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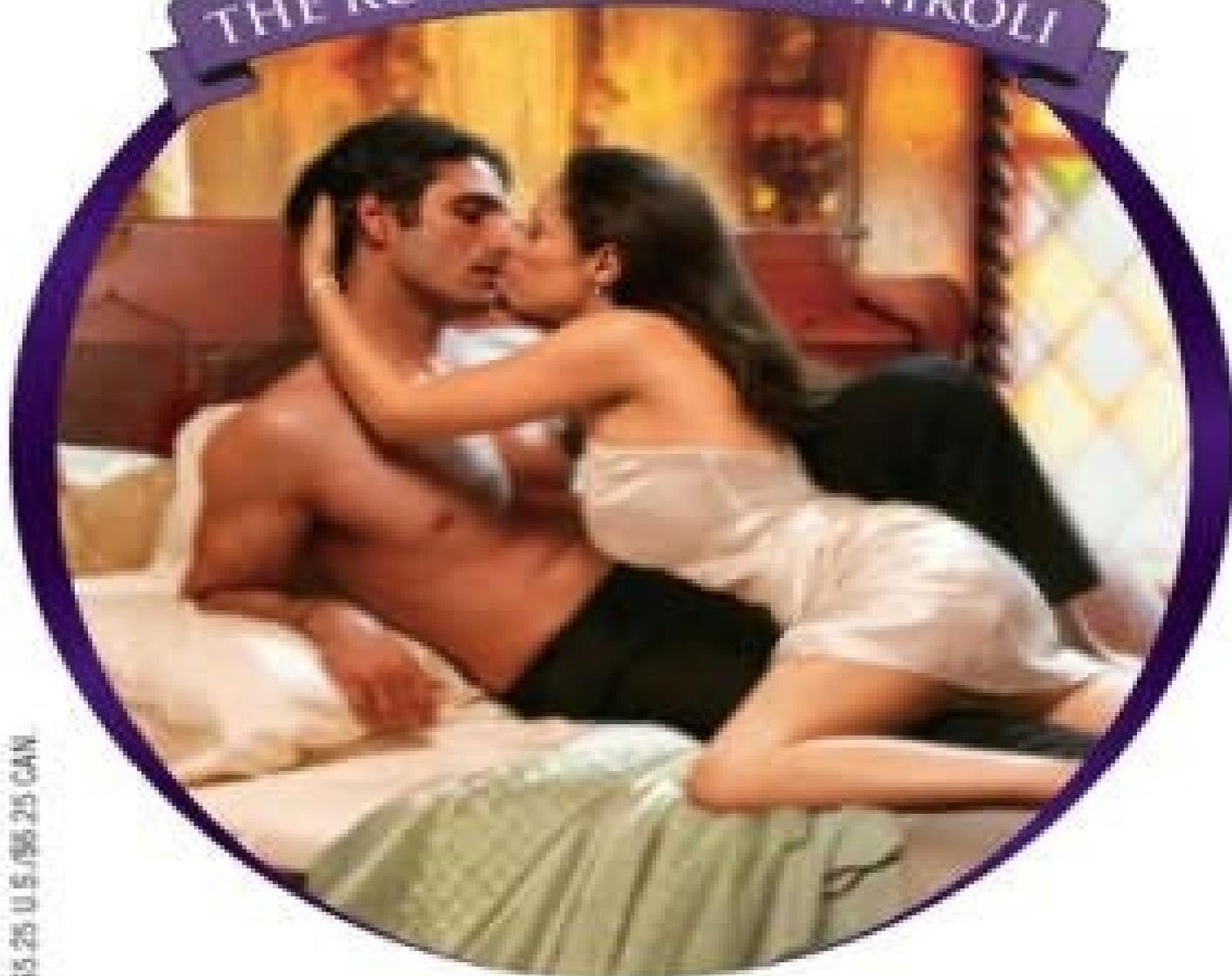
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Penny Jordan

A ROYAL BRIDE AT
THE SHEIKH'S COMMAND



THE ROYAL HOUSE OF NIROLI



85-25 U.S./98-25 CAN.

Penny Jordan

A ROYAL BRIDE AT THE SHEIKH'S COMMAND

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Special thanks and acknowledgment are given to Penny Jordan for her contribution to THE ROYAL HOUSE OF NIROLI series.

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PROLOGUE

SHE was in total shock.

She needed very badly to sit down, but of course she couldn't. For one thing she was still in the Royal Presence Chamber, and, whilst she was a modern go-getting woman, her Nirolian ancestry within her reminded her that she was alone in the presence of Niroli's King.

And for another...Well, she told herself grimly, the king wasn't going to welcome seeing any kind of weakness being shown by the bride he had selected for this newly

discovered heir. So newly discovered, in fact, that she, the bride-to-be in question, had been sworn to absolute secrecy about the whole thing.

It was of course a story that would attract every member of the paparazzi like blood in the water attracted sharks, and one that could be just as potentially perilous to anyone who obstructed King Giorgio's plans. She had just learned that these plans required her, as a dutiful subject, to marry this Prince Kadir Zafar, the King's previously 'secret' illegitimate son, for the sake of the island she loved so passionately.

CHAPTER ONE

Venice

SHE might be passionately attached to Niroli, but there was no doubt that Venice had a very special place in her heart, Natalia acknowledged, lifting her hand to try to stop the breeze from playing with the heavy weight of her thick dark curls. She was waiting for the water taxi to take her to her destination, and was totally oblivious to the admiring male looks she was attracting. When one man proved bold enough to murmur, 'Bella, bella,' caressingly as he stopped to stand and stare openly at her, she couldn't help but laugh, her marine blue eyes sparkling with the rich colour of the lido in the sunshine. Just having her sombre mood lightened for a few seconds was a much needed relief at the moment.

It was all very well having sleepless nights and worrying herself half a stone thinner over whether or not she had made the right decision, but what she ought to be asking herself surely was why on earth had she ever agreed to do it in the first place.

The water taxi arrived and she picked up her small weekend bag and stepped into the taxi with ease and elegance. She was a tall woman of close to six feet who wore her height with calm pride.

'Via Venetii? The Buchesetti Spa Hotel,' she asked the vaporetto driver.

'Sì,' he agreed, with open admiration in his gaze.

The tranquil ride to her destination made Natalia reflect ruefully on the uncomfortable speed with which the direction of her life had suddenly changed. Increasingly she was waking up in the morning feeling as though she had stepped on board a train that had then suddenly picked up speed to such an extent that she was beginning to feel that it was running away with her.

So why had she allowed it to happen in the first place? After all no one had forced her.

No? When your king appealed to you personally for your help to save the future of your country, a country you loved, you didn't just turn round and say no, did you? At least not if you were a Carini.

The trouble was that, since she had said yes, the list of reasons why in her own interests she would have been better off saying no had begun to grow by the day.

'Via Venetii,' the vaporetto driver pointed out to her, interrupting her thoughts. 'The hotel, she is not far now. Is a very beautiful hotel. You go there before?'

'Yes,' Natalia told him. She could see from the expression on his face that the answer had sounded more curt than she had intended. But how could she explain to him how she felt about the fact that she had been obliged to sell her beloved spa hotel on Niroli to this one in Venice?

True, the choice of whom she should sell to had been her own. True, too, that she knew that the new owners, Maya and Howard, would uphold her own high standards, now that they had officially added her spa to their portfolio, but that still did not mean that she was not allowed to grieve for her much cherished and loved 'baby', did it?

So why give it up in the first place? Why give up the life she had worked so hard to build for herself to enter into an arranged marriage of state? So that she could be a princess? Natalia almost laughed out loud, the white flash of her even white teeth contrasting with the full warmth of her soft red lips making the driver of the vaporetto

sigh in a way that caused Natalia to look away to conceal her amusement.

At twenty-nine she had had ample time to get used to her effect on the opposite sex.

To get used to her effect on the opposite sex, but never to fall in love. And now with her forthcoming marriage to the newly discovered heir to the Nirolian throne she was giving up the chance to do so for ever, wasn't she? After all, she wasn't foolish enough to think that a marriage arranged between two strangers by a king whose only thought was to secure the future of his kingdom could by some miracle turn into a passionately intense and lifelong love affair, was she? Not when she had never, ever fallen in love; not when her sole reason for agreeing to this marriage had been her passionate love, not for a man, but for a country, her country, just as her husband-to-be's desire was directed towards the throne of Niroli and not towards her. Could it work? Was she as mad as she was beginning to think to have agreed to marry Prince Kadir just so that she would be there at his side to ensure that he ruled her beloved country with wisdom and love? If only there were someone she could turn to for advice, but there wasn't. The king had forbidden her to discuss the matter with anyone.

The elegant and exclusive spa hotel that was her destination had its own landing stage. As she saw it approaching Natalia turned to pick up her bag. As she did so a man striding impatiently across the small square to the side of the hotel caught her eye, as much for any other reason as for his height. At almost six feet herself, she was appreciative of the visual impact of men who were taller than her, and this man was certainly that, taller, and broad shouldered, with surprisingly hard-packed muscles, too, for a man who looked as though he was closer to forty than thirty. Thick dark hair that just brushed the collar of his jacket gleamed with good health under the brilliant sunlight. His skin was warmly olive and although he was too far away for Natalia to see the colour of his eyes she could see the hard, precision hewn perfection of his facial bone structure with its high cheekbones and strong jaw. Here was a man, she acknowledged.

As though by some alchemic means he had somehow sensed her interest and paused, turning his head to look directly at her. She still could not see the colour of his eyes, but she could see that he was even more stunningly handsome face on than he had been in profile. It had to be the sun that was making her feel slightly dizzy and not the fact that he was looking at her...Had been looking at her, she recognised to her relief as he turned away and resumed his progress across the square. As the vaporetto pulled into the landing stage she admitted to herself that her brief interest in this man was not the wisest of things in a woman soon to enter into a dynastic marriage. How was she

going to go on in that marriage if she was experiencing sexual desire for another man now? Sexual desire? That was ridiculous. She had simply been looking at him, that was all, and anyway he had gone now, and she was hardly likely to ever see him again, was she?

When Natalia arrived in the lobby, Maya hurried forward to hug her exuberantly. ‘This is so good of you to come and help us with the transition of ownership. We wanted it to go smoothly and there’s still so much to learn about your Nirolian spa. We had not dared to hope that you would be generous enough to come back to Venice so quickly.’

Natalia returned the hug a bit guiltily. It was impossible of course for her to tell her that the main reason she was back in Venice was because King Giorgio had wanted her out of the way until the newly discovered heir to the throne of Niroli had arrived on the island. Then she would be allowed to return and they would be presented, with full pomp and dignity, to the people of Niroli, along with the announcement of their marriage.

‘But why can’t I remain here?’ she had questioned the king. ‘After all I shall have to make arrangements for the future of the business.’

‘You are a woman and I cannot permit you to remain where you could be tempted to break the vow of secrecy I have sworn you to.’

She had of course been tempted to object to the use of that contemptuous ‘you are a woman’ but, knowing King Giorgio as she did, she had decided that there wasn’t very much point, and then she had received the frantic plea to return to Venice to discuss the handover of the business with Maya and Howard. They had expressed their wish to buy some of her special formulae for the oils she used.

The truth was that, much as his old-fashioned attitudes often infuriated her, on this occasion, and perhaps against her own best interests, she had actually felt slightly sorry for the king when he had approached her with his unexpected proposition. He had run through each and every one of his potential male heirs in turn and been forced to reject them. Loving Niroli every bit as much as he did, she had fully understood his contrasting feelings of joy at the discovery that he had fathered an illegitimate son

during a brief affair over forty years ago with an Arabian princess, and anxiety about offering this son the throne in case his son's Arabian upbringing meant that his ideas on how to rule were not suited to Niroli. And, yes, if she was honest it had been flattering—very flattering—to be told by King Giorgio that he had picked her out of all his single female subjects to become the wife of Niroli's future King because he had seen in her certain strengths and virtues that reminded him of his beloved first wife, Queen Sophia.

Everyone knew how much the people of Niroli had loved and revered King Georigo's first wife and how much she had done for Niroli. As a little girl Natalia had woven foolish daydreams as children did of somehow going back in time to meet Queen Sophia and 'helping' her with her work. Now she had been given that opportunity in reality, or at least an opportunity to continue the work Queen Sophia had begun. At the time, filled with euphoria at the thought of her coming role in the future of her country, she hadn't thought marriage to a stranger too much of a price to pay. After all she had never been in love and had no expectation of being in love; she liked to think of herself as practically minded and she had embraced the idea of taking a marriage between two people with a common goal and making it work. Of course, even then she had had some doubts and concerns. Marriage to a future king meant producing that future king's heirs and spares, and that of course meant having sex with him. But King Giorgio had been too thrilled not to mention the fact that his secret son looked very like him, and since the king, even now in his old age, was a very good-looking man Natalia was assuming that her future husband was reasonably physically attractive.

What about his personality, though? she wondered and worried now. What if he was the kind of man she just could not grow to like or respect? If he was, she wouldn't want to abandon her country to him, would she? No, she would want to do what she could to offset those faults in him as his wife. Those who thought they knew her as a forward-thinking, successful business-woman would, of course, be stunned and disbelieving when the news did break, and would no doubt question why she had not immediately refused to have anything whatsoever to do with the king's grand plan.

But then that was the trouble, wasn't it? Whilst on the surface she might appear to be all modern, she herself was something of an anomaly in that deep down inside her there was something else. That 'something' was her passionate and deep-rooted love for her country, for its past and its present but most of all for its future. Or rather the future it could have in the right hands. Because Niroli, like so much of the rest of the world, was at a crisis point where traditional values were clashing badly with modernity; where those on and off the island like herself, who wanted to see Niroli move forward into a future that guarded and protected its unique geographical benefits rather than wasted and abused them, were often in conflict with those who could see

no reason not to squander Niroli's natural assets, or even worse those who sought to strip the island of its unique heritage in the name of progress by turning it into one huge tourist attraction.

What Natalia favoured was a different way, an ecologically and Nirolian friendly way that would preserve the best of their traditions as well as move them forward into a prosperous future. She had never made any secret of her feelings about this. Her commitment to her other work, as an apothecary using natural oils and holistic treatments in the spa she had set up, was well known. However, as Natalia Carini she could only do so much and her sphere of influence was limited to those who for the most part shared her views. As Niroli's Queen she would be in a far, far more influential position to make very real and worthwhile changes. Certainly far more so than she did as the granddaughter of the island's acknowledged expert vintner.

'I'd be very happy to give you exclusive rights to some of my special oil recipes,' she told Maya now, switching her thoughts.

'We have been using the samples you were kind enough to give us during the negotiations for the purchase of your spa,' the sweet round faced Italian said, 'and our clients have raved about them. The deep muscle replenisher you have created for sportsmen has found particular favour and we have a growing client list of sportsmen already using our spas—skiers, football and polo players mainly—who come to us by word-of-mouth recommendation, and Howard has been panicking that we would soon run out of your oil.'

Natalia laughed. She was as responsive to flattery when it was genuine and given for the right reasons as anyone else, and it always delighted her when people reported favourably on her therapeutic oils.

'Then it is just as well perhaps that I took Howard's hint when he phoned last week and brought you a fresh supply with me,' she told Maya. Whilst she knew she could hardly continue to run a business once she was married to Prince Kadir, one thing Natalia did intend to stick out for was her own private space where she could continue to use her 'nose' as a perfumier—not to create new perfumes so much as to use the ingredients that went into them in a more therapeutic way. Just as music and now colour were both recognised as having healing properties, increasingly people were beginning to accept that scents also possessed the power to heal the body, the mind

and the heart when blended and used properly. It was one of her dreams to create a range of scents that would do this, and now she had added to that a new dream of using her position as Niroli's Queen to set up a charity to distribute them to those in need.

'You will dine with us later this evening, I hope, but for now we thought you might welcome some free time to enjoy Venice, before we sit down together to talk over the mechanics of the purchase of your oil recipes.'

'That would suit me perfectly,' Natalia confirmed.

She laughed when Maya hugged her again and said emotionally, 'Oh, Natalia, I am so glad that you are willing to do this for us.'

As she returned Maya's grateful hug, Natalia acknowledged that she had been hoping to have a bit of time for herself, because there was one place in particular that she really wanted to go.

The late afternoon autumn mist stealing from the canals and swirling round the squares and streets created an atmosphere within the city that for her, whilst concealing it in the material sense, revealed it very sharply in an emotional sense. With the mist came a sombreness and a melancholy that she felt somehow truly reflected the deep hidden heart of the city, stripping from it the carnival mask it wore so easily for those it did not want to know its secrets. Natalia, though, had been coming here for many years, drawn back to it time after time, and there was no hesitation in her long-legged stride as she made her way to the vaporetto stop from which the water taxi would take her to the small glass-making factory she had discovered years ago on her first visit here. She had been awed and entranced then by the beauty of the perfume bottles she had watched being blown, and on each return trip she had revisited it, choosing for herself a bottle that reflected in its unique colours something of her mood of that visit. What would catch her eye on this visit? she wondered. It was part of the game not to anticipate what she would choose, but simply to let it happen.

As she crossed the square she had seen earlier she realised that she was following in the footsteps of the man she had watched from the water taxi. Now what had brought

him into her thoughts? Not some ridiculous idea that she might see him again? After the dismissive look he had given her? When she was almost on the eve of getting married? Fantasizing about tall, handsome men glimpsed in the street hadn't been a folly she had indulged in even when she was a teenager. Why was she doing it now?

That was Venice for you, Natalia told herself ruefully. It played tricks on the imagination and the eye, and in more ways than one.

‘Signorina, it is you. Ah, you grow more lovely with every visit.’

Old Mario, the head of the family, gave her a gummy smile as he welcomed her.

‘And you grow more silver-tongued, Mario.’ She laughed, already looking past him towards the inner sanctum where they kept their special one-off creations, like a small child anticipating Christmas, and salivating almost at the prospect of being allowed to choose just what she wanted.

Mario was turning away from her and she made to follow him, but his son stopped her.

‘Please, we have something special for you this time. My father has made it himself. He said that he had this thought of you and that he felt he must do this thing...’

Natalia tried not to look as disappointed as she was feeling. She was strong-minded and independent enough to want to choose her own perfume bottle, but sensitively she didn't want to offend the old man.

He had disappeared into the back room and it seemed an age before he returned, carrying a battered cardboard box from which she could see tissue paper sticking out.

‘Here,’ he told her, proffering her the box.

Forcing a wide smile, Natalia took it, carefully unwrapping the tissue paper until she had revealed the small perfume bottle that lay within it. At first all she could see was every colour of the rainbow spliced with silver and gold and every nuance of beautiful colour and shade the human eye could imagine. It defeated her ability to rationalise what colour it actually was.

‘Hold it in your hand,’ the old man urged her.

A little hesitantly Natalia removed the bottle, and held it.

‘Now look,’ the shop owner commanded.

Natalia gasped as she stared at the bottle. It seemed to shimmer and glow as though it were still molten and not solid; as though it had a life force of its own that pulsed within it and, absurdly, she felt afraid to touch it, in case she harmed it.

‘What...what is it?’ she asked in an awed whisper.

‘It is diamond glass, a very special and old recipe—we don’t use it any more because it is not easily possible to come by the ingredients, and they have to be ground down and heated in such a way that makes it dangerous to the creator and the creation. Legend has it that only the Doge was allowed to own glassware made from this recipe, which was stolen from one of the great Caliphs of the East,’ the younger boy explained wryly to her.

‘It’s so beautiful...’

‘It is unique—possibly the last of its kind ever to be made and my father has made it for you. It is said that when the pure of heart hold the bottle it glows as it did just then for you, but when those who are motivated by darkness and evil touch the glass it

grows dull and cold so that its colour vanishes.’ He laughed. ‘As yet we have not been able to confirm whether or not that is true, although my father swears that it is.’

The older man said something huskily in Venetian, which his son translated for Natalia even though she was able to do so herself.

‘My father says that whenever you touch this bottle you will be reminded of the purity of your heart and the true beauty that comes from within. May it lift your spirits and warm your heart throughout your life.’

Tears filled Natalia’s eyes. Increasingly she was beginning to worry that she might need raw warmth from outside her marriage to sustain her through it, and yet again she questioned whether she had made the right decision.

It was later than she had planned when Natalia finally left the factory and as she glanced at her watch she recognised that she was only just going to make it back to the spa hotel in time to join Maya and Howard for the pre-dinner drink they had offered her.

However, the minute she stepped into their private suite she realised that they had more to worry about than her being late for drinks. Maya was seated on one of the large room’s three plain cream leather sofas, her right hand heavily bandaged and her arm in a sling.

‘She slipped and dropped a glass bowl and then cut her hand on it,’ Howard explained.

‘And now we are in the most dreadful fix.’ Maya sighed miserably. ‘We had a phone call earlier, before I fell, from an unexpected client who is in between flights and who wanted to book in for the night. He plays polo and has an old injury that occasionally flares up. He requested the massage you showed me, Natalia, you know the one? The deep muscle massage you devised for sports injuries?’

Natalia nodded her head. The massage in question was one of her spa's specialities.

'When he was here last month I recommended it to him,' Maya continued, 'and he said it was most beneficial. Apparently these days he spends more time behind a desk than he does on the polo field and so this old injury occasionally flares up. Naturally I took the booking, and now he is expecting his massage in half an hour's time. He has taken our best suite, so he is not someone we would want to offend. Now I can't do the massage, and Gina, the only other masseuse we have who could do it, is on holiday. I can't tell you how cross with myself I am for doing something so stupid as dropping that wretched bowl.'

Natalia sympathised with her. She could tell that Maya was like her in that she set herself very exacting standards and she knew just how she would be feeling in her shoes. 'Couldn't I do the massage for you?' she offered impulsively.

'Would you?' Immediately Maya was all relieved and grateful smiles. 'We were hoping you might offer,' she admitted honestly, adding, only half jokingly, 'Natalia, are you sure you would not like a partnership with us? Only you would be the most wonderful asset to the business.'

Don't tempt me, was Natalia's immediate private reaction as she smiled and shook her head. The explanation she had given the other couple for her decision to sell the spa had been her wish to focus on developing her skills as a perfumier. Another lie, but a necessary one, according to King Giorgio.

'What time is he booked in for?' she asked Maya quietly, slipping into her professional persona.

'Half past. You've got twenty minutes to get ready. I've already brought up a uniform for you. His name is Leon Perez. Since his injury is a polo injury I imagine he must be South American. He's requested the massage in his suite, by the way, but there's nothing untoward in that, as you will know. We do offer that facility. However, if for any reason his behaviour should become unacceptable, just press the buzzer at the side of the bed. We've had them installed in all of the rooms just in case. We intend to keep a list of those guests who mistake our services for those of a very different kind, so

that we can make sure they don't repeat their mistake.'

'A wise precaution,' Natalia agreed. 'I did the same thing, although fortunately they haven't been used as yet.'

'When you've finished, we'll have drinks and dinner and continue our business discussions then,' Maya said as she handed Natalia a spa uniform.

The spa's uniform was a simple cap-sleeved, high-necked, linen-mix, A-line shift dress in plain white. The fabric was thick and heavy enough not to reveal what its wearer might be wearing underneath, Natalia noted approvingly. She liked the fact that Maya respected her employees enough not to give them a uniform that was in any way provocative. There was just about enough time for her to go to her own suite to shower, plait her hair to keep it out of the way and change into the uniform. It was rather shorter perhaps than she would have liked, and a bit tighter, but that was a problem one became accustomed to when one was tall and had a voluptuously curved hourglass figure. She gathered together everything Maya had given her that she would need before making her way to the guest's suite.

Natalia had given clients massages a hundred thousand times and more so there was no reason at all for that funny little sensation to curl its way through her stomach as she pressed the bell and then stood outside the suite waiting to be let in.

The suite door was being opened. A man was standing just inside it, wearing the ubiquitous white hotel bathrobe.

As she looked at him Natalia found that she was blinking dizzily in much the same way she had done when she'd first looked at the perfume bottle. It was him. Leon Perez was the man she had seen earlier, crossing the square. That it should be him was surely against all the laws of reason and logic, and yet there was no mistake. It was him. Her senses were telling her that very loudly and clearly. Her senses. What right had they to get themselves involved in what was after all a purely professional matter? This was dreadful. And what was worse, far worse, was that everything she had just told herself about there being no need for her to feel anxious had just been blown totally out of the water by the force of one single look from those impossibly long-

lashed jade green eyes.

Her heart swung crazily through her chest as though suspended from a pendulum and then stopped dead. She felt as though she were drowning in the depths of his eyes; as though she were being sucked under by some powerful sensual undertow come out of nowhere to possess her. Through the clamouring tumult of her senses she could think only one clear thought. And that was how very, very badly she wanted him.

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT was this...this lightning dart of pure volcanic sexual desire shooting up inside Natalia to spill past the long-closed gates of her own restraint, melting them into nothing?

Leave! Leave now, an inner voice was urging her. You can't afford this. Just turn around and go...because if you don't...

'You booked a massage?'

Too late...too late. Why hadn't she done what that inner voice had urged her? she wondered shakily as she stepped into the warm womb of semi darkness that was the dimly lit foyer of the suite. Her 'nose', so sensitive always, too much sometimes, went into overdrive. She was being overwhelmed by the flood of scents washing over her, the new decorations smell of paint and carpet and fibres all mingled together. The scent of the lilies in the hallway, overlaying the special signature perfume she had created for herself and always wore, a special recipe based on roses, with a hint of musk sharpened with the unique oil she had produced by blending grapes as they ripened, and vines as they thrust out new growth, maturity blended with the raw, powerful surge of new life. Normally it pleased and soothed her, but now was distorted perhaps by the smell of her own fear and she discovered that she was fighting against its unfamiliar demanding sensuality.

But most powerful of all was the scent of him. Images flashed inside her head; heat; the scent of something alien and unknown to her carried on a hot wind, the scent of male power both physical and mental; a rawness and vitality merging into something so intimate that she felt almost as though he had physically imprisoned her. Something

dangerous and very unwanted was happening to her, Natalia admitted, grand slamming her senses, rushing over her and through her, forcing her to surrender to it.

‘This way.’

With a tremendous effort Natalia forced herself to ignore what she was feeling. For a moment she had wanted him. So what? That was probably just a knee-jerk reaction to her own knowledge that her unplanned years of celibacy were shortly to be brought to an end via her marriage. There was perhaps nothing like recognising that something was about to be taken ‘off the menu’ for it suddenly to be extraordinarily desirable. As for that dizzy, soft-boned feeling sliding through her like warmed precious oils, that was probably caused by the unfamiliar act of having to tilt her head back to look up at him, instead of him being on her own eye level as most men were. How tall was he, exactly?

King Giorgio had not offered her any information as to the physical make-up of his illegitimate son, other than his very proud boast that he was ‘obviously his son’. All she knew about him was that he was forty years old, had never been married, and had been brought up as a sheikh-in-waiting, but that on being offered the throne of Niroli he had handed over the rulership of Hadiya to his younger half brother.

There had been days since she had agreed to the king’s proposition when it had been a hard call not picturing someone squat, plump and wearing too much gold, especially in his teeth, despite King Giorgio’s obvious admiration for him.

In contrast, this man was six feet three at least, powerfully muscled without an ounce of excess weight and, as for his teeth, well, that small chip in one of the front pair suggested that despite their excellent shape and colour they were all his own. It would be wonderful to dance with a man whose height was so perfectly devised by nature to physically match her own. Just to dance, what about...? She tensed her body against what she was thinking. It was tilting her head that was responsible for her out-of-character response to him, she told herself feverishly. After all, at that angle the flow of blood to the brain would be diminished and that alone would be enough to induce... to induce what? Mind blowing images of such sensory sensuality that her nerve endings felt stripped of their protective covering.

For such a tall and powerfully built man he moved very lightly and easily—and very confidently, walking ahead of her, leaving her to follow in his wake like some harem woman following her master? Now where on earth had that idea come from? This man was South American, Maya had told her.

Maya and Howard had chosen to renovate the interior of the small palazzo they had transformed into their spa hotel in a way that was naturally holistic and an example of pared-down minimalism. The luxurious comfort of its rooms and décor came from the quality of the natural furnishings and fabrics they had used. This suite, the most exclusive of all the rooms, had plain off-white walls to offset its marble floors. All the rooms had specially designed massage tables in addition to their huge king-sized beds.

‘You booked one of the spa’s special neck and back massages,’ Natalia checked as they approached the massage table.

‘Yes. And let me warn you, you had better know what you are doing.’

He sounded almost antagonistic towards her, something that Natalia wasn’t used to either as a woman or as a professional, and somehow, instead of dampening down the unwanted feverish intensity of her reaction to him, it only seemed to inflame it. Was she really so immature? Wanting what she couldn’t have because she couldn’t have it? That was ridiculous. She just wasn’t that kind of person.

Perhaps now wasn’t the time to tell him that she was the one responsible for creating the massage in the first place, Natalia admitted, even if his attitude towards her had put her on her mettle. She knew without vanity that she was an excellent masseuse—it was a gift and an instinct she had known she possessed virtually from childhood, this power to soothe and heal with the touch of her hands. Had she been doing this in her own spa she would have been talking with her clients, drawing them out about themselves whilst she assessed which of her own specially blended oils would suit their needs best. She had no intention of trying that with this man though. She had no idea why she should feel this instinctive awareness of a need to protect herself from him.

Don’t you? an inner voice taunted her. Take a good look at him—that should tell you.

No woman with red blood in her veins could fail to be affected by his maleness, especially not one who has just agreed to a passionless dynastic marriage.

Was that it? Was her unexpected and definitely unwanted reaction to him solely some unfamiliar last-minute and reckless desire to rebel against her own decision; a reminder by her senses of just what she would be giving up? She had never been promiscuous, she reminded herself, so why on earth should her senses suddenly have her physically yearning for an unknown man now? Physically yearning? She was doing no such thing! Yes, you are, her senses responded smartly. Determinedly Natalia fought to subdue them. She was here to work, nothing else. Just to work.

He had his back to her now and was stripping off the spa's robe, letting it drop to the floor. Natalia held her breath. If he was nude, beneath the robe—and he certainly had the kind of male confidence that would mean that he could quite easily be. But he wasn't. And she wasn't prepared to let herself know whether she was pleased or disappointed to see that he had a small towel wrapped around his hips. Far better from a masseur's point of view than underwear, it showed her that he was familiar with this kind of experience. How many other foolish women had felt as she was feeling right now? Had he looked at them as indifferently as he was looking at her or had they seen desire for them in those dark green eyes? From out of nowhere like a fierce tornado, jealousy gripped hold of her. The shock of it made her hands tremble as she waited for him to lie face down on the table.

She was, Natalia discovered, holding in her breath, and no wonder, when she saw the way those superbly defined muscles rippled with pure male strength. Yes, he was obviously a horseman, she acknowledged—those thighs certainly indicated that. And as for him being a polo player—he certainly had the requisite muscle structure, and the wealth if the understated but still discreetly logoed expensive watch and the fact that he was in this suite were anything to go by. His flesh shone a subtle warm bronze in the room's lights, moving sleekly over the heavy padding of his muscles. He moved like a hunting cheetah, light on his feet, swift, silent and deadly. If she had not known he was South American she suspected that she might have put him down as Italian, although there was something within the devastatingly hard-boned masculinity of his face that hinted at a cultural legacy she could not quite define, something alien—and challenging to her as a woman? Ignore it, she warned herself speedily, trying to focus on other aspects of her client. His manner was certainly European, and yet it was also not. Because he was South American? Irritatingly that something 'other' for some reason was nagging at her subconscious, trying to tell her something, though she didn't know what. More out of habit than anything she turned away whilst he settled himself on the massage table.

An important part of this particular form of massage was the mood music and lighting that accompanied it. Maya had instructed her how to activate the sound and light systems, both pretty similar to her own, although she preferred whenever possible to open the windows and have the simple sounds of nature as the only auditory accompaniment to her massage. But then of course she also used her oils and she was a great believer in not overloading the senses with too many strong stimuli at once.

She poured a small amount of oil into the waiting bowl and warmed it over a tea light and then poured a very small amount into her own cupped palm.

‘This massage is designed to work on tensions and blocks within the deep muscle structure,’ she explained calmly. ‘You may find that it gives rise to the occasional uncontrollable movement of one or other of those muscles depending on the degree of stress they are under, but that’s completely normal.’

The sound of him exhaling conveyed his impatience far more effectively than any words could have done—and his desire for her to keep her distance from him by not talking. Well, that certainly suited her.

She started to sweep her hands over his skin, assessing the tone and texture of the muscles beneath it, breathing evenly and slowly as she let herself sink down into and be absorbed into her gift for her work. So many things could be learned by this silent communication of touch and flesh, so many secrets withdrawn—he, for instance, was tensing himself against her even though he might be pretending with his steady, even breathing not to be doing so. At some stage in his life he had fallen heavily on his left hip, possibly from a horse. Polo again? There was no obvious damage but she could feel the muscle’s sensitive flutter as it whispered to her of its secret trauma. Automatically she responded to its need, stroking first reassurance and then, once it had accepted her touch, using a deeper, more searching kneading technique to send strength back into it, giving it power and confidence, telling it with her touch that it need not fear, that it could trust itself.

His hair, thick and dark—darker than her own, in fact—would, as she already knew, brush his collar when he was dressed. Now it felt sweetly soft against her fingertips as she swept up over his back and searched out the tensions in his neck muscles. She had