioned from silk with silver glitter outlining its wings.

“For your tree,” she rushed out. “I made it to brighten you up. Not that you probably need it now but I thought I’d give it to you before the two of you make off out of the club.” Her eyes sparkled delight. “It can mark this reunion with Quin.”

“It’s beautiful, Jade. Thank you. But...”

“What tree?” Quin cut in before Nicole could deny the double departure Jade was obviously anticipating.

“The butterfly tree,” Jules supplied. “It’s a great fantasy décor piece. The branches are made of driftwood and...”

Nicole panicked, afraid he was about to mention Zoe. “It’s a private thing, Jules,” she warned, her eyes stabbing the point home. “And you’re mistaken, Jade. Quin and I are not going off together. We were simply settling an old score between us.” She quickly turned to Quin and held out her hand. “Thank you. We do have everything settled, don’t we?”

He gripped hard, his eyes probing hers with nerve-tearing intensity. “Time will tell,” he said, the sense of threat behind his words warning Nicole she had better deliver her side of the deal.

She nodded. “I won’t keep you from your party any longer.”

His mouth curled into a sardonic little smile. “Nor I from yours.”

To her intense relief he said good night to Jade and Jules, taking his leave without another word. Which left her with the task of fending off their curiosity for the rest of the evening at the club. Fortunately they didn’t want to stay late as they had an important business meeting in the morning. By one o’clock Nicole had been driven home and she was seated at her computer, ready to transmit the necessary figures for Quin to rescue her mother from losing everything.

Her fingers hesitated over the keyboard.

She stared at the e-mail address on the card he’d given her.

This was the point of no return.

Total bankruptcy or twenty-six nights with Quin.

Her chest felt very tight.

Don’t think about it, she fiercely told herself.

Just do it.

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