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By Penny Jordan

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Editorial Review

Review

"Women everywhere will find pieces of themselves in Jordan's characters" Publishers Weekly

About the Author

After reading a serialized Mills & Boon book in a magazine, Penny Jordan quickly became an avid fan! Her goal, when writing romance fiction, is to provide readers with an enjoyment and involvement similar to that she experienced from her early reading – Penny believes in the importance of love, including the benefits and happiness it brings. She works from home, in her kitchen, surrounded by four dogs and two cats, and welcomes interruptions from her friends and family.

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Zuran had to have the cleanest airport in the world. Mariella decided as she retrieved her luggage and headed for the exit area, and Kate had been right about Prince Sayid's willingness to spare no expense to get her to Zuran. In the first-class cabin of their aircraft Fleur had been treated like a little princess!

Arrangements had been made for her to be chauffeur-driven to the Beach Club Resort where she would be staying along with Fleur in their own private bungalow, and, thanks to the prince's influence with the right diplomatic departments, all the necessary arrangements to get Fleur a passport, with Tanya's permission, had also been accomplished at top speed!

Craning her neck, Mariella looked round the busy arrivals area searching for someone carrying a placard bearing her name.

Behind her she was vaguely aware of something going on, not so much because of an increase in the noise level but rather because of the way it suddenly fell away. Alerted by some sixth sense, Mariella turned round, her eyes widening as she watched the way the crowds parted to make way for the small phalanx of white-robed men. Like traditional outriders, they carved a wide path through the crowd to allow the man striding behind them to cross the marble floor unhindered. Taller than the others, he looked neither to the right nor the left so that Mariella's artist's eye was able to observe the patrician arrogance of a profile that could only belong to a man used to being in command.

Instinctively, without being able to substantiate her reaction, Mariella didn't like him. He was too arrogant, too aware of his own importance. So physically and powerfully male, perfect in a way that sent a hundred unwanted sexual messages skittering over her suddenly very sensitive nerve endings. He had drawn level with her, and, whether because she sensed her antagonism or because Mariella had gripped her just a little bit more tightly, Fleur suddenly broke the silence with a small cry.

Instantly the dark head turned in their direction whilst the equally dark eyes burned into Mariella's. Mariella registered his gaze as her body gave a small, tight shudder.

The dark eyes stripped her, not of her clothes, but of her skin, her defences, Mariella recognised shakily, leaving them shredded down to her bones; her soul! But his gaze lingered longest of all on her face. Her eyes, she realised as she returned his remote and disdainful look of contempt with one of smouldering fury.

Fleur made another small sound and immediately his gaze switched from her to the baby and stayed there for a while, before it switched back to her own as though checking something.

Whatever it had been it brought a sneering look of contempt to his mouth that curved it into an even more dangerous line, Mariella noticed as her body responded to his reaction with a slow burn of colour along her cheekbones.

How dared he look at her with such contempt? She didn't care who or what he was! Once she imagined her father must have looked so at her mother before walking out on her, before leaving her to sink into the needy despair and dependence that Mariella remembered so starkly from her childhood, until her stepfather with his love and kindness had come to lift them both out of the dark, mean place her father had left them in.

As swiftly and as silently as they had arrived the small group of men swept through the hall and left. As a production it had been ridiculously overdone and theatrical, Mariella decided as she found the chauffeur patiently waiting for her and allowed herself to be carefully driven along with Fleur in the air-conditioned luxury of the limousine.

The Beach Club Resort was everything a five-star resort should be and more, Mariella acknowledged a couple of hours later when she had finished her exploration of her new surroundings.

The bungalow she had been allocated had two large bedrooms, each with its own bathroom, a small kitchen area, a living room, a private patio complete with whirlpool, but it was the obvious forethought that had gone into equipping the place for a very young baby that most impressed Mariella. A good-sized cot had been provided and placed next to the bed, the bathroom was equipped with what was obviously a brand-new baby bath, baby toiletries had been added to the luxurious range provided for her own use, and in the fridge was a very full selection of top-of-the-range baby foods. However, it was the letter that had been left for her stating that the Beach Club's chef would prepare fresh organic baby food for Fleur on request that really made Mariella feel she could relax.

Having settled Fleur, who fell asleep as easily and comfortably as though she was in her own home, Mariella checked her watch and then put a call through to her sister. Tanya's cruise liner was on an extended tour of the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico.

'Ella, how's Fleur?' Tanya demanded immediately.

'Fast asleep,' Mariella told her. 'She was fine on the flight and got thoroughly spoiled. How are you?'

'Oh...fine... Very busy...we're doing two shows each evening, with no time off, but as I said the money is excellent. Ella, I must go... Give Fleur a big kiss for me.'

A little guiltily, Mariella looked at the now-silent mobile. She hadn't said anything to Tanya about her determination to confront her sister's faithless ex-lover and tell him just what she thought about him! Tanya might have gone willingly to his bed, but Mariella knew she hadn't been lying to her when she had told her that she had believed that he loved her, and that they had a future together.

Mariella struggled to wake up from a confused and disjointed dream in which she was being dragged by her guards to lie trembling at the feet of the man who was now her master. How she hated him. Hated him for the way he stood there towering over her, looking down at her, looking over her so thoroughly that she felt as though his gaze burned her flesh.

He was looking deep into her eyes. His were the colour of the storm-tossed skies and seas of her homeland, a cold, pure grey that chilled her through and through.

'You dare to challenge me?' he was demanding softly as he moved closer to her. Behind her Mariella was conscious of the threatening presence of the guards.

She hated him with every sinew of her body, every pulse of blood from her heart. He left the divan where he had been sitting and came towards her, bending down, extending his hand to her face, but as his fingers gripped her chin Mariella turned her head and bit sharply into the soft pad of flesh below his thumb.

She felt the movement of the air as the guards leapt into action, heard them draw their swords, and her body waited for the welcome kiss of death, but instead the guards were dismissed whilst her tormentor stepped back from her. One bright spot of blood glistened on the intricately inlaid tiled floor.

'You are like a wildcat and as such need to be tamed,' she heard him telling her softly.

She could feel the cleanliness of her hair on her bare skin and froze as he slowly circled her, standing behind her and sliding his hand through her hair and then wrapping it tightly around his fingers, arching her back against his body so that her semi-naked breasts were thrown into taut profile. His free hand reached for the clasp securing her top and her whole body shook with outrage. And then abruptly he released her, turning to face her so that she could see the contempt in his eyes.

Swimming up through the layers of her dream Mariella recognised that his face was one she knew; that his cynical contempt was something she had experienced before...

In the half heartbeat of time between sleeping and waking she realised why. The man in her dream had been the arrogant, hawk-eyed man she had seen earlier at the airport!

Getting out of bed, she went into the bathroom, shaking her head to clear her thoughts, and then, when that tactic did nothing to subdue their dangerous, clinging tentacles of remembered sensuality, she turned on the shower, deliberately setting it at a punishing 'cool,' before stepping into it.

The minute the cool spray hit her overheated skin she shuddered, gritting her teeth as she washed the slick film from her body, and then stepping out of the shower, to wrap herself in a luxuriously thick, soft white towel. In the mirror in front of her she could see the pale, pearlescent gleam of her own skin, and dangerously she knew that if she were merely to close her eyes, behind her closed eyelids she would immediately see her tormentor, tall, cynically watchful, as he mocked her before reaching out to take the towel from her body and claim her.

Infuriated with herself, Mariella rubbed her damp skin roughly with the towel, and then reset the air-conditioning. In her cot Fleur slept peacefully. Going to the fridge, Mariella removed a bottle of water and opened it. Her hand was shaking so much some of it slopped from the bottle onto the worktop.

Mariella and Fleur had just finished eating a leisurely breakfast on their private patio when a message came chattering through the fax machine. Frowning, Mariella read it. The prince had been called away on some unexpected business and would not now be able to see her for several days. He apologised to Mariella for having to change their arrangements, but asked her to enjoy the facilities of the Beach Club at his expense until his return.

Carefully smoothing sun-protection lotion onto Fleur's happy, wriggling little body, Mariella bent her head to kiss her tummy, acknowledging that this would be an ideal time to seek out Fleur's father. She had his address, after all! So all she needed to do was summon a taxi to take her there!

Kate had been quite correct when she had described Zuran's February weather as perfect, Mariella admitted half an hour later as she carried Fleur out into the warm sunshine. Since she was here on business and not holiday she had packed accordingly, and was wearing a pair of soft white linen trousers and a protective long-sleeved top. When she showed the taxi driver the sheikh's address he smiled and nodded. 'It will take maybe three quarters of an hour,' he told her. 'You have business with the sheikh?' he asked her conversationally.

Having learned already just how friendly people were, Mariella didn't take offence, replying simply tongue in cheek, 'You could say that.'

'He is a famous man. Revered by his tribe. They admire him for the way he has supported their right to live their lives in the traditional way. Although he is an extremely successful businessman it is said that he still prefers to live simply in the desert the way his people always have. He is a very good man.'

Mariella reflected inwardly that the picture the driver had just drawn for her was considerably at odds with the one she had gained from her half-sister.

Tanya had met the man in a nightclub, after all. Mariella had never liked the fact that Tanya worked there—although she had been employed as a singer, it openly advertised the sexual charms of its dancers, and Tanya had freely admitted that the majority of the customers were male.

And, certainly, during the twelve months they had been together, Mariella had never heard Tanya mention any predilection on her sexy sheikh's part to spend quality time in the middle of the desert! In fact, if she was honest, she had gained the impression that he was something of a 'playboy,' to use a perhaps now outdated word.

It took just under forty minutes for them to reach the impressive white mansion, which the taxi driver assured her was the correct address.

A huge pair of locked wrought-iron gates prevented them from going any farther, but as if by magic an official stepped out of one of the pair of gatehouses that flanked the gates, and approached the car.

As firmly as she could Mariella explained that she wished to see the sheikh.

'I am sorry but he is not available,' the official informed her. 'He is away at the oasis at the moment and not expected back for some time.'

This was a complication Mariella had not been expecting. Fleur had woken up and was starting to grizzle a little.

'If you would care to leave a message?' the official was offering courteously.

Ruefully Mariella acknowledged inwardly that the nature of the message she wanted to give to the sheikh was better delivered in person!

Thanking him, she asked the taxi driver to take her back to the hotel.

'If you want, I can find someone to drive you to this oasis?' he suggested.

'You know where it is?' she questioned him.

He gave a small shrug. 'Sure! But you will need a four-wheel drive vehicle, as the track can be covered with sand.'

'Could I drive there myself?' Mariella asked him.

'It is possible, yes. It would take you two, maybe three hours. You wish me to give you the directions?'

It made more sense to drive to the oasis under her own steam than to go to the expense of paying a driver for the day as well as hiring a vehicle, Mariella decided.

'Please,' she agreed.

Methodically, Mariella checked through everything she had put on one side to pack into the four-wheel drive for her trip into the desert. The Beach Club's information desk staff had assured her that it would be perfectly safe for her to drive into the desert, and had attended to all the necessary formalities for her, including ensuring that a proper baby seat was provided for Fleur.

The trip should take her around three hours—four if she stopped off at the popular oasis resort for lunch as recommended by the Beach Club. But just in case she decided not to, they had provided her with a packed lunch in the form of a picnic hamper.

If it hadn't been for the serious purpose of her trip, she could quite easily have felt she were embarking on an exciting adventure, Mariella thought. Like everything else connected with the Beach Club, the four-wheel drive was immaculately clean and was even provided with its own mobile telephone!

The road into the desert was clearly marked, and turned out to be a well-built, smooth road that was so easy to navigate that Mariella quickly felt confident.

The secluded oasis where apparently the sheikh was staying was located in the Agir mountain range.

The light breeze, which had been just stirring the air when she had left the Beach Club, had increased enough to whip a fine dust of sand over her vehicle and the road itself within an hour of her setting out on her journey. The sand particles were so fine that somehow they actually managed to find their way into the four-wheel drive, despite the fact that Mariella had the doors and windows firmly closed. She had left the main road, now branched out onto a well-marked track across the desert itself.

It was a relief when she reached the Bedouin village marked on her map. It was market day and she had to drive patiently behind a camel train through the village, but fortunately it turned off towards the oasis itself, allowing her to accelerate.

In another half an hour she would stop for some lunch—if she hadn't reached the second oasis, marked on her map, she and Fleur would have their picnic instead.

The height of the sand dunes had left her feeling surprised and awed; they were almost a mountain range in themselves. Fleur was awake and Mariella turned off the radio to play her one of her favourite nursery rhyme tapes, singing along to it.

It was taking her longer than she'd estimated to reach the tourist base at the oasis where she had planned to have lunch—it was almost two o'clock now and she had expected to be there at one. A film of sand dust had turned the sky a brassy red-gold colour, and as she crested a huge sand dune and looked down into the emptiness on the other side of it Mariella began to panic slightly. Surely she should be able to at least see the tourist base oasis from here?

Ruefully she reached for the vehicle's mobile, realising that it might be sensible to ask for help, but to her dismay when she tried to make a call to the number programmed into the phone the only response was a fierce crackling sound. Stopping the vehicle she reached for her own mobile, but it was equally ineffective.

The sky was even more obscured by sand now, the wind hitting the vehicle with such force that it was physically rocking it. As though sensing her disquiet Fleur began to cry. She was hungry and needed changing, Mariella recognised, automatically attending to the baby's needs whilst she tried to decide what she should do.

It was impossible that she could be lost, of course. The vehicle was fitted with a compass and she had been given very detailed and careful instructions, which she had followed to the letter.

So why hadn't she reached the tourist oasis?

Users Review

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