

Harlequin Mills & Boon



Dangerous Entanglement

SUSANNE McCARTHY



DANGEROUS ENTANGLEMENT

Susanne McCarthy

Melting paint....

When Joanna refused to jump into bed with Alex Marshall, he assumed she was frigid! But the arrogant entrepreneur sensed that it wasn't just the intense Egyptian heat that was responsible for melting the cast-iron defenses that Joanna had erected since the end of her marriage! However, there wasn't any future in a no-strings affair--no matter how much she ached for Alex..

CHAPTER ONE

'ALL right, I give up—I'm lost.'

Alex Marshall grinned wryly—half an hour alone in the Egyptian desert, and already he was reduced to talking to himself! He wasn't a man who was given to conceding defeat easily, but the road that was quite clearly marked on the map as a single, straightforward route now divided into two, and there was no clue to tell him which one he should take.

Standing up behind the wheel of the dusty Land Rover, he lifted his binoculars and scanned the surrounding landscape. The morning sun was rising rapidly into the hot blue sky, baking the yellow hills and tumbled scree to oven temperatures. Neither man nor beast could survive out here for long...

So it came as quite a shock to realise that he wasn't alone; he was being watched, from close quarters. She had risen like a mirage out of the rocks at the side of the road, the very last thing he would have expected to see in this God-forsaken wilderness—a cool English blonde.

His first thought was that she had a great pair of legs— they started somewhere down in the desert, and ended in paradise, and were clad in a pair of faded, dusty denim jeans that fitted their slender length so well she looked as if she'd been born in them. He couldn't wait to get a look from the back.

The T-shirt that topped them was just as nicely filled, but the eyes that glittered at him from beneath the brim of a floppy cotton sun-hat were the sort that could flash and turn you to ice, even if the thermometer—as now—was climbing way into the hundreds. Apparently she didn't welcome his appreciative survey.

'Hello.' He tried a smile, but somewhat to his surprise it didn't seem to have its usual effect. She had put her sunglasses on again, but he could still feel the frost from that steady gaze. 'I... seem to be having some difficulty with my map. Could you tell me how far I am from *Taqato al qabrin*?'"

'You're there.'

'Here?' He glanced around in surprise. There seemed to be nothing but a jumble of rocky outcrop. 'Where? I don't see any village?'

'It isn't a village. In Arabic, *Taqato al qabrin* means Crossroads of the Tombs.'

'Oh...' He looked up at her, a little puzzled by the frigid hostility in her tone. Granted, his initial appraisal had been rather too obvious, but with a shape like that she must surely be used to an occasional crass male reaction.

But apparently she was the type who didn't much care for the male reaction, he reflected, studying her more discreetly. Pity —she could have been quite a looker if she made the effort.

He'd put her in her late twenties, five-ten in her stockinged feet, and certainly not above a hundred and twenty pounds. She wasn't wearing a scrap of make-up, and the

strands of hair straggling from beneath her battered hat had been bleached to straw by the sun.

And the way she was standing there, feet aggressively apart, hands on hips, was positively masculine. But the impression created by the strong brow and determined chin was somewhat belied by a very pretty nose, and a hint of soft vulnerability about her mouth.

Alex frowned. Just what was a lone Englishwoman doing out here in the middle of nowhere anyway? In all his discussions with the Ministry of Industry and Resources in Cairo she hadn't been mentioned—he had been given to understand that the area was completely unpopulated.

'Are you living out here?' he enquired quizzically.

She shook her head. 'Working,' was her terse response. He lifted one dark eyebrow. 'I'm an archaeologist.'

Ah—that might explain a number of things! It appeared that she was better informed than he was. 'I didn't know there were any archaeological sites in the area,' he remarked, trying hard to win even just the shadow of a smile.

'Well, there is,' she retorted, not unfreezing by one degree.

'I see.' He switched off the ignition of the Land Rover, and climbed out. 'Mind if I take a look?'

As he moved towards her, she stepped quickly back, defences bristling. He slanted her a look of sardonic humour; if she was worried about him, what was she going to make of a mining-camp housing upwards of fifty men plonked right on her doorstep? Mind, she looked more than capable of taking care of herself, he reflected drily—he'd back her against a bunch of sex-starved quarry-men any day of the week!

But as she turned her back on him and began to climb up over the scree, that rear view, lovingly hugged by the fading denim, was everything he had anticipated. It was fortunate, perhaps, that he was going to be rather too busy to think about women while he was here—he found the challenge in those blue eyes really quite intriguing.

Which was really slightly crazy, he told himself with a hint of self-mocking amusement—he had never been attracted to that prickly, aggressive type; he liked his women sweet and soft and feminine. The heat must be getting to his brain!

He was a week early; April, the Department of Antiquities had told her, and it was still only March. Joanna felt a knot of angry frustration twist in her stomach. There was still months of work to do to excavate the tombs properly, and soon it would be too hot to work at all—and by the time the weather began to cool again, in September or October, the whole side of the valley would have been reduced to rubble, ripped apart for the extraction of the valuable mineral ore in the rocks.

They would never have done this to her father, she reflected bitterly. Maybe she should swallow her pride after all, and ask him to pull strings for her, while there was still time. He would do it, of course; naturally he had been ready to offer any help she needed with her 'ink project'.

Her mouth twisted into a wry smile. Maybe he couldn't help it, but his attitudes were as ancient and dusty as the mummies he was such an expert on. The illustrious Professor Julian Holloway, renowned Egyptologist and Fellow of the Royal Society, was a plain old-fashioned chauvinist, and just couldn't imagine why his only daughter might want to establish a name for herself in her own right.

To be honest, it wasn't the most important dig in the world. There were hundreds—thousands—of ancient tomb-sites scattered along the banks of the Nile, and there was no reason to suppose this one would have escaped the attentions of grave-robbers when even most of the those in the Valley of the Kings, a little way further downriver, had been comprehensively stripped of all their treasures. The only reason she'd been granted permission to excavate them was that they were about to be destroyed.

She hadn't expected Alexander Marshall himself to show up, especially alone and in a battered old Land Rover. She had recognised him at once, of course—he was rarely out of the news, if not for his ruthless business dealings then for his outrageous private life. He had even been prepared to shove his own father and elder brother aside to gain control of his company—and the scandal of his divorce, and his numerous affairs, had been a staple of the tabloid front pages for years.

It was obvious how he had earned his reputation, she mused, slanting him a covert glance from behind the useful defence of her dark sunglasses. He had put his own sunglasses on now, but the way he had looked at her before had made her feel... as if she wasn't wearing any clothes.

He was perhaps even better-looking in the flesh than in those fuzzy black and white newspaper pictures, she acknowledged with some reluctance—the camera couldn't really do justice to those strong-boned, aquiline features, or catch the crisp curl of his dark hair.

But there was no mistaking his arrogance, nor his ruthlessness—it was written into every cynical line of that hard mouth. And though he was a good many years younger than her father—the newspapers had him down as thirty-five—she would guess that he was just as much of an obdurate chauvinist.

They reached the top of the low rise that hid the tombs from the road. The dark, gaping tomb-entrances were in two rows, six on the lower level, three above, carved deep into the weathered yellow limestone of the hill. She gazed at them with a sharp twinge of regret; three and a half thousand years they had been here, and now in a few more weeks they would be gone. .

Alex glanced around the bleak site, one dark eyebrow lifted in faint surprise. 'Who's in charge of the dig?' he enquired.

Joanna's eyes glittered with icy anger; she might have known he would assume that it would be a man in charge. 'I am,' she ground out.

He smiled in wry apology. 'I see. Have you found anything interesting?'

She shrugged her slim shoulders. 'No spectacular caches of gold, if that's what you mean,' she conceded reluctantly. 'This site is nothing like as grand as the ones up in the Valley of the Kings. But it's telling us a great deal about the day-to-day lives of the ordinary people— what they ate, how they prepared their food, how they organised their households. We could probably find out a lot more...' She slanted him a look of bitter resentment. 'But of course, now that you've arrived, we won't get the chance.'

He lifted one dark eyebrow in quizzical enquiry. 'I gather from that remark that you know who I am?'

'Of course.' She injected her voice with several degrees of frost. 'Mr Makram from the D of A warned me you'd be coming—though I wasn't expecting you until next month.'

'I'm sorry,' he responded on an inflection of sardonic humour.

Joanna felt her palm itch-to slap that arrogant face. He was just mocking her; he knew full well that there was nothing she could do to prevent him starting work on his contract whenever he liked.

'Well, if you've seen enough, please excuse me,' she rapped tautly, turning him an aloof shoulder. 'I'm afraid I have a great deal of work to do.'

Unfortunately the dignity of the effect was somewhat marred when she missed her footing on the rough ground, and slipped. A strong hand caught her instantly, like a vice around her arm.

'Careful,' he advised smoothly. 'If you broke your ankle out here you could be in big trouble.'

A sudden rush of heat flowed through her, and she felt her heartbeat skip oddly. 'Th... thank you,' she managed, her voice a little unsteady. 'I'm perfectly well able to take care of myself.'

'Really? I'm glad to hear it.' He let go of her arm. 'I'd like to take a look at these tombs of yours—if you'd be so kind as to show me?'

She slanted him a look of wary suspicion, sceptical of the interest he was showing. But if there was the slightest chance... She would very much have preferred not to have had to spend any more time in his company, but if she could persuade him to delay starting his quarrying, even for just a few weeks, it would be worth it.

'All right,' she conceded somewhat ungraciously. 'This way. You'll have to mind your head—the roof's quite low.'

She led him down the slope, and into the second tomb on the lower level—the best one they had found so far. Picking up her torch, she shone the beam to light the way down the narrow passage carved into the living rock. Every time she came here, she felt again that sense of awe for all the timeless ages that had passed since men had first hewn out this place; just touching the rough walls, she felt as though she was making some kind of tenuous link with those long-past generations.

'Careful,' she warned. 'It's a steep slope, but it's not far to the bottom. We've put in a rope hand-grip to help. Wait here till I get down, then I'll shine the torch for you.'

She clambered carefully down, and then called up for him to follow, playing the torch-beam on the rough-hewn ground underfoot as he edged his way after her. He was so tall that he had to bend almost double to avoid hitting his head on the roof. As he reached the bottom and straightened beside her, Joanna found herself suddenly a little breathless—but then it was always rather hot and airless down here.

She flashed the torch around the walls, showing him the paintings, thousands of years old but so incredibly well-preserved that they could have been painted only yesterday. 'This is the first chamber,' she explained, a hint of proprietorial pride in her voice. 'We think it was built for a local viceroy of the eighteenth dynasty—that would put it at about the fourteenth-century BC. The decoration is typical of the period.'

'Very nice.' He sounded genuinely impressed. He reached out his hand to touch the hieroglyphics carved into the rock. 'I wonder what these mean?'

"Behold Osiris, the scribe of the holy offerings of all the gods. Worship to thee who has come as Khepera, as the creator of the gods," she read fluently. ' "Thou risest, thou shinest, making bright thy mother, crowned as king of the gods."

He glanced down at her in astonishment. 'You can read it?'

She felt a stab of annoyance; did he think she was some kind of amateur? 'Of course,' she responded coolly. 'It's an inscription from the opening chapter of the *Book of the Dead*. The painting is of the funerary procession; the mourners are bringing offerings of food and spices to sustain the spirit on its journey to heaven.'

'I see.' He studied the mural, a faint smile curving his mouth, and Joanna felt suddenly uncomfortable as she guessed what he was thinking; most of the figures were draped in a white cloth that had been painted to appear almost transparent. 'Rum lot, those ancient Egyptians,' he remarked; he had

removed his sunglasses, and in the glimmer of the torchlight she could see the glint of mocking humour in his dark eyes. 'Did they dress like that all the time?'

She forced herself to return him a long, cool look— it was rather disconcerting to have him standing so close, so tall and wide-shouldered and so...uncompromisingly male. 'Most of the murals of that particular period appear to show a similar style of clothing,' she responded with frosty dignity. 'Would you like to see the burial-chamber?' He nodded, and she shone the torch- beam across the floor. 'Be careful here—there's a robber-trap. I'll cross first, and then hold the torch for you.'

The trap was a deep pit that opened right across the passage. Investigation had revealed it to be about twenty feet deep, but as a deterrent to grave-robbers it clearly hadn't been too successful—the burial-chamber, when they had reached it, had long ago been looted of its treasures.

They had placed a plank across it, weighed down with sandbags, to make a bridge, and she skipped nimbly across, and then waited for him to follow her. The beam of the torchlight threw his shadow against the far wall, huge and menacing, and she felt her mouth go suddenly dry. They were all alone down here, and the nearest village was five miles away...

She stepped back quickly as he reached her side of the plank-bridge, hoping he wouldn't hear her heartbeat pounding. 'This is the burial-chamber,' she announced, her voice sounding oddly unsteady to her own ears. 'We found the remains of the sarcophagus, and a few bits of the canopic jars, but all the rest had been stolen.'

'A pity.'

Was it just her imagination, the way he was looking at her? She retreated a little further into the chamber. 'Unfortunately, all the other tombs we've found so far have been in the same state,' she rushed on. 'We were hoping to at least find something that would identify the occupants, but unless we can find a sarcophagus still intact it doesn't seem very likely.'

'How many more tombs are there?' he enquired. His tone was quite neutral, but the way he was standing there, his wide shoulder propped against the wall, gave her the uncomfortable feeling that he was barring her way out.

'I... I don't know for sure. We've found nine so far, but there could be more.'

'We...?'

She hesitated, wondering if it was quite wise to let him know how unprotected she was out here. But he would find out anyway soon enough. 'Just... myself and my assistant, Annette.'

He arched one dark eyebrow in surprised question. 'Just two women?'

'Yes.' She felt a flood of heat rush through her. 'We're perfectly capable of undertaking a project like this.'

'Oh, I'm sure you are.' There was no mistaking that faint hint of mockery. 'But isn't it rather heavy work?'

'Not with modern equipment.' She was beginning to find his proximity a little too much to cope with. Mustering as much dignity as she could, she moved past him, back towards the plank-bridge. 'Well, that's all there is to see, I'm afraid...' And if he so much as tried to touch her, he would find out just how strong six months of humping great big stones around had made her.

But he made no untoward move, merely following behind her as she stepped across the plank-bridge and scrambled up the slope to emerge into the bright glare of the Egyptian sun. She drew in a long, deep breath, feeling a little foolish now for letting him unsettle her like that for what had really been no reason.

'Well... As I said, all the others we've found so far are in much the same condition.' She felt much calmer now—it must have just been an unexpected attack of claustrophobia. 'But we've started to dig lower down— we think there may be another level below this one.'

'And how long would it take you to find out?'

She glanced up hopefully, searching his face, but all she could see was her own reflection in his sunglasses. 'Oh, about... three months,' she suggested tentatively.

'We'd have to finish by the end of June anyway—it would be much too hot to carry on by then.'

'I see.' He shook his head with what she could almost have taken for genuine regret. 'Well, I'm sorry, but I won't be able to give you that long. We've a contract to meet. We start blasting in three weeks.'

She stared at him in startled horror. '*Blasting?* You mean you're going to use *dynamite?*'

That oddly intriguing mouth quirked into a mocking smile. 'Well, what did you think we were going to use?' he taunted. 'Picks and shovels?'

She returned him an angry glare, not amused by his humour. 'You're just going to blow everything up?' she demanded, blazing.

'Well, not quite as drastic as that,' he conceded. 'But modern quarrying methods are pretty efficient.'

'It's nothing but licensed vandalism!' she flared. 'You're just going to destroy all that history...'

'The decision isn't mine,' he pointed out drily. 'It's the Egyptian government's. The country needs the foreign exchange that exporting the ore will bring in. You can't eat history, or put it on your kid's feet instead of a pair of shoes.'

She felt her fist clench. He was perfectly right, of course—but she'd be damned if she was going to admit it. 'Well, since I have so little time, I'd better not waste any more of it,' she rapped, a bite in her voice. 'Good morning, Mr Marshall.'

That cynical mouth curved into a mocking smile. 'Thank you for showing me around,' he drawled. 'I shall probably be seeing you again, Miss... ? Or is it Mrs?'' he added, deliberately provocative.

'Ms.' Why, three years after her divorce, was she still so defensive? 'Holloway.'

He acknowledged the stilted introduction with a slight inclination of his head. 'I see. Well, Ms Holloway, it's been very pleasant meeting you. I'm sorry my arrival signals the end of your work here—I can imagine how frustrating that is for you.'

She found that he was holding out his hand, expecting her to shake it, but with a sudden rush of embarrassment she remembered how rough her own hands were from all the work and neglect she had been subjecting them to for the past six months, how damaged her nails.

'Yes, well...' Instinctively she tucked her hands out of sight behind her back. 'There's nothing much I can do about it, is there?'

'No, I'm afraid there isn't.' Again that mocking smile. 'Goodbye, then.'

'Goodbye.'

She watched him go, her mind a tangle of confusion. Why had she acted like that down in the tomb—like some prim little schoolroom miss? Had she been too long out here in the desert, that she had forgotten how to respond when a man showed her even a spark of admiration? He must have thought she was crazy.

Or more likely, she reflected ruefully, that she wasn't accustomed to it. She twined one finger around the strand of hair that had slipped from beneath her hat, feeling the rough, dry ends; she had neglected it terribly these past couple of months—out here in this hot, dusty climate she really ought to take better care of it. And her hands were just awful—she couldn't remember the last time she had given herself a manicure.

Not that she cared a damn what he thought of her, she reminded herself forcefully. She didn't want him here. Unfortunately there was nothing much she could do about it—Mr Makram had made it clear, when he had arranged for her to be granted the licence to explore the tombs, that she couldn't be allowed to hold up the mining of the mineral ores, so essential to the country's economy.

Well, if she only had a short time, she had better get on, she scolded herself, dismissing all thoughts of Alex Marshall with a shrug of her slim shoulders. She had no intention of letting any man—least of all one with a reputation like the boss of Marshall Mining and Marine—distract her from her objective.

'Oh, just my luck, that he should come while I wasn't here!' Annette protested, gurgling with laughter. 'It isn't fair.'

Joanna grunted, her attention all on rigging a tripod for her camera, to photograph the wall-decoration in the last burial-chamber they had found. 'You didn't miss much,' she commented dismissively. 'Did you manage to get everything we needed?'

'Almost. The hypo-crystals haven't arrived yet—he said to try tomorrow.'

Joanna frowned impatiently. 'He said that yesterday,' she complained. 'We're nearly out, and we can't afford to wait—we've got to get everything finished before they start quarrying.'

Annette's brown pansy eyes sparkled with mischievous speculation. 'I wonder... Maybe we could persuade him to give us a few more weeks?'

'I very much doubt it,' Joanna responded a little too forcefully. 'He can't get in here quick enough with his bulldozers, and start smashing everything up. The only thing he cares about is his profits—he's not going to let anyone stand in his way.'

Annette looked a little startled by the venom of her reaction. 'What's wrong?' she asked innocently. 'Didn't you like him?'

Joanna slanted her young assistant a sardonic smile. Still of the age to believe in romantic dreams, Annette had been drooling for weeks over the prospect of meeting the celebrated Alex Marshall in the flesh. And if anyone could succeed in melting that rock-hard heart, she reflected with an odd twinge of an emotion she didn't care to explore too deeply, it could well be Annette. Small and extremely pretty, with a cloud of dark curly hair and huge brown eyes, fringed by the longest, silkiest lashes, she could wind almost any man around her little finger.

But Joanna felt a certain responsibility for her; after all, she wasn't even twenty-one yet, and she was here to complete the field-course portion of her degree, not to flirt with a man as dangerous as Alex Marshall. 'I...hardly had time to form an opinion,' she responded, taking a slightly flexible approach to the truth. 'He was only here for a few minutes.'

'Yes, but what was your first impression?' Annette persisted eagerly.

Joanna shrugged her slender shoulders, hoping to convey the most supreme indifference. 'He seemed rather too full of himself for my taste,' she dismissed casually.

Annette regarded her with naive sympathy. 'You've never really fancied anyone much, though, since your divorce, have you? Oh, I'm sorry...' she rushed on anxiously as Joanna's jaw tensed. 'I shouldn't have mentioned it... I...'

Joanna laughed drily. 'Don't worry about it,' she assured her, all her attention on checking the focus of the camera. 'I certainly don't. I was very well rid of the rat, and I have no intention of falling into the same trap ever again.'

'You mean...you don't ever want to get married again?' the younger girl protested, aghast at such a prospect.

'No, thank you,' Joanna asserted with calm certainty. 'Marriage isn't all it's cracked up to be, I'm afraid. I much prefer being single.'

'You can see the strata the ores are in,' Alex pointed out, sweeping his powerful binoculars along the ridge of yellow hills on the far side of the valley. 'It runs right along—that line of slightly darker rock.'

His young companion nodded. 'I see it. What were the final results of the drilling tests?'

'Most of the ore is very high grade,' Alex confirmed, rolling out the large-scale map on the bonnet of the Land Rover. 'We'll start blasting here, beneath that outcrop to the left, and work our way along this way.'

Greg bent his fair head over the map, checking the contours of the hills against the area Alex had marked. 'I see. Where do you intend setting up the work-camp?'

'Where would you suggest?' Alex returned to him.

Greg frowned, concentrating. Newly qualified with an engineering degree, he felt it was important to make a good impression; Alex wasn't the sort to do him any favours just because he was his cousin. 'I'd say.. just there.' He pointed to an area closest to the river, at the opposite end of the ridge from where blasting was to begin, and lifted his binoculars to check that it was as suitable as it appeared from the map.

It looked a pretty inhospitable place—a rough, rocky, sun-baked hillside, with just a few straggling thorn bushes and some parched grass for vegetation. The back door of hell. He swung the glasses along the ridge, and then back again abruptly. 'What's going on down there?' he asked, focusing in to take a better look.

Alex felt himself tense with unreasoning annoyance. So the damned girl was proving a distraction already! 'I forgot to mention it,' he remarked dismissively. 'I just found out about it last week. There's some female doing an archaeological dig. Don't worry—it won't be a problem to us. I checked with Makram—she's only got permission to stay until we're ready to start blasting.'

'You forgot to mention it?' Greg slanted him a quizzical glance. 'You run into an angel like that out here in this God-forsaken place, and then forget all about it? Pull the other one.'

Alex raised one dark eyebrow in surprise; 'angel' was hardly the word he would have chosen. He lifted his own binoculars, sweeping along the ridge to find the half-hidden hollow where the tombs were clustered. But there was no sign of the aggravating Ms Holloway—just one of Greg's pint-sized brunettes, squatting on the ground, mending the handle of an old shovel. He vaguely recalled that there had been some mention of an assistant, but he couldn't remember her name. 'That's not her...'

At that moment she emerged from the entrance of the tomb. As he watched, she reached up for a rope suspended from a block and tackle, and began to haul on it. God, she must have muscles on her like a navy, he reflected in horror—a man could get quite a shock trying to cuddle up to that at night!

'There she is,' he told Greg. 'The one in the yellow T-shirt.'

Greg looked, but didn't seem impressed. 'You can keep that one,' he accorded generously. 'I'll take the brunette.' He let his gaze linger for a long time. 'Mmm— very nice indeed.'

Alex laughed with sardonic humour. 'You're supposed to be here to work, not admire the scenery,' he reminded him drily.

Greg grinned sheepishly. 'Sorry. But there's no harm in getting to know our neighbours, is there? After all, I'm the one that's going to be stuck out here doing all the hard work—you'll just be buzzing in and out in your little toy helicopter, looking important.'

Alex snorted at that friendly dig at his pride and joy, his Bell Jetranger, which he piloted himself. 'The privilege of rank,' he returned loftily. 'Besides, they won't be here much longer—once we start blasting, they'll have to clear out.'

He lifted his binoculars again, watching the girl as she finished hauling up a trolley-load of rubble, and tipped row All that heavy work certainly kept her in good trim, he reflected, somewhat revising his earlier opinion. Most of the women he knew dieted to the point of tedium, and spent hours working out in aerobics classes, but any one of them would have killed for a shape like that.

But he had an unpleasant suspicion that she was going to prove herself to be a damned nuisance—she seemed perfectly capable of launching a campaign to delay him until she had finished excavating her precious tombs. He lowered the binoculars, and swung himself behind the wheel of the Land Rover.

'Come on—if you've seen all you need to see out here we might as well be getting back to town,' he grunted impatiently. 'I've got some calls to make.'

Greg glanced at him faint surprise, but climbed into the passenger seat beside him. 'Right-ho,' he agreed easily. 'Although... it wouldn't hurt just to stop on the way and take a closer look at the bottom of that ridge,' he added with a wolfish grin.

Alex slanted him a look of ironic amusement. 'Strictly business, of course?'

'Oh, of course.'

CHAPTER TWO

'THERE'S a Land Rover coming this way—the same one that went past an hour ago.' Annette stood up straight, shading her eyes with her hand as she peered along the dusty road. 'I wonder who it is?'

Joanna barely glanced around as she checked the balance on the block and tackle they had rigged above the tomb entrance. 'I've no idea,' she responded with a careful lack of interest. It had been a week since her unfortunate encounter with Alex Marshall, but she had known it wouldn't be long before he was back.

Of course, it might *not* be him in the Land Rover, but there wasn't much reason for anyone else to be driving along that rough track through the desert—it didn't lead anywhere but to an old oasis, long deserted since the water had dried up.

'There's two of them,' Annette announced. 'I think one of them's Alex Marshall himself!'

There was a lilt of excited anticipation in her friend's voice, and Joanna felt an odd little stab of something she didn't care to put a name to. If Annette should succeed where she had failed in persuading him to delay the start of his operations, it would be all to the good.

'He's going to stop.' Annette swiftly brushed the dust from her shorts, and pushed her hair back tidily from her face. 'At least it's nice of him to say hello.'

Joanna snorted derisively, refusing to leave her task. If Annette chose to make the effort to be pleasant to the arrogant Mr Marshall, that was up to her—all she hoped was that she would retain enough common sense not to let that smooth charm turn her head; she had no confidence at all that he would have any scruples about taking advantage of her youth and innocence to entertain himself.

She took the rope, and wrapped it around her hands, and began to pull. She had loaded the trolley a little more than some of the others, and it was maybe a little too heavy for her to lift on her own, without Annette to help, but there was a certain vicious satisfaction in meeting the physical challenge. Gritting her teeth, she felt it begin to budge.

It was just an odd prickle of awareness that warned her that he was watching her. She did her best to ignore it, but it would have taken a stronger will than she possessed to resist the temptation to slant just one covert glance in the direction of the Land Rover.

He sat resting his arms across the steering-wheel, a faint smile curving that cynical mouth as he responded to Annette's flirtatious advances. He was wearing those dark sunglasses again, so it was impossible to be sure of exactly which way he was looking—and she certainly wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of thinking it bothered her in the slightest. Turning him an aloof shoulder, she continued hauling up the sack of rubble.

She had managed to raise the heavy trolley to the top of the wooden ramp they had rigged at the entrance to the tomb, to make it easier to tip the rubble out into the wheelbarrow, when she sensed that he had come up behind her. He leaned casually against the rock wall at the entrance to the tomb, regarding her with a faintly mocking smile. 'Isn't that a bit too heavy for you?' he enquired, deliberately provocative.

She returned his look with a frosty glare. 'Not at all,' she responded, tying up the rope and manoeuvring the wheelbarrow into place. The front-panel of the trolley was designed to lift out, allowing the contents to pour out easily.

He laughed softly. 'You're a very independent lady, aren't you?' he taunted.

'Very.' The wheelbarrow was awkward to manage, but she'd be damned if she'd concede, with him standing there watching her. Somehow she managed to trundle it over to the dump and tip out the rubble, struggling to ignore him; but it wasn't easy—she could feel the heat of his gaze with every move she made.

There had been a time, a long time ago, when she might have been flattered by that sort of interest from such an attractive man. Brought up to believe that a woman's role was to be pretty and pleasing, and not to threaten the fragile male ego in any way, she had seen marriage as the only goal a woman needed in life. She had taken her university degree simply as a way of passing the time, and her father had been delighted when she had married one of his brightest young proteges.

Real life had come as a rude awakening. Happy only to be helping her husband, she had been merely puzzled at first to find that she was the one doing most of the research, while he took all the credit. It had dawned on her only slowly that she was being used to advance his career, but with that realisation had come the stirring of her own ambition.

Paul hadn't liked it, of course, when she had started to assert a little independence; he had done all he could to keep her in what he saw as her place—he had even sunk so low as to try to persuade her to have a child, and when she had refused he had called her an unfeminine bitch. And then he had compounded the humiliation by starting an affair with one of her oldest friends.

The divorce had been painful, but at least she was older now, and wiser—too wise to fall for a man like Alex Marshall. Her defences had been erected with care. The first of them was her deliberate neglect of her appearance—which made it all the more disconcerting that he seemed not to have noticed that her hair was such a mess, her clothes old and work-worn. If the newspapers were anything to go by, he usually went for the sleek, well-groomed sort—models and actresses, mostly. But she sensed that he was the kind of man who would always have an eye for a woman, even if she was dressed in a sack.

He watched her walk back from the tip, trundling the barrow. 'How's it going?' he enquired. 'Found anything interesting yet?'

Joanna slanted him a suspicious glance from behind her sunglasses. The remark seemed casual enough, as though he was merely making conversation—except that she doubted Alex Marshall ever made casual conversation without having some ulterior motive. He was probably

concerned that if she came across something really valuable the Egyptian government might change its priorities and allow her to continue the dig.

'We're still clearing the passage into the burial- chamber,' she returned warily. 'It'll be at least a week before we can get through.'

'I checked with your friend Mr Makram from the Department of Antiquities,' he informed her, a definite hint of steel underlying his bland tone. 'He confirmed that your licence was only granted on the condition that you vacate the site as soon as I declare it unsafe.'

'I'm perfectly well aware of that,' she responded with icy dignity, all her attention on unravelling the rope, which had somehow got itself tangled around the pulley. Damn—the thing *would* be just a fraction too high for her to reach! She balanced herself somewhat precariously across the tomb entrance, stretching up on tiptoe, all too acutely aware that her T-shirt, which admittedly had seen better days, had parted company with the waistband of her jeans, permitting him a tantalising glimpse of her slim, suntanned midriff.

He came over, reaching up easily and freeing the rope. Again she felt that sudden sense of vulnerability as he brushed against her, and she breathed the musky male scent of his skin. She stepped back, struggling to control the ragged beating of her heart.

'Th... thank you,' she managed, her voice sounding oddly unsteady to her own ears.

'Don't mention it...'

There was a strange huskiness in his tone, as if he too had been affected by that fleeting touch. She lifted her eyes to look up at him and found him looking down at her. Something was weaving a spell around them, holding them both in a kind of thrall...

'Where are you staying?' he enquired softly.

All of a sudden red lights and alarm-bells started going off frantically inside her head; that question, in her experience, had all too frequently been the prelude to a request for a date. Instinctively she retreated on to the defensive. 'Why do you want to know?' she countered jaggledly.

At once that smile took on a sardonic twist—whatever she had seen, or thought she had seen, was gone. 'Simply out of concern for your safety,' he returned drily. 'I wouldn't like to think you'd be out here after dark. I'll be moving my men out here over the next couple of weeks, and while I can guarantee that they'll be kept too busy during the day to even think about a woman, once that whistle blows their time's their own.'

She glared up at him in angry defiance, her hands on her hips. 'Are you trying to intimidate me, Mr Marshall?' she challenged.

'I wouldn't dream of it, Ms Holloway,' he returned, placing a mocking emphasis on the title she had insisted on. 'I was simply making you aware of the situation. There's more than one reason why this site may be considered unsafe for you.'

'Thank you,' she responded tartly. 'I'll try and remember that.'

'I would if I were you.' Now his voice held an unmistakable warning. 'I don't like people trying to stand in my way.'

'So I've heard.' She allowed a sardonic edge to creep into her own voice. 'Whoever they are.'

'Oh?' He arched one dark eyebrow in mocking enquiry, knowing exactly what she meant. 'You've taken an interest in my past career?'

'Who could miss it?' she retorted with cool disdain. 'You seem to have a flair for publicity.'

'Not intentionally. And you shouldn't believe everything you read in the papers.'

'Oh? You mean it's all a pack of lies?'

He laughed without humour. 'Well, not quite,' he conceded. 'Let's just say the tabloid version tends to be somewhat economical with the facts.'

She slanted him a sceptical glance. Maybe that was true, to some extent; but there was no mistaking his arrogance, or his ruthlessness—it was written into every line of that hard-boned, aquiline face. A small shiver ran through her. He was the kind of man who would get what he wanted—whatever he wanted. And he wouldn't be too particular about his methods.

She shrugged her slender shoulders in a gesture of indifference, turning her attention to setting up the trolley ready to bring up another load of rubble. 'Anyway, it's really no concern of mine..

'Ah, there you are!'

Joanna turned, startled, as Annette appeared, a fair-haired young man in tow—the one who had been in the Land Rover with Alex. Until that moment, she had completely forgotten that they were there.

'Sorry to have been so long,' Annette added, blithely unaware of any tension between the other two. 'I was just showing Greg the Nomarch's tomb. Greg, this is Joanna. Joanna—Greg Taylor.'

Joanna found herself shaking hands politely, murmuring some sort of greeting.

'Oh, by the way,' Annette added, oddly breathless, 'I've suggested that Greg and Alex might like to drop by and have dinner with us tonight. That's all right with you, isn't it?'

The words were casual enough, but there was a glow in Annette's brown eyes as she glanced up at the young man by her side that hinted that it was very important indeed that she should agree. And he seemed equally smitten, smiling down at her as if she were the embodiment of all his dreams.

So that was the way the river was running! Neither of them had wasted much time, Joanna reflected, with a wry twist of amusement. It looked like

a classic case of love at first sight. But it did place her in something of a quandary. The last thing she wanted was to have Alex Marshall come to dinner, but how could she possibly stand in the way of two such love-birds?

'Of course it's all right,' she forced out, her smile rather brittle. 'So long as they don't mind what they get—it's my turn to cook.'

'Oh... No, it's all right—I'll cook,' Annette offered quickly, her cheeks a pretty shade of pink. 'I wouldn't want to give you the extra work.'

Joanna interpreted this very astutely as Annette's understandable desire to show off her excellent cooking skills. She laughed with dry humour. 'All right—I'm more than happy to leave it to you.'

Annette's eyes signalled her thanks, but her manner towards Greg was breezy. 'Well, we'll see you tonight, then. We usually work here till quite late, so we don't eat till about nine. Will that be OK?'

'Yes, of course. Er.. it will, won't it, Alex?'

The older man shrugged his wide shoulders in a gesture of acceptance. 'Oh, I think we can manage it,' he confirmed lightly, the incipient smile that lingered at the corners of his mouth indicating that he was mildly amused by what was going on. 'Thank you for the invitation.'

Annette smiled up at him a little apprehensively; it was clear that, in spite of her earlier boldness, she found. Which was probably just as well, Joanna reflected drily; he'd eat her for breakfast.

As the other couple moved away, Alex turned to her. 'I hope it isn't too much trouble for you?' he enquired just a shade too solicitously—he *knew* how much of an effort it was going to cost her to sit through this meal.

'Of course not,' she returned, the hint of frost in her tone intended to warn him that even if the other two were hovering on the brink of romance, it changed nothing between them.

But he merely smiled with mocking humour. 'Then I shall look forward to it,' he murmured, impeccably polite. He held out his hand to her. 'Until tonight.'

Joanna hesitated, her heart suddenly fluttering in alarm at the thought of allowing those strong, sensitive fingers to enfold her own. But if she avoided the challenge, he would have scored some kind of victory. So she kept the touch fleeting, drawing back before he had time to capture her.

'Until tonight,' she concurred.

With a farewell nod, he swung himself into the Land Rover. 'Come on, Greg, we'd better get going—we've got a ferry to catch.'

The younger man had some difficulty tearing himself away, but with a last wave he too climbed into the Land Rover, and it disappeared down the road in a swirl of yellow dust. As soon as it was out of sight, Annette gave a little skip of joy, dancing in a circle.

'Oh, Jo...! Isn't *he gorgeous*? You do like him, don't you?'

Joanna smiled wryly. 'He seems very nice,' she agreed, trying not to sound too cynical. 'And he's certainly keen on you.'

'Do you really think so?' Annette's brown eyes betrayed all the soaring leap of her emotions. 'You're not

just saying that?'

Joanna gave her friend a playful hug. 'You'd have to be blind not to see it.' She felt a faint twinge of envy, recalling how she had once been so young and eager for life—before life had taught her some hard lessons.

'I had to invite both of them,' Annette added earnestly. 'It would have looked much too obvious just to invite Greg by himself. I didn't want him to think I was too forward. You didn't mind, did you?'

Joanna laughed, struggling to keep her grip on her sense of humour. 'Mind?' she responded, feeling rather as if she was drowning. 'Why on earth should I mind?'

'Oh... Is that all you've got to wear?'

Annette had spoken impulsively, and now she was trying to smile to soften the impact of her words. But Joanna was defiant. 'Of course—what's wrong with it?' she challenged, a hint of belligerence in her voice as she surveyed her own reflection in the chipped mirror screwed to the back of the door.

She had chosen, from the rather limited selection in her wardrobe, a plain white cotton shirt, cut like a man's, and a pair of loose brown cord trousers. She had tied her hair back at the nape of her neck with a green Paisley- print scarf, and her only concession to ornamentation was a loose, quilted waistcoat and a silver-buckled belt.

It was a deliberately unfeminine outfit—unlike Annette's swirling Indian-print skirt and pretty embroidered top. But then Annette would look dainty and feminine whatever she wore. And anyway, Joanna didn't have anyone to impress. 'It's just... I thought..Poor Annette was embarrassed, and Joanna hugged her, laughing teasingly.

'*You're* the one to shine tonight,' she reminded her. 'They're not coming to see me.'

Annette glanced up at her, frowning slightly. 'I don't know,' she mused. 'It struck me that Alex was more than a little interested in you.'

'I doubt it,' Joanna responded drily. 'I'm not exactly his type—he goes for raving beauties.'

'Oh, but... If only you'd make a little bit of effort...' Annette began to protest. But Joanna cut her off with a forceful shake of her head.

'No, thank you,' she insisted. 'It just leads to complications.'

A shadow of sympathy darkened Annette's sparkling eyes. 'Oh, Joanna—I wish... If only you could meet someone you really liked. Not all men are like your ex- husband, you know.'

'Oh?' Joanna chuckled teasingly. 'You're speaking from wide experience here, are you?'

Annette giggled. 'No, of course not. But you know, I never thought I'd meet anyone like Greg.'

'I've no doubt he's quite unique,' Joanna conceded, with a hint of sardonic humour. 'Unfortunately I'm finding that with every passing year I'm getting even more picky.'

'Oh, come on,' Annette protested indignantly. 'You talking as if you're about a hundred! You're not even thirty yet!'

'It's only another three months.' Joanna smiled, wryly conscious of how much older she felt. 'But even so, I can't see any man matching up to what I want.'

'What *do* you want?' asked Annette.

'Oh...' Joanna tipped her head on one side, musing. 'He'd have to have the sense of humour of Victor Borge, and the brains of Steven Hawking, and be as kind and caring as Bob Geldof... and as good-looking as Kevin Costner!'

Annette chuckled, her eyes dancing. 'You're not asking for much!'

'See what I mean?' Joanna countered.

'But there are *some* men like that,' Annette insisted, earnestly romantic, and then blushed a becoming shade of pink.

Joanna slanted her a teasing glance. 'Like Greg, for instance?' she enquired.

Annette blushed even deeper. 'Well...'

'Annie, you've only known him for ten minutes, at the outside,' Joanna reminded her with gentle concern.

'I know, but...' Annette's fine eyes took on a dreamy look. 'How long does it take?'

Joanna smiled wryly. 'Oh, about ten minutes,' she acknowledged, reflecting how easily she could have done the same, if bitter experience hadn't taught her to be more cautious. 'But just the same, take it slowly,' she warned anxiously. 'You don't know anything about him—I'd hate to see you get hurt.'

Annette's soft mouth trembled slightly, betraying how very vulnerable she was. 'I know,' she murmured. 'But...' The sound of a Land Rover pulling up outside sent all other thoughts spinning from her brain, and she rushed over to the window. 'It's him!' Love had thrown her into a panic. 'Do I look all right?' she pleaded, running back to the mirror to smooth her hair and her skirt, and fidget with the neckline of her pretty blouse.

'Oh... I'd better go and check on the dinner—will you let them in?'

'Of course I will.' Joanna smiled her reassurance. 'And don't worry—you look gorgeous. If he hasn't fallen in love with you already, it won't take him long.'

She had barely finished speaking when there was a rap on the door. Annette squeaked in alarm, and dived into the kitchen; Joanna was outwardly rather more casual as she strolled across the room, though her own instincts were urging her to hide too. But she had to survive this evening—for Annette's sake. She could still remember what it was like to be young and in love—though it seemed like a long time ago now.

Pausing to steady her nerves with a slow, deep breath, she pulled open the door. Greg was on the doorstep, his eyes alight with an eager expectancy that changed to an almost ludicrous disappointment when he saw Joanna standing there instead of Annette.

'Oh... Hello... How are you?' He was far too nice a young man to forget his manners completely, and his open smile won Joanna's heart; it was so totally obvious that he was every bit as besotted as Annette.

'I'm fine. Come on in,' she invited, taking pity on him. 'Annie's in the kitchen, checking on the dinner.'

'Oh... Well, perhaps I should...just go and see if she needs a hand, then, shall I?' he suggested earnestly.

'Good idea,' she agreed, tongue in cheek, noting with satisfaction the signs of the effort he had made to spruce himself up for this evening—a slight redness beneath his chin where he had shaved for the second time, a betraying pleat in his shirt where he had ironed it rather inexpertly.

He shot her a grateful grin, and darted across the room—leaving her alone to face the tall man who had walked in behind him.

'Good evening,' she managed, just the slightest trace of stiffness in her voice.

'Good evening.' That hard mouth was curved into a wry smile, acknowledging the position they both found themselves in, as gooseberries to the other couple.

He cast a brief glance around, and she followed his eyes, trying to see the tiny flat as he would see it. Close to the centre of town, in the heart of the tourist bazaar, it was above a narrow Aladdin's cave of a shop that sold everything from T-shirts printed with meaningless hieroglyphics to beautiful hand-engraved glass hubble-bubble pipes and copper tea-trays.

It was far from being a palace, though it was clean and comfortable enough for their needs. There were just two rooms, one of which they used as a bedroom, the other as a study, cluttered with books and papers and dusty finds from the tomb site waiting to be properly catalogued. The kitchen was little bigger than a cupboard, with an ancient gas stove and a huge old stone sink, and an occasional problem with scorpions for which they kept a jam-jar and a piece of cardboard ever ready.

The best feature was the wide balcony at the back, with a spectacular view over the floodlit ruins of Luxor Temple to the wide sweep of the Nile; Annette was trying to grow geraniums out there, not with any great deal of success. Tonight she had spread a red and white-checked tablecloth over the weathered wooden table, and they had pillaged one of the odd chairs from the study to make up enough to sit on.

'Nice place you've got here.'

'Thank you.' She returned him a sardonic look, knowing that the remark was mere politeness.

'Oh, by the way, we brought along a couple of bottles of wine.' He held it out to her. 'White—Greg brought red, to be on the safe side.'

'Fine—thank you.'

She glanced fleetingly at the bottle, recognising the label. It was a very good burgundy—a little extravagant to eat with such a scratch meal, perhaps, but then Alex Marshall looked like the kind of man who would expect a good wine whatever he was eating. Maybe it was just as well he'd brought his own, she reflected with a crisp touch of irony—the anonymous bottle of plonk they had bought from the shopkeeper downstairs had probably been standing around in the simmering Egyptian heat for the past six months, and would taste more like vinegar than anything else.

Alex strolled across the room, and out on to the balcony, standing balanced with his feet a little apart, his hands deep in the pockets of his khaki trousers, his wide shoulders square against the sky. 'Nice view,' he accorded casually.

'Yes.'

Joanna spared a glance for the brooding ruins of the temple, and the tranquil river beyond, glittering darkly beneath the desert moon. If she had been a romantic, she would have said there was something almost magical about the scene... But fortunately she had learned to control such flights of fancy a long time ago.

Well, if this was going to be the height of their conversation, it didn't bode particularly well for the evening ahead, she mused to herself as she moved across to the table, sitting down and folding her hands together on the cloth to stop them fidgeting.

Alex slanted her a smile of wry amusement. 'Have you managed to maintain any other topic of conversation this afternoon?' he enquired, nodding his head in the general direction of the kitchen.

Joanna glanced at him warily, not sure if an admission would be betraying Annette's confidence. But since he was being so frank, maybe she could afford to be too. 'Not for very long,' she admitted. 'Love's young dream, eh?'

He lifted one dark eyebrow in quizzical amusement. 'You sound a little cynical,' he remarked.

She shrugged evasively, glancing away. 'Oh, maybe,' she conceded. 'I suppose I've been around once too often.'

'Only once?' he enquired with a trace of ironic laughter.

'Once was enough.' She hoped her effort to sound light-hearted about it had come off, though she suspected he was far too perceptive to be deceived.

With a casual movement he hooked out a chair, and sat down at the far end of the table. 'You've been married?' he asked with a gentleness that surprised her a little.

'Once,' she managed.

'And divorced?'

'Three years ago.'

An awkward silence fell again. Joanna was already regretting that she had told him even that much about herself—she had intended to keep an impersonal distance between them. But there was something about this man that was very disruptive to her hard-won peace of mind; and there was no

way she could pretend that the way her heartbeat was racing at this moment was due to claustrophobia.

But to her relief, he chose to change the subject. 'Shall we make a start on the wine?' he suggested, reaching for the bottle.

'Oh... Don't you think we ought to wait for the others?' she suggested, her voice a little unsteady.

From the kitchen came the sound of merry laughter. 'If we wait for them, we could be waiting all night,' he remarked with perspicacity. He pulled a heavy-duty penknife from his pocket, and opened a corkscrew from among the various useful attachments folded into it. 'Be prepared,' he mocked himself mildly.

Joanna's lips quirked into a smile. 'You were a boy scout?' she enquired, daring to tease him a little.

He grinned, that hard face suddenly almost boyish. 'A long time ago.'

She propped her elbow on the table, resting her chin on her cupped hand, her blue eyes dancing. 'I can't imagine it,' she mused. 'Did you wear shorts and a woggle?'

Dark eyes twinkled with amusement at her across the table. 'Of course.' He took her glass and filled it. 'What shall we drink to?' he enquired, a lilt of light humour in his voice. 'Young love? Or wisdom and maturity?'

'Oh, the latter, I think,' she asserted wryly. 'It lasts much longer.'

He laughed in ironic agreement. 'Unfortunately, you're probably right.'

Joanna sat back in her seat, enjoying the rich, distinctive flavour of the wine. A few years in the wood had given it a mature subtlety that she found very pleasing, a smooth sweetness that lingered on the tongue, deeply satisfying.

It *was* a romantic evening, she acknowledged to herself. A slight breeze was rustling the leaves of the palm-trees along the riverbank, cooling the lingering warmth in the air. The sky was a velvet black, spangled with stars, and the water was smooth and dark, disturbed only by a few clumps of water-hyacinth that floated slowly downstream on the current. In the distance, music was playing—there must be a dance on board one of the cruise-boats moored at the ferry-stage.

'So, what happened with your marriage?' Alex enquired with the kind of sympathy that could only come from someone who had trodden the same rocky path.

'Oh...' She shrugged her slim shoulders in a gesture intended to convey a measure of indifference. 'The usual, I suppose. We were probably too young. It was fun for a while, but we were heading in different directions. Unfortunately the person he chose to head off with was my best friend at the time.'

'I see.'

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the sound of laughter from the kitchen. 'What about you?' she asked after a moment.

He swirled the wine around in his glass. 'Remarkably similar, as a matter of fact. Only in my case, it was my brother.'

'Oh...' She shifted under the weight of a heavy discomfort. Was that the brother he had displaced from the family firm? Had that been his revenge? But those were hardly the sort of questions she could ask him.

But he went on without a prompt. 'Like you, we were rather too young—I was twenty-three, she was twenty-one. And I had to be away a good deal of the time—I suppose in a way it was only natural for her to turn to my brother; he was a couple of years older than me, being groomed by my father to take his place as chair of the company. And they had similar tastes,' he added drily. 'Expensive cars, expensive clothes...'

She sipped her wine, her eyes studying that darkly handsome face. The only light on the balcony was the glow spilling out from the sitting-room—Annette had put a couple of candles ready in glasses, but they hadn't been lit yet. But the shadows did nothing to soften the arrogant lines of his features—if anything they lent him an almost... sinister air.

'But then... you became chairman instead, didn't you?' she enquired diffidently.

He nodded, a hint of hardness around his mouth. 'That's right,' he confirmed. 'Unfortunately, between them, my father and my brother were making quite a mess of things, so I had the board elect me instead. Then I bought them out.'

That brief, ruthless explanation sent a chill scudding down Joanna's spine. From the newspaper accounts, it had been shortly after his wife had left him for his brother that he had ousted both him and their father from the company. Whatever his rationalisations, the implication was clear—it had been an act of pure revenge.

She had been a fool to let the wine and the moonlight hill her into a dangerously unguarded mood, she chided herself warningly—she ought to have known better. This was a man who got what he wanted, and damn the consequences for anyone else. It would be wise not to let herself forget that, not for a second.

CHAPTER THREE

JOANNA took another sip of her wine. It was difficult to maintain her cool facade, with Alex Marshall sitting there on the other side of the table, still watching her with those enigmatic dark eyes. Was it a spark of genuine interest in her that she could see there? Or was he playing some kind of game with her, to try to prevent her holding up the mining operation?

She shifted edgily in her seat, glancing back over her shoulder. 'Those two are taking their time in the kitchen,' she remarked with a nervous laugh. 'We'll probably be lucky if we get fed at all tonight.'

But at that moment the other couple appeared, Annette blushing delightfully, her hair dishevelled, while Greg was managing to look both pleased with himself and a little sheepish at the same time. They were each carrying a large serving-dish, which they set down on the table.

'I'm sorry,' Annette apologised breathlessly. 'The rice got a little bit... overcooked.'

Alex's hard mouth quirked into a smile of ironic humour. 'So I see,' he commented, surveying the doughy sludge in front of him. 'Er... do I eat it with a fork or a spoon?'

Annette giggled. 'You might have to use a spoon, I'm afraid.' She sat down, her eyes sparkling up at Greg as he held her chair out for her. 'Oh... We left the wine in the kitchen...'

'Don't worry about it,' Alex put in. 'We might as well finish this one off first.'

He filled their glasses with the burgundy, leaning across to top up Joanna's glass before she realised he was going to. She accepted it without protest, but silently warned herself to be careful how much she drank; she needed to keep a cool head—just in case the love blossoming unmistakably between the couple on her left should prove to be contagious.

The rice really wasn't quite as bad as it looked—just a little soft—and Annette's lamb *kofta* was always delicious. She dimpled with pleasure at the fulsome compliments of the two men, but it was obvious whose praise meant more to her.

That was something of a relief to Joanna—she had wondered whether, once she had had a chance to see more of Alex, Annette's preference might begin to waver. But her manner towards him was characterised by the kind of politeness and respect that suggested that his thirty-five years appeared, from her mere twenty, to be a generation gap as wide as the Nile Valley.

This fact seemed to afford him some amusement. Watching him covertly from beneath her lashes, Joanna was a little surprised to realise that he had a real sense of humour; with Annette, and with his young cousin, there seemed to be no trace of that mocking cynicism. He had a very attractive laugh, too—deep and husky, lighting his eyes.

The table was lit by two candles, stuck in drinking glasses so that they wouldn't blow out, and their flickering light seemed to sculpt the strong bone-structure of his face, emphasising the intelligence written in his high forehead, the arrogant hook of his nose. He was wearing a casual linen shirt, and in the shadow of the open collar she could glimpse a few rough, dark hairs that curled at the base of his throat.

Her mouth seemed to have gone strangely dry. It was a long time since she had been so acutely aware of a man; after the break-up of her marriage, it was something she had taught herself to avoid. But there was something about Alex Marshall, an aura of power and raw masculinity, that couldn't be ignored.

Suddenly he caught her eye across the table, and, though they were five feet apart, she could feel the hypnotic power of that gaze holding her prisoner. She didn't seem able to look away, although she knew that he would see far too much—all the vulnerabilities that she would have preferred to keep hidden behind the brittle mask she customarily wore.

'... one in the Guimet museum that was wrapped in an old sail. But Joanna's the one you should really be asking—she's the expert on mummies. She's written papers about it.'

The sound of her own name brought Joanna back to earth, and she turned to her friend, as disorientated as if she had switched on the television in the middle of a programme. 'I.. I'm sorry?' she stammered.

'The Lyons Sailor,' Annette prompted innocently— she had been so absorbed in her conversation with Greg that she wouldn't have noticed if the sky had fallen in around her, let alone picked up the subtle undercurrents passing between the two other occupants of the table. 'Didn't they find out it was an old sail he was wrapped in?'

'Oh... Yes. They pieced all the strips together,' she explained to Greg, glad to feel herself on safe ground, dealing with the dusty facts of ancient history. 'It turned out to have been ripped from one large square piece of material, still with part of the rigging in it.'

'Didn't a lot of them have bad teeth?' Alex enquired, joining in the conversation.

Joanna nodded. 'Yes. Partly because the cereals in their diet were very coarsely ground, which would have caused a lot of wear. But many of the Pharaohs, in particular, had a lot of decay, which suggests that they ate a lot of sugar. It does tend to make it rather difficult to work out how old they were.'

'Don't they use carbon dating?' asked Greg.

'That's to find out *when* they lived, silly,' Annette corrected him with a teasing laugh. 'If they want to find out how *long* they lived, they have to examine the skeleton with X-rays—though even then it's hard to be sure...'

Joanna slipped back out of the conversation, sipping her wine, watching the young couple with affectionate humour. Greg was prompting Annette with questions, listening raptly to her answers, as if he had waited all his life to hear about the history of ancient Egypt.

It made her feel a little old, and maybe a little sad- she had learned too soon that love wasn't all it was cracked up to be. She just hoped that this promising romance wouldn't end in the same sort of disappointment she had found—she wouldn't wish that on anyone.

From beneath her lashes, she slid a covert glance towards Alex. He too was watching the younger couple, a glint of tolerant amusement in his eyes. Were his thoughts similar to her own? If they had met when they were younger, as naively open to taking a chance as

Annette and Greg, could that spark of physical awareness between them have ignited into a stronger flame?

With a small inward shrug, she dismissed the suggestion from her mind. She had decided a long time ago that it was foolish to waste her emotions on regrets and might-have-beens. And where Alex Marshall was concerned, she reflected with a hint of stern self- chastisement, it was probably just as well that she had had so many years to perfect her defences. She had had several warning glimpses already of how ruthless he could be.

Those brown eyes turned towards her, but this time she had no difficulty in meeting them coolly. 'Would you like coffee?' she enquired. 'I'm afraid we can't offer you anything stronger.'

'Coffee will be fine.' He rose to his feet. 'I'll give you a hand with the dishes.'

She was about to decline the offer, but his glance slid meaningfully towards the younger couple, wordlessly suggesting that it would be tactful to withdraw. A wry smile flickered at the corner of her mouth, and, with an almost imperceptible nod of her head, she betokened agreement. She wasn't at all keen on being alone with Alex in the kitchen, but if she had been Annette, she knew she wouldn't have welcomed company at this point. And besides, she told herself firmly, she could cope- she had had plenty of experience in keeping men like Alex Marshall at a proper distance.

Gathering up the plates she preceded him into the kitchen, and ran a careful measure of hot water into the washing-up bowl—water was precious out here in the desert, even with the Nile so close at hand, and the lavish habits

of home had had to be adjusted somewhat. 'Shall I put the kettle on?' Alex enquired helpfully.

'Yes—thank you. It's there.' She indicated with one soapy hand. 'The coffee's in the cupboard above it.'

He set out only two cups, and she slanted him an enquiring glance. 'I don't think those two will want coffee,' he explained, a flicker of dry humour in his voice. 'They're finishing off the wine.'

'Oh...' She nodded in immediate understanding, sharing with him a smile that acknowledged their benign conspiracy to leave the younger couple alone. But that meant she was going to have to entertain him on her own for a while. Aimlessly swirling the dishcloth around one of the plates, she struggled to find something to say to maintain the flow of light conversation. 'Have you been to Egypt before?'

'Frequently. We've got manganese extraction in the Sinai, and aluminum over by the Kharga oasis. Not rich deposits, but valuable for the Egyptian economy.'

The pointed look which accompanied his last words were an unnecessary reminder that he had no intention of allowing her to stand in his way. 'I suppose so,' she acknowledged, a wistful echo in her voice. 'It just seems such a shame that money has to come first all the time.'

He laughed without humour. 'Unfortunately, that's real life,' he reminded her brutally. 'Besides, do you really believe you're going to find anything important down there? There must be...oh, I don't know, hundreds—maybe even thousands—of those tombs scattered along the length of the Nile Valley. And most of them, as you said yourself, were stripped bare a long time ago. The odds of your coming up with anything really new must be pretty long.'

The fact that he was almost certainly right didn't help her temper. 'That's exactly the sort of remark I'd expect from you!' she flared at him. 'The Egyptian civilisation was the root of the whole of our history. Where do you

think the Greeks and the Romans got their ideas from? *Everything* we find out is important—however small.'

'Whoa!' He held up his hand to stop her flow, his eyes glinting with mocking amusement. 'There's no need to get on your high horse about it. Look, I sympathise with how you feel—I'm interested in what you're doing, and it would be nice to be able to preserve it. But unfortunately, when you're poor, history's a luxury you can't afford.'

'Very pious,' she rapped bitterly. 'And of course there's no harm in you raking in a nice little profit in the process.'

'We make a profit,' he conceded, a taut note of impatience creeping into his voice. 'But not an excessive one. We do a great deal of work in Africa—I prefer to keep my percentages low, and get more contracts. That way everybody wins—more foreign exchange for the country concerned, more employment, and I still make the same amount of money at the end of the day.'

She flashed him a look of simmering annoyance. But there was really nothing to be gained from arguing with him—he seemed to win every time. She had never met such an aggravating man in her entire life. He was leaning against the kitchen table now, his arms folded, his long legs crossed at the ankles, quite relaxed, but his presence seemed to dominate the small room. He was a taker, she reminded herself grimly—just like her ex-husband. And anyone who was foolish enough to give would get absolutely nothing in return. But when he smiled at her, offering a truce, she couldn't help but smile back; that smile did all sorts of crazy things to her heartbeat. 'So tell me, what made you decide to take up archaeology?' he enquired in a friendly tone.

She hesitated for a moment before replying; she would have preferred to have stayed angry with him—it felt safer that way. But it would have seemed merely bad manners to have refused to respond, so she shrugged her slim shoulders. 'Oh, following in my father's footsteps, I suppose.'

'He's an archaeologist too?'

She glanced up at him in surprise. 'Professor Julian Holloway?' she prompted on a note of cool irony.

Alex met that with a blank look. 'I'm afraid I've never heard of him.'

Joanna laughed with self-mocking humour. It had always seemed to her that *everyone* knew her father. But of course, he was only really famous in his own field—there was no reason why anyone outside the narrow confines of the archaeological world should know him.

Those dark eyes were smiling down at her. 'Have I put myself completely beyond the pale now?' he teased lightly.

'Oh... No, of course not,' she responded, suddenly a little breathless—that smile really was quite devastating at close-quarters. 'It's just... Most of the people I know are involved in archaeology, and I suppose it is a bit of a small world. It makes a change to meet someone from outside,' she added, conscious of the blush of pink rising to her cheeks.

He nodded in understanding. 'I suppose it's pretty much the same in my field,' he mused.

'Really?' Her blue eyes sparked with merriment. 'Those girls I've seen with you in the papers didn't look much like mining engineers.'

He rocked with laughter. 'No, I suppose not,' he acknowledged, chuckling. 'But for me it makes a change to meet a woman who isn't a model or an actress. It's quite refreshing.'

She glanced up, and found him looking at her in a way that made her mouth feel suddenly dry. He made a move towards her, and she tensed, instinctively defensive. But fortunately at that moment the kettle came to the boil, and whistled shrilly. With a wry smile, he turned his attention to making the coffee.

'Milk and sugar?' he enquired.

'No—neither.'

'Nor do I,' he remarked, bringing the two cups over. 'You see? We have something in common after all—even if it is only our taste in coffee.'

She took the mug he held out to her, careful not to allow herself to brush his hand or meet his eyes. She was finding it harder and harder to control her responses to him. In the confined space of the dingy little kitchen she was almost overpoweringly aware of that aura of raw masculinity that emanated from him. But she was determined not to let him see that he had any effect on her—he wouldn't hesitate to take advantage of it.

He had picked up a tea-towel and begun drying the plates she had washed, slotting them neatly back into the wooden rack above the sink. She slanted him a look of teasing humour. 'Well, this is unexpected,' she remarked lightly. 'The mighty chairman of Triple M, drying plates in a crumbling Egyptian apartment?' 'I make it a policy,' he responded, amused at her challenge, 'to be able to do anything I expect anyone else to do better than they could do it themselves.' He held up the plate to the light. 'There—see? Not a smear.'

'Excellent,' she approved. 'You must be a very demanding boss to work for.'

'Oh, I don't think so,' he demurred. 'I set high standards, and I suppose I don't suffer fools gladly, but people don't seem to mind. I've never had a strike, anyway.'

'Maybe that's just because no one would dare?' she suggested, her eyes dancing.

'Maybe.'

He was standing very close to her—so close that she was aware of the faint musky scent of his skin. And those dark eyes seemed to be spinning some kind of spell around her, holding her mesmerised. But she fought the treacherous weakness with every ounce of her will-power.

'Well, that's the washing-up done!' she remarked, her voice sounding artificially bright to her own ears. 'Thank you for your help.' She wrung out the dishcloth, laying it carefully over the taps to dry, and emptied the bowl,

and then she was able to pick up her coffee and move away, perching on the edge of the kitchen table. 'Your job must involve quite a lot of travelling?' she enquired, determined to make polite conversation.

'Quite a lot.' The glint of sardonic humour in his eyes warned her that he wasn't fooled by her cool demeanour. 'Though I'm hoping that as Greg comes more into the firm he'll be able to take on some of the load.'

'Isn't he rather young for that sort of responsibility?'

He shook his head. 'It won't hurt him. I won't load too much on to him to start with, of course, but he's a bright lad—and he's the same age as I was when I came into the business.'

'That's what I mean,' she argued, recalling what had happened to him. 'All that time he'd have to spend abroad...'

'But Greg isn't married,' he pointed out drily.

'Well, no, but...' Automatically her eyes turned in the direction of the balcony outside, suspiciously quiet now.

Alex laughed in ironic amusement. 'Running on a bit quickly, aren't you?' he remarked. 'They've only just met.'

Her eyes glittered defensively. 'I know,' she protested. 'But they seem...very fond of each other..'

'At that age, it's just puppy-love,' he asserted with brutal realism. 'They'll get over it.'

She stared up at him, stung by the harsh cynicism in his words. 'What if they don't?'

'Then they'll survive a few separations,' he responded evenly. He had put down the tea-towel, and as he moved towards her she found that she couldn't retreat. 'You know, you're quite the romantic, behind that mask of self-sufficiency you wear,' he taunted softly. 'Maybe you should let yourself

loosen up a little now and then—you might find there's more to life than dusty old Egyptian tombs.'

'I...' He seemed to be towering over her, and she felt herself compelled by a force stronger than gravity itself to look up into those dark, hypnotic eyes. Where were all her defences now, when she needed them? She was still holding her coffee-cup, but he took it firmly from her clenched fingers and placed it down on the table beside her. And then he put his hands around her slender waist, and drew her inexorably towards him. And as his head bent towards hers, she was helpless to evade him.

His mouth brushed over hers, lightly, experimentally, sending an uncontrollable shimmer of response running through her. He smiled slowly, and lowered his head again, the hot, moist tip of his tongue probing insistently, coaxing her lips apart.

She yielded by a millimetre, and then another, reluctant, but unable to counter the irresistible power of his will. It had been too long since she had let any man get this close. He was exploring all the sweet, secret depths of her mouth with a flagrant sensuality that was heating her blood like a fever, making her tremble like a teenager experiencing her first kiss.

He had curved her back against the kitchen table, so that every inch of her body was crushed against the hard length of his, and she felt a wanton stirring deep inside her. She had put up her hands against his shoulders, at first in instinctive defensiveness, but now she was clinging to him, thrilling to the sheer masculine power she could feel in the smooth muscles beneath her fingers.

He sensed her response, and the kiss became deeper, more demanding, his lips crushing hers with a fierce intensity that was as frightening as it was arousing. His hand had slid up to cup the ripe firmness of her breast, and she felt the tender nipple swell and harden beneath the brush of his thumb...

There was a sudden click, and the dim lightbulb suspended from the ceiling was extinguished, the buzz of the fan that provided a faint but welcome coolness to the room ceased. From the balcony there was a cry of surprise, and from downstairs the shouts of the shopkeeper-and his family, raised in

protest at the vagaries of the power-cables that supplied the house with electricity.

'Oh... It's a power-cut.' Joanna seized on the excuse to draw back out of Alex's arms, grateful for the reprieve—she was shaken with shock at the realisation of how swiftly things had been getting out of control. 'They happen all the time here.'

'Really?' In the hot darkness, the sardonic inflection in his voice conveyed his recognition of her panicked retreat. 'Perhaps I'd better go and see if I can help fix it.'

'Joanna?' Annette's voice came from the doorway. 'Are you OK?'

'Of course.' She hoped her voice didn't sound too unsteady. 'Mahmood will have it fixed in a couple of seconds...' Even as she spoke, the light came on, and the fan started up again. 'There!' she exclaimed triumphantly. 'No problem. How about coffee, you two?'

Alex glanced briefly at his watch. 'Not for us, thanks,' he said, slanting a look of sardonic apology at Greg, who was standing in the doorway, his arm openly around Annette's waist. 'We'd better be getting back to our hotel. Greg?'

The younger man grinned wryly. 'OK,' he conceded reluctantly. 'Coming.'

But not before bestowing on Annette a deep, lingering last kiss that left Joanna aching with the memory of how Alex had kissed her. He, at least, didn't seem motivated to repeat the experience; from his cool demeanour, she could almost have believed she must have imagined it—except for the bruised softness of her lips, which still bore the physical imprint of him. But all she got from him in farewell was a politely formal handshake, as Greg finally let Annette go. 'Goodnight,' he said briskly.

'G...goodnight.' She withdrew her hand quickly, feeling an odd tingling sensation from his touch.

He turned to Annette, his smile softening. 'Goodnight. And thank you for the excellent dinner.'

She dimpled, blushing. 'Oh... Yes. I'm sorry about the rice.'

'Think nothing of it,' he assured her, gently teasing. 'Be seeing you.' And, placing a firm hand on his young cousin's shoulder, he steered him out of the door.

As soon as they were gone, Annette spun round to face Joanna, her eyes bright. 'Well? What do you think of him now?' she demanded breathlessly.

'I think he's the most insufferably arrogant, irritating, infuriating man I've ever met in my life!' Joanna exploded with feeling—and then realised from her friend's shocked surprise that the question had been about Greg, not Alex Marshall. 'Oh, no, I didn't mean Greg,' she amended quickly. 'He seems really nice.'

Annette seemed hardly to notice the mistake—her eyes had taken on that dreamy expression again. 'He is, isn't he?' she sighed happily. 'But not at all *wet*, if you know what I mean. It always seems so unfair that all the nice men are such wimps, and all the ones that aren't wimps are real rats. But Greg's somehow...'

'Perfect?' suggested Joanna, just the faintest flicker of ironic humour in her voice.

'Yes... Well, no—I know he's not perfect. Everybody has faults.' She didn't sound fully convinced. 'He's just so... nice.'

Joanna laughed, a little envious of her friend's capacity to feel such a deep, honest emotion. 'He's wonderful,' she assured her warmly. 'Perfect for you, at least. Has he proposed yet?'

Annette blushed a vivid scarlet. 'No, of course not!' she protested, her voice a little unsteady. 'We've only known each other... less than a day. Goodness—was it really only this morning we met? It seems much longer than that.'

'You *have* got it badly,' Joanna teased.

'He said he'll call me tomorrow,' Annette confided. A sudden shadow of anxiety crossed her eyes. 'Do you think he meant it?'

'Of course he did.'

It was a relief to Joanna that her friend was so obsessed with her own love-affair that it hadn't even occurred to her to wonder what the other two had been doing in the kitchen. She wasn't sure herself why she had allowed it to happen, and she certainly didn't feel ready to explain it to anyone else.

What she needed was a little time alone, to think through her own feelings, to set them in perspective. The memory of that kiss was still taunting the fringes of her mind, and she was afraid that if she didn't manage to regain her usual cool self-control it was going to be very difficult to face the man when she met him again.

'Are you going to bed?' she asked Annette breezily. 'I think I'll just finish off cataloguing that last batch of photographs before I turn in.'

Annette stifled a yawn. 'Are you sure you don't need any help?' 'No, of course not. I won't be long anyway. You get your beauty sleep—just in case Greg comes round tomorrow.'

Annette smiled, her eyes alight with anticipation. 'I don't know if he will,' she demurred. 'I expect he'll be busy.'

'Not so busy he won't be able to find some excuse to come over,' Joanna prophesied sagely.

'Well... I hope so. Goodnight, then.' As she turned away, Annette hesitated, and frowned. 'What about Alex?' she enquired curiously. 'I hope you didn't mind being stuck on your own with him?'

Joanna managed a casual shrug. 'Oh, that's OK,' she responded, listening for any betraying tremor in her own voice. 'It was better than playing gooseberry to you two.'

Annette laughed, but she slanted her a searching look. 'You were talking to him in here for an awfully long time,' she hinted speculatively.

'We were doing the washing-up, mostly,' Joanna countered, her eyes evasive.

'Oh...' Annette looked a little disappointed. 'It was just... I thought...' Meeting with only a blank response, she shrugged. 'Well, maybe not. Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.'

Joanna glanced around the untidy study, making a mental note to take an afternoon to sort out the piles of junk. What Alex must have thought... Not that she cared what he thought, she reminded herself crisply. Certainly he was attractive, with all that rugged maleness barely contained by the urbane gloss of his manners; but she had known any number of attractive men since her marriage had ended, and she had had little trouble in keeping them at arm's length. There was no reason why it should prove any different with Alex Marshall.

And yet... she was having a great deal of difficulty pushing him out of her mind. That kiss had been more disturbing than she had cared to admit, awakening responses inside her that she had never experienced before—even in the better days of her marriage.

Sitting down at the big wooden table, she rested her chin on her propped hands, her eyes unfocused. What was it about that man that made him so difficult to forget? She could still feel the impact of his mouth on hers, feel the warm strength of his arms around her— even just thinking about it now could make her heart beat faster...

So she really shouldn't be letting herself think about it, she scolded herself impatiently. Putting the shoebox of photographs down in front of her, she began to sort through it, selecting the ones she needed and tossing the rest straight into the rubbish bin at her feet.

But it wasn't so easy to concentrate; the temptation to indulge herself just for a few moments was almost too much to resist. She struggled for a while, but gave up; maybe she was just tired—by tomorrow morning, she would feel in control again.

CHAPTER FOUR

'DON'T upset yourself over him.' Joanna glanced down at her young friend in wry concern. It was two days since Greg and Alex had come to dinner, and neither of them had been in touch since; but her own feelings of relief were tempered by sympathy for poor Annette's distress. 'There are plenty more fish in the sea.'

She had to confess to being more than a little surprised that Greg had failed to follow through—she would have sworn that his interest was genuine. But again and again her thoughts went back to that conversation she had had with Alex, in the kitchen. Puppy-love, he had called it—they would soon get over it. Maybe Greg had just got over it quicker than Annette.

Or maybe Alex had decided he didn't want his young cousin getting involved in a relationship that might make him reluctant to spend the long periods abroad that his job was going to require. Maybe he had deliberately put a spoke in the wheel—had kept Greg so busy he hadn't had time to call, even found an excuse to send him back to England.

She wouldn't put it past him, she reflected bitterly— he wouldn't care what sort of hurt he caused, so long as he got his own way. He had been ruthless enough to cast even his own family aside—he hadn't even tried to pretend that those news stories weren't true.

Annette was struggling to put on a brave face. 'I know,' she admitted, a wistful note in her voice. 'It's just... I suppose if anything had happened, someone would have let us know, wouldn't they?'

'I should imagine so. Look, he's just a man, Annie— they're ten a penny. The only reason you thought he was anything special was because you're stuck out here in the desert with nothing else to compare him with. You wait—as soon as we get back home, you'll wonder what you ever saw in him.'

Annette shook her head. 'No—he was special. It was like... Oh—I can't explain it. It was like meeting the other half of myself.'

For a fleeting moment, the other girl's words struck a chord in her own heart. But she pushed the thought away at once. 'Look, I'd better be going. You can bet your life if I'm late the ferry'll have left on time—for the one and only time in history. I'll be back in a couple of hours. Are you sure you can manage that digging on your own?'

'Of course I can.' Annette managed a brave smile. 'It'll probably do me good. Though if by any chance you happen to run into... ?'

'I don't suppose I will,' Joanna responded with gentle humour. 'Anyway, for all we know he may even have gone back to England for a few days.'

'He never said he was going to,' Annette argued bleakly.

'Well, whatever he's doing, you're probably better off without him. Cheerio—see you later. Don't find any mummies while I'm gone.'

It was their standing joke—the usual response was 'Chance'd be a fine thing,' but Annette couldn't even muster that much today. If this is love, Joanna reflected as she drove the battered pick-up carefully along the dusty road, thank heavens I've grown out of it!

The ancient car-ferry was filling up rapidly when she arrived. *Fellaheen* in their cool, flowing cotton *djellabas* were hunkering down along the gunwales to pass the time of day as they waited for the last battered vehicles to make their way down on to the low deck. Baskets of noisy pigeons, destined for the meal-table, were piled high, and there was already some casual bartering going on, wads of grubby Egyptian pound notes changing hands.

Joanna bought her ticket, and palmed some *backsheesh* to the man who guided her safely on board, waving away the small child who was trying to sell her some rather unsavoury-looking *basbousa*. Once she had parked the pick-up on the deck she climbed out, and hauled herself up to sit on the roof, her feet on the bonnet—she had discovered long ago that this was the best way to avoid being pestered by hawkers, and to maximise the advantage of the cool breeze that drifted down the river.

Suddenly there was a commotion behind her. She glanced round automatically—and recognised at once the dusty Land Rover bearing the triple M logo of Marshall Mining and Marine. Alex Marshall was having a loud argument in scrambled English-Arabic with the ferryman, who was trying to insist that there wasn't room for another vehicle, when there clearly was. But yelling your head off was no way to win the point—not here in Egypt.

Not that it concerned her in the slightest, she reminded herself coolly, turning her back on him as if totally absorbed in watching a felucca tacking up the river, its tall, graceful sail catching the slightest hint of breeze.

The quarrel behind her was getting heated. Others were beginning to take sides—mostly against Alex, which was doing nothing at all for his temper. Much too used to getting his own way, she decided grimly—it would do him good to come unstuck for a change.

'Joanna?'

Damn! She should have climbed down from the roof of the truck before he spotted her. She tried to pretend that she hadn't heard, but that was ridiculous. Reluctantly she turned her head.

He was standing there with his feet planted firmly on the gangplank so they couldn't move it, his wide shoulders squared aggressively, glowering down at the somewhat smaller *fellaheen* who were trying to bar his way.

'Joanna, do you speak the lingo?' he demanded impatiently. 'For goodness' sake, come and help me sort this out! My Arabic's just not up to it. I've bought my ticket, and given this b... this blighter some *backsheesh*. I can't make out what his problem is.'

Everyone was looking to her now, and it was quite evident that if she didn't intervene the ferry was going to be considerably delayed. So, with a weary sigh, she clambered down from the roof of the truck, and went to see what it was all about.

'What's wrong?' she asked the ferryman.

He launched into a flood of Arabic, laced with a strong Nubian accent, but she was able to pick up the gist of what he was saying. She turned to Alex with a dry smile. 'He says you're carrying explosives,' she translated for him. 'You're not allowed to bring that on to the public ferry.'

His eyes blazed in angry indignation. 'I'm not...' But as the ferryman pointed excitedly to an old crate in the back of the Land Rover, clearly marked with the international symbol for dynamite, he laughed wryly, his temper evaporating. 'Oh, damn. No, that's not explosives.' He leaned over and picked up the crate, casually swinging it out of the Land Rover as all the *fellaheen* stepped back in alarm. 'Look,' he invited cordially, holding it out to show them its contents. 'It's just a load of old papers—er.. *waraq*.'

The ferryman peered in cautiously, and then laughed too, clearly most relieved. 'Come, come,' he urged, gesturing to Alex to drive aboard. 'Plenty of room.'

'Thank you,' Alex murmured wryly, and slipping the Land Rover into first gear steered it carefully aboard.

'*Afwan*,' Joanna smiled gratefully to the ferryman as he handed her back on to the boat.

'Irr sharrifeso,' he responded with a polite little bow.

She would have liked to have been able to retreat to her perch, and avoid any further conversation with Alex, but that was clearly going to be impossible. As she stepped past the Land Rover, he climbed out, effectively barring her passage.

'Thanks for your help.'

'That's quite all right,' she responded, as coolly as politeness allowed.

He seemed faintly amused by her pose of indifference, and she had the uncomfortable feeling that he could see right through it. 'I'm glad to have run into you,' he remarked. 'I've got a message for your friend, from Greg.'

She slanted him a look of sardonic enquiry. 'Oh, really?'

'Unfortunately he's been—er—"indisposed". An acute case of gippy tummy, in fact.' The lilt of humour in his voice was of a man who would never succumb to such a mundane ailment.

Joanna, who had an iron constitution herself, would have been more sympathetic, but she wasn't prepared to unbend at all in front of Alex Marshall. "Thank you," she responded stiffly. 'I'll pass on the message.'

But the man wasn't so easy to get rid of. 'What's wrong?' he enquired, lifting one dark eyebrow in mocking question. 'Do I get the impression that you aren't too keen to encourage this budding love-affair?'

She glanced up at him in wary suspicion. 'Why should you think that?' she countered, wishing he wasn't wearing those damned sunglasses so that she could see into his eyes.

'Oh, just a certain lack of enthusiasm in your response,' he taunted, that firm, fascinating mouth curving into a smile of ironic humour. 'Or maybe it's just me that you don't want to talk to.'

She shrugged her slim shoulders in a gesture of casual concern. 'It doesn't bother me,' she countered, the effort of keeping her voice steady draining it of all expression.

He chuckled with laughter. 'Well, that's certainly put me in my place,' he remarked. 'My stepmother would approve of you. She thinks I have an outsize ego, due to having too many women pursuing me for my fortune.'

Joanna felt her cheeks flush faintly pink. In spite of the modest tag, he must know full well that his fortune had nothing to do with his attraction—she had never even thought about it herself. But his mention of his stepmother had stirred her curiosity, and she couldn't resist the opportunity to find out a little more about him.

'I...didn't know you had a stepmother,' she remarked, slanting him a questioning look. 'Your parents are divorced as well?'

He shook his head. 'No—my mother died when I was a kid. My father married again six years ago.'

'Oh...' Her glance was full of sympathy. 'What's she like? Is she nice?'

'As wicked as they come!' he fibbed outrageously. 'I have to be careful of every apple I bite into, in case she's put a spell on it, like in *Snow White*.'

She couldn't help but laugh at that. 'Anyone less like Snow White would be impossible to imagine!'

From behind his sunglasses, she caught a glint of satisfaction, reminding her that she should never have let him break through her barrier of reserve. But it was too late now—far too late. It wasn't even worth wasting the energy trying to fight it.

'How's the dig coming along?' he asked in a conversational tone.

'Quite well.' She hesitated for a moment, but she might as well tell him of the latest development—it probably wouldn't make any difference anyway. 'We think we may have found the entrance to another tomb. It was hidden underneath the rubble in the burial-chamber of Number Nine, and it looks as if it may not have been disturbed— at least not for a long time.'

'Very interesting.' There was an inflection of sardonic humour in his voice. 'How long will it take you to open it?'

'That depends on how complex it is,' she responded evasively. 'We've got a lot of rubbish to clear out of the way before we can get to the first door. Then there could be all sorts of chambers and passages inside—it depends on how important the person was, and how long they had to work on the construction of their tomb. Some of those in the Valley of the Kings could take up to five years—but of course, they're very elaborate. Most of the ones here are much simpler, cheaper versions, with maybe just one chamber before the actual burial- chamber.'

'How long?' he persisted, not to be deflected.

She turned on him with an angry glare. 'Anything up to a month.'

'You don't have that long,' he reminded her bluntly.

She turned on him a fulminating glare. 'This could turn out to be a very important find.'

'That's for the Department of Antiquities and the Ministry of Economic Affairs to sort out,' he countered, a hint of steel in his voice. 'I think it would have to be a find of quite spectacular importance to persuade them to delay mining operations.'

'We'll see,' she retorted, gripped by a violent urge to shove him over the side of the ferry into the river. 'Not everyone thinks like you—profit, profit, profit—thank goodness. Some people are more concerned about *real* values!'

'Well, bully for them,' he countered, his eyes taunting her. 'It's a good job there's the rest of us willing to dirty

our hands making the filthy lucre so they can afford to do it.'

'Huh! You'll be telling me next you pay your taxes to keep people like me!'"Correct.'

For a moment she glowered at him, frustrated rage simmering inside her. She had never met anyone so damned.. *impervious* in all her life! And he was *laughing* at her! Turning sharply on her heel, she stalked away, that mocking laughter following her as she scrambled up to her perch on the roof of the truck.

She sat with a rigid back, trying hard to ignore her awareness of him, refusing to even glance back over her shoulder to see if he was still looking at her. She had been a fool to let him beguile her into a semblance of friendship with that smooth, practised charm. He wasn't her friend—he was her opponent, in a critical race to win the rights over that dusty patch of hillside that no one had wanted for the past three thousand years. It was really quite ironic, when you came to think about it.

At least someone was happy, Joanna reflected, wryly amused by the way her friend had been transformed from misery to sparkling merriment by Greg's simple message. Ever since yesterday she had been on a high; she was even singing as she shovelled the rubble from the tomb into the trolley to be hauled up out of the way.

'Annie—put a sock in it,' she requested good- humouredly. 'If I hear that song one more time, I'll scream.'

Annette's eyes opened wide with innocence. 'Don't you like it?' she protested. 'They were playing it on the radio the other night.'

'I know they were—and you were supposed to be cooking rice at the time,' Joanna countered drily. 'No wonder it came out like soup.'

Annette gurgled with laughter. 'It was a bit of a...'. She stopped abruptly, cocking her head to catch the sound she had been listening for all morning—an approaching Land Rover. 'Is it?' she whispered urgently.

Joanna slanted her a sardonic smile. 'Who else would it be?'

'Are they going to stop?'

It appeared that they were. The tyres crunched crisply on the rough ground, and the engine died. Then footsteps. With a swift hand Annette brushed the dust from her T-shirt, her cheeks slightly flushed with pink, but, with an air of nonchalance that Joanna could only admire, she picked up her trowel and continued to fill the trolley.

'Hi.'

Feigning a surprise that would probably fool no one but a man besotted, Annette glanced over her shoulder as Greg appeared in the entrance to the tomb. 'Oh, hello,' she responded lightly. 'How are you?'

Greg grinned ruefully, bending his head to edge sideways down the steep passage. 'Rather better today, thank you. I haven't dared stir too far from the bathroom the past two days.'

Annette chuckled. 'Oh, nearly everyone gets it,' she assured him, her eyes dancing up at him as he reached the chamber, and came over to take her in his arms. 'So long as it wasn't my *kofta*?'"

'Oh, no,' he assured her quickly. 'That was delicious—wasn't it, Alex?'

'Best I've ever tasted.'

Joanna turned reluctantly. Alex had followed Greg down the passage, and was standing at the bottom, leaning one wide shoulder casually against the rock wall.

In the dim light of the bulb they had rigged on a tripod in the corner of the chamber he looked bigger and more rugged than ever, she reflected, her mouth slightly dry. He was all male, aggressively so; she had never really been attracted to that type, but there was something about Alex Marshall that made her react in a way she never had before.

'So this is where you've found the new entrance?' he enquired, glancing around.

Reluctantly, Joanna nodded. 'Just here.' It was no more than a hole, low down in one wall; originally it would have been covered by the head of the stone sarcophagus in the main tomb, but that had been smashed a long time ago by robbers seeking treasure. It was only when they had removed the remaining rubble that they had uncovered the secret entrance.

He came over, bending to peer into the passageway they had begun to clear. 'Looks like you've got a long way to go,' he remarked. 'It's going to take you a heck of a long time with those small trowels.'

Joanna felt her jaw clench with annoyance. 'Look, don't you tell me how to do my job, and I won't tell you how to do yours,' she countered tersely. 'You

have to be very careful, even when you think you're just clearing rubbish—there could be something priceless in it.'

His mouth quirked into a smile of sardonic humour. 'I beg your pardon—I bow to your superior knowledge.'

In spite of herself, it was difficult to suppress an answering smile. 'You see, quite often, one generation would just throw away the treasures of the previous generation,' she explained. 'Or use them for building materials—to in-fill a wall or a foundation-trench, maybe. That's what makes it so much fun—you never know what you're going to find.'

'I see...'

Somehow, in bending to look into the hole, their heads had come very close together, and suddenly she found herself looking deep into those dark eyes. It was like looking into the heart of a fire—flames flickering, mesmerising her, drawing her dangerously closer. Her lips felt warm, remembering the way he had kissed her...

'Joanna—Greg and Alex have invited us to have dinner with them tonight, at their hotel.' Annette's bright, innocent voice abruptly broke the spell. 'That would be nice, wouldn't it?'

'Sort of in return for the other night,' Greg added, trying to sound casual. 'We thought that afterwards we could all go on to the Sound and Light show at Karnak.'

'That would be fun.' Annette's tone was light, but her eyes were pleading with Joanna to agree. 'I've never actually been to the Sound and Light.'

'Well, why don't you two go?' Joanna felt a heel, but the last thing she wanted was to get dragged into going anywhere with Alex Marshall. 'I'm afraid I've got rather a lot to do tonight—you'll have to count me out.'

'You ought to take a break,' Alex put in, his voice laced with mocking humour. 'All work and no play...'

Her eyes flashed him a frost warning. 'As you reminded me yesterday, I only have a few more weeks before I'm going to have to abandon this site,' she grated tersely. 'I can't afford to waste any of it.'

'But you can't stay out here on your own,' Annette pointed out, a little puzzled by her friend's uncharacteristic intransigence. 'Especially once it gets dark.'

'Anyway, I don't really fancy the Sound and Light,' Joanna persisted, struggling to hide her desperation behind a brittle smile. 'It gets absolutely packed with tourists.'

'Yes, but you know the layout so well you can show us which way to go to miss the worst of the crush,' Annette argued.

'We were really hoping you'd come,' Greg put in earnestly. 'You're the expert—you can fill us in on all the details.'

'Annette's quite an expert, too.'

'Oh, but I don't know nearly as much about it all as you do,' Annette protested.

Joanna could feel herself losing the fight. Alex was standing there beside her, watching her with those coolly perceptive eyes, knowing that she was searching in vain for another excuse, and she felt as if she was being delivered right up into his hands. With an impatient sigh, she shrugged her slim shoulders.

'Oh, all right then,' she conceded grudgingly. 'But don't forget, it gets really hot in there. The stones have been baking in the sun all day, and they give it off like an oven.'

'Oh, yes—we'll have to remember to take some bottled water,' Annette suggested. 'We can pick some up from the hotel, can't we?'

Alex smiled mockingly. 'You see? Already we're benefiting from your experience.'

She slanted him a look of cold dislike. 'Well, if we're finishing early, we'd better get on,' she reminded Annette, picking up her trowel again and turning him an aloof shoulder. 'It's going to take us days to clear this lot, anyway.'

* * *

Joanna had been in something of a quandary about what to wear; much as she might try to deny it, she wanted to look good—but not as if she was trying to impress. Given the limitations of her wardrobe, and the need to consider the trip to Karnak, it was a difficult decision.

In the end she had settled on a loose black cotton skirt, banded with coloured braid around the full hemline, and teamed it with an indigo-blue cotton and macrame top that had caught her eye one day down in the street market. And she had tried hard to do something with her hands, pampering them with a rich moisturising cream and touching her nails with pale pink polish.

Annette was emphatic in her approval. 'There—that's much better. I'll tell you what, I'll lend you my scarab- beads—you know, the blue ones. They'll go lovely with that top. And why don't you let me trim the ends of your hair a bit, just to tidy it up?'

It was easier to submit to these ministrations than to argue; Annette had come close to guessing the truth already, and Joanna was reluctant to protest too much, for fear it would give the game away. By the time her friend had finished with her, insisting that she use a little mascara and lipstick too, the reflection she saw in the mirror reminded her rather disturbingly of her younger self.

Her hair, trimmed and tidied, just brushed her shoulders, a mass of golden curls, and the colour of the lapis beads brought out the deep blue of her eyes. The neckline of her top plunged to a deep V, trimmed with macramé lace, revealing just a hint of the soft valley between her breasts.

Maybe she should have stuck to jeans and a T-shirt, she considered with a sudden stab of panic—it could be dangerous to risk courting Alex Marshall's

interest in this way. But after all, she reminded herself a little unsteadily, she ought to be more than capable of keeping any man at arm's length—she had had plenty of practice at that since her divorce.

And anyway, there was no time to change her mind now—the taxi he had insisted on sending to collect them had arrived. With a grim little smile, she turned away from the mirror and picked up her handbag. After tonight, there would be no more need for this sham of double-dating—Annette and Greg could go it alone.

Needless to say, Alex Marshall was staying in the best hotel in town; some distance from the noisy, bustling district around the Temple, it had an elegant air-conditioned restaurant, leading out to a lush terraced garden overlooking the river.

He and Greg were waiting in the cool marble foyer when they arrived, and they both rose to their feet at the same moment, coming forward to greet them. Joanna felt a small shimmer of heat run through her as those dark, dangerous eyes slid over her in surprise and unmistakable appreciation. Why was it that all her carefully constructed defences seemed so vulnerable when he was around? He only had to look at her...

She couldn't help but notice the interest he drew as he walked across the foyer; not just the women, but the men too, were aware of that intrinsic aura of authority he exuded without any apparent conscious effort.

He was casually dressed for the hot evening, in cool white cotton slacks, and a white linen shirt, the sleeves folded back over his strong, sun-browned wrists. He must have been in the shower—the ends of his hair were still slightly damp and curling. And, suddenly, a startlingly vivid image rose in her mind—of him in the shower, that powerful, hard-muscled body bronzed and wet, and naked...

'Good evening.'

She half-choked, struggling to steady the racing beat of her heart. 'Good... evening,' she managed, her eyes looking everywhere but into his.

'You're looking strikingly attractive tonight,' he added, softly teasing. 'I hardly recognised you.'

That succeeded in provoking her into shooting him a look of sardonic amusement. 'Am I supposed to take that as a compliment, or not?' she enquired boldly.

'Oh, a compliment,' he assured her, laughing. 'Tonight I can only pay you compliments. Would you like a drink before we go in to dinner?'

'Do we have time?' she queried, wary of consuming too much alcohol—she would need to keep all her wits on red-alert tonight. 'The Sound and Light starts at nine.'

'It won't take us long to get there—I've arranged a car to take us. But perhaps you're right,' he conceded. 'We don't want to have to rush—we can have a drink with our dinner.'

She nodded, falling into step with him as they walked over to the restaurant. Annette and Greg were already engaged in an animated conversation, gazing into each other's eyes with unmistakable adoration. That wasn't going to make the evening any easier, Joanna reflected wryly—it seemed likely that once again she was going to be left to cope with Alex Marshall on her own.

The head-waiter knew her—she had stayed at this hotel many times with her father when he had been on archaeological trips—and greeted her warmly. '*Masa' il- kheer*, Miss Holloway. *Qayfah hahlik?*

'Qwayyisa, il-hamdu lillah.'

'Your table is ready, Mr Marshall,' he added politely to Alex. 'Please to come this way.' He showed them to a table beside the large picture window, looking out over the spot-lit gardens and the slow-flowing river, and the waiter hurried over immediately with the menu.

'You will wish wine with your meal, sir?'

'Yes, please. Another bottle of that Valmur I enjoyed so much last night, I think.'

Joanna bit back a word of protest; she would have been happy enough with a local Egyptian wine with her meal, but if Alex Marshall chose to pay the extortionate price of an imported wine that was entirely up to him. Opening the menu, she cast her eye down over the exquisite selection, wavering between trout in almonds or lamb with wild mushrooms, which she knew was the chef's speciality. Or maybe duck in apricot—that sounded interesting.

The others had ordered, and the waiter stood poised with his pencil hovering over his pad. What was wrong with her, dithering like this over a simple decision? It wasn't like her at all. But with Alex sitting there opposite her, watching her with that disconcertingly cool gaze, she seemed all at sixes and sevens.

'I'll have...the lamb,' she chose, settling for the safest option. 'And for a starter... the juniper salad.'

The waiter took the menus with a polite bow, and moved away.

Joanna picked up her glass, and took a small sip of the wine; after what had happened the last time she had drunk alcohol in Alex Marshall's company, she intended to be very careful indeed, tonight. Just thinking about the way he had kissed her that night made her lips feel warm...

'So, tell us about this Karnak Temple,' Greg opened the conversation. 'How long ago was it built?'

Annette looked to Joanna to respond. Quickly, she drew her mind back from its disturbing memories. 'Most of it was built during the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties,' she explained. 'Although the site dates back to at least 1800 BC. It was dedicated to the god Amun— originally he was just one of the nine main deities of Egypt, but after the expulsion of the Hyskos in 1567 BC he became much more important.'

'Joanna's father was one of the people who helped excavate it,' Annette put in. 'Tell them about it, Joanna.'

Joanna pulled a wry face; her father's shadow seemed to pursue her into everything she did. 'I don't suppose they'll want to hear all those details,' she excused herself lightly. 'Anyway, you'll see it all for yourselves in a little while—that'll be much more interesting than me telling you about it.'

Fortunately the waiter returned at that moment with their starters, and by the time they had finished sorting out who was having what, and exclaiming over the beautiful presentation of the food, the subject appeared to have been forgotten.

But she should have known better. Waiting until Greg and Annette were deeply involved in their own conversation, Alex glanced across at her and remarked quietly, 'Do I get the impression you don't get on very well with your father?' She slanted him a warily defensive look. 'Of course I do!' she protested, a little too quickly. 'Why on earth should you think that?'

He lifted those wide shoulders in a slight shrug. 'I was just... curious. You always have that tight look around your mouth whenever you mention him.'

She stared at him, startled by his perception. 'I...I get on with him very well,' she insisted. 'It's just that...'

'Sometimes it isn't easy following in the footsteps of a Great Man?' he suggested.

He had summed it up with alarming accuracy, but she didn't want to concede anything to him; she was coming dangerously close to starting to like him, and that could prove fatal. 'What would you know about that?' she countered, caustically. 'It was hardly a problem you experienced.'

'No,' he acknowledged with a slight inclination of his head. 'But my father did.' She lifted her eyebrows in startled question, and he continued, 'My grandfather was a self-made man. He founded Marshall's from nothing, and built it into an empire. Unfortunately, my father was totally in awe of him, but the harder he tried to live up to him the less he succeeded. Even after the

old man was gone, my father still struggled, making himself ill. It's only since he retired that he's learned how to relax and enjoy life.'

She slanted him a look of surprise. He made it sound as if his father had been glad to give up the chairmanship of the family firm to his younger son—but that wasn't the way the newspapers had told it. But then, how did she know whether the newspapers had told the truth?

'I'm afraid I'm not quite the villain the newspapers painted me,' he remarked, seeming to read her mind again. 'I suppose the truth wouldn't have been particularly newsworthy—I have to admit, the dramatised version read better. If I hadn't been directly involved, I would have found it quite entertaining.'

She felt her cheeks flush faintly pink. She was beginning to realise that Alex Marshall was far more complex a character than she had at first judged; seeing him standing there that first time she had met him, surveying her with all the insolent arrogance of a slave-master sizing up the latest consignment of human flesh, she had believed there could only possibly be one track to his mind. She had quickly added another—profit. But she had been wrong; he had a great sense of humour, and sometimes he could be surprisingly kind and considerate...

She caught herself up in alarm, hearing her own voice describing to Annette her ideal of the kind of man she could fall in love with. Oh, no—not Alex Marshall...! She had to be crazy! Whatever else the newspapers may have got wrong—and, after all, she only had *his* version of events to go by—they hadn't been wrong about his reputation with women, she knew that instinctively. He was a natural predator—and any woman who allowed herself to become his prey deserved the broken heart she would most certainly be left with.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE script of the Sound and Light show at Karnak was so completely over the top that in any other circumstances it would have been comic. But somehow, standing there with those massive ruins towering into the night sky, floodlit into dramatic contrasts of shape and shadow, the only possible emotion was awe.

Even Joanna, who had known the place since her cradle, and who had lost count of the number of times she had seen this show, couldn't help feeling an odd little shiver run down her spine as the thundering music gave way to the sonorous voices, telling of ages and kings long past.

Or maybe it was something to do with the man standing just behind her, so close that she could feel the heat of his body. In the dense crowd they had already lost the other two—possibly the attractions of a dark corner away from the crush had proved more tempting than the spectacle.

The spotlights picked up the key features one by one as the voices related their story, bathing the huge stone columns and statues in a golden glow. 'Quite something,' Alex murmured, stepping back to get a better look at one of the soaring statues of Rameses II, carved from pink granite, which guarded the second gate. 'They certainly knew how to build on the grand scale in those days.'

'We'd be better to slip out the other way, and into the Hypostele Hall through the side entrance,' Joanna suggested, her voice just a little unsteady. 'Once everyone starts moving through the second pylon it's just an impossible crush.'

He nodded, following her across the rough courtyard and out through one of the gaps in the high wall. It was nice to get away from the press of the crowd for a few moments, and feel the velvet caress of the warm evening breeze on her cheeks.

A couple of the guides lounging around waiting for the opportunity to earn a little *backsheesh* came forward, but recognised her at once and greeted her warmly. It was only polite to stop and chat, responding to their enquiries about her father and asking after mutual acquaintances.

They were regarding Alex with curiosity, laced perhaps with a hint of disapproval—they would never have allowed a daughter of theirs to be out alone at night with a man. She introduced him, and the fact that he spoke enough Arabic to converse with them eased the atmosphere a little, but she was glad to make an excuse for them to slip away.

Alex laughed drily as they strolled along the outer wall. 'Was it my imagination, or was I *persona non grata* back there?' he enquired.

Joanna managed an unsteady smile. 'Oh, it's just that... I've been coming here with my father since I was a baby. I suppose they... sort of look on me as one of their own, and get a bit over-protective.' She risked a swift glance up at him. 'Stupid, of course.'

'Oh, I don't know.' They had reached the gate into the second section of the temple, and as they stepped in among the forest of massive stone columns he slid a hand around her waist, and drew her into a shadowy corner. 'If I had a daughter, I wouldn't want her to be out at night with a man like me.'

And as she felt the warm strength of his arms fold around her, Joanna knew that she had been waiting all evening for him to do this. He laughed softly, knowing that he was going to meet not an ounce of resistance; his mouth came down on hers, firm and enticing, and a melting tide of submission flooded through her.

Her lips parted beneath his gentle persuasion, and, as his tongue sought the sweet depths of her mouth in a flagrantly sensual exploration, she curved her supple body against the hard length of his, breathing with aching pleasure the musky male scent of his skin.

Dark fires were igniting inside her, heating her blood, and she was responding in ways she had never thought she was capable of. His hand had slid down the length of her spine, moulding over the soft curve of her

derriere, holding her so intimately close that there was no way she could miss the warning tension of male arousal in him.

There was a delicious ache in her breasts, swollen and crushed against the solid wall of his chest, and as she felt his hand stroke up over her slim midriff with unmistakable intent she moaned softly, moving in unconscious invitation.

He laughed, low in his throat, his palm brushing over the firm ripeness of her breast. Beneath the gentle abrasion the tender nipple hardened into instant response, betraying to him the full depth of her vulnerability. As his hand slid inside her top, easing aside the dainty lace cup of her bra to stroke over her soft, naked skin, a sweet pleasure suffused her, melting her bones.

Their mouths broke apart, and her forehead fell against his shoulder as his hot mouth sought the sensitive hollow just behind the lobe of her ear, swirling it languorously with the moist tip of his tongue. His long, sensitive fingers had curved beneath the ripe swell of her breast, caressing it with the most exquisite skill, toying gently with the tender nipple until she was breathing in ragged sobs, lost to all memory of past or future, surrendering totally to the searing hunger that was burning inside her.

'God, I want you.' Alex's voice was thick and husky. 'I could take you right here.'

It took several seconds for the import of his words to sink into her brain. And then, with a gasp of horror she drew back, struggling free of him. 'No!'

He laughed, low in his throat. 'I didn't mean it literally,' he assured her teasingly. 'I was thinking more of my nice big comfortable bed back at the hotel...'

'No.' She was glad of the darkness to hide the scarlet blush of shame that had flooded her cheeks. Her fingers felt numb as she struggled to straighten her clothing, humiliatingly aware of how wantonly she had behaved. 'I... Please don't do that again,' she choked out, unable to even look at him. 'Leave me alone.'

She sensed his surprise, swiftly replaced by a flash of anger. 'Don't put it all down to me,' he grated. 'You're quite old enough to know what you were doing.'

'I... I'm sorry.' She drew in a long, steadying breath and forced herself to meet his fulminating glare. 'I didn't intend it to happen, and I would prefer that... I mean...' His mouth was a hard line, but he shrugged his wide shoulders in a gesture of cool dismissal. 'Fine,' he returned crisply. 'It's no big deal to me.' He brushed past her, all his interest turning to the wonders of Ancient Egypt. 'So what's this part called?' he enquired, his hands thrust deep into his pockets as he strolled down one of the narrow aisles between the thick, carved pillars of stone.

Joanna had to swallow hard, struggling to match his cool indifference. Her head felt a little, dizzy—it must be the heat; although it was almost nine-thirty, the temperature was still in the nineties, and between the massive blocks of masonry the air was as hot and dry as a kiln.

'Th...this is the Hypostyle Hall,' she managed, her voice strained. 'It was originally the vestibule of the temple. There are one hundred and thirty-four columns; the central rows are twenty-three metres high...'

He slanted her a mocking glance over his shoulder. 'You sound like a tour-guide,' he taunted.

She returned him an icy glare. 'The columns are fitted together without mortar,' she expounded doggedly. 'Their carvings show the Pharaohs, mostly Seti I, making offerings to the gods. In some places the original paint still remains.'

'Fascinating.' There was a bite of sarcasm in his voice. 'Does it feel safer, hiding yourself away in things that happened thousands of years ago, instead of facing up to real life?'

She turned him an aloof shoulder, refusing to admit how close he was to the truth. 'We're...missing most of the show,' she pointed out stiffly.

His eyes glinted with sardonic amusement, taunting her for seeking the safety of the crowd, but he stood aside for her to lead the way from the main part of the ruins out to the environs of the Sacred Lake, where the audience was gathering in the grandstand for the second half of the spectacle.

It was a strain sitting beside him in the warm darkness beneath the ancient stars, feigning an interest in the story unfolding—a story she knew almost by heart. Slanting a covert glance up at his hard profile, she felt an odd little shiver run down her spine.

Why had she let him kiss her like that? She couldn't excuse herself that she didn't know of his reputation— and he had never troubled to deny it. And the ease with which he had accepted her rejection had been almost an insult—proof, if she had needed it, that she was nothing to him but a mild diversion. Certainly not worth making an effort for.

One of the guides came round, selling cups of the cool, sweet *kirkidi*, a local drink brewed from the petals of hibiscus blossoms. Alex bought a couple, and handed her one with casual chivalry. 'How long does this go on for?' he enquired. 'These aren't the most comfortable seats in the world.'

She had already noticed that his powerful frame was a little too large for the rather flimsy plastic seats; he had one foot propped up on the back of the row in front, and his arms stretched along behind the two on each side of him. 'About half an hour,' she told him, her voice carefully flattened of all intonation. 'We don't have to stay if you don't want to.'

'Good.' He drained his cup, and rose to his feet. 'Come on, then.'

'What about Annette and Greg?' she enquired as they made their way down the steps at the side of the grandstand. 'Shouldn't we wait for them?'

He laughed drily. 'They've probably left already,' he surmised. 'I doubt if you'll see her again before morning.'

Joanna's eyes sparked with anger at his glib assumption. 'Oh? And what makes you think that?' she challenged indignantly.

He slanted her a mocking look. 'It seems the most likely outcome, when a healthy young man and a healthy young woman get together, and there's nothing to stop them.'

'Nothing but a few scruples, perhaps,' she countered, uncomfortably aware that she sounded like a prude.

'Oh, get real, Ms Holloway,' he snapped, betraying his own frustrated annoyance. 'The rest of the world left the Victorian era behind ninety years ago.'

'*Your* world, maybe,' she sneered, tilting her chin at a haughty angle. 'Frankly, the sort of dumb females you seem to go for don't look as if they could even spell the word "scruples", let alone know what they are.'

'Catty!' he taunted, his eyes glinting with knowing amusement. 'I should have thought it was beneath you to be jealous.'

'*Jealous?*' She arched one finely drawn eyebrow in icy contempt. 'Over you? Don't be ridiculous. Why on earth should I be jealous?'

That disturbingly sensual mouth curved into a provocative smile. 'You tell me. Maybe because you're finding it's not so easy to keep yourself locked up in that deep-freeze of ancient history when I'm around.'

She threw him a look of withering scorn. 'Oh, the typical male ego,' she jeered. 'Just because I won't jump into bed with you, I have to be frigid, right?'

He laughed again, softly taunting. 'Who mentioned frigid? I wouldn't say you're frigid—far from it.' He caught her hand, lifting it to brush his lips lightly over the tumultuous pulse inside her wrist, those deep, dark eyes holding hers in a hypnotic spell. 'You see?'

She felt a shimmer of heat run through her, and tried to withdraw her hand, but he wouldn't let it go.

'You know, I never thought this trip could turn out to be quite so entertaining,' he murmured. 'Just another dirty old patch of desert, I thought—how wrong can you be?'

She stared up at him, struggling to resist the mesmeric power of his gaze. 'I'm...not just here for your amusement,' she protested weakly.

'Of course not,' he conceded lightly. 'That would be *very* dull. Believe it or not, I like a woman who has her own career, her own interests. But there's no reason why we couldn't enjoy a little mutual... diversion... ?'

She had almost begun to succumb to the treacherous tug of temptation, but his reference to her career reminded her abruptly that their interests were diametrically opposed. She drew back defensively. 'No, thank you,' she managed, struggling to keep her voice even. 'I'm afraid I'm just not interested in that sort of relationship.'

'What sort of relationship *are* you interested in?' he queried, a sardonic inflection in his voice. 'Marriage? We've both tried that, and found out it wasn't all it's cracked up to be. Personally, I prefer something a little more straightforward and honest—no strings, no promises that can't be kept. That way no one gets hurt.'

'I... don't want that either,' she retorted, defiant. 'That's why I've chosen to concentrate on my career—it provides all the entertainment and diversion I need.'

'Really? You could have fooled me. When I touch you, you respond with the same kind of needs as any other woman.'

'Well, I'm not one of your other women,' she rapped, her voice dangerously close to breaking. 'And I wouldn't want to be—I can't stand crowds.' She didn't want to think about them, those other women. How many had there been? Was that what had really wrecked his marriage? Struggling to regain some semblance of composure, she turned away from him. 'I'm going home,' she announced haughtily. 'And if you don't mind, I'd prefer to go by myself.'

He shook his head, falling easily into step beside her. 'You don't really think I'd let you do that, do you?' he insisted. 'I brought you, and I'll see you home.'

'It really isn't necessary—I'm perfectly capable of getting a taxi without your help. And Egypt is a good deal safer than most parts of London for a woman to walk around on her own.'

'I'm quite sure it is,' he conceded, a mocking edge in his voice. 'Put it down to ingrained habit—a last vestige of the gentlemanly behaviour I was brought up to.'

She knew it would be a waste of time arguing with him—she might as well try to persuade one of these huge blocks of ancient stone to rise up into the air. 'All right,' she ground out with an indifferent shrug. 'If you insist.'

Those dark eyes glinted with sardonic humour. 'You needn't worry—I shan't force my unwanted attentions on you,' he assured her tauntingly. 'I think I can manage to control myself until I can get home and take a cold shower.'

She ignored the provocation, walking ahead of him, her head held very erect, her spine a rod of ice. In the taxi she sat as far away from him as possible, all her attention focused out of the side window as they drove the short distance back into town.

Over on the west bank of the river, the scattered lights of the villages glowed yellow against the dark background of the Theban Hills, shouldering against the night sky; here in Luxor it was much brighter, the tourist bazaar still doing a roaring trade, the streets busy with traffic.

The taxi paused to allow one of the little horse-drawn carriages that were so popular with the tourists out of a side street, before drawing up at the kerb outside the entrance to her apartment. With an effort of will, she forced herself to turn to Alex, a brittle smile pinned in place. 'Goodnight,' she managed stiffly. 'Thank you for... for dinner.'

'Goodnight.' His voice was laced with cynical amusement. 'I had a very pleasant evening—and quite enlightening.'

She was glad of the darkness to hide the blush of pink that sprang to her cheeks. She was under no illusion that he was referring to the history lesson; she had betrayed far too much of her vulnerability tonight. And Alex Marshall wasn't the man to let things rest at that.

Damning the fate that had got her tangled up with him, she fumbled to open the door, and climbed out. His soft laughter followed her on the night air, but she refused to allow herself to look back.

* * *

It was the small hours of the morning when Annette arrived home. She crept into the bedroom, and gasped in surprise when Joanna sat up and turned on the bedside light.

'Oh... I'm sorry—I didn't mean to wake you.'

'I wasn't asleep,' Joanna responded, a trace of private irony in her voice—she had lain awake for the past couple of hours, her mind a jangle of emotions that she hadn't yet managed to sort out.

Annette sat down on the edge of the bed, uttering a blissful little sigh. 'We went for a ride in a *caleche*. It was so beautiful, with the moon shining on the river. Isn't Egypt a *lovely* country?'

Joanna laughed drily. 'I think you're in love.'

Annette blushed prettily. 'I think perhaps I am,' she admitted, a dreamy look in her soft brown eyes. 'It seems incredible—I never thought anything so wonderful could ever happen to me. Isn't it funny, how you go along day-to-day—happy enough, but thinking life's always going to be pretty much the same—and then suddenly *wham!* You meet someone, and everything seems different— everything's turned upside down. And you know that nothing is ever going to be the same again.'

Yes, it is pretty funny, Joanna agreed wryly to herself. But I'm not so sure I'd call it wonderful; in fact it feels decidedly uncomfortable. It was fortunate that Annette was too wrapped up in her own happiness to notice her silence;

the last thing she wanted right now was to face any sympathetic questions about the cause of her own heartache.

Heartache? Yes, that was exactly what it was. Everything her young friend had said had rang bells in her own brain—because she was falling in love as well.

But there the similarity ended. It was more than obvious that Greg was every bit as besotted as Annette, whereas Alex... she doubted that he was even capable of such an emotion.

At least he had been honest, she mused—he had made it perfectly clear what he was offering. No promises that couldn't be kept... If she was stupid enough to succumb to him now, it would be her own fault when she got hurt. And she could be quite certain she *would* get hurt- Alex Marshall was the type for whom other people were only there to be used, and ridden roughshod over if they got in his way. He had done that to his own father and brother, and he wouldn't hesitate to do it to her, if he thought her excavation work could interfere with his quarrying activities.

Annette was getting ready for bed, a happy little smile curving her soft mouth. 'I'm sorry we went off and left you like that,' she murmured with a shy smile. 'I hope you didn't mind, only... well... Greg said it would be all right, because you were with Alex. Did you have a nice time?' she added innocently.

'Not too bad,' Joanna assured her, careful to keep all trace of irony from her voice.

'Only, I know it can't have been all that interesting for you—you've been there so many times before. And Alex... Well, he's very nice, of course, but he is a little bit.. .intimidating sometimes—if you know what I mean.'

'I know exactly what you mean,' Joanna agreed with a touch of sardonic humour.

'Maybe it's just because he's so much older.'

'Older?' Joanna heard herself protest sharply. 'He's only thirty-five.'

Annette glanced at her in mild surprise. 'Well, I know, but... being the boss of such a big company, I suppose he's just used to everyone doing as he says all the time. Greg says he doesn't suffer fools gladly—even though Greg's his cousin, he wouldn't have given him a job just because of that. Although Greg says he's really good to work for—he says he's learned more in the past year from Alex than he did all the time he was at university.'

'Does he?' Joanna hid a smile of wry amusement; 'Greg says' seemed to be becoming a constant refrain in her young friend's conversation.

Annette clambered into bed, and sat there hugging her knees. 'I'm really glad we went tonight,' she sighed wistfully. 'I won't be able to see much of Greg for the next few days—he's going to be busy. Alex is leaving him in charge of setting up the workmen's camp, while he goes back to England.'

'Oh?' Joanna felt her heart thud. 'I...didn't know he was going back so soon.'

'Yes—tomorrow.' Annette lay down, and turned out the light. 'Greg says he won't be spending so much time here now that they've got started—he has a lot of other sites, all over the place, and he travels around to all of them. He'll just be popping in occasionally to see that everything's all right.'

'I see...'

In the darkness, Joanna lay staring up at the ceiling. So, Alex was leaving tomorrow—he hadn't bothered to mention it. It was fortunate that she hadn't been fool enough to succumb to his expert seduction, she reflected with a touch of asperity—she would no doubt have been unceremoniously dumped in the morning, with a polite thank you and goodbye. The rat!

Well, thank goodness he was going; she would be able to concentrate on her work, for the few weeks that remained before she would have to abandon the site. With a bit of luck, he wouldn't be back until she was gone herself, and she wouldn't have to see him again at all.

And there's nothing to cry over, she scolded herself roundly, brushing a tear from the corner of her eye. The man was dangerous; if she wasn't careful, he could destroy all the precious defences she had built, leaving her vulnerable heart unprotected.

The solitude of the desert had been well and truly shattered. The trucks had been thundering past all day, churning up clouds of yellow dust, and a small village of dark green prefabricated huts was already springing up on a patch of flat land beside the road, less than a quarter of a mile away.

Needless to say, there had been considerable interest from the men when they had discovered two women working so nearby—several of them had wandered closer to take a look. Then Alex had appeared—Joanna had been a little surprised to see him, thinking he had already gone.

He had called the men back, and, as she watched, he had summoned the whole gang, and stood there lecturing them—she could see him pointing towards a spot midway between the camp and the tomb-site, and she could imagine what he was saying, though she was too far away to hear. They were being warned that the tomb-site was strictly out of bounds—and she would doubt that anyone was going to risk disobeying his orders.

A short time after that, she saw him drive away in the Land Rover. She watched him go, from a shadowy spot just inside the entrance to one of the tombs—he didn't even glance in her direction. And she felt as if something inside of her had gone with him; it was true what Annette had said—nothing was ever going to seem quite the same again.

Three days later they broke through into the hidden tomb.

At first, Joanna just stood there, hardly able to believe the evidence of her own eyes. The tomb hadn't been touched, and the sarcophagus was still intact. It was only a wooden one, not gold like those in the Valley of the Kings, but it was beautifully carved, and the walls of the tomb were painted, the colours still as fresh as if they had been done weeks ago, not thousands of years.

'Is the mummy still here?' Annette asked in an awed whisper.

'I... think so.' She drew a long, deep breath. 'I think we'd better leave it for now—we'll need specialist equipment to move it. We'd better go and ring the Department of Antiquities, and let them know.'

Annette nodded. 'I'll go and tell Greg,' she bubbled excitedly, skipping away before Joanna could think to stop her. It probably didn't matter, though, she reflected—she could trust Greg. If Alex had still been here...

Her mouth set into a grim line. Alex Marshall wasn't going to be best pleased when he heard of this find. She was going to have to move quickly to ensure that the whole site could be preserved long enough for a full exploration to be undertaken—before he had time to blow it all up.

Annette was back within a few moments, an equally excited Greg in tow. 'This is incredible!' he gasped, gazing around at the wall-paintings. 'Just look at this one...' He reached out to touch the stone wall, as if he almost expected the paint to be still wet.

'There's been very little air in here,' Joanna explained to him. 'That's why the pigment's hardly faded.'

He nodded, deeply interested. 'What happens now?' he asked. 'Do you need any help with anything? I can get some of the men to come up if you like—this is going to hold everything up at our end, so they might as well have something to keep them occupied.'

Joanna glanced up at him doubtfully. 'Well... All this rubble will need to be cleared out of the way, so that we can move the sarcophagus out,' she acknowledged. 'But... won't Alex object if he finds out?'

Greg's open face registered blank surprise. 'Why should he? He won't want the men sitting around doing nothing.'

Joanna reserved her private thoughts on the matter. 'Well, OK—thank you. If some of them could help clear this passage, maybe a few of the others could help us in the other tombs—now we've found this one, I'd like to look

more closely and see if there are any more concealed entrances further along.'

'Wilco!' agreed Greg cheerfully. 'I'll go and get them organised—you just show me what you want them to do.'

'Annette can do that. I need to go back into Luxor and speak to the people at the Department of Antiquities. I'll be back as soon as I can.'

'Right.'

She left them earnestly discussing what needed to be done, and drove off in the pick-up. The men had been working on the road with bulldozers since they had arrived, filling in some of the pot-holes to smooth the surface, and extending it along the side of the hills, to where they would begin quarrying—Alex was going to be livid when he found out it was all going to have to be delayed.

An odd little shimmer of heat ran down her spine. He would be back as soon as he heard about it. And he was bound to try to stop her—she was going to have to pull every string she knew of to ensure the tombs were given priority over the mining. Even her father—at the risk of him coming out here and taking over. But this find was much too important to let her own ego stand in the way.

CHAPTER SIX

'GOODNESS—it's getting like Piccadilly Circus around here!' Annette chuckled as yet another car of dignitaries drew up, disgorging its passengers on to the rough area of ground in front of the tomb-site.

'Mmm.' Joanna knew she ought to be pleased—with all this fuss, it was guaranteed that the importance of the site would be properly recognised. But instead she felt a kind of perverse resentment that it was all being taken over, taken out of her hands.

It seemed like there were half a hundred people here—representatives from the Department of Antiquities, experts from the university, archaeologists from other sites who had come along to take a look, even a couple of television news crews. And as a backdrop, Alex's men, toiling without their shirts on, trundling load after load of rubble out of the other tombs and on to his lorries.

'What time's your father coming?' asked Annette.

Joanna glanced at her watch. 'His plane's due in about an hour or so—I promised to go over and fetch him from the airport...' She glanced up as she spoke, watching without surprise as a helicopter swung in to land beside the road—they'd be coming in by jumbo jet next! But the next instant a familiar figure swung down from the pilot's seat, and she felt her heart slam into a higher gear. 'Oh, lord—he's here.'

Annette glanced around with a puzzled frown. 'Your father?'

'Er... no.' Joanna shook her head, her cheeks a little flushed at that all too revealing slip of the tongue. 'Alex Marshall.'

'Oh...'

For the past few days she had been trying to tell herself that it was ridiculous to be so apprehensive at the prospect of seeing him again, but the sight of

that tall, wide-shouldered frame brought all her feelings of feminine vulnerability rushing back.

He stood for a moment, feet apart, hands on hips, regarding the scene of bustling activity, his jaw set in a grim line. Then he turned, and strolled towards where the two girls were perched on a rock a little way from the entrance to the newly discovered tomb.

'Er... I think I'll just go and find Greg, and tell him Alex is here,' Annette murmured, getting ready to beat a strategic retreat.

'He probably already knows,' Joanna remarked drily—he must have heard the sound of that helicopter approach. He didn't seem to be in any particular hurry to come out and face his boss; not that she could blame him, she conceded, her mouth a little dry—she would very much prefer to avoid this confrontation herself.

He came up the slope, and she found herself forced to tip her head back to look up at him as he towered over her. It made her feel at a distinct disadvantage. And those sunglasses didn't help, either—all she could see was her own twin reflection in miniature.

'Good morning,' he greeted her, that familiar sardonic inflection in his voice. He glanced around at the scene of bustling activity, his mouth curving into a cynical smile. 'I see you struck oil.'

'Yes.' She had to draw a long, deep breath in an attempt to steady her fluttering heartbeat. 'I'm...sorry for the delay this is going to cause you.'

'Are you?' He arched one dark eyebrow beneath the brim of his battered baseball cap. 'It looks to me as if you haven't wasted a second in getting the big guns in on your side.'

'The Department of Antiquities felt it was a very important find,' she countered with cool dignity.

'So it appears. I see you haven't hesitated to avail yourself of my work-force, either. Are you officially subcontracting them, or are they still on my payroll?'

'They're... still on your payroll,' she admitted a little awkwardly; from his point of view, it must seem like adding insult to injury—he would be perfectly within his rights to demand that they immediately return to their proper jobs.

But, rather to her surprise, he laughed with grim humour. 'I suppose I should have expected that. No doubt I have my young cousin, Greg, to thank?'

She slanted him a cautious glance from beneath her lashes. She had been expecting ranting fury—but then Alex Marshall wasn't the sort to waste his energy on a battle that, for the time being at least, he couldn't win. But she would be a fool to believe that he had conceded defeat; this was only the first round. 'Well... He *did* say you wouldn't want them sitting around doing nothing,' she explained tentatively.

'Too right,' he acknowledged with feeling. 'And where exactly might he be hiding now?'

'I think he's...down in the new tomb,' she responded warily. 'Helping them work out how to move the sarcophagus.'

'I'm glad to know he's making himself useful,' he remarked, a hard note in his voice hinting that Greg was in for a rough ride when it came to explaining why he had reversed the boss's orders about letting the men come down to the tomb-site. 'Would you like to show me?'

With some reluctance she rose to her feet. Far from letting her imagination exaggerate the impact of that raw maleness, she realised now that she had rather been inclined to underestimate it. With him walking beside her down the rough slope, she felt an odd little shimmer of heat run through her, a vivid physical memory of the way it had felt to be held in those warm, strong arms...

Swiftly she forced herself to push the thought from her mind; she couldn't afford that sort of weakness around Alex Marshall—he would certainly take advantage of it. The more so now, in revenge for her disruption of his work schedule.

Greg and Annette met them at the entrance to the tomb. Greg greeted his older cousin with a slightly sheepish grin. 'Hi! You—er—got here pretty quickly.'

'I was down in Addis when I got your message,' Alex responded with a touch of asperity. 'I thought I'd better come and see for myself what was happening. And it appears that I was right not to delay,' he added, stepping aside as one of his own labourers came trundling past with a loaded wheelbarrow. 'I thought I left strict instructions that the men weren't to come anywhere near this site?'

'Oh.. .yes. But there hasn't been any trouble,' Greg assured him earnestly. 'And, you know, I really think they've enjoyed helping out—it's made a nice change for them.'

Joanna noticed an odd quirk at the corner of Alex's firm mouth; was she mistaken, or was that an incipient smile? 'I'm glad to know you've been able to be so philanthropic on my behalf,' he remarked with sardonic humour. 'Well, let's take a look at this magnificent discovery—I warn you, I'm expecting no less than the eighth wonder of the world.'

Any temptation to lower her defences was instantly stifled by his cynical mockery. She returned him a fulminating glare. 'This way,' she grated, her voice sharp with irritation. 'I'm afraid it's going to be a bit crowded down there—some people from the Egyptian government have arrived to see it.'

It was necessary to crawl along the low tunnel from the Nomarch's tomb to the other, hidden behind it. The inner chamber was hot and airless, lit with harsh electric lights powered by a petrol-generator outside that belched oily smoke and noise, polluting the entire area.

It was unfortunate that Alex wasn't able to appreciate the full dramatic impact of the place as she had experienced it when she had first seen it,

Joanna reflected as she rose to her feet at the end of the tunnel. But, after all, she could hardly expect him to share her enthusiasm; this discovery was likely to delay the start of his quarrying by an indefinite period.

He straightened beside her, and looked around. The tomb was quite roughly carved and painted, as if it had been prepared in a hurry. 'So this is it?' he remarked. 'How old is it?'

'According to the inscription on the sarcophagus, it dates from the reign of Amenophis III, which would put it at around 1360 BC,' Joanna told him tautly. 'It's the tomb of the eldest son of the local district governor, or Nomarch; apparently he was very fond of him, which is why he went to such particular lengths to hide the tomb from robbers.'

He smiled in wry humour, his jaded glance surveying the earnest academics bent in study over the carvings on the bitumen-soaked wooden outer-coffin. 'Well, I suppose three thousand years isn't a bad run for your money,' he murmured in faintly sardonic amusement.

'If you'd had your way,' Joanna reminded him, slanting him a glittering look, 'it would all have been blown up.'

He acknowledged her point with a faintly mocking smile. 'It seems the old geezer's luck's still holding,' he conceded. 'So, what happens to all this now? I assume it's going to have to be shifted?'

She nodded. 'It's probably going to be moved across to the museum at Luxor. My father's coming out to take a look at it, before it's decided exactly how to go about it... In fact I ought to get going,' she added, glancing at her watch. 'I have to be at the airport to meet him.'

'That's OK,' Alex assured her laconically. 'You can come over in the chopper with me—I have to meet someone too.'

There was an odd note in his voice that made Joanna glance up at him sharply from beneath her lashes. His tone had seemed to imply some lack of enthusiasm about the person's arrival, and her curiosity was instantly

piqued; it was hard to imagine anyone having the temerity to come out here against Alex Marshall's wishes. Intriguing...!

But she didn't quite have the courage to probe further, so she responded with a murmured, 'Thank you—that will save quite a bit of time.'

She was reluctant to be away from the site for too long; she knew better than most that the air of studious seriousness among the archaeological scholars was deceptive—they were deeply competitive, and would have no scruples at all about claiming any of her discoveries exclusively for themselves if they were allowed even half a chance.

Alex was examining the rest of the tomb with interest. It was stocked with everyday domestic items, like spare lumber piled in an attic—there was a wooden bed, a painted and gilded chair, several dozen vases and pieces of pottery, and a number of wooden coffers covered with beaten copper, etched with hieroglyphics and figures of the gods.

'What are these?' he enquired, stooping to study a set of four beautifully carved stone jars with elaborate stoppers in the shape of animals heads.

'Oh—those are the Canopic Jars,' she told him. 'They hold parts of the body extracted during the mummification process. And these are the *ushabti*; the Egyptians believed that in passing through the Underworld the spirit of the deceased would be called upon to perform all sorts of tasks, so they buried dozens of these little figurines in the tomb along with the body, as kind of spirit-slaves.'

He laughed drily, picking up a small earthenware statue of a servant-girl grinding corn, moulded and painted in the finest detail. 'So they didn't have to lift a finger, even in the afterlife?' he remarked. 'They certainly had it well worked out, those guys.'

Joanna couldn't help but smile. 'They did. And the figures have been very useful to us in working out how they lived their daily lives. This one's straining barley mush through a sieve, for instance, to make beer.'

'They had beer?'

'Beer, wine... The rich had a very comfortable lifestyle. And they lived in beautiful palaces, with painted walls, and courtyards with gardens and pools.'

'Really? Funny—I'd never thought about the kind of houses they lived in. You tend to just think of the pyramids and temples and things.'

She smiled up at him, pleased at his interest—and found herself gazing into those deep, dark eyes. She hadn't realised she was standing so close to him; it was like being caught in some kind of gravitational force field that she couldn't escape—though there were so many other people in the tomb, it was almost as if they were alone...

With a supreme effort of will she drew back, struggling to steady the racing beat of her heart. Was this a deliberate game, feigning an interest in her subject so that she would forget to put up her usual defences? 'We'd... better be going,' she forced out rather stiffly. 'My father hates to be kept waiting.'

His smile told her that he could read her reactions as well as ever, but he nodded a mocking assent, standing politely aside to let her squeeze past him and make her way back to the passage and through the upper tomb into the outside world. She drew in a long, deep breath, feeling a sense of relief at being able to move casually away from him.

The helicopter was painted in a livery of red and yellow, perched like some weird kind of stick-insect on the rough ground beside the road. Joanna regarded it with just a touch of misgiving—she had never flown in one before. 'Will there...be enough room for all of us?' she enquired uncertainly. 'With my parents, and your visitor... ?'

'No problem,' he assured her. 'It'll take five.'

'Oh... Good.'

He held open the passenger-side door for her, and offered her his hand for assistance as she stepped up over the high sill. The cockpit was functional but reasonably comfortable, though the controls looked alarmingly

complicated—it must be extremely difficult to fly one of these things, she reflected with reluctant admiration.

Alex was walking slowly around the craft, inspecting that everything was in order, and then he climbed up into the seat beside her, slipping on his head-set and checking in with the airport control tower to let them know he was going to be in their airspace.

'You'll want your headset on,' he reminded her briefly as he ran through the pre-flight safety routine. 'The noise'll make your ears buzz.'

She nodded, her mouth a little dry. He reached down to ease up the lever between their seats, which she had rather foolishly assumed was some kind of handbrake, and the helicopter lifted to hover about six feet from the ground. And then the last-minute checks were completed, and he turned the machine into the wind, and they were away.

And suddenly she was enjoying herself. They swooped up high into the air, their shadow dancing across the dusty ground, and she looked down to see the road snaking below her, along the abrupt margin between the patchwork of fertile fields close to the river and the inhospitable desert beyond.

'Fantastic!' she breathed, searching out familiar landmarks. 'Look—there's Banana Island. And look at that—that big depression; that's the remains of a man-made lake Amenophis III had built for his wife. Oh, and look—there are the Colossi.'

Alex glanced down at the two massive seated statues, towering sixty feet high beside the road to the ferry-stage. 'They look pretty imposing even from up here,' he agreed. 'What were they built for?'

'Originally they were at the entrance to a temple—the funerary temple of Amenhotep III—but the rest of it was demolished by later Pharaohs who filched the stone for their own buildings.'

He slanted her a look that she found a little difficult to interpret. 'You really know your stuff, don't you?'

She felt her cheeks flush faintly pink at the compliment. 'Well, I more or less grew up with it,' she demurred modestly. 'I had it instead of fairy-stories when I was little, and practically every summer holiday from school I came out here to be with my parents—my father was based here for a long time, and my mother always came with him.'

'Was she an archaeologist too?'

'No.' She smiled wryly. 'She was content just taking care of Daddy.'

He lifted one dark eyebrow in amused response, but made no comment. 'Do you have any brothers and sisters?'

'No.' She laughed as old memories stirred. 'I think they decided one child was quite enough to trail around with them; two would have been too much of a handful on a field-trip.'

'Probably wise of them,' he remarked with dry humour. 'It must have been pretty lonely for you, though.'

She shook her head. 'Not really. There were always lots of other children to play with—it was like a miniature United Nations at times, with kids here from all over the world. I learned to speak about a dozen languages.'

'Very useful,' he concurred. 'And was that how you met your husband?'

She shot him a startled look; the question had caught her off guard. 'Y...yes,' she stammered. 'He was...one of Daddy's students. We were working on the site at Tel- Armana, down the river, just past Asyut.'

'Do you still see much of him?'

She hesitated, a little puzzled by his interest. But no doubt he was simply making polite conversation, so she responded with a casual shrug of her slim shoulders. 'No—he's in America. He lectures at a university out there. I haven't seen him for... oh, more than two years now.'

'Why didn't you have any children?'

She felt a hint of pink colour her cheeks. 'I... we... It wasn't something we... ever got around to,' she stammered, wishing she could think of a way to turn the conversation into less intimate channels. 'Fortunately, as it turned out, I suppose,' she added, struggling for a tone of indifference.

He nodded, agreeing with her words. 'Same here. My wife never wanted children.' A faint smile flickered over that cynical mouth. 'She was afraid they would spoil her figure.'

From beneath her lashes, she covertly studied that hard, handsome profile. Was that the truth? Or was it that his wife, like herself, had recognised that attempting to cement a crumbling marriage by having a child was a venture doomed to failure? They had crossed the river, and she turned her head to look out of the window at the town of Luxor sweeping past below them. Further conversation was prevented as Alex checked in again with air traffic control to ask for clearance to bring the helicopter in to the airfield, and just a few moments later they had set down close to the terminal building, in time to watch the plane from Cairo come in to land and taxi in across the apron.

The business class passengers would be the first to alight; Joanna watched idly, knowing her parents would be in Economy—her father always insisted that it was a waste of money to up-grade. But she was curious to see who Alex had come to meet. There were several possible candidates, Arab and European, with important looking briefcases in their hands, but apparently it wasn't any of them. But as the next figure emerged, he snorted with laughter.

'Trust Felicia—absolutely no concession whatsoever to anybody's cultural sensitivities.'

Joanna's eyes widened in surprise; so this was who he had come to meet. She had to be a model—that pose was pure catwalk, one foot half turned out, her head thrown back as one hand brushed through a tousled mane of blonde hair. She was wearing the shortest skirt Joanna had ever seen outside of a magazine—though she had to admit, however much it choked her, that she had the legs for it.

She sashayed down the steps as if there were a hundred cameras waiting for her, the men of the ground-crew watching as if their eyes were on stalks. Spotting the helicopter in its distinctive livery, she lifted one slender arm in an enthusiastic wave—although it was quite unnecessary to draw attention to the fact that she had arrived.

'I'd better go and see about getting her luggage sent straight to the hotel,' Alex murmured on an inflection of dry humour, swinging himself down from the helicopter. 'No doubt it'll require a truck, as usual.'

Joanna flickered him a glance of surprise. His attitude to the stunning young lady now running towards him with an eager smile on her scarlet-painted lips didn't seem to be one of unmitigated welcome; he waited for her with his hands on his hips, and even when she threw her arms around his neck it was several moments before he returned her embrace.

At closer quarters, she could see that the girl was rather younger than her sophisticated make-up and clothes suggested; in fact she was probably still in her teens. What in heaven's name was a man like Alex Marshall doing dallying with a girl of that age? It was almost criminal!

Something painful twisted in her heart, and she had to close her eyes for a moment to squeeze back a sudden rush of tears. Stupid, stupid, stupid, she chided herself furiously—you knew the score right from the beginning. But it was one thing to be aware that there were a lot of women in his life—it was rather different to face the reality in the flesh. And to see him with a chit of a thing barely out of her school uniform...!

She climbed down from the helicopter, hesitating awkwardly, hoping her mask of composure gave nothing away. The girl spotted her, and her eyes flickered with surprise. She drew back out of Alex's arms, casting an openly disparaging glance down over Joanna's dusty, wok-stained clothes. It was clear that she didn't welcome the intrusion.

'Who's this?' she demanded with a pout.

Alex half turned, keeping one casual arm around the girl's waist. A smile of sardonic amusement was curving that hard mouth. 'This is Ms Joanna

Holloway.' He introduced her, a subtle trace of mockery in his tone. 'She's the one who discovered the tomb you're so...ah...eager to see.'

'Ms?' The blonde fastened at once on that tiny detail—the mention of the tomb seemed to have passed from one jangling earring to the other without meeting anything of substance on the way. 'Oh, heavens—you're not one of those awful feminists, are you?'

Joanna blinked at her in surprise; she had never particularly thought of herself in that light—but it certainly wasn't an accusation she was going to deny, not when she had fought so hard to become something more than a mere ornamental accessory for a man. And especially not with Alex standing there, watching her with those far too perceptive dark eyes.

'Of course,' she returned with cool dignity. 'Isn't every sane woman these days?'

Felicia looked a little startled. She giggled fatuously, glancing up at Alex to gauge his reaction. He seemed amused at the exchange. 'A little feminism wouldn't do you any harm,' he advised her with a touch of asperity. 'You won't be able to get by just by batting those big baby-blues for ever.'

Joanna didn't have time to sort out her astonishment at that remark; at that moment she spotted her parents stepping from the aircraft, her father as usual impatiently scolding her mother, who was struggling with all their hand baggage while he carried nothing at all. Leaving her confusion behind, she hurried over to the aircraft steps, greeting her mother with an affectionate kiss, and her father with a wry smile.

'Hello, Daddy—I'm glad you could come over so quickly.'

He smiled down at her rather vaguely. 'Oh... Yes, quite. Come along, Daphne, do hurry up—we have to get our cases, and then find a damned taxi. We haven't got all day.'

'You don't have to worry about that, Daddy,' Joanna assured him. 'You can send the suitcases on to the hotel, and come straight over to the tomb-site in the helicopter.'

'Eh?' He peered across the tarmac from beneath shaggy white eyebrows, but accepted the presence of the helicopter as merely his due. 'Well, come along, then,' he urged. 'They're unloading the luggage already.'

It didn't take long to collect their suitcases; as soon as they appeared on the conveyor belt, Professor Holloway swooped on them, barging aside anyone who happened to be in his way—fortunately his age, his white hair, and his general air of eccentricity protected him from any outraged protest.

Emerging from the crowd around the baggage reclaim area, they found Alex and Felicia waiting with a porter, and a mountain of expensive leather luggage—she must have brought a great many of those microscopic skirts with her to have needed so many suitcases, Joanna reflected acidly.

But she let no trace of any emotion show in her face as she introduced her parents. 'Mum, Daddy—this is Alex Marshall. He's the head of the mining company that's going to be taking over the site as soon as we've finished.' She had added a deliberate emphasis to the last words, her eyes glinting with an aggressive challenge to him to contradict her, but he merely smiled with that sardonic humour that was becoming so familiar to her.

'Good afternoon, Professor Holloway,' he said, holding out a polite hand. 'I'm very pleased to meet you—I've heard a great deal about you.'

But consideration of good manners had never influenced the Professor. He scowled at the stranger, ignoring the proffered hand. 'Mining, eh? Well, I hope you're not in a hurry, young man. A find like this is of enormous value—incalculable. I'm afraid you'll just have to wait.'

To Joanna's relief, Alex merely seemed amused by this response. 'I'd already gathered that,' he said drily. 'I've arranged for the luggage to be taken on to the hotel, so if you'd like to come with me, the helicopter should be refuelled ready for take-off.'

'Good. I'm in a hurry, you know.' The fact that Alex was doing him a favour had apparently failed to register with the Professor; stalking on ahead, he expected everyone to step out of his way, scowling fiercely at those that were a little slow.

Daphne Holloway glanced up apologetically at Alex. 'I'm...sorry about him,' she murmured in her soft, deferential voice. 'He.. .gets a little agitated at times.'

Alex smiled down at her in warm reassurance. 'Please, don't worry about it,' he responded gently. He drew forward the blonde, who was waiting at his side, clearly growing somewhat impatient at not being the centre of attention. 'By the way, may I introduce my sister, Felicia?' he added blandly.

Joanna's startled eyes flew straight to his face, and she knew as she saw the mocking glint in his that she had given herself away. She struggled to catch her breath, a betraying flush of colour heating her cheeks. His *sister*? Well, how was she supposed to have guessed that? There was such a huge difference in their ages, and they didn't look a bit alike.

Flashing him a look of icy disdain, she turned him an aloof shoulder, taking her mother's arm. 'Did you have a good flight?' she enquired solicitously. 'I hope it wasn't too much for you to have to drop everything and rush out here like this?'

'Of course not,' her mother assured her with a smile. 'Your father was terribly excited by your news, you know. He's extremely proud of you—just in case he forgets to tell you.'

Joanna laughed drily. 'Oh, Mum,' she chuckled. 'Where would he ever be without you?'

Daphne blinked at her in surprise. 'Why, what on earth do you mean?' she protested, genuinely puzzled. 'Your father's a very clever man.'

'I know. That's his trouble.'

The mechanics had just finished refuelling the helicopter, and Joanna helped her mother up into the back beside her father, climbing in herself to join them. Alex's sister scrambled into the front seat beside him, a feat which stirred considerable interest among the airport workers gathered on

the ground, and caused Professor Holloway to frown in disapproval—which seemed to bother her not at all.

The flight back across the river took no more than a few minutes. A small deputation was waiting to meet the august professor of Egyptology, their dignity somewhat ruffled by the whirlwind of grit and sand thrown up by the down-draught from the helicopter's rotors as it came in to land. Bent in half, and hugging a straw hat to his head, one of them ducked beneath the whirring blades and ran forward to open the door.

'Professor Holloway—how wonderful to see you again. You remember me? We met at Tanis, three years ago.'

'Of course, of course.' Impatient to see what he had come for, the professor had no time for greetings. He clambered stiffly down from the helicopter, exchanging the briefest of handshakes before striding off towards the tombs.

'Oh, dear,' muttered his wife anxiously. 'He's forgotten his sunhat—he'll catch the sun on his head.' She scrambled down after him, hurrying to catch him up.

Felicia swung herself elegantly to the ground, and stood looking around. Joanna couldn't help wondering quite why she had come—she didn't seem at all the type to be interested in ancient history. But she had evidently seen something she was interested in, and as Joanna followed the direction of her gaze, she frowned; Greg had just appeared in the entrance to the tomb, talking to one of the men.

Alex lifted his hand to flick off the fuel and master electric switches on the console above his head, and the rotors slowed to a halt. He turned in his seat to regard her with a provocative smile. 'You were surprised to hear that she was my sister?' he queried, somewhat rhetorically.

Joanna's eyes flickered evasively past him. 'A little,' she conceded, trying for a light note. 'She's a lot younger than you.'

'Actually, she's my stepsister,' he explained, slanting a wry glance after the retreating figure so spectacularly out of place in this location. 'And a handful.' There was a glint of mocking amusement in his eyes. 'Did you really think I was such a cradle-snatcher?'

Joanna felt again that treacherous rush of colour to her cheeks. 'Of... Of course not,' she returned stiffly. 'It's really none of my concern.'

He laughed softly. 'You're not a very good liar, you know,' he taunted, those dark eyes mocking her. 'I can tell exactly what you're thinking.'

She lowered her lashes in instinctive defence, but she knew it was no use pretending any longer—not to herself, nor to him. 'You... never told me you were going to meet your stepsister,' she accused tautly.

'No.' His voice was low and husky. 'Maybe I did that deliberately. I wanted to see if I could make you a little jealous.' He reached across and took her hand. 'I can't quite figure out what you're doing to me, Ms Holloway, but somehow you're getting right under my skin.'

She drew her hand back in alarm, her attempt at a careless laugh coming out as a kind of strangled croak. 'That's probably just because you're furious with me over causing you all this delay,' she forced out unsteadily.

'That's what I thought. But it doesn't explain why, the first time I saw you again, I wanted nothing more than to snatch you up and carry you off with me, and finish what we started that night at Karnak.'

Her eyes darted to his, and swiftly away again, as heat rushed through her veins. 'I... That wasn't... You needn't think anything like that will ever happen again,' she protested. 'You took me by surprise that night.'

'*You took me* by surprise,' he countered, a hint of wry self-mockery in his voice. 'The way you responded when I kissed you almost made me lose control. And your body was so beautiful. Your breasts were like peaches, firm and ripe in my hand...'

With a gasp of panic she unfastened her seatbelt and jumped down from the helicopter, her legs almost giving way beneath her. He was beside her at once, catching her elbow to steady her.

'You can run away from me,' he taunted, an edge of acerbity in his voice. 'But you can't run away from yourself. You want what I want—and sooner or later, it's going to get too strong for you.'

'Let me go,' she snapped at him furiously, shaking off his hand. 'I don't know what you're hoping to gain by this...'

'Don't you?' That mocking glint was back in his dark eyes. 'Then it's obviously been far too long since you felt the weight of a satisfied man crushing you down after making love to you. It isn't healthy to be so abstemious.'

'I'll worry about my own health, thank you,' she rapped heatedly. 'Now if you don't mind, I'd like to go and see what's happening.'

He laughed, but let her go, and she stalked away, her head held very erect but her spine feeling like a column of ice that was slowly melting in lazy trickles of heat.

Every word he had said was true; she wanted him, with a fierce, aching longing that was gnawing at her soul. When she had thought Felicia was his girlfriend she had been racked by a jealousy so sharp that it had almost torn her heart out. And it was becoming more than she could fight; her defenses, once so seemingly impregnable, were no match for his assault. She was falling in love with him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE atmosphere inside the tomb was hot and tense; there must have been twenty people crowded into the confined space. Professor Holloway had completed his preliminary survey, and was ready to open the sarcophagus and see what was inside.

Howard Carter must have felt like this, Joanna reflected, at the opening of the tomb of Tutankhamun. Not that this discovery was going to be anything like as fabulous, of course—but, nevertheless, she held her breath as she watched the workmen begin to ease up the heavy wooden lid, their bodies glistening with sweat in the yellow glow of the electric light.

With a scraping sound the lid began to move. Other hands reached in to help, easing it aside with infinite care. As soon as there was a small gap, the elderly professor held up a peremptory hand, and shone his torch inside, as everyone waited expectantly.

Joanna smiled wryly to herself—she had seen her father go through this performance dozens of times before, milking every last drop of drama from the moment. She had been trying to ignore the sensation of being watched herself, but it was stronger than she could withstand, and she felt her eyes drawn, almost against her will, across the shadowy circle around the sarcophagus.

Alex was standing just inside the entrance from the upper tomb, watching the proceedings with a sardonic smile on his hard mouth. He appeared to have accepted the inevitability of the delay, at least; he didn't even seem to mind letting his men help with the heavy work. But she wasn't fooled into thinking that implied any softening of attitude on his part; at the first word, he would be in here with his dynamite and his bulldozers, reducing the whole site to rubble.

'The coffin appears to be undisturbed,' Professor Holloway announced in appropriately sepulchral tones. 'I believe we may find the mummy to be intact.'

Excitement bubbled up into a froth of congratulation and back-slapping. Not everyone had forgotten that it was Joanna, not her father, who had actually made the discovery, and she found herself surrounded, shaking hands with all the important visitors, explaining again exactly how she had come to find the tomb.

When at last she was able to escape, Alex had disappeared, but as she emerged from the tomb she found him outside, deep in conversation with Mr Makram from the Department of Antiquities and another man she didn't know. She guessed at once that they were discussing how long it would take to clear the site of anything worth preserving so that the quarrying could go ahead; well, they weren't going to keep any secrets from her, she vowed resolutely, and, drawing a slow, steady breath, walked over to join them.

Alex glanced up at her approach, a flicker of grim humour curving that hard mouth. 'Ah, Ms Holloway,' he greeted her with mocking formality. 'You already know Mr Makram, I believe?'

The wizened antiquarian greeted her with an effusive gush. 'Ah, Miss Holloway. May I offer my congratulations? A truly splendid discovery. It may be hoped that it will reveal much new information. Your father will be remaining to conduct the examination, I aspire?'

'I believe so,' she responded evenly, ignoring the watchful glint in Alex's dark eyes.

'Allow me to introduce my colleague Mr Hamid, from the Ministry which has responsibility for mineral resources,' Mr Makram added with smiling formality.

The other man was offering her his hand. 'Good afternoon, Miz Holloway,' he greeted her eagerly. 'It is very much welcome to see you here. And your most great father also. It was very much interest I had to listen to him speech in Cairo at Museum, five, six years ago— very much interest indeed. A very much knowledgeable man about Egypt history.'

She shook his hand warmly. '*Shokran*,' she responded, slipping easily into his language. 'The question now, of course, is how much time you will be

able to allow us to complete the exploration of this site, before Mr Marshall will be able to recommence his quarrying operations.'

'The matter has already been discussed,' Alex put in coolly. 'Naturally, you will have enough time to do whatever is considered necessary.'

She slanted him a glance of wary suspicion. 'It's very difficult at this stage to estimate how long that will take,' she responded carefully. 'There could be more tombs still to be found.'

'Do you really think that's likely?' he enquired drily.

'It's possible.' She turned a winning smile on the gentleman from the Ministry. 'And I'm sure you'll agree the site is now much too important to risk destroying it prematurely?

He beamed, clearly susceptible to a touch of feminine charm. 'I'm sure my department will wish to do everything possible to facilitate you,' he assured her. 'We will be most anxious to assist the great Professor Holloway with his research.'

'That is most kind.' She didn't trouble to remind him that the research was hers, not her father's—she was going to exploit every single crumb of advantage, no matter how much it might cause Alex Marshall to clench his jaw.

The two government officials moved away to converse between themselves, leaving her alone with Alex. He slanted her a look of cynical amusement. 'You'll use every trick in the book to get what you want, won't you?' he taunted. 'Poor Hamid—you were winding him around your little finger.'

She arched one finely drawn eyebrow in cool question. 'I'm afraid you're getting a little paranoid,' she responded, her voice edged with disdain. 'I was merely being pleasant to him.'

'Oh, was that what it was?' he countered, those dark eyes mocking her. 'No wonder I didn't recognise it—I don't think you've been pleasant to me once

since I've known you. At least, not for more than five minutes at a time. I'd assumed you were just as abrasive with all men, but apparently not. Why me, I wonder?"

'Because you don't deserve being pleasant to,' she threw back at him. She could feel the treacherous heat of a blush rising to her cheeks, and turned him an aloof shoulder, walking away before she could betray herself further. But behind her she could hear him laughing softly. He *knew* the effect he was having on her, damn him, and he was deliberately playing with her. Maybe that was his way of getting his revenge, because she had disrupted his plans.

She went in search of Annette, but she couldn't find her, so instead she wandered along to see how things were going in the other tombs. Some of Alex's men were working with rock-cutters to remove a section of one of the walls, and she watched for a moment, her hands over her ears against the deafening racket. Greg, who was supervising the activities, turned to her with a grin.

'Quite a noise, isn't it?' he shouted. 'OK, that'll do.' He held up his hand, and the men stopped gratefully to rest. 'What do you think?' he asked Joanna, proud of his efforts.

'It's coming on,' she approved warmly.

'This sandstone's like butter,' he told her. 'We should be ready to start chiselling out on each side of the cuts by tomorrow. That'll take a couple of days, and then we can start cutting through behind.'

She nodded. 'Fine. By the way, have you seen Annette?'

He shook his head. 'Not for an hour or more.'

'Oh.' She frowned, a little puzzled. 'Well, she must be around here somewhere. Probably over by the trucks. I'll see you later—bye.'

She left him with a casual wave, and climbed back up the narrow access passage on to the scree-strewn hillside, baked by the late afternoon sun. She

put up her hand to shield her eyes, and squinted across to where their beaten-up old truck was parked, now surrounded by half a dozen other cars, but there was no sign of Annette. Strange—where could she have got to?

There was someone else there, however—Felicia, draped leggily across a rock, burnishing her suntan, attracting a considerable amount of attention from the workmen as they passed to and fro. She glanced up languidly as she heard Joanna's footsteps.

'Oh—hi,' she greeted her with a bored yawn. 'How's it going? Have they finished messing about in that tomb yet?'

'More or less. I expect your brother will be ready to leave soon—it'll be getting dark in half an hour or so, anyway.'

'Thank goodness for that.' The blonde sat up, preening herself as a couple of the men almost fell over their own feet through turning to stare at her. 'There's not really much to do out here, is there?'

'No, I'm afraid not,' Joanna responded, faintly amused. 'Are you planning to stay long?'

A smug little smile curved that perfectly formed mouth. 'I don't know,' she purred. 'That depends.'

On what? Joanna wondered drily. The next whim that entered that pretty head? What had brought her out here in the first place anyway? She clearly wasn't remotely interested in archaeology. Probably she had had a row with a boyfriend at home, and had flounced off in a huff. So long as it was nothing to do with Greg, she reflected, recalling that fleeting impression when the helicopter had landed. That could prove awkward!

'Ah—so there you are.' Joanna stiffened involuntarily as Alex's voice cut across her thoughts. He regarded his stepsister with wry resignation. 'Is it absolutely necessary for you to pose around like that, distracting my men?' he enquired, a sardonic inflection in his voice. 'You're likely to cause an accident.'

The girl seemed to find this flattering. 'I can't help it if they look at me,' she reasoned ingenuously. 'What do you expect me to do?'

'It might be worth your while remembering that they're accustomed to women dressing a little more modestly out here,' he pointed out with apparently little hope of being attended to. 'Anyway, I thought you were keen to see the tomb?'

Felicia shrugged her slender shoulders in a gesture of dismissal. 'I've seen it,' she responded coolly. 'Besides, it was stuffy down there with all those people.'

Alex appeared to be having some difficulty controlling his temper. Joanna watched him covertly from behind her sunglasses; she could sympathise with his feelings—Felicia seemed to be an extremely spoilt young lady—but it was quite intriguing to see him being bested in this way. She strongly suspected that he would like nothing better than to be able to put the silly girl over his knee, and was finding it most frustrating not to be able to do so.

He turned on her abruptly. 'It appears that they won't be able to move the mummy until next week,' he informed her with a glare. 'Apparently they want to take it to Cairo for a proper examination.'

'Oh..;

'At least by then you should have had sufficient time to check out the rest of the site,' he added, a bite of sarcasm in his voice. 'Particularly since it appears that I'm continuing to provide the manpower.'

She bridled in anger at his tone. 'I'm quite sure that isn't necessary,' she retorted. 'Now that the site's been declared of interest, the Department of Antiquities would be willing to provide the labour.'

'Which will probably take a month to arrange,' he pointed out. 'I think I'm better off leaving things as they are.' He turned to his stepsister. 'If you're in such a hurry to leave, you'd better come along,' he rapped at her. 'I'm going in a few minutes.'

She slanted him a petulant look. 'I didn't say I was in a hurry to leave,' she complained.

'Well, I'm not leaving you out here by yourself,' he advised her caustically, and turning his back he strode away.

Felicia glanced after him with a quizzical smile. 'What's got into him?' she enquired of no one in particular.

'I think he's annoyed about the delay,' Joanna responded, her tone carefully indifferent.

Felicia rose to her feet. 'Well, there's no need for him to come the big brother with me,' she grumbled. She glanced at Joanna with mocking scrutiny. 'You fancy him, don't you?'

Joanna felt a faint blush of pink colour her cheeks. 'Of course not,' she protested rather too forcefully.

But Felicia wasn't fooled by her denial. She chuckled in triumph. 'I thought so! They all do. Of course, I suppose he's quite good-looking—and *very* rich. You want to watch out for him, though,' she added with an air of spurious concern. 'He's not very easy to get your claws into. Even the really beautiful ones can't hold on to him for long.'

'Thank you for the advice,' Joanna returned with tart humour. 'I'll try and remember it.'

She watched the younger girl saunter off towards the helicopter, her body swaying provocatively in that abbreviated skirt. A slight frown creased her brow. It was a pity Alex had couched his warning in such tactless terms—the way some of the men were watching her was more than a little worrying. Of course, the fact that she was Alex Marshall's sister ought to protect her from the consequences of her own naivete—the men seemed to have a good deal of respect for him. But there was no guarantee.

It was late by the time Joanna got back to the flat; after driving her parents over to their hotel, they had naturally expected her to stay and have dinner with them. She had been a little reluctant to agree—she hadn't been able to find Annette at all at the tomb-site, and she was beginning to worry slightly.

But Annette was a sensible girl, and knew how to take care of herself out here. She had probably just decided to come back into town to early, and with all the excitement it wasn't surprising that whoever she had left a message with had forgotten to pass it on.

She had been sipping her coffee and listening absently to her father's dissertation on the correct procedure for examining mummies, when she had noticed Felicia out on the terrace, sitting with a group of the wealthy local businessmen who congregated there nightly, talking into the small hours and smoking from hubble-bubble pipes.

A little surprised, she glanced around for Alex, but there was no sign of him. Of course, it was probably perfectly all right, she assured herself doubtfully—they were probably business associates of his. Surely even Felicia wouldn't be so foolish as to be so familiar with a group of totally strange men in a foreign country? But, nevertheless, she kept an eye on the younger girl as she finished her meal.

Her parents had decided to retire to their room, and after bidding goodnight to them she was on her way out of the hotel when she ran into Alex. He seemed slightly distracted, and glanced down at her in surprise. 'Oh... hello. I suppose you've been having dinner with your parents?'

'Yes.'

He was looking around the foyer, a frown creasing his brow. 'Have you seen Fliss anywhere?' he enquired.

Joanna hesitated, reluctant to cause trouble between him and his sister. But, looking past his shoulder, she could see that the girl had spotted him, and had slipped discreetly away from her friends. 'She's... out on the terrace, I think,' she responded gratefully. 'Is Greg with you?'

'Greg?' He lifted one dark eyebrow in surprise. 'No- he's staying out at the work-camp now.'

'Oh. Only I thought... Annette came back over early, and I assumed they must have a date.'

He shook his head, his smile a little grim. 'I'm afraid Greg doesn't have time for gallivanting at the moment,' he responded darkly. 'Since he's taken it upon himself to countermand my direct orders, he now has full responsibility for what goes on out there.'

She slanted him a trenchant look. It seemed a little petty of him to punish poor Greg in that way—it really hadn't been his fault, what had happened. He really didn't like it when he didn't get his own way, she reflected wryly—and woe betide anyone he chose to blame.

'Well, I'd better be getting home,' she excused herself politely. 'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.' Those dark eyes glinted down at her in a way that warned her he was still looking for a way to take out his revenge on her. 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

Rather to Joanna's surprise, the flat was in darkness when she got back to it. But, as she closed the door, she heard a muffled sound from the bedroom. Puzzled, she crossed the room, and pushed open the door. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she saw a dark hump on the bed, and the distinct sound of sobbing.

'Annie?' She moved over quickly to the bed, and turned on the light. 'What on earth's the matter? Are you ill?'

The pretty face that was raised to hers was wet with tears. 'No! I'm... It's that...That *rat*! I hate him—I never want to see him again as long as I live!'

Joanna frowned, puzzled. 'You mean Greg?' she queried gently. 'Why? What's happened?'

Annette sat up, scrubbing her eyes fiercely with the back of her hand. 'You were right all along,' she declared, her lower lip trembling. 'They're all the same. Men! He was *kissing* her!'

'Kissing who?' She groaned inwardly. Oh, God, who else? 'Felicia?'

'Yes. That bitch in the short skirt.' The venom in Annette's sweet voice was deadly. 'Did you know that they were engaged?'

'*Engaged?*' That really was a shock.

'Apparently they've been engaged for six months, and they're getting married next year. I dare say he just forgot to mention it to me.'

Joanna sat down on her own bed, pondering this piece of information with suspicion. 'Who told you that?' she asked.

'She did.'

'And did you ask Greg about it?'

'Well, of course not,' Annette responded bitterly. 'I don't ever want to speak to him again.'

Joanna tipped her head on one side, frowning. 'You know, I don't remember seeing a ring on her finger,' she mused. 'And somehow, I'm surprised that Alex never mentioned it either—after all, she is his stepsister.'

Annette looked up at her sharply. 'What are you saying?' she demanded, a painful intensity in her voice.

Joanna shrugged. 'Just that... I think you *ought* to speak to Greg—give him a chance to explain.'

'No.' Annette's jaw was set in obstinate refusal. 'If he wants to explain anything, he can come and see me. And anyway, why was he kissing her?'

'I don't know,' Joanna admitted wryly. 'But I just think you should give him the benefit of the doubt.'

Annette laughed with brittle humour. 'That sounds good, coming from you,' she retorted. 'You're the one who warned me off in the first place.'

'I know, but... Somehow it doesn't seem like Greg to behave like that.'

'I thought so, too.' The tears welled up into Annette's soft brown eyes again. 'But I saw it myself...' With a strangled sob she threw herself down on the pillow again, crying as if her heart would break.

Joanna watched her with anxious concern. It really didn't seem to make sense—she could have *sworn* that Greg was genuine. Oh, she wouldn't be surprised if Felicia was after him—and, like her stepbrother, she seemed to feel that whatever she wanted she was entitled to have. But that there was anything serious in it? She wouldn't put it past the spiteful little madam to have made that part up, she reflected acidly—although that didn't explain what he had been doing kissing her.

'Have you eaten anything?' she asked Annette.

The younger girl shook her dark head. 'I'm not hungry.'

'Just a cup of tea?'

'No—thank you.'

'You have to eat something,' Joanna urged gently. 'You'll make yourself ill.'

'I don't care.'

The tears were showing no signs of abating; they were racking the slim little body in great tearing sobs. It was painful to see her in such distress, but Joanna felt helpless; there was only one thing that would put things right. 'Look,' she offered at last, 'would you like me to pop over to the camp and talk to him?'

Annette lifted her head to peer up at her, a glimmer of uncertain hope in her tear-stained eyes. 'What, now?' she whispered uncertainly. 'But it's dark.'

'I know. It doesn't matter,' Joanna returned drily. 'I think I ought to be able to find the way well enough by now.'

Annette hesitated, but it was clear that the idea had cheered her considerably. 'Well, but... Will you be all right by yourself?' she queried anxiously.

Joanna smiled with an assurance she didn't quite feel. 'Of course I will,' she insisted. 'You dry your eyes. I'm sure everything will turn out all right.'

Annette fumbled for a tissue in the box on the bedside table. 'If you're really sure... ?'

Joanna rose briskly to her feet. 'The ferry'll be running for another couple of hours yet—I should be back well before midnight.' She bent and kissed her friend's tear-stained cheek. 'Cheerio—see you later.'

'Goodbye. And... be careful how you go,' Annette responded, her voice serious with concern.

Joanna smiled at her reassuringly. 'Don't worry. I'll be back in a couple of hours—with Greg.'

In spite of her confident words to Annette, Joanna felt a certain apprehension as she left the lights of the ferry-landing behind her and headed out alone into the darkness. The beam of her headlamps showed her only an arc of dusty desert, the road picked out with just a line of whitewashed stones. But she had driven this way so many times that she had little trouble finding the way, and barely half an hour later she saw the lights of the camp ahead of her.

As she drew the truck to a halt, she could hear music coming from one of the huts, and she could see people moving about inside; that seemed to be the mess-hut, so she made her way over to it and pushed the door open.

She had been right; the room was full of men, some playing cards, others just sitting around relaxing in battered armchairs. The walls were covered in pictures torn from magazines—most of them startlingly explicit. And, through a blue haze of cigarette smoke, she found herself the cynosure of several dozen pairs of very interested eyes.

With a sudden stab of alarm, she realised that there was no sign of Greg. She was alone—with several dozen beefy labourers, who had been stuck out here in the desert for the past couple of weeks, deprived of the comfort of their wives, and they were looking at her as if she was their next meal.

A rising tide of panic caught in her throat; she had been an idiot to come out here—she would have been the first to warn any other woman not to take such a damned stupid risk. She stepped back hastily—and felt someone behind her grab her arm.

She screamed, striking out instinctively, but he was a good deal stronger than her, and he caught her other arm, dragging her away from the door as she struggled wildly. 'What in hell's name do you think you're doing out here?'

The sound of that familiar voice came as such a relief that tears sprang to her eyes. 'Alex!'

'You'd better just thank your lucky stars that it is,' he grated harshly, giving her a shake that rattled her teeth. 'Are you *crazy*?' And then his arms were around her, crushing her against the hard length of his body, and his mouth came down on hers with a fierce demand that took her breath away.

A flood of purely feminine submissiveness swept away all her defences, and she curved herself into his savage embrace, reaching up on tiptoe to wrap her arms around his neck. His mouth was like fire, hot and greedy, his tongue invading deep into the sweet, moist valley of her mouth, plundering all her responses.

He groaned softly, his hand sliding up to encompass her breast with rough possessiveness. 'God, Joanna— this is getting crazy,' he breathed. 'You're driving me out of my mind. Come on over to my hut...'

She tensed in sudden alarm, pushing herself away from him. 'No!' she protested raggedly. 'I came out here to look for Greg...'

'*Greg?*' His eyes blazed, and his hands caught her shoulders in a vice-like grip. 'What do you want to see him for?'

With a dizzying sense of bewilderment, she realised that he was jealous. Her heart soared—but only for a fleeting moment; once again, she realised, it was only frustration at not getting his own way. 'For Annette,' she informed him bitinglly. 'I should have thought you would have known the reason.'

He lifted one dark eyebrow in sharp enquiry. 'Should I?'

'I suppose it never occurred to you to mention that he had a... relationship with your stepsister?' she challenged, a sardonic inflection in her voice.

'You could hardly call it a relationship,' he countered dismissively. 'She's had an outsized crush on him since she was about twelve, but so far as I know he's never been even remotely interested in her.'

'Oh, really? Then can you explain what he was doing kissing her?' she challenged, returning him a defiant look.

He looked genuinely surprised at her words. 'No, I can't,' he admitted, a grim note in his voice. 'Perhaps we'd better go and ask him.'

He took her elbow, and steered her firmly across the compound to one of the smaller huts. Not even bothering to knock on the door, he pushed it open. There were two iron bunks inside, and Greg was lying on one of them, playing with a pocket computer-game. He started up as soon as he saw them, a puzzled look on his face. 'Joanna? What on earth are you doing out here?'

'You might well ask,' Alex responded for her. He drew her inside, closing the door. 'Would you mind telling me what you've been up to, playing the gigolo?'

Poor Greg looked even more confused. 'Playing the gigolo? Me?'

'What else would you call it?' Alex enquired with a touch of asperity. 'Stringing two girls along at the same time?'

A crimson flush swept up over that boyishly handsome face. 'I... I don't know what you mean,' he protested raggedly. 'I haven't been stringing anyone along.'

'No? One minute you're panting after that little brunette, and the next you're kissing my sister.'

The flush deepened. 'I wasn't kissing her,' he mumbled awkwardly. 'She... She was kissing me.'

'Oh...?'

Greg sat down on the edge of his bunk, looking up at his cousin as if he expected to be eaten alive. 'I'm sorry. I... didn't know how to stop her,' he explained limply. 'I didn't even know she was coming out here. She... caught me by surprise.'

Alex laughed without humour. 'I can well imagine. That little minx... Well, you seem to have some explaining to do to your young lady.'

'Annie?' Greg looked around, as if he expected to see her there. 'She... doesn't know about it, does she?'

'She saw you,' Joanna informed him with little trace of sympathy. 'She's currently crying her eyes out.'

'Oh, dear!' He jumped to his feet, his eyes dark with anxiety. He turned pleadingly to Alex.

'Oh, go on,' the older man grunted with wry impatience. 'You'd better go and make your apologies.'

'Of course. Thank you. I'll come back as soon as I've explained.'

'I dare say the ferries will have stopped running by then,' Alex surmised with weary resignation. 'You'd better stay the night.'

Greg blushed again, glancing awkwardly at Joanna. 'I... Yes, I suppose...' With an embarrassed grin, he darted out of the hut.

Joanna drew in a deep breath, and glanced up at the man at her side with a forced smile. 'Thank you,' she managed. 'It was.. .very kind of you to let him go and see her.'

His eyes glinted with cynical humour. 'It would have been kinder to have sent him to Australia,' he remarked drily. 'The last thing he needs at his age is that sort of entanglement.'

'Oh, but it would be so cruel to try to break them up!' she protested, aghast. 'They're in love.'

'Puppy-love,' he dismissed derisively. 'If they were kept apart for six months, they'd forget all about each other.'

'He's only a year younger than you were when you got married,' she reminded him tartly.

'Exactly. And if someone had sent me to Australia for six months instead they'd have earned my eternal gratitude. But my action wasn't entirely altruistic,' he added, his mouth curving into a smile of lazy mockery as he reached out for her. 'I have the misfortune to share this hut with him, and now that he's not going to be here...'

Joanna drew back sharply, her heart thudding in sudden panic. 'No, I... I have to catch the ferry. Annette will worry if I don't get back.'

'I doubt if Annette will notice,' he responded drily. 'If you go back there, you'll only spoil the touching reconciliation—unless you're willing to sit up all night on one of those uncomfortable-looking armchairs in your flat.'

She regarded him with cool dignity. 'It will probably come as a considerable surprise to you, but Annette and Greg aren't sleeping together,' she informed him. 'If anyone sleeps in the armchair, I'm quite sure it will be Greg.'

A glint of irritation flickered in his eyes, but he let her go. 'Oh, damn you—go on, then,' he grated. 'One of these days, some poor sap will probably end up strangling you—and he'll have my deepest sympathy.'

Her heart was fluttering like a million trapped butterflies as she walked back to the truck. The moon had risen, bathing the scene with its cold, pale light—it was almost like being on some alien planet. From across the compound, she could hear the sound of music still, and laughter, and a small shiver ran through her; if Alex hadn't been there, what would have happened to her?

He was still standing in the doorway of Greg's hut, watching her as she drove away. The heat of that kiss was still warming her lips. Such savage intensity was a little frightening; she had never had to cope with anything like that before. It was like sitting on a powder-keg, waiting for it to explode. And when it did, there wasn't going to be much left of her. As Felicia had somewhat unnecessarily reminded her, even the really beautiful ones couldn't hold on to him for long.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'WELL, here's to the two of you.' Joanna lifted her glass, and smiled at the young pair across the table. 'I hope you'll both be very happy.'

Annette's eyes sparkled as brightly as the brand new diamond ring on her finger. 'I *know* we will be,' she whispered, gazing up adoringly at the man at her side.

They were celebrating the engagement with dinner on the balcony of the flat, though this time there were just the three of them, much to Joanna's relief—after what had happened last night, the less she saw of Alex Marshall, the better. For much of the day she had managed to avoid him—indeed, it had seemed that he was as intent on avoiding her. There had been a great deal to keep her busy, supervising the removal of the artefacts from the tomb, and she had seen him only from a distance, down in the work-camp. He hadn't come up to the site at all.

Somehow, seeing the other two so happy made the pain in her own heart seem all the more acute. But she would never let them guess that; her smiling mask was flawless. 'Have you set a date for the wedding yet?' she enquired with a hint of teasing.

Greg shook his head, looking serious for a moment. 'It isn't going to be easy—my job will keep me abroad a lot of the time.'

'But as soon as I've finished my degree I'll be able to come out and join you,' Annette reminded him eagerly.

'And we don't have to rush to...start a family.' A rich blush coloured her cheeks as she finished the sentence.

Greg slipped his arm around her shoulders, and hugged her. 'One day,' he promised, his voice husky. 'But you're right—there's no rush.'

Joanna felt as if a knife was twisting in her heart, and, to cover it, rose to her feet and started collecting up the plates.

'Oh, we'll do that,' Annette protested quickly, jumping up.

'No, no—you two stop out here for a bit. It won't take me long.'

'I'll just give you a hand with the plates, then.'

Something in her young friend's tone hinted that she wanted a private word, so Joanna nodded. 'OK— thanks.'

She carried the plates through to the kitchen, and put them in the sink. Annette followed her, her eyes betraying a shadow of anxiety. 'I was just wondering... You don't think Alex will try to stop us getting married, do you?' she asked earnestly.

Joanna tried not to hesitate. 'Of course not—why should he?'

Annette managed an uncertain smile. 'Oh, I don't know. Just... He might think it would interfere with Greg's career. And then... there's his sister...'

Joanna could smile at that. 'Oh, I don't think you need worry that he had Greg lined up for her,' she responded lightly. 'I imagine he would think she's far too young for any serious involvement yet.'

'Are you sure?'

'Well, that's certainly the impression I got. You could be a little closer on the first count, but I'm sure he wouldn't do anything to stand in your way. Stop worrying about it.'

Annette's eyes brightened. 'Thanks,' she responded warmly. 'And Joanna—thanks for going out there last night. I was a bit too.. .upset to really think straight, but I shouldn't really have let you go, you know. Greg says the men can be pretty rough at times, and it *was* pretty late.'

Joanna hid a wry smile. 'Oh, it was no problem,' she murmured evasively. 'There, I'll finish the washing-up now—you go outside and help Greg with that bottle of wine.'

Annette smiled gratefully, and slipped away. Alone in the kitchen, Joanna tried hard not to let her thoughts dwell on that other night—was it really less than two weeks ago?—when she had been in here washing up after dinner, and Alex had been helping her.

Oh, this was getting ridiculous, she chastised herself, shaking her head impatiently. Surely at her age she was capable of being sensible about a thing like this? Yes, Alex Marshall was a very attractive man—*very* attractive. And he had a way of making you feel as though...everything your common sense told you about him was wrong.

But common sense was the only thing she had to hold on to at the moment—all her other defences seemed to have crumbled like sand. And common sense told her that there was no way Alex Marshall was interested in anything more than chalking up another conquest, and the only reason he appeared to be pursuing the game with a somewhat surprising degree of intent at the moment was because she had proved to be a thorn in his side. The only way a man like that knew how to cope with a woman who stood up to him was to try to get the better of her—i.e. by getting her on her back.

And even if, by some infinitesimally remote chance, he *was* interested in anything more, it would never work out. She had no intention whatsoever of giving up her career and becoming once again a mere appendage to some man. And Alex Marshall wasn't the type to want a career wife—he would want a sweet, pretty little fluff- ball who wouldn't have any opinion that might conflict with his own, who would have his children...

A sudden fierce pain, as if she had been stabbed by a knife, almost took her breath away. His *children*... Oh, lord, what would they be like? Sturdy, and dark- haired, and boisterous, playing in the garden, running in to show off something they had found... 'Mummy...'

She laughed a little hysterically. Indulging the occasional fantasy that he might not be just playing a game with her was one thing—dreaming dreams

of playing happy families was the straight road to insanity. Firmly getting a grip on herself, she finished the washing-up, and began to dry off the plates.

A sudden loud rap on the door startled her. Who on earth could that be, at this time of night? Putting down the dishtowel, she went over to open it. Alex was standing at the top of the steps—and something had upset him; anger, worry, agitation were written plainly across his face.

'What's wrong?' she asked anxiously, all the foolish fantasies of a few moments ago vanishing as if in a puff of smoke.

'I need your help,' he announced without preamble. 'Fliss has disappeared.'

She blinked up at him in astonishment. 'Disappeared?'

He nodded grimly. 'She's packed up all her things, and checked out of the hotel. At three o'clock this afternoon.'

'But... Are you sure she hasn't just gone home?' she queried—though she knew it was a stupid question; he would have checked that already.

He shook his head. 'I've checked with the airport both here and in Cairo—she hasn't boarded a plane.' He glanced up briefly as Greg and Annette appeared from the balcony. 'Besides, she was seen leaving with some man—a local businessman, apparently—he owns several shops here in town.'

Joanna felt a sharp stab of guilt; she shouldn't have covered up for the silly girl last night. But she hesitated now to confess, afraid he would blame her for what had happened. 'Do you mean she's been... *kidnapped*?' she queried, her voice unsteady.

He shook his head, a bitter smile curving his hard mouth. 'I doubt it—she appears to have gone along with him quite voluntarily. Though whether things will turn out quite how she's expecting is another matter,' he added grimly.

They all stared at him, appalled, as they considered the possible consequences.

'I... I'm sorry,' stammered Greg, a little pale. 'It's my fault. She--'

'It isn't your fault,' Alex cut him off with brusque impatience. 'If anything, it's probably mine—I might have known she'd do something stupid. I should have kept an eye on her—or better still, made sure I put her on the first plane home.'

'Do you know where this man lives?' Joanna asked.

'I've got the address of one of his shops.' He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. '*Sharia Ibn Tulun*—do you know where it is?'

She nodded. 'It's in the *souk*. I'll come with you—my Arabic's better than yours.'

He smiled gratefully. 'Thank you.'

'Is there anything we can do to help?' Annette offered.

'You could go back to the hotel, and wait there in case anything comes up,' he suggested, his voice edged with anxiety.

'Of course.'

Joanna had slipped her doorkeys into her pocket. 'I'll see you later,' she said to Annette. She glanced up at the man at her side. 'I'm sure it will be all right,' she urged. 'We'll find her.'

'I hope you're right,' he responded grimly, and led the way quickly down the outside steps to the alley alongside the shop, where his Land Rover was parked. Several children had already gathered around it, holding out their hands in appeal, but Joanna shooed them ruthlessly away—she knew that their parents would strongly disapprove of them begging for *backsheesh* without doing anything to earn it.

Alex swung himself in behind the steering-wheel, and fired the engine. 'Which way?'

'Turn left here,' she instructed. 'Then right at the traffic-lights.'

Although it was after ten o'clock, the centre of town was still bright and bustling with tourists. But, as they turned off the main road into the narrow side-streets, they entered another world. Here there were few European faces—this part of town belonged to the local people.

The road was unsurfaced, rutted and dusty, and the buildings on each side looked alarmingly rickety, as if a single gust of wind would knock them all down. The shops were narrow and dark, many of them displaying their wares on the street. Here and there, people were cooking over open braziers, the smell of the charcoal flames and the food mingling with the scent of spices on the night air to create an aroma that was—perhaps fortunately—quite unique.

Alex had to drive very slowly, making allowances for the strolling crowds of pedestrians and the occasional laden donkey, and in places inching around the obstruction of piles of building sand or sacks of grain stacked anyhow against a wall. Joanna could sense that it was costing him some effort to retain his patience, and she wasn't surprised when he treated a particularly recalcitrant *caleche* driver to a loud blast on his horn.

In the darkness, she was able to study his face, plainly reflecting his growing concern. In spite of everything that had happened between them, she couldn't help but feel a strong tug of sympathy for him. He was a man who hated to feel powerless in any situation, and it was clear that, in spite of his rather brusque attitude towards his foolish young stepsister, he was deeply fond of her.

'How did you find out that Felicia had left the hotel with this man?' she ventured.

'One of the taxi-drivers who are always hanging around outside remembered her. Silly little... This time I really will put her over my knee—I should have done it a long time ago.'

'But then... it's not exactly your place, is it?' she reminded him tentatively, concerned that his temper might lead him to make things even worse.

He shot her a fulminating glare. 'I might have known you'd take her side,' he blasted.

'I'm not taking her side,' she responded evenly. 'I'm simply pointing out that you're her brother—stepbrother—not her father.'

He snorted. 'Oh, I dare say you're right. But a fat lot of good my father has ever been as a stepfather to her. He's doted on her since she was a little girl, and she cut her teeth winding him around her little finger.'

Joanna slanted him a slightly puzzled look, mentally doing her sums. 'I thought you said he only remarried six years ago?' she queried.

'He did. But Ellie—that's my stepmother—was his secretary for years before that. In fact, he should have married her a long time ago—he needed someone to take care of him. It wasn't until he retired that the idea seemed to occur to him. It's done him a power of good—taken years off him.'

Joanna watched him thoughtfully. He didn't speak like a son who had ruthlessly ousted his father in a bitter boardroom battle—he spoke with what sounded like genuine affection. There was that treacherous tug again, making her doubt what she had believed she was so sure of. But once she let herself concede on that point, she was afraid that all the remainder of her defences would also crumble away.

She glanced out of the window, frowning as she tried to get her bearings in the maze of streets. 'I think you turn right down here,' she mused. 'Park the car just round the corner, and we can walk down till we find it.'

The street looked identical to the one they had just left, lined with linen shops and leather shops and goldsmiths. As soon as they stepped out of the car, another swarm of children descended, and Joanna picked the eldest, a sensible-looking lad of about ten.

'Guard the car until we come back, and we will pay you well,' she told him.

He nodded, beaming with pride, taking his duties seriously from the start by slapping away the hand of a smaller child who was curious about one of the wing- mirrors.

Alex fell into step beside her, his hand on her arm. She allowed herself the indulgence of enjoying the sensation, even though it was hardly necessary for him to protect her here—she would probably have been perfectly safe even on her own.

The only problem was the shopkeepers, eager to invite them to pause and admire their wares. She shook her head firmly against the offer of a very good price for a set of fine Egyptian cotton table-linen in any colour she cared to mention. 'No, thank you. But can you direct me to the shop of Mahmoud Abdu?'

'Ah—yes, yes,' came the obliging response. 'Down here—just a few steps. See—beyond the leather shop, it is the one that sells gold and silver.'

'Thank you.' She glanced up at Alex, unsure if he had understood. 'It's just down there,' she pointed to him.

He nodded, his mouth a grim line—Joanna could only hope that he would be sensible enough not to start serious trouble here in the middle of the souk. The goldsmith's was obviously a prosperous business—the shop was lined with locked glass cases, displaying a fortune in precious metals.

'Is this it?' enquired Alex, studying the place through narrowed eyes. 'Ask if he's here.'

The young man who came forward as they stepped into the shop looked a little like one of the ones Felicia had been with on the terrace of the hotel. 'Mahmoud?' he repeated, a little puzzled at her question. 'Yes, he is my brother. But he is not here at present.'

'Where is he?' Alex put in sharply.

The young man spread his hands, his eyes cast with a shadow of anxiety as he recognised the bigger man's anger. 'I am not sure. He travels much on business—we have shops also in Aswan. He may perhaps be there.'

'When did you last see him?' Joanna asked.

'This morning. He said he was going away for a few days, and I must stay and take care of the shop. Why do you seek him? I trust there is not trouble?'

'We think he may know where my friend's sister is,' Joanna explained carefully. 'She's very young, and naturally he is worried about her.'

It was apparent that her words meant something to him. 'The English lady, from the hotel—the one with hair like the moon? She is the gentleman's sister?'

'What's he saying?' Alex demanded tautly.

'He knows Felicia—he must have seen her at the hotel. Do you know if your brother has gone away with her?' she added to the Egyptian.

A look of grave concern came into his eyes. 'I do not know. But I am sure my brother would not do a bad thing. She is very young, you say? Indeed, he would have respect. But I will telephone to my cousin in Aswan, and ask if he knows of anything.'

Joanna glanced up at Alex. 'He's offering to phone his family down in Aswan, and see if they've gone there,' she translated for him.

He hesitated for a moment, thinking, and then shrugged his shoulders. 'He might as well,' he conceded. 'If he's going to warn them to scarper, he can do it just as easily as soon as we've gone.'

She turned back to the shopkeeper. 'Thank you very much,' she said with a smile, wondering how much of Alex's acid remarks he had understood.

But the phone call yielded nothing. The young man spoke in Nubian, but Joanna had little trouble following what he was saying, and it seemed that

he was quite genuine. 'I am sorry,' he said at last, putting down the phone. 'My cousin has not seen him, and is not expecting him. Of course, it is possible that he may go there—he has a house. I will give you the address.'

'Thank you.' Joanna was a little surprised by his degree of co-operation, but it was evident that his was a respectable family, and he was most anxious to avoid any scandal.

He wrote the address down carefully, and the address of the shop in Aswan, and handed it to her. 'I hope you have success in finding the young lady, but I am sure you will discover that my brother is not involved,' he insisted earnestly.

She bade him farewell with a smile, dragging Alex from the shop when he seemed a little inclined to linger and insist on searching the premises. 'Come on,' she insisted. 'There's nothing more you can do here—you'll have to go down to Aswan in the morning. Have you reported it to the police yet?'

'No.'

'Then I suggest we do that now—the police station's not far from here.'

* * *

It was almost midnight by the time they drew up at the end of the alleyway leading to the steps up to Joanna's flat. The shops were closing down now, most of their trade having returned to their hotels, or to the rows of Nile cruisers stacked three or four deep like floating blocks of flats along the ferry-stage.

She unfastened her seatbelt, and put her hand on the catch of the door before turning to him with a hesitant smile. 'Well, goodnight,' she murmured. 'If you....need me to come to Aswan with you tomorrow... ?'

In the darkness it was hard to read the expression in his eyes, but his voice was soft. 'Thank you—I'll pick you up about seven. And you know, I really appreciated your help tonight.'

'Oh...that's all right.' She was trying to sound casual, but doubted that it was coming off.

He laughed, low and husky, and picked up her hand. 'Given the way we usually spend all our time sniping at each other, I wouldn't have been surprised if you'd told me where to go when I came knocking on your door this evening.'

'I...wouldn't have done that,' she stammered, her heart beginning to race as an electric warmth spread slowly up her arm.

'I know you wouldn't.' He lifted her hand slowly to his lips, and, turning it over, laid a single kiss in her palm. Then he closed her quivering fingers around it, as if to hold it there. 'Goodnight,' he murmured, and let her go.

She was still trembling inside as she hurried up the steps and let herself into the flat, closing the door behind her.

* * *

Early morning was kind to the harsh desert landscape; the light had a mother-of-pearl quality that softened the jagged lines of the hills and tinted the barren rocks a delicate shade of pink. As the long rays of the rising sun caught the river it glistened like a ribbon of silver, curving away into the distance below.

Joanna had been a little surprised to find, on arriving at Luxor's small airport, that Alex intended to fly down to Aswan by helicopter, rather than take the plane. But then it was typical of him to want to be totally in control, not at the mercy of seat availability and airline schedules.

'How long will it take us to get there?' she enquired, glancing across at him.

'About fifty minutes or so. We'll land at the airport, and get a taxi into town.'

She slanted him a look of quizzical humour. 'At the airport? I'd have thought you'd come down right smack on the Corniche, at the very least,' she teased, trying to lighten the atmosphere a little.

A reluctant smile hovered at the corners of that hard mouth. 'It will be useful to be able to top up the fuel tanks, in case we need to fly on.'

'Oh.' She shifted a little in her seat, making herself comfortable; it appeared that they could be in for a long day.

It was fascinating to fly so low along the line of the river. Joanna had made this journey frequently before, but always by aeroplane, too high to appreciate much of the detail. Now she could identify the cultivated fields of sugar-cane and cotton, watch the local train chugging its way down the single track of railway, wave to the children gathering bundles of alfalfa to feed their donkeys and camels.

Alex glanced across at her, laughing. 'Enjoying yourself?'

She returned him a wry look. 'I'm not sure,' she confessed. 'There seem to be so many things that could go wrong with these things—every time I've seen one in a film, they seem to crash into the side of a mountain in a ball of flame or something.'

He snorted in derision. 'Rubbish—they're safer than walking down the street. Of course they'll crash if you do something stupid, but they don't necessarily catch fire.'

'Not "necessarily"?' she repeated drily. 'That sounds *very* reassuring.' She cast her eye over the controls of the helicopter, impressed by his mastery of such a complicated piece of machinery. 'It looks terribly difficult to fly,' she remarked. 'How long did it take you to learn?'

'You need forty hours' flying time—after you've got your fixed-wing licence. It isn't particularly hard to get the hang of. The pedals control the yaw, to help you maintain balance in the air. This stick is called the cyclic—it gives you speed and direction. And this lever here is the collective.' He indicated the lever between the seats. 'That controls the height.'

She rolled her eyes expressively. 'Simple!'

'You could learn it easily enough.'

She glanced at him in surprise. 'Do you think so?'

'Of course.'

She shook her head, smiling wryly. 'I don't know—I don't think so. I think I'll stick to driving, and let the experts do the flying.'

'Coward,' he taunted.

She chuckled with laughter, and for the rest of the flight sat back in her seat, watching him covertly from beneath her lashes. There was still an unmistakable determination in the set of his jaw, but he seemed a little less tense this morning, as if he had decided that, whatever the consequences of his sister's outrageous behaviour, she had brought them on herself.

Unfortunately, their investigations in Aswan yielded nothing. They spent the whole morning visiting first Mahmoud Abdu's house in one of the more prosperous suburbs, and then each of his three shops, on the Corniche and in the *souk*, without success. By midday, as the hot sun baked the hard pavements, even Alex was forced to concede defeat.

'So what do we do now?' Joanna enquired, gratefully sipping a cool glass of *kirkidi*. They were sitting on the covered terrace of the Old Cataract hotel, a splendidly old-fashioned Edwardian-Moorish edifice of russet- coloured brick, built on a granite bluff overlooking the Nile.

This had long been one of her favourite spots on the whole length of the river—the terrace itself, evocative of a more gracious era; the shimmering quality of the light reflecting off the sparkling blue water of the river, here confined by the smooth amber sands of the Sahara which came right down to its palm-fringed bank; the graceful white egrets fishing off the gargantuan humps of smooth grey rock that had given Elephant Island its aptly descriptive name; the tall, single-sailed feluccas tacking in the faint stir of breeze.

Alex shrugged his wide shoulders in wry resignation. 'I don't really know what else we can do,' he acknowledged. 'Just hope the police can come up with something, I suppose. In the meantime, we might as well have lunch here—it's a bit too hot to dash around anyway.'

Joanna could only agree; although it was shady under the canopy of the terrace, with its cotton sun-blinds half rolled down, she could feel the heat from outside—it was rather like sitting in front of an open oven. At Alex's discreet summons, a waiter hurried over with a menu.

She chose a salad, promising herself one of the delicious ice-creams for dessert, and Alex had grilled Nile perch, fresh from Lake Nasser. They spoke little while they ate—Alex seemed to be deep in thought, and Joanna sensed that any attempt on her part to make conversation would not be welcomed right now. But when her ice-cream arrived, topped with a great mound of whipped cream, coconut and sultanas, he slanted her a look of sardonic humour.

'All those calories?' he remarked quizzically. 'It makes quite a change to find a woman who's not on an everlasting diet.'

'I couldn't be,' she confessed, her mouth half-full of ice-cream. 'I've got a terribly sweet tooth.'

'Really?' He slid an appreciative glance down over her slender figure. 'It doesn't show.'

She felt a betraying glow of pink colour her cheeks. 'Oh, I.. think I must burn it all off,' she responded, her voice a little unsteady. 'I've always been skinny.'

'Oh, I wouldn't call you skinny,' he responded, a glint of remembered intimacy in those dark eyes. 'There's not a lot to spare, but what there is curves in all the right places.'

She stiffened, darting him a wary glance from beneath her lashes. She hadn't expected that he would start flirting with her today, under the circumstances—and they were a long way from home. 'What., time were

you thinking of going back?' she enquired, hoping her voice sounded firm and steady.

He leaned back in his chair, twisting his wrist to glance casually at his watch. 'Oh, in a couple of hours, once it starts to cool down a bit. There's no rush. I'm beginning to think that silly little madam has made her own bed, and is going to deserve whatever she gets.'

She glanced up at him in surprise. 'You don't mean that,' she protested.

'Don't I?' His hard mouth curved into a wry smile. 'Maybe not. But when I find her...! She's led us a right merry dance...'

At that moment one of the waiters approached their table. 'Excuse, please—Mr Marshall?' he enquired deferentially. 'There is a telephone call for you in Reception.'

That idling pose vanished immediately; he rose to his feet, nodding a swift thank-you to the waiter and exchanging a brief glance with Joanna before striding away. She waited for him to return, biting her lip. What was the news?

She knew the minute she saw his face. He was furious—which meant Felicia was safe. 'She's in Hurghada!' he exploded, snapping his fingers impatiently for the bill.

Joanna frowned. 'Hurghada? What on earth would she want to go there for?'

'You tell me!' he returned, handing the waiter a fistful of notes without even bothering to count them. 'That was Greg on the phone. Apparently, Abdu's just got back. She talked him into driving her there, but he wasn't very happy about it. As soon as he found out we were looking for her, he contacted Greg right away. It appears she was very fortunate in her choice of escort—heaven only knows what could have happened to her.'

'So where are we going?' she asked as he pulled her to her feet.

'Hurghada,' he responded darkly. 'By the time I've finished with that girl, she won't sit down for a week!'

The flight to Hurghada was almost twice the distance of that to Aswan, and once they had left the river to cut across the Eastern Desert the scenery was -very different. Bleak mountain ranges of layered sandstone and hard, dark breccia, cut through with arid limestone *wacilis*, showed no signs of life, except for the occasional glimpse of a long-ruined temple, or the dried-out bones of a camel left by a passing caravan of Bedouin.

From time to time, Joanna slanted a wary glance at Alex's set face, but she didn't venture to speak. Whatever was coming was between him and his stepsister, and nothing she could say would make things any better. So she sat quiet, watching their shadow flit swiftly across the uneven ground below.

What was happening back at the tomb-site? No doubt her father would have the preparations for removing the sarcophagus well under way. Was it just her resentment at having him take everything out of her hands that made her wish it were possible for the mummy to remain where it was—where it was meant to be? It seemed a little sad that after all these years it should be disturbed, when so much care had been taken to preserve the secret of its existence...

There was no warning; one moment the whole horizon was a clear, vivid blue, the next it was stained ochre with the swirling dust of a sandstorm. She barely had time for a gasp of shock before it caught them, blanking out all visibility—above, below and all around.

Alex swore viciously, grabbing at the lever between the seats. 'I'll have to try and put us down,' he yelled at her through his head-set. 'Couldn't you get above it?' she suggested anxiously. He shook his head. 'Too risky—this grit'll have got into everything, and if the rotor-head seizes... As soon as we touch down, just jump out and run, but for goodness' sake remember to keep your head below the rotors.'

SHE SHOT HIM A LOOK OF TERROR, IMAGES OF EVERY DISASTER FILM SHE HAD EVER SEEN FLASHING THROUGH HER MIND. AND THEN SUDDENLY, THE GROUND WAS COMING UP AT THEM, ROCKY AND UNEVEN, AND ALEX SNATCHED UP THE LEVER BETWEEN THE SEATS, TRYING TO CUSHION THE LANDING AT THE LAST MINUTE. JOANNA HEARD HERSELF SCREAM AS THEY HIT AND TUMBLED OVER, THE GRINDING CRASH OF METAL IN HER EARS...

CHAPTER NINE

THE seatbelt jerked, and Joanna realised with a dizzy flood of relief that they hadn't tumbled all the way down the side of the mountain; but the helicopter had tipped over almost on to its roof, the perspex front windows smashed and one rotor arm broken off. At the same instant, she realised that Alex had been knocked out; a small trickle of blood was running down from his forehead.

An instinct of sheer panic spurred her into action. Swiftly unlatching her seatbelt, she clambered awkwardly around the instrument console, kicking out the broken perspex. But how on earth was she going to manage Alex? He must weigh twelve stone or more...

Somehow she managed to get his seatbelt undone, and then, hunching beneath him, manoeuvred his arms across her back, and half lifted, half dragged him out. Under the momentum of his weight she toppled backwards, whimpering in fright at the delay as she struggled up again, her feet slipping on the loose shale, the storm whipping sand into her eyes and mouth.

'Damn you, Alex Marshall—why do you have to be so heavy?' she bleated desperately, as she struggled with his dead weight, slipping and sliding down the slope, dragging him with her like a sack of potatoes, until a larger boulder halted her progress. She had just managed to get him round behind it when the helicopter exploded.

She screamed, ducking her head instinctively into the safe hollow of Alex's wide shoulder as debris flew in all directions. He stirred, grunting with pleasure as if surprised at finding her there, and his arms clamped around her, drawing her down on top of him as his mouth found hers in a kiss as hot as the fireball raging fifty feet up the slope.

For one mad moment, sheer relief that they were both still alive made her forget all thought of restraint, and she kissed him back fiercely. But, as his hand slid up over her slim thigh to mould the denim-clad curve of her neat derriere tightly against him, she realised that he might have somewhat

misinterpreted her response. Struggling to keep a hold on her sanity, she pushed herself away from him.

He grinned up at her with wolfish humour. 'I'm not sure that's in any of the first aid manuals, but it's certainly a great way to revive an unconscious man,' he teased.

Her eyes flashed him a fulminating glare. 'You... We could have been killed! You said it wouldn't blow up.'

'I said it wouldn't *necessarily* blow up,' he reminded her with a touch of wry amusement. 'Unfortunately, when you get something like fifty gallons of aviation fuel slopping around, there are no guarantees.' He twisted round to look up at the blazing heap of wreckage, still holding her within the circle of his arms, their legs tangled up together. 'Quite a firework display.'

'Is that all you can say?' she demanded, very close to the end of her tether. 'We're stuck out here in the middle of five thousand square miles of desert, in a raging sandstorm, and no one knows where the hell we are!'

He eased himself upright, gingerly feeling the lump that had come up on the side of his forehead. 'Don't panic,' he advised calmly. 'We're both alive and in one piece, the sandstorm's passing, and the Sarbe will have had a few seconds to transmit a mayday before the thing blew up.'

'Brilliant! There are mountains all around us, in case you hadn't noticed. Who's going to have picked up the signal in those few seconds? A passing vulture, I suppose?'

He chuckled teasingly, trying to draw her into his arms again. 'If you'd remembered to turn off the fuel and the main electrics, it wouldn't have blown up at all,' he responded with provocative humour.

But she was too overwrought to be amused, and fought back, thumping him on the chest with her balled fist. 'Damn you...! I was too busy trying to drag you out, you great heavy lump!' she protested, close to tears. 'I thought we were both going to die!'

'Hey, hey!' He caught her wrists, laughing softly, and, with the subtlest exertion of his superior strength, forced her down on to her back. 'That's no way to treat a man whose life you've just saved,' he mocked gently. 'In Native American lore, you'd be responsible for me now for the rest of my life, you know.'

And as she gazed up into those deep, dark eyes her heart gave a sudden kick. Through the teasing amusement there, she could see something else—something that was in unmistakable earnest. She forgot to struggle, her lips parting in a soundless breath of surprise, and he took instant advantage, bending his head to claim her mouth in a kiss of the deepest tenderness, his tongue swirling languorously over all the sweet, sensitive membranes within.

She could only respond, clinging to him, her body crushed beneath his. There were stones digging into her back, but she didn't care; she loved him, and she had so nearly lost him, and now he was telling her that it wasn't just a game for him, after all. Quite what it *was*, she didn't need to know yet; anyway, there was no room for rational thought in her mind. There was only this kiss—this wonderful, magical, incredible kiss.

It was a long, long time before he finally lifted his head, looking down at her with a slightly crooked smile as he dusted the sand gently from her face. She felt suddenly shy, lowering her lashes to evade his gaze. Was she reading too much into the look in his eyes, wanting so much for him to want her that she was letting her imagination rule her common sense? She needed to slow things down a little, take a little more time to be sure.

The sandstorm had passed now, revealing the stark slopes of the mountains around them, and the rough track along the floor of the *wadi* they had been following. Above them, the helicopter was just a tangled mass of metal, a few flames still flickering around it. And already the sun was sinking behind the mountains—in a short time it would be dark.

She rose to her feet, looking around as she dusted out the sand that seemed to have got into every fold of her clothes. 'Well, what do we do now?' she enquired, flickering a brief glance up at him. 'I suppose we could start walking, and hope someone comes along to give us a lift?' 'It's a bit of a long

walk,' he pointed out drily. 'And this road isn't used very much—it's only passable with four-wheel-drive vehicles.'

'Well, maybe we could...'

She broke off, shielding her eyes with her hand—she had lost her hat and her sunglasses in the scramble to get out of the helicopter. But what she was seeing wasn't a mirage; along the track below them a white-swathed Bedouin was approaching, riding a camel and leading another on a string behind him. He saw them, and hailed them with a cheerful wave.

'Aeloa! Inglezi? You are OK, yes? I see hilikobtar go by, get caught in sandstorm, then hear big smash—come to see if I help?'

'*Shokran*,' Alex called back, returning the wave. 'That's very kind of you.' He took Joanna's hand firmly in his, and led her down the slope.

The Bedouin brought his camel down, and dismounted nimbly. 'You are not hurt? You were very lucky, sir. Please, come to my tents. I will send my son with a message to Qena, and you will eat dinner with me and spend the night, yes?'

'Thank you—we would be most grateful,' Alex responded warmly, shaking the man's hand.

'My name Hamid,' he introduced himself, grinning broadly to show the gold in his teeth. 'You ride camel? Is very comfortable.'

He couched the other camel, inviting them both to mount. Joanna hesitated for a moment; the beast looked decidedly unfriendly—but then she'd never seen one that looked remotely friendly anyway. So, taking her fate wryly in her hands, she grasped its head with one hand and the pommel of the wooden saddle with the other, and putting her foot on the animal's neck clambered awkwardly up, swinging her leg across its back.

Alex climbed up into the saddle behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and nestling her close against him. At a word from Hamid, it rose

jerkily to its feet, pitching them sharply backwards and then forwards, before settling into its rolling gait.

'All right?' Alex asked softly, his mouth close to her ear, his warm breath brushing her cheek.

She nodded, not quite trusting herself to speak. Wrapped up in his arms like this she felt so safe and protected... Of course, it was an illusion, she reminded herself, struggling to resist the treacherous tug of temptation that was inexorably weakening her defences. She would be far from safe with him.

The Bedouin encampment was a short distance from the road, where a tiny spring of water trickled out of a crevice in the rocks and splashed into a stony pool. Half a dozen of the low black goat-hair tents were clustered around a smoking cooking fire, and nearby a small boy tended a herd of goats that grazed on the rough grass and ferns growing on the scree slope. It was a timeless scene—except for a couple of battered Toyota trucks which evidently now supplemented the camels as a means of transport.

Hamid ordered the camels down, and Joanna gripped the pommel as once again they were pitched alarmingly forwards and backwards as it sank to its knees. She was rather glad to dismount, moving strategically out of the way of the end that could bite.

Instantly they were surrounded by a crowd of small and very excited children. Hamid hollered at them with an anger that Joanna suspected was not intended to be taken seriously, and they darted back, but only a short way, staring at them with wide-eyed interest.

'You would like wash first, yes?' Hamid suggested with another flash of his gleaming gold teeth. 'Get rid of sand.'

'Yes, please!' Joanna responded with heartfelt sincerity—she was dying to get the sand out of her hair.

A pretty young girl, clad in layers of brightly coloured clothes and with dozens of bangles jangling on her wrists came hurrying over, and at a few

words from Hamid beckoned to Joanna. '*Hazah tareq*,' she murmured with a shy smile, beckoning to her to follow.

'Shokran.'

The girl looked surprised. 'You speak Arabic?'

'Yes, I do. It's very kind of you to help us like this.'

'But it is almost nightfall, and we are a long way from the town,' the girl responded, slightly bewildered that there could be any question about it. 'Here—I will bring water, and some clothes for you to put on.'

Joanna found herself ushered into one of the tents. Within a few moments the girl returned with a pitcher of water, and then hurried away again to fetch a pile of clothes—a skirt of brightly striped cotton which tied around her waist, a pretty embroidered smock-blouse with a softly gathered tie-neckline, and a loose jacket of finely woven undyed wool. She thanked her gratefully, knowing that these must be some of her best things.

With a sigh of relief, she stripped off her jeans and T-shirt and her underwear, carefully brushing the gritty sand out of every corner of her skin. There was only a frugal amount of water, but it was enough to rinse her hair, and the Bedouin girl lent her a comb; she seemed fascinated by the bright golden colour of Joanna's hair, unable to resist touching it and patting it.

'Your husband must like it very much,' she giggled, her eyes dancing.

Joanna hesitated; of course, the girl would have assumed that Alex was her husband—she would understand no other relationship between a man and a woman travelling together. Maybe it would be better not to shock her by telling her the truth.

'How many children do you have?' she added with nothing but friendly interest.

Joanna felt a hint of pink colour her cheeks, and shook her head. 'None.'

That brought a cry of distress. 'Oh...! But what a pity! But there can be nothing wrong—your husband is a fine-looking man. Don't worry—they will come soon. Wait! I have something for you.' She hurried out, and returned a moment later with a packet of fragrant herbs, stitched up in a small cotton pouch. 'Here,' she murmured, reaching up to hang it around Joanna's neck. 'This will make sure of it.'

'Thank you.' Joanna smiled wryly to herself, fingering the pouch. She would have to remember to take it off as soon as she got the chance, just in case the magic was as strong as the Bedouin girl believed ...!

Outside, the Bedouin had completed their evening prayers, and she heard Hamid's voice, hailing her cheerfully. She lifted the flap of the tent. Hamid was standing there with Alex, who had also had a wash and changed into borrowed clothes—a pair of loose cotton trousers, beneath a long, flowing *djellaba* of faded pale blue.

'Ah, you are ready,' Hamid beamed. 'Come, you would like coffee?' Joanna glanced at him in some surprise; she had expected that she would be staying with the women. But apparently, as a guest, she was to be treated as an honorary man—a neat way of compromising between custom and hospitality.

'Feeling better?' Alex asked quietly as they followed their host across to the main tent.

She nodded. 'Much better—it was lovely to be able to wash that sand out of my hair. How's your head?' she added, noticing that the graze on his forehead had been bathed and covered with a sticking-plaster.

'A bit sore,' he admitted wryly. 'I don't know what our friend put on it, but it stung like hell!'

'Probably some kind of antiseptic,' she suggested. 'It'll do it good.'

He slanted her a crooked grin. 'I might have known I'd get no sympathy from you,' he teased.

The main tent was where all the men of the family were gathered, smoking from a hubble-bubble pipe and drinking coffee. Inside, it was spacious and comfortable; the walls were covered with bright tapestry hangings, and richly coloured woven rugs were spread on the ground. There were low cushions to sit on, around a beautifully worked table of carved wood inlaid with brass, and the men welcomed them with all the warmth of their traditional hospitality, making room for them to sit down.

The coffee was strong and sweet and spiced with cardamom, poured with expert skill from a great height into the silver thimble-sized cups. Hamid had given instructions, and one of the younger men went off to ride down into Qena, the nearest town, with a message to be sent to Greg; meanwhile, the succulent smell of roasting meat told them that dinner was almost ready.

Joanna had met Bedouin before—some of them had even settled in the villages along the Nile, giving up their nomadic way of life as times had become more difficult for them. But she had never dined with them in tents; as evening began to close in, and the tent was lit with the romantic yellow glow of oil-lamps, it was as though they had slipped back through centuries.

The women brought the meal in—a great bowl of rice; platters of flat bread; piles of miniature bananas and crisp red dates, as well as a whole side of meat on a thick metal skewer, resting on a huge metal tray. It was a feast fit for royalty.

But, though there was plenty of food, the women didn't stay to eat with them, withdrawing to their own tent to eat later. Alone in that all-male gathering, Joanna felt just a little awkwardness; from beneath her lashes, she glanced around at all those proud, hawk-like faces in the smoky dimness of the tent.

And Alex seemed almost like one of them; he had fallen immediately into the same way of sitting, his right leg curled beneath him, his arm resting on his raised knee as he ate a rough-carved chunk of meat straight from Hamid's fierce looking dagger.

An odd little shimmer of heat ran through her. All the feelings she had been fighting for weeks were growing too strong for her to control any longer; all she wanted was to feel his strong arms around her again, feel his weight crushing her beneath him...

He slanted a brief glance down at her. 'All right?' he murmured softly.

She nodded. 'I'm getting a little sleepy.'

He smiled. 'It's going to be a while yet, I'm afraid— we'll probably be sitting here talking half the night.'

Well, maybe that was just as well, she reflected. She wasn't quite sure what the sleeping arrangements were likely to be—she wasn't even sure what she wanted them to be. She felt as though she was being drawn towards an outcome which she knew was inevitable—but what would happen afterwards? How long could it possibly last? Not long, she could be certain, if his past record was any guide. And then she would be left with nothing—except for a broken heart...

Her watch told her that it was almost midnight before the conversation began to show signs of breaking up. At last Hamid stood up. 'Well, my friends, the hour grows long, yes? It is time to turn down the lamps. Come—I will show you to your tent.'

'Thank you.'

Alex rose to his feet, offering Joanna his hand to help her up. She felt her heart begin to flutter, making it a little difficult to breathe, and her eyes slid evasively away from his. They bade the others a smiling goodnight, and followed Hamid outside. The night temperature had dropped to a cool fifteen degrees, and after the warmth inside the tent Joanna gave an involuntary shiver.

'Cold?' Alex glanced down at her, smiling, and slid an arm around her shoulders, drawing her against his side. The heat of his body shimmered through her, making her feel weak.

The sky was like a black velvet cloak, spangled with a million diamonds, and the moon was huge, its silver face painted with the shadows of its empty seas—it seemed to be sailing so low over the dark crags of the mountains that Joanna could fancifully imagine that if they climbed to the top of one of them they would be able to reach out and touch it.

Hamid led them over to a small tent on the edge of the encampment, and lifted the flap. '*Tisbah 'ala kheer*,' he wished them cheerily. 'Goodnight.' He melted away, leaving them alone.

Joanna stepped inside the tent, as Alex let fall the flap behind them. Like the other, it was extremely comfortable inside, the walls hung with beautiful tapestries in rich, glowing colours, the ground covered with woven carpets. And there was a large, comfortable looking mattress waiting for them, covered with thick goat-skins and dozens of embroidered pillows.

As she stood staring at it, her mouth dry with sudden apprehension, she felt Alex come up close behind her and slide his arms around her waist, drawing her back against him. 'It appears that Hamid has made certain... assumptions,' he remarked softly, his warm breath stirring the hair at the nape of her neck. 'Would you like me to ask him to change the sleeping arrangements?'

She drew in a long, slow breath, a delicate flush of pink colouring her cheeks. 'No,' she responded shyly, letting him turn her in his arms. 'No, this will suit me fine.'

He stroked his hand down over her hair, tilting up her face to his. 'Are you sure?' he murmured, his dark eyes glowing with a primeval fire.

She nodded, lifting her arms to wrap them around his neck, her cheek against his hard jaw. 'I love you,' she whispered tremulously.

His arms tightened around her almost convulsively, dragging her into the curve of his body, making her vividly aware of the fierce tension of male arousal in him. His mouth sought hers in hungry demand that swept aside any thought of resistance—not that she had had any. Her bones seemed to

have melted in the heat of his embrace, and her head swam dizzily as he scooped her off her feet and carried her over to the bed.

She sank into the warmth of the goat-skins as if into a cloud, as he wrapped her up in his arms, his mouth moving over hers with a drugging intensity, coaxing and inciting her responses. His plundering tongue was seeking all the sweetness within, swirling with flagrant sensuality over the delicate membranes, exploring the deepest corners with an assured possessiveness that foreshadowed what was to come.

There was an aching need raging inside her, and she whimpered softly as he drew away from her, reaching out for him. But he was only tugging off the *djellaba* that Hamid had lent him, and when he came back into her arms she could feel the warm power of the strong muscles beneath his smooth skin, rippling down his back as he moved.

'Hush,' he soothed, dusting burning kisses over her trembling eyelids, finding the racing pulse beneath her temple. 'I love you, Joanna. I've never wanted to make love to a woman as much as I want you.'

She wasn't sure that she had heard him correctly; maybe her imagination had made her hear what she so much wanted to hear. But she didn't care. What did it matter what would happen tomorrow, when he was holding her like this, touching her like this?

He had eased the light woollen jacket back from her shoulders, casting it aside; her borrowed clothes hadn't extended to underwear, and beneath the pretty peasant blouse she was naked, her breasts ripe and firm, her nipples hardening to tender buds against the fine cotton as his palm rolled over them, setting up a heated friction.

She could hear her own breathing, ragged and uneven, as her head fell back into the crook of his arm, and he traced a path of scalding fire with the hot, moist tip of his tongue, into the delicate shell of her ear and down over the long, vulnerable curve of her throat to nuzzle into the sensitive hollows of her shoulder at the point where her tumultuous pulse fluttered beneath her skin.

'This is nice,' he approved, lifting his head to admire the pretty blouse, trailing one finger lightly over the bright embroidery. And then, with a smile of unmistakable intent, he tugged slowly at one end of the bow that gathered the loose neckline together, sliding it undone. 'But this is nicer,' he murmured huskily, stroking the fabric down to uncover the ripe, creamy fullness of her naked breasts, daintily tipped with rose- pink.

His touch was magical, tracing slow, tantalising circles over her heated skin. A trembling sigh escaped her lips, and she closed her eyes, surrendering herself without thought or reason to the desires he was arousing in her helpless body. He laughed softly, low in his throat, conceding to her incoherent entreaties at last as he took one tautly sensitised nipple between his fingers, pinching it lightly, rolling it and tugging at it, sending sparks of fire into her brain.

She barely noticed as he lifted the blouse over her head; all she knew was the sweet flood of pleasure as he cupped her two aching breasts in his hands, burying his face in the soft valley between, his rough jaw rasping against her delicate skin. And then he moved to take one exquisitely tender nipple in his mouth, suckling it with a deep, hungry rhythm that reduced her to a state of mindless rapture.

She was caught in a spinning vortex of desire, her body quivering with a need that only he could satisfy. He had unfastened the tie of her voluminous skirt, drawing aside the folds to stroke his hand up over her long, bare legs, making no comment on finding that she wore nothing beneath it. She could only yield to his compulsive persuasion, a tide of purely feminine submissiveness flooding through her as she felt his sensitive touch, gently coaxing apart her slender thighs, seeking the most intimate caresses.

She had never known it could be like this. Awash with sensation, she lay back among the pillows, her breath sobbing on her lips as, with expert skill, he found the tiny seed-pearl of passion hidden within its moist velvet pleat, arousing in it an instant sizzling response.

He was kissing her again, his lips like fire on hers, as his long, clever fingers gently eased inside her, stretching her deliciously, making her gasp in pleasure, her spine curling to arch her body towards him in the most wanton

invitation. She wanted him so much that she was desperate, clinging to him, drawing him down to her, her limbs twining around him as she offered the ultimate surrender.

And at last he took her, plunging into her with one deep powerful thrust that almost took her breath away. He hesitated, just for a moment, but as she moved beneath him in instinctive supplication, her slender body matching the hard male strength of his, a warning tremor ran through him, and all restraint was abandoned.

They were a perfect match, moving to the same driving rhythm, their naked bodies slicked with a fine layer of sweat in the golden glow of the oil-lamp as they wove the ancient harmonies of their erotic dance. Joanna had allowed her instincts to take over, and they taught her all sorts of wanton caresses that had him shuddering with pleasure in her arms, retaliating with a torment so sweet that she felt herself dissolving like honey.

And then finally, with a low growl, he gathered her up in his arms, his body taut as he built up to a final convulsive spasm, and at the same moment she felt her own pleasure explode inside her like a cascade of fire, spilling fever into her blood, as she slid out of the realms of consciousness into a golden, floating dream.

CHAPTER TEN

JOANNA lay half awake, snuggled into the warmth of Alex's body, listening to the slow, deep regular sound of his breathing. She could stay like this for ever. And last night he had said he loved her—not once, but over and over, until even she couldn't doubt her own hearing.

With a small sigh of contentment, she closed her eyes. It must be very early—the light creeping in through a small gap in the tent-flap was still pale, and the only sound was the soft bleating of the goats or an occasional grumble from a camel. The sun hadn't yet warmed the air, and the small part of her shoulder outside the cosy goat-skin coverlet told her that it was still much too chilly to think of getting up.

Love... It had taken her a long time to find out what it felt like. Her whole body seemed to be filled with a glowing aura, every sense heightened, so that colours seemed brighter, perfumes sweeter. Opening her eyes again, she gazed around the tent; without the romantic flicker of the oil-lamp that had bathed it in such a magical glow last night, it bore the scars of long years of wear and tear—small, carefully darned holes in the rugs showed where embers from the cooking fire had fallen and burned through, and the goat-hair tent was patched and worn. But she would always remember it as their perfect love-nest, the place where all her dreams had come true.

But as she lay watching the man beside her, the hard, arrogant lines of his face softened a little in sleep, the uncomfortable whisperings of reality began to niggle at her mind. Last night he had been in love with her—at least he had certainly seemed to mean it when he had said it. But what about this morning? What if he too had just been caught up in the romance of the desert night? Maybe even the fact that she had saved his life by dragging him out of the helicopter had played a part. What if he regretted having said it when he woke up... ?

And what if he didn't? Neither of them had a particularly good track record when it came to marriage... But then, he had already made his views on that institution very clear. And he had been right, she reflected despondently; it was better not to make any promises that perhaps couldn't be kept. That way

it wouldn't hurt quite so much when the time came—as it almost inevitably would—when they began to drift apart.

After all, what was there to hold them together? Apart from sex, of course, she reminded herself with a trace of wry humour. But even the best physical relationship couldn't be enough in the long run—love needed a similarity of outlook, mutual interests if it was to grow...

With a small grunt of pleasure, Alex stirred, his arms sliding around her and drawing her against him. 'Good morning,' he murmured, the smile in his eyes as he opened them telling her that at least his feelings hadn't changed yet. 'What a very pleasant way to wake up.'

'Good morning,' she responded shyly, already sensing his intentions.

His hand slid down over her body in a possessive gesture, and his mouth closed over hers in a kiss of the deepest tenderness. She could only surrender, her own need stirring inside her, as fierce as if they hadn't spent most of the night making love.

Each time it seemed to get better, as they learned the secrets of each other's bodies, how to draw out the sweetest responses. They moved together in perfect harmony, totally in tune, taking all the time in the world to explore the delights of their own erotic paradise.

Joanna had never realised the depths of her own sensual nature. She allowed him every licence, glorying in the most wanton caresses, surrendering in helpless consent to every demand. Her body was alight with the excitement of what he was doing to her, and she returned the favour, driving him into a frenzy until he threw her down across the bed, taking her with an intensity of passion that almost seemed to rip her apart.

When at long last it was over, they lay tangled up in each other's arms as their ragged breathing slowly returned to normal. Outside, the sounds of people moving around warned that the camp was awakening. Alex yawned, stretching lazily, and nuzzled into Joanna's hair.

'Mmm-I want to wake up like this every morning for the rest of my life,' he murmured.

She stiffened warily, slanting him a look of alarm. So it was starting—the well-intentioned promises, the illusions of eternity. And oh, it would be so easy to let herself believe that it could all come true. But if life had taught her nothing else, it was that dreams aren't always enough.

He looked down at her, a sudden frown darkening his brow. 'What's wrong?' he asked.

She drew away from him, laughing lightly. 'You'd pretty soon get fed up of waking up in a tent,' she teased, slanting him a mischievous glance from beneath her lashes. 'No central heating, no en-suite bathroom... ?'

A flicker of surprise, and then anger passed behind his eyes. 'I wasn't talking about waking up in a tent,' he grated. 'I was talking about waking up with you.'

She shrugged in non-committal response. 'Ah, well, you'd pretty soon get fed up with that, too,' she countered, hoping he wouldn't catch the slight tremor in her voice. 'The same woman every day? You?'

'Yes,' he insisted, dragging her beneath him and pinning her there with his weight. 'What's so surprising about that? I love you—I want to marry you.'

Her heart kicked against her ribs—he was far more serious than she had ever anticipated. But somehow she had to be strong. 'I thought you were only into casual affairs?' she returned with careless indifference. 'No strings, remember?'

'Well, I've changed my mind,' he growled, the tip of his hot tongue finding unerringly the sensitive little hollow behind the lobe of her ear, sending shimmers of response scudding down her spine. 'I want strings—I want damn great prime-steel hawsers thick enough to hold up the Sydney Harbour Bridge. I want you to lock me up and throw away the key. I want forever.'

It was taking all her will-power to resist him, but this was one battle she *had* to win. She forced a brittle laugh, trying to push him away. 'Don't be silly,' she protested playfully. 'I think that knock on your head must have done more harm than we thought.'

He caught both her wrists, pinning them back against the pillows. 'I mean it,' he grated fiercely. 'What's wrong with you? Last night you told me you loved me. Were you lying?' 'No...' 'There was no way she could deny that, no way she wanted to. She met his eyes without fear. 'I *do* love you. But... I don't want to marry you, Alex. It... wouldn't work out.'

He looked puzzled, though his grip on her wrists gentled. 'Why not?' he demanded roughly. 'I know you've had one bad experience with marriage...'

'We both have,' she reminded him ruefully. 'And I don't want to take that kind of risk again. I'd rather we just... kept it like this. No illusions, and no disappointments. We can both just enjoy it for as long as it lasts...'

'And then say goodbye, with no regrets?' he concluded bitterly. 'Do you really think that's possible?'

She shrugged her slender shoulders. 'I don't know. But I *do* know it'll be far, far worse if we go through all the performance of getting married. And anyway, why bother? It's not as if we're a pair of dewy-eyed young romantics like Annie and Greg. We both know it's just a scrap of paper--'

'A pretty important scrap of paper,' he cut in tautly. 'And what about children? Don't you want them?'

Oh *yes*, her heart was crying. But every ounce of common sense was warning her to resist. 'One day, maybe,' she conceded carefully. 'We'll see.'

His smile was grim. 'Yes, we'll see. All right, if that's the way you want it, that's the way it is—for now. But don't think I'm going to give up, Ms Holloway. I want you to be my wife—and I've warned you before that I usually get what I want in the end.'

He rolled out of bed, and picked up his clothes from where they had been tossed on the floor the night before. She lay peeping out from beneath the goat-skin covers, watching him as he dressed, fascinated by the sheer masculine beauty of his hard-muscled body.

She loved him so much—and maybe... But she didn't dare let herself hope for too much. It was better this way, however hard it was. She would just take it one day at a time.

He glanced down at her with a provocative smile. 'Are you planning to stay there all day, lazybones?' he enquired dangerously.

'Oh, I don't know.' She yawned, and stretched languorously as a cat, enjoying the thrill of defying him. 'It's so warm and comfortable.'

Ruthlessly he snatched the covers away, exposing her naked body to the cruel chill of morning. She screamed in laughing protest, grabbing at them. 'You wretch! It's cold. Let me have them.'

He dragged them right off, out of her reach, so she picked up a pillow instead and aimed it at his head. The blow missed, hitting him across the shoulder, but he caught his foot in a hole in one of the rugs and tumbled on to the bed.

With a shout of triumph she jumped on top of him, kneeling across his body, and began to attack him mercilessly with the pillow as he held up his arms to defend himself. 'Help, help!' he begged, weak with laughter. 'It isn't fair—I'm an injured man...'

'Alex?'

Joanna gasped in shock, ducking down behind Alex as the tent-flap opened to admit a shaft of sunlight. Greg, looking as startled as she was, stood blinking in the gap, Annette at his shoulder. 'Oh... I'm sorry—I didn't realise...'

Alex sat up, reaching for the bed-cover and wrapping it protectively around Joanna's shoulders. 'Your timing is a little inopportune,' he remarked drily. 'We weren't expecting you to be here so soon.'

'The others are on their way,' Greg explained earnestly. 'Your father and stepmother came out yesterday because of Felicia—she flew back from Hurghada as soon as she heard about the crash on the news. And of course, Joanna's parents have come too, and some of the Press people who were there covering' the mummy story. We came on ahead, to—er—warn you. Actually, it was Annie who said we should—I thought she was talking nonsense. I had no idea...'

Alex's hard mouth flickered into a wry smile. 'I can only be grateful that it hasn't been obvious enough for even you to notice,' he commented with a touch of asperity. 'Now, do you think we could have a few moments' privacy before this horde descends on us?'

'Of course... I'm sorry...'

Greg backed out of the tent, letting the flap drop, and Joanna groaned, pulling the bed-covers up over her head. Of all the embarrassing situations to be caught in—and Alex was *laughing*! She lifted her head, glaring at him indignantly.

'It's not funny!' she railed. 'How are we going to explain the fact that we were sharing a tent?'

'Do we have to explain it?' he enquired. 'After all, we're both free and over twenty-one.'

'That's all very well for you to say,' she protested. 'But my parents are old-fashioned—they'll be horrified.'

'Well, we could always tell them we're getting married,' he suggested, a mocking glint in his eyes.

She shook her head, firmly resisting the temptation to succumb to the short-term solution. 'I thought we'd agreed on that.'

'I haven't agreed to anything,' he reminded her darkly. 'I warned you, I intend to get my own way, and if I have to use this situation to do it, I shall.'

Her eyes sparked with anger. 'I never thought even you could sink that low,' she sniped, rolling off the bed and reaching for her clothes.

He lifted a dark eyebrow, propping himself on one elbow to watch her dress. 'The solution's in your hands,' he pointed out. 'Why not take a chance? Sure, no one can guarantee the happy-ever-after, but we're both a little older and a little wiser than we were the first time around. We both know marriage has to be worked at.'

Her mouth set into an obstinate line. 'I'm not going to be rushed into anything,' she insisted guardedly. 'I've only known you a couple of weeks.'

'Well, don't take too long about making up your mind,' he advised, a glint of provocative humour lurking in his eyes. 'You're not getting any younger, you know—you're almost thirty.'

'Why, you...!' That insult deserved a punishment, and snatching up his shoes from the floor she threw them at him, one by one, and then her own. With a roar he reared up from the bed and chased after her; she dodged away from him, darting through the flap of the tent, shrieking with laughter—just as a convoy of Land Rovers pulled into the encampment. She stopped abruptly, and he cannoned into her from behind, catching her around the waist as they both almost lost their balance. She felt her cheeks flame scarlet—they couldn't have made it more obvious if they had tried. Felicia was first out of the Land Rovers, scrambling out and racing over to throw her arms around Alex's neck, ignoring Joanna. 'Oh, Alex! Thank goodness you're all right! When I heard about the crash...! I'm so sorry—I was so stupid and selfish. I'll never do anything like that again, as long as I live—I promise.'

'As long as that?' he queried, a lilt of teasing amusement in his voice.

She pouted, but showed her good intentions by standing aside from the limelight, even managing a smile as the others came up to join them.

Joanna's mother hugged her. 'Oh, my dear—it's such a relief to see you!' she exclaimed. 'I was horrified when I heard what had happened.'

'We were very lucky,' Joanna agreed sincerely. 'It could have been a lot worse.'

She found herself being regarded shrewdly by a woman in her middle forties, still very attractive; Felicia would be fortunate if she aged as well as her mother, she reflected as she prepared herself a little nervously to be introduced.

'I'm very pleased to meet you,' Alex's stepmother assured her warmly, taking both her hands and smiling up at her with sparkling blue eyes. 'In fact, I'm delighted. I can't tell you how much I've wished that stepson of mine might come up against a woman with a bit more about her than all those dreadful air-brained bimbos who hang around after him all the time. I think you might do him a great deal of good.'

Joanna blushed vividly again. 'I—er—th...thank you,' she stammered, nonplussed; was Helena Marshall psychic, or had Alex said something to give her a clue the last time .he had been back in England?

'You must meet my husband,' the older woman added, turning to a ruddy-faced middle-aged man at her side. Joanna regarded him with interest; he looked very like Alex, though his face lacked some of his force of character. And there was certainly nothing in his manner that suggested any estrangement between him and his son.

He smiled down at her, a twinkle in his eyes. 'So, you're Joanna, eh? Nice to meet you. Quite an adventure you had there, son,' he added to Alex, his bluff tone of voice not completely disguising his concern. 'What happened?'

'We were caught in a freak sandstorm. I was knocked out, but Joanna managed to drag me out—otherwise I wouldn't be here to tell you about it.' His arm still rested loosely around her waist, and he smiled down at her with warm intimacy.

The Press contingent had gathered around them, listening to the story, their cameras clicking, and she tried to draw discreetly away from him, embarrassed at the thought that by tomorrow she would be plastered all over the tabloids as his latest conquest. With a wicked grin he jerked her closer and bent his head to kiss her on the mouth.

'Stop it!' she hissed, furious that he was taking such ruthless advantage of the fact that she couldn't push him off without giving the photographers an even more interesting picture.

'I warned you,' he reminded her mockingly.

Her eyes glittered fiercely, and she stamped down hard on his foot, slipping back out of his grasp.

'Could you show us the scene of the crash?' one of the photographers requested, eager for the dramatic shot.

'Sure.' He slanted Joanna a look that promised that the debate wasn't yet over. 'It's only a short distance—we can go in the Land Rovers.'

'If you don't mind, I'll stay here,' she argued sweetly.

'Oh, no—I'm sure they'll want to take a picture of us both beside the wreckage,' he insisted, his smile hard. 'Won't you, boys?'

They were in vociferous agreement that they would, and so, reluctantly, she found herself crushed into one of the Land Rovers beside him, his arm around her shoulders, as they bounced back over the rugged track through the mountains that they had travelled by camel the previous afternoon.

It was oddly chilling to see that twisted mass of burned-out metal again—Joanna was glad that their parents had remained behind at the Bedouin encampment, though Felicia and Annette had come along with Greg, and they gazed at it pale-faced.

'My God—you *were* lucky,' Annette breathed.

'Yes...' Joanna felt her mouth go dry. If she hadn't been able to pull Alex out in time...

She was subdued as she posed with him for the photographers. The sun was rising hot into the sky now, parching the bleak hillside, and the dazzling glare was making her head ache slightly—automatically she sought for her sunglasses, and then remembered what had happened to them. Thank goodness that was all she'd lost...

Suddenly it seemed very silly to be so afraid of taking a chance on the future—the option had so nearly been taken away from her. Alex might not be here now, standing beside her, so large and real and solid; they might never have had last night...

It was a relief when they all piled into the Land Rovers again for the short ride back to the camp. The Bedouin had lit their cooking fire, and were hospitably serving coffee to all their unexpected guests. Her mother and Alex's stepmother were deep in friendly conversation, sitting on a couple of cushions outside the main tent, but their two fathers were enjoying a vociferous argument, oblivious to the drama that was the object of everyone else's attention.

'I wouldn't care if there was gold there!' Professor Holloway was expostulating hotly, stabbing the stem of his pipe towards his opponent. 'What you're suggesting is sheer vandalism!'

'And what you're suggesting is completely crackpot!' George Marshall countered, emphasising his point with a jab of his thick cigar.

'*Crackpot?* Do you realise how priceless a find like this is? It's unique!'

'Unique? The museum in Cairo is stuffed full of mummies! They couldn't cram another one in there if they tried!'

'That just goes to show that you've no idea what you're talking about...'

Alex slanted Joanna a look of quizzical amusement, and she smiled wryly—it was almost exactly the argument that they had had themselves, so many times. He held up his hand, intervening between the two older men.

It's all right—you don't need to come to blows over it,' he declared. 'The whole thing rests in the hands of the Prime Minister anyway.'

'What do you think should happen, Mr Marshall?' one of the Press contingent enquired, hoping to stir up an interesting hint of controversy. 'Should the mining be delayed while the mummy's moved?'

He shook his head, an oddly enigmatic smile playing at the corners of his mouth. Joanna glanced at him sharply.

'I don't think the mummy should be moved at all,' he stated with calm precision. 'I think it should be left where it is, in its proper resting place, and the tomb sealed. Of course, it would mean losing some of the mineral ores, but not a substantial proportion—the quarrying needn't affect the tomb itself.'

There was a moment's startled silence, and then a babble of questions were thrown at him.

'Would that leave the operation commercially viable?'

'Will the Egyptian government be able to afford the loss of revenue?'

'Are you saying that for the same reasons as you pulled out of the contract to extract zinc from Aboriginal tribal lands in Queensland, Australia last year?'

He looked a little surprised at the last one, as if he hadn't expected the details to be common knowledge, but nodded his head. 'Very similar reasons, yes. Industry ought to make some concessions to other considerations, besides pure profit—we need to think about what sort of world we're going to pass on to our children. I propose to set up a trust, which will sponsor schemes to enable archaeological and similar projects to exist side by side with mining interests.'

Joanna was staring up at him in blank amazement. 'When did you decide to do that?'

'Oh, some time last night,' he responded, his eyes glinting wickedly.

She blushed again, darting a swift glance at the interested listeners. 'Shh...' she whispered pleadingly.

He bent his head close to her ear. 'Say you'll marry me, or I'll tell them exactly at which point last night,' he warned.

'You wouldn't!'

'Try me.'

It really was crazy to go on resisting, she realised with a dizzy rush of blood to her head—she really *did* want to marry him, after all.

Annette had guessed what was going on, and turned to Greg with a crow of triumph. 'See? I told you so!'

He grinned wryly, kissing the tip of her pretty nose. 'I should have known you were right.'

'What did she tell you?' protested Felicia, struggling bravely to be mature about this obvious demonstration that her rival had won the game, and that she herself was being excluded from the limelight by someone she had barely considered worthy of notice before.

'I suspect you're about to have a new sister-in-law,' her mother remarked with satisfaction.

'Eh?' Professor Holloway looked up sharply. 'That's the first I've heard of it!' He glared belligerently at George Marshall. 'You needn't think that just because he's got money I'm going to approve,' he declared.

'That's just the sort of damned fool remark I'd expect from you...'

'George, do please stop arguing,' his wife begged, wearily.

'Oh, never mind them,' Daphne Holloway chuckled with tolerant humour. 'So long as it keeps them out of the way while we're getting on with the arrangements. You know, Helena, even though the wedding would have to be in the register office, I'm sure our vicar would be willing to conduct a Blessing. And the village church would be absolutely lovely in June—if that's not too soon...?' she added, glancing questioningly at Alex and Joanna.

'Not a moment too soon,' Alex agreed readily.

'Hey!' Joanna protested, indignant. 'I haven't said yes yet!'

But Alex knew exactly how to sway her decision. His mouth came down to claim hers, meltingly warm, his sensuous tongue probing languorously between her lips to swirl over the delicate membranes within. She gave up the fight, her lips parting hungrily to welcome his plundering invasion, her body surrendering totally to his embrace.

That was apparently the very shot the photographers had been waiting for—the click and whir of their cameras brought Joanna's head round in indignant protest. But Alex merely laughed.

'Oh, let them,' he soothed. 'We really can't stop them.'

Joanna slanted him a mischievous look from beneath her lashes. 'You really do always get what you want, don't you?'

His eyes glinted in triumph as he held her close. 'I do—when it's something I want as much as I want you.'